



National Center for Homeless Education
Supporting the Education of Children and
Youth Experiencing Homelessness
www.serve.org/nche



MCKINNEY-VENTO LAW INTO PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES

Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: An Introduction to the Issues

INTRODUCTION

The word *homeless* typically does not bring to mind images of children and youth, but the reality is many homeless people are under the age of 18. Some of them are a part of families experiencing homelessness, while others are on their own, despite their young age. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. § 11431 et seq.) is a federal law that addresses the needs of homeless people, including the educational needs of children and youth. This brief provides basic information about the scope of the problem, the impact of homelessness on education, and the rights of children and youth to a public education. Briefs on additional homeless education topics are available at <http://center.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>.

HOW MANY CHILDREN AND YOUTH EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS?

Rates of homelessness in the United States among children and youth are higher today than at any point since data has been collected on homelessness. 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 2011-2012 school year, schools identified

Who is homeless?

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (as reauthorized by Title X, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 2. 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; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
 3. 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...
 4. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 5. 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).

1,168,354 children and youth as homeless. During that same school year, 43 states reported an increase in the number of children and youth who experienced homelessness during the year (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2013).

WHO IS HOMELESS?

Schools use the definition of *homeless* provided in section 11434a of the McKinney-Vento Act. It states that any person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence is homeless. While the law mandates the criteria of fixed, regular, and adequate to assess housing, it also provides several examples of homelessness. Sharing the housing of others 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 75% of all homeless children living in doubled-up conditions (NCHE, 2013). Staying in emergency, family, domestic violence, and transitional living shelters is the next most common type of homelessness experienced by students. 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 is the third most common type of homelessness reported by public schools. Many children and youth also live in unsheltered situations, which can include campgrounds or public places not meant for housing, such as parks, bus or train stations, and condemned or abandoned buildings. Unsheltered homeless children and youth accounted for more than 41,000 students identified by schools during the 2011-2012 school year (NCHE, 2013).

In addition to providing a definition of *homeless*, the McKinney-Vento Act defines *unaccompanied youth* as youth who are "not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian" [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)]. Unaccompanied youth make up a much larger segment of the homeless population than many people realize. While not all unaccompanied youth lack fixed, regular, and

adequate housing, nearly 60,000 unaccompanied youth qualified as homeless during the 2011-2012 school year (NCHE, 2013).

WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME HOMELESS?

Considering the myths and stereotypes that persist regarding people experiencing homelessness, it is important to understand some of the factors 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 standing, but it 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. 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 or no resources to deal with financial crises and can often lead to homelessness.

Could your job be eliminated due to cutbacks or a changing job market?

It is no surprise that a financial crisis, like the loss of a job, can leave a family homeless. During the Great Recession, which spanned between December 2007 and early 2010, more than 8.7 million jobs were lost in the United States. While the economy has seen decided job growth, more than 1.1 million jobs have yet to be recovered, leaving many without work. Long-term unemployment presents a

significant problem as well; nearly two-fifths of people without a job during December 2013 fell into this category (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, n.d.) As unemployment rates increased, so did foreclosure rates. More than 4.4 million foreclosures occurred during and in the wake of the Great Recession. Renters and homeowners alike have been impacted as landlords also lost their properties. The National Low Income Housing Coalition (n.d.) estimates that renters make up as many as 40% of the households facing foreclosure.

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 expenses can deplete family resources; as much as 62% of all personal bankruptcies are related to healthcare costs (Himmelstein, Thorne, Warren, & Woolhandler, 2009b). In the majority of bankruptcy cases linked to healthcare expenses, the families owned homes, included members who had attended college, and had middle-class incomes prior to their crises (Himmelstein, Thorne, Warren, & Woolhandler, 2009a).

Have you or has anyone close to you ever struggled to make ends meet?

Rising costs of basic household commodities

POTENTIAL WARNING SIGNS OF HOMELESSNESS

Possible warning signs of homelessness among school-age children and youth include:

- a lack of educational continuity;
- school attendance and transportation problems;
- poor health and nutrition;
- poor hygiene;
- lack of privacy and personal space after school;
- social and behavioral concerns; and
- reactions or statements by the parent, guardian, child, or youth.

For more information, visit <http://center.serve.org/nche/nche/warning.html>.

can lead to housing crises as well. During the peak of the Great Recession, gasoline prices climbed significantly. Rising food costs provide another example of a basic commodity that can significantly impact households. During the recent economic decline, the number of households reporting an inability to provide food for all members of the household increased, and households with children struggled to provide food for their families at greater rates than those without children (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.)

Could you ever experience a flood, fire, tornado, storm, or other natural disaster?

Natural disasters often strike with little to no warning and can devastate a community. Since 1980, the United States experienced 144 natural disasters with damages totaling \$1 billion or more (National Weather Service, n.d.) While this immediately brings to mind the often catastrophic impact of hurricanes, the interior of the country has not escaped the impact of natural disasters. Floods, fires, tornadoes, and winter storms have all caused significant damage to homes 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 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). Conversely, sometimes the issue is simply a housing problem and not one related to family function; when families are forced to double-up with others, the housing may not be able to accommodate the entire family. These and other threats to family stability can often lead to youth homelessness. Nearly half of unaccompanied youth were forced out of their homes and another 22% described the reason they left home as a combination of having been thrown out and having run away (Benoit-Bryan, 2013).

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. Increasing homelessness among families with children and youth became particularly concerning as more was learned about the problems students face when juggling homelessness and academic demands. 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 challenges created by homelessness and guarantees homeless students the right to enroll, attend, and succeed in school. The law places the responsibility for guaranteeing the rights of homeless students on states and school districts. McKinney-Vento eligible students have the right to:

- enroll in school immediately, even if lacking documents normally required for enrollment;
- enroll in school and attend classes while the school gathers needed documents;
- enroll in the local attendance area school or continue attending their school of origin (the school they attended when permanently housed or the school in which they were last enrolled), if that is the parent's, guardian's, or unaccompanied youth's preference and is feasible;¹

¹ If the school district believes the school selected is not in the student's best interest, then the district must provide the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth with a written explanation of its position and inform him/her of the right to appeal its decision. For more information, download NCHC's *Dispute Resolution* brief at <http://center.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>.

- receive transportation to and from the school of origin, if requested by the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth;
- receive educational services comparable to those provided to other students, according to the student's need; and
- not be stigmatized or segregated on the basis of homeless status.

WHY IS SCHOOL IMPORTANT TO HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

While students experience instability in their home lives due to homelessness, school is often a place of safety and security. Research has shown that no common set of characteristics describes the typical homeless student, but all students do need a sense of belonging, a consistent and caring environment, and the security of an organized and predictable classroom and school schedule to succeed (Moore, 2013). School also provides basics that the students may not have 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 homelessness for students. Despite the significant challenges created by homelessness that make getting an education difficult, students often cite the desire for a better life as the reason why they continue to work toward graduation.

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.

Former Homeless Student
and LeTendre Scholar

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP HOMELESS STUDENTS?

- 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.
- Every state has a State Coordinator, much like every school district has a local liaison. To reach your State Coordinator, visit NCHE's website at http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.
- NCHE provides assistance through a comprehensive website that includes a variety of materials, monthly webinars on various topics related to homelessness and education, and a national Helpline. To learn more or get assistance, visit the website at <http://center.serve.org/nche/index.php> or contact the Helpline at (800) 308-2145 or homeless@serve.org.
- NCHE's *Homeless Liaison Toolkit* is a comprehensive homeless education resource that will assist new and veteran local liaisons in carrying out their responsibilities. *Chapter 17 - Additional Resources* includes links to a wealth of information and expertise that can help increase practitioners' capacity to serve homeless children and youth. While the *Toolkit* targets local liaisons, information included will help anyone interested in learning more about homeless education. Visit http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/liaison_toolkit.php to download the *Toolkit* as a whole or by chapter, as needed.

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This brief was developed by:

National Center for Homeless Education

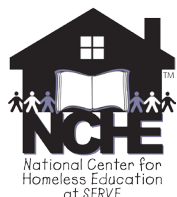
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Updated Winter 2014

NCHE is supported by the U.S. Department of Education Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs. The contents of this brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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 will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.

Local Contact Information: