

### RESEARCH BRIEF

## Educational Disengagement of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

*The purpose of this study was to describe the characteristics and experiences as well as the educational engagement of homeless and unstably housed youth in comparison to that of their peers.*

### BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Engagement in school has been shown to be a prosocial resource (Bender, 2012; Snyder & Smith, 2015; Thompson et al., 2010), a resilient factor for children with maltreatment history (Hyman, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2011; Masten et al., 2008; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004), and a source of critical social capital (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Kao & Rutherford, 2007). While multiple studies have examined school engagement patterns of homeless and unstably housed youth using qualitative methods (Thompson & Bender, 2010; Yoder et al., 2014, 2015), few studies have employed a quantitative approach. Using a combination of approaches ensures that the limitations of one type of data are balanced by the strengths of another and that understanding is improved by integrating different ways of knowing.

This exploratory study examines the characteristics, experiences, and educational outcomes for homeless and unstably housed youth in Hennepin County, Minnesota using quantitative data integrated across housing services, child welfare, and education. A peer reference group is employed for contextual and comparative purposes. The study is grounded in the understanding that school engagement is a major protective factor for youth who experience external chaos in their ecological environment. The study addressed the following questions:

1. *What are the characteristics of homeless and unstably housed youth?*
2. *Do homeless and unstably housed youth have different histories of child welfare involvement than their peers?*
3. *How do educational engagement patterns differ for homeless and unstably housed youth as compared to their peers?*



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ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL HAS BEEN SHOWN TO BE A PROSOCIAL RESOURCE, A RESILIENT FACTOR FOR CHILDREN WITH MALTREATMENT HISTORY, AND A SOURCE OF CRITICAL SOCIAL CAPITAL.  
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## METHODS

*Records of youth (aged 16-24 years) receiving services from YouthLink and Hennepin County shelters in 2011 were used to identify young people who were homeless or unstably housed. Key outcomes of interest for comparison between homeless and unstably housed youth and their peers included previous child welfare service receipt (child protection, out-of-home placement, and children's mental health) as well as school attendance and graduation.*

## FINDINGS

*Homeless and unstably housed youth were demographically dissimilar from and had much higher rates of child welfare service receipt than their peers. Homeless and unstably housed youth disengaged from school at higher rates and at an earlier age than their peers. Homeless and unstably housed youth also graduated at much lower rates than their peers – a trend that remained consistent across racial categories.*

Through Minn-LInK, we matched education records from the Minnesota Department of Education (AY 2001-2014) and Child Protective Services (CPS), Out-of-Home Placement (OHP), and Children's Mental Health (CMH) records from the Minnesota Department of Human Services (2000-2014). The study cohort included unstably housed youth aged 16 to 24 who accessed services through YouthLink (n=1,251) – a nonprofit serving youth experiencing homelessness and youth unstably housed – or a Hennepin County-contracted shelter (n=849) during 2011.

We created a reference group (n=5,820) from a random sample of the general student population, stratified by age and district of residence. This reference group was not meant to serve as a quasi-experimental control but rather to highlight differences between homeless and unstably housed youth and their Hennepin County peers. District of residence was restricted to districts where most homeless and unstably housed students lived, including Minneapolis, Brooklyn Center, Richfield, Robbinsdale, Bloomington, Anoka-Hennepin, Osseo, St. Louis Park, and Hopkins.

School disengagement was defined as less than 90% attendance during a full-time enrollment record. Any youth that did not graduate for any reason was included as a non-graduate. Involvement in CPS, OHP, or CMH was determined by workgroup records within each category. As such, CPS involvement represents reports of maltreatment receiving an assessment or investigation response, regardless of the result.

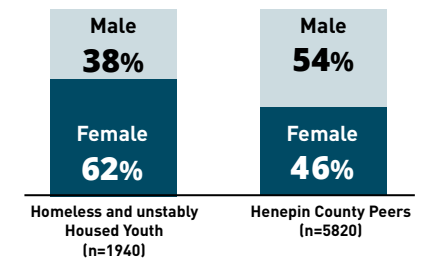
## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

This study examined the educational outcomes of youth aged 16-24 who had experienced homelessness or unstable housing, defined as having accessed services to address homelessness in 2011 in Hennepin County, Minnesota. This exploratory quantitative research both describes this cohort as well as crosses the youth's history against child welfare and education data. Comparative assessment was made possible by creating a reference group of similar youth based on age and district enrollment.

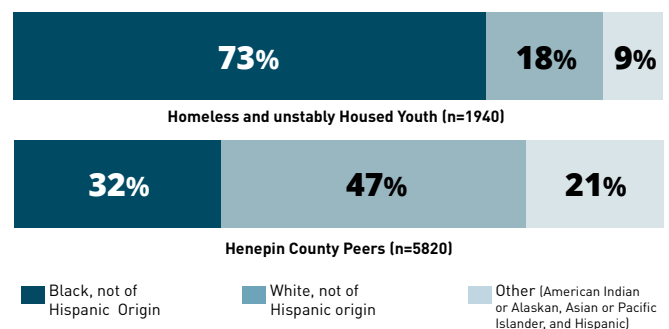
The majority (62%) of the homeless and unstably housed cohort was female whereas less than half (46%) of the peer reference group was female (see Figure 1). Differences between the two groups may be due to the fact that the homeless and unstably housed cohort is partially comprised of youth accessing homeless shelters and females with children are often given preference.

As seen in Figure 2, the vast majority of the homeless and unstably housed cohort (73%) was Black whereas only 35% of the peer group identified as Black. In fact, the peer group was largely comprised of White youth (47%) whereas only 18% of the homeless and unstably housed cohort was White. The remaining 9% of the homeless and unstably housed cohort encompassed all other racial and ethnic groups. The disproportionate representation of Black youth in the homeless and unstably housed cohort coincides with Amherst Wilder Foundation's ongoing single day counts of homeless youth over

**Figure 1.**  
**Demographic Composition by Sex**



**Figure 2.**  
**Demographic Composition by Race/Ethnicity**

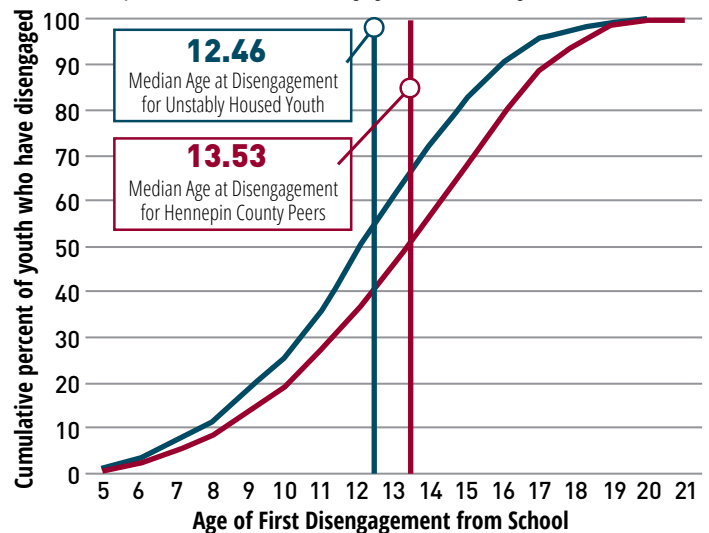


the last decade (Amherst Wilder Foundation, 2016). In their most recent count, Amherst Wilder Foundation found 63% of homeless youth (aged 18-24) were Black with only 16% identifying as White. The disproportionate number of Black youth in the homeless population has been consistent for close to 10 years (Amherst Wilder Foundation, 2016). Several possibilities underlie this result. Poverty has a larger impact on communities of color. Further, the interventions to assist youth who are homeless might be more effective for White youth, resulting in a higher proportion of Black youth continuing with unstable housing.

The homeless and unstably housed cohort showed a significant degree of child welfare involvement (inclusive of involvement in child protection, out-of-home placement, and children’s mental health) as compared to the peer group (Figure 3). Of the three child welfare areas examined, the study revealed that almost half (45%) of homeless and unstably housed youth had a child protection history. In addition, one third of the homeless and unstably housed cohort experienced at least one out-of-home placement compared to only 8% of the peer group. The high rate of child welfare involvement in the homeless and unstably housed group may be related to the racial disproportionality evident in child protection, where Black children are disproportionately represented in both child protection cases and out-of-home placements.

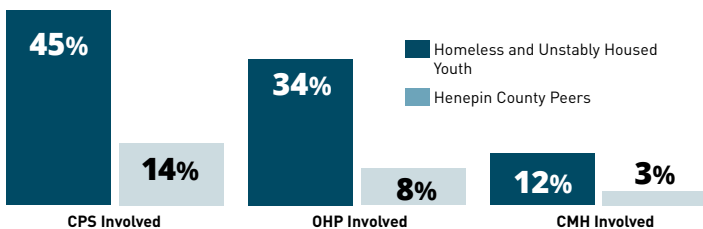
more prevalent throughout their academic career, from age 5 through age 17. This finding may reflect the high degree of child welfare involvement of the cohort; school disruption has been shown to be associated with child welfare involvement and have ongoing effects on youth’s education (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009).

**Figure 4.**  
**Educational Disengagement of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth and Their Peers**  
*(of youth who had ever disengaged and did not graduate)*



The overall graduation rate for the homeless and unstably housed cohort was half of that of their peers; 31% of homeless and unstably housed youth graduated as compared to 62% of their peers. This pattern held across racial groups; however, the differences between the study cohort and peer group’s graduation rates varied across racial groups. The largest difference between graduation rates occurred for White youth – a difference of 44% between homeless and unstably housed youth and their peers. Graduation rates evident in this study reflect similar disparities evident across the state of Minnesota in which the graduation rate of Black youth was 49% (MDE, 2014) whereas the rate of White youth was 82%. Interestingly, the current study found no disparity between the graduation rates of Black and White youth when comparing the homeless and unstably housed cohort. It appears that homelessness and unstable housing has a profound impact on White youth’s graduation rates as compared to those of Black youth.

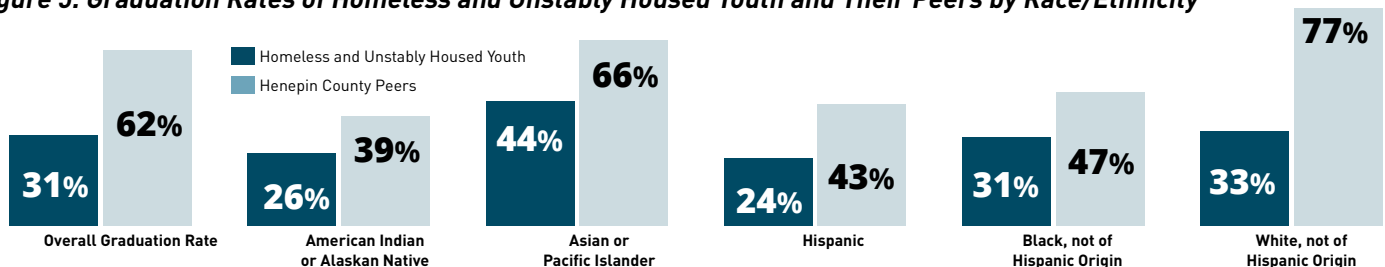
**Figure 3.**  
**Demographic Composition by Child Welfare Involvement**



## EDUCATIONAL DISENGAGEMENT

Findings revealed that homeless and unstably housed youth experienced school disengagement – attending school less than 90% of the time –at least one year earlier, on average, than their peers. (See Figure 4.) Further, the disengagement of homeless and unstably housed youth was significantly

**Figure 5. Graduation Rates of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth and Their Peers by Race/Ethnicity**



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## Conclusion

This study examined educational engagement patterns of homeless and unstably housed youth as compared to those of their peers. By integrating data across housing services, child welfare, and education, we hope to shed light on the outcomes of youth experiencing homelessness and unstable housing and to understand, through quantitative methods, the variables affecting outcomes. We began this study with a foundational understanding that school engagement is a crucial factor for resilience and protection against future poverty and social chaos. This study contributes to the discussion of well-being for youth and locates school engagement as a core well-being attribute.

Findings revealed that Black youth were disproportionately represented in the homeless and unstably housed youth cohort; as a group, homeless and unstably housed youth had disproportionate rates of child protection involvement and out-of-home placement. Homeless and unstably housed youth experienced school disengagement at younger ages and at higher rates than their peers. They also graduated at lower rates than their peers. While differences among graduation rates by race/ethnicity were apparent, graduation disparities found between White and Black youth disappeared in the homeless and unstably housed cohort. This is critical information for both community and school social services staff. Early school disengagement may be viewed as a warning sign of struggle which requires effective, immediate intervention with the goal of creating secure school connections. Rouse & Fantuzzo (2009) sum up the complexity of school engagement: "Enhancing the educational well-being of young children with disproportionate risks requires intentional, systematic, and comprehensive interventions that can only be done through such collaboration." This intentionality and consideration is of utmost importance for youth experiencing homelessness and unstable housing.

### LIMITATIONS

*The peer group match was based on age and district enrollment. While this gives a broad definition of "peer group", additional data variables would enrich the outcomes. When using secondary data sources for research we are limited by access and privacy statutes. The study lacks juvenile justice data which has shown to be a major factor for educational outcomes. This study would be further enhanced by the inclusion of economic data.*

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