Supporting Homeless Students

Identifying Homeless Students for Educational Support Services

Target a Priority Outcome Over one million students experience homelessness in the United States.[1] The Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) helps State Educational Agencies (SEAs) ensure that homeless children have equal access to free and appropriate public education through roughly $85 million in grants annually.[2] Students who lack fixed and stable housing are entitled to receive additional educational supports including immediate school enrollment, free meals, transportation to their school of origin regardless of a change in residence, and additional tutoring and educational supports. However, many homeless students remain unidentified and therefore do not access the supportive services that can make a difference in their education and lives.

Translate Evidence-Based Insights Due to the stigma associated with homelessness, these students and their families may be reluctant to identify their housing status, and may also be unaware of the services available to them. To help connect students experiencing homelessness with these services, each school district appoints a homeless student liaison to understand the needs and rights of these students, and help school staff work with these individuals. Homeless liaisons ensure that students experiencing homelessness are identified by school staff through coordinated efforts with teachers and, sometimes, other social service agencies.

New evidence-based email communication materials were developed in partnership with

OSHS and the Education Authorities of New Jersey, New Mexico, and New York. The new communication used behavioral insights to share simplified information with Local Education Authorities (LEAs) homeless liaisons and superintendents to help them accurately identify homeless students in their districts and schools. In the bi-weekly emails, liaisons received suggestions for concrete actions and relevant resources to prompt their interactions with students. The messages also helped deliver new guidance on the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program[3] and the Every Students Succeeds Act[4]. They reduced information overload by simplifying and concretizing actions liaisons can take, addressed present bias through regular reminders, and increased salience through the use of loss frames, personalization and time scarcity.

Embed Tests The evidence-based insights were tested with a randomized controlled trial between January and May 2017. LEAs (n = 1,732) were blocked by state, if they had reported homeless students in School Year 2015-2016, and if they were a charter school. LEAs were randomly allocated to receive the status quo (less frequent, more formal, traditional emails) or more frequent behaviorally informed emails.

Analyze Using Existing Data Impacts were measured using LEA-level data on the number of identified homeless students during the 2016-2017 academic year (August 2016-May 2017).

Reanalyzed Results By the end of the school

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[1] Digest of Education Statistics (September 2018). https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_204.75d.asp
[2] Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) Program (September 2018). https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/statetables/19stbyprogram.pdf

[3]Education for Homeless Children and Youths Grants for State and Local Activities (September 2018). https://www2.ed.gov/programs/homeless/index.html
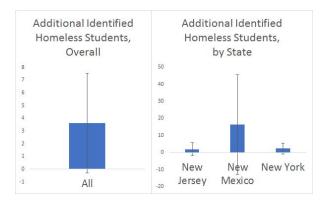[4] Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (September 2018). https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn

year, LEAs in the intervention group identified on average 3.6 more homeless students (p = 0.07, 95% CI[-0.31, 7.56]),[5] a 12 percent relative change compared to the control group baseline mean. This represents identifying over 3,000 more students to receive support through the EHCY program in the study sample. However, the intervention did not make districts more likely to identify homeless students if they had not previously done so.

Build Evidence Regular, concise, behaviorally informed emails sent to homeless liaison staff in LEAs increased the identification of homeless students for needed support. Converting guidance for identifying homeless students into several short, behaviorally informed emails sent every other week during the Spring semester increased the number of homeless students identified by 12 percent relative to the baseline control group mean. While the estimated effect of emails is imprecise, the cost is low.

However, it should be noted that these effects did not appear to be uniform across the three states. The state of New Mexico appears to be driving the observed results. Because the test was not

designed to capture differences between the states, conclusions cannot be drawn about how the unique circumstances in each state may have contributed to the overall results. Future work could explore why the intervention had differential results across each of the three states.

The results suggest the intervention was effective because it gave liaisons a clear set of well-timed action steps, in a context where they previously received a large amount of dense information. More work could explore this more deeply and confirm such results hold across contexts.

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[5] Exploratory analysis suggested that the change may be concentrated in LEAs who were already reporting greater than zero homeless students.