

Home for the holidays (part one)

The impact of housing instability on students

by Shannah Cariño, District Homeless Liaison and McKinney Vento Specialist, Akron Public Schools

“There’s no place like home for the holidays....” The beloved Christmas song couldn’t be more right. Homeless families with children struggle on many fronts, and this can be particularly acute during the holiday season. But stories of great resilience arise for even their youngest members, and with support from the community there can be help, hope, and solutions.

In this two-part series, Big Ideas explores family homelessness at the holidays - and throughout the year. This week, the column welcomes guest contributor Shannah Cariño. Ms. Cariño fills a crucial role in the Akron Public School system at [Project Rise](#) as the District Homeless Liaison and McKinney-Vento Specialist. She and her team work to ensure students without a stable nighttime residence have access to the same education as students who are housed. With federal funds from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Akron Public Schools delivers special programming designed to identify all students experiencing homelessness and remove barriers to education and stability. The team can assist in ensuring an array of basic needs are met for these youth through community referrals, school stability, supplies, hygiene products, transportation assistance, and more.

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Every year, around 2,000 Akron Public Schools’ students will experience housing instability. That’s roughly 10% of our student population. On the tails of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as related aid runs dry, our local families are facing more complex

barriers than ever to their housing stability. Homelessness in greater Akron is lasting longer and shelters are struggling to meet need.

Shelter is one of our core physiological needs, sitting at the very base of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid. But humans - and especially children - actually need more than just shelter to thrive. They need a true home and all the stability, routine, and comfort that comes with it. A safe place to decompress, a quiet space to rest or do homework, their own bed with accompanying morning and night-time routines, and a consistent haven they know will be there for them today and tomorrow.

It comes as no surprise - when children experience homelessness and all the instability that accompanies it, they face many negative outcomes. According to the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), these youth have higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems; have increased risk of serious health problems; and are more likely to experience separations from their families.

Negative impact also presents in the educational arena - making school a natural place to provide targeted intervention. Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to move schools, repeat a grade, be expelled or drop out of school, and have lower academic performance. They miss more days of school than their housed peers, score lower on standardized tests, and have a lower graduation rate. National data shows that the longer the student experiences homelessness, the greater the detrimental impact on their education.

In addition to daily support like that provided by Project Rise, the very stability of the school community must also be protected for these youth - and federal law empowers public schools to do so. Many of our APS schools are a place of stability and comfort and it would be detrimental to bounce around schools as they are also moving around nightly. The daily impact on school-aged students varies, but we find that when days start in unpredictable ways (where am I staying?, how am I going to get to school?, what is my teacher going to say when I walk in late?) - they

have less security which can equate to poorer academic performance and even mental health challenges over time.

The negative impacts of family homelessness are magnified during the holiday season - adding an extra layer of stress to these families and an extra element of loss. Family members often feel a particular type of desperation during the holidays. These families are not able to provide all the beloved holiday extras for their children. They may skip established holiday traditions and miss opportunities to make new ones. Further, although many community services are still open and still helping families navigate homelessness - school is closed. The lack of routine and school meals can magnify an already stressful time. Finally, homeless families tend to be more mobile during the holidays, meaning services like Project Rise struggle to keep connected and maintain stable support.

While the need is deep and roadblocks can be high, there is much we can do to support these families and especially their children. Community awareness of resources like Project Rise is critical - at the holidays and throughout the year. Project Rise stays open year round to maximize availability, supports, and referrals. We spend a lot of time and resources finding the families who have lost housing and appreciate all referrals from those in the community who know of families who lost housing. Another large piece of this work is to continue building robust community partnerships to provide safety nets for these families. The partnership between Community Legal Aid and Project Rise is a good example, as we are able to send complicated housing and financial matters to CLA's attorneys for families who need legal solutions. Working together as a community to help families stay housed - and create homes - should be a priority at the holidays...and year round.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

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