



## Center on Rural Education and Communities

### **Poverty, Housing Insecurity and Student Transiency in Rural Areas**

#### **Introduction**

##### Why Do People Move?

The United States is a mobile society. Census figures show that between March 1999 and March 2000 slightly more than 16 percent of the population changed residence.

We generally think of residential mobility as both voluntary and opportunity-related. That is, people choose to move in order to start a new job, live in a better neighborhood, attend a better school system, or in some other way improve their quality of life.

However, some groups are far more likely to make residential changes than others, including renters and people living below the poverty line. During that same time period between March 1999 and March 2000, nearly 33 percent of renters moved, and nearly 28 percent of people living in households below the poverty level moved.

For many poor households, residential mobility is largely unplanned and unpredictable, and is often a result of family stress, inability to pay rent and bills, and poor quality or unsafe housing. Instead of resulting in greater opportunity, this mobility can be a symptom and a cause of household insecurity and broader community disadvantage.

#### **Poverty, Student Mobility and the Effect on Schools and School Districts**

One of the effects of this residential change is chronic student transiency, the non-routine and unscheduled movement of students from one school or school district to another.

Evidence from research strongly suggests that frequent student movement has significantly negative consequences for mobile students because of academic and social disruption. It may also have negative effects on non-mobile students in schools with high levels of student movement.

Schools face challenges in the areas of classroom administration, as well as in planning and budgeting. Increased or unexpected transiency-related school costs are often reflected in increased local tax burdens.

An extended study on poverty and student mobility in rural New York found:

- There is wide variance in the levels of student mobility experienced by surveyed districts, ranging from almost no turnover to over 40 percent annual student turnover;
- The poorest districts experienced the highest rates of student transiency;
- Poor and high-need students were most likely to be high-frequency movers. Most movement appeared to be confined to a several-district area shuffling back and forth;
- Districts are negatively impacted because of the high fiscal and administrative costs associated with high-need, highly mobile students. School district administrators also expressed strong concern that school testing assessments were also negatively affected.

### **What Can School Districts and Communities Do?**

Many factors associated with student transiency, such as housing insecurity (the inability to obtain safe, stable and/or affordable housing) and household economic hardship, are outside the control of the school district itself. At the same time, schools and communities have resources to at least partially address some of these problems.

- Understanding and Documenting Student Transiency

Transient students and their families are a largely unrecognized and untargeted population. Because of this, schools should be aware of the degree of student movement and communicate the prevalence and severity of the problem to a range of stakeholders including parents, community members, local leaders and policy makers.

Greater documentation of not only the degree but the effects of student transiency would put schools in a better position to leverage increased support for high need and highly mobile students. Ideally, documentation should occur not only at local, but at state and regional levels as well.

- Inter-District Collaboration

Increased documentation and awareness of mobility patterns may reveal new opportunities for inter-school district collaboration. Most mobile students only move short distances, often to neighboring or adjacent districts. Because of this, districts should keep track of which other neighboring districts seem to be frequent districts of origin and destination for mobile students.

These districts would then be in a better position to work with each other as well as with community and county-based social service agencies in areas from records sharing and transfer, to outreach services, to collaborative efforts at addressing high residential mobility and the needs of transient students.

- Efficient Records Transfer

When students do move out of a district, schools can help minimize the negative effects of school change by streamlined records transfer so that students may be efficiently and appropriately placed in academic and social support programs at the new school. Efficient records transfer helps ease the adjustment for the student in the new school and reduce the academic and social disruption associated with the move.

- Community and School Outreach

Schools can initiate public awareness campaigns and work with parents to communicate the negative effects of unscheduled school transfers on students. Parents need to know that unavoidable school changes, if possible, should be made between the academic terms or at the end of the school year.

Schools can also work to build effective referral systems so that students and their families are aware of available community services and are able to take advantage of them as necessary. Schools should be especially careful to monitor the academic status and progress of mobile students and make contact with parents about the academic progress of new students.

Staff, including guidance counselors and teachers, can work with mobile students to encourage stability and integration into the school environment through mentorship and new student programming. Some schools have created orientation materials including information packets and videos to help new students learn about and adjust to their new school environment.

The more that a school can do to welcome new students and integrate them and their families into the community, the more likely are the chances of increasing the stability of the student body. Students who are involved and invested in their schools, and families who similarly have multiple opportunities to become involved in their communities are more likely to remain in their community.

- Community Housing

In many rural communities across the country, there are serious and often increasing shortages in the supply of affordable and safe housing – a major contributing factor to housing instability and insecurity.

Some have suggested that local public housing authorities be made aware of the effects of forced housing displacement upon the academic and social status of children, so that housing displacement and relocation due to eviction and other factors be kept to a minimum during the school year.

Some local governments have mandated housing quality inspections for all privately-owned rental properties, helping to ensure a basic level of housing quality within the community.

## **Student Transiency and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

The 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act provides expanded resources for homeless

students, by widening the definition of who is considered to be homeless. This definition includes children who live in substandard housing or who share housing with others because they lost their previous home. Resources to assist these students are made available to districts through the McKinney-Vento Act.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act mandates that every local education agency (i.e. school district) designate a liaison for homeless children and youth. The liaison serves as a key contact between homeless students and the families on the one hand and school personnel and community service providers on the other. In the broadest sense, the liaison's responsibility is to ensure that homeless children and youth have the same opportunities for academic success as their non-homeless peers.

Liaisons are also responsible for ensuring that transportation services are provided that might reduce the academic transiency of residentially mobile homeless children. By law, if a child becomes homeless and relocates outside the school district, the student is entitled to remain in the district of origin for the duration of the homelessness, with transportation arranged for and provided by the district of origin as long as the transportation is not in excess of 50 miles each way.

Districts need to work closely with state homeless education coordinators to ensure that staff understand the legal provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the educational rights of students in homeless situations and the responsibilities of school districts and other local service providing organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Housing insecurity and the frequent residential mobility that often results are serious issues for communities and schools. While most of the root causes of student transiency, including poverty and housing insecurity, are beyond the control of schools themselves, there are measures that can be taken by schools and communities that may lessen the frequency of poverty-driven mobility and the severity of its consequences for students, their families and their schools. However, more still needs to be learned about the causes and consequences of student transiency. Schools can play an important role in this learning process as part of their efforts to advocate for disadvantaged students.

## **CREC Initiatives**

The Center on Rural Education and Communities has completed an 11-district study of student transiency in rural New York. We are also collaborating with colleagues from Cornell University, the University of Vermont, the University of Missouri, as well as Penn State University on a range of research and outreach initiatives designed to address and better understand the causes and consequences of poverty-related student transiency as it affects schools and communities.

**Assessing Student Mobility and its Consequences: A 3-District Case Study** This study was conducted jointly by Kieran Killeen (University of Vermont) and Kai Schafft (Penn State), funded by the SUNY Education Finance Research Consortium. The study is a mixed method investigation of the causes

and consequences of student transiency in three contiguous rural districts. [Full Report](#) (PDF)

"Examining Residential Mobility and Family Literacy Educational Outcomes Among Poor Families in Pennsylvania" This pilot study, undertaken in collaboration with [The Goodling Institute](#) assesses how poverty and residential mobility influence adult persistence and participation in family literacy programs across both urban and rural contexts. Research methods include interviews with family literacy program directors and residential and educational histories of family literacy participants and their children. To access a Goodling Institute Research Brief on this work, [click here](#). (PDF)

"The Community Connection to Rural Youth Academic Development" Prior studies have found that rural youth have lower educational aspirations and attainment than others, and they struggle with how educational and career goals conflict with decisions of whether to stay or leave rural areas. The major purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the community factors which support educational attainment and aspirations, career goals and residence intentions of youth in rural communities. This study involves research collaboration between faculty and graduate students in the Department of Rural Sociology and the College of Education with a time frame for research between summer, 2006 and summer, 2007.

## Resource Materials

"Poverty, Residential Mobility and Student Transiency within a Rural New York School District" "Poverty, Residential Mobility and Student Transiency within a Rural New York School District" was presented at Rural Poverty in the Northeast: Global Forces and Individual Coping Strategies a conference on rural poverty sponsored by the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development and the Rural Policy Institute, May 3-4, 2005 at Penn State University. This paper presents a case study of residential instability and student transiency within a poor rural New York school district, examining both enrollment change data and residential histories collected from economically disadvantaged parents of mobile students. It finds that poverty-related mobility is frequently not voluntary but the consequence of precipitating social and economic crises at the household level, exacerbated by the lack of adequate and affordable housing. [Full Report](#) (PDF)

"Low Income Student Transiency and its Effects on Schools and School Districts in Upstate New York" "Low Income Student Transiency and its Effects on Schools and School Districts in Upstate New York" was first issued as a research summary report in August, 2002. It was originally written for New York school district superintendents who responded to a mail survey about poverty-related student turnover within their districts. The study is based on a mail survey to nearly 300 New York school districts, as well as follow-up interviews with administrators from nearly 50 of the surveyed districts. This study was ultimately published in the Journal of Research in Rural Education. [Full Report](#) (PDF)

"Rural Poverty in the Northeast: Strengthening the Research Effort" The published proceedings from Rural Poverty in the Northeast: Global Forces and Individual Coping Strategies. [The Proceedings](#) (PDF)

Southern Rural Development Center Report on Rural Education In an effort to further expand the knowledge base regarding the connections between rural education and local community well-being, the USDA's Economic Research Service and the Southern Rural Development Center (in partnership

with the Rural School and Community Trust) hosted a two-day workshop in Spring 2003. A group of social scientists, along with practitioners and policy-analysts, delivered and discussed current research being undertaken on a variety of rural education and economic development-related subjects. A report based on that workshop entitled *The Role of Education: Promoting the Economic & Social Vitality of Rural America*, was released in January, 2005 and features nine of the research articles presented over the course of this two-day symposium. These articles include a contribution by Dr. Kai A. Schafft entitled, "Bouncing Between Disadvantaged Rural School Districts: The Hidden Problem of Student Transiency." Read more about this report on the "NEWS" section of this website. [Full Report](#) (PDF)

**Public Radio Series on Rural Homelessness and Housing Insecurity** In May, 2004, North Country Public Radio, based out of Canton, New York near the Canadian border did a series of stories on rural poverty and homelessness, focusing on the affordable housing crisis in rural areas, student transiency and the "school shuffle," and community responses. Twelve short segments are archived on this site, as well as an hour-long call in show, all accessible as web-based audio files.

## Links

- **National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)** NAEHCY is a national grassroots membership association that connects educators, parents, advocates, researchers and service providers to ensure school enrollment and attendance, and overall success for children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by the lack of safe, permanent and adequate housing. NAEHCY accomplishes these goals through advocacy, partnerships and education. NAEHCY holds an annual conference on homeless education. The website has numerous informational resources on homelessness and homeless education.
- **National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE (NCHE)** The National Center for Homeless Education provides research, resources, and information enabling communities to address the educational needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Center serves as a clearinghouse of information for people seeking to remove or overcome educational barriers and to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for children and youth experiencing homelessness. The Center also supports educators and service providers through producing training and awareness materials and providing training at regional and national conferences and events. Several documents very useful for teaching staff and administrators are available on the website, including, "Reading on the Go! Students Who Are Highly Mobile and Reading Instruction," "Increasing School Stability for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Overcoming Challenges to Providing Transportation to the School of Origin," and "Domestic Violence, Homelessness, and Children's Education," as well as a series of briefs, brochures and posters related to homeless education.
- **National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP)** The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty was established in June 1989 two years after Congress passed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The mission of the Law Center is to prevent and end homelessness by serving as the legal arm of the nationwide movement to end homelessness. To achieve its mission, the Law Center pursues three main strategies: impact

litigation, policy advocacy, and public education. The website has useful informational resources on the McKinney-Vento Act and K-12 education.

**Project HOPE – Virginia Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program** Project HOPE, the Virginia Education Program for Homeless Children and Youth, is a federally-funded grant authorized by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Project HOPE ensures the enrollment, attendance, and the success of homeless children and youth in school through public awareness efforts across the commonwealth and subgrants to local school divisions. Local Education Agencies (LEA) develop customized programs to meet the needs of homeless children and youth in their area. Of particular note for schools experiencing high mobility is the Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit designed by Project HOPE-Virginia staff and available for download on the website. The toolkit is a comprehensive and practical guide for homeless education liaisons and is an excellent resource.