Factors That Can Make a Difference in Meeting the Needs of Homeless Students in Schools: Perceptions of District Homeless Liaisons in Ohio

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Dedication

To my family and friends, near and far, whose support and encouragement made this journey possible.

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Factors That Can Make a Difference in Meeting the Needs of Homeless Students in Schools: Perceptions of District Homeless Liaisons in Ohio

The needs of homeless students are significant and varied. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act helps ensure homeless students can access a quality education. One of the key provisions is the requirement that all LEAs identify a liaison to be in charge of meeting the needs of homeless students. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of district liaisons in regard to the needs of the homeless students they serve and the factors that facilitate and hinder their ability to meet these needs. The study was designed as a qualitative study relying primarily on interviews with 20 liaisons from a representative sample of districts in the state of Ohio.

The findings indicate that homeless students face a number of needs, including access to basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter, and transportation, and to social services including mental health services and drug treatment centers. Liaisons indicated that they played a less direct role in supporting students' academic needs, instead relying on school-based staff members to support homeless students' academic needs.

Liaisons identified a number of factors that facilitate and hinder their ability to meet the needs of their homeless students. The availability or lack of district resources like funding and personnel were especially important. In some districts, superintendents had prioritized hiring additional social or community workers. Liaisons indicated they relied a great deal on the support of these personnel. Further, the availability (or lack) of community-based service agencies greatly impacted liaisons' work.

Finally, liaisons faced a number of competing demands that made their roles challenging. The vast majority of liaisons held another full-time role in the district, meaning they had limited time to devote to the role of liaison. Liaisons also indicated that navigating both community perceptions of homelessness (whether identified families were “truly” homeless or deserving of support) and the proper role of the school in the community were added challenges.

These findings suggest that additional personnel to help meet the needs of homeless students and greater coordination between schools and social service agencies would benefit both liaisons and the homeless students they serve.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Nearly 11 million people experience homelessness at some point each year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2015). These individuals are some of society's most vulnerable, facing a host of challenges including mental disorders, substance abuse, trauma, and domestic violence (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013).

When families with children experience homelessness, the challenges become more complex. Homelessness can damage the physical and emotional health of family members, can disrupt children's education and development, and can result in the separation of family members (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Homeless families tend to fall into one of three categories. Seventy to 80 percent of homeless families are temporarily homeless, meaning that they remain homeless for a short amount of time, typically three to six months. Twenty to 25 percent of homeless families are considered "long stayers," meaning that they experience an episode of homelessness lasting one year or more. Finally, between 5 and 16 percent of homeless families are episodically homeless, meaning that they cycle frequently in and out of episodes of homelessness (Thiele & McDonald, 2012). In all, about 2.5 million children and youth in the United States—one in 30—experience homelessness each year (Bassuk, DeCadia, Beach, & Berman, 2014).

In the 2013-14 school year, nearly 1.3 million of these homeless children and youth were enrolled in the k-12 public education system. Most (76 percent) were "doubled up," meaning that they were temporarily living with another family. Fourteen percent were living in shelters, six percent in hotels or motels, and three percent were unsheltered (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016b).

Though the effects of homelessness are difficult to disentangle from the larger effects of poverty, the children and youth who grow up experiencing homelessness face numerous challenges and barriers to their success. Some research indicates that children without a home are in fair or poor health twice as often as their non-poor peers, and have higher rates of asthma, ear infections, stomach problems, and speech problems. They also experience more mental health problems and are twice as likely to experience hunger (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Such experiences have harmful effects on a child's ability to gain a high-quality education, which in turn has a negative impact on their ability to live stable, productive adult lives. Homeless children face additional educational barriers that their low-income housed peers may not experience, including barriers to enrollment, poor and sporadic attendance, lack of transportation, inability to obtain necessary documentation, and lack of clothing and school supplies. In short, "the educational deficits that homeless youth develop are serious economic, social, and health handicaps for their reintegration into society as they become adults" (Shane, 1996, p. 32).

Research Purpose and Research Questions

Homelessness can be devastating to a child's educational outcomes. Through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, the federal government has taken steps to help support homeless students and improve their access to educational opportunities. Originally passed in 1987, the goal of this legislation is to ensure homeless children have access to the supports and protections they need to access a free and appropriate education. When the law was reauthorized in 2001, a new district-based support structure was added: the amendments required school districts to designate one individual as a homeless liaison to work directly with homeless students to remove barriers to their educations.

This research seeks to better understand what district liaisons perceive to be the needs of the students and families they serve and the factors that they perceive to both facilitate and hinder their ability to do so. It will answer the following two research questions:

1. What do LEA homeless liaisons perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students and families they serve?
    a. What are the students' particular needs related to education?
    b. What are the liaisons' priorities in serving homeless students? What considerations led to their current focus?
    c. What are other conflicting priorities in the context of liaisons' broader responsibilities?
2. What factors do LEA homeless liaisons perceive to facilitate and constrain their ability to support homeless students and families?

An important point of analysis for the findings of these two research questions will be to better understand whether liaisons' perceptions of student need and factors that facilitate and hinder their ability to serve homeless students vary by any factors related to the district context (its poverty level or geographic location, for example). While these factors are not explicit research questions, this information is pertinent to fully understanding the findings of the study's two research questions, and thus a discussion of them is included throughout this dissertation.

Context

National Homelessness

The face of homelessness is changing. Although a majority of the homeless population in 2014 was comprised of individual adults, approximately 38 percent were families (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015). Between 2010 and 2013, the number of homeless children and youth enrolled in public school districts nationwide increased by more than 18 percent. By the 2013-14 school year, nearly 1.3 million homeless students were enrolled in public schools nationwide (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2016b).

Poverty in Education

Study after study has demonstrated that socioeconomic status is one of the strongest predictors of a child's educational success (Reardon, 2011). Children who grow up in poor families experience poor health, limited access to language-rich home environments, low birth weight, limited access to high-quality preschool, less participation in educational summer and after school programs, and more movement in and out of schools compared to their peers not growing up in poverty (Ladd, 2012). Subsequently, these children complete fewer years of school, earn less money, work fewer hours, receive more government aid, and are more likely to have chronic poor health than their non-poor peers (Coley & Baker, 2013).

Homeless children experience many of these same barriers and challenges. Though the situations of homeless children are further compounded by the lack of stable housing, there remains some uncertainty as to whether the impacts of poverty have an even greater impact on homeless children and youth compared to poor children growing up in residentially stable environments (Miller, 2011). A 1994 study compared the academic outcomes of homeless and low-income housed students and found that there were few discernable differences between the housed poor and the homeless (Ziesemer, Marcoux, & Marwell, 1994). Other findings indicate that the length of time a student is exposed to homelessness appears to be relevant in determining how much homelessness affects students' schooling outcomes (Barwich & Siegel, 1996; Shinn, Williams, Carlin-Mathis, Becker-Klein, & Weitzman., 2008). Nonetheless, poverty—and homelessness—remains a positive predictor of poor educational outcomes.

Some barriers do differentially impact homeless students. Research completed in 2005 estimates that 41 percent of homeless children will attend two different schools, and 28 percent will attend three or more schools, within one academic year (Miller, 2009). Every time a child changes schools, his or her education is disrupted. According to some estimates, three to six months of education are lost with every school transfer (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007b).

Further, homeless children face barriers to even enrolling in school: they may be unable to meet enrollment requirements, lack transportation, lack school supplies and appropriate clothing, and often face poor health, fatigue, hunger, and suffer from emotional crises and mental health issues resulting from housing instability (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007b).

Policy Background

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act

In 1987, amid growing concern about the challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness, Congress passed the Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act.

The act was renamed the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act shortly thereafter, in honor of its chief Republican sponsor, Stewart B. McKinney, who died soon after the law was passed. The original law consisted of fifteen programs providing services to homeless individuals. Services ranged from emergency shelters to job training and education (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996). Title VII of the act authorized several programs related to education, training, and community service programs for homeless individuals. Among these programs was the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987).

The program required that states ensure homeless children and youth have access to a free and appropriate education, including amending any existing residency requirements that may inhibit homeless children or youth from enrolling in school; establishing or designating a state-level Office of Coordinator for Education of Homeless Children and Youth; and ensuring that LEAs allow homeless children to remain in their school of origin; and provide identified children and youth with education services comparable to their stably-housed peers. (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). From the beginning, the goal of the EHCY program has been to “mitigate the effects of residential instability through the identification of homeless children in school and the provision of services, including expedited enrollment, transportation to school, tutoring, and mental and physical health referrals” (Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010).

Amendments to the legislation passed in 1990 further enhanced the educational opportunities available to homeless children. These amendments required state homeless education coordinators to look beyond residency issues toward other potential barriers that kept homeless children out of school. States were required to review and revise all policies, practices, laws, and regulations that might act as barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children. Appropriations were increased significantly from 1987 levels to support the additional required services (Bowman, Endres, & Moore, 2013).

In 1994 the education subtitle of the McKinney Act, including the EHCY program, was incorporated into the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), known as the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). As part of IASA, the McKinney Act increased legal protections for homeless children to ensure greater access to appropriate education services.

The McKinney Act was renamed the McKinney-Vento Act in 2000 in honor of Bruce Vento, one of the original sponsors of the law. The 2001 reauthorization of ESEA, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), again reauthorized the EHCY program. Additional supports were incorporated into the law and states and local education agencies (LEAs_ were given greater flexibility in their use of McKinney-Vento funds (Bowman et al., 2013). A key provision of the 2001 reauthorization was the requirement for all LEAs to designate a homeless liaison to be responsible for identifying homeless students and ensuring they have access to the provisions required under the law. The McKinney-Vento Act was most recently reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015.

One critical component of the McKinney-Vento legislation is its definition of "homeless." There is no universally agreed-upon federal definition of homeless; federal agencies craft their own definitions. According to the McKinney-Vento Act, the term "homeless children and youths" means:

- Children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are abandoned in hospitals;
- Children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a private or public place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; and
- Children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings, and some migratory children (McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act, 2001b).

The inclusion of children who are "doubled up" (sharing housing with another family) distinguishes the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness from that of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Miller, 2011).

Funding

The McKinney-Vento Act authorizes the U.S. Department of Education to provide grants to state education agencies (SEAs) to "ensure that homeless children and youth have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including public preschool education, as is provided to other children and youth" (Bowman et al., 2013, p.

4). The grants are based on a proportion of a state's Title I federal allocation. They are used to:

- Carry out the policies in the Act;
- Provide activities to ensure that homeless children and youth can enroll in, attend, and succeed in school;
- Establish an Office of Coordinator for Education of Homeless Children and Youth;
- Carry out the state plan for serving homeless children and youth; and
- Create and implement professional development programs for school personnel to heighten their awareness of and capacity to respond to specific problems in the education of homeless children and youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a; Bowman et al., 2013).

SEAs must distribute no less than 75 percent of their annual McKinney-Vento allocation to LEAS via subgrants (Bowman et al., 2013). The rest can be retained for state-level activities. In total in FY14, states and territories received approximately $65 million in McKinney-Vento funds. Estimated funds for FY15 and FY16 also amount to $65 million (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). However, in 2015 ESSA authorized $85 million for each of fiscal years 2017 though 2020, a 31 percent increase over current appropriations (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2015).

Subgrants are awarded competitively to LEAs based on their need and the quality of their application. As of the 2013-14 school year, approximately 25 percent of LEAs nationwide received McKinney-Vento subgrants (Endres & Cidade, 2015). Districts that apply for and receive McKinney-Vento subgrants may use the funds to provide before- and after-school programs, additional tutoring, referrals for medical and mental health services, preschool programs, parent education, counseling, social work services, transportation, and other services that many not otherwise be provided (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a; Bowman et al., 2013). However, whether or not they receive a subgrant, all LEAs are required to implement the provisions in the McKinney-Vento Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a).

District Liaisons

The 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act required each LEA to designate one individual as a district liaison. The liaison's role includes ensuring:

- That homeless children and youth are identified;
- That homeless children have "full and equal opportunity" to succeed in school;
- That homeless children and families receive any educational services for which they are eligible, and referrals to other appropriate services;
- That parents/guardians are informed about educational opportunities available to their children;
- That information about the educational rights of homeless children is disseminated;
- That enrollment disputes are mediated in accordance with the law; and
- That the parent/guardian is fully informed of all transportation services available to their child(ren) (McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act, 2001a; U.S. Department of Education, 2004a).

All SEAs are required to have a state plan that includes further district-level responsibilities that the state enforces; subsequently, liaisons may have additional policies that they are responsible for implementing. To further clarify the responsibilities of liaisons, the Department of Education included Standards and Indicators for Quality McKinney-Vento Programs in its Non-Regulatory Guidance. These Standards were most recently revised in 2006 (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Quality Standards and Indicators for LEA Liaisons

Standard Number	**Text**
Standard 1	All homeless students identified and enrolled at the time of the state assessment take the state assessment required for their grade levels.
Standard 2	All homeless students demonstrate academic progress.
Standard 3	All children in homeless situations are identified.
Standard 4	Within one day of an attempt to enroll in school, homeless students are in attendance.
Standard 5	All homeless students experience stability in school.
Standard 6	All homeless students receive specialized and comparable services when eligible.
Standard 7	All preschool-aged homeless children enroll in and attend preschool programs.
Standard 8	All homeless unaccompanied youth enroll in and attend school.
Standard 9	All parents (or persons acting as parents) of homeless children and youth are informed of the educational and related opportunities available to their children and are provided meaningful opportunities to participate in their children's education.
Standard 10	LEAs help with the needs of all homeless children and youth through collaborative efforts both within and beyond the LEA.

Source: Bowman et al., 2013, page 2-4

Implementation

Despite the fact that the McKinney-Vento Act has been in place for nearly three decades, policymakers have limited information about how schools identify homeless children and the specific services that individual children receive (Cunningham et al., 2010).

A 2015 survey of state coordinators and district liaisons found that state coordinators spend most of their time providing technical assistance to districts and coordinating services with other organizations. District liaisons reported that they spend the most time identifying eligible students and ensuring identified students and families receive services (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).

Research has also identified a number of barriers that districts face in successfully educating homeless students. To begin with, during the 2013-14 school year, fewer than 25 percent of LEAs nationwide received a McKinney-Vento subgrant (Endres & Cidade, 2015). This means that more than three-quarters of districts nationwide must provide services to homeless students through their general operating budgets. A recent study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found numerous challenges, including under-reporting of homeless students and challenges identifying them; difficulty coordinating services at the federal, state, and local levels; and limited staff and resources (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). Transportation and "family or student preoccupation with survival needs" were the most-identified barriers to enrollment and attendance for homeless students, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2015b).

Research on EHCY suggests, "The policy has a fundamental, if unfulfilled, role in increasing homeless students' educational opportunities. The policy mandates school and community responsiveness, and, as its rate of implementation grows, more students appear to benefit. Significant implementation obstacles, however, appear to limit its full actualization" (Miller, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on four bodies of literature: the relationship between poverty and achievement; the relationship between homelessness and achievement; a focused review of the implementation literature, concentrated specifically on the implementation of programs in environments with competing demands; and finally, the impact of poverty and geography on educational institutions.

These four bodies of literature combine to create the underlying framework for this study. Specifically, liaisons often function as an intermediary between homeless students and the educational challenges associated with both poverty and homelessness. However, district liaisons also function in a broader context in which factors both in the district (such as policies and priorities set by the central office) and out of the district (its poverty level and geographic location) interact with liaisons' work.

Poverty and Achievement

Poverty has direct, negative impact on children: it increases risk factors and limits protective factors and opportunities for stimulation and enrichment (Engle & Black, 2008). Many studies have documented the negative relationship between poverty and academic outcomes. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely than their non-poor peers to experience low birth weight, which in turn has the potential to negatively impact a child's cognitive and neuropsychological outcomes. Children born with low birth weight score significantly lower on intelligence tests than do children of normal birth weight; they also experience poorer performance in tests of language ability, memory, attention, fine and gross motor coordination, perceptual-motor skills, and nonverbal reasoning and problem solving skills (Hack, Klein, & Taylor, 1995). In addition to lower cognitive and academic performance, research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network has shown that children in chronically impoverished families exhibit more behavior problems than children who are not exposed to poverty (Engle & Black, 2008). As these children grow, they are also more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD or other specific learning disabilities.

In addition to being at greater risk for low birth weight and the associated cognitive and academic challenges, children in poverty are also more likely to have limited access to home environments with rich language and experiences, limited access to high-quality preschool opportunities, less participation in summer and after school enrichment activities, and more movement in and out of schools (Ladd, 2012). All of these risk factors stand to have significant, negative impacts on the educational outcomes of these students.

It is especially troubling when poverty occurs early in a child's life. Children from low-income families enter kindergarten already behind their non-poor peers. Lee and Burkam (2002) found that most American students who start school significantly behind their peers never fully close the reading gap with their kindergarten-ready peers; instead, this gap continues to widen as students progress through school. Engle and Black (2008) estimated that between 30 and 40 percent of children entering kindergarten are not ready for school. They argue that the "consequences of early school failure are increased likelihood of truancy, drop out, and unhealthy or delinquent behaviors" (p. 244). All of these risk factors leave low-income children at risk of being poorly positioned to enroll in college, obtain a high-paying job, and provide for themselves and their families as adults.

Homelessness and Achievement

Homeless students are a particularly vulnerable subgroup of the already-vulnerable low-income student population. Research indicates that students who experience homelessness struggle in many aspects of school; the most common school-related problems among homeless students include achievement difficulties (low grades and test scores), poor school attendance, elevated school transfers, high rates of disability identification, high dropout rates, and violent behavior. However, there remains some uncertainty as to whether these struggles are any different from those documented among students who are low income yet residentially stable (Miller, 2011). Ziesemer et al. (1994) compared the academic outcomes of homeless and low-income housed families and found that there were few discernable differences between the housed poor and the homeless. Other research indicates that the length of time a student is exposed to homelessness is relevant in determining how much homelessness affects students' academic outcomes (Barwich & Siegel, 1996; Shinn et al., 2008). Still other research has found that young homeless children exhibit lower academic achievement compared to low-income housed children (Masten, Sesma, Si-Asar, Lawrence, & Miliotis, 1997; Obradovic, Long, Cutuli, Chan, Hinz, Heistad, & Masten, 2009; Rubin, Erickson, San Agustin, Cleary, Allen, & Cohen, 1996; Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Chen, Rouse, & Culhane, 2012).

Outside of impacts on achievement, homeless students face barriers to school enrollment and stability that their housed peers—regardless of income level—do not encounter. These include being unable to meet enrollment requirements; high mobility resulting in lack of school stability and educational continuity; lack of transportation; lack of school supplies and clothing; poor health, fatigue, and hunger; and emotional crises and mental health issues (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, n.d.). Further, homeless children may face barriers in accessing specific educational programs including special education, Head Start, gifted and talented programming, family literacy programs, and programs for ELL students (Cunningham et al., 2010).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that young homeless children are more likely to have poor attendance records (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Zima, Bussing, Forness, & Benjamin, 1997). Research completed in 2005 estimates that 41 percent of homeless children will attend two different schools, and 28 percent will attend three or more schools, within one academic year (Miller, 2009). Attendance issues stem most commonly from residential instability, which is extremely disruptive. Unpredictable and undesired moves from one’s home adversely affect the family support system and children’s development and well-being (Buckner, 2007).

Further, young homeless children are more likely than their housed low-income peers to have instability in their school environment through multiple, unplanned school moves (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001). This is important as research has documented the wide range of educational outcomes affected by school mobility, such as lower math and reading scores (Mantzicopoulos & Knutsen, 2000; Xu, Hanaway, & D’Souza, 2009), increased risk of behavior problems (Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008; Tucker, Marx, & Long, 1998), and higher likelihood of being held back (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Tucker et al., 1998).

The negative relationship between school mobility and academic achievement is particularly pronounced among students from large urban school districts making intra-district moves (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Fantuzzo et al. (2012) found that, after accounting for demographic characteristics related to educational well being, the combined experience of homelessness and school mobility was related to both poor academic achievement and problems in classroom engagement. Furthermore, they find that experiencing both homelessness and school mobility was associated with higher risk for poor educational well being than experiencing either homelessness or school mobility alone. Their findings suggest that instability in both home and schooling environments is associated with the poorest educational outcomes. This instability tends to have a greater negative impact on reading than math. This is consistent with a large body of research that shows that early social interactions, particularly with parents in a stable home environment, are necessary to support the early development of language and literacy skills (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995).

Policy Implementation: Competing Demands

Liaisons do not function in isolation; the ability to fulfill the requirements of the law is impacted by a number of outside forces. To begin with, liaisons have limited time and resources available to them; as a result they are often forced to make difficult tradeoffs among students and supports to ensure that their efforts make the greatest impacts possible for the students they serve. Further, not all districts receive McKinney-Vento subgrants; yet whether or not a liaison has additional funds to support her work, she must fulfill the requirements of the law. In addition, liaisons are not typically dedicated full-time to this particular role; many hold other full-time positions within the district ranging from building principal to social worker to central office administrator. The level of training and focus on homelessness and homeless students varies widely by districts as well, creating varying and uneven support for liaisons and their work.

Additionally, there are a number of contextual characteristics that can serve as barriers. First, liaisons may face a host of school-level barriers including challenges identifying and enrolling homeless students, ensuring adequate transportation to and from school, a lack of accountability at all levels, and a lack of coordination among services both within the district and with the broader community (Rosenfeld, 2003; Holtzman, 2013; Ascher & Phedix, 2006). Second, liaisons face constraints stemming from their broader context. Districts are implementing a large number of policies at any given time; these reflect both federal and state-mandated policies as well as internal priorities. All of these policies place competing demands on districts for already-limited human and financial resources, forcing districts to make difficult decisions about how to allocate limited resources.

Liaisons may also face conflicting views about the importance of supporting homeless students among school personnel, and varying levels of support from colleagues and the district as a whole.

The Impact of District Poverty Level and Geography

Even within the same state, district context varies significantly. The poverty level of the district and the district's geography are two of the main factors that may impact the work of liaisons. To begin with, research has long demonstrated that the poverty level of a district or school affects the day-to-day experience of its personnel. Students living in poverty often exhibit behavioral and academic challenges that place a strain on teachers and staff members; these challenges are magnified when there are concentrated numbers of students in a given school or district. High-poverty schools often have lower-quality resources, larger class sizes, less qualified teachers, higher rates of teacher turnover, poor working conditions, lower quality leadership, and lower quality school cultures compared to those with lower levels of poverty (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Kraft, Papay, Charner-Laird, Johnson, Ng, & Reinhorn, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2013). All of these factors impact the work of liaisons.

The urbanicity of a district—whether it is located in a rural, suburban, or urban environment—also impacts the level of resources liaisons have at their disposal. In particular, the geographic location impacts liaisons' access to service providers and transportation—two critical supports for their work with homeless students.

Significance of Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand what Ohio's homeless liaisons perceive to be the needs of the homeless students and families they serve, and what factors they perceive to facilitate and inhibit their ability to serve homeless students.

There is limited research on the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act from the perspective of the district liaisons. This research is a starting point to filling that gap. Many districts have limited capacity to fully meet the needs of their homeless students. As a result, this research may serve to identify important obstacles to supporting homeless students at the state and district levels. State-level policymakers can draw on these findings in setting priorities, allocating resources, and taking steps to remove existing barriers. District-level policymakers can use the information to design policies and programs to support the homeless students they serve.

Overview of Methodology

The overall goal of this research is to better understand the perspectives of homeless liaisons in Ohio's school districts, in particular what they perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students and families they serve and what factors facilitate and hinder their ability to serve their students.

Three factors were anticipated to impact the work of the district liaisons: the poverty level of the district in which they work, the size of the district in which they work, and the geographic location of the district in which they work. The Ohio Department of Education has created a typology to categorize its districts by these three variables. Based on this typology, Ohio's 609 school districts are categorized into eight types. This typology was used to stratify the districts; a representative sample of 20 districts was chosen at random from each of the eight categories.

For each district, any district-level documentation regarding the role of the homeless liaison and/or supports for homeless students was analyzed and the liaison was interviewed. All interviews were semi-structured, using an interview protocol that included primary questions, follow-ups, and probes.

Interview data were analyzed through four rounds of coding: attribute, structural, descriptive, and pattern (Saldana, 2009). First, attribute codes were used to apply descriptive codes to the data (district poverty level, urbanicity, etc.). The second round of coding was structural coding, where short, one- to three-word codes were assigned to portions of data. These codes corresponded directly to each of the two research questions. Round three of coding applied descriptive codes to sections of data. These codes emerged from the ideas presented by participants, rather than from the pre-determined research questions. The final round of coding was pattern coding in which descriptive codes were organized into groups, or patterns. These pattern codes consisted of thematic or categorical codes and formed the basis of the findings of this study.

NVivo, a qualitative research analysis software, was used to help code and organize the data. The results are presented in graphic and narrative format throughout chapter four.

Delimitations and Limitations

There are several delimitations with respect to the scope of the study and the data collection process. First, this study was delimited to only one portion of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act: the homeless liaisons themselves and their perceptions with respect to their priorities and the factors that facilitate and inhibit their work. This study did not attempt to compare liaisons' reported priorities to their job description under the law; neither did it attempt to measure the quality or level of implementation of services in any of the districts. While these are certainly research questions worth exploring, this study focused on liaisons' perceptions of their priorities and their capacity to implement them, and barriers and facilitators to their work. Interviews were also limited to district liaisons working in traditional school districts. The study did not include the perspectives of parents, teachers, students, counselors, or other district officials regarding the services in place for homeless students. Neither did it explore the ways charter schools, micro-schools, virtual schools, or other nontraditional schools implement the legislation. Furthermore, this study made no attempt to judge the quality of services provided to homeless students; nor does it attempt to draw a connection between services provided and the academic outcomes of the homeless student population.

The study's findings faced several limitations as well. First and foremost, the implications of the qualitative interviews are limited in scope. While the use of the Ohio Department of Education's district typology was an attempt to ensure that a representative sample of districts was included in the study, there are no doubt perspectives that were not captured by the study's sample. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to all districts in Ohio or to districts and states outside of Ohio. Despite these limitations, the information and insights gathered from the interviewees and document analysis provides a starting point from which policymakers can inform future policy development and programs to support homeless students.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter presents an overview of and foundation for the study. It identifies challenges faced by low-income and homeless individuals, in particular low-income and homeless children and youth. It also provides an overview of the history and requirements of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act. This chapter also described the purpose and potential significance of the study: to better understand how liaisons perceive their priorities for serving homeless students and families, and the facilitators and barriers they face in doing so. Finally, this chapter provides an overview of the study methodology and its limitations.

The remainder of the study is organized into four additional chapters, followed by a reference list and appendices. The second chapter provides an overview of the conceptual framework and the relevant literature on the educational outcomes of students in poverty, the educational outcomes of homeless students, and the implementation literature pertaining to competing demands in school districts. Chapter three describes the methodology used, including the study design, population and sample, procedures for data collection and analysis, efforts to promote quality, and ethical considerations. Chapter four presents the findings for each research question, and chapter five presents the interpretations of the study findings, conclusions, and implications for policy and further research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature relevant to the study. It begins with an overview of the McKinney-Vento Act, including a summary of its key provisions by topic area. It provides an overview of the conceptual framework and then moves to a discussion of the impacts of poverty and homelessness on children and youth. The next sections present the literature relevant to each of the two research questions. Finally, a discussion of two district-level contextual factors that can impact liaisons' work, the poverty level and geographic location of the district, is included.

Overview of the McKinney-Vento Act

In 1987 Congress passed legislation to address growing concerns about the challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness. The law contained emergency relief provisions for shelter, food, mobile health care, and transitional housing. It also created the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program (Bowman et al., 2013). This program aims to "mitigate the effects of residential instability through the identification of homeless children in school and the provision of services, including expedited enrollment, transportation to school, tutoring, and mental and physical health referrals" (Cunningham et al., 2010).

In 1994 the education subtitle of the McKinney Act was incorporated into the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). As part of IASA, the McKinney Act increased legal protections for homeless children to ensure greater access to appropriate services including preschool, greater parental input, and emphasis on interagency collaboration.

Renamed the McKinney-Vento Act in 2000, it was again reauthorized as part of ESEA, this time under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. One significant amendment to the ECHY program under the 2001 reauthorization was the creation of LEA (district) homeless liaisons. The legislation requires all districts to identify a local liaison who is to be in charge of ensuring that the district's homeless students are identified and provided access to the provisions required by law. The McKinney-Vento Act was most recently reauthorized in 2015 under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

The U.S. Department of Education awards formula grants to states to support the implementation of McKinney-Vento and the EHCY program. State education agencies (SEAs) must distribute no less than 75 percent of their annual McKinney-Vento allocation to school districts via subgrants; the rest can be retained for state-level activities. Since fiscal year 2009, approximately $65 million has been appropriated to states to carry out the provisions of the EHCY program (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). ESSA increased annual appropriations to $85 million for FY17 through FY20 (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2015).

States award subgrants to LEAs on a competitive basis. In school year 2013-14, approximately 25 percent of districts nationwide received a subgrant (Endres & Cidade, 2015). Districts that apply for and receive McKinney-Vento subgrants may use the funds to provide before- and after-school programs, additional tutoring, referrals for medical and mental health services, preschool programs, parent education, counseling, social work services, transportation, and other services that many not otherwise be provided (Bowman et al., 2013). However, whether or not they receive a subgrant, all LEAs are required to identify a liaison and implement the provisions in the McKinney-Vento Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). Table 1 below provides a summary of key McKinney-Vento provisions by topic.

Table 2
Summary of McKinney-Vento Provisions by Topic Area

Topic	Summary
Academic Achievement	• Homeless students must have the same access to a free, appropriate public education, including preschool, as other children and youth. • Homeless students must have access to the same education and other services provided to other children and youth.
Enrollment	• States must revise any laws or policies that act as a barrier to the enrollment, attendance, or success in school of homeless youth. • A school selected by the parent or guardian of a homeless child must immediately enroll the student, even if s/he is unable to produce records normally required for enrollment. • The school shall refer the student and family to the local district liaison to receive support and services.
Local District Liaison	• Each LEA must designate a staff person as a liaison for homeless children and youth. • The liaison is responsible for: identifying and enrolling homeless students in school; coordinating with local social services including housing assistance services; ensuring that homeless students have access to educational services; working with parents and families to ensure they have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their child; and ensuring that homeless families are fully informed of all of their rights including transportation to the school of origin and assistance in accessing this transportation. • Liaisons must coordinate with the state coordinator and other appropriate community and school personnel.
Segregation	• Homeless students may not be placed in a separate school or in a separate program within a school based on their homeless status.
School Selection	• Schools and liaisons must provide assistance to the parent or guardian to choose where their child attends school. • To the extent possible, districts shall continue the child's education in the school of origin. • Students may continue to attend the school of origin throughout the duration of homelessness until the end of the academic year in which they move into permanent housing.
Transportation	• Schools must coordinate with the district to ensure the child has transportation to the school selected by the parent or guardian. • If the student's temporary residence is outside of the school of

	origin's LEA, the LEA where the student lives and the LEA in which the school of origin is located must coordinate and determine how to transport the student to and from school. • Transportation services must be equivalent to those provided to other students.
Other Services	• Homeless students must have access to comparable services including special needs services, gifted and talented services, vocational and technical education, and school nutrition programs. • Districts must implement a coordinated system for ensuring that homeless students are advised of their school choices, are immediately enrolled in their school of choice, and are provided necessary services.
State Coordinator	• Each state must establish a Coordinator for Education of Homeless Children and Youth. • The coordinator is responsible for: gathering data on the extent of homelessness in the state; developing and carrying out the state plan to support homeless students; facilitating coordination between the SEA and other social service agencies; and coordinating and collaborating with educators, local service agencies, and local district liaisons.
State Plan	• Each state must develop a plan to provide education to its homeless students. • This plan must include a description of how homeless students will be identified, how disputes regarding educational placements will be resolved, a description of programs to heighten awareness of school personnel to the needs of homeless students, and strategies to address problems with respect to educating homeless children and youth.
Subgrants to LEAs	• States must make subgrants to LEAs for the purpose of facilitating the enrollment, attendance, and success in school of homeless children and youth • Subgrants will be made based on need, including the number of homeless students and the ability of the LEA to meet their needs • Services provided through subgrants must, to the maximum extent possible, integrate homeless children and youths with non-homeless children and youths, and expand or improve services as part of the school's regular academic program • Authorized activities for which subgrants my be used include tutoring, supplemental instruction, expedited evaluations of the strengths and needs of homeless students, professional development for teachers and school personnel, the provision of related services to homeless students, defraying costs associated with transporting homeless students, services designed to attract, engage, and retain homeless youth, summer programs, provision of education and training to parents of homeless youth, coordination between schools and local agencies, and the

provision of other assistance needed to enable homeless children and youth to attend school.

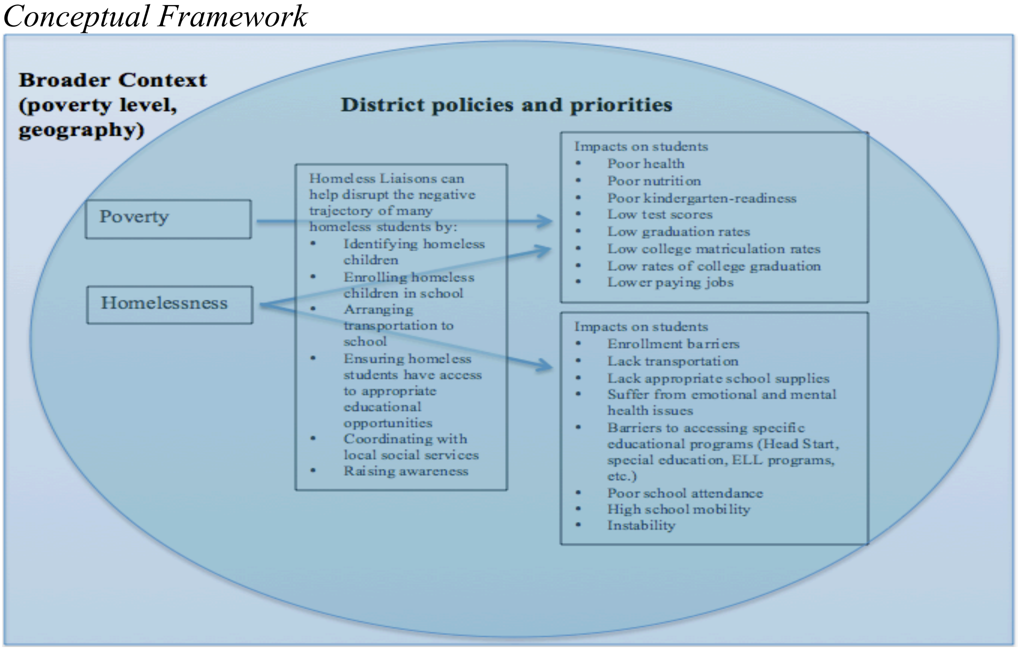
Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2004b

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on four bodies of literature: the relationship between poverty and achievement; the relationship between homelessness and achievement; a focused review of the implementation literature, concentrated specifically on the implementation of programs in environments with competing demands; and finally, the impact of poverty and geography on educational institutions.

These four bodies of literature combine to create the underlying framework for this study. Specifically, homeless liaisons can function as an intermediary between homeless students and the educational challenges associated with both poverty and homelessness. However, district liaisons function in a broader context in which factors both in the district and out of the district interact with liaisons' work. Figure 1 below visually illustrates this framework.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Impacts of Poverty and Homelessness on Children and Youth

There is a large body of research demonstrating the detrimental effects that poverty and homelessness have on children and youth. Growing up in poverty negatively impacts one's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It also creates barriers to academic success that span the P-20 pipeline: early learning and behavioral difficulties in preschool and early elementary school persist into high school and beyond, ultimately impacting one's college and/or career opportunities. Three findings are particularly relevant to this study.

Finding 1: Poverty and homelessness negatively impact a child's development beginning at an early age. Children who grow up in poor families often experience poor health, limited access to language-rich home environments, limited access to high-quality preschool, less participation in educational summer and after school programs, and more movement in and out of schools compared to their peers not growing up in poverty (Ladd, 2012). Subsequently, these children complete fewer years of school, earn less money, work fewer hours, receive more government aid, and are more likely to have chronic poor health than their non-poor peers (Coley & Baker, 2013).

Poverty begins to have a detrimental effect on children starting, in many cases, before birth. Households with low incomes may have no access, or access to lower quality, prenatal health care, and low-income mothers are likely to have poorer nutrition than more affluent mothers (O'Regan & Wiseman, 1989). As a result, babies born to low-income families are more likely to have low birth weight, which in turn has the potential to negatively impact a child's cognitive and neuropsychological outcomes. Children born with low birth weight score significantly lower on intelligence tests than do children of normal birth weight; they also experience poorer performance in tests of language ability, memory, attention, fine and gross motor coordination, perceptual-motor skills, and nonverbal reasoning and problem solving skills (Hack et al., 1995). Further, research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network has shown that children in chronically impoverished families exhibit more behavior problems than children who are not exposed to poverty. As these children grow, they are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD or other specific learning disabilities (Engle & Black, 2008).

Finding 2: Poverty and homelessness negatively impact the academic outcomes of students across the P-20 pipeline. Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) demonstrate that cognitive and academic differences between poor and non-poor children manifest at an early age. For example, 55 percent of 2-year-olds in poverty demonstrated proficiency in expressive vocabulary and 45 percent of 4-year-olds in poverty demonstrated proficiency in recognizing numbers and shapes, compared to 67 and 72 percent of their peers living at or above poverty (Coley & Baker, 2013). Lee and Burkam (2002) find that most American students who start school significantly behind their peers never fully close the reading gap with their kindergarten-ready peers; instead, this gap continues to widen as students progress through school. Engle and Black (2008) estimated that between 30 and 40 percent of children entering kindergarten are not ready for school. They write that the "consequences of early school failure are increased likelihood of truancy, drop out, and unhealthy or delinquent behaviors" (p. 244).

These early differences persist throughout primary and secondary education. They manifest in lower test scores and graduation rates, and ultimately result in dramatically different college graduation rates. Reardon (2011) demonstrates that the test-score gap between children in the 90th and the 10th income percentiles has more than doubled, from about 0.60 standard deviations in the 1940s to 1.25 standard deviations by 2000. He finds that the gap between children from high- and low-income families is now much larger than the gap between black and white children. However, other research finds that the rates of poverty for black and Hispanic families are much higher than the national average (National Poverty Center, 2015). As a result, the income gap disproportionately impacts black and Hispanic families.

Ladd (2012) demonstrates through a simple bivariate regression of state test scores and state poverty rates, that 40 percent of the variation in reading scores and 46 percent of the variation in math scores is associated with the variation across states in child poverty rates. Further, results on the past six administrations of the NAEP indicate that increases in child poverty rates during the last 10 years have translated into reductions in average test scores in reading and math. Similar patterns emerge both within and across countries.

According to the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), just 20 percent of eighth graders eligible for the national school lunch program scored proficient or higher on the math and reading assessments. In contrast, 49 and 48 percent of their non-eligible peers scored proficient or higher on math and reading, respectively

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). Further, youth ages 16 through 24 whose families fall in the lowest quartile of income nationally consistently drop out of high school at much higher rates than their higher income peers. In 2012, nearly 12 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds in the lowest income quartile dropped out of high school, compared to just two percent of students in the highest income quartile (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b). Not graduating from high school has serious impacts on one's ability to obtain work: in 2015, 8 percent of individuals 25 and older who had not earned a high school diploma were unemployed, compared to just 2.8 percent of individuals who had completed a bachelor's degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). For those low-income students who do graduate high school and are college-bound, differences still remain: among high school seniors taking the SAT, those at the lowest levels of family income scored about 100 points lower than those at the top (College Board, 2012).

The gaps present in primary and secondary education persist into postsecondary education. For example, for students born between 1961 and 1964, just 5 percent of students in the lowest quartile of family income graduated from college, compared to 36 percent of peers in the top income quartile. The same data were analyzed for a second cohort, those born between 1979 and 1982. Although there were increases in postsecondary attainment between the two periods, the growth appears correlated with family income: just 9 percent of students born between 1979 and 1982 and in the lowest family income quartile graduated from college, compared to 54 percent of their peers in the top income quartile (Coley & Baker, 2013). Individuals holding a bachelor's degree were nearly half as likely to be unemployed than individuals holding only a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Of individuals 25 years and older who are employed, those with a bachelor's degree make, on average, more than twice the average annual salary of those who did not graduate from high school ($56,500 vs. $25,100 in 2011) (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

It is difficult to disaggregate the impact of homelessness on achievement from that of poverty, however some research finds that experiencing homelessness can add additional barriers for students. Masten et al. (1997) found that black children ages 6 to 11 years old living in a homeless shelter were more likely to have low standardized test scores, low grades, and more behavioral problems than their low-income housed peers. Cutuli, Long, Chan, Desjardins, Herbers, Heistand, Hinz, and Masten (2012) examined student academic achievement data across third through eighth grade, comparing homeless and highly mobile students with other low-income students (those eligible for the national school lunch program). They found that math and reading achievement was lower among homeless and highly mobile students (HHM), and that growth in math achievement was slower during the years of HHM identification. They also find that students who were ever identified as HHM showed lower levels of reading and math achievement when compared to groups of more stably housed peers, including those who were never HHM but had very low income.

Fantuzzo and Perlman (2007) found that homelessness predicted lower levels of literacy and science achievement among students in a second grade cohort in a large, urban school district. This finding persisted when controlling for gender, ethnicity, out of home placement, child maltreatment, and any birth-related risk (including prenatal care, premature birth, and low birth weight). Children who had experienced homelessness had lower levels of academic achievement, even while accounting for other relevant social risk factors. Rubin et al. (1996) contrasted homeless and housed school-aged children from the same classroom. Math, spelling, and reading achievement scores were lower for the homeless group, a finding that was only partially explained by differences in school attendance.

Conflating these issues is the fact that low-income students are often concentrated in urban schools predominantly serving other low-income and minority students. Compared to schools serving high-income students, these schools often experience higher rates of student behavior problems, including truancy, suspensions, expulsions, classroom discipline, and weapons possession (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996). Urban schools typically have larger class sizes than suburban schools, and administrators report more difficulty in hiring teachers. Teacher absenteeism and turnover are also more prevalent in low-income schools. A high rate of turnover has both financial and intangible costs to schools, including lower organizational capacity, staff trust, and instructional cohesiveness (Guin, 2004) and disruption to the culture, curriculum, and school community (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997). All of these factors, in turn, negatively impact the achievement of an already at-risk group of students.

Finding 3: Homelessness creates barriers to school enrollment and school stability. Due to their lack of a home, many homeless children face barriers to even enrolling in school. They may be unable to meet enrollment requirements, lack transportation, lack school supplies and appropriate clothing, and often face poor health, fatigue, hunger, and suffer from emotional crises and mental health issues resulting from housing instability (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007b). Further, homeless children may face barriers in accessing specific educational programs including special education, Head Start, gifted and talented programming, family literacy programs, and programs for ELL students (Cunningham et al., 2010).

Even if successfully enrolled, maintaining stability in a school is a major challenge for homeless children. Numerous studies have demonstrated that young homeless children are more likely to have poor attendance records (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Zima, Bussing, Forness & Benjamin, 1997). Research completed in 2005 estimates that 41 percent of homeless children will attend two different schools, and 28 percent will attend three or more schools, within one academic year (Miller, 2009). Buckner et al. (2001) found that young homeless children are more likely than their housed low-income peers to have instability in their school environment through multiple, unplanned school moves. Unpredictable and undesired moves from one’s home adversely affect the family support system and children’s development and well-being (Buckner, 2007).

School mobility has significant impacts on educational outcomes, including lower math and reading scores (Mantzicopoulos & Knutsen, 2000; Xu, Hanaway, & D’Souza, 2009), increased risk of behavior problems (Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008; Tucker, Marx, & Long, 1998), and higher likelihood of being held back (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Tucker et al., 1998). According to some estimates, three to six months of education are lost with every school transfer (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007b). Even if they remain stable in school, homeless children are also more likely to face chronic absenteeism, which also has detrimental effects on their academic achievement. Chronic absenteeism is associated with lower academic performance, and students who are chronically absent may be less likely to graduate on time (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Fantuzzo et al. (2012) found that, after accounting for demographic characteristics with known relations to educational well-being, the combined experience of homelessness and school mobility was related to both poor academic achievement and problems in classroom engagement. Furthermore, they find that experiencing both homelessness and school mobility was associated with higher risk for poor educational well-being than experiencing either homelessness or school mobility alone. Their findings indicate that instability in both home and schooling environments is associated with the poorest educational outcomes. The combined experience of homelessness and school mobility had a more substantial negative relation with reading than with math. The negative relations between school mobility and academic achievement are particularly pronounced among students from large urban school districts making intradistrict moves (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004).

Research Question 1: What do LEA liaisons perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students and families they serve?

Given the many and varied needs of homeless students, and the supports required by law, homeless liaisons must make decisions about how to best support their homeless students. This study seeks to better understand what the highest-need areas are and how liaisons prioritize these needs and their activities amid the broader context of their responsibilities. The research on district homeless liaisons is somewhat limited; studies that do exist often have low response rates. However, important trends emerge from the literature that does exist.

Student needs, liaison priorities. In a study of state homeless coordinators, Wong et al. (2004) note, “As a competitive process with so little money to spend, state coordinators have to decide between cities with large problems and small communities with few resources; between programs for youths and for children; between pre-school and K-12” (p. 318). The same trade-offs must be made at a district level, with liaisons having to decide where best to spend their time—which groups of students to focus on and which programs will make the greatest impact.

Wong et al. (2004) examined data collected by Connecticut district liaisons through the state’s Liaisons’ Online Unified Information System (LOUIS). Using LOUIS, district liaisons can capture their goals and activities related to meeting the needs of homeless students in their districts. They find that among grantee districts, funds during the 2002-2003 school year were used to focus on various age groups, special needs populations, and approaches. In general, the liaisons’ programs emphasized students in grades K-8. Students in grades 9-12 were less served using McKinney-Vento grants. Many sites focused on helping parents of homeless students understand their rights or on providing parents with additional training in parenting, life, and/or job skills, among others. All of Connecticut’s liaisons reported that their activities included increased identification and enrollment of homeless students. Finally, liaisons reported efforts to increase communication among the various players both within the school and in the broader community.

Context of liaisons’ responsibilities. All LEAs are required to identify a homeless liaison. However, as noted previously, not all districts receive sub-grants; those that do often find the sums inadequate to cover all activities related to homeless students.

In a study of state coordinators, Wong et al. (2004) note, "The state coordinator plays a critical role in orchestrating the efforts of the state agency, local schools, and communities in fulfilling the requirements of the Act. In states receiving minimum funding or even a few levels above, the funding is not adequate to support the work of a full-time state coordinator. As a consequence, state coordinators hold many other job responsibilities." (p. 315-316).

The situation at the district level is very similar. Too often individuals already holding full-time jobs in the district, such as social workers, special education coordinators, school principals, or directors of instruction, are given the additional role of homeless liaison. As a result, they are not able to devote their full attention to addressing and meeting the needs of homeless students. Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) found that in many districts, designated liaisons had little knowledge of federal policy and were not even aware that they held the liaison role. Miller and Bourgeois (2013) argue, "regardless of how well intentioned these personnel are, research suggests that those who hold multiple roles simply do not have much time to devote to homeless-specific issues such as transportation, school mobility, and social isolation" (p. 4).

In fact, a study by Rosenfeld (2003) found that 70 percent of responding district liaisons in New Jersey spent less than 20 hours each week on duties associated with the liaison position. A more recent study by Holtzman (2013) found that nearly 70 percent of responding liaisons in Wisconsin spend five or fewer hours per week on homeless liaison tasks; only 8 percent of respondents spent more than 20 hours per week on liaison duties.

Research Question 2: What factors do homeless liaisons perceive to constrain their ability to support homeless students and families?

Providing necessary services to homeless students can be challenging for a number of reasons. In describing the literature on this topic, there are two levels of potential constraints that must be considered. The first consists of immediate school and district-level barriers to implementation. The second level consists of the broader district context in which liaisons operate; this level accounts for the many other competing demands placed on districts and schools.

District-level constraints. Research has documented that local liaisons face a number of barriers to providing homeless students with appropriate educational opportunities.

Identification and enrollment. Identification and enrollment-related issues and transportation challenges are most commonly cited as the biggest barriers to providing homeless children and youth with access to education (Berkowitz, 2002; Miller, 2009; National Center for Homeless Education, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). Identifying students eligible for McKinney-Vento services is an ongoing challenge. Fear or shame may discourage parents and children from making the district aware of their situation; others, such as those living temporarily with friends or relatives, may not realize they qualify as homeless and are entitled to services. In a survey of liaisons in New York State, Ascher and Phenix (2006) found proof of residency, parent or guardianship documentation, academic and health records are barriers "sometimes" or "always" for more than one-third of respondents. Even if identified, some students may face barriers to enrollment, including lacking necessary documentation such as proof of residency, immunization records, and previous academic records (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).

Transportation. Arranging transportation for homeless students is an ongoing challenge. The National Center for Homeless Education (2009) analyzed data collected by the U.S. Department of Education from all SEAs and LEAs during the 2005-06 school year through the 2007-08 school year. They found that transportation to and from school was the most frequently reported barrier to educating homeless children and youth. Transportation was "consistently the biggest challenge" for districts, both financially and logistically (Wong et al., 2004). Ascher and Phenix (2006) found that coordinating transportation between LEAs was a barrier for liaisons in New York State, in particular for those districts serving more than 10,000 students. Financially, it is expensive for a district to bus children if they currently live outside of the district. If busing is not feasible, the district may provide alternate means of transportation including tokens or tickets for public transportation or alternate means like a taxi. In any case, the district bears the financial burden. Transportation is also a logistical issue if a homeless child lives out of the district, as buses are on set schedules and routes; altering one creates a domino effect of alterations for other schedules and routes.

Other barriers. Other barriers that may be faced to varying degrees at the local level include access to tutoring or other academic support programs (special education, gifted education) and district coordination with local support agencies (Holtzman, 2013, Ascher & Phenix, 2006). Issues including a lack of necessary funding, poor dissemination of information, a lack of accountability at the local, state, and federal level, and a lack of coordination among social service entities all create additional challenges for homeless liaisons (Biggar, 2001; Rosenfeld, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). In her study of McKinney-Vento implementation in Wisconsin, Holtzman (2013) found that liaisons report a number of barriers to success for their students, including family mobility, low parental literacy, low parental involvement, inadequate health care (both physical and mental), lack of tutoring services, and irregular school attendance. Respondents consistently noted family mobility and difficulties identifying and counting homeless youths as the two greatest barriers they faced.

Broader contextual constraints. In addition to implementation constraints at the individual district level, it is imperative to understand McKinney-Vento implementation in a broader context: McKinney-Vento is one of dozens of federal and state policies that districts are responsible for implementing at any given time. All of these policies place competing demands on districts for human and financial resources, forcing districts to make decisions about how to allocate limited resources.

Honig and Hatch (2004) write, "schools face a barrage of demands from various sources including federal and state governments, local school boards, unions, and community groups—these demands focus on numerous aspects of schooling including curriculum, use of time, testing, accountability, management, parental involvement, and professional development" (page 16). These demands tend to converge on the workers, particularly teachers, administrators, and school staff, who likely have inadequate resources for navigating them. These cumulative demands "and resulting fragmentation and incoherence can undermine the capacity of schools to make the very improvements so many desire" (Hatch, 2002).

Unfortunately, limited research about district-level decision-making exists. However, important themes can be drawn from research on how individual schools and even teachers make decisions among competing demands. Below are two examples of how school-level implementers must make tradeoffs when implementing school-level programs.

Example 1: NCLB implementation. The implementation of NCLB offers a particularly salient example of how policy implementation forces tradeoffs in individual classrooms. In the wake of NCLB-mandated high-stakes testing in math and reading, many other priorities got pushed aside. Research finds "strong evidence" that teachers now spend more time on math and reading instruction and less time on science and social studies (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013) Other research finds that between 1997 and 2008 the percentage of typical eighth-grade students who received visual arts instruction three to four times per week fell from 52 percent to 47 percent (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2008). A 2005 RAND study found that "Educators reported a narrowing of the curriculum and an emphasis on test preparation, particularly for 'bubble kids' near the proficiency cut score for their state assessment system" (Dee et al., 2013, p. 255). A 2007 RAND report assessing NCLB's effect on teaching found that, in addition to prompting more teachers to spend more time teaching content or searching for more effective teaching methods, NCLB testing resulted teachers devoting a greater amount of time to teaching test-taking strategies (Hamilton, Stecher, Marsh, McCombs, Robyn, Russell, Naftel, & Barney, 2007).

NCLB highly incentivized test scores in reading and math, and as a result, implementers' (teachers') behavior changed. The result of this behavioral change is that more time and energy was spent on incentivized behaviors and policies; other behaviors, like teaching social studies, music, or gym, fell down on the list of priorities.

Example 2: New American Schools. A second example comes from a 1998 study by RAND that examined the implementation of New American Schools' (NAS) scale-up initiative (Bodilly, Keltner, Purnell, Reichardt, & Schuyler, 1998). NAS was a nonprofit organization that developed school improvement designs. Bodilly et al. (1998) found significant variation in the implementation of NAS' school improvement strategies, ranging from no implementation through to fulfilling implementation. Many factors influenced the level of implementation, including a poor and hurried initial selection process; the ability of design teams to provide support to schools; lack of stable leadership; the governance structure of participating schools; and school culture, among others. The authors argued, "The accomplishments are slow to materialize and are often fleeting because of the political nature of the system in which K-12 education is embedded. Local community issues and district politics—changes in leadership, budget crisis—have an effect and lead inevitably to adjustments and slowed pace" (page xvi).

Although implementation of EHCY is not a "program" that can be implemented in the way the NAS initiative was, the challenges faced by NAS still resonate. School leadership and culture play a huge role in how priorities are set within districts and schools, and the larger political context places additional pressure to implement certain initiatives over others.

Additional constraining factors. The two examples outlined above offer insights into the challenges created when district, school, and classroom demands are in competition for limited time and resources. A number of factors lead to these challenges. These factors are outlined below.

Differing views among school personnel. Too often individuals within schools have varying priorities that create further challenges to implementation. Hatch (2002) argues, “Different initiatives within a school may reflect different views about the key problems that need to be addressed and the mechanisms and strategies that will make improvements possible.” McLaughlin (1991) argues that “policy success depends critically on two broad factors: local capacity and will. Capacity, admittedly a difficult issue, is something that policy can address. Training can be offered. Dollars can be provided. Consultants can be engaged to furnish missing expertise. But will, or the attitudes, motivation, and beliefs that underlie an implementer’s response to a policy’s goals or strategies, is less amenable to policy intervention.” She continues, “questions of motivation and commitment (or will) reflect an implementer’s assessment of the value of a policy or the appropriateness of a strategy” (p.187). As Johnson (2012) found, “Moral purpose, in and of itself, is not enough to produce change and must be accompanied by identity, capacity, resources, and support” (page 46).

Program support. Support for a policy or program is critical to its success. Yet, Odden (1991) argues that support alone for a program or policy is not sufficient “because of the competing priorities and demands that operate with the implementing system” (page 188). He goes on to argue that “vague mandates and weak guidelines provide opportunity for dominant coalitions or competing issues to shape program choices…And in settings where…policy aims at weak beneficiaries, pressure can provide necessary legitimacy for program officials” (page 188). The level of support at a district, school, and classroom level can be critical to the success (or failure) of a program or policy.

Stakeholder motivation. In addition to support, successful policy implementation requires the motivation of stakeholders (Fullan, 2006). Cohen (1982) argues, "intentions are an inconsistent guide to results" (page 474). In other words, support and good intentions are insufficient to create meaningful policy implementation. Fullan (2006) argues that reform must invoke both individual and collective motivation in order to be successful. However, "moral" purpose in and of itself is not enough to drive collective motivation. Capacity and leadership are prerequisites for collective motivation. Crosby (1996) argues that "Before anything else can happen, the proposed policy must be viewed as legitimate by key decision makers…To implement a new policy, human, technical, and financial resources must be set aside" (p.1406).

Financial means. Financial support for a policy is also a key component of implementation success; lack of adequate funding is often cited as a barrier. For example, in examining the implementation of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR), Datnow (2005) found that a lack of adequate financial support impacted the ability to successfully implement the reform; grants, although small, provided much needed resources to initiate and begin implementation of the comprehensive school reform models. Vernez and Goldhaber (2006) also found that a lack of support among key stakeholders compromised implementation.

While the McKinney-Vento Act may garner significant support from a moral perspective, it is one of many policies districts must implement. And with shrinking budgets and increasing accountability, there is stiff competition for a district's limited capacity and resources. As a result, a number of competing priorities exist. When test scores are at a premium, reaching and educating homeless students—and the attendant academic challenges they often present—falls far down on the list of priorities.

Collaboration among support organizations. One of the critical roles of the district homeless liaison is to be able to connect homeless students and their families with services provided in the community. However, much research has demonstrated the challenging nature of collaboration both within and between organizations. Miller (2011) writes, "The enactment of the McKinney-Vento Act…is described as being fundamentally dependent on key actors' and/or organizations' capacities to communicate, share resources, and develop mutual understandings" (page 325). This collaboration has to occur first within the district itself: upper-level administrators and principals must be on the same page as the "frontliners" like bus drivers and transportation coordinators in order to ensure the district provides adequate services to its homeless students (James & Lopez, 2003). So too do special education teachers, general health providers, and housing services need to work collaboratively to identify and meet homeless students' needs (Zima & Forness, 1997).

Further, homeless liaisons must be in regular contact with local shelters and other social service agencies to coordinate supports for homeless students. Other community-based agencies like youth drop-in centers, tutoring programs, and after-school arts, sports, or literacy programs are all important support levers in meeting the needs of homeless students (Miller, 2011). However, the coordination among these organizations and the schools is often lacking, creating additional burdens for liaisons as they try to connect students with support services.

District Contextual Factors: Poverty Level and Geographic Location

Research suggests that many factors impact the needs and challenges of districts within the same state. The two factors most relevant to this study are the poverty level of the district (whether it is high or low) and the urbanicity of the district (whether it is located in an urban, suburban, town, or rural community).

Poverty. Research has long documented that high-poverty schools and districts experience more and greater challenges to educating their students than low-poverty schools and districts. The challenges faced by individuals living in poverty (which were discussed previously in this literature review) are magnified when half or three-quarters of the student body all faces those same challenges. These student background variables seem to matter most when it comes to predicting student test scores (Borg, J., Borg, M., & Stranahan, 2012), which means that overall academic achievement is likely to be lower in schools serving a high population of students living in poverty. As a result of continued lower academic achievement, these schools have faced the brunt of federal sanctions through policies like No Child Left Behind.

It is also well documented that high-poverty schools have lower-quality resources, such as textbooks, curriculum materials, laboratories, and computers; significantly larger class sizes; less qualified and experienced teachers; higher rates of teacher turnover; poor working conditions; lower quality leadership; and lower quality school cultures (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Kraft, Papay, Charner-Laird, Johnson, Ng, & Reinhorn, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2013).

Given that these differences between high- and low-poverty schools and districts exist, it is necessary to understand how they relate to the work of homeless liaisons. Surely a high-poverty district is more likely to have larger numbers of students experiencing homelessness, and thus district liaisons will have greater and differing needs from their counterparts working in lower-poverty districts. But it is possible that other challenges faced by high-poverty districts—those associated with staff turnover or lack of access to necessary resources—may also impact the work of homeless liaisons in these districts.

On the other hand, one of the roles of both the state coordinator and district liaison is to provide professional development and training on and raise awareness about the unique needs of homeless students. It is possible that individuals working in low-poverty districts are much less aware of homeless students and low-poverty communities may lack the resources necessary to support them. In fact, Allard (2004) found that across Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., census tracts with high poverty rates are located in closer proximity to social service providers than tracts with low poverty rates. This means that homeless students and families living in districts serving primarily low-poverty neighborhoods may have significantly less access to the social support services needed by homeless students.

Urbanicity. Research has also documented the varying needs of communities based on their urbanicity. While some of these challenges overlap with poverty levels (high-poverty urban, suburban, and rural districts all likely struggle to educate students who are below grade level or who lack appropriate school supplies), some challenges are unique to the district's geographic location.

Access to service providers. In a study of neighborhood variation in access to social services, Allard (2004) found that poor populations living in urban centers have greater spatial access to social services than poor populations living in suburban areas.

When examining social service provision in rural areas, Allard and Cigna (2008) found that rural towns have limited access to social services agencies; in particular there are very few nonprofit agencies. However, poor individuals living in areas near town centers have greater access to services than poor individuals living in outlying rural areas. Funding cuts to service organizations may impact rural areas more intensely, as agencies are forced to rein in their service provision to cut spending.

Suburban districts too may face strained local services and limited philanthropic resources as poverty rates increase (Kneebone, 2014). For example, in Chicago, D.C., and Los Angeles, only 25 percent of suburban municipalities had registered nonprofits aimed at providing employment services to poor adults; only 45 percent of suburban municipalities had registered nonprofits aimed at providing food assistance to poor families (Kneebone, 2014). Further, suburban areas have significantly fewer philanthropic dollars to support poor families. For example, in 2008 in the Chicago metropolitan area there were $68 per poor person in the city, compared to only $2 in the suburbs (Kneebone, 2014).

Transportation challenges. Transportation to service centers is a particular challenge in rural areas. Allard and Cigna (2008) argue that because there is little or no public transportation in most rural places and distances to be covered can be too far to walk, automobile transportation is even more critical. In these situations, poor families that cannot afford to purchase or maintain a car have little means of accessing any available services. As Allard (2007) argues, "…inadequate access to service providers can be tantamount to being denied assistance" (p. 3).

Further, providing bus service in rural areas can be a challenge. The length and potential dangers of bus rides in rural areas are an area of concern. Howley, Howley, and Shamblen (2001) found that compared to their suburban school peers, elementary school students living in rural areas are more likely to have bus rides of over 30 minutes; have routes with "rougher" rides; and have rides that include middle and/or high school students on the same bus.

Limitations of Research Studies Reviewed

The research presented here is not without limitations. To begin with, separating the effect of homelessness on achievement from the impacts of poverty on achievement is extraordinarily difficult. Some of the studies presented here find that homelessness has additional impacts above and beyond the effects of poverty; however it is clear that homeless students face *at least* the same barriers to achievement as their stably housed low-income peers.

Second, there is limited research on the specific research questions asked in this study. Existing studies are included in this review, but their varied scope and low response rates make it difficult to draw clear conclusions.

Finally, because much of the research presented here is specific to a particular state, city, or school, the context varies significantly. It is nearly impossible to hold all aspects of a context constant—making it challenging for researchers to draw conclusions across districts. For example, the studies of NCLB implementation reviewed above all take place in different districts. Because state and local context varies dramatically, drawing consistent conclusions about the nature of NCLB implementation and the factors impacting it is not realistic. So while study designs may be strong, they often offer few consistent results, making it challenging to draw conclusions across studies.

As a result of these limitations, the research presented here is not meant to be a conclusive discussion of the impact of homelessness on achievement, or of the barriers facing liaisons, or of the role that poverty and geography play in impacting schools, policies, and programs. Instead, it is meant to be an overview of the varying themes present in these bodies of literature and their relevance for understanding the role and context of district homeless liaisons.

Summary

The focus of this research project is the perceptions of homeless liaisons related to the needs of their students and factors that facilitate and inhibit their work. Homeless liaisons can function as an intermediary between homeless students and the educational challenges associated with both poverty and homelessness. However, they also function in a broader context in which factors both in the district and out of the district interact with liaisons' work. Four main bodies of literature created the conceptual framework for understanding the context of liaisons' work, and subsequently, this study: the relationship between poverty and academic achievement; the relationship between homelessness and academic achievement; a focused review of the implementation literature, concentrated specifically on the implementation of programs in environments with competing demands; and finally, the impact of poverty and geography on educational institutions.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This chapter explains the study's methodology. It describes the research design, methods of data collection, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations required by studies using human participants.

Research Design

This study was designed to better understand what district liaisons perceive to be the needs of the homeless students and families they serve, and what factors facilitate and inhibit their ability to provide students and families with these services. In particular, the study's two research questions seek to understand what liaisons perceive to be the main needs of homeless students and how they set priorities for serving homeless students in the context of their own broader responsibilities and diverse institutional contexts, and what factors constrain and facilitate their ability to support homeless students.

The study's two research questions seek to understand the perceptions and experiences of the district homeless liaisons in the state of Ohio in particular. As a result of this focus, a basic qualitative design was deemed most appropriate to answer its research questions. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research is concerned with understanding "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). This study is categorized as a basic qualitative study because its "overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their lived experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). In particular, this study seeks to understand how homeless liaisons in Ohio interpret their priorities and challenges.

This qualitative study is grounded in the theory of constructivism, sometimes called social constructivism. Social constructivism traces its roots to Berger and Luckmann (1966), who argued that knowledge and reality are socially constructed through the institutionalization of norms, behaviors, and interactions among individuals within a social group. Cresswell (2007) explains that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences that are varied and multiple, and are formed both "through interaction with others…and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (p. 20-21). Ultimately, a social constructivist philosophy "assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality" (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). Rather, it acknowledges that each individual's "reality" is shaped by his or her own unique, lived experiences.

Because the study's research questions seek to understand how homeless liaisons perceive and understand their roles and responsibilities, a qualitative study is most appropriate. Semi-structured interviews form the basis of data collection for this study. According to Harrell and Bradley (2009), interviews "are most likely to provide the depth of information that might be useful" (p. 10). Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up and clarifying questions to ensure full understanding of the participants' perceptions. This research design—a qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews—was the most appropriate design for answering the study's two research questions.

Study Population

As is required by the McKinney-Vento Act, all school districts must identify one individual as the district homeless liaison. For this study, the population constituted all homeless liaisons working in traditional school districts in the state of Ohio, for a total of 609 liaisons. The state was chosen due to its large number of districts and the varying district contexts in which liaisons work.

Study Sample

The basis of this study was semi-structured interviews with 20 liaisons working in 20 school districts in Ohio. Stratified random sampling was used to identify a sample of districts representing a proportionate number of Ohio's students; the corresponding liaison was then contacted for an interview. Stratified random sampling, rather than random sampling, was used because the researcher wanted various subgroups within the population to be represented (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In particular, the researcher was interested in ensuring that a representative sample of district poverty levels, district size, and district geographic locations were included in the interview data collection.

In order to control for these three district-level variables, the Ohio Department of Education's (ODE) district typology was used. This typology was initially created in 1996 to classify similar districts together based on shared demographic and geographic characteristics including the average student poverty level, the student population size, and the geographic location of the community. This typology was revised in 2013 and now includes eight categories of districts (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). Table 3 summarizes the ODE's school district typology. Table 4 presents descriptive statistical information about the districts in each type. Table 5 identifies both the number and percent of Ohio's school districts that fall into each type and the number of students served by each type of district.

Table 3
Ohio School District Typology

Typology Code	Major Grouping	Full Descriptor
1	Rural	Rural - High Student Poverty & Small Student Population
2	Rural	Rural - Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population
3	Small Town	Small Town - Low Student Poverty & Small Student Population
4	Small Town	Small Town - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size
5	Suburban	Suburban - Low Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size
6	Suburban	Suburban - Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population
7	Urban	Urban - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population
8	Urban	Urban - Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population

Source: Ohio Department of Education, 2013

Table 4
District Typology Classification Statistics

Typology Code	Statistic	Enrollment (ADM)	Median Income	Student Poverty	Percent Minority
1	Maximum	4,010	$35,347	78%	14%
	Mean	**1,366**	**$29,161**	**47%**	**4%**
	Minimum	175	$22,857	19%	0%
2	Maximum	2,314	$39,107	82%	14%
	Mean	**1,032**	**$32,486**	**36%**	**3%**
	Minimum	247	$24,223	6%	0%
3	Maximum	3,968	$45,101	53%	21%
	Mean	**1,676**	**$34,507**	**30%**	**5%**
	Minimum	549	$27,581	1%	0%
4	Maximum	5,966	$34,604	82%	85%
	Mean	**2,230**	**$27,713**	**51%**	**14%**
	Minimum	419	$17,910	1%	3%
5	Maximum	9,608	$49,772	61%	85%
	Mean	**4,176**	**$37,567**	**28%**	**16%**
	Minimum	889	$26,301	3%	1%
6	Maximum	17,409	$73,125	32%	59%
	Mean	**5,254**	**$53,233**	**12%**	**13%**
	Minimum	718	$37,890	0%	2%
7	Maximum	19,336	$33,336	92%	100%
	Mean	**4,608**	**$26,283**	**64%**	**45%**
	Minimum	632	$19,844	35%	10%
8	Maximum	49,616	$27,819	100%	85%

Mean	**30,647**	**$24,716**	**84%**	**70%**
Minimum	14,174	$22,343	70%	56%

Source: Ohio Department of Education, 2013

Table 5
Number and Percent of Districts and Students by District Type

Typology Code	Districts (N)	Districts (%)	Students (N)	Students (%)
1	124	20%	170,000	10%
2	107	18%	110,000	7%
3	111	18%	185,000	11%
4	89	15%	200,000	12%
5	77	13%	320,000	20%
6	46	8%	240,000	15%
7	47	8%	210,000	13%
8	8	1%	200,000	12%
Totals	609	100%	1,635,000	100%

Source: Ohio Department of Education, 2013

The Ohio Department of Education asserts that it "used several data sources to classify like districts together based on shared demographic and geographic characteristics. As a result, the classifications can serve as a basis for a stratified sample of districts in the state" (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). Accordingly, this typology was used as the basis for identifying a stratified random sample of liaisons to interview for this study. As Table 5 indicates, there is slightly greater variation in the percent of total districts represented by each type (from 1 percent to 20 percent) than the percent of total students served by each type of district (from 7 percent to 20 percent). As a result, the proportion of total students served by each district type, rather than the proportion of total districts in each type, was used as the basis for determining the proportion of the 20 interviews that would come from each type. This helped to ensure that the liaisons interviewed, and subsequently the liaisons' perspectives included in this study, were broadly representative of the students living in Ohio and being served by its districts, rather than artificially inflated or deflated due to the number of districts of each size. (For example, while just 1 percent of districts are Type 8—large urban districts with very high rates of poverty—fully 12 percent of Ohio's students attend these districts. To base the interview sample on the proportion of districts of each type would mean that zero out of the 20 interviews would be with liaisons serving Type 8 districts, and subsequently, that a vital perspective would not be included in the data analysis. Using the proportion of students ensures that the needs of this unique group of students is fairly represented in the sample of liaisons' perspectives. On the other hand, while 18 percent of Ohio's districts are Type 2—very small rural districts with average poverty—just 7 percent of students attend these districts. Again, using the proportion of students rather than districts ensures that the study's results fairly represent the proportion of students served by liaisons in Type 2 districts.)

The following procedure was used to determine the number of liaisons in each district type to interview: first, the total number of students served by each type of district was divided by the total number of students attending traditional public school districts in Ohio (for example, 170,000 out of 1,635,000 students, or approximately 10 percent of students, attend Type 1 districts). This proportion was then multiplied by the total number of interviews (20) to be completed. (So 10% x 20 interviews = 2 interviews). Fractions were rounded to the nearest whole number. Table 6 below shows the breakdown of interviews by district type.

Table 6
Number of Interviews by District Type

District Type	Number of Interviews
1	2
2	1
3	2
4	2

5	4
6	3
7	3
8	3

Once the number of district liaisons in each district type was determined, Microsoft Excel's =RAND function was used to randomly assign each district in each stratum a number between zero and one. Once a random number had been assigned, the lists were sorted from least to greatest, and the appropriate number of district liaisons was contacted. (For example, because two interviews would be conducted with liaisons working in Type 1 districts, the liaisons for the districts with the two smallest =RAND numbers were contacted.)

Interviewees' participation was solicited by email initially. If an individual did not respond after two emails, a follow-up phone call was made to the individual's school or district office in attempt to contact the individual. If randomly selected participants declined to participate in an interview, the liaison working in the district with the next-smallest Excel-generated number was contacted. Liaison contact information was obtained from the Ohio Department of Education's website.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 district liaisons representing 20 school districts in Ohio. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that questions are worded more flexibly and the interview is a mix of structured and unstructured questions (Merriam, 2009). Since these interviews sought specific information regarding participants' experiences as district homeless liaisons, the interview was guided by a list of questions and topics; however the exact wording of each question and the order in which the questions were asked was not rigidly set. This allowed the researcher to ask follow-up, clarifying, or probing questions as needed based on interviewees' responses.

Participants were selected at random using the methodology described above. In the initial email soliciting an interview, participants were provided with the appropriate informed consent form. All interviews were conducted on the phone using a free conference call line to enable the conversation to be recorded and saved. Interviews were recorded to enable their transcription and subsequent coding and analysis. Participants were made aware at the beginning of the call that it would be recorded, and their verbal permission to record the interview was captured in the recording. If a participant declined to be recorded but was still willing to participate in an interview, the recording feature was turned off. The interview then proceeded as planned but the researcher took thorough notes throughout the call. In addition, participants were made aware that no identifying information, including their name or district of employment, would appear in the final research study. Participants were made aware that the name of the state in which they work would be identified in the final report.

Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. An introductory opening was scripted to begin the interview, and several open-ended, semi-structured questions were used to guide the conversations. Participants were asked to describe, for example, the kind of work they do to support homeless students, and the factors that set those priorities. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for follow-up probes to gain more insight or information from the participants than the survey enabled (Merriam, 2009). These probes included prompts such as:

Please tell me more about ________.

What do you mean by _______?

Can you explain that further?

Can you give an example?

Why do you think that is so?

The protocol was written in such a way that the question categories did not have to follow a particular order. Relatively neutral, descriptive information was gathered at the beginning of each interview (for example how long the liaison had been in the role and how she came into the position), however the order of the rest of the questions varied from interview to interview. This flexibility made it possible to respond to the flow of the conversation in order to gather as much data as possible.

Prior to implementation with the study participants, the interview protocol was piloted on a small group of the researcher's colleagues and revised as necessary following feedback from members of the pilot group.

More detailed information about the study's data collection procedures is included in the appendices of this report: Appendix A contains the informed consent form provided to all participants; Appendix B contains the interview protocol; and Appendix C contains a sample email sent to liaisons to solicit their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed as quickly as possible following their conclusion. Typically transcription occurred within 48 hours of the conclusion of the interview, however this was not always possible. Because interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants, sometimes several interviews took place in the span of just one or two days. Interviews were still coded as soon as possible; however in these cases transcription may have occurred up to a week after the interview was conducted.

Both during and at the conclusion of each interview, the researcher made notes about topics, ideas, questions, or issues of particular interest or importance that were raised during the interview. These notes were included at the top of each interview transcription and included in the data analysis process.

Once transcribed, all data were immediately de-identified. Each transcript was re-labeled with a code linking the data to its strata in order to ensure the anonymity of both the liaison and the district. The de-identified interview transcriptions were then uploaded to a qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo for Mac, version 11.0.0. All data were coded using this software.

The data were coded in four steps, using four different coding methods. The first three methods are part of what Saldana (2009) calls "First Cycle" methods. These coding methods "happen during the initial coding of the data" (p. 45). The first type of coding used was attribute coding (Saldana, 2009). (Miles & Huberman (1994) refer to this type of coding as "descriptive coding.") Attribute coding "is intended as *coding grammar*, a way of documenting descriptive 'cover' information about participants, the site, and other related components of the study" (Saldana, 2009, p. 57).

Accordingly, attribute codes for interview data consisted of descriptive data about both the liaison (how long she had been in the role and what, if any, other position she held in the district) and the district in which she worked (its poverty level, student population size, and urbanicity). Labeling the data using attribute codes allowed for the data to be sorted by these variables and analyzed to see if differences exist between liaisons working in high- or low-poverty districts, in urban or rural districts, and so on.

Following the completion of attribute coding was structural coding. According to Saldana (2009), structural coding “applies a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview” (p. 66). Accordingly, in the second round of coding, short, one- to three-word codes were assigned to paragraphs, sentences, or words that corresponded with each research question. Seven structural codes were applied to the data in this step of the analysis: community facilitator; district facilitator; community challenge; district challenge; liaison priorities; student needs—academic; and student needs—nonacademic. These codes allowed the data to be grouped by research question to allow for ease of analysis.

The third round of coding was what Saldana (2009) calls descriptive coding. (This type of coding is called “topic coding” in some of the literature.) Descriptive coding “summarizes in a word or short phrase…the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldana, 2009, p. 70). This type of coding “leads primarily to a categorized inventory…of the data’s contents. It is essential groundwork for Second Cycle coding and further analysis and interpretation” (Saldana, 2009, p. 72).

In this phase of the data analysis, data were analyzed line-by-line and assigned descriptive codes. These codes emerged from the data; specifically, descriptive codes were assigned to each idea described by participants. These codes consisted of short words or phrases that summarized the main ideas raised by participants. For example, descriptive codes including “food and shelter,” “transportation,” “mental health care,” and “social services” were ascribed to corresponding ideas described by participants.

Prior to undertaking the final stage of coding and analysis, some data were recoded as appropriate, as more accurate words or phrases were discovered for initial codes or as some codes were merged together because of conceptual similarities (Lewins & Silver, 2007).

The final stage of coding consisted of pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009). Pattern coding is a Second Cycle method, meaning that its goal “is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes” (Saldana, 2009, p. 149). Pattern codes are “explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69).

The pattern codes used in this analysis emerged from the data. In order to identify pattern codes, the previous codes, in particular the descriptive codes from round three of the coding process, were reviewed. Similar codes were assembled together into meaningful categories to create a pattern code. These pattern codes help summarize specific segments of data and group those summaries into smaller themes, which enabled deeper analysis of the data and greater levels of specificity and insight. Table 7 below provides an example of how four descriptive codes were grouped to form a pattern code.

Table 7
Example of Descriptive and Pattern Codes

Descriptive codes	**Pattern code**
Food and shelter	Basic necessities
Transportation	
Mental health care	

Social services

The pattern codes identified through this four-step data coding process formed the basis for the findings of this study. Saldana (2009) advocates using the pattern codes in this way: “Use the Pattern Code as a stimulus to develop a statement that describes a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of inter-relationships, or a theoretical construct from the data” (p. 154).

The goal of qualitative research is to present a clear picture of the issue or topic under study so that it contributes to the general knowledge on the topic and can inform policy and practice. In this case, data were expected to illuminate the particular needs of homeless students in one state, the priorities of district homeless liaisons and how these priorities were set, and any factors that either constrained or supported liaisons as they sought to address the needs of their students. Further, these data were expected to identify any common themes emerging across districts based on their size, poverty level, and/or geographic locale. The data are presented in the following chapter using both descriptive prose and visual displays.

Ethical Considerations for Human Subjects

The study’s methodology ensured that the risks to participants were minimal. All individuals were provided with sufficient information about the study to decide whether they wished to participate, including a consent form that explained the study’s purpose, risks, and benefits. Continuing in the process by participating in an interview indicated participants’ consent. Interview participants also verbally agreed to the recording of the interview. Steps were taken at every phase of the study to protect the participants’ identities and responses. Once the interviews were transcribed, the recordings were deleted. Survey data and interview transcriptions were kept on the researcher's computer and in her Dropbox account; both were password protected.

The only identifying information included in this study is the state in which the liaisons work. Neither the district nor the name of any liaison is identified. This de-identification was important to ensure that participants felt comfortable being open and honest about their experiences, including discussing challenges related to specific district policies or personnel, without fear of reprisal. To further ensure anonymity, direct quotations used in the final report are not attributed to any particular person or district. Any potentially identifying information about a district (the name of a local agency or nonprofit, for example) in a quotation is omitted. The researcher chose not to attach pseudonyms to the liaisons to avoid the possibility of them being matched to districts and potentially "outing" participants. Instead, district characteristics were included when necessary to contextualize a response or direct quote.

All documents reviewed for this study were publicly available and are open to anyone's scrutiny.

Summary

This study has been designed as a qualitative study relying on interviews as the primary data collection tool. This chapter has provided an overview of the methodology used in this study, including details of its collection and analysis, and overview of the concerns regarding quality of this type of study, and a discussion of its ethical considerations. The following chapter presents the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the perceptions of Ohio's district homeless liaisons in regard to the needs of the homeless students in their district, and the factors that facilitate and inhibit their ability to serve their homeless students. The findings are based on 20 interviews with liaisons working in districts of varying types (high and low poverty; large, average, and small population; and urban, suburban, town, and rural geographies). The liaisons represent a stratified random sample of school districts in the state of Ohio. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has created a typology to categorize its 609 traditional districts into eight types. The proportion of students attending each type of district was used to determine the number of interviews conducted with liaisons in each district type. Tables 3 through 5, presented in chapter three, provide detailed information about each district type.

Participants ranged from one to 14 years of experience in the role of district homeless liaison, with an average of six years. Six liaisons had 10 or more years of experience in the role of homeless liaison, five had between five and nine years of experience, and nine had less than five years of experience. (The legislation mandating liaisons was first implemented in the 2002-03 school year, meaning that 14 years is the most an individual could be in the role. Some liaisons indicated they had been working in the district since before 2002 but only came into the role of liaison once the legislation was passed.)

The homeless population served by liaisons ranged from approximately three students each year to over 4,000. With the exception of the three liaisons working in

Type 8 (large, urban, high-poverty) districts, all liaisons held other full-time roles in the district. Most of these roles were at the district level, including positions like assistant superintendent, director of student services, or curriculum director. Two liaisons held school-based positions as building principals. For all 17 of the liaisons in district Types 1-7, the role of homeless liaison was an additional duty. In no cases were liaisons given additional leave time or compensation for performing their liaison duties. On the other hand, the three participating liaisons working in the Type 8 large, urban, high-poverty districts were in full-time roles dedicated to working with homeless students and families. Table 8 below summarizes the characteristics of the districts in which participants worked.

Table 8
Characteristics of Districts and Liaisons

District Type	District Type Descriptor	Number of Liaisons Interviewed	Liaison Role: Full-time or Part-time	Range of Homeless Students Served Annually by Participating Liaisons
1	Rural - High Student Poverty & Small Student Population	2	All part-time	<10
2	Rural - Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population	1	All part-time	<10
3	Small Town - Low Student Poverty & Small Student Population	2	All part-time	<10
4	Small Town - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size	2	All part-time	<10 in one district and 200-300 in the other

5	Suburban - Low Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size	4	All part-time	15-30
6	Suburban - Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population	3	All part-time	20-30
7	Urban - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population	3	All part-time	100-200
8	Urban - Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population	3	All full-time	600-4,000

In an effort to ensure anonymity, the names of the counties, cities, districts, schools, job titles, and participants are not reported here. All pronouns have been changed to "she," and references to district-specific programs or community-specific organizations have been omitted. The direct quotations presented in this chapter are not ascribed to particular participants. Instead, district characteristics are included when necessary to contextualize a response or direct quote. To ensure broad representation of participants' voices, at least one direct quote from each participant is included in the findings below, and no participant is quoted more than six times. Direct quotations are included in each finding to help demonstrate how participants think and talk about each issue, but the number of direct quotes included is not indicative of how many participants identified the themes presented in the findings. Tables 9 and 10 indicate the frequency of each finding (i.e., the number of liaisons who spoke about each).

To obtain background information about the participants, the interview protocol began by asking participants to speak about their role in the district, how they came into the role of liaison, and how many years they had been serving as the district homeless liaison. Participants were also asked how many homeless students they worked with in a given school year. These background questions helped provide context in which to understand their work as liaisons.

Data were coded in four layers as described in chapter three. This chapter presents the results of this study for each of the two research questions. The data presented in this chapter reflect the responses of the participants in this qualitative study and cannot be assumed to be representative of all districts in a given type, or of all liaisons in the state of Ohio.

Research Question 1: Homeless Students' Needs

Research Question 1: What do LEA liaisons perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students they serve?

This research question sought to explore what liaisons perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students and families with whom they work, academic and otherwise. It also sought to understand what liaisons' priorities are in their work with homeless students and how they set those priorities. In general, the findings for this research question are consistent with existing literature: students lack access to basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter, and liaisons prioritize meeting these needs in their work with students and families. Liaisons also prioritize identifying homeless students and training staff members on the requirements of the McKinney-Vento legislation. Interestingly, though the impact of homelessness on students' academic outcomes is widely discussed in the literature, the liaisons themselves had less direct knowledge of the academic needs of their students. As a result, they placed a lesser priority on factors related to academics, instead leaving this to school-level staff members like principals, teachers, or counselors.

During the second round of coding, three structural codes were applied to data addressing this research question: liaison priorities; student needs—academic; and student needs—nonacademic. In the third round of coding, descriptive codes were applied to the data. These codes further identified main topics or issues raised in the data. Finally, these descriptive codes were categorized into pattern codes. The four pattern codes that emerged from data coding and analysis process are presented in Table 9 and discussed in detail in the text that follows.

Table 9

Liaison Perceptions of Homeless Students' Needs

Research Question 1: What do LEA liaisons perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students they serve?

Pattern Code	**Descriptive Codes**	**Number of Liaisons Identifying this Component**
Basic necessities	Food and clothing	20
	Shelter	20
	Social services	20
	Transportation	20
Academic support	Tutoring and other academic supports	20
	Impact of transience on academic outcomes	8
	Attendance and consistency	13
Identification	Fear of overlooking homeless students	4
	Training	20
	Raising community awareness	20
How liaisons approach their work	Facilitating versus doing the work	20

Finding 1: Basic Necessities

Liaisons report learning about student needs from teachers and other school-based staff members. Teachers often notice, for example, that students are wearing the same clothes day after day, or that they consistently come to school hungry, and report these observations to the liaisons. Liaisons explained that these behaviors could be signs of homelessness—or at minimum that a student needs some additional support. One liaison in a suburban district explained it this way:

> It's really about keeping our ear to the ground. Sometimes a kid will say, completely innocently, oh you know, I was at grandma's last night and then I was at so-and-so's over the weekend and I'm going to my friend's tonight. Or, we have backpacks of food that needy families get over the weekend, and sometimes a kid will say, oh, I'm so excited for my backpack this weekend! So it's really just keeping our ears to the ground. Teachers will mention these things either to their principals or to me directly and I'll follow up with the child or family, depending on the situation.

All 20 liaisons reported holding initial "intake" meetings with families once they are identified as being homeless. These meetings consist of completing state- and federally mandated paperwork to document their homelessness. These meetings are also opportunities for liaisons to identify any immediate needs that the students and/or family may have. Once a liaison has identified and met with a family and determined the needs of the students and adults, the next step is to begin connecting that family with necessary services.

Food and clothing. All liaisons reported that basic necessities like food and clothing are homeless students' most immediate needs. Below are examples from three liaisons describing how they address their students' food and clothing needs:

> The most time is spent probably just making sure they have their basic needs met. Like, make sure they have food, make sure they have clothing, make sure they have glasses if necessary, that kind of thing.

> We have a local food pantry and that's usually the first stop. If a family isn't already connected there, I'll make sure they can get some food.
>
> We give each kid a school uniform, one per child. We don't even ask, we just give it to them. More than likely they don't have one, or if they do it's old and dirty. We also make sure they get signed up for the free breakfast and lunch program, and that they know to get to school early to get that breakfast.

Before liaisons are able to work with families on any other potential needs or longer-tem goals, meeting these basic needs is imperative.

Shelter. Liaisons indicate that most of the students with whom they work have obtained temporary shelter with family or friends, in a shelter, or in a motel, making housing a less-immediate need than food and/or clothing. All 20 liaisons reported that more than half of their district's homeless students were doubled up, meaning that they had secured temporarily housing with friends or family members. The second most common housing situation for students and families was to be living was in cheap local motels, followed by homeless shelters. Only four liaisons reported working with students who were living in their cars, and no liaisons reported working with families who were living on the streets. The four liaisons working with families living in cars indicated that this was a rare occurrence. As one liaison working in a small town with relatively low poverty explained,

> It's really just about ensuring they have extra clothes, they have food…it's rare that they're living out of their car. They're usually with somebody and have a place to sleep, just not their own home.

A liaison working in a larger district with a high level of student poverty echoed this sentiment, explaining:

> They're homeless so obviously stable housing is an issue. But most of our families have gotten that taken care of, at least for now. Sometimes it does become an emergency, you know, they thought they could stay with aunt or

> grandma for two months but she wants them out now, but those situations are rare. It's really more about making sure the kids have food to eat and clothes to wear. Sometimes things like glasses or shoes are an issue too. Then, depending on the situation, we'll address longer-term housing options.

Once families have gone through the initial intake process and liaisons have connected families with organizations to support them in meeting their basic needs, liaisons reported that most families required limited on-going support from the liaison. Liaisons continued to check in with students and families on a regular (typically monthly) basis.

Social services. Liaisons report that often the families of homeless students are in need of social services including mental health services, substance abuse services, and support obtaining employment or job training. Research shows that mental health issues, substance abuse, incarceration, and job loss are often precursors to homelessness (Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008; National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2012). Liaisons report that once they meet students' basic and immediate needs (food, clothing, shelter), they can then support students and families in acquiring any additional social services. As one liaison observed, "In working with families over the year, and sometimes many years, it's pretty obvious when drugs or stuff like that is a problem." As one liaison working in an average-sized urban district explained,

> Most of our homeless families come with other baggage as well. Usually emotional issues because of whatever they've been through: domestic abuse, drugs, incarceration, mental health issues. Most or all of our homeless families are dealing with one or more of those things too.

Another liaison working in a different average-sized urban district observed,

> The parents almost always need mental health support. Even if it's nothing major—they're not bipolar or schizophrenic or anything—they're probably depressed at least. But sometimes the kids need those services too. We have one unaccompanied minor right now who I know drugs are a problem. And a lot of

> times the kids need counseling or other mental health services too just because of everything they've been through.

However, seeing the need and addressing it are two separate things. Many liaisons indicated that these needs are much more complicated and vexing to address than the basic needs of food and clothing, due both to a family's willingness (or lack thereof) to engage these types of services and the availability (or lack thereof) of appropriate service agencies in the community.

Transportation. All 20 liaisons reported that their district's homeless students need support arranging transportation to and from school. Liaisons working in larger districts report more complicated intra-district transportation needs (meaning students continued to live within district boundaries but need transportation to a school outside of their current neighborhood), while liaisons working in smaller districts report more inter-district transportation needs (meaning students move outside of district boundaries and need transportation back into the district to attend their school of origin). In many cases liaisons explicitly referenced the McKinney-Vento legislation when discussing the issue of transportation, explaining that obtaining transportation back to the "school of origin" was a legal right for homeless students and a legal requirement for the district of origin to arrange and provide that transportation to homeless students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b).

The school transportation needs of homeless students varied. Two interesting themes emerged based primarily on district size: first, liaisons working in small districts (rural, town, and small suburbs) with few school buildings (typically one elementary, one middle, and one high school) report that arranging transportation is relatively straightforward when a student moves to a new location within the district boundaries. One liaison in a small town district explained,

> When they're homeless at the elementary level and they're moving around in our district, we have busing for our students. So transportation isn't a huge issue. We just go to their babysitter's or to their neighbor's house they're staying at.

Another liaison working in a small rural district echoed this sentiment, stating, "Our buses stop and pick them up like every other kid." In these cases, a school bus route to the elementary school or the high school is already in place, and more than likely that bus route already goes through the homeless child's new neighborhood. So it becomes a matter of communicating that new bus stop to the parent and child rather than rearranging transportation routes.

However, liaisons in these same district types report that if a family finds temporary housing *outside* of the district but wants to remain in the original district, transportation becomes much more complicated. One liaison in a small, high-poverty town explained,

> Transportation when a student moves out of the district and still wants to attend here is a real problem. We're a small district and don't have yellow buses. We also don't have taxis or public transportation, so it becomes difficult…Sometimes if they have a car we give them a gas card, it just depends. We have to get creative.

On the other hand, liaisons working in districts with medium-to-large populations (suburbs, urban areas) that have multiple elementary, middle, and high school buildings reported that needing to arrange intra-district transportation was more common than inter-district transportation. These intra-district transportation arrangements can be particularly complex. In all of these districts, school assignments are based on geographic catchment zones, and the bus routes from a particular neighborhood service only one elementary, middle, and/or high school. As a result, when a student moves within the district to a new neighborhood but wants to attend his or her previous school, a new bus route must be created. One liaison in an urban district explained it like this:

> So we're also talking cross-city, you know, long rides on the school bus. And that gets costly and we have to put a route in place which takes a lot of time.

These routes are further complicated when there are multiple children of different grade levels all attending their school of origin, as explained by a liaison working in a different urban district:

> There are usually multiple kids in a family, so you've got kids going to different schools at different times from different bus stops. That gets tricky.

However, despite greater complexity in arranging intra-district transportation for homeless students, liaisons working in these larger districts reported fewer inter-district transportation arrangements. More than likely this is due to the greater availability of housing within a larger district's boundaries, meaning that families need not leave the district to find affordable housing, to access a shelter, or to move in with a friend or family member.

Further, liaisons working in large urban districts and in districts in close proximity to large urban centers reported that they are able to use public transportation—typically city buses—to help get students either from another district into their district or across the district to their school of origin. Liaisons are able to access bus passes for students (and for parents of younger children) to help them get to school.

Finding 2: Academic Support

In general, most liaisons had less awareness of the specific academic needs of the homeless students they serve. In only two cases did a liaison mention academics without being prompted. In the remaining 18 interviews, liaisons were asked specifically about the academic needs of their homeless students. Only one liaison was able to speak to particular academic needs of specific homeless students. This particular liaison's full-time role was as a building principal, which allowed her greater day-to-day contact with her homeless students and their teachers and families. It is likely that the greater and more regular proximity to her students allowed her to speak to their particular academic needs in a more detailed way than liaisons who do not work at a school level. Liaisons working at the district level reported that academic needs are handled at the school level by the principal, counselor, and/or teacher(s). Liaisons do, however, perceive that the academic needs of their homeless students stem from their transience. The academic supports these students receive are the same as any other struggling student enrolled in the district. Liaisons believe their work with students and families to ensure school attendance and consistency is critical to supporting students' overall academic success.

Tutoring and other academic supports. As discussed above, liaisons readily identified basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, and social services as needs of the homeless students and families they serve, but they expressed less awareness of the specific academic needs of their students. Several liaisons indicated that this is because they hold district-level rather than school-level positions and subsequently have minimal day-to-day interactions with students. This degree of separation results in less awareness of the specific academic needs of the students they serve.

Liaisons spoke about homeless students' needs generally, explaining that most high-need students require additional academic support, and that homeless students are typically served right along with other high-need students. Liaisons' responses also suggest that they do not get directly involved in the academic needs of students. Instead, they make building principals aware of a student's homelessness but leave it up to school-based staff—principals, teachers, and guidance counselors—to address any specific academic needs. One liaison working in a small town district summed it up this way:

> The academic stuff, that has to happen at the school level. I have hundreds of students so there's no way I can also keep track of their academic needs too. I make sure the principals are aware [of a student's homeless situation] and then they can work with a student's teachers on additional academic support. We already have that in place for non-homeless students, so the homeless students just get the same support.

Further, seven liaisons indicate that they have a support team—multiple liaisons working at the school level, additional social workers, or school-based community workers—who they can deploy to work more closely with students. The liaisons with these additional supports indicate that part of the role of these school-based support staff members is to be in closer contact with homeless students' teachers and have a better handle on individual students' academic needs. As one liaison explained:

> I'm truly blessed to have my [school-based social workers]. Without them I wouldn't be able to do this job. They keep in touch with the kids, their teachers, the administrators, the parents, providing more support than I am capable of. They have a much better feel for the academic needs of each kid.

This is not to say, however, that liaisons are completely unaware that their homeless students may need additional academic support. Liaisons recognize that the transiency of many homeless students can lead to academic problems. While liaisons do not see their role as directly supporting the academic needs of homeless students, leaving that to school-level staff instead, they emphasize that their work related to arranging transportation, ensuring students can stay at their school of origin if desired, and addressing other needs that impact students' attendance, helps support students' ability to succeed academically.

Impact of transience on academic outcomes. Although liaisons were less aware of the specific academic needs of homeless students—they could not, for example, say whether most homeless students require additional reading or math support or whether a large number required special education services—they did have a general awareness that academics were likely an issue for many of their homeless students. When prompted to reflect on the academic needs of their students, eight liaisons expressed that the academic needs of their homeless students are likely a result of their transiency, which requires them to start over at new schools and/or in new districts quite frequently. Below are statements from four different liaisons explaining the impact of homelessness and transiency on their students:

> We do find that the kids need academic support because they're so transient. There are gaps in their education from repeated absences and switching schools and districts. But the academic supports we provide depend on their needs, not why they need it. We just treat them as one of our students that has academic needs, and so whatever interventions we have available, that's what we provide.
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> I think academic issues pop up an awful lot, but I think part of that too is they're just so transient. And there's a study out recently, I just read it, that says when a kid moves it takes four months to catch back up and get into a groove. So if they've moved a bunch of times, it becomes a problem. They're losing tons of time.
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> A lot of them are behind academically. Not always substantially behind, but behind enough to need some supports as far as academics go. It's not drastic though. And I would say about a quarter of our homeless students are currently identified with a disability as well.
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> Homelessness just isn't conducive to good academics. For example, we have a family living in a car right now. Mom picks up the kids from school, they walk around the mall. They have a few friends who will let them shower at their home but then it's back to the car where they live and sleep. The kids aren't able to do their work. A car isn't conducive for that. Or families that are doubled up may be

> in one bedroom with four or five other people and no real space for the kids to do their work or to concentrate on academics.

In some cases, liaisons perceive that the transience itself is the problem because of the instability and disruption it causes, and that homeless students who are able to maintain educational consistency can remain academically on track. One liaison from a large suburban district explained it this way:

> Transience is a big deal. The kids are behind academically because they haven't been consistently in one place for a very long time. And every time they start a new school, they're starting over again. Some of our families, though, that have been with us from the beginning, the kids are doing really well academically. And, you know, we see a dip, we always see a dip academically when a family is going through a crisis. But after we put supports in place we've been pretty pleased with the results. Kids are resilient typically. They're able to come right back up to the academic level where they were prior to the homelessness occurring. In that way, McKinney-Vento has been so crucial for kids in maintaining that consistency. I always say, when everything in your life is falling apart, at least school can remain constant.

Liaisons working in high-poverty districts (regardless of district size) indicate that the vast majority of their students—homeless or not—require additional academic supports. These districts have addressed student achievement needs broadly by instituting policies and programs like after-school tutoring, longer reading and math classes, remedial courses, and/or summer school programs. Homeless students are entitled to and have access to these academic supports just as any other struggling student does.

Attendance and consistency. Although liaisons are less engaged in the specific academic needs of students than are school-based staff like teachers and principals, they are aware that the transient nature of many homeless families can lead to academic challenges and thus see their work as part of the larger work of enabling students to succeed academically. Thirteen liaisons expressed that the transportation arrangements that they make, which enable students to remain in their same school despite any number of moves, help create stability and consistency and encourage attendance since students do not have to rely on transportation from friends or parents. A liaison from a small suburban district explained it this way:

> So one of the main things we try to do is to make sure we keep them in the district. Because there are the major stressors in life, you know, changing schools, moving, parents divorcing. And homeless kids hit two of those three. They've moved and now they'll lose their school. So we do everything we can to keep them in the school for stability and to keep them in a routine.

A liaison from a small, high-poverty district echoed this sentiment:

> I feel like they need academic support and structure. [This school] may be the most structure a child receives and we find it very important to give them what they need to feel successful and stay on track.

Ultimately, though liaisons generally have less direct knowledge about students' academic needs, they are fully aware that academic needs likely accompany their students' other, more basic needs. The work liaisons do around facilitating transportation and attendance is a major key to creating schooling stability and allowing homeless students the best-possible opportunity for academic success.

Finding 3: Identification

Liaisons indicated that they prioritize identifying homeless families. Training staff members and raising awareness in the community are tools they use to help them in the identification process.

Identification of homeless students and families. Liaisons indicate that a major focus of their work is identifying homeless families. Four liaisons expressed explicit concern about the students they aren't able to identify. One liaison in a suburban district expressed it this way:

> I worry about what I don't know; who I'm not finding. We're able to base what they say at registration or where they're living to say hey, I think this child is in a

homeless situation, but how many of our other kids are out there and we just don't even know it?

> A liaison from a small, high-poverty district concurred, explaining:
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> I'm afraid of what I don't know. The numbers that get reported are the instances I know about. I worry that there are more going unreported and un-served. So I spend a lot of time putting up fliers, you know both in the schools but also in a local trailer park and low-income apartment buildings and places like that.

According to one liaison, part of the challenge of identifying homeless families is that often the families do not "look" homeless:

> Our families often present as a typical family. And I say typical loosely because you know, what is that anymore, but our child who comes to school bathed every day, with homework done, may not be eating. May not have a place, a consistent place to lay their head. So I think one of the biggest challenges is making sure that you have your families taken care of. Because they're not living under—you know, when I was young, homeless meant you were living under a bridge or that you were, you know a dirty person begging for money on a street. That's not our homeless families. We don't have any families that are in that situation. So sometimes being able to identify them is so tough. But it's also important. It's such an important part of what I do as a liaison.

In an effort to better identify homeless students, liaisons explain that they spend time in the school and larger community raising awareness about homelessness and the supports to which homeless families are entitled. This includes both training staff members around signs of potential homelessness and what to do if they suspect a student is homeless, as well as raising awareness in the community by putting up fliers and information about McKinney-Vento in the school and community. The McKinney-Vento legislation requires that liaisons do both of these things, and most liaisons indicate that they feel training and awareness-raising are priorities because it helps them identify families in need.

Training. Liaisons reported relying heavily on training facilitated by the Ohio Department of Education to ensure they fully understood their duties as the district liaison. Four liaisons specifically mentioned a large binder containing the federal legislation, guidelines for their roles, copies of fliers to hang in school and district offices, and other resources to support them in performing their duties. In turn, part of the role of the liaison is to train district and school-level staff members on the issue of homelessness and what to do if they suspect a student may be homeless.

All 20 liaisons reported that at minimum, teachers, administrators, and secretaries/registrars receive annual training on the McKinney-Vento legislation and on their district's process for identifying and serving homeless students. This training includes ensuring that these staff members have the appropriate forms and know what to do if they suspect a student is homeless. Some liaisons indicate that the training they provide goes beyond teachers and administrators and includes janitors, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers—essentially all adults who come into contact with children. Online modules and assessments, some provided by the Ohio Department of Education and some by other third-party organizations, were mentioned as common forms of training:

> Each year we start with an all-staff meeting before the first day in the building. McKinney-Vento and homelessness is always a topic we go over, training staff on what to look for and how to support students. We also created a manual that answers every question we could think of related to McKinney-Vento, the students, and our district policies and procedures to link families to resources. These manuals are available in all the buildings too, in case someone has a question about what to do.

Raising community awareness. In addition to training school and district staff, liaisons focus on raising awareness in their communities to ensure families in need have access to information about how to seek help. All 20 liaisons indicated that they put up McKinney-Vento fliers in school offices. These fliers explain the legal definition of homelessness, identify the rights to which families are entitled, and provide contact information for the school or district personnel who can assist a family struggling with homelessness. Some liaisons indicate that they also put up fliers and information throughout the community. Two different liaisons explained their work to raise community awareness as follows:

> I have fliers in the Laundromat, I have fliers in the churches, I've talked with the church folks in our local churches, I've even put fliers in some bars, in some local bars, just to see if they're there and see them.

> By federal law we have to have McKinney-Vento posters and fliers up. We have them in all school offices and some schools have put them in student settings like the cafeteria or media center. All of our [social workers] have fliers too, so when they meet with parents they give it to them. They always have them handy, especially for when their "professional gut" tells them more is going on in a family than what a parent is disclosing.

One liaison who was relatively new to the role (2 years) indicated that this training and awareness-raising was new for her district and community, but felt it was extremely important because it takes some of the burden off the families to self-report:

> Before I came on board, previous staffing put the onus on families to prove they were homeless and to ask for services. And when I came on board I said no, that's not how it works. We need to watch for it, we need to make sure families who need help know where to go, and we need to be asking the right questions.

Despite the fact that identifying homeless families is a priority for liaisons, it is not always easy. The fear and secretiveness of homeless students and families can make this part of liaisons' jobs challenging.

Finding 4: How Liaisons approach their Work

Liaisons place a high priority on ensuring that homeless students' basic needs are met, but some liaisons actually do the work while others facilitate it.

Facilitating versus doing the work. As described above, homeless students and their families often lack basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter. Meeting these immediate needs is always a top priority for liaisons working in all district types. However, there was an interesting divergence in *how* liaisons do the work of meeting homeless students' needs. On one hand, some liaisons function much like a social worker: they meet regularly with families, contact community agencies directly, connect families and community agencies, deliver food or clothing to homeless families, drive them to appointments, arrange transportation to school, and more. In these cases, liaisons prioritize *doing* the work. Twelve of the 20 liaisons interviewed fall into this category. One liaison in an urban district expressed it this way:

> I spend most of my time getting families in contact with agencies. I have to contact a central agency in [the county] to figure out the correct agency that's going to help with their specific needs. And then contacting the family to make sure they have the right phone numbers, and the right person's name they need to see, and transportation to get there. And then making sure the families actually follow through or a social worker from the agency follows up. And if they don't then figuring out why not, and figuring how to get the family's needs met in the meantime.

In other cases, liaisons see themselves as *facilitators* of the work, understanding their role as identifying student needs and connecting families with other staff members to help get those needs met, but not actually meeting those needs themselves. They see their responsibilities as completing the intake paperwork and making sure others are following up on students' needs. Eight of the 20 liaisons interviewed fall into this category. One liaison in a suburban district explained her role this way:

> So, you know, part of my job is to not, not to play the role of the social worker. We have a social worker so I don't do things like call on churches that frequently because I'm not the social worker, you know. And I feel like that's kind of her role. I let her know the situation and make sure she connects with the kid or family, but that's her role. Same with transportation. I have a guy at our transportation headquarters that I connect directly to our homeless families. And they work out the transportation thing. If there's a problem I certainly hear about it and get involved if I need to, but that's his thing. I just kind of oversee it all. I

> coordinate but I don't do unless it's a real emergency situation. Then I jump in however I can.

The divergence in liaisons occurred mostly based on the amount of in-district support for students, which correlates closely with the poverty level of the districts. Liaisons working in districts with few homeless students—or smaller proportions of low-income students—had fewer in-district personnel resources like social workers at their disposal. That means that they themselves had to *do* a lot of the work. However, these districts also have fewer homeless students, so doing the work is more feasible. On the other hand, districts with large numbers of low-income students tended to have larger support networks of social workers, counselors, and/or paraprofessionals to support students and programs like after-school tutoring to address students' academic needs. Liaisons were able to tap into these resources to support their work with homeless students, and thus *facilitate* rather than *do* the work.

Research Question 2: Facilitators and Constraints

Research Question 2: What factors do LEA liaisons perceive to facilitate and constrain their ability to support homeless students and families?

This research question sought to understand the factors that liaisons perceive to facilitate and hinder their ability to meet the needs of the homeless students with whom they work. Two questions on the interview protocol were directly related to this research question. One asked liaisons to identify factors that helped support them in their role, and one asked liaisons to identify challenges that they faced in meeting homeless students' needs. Liaisons also identified facilitators and constraints as they answered other questions, sometimes mentioning, for example, other staff members on whom they relied, programs in the district that supported their work, and/or community organizations with which they worked closely.

During the second round of coding, four structural codes were applied to data addressing this research question: community facilitator; district facilitator; community challenge; and district challenge. These data were then coded using descriptive coding, where the data in each structural code was further analyzed and identified by a code illuminating the main topic or issue raised in the data. Finally, these descriptive codes were categorized into pattern codes. The five pattern codes that emerged from these four rounds of coding and analysis are presented in Table 10 and discussed in the text that follows. A discussion of the fifth factor, district characteristics (size, geographic location, poverty level), is included alongside the other four factors when applicable, rather than discussed separately.

Table 10
Factors Influencing How Liaisons Support Homeless Students

Research Question 2: What factors do LEA liaisons perceive to facilitate and constrain their ability to support homeless students and families?

Pattern Code	**Descriptive Codes**	**Number of liaisons identifying this component**
Resources	Financial resources (including district budgets and McKinney-Vento subgrants)	13
	Personnel resources (like social workers or community-based workers)	6
	Staff member commitment	5
	Leadership	7
Competing demands	Other roles held by liaisons	17
	The role of the school in the community	7
	Community perceptions of homelessness	6
Characteristics of homeless families	Lack of disclosure, secrecy, and fear	11

Availability of community resources	Low-income housing and/or homeless shelters	20
	Quality and availability of local social service agencies	20
	Faith-based institutions	15
District characteristics	Size, geography, and poverty level	

Finding 5: Resources

The resources at liaisons' disposal are critical to their ability to meet the needs of the homeless students and families they serve. Grants provided through the federal McKinney-Vento legislation and the Ohio Department of Education's method for allocating subgrants to districts significantly influences the financial resources available to districts and subsequently to liaisons. The cost of transportation was frequently cited as a constraint for liaisons' work, as in the absence of adequate funding, liaisons had to tap into district budgets to cover the costs of transporting homeless students to and from school. In addition, the availability or lack of financial resources impacts the personnel resources available to liaisons to support their work. However, in some cases liaisons work in districts with ample support from district leadership and staff, and are able to acquire personnel resources even in the absence of financial resources.

Financial resources. The lack of financial resources to support homeless students was explicitly cited by 13 liaisons. The vast majority of liaisons in this study—and statewide—work in districts that did not receive McKinney-Vento subgrants for the current academic year. In fact, in FY 2016, just 18 out of 609 districts in the state of Ohio received McKinney-Vento sub-grants (Ohio Department of Education, 2015a). Liaisons working in three subgrant-recipient districts participated in this study. All three worked in large, high-poverty, urban districts. In addition to funding through McKinney-Vento, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires all districts to set aside funds to serve homeless students not attending Title I schools (Ohio Department of Education, 2006). However, liaisons report that this set-aside is insufficient. As one liaison in a suburban district explained,

> I believe there is a need to expand the grant or expand the entitlement monies that come specifically for homelessness because the transportation costs alone last year, I want to say were around $30,000 in transportation costs and we only had a $5,000 set-aside. So that gives you an idea of the real kind of dollars districts have to spend to comply with the law. And we want to comply with it, but you know, the federal flow-through money is just not enough.

Funding is an especially important factor for liaisons as they strive to meet the transportation needs of their students as required by McKinney-Vento. Across district type, the 13 liaisons identified funding as a challenge. All had similar experiences related to meeting students' transportation needs. Below are examples of comments from three different liaisons:

> Since transportation concerns are the primary need identified for our families, the district budget is the most critical factor in meeting the needs of our homeless students.

> The expense to transport students is variable and unpredictable. The district honors our commitment when transportation is required regardless of the impact to our budget.

> The biggest portion of my time though is usually spent on transportation. Working with our transportation director on, you know, last year we had a family that I am not joking moved every two weeks. And we basically followed them around the city with a bus…And working with our transportation director and trying to route and trying to make sure that the family knows where we're going to pick them up. It's a lot of time. And it's expensive especially when we have to put a new route in place.

Even in districts where all students walk to school, liaisons worry about the financial impact of arranging transportation:

> Funding is one of our biggest challenges. Because if we're doing the transportation, well, we don't have transportation. We're a walking district. So the transportation needs, which we have only had one case where transportation was an issue, but it could really put the district in a really—in a bind, because of that transportation piece. We don't have funding for that.

Personnel resources. Participants described a variety of personnel resources on which they rely for support as they work with homeless students. The three McKinney-Vento subgrant-recipient districts included in this study had significantly different personnel resources than the other districts. The subgrants these districts receive ranged from $150,000 to $400,000 (Ohio Department of Education, 2015a). These additional funds enabled the districts to hire full-time liaisons and additional personnel, and to create full programs to support homeless students, rather than relying solely on a single liaison to meet all homeless students' needs.

In one of these large urban districts the role of the liaison was just recently expanded into a full-time role. That liaison indicated that she is in the process of creating more formal support structures and programming for students and is working to build formal relationships with local community agencies where they do not already exist. (Prior to her coming on board, the district already had formal relationships with local shelters, where district teachers provide tutoring, for example.)

In the other two large urban districts, full programs exist that are designed to support the district in meeting the needs of their homeless students. Because homelessness has long been a challenge faced by students attending these districts, both of these programs existed in the district prior to the 2001 requirement for districts to identify a homeless liaison. The director of each program now serves as the district liaison, and the programs have adapted to ensure they meet the requirements of the most recent reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento legislation. The McKinney-Vento subgrants are used to support these programs.

Both programs work closely with area shelters, food banks, mental health agencies, and other social service agencies. They have social workers, psychologists, and teachers on staff to work directly with students, as well as staff members who are in the schools daily working with students on everything from life skills to behavior to academics to ensuring they have food and clothing. Further, both programs work with families and the district and city transportation systems to ensure students are able to attend the same school all year.

For these three districts, the additional funding provided through the McKinney-Vento subgrant was a major facilitator for obtaining additional personnel. However, in high-poverty districts that did not receive a subgrant, some liaisons were able to rely on other types of personnel support. For example, three liaisons working in high-poverty districts not receiving McKinney-Vento subgrants (one rural, one town, and one average-size urban) reported having additional school-based social workers to support students and families. These social workers work closely with students and their families to manage any crises that might arise, from losing a parent or family member to dealing with incarceration to academic needs to homelessness. One of these liaisons described the role of her school-based social workers this way:

> We have [social workers] in all our buildings. Part of their job is to reach out to families if there are any issues. And the families in these buildings know to reach out to these [social workers] directly if there is a need. They're also involved with

> outside community partners so they reach out to those partners directly and build relationships with them and help direct families to the appropriate resources.

In some districts, the personnel resources are less formal, meaning that the liaison herself has built a team to help support her and her work with homeless students. One liaison in a low-poverty, suburban district explained it this way:

> We have sort of built a system based on the fact that the families experiencing homelessness, there are other issues. And so we have a district social worker who works very closely with me, we have a district attendance officer who is one of our building principals who has that as a supplemental role, and I also work very closely with the registrar…So we really are this team of five people. It's kind of like one hand shakes the other. We all have to be aware of the family and know about the situation. And we can meet their needs better as a team.

In districts with few homeless students (particularly small rural districts and low-poverty suburban districts), a lack of additional personnel to support homeless students was not identified as a challenge.

Staff member commitment. Overall, liaisons spoke highly of their coworkers. Five liaisons explicitly indicated that their entire staff works together as a team to meet the needs of homeless students. This includes the support of non-teaching staff members like bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and janitors. Bus drivers were frequently identified as the staff members who first alert the liaison to a potential homeless situation. Examples of such statements from three different liaisons follow:

> Typically it's our bus drivers who are our go-to people. They're the ones who come to me first. And I work with the bus drivers every year on identifying what are the red flags. And they're the ones who will come to me and say, they're dropping the kid off, there's no house, you know. Those are the ones.

> The bus compound does training around homelessness for the bus drivers. I think they do that every year because so often they're the first ones to notice when something isn't right.

> You'd be surprised at how often bus drivers are helping kids with homework, just sitting in the bus compound while they wait for a sibling to arrive so he can take them all home.

In addition to bus drivers, liaisons note that other school-based staff members, in particular janitors and cafeteria workers, are both a source of information to liaisons and a source of support to homeless students. Two different liaisons described these relationships as follows:

> A lot of times kids will talk to our janitors. They're often the least-threatening adults in the building, so kids will tell them things. So I've talked with them as well on how to handle those situations, what to do if they think a kid is homeless, that kind of thing.

> It's happens pretty often—cafeteria workers are helping kids with homework after school, or giving them some food to take home over the weekend. It's really an all-school effort to support our kids.

Liaisons indicate that knowing that all adults who come into contact with students are looking out for them and wanting to support them however they can facilitates their ability to do their jobs.

Leadership. In addition to the support of these staff members, liaisons working in high-poverty districts, regardless of the size or geography of the district, indicated that district leadership has made concerted efforts to put in place systems of support for their students, which in turn becomes a source of support for liaisons' work with homeless students. Liaisons working in these high-poverty districts stated that their leadership acknowledges the many challenges that students coming from low-income backgrounds often face related to school attendance, behavior, and academics, as well as in meeting basic needs like food or hygiene, and have put programs or policies in place to help support all students in need. These programs often include additional social workers or after-school tutoring programs. Seven liaisons explicitly credited their district leadership, in particular their superintendents, for prioritizing students' needs and ensuring funding is available to support the additional personnel, programs, and/or services. Two such responses from different liaisons are below:

> We have social workers in each building. They're all paid through [special education] and general dollar funds for the district, so it's a commitment from the superintendent to have them in the buildings. The social workers are able to show through the data of what they do all day that right now in the community their positions are desperately needed. So our district really sees value in having them and is willing to fund them. And most have been in the district for five-plus years, so they know the resources and communities and are a huge asset to me and the families.

> We have a superintendent who truly is, and all educators are supposed to say this, but she truly is student-first. She will not make a decision that will make an adult happy simply to avoid a union issue or some sort of drama in that respect. She truly is student-first. She sees the need in our community for a community resource, a wraparound care team. She just sees the need and is willing to find the resources to meet that need.

Finding 6: Competing Demands

The broader context in which liaisons work can also create conflicts and challenges as liaisons seek to meet the needs of homeless students. In particular, all but three liaisons held other full-time roles in the district, meaning that the needs of homeless students and the work related to meeting those needs competes for time and capacity with their other role(s) in the district. In addition to this practical challenge, several liaisons indicated uncertainty about the proper role of the school in the broader community and whether it should truly be the "job" of the school staff to ensure students have food, clothing, and shelter, in addition to working to ensure they meet academic expectations. Community perceptions about homelessness and the legislation (specifically the definition of "homeless") also created challenges for liaisons to navigate as they work with homeless students. In particular, liaisons reported concern that families may try to take advantage of the McKinney-Vento legislation to get their children into “better” schools. Liaisons found it difficult to navigate the line between wanting to help families who need it while being careful to “protect the district” from “interlopers.”

Liaisons’ other roles. With the exception of the three liaisons working in large, urban, high-poverty districts, all liaisons included in this study held other full-time roles in the district. These roles ranged from assistant superintendent to director of student services to curriculum director to principal. For all of these individuals the role of homeless liaison was an additional duty. In no cases were liaisons given additional leave time or compensation for performing their liaison duties. Liaisons were asked to describe how they balance their full-time role with the duties as a liaison and to estimate how much time they spend working with homeless families in a given week or month.

In districts with few homeless families (typically small rural districts, suburban districts, and low-poverty districts), liaisons perceive their roles to be manageable with their other full-time duties. They indicate that they are typically only dealing with a few families at any point in time, and that the most time-intensive work takes place during the initial intake process, when liaisons meet with homeless students and families to determine their needs and then identify and connect them with the appropriate service agencies. Going through this process with one or two families at a time is manageable, as is keeping in contact with families over time—which liaisons indicate requires less time. When emergencies do arise, for example if an identified family suddenly loses their temporary housing, liaisons report that they are able to deal with these situations on an as-needed basis without too much struggle. Responses from three different liaisons working in districts with few homeless students to the questions on the interview protocol around how they balance their roles are as follows:

> To be honest with you, my role as a homeless liaison is miniscule compared to the other stuff that we do…The most I do in my role as homeless liaison is get the word out; is to spend time putting up posters, talking to people, doing some PD with our staff. And then if we think we have a case of homelessness it's just a matter of investigation…and we go from there. But it's really quite miniscule.
>
> We have less than 30 students identified as homeless, and their needs tend to be spread out. So we do not have the demand on our time or resources as experienced by other districts in [the county] that have more low-income and more homeless students.
>
> My initial meeting with them is more for intake and paperwork and making sure they get in, and I just keep tabs on them using my social worker. And I follow up, usually quarterly, just to say hey, what do you need? But I personally am not doing a whole lot beyond the initial meeting. I mean, if there's a need then I take care of whatever it is if I can. But the bulk of my time is pretty much an administrative capacity. Just kind of checking the paperwork, checking the family, seeing what their status is, if they're in the same situation or not. That kind of thing.

On the other hand, liaisons working in districts with a much larger population of homeless students (typically high-poverty rural, town, and urban districts, regardless of size) find that balancing their full-time role with their duties as liaison is quite challenging. As one liaison explained it, "It's ugly. Really ugly. There is no balance. If there's a family in need, that has to come first no matter what else I'm doing." Two other liaisons concurred, explaining:

> I'm lucky because my children are grown. If I had young kids, there's no way I could do this job. I spend a lot of time here at school. I'm here very late at night sometimes because I get very little work done during the day. But I do my best not to get emotionally involved. I love my students, but I have to separate myself. I work on the work I can work on. And if I can't do it, if it's not within my realm, or it's not within what I can do, I will recognize that and I'll try to get help from whoever or whatever agency that can do something about it.
>
> It's kind of like on the fly. Walk with me, let's walk and talk. It's balls in the air, it's keeping everything floating. I have no magic answer to that except you know,

> like emails are something that typically happen at night. Everyone knows if they cannot catch me during the day, definitely around 9:30pm they will catch me on email.

As discussed above, some of these districts have hired additional social workers or community-based workers to help support homeless and other high-need students. In these districts, given the number of homeless students and the amount of time spent working with them, the liaisons indicate that they would not be able to fully meet the needs of their homeless students without the support of the other staff members. One liaison working in a small town district with additional staff member support described her workload this way:

> I'm telling you with 100 percent certainty that I do not deserve four social workers. You're not going to find a district our size that has close to that. If I did not have them, then absolutely my position would need to be full-time. I could not do it by myself in addition to my work. I can coordinate it, but I cannot carry through, I cannot ensure that my families are getting what they need on my own.

In other cases, liaisons have recognized that they cannot adequately fulfill the role of homeless liaison alone, and have created their own support teams. One liaison in a high-poverty district explained how she balances her work like this:

> Delegate. I have to delegate. You know, make it at a lower level and just set the pace and the agenda. I'm the person who found the [McKinney-Vento legislation] binder and it's got 194 pages in it. So I went through and said, okay, to get started in this role, what do we need to do to say we are giving it a boy scout try? And so, then I asked myself who could do each of the pieces. And delegated those out. I couldn't do it by myself.

Because the demand on their role as liaison was so much greater in high-poverty districts, liaisons working in those districts perceived their dual-roles to be much less manageable or sustainable.

The role of the school in the community. One of the challenges a number of liaisons indicated that they face is a lack of community-based social services to meet the needs of homeless students and families. Even in large, urban districts, there never seem to be enough social service agencies available to meet all of the needs of the homeless families. As a result, liaisons indicate that the schools have become the "hub" for the community. Families are increasingly turning to the schools to meet their non-academic needs (in addition to their academic ones). And schools are adopting many of these social-service roles (operating food banks, providing psychologists and counselors, teachers are doing home visits, etc.) because there are needs not filled elsewhere in the community. Comments from liaisons hinted at this tension in a variety of ways. One liaison in a small suburban district very clearly articulated that local community members feel it is the "job" of the school to provide for all of their needs:

> In our community, the first place families turn is to the schools. Not to the resources or city hall or anything else. There was a fire in an apartment complex last year and the families called the schools right away. Our schools are kind of the hub of the community. They just think it's our job to take care of these issues.

In other cases, because communities lack services, liaisons explained that the school has stepped in to fill those gaps. Two such statements from different liaisons are as follows:

> There are no services in this part of [the county]…So we do what we can at school, which is really a Band-Aid. And as you know, the role of our guidance counselor in the age of testing has really moved from one of someone who really guides children, to focusing on testing. So we're limited in what we can do but we have to do something because there aren't other options.

> We have several different food bank options locally. But we've opened a district one to hold in reserve for an emergency situation. So if a family has already utilized their one-a-week at that food bank, and if they're out of options with our community resources, we will give them food bank things from the district…It was too hard to tell families no, that's not something we do, and knowing our kids would go hungry, so we opened [a district food bank].

Still other liaisons indicated that the role and focus of schools has shifted over time, with schools (and the teachers, administrators, and staff members working in them) taking on even greater responsibilities. Two liaisons described their experiences as follows:

> So it's interesting because we really have a different focus of what we do [as a school], and the focus of my day is much different than it was when I first became an administrator. You know, between the number of parents and the number of families—the needs of the families and the needs of the kids. Everyone is just needier. And I—our school—is supposed to meet those needs.

> Schools used to be all about education. But now…it's still education, and testing, you know. But students are coming with so much other stuff that we have to shuffle through that stuff before we can get to the academics and learning. And we have community agencies, but really, too often if we don't address a mental health need, or a hungry kid, or something like that, it won't get dealt with.

Statements like these hint at a broader conflict that liaisons were struggling with over their role, and the role of the school, in meeting families' non-academic needs.

Community perceptions of homelessness. Legally, a child or youth is considered homeless if she "lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This includes children who are sharing housing with another family; living in a motel, hotel, trailer park, or camping ground; or who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, or bus or train stations (McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act, 2001b). Despite the clarity of the legal definition, however, some liaisons reported feeling conflicted about whether all identified families are *truly* homeless.

Six liaisons indicated concern over whether some families are misusing the system to enroll their children in a "better" district. Liaisons expressed that they felt in conflict over the need to "protect the district" (as one liaison put it) versus their desire to help all families who say they need help. In particular, three of these liaisons worked in districts located outside of large, high-poverty districts or near lower-performing districts. They indicated a concern that some of the families who claimed to be homeless were using that as a way to get their children into a higher-performing district. These liaisons referred to the districts in which they work as “destination” districts or indicated that their district “is the best in the surrounding area.” Liaisons described this conflict in a variety of ways. Below are examples of statements from three different liaisons:

> I hate to say it this way, but you know, we, we do advertise that we have a homeless liaison and that they have rights. We have brochures out in our buildings. But you also don’t want to make it so accessible that people, to stay in our district, and many people want to stay in our district, will claim homelessness when they’re really not. And that’s happened to us many times. Families literally, they have an apartment, they’re all living there, but you know, we were homeless last year and we’re not going to tell anybody that we’ve moved and established residency. It’s happened several times.
>
> We had three families register on the same day. They all showed up with McKinney-Vento information printed off the website and explained how they qualified. One family even told the secretary she wasn’t legally allowed to ask any more questions. So families are talking. And we need to balance protecting the district—because some families may just want their kids here—with helping families who really need it.
>
> So the belief is that we have a lot of people who are trying to kind of interlope and get in here…and I’ll be honest, I have had two families that I can prove were dishonest and disingenuous with me who said they were homeless to keep their kids here and in fact they did.

One liaison working in a low-poverty suburban described the challenge of fighting against the *perception* that homeless families are misusing the system. She noted that she had never personally worked with a family that to her knowledge, was misusing the system, but that there was an assumption that at least some families were:

> How do I say this in a nice way? There are—sometimes people think McKinney-Vento is enabling people not to follow through, not to, you know, you hear this, ‘I’m a taxpayer in this district and why are we taking one of our buses and going

> all the way across town to pick up this family. They should just go to school there.' Or, 'they're not really homeless.' You know, I mean, I try to help people understand that the definition of homeless doesn't literally mean you're in a box outside. And that's hard. Because there are prejudices that exist among a school staff, and in every building, and if you work hard and pay your taxes and you see somebody else, a family that you, um, perceive as milking the system, I've heard that many times. They're working the system. You know, so, it's kind of hard for me to be the lone voice sometimes. I've learned over the last how many years I've done this, who to call, who not to call, how to approach the situation, you know. Prejudice exists. It really does. Especially in a district like this where you've got great affluence and you have very, very desperate people, very poor people. You know, there's a divide there no matter what I do to try to make it not so, there's a divide.

It is important to note, however, that all of the liaisons who indicated they felt that some families might be taking advantage of the provisions in the legislation also stressed that they did *not* feel this was happening in most cases. However, they had experienced some situations where it had been proven that a parent had lied about his/her homeless status in order to get into the district and as a result, the liaisons are more aware that this is a possibility.

Further confounding the situation is that some liaisons admitted that they themselves struggle with how homelessness is defined (in particular the doubled-up component of the definition), and wonder whether all identified families are *truly* homeless. One liaison working in a different low-poverty suburb told this story:

> I've got this lady who has been on the list for a while. Three or four years now, I think…She lives with her parents. And you know, she comes in, she's well dressed, her nails are done, you know, her hair is done, and people look at her and make judgments. Well, how can you be homeless? Well you know, again, ethically is this the thing she should be doing? I don't know. I mean that's something she has to wrestle with. Would our community members be happy about it? Probably not. But this is the law. She was here, she lost her home and now she's staying with family members so she's doubled up. And she's been there now for three or four years. Well, I can't you know, there's no statute of limitations on enforcing McKinney-Vento. Does she have a home? Yeah. Does she go back and forth to her parents' house? Yeah. She doesn't have any needs per say.

Liaisons' comments indicate that despite the legal definition of homelessness, there are often conflicts and tension about who is "truly" homeless, who should be entitled to services, and whether or not the provisions in the legislation allow families to misuse the system.

While this research project did not focus on how participants themselves make sense of homelessness or how they perceive the students and families with whom they work, it is important to acknowledge the tension and discomfort underlying these comments. When giving the above examples or voicing negative stereotypes about homeless families, the uneasiness liaisons felt was clear: they spoke with less confidence, less clarity, more pauses, and more fillers like "um" or "uh." They were also less likely to indicate that any negative opinions were their own, instead talking in broad generalities about "certain coworkers" or "members of the community" who hold negative beliefs about homeless families.

This tension over how to make sense of homelessness—as the failure of an individual or as a symptom of larger societal issues—was a clear undercurrent to this discussion. Liaisons indicated that "some people" feel that there are homeless families who are "using the system" or who "won't get a job." Though not stated explicitly, the implication seemed to be that there are indeed homeless families who are not "truly" homeless or who are less deserving of support. However, liaisons were also always quick to indicate that they feel that the vast majority of the identified homeless families in their district are truly homeless and deserve support.

Finding 7: Characteristics of Homeless Families

Secrecy, fear, and lack of disclosure. Many of the liaisons indicated that their greatest challenge in working with homeless families was the families themselves: they are difficult to get in touch with, miss meetings, and are secretive about their situations. The liaisons acknowledged that the uncertainty that comes with being homeless makes it especially difficult for these families to be punctual or reliable. Further, pride, coupled with fear of being turned into children's services or of being kicked out of the district, leads many students and families to hide their situations. Despite understanding why the homeless families exhibited these characteristics, the liaisons indicated that it made their work challenging. One liaison in a high-poverty rural district explained it like this,

> I guess for me one of the biggest barriers is that oftentimes the parents are not forthright. And that's being kind. That's, saying not being forthright is being kind. They sit and boldface lie to me. And I can't help their kids if they won't admit whatever the problem is, and they're argumentative and they're the first ones to place blame, you know, they're addicted and they're not thinking straight. That's the biggest barrier. And oftentimes even if they're not addicted, there's a mental illness or they're emotionally disturbed in some way. That's the biggest barrier and it's happening more and more frequently.

Liaisons who have experience working with unaccompanied youth express a similar frustration around the lack of forthrightness and honesty about their situations. According to one liaison working in a small town,

> The unaccompanied high school students who are couch surfing are not as forthcoming. It's a small number that is actually reported. I've worked with unaccompanied students in [the county] in a different role not related to this one, about their experiences being unaccompanied minors. Through that I learned that the students are afraid to tell anyone about their situation because they're afraid they'll be put in foster care or that they'll be forced to go back home. A lot of times if the kid left their family they did it for a reason—drugs, abuse, you know, and they don't want reunification. They're afraid they'll be forced to reunify if they tell anyone, so they keep it a secret. So the number of unaccompanied minors actually reported in our data is very small.

In addition to the secretiveness and lack of honesty displayed by homeless students and families, liaisons report that their frustration with families who appear to be "making no effort" to change their situation can be a barrier to their work with the families. One liaison expressed her frustration around one family's priorities:

> Probably the biggest issue I have is, the biggest hurdle I have is the majority of people who become homeless and stay homeless are uneducated parents who don't understand how to meet the basic needs of their kids. When I say that, you know, I go to a motel to meet a family, they can't afford clothes, they can't afford food, yet they've got cigarettes and beer and alcohol. I was trying to enroll a family late last year that came to a motel and I'm driving back and forth, they have no transportation, and I'm trying to make an appointment with mom so I could pinpoint her down to sign all the paperwork so we could get the kids in and she couldn't make it during my time frame because she had to go to dart league. It was more important. She's homeless because she doesn't have a place to stay, but she had to go to dart league.

As discussed above, some liaisons struggle with their own judgment of or biases against homeless or other needy families. These biases can color the way liaisons interpret families' actions, creating a challenge for liaisons to continue to work their hardest in the midst of the demands and priorities of their other full-time roles. Again, the unstated question of whether or not some families are "deserving" of resources and support is an undercurrent here:

> So it's those, those families who you become frustrated almost with because at one point you start to wonder if, because McKinney-Vento doesn't you know, stop after a year, McKinney-Vento is unlimited. So it's those families you begin to wonder if it just becomes easier to let you as a district do everything, so as not to change your circumstance. I have a handful of families like this. One that comes to mind has six kids. So you know, you're talking a good chunk of kids, a good chunk of time just with a couple families coordinating those services. Six kids, so you've got six doctor's appointments and pick up prescriptions for six kids and glasses for six kids. You have to wonder if it's just easier for them to have us coordinate all that.

Finding 8: Availability of Community Resources

Given the needs of homeless students—food, clothing, shelter, and social services like mental health or substance abuse—the availability of social services agencies in a community is a major factor impacting liaisons' work. The availability of services is most heavily impacted by the location of the district, with urban districts and those located nearby having the greatest access to the highest-quality services, and town, rural, and suburbs located far from city centers having the least access to and availability of services. The availability of housing options was a major factor, and to a lesser extent the availability of other social service agencies. In all types of districts, faith-based institutions helped fill critical needs for homeless families.

Housing. Liaisons working in districts located in rural communities or in small towns, and to a lesser extent those working in suburban districts not near large urban areas reported a lack of housing options: there are no homeless shelters and few cheap motels or low-income apartments available for families. Without these resources, liaisons have an especially difficult time working with families who are in need of housing. Liaisons described this challenge in a variety of ways. Sample responses from four different liaisons are below:

> There's none, no permanent shelters in our district specifically because we're in a rural setting. But in the county, once you get out into the more, closer to the city there are some. We have to send people there for shelter.
>
> Without shelters in the area, it's difficult. Families' options are really limited. And a lot of times those doubled up situations that they're forced into are more volatile than a shelter or motel. If a family comes home and the sister who said they could stay has decided enough is enough and you have to leave by Friday, or if your friend's landlord finds out others are living there and threatens to evict her unless they move out, it becomes a crisis situation.

> We do not have any homeless shelters in the district or in any of the cities served by our district. In [a town] about 15 minutes away from here there's a women and children's shelter but it's always at capacity. And we only have one hotel in the district. So yeah, if they don't have friends or family, it's a real problem.
>
> We only have one hotel in the district. In the next city over there's a long street with cheap hotels, so a lot of our families will end up there. Then we have to arrange transportation, so you see how these things are related. Sometimes families will end up in their car just trying to find friends or family that will let them stay.

In the absence of homeless shelters, the onus falls to the homeless liaison to help families access housing. One liaison explained her challenge this way:

> We will try to do private housing. Obviously they usually only last a couple of months and then either our families are asked to leave or they just stop paying rent. We can go to [a local agency] for rent support, but there's a limited number for each family for the year. So we kind of shop around. And we beg. Come on, just help us out! We have only one homeless shelter and they sit around 30 beds. And they typically limit to I think it's 60 days. Sometimes we can get them to stay 90, so sometimes we will beg them if we are truly up against a wall, we will beg the homeless shelter to stay longer. At that point we [the district] will pay for drug tests to make sure our parents are staying clean while they're there, you know what I mean, just trying to provide an incentive to be able to stay in the places that we can find.

Another liaison, living in an area with no shelters and few cheap motels but a large amount of rental property, expressed the challenge this way:

> My community does have a lot of rental property. A lot of two-family homes, a lot of apartment buildings, so they just go through them. It takes a little while before you kind of burn all the bridges. So, I've got a couple of families who literally have gone through, you know, different landlords, different management companies, and you know, once your name is mud, kind of with a couple of them, then you can't get a place anymore because they check the credit history, they check your rental history and all that kind of stuff. And a lot of the landlords are private landlords because they own the property. They don't necessarily report to the credit agencies and things the way apartment uh, management companies do so it doesn't show up on their credit history that they were in a place and didn't pay. And a lot of them don't necessarily check. If you've got the money they'll take you. They don't care. So we can find housing that way.

Social services. Many of these same communities lack food banks, mental health agencies, adult education programs, and employment assistance programs that can support families going through crisis. As one liaison in a high-poverty, small town district explained,

> We've had a couple nonprofits come and go, but many have closed. It's hit or miss, trying to have a pulse on the resources that are available. Two of the nonprofits we worked with a lot last year have closed due to lack of funding, so that's a problem.

The lack of these agencies creates a real challenge for liaisons as they attempt to meet the needs of their district's homeless families. It also creates the expectation among community members that the school, as one of the only government-run organizations in the community, should be the organization to meet these needs. One liaison in a high-poverty, rural district explained her challenge this way:

> There are no services in our part of [the county]. A couple of years ago I wrote a grant and we did get services down here through the grant. We gave two rooms in our old middle school to a mental health agency in [the county] so we were able to provide services down here for families. They would send case workers down here who would work with children during the school day, and pediatric psychiatrists who would come down here and meet with kids once a month to evaluate meds, and they'll meet with the parents as well. But we no longer have the grant, so those services are gone. But it was a good thing.

In contrast, liaisons working in districts located in or near large urban areas have a number of community social service agencies with which they can connect their homeless families. The availability of these organizations provides a great deal of support to liaisons as they work to meet the needs of their homeless families. One liaison in a suburban district described her community's support organizations this way:

> What we have is kind of two things. We have the [city] food pantry, and basically every other week people can get food. They're a really good resource. Our school nurses and guidance counselors have a couple social agencies they work with to get glasses and shoes for the kids. We also set them up with the [county]

> combined health district. They make sure the kids have the shots we require and any other medical needs met. So we work with the [county] combined health district for that. And so one of the other things I work with the parents is if they have no transportation and I work with them to get [bus] passes for our public transportation so parents can at least get around. We're fortunate to have the [public bus system] here.

This kind of outside support can really cut down on the amount of work that liaisons have to do themselves. One liaison in a high-poverty district explained it like this:

> Really, most of our families are supported by outside resources. We don't do a lot within the district after we identify the families and connect them with services. Some come to us already connected. There have been instances where we've provided school supplies or partnered with the church that's next door because they have a food pantry. So a couple families have accessed that through us. But our support is pretty minimal because the families get what they need through other organizations.

A district's proximity to a large city that has the necessary resources, even if the city in which the district is located lacks them, can be a huge source of support to liaisons:

> We're really near [large city]. And because [city] is the type of demographic that it is, it's a lot of low-income families, the county is very well aware of that so there are many supports in place for families that are struggling. And we benefit from those as well.

Faith-based institutions. Liaisons working in all district types report that local churches are a source of support; churches frequently have food banks, are able to get clothing, furniture, or other material needs of families, and even allow families to sleep in their basements or offices in short-term emergency situations. For rural, town, and suburban districts in particular, churches were often among the first institutions identified by liaisons when asked about local support organizations. Liaisons in larger and more urban districts identified churches as a source of support as well, however they typically identified formal social service agencies like homeless shelters as their resources of first-resort. Liaisons explained their relationships with local churches in a variety of ways. Examples of statements from five different liaisons are below:

> I have to say our community members, you know I have pastors who come in here to talk to me about their concerns, I have one church who brings me Walmart gift cards that I can give to families. So our community is very involved. It isn't just the school.
>
> There's a local Presbyterian church that gives us these gift cards. They have a meeting the third Wednesday of every month and I typically go to that meeting after they've given us gift cards so I can update them, tell them how I plan to distribute that money this year, or right now given a situation we have right now. So yeah, we have a good relationship with that church.
>
> We have an understanding with a local church. I have a person there I can call if I need anything. And yesterday actually, they just loaded my car with all kids of stuff. Food, clothes, stuff for our needy kids.
>
> We have several churches that we work with. They provide backpacks. We have one church that every Friday brings, it's called [name of program] and they—it's a backpack filled with foods that a kid can have over the weekend. We have another women's group. I go to that women's group for shoes, if a child needs shoes. And they also do, I forget what they call it, but they give the kids a blanket and a book…and there's another women's organization I go to if I need clothes.
>
> I meet regularly with the churches. They have been incredibly offering and kind. I did have to call a church last year and you know, ask if they could find housing for a family. And they came through beautifully. It was, I needed housing for like two nights for a family and they did it.

Liaisons indicated that the existence of outside social service agencies or faith-based institutions was an enormous source of support to the work they do in meeting the needs of their district's homeless students and families.

Summary

The homeless liaisons interviewed in this study indicate that the students and families with whom they work are in need of basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. Meeting these needs tends to be the first and main priority of liaisons in their work with homeless families. However, liaisons also recognize that academic support and access to mental health or substance abuse services are major needs for homeless students and their families.

Liaisons rely on a variety of supports to help meet these needs, including district-based structures like counselors or social workers and academic supports like tutoring or after school programs. Community-based resources like food banks, social service agencies, and churches are also invaluable resources for liaisons. Despite existing support structures and organizations, liaisons do face a number of challenges and barriers to their work. These include competing demands on their time resulting from holding a full-time role in the district in addition to being the liaison, a lack of available community services and resources, and tension around how homelessness is understood and perceived both personally and in the broader community.

Table 11 below lists the eight findings discussed in this chapter. Chapter five discusses these findings in the context of the literature and their implications for education policies more generally, and provides conclusions and recommendations.

Table 11
List of Findings

Number	Finding
1	Basic necessities: Liaisons perceive that basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and social services are homeless students' biggest needs
2	Academic support: Liaisons have less insight into students' academic needs, however they are aware that homeless students' transience likely leads to academic challenges.
3	Identification: Liaisons prioritize identifying homeless students and families, and conduct regular staff trainings to ensure staff members are aware of potential signs of homelessness.
4	How liaisons approach their work: The type of district and amount of support liaisons perceive impacts whether they facilitate meeting homeless students' needs or actually do the work themselves.
5	Resources: Financial and personnel resources are critical to supporting

	homeless liaisons in meeting students' needs. Commitment from leadership and staff members is critical, especially in the absence of additional dedicated funding or staff.
6	Competing demands: Liaisons' other roles in the district, the role of the school in the larger community, and perceptions of homelessness all make it challenging for liaisons to navigate their roles.
7	Characteristics of homeless families: The secrecy and fear that many homeless students and families live with makes it challenging for liaisons to identify them and meet their needs.
8	Availability of community resources: In urban districts and those located near large urban areas, resources like housing and social service agencies are more plentiful, and liaisons identify them as important facilitators to their work. In more rural communities the lack of community resources is a major barrier. In all community types, local faith-based institutions help fill in gaps.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Recommendations

This qualitative study involved a sample of 20 district liaisons working in 20 school districts in the state of Ohio. The liaisons included in this study represent high-poverty and low-poverty districts; rural, town, suburban, and urban districts; and districts serving small, average, and large student populations. Participants held various full-time roles in their districts, and had held the role of liaison for varying numbers of years. The goal of this study was to understand what liaisons perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students in their districts, as well as to identify the factors that liaisons perceive to facilitate and inhibit their ability to meet the needs of their homeless students.

This chapter draws conclusions from the study findings and discusses the implications of these conclusions in the context of broader education policy and reform, including recommendations for policy. It focuses on the importance of considering the role of schools in the broader field of social services, as well as on the importance of understanding how current efforts at education reform will impact the needs of homeless students.

The first section of this chapter places this study's findings in the context of three broader education policy issues: school and community resources, the overwhelming demand on schools to coordinate or provide services for needs that are not being met in other ways, and school choice. The second section of this chapter identifies recommendations for policy to better meet the needs of homeless students.

Discussion

School and Community Resources

The findings identified in this study must be considered in the broader context of school and community resources. School funding is a perennial problem. Much of districts' funding comes from local property taxes, meaning that districts located in poor communities with few businesses generate less property tax and therefore the schools get fewer local dollars that those in higher-income communities. State and federal funds make up some of this difference. Yet, despite extensive school finance litigation and reform, inequalities between states, between districts within a state, and even between schools within a district, continue to persist. In most states, black, Latino, Native American, and low-income students are disproportionately assigned to under-resourced schools (Richard, 2015). According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, more than 40 percent of Title I schools spend less state and local money on teachers and other school personnel than non-Title I schools in the same district serving the same grade level (Heuer & Stullich, 2011). In some states, high-poverty districts receive only about 80 percent of the funding provided to low-poverty districts (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2015).

Interestingly, several of the liaisons working in the high-poverty districts included in this study indicated that they had additional student supports in place—social workers in most cases—to help meet the needs of these students. These liaisons suggested that their superintendents made it a district priority to have additional social workers on staff. An analysis of district budgets was not conducted for this study; however further research into the tradeoffs made by these districts could be informative for other high-poverty districts struggling to meet the non-academic needs of their homeless (and low-income) students. The large, urban, high-poverty districts included in this study all benefitted from additional funding. All three were recipients of McKinney-Vento subgrants ranging from $150,000 to $400,000 (Ohio Department of Education, 2015a). Though fungible, this funding is enough to, at minimum, cover the salaries of several full-time staff members dedicated to working with the district's homeless students.

In addition to district funding and the availability of staff to support liaisons' work, the availability (or lack) of community social service agencies and public goods like transportation was cited as important to liaisons' work. In urban districts and in districts located in close proximity to urban centers, liaisons indicated that social services including homeless shelters, food banks, mental health and substance abuse counseling centers, health centers, child care, and job training and adult education services are readily available. This aligns closely to research, which finds that poor populations living in urban centers have greater access to social services than similar populations living in either suburban or rural locations (Allard, 2004).

Allard (2004) suggests, "A service-based welfare system places greater importance upon ensuring that eligible individuals have access to the social services they seek" (p. 1). Of particular concern then is the access that homeless families living in rural communities have to necessary social services. Belanger and Stone (2008) found that rural communities frequently lack access to services considered necessary for child welfare practice. Compared to urban communities, rural communities have approximately 2.5 times fewer pediatricians per capita and 2.5 times fewer specialists per capita, including one-third as many psychiatrists (Fordyce, Chen, Doescher, & Hart, 2007). Even when these services do exist, barriers including lack of transportation or childcare, can keep families from accessing them (Allard & Cigna, 2008).

Given this research, it is predictable that one of rural district liaisons' greatest challenges is accessing appropriate services for the students and families they serve. It is also logical that, given a lack of necessary social services, some district leaders attempt to offer these services through the school district. As discussed in chapter four, this can create tension or uncertainty around the proper role of the school in the community. It also places a greater burden on already-stretched district budgets.

Liaisons' reliance on faith-based institutions (churches) to fill some of the gap in social services is part of a growing trend nationally. In 2002, President Bush created the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives (Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, 2014). (President Obama later renamed this office the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.) This office coordinates Centers for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships in various federal agencies; these Centers then form partnerships with faith-based and community-based groups to support relevant programs (Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, n.d.). Through this office, faith-based organizations can access more than $100 billion from federal and state agencies (Smith & Teasley, 2008).

With the 2006 fiscal budget, the Bush Administration terminated 65 federally funded programs and reduced 63 major programs with the expectation that faith-based organizations would help fill the resulting gap in social services (Smith & Teasley, 2008). Research is limited as to the effectiveness of faith-based organizations' provision of social services. In a review of existing literature, Smith and Teasley (2008) suggest that little is known about the specific programmatic mechanisms of faith-based organizations that enhance client outcomes. Other research indicates that faith-based organizations get less public funding than secular nonprofits, often utilize volunteers more frequently than secular nonprofits, and experience more challenges with political and bureaucratic processes and barriers (Jackson-Elmoore, Hula, & Reese, 2014).

Despite the lack of literature on the effectiveness of service provision by faith-based institutions, liaisons' reliance on churches to support them in meeting homeless students' and families' needs does appear to be a trend mirrored in the broader world of social service provision. In communities that lack other government or nonprofit social services, liaisons have an incentive to work with their local churches and other faith-based organizations to obtain these services for their students.

Demand on Schools

The findings from this study suggest that liaisons function as a bridge between schools and other, non-academic social service agencies. In cases where outside social agencies do not exist, liaisons (and subsequently the districts in which they work) take on some of the roles of those outside social agencies—providing students and families with food, supporting them in accessing housing, and more. Whether this work *should* be in the purview of school or district staff members is up for debate. However, the requirements of the McKinney-Vento legislation, coupled with the increased focus on student test scores as a means for judging school quality, place schools in a bind. On one hand, policy incentivizes schools to focus all of their resources and attention on improving students' test scores. This shift in focus has sparked accusations of curriculum narrowing, teaching to the test, and extensive test prep. In fact, research has shown that since NCLB was passed in 2001, time spent on tested subjects (reading and math) increased by approximately 43 percent, while time spent on non-tested subjects including science, social studies, music, art, and physical education, decreased 32 percent on average (McMurrer, 2007).

On the other hand, research has consistently demonstrated the impact of poverty on achievement. It would follow that schools, desiring increased student achievement, would focus time and resources on supporting low-income students in addressing their barriers to learning *and* in teaching students the necessary content and skills. This approach may have a less-immediate impact on students' test scores, however. And in the NCLB and post-NCLB eras of penalties and sanctions for not meeting school performance goals, school officials focus on the most immediate impact to student achievement, often resulting in resources being channeled away from supports like counselors or social workers.

However, despite the design of policy incentives, liaisons indicate that they and their fellow staff members recognize the non-academic needs of students and the importance of addressing these alongside academics. In the absence of community-based social services, schools often become the organization expected to provide for all student needs.

But the role that schools can, do, and should play in the broader social policy context is far from obvious. It may make sense, if schools are seen as community "hubs," for them to also be places where needy families can access services like health care. More than likely parents are familiar with the school, and may be there regularly for conferences, school events, or to retrieve children at the end of the school day. If parents already feel comfortable in the school environment, making broader services available in that same environment could be beneficial.

However, there is an important difference between utilizing school buildings as the physical location where services are provided and schools—and school staff—actually providing those services themselves. It is not at all obvious that schools themselves should be responsible for meeting families' non-academic needs; however given the impact on students' academic outcomes when these needs go unmet, school officials and staff find themselves in a challenging situation.

Research is needed to help better understand both the current status of schools—how they are seen in the context of broader social services, what families want and expect from them, and what they are realistically capable of doing. Further, understanding how schools currently interact with existing social service agencies would help policymakers craft better policy to support productive relationships between schools and other agencies. So too would additional training for liaisons to understand how to create and foster high-quality, productive relationships between schools and outside social service agencies.

Further, the way in which liaisons attempt to balance their liaison duties with their other full-time roles reveals conflicts in their work that point to broader social and community tensions. It comes as no surprise that liaisons who work in districts with small numbers of homeless students found their role as liaison to be manageable. While liaisons were not asked to estimate the amount of time spent working in the role of liaison in a given week or month, liaisons in these districts indicated that they performed these duties on an as-needed basis, prioritizing homeless students' or families' needs above their other work. In general, the findings from this study are consistent with other studies that have attempted to quantify the amount of time liaisons spend working in that role each week: One study of liaisons in New Jersey found that 70 percent of responding district liaisons spent less than 20 hours each week on duties associated with the liaison position (Rosenfeld, 2003). Holtzman (2013) found that nearly 70 percent of responding liaisons in Wisconsin spend five or fewer hours per week on homeless liaison tasks; only 8 percent of respondents spent more than 20 hours per week on liaison duties.

Again, while liaisons in this study were not asked specifically how many hours they spend working in the role of liaison, it seems perfectly reasonable that liaisons working in districts with a very small number of identified homeless families spend fewer hours each week performing liaison-specific duties. In these districts, though there is no additional state funding provided to support a full-time district liaison, it is unlikely that one is needed.

However, in other districts with more significant numbers of homeless students, liaisons reported that they do find it difficult to balance their role as liaison with their other full-time roles. As the participant comments suggest, liaisons often have to make personal sacrifices, like staying at school late into the evening or answering emails late at night or on weekends, in order to fulfill both sets of duties.

In addition to some liaisons finding that fulfilling the requirements of McKinney-Vento competes for time with their other roles, it also competes for priority within the district. When asked about district priorities, liaisons indicated that "teaching all students" and "academic achievement" were the district's top priorities. As is discussed in chapter four, districts prioritize students' academic and social needs by creating systems of support for struggling students. Though, with the exception of the large, urban, high-poverty districts, these systems are not aimed at homeless students *specifically*, many of the needs of homeless students are similar to the needs of other low-income students. Therefore, liaisons indicated that they felt the district was making attempts to address the broader needs of low-income students, including those experiencing homelessness.

Finding 6 however, suggests that liaisons—and the districts in which they work—feel pressure to accept only the homeless students that they are required to accept; i.e., those living within their boundaries or those whose "school of origin" is located within their boundaries. Liaisons, particularly those working in districts that were considered higher performing than others nearby, indicated that they felt a need to "protect the district" against "interlopers" who take advantage of the provisions in the McKinney-Vento legislation. Though liaisons stated that there were only a few circumstances in which they knew for certain that a family had taken advantage of the legislation, it is always a consideration when a new family is identified. In a similar vein, liaisons also indicate that they and others in the community sometimes question whether all identified homeless families are "truly" homeless. More often than not these questions are raised in relation to doubled-up families living with extended family.

Because of districts' limited resources to serve homeless students and liaisons' limited time to ensure all families are served, it is logical that these concerns arise. Regardless of good will or a desire to "serve all students," districts have limited resources with which to serve the most needy students, and have to balance serving their needy students with providing high-quality academic and extracurricular programs for the entirety of their student bodies.

Societal stereotypes about homeless and low-income families certainly play a role in this conflict, as well. Labels and ideas like “welfare queens” and “homeless by choice” are pervasive and damaging stereotypes that can inhibit liaisons’ ability to do their work. Even if they themselves do not subscribe to these beliefs, chances are there are community members who do, and who question and challenge the district’s servicing of homeless students.

Finally, liaisons’ responses indicated uncertainty about the role that schools should play in society. Several liaisons who had been working in their districts for decades noted how the focus of schools has shifted during their tenure. On the one hand it has shifted to test-based accountability and a heightened focus on students’ academic outcomes, but on the other hand, schools are also expected to overcome the effects of poverty, and, in many communities, overcome these impacts with limited support from other social service agencies.

For decades the U.S. Department of Education has required states to collect data on student demographics and achievement. Using these data, policymakers are able to identify and categorize schools based on the success of their students. The correlation between the poverty level of a school and the academic achievement of its students has become the source of a fierce debate in the education sector, with many believing that poverty cannot and should not be used as an excuse for low achievement. This has led to incredible pressure on schools to educate all students to high levels regardless of poverty—even as homelessness and poverty increase across the nation. But this increase in expectation on schools has not been met by an increased investment in the social services and supports that many children need to be academically successful. In fact, in the face of shrinking budgets, many districts are reducing the number of social workers, school psychologists, and guidance counselors (Bidwell, 2013; Weir, 2012). Yet, with the heightened focus on academics, these services are becoming even *more* necessary for districts to support students in overcoming the effects of poverty and achieving academically.

Yet whether or not it is appropriate for schools to play this kind of social-service role in a community is far from clear. Neither is it certain that schools and other social agencies (assuming they exist) can work together easily (Moore, 2005). Additional research is necessary to better understand the role that schools can realistically play in communities and what social services are better left to other governmental and nonprofit agencies.

School Choice

The findings identified here are based on interviews with liaisons working in traditional school districts. However, it is important to also consider these findings and their implications in the broader context of school reform efforts, specifically in the context of school choice. School choice—in the form of charter schools, private school vouchers and tax credit programs, and inter- and intra-district choice—is gaining momentum across the nation, particularly in large urban areas with high concentrations of low-income and minority students. As of 2015, 42 states and the District of Columbia have a charter school law. In 28 school districts across the country, more than one-quarter of the students attend charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). Sixty-one programs operating in 30 states and the District of Columbia allow students to attend participating private schools using public dollars (Friedman Foundation, 2016b). In light of such increased school choice, it is critical to understand how current education reform trends impact, both positively and negatively, homeless students.

In particular, the prominence of charter schools and school choice is increasing in high-poverty, urban districts across the country. These districts tend to also have the large populations of homeless students (for example, more than 4,000 students were identified as homeless in one of the large, urban, high-poverty districts included in this study). However little is known about how school choice policies impact homeless students in particular. Provisions as seemingly basic as requiring districts to transport students back to their school of origin become complicated when students attend non-district schools like charter schools, or use public funding in the form of vouchers or tax credit scholarships to access private schools.

The McKinney-Vento legislation requires all LEAs to identify a homeless liaison. In a number of states, charter schools are legally considered their own LEA. Additional research to help policymakers understand whether and how charter LEAs are implementing the provisions in McKinney-Vento would be beneficial; so too would research to better understand how the needs and challenges of liaisons and their students are similar and different across district schools and charter schools.

Further, in many cities the footprint of traditional school districts is shrinking, meaning that education officials and policymakers must begin to think about how policies like those required by McKinney-Vento will be carried out if and when the district is no longer the main provider of education. In cities like D.C., Detroit, Kansas City, and Cleveland, public charter schools enroll one-third or more of the city's public school students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). If these numbers continue to climb, there will be major implications on the role of the traditional district in providing education.

In New Orleans, where more than 90 percent of students attend public charter schools, the traditional school district barely exists. Prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) operated the city's schools like any other traditional district. However in the decade since the hurricane, the city's school system has been entirely rebuilt. The OPSB directly operates just six schools; the rest of the city's schools are charter schools authorized by the state-created Recovery School District (a statewide school district tasked with turning around low-performing schools), the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, or the OPSB (Sims & Rossmeier, 2015). The state of Louisiana also has a robust school voucher program, called the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP). More than 7,000 students statewide participate statewide; nearly 3,000 in New Orleans alone (Friedman Foundation, 2016a; Sims and Rossmeier, 2015).

Students living in the city have citywide school choice; they rank their top school choices using the city's common enrollment system and an algorithm matches students to schools. The common enrollment system allows students to choose from among district, charter, and private schools that participate in the state voucher program.

Because there is no traditional district overseeing all students in the city, it is important to understand how such a decentralized system ensures homeless students do not fall through the cracks.

Logistics like transportation back to a student's school of origin are also likely to be impacted by increasing school choice. In some cases, school choice could be detrimental to homeless students, as some states do not require charter schools to provide transportation to students. In the absence of public transportation, homeless students who move consistently may have no way of returning to their school of origin, thus potentially creating greater disruption as students must change schools each time they move.

On the other hand, policymakers and school officials can think creatively about how transportation could be provided to make accessing schools easier for all students, including homeless students. For example, the Denver Public School District has a fleet of buses called the "Success Express." These buses circulate the neighborhoods and the elementary, middle, and high schools located in both the Near Northeast and Far Northeast regions of the city every fifteen minutes during the hours before and after school. Students get on at the stop closest to their house, and get off at their school. The 15-minute increments mean that students can catch the bus at a time that gets them to their school at the appropriate start time; it also means that if students miss their buses and lack another form of transportation to school, they can catch the next bus and do not have to miss the entire school day (Denver Public Schools Department of Transportation, 2016). Creative policies like this can help support homeless students by ensuring they are able to remain in their school of origin despite housing moves.

The relationship between charter schools and local social service agencies is also an area where further research would be beneficial. We know that charter schools often struggle to meet the needs of special populations of students, like those with special needs or who are learning English as a second language (Garda, 2012). Therefore, it is far from obvious that charter schools are a natural fit to serve homeless students well. It is possible that because charter schools lack a central office bureaucracy, they may have an easier time coordinating services for students in need. But it is also possible that the lack of a central office to coordinate such services means that school leaders and teachers must take on this role, in addition to their other roles. Further, in states where charter schools are considered LEAs, they too are required to have their own homeless liaison. The extent to which charter LEAs have liaisons and are implementing the McKinney-Vento legislation is an important topic for further research. But assuming that all charter LEAs do in fact have a liaison, in cities with large numbers of charter schools this could mean dozens of liaisons reaching out to the same limited number of service agencies in an attempt to secure services for their homeless students.

It is likely the case that traditional school districts reach an economy of scale that makes them better suited to address the needs of homeless students. Charter management organizations (CMOs) that run a set of schools in a given geography essentially replicate the district structure and, depending on how many schools a CMO operates, may be able to reach a similar economy of scale as a traditional school district. However, the proliferation of schools outside of the traditional structure still means that there are more liaisons clamoring for the same limited services, potentially creating greater strain on the agencies and ultimately, lowering the quality of service provision. Research to better understand how charter schools serve homeless students and the impact that school choice has on service agencies is crucial.

Regardless of the specific policy, however, it is imperative that the findings of this study be considered in the context of school choice so that as the school landscape of cities changes, the needs of homeless students are not overlooked.

Policy Recommendations

Federal, state, and local legislation and policy can have a large impact on districts' ability to meet the needs of homeless students. Recommendations for improving and strengthening existing policy based on the findings of this study fall into three main categories: policies related to funding and personnel; polices related to the broader community social services sector; and policies related to school choice.

Adequate Funding and Personnel

The findings from this study indicate that a lack of adequate funding is a major barrier to liaisons' work. This challenge presents itself in two main ways: first, a lack of funding makes it difficult to meet certain requirements of the law, like the mandate to transport homeless students back to their school of origin. Second, a lack of funding means that in most districts, the role of liaison is not a paid position. Instead, a staff member already serving full time in another role takes on the duties of the liaison in addition to her other duties.

As a result, policymakers must allocate appropriate financial resources to districts to both meet the mandates of the law and hire the personnel needed to fulfill the duties of the liaison. In particular, the one-size-fits-all mandate of a single liaison per district is inadequate for many districts with large numbers of homeless students and/or few available community services. The federal legislation should require districts to hire a specified number of liaisons based on a formula that accounts for the district's number of homeless students, its poverty level, its size, and its geographic location.

In line with this formulaic approach to the number of liaisons, states must reconsider how they define "need" for the purposes of subgranting federal McKinney-Vento funds to LEAs. Typically, need is defined as the number of homeless students served in the LEA. Though all LEAs are eligible to apply for a grant in Ohio, grant amounts are based on the LEA's reported count of homeless students in the previous year (Ohio Department of Education, 2015b). However, the findings from this study confirm the findings of a body of literature that suggests that geography and availability of social services are highly correlated. Agencies and organizations serving the homeless tend to be clustered in city centers, meaning that districts located in or near urban areas have a variety of agencies at their disposal, while rural and suburban areas have greater difficulty accessing similar services (Allard, 2004; Jackson, 2013; Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, n.d.). Because of this, states need to consider both geography and availability of outside service agencies alongside the homeless population size when determining need and subgranting funds.

In spite of these areas for improvement, the McKinney-Vento Act is an example of the federal government playing an appropriate role in education: it has shone a spotlight on an underserved group of children and required states to address the gaps and barriers that exist in order to ensure homeless students have access to a quality education. It is imperative, therefore, that the federal requirement that districts hire specifically for the position of homeless liaison continues. As discussed above, pressure from federal and state accountability frameworks can lead school staff members to prioritize students' test scores over other needs. The role of liaison ensures that there is at least one individual in the district hired specifically to focus on homeless students' broader needs.

Moreover, it is worth understanding whether liaisons should hold district or school-level roles, as there are advantages and disadvantages to each. As discussed is Finding 2 above, liaisons that hold school-level roles (like principals or guidance counselors) have greater day-to-day contact with students and thus may have a fuller picture of students' academic needs. On the other hand, liaisons that hold district-level positions may have greater access to outside service agencies and be better able to coordinate services across schools within the district and across agencies. Because the findings of this study suggest that the greatest portion of liaisons' work involves collaborating and coordinating with outside agencies, district-level personnel seem best fitted to hold the role of homeless liaison.

Community Resources

The findings from this study indicate that liaisons rely heavily on community-based resources to support the homeless students and families with whom they work. But in many communities, these resources are insufficient. Many rural communities lack homeless shelters, mental health agencies, job training agencies, and other social services altogether. County-based services are typically available, however accessing them often requires a car and long distances to travel.

High-poverty, urban communities likely have many of these services, however many are overwhelmed, lacking available beds in shelters, for example, and are unable to meet all the needs of the community. As a result, the onus has fallen to the schools to find ways of meeting their homeless students' needs.

Further, the findings of this study suggest that there is a lack of clarity around the role that the school can and should play in the larger community. Should schools be responsible for running food banks if many of its students are hungry? It is far from obvious whether this is appropriate. Additional research is needed to better understand the role that schools play in the larger social services sector and where communication across schools and other social service agencies can be strengthened and streamlined. Integrating social services and schools may be an option for some communities. Social work agencies, medical clinics, or other services could rent space in a local school building after school hours to meet the non-academic needs of students, their families, and the larger community. In other communities, working to increase the services available is a necessary first step.

Regardless of the structure, schools and social service agencies must work together to improve inter-agency communication, collaboration, and data sharing to better meet the needs of homeless students and their families.

Identification and Transportation in Cities with Robust School Choice

The liaisons interviewed for this study indicated that identifying homeless students was a top priority. Several also indicated concerns about the students they have not been able to identify. This is a very real challenge for liaisons working in traditional districts, and one that becomes even more complex when considered in the broader context of school choice. In cities or other geographic areas where there is significant school choice, there is typically not one central agency to track students or to ensure their needs are being identified and addressed. To help mitigate these challenges, system-wide policies and processes, like common application systems, can be developed to ensure homeless students are tracked and do not fall through the cracks of a decentralized system. Other city-level coordination mechanisms to aid schools and social service agencies in working together would also be beneficial. In some cities with high levels of school choice, organizations known as “harbormasters” have stepped up to support citywide coordination of services like special education. These organizations could take on the additional role of coordinating services across schools and social service agencies to ensure that all homeless students are identified and served. If a city-level organization were to take on this role it could both help ease the burden on individual schools to meet their homeless students’ needs while also ensuring that service agencies had a single “go-to” organization to coordinate services rather than attempting to work with multiple liaisons across the district and many charter schools.

Further, as liaisons identified transportation as both a major need for their students and a logistical barrier to serving students, district transportation policies must be reviewed to ensure they are flexible and adaptable enough to appropriately serve homeless students. The impact of increased school choice also has implications for transportation policy, as students may move between district and charter schools—which typically have different transportation systems. The need for school officials to streamline transportation across sectors is evident. A citywide school transportation system, rather than separate district and charter transportation systems, may be a viable option for high-choice cities. But even in cities where district schools remain the primary school option, it is imperative that transportation policies account for the needs of homeless students and ensure all students have equal access to high-quality schools.

Summary

As long as homelessness continues to be a societal truth, homeless students will continue to need the support of their schools. Though there is not a perfect solution to ensuring all homeless students are identified and receive the necessary supports to be successful in school, the McKinney-Vento legislation and district homeless liaisons are important steps toward raising awareness about the needs of homeless students and ensuring that school districts take steps to eliminate barriers and meet students' needs. The relationship between homeless students' non-academic needs and their academic outcomes makes it somewhat challenging, however, as in order to provide for students' non-academic needs, government and nonprofit agencies must play a role, must offer quality services, and must have the capacity to serve all students who require their services. This is not something that can be easily solved, especially by school officials themselves. It will require broader input, communication, and collaboration between schools and other social service agencies.

However, policymakers can advocate for the implementation of policies within school districts' control. These include providing additional funding or hiring additional staff to help meet homeless students' needs, ensuring citywide mechanisms are in place to identify and transport homeless students, and assisting liaisons in collaborating with outside agencies. It may not be within the purview of schools and districts to attempt to address the broader societal challenges that lead to homelessness. But it is within the purview of schools to ensure the needs of homeless students are considered and accounted for in districts' policies and priorities.

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Appendix A
Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form
Factors that can make a difference in meeting the education needs of homeless students: Perceptions of district homeless liaisons
IRB # 061501

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Dr. Iris Rotberg, Kelly Robson, and the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University. You are being asked if you want to take part in this study because of your role as a district homeless liaison. Please read this form and ask us any questions that will help you decide if you want to participate in the study. Taking part is completely voluntary and even if you begin participation, you may quit at any time. Your employment status will not be affected in any way should you choose not to take part or to withdraw from the study.

You are one of 20 people randomly selected to take part in this study. Your decision to take part or not will not affect the services or benefits provided to you by your school district of employment.

The purpose of this study is to better understand district homeless liaisons' perspectives of the needs of the homeless students and families they serve, and any factors that liaisons perceive to facilitate and/or hinder their ability to serve this population of student. The study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

1. What do district homeless liaisons perceive to be the main needs of the homeless students and families they serve?
2. What factors do district homeless liaisons perceive to facilitate and constrain their ability to support homeless students and families?

The total amount of time you will spend participating in an interview is approximately 45-60 minutes. This study has the following risks:

You may feel some emotional discomfort answering the interview questions. You are free to not answer any question or to stop participating at any point. There is a small chance that someone not on our research team could find out that you took part in the study or somehow connect your name with the information we collect about you, however the following steps are being taken to reduce these risks: all data will be de-identified (meaning that all interview responses will be immediately separated from the respondents' names and email addresses and replaced with an alphanumeric code); the alphanumeric coding will be linked to a key, which will be stored in a separate, secure location; all data will be stored on the researcher's personal computer and Dropbox folder, both of which are password protected and only the researcher knows the password; and all data and codes will be immediately destroyed following the conclusion of the final report.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any published articles or presentations, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Your records for the study may be reviewed by departments of George Washington University responsible for overseeing research safety and compliance.

Taking part in this research will not help you directly, however the benefit to society will be a better understanding of district homeless liaisons' perspectives of the needs of the homeless students and families they serve and of any factors that facilitate or inhibit liaisons' ability to meet these needs.

Please talk to the research team if you have questions, concerns, complaints, or think you have been harmed. You can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Iris Rotberg, at irotberg@gwu.edu or Kelly Robson at robsonk@gwu.edu. For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human research, please call the GWU Office of Human Research at 202-994-2715.

Agreeing to participate in an interview indicates your informed consent. Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix B
Liaison Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As you may know, I am a doctoral student in the Education Policy program at George Washington University, and I am writing my dissertation on the role of school district homeless liaisons. We will discuss a number of topics in the interview today including the role of the homeless liaison title in serving homeless students and families and the needs of the homeless students and families you serve.

This interview is being recorded purely for transcription purposes. Everything you say will be kept confidential. Only the state in which you work will be identified; your name and district of employment will not be associated with any specific comments or conclusions expressed in the study. The interview should last about 45 minutes.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. To begin, I would like to get some basic information about you:
    a. How did you obtain the position of district liaison?
    b. How long have you been in this role?
    c. Do you have other roles within the district in addition to serving as the homeless liaison?
    d. Are you provided additional compensation or release time?

2. Do you feel that teachers, school leaders, and district administration has the time to focus on the needs of homeless children?
    a. Why/why not?
    b. What do you feel are the district's main priorities?
    c. How would you describe the level of support for homeless students in the district?
    d. What, if anything, does your district do to support homeless students?

3. Is there anyone else in the district working with you on this specific issue?
    a. What staffing recommendations would you make to ensure enough support for all the homeless students in your district?
    b. How do you balance your other roles with your role as a liaison?
    c. Are you assigned to a specific school for your other role? How do you balance needing to meet with homeless students across the district with having to be in a specific building to complete the responsibilities for your other role?
    d. In addition to your role as liaison, are there programs or policies in place in your district to support homeless students?

4. What do you feel are the main needs of the homeless students you serve?

5. How do you determine what the needs are of the homeless students you serve?

    a. Of all of the needs you just described, on which do you find that you spend the most time? Why?

6. What are some of the factors that enable you to meet the needs of your district's homeless students?

7. What are some of the challenges you face in meeting the needs of your district's homeless students?

8. Do you feel that the position of homeless liaison is sufficient for supporting the district's homeless students?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your role as a homeless liaison?

That concludes my questions. Are there any other questions or thoughts you would like to share? Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix C
Email Request for Participation

Dear [liaison name],

My name is Kelly Robson and I am a doctoral student in the education policy program at George Washington University in Washington, DC. My dissertation research is focusing on how school districts support their homeless students. In particular, I am interested in the role that homeless liaisons play in supporting homeless students and their families. As part of my research I am conducting interviews with homeless liaisons in Ohio, and I am reaching out to you because the ODE website identifies you as the homeless liaison for [name of school district].

I have recently received approval from the district to conduct interviews with staff members about their work with homeless students, and I am wondering if you would be willing to set up a time to talk with me at some point in the next few weeks about the work you're doing as a liaison? The interview should last approximately 30-45 minutes, and we can schedule it at your convenience.

The attached document is an informed consent form, which provides more information about my project. However, if you have additional questions before deciding whether or not to participate, please feel free to reach out.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration!

Best,
Kelly