



# **HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT** **HOMELESS STUDENTS IN** **AMERICA'S PUBLIC** **SCHOOLS**

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**A REPORT BY CIVIC ENTERPRISES AND HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES**



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# AN OPEN LETTER TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**I**n working to increase the number of students who graduate high school prepared for college and employment, another hidden epidemic has come to light – the children and youth in pre-K through high school who are homeless. Their numbers are more than one million every year and their homelessness is a threat to everything they might want to achieve in life.

In our nation's efforts to ensure no child is left behind and every child can succeed, public policy has required states, districts and schools to set high school graduation rate goals, to track progress by income, race, ethnicity, disability and English Language Learners (ELL), and to be accountable for progress. Civic and its partner organizations in the GradNation campaign have issued annual updates showing a more than 11 percentage point gain in high school graduation rates over the last dozen years and the significant challenges that remain to reach the 90 percent high school graduation rate goal for *all* students by the Class of 2020.

In subsequent efforts, the nation focused on “opportunity youth” – the 5.5 million young people ages 16-24 who were disconnected from school and work and whose reconnection became a top priority for individuals, nonprofits, businesses, governments, taxpayers and society. Their numbers are declining as more opportunity youth reconnect to school and work. Here, too, the nation is making progress.

From these efforts, we have learned that to be successful, everyone has a role to play—community leaders, funders, parents, educators, and students. The recent PBS film, *The Homestretch*, funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, highlights the deep need of homeless students for the support of all of these stakeholder groups if they are to persist in school in the face of homelessness. The film shares the stories of three homeless teenagers experiencing the pressures of high school and life alone on the streets while holding on to their dreams for a brighter future. This film is a powerful testament to the challenges these young people and their families face, and a strong argument for how we must work together to help all of our students succeed despite the barriers in their paths.

Encouragingly, Congress and States collaborated in bipartisan fashion nearly 30 years ago to pass the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, authorized by a Democratic Congress and signed into law by Republican President Ronald Reagan, and reauthorized in more recent years. This law provided some infrastructure to help address the challenges faced by homeless youth and their families. The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act strengthens existing supports, requires states, districts and schools to disaggregate graduation rates by homeless students, and affirms the urgency and importance of addressing homelessness to the futures of our young people.

Working with extraordinary groups and associations at the local, state and national levels, and seeing rays of hope in how some schools, districts and communities are innovating to address youth homelessness, we hope to elevate this issue to prompt more discussion and action. We must work together to elevate the voices of young people who experience homelessness while in school, and the caring adults who are working so hard to help them. By listening to those on the frontlines of this issue, we can learn how and why they experienced homelessness, what effect it had on their ability to succeed in school and life, and what might help them persist toward high school graduation, college, and future careers.

These young people have large dreams even in the face of great challenges. They do not choose to be homeless, nor want it to define their futures. It is time for America to address this issue that affects millions of our young people and work together to ensure homeless children have the supports, stability and care they deserve to pursue the American Dream.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**W**hile student homelessness is on the rise, with more than 1.3 million homeless students identified during the 2013-14 school year<sup>1</sup>, these students and the school liaisons and state coordinators that support them tell us that student homelessness remains an invisible and extremely disruptive problem, compounded by the lack of awareness of the issue in many communities.

Students experiencing homelessness struggle to stay in school, to perform well, and to form meaningful connections with peers and adults. Ultimately, they are much more likely to fall off track and eventually drop out of school than their non-homeless peers. Until this year, states and schools were not even accountable for tracking and making progress on their rates of graduation for homeless students.

Although student homelessness is a challenging problem, we believe it is a solvable one. Our nation's public schools have a critical role to play in connecting students to the supports that will help them regain stable housing, weather the trauma and disruption homelessness brings to their lives, and stay on track to get a quality education fundamental to their success in life. The majority of jobs will now require high school completion and further education of some kind, and these students cannot afford to miss out on the opportunity to complete the critical first step of a high school diploma due to homelessness.

Schools are a central touch point for students and their families, with deep roots and connections to the communities they serve. These institutions can function as a hub for quickly identifying homeless students, and connecting them and their families to the organizations and agencies that have the capacity and resources to provide housing, transportation, mental health care, and other tangible and emotional supports that will help students persist in school during these difficult times. Students spend a significant portion of their day in school – and as a result, schools can offer these students a safe and consistent place to study and access to caring adults who can help them navigate some of the challenges they face. In an otherwise chaotic time of homelessness, schools can be pillars of stability.

## Frequently Used Terms

**The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act** (referred to as McKinney-Vento throughout this report) is a federal law that provides for immediate enrollment and educational stability for homeless children and youth, and provides federal funding to states and school districts for the purpose of supporting homeless children and youth.

**For a full definition of child and youth homelessness under McKinney-Vento, see Appendix III.**

Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, each state is required to appoint a **State Coordinator** who is responsible for overseeing and ensuring the effective implementation of McKinney-Vento within their state. Each school district must also appoint a **Local Liaison** who is responsible for ensuring that homeless children and youth in their area receive all the protections and services required by law.

McKinney-Vento defines “**unaccompanied youth**” as youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, while **accompanied youth** are those experiencing homelessness with a parent or guardian.

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 strengthens the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act through provisions that recognize the central role schools must play in addressing this issue. Federal laws alone, however, are not a panacea, as many homeless students and their parents remain unaware of their rights, and go without critical supports they need. Furthermore, communities and the country continue to undercount and miss many homeless students who hesitate to identify themselves out of embarrassment, fear of stigma, or worry that their family may be broken apart by government intervention.

The rising numbers of homeless students, with a more than 100 percent increase since 2006-07, together with model programs that are showing good results, and the strengthening of law through ESSA around the responsibilities of schools to provide for their education, all mean the time is right to reach out to our schools, communities, and leaders at all levels to engage their attention on this pressing and growing problem. The homeless students,

## Methodology

Hart Research Associates conducted the following qualitative and quantitative research between October 2015 and February 2016:

1. One telephone focus group with state coordinators, and two telephone focus groups with McKinney-Vento liaisons
2. Quantitative online survey among 504 McKinney-Vento liaisons
3. 44 in-depth interviews with currently homeless youth in diverse locations around the country
4. Quantitative survey of a cross section of 158 18-24 year-olds who experienced homelessness at some point during their middle- and/or high- school careers

Youth Survey respondents were screened at the beginning of the survey to ensure they qualified based on the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless youths. Because homeless youth often do not describe themselves as homeless, in several questions throughout the survey the phrase “being homeless or had a very unstable housing situation” was used.

A note on the scales used in the quantitative research:

- In the youth survey, metrics of importance and performance are based on Likert-type scales with defined response options (e.g., very good job, good job, fair job, or poor job).
- In the liaison survey, metrics of importance and performance are based on 0 to 10 numeric rating scales with defined anchors (e.g., 10 = very good job and 0 = falling far short).

school liaisons and state coordinators interviewed for this report overwhelmingly tell us that with heightened public awareness of the problem, schools making it a priority for action, and the right supports to students at the right times, homeless students can succeed in school and continue toward successful futures.

## The Trauma and Disruption of Student Homelessness

Youth interviewed and surveyed for this report overwhelmingly report that **homelessness is taking or has taken a significant toll on their lives, their health, their relationships, and their education.**

- **Greater than 8 in 10 (82 percent) of formerly homeless youth say that being homeless had a big impact on their life overall.** Majorities of homeless youth cite specific impacts, such as:
  - 72 percent on their ability to feel safe and secure;
  - 71 percent on their mental and emotional health and 62 percent on their physical health; and
  - 69 percent on their self-confidence.
- More than two-thirds (68 percent) cite how homelessness made it difficult to maintain relationships with their own families, and 57 percent cite the same challenge with friends.
- **Sixty-seven percent say homelessness had a big impact on their education, with:**
  - **Six in 10 formerly homeless youth saying it was hard to stay in school** while they were homeless; and

- **68 percent saying it was hard to succeed and do well in school** during their homelessness.

- Reflecting the impacts of homelessness on a student’s education, **42 percent of youth surveyed told us they had at one or more points dropped out of school.**

These findings bolster existing research showing homeless students are more likely to be held back from grade to grade, be chronically absent, fail courses, have more disciplinary issues, and drop out of high school than their non-homeless peers. Homelessness can have highly negative impacts on a young person’s life, with dramatic effects on early development and learning, performance in middle and high school, and entry into the juvenile justice system. Often, the longer the period of homelessness the more dramatic the impact. In turn, research also indicates that when newly homeless unaccompanied youth return home safely and quickly, they are often able to stay home for long periods of time, mitigate the negative effects, and have the opportunity to complete their education.

## The Invisibility of Student Homelessness

**Given the heavy toll that homelessness takes on students, it is critical that they be identified and connected to the right support systems as soon as possible.** This is made difficult, however, by the fact that **many students do not want to share the fact that they are homeless** with friends, classmates, teachers, counselors, or liaisons due to embarrassment, fear of stigma or bullying, or worry over what will happen if they self-report.

- **Approximately two thirds (67 percent) of formerly homeless youth say they were uncomfortable (and nearly 4 in 10 were very uncomfortable) talking with people at their school**

about their housing situation and related challenges. In fact, in qualitative interviews many report that *no one* at their school was ever aware of their situation.

In addition, student homelessness is a highly fluid situation, with 45 percent of young people interviewed reporting that homelessness is something they experienced more than a few times, and a similar proportion (47%) reporting that they experienced homelessness both on their own and with their families at different points in time. This ambiguity adds to the difficulties of identifying homeless students quickly.

- **78 percent were homeless a few times or more.**
- 94 percent stayed with other people, rather than in one consistent place.
- 68 percent slept somewhere not typically designated for sleep because they had nowhere else to go.
- **50 percent slept in a car, park, abandoned building, bus station or other public place.**
- 44 percent slept in a hotel/motel and 34 percent in an emergency shelter.

McKinney-Vento liaisons report that identifying homeless students is made more difficult because not all school staff receive training to help identify and intervene with homeless youth and families.

- One-third of liaisons (34 percent) report that **they are the only person within their school district who receives training** to help identify and intervene with homeless youth and families, while 57 percent report that they and others receive training, and 9 percent report that no training at all is provided in their district.
- Only a minority (44 percent) of liaisons report most staff were aware of the problem and knowledgeable about the signs to look for, while liaisons cite the following individuals within schools as most important to help identify homeless youth:
  - Guidance counselors and social workers (74 percent);
  - Office and clerical staff (63 percent);
  - Teachers (55 percent);
  - Principals/administrators (31 percent);
  - Nurses and medical staff (23 percent); and
  - Cafeteria workers and bus drivers (19 percent).

## Supports and Services Needed to Keep Students in Schools

Homelessness presents students with a myriad of barriers that they struggle against every day to stay in school and on track. These students need a range of supports from their schools, as well

as from outside entities that can offer additional resources that schools cannot.

**Youth and liaisons have similar priorities in terms of the services and supports that are most important to helping homeless students succeed in school.** At high rates, both groups identify supports that provide basic human needs such as food, shelter, emotional support and mental health care, as well as additional services such as transportation, clothing, school supplies, and academic assistance.

Notably, youth identify **both** the concrete supports (such as school supplies, transportation, and academic support), as well as emotional factors (feeling safe, emotional supports) as important to their ability to stay in and do well in school. They also long to stay connected as homelessness threatens to disconnect them from family, friends, and school.

- **More than half of formerly homeless youth (54 percent) say both concrete supports and emotional factors were equally important.**
- Eighty-six percent cite having someone to talk to or check in with for emotional support as very or fairly important as they navigated the difficulties of homelessness.
- Eighty-six percent highlight the importance of connecting with their peers or maintaining friendships.
- Eighty-two percent cite participating in school activities such as sports, music, art, or school clubs.
- Seventy-nine percent highlight engaging in outside school activities, such as field trips and dances, during their homelessness.

Nearly 90 percent of liaisons report that they work with unaccompanied youth, and **fully half of liaisons report that unaccompanied youth present a major challenge when it comes to connecting them to the services and supports they need.**

Homelessness puts students in a state of constant transition, meaning that they may have to navigate the disruption of changing schools multiple times as their living arrangements shift.

- Half of homeless students had to change schools, and many did so multiple times.
- **Sixty-two percent of youth who had to change schools during their homelessness report that this process was difficult to navigate**, given the various logistical and legal barriers that they experienced.
- **Majorities of youth tell us that proof of residency requirements (62 percent) and lack of cooperation between their new and old schools (56 percent) posed a major challenge for them while changing schools.**

- Other key challenges cited by homeless students that made changing schools or enrolling in a new school difficult include: medical records or immunizations (50 percent cite); being behind on credits due to missing school (48 percent); needing a parent or guardian to sign forms (48 percent); transportation to/from school (48 percent).

## Gaps in Perception and Practice

Youth and liaisons both identify the same sets of supports and services as most important to keeping homeless students in school and engaged in learning. But despite general agreement on what homeless students most need to stay connected to school, there are several areas where there are gaps between perceptions of what should be done, or what is working, and practice within schools.

- Eight in 10 liaisons (82 percent) say their schools are doing a good or fair job of addressing youth homelessness.
- However, **fully one-third of liaisons (33 percent) believe their school district does not place a high priority on the problem of youth homelessness.**
- Nine out of 10 (89 percent) see room for improvement in the job their schools and other organizations are doing of addressing this issue.
- Students and liaisons agree that, by far, the most significant challenge is connecting homeless youth to housing. While both youth and liaisons identify safe, stable housing as imperative to these young peoples' success in school, **only 25 percent of youth and 29 percent of liaisons believe their schools are doing a good job on this vexing issue.**
- In addition, nearly six in 10 youth (58 percent) feel that their schools did only a fair job or a poor job supporting them and helping them stay in and succeed in school.

Youth give their schools the most credit for doing a good job ensuring students have enough food to eat (56 percent), transportation (54 percent), and access to before- and after-school programs (54 percent). **Just over half of homeless students, however, indicate that their schools did a good job providing or connecting them to each of these services.** By contrast, liaisons give their schools more credit than homeless students for doing a good job connecting youth to these same three services.

Other areas where significant gaps in perception between youth and liaisons exist include:

- Clothing and school supplies: Only 36 percent of youth, but 82 percent of liaisons, say schools are doing a good job.
- **Academic tutoring and support: Only 46 percent of youth, but 73 percent of liaisons say schools are doing a good job.**



- Help with college preparation: Only 42 percent of youth, but 65 percent of liaisons say schools are doing a good job.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Schools are critical access points to identify homeless students in need of help and connect them to a wide range of resources, both inside and outside school walls. Schools themselves are stretched thin, however, with limited time and dollars to adequately support this demographic of students. Our research illuminated many deeply challenging issues for youth, and the school systems that they encounter.

Liaisons tell us that **while the problem of student homelessness has intensified, the resources available to address it have not kept up.** Beyond funding, over 90 percent of liaisons report that they work in another official capacity other than as a homeless liaison within their school district, and 89 percent tell us they spend half of their time or less on their responsibilities as homeless liaisons.

Liaisons identify core challenges in providing homeless students and families with the services and supports they need. In addition to the expected challenge of funding (cited by 78 percent) and time, staff and resources (57 percent), liaisons highlight as one of their top three obstacles:

- Community awareness of the problem (36 percent).
- Ability to find safe spaces for homeless students before or after school (30 percent).

- Collaborating and sharing information with outside entities and agencies (29 percent).
- Support from local and city government (24 percent).

Liaisons also pinpoint actions that could improve the identification of and supports and services to homeless youth.

- Sixty percent cite more efforts to raise public awareness of the problem.
- Fifty-five percent want more efforts outside of school (and 45 percent within schools) to notify homeless students and their parents about their rights and services available.
- Fifty-five percent cite more opportunities for liaisons across the country to share information.
- Fifty-two percent highlight more training and professional development for school staff.
- Fifty percent want standardized procedures and forms to identify homeless youth.

## Resilience and Perseverance of Homeless Students

Despite the enormous challenges homeless students face, state coordinators, local liaisons, and youth themselves are confident that, given the right supports, these students can succeed in school. **In fact, fully 88 percent of liaisons interviewed say they are optimistic regarding the potential of youth they work with to graduate from high school college- and career-ready.**

Youth themselves reflect strength, perseverance, resilience, and the motivation to succeed, as well as a very real understanding of education as a very important factor in achieving their goals. **Three in four young adults interviewed (73 percent) say they feel motivated to take the next steps in their lives, whether that is completing their education, or pursuing a career.**

## Policy and Practice Paths Forward

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) addresses many concerns that were raised by homeless and formerly homeless youth, as well as state coordinators and district liaisons (a full comparison of ESSA and the concerns of students and educators raised in this report can be found in Appendix I). Given that the new provisions align so closely with what we heard from students and adults on the front lines of this issue, **it is essential that states, schools, and districts focus on fully implementing the measures regarding homeless students in the ESSA**, which will go into effect during the 2016-17 school year.

The following recommendations highlight paths forward through ESSA implementation, as well as those that go beyond the scope of the new law.

### IN SCHOOLS

1. **Refine and standardize systems for identifying homeless students** (*ESSA contains five separate amendments designed to increase the identification of homeless children and youth – see Appendix I for a full list*).
  - Ensure that *all* school staff, not just McKinney-Vento liaisons and coordinators, receive adequate training so that they can assist in identifying and supporting homeless students.
  - Gather residency information from students and families at *multiple* points throughout the year, not just at the beginning, and conduct regular reassessments to ensure students receive the appropriate supports.
2. **Focus on outreach efforts to inform homeless students and their families of their rights** (*ESSA requires that liaisons disseminate public notice of McKinney-Vento rights in locations frequented by parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth, in a manner and form understandable to parents, guardians, and youth*).
  - Significant proportions of liaisons believe that enhanced efforts to inform homeless students and parents about their rights and the services and supports available to them—both *inside* schools (45 percent) and *outside* schools (55 percent)—would make a big difference in their willingness to actively seek help and support.
3. **Actively work with students to help them stay in school** (*ESSA addresses many issues of enrollment, academic records, and credit accrual – see Appendix I for a full list*): Beyond emotional supports and the tangible services discussed, many youth report that there are things schools could have done to make it easier for them to stay in school, including:
  - Proactively work with students to find ways to get them assignments and provide extra assistance when they have to miss school.
  - Be more flexible with policies around attendance or timelines for assignments.
  - Assist homeless students as they work through delays and challenges in the transfer of transcripts and test scores between schools.
  - Help homeless students navigate legal issues such as obtaining parental consent to reenroll, or participate in school activities. This is especially important for students who have difficult or strained relationships with parents or guardians.

#### 4. Actively work to connect homeless students to outside

**supports:** Connections with caring adults beyond the walls of the school are invaluable to youth personally. However, **young people tell us that these connections were not made nearly as frequently as they were needed.** And while they acknowledge and emphasize the importance of collaboration with outside entities, only 36 percent of liaisons report that they work “a great deal” with community organizations, agencies, or businesses to help provide services and supports. Another 37 percent work with these groups a fair amount, while 27 percent do so just some, or not at all. However, **those liaisons who work more frequently with outside entities give their districts much higher ratings on providing students with the services and supports they need.**

#### 5. Leverage early warnings systems to prevent student

**homelessness:** Early warning systems that track student attendance, behavior, and course performance can be leveraged to identify not only students who are falling behind academically, but also those students who may show these same warning signs due to housing struggles. Identifying students who are at risk of becoming homeless through these early warning systems can allow schools to preventatively connect them to the right supports before their housing situation becomes unstable.

### IN COMMUNITIES

- 1. Build connections to local schools:** Liaisons emphasize that schools cannot do this work alone – support from outside organizations is critical. This includes nonprofits, local businesses, faith-based organizations, local government, service providers, and other community-based agencies and programs that can fill in the gaps in services and supports that schools cannot provide.
- 2. Work to raise awareness across the community:** Liaisons and students told us that in many cases, this problem remains invisible due to stigma, embarrassment, and fear. Community organizations can help remove some of these barriers by raising awareness among the public that this problem is prevalent and rising, even in wealthy or more isolated communities where it may not be readily visible. This can help to diminish the stigma and fear that many students feel, and build empathy and understanding in communities.
- 3. Set community goals and use data to drive progress:** Many communities currently engage in collective impact efforts, and use data across a variety of social, economic, and educational measures to track and improve progress among vulnerable youth. These collaborative efforts should also disaggregate data by homelessness, and work towards achieving equal outcomes for homeless students, particularly now that federal law will enable the collection and reporting of such data.

### IN STATES AND THE NATION

Building on the work of McKinney-Vento, with the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), there is now a stronger federal mandate for homeless students to have access to the supports they need to remain in their home schools. The law also includes provisions for tracking outcomes for homeless students, opening the door to create accountability, and setting school, district, state and federal goals around keeping these students in school and on track.

- 1. Work to ensure ESSA is fully implemented:** Enactment of laws is often only the beginning of an effort to change practice. Schools must be educated on the new requirements of McKinney-Vento under ESSA, and ensure that those requirements are fully carried out and funded as mandated by law. This includes removing barriers to access as required by law, such as proof of residency requirements, and ensuring cooperation between schools to share student records and transfer credits quickly. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education must provide adequate oversight, guidance, and regulation to ensure the full and effective implementation of the legislation.
- 2. Increase efforts around affordable housing:** The problem of connecting students to housing was identified by liaisons and youth as one of their biggest obstacles, made more difficult by the chronic shortage of affordable housing in so many communities across the United States. Lawmakers at the local, state, and national levels must find ways to increase public sector funding to bring innovative housing concepts to scale, examine restrictive regulations that may prevent unaccompanied youth or families of homeless students from qualifying for existing public funds, and find ways to circumvent or remove those restrictions. In addition, lawmakers should review outcomes of successful innovations such as host homes and school partnerships with housing agencies, and help to scale those efforts whenever possible.
- 3. Set a national high school graduation rate goal for homeless students:** Under the ESSA reauthorization, states are now required to track and report graduation rates for homeless students as they already do for other subgroups (such as for low-income students, minorities, and English Language Learners,) to close the opportunity gap on educational attainment. States and the nation should set the goal of progressively moving towards a 90 percent graduation rate for homeless students, and use the new required data to keep schools, districts, and states, accountable.



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