

Homelessness as a Risk Factor for School Disciplinary Outcomes

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers, educators, and other professionals engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-Link Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful dialogue about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

Experiences of homelessness can undermine academic success, health, and well-being among school-aged children. Homelessness also places students at a higher risk for school disciplinary outcomes. In this issue, we were interested in understanding the impact of homelessness on the disciplinary outcomes of school-aged children over time. We found that experiences of poverty and homelessness were the most salient predictors of out-of-school suspensions. Additionally, children in 7th grade were at the highest risk for out-of-school suspensions. Ethnic-racial minorities (except for Asian students), had higher rates of out-of-school suspensions when compared to White students. Female students, on average, had lower out-of-school suspension rates than male students.

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. This study found that experiences of poverty and homelessness were the most salient predictors of out-of-school suspensions. How can school administrators go about identifying children who are at highest risk for out-of-school suspensions? How can we train educators to be aware of children most at risk, and use alternative disciplinary strategies with these children? How can you promote an inclusive environment within schools where children experiencing homelessness feel welcome, and not ostracized?
2. There is a need for interventions to prevent and/or reduce out-of-school suspensions, especially for children who are in middle school. What kinds of interventions should be created for these children? What would be an effective way to teach children about emotion regulation and coping strategies? Should these interventions occur in the classroom, with the whole class? Or would it be better for these interventions to be exclusive for children who are most at-risk in small groups or one-on-one?
3. Students in the 7th grade are at the highest risk for out-of-school suspension. Should middle-school teachers be required to complete specialized education on how to handle disciplinary issues? What factors are unique to middle schoolers that can explain this? What is a possible explanation for the decline in suspensions from 8th-12th grade?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. Policy-level change is needed to reduce student homelessness and poverty. What policies and practices are currently in place that combat these issues in your state and school system? Are these policies and practices sufficient? How could they be improved? What valuable resources are available in your community?
2. When compared to White students, out-of-school suspensions were more likely for Black, Native American, and Latinx students. Should administrators and teachers in your district complete cultural humility/bias training to address some of these disparities? If these trainings already exist, how can these trainings be improved? How can you ensure that the disciplinary practices that are utilized in your school district are trauma-informed and free of racial bias?