

Distribution and Variation of Housing Instability among San Mateo County Students: Part 1



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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (Gardner Center) to partner with public school districts in San Mateo County to examine the barriers to educational success that homeless and highly mobile students face. Given the increasing prevalence of homelessness and unstable living arrangements among youth nation-wide, and particular challenges related to income inequality and rising housing costs in San Mateo County, this partnership aims to identify factors that may promote academic achievement among this vulnerable population.

In this report, we present results for the first of three stages of this investigation into the prevalence and distribution of youth experiencing housing instability in San Mateo County, breaking the school districts into three geographically-based sub-groups. In this first stage, we describe youth enrolled in the Sequoia Union High School District and its eight feeder elementary school districts. We aim to address three key research questions:

1. What is the size and distribution of the homeless and highly mobile student population in Sequoia area school districts during the last three to five years?
2. To what degree do circumstances vary for this student population (e.g., in terms of chronicity of homelessness, instability of current living arrangements, placement in foster care, newcomer immigrant background, family structure)?
3. How does being homeless or highly mobile affect students' educational outcomes?

KEY FINDINGS

- **Across all Sequoia area school districts, African American, Latinx and English Learner students are more likely to experience housing instability than their peers.** These disparities are greater in Ravenswood City School District than other area school districts.
- **Students in Ravenswood City School District are more likely than those in neighboring districts to experience housing instability for multiple years.**
- **The predominant type of housing instability experienced by students varies greatly across districts.**
- **Students facing housing instability experience worse academic achievement and school attendance than their housing-stable peers.** Those lower GPAs and attendance rates may translate to facing long-term challenges with high school graduation and college matriculation.
- **The type of housing instability students experience has a marked relationship with academic achievement.** Students documented as residing in temporary shelters, living in hotels/motels, or as temporarily unsheltered, tended to have the lowest course grades, standardized test scores, and attendance. Students classified as doubled-up or highly mobile tended to have higher grades and test scores and better attendance than other housing unstable peers, but lower than students who experienced no housing instability.

SAMPLE

Our sample for this stage includes students across the Sequoia Union High School District and its eight feeder elementary school districts (i.e., Belmont-Redwood Shores, Las Lomas, Menlo Park City, Portola Valley, Ravenswood, Redwood City, San Carlos, Woodside) at all grade levels in the 2014-15 through 2017-18 school years. We refer to this subset of San Mateo County public schools as “Sequoia area school districts.” This is a sample of roughly 134,000 student-year observations of 48,300 unique students. We study about 47,000 of those students for whom full information is available in all years we observe each of them. For educational outcomes we restrict our sample to only the 2017-2018 school years for these students.

MEASURES OF INTEREST

We rely on district-reported McKinney-Vento housing status to investigate the prevalence of housing instability among students. In accordance with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, San Mateo County public school districts keep and report records of students who are homeless, recording such students as Temporarily Unsheltered, Temporarily Sheltered, Sheltered in a Hotel/Motel, or Temporarily Doubled-Up (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012). According to the McKinney-Vento Act, “Temporarily Doubled-Up” includes students who are “sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.” In certain analyses, we define “literally homeless” students by combining the McKinney-Vento categories of Temporarily Unsheltered, Temporarily Sheltered, and Sheltered in a Hotel/Motel.

In addition to the McKinney-Vento housing status categories, we also distinguish students as highly mobile if they have moved two or more times during the school year. In our data, we observe students’ movements if they change schools within the same district or change schools between districts but remain in the San Mateo County districts for which we have data. This means students could move outside of the districts we study or during years we do not study and would not be counted as highly mobile here. We count the number of in-district, between-district, and total school moves that we observe each student make in a given year. The vast majority of highly mobile students (94%) are not also homeless in the same year they are highly mobile, according to district reporting. When we refer to highly mobile students in relation to homeless students, we mean that the students are only highly mobile; otherwise we designate students as homeless. We refer to the overarching condition of experiencing any, several, or all of these housing situations as *housing instability* and refer to those students experiencing this broad condition as *housing-unstable*.

We include several other measures obtained from district administrative records in order to investigate variation based on student characteristics. First, we differentiate students by developmental stage—whether they are in early elementary school (kindergarten through second grade), late elementary school (third through fifth grade), middle school (sixth through eighth grade) or high school (ninth through twelfth grade). Next, we differentiate students by reported race or ethnicity, grouping students as white, Latinx, African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, or multiracial or another race/ethnicity. We then identify students’ English proficiency, determining

whether students are English speaking only, English fluent, English learners, or have been reclassified as English fluent.¹

To investigate the relationship between housing instability and educational outcomes, we include several measures available from district administrative records. First, we use course grade records to compute an overall average GPA that is standardized across all districts. GPA is a measure of both academic performance throughout the year and the abilities of students to present work in ways that are pleasing to teachers (Brookhart et al. 2016). GPA is highly predictive of on-time high school completion and college matriculation (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson 2014) and thus serves as a proxy for potential long-term challenges students may face due to housing instability. We equally weight each course and take the average of grades A+/A through F using a standard 4.0 scale. We also look at the average number of failing grades by counting any course in which a student earns a letter grade of D+ or lower. Course grade files are available from all districts for grades 6 through 12 (middle school and high school).

Next, we draw on computed scaled scores on the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments prepared by the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC). The SBAC tests are comprehensive, end-of-year assessments for English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics, and measure progress toward college and career readiness. These tests are administered to students in grades 3 through 12 and represent narrowly-defined snapshots of academic performance compared to GPA measures. Based on their scaled scores, students fall into one of four categories of performance called achievement levels. Students scoring in Level 3 or Level 4 are considered “on track” for college and career readiness. From the computed SBAC scaled scores, and published achievement levels, we create a binary indicator differentiating students who are considered on track in both subtests.

Finally, we analyze attendance records to calculate a total number of absences—both excused and unexcused. Attendance files are available across districts for all grade levels.

SIZE AND DISTRIBUTION OF HOMELESS AND HIGHLY MOBILE STUDENT POPULATION IN SEQUOIA AREA SCHOOLS

To begin, we report estimates of housing instability among Sequoia area students in general, meaning we do not identify McKinney-Vento housing status and/or whether students are highly mobile. In 2017-2018, the most recent year for which we have data, a combined three percent of students were housing unstable in Sequoia area school districts. In years prior, the proportion was slightly higher at about four percent of the total student population in Sequoia area schools experiencing housing instability. Table 1 shows the distribution of students experiencing housing instability across the school years and districts under study. These values count each student reported as housing-unstable in a given year, meaning some students show up in multiple years. The vast majority of students experiencing housing instability in any given school year are enrolled

¹ Initially, we also considered foster youth for analysis. However, very few students identified as such were also housing-unstable in the same year. In future reports, we may consider including foster and migrant youth as “highly mobile,” as has been suggested in prior literature (see Gouwens, 2001, Popp et al., 2003), or as their own category of vulnerable students.

in Ravenswood Elementary schools, while Las Lomas, Portola Valley, and Woodside report between zero and five students as housing-unstable in any given year. Due to the immense disproportionality in housing instability in Ravenswood compared to neighboring districts, we report all other results for Ravenswood separately and have flagged the district for further detailed study in subsequent stages of this project.

TABLE 1. *Housing instability among school districts, by district and school year observed.*

School District	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Belmont-Redwood Shores	*	8	8	12
Las Lomas	-	-	-	*
Menlo Park City	0	*	*	28
Portola Valley	0	0	0	0
Ravenswood City	1189	1276	1345	804
Redwood City	40	*	*	43
San Carlos	11	13	15	14
Woodside	0	0	0	0
Sequoia Union High	38	27	17	88

Note: Values less than five in a given school year are suppressed and marked with an asterisk (*). Years of data currently unavailable for the project are marked with a dash (-).

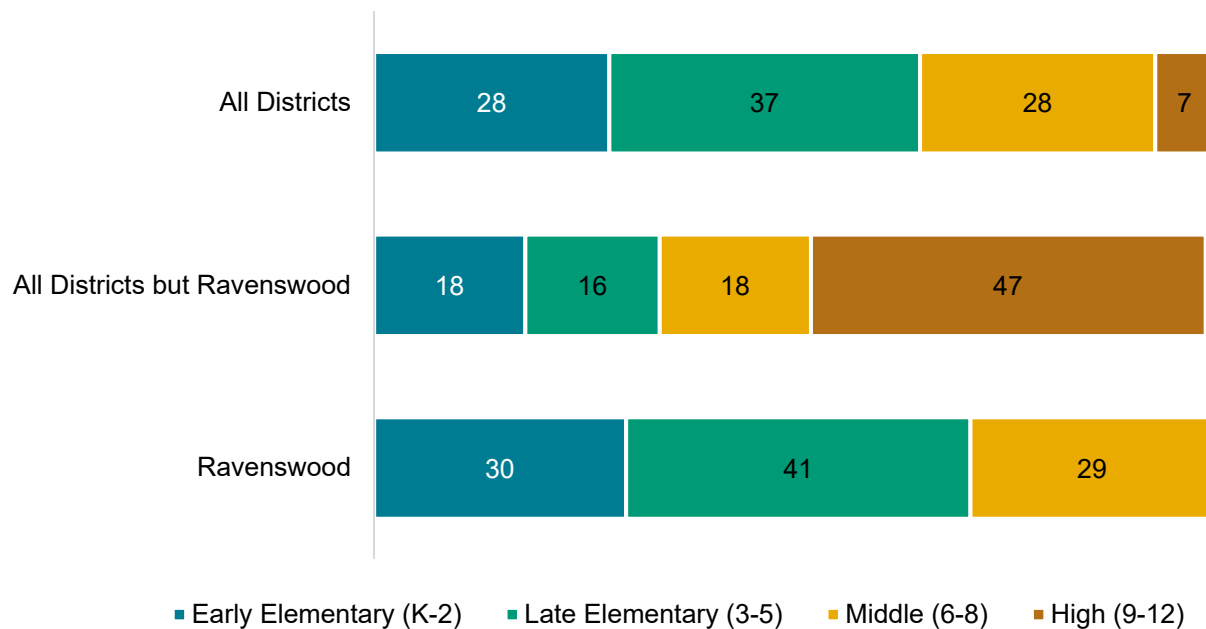
Outside of Ravenswood, most students who experience housing instability do so for one year or less. Among housing-unstable students in those districts for whom we can observe four school years of data, about 71 percent experience some form of housing instability just once, nine percent experience some form twice, and 19 percent experience some form for three or four years (Table 2). In Ravenswood, 18 percent experience some form of housing instability just once in the four years observed; about as many (17%) are housing-unstable twice and about two thirds experience some form of housing instability three or four times.

TABLE 2. *Length of students' housing instability, among those experiencing any.*

Number of years	Percent of housing-unstable students	
	All districts except Ravenswood	Ravenswood
One year	71	18
Two years	9	17
Three years	15	31
Four years	4	34

In all subsequent analyses, we count students only once in the possible four years we can observe them; we choose the most recent year in which we observe each student as housing-unstable in any of the districts under study. Figure 2 displays housing instability across districts by school level of the student. Across all districts in this time frame, about 28 percent of students experiencing housing instability are in early elementary school, 37 percent are in late elementary school, 28 percent are in middle school and seven percent are in high school. Patterns of housing instability in Ravenswood City School District distort the school level distribution of students elsewhere. When only considering Belmont-Redwood Shores, Menlo Park City, Redwood City, and San Carlos elementary districts, and Sequoia Union High School District, about a fifth of housing-unstable students are in early elementary, late elementary, and middle school each, while nearly 50% of students experiencing housing instability are in high school grades. Students experiencing housing instability in Ravenswood City School District are fairly evenly distributed among early/late elementary and middle school.

FIGURE 2. *Distribution of housing instability among school districts by school level.*

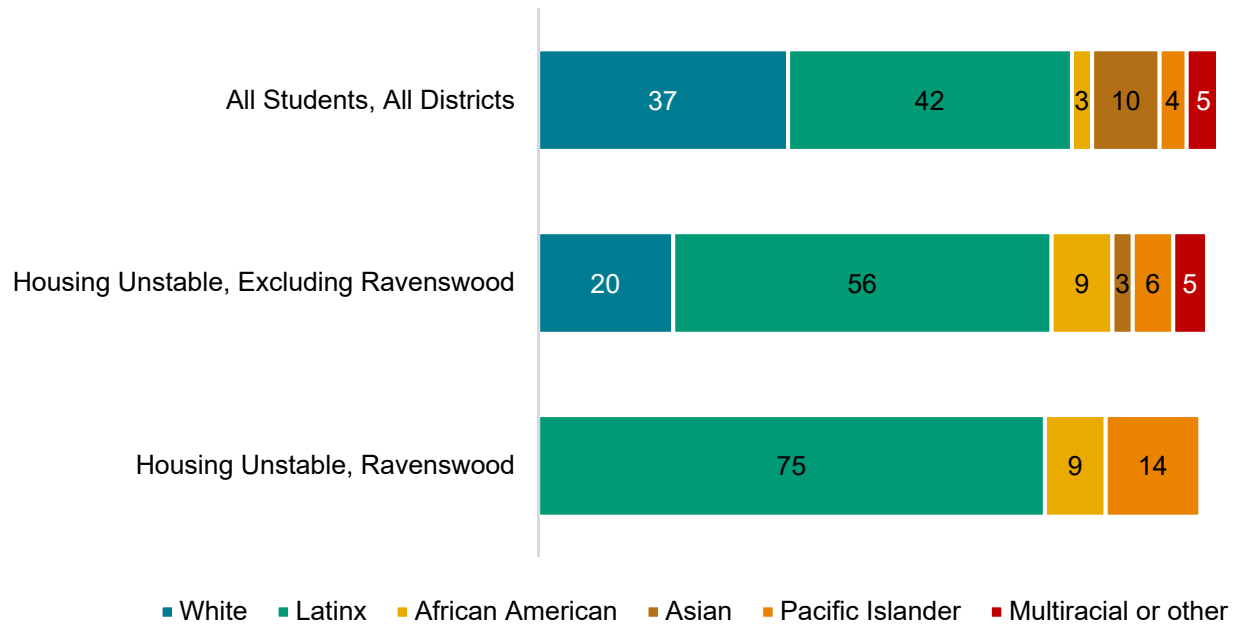


Note: Data come from 2014-15 through 2017-18 school years. Each student is counted only once within that time frame; we report the school year for which we see the student experiencing housing instability most recently (N=47,121). Housing instability includes those students who have a McKinney-Vento housing status as well as those who appear highly mobile in our dataset (i.e., 2 moves in a given year). Values represent any spell of housing instability.

Turning to variation by race (Figure 3), we first acknowledge that across districts about two in five students are white, another two-fifths are Latinx, three percent are African American, ten percent are Asian, four percent are Pacific Islander, and a remaining five percent identify as multiracial or of another race or ethnicity. Among those experiencing housing instability across all districts but Ravenswood, Latinx and African American students are overrepresented while white and Asian students are underrepresented. Only one in five is white, nearly three in five are Latinx, ten

percent are African American, three percent are Asian, and the remaining 11 percent are multiracial or of another race or ethnicity. In Ravenswood, three of four housing-unstable students are Latinx, another nine percent are African American, and a full 14 percent are Pacific Islander.

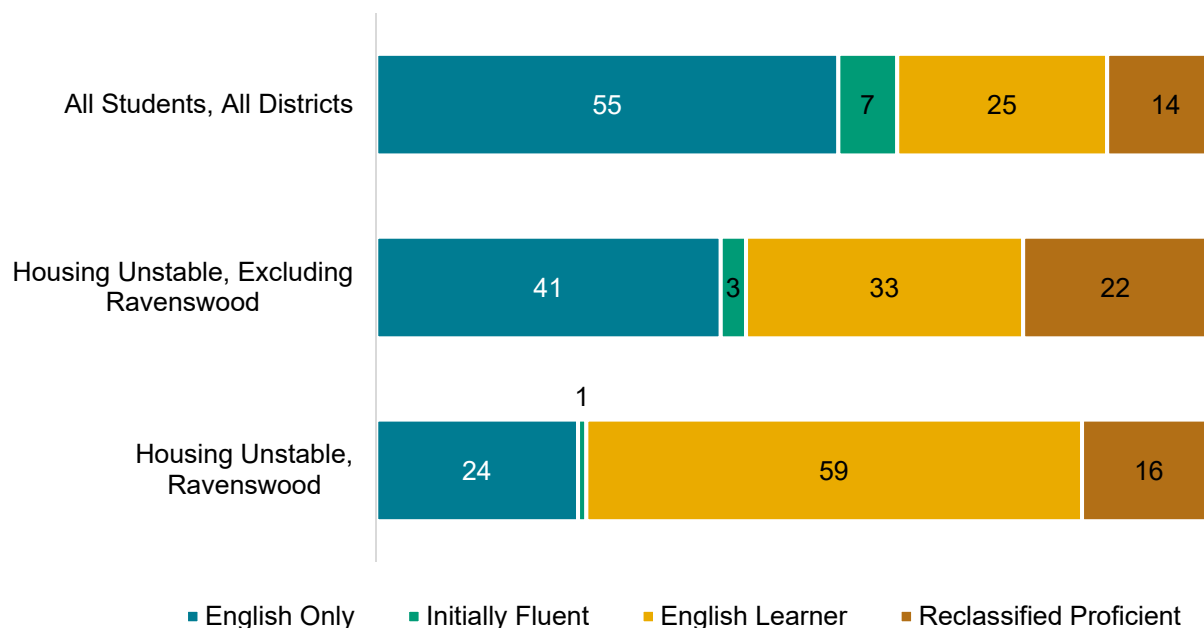
FIGURE 3. *Distribution of housing instability among school districts by race and ethnicity.*



Note: Data come from 2014-15 through 2017-18 school years. Each student is counted only once within that time frame; we report the school year for which we see the student experiencing housing instability most recently (N=47,121). Housing instability includes those students who have a McKinney-Vento housing status as well as those who appear highly mobile in our dataset (i.e., 2 moves in a given year). Values represent any spell of housing instability. Values below 1 percent are suppressed.

Next, we differentiate those students experiencing housing instability by English language proficiency (Figure 4). Among all students in all districts under study, over half speak only English, seven percent spoke fluent English upon first being assessed, a quarter are English learners, and 14 percent have been reclassified as proficient English speakers after previously being designated as an English learner. Among students experiencing housing instability, English learners and those reclassified as proficient English speakers are disproportionately represented while English only and initially fluent English speakers are underrepresented. In districts other than Ravenswood, a third of students experiencing housing instability over this time frame are English learners and more than two of five are reclassified as proficient English speakers. In Ravenswood, three of five students experiencing housing instability are English learners while 16 percent have been reclassified as proficient English speakers.

FIGURE 4. Distribution of housing instability among school districts by English proficiency.

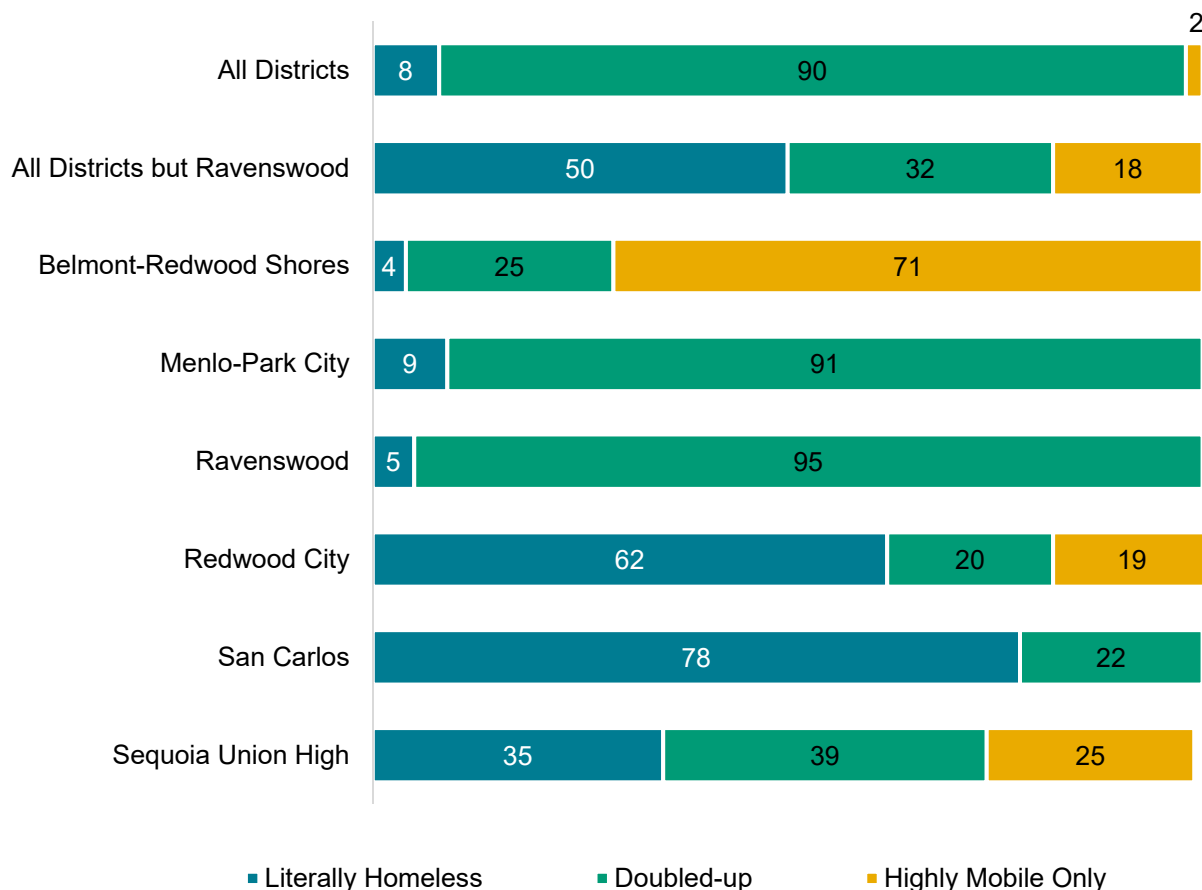


Note: Data come from 2014-15 through 2017-18 school years. Each student is counted only once within that time frame; we report the school year for which we see the student experiencing housing instability most recently (N=47,121). Housing instability includes those students who have a McKinney-Vento housing status as well as those who appear highly mobile in our dataset (i.e., 2 moves in a given year). Values represent any spell of housing instability. Values below 1 percent are suppressed.

VARIATION OF HOUSING INSTABILITY

Here, we briefly examine housing instability in the Sequoia area school districts by the type of housing instability students experience. We distinguish among those students who are “literally homeless” (i.e., those who have a recorded McKinney-Vento housing status of Temporarily Unsheltered, Temporarily Sheltered, or Sheltered in a Hotel/Motel), students who have a recorded McKinney-Vento housing status of “doubled-up,” and students who are highly mobile. Figure 5 shows the prevalence of students in each district who are literally homeless, doubled-up, and highly mobile. Across all districts, nine in 10 students experiencing housing instability are doubled-up in housing. In a Ravenswood Elementary School District, 95 percent of students who are housing-unstable are doubled-up. When excluding Ravenswood students, roughly half of students experiencing housing instability in the remaining districts are literally homeless, a third are doubled-up, and nearly two of five are highly mobile only. The distributions of housing instability by type vary greatly across districts. Housing instability in Belmont-Redwood Shores Elementary schools is dominated by students who are highly mobile (71%), while a quarter are doubled-up and only four percent are literally homeless. By contrast, Redwood City and San Carlos Elementary school districts tend to serve more literally homeless students than those who are doubled-up or highly mobile only. Like Ravenswood, Menlo Park City Elementary tends to serve doubled-up students. The high school district serves a housing-unstable student population that is equal parts literally homeless, doubled-up, and highly mobile only.

FIGURE 5. *Distribution of housing instability within and between school districts by type of instability.*



Note: Data come from 2014-15 through 2017-18 school years. Each student is counted only once within that time period; most recent status and school are used in estimates (N=47,121). Values represent any spell of housing instability. Students who are highly mobile are only counted in the district where they spent the most time in a given year. Las Lomas, Portola Valley, and Woodside are excluded due to having fewer than five or no housing-unstable students reported.

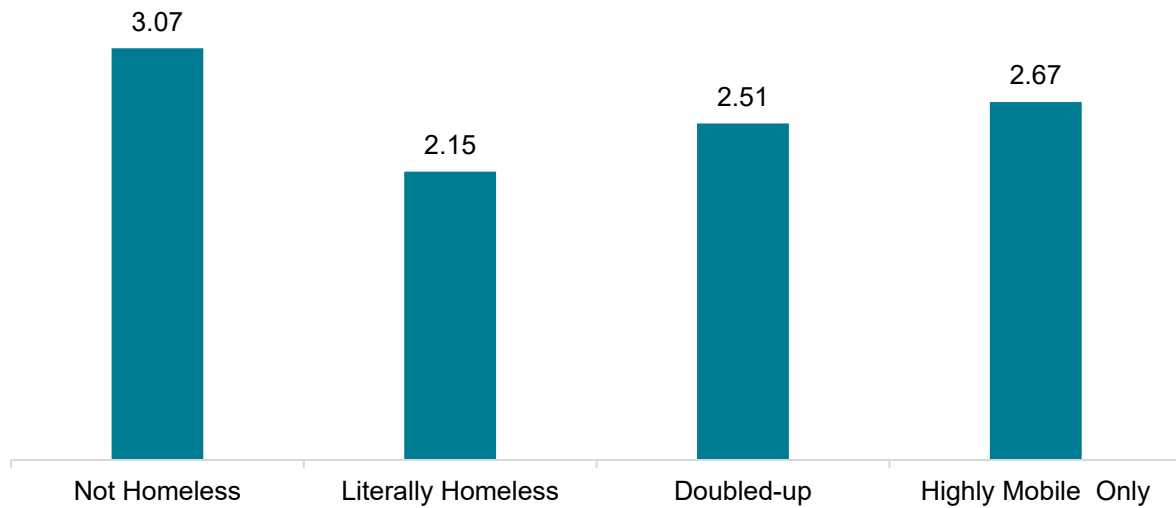
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Finally, we investigate the relationship between housing status and key academic performance measures in Sequoia area schools. We disaggregate the data among those students who are literally homeless, students who have a recorded McKinney-Vento housing status of doubled-up, and students who are highly mobile (i.e., two moves in a given school year) across the combined sample of students in Sequoia area school districts. For these analyses we look only at results for the 2017-2018 school year for all grade levels in which data are available.

First, we describe course grades for students enrolled in grades 6 through 12 (N=16,384). Figure 6 shows the average overall GPA by housing instability status for students. Students who were neither homeless nor highly mobile had the highest average GPA at 3.07. Students who were highly mobile had the next highest GPA at 2.67, followed by students who were doubled-up, earning an average overall GPA of 2.51. Students who were literally homeless had the lowest

average GPA at 2.15, over a standard deviation below students experiencing no housing instability in 2017-2018.

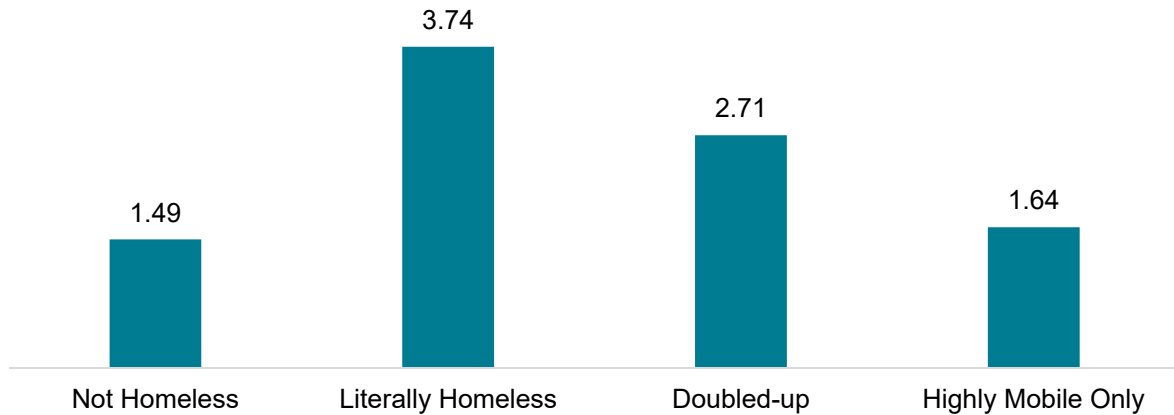
FIGURE 6. Average overall GPA, by housing instability status



Note: Data come from the 2017-18 school year for students enrolled in grades 6 through 12 (N=16,384).

Next, we describe the average number of failing grades (Ds and Fs) earned by students (Figure 7). Those who were neither homeless nor highly mobile earned an average of 1.49 failing grades in the 2017-2018 school year. Highly mobile students similarly earned an average of 1.64 failing grades. Compared to this, typical students who were temporarily doubled-up received nearly twice as many failing grades (2.71) and those literally homeless earned two-and-a-half times the number of failing grades as those not homeless, with an average of 3.74.

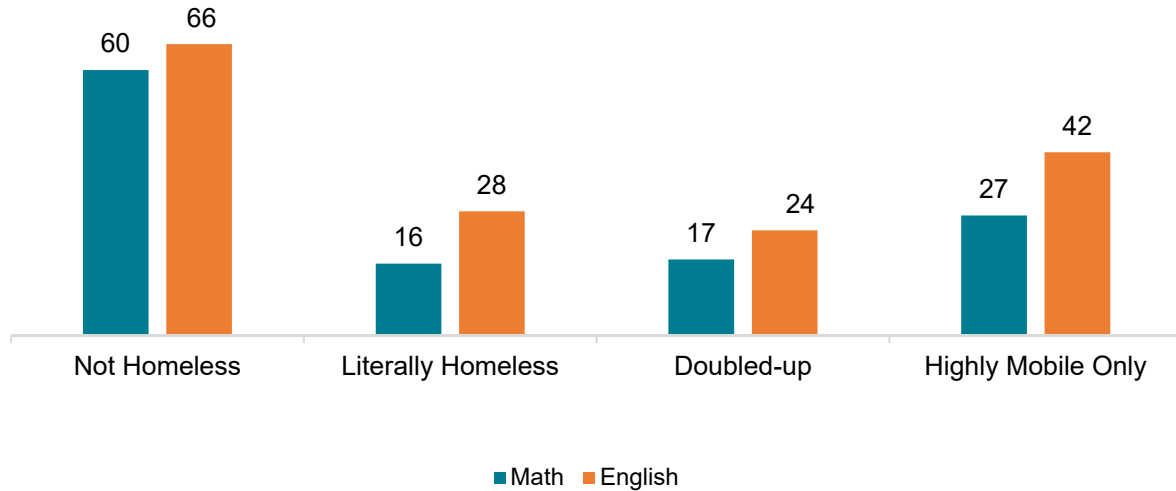
FIGURE 7. Average number of D's and F's, by housing instability status



Note: Data come from the 2017-18 school year for students enrolled in grades 6 through 12 (N=16,489).

We next describe performance on the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments (SBAC tests) for English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics, for students enrolled in grades 3-12 in the 2017-2018 school year (N=16,855). Figure 8 shows the percentage of students who earned a scaled score that is considered “on track” for college and career readiness, by housing instability status. On both ELA and math tests, students who were not homeless had a higher probability of earning an on track scaled score compared to other groups of students. Sixty percent of students who were not homeless earned on track scores on the math test, and 66 percent of those same students earned on track scores on the ELA test. Highly mobile students had the next greatest percentage of students earning on track scores on both subtests, with 27 percent of students on track in math and 42 percent on track in ELA. Students who were either literally homeless or who were doubled-up had a similarly low probability of earning an on track score. Only 16 percent of students who were literally homeless and 17 percent of students who were doubled-up earned on track scores on the math test. Similarly, 28 percent of students who were literally homeless and 24 percent of students who were doubled-up earned on-track scores on the ELA test.

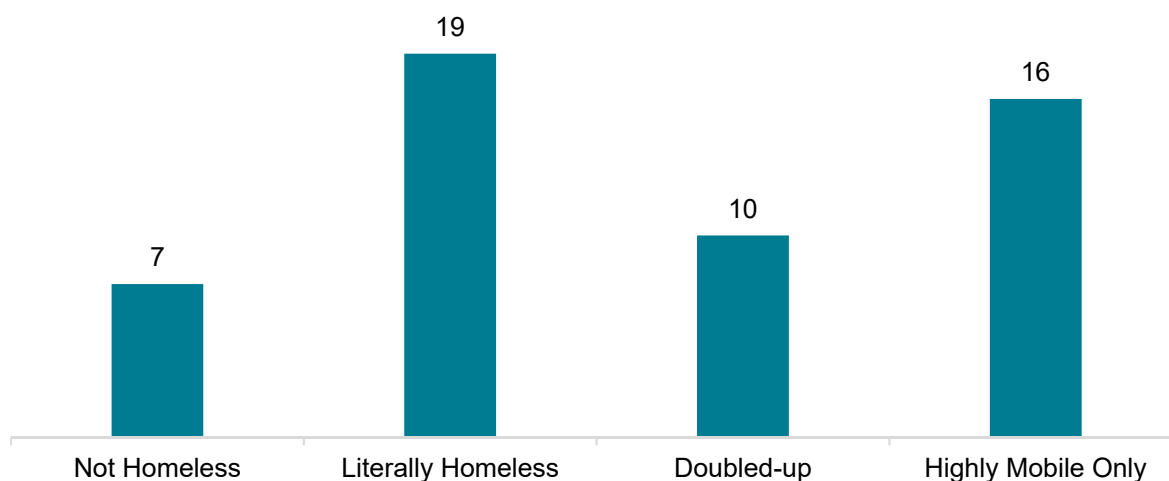
FIGURE 8. Percentage of students earning an “on track” scaled score on SBAC ELA and mathematics tests, by housing instability status



Note: Data come from the 2017-18 school year for students enrolled in grades 3 through 12 (N=16,855).

Finally, we look at attendance as a key educational outcome. Figure 9 depicts the average number of student absences by housing instability status, for students enrolled in all grades in the 2017-2018 school year (N=30,874). The total count of student absences includes both excused and unexcused absences. Typical students who were neither homeless nor highly mobile had the fewest absences (seven) in 2017-2018, followed by students who were doubled-up (ten). Highly mobile students had an average of 16 absences throughout the school year. Students who were literally homeless had an average of 19 absences, the largest of any subgroup. This suggests that given a 180-day school year, the average highly mobile student is only two absences away from being labeled “chronically absent,” while the average student who is literally homeless exceeds the cutoff for chronic absenteeism by one absence over the course of the school year.

FIGURE 9. Average number of student absences, by housing instability status



Note: Data come from the 2017-18 school year for students enrolled in all grades (N=30,874).

IMPLICATIONS

We have described the size, distribution, and heterogeneity of housing instability among youth enrolled in Sequoia area public schools. We disaggregated these results by school district and by a number of factors including chronicity of housing instability, developmental stage, race/ethnicity, English proficiency status, and type of housing instability experienced. In addition, we investigated the relationships between each type of housing instability and several academic outcomes across all Sequoia area school districts in the 2017-2018 school year. We presented findings on course grades (including average GPA and number of failing grades), standardized test scores (including English language arts/literacy and mathematics SBAC tests), and attendance (including total number of absences). Below, we discuss the implications of these analyses based on variation and distribution of housing instability and the relationship between housing instability and educational outcomes.

Variation and Distribution of Housing Instability

When looking at characteristics of housing-unstable students in the Sequoia area public school districts of San Mateo County, some trends cut across districts. We find that among students experiencing housing instability, African American, Latinx and English learner students are disproportionately represented across all districts studied. Although the nine Sequoia area districts are geographic neighbors, our results highlight a few key distinctions between them with regard to the population of housing-unstable students and, in some cases, offer opportunities for shared learning across districts.

First, Ravenswood City School District serves a much larger percentage and number of housing-unstable students in comparison to neighboring districts and these students tend to experience

housing instability for multiple years. These figures contrast starkly against the relatively low number of housing-unstable students in the remaining Sequoia area school districts, where students tend to experience some form of housing instability just once. The pervasiveness of housing instability in Ravenswood City School District—in terms of proportion, volume, and chronicity—suggests opportunities for supporting these students may be different from those of other districts in the area.

Next, the type of housing instability experienced by students varies greatly across all districts. While Ravenswood City School District serves the vast majority of doubled up students, other districts serve more literally homeless students, while others still serve primarily highly mobile students. Recent research has shown that students experiencing housing instability have unique needs depending on their dwelling type (Pavlikis, 2018), suggesting that districts might need to tailor their supports for these students depending on the type of housing instability that is most prevalent in their district. At the same time, there might be opportunities for cross-district communication around strategies and supports in those districts whose distributions of housing instability are more similar (e.g., Redwood City and San Carlos).

Finally, the findings above likely do not capture the full population of youth experiencing housing instability in the Sequoia area school districts. Tracking housing instability among students is notoriously challenging (e.g., Tobin & Murphy, 2013) and most often results in under-counting. Looking closely at processes for identifying and tracking housing instability among students, including how often these data are collected and updated, might be another opportunity for cross-district communication.

Housing Instability and Educational Outcomes

We find that academic achievement varies greatly by type of housing instability students experience. Students who are literally homeless tended to have the lowest course grades, standardized test scores, and attendance levels. On the other hand, students who were reported as being doubled-up or highly mobile tended to have higher course grades, standardized test scores, and attendance levels than their peers who were literally homeless, but lower than those who had not reported housing instability during the school year.

The one exception to this pattern is on the SBAC English language arts/literacy test, where literally homeless students are slightly more likely than their doubled-up peers to achieve an “on track” score. However, it is likely that differential attrition by homeless status drives these counterintuitive results. Students who are literally homeless are absent from school much more often than their doubled-up peers, meaning they are also less likely to be present to take these tests. In future analyses, we will interrogate this potential source of bias in the test scores.

We speculate that housing instability affects educational outcomes beyond the time period that students are having housing issues. Since housing-unstable students in these districts tend to receive lower grades and miss school more than their peers, they may also experience worse long term educational and career prospects. Having a lower GPA, earning more Ds and Fs, and experiencing chronic absenteeism – even in early years – are all predictive of high-school non-completion (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson 2014). In addition, scores on the SBAC test in early grades influence course and college-track placements, including access to A-G courses that are required to apply to University of California system colleges. In 11th grade, SBAC can and does influence California State Universities and community colleges determinations of whether students are in need of remedial support. These findings suggest the type of housing instability matters when thinking about academic supports.

Thus, we recognize the relevance of considering housing-unstable students as a single group that collectively face greater educational challenges than housing-stable peers. Yet we also find that different housing designations identify subgroups of students with unique needs that likely require different solutions. Several studies have illustrated an underlying “continuum of risk” of housing instability, in which youth staying in shelters are at greater risk for negative educational outcomes than their housed low-income peers, who are in turn at greater risk than their advantaged peers (i.e., never identified as homeless and highly mobile or low-income) (e.g., Masten, Fiat, & Labella, 2015; Bassuk, Richard, & Tsertsvadze, 2015; Brumley, Fantuzzo, Perlman, & Zager, 2015). Our analyses reveal that students in temporary shelters or hotels/motels, or who are temporarily unsheltered, generally perform worse compared to students who are doubled-up across a range of educational indicators. These findings warrant additional investigation to determine whether certain subgroups of McKinney-Vento students are at greater risk than others.

NEXT STEPS

This report marks the first of three stages of reports on youth housing instability in San Mateo County. In the months ahead, will conduct parallel analyses and draft a similar report for the remaining public school districts in the county. In the next phase, we will look at youth enrolled in San Mateo Union High School District and its feeder schools: Burlingame, Hillsborough City, Millbrae, San Bruno Park, and San Mateo-Foster City Elementary School Districts. In the third stage we will look at youth enrolled in the remaining San Mateo county public schools: Bayshore, Brisbane, Jefferson, and Pacifica elementary districts; Jefferson Union High; and Cabrillo, La Honda-Pescadero, and South San Francisco Unified school districts.

At the end of this project, the reports from these three stages will be complimented by a comprehensive, county-wide report on housing instability among children and adolescent students across all participating districts. This county-wide report will include a comprehensive connection to the prevailing literature in the field and rigorous analytic methods to better understand the distribution of housing instability among the county’s youth and its impact on their educational success and attainment.

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