



Why We Use the Phrase “Experiencing Homelessness”

“I was only 9 years old when our house got foreclosed. I thought it was just going to be another couple of months and then we would have a house of our own. But that didn’t happen. Ever since then, I’ve kind of been house-hopping, couch-hopping and living in motels, doing what I need to do to live. I’m never houseless, but I’ve always been homeless.”

- Paige, age 18, [“What’s Homelessness Really Like,” New York Times](#)

In recent years, the terms “unhoused,” “houseless,” and “housing insecurity” have gained popularity in public conversations about homelessness. While most public discussions on homelessness are centered on single adults, many children, youth, and families also experience homelessness, and these terms are increasingly used to refer to them.

More people – from members of the media to our coalition partners – have begun to ask us about these terms, and why we at SchoolHouse Connection have chosen primarily to use the phrase “experiencing homelessness.” In responding, it is not our intent to tell people what to say or how to talk about homelessness. Phrases fall in and out of popularity over time, people adopt new terms (often based on what they hear others say), and language will continue to evolve. We write here to explain the choices that we have made, knowing that language shapes perception, and that perception informs actions. In short, it matters *both* what we say *and* what we do.

At SchoolHouse Connection, we have made an intentional choice to primarily use the phrase “experiencing homelessness,” rather than “unhoused,” “houseless,” or “housing insecure,” when we communicate to the general public and to policymakers about child and youth homelessness. Here’s why.

Our goal is to help the public better understand how homelessness is experienced by children, youth, and families; the protections and services provided by law; and the need for stronger policies and more support.

Federal early care and education laws correctly recognize the reality of child, youth, and family homelessness, and therefore use [a definition of homelessness](#) that specifically includes children and youth who share the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. It also includes those in motels due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations. This “hidden homelessness” is very common among children, youth, and families, due to lack of shelter space, as well as fear of child welfare and other authorities. In fact, [more than 80%](#) of children and youth identified as homeless by public schools are staying with others temporarily, or in motels, when they are first identified as experiencing homelessness. These temporary situations are very unstable, often unsafe, and put children,

youth, and families at risk of harm. [A number of studies](#) find that children and youth who stay with other people temporarily or in motels have educational risks and outcomes that are comparable to or worse than the risks and outcomes for those who stay in shelters or are unsheltered.

Early care and education agencies have specific requirements to identify and provide services to children, youth, and families who meet this definition of homelessness, but they can only do so once they have properly conducted outreach and training – and that means understanding the legal early care and education definition of homelessness. So we also stick with the phrase “homelessness” in our communications to the public because any other way of referring to the experience of homelessness would not track the terminology of the laws that provide critical protections and services for children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness.

Phrases like “houseless,” and “unhoused” contribute to the misconception that if people have roofs over their heads, they are not experiencing homelessness.

This makes our work in explaining the reality of child and youth homelessness to policymakers and to the public – including early care and educational professionals – even more difficult. These phrases reinforce stereotypes about what homelessness is, and who experiences it; they keep children, youth, and families who experience homelessness even further out of national conversations on homelessness.

“Housing insecurity,” too, is sometimes used to refer to “homelessness,” even when situations that are being described very clearly meet the early care and education laws’ definition of homelessness.

The term “housing insecurity” can minimize – and often seems to be *intended* to minimize – the harsh, traumatic realities of families and youth who are staying with others temporarily or in motels. The term may be used by proponents of [the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s narrow definition of homelessness](#) as a form of triage to relegate children, youth, and families to a second, lower tier for responses to homelessness. This term also can be confusing and misleading for early care and education professionals, who have specific responsibilities for identifying and serving children and youth who meet the legal definition of homelessness (not “housing insecurity”) for early care and education programs.

The terms “houseless,” “unhoused,” and “housing insecurity” put an emphasis on housing as the sole condition to be addressed. But homelessness is a complex phenomenon with many contributing factors and different kinds of instability.

For children and youth, homelessness is the lack of a safe and stable place to live, grow, and thrive. Its causes are complex, and may involve factors that are unrelated to the lack of affordable housing – factors such as domestic violence, parental addiction or mental health challenges, or abuse and neglect. A [national study](#) found that the top three risk factors for youth and young adult homelessness were lack of a high school degree or GED; being pregnant or having a child; and having a low-income. Implicitly reducing homelessness to a narrow housing problem inaccurately conveys the complexity of homelessness, and can lead to misguided attempts at solutions that address only one symptom, rather than multiple root causes.

Finally, we use the phrase “experiencing homelessness” because of the many children, youth, and parents who have told us that homelessness is something that happened to them – it does not define them. It is something they went through, it is not who they are.

The phrase “experiencing homelessness” emphasizes this powerful insight from young people and parents. It conveys that children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness are first and foremost children, youth, and families. Homelessness is a situation that they are in – that they are *experiencing* – and while it creates tremendous barriers, it can be overcome, and collectively, we can pursue multi-faced policies to solve it.

Addressing Stigma and Shame in Communicating with Families and Youth

We recognize the stigma and shame that the word “homeless” brings, particularly for children, youth, and families. We know that the word itself creates barriers to identification and services. But “unhoused,” “houseless,” and “housing insecure” are *equally* stigmatizing, with their emphasis on deficits. In fact, all of these phrases have negative connotations because homelessness is a negative experience. When the purpose of communication is to help the public, policymakers, and early care and education professionals understand homelessness, euphemisms should not be used to obscure the harsh realities.

However, to avoid the stigma of any of these phrases when speaking to children, youth, and families, and when conducting outreach, skilled early care and education professionals avoid the word “homeless” and these other phrases altogether. They use phrases that describe the actual living situation, rather than the person. In a school setting, they may use phrases like “Students in Transition” or “Students in Temporary Housing,” or give their programs names like “Project Connect” or “Project Access” or “Project HEART.” Some educators may refer to “McKinney-Vento students” as a way to call attention to the law without using the phrase “homeless.”

Ultimately, what we *do* about homelessness matters more than the language we use to describe it. But language shapes our perceptions and understanding, and therefore our actions. So we

choose our words carefully, considering who we are communicating with, and the purpose of our communication.

To learn more about the experience of homelessness directly from young people and parents, we recommend SchoolHouse Connection's "[Hidden Homelessness](#)" series and [Parenting Through Homelessness and COVID-19: The Unfiltered Truth](#).