

# **FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE EDUCATION OF DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA BLACK HOMELESS YOUTH: RACIAL INEQUALITY, POVERTY AND CONSECUTIVE EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

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## ***Abstract***

*Federal law defines homeless children and youth as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). Youth and families with children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in the country (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011; Department of Housing and Human Development [HUD], 2010; US Conference of Mayors, 2011), which resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of homeless students (Flannery, 2010). Researchers have identified the factors that impede the education of homeless students, yet despite their bleak conditions homeless youth successfully graduate from high school (Chibbaro, 2011). The District of Columbia (Washington, DC) is experiencing a dramatic increases in the number of homeless families (Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments [MCWOG], 2013). This paper explores the common social conditions District of Columbia black homeless high school aged youth share, and the factors that hinder their education.*

## **INRODUCTION**

The District of Columbia has a unique history, and exceptional socio-economic challenges. The District of Columbia is the nation's capital established in 1800 by George Washington, and to date is not a state, but a federal city without congressional representation. On April 16, 1862, nine months before the passage and signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery in the District of Columbia. In the 1950's the District of Columbia black population was considerably large at 50%, and its business enterprises, neighborhoods, establishments, colleges and schools remained segregated and ruled by white southern congressional members (Lightman, 2009).

During that period, the District of Columbia was the first US urban city in the nation with a black majority population (McQuiter, 2003).

In 1961, Congress allowed District residents to vote in the presidential elections, and in 1967 President Lyndon B. Johnson recognized the District of Columbia's government, and appointed its first city mayor, nine city council members, and city commissioners. District of Columbia residents won limited home rule in 1971, and for the first time its residents were able to elect their mayor and city council. While Congress gave limited authority to the government of the District of Columbia, to date, Congress retains control of its revenues and expenditures and annually reviews its budget (Urban Institute, 2011). From 1971 to 2006 the District of Columbia public school system operated under various boards, but always with congressional oversight (Fixing DC Schools, 2006).

The ramifications and legacy of segregation is still observed today across District of Columbia neighborhoods, communities, and schools (Sawyer & Taitan, 2003). The DC metro area is the sixth most segregated geographical area in the US (Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012). In 2000, 17 District neighborhoods, home to approximately 46,000 residents, had populations that were more than 98 percent black. In 2011, the racial makeup of those same neighborhoods was almost the same (Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012). This racial divide is reflected in its public school student population. A 2005 report characterized the District's public school system as "separate and unequal" (A Parents United for the DC public Schools Committee Report, 2005). According to the Federal Education Budget (2012) the District of Columbia public school (DCPS) total student population is 44,199, with the majority being black students (77.8%) (Federal Education Budget, 2012).

The child poverty rate in the District of Columbia is one of the highest in the nation at 32% (NCES, 2011). District of Columbia residents living in deep poverty — below half of the poverty line (\$11,000 for a family of four) — rose from 8% in 2007 to 11% in 2009, and in 2011 the city poverty rate jumped to 18.2% making it the third highest in the nation (US Census Bureau, 2011). The poverty rate of the District of Columbia was noted in 2009 by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Commission, where in the fall of 2010, the United Nations Human Rights [UNCHR] Commissioner Raquel Rolnik visited the District of Columbia on a fact-finding tour to investigate the rising number of homeless and low-income communities in the city (NLIHC, 2009; Rolnik, 2010). This trend continued. In 2011, the number of persons living below poverty in the District of Columbia was 18.2% of the total city population, which is considerably higher than the national rate (US Census Bureau, 2011). In 2011, the poverty line in the US for a family of four was at \$23, 550. Meanwhile, in 2013 more than half of the District of Columbia's black residents (51.9%) were at or below the national poverty rate, or about one in five black residents were at or below the national poverty line. Meanwhile one in ten city residents were unemployed (10%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). As a consequence of widespread and acute poverty among District of

Columbia residents, the city has experienced a dramatic rise in the number of homeless families with children (Kids Count, 2010; Ferrell, 2011; Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, 2011; National Alliance for the Homeless, 2011).

In 2009, District of Columbia homeless children accounted for 26% of the total city homeless population (Ferrell, 2010). In 2011-2012 the national homeless population average rate was 20 individuals per 10,000, meanwhile in the District of Columbia, the homeless population rate was at least six times higher than the national average. In 2012, the rate of homeless individuals in the District of Columbia accounted for 133 individuals per 10,000 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2013), and homeless families comprised 39% of the total homeless city population (Homeless Children's Playtime Project [HCPP], 2012). Meanwhile the 2013 PIT count of homeless persons in the District of Columbia comprised of 1.9% the entire city population (Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, 2013). During that same 2013 January PIT count, 2,478 youth under the age of 24 were homeless (Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, 2013).

To illustrate the magnitude and breadth of poverty in the District of Columbia consider this: 70.36% of DCPS students are eligible for free and reduced lunches and more than 80% of DCPS schools receive Title I funding (Federal Education Budget, 2012). According to the Federal Education Budget (2012), 73% of DCPS' student population are eligible for free and reduced lunch (Federal Education Budget, 2012). Of the 129 DCPS public schools (excluding charter schools), 108 are Title I schools and only 21 DCPS schools are non- Title I schools (DCPS-Washington, DC, 2011). The majority of non-Title I schools in the District of Columbia are located in the most affluent Ward in the city (Ward 3) (Title I Schools-DCPS-Washington, DC, 2011). A recent study found the vast majority of black homeless youth are residents of the poorest wards in the District of Columbia (Abdul Rahman, 2014).

Poverty is described as the greatest cause of suffering on Earth (WHO, 1992). Poverty is directly related to individuals' inability to meet the bare minimum basic needs, and results in the deprivation of access to adequate shelter, food, clothing, health care, and access to essential resources. The District of Columbia's poor suffer gross human rights abuses related to their economic conditions, absence of governmental support services, and income disparities (Rolnik, 2010). Poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon that adversely influences homeless youth's ability to satisfy minimum basic needs. The state of homelessness compromises youth's sense of stability and safety, self-esteem, as well as their education, health and future prospects (APA, 2014; Murali & Oyeboode, 2004). Poverty impacts the disposition and development of homeless youth. It influences the physical, emotional, behavioral, and mental state of young people. It obstructs their ability

to meet their basic human needs, which is a vital prerequisite to ward off emotional, physiological, and health ailments (Howard & Prince, 2002).

Acute shortages of affordable housing in urban cities are severely impacting low-income renters (NLIHC, 2005, 2009). Similarly, the shrinking supply of affordable housing in the District of Columbia is a contributing factor in the growth of family homelessness (Abdul Rahman, 2014; Sard, 2009). The poor in the District of Columbia face considerable hardships (Reed, 2010, Sard, 2009) where high unemployment rates and declining wages have put housing out of reach for many families (Abdul Rahman, 2014; NLIHC, 2005). Poor and low-income families living in the District of Columbia unable to meet their monthly rent face eviction, and those unable to meet their mortgage payment face foreclosure and eviction (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2009; Rolnik, 2010).

More to the point, District of Columbia homeless children and youth are living in transitional shelters, emergency shelters, runaway youth shelters, streets, parks, alleys, abandoned buildings and stairways (Ferrell, 2010). The federally mandated annual homeless enumeration in 2009 accounted for 6,228 homeless individuals living in the District of Columbia, of whom 1,426 (20%) were minors (Kids Count, 2009). In 2010, the annual homeless enumeration count identified 1,620 homeless children, comprising of 26% of the total city homeless population (MCWOG, 2011; Ferrell, 2010). Meanwhile, according to the Department of Education (2013) one of every 16 DCPS students enrolled in school are homeless (Department of Education, 2013). Homeless children and youth are the most vulnerable and victimized population (Cunningham et al., 2011).

### **DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT, LITIGATION, AND SCHOOL REFORMS**

For decades DCPS administrators struggled with fragmented leadership, management problems, and low student outcomes (Boggs & Flagg, 2011; Frueh, 2011). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was first introduced in 1987 to address the urgent needs of the homeless (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [PL100-77], 1987). In 1994, ten homeless parents, on behalf of their children, and the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging DCPS' failure to ensure free, appropriate education for homeless children (Lampkin vs District of Columbia, 1994). The suit alleged that the District of Columbia was failing to consider the best interests of homeless children. The plaintiffs suggested DCPS failed to appropriate homeless students' school placements, school transportation, coordinate social and education services, and provide them school meals (Project Hope, 2008). The case challenged the District of Columbia for ignoring to fulfill the McKinney-Vento Act (Project Hope, 2008).

Furthermore, DCPS has also been cited for failing to comply with its legal obligation to meet the needs of its students. In 1994, *Lampkin v. District of Columbia* (Washington DC, 1994) argued that the District of Columbia demonstrated its unwillingness to comply with the McKinney-Vento Act voluntarily. The plaintiffs asked the courts to step in to force the DCPS, through judicial proceedings, to meet its legal obligations (Project Hope, 2008). The United States Courts of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled that DCPS was mandated by all the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act and must meet the needs of the District of Columbia's homeless students (*Lampkin vs District of Columbia*, 1994). DCPS was also heavily litigated against for failing to provide IDEA eligible students free appropriate education and hold timely due process hearings, for violating school fire codes, and operating hazardous school (Brogg & Flagg, 2011).

From 1971 to 2007 the District of Columbia public school system operated under various boards, but always with congressional oversight (Fixing DC Schools, 2006). In 2007, the District of Columbia Education Reform Act transferred DCPS control from the elected board to the Mayor, created the position of DCPS chancellor, and established six educational agencies: the District of Columbia Public Schools, Department of Education, State Board of Education Agency, Interagency Collaboration Services and Integration Commission, Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, and the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education. GAO (2008) report outlined the structural problems the District of Columbia Education Reform Act has produced and recommended the development of a strategic plan to evaluate, assess and align the role and purpose of these agencies (GAO, 2008).

Evidence suggests that closing schools in impoverished communities adversely impacts homeless students, their academic achievement, and retention (Education Week, 2010; Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni, 2010)). Since 2008, DCPS closed 23 schools and in 2011 DCPS closed more than 30 schools. The majority of school closures that took place in the District of Columbia were located in the city's poorest neighborhoods (Public Policy and Research Department of IFF, 2012). Recent findings suggest that DCPS school closures, restructuring, and consolidations are gravely impacting DCPS homeless students (Abdul Rahman, 2014).

While DCPS schools have continued to struggle to meet Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) (Frueh, 2011), most recently DCPS student achievement made modest improvements. For example, DCPS eighth-grade student proficiency score on the NAEP scale rose from 17% to 19% (NCES, 2013), but DCPS' black students reading score average was 64 points lower than white DCPS students, and 54 points lower in math (NCES, 2013). According to the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee on Education report (2013), 50% of DCPS students graduate from high school, and as it stands it will take DCPS 30

years to achieve its stated objective of reaching 75% proficiency in reading and math (Council of the District of Columbia, 2013).

Several reasons have been cited as the cause of DCPS' failure to improve student outcomes. DCPS' hyper focus on student testing has become an issue of concern, where more than 60 instructional days in the DCPS school calendar are set aside to prepare, administer and evaluate students (DCPS, 2014). Also DCPS school reforms were based on school closures and school consolidations, but failed to include an independent evaluation plan to monitor, assess, and track DCPS' complex and layered reforms (Frueh, 2011, GAO, 2008). Meanwhile the District of Columbia is still struggling to meet its IDEA requirements. Black students represent over 90% of children with special need, and it was recently ranked as the worst IDEA compliant school district in the nation (Education Week, 2011).

### **DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA HOMELESS STUDENT POPULATION**

The poor economic conditions manifested nationwide are acutely impacting low-income students living in the District of Columbia. In 2009, DCPS administrators identified 950 homeless students attending city public schools (Seif, 2009). Within a span of one year the number of homeless students enrolled in DCPS increased by twofold at 1,900 students (OSSE, 2010), and in 2011 the total number of homeless student reported enrolled in DCPS totaled 3,058 (NAEHCY, 2012) (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**A Three-Year Comparison of Homeless Students Enrolled in District of Columbia Public Schools**

	Total Enrolled SY0809	Total Enrolled SY0910	Total Enrolled SY1011
Number of Homeless Students Enrolled in the District of Columbia	950	2,499	3,058
Percent of Homeless Students Enrolled in DCPS	2.1%	5.58%	6.76%
Annual Percentage Change	--	163%	22.37%

Source: NAEHCY, 2012 & DCPS Student Audited Enrollment SY 2001-2002 to SY 2012-2013.

This trend continued. In 2012, the number of homeless students in the District of Columbia schools accounted for 1 homeless student for every 16 DCPS students (NAEHCY, 2013). During the month of February 2013, more than 601 homeless students were enrolled in District of Columbia public high schools - see Table 2 (DCAYA, 2013).

**TABLE 2**  
**DCPS Homeless High School Students**

DCPS High School	Grade	Ward	2012 School Demographics	2013 Homeless Enrollment
Anacostia	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	8	100% Black	79
Ballou	9th 12 <sup>th</sup>	8	100% Black	29
Ballou STAY	Alternative High School	8	99% Black	77
Benjamin Banneker*	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	1	99% Black	8
Cardozo@ Meyer	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	1	73% Black	13
Coolidge	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	4	92% Black	14
Duke Ellington	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	2	86% Black	4
Dunbar	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	5	99% Black	37
Eastern	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	6	100% Black	16
H.D. Woodson	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	7	100% Black	48
Luke C. Moore	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	5	99% Black	57
McKinley Technology *	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	5	96% Black	7
Phelps Architecture, Construction and Engineering	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	5	95% Black	10
Roosevelt	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	4	71% Black	17
Roosevelt STAY	Alternative High School	4	48% Black	89
School Without Walls *	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	2	58% Black	4
Spingarn	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	5	99% Black	29
Spingarn STAY	Alternative High School		100% Black	14
Washington Metropolitan	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	1	100% Black	26
Wilson *	9th-12 <sup>th</sup>	3	58% Black	23
Total			88.6%	601

Source: DCPS School Profile, 2012 & DCPS Homeless Student Enrollment, DCAYA, 2013.

The 601 homeless high school student enrollment count excludes 51 homeless youth attending the following DCPS schools: K-12 schools Mamie D. Lee (3 homeless youth); 6th-12th Choice Academy (1 homeless youth); Cardozo Education Campus (13 homeless youth) Columbia Heights Academy (26 homeless youth); Youth Service Center (8 homeless youth) (DC Alliance for Youth Advocacy [DCAYA], 2013), if included the number of homeless students attending DCPS high schools total will account for 652 students. Additionally, DCPS' homeless student count also excludes incarcerated homeless youth since they fall under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system. Incarcerated homeless youth are housed in state detention centers during their custody term. Meanwhile, DCPS enrollment data suggests that 10,913 high school students were enrolled in DCPS during 2012-2013 (DCPS Audited Enrollment Data, 2013). Accordingly, at least 5.97% of DCPS high school students either self identified or were identified by DCPS teachers and school administrators as homeless students.

In addition, according to DCPS, 42 homeless students were officially enrolled in four high performing and competitive entry schools (\*Banneker, McKinley Technology, School without Walls and Wilson) (see Table 2). A recent study suggests that District of Columbia homeless high school students have a strong desire to maintain school enrollment and graduate from high school (Abdul Rahman, 2014).

Moreover, in 2008 and 2011, DCPS closed 53 schools. The majority of school closures that took place in the District of Columbia were located in the city's poorest neighborhoods (Public Policy and Research Department of IFF, 2012). As of 2013, 10% of DCPS schools were closed. Recent research findings suggest that DCPS school closure, restructuring, and consolidation initiatives taking place in the District of Columbia are gravely contributing to homeless students' educational attainment (Abdul Rahman, 2014).

### **RELEVANCE OF RESILIENCY TO DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA HOMELESS STUDENTS**

Researchers are studying more closely the role of resiliency as a coping tool for youth experiencing adversity (Forge, 2011; Garcia Coll, Buckner, Brooks, Weinreb & Bassuk, 1998; Masten & Osofsky, 2010; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2009; Masten & Tellegen, 2012; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Vasquez, 2000; Wolin & Wolin, 1993), and how those resiliency traits and coping skills can be taught and fostered in school to improve the innate capacities of students who are experiencing hardships (Henderson, 2012, 2013; Masten & Naryan, 2012; Rak & Patterson, 1996).

Whereas the basic human need for food, clothing, and shelter as well as other educationally related support services such as tutoring, counseling and



transportation for homeless students are overwhelming and distinct from students who are in poverty but permanently housed, however a strata of students experiencing homelessness are at or above grade level in core academic subjects such as reading, mathematics and science (McCallion, 2012; NCHE, 2013). Many are thriving academically with school being the linchpin (Masten et al., 2012). The media has often carried stories that speak of the resiliency of homeless youth. The "homeless to Harvard" and "homeless valedictorian" offer the promise of a better future among those who are most improvised and vulnerable in our society (Murray, 2011; O'Donnell, 2012; Walters, 2010). Nevertheless, while these few homeless youth have been able to mitigate their strenuous conditions, most homeless youth still struggle to graduate from high school. The number of homeless youth who have either dropped out or will drop out of school is as high as 75% (NCL, 2010).

Resilience research is a "health" oriented research approach to the homeless youth phenomena. It is an appealing research alternative that attempts to explore ways to tap into youth's innate strengths, independence, intuitiveness, positive disposition, and drive to overcome adversity. However, the resiliency orientation is an inherently limited approach to this particular population (Abdul Rahman, et al., 2015). Since by definition resiliency is an intrinsic, interactive and fluid trait that does not operate in isolation, but is influenced by outside factors (ethnicity, socio economic status, coping skills, mental acuity, health) and system partnerships (family, adult relationships, schools, programs, service providers). For homeless youth in particular supportive, well developed, and functioning systems are crucial in sustaining their resiliency and improving their educational outcomes. While research has substantiated that some homeless youth are resilient in face of adversity (Abdul Rahman, 2014; Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Chibbaro, 2011; Larkin Homeless Street Youth Services, 2010). Nonetheless resiliency without the supportive networks that help facilitate the teaching and learning of these youth is not sufficient (Abdul Rahman, 2014, Abdul Rahman et al., 2015).

Also, for resiliency to produce the desired outcome it needs responsive support systems to address homeless youth's complex and multi layered conditions (Abdul Rahman, 2014, Abdul Rahman et al., 2015). So, while it is important not to overlook the role of resiliency as a protective factor for homeless youth that can imbue a positive attitude, provide a set of important coping skills, and drive researchers must also be mindful of resiliency's heavy dependence on outside factors without which resiliency will diminish, and for some who have experienced homelessness since a young age it will deplete. With the appropriate supports in place homeless youth's innate skills can be leveraged to improve their conditions and academic outcomes. Considering the growing number of homeless students, it is important for researchers to understand the limitations of relying solely on the resiliency framework. Furthermore with or without resiliency homeless youth are incapable of institutionalizing support networks, or building the proper support

structures to meet their basic needs, get to school, and build their academic competencies, but school leaders, providers and legislatures can.

## CONCLUSION

District of Columbia homeless population is spreading across every ward and community comprising 2% of the entire city population (10.9% homeless individuals for every 1,000 residents). In addition DCPS has initiated consecutive school reforms agendas that have a measurable impact on its homeless student population. Like other homeless youth populations, District of Columbia homeless students are challenged by factors that stem from their situational and geographical location (high poverty urban city where 10% of its population are unemployed), their unique homeless experience (disconnected, isolated, living in crowded unsanitary conditions), and by factors outside their influence. Many of the negative factors homeless youth encounter are directly related to policies initiated by District of Columbia legislators and DCPS administrators (school reforms, school policies, and shelter shortages) (Abdul Rahman, 2014).

District of Columbia, the Capital of our nation is home of the oldest African-American professional and middle class community in the United States. Black city residents are well aware of the city's unique history and accomplishments including those experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, many District of Columbia black families and communities are members of were once part of a rooted middle class, which may not be shared by other urban centers (Griffin & Reed, 2014). They desire to improve their prospects and recognize the important role education in pulling them out of poverty (Abdul Rahman, 2014). Meanwhile, District of Columbia black homeless students face considerable challenges. However, they face structural obstacles that are directly related to the absence of deliberate school support systems that can help facilitate their access to school, meet their basic needs and educational objectives. These structural barriers are due to school operational policies (school paper requirements, identification, enrollment procedures, school closures and transfer policies) or state policies (limited number of emergency shelters beds, city codes, school reform initiatives). For some District of Columbia black homeless youth these barriers are too difficult to overcome.

Homeless youth are the poorest among District of Columbia low-income communities, and poorest in the nation. They face a range of complex issues that adversely affect their education and cause them high level of emotional stress and mental anguish, these include finding food, shelter, clothing or getting to and from school (Abdul Rahman, 2014). A recent study found that District of Columbia homeless youth possess a strong desire to attend school, but to achieve it they encounter several logistical, procedural, city and school related structural obstacles (Abdul Rahman, 2014). The data also demonstrated that these youth realize the value of education and the role it plays in ending their individual and familial cycle

of poverty and homelessness, nevertheless the absence of structural supports in the form of school and city services is a considerable challenge for these youth (Abdul Rahman, 2014).

School and city legislators can reduce the impact of these barriers on District of Columbia black homeless youth by evaluating the impact of past and recent DCPS school reform policies, employ thoughtful targeted initiatives to control the damage of their school reform initiatives on the growing number of DCPS homeless students. Also the implementation of school community collaborations that share the responsibility of meeting the needs of homeless students can improve homeless youth's conditions, educational prospects, and foster successful outcomes for school and state agencies who are accountable for this particular population. Meanwhile, researchers focus on the resilient attributes of homeless youth, while important, it will not help solve the myriad and complex issues that homeless youth face. District of Columbia homeless students are invested in their education. Nonetheless, without the necessary support systems in place District of Columbia schools will continue to struggle to meet the educational needs of its most vulnerable population.

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