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## **FAQ: HOMELESS STUDENTS IN CALIFORNIA**

### **Why is this data important?**

Family homelessness is often associated with extreme poverty, weak social networks and domestic violence – all conditions that can harm children's health and well-being. California accounted for just over one-fifth of all homeless public schools students in the U.S. in recent years, the largest share of any state.

### **How many homeless students are there in California? What is the trend?**

During the 2012-2013 school year, nearly 270,000 California students experienced homelessness. More than half of all homeless public school students in California were enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5 (52%) in 2013, while 21% were in grades 6-8 and 27% in grades 9-12. Child and youth homelessness is increasing in California, with an 8% increase over the last school year, and a 22% increase since the 2010-2011 school year.

### **What definition of homelessness are you using and how does it compare to other definitions?**

Students are counted as homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence at any point during the school year. This is the definition used by the [McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth program](#), a federal program created under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 to reduce the challenges that homeless children and youth have faced in enrolling in, attending, and succeeding in school.

The definition includes children and youth who are:

- sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as doubled-up)
- living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of adequate alternative housing
- living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar environments
- living in a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, regular sleeping accommodations
- living in emergency or transitional shelters
- abandoned in hospitals
- awaiting foster care placement
- children of migrant workers who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above

The education definition of homelessness [is considered to be more inclusive](#) than the one used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which excludes families "doubled up" with others or those living in motels because they cannot find other housing.

Child advocates are supporting the [Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2014](#), which would expand HUD's definition to include homeless children and youth who have been verified as homeless by its own homeless assistance programs and certain other federal programs, including the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program.

#### **How were the data collected? How reliable are these numbers?**

McKinney-Vento liaisons are required to identify the students experiencing homelessness in their Local Education Agency (LEA) over the course of the school year and record this information in data management systems. In turn, every LEA reports the data once a year to the California Department of Education, where it is compiled, certified, and submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.

The data represent the total number of students from pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade who are enrolled in public schools in California and who are identified as homeless by a McKinney-Vento liaison. A special tabulation was completed by the California Homeless Youth Project at the California Research Bureau by using the district office address to categorize school districts into legislative districts.

Kidsdata.org plans to provide the updated data as it becomes available.

#### **Do your estimates understate the problem?**

Probably. The data do not include homeless children and youth who are not in school or whose school is not aware of their homelessness.

In addition, parents or guardians may not want to report homelessness to school staff, and school staff may have a difficult time gathering and reporting this information. Homeless children, particularly older

ones, may not self-identify for fear of contact with law enforcement, child protective services, or parents/guardians.

**How much variation is there among counties or school districts in identifying and reporting homeless students under the McKinney Vento act? Could those with higher percentages or numbers of homeless students just be better at identifying them?**

LEAs are required to identify and report homeless students; however, there isn't a formal standard process. Many LEAs identify homeless students through the registration process at the beginning of the year; whereas, others run queries in their student-level data systems for nighttime residency. Care-giver affidavits are used to verify doubled-up situation, and outreach providers sometimes do home visits.

As for the reporting process, LEAs have student-level data systems that align to the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), and that information is uploaded on a regular basis.

LEAs that receive McKinney-Vento funds or targeted training are likely to capture more of their homeless students, as are LEAs that dedicate higher percentages of staff time to liaison duties. These factors could contribute to some discrepancies among counties or school districts. However, many LEAs that have maintained consistent staff and capacity over time are showing significant increases in homelessness, indicating that the overall trends are accurate.

**Why do I see N/A or LNE for my region or school district?**

LNE (Low Number Event) refers to data that have been suppressed because there were fewer than 20 homeless students. N/A means that data are not available.

**How does being homeless affect kids' health and educational performance?** Research has shown that homelessness causes severe trauma to children, disrupting their relationships, putting their health and safety at risk and hampering their development. Homeless children are more likely than other kids to have physical and mental health problems, to experience hunger, and to have difficulties at school. In addition to the risks faced by homeless children, studies show that youth without homes are far more likely than their peers to drop out of school or have other serious health problems.

**What special services or supports do kids get in school if they're identified as homeless?**

The McKinney-Vento Act offers students experiencing homelessness rights and resources including:

- Immediate enrollment in school, even if they lack documents typically required for enrollment
- The right to remain stable in one school, even if homelessness forces them to move across school district boundaries
- Access to educational services for which all students are eligible, including free school meals, transportation, and dispute resolution procedures
- a homeless liaison at the student's LEA, usually a school district

Since the McKinney-Vento Act was last reauthorized in 2001, states and LEAs have generally made significant progress in improving educational stability for homeless children and youth attending school.

Recent California legislation has contributed to this progress, including:

#### **[SB 177: Homeless Youth Education Success Act](#)**

This law includes provisions that affirmed the education rights of California's homeless students by considering them eligible to participate in extra-curricular activities including afterschool sports, even if they don't meet school-residency requirements. It also provides youth access to educational support and services by requiring:

- Immediate enrollment of a homeless child or youth;
- The State Department of Education and the Department of Social Services to organize a work-group to develop policies and practices to support homeless children and youth and ensure that child abuse and neglect reporting requirements do not create barriers to school enrollment and attendance; and
- Local educational liaisons for homeless children and youth to ensure public notice of the educational rights of homeless children and youths are distributed in schools.

#### **[AB 652: Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act: homeless children](#)**

This law clarifies that the fact that a child is homeless or classified as an unaccompanied minor (as defined by the McKinney-Vento education definition), is not, in and of itself, a sufficient basis for reporting child abuse or neglect.

#### **[AB 1068: Pupil Records](#)**

This law gives unaccompanied youth age 14 and over the right to access and consent to disclose their school records. It also extends these rights to caregivers who enroll students in school, and it prevents schools from releasing directory information (such as the name, address, phone number, and photograph) of students experiencing homelessness, unless a parent expressly consents.

#### **Where can I get more information?**

**[California's Homeless Youth: A Growing Population](#)**, Shahera Hyatt, Brynn Walzer, and Patricia Julianelle, (September 2014).

This brief identifies what we know about the size of California's homeless youth population in the educational system and provides statewide data on the numbers of homeless youth by county and legislative district. The brief concludes with recommendations for improving educational success for homeless students and suggests ways to increase state and local capacity for data collection.

#### **[Homeless Public School Students](#)**

- **[by Grade Level](#)**
- **[by Nighttime Residence](#)**

- [by Legislative District](#)

The [Homeless Education Program](#) in the School Turnaround Office at the California Department of Education

[The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth](#)