

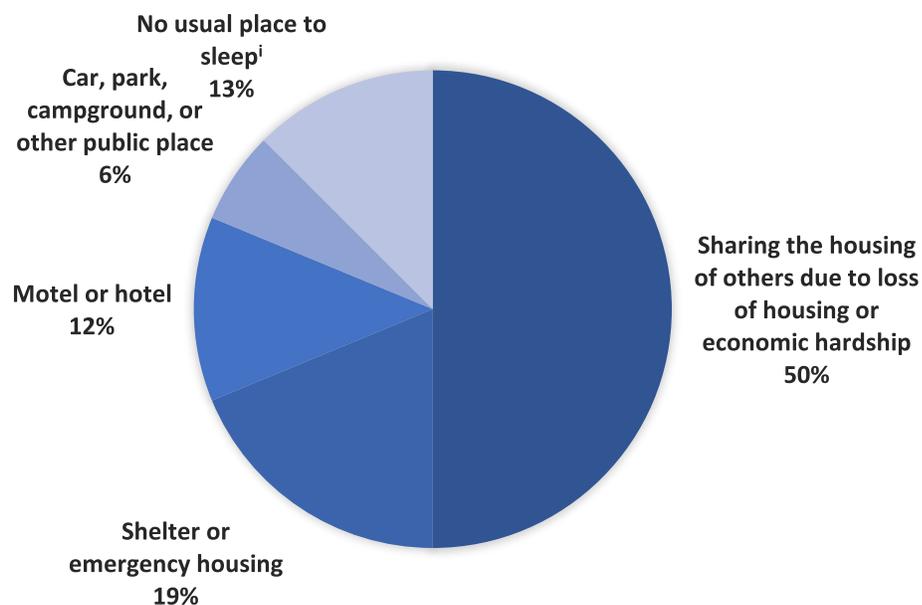


STUDENT HOMELESSNESS: LESSONS FROM THE YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

PART IV: VULNERABILITY OF DIFFERENT HOMELESS SITUATIONS

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) was first developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 1990 to assess the health risk behaviors of youth and adults in the United States. For the first time since the survey has been widely administered, the 2017 YRBS optional question list included two questions pertaining to homelessness. SchoolHouse Connection analyzed demographic and risk factor data from the YRBS in 17 states¹, comparing high school students experiencing homelessness and those not experiencing homelessness. This series shares the striking and heartbreaking results of that analysis, with tangible action steps schools can take to promote safety and health for students experiencing homelessness.

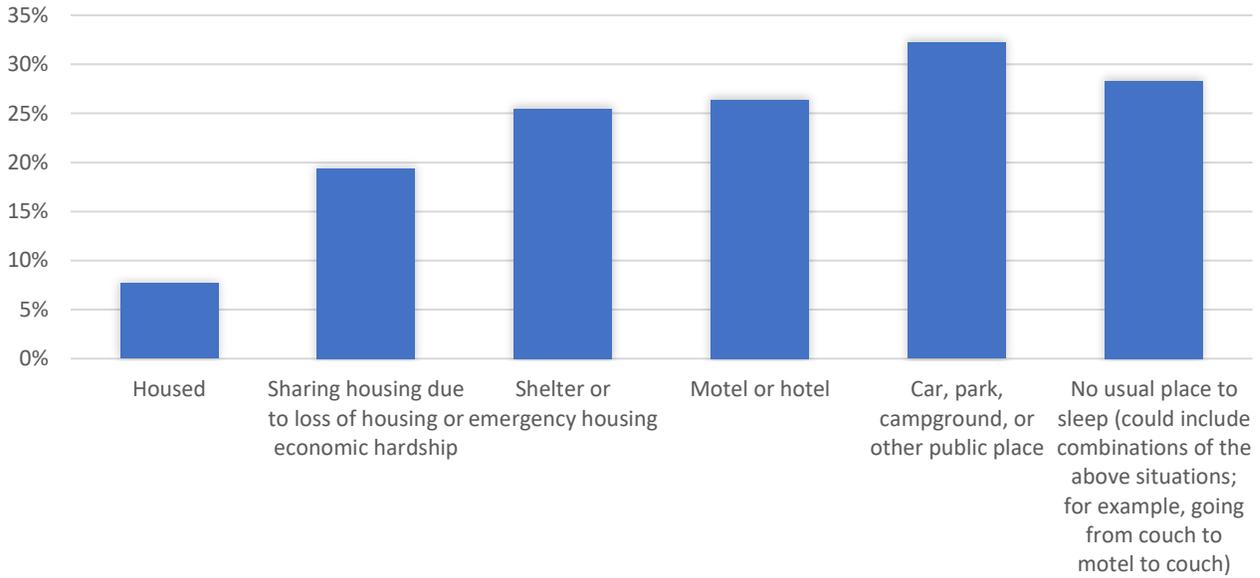
SchoolHouse Connection analyzed YRBS data to determine the vulnerability of youth in different homeless living situations to a variety of health risk behaviors. When asked where they usually slept during the past 30 days, high school students reported homelessness as follows:



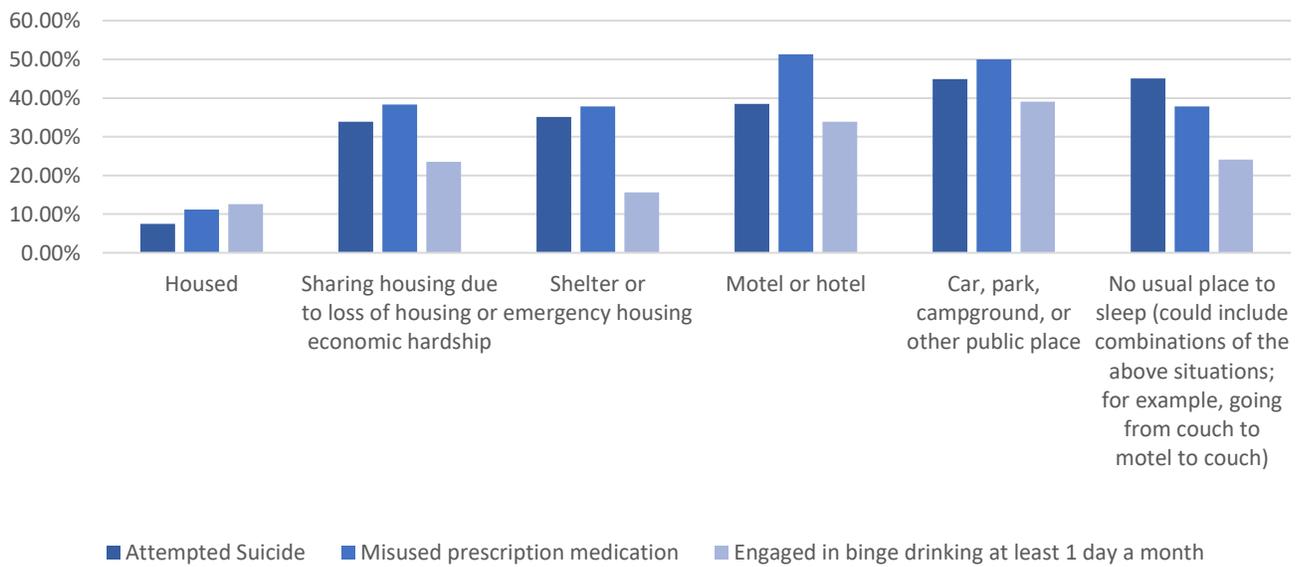
ⁱ While “no usual place to sleep” does not fall under a specific subcategory of homelessness defined under the McKinney-Vento Act (42 U.S.C. §11434a), the answer indicates that students may have been moving so frequently that they could not identify a usual sleeping arrangement in any single category, even looking back over only the previous thirty days. Part of the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of homelessness is that the living situation is not “regular”; it is subject to change. These students also indicated health risk factors comparable to students in homeless situations. Therefore, while we cannot determine that these students lived in any particular subcategory of homelessness, we believe the answer “no usual place to sleep” is very likely to indicate a level of mobility that would make the students’ living situation not regular, and therefore homeless.”

Analyzing risk behaviors of students in each of these living situations revealed that youths' vulnerability to violence, suicide, substance abuse, hunger, bullying, and lack of sleep was comparable across different living situations. For every risk behavior studied, the incidence among students in any homeless living situation was significantly higher than that of their housed peers.

For example, the following percentages of students in each living situation reported having been raped:



Similarly, struggles with mental health and substance abuse were significantly higher among students reporting homelessness, and comparable across homeless living situations:



YRBS homelessness data show that high school students experiencing homelessness are very vulnerable to a variety of harms to their safety, health, and well-being. This vulnerability crosses all homeless living situations.

Students experiencing homelessness are at dire risk of rape, assault, suicide, substance abuse, hunger, bullying and other risks, whether sleeping in a motel, a car, a shelter, temporarily with other people, or moving so frequently that they cannot identify a usual sleeping arrangement over a thirty-day period.

The YRBS data on the vulnerability of youth across different homeless situations is consistent with [previous research](#) showing that homeless students who stay with others temporarily (“doubled up”), or in motels, have similarly poor academic outcomes as those who stay in shelters or are unsheltered. [Other research](#) shows the fluidity of homelessness for youth and young families: most do not stay in one place while experiencing homelessness, but rather move frequently between different situations.

“My family lived in motels, in cars, on couches and in basements while I was in school. Living in these conditions took a huge toll on my mental and physical health. We lived with adults I didn’t feel safe around. We didn’t have access to a kitchen or a quiet place to sleep. Despite having a roof over our heads, we were at serious risk for harm.” -Kara Freise, SchoolHouse Connection Young Leader

Action Steps for Schools

1. Conduct [comprehensive activities to identify](#) students experiencing homelessness in all living situations. Ensure that homeless liaisons, which the McKinney-Vento Act requires every school district and charter school to designate, have adequate capacity to lead these comprehensive identification activities.²
2. [Support the Homeless Children and Youth Act](#) (HCYA), which would make children and youth in all homeless living situations eligible for homeless assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD’s definition of homelessness excludes most students living in motels and those sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. [HCYA](#) would allow local communities to assess the vulnerability of all homeless children and youth and provide assistance tailored to the most vulnerable populations.
3. Raise awareness in your school district and community about the different kinds of homeless living situations, and the vulnerabilities associated with them. Campaigns like [#CouchesDontCount](#) are an example of how to shine a light on hidden homelessness.
4. Adopt a trauma-informed approach to education. Provide training for educators and administrators in recognizing [behavioral, social, and cognitive characteristics](#) which may indicate reactions to trauma. Foster quality relationships between students and educators and make all students aware of school-based support personnel (school psychologists, school nurses, administrators, social workers). Equip students to identify potentially harmful situations and take direct action using school-based intervention programs such as [Green Dot](#).

5. Use school-based mental health screenings, prevention, and treatment. A multi-tiered approach provides all students with [school-based prevention](#) and mental health wellness initiatives. Provide selective interventions to students exhibiting risky behaviors or displaying characteristics of being at-risk for substance abuse/mental health disorders. Students with chronic mental health issues and serious problem behaviors should receive individualized intervention from school psychologists, IEP team members, social workers, and other staff. Screening procedures must be context-sensitive, as some students experiencing trauma may not be identified if they are functioning well in school. When possible, collaborate with community-based mental health providers to provide a continuum of services in case students' needs go beyond the capacity of the school.

Resources

The [Homeless Children and Youth Act](#) (H.R. 2001)

National Institute on Drug Abuse, [Preventing Drug Use Among Children and Adolescents](#)

Resource Sharing Project, [Working with Teen Survivors of Sexual Violence](#)

Safe Supportive Learning, [Providing School-based Mental Health Services](#)

Violence Prevention Works, [Preventing Dating Violence](#)

1 AK, AR, CA, CO, DE, HI, ID, IL, KS, KY, ME, MT, NH, NC, PA, VA, WI.

2 The McKinney-Vento Act requires that liaisons be “able to carry out the duties described” in the law, which includes ensuring that children and youth experiencing homelessness “are identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination activities with other entities and agencies.”