

Homeless Children

DEFINITION

Homeless children is the number of children under age 18 who stayed at homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters or transitional housing facilities in Rhode Island with their families. This number does not include homeless and runaway youth who are unaccompanied by their families.

SIGNIFICANCE

In the United States, 2.5 million children (one in 30) are homeless each year.¹ Families can become homeless due to lack of affordable housing, unemployment, low-paying jobs, extreme poverty and decreasing government supports. Other causes include domestic violence, mental illness, substance abuse, and frayed social support networks.^{2,3,4}

Compared with their peers, homeless children are more likely to become ill (particularly with illnesses such as stomach problems, ear infections, and asthma), develop mental health issues (such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal), experience significant educational disruption, and exhibit delinquent or aggressive behaviors. Homeless children go hungry at twice the rate of other children.⁵

Homeless children are at a higher risk of abuse and exposure to violence. This trauma can lead to an increase in developmental delays and emotional distress and a decrease in academic

achievement.^{6,7} When homeless children are exposed to multiple traumatic events, they may have increased levels of anxiety, poor impulse control, and difficulty developing trusting relationships.^{8,9}

Families who have experienced homelessness have higher rates of family separation than other low-income families, with children separated from their parents due to shelter rules, state intervention, and/or parents' desires to protect their children from homelessness. Homeless children are more likely to have been placed in foster care (12%) than other children (1%). Homelessness also can be a barrier to reunification; it is estimated that more than 30% of children in foster care in the U.S. could return home if their parents had adequate housing.¹⁰

In 2016, 515 families with 966 children stayed at an emergency homeless shelter, domestic violence shelter, or transitional housing facility in Rhode Island. Children made up 23% of the people who used emergency homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transitional housing in 2016. Half (48%) of these children were under age six, not yet school age.¹¹ Other families are on the state's family shelter waiting list, awaiting placement when a slot opens up.

In 2016, United Way 211 received 112,563 calls from individuals and families seeking housing or shelter and 3,644 related to foreclosure prevention.¹²

Rhode Island's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness

◆ In 2012, Rhode Island released a statewide strategic plan to transform the provision of services to decrease the number of homeless individuals and families. Rhode Island's plan (*Opening Doors Rhode Island*) is based on a comparable federal initiative called *Opening Doors, the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*.¹³

◆ *Built for Zero* is a national campaign focused on helping communities across the U.S. end chronic and veteran homelessness. Rhode Island has expanded this goal to also target family homelessness.^{14,15,16}

Supporting Homeless Children in Schools

◆ Family residential instability and homelessness contribute to poor educational outcomes for children. Homeless children are more likely to change schools, be absent from school, and have lower reading and math scores than children who have housing.¹⁷

◆ The federal *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act)* requires that states identify homeless children, allow them to enroll in school even if they lack required documents, allow them to stay in their "home school," provide transportation when needed, and offer services to help them succeed in school.¹⁸

◆ The *McKinney-Vento Act* defines a child as homeless if he or she does not have a "fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence."¹⁹ During the 2015-2016 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 1,057 children as homeless. Of these children, 64% lived with other families ("doubled up"), 25% lived in shelters, 10% lived in hotels or motels, and 1% were unsheltered.²⁰

◆ Schools can support homeless families by identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness, ensuring that families and staff are aware of students' rights under the *McKinney-Vento Act*, developing relationships with community agencies serving homeless families, and helping homeless children get clothing, school supplies, tutoring, and referrals to other services they may need to succeed in school.²¹ The federal *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, which re-authorized *McKinney-Vento* in 2015, strengthens existing provisions for homeless students, guarantees school stability for students starting in preschool, and requires schools to report on student achievement and graduation rates for homeless students.²²

Table 8. Homeless Children Identified by Public Schools, Rhode Island, 2015-2016 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	# OF CHILDREN IDENTIFIED AS HOMELESS BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PERSONNEL
Barrington	3,355	0
Bristol Warren	3,218	17
Burrillville	2,341	35
Central Falls	2,589	57
Chariho	3,270	25
Coventry	4,713	16
Cranston	10,415	25
Cumberland	4,568	*
East Greenwich	2,504	0
East Providence	5,238	19
Exeter-West Greenwich	1,654	*
Foster	265	0
Foster-Glocester	1,147	10
Glocester	547	*
Jamestown	488	0
Johnston	3,190	*
Lincoln	3,002	10
Little Compton	246	0
Middletown	2,191	117
Narragansett	1,326	11
New Shoreham	120	0
Newport	2,198	71
North Kingstown	4,047	48
North Providence	3,493	33
North Smithfield	1,707	*
Pawtucket	8,984	45
Portsmouth	2,464	*
Providence	23,983	146
Scituate	1,305	0
Smithfield	2,384	51
South Kingstown	3,111	*
Tiverton	1,841	0
Warwick	9,124	104
West Warwick	3,474	22
Westerly	2,865	51
Woonsocket	5,863	78
Charter Schools	7,024	33
State-Operated Schools	1,746	*
UCAP	142	0
Four Core Cities	41,419	326
Remainder of State	91,811	692
Rhode Island	142,142	1,057

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, Public School Enrollment in grades preschool to 12 on October 1, 2015.

Number of children identified as homeless by public school personnel includes children in preschool through grade 12 who are identified by public school personnel as meeting the *McKinney-Vento* definition of homelessness, which includes any child who does not have a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence."

Charter schools reporting include Blackstone Academy, Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy, Southside Charter School, and Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts. State-operated schools reporting include the Metropolitan Regional Career & Technical Center and the Rhode Island School for the Deaf.

The Newport, North Kingstown, Warwick, and Woonsocket school districts received grants that provided additional resources to identify and serve homeless students.

*Fewer than 10 students are in this category. Actual numbers are not shown to protect student confidentiality. These students are still counted in district totals and in the four core cities, remainder of the state, and state totals.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

References

- ¹⁴ Bassuk, E. L., DeCandia, C. J., Beach, C. A., & Berman, F. (2014). *America's youngest outcasts: A report card on child homelessness*. Needham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- ^{2,5,10} *The characteristics and needs of families experiencing homelessness*. (2011). Needham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- ³ Aratani, Y. (2009). *Homeless children and youth: Causes and consequences*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, National Center for Children in Poverty.
- ⁶ American Academy of Pediatrics. (2013). Providing care for children and adolescents facing homelessness and housing insecurity. *Pediatrics*, 131(6), 1206-1210.

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