

Statewide Initiative

Poverty Solutions

University of Michigan

Poverty Solutions is a university-wide presidential initiative at the University of Michigan that partners with communities and policymakers to find new ways to prevent and alleviate poverty through action-based research. Their data analysis and research about students experiencing homelessness addresses identification, graduation and dropout rates, early childhood homelessness, and school discipline.

Using data from the 2015-2016 school year, the Child Homelessness in Michigan data visualization map shows where the 36,000 children experiencing homelessness in Michigan are concentrated. This data compilation revealed that Michigan has the sixth highest population of identified children experiencing homelessness; that the highest rates of homelessness were found in the state's more rural school districts; and that students experiencing homelessness in Detroit are significantly undercounted. These findings are significant because they reveal that many children experiencing homelessness are located in the least-resourced school districts. This is particularly harmful for children of color experiencing homelessness, many of whom go unidentified. As a result of the report, Detroit Public Schools Community District has improved its identification from 605 homeless students in SY 2015-16, to more than 2,000 homeless students so far in 2021-2022. The school district also has increased staff capacity, growing the McKinney-Vento program from one McKinney-Vento Coordinator to a central team of three staff, and identified and trained points of contact in every school building. The McKinney-Vento Coordinator is also now able to communicate directly with families living in city shelters and connect them to school and early childhood programs.

- Falling through the Cracks: Graduation and Dropout Rates among Michigan's Homeless High School Students was published in 2018 and analyzed then-newly available public education graduation and dropout data (the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) now requires states to publish high school graduation and achievement data for students experiencing homelessness). This report revealed that students experiencing homelessness have the lowest four-year high school graduation rate and highest high school dropout rate of any student group. These data reveal the need for better academic supports for students experiencing homelessness, and can be used by educators and local policymakers to identify early interventions that will lead to improved, on-time graduation for students experiencing homelessness.
- Missing School, Missing a Home: The Link Between Chronic Absenteeism, Economic Instability and Homelessness in Michigan was published in 2018 and used publicly available data to connect the issues of chronic absenteeism, economic hardship, and homelessness. Of particular importance was the timing of its release, as Michigan was in the process of implementing a law that holds back any student who does not reach third grade reading proficiency. Among its findings, the report notes that students experiencing homelessness have the highest rate of chronic absenteeism in Michigan – 40%, or 2.5 times the statewide average. Understanding the impacts of homelessness on school attendance helps strengthen the conversation about academic interventions and other actions that practitioners and policymakers can take to support students experiencing homelessness.
- Homelessness in Early Childhood [Published in June 2019]: Michigan League for Public Policy and Poverty Solutions collaborated to analyze the characteristics of children experiencing homelessness between birth and age 4. Noting the critical importance of enrolling in a high-quality early childhood program, they identified low enrollment rates of children experiencing homelessness in home visiting and center-based programs. Because there is not a single dataset available for children experiencing homelessness ages birth through four, enrollment data of 1st grade students experiencing homelessness and assumed the same percentage of younger children.

Recognizing Trauma: Why School Discipline Reform Needs to Consider Student Homelessness

This report, published in May 2021 by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, uses data from the Michigan Department of Education to explore suspension and expulsion rates among students who have experienced homelessness compared to their housed peers. The analysis finds both currently and formerly homeless students face much higher rates of disciplinary action. Policy recommendations are provided.

Key Findings:

- Housed students who were economically disadvantaged were suspended at rates close to three times those of their housed peers who were not economically disadvantaged (11% vs. 4%, respectively), and homeless students faced even higher rates of disciplinary action (at 16%).
- The association between homelessness and higher rates of disciplinary action persisted even after stable housing was found. Michigan students who were currently housed but had experienced homelessness at any point in the last eight years were disciplined at rates even higher than their currently homeless peers (18% vs. 16%, respectively).
- While across all races and ethnicities the same pattern persists, with formerly homeless students facing the highest rates of suspension and expulsion, Black students are disproportionately impacted.
- Even very young elementary students who experienced homelessness faced high rates of suspension, with disciplinary action rates on par with high school students who had never experienced homelessness.

As a result of this report, language on homelessness has been added to pending discipline reform bills in the Michigan State Senate. If passed, homelessness would be added as an 8th factor of consideration prior to any suspension or expulsion.

In August 2021, Poverty Solutions published The Educational Implications of Homelessness and Housing Instability in Detroit. The report analyzed data from the MERI-Michigan Education Data Center alongside data from Detroit community surveys, and found that approximately 88% of children experiencing homelessness in Detroit City Public Schools (DCPS) went unidentified during SY2017-2018. Specifically, students in middle school and children in early intervention programs were the least likely to be identified. The report notes that since those data were collected, DCPS has identified a homeless point of contact for each building within the district, and provides increased training for all staff.