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Young, Black, successful, and homeless: examining the unique academic challenges of Black students who experienced homelessness

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ABSTRACT
Youth homelessness is a growing crisis impacting urban high schools across the United States. Black youth, in particular, are disproportionately affected. While the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is designed to provide educational access to students experiencing homelessness, the extent to which the policy supports Black students is unclear. This qualitative study uses structural racism as an analytic framework to examine the narratives of eight Black youth who successfully graduated high school while experiencing homelessness. Findings show that being Black and experiencing homelessness creates unique challenges for accessing resources under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Participants identified hostile racial climates at school as a common deterrent from disclosing their homeless status to adults at school, thereby restricting their access to federal support. The findings suggest the need for race-conscious language and interventions to be included in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Additionally, the author urges more researchers studying youth homelessness to use a critical racial lens to address the racial knowledge gap that exists in the current literature on student homelessness.

KEYWORDS
Homeless students; McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act; race and homelessness; education and homelessness; poverty and education

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the number of youth[1] experiencing homelessness in the United States has doubled; today more than 1.5 million students are homeless (National Center for Homeless Education 2020). Youth homelessness is associated with negative academic and life outcomes. For example, close to 70 percent of high school students experiencing homelessness perform below grade level in state reading assessments, and 80 percent perform below grade level in math (National Center for Homeless Education 2020). Similarly, only 64 percent of students experiencing homelessness graduate high school on time (National Center for Homeless Education 2020) compared with 85 percent of students nationwide (US Department of Education 2018). Youth experiencing homelessness are also 4.5 times more likely to not complete high school than their stably housed peers (Kull et al. 2019).

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Currently, the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act (2015) (McKinney-Vento) is the most significant piece of federal legislation addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness (Gabbard, Ford, and May 2006). The federal policy defines student homelessness, articulates the legal rights of students experiencing homelessness, and outlines the range of supports that school districts are required to provide students identified as homeless (Pavlakis and Duffield 2017). While McKinney-Vento has made school more accessible to students experiencing homelessness nationwide (Miller 2011), little is known about the extent to which the federal policy addresses the specific needs of Black students, who research continually confirms are disproportionately impacted by homelessness (Carrasco 2019).

Black families represent 54 percent of families living in homeless shelters (Abt Associates. 2018) despite making up only 15 percent of US families (US Census 2019). A 2018 study surveying more than 26,000 participants across the country found that Black youth between the ages of 16 and 24 years are 83 percent more likely to report having experienced homelessness than youth of any other race (Morton et al. 2018). In Los Angeles County, the population of Black youth experiencing homelessness is disproportionately higher than their overall representation within the county's schools (Edwards and Howard 2019). Despite disproportionate rates of homelessness among Black students, McKinney-Vento does not explicitly mention race nor address Black student needs specifically. As such, it remains unclear whether or not the Act is adequately serving the needs of Black students experiencing homelessness (BSEH).

The purpose of this exploratory study is to expand our understanding of Black students' experiences with homelessness and the potential challenges they may face accessing McKinney-Vento. By examining the narratives of eight Black high school graduates who experienced homelessness in Los Angeles County while attending a public high school, this study answers the following research questions:

(1) What challenges do Black high school students experiencing homelessness encounter in school as a result of their race and housing instability?
(2) To what extent could being Black and experiencing homelessness present challenges in accessing resources provided by McKinney-Vento?

As context for this study, the following section of this paper details the evolution of McKinney-Vento. First, I introduce the policy and discuss the influence of research on the expansion of the federal definition of homelessness to include factors like diverse living contexts and family compositions. I then argue that homeless policy and youth homelessness research have neglected the impact of race on individuals' experiences with homelessness and present structural racism as a viable analytical lens for understanding the experiences of Black students experiencing homelessness.

Research in context

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

McKinney-Vento, established in 1987 and recently reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is the most comprehensive federal legislation designed to support the academic achievement of students impacted by homelessness (Pavlakis and Duffield

2017). The policy defines student homelessness broadly as any student who lacks a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (42 US Code § 11434a(2)(A)).

McKinney-Vento's definition includes children from families who are temporarily living with relatives or other adults (also known as doubled-up), as well as those living in shelters, motels, or cars. The policy mandates that once students are identified as experiencing homelessness, schools are legally responsible for ensuring that their homeless conditions do not interfere with their ability to access a quality education comparable to that of their stably housed peers (42 US Code § 11431). McKinney-Vento attempts to stabilize the education of students experiencing homelessness by ensuring that they have the right to stay at their school of origin and have access to transportation to and from school and school-related activities (Miller 2011). If staying at their school of origin is not in the student's best interest, the policy mandates that a school closer to the student's new residence allow them to immediately enroll (42 US Code § 11432(e)(3)(C)).

McKinney-Vento has been reauthorized five times (1988, 1990, 1994, 2001, and 2015). Each reauthorization has increased the number of mandates that State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) were required to abide by within the policy (Pavlakis and Duffield 2017). Additionally, McKinney-Vento's reauthorizations have broadened the scope of *who* fits the definition of homelessness and how they are supported by policy. Over the past 30 years, researchers have revealed the unique barriers associated with students experiencing homelessness across physical locations (e.g., shelter, motel, doubled-up, outside, etc.) (Deck 2017), different family compositions (Aviles de Bradley 2011) and recently geographical locations (rural, suburban, and urban) (Pavlakis 2018). In several cases, researchers' concerns have been incorporated into the policy discourse around student homelessness and have informed the McKinney-Vento's reauthorization amendments (Pavlakis and Duffield 2017). Moreover, the inclusion of more subpopulations within the policy has led to deeper research on homeless students' nuanced experiences.

Living context and homelessness

One of the most pronounced changes within McKinney-Vento was the expanded definition of homeless under its reauthorization in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Prior to NCLB, McKinney-Vento did not explicitly qualify students temporarily living with other families due to financial crisis—doubled-up—as experiencing homelessness. Scholars asserted that doubled-up students experience high rates of student mobility and learning loss (Rafferty 1995), and successfully advocated for their inclusion in McKinney-Vento. Their inclusion in the policy made a significant impact on the total number of students identified as experiencing homelessness. Currently students doubling-up represent more than 70 percent of schools' homeless population (National Center for Homeless Education 2020). This once invisible subgroup of students experiencing homelessness has become discernable, thereby resulting in more research and applied practice to meet their needs (Hallett 2012; Hallett, Skrla, and Low 2015).

Family composition and homelessness

In addition to expanding the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless to include doubled-up students, the NCLB reauthorization also emphasizes the need for homeless liaisons to

support unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness (Pavlakis and Duffield 2017). McKinney-Vento defines unaccompanied youth as homeless children and youth who are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Often unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness (UYEH) are separated from their families as a result of being kicked or pushed out of their homes (Moore 2005). Traumatic reasons for displacement make unaccompanied youth more likely to experience physical or sexual abuse, sleep in unsheltered environments, and experience higher levels of victimization while homeless than youth experiencing homelessness with their guardians (Moore 2005). Moreover, unaccompanied youth do not have parents or guardians to advocate for them in school, and they often rely on teachers and mentors for guidance to succeed academically (Aviles de Bradley 2011; Mendez et al. 2018). The most recent reauthorization of McKinney-Vento acknowledges some of the specific challenges that impact UYEH, and the policy now requires school district homeless liaisons to ensure that UYEH know their rights under the policy, that liaisons advocate for the best interest of UYEH, and support them in the financial aid process for higher education (Aviles de Bradley 2011; Moore 2005).

Race and homelessness

While research has started to acknowledge the diverse living conditions of students experiencing homelessness across residential, regional, and family contexts (Deck 2017; Hallett, Skrla, and Low 2015; Low, Hallett, and Mo 2016; Pavlakis 2018), literature on the intersections of race and student homelessness remains sparse (Aviles de Bradley 2015a, 2015b; Milner 2014; Pavlakis 2018). Carrasco (2019) laments that students of color make up three-quarters of the homeless population but "… scholars have seldom afforded them specific and direct attention" (57). Similarly, McKinney-Vento also fails to mention race, and federal reports required by the McKinney-Vento Act do not disaggregate student enrollment numbers or achievement data by race. Limited research and federal data on students of color makes the challenges and resiliency of BSEH invisible.

Aviles de Bradley's (2015a) case study of two schools in one Chicago school district, is one of the first studies to center on the experiences of students of color impacted by homelessness. The study used Critical Race Theory to examine the manner in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impacted the social structures, practices, and discourses on Black UYEH. Findings from Aviles de Bradley (2015a) suggest that oftentimes schools and school districts treat McKinney-Vento as a charitable endeavor instead of a federal mandate. School districts' basic resources are often provided by donations (due in part to the underfunding of the federal policy), and while many passionate and well-intentioned people are charged with supporting students experiencing homelessness at the district level, they usually are not sufficiently skilled to effectively serve as homeless liaisons. Further, "homeless liaison" is rarely a singular job description but instead an additional, secondary position someone volunteers to fill. Given that Black students are more likely to attend under-resourced schools in under-resourced school districts than students of other races, a charitable approach to McKinney-Vento has disproportionately negative impacts on them. Additionally, one finding from Aviles de Bradley (2015a) was that homeless liaisons and teachers were often uncomfortable discussing matters of race and were reluctant to associate race with student homelessness despite Black students

comprising 90 percent of the Chicago school district's homeless population and 40 percent of the overall school district.

In a related study, Aviles de Bradley (2015b) found that Black youth internalized a dominant narrative that attributed Black people's overrepresentation in the homeless population to internal flaws within the overall Black community. Having provided evidence for the fact that race was indeed playing a role in shaping the experiences of BYEH, the author charged researchers to use a critical race lens when examining student homelessness. In response to that charge, this study uses structural racism as a lens to examine how McKinney-Vento intersects with the experiences of Black students impacted by homelessness.

Structural racism

Structural racism is a form of "racism without racists" (Bonilla-Silva 2010). It refers to the ways in which race and class have been historically implicated in the structure of the political economy of the United States (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Unlike interpersonal racism, structural racism is not premised solely upon the actions, motivations, or beliefs of individuals, but instead the operation of markets (particularly financial and housing markets), political systems, and public institutions that reinforce the marginalization of certain racial minorities (Powell 2007). While on a day-to- day basis the aforementioned systems may operate without explicit racial objectives, the adverse impact of policy is almost always greatest among those who have been historically subjugated, oppressed, and discriminated against, thereby making Black people (in this paper, Black students) frequent and disproportionate victims (Powell 2007).

When structural racism is utilized as an analytical framework for studying social problems, racial disparities can be traced back to a history of racial oppression and the ways in which institutions continue to discriminate against and oppress racial minorities today (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2010; Haney-López 2015). To contextualize this Los Angeles-based study, I will briefly discuss the role of the housing market, the child welfare system, and the public-school system as institutions ridden with racial disparities that interact (both directly and indirectly) with BYEH's ability to access resources provided by McKinney-Vento.

The housing market and redlining

An important structural mechanism that influences BYEH is the racial segregation of neighborhoods and schools. A legacy of redlining practices that concentrated Black and Latinx families into segregated areas of cities while also divesting from their communities (Katznelson 2005) has resulted in increased Black student enrollment in intensely segregated, nonwhite, and impoverished schools (Frankenberg et al. 2019). In Los Angeles, many Black residents were displaced from historically Black neighborhoods while Latinx residency in those same neighborhoods increased (Pastor et al. 2016). The shifting demographics of historically Black neighborhoods coupled with anti-Black racism and racist nativism (against Latinx immigrants or Latinx people in general) has resulted in a long history of racial and ethnic tension between the Black and Latinx community in Los Angeles. Symptomatic of white supremacy, the discriminatory and contentious school and community climates created by racial and ethnic tension could present challenges for BYEH (Lippard 2011).

The foster care system

Previous research has mentioned that families and unaccompanied youth do not disclose their homeless status to school districts due to fear of being reported to child protective services (Ingram et al. 2017). While Black families are not the only group impacted by child protective services and the foster care system, the history of state agents taking Black children from their parents is part of a collective memory within the Black community dating back to chattel slavery in the English colonies in the 1600s (Roberts 2011). Today, Black families are disproportionately reported, investigated, and substantiated for neglect (Ards et al. 2012; Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016; The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2006). In Los Angeles County, Black families experiencing homelessness are eight times more likely to have a child in the custody of the Department of Children and Family Services than non-Black families (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority 2018). While California legislation explicitly states that being homeless itself is not grounds for reporting neglect (Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act of 2013), for Black families, the threat of facing negative repercussions for experiencing homelessness is a serious concern. Public-school teachers and administrators are agents of the state, and fear of child protective services could keep Black students and/or Black families from disclosing their homelessness.

Public-school systems

Several of the educational challenges confronting Black students are structural (Howard 2013; Ladson-Billings 2006; Noguera 2003). Black youth are more likely to attend under-resourced schools segregated by race and class than their white peers (Knight 2017). Black youth are also more likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers (Knight 2017), be placed in special education classrooms (Ford et al. 2017), excluded from advanced academic courses (Ford et al. 2017), suspended or expelled from school (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Howard 2013), and have teachers with lower academic and behavioral expectations for them than their non-Black peers (Ford et al. 2017; Milner 2012). The disparate outcomes for Black students have contributed to many Black families' distrust of public education, thereby keeping them from seeking services to support BYEH. Rorrer and Skrla (2005) describe the critical role that school leadership plays in supporting policy implementation by (a) cultivating relationships and interactions, (b) re-culturing schools, and (c) integrating and aligning school districts, goals, policies, and practices (55). When school leadership is able to execute all three functions, schools can identify and better serve student experiencing homeless (Hallett, Skrla, and Low 2015).

While the housing market and the foster care system are not the targets of McKinney-Vento, their racial disparities and oppression (both current and historic) interact with the racial disparities occurring in our public-school system for Black youth and families. I contend that to understand Black students' access to McKinney-Vento one must use an analytical frame that both analyzes the policy's interaction with the education system and other public institutions along the lines of race. Structural racism is an analytical frame that fills this need.

Methods

Recruitment and participants

Los Angeles County public-school districts currently teach more than 5,000 BSEH (Edwards and Howard 2019), thereby making LA county an ideal recruitment location for the current study.

Upon receiving approval from the university Institutional Review Board, I recruited participants by contacting local college counselors, district homeless liaisons, and local non-profit organizations dedicated to supporting youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles. I informed them of the nature of the study, and interested students subsequently reached out to me to opt in as participants. I recruited eight participants, all of whom met the following criteria:

- Received a high school diploma between 2010 and 2019 from a public high school in a city in Los Angeles County
- Experienced homelessness (as defined by McKinney-Vento) during high school
- Racially identified as Black

Table 1 provides demographic information on the eight participants. Participant names and the names of everyone they referenced in the study were changed to ensure confidentiality. Similarly, the cities, schools, and school districts were assigned pseudonyms. The goal of this study was not to critique schools or districts in Los Angeles County, but to understand the experience of Black students who experienced homelessness while working toward successfully graduating from high school.

Data collection

Each participant engaged in a 90- to 180-minute in-depth, in-person interview with me, which was recorded on audio. The interview protocol was a modified version of Seidman's (2013) in-depth phenomenological interview structure and was divided into the following three sections: life history, concrete experiences of homelessness in high school, and how each individual made meaning of their homeless experience. Each interview section had a cluster of three to five open-ended questions. The interviews involved the examination of five domains: (1) narratives from the participants describing their homeless experience, (2) an account of school practices and people, agencies, and moments that the participant perceived as contributing to their success, (3) an account of any potential reservations that may have held participants back from leveraging resources, (4) participants' perceptions of how their race and homeless experience intersected with their goal of graduating high school, and (5) participants' recommendations on how youth experiencing homelessness can be better supported to increase high school completion rates.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using three cycles of coding and analysis to identify common themes within each participant's narrative. In the first cycle, I coded each interview individually using the in vivo coding method (Saldana 2015). I read

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant alias	Robert	Alina	Marcus	Kevin	Jamelle	Dayon	Elizabeth	Jeffrey
Age at interview	21	21	19	22	23	17	19	20
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Race/ ethnicity	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black
HS graduation year	2013	2017	2015	2012	2012	2019	2016	2017
School district	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 2	District 2	District 2
Number of high schools attended	3	1	2	1	1	1	2	3
Living arrangement	Doubled-up	Doubled-up, Motel, Shelter, Street	Doubled-up, Motel, Shelter	Motel	Doubled-up, Motel	Doubled-up	Couch-surfing	Couch-surfing, Street
Estimated duration of homeless experience(s)	3 Academic years	2 Academic years	7 Months	1 Academic year	6 Months	2 Academic years	3 Academic years	2 Academic years

through each interview transcript and highlighted passages that described (1) how and where participants lived while experiencing homelessness, (2) accounts of school practices and people, agencies, and moments that impacted their high school completion, (3) how they identified the resources, and concerns they considered when deciding to leverage resources, (4) participants' recommendations for how youth experiencing homelessness can be better supported when working toward graduating high school, and (5) participants' references to racialized experiences while experiencing homelessness. In the second cycle of coding, I synthesized each interview's in-vivo codes into descriptive codes. In-vivo codes highlighted phrases within each interview, and the descriptive codes organized the phrases across the data corpus into broader categories. The third cycle of coding integrated my descriptive codes into themes filtered with a structural racism lens that provided insight into my research questions. The process of parceling out codes into logical clusters that answered the posed research questions allowed me to identify major findings. My analysis uncovered that participants were able to secure and leverage their own supports for both academic and non-academic assistance via church, community based organizations, friends, etc. The scope of this paper, however, focuses on participants' ability to access services and supports under McKinney-Vento.

Experiential knowledge

As Maxwell (2013) writes, "Any view is a view from some perspective, and is shaped by the location (social and theoretical) and lens of the observers" (46). My personal experience with homelessness in a variety of living arrangements as a Black youth, coupled with my experience as a high school teacher, framed my lens for conceptualizing and conducting this study. My insider positionality made me keenly aware of the lack of research on Black youth experiencing homelessness and afforded me credibility during the recruitment process. Given my positionality, I took several steps to protect against researcher bias. The first step was establishing open lines of communication with participants throughout the data- collection, analysis, and drafting process. Communication included several emails and phone calls to clarifying particular events discussed in participant interviews. I also shared potential data assertions and gave each participant drafts of my general findings. Additionally, I workshopped my codebook, themes, and findings with five education scholars over the span of a 10-week graduate course. Colleagues reviewed my codebook and my initial findings to refine my analysis and increase the interrater reliability of my findings.

Findings

A common theme that emerged from seven of the eight participants was the experience of a hostile racial climate at school. In this study, hostile racial climate is defined as "an environment that is steeped with racial inequity and racism on both institutional and interpersonal levels" (Kohli 2018, 309). In response to the question, "Do you think your experience with homelessness had unique challenges because you are Black?" participants described experiences with racial microaggressions at school and cited racial disparities in discipline, low expectations for Black students, and racial tension between Black and Latinx students as examples of a hostile racial climate (See Table 2). While similar issues likely impacted stably housed Black students at their schools as well, the hostile

climate became a hidden barrier to Black students experiencing homelessness—in many cases preventing youth from accessing services under McKinney-Vento (See Table 3). Only one participant did not describe a hostile racial climate in high school; he instead described feeling supported and empowered as a Black student at his school.

School discipline: Robert's story

Today, Robert is a community college graduate working toward his bachelor's degree at one of California's top universities. He aspires to build a career helping students from under-resourced schools gain access to higher education—an opportunity he feels he had to discover largely on his own and without the help of his school. For Robert, school discipline created a hostile racial climate that prevented him from seeking McKinney-Vento resources while he was experiencing homelessness. While Robert may be viewed as a success story now, during high school he was frequently targeted, particularly by his white teachers, for what his school discipline policies refer to as "willfully defiant behavior."

Robert, his two older brothers, and mother were evicted from their one-bedroom apartment when he was in ninth grade. Throughout the remainder of his high school career, he and his family members split up and rotated between living with his grandmother, aunt, uncle, and friends. He attended three different high schools before receiving his diploma. Reflecting back on his interactions with teachers at all three of the schools he attended, he recalled:

> Black students were disciplined a lot there. I feel like we would always be getting kicked out of class. There was always conflict there. … I had one teacher; he was a white guy with this crazy mustache that I would never forget. I would be doing all of my work in there, and once I did anything wrong, he would kick me out. I just feel like they had a low tolerance for Black students in general. You could be asking students about an assignment and a teacher would be like, "You want to talk? Get out of here!" The teachers, the administration, the office folks didn't care about your side of the story. They just cared about what the teacher wrote on that slip that was sent to the office. I remember getting wrote up [*sic*] a lot of times, thinking back. The teachers disempower you and come at you really rude and then it is your word against theirs.

Robert described his teachers as quick-tempered toward Black students and saw their impulsive removal of them from class as a "disempowering" act reinforced by school administration. Robert's perception of the relationship between his teachers and Black students coupled with the excessive discipline he faced, made him distrustful of school faculty and staff, which ultimately influenced his decision not to disclose his housing instability to any adults at school. Robert stated that being overly disciplined in school, "puts you in this robotic position where (pause) I did my work and stuff, but I didn't really talk to my teachers about anything." He also believes that had he been a white student experiencing homelessness, "Teachers would have had a higher tolerance for me and cared more."

> Robert was not the only participant who felt Black students were disciplined unfairly at school—other participants shared similar stories. Being disciplined or bearing witness to the excessive discipline of other Black students at school discouraged disclosure and prevented students from seeking help. Reflecting back, Robert stated that he wished he "would have told somebody to see the kind of support I would have gotten." Unfortunately,

Table 2. Participants' experiences with hostile racial climate at school.

	Unfair discipline	Low expectations	Racial tension between peers	Fear of child protective services
Robert	"I just feel like they had a low tolerance for Black students in general. You could be asking students about an assignment and a teacher would be like, 'You want to talk? Get out of here!'"	"I don't know if it was because of my skin color, but I remember feeling like this counselor was undermining me. They didn't believe in me there."	NA	NA
Alina	"When I started going through [homelessness]. And I thought about talking to people and they would just be yelling at me for being late and stuff."	"People at school would say, 'you are so smart for a Black person.'"	"I was elected the vice-president of my school and the girl I beat literally told the principal right in front of me, 'Aline can't be the face of the school, She's Black.'"	"I had talked to my counselor about it. I was like, 'If someone is homeless, what do you guys do?' Without saying, I was the one homeless. And she said, 'Oh, we would have to contact, foster-care people again.'"
Marcus	"There was an issue with White staff and Black or Brown students. And [we] always felt like we were being targeted, or suspended, or giving whatever type of penalization especially if you weren't high achieving."	NA	NA	NA
Kevin	NA	NA	NA	NA
Jamelle	NA	NA	"It's just the culture and the nature of the school. Cuz for real, high school on the westside [of my city] is known to be a place where like race riots happen. Fights happen all the time."	NA
Dayon	NA	"I was in the class making up a test and a [teacher] said out loud, 'I don't like these kids.' When they realized I was in the class they both looked at me, and I looked at them too because I was literally right there. And she was like, 'I am not talking about you.' … I really kept that in mind."	"I know two people in the [majority black] gang and they are cool but if you diss their hood, it's a wrap. So when a Mexican kid did, they jumped him … I guess the Latino dude got his people because during a fire drill there was a race riot."	NA
Elizabeth	NA	NA	NA	"There's those other teachers that would be like 'Oh so this is why you acting like this, okay, well I should've been called CPS. Something told me to call CPS a long time ago, but I didn't want to do it.'"

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

	Unfair discipline	Low expectations	Racial tension between peers	Fear of child protective services
Jeffrey	NA	NA	NA	"I knew that if somebody come to me and ask me certain stuff, like, you know, especially when it's like the DPSS and Social Service people, you have to be careful what you say because you can get taken on it … one time this teacher was lying on me and was trying to detach me from my family."

the hostile racial climate prevented him from feeling comfortable sharing his homeless experience. Robert was never identified by the school district as experiencing homelessness and thus never accessed the resources guaranteed under McKinney-Vento, despite needing them (see Table 3).

Low academic expectations for Black students: Alina's story

A hostile racial climate not only manifested via "disempowering" school discipline practices, but also via low academic expectations for Black students. At 21, Alina currently works as a homeless outreach coordinator and uses her expertise to support youth experiencing homelessness. In high school, however, low academic expectations for Black students kept her from being able to access any supports herself. Alina spent two years of high school living in tents, shelters, and closets after her mother abruptly left her and moved to Las Vegas to escape domestic violence. While Alina was one of the top students in her school, she felt that people there held low expectations for her because she was the only Black student in a predominantly Latinx school. When I asked Alina about the experience of being the only Black student at her school, she responded,

> I got a lot of people said they were surprised that I was smart. It was weird because I went from going to an all Caucasian [middle] school where they would tell me that they were surprised that I was smart to an all Latino [high] school and hearing [the] same thing.

Though Alina was an exceptional student, she frequently felt unsupported and underestimated, and she believed that her school counselor reinforced low academic expectations by deterring her from applying to highly competitive universities. Since eighth grade, Alina had been set on applying to eight universities, including the University of Southern California and Howard University. Rather than encouraging her to apply to the colleges of her choice, her school counselor recommended against it and encouraged her to apply to less competitive state universities instead. Alina recalled her interaction with her counselor during her junior year of high school:

> [My counselor] was like, 'Why are you applying to eight colleges? You are not going to get into eight colleges. You are choosing colleges and you do not have any Cal States.' And I was like, 'Yes I do. I believe I applied to Cal State Fresno and Cal State Pomona.' She was like, 'You

Table 3. Participants' use of the services provided under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

	Robert	Alina	Marcus	Kevin	Jamelle	Dayon	Elizabeth	Jeffrey
Notified school district?	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Knew about the McKinney-Vento Act?	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Participant unmet needs?	Transportation	Transportation, Counseling	None mentioned	None mentioned	Transportation	None mentioned	Right to stay at school of origin	Counseling Transportation
Quote	"I was getting around using the train and bus … I had to save money to make sure I was set [to] get to school every day."	"When I was homeless I would tell [police officers] that I lived in a shelter and didn't have a bus pass to get to school."	None	None	"If I had like tokens to like go to school [my mom] like she wouldn't have had to worry about that at all."	"I didn't feel like I needed anything."	"I was homeless, so I was staying back [and] forth with my aunts … so when they went to pull-up the information in the school system … they were like, 'okay, well your homeschool is Jackson', so I ended up at Jackson High."	"Schools need more services like more counselors … people that you can talk to about trauma." "My problem was transportation."

> should apply to more. You have to think about where you are actually going to get in. You won't get into Pomona, but you'll probably get into Cal State LA.'

In addition to applying to rigorous California State Universities, Alina wanted to apply to highly competitive private universities as well. The counselor's low expectations pushed Alina to complete her college applications on her own, and Alina was proud to share that she was the only student in her graduating class to get accepted to seven colleges and be waitlisted at the University of Southern California. Alina committed to Howard University, but due to a lack of parental and school support, she struggled to explain to the university that she was experiencing homelessness and that she needed an extension for the $500 dorm room deposit charge. As a result, she lost her campus housing and never completed her enrollment at Howard. The lack of support demonstrated by her counselor made Alina feel she had to navigate the logistical challenges of college without the support of an experienced adult. The counselor's inability to provide effective support, as well as the low academic expectations she held for Alina, ultimately kept Alina from disclosing her experience with homelessness. When I asked Alina if she felt she could have received help from teachers or staff at school, she responded:

> They were going to be like, 'there is no excuse,' especially, my counselor. She basically told me that I was crazy for applying to so many colleges. … I was like, there is no point of telling them. The lady doesn't even believe you are going to make it.

When asked if she felt that her homeless experience in high school would have been different had she been another race, she responded, "Yeah, and I probably would not had gotten those prejudiced comments."

Alina's narrative provides another example of how a hostile racial school climate can limit Black students' willingness to disclose their homeless experience, thereby keeping them from accessing the support to which they are entitled. Under McKinney-Vento, school districts are responsible for providing students experiencing homelessness with academic advising and college readiness—a resource that would have dramatically shifted Alina's college trajectory.

Tension between Black and Latinx students: Jamelle's story

While Alina and Robert's experiences highlight the ways in which school staff promulgated a hostile racial climate, Jamelle's experience illustrates how neighborhood tension among peers created a similarly hostile racial climate that adversely affected BSEH and their ability to access resources. Jamelle referred to tensions between Black and Latinx students as "race riots" and described the ways in which they disrupted her learning and exacerbated her disconnection from school staff.

Jamelle is a recent college graduate with aspirations of becoming a classroom teacher. Toward the end of her sophomore year of high school, Jamelle received a phone call from her sister while she was at school notifying her that their family was being evicted from their home. Jamelle, her mother, and younger brother were forced to move in with her 30-year-old sister, Latoya, and Latoya's daughter. The six of them shared a one-bedroom apartment from the end of her sophomore year through much of Jamelle's junior year of high school. Jamelle went from being an honor roll student as a freshman to a "C student" who frequently skipped school by the end of 11th grade. Jamelle recalled,

"I would go to the park every day to smoke [marijuana] so I would forget about [being homeless]."

While Jamelle wished she could have talked to someone at school about her home life, she did not build any strong relationships with adults at school. When I asked Jamelle why she did not ask anyone at school for help while she was experiencing homelessness, Jamelle recalled:

> It's just the culture and the nature of the school. "Because" for real, high school on the west-side [of my city] is known to be a place where like race riots happen. Fights happen all the time. So, the relationship between teachers and students is like always clashing. So as far as like going to an administrator or a teacher to talk about personal problems, that was just like unthought of.

Jamelle later shared that most of the "race riots" that occurred at her school were related to conflicts between rival neighborhoods. The neighborhoods in Jamelle's community were segregated along racial and ethnic lines, and fighting between Black and Latinx students was a normal occurrence in school. The frequent fighting created an environment that did not foster strong student and school adult relationships, which in turn prevented Jamelle from accessing resources while she was experiencing homelessness. When Jamelle becomes a teacher, she vows to have,

> an open-door policy and even open parts of myself up to [my students]. Sharing my experience of homelessness, hopefully will allow them to see like [they] can overcome it. And if they need someone to talk to, I'll be there.

In addition to benefiting from having an adult to talk with at school, Jamelle would have also benefited from having a space to complete her homework and bus fare in order avoid walking 80 minutes a day to get to and from school. Jamelle would have been granted such supports under McKinney-Vento.

Fear of child protective services: Elizabeth's story

Elizabeth is a recent high school graduate with ambitions of starting her own cosmetic line. During middle and high school, Elizabeth constantly moved between family apartments. During middle school, she and her mother doubled-up with an aunt who lived on the affluent westside of her city; however, during high school, Elizabeth's mother moved into a one- bedroom apartment on the less affluent southside of the city. Elizabeth did not feel comfortable staying in a one-bedroom apartment with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, so she began to couch-surf between various aunts' and friends' houses while continuing to attend school on the westside. Things became complicated when Elizabeth was caught skipping school one day and forgot which aunt's address was listed on her school forms. She recalled:

> I was homeless, so I was staying back and forth with my auntie which was true. But I wasn't staying with the auntie whose address we were using, so when they went to pull-up the information in the school system, they're like "Well you don't even know your address. Your auntie's name is not even on here. We can't even use her as an emergency contact. It's just your mom's name, your auntie's address and then you … " Once they updated all that information they were like, "Okay, well your homeschool is Jackson," and I ended up at Jackson High [a school on the southside] … Jackson was humbling. I had to humble myself because you know first day of Jackson, they pulled a gun out on Lakewood and

> Forest … dude was losing the fight, so he snatched it and was like boop, boop, boop, in the air. Everybody just scattered. I ain't never seen that before.

Elizabeth did not have a consistent nighttime residence and qualified to stay at her school of origin on the westside under McKinney-Vento. However, it seems the school was unable to recognize the signs that she did not have secure housing. Instead of requesting that the homeless liaison speak with her and further investigate her living arrangement, they immediately transferred her.

Upon arriving at Jackson, Elizabeth still did not disclose that she was experiencing homelessness to teachers or administrators because she was scared that such a disclosure would get her mother in legal trouble. Elizabeth explained:

> Sometimes the problem isn't always what they seem to make it. So, then they want to get the police involved or they wanna call CPS [child protective services], and it's just like dude … they bring the wrong attention. That's not the attention I need. This is a different cry for help pretty much. Like, I don't need CPS looking for me, it's not even that serious.

Elizabeth feared that teachers or school staff would "overreact" and call child protective services as a result of her running away from her mother's house. While some people might consider a teacher calling CPS an act of care, Elizabeth viewed it as a threat or retaliation strategy in response to misbehavior. Elizabeth stated,

> There's those other teachers that would be like 'Oh so this is why you acting like this, okay, well I should've been called CPS. Something told me to call CPS a long time ago, but I didn't want to do it.'

Elizabeth's perceived response from teachers made disclosing personal issues at school a risky endeavor that could end with a child being removed from their family or someone getting arrested. Elizabeth's fear of the school misinterpreting or even weaponizing her needs prevented her from ever receiving any support under McKinney-Vento.

A positive school racial climate for Black students: Kevin's story

Different from all of the other participants, Kevin was the only one who did not experience a hostile school racial climate. In fact, he frequently discussed how school staff at Carter High School, particularly his school administrators and extracurricular program coordinators, supported and empowered him as a Black youth. Kevin described his school administrators, teachers, and coaches as more akin to mentors and family members than school authority figures. For example, he said his assistant principal, a Black woman I will refer to as Ms. Toldson, "acted as my mom in the school" and his principal, a Black man I will refer to as Dr. Little, made sure that he "knew what [he] needed to do as a young man to be successful and graduate high school."

Kevin described being thrust into homelessness at 14 years old after being physically abused and kicked out of his father's home at the same time that his mother was being evicted. Kevin, his three brothers, his mother, his mother's girlfriend, and his mother's girlfriend's daughter were all forced to live in various one-bedroom motel units for most of his freshman and part of his sophomore year in high school. Kevin and his brothers frequently arrived late to school or were picked up early as a result of having to attend several meetings with their mother at the various county departments they frequented for social services. Kevin's mother disclosed their homeless status to his school administrators

at a meeting they requested to discuss her children's inconsistent attendance. Kevin recalled the meeting with his mother and principals:

> [She] told the school 'Look, I'm a single parent with four boys trying to take care of them, and we are homeless.' So our school made a report to where we had a caseworker show up and give us bus tokens to get to and from school, and for my brothers to get to and from school.

He also remembers a third Black adult, an assistant principal, turning to him during the same meeting and saying, "You all are survivors, you are going to survive. If you need any help I'm here." Reflecting on his principal's words during the interview, Kevin shared, " … and he was one person I knew that had my back."

Though Kevin did not attend Carter High School for too long before experiencing homelessness, his administrators were able to demonstrate a level of care that allowed Kevin's mother to disclose her homeless experience and helped Kevin to feel supported. In addition to immediately connecting Kevin with the McKinney-Vento homeless liaison, the administrators at the school continued to be instrumental figures in Kevin's high school career. Support from the administrators was supplemented by coursework, athletics, and extracurricular programs oriented to Black youth throughout his high school tenure. Kevin was enrolled in a sophomore college readiness elective course called Black Youth Academy, which set higher education as an expectation. After his homeless experience, he became part of a youth academy hosted by a Black fraternity and started by Dr. Little. The academy was run by high school alumni, which helped Kevin feel connected to his school. The distrusting adult relationships that Robert described, the weaponizing of child protective services that Elizabeth experienced, and low academic expectations that were present in the Alina's narratives were the opposite of Kevin's high school experience. While Kevin's mother was not interviewed for this study, it is possible the positive racial climate that Kevin felt at school could have influenced her decision to disclose their housing circumstances. Additionally, Kevin personally disclosed his homeless experience to his Black Youth Academy teacher and track coach—both of whom could have also potentially connected him with McKinney-Vento services. After going away to college, Kevin came back to his former high school as a program manager for the Black Youth Academy.

Accessing McKinney-Vento directly from the district: Marcus's story

Marcus was the only other participant who accessed McKinney-Vento services. Like Kevin's mother, Marcus's mother disclosed her family's homeless status, however she did so directly to the school district. Marcus and his family were referred to their local school district homeless liaison by the family transitional shelter in which they resided. Marcus and his four younger siblings arrived in Los Angeles County from Tucson, Arizona. His mother secured an apartment using a Section 8 housing voucher prior to arriving in Los Angeles. Her prospective landlord, however, reneged on their housing after growing impatient with the length of the Section 8 voucher process. Upon arriving in Los Angeles County in 10th grade, Marcus lived in various motel rooms until his family was placed into a family shelter. He was attending an online school, but the shelter forced his mother to enroll him in a brick-and-mortar school due the family's lack of consistent internet access. During the enrollment process, Marcus' mother enrolled

in the local district using the homeless shelter's address and was connected to the district's homeless liaison. Marcus recalled:

> So my mom didn't have a choice. So she put us in regular school. In the meantime, we got a resource from the district and there is a woman. Her name is (pause, thinking) I forgot her name. Dang. She helped us so much and she continues to help us … She gave us tokens for free. So we would get a monthly stipend of tokens for me to take the bus or for my mom to take the bus or something like that.

While it is unclear if the family shelter directly connected Marcus' family to the local district homeless liaison or if the new school district enrollment process flagged the homeless liaison due to the family's shelter-based address, the connection allowed Marcus' mother to learn about McKinney-Vento and have her children accept the offered services.

Despite accessing McKinney-Vento resources, Marcus still described experiencing racial hostility at his school. He explained, "There was an issue with White staff and Black and Brown students and we always felt like we were being targeted, or suspended, or giv[en] whatever type of penalization, especially if you weren't high achieving." He also discussed being enrolled in the district's most under-resourced and segregated high school, a process he believed was intentional. While describing his travel routine, he explained why he did not attend a relatively closer high school near the homeless shelter in which he resided:

> So I could either walk to school or [my mom] would just drop me off, other than that, I get there by bus. And it wasn't [pause] like it is this weird thing, they have zoning and it is kind of really segregated in [our city]. If you go to a certain neighborhood, you have to go to a certain school, unless you petition. Certain neighborhoods were zoned in a way that low-income communities or people in certain areas were all a certain demographics and they all went to the same school. For example, my high school Franklin, it had a high population of students with mental illnesses, students with disabilities, and students that were in foster care. They had the highest population in the district. I think there are like four or five schools in the district. All of those kids live in a certain area or there is something set up in the district where they go to that school. I wasn't zoned for Mason High School [the highest performing district high school]. I was zoned for Franklin High School, even though I lived on the eastside and Franklin was on the northwest side.

Marcus was able to excel at Franklin High School and build meaningful relationships with some of his teachers; however, he frequently described his experience as somewhat different from that of other Black students because he was a "high achieving student" at a low performing school.

Participant narratives shed light on some of the unique ways in which Black students experiencing homelessness are negatively impacted by their high school's hostile racial climates. For participants in this study, and likely many other Black students experiencing homelessness, racial hostility at school limits their accessibility to federal aid provided by McKinney-Vento. It is equally important to note that the hostile racial climate manifested at school is a multilayered phenomenon, for it extends beyond the schoolhouse. Participants' experiences of racial hostility illustrate the ways in which racial disparities in housing and government institutions interact with schools to sustain racism, discrimination, and inequity.

Discussion

The structural racism lens I employed for this study exposed the interconnectedness of institutions and how they can interact with racially neutral policy to perpetuate the

marginalization of Black students experiencing homelessness (BSEH). Pavlakis (2018) argues that one cannot disregard external conditions outside of school, such as housing context and family homelessness policies, when considering the implementation of McKinney-Vento. Similarly, findings from this study suggest that one cannot disregard race and racism either. While literature stresses the importance of school and district leaders establishing a culture that helps mediate the implementation of homeless polices (Hallett, Skrla, and Low 2015; Rorrer and Skrla 2005), the various forms of racial hostility endured at the high school level neutralized McKinney-Vento for the majority of BSEH in the study. A hostile racial climate at participants' high schools created a disconnect between BSEH and district homeless liaisons that resulted in youth not being identified as homeless and thus not receiving support under McKinney-Vento. For several students, racial hostility was manifested via low academic expectations and high rates of discipline for Black students—two major factors contributing to low high school graduation rates for Black students (Howard 2013). This finding aligns with empirical data that BSEH are suspended at higher rates and have less academic success than other racial groups (Edwards and Howard 2019).

While a hostile racial climate in high schools was the overarching theme connecting the narratives of BSEH, many of the negative interpersonal exchanges that students perceived as racially biased in school were indirectly connected to factors outside of the public-school institution. For example, teachers' and school counselors' use of child protective services as a threat against BSEH illustrates how agents from one institution leverage the power of another institution to perpetuate oppression. Fear and distrust of government agencies is deeply rooted in the longstanding history of Black families (Roberts 2011). Black families have a collective memory of public institutions, such as child protective services, disproportionately impacting them and separating children from their families (Roberts 2011). Thus, while teachers do not work for a CPS agency, as mandated reporters, they are bridges to that institution. So, while it is unlikely that school staff were attempting to deter BSEH from receiving McKinney-Vento services, evoking child protective services to a population disproportionately impacted by that institution, ultimately results in that outcome. Previous homelessness literature has discussed families and unaccompanied youth fearing CPS (Ingram et al. 2017), however the literature does not mention this fear being weaponized against students or perpetuated by school staff. Calling child protective services would not be a severe threat to Black students if racial disparities within the institution itself were less pronounced. As such, racism and racial disparities within the CPS institution was an undercurrent for the hostile racial climate that participants in this study experienced at school.

Similarly, racial segregation in the housing market also perpetuates a hostile racial climate in schools that prevents many BSEH from accessing McKinney-Vento. Schools in the United States are deeply tied to the housing market (Frankenberg et al. 2019). Where BSEH attended school was an important contextual factor in their narratives. Alina talked about facing prejudice as the only Black student in her predominately Latinx school. Jamelle and Dayon discussed racial violence between Black and Latinx students. The participants' negative racial interactions with Latinx students are symptoms of deeper issues associated with neighborhood segregation and the displacement of Black families in Los Angeles County. While redlining practices isolated and divested in the Black and Latinx communities (Rothstein 2017), reverse redlining practices and

gentrification has led to the displacement of Black residents from historically Black urban communities (Taylor 2019). Cultural differences and misunderstandings coupled with group competition over limited resources is a root cause of tension between Black and Latinx students occurring in schools (Pastor et al. 2016). Thus, as schools work to establish racial and ethnic solidarity between students to mitigate the tension between Black and Latinx schools, the influence of neighborhood segregation should not be ignored.

It should be noted that experiencing homelessness can also exacerbate a student's chances of attending an underperforming school that is segregated by race, class, and ethnicity. In this study, Elizabeth and Marcus were required to attend lower performing schools as a result of circumstances associated with their homelessness. Their experiences are affirmed by findings from a recent quantitative study that showed that students experiencing homelessness were concentrated in schools with a majority low-income Black and Latinx student body and higher concentrations of students enrolled in special-education programs (Dhaliwal et al. 2019). The combined impact of being placed into under-resourced, high-needs schools due to both housing segregation patterns and school internal zoning practices may increase Black students' chances of attending a school with a hostile school environment.

McKinney-Vento policies were effective at identifying BSEH in the study only when coupled with a positive school racial climate that empowered Black students. In the study, the only example of parental disclosure of the family's homeless status was to a high school that had established a positive racial environment. The administrators were able to fulfill their essential functions as mediators for the execution of educational policies outlined by Rorrer and Skrla (2005). Specifically, school leaders cultivated relationships and interactions with stakeholders to ensure that McKinney-Vento was executed for BSEH. In addition to personally demonstrating care, the school leaders designed programs at their school to counteract some of the negative racial experiences that students may encounter, such as low academic expectations and disempowerment. The extracurricular clubs and elective courses that Kevin at Carter High School described as being impactful to his school belongingness and relationship building serve as examples of safe school environments for Black girls (Evans-Winter 2007) and boys (Howard 2013).

Strengths, implications, and future directions

The contributions of this study to research and policy are significant. In response to Aviles de Bradley's (2015a) call to action, this is one of only a handful of studies that employs a structural racism lens to examine McKinney-Vento as a race neutral policy. Also, to my knowledge, this is the first study to expose the ways in which schools weaponize child protective services against Black students experiencing homelessness. Equally important, this study examines Black youth who experienced homelessness in high school via an analysis of their success. Despite the obstacles that they endured, all of the participants of this study graduated high school and are engaged in meaningful work today, which shows that we can also learn about structural issues through the *successes* of marginalized student populations (Edwards 2019).

Findings from this study have several important implications for researchers, policymakers, and school leaders. First, this study corroborates Aviles de Bradley's (2015b) claim that

> If McKinney–Vento is to truly work for all the students it has set out to serve, then [homeless education programs] should include language that addresses the racial inequities inherent not just in schools but in all aspects of life. (862)

While McKinney-Vento does not attempt to limit Black students' access to services, the implementation of the policy ultimately does so, because by not addressing the specific barriers that BSEH encounter, it makes their experience invisible. Moreover, the policy does not require that homeless enrollment, achievement, or discipline data be disaggregated by race at the federal, state, school district, or school level. The lack of disaggregated data for students experiencing homelessness prevents stakeholders from having any measures by which to identify and address disparities—this colorblind data-disclosure method ultimately perpetuates existing racial inequalities within the student homeless population. Some small districts and schools would not be able to share disaggregated homeless data by race due to low numbers and confidentiality concerns; however, such districts should be the only exception. As the evolution of McKinney-Vento has already demonstrated, identifying unique homeless subpopulations leads to targeted strategies and policy changes that support greater numbers of students residing in precarious living arrangements (Pavlakis and Duffield 2017).

Future research should seek to build from this study and examine the intersections of race and the various contexts of homelessness. Moreover, we must continue to study precarious living arrangements along the intersectional lines of race (Aviles de Bradley 2015b), gender (Shelton 2015), and sexual orientation (Snapp et al. 2015). By doing so, researchers will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges affecting youth experiencing homelessness. Future studies should also include the experiences of parents, teachers, school staff, and school leaders to gain a more comprehensive perspective of how Black students experiencing homelessness access services.

Policymakers should also start explicitly acknowledging race and racism within McKinney-Vento and other public policies. To do this, Powell (2008) recommends using a targeted universal approach that sets universal policy goals and then requires specific interventions for subpopulations to reach that goal. For example, if policy makers set a goal for 80 percent of their students experiencing homelessness to graduate from high school college- and career-ready, in order to reach that goal, school districts would have to create intervention plans that specifically address the unique needs of each racial group and provide disaggregated data to ensure that each group meets the goal.

> Last, school leaders must understand how interpersonal relationships and racial bias from school staff and among the student body contribute to a hostile racial climate. School leaders must (1) collect internal data to see if these disparities are occurring at their school, (2) provide staff with training on McKinney-Vento, homelessness, and anti-racism, (3) provide staff and community stakeholders with time to design interventions to support Black students experiencing homelessness, and (4) provide programming specifically geared toward establishing a safe and supportive school environment for Black students.

Note

1. In the context of this study, the term "youth" is used to refer to high school aged students, specifically adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Earl J. Edwards is currently a doctoral candidate at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and a researcher at the UCLA Black Male Institute. His research interests include the impact of structural racism and implicit bias on American public institutions serving youth impacted by homelessness. Edwards is also a certified English Language Arts high school special education teacher.

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