

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies
Publications

Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies

Summer 2007

O, Give Me A Home: Kids, Stability, & Education

Andrée Tremoulet

Portland State University, andree@commonworksconsulting.com

Elizabeth Mylott

Portland State University, more@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/metropolitanstudies>



Part of the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Tremoulet, Andrée; Mylott, Elizabeth, "Oh, give me a home" (2007 Metroscape, Institute for Portland Metropolitan Studies, Portland State University)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies Publications by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.



Anna is a fourth grader who lives in a two bedroom apartment with her parents, two sisters and one brother. All four kids share a bedroom with two beds, where the three girls do their homework while their little brother plays in the same room. Since kindergarten, Anna has attended four schools. Her favorite subject is science.



Steven lives with his brothers, his mom, his grandparents, an aunt and uncle. He does his homework in the kitchen. Sometimes his brothers do their work at the same time. Sometimes it is hard for Steven to concentrate on his school work because his five year old cousins come into the kitchen and cause trouble.



Thuyet sometimes lives in a shelter with his family. Since he began school four years ago, he has attended five schools. He says that being at the shelter is “really cool” because he gets “babysat by nice people.” When he is at the shelter, he gets to do his homework in his babysitter’s room.

Oh, Give Me a Home

Today, it's kids, not buffalo, who roam

by Andrée Tremoulet and Elizabeth Mylott

Amy is a fourth grade teacher in a Portland metro region elementary school with a high percentage of transient students. Anna, Steven and Thuyet are her students. [We have used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the informants.]

“By the second week of each new school year, it’s plainly evident which students have been in the same school for several years and which are recent arrivals,” Amy says. “Attending school in the same building with the same teachers is an incredibly important indicator of success.”

Amy, Thuyet, Steven, and Anna are four of the many students, teachers, families, and school administrators in the metrocape contending with the impacts of housing instability on the education and future chances of today’s kids. Student mobility impacts not just the individual child who is entering and leaving different schools during the same year, but also other students and the overall education system, according to school administrators and researchers.

Conversely, improving housing stability—decreasing the percentage of households with school age children who move involuntarily—is likely to reap benefits not only for the affected students, but also for other families in the community.

Moving Up or Just Moving?

Is moving such a bad thing? The answer is: it depends.

Mobility is part of the American way of life. According to the U.S. Census 2000, nearly one in five households moved during a fifteen month period that began January 1999. Portland metro area residents are even more mobile than average. Nearly one in four Portland area households moved, including nearly half of all renters (47.7%) and more than one in 10 homeowners (11.4%) during that fifteen month period.

Whether moving is a good thing or a bad thing for kids depends in part on whether families are moving by choice or not. Research on school age children shows that the impacts on the two groups tend to differ, according to PSU graduate student Renée Ramey.

Ramey found research that correlates voluntary moves with higher socio-economic status and improved long-term outcomes for the children. These families may move to pursue a better life for their family. They are not likely to move multiple times during a school year. They can time their move to occur when it would

be least disruptive. Students from these families tend to bear the costs of moving (loss of familiar classmates and teachers, lack of continuity in class work, adaptation to a new environment) during the first year after their move, while the benefits of an improved environment or economic status tend to continue to accrue over time.

Other families, typically those with lower incomes, are forced to move. These are the households for whom housing instability—the lack of place to live on an ongoing basis that is within their means—is a critical issue.

Students with higher average mobility rates not only experience the personal dislocation associated with frequent moves, but they also tend to cycle in and out of schools that serve a more unstable population. For these students, the adverse effects of housing instability accumulate over time.

The Costs of Housing Instability

Children and youth experiencing ongoing housing instability or homelessness experience a host of threats, including illness, hunger, exposure to violence, and impacts on their mental health.

When kids move, they also lose ground academically, and this can affect the options they have later in life as adults. The more they move, the more ground they lose. According to some estimates, students lose three to six months of education with every move. They are at higher risk of falling behind their peers and failing to graduate.

According to Ron Naso, Superintendent of North Clackamas Schools, student mobility wreaks havoc with the progression of a student through a curriculum based on remaining in the same school for the duration of his or her studies.

“Our educational system in Oregon is premised on continuity. If a student changes schools or school districts, there’s no particular guarantee that the requisite prior learnings were addressed along the way,” Naso says. “When students can stay in the same cohort throughout their time in a school, we see a much better level of performance.”

That perspective is echoed by Amy, the fourth-grade teacher in a school with a highly mobile population. “Each individual school devises a ‘building plan’ for instruction. We plan vertically, meaning that we take the objectives and benchmarks that a graduating fifth grade student must have in order to be successful and break it down by grade level,” she says. If a student doesn’t progress through the plan, they may miss critical elements.

The Costs of Housing Instability

Housing instability and homelessness impacts far more than a child’s education.

■ Homeless children get sick twice as often as other children. They have:

- ◆ Twice as many ear infections
- ◆ Four times as many asthma attacks
- ◆ Five times more stomach problems
- ◆ Six times as many speech problems
- ◆ Twice as many hospitalizations

■ Homeless children go hungry twice as often as other children

■ Homeless children are confronted with traumatic events. Within a year:

- ◆ 22% are separated from their parents to be put in foster care
- ◆ 25% have witnessed acts of violence within their family

■ Homeless children have more mental health problems than other children

- ◆ More than 20% of homeless pre-schoolers require professional care for emotional problems
- ◆ 47% of homeless school age children experience anxiety, depression, withdrawal or other mental health problems, compared to 18% for other children
- ◆ Homeless children are twice as likely to have learning disabilities
- ◆ Homeless children are four times as likely to have developmental delays

Source: The National Center on Family Homelessness

What Does “Homeless” Mean?

The term “homeless” includes a spectrum of living conditions that share the common factor of housing instability. Federal law defines a homeless individual as one who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate night-time residence. The Oregon Department of Education includes children and youth who:

- ◆ Are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship
- ◆ Lack a stable or safe living environment
- ◆ Are living in emergency or transitional shelter
- ◆ Are abandoned in hospitals
- ◆ Are awaiting foster care placement or are in temporary foster settings
- ◆ Have a primary nighttime residence that is not designed as sleeping accommodations for humans
- ◆ Are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations or similar settings
- ◆ Are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks or camp grounds

Source: Oregon Homeless Education Program, Oregon Department of Education

Less than a third of Amy's fourth-graders have attended the same school since first grade. "I have students who have no idea of where to place a period, students who are unfamiliar with the rules of capitalization, students who have missed significant parts of academic years, students who have fallen through the cracks," she says.

According to Jean DeMaster, Executive Director of Human Services, a non-profit that provides housing and services to low-income families in East Multnomah County, homeless kids face huge learning challenges. Students may have to adjust to new ways of learning. For example, one teacher may have explained subtraction one way, but another might explain it differently, and the child can get lost between the two. And, as Amy indicated, students can miss content essential to their progression.

High school age kids who move frequently during the year face an additional set of challenges. "The educational system is not built for highly mobile youth, like kids who are dealing with highly stressful situations or housing issues," says Jonathan Zook, Homeless Program Liaison for Portland Public Schools.

In Portland Public Schools, if a high school student is not enrolled for classes by December 1, that student cannot start earning credits again until February. While alternative schools and special education programs permit students to earn partial credit or provide flexible timing, high school students in traditional programs may find themselves far behind their age cohort in progressing toward graduation.

The problems can be compounded when students change school systems. "When high school students move, they may lose credits if they change school districts," according to Nancy Faaren, Principal at Fort Vancouver High School.

When kids of any age move, they also lose

something called "social capital"—the benefits derived from having relationships with others in their environment. "Parents and children who have many friends in their community and who are highly involved with other members of the family have more social capital than those who do not," Ramey says.

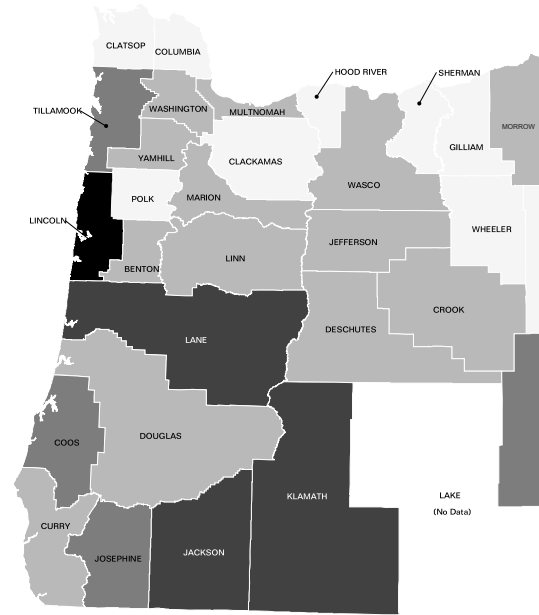
"In times of stress, social capital can help buffer families. When families move, often these ties are broken.

Kids can lose classmates, teachers, friends and helpful adults in their lives just when they need them the most," Ramey says.

The kids who move are not the only ones who are affected by housing insecurity. Student mobility forces everyone in the classroom to adjust to fluxes in the environment.

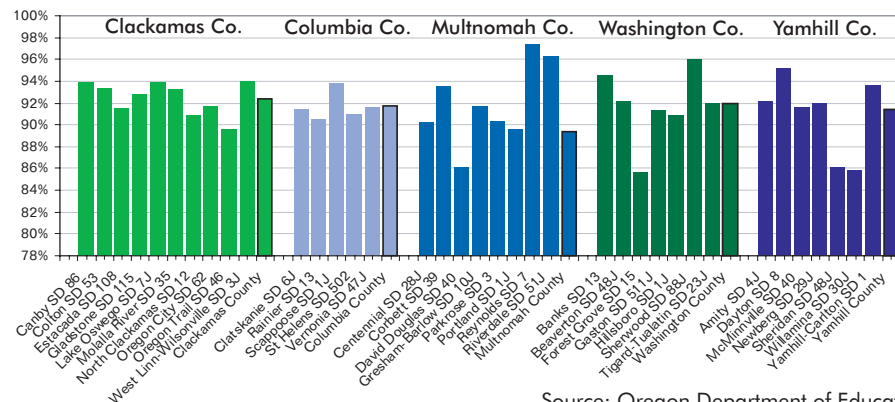
"In elementary school, the adaptation challenges can be significant," Naso says. "Teachers have to adapt to include the new student, and the class overall has to make adaptations. Personalities and relationships change. Some kids coming in might be very disruptive until the teacher can assimilate them."

Studies have found that homeless children have four times the average rate of delayed development. According to the National Center of Family Homelessness, 21% of homeless kids repeat a grade due to frequent absence from school, compared to 5% of other children. Other impacts of student mobility include an increase in nega-



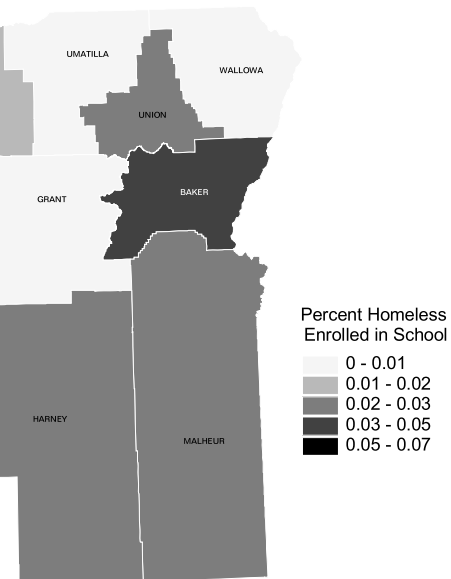
Source: Oregon Department of Education

**Student Stability Rates for Selected School Districts:
Students Starting and Ending in the Same School, October 1, 2005 to May 1, 2006**



Source: Oregon Department of Education

Percent Homeless Enrolled in School



tive behavior and a decreased likelihood of graduating from high school. These impacts persist even when the effects of other possible causes of poor performance, such as socio-economic status, are considered.

The Geography of Student Mobility

Mapping student mobility is a complex task because there is not a single, generally-accepted measure. One way is to measure a school's stability rate—the percentage of students enrolled in the beginning of the year who are also enrolled at the end of the year.

A class with an enrollment of 30 students on October 1 would have a stability rate of 90% if 27 of those same students were enrolled on May 1.

While the stability rate portrays one dimension of classroom flux, it does not necessarily capture the full extent of student mobility because it does not count the number of students who come and go during the course of the year. In the example above, it is possible that the class had only three part-year students, or it could have had 11, 18 or any other number three or greater.

A second measurement of student mobility is the percentage of students enrolled in a school during an academic year who met the definition of “homeless” (see sidebar). The McKinney-Vento Act, the federal legislation pertaining to homelessness, defines a homeless individual as one who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. Not only does it include families and youth living on the street, but it also includes those doubling up with other households, living from motel to motel, in temporary foster care, or living in cars.

While homeless students can remain in the same class throughout an academic year or longer, often their situation results in their changing schools. National studies have found that 40% of homeless children attend two different schools within a single year, and 28% attend three or more different schools.

The stability rate and the percentage of students who are homeless generate a sense of classroom turnover. While neither measure

alone is complete, when taken in combination the two are useful in describing the relative degree of student flux in a classroom, school, district or county.

Within Oregon metro-area school districts, stability rates range from a low of just under 86% to a high of more than 97%. Within individual public schools, stability rates range from just below 80% to nearly 99%, a high degree of variation.

Homeless children constitute more than a third of all homeless individuals in Oregon. Oregon public schools enrolled 1,500 homeless students in the 2004-2005 school year, which constitutes approximately 2.4% of all students statewide.

Significant variation exists among Oregon counties with respect to the percentage of their enrollment composed of homeless students. On the high end, Lincoln and Jackson Counties had the highest proportions at 7.1% and 5.1%, respectively, while Wheeler, Wallowa and Grant counties reported no homeless students. Among the six counties of the metroscape, Columbia reported the lowest share of homeless students (less than 1%) and Multnomah County the highest (nearly 2.5%).

Most Oregon homeless students—six of 10—were doubled up with other households. The remaining students were living in shelters, hotels or other temporary lodging, or they were living in the open.

A pattern of mobility is often overlaid with other stressors on a school system, such as a high rate of free or reduced lunches (an indicator of poverty) and a high percentage of students who do not speak English at home. These same districts also face the challenge of serving expanding school-age populations without the resources to provide additional facilities.

How Schools Are Responding

By federal law, schools are required to provide assistance to homeless children to keep them in school and help them succeed. The McKinney Vento Act mandates that school districts designate a Homeless Liaison to assist students, provide access to enrollment in the school of origin, provide transportation from where they are living to the school of origin, and provide access to services available to non-homeless students.

According to Zook, a homeless student liaison with Portland Public Schools, being able to stay in the same school is a big advantage to high

school age youth. “It’s their rock, their stability when everything else may be in chaos. Their friends and teachers are there.”

“Each kid is different,” Zook says. One student who was homeless during part of her senior year graduated among the top five students in her class recently, he says.

Renee Holmes is a former homeless mother of three teenage girls who sees great value in the services that the schools provide. Sometimes homeless parents are not able to cope with taking care of their kids’ needs.

“I was chronically homeless from 1998 through 2003, and in and out of homeless shelters with my three girls,” she says. She ticks off the impacts on her girls.

“My oldest missed three-quarters of her ninth grade because of unstable housing. It’s hard to give busses an address. Moving all the time affects schoolwork. My kids didn’t have a computer or a quiet place to work,” she says.

Some homeless kids develop “an attitude,” Holmes says. “Their perception of school becomes something like ‘why bother’” to try to attend if they don’t even have a place to live.

Against all odds, Holmes’s story has a happy ending. No longer homeless, she is the Community Resource Coordinator for Open House Ministries, a homeless family program in Vancouver, Washington. Her girls have rebounded and are excelling. She credits the Vancouver homeless liaison with coming through for her girls when she was not able to do so herself.

Homeless liaisons not only help kids and parents navigate the educational system; they also assist with linking them to social services, after-school programs, health services, free and reduced lunches, clothing, hygiene products, and shelter. “We serve as the connection between schools and the community,” says Kristin Kinnie, Homeless Program Coordinator for North Clackamas Schools and Site Coordinator for the Family Support Center.

Despite all these services, the key ingredient is housing. “The education of our kids would be so much stronger if they lived in stable housing,” Kinnie says. “There’s just a general lack of resources for homeless families, and that impacts kids.”

What Housing Providers Are Doing

Homeless service providers and schools have been coordinating at the service delivery level for

many years. “Homeless service providers understand the link between keeping kids in school and preventing future homelessness,” Jean DeMaster, Executive Director of Human Solutions, says. Homeless kids who fall behind become potential candidates for homelessness as adults.

“To get stability for the family, one of the first things you need to do is get the kids in school,” she says. This works both to the benefit of the kids, who need continuity in schooling to succeed, but also to the benefit of the parents, who need to spend their days seeking work and housing.

Recently, housing providers, homeless advocates, and funders in a four-county region (Clark, Clackamas, Washington, and Multnomah Counties) have crafted a new, more flexible approach to meeting the housing and service needs of homeless families. Called Bridges to Housing, the program is built around three principles:

1. Provide permanent affordable housing to families as long as it is needed.
2. Provide intensive family services to build on the strengths of family members.
3. Provide child services, including school support, to address the needs of kids.

The 10-year goal is to provide 300 units of family housing supported by services, including case management, employment support for adults, and school support for kids. The program has just begun a three-year pilot phase and recently issued a \$900,000 request for proposals to housing and service providers in the four counties, according to Alison McIntosh, Project Associate with the Neighborhood Partnership Fund. Meyer Memorial Trust provided a \$500,000 challenge grant and the Gates Foundation provided a \$1 million three-year matching grant to help bankroll the pilot phase, which project sponsors anticipate will result in 30 to 60 units of housing.

According to DeMaster, the benefits of a “housing first” approach is that the family is moved into permanent housing from the start instead of moving from shelter to transitional housing then finally to permanent housing. This approach can mean a world of difference to kids in school, she says.

“They may be able to stay in their local school.



If the family can't find housing near that school, then they can pick a school and neighborhood and only move once. Then we focus on helping the kids stay in school," she says.

In addition to providing housing and access to social services, this initiative will include at least \$1,700 per family per year for client services or direct payments in support of family goals. In the area of school support, these payments could cover an assessment for learning disabilities, participation in an after-school program, and attending school field trips or other extra-curricular activities that may not be available without financial assistance, McIntosh says.



front porch because the family for whom the house must be inside to do homework.

Also promising is the Schools, Families, Housing Initiative led by Portland Commissioner Erik Sten, which is aimed at retaining and recruiting families with children to Portland neighborhoods. Portland Public Schools is one of the few school districts in the region losing school enrollment. Analysts attribute the declining enrollment in part to families being priced out of core city neighborhoods. In districts outside the Portland core, analysts report that enrollment is up precipitously because families are moving to where they can find affordable family housing.

"There is a direct link to Portland's school enrollment and housing choices," Sten says. "We want to ensure that Portland has housing options for people in all circumstances, including parents raising children. In order to have healthy schools, we need to provide affordable and appropriate housing options for families."

The overall initiative embraces numerous city bureaus and is supported by \$2.5 million in new City of Portland funding and the realignment of existing programs, according to Rich Rodgers, Coordinator of the Schools, Family, Housing Initiative.

Family housing initiatives include boosting funding to programs providing affordable homeownership, creating a new housing stabilization program, and utilizing urban renewal and other funding to encourage new construction of family-oriented infill housing in and around selected school sites.

The housing stabilization program is a new rent assistance fund intended to help families keep their children in the same school throughout the academic year despite economic hardships and

other challenges that can prompt moves. Funded with \$500,000 in general fund resources, the program is currently under design, according to Rodgers.

Rodgers says that the program will work through existing school contacts, such as the SUN program, to identify when kids are at risk of an involuntary move. The notion is that a small amount of targeted assistance at a critical juncture may result in forestalling a move or possible homelessness. Funds could be used for rent stabilization to keep the family in place and direct financial assistance for one-time costs such as utility deposits, should the family have to move.

The Portland Development Commission has identified \$5.5 million in proposed FY 07-08 funding to support new family-oriented infill development in key areas. Potential areas may include the Cully neighborhood, the River District, Hillsdale, Humboldt, Lents and East Portland within David Douglas, Rodgers says.

The Initiative also includes a small grant program funded by the City of Portland to be administered by Portland Schools Foundation. Grants will support collaborative efforts by community partners who want to make their neighborhood more family friendly and/or improve their schools. One of the potential uses of funds is to support family housing by helping families find and keep homes near neighborhood schools.

Meeting The Need?

Both housing providers and homeless student liaisons in schools agree that there are not enough resources to meet the needs of involuntarily mobile and homeless families. The need for affordable housing when seen through the struggles of a child experiencing housing instability takes on a new urgency and meaning.

The fact that more than one-third of Oregon's homeless population consists of children calls for a re-examination of stereotypes of the homeless. One has to wonder what the future is going to be like for those kids. Some, like Renee Holmes's daughters, will rebound; others, like the homeless student who graduated at the top of her class, will beat the odds. Without a stable place to call home, others may fall through the cracks. **M**

Andrée Tremoulet is a community development practitioner and doctoral candidate in Urban Studies at Portland State University. Elizabeth Mylott is a Ph.D. student in Urban Studies at Portland State University.