

**Rural Homelessness: The Effect on Children's Academic, Social, and  
Emotional Development in Schools**

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## **Rural Homelessness: The Effect on Children's Academic, Social, and Emotional Development in Schools**

Andrew<sup>1</sup> was smart. I remember it being the first thing I noticed about him. He could read and spell, and his basic math skills were strong. There was no dyslexia diagnosis, or any other learning difficulty. The only difference I noticed was that his skills were below grade level. He didn't know all of his multiplication facts, and he had trouble reading words that were longer than the typical 3-letter sight words. But he knew some of his multiplication facts, and knew the addition to figure it out after that. And he knew how to sound out many of the bigger words, he just didn't know them on sight. Again, it wasn't like he was having trouble with concepts, he just didn't know everything. It would all begin to make sense when I would come to be told that he had missed almost 50 days of school in the previous school year, and was on track to beat that number by only March of the current one<sup>2</sup>.

Andrew. My buddy. He was a student for two years in the classroom I worked in. He was labeled off and separated with the "bad behavior kids". In only the second grade, he was hit with this label. Little did I know how much Andrew would change my perspective on education and challenging behaviors. Why? Because he was homeless.

The story starts when he was a child. Born to parents who were both addicts<sup>3</sup>, Andrew, his much older sister, and his parents lived with his grandfather and his step-grandmother. Andrew's grandparents lived in a middle class home in a neighborhood in the rural, middle class town that the school district was in. Money was relatively tight with his parents, but with the

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<sup>1</sup> This name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> The typical school year is 180 days. Students are expected to have approximately 5 absences per year, and after 5 there becomes a conversation with administration and the parents to determine the amount of progress the child lost due to poor attendance. Children are often discussed to repeat grades (for lack of completing the requirements) after 30 absences in a year.

<sup>3</sup> It is legal to disclose to a teacher that a child's parents are addicts, but it is not legal to disclose the severity, substances they are addicted to, or any other details.

help of his grandfather, Andrew's life was stable. He went to school, had friends, and even went on a family trip to Disney World when he was 3. Andrew's grandfather was the one raising him.

Andrew's world came crashing down when he was 6. His grandfather died, and his wife kicked Andrew's family out of the house. With two addict parents who didn't work, Andrew's family was homeless. For the next two years until I met him, and unfortunately still to this day, Andrew's living situation was unstable. He slept in cars, in shelters, and Child Protective Services (CPS) did not get involved enough to place him out of his parent's care.

From there grew my passion for advocacy in education for children who are experiencing homelessness in rural settings. There is an astonishing amount of data that highlights both the educational deficiencies, as well as behavioral problems, that are heightened with early elementary students who are experiencing homelessness<sup>4</sup>. People need to understand how rural homelessness is so dangerous to the education of children. Even though they are inside the school walls, they are not protected from the effects their home life carries with them<sup>5</sup>. Children who experience rural homelessness perform substandardly in academic settings, and therefore need stronger academic, social, and emotional support in schools<sup>6</sup>.

This entire situation uprooted any life that he had previously known. He wasn't able to make it to school for almost half the days, as gas was too expensive for his family, and the shelters they were staying in were all over 20 minutes away, in the closest city. When he was at school, he was so exhausted from not sleeping, and hungry from not having any dinner or food after he left school in the afternoon. With all of these components, along with the constant

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<sup>4</sup> Children experiencing at least one encounter with homelessness in early childhood was associated with non-proficiency in mathematics and academic engagement problems (Fantuzzo et al., 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Fulfillment of the needs of competence, autonomy, and social relatedness is correlated to mastery of goals and graded performance in a school setting. There is a direct effect on schooling, mastery of goals, graded performance and testing scores (Theis et al., 2020).

<sup>6</sup> The cumulative goal of all the research in this paper is to advocate for policy and practice change for these children in order to better their education experience, no matter the situations they were faced with outside the school building (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007).

mental stress of uncertainty that came with his home situation, he couldn't focus in school. It didn't take long for me to realize while working with him that his behavioral issues were not because he was just trying to be defiant, but rather because his outside circumstances made it hard for him to come to school and be an active, positive member of the classroom<sup>7</sup>.

Andrew's behavioral issues included defiance of authority, inability to follow multiple step directions, and a general negative attitude. He never harmed himself or other students, and was never disruptive to the class around him. However, looking inward, his defiance came from his lack of authority figures at home. If nobody reinforced structure and rule following at home, he would continue this pattern at school. His inability to follow multiple step directions came from his tired mind; he was exhausted and not sleeping well most nights. Sharing the back of a car with his adult sister, or trying to sleep in a noisy shelter, on a glorified towel that they called a cot, were often things Andrew complained of at school the next day. He wasn't choosing to forget these directions— the lack of sleep made it hard for him to remember. And his negative attitude? It was really hard for the young child, who experienced instability every day of his life, to keep a positive attitude with adults who constantly told him that he was not doing enough for their standards. These behavioral difficulties were what kept him separated with the special education children, but he did not deserve to be in the same category as his ADHD filled peers. Medication would not fix these behaviors. They were brought about by the compounding factors he experienced outside of the school walls, and what he needed was understanding from his teachers and support from staff who knew how to handle these kinds of situations.

Andrew was smart, and the reason that his test scores were low was not because of academic challenges, but because his poor attendance meant he was constantly missing the

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<sup>7</sup> Children who have experienced out of home placement have higher rates of behavioral incidents at school. Children who have behavioral incidents do not all have behavioral disorders, but rather they have incidents of behavioral trouble due to compounding factors (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007).

teaching of newer and more advanced skills, that all built upon each other<sup>8</sup>. In such a rural setting, Andrew's situation was not common within the student body. His teachers were not trained and prepared to alter their expectations for him within their classrooms. I worked with him very closely for the following two years, and he ended up making great progress. His limitations in school were still visible in test scores and behavioral problems, however, because his home situation showed no signs of improvement.

At the end of June 2022, approximately 18 months after he and I started working together, he had to switch school districts due to his family receiving an opportunity for housing through government assistance. Because we live in such a small, rural town, there were no opportunities for housing within the limits that would have kept him in our school district. Not only was his life unstable, but now, at school, the one place that had been stable and loving for him during this horrific time, was being ripped away from him once again. His friends would not hear from him again, and his teachers would be left wondering how he is doing.

Homelessness, especially in a rural setting, can have a very negative mental effect on the child experiencing this, and therefore will set the child back beyond just academics. Children who experience rural homelessness often struggle with social judgments due to their home conditions, which can be very impactful on their mental health and social well-being at school. In a rural setting, the occurrence of homelessness is much less than in an urban setting. As children are more unexposed to this situation, they can be brutal in their bullying and exclusion of their peers who struggle.

“Barriers to securing rental housing in a tight market were influenced by small-town dynamics and discrimination. These experiences led to feelings of hopelessness, which combined with daily stressors of managing unsuitable living conditions to contribute to deteriorating physical and mental health. Opportunities for tailoring interventions to the rural context include

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<sup>8</sup> More frequentness in homeless episodes also has been found to lead to issues of truancy in the third grade (Fantuzzo et al., 2013).

increasing awareness, expanding transportation, improving access to local services, and applying Housing First principles"(Boullion et al., 2021).

While homelessness is devastating in any situation or location, it is more expected and prepared for in city populations. There is a benefit to having multiple shelters and safe-havens within walking distance of the very school a child could be attending. Having a large homeless population also helps prevent complete social isolation for a child experiencing homelessness. Children in more rural settings do not have the geographical benefits that being in a city and being homeless can offer, but also these children do not have as many peers to relate to in regards to understanding and accepting their position, as long as not completely isolating the child for something that is out of their control.

Child displacement is a jeopardizing effect that often occurs within rural homeless situations. If CPS was to get involved with the children, they can often be removed from a family's care due to lack of stable housing. Those who struggle with rural homelessness, also suffer with larger geographic areas, inadequate public transportation, and lower general service availability. Rural homelessness is not a crisis due solely to the cost of housing (Boullion et al., 2021). If a child is displaced from a home, they are often taken far from their comfortable surroundings, and family members will have much less access to travel and see the children while they are in placement. Knowing that children's schooling, housing, and general life stability will be affected based on their entire familial situation is crucial to understanding how rural homelessness affects the family unit dynamic. There are many programs to advocate for keeping a family unit together, even in times of a housing crisis (Boullion et al., 2021). Some alternatives to removing a child from a home and not giving any further support to the parents are shelters, emergency placement, or government housing assistance such as Section 8 (known as the Housing Act of 1937). It is important to advocate for these alternatives, as opposed to

splitting up children from their families, especially with all of the extra barriers to visitation and maintaining communication that come with a rural situation.

Rural homelessness also has a detrimental effect on a family unit. When child displacement occurs, a family will be separated for an undetermined amount of time. Family units are members of the family who live together- often parents and children, but can include other members who reside with the family. The feelings of connection between family units are strong when support and understanding are established. When children are removed from the support systems that are their parents or guardians, the family unit is unable to foster an environment of support during the tough time. Instead, these children become supported by other adults, which will weaken their parent/child support system bond at the time of reunification. Understanding within the family unit is also not able to be established when children are separated from their family members during a period of rural homelessness. Because the family unit is not experiencing life together, they lose understanding of what each other is feeling and experiencing. This lack of understanding can harbor resentment and lack of empathy. With these feelings, there is a clear understanding of how rural homelessness can lead to detrimental effects on a family unit.

Educational interventions to assist children experiencing homelessness need to start early in the educational career, as gaps in educational outcomes tend to persist and widen with time<sup>9</sup>. Students who struggle with rural homelessness struggle because they are not given the same tools to succeed that all their peers have. Time is their biggest obstacle, and almost always, the increased truancy is not the choice of the child. While students who do not experience rural homelessness have 180 days in a given school year to learn and grow, children who experience

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<sup>9</sup> Children with a history of out-of-home placement were found to be at an increased risk for poor literacy and science achievement by only the second grade, in a 2007 study by Fantuzzo & Perlman.

rural homelessness (and therefore, decreased attendance) are not given an equal amount of days to grow and learn<sup>10</sup>. My argument is not that children who experience rural homelessness are not as smart as their peers, but rather, they need more support to succeed the same as their peers. There are many examples of policies and procedures that can be altered to be more accommodating for students struggling with rural homelessness. Teachers need to accept work from students who were not there on the due date to pass it in. Homework needs to be made accessible for students who do not have internet or computer access at home, as well. This has been a large trend in the COVID pandemic that has only worsened since. Children with rural homelessness often do not have access to the internet or computers when they leave school for the day. In urban areas, these children and families are often within walking distance to public libraries, coffee shops, or other establishments where these necessities are free and accessible. However, children in rural areas do not often have this walkability, or those resources in close enough proximity for them to be utilized on a nightly basis for homework, projects, or other assignments. By offering paper assignments, teachers will be able to cater to all home situations for their students. It is also important to note as well that teachers must not single out these students, while everyone else has virtual homework, as this just aids to the previous point that students who struggle from rural homelessness are often ostracized and separated from their peers simply due to their home situation. The possible alternative policies and procedures that teachers can implement for their homeless students are endless; the goal here is to ask for empathy, understanding, and flexibility for the children who have no control over what happens at home, and who are just looking for an equitable chance at success with their academic careers.

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<sup>10</sup>Children who experience at least one encounter with homelessness in early childhood were found to be associated with non-proficiency in mathematics and academic engagement problems. More frequentness in homeless episodes also led to issues of truancy in the third grade (Fantuzzo et al., 2013).



There are often kind, understanding single adults in the system who will try to ‘save’ these kids. There are teachers, administrators, counselors, and just about every other staff member who will see the child who walks alone in the halls, turns in their work late, and is always picked up last at the end of the day. Educators are known for their big hearts, and often will attempt to ease the burden that is on the shoulders of the students they see struggling. However, even these most sincere attempts will be unsuccessful, because the rural homelessness’s instability will prove to be a downfall of this approach. One adult is not enough to push through the broken system that is housing, government assistance, and child protective services. I had to unfortunately learn this lesson the hard way. With Andrew, I wanted so badly to be the advocate that got him into a stable and loving home, but there was simply not enough time before his unstable living situation changed, and he was pulled from the district and all those around him who had put so many hours into his progress and care.

*The Glass Castle* is a novel that follows the story of a young girl who belongs to a nomadic family with financial struggles, and who does not receive proper education (Walls, 2017). I chose to include this story, not because of any research behind it, but because Jeanette’s story reminds me of Andrew. How there were so many times when she felt safe, and thought her life might be stable for a short time. Then her parents, trusted adults, or even the government, would come in and sweep the rug out from under them once again. I think the Glass Castle is a way I can almost get inside Andrew’s brain at points, and use it as a point to advocate for change for these kids who deserve better.

I constantly wish I had been able to do more for Andrew. I wish I could have convinced his social worker that he needed to be taken from his parents. I wish I could have convinced other teachers in the school to be kinder to him when he had an outburst, or more understanding

when he fell asleep in class. I wish I had been able to pull him out of the dark place he had been in. I wish I knew where he was now.

I believe this paper has been my way of showing how much he impacted me. How I will never stop advocating for kids like him, and how I want everyone to understand that he was smart and kind, and not any of the negative traits that were labeled on him while he was struggling. I want this paper to be read by future educators so that they can recognize the students in their classes who may have these traits, and understand how their home situations will affect their learning. Future educators need to be better for their kids. They need to understand the implications homelessness will have on their kids, their learning, and their behaviors. They will have to overcome obstacles such as transportation, social stigma, and trauma before most of their peers even have their first encounter with a bully. The incredible amount of tough situations that these children go through needs to be understood and remembered. It is their teachers' jobs to push them to be the best they can be. However, they cannot be at their best until they feel rested, fed, and most importantly- safe.

Without systemic support, students who are experiencing homelessness will not have the ability to succeed in an academic career. I hope to advocate that systemic change needs to be made to support students struggling with rural homelessness. They need resources, support, and most of all, understanding from educators and staff that their situation does not define their abilities as students, but it does define their ability as children accessing their education. However, there is something else I want to include that has been a very recent development in this story. This past March, I saw Andrew for the first time in almost a year.

I was driving in a different town: the one we had been told Andrew's family had gotten housing in. I always tend to keep an eye out when I see school buses there, but I figured it was a

long shot. I was sitting at a light when a bus came the opposite way. A boy came barreling off the bus to an older male waiting on the sidewalk. I thought the waiting adult looked familiar, but I figured I was making things up in my head. The boy that got off had the same, bright blonde hair my Andrew did, and he walked the same funny way. I never got to see his face, but I couldn't shake it in my heart that it was him. Two days later, I was walking out of the Dunkin at that same corner, and I stood and watched as Andrew came off the bus once again, to his father waiting for him. This time, since I was in the coffee shop, I was able to pause from a distance and really make sure it was him. When his face turned around, there was no doubt in my mind. I watched as his dad took his backpack, slung it over his shoulders, and hopped on a bike. They ended up at a set of train tracks not far down the road, and seemed to be almost waiting for someone.

I had to continue on with my day. But there was something almost settling and unsettling at the very same time about seeing Andrew.

In *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette ends up seeing her homeless mother, rooting for trash in NYC, years after she escapes and makes a life for herself (Walls, 2017). I felt reflective of the same situation for Andrew, and even his family. I would do anything to get that little boy into the proper care he deserved, but his parents didn't want that- and you can't help somebody who doesn't want to be helped. Jeanette tried to convince her mother to come live with her- but her mother wanted to continue her lifestyle, and Jeannete couldn't force her.

It's a horrible feeling, helplessness. I just hope that Andrew remembers my time with him, and the love and care we showed him while we could. Maybe one day, I will see him again and wish him well. I promise to dedicate my time between now and then, advocating for others who are in the same situation, and making sure those other children know someone believes in them and wants them to succeed.

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