

Homeless—

About a million homeless students live doubled-up. What's life like for them, and how can schools help?

Vicky Dill

The bank foreclosed on your home because your parents divorced and don't have enough money to pay the mortgage. You're locked out of your house. Where will the family sleep?

Your house burned down in a brush fire, and your parents had allowed the homeowner's insurance to lapse because it was just too expensive. What will you do for shelter?

Your family's apartment rent tripled because the company down the road that's doing hydraulic fracturing ("fracking") needs more housing for its employees. Your mother can't afford the newly tripled rent. To whom will you turn?

Most families turn to friends and relatives at times like these. That's why some 75 percent of the 1,258,182 homeless students in the United States live "doubled-up," a percentage that has increased dramatically since the Great Recession began in 2008 (Barshay, 2014).



And Doubled-Up

Knowing which students are homeless in your school or classroom is vitally important to ensuring their academic success. The federal definition of homelessness that all U.S. public schools use includes children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. It refers to children and youth living in shelters, transitional housing, cars, campgrounds, and motels, as well as those who are temporarily sharing housing with others because of loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons. The law recognizes that living doubled-up is a hardship and an inherent barrier to academic success, and that's why students living doubled-up are eligible for homeless services under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

What It Looks (and Feels) Like

Telltale signs of living doubled-up include references to crowded conditions, panic attacks in class, chronic hunger or food-hoarding behaviors, sleep deprivation, unkempt clothes, inadequate personal hygiene, and unmet medical or psychological needs. Many students are runaways from crowded, doubled-up situations because the atmosphere has become insufferable, they're in danger from domestic violence, or they're chronically hungry or depressed.

Trauma after Trauma

All homeless students are likely to be somewhere on the post-traumatic stress disorder spectrum (National

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Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012; Yeager & Bennett, 2012). Homelessness in any form is often distressing enough to children or youth to bring on nightmares, emotional numbing, difficulty concentrating, sleeping and eating disorders, or struggles to maintain emotional control (SanFilippo, 2012).

Homelessness often follows one or more other traumas, such as foreclosure; divorce; domestic violence; or the loss, illness, or incarceration of a parent. Events like these dramatically alter the life and stability of a child.

A World Turned Topsy-Turvy

Children whose housing is suddenly doubled-up face new and uncertain rules and routines. Unlike students who live in shelters with stated rules and often rigid routines, families doubled-up may experience few rules or routines or seemingly capricious rules or routines, leaving children bewildered.

In their own homes, the parents made up the rules and routines. But doubled-up families coexist in a universe with possibly two or more sets of rules. Who disciplines which children? What does the host family do when the guest family leaves the lights on or turns the air conditioning up, incurring costly utility bills? How do you settle squabbles like, “Who ate my mac and cheese?” or “Who left dirty dishes on my notebook?” How early can you make noise in the morning, and how late can you play music at night? Who decides on the curfew for which children? Must all the kids, or just some, attend school regularly? Who decides what you watch on TV? How do you sleep or do homework when the guest



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family’s baby is screaming? Who let this homeless family in here, anyway?!

For these and many more reasons, living doubled-up is perhaps the most precarious form of temporary housing and is often followed suddenly and unexpectedly by life in a shelter, in a car, or on the streets.

Health and Hygiene on Hold

Homeless students living doubled-up often sleep in bedrooms crowded with an older sibling, along with the sibling’s spouse or partner and their children. The students may not have a chance to shower or wash up in crowded bathrooms before coming to school. They often lack clean clothes and have hygiene challenges and

unmet medical needs. They also tend to be food insecure, never knowing if or when they’ll eat next.

Among the many differences between shelter life and doubled-up life is that students in shelters or transitional housing usually have access to outside supports, such as counseling, medical and dental care, immunizations, and preventive care. These advantages are rarely provided to students living doubled-up.

A Secret to Hide

Most homeless students living doubled-up hide their living situation and avoid acknowledging it at all costs. This behavior is understandable because many families believe they have to lie about where they live to keep their children enrolled in school. Or perhaps they’re fleeing landlords or are ashamed to admit why they’re living in crowded and impoverished conditions. They may be afraid of losing their children to child protective authorities.

Feeling embarrassed about their parents’ situation and often afraid of being removed from school, students may fib about why they’re struggling academically or have discipline infractions. Students unable to check angry outbursts, stay awake in class, hide their hunger or illnesses, or respond with any modicum of motivation or energy in the classroom will seldom divulge the circumstances causing these behaviors. Teachers and counselors may also be unaware of students’ struggles because living doubled-up is a less visible form of homelessness than living in a car, in a shelter, or under a bridge. Indeed, these students *do* have a roof over their heads, but the price they pay may be

nearly intolerable, especially as teens grow older and their need for privacy increases.

A Target for Bullies

As if they didn't have enough problems, homeless students living doubled-up may be bullied because of their appearance or behavior or simply because they live in crowded and often disorganized conditions or are in extreme poverty. This bullying may go undetected or unaddressed by teachers, who are often unaware of a student's living situation and may react punitively instead of with empathy.

In Constant Fear

The specter of being on the streets is constant for these students; they're always under the threat of having to contend with difficult weather conditions, hunger and thirst, dangerous predators, street crime, rape, human trafficking, and more. Because it just takes one misstep—one tripping of a smoke alarm, one time eating someone else's food, one stroll across a parking lot in front of an apartment supervisor who didn't know you lived there. If that happens, the guest family can lose its doubled-up situation, and the sequence of mobility starts all over again.

In a groundbreaking study, Hallett (2012) quotes one young man who described his residence:

It's an apartment, we pay like about \$880 dollars for rent, it is two bedrooms, and I live with my mom, my brother, my sister, my grandparents, my aunt, and my cousin. . . . My aunt and my cousin, they got their bedroom. My mom, my brother, and sister got to share a bedroom, and there's a closet, and they turned it into a bedroom for me. My grandparents is in the living room. (p. 1)

For students, every move occasions a complete grieving process or cycle, from leaving behind an environment



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MEET OLGA'S KIDS

The retired grandparents lived in a travel trailer—and then their daughter and her eight kids moved in. Now there are too many people living in too small a place. They have a truck, but it doesn't work; it serves instead as the family's "giant suitcase." To meet this doubled-up family, visit Diane Nilan's *Worn Out Welcome Mat: Homeless in Donna ISD* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDZFsVD8l0.

in which they may have just begun to feel comfortable, to starting at a different school, to living in a different place in a new neighborhood, while enduring the dual stigmas of being not only the "new kid" but also "the homeless new kid"—and then learning of another move and more separation, with the cycle continuing (Bailey et al., 2011).

Two Ways to Double-Up

Most doubled-up situations are chaotic and destabilizing for students of any age. But some doubled-up households, happily, break this pattern. These households exhibit cooperative strategies that support both the doubled-up families and the good of the whole group. Hallett (2012) describes these two types of doubled-up households as *merged* and *separate*.

The Merged Household

In merged households, roles are eventually clearly defined, and accountability for following the rules is delegated, usually to one person who tends to be the decision maker. Compromises are worked out to benefit both households. One or more adults may work to pay the rent or mortgage, while the other adults oversee child care, transportation to school or extracurricular activities, meal preparation, or homework supervision. In a merged household, roles are configured more like marriage roles.

Merged households tend to support youth resilience because they're more orderly. Routines and rules are possible because someone is in charge and the other members of the household acquiesce and are held accountable. Orderliness and cleanliness are more common in a merged household because there are consequences when people don't properly assume their roles. Although resources may be scarce, such an environment nevertheless supports students' ability to manage and direct their thinking, control their actions, and adapt to group goals. These are the basic building blocks of executive function, a key predictor of school success (Masten et al., 2012).

The Separate Household

In separate doubled-up households, members share space, but they don't cooperate. They support more of an "everyone for him- or herself" atmosphere (Hallett, 2012). Whoever gets to the refrigerator first, eats. Whoever finds a quiet place to do homework must protect it from noise and intruders. If there's a shortage of beds, the last person in sleeps on the floor.

The Need for a Guiding Hand

Whether the home of a doubled-up student is merged or separate may give educators guidance about how much

support the student needs to meet the school's behavioral expectations, advance in grade, accumulate credits, or plan for the future after high school. A simple question like, "Can you tell me how your family works?" or "Can you share who does what in your household?" can provide vital clues about what supports might be helpful.

Students in doubled-up homes, whether merged or separate, verbalize their aspirations for advanced academic degrees and well-paying careers at the same rate as traditionally housed students do (Hallett, 2012). Many will express their dreams to become a doctor, a star athlete, a veterinarian, or some other high-paying professional. However, many homeless students are unaware of the steps they need to take and of the proper timing and sequence of those steps to make their dreams come true. They may have heard phrases like *credit accrual*, *college entrance tests*, and *community service requirements*, but they usually know little about what those terms mean.

If a household is merged or cooperating, chances are higher that an adult will provide guidance or raise issues of post-graduation preparation. In a merged setting, adults may demand greater accountability for how youth spend their time or money. However, all homeless youth, whether on the streets, in a shelter, or doubled-up, show greater propensity for risky behavior and a smaller propensity for pursuing higher education than stably housed youth do (Hallett, 2012).

A Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

More than adequately housed students, homeless students need a personal mentoring relationship with educators to develop the self-regulation all students need to succeed. A teacher or mentor who provides appropriate guidance sees the need for order and calm in the classroom, predictable routines and



MEET LEIA

Tumbleweed. That's the closest metaphor for Leia and her family's living situation. Once she divorced, she and her three children bounced from well-meaning friend to well-meaning friend. Soon after this interview, her family was forced to move again. Relocated, but to where? When will the tumbling stop? For Leia's story, visit Diane Nilan's *Worn Out Welcome Mat: Leia and Family* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z33aZS1i6Bo.

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fair rules, the provision of basic needs, and an understanding ear. These are universal needs of students under stress.

Advances in brain research and teachers' growing awareness of the role of neurology in learning have provided additional tools to reach and successfully teach traumatized students. Trauma-related student behaviors include *internalizing* symptoms, such as depression, pessimism, or anxiety, as well as *externalizing* symptoms, such as irritability, angry outbursts, and difficulty managing emotions or impulses (McInnes, Diamond, & Whittington, 2014).

Traumatized children's brains may be alarmed by new material or activities, or they may be unable to integrate novel information into hypersensitive neural pathways, no matter how hard they try. Highly

stressed students may not have enough composure or executive function to logically connect poor behavior to consequences (McInnes et al., 2014).

Four Effective Approaches

Several approaches have proven helpful in addressing traumatized students' needs. First, effective teachers of traumatized youth build strong personal relationships with the students to support a sense of community and empathy in the classroom. Teachers can establish this relationship by taking a few minutes daily to converse with the student to build trust. This process may take a while because homeless students often cover up their emotions.

Second, effective teachers frame problematic behavior as indicative of the student's state of mind at that time and not as reflective of his or her nature (McInnes et al., 2014). Attributing behaviors to a student's character instead of to his or her particular context can lock in attitudes on both the student's and the teacher's part, making it more difficult for a student to be empathetic, prosocial, and community-minded.

Third, because homelessness can devastate the ego, effective teachers build traumatized students' confidence. The shame and embarrassment the students experience can turn into a lack of confidence in all areas of their lives, including academics. It's crucial to scaffold classroom tasks so that students can claim ongoing, even if small, successes.

Fourth, caring teachers help students recognize and not run from difficulties. Such teachers encourage students to talk privately but openly about the challenges they face, and they promote the ability to articulate hurdles and address them head-on. This coaching is often accomplished in the context of building classroom community, which, researchers

note, is also an essential foundation for success with traumatized youth (McInnes et al., 2014).

Teachers' ability to admit mistakes and to be transparent and vulnerable helps students move away from both internalized harmful behaviors and externalized anger or irritability to hone their abilities to empathize, tolerate differences, and live gently in a violent world (Haberman, 2004). Because shifts in school climate result from everyone in the building learning new ways to teach and grow, whole-school professional development in gentle teaching and in pedagogical approaches informed by insights on trauma is indispensable.

Training should include understanding the specific behaviors and neurological tendencies of traumatized youth, approaches to healing in the classroom, and ways to regularly discuss and model how to make good choices in difficult situations. For example, what might students do when they're feeling as though they're going to explode because the house is so noisy? What coping strategies can they use to deal with never having any place to call their own?


Finally, although these skills are seldom part of any teacher-training program, teachers should know how to talk about and model attachment, self-regulation, attunement, tolerance, and respect (Haberman, 2004; McInnes et al., 2014). In addition to teachers, adult models such as parents, grandparents, clergy, and mentors in the community can teach these soft skills; they're not inborn.

As Best They Can

For the close to one million students who live in crowded conditions with inadequate housing and food, school is often the least of their worries. Many try to attend as best they can. They often will do their homework—if they can find a quiet space. They typically

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feel alone with their big dreams for college or career, and they usually have little idea of how to make those dreams come true.

Teachers have a unique opportunity to help. By identifying students living doubled-up and understanding the challenges they face, teachers can better guide students toward a life with improved prospects. 

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MEET IRA

Few know that 18-year-old Ira is homeless. He's always happy, he's always smiling, and he does his work in school. But he knows homelessness, and he knows it well. "I've been at it," he says, "since I was 13." To hear more from this resilient young man, visit Diane Nilan's *Worn Out Welcome Mat: Ira's Story* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7LRxYfKnGc.

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