



# STUDENT HOMELESSNESS: LESSONS FROM THE YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Part I: Prevalence, Identification and Action Steps for Schools

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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 2017 survey administration, two optional questions about homelessness were added to the survey, with 17 states responding to those optional questions. In 2019, 27 states responded to the optional questions. The 2021 standard questionnaire will, for the first time, include one question about homelessness. States will also have the opportunity to choose an additional optional question. SchoolHouse Connection analyzed demographic and risk factor data from the YRBS in 27 states [i], 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's analysis of YRBS data found that young people experience homelessness at an even higher rate than currently reported by the U.S. Department of Education. The YRBS indicates that 5.8% of high school students surveyed in the 27 states experienced homelessness at some point during the 2018-2019 school year.

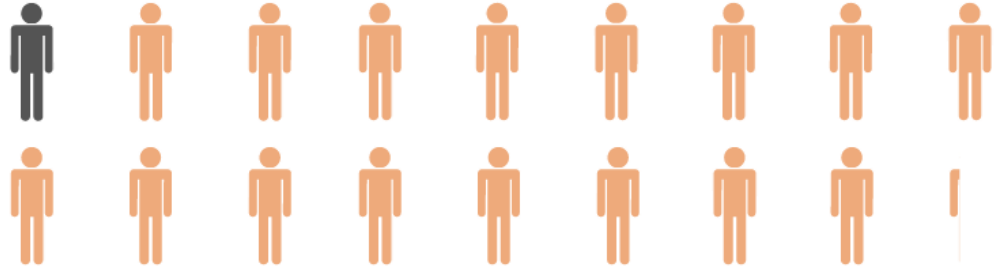
## THE METHODOLOGY

The YRBS utilizes a two-stage cluster sample design to generate a representative sample of high school students across various states. Schools were selected with probability proportional to school district enrollment size and representative classrooms were then randomly selected. Each state met the CDC requirement for overall response rate of at least 60% for using population weighted data. The weighting was adjusted for non-response rates and for students' grades, gender, race, and ethnicity. More information about the sample procedure and weighting process, as well as the data that support the findings of this study, are available publicly on the [CDC website](#). All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Version 27 and R Studio 1.4.1103. All prevalence rates and tests of significance were calculated using weighted data.

Survey results show:

## 5.8% OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS INDICATED THEY HAD EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS IN THE 2018-2019 SCHOOL YEAR

For every 17.3 high school students, 1 has experienced homelessness.



Data: SchoolHouse Connection's analysis of 2019 YRBS data from 27 states (AK, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, HI, ID, IL, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MI, MT, NH, NM, NC, ND, PA, RI, SC, SD, VT, VA, WI)

In contrast, public schools reported only 2.27% of all public school students as experiencing homelessness. In other words, based on YRBS homelessness data, public schools are identifying only slightly less than half of high school students experiencing homelessness.

**AS MANY AS ONE MILLION STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS PRE-COVID ARE NOT RECEIVING SERVICES THEY NEED, AND TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED UNDER THE FEDERAL MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT.**

### ACTION STEPS FOR SCHOOLS

1. Ensure that homeless liaisons, which the McKinney-Vento Act requires every school district and charter school to designate, have adequate capacity to lead comprehensive identification activities. [ii]
2. Provide annual training to school staff on the definition of homeless, signs of potential homelessness, and whom to contact if they believe a student may be experiencing homelessness. [iii] Training should include school counselors, registrars, teachers, bus drivers, resource officers, nurses, dropout prevention specialists, attendance officers, principals, and food service staff. Training should include trauma-informed practices to cultivate an environment that encourages students experiencing homelessness to self-identify.

## COVID-19

As COVID-19 disrupts education, services and life across the country, children and youth experiencing homelessness are exceptionally vulnerable. Identifying these students can be challenging during COVID when so many schools are operating virtually. Schools and districts can ensure that teachers have information on the signs of homelessness in a virtual learning environment.

3. Avoid the word “homeless” when talking to students, caregivers, parents, and school staff. Use descriptive language and ask questions with discretion.

4. If possible, administer housing questionnaires multiple times throughout the year, not just in the fall. This will help to identify students and families who are currently experiencing homelessness but were not at the start of the school year.

5. When talking with families experiencing homelessness, ask about younger siblings in the family. Connect young children to early intervention, Head Start, and preschool services.

6. Work with homeless service providers, social service agencies, drop-in centers, faith communities, food banks, campgrounds, low-cost motels, and other locations where families and youth experiencing homelessness may stay or receive services. Make special efforts to connect with groups that cater to teen parents, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ youth.

7. Post information about the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness on school and district websites, in school buildings, libraries, motels, campgrounds, and service provider locations.

8. Use behaviorally-informed email communications to increase identification.

9. Ask youth to help spread the word about the assistance schools can provide to students experiencing homelessness.

“Despite spending most of my middle and high school years sleeping on couches or in basements, I was not identified as a homeless student until the last two weeks of my senior year of high school. I did not have access to adequate transportation, which caused me to miss a lot of school. I was subject to disciplinary consequences due to frequent lateness and absences which jeopardized my grades. I didn’t have reliable access to a computer to do schoolwork, which caused my grades to suffer, and I was too embarrassed to explain the situation to my teachers. We didn’t have access to a stove or kitchen, so I went without adequate nutrition. Early identification would have saved me from a lot of stress and shame.”

**-K. F., SchoolHouse Connection Young Leader**



# RESOURCES

- National Center for Homeless Education, [Identifying Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness](#).
- Patricia Julianelle, [Training videos for school staff](#).
- Project HOPE-Virginia, [How to identify homeless students video](#).
- SchoolHouse Connection, [Guidelines for Designating LEA-Level and Building-Level McKinney-Vento Liaisons](#).
- Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, [Downloadable posters and brochures in multiple languages](#).
- SchoolHouse Connection, [Identifying Students Experiencing Homelessness during School Building Closures](#)
- SchoolHouse Connection, [PSA: Do You See the Child Experiencing Homelessness?](#)
- National Center for Homeless Education, [Sample Housing Questionnaires](#)

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[i] AK, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, HI, ID, IL, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MI, MT, NH, NM, NC, ND, PA, RI, SC, SD, VT, VA, WI

[ii] 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.”

[iii] The McKinney-Vento Act requires that liaisons ensure “school personnel providing services under th[e] subtitle receive professional development and other support.”