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## Predictors of Academic Achievement among Homeless and Low-Income Housed Children

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Based on a study of sheltered homeless and low-income housed families, predictors of academic achievement among 174 English-speaking children age 6 and older were examined, focusing on housing status, mobility, and race/ethnicity. Days absent from school was hypothesized as the mediating link between homelessness and academic achievement. In multivariate analyses, a composite measure of academic achievement was independently predicted by child's gender (girls scoring higher than boys), race/ethnic status (non-Latino Whites scoring higher than children of color), age, and school mobility. Housing status was not associated with academic achievement. Results indicated that homeless and housed children had comparable rates of absenteeism and other school-related problems, which may explain why homeless and housed children were similar in terms of achievement. Although children of color were equivalent to non-Latino White children in terms of nonverbal intellectual ability, their lower academic achievement scores suggest that they are not reaching their academic potential. © 2001 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

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Approximately 19% of all American children under 18 years of age are members of families with incomes below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Children of color are especially likely to be poor. Half of African American and 45% of Latino children are living in poverty compared with 18% of non-Latino White children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). Children growing up in impoverished circumstances in the United States increasingly face homelessness, residential instability, violence, and other stressors in their lives. The extent to which each of these experiences affects their academic achievement and school performance is not well understood.

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Based on a sample of extremely poor children (about one third of whom were living in a homeless family shelter at the time of interview), this study examines predictors of children's academic achievement, focusing in particular on the independent and relative contribution of current housing status (i.e., homeless vs. housed) and geographic/school mobility as predictors. Given the well-documented school difficulties that homeless children have had prior to federal legislation passed in 1987 to redress this problem, we also examined whether currently homeless children were having greater problems with school attendance and grade failure than were low-income housed (never homeless) children.

### HOMELESSNESS AND CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Homeless individuals and families often represent the extreme end of the continuum of persons living below the poverty line. Poverty poses increased risks to children's psychosocial development (Luthar, 1999; McLoyd, 1998) as well as academic achievement and school success (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999; Pagani, Bourlerice, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 1999).

The U.S. Department of Education (1995) estimates that approximately 744,000 school age children and adolescents are homeless in the course of a year. When the crisis of family homelessness emerged in the United States in the 1980s, most communities and school systems were unprepared to deal with the complex needs of homeless parents and their children. Some homeless children were denied access to education, with school districts claiming that families living in shelter did not meet permanent residency requirements and therefore were not eligible for enrollment (Rafferty, 1995). Stronge (1992) listed the most frequent impediments to adequate education for homeless children and youth as residency, guardianship, immunization requirements, availability of records, and transportation to and from school.

As part of the *Stewart B. McKinney Homelessness Assistance Act of 1987*, Congress established the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program to ensure that homeless children had the same access to public education as all other children. For more than a decade, the EHCY program has provided formula grants to state educational agencies to review and revise policies that may act as barriers to school enrollment and attendance as well as to fund direct services such as transportation and tutoring. Anderson, Janger, and Pantan (1995) conducted a national evaluation of the EHCY program and found that over 85% of homeless children and youth were regularly attending school, indicating a marked improvement in school access compared with pre-EHCY program attendance rates.

Previous studies of homeless children have documented disrupted school attendance and performance. For example, Bassuk and Rubin (1987) found that 43% of students living in Massachusetts shelters had repeated a

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