

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY IN THE EDUCATIONAL LIVES OF OUR  
MOST VULNERABLE YOUTH: THE MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT  
AND HOMELESS CHILDREN

A CRITICAL POLICY  
ETHNOGRAPHY

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of PHILOSOPHY

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
August 2013

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## DEDICATION

First off, love to Angel, Fuzzy, and The Magnifique; *everything* and *always*. Next I cannot neglect my family (Yrag, Mom, Dad, Sebastian – I’m proud of the man you are becoming – Lexi, Gabby, and Kayla – you’re going to make a stupendous teacher) and friends (too many to mention, but especially Jake, Lee, and Pop) for putting up with my nonsense and telephone-phobia; you know my love and respect never wavered. And I must give it up to my writing crew -- Greg, Ri-K, Genise, Leticia, Karon, Monica G., and Xinto – for coaxing me to this finish line. You have helped keep my optimism vibrant. I especially want to thank the other Monica in our group, whose spirit, kindness, and organization kept us moving forward and together. And of course I cannot forget my committee, who exhibited superlative patience with both my timeframe and, uh, vision. Thanks for putting up with me and the guidance you provided. I especially want to thank Miguel for his compassion and prodding; I am a better man for knowing you my friend. Almost to the end now, I promise, but I also want to offer gratitude to all my students over the years whose humanity has incalculably influenced everything I stand for, as well everyone working to make the world a better place; I will never meet the vast majority of you all, but I know you are out there and this provides me fuel to keep on keeping on. And finally, I return to the stranger I passed that fateful day picking phantom bugs off his face. I never properly met you, but I ultimately dedicate this study and all that comes from it to you. May you go in peace, wherever you may be.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to acknowledge everyone I listed on the previous dedication page. I would like to again send you my utmost love and respect. Hmmm. I suppose I would also like to take this opportunity to thank punk rock – especially Joe, Jello, and Greg – for helping show me, when I was a highly impressionable youth, that there was a different way to go about living life beyond just chasing the bottom line. This has made all the difference in the world.

This manuscript was submitted on July 10, 2013.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY IN THE EDUCATIONAL LIVES OF OUR MOST VULNERABLE YOUTH: THE MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT**

**AND HOMELESS CHILDREN**

**A CRITICAL POLICY**

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**by**

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**Texas State University-San Marcos**

**August 2013**

**SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: MIGUEL A. GUAJARDO**

This critical policy ethnography analyzes the McKinney-Vento Act and the impact it has on the lives of homeless youth. Data comes from conversations with research partners situated in various key roles within the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy and the researcher's experience as an educator and participant observer at a homeless shelter and school as well as conversations at district and state level administrative offices. Analysis was informed by an ethic of care framework and a historiography was created to chronicle the policy's genealogy, intent, and guiding values. Utilizing an open systems model and creative nonfiction, the findings are presented in a deliberate effort that puts a human face to the families the policy impacts. Major findings and

recommendations include a need for increased awareness and compliance monitoring of the policy as well as an investment of additional resources to adequately respond to McKinney-Vento issues throughout the public education system.

## **CHAPTER I:**

### **A NATIONAL CRISIS**

#### **A Beginning of Sorts**

It was a warm and sticky Sunday morning, typical for downtown San Antonio in mid-June. I walked with my family to the Children's Museum aglow in the joy of my son's second birthday. It was the kind of emotionally charged day during which I try to take stock of all I have been blessed with.

My child perched contentedly on my shoulders as we walked through a small park that had largely been taken over by homelessness. We passed particularly close by a solitary man wearing a dirty hospital gown and a distant look on his face. He appeared to be methodically picking imaginary bugs out of his beard. He seemed largely oblivious of his surroundings.

I suppose he did not notice the elegant hotel but a shekel's throw across the street behind him, or the obvious wealth of the people staying there judging by the luxury cars in its protected valet parking lot. I doubted the people at the hotel much noticed him either. The dichotomy between my situation and this man's struck me sharply as I moved past with my beautiful boy. Was he not someone's beloved child as well? Did he not have a parent who once dreamed about what he would become when he grew up? Did they picture him living on the streets of San Antonio, picking phantom insects from his

face, dressed in little more than a rag? How was it possible that this *human* was living this way in the very shadow of great luxury? Did anyone care about this person's story?

I could not accept there was such a thing as human debris. I determined right there that I needed to find a way to help give voice to this forgotten man. I was not sure what or how I was going to do it, but I knew it was something I simply had to do. Thus, this project was born, although I did not know it until much later. Returning to my car, my son back up on my shoulders some two hours of raucous play and laughter later, the forgotten man on the sidewalk was still there picking imaginary bugs off his face.

### **The Problem**

The United States is experiencing a mostly ignored epidemic of increased youth homelessness (Hallett, 2012; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009a, 2011). The children impacted by this epidemic are at risk for a plethora of problems associated with homelessness, one of the most significant being a lack of educational success which could set them up for a lifetime of struggle (Attles, 1997; Hallett, 2012; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge, 2000a; Tower & White, 1989). Given the scope of youth homelessness, and the implications it has on the lives of those affected, it is an issue the nation needs to address for the sake of a more humane future. Judging by the fact that a large percentage of youth – perhaps greater than half -- who experience homelessness end up without degrees (Duffield, 2000; Hyman, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011) it is obvious there is much work to be done. This study was hopefully one small step in that direction.

On a single January day in 2011 over 630,000 people managed to be located and included in the most recent Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

homeless population count (HUD, 2011a). National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) estimates placed the amount of homeless persons in the United States at somewhere between 2.5 and 3.5 million annually, or roughly 1% of the American population *before* the recent recession (NCH, 2009a). Given the continuing poor economy since then, these numbers have only likely increased (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009a). There is also evidence that the nature of homelessness is shifting from a population of mostly single males to an increasing number of families – especially those headed by single females -- with children (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011). In other words, the numbers of homeless children is likely on the rise.

The most recent data from the Department of Education (ED) provided testament to this unfortunate trend. In 2010-2011 the nation's public schools served 1,065,794 homeless students, a 13% uptick from the previous school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012a). And these students represented but some fraction of the overall school-aged homeless population, one notoriously difficult to numerate with any certainty (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge, 2000a).

The negative impact of homelessness on a child's education is well documented (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Newman, 1999; Stronge & Popp, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 1999). These students are more likely than their housed peers to miss class, suffer learning disabilities, be retained a grade, as well as read, write, and compute below average. Ultimately, they are at a much greater risk of dropping or being pushed out of school altogether (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Somewhere around one in three homeless children do not even attend school at all (Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

The potentially marginalizing impact of a negative educational experience on one's future life opportunities is likewise well established (DeSena & Ansalone, 2009; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Waters & Harris, 2009; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). An inability to read and write at a basic level, not to mention lacking a diploma altogether as many of these students likely will, is a recipe for a lifetime of struggle with poverty. The harmful consequence of this on the children of those so affected has also been documented, not to mention the potential effect this has on subsequent generations raised in an environment of decreased opportunity (Ashworth, Hill, & Walker, 1994; Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 2008; Brady, Fullerton, & Cross, 2009, 2010; Felitti, et. al., 1998; Kozol, 1988; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). In short, a bout of youth homelessness might reverberate for decades as the experience increases the likelihood a child so affected struggles with poverty as an adult, which in turn translates into greater odds that any children they have will suffer in a similar manner and so on down the line. Any effort that adds to the knowledge of how to break this cycle is worthwhile, whether it may be put to pedagogical or policy use, whether it is measured on an individual or societal level.

Regardless how one chooses to quantify or define it (more on the problems inherent with this below), it is indisputable that homelessness is an issue of concern in the United States. One may take a Deweyan (Dewey, 1916) perspective wherein the marginalized represent a lessening of the potential of the country's democracy or an economic one in which case the existence of sizeable populations in a state of vulnerability overly taxes the public welfare system and therefore utilizes resources more inefficiently than would occur if people were better able to support themselves. From a social justice lens there would be a clear concern with the marginalized of society as



represented by those without stable housing. There are obviously further ethical, practical, and other reasons one might be concerned with minimizing the societal impact of homelessness. Regardless of the tack one takes, it is hard to imagine a legitimate argument against this being a problem worth trying to mitigate. Coming from my own viewpoint, I would call any level of homelessness above those who voluntarily choose to live in this manner – and then who am I to challenge their decision about what is best for their own lives – an issue a just society *must* be concerned with. For if a society is but an amalgamation of its individual members, if any member is suffering, that society, by definition, is lesser than it otherwise could be. And how can this not be something that concerns us all? Far from impacting only the individual – and on moral grounds this seems sufficient to garner our attention – the marginalized of society impact everyone.

The question then turns toward how best to tackle the problem. It seems inescapable in the ubiquitously bureaucratic modern nation-state that the government will play a large role in most efforts at impacting society at large. Guiding these state-led endeavors are policies, written by people at the top of a bureaucracy (or at least the policy creators have some sort of access to those at the top) charged with its implementation. It is via this implementation that whatever social change is intended is supposed to occur.

After the policy is created it is then interpreted by those near the top of the system and disseminated to others down the bureaucratic line, who in turn interpret both the policy itself and the instructions they have received about its implementation from those above. Then they, too, disseminate it still further down the line and so on until eventually the policy, having been subjected to the understanding, politics, and personalities of many complex human beings along the way, is finally enacted upon the population

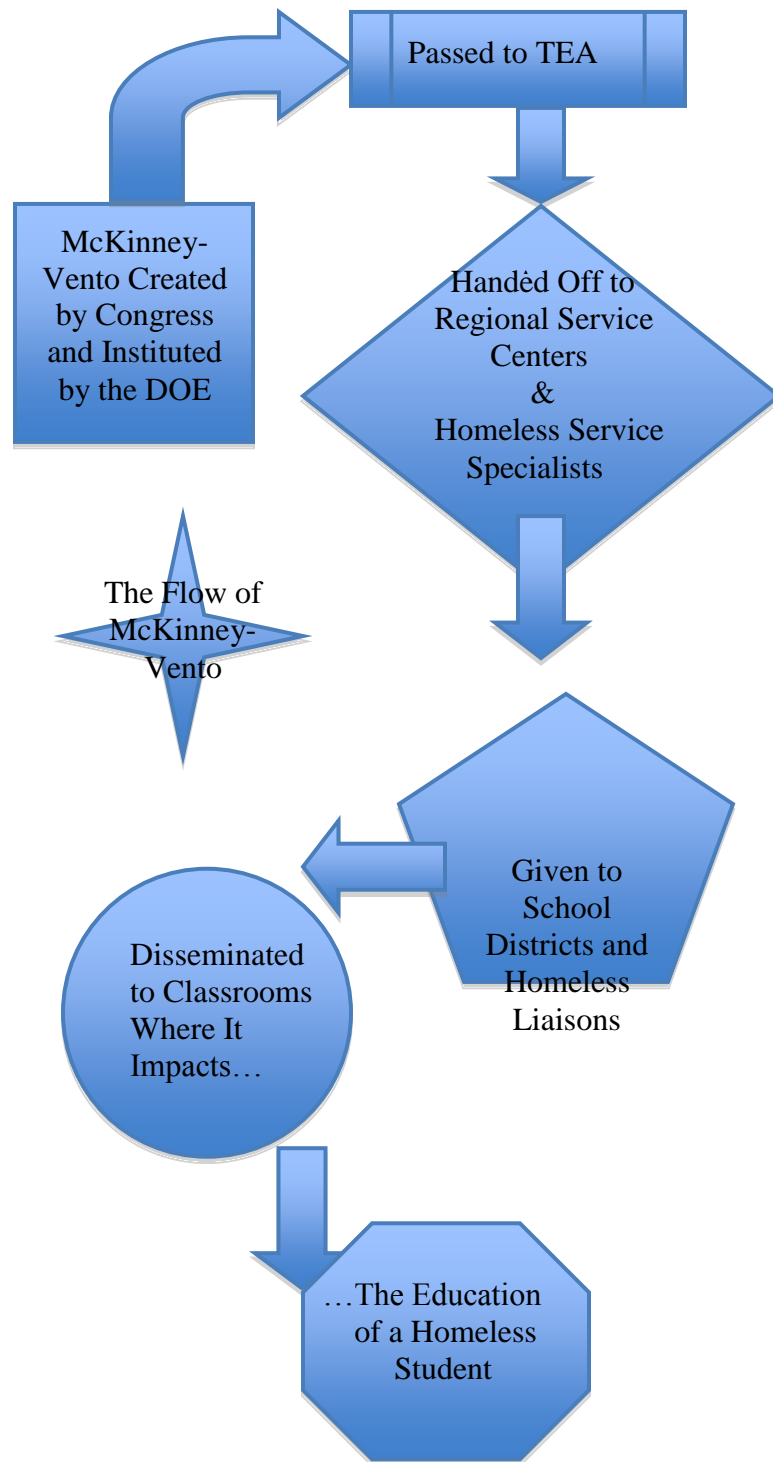
originally targeted. Obviously, the scope of the bureaucracy, the amount of layers it possesses, and the distance (both literally and figuratively) between these levels all play a large role in determining both the complexity of the bureaucracy and the degree of difficulty inherent in the top of the system's ability to communicate its intentions effectively with the bottom. The larger and more complex the bureaucracy the more difficult this task becomes.

It also follows that bureaucracies and their impacts can be imagined on a scale ranging anywhere from highly positive to highly negative or somewhere in between. And while impact and intent are not necessarily completely conjoined – e.g., a system can theoretically have a positive impact even if it is not performing the task in the way its creators intended – my presumption was that the intent and spirit of a policy should guide its implementation; otherwise, there is little point of having one in the first place.

Working from the assumption that homelessness is severely detrimental to a child's education, and that this, as well as homelessness in general, is an issue a just society must be concerned with, and that for better or worse, modern nations deal with large societal problems via state run bureaucracies, this study investigated the federal policy the United States has crafted to handle the issue of homelessness. I also assumed the stated purpose of this policy -- to connect homeless youth to the kind of successful educational experience that would be otherwise available to them if they were housed – was truly intended. By this standard I analyzed the policy's intent, process, and output.

The McKinney-Vento Act is the federal policy that for the past two and a half decades has governed the education of homeless students in the United States. Even though this policy is intended to serve a large number of the country's most vulnerable

students there are definite gaps in our knowledge about how, and how well, McKinney-Vento is working (Canfield, Teasley, Abell, & Randolph, 2012; Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010; Miller, 2011). This study looked to help fill this gap and contribute to our knowledge of McKinney-Vento by investigating the policy itself, the bureaucracy that has grown around its implementation, and the impact it has on the children it is supposed to serve. I paid special attention to how well recent changes to the policy were understood and accounted for. I hoped to provide insight into how the policy and bureaucracy were serving or disserving homeless youth in addition to how this might be improved for everyone involved -- student, school, and policymaker.



**Figure 1** The Flow of McKinney-Vento Within the Open Systems Model

*Figure 1 traces the McKinney-Vento Act as it was investigated through the Open Systems Model. The policy was created by Congress in the upper left hand corner of the figure, before it was handed to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and passed to the Regional Centers through which TEA operates its bureaucracy. The policy was then disseminated to school districts, each of which has a homeless liaison in charge of their particular McKinney-Vento programming. The policy was then implemented by school districts in individual classrooms where the homeless students were educated. The output, at the bottom of the model, was the educational outcome a homeless child received.*

### **Research Questions**

My ultimate aim in this study was to determine how McKinney-Vento impacted the homeless students it was designed to serve. This is the primary target of the policy itself and the most important output it produces. Part of the answer to this question involved determining how the people charged with implementing the Act understood and interpreted the policy. Other important components involved discovering how the policy was turned into practice at different levels of the bureaucracy as well as how effectively the state monitored what was going on and ensured compliance. Eventually, my inquiry was narrowed to the following three guiding questions:

1. How is McKinney-Vento being implemented at different levels of the educational system, including identification, learning, and support?
2. How does the McKinney-Vento bureaucratic framework impact the practice of the policy?

3. How effectively does the government ensure compliance with McKinney-Vento?

### **Significance of the Study**

Shedding light on the problem of how to more effectively educate and serve homeless youth would clearly be beneficial for this marginalized population and public schooling in general. Discovering how and why schools treat homeless students under McKinney-Vento could inform practice and policy for a system that is supposed to be helping the homeless youth population – which research (Burt et al., 1999; Duffield, 2001; National Center for Homeless Education, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010; Rescorla, Parker, & Stolley, 1991) clearly demonstrated was at an elevated risk for all sorts of problems – access the educational opportunities offered by society with all the accompanying benefits accruing over the course of a lifetime. Surely this is an end worthy of investigation.

The knowledge gained by this project could be put to both pedagogical and policy use. As a teacher who has taught several homeless students, I would welcome any information concerning how I might provide a safer and more effective educational experience to my homeless students. This is especially true for the unidentified homeless students I have undoubtedly taught while ignorant of this fact and therefore less able to provide them the assistance they likely needed. No doubt there are other educators out there with similar sentiments.

On a policy level, such information would also be useful, especially in light of the fact that there is little in the literature that addressed this issue. McKinney-Vento has been in place for more than two decades now, yet there is a paucity of data concerning its

impact (Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010). In other words, society is facing a growing crisis fraught with potential wide-ranging negative consequences for several generations in the future and we have charged McKinney-Vento with the task of dealing with it. Yet despite the seriousness of this charge we have not studied it anywhere close to a depth that would seem prudent.

Filling this informational gap seems especially pertinent in light of the changing face of homelessness and the recent increase in its youth numbers. Even if we believe McKinney-Vento was effective for some purposes ten years ago, youth homelessness has changed since then. Is it still working in 2013? As I wrote this paper I heard of another suburban Central Texas town opening a drop-in center to address the unprecedented increase in homeless youth they were witnessing. This was a middle class suburban town that had not faced such a problem in the past, at least not on a scale upon which they felt the need to tangibly act. Within the property rich district where I teach our homeless population increased from around 30 students in 2010 to over 200 the next year to a tally well surpassing 300 in 2013. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to find further evidence of the continuing problem of homelessness facing the nation, from metropolises like New York (Markee, 2013) to low density rural areas like Wyoming (Healy, 2013).

On a similar note, the shelter where I volunteered had to dedicate a large section of their housing supply to families with children. Much to their surprise, around one-third of their admits in 2012 had been families with children. Sadly, both examples fit the trend toward increased youth homelessness that research has uncovered. It is a growing problem which we would be wise to get in front of sooner rather than later. Quite literally the future viability of our democratic society might be at stake, assuming that a growing

large swathe of marginalized citizenry represents such a risk. To that point then, if McKinney-Vento is the vehicle to which we have hitched our aspirations toward helping the homeless youth population achieve their education it seems long overdue to take a good, hard look at how it is being implemented and some of the impacts this is having.

Ultimately, I see myself as an advocate attempting to nudge the system charged with educating homeless students in the direction of greater dignity, humanity, and effectiveness. I viewed this study as a tool for helping make this aspiration a reality. Basically, I believe that while McKinney-Vento has been undeniably beneficial in some areas, it still falls far short of what it could accomplish if we were to more fully (and continually) assess, critique, and adjust how it operates. There are many aspects of McKinney-Vento of which we were systemically ignorant, aspects that impact both its implementation and effectiveness. New knowledge in this area could be utilized by policymakers and practitioners to steer service to some of our most vulnerable children in a more effective direction.

To that end I saw myself working in five separate, but connected, intersections where McKinney-Vento and the people involved with it met. The first junction was where homeless youth and families were served by the policy. This research shed light on how the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy considered and treated those who should be the most important people in the entire structure. The second juncture occurred at schools, the places where McKinney-Vento should have been linking homeless children and their educational success most overtly. The third connection happened at the district level, where the policy was governed at the local level. The fourth linkage was found at the state, where TEA received mandates from the Department of Education and then



disseminated its interpretations and priorities to Texas' school districts for implementation. The final crossroads between McKinney-Vento and the people it touched happened at the political level, where policy was created and instituted.

From my review of the literature, I have not found evidence that anyone has investigated McKinney-Vento in this fashion. If the policy has been investigated in something approximating this manner, it surely has not been done so to any great extent. My intention was to use this study to assist in the forging and implementation of more effective and humane policy and practices that impact homeless children in this country and thereby contribute to enhancing the human condition in our communities. This included informing policy, practice and pedagogy in a way that begins to rehabilitate the work in our schools, non-profits, universities and houses of government.

Ultimately, if I had the power to craft what the future held for my research, I would most hope to see it utilized to help homeless students more successfully access their education on their own terms for their own purposes. This is the primary target. Beyond that it would also help schools facilitate this process in a manner that made the schools' task easier. Finally, it would provide tangible and useful information to policymakers to assist them in the creation of a better McKinney-Vento. It was an objective, I believed, which would serve the interests of society at large, especially some of its most vulnerable members.

### **Format of this Document**

This first chapter described the nature of the problem of educating homeless students in the United States, why this issue is critical to all of society, and the primary questions that guided the study. Chapter Two takes a look at the literature surrounding

homelessness in general, and homeless youth in particular. It also goes into depth about the history of McKinney-Vento from its initiation in the early 1980s up to its most recent changes. Chapter Three lays out the methodology used for gathering the data as well as for conducting the analysis. Chapter Four details more fully the open systems model used both to organize the study and highlight the macro level flow of the policy. I also introduce here the creative nonfiction genre for delivering the observables in dynamic and ethnographic way. Chapter Five covers the presentation and analysis of the data gathered from my micro-investigation of the through puts in the open system model, the places where the McKinney-Vento policy is turned into practice. Chapter Six returns to my original research questions to see how they were answered and goes into my recommendations for making the policy more effective. Following this are my reference list and appendices.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Those Without Housing: A Matter of Little Clarity**

There is much in the way of stereotype, misunderstanding, ignorance, and prejudice surrounding homelessness. There is also general disagreement – academic and otherwise – regarding its causes, effects, demographics, and solutions. There is not even a clear consensus on what it exactly means to be homeless. Indeed, the one basic “fact” that can seemingly be agreed on is that the main cause of homelessness is a lack of housing. However, even here there is some fundamental disagreement about what constitutes a “lack of housing.”

The bulk of this murkiness is largely unavoidable due to the nature of the population involved. To begin with, numerating the homeless population with any certitude is next to impossible (Newman, 1999; Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998; Wasserman & Clair, 2010; Wright & Devine, 1995). People who have suffered circumstances drastic enough to predicate losing the very roof over their head are by definition not as locked into “normal” society – and thus accessible to such counting mechanisms as income taxes, welfare, or social security -- as someone possessing a steady place to live. Exacerbating this is the fact that some may view

authority with suspicion because of previous negative experiences so they go out of their way to avoid being noticed (Murphy & Tobin, 2010; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

Furthermore, many vacillate in and out of homelessness as their circumstances fluctuate. Someone might, for example, live in a car for two weeks before coming up with money to rent a room at a hotel or finding temporary shelter with a friend (Julianelle, 2009; Tower & White, 1989; Vanderstaay, 1992; Vissing, 1992; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). A woman with children may flee an abusive relationship to a temporary shelter, reconcile with her partner, only to repeat the process several times (Newman, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Vissing, 1992). Perhaps someone with schizophrenia is sufficiently stable to work and pay rent for months at a time, only to return to the streets when their mental health deteriorates (Montgomery, Metraux, & Chulhane, 2013; Vanderstaay, 1992). Many homeless people “dwell” in places like rudimentary campsites, abandoned buildings, or even caves (NCH, 2009; Vanderstaay, 1992; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). In short, the homeless count varies from moment to moment and it is next to impossible to canvas all the locations used for shelter or account for the revolving nature of everyone’s housing status. Thus, it is difficult to numerate the problem with anything approaching exactitude. Quite simply, there is no turnstile to record when someone moves from the streets to housing and back again, there is no registration process for a change in lodging status and there is no application for constructing a makeshift camp in the woods. This problem is particularly acute for the “street homeless” (those who do not make use of shelters on a regular basis for whatever reason) or those precariously housed in doubled-up circumstances with friends or family (Vissing, 1996; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

In the end, we are left with a wide range of estimates about the numbers of people suffering homelessness in a year. Among legitimate research organizations, the number 3.5 million arises repeatedly (NCH, 2009; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2007; Urban Institute, 2000). However, when citing this figure it is prudent to recall Shlay and Rossi's (1992) meta-analysis of sixty studies that discovered estimates of the national homeless population ranging from 250,000 to 3,000,000. In other words, we really do not know how big of a problem we are dealing with, but perhaps the exact numbers are less important than the acknowledgment that the problem exists and it is significant. This was my assumption at any rate.

### **Who Is Homeless?**

Adding to the problem of figuring out how many homeless people there are is the fact that there is no single definition of what it means to be homeless in the United States. Of course, there is the classic stereotype of the unshaven bum with a pack over his shoulder, begging for change on the corner with which to buy alcohol. Everyone can agree this person is homeless. But, what about the family living on a cousin's couch because mom lost her job? Is this family homeless? Technically, they have a roof over their head, if only (possibly) a temporary one. Similarly, what about families living week-to-week in a hotel? Once again, they have a roof over their head, if admittedly only a tenuous one.

In a similar vein, should there be different measurements for those who live in a shelter compared to those who are completely roofless, the so-called "street homeless"? Should there be different categories for those who voluntarily choose the homeless lifestyle from those who are mentally ill? How about those who are substance abusers?

Or those who bounce from temporary homelessness to housing and back again when compared to those who are consistently homeless for long stretches of time? In other words, whenever discussing the numbers and composition of the homeless population, one must be aware the subject is complicated by the many different metrics and definitions used in considering who exactly counts as homeless in the first place.

The United States government officially utilizes two somewhat contradictory measures. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2011) defines homelessness in the following manner:

The terms “homeless” or “homeless individual” includes –

1. an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
2. an individual who has a primary residence that is –
  - A. an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
  - B. a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

Meanwhile, according to the McKinney-Vento Act (H.R. 558--100th Congress: Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987), the framework by which the Federal government has addressed youth homelessness and education for most of the past two-plus decades:

The term ‘homeless child and youth’ means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes

- (i) children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels,

trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

(ii) children and youth 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;

(iii) children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children (as such terms is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

Obviously, McKinney-Vento's definition is significantly more expansive than HUD's and the fact that two arms of the same federal government cannot agree on what it even means to be homeless in the first place is rather indicative of the lack of exactitude that infuses the entire subject.

In 2009 (the government did not issue its final ruling on this definition of "homeless" until late 2011) a new wrinkle was added to the mix when McKinney-Vento was reauthorized as part of a larger federal homelessness policy effort, the HEARTH Act (HUD, 2011b). While the bulk of HEARTH – as does much of McKinney-Vento itself -- concerns wider homelessness issues in general, it impacts educational systems by expanding the definition of who is considered a homeless youth in the eyes of the law (HUD, 2009; National Alliance to End Homeless, 2012e; National Association for the

Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2011).

HEARTH considers homeless those who at risk of losing their housing within 14 days (the previous standard had been 7 days). It also adds a new category of homelessness: families with children or unaccompanied youth who are “unstably housed.” People fitting this description are families with children or unaccompanied youths up to 24 years old:

Who have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in the last 60 or more days, have had two or more moves in the last 60 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed because of disability or multiple barriers to employment (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012e).

Perhaps most significantly, HEARTH *increases the age of minority to 25 years*. Judging by the paucity of citations to HEARTH in the literature, it is too early to gauge the difference it has made on numeration of the homeless population, although it would seem logical to assume it has, and will, lead to an increase. At the very least it will surely throw even more uncertainty on already nebulous population numbers while making it that much more difficult to compare future studies to those already completed. It also highlights the difficult nature of attempting to entreat with the issue of homelessness: the data used is very much shaded by how one defines the parameters of the issue and even then the process is darkened by uncertainty.

### **Counting the Homeless Population: A Matter for Debate**

There are two distinct methodologies commonly used for determining the size of the homeless population. The point-in-time method attempts to canvas everyone homeless on particular day or during a single week. This method has been criticized for



its inability to account for the dynamic nature of homelessness. (Hopper, Shinn, Laska, Meisner, & Wanderling, 2008; NCH, 2009a; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

A second method, the period prevalence count, attempts to numerate the amount of homeless persons over a given period of time. This method is seen by some as a better, or at least more useful in certain circumstances, representation of a reality where many vacillate in and out of homelessness as circumstances change (Burt, 1996; Lee, et al., 2010; NCH, 2009a). However, not even this method is free from concerns that it might skew the demographics and estimates of the homeless population (Phelan & Link, 1999; Ringwalt, et al., 1998).

At any rate, there is little doubt the counting methodology is imperfect, whichever one is used. About the only thing that can be said with certainty is that estimates vary depending upon who is doing the counting and the methods they are using. One recent study from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP, 2007) estimated that approximately 3.5 million individuals -- 1.35 million of whom are children -- experience homelessness in a given year. A point-in-time count by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH, 2007) reported a figure of 744,313 on a single night in 2005. By comparison, the 2011 HUD count placed the population at 1.6 million, significantly less than the two other groups' findings -- both of which are homeless advocacy organizations -- and this despite it was conducted *after* the recent economic downturn which is almost universally assumed to have increased the homeless population (HUD, 2011a).

Illuminative of the sheer lack of consensus is a 1992 analysis of sixty separate national homeless studies that found population estimates ranging from 250,000 to

3,000,000 (Shlay & Rossi). In other words, various estimates of the homeless population, each compiled by reputable sources – albeit with different agendas and assumptions -- vary so greatly as to be almost useless for purposes requiring exactitude. But, perhaps the exact number is not so important here. For regardless if you choose the low or high figure or somewhere in between it is undeniable that the numbers of the homeless in the United States are sizable and pose a real problem for society.

### **The Causes of Homelessness**

There are two basic causal strains of homelessness in the literature. The traditional reason, one that fits neatly into American individualistic bootstrap ideology, attributes homelessness to something a person has done to oneself or a condition from which one suffers (Fagan, 1995; Gottfried, 1999; Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Vanderstaay, 1992). According to this line of thinking, homelessness is the result of something like substance abuse, laziness, or a poor personal decision; in other words, something one has control over. Homeless due to mental illness would also fall under this classification, as well as someone forced to the streets as a result of something like family violence. While lacking the connotations of blame implicit in homelessness stemming from a supposed lack of self-discipline or personal responsibility in a case such as drug addiction, homelessness due to mental illness or domestic violence is still the end result of some *individual* action or pathology. Following the natural logic here, the solution to homelessness in these instances would entail striking at individual problems, be they schizophrenia or spousal abuse; do this and the homelessness, but a symptom of the underlying problem, should fall away.

Contrasting this individualistic reason for homelessness is what may be

considered a structural cause. The logic here says that homelessness is basically a societal/economic problem tied to poverty and a dearth of affordable housing.

Subscribers to this theory note how the nature and numbers of the homeless population have changed since the Reagan era, when national policy began cutting back support for both poor people and the low cost housing they depend on (Fagan, 1995; Gottfried, 1999; Lee, et al., 2010; NCH, 2009d; Newman, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

The logic for combating homelessness in the structural case would entail changing the very nature of society in order that people may better meet their basic needs. Much emphasis in this case is placed on the extreme difficulty inherent in attempting to support oneself, under the best of circumstances, on the kinds of low wage jobs readily available for the poor in the American economy, thereby seriously questioning the validity of attributing homelessness to some personal flaw when a person can “work hard” and still find themselves unable to keep the specter of poverty at arms-length. (Ehreneich, 2001; Lee, et al., 2010; Kozol, 1988; Merino, 2009; NCH, 2009d; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

The individualized approach seems to be the one most commonly adopted by groups – be they private or public -- that work directly with the homeless. While often acknowledging that societal and economic problems do contribute to homelessness, many, if not most, still take the individualized approach with their step and/or faith-based programs (Lyon-Callo, 2000; Mathieu, 1993; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). In essence, the individualized approach implies that homelessness can best be solved by relying on one’s own agency; while structural obstacles undeniably exist, the main issue is still some

deficiency or pathology on the part of the homeless person.

That this is the tack most often taken is not surprising considering the implications of the approach one chooses. If the roots of homelessness are attributed to the actions of an individual it is relatively clear what must be done to rectify the problem. There is now a target in sight such as lack of job skill or substance abuse; the trick is figuring out how to hit it, be it vocational training or Narcotics Anonymous. Humans are comfortable with quantifiable, tangible concepts that provide a direction from point A (problem) to point B (solution), so we tend to gravitate toward solutions that offer such certainty, even if certainty is often little more than a will-o-the-wisp. Once the target is set, all that is required is hard work. This is nice, neat, and seemingly attainable.

The second approach, however, is far messier. If homelessness stems from something structural in society where does one begin? In which direction lies the target? What is the equation to be solved? Unlike addiction, which is comparatively straightforward, if homelessness stems from an inequitable society that offers wages that cannot sustain someone willing to work -- especially in light of rising transportation, food, daycare, and housing costs -- if it stems from increasing gentrification that shrinks the availability of affordable housing while harmfully raising the tax burden of other low income housed families, if it stems from a public school system that has provided some with great opportunity and others little, if it stems from dysfunctional judicial and health care systems, well, where does one begin? The structural causes mentioned here -- along with countless others in the complex web of human existence -- are unimaginably detailed and daunting. So, while there is a basic understanding that societal issues are in play when discussing the causes of homelessness, it is understandable that those who

work, often tirelessly, trying to “solve the homeless problem”, largely stick to the individualized, more tangible approach. It is far easier to work on the relatively small problem you can see in front of your face, rather than the tenuous, gargantuan ones permeating the entire society, even if these might be the only ones that offer a true means to ultimately “solve” the problem.

### **Demographics of Homelessness**

It is generally accepted that, similar to many other measures related to poverty and lack of opportunity, minorities are overrepresented in the homeless ranks. Thus we see Blacks comprising somewhere around 40% of the homeless population compared to an overall national population of 13%. A similar, if not as severely skewed – some reckonings even suggest there is no overrepresentation at all -- situation exists for Hispanics, with 20% homeless compared to the national population of 16%. Whites are greatly underrepresented at around 40% and 64% of the homeless and national populations, respectively (HUD, 2010; NCH, 2009b; 2009f; US Census, 2010). Naturally, these numbers vary depending upon the definition and counting method one chooses to utilize. It seems safe to generalize however, that minorities, especially Blacks, are well overrepresented in the homeless ranks, while Whites are underrepresented.

There are also statistical skews concerning the gender makeup of the homeless population. Although again the numbers are far from exact, it is generally accepted that most of the homeless population is male, perhaps somewhere in the 60-70% range (HUD, 2010; NCH, 2009b; US Conference of Mayors, 2007; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). However, the situation is reversed when talking about family homelessness. Of this population, somewhere around 65% are females (NAEH, 2010a; NCH, 2009b).

### **Types of Homelessness: Sheltered vs. Unsheltered**

The literature distinguishes several different categories of homelessness. One major differentiator is whether the homeless person is considered sheltered or unsheltered (HUD, 2011a; Hopper, et al., 2008; NAEH, 2011; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). Here, too, there are somewhat different interpretations of basic definitions. According to many homeless advocates, sheltered homelessness means having some sort of roof overhead that is intended for human habitation, be that roof an actual emergency shelter, transition housing, temporarily bunking with a family member, or staying in a motel (NAEH, 2011; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

But, according to HUD (2011a), sheltered has been defined more narrowly by removing people who are “housed” in manners such as doubling-up at someone else’s residence or staying in motels. In this case they are considered *precariously housed* and not typically counted among the ranks of the homeless in the eyes of the government and therefore do not have access to the funding that can accompany this designation. This has caused problems as the HUD definition contradicts McKinney-Vento, making it more difficult for states to provide services or even conduct a truly representative count, especially in rural areas (NCH, 2009g; Vissing, 1996).

The part of McKinney-Vento that deals specifically with education considers families with children who are precariously housed as eligible for services. But, if there are no children involved someone precariously housed in the exact same manner is not considered homeless. The new HEARTH Act (see above) has added another wrinkle to this measurement, at least where homeless students are concerned. As noted, it remains to

be seen what sort of effect this will have.

Defining unsheltered homelessness is more straightforward. Unsheltered means staying either on the streets or in some place not meant for human habitation such as a vehicle, campsite, or abandoned building. (HUD, 2011a; Vanderstaay, 1992; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). This usage of unsheltered is consistent throughout the literature.

In some respects, the unsheltered homeless are the ones who most closely fit the classic stereotype of what a homeless person is, namely someone who lives on the streets. Of note is that recent figures (NAEH, 2012a) estimate the unsheltered homeless at around 40% of the overall homeless population, a figure significantly below the majority, suggesting our most basic stereotype of homelessness is grossly mistaken. However, it also stands well to remember that because both the street homeless population and those precariously housed are two of the most difficult populations to numerate with any accuracy, these are very much ballpark figures, if even that.

### **Types of Homelessness: Chronic**

Another common method used to categorize homelessness is whether it is considered chronic or not. Once again, there is some difference of opinion depending upon who is doing the defining. According to HUD (2009):

(A) IN GENERAL, the term ‘chronically homeless’ means, with respect to an individual or family, that the individual or family (i) is homeless and lives or resides in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter; (ii) has been homeless and living or residing in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter continuously for at least 1 year or on at least 4 separate occasions in the last 3

years; and (iii) has an adult head of household (or a minor head of household if no adult is present in the household) with a diagnosable substance use disorder, serious mental illness, developmental disability (as defined in section 102 of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (42 U.S.C. 15002)), post traumatic stress disorder, cognitive impairments resulting from a brain injury, or chronic physical illness or disability, including the co-occurrence of 2 or more of those conditions.

(B) RULE OF CONSTRUCTION - a person who currently lives or resides in an institutional care facility, including a jail, substance abuse or mental health treatment facility, hospital or other similar facility, and has resided there for fewer than 90 days shall be considered chronically homeless if such person met all of the requirements described in subparagraph (A) prior to entering that facility.

In many respects, the chronically homeless person fits the stereotype of what a homeless person is supposedly like: someone with a substance problem, mental illness, and/or some other visibly obvious disability wandering the streets in a state of distress. Under HUD's metric, chronically homeless persons comprise less than 20% of the overall homeless population, far below the majority, demonstrating once again that the stereotype hardly fits the reality (NAEH, 2012a). There has been progress in recent years toward decreasing this population's homelessness through intensive therapeutic intervention (NAEH, 2012a). There is also a general agreement that those who are chronically homeless utilize a disproportionately high percentage of the resources dedicated to homeless assistance (Culhane & Metraux, 1998; NAEH, 2010a).

There is some controversy within the homeless advocacy community over HUD's



limiting of the definition to these narrow parameters, under the belief that this treats homelessness as if it were a medical condition, that it misrepresents the causes of homelessness for those who actually do have disabilities (i.e. it is not their disability that causes their homelessness, but economic forces such as a lack of housing), and ultimately ill serves the majority of the homeless and homeless-vulnerable population by targeting resources in a manner that is not based on a valid metric (Lyon-Callo, 2000; Mathieu, 1993; NCH, 2002; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

I find it difficult to argue with the advocates in this instance. If someone is repeatedly homeless, even though they do not have a diagnosed disability or are homeless for long stretches of time, it seems quite a misuse of the word “chronic” not to label them as such. It certainly does not make sense if the ultimate goal is to decrease the negative impact of homelessness, whatever its source. For the purposes of this project, whether or not someone is repeatedly homeless or suffers “only temporarily” seems quite pertinent to the story I am attempting to tell. I will avoid using the term “chronic” then, except to refer to the specific definition as provided by HUD. When referring to the time span of someone’s homelessness I will attempt to be as specific as possible based upon the information I am provided.

### **Types of Homelessness: Individual vs. Family**

Another distinction is made regarding whether or not the homeless person is an individual or part of a family with children. It is generally agreed that the majority of the homeless population consists of single adults who remain literally homeless (i.e. residing on the streets) for a relatively short period of time (NAEH, 2010b; Culhane, Metraux, Schretzman, & Valentine, 2007).

Nationwide, “people who were homeless in families -- that is, in the over 79,000 homeless households with at least one adult and one child -- comprise 37 percent of the people” noted in HUD’s 2010 point-in-time count (HUD, 2010, p.6). Similar statistics are quoted by other authorities (NCH, 2009d; NCFH, 2011a). These numbers seem to be rising in recent years, although naturally there is variation regarding how severely this is occurring (HUD, 2010; NAEH, 2012c; NCH, 2009d).

Families typically become homeless due to financial emergency or domestic violence (NAEH, 2012c, 2012d; NCH, 2009e; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2010a, 2010b). In cities homeless families are more often sheltered (have nighttime access to some structure intended for habitation) than unsheltered (HUD, 2010; Vissing, 1996). Many are doubled-up with others (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2011; NCFH, 2011a; NCH, 2009d). They constitute a disproportionately high percentage of rural homelessness, where they are also much more likely to be unsheltered due to services shortages (Craft-Rosenberg et al., 2000; NAEH, 2009c; NCH, 2009b; Vissing, 1996). Most homeless families become re-housed within a few months of receiving assistance although they often suffer from chronic housing instability after making it from the streets (ICPH, 2011; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; NAEH, 2012c).

Well over half of the time homeless families are headed by a single female (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2011; NAEH, 2012c; NCH, 2009b; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2010b). These mothers tend to be in their late twenties, did not finish high school, have two children with them, and anywhere from 50-90% have suffered abuse sometime in their lives (NAEH, 2012d; NCH, 2009e). Somewhere around 40% of their kids are 6 years old or younger (Burt, et al., 1999;

National Council on Family Homelessness, 2011a; NCH, 2009d;). Blacks are most likely overrepresented in the family homeless population compared to the overall national populace; Whites and Hispanics seem to be underrepresented (Burt et al., 1999).

### **Types of Homelessness: Urban vs. Rural**

Geographically, the majority – perhaps somewhere around three-quarters or more -- of the homeless population dwells in urban areas (NAEH, 2009c; NCH, 2009g). Nearly half may be found in cities of over 500,000 people, even though only about one-third of the nation's population stems from such metro areas; in other words, a disproportionate amount of the nation's homelessness is centered in its largest cities (NAEH, 2009c).

As far as we know, only about 10% live in areas that could be considered rural, although there is a strong suspicion that rural homelessness has been understated, perhaps greatly, due to the fact that someone who is homeless in a such an area is much more likely to be unsheltered or doubled-up due to the dearth of services outside of cities as well as the different cultural norms that frequently exist in rural areas (NAEH, 2011; Link, et al., 1994; Vissing, 1996). It is also believed by some that rural homelessness has been increasing (HUD, 2011a).

### **Stereotypes: Homeless People Are Lazy**

One popular conception is that the homeless are simply lazy; this is why they are struggling in the first place and what prevents them from getting off the streets. While there are obviously those who do not work for whatever reason -- and there are plenty of such people amongst the housed, it must be noted -- numerous studies have shown this clearly does not apply to the entire homeless population. In fact, many homeless people have jobs, they simply do not get paid sufficiently to maintain stable housing (Ehreneich,

2001; NCH, 2009c; Newman, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). In short, for many people homelessness is much more societal structural issue rather than some personal failing.

### **Stereotype: The Homeless Are Substance Abusers**

There are high levels of substance use amongst homeless persons, no doubt (Didenko & Pankratz, 2007; NCH, 2009h). But, some have questioned how different this usage is from virtually every other segment of society, except for the fact that a homeless person's use occurs in a much more public forum (Wasserman & Clair, 2010). There is also debate about whether substance abuse is what pushes people to the street or simply a way of coping when someone ends up there (Didenko & Pankratz, 2007; NCH, 2009h; Wasserman & Clair, 2010).

Regardless whether it is causal or symptomatic or really that different from use by the general population, it is undeniable that plenty of homeless persons do not have a substance problem. For example, in 2011, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) estimated 35% of all homeless people had substance abuse issues; the 2006 US Conference of Mayors Hunger and Homelessness Survey quantified homeless substance abuse at only 26%. In other words, both national studies from reputable organizations determined that on the low end more than 60% of the homeless population they investigated were *not* substance abusers. Simply put, the belief that most homeless people are stuck on the street due to substance abuse hardly matches the reality.

### **Stereotype: Homeless People Are Criminals**

There is a common characterization that most homeless people are criminals

and/or dangerous. This is an ignorant simplification akin to lumping every young male from a certain neighborhood or demographic with gang membership. There are many examples from the literature of homeless people who obey the law (Kozol, 1988; Newman, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). And while the homeless population does get arrested more often than the housed population, they tend to get arrested for crimes related to their not having a residence, namely offenses such as trespassing, public intoxication, or sleeping in public, the sorts of things that would not be a problem if one possessed reliable housing (Snow, Baker, & Anderson, 1989; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). In other words, they commit more crimes because in many instances their common daily activities are illegal simply by virtue of where they do them. So, while homeless persons are more likely to commit property crimes such as shoplifting or breaking into abandoned buildings, they are no more likely to perpetuate violence against someone than the general population (Snow, Baker, & Anderson, 1989). Such false characterizations only serve to further demonize an already marginalized population.

### **Stereotypes: Most Homeless People Are Mentally Ill**

There also exists a widespread belief that much of the homeless problem stems from mental illness. Here too the subject has been oversimplified. While it is probably true that homeless people suffer a higher rate of mental illness compared to the overall population, near half suffer no mental issues at all according to the studies that have found the *highest* incidence of occurrence (NAEH, 2013a). On the low end, a 2006 study by the US Conference of Mayors found only 16% of the homeless population was mentally ill. Other than again demonstrating the puzzle of homeless statistics in general,

it clearly makes the point that a significant percentage of the homeless population does not suffer a mental illness.

Furthermore, there is also debate regarding whether mental illnesses and depression are causal or symptomatic of homelessness (Mathieu, 1993; Snow, Baker, Anderson, & Martin, 1986; Vanderstaay, 1992; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). Of special note here is that many people in the United States suffering from mental illness still manage to maintain housing stability, so this condition is hardly deterministic. At any rate, attributing the majority of homelessness to mental illnesses is clearly far from valid.

### **Veterans**

Although quantifying the amount of veterans amongst the homeless population is beset with the same issues of inexactitude that fill the rest of the field, there is general agreement they are disproportionately represented on the streets. The most recent HUD point-in-time estimate (2012) figures veterans at 13% of the homeless population compared to about 7% of the overall United States adult population (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2013). Whatever the exact number, veterans clearly represent a special subset of homelessness. Most homeless vets are single, male, minority, live in urban areas, and suffer from substance abuse and/or mental illness (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2013). They are particularly susceptible to chronic homelessness.

### **Overview: A Snapshot of Homelessness**

Always bearing in mind the caveat that most of this is filled with uncertainty, in light of what has been discussed to this point we may now paint a picture of homelessness that is probably about as close to reality as possible to create.

First there is a segment of the homeless population, likely the majority, which

suffers some economic problem that predicates their homelessness for a short period of time, at the end of which they are able to pull themselves back off the streets and into housing, precarious though that shelter may be. Most family and youth homelessness falls within this subgroup (NAEH, 2012c). While obviously a simplification, this group's homelessness may be most directly attributed to a decline in real wages and low-income housing stock as well as a general increase in living expenses such as food, transportation, and medical care. This segment of the homeless population has seen some of the greatest growth in recent years (NCH, 2009b).

A second group rotates in and out of homelessness with a sort of regularity (NAEH, 2006a). This group includes those who are able, for whatever reason, to find housing for extended periods of time, only to eventually suffer some issue that brings them back to the streets. Many of those who are homeless due to substance abuse or mental illness fall within this grouping, as do many of those considered "chronic" under the letter of the law.

A final group remains homeless as a more or less permanent condition (NAEH, 2006a). Those who fit into this segment – which represents but a small fraction of the overall population -- probably come closest to fitting the traditional homeless stereotype. While there many different reasons someone might be living like this, there are likely higher than average rates of substance abuse and mental illness among this grouping. Many likely rotate in and out of shelters and the street as factors such as weather or food availability shift.

It seems likely that those in these latter two categories utilize a greater proportion of resources than accounted for by their proportion of the homeless population in general,

simply because they frequent the shelters wherein most of the resources dedicated to homelessness are concentrated.

The demographics of homelessness are skewed toward males and minorities. However, when the homeless person is part of a family, the overwhelmingly majority is headed by a female. Somewhere between one out of every four or five homeless people is a military veteran. Many homeless people work. While substance abuse and mental illness are present in higher percentages (we think) amongst the homeless population, there is debate about whether they are related symptomatically or causally. Likewise, homeless persons are more likely to get in trouble with the law for petty offenses related to their daily activities, but they pose no more threat of violence than the general population.

There are two basic strains theorizing the root causes of homelessness. The first approaches the problem as if it is something clinical that needs to be fixed. This leads to homelessness programs that focus on job training or addiction therapy and the oft-mentioned and revisited plan to “end homelessness in 10 years” or some other time frame hovering just over the horizon (HUD, 1994; NAEH, 2006a; USICH, 2010). The second approaches the issue as a structural one, where economic forces and societal inequities push the poor and vulnerable to the streets. While acknowledging that factors such as mental illness or lack of job skill can contribute to the immediate reason someone ends up homeless, those in this camp argue that if society were structured in a more equitable fashion these obstacles would not push as many people onto the streets and until we construct a more just social order the problem of homeless will never dissipate.



### **Homeless Youth: Who are They?**

The inexactitude surrounding the issue homelessness in general naturally impacts the more specific subject of youth without housing. The government's utilization of disparate definitions of homelessness has contributed to this situation. The Department of Housing and Urban Development has traditionally defined a homeless individual as someone lacking regular nighttime quarters or living in a shelter (NCH, 2009b). Meanwhile, the McKinney-Vento Act more specifically addressed youth homelessness and added to the HUD standards children who were abandoned, awaiting foster placement, migratory (defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965), facing the imminent loss of housing, or living, due to hardship, in motels, campgrounds, or doubled-up (Duffield, Heybach, & Julianelle, 2009). Obviously, this is a much more expansive view and therefore makes quantification more problematic.

Adding to the confusion, in early 2012, a new standard was introduced of what it meant to be homeless with HUD's release of its HEARTH (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing) "final rule" regarding how the Federal government was going to define homelessness. While keeping all of the past definitions alive, under the new metric many more people are now going to qualify as "officially homeless" in the eyes of the state (NAEH, 2010a). Perhaps most pertinent for the numbers I used in this study, the new definition – the standard which I utilized unless otherwise stated -- has increased the age of a youth from the traditional 18 years of age to 25 (HUD, 2011b).

In short, any quantitative measure of the scale of youth homelessness is impacted by which definition one uses, the type of person being considered, and when the study

was conducted. This is simply unavoidable.

These loose estimates of the homeless youth population are broken down into two basic subgroups. The first is what might be considered the stereotypical street urchin. These are the “unaccompanied” kids visible on city streets, especially around so-called “cruise areas” where younger people congregate (Witken, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2005). They have typically either ran or been expelled from dysfunctional homes, or released from state guardianship (jail or foster care) with no place to go (NAEH, 2006b; NCH, 2008). This population suffers an elevated risk of abuse, criminality, and substance problems (NAEH, 2009b; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). They often have a background of physical and/or sexual abuse and parents with substance issues (NCH, 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). The unaccompanied youth was, under the metrics of the previous standards upon which these numbers were based, typically between ages 15-17. The extension of the youth definition to 25 will necessitate a substantial reworking of all statistics here, but, given the focus of this study, the point they make, outdated or not, is still pertinent. They are just as likely to be male as female (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002). Studies disagree whether minorities are overrepresented while they mostly agree that LGBT youth are greatly overrepresented (NCH, 2009c; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004).

Estimates of the unaccompanied youth population are notoriously unreliable. Most sources that reference the subject do so with the caveat they have little clue if what they are stating is even close to accurate. That being said, there is a general sense that the numbers are significant, but that most children (as defined by the *old definition* it must be remembered) who experience homelessness do so for short periods of time before

returning to some form of shelter. In other words, they follow the typical pattern for family homelessness or they are temporary runaways who return to shelter after some time on the street (NAEH, 2012a).

On the low end, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2012b) cites an admittedly vague estimation that some 50,000 children sleep on the streets at night. Note, this only speculates about youth in the worst possible situation, not those in shelters or doubled-up in precarious housing, to say nothing of factoring in the new HEARTH designation. The National Coalition for the Homeless (2008), another well-respected national advocacy organization, accepts a figure in the vicinity of 1.7 million per year. Regardless of the exact size of the population, which seems rather beyond our current capacity to nail down with anything approaching specificity, it does seem safe to say that it is a sizable demographic with a high-risk for negative consequences from their homeless condition.

The second subgroup consists of those with a parent present. It is believed that families represent, *on the low-end*, around 35-40% of the nation's homeless population; some suspect this total to be greater than half (NAEH, 2012a; NCFH, 2011a; NCH, 2009d; Vissing, 1996; Weinreb, Rog, & Henderson, 2010). At any rate, we know the numbers are significant and seemed to be rising at the time of this study (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2011; NCFH, 2011b; NCH, 2009a, 2009d), although there were the ubiquitous contradictory statistics cited by others that suggested otherwise (NAEH, 2012a).

Families typically become homeless due to financial emergency or domestic violence (NAEH, 2012c, 2012d; NCH, 2009e; National Law Center on Homelessness

and Poverty, 2010a, 2010b). In cities homeless families are more often sheltered (have nighttime access to some structure intended for habitation) than unsheltered (HUD, 2010; Vissing, 1996). Many live doubled-up with other people (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2011; NCFH, 2011a; NCH, 2009d). They constitute a disproportionately high percentage of rural homelessness, where they are also much more likely to be unsheltered due to services shortages (Craft-Rosenberg et al., 2000; NAEH, 2009c; NCH, 2009b; Vissing, 1996). Most homeless families become re-housed within a few months of receiving assistance although they often suffer from chronic housing instability after making it from the streets (ICPH, 2011; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; NAEH, 2012c). Well over 50% of the time homeless families are headed by a single female (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2011; NAEH, 2012c; NCH, 2009b; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2010b). These mothers tend to be in their late twenties, did not finish high school, have two children with them, and anywhere from 50-90% have suffered abuse sometime in their lives (NAEH, 2012d; NCH, 2009e). Somewhere around 40% of their kids are six years old or younger (Burt, et al., 1999; NCFH, 2011a; NCH, 2009d;). Blacks are most likely overrepresented in the family homeless population compared to the overall national populace; Whites and Hispanics seem to be underrepresented (Burt et al., 1999).

### **How Does Being Homeless Impact a Child?**

Experiencing homelessness as a youth often has long-term consequences. Compared to housed children homeless kids are much more likely to get sick, lack food, suffer emotional and/or behavioral issues, and have witnessed serious acts of violence (Bassuk, et al., 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; NCH, 2008; Tower & White, 1989;

Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Not surprisingly, the impact of this often manifests academically (Attles, 1997; Hallett, 2012; Heflin & Rudy, 1991; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Newman, 1999; Stronge, 2000a). Children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to be developmentally delayed, suffer learning disabilities, score lower on standardized tests, and/or read below grade-level (Attles, 1997; Hallett, 2012; Newman, 1999; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge, 2000a). At least 10-20% do not even attend school and a greater percentage do not make it there on a regular basis; even when they make it class, they often suffer academically from high levels of mobility (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; NCFH, 2010; Stronge, 2000a). They frequently lack basic supplies and places to study (Eddowes & Butcher, 2000; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Newman, 1999; Penuel & Davey, 2000; Vissing, 2000). For unaccompanied youth all these issues must be faced without the help of an adult. Even when an adult is present there are obviously other concerns facing a homeless family that can quite understandably detract from a focus on academics. Ultimately, all of these obstacles lead to a very high attrition rate for school completion. While the numbers vary by study, it is accepted that living without housing can have a devastating impact on the ability to earn a diploma, leading to high levels of dropping out of school (Biggar, 2001; Gwadz et al, 2009; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; NCFH, 2011a).

### **A General History of Social Welfare Policy in the United States**

Historically, United States federalism has led to a strong tradition of decentralized social policy implementation (Barusch, 2002; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Skocpol, 1992). While this trend has weakened in past decades as the national government has expanded in scope and power – especially during the Great Depression and the 1960s – most social

policy in the US has been, and still is, filtered through the individual states (Barusch, 2002; Lipsky, 1980).

A second, perhaps even more influential tradition has been the preeminence of the classical liberal ideals of individualism, private property, and distrust of government within the mainstream American societal narrative (Chomsky, 1999; Zinn, 1980). Simply put, and regardless of the truth behind the claim, the United States has long prided itself on an individualistic, up-by-the-bootstraps self-image, one that has fused with strong native religious and capitalistic beliefs to form a sort of overarching nationalistic morality wherein individuals are supposed to be able to fend for themselves; to not be able to do so amounts to a sort of character flaw. When forced to acknowledge that there might be certain instances which call for some form of social welfare it is preferred that this welfare come from private sources (Barusch, 2002; Kyle, 2005; Lipsky, 1980; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Skocpol, 1992). This is the narrative that has informed the public opinion and politics by which governmental policy has been formulated during the past one hundred plus years. Not surprisingly, this system has not served all persons equally well.

Three important social policy realities have resulted from these historical trends. First, the United States has been slow to adopt the sort of wide-reaching governmental safety net seen in many of the other older-industrialized regions such as Western Europe (Barusch, 2002; Skocpol, 1992). Second, even when larger social policy efforts have been successful there has remained a troublesome issue of access based upon factors such as class, ethnicity, or wealth (Issel, 1987; Lipsky, 1980; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Skocpol, 1992). And third, successfully implemented policies are often under threat of asphyxiation by either neglect (denial of proper funding for instance) or fiat (simple

abolishment by law), especially if they are aimed at assisting populations at the margins of the dominant societal paradigm. Some question if many of these policies are even designed to assist the most vulnerable or if they are more utilized as mechanisms of control (Lipsky, 1980; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Skocpol, 1992).

In sum, the United States has hardly been on the vanguard of enacting wide-reaching social policy for the most vulnerable of its citizens (other than in a few special cases with extenuating circumstances, such as child and female labor laws). When it has enacted such legislation it has usually taken a concerted effort from a group of activists who are able to capture both public attention and sympathy, which they then use to wrangle concessions from well-placed politicians, who often have their own self-serving motivations (Barusch, 2002; Skocpol, 1992). In other words, when it comes to protective social policy, politics and access very much matter in determining who gets served and how exhaustively this service is delivered. Even when some gains are made there often lurks the specter of America's general distrust of government threatening to reverse any victories that might have been won.

A notable shift in the direction of federal social policy toward a return to less government provision for society's vulnerable has occurred over the past few decades. The backlash against efforts like the War on Poverty can be seen in the tax revolts of the 1970s and the Reagan administration's deregulation and intentional dismantlement of the public safety net (Barusch, 2002; Issel, 1987; Kozol, 2005). This trend has been sustained through both Republican and Democratic presidencies (i.e. welfare reform under Clinton) and remains alive to this day with the net result being much less government assistance available for the nation's most vulnerable populations (Barusch, 2002; Grinfeld, 2012;

Kent; 1996; Ng & Sim, 2012). Note, this does not mean the federal government has removed itself from the field of social policy; for the most part the bureaucracies dealing with social policy all still exist in some form or the other. The change has instead come in the scope, funding, and effectiveness of the safety net which has steadily provided less and less for those in need. It should come as no surprise the homeless population has increased as this has unfolded (Sparks & Sweeney, 2009).

### **A Brief History of United States Homeless Policy in General**

The history of how the government has dealt with homelessness has taken a similar tack to that of social policy in general. Until WWII, homelessness was an issue handled largely by private charitable organizations or locally financed poorhouses. The stigma against homelessness during this time period – with some exceptions, most notably during the Great Depression -- was strong. Basically, it was seen as a moral failing for someone to be in the position of needing help (Kusmer, 2002; Rossi, 1989; Stronge, 1992; Vissing, 1996).

Mirroring the general trend in the growth of the state in the post-war era, the federal government became much more involved with the issue in the past few decades. This became especially so in the 1980s in response to the growing ranks of homeless people on the streets of America – the numbers growing, of course, in relation to the dismantling of welfare policy -- as well as the changing nature of this population's demographics away from single men towards females with children (Rossi, 1989; Sparks & Sweeney, 2009).

This shift in focus put more emphasis on the federal role in alleviating homelessness – achieving some positive gains along the way -- but the efforts were still



influenced by the longstanding attitudes that have informed public policy, with the result that access and service are still influenced by one's societal position. To be blunt, there is hardly anyone more marginalized from mainstream society and worse positioned for having their voice heard by the federal bureaucracy than those who are homeless. To that end then, homeless policy has been beset with a lack of funding ever since the federal government became more involved in shouldering a share of the load; likewise, states, localities, and schools have often balked at implementing some of the national homeless policies and the federal government has frequently had neither the will nor power to enforce policy mandates on them (Biggar, 2001; Hallett, 2012; Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Miller, 2009). In other words, the pattern of decentralized social policy falling short of effectively serving the most marginalized population very much applies when considering federal homeless policy. The McKinney-Vento Act is the current policy by which the United States entreats with the issue of homeless youth, surely among the most vulnerable class of people in the country (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Miller, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Sparks & Sweeney, 2009; Stronge, 1992). Any study of McKinney-Vento cannot ignore this reality and where it situates the education of homeless children within the pecking order of public policy interests.

### **McKinney-Vento**

McKinney-Vento was created in 1987 as a response to the growing problem of homelessness in general, as well as its demographic shift from middle-aged single men toward more adolescents and families (Sparks & Sweeney, 2009; Stronge, 1992). It has since undergone many revisions and reauthorizations while serving as the primary government response to the dilemma of homelessness (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). There is

strikingly scant research concerning how effective this policy has been regarding helping homeless students procure educational success (Canfield, Teasley, Abell, & Randolph, 2012; Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010; Hendricks & Barkely, 2012; Miller, 2011). Given that many respected advocacy groups such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2011), the National Center for Homeless Education (Aratani, 2009), and the National Coalition for the Homeless (2009d) point towards increasing numbers of adolescents on the streets of the United States, combined with the generally acknowledged detrimental impact homelessness has on a student's learning and the negative influence this in turn has on one's life opportunities, it is obviously prudent to better inform ourselves of McKinney-Vento and the bureaucracy charged with its implementation.

This is especially timely now, as McKinney-Vento had recently undergone changes as part of the HEARTH Act which both expanded who is included in the homeless population count as well increased institutional (i.e. schools) obligations for ensuring these youth receive an adequate education (HUD, 2009). The literature on McKinney-Vento was scarce to begin with and the recent changes are simply too new to have been studied in great depth. This study looks to help fill this gap by investigating the policy aspect of the legislation, the practice it informed, and the impact it could have on the education of some of the most vulnerable children in this country.

Very little has been published regarding this issue considering that it critically impacts so many people nationwide (Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010), but the research that has been conducted paints a picture residing somewhere between success and failure. While there are obviously nuances to this, the basic scorecard on McKinney-

Vento, according to our incomplete present knowledge, suggests that it has increased the issue's profile and perhaps led to slight increases in student performance; however, this impact is hardly as pervasive and beneficial as would be desired (Miller, 2011).

In short, McKinney-Vento has done much to entreat with some of the issues involved with homeless youth such as making schools enroll students immediately even if they lack required paperwork and mandating that a homeless child may attend their original campus (often referred to as "school of origin"), with transportation provided, even if they have moved out of district. It has also given advocates and families clear guidelines and support in helping secure the rights of homeless students to a public education. Unfortunately, while these gains are definitely steps in the right direction, it is also generally accepted that McKinney-Vento is neither sufficiently funded nor implemented and despite having been in place for over two decades, homelessness still plays a devastating role in far too many students' academic lives.

The official Department of Education recordkeeping apparatus for the academic performance of homeless students under McKinney-Vento is housed at the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at the SERVE Center on the campus of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Basically, each state is responsible for gathering its own data on the homeless students they are responsible for serving and then sending it upward to the federal level. As explained on the official NCHE website:

States submit McKinney-Vento...data to ED using two methods during two periods. Most of the data are programmed and submitted in the Fall via the *EDFacts* data collection system, which populates tables in the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR). The CSPR also has questions or tables requiring

manual entry or comment before certification and submission via ED's Data Exchange Network. After the data are reviewed by the program offices, there is a revision period prior to recertification of the data in the Spring (NCHE, 2011).

The data gathered is limited to basic, easily quantifiable information such as attendance rates and scores on reading and math assessments. *Graduation rates are not tracked.* In the NCHE's own words (2011), their data is "obtained principally from Local Education Agencies (LEA) with McKinney-Vento subgrants", meaning it gets the bulk of its information from districts who have gone out of their way to seek federal funding (the subgrants), although they do collect some information from every LEA in the country. Needless to say, the data gathered is hardly exhaustive, very much par for the course as far as homeless statistics in general are concerned. Regardless of our lack of comprehensive data, what information we do have paints a picture where far too many homeless youth are unable to experience educational success. There is clearly much work left to be done.

### **A History of McKinney-Vento**

The 1970s and 80s witnessed a great shifting in the nature of the American economy, government, and society. Manufacturing jobs were being shipped overseas, replaced by lower pay service industry ones, thereby shrinking the opportunities for a person to comfortably raise a family in economic stability, especially without some sort of postsecondary education (Chomsky, 1999; Divine, et al., 2005; Hersh & Weller, 2003; Issel, 1987; Kozol, 1988; Roark, et al., 2009; White & McMahon, 1995). In a related phenomenon, real wage purchasing power steadily declined at the same time along with the standard of living for the lower classes (Bluestone & Harrison, 1988; Chomsky, 1999;

Divine, et al., 2005; Gittleman & Joyce, 1999; Gordon, 1996; Kozol, 1988; Leamer, 1996; Roark, et al., 2009; White & McMahon, 1995; Zinn, 1980).

Concurrent with these general economic trends, the federal government, behind the momentum of the Conservative Republican victory in the 1980 election, made a conscious philosophical shift away from making an effort at providing a far-reaching social safety net and towards so-called smaller, fiscally responsible government (Adams, 1987; Barusch, 2002; Chomsky, 1999; Divine, et al., 2005; Heclo, 2008; Roark, et al., 2009; Walton & Robertson, 1983; Zinn, 1980). Even if this actually meant more or less shifting where the feds directed resources towards priorities other than welfare type provisions rather than any true attempt at less spending, the net result was a decrease in the amount of money spent on many programs designed to meet the basic needs of the nation's poor (Chomsky, 1999; Divine, et al., 2005; Friedman, 1992, Roark, et al., 2009). Thus the early eighties saw a decline in the funding of general living assistance for the needy such as food stamps, as well as in the state effort to ensure sufficient quantities of affordable places to live for the nation's poor (Divine et al., 2005; Kozol, 1988; Roark, et al., 2009; Stoesz & Karger, 1993). This was then coupled with a concurrent shrinking supply of low-income housing stock for various reasons like gentrification (Kozol, 1988; McChesney, 1990; Shinn & Gillespie, 1994; Swanstrom, 1989).

Socially, the 1970s and 80s witnessed an upswing in the amount of children being raised in single parent homes (Heuveline, Timberlike, & Furstenberg, 2003; Usdansky, 2009; Song, Benin, & Glick, 2012). In a perhaps related phenomenon, the decades also witnessed a continued shift towards a more isolated existence marked by less vibrant social networks to provide private sources of assistance for those in need (Miller-Cribbs

& Farber, 2008; McKnight & Block, 2010; Offer, 2012; Putnam, 2000; Tigges, Browne, & Green, 1998).

All of these factors seemingly created a perfect storm to initiate the homelessness crisis facing the United States at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Naturally, there is debate in the literature about the extent and level of impact these factors have had on the overall homeless phenomenon (Fagan, 1995; Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010; Main, 1996). However one wants to quantify the issue and its base causes – if it is even possible to hope for such specificity when discussing humanity -- it seems hard to argue that some combination of these trends did not contribute to both an increase in the numbers of homeless people in the United States during the 1980s, as well as a shift in their demographic composition away from mostly single males with what might be considered some sort of pathology (e.g., mental illness or substance abuse) toward a great increase in women and families.<sup>1</sup> The lack of job opportunities providing living wages combined with the diminishing levels of government benefits and low income housing supply led to an increased population of people unable to find and afford steady housing. Likewise the literature is clear that it is more difficult to economically survive in a single parent family, increasing the chances that an economic hardship such as losing a job will push a

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<sup>1</sup> Along with near countless other causes no doubt; homelessness, being a human condition/creation, is incredibly complex. I am under no impression that I have presented an exhaustive case for why homelessness increased in the form and numbers it did during this time period. However, I do believe a solid case can be made that the reasons listed here were primary drivers of what was occurring.

family to the street (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Gittleman & Joyce, 1999; Renwick & Bergmann, 1993). When these sorts of problems – be they loss of transportation due to car problems or an incapacitating illness – arose in the past, the existence of more vibrant community ties enabled greater numbers of people to survive such episodes without being forced to the vicissitudes of the streets. As American society became more isolated such issues more frequently had to be handled alone, increasing the likelihood that they would create an economic crisis that could lead to losing one's shelter.

To paint a simple picture then, in the 1970s and 80s well paying jobs and affordable housing became more difficult to find. At the same time government largesse became purposefully more difficult to procure, two parent households with their greater financial security became scarcer on a societal level, and the organic safety net of the community was dissolving. Not surprisingly, the numbers and nature of the homeless population changed during this time period and people began to take notice (Kyle, 2005; Rossi; 1989).

Advocates calling for a response to the problem organized and began putting pressure on the government to do something about it. There was also a shift in the conception of the root of homelessness, from that of a personal pathology toward more of a societal structural issue (Kyle, 2005; Murphy & Tobin, 2011). The Reagan administration, believing that homelessness was an issue most appropriately handled at the local level created the Federal Interagency Task Force on Food and Shelter for the Homeless in 1983 to coordinate community and state responses to the issue; emergency money was also made available to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to distribute to those in need (Foscarinis, 1996).

Despite these efforts, homelessness was not going away and the advocates kept pressing their case. Following the creation of prominent advocacy organizations such as the National Coalition for the Homeless (1981) and the National Alliance to End Homelessness (1983), there were now entities with the ability to coordinate organized lobbying efforts to push for a stronger government response (NAEH, 2013; NCH, 2011).

Contributing to the effort were several protests led by groups such as the Community for Creative Non-Violence and individuals like Mitch Snyder that received national media coverage (Kyle, 2005; Levison, 2004; NCH, 2010). Eventually the cause began gathering traction in Washington, leading to the attempted passage of the Homeless Persons Survival Act in 1986 (NCH, 2006). While only parts of this bill made it through the legislative process, it seemed as if the possibility of a more comprehensive federal homeless policy was on the horizon.

This proved true in July of the next year when Reagan reluctantly signed into law the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act after several earlier attempts to pass like-minded legislation died in committee (H.R. 286--100th Congress: Homeless Persons' Survival Act of 1987, 1987; NCH, 2006; S. 2608--99th Congress: Homeless Persons' Survival Act of 1986, 1986). Originally termed the Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act, it had been renamed after Senator Stewart McKinney, a Connecticut Republican who had long championed the cause of homelessness and recently died after catching pneumonia while sleeping outside the White House in one of the advocacy protests indicative of this period (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2011).

The phrasing of the McKinney Act made clear its lofty objectives: "A bill to



provide urgently needed assistance to protect and improve the lives and safety of the homeless, with special emphasis on families and children” (H.R. 558--100th Congress: Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). Most pertinent for our purposes here, Title VII of the McKinney Act established the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY) to specifically address the education of homeless children (NCH, 2006). More to the point, it moved in the direction of guaranteeing homeless students access to school -- something they had been routinely denied due to their frequent lack of records and the obvious problem of a permanent residency -- by requiring states to “review and revise residency requirements for the enrollment of homeless students” (Markward & Biros, 2001; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; NCHE, 2012b). This was an important step in the direction of the “school of origin” guarantee intended to stave off the academic and social degradations of being a highly mobile student as families bounced around in different housing situations (Biggar, 2001). It also established a formula grant system by which the federal government could channel funds to the states, who would in turn issue subgrants to local education agencies (LEAs) for use in educating homeless students, as well as mandating states create a coordinator to promote the cause (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; NCH, 2007). If nothing else, it was a starting point for addressing this growing problem.

Unfortunately, despite the rhetoric of “providing urgently needed assistance” the McKinney Act seemed to fall short of the mark in these initial stages, at least as far as homeless students were concerned, for within only a few months of its passage (December, 1987), the National Coalition for the Homeless and a handful of others brought a lawsuit against the Department of Education (ED) for noncompliance

(Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). The ED settled the suit out of court early the next year, minimally promising to send information to the various state education agencies urging them to apply for formula grants (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). It would not be the last time the legal system would be used to force compliance with the intent of McKinney, nor the final out of court settlement.

The next amendment to McKinney directly involving education came in 1990. It placed more direct pressure on states to clear up the still persistent issue of school attendance, put more focus on educational success once children were enrolled, mandated equal access to all services available to housed students, permitted more flexibility in how federal money could be used, and increased the amount of actual appropriations (Biggar, 2001; Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Helm, 1992; NCH, 2006; NCHE, 2012b; Rafferty, 1995). In a significant move that demonstrated a recognition of the need for a more academic focus to the policy, the 1990 amendments also declared that 50%-65% of the funding must be applied to “direct services” such as tutoring or other educational programs; no more than 50% could be used for related services such as transportation (Rafferty, 1995). Obviously there was an understanding that simply getting the kids to school was insufficient; it was at least as important what happened once they were through the doors.

The 1990 amendments also signaled an important change in the perception of the McKinney Act in the eyes of many education providers and their advocacy groups. Back when the Act was first proposed, it had received resistance from groups like the National Association of State Boards of Education and the Chief State School Officers due to not unfounded fears over the potential of another unfunded mandate; by 1990 these groups

were neutral or supportive of the issue (Alker, 1992). Likewise, the recently formed National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Children and Youth was now in a strategic position to advocate for a more effective policy (Alker, 1992).

Despite these changes, there was still much to be done. Frustrated by the continued evidence of the lack of access, in 1992 the National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP) and several homeless families took the District of Columbia to court over the issue. The groundbreaking suit, *Lampkin v. District of Columbia*, demonstrates both the general process by which McKinney-Vento has evolved with pressure from the bottom upwards, as well as the potential for reforming action when various community organizations join forces to advocate on behalf of homeless students.

A 1990 report on the District of Columbia school district's compliance with McKinney brought to light that there were still systemic issues with children being denied access to school. In response a disparate array of community organizations attempted to work with the school district to rectify these problems. This community effort naturally included traditional homeless advocacy organizations, but also groups as varied as the Girl Scouts and a local Jewish Community Center. The District responded to this communal outpouring with a couple of programs to address the transportation concerns that seemed to be at the heart of the issue in this particular case. The District's efforts were soon abandoned, however, and in 1992 *Lampkin v. District of Columbia* (1994) was filed in federal court (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

The lawsuits were initially dismissed at the district level. However, the District of Columbia Circuit of Appeals overturned the decision, determining that the McKinney Act

did have enforceable rights, referring to it as a:

Broad congressional policy that ‘each State educational agency ... assure that each child of a homeless individual and each homeless youth have access to a free, appropriate public education ... [and that] homelessness alone ... not be sufficient reason to separate students from the mainstream school environment (Lampkin v. District of Columbia, 1994).

The case was thereby returned to the lower court, which declared the District must do a better job identifying, enrolling, and providing transportation for their homeless students (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

It was here that the case took on national significance. For even though the Appellate ruling only officially established precedent in a small region of the United States, it intimated the direction the courts were heading with their interpretation of the law and therefore impacted similar suits elsewhere in the country as well as providing tangible evidence to schools concerning their obligation to serve homeless students (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Meanwhile, the educational component of McKinney was amended once again in 1994 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Continuing the trend of increased obligations and incentives for compliance, it also expanded services to include pre-K children and attempted to facilitate an expansion of general awareness of the issue (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; NCHE, 2012b). Still, if it might be said that progress was being made in the sense that at least policy was evolving to address emerging best practices for serving homeless students, repeated studies and reports from the decade clearly demonstrated that the effort was falling far short of

ensuring “urgently needed assistance to protect and improve the lives and safety of the homeless, with special emphasis on families and children” (H.R. 558--100th Congress: Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act; 1987). More specifically, obstacles such as a lack of transportation and record transfers were cited, as well as systemic difficulties in procuring special services (Foscarinis & McCarthy, 2000). In other words, the policy was evolving, but practice lagged behind.

The next round of updates to the educational components of the law came as part of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, about a year after Bruce Vento’s name – the recently deceased Minnesota Congressman had long supported homeless causes -- was added to create the now familiar McKinney-Vento Act (NCH, 2006). As with many other aspects of education in general, NCLB greatly impacted how the recently renamed McKinney-Vento Act influenced the ways schools systemically interacted with homeless students.

Reacting yet again to reports of consistent lack of access, and consulting with advocacy groups about best practices, the NCLB reauthorization mandated several new obligations to the states and their LEAs: transportation must be guaranteed, enrollment made immediate with questions to be worked out after the fact, school of origin rights were solidified, and the practice of segregating homeless students from others based upon their housing status banned (ED, 2004; Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Quint, 1994). It also continued the trend toward greater focus on academics rather than simply getting the child through the school door, replacing the phrase student “performance” with “academic achievement” as a primary objective of the reauthorized act (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013).

Perhaps most significantly, the Act now mandated that every LEA in the nation, whether they received subgrant funding or not, must designate a homeless liaison to coordinate their district's response to the issue locally (ED, 2004). One of the stated primary functions of the district liaison was "collaborating and coordinating" with "local and school personnel" to help homeless students find success at school (ED, 2004, p.10). There was now, at least theoretically, an advocate for the homeless student in every district across the nation. It seems undeniable that this policy change alone could not help but increase awareness and service of the issue. And even if the overall impact of NCLB remained, at best, up for debate, it cannot be argued that the law shone a spotlight on the issues of statistics, demographics, and accountability; at the very least it forced many schools to look more closely at all of their subpopulations (Dee & Jacob, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006).

To summarize the past two plus decades of McKinney-Vento then, the policy grew as a response to the changing nature and increasing numbers of homelessness in the early 1980s due to several economic, governmental, and societal factors. The first comprehensive federal response to homelessness, the Stewart B. McKinney Act was enacted in 1987, taking on the name of Bruce Vento in 2000, thereby becoming the now familiar McKinney-Vento. Part of this overarching law to deal with the many facets of homelessness was the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY). EHCY has been reauthorized and amended in 1990, 1994, and most recently in 2001 as part of No Child Left Behind. Each reauthorization has strengthened the obligations LEAs have for providing access to all aspects of education for homeless students and reporting progress back to the state, as well as providing some level of funding to support

this effort. The trend has also been in the direction of removing obstacles to enrollment and establishing a definite preference for students receiving services in their school of origin.

There has also been a push toward providing more academic support for homeless students, at least in the way the policy is written. Likewise, the trend has been toward encouraging more collaboration between schools and other service providers (i.e. shelters) to better serve the educational needs of homeless students. The 2001 mandate that each LEA designate a local homeless liaison with prescribed statutory obligation was also an important milestone in the policy.

### **The HEARTH Act**

McKinney-Vento has most recently been reauthorized as part of a larger federal homelessness policy effort, the HEARTH Act. While the bulk of HEARTH – as with McKinney-Vento -- concerns wider homelessness issues in general, it impacts educational systems by expanding the definition of who is considered a homeless youth in the eyes of the law as well as mandating that institutions receiving federal funding better coordinate their activities in order to serve the academic needs of youth within the system (HUD, 2009; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2011; NAEH, 2012e).

Specifically, HEARTH mandates that organizations applying for federal funds to deal with homelessness collaborate with local school districts in the identification of homeless students and show they are sheltering these students as close as possible to their schools of origin. They must also establish policies consistent with McKinney-Vento as well as designate a staff person responsible for ensuring that children are enrolled in

school and have access to appropriate programs like Head Start (HUD, 2009; NAEHCY, 2011).

Regarding the expansion of who is now labeled homeless in the eyes of the government, HEARTH considers homeless those who are at risk of losing their housing in the next 14 days (the previous standard had been 7 days). It also adds a new category of homelessness: families with children or unaccompanied youth who are “unstably housed.” People fitting this description are families with children or unaccompanied youths up to 24 years old:

Who have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in the last 60 or more days, have had two or more moves in the last 60 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed because of disability or multiple barriers to employment (NAEH, 2012e).

In essence HEARTH has created new mandates requiring that the various organizations serving homeless youth -- shelters and housing authorities for example -- work collaboratively with schools to find, enroll, and serve the expanded rolls of homeless youth. From the wording of HEARTH it appears the burden rests more with the service providers to work with the schools than vice versa, although there is an obvious implicit obligation on schools to comply with these efforts as well.

Considering the history of federal homeless education policy has more or less been a series of broad mandates followed by noncompliance followed by lawsuits or advocate-pushed amendments to achieve both clarity and compliance, it stands a good chance the exact details of what this collaboration is going to look like lay further down the road. Hopefully, this study has offered a measure of clarity by investigating what



sorts of interpretations and collaborations are occurring by those implementing the policy in the field.

### **McKinney-Vento Overview**

The McKinney-Vento Act was created to address a growing crisis of homeless families and children in the mid 1980s. Since then it has gone through several iterations, each time resulting in a greater focus on helping children succeed at school. Despite several gains in this direction, most notably in the area of access, it is largely unknown how well homeless students are doing now that they have made it through the classroom doors. What we do know is that homelessness seems to have a negative impact on educational achievement and despite more children gaining admittance, many still seem to be struggling and this holds chilling implications for both their personal futures and society in general.

Despite the fact that McKinney-Vento is more or less the only large-scale organized societal response to this matter, very little is known concerning how well it is serving the educational needs of homeless children. There is certainly a lack of understanding regarding how the people implementing the policy interpret what they are doing or even how it is being enforced. There is likewise a fissure in our grasp on how it is impacting the lives of students and schools, especially as told through the perspective of the people actually living the experience. This study looks to rectify this oversight, first by taking a critical look at McKinney-Vento itself and second by interacting with those who implement and are supposed to be served by the policy.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study takes the form of a critical policy analysis of the McKinney-Vento Act, the guiding policy by which the federal government deals with the education of homeless youth. I chose a qualitative ethnographic research design for the purpose of bringing to life how this policy works and the effect it has on the humans it touches. I wanted to tell this story through the perspective of those who are living with the policy; I sought to understand how those involved make sense of McKinney-Vento and how this influenced their behavior (Crotty, 1998; Fetterman, 2010; Maxwell, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In particular the focus was on the intersection of policy and practice, bureaucratic implementation, and how this affected what happens in schools and the lives of homeless youth.

Based on an extensive examination of the literature I created the above historiography<sup>2</sup> of the McKinney-Vento Act to serve as the context for the study. I then had conversations with knowledgeable informants and investigated archival data to learn how this policy was understood and implemented, and the impacts this was having on homeless youth and the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy created to serve them. I paid especial attention to the assumptions, concerns, understandings, interpretations, biases,

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<sup>2</sup> The writing of history based upon a critical examination of sources.

and insights the people charged with implementing McKinney-Vento held about the policy, including their understandings concerning recent changes.

The bulk of the data came from a series of discussions with key informants (Patton, 2000) knowledgeable of either McKinney-Vento or the education of homeless youth. I then compared these findings with the literature and statistics on the subject as well as the wording of the policy itself and the aforementioned historiography. Informants situated close to homeless youth in their daily lives and my own personal experiences as a participant observer (Patton, 2000) as a volunteer at a shelter, personal friend to those on the streets, or through the various times my own residence has served as a sort of flophouse, added perspective to the study. I then organized the data through an open systems model in order to report my findings and recommendations.

### **Settings**

The study mainly took place with participants from four locations, Green Heart Homeless Shelter, Blue Sky High School, the central administrative building of the LEA of which Blue Sky is a part, and an administrative arm of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Each location was purposefully selected for its connection either to McKinney-Vento or the education of homeless youth. All of the locations are in Central Texas. All names are pseudonyms.

***Green Heart Homeless Shelter:*** The homeless shelter where I volunteered is located in a densely populated, industrialized urban neighborhood. This is very obviously a low-income area, with a near constant police presence. The shelter is comprised of several buildings surrounding a large, architecturally pleasant courtyard. There were typically hundreds of people moving within the complex whenever I was there, creating a

sense of constant commotion and activity. The grounds are literally bisected by railroad tracks as well, adding to the energetic atmosphere anytime a train rolls through.

Green Heart serves over one thousand people on a daily basis; between one-fourth to one-third of these are children. The shelter provides services ranging from simply offering a meal, shower, and safe place to sleep to comprehensive substance rehabilitation and transitional housing. Dozens of public and private service providers maintain a presence at the shelter from the YMCA to the Department of Veterans Affairs. There is a large wing of the shelter, separated by access-controlled gates from the general population, dedicated to families with children. Within this section are daycare and playground facilities, as well as a small library and reading room. It is at these latter two places where I spent the bulk of my time volunteering.

***Blue Sky High School:*** This high school is located in an upper middle class suburban area surrounding the larger city containing the Green Heart Shelter. This particular high school is the lowest income, most ethnically diverse school in the entire district. It also possesses the highest percentage of homeless students. It serves grades 9-12 with a total student population of around 2000; of these around 30% are considered low SES.

***Blue Sky High School's Central Administration:*** The leadership arm of this LEA serves a populous and geographically large district. There are multiple high schools within their domain, ranging from suburban to rural in nature, although the latter is becoming much less pronounced and seems to be disappearing along with population growth and a corresponding demographic shift. The majority of the district population students is White and enjoys above average income levels. This, too, has been changing

in recent years, shifting in a direction toward lesser income and more minorities. Like much of Central Texas it has experienced continuing rapid growth over the past decade.

***Texas Education Agency:*** TEA is the organization charged with overseeing school districts throughout the state. With leadership located in Austin, TEA is split into twenty smaller units, each covering a regional section of Texas. It is the organizational structure through which the state government operates its public school system.

### **Participants**

In accordance with qualitative methodology, my research partners were purposefully selected (Maxwell, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Weiss, 1994). I frequently refer to them throughout this paper as “research partners” instead of the more traditional “participants” to highlight my belief that I was less an outsider coming to investigate and more an equal interacting with a fellow human in the pursuit of knowledge. Each partner was well placed to possess knowledge about homeless education not known by the average person. I had conversations with four adults at different levels of the public education bureaucracy charged with implementing McKinney-Vento, as well as another outside of this bureaucracy who possessed considerable experience working with homeless students. All participation was voluntary and each provided explicit permission in compliance with Institution Review Board (IRB) protocol. I acted as a participant observer during the process, interacting with my research partners as we uncovered new knowledge together.

***TEA McKinney-Vento Administrator:*** this person has worked with McKinney-Vento and TEA in an administrative capacity for well over a decade. In order to protect her identity I shall provide no more details than this.

***District Homeless Liaison:*** every district in Texas is required by law to designate a liaison to deal with all the issues surrounding homeless students within their particular district. This person is responsible for ensuring the district is abiding by the McKinney-Vento mandates. This participant had over a decade worth of experience in the social work field; at the time of this study she had just recently become the district's liaison.

***Campus Principal:*** this person has been running this particular school for several years and has noted a much greater homeless presence there in the past couple years. The principal is responsible for ensuring that the campus is compliant with McKinney-Vento.

***Reading Program Director at the Shelter:*** this person has several years experience working as a college librarian as well as designing and running a reading and crafts program for homeless youth at the Green Heart Shelter. During this time she has interacted with literally hundreds of homeless children and parents.

### **Interviews**

The use of interviewing is common in qualitative studies (King & Horrocks, 2010; Maxwell, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with my partners to gather the rich data needed for ethnography (Fetterman, 2010; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The process was actually much more along the lines of having back and forth discussions with my partners about their experiences and the realities of educating homeless children. The goal was to engage in deep conversations and observations in order that I could learn the stories, perspectives, and understandings surrounding McKinney-Vento.

I had two in-depth conversations with the district liaison and a single similar talk with the principal and TEA advocate. I held numerous short informal chats with the

reading director over the course of several months, as well as one longer, more formal conversation near the end of my data collection. True to the ethnographic method, the discussions were a “mixture of conversation and embedded question” (Fetterman, 2010, p.41). I fully transcribed each talk after it was completed, using the information discovered to modify my next round of investigation. Immediately afterward, while the experience was still fresh, I took field notes to record anything else of pertinence.

I went into each dialogue with a template of open-ended guiding questions (see appendix A for an example of the protocols). There were slightly different templates for each of my partners; they occupied different roles within the educational structure and the questioning needed to reflect this fact. As is typical in ethnographic methodology, the template allowed ample flexibility for exploration of topics my participants felt were important or arose during the course of the conversation (Fetterman, 2010). My desire was to capture the thoughts, ideas, and stories of those with experience in the world I have attempted to document, much in the same way as described by Merrill and West (2009), not steer them in whatever directions I thought the discussion should go. I acknowledge, of course, that a certain amount of steering likely occurred, as I was, and am, the ultimate tool through which this research was filtered. Still, I attempted to keep this bias to a minimum by not arbitrarily sticking to a script I created if the story was naturally flowing in a different direction. Additionally, open-ended questions lent themselves to gathering “thick descriptions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 28) of the beliefs, values, and culture surrounding McKinney-Vento and this type of rich data is the foundation upon which ethnography is built.

The discussions each lasted between one and two hours and were held at locations convenient to my partners. In an effort to consistently self-reflect on how my study was proceeding as I conducted my research, my thoughts on the experience were recorded in a journal immediately after each conversation was completed (Banegas, 2012; Patton, 2002). I personally transcribed the dialogues in the next few days following their recording, in order that the proceedings were still fresh in my mind and could be used to guide the future direction of my research.

The discussions with the reading director took place over several months at the homeless shelter either before or after we had worked with the children. They consisted of a running dialogue about the issues surrounding the children and observations of the homeless shelter as we were going through the experience. This seemed effective for getting a more in depth examination of her perspective, one made possible due to the regular access I had with her as part of my volunteer work. Notes were made in my journal following these talks as with the others. The more formal conversation occurred after I had gathered the rest of my data and was in the middle of the analysis stage; this seemed fitting as she was the person with the most direct experience working with the homeless youth who were the main focus of the policy I was studying. I could therefore use the opportunity to examine my findings with her and discuss what they might mean.

Of course, all of my partners were voluntary and provided written permission (see Appendix B) for inclusion in the project. As part of the written permission I included details to ensure that everyone understood what the study was about and that they were free to excuse themselves at any point they wished. I also included contact numbers to community-based counseling services in the off chance anyone should need to avail



themselves of such as a result of their participation. As a rule I was always upfront concerning the nature and purpose of my research from my first contact with any potential information source.

### **Other Data Sources**

Following the qualitative research method, multiple data sources were collected over the course of the study (Maxwell, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In addition to the conversations, which served as my primary informational source, I also utilized statistics from national, state and local data sets to develop my analysis of the policy. The national data on McKinney-Vento is stored at the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at the SERVE Center on the campus of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Via the *EDFacts* system states submit figures to the NCHE where it is compiled in the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR). State McKinney-Vento data is kept at the Charles E. Dana Center on the campus of the University of Texas-Austin. Local information is available at the administrative offices of the district to which Blue Sky High School belongs. In addition to these educational records, information about the Green Heart Homeless shelter was also consulted during the analysis. Of course, all personal identifiers remained hidden whenever I reported on this data. I also referred to the McKinney-Vento and HEARTH Acts during this study, both of which are readily available in the public domain.

The entire time I was working on this project I was also journaling about my experiences while volunteering at a homeless shelter, working as a classroom teacher in a high-poverty school with several homeless students, and intermingling with my study partners (Banegas, 2012; Patton, 2002). I actually began this researcher's journal the first

time I volunteered at Green Heart. In it I recorded my observations and feelings about what I witnessed. I added to this journal topical experiences I have had dealing with the issue of homelessness as a teacher in the high poverty school where I teach, as well as those I had while interacting with my study participants as I forged relationships with them in preparation for my interviews.

I also held short phone conversations with a liaison from another school district with a reputation for serving its homeless students very effectively, as well as various members of homeless advocacy organizations, mainly for the purposes of clearing up nuances of the law. In addition I had a few talks with a high school counselor who had acted as a campus McKinney-Vento expert (basically she was her school's contact for the district liaison) for several years in the mid-2000s. All of these sources were located in the same general geographical area as my main study participants.

### **Historiography**

A historiography is “the narrative presentation of history based on a critical examination, evaluation, and selection of material from primary and secondary sources and subject to scholarly criteria” (Nichols, et al., 2000). I created this historiography and wove it into my literature review (see above) from the actual McKinney-Vento document itself, as well as from my investigations into the thinking behind, and events surrounding, all of the Act's different iterations. This history of McKinney-Vento served as a sort of baseline for my research and analysis. I added to this an extensive look at the literature concerned with the policy, the education of homeless youth, and the issue of homelessness in general over the past thirty years. The ultimate product was a critical history of the Act, what was being written and debated about it at different time periods,

and how this impacted how the policy evolved and has been enacted over its years of existence. This historiography served as a contextual piece as I attempted to understand and analyze McKinney-Vento's intent and purpose and the effect this has on the education of homeless youth.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I adopted a hybrid theoretical construct through which I filtered the analysis of my data and McKinney-Vento. This hybrid included critical theory, postmodernism, and the ethic of caring. Critical theory denies that one can be intellectually and emotionally detached from the subject one is researching (Noddings, 1998; Patton, 2002). I firmly reject the possibility and morality of striving for cold objectivity when dealing with the complexity of people. I am also very much concerned with human dignity and freedom and how society may be reformulated so that more people may reap their liberating rewards in the real world, not just the academic theoretical one (Freire, 1994; Goodlad, 1997; McMannon, 1997; Noddings, 1998; Wheatley, 2002). In essence, my study critically examined McKinney-Vento in order to determine how well it was serving its purpose, which I interpreted as helping homeless youth more successfully navigate their way to an education that will lead to a greater chance at having a more self-actualized, dignified, and free life. If I found it was not living up to this objective I felt it my responsibility to call attention to this and propose suggestions for improvements; anything less would have been unethical because this policy directly affected the lives of human beings.

Postmodernism was also an inescapable part of the lens through which I viewed this project because I reject the concept of a universal, generalizable truth, instead

looking to make sense of a situation as it exists within the its own reality and context (Noddings, 1998; Patton, 2002). I also reject the proposition that I could have researched this subject without bringing my own contextualized understanding to whatever I did, just as I understood that each of my research partners was also subject to the same subjectivities based upon their own surroundings, backgrounds, and understandings. In essence, I believe that all human beings are influenced in countless ways by their personal histories, social paradigms, internal hopes, fears, confusions, and understandings, as well as by the mood and dynamics of whatever moment they are experiencing. And that each of these individuals and their own contexts impact each other in incalculable ways whenever people are brought together as happened when I interacted with other humans whilst gathering my data. I thereby acknowledge and openly admit that this unavoidably impacted my research, analysis, and presentation. There was simply no way around it.

Bringing all of this together and acting as a kind of target and potential solution to my critical perspective in particular, was the strong ethos of caring I attempt to wear on my sleeve and infuse in my being. Buber (1965) refers to affirming and encouraging the best in others. Noddings (1998) talks about the need for trust and the building of positive relationships. Greenleaf (1977) discusses the sanctity of serving others because such is the moral purpose of a humane, caring person. I subscribe to all of these tenets and believe that it is by caring for others and collectively working to ensure their needs are met that society may become a better place for more people. I believe, along with Dewey (1916), that public schools play a large role in serving this end in a democratic society. Like Buber, I believe they should be places that encourage and affirm the best of our

collective humanity. Like Noddings, I believe that trust and positivity are critical for this to occur. And, like Greenleaf, I utterly believe that if we ever want to build a more just, humane, and dignified society our institutions must become servants of the people whose lives they operate on at an ever-increasing rate. By this standard I assessed McKinney-Vento and those charged with its implementation. By this lens I viewed, analyzed, and reported what I found.

### **Data Analysis**

My analysis was hermeneutic in nature because, in essence, my observables were gathered in the form of a narrative as related by my research partners. I engaged in conversations about their experiences with McKinney-Vento and attempted to make sense of them (Noddings, 1998). This was very similar, in my view, to looking at a historical document such as a diary and trying to place it within a larger context. It was also appropriate for analyzing the text of the act itself, as well as its surrounding history.

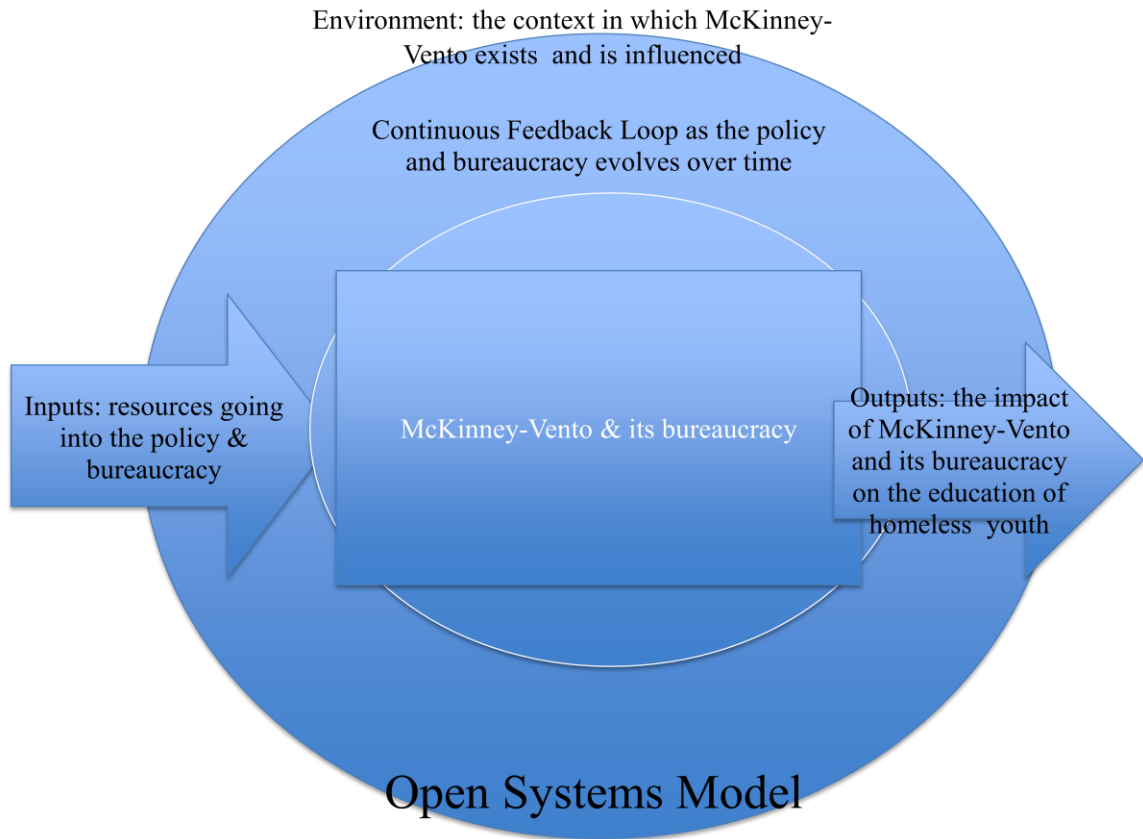
I also felt drawn to heuristics (Patton, 2002). During my research and analysis I attempted to consciously remain open to new concepts and fully embraced that the direction of my study was open to change as the data emerged. Indeed, it did evolve as the process unfolded. I was seeking themes, congruencies, incongruencies, and patterns within the data in order to forge understanding about how McKinney-Vento was being interpreted and how this impacted the people the policy was intended to serve.

My initial step in data analysis began when I became involved with the subject of homelessness as a participant observer at the shelter (Merriam, 2009). This became more formalized when I started recording my experiences and thoughts in a reflective journal as well as began engaging in dynamic conversations with my participants. The next

important analytic step occurred when I personally transcribed the interviews (King & Horrocks, 2010). By performing my own transcriptions I also become more familiar with my data, thereby aiding in the analytic process (King & Horrocks, 2010).

I initially sorted my data by hand, open coding in the margins of my transcripts to construct my categories. I then named the categories and placed appropriate data into separate computer files based on which category it fit. From these categories I developed the larger themes I used to compose my study's narrative.

I coded the data in the first and second cycle method as detailed by Saldaña (2009). I used structural coding in the first cycle as I gathered major categories and themes from my interview data. Structural coding is particularly effective for studies with "multiple partners...semi-structured data gathering protocols...and exploratory investigations" (Saldaña, 2009, p.66-67). During the second cycle I employed pattern coding (Saldaña, 2009). Pattern coding is effective for the development of significant themes, rules, and explanations within investigations of social networks like the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy (Saldaña, 2009).



**Figure 2** The Open Systems Model

*The Open Systems Model is an analytic tool that enables us to break down a complex organization into smaller pieces in order to take a closer look at what is happening with its individual parts. Major components of the model include the inputs that go into the organization, the outputs it produces, the surrounding environment which provides the influencing context for everything that occurs, as well as a constant feedback loop to demonstrate that organizations are not static, but constantly evolving. The middle box, the through puts, represents the organization that is being studied in detail. This is where most of my investigation took place.*

### **The Open Systems Model**

The open systems model allows for an examination of the how McKinney-Vento interacts with the educational system from bottom to top. While concepts such as hermeneutics, heuristics, and the ethic of caring are the filters by which I intuitively process most everything I intellectually interrogate, the open systems model is what I used to organize, visualize, and present the process and flow of the life of the policy as it travels through the system in a functional way. This gives the reader and myself a schema outlining the life of the policy. It also presents the reader with a macro level perspective of the McKinney-Vento Act -- the unit of analysis for this study -- and the structure that turns this policy of educating homeless youth into the reality acting upon people's lives (Ballantine, 1997). Using this model I looked at the *through puts* (the micro level implementation of McKinney-Vento bureaucracy) charged with accomplishing a certain goal (assisting homeless students achieve educational success), the environment the organization operated within (political, stereotypical, and economical realities surrounding homelessness and public education), the inputs the organization had to work with (the people, money, and laws working on, and for, McKinney-Vento), and the outputs the organization produced (student successes or failures). In essence, the open systems model is an organizational tool that allows for an isolated and detailed inspection of each level of McKinney-Vento, from its design and implementation to the impact it had on the youth who are to lead us into the future.

### **Critical Policy Ethnography**

Ultimately my analysis and final output took the form of a critical policy ethnography. Here I followed a path laid out by Dubois (2009), who interprets the



purpose of a critical policy ethnography in the following manner well aligned with what I produced:

Two main premises lead researchers to carry out an in-depth fieldwork in order to analyze the concrete practices through which a policy is enforced in everyday life...The first consists in positing that subordinate officers in administrations can play a key role in defining a policy. Not only do they implement decisions taken at the top level, but they also make decisions themselves on individual cases. Even though they do not make major decisions, they can always use their discretion in the orientation of their practices and the definition of their attitude. Public policy is in fine the sum of these decisions, practices and attitudes. The second premise consists in considering that a policy principally exists through the experience of its recipients. For pupils and parents, the sick or the unemployed, education, health, or employment policies are more significant as places, agents and concrete situations that have tangible effects on their social life than as laws and budgets (p. 221).

In other words, in order to gain a better understanding of how a particular policy works, one must look not only at the policy from the top, but also at the different levels charged with its implementation, because each one impacts how the policy works. Furthermore, a critical study of policy must also take into account the experiences of the people whom the policy is supposed to be serving. And taking into account does not entail a statistical glimpse at numbers on a computer page, but a qualitative investigation of how the policy has impacted their daily lives. It means interacting with them at the human, face-to-face level and hearing what they have to say. It is the sort of interaction I had while

volunteering at the shelter and hearing from homeless children about how school was going. It was observing their academic progress or lack thereof, hearing from parents the concerns they had about what this ordeal was doing to their children. It involved hearing stories of humiliation stemming from a bus driver who told a homeless student it is no wonder they live at the shelter since they obviously had bad parents. It involved listening to a frustrated father discuss how his child arrived late to school each day due to transportation issues out of his control. It involved feeling firsthand the dismay of spending time building a relationship with a struggling reader, only to see the child disappear without a trace. In short, it involved delving into the depth of the human story that simply could not be told through a quantitative analysis.

Referring specifically to the subject of welfare policy, but conceptually no less pertinent for this study of McKinney-Vento, Morgan and Maskovsky (2003) write that:

Ethnographers, claiming access to insight overlooked in the largely quantitative research of policy science, have produced findings to intervene strategically in the policy debate with a variety of objectives: to humanize welfare recipients and to deconstruct, complicate, and contest the ideologically saturated policy discussions of welfare (p. 323).

Replace “welfare” in the sentence above with “McKinney-Vento” and this is what I have strived to accomplish with this project. Rather than studying McKinney-Vento from afar, I immersed myself into a discussion with some of those who enact the policy as well as some of those upon whom it is enacted, and learned from them what it looks like in actual practice. It is one thing to talk high-minded about leaving no child behind in some academic or governmental circle; it is a far different exercise to actually go talk to

the principal in a school trying to educate children from a neurotic society or the parents of a student at a shelter who cannot read by age ten. Far too often it seems our studies of policies are conducted from afar and do not bother to seek input from the people they are supposed to serve as they are reduced to numbers on a page. This project sought to fill that gap for McKinney-Vento in some small way.

As Dubois (2009) states:

Ethnographic observation of basic bureaucratic work and relationships not only gives us a better understanding of the realities of public intervention, but it is also a powerful way of revealing its structural characteristics and current transformations (p. 223).

McKinney-Vento is the primary policy by which our society deals with homeless students and how we can help them receive the education we all seem to agree would serve them well. It would serve us well to take a closer look at how it works and hear from some of those for whom it exists in the first place.

### **Trustworthiness**

Concerning the credibility of my study, I obviously needed to collect the data in a systematic and respectful manner. Everything hinged upon the way I related with my research partners and my careful and transparent coding, collection, and transcription of the data. Beyond this, my credibility will be established by the analysis I have arrived at and the manner in which I have presented this analysis. I have made a concerted effort to not make generalizations more expansive than those I can reasonably support with data. I also used the voice of the participants to tell the story and make the pertinent points as

much as possible. Much of this is their story and it seemed only fitting that their voices be the ones that told it.

I triangulated my data by having interviews with several people in varied roles and settings within the McKinney-Vento milieu. This helped ensure the study's credibility, as well as the careful coding, analysis, observation collection, and transcribing of what I found (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). As a further safeguard all transcriptions, interpretations, and the final product were overtly shared with my learning partners as a form of respondent validation (King & Horrocks, 2010; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Drawing data from disparate sources, such as my journal and TEA archival records, also added credibility to the study (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2009).

### **Ethical Considerations and My Own Role Within the Study**

I was both the interview and observational tool in the study. I was the evaluator of what I discovered and the analyzer of what it meant. As I volunteered at the homeless shelter and taught my students I operated as a participant observer. For the project's academic purpose, these were my primary roles. But, within the wider, more important real world in which the study exists, I was also conscious of my unabashed desire to advocate whenever and wherever it was possible and appropriate. I make no apologies for assuming this position; the concept of the detached observer simply seems hollow in my eyes, if it is even possible to be truly "detached." As I put my obligations toward my students as humans far above my professional academic obligation to them as their teacher, as I would turn my back on riches for a life of meaningful relationships with others, I consider my role as a public servant far more important than researcher.

Although I did not have the words to express it as such in my youth, I have long felt the call of the critical pedagogue (Freire, 1994). It is simply the understanding of my place in the world with which I have been gifted and it would be dishonest to deny this. Within this spirit then, I attempted to reciprocate whatever knowledge or insight I could offer my research partners that might be of service to them. This was an inquiry process grounded in reciprocity and critical pedagogy (Crotty, 1998; Freire, 1994; Noddings, 1998; Rossmann & Rallis, 2003).

Obviously, I approached the subject from a social justice perspective, with strong feelings of wanting to help the marginalized fight back against, and hopefully transform, a system I see as treating far too many far too inhumanely (Freire, 1994, Goodlad, 1997; Noddings, 1998; Sizer, 1997; Wheatley, 2002). I have thought this my function in the world for as long as I recall. In order to minimize the threat of this perspective clouding my findings, I attempted to remain on guard against seeing injustice that was not there. I could not allow the indignation and dismay I feel towards what I believe are largely avoidable social ills lead me to leap to invalid conclusions. I needed to let the individuals tell their story and then allow the evidence to speak for itself, not insert ideas that were not there because this is what I thought I should hear.

Regarding treating my participants with the dignity they deserve, quite obviously, all personal identifiers are hidden in this write-up. Beyond this, the main issue I needed to confront was to be constantly up front about my plans, goals, and agenda while conducting my research. If I volunteered at a shelter, I had to say from the beginning that I was doing research, and that while I truly did desire to help for its own intrinsic value, I also had my own agenda. I went in with the belief that if I were honest in this way and

treated with respect the people who were sharing their space with me that I would find many doors open and that this would help validate the data. It was my experience that I was quite correct in my assumption; I received nothing but gracious welcome and participation wherever I looked.

To that end then, I needed to be constantly mindful of the different spaces I was occupying in my pursuit of information. At the shelter I had to be respectful and up-front about the existence and purpose of my research. During the interviews I had to be prepared and professional. I needed to put my interviewees at ease by my demeanor during our interactions and the earnestness with which I was pursuing this study.

I felt especially that I must view myself as volunteer first, and researcher second, when I was working at the homeless shelter. I was entering the personal space of those who called the shelter home under trying -- to say the least -- circumstances and needed to approach every moment with the utmost tact and humility. My ultimate goal was to serve in as great a way as possible, not to use others for my own selfish purposes or exacerbate an already stressful situation.

In a way my volunteer work at the shelter, while on one level providing access to a data set needed for this project, on another, more substantive level, served as an end in itself: satisfying my deep felt desire to contribute positively to the world around me. Therefore, while my aims as researcher were obviously important to me, it did not measure compared to the lives of the people I was dealing with. To that end, even when this paper is long completed, I fully intend to continue my volunteer work.

Regarding the primary participants of the study whom I talked with there was minimal risk of harm. There was some small potential that one of them might feel

uncomfortable during the process, of course; therefore it was incumbent upon me to entreat with my partners in as thoughtful a manner as possible in order to minimize such feelings. To that end I also assured everyone involved that their identities were to always be kept confidential and that they were free to review my findings and discuss them with me before they were finalized. They were constantly reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and that they might remove themselves from the study any time they desired.

As I suspected, however, no issues arose during my study. All my partners were adult professionals with many years experience working in a field dedicated to the education of children or serving those in need. They were all in positions of leadership within their own particular institutions and accustomed to talking with others on a regular basis as a natural part of their jobs. They all seemed to readily grasp the purpose and import of this study and were more than willing to assist in the effort. On the off chance that our conversations did stir up some sort of negative emotional reaction I supplied them with contact information to free community based counseling services.

### **Challenges to the Study**

One of the main challenges to the validity of the research lay in the fact that several of the key participants were held specifically responsible for the proper implementation of McKinney-Vento by law (Duffield, Heyback, & Julianelle, 2009). There was, therefore, a reasonable possibility that any one of them might have been inclined to downplay information that might not make them look good or overstate that which did. It was critical, then, that I gathered rich data during our conversations and

compared it to my own experiences and the literature to discover any anomalies that needed to be investigated more thoroughly.

Another issue revolved around the fact that no homeless children or their families were directly cited in the study. Obviously, no other informant was better situated for understanding the effects of McKinney-Vento on the education of homeless children than someone directly experiencing it first hand. However, gaining access to such a vulnerable class is fraught with ethical peril and was not practicable at this stage in my exploration of the issue. By including someone from the shelter community I attempted to circumvent this obstacle as best I could; if this informant was not a child going through school while homeless it was nevertheless someone very close to those in that world.

### **Overview**

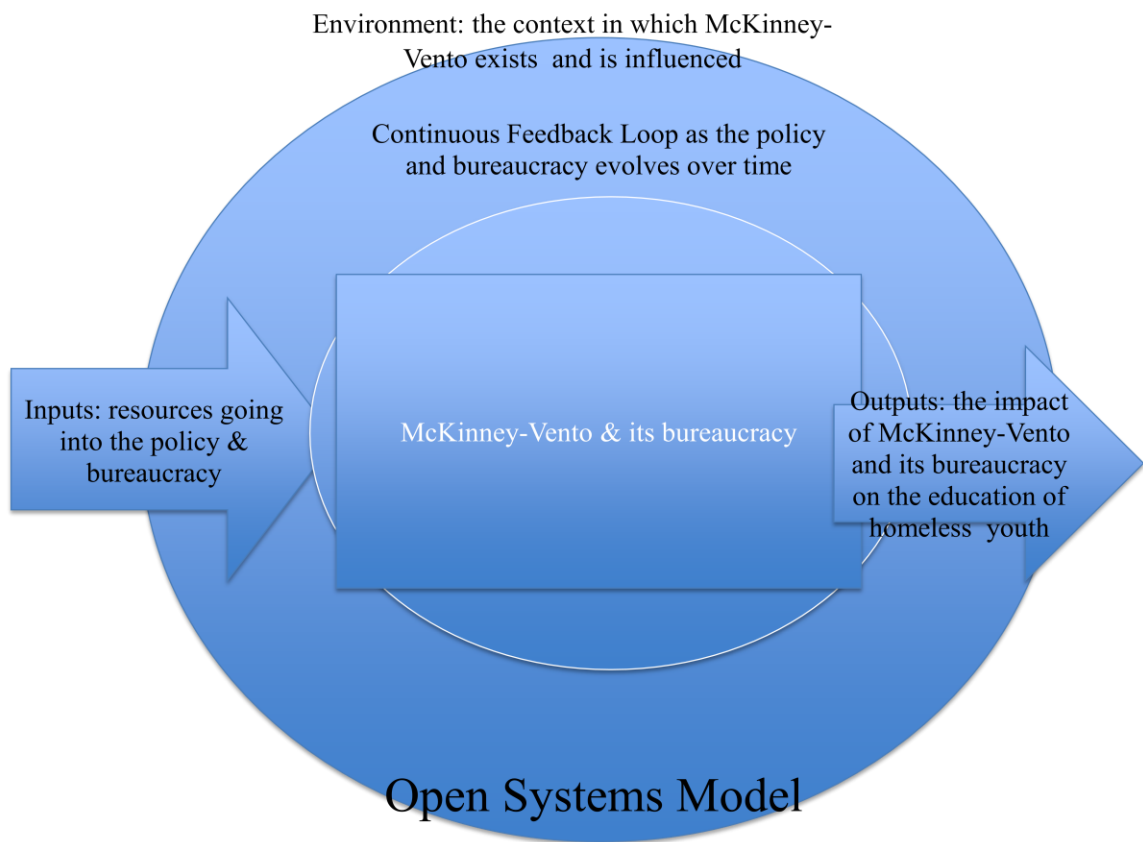
This critical policy ethnography attempted to bring to put a human face on the McKinney-Vento Act and the education of homeless children. Utilizing an open systems model as an organizing tool, I investigated the inner workings of the places and people that turned this policy into practice. Taking on the role of a participant observer through my volunteer work at a homeless shelter, as well a teacher in a low-income public high school, I first attempted to get to know some of the children and families struggling with homelessness. I then expanded my investigation in a more formalized manner, meeting with several strategically placed informants at key junctures within the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy. Taking the data gathered from these conversations as well as from a few other sources, I put it together with a historiography of the McKinney-Vento policy that I created and used this to analyze what the policy was intended to accomplish and how well it was succeeding in this effort. The next chapter explains further how I used the



open systems model to investigate this issue and the style I have chosen to present the findings.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE OPEN SYSTEMS MODEL & MCKINNEY-VENTO



**Figure 3** The Open Systems Model

The open systems model provided the frame by which I organized and presented my analysis of McKinney-Vento and how it impacted the lives of the homeless children and families. At the center of this conceptual model are the through puts where people and places turn the policy into practice. This center box was the

primary location of my investigation and upon which I made my analysis. The bulk of these findings are discussed in depth in the next chapter.

First, though, we will take a short look at some of the other components of this model: the environment which provides the context within which the policy operates; the inputs which include the resources provided for the policy's implementation, as well as the humans involved in McKinney-Vento who bring their own issues and understandings to the table; and the outputs, namely the education homeless children receive and the ripple effect this has on wider society.

### **Environment**

There is a long history in the United States of treating homelessness like a pathology or personal failure (Kusmer, 2002; Rossi, 1989; Stronge, 1992; Vissing, 1996). There is a corresponding history wherein the US government does not significantly intervene in social welfare issues, certainly not in cases where individuals are potentially blamed for their own situations, such as we see with homelessness (Baurisch, 2002; Kyle, 2005; Lipsky, 1980; Piven & Cloward, 1971). There exists then, but a paucity of outside help for homeless families. What assistance can be found is usually not comprehensive and does little more than allow one to tread water, if even that.

Added to this mix is a shrinking stock of low-income housing, as well as a general deterioration of real wages and general standard of living over the last three-plus decades (Chomsky, 1999; Kozol, 1988, Roark, et al., 2009). The economic downturn of the past few years squeezed poor families even more, erasing job opportunities and diminishing available government assistance (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009a).

The net result of all of this was an economic climate hardly conducive for earning enough money to escape poverty, let alone weather an emergency such as a sick parent, car breakdown, or job layoff. Simply put, many families were hurting, leading a great number of them to the streets. Once there, their options were often limited, creating a difficult to break cycle.

Not surprisingly, this can result in a plethora of negative impacts on the people who experience it, not the least of which includes a potentially detrimental effect on a child's academics (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Newman, 1999; Stronge & Popp, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 1999). Obviously, if someone is caught up in a life of homelessness there are going to be many possible harmful side effects, not to mention distractions conspiring against one's ability to learn. Due to less than optimal economic and social welfare realities, it is likely going to be a difficult, exhausting, and time consuming process for a child to escape this situation, if they are even able to do so. This, then, is the environment directly impacting many of the nation's homeless students and therefore the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy as well.

Daunting social and economic forces have shoved at least one million vulnerable and hurting homeless children through the doors of the nation's schools (NCHE, 2012a), many of them places with little capacity for dealing with such a crisis in the first place (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Kozol, 2005). This situation is heaped on top of an already difficult reality facing many schools struggling under the pressures of exhaustive standardized testing and tight budgets. If homelessness is even recognized as a problem at a school, it is but one in a long line of others that must be dealt with as well. Frequently, it is not considered a priority worthy of much attention in the first place. If

schools do a good job or not who is bothering to check? It is much easier to do the bare minimum to keep the government out of your hair and pay more heed to things like the STAAR Test that TEA definitely takes very seriously.

A strong case could be made that the environment surrounding the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy is one that makes its task all the more difficult to accomplish. Indeed, it could be argued that such a tough environment sets the entire system up for failure. At the very least, it certainly seems that it would require a concerted effort to alleviate the problem of educating homeless students to overcome the troubling environment in which the issue exists.

### **Inputs**

It is an unavoidable fact that the federal government's implementation of McKinney-Vento is less than optimally funded. This scarcity of input resources operates on several fronts. For one, the nation's shelters are underfunded, leading to a plethora of problems contributing to making it difficult for a homeless student to thrive in school (Lundahl & Wicks, 2010). On a societal level, this scarcity certainly includes the failure to ensure a general supply of stable, affordable housing -- or, at least, providing assistance for procuring such -- the provision of which would likely go a long way toward alleviating the problem in the first place or making it much less severe (Kozol, 1988; Roark, et al., 2009; Stoesz & Karger, 1993). The lack of funding also makes the kind of intensive academic tutoring and therapy many homeless students need very difficult to provide, if such programs are even envisioned in the first place.

The shortfall begins with Congress and the level of funding they provide the Department of Education for McKinney-Vento purposes (NAEH, 2012f). This deficit is

then passed down to the states and their individual bureaucracies, the Texas Education Agency in this particular case, and handed from there to the school districts that are expected to implement the policy. The small amount of funding attached to this mandate (NAEH, 2012f) and the equally miniscule amount of enforcement capacity provided to ensure that it is being followed as intended almost guarantee that the resource inputs that going into McKinney-Vento are insufficient for meeting its overall objective of sufficiently educating all homeless children.

This level of inputs directly impacts schools' ability to service homeless children and implement McKinney-Vento. As I discuss in my findings below (Chapter 5), even in districts with a large homeless population, the liaison is typically forced to wear multiple hats beyond simply dealing with their McKinney-Vento duties. While some of this obviously stems from homelessness not being treated as a high priority issue, surely schools would be more likely to make it such if a greater level of funding were provided. For instance, the subgrant for the district I investigated paid less than half the liaison's annual salary. The federal government, even by conservative measures, allots no more than \$75 annually *per homeless child* in the United States to the McKinney-Vento program (NAEH, 2012f). This is especially troubling because there is little doubt that, if anything, homeless children require greater levels of funding to properly educate than a student with housing stability (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). These extra expenses include necessities such as increased transportation costs, extra tutoring, and speech therapy. However, if the goal of McKinney-Vento is to ensure that a child's homelessness is not the cause of their academic failure, these are the realities that must be faced and accounted for. Otherwise the goal is simply unattainable.

As with the environment then, the inputs, or lack thereof, seem to be conspiring against McKinney-Vento's ultimate success. Given all the obstacles and challenges facing the prospect of achieving positive gains in this direction, it stands to reason that a great amount of resources needs to be directed to the purpose. It is quite telling that this is not occurring. We should not be surprised McKinney-Vento is achieving less than optimal output success.

### **Outputs**

Children who experience extended bouts of homelessness frequently suffer corresponding detrimental academic effects. On this the literature is clear (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Newman, 1999; Stronge & Popp, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 1999) and my investigation uncovered nothing different. McKinney-Vento and its accompanying bureaucracy are intended to counterbalance these negative impacts and produce students similar to those fortunate enough to possess stable housing. In other words, well adjusted, prepared for a productive adulthood graduates are supposed to be the output of McKinney-Vento. Or, at least the policy should be providing the support so that schools could produce such students to the same proportion as they are able to do so for those who are not homeless. And although the exact numbers remain beyond our capacity to figure here, it seems obvious that this lofty intention is not being met.

Instead, homeless students are falling behind their housed counterparts, dropping out at a greater rate, and struggling on such metrics as reading and math (Attles, 1997; Hallett, 2012; Newman, 1999; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge, 2000a). All of these lead to an output of students with a much greater propensity for a lifetime of struggle (DeSena & Ansalone, 2009; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Waters & Harris, 2009; Whitbeck & Hoyt,

1999). Granted, homeless children enter the system as inputs carrying a long train of potential problems, issues, and learning deficits. As noted earlier, the environment surrounding homelessness and society's response to it also conspire to set the table for failure. Schools, the main loci where McKinney-Vento meets homeless children for the policy's implementation, are institutions with numerous responsibilities they are required to attend to beyond homelessness. On top of this, many districts, especially the ones with the highest homeless populations, are notoriously underfunded to deal with these multifarious issues. Given this input reality, on top of the difficult, if not downright hostile environment in which it exists, it should come as no surprise if the McKinney-Vento output leaves much to be desired.

Note, this is not to say that the policy has been a total disappointment. Indeed, it has undeniably produced some positive results, mainly in providing homeless students with a legal basis to at least get through the school door when they were so frequently turned away in the past (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). It seems, however, that the progress made from this giant leap forward has since petered off. The Act has reached a plateau where homeless children are now sitting in classrooms on a more regular basis, but struggling once there (Miller, 2011). It is time to take the next step and more heavily invest in McKinney-Vento and the vulnerable children it is intended to serve. We can and should do better.

### **Through Puts: The McKinney-Vento Bureaucracy**

The bureaucracy charged with implementing the McKinney-Vento Act is the organization to which this study turned its focus. It is the center box where the action takes place, where the humans and institutions meet as the policy is carried out. The open



system models allows us to break apart the complex and multilayered entity that is McKinney-Vento and the education of homeless children into its component parts for analysis (Ballantine, 1997). We have already touched on the difficult environment surrounding the policy, the paucity of resources the Department of Education and the Texas Education Agency input into this system, as well the difficulties many homeless students carry with them as a result of the crisis they are experiencing. Likewise, there is strong evidence that the output from this structure, namely the education homeless children receive and the ramifications this has on families, is achieving far less than could be hoped for.

But, this does not tell us why this is happening or what is going on that makes it so. The answers to these questions lie within the stories of the humans whose lives are touched by the practice of McKinney-Vento. The macro view tells a pretty convincing story that educating homeless children is an extremely difficult task that does not appear to be finding much success. Stepping inside the places where the policy is practiced and looking at the micro view of what is going on there will help us answer the all-important question of why this is happening, which will then open up the possibility for taking some corrective action to make it more effective. The open systems model allows us to do this.

This investigation involved looking at four major locations where the micro view could be accessed. The first was a homeless shelter where I met dozens of homeless children and a volunteer who had spent an even longer time there working with many more kids. The second was a high school grappling with a growing homeless population and a principal attempting to wrap his head around the McKinney-Vento policy as it

applied to his campus. The third was the district administration of which the high school was a part. I talked here to a homeless liaison about her efforts to navigate the policy and make a positive impact in the lives of homeless families. Finally I talked to someone within the TEA bureaucracy who had spent more than twenty years attempting to implement McKinney-Vento in the Central Texas region.

I have laid out the findings and analysis from these four micro investigations within the next chapter. I then followed with specific recommendations to improve the way the policy is practiced in the final chapter.

### **Creative Nonfiction and Critical Policy Ethnography**

Critical policy ethnography strives to bring to life the qualitative stories of the people touched by a particular institution or governmental policy (Dubois, 2009; Morgan and Maskovsky, 2003). It attempts to put a face to an analysis that far too often distances us from the frequently unspoken reality that for every statistic on paper there are flesh and blood humans somewhere whose lives are being impacted.

Creative nonfiction is a tool that allows the researcher to present data in a manner that allows the reader to look beyond the statistic and glimpse into the life of the person on the other side (Gutkind, 1997). It is an accepted genre of data presentation used to great effect by well-known educator TheodoreSizer (1996) in his *Horace* series of books. What follows below is my endeavor, using creative nonfiction, at bringing to life some of the people I met during the course of my research as well as various others I have known over the years. I have presented these efforts in italics so they can be easily discerned from my analysis and more traditional data reporting.

The stories I have told in this fashion do not belong to a single person or family. They are amalgamations of people I have met, heard about, or otherwise stumbled over at some point in my life. I am using them to illustrate the point that the analysis and recommendations I made regarding McKinney-Vento were not simply some detached academic exercise. It was for our fellow humans that this policy was created and intended to serve; this is why I found it worthy of study in the first place. The more we can witness the impact this policy is having, through the eyes of those affected, the closer we can come to finding a way to make it work more humanely and effectively. I hope my presentation is able to accomplish this goal for you.

### **Overview**

The open systems model is a data organizational tool that enables us to break down a complex entity such as the McKinney-Vento educational bureaucracy into smaller parts in order to more closely study what is happening where this policy is turned into practice. It is a method that allows the researcher to report what occurs inside a multilayered organization in a way that typically gets lost when looking at the entire structure in all its intricacy. It allows for a look at the people at the heart of the organization that is actually bringing the policy to life, the people best situated to understand what is going on. It is within their stories we will find the answers to how and why the policy works as it does.

Creative nonfiction is a data presentation method that works well with the open systems model in accomplishing the same goal of bringing McKinney-Vento to life. By turning data into amalgamated stories it allows the information to be attached to a human spirit in a manner that reminds the reader there are actual flesh and blood people on the

other side of every data report. It helps us remember the high stakes of this policy and its implementation. For every success or failure a child and family are impacted. We lose sight of this at the risk of our own humanity. The stories of the people I met during the course of my research follow in the next chapter.

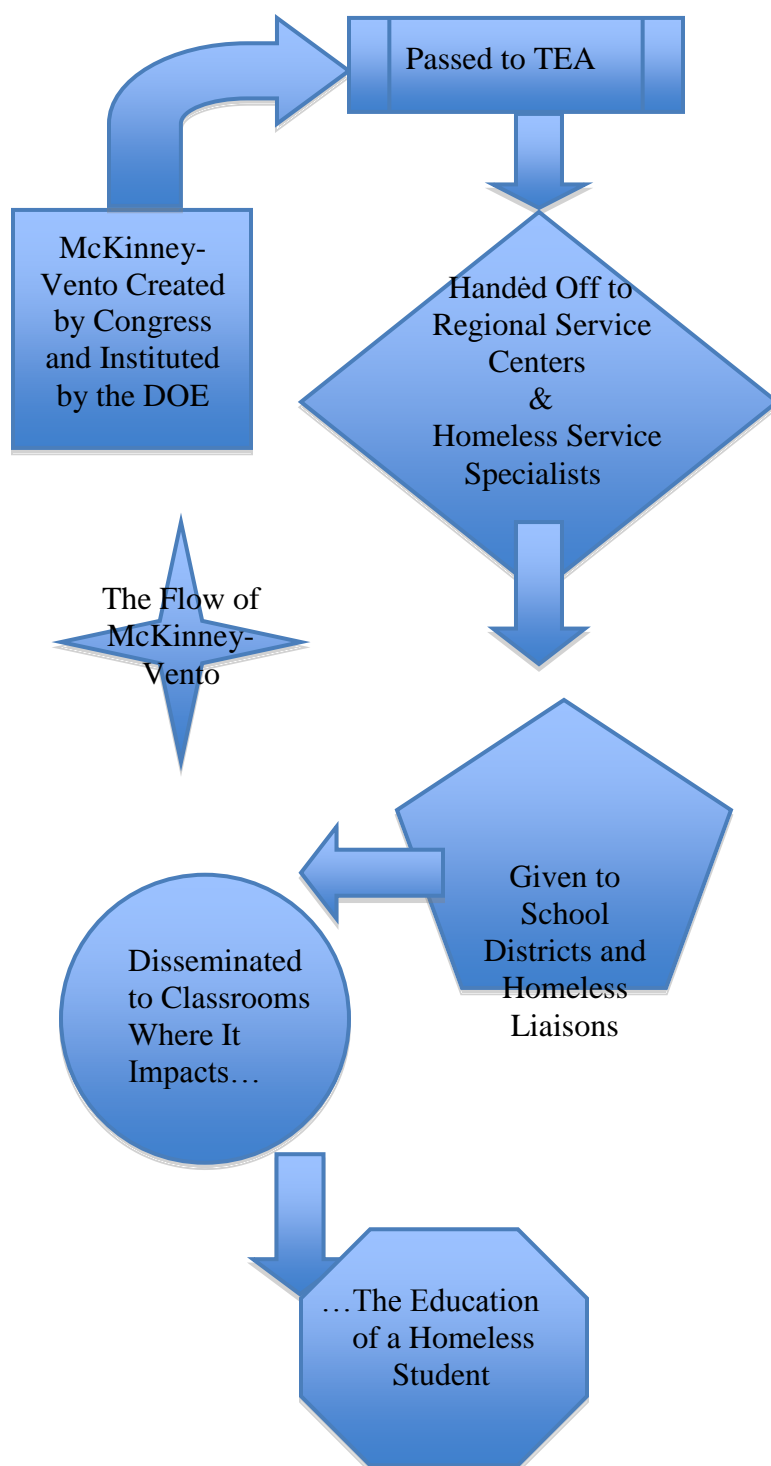
## **CHAPTER V**

### **FACES OF HOMELESSNESS: FAMILIES, CHILDREN, & SYSTEMS**

#### **Introduction**

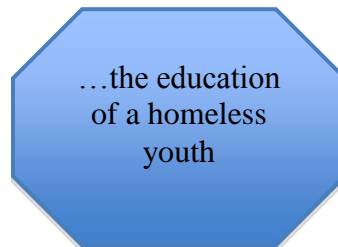
This chapter includes the bulk of my findings as well as an analysis and explanation for what I discovered happening. I present them in four separate pieces, stops along the McKinney-Vento through puts where the policy meets the people who are turning it into practice. Moving backwards and up from the open systems model as laid out in figure 4 below, I first start at the shelter, where the children who have been impacted by the policy spend much of the their time. Next I move to a school where the policy is practiced on the ground level, before heading to the district administration and finally a Regional Center within the Texas Education Agency.

At each stop along this path I lead off with a creative nonfiction story of someone impacted by the policy and the environmental context surrounding homelessness. I follow this with a presentation of my findings and an analytic explanation for what I uncovered. After visiting the shelter, school, district, and state in this manner I finish with a conclusion at the end of the chapter.



**Figure 4** The Flow of McKinney-Vento in the Open Systems Model

### The Shelter



**Figure 5** The Shelter Within the Open Systems Model

*Shane had not always disliked school. Back in his elementary days, he had been a top student, excelling at reading and consistently receiving positive feedback from his teachers. Now he was in high school, failing most every class, not a surprise since he consistently missed a day or two per week. Besides that he hardly ever turned in an assignment, not exactly conducive to positive feedback. What would be the point when he was likely destined to abruptly switch schools anyways and the work all gone for nothing?*

*Repeated bouts of homelessness had clearly taken their toll on this thin young man with nervous eyes and demeanor. His roots had been repeatedly ripped from whatever soil he had attempted to sink them in as his parents were forced to move around from place to place while trying to keep a roof over the family's head after mom had gotten sick, their rent increased, and dad had lost his job trying to deal with it all. First had come an extended stint at various family members' apartments, but they were all hurting for money too and it was simply too much to ask for them to put up a family of five for very long, especially one with a young baby and a near incapacitated mother.*

*Next had come a difficult episode living out of their car and a campsite, before they eventually rotated through a series of homeless shelters of various reputes. Some were downright shady, where Shane spent most of his waking hours worrying about his little sister Mary, towards whom he was incredibly protective. He missed a lot of school when they were staying at places like this; when he was in class it was nearly impossible to concentrate (his teachers usually figured he must have ADHD). Other shelters incessantly preached religion and made him feel guilty because he did not believe what they were saying. He had grown up in the church and thought of himself as a believer, but not the way they told him he should believe. It was pretty hard to concentrate on school too much when he was here, either.*

*Ultimately, though, it mattered little what one place or the other was like, because he was only going to be there for a short while before they inevitably moved to yet another shelter and another school. He had been told a couple of times after these uprootings that he could stay at the same school if he wanted, but usually the new shelter was far enough way from the old one that this was impractical. Besides, he had learned about halfway through this ordeal, which was going on three years now, that it was easier to cope if he made as few connections as possible to the people and schools he met along the way. It had not taken too many heartaches from losing new friends, and even a girlfriend, to teach him this cold lesson. He would like to make roots and connections some place and this new shelter was actually telling his family they can stay for the next several months. Maybe it will be different this time. Shane still dreams of going to college someday and becoming a good student again, the way he used to be before all this happened. He is so far behind though, especially in math and science, which make almost*



*no sense to him anyway. Besides, he does not know if he believes this place, this school will be any more permanent than the parade of ones from the past. Will it be worth the effort this time? Does he even have the effort in him anymore?*

Homeless shelters have an important role to play in the education of homeless students. It is where they spend much of their time when they are not at school; obviously, what happens here matters for the learning of a child, no different than the home life of a housed child comes to play in their education. For the purpose of this research, this was the primary location where I interacted with and heard the stories of homeless children and families. It was where I gathered most of the qualitative data regarding the output of the policy as designated by the open systems model.

The primary measure of this output revolves around the quality of education homeless children receive from the public school system. Indeed, the overarching goal of McKinney-Vento is that homeless students are placed on equal footing with housed students; the intent of the policy is to provide the necessary support to a homeless student so that their housing status does not determine how they fare at school.

My assumption here is that the public school system has been designed to deliver a quality education and that one measure of this quality can be seen in basic skills such as reading and math. Therefore, any rubric by which the policy will be judged must examine how homeless students seem to be doing in these areas. Unfortunately, the results from the shelter were discouraging. While there were obviously numerous factors at play here, many or perhaps most of these factors conspiring against a homeless child thriving academically, it seemed quite obvious that McKinney-Vento was not achieving its lofty

goal of ensuring that the children residing at Green Heart suffered no educational disadvantage because of their homeless status.

Spend but a short time working with the children here and some of these ill effects are painfully obvious. In my one-plus year at the shelter somewhere around 1 in 5 of the youth I worked with exhibited some sort of obvious speech impairment. This is a rate significantly higher than the national average and also impacted children older than we typically see suffering speech issues (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2008). The reading program director, who had worked with several hundred students at the shelter, expressed a similarly undeniable observation. Sadly, this was all too consistent with trends that have been seen since McKinney-Vento was first conceived (Grant, 1991; Joffe, Nippold, & Oetting, 2012; O'Neil-Pirozzi, 2003), suggesting that for these children at least, the policy was not effectively addressing their linguistic development. The implications of this shortfall on academic achievement are significant and manifest themselves in numerous negative fashions (Davis, Howell, & Cooke, 2002; Morgan, Farkas, & Wu, 2011).

While these troubles cannot all be directly attributed to the students' homeless status anymore than they can be directly attributed to any other one cause, it seems undeniable that the living conditions at the shelter must surely have had some effect. This seemed especially likely considering that the reading director and I both noted an increase in behavioral issues with children the longer they remained at the shelter. As a teacher with many years of experience, I could very well envision what some of this manic, spastic, and/or irrational behavior must have entailed if it occurred in the structure of a classroom. As disruptive as jumping from tabletop to tabletop while screaming about

a craft project was for our program, where we possessed more flexibility and lax discipline due to the nature of our setting, it would have been unacceptably distracting within the formal school milieu. Undoubtedly, such behavior must have caused problems for the child in class. At the very least it would have resulted in their being frequently distracted from the learning process; just as likely it was grounds for the student running afoul with authorities, further separating them from needed instruction as well as fostering negative connotations of school in the child's mind. And keep in mind these youth already required extra instruction due to the many holes in their knowledge and skill base from the difficult lives many of them had led that had brought them to the shelter in the first place. The deck seemed to be very much stacked against them and you could witness many of the children falling further behind as they worked with us.

Again behavioral problems such as extreme hyperactivity or frequent sobbing could not be solely attributed to the stress of living at the shelter. However, it was undeniable that we witnessed such issues increase with many of the children the longer they stayed there. Indeed, you could watch the deterioration of a child from relatively well self-regulated into a nervous wreck over the course of several weeks. The reading director and I were both convinced that there was a connection between the two. Indeed, it only made sense that there would be a connection. The shelter was an undeniably chaotic, crowded, and stressful place. As evidence of this, and perhaps contributing to the feeling as well, there were armed police officers patrolling the grounds at all times. Different sections were only accessible via locked doors and gates opened by the badges everyone was supposed to constantly display. When you entered the main gate all residents had to pass through a metal detector. Anyone older than a young child had to

blow on a Breathalyzer to gain admittance to what is, while they were staying there, *their own home*. In a visible sign that the people living at Green Heart were different from those on the outside, volunteers such as myself were allowed to bypass the metal detector and alcohol test.

Many people walked around the shelter visibly desperate and upset. It was far too common to see parents berating their children in what seemed like excessively negative language and tone. In other words, there were many factors contributing to the shelter being a less than tranquil and stable place for anyone to live. Therefore it seemed reasonable to attribute some of the noted erosion of a child's self-regulatory behavior to their living there. It should likewise not be a surprise that this behavior would have a detrimental effect on their experience at school and this, in turn, pose a real obstacle to learning.

Similar negative impacts were also readily noted regarding basic academic skills such as math and reading. Whether witnessing 10 and 11 year olds using fingers to do simple computations or struggling to sound out basic words while attempting to read primer books, it was painfully obvious that many of these children had already fallen far behind. The potential implications for a student entering middle school with the inability to read and do math above the most elementary levels were chilling. Again these observations were consistent with longstanding findings from homeless students over the past two decades (Attles, 1997; Hallett, 2012; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge, 2000a; Tower & White, 1989) and were clearly noted by both myself and the reading director. Indeed, they were impossible to ignore after spending but a short time working with the children at Green Heart. For many it was clear that McKinney-Vento was not making

much of a difference in their academic lives. And the literature is unambiguous that these types of gaps obtained at an early age are quite difficult to overcome and potentially carry lifelong consequences (DeSena & Ansalone, 2009; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Waters & Harris, 2009; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Both of us readily agreed that evidence of these sorts of problems was exhibited by at least half the students we worked with during our program activities.

On a brighter note, this still meant that some 50% of the children exhibited no outward signs of trouble in terms of reading and math skills. Indeed, many children reported enjoying school and finding success in class. Almost every child I interacted with who spoke positively about school in this way seemed to possess adequate reading skills. The director observed a similar link between literacy and reported school success. Likewise, we both discerned a definite relation between length of stay at the shelter and visible behavioral problems which held obvious academic implications; it seemed that the longer a child was there the more restless and less in control of their behavior they became. Note, the length of stay did not necessarily indicate the length of a child's homelessness as we were not privy to the back-story of these children or aware of where they had been before they came to Green Heart.

This detrimental effect was further compounded by the highly mobile nature of homelessness, a phenomenon we frequently witnessed first hand. Granted, we were not privy to where the students moved or if they were able to remain in their school of origin. Regardless, it seemed hard to believe that all of the sizable numbers of kids we saw moving in and out of the shelter regularly were able to stay in their home school. I personally spoke to many children who reported moving around with grandma or aunts or

siblings in different cities or states as the tide of opportunity washed in and out. We know that switching schools is detrimental to a student's academic career (Masten, 2012; Masten, et al., 2012). Surely some, if not most, of these children faced the ill effect of moving schools over the course of these rapid changes in housing status.

The director, who had greater exposure to the families at the shelter than I, also noted a relationship between a parent's behavior and their children's academic performance. Quite simply, some parents seemed to deal with their situation in a more calm and measured manner than others. In some sense, these parents almost managed to maintain a sense of normalcy amidst the storm of chaos, uncertainty, and misfortune that surrounded them. Whatever the source of their strength, it seemed to somehow foster academic resiliency in their children in some important manner.

On the other end of the scale, and these examples were patently obvious due to their very nature, those parents who were visibly not coping very well with their circumstances had an obvious negative effect on their children's behavior. There were some parents who simply seemed angry and desperate much of the time, quick to jump all over their children at a second's notice. For instance, I witnessed multiple instances of a parent refer to a child as stupid or some similar pejorative. Although we diplomatically tried to intervene in situations like this to break up the tension, such occurrences happened all too often. At any rate, the connection was not hard to make. It was likely very tough for a child to have their head in a place conducive for learning when, on top of the chaos of living in a homeless shelter, their parent, perhaps the only loved one the child interacted with on a regular basis, spent a good bit of time belittling them. If the ethic of caring offers us a potential solution for the problems inherent in educating

vulnerable homeless youth, it also seems that the more anger replaces acceptance, patience, and kind words, the more a child struggles.

On top of that, the stress at the shelter was frequently almost tangible; people simply seemed to be on edge quite often. If it was disconcerting to me, an outsider who could come and go as I pleased back to my stable family, I could only imagine how it must have impacted a child, especially one whose parent yelled at them on a regular basis. Once again returning to the concept of caring and its potential for a better way, it definitely seemed that the less simple kindness was replaced by anger, depression, or anxiety, the less ready to learn a child became.

Most frustrating to the director was the organizational roadblocks she found in her way as she attempted to forge the kind of program she was trained to create and which she believed would have helped address some of the academic holes the children suffered. Part of the difficulty was bureaucratic in nature. In some instances the fact that there was not a clear chain of command at the shelter caused problems. For example, the books she had painstakingly collected and prepared to seed the shelter library were lost in the facility's warehouse before she could even get it open, requiring her to procure an entire new set of several hundred volumes.

Even after overcoming the unnecessary headache of finding this new cache of books, there was also the constant danger of losing the craft material we used during our lessons from week to week as the locked closet we were promised was left unsecured. Or she would get the library organized and on the verge of being ready for loaning out books and someone would come in and ruin all her work. Again, whenever this kind of thing occurred no one had any idea who was responsible.

Another time a local private school attempted to give Green Heart several computers and indecision on the part of the shelter about who would be in charge of them and where they would go dragged on for several months before the offer was eventually withdrawn. When the reading room did finally manage to procure three computers, it was with the understanding that they would be designated for student academic use and loaded with appropriate programs and protections so the children could practice needed skills such as math and writing. However, even after being given this assurance, there were numerous instances when the director turned the computers on only to be greeted with pornographic images saved to the desktop. Eventually she gave up on using them altogether.

There were many other such examples of shelter disorganization getting in the way of creating a stable learning environment. However, since there were so many people involved with the facility and no one truly in a position of authority – at least as far as being able to guarantee the conditions we were dealing with from week to week – there were numerous obstacles placed in the way of the program's success. It also seemed that the lack of clear leadership and communication channels worked against the creation of a single vision for what the reading program was even supposed to be. In many instances, the director was given mixed signals about what Green Heart wanted her to create. Initially it seemed they desired something revolving around vigorous academics. At other times it seemed like it was to fill the role of a babysitting service so parents could socialize. From the director's perspective, while she would have preferred the former, she was more than willing to do whatever Green Heart thought was best; she was here to serve, whatever form it took. Repeatedly however, she would have something set



up with the person who was supposedly in charge and get something rolling accordingly. However, no sooner had she made this effort then the person in the leadership role would disappear, replaced by someone else with a different vision and she would be back at square one.

Perhaps what was going on here was also symptomatic of a distressing sense of fatalism about what could realistically be expected of the children in any case. On several occasions the director had conversations with people at the shelter to the effect of “I don’t know why you spend so much effort trying to help these kids. They’re only going to be here for a short time before they move on” (reading director, conversation, March 17, 2013). The most distressing part about these statements was that they definitely rang true with many of the children, for no sooner had we begun to build a relationship with them then they would disappear, never to be seen again. And given confidentiality rules we did not have the ability to even try and find out where they went to see if we could do anything else to continue our work. It was equal parts frustrating and heart breaking. Here we were approaching the children from a perspective of wanting to help them succeed, simply because this was the right and noble thing to do. Yet, because of the transient nature of homelessness, an inadequate shelter system that pushes families to transiency, as well as the legal framework of modern society that would not grant us access to such privileged information, we were unable to help many of the children as we would have wished. We brought to the task a desire to help and a sense of caring for the children we had come to know. This was not enough in many cases, however, as families were caught up in the shifting tides of homelessness and our societal response to the crisis.

The director believed part of the problem stemmed from the overwhelming nature of the realities the shelter dealt with. There were simply so many people in distress for the most basic of needs that the shelter was forced to concentrate on the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy. And it was hard to fault them for this. Important as literacy is in the long run, when forced by scant resources to choose between feeding a hungry family and setting up a truly robust academic program the former must win every time.

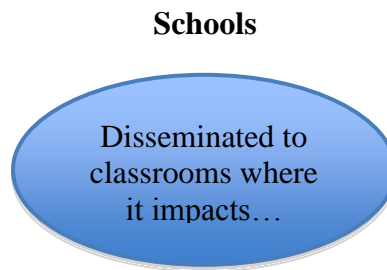
In an episode rather symptomatic of the whole experience, in early 2013 we made the decision to shift the reading program from the very transitory Green Heart to an associated shelter where the families live for a longer period of time, up to a year or beyond. Frustrated by her inability to create at Green Heart the type of program she desired, the director was relocating to a place where she believed she could do so. We spent a few days in the spring carefully packing our books in preparation for the move to the other shelter. We then made arrangements with Green Heart for one of the volunteer groups to procure a truck to move them to our new location. One week later, when we arrived to help oversee the move, the books were gone. We were still trying to find out where they put them as I finished up this report over the summer. No one knew who moved them or why.

At any rate, and beyond the point of our inability to create a truly workable program at Green Heart, there were undeniable behavioral and academic effects visibly manifested by many, if not most, of the children at the shelter. Whether they could be mainly attributable to the shelter, stress, school mobility, or some other factor was impossible to nail down with certainty. Most likely it was some combination of all these and more. What was unarguable was that these children were visibly falling behind and

unless some sort of serious intervention were enacted many of them were likely going to end up on the wrong end of an academic statistic sometime in the future. In other words, if you want to see why children with extensive bouts of homelessness drop out of school at a high rate, you need look no further than Green Heart to see how this process works. The kids come into the shelter with academic deficiencies, fall further behind while there, perhaps due partially to the environment, and then move on after a short time period with their learning problems largely unaddressed, likely to repeat the process elsewhere. Disturbingly large proportions suffer extremely high rates of speech impediments, and many of them are clearly well behind grade level for basic skills such as math and reading. Obviously, these traits conspire to set the students up for an extremely difficult academic road in the future, one that has multigenerational implications.

It would seem that any effort to repair these sorts of academic holes must include a deliberate effort involving multiple stakeholders such as schools, shelters, parents, and community resources. The Green Heart children face so many issues that to lift them up to where their lack of housing does not impact their learning is going to require an extensive, well-planned effort including such components as focused tutoring and ready access to appropriate learning materials. It would also seem to require a stable environment with a greater focus on meeting children's educational needs. Unfortunately, Green Heart is hardly a stable or well-organized environment, at least as far as providing academic help is concerned. Indeed, it seemed that academics was almost an afterthought, judging from the questioning the director received about why she was "bothering" to help these kids with their reading. At any rate, it hardly seemed to be an environment conducive for providing the sort of intensive and focused help that was

undoubtedly needed to overcome the plethora of deep obstacles standing in the way of many of these students and academic success. And if this was not happening for children in the place where they were living, where was it supposed to happen?



**Figure 6** Schools Within the Open Systems Model

*Shane's 10 year-old sister Mary was a beautiful young girl but not many people noticed this quality about her. Her hair was often unruly and her clothes too small and disheveled. She frequently had an odor of one who bathed too infrequently and spent time around cigarette smoke. She was usually withdrawn, possibly due to her stuttering, almost whispered, speech. Or perhaps it was the violence she witnessed in recent months at one of the shelters she had lived at. She constantly chewed her nails and pulled at her cuticles until her fingers bled. Due to social promotion, Mary was in her appropriate 5<sup>th</sup> grade, despite the fact that she could read but the simplest primary words and needed her hands to compute basic arithmetic.*

*The other children at the school she currently attended – her fourth in the last two years – thought she was weird and had few qualms telling her so. Even though it was hardly the first time she had heard such pejoratives, they still hurt. Indeed, the insults*

*only cut more deeply the older she grew, although she rarely verbalized any response to the taunting.*

*Mary's life had been thrown upside-down just when she was beginning to learn to read and perform basic addition. After the initial shock of her mom's near-death, the uprooting from her friends, home, and school, she had hardly been in a state of mind to pick up these foundational academic skills. By the time she was finally ready to focus again while living with an aunt (after having resided temporarily with grandparents and a cousin), she was abruptly yanked from a classroom where she felt comfortable when her family moved from Missouri to Texas to stay with her father's brother. This happened near the end of the school year and she never managed to adjust to the new classroom or teacher. She has been behind ever since and has now almost given up on herself and the entire concept of school.*

*Mary is actually a rather bright child, with a wonderful imagination and a beautiful singing voice. It is hard for her classmates and teachers to discern these things about her, however, due to her appearance, introverted demeanor, not to mention the frequent outbursts she has in school. A meek child who never got in trouble before her mother's illness and her father's unemployment, she is often in "time out" nowadays. Her outbursts range from uncontrolled weeping to the point where she is sent to the counselor's office for hours on end or it is violent, when Mary attacks other children or stands on desks and yells at the adults in the room. Accordingly, she spends much time at the principal's office in an effort to calm down. Neither principal nor counselor knows what to do with Mary, although they suspect she must surely be bipolar, oppositionally defiant, or have ADHD. What they think likely matters little, however, as Mary is liable*

*to be someone else's problem in short order. Meanwhile, she falls further and further behind academically, inching closer to a point where it will be almost beyond return.*

Schools are where McKinney-Vento and the homeless children it is intended to serve meet and the policy turns into direct practice. It is at this level of the bureaucracy where the majority of homeless children are first identified as eligible for service. It is in classrooms where a homeless child's learning problem is most likely to come to the attention of someone with knowledge of what to do about it. The school is the institution that possesses the knowledge, skill, and resource base to provide a homeless child with the academic therapy to tackle this learning concern. If the shelter provided evidence of how the system was working for homeless children, the school demonstrated how McKinney-Vento played out on the ground level where the child meets the policy in practice.

Right off the bat in our conversation the principal of Blue Sky High School openly acknowledged his school was likely underidentifying homeless students, an issue that has long been problematic with McKinney-Vento; indeed it was one of the main issues driving many of the evolutions to the policy (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Stronge, 1992). To put it bluntly, while McKinney-Vento has undoubtedly made some positive impacts in rectifying this issue (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Miller, 2011), it is clearly falling short of where it could be, at least in this particular school. The underidentification problem at Blue Sky seemed to revolve around a student's reluctance to self-report their loss of housing, and the staff's general ignorance of signs to look for that a child is homeless. This was not surprising since we know that homeless people are typically

reluctant to admit to their homelessness out of a sense of shame or embarrassment (Collins & Barker, 2009; Vissing, 1996).

This underidentification was especially telling because Blue Sky was led by a principal who actually desired to treat these children decently out of a sense of compassion and moral imperative; he clearly approached his duty as principal from a perspective of caring. It was also a campus with a level of funding that enabled it to have several counselors and a social worker on staff (a luxury not possessed by many schools). It was situated within a district that actively participated in the McKinney-Vento subgrant process, with a liaison who had relatively few responsibilities (compared to other liaisons) beyond just dealing with homelessness issues. It was located in a wealthy suburban community with few homeless students compared to a big city. In other words, Blue Sky sat in about as optimal a situation as could be hoped to achieve full McKinney-Vento implementation. Yet students were admittedly slipping through the cracks here. And even if the number – which, of course, no one knows – of such students was relatively small, one cannot help but wonder what is likely happening at a school where all of these factors making it conducive to implement the policy do not exist. It seemed very likely that many such students were being missed in districts like this, which, it must be pointed out, are the majority. Quite simply, most high schools are not as well situated as Blue Sky to service their homeless population. If Blue Sky was having problems it is likely a much greater concern at places that are not so fortunate or well resourced.

The principal also expressed a belief that the manner in which information about McKinney-Vento was disseminated from the state to his school left much to be desired. One of the main charges of the Act requires that states develop plans to heighten

awareness of the needs of homeless children. Obviously, this involves providing information to districts regarding the policy and how it is supposed to be applied. Yet a full decade after the 2002 reauthorization of the policy as part of NCLB, this very experienced principal, who had been stably running Blue Sky for half a decade, reported he was still picking up important information about McKinney-Vento in piecemeal fashion as he went along. He admittedly had been assisted in this endeavor by the presence of the district liaison – an undeniable accomplishment that may be attributed to the Act -- but almost all of his knowledge of the policy had still come from his own information seeking. Basically, he would hunt for solutions to homelessness-related problems as they emerged, growing more familiar with the general topic in the process. In other words, his McKinney-Vento education was reactive and self-directed. When I asked him if he had any contact with the state concerning this matter he laughed and retorted “only when we do something wrong!” (Blue Sky principal, conversation, September 6, 2012).

Note, this is a principal who very much wanted to do right by these students and help them in any possible way he could. One cannot help but wonder what the situation would have looked like if he had not possessed this ethos. It could be said that it was his sense of caring for the children, as well as his notion of doing the right thing, that had led him in the general direction of providing service for the homeless children of his district.

Yet despite the obvious presence of these personal characteristics, he was nevertheless still hampered in his efforts by the structure of the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy within which he operated. For while he did report that the state was generally helpful when he or his staff had occasion to contact them, these instances were



still occasioned when issues arose for which the school did not have a ready answer so they turned to TEA for clarification. Again it could be characterized that the state resources were being utilized in a reactionary, not proactive, fashion. First, the principal was forced to hunt for details about the policy on his own as situations arose requiring clarification; the government had no systematic manner for getting information to Blue Sky, or at least not one that had been implemented to the point that this leader of several years at the same school had been sufficiently exposed. It would seem logical that if the state wanted to ensure that McKinney-Vento was being properly implemented in schools it would have done a better job of illuminating key players in the educational bureaucracy to what the policy was about; it certainly would not have forced them to discover the basics of the policy on their own nor assume that they would even bother making the effort. As the history around McKinney-Vento has demonstrated it is much simpler to tell a kid that he cannot attend because his parents are not around to sign the enrollment paperwork. If the law is not made manifest through a pervasive knowledge base, it is of little use. It certainly should not be formatted in a manner that requires an experienced principal to hunt around in near darkness for the proper procedure or best practices for serving the homeless students at his school. This is certainly not the best use of his time or the potential offered by his sense of caring and social justice. And once again, just imagine what would have happened to the children if he had not possessed these characteristics.

Unfortunately, the number of homeless kids at Blue Sky seemed to be rising in the past few years alongside their free and reduced lunch population, which had almost doubled from around 20% of the school population in 2006 to 40% in 2012. He largely

attributed this increase to economic vicissitudes as families were uprooted leaving children behind to fend for themselves or people lost their housing due to layoffs. In a similar vein, he maintained a network of principal colleagues in various places across the state of Texas and noted that they had seen a similar rise in their poverty and homeless numbers over the same time period.

He also noticed the same correlation between many of Blue Sky's homeless students and behavioral issues having a negative impact on academic performance that we had seen amongst the shelter children. Quite simply, many of the homeless students were difficult to deal with when they were in school, if they managed to show up for class on a regular basis at all. He likewise expressed frustration at the school's inability to overcome many of these obstacles and worried at the implications this held for the students' futures. He steadfastly believed that forging strong and caring student/teacher relationships was key to addressing this situation, but in many cases the youths had so many deep-seated psychological issues – issues to which he was completely sympathetic – that it seemed almost impossible to break through the barriers they had built up. Once again, he was very understanding as to why many of the students were like this, describing the children as having “been through the wringer” (Blue Sky principal, conversation, September 6, 2012). Nevertheless, even with all his sympathy, it remained that the homeless students at his school were some of the toughest with which to build a trusting relationship. Many have had their trust repeatedly abused by adults in the past and it was extremely difficult to break through these kinds of psychological walls. As he noted, many of his homeless kids had “been through the wringer” and were understandably fraught with obstacles ranging from trust apprehension to behavioral

concerns to academic deficits. Many evidenced high rates of absenteeism. Obviously, there was often a lack of stability and structure in their daily existence. Clearly, many had pressing needs requiring their focus such as procuring food or a place to sleep. In other words, even when homeless students were identified, they were among the most difficult kids to teach or reach. It was no wonder that many of them struggled. It was also clear that someone from the school striking a close, caring relationship with a homeless student held the greatest promise for helping a child make it through their crisis with a chance for academic success intact. The system must acknowledge this potential and work to make the system one where such caring is facilitated.

The difficulties of fostering these types of relationships was seen when Blue Sky attempted to establish a rigorous tutoring structure for their homeless population in an effort to help them pass their classes. Even with the incentive of free food to make attendance more appealing, hardly anyone showed up, although many of the students faced multiple failing grades and continued struggle. A great deal of effort went into establishing this tutorial plan specifically designed for the campus' homeless pupils, surely more focused of an effort than happens at most other schools. Despite this effort and expense it was largely a failure, highlighting the difficulties facing those attempting to systematically address the academic needs of homeless students. Once again, it must be stressed that this was occurring in a district and school as well situated as any to successfully implement such a program. And while many of the Blue Sky homeless kids *were* finding success despite all the challenges they faced, many were obviously not, even amongst those who had been identified. It was not difficult to imagine what surely must be occurring at schools not so strategically situated.

Finally, the principal recognized that it would probably serve to have had his teachers and staff better aware of the signs to look for that a student was homeless, as well as the kinds of obstacles facing children in such situations. This would have undoubtedly assisted with the underidentification problem we discussed, as well as given the teachers a better understanding of what life was like for some of their most vulnerable students. It would have offered a chance to help foster the ethic of caring that was such an important part of the principal's personality and which enabled him to be a strong advocate for homeless kids. As of this writing no such professional development had taken place nor was planned for the future.

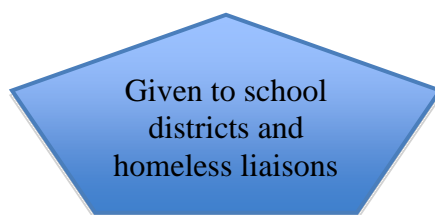
This was especially noteworthy because the district was largely reliant upon teachers and other staff to help identify students that become homeless in the middle of the year after the Student Residency Questionnaire – the vehicle by which Blue Sky initially identified their homeless population, which was administered when a student first registers for school -- had been filled out. Given this, it would seem critical to ensure that all staff be made informed of McKinney-Vento. Indeed, given the caring nature of most people who go into education, to not ensure that this kind of knowledge is pervasive seemed to be a great underutilization of potential resources that could be put to use to get homeless children the help they need.

In another testament to this phenomenon, I have been teaching in this area for a decade, the whole time at public schools with high poverty rates; in other words in locations that have likely possessed a higher than average homeless population. Despite this I have received exactly *one* in-service on the subject of homeless students during my

entire career; this one instance consisted of a half-hour online tutorial with simple questions following to ensure I had bothered to watch.

Clearly the state has done an insufficient job of either disseminating information about McKinney-Vento in a systematic manner or at least forcing districts to do so themselves. It would seem a basic truth that for the policy to stand a realistic chance at being optimally successful it is going to require a pervasive awareness of the law. The fact that this was obviously not happening underscored a great likelihood that many eligible children were not being served or at least not as well as they potentially could have been.

### **The School District**



**Figure 7** The School District Within the Open Systems Model

*Joe hung up the phone with a mixture of disgust and relief. He had spent the past few hours -- up in his corner office located as off the beaten path as it was possible to be in this particular administrative building -- attempting to patch together some semblance of services for this poor child that had seemingly dropped from the sky into his lap. Having been his district's homeless liaison for several months now, this was hardly the first time something like this had occurred.*

*The boy, Shane, arrived with a back-story similar to many others he had heard before given his extensive background in social work. Shane had been living with his*

*parents in a shelter located in a neighboring city. Shane had become defiant and found himself in trouble at both school and shelter. It eventually got to a point where the shelter told Shane's parents that either the boy goes or they all do. With two young children besides Shane, who was in high school and pushing adulthood, what option did they have? Shane would have to make it by himself until the family got back on its feet. Fed up with living like this, the young man felt more than ready to take out on his own anyways.*

*He had ended up in this suburban town some fifty miles away from the bigger city after bouncing around the informal network of street kids in the region, eventually negotiating a fairly regular rotation of local sofas to crash on, with an occasional stint under a bridge down by the lake. After several months of living in this manner, Shane decided he had had enough and was determined to go back to school and turn his life around. He knew he was better than this and wanted to prove it.*

*So he went with a friend, Billy, whose parents let him sleepover sometimes, to enroll at one of the local district's high schools. It was a relatively affluent school, known for its strict discipline, dress code, and sports prowess. Conversely, Billy was renown for his opposition to discipline, his black death metal t-shirts, and pot smoking. The front office knew him well and adopted an instant negative attitude toward the disheveled and guilty-by-association Shane, who looked kind of like a drug user to them as well, an impression certainly not helped any by his nervous behavior as he attempted to enroll in a strange school with a lady who seemed put off by his very presence.*

*Of course, Shane was unable to produce official paperwork proving residency, nor did he have any adults with him to claim guardianship. He was told rather smugly by the registrar that without these things there was nothing she could do to enroll him in*

*school. Shane left without saying much after this rebuff, even though Billy wanted to make a scene right there; Shane's time alone on the street the past few months had taught him that it was much better to attract as little attention as possible to himself.*

*But, a memory of someone telling him that going to school was his right, even if he did not have paperwork and stuff, flickered in the back of his mind. Likewise, his experience of the last few years had brought him into contact with more than one district liaison that had been able to provide his family – it hurt how much he missed his family, especially Mary -- with assistance. He figured there might be such a person in this district too, so he went to the local library and looked up the liaison's contact info on a free computer.*

*This is what brought him to Joe's attention late this morning. Joe had then spent the bulk of the afternoon arguing with the principal of the school where Shane had been turned away that he indeed did have the right to enroll, even without paperwork and parents present. Yes, even if he is friends with a known drug user and troublemaker. He had even had a heated conversation about federal law with an assistant superintendent whom Joe knew to be tight with the obstinate principal. This was hardly conducive to job security, Joe thought, mentally adding another stressor to his already full plate.*

*Shane had eventually been allowed to enroll at the high school, albeit with the principal promising Joe that "this was not over." Joe had then spent the bulk of the rest of the afternoon procuring Shane a bed at one of the two local "runaway" shelters, where he would be allowed to spend up to two weeks, so at least it would buy them some time to find a more permanent solution. As the evening came on Joe finally went home, happy that he had been able to help this one child in need, but troubled nonetheless.*

*What if Shane had not had the wherewithal to get hold of Joe? What would have happened then? How many times had this occurred in the past and no one had noticed? How could it be prevented in the future? He was still searching for answers as he drifted off to sleep.*

The school district functions as the administrative arm for McKinney-Vento on the local level. As the principal is the gatekeeper for what occurs on an individual campus, the district leadership sets the tone for what happens within an entire local educational system. If the district is run effectively and the administration has a strong commitment to serving their homeless children, presumably McKinney-Vento would stand a better chance for success in such a situation. Likewise, if the district leadership is ineffective or non-supportive we would expect the policy to struggle.

In charge of homeless services for a LEA is the McKinney-Vento liaison. This federally mandated position potentially holds much power to influence the local system's response to how homeless students are treated. The liaison is usually not a top power in a district's administrative structure, however, so they are largely dependent upon others above them to provide the resources and backing to accomplish their goals. It would therefore seem that the overall effectiveness of a liaison very much hinges on the support they receive from the higher ranked district leadership.

It is at this level of the McKinney-Vento structure that we can witness how the policy is received from the state, administratively processed, and then disseminated to individual schools. What sorts of resources are put into this effort? How effectively and pervasively is the message of McKinney-Vento spread? How does the district ensure compliance at individual campuses? With what level of prioritization does the district



approach educating homeless pupils? What kind relationship does the district have with the state McKinney-Vento bureaucracy? These are some of the major questions we should be able to find answer to by taking a closer look at what goes on at the district level.

Perhaps not surprisingly since they are part of the same system, many of the same general issues found at Blue Sky also applied to the district of which it was a part. Here, too, according to the liaison, there was a sense that students were surely slipping through the cracks of underidentification. Part of this stemmed from the almost overwhelming workload facing the liaison, the primary – and more or less solitary – district-wide employee directly dealing with homeless children. In an organization of several thousand students, it seemed an almost impossible task for one person to sort through all the records to determine who might qualify for services and not overlook a child or two.

This potential for missing an eligible child does not even take into account the fact that most of the identifying emerged from two questions on the Student Residency Questionnaire (SRQ) a student or parent filled out at the beginning of the year or whenever they enrolled in school. In other words, most of the identifying came from self-reporting. However, we know that many people, due to a sense of shame or embarrassment, are hesitant to self-report their homelessness, assuming they are even aware that living in a situation such as being doubled-up or in a hotel qualifies them for service (Collins & Barker, 2009; Foscarinis & McCarthy, 2000; Stronge, 2000; Tower, 1992; Vissing, 1996).

Another problem lay in the fact there was no systematic manner to discover students who became homeless in the middle of the school year after they had already

filled out the SRQ. Here again the onus lay with the student self-identifying or someone who worked at the school noticing signs that a child had lost their housing and was in need of help. While this method has worked to identify some students the district is still relying upon sources we know are likely to overlook others (Collins & Barker, 2009; Foscarinis & McCarthy, 2000; Stronge, 2000; Tower, 1992; Vissing, 1996).

An additional source for the likely underidentification revolved around overt noncompliance with the law. For instance, the liaison had been contacted by an unaccompanied student early in the school year and informed that the high school he was trying to attend had denied him access due to his inability to provide documentation from absent parents. When she contacted the school and informed the principal that the school was bound by law to enroll him immediately, she met resistance on the grounds that the child was an alleged “drug user” (district liaison, conversation, September 18, 2012). After a few phone calls to TEA and the vice superintendent the student was eventually admitted, but the implications of the incident were clear: if this child had not possessed the wherewithal to contact the liaison on his own volition, no one would have known the event had even occurred. Much as it pained the liaison to admit this, it seemed pretty naïve to pretend that this sort of thing had not happened before; in other words, there was a great likelihood the district had willfully allowed students to slip through the cracks. If there was any doubt about this, as well as the potential purposeful nature of it in some cases, it was dispelled when she was told by another district administrator that homeless families needed to “jump through some hoops” (district liaison, conversation, September 18, 2012) before they were provided services.

Providing further evidence that the district had indeed likely been underidentifying its homeless population in the past, the number of such students had jumped from around 30 two years earlier to over 300 in the first few months of the 2012-2013 school year. Some of this increase might be attributed to a growing overall homeless population, but it seems hard to believe that a significant portion did not stem from the fact the district was now doing a much more thorough job identifying eligible children. This is not surprising considering the liaison position had been filled by a licensed social worker with McKinney-Vento occupying one of her primary duties; the previous liaison was a paraprofessional stretched thin by the multiple programs in which she participated.

The liaison also reported a lack of clarity regarding her roles and responsibilities. While she made a point to note the helpful nature of the state resources she had accessed when she needed specific questions answered as the occasion arose, it still often seemed like she was sort of defining the job as she went along. Granted, she had just started this position at the beginning of the school year (I first talked to her around Thanksgiving) and as the months progressed she reported feeling increasingly comfortable with what she was doing. But, this did not disguise the fact that she was basically thrown into the job and forced to figure out how best to do it more or less on her own. And despite the state resources available to assist her in this process it was still undeniable that for most of her day-to-day operations she was forced to make it up as she went along.

Much of this goes back to the simple, unavoidable truth that McKinney-Vento was really not that much of a priority with either the district or the state. Note, this does not mean that there were not diligent, hardworking, and competent people working up

and down the McKinney-Vento bureaucracy. Once again, I found that many of the people I met in during this investigation were dedicated to the cause of working for the betterment of homeless children because they possessed a deep ethic of caring and believed that it was the right thing to do. Most of them might not have had the language to call this a social justice perspective, but it nevertheless approached such a mindset. Yet many of these well-intentioned individuals were seemingly running uphill as they attempted to perform their good work. In the case of the liaison she would have benefited from the existence of better-organized structures in place to assist people in her position navigate the initial steps of the job. She would not have been thrust into this role with little oversight and basically forced to define her job description on the fly. She would not have been responsible for other tasks above and beyond working with the district's homeless population. It was telling that this was the case. Thankfully, she was a competent, well-trained, and caring individual so she managed to do well despite these obstacles. One cannot help but wonder what would have happened if this had not been the case, if she had not possessed this sense of duty and caring. One might also wonder what would happen if we took more advantage of such people's natural inclination to help by creating structures that better facilitated them doing so. At any rate, it definitely seemed like the liaison was not being utilized by the district in a way that enabled her to maximize the gifts and talents she brought to the table.

Providing further evidence of an informational gap between the policy adoption and implementation that was indicative of its basic lack of prioritization, the liaison was totally unfamiliar with the HEARTH Act and the changes it made to the education of homeless students when I asked her about it, even though the changes had been in effect

for several months by that point. It would stand to reason that this would not have been the case if the government were doing a more extensive and systematic job providing information to those on lower rungs of the educational bureaucracy.

In another concern related to this lack of direction, the liaison described her position within the district like being on an island much of the time. There was very little administrative oversight monitoring what she was doing. In such a situation she readily admitted that it would have been rather easy for her to put on the appearances of working while actually putting forth minimal effort to satisfy the few tangible requirements her bosses were watching out for. To her credit she did not take advantage of this laxness on account of her moral obligation to help these kids, but the implications were clear. Tucked away into a far corner of the administrative building with no supervisor actively following what she was doing on a daily basis, it would have been fairly easy for her to have simply sat at her desk and picked up a paycheck, especially in a district where at least some feel the homeless must be made to jump through hoops. Once again, it must be stressed that this was not the course of action she took; indeed, she was constantly exhausted as she rushed from crisis to crisis, trying to procure help for families in need. However what might be happening in other districts with less passionate liaisons was obvious. It also raised the question again if this were the most effective use of this caring, dedicated individual.

To that point, the liaison lamented the lack of time she had to put in place everything she wanted to accomplish. She was so busy trying to identify students and help them access what little resources existed in this community that she did not have time in the day for much anything else. I asked her if she had considered the possibility of

providing sensitivity training on dealing with homeless children; for example, alerting teachers to the potential emotional harm that might be done by asking a child to draw a picture of their home if they did not have one. She admitted that while this was a great idea she simply did not have the time right then to even think about creating a vehicle to accomplish something like this on a systemic level. She was, however, optimistic that the potential for having the time to do something like this was there in the future. Talking with her several times as the year progressed she consistently expressed feelings that she was running short on time, although it did get better after the work on the Student Residency Questionnaires were wrapped up.

This situation was exacerbated by the fact that she also was in charge of another district-wide program that took focus away from her McKinney-Vento responsibilities, stealing precious time she already did not have. She noted that she was hardly the only liaison she knew in this boat. The woman who held the position before her had five or six different duties besides dealing with McKinney-Vento issues, as did most every other liaison she had ever spoken to, including some from districts with tens of thousands of students. She definitely thought that for her to do the kind of thorough job that these kids deserved that at the very least the liaison should be a “fulltime plus someone” (district liaison, conversation, September 18, 2012) position.

Quite simply, the scope of the liaison’s duties was daunting for one person to handle all of the responsibilities required to implement a truly comprehensive McKinney-Vento program to address the multifarious needs of extremely vulnerable children. This was compounded by the fact that her focus was pulled away by other nonrelated responsibilities, a task that stood to get even harder for the 2013-14 school year as she

takes on a newly assigned job as the social worker for an entire high school. Indeed, this new role might very well demand the bulk of her attention if she is to do it justice. It is hard to see how this cannot but lead to less time for her to dedicate to the district's homeless children.

If thoroughly serving homeless children were treated as a priority on the scale of standardized testing or athletics, surely the liaison position would at least merit having someone in place for whom McKinney-Vento was their sole responsibility. This same district deemed it worthwhile to pay a person in excess of six figures, with a personal secretary, to act as its athletic director. In other words, it had clearly demonstrated a willingness to fund the sorts of programs it considered important.

Even when the liaison was able to find the time to do something beyond just identifying students and helping families procure what scant resources were available, her efforts sometimes still ended in frustration. For instance, she managed to organize after-school tutoring specifically geared for the Blue Sky homeless population using the subgrant to provide stipends for teachers and refreshments for the students. She went to everyone who was eligible and extended personal invitations for them to attend. Despite this effort hardly any students showed up to the sessions, often only one or two out of the more than thirty she had reached out to. Demonstrating the spirit she brings to the job, the liaison plans on continuing these efforts and hopes it can evolve into something utilized to a greater extent in the future. Regardless, it still highlights the kinds of issues she faces in her attempt to build the district McKinney-Vento services into a more viable program.

The liaison also expressed frustration at the scant resources that existed in the community to help homeless families. This primarily upper middle class suburban area

has never had a visible homeless problem and she found that many people she talked to about the issue held conventional deficit views about blaming the homeless families. This became especially obvious when she was part of an endeavor to organize some local churches to address the lack of shelter opportunities in the county. The plan would have utilized several different religious groups to provide shelter for homeless families on a rotating basis at different times of the year. Presumably, such organizations, by their very natures, would have been ideologically receptive to the concept of helping those in need. One would expect that a religious group would exhibit an ethic of caring for members of their own community who were clearly down on their luck. The plan was even designed to avoid requiring too much effort of any one group in particular, only imposing upon a church for a week or so at a time, two or three times per year. Yet these relatively simple efforts were repeatedly met with obstacles amidst concerns about having “those people” (district liaison, conversation, September 18, 2012) in their buildings. In other words, homelessness was not only treated as a low priority issue in the community; when it was overtly considered at all it was viewed through the same sort of deficit lens that has plagued it for decades. In other words, many still judged the homeless person as a sort of outcaste, part of an almost deviant, or at the very least, deficient class of people. The ethic of care did not extend to society’s most marginalized.

The net result of this lack of local resources meant that many of the families were forced to seek services in surrounding communities where there were more options, thus pushing the students further from their school of origin. It seemed this community had not recognized they had a legitimate homelessness problem in their midst or believed that those who had been so effected were worthy of support. And, as I said before, this town



was solidly middle to upper middle class with a thriving economic base; it clearly could have done much more if it were considered important.

Another theme which emerged from our conversations regarded the McKinney-Vento subgrant the district had received. Even though the amount of the grant was relatively insignificant – under \$30,000 for the school year – the documentation the district had to provide regarding its implementation was disproportionately tedious (district liaison, conversation, March 5, 2013). Indeed, the liaison's supervisor, who had to spend a couple days assisting when the state came to monitor the subgrant, was flabbergasted with what was required for this miniscule amount of funding. This supervisor was also intimately involved with another federal grant the district had received, this one in the millions of dollars. She described the documentation required for the multimillion dollar grant as substantially less than for the McKinney-Vento one. This led her to laughingly suggest that it was not worth their time to pursue this money in the future. She was clearly joking in this instance, but one has to wonder if such a disincentive has not driven other districts away from the subgrant process.

Demonstrating further potential flaws in the subgrant process, at one point the state auditor asked for documentation that the district had communicated, as the law requires, with local service providers. Unsure how to exactly prove this, the liaison offered up her Roll-A-Dex which listed several handwritten phone numbers and notations. The liaison showed these to the auditor, telling her that they were some of the local providers. The auditor glanced at them and this somehow served as ample evidence that this critical aspect of the policy was being followed. The potential abuse or mistake in the face of such oversight was obvious.

A final theme emerged regarding the general level of ignorance about McKinney-Vento and homeless children throughout the district. To put it in simple terms, the issue barely seemed to have registered unless one had a direct link to it. However, this could have been rectified if the will had been there on the part of the district. Every year teachers are forced to sit through the same repetitive staff development videos about the prudence of not exposing oneself to the dangers of bodily fluids, even though most educated adults likely grasp this rather basic concept already. Yet the majority of these same people have never heard of McKinney-Vento or realize that the youth sleeping on the couch of a family friend is eligible for services that might help them succeed in school. Most teachers do not know the basic signs to look for that a child might be homeless nor how they might organize their classroom with sensitivity to those who might be experiencing this trauma. This situation could have been greatly improved if more staff such as teachers, who are strategically situated to interact with homeless, were brought into the fold and made more aware of the issue. If the district leadership wanted to make this a priority, they could do so. If the state had wanted to make this a priority it could have done so. And if there had been more sensitive and knowledgeable eyes at all levels of the district looking out for vulnerable children, presumably the problem of underidentification could have been alleviated as well. The pressing problem of unaccompanied youth – a critically vulnerable subgroup highlighted by the liaison, Blue Sky principal, and TEA coordinator (see below) -- could also have been addressed if these forces were mustered. Perhaps having more *informed* eyes and ears in schools could have helped uncover new and better ways to serve these kids.

However, given that some in the district administration seemed to be, at best, lukewarm about providing these kids services (“they need to jump through hoops”) and that the liaison, already stretched thin from her McKinney-Vento focus by other duties, was delegated even more responsibilities for the next school year, this sort of prioritization did not seem imminent. And, once again, it must be reiterated that this is in a district going into its second year *with a subgrant*. One wonders what sort of prioritization occurs where this direct relationship with the state does not exist.



**Figure 8** The Region Within the Open Systems Model

*Joe called Nancy in late April, informing her that his district would no longer be participating in the McKinney-Vento subgrant process she oversaw. He explained that his district's new leadership wanted to go in a different direction with their homeless service provision. Having fostered a relationship with Nancy over the past year, Joe was able to speak bluntly regarding the reason this decision was being made. Basically, the rigors of ensuring compliance with the stipulations accompanying such a small amount of money, that did not even cover half of Joe's salary, were deemed not worth the effort. And while Joe could not verify this for sure, he also got the sense that the extra scrutiny*

*accompanying the subgrant had been received with less than welcome arms by folks higher up the administrative food chain.*

*Joe further confided to Nancy that he was worried about what their McKinney-Vento program was going to look like in the future. He was being assigned even more duties the next school year that would further cut into the scant time he already had available. As part of this move he was even being evicted from his out of the way office at the Central Administration building, transferred to a small room tucked into a middle school library elsewhere in the district. Joe sounded frustrated as he told Nancy he was having a hard time envisioning ever having the capacity to build the kind of comprehensive program he believed was called for to address this issue he thought so important, but for which he received such little administrative support.*

*While understandably disappointed, Nancy was hardly surprised by this development. She had heard similar stories in the past, especially in the early days of McKinney-Vento before NCLB when she literally had to plead with districts to take her money and help. This particular case especially did not come as a shock, as she had been to the district a few weeks earlier to give a presentation to the assembled principals about McKinney-Vento and homeless students. When she arrived on the appointed day she was delighted to see an old acquaintance who was apparently the recently hired head of the district.*

*After exchanging pleasantries, the new superintendent asked Nancy what she was doing there. Apparently he had forgotten that Joe had arranged for Nancy to come and present her McKinney-Vento expertise to his principals during this particular monthly meeting. His memory slightly jogged now, he asked Nancy how quickly she could be done*

*with what she needed to do. Surprised, she replied that she had been planning on having around three hours to provide a comprehensive and practical introduction of the subject for these critical players in the McKinney-Vento milieu. Blushing, he responded that there was no possible way he could give up that much of his time; he had important matters to attend to with his principals. He then asked how long she “actually needed” to cover the basics. Nancy figured she could do so in about half an hour. Smiling, the superintendent told her that she had twenty minutes. He would yield her the floor in fifteen minutes or so. He then wheeled around and walked off, leaving Nancy and Joe speechless and scrambling to adjust their plans on the fly.*

The state of Texas runs its public education bureaucracy through the TEA. The TEA is further broken down into Regional Centers which deal directly with individual school districts. In other words, it is at the regional level where the state McKinney-Vento bureaucracy comes into the most direct contact with the different local education agencies. Within each of these regions is a homeless education specialist who coordinates their particular organization’s McKinney-Vento services; some regions have two specialists, each working on a half time basis. It is at this level where we can see how the state provides information and resources to school districts. It is here that we can see how much support they provide LEAs. It is here where we can see how closely the state monitors if the policy is being followed. In short, it is at this level where we can investigate how the government turns McKinney-Vento into practice.

The homeless service specialist I talked with had several optimistic things to say about the direction McKinney-Vento seemed to be headed. Her opinion carried much weight seeing how she had been associated with McKinney-Vento in some fashion for

over two decades. The most important development she had seen was that there was significantly more adherence to the law since the Act's reauthorization as part of NCLB. Before NCLB she described having to beg school districts to sign on for the subgrants she offered. After NCLB districts started approaching her asking to sign on. She attributed this about-face to NCLB because it forced districts to track various student subpopulations. This had in turn increased awareness of the plight of homeless students and made it much harder for districts to deny them services. Quite simply, it is much harder to hide different subpopulations now and if a student drops out the district suffers a "ding" (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012). And districts definitely want to avoid the consequences of these dings. She was optimistic that this trajectory of increased awareness and accountability of the homeless population would continue.

Despite this greater attention one could not help but wonder if it even came close to meeting the spirit of the law and ensuring that a student's homelessness was not the cause for their academic distress. For one thing there is no direct relationship between the state and the districts that are supposed to be implementing the policy in the schools unless a district has a subgrant. We have already seen how students might easily slip through the rather porous homeless identification net in a district *with* a subgrant. We have also seen how that same district, once it got a subgrant, increased its homeless count from around 30 to almost 400 in less than two years! Surely the bulk of this did not stem from a simple natural increase. Obviously, the effort of the liaison, perhaps inspired by the subgrant, could take most the credit for this significantly greater level of identification. Once again one must wonder what happens at districts without subgrants and/or without such passionate and competent liaisons. Given what we have seen it

would seem quite naïve to pretend that the state is not missing significant numbers of eligible students; it also seems likely that many of these hidden children suffer academically.

In response to an inquiry, my research partner was able to highlight several districts that had developed effective systems to help ensure the success of the homeless students they served. She described one of her agency's roles as that of helping seed these sorts of effective networks. Basically, she would work with a district that had received a subgrant and assist in establishing systems for delivering various services ranging from graduation presents to tutoring programs. A handful of these districts had then in turn evolved their own networks of service delivery to the point that they became almost completely self-reliant and had established what appeared to be a sustaining capacity. In other words, a far cry from what had occurred in the days before McKinney-Vento when the number of such successful examples was basically zero; undeniably this represented a measure of triumph for the policy that should not be overlooked.

She largely attributed the ability of these districts to accomplish such effectiveness to their capacity to muster the support of various community resources such as churches, businesses, or service organizations. A key component for doing this involved having a competent person in the liaison position who possessed the visible backing of their district's leadership. The district leadership (i.e. superintendent) did not necessarily need to be actively involved with the service provision per se, but they did need to let it be known that homeless services had their full support. This would allow the liaison to overcome the types of resistance that often arises when such efforts are introduced.

Furthermore, the liaisons that had managed to create these effective systems all demonstrated a passion for helping vulnerable students. In other words, they exhibited signs of possessing the ethic of caring (Noddings, 1998; Wheatley, 2002) that has arisen so often in this study whenever I have found people faithfully serving homeless students. In such situations the specialist described liaisons willing to steadfastly push to ensure that homeless children within their district received the assistance they needed to succeed because they saw their work as having a moral aspect. They saw their liaison duties as more than a job; it was a case of seeking the just and moral action.

She also described these exemplar liaisons as being nonjudgmental when they interacted with homeless families. Indeed, my TEA research partner was steadfast in the absolutely critical need to remain nonjudgmental when dealing with homelessness. To that point, it was also important that a liaison strive to communicate this sort of nonjudgmental thinking to the wider community in a manner that convinced them to help the district's McKinney-Vento efforts, because once the community became involved under this type of leadership, powerful and effective service structures were created. In other words, a liaison with a strong ethic of caring had managed to explain the power of this message to the local community, building up support along the way and this eventually evolved into a robust homeless student program. It was the combination of an effective liaison with the visible backing of their district administration and community that made the difference. Ideologically guiding the effort was a sense of caring and social justice for the most vulnerable of the community.

These bright spots were tempered, however, by the fact that they were very much the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, even taking into account that more school



districts than ever were actively participating in the subgrant process in the region where my research partner worked, slightly less than one-third actually did so. Granted, some of the other districts had their own programs and grants independent from her particular organization, but even taking this into account, no more than half the districts in this region had any sort of active relationship with a McKinney-Vento focused government entity. And while my research partner was confident that all the districts in her region were doing “the job” when it came to following the law, she was also convinced that the organizations holding active subgrants with her organization had a greater “level of commitment” (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012). Or, to put it another way, in her experience, districts that had subgrants tended to do a better and more thorough job with their McKinney-Vento services.

Combining this insight with the strong evidence that even a district *with* a subgrant like the one in my study had allowed students to slip through the cracks for various reasons, the likelihood that students were being missed, perhaps on a large scale, seemed great. In the entire state of Texas’ roughly 1200 independent school districts, around sixty had subgrants in the last cycle. Up until a couple of cycles ago there were only around thirty with subgrants (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012). In other words, it seemed highly probable that a significant number of homeless students were slipping through the McKinney-Vento cracks.

She also seemed resigned to the fact that they were likely to remain always underfunded by the government, referring to their organization as a “small fish” (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012). They nevertheless made do with

whatever money they were allotted, even if this meant not accomplishing everything her office might have hoped for.

Again it would seem the lack of prioritization was the main culprit here. For one thing, McKinney-Vento has been traditionally severely underfunded to do the job it was allegedly intended to perform. In fiscal years 1987 and 1988 over \$700 million was appropriated to EHCY programs; under \$10 million was actually allocated however, less than \$10 per identified homeless child (Biggar, 2001; Rafferty, 1995). In 2001 \$35 million was provided, \$15 million *less* than eleven years earlier (NCH, 2007). In 2003 the appropriation was back up to \$55 million, a figure still \$15 million below the \$70 million that had been authorized (NCH, 2007). Since 2009, around \$65 million has been funded each year, to support somewhere around one million homeless students that have been officially identified by the system, a population count almost universally regarded as an underrepresentation (NAEH, 2012f). Even being conservative, this amounts to no more than \$75 per homeless student per year, a sum clearly insufficient if indeed the goal of the policy is to truly assist homeless students overcome the obstacles posed by their lack of housing.

Perhaps most representative of the impetus behind this sadly reliable lack of funding occurred during a 1995 House of Representatives Budget Committee debate over a proposal for totally killing all funding for the EHCY program. A legislator demanded that somebody “show him one child who had ever been helped” by EHCY, completely ignorant of the fact that there were two such programs assisting kids in his own district (Duffield, 2000, p. 221). The elimination proposal was obviously not successful but it was still illustrative of both the attitude towards, and ignorance of, the general subject of

helping homeless students. Quite simply it has not been treated as a policy priority by the government.

One consequence of this lack of urgency is a general lack of awareness of the homeless students and McKinney-Vento within the school milieu. The Blue Sky principal spoke to this, as did the district liaison. Another counselor I spoke to who was a multi-year campus liaison in a nearby district concurred on this lack of information, stating that unless you were specifically assigned to a homeless child the likelihood that a teacher knew about McKinney-Vento, or the signs to look for that a child might be homeless, was minuscule. Actually, she began laughing when I asked her how widespread such knowledge was in her experience.

In short, the state has not made it a priority to disseminate information on McKinney-Vento and this attitude has permeated down to the school district and campus levels. My research partner admitted as much, saying that we needed to do a “better job” (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012) informing schools and other stakeholders about the law and general issues facing these vulnerable children. Judging by the informational push that has traditionally surrounded causes like the TAKS test or UIL eligibility rules, or even the ubiquitous blood borne pathogens video, it was obvious that the state could do a much more thorough job of disseminating information to the educational bureaucracy when it wanted. Indeed it could even be argued the state can achieve super saturation rates with certain information it deems ultra-important. It was simply a matter of which priorities were considered worthy of this extra effort and which were almost afterthoughts. It was telling to see which issues were prioritized; it would only make sense that they would be the ones that matter most to the policy makers and/or

those occupying steering roles at the top of the educational bureaucracy. I had to wonder if there would even be a policy or bureaucracy focused on the education of homeless children of Texas if there were no federal mandate.

Another significant consequence of this lack of prioritization revolved around a basic lack of enforcement capacity. There were over 1200 districts in the state of Texas in the 2012-13 school year; somewhere around 60 had subgrants with the state and therefore a more direct, supervisory relationship existed between the two. This sort of relationship appeared to have a positive impact on identifying homeless children in the district under study – an undeniable success for McKinney-Vento -- but even here we have seen that difficulties remained concerning helping students find academic success as well as overcoming traditional biases.

But, what about the vast majority of districts that did not have subgrants? What was happening here? Granted, several had different grants for dealing with homeless children, but the majority still possessed no direct relationship with the government to ensure their compliance with the law. There is but one office located outside Dallas dedicated to looking into compliance issues for the entire state; this is obviously insufficient for a place as large and populous as Texas. And while a helpline does exist and was reportedly very useful when accessed, one must ask how often it accessed relative to how many students are potentially eligible?

In Blue Sky's own district we uncovered an obvious example of a child who would have fallen through the cracks if he had not happened to reach out to the liaison on his own accord. How many others who were turned away unaware that such a helpline existed? How many students did not realize they were eligible for services when they are

living on a friend's sofa or their family was squeaking by week to week in a hotel? How many teachers who might have been able to help in many of these cases even knew about McKinney-Vento? I suspect further study, which I intend to conduct at a later date, would bear this out. I asked every single teacher on my own campus about McKinney-Vento and not one of them (out of eleven) had a clue about what the policy was or the existence of a helpline. The TEA administrator told me about districts she deals with who *actively* work to deny kids services to the point that she just calls the helpline as a matter of course rather than bothering to call them and getting the runaround.

Basically, there is much evidence pointing to the fact that there are plenty of areas where McKinney-Vento compliance has not occurred, whether by ignorance or design. And while there is a useful helpline and office looking into compliance issues, this hardly seems sufficient to uncover what is truly happening out there or force districts to adhere to the intent of the law. As further evidence, I return to the statistic that the district I investigated increased its homeless population tenfold upon receiving the greater scrutiny, such as it was, of a subgrant. The implications are obvious. Many children have been slipping through unseen in previous years and considering that the vast majority of districts do not have subgrants the potential number of such students who have missed out on being served over the years seems great.

Compounding the problem, when there is direct oversight such as occurs when a subgrant was issued, the compliance aspect of this oversight could actually provide a disincentive for a district to continue with the relationship due to its tedium and overly burdensome paperwork requirements. And using the Roll-A-Dex incident as evidence, one must wonder how effective this tedium is at any rate. Surely the level of compliance

enforcement could be increased to encompass and cast a wider net and made more user friendly for those districts that are trying to work with the state. What can hardly be denied is that more compliance and oversight are required if McKinney-Vento is to ever approach achieving its intended effect.

Another issue, possibly related to resources and time constraints, involves the dissemination of information about the policy. Quite simply it appeared that the same sort of informational needs seen at the district and campus level operated on the macro-level of the state as well. My research partner cited a need to do “staff development for teachers” and other “staff in schools” as well as groups such as the “student council” (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012). Basically, she called for a general publicity drive to enlighten as many people as possible about the issues and concerns surrounding the needs of homeless students. She thought such an awareness push would be especially useful for the identification of homeless students as they often “won’t tell” (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012) about their distress. It appeared that this informational piece was one of the most powerful ways in which the liaison could make the biggest difference in the life of homeless students. People and organizations “want to help” (TEA representative, conversation, October 17, 2012) she believed; if the liaison could facilitate the organization of a system to connect people who wanted to help with the students who need the assistance, this is where the really effective programs occurred. It was one of the main roles of her office to help facilitate this sort of synergy between community and school districts.

One final pertinent theme emerged from our dialogue. It was the same issue that had been highlighted by the district liaison and the Blue Sky principal, namely that the

schools in the region faced a serious, often unnoticed, problem of unaccompanied youth. In her opinion these children faced the toughest situations because they had nowhere to go and it was difficult for the system to identify them for services. Once again the solution to this issue needed to begin with an awareness campaign.

### **Summary**

Several important themes emerged from this investigation into the four places where the McKinney-Vento policy was turned into practice. Many of these themes spanned the boundaries between the different levels; a few were place specific. On the positive side, and encompassing the entire spectrum of locations, it seemed that where good work was happening it came from someone possessing a strong ethic of care and a sense of moral responsibility for helping homeless children and families. We saw this with each of my primary research partners as well as at the most effective districts that were highlighted by the TEA specialist. Emphasizing this point in an opposite fashion, it likewise seemed that wherever people were acting without this sense of moral responsibility was where the biggest problems arose, whether it be the principal trying to get rid of a kid because of his alleged drug use to local churches not wanting “those people” on their property. In other words, it seemed the ethic of caring was a critical component of any successful McKinney-Vento program.

Another commonality seen on all levels was a lack of resources. This manifested at the shelter level, where the organization was too busy to go beyond meeting people’s basic needs to worry about education, to the liaison not having enough time to identify all the students, to the TEA administrator labeling her program a “small fish.” Indeed, when

the federal government allots less than \$75 per homeless child per year (NAEH, 2012f), can there be any wonder that the entire system seemed pinched for resources?

Another theme present in the official educational system (i.e. this did not really apply to the shelter) was the general lack of information about McKinney-Vento amongst most teachers and other school staff. Quite simply, such knowledge was not nearly as pervasive as it could or should have been. Indicative of this was the liaison and principal describing how they had to piece together their understandings of the policy as they went along, as well as the TEA homeless service specialist admitting that the state needed to do a better job in this area.

There were some location specific findings related to the shelter as well. In the main the shelter environment and structure were hardly conducive to a homeless child's academic well being. It was too chaotic and transitory. Even when we came in with the reading program and tried to help with this issue, the lack of coherent structure at the shelter made this exceedingly difficult to accomplish.

Overall, the main issue conspiring against the successful implementation of McKinney-Vento at all four levels was a basic lack prioritization. This started with the state, which barely funded the policy to begin with and certainly did not provide it sufficient staffing to ensure that districts and schools were following the intent of the law. It was seen at the district level where the liaison was almost an afterthought position, given many extra duties besides working with homeless kids and even expelled from the central administrative building. It was seen on the campus level where teachers were almost universally ignorant of McKinney-Vento or the signs that a child was struggling with homelessness. It was seen at the shelter level where staff wondered why we



bothered to trying to help these kids learn since they would just move on in a short time anyway. Sadly, this lack of prioritization was all too similar to society's approach to homelessness for a long time (Kusmer, 2002; Rossi, 1989) and might very well be the biggest obstacle to ever making a true dent in this problem.

And there is no doubt it is a problem that is not going away. Watching the children at the shelter for but a short time, this much was obvious. And remember, this is with the children who have been identified by the system. All levels of the educational bureaucracy acknowledged that they were underidentifying children, perhaps to a great extent. We had no idea how these unidentified children were doing. Judging from the ones we are aware of at the shelter it seemed very likely they were not doing too well. Staggering numbers of kids at Green Heart struggled with their reading, writing, and speaking. It was more or less the same story concerning the learning of homeless children we have known about for the past few decades (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Newman, 1999; Stronge & Popp, 1999; Vanderstaay, 1992; Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 1999). We also know what the future holds for many of these children if their academic issues are not properly attended to (DeSena & Ansalone, 2009; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Waters & Harris, 2009; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). It is a chilling proposition.

Fortunately, there were a few bright spots, illuminated by people acting out of an ethic of caring, that pointed the way to a better future. We would be wise to follow their lead. Time is running short for far too many children. I will close this paper with some concrete recommendations for making this happen.



## CHAPTER VI

### POSSIBILITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

*Shane's father, Greg, often felt like a beaten man. A naturally hardworking, soft-tempered person, the past three-plus years increasingly fostered within him feelings of anger and worthlessness, emotions which hardly made him feel any better. In many ways it was a downward cycle that required all his mental strength just to keep plugging along each day. He had incessantly worked odd jobs and sought better paying employment since his beloved wife had fallen ill and their troubles began, but what opportunities were available (and of which he always partook) never paid sufficiently to keep his family afloat while simultaneously enabling him to sock away enough for deposits and such to get a place of their own. Rents were simply too high and wages too low. This seemed to be The American Way nowadays. It certainly wasn't like this in his father's time, that was for sure.*

*He had even uprooted from his multigenerational hometown of Springfield, Missouri, in order to benefit from the supposedly strong economy of Texas, the land where everyone had great jobs and low taxes. Ha! What jobs he had found in this "utopia" barely paid minimum wage, certainly not enough to get his family back on its feet. Soon after Greg brought his family there to live with his brother they were forced to the streets after the landlord discovered their presence. Why it mattered, since they*

*hardly caused any fuss, Greg couldn't figure, but he was not about to see his little brother's family put out due to big brother's troubles.*

*What had followed was a nightmare of moving from campsite to shelter to car and back again to various shelters. His daughter Mary had seen violence beyond her youth in these years of trial. Shane (well-behaved Shane!) had developed a rebellious streak. His other daughter, Hope, had been born in the midst of all this mess, which, of course, only made it that much more difficult to cope with and get the family back upright. The ordeal had also made his beloved wife even sicker, making it harder for her to contribute beyond simply loving the young baby who had known nothing but homelessness her entire short life.*

*Greg felt beat down by the enormity of everything he faced, the sheer impossibility of it all. He had lost his son along the way, Mary barely spoke anymore and when she did it was with a stutter. His wife seemed to withdraw into herself a little further everyday. This was hardly the life to provide his sweet Hope! But, what could he do? I'll tell you what. He would continue to work, try to save, and deal with the humiliation dispensed at various welfare bureaucracies as he sought help for his family. He **WOULD** get his family back on its feet. It was simply a matter of time. He knew that if he ever stopped believing all was lost. As long as he had hope he could keep going on.*

McKinney-Vento has promised to ensure that homelessness does not cause a child's academic failure. This is what the policy says it supposed to do and I am going to take Congress – the body that created the policy and is ultimately in charge of its fate -- at its word while making my recommendations for how it can better live up to this promise. That being said, I fully acknowledge that some of these recommendations require a

serious rethinking of how society addresses the issue of homelessness in general. They entail a higher level of social and political commitment to directing more resources to the effort of grappling with this crisis, assuming, once again, that the stated objective of McKinney-Vento is anything more than a platitudinous catchphrase designed so we can pat ourselves on our collective backs, content with the knowledge that we have “done something.” We can, and should, do better than this. Here are some ideas for moving us in that direction.

I follow these recommendations with some suggestions for further research. I then close by returning to my original research questions to see what sort of answers the data uncovered and to wrap up the storylines of the family we met earlier.

### **First Recommendation: Awareness**

One of the most persistent themes that emerged from the data was a general lack of awareness about McKinney-Vento and the education of homeless children in general. At the shelters this resulted in learning issues being almost an afterthought. At the school and district level it manifested in teachers being ignorant of the policy when they might have otherwise been brought into the fold as allies. At the state level we saw that the government is extremely limited in its knowledge of the extent of how many eligible children are being denied services by intent or mistake. Simply put, the level of awareness of this important policy and the children it is supposed to serve is far too insufficient to accomplish its intended goal.

Increasing this awareness is one of the most important steps that can be taken to improve this deficit. For the shelters, this would mean attaching a new sense of importance to academic issues. When a homeless youth is residing at a shelter it is often

the place where they are going to spend more of their time than anywhere else. If homeless students are to have any hope of keeping abreast of their studies, or begin to repair any academic damage they might have sustained during the ordeal that led them to lose their housing in the first place, the shelter must play a key role in making this happen.

To that end then shelters must organize concrete plans for helping their young residents address any academic needs they might have while they are living there. At the very minimum, these plans should strive to create stable, quiet, non-distracting, and consistent settings for students to study so that they do not fall further behind than they already likely are. Optimally, these plans would include a systematic tutoring component so children could begin to directly address their personal academic needs, especially the reading, math, and language skills so foundational to all kinds of formalized learning.

The most obvious way for this to occur would be for the shelter and school where the child attends to collaborate on crafting personalized learning plans. Once again, the most important component here would be for the shelter and school to become more aware of this issue and work together to come up with a solution that would benefit the children that are their mutual interest. This could be modeled on the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) system already familiar to schools from their Special Education Programs. While it would not need to be as formalized or paperwork-intensive as the IEP system, it would not be too burdensome for schools to communicate with a shelter about the youths living with them. The schools could highlight a child's personalized learning needs and help the shelter craft a realistic and academically valid game plan for addressing them as specifically as possible. The potential dividends from these efforts

could mean the difference between a youth repairing a learning deficit or falling further behind.

The shelters could even appeal to the wider community for assistance with implementing this plan. This would serve the twin purposes of availing them of untapped resources that might be utilized to help students overcome some of the many obstacles in their path, as well as working to dispel some of the deficit stereotypes about homeless people as more of the community gets to know them as human beings rather than caricatures. It has been my experience working with schools and communities that there are many people out there with the talent and desire to help their fellow humans, especially youth, if they are only brought into the fold of a systematic organization that enables them to focus their efforts at doing so. I suspect that a concerted effort on the part of shelters to reach out to community resources might very well tap into a veritable gold mine of skills and talents.

For instance, the shelter where I volunteered lies within a stone's throw of a major university as well as a large retirement home. I have talked to several people connected with this university and the majority was unaware there was a large homeless shelter almost on their back doorstep. I cannot help but wonder how many students at that university, which has a large school of education, would be willing to provide tutoring to the shelter's children, volunteer work that would likely provide the college student with just as much reciprocal benefit as the youth who might therefore actually pass a class they would otherwise fail. There is also an excellent chance that there is retiree sitting across the street from the shelter who would love the opportunity to fill a vacant hour or two listening to a child read, thereby increasing his or her fluency in the process as well

as making an invaluable human connection. In most cases this would require minimal commitment on the part of the volunteer, but it could pay big dividends for a child struggling to read or graduate from high school.

However, it must be stressed that to get the most return on this investment it would need to be an organized and systematic effort. This is why the collaboration piece between school and shelter would be so critical. Schools have the expertise and tools to assess a child's academic needs and they could best direct the shelters on how to address them. Blue Sky attempted to establish an evening tutoring plan at their campus and it was unsuccessful because the targeted students did not show up. It was very likely that some, if not most, of the problem lay with transportation issues; not surprisingly, most homeless children do not possess access to transportation making it nearly impossible for them to stay after school. In a situation such as this it makes more sense to move the program to the location where the kids spend most of their time out of school.

The parents should also be brought into this endeavor to as great an extent as possible. Besides the positive interaction that could transpire between parent and child in this setting – healthy on its own merit -- it would also offer an excellent opportunity for the shelter to begin to address any academic needs the parent might have. At the very least, it would likely be most productive for the children if a parent were involved with the endeavor. Therefore, they should be included in the formation and implementation of the plan to as great an extent as possible. The key, again, is making more players within the shelter milieu aware of the importance and possibilities of designing programs to help homeless children receive their education.



For schools and districts, the awareness issue centers mainly on bringing the untapped resource of caring teachers and other staff to bear on finding eligible children as well as new solutions to the problem of educating students. I already mentioned the collaborative piece of schools getting together with shelters to help with student learning. Besides this, the most critical issue schools must address concerns the need to increase the pervasiveness of information about McKinney-Vento and youth homelessness amongst their staff. This is especially the case for teachers and others who have direct interaction with homeless children or their families. A major reason for this is to help identify eligible youth in the first place; the greater the quantity of informed eyes searching for homeless or precariously housed children, the more we will find. And there is no group of people better situated within the school milieu to uncover this kind of information than teachers. This might be the most important of all the recommendations I make. Teachers must be made more aware of the law, the multifarious needs of homeless children in general, and the signs to look for that a student may have lost, or be on the verge of losing, their housing.

Losing one's shelter is an intensely personal and often shameful experience that many naturally prefer to keep private. I was recently privy to a heartbreaking illustration of this when my son's 7 year-old best friend told him his "big secret" in a hushed whisper: "We used to sleep in our van." This was a child whose seven-member family had lived with us for a couple months<sup>3</sup> in cramped and intimate quarters; we definitely

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<sup>3</sup> This was the frustratingly simple step it took for them to get off the streets ever since; there is no reason this could not occur with *many* more homeless families if *we* wanted to make it happen.

knew each other well. He had been my son's best friend for over a year. Yet he obviously felt shame for what had happened to him. If my son's friend still felt the need to hide his homelessness from those to whom he was close and had actually lived with, imagine how difficult it must be for a student to open up in a school setting. However, if a child is going to do so, it will most likely happen with a teacher or other someone else on campus who has forged a bond of trust with the child. These are the kinds of personal connections that often occur at school. This being the case it is imperative that the adults forming these types of relationships with students are informed of McKinney-Vento and homelessness issues so they can better identify and help vulnerable youth procure the assistance they need to survive their ordeal with as little trauma as possible.

This is where the liaison should intervene to ensure that this information spreading process occurs throughout the district. Quite frankly, it is unacceptable that most teachers and other educational staff are largely unaware of these subjects considering their import and that the policy has been in place for well over two decades. This fact alone shows that McKinney-Vento has failed to some measure, as the policy mandates that awareness be increased amongst stakeholders. Districts must rectify this shortfall if they are to fully implement the Act within their own organizations.

To that end then the liaison must establish a strong professional development program to educate the *entire* district of the policy and its intents. This instruction must include the basics of the law and its mandates for schools. It must contain information to counter the deficit thinking surrounding the issue of homelessness in general and the blaming of homeless people for what they are going through. As the TEA representative insightfully stated to me, *even if* the parents of these students have perhaps made

decisions that have contributed to their family being in this situation, what does this have to do with their children? Surely, if someone feels the need to ascribe blame it cannot be pinned on the kids. Besides, what does blame have to do with improving the odds that this experience will not haunt the students well into the future? There is a long history in the United States of blaming the homeless for the ordeal they are going through and what good has this accomplished? Whatever the validity of this viewpoint, it matters little for helping lead vulnerable students down a path where they can overcome the obstacles they face and reach a more productive and self-actualized future. What happens tomorrow should be our focus, not ascribing blame for what happened yesterday. This nonjudgmental mindset, this focus on what matters most in the future, must be embraced by the liaison and communicated to the entire district. It must be repeated consistently and in many different forums. While deficit thinking will likely always exist in some way, shape, or form, the more people in the district can look past these kids as objects to be harshly judged, become aware of their mutual humanity, the closer the district will move towards serving them in the manner McKinney-Vento intended.

Another way the liaison might fundamentally improve how a district serves their homeless students is to make the wider community more aware of their McKinney-Vento efforts. My assumption here is that the more the community is aware that such students and families exist within their midst, the more likely it is that new resources and solutions will be brought to bear to help with the situation. I asked the TEA administrator to provide examples of districts doing excellent work with their homeless population. In addition to listing several, she explained that one of the common denominators in these

highly effective organizations was a district liaison that had managed to vibrantly involve the local community in their McKinney-Vento efforts.

I then arranged a conversation with a liaison from one of these highlighted districts in which we discussed what made her district so effective. She told me that other than having the clear backing of her superintendent and the time needed to accomplish her duties as she thought best, there was nothing more critical than the support of the local community. This assistance involved everything from churches donating presents to every single graduating senior to service organizations providing free school supplies. She described the building of this network as a slow and organic process that gained momentum as it expanded and knowledge of its existence reached more people in the community. She had been in the district for several years, growing her support and expanding the base of those informed of McKinney-Vento during this time. These efforts increasingly paid dividends as more people became aware of what was occurring and offered their help in various forms. The end result was that homeless children were better served. And once again we can see that this outreach served the twin purposes of bringing needed resources to bear for a cause that can use as much help as possible and educating the community about homelessness within their midst. In other words, there is little doubt that a liaison would be well served to take the cause of educating homeless students out into the open of the community of which the school and these children are a part. This is where truly powerful McKinney-Vento programs are born.

A similar rededication to dramatically increasing awareness of McKinney-Vento and the issues facing homeless children in general must come from the state level. This entails the state treating the Act with a new sense of urgency. It must dedicate the same

level of resources and commitment to serving homeless students that it provides such causes as standardized testing, where virtually the entire state public education system comes screeching to a halt to ensure that everyone follows the letter of the law. One might wonder what could happen if but a small percentage of these resources were directed toward ensuring that McKinney-Vento was as thoroughly implemented. It would definitely be interesting to see.

Note, I am hardly arguing that Texas approach the dissemination of McKinney-Vento awareness in the exact manner it does TAKS or STAAR testing. The point is that the state educational bureaucracy has proven it can effectively disseminate information down the bureaucratic chain of command when it chooses to do so. I do not believe it would be a stretch to apply some of this same sort of effort to serving homeless children. *It is possible to greatly increase the awareness of this problem and the options that exist to procure systemic assistance. All it takes is a will on the part of the state to make it happen.* Texas already has plenty of bureaucratic structures in place, used to pass along information such as UIL rules or Special Education inclusion mandates. It needs to apply these same labors to McKinney-Vento. This change alone would likely greatly increase the amount and quality of the homeless services provided to needy youth. There is no reason this cannot happen almost immediately if the will were there.

This finally points us in the direction of the Department of Education and Congress. Ultimately, they are the bodies responsible for the nation's response to this important issue affecting millions of Americans. If the leadership at the top of this system wanted to dramatically increase the awareness and import of McKinney-Vento, they have the means at their disposal to do so. The model for information distribution in the

nation's education system is clearly available, as evidenced, for example, in the successful push it conducted to implement NCLB. If the will was there for McKinney-Vento, this could happen here too. It is past time that it did.

### **Second Recommendation: Resources**

Another problematic issue seen at every location during the investigation involved a consistent resource shortage. At the shelter, this meant that there was not enough left after supplying basic needs to focus on academics. At the school the principal had to scramble for information due to the lack of a strong support network. The liaison struggled to find time to accomplish everything she thought needed to be done. The TEA administrator described her office as a "small fish" in the schema of state policy.

Again the onus lies at the top of the bureaucratic ladder to create a change in this situation. Starting with Congress and on down through the Department of Education and TEA, more resources must be allocated to the cause of homeless education. There is no way around this. The money provided for McKinney-Vento at the current time is nowhere close to sufficient.

However, even without an infusion of money from the federal or state government, districts can still take steps to better their McKinney-Vento programs on their own. Most importantly, district leadership must give the liaison the resources needed to thoroughly address the basic mechanics of the job; for example, provide the time to thoroughly identify all homeless students. This is critical. At the very least this entails freeing the liaison from extraneous duties if the district is of sufficient size to require this level of support. Once again, as we have seen with examples like the athletic director, districts are more than capable of rearranging resources for causes they consider

important enough to do so. They need to treat homeless children with at least the same level of prioritization as football.

As part of this increased resource effort district leadership must also make it widely known that the liaison has the backing of the administration and that it will be considered unacceptable to obstruct them while they carry out their McKinney-Vento duties. According to everyone I spoke with, having this level of top administrative support was absolutely imperative. Given that we can almost guarantee that there is going to be at least some level of prejudice and/or deficit type thinking existent in every organization – this attitude has simply permeated society’s view of homelessness for such a long time – someone like the superintendent or similarly clear authority figure must be visibly unambiguous in declaring that the liaison deserves everyone’s full support. Making this clear from the very beginning can help avoid potential situations such as the one where the liaison was forced to fight simply to get a school to follow the most basic tenet of the law. It could also help convince different players in the system, from principals to teachers to registrars, that this is an important issue that needs to be taken seriously. And there is no reason this cannot be implemented immediately as it requires little change other than a visible show of support.

Ultimately, though, if society truly wants to make a sizable dent in this issue the entire concept of shelter must be redesigned and this undoubtedly requires a much greater infusion of resources. For example, there is a serious problem with shelters placing short-term limits on the length of time people are allowed to stay. While there are obviously various reasons for this stipulation, one of the consequences of this revolving door approach is for a child to experience an unstable and chaotic existence that we *know* is

going to hurt them academically. There is simply no way around this. As long as children are forced to bounce around from one temporary housing situation to another we know their learning is going to suffer. So, once again, if McKinney-Vento is to ever live up to its stated objective of making sure a child's homelessness is not cause for their academic failure, this situation must be fixed. A child's residence must be made more stable or their learning will suffer. Obviously, this entails an increase in resources so that infrastructure and staffing can be redesigned to accommodate the necessary changes. However, this is what we must face if we are truly committed to ensuring that society's homeless children have a realistic chance at achieving their full academic potential.

Beyond the basic morality of expending greater levels of resources to better address this problem, my suspicion is that the economic cost of changing the fundamental concept of shelter for homeless families would more than pay for itself if we had longitudinal data that demonstrated how extended bouts of homelessness negatively impact academic achievement and how vigorous intervention of the kind described above can effectively counteract this effect. This could then be correlated with research on the societal costs of such metrics as dropping out or illiteracy and compared to how much is spent redesigning the shelters. My suspicion is that it would cost less in pure dollar terms – to say nothing of the morality – to spend the money on re-envisioning the concept of shelter rather than devoting the resources to dealing with the fallout of a broken system. This sort of analysis has never been done to my knowledge, but it very much seems like a worthy research project for someone to undertake.

The need for a higher level of commitment is especially grave regarding shelters that force families to the streets each morning when they close down until reopening in



the evening. This type of shelter is usually of the very short-term variety as well. Living like this is, by definition, unstable and disruptive, as families bounce around from different housing – or the streets – from night to night, shoved out the front door when the sun comes up to who knows where. Forcing a child to live like this clearly places them at exceptional risk for academic damage. It is hard to see how anyone in such a situation would not be so affected. To put it simply, we must reframe our concept of shelter to a more long-term, stable, nurturing concept if we are to ever truly make McKinney-Vento the kind of program it claims to be. There is no way around this. To act otherwise is to deny the reality of the situation.

### **Third Recommendation: Compliance**

My final recommendation is to change how we ensure districts comply with McKinney-Vento. The burden for making this change falls on both the federal government, which should demand this happened throughout the country, and TEA, which could easily take steps to make it happen independent of the national government.

First, the subgrant auditing process must be made much simpler and more streamlined. The district I investigated in my study received less than \$30,000, yet they were forced to expend more energy on this small sum of money than they did for another federal grant worth several million. This must be changed. I talked to an administrator of another district who had dropped out of the subgrant program several years back and he confirmed that one of the primary reasons they did so was the hassle of compliance. This is simply unacceptable. There are enough problems facing this policy without its primary advocates at the state level adding compliance minutiae to them. This needs to be fixed.

But the bigger compliance issue by far is the fact that most districts in Texas have no direct relationship between themselves and the state McKinney-Vento administration. Unless a district has a subgrant, or someone files a complaint, there is virtually no meaningful communication between the two concerning homeless children. In other words, no one is bothering to check how compliant districts are being with the policy. No one is determining if information about the policy is being distributed as it is supposed to be. No one is making sure registrars are not illegally or accidentally turning away kids without allegedly necessary paperwork. No one is looking into how thoroughly districts are identifying precariously housed youth.

In other words, the state has duly passed along news of the McKinney-Vento mandate to the more than one thousand school districts it oversees and is more or less just hoping that they follow the law. If there are any problems, TEA is largely relying upon the victims – these belonging to a long-marginalized group whom we know are hesitant to bring attention to their homelessness – to report violations of a policy of which the majority of people are ignorant, to a hotline they *might* be aware of. Using as evidence my own district that increased its numbers from 30 to around 400 after they received a subgrant and liaison with more time to investigate, it seems obvious to say that this method of self-reporting does not appear to be working.

At the very least, the state needs to add a compliance office in each Regional Center with sufficient staff to make regular audits and spot checks to see how individual districts are doing. These offices could also be of great service in the dissemination of information mentioned above. At any rate they would need to make themselves visibly well known to the districts within their region. This more noticeable presence alone

would likely increase the level of McKinney-Vento implementation simply on account of districts having a tangible example of the new level of seriousness the state is now treating the policy.

### **Overview**

I have made three main recommendations regarding how to make the McKinney-Vento Act a more effective tool to positively intervene in the lives of homeless students. The first involves greatly increasing the awareness of this policy and the plight of homeless children in general. The most powerful and effective examples I found of homeless children being served revolved around kind hearted individuals wanting to help out due to a personal moral code and ethos of caring. I believe there are many more such sources of hope out there with the ability and willingness to help, people like teachers, who are unaware of the scope of this problem facing the United States. Bringing more of these resources to the table is a critical step in making a dent in this pressing issue. Awareness must lead the way in accomplishing this.

The second recommendation involved increasing the resources dedicated to the McKinney-Vento effort. To be blunt, state and federal governments must allocate more money on the Act or it stands no chance of meeting its stated goal. On a more micro level, school districts must provide their liaison with ample resources to sufficiently accomplish their duties. Ultimately, though, if this problem is to ever truly be “solved” the entire concept of shelter must be re-conceptualized and sufficiently funded in order to create a more stable and holistic design where children and families can thrive, not just be temporarily housed before they are shipped off elsewhere.

The final recommendation concerned the state creating a new level of compliance surveillance for McKinney-Vento. As it currently stands we have no clue how compliant the more than one thousand districts in Texas are doing with their identification and service of homeless students as mandated by the law. This study found clear evidence that some are being lost in the system. The potential for the number of such students to be large seems quite possible. The state must put more focus on finding out what is going on in the districts it oversees and ensuring that the law is not being broken, either by design or accident. The homeless youth of Texas deserve nothing less.

Ultimately, all three of these recommendations demand that society – policy makers, state bureaucrats, school districts, teachers, shelters, all of us – give the issue of educating homeless children the level of urgency it deserves. We must make it a priority and act accordingly. How many students have we lost in the past decades by not treating it as such? How many are we losing now? At what point will we say enough is enough?

### **Further Research**

The longitudinal data that will now be available on a macro scale due to the inclusion of a homeless category on the state PEIMS system offers an intriguing opportunity to dig into the long-term impact homelessness has on academic achievement. Students who experience homelessness in Texas can now be tracked through the system even after they are no longer homeless. And while this tracking could have been done by an individual district before this, it was bulky and would have involved great effort. To do so on the state level would have been next to impossible.

Now, however, it should be relatively easy to anonymously and longitudinally track homeless students and compare the data to all sorts of different variables. This

could bring us closer to a more definitive answer about how homelessness impacts a student's academic development. Right now we are safe to say it often has a negative impact, perhaps profoundly so. And while we can describe some of the effects of this impact such as language and math problems, we still lack important metrics like how homelessness at different ages or lengths impacts the propensity for dropping out of school. There is currently no way to calculate, on a macro or longitudinal scale, how a bout of homelessness affects an outcome such as graduation. Presumably, most students who become homeless for an extended length of time are going to suffer some measurable long-term impact. This would likely manifest in ways such as low test scores or higher rates of dropping out. Yet there exists no mechanism to track a student who, for instance, becomes homeless for six months in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, to see how they do in high school. Is their reading level demonstrably lower than someone who never experienced homelessness? Do they drop out at greater rates? Do they get in trouble more often? Is there a difference in becoming homeless in middle versus elementary school?

This is the kind of data that would get a district and public's attention, the sort of information that might induce society to put greater focus on serving homeless students (assuming it showed that homelessness does indeed have a negative effect). And while it has been impossible to gather and track such data in the past, at least on a macro level, it is possible to do so now that Texas has added a homeless category in PEIMS – the state's demographic and academic performance data tracking system. It needs to begin following this data longitudinally and analyzing it so that we can get a better grasp on how homelessness impacts students and society. This tracking must start immediately and the findings broadcast throughout the entire education system. This newly available PEIMS

data could take us a step or two closer to answering these important questions and must therefore be studied in more detail as it emerges.

A second area that bears further investigation concerns the unaccompanied youth that kept arising during the conversations with my school, district, and TEA participants. All listed this homeless subpopulation as a hidden crisis facing their particular loci of concern. Each agreed these were the kids whom their organizations were most often overlooking as well as the ones requiring the most assistance to overcome their homeless situation. Everyone seemed to believe that unaccompanied youth were present in the system to a much greater extent than recognized. It would be useful if someone would investigate this charge to measure the extent of this problem and what might be done to address it.

*The clock was ticking on the family's welcome at the shelter. There was a more or less three-month limit to the length of "residency" there and it had been 10 weeks now. Greg had attempted to save money for a deposit, and had actually come pretty close to doing so, but then the baby had fallen ill and he had lost nearly two weeks pay dealing with the crisis. Their savings were now exhausted and things looked bleak.*

*On the bright side, Mary had actually bonded with a teacher at her latest school, one who had pushed for testing that diagnosed a speech problem that could be easily addressed with a bit of therapy. Unfortunately, the paperwork and whatnot to get the process initiated took several weeks to complete and now the school year was coming to an end. They wanted Mary to see the therapist over the summer to get the help she needed, but Greg didn't see how he could pull that off and still use their unreliable car to get to work. Obviously, making money had to take precedence at this point in time. And*

*his wife Callie was certainly not up to the task of catching the bus across town three times per week with Mary and baby in tow.*

*It turned out to be a moot point, anyway. Faced with eviction and no place to turn, Greg decided to move back to Missouri in an attempt to pick up the pieces in his home state. Mary would just have to get the help she needed at a different school.*

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In closing, I would like to briefly return to the questions that originally guided this inquiry:

1. *How is McKinney-Vento being implemented at different levels of the educational system, including identification, learning, and support?*

On the face of it, not very thoroughly. It would seem that its more tangible, managerial-type tasks are the ones being most successfully implemented. Included here are accomplishments such as providing liaisons the legal backing to force open doors when unsympathetic school leaders are attempting to keep them closed. They also include positive developments such as allowing homeless children to maintain their school of origin attendance even when they move out of district. I uncovered numerous instances of this, all of which were quite consistent with the literature on the subject (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Miller, 2011). I find it hard to believe that this would be the case without the pressure of McKinney-Vento.

That being said, it appears the policy is falling well short of the mark in several other important areas. Concerning identification, everyone I talked to at the school, district, and state level acknowledged that many children were falling through the cracks, especially unaccompanied youth. Likewise, the extensive lack of information about the

needs and legal requirements regarding homeless education throughout the entire school system definitely counteracted the identification process.

A similar situation surrounded the learning aspect of the policy. While some lip service is paid to learning in the wording of the Act, and some efforts were made in this direction as far as providing tutoring was concerned, I did not discover any systematic approaches to help provide homeless students with the academic assistance the literature tells us they likely need. The widespread ignorance of the issue amongst the general teaching staff also reinforced this conclusion.

Finally, the level of support provided to those implementing the policy clearly leaves much to be desired. Once again, the fact that most teachers and staff have no clue about McKinney-Vento speaks volumes. And while I did find several complimentary reviews of the state bureaucracy regarding their ability to answer specific questions when they were posed, there also emerged equally strong feelings on the part of the principal and liaison of having to navigate their way through the ins and outs of this complex issue and policy with very little guidance. If these are the opinions expressed by trained professionals, imagine what it must be like for a homeless family attempting to procure services they might not even know exist. Clearly more support could, and should, be provided.

2. *How does the McKinney-Vento bureaucratic framework impact the practice of the policy?*

From what I could tell, the bureaucratic structure of school, district, and region did not present any major barriers to the implementation of McKinney-Vento. The different people within the bureaucracy seemed to have little problem communicating



with each other. There also seemed to be relative high levels of coherence between the different layers when each was on board with, and relatively knowledgeable of, what the Act entailed. In other words, McKinney-Vento did not seem to suffer from any bureaucratic morass resulting from burdensome amounts of red tape. This is definitely a positive.

The main problem actually seemed to lie in the opposite direction. Instead of struggling with too extensive of a bureaucracy to accomplish a coherent goal, the bureaucracy was too small to achieve pervasiveness. This was exemplified when the principal attempted to defy the law by preventing a student from enrolling, even though this was clearly within his rights. If the McKinney-Vento bureaucratic framework was sufficiently pervasive to act as both an information source and enforcer this would not likely have occurred. Likewise, my research partners would not have felt so alone when figuring out how to navigate the Act if there had been a more supportive bureaucracy in place to help them do so.

Ironically, the one place the enforcement did seem truly comprehensive actually provided a disincentive to the policy's implementation. In this case the overly exhaustive compliance procedure accompanying the subgrant process left the school district wondering if it was even worth the effort for such a small amount of money.

Overall, it seems the McKinney-Vento bureaucratic framework leans in the direction of working effectively and I uncovered several instances where it appeared to be doing so. However, it also appears as if this effort is hardly sufficient to the task at hand. That being said, there are still definite grounds for optimism. The soil has been prepared for a more extensive infrastructure to be sown. The task lies more with

increasing its reach rather than reinventing its form. There is an effective bureaucracy in place waiting for an infusion of resources. The effort could yield great dividends.

*3. How effectively does the government ensure compliance with McKinney-Vento?*

Quite frankly, it does not ensure compliance very effectively at all. Again, the one area in which the state did utilize a microscope to look at details closely – during the subgrant compliance episode -- was more of a deterrent than incentive for districts to get on board with McKinney-Vento. Other than this there was very little evidence of direct state oversight to ensure districts are complying with the Act's mandates. There is no government entity charged with determining how thoroughly districts are implementing the policy nor how well homeless students are being served. How many children are being turned away by unsympathetic or misinformed schools? How many administrators are conspiring to deny school of origin transportation to save money? The hard truth is we have no idea because no one is bothering to investigate these things.

Even harder to stomach is the reason no one is bothering to investigate. To put it bluntly, it is because McKinney-Vento is not considered very important by our schools, our government, or our society. And if it is not a priority, why would we bother to investigate how well it is doing? No doubt, it would be a difficult and expensive task to uncover what is truly happening and ensure that what needs to get done to help homeless children actually occurs. It is clearly much more manageable to measure attendance rates of the kids we can find. It is obviously much more cost effective to rely upon self-reporting when a student is denied access or transportation, rather than create an effective compliance infrastructure. Once again though, we know that unless we address these issues there is very little chance we are going to ever make a lasting dent in this problem.

If we truly believe it is an issue worth our attention, an important affair that impacts the very future of our democratic society, we must approach it with a greater level of seriousness and commitment. Otherwise we are doing little more than treading water and hoping we do not drown at some point in the future.

*Shane eventually entered the state CPS and foster care system. Once there he bounced from home to home within this Byzantine network, eventually dropping out of school. After aging out of foster care, he ended up passing through a running series of flophouses, couches, and camps, developing a semi-major substance abuse problem along the way. In his mid-twenties he cleaned up, finding a steady, if low paying, fast food job, apartment, and girlfriend. He doesn't talk to his family much anymore as they live so far away; besides, he still struggles to cope with what he went through as an adolescent and talking to them just brings up bad memories. He and his girlfriend are expecting their first child in six months and he knows he needs to earn more money to give his growing family the life he wishes them to have, the one he was denied. To this end he is planning on looking into getting his GED and a better job the next chance that arises...*

*Mary finally ended up getting the speech therapy she needed after bouncing around four schools in three different cities. She speaks without stuttering now, and even seems to be coming out of her shell a bit after years of painful introversion. Living in a stable home for the past three years has had a calming influence and she no longer acts out so aggressively or emotionally at school. Granted, she periodically suffers from night terrors, but this too seems to have dissipated in recent months. Her most noticeable academic impact from the ordeal is a learning disability in reading and math. Mary is*

*several grade levels behind her classmates in these areas. She is in mostly Special Education classes in an effort to remediate, but as she heads closer to high school it looks more and more likely she will never catch up to the point where something like college will be a realistic goal. These sorts of concerns are beyond Mary's daily thinking, however. Mainly she dreams of some day going to live with her brother Shane in Texas...*

*Hope was probably the biggest academic casualty of the whole affair.*

*Experiencing the worst of the family's travails in the crucial first few years of her life, the child struggles to read even the most basic of words. After attending several different schools on a transient basis, Hope entered third grade at her Kansas City neighborhood campus, where she has been ever since. However, she has shown little inclination to even attempt to formally read. She is a fidgety, nervous, and loud child. There is nothing really aggressive or mean-spirited about her behavior, she simply cannot sit still long enough to focus on learning. Her parents and teachers are at wits end as she prepares to graduate into middle school, wondering what options they have. The counselors and medical professionals that have looked at Hope have diagnosed her with one of the most extreme cases of ADHD they have ever seen. Hope is now heavily medicated much of the time in an effort to counteract this condition. There has been little reason for optimism up to this point that the drugs are helping pave the path to a more successful academic future. Perhaps she will just grow out of it...*

## **APPENDIX A**

### **SAMPLE INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDES**

#### ***Initial Interview Guide for the District Liaison (Partial)***

1. How do you keep yourself informed about issues concerning homeless students?
2. What are the biggest issues facing homeless parents?
3. How do you keep yourself informed about issues facing homeless parents?
4. What do you believe are the main causes of homelessness?
5. What do you believe is the general solution to homelessness?
6. Is homelessness a societal or individual problem?

#### ***Initial Interview Guide for the Campus Principal (partial)***

1. Please describe your role and duties as principal regarding McKinney-Vento compliance.
2. How did you become involved in education? How long?
3. Why did you get into school administration?
4. What do you know about McKinney-Vento?
5. How do you find information concerning McKinney-Vento?
6. What do you know about homelessness in general?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION AND CONSENT FORM**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Keith Cunningham, doctoral candidate at Texas State University. The purpose of this study is to examine how the McKinney-Vento Act for the education of homeless students is being implemented in public schools. In particular, this qualitative investigation will explore how those implementing the policy at various levels of the bureaucratic system interpret and feel about the policy and how it is working. You were selected as a possible participant for this study because of your role within this framework and the knowledge about this position you can provide.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, confidential and separate from normal work duties.

If you are interested in participating in this study and would like additional information, please contact Keith Cunningham via email at [kc1042@txstate.edu](mailto:kc1042@txstate.edu) or by phone: 555-666-7777.

Thank you,

Keith Cunningham  
Texas State University – San Marcos  
Doctoral Candidate

**Consent Form Principle Investigator/Researcher:** Keith Cunningham, doctoral candidate, Texas State University – San Marcos, [kc1042@txstate.edu](mailto:kc1042@txstate.edu), 555.666.7777

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Miguel Guajardo, Ph.D., Associate Professor for Educational Administration, [mg50@txstate.edu](mailto:mg50@txstate.edu), 512.215.9999

**THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY IN THE EDUCATIONAL LIVES OF OUR MOST VULNERABLE YOUTH: THE MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT AND HOMELESS CHILDREN A CRITICAL POLICY ETHNOGRAPHY**

You being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the qualitative study. The researcher conducting this research study will also describe the study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to participate. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with Texas State University. To end your participation, simply notify the researcher that you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your records.

**The PURPOSE of this qualitative investigation is to explore how those charged with implanting McKinney-Vento in our public schools interpret, understand, and feel about the policy and the education of homeless youth in general.**

**If you agree to this study, I will ask you to do the following:**

- ☐ Participate in two video-recorded individual interviews about your understandings of and experience working with McKinney-Vento and homeless students.
- ☐ Participate in one video-recorded, focus group session with four other participants exploring McKinney-Vento and the education of homeless youth.

**Risks and benefits of participating in this study:**

- ☐ Risks of participation in this study are minimal and expected to be no greater than everyday life activities.
- ☐ Participation in this study is expected to benefit participants by engaging them in a reflective conversation about meeting the educational needs of one of the nation's most vulnerable student populations amidst a backdrop of education policy.
- ☐ Homeless youth are undoubtedly one of our student populations at greatest risk of dropping out and suffering a lifetime of struggle with poverty and many other social ills. Despite this risk, very little research has been conducted on this population and how they are being impacted by McKinney-Vento. Your participation in this study would be of great service as we seek to expand our knowledge about these students who so desperately need and deserve all the assistance we can provide them.

**Compensation:**

- ☐ There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:**

- ☐ The data resulting from your participation will be used for educational purposes. The data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in this study.
- ☐ Data will be stored to ensure that it is secure and remains confidential. The participants' responses to interview questions will be videotaped, though participants may choose whether or not to be videotaped. Pending participant approval, the video recorded sessions will be saved to a flash drive and kept in a secure place (locked in a filing cabinet located at the researcher's home), limiting access to the taped recordings and research data. Video recordings will be destroyed immediately following transcription. Pseudonyms will be assigned after interviews and actual names will be removed from all recordings and data. The researcher will maintain a master key, which maintains the participant's real name and the assigned pseudonym. This key will be securely stored in a separate locked desk drawer located in the researcher's home.
- ☐ The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from Texas State University and members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject.
- ☐ Throughout this study, the researcher will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

- ☐ If you have any questions about the study, please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation, contact the researcher conducting this study. My name, phone number, and email address are listed above as is the contact information for the Texas State University sponsor, Dr. Miguel Guajardo.
- ☐ If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or question about the research, you may contact Dr. Jon Lasser, Chair, Texas State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 512-245-3413 or the Office of Institutional Support at 512-245-2348, or email [ospirb@txstate.edu](mailto:ospirb@txstate.edu).

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**



**Statement of Consent:**

☐ I have read the information above and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study.

☐ I consent to participate in this study.

Your signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Please print your  
name\_\_\_\_\_

☐ I grant permission for the researcher to use the data collected as a result of my participation in this study for other educational purposes.

Your signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of researcher\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

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