Falling Through the Cracks:
Graduation and Dropout Rates among Michigan's Homeless High School Students

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Overview

Over 3,500 high school students in the class of 2017[*] were homeless in Michigan. Under federal education law, all children and youth who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" are homeless.[†1] While representing a small proportion of the entire student body (3%[‡]), these students were disproportionately likely to face negative educational outcomes and accounted for almost 7% of all students who dropped out of high school.

In compliance with new regulations under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)[2], the State of Michigan recently released graduation, dropout and attendance rate data for homeless students for school years 2012-13 through 2016-17. This policy brief examines the state's newly available public education graduation and dropout data and finds dramatic disparities between homeless students and their low-income and non-low income peers. Across every available comparison group homeless high school students had worse educational outcomes. Given recent data that has shown student homelessness to be a statewide issue affecting rural, suburban and urban communities alike,[3] this finding highlights the need for greater focus on a previously invisible but highly vulnerable group of students. Data for this brief are for public school students, including charters, and come from the Michigan Department of Education and the Center for Educational Performance and Information.[4]

Key Findings

- **Homeless students have the lowest four-year graduation rate of any group in Michigan for which data was available.** Just over half (55%) of homeless high school students in Michigan graduated in four years. This rate was significantly lower than both the rate for economically disadvantaged students[§] (68%) and the average graduation rate for the state as a whole (80%).
- **Homeless students have the highest high school dropout rate of any group in Michigan.** One in five homeless students dropped out of high school (20%), a rate six percentage points higher than that of economically disadvantaged students (14%) and 11 percentage points higher than the statewide average of 9%.
- **Dropout rates for homeless students in Michigan are increasing despite downward trends among other groups.** While dropout rates for both economically disadvantaged student and all students progressively declined by two percentage points from school year 2012-13 to 2016-17, the dropout rate for homeless students increased by roughly one and a half percentage points over the same time period.
- **The newly released Michigan education data for graduation and dropout rates reveal homeless high school students to be a uniquely vulnerable group that has previously gone unrecognized.** The educational outcomes of homeless high school students are distinct from their economically disadvantaged peers who are not homeless. Identifying the unique needs of these students is critical to improving their high school outcomes.

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[*] Defined as the 4-year 2017 graduation cohort.

[†] The McKinney-Vento Act defines homeless children as those that "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" this includes children and youths who due to loss of housing or economic hardship are living in hotels, motels, trailer parks, camping grounds, another person's housing, emergency or transitional shelters or any place not meant for human habitation (such as cars, public spaces, or abandoned buildings).

[‡] For the purposes of this report all percentages have been rounded.

[§]Economically Disadvantaged Students are those eligible for free- or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch program, are in households receiving food (SNAP) or cash (TANF) assistance, are eligible under Medicaid, are homeless, are migrant, or are in foster care.
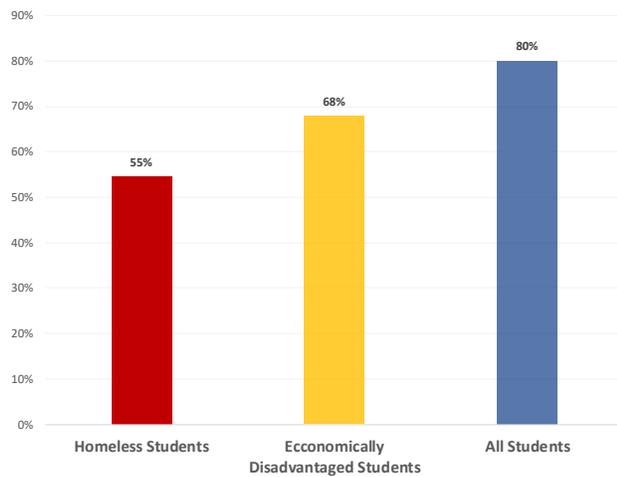
At Risk for Not Graduating

Only 55% of homeless high school students in Michigan graduated in four years. This rate was 13 percentage points lower than the rate for economically disadvantaged students and 25 percentage points lower than the average graduation rate for the state as a whole.

While graduation rates for both economically disadvantaged students and all students progressively increased (by four and three percentage points respectively), graduation rates for homeless students remained flat over the five-year period from school year 2012-13 to 2016-17.

Four-Year Graduation Rate
Homeless Students vs. Economically Disadvantaged Students and Statewide Average
Michigan, School Year 2016-17

Beyond having lower graduation rates than both the statewide average and economically disadvantaged students within the state, homeless students had the lowest graduation rates of all subgroups available for comparison (note that migrant students are not considered because of small sample size). The second lowest graduation rate was for students with disabilities (57%). While these gaps are striking, it is important to note that they are likely under-estimates of the full extent of the disparity, due to the fact that there are homeless students counted in all of the comparison subgroups.
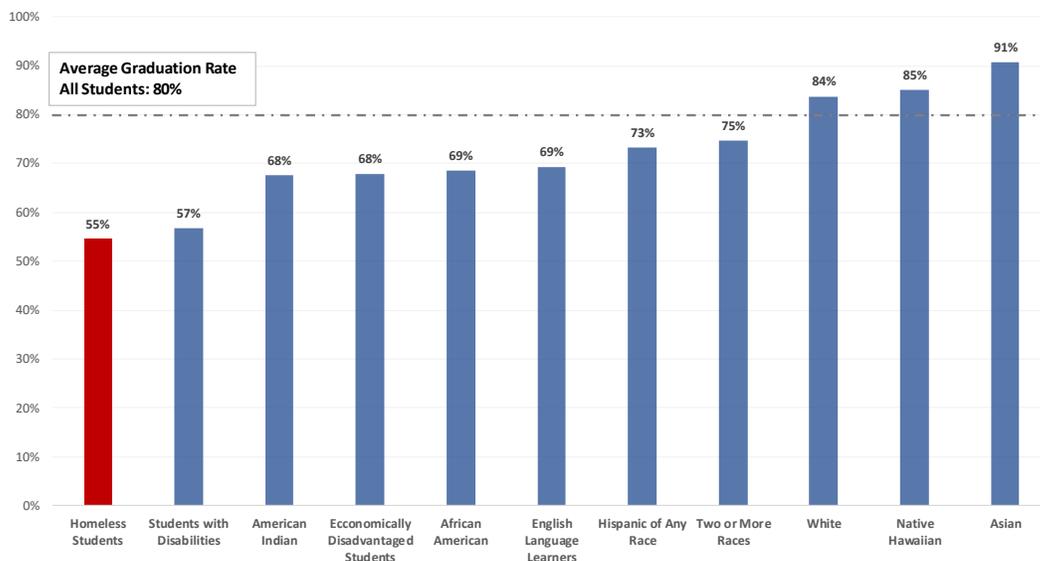
Four-Year Graduation Rate
Homeless Students vs. All Other Available Subgroups
Michigan, School Year 2016-17

Dropping Out of High School

In addition to struggling to graduate on time, homeless high school students in Michigan are dropping out of high school at very high rates.
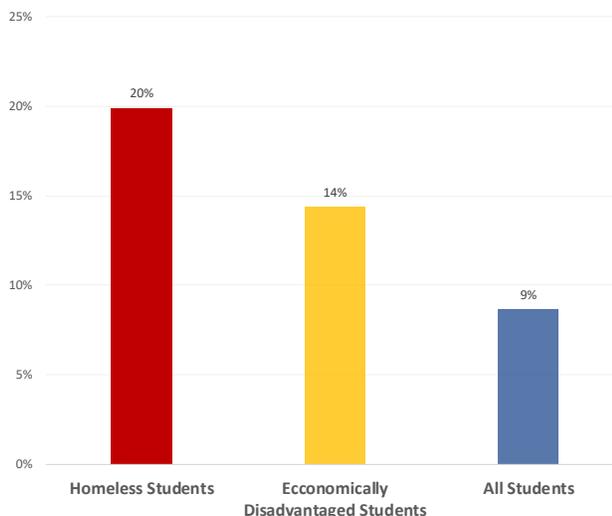
One out of every five homeless students dropped out of their graduating class in School Year 2016-17. This rate was roughly six percentage points higher than that of economically disadvantaged students and 11 percentage points higher than the statewide average of 9%.

While dropout rates for both economically disadvantaged student and all students have progressively declined by two percentage points since school year 2012-13 the dropout rate for homeless students increased by roughly one and a half percentage points over the five-year period for which the data are available.

Four-Year Dropout Rate
Homeless Students vs. Economically Disadvantaged Students and Statewide Average
Michigan, School Year 2016-17

With a dropout rate of 20%, homeless students had the highest dropout rate of all subgroups in the state for which data was available. The next highest dropout rate was five percentage points lower (at slightly above 15%) for students who self-identified as Native American. However, this subgroup represents less thank 1% of both students and dropouts.
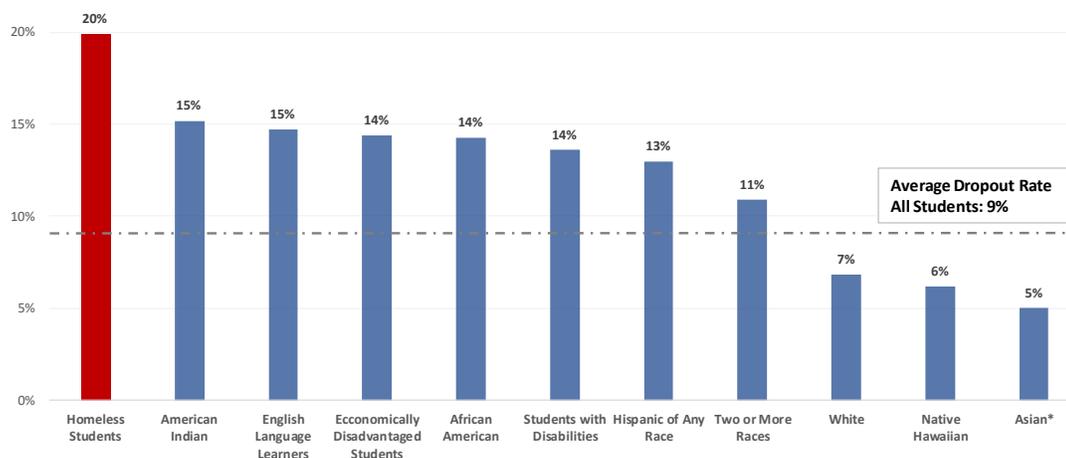
Four-Year Dropout Rate
Homeless Students vs. All Other Available Subgroups
Michigan, School Year 2016-17

Note: The dropout rate for Asian is listed in the raw data is >5%.
Source: The Center for Education Performance and Information (CEPI). "Michigan Department of Education 2016-17 Graduation Dropout Trend Statewide: 4-Year (2017 Graduation Cohort)". https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles2/StudentInformation/GraduationDropoutRate2.aspx (accessed April 2, 2018).

Conclusion

Newly released State graduation and dropout data reveal homeless high school students to be at much greater risk for not graduating from high school than their non-homeless peers. These findings combined with previous research on student homelessness in Michigan highlights the need to better identify and support homeless students so that they can succeed academically.[5]

References

[1] The National Center for Homeless Education. "The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless," https://nche.ed.gov/legis/mv-def.php (accessed January 29, 2018).

[2] SchoolHouse Connection. "State Laws on High School Graduation for Students Experiencing Homelessness," https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/state-laws-on-high-school-graduation-for-students-experiencing-homelessness/ (accessed April 3, 2018).

[3] Jennifer Erb-Downward & Michael Evangelist. "A Snapshot of Homelessness and Housing Instability in Michigan Schools," https://poverty.umich.edu/about/child-homelessness-in-michigan/ (accessed April 3, 2018).

[4] The Center for Education Performance and Information (CEPI). "Michigan Department of Education: MI School Data, Student Counts," https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles2/StudentInformation/StudentSummary.aspx (accessed April 2, 2018).

[5] Jennifer Erb-Downward & Michael Evangelist. "A Snapshot of Homelessness and Housing Instability in Michigan Schools," https://poverty.umich.edu/about/child-homelessness-in-michigan/ (accessed April 3, 2018).