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Strengthening Homeless Families

Key Points

- Based on how it defines a homeless family, the HUD PIT Count underestimates the scope of the homelessness problem Texas faces.

- Those excluded—largely homeless families—are ineligible for the largest source of publicly funded homelessness resources available.

- The long-term ramifications of a homeless child without access to early and effective intervention will dramatically exacerbate the crisis in the state.

Purpose

According to data provided by the federal Department of Education (ED), Texas had 111,411 homeless K–12 students in the 2019–20 school year, a figure that does not include the parent(s) of those students nor their non K–12 sibling(s) (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021, p. 5). By contrast, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports 27,229 homeless Texans overall (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, n.d., para. 1). The discrepancy lies in the fact that HUD employs a modified version of the McKinney-Vento definition that ED employs.

The Texas Legislature should adopt the most recent definition of homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to adequately gauge the scope of the homeless problem the state faces and to ensure that all homeless families have the opportunity to permanently exit homelessness and achieve their full potential.

Background

In 1987, homelessness had grown into an acute problem and "there were early indications that the demographics were changing with women and children representing a growing portion of the population" (William & Mary School of Education, n.d., para. 3). The crisis prompted Congress to pass, and President Reagan to sign, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in honor of Rep. Stewart B. McKinney of Connecticut, who had recently passed away. The provisions of the bill, particularly those related to funding, established much of the early definitional and programmatic framework that would serve as building blocks in later legislative efforts. In fact, Congress would build on this legislative framework in 1990 and again in 1994. Then, in 2001, Congress expanded further on this footprint by reauthorizing the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act with the goal of "clos[ing] the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child is left behind" (William & Mary School of Education, n.d., para. 11). It is from this legislative act that the ED borrows its definition of homelessness. This definition ensures that children whose families are temporarily sharing housing with other persons or whose families are paying for a temporary motel room have continued access to education and the services required to help them exit homelessness.

In contrast, HUD—the federal agency responsible for national policy to address America's homeless population—uses a different definition. In its 2013 institutionalization of Housing First policy, HUD (n.d.-a, p. 1) employed a modified

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version of the McKinney-Vento act's definition that excludes and ignores the reality of most homeless families who are temporarily doubled up to avoid life on the streets.

Specifically, families who are temporarily doubled up in another person's housing, even those sleeping on the garage floor of a stranger's home, are not included in HUD's definition and thus do not meet HUD's criteria for assistance—nor do families that are living temporarily in motel rooms for which they pay. However, if HUD pays for the rooms, then families meet its assistance criteria (Helping Families Save Their Homes Act, 2009, Section 1003 (5)).

HUD's narrow definition is also the basis for determining the number of children and families reported in each of its annual Point-In-Time (PIT) counts, which are "a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January" (HUD, n.d.-b, para. 1). Per agency rules and requirements, Texas submits its PIT count to HUD on an annual basis (Texas Homeless Network, n.d., para. 4). In 2020, a PIT count reported 27,229 homeless Texans (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, n.d., para 1).

For context, the National Center for Homeless Education (2021, p. 5), based on ED data, reported 111,411 homeless K–12 students in the 2019–20 school year, a number nearly four times the total number of homeless Texans reported by HUD. Importantly, the ED numbers do not include the students' parent(s) nor the siblings that are not enrolled in the K–12 system.

The difference in counts skews the scope of the problem the state faces, but this is not the only problem with the non-reconciled definitions. "Non-counted" families are also rendered ineligible for Texas' publicly funded programs that are based on the HUD definition. The implications

are costly in both the short and the long term. Data from the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, the Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network reveal that:

- 24% to 40% of homeless school-age children experienced mental health problems requiring clinical evaluation—a rate 2 to 4 times higher than poor children in the National Survey of America's Families (Bassuk et al., 2015, para. 3).

- In NYC, homeless students performed far worse than their non-homeless classmates, "with proficiency rates on both English and math tests close to 20 points lower than their housed classmates" (Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2016, para. 7).

- "Homeless children have twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems, all of which make homeless students twice as likely to repeat a grade compared to non-homeless children" (NCTSN, 2005, p. 2).

A homeless child beset with a wide array of overwhelming life challenges is much more likely to become an addicted, mentally ill, and seemingly "unemployable" homeless adult living on the streets, without early and effective intervention. Indeed, the latest data available from the United States Interagency Council in their 2020 Expanding the Toolbox report show this deterioration happening at an increasingly alarming rate (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2020).

Proposal

To ensure that all Texas families struggling with homelessness are counted and to ensure they have access to the state's homeless resources, the Legislature should adopt the McKinney-Vento homeless definition.

The state of Washington was the first state to do so in 2021. By adopting this definition, the Texas Legislature will be able to clearly gauge the scope of the state's homeless crisis and maximize a homeless family's opportunity to permanently escape homelessness, while reinforcing its core values of family, independence, and a strong Texas. ★

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Steeb is a senior fellow with the Texas Public Policy Foundation and oversees the Foundation's initiative to transform United States' and Texas' homelessness policy. She has spent her career in causes for the public good beginning with leadership roles in both federal and state senate campaigns. She served four years as the Vice President of Political Affairs for the California Chamber of Commerce and prior to that, founded two technology-focused companies.

In 2006, Michele joined a struggling shelter for homeless women and children and transformed it into one of the nation's beacons of success. Saint John's, now a comprehensive 18-month program, helps homeless women and their children actively address and overcome the root causes of their homelessness by providing both housing and services to support them in becoming contributing members to society.

During her tenure, Michele served on multiple boards to address homelessness and was appointed by Governor Brown to serve on the State's Prison Industry Authority (2012-2020). She is a noted public speaker and author of "Answers Behind the RED DOOR: Battling the Homelessness Epidemic." Her work on homelessness has been published in several national outlets including the *Washington Post, USA Today, Newsweek* and the *Washington Examiner*.

Michele received multiple awards including the Martin Luther King Jr. Difference Maker award, the Regional Social Equity Leader award, the Women Who Mean Business Award, the Non-Profit Visionary of the Year Award, the Allied Professional Award from the US Congressional Victims' Rights Caucus, a woman of the year by the California State Legislature and the prestigious Ignatian Award by her alma mater, Santa Clara University.

Michele attended Auburn University (War Eagle) and is a graduate of Santa Clara University. She and her husband are parents to five children and have served as a host family for many foreign and domestic students. Their two dogs, Cargo and Leia, enjoy living with them in Lucas, Texas.

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