



National Center for Homeless Education  
Supporting the Education of Children and  
Youth Experiencing Homelessness  
<http://nche.ed.gov>



#### MCKINNEY-VENTO LAW INTO PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES

## Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: An Introduction to the Issues

### This NCHE brief:

- explains the definition of *homeless* established in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act;
- describes some of the challenges faced by families, children, and youth experiencing homelessness; and
- provides an overview of the educational rights and supports available to students experiencing homelessness.

### INTRODUCTION

The word *homeless* typically does not bring to mind images of children and youth, but the reality is that many people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 18; some of them are a part of families experiencing homelessness, while others are youth experiencing homelessness on their own. Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in 2015 by Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act, (42 U.S.C. § 11431 et seq.) is a Federal law that addresses the educational needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness. This brief provides basic information about the scope of the issue of child and youth homelessness, the impact of homelessness on education, and the educational rights and supports available to children and youth experiencing homelessness. Briefs on additional homeless education topics are available at <https://nche.ed.gov/briefs.php>.

### MCKINNEY-VENTO DEFINITION OF HOMELESS 42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
  - i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;
  - ii. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...;
  - iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
  - iv. migratory children...who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

## HOW MANY CHILDREN AND YOUTH EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS?

Rates of homelessness in the United States among children and youth have seen a steady increase in recent years. Each year, public schools across the nation report the number of students identified as homeless to the U.S. Department of Education. Over the course of the 2014–2015 school year, schools identified 1,263,323 children and youth as homeless, up from 1,219,818 during the 2012–2013 school year (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2016).

## WHO IS HOMELESS?

Schools use the definition of *homeless* established by the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (hereafter *the McKinney-Vento Act*) [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)]. It states that a child or youth who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence is considered homeless. The law also provides several examples of living arrangements that are considered homeless because they are not fixed, regular, and adequate. Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason is the most common form of homelessness experienced by school-age children in the United States, with 76% of students experiencing homelessness enrolled by U.S. public schools during the 2014–2015 school year living in homeless doubled-up arrangements (NCHE, 2016). Staying in emergency, family, domestic violence, and transitional living shelters was the next most common type of homelessness experienced by students during the 2014–2015 school year (14%). When faced with homelessness, some families are able to stay in hotels or motels; living in a hotel or motel due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations was the third most common type of homelessness reported by public schools during the 2014–2015 school year (7%). Many children and youth also live in unsheltered situations, which can include campgrounds or public places not meant for human habitation, such as parks, bus or train stations, and abandoned buildings. Unsheltered homeless children and youth accounted for more than 39,000 students (3%) identified by schools during the 2014–2015 school year (NCHE, 2016).

In addition to defining homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Act also defines *unaccompanied youth* as “a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a

parent or guardian” [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)].

Unaccompanied youth make up a larger segment of the homeless population than many people realize, with nearly 90,000 of such youth qualified as homeless during the 2014–2015 school year (NCHE, 2016).

## WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME HOMELESS?

Considering the misconceptions that persist regarding people experiencing homelessness, it is important to understand some of the dynamics that can cause people to lose their homes. Homelessness is often thought of as something that only happens to people with particular traits, habits, or economic standings; but, in reality, homelessness impacts people from all backgrounds. Consider the following:

### HOW AFFORDABLE IS THE HOUSING IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

The United States is experiencing an affordable housing crisis. For housing to be considered affordable, the cost of the housing must consume 30% or less of the household’s income. Currently, a single-income household earning minimum wage cannot afford the local fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in any State in the country (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, Errico, & Pang, 2017). In addition, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (n.d.) estimates that roughly 12 million households, both those that rent and those that own their homes, are paying more than 50% of their annual income for housing. Allocating higher levels of income to housing leaves families with limited income to pay for other living expenses, and limited or no resources to deal with financial crises, which may lead to homelessness.

### HAVE YOU OR HAS ANYONE CLOSE TO YOU EVER STRUGGLED TO MAKE ENDS MEET?

Rising costs of basic household commodities can lead to housing crises. The percentage of household budgets dedicated to gasoline rose to a 30-year high in 2012 (EIA, 2013). Rising food costs have a significant impact on household budgets, as well. Nearly 17% of households with children struggled to provide food for their families in 2015 (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2016, p. 14).

### **COULD YOUR JOB BE ELIMINATED DUE TO CUTBACKS OR A CHANGING JOB MARKET?**

Not surprisingly, a financial crisis, such as the loss of a job, can leave a family homeless. As a result of the Great Recession, 8.7 million jobs were lost in the United States between January 2008 and February 2010 (Davidson, 2014). While unemployment rates currently reflect those before the Great Recession, employment-to-population ratios indicate that a number of workers are still unable to find work, or are only working part time when they would prefer to work full time (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016). Long-term unemployment continues to present a significant problem, as well, with more than 30% of people without a job during 2015 falling into this category (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

### **DO YOU HAVE ENOUGH FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOU AND YOUR FAMILY IF ONE OF YOU SUFFERS FROM A SERIOUS ILLNESS OR ACCIDENT?**

Illnesses and healthcare expenditures can deplete a family's financial resources, with as many as 62% of all personal bankruptcies being related to healthcare expenses (Himmelstein, Thorne, Warren, & Woolhandler, 2009b). In the majority of healthcare-related bankruptcy cases, the families owned homes, included members who had attended college, and had middle-class incomes prior to their crises (Himmelstein, Thorne, Warren, & Woolhandler, 2009a).

### **COULD YOU EVER EXPERIENCE A NATURAL DISASTER?**

Natural disasters often strike with little to no warning, leaving devastation in their wake. Since 1980, the United States has experienced 212 weather and climate disasters where overall damages/costs totaled \$1 billion or more (NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, 2017). While this may bring to mind the often catastrophic impact of hurricanes, the interior of the country is impacted by natural disasters, as well. Floods, fires, tornadoes, and winter storms all have caused significant damage in communities across the country.

### **HAS YOUR FAMILY EVER EXPERIENCED SIGNIFICANT CHANGES, CHALLENGES, OR STRESSORS THAT FELT OVERWHELMING?**

Significant family discord, often developing over a long

period of time, is a commonly cited reason for why youth experiencing homelessness on their own are separated from their families. Furthermore, youth who experience abuse, including verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, are more likely to run away from home (Benoit-Bryan, 2013). And yet, sometimes separations between youth experiencing homelessness on their own and their families are the result of a housing problem, rather than family dysfunction. For example, when families are forced to double-up with others because they have no place to stay, the host's housing may not be able to accommodate the entire family. These and other threats to family stability can lead to youth homelessness. More than half of unaccompanied homeless youth were either forced out of their homes, or their parents failed to stop them when they indicated they were leaving (Benoit-Bryan, 2015).

### **WHAT IS THE MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT AND HOW DOES IT HELP?**

During the 1980s, the magnitude and impact of homelessness on all segments of society became pronounced. The increasing prevalence of homelessness among families with children and youth became particularly concerning as more was learned about the effects of homelessness on children's development and school performance. For example, students experiencing homelessness often change schools frequently. This can impact learning as students must adjust to new environments, new curricula, and new teachers and classmates, while still learning the same information other students are expected to master. The loss of a home can be traumatic, leaving children and youth with tumultuous feelings that can impact their social and intellectual wellbeing. Limited access to food, medical care, and basic school supplies can also impact performance in the classroom.

The McKinney-Vento Act addresses educational barriers and challenges created by homelessness by guaranteeing students experiencing homelessness the right to enroll in and attend school, and providing supports needed for school success. The law places the responsibility for ensuring the rights of homeless students on states and school districts. McKinney-Vento eligible students have the right to:

- receive a free, appropriate public education;
- enroll in school immediately, even if lacking

documents normally required for enrollment, or having missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness;

- enroll in school and attend classes while the school gathers needed documents;
- continue attending the school of origin<sup>1</sup>, or enroll in the local attendance area school if attending the school of origin is not in the best interest of the student or is contrary to the request of the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth<sup>2</sup>;
- receive transportation to and from the school of origin, if requested by the parent or guardian, or by the local liaison on behalf of an unaccompanied youth; and
- receive educational services comparable to those provided to other students, according to each student's need.

### WHY IS SCHOOL IMPORTANT TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

While students experience instability in their home lives due to homelessness, school is often a place of safety and security. School provides students with a sense of belonging, a consistent and caring environment, and the security of an organized and predictable daily schedule (Moore, 2013), all of which provide a foundation for school success. School also provides basics that the students may not have access to at home, like breakfast and lunch.

As schools continue to increase their focus on producing college- and career-ready graduates, education also becomes an increasingly clear path out of poverty and homelessness for students. Despite the significant educational barriers posed by homelessness, students often cite the desire for a better life as the reason why they continue to work toward graduation.

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*“Through it all, school is probably the only thing that has kept me going. I know that every day that I walk in those doors, I can stop thinking about my problems for the next six hours and concentrate on what is most important to me. Without the support of my school system, I would not be as well off as I am today. School keeps me motivated to move on, and encourages me to find a better life for myself.”*

*Formerly Homeless Student*

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### WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

- Every state has a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, who oversees the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act in school districts throughout the state. To reach your State Coordinator, visit NCHE's website at [https://nche.ed.gov/states/state\\_resources.php](https://nche.ed.gov/states/state_resources.php).
- Every public school district has a local homeless education liaison to help identify, enroll, and support the education of students experiencing homelessness. To find your local liaison, contact your school district's central office or your State Coordinator for Homeless Education.
- NCHE provides information and assistance through a comprehensive website, monthly webinars on various homeless education topics, and a national homeless education helpline. To learn more or get assistance, visit the website at <https://nche.ed.gov/> or contact the helpline at (800) 308-2145 or [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org).
- NCHE's *Homeless Liaison Toolkit* is a comprehensive homeless education resource that assists new and veteran local liaisons in carrying out their responsibilities. While the *Toolkit* is geared towards local liaisons, the information included will be of use to anyone interested in learning more about homeless education. Visit [https://nche.ed.gov/pr/liaison\\_toolkit.php](https://nche.ed.gov/pr/liaison_toolkit.php) to download the *Toolkit* as a whole or by chapter, as needed.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *school of origin* means the school that a child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled, including a preschool. [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(i)].

<sup>2</sup> If the school district believes the school selected is not in the student's best interest, the district must provide a written explanation of its position and information on appeal rights to the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth. For more information, download NCHE's *Dispute Resolution* brief at <http://center.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>.

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals oversee the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at [http://nche.ed.gov/states/state\\_resources.php](http://nche.ed.gov/states/state_resources.php).

For more information on issues related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, contact the NCHE helpline at 800-308-2145 (toll-free) or [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org).

**Local Contact Information:**

A large, empty, light blue rounded rectangular box intended for local contact information.