Homelessness among children in Minnesota has increased dramatically over the past decade, as it has among children nationwide. Both the number of children in shelters in Minnesota and the proportion of individuals in shelters who are children have increased (see Figures 1 and 2). Moreover, these increases have occurred among different family types. Between 1991 and 1997, there was a 440 percent increase in the number of single men with children in shelters, a 240 percent increase for single women with children, a 310 percent increase for couples with children and a 570 percent increase in unaccompanied youth.*

As homelessness increased among children in Minnesota and across the country, concerns grew about health, mental health, and educational risks for these children. In 1989, we began a series of studies to document the risks associated with homelessness among Minnesota children, with the aim of informing policies and programs designed to foster the well-being of these children. In this report, we present highlights of our findings from studies focused on understanding school success among this high risk population. Improving services for homeless children requires not only information about problems and risk, but also knowledge about success and resilience.

*Percent are based on a statewide single night shelter survey conducted by the Wilder Foundation.
Thus, we were looking for the factors associated with better achievement and behavior as well as problems. Children who do well under these difficult circumstances may provide the best clues about what makes a difference.

In our earliest studies, we learned that children living in shelters with their families shared many of the same risks as other very-low-income children. Risk factors shared by both groups included high rates of belonging to single-parent households, parents with little education, parents with low employment rates, and a history of many stressful life experiences, including moving, violence, and illness or death of parents. There were also high rates of behavioral and emotional problems among both groups of children.

We found few differences between homeless children and a matched comparison group of low income “housed” children, and the differences we did find appeared to reflect the current crisis in their lives. For example, homeless children had experienced significantly more stressful life events over the past year than children from similar families living in a home. The most intriguing differences we noticed were within the homeless families. Even though all of the homeless families were in crisis, it was clear that the level of risk to the children could differ quite substantially and that some children were succeeding in spite of a highly challenging situation.

Thus, the goal of the two studies reported here was to examine the linkages between risk and protective factors on the one hand and behavior related to school success on the other. Our measures of school success included both achievement and conduct indicators, since both are essential for succeeding in school. We also examined additional domains that could undermine school performance, including health problems and hunger.

Research with families in crisis presents many challenges. Parents are understandably preoccupied with finding housing. The length of the shelter stay is unpredictable and families are highly mobile after they leave, often moving multiple times within a few months as they try to secure stable housing. Yet, we have found these families to be remarkably willing to participate in our research at a difficult time in their lives. Parents typically are quite concerned about their children and value education as the most important need of their children beyond the survival basics of shelter, food, and clothing. In each of these two studies, we were able to obtain follow-up information about many of the children after they left the shelter, though in some cases, families simply disappeared. Our analyses focused on African American children, who comprise by far the largest proportion of children from homeless families in the Twin Cities.

In 1993-94, we interviewed a representative sample of fifty-nine parents with six- to eleven-year-old children currently residing in the largest shelter in the Twin Cities. After the families left the shelter, the children were tested on standardized achievement tests, school records were secured, and teachers completed ratings about the behavior of the children in their classroom. In 1995-96 we tested a group of ninety-eight African American children, ages eight to ten, living in the two largest shelters. The demographic data for these two samples were very similar. For 1994 and 1996 samples, respectively, we found that 78 and 82 percent of the families were headed by single parents; 37 and 48 percent of the parents had not finished high school; 83 and 82 percent of the families were on welfare; 48 and 47 percent had been homeless before; 55 and 54 percent had come to the Twin Cities within the past year; and 76 percent of both samples had been homeless less than three months.

How Much Risk?
The importance of total cumulative risk in the lives of these children was examined by counting up the number of risks in a child’s life, adding a point for each of the following risk factors: a parent does not have a high school degree, they live in a single-parent household, their parents are divorced, a parent has died, they have been in foster placement, they have been abused, and they have witnessed violence. Then we looked at hunger, health, mental health, and school achievement as a function of the number of risk factors in the child’s life. Data clearly showed a relationship.

Figure 3 illustrates how risk was related to externalized behavior problems (such as aggressive, acting out behavior) as reported by parents. The level of behavior problems is shown in standard scores where the average score in the general population is 50 and 98 percent of the population score below 70. Scores above 60 (90th percentile) suggest a need for mental health services. Children with four or more risk factors typically fell into this “clinical range.” On the other hand, children with none or few of these risk factors, children who have the resources of two
parents who are better educated and who have less stressful life histories, don’t typically have behavioral and emotional problems. Results for teacher reports of behavior problems were highly similar. Moreover, as one might expect, achievement data showed a comparable pattern: children with more risk factors showed lower achievement. Children who had none or few risks and more resources had much better achievement scores.

Hunger and health also were related to risk in the expected direction. Results for hunger are illustrated in Figure 4. Our measure of hunger was based on a set of questions used in national surveys of hunger; it is a summary of answers to questions such as, “Did children ever eat less than you felt they should because there was not enough money to buy food?” Given what these parents report about hunger, it is not surprising that we have found consistently since 1989 that homeless children report high levels of fear about not having enough food to eat. In 1989 and in 1995-96, three-fourths of the children (eight to twelve years old) reported fears of “having no food to eat.” This rate was about twice as high as school children in the same community, even though this community also includes a substantial number of children living in poverty.

Health problems were also related to risk status with parents of high risk children reporting many more health problems than parents of low risk children. Both health problems and hunger, clearly associated with level of risk, could adversely affect learning.

**The Educational Risks**

School was clearly important to these children and their parents and most of them reported very positive experiences at school. In the 1995-96 sample, for example, 94 percent of the children reported that school was very important to them and 94 percent wanted to go to college. All liked school at least a little and 86 percent liked it “a lot.” Furthermore, 88 percent of the children thought their teachers cared “a lot” about them. Among parents, 98 percent reported telling their children school is very important, 86 percent had visited their child’s school during the past year, and 84 percent wanted their children to go to college.

Nonetheless, the educational risk of these children was evident in their test scores. We administered the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test - Screener because this is a new test with good norms for diverse children and can be administered quickly. For the 1993-94 sample, 80 percent of the children fell into the bottom quartile on this test (25 percent would be expected in a general population). For the 1995-96 sample, the rate was 63 percent. These figures are consistent with their school records, which show low test scores and academic delays, and findings from one of our earlier studies using a different achievement test that showed more than half of these children already two or more years behind in elementary school. This is an ominous sign for the future, as the high school drop-out rate is very high among children this far behind before they enter secondary schooling. Moreover, it was clear from school records that their academic problems often preceded homeless status. Still, there were some children who had good achievement; it was important to ascertain what could account for their success.
Succeeding Despite the Odds
First, we confirmed our expectation that children who had good achievement also would have good behavior, attention, and cognitive skills. Though their numbers were small, children learning at grade level had few behavior problems reported by either parents or teachers. This suggested that there might be family differences that accounted for their success in multiple domains. In the 1993-94 study, interviews with the parents indicated that parenting was strongly related to both behavior and achievement in school.* More specifically, the parents’ involvement in their child’s education (through interest and participation) and their closeness with their child were important predictors of school success according to cumulative school records and teacher reports after the children left the shelter.

Both of these factors (parental involvement and closeness) were measured during the shelter stay. Figure 5 indicates the importance of good parenting for academic achievement as judged from a rating of the child’s overall performance based on school records. Children who had closer relationships with parents and parents who were more involved in their education had better grades and higher test scores. Figure 6 illustrates how the same two parenting qualities were related to teacher reports of behavioral and emotional problems in the classroom. Children with involved, close parents had few behavior problems.

Finally, we examined the possibility that special school programs for homeless children could make a difference. Providing school services to address the needs of homeless children is a formidable task because the children have multiple needs, few resources, high mobility, and overwhelmed parents. The first step is access. In years past, homeless children were blocked from attending schools by rules about permanent residency, school or health records, or transportation problems. Now, homeless children have better access to school as a result of federal and state legislation and funding. Very few of the children in our recent studies have encountered barriers to school registration or attendance. However, facilitating school success is another matter, though clearly this is a high priority goal shared by state agencies, the Minneapolis Public Schools, and these families.

In the course of our 1995-96 study, we evaluated a tutoring-advocacy program for homeless children in the Minneapolis schools. The nature of this program varied in each school, with some schools providing after-school activities, while others provided in-class tutoring or “pull-out” tutoring. Due to limited funding, only 23 percent of the elementary schools in the district were able to provide this intervention. Yet 43 percent of the fifty-six students in our study who attended Minneapolis public schools ended up in a school that had a program, indicating a good selection of schools in which to house the intervention. However, only fifteen of these children (27 percent) had five or more contacts with the intervention program, which was our criterion for inclusion in the “intervention” group. Children did

*These interviews were conducted by Donna Miliotis as part of her dissertation research.

Figure 5. Homeless Children’s Academic Achievement Scores, Plotted for Three Levels of Parenting
School records were rated on a five-point scale from 1 (well below average) to 5 (well above average), with scores of 3 meaning average performance.
Data from the 1993-94 study.

Figure 6. Teacher Ratings of Behavioral and Emotional Problems in Homeless Children, Plotted for Three Levels of Parenting
Average score in the general population is 50 and scores above 60 (90th percentile) suggest a need for mental health services.
Data from the 1993-94 study.

Tutoring programs in the Minneapolis public schools, like this program at Broadway Elementary, have significantly improved students’ relationships with their classroom teachers.
not have much contact for a variety of reasons, including poor school attendance. This left few children in the intervention group to compare with the rest.

Even with these small numbers, however, we found that the quality of the relationship between the child and the classroom teacher in the intervention group was significantly more positive than this relationship for children who had received little or no intervention. There was little evidence of change in academic progress associated with intervention, but measurable changes might not emerge in the short time we could follow the children. One of our findings was especially encouraging: tutored children, particularly boys, scored significantly higher in math than non-tutored children in routine standardized tests given at school during the spring. Focus groups conducted with tutors and advocates revealed a strong consensus that the key ingredient to this type of intervention across sites and methods was the interest and individual attention from a concerned adult in the school. The tutor-advocates believed that one-to-one relationships serve to increase bonding to school and to improve attendance, two basic first steps for school success. Our observations and data suggest that interventions that involve stable attention from an adult while providing focused, positive learning experiences have considerable potential to boost the engagement and performance of these children in school.

Fostering Resilience in Homeless Children

Our studies of homeless children are highly congruent with research on children at risk for other reasons. Many of these families live with severe adversity that can overwhelm a parent with concerns about survival needs of shelter, food, clothing, and medical care for their children. Yet even under these difficult circumstances, there is clear evidence of resilient children who are succeeding despite poverty, mobility, stress, and whatever burdens of discrimination they face due to socioeconomic status, the stigma attached to homelessness, impoverished appearance, or race.

Over the past twenty years, there has been growing attention to the phenomenon of children who succeed in spite of severe adversity. Studies of children around the world who overcome war, family violence, poverty, and many other adversities suggest that there are key protective factors that allow children to develop well under difficult conditions. At the top of that list are relationships with competent and caring adults and also good cognitive abilities, reflecting healthy brain development. Resilient children typically have fewer risk factors in their lives and more resources, both in terms of their social and individual assets. The combination of more resources and fewer risks can also be seen in the lives of children from homeless families in Minnesota who are, despite it all, successful.

Our results from studies of homeless children, particularly in the context of what has been learned from other studies of resilience, suggest that efforts to foster better outcomes in these high risk children could focus on three strategies: reducing risk, boosting resources, and facilitating protective relationships with competent adults. Of these, the prevention of risk is an important long-range strategy for our society. But for many children, it is too late to prevent the piling up of risk factors because it has already occurred. Therefore, efforts to increase the resources available to these children and to facilitate relationships with competent adults will be crucial. Resources include the basics of housing, food, clothing, and medical care, plus opportunities to develop thinking skills and other talents. Relationship strategies include one-on-one tutoring or mentoring and family education programs, plus efforts to stabilize housing and school attendance so that bonds to community and school have a chance to grow.

Developmental scientists have argued that we can learn how to improve interventions by understanding...
resilient children. As more is learned about the pathways to success among children at risk, including children from homeless families, it should be possible to help the children who have lost their way, despite their dreams and the faith of their families in education, to make it back onto roads leading to success.

The 1995-96 study reported here was made possible through one of CURA's Interactive Research Grants. The grant made it possible to collect a new set of data and to prepare a report for community educators highlighting findings from this research program since 1989. Interactive Research Grants are supported by CURA and the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Minnesota. They have been created to encourage University faculty to carry out research projects that involve significant issues of public policy for the state and that include interaction with community groups, agencies, or organizations in Minnesota. These grants are available to regular faculty members at the University of Minnesota and are awarded annually on a competitive basis.

Masten and Sesma wish to add that, “The research we have done on homelessness was made possible by the willingness of families in shelters to share their experiences during a difficult time in their lives. We are also deeply grateful to the following organizations for their support of this work over the years: People Serving People; Mary’s Place; the Minneapolis Public Schools; the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning; and the University of Minnesota. Financial support has come from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the University of Minnesota, through a McKnight Land-Grant Professorship and an Interactive Research Grant from CURA.”

Ann S. Masten is a professor and associate director in the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota. She is a licensed psychologist and coordinates the intercollege child clinical training program at the University. Her research has focused on understanding how competence develops among children at risk due to adversity and socioeconomic disadvantage, with the goal of informing interventions and policy to foster better development among high risk children and youth. She directs the Project Competence study of 205 Minneapolis school children followed from childhood to adulthood. Since 1989, she has conducted studies of homeless children in Minnesota and also young Cambodian refugees who survived the Pol Pot regime. Professor Masten has published numerous articles on competence, risk, and resilience in children and youth. She has been invited to speak about resilience and homelessness to scientists, educators, clinicians, lawmakers and policymakers, at the local, state, and national level, as well as in Canada and Europe.

Arturo Sesma, Jr. is a doctoral candidate in child psychology at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota. He has given conference presentations and published papers on the academic and psychological functioning of children homeless in Minnesota. He has interests in how friendships aid in adaptation for children living in poverty, as well as in using psychological research to inform public policy affecting children and families.

Rural Community Assistantships

A new University of Minnesota initiative has been launched to develop more effective partnerships with Minnesota’s rural communities. Student assistance with applied research, program planning and development, evaluation, and other short-term projects is being offered to communities in southeastern and south-central Minnesota. The new program is a partnership effort of the University of Minnesota (through its Rural Development Council), The Initiative Fund of Southeastern and South Central Minnesota, and local communities and organizations. CURA serves as the fiscal agent for the project and as a member of the University's advisory committee.

Rural Community Assistantships will help meet community needs while giving students career-related experience. Communities apply to the program with a project that will benefit from student skills and expertise. Early pilot projects have included agrotourism, city park planning, land use planning, youth leadership, restructuring county services, and economic analysis.

Projects that are approved will have funding available for a student stipend and in some cases travel and other related costs may be covered. The University provides help in the application process and in identifying students who might work on the project. The community chooses the student. Rural Community Assistantships are funded through contributions from the University, in-kind support from other groups, and a $75,000 grant from the McKnight Foundation. If the initial eighteen-month program in southeastern and south-central Minnesota is successful, it will be expanded into other areas of the state. For more information about the project, contact the community liaison Roger Steinberg, University of Minnesota Extension Service, Southeast District Office in Rochester (507) 280-2867 or the campus liaison Carla Carlson, Rural Development Council (612) 624-5260.