

Immigrant and Homeless: Information for Local Liaisons



Immigrant Issues

Recent increases in the numbers of immigrants, including political refugees, along with their wide-ranging ethnic backgrounds have expanded both the cultural and linguistic diversity of the United States. In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau reported over 33 million residents who had been born outside the United States, 16 million of whom had arrived since 1990. Surely no organization has felt the impact of immigrant children more than our public schools. In 2000, about eight million of the total 53 million school-age children (5-17 years old) in the United States were the descendants of post-1970 immigrants.¹ With this drastic increase in the percentage of immigrants, it follows that English language learner (ELL) students are the fastest growing segment in U.S. public schools.² Nationally, ELL student enrollment rose from 2.1 million in the 1990-1991 academic year to over 4 million (8 percent of all students) in the 2002-03 school year.³ Currently, about one in ten students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 is ELL,⁴ with 350 language groups represented in U.S. schools.⁵

The process of immigrating to the United States is full of stressors, both prior to and after arrival, that are unique to immigrants.⁶ Even immigrants who are well-educated and professionally credentialed often experience an initial drop in their status and earnings while they improve their English skills, re-take courses, and pass licensing exams needed to practice in this country.⁷ This often leads to receiving low incomes, living in less than desirable neighborhoods and housing, and experiencing poor health.⁸ In addition, leaving family, friends, and familiar surroundings creates uncertainty and anxiety for immigrants who are attempting to assimilate into American society while trying to retain part of their own culture and heritage.

Refugees

A refugee is an immigrant “outside of his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”⁹ Each refugee entering the United States is sponsored by a national voluntary agency (VOLAG) that works through a network of local refugee resettlement agencies to provide resettlement services. Under a contract with the U.S. Department of State, resettlement agencies are responsible for providing certain core services during the first 30 days a refugee is in the U.S., including appropriate housing, food, basic orientation, school registration for children, initial health screenings, and health care, if needed. Additional referrals for specialized services, such as mental health, may be made.

Who is homeless?

(McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 – Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act – Sec 725)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. *means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and*
- B. *includes —*
 - i. *children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;*
 - ii. *children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...*
 - iii. *children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and*
 - iv. *migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).*

Refugees also receive services funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/ Administration for Children and Families/Office of Refugee Resettlement, mostly through state governments, that include eight months of Refugee Cash Assistance and Refugee Medical Assistance; English as a Second Language (ESL) classes; employment services; and other specialized services, all geared to support their reaching self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. Services provided under state funding can last up to 60 months. Aside from these services, many local agencies continue to serve the refugees that they resettle, as well as “secondary migrants” (refugees who move to a new location following resettlement) when they come to these agencies in need.

Many refugee children and youth are separated from family members as they flee persecution¹⁰ and become heads of households or unaccompanied youth due to the death of their parents or caretakers. Some live with related or unrelated families. Although resettlement agencies encourage these families to apply for guardianship, they do not always do so due to cultural, language, and logistical barriers. Whatever their experiences, many refugee children and youth have lost social stability and access to schooling.¹¹ Education is not only necessary for their future economic success but also for emotional healing¹² in their quest to overcome the trauma they have experienced.¹³

Role of Schools in the Lives of Immigrant Students

Immigrant children are often in the center of a culture clash between their parents and the American way of life. Schools can serve as a stabilizer by easing the acculturation process and reducing academic and other barriers¹⁴ through the strategies listed below. The behaviors and attitudes of school district personnel can have significant impact not only on the educational outcomes of students but on the entire family’s assimilation into this country.

Although clearly positioned to have a positive impact on the children’s future success, school districts across the nation are also facing significant challenges in serving these students appropriately. (See box on right.) Lack of English fluency is one of the most obvious contributors to school failure, which then puts students at a greater risk of dropping out of school.¹⁵ English language learners generally require at least five years to catch up academically in English, although they may be conversationally fluent in two years.¹⁶ In addition to their need to learn English, many immigrant students also need extra academic instruction because schooling in their home country was limited or nonexistent.

Learning how to navigate the educational system in the United States is one of the most difficult challenges immigrant children and their parents face. Often, families are not comfortable with English, so parents may be reluctant to meet and talk with school officials. For those who do speak English, their culture or limited education may pose the most serious barriers to communicating with school personnel. Because of their intense respect for school personnel, some cultures consider it rude for a parent to enter the classroom. Involvement of immigrant parents also may be hindered by the lack of interpretation services, lack of transportation to schools, or their inability to take time off work. Unfortunately, many school administrators and teachers misinterpret this behavior as a lack of interest in the child's education.¹⁷ On the contrary, immigrant parents appear to be a huge motivating factor for their children’s academic success.¹⁸

**Immigrant Students’
Educational Barriers to Success**

- Deficits in previous education from large gaps in schooling or from never having been in school
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, grief, and other emotional issues
- Perceived lack of academic support from parents
- Language barriers
- Different culture and learning styles
- Difficulty of tracking students due to high mobility and language barriers
- Varied definitions and classification systems for ELL
- Lack of quality staff development programs for administrative, instructional, diagnostic, and support staff in school districts
- Lack of parental materials in native languages
- Discrimination/rejection – often from lack of accurate information and cultural misunderstandings
- Few classes for students who must work full-time to help their families

Immigrant Students Experiencing Homelessness

Immigrant students tend to have higher mobility rates,¹⁹ and their economic situations often result in high rates of poverty,²⁰ which is a predictor of homelessness.²¹ Because of the services available to refugee families, it is rare to find refugees who do not have housing, yet they may meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless in several ways. They are clearly families in transition. Refugees often have been in flight or living in refugee camps for years prior to arrival in the U.S., and they may move several times following arrival. Families can be quite large, and refugees initially may live with friends or family members in temporary or overcrowded conditions for economic reasons.

Homeless education programs can provide a safe and welcoming place for immigrant and refugee students and their parents who are experiencing homelessness. In order to serve McKinney-Vento eligible immigrant students, local liaisons for homeless education should identify school and school district personnel in programs such as Title I and Title III that serve immigrant students. Collaboration with other school district programs would include discussing more effective ways to identify and coordinate services for students who may be eligible for McKinney-Vento services.

Determining McKinney-Vento Eligibility for Immigrant Students

As with all students, immigrant eligibility for McKinney-Vento services is determined by the local liaison on a case-by-case basis. (See the NCHE brief on determining eligibility at http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/det_elig.pdf). According to the Act, a student is eligible for McKinney-Vento services if he or she lacks a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” If further information is needed to determine this, below are some key questions to ask - with the help of an interpreter if needed. Be sure to explain beforehand that you’re asking these questions in order to determine whether the child is eligible for additional services.

- 1. Is this a permanent living arrangement or just a temporary place to stay?
- 2. Are you are living with friends or relatives?
- 3. In how many places have you lived since you came to the United States?
- 4. Where did you live just before moving to your current place? How long were you there? Why did you leave?
- 5. How long have you been at your current place? How long do you plan to stay?
- 6. How many people live in the home? How many bedrooms and bathrooms are there?
- 7. Do you and your children share a room? How many stay in one room?
- 8. Does the home have electricity/heat/running water?

If a student is identified as eligible for McKinney-Vento services, local liaisons may encourage parent participation by providing interpreters, explaining the school’s expectations, and arranging transportation for school meetings. Liaisons’ collaboration with social service agencies can secure medical, dental, mental health, and other services necessary for homeless immigrant families’ successful adjustment. Many foreign-born children lack documents verifying their immunization status.²² Although many foreign countries have immunization rates comparable to or exceeding those of the United States, some immigrant children may not have been

Strategies to Reduce Barriers

- Connect with the local immigrant leadership groups, churches, mosques, parent advisory council, etc., to become more familiar with immigrant cultural and language issues.
- Work closely with refugee resettlement agencies in order to determine McKinney-Vento eligibility on a case-by-case basis.
- Arrange for immunizations or retrieve immunization records.
- Make referrals to healthcare, dental, mental health, and other service providers.
- Arrange transportation for parents and ensure that interpreters are available for parent meetings.
- Have materials translated into immigrants’ native languages.

(continued on the next page)

immunized. Liaisons can help retrieve immunization records and arrange any needed immunizations, while ensuring the student is enrolled in and attending school in the meantime.

Liaisons should work with other school programs to ensure that homeless immigrant children and youth receive appropriate academic support. Immigrant children tend to have high rates of developmental delays and may require educational testing and special education services.²³ The caution is that lack of English skills often results in immigrants being placed in special education or low academic tracks, despite having high capabilities.²⁴

Next Steps for Local Liaisons

Contact your school district's Title III coordinator to:

- Increase awareness of the McKinney-Vento Act and services provided to children and youth experiencing homelessness and to understand who is eligible.
- Get assistance in identifying a term in the immigrant's native language that connotes homelessness or eligibility for McKinney-Vento services.
- Find out what school or school district and community services are provided for immigrants/refugees.
- Discuss ways to coordinate services for immigrant children eligible for McKinney-Vento services.
- Ask for assistance with identifying children who may be experiencing homelessness.
- Ask for assistance in providing interpretation when speaking with students and families who may qualify for McKinney-Vento services.

Contact community agencies to:

- Increase awareness of McKinney-Vento by providing posters, conducting workshops for staff, etc.
- Find out what services are available in the community and discuss ways to coordinate community and school services.
- Acquire more information on local laws/policies related to immigrant families.
- Find assistance with translating materials and provide interpretation at meetings for parents.
- Help develop procedures by which agencies will refer children and families who may be eligible for McKinney-Vento services to the local liaison.

Endnotes

1. Camorato, 2001
2. Smith-Davis, 2004, p. 45
3. National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.
4. Gershberg, Dannenberg, & Sanchez, n.d.
5. Escamilla, 2000
6. Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005, p. 583
7. Allen, 2005
8. Urban Institute, n.d.
9. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.
10. Boyden, de Berry, Feeny, & Hart, 2002
11. Ibid.
12. Sinclair, 2001
13. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000
14. Eisenbruch, 1988
15. Olsen, 2000
16. Smith-Davis, 2004, p. 22
17. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001
18. Portes & Rumbaut, 2001
19. Hartman, 2006
20. Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000
21. Burt, 2001, p. 1
22. Talbot, Moore, McCray, & Binkin, 2000; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2005
23. American Academy of Pediatrics, 2005, p. 1096
24. Cheng, 1998; Allen, 2002

Resources

The Title III Program (Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students) is designed to help with instructional strategies for teaching English and professional development. The U.S. Department of Education disburses Title III funds to state education agencies (SEAs) based on each state's share of both LEP and recent immigrant students. Each SEA must then award 95% of its Title III funds as formula subgrants to districts. SEAs are required to reserve between 5 and 15% (most states use 15%) of the subgrant funds for those districts experiencing significant increases in the number or percentage of immigrant students. In addition, districts and community-based organizations (CBOs) can collaborate on developing plans to serve immigrants and apply jointly for subgrants. More information about Title III programs is available on the Office of English Language Acquisition page of the U.S. Department of Education's website at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/funding.html>.

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) has extensive resources for information about language and culture, immigrant education, refugee education and services, and cross-cultural communication. CAL's website (<http://www.cal.org/>) includes information about school district-sponsored newcomer programs funded by the National Institute for the Education of At-Risk Students (NIEARS), Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), and the U.S. Department of Education (subcontract from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence). The increasing concentration of immigrants in some areas has prompted nearly 100 districts to establish these programs, which typically educate students for a limited period of time (usually from a few months to 2 years) either all day or part of a day. The wide range of programs includes a number conducted in the local school for part of the day, some all-day centers located at separate sites, and many other variations. Most of the programs focus on providing a strong foundation in English language development and acculturation to U.S. schools along with some subject area knowledge. More information about newcomer programs, including current locations and how to establish new ones, is available at <http://www.cal.org/crede/newcomer.htm>. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs also has information about welcome center programs at <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/reports/systemwideconf/profiles.pdf>.

The Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) helps state representatives increase their capacity to promote English language learning and academic achievement of adults learning English. Funded by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) of the U.S. Department of Education, CAELA focuses on building a state's capacity to improve the skills of its teachers and administrators, developing web-accessible resources, and providing technical assistance - all related to adult ESL. More information is available on their website at <http://www.cal.org/caela/>.

The United States has resettled over two million refugees (approximately half of them children) since 1975. Information specific to refugees, including a guidebook, topics related to particular refugee groups, cultural orientation, and resettlement programs is available at <http://www.cal.org/rsc/>.

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS), a joint project of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), provides national technical assistance to "bridge the gap" between public child welfare and other mainstream organizations, refugee-serving agencies, and refugee communities. BRYCS' overarching goal is to strengthen the capacity of service organizations across the United States to ensure the successful development of refugee and newcomer children, youth, and families through targeted training, consultation, resource development, and a website and clearinghouse with over 1,200 resources on refugee children and youth. Topics of BRYCS's articles and publications include education, family strengthening, child welfare, and positive youth development for refugees. All publications and technical assistance are provided free of charge under a cooperative agreement with the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services. See <http://www.brycs.org> for more information.



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National Partners in Homeless Education

The agencies listed below can serve as helpful resources for understanding education laws and programs that can provide valuable services to homeless students.

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
202-364-7392
<http://www.naehcy.org>

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty
202-638-2535
<http://www.nlchp.org>

U.S. Department of Education, Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) Program
<http://www.ed.gov/programs/homeless>

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National Center for Homeless Education
800-308-2145 (toll-free HelpLine)
<http://www.serve.org/nche>

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Every state is required to have a coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth, and every school district is required to have a liaison for homeless students. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the



McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your state coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at <http://www.serve.org/nche>.

For further information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE HelpLine at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.



Local Contact Information: