

IDENTIFICATION:



Identifying all students experiencing homelessness is critical as it allows liaisons to help students who may have difficulty with enrollment, allows liaisons to connect students to educational support and community services, and increases the likelihood that homeless students will overcome the extra educational challenges they face.

The McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Act provides a definition of homeless children and youth to be used by state and local educational agencies (LEAs) in 42 U.S.C. § 11434(a)(2). It defines homeless children and youth to be those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Under the larger umbrella of lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, the law also provides several examples of situations that meet the definition. The examples include children and youth:

- sharing housing due to a loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- living in hotels, motels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to a lack of alternative, adequate housing;
- abandoned in hospitals;
- living in a public or private place not designated for, or normally used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar places;
- living in one of the above circumstances and who are migratory according to the definition in Section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

When considering if a student meets the criteria in the definition provided by the law, it is important to remember that the list provided is a guide and more situations may exist that meet the criteria than are actually listed. However, liaisons must always rely on the criteria outlined in the law of lacking fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence as the ultimate test of whether a student's housing meets the definition.

STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFICATION:

- **STANDARD FORMS:** Use a standard enrollment form that asks about the family's or youth's living situation to gather initial information. You can find links to sample forms in this toolkit. If the form indicates that the student may be homeless, ask questions to get a better sense of the family's or youth's circumstances.
- **AVOID STIGMAS:** Avoid using the word "homeless" as the stigma associated with the word may lead parents or youth to insist they are not homeless, even though their living situation would fit the McKinney-Vento definition. Tell them the purpose of the questions is to determine if they are eligible for extra services like transportation, clothing, school supplies, and/or tutoring.
- **PRACTICE PRIVACY:** Do not contact persons or agencies outside the school system to obtain information about the student's living situation; this would likely violate the family's or youth's privacy and dignity as well as the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). For example, do not contact landlords, public housing agencies, or law enforcement to verify living situations. See sample questions to assist with gathering information directly from parents, guardians, or youth regarding their living situation.
- **PROVIDE SPACE:** Respect the family's or youth's privacy by talking to them in a private space where other students and faculty members cannot overhear the conversation.
- **BE INFORMATIVE:** Share information on the rights and services available under the McKinney-Vento Act for eligible children and youth, and ask the parent/guardian or youth to provide the information you need to make the determination of eligibility. Understand that families or youth may be hesitant to answer questions for various reasons that include a desire for privacy, concerns related to domestic violence, or fear of losing their children or housing; however, in most cases you will have enough information to make a determination.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

TO ASK THE STUDENTS OR PARENTS FOR
INFORMATION GATHERING

The following questions are designed to elicit information that is relevant for the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless; that is, to determine the extent to which the children and their families or the youth are living in a fixed, regular, and adequate living situation.

**Please note it is best to not ask all of the questions listed at once. Asking only one or two questions from the list should be sufficient to make an eligibility determination.*

**If you use a form that only requires boxes be checked for answers (see sample) you will need to ask fewer questions.*

FIXED:

A fixed residence is one that is stationary, permanent, and not subject to change.

- Is this a permanent or temporary arrangement?
- Are you looking for another place to live?
- Do you plan to move out soon?
- Why are you staying in your current place?
- Where were you living right before this place? Why did you leave?
- Where would you go if you couldn't stay where you are?
- Are you staying with friends/relatives just for a little while?
- Did you and your friends/relatives decide to move in together and share a home and expenses for the long term? Or is this a temporary situation for you?
- Could your friends/relatives ask you to leave if they wanted to?
- Are you all sharing the home equally, or are you more like guests in the home?

REGULAR:

A regular residence is one that is used on a regular [i.e., nightly] basis.

- Do you stay in the same place every night?
- Do you have a key to the place where you are living?
- Do you move around a lot?
- How long have you been at that place? How long do you plan to stay?
- How long did you live in your last place?

ADEQUATE:

An adequate residence is one that is sufficient for meeting both the physical and psychological needs typically met in home environments.

- How many people are living in the home? How many bedrooms/bathrooms does it have?
- Are you and your children sharing a room? How many people are staying in one room?
- Are you and your children sleeping in a bedroom, or a public area, like a dining room?
- Does the home have heat/electricity/running water?
- What condition is the home in? Does it keep out rain and wind? Is it safe? Is it warm and dry? Do the windows have glass panes?
- Can you come and go as you please?

If you are still not sure if a student is eligible for McKinney-Vento services, consider the following resources:

- Contact your district homeless education liaison (if you are a school staff person).
- Contact your county homeless education liaison.
- Contact your State Coordinator for Homeless Education.
- Call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or check out their helpful brief <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/identification.pdf>