Transition out of Homelessness: Following Black and Brown Students Experiencing Homelessness from High School to Higher Education

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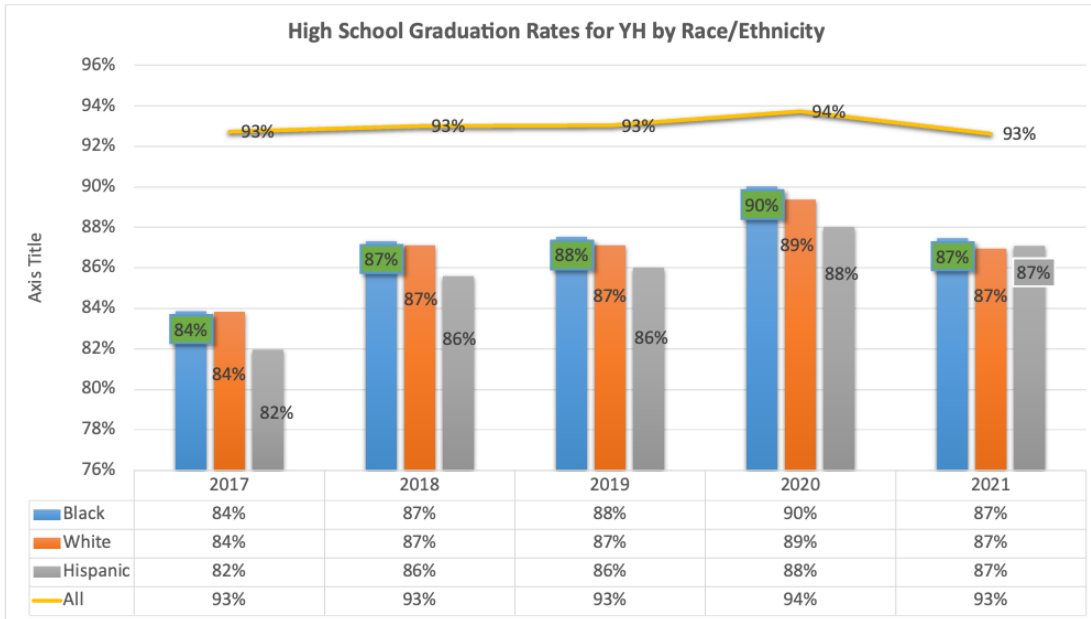May 2024

What I Studied

Across the U.S., the number of youths who experience homelessness is increasing. The increase of youth homelessness is growing most rapidly for Black and Hispanic students and is occurring in both small and large states. In Texas, one of the states with the largest population of students experiencing homelessness, its youth homeless population is more than six times the national average. This research has examined the longitudinal and disaggregated impacts of homelessness on youth by race and ethnicity, specifically during the critical transition from high school to college. The purpose of this study is to examine the transition of graduating seniors who experience homelessness and their enrollment in college. To achieve this purpose, I addressed the following research questions in this study: (1) How do high school graduation rates vary across students based on their homeless status, race/ethnicity, and their interaction in Texas? (2) Among high school graduates, to what extent does homelessness by race impact students' college enrollment for Black and Hispanic students in Texas? (3) Among students experiencing homelessness, how does the likelihood of high school graduation and college enrollment for Black and Hispanic students compare to that of White students in Texas? I analyze these questions over 9 years (between 2013-2022) for a longitudinal analysis.

This study provides a counter-narrative of the student homeless population that includes a reframing of Black, Hispanic, and White students experiencing homelessness. Black students experiencing homelessness have stronger graduation rates and are found to enroll in higher education at higher rates in comparison to White students experiencing homelessness. Hispanic students comprise half of the student homeless population and require the inclusion of ethnicity to be seen in the data. The implications for future research, policy, and practice will become limitless when we begin to put race/ethnicity at the center of education for students experiencing homelessness. As a society we "other" students with labels of "homelessness," "Black," and "Hispanic." Among the many labels, this will always impact research, policy, and practice until the nexus of our practice considers the implications of racism and the intersection it has with classism.

How I Analyzed the Data

I employed descriptive statistics and linear regression methods for continuous outcomes using models to better isolate the relationship between homelessness and students' K-12 and college outcomes. I include data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). The longitudinal study is comprised of five cohorts of students (2013-2022), each cohort is comprised of students qualifying as students experiencing homelessness during any time in their high school career as seen in Figure 1.

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Figure 1

High School Graduation Rates for YH by Race/Ethnicity

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Black	84%	87%	88%	90%	87%
White	84%	87%	87%	89%	87%
Hispanic	82%	86%	86%	88%	87%
All	93%	93%	93%	94%	93%

Students are naturally identified in cohorts during their high school career and identify with their graduating year. This study honors common practices among educators and society. The study's parameters are limited by the available data in the ERC, beginning in 2013 (freshman year) and up until the latest data was made current and available at the time of this dissertation, in 2022 (college enrollment/freshman year).

The four OLS linear regression models depicted examine college enrollment, any college in Table 1, from all higher education institutions in the Texas data between 2017-2021. The population of students included in the four models for any college was appended by each cohort, 2017 through 2021, which has a sample of 1.9 million students including non-homeless and students experiencing homelessness. In Table 1, the first model only includes the race/ethnicity and homeless variables, the second model adds other demographic covariates and cohort fixed effects, the third model includes a race/ethnicity by homeless interaction term, and the fourth model includes a cohort by homeless interaction term.

In the first model, the regression output includes the variables of race, ethnicity, and homelessness for any college enrollment in Table 11. The first model is an OLS linear regression model that was run as a baseline model to show the regression results for homelessness and race for all students in the five cohorts. The first model does not control any other variables. In this baseline model, all students experiencing homelessness enroll in any college (-14.5%) at lower rates than non-homeless students, controlling for students' race/ethnicity. The homeless/non-homeless gap in any college enrollment is larger than the White/Hispanic gap and more than twice as large as the Black/White gap. Black students enroll in any college at a similar rate to White students, the reference group. All variables are statistically significant in this model.

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Any-College Enrollment

Table 1
OLS Linear Regression Models Predicting Any-College Enrollment

Variable	Model 1 (no controls)	Model 2 (demographic controls)	Model 3 (race/homeless interaction)	Model 4 (cohort/homeless interaction)
	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient
Race/Ethnicity (Reference = White)				
Black	-.054***	.005***	.003*	.005**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Hispanic	-.068***	-.011***	-.012***	-.011***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Two or More	-.031***	-.019***	-.022***	-.019***
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Asian	.119***	.084***	.082***	.085***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Homeless	-.145***	-.067***	-.069***	-.097***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Female		.083***	.083***	.083***
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Gifted		.117***	.117***	.117***
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Special Education		-.179***	-.181***	-.179***
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Economically Dis		-.080***	-.080***	-.080***
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Percent Absent		-.008***	-.008***	-.008***
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
age		-.086***	-.085***	-.086***
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Homeless (Interaction with Race/Ethnicity)				
Black			.021***	

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Table 1 (continued)

		(0.005)		
Hispanic		-.010 *		
		(0.004)		
Two or More		.030 **		
		(0.011)		
Asian		.030 *		
		(0.012)		
Cohort (Reference = 2017)				
2018		-.005 ***		-.006 ***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
2019		-.010 ***		-.011 ***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
2020		-.065 ***		-.066 ***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
2021		-.056 ***		-.059 ***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Homeless (Interaction with Cohort)				
Homeless*2018				.034 ***
				(0.005)
Homeless*2019				.029 ***
				(0.005)
Homeless*2020				.027***
				(0.005)
Homeless*2021				.052 ***
				(0.005)
Constant	.477 ***	2.01 ***	1.972 ***	2.011 ***
	(0.001)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Observations	1872428	1872428	1872428	1872428

Standard Error in parentheses

$^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

The second model was run with all covariates including race, ethnicity, homelessness, female, gifted, special education, economically disadvantaged, percent absent, age, and cohort. In the second model controlling for all covariates, Black students enroll in any college 1.89% higher than the reference group of white students. Hispanic students enroll in any college at lower rates than White students. Included in the model are also Two or More Races that enroll in college at approximately the same rate as the reference group. Asian students also enroll in higher education at 8% higher than the reference group. For the other covariates included in the model female and gifted students enroll in any college at higher rates. Age, special education, and economic disadvantage are negatively related to any college enrollment rates. The cohort reference group was the 2017 cohort. During the longitudinal analysis, during the year of the COVID pandemic students experiencing homelessness enrolled in any college at 6.5% lower rates compared to the 2017 reference group.

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The third regression model included an interaction of homelessness and race while controlling all other covariates. Black students experiencing homelessness enroll in any college at approximately 2% higher rate than White students experiencing homelessness. The positive coefficient of 0.021 implies that Black homeless students demonstrate a smaller decline (or a more positive difference) in college enrollment rates compared to their Black non-homeless peers than the difference observed between White homeless and White non-homeless students. Put differently, homelessness is more strongly related to depressed college enrollment rates for White compared to Black students.

Black homeless students show relatively better progress or resilience in maintaining or increasing their enrollment rates when compared to the expected decline due to homelessness. This progress is noteworthy because it is significantly better than what is observed among White students, where homelessness might have a more detrimental impact on enrollment relative to their non-homeless peers. Hispanic students experiencing homelessness enrolled in any college at the same rate as the reference group, with a negligible difference of 0.10%. Students of two or more races experiencing homelessness enrolled in four-year colleges at a rate that was 3 percentage points higher than that of the reference group. Asian students experiencing homelessness had the lowest any-college enrollment rates among all students experiencing homelessness and 3% below the rate for Asian, non-homeless students.

The fourth regression model included an interaction of homelessness and cohort while controlling for all other covariates. These interaction terms indicate how the relationship between homelessness and college-going has changed from 2017 to 2021. With 2017 as the reference group, all year-by-homeless estimates indicate how the relationship between homelessness and college-going differed in the target year compared to the reference year of 2017. For any college enrollment, the gap between homeless and non-homeless students was smaller in all other years compared to 2017. For any college enrollment, the homeless/non-homeless gap reduced by roughly three percentage points from 2017 to 2018 and stayed roughly constant until 2020. However, in 2021, this gap closed by 5.2%. These results suggest the homeless/non-homeless gap in any college enrollment was cut in half from 2017-2021, from 9.7% in the base year of 2017 to 4.5% (9.7%-5.2%) in 2021.

What I Discovered

The findings indicated that students experiencing homelessness graduate and enroll in college at lower rates than non-homeless students. Three overall findings emerged in this study: (1) there is overrepresentation within the demographics of youth that are experiencing homelessness, 70% are Black and Hispanic students, and these student groups only account for 2% of students in the state, respectively (TEA, 2020); (2) students experiencing homelessness graduate from high school and attend higher education; and (3) during natural disasters and pandemics, graduation and enrollment rates were impacted. These findings suggest that students experiencing homelessness, in comparison to non-homeless students, graduate at lower rates, and Black students experiencing homelessness enroll in higher education at higher rates than the reference group of White students.

The growing body of empirical research and policy with a focus on Black and Hispanic students experiencing homelessness in college indicates a need to connect the knowledge from high school graduation to college enrollment. Black students experiencing homelessness are graduating and enrolling in four-year universities at higher rates than Hispanic and White students experiencing homelessness. The third regression model Black homeless students show relatively better progress or resilience in maintaining or increasing their enrollment rates when compared to the expected decline due to homelessness. This progress is noteworthy because it is significantly better than what is observed among White students, where homelessness might have a more detrimental impact on enrollment relative to their non-homeless peers. For any college enrollment in the fourth model, the gap between homeless and non-homeless students was smaller in all other years compared to 2017. For any college enrollment, the homeless/non-homeless gap reduced by roughly three percentage points from 2017 to 2018 and stayed roughly constant until 2020. However, in 2021, this gap closed by 5.2%. These results suggest the homeless/non-homeless gap in any college enrollment was cut in half from 2017-2021, from 9.7% in the base year of 2017 to 4.5% (9.7%-5.2%) in 2021.

However, to understand my findings, I situate them within context. In this study, I did not account for student achievement variables during high school, including grades state achievement scores, or limited English proficiency. In the findings, Black

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students experiencing homelessness enrolled in college at higher rates, however, this does not mean that more work is not needed to support Black students experiencing homelessness. Black students experiencing homelessness comprised 170, 239, collectively, among the five cohorts of students.

Policy Recommendations

Students experiencing homelessness in PK-12 schools would benefit from a combination of policy, future research, and practices that assist in the transition from high school to higher education. Black and Hispanic students experiencing homelessness comprise over 70% of students experiencing homelessness and are overrepresented in the student homeless population, as the findings from the five cohorts confirm. Considering these findings disaggregated data by race/ethnicity, as well as data that connects PK-12 to higher education, are instrumental practices that further enlighten policy and practice for school practitioners (homeless liaisons, counselors, administrators).

This study offers several policy implications. ESSA began the journey for students experiencing homelessness to receive federal financial assistance for unaccompanied youth. Future policy considerations should include all students experiencing homelessness in their senior year for federal financial aid and a college homeless liaison. Connecting students with their PK-12 homeless liaison to a similar position in higher education can offer further methods to mitigate the pipeline from youth homelessness to adult homelessness with education. The findings from the study include a decreasing gap from FY2017 of 10%, FY2018 of 6%, FY2019 of 6%, FY2020 of 5%, and FY2021 of 5% for Black, Hispanic, and White students experiencing homelessness after graduating from high school. The strong policy put into place for practitioners (homeless liaisons, counselors) to provide support for transition from high school to postsecondary options may have played a part in the decreasing gap in Texas, even amongst natural disasters and the COVID pandemic.

The framing of this study includes a focus on Black and Hispanic students experiencing homelessness, with data to support the transition paths from high school to college. The findings indicate that Black students experiencing homelessness enroll in any college at higher rates in the first three Cohorts and lower college enrollment rates during the COVID-19 pandemic years, in comparison to White students experiencing homelessness. Hispanic and White students experiencing homelessness show the largest enrollment gaps, ranging from 10% to 25%, compared to their Hispanic and White non-homeless counterparts. This highlights the need for state and local policies to expand data collection on students experiencing homelessness beyond just living situations and overall graduation rates, including disaggregated data by race and ethnicity. An implication for future research is to include disaggregated data as a requirement in McKinney-Vento (M-V) policy and practice in reauthorizations beyond ESSA.

In Texas, there are 1,247 school grants with 87 districts receiving M-V funding, leaving 70% of school districts unfunded mandate to implement M-V. The state of Texas has an opportunity to expand funding across more school districts and advocate for future funding streams to assist students experiencing homelessness.

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