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A Landscape Scan of Research on the K-12 Education of Young People in the United States Who Experience Foster Care, Incarceration, and/or Homelessness

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SUPPLEMENTAL

INFORMATION

We have included yellow buttons throughout the report to link you to a different page or to an external website.

Please explore the additional pieces that contribute to this body of work.



Summary of Studies by the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools on Students Experiencing Homelessness, Students with Foster Care Experience, and Justice System-Involved Youth in K-12 and Higher Education Settings



Summary of Postsecondary Research on Students Experiencing Homelessness, Foster Care, and/or Incarceration



Online Research Repository
of the 200+ Publications
Reviewed (Airtable)

LIST OF

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The project team included First Quarter Strategies principal consultant Stephanie Malia Krauss, in partnership with Maddy Day of Maddy Day, LLC and Associates; Thaddeus Ferber of Connect 4 Action, LLC; and Danielle Wallis of Danielle Wallis, LLC.

This team brings decades of experience on this issue, spanning research, philanthropy, policy, and practice.

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For a list of participating researchers, see Appendix 2 (p. 80).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year in the United States, more than 1.6 million young people are forced to navigate their K-12 education while experiencing homelessness, foster care, and/or incarceration.¹ Though these students collectively surpass the population size of New Hampshire or Hawai'i, they are often hidden from education discussions and decisions.

These young people face extreme challenges and often endure oppressive and unsupportive system conditions that make school difficult, impeding their learning and life outcomes. These young people are disproportionately students of color, living in poverty, and often face numerous barriers to educational access, stability, and success.

A Landscape Scan of Research on the K-12 Education of Young People in the United States Who Experience Foster Care, Incarceration, and/or Homelessness builds from recommendations offered in a prior funding landscape and root cause analysis to share findings from a comprehensive review of research published between 2010 and 2024.

The authors identified 400 relevant peer-reviewed articles and field-produced research reports, 200 of which were analyzed directly and focused specifically on the K-12 educational experiences of young people in the U.S. experiencing homelessness and systems involvement; the research team considered 27 federal clearinghouses with studies on young people, and selected ten relevant clearinghouses to search for studies on this topic; 20 interviews and two focus groups were conducted with leading researchers from multiple disciplines.

THROUGH THESE ACTIVITIES, THE LANDSCAPE SCAN SOUGHT TO ANSWER THREE QUESTIONS:



What research has been published on the education experience of youth in the U.S. experiencing homelessness, foster care, and the juvenile justice system between 2010 and 2024?



What are new and persistent research gaps and opportunities?



What can we learn from available research that can positively impact the educational experience and outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness, foster care, and/or the justice system?

¹This number is a combined calculation of the National Center for Homeless Education count for children and youth experiencing homelessness in the 2021-2022 school year (1,205,292); the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Book count for children and youth in foster care in 2021 (391,641); and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) count of young people held for at least one day in a juvenile facility in 2020 (25,014). We expect the total count of 1,621,947 is far lower than actuals, given variations in how these populations are defined and counted, as well as anecdotal evidence.

Key Findings

RESEARCH LANDSCAPE

Overall, 207 publications were analyzed and coded, including 132 peer-reviewed articles and 75 field reports.

Taken together, the authors found the following:

- By student experience, 81 publications focused on foster care, 66 on homelessness, and 39 on juvenile justice.
- Only 21 publications (~10%) examined multiple system experiences, and just three (~1%) studied all three populations together.
- Of the publications with a geographic focus, 41 studies focused on the West (over half from California), while the Southwest (7 studies) and Southeast (21 studies) were underrepresented. Nearly 30 studies were from the Northeast.
- Nearly half of peer-reviewed publications were led by education or human development researchers, with social work scholars comprising the second largest group.

RESEARCH GAPS

There are persistent gaps in what we know about these young people's school experiences and the long-term academic consequences of homelessness, foster care, and incarceration.

Several research limitations were repeatedly discussed in the literature:

- Limited access to student-level data due to privacy concerns and bureaucratic obstacles
- Incomplete or inaccurate datasets due to student mobility and system barriers or differences in how populations were defined and tracked
- Funding constraints and challenges in tracking highly mobile populations

There is a limited—but growing—body of research on prevention and early intervention, intersectionality, and marginalization. While interviewees and focus group participants spoke about the power and importance of participatory research, the scan suggests this type of research is underutilized and often yields small sample sizes, which limits generalizability.

Federal clearinghouses contain remarkably few studies about these students, limiting publicly available and vetted evidence-based interventions. The What Works Clearinghouse, for example, includes no studies on youth experiencing homelessness and only one on juvenile justice.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Despite these gaps, promising opportunities exist for expanding research, building evidence, and improving understanding. Research partnerships and collaboratives are vital platforms for multi-disciplinary work, generating new research, and field-building.

- The National Conference for Hidden Populations brings together researchers, practitioners, and those with lived experience across multiple universities.
- The Juvenile Justice Multi-Institutional Consortium has built significant research on young people in juvenile justice settings, especially those with special education needs.
- The UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools is a university center successfully supporting partnerships that produce translational publications for diverse audiences.

Researchers shared a growing interest in pursuing intersectional and cross-disciplinary research, participatory research methods, longitudinal studies, and prevention and intervention studies.

Interviewees and focus group participants elevated the importance of supporting emerging and established scholars with lived experience and developing coordinated research agendas focused on these hidden student populations.

LEARNINGS FROM AVAILABLE RESEARCH

Studies showed that comprehensive wraparound services, trauma-informed practices, and policies promoting educational stability can be effective intervention and prevention strategies for young people having these experiences. The evidence base points to the importance of cross-system collaboration between schools, child welfare, housing, and juvenile justice systems. Studies amplified the critical role of caregivers and the need for educators and system leaders to work with families in positive, productive ways.

The research emphasized the benefits of having dedicated staff support and positive school climates prioritizing belonging and inclusion over punishment and exclusion.

Findings also suggest these strategies work best when students are considered holistically and strategies are customized to context. Studies examining the compounding harms of homelessness, foster care, and juvenile justice involvement and the broader interconnected societal and systemic injustices (sometimes referred to as the “carceral state”) point to the value of researchers conducting root cause analyses that focus on the intersecting impacts of race, gender, disability and more. The research base is limited and more research is needed to know which supports and strategies work best depending on context and circumstances.

MOVING FORWARD

This landscape scan points to the need for a common research and data agenda with these six future priorities:

- 1. Invest in Prevention and Early Intervention Research**
- 2. Prioritize Intersectional and Longitudinal Research**
- 3. Improve Cross-System Collaboration and Data Sharing**
- 4. Sustain and Expand Research Partnerships and Centers**
- 5. Translate Research Findings into Implementation Tools**
- 6. Elevate This Issue in Federal Clearinghouses**
- 7. Establish Common Measures and Definitions**

Existing research shows investment, energy, and gaps in research on the K-12 education of young people experiencing homelessness, foster care, and incarceration, especially when experiences are combined or rotational.

The path forward requires sustained commitment, funding, and elevated visibility from decision-makers so emerging and established researchers focused on this topic can continue to build evidence for improving educational experiences and outcomes for young people most harmed by systems that should support them.



INTRODUCTION

The K-12 academic experiences young people have while enduring homelessness, foster care, and/or incarceration in the United States is a critical but overlooked area of study. Many educators and researchers have little understanding of what young people experience and how their quality of learning and life suffers during and because of those experiences.

Although numbers vary, current counts suggest that each year, more than 1.6 million young people older than age 6 in the U.S. experience these complex, challenging circumstances.² If we include young children, birth to 5, that number jumps to at least 2.8 million.³

Ample studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that a young person experiencing one of these challenging circumstances is at high risk of concurrently or rotationally experiencing another—meaning, children and youth who experience foster care are at higher risk of juvenile justice involvement or homelessness, and so on. These young people face extreme challenges, marginalization, and oppressive system conditions, which can lead to developmental trauma and poor learning and life outcomes.

Research and anecdotal evidence also make clear that young people of color, those living in poverty, and those faced with other difficulties (e.g. disabilities) are at increased risk of poor treatment at school and within foster care, criminal, and housing systems.



This underserved and often unseen student population is larger than the total population of New Hampshire or Hawai'i.⁴



This report attempts to prioritize these young people by summarizing research studies and reports on their K-12 educational experience published between 2010 and 2024.

Our team reviewed over 400 articles, ranging from early childhood to postsecondary completion, and thoroughly analyzed more than 200 that directly addressed young people's K-12 educational experience.

We scanned 27 federal clearinghouses and reviewed studies from the ten most relevant. We conducted 20 interviews and two focus groups with leading researchers across disciplines.

THROUGH THIS SCAN, WE SOUGHT A HOLISTIC PICTURE OF THE RESEARCH LANDSCAPE, SURFACING CRUCIAL GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE INQUIRY AND INVESTMENT.

WE ATTEMPTED TO IDENTIFY WAYS TO MAKE THESE YOUNG PEOPLE'S EDUCATION AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES MORE VISIBLE AND BETTER PRIORITIZED AMONG DECISION-MAKERS.

²This number is a combined calculation of the National Center for Homeless Education count for children and youth experiencing homelessness in the 2021-2022 school year (1,205,292); the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Book count for children and youth in foster care in 2021 (391,641); and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) count of young people held for at least one day in a juvenile facility in 2020 (25,014). We expect the total count of 1,621,947 is lower than actuals, given chronic absenteeism numbers and anecdotally reported increases.

³As reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center.

⁴This is according to U.S. Census Data 2020 Decennial Census Counts.

BACKGROUND

In February 2022, First Quarter Strategies, in collaboration with Maddy Day, LLC, and Associates, completed an investment landscape and root cause analysis for a group of U.S. foundations that summarized extant philanthropic investments focused on educating young people in the U.S. who experience homelessness and/or involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

The final report issued eight recommendations, including this recommendation about research:

Invest in communities of learning for scholars and funders. [A] research collaborative should bring together researchers with lived experience and experiential depth in these intersectional issues.

Considering that recommendation and an interest in learning more about what has already been done, the Annie E. Casey Foundation engaged First Quarter Strategies to do a landscape scan of existing research and researchers in this area. The resulting scan offers a level-setting for the field regarding the data available, illuminates areas for future study, and highlights ideas for future partners and projects.

The information shared in this report aims to provide critical information and actionable insights for the scholarly community, funders, and education leaders alike.

EXPERIENCE

PARAMETERS

Foster Care

including group homes, kinship care, and temporary placements

Incarceration

including temporary and longer-term residential facilities (e.g., detention centers)

Homelessness

including living in hotels, motels, and doubled up with relatives

RESEARCH SCAN

OVERVIEW

Three questions were used to organize project activities, develop key search terms, establish criteria for reviewing federal clearinghouse studies, and create interview and focus group protocols (see [Appendix 1](#), p. 79 for those protocols):⁵



What research has been published on the education experience of youth in the U.S. experiencing homelessness, foster care, and the juvenile justice system between 2010 and 2024?



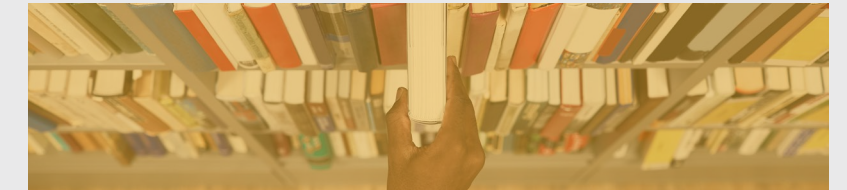
What are new and persistent research gaps and opportunities?



What can we learn from available research that can positively impact the educational experience and outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness, foster care, and/or the justice system?

⁵ All reviewed research is housed in an online research repository located [here](#).

Interviews and focus groups were used to elicit contextual insights to further our understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to designing and carrying out research in this area, including why specific research gaps exist and how new research partnerships can be realized.



Landscape Scan Strategy

Our team used a multi-pronged strategy to develop a comprehensive picture of available research. This included reviewing academic and field-produced publications and federal clearinghouse studies, conducting interviews and focus groups, and a final analysis using researcher-led and artificial intelligence tools (Otter.ai and Claude.ai) for transcription and analytics, respectively.

ACTIVITIES

Research Review

More than 400 peer-reviewed articles and field reports published between 2010-2024 were considered due to their coverage of the education of young people who experience homelessness, foster care, and/or the juvenile justice system.⁶ From those, 223 articles were selected and reviewed because they directly addressed the K-12 academic experiences of young people; these articles were coded and organized using [Airtable](#), a cloud-based database platform.⁷ Two-thirds of reviewed publications (143) were peer-reviewed, and the rest were field reports (80). Publications about early childhood or postsecondary education were included if research was about transitioning into or out of K-12 schools (see [“Postsecondary Research”](#) (p. 76) for more on the postsecondary research landscape).

Our team scanned 27 federal research clearinghouses and reviewed studies from the ten most relevant (see “Scan of Federal Clearinghouses” section and [Appendix 4](#), p. 86 for more details).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Twenty interviews were conducted with scholars who study and publish in this area. Researchers ranged in career tenure and disciplinary affiliations. The interview protocol and participant list are in [Appendices 1 and 2 \(pp. 79-80\)](#).

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held with scholars collaborating on education and foster care research. These discussions explored research partnerships, gaps, and future opportunities. See [Appendices 1 and 2 \(pp. 79-80\)](#) for the focus group protocol and participant list.

⁶ We pulled peer-reviewed research from 568 academic databases, including popular ones like PubMed, JSTOR, JAMA, Springer, and APA. In most cases, we reviewed both the abstract and full-text versions of each article. Our keyword search is available by request.

⁷ For more on our selection criteria, see [Appendix 5](#).

Landscape Parameters and Constraints

Our team worked to create a comprehensive landscape view of research on this topic from 2010-2024. It is incomplete. Our search was limited to peer-reviewed articles in searchable journals and field publications from organizations we knew or found online. We did not include dissertations or reports by individual schools or direct service providers. A few articles could not be accessed in full-text form, which led to incomplete entries in Airtable or a decision to exclude the article.

Our work was time-bound and only included publications through May 2024, excluding anything underway or in press. Perhaps, most significantly, we excluded some critically important research about these young people and the system and societal inequities they face because the research was not expressly about their K-12 education and academic experience.

There's much to be learned from these other studies, and we believe their findings and recommendations can improve young people's quality of learning and life.

Considering these constraints, we created an Airtable database as an evergreen research repository; for now, it is free and available for future use and expansion (see "[Companion Online Research Repository for Future Use](#)").

We hope this repository, available at <https://tinyurl.com/HiddenPopData> is broadened to eventually provide a comprehensive research library of publications about these young people and the many facets of their learning, development, and school experiences.

LANDSCAPE SCAN

FINDINGS

The following tables, figures, and narrative descriptions showcase the significant findings from our scan.

This section provides some contextual insights from interview and focus group participants.

“There’s no education data survey that asks questions about education experiences and trajectories when [students] have these experiences.

We can use proxies, like FAFSA, but there is a lack of data.”

**RESEARCHER
INTERVIEWEE**

Common Data Sources and Analysis Methods

[Table 1 \(p. 18\)](#) shows the 207 peer-reviewed articles and field reports included in Airtable, broken down by research type.

Many quantitative and mixed methods rely on existing data sources, including student data. For example, studies about the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness tend to rely heavily on public school district data. In contrast, studies about the education of young people facing incarceration frequently use non-student data such as staff surveys or legal documents like class action lawsuits.

In interviews and focus groups, researchers shared the challenges of accessing student-level data—often due to privacy concerns or bureaucratic barriers. This limits what’s available for studies and can make it hard to conduct experimental and longitudinal studies—especially those requiring IRB approval.

In some reviewed qualitative studies, researchers wrote about the difficulties of delayed or incomplete responses and data collection, which made it hard to meet academic and time pressures and other requirements associated with tenure and funding. One focus group attendee suggested adding questions about these young people to scalable and easy-to-obtain surveys already administered by schools and districts, thereby increasing reliable and scalable data sources.

Another researcher described the issue this way: “There’s no education data survey that asks questions about education experiences and trajectories when [students] have these experiences. We can use proxies, like FAFSA, but data is lacking. There’s no education survey that asks comprehensive questions about education experiences for this population.”

Over half of reviewed qualitative and mixed-methods studies relied on interviews and focus groups. Researchers told us these methods enable the most direct engagement with young people, their caregivers, and staff. According to the researchers, these methods can be effective for single-use engagement and small sample sizes but become more challenging in longitudinal and time-lapse studies due to student and staff turnover.

Articles or reports about quantitative studies that used existing datasets described research challenges like bureaucratic barriers, difficulties obtaining student-level data due to privacy concerns, and—as several researchers described—the risk of incomplete or inaccurate datasets due to human error or data entry issues. Across publications, the rigor and structure of data collection and analysis varied. For example, some scholars used interview instruments co-developed and vetted by multiple scholars, while others labeled informal conversations at conferences as interviews.

Sample sizes were small across many studies. Qualitative studies were often conducted in a single school or facility; with samples below threshold requirements for many federal funding sources. However, this enabled researchers to deeply study system conditions, the educational setting, and young people’s personal experiences.

One focus group attendee who studies young people in foster care described how small sample sizes lead to funding challenges: “When [applying for an] IES grant, they said they never fund studies with fewer than 1000-person sample sizes even though they want to study marginalized and vulnerable communities. [We] said they will not be able to truly focus on marginalized and vulnerable communities if they need a large power/statistical significance and effect size and large sample [because this] criteria is tough with [our] small population, [especially if the] child welfare system is not on board.” One researcher told us how scholars struggle to design studies that capture and consider the complexity and nuance of young people’s academic journeys with larger samples of students.



See Airtable for publication-level details on data sources and collection methods

**TABLE 1
RESEARCH BY TYPE**

Total Reports Reviewed and Included in AirTable:

207

Peer-Reviewed:

132

Field Reports:

75

Quantitative Research - 86 publications total

	Peer-Reviewed Articles	Field Reports
Totals	56	30

Qualitative Research - 80 publications total

	Peer-Reviewed Articles	Field Reports
Totals	56	24

Mixed-Method Research - 38 publications total

	Peer-Reviewed Articles	Field Reports
Totals	19	19

Research Changes Over Time

This scan considered changes in research questions over time from 2010 to 2024.

This scan considered changes in research questions over time from 2010 to 2024. There is growing focus on how the experiences of homelessness, foster care, and or incarceration intersect with other marginalized and oppressed identities, such as being a young person of color, queer, having a disability, or living in poverty. This increased focus on “intersectionality” showed up in research studies exploring the impacts of trauma and multiple systems involvement (e.g., juvenile justice and child welfare), as well as studies examining the roles of race, culture, and identity and how those impact young people academically and at school.

We spoke to several researchers conducting or carrying out root cause analyses and studies examining the compounding harms of homelessness, foster care, and incarceration with the broader but linked societal and systemic injustices (sometimes referred to as the “carceral state”).⁸

Separately, one researcher noted that future research needs to manage the perception that systems involvement or homelessness is the defining feature or most damaging aspect of a young person’s education, life, or identity. As that researcher aptly put it, young people live dynamic lives. At different points, their systems involvement or housing situation may not be a central or negative influence on how they learn and live.

Future research should consider a wide range of influential and developmental factors that impact young people’s K-12 education when they are homeless or systems-involved.

Most of the reviewed longitudinal studies were conducted in the past decade (2015-2024); this is also true for research using participatory methods. This may reflect broader education and social work research trends and available funding. During this same period, there was an uptick in studies on education stability and college readiness, along with a stronger focus on postsecondary outcomes and economic pathways. We spoke to several researchers conducting or carrying ([see companion resource on the Center for more information, p. 64](#)), more research has been published focusing on policy, race, and ethnicity. While studies about the impacts of race and racism and the broader carceral state are on the rise, they still represent a small percentage of publications overall (25 of the ~200 reviewed).

Overall, trends point to an increasing awareness of the complex and intersectional challenges facing young people who are co-navigating their education and the complex, often traumatizing, realities of homelessness, foster care, and incarceration. These trends indicate a heightened awareness of the nature of these issues and the need for multifaceted approaches and cross-disciplinary teams to study and address them.

Overall, trends seem to reflect an increasing awareness of the complex and intersectional challenges facing young people who are co-navigating their education and the complex, often traumatizing, realities of homelessness, foster care, and incarceration.

⁸ Even so, research on multiple systems experiences and intersectionality is still limited.

Disciplinary Journal Affiliations and Publication Authorship

As shown in [Figure 1 \(p. 23\)](#), roughly 2 in 5 peer-reviewed publications were published by education or human development academic journals or organizations, with social work-affiliated journals or organizations being the second most common.

A sort of peer-reviewed publications by student experience revealed an analysis distribution across disciplines: foster care research was predominantly published by social work journals, homelessness research was found in education journals, and juvenile justice research was more evenly spread across education and social work, along with other disciplines like criminal justice and psychology.

Focus group participants shed light on this unequal distribution. Some social work scholars told us that because they do not represent the education discipline they struggle to get manuscripts accepted into peer-reviewed education journals, even for articles about education and academic outcomes. Given this insight, we generated [Figure 2 \(p. 23\)](#) to show the distribution of primary authors of peer-reviewed pieces across disciplines. [Figure 2](#) shows that nearly half of peer-reviewed publications were led by an education or human development researcher or research team, significantly more than other disciplines.

Valuable peer-reviewed studies on this topic exist, however, they are likely not accessible to or read by educators and education researchers because they do not appear in non-educational journals or news sources.

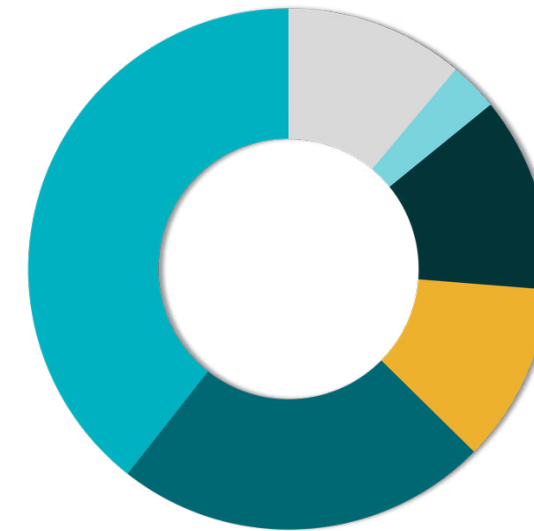
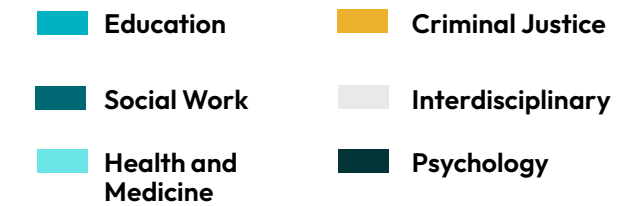


FIGURE 1

Journal Disciplines for Peer-Reviewed Articles (N=132)



There are a core group of foundations, nonprofits, and university centers that regularly publish about these young people. These publications include translational pieces, new research (often surveys and interviews), and others' research.

These reports may or may not be about young people's academic journeys and sometimes cover other aspects of the K-12 experience beyond academics (e.g., the school-to-prison pipeline). Several groups regularly produce reports on young people's K-12 educational experience, especially SchoolHouse Connection and the Center for the Transformation of Schools at the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies. For a list of identified organizations publishing on this topic, see [Appendix 6 \(p.90\)](#).

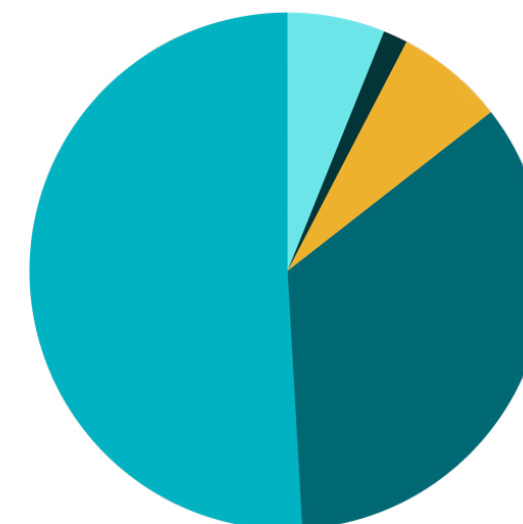
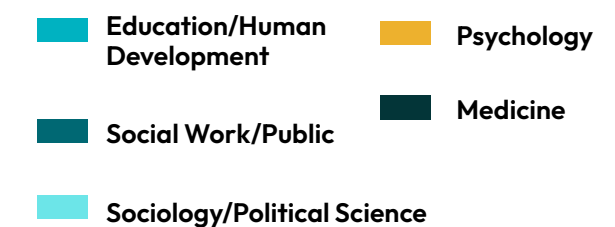


FIGURE 2

Disciplinary Affiliation of Primary Author(s) (N=132)



Research by Young People’s Experience

Table 2 (p.25) shows publications sorted by youth experience, which can be customized using the Airtable repository.

We conducted this analysis to understand which publications considered each system experience separately, multiple systems at once (e.g., young people in foster care *and* experiencing homelessness), and which considered young people with different systems experiences (e.g., a study looking at the similarities or differences between young people involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems).

Table 2 (p. 25) shows that studies investigating multiple systems experiences have increased over time, but there are still few. Although it is not included in this sort, this was the case for studies about intersectional identities, such as race, gender, and sexuality.

The research topics studied by the scholars we interviewed reflected a similar breakdown. While these populations are under-studied compared with other students, it appears young people in foster care are studied by more researchers than young people experiencing homelessness or incarceration.

Conversely, research focused on the K-12 experiences of youth incarcerated is the least studied, with little research found on the academic experiences of young people who are court-involved or on probation. This is shown in Table 2 (p.25) and was reinforced in interviews with scholars who led many of those studies.

The publications on youth incarcerated are overwhelmingly authored by a close network of scholars in the United States—many with legal and special education backgrounds—who have worked and published together for years. Most belong to a multi-institution consortium focused on this topic, which places a heavy emphasis on mentoring junior scholars (for more, see “Research Partnerships”).



See Airtable for publication-level details on data sources and collection methods

TABLE 2

RESEARCH BY STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND RESEARCH TYPE (N=207)

	Total Publications	Quantitative	Mixed Methods	Qualitative
Homelessness and Housing Instability	66* PR: 33 FR: 33	24	10	31
Foster Care	81** PR: 60 FR: 21	40	13	24
Juvenile Justice	39 PR: 32 FR: 7	11	9	19
Juvenile Justice and Foster Care	12 PR: 5 FR: 7	5	3	4
Homelessness and Foster Care	6 PR: 1 FR: 5	4	0	2
Homelessness and Juvenile Justice	0	0	0	0
Homelessness, Juvenile Justice, and Foster Care	3 PR: 1 FR: 2	2	1	0

Key:

PR = Peer-Reviewed; FR = Field Report

*1 publication with an unclear methodology

**4 publications with an unclear methodology



Research by Age and Grade

When we sorted publications by age and grade, we found that publications focusing on policies like *The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* spanned multiple ages and grades. Only eight studies of the more than 200 were specific to elementary school students; only three were exclusive to middle school students; about 30 studied the high school experience. The rest studied one or more age groups or grade spans (e.g., middle *and* high school).

In our experience, when research studies cover multiple parts of the educational pipeline (e.g., high school *and* college, or middle *and* high school), they can be more challenging for specific school settings to understand, apply, and adopt the research because it is not targeted enough (e.g., high school-specific). To strengthen research-to-practice strategies, scholars might consider translating multi-age and -grade studies to age and grade specific resources and recommendations.

To strengthen research-to-practice strategies, scholars might consider translating multi-age and -grade studies to age and grade specific resources and recommendations.

Research by Educational Setting

While some reviewed studies covered multiple educational settings (e.g., residential facilities *and* school districts), most were about traditional K-12 public schools. These could be roughly grouped into two categories: (1) studies about large districts or national and state research, often on broader policies or issues and their impacts on academics (e.g., the impact of McKinney-Vento on educational stability), or (2) studies about a sample/subset of young people in a specific setting (e.g., foster care group home where young people attended multiple schools).

One exception was research about young people who are incarcerated. Although fewer young people are incarcerated, the articles we found predominantly focused on education services for those who are; this may change over time. If our scan were expanded to include research on the school-to-prison pipeline and the broader carceral state, there would have been more articles to consider.

Young people who are experiencing homelessness, foster care, or the justice system tend to be overrepresented in alternative and career and technical education (CTE) settings, so we expected to find ample research on these settings. However, there were only 13 and two, respectively. There may be more within the workforce development or postsecondary education literature. One researcher indicated growing interest in research on career and employment pathways starting in K-12 and continuing into postsecondary.



Research Topics

To understand the spectrum of research topics covered, we reviewed all purpose statements and research questions from peer-reviewed articles and the introductory text and summaries of field reports.

[Appendix 3 \(p.82\)](#) lists recurrent research topics found across publications.

Study topics can be considered across the educational continuum of access, stability, and success.

ACCESS

- Identifying and supporting students who are homeless
- Access to educational supports and services
- Special education identification
- Postsecondary access
- Barriers to enrollment and attendance

STABILITY

- School mobility and attendance
- Educational stability during transitions
- Systems coordination and data sharing
- Continuity of services during transitions
- Reducing school transfers and maintaining school placements

SUCCESS

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic outcomes and achievement gaps • Mental health and social-emotional impacts • Special education services • Trauma-informed practices • Caregiver involvement in education • Academic interventions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School discipline • Graduation rates and postsecondary completion • Educational advocacy and support services • Effective practices for supporting students' mental health and social emotional learning needs. |
|---|--|

Across publications, the most common research topics included the following: educational outcomes and academic achievement of students experiencing homelessness or in foster care (49 studies), school experiences and perceptions of these students (28 studies), implementation of policies like *The McKinney-Vento Act* (15 studies), transition services and postsecondary outcomes (22 studies), special education services for students who are incarcerated (19 studies), school mobility and its effects (11 studies), and interventions or programs designed to support these students (31 studies).

Additionally, we found 18 studies that looked at workforce issues, including teacher preparation, perceptions, or practices when working with these young people. In future work, it would be helpful to look at which research studies apply a more deficit-based or strengths-based lens, what scholars' theories of change are, and how the complexity of context and broader environment are understood and attended to.

Research Findings Related to Prevention and Intervention

To understand what research suggests improves the educational experiences of these young people, we looked for promising or proven strategies within publication findings and recommendations.

We flagged prevention and intervention strategies that have been shown to improve education access, stability, and success.

ACCESS

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on interventions that reduce barriers to enrollment and attendance • Improve access to educational and wraparound supports and services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance special education identification and service provision • Offer advising and navigational supports for postsecondary access and transition |
|--|--|

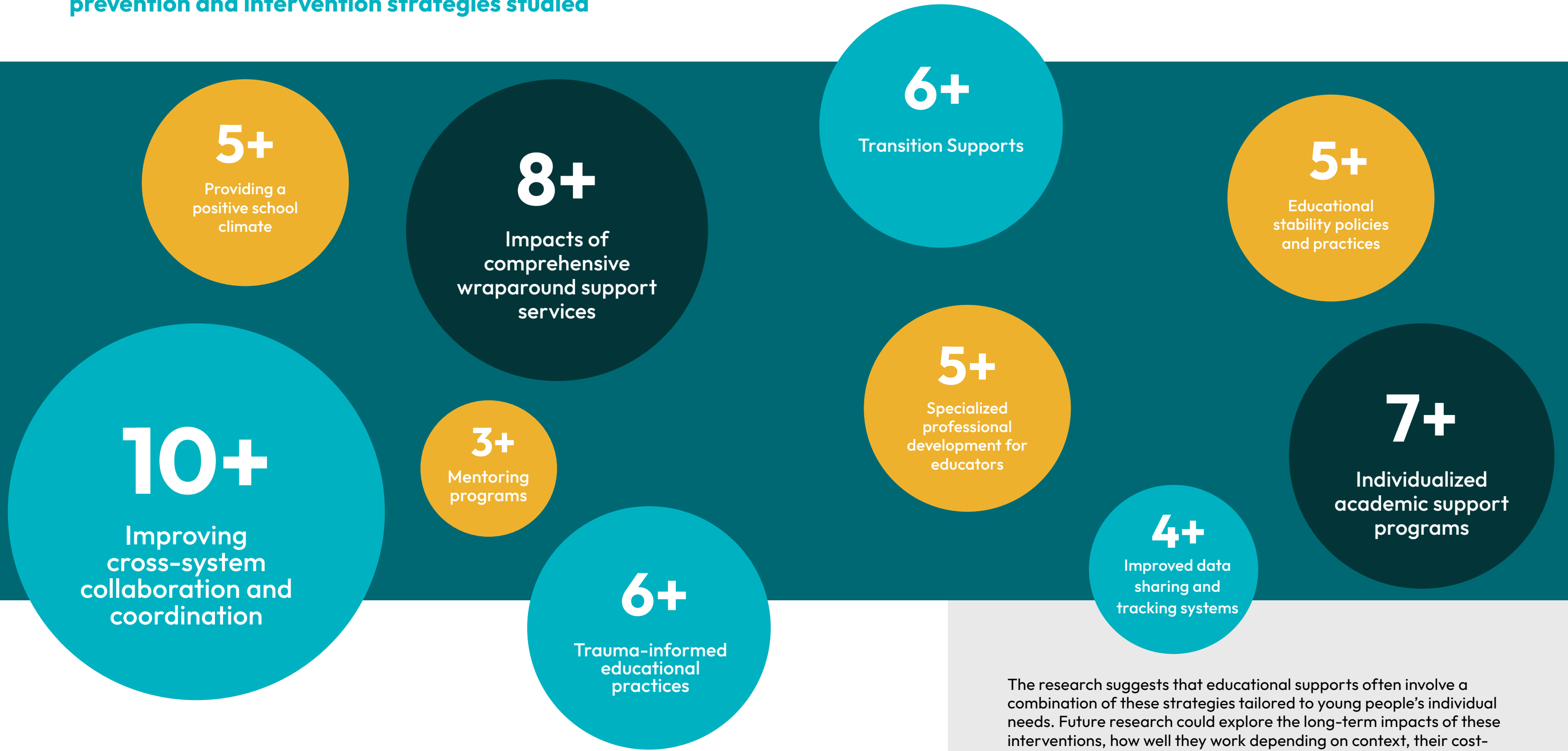
STABILITY

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on interventions that reduce school mobility and mitigate its effects • Ensure policies and practices that promote educational stability and continuity during transitions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve strategies for systems coordination and data sharing • Ensure continuity of services during transitions • Maintain school and classroom placements when possible |
|---|--|

SUCCESS

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on interventions that close achievement gaps • Offer services and support for mental health • Attend to social-emotional needs • Train all staff on developmental trauma and trauma-informed practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase caregiver involvement in education and educational decisions • Use academic interventions and support services proven effective for these populations (e.g., tutoring and mentorship) • Focus on restorative discipline practices rather than punitive punishments |
|---|---|

Across publications, here were the most common prevention and intervention strategies studied



The research suggests that educational supports often involve a combination of these strategies tailored to young people's individual needs. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of these interventions, how well they work depending on context, their cost-effectiveness, and how they can be scaled and implemented across various educational settings and within different policy contexts. Additionally, more studies are needed to understand how these strategies can be adapted to meet the unique needs of distinct subpopulations.



Geographic Distribution

In [Airtable](#), publications are coded according to geography, from national to local, when provided.

In some cases, researchers did not list a community but described it, for example, “a large metropolitan area in Illinois.”

Figure 3 below depicts the U.S. regional breakdown of reviewed research. In some cases, studies covered multiple geographies.

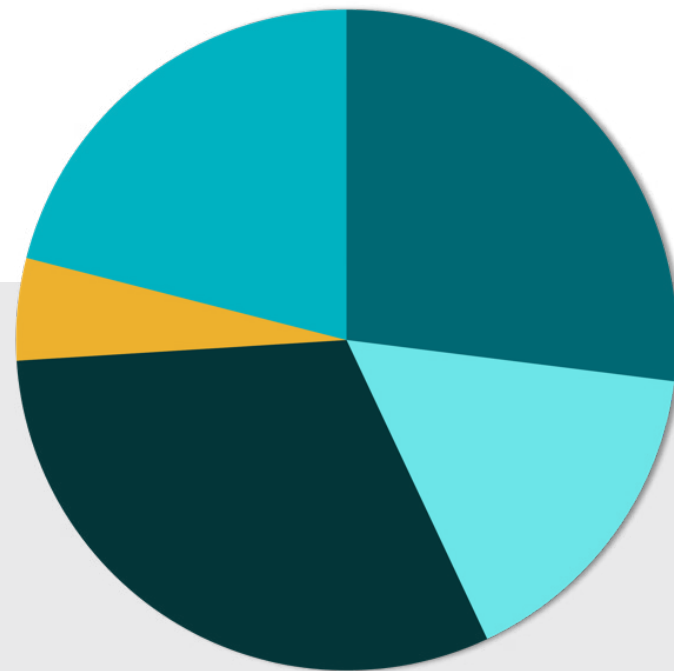
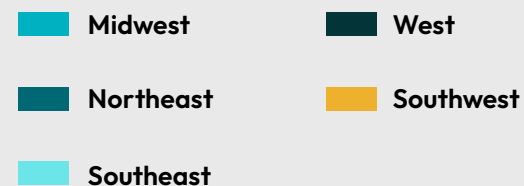


FIGURE 3

Geographic Distribution of Research Studies With Regional or State Focus (N=132)



The West represents the highest proportion of publications. Of the 41 “Western” publications, more than two-thirds (28) focused on California.

Conversely, the Southwest and Southeast represented a combined 28 publications, with the Southeast accounting for 21 articles and the Southwest only seven.

In the Southeast, there were no publications about students in Alabama, Delaware, Mississippi, South Carolina, or West Virginia; in the Southwest, 5 of the seven publications were about Texas, with none from Oklahoma.

Seminal Publications

As we scanned publications, there were several that are not studies but are foundational pieces for the field and building baseline awareness of the educational challenges and experiences young people face when homeless, in foster care, or involved in the juvenile justice system.

Here are three such publications, one representing each system experience:

Leone, P., & Weinberg, L. (2010). *Addressing the Unmet Educational Needs of Children and Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems*. Center for Juvenile Justice Reform.

Mathematica (2024). *Findings from Mathematica’s Review of the Evidence of Programs, Policies, and Strategies to Support TAY [Transition-Age Youth] in Foster Care*.

National Center for Homeless Education (2023). *Educating Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness, Summary of Research 2015-2022*.

Several organizations, advocacy groups, and university centers actively publish pieces for policymakers, practitioners, and the public. These groups, including Chapin Hall, SchoolHouse Connection, and CSG Justice Center, translate current population counts, new data and research, and complicated policy changes into easy-to-understand reading.

Notably, these organizations often conduct their research and present findings in a way that is organized differently than peer-reviewed publications or traditional research reports.

There is a long-standing and growing body of root-cause research among scholars and organizers that addresses systemic conditions like racism, policing, and criminalization in America.

This research provides the holistic view needed to ensure research is grounded in history, focused on equity, and attends to structural oppression and other injustices.

Research Gaps and Study Limitations

DATA GAPS

Data collection methods associated with longer-term studies and larger, stabler sample sizes were used least often, including time series analysis and ethnographic methods. This is consistent with findings from interviews and focus groups, where we heard about challenges in conducting longitudinal research and experimental designs.

Researchers told us longitudinal studies and related methodologies are problematic for different reasons, including funding limitations, the challenges of tracking and staying in touch with young people over time, and the the complexity of navigating child welfare and education systems requirements and data privacy concerns.

Our conversations suggest funding and professionals need added flexibility, resources, and longevity to support these studies. One interviewee cited an unexpectedly positive challenge when conducting a randomized controlled trial in a youth detention facility: “I remember a study in Arizona where kids in the experimental group were doing really well [and] started to get early release because of good behavior.”

Challenges are shared across disciplines and areas of scholarship. Investment and infrastructural changes are needed to remedy these issues, especially at scale. From what we heard and read, policy, fiscal, and institutional incentives often need to be improved to make those changes.



STUDY LIMITATIONS

Several limitations tap into more significant research gaps. The most common being small sample sizes and a lack of sample diversity (e.g., race and gender). More research is being done on urban and large suburban settings than rural areas and small towns. Another limitation was studying a single setting, like a school or classroom. These research constraints can be limiting, but they are also strengths. Qualitative studies with small samples are hard to generalize but offer contextual depth and detail that quantitative studies cannot achieve.

In interviews and focus groups, researchers explained that beyond research implications, this could be why academic journals and federal clearinghouses exclude some of their studies. One focus group participant described it this way, “Because [youth in foster care] are a numerically small group, they are often not of interest . . . you’d think they would be a focus [for academic education journals] because they are highly minoritized and vulnerable. It’s overlooked – such a small number – the methods [these journals] prioritize are quantitative, and we can’t get the sample size to do anything ‘meaningful.’”

Researchers also described frequent issues with data quality and availability. Researchers often relied on states or schools for data and received incomplete or inaccurate datasets.



Other researchers described being unable to access specific data fields or information because of privacy concerns or technical issues. The need for longitudinal and widespread reliable empirical and administrative data makes it hard for researchers to locate and report on long-term outcomes.

Other recurrent limitations included reliance on self-reported information and the related possibilities of bias; research design methods that limit the ability to determine causality; limited time frames due to factors like student transience, staff turnover, or funding constraints; lack of control groups or other barriers to experimental design; definitional issues, especially for those studying youth homelessness; selection bias; and difficulties accounting for the many complex, contextual factors that impact these young people’s educational experiences. In the past four years, only two studies mentioned the impact of COVID-19, but we hope this changes with time.

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Throughout this project, we spoke to leaders from four research partnerships that have produced many of the publications on young people's K-12 and higher education experiences and the related education policy and structural conditions affecting them. These partnerships provide strong thought leadership and cohesiveness in an otherwise fractured field.

Research, partnerships offer space and time for researchers to cross-pollinate their ideas, work, theories of change, co-evolve inquiries, and generate future research questions. These groups are primed for convening and making sense of the extant evidence base, including implications for policymakers, practitioners, and the public. These partnerships, and partnerships like them, are vital for future scholarship and studies.

In interviews, researchers expressed how valuable partnerships are professionally and personally. Unfortunately, busy academics often run partnerships voluntarily and need more sustainable and set aside funds. There is a real opportunity to grow these partnerships and invest more deeply in the collaborative projects and convenings generated from them.

In addition to the partnerships described on the following page, key university centers and nonprofits, such as Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, the Urban Institute, Mathematica, and SchoolHouse Connection in Washington, D.C., are respected research hubs and prolific publishers on issues impacting these populations, including and beyond K-12 education.

Juvenile Justice Multi-Institutional Consortium

This consortium of 10 scholars spans three higher education institutions. The group aims to build a broader understanding of special education within the juvenile justice system. This work builds on decades of collaboration between a close network of academics, includes graduate students in their studies, and prioritizes mentoring early career scholars to create a continuous pipeline of academics studying this topic.

National Conference for Hidden Populations (NCHP)

In 2020, this collaborative was launched as an effort to connect practitioners and researchers who study and serve students with experiences and journeys often not seen or understood by higher education systems (e.g., homelessness, foster care, carceral system involvement, etc.). Annual conferences share highlights from research across the “hidden populations” spectrum and convene multidisciplinary research teams comprised of researchers, practitioners, and those with lived experience. NCHP has expanded to include a monthly research brief, The Scholar-Practitioner, and Oklahoma State University—which houses the NCHP—has developed a Hidden Populations Graduate Certificate program.

National Research Collaborative on Foster Alumni and Higher Education (NRC-FAHE)

Launched in 2019, NRC-FAHE is a network of researchers and practitioners focused on developing research to inform policy and practice impacting students in higher education with experience in foster care. It publishes a quarterly newsletter and hosts monthly webinars highlighting innovations in research and practice to promote the development of evidence-informed best practices across the field.

Center for the Transformation of Schools (CTS) at the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies

CTS was launched in 2017. Since its inception, the center has prioritized young people who experience homelessness, systems involvement, and other marginalizing experiences. Over the past six years, CTS has expanded partnerships with scholars throughout the U.S. to launch numerous studies in this area, producing translational publications that inform academics, policymakers, and field leaders alike ([see Companion Piece 1, p.64](#)). Many scholars affiliated with the Center are working on and writing about this issue at high-profile institutions nationwide.

FEDERAL

CLEARINGHOUSE

SCAN

“There was [once] a call for more studies on marginalized populations and they had 1000+ criteria and requirements.

[For this population] it is hard to sell people on a comparison group where some young people won’t get an intervention, because it’s research.”

RESEARCHER FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Our team also scanned 27 research clearinghouses and selected the ten most relevant to review for studies on this topic. We used a multi-step process described in [Appendix 4 \(p. 84\)](#) to locate those studies.

We used a multi-step process described in Appendix 4 to locate relevant studies. Findings are shown in [Table 3 \(p. 41\)](#). See [Appendix 4 \(p. 84\)](#) for more information on our selection and review processes, including verbatim communications from the What Works Clearinghouse confirming that no studies about the education of youth experiencing homelessness or the juvenile justice system were in that primary education research database.

Too few studies exist in federal clearinghouses about the K-12 academic experiences of young people facing homelessness, foster care, and/or juvenile justice systems. This may be because clearinghouses serve as repositories for rigorous impact evaluations, which are limited on this topic.

That said, our team has firsthand experience receiving funding tied to choosing interventions from these clearinghouses; in such cases, educators cannot find and choose solutions proven to support the unique needs of these young people because few options are in the databases they must choose from. In focus groups and interviews, researchers confirmed these findings, sharing that clearinghouses have strict requirements for what constitutes evidence, including having large sample sizes.

Here are some responses we received when we discussed these findings in interviews and focus groups [brackets used for clarity]:

- “The government loves to invest in evidence-based practices but doesn’t like to invest in what it takes to do it. To do a true RCT [in this area] requires funding at a significant level.”
- “I’m not surprised you found nothing in the What Works Clearinghouse [about youth in the juvenile justice system] because they are specifically focused on experimental studies. Nothing we do can meet their requirements.”
- “There was [once] a call for more studies on marginalized populations, and they had 1000+ criteria and requirements. [For this population] it is hard to sell people on a comparison group where some young people won’t get an intervention because it’s research.”



We contacted a former staffer from one clearinghouse to ask what it would take to fix this. This individual, who previously held a senior leadership role, explained these youth populations need to be added to the clearinghouse radar. According to this person, the issue could be fixed if Congress formally requested clearinghouses to address these gaps and add more extant studies about these student populations.

This could happen if clearinghouse staff received a letter from Congress or if it became a legislative requirement.

Traditional advocacy strategies could be used to raise awareness and pressure clearinghouses to add existing studies, create new toolkits, and increase the inclusion of evidence that scholars have already produced.

“I’m not surprised you found nothing in the What Works Clearinghouse [about youth in the juvenile justice system] because they are specifically focused on experimental studies. Nothing we do can meet their requirements.”

RESEARCHER INTERVIEWEE

“The government loves to invest in evidence-based practices but doesn’t like to invest in what it takes to do it. To do a true RCT [in this area] requires funding at a significant level.”

RESEARCHER INTERVIEWEE

FEDERAL CLEARINGHOUSES REVIEWED FOR RELEVANT STUDIES

- [What Works Clearinghouse](#)
- [Evidence Exchange](#)
- [Crime Solutions](#)
- [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#)
- [Community Guide](#)
- [Pathways to Work Clearinghouse](#)
- [Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness' Continuum of Evidence](#)
- [Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research](#)
- [Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center](#)
- [National Clearinghouse on Homeless Youth and Families](#)



See Airtable for publication-level details on data sources and collection methods

TABLE 3 STUDIES BY STUDENT EXPERIENCE

	Number of Studies on K-12 Education, by Student Experience		
	Homelessness and Housing Instability	Juvenile Justice	Foster Care
Federal Clearinghouse			
What Works Clearinghouse (Dept of Ed)	0	1	4
Evidence Exchange (AmeriCorps)	2	3	5
Crime Solutions (Dept of Justice)	1	1	0
Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (Health and Human Services)	0	0	0
Community Guide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)	0	0	0
Pathways to Work Clearinghouse (Health and Human Services)	1	1	1
Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness' Continuum of Evidence (Dept of Defense and USDA)	3	4	3
Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research (DOL)	4	4	7
Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center (SAMHSA)	0	0	0
National Clearinghouse on Homeless Youth and Families (FYSB, Health and Human Services)	11	0	4

KEY INSIGHTS

FROM INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The 20 interviews and two focus groups we conducted provided critical context and depth of understanding that would have been otherwise inaccessible. We spoke with leading scholars representing multiple disciplines, geographies, and career tenures. We also sought racial, gender, and age diversity.

The resulting group spanned early career professionals to recently retired academics, with presence and positions covering a wide range of the continental U.S., from Boston to Washington, Los Angeles to Alabama. The collective disciplinary reach of the group was broad, and many individuals were affiliated with multiple academic departments. About one-third currently work in schools of education and human development, with another third housed in schools of social work. The remaining third are affiliated with psychology and criminal justice departments or interdisciplinary centers.

Several key insights listed to the right and described in the following pages, emerged from these conversations, which amplify and align with what we found in the publication review and shine a light on the state of the research landscape with possibilities for the future:

Compounding Effects of Intersectionality and Marginalization

Importance of Cross-Systems Collaboration and Data Sharing

Need for More Participatory and Policy Studies

Need for More Longitudinal and Lifespan Studies

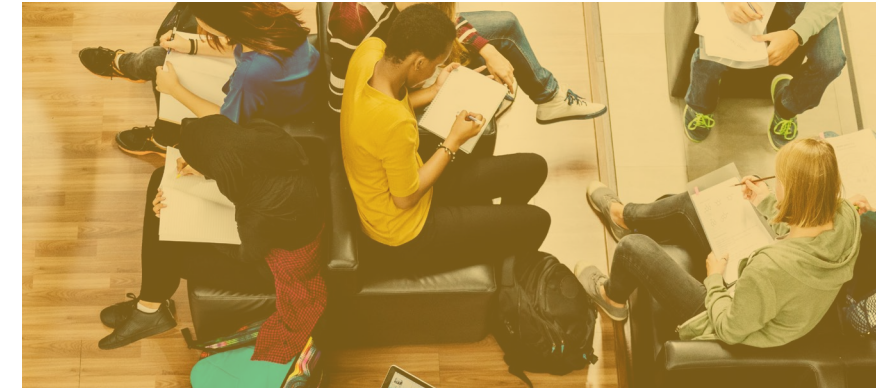
“Complex problems defy singular approaches. Issues of access and success for young people with foster care experiences defies a one-disciplinary approach.

It’s negligent not to be in collaboration with other disciplines who understand different aspects of experience.”

RESEARCHER FOCUS
GROUP PARTICIPANT

Compounding Effects of Intersectionality and Marginalization

Most researchers we spoke to had relevant professional or personal experience. Before becoming academics, some experienced these circumstances themselves through fostering and adopting children; many held practitioner roles as teachers, advisors, and caseworkers, working directly with young people facing homelessness, foster care, and/or incarceration.



Researchers identified an alarming gap between the multidimensional lives of these young people and the siloed and single-system nature of most studies.

Repeatedly, researchers told us that experience motivates them to study these topics despite funding and tenure challenges. The researchers we spoke with bring an authentic and empathetic understanding of the complexity of these systems, the harm they can cause, and what it means to go to school and try to learn while faced with foster care, homelessness, or incarceration; connectedly, their passion and purpose for this work were evident.

Researchers with backgrounds in this area provided first and second-hand accounts of young people who are forced to endure one system (e.g., foster care) with or followed by another (e.g., homelessness, housing instability, and involvement with the juvenile justice system). They understand the intersectionality and compounded complexity, oppression, and trauma young people face; as a result, they seem more inclined to use participatory research methods that include the most impacted young people.

Researchers identified an alarming gap between the multidimensional lives of these young people and the siloed and single-system nature of most studies. As seen in [Table 2 \(p. 25\)](#), of the more than 200 publications reviewed, only three focused on foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice. There is an urgent need for more intersectional and multi-systems research. This research is vital in developing an empirical and holistic understanding of young people's lives and learning during their K-12 experiences.

Researchers also spoke to the need to conduct more studies on the interconnectedness of systems and how they have historically marginalized and continue to oppress certain groups of young people. This research can be done quantitatively and qualitatively, with each complementing the other.

One researcher explained that quantitative studies can use descriptive analyses of young people's multi-system experiences and intersectionality. Meanwhile, qualitative methods can be used to understand system and structural conditions, young people's academic needs, and how specific policies or practices impact young people in different ways and education contexts.

A focus group participant said, "Complex problems defy singular approaches. Issues of access and success for young people with foster care experiences defy a one-disciplinary approach. It's negligent not to be in collaboration with other disciplines who understand different aspects of experience."

The need for intersectional research extends beyond young people's systems involvement to include a necessary examination of how race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, and sexual orientation intersect with experiences of homelessness, foster care, and juvenile justice involvement, and both impact and compound young people's educational adversity and experiences. One interviewee noted, "We are not always asking the right questions, [because we are concerned about] not taking on bigger projects... there are real challenges of funding [for intersectional work]."



Importance of Cross-Systems Collaboration and Data Sharing

Repeatedly, interviewees told us there is a need to improve and invest more deeply in collaboration and data sharing between education, child welfare, housing, and juvenile justice systems. They shared how uncoordinated systems can lead to fragmented services, missed opportunities for intervention, unreliable support, and— from a research perspective—issues with data, reporting, and responsiveness. Even when coordination exists, available data can vary in quality and reliability.

Cross-system collaboration and data sharing are critical for the access, stability, and success of young people’s education, and this same cross-system sharing can improve research. That said, effective cross-system collaboration and sharing rely on the availability of accurate and complete information and well-trained, coordinated partners.

“[One state] was way more bureaucratic than expected - creating barriers to partnership. [There was] lots of turnover in peoples’ positions, which means you have to start over in building partnerships.”

RESEARCHER FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

RESEARCHERS SHARED THAT ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION IS EASIER SAID THAN DONE.

Regarding specific attempts at foster care research, one individual said, “Child welfare agencies make it impossible to move forward. None will help you build evidence by participating meaningfully in research.”

Another echoed this sentiment, noting, “[One state] was way more bureaucratic than expected - creating barriers to partnership. [There was] lots of turnover in peoples’ positions, which means you have to start over in building partnerships.”

Several researchers described the importance of scholars building relationships with agency staff and taking time to understand why data quality is what it is and the barriers that can stand in the way.

In one focus group, there was a discussion about the importance of training researchers for this type of community work before it starts; this is true not only for working with public agencies but also for community partners, schools, and young people. Another researcher explained that linking state agency datasets requires states to create a unique person identifier (UPI) for each young person.

This UPI enables basic data-sharing and can improve longitudinal and cross-system data collection because young people can be tracked as they move within and between systems. According to this researcher, UPIs can be used to circumnavigate certain data privacy concerns. While some states, like Michigan, have already begun to use UPIs, most have not.

Despite these challenges, researchers emphasized that effective systems collaboration—like data sharing, aligning policies, and coordinating services—can radically improve educational experiences and academic outcomes for young people; it can also make experimental and larger-scale research in this area more viable, thereby improving and expanding the evidence base.

One interviewee highlighted the potential of improved data sharing across systems this way: “[If we could] link administrative data better, analyze [it], then we could better understand pathways to and through homelessness and what those predictors are.” Likely this is true for pathways to and through education, foster care, the justice system, and more.

Need for More Participatory and Policy Studies

Researchers consistently emphasized the need for more participatory research and policy studies. This type of research is seen as crucial for understanding the complex interplay between systems and the lived experiences of young people as they concurrently navigate school with homelessness, foster care, and/or incarceration.

Researchers stressed the importance of prioritizing the voices and experiences of those most impacted by these systems. One interviewee noted, “We need to move beyond just studying these young people to actively involving them in the research process.” This approach not only provides more authentic insights but also empowers young people to contribute to strategies and solutions that affect their lives.

There is a critical need for research that interrogates the linkages between systems and what some researchers call the carceral state. This includes exploring connections between the research we reviewed and literature on policing, racial discrimination, and the school-to-prison pipeline. This also includes studies on young people in the “deepest end” of systems involvement—those who experience multiple systems and many academic challenges. One focus group participant explained, “We can’t fully understand the educational experiences of these young people without examining the broader ecosystem they inhabit.”

“We can’t fully understand the educational experiences of these young people without examining the broader ecosystem they inhabit.”

RESEARCHER
INTERVIEWEE



Researchers also suggested prioritizing federal, state, and local policy studies. They highlighted the need for more analysis of how policies interact and impact young people’s educational experiences. Several researchers pointed to the need to bring less mainstream research into better view and visibility. This includes work by direct service providers, organizers, and advocacy groups that are often more issue-focused and setting-specific. This work can provide valuable insights and implications for both policy and practice.

Finally, there was a call for increased efforts to make peer-reviewed research more relevant to policymakers and to produce more translational pieces for practitioners and educational decision-makers.



Need for More Longitudinal and Lifespan Studies

In interviews and focus groups, we repeatedly heard a need to conduct more comprehensive, longitudinal studies that track outcomes across multiple systems and follow young people over time.

While there are existing studies focused on specific aspects of education for young people experiencing homelessness, foster care, and incarceration, there is little research following these young people across the intersectional roadways of systems and life stages.

These studies would enable research teams to explore significant questions about how young people end up in these systems, the interrelationships between schooling and continued systems involvement, and what happens when young people transition and rotate through different systems. It could be valuable to examine relevant longitudinal and lifespan studies that have worked to learn more about their design and execution.

Until there are more lifespan and longitudinal studies, we will have a limited understanding of the long-term academic impacts of systems involvement and the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies over time. This is a significant area for future investment and attention. Conducting these studies is challenging, and requires funder flexibility and ample funds.

One interviewee highlighted this when they said, “A big thing to consider is where there is money to prioritize research for these communities. While there’s federal money, the focus is so narrow or talks about short-term outcomes that you lose the systems-thinking.” Another said, “Most researchers aren’t conducive to serious long-term research projects . . . It takes partnership at policy/research/advocacy levels to connect the dots and form the study.”

The challenges of conducting longitudinal research are solvable, and while they include funding, they extend beyond that. Researchers explained the need for better ways to stay in touch with young people over time, especially given their transience and system transitions. This is partly because public systems tend to be behemoths and hard to navigate, often with complex research requirements, resource instability, and ever-changing data privacy and reporting requirements.

While there are existing studies focused on specific aspects of education for young people experiencing homelessness, foster, and incarceration, there is little research following these young people across the intersectional roadways of systems and life stages.

Young people may not want to be labeled and tracked over time for complex and painful experiences they wish to keep in the past and private. Even so, as one interviewee described it, “[We] generally don’t know what happens to young people 1-2 years after the program. It takes real commitment to follow up over time... First, state and maybe national funders need to make this type of investment in longitudinal studies. Otherwise, people will look at the upfront expense and modest outcomes.” Without a long-term picture of the adverse lifetime effects of foster care, homelessness, and justice involvement in education, it’s hard to make a case for additional resources, services, and support for these young people while they attend school.

The value of longitudinal and lifespan studies—particularly for those focused on prevention and intervention—can’t be overstated.

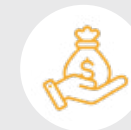
One interviewee lamented the risks of not knowing what happens to children and young people after they experience homelessness because many interventions are only available to a young person for the time homelessness or housing instability is happening. The interviewee said it this way, “We have different programs available depending on what status you match at the time, but children need ongoing support . . . if you’re no longer homeless you may no longer be eligible for supports. It doesn’t mean the trauma of your experience has gone away. It doesn’t mean that your behavior is a manifestation of being behind, but rather what happened to you. People don’t have the same empathy [if you are not currently experiencing homelessness].” We need more longitudinal studies because we do not have a sufficient evidence base to build a collective understanding of the long-term educational and life impacts of homelessness and involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

These studies would enable research teams to explore significant questions about how young people end up in these systems, the interrelationships between schooling and continued systems involvement, and what happens when young people transition and rotate through different systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our comprehensive research scan from 2010 to 2024 reveals progress and persistent gaps in the research on the K-12 education of young people facing homelessness, foster care, and incarceration.

Recommendations for Future Research



INVEST IN PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION RESEARCH



PRIORITIZE INTERSECTIONAL AND LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH



IMPROVE CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION AND DATA SHARING



SUSTAIN AND EXPAND RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS AND CENTERS



TRANSLATE RESEARCH FINDINGS INTO IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS



ELEVATE ISSUE IN FEDERAL CLEARINGHOUSES



ESTABLISH COMMON MEASURES AND DEFINITIONS

Invest in Prevention and Intervention Research

There is a significant opportunity to increase prevention and early intervention studies. Investing in this research could lead to more proactive approaches to supporting young people before and during educational and life disruptions, thereby improving educational stability and success. More studies are needed to develop and evaluate models that prevent educational disruption and reduce or eliminate the other negative educational impacts young people face when systems-involved.

By focusing on these critical areas, we can work towards a research base that more accurately reflects and responds to the complex realities young people face when they experience homelessness, foster care, and incarceration. This, in turn, can inform more effective policies and practices to support these young people's academic experiences.

Research indicates these young people face significant barriers to educational access, stability, and success.

However, it also points to promising practices, such as the positive benefits of dedicated staff support, trauma-informed teachers, and cross-system collaboration. By addressing the research gaps and translating findings into action, we can dramatically improve the education of affected young people.

Educators and schools are responsible for ensuring they serve the needs of these young people, understanding and attending to the full complexity of their lives and working towards meaningful, lasting change. By easing the burdens and challenges of doing this research, we can encourage more scholars and research organizations to choose this as a focus area and improve the visibility and translatability of their work so that it can make lasting positive changes in our schools and students' lives.



Prioritize Intersectional and Longitudinal Research

There is a need for more interdisciplinary studies that examine the intersections of homelessness, foster care, and juvenile justice involvement, especially ones that consider identities and the experiences of young people who are least academically successful.

There is a need for long-term, comprehensive, contextualized, and culturally sensitive studies that consider young people humanely and holistically, following them across educational experiences and life stages.

Academic institutions, funders, and publishers should prioritize this research and publications, even when it requires more flexible approaches, longer timelines, and different funding streams. Such research could provide crucial insights that improve these young people's educational access, stability, and success.

Improve Cross-System Collaboration and Data Sharing

The need for better collaboration between education, child welfare, housing, and juvenile justice systems emerged as a critical issue impacting the quality of research-practice partnerships and young people's educational experiences. Policymakers should create incentives and infrastructure for improved data sharing and systems collaboration, and funders should provide researchers with flexibility and resources to support the administrative burden of building system partnerships and establishing data-sharing agreements and reliable data sources. This can positively support young people as they traverse multiple systems throughout their K-12 journeys and strengthen the evidence base.

Doing this could involve creating shared data systems and less cumbersome data-sharing agreements, aligning policies across departments, or establishing cross-sector working groups.

As one interviewee suggested, we must “create a culture of evidence-based and informed decision-making. [We are] lacking the muscle to tie research and practice together in child welfare.” Improved collaboration could enhance the early identification of youth at risk of systems involvement or academic difficulties and facilitate more timely prevention and intervention strategies to ensure educational access, stability, and success.

Sustain and Expand Research Partnerships and Centers

Research partnerships and centers, such as the Juvenile Justice Multi-Institutional Consortium and the Center for the Transformation of Schools at UCLA, provide vital platforms for cross-disciplinary collaboration, mentoring early career scholars, and growing this body of research. To continue, these partnerships need sufficient and sustainable funding, and scholars need their universities to support their participation in and leadership of such efforts.

Investing in these collaboratives can foster innovation, build research capacity, increase visibility, and ensure a continuous pipeline of scholars dedicated to this critical study area. As one focus group participant noted, “Complex problems defy singular approaches... It's negligent not to be in collaboration with other disciplines who understand different aspects of experience.”

There is also a need to recruit and support scholars who have experienced homelessness, foster care, and the justice system. Our interviews and focus groups reinforced the necessity and urgency of investing in these scholars and their leadership. Given their intimate understanding of the issues and what's at stake, these scholars are well-positioned to lead cutting-edge projects and form the future researcher vanguard in this area.

Investments in research partnerships and a robust research pipeline require increased visibility and value for this research and the topic. Currently, as discussed in interviews, focus groups, and throughout this report, some academic leaders view research partnerships and community collaborations as outside the purview of tenure or funding requirements. Some requirements encourage or require scholars to stay focused on a single system or issue or to choose methodologies that prevent them from studying the larger and more complex realities inherent in these young people's educational journeys.

To continue, these partnerships need sufficient and sustainable funding, and scholars need their universities to support their participation in and leadership of such efforts.

Elevate Issue in Federal Clearinghouses

Our scan of federal clearinghouses revealed a problematic lack of attention to these populations, mainly due to student population size and strict requirements around study sample sizes and methodologies. Even when we found studies about these young people, they rarely focused on academics and K-12 education.

Federal clearinghouses should expand their criteria to include a broader spectrum of studies, particularly those with smaller sample sizes or qualitative methods necessary for studying these populations.

This expansion could significantly increase the visibility and influence of research on these student populations (and likely others), making it more possible to inform policy and practice and gain academic attention.

Establish Common Measures and Definitions

There are significant inconsistencies in how researchers, practitioners, and policymakers define and measure the experiences of young people in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. These variations make it challenging to accurately count affected youth, understand the overlap between systems, track educational outcomes, or compare findings across studies and locations. Different agencies and institutions often use varying definitions and tracking methods, leading to incomplete or inconsistent data about these populations.

This fragmentation makes it challenging to understand the true scope of this population and the issues and to coordinate responses across systems effectively. A national research collaborative or network of research partnerships could work together to establish common definitions and measurement approaches that capture these young people's distinct and overlapping experiences.

This standardization would improve data quality, enable more accurate counting and tracking of young people's experiences over time, facilitate cross-system collaboration, build buy-in about the magnitude of the issues, and ultimately lead to more effective, evidence-based interventions to support these young people's educational access, stability, and success.

Translate Research Findings Into Implementation Tools

There are many interview-based studies that have yet to be translated into concrete actions or interventions. One researcher pointedly stated, "We have so many studies of just interviews. What are the barriers? How many times? How many more dissertations will come out with the same focus? People do not do practice research and intervention research." Relatedly, we were struck by how many publications offer the same findings and recommendations—with slow to no progress in educational outcomes over time (2010-2024).

The gap between research and policy or practice effectiveness must be further analyzed. Relatedly, there is a pressing need to increase the acceptability of extant studies as reliable evidence for what works to improve these young people's education—even when and if the studies have small sample sizes or other common limitations like data quality.

To bridge this gap, we recommend prioritizing studies that test what happens when prevention and intervention strategies are effectively converted into educational policy and practice. This requires more robust investments in research collaboratives and research-practice partnerships, which create channels for ongoing communication and opportunities to bring together researchers, educators, and policymakers.

Lastly, it would be worthwhile for a research collaborative to consider the recurrent findings in this scan and identify those they can collectively work on in the years ahead.

COMPANION ONLINE

RESEARCH REPOSITORY

FOR FUTURE USE

Throughout this project, we created a [database in Airtable](#) of the 200+ reviewed publications. This repository is bound by the time parameters of this project (2010-2024), but moving forward scholars can add and adjust parameters and publications for optimal and expanded use. This database was created as a companion tool for this report and served as the information hub for analysis and synthesis.

The public version has been formatted for ease of use. Customized filtering and grouping options are available at the user's discretion. We built this repository on Airtable because it is currently free, includes easy filtering and sorting options, and allows others to contribute.

We recognize we may have made errors in entering the research, including missed publications, misinterpretations, or misspellings. Because this tool will extend beyond publishing and presenting this report, anyone can make corrections and additions. We hope this [Airtable repository](#) can be used by those looking for research on this topic area, making it easier to find and use research often siloed by discipline and hidden behind paywalls or complex federal clearinghouse search functions. While it can't address barriers to getting full-text access to certain peer-reviewed publications, it does provide any user with a level of detail beyond abstracts.

[Appendix 5 \(p. 88\)](#) contains information about our choices when building the repository and selecting articles to include.



If you printed this report and are reading a hardcopy, scan this QR code for access to the Airtable.

You can also type <https://tinyurl.com/HiddenPopData> into your web browser.



See our Online Airtable
Research Repository

CONCLUSION

This landscape scan reveals a body of research that unpacks the complex challenges among youth navigating multiple systems while attending K-12 schools and the researchers studying these young people's experiences. There is a wide-ranging network of researchers deeply committed to these young people and this issue. They struggle against barriers that make their research unnecessarily difficult or keep their work outside the education discourse.

This scan underscores an urgent need for intersectional research, improvements to cross-system collaboration, and more flexible and sustainable funding sources to support studies and partnerships that explore what these young people experience and need academically and overall. This report highlights the breadth and depth of the research landscape from 2010 to 2024, illuminating key themes from leading researchers and critical areas for future action.

The gaps and opportunities identified in this scan point to promising avenues for future research, partnerships, policy, and practice. There is also a pressing need to prioritize these young people more visibly in education.

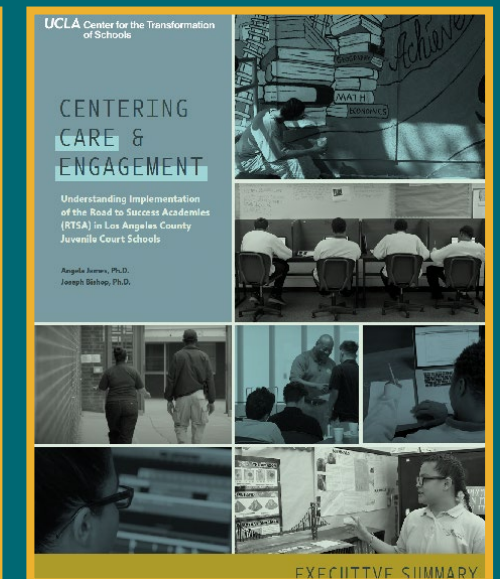
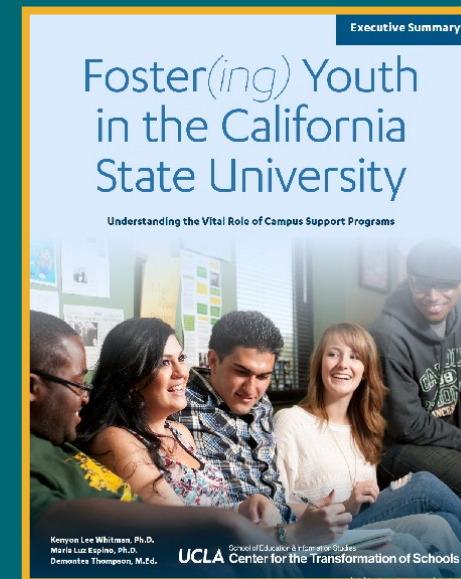
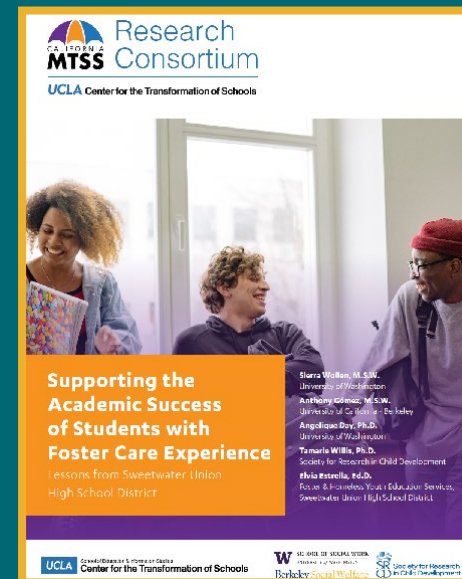
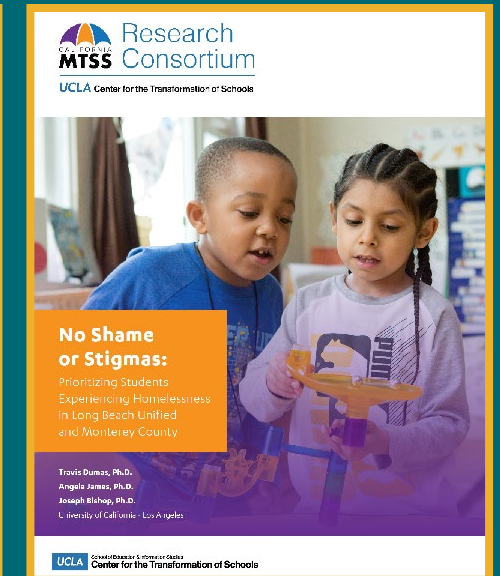
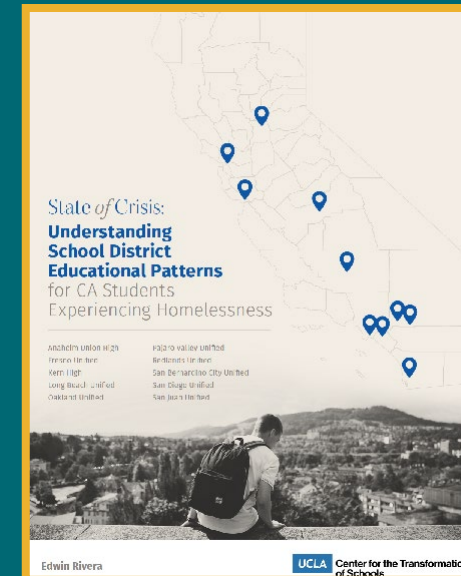
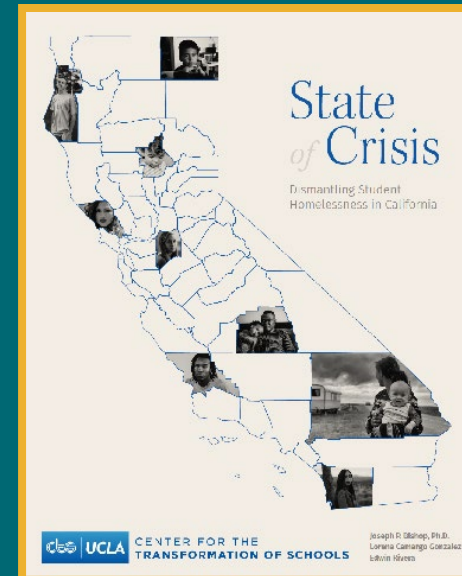
By fostering a shared understanding of the current state of knowledge and the most pressing research to be pursued, we hope to catalyze stronger collaborative efforts and future research that improves educational outcomes for young people in the U.S. who face the most complex challenges.

COMPANION PIECE

to A Landscape Scan of Research on the K-12 Education of Young People in the United States Who Experience Foster Care, Incarceration, and/or Homelessness

Summary of Studies by the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools on Students Experiencing Homelessness, Students with Foster Care Experience, and Justice System-Involved Youth in K-12 and Higher Education Settings

Prepared by Joseph Bishop, co-founder and Executive Director of UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools



STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

State of Crisis: Dismantling Student Homelessness in California (2020)

Study Summary

269,000 CA K-12 young people were experiencing homelessness as of 2020, as well as 1 in 5 CA community college students, 1 in 10 California State University (CSU) students, and 1 in 20 University of California (UC) students. This is a 48% increase over the previous decade, and the actual numbers are likely far higher due to challenges with undercounting students and inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. Students experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity tend to be disproportionately Latinx and Black and have poor academic outcomes compared to their peers.

CTS interviewed 150 stakeholders from across the state to develop a clear picture of the underlying challenges facing students experiencing homelessness, as well as patterns and geographic needs across the state, to explore the types of education and social supports that students experiencing homelessness need to succeed academically. Our analysis is based on the perspectives of students, educators, homeless liaisons, community-based organizations, school districts, county offices of education, early childhood agencies and higher education institutions.

Findings

1. Current professional capacity to support students experiencing homelessness is inadequate: comprehensive, targeted and coordinated training is needed.
2. Homeless liaisons are struggling to effectively respond to growing needs in their community, requiring more resources and staffing.
3. The prevalence of Latinx and Black students experiencing homelessness requires more racially and culturally responsive strategies in education practice and policy.
4. Students experiencing homelessness are often overlooked or misunderstood in school settings, which can result in negative educational experiences.
5. Better coordination is needed between child welfare, housing and education stakeholders to alleviate barriers for students and families.
6. Community-based organizations and nonprofits provide a critical function as part of an ecosystem of support for students and can get out resources to families quickly.
7. The bookends of education, early education and higher education are an essential part of a coordinated response to student homelessness, from cradle to college.

State of Crisis: Understanding School District Educational Patterns for CA Students Experiencing Homelessness (2021)

Study Summary

This policy brief builds upon our 2020 analysis of student homelessness statewide to examine district-level data for 10 districts across the state. In 2021, California made historic investments to help students and schools recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, which adversely impacted schools and students experiencing homelessness, limited the scope and application of student data, and created new challenges for teaching and learning.

The brief examines publicly available district-level data across a set of variables that illuminate the educational experiences of students experiencing homelessness. This investigation is based on an interactive table CTS developed that displays educational discrepancies between districts for unhoused young people. This analysis is accompanied by district, county, and state policy recommendations.

Findings

1. Enrollment Rates: During the 2018-2019 school year, 13% of the Anaheim Union High School District and Redlands Unified School District enrolled students experienced homelessness. Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students were disproportionately affected by homelessness during the 2018-2019 school year as compared to other racial groups.
2. California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP): Nearly half or more of third, eighth, and 11th-grade students who experienced homelessness during the 2018-2019 school year did not meet the CA Math and English Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) standards. In Oakland Unified, 100% of third-grade students experiencing homelessness did not meet ELA standards, compared to 65% of housed students.
3. Graduation Rates: Students experiencing homelessness were reported as being less likely to meet their 4-year graduation requirements than their non-homeless peers within each examined district. In Oakland Unified, there was a 36 percentage point difference when comparing graduation rates of students experiencing homelessness to non-homeless students.
4. UC/CSU Requirements Met In San Bernardino City Unified, Kern High District, Fresno Unified, San Juan Unified, and Pajaro Valley Unified, only 1 in 3 students experiencing homelessness met UC/CSU requirements.

5. **Suspension Rates:** In all ten districts, students experiencing homelessness are suspended at higher rates than their non-homeless peers. Students experiencing homelessness in Fresno Unified and Kern Unified were more than twice as likely to be suspended.
6. **Chronic Absenteeism Rates:** In nine of the 10 districts, students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent at higher rates than non-homeless students. In Kern High, the rate of chronic absenteeism for students experiencing homelessness was 51%; in Oakland Unified, it was 59%; and in Fresno Unified, it was 42%.

No Shame or Stigmas: Prioritizing Students Experiencing Homelessness in Long Beach Unified and Monterey County (2023)

Study Summary

In California, Long Beach Unified and Monterey County have significant numbers of students experiencing homelessness. Recognizing that homelessness is a condition that is intersectional with the educational experiences and outcomes of youth, this brief highlights state and school officials' perspectives to examine relevant challenges, policies, and practices related to the youth homelessness crisis. In addition to identifying pertinent challenges, participants provided insights into established and emerging practices and approaches that have been effective in meeting the needs of homeless youth. The brief concludes with recommendations for state officials, local officials, and school staff to inform better supports of youth impacted by homelessness.

This research brief is a part of a series of 8 briefs from the CA MTSS Research Consortium, created to serve as resources to support educators implementing CA MTSS. They provide information for best practices and evidence-based resources to support CA MTSS implementation as it pertains to teaching, racial equity, approaching school discipline, students in foster care and CA English Language Learners.

About the CA MTSS Research Consortium

The CA MTSS Research Consortium is a network of expert scholars from across the country who were brought together to investigate how to support educators as they implement CA MTSS across academic, behavior and social emotional learning domains of the CA MTSS framework. The diversity of researchers comprising the consortium allowed for a multifaceted understanding of the CA MTSS framework by bridging perspectives from the disciplines of social work, education policy, psychology, economics and educational leadership. Consortium scholars draw on their expertise in alternative discipline approaches, racial equity, the development of educator training programs, and educational cost-benefit analyses.

Findings

1. **Roles and Responsibilities:** In reflection of their primary obligations, participants, all as professionals engaging students and families experiencing homelessness, collectively identified five seminal roles and responsibilities: Outreach, Student and Family Supports, Collaborations, Resource Management, and Training.
2. **Promising Practices:** Participants identified a body of approaches that were effective in supporting students experiencing homelessness: Supplemental and Additional Resources such as individualized, high-impact tutoring, Wraparound Services/Approach such as collaboration and communication between resource agencies, and Community Relationships such as Parent-Teacher Associations.
3. **Challenges:** Within their work, participants described common and persisting challenges they encountered as professionals engaging issues of student homelessness, most pronouncedly: identification of students, gaps in policy, and stigma.
4. **COVID-19 Pandemic:** Within this study, participants distinguished how the pandemic both exacerbated existing challenges and created new ones, including troubled rollout of response procedures, related staffing shortages, increases in disciplinary infractions, health and wellness, absenteeism, and technological barriers.

STUDENTS EXPERIENCING FOSTER CARE

Supporting the Academic Success of Students with Foster Care Experience: Lessons from Sweetwater Union High School District (2023)

Study Summary

The CA Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) has brought considerable attention to the academic needs of students with foster care experience (FCE). To help identify effective strategies that address these needs, this brief from our CA MTSS Research Consortium details the findings of a case study of Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD), based in Chula Vista, California, and its practices, programs, and policies that promote the academic well-being of students with FCE. Conjointly, drawing from interviews with California high school graduates with FCE, we will also report students' recommendations for schools serving such students, as well as best practices identified in focus groups conducted with educators and service providers.

Findings

1. **Interdisciplinary Teams:** SUHSD developed a continuum of services that are collaboratively administered by personnel from the school district and the local child welfare agency. The incorporation of restorative and collaborative practices within the district made it easier for caseworkers to become involved in students' academic affairs if the school needed access to out-of-district school records or students needed an advocate in a disciplinary meeting.
2. **Restorative and Trauma-Informed Practices:** SUHSD goes beyond the minimum state standard of offering students alternatives to suspension and expulsion by prioritizing practices that reduce the likelihood of escalation. These include training staff to consider the reasons behind students' behaviors, allowing students to take breaks during the school day, offering a wellness room where students can decompress, and resolving disputes in the classroom with restorative circles.
3. **Supporting Student Autonomy:** SUHSD staff work collaboratively with students to ensure that their academic journeys are reflective of their needs and interests. Staff members regularly connect students to school/after school programs that facilitate students' exploration of extracurricular interests.
4. **Community:** Many of the staff we spoke with were Sweetwater graduates themselves, naturally relating to students and deeply committed to their success. The Youth In Transition (YIT) Program aims to foster a sense of community among students with FCE by coordinating award ceremonies and field trips to local college campus support programs for students with FCE.

Foster(ing) Youth in the California State University: Understanding the Vital Role of Campus Support Programs (2023)

Study Summary

This study provides an analysis of California State University (CSU)'s campus-based support programs for students with foster care experience. California has long been considered a champion for its support for youth who experience foster care, and is particularly noteworthy in creating campus-based programs to support their postsecondary education. As the largest university system in the US, CSU plays an important role in supporting positive life outcomes for students who have experienced foster care, with an estimated annual enrollment of 3,000-3,500 students with foster care history.

For this study, CTS engaged with 23 support program staff members from across the CSU system to develop a deep understanding of high-impact practices, successes, and challenges. Research findings are used to develop actionable recommendations at the campus, system, state, and federal levels. We hope this study will be used to encourage greater investment in college campus support programs for foster youth.

Findings

1. Foster youth campus support programs deliver critical advising services that meet students' needs.
2. Educational and social/cultural programming and case management are standard practices that exemplify quality and equity across campus support programs.
3. Financial support is inadequate for foster youth students and campus support programs.
4. Trust and support must be strengthened between program staff and campus leadership.
5. Foster youth campus support programs measure success beyond graduation and retention statistics.

Education Perspectives of Students Who Have Aged out of Foster Care: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) with California Youth Connection (2023/24)

Study Summary

CTS is collaborating directly with current and former foster youth through an equitable, youth-centering approach to research known as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to better understand the obstacles they face and the support they need. The study looks at the state of foster youth in all 58 CA counties, from early education through higher education. Key findings from the analysis will help generate local, state and federal policy recommendations to promote meaningful youth-centered systems change across the state. We are hopeful that this effort will help strengthen a movement for improving educational outcomes for foster youth in California who are more likely to be chronically absent, to be suspended, less likely to graduate from high school or to be prepared for college than their peers.

Impact of Trauma on Learning and School Engagement at Los Angeles Unified School District (2023-24)

Study Summary

The purpose of this study is to determine the efficacy of Los Angeles Unified's MONARCH (Multifaceted Approach Offering New Beginnings Aimed at Recovery, Change, and Hope) room intervention in increasing the educational well-being of traumatized students, particularly students with foster care experience (FCE). The MONARCH room intervention is a sensory integration and de-escalation space in school facilitated by behavioral interventionists and paraprofessionals. We are interested in understanding to what level students with FCE exposed to the MONARCH room intervention experience increased attendance, lowered disciplinary and dropout rates, boosted academic performance, and report improved school climate in comparison to LAUSD enrolled students with FCE prior to the implementation of the MONARCH room intervention.

The research team will gather lessons learned from the MONARCH intervention pilot through a wide range of education stakeholders of administrators, teachers, other school staff, and current and former foster students from 10 middle and high schools within the district that have self-selected into the MONARCH room intervention.

Chronic Absenteeism and School Stability for Foster Youth Across Los Angeles County (Spring 2024)

Study Summary

In partnership with Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection (OCP), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), CTS is leading a mixed methods study on chronic absenteeism among foster youth to better understand chronic absenteeism among foster-youth and what factors contribute to high rates of chronic absenteeism experienced by this population. One of the key factors that we will look more deeply into is school (in)stability, which includes a close examination of the County's school stability initiative designed to keep foster youth in school despite changes in placements.

The study will focus on key drivers of absenteeism as identified in the education literature, with particular emphasis on school (in)stability. We will analyze how chronic absenteeism and school stability affect student well-being, achievement, social-emotional learning and the relationship between absenteeism and foster-youth specific metrics such as number of school changes, placement changes, and permanency outcomes. We will also investigate how the transportation initiative may have contributed to alleviating school (in)stability and chronic absenteeism and what lessons can be learned from this project to inform future policies around absenteeism. The study will collect quantitative administrative data from several County districts and conduct qualitative data collection through interviews with stakeholders, caregivers, and foster youth. The resulting study will be used to educate key stakeholders on the best practices and lessons learned from LA's school stability efforts as well as highlight the need for sustainable funding for these efforts.

JUSTICE-SYSTEM INVOLVED YOUTH

Centering Care & Engagement: Understanding Implementation of the Road to Success Academies (RTSA) in Los Angeles County Juvenile Court Schools (2022)

Study Summary

Los Angeles County's 'Road to Success Academies' (RTSA) is an educational delivery model designed to more deeply engage students in carceral settings. The approach features project-based learning based on themes selected to address both academic and social-emotional needs and ignite student excitement and interest in learning in order to help students successfully return to classrooms in their communities upon release.

CTS partnered with the Los Angeles County Office of Education's Juvenile Court System and the Probation Department to gauge what's working—and what's not—within RTSA through the eyes of the students themselves and the larger school site community. This report examines the implementation of the RTSA educational model in order to answer the question of whether this model lives up to its promise in terms of student engagement and helping to address these students' wide-ranging academic needs. Addressing academic and social-emotional needs of incarcerated youth can ensure a successful return to classrooms and communities and interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Findings

1. The RTSA model of instruction and intervention is associated with modest gains in reading but not in math.
2. Student performance on standardized measures of skill mastery is often well below grade level upon entry into camps and there is often tremendous variation in skill levels among students at each camp at any given time.
3. Classroom observations and student interviews suggest high levels of student engagement and excitement about themes and topics explored in project-based learning projects.
4. The timing of educational assessments are not uniformly administered at entry and thereafter every 90 days in accordance with policy, making assessment of model impact on direct learning outcomes difficult. The lack of consistency alignment and data-sharing between agencies stymies implementation fidelity.
5. Educational delivery services must be coordinated with multiple agencies (Probation and DMH) that have programs and practices that may be in conflict, or that would be better supported with more meaningful coordination.
6. High levels of turnover among both administrators, and teaching staff, must be considered in ongoing implementation plans and is critical to achieve successful implementation of RTSA.
7. Other educational services offered alongside RTSA (i.e. for credit recovery, and ELL) have not yet been fully aligned to the RTSA model and may depress the overall levels of student engagement.

Bridging Perspectives on School Policing, Safety, Student Learning & Racial Justice (Fall 2024)

Study Summary

School safety is one of the most challenging and emotionally fraught topics in education. Fear of potential school violence has given rise to both zero-tolerance policies and a level of direct police presence on school campuses unseen in previous generations. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought recognition of disproportionality in how these policies and policing impact Black and additionally, Latinx students, and have made issues surrounding policing a central concern in the fight for racial justice.

CTS is working with Dr. David C. Turner III, Assistant Professor of Black Life and Racial Justice in the Department of Social Welfare at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs to explore these issues alongside community partners in Contra Costa, Stockton and Los Angeles school districts. Our goal is to understand how student activism and community organizing have changed perspectives and practice on school safety, and how these schools and communities are working to improve school climates and academic outcomes by changing policing and safety policies.

COMPANION PIECE

to A Landscape Scan of Research on the K-12 Education of Young People in the United States Who Experience Foster Care, Incarceration, and/or Homelessness

Postsecondary Research

Prepared by Maddy Day, Consultant, Maddy Day LLC and Associates, Kalamazoo, MI

There is a growing community of scholars who study the postsecondary education experiences of young people who are or have been involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, and/or have experienced homelessness and housing instability. While we did not extend this report or the companion online research repository to include postsecondary education research, we felt it timely to highlight a forthcoming report that articulates an approach that could be replicated to focus on students in either K-12 or higher education who experience incarceration and/or homelessness.

Working Title

A Systematic Review of Educational Outcomes of Students with Experience in Foster Care

Authors

Nathanael J. Okpych, PhD, Associate Professor, University of Connecticut, Hartford, CT; Kenyon Whitman, Assistant Professor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV; Jane Lee, PhD Candidate, University of Connecticut, Hartford, CT; Liz Neria-Piña, PhD, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK; Lisa A. Jackson, Assistant Teaching Professor, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL; Maddy Day, Consultant, Maddy Day LLC and Associates, Kalamazoo, MI

Goal of Study

Students who experience foster care (SEFC) remain some of the most educationally marginalized youth in the US. However, rates of secondary and postsecondary outcomes vary widely across studies limiting the ability to inform policy (Okpych, et al., 2023). At present, there is no definitive publication that reports secondary and postsecondary education rates based on best available empirical evidence. The goal of this study is to fill this gap in the literature by reviewing methodologically sound studies with SEFC published between 2000 and present.

Rationale

Statistics stating the educational outcomes of some SEFC are mistakenly reported as an accurate representation for all SEFC. For example, widely repeated statistics are that about half of SEFC graduate from high school and just 3% of SEFC earn a college degree. These statistics were initially reported by a report by Wolanin (2005) and the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2006), respectively. However, these studies have significant caveats, including geographic representation and age ranges, and they only count postsecondary education as completion of a bachelor's degree. Moreover, both studies include SEFC in a bygone era of child welfare policy. Several foundational policy changes have occurred since then, including Fostering Connections, a 2008 law that allowed states to raise the foster care age limit from 18 to 21, and a proliferation of states that offer tuition and fee waivers to SEFC. These policy changes could have increased SEFC's postsecondary access and completion rates.

Research Questions

- What are the secondary completion rates, postsecondary education (PSE) enrollment, and PSE completion rates for SEFC?
- What are the differences by race and ethnicity in secondary completion rates, PSE enrollment rates, and PSE completion rates for SEFC?

APPENDICES

to *A Landscape Scan of Research on the K-12 Education of Young People in the United States Who Experience Foster Care, Incarceration, and/or Homelessness*

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

For this landscape scan, the team conducted 20 individual interviews and two focus groups with leading researchers in the U.S. who study and write about the education of young people experiencing homelessness, foster care, and/or the juvenile justice system. These were semi-structured conversations organized by questions listed below (edited for clarity and brevity). Discussions were transcribed using Otter.ai and analyzed by the research team using researcher-led ethnographic techniques and technology assistance from Claude.ai.

Interview Questions

1. Describe your research related to the education of young people who experience homelessness, foster care, and juvenile justice.
2. Has your research surfaced any practice or policy implications? If yes, please share.
3. What have you learned about the types of system and structural conditions that need to be addressed to support and strengthen these young people's educational experiences?
4. Given what you've learned from your work, what do you see as possible research priorities or questions to pursue in the future?
5. Describe any research partnerships and collaborations you are a part of or know about in this space.

Focus Group Questions

1. Describe your work in this area as though you were talking to students you have never met.
2. Describe the kinds of research collaborations and partnerships you are/have been in and how they have been helpful in advancing this type of research.
3. Describe any efforts you are involved in to bring up younger/more junior researchers or researchers with lived experience.
4. What is the thing you cannot stop thinking about regarding where this research needs to go next?

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF RESEARCHER PARTICIPANTS FROM INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

We are grateful for the generosity and engagement of more than 20 leading researchers who study and write about the education of young people in the United States experiencing homelessness, foster care, and/or incarceration.

The researchers listed on the following page engaged in individual interviews, focus groups, or both. Individual interviewees were invited to review and comment on this report, and all researchers were asked to share relevant publications. Due to the funding provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we were pleased to offer all researchers an honorarium for their time.

Name	Institution	Discipline
Amy Salazar	Washington State University	Department of Human Development
Angelique Day	University of Washington	School of Social Work
Earl Edwards	Boston College	School of Education and Human Development
Heather Taussig	University of Denver	Graduate School of Social Work
Jeffrey Butts	City University of New York	John Jay College of Criminal Justice
Jennifer Erb-Downward	University of Michigan	Poverty Solutions
Jennifer Geiger	University of Illinois	Jane Addams College of Social Work
John Gibbs	Ohio State University	Department of Psychology
Jonathan Zaff	Northeastern University	Department of Applied Psychology
Joseph Bishop	University of California, Los Angeles	Center for the Transformation of Schools, UCLA School of Education & Information Studies
Kenyon Whitman	University of Nevada Las Vegas	Educational Psychology, Leadership, and Higher Education
Kerri Kearney	Oklahoma State University	Educational Foundations, Leadership & Aviation
Lisa Schelbe	Florida State University	College of Social Work
Matthew Morton	Constellation Lab (CoLab)	
Megan Piel	University of Texas San Antonio	College for Health, Community, and Policy
Miguel Casar Rodriguez	University of Alabama	Department of Educational Studies
Nathanael Okpych	University of Connecticut	School of Social Work
Peter Leone	University of Maryland	Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education (CHSE)
Rashida Crutchfield	California State University, Long Beach	School of Social Work
Royel Johnson	University of Southern California	School of Education
Sarup Mathur	Arizona State University	Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College
Stephen T. Russell	The University of Texas at Austin	Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, School of Human Ecology
Tuppett Yates	University of California Riverside	Department of Psychology

APPENDIX 3: RESEARCH TOPICS BY YOUTH EXPERIENCE

The table on the following page summarizes research topics by experience. It should be reviewed with the context and counts provided in [Table 2 \(p.25\)](#); for example, summarized topics for “foster care” represent far more articles than “homelessness, juvenile justice, and foster care,” which only represent three.

Summarized Research Topics by Student Experience	
	Research Topics
Homelessness and Housing Instability (66 publications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic outcomes and achievement gaps • School mobility and attendance • Access to educational supports and services • Mental health and social-emotional impacts • Identifying and supporting homeless students • Intersections of race, poverty and homelessness • Policy implementation, particularly The McKinney-Vento Act
Homelessness & Foster Care (6 publications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational stability during transitions • Academic outcomes compared to peers • Access to higher education • Trauma-informed practices in schools • Coordination between housing, education and child welfare systems
Homelessness, Juvenile Justice, & Foster Care (3 publications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-system collaboration and data sharing • Educational advocacy and support services • Trauma-informed practices across systems
Foster Care (81 publications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational stability and school mobility • Academic achievement gaps and outcomes • Postsecondary readiness, access, and retention • Special education needs and services • Caregiver involvement in education and lack of communication between caregivers across systems • Trauma-informed school practices • Tutoring and mentorship • Voices of young people on educational experiences • Social emotional factors in learning
Foster Care & Juvenile Justice (12 publications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational reentry after detention • Special education needs in facilities • Academic outcomes for crossover youth • Trauma-informed practices in schools and facilities
Juvenile Justice/ Youth Incarceration (39 publications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic interventions in facilities • School reentry and transition support • Special education in facilities • Recidivism and educational outcomes • Trauma-informed practices in facilities

APPENDIX 4: FEDERAL CLEARINGHOUSE SELECTION PROCESS

To conduct the Federal Clearinghouse scan, we first reviewed the description of each federal clearinghouse listed on the Youth.gov website. We excluded any that seemed unlikely to include studies about academic outcomes for youth experiencing foster care, homelessness, and/or the juvenile justice system.

Federal Clearinghouses Initially Scanned

AmeriCorps

- Evidence Exchange
- Evidence of Effectiveness in AmeriCorps-Funded Interventions

US AID

- YouthPower – What Works

Department of Agriculture

- Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness
- RIDGE Project Summaries Food and Nutrition

Department of Defense

- Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness

Department of Education

- What Works Clearinghouse
- Safer Schools and Campuses Best Practices Clearinghouse

Department of Health and Human Resources

- Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review
- CDC Community Guide
- CDC Prevention Research Synthesis
- SAMHSA Evidence Based Resource Guide Series: Prevention and Treatment of HIV Among People Living with Substance Use and/or Mental Disorders.
- SAMHSA Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Measures Review
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center Resources and Programs Repositories
- Evidence-Based Cancer Control Programs
- Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness
- Assessing the Evidence of Effectiveness of Home Program Models Implemented in Tribal Communities
- Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse
- Proven and Promising Responsible Fatherhood and Family Strengthening Initiatives-Evidence Review, 2010-2012
- Pathways to Work: Evidence Clearinghouse
- Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse

Office of Population Affairs

- Teen Program Pregnancy Evaluation

National Institutes of Health

- Promise Neighborhoods Research Consortium: What Works

Department of Justice

- Crime Solutions
- National Reentry Resource Center What Works in Reentry Clearinghouse
- OJJDP Model Programs Guide

Department of Labor

CLEAR: Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research

Next, we reviewed the About Us page (or equivalent) on each clearinghouse's website to check for matching topics and research; we excluded practice briefs or similar publications not backed by studies. From there, we had a narrower set of clearinghouses to review:

Selected Federal Clearinghouses

- What Works Clearinghouse (Department of Education)
- Evidence Exchange (AmeriCorps)
- Crime Solutions (Department of Justice)
- Pathways to Work Clearinghouse (Health and Human Services)
- Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (Health and Human Services)
- Community Guide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness' Continuum of Evidence (Department of Defense and USDA)
- Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research (Department of Labor)
- Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA))

APPENDIX 4: FEDERAL CLEARINGHOUSE SELECTION PROCESS (CONTINUED)

We added the National Clearinghouse on Homeless Youth and Families due to its relevance, even though it is not listed on the Youth.gov list of federal evidence-based clearinghouses.

Keyword Search

Our federal clearinghouse scan was bound by the same period as our publications review (2010–2024). For federal clearinghouses focused on education, work, or national service, we searched for studies with the following keywords: homelessness, homeless, child welfare, foster care, juvenile justice, criminal justice, justice-involved, justice.

For clearinghouses focused on child welfare or juvenile justice, we searched for studies with the following keywords: college, education, higher education, high school, students, academic, academics, postsecondary education, school, school climate, school violence, student supports. For Crime Solutions we downloaded the database of programs and policies and ran a custom formula to identify potentially relevant studies.

This keywords search yielded studies that were then scanned for (1) academic outcomes for children and youth, (2) focus on children, kindergarten-aged or older, and who experienced foster care, homelessness, or the juvenile justice system. Studies meeting these criteria were reviewed once more for a focus on U.S. education and attention to the K-12 system and then put in our research database and listed on [page 40](#).

Validity Check and Concerning Conclusion

Because the What Works Clearinghouse is used by educators and direct service providers, we submitted multiple webforms to clearinghouse staff to ask if our search process overlooked relevant items and studies because we found no studies on youth experiencing homelessness or foster care. Here are the verbatim responses we received:

“Thanks for contacting the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). To date, the WWC has not reviewed research on the education of youth who have experienced homelessness. We appreciate this suggestion, which we will pass along to WWC leadership for consideration. We encourage you to check our website for updates on our reviews.”

“The WWC does not have any intervention reports related to the education of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. We appreciate your suggestion of the topic as a possible topic area for future WWC intervention reports. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and the WWC are currently considering future topics for review. All publicly available information about future reviews is on our website. Please continue to check our website for updates.”

APPENDIX 5: CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN THE COMPANION RESEARCH REPOSITORY

The research scan that supported this report and the resulting Airtable repository represents a comprehensive review of available peer-reviewed and field research from 2010-2024, focused on the K-12 education of young people who experienced foster care, homelessness, and/or the juvenile justice system. While we aimed to include all available publications, there are inevitably research papers we did not encounter, could not access, or otherwise omitted.

This appendix describes the criteria applied for inclusion in the research repository:

(1) For all peer-reviewed and field research publications, the primary criteria for inclusion were:

- Research focused on the K-12 academic outcomes and education of children and youth who experienced foster care, homelessness, and/or the juvenile justice system (with a specific focus on time spent in a correctional facility)
- Publication date between 2010-2024

(2) As we reviewed the research that met these criteria, we needed to further sort for relevance and our ability to fully review the publication's contents. The following second-level criteria were as follows:

- Publicly available publications
- Field publications were included if they had a stated research methodology that responded to a research purpose and/or questions
- When there were multiple versions of the same report, often due to updates, but by the same authors from the same publishing institution, and/or with the same title, we selected and used the most recent report
- Reports focused on postsecondary education were generally excluded, but we chose to include several publications about college access and the transition into postsecondary education because of the relationship to the K-12 education experience

- We included landscape meta-analyses and compendiums about the K-12 education experience of our priority populations, even if they included articles related to other parts of the education pipeline (e.g., postsecondary education). Meta-analyses and landscape pieces were excluded if the overall purpose or topic was not about the education of our priority populations. For example, a study on homelessness in California mentioned education and young people, but it was not the focus of the piece. For this reason, it was excluded from the repository
- While we are aware many factors impact the educational stability and success of the young people this scan focused on, we excluded publications that focused on related issues such as mental health, food access, and transportation, unless those publications were about the connections between those enabling factors and young people's academic experience and outcomes

The following types of publications were excluded from the research repository and this scan overall:

- Research studies focused outside of the United States
- Descriptions of future or unpublished projects and research
- Policy agendas and issue briefs
- Legislative reports that are summative in nature
- Program evaluations, impact summaries, or updates, unless they were a research project with a clear purpose, questions, and methodology
- Action guides or compilations of best practices
- Training and professional development publications
- Reports that communicate population counts, but do not articulate research questions, findings, or recommendations
- Publications that focus on school-to-prison pipeline or punitive practices in schools but do not focus on academic experiences or outcomes
- Publications that do not focus on academic or school experiences, even if they report on academic outcomes
- Publications about the education system focused on the system but not the student experience
- Publications about basic needs insecurity that do not directly cover issues of homelessness or systems-involvement
- Funding and fiscal reports

APPENDIX 6: PEER-REVIEWED AND FIELD RESEARCH SCAN METHODOLOGY

Our scan of peer-reviewed articles was time-bound to only include articles and reports published between 2010 and 2024. We used a major university's online library access, which enabled us to access studies from more than 500 research databases. Articles were filtered for those that were peer-reviewed, available online, and within our time parameters. A partial list of our search terms included homelessness, homeless, child welfare, foster care, juvenile justice, criminal justice, justice-involved, and justice.

This keyword search yielded a set of studies that were scanned for the inclusion of (1) academic outcomes or educational experiences for children and youth within the U.S. K-12 system, (2) focus on children, kindergarten-aged through high school, who experienced foster care, homelessness, and/or involvement with the juvenile justice system. Studies meeting these criteria were entered into our research database.

Our scan of field publications used the same keywords, criteria, and timeframe as above. It relied on leading organizations and research bibliographies to achieve a relatively comprehensive list of relevant organizations, and research published during this time.

The following organizations were primary resources in this process:

- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- AIR (American Institutes for Research)
- Alliance for Children's Rights
- America's Promise Alliance
- Building Changes
- California Homeless Youth Project
- Center for American Progress
- Chapin Hall at University of Chicago
- Child Trends
- CoLab
- Council of State Governments Justice Center
- Institute for Children, Policy, and Homelessness
- Learning Policy Institute
- MDRC
- National Center for Juvenile Justice
- Pointsource Youth
- PolicyLab at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)
- RAND
- SchoolHouse Connection
- Treehouse
- UCLA Center for Transformation of Schools
- Urban Institute

**APPENDIX 7: QR CODES FOR EXTERNAL LINKS
AND REFERENCE MATERIALS**

Airtable Research Repository



Annie E. Casey Foundation



First Quarter Strategies, LLC



State of Crisis:
Dismantling Student Homelessness in California



State of Crisis: Understanding School District
Educational Patterns for CA Students
Experiencing Homelessness



No Shame or Stigmas:
Prioritizing Students Experiencing Homelessness in
Long Beach Unified and Monterey County



Supporting the Academic Success of Students with
Foster Care Experience: Lessons from Sweetwater
Union High School District



Foster(ing) Youth in the California State University:
Understanding the Vital Role of Campus
Support Programs



Centering Care & Engagement:
Understanding Implementation of the Road to
Success Academies (RTSA) in Los Angeles County
Juvenile Court Schools





FIRST QUARTER

Strategies