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Education on Unstable Ground: A School-Based Response to Youth Homelessness

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SUMMARY

Youth homelessness is a widespread issue driven by structural inequalities and racial disparities that significantly undermines access to high-quality education, housing, and other basic necessities. These unstable living conditions hinder academic performance and facilitate chronic stress, distraction, and disengagement. Research has shown that experience in youth homelessness differs across different racial groups, particularly amongst white and African American individuals, in which African American groups have reported greater amounts of negative and polarized experiences with youth homelessness. However, despite these differences, most homeless youth experience a similar background of instability, neglect, and a decline in academic performance. This proposal advocates creating vital centers within schools that offer accessible support by connecting students with essential services to promote stability, academic achievement, and ultimately, stabilize their personal lives. It is essential to ensure that youth homelessness is addressed proactively and will not continue to undermine youth's long-term opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Youth homelessness is a growing national issue, rooted in long-standing structural inequalities, racial discrimination, neglect, and systemic barriers that prevent youth

from accessing stable housing or education. High school students who are facing housing instability are more likely to struggle academically as they face life-threatening challenges that impair their ability to learn, thus causing them to disengage from school altogether. Additionally, research has proven that homelessness impacts youth differently amongst different racial populations, highlighting significant disparities in how resources, safety, and support are made accessible. Schools, which serve as vital, stable environments for students, must be positioned to recognize early signs of housing instability in order to connect students with essential resources regardless of their background, circumstances, or socioeconomic status.

PROBLEM

Youth homelessness in high school students negatively impacts academic performance and lessens their likelihood of attending college and finding job opportunities. Upon surveying populations of homeless high school students, there were remarkably polarized responses between white and African American individuals. A study revealed that white youth are more likely to have a positive mentality regarding the community of homeless youth, even going as far as to describe it as a "family". In contrast, African American youth were more likely to report negative encounters they have experienced, as well as mention how it was not a choice but rather the circumstances they were born into. Both

groups shared similarities in having a dysfunctional family and/or living situation, abuse, neglect, and other detrimental factors in child development. White individuals who were surveyed were more likely to report having run away from home as a result of unbearable living situations, African American youth reported experiences growing up below the Federal Poverty Line and having been forced into homelessness. However, regardless of differences in origin, one similarity between racial and socioeconomic populations remained prominent: between the drive for survival and navigating the tribulations resulting from a lack of positive influence, academic performance is considered unimportant to most homeless youth, as is planning for future success when the present feels overwhelmingly daunting.

SOLUTION

Creating vital centers within schools that provide anonymous and optional resources to help students affected by homelessness find housing stability would be a viable solution to the issue of not only youth homelessness, but also decreased academic performance. By incorporating these services directly into the school environment, students are given a familiar and non-stigmatizing point of contact. These centers would provide truly anonymous access so students who are hesitant to disclose their situation can still obtain information and support. They must also connect youth to a comprehensive network of local services, including emergency housing, family reunification programs (when suitable), job training opportunities for employment-age youth, and mental health services. Making all support optional

and student-driven would allow for young individuals to maintain their dignity and sense of agency throughout the process of seeking help. In addition, training school staff to recognize signs of homelessness and make gentle, informed referrals to the center ensures that the students in need are identified and supported early. This system would allow students to gain assistance quickly and without judgement, providing a relaxed way to ask for support, whether they need housing information, assistance with school, or simply someone to talk to. If schools offer this kind of support, they would become reliable places where students can find guidance and practical tools to work toward stability and a better assured future.

PRECEDENT

Several existing policies and programs demonstrate the effectiveness of providing youth-centered, easily accessible support for students experiencing homelessness. At the federal level, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires school districts to identify and assist homeless students by ensuring enrollment, transportation, and access to trained liaisons. While this law provides a structural foundation, it does not establish on-campus support centers, leaving schools responsible for delivering services directly. California's AB27 similarly strengthens district responsibilities by expanding the role of homeless liaisons and improving training, representing a statewide effort to better identify and support affected youth. Beyond school systems, New York City's Runaway and Homeless Youth Drop-In Centers offer a successful model of low-barrier, youth-friendly spaces where young individuals can obtain food, crisis counseling, and referrals without needing

parental involvement, demonstrating how accessible resource hubs increase youth engagement. Washington State's school-based health centers also show how embedding social and mental-health services in school environments improves student stability and participation. Together, these precedents support the idea that placing confidential, supportive, and non-stigmatizing services directly in schools is a proven strategy for improving outcomes for housing-insecure youth.

school-based centers are financially efficient investments that prioritize prevention over remediation.

FISCAL ANALYSIS

The financial cost of establishing school-based homelessness resource centers depends on school size and district capacity, but a rough estimate suggests the proposal is feasible and cost-effective. Initial setup costs include allocating or lightly renovating a private space, typically between \$5,000 and \$15,000, and obtaining basic supplies such as informational materials, hygiene items, and secure technology systems for anonymous access, which add approximately \$1,500 to \$4,500. Annual operating costs represent the largest portion of the budget, with a part-time or full-time caseworker costing \$45,000 to \$70,000 per year, staff training costing an additional \$2,000 to \$5,000, and ongoing materials costing \$1,000 to \$3,000 annually. In total, each school can expect an annual cost of about \$55,000 to \$90,000. Multiple funding sources can offset these expenses, including federal McKinney-Vento allocations, state education grants, district supplemental funds for high-need students, partnerships with nonprofit housing organizations, and county social-service grants. As early intervention dramatically reduces long-term social service and crisis-response costs, these

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