



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 children and youth experiencing homelessness (CYEH).

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 (McKinney-Vento Act) is a federal law that addresses the educational needs

of CYEH. 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 CYEH. Briefs on additional homeless education topics are available on the [resources page of the NCHE website](#).



THE MCKINNEY-VENTO HOMELESS ASSISTANCE ACT DEFINITION OF HOMELESS McKinney-Vento Act section 725(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 school year (SY), public schools across the nation report the number of students identified as homeless to the U.S. Department of Education (ED). According to NCHE's most recent national homeless education data report, U.S. public schools identified and enrolled 1,374,537 CYEH during SY 2022-23, representing 2.8% of all students enrolled in U.S. public schools. This figure also represents a 14% increase in reported numbers of students experiencing homelessness from SY 2021-22 and a 25% increase from SY 2020-21 (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2024).

HOW IS STUDENT HOMELESSNESS DETERMINED IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Schools use the definition of *homeless* established by the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act (McKinney-Vento Act section 725(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 and youth in the United States and is often referred to as "doubled up." In SY 2022-23, U.S. public schools reported that 75% of students experiencing homelessness were living in doubled-up arrangements (NCHE, 2024). It is important to note that the ED definition of homelessness differs from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition, particularly as it relates to children, youth, and families who are doubling up and their eligibility and prioritization for HUD-funded homeless response assistance (HUD, n.d.).

Staying in emergency, family, domestic violence, and transitional living shelters was the next most common type of homelessness experienced by children and youth during SY 2022-23 and represented over 11% of reported students (NCHE, 2024). When faced with homelessness, some families are able to stay in hotels or motels. During SY 2022-23, 9% of students experiencing homelessness were living in a hotel or motel due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations, making this the third most common type of homelessness reported by public schools (NCHE, 2024). Many CYEH 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 children and youth accounted for more than 4% of identified students who experienced homelessness during SY 2022-23 (NCHE, 2024).

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" (McKinney-Vento Act section 725(6)). Unaccompanied youth make up a larger segment of the homeless population than many people realize, with 123,972 of such youth qualifying as homeless during SY 2022-23. This is an increase of 31.4% from the SY 2020-21 (NCHE, 2024).

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 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. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), 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. In fact, the average hourly wage necessary to be able to afford two-bedroom housing in the United States is \$32.11 and is \$26.74 for one-bedroom housing; these hourly wages are much higher than those earned by 42% of the entire U.S. workforce, or 64 million people (NLIHC, 2024). Recent research shows that 22.4 million American households spend more than one-third of their income on rent and utilities (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2024). In addition, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 10.4 million renter households in 2021 paid more than 50% of their annual income for housing, an increase of 1 million households from 2019 (Mateyka & Yoo, 2023). The allocation of 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 goods can make it difficult to afford basic necessities and lead to housing crises. For roughly two decades (2000-2020), the annual inflation rate averaged 2.1% but reports in January 2025 revealed a 3% annual inflation rate (Burrows, 2025). In addition to housing costs, rising food, energy, vehicle, and medical costs also have a significant impact on household budgets, including the ability to afford those basic necessities. For example, 13.5% of 18 million households in the United States experienced food insecurity in 2023, meaning these households lacked consistent or dependable access to food due to limited resources, including a lack of money (Rabbitt et al., 2024).

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

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). More recently, as a result of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, the United States saw unemployment rates over 14% (Tyson et al., 2025). While the unemployment rate has mostly returned to pre-pandemic levels, long-term unemployment continues to present a significant problem, with more than 21% of people without a job during 2025 falling into this category (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

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 66.5% of personal bankruptcies being related to medical-related expenses or medical problems causing loss of work (Himmelstein et al., 2019). A 2022 study of healthcare debt in America found that 4 in 10 adults, or 41%, have medical- or dental-related debts, with 24% of those debts past due or unable to be paid (Lopes et al., 2022). Of those with medical debts, 63% reported that they had cut back on spending related to food, clothing, or basic household items, and 19% reported that their living situation changed as a result of their medical debts (Lopes et al., 2022). Medical debts and loss of work due to illnesses can cause financial strain that could ultimately lead to a family experiencing homelessness.

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 403 weather and climate disasters where overall damages/costs totaled \$1 billion or more (Smith, 2025). While this may bring to mind the often catastrophic impact of hurricanes, the interior of the country is impacted by natural disasters, as well. Twenty-seven individual weather-related events occurred in 2024, including floods, wildfires, tornadoes, hurricanes, droughts/heatwaves, and winter storms/cold waves, all of which caused significant damage in communities across the country (Smith, 2025).

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

Significant family friction, often over a long period, is a commonly cited reason why youth experiencing homelessness on their own are separated from their families. The National Runaway Safeline (2024) reported that 75% of people who reached out for crisis intervention cited family dynamics as the primary reason for contact. Additionally, youth who experience physical, mental, and/or sexual abuse are up to 40% more likely to run away from home than peers who have not experienced abuse (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.

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, CYEH often change schools frequently, with research from a large urban district showing that CYEH change schools at more than double the rate of their permanently housed peers (Dhaliwal et al., 2021). This high mobility can impact learning as CYEH already have lower school attendance rates than children and youth not experiencing homelessness, which results in fewer instructional days (Richards & Pavlakis, 2022; Tobin, 2016). Additionally, CYEH must adjust to new environments, new curricula, new teachers, and

new classmates, all while still learning the same information other students are expected to master. This can be challenging, with research showing that CYEH have lower academic achievement growth than their permanently housed peers (Cowen, 2017; Pavlakis et al., 2017).

The loss of a home can be traumatic, leaving children and youth with tumultuous feelings that can impact their social and intellectual well-being. 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 CYEH the right to enroll in and attend school, and providing support needed for school success. The law places the responsibility for ensuring the rights of CYEH on states and school districts. Eligible students have the right to:

- receive a free, appropriate public education (McKinney-Vento Act section 721(1));
- enroll in school immediately, even if lacking documents normally required for enrollment, or having missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness (McKinney-Vento Act section 722(g)(3)(C)(i)(I-II));
- enroll in school and attend classes while the school gathers needed documents (McKinney-Vento Act section 722(g)(3)(C)(ii-iii));
- continue attending the school of origin, 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 (McKinney-Vento Act section 722(g)(3)(B)(i-iv));
- 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 (McKinney-Vento Act sections 722(g)(1)(J)(iii) and 722(g)(4)(A)); and
- receive educational services comparable to those provided to other students, according to each student's need (McKinney-Vento Act section 722(g)(4)(B-D)).

WHY IS SCHOOL IMPORTANT TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

While students experience instability due to homelessness, school is often a place of safety and security. School and community supports can help to make the negative impacts of homelessness less severe and are often referred to as “protective factors” (Clemens et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2023; Wilkins et al., 2015). These protective factors include access to school-based support, community resources, and interventions that address the academic, social-emotional, and physical challenges associated with experiencing homelessness. For example, 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 access to basic needs that students may not have access to at home, like breakfast and lunch.

¹The 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. (McKinney-Vento Act section 722(g)(3)(I)(i)).

²If 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](#).

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.

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP CHILDREN AND YOUTH 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. You can identify your state coordinator by visiting [NCHE's data webpage](#). Every public school district has a local homeless education liaison to help identify, enroll, and support CYEH. 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, webinars on various homeless education topics, and a national homeless education helpline. To learn more or get assistance, visit the [NCHE website](#) or contact the helpline at 305-306-8495 or NCHE.helpline@safalpartners.com.
- 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. You can download the NCHE [Homeless Liaison Toolkit](#) as a whole or by chapter, as needed.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

- [National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth](#) - The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) is a national membership association dedicated to ensuring educational equity and excellence for children and youth experiencing homelessness. NAEHCY connects educators, parents, advocates, researchers, and service providers to ensure school enrollment and attendance and overall success for children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by the lack of safe, permanent, and adequate housing.
- [National Network for Youth](#) - The National Network for Youth (NN4Y) is dedicated to preventing and eradicating youth homelessness in America. NN4Y work in communities with youth who have experienced homelessness, service providers, and systems to help accelerate the community's progress in ending homelessness and human trafficking among young people. NN4Y envisions a future in which all young people have a safe place to call home with endless opportunities to achieve their fullest potential.

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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

- [SchoolHouse Connection](#) - Founded in 2016, SchoolHouse Connection (SHC) is a national non-profit organization working to overcome homelessness through education. SHC provides strategic advocacy and practical assistance in partnership with early childhood programs, schools, institutions of higher education, service providers, families, and youth.

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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 data webpage](#).

For more information on issues related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, contact the NCHE helpline at **305-306-8495** or NCHE.helpline@safalpartners.com.

