# The Impact of Illiteracy on the Cycle of Homelessness

Sofia Marletta

## Introduction

Nearly every part of day-to-day life requires literacy, a skill that many take for granted. But for those facing homelessness, illiteracy is a barrier that prevents them from reintegrating into society and improving their situation. Literacy can be defined as the comprehension of and ability to read and write, but it can also extend to digital and social literacy (Hanckel et al., 2024). Digital literacy is understood as the ability to use digital technology, while social literacy teaches interpersonal interactions and negotiation (Vanek, n.d.). All of these skills — literary, digital, and social — are often learned at a young age, and social literacy in particular can only be learned through social interaction (Hanckel et al., 2024). All types of literacy are especially essential in adult life, and when lacked, create obstacles to maneuvering through life. Literacy is essential to obtain most jobs or higher education, and without access to literacy the cycle of homelessness perpetuates indefinitely. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, roughly 30% of those experiencing homelessness are a family unit with children. Often, these children are unable to achieve a quality education and high literacy, which hinders their ability to get a job later in life. Thus, the cycle continues, and it becomes increasingly difficult to navigate out of homelessness.

How specifically does homelessness impact access to literacy, and how is literacy essential to mobility out of homelessness? The objective of this paper is to clearly answer these questions, as well as to inspire those who have the privilege of literacy to share it with those who do not. This paper addresses the cycle of homelessness, beginning with children born into homelessness who have limited access to education, as well as acknowledging the demographics most often affected. Next, it transitions to discuss the difficulty of finding or keeping a job that pays well and does not require literacy, and how the process of applying for a job is complicated without literacy. Finally, it considers the struggle of achieving literacy later in life, and how the cycle is continued when children are born into homelessness. This paper aims to motivate further research into pedagogy for homeless youths and adults, and to create more volunteer-led centers to encourage higher literacy rates among those experiencing homelessness. The ultimate hope is that the homeless may more easily mobilize out of homelessness using the skill of literacy.

### The Beginning of the Cycle: Education and Homeless Children

Homelessness has a long history in the United States, and in recent years has seen a significant spike. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to increased homelessness, as the unemployment rate tripled to 13.0% (Duong et al., 2021). This unemployment primarily targeted workers already living below the poverty line, resulting in instability and, in many cases, homelessness. Chronic homelessness in the years following the pandemic increased approximately by 49%. In 2019, approximately 567,715 people experienced homelessness in the United States. In 2023, as unemployment gradually led to homelessness, the figure rose to approximately 653,104, an all-time high in the nation (Soucy, 2024).

Despite the impact of the pandemic on homelessness over the past four years, homelessness has its roots in decades of systematic oppression and failed policy (United States

Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2023). Factors of homelessness include limited access to affordable housing, domestic violence, previous incarceration, and unemployment. (Aratani, 2009). Marginalized groups in America are often at a disproportionately higher risk of homelessness. This is evident in California, a state where, according to the 2020 Census, only 5% of the population is African American and yet just under a third of the homeless population is African American. Additionally, about half of California's homeless population faces either severe mental illness or substance abuse (Johnson, 2024).

Another significant demographic of the homeless population is family units. As previously stated, families with one or more child make up 30% of the homeless population in the United States. Children experiencing homelessness are more likely to have behavioral issues, develop physical and mental health problems, and suffer academically (Soucy, 2023). Homeless children who attend school often face instability, and on average will attend 4.2 schools and face grade retention. Homeless students are also more likely to suffer from absenteeism, with 39% missing at least one week in the span of three months (Aratani, 2009). Instability and stress detract from a child's ability to perform well and meet their grade level.

The McKinney-Vento Act of 1987 was passed to ensure that homeless students are not barred from enrolling in school on the basis of lacking guardianship and residency. However, there are still many barriers to the success of homeless children. Often, schools fail to provide academic support to homeless students and mental and learning differences are not accommodated for. Additionally, students who face homelessness deal with social-emotional issues and stress that many educators and administrators are not equipped to handle (Stronge, 1993). Until these concerns are addressed, it is less likely for the student to succeed. Therefore, even when homeless children are given access to education, it does not guarantee their success.

**Types of Literacy and the Perpetuation of Illiteracy and Homelessness**

As a result of inadequate education, homeless students are more likely to suffer from illiteracy. There are many types of literacy, including social, health, and digital, and all are necessary to function in today's world (Hanckel et al., 2024). The most general form of literacy is the ability to read and write. Such literacy is partially the result of education, but is more linked with a parent's literacy, as 86-98% of a person's vocabulary is learned from parents (Clark & Haderlie, n.d.). Therefore, children born to less educated parents and then not given resources to become well educated themselves are less likely to develop a strong vocabulary and literacy, perpetuating the cycle of illiteracy.

Social literacy refers to the use of literacy in social settings, such as reading a bedtime story or a workplace notice (Hanckel et al., 2024). Health literacy is a person's capacity to understand, use, and make informed decisions based on medical information or reports (National Institutes of Health, 2021). Digital literacy skills include the ability to find and evaluate digital information and the responsible use of technology (Vanek, 2019). Digital literacy is becoming more and more essential to potential workers as technology continues to permeate into the workplace.

Children lacking a rudimentary education and understanding of literacy are far less likely to attend higher education and earn a degree. This puts them at a severe disadvantage when searching for a well-paying job. In the past decade, there has been a trend of companies requiring degrees in order to work low paying jobs that generally only require a high school diploma, such as a law firm in Atlanta that requires college degrees for every job, including receptionists and paralegals (Weiss, 2013). This is an example of "degree inflation," a

phenomenon describing how employers have raised minimum degree requirements from high school to college. In 2013, 66% of hiring managers admitted to hiring college graduates into the positions previously held by high school graduates (Hopkins et al., 2015).

The retail and manufacturing industries, which have historically hired workers without college degrees, are also showing a trend of favoring employees with undergraduate degrees (Weiss, 2013). In 2018, 37% of jobs were available to those with high school diplomas or less, but since then, these jobs have been on a sharp decline and their pay and opportunity has decreased; from these jobs, it is also more difficult for employees to work their way up the "career ladder" and significantly improve their socioeconomic status (Carnevale et al, 2011). Considering that these jobs now require college degrees, it is highly unlikely that a potential employee with poor literacy skills and no higher education will be hired.

In addition to difficulty getting into college without either a high school degree or proper literacy, there is also a cost barrier. Since 1980, tuition costs have increased up to 170% while the median family income has increased only 27% (Lillis & Tian, 2008). For the 2024-2025 academic year, public in-state tuition averages $11,011 and public out-of-state tuition averages $24,513. Meanwhile, private university tuition averages $43,505 (Wood, 2024). In the 2019-2020 academic year, 72% of students required financial aid from their college or university, and that number rose to nearly 90% in 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

There are some options for families who struggle to afford higher education, but even these are inaccessible for those with underdeveloped literacy skills. Applications for processes such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) require financial and digital literacy as well as the ability to read and write (Kofoed, 2016). If a parent is illiterate and unable to interpret financial documents that help to determine the academic future of a child, the cycle of illiteracy and under-education will likely perpetuate onto the child. Even among literate adults, financial literacy continues to decline, as does their inclination to discuss finances with their children (Jorgensen & Salva, 2010).

The consensus definition of financial literacy as provided by the President's Advisory Council on Financial Literacy is as follows: "the ability to use knowledge and skills to manage financial resources effectively for a lifetime of financial well-being" (Hung et al., 2009). People experiencing homelessness are far less likely to have financial education, and therefore are more likely to be unable to interpret financial documents and make educated decisions, not to mention the difficulty of using underdeveloped literacy to understand complex forms. Being financially literate can be a significant tool to navigate out of homelessness as it helps to develop an understanding of financial issues and how to manage money (Wilson, 2019).

As the world continues to digitalize, the homeless population has fallen behind. Some researchers have pointed out that libraries have failed to properly adapt during the digital age and have not made technology and digital information accessible to the entire public (Riso et al., 2020). Libraries that do provide access to computers and the Internet perpetuate "digital homelessness," as users are forced to start over each time they use them. Using only a public computer, users must carry their online "homes" with them, including information on hard-drives and passwords written on sheets of paper (Comi et al., 2022). This makes library computers effective for one-time use, but not continued use as the homeless population requires. Having access to the Internet does not guarantee digital literacy, and the homeless are more likely to be victims of online scams and identity theft that continue to put pressure on already unstable financial situations (Comi et al., 2022).

However, the past two decades has seen an increasing portion of the homeless with access to technology. A 2017 study in Philadelphia found that 60% of the reported homeless population in the city had access to the Internet, owned a cell phone, or had an email address, while surveys in New York City and Los Angeles showed that the homeless population used technology in roughly the same proportion as the non-homeless (Dukes et al., 2018). Typically, the surveyed homeless stated that they used technology in order to regulate health-related issues, including addiction and HIV; very few reported using it for literary or educational purposes (Dukes et al., 2018). Additionally, a study in Chicago found that the majority of the homeless population used the Internet for leisure or social activities, and while important for mental well-being, these practices do not necessarily promote literacy (Marler, 2023). Meanwhile, digital literacy is becoming essential to more and more jobs. 82% of jobs that do not require a college degree do require digital literacy, including skills with spreadsheets and word processors (Vanek, n.d.).

**Continuation of the Cycle**

The older an illiterate person grows, the more difficult it is to become literate (Greenberg & Feinberg, 2018). Adults face unique barriers to literacy, including a phenomenon referred to as "brain plasticity", which prevents quick decoding of words, fast reading, and comprehension (Aker et al., 2024). Adults are more likely to struggle identifying phonemes, the basic sounds that letters make, and morphemes, which include endings such as "-ing" and "-ed" (Greenberg and Feinberg, 2018). Research of adult pedagogy found that education in social climates helps adults to retain information, and socialization is essential to mastering literacy (Hanckel et al., 2024) However, in a 2015 survey, a third of a surveyed homeless population reported never seeing their family, while another third were "dissatisfied" by how often they saw their family; about half interacted with non-homeless friends an "adequate" amount, but two-thirds of that group still experienced feelings of loneliness more often than not (Brown & Sanders, 2015). Evidently, isolation is a problem for the homeless that further hinders the growth of literacy.

In addition to the difficulty of gaining literacy at a later age, it is more difficult for older adults to become employed than young adults, especially coming from an unemployed background (Koenig et al., 2015). In an AARP survey, a third of those struggling to find employment claimed that a barrier to getting a job was that "employers thought [they] were too old" and that they did not have enough experience for their age (Koenig et al., 2015). Additionally, further research has found that it becomes more difficult to become employed the further into homelessness a person is (Mackenzie et al., 2012). Isolation also factors into the difficulty of becoming employed since social skills are often required in order to get hired and have positive work relationships (Mackenzie et al., 2012).

As a result of these circumstances and the toil to earn a living wage as a homeless, uneducated, and illiterate person, it is nearly impossible to provide children with opportunities to advance their own lives, financially or academically. These barriers become more apparent as the housing market continues to slip out of accessibility for lower classes in America, and studies have established that community members in poverty are unable to afford even the cheapest rent in their community (Buckner & Rog, 2007). As previously mentioned, children of poverty face instability that causes them to disproportionately flounder in academic settings and proceed into adult life without the skills or knowledge to improve their situation, let alone find a stable residence (Knapp et al., 1990). Among these skills is literacy in all of its forms, including digital, financial, and social, all of which are necessary for some facet of life (Hanckel et al., 2024).

Since the 1980s, families have become one of the fastest growing demographics within the homeless population, with approximately 420,000 families and 924,000 children homeless in 2007 (Buckner & Rog, 2007). Estimates, however, rose to above 1.6 million children in just seven years (Mohan & Shields, 2014), likely due to economic factors such as the 2008 Recession, which resulted in a total of 8.6 million job losses (Jones, 2020). As already mentioned, parents who are illiterate are unlikely to raise literate children, especially when those children have an unstable education. Additionally, it becomes more difficult to break free from the cycle of homelessness the longer a person is mired in it, which indefinitely perpetuates the struggle (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2016). Illiteracy has proved itself to be a major hurdle that the homeless population needs support with in order to surmount and ultimately end the cycle of under-education and homelessness.

**Conclusion**

The most immediate solution to illiteracy in the homeless and impoverished community is volunteer-led tutoring. Although private tutoring proves to be extremely effective in many cases, it can also be costly, especially for those struggling with finances (Benckwitz et al., 2022). The suggestion put forth by this paper is to make free, volunteer based tutoring, particularly for reading and writing, more accessible to homeless youth. Organizations such as Harbor House Ministries in Oakland, California have adopted this solution and put it into practice at Franklin Elementary, where more than 70% of students were below their reading level. After one year of providing free after-school tutoring, these numbers already began to drop. Franklin Elementary is a public school located in the Oakland neighborhood Eastlake, which has extremely high homelessness and poverty rates (City of Oakland, 2023), including around eight homeless encampments in which groups of homeless people live together, often in tents (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, 2018). Many students are among lower classes, and having the Harbor House program to improve literacy has most likely improved their future prospects. Establishing similar initiatives within public schools and homeless shelters across the country would help to boost literacy and give children a new chance at life.

That being said, there is further research to be done regarding pedagogy for homeless youth and adults. Tutoring programs for adults, while also necessary, would require even more insight into how best to teach homeless adults (Hanckel et al., 2024). Homeless children, too, face different barriers than housed children regarding tutoring. Some homeless shelters have used tutoring programs to promote bonding between homeless parents and children by creating intimacy and shared learning experiences (Ardell et al., 2010). Other teachers have used reading and writing to unlock and uplift creativity in children; by showing them that they are exceptional or talented, students become more invested in their own learning process (Risko & Walker- Dalhouse, 2008). There are many ways to make tutoring effective for homeless youth and adults, and volunteers interested in these programs should use a range of strategies to find success. Literacy is an essential piece to overcoming the cycle of homelessness, and communities daunted by under-education and illiteracy must implement systems to elevate possibilities for the homeless.

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