



“Does it fit in a box we can check off?” The interpretive work of identifying doubled-up homeless students

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Identifying doubled-up homeless students is crucial to securing their educational rights and understanding the extent of housing insecurity among school-aged children. Drawing on a survey and focus groups conducted with NYC district and school staff, we introduce interpretive work as a central but underexamined feature of the identification process. While the broad and flexible federal definition of “doubling-up” grants staff wide latitude in determining McKinney-Vento eligibility, interpreting which living arrangements qualify requires a deep understanding of the law and of families’ specific circumstances. It also necessitates establishing trust with families so that they feel comfortable disclosing private information. Ultimately, these labor- and knowledge-intensive interpretive processes introduce implementation challenges and place a heavy burden on staff and families.

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**“Does it fit in a box we can check off?” The interpretive work of identifying doubled-up
homeless students**

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Introduction

Doubled up homelessness – defined as sharing the housing of others due to housing loss, economic hardship, or a similar reason – became federally recognized with the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento) reauthorization (Pavlakakis & Duffield, 2017). The inclusion of doubled-up homelessness in the McKinney-Vento definition was a win for education advocates: it made a large population of unstably housed students legible to policymakers and practitioners and entitled them to distinct educational rights (Edwards, 2020; Pavlakakis & Duffield, 2017). Under McKinney-Vento, homeless students are entitled to supports that equalize access to educational opportunities, and evidence suggests this mitigates the educational harms of homelessness (De Gregorio et al., 2022). Yet, many doubled-up students do not receive the services they are entitled to because they remain unidentified (Cutuli et al., 2024; Dhaliwal et al., 2026; Miller, 2011; Pavlakakis, 2018; Shaw-Amoah & Lapp, 2021).

Drawing on survey and focus group data from district- and school-level staff who serve homeless students in New York City Public Schools (NYCPS), we contribute to the small but growing literature examining barriers to identifying homeless students. We show how the broad definition of doubling up requires staff to engage in labor- and knowledge-intensive interpretive work to fully understand and accurately categorize families' living arrangements. Although the flexible definition gives staff latitude to identify a wide range of living situations as doubling up, it also introduces substantial implementation challenges. Accurate identification of doubled-up families requires a deep understanding of both families' circumstances and of the legal definition of homelessness. This places a heavy burden on the staff tasked with identifying homelessness, as well as on other school-based staff and families. Studying identification processes illuminates the barriers that prevent homeless students from accessing protections and services they are

entitled to. Moreover, because McKinney-Vento counts are used to understand the scale of homelessness among school-aged children, documenting the processes and challenges that affect them is crucial.

Literature Review

Policy Context

McKinney-Vento seeks to mitigate educational inequalities associated with homelessness. The Act defines homeless students as those who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This definition includes students staying in shelters; hotels, motels, trailer parks, or camping grounds; cars, outdoors, abandoned buildings, or substandard housing; and those “sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason” (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 2015), commonly known as doubled-up. As of 2023-2024, three-fourths of students identified as homeless nationally were doubled-up (Poverty Solutions, 2025). Although doubled-up homeless students face different challenges than students in shelters, they are also vulnerable to negative educational impacts (Pavlakis, 2017). Researchers have linked doubled-up homelessness to lower grades and on-time graduation and higher truancy, absenteeism, and school instability (Low et al., 2017; Lowell & Hanratty, 2022).

Being identified as eligible for McKinney-Vento rights and services can be impactful for students. McKinney-Vento requires that schools provide homeless students with full and equal opportunities and that barriers to accessing academic and extracurricular opportunities are eliminated. Homeless students are entitled to immediate enrollment and participation in school activities, even when lacking required records. They have the right to remain in their school of origin, even when no longer residing in the catchment area, and they are eligible for transportation to and from their school (Canfield & Teasley, 2015; School House Connection,

2024). The funds that schools allocate to serve homeless students can also be used for tutoring, before- and after-school programs, summer programs, school supplies, and other supports that facilitate full participation in school activities. Additionally, McKinney-Vento requires that homeless students receive appropriate referrals, such as to health and dental services and housing assistance. Although research about the impact of McKinney-Vento services on student outcomes is limited, some evidence suggests that attendance and academic performance stabilize after students are identified as homeless (De Gregorio et al., 2022; Larson & Meehan, 2009).

Identifying Doubled-Up Homeless Students

McKinney-Vento defines which students are entitled to protections and services, but individual educational agencies are responsible for identifying these students (Canfield & Teasley, 2015). By law, each public school district must appoint a liaison to coordinate homeless students' identification and ensure they receive appropriate services and their rights are protected (National Center for Homeless Education, 2024). Federal guidance recommends that liaisons make determinations about students' housing status on a case-by-case basis after familiarizing themselves with the homelessness definition, and that they collect residency information through housing questionnaires during school enrollment (National Center for Homeless Education, 2020). Yet, how districts actually undertake the work of identifying students remains largely a black box (M. Cunningham et al., 2010).

Districts often fail to identify all homeless students, leaving many without supports to which they are legally entitled (Cutuli et al., 2024; Dhaliwal et al., 2021; Shaw-Amoah & Lapp, 2021). Doubled-up students are particularly at risk of under-identification (Dhaliwal et al., 2026; Pavlakis, 2018). Prior research highlights three challenges that limit identification of doubled-up

students: lack of knowledge, time constraints, and families' fears around disclosing their housing status.

First, administrators and staff may not understand that doubled-up students are entitled to identical rights as other homeless students. Although McKinney-Vento defines doubling up as a form of homelessness, definitions of homelessness employed by other federal agencies and laws often exclude doubling up (Sullivan, 2023). District administrators who do not understand that doubled-up students are homeless may not prioritize training and policies that facilitate identification of these students (Hallett et al., 2015). School-level staff, like teachers, may be well-positioned to identify homelessness during close interactions with students, but often have limited knowledge about McKinney-Vento (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; K. A. Cunningham, 2014; Ingram et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2023).

Second, even with adequate knowledge, time constraints can make identifying all eligible students challenging (K. A. Cunningham, 2014; Havlik et al., 2020). Although the law requires districts to name a liaison to oversee McKinney-Vento implementation, this position is not required to be full-time. Liaisons often hold multiple roles, which compete for their limited time (Havlik et al., 2020; Ingram et al., 2017). Many liaisons spend ten or fewer hours per week on supporting homeless students (US Department of Education, 2015) and, in extreme cases, the title of liaison may be merely pro forma (Hallett et al., 2015). Doubled-up students are at particular risk of being under-identified by time-constrained liaisons because they are often viewed as having lesser needs than sheltered students, and they lack shelter caseworkers to coordinate with the school (Pavlakakis, 2017).

Finally, families often avoid disclosing their housing status. Many families, particularly doubled-up families, are unaware of the rights and services to which homeless students are

entitled, meaning they have less reason to self-identify (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Dhaliwal et al., 2026; Ingram et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2015). Moreover, families and students are often motivated to conceal their housing status. Given the stigma surrounding homelessness, families may feel embarrassed by their situation (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; K. A. Cunningham, 2014; Havlik et al., 2020). They also may fear that disclosing their housing status could draw unwanted attention from other agencies, such as child protective services or immigration (Edwards, 2020; Moore et al., 2023).

Altogether, identifying students experiencing homelessness, especially doubled-up students, is difficult for school districts. Research on how staff undertake this work, and the challenges they perceive, is limited but suggests that capacity constraints and family distrust hinder identification. We advance this literature by introducing *interpretive work* as a central but underexamined feature of the identification process. We find that the broad, flexible definition of doubled-up homelessness places the burden on school staff to develop a deep understanding of families' living arrangements and interpret how these arrangements fit into the McKinney-Vento definition. Our findings reorient scholars to consider not only the constraints that staff face, but also the nature of the McKinney-Vento definition itself and the identification process it entails. It is because identification requires interpretive work that staff capacity and family trust are so crucial to whether doubled-up families are identified.

Methods

Nearly 14 percent of the students in NYCPS – roughly 154,000 students– are identified as homeless; most of these students (53%) are doubled-up (Advocates for Children, 2025). Compared to many districts across the country, NYCPS devotes substantial resources and staffing to serving homeless students. New York is one of the few states that allocates specific

state funding, in addition to required federal funds, to support homeless students (Espinoza et al., 2023). While McKinney-Vento requires that every district designate a liaison for homeless students, NYCPS is among the few districts where every *school* has a liaison. As in other districts, NYCPS liaisons often hold additional roles. However, schools with high proportions of homeless students have social workers and community coordinators as liaisons, and their roles are entirely devoted to serving homeless students. NYCPS district-level staff further support school-based liaisons' work.

We collected data from focus groups and a survey with NYCPS non-instructional staff (e.g., social workers, guidance counselors, assistant principals, and community coordinators) who serve doubled-up students. (See Appendix A for further methodological details.) Our analytic sample includes 331 survey responses from staff at 306 schools, most (90%) of whom were school-based liaisons. Other common roles were guidance counselors, social workers, and parent coordinators. We conducted 13 focus groups with a subsample of 26 survey respondents and an additional 19 district-level staff. Survey and focus group questions captured staff knowledge about doubled-up students, identification and support processes used in their schools, and perceptions of professional development needs. We also collected and reviewed written guidance and recordings of professional development sessions for school-based liaisons.

We transcribed all focus groups and three authors coded the data. We approached our analyses using a pragmatic lens, moving back and forth between deductive and inductive strategies (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Each research team member wrote memos analyzing and synthesizing the data grouped under each code, and findings emerged through discussions about themes and the way(s) they aligned, overlapped, and/or contradicted one

another. We descriptively analyzed closed- and open-ended survey responses, looking for confirming/disconfirming evidence for themes emerging from our qualitative analyses.

<<TABLE 1>>>

Findings

Processes to Identify Doubled-Up Students

In many districts, including NYCPS, identification of sheltered students is facilitated by data-sharing between homeless shelters and schools (Dhaliwal et al., 2026; Hill & Mirakhur, 2019). Conversely, identifying doubled-up students requires gathering housing details directly from families. Maintaining accurate records is often a labor-intensive process that staff approach both formally and informally. NYCPS’s formal identification tool is a Housing Questionnaire, which asks families to categorize their living arrangement into one of five options: doubled-up, shelter, hotel/motel, other temporary living situation, or permanent housing. The questionnaire defines doubled-up as “living with another family or other person because of loss of housing or as a result of economic hardship.” Survey respondents reported that doubled-up students were most frequently identified via the Housing Questionnaire (Table 2), either when staff administered it (61%) or when families self-administered it (46%).

Although families can complete the Housing Questionnaire independently, focus group participants highlighted how gathering necessary information often requires staff time and attention. Front-office staff, such as school secretaries, or liaisons typically administer the questionnaire and answer families’ questions about it. NYCPS trainings encourage staff to “ensure and help families accurately reflect their housing situation on the questionnaire.”

Families complete the Housing Questionnaire upon school registration and when reporting an address change, but keeping records up to date requires ongoing attention from staff

throughout the year. Staff explained how students' housing can change at a "moment's notice" and that some students "were constantly moving to different locations." They described asking families to update their responses repeatedly, in line with district-level policy guidance. An elementary school liaison said, "We have [the questionnaire] right on the [front office] counter, readily available. We ask the parents when they come in... 'If anything has changed, will you do the housing survey for us?'"

Others described sending hard copies of the questionnaire home with students, distributing a digital version for families to complete electronically, and keeping copies in the front office for parents to take. However, families did not always return questionnaires that staff sent home. In these situations, staff had to engage in more labor-intensive methods of gathering information. For instance, one liaison told us:

I started making phone calls to verify addresses and just to make sure that we had the proper information. I made it just part of my role every year at the beginning of the school year to call every single student's families just to make sure that the information is correct.

<<TABLE 2>>>

The work of identifying homelessness extends beyond the designated liaison to other school staff. Though a less common identification method, staff who interact regularly with families and students sometimes discover housing changes during informal conversations. About one third of survey respondents indicated that identification frequently happens through family-initiated (33%) and staff-initiated (30%) conversations between families and staff, and through staff-initiated conversations with students (31%). An elementary school liaison explained:

There are also different ways [to identify doubled-up students], like just talking to folks. Our parent coordinator—she knows everyone in the building, all of the families...Once she finds out [a family is doubled-up], she has to confirm everything, and then our school secretary will change it in the system.

Likewise, staff sometimes notice indirect signs that a student might be experiencing homelessness and initiate a conversation. For instance, another elementary liaison said:

There are other teachers that are more intuitive; they notice things, and then they're curious on their own. If they notice that a student's wearing the same clothes, and it's already the fifth day of school, then they'll ask for support and they'll ask questions.

Interpreting What Counts as Doubled-up Homelessness

Gathering relevant information about families' housing status and accurately using it to identify doubled-up families requires understanding the McKinney-Vento homelessness definition. When asked what doubled-up means, staff often provided examples rather than a formal definition. These responses highlight the multiple dimensions of knowledge about students' cases that they rely on to evaluate McKinney-Vento eligibility. A middle school liaison mentioned household composition, "We define 'doubled-up' as someone living at a grandma's house, or living at a cousin's house, or living at someone else's home." In contrast, a district staff member listed reasons families double up: "I would define it as family members who have been displaced due to an unanticipated event...such as fire, due to unemployment, and any other things." A high school liaison described the space a family occupied, "Doubled-up is basements that are rented out. Doubled-up is sleeping on a couch...Doubled-up is living in a garage and using a space heater as opposed to having real heat." As these quotes suggest, examples varied

widely. Multiple staff explicitly highlighted the diversity of doubled-up households, including a district liaison, who summarized, “Doubled-up can look different.”

Often, staff explained doubling up by referencing common challenges. Some emphasized crowding. “Doubled-up is anyone who is sharing a living space with more people than it was intended for,” said one elementary school liaison, while another described children “sleeping on the floor.” Others highlighted limited control over space. “I’ve worked with [families] who are renting a room and can’t use the kitchen or have a schedule to use the bathroom,” an elementary school liaison recalled.

Identifying doubled-up students thus requires staff to have a deep understanding of families’ circumstances – including the people they live with, how they came to live there, and the organization of living space and daily routines in the household – and to then evaluate how these circumstances fit into the broad McKinney-Vento definition. A district liaison summarized:

It is all those things, I think. What makes it also very complicated...Every situation is unique unto itself. And I think until you have a real understanding of people's lived experience, and how they express their experience to be, can you really understand what something is? And does it fit into a box that we check off?

Staff may use examples to explain doubling up because – as this quote suggests – they see it as too complex a concept to be captured in a succinct definition. A high school liaison emphasized, “You have to really be immersed in it to know all the little idiosyncrasies of it.”

The interpretive work that staff undertake is further complicated by the disconnect between families’ own understandings of their living arrangements and staff’s interpretation of the McKinney-Vento definition. One particular challenge staff highlighted was distinguishing between families who share housing due to financial hardship and are McKinney-Vento eligible,

and families who share housing due to cultural preferences and are therefore not considered homeless. A district liaison described conversations with school staff:

Sometimes I've heard, 'Oh, well, culturally, they would live together anyway.' And sometimes yes, they may, and sometimes people live together because financially they cannot do it on their own...If the finances were where you can afford to live somewhere else, yes, people would [still live together], but not all the time.

Thus, staff need to understand families' cultural backgrounds and preferences to interpret their descriptions of their living arrangements.

When household sharing was culturally normative, staff found that doubled-up families were less likely to self-disclose on the Housing Questionnaire, because they believed McKinney-Vento did not apply to them. A high school liaison observed students being classified as permanently housed on their Housing Questionnaire, but later identified as homeless by school counselors:

Then that's how we find out that they're doubled-up, 'cause if they live with family members, that seems very normal, 'cause a lot of them come from communities or cultures that families do house together, so it doesn't seem [unusual]. Like, 'Well, I'm not homeless, I live with my aunt.'

Staff also observed instances where doubling up reflected personal and cultural preferences, but families were incorrectly labeled homeless. An elementary social worker said:

I've also had situations where families are listed as doubled-up, but they're doubled-up not because of financial hardship. They're doubled-up because they just live in a multigenerational home, and that's just by choice. When they come up to receive certain things, they're a bit confused, like, 'I don't need this.' I'm like, 'Oh, but you said you

were doubled up.’ I think just identifying the difference between being doubled-up because of a financial hardship and [not] – there’s a difference that not everybody really understands.”

A high school liaison described one group of recent immigrants in their school who commonly live doubled-up.

That seems to be by choice and by design. They will click the double-up box because they are living with other families...but it's a pretty common practice with those families in particular. They don't seem to display the same level of need as our families in shelters or even some of our families who are in permanent housing.

As these quotes suggest, staff see both culture and material needs as key to effectively identifying homelessness and targeting the district's limited resources.

Challenges of Building Trust with Families

Given the complexities of interpreting whether a family is doubled-up, staff require in-depth knowledge of families' living arrangements, culture, and material needs, and may have to ask sensitive questions. Yet families are often not open and honest with staff about their housing instability. An elementary school liaison explained, “There’s a defense and [families] might not fill it out correctly, or [might] be more private and not want to share with us.”

A majority of survey respondents identified families' reluctance to share their housing status due to housing restrictions (e.g., not wanting to violate a lease or lose subsidized housing) (56%), safety concerns (e.g., fear of having children taken away, or due to immigration status) (55%), and fear of stigma and bullying (43%) as barriers to identification. “[Families] don't necessarily see the school as a partner and as a support,” one middle school liaison observed, “[They think], ‘If I disclose something, they might call [child services] on me, or they're gonna

look at my child differently, or they're gonna judge me.'" Likewise, an elementary school liaison said, "Families don't wanna disclose that they are doubled-up because they're afraid of the ramifications ...they feel like [if] they're listed as doubled-up, it might impact them becoming citizens or getting their green card or other benefits."

<<<TABLE 3>>>

Additionally, families are often unaware of the benefits of identification. About 50 percent of survey respondents reported that families' lack of knowledge about McKinney-Vento rights was a common barrier to identification. A district-level staff member proposed:

I think also the messaging from schools could say the reasons why it's helpful for us to know this information. I think that there is an element of a transaction that occurs in that process: 'If this is a circumstance that pertains to you, we might be able to support you.'

But I think there's a trust element that has to come with that.

Families' hesitance to confide in staff matters because of the deep understanding staff need to accurately categorize a family's housing status. A district staff member explained:

There's a lot that goes into a conversation around, 'Where do you live? And who do you live with? And why do you live there?' A certain level of trust really needs to be built up between a school and a family.

A high school liaison described a delicate balance between respect for families' privacy and accurately identifying their housing status:

You gently ask parents, and you don't want to be too intrusive. And if they mark it doubled-up, they mark it doubled-up. They mark it permanent, they mark it permanent.

You dig a little deeper with respect to their culture, with respect to their privacy. If they

want to share, we put it down. If they don't want to share, then you have to use your discretion and respect their judgment as well.

Limited capacity makes it more challenging to build trust with families. The liaison quoted above continued, “One of our main obstacles is having the people that have the time in their workday to really devote... to building trusting relationships with all students and families to be able to really understand people’s situations.” Fully understanding families’ living arrangements is necessary for staff to identify doubled-up homelessness, but developing the trust that makes this possible is difficult.

Challenges of Building Knowledge Among Staff

Staff lacking knowledge about McKinney-Vento is another important barrier to identifying doubled-up students. Given limited capacity, staff who are not liaisons but are well positioned to gain information about students’ housing, particularly teachers, can contribute to identification, but only if they understand when and how students should be identified. Focus group participants noted that knowledge of doubling up depended on the extent to which staff’s roles explicitly involved implementing McKinney-Vento. In our survey, 24 percent of respondents said staff not knowing what “doubling up” means is a common barrier to identification. A district staff member elaborated:

If you were to ask...[the] liaison in a school, they may have a more specific answer and have a more confident answer, like, ‘Oh, this is what it means to us’. But I think if you asked random staff, like teachers and paraprofessionals and support staff, I think your answers would be very different, even in the same building.

Liaisons pointed to teachers, in particular, as needing knowledge because they interact with students daily. Although some teachers watch for signs, identifying homelessness, in the words of one elementary liaison, “is not really on most teachers’ radar.”

Liaisons regularly attend district-level professional development on doubled-up homelessness, but they find it challenging to transmit this knowledge to school staff. Capacity constraints are one concern, with multiple liaisons noting it is “unfair” to task one person with sharing professional development materials to the entire school. An elementary liaison reported, “Though I appreciate being sent [materials], there’s only so many hours in the day where you can turnkey. They can’t just keep putting everything on us.”

Moreover, the definition of doubled-up homelessness is difficult to convey. “There’s a lot of room for interpretation,” a district staff member explained, “And so people’s biases have a great opportunity to come forward at the expense sometimes of our kids and families.” A high school liaison recounted how personal backgrounds shaped interpretation of doubling up:

Even when... [staff] are shown the information, or I present them with the information, it still just doesn’t click, for lack of a better word, because they also come from their own cultures. I see that a lot of them also are like, ‘This isn’t doubled-up. They live with grandma.’

Liaisons struggled to build a common, accurate understanding of doubling up among staff with diverse backgrounds.

Discussion and Implications

Contributing to the growing literature on student homelessness, this research explores the challenges staff face in identifying doubled-up students, a group that is entitled to support under federal law but particularly difficult to identify (Dhaliwal et al., 2026). We shed new light on

relevant processes within NYCPS, the largest school district in the US, with relatively greater staff capacity for identification. NYCPS identifies doubled-up homelessness via a range of formal and informal mechanisms: administering the Housing Questionnaire at standard intervals, encouraging families to update their housing status throughout the year, and gathering information through informal conversations with families and students. Even in this context, the work is often labor-intensive and it is most effective when all staff – not just those directly tasked with McKinney-Vento compliance – are attuned to identifying homelessness.

We uncover a previously unrecognized reason that identifying doubled-up homelessness is so labor-intensive: the definition of doubled-up homelessness itself. We find that staff who work directly with homeless students – and are most knowledgeable of the definition – describe what doubling up is through examples rather than a formal definition. Staff seem to take a “know it when you see it” approach that requires gaining in-depth knowledge of families’ living arrangements, cultural backgrounds, and material needs, to assess how they fit the McKinney-Vento definition. Relying on families’ own reports can result in misclassifications, so staff take responsibility for translating details of the family’s lived experience into the district’s pre-defined list of housing categories.

Gaining the information needed to do such interpretive work requires trusting relationships between staff and families. Consistent with prior research (Dhaliwal et al., 2026; Edwards, 2020), staff see this as a major challenge. Staff have limited capacity to develop relationships, and families often do not understand how sharing details about their living arrangement can help them. Yet, staff rely on deep understandings of families’ situations to determine McKinney-Vento eligibility. We highlight the limitations of identification processes that rely on families to disclose intimate details of their lives, often without fully understanding

why – limitations that, amid rising fears of external institutions like immigration enforcement, are likely to grow.

Moreover, staff who are well-positioned to gain housing details, especially teachers, rarely fully understand identification processes. Our findings are consistent with research showing that misunderstanding of the homelessness definition is pervasive (Hallett et al., 2015), especially among staff not directly tasked with identification (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Ingram et al., 2017), and provide new insight into why. Liaisons told us that developing staff knowledge is difficult due to the definition’s “room for interpretation” and because staff bring their own backgrounds and biases to the work. Accordingly, the definition of doubled-up homelessness is challenging to convey, especially amid liaison capacity constraints (Havlik et al., 2020).

Doubled-up students are vulnerable to not being identified (Dhaliwal et al., 2026), curtailing access to resources and, potentially, academic outcomes (De Gregorio et al., 2022; Larson & Meehan, 2009). We open the black box of homelessness identification processes, revealing inequities in who can access McKinney-Vento supports and rights. As staff use a range of details –household composition, motivation for sharing a home, how space is shared – to categorize families’ living arrangements, those who openly communicate their private information are more likely to be identified. Families whose needs are openly displayed and understood by staff may be prioritized over those who hide, downplay, or underestimate them. Students of color and immigrant students may be particularly at risk of under-identification, as experiences of racism, staff perceptions of cultural norms, and perceived risks from institutions like immigration or child protective services shape whether families are comfortable revealing information (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Edwards, 2020). Mis-matches between the cultural background and identity of families and school staff can likely exacerbate these problems, and

the risk of staff making incorrect assumptions about families' housing preferences.

Under-identification denies students important educational rights, and because McKinney-Vento counts are commonly used to measure homelessness, it leads to underestimates of the extent of the housing crisis among school-aged children.

The definition of doubled-up homelessness – “sharing the housing of others due to housing loss, economic hardship, or a similar reason” – allows for interpretive flexibility. But the definition's breadth requires substantial interpretive work to determine which housing scenarios count. Our findings suggest that evaluating whether the definition of doubling up could be more precise – or more simply conveyed to staff and families – may be worthwhile. However, reducing flexibility in the definition could be counterproductive; doubled-up homelessness encompasses a wide spectrum of living arrangements, and an overly rigid administrative category would likely leave fewer students' housing instability legible. Policymakers should acknowledge the burden that the expansive definition of homelessness places on front-line staff and provide resources that increase schools' capacities to identify and serve these students.

Further studies are needed to understand how identification processes differ across districts. In contrast to NYCPS, most districts do not appoint a liaison for each school, and some do not use Housing Questionnaires (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). Studying a district with strong structures for identification allowed us to move beyond standard explanations for underidentification that highlight implementation constraints and show how the definition of doubled-up homelessness itself introduces challenges. Understanding variation across districts is an important next step. Moreover, while we focus on staff perceptions, identification requires family cooperation. Future research should examine whether greater knowledge of what counts

as homelessness and the benefits of identification could increase families' willingness to share information with schools.

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Tables

Table 1 <i>Characteristics of Survey Respondents</i>	
STH Liaison	89.7%
Staff Role	
Guidance Counselor	29.6%
Social Worker	26.6%
Community or Parent Coordinator	13.9%
Principal or Assistant Principal	6.6%
Pupil Accounting Secretary	1.8%
Other	13.6%
Source: Survey on doubled-up homelessness administered to non-instructional NYCPS school staff. Note: N = 331. Individuals in the “other” category play other staff roles.	

Table 2 <i>Frequency of Strategies Used in Identifying Doubled-up Students</i>				
	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Staff initiate completion of HQ	60.7%	25.4%	11.2%	2.1%
Families independently complete HQ	45.6%	35.1%	15.4%	4.5%

Families initiate conversation about their housing status	32.6%	44.1%	17.8%	3.6%
School staff initiate conversation about housing status with families	30.2%	43.2%	18.1%	6.7%
School staff initiate conversation about housing status with <i>students</i>	30.5%	36.9%	21.8%	9.7%
Students initiate conversation about housing status with school staff	10.9%	36.6%	35.1%	15.7%
Staff initiate conversation with student's friend	10.3%	20.2%	27.8%	40.2%
Source: Survey on doubled-up homelessness administered to non-instructional NYCPS school staff.				
Note: N=331. Totals may not add up to 100% due to missing data.				

Table 3*Identification Challenges*

Proportion of respondents who report that identification is difficult because

Students and families don't know what doubled-up means	63.4%
Students and families have concerns about housing restrictions	55.9%
Students and families have concerns about safety	54.7%

Students and families don't know their rights under McKinney Vento	49.6%
Students and families are worried about stigma or bullying	42.9%
Staff don't know what doubling up means	24.2%
Source: Survey on doubled-up homelessness administered to non-instructional NYCPS school staff. Note: N = 331. Totals may not add up to 100% due to missing data.	

Appendix A

Survey Methods

Our survey included a combination of closed- and open-ended questions. The questions capture the extent of knowledge non-instructional staff have about doubled-up students, the identification and support processes for doubled-up students at their school, and their perception of staff professional development needs at their school. In developing our survey, we incorporated elements from a similar instrument used in Los Angeles County, California by Abt Associates for a study of doubled-up student homelessness in middle school (De Gregorio, 2025). We also collaborated with NYCPS district-level stakeholders to add items that may be unique or important to the NYCPS context. In addition, we conducted two cognitive interviews with district level staff to refine the face and content validity of the survey. In particular, we edited the phrasing of some of our questions and added response options to be better representative of the experiences of school staff.

Target Population

We administered our survey to all 1,591 school-based Students in Temporary Housing (STH) liaisons who worked in the district in the 2023-24 school year through the online platform Qualtrics. Every NYC school has a designated school-based STH Liaison. The STH Liaison is responsible for supporting families in temporary housing with student enrollment, understanding their transportation options, and finding support resources. Importantly, STH Liaisons might play other roles at their school (e.g., principal, social worker, guidance counselor, etc.). In addition, as described below, we also asked liaisons to forward the survey to other non-instructional staff in their school who work with doubled-up students. Such staff include social workers, guidance counselors, assistant principals, and community associates. We aspired to gather multiple

participants from the same school as well as from every community school district within NYCPS.

Recruitment Procedures

In May and June of 2024, we recruited survey responses through weekly emails to all STH liaisons within NYCPS. These emails described the purpose of the study and encouraged STH liaisons to complete the survey online as well as to forward the link to other non-instructional staff at their schools who work with doubled-up students. In addition, we made follow-up phone calls to STH liaisons at schools with fewer than 2% of students doubled-up or over 7% of students doubled-up; these cutoffs are the bottom and top quartiles of the distribution based on analyses of STH data from the 2021-2022 school year. We prioritized these schools to gain insights from a wide range of school contexts, including schools where staff likely interact less or more frequently, respectively, with students identified as doubled-up. Within this category of targeted schools, we further prioritized schools that had fewer responses. We also targeted community districts with lower response rates to ensure the geographic representativeness of our survey sample. While we gave respondents the option to complete the survey over the phone (with a research team member inputting their responses into Qualtrics), all but 3 surveys were collected via the online Qualtrics survey.

Final Survey Response

We collected 500 surveys. For our final analytic sample, we excluded surveys where the respondent did not advance to the first substantive question (i.e., they only responded to the questions asking if they consent to participate and for their staff role, and then stopped taking the survey). Our final sample includes 331 responses, with 297 STH liaisons and 34 staff members

in other roles. We received at least two survey responses from every NYC geographic community school district.

Survey Analysis

We cleaned and, where needed, re-coded the survey data prior to analyzing responses from these individuals in two ways. First, we conducted descriptive analyses (i.e., visually analyzing means and distributions) of close-ended survey responses. We did so to find (dis)confirming evidence for the themes that were emerging from our qualitative data analyses. Second, we coded responses to an open-ended question on the survey which asked respondents to report their definitions of doubling up. As with the close-ended data, we calculated summary statistics (i.e., counts) of responses that (dis)confirmed themes that emerged in the focus group data analysis. Our aim was to use the survey data to quantify the prevalence of the issues that emerged from the focus groups. Our survey response rate limits our ability to make strong claims about the precise prevalence of each issue; however, the survey results affirm that the challenges to identification brought up in the focus groups were experienced by a broad subset of NYCPS staff.

Focus Group Methods

Our focus group inquiry was aimed at understanding sources of variation in the identification of students who are doubled-up; the nature of resources provided to doubled-up students specifically (relative to homeless students more broadly); as well as the resources and supports school staff need in order to serve students experiencing homelessness. Focus groups provided interactive opportunities for participants to share in detail or corroborate examples of school staff's work in supporting doubled-up students.

Focus Group Sample and Procedures

At the end of the survey, respondents were able to express interest in participating in focus groups. Respondents were notified that their schools would receive \$100 (total) as remuneration for their participation. As such, the focus group sample is a subgroup of the survey sample.

We conducted focus groups in May and June of 2024. We conducted 10 focus groups with 26 school staff members: 10 worked in elementary schools, 7 in middle schools, and 9 in high schools. We also conducted 3 focus groups with 19 district-level staff members. To ensure some similarity in experiences across focus group participants, we conducted separate focus groups for district-level and school-based staff, and we separated school-based staff into focus groups based on grade band/role (i.e., elementary, middle, high school, and district). All focus groups took place via Zoom and were audio recorded and transcribed.

Focus Group Analysis

Our analysis employed both deductive and inductive approaches. Four of the authors, including the lead author, read the full set of transcripts and based on the research questions, and insights that emerged from reviewing the transcripts, created a codebook. The codebook went through several rounds of refinement: the authors coded the same transcript, and then held discussions to compare coding, clarify code definitions, and produce shared guidelines around code use. After the codebook was finalized, three of the authors coded all of the transcripts, and completed three rounds of interrater reliability to ensure consistency in data analysis.

After the data were coded, each author produced thematic memos in which they synthesized the coded data for at least one code. We discussed these memos as a group, revealing how our insights aligned, overlapped, or contradicted one another, and we returned to the

transcript data as needed. We noted both transcript data that supported our claims and any disconfirming data. Our thematic findings, supported by quoted excerpts from the transcripts, emerged from this process.