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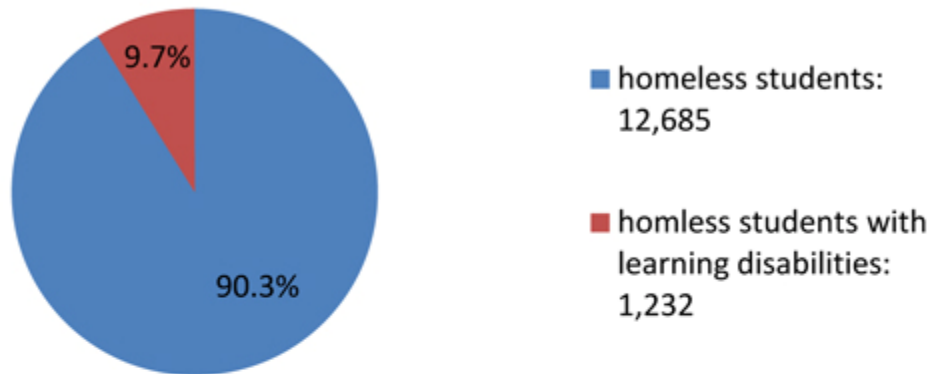
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HEADLINE: If you're homeless, you are more likely to have a learning disability

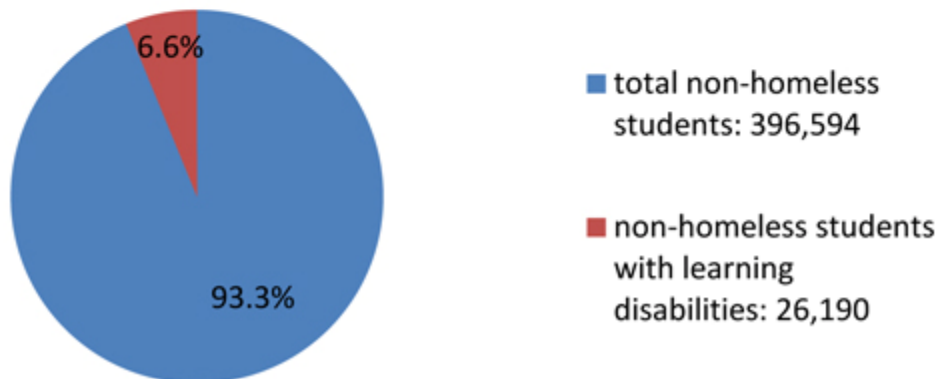
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Learning Disabilities Among Homeless CPS Students



Learning Disabilities Among CPS Students (non-homeless)



If you're homeless, you're more likely to have a learning disability

by [Sarah Marchmont](#)

Feb 24, 2010

Try being homeless.

Then add a learning disability on top of that.

If you're a child, the combination is an almost insurmountable challenge – without intervention. According to a study by the National Center for Family Homelessness, homeless children experience double the rate of learning disabilities as non-homeless children.

Other studies cite higher rates as well.

While the rates in Chicago Public Schools aren't double, they are higher.

Of the 409,279 students enrolled in Chicago public schools, 12,685 students are enrolled in the CPS program for homeless children.

Of those students, 1,232 are receiving special education services for a learning disability, according to Pat Rivera, CPS manager of Educational Support for Students in Temporary Living Situations.

That's 9.7 percent, as compared to a rate of 6.6 percent among non-homeless students.

There are many unknowns about the causes of learning disabilities, but there is a definite genetic component, said Robert Daniels, a licensed clinical psychologist and the executive director of the Chicago Children's Clinic.

And why the rates of the learning disabilities for homeless kids are sometimes double that of other kids isn't clear either.

“Learning disabilities have biological bases — probably have something to do with wiring. Why it is twice as common, I can't answer that,” said Ellen Bassuk, president of the National Center on Family Homelessness.

But there are factors that are often present with homelessness and learning disabilities.

Hand in hand

Daniels said it made sense that there were higher rates of learning disabilities among the homeless. "If you look at the population of homeless people, most of them have a disability of one sort or another," he said.

There are higher rates of every type of disability among the homeless population, Daniels said. Then, add in the fact learning disabilities run in families.

A not-uncommon situation could look something like this:

A child from a poor neighborhood never gets a diagnosis or treatment for a learning disability. The child struggles through school and never overcomes the disability. As an adult, he is unable to get a good job and have a stable income. The economy takes a bad turn, he gets behind on bills, and the situation worsens until he ends up homeless.

If he's a parent, when he loses his home, so do the kids.

A child of a parent with learning disabilities is six times more likely to have a disability, Daniels said.

Then these children are enrolled in the public schools, and consequently there's a higher rate of learning disabilities among that group of students.

Many homeless children attend underfinanced schools. These kids sometimes get fewer services. "We know that the rates are very high," Bassuk said. "We also know that the services are not adequate to address all these needs."

Early intervention is key

Many people believe the key to helping people overcome their learning disabilities so they can lead successful, independent lives is to identify that disability early. "The issue is to get these kids evaluated early," Bassuk said.

Daniels agreed that the younger a child is when diagnosed, the better the result.

Nearly anyone with a learning disability can lead an independent life if there is early intervention, he said. "Early," in this case, would ideally be the second semester of kindergarten.

Approximately 80 percent of learning disabilities are reading-related. Dyslexia is probably the most common, Daniels said, but there are others as well.

Nurture may play a role

Higher concentrations of people with learning disabilities tend to be in lower economic situations, said Rodney Estvan, education policy coordinator at Access Living, a disability advocacy organization that also offers independent living services, along with working to raise awareness.

“There is some discussion in the literature of learning disabilities about possible environmental consequences that can create a propensity to learning disability,” Estvan said.

Though the reason isn’t clear, the correlation between poverty and learning disabilities is high, he said.

“I think that in families that live in extreme poverty, it’s predictable that you’re going to have many difficulties,” said Rene Heybach, director of the law project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.

And though parents may realize something is wrong with their child’s development, in the chaos of being in a homeless situation, the child’s needs may not get addressed, and the opportunities for early intervention may be missed, Heybach said.

Heybach also stressed the importance of early intervention, preferably by preschool.

“We know that a lot of homeless children do not get those programs,” she said. “We know that homeless families feel very isolated, even though their kids are in school.”

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