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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

Stephanie Malia Krauss, Maddy Day, Thaddeus Ferber, and Danielle Wallis



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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.



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