

Homeless Education: An Introduction to the Issues

How many people in the United States are homeless?

People experiencing homelessness are not a static group; homelessness is a “revolving-door phenomenon”. It is estimated that, over the course of a year, between 2.3 and 3.5 million people will experience homelessness, of which between 900,000 and 1.4 million will be children.ⁱ

What are the main causes of homelessness?

The main cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing. While this lack alone is often enough to cause homelessness, when combined with other factors such as low wages, unemployment, domestic violence, family illnesses, mental health issues, and addictions, the risk of experiencing homelessness increases dramatically.

Unaccompanied youth are youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. The primary causes of homelessness among unaccompanied youth are abandonment by a parent/guardian; forced from the home by a parent/guardian; or, running away because of neglect, parental abuse or family conflict.

Homelessness: A fringe issue?

Many people view homelessness as a fringe issue, affecting only “certain kinds of people” on the edges of society. This view does not reflect the changing demographics of homelessness in the United States, including a steady rise in homelessness among families with children. Consider the following questions:

- *Could you ever experience a flood, fire, tornado, or other natural disaster?*
- *Do you work in an area of the economy where your job might become obsolete?*
- *Could you ever suffer from a long-term illness or accident without proper health benefits or other compensations?*
- *Do you live in a household with only one full-time wage earner?*
- *Are you behind on any monthly bills?*
- *Are housing costs in your area increasing faster than wages?*
- *Does anyone in your family struggle with addiction or mental illness?*
- *Could you ever face extreme financial difficulty without family or close friends available to come to your aid?*

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you are not immune to homelessness. These questions are not meant to create alarm, but rather to spread awareness that people experiencing homelessness are people just like us. They desire financial stability and a secure home, but have confronted difficult circumstances without sufficient resources to overcome the situation and remain housed.

Homeless with homework: Challenges faced by homeless students

Children experiencing homelessness face great challenges. high mobility, precarious living conditions, and extreme poverty combine to present significant educational, health and emotional difficulties. Consider this:

- *At least 20% of homeless children do not attend school.ⁱⁱ*
- *Within a year, 41% of homeless children will attend two different schools; 28% of homeless children will attend three or more different schools.ⁱⁱⁱ*
- *With each change in schools, a student is set back academically by an average of four to six months.^{iv}*
- *Children experiencing homelessness often feel like outsiders and have difficulty maintaining*

friendships due to frequent moves. Their lives feel out of control, and they often experience anxiety and depression as a result.

- *Many homeless children lack basic school supplies and a reasonable environment in which to do homework.*
- *Unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness confront these and other challenges associated with homelessness without the support and guidance of a caring adult.*

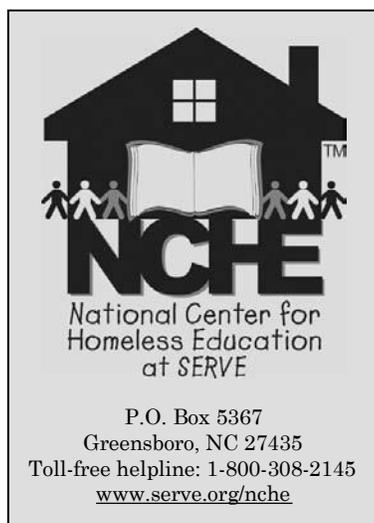
Homeless children are truly among our nation's neediest and most at risk.

McKinney-Vento: Federal homeless education legislation

During the 1980s, the federal government recognized the magnitude of the problem of homelessness within our country and, more specifically, the increasing incidences of homelessness among families with children and unaccompanied youth. To address this issue, Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Act, reauthorized most recently as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This act guarantees homeless children and youth the following:

- *The right to immediate enrollment in school, even if lacking paperwork normally required for enrollment.*
- *The right to attend school in his/her school of origin (if this is requested by the parent and is feasible) or in the school in the attendance area where the family or youth is currently residing.*
- *The right to receive transportation to his/her school of origin, if this is requested by the parent.*
- *The right to services comparable to those received by housed schoolmates, including transportation and supplemental educational services.*
- *The right to attend school along with children not experiencing homelessness. Segregation based on a student's status as homeless is strictly prohibited.*
- *The posting of homeless students' rights in all schools and other places around the community.*

While having the opportunity to enroll and succeed in school may seem like a given to many of us, the McKinney-Vento Act was enacted due to the numerous barriers homeless children faced in obtaining a free, appropriate public education. It is the mission of the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) and its partners to create public awareness of the rights of homeless children and youth and to ensure compliance with the law at the state and local levels.



References

ⁱ Burt, Martha R., *What Will It Take to End Homelessness?* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2001). Available online at www.urban.org.

ⁱⁱ Author, *Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts* (Newton, MA: National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999). Available for order online at www.familyhomelessness.org/.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Dr. Joy Rogers of the Loyola University Department of Education, *Education Report of Rule 706 Expert Panel presented in B.H. v. Johnson*, 715 F. Supp. 1387 (N.D. Ill. 1989), 1991.