



Youth Homelessness and Higher Education: An Overview

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Many Youth Experiencing Homelessness Aspire to Jobs that Require Postsecondary Education.

Despite facing many challenges resulting from deep poverty, abandonment, and abuse and neglect, many youth who experience homelessness wish to pursue careers that require some form of postsecondary education. A California Homeless Youth Project study found that more than 90 percent of youth interviewed specified a career goal that required education beyond high school. Yet only 16 percent said they believed they would be able to attend or graduate college within the next five years.¹

Youth Experiencing Homelessness Face Barriers to Pursuing College.

- A 2016 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study found that homeless youth experience challenges that make it harder for them to pursue college, such as weak academic foundations, limited family support, and lack of awareness of available financial resources.²
- In response to these barriers, federal law (the McKinney-Vento Act) contains several provisions designed to increase college readiness and access, including requirements for counselors to prepare and advise homeless students for college, and requirements for school district liaisons to inform unaccompanied homeless youth of their status as independent students for federal student aid and help them obtain documentation required to qualify for such aid.³
- According to a [2019 national study](#), young adults who experienced homelessness were less than one-third as likely to be enrolled in a four-year college as stably housed peers. Yet higher education also appears to be a protective factor against young adult homelessness: the same study showed four-year college enrollment to be nearly four times higher for young adults without experiences of homelessness in the prior 12 months (52% compared to 15%).

¹ <http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/CollegeSupportsReportPDF4-27-17.pdf>

² <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-16-343>

³ [McKinney-Vento Act: Quick Reference](#)

A Significant Number of College Students Experience Homelessness.

- According to a national study by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 4.2 million youth and young adults experienced homelessness on their own during a 12-month period. This number includes 3.5 million young adults between the ages of 18-25.⁴
- Chapin Hall's study also found 29% of young adults who experienced homelessness were enrolled in college or another educational program at the time that they experienced homelessness.⁵
- For the first time in 2023, the federal government released data on homelessness as part of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and found 8% of undergraduates and 5% of graduate students are experiencing homelessness.⁶

Youth Experiencing Homelessness Encounter Challenges with Financial Aid.

- Unaccompanied homeless youth are not living with, or supported by, a parent or guardian and cannot obtain parental income information. Therefore, under the Higher Education Act, they are considered independent students and do not need to provide a parent's signature or information about parents' income on the FAFSA.⁷
- A 2016 GAO report found that burdensome financial aid program rules (including the requirement to document status each year) can make it more difficult for unaccompanied homeless youth to obtain federal financial assistance for college.⁸
- [An analysis of recent FAFSA data](#) shows the alarming impact of the pandemic on FAFSA completion for youth experiencing homelessness and youth with experience in foster care. It finds that:
 - In the 2020-2021 academic year, the number of unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) FAFSA determinations declined by almost 10% from the prior year (2019-2020). The number of FAFSA applicants who were determined to be independent because both parents were deceased, or the applicants were in foster care or dependents or wards of the court decreased by 7% from the prior year (2019-2020). Both declines are significantly larger than the 1% decrease in the total number of FAFSA applications submitted in 2020-21.⁹

⁴ <http://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>

⁵ <http://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>

⁶ [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study - Overview](#)

⁷ <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/homeless-youth.pdf>

⁸ [Higher Education: Actions Needed to Improve Access to Federal Financial Assistance for Homeless and Foster Youth | U.S. GAO](#)

⁹ ["Working Harder Just to Be Seen and Heard:" Barriers to Financial Aid for Homeless and Foster Youth](#)

- The number of youth who requested FAFSA homeless determinations but did not receive them by the end of the application cycle increased by 23% from the prior year (2019-2020), and by 34% from 2018-2019.

Many Students Who Experience Homelessness are Also Food Insecure.

- Food insecurity is the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.¹⁰
- The same NPSAS contains the first nationally representative data on food insecurity and found that 23% of undergraduates and 12% of graduate students are experiencing food insecurity.¹¹

Homelessness Impacts the Academic Progress of College Students.

According to California State University's 2018 study, many students experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, or both had lower GPAs and stronger academic concerns than students who reported being housed and/or food secure.¹²

Institutions of Higher Education are Responding in a Variety of Ways.

- The [California State University system](#) is creating basic needs assessment surveys to learn more about their student population.
- Institutions have included questions about homelessness in their applications and have used other strategies, such as partnering with the financial aid office, to identify homeless college students.¹³
- SchoolHouse Connection has created a series of [tip sheets](#) that summarize best practices from across the nation on the following topics: Transitioning from High School to College; Identifying Homeless College Students; Housing On and Off Campus; Accessing Financial Aid; Creating and Sustaining Campus-Based Programs; and Parenting Students.¹⁴

¹⁰ [Definitions of Food Security](#)

¹¹ [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study - Overview](#)

¹² [Study Of Student Basic Needs – California State University](#)

¹³ [Strategies for Identifying Homeless College Students](#)

¹⁴ [Tips for Helping Homeless Youth Succeed in College](#)

Policy Change is Underway in State Legislatures and the U.S. Congress.

- Some [state legislatures](#) have enacted laws to support college students experiencing homelessness, addressing issues ranging from housing to tuition and fee waivers.¹⁵
- Additional states are continuing to pursue higher education and homelessness legislation.¹⁶
- In 2020, the FAFSA Simplification Act (Public Law No: 116-260) was signed into law. This legislation includes significant financial aid policies, including revisions to the Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA) for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness and former foster youth. The U.S. Department of Education released [guidance](#) in July 2024 stating that these provisions are in effect". The provisions include:¹⁷
 - Homeless or foster care status does not need to be redetermined every year.
 - Determinations of unaccompanied homeless youth and foster youth must be made as quickly as practicable.
 - More officials and programs are authorized to verify unaccompanied homeless youth.
 - School district homeless liaisons or their designee;
 - Director or a designee of a director of an emergency or transitional shelter, street outreach program, homeless youth drop-in center, or other program serving individuals who are experiencing homelessness;
 - Director or a designee of a director of a program funded under a TRIO or Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for an Undergraduate program ("GEAR UP") grant;
 - A financial aid administrator at the current institution or at another institution who previously made a determination.
 - Financial aid administrators must accept documentation from authorized entities.
 - Financial aid administrators must make unaccompanied homeless youth determinations for youth who cannot get determinations from other authorities.
- The U.S. Congress is contemplating additional changes to the Higher Education Act, including those that will affect youth experiencing homelessness.

¹⁵ [State Laws Supporting College Students Experiencing Homelessness](#)

¹⁶ [State Advocacy](#)

¹⁷ [The FAFSA Simplification Act: Youth Experiencing Homelessness and Youth with Experience in Foster Care](#)