

Children Experiencing Homelessness

DEFINITION

Children experiencing homelessness is the number of children in preschool through grade 12 who are identified as homeless by public school personnel because they meet the federal *McKinney-Vento* definition of homelessness, which includes any child who does not have a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” including children doubled up with families due to financial hardship.

SIGNIFICANCE

In the United States, 1.4 million school-age children experience homelessness each year, meaning that one in 41 school-age children are homeless. The rate is even higher for young children under age six -- one in 18.¹ Black children and families are more likely to experience homelessness than other racial and ethnic groups.²

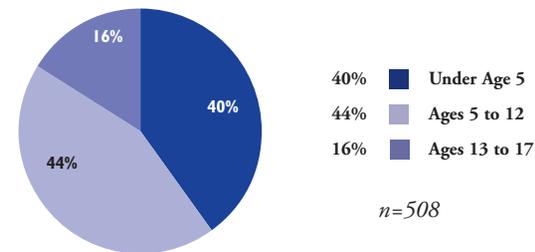
For many families living in deep poverty, episodes of homelessness are part of a cycle of housing instability that often includes living in housing that is unaffordable and/or unsafe, doubling up with families or friends, and being evicted. For these families, the shortage of housing that is affordable to them is the primary reason they become homeless. However, family violence is another major factor. More than 80% of women with children who experience homelessness have experienced domestic violence.³

Lack of stable housing is often a precipitating factor for a family’s involvement in the child welfare system, and unstable or inadequate housing can delay family reunification. Addressing families’ housing needs can reduce child neglect and abuse and help families stay together.^{4,5}

Children experiencing homelessness have higher rates of acute and chronic health problems than low-income children who have homes. Compared to their peers, homeless children have four times as many respiratory infections, twice as many ear infections, and five times as many gastrointestinal problems. They are also at higher risk of abuse and exposure to violence. This trauma can lead to an increase in developmental delays and emotional stress. When homeless children are exposed to multiple traumatic events, they may have increased levels of anxiety, poor impulse control, or difficulty developing trusting relationship.^{6,7,8}

In 2021, 242 families with 508 children stayed at an emergency homeless shelter, domestic violence shelter, or transitional housing facility in Rhode Island. Children made up one fifth (20%) of the people who used emergency homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transitional housing in 2021. Forty percent of these children were under age five. As of January 2022, there were 153 families with 283 children in the shelter queue awaiting shelter.⁹

Children in Emergency Shelters, Domestic Violence Shelters, and Transitional Housing Facilities by Age, 2021



Source: Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness, 2021.

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 chronically absent from school, and have lower academic achievement than children who have housing.¹⁰
- ◆ 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 provide access to all services and programs that the child is eligible for, including preschool, before- and after-school care, school meals, and services for Multilingual Learners/English Learners.¹¹
- ◆ The *McKinney-Vento Act* defines a child as homeless if he or she does not have a “fixed, regular and adequate night-time residence.”¹² During the 2020-2021 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 1,109 children as homeless. Of these children, 66% lived with other families (“doubled up”), 19% lived in shelters, 14% lived in hotels or motels, and 1% were unsheltered.¹³
- ◆ Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were missing a sizable number of homeless children, about 1 million nationally. During the pandemic, with distance learning and school building closures, it became even more difficult to identify these children, and researchers now estimate that 1.4 million homeless students were not identified.¹⁴

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Table 8. Homeless Children Identified by Public Schools, Rhode Island, 2020-2021 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	# OF CHILDREN IDENTIFIED AS HOMELESS BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PERSONNEL
Barrington	3,388	*
Bristol Warren	3,061	22
Burrillville	2,106	41
Central Falls	2,780	76
Charlho	3,143	17
Coventry	4,390	61
Cranston	10,403	30
Cumberland	4,602	24
East Greenwich	2,532	*
East Providence	5,041	50
Exeter-West Greenwich	1,564	*
Foster	208	0
Foster-Glocester	1,383	*
Glocester	523	0
Jamestown	462	*
Johnston	3,110	17
Lincoln	3,213	27
Little Compton	209	0
Middletown	1,955	97
Narragansett	1,221	*
New Shoreham	148	0
Newport	1,995	32
North Kingstown	3,923	26
North Providence	3,525	46
North Smithfield	1,623	*
Pawtucket	8,450	81
Portsmouth	2,294	*
Providence	22,440	160
Scituate	1,197	0
Smithfield	2,364	20
South Kingstown	2,750	27
Tiverton	1,691	*
Warwick	8,140	66
West Warwick	3,551	12
Westerly	2,433	27
Woonsocket	5,742	61
Charter Schools	9,694	54
State-Operated Schools	1,816	11
UCAP	114	0
Four Core Cities	39,412	378
Remainder of State	88,148	671
Rhode Island	139,184	1,109

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, Public School Enrollment in grades preschool to 12 on October 1, 2020.

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.” This includes children who are living with other families (“doubled up”), in shelters, living in hotels or motels, and unsheltered.

Charter schools reporting include Blackstone Academy, Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Highlander, Learning Community, Rhode Island Nurses Institute, Rise Prep Mayoral Academy, Sheila C. “Skip” Nowell Leadership Academy, and Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts. State-operated schools reporting include the Metropolitan Regional Career & Technical Center, the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, and William M. Davies Jr. Career and Technical High School.

The Central Falls, Middletown, Newport, North Kingstown, Providence, Warwick, West Warwick, and Woonsocket school districts received grants that provide 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.

Rhode Island totals are not the sum of all of the districts because some students move districts during the school year and are counted as homeless in both districts.

References

¹ Baldari, C., & McConnell, M. (2021). *Child, youth, and family homelessness in the U.S.* Retrieved April 6, 2022, from www.campaignforchildren.org

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Educational Outcomes for Children Experiencing Homelessness

◆ 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.¹⁵

◆ In Rhode Island in 2021, 15% of homeless students met expectations on the third grade *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)* English language arts assessment compared to 41% of non-homeless students, and less than 5% of homeless students met expectations on the third grade mathematics assessment compared to 25% of non-homeless students.¹⁶

◆ In Rhode Island, the four-year high school graduation rate for the Class of 2021 was 61% for homeless students and 84% for non-homeless students.¹⁷

◆ The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) includes funds to support the needs of students disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures, including students experiencing homelessness.¹⁸