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How Dedicated Federal Funding Supports the Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness



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In the 2020-21 school year, more than 25 million children and youth – roughly half of all elementary and secondary students in the United States – attended schools in school districts that lacked dedicated funding to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. This significant funding gap increases the likelihood that many children and youth experiencing homelessness will not be identified, and even in cases where they are identified, that they will not receive the educational protections and services that can stabilize their education and their lives. Ensuring access to these supports is an important part of creating a school system that meets the needs of all our nation’s children and youth.

SchoolHouse Connection and Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan analyzed publicly-available [preK-12 federal education data](#) for the 2020-2021 school year to examine patterns that are correlated with under-identifying and inadequately supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness. Key findings include:

1. [The Likelihood Of Under-Identification Is Much Higher In Schools Without Dedicated Homeless Education Funding.](#)
2. [Rural Areas Enroll A Disproportionate Share Of Children And Youth Experiencing Homelessness, But Have The Largest Share Of School Districts Without Dedicated Homeless Education Funding.](#)
3. [Charter Schools Are Over-Represented Among School Districts Reporting No Children And Youth Experiencing Homelessness.](#)
4. [In Addition To Underidentification Challenges, Many Students Experiencing Homelessness Attend Schools That Receive No Dedicated Support To Meet Their Unique Needs.](#)
5. [The Number of Local Educational Agencies Receiving Dedicated Homeless Education Funding More Than Doubled as a Result of a Bipartisan Amendment to the American Rescue Plan Act.](#)

KEY FINDINGS

1. The Likelihood Of Under-Identification Is Much Higher In Schools Without Dedicated Homeless Education Funding

When children and youth experiencing homelessness are not identified by public schools, they miss out on critical educational protections and services that can stabilize their education and their lives. Inadequate dedicated homeless education funding through the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program contributes to under-identification.

Our analysis of federal education data builds on other analyses (including [CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey data](#) and [a recent Center for Public Integrity investigation](#)), and shows a strong correlation between lack of dedicated homeless education funding and under-identification of students experiencing homelessness.

- One-quarter (25%) of all school districts – 4,930 school districts – reported no students experiencing homelessness. These school districts collectively enrolled 300,599 students.
- 92% of the school districts that reported no students experiencing homelessness also received no dedicated homeless education funding.

2. Rural Areas Enroll A Disproportionate Share Of Children And Youth Experiencing Homelessness, But Have The Largest Share Of School Districts Without Dedicated Homeless Education Funding.

- Despite structural challenges inherent in identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness in rural school districts, children and youth were more likely to experience homelessness in these areas than their share of the school population would suggest: rural school districts enrolled 20% of all students experiencing homelessness, despite only serving 15% of students overall.
- When compared to school districts in cities, suburbs, and towns, rural areas had the largest proportion of school districts (88%) without dedicated homeless education funding. This is of particular concern because in rural areas, social services are often very limited and hard to access, making schools one of the only sources of support for children and youth experiencing homelessness.

3. Charter Schools Are Over-Represented Among School Districts Reporting No Children And Youth Experiencing Homelessness.

- Thirty-six percent of public charter districts reported no students experiencing homelessness, compared to 19% of traditional public schools. Public charter schools considered independent local educational agencies under state charter school laws are subject to the same requirements to identify and serve students experiencing homelessness as traditional public schools, yet may not receive or provide the same training and professional development that is necessary to fulfill this responsibility.
- Thirteen percent of charter schools received dedicated homeless education funding, compared to 23% of traditional public schools. Public charter schools may be less likely to apply for a competitive homeless education subgrant as a result of lack of awareness and under-identification; specific strategies to support students experiencing homelessness in charter schools should be explored.

4. In Addition To Under-Identification Challenges, Many Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Attend Schools That Receive No Dedicated Support To Meet Their Unique Needs.

- Nationally, 42% of students identified as homeless – 471,134 students – attended a school district in the 2020-2021 school year that did not receive any dedicated funding to support their needs through the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.
- The number of students experiencing homelessness in school districts that lack dedicated homeless education funding is likely even higher than what is shown in this data. This is because, as described above, under-identification of students experiencing homelessness is more likely to occur in school districts that do not receive annual funding through the McKinney-Vento Act’s EHCY Program.

5. The Number of Local Educational Agencies Receiving Dedicated Homeless Education Funding More Than Doubled as a Result of a Bipartisan Amendment to the American Rescue Plan Act.

- Under the current annual funding level for the McKinney-Vento Act’s EHCY program, less than one in five (19.5%) local educational agencies received an EHCY subgrant.
- Based on preliminary data from 48 states, this proportion has increased to 53.1% as a result of [a bipartisan amendment to the American Relief Plan Act](#) that dedicated \$800 million to the identification and support of children and youth experiencing homelessness. This means many schools that have never received specific support to respond to student homelessness are now able to do so, as long as this funding lasts.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The McKinney-Vento Act’s EHCY program is the only federal education program charged with removing barriers to school identification, enrollment, attendance, and success caused by homelessness. No other federal program has the responsibility for and expertise in finding, engaging, and stabilizing these students. Local school district homeless liaisons help identify homeless children and youth, ensure school access and stability, provide direct services, and coordinate with community agencies to meet basic needs.

The EHCY program also has a long history of bipartisan support: it has received varying levels of funding increases regardless of which party controlled one or both chambers of Congress. The amendment to the American Rescue Plan Act in 2021 that dedicated \$800 million to the identification and support of children and youth experiencing homelessness was bipartisan, supported by four Republicans and two Democrats. Nevertheless, the EHCY program also has suffered from being extremely small relative to the need, and it is not as well known or understood as larger federal education programs. Yet without the protections of the McKinney-Vento Act, some of our nation’s most vulnerable students would not have the most basic access to education. Without such access, these students cannot benefit from any of the other federal, state, or local education investments – leaving them without a true opportunity to thrive.

To increase dedicated support for students experiencing homelessness across all school districts, we recommend:

1. Increasing federal funding for the EHCY program to at least \$800 million.

An appropriation of \$800 million, less than 2% of the total federal K-12 education budget, would sustain the level of support provided to students experiencing homelessness provided through the American Rescue Plan, while increasing the number of EHCY subgrants to reach at least half of all school districts nationwide.

2. Allowing EHCY funds to be used as flexibly as the \$800 million provided through the American Rescue Plan Act (American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth, ARP-HCY funds).

The U.S. Department of Education has provided considerably more flexibility in the use of ARP-HCY funds than is allowed for the use of EHCY program funds. The additional uses include innovative efforts to increase identification of and support for students experiencing homelessness. This flexibility should be applied to annual EHCY funds, and state and local educational agencies should be discouraged from imposing restrictions of their own that ultimately prevent funds from meeting the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness.

3. Improving federal and state oversight of Title I Part A funding.

Under current law, school districts that receive Title I Part A funds are required to reserve “such sums as may be necessary” to provide educationally-related support services to children and youth experiencing homelessness. Yet too often, these funds are not reserved at all, are reserved in inadequate amounts, or are reserved but not utilized. School district homeless liaisons may not be involved in decisions about the amount of funding reserved or how it is used. The FY2023 final appropriations legislation directed the U.S. Department of Education to provide more training and oversight on the use of Title I Part A for students experiencing homelessness. We urge ED and state education agencies to robustly monitor the Title I Part A homeless reservation requirements, and make the funding amounts reserved transparent to the public.

4. Allocating state funding to match or expand federal EHCY funds.

To date, very few states have contributed any state funding to support students experiencing homelessness. Only Washington state has appropriated funds for a comprehensive state program to supplement federal funds and create strong ties to housing programs, with demonstrable results. State legislatures should invest in expanding the reach and impact of federal EHCY funds with dedicated state investment.