

Homeless students suffer with housing, food insecurity

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In the E-R's weekly series on homelessness, this story is the first in a three-part special miniseries about students experiencing homelessness.

At least 70% of Oroville's high school students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. In Chico, Between 400 and 500 children are categorized as housing insecure at any time during the Chico Unified School district's school year. Across the county, thousands of students often rely on each district for help just to get to school and to get a meal.

In these statistics a tragic side is seen in the Butte County homelessness issue — ongoing prevalence of child homelessness, and students of all ages facing unstable living situations. As the county with the highest rate of Adverse Childhood Experiences in California, one of the county's ongoing problems is its struggle to address the wellbeing of homelessness and foster youth.

The school districts in both cities have worked to address these issues in their own spheres — particularly after the Camp Fire.

Socioeconomic factors

Oroville is the most at risk city in Butte County for socio-economically disadvantaged children. A total of 770, or 72% of the student body, are identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged in the Oroville Union High District alone. That means these students qualify for benefits, are eligible for free or reduced priced meals or have parents or guardians who did not receive a high school diploma.

Concerns about keeping these students in school are a constant for all districts in the city. A California's Bureau of Children's Justice investigation into suspensions was launched in 2019 at Oroville City Elementary School District to analyze the district's student discipline policies and practices, including suspensions, expulsions and alternatives, as well as protections for foster and homeless youth.

In response, Oroville City Elementary School District Superintendent Spencer Holtom said that many students are "dealing with trauma within the home," such as abuse and instability. Holtom said a small population of students in his district (now at an overall total of about 2,400 this school year) were transplanted from Paradise and the burn zone after the fire and are still dealing with the aftermath.

"Some are still living in trailers," Holtom said. The district currently uses emergency grants from the fire to help some of these students and makes sure they have access to part-time case workers who can provide one-on-one support.

Aside from Camp Fire trauma, the southern part of the county struggles with high levels of other socioeconomic issues like poverty and lack of stable housing and transportation.

Sheri Hanni, program coordinator at the Butte County Office of Education, said surveying Oroville is a bigger focus for BCOE than in Chico due to higher rates of suspension, trancies and other attendance problems. "We tend to get much higher absence rates at Oroville, as well as homelessness," Hanni said.

"(The) south county is somewhat unique. There are seven schools that feed into one high school district. Every district is different in how they address these issues, and has different experiences and different support."

Hanni also mentioned the fact that more rural areas have higher rates of chronic absence, with a known geographic barrier that causes issues for many students to get transportation for every day of the week.

"Housing is a huge barrier," Hanni said. "We don't have much housing or affordable housing and don't have much shelter beds."

She said using an urban model— requiring students to come to services in the city that they need, like study aid, food banks and mental health resources — are less successful in a city like Oroville where some may need services brought to them.

“We can give them bus passes, but what if they aren’t near a bus stop?” she said. “We don’t always have enough (buses) for where they live. When you’re focused on what you’re going to eat and where you’ll sleep, getting on a bus isn’t high on your priority list.”

Oroville’s demographics have another issue— family history of completing high school is lower, she said.

“With a lot of families it’s a generational thing,” Hanni said. “Often the parents and grandparents didn’t graduate, and they (students) feel isolated from those systems. They don’t see it within their families.”

However, more solutions are needed at schools that don’t have after-school programs with “more people living in poverty on this side of the county,” she said.

Countywide solutions

Although the issues seen in south Butte County also exist in Chico, they’re at a lesser extent — the rate of socioeconomically disadvantaged students is around 49% district-wide, and there are more programs available to educators in town, Hanni said. The Boys and Girls Club, as well as resources like the Torres Shelter and The Esplanade House — available to some students and families seeking temporary housing — are ways that case workers at schools can direct students to help more quickly.

One solution for Oroville is the School Ties program, which serves foster and homeless youth, Hanni said. There are two homeless case managers assigned that connect with local at-risk families — schools notify them that a family is homeless, then connect with the family that needs bus passes or a gas card. The program also provides backpacks with school supplies, or even clothing when available.

Such efforts are about more than just making sure students are getting enrolled in school and staying there, Hanni added. Educating the districts is necessary, “about the rights that homeless students have, the fact that transportation has to be provided, along with current initiatives like providing free and reduced lunch.”

This is where the use of urban solutions to help children with housing and food insecurity get support, she said.

“We are much more connected to other counties from here to the north all the way to the Oregon border,” Hanni said. “So there’s a lot of sharing among other rural areas for what has worked.”

Hanni identified recent overhauls of the Butte County’s approach to targeting attendance, like taking punitive action “off the table” and making the system less about punishment for students, as positives.

“We should identify a family’s barrier (to school) and what we can do to support them, rather than saying kids have to be in school or else something will happen to them,” she said, adding that truancy court “exists but is a last resort.”

Hanni added that the district attorney’s office has been very “supportive” in BCOE’s efforts to support children and “get them back into school.”

“Being rural, we don’t always have the funding that we would like, but it’s a much more cooperative effort now, not just getting kids to school,” she said. “People are really hungry for strategies.”

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