

Who are Homeless Children and Youth?

Before schools can be certain they are complying with legislation related to educating students experiencing homelessness, they must understand who can be considered homeless. The McKinney-Vento Act (Section 725) defines “homeless children and youth” (school-age and younger) as:

- Children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including children and youth who are:
 - Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing economic hardship, or a similar reason.
 - Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations.
 - Living in emergency or transitional shelters.
 - Abandoned in hospitals.
 - Awaiting foster care placement.
- Children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.
- The term *unaccompanied youth* includes a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. This would include runaways living in runaway shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, on the streets, or in other inadequate housing; children and youth denied housing by their families (sometimes referred to “throwaway children and youth”); and school-age unwed mothers living in homes for unwed mothers because they have no other housing available.

In determining whether or not a child or youth is homeless, consider the *relative permanence of the living arrangements*. Determinations of homelessness should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Who is Homeless?

Key Provisions

- The term *homeless* is broadly defined by the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.
- Pre-school children, migrant children, and youth whose parents will not permit them to live at home or who have run away from home (even if their parents are willing to have them return home) may be identified as homeless.

Homelessness is a lack of permanent housing resulting from extreme poverty. Two trends are largely responsible for the rise in homelessness over the past 15–20 years: a growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty. There is an increasing gap between income and housing costs for low-income individuals. A minimum wage worker cannot afford the fair-market rent for housing in any jurisdiction in the United States. To afford the national median fair market rent for a two-bedroom rental unit, a minimum wage worker would need to work 97 hours per week.

Yet, despite the obvious need, the supply of affordable housing has dwindled. By 1995, the number of low-income renters in America outstripped the number of low-cost rental units by 5.4 million units. The lack of affordable housing has resulted in an increase in the number of employed people who become homeless. A survey of 30 U.S. cities found that almost one in four homeless persons is employed.

The changing character of homelessness means that children and youth in homeless situations often do not fit society's stereotypical images. Only 33% of students experiencing homelessness live in shelters. Most students share housing with friends or relatives or stay in motels or other temporary facilities. Yet, these children and youth may not immediately be considered homeless and are sometimes denied the protections and services of the McKinney-Vento Act. Therefore, the Act now contains a specific definition of homelessness that includes a broad array of inadequate living situations. This definition can help educators and families understand who is entitled to the Act's protections.

The issue brief entitled *Identifying Students in Homeless Situations* found in Appendix G provides strategies to locate and serve children and youth living in a variety of homeless situations. Consult other issue briefs in this series for legal provisions and implementation strategies to ensure children and youth in homeless situations can choose their school, enroll in school immediately, access transportation services, have disputes resolved quickly and access Title I and other educational services.

Note: All definitions are contained in McKinney-Vento Act sec. 725(2); 42 U.S.C. 11435(2).

Sources for affordable housing and poverty data:

National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2000). *Out of reach*. Retrieved from www.nlihc.org/oor2000.

Daskal, Jennifer. (1998). *In search of shelter: The growing shortage of affordable rental housing*. To obtain a copy e-mail center@center.cbpp.org.

U.S. Conference of Mayors. *A status report on hunger and homelessness in America's cities: 1998*.

U.S. Department of Education. (1997). *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Report to Congress*.