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Low-Income High School Students Get Less Time to Learn, Calif. Study Shows

By Kathryn Baron on November 21, 2014 2:00 PM | No comments

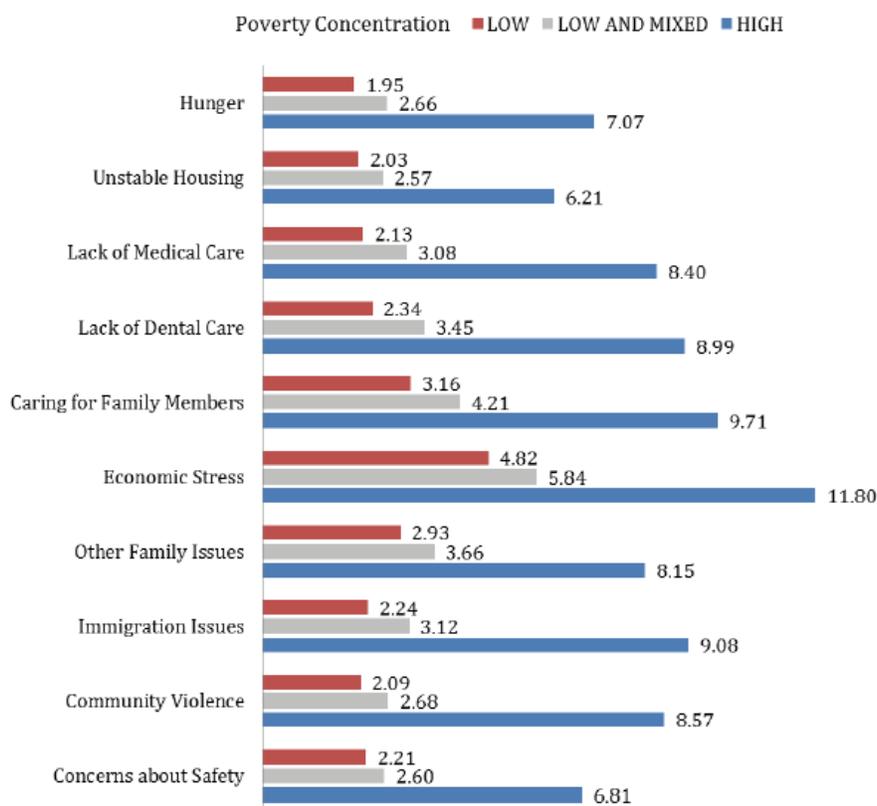
The difference between attending a high-poverty and a low-poverty high school in California is nearly two weeks of instructional time a year, according to a new [study](#) on lost learning time from the graduate school of education at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In schools where most students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, teachers said they lost about 30 minutes of class time a day to emergency lockdowns, computer shortages, noisy and dirty classrooms, a lack of qualified substitutes, preparation for standardized tests, and students' dealing with the stresses of living in poverty.

As the chart below illustrates, the report also found that on any given day, low-income students are three times more likely than wealthier students to miss school, arrive late, or be distracted in class because they're hungry, homeless, don't have transportation to school, have no health insurance and are sick or caring for sick family members, are dealing with immigration issues, or live in violent neighborhoods.

"The ZIP code that you live in and, hence, the neighborhood in which you go to school, determines how much learning time you have, and the amount of learning time is a critical educational opportunity," said John Rogers, a UCLA education professor and co-author of the report.

Economic and Social Stressors (# of Students Affected in Typical Class)



His team surveyed teachers at 193 California high schools that were selected based on location and student demographics. Nearly 800 teachers completed the survey between November and December 2013.

The findings support claims by students at some of the most disadvantaged high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, who cited many of the same issues in a [class action](#) filed against state education officials last year. Although California high schools are [required by law](#) to provide the equivalent of six hours of school a day for a minimum of 180 instructional days a year, the students allege they've been shortchanged by traumatic events, mismanagement, and a lack of trained mental-health counselors that requires teachers to step in and try to provide that support.

Last month, as we [reported](#) here in Time and Learning, the students won a round when a superior court judge ordered the state to intervene after some schools bungled implementation of a new software program for class scheduling, forcing many students to miss weeks of required

A quarter of all high school students in California attend schools where almost every student is designated by the federal government as low-income, said Rogers, and students of color are a majority at four in five of these schools.

He said the "dramatic inequalities" reported by teachers in the survey may indicate that things are worse in other parts of the country, because school funding in California is more equal than in most other states.

The conditions that impinge on learning time also impact what teachers do with the time they have. All teachers in the survey wrote that they value "rigorous, hands-on, and creative learning opportunities that engage students in higher-order thinking about complex academic and social issues," but teachers from high-poverty schools felt pressure to teach to the test instead.

One unidentified teacher quoted in the report, wrote, "I'm trying to push my students toward academic excellence in the time that we have, but with so many pressures to handle, and with the combination of traumas that my students are exposed to and are constantly experiencing, sometimes the overwhelming need is overwhelming."

The opportunity gap could narrow now that California has a [new school funding formula](#) that provides additional money to districts with large numbers of low-income students, foster youths, and English-language learners. And innovative teaching may be encouraged as states introduce the new student assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards, which require teaching deeper-level thinking skills.

But those initiatives won't improve students' lives outside school, stressed Rogers. He said the study highlights the need for communities to focus immediate attention on new public and social policy around the consequences to students of continued economic and racial segregation.

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