

# Study: Homeless, Mobile Students Face Academic Risk Beyond Poverty

By Sarah D. Sparks on June 17, 2013 1:35 PM

Homeless, highly mobile children are arguably the most at-risk of any students, well beyond the academic difficulties created by poverty alone. But many can persist and recover academically once their living arrangements stabilize, according to [a new study](#) in this month's *Child Development*.

Researchers led by J.J. Cutuli, research director at the Intelligence for Social Policy initiative at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, worked with administrators at Minneapolis public schools to track the enrollment of nearly 26,500 students in grades 3 through 8 over six years from 2005-06 to 2008-09, while also analyzing achievement test results in the latter five years. The researchers separately identifying students with special needs, in poverty, or homeless and highly mobile. Nearly three out of four students in that time qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch, and nearly 14 percent had been homeless at some point in the last six years.

The researchers found students who had ever been homeless or highly mobile during the study had significantly lower academic achievement in reading and math throughout elementary and middle school—and lower rates of academic growth—than students who had stable homes. The findings held even for those in families with very low income, special education students, and English-language learners.

"The gaps for [homeless and highly mobile] students were already apparent in both reading and math achievement by 3rd grade, the earliest year available on the achievement test in this district," the researchers noted, adding that "a general deterioration in achievement" typically started the fall after years a student first became identified as homeless.

However, about 45 percent of the students identified as homeless and highly mobile during the study were considered "resilient"—they met or exceeded expectations in math or reading over time, in spite of their challenges. While higher attendance, qualifying for special services, and other characteristics seemed to help bolster these students' resilience, they did not fully explain it.

"This suggests that the most influential protective factors and assets that might promote academic resilience in disadvantaged children are not among those routinely measured by school districts," Cutuli and his colleagues concluded.