



HOW RISING RENTS HARM KIDS



In Sacramento, CA, [rents have risen](#) 21 percent in the past year, to an average of \$2,582 per month. In Cincinnati, Ohio, they're up 24 percent year-over-year, to \$1,473. And in Austin, Texas, rents rose a whopping 40 percent between 2020 and 2021, to \$2,290 per month.

A combination of COVID-related factors, rising housing prices that keep more potential home buyers in the rental market, and low inventory has led to increases averaging 14 percent nationwide in the housing rental market this year. This surge is on top of [longer-term increases](#): Between 2010 and 2019, rental expenses increased 27 percent, or *four times faster* than the price of other goods, resulting in a situation in which roughly half of renters are now “housing cost burdened,” meaning they spend more than a third of their incomes on utilities and rent.

In a [new article](#) in the peer-reviewed *Review of Educational Research*, NEPC fellow [Jennifer Jellison Holme](#) of the University of Texas at Austin takes stock of the ways in which these shifts have impacted families with children. Her integrative literature synthesis, which reviews 64 studies published between 2010 and 2020, summarizes four ways in which housing costs have likely impacted children:

- 1. Through mobility:** When families can no longer afford their housing, they move. As a result, children may switch schools, sometimes repeatedly. Or they may experience periods without housing. Although some studies suggest that underlying family risk factors also contribute, research suggests that mobility is associated with “negative academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes,” as well as with lower levels of educational attainment down the road. Mobility is also associated with eviction. Holme notes that eviction’s impact on childhood outcomes is understudied. However, it al-

most certainly increases the difficulty for families to find future housing, since many landlords screen out new tenants with prior evictions.

- 2. Through living environments:** Low-income families may double up with relatives or rent homes that are too small for their needs. This can in turn lead to overcrowding, which has been associated with lower levels of educational attainment and with lower levels of math and reading achievement. Families may also find the only housing they can afford is located in high-crime or heavily polluted neighborhoods, or in homes or apartments that are unsafe due to the presence of mold, lead, inadequate ventilation, or other dangerous living conditions. These dangerous conditions have been linked to poorer maternal mental health and to child behavioral struggles.
- 3. Through learning opportunities in neighborhoods and schools:** Most children attend their local schools, and schools located near affordable housing are often of lower quality than schools in areas where housing expenses are higher. Lower-income neighborhoods also may offer fewer learning-related resources, such as high-quality enrichment or after-care programs. “Collectively, these neighborhood and schooling contexts are linked with lower levels of academic achievement, lower levels of educational attainment, and reduced earnings as adults,” Holme writes.
- 4. Through parental resources:** Parents who spend the lion’s share of their incomes on utilities and rent have fewer resources available for other expenses, such as high-quality childcare programs, music lessons, or books. Research has linked higher levels of these so-called “enrichment expenditures” to better academic outcomes. If housing expenses make it challenging to afford sufficient or healthy food, children may in turn experience poorer cognitive, behavioral, and mental health outcomes. There is also evidence to suggest that low-income parents experience more financial stress, which may in turn lead to negative outcomes for their children.

Holme concludes her review with two main recommendations for policymakers and practitioners:

- 1. More and better federal housing assistance:** Holme’s review finds that children who live in public housing experience cognitive benefits and better long- and short-term educational attainment. Although vouchers (such as Section 8) reduce the odds of homelessness and improve living conditions, both of which have the potential to positively impact children, the research Holme reviewed has not directly linked these programs to childhood outcomes. Holme suggests that the federal government should devote more resources to housing assistance, especially given that three out of four families eligible to receive it do not, due to insufficient funding. This additional housing should not be concentrated in low-income and segregated neighborhoods that are too often unsafe and lacking in educational opportunities.
- 2. More and better data:** State and local education agencies need to start collecting data on housing affordability. Because it’s rare for such information to be incorporated into educators’ data systems, it’s challenging for researchers to assess the impact of affordability on academic outcomes. Even more importantly, better data could enable schools to better assist students living in crowded or unsafe homes, families at risk of

eviction or homelessness, and parents who, while ineligible for programs such as free or reduced-priced meals, may spend so much on housing that they struggle to pay for food, childcare, and other expenses. Holme concludes:

The collection of a range of affordability and housing hardship data (rent burden, dwelling quality, crowding, eviction risk, etc.), if made available to educators, can provide both a more holistic picture of students and families, and potential opportunities for intervention.

NEPC Resources on Social Context of Education

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