

# Teacher Relationships in Children at Risk Due to Homelessness

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## Background & Hypotheses

- Poverty is a well-established risk factor for child development.<sup>1</sup>
- Children experiencing homelessness are exposed to unique stressors in addition to extreme sociodemographic risk, but many have the capacity for resilience.<sup>2</sup>
- Relationships are crucial for resilience.<sup>2</sup> Caregiver-child relationships are important, but the stress and adversity of homelessness may interfere with effective parenting practices.<sup>3</sup>
- Teacher-child relationships can support child resilience<sup>4</sup> and may play a key protective role for children at risk due to homelessness. Research is needed on teacher-child relationships in the context of homelessness.

### Hypotheses

- Higher cumulative sociodemographic risk will be associated with higher teacher-child conflict and lower teacher-child closeness.
- The sociodemographic risk factor of high mobility (living at 5 or more addresses), will be most strongly associated with higher teacher-child conflict and teacher-child closeness.

## Methods

### Sample

Data were collected from two homeless shelters. Participants were 83 caregivers (89.2% biological mothers; 95% female,  $M_{age} = 30.3$  years, range = 19-49; 61.4% African American, 3.6% African Native, 14.5% Caucasian, 9.6% Multiracial, 10.8% other) and their children (54.2% male,  $M_{age} = 5.9$ , range = 4.5-6.9; 66.3% African American, 1.2% African Native, 4.8% Caucasian, 22.9% Multiracial, 4.8% other).

### Measures

**Teacher-Child Relationship:** Teachers reported on subscales from the Health and Behavior Questionnaire.<sup>5</sup> Five questions pertain to teacher-child closeness and five questions pertain to teacher-child conflict (1=*Definitely does not apply* to 5=*Definitely applies*).

**Sociodemographic Risk:** 10 previously established risk indicators.<sup>6</sup>

**Covariates:** Shelter, Child Age, Sex, & IQ. Child IQ was a composite of 3 measures: Matrix Reasoning & Information from the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-III with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (receptive vocabulary).

### Analyses

Analyses were conducted in SPSS Version 24 and R. Correlations examined the relationship between key variables. Two hierarchical linear regressions examined whether sociodemographic risk indicators predicted teacher-child closeness and conflict. For each regression, Step 1 included child age, child sex, and shelter. Step 2 included Child IQ. Step 3 included the 10 sociodemographic risk indicators. We tested the change in  $R^2$  between each step. Exploratory analyses examined differential risk effects.



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## Results

### Teacher-Child Relationship:

- Teachers reported that they felt close to the child, on average, “Neutral, Not Sure” to “Applies Somewhat” ( $M=3.89$ ,  $SD=.78$ ).
- Teachers reported that they felt conflict with the child, on average, “Not Really” ( $M=2.12$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ).

Figure 1. Cumulative Sociodemographic Risk

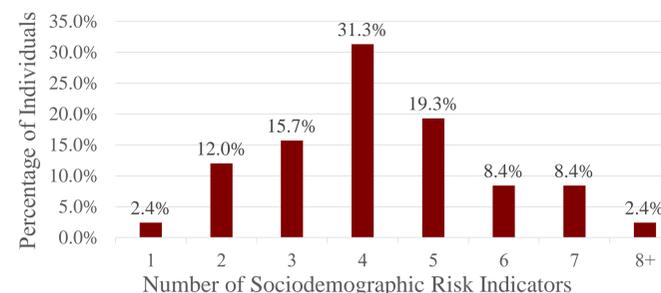


Table 1. Prevalence of each Sociodemographic Risk Indicator

Sociodemographic Risk Indicator N=83	Yes N (%)
Parent unemployed	63 (75.9%)
Parent is single	54 (65.1%)
Family was unable to afford rent	50 (60.2%)
Household has four or more children	42 (50.6%)
Parent younger than 18 years of age at birth of first child	37 (44.6%)
Parent chronically homeless (3+)	26 (31.3%)
Family lived in unsafe neighborhood	25 (30.1%)
Parent has less than a high school education	21 (25.3%)
Family is highly mobile (child lived at five or more addresses)	20 (24.1%)
Family lived in unsafe housing	15 (18.1%)

## Results

Table 2. Correlations of Main Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Teacher Conflict						
2. Teacher Closeness	-.22*					
3. Cumulative SES Risk	.19†	-.07				
4. Child IQ	-.17	.19†	-.09			
5. Child Age	-.05	-.13	.06	.07		
6. Sex	-.32** <sup>1</sup>	.17	-.13	-.02	-.11	
7. Shelter	.22†	-.04	.24* <sup>2</sup>	-.03	-.02	-.27* <sup>2</sup>

Note. † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . <sup>1</sup>Males had higher conflict scores; <sup>2</sup>One shelter had fewer boys and lower SES scores.

### Summary of Findings:

- Teachers reported more conflict with boys ( $p < .01$ ).
- Teachers reported higher closeness for children with higher IQ scores ( $p = .05$ ).
- The 10 socioeconomic status risk indicators did not predict teacher-child closeness or conflict over and above child age, sex, shelter, and IQ.
- High mobility (as indicated by living at 5 or more addresses) did not predict teacher-child closeness or conflict.
- Exploratory analyses suggested:
  - Parents less than 18 years of age at birth of first child was the strongest predictor of teacher-child closeness, showing an unexpected *positive* prediction.
  - Unsafe housing was the strongest risk factor predicting teacher-child conflict.

## Discussion

- Hypotheses were not supported, possibly due to the small sample size and overall high risk level of the children.
- Child IQ, sex, and specific sociodemographic risk indicators were differentially related to teacher-child closeness and conflict, highlighting the potential importance of individual and contextual characteristics for teacher-child relationships, and thereby possibly school success.
- Teacher perceptions of young children recently experiencing homelessness were generally positive, suggesting they could be an important resource for these children.

## References

- Brooks-Gunn & Duncan (1997); 2. Masten, Fiat, Labella, & Strack (2015); 3. Conger & Donnellan (2007); 4. Hamre & Pianta (2001); 5. Armstrong & Goldstein (2003); 6. Labella et al. (2019)