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When children get evicted, they lose homes, health, chance at education and a future

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FrontLine Service Inc. tailored the Partnering For Family Success program for caregivers who had experienced homelessness or housing instability and whose children were in foster care. The painting, called 'Color of Dreams' was created by a FrontLine client served by a different program but represents the hope workers try to instill in families the agency serves. FrontLine Service Inc.



By [The Associated Press](#), [Namu Sampath | nsampath@repub.com](#) and Moriah Balingit | The Associated Press

BOSTON — Dr. Megan Sandel was treating a 2-year-old. The main symptom? The toddler was still the size of a baby.

“He had not outgrown his 12-month-old clothing, he wasn’t sleeping well, and nothing was working,” she said.

But the problem behind the symptom, Sandel pointed out, can’t be seen on a medical chart: unstable housing.

The lack of safe and affordable housing has ripple effects on the growth and development of children, and their education and future prospects, said Sandel, a professor of pediatrics at the Chobanian and Avedisian School of Medicine at Boston University.

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It wasn’t until his family got off an affordable housing waitlist and into a home that the child’s circumstances improved, she said.

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Housing instability

Housing instability, she said, has many definitions: Homelessness, the risk of eviction or falling behind on rent, moving three or more times in one year, and overcrowding, are all examples.

Research shows that schoolchildren threatened with eviction are more likely to end up in another district or transfer to another school, often one with less funding, more poverty and lower test scores.

They're more likely to miss school, and those who end up transferring are suspended more often. That's according to a groundbreaking analysis from the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, published in Sociology of Education, a peer-reviewed journal, and shared exclusively with The Associated Press' Education Reporting Network.

Pairing court filings and student records from the Houston Independent School District, researchers identified more than 18,000 times between 2002 and 2016 when students lived in homes threatened with eviction filings. The data from the Eviction Lab, which does not include Massachusetts' eviction filings, analyzes formal evictions in 10 states.

They found students facing eviction were absent more often. Even when they didn't have to change schools, students who were threatened with eviction missed four more days in the following school year than their peers.

In all, researchers counted 13,197 children between 2002 and 2016 whose parents faced an eviction filing. A quarter of those children faced repeated evictions.



Teacher Alicia Blair hosts puppet time inside the COLORI Playspace Express, a school bus that was converted into a mobile classroom for children who are homeless in Massachusetts. (Sebastian Restrepo / MassLive.com, File) Sebastian Restrepo

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Tracking children in Mass.

Meanwhile, it is unclear how many children are affected by evictions in Massachusetts. Minors are not always listed in eviction proceedings, and families aren't required to report the circumstances of their unstable housing to school districts.

The state Department of Education tracks data on "churn rates," which quantifies the number of students transferring between school districts throughout one school year, Sandel explained.

In 2024, close to 23% of Springfield Public Schools students transferred districts. In Boston, 19% of students transferred, followed by 18.1% in Holyoke, 17.1% in Worcester and almost 14% of students in Chicopee's public school district.

In addition to this data, public school districts in Western Massachusetts, Boston and Worcester maintain data on the percent of their students facing homelessness.

In Springfield, about 5% of students are or were experiencing homelessness during the 2024-2025 school year, according to Sahira Torres-Vazquez, a coordinator for Springfield Public Schools' educational stability program.

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The district does not require families to explain the circumstances around their homelessness, said Torres-Vazquez, so it is unclear what percent of students are displaced as a result of eviction.

In Chicopee, roughly 3% of the district's students faced homelessness during the school year.

In Worcester, 8% of students are experiencing or did experience homelessness during the school year, according to data from the district. That number has decreased slightly from the 2022-2023 school year.

Holyoke and Boston public schools did not respond to inquiries on their data.

Types of eviction

Researchers in the commonwealth say that formal evictions are one of two ways families can get evicted. The other is if they are forcibly displaced by a landlord, said Sandel. As eviction rates worsen, more children will be landing in shelters.

Meanwhile, households with children are about twice as likely to face an eviction than those without children, Eviction Lab research has shown.

In its Houston study, that means 1.5 million children getting evicted every year — and one in 20 children under 5 living in a rental home.

Still, much of the discourse around evictions focuses on adults — the landlords and grown-up tenants — rather than the kids caught in the middle, said Peter Hepburn, the study's lead author.

“It's ... worth reminding people that 40% of the people at risk of losing their homes through the eviction process are kids,” said Hepburn, a sociology professor at Rutgers University-Newark and associate director at the Eviction Lab. “And they're in that situation through nothing that they themselves did.”

Households often become more vulnerable to eviction because they fall behind financially when they have children. Only 5% of low-wage earners, who are especially vulnerable to housing instability, have access to paid parental leave.

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It does not help that some landlords do not want children — or the noise and mess they bring — in their buildings.

Help from McKinney-Vento act

Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, a federal law that protects homeless students, districts are supposed to try to keep children in the same school if they lose their housing midyear, providing daily transportation.

Close to 50 public school districts in Massachusetts received a total of \$1.7 million in federal funding to support the homeless education services program last fall.

Torres-Vazquez said the Springfield district collaborates with a number of others in the county to help kids stay in the same school until the end of the year. Still, state data from the Department of Education shows that the percent of students who transfer schools in the middle of the year is high.

Students, Torres-Vazquez said, can qualify for the program throughout the year, even if they find housing sooner. Students who are displaced or live farther away from their original school can sometimes also be provided transportation through the program, she said.

In Springfield, students in preschool through grade 5 must live more than 1.5 miles away to receive the transportation support from their school, and middle and high schoolers must live more than 2 miles away.

Not all interventions work

Despite services like the McKinney-Vento Act, “interventions can fail,” said Sandel, an expert in housing and child health.

“Students have the right to stay, but if you are unable to get to school, you’re deemed chronically absent,” Sandel said. “Not showing up to school because of unstable housing has a number of adverse effects.”

Sandel echoed Hepburn’s comments about the lack of data on children affected by housing instability, and added that Boston Medical Center, where she works, has been implementing research results to understand the families they treat and to help fill the gaps.

“We want to work with families to navigate the symptoms and make sure that families are aware of the services we provide,” she said.

The hospital also offers cash-like resources to families to boost their economic mobility, to prevent them from falling short.

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