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Abstract

Background The drastic surge in the number of homeless families in the United States (U.S.) has resulted in an increase in the number of homeless students attending U.S. public schools. Meanwhile, the U.S. public school system is struggling to meet the educational needs of their homeless students.

Objective This study examined the historical trajectory of U.S. federal initiatives that aim to respond to the needs of homeless youth; homeless youth research, classifications and typologies; homeless youth social conditions; and the factors that foster or impede their education.

Methods This study reviewed U.S. federal policies that intend to address homeless youth needs and education; the causes and impact of homelessness on youth; the economics of homelessness; and the relevance of resiliency in improving homeless youth prospects.

Results Despite the enormous challenges homeless youth face, some manage to successfully graduate from high school. While homeless youth are incapable of building or institutionalizing the support networks and structures they need, they are capable of utilizing available support systems within their surroundings.

Conclusion Without responsive structural support this vulnerable population is at high risk of failure. Several federal programs are mandated to assist homeless youth meet their basic needs and education. For these programs to realize their objectives, deliberate efforts must be expanded to assess and evaluate program efficiency. Also, past federal educational...
initiatives may offer insights on how to better chart and inform the many existing federal homeless youth programs that aim to meet the diverse and complex needs of homeless students.

**Keywords**  The nature and landscape of homelessness in the U.S. · Historical trajectory of U.S. federal homeless youth policies · Homeless youth federal legislative initiatives · Relevance of resiliency in improving homeless youth prospects · Homeless youth research classifications and typologies · The role and effectiveness of federally funded homeless youth programs · The IDEA Act can help inform federal homeless youth initiatives

**Introduction**

Youth homelessness is a growing concern in the U.S. The dramatic surge in family and youth homelessness is attributed to a decade-long recession, lack of affordable housing, the tight job market, low wages, and the large number of unskilled workers who continue to lag behind other sectors of the workforce. These economic conditions are also aggravating intergenerational poverty and racial inequality in the U.S. (Bird and Higgins 2011; Ladson-Billings 1995; Shapiro et al. 2013). For several decades, and particularly during the late 1980s until the early 2000s, the problem of youth homelessness was noted in American social and educational research as a phenomenon confined to U.S. urban centers, where some proposed it was a temporary problem that can be rectified (Hambrick and Johnson 1998; Mooney and Ousley 2000; Wright et al. 1998). However, the U.S. homeless youth phenomenon became a persistent problem manifested across every state. The accelerated spread of youth homelessness from the heavily populated U.S. urban centers to small American towns; counties and rural areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1996; Lauden and Fitchen 1996; Vissing 1996), prompted renewed research interest on the impact of family and youth homelessness on public education. Meanwhile it is still not clear whether the existing supports provided by federal, state, and local governments are sufficient to slow the spread of youth homelessness, or prevent such large-scale homelessness, or mitigate its impact on the educational attainment of individuals who experience intermittent, chronic, or frequent episodes of homelessness.

Homeless youth today are the fastest growing and most vulnerable segment of the U.S. homeless population (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] 2010; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY] 2012; National Coalition for the Homeless [NCH] 2009; Tobin and Murphy 2013). During the 2011–2012 academic year, 59,711 unaccompanied homeless students were reported enrolled in U.S. public schools (NAEHCY 2013), a figure higher than the entire populations of several U.S. state capitals, including Annapolis, MD; Charleston, WV; and Harrisburg, PA (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). Meanwhile, during that same year the number of homeless students enrolled in K-12 public schools was 1,168,354 (NAEHCY 2013), which is more than the number of students who attend the New York City public school system, the nation’s largest, which serves 1.1 million students and administers 1,800 public K-12 schools (NYC Department of Education 2013). In an era of tightened educational accountability for U.S. public school students, the academic achievement gap for students experiencing homelessness, above and beyond the gap for economically disadvantaged students, has become more evident (Masten et al. 2012).
The continued alarming rise in the numbers of American homeless families and youth has inspired several federal targeted initiatives to support the education of homeless children and youth. For example those required by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2002); Title I, Part A, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Public Law 107-110), as amended in 2001 (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] Act 2001); the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as amended in 2004 (Public Law 108-446), and the Head Start Act, as amended in 2007 (Public Law 110-134), all of which include specific provisions for serving homeless children and youth.

Today there are at least 27 different federal entities that administer programs for homeless individuals. For example, the White House Interagency Council on Homelessness, which operates within the U.S. federal executive office, includes 19 agency members (eleven federal departments and eight federal agencies) that aim to address the needs of homeless families, children, and homeless individuals (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH], 2014). Each federal agency applies its own operational definition of the homeless population it serves, which includes “homeless individual,” “homeless family,” “homeless child,” “unaccompanied youth,” and “homeless youth” (Congressional Research Service [CRS] 2013).

After the first wave of research on homeless children and education in the late 1980s (Acker et al. 1987; Bassuk and Rosenberg 1988; Bassuk and Rubin 1987; Janus et al. 1987) and early 1990s (Bassuk and Rosenberg 1990; Boesky et al. 1997; Farrow et al. 1997; Greenblatt and Robertson 1993; Johnson 1990; Kiesler 1991; Molnar et al. 1990; Rubin et al. 1996; Shinn et al. 1991; Stronge 1992; Stronge and Hudson 1999), a new wave of research emerged as a consequence of federal legislative data collection requirements. In 2004, states were required to collect and annually report homeless student data and academic outcomes to the U.S. Department of Education’s Consolidated State Academic Performance Reports (CSPR) (U.S. Department of Education2013), and the EdFacts initiative (U.S. Department of Education 2012). Since 2005, researchers have been able to access extensive academic performance data made available by the U.S. Department of Education, state departments of education, and local educational agencies.

Today, researchers and policy makers can track U.S. homeless students’ enrollment, attendance, academic achievement on state assessments, and graduation and dropout rates; compare homeless student data nationally and regionally; and evaluate homeless students’ performance with housed students, economically disadvantaged students, or advantaged students (Cutuli et al. 2013; Masten et al. 2012; Herbers et al. 2012). These Department of Education data reporting and data mining tools provide researchers, educators, and federal and state agencies the capacity to monitor the number of homeless students enrolled in U.S. public schools and their academic progress.

Basic human needs for food, clothing, and shelter, as well as educationally related support services including tutoring, counseling, school supplies, a permanent address, official documentation, and transportation, are far more difficult for homeless students than for students who live in poverty but are permanently housed. However, a strata of students experiencing homelessness rank at or above grade level in core academic subjects such as reading, mathematics, and science (McCallion 2012; NAEHCY 2013). Many are thriving academically, with school being the linchpin (Masten et al. 2012). The “homeless to Harvard” and “homeless valedictorian” stories that speak of the resilient attributes of homeless youth often attract media attention (Murray 2010; O’Donnell 2012; Walters 2010). Researchers are studying more closely what makes these youth so resilient despite their adverse conditions (Forge 2011; Rak and Patterson 1996; Vasquez 2000; Wolin and Wolin 1993), and how to utilize, teach, and foster these resiliency traits and coping skills.

The poor economic conditions of the last decade have acutely impacted low-income families living in the U.S., where homeless families account for 37.8% of the U.S. homeless population (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH] 2013). The purpose of this preliminary study is to provide an understanding of the alarming growth of the U.S. homeless youth phenomenon; the extent and prevalence of homeless youth; homeless youth research classifications, definitions, and typologies; U.S. federal legislative initiatives that aim to address the growing number of homeless students; the factors that place homeless students at high risk status, and the factors that influence their education; the economics of homelessness; and the relevance and limits of resiliency to homeless youth.

The Extent and Prevalence of Youth Homelessness

Federal law defines children and youth who are homeless as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act 2009). The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 (HEARTH Act) expanded the age of homeless youth eligible for McKinney-Vento services to age 21 and younger.

In any study that involves homeless youth, definitions and measurements of homelessness are likely to be an issue for debate or criticism. Congress has given federal agencies administering homeless assistance programs at least two different operational definitions. HUD Point in Time (PIT) homeless counts defines homeless youth as either sheltered or unsheltered (Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] 2013a, b). Meanwhile the U.S. Department of Education (ED) responsible for identifying and reporting on children and youth enrolled in public school districts includes those students who are involuntarily doubled-up with friends, family or strangers, living in hotels, motels or other substandard housing (CRS 2013). Accordingly ED’s homeless student definition is broader than HUD’s, and while ED does not conduct PIT counts of school aged homeless youth whether enrolled in school or not, ED collects data on those homeless students who are enrolled in U.S. public schools (CRS 2012).

Determining the precise numbers of homeless youth is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Some researchers contend that 1.6 million youth are homeless at some point due to economic hardships or job layoffs (National Center on Family Homelessness [NCFH] 2011). Others suggest that 1.3–2.1 million American youth experience homelessness at some point between the ages of 12 and 24 (Foster 2010), while still other figures indicate that at least 1.6 million youth experience intermittent homelessness between the ages of 12 and 17 (Toro et al. 2011). Some researchers estimate that one in every 45 children is homeless in the U.S., and others suggest that one in every 50 children is homeless and trapped in deep poverty (NCFH 2009). In 2010, a HUD report to Congress accounted for 294,048 homeless children aged 17 and younger in homeless shelters in the U.S. during one specific homeless night count in January. Among these children, 22,700 were unaccompanied youth (HUD 2010). However, some experts estimate the actual number of unaccompanied homeless youth as considerably higher, at 110,000 (USICH 2013). Meanwhile, according to the Department of ED, more than one million homeless students were enrolled in K-12 U.S. public schools (Department of Education 2013).
The rise in the homeless student population in the U.S. is attributed to the dramatic increase in the number of homeless families (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless 2013; Flannery 2010; HUD 2013a, b). While in the past homelessness was considered to be a temporary phenomenon that could be contained (Hambrick and Johnson 1998), today homeless families and youth have spread beyond America’s metropolitan cities; many homeless people reside in small towns and rural areas without access to homeless shelters or supportive services (Lightfoot 2011).

Homeless youth are without political, social, or economic power. They are a vulnerable population excluded from making decisions about matters that affect them directly (Rolnik 2010), and they are often unprotected, without rights or privileges. Regardless of how or why they became homeless, our society remains responsible for meeting the minimum needs of this most vulnerable population—children and youth who lack the means to be housed in safe shelters, fed and educated. Since 1948, the U.S. has been bound by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which codifies the “right of adequate housing” for citizens experiencing economic hardships beyond their control, and specifically addresses the rights of children and youth to have adequate housing (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948).

**Homeless Youth Research Classifications and Typologies**

Of all the homeless subgroups, youth are perhaps the most diverse subpopulation category in terms of the range of ages, genders, health status, mental acuity, development trajectory, family backgrounds, risk categories, types, and number and duration of homeless experiences (Toro et al. 2011). The absence of an agreed-upon age definition of homeless youth adds another layer of complexity to researching this vulnerable population. Increasingly, however, federal and local agencies are extending the upper age range past ages 21 or 22, in some cases to ages 24 or 25 (NAEH 2011).

Each U.S. federal agency applies a different set of age limits (from 0 to 17, from 5 to 12, until age 18, or 21, or age 24 and younger) to its respective homeless youth programs. For example, NAEHCY interchangeably uses “youth,” “children,” “minors,” and “preschool children” to describe homeless age coverage and eligibility for McKinney-Vento (NAEHCY 2013). Without a specific age limit, NAEHCY’s age range overlaps across several age categories (toddlers, pre-teens, adolescents, and majority age youth). Federal agencies that serve homeless youth, such as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), HUD and the Department of Education, operate under a wide range of homeless youth and child age criteria, depending on the program administered within their respective agencies.

HHS administers 13 homeless programs that target or serve children and youth (HHS 2007). Each HHS program applies its own age criterion, which varies by program from ages 0 to 5, 0 to 17, 16 to 21, 18 to 20, and 18 to 21, as well as age 12 and older (HHS 2007). Similarly, HUD’s homeless youth age criteria can range between 0 to 16, 16 to 21, 16 to 24, or until age 25; the Department of Education’s criteria depend on state age determinations and school grade-age eligibility limits for K-12, unless the student is IDEA-eligible; and under IDEA, the service eligibility of homeless students with disabilities extends to age 22 (CRS 2013). In general, the U.S. Department of Education’s definition of children and youth eligibility for services depends on each State Educational Agency’s (SEA’s) age-eligibility for elementary or secondary public education, which usually ranges from age 5 to age 18 for grades K-12 but can go up to age 21 for special education students.
or age 22 for students who are IDEA eligible. In states with public pre-school (Pre-K) programs, eligibility may begin at age 3 (CRS 2012).

There are also many homeless youth typologies proposed by researchers and policy-makers (Toro et al. 2011). These specific research classifications are usually developed for clinical and administrative purposes and in some cases are driven by public policy interests and/or funding (HHS 2012; HUD 2007). In addition, due to the difficulty of capturing the entire homeless youth population, most homeless youth research is situation-specific (shelter youth, street youth, and transitional youth) (Braciszewski et al. 2011).

Interest in homeless youth research is also shared by a variety of stakeholders who intersect with this vulnerable population, such as social workers, health practitioners, psychologists, counselors, juvenile court judges, educators, and service providers. Each of these disciplines and their practitioners has a distinct interest in studying the impact of homelessness on youth, based on their disciplinary perspective, theoretical framework (causation, impact, problem solving), and the services each provides (Braciszewski et al. 2011).

While the variety of research, classifications, and objectives has helped provide a better understanding of the complex needs and layered profiles of homeless youth, these varying approaches have also established highly variable definitions and criteria for studying the homeless youth phenomenon. In short, because of the absence of a clear, consistent definition of “homeless youth,” many studies use only one of several possible research typologies, deliberately excluding others by design (Toro et al. 2011). As a result, gaining a comprehensive picture of the nature and extent of the homeless youth phenomenon in the U.S. remains a formidable challenge.

Researchers have generally classified homeless youth in four main categories: “throwaway youth” are young people who were forced to leave their homes; “street youth” refers to youth who live on the streets; “runaway youth” are youth who have run away from their homes; and “system youth” are those who exit the juvenile justice system or foster care (Farrow et al. 1992). It is important to note that these classifications are not exclusive; for example, a “street youth” may also be a “system youth” at the time or prior to any given study, or a “system youth” may also be a “throwaway youth.” Regardless of the reasons or whether or not homeless youth fit into one or several categories, these youth are homeless without adult supervision or caretakers (Cunningham et al. 2011; Haber and Toro 2004).

In a similar approach, researchers have generally used one of four basic approaches to sample and study the general homeless population (Toro et al. 2007). These approaches include large general population surveys that help identify homeless youth (Greene and Ringwalt 1998); service-setting samples (Kipke et al. 1993); homeless youth residing in shelters (McCaskill et al. 1998); and street youth (Robertson 1989). Nonetheless, homeless youth have been researched less often than other vulnerable homeless populations, and few researchers have attempted to study the entire homeless youth population (Robertson and Toro 1999).

Homeless youth research has largely concentrated on one or more distinct subgroups within the homeless youth population. Therefore, most studies overlook other subcategories of the homeless youth population. Accordingly, each homeless youth sampling methodology has deficits and limitations inherent in the approach employed. Although few studies have captured the entire youth homeless population, the various research methodologies employed have made important contributions to our understanding of the homeless youth phenomenon (Murphy and Tobin 2011; Toro et al. 2011).
Federal Policies Addressing Youth Homelessness

Homelessness first surfaced in the U.S. in 1640—early in American colonial history—and again during the Civil War (1861-65), the Great Depression of the 1930s, and as a result of natural disasters such as the Great Chicago Fire (1871), the San Francisco earthquake (1906), and the massive flooding of the Mississippi that displaced 1.3 million people in 1927. In all of these eras and situations, the homeless phenomenon was largely assumed to be a temporary situation (Kusmer 2002) caused by manmade circumstances or natural disaster. During the early 20th century, the homeless population was relatively small and was largely made up of White men (CRS 2013). After the Vietnam War, the U.S. homeless population became a more visible phenomenon (NCH 2003) and a concern for U.S. legislators. During the 1970s the U.S. homeless population included women and children, and was generally more racially and ethnically diverse (CRS 2013).

Due to the rising number of homeless Americans, in 1974 Congress enacted the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (P.L. 93-415) and established the Runaway and Homeless Youth program (RHY), which at the time was the first federal program that focused on homeless individuals regardless of age. In 1977 the RHY program became the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), administered by HHS; it remains the sole federal program that services unaccompanied homeless youth (Child Policy Forum 2013; The National Youth Network 2013). RHYA provides grants to states and local communities to fund street outreach programs, counseling, drop-in centers, food, clothing, shelter referrals, transitional housing, education support, and mental and health services.

Since the 1980s, the number of homeless Americans significantly increased as a result, in part, of federal and state cuts in housing and social services (Rossi 1989). In response to the rising number of homeless youth, the federal government enacted several major public policy regulations to provide services and educational support for homeless youth. The Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2011 amended and consolidated the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act of 1978, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to ensure homeless youth coverage until the age of 21.

The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 (HEARTH) revised the age of homeless youth to 21 and redefined school and supportive services available to homeless youth. The HEARTH Act offered federal guidelines to ensure that homeless youth have access to school and shelter programs administered by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and HUD programs until age 21. In January 2011, HUD, the main federal funding agency for homeless shelters, expanded the definition of homeless youth to include those 21 years of age, with special provisions for homeless youth with developmental delays and/or physical, mental, and emotional disorders (Federal Register 2011). In addition, Public Law 108-446 (2006) specifically covers homeless youth attending private and public schools; regardless of the severity of their disabilities, they remain eligible for IDEA funding and services until age 22.

The IDEA statute covers homeless youth as defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to meet their special needs. In addition, Sect. 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act provide protections to homeless students with disabilities. Since 2002, federal law has offered school agencies serving homeless students access to these and other federal programs to support their unique conditions and meet their educational needs, including individual needs assessments and homeless students’ exceptional challenges (Department of Education 2010). These federally funded programs aim to meet the educational needs of disadvantaged
students and require states to include homeless students in school districts’ academic assessments (Department of Education 2011, 2008, 2004).

According to the Department of ED, 78% of homeless youth were enrolled in school in 2008. Schools offer homeless students stability, security, and the necessary skills to improve their prospects (NCH 2009; Mizerek and Hinz 2004). NCLB recognizes the importance of schools for homeless youth as one of the few stable and secure environments where they can acquire the necessary academic and social skills to escape poverty (NCLB Action Briefs 2012).

These legislative efforts have shaped the role of school educators and school professionals in regard to homeless students. Schools are tasked with implementing targeted efforts to remove educational barriers (such as class, race, gender, language, and disability), address their students’ human and social conditions, identify and respond to the needs of their students, and build upon their students’ innate assets to fulfill their educational objectives and advance their well being (Griffin and Farris 2010). In short, educators are called to engage in school activities to promote students’ legal right to be educated, and to ensure that all students have access to the necessary skills and tools that can enable them become contributing adults.

Since the passage of NCLB, school districts have implemented a set of standards and accountability measures to improve educational outcomes for all students, including homeless students (NCLB 2002). The law requires schools to offer homeless students equal opportunity to achieve the same high academic standards as all other school district students (Department of Education, 2004, NCLB 2001). These legislative developments (IDEA, Title I, and NCLB) have prompted schools to apply data-driven decision-making and employ school-wide strategies to improve student outcomes. As a result of these federal initiatives, school districts across the U.S. are engaging in school-wide reforms and school activities tailored to address their schools’ social environment and settings, meet the needs of their students, and improve academic outcomes for diverse student populations and subpopulations. Successful schools are engaged in prevention, monitoring, and intervention to improve the academic performance of their students (National Education Association [NEA] 2008).

Today states are required to ensure that school districts comply with the McKinney-Vento Act, including school districts that are not receiving McKinney-Vento funding (Ableidinger 2003; Georgia Department of Education 2011; National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty [LCHP] 2004). Since 1988, school districts have had access to McKinney-Vento funds to support homeless students’ educational needs (Department of Education 2004). The 1965 Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides federal funding to local educational agencies (LEAs) and Title I schools with high numbers of students from low-income families (McLaughlin 1975; Bailey 1966). Title I funds aim to meet the educational needs of underprivileged students, including homeless students, mandating states to include homeless students in school districts’ academic assessment, reporting, and accountability systems (Department of Education 2010, 2004; McCallion 2012).

Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act provides protections to homeless students with disabilities (Department of Education 2008). IDEA requires schools to identify and include all homeless children for special education needs and avoid administrative processing delays of homeless students’ identifications, and it also offers schools provisions and immediate access to a variety of federal programs and services to meet the educational needs of homeless students (Department of Education 2004).
Furthermore, the Department of ED requires school districts to meet the needs of all students and mandates school districts provide intensive support, effective interventions, and a wide range of services to homeless youth (Department of Education 2010; McCallion 2012). NCLB provides academic and social support provisions specifically designed to address homeless students. Schools are required to provide homeless students with transportation subsidies, school supplies, and clothing as well as a variety of academic services such as extended class time, AP fee waivers, and tutoring (Department of Education 2010; McCallion 2012; DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education [OSSE] 2009).

Meanwhile, the homeless student population is on the rise, and responding to their needs continues to challenge school and state educational systems (Flannery 2010). Nevertheless, these federal initiatives are of critical importance, and their aim to address the needs of the growing number of homeless students remains of value to this vulnerable population. These programs play a vital role in expressing U.S. federal resolve to provide homeless students with services and supports to address their unique educational, social, and economic conditions (Department of Education 2010).

However, although federal and other overlapping response programs are significant, so far they have failed to solve the myriad and complex issues homeless students face (NCH 2009). While NCLB outlines several provisions to assist schools in meeting homeless students’ needs, this act omits provisions for statewide program evaluations or individual school programs. Nonetheless, several studies on the federal level have explored the coordination of these programs with other federal and community programs, a specific provision of NCLB (CRS 2012).

For example, EHCY provides funding for designated homeless program coordinators, but has little control on how much time coordinators spend on EHCY-related activities such as collecting reliable data and implementing homeless youth education plans (CRS 2012). The law explicitly states that EHCY-funded local homeless liaisons can also serve as coordinators for other federal programs (CRS 2012). However, there has been no evaluation of the role and effectiveness of EHCY-funded coordinators or the proportion of time EHCY coordinators spend on EHCY activities compared to other programs (CRS 2012). Most examples of effective EHCY-funded programs are noted for their coordination with other federal, state, or local education programs and working relations with public agencies and community organizations serving homeless families, children and youth, rather than for their targeted, intensive interventions with homeless students.

Meanwhile, EHCY resources, the only funds earmarked specifically for homeless students, are very limited considering the high number of homeless students attending U.S. public schools. For example, the total EHCY state appropriations in 2009 totaled $65,427,000 for 939,903 students (CRS 2012); in 2012, the program served more than 1.1 million homeless students, yet its appropriations declined to $65,173,000 (NAEHCY 2012).

Furthermore, homeless youth school initiatives need to encourage school administrators to build supportive structures and networks to help homeless students acquire skills to improve their educational outcomes. For example, homeless youth programs that foster constructive, supportive interaction and provide links to support networks and services are known to improve student outcomes. Homeless youth benefit from focused programs that build and support their resiliency and coping skills (Jing Zhang and Fogarty 2007; Kidd and Davidson 2007). Supported homeless youth can develop competencies to support their education and become future functioning adults (Crain 2011). In general, however, federal
initiatives lack a comprehensive and coordinated plan of action and clear expectations to meet the academic and social needs of homeless students (Wilkins and Elliott 2010). Notwithstanding, federal law currently mandates all states and school districts to provide homeless students school access, facilitate their enrollment, and offer homeless students free meals, reliable transportation, school supplies, and appropriate school and academic services, including extra curricular and enrichment programs to meet their unique situation and educational needs (NAEHCY 2009).

Factors that Contribute to Youth Homelessness

While the types of youth homelessness, geographical location, definitions, typologies, and population estimates of homeless youth vary widely, so do the causes of youth homelessness. The decade-long constriction of the U.S. economy has resulted in an increasing number of Americans living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2010). The U.S. poor represent vulnerable subpopulations of different poverty rates (poor, near poor, low income, and middle class) that represent America’s underclass (Swick 2004). The prolonged economic recession and job layoffs have compounded the economic hardships of low-income communities (APA 2011, NCFH 2009); concurrently, the rising costs of food, fuel, and housing have distressed the middle class and poor families alike. These difficult economic pressures have resulted in an unprecedented increase in the number of homeless families (U.S. Conference of Mayors [CM] Status Report(s) on Hunger and Homelessness in U.S. Cities 2007, 2008, 2009; NCH 2009).

Families with children account for 36 % of the nation’s homeless population (HUD 2013a, b), and racial and ethnic minorities make up 60 % of the homeless population (NLCHP 2013). While non-White Americans make up less than 25 % of the U.S. population, 38.1 % of the homeless population is African American, 8.9 % is Hispanic, 4 % is Native American, 7.9 % is multi-racial, and 0.7 % is Asian American (NLCHP 2013). It is clear that the decade-long U.S. recession has affected every racial and class category except the very wealthy, but data suggests that low-income African Americans have suffered the most (NLCPH 2013).

African American families with children constitute less than 14 % of the U.S. family population, yet they make up 39 % of the homeless population (Child Trends 2010). The high rate of African American homeless families may be attributed to the rise in housing costs, depressed wages, and service cuts in large U.S. urban centers, for example during 2007–2008, large cities in the U.S. saw an 8 % increase in the number of homeless families with children (CM 2009). In 2010, 77 % of the entire homeless population was counted in large cities (NAEH 2010). In addition, urban centers generally have a higher cost of living than the national average. For instance, the cost of living in the District of Columbia (Washington, DC) is 40 % higher than the national median (The Economic Policy Institute 2013).

While the incidence of homelessness among children and youth in the U.S. is shocking for an advanced industrial society, this trend can be better understood when considering the correlation between poverty and homelessness. The World Health Organization has described poverty as the greatest cause of suffering on earth (World Health Organization [WHO], 1992). A 2010 comparative study of child poverty rates among industrialized nations found the poverty rate in the U.S. was the highest, except for the United Kingdom (Child Trend 2010). In 2012, UNICEF issued a report that documented the percentage of children living in poverty among the wealthiest 35 nations, which placed the U.S.
23.1 % (34 of 35), slightly ahead of Romania, at 25.5 % (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] 2012). The U.S. child poverty rate is not a sudden occurrence, but rather is a consequence of deliberate federal and state cuts initiated in the 1980s and the 1990s. Interestingly, during that same period the nation’s homeless population increased significantly. Poverty exposes youth to serious negative outcomes that impact and impede their education and is a strong indicator associated with academic failure among youth (Murali and Oyebode 2004).

In addition, while the U.S. is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), it has not signed other international conventions that would guarantee American children the minimum basic human rights that poverty erodes (Amnesty International 2014). The United States, Somalia (a country without a legally constituted government), and the Republic of South Sudan (a country that gained independence in 2011) are the only three United Nations members that have yet to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Amnesty International 2014; National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges 2012).

A report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur argues that despite our country’s massive wealth and the existence of internationally recognized human rights laws, millions of young Americans suffer from poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, preventable diseases, and unequal access to education, and they bear the weight of legislative and justice systems that fails to meet the minimum needs of its most vulnerable population (Rolnik 2010). Consequently, American underprivileged children have been compromised as a result of deep poverty-driven problems and economic hardships (Kiem 2009; NLCHP 2013) that are beyond their control.

**Homelessness and Its Impacts on Youth**

As stated earlier, federal definitions describe homeless youth as youth lacking in fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Residential and housing stability is a critical contributor to the positive development of youth. Housing stability ensures youth remain connected to their family and community, providing them with constructive structural support to develop emotionally, socially, physically and mentally (Bratt 2002). Two principle contributors to residential instability are poverty and a lack of affordable housing. Youth who are deprived of housing security are often separated from family, peers, school, teachers, and others who play a meaningful role in supporting the development of young people and contribute to their sense of stability (Cowal et al. 2002). Without a stable home, youth are isolated from the support systems that can protect them from physical, mental and emotional harm (Burt 2001; Rafferty et al. 2004). Youth who are deprived of a stable home experience such barriers as transportation, proof of residency, medical records, and lack of school transcripts, all of which impact their education (National Network for Youth 2006). Furthermore, the absence of caring adult relationships can arrest or slow the executive functioning skills of young people, which are essential tools for homeless students’ success in learning (Center on the Developing Child 2014).

**Emotional, Social, and Physical Health**

Homelessness impedes youths’ emotional and social functioning capacities (Clark and Robertson 1996; Fronczak and Toro 2003; Menke 2000). More than 80 % of homeless youth who range in age between 14 and 25 years suffer from depression, anxiety, and
aggression, and 43% report having attempted to commit suicide (American Psychological Association [APA] 2013; Klee and Reid 1998). In addition, 33% of adolescents who lost their homes show effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD) and exhibit a range of emotional and behavioral dysfunction (APA 2014; Burt 2001; Fazel et al. 2008). Anxious, depressed, and behaviorally challenged youth are less likely to be attentive and fully engaged in the classroom, which can influence their educational outcomes (Murphy and Tobin 2011).

Furthermore, the transition from living at home to becoming homeless, while difficult for adults is considerably more difficult for young people (Durham 2003). While children and youth typically become homeless in the company of their families, they are often separated due to a lack of family shelters, limited number of shelter beds, or because of homeless shelter admission restrictions on unaccompanied minors or families with adolescent boys (NAECHY 2012; National Conference of Legislatures [NCL] 2010; CM 2012). According to HUD data, the number of homeless U.S. “households” with at least one child under the age of 18 counted at one time during the last week of January 2013 was 439,101—but the number of beds available to homeless families during the same period was only 343,718 (HUD 2013a, b). Homeless youth separated from their families often end up living alone either in shelters or on the streets without adult supervision (NAECHY 2012; NCL 2010).

Their lack of stable, decent housing makes homeless youths particularly vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation (Lindsey et al. 2000). Homeless youth left on their own to fend for themselves are obviously the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse (Whitehead 2008). Homeless youth are twice to three times more likely to be raped and assaulted (Cauce et al. 2000; Robertson and Toro 1999).

Without adult supervision or caring adults, homeless youth may be unable to secure food or shelter and are left with few options other than to sell their bodies (Harber et al. 2004). Researchers suggest that some homeless youth willingly engage in illicit activities and sex crimes to make ends meet (Boye 1996; General Accounting Office [GAO] 2010; Longford 1995; Shamim 1993; Whitehead 2008), and as many as 33% of homeless youths may exchange sex for food. According to the National Conference of Legislatures, more than 60% of homeless youth report being physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused (NCL 2010).

In fact children, whether housed or homeless, make up 66% of all sex offence victims and 25% of all U.S. crime victims (National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse 1999). By some estimates, roughly 200,000 children and youth are sexually exploited in the U.S. (Estes and Weiner 2005); others suggest the number is as high as 300,000 children (Kiem 2009; Munir and Yasin 1997). In 2009 UNICEF published a provocative report, “Child Sexual Exploitation in the U.S.A: Not Just a Problem for Developing Nations,” which highlighted the social and economic problems faced by youth in the U.S. today. In the past, child sexual exploitation was a phenomenon linked to poverty among children living in developing poor countries, but in recent years the same social factors that lead to child sexual exploitation in poor countries are being manifested in one of the wealthiest nations in the world (Kiem 2009). Poverty, unemployment, and home foreclosures are social structural conditions outside the influence of homeless youth and are primary contributors to the rise in the number of youth engaging in “survival sex” to secure food, shelter, and transportation (Whitehead 2008; Gaetz et al. 1999).

In addition to emotional and psychological stress and vulnerability to sexual exploitation, homeless youth on average are twice as likely as housed youth to suffer from physical health problems and three times more likely to suffer serious, acute physical health
problems (Smith and Richards). According to Books (2004), homeless youth often suffer from chronic illness and severe health conditions (Books 2004). Poor hygiene, limited availability of water, and infested shelter conditions contribute to a range of health issues among homeless youth, including asthma (Barry et al. 2002; Karabanow 2004; Williams 2003), tuberculosis, influenza, Hepatitis A, lice and scabies (Beharry 2012), heat stroke and hypothermia (National League of Cities 2004). Homeless youths’ reliance on soup kitchens and fast food meals that are high in fat, sugar and salt, combined with their limited access to high fiber foods, can induce a range of acute health problems including diabetes, heart disease, anemia, and obesity (Beharry 2012; Feldmann and Middleman 2003). Living in crowded shelters predisposes youth to infectious disease and chronic illnesses that impact their school attendance, attentiveness, educational outcomes, and future prospects (Books 2004; Getzoff 2010; Murphy and Tobin 2011).

Educational Achievement

Research suggests a strong negative correlation between homelessness and educational success (Duffield and Lovell 2008; Levin et al. 2007). More than half (52%) of homeless students test below grade level in reading, and 57% test below grade level in math (NCFH 2012). In addition, current and past literature suggests that learning challenges among homeless youth are higher than in the general school population (APA 2014; Toro et al. 2007). Homeless children exhibit four times the rate of developmental delays compared to their peers who are not homeless (NCFH 2012). Homeless students have twice the rate of learning disabilities, and three times the rate of emotional behavioral problems as their housed peers (NCFH 2012; Family Housing Fund 2008). Homeless youth frequently acquire oppositional, defiant traits and behavioral problems that negatively influence their social interaction with school and community and impede their ability to meet their educational objectives (Center on the Developing Child 2014; Toro et al. 2007).

Homeless students’ high mobility predisposes them to frequent school disruptions and high truancy rates (APA 2011; Bassuk et al. 1986). Over 40% of homeless youth on average attend two or more schools a year, and with each change in school enrollment their education is set back four to six months (Hinrichsen and Kollin 2012; McCormack Institute 2000). In each school transfer, homeless youth must learn a new school environment, develop new relationships, get accustomed to new instructors, and adjust to new curricula and school expectations (Masten et al. 2012). Whether these youth are living in shelters, streets, abandoned buildings, or are in search of safe shelter, their high mobility obstructs their education in myriad ways, such as finding places to do homework, maintaining an address, enrolling in school, or complying with school requirements such as immunization or birth records (Endres 2010). Such continuing disruptions compromise homeless students’ high school graduation rates (NCH 2009; NCL 2010). Some studies have found that only one in four homeless students graduates from high school (Education Rights Project 2014; NCFH 2009).

Recent trends toward urban educational reform have overlooked the impact of school closures and school choice initiatives on homeless youth. For example, a study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that Chicago homeless students had to change school enrollment several times a year due to city school closures and consolidations (Education Week 2010). Most school reform initiatives have ignored evidence suggesting that closing schools in impoverished communities adversely impacts homeless students, their academic achievement, and retention (Education Week 2010). Few, if any,
school districts include an independent evaluation plan to monitor, assess, and track the impact of their reform initiatives on the teaching and learning of their students.

Still, despite the enormous social, emotional, psychological, and economic challenges, thousands of homeless youths do successfully graduate from high school (Larkin Homeless Street Youth Services 2010). Furthermore, federally mandated state data recently collected on homeless students who take state proficiency tests in math and reading suggests that 51 % of these students met or exceeded their state math proficiency test and 49 % met or exceeded states’ proficiency test in reading (NCHE 2013).

The Economics of Homelessness

Homelessness carries a financial cost for local municipalities and the federal government (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2013; HUD 1994). Poverty among children carries an estimated cost of $500 billion a year and reduces the nation’s Gross Domestic Product by 1.3 % annually (APA 2014; Holzer et al. 2008). Besides the loss of potential earnings for homeless individuals and the loss of state and federal tax revenues, U.S. taxpayers often shoulder the cost of meeting the basic needs of the homeless population, which includes funding and covering the expense of the local homeless population’s medical treatment, hospitalization, incarceration, and police intervention, as well as emergency and short-term homeless shelters. On average the cost of medical treatment for one homeless individual is $2,444 more than for a non-homeless individual (NAEH 2013); the expense of treating substance abuse for one homeless youth can exceed $14,000 (Salit et al. 1998). The annual cost of an emergency shelter bed is approximately $8,067 more than the average annual cost of a federal housing subsidy (HUD 1994).

The Resiliency of Homeless Youth

It is important to note that although most homeless research documents the enormous challenges faced by homeless youth, many researchers have also documented the tremendous resiliency of homeless youth, including their ability to develop constructive relationships, structural supportive tools and reliable networks (McKay 2009). While the capacity for resilience is an important survival attribute for all humans, it is of immense importance to homeless youths in overcoming their dire conditions and harsh reality. Self-reliance contributes to homeless youths’ sense of self-worth and independence, supports their ability to maintain strong motivation, and helps them develop trusting relationships and personal connections to overcome adversity (Cleverley and Kidd 2011; Crain 2011).

Close bonds with family and the wider community are protective factors that build young people’s resilient capacity to moderate the effects of risk exposure (Brooks 2006; Yates and Masten 2004). Since homeless youth are often disconnected from the family, their interaction with the wider community becomes more relevant. Young adolescents can overcome adversity by relying on a dynamic network of relationships with the wider community through the development of supportive non-kin relationships, positive school experiences, and encouraging role models (Groetzberg 1995; Yates and Masten 2004).

Researchers have become interested in studying the coping skills, personal resilience, and systems structures that help homeless youth overcome obstacles (Bender et al. 2007; Masten 2001, 2014; Rew and Homer 2003). This body of research explores the relevance of resiliency and identifies important factors that help homeless youth overcome their complex challenges. For example, research shows that homeless youths often undergo a
self-motivated process to reconstruct their sense of self, reassess their individual identity, and develop the necessary coping skills to ensure essential survival needs and personal safety. They successfully balance their needs for independence and dependence on others by distinguishing among the adults they interact with, identifying those they can trust to help them survive and cope with their homelessness (Cleverley and Kidd 2011; Thompson et al. 2005). These homeless youth learn to avoid control and exploitation, while fostering trusting relationships that satisfy their need for emotional support and secure essential resources. This approach helps homeless youth retain a positive attitude about improving their lives and future prospects (Bender et al. 2007).

With the appropriate support, many homeless youths can develop positive attributes, strong social skills, and a sense of purpose. Structural external support can contribute to the positive development of protective social skills and a sense of purpose among homeless youth (Crain 2011; National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth 2007; Rew and Homer 2003). Intervention programs that provide supportive permanent connections have been definitively shown to benefit homeless youth (Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Centers, n.d.). Recognition and support of homeless youths’ positive attributes can increase their capacity to become well-functioning adults (Crain 2011).

**Findings**

A considerable number of federal programs have specific mandates to assist homeless youth (USICH 2013). Explicit federal homeless youth programs also exist in U.S. Departments of ED, HUD, and HHS. Nevertheless, these federal resources have failed to effectively address the needs of the growing number of homeless youth. Reliable estimates indicate that 75% of homeless students drop out before graduating from high school (Education Rights Project 2014; NCFH 2009). In addition, several barriers still exist that hamper the educational success of homeless students. These include removing school procedural barriers, providing homeless students transportation services to their school of origin, and meeting the educational and basic needs of homeless students (Murphy & Tobin 2011; U.S. Department of Education 2001, 2010). Notwithstanding, several positive outcomes have been realized due to federal legislations, these include an increase in awareness of the special needs of homeless students, and a rise in the number of homeless students enrolled in US school districts (NAEHCY 2013).

Overall the various and well intended federal educational initiatives that span several decades were marshaled to address the necessity to educate the entire US public student population regardless of ethnicity, social status, or disability. Since 2002 school districts, administrators and teachers have been held accountable for improving educational outcomes or all students—including homeless student (Department of Education 2002, 2009; NCH 2012; CRS 2005). In the meantime, the failure of federal legislative mandates to include concrete measurements or assessments—of what works, what doesn’t, and why—the laudable objective of these homeless programs will remain elusive. In general, these federal initiatives lack a comprehensive and coordinated plan of action or clear expectations to meet the academic and social needs of homeless students (Wilkins and Elliott 2010). For example, EHCY provides funding for designated homeless program coordinators and homeless liaisons, but has little control on how much time coordinators spend on EHCY-related activities such as collecting reliable data and implementing homeless youth education plans (CRS 2012). Fundamentally, federal homeless youth initiatives have overlooked to ensure federal supports provided to homeless youth programs are clearly
earmarked for their purpose. For example, EHCY provides funding for designated homeless program coordinators and homeless liaisons, but has little control on how much time coordinators spend on EHCY-related activities such as collecting reliable data and implementing homeless youth education plans (CRS 2012).

For homeless-directed programs to meet their objectives deliberate efforts must be expanded to assess how and where these federal and state homeless youth funds are being spent. For example, federal homeless youth initiatives can improve program efficiency and outcomes by integrating and implementing periodic program evaluation procedures for state and local homeless youth coordinators. The inclusion of program evaluation procedures will help guide federal programs to better meet the complex needs of homeless youth. Specifically, EHCY, Title I, Part A, RHYA, and IDEA programs could boost program outcomes and efficiency by providing clear benchmarks and procedural guidance at the school district and state level.

Furthermore, in spite of the venerable aim of these federal initiatives, they have yet to be adequately funded. EHCY’s federal appropriations in 2009 totaled $65,427,000 for 939,903 homeless students ($6.96 per student) (CRS 2012). In 2012, EHCY served 1,168,354 homeless students, yet federal funds appropriated to EHCY totaled $65,173,000 ($5.57 per student) (NAEHCY 2012). Bearing in mind the annual estimated economic cost of poverty and homelessness at some $500 billion a year (Holzer et al., 2008), policy makers would be wise to shift focus from short-term solutions to wellfunded, sustainable policy initiatives. Adequately funded homeless youth programs could substantially decrease future federal and state costs, and will also improve the future prospects of homeless youth.

In addition, the numerous types of homeless youth research methodologies, and multifarious population estimates of homeless youth have not helped researchers and educators come to terms with the magnitude of the U.S. homeless youth phenomenon. The absence of an agreed-upon federal definition of homeless youth, and the variety of homeless youth research typologies and classification adds to the complexity of fully capturing the U.S. homeless youth population. Federal agencies that serve homeless youth operate under a wide range of age criterion and several descriptive definitions. Also each federal agency applies its distinct operational definition of the homeless youth population it serves, such as “homeless individual,” “homeless child,” “unaccompanied youth,” “homeless youth”, and “homeless family,” (CRS 2013).

Federal homeless youth response initiatives could benefit from establishing clear guidelines as those proposed and implemented by the IDEA Act (U.S. Department of Education 2013). The IDEA Act ushered in sweeping new standards and accountability measures for all school districts receiving IDEA funds, holding schools accountable. Some 30+ years after the initial Act took effect, U.S. teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists are far better prepared to understand the needs students who exhibit various categories of emotional, physical, and behavioral disabilities that range from acute to functional learning challenges (Center for Public Education 2009). IDEA could offer legislators a far better program design that could more effectively address the educational needs of homeless students.

As for the recent interest and focus on the resiliency of homeless youth, while it is promising, nonetheless the resiliency orientation is limited. Since by definition resiliency is an intrinsic, interactive and fluid trait that does not operate in isolation, but is influenced by outside factors. In addition, resiliency is dependent on building constructive partnerships (Brooks 2006; Yates and Masten 2004) that may be readily available to some homeless youth but unavailable to others. For homeless youth, welldeveloped and functioning support systems are crucial in sustaining their resiliency and improving their educational outcomes.
Resiliency may indeed be a protective factor for homeless youth. It can help foster youths’ positive attitude, promote essential coping tools, and personal drive (Cleverley and Kidd 2011; Crain 2010). With the appropriate supports in place, many homeless youths’ innate skills can be leveraged to improve their conditions and academic outcomes. Nonetheless, it is important to note that for this vulnerable population, the resiliency orientation has inherent limits. For homeless youth in particular, well developed supportive structures, and functioning systems are crucial in sustaining their resiliency and improving their educational outcomes. With the appropriate supports in place, many homeless youths’ innate skills can be leveraged to improve their conditions and academic outcomes.

**Conclusion: What Can Be Done?**

The wide types of youth homelessness, geographical research count methodologies, and population estimates of homeless youth have not helped researchers and educators come to terms with the magnitude of the U.S. homeless youth phenomenon. Furthermore, the absence of an agreed-upon federal definition, research typologies and classifications of homeless youth adds to the complexity of fully capturing the U.S. homeless youth phenomenon. Federal agencies that serve homeless youth, such as ED HHS, and HUD operate under a wide range of age criterion and several descriptive definitions “youth,” “children” “minors” and “preschool children”. Also each federal agency within the USICH applies its distinct operational definition of the homeless youth population it serves, such as “homeless individual,” “homeless child,” “unaccompanied youth,” “homeless youth”, and “homeless family,” (CRS 2013). In general, federal initiatives have overlooked to ensure federal supports provided to homeless youth programs are clearly earmarked for that purpose. For example, EHCY provides funding for designated homeless program coordinators and homeless liaisons, but has little control on how much time coordinators spend on EHCY-related activities such as collecting reliable data and implementing homeless youth education plans (CRS 2012).

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