



National Center for Homeless Education
Supporting the Education of Children and
Youth Experiencing Homelessness
<http://nche.ed.gov>



BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION BRIEF SERIES

Supporting the Education of Immigrant Students Experiencing Homelessness

This NCHE brief

- discusses specific issues related to immigrants and homelessness, and
- highlights strategies for schools to support the education of immigrant students experiencing homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

The process of immigrating to a new country and acclimating to its culture can be stressful. Leaving family, friends, and familiar surroundings creates uncertainty and anxiety for immigrants attempting to assimilate into American society while trying to retain part of their own culture and heritage. Even immigrants with extensive professional experience in their own countries may need to improve their English language skills, re-take courses, and pass additional licensing exams to practice in this country. In the interim, lower incomes may result in living in less desirable housing, experiencing housing instability, or even living in situations that meet the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless* (see sidebar.)

According to the U.S. Department of Education (ED), there are more than 840,000 immigrant students enrolled in U.S. schools (n.d.). This brief aims to help local liaisons for homeless education (hereafter *local liaisons*) and other school personnel identify, enroll, and serve immigrant students in public schools; refer them to additional community services, as needed; and help

McKINNEY-VENTO DEFINITION OF HOMELESS 42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 - i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;
 - ii. children and youths 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...;
 - iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 - iv. migratory children...who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

them transition to higher education. Briefs on additional homeless education topics are available at <https://nche.ed.gov/briefs.php>.

REFUGEES

Refugees are immigrants who are generally unable or unwilling to return to their own country because they have been persecuted, or fear they will be persecuted, because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. [Nine national volunteer agencies](#) provide resettlement services to refugees arriving in the United States, arranging for food, housing, clothing, employment, counseling, medical care, and other immediate needs during the first 90 days after arrival. Depending on the state, refugees may be eligible for additional specialized services after that period.

In addition to the trauma of war or persecution, and separation from or loss of family and homeland, refugees also may have experienced lengthy displacement before arriving in the United States; as such, some refugee children may have few life experiences outside their former refugee camp, where they received minimal, if any, formal education. Thirty-five to 40 percent of refugees resettled in the United States are children, about 95% of whom arrive with their parents (BRYCS, n.d.). Another five percent of refugee children are resettled with relatives or other adults who have agreed to care for the children, while a small number are placed into specialized foster care through the [Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program](#) (n.d.).

UNACCOMPANIED ALIEN CHILDREN (UACs)

Youth arrive in the United States without their parents or guardians for a variety of reasons. Some are refugees who fled their homeland to escape widespread persecution and human rights abuses. Others come to the United States alone after experiencing abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Some have been separated from their families due to war, natural disasters, or human trafficking. Additionally, some come to live with family members already in the United States to take advantage of educational opportunities, or to earn income to assist family members remaining in their home country.

Unaccompanied alien children (UAC) is a term defined in federal statute to refer to a child who has no lawful

immigration status in the United States, has not attained 18 years of age, and either has no parent or legal guardian in the United States or no parent or legal guardian in the United States who is available to provide care and physical custody [6 U.S.C. § 279(g)(2)]. Upon arrival, these children are taken into the custody of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) (ORR), which then considers each child's unique situation and makes placement decisions based on the best interest of the child. Most UAC are reunified with family members or placed with sponsors in the United States (ORR, 2017), while a few are placed in foster care settings (BRYCS, n.d.).

MCKINNEY-VENTO ELIGIBILITY

Immigrant families are disproportionately likely to experience poverty, which is a predictor of homelessness; as such, they may be more likely than non-immigrant families to experience homelessness. And yet, local liaisons use the same process of determining McKinney-Vento eligibility for an immigrant child or youth as that used for a child or youth born in the United States. (For more information, see NCHE's *Determining Eligibility for McKinney-Vento Rights and Services* brief at <https://nche.ed.gov/briefs.php>). Simply put, if an immigrant student's living arrangement meets the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of *homeless*, the student is considered eligible for rights and services under the Act.

ORR facilities are considered fixed, regular, and adequate housing; as such, children and youth in ORR custody are not eligible for McKinney-Vento services. Upon release from an ORR facility, sponsors are obligated to provide for the housing, food, medical care, and education of the child; thus, while most of these children will not qualify for McKinney-Vento services, some may qualify on a case-by-case basis. For example, if the sponsor family loses their housing and moves into

DETERMINING MCKINNEY-VENTO ELIGIBILITY

For more information on determining eligibility, see NCHE's *Determining Eligibility for McKinney-Vento Rights and Services* brief at <https://nche.ed.gov/briefs.php>.

a homeless situation, the UAC placed with them would be McKinney-Vento eligible.

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND PLACEMENT

According to the 1982 Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe* [457 U.S. 202 (1982)], all school-age children must be enrolled in U.S. public schools regardless of their immigration status. The McKinney-Vento Act requires that students experiencing homelessness be enrolled in school immediately, even if lacking documentation normally required for enrollment, or having missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(C)(i)(II)]. It is the responsibility of the local liaison to ensure that all students who qualify for McKinney-Vento services, including immigrant children and youth experiencing homelessness, are enrolled in school immediately.



UNDERSTANDING TERMINOLOGY

Immigrant: An immigrant student is one who was not born in the United States, and has not been attending school in the United States for more than three full academic years.

Refugee: A refugee student is one who is generally unable or unwilling to return to his/her own country due to persecution or fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

Unaccompanied Alien Child (UAC): A UAC is child who has no lawful immigration status in the United States, has not attained 18 years of age, and either has no parent or legal guardian in the United States or no parent or legal guardian in the United States who is available to provide care and physical custody.

The McKinney-Vento eligibility of immigrant, refugee, and UAC students should be determined on a case-by-case basis considering whether the student's nighttime living arrangement meets the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless*.

Consider the following strategies for the school enrollment and placement of immigrant students experiencing homelessness.

- Provide McKinney-Vento rights information to new students in a language the student/parent can understand. Visit <https://nche.ed.gov/ibt/transl.php> to access homeless education resources in a variety of languages.
- Many foreign-born children lack documents verifying their immunization status. Although many foreign countries have immunization rates comparable to or exceeding those of the United States, some immigrant children may not have been immunized. For McKinney-Vento students, local liaisons must help obtain necessary immunizations or screenings, or immunization or other required health records, while ensuring the student is enrolled in and attending school in the meantime [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(C)(iii)].
- If the student does not have previous school records,
 - check with the prior school, if possible;
 - contact the consulate in the country where the student lived prior to moving to the United States; or
 - recreate records based on information you gather from prior schools, parents, and/or students.
- If the child has limited English proficiency, refer the family to the school district's English Language Learner program to evaluate his/her language skills, and provide the student with the needed services to learn English and participate in the academic program for his or her grade level. If parents do not speak or understand English, the school district must provide a qualified interpreter for school meetings.
- If the student does not have enough credits to graduate in the time allowed by your state or school district, enroll the student immediately and work with the parent and/or student to determine best options for school placement.
- For general information about enrolling immigrant students, see ED's *Fact Sheet II: Additional Questions & Answers on Enrolling New Immigrant Students at*

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/unaccompanied-children-2.pdf>. Also see the U.S. Department of Education's *Educational Resources for Immigrants, Refugees, Asylees and other New Americans* webpage at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/immigration-resources.html>.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

Immigrant children and youth may need additional services to help offset the unique challenges and barriers they encounter as they attend and seek to succeed in school. The McKinney-Vento Act emphasizes not only identifying and enrolling students experiencing homelessness, but also removing barriers to their academic success. School districts can help remove barriers that prevent youth from receiving appropriate credit for full or partial coursework satisfactorily completed while attending a prior school [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(F)(ii)] by complementing regular classes with independent study programs, including learning labs, on-line learning, and computerized models (ED, 2017, p. 46). In addition, local liaisons should work with other school departments to ensure that immigrant children and youth experiencing homelessness receive appropriate academic services from English Language Acquisition (ELA), special education, and other programs.

When students are eligible for McKinney-Vento services, local liaisons may encourage parental involvement by providing interpreters, explaining school expectations, and arranging transportation for school meetings.

Immigrant children experiencing homelessness can benefit greatly from after-school programs that address academic and socioemotional needs by providing homework assistance, enrichment activities, and field trips that supplement classroom learning. Recent studies suggest that organized after-school activities are particularly important for students in immigrant families, providing them with additional experiences that contribute to improved academic achievement and psychosocial outcomes (Camacho & Fuligni, 2015; Yu, Newport-Berra, & Liu, 2015).

Many children from immigrant families start school at a disadvantage relative to native-born children, so participation in a formal pre-kindergarten program may be especially critical for them. Research has shown

positive outcomes in both academic and socioemotional domains of readiness measures as a result of pre-K participation. In addition to the academic advantage that all children receive in pre-K programs, immigrant children experience the further benefit of early English language development, with some researchers finding that the effects on English proficiency were even stronger for immigrant children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Gottfried & Kim, 2015). Since undocumented parents may choose not to enroll their young children in early learning programs for fear of deportation (Capps, Fix, & Jong, 2016), it is imperative that schools present themselves as a safe haven, and that parents are informed of their children's educational rights, including those provided under the McKinney-Vento Act.

Because many immigrant students have experienced intensive trauma, they may require functional and life skill assistance beyond what can be provided by schools. Programs that are highly successful in closing the achievement gap between immigrants and other students involve coordination of school and community resources that provide trauma-informed wraparound services related to education, health, transportation, and family services. Local liaison collaboration with community partners can help to secure a variety of services necessary for the students' and families' successful adjustment.

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Researchers have identified two distinct groups in recent immigration trends: one is highly skilled professionals primarily from Asia, and the other is mostly unskilled labor and manual workers from Latin America, the Caribbean, and some Southeast Asian countries (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009). Children of the former have easy access to higher education opportunities, and often surpass native white youth in enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education. The latter group, like other low-income and first-generation college students, face significant barriers to enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education. Their difficulties may be exacerbated by lack of information about college opportunities and how to access them, cultural differences, citizenship issues, and language barriers. For more information about helping students access higher education, visit NCHE's *Access to Higher Education for Students Experiencing Homelessness* webpage at https://nche.ed.gov/ibt/higher_ed.php.

Each year, about 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools, with many facing unique obstacles related to college admission, tuition, and financial aid (College Board, n.d.). Access to higher education for undocumented students depends largely on state law and institutional policy. And yet, despite challenges, undocumented students, including those experiencing homelessness, can go to college. For more information on access to postsecondary education for undocumented students, visit the College Board's *For Undocumented Students* webpage at <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-started/for-undocumented-students>, or download the U.S. Department of Education's *Resource Guide: Supporting Undocumented Youth* at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf>.

NEXT STEPS FOR LOCAL LIAISONS

Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act provides Federal funding to SEAs and school districts to help ensure that English learners (ELs) attain English language proficiency and meet state academic standards. Local liaisons should contact their school district's Title III coordinator to

- share information about the McKinney-Vento Act, including regarding eligibility and the rights of eligible students;
- receive assistance with identifying a term in the student's native language that connotes homelessness or eligibility for McKinney-Vento services;
- ask for assistance with identifying immigrant students who may be experiencing homelessness.
- ask for assistance in providing interpretation when speaking with students and families who may qualify for McKinney-Vento services and have limited English proficiency;
- discuss ways to coordinate services for immigrant children who are McKinney-Vento eligible; and
- find out what school and community services are available to immigrants/refugees.

Local liaisons should contact community agencies to

- provide information about the McKinney-Vento Act, including regarding eligibility and the rights of eligible students;
- share informational resources, such as educational rights posters, NCHE brochures, and parent booklets, available at <https://nche.ed.gov/products.php>;
- help develop procedures by which agencies can refer children and families who may be eligible for McKinney-Vento services to the local liaison;
- find out what services for immigrant families are available in the community, and discuss ways to coordinate school and community services;
- gather information on local laws/policies related to immigrant families; and
- receive assistance with translating materials and providing interpretation at meetings for parents with limited English proficiency.

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This brief was developed by:
National Center for Homeless Education
800-308-2145 | homeless@serve.org
<http://nche.ed.gov>

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals oversee the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://nche.ed.gov/states/state_resources.php.

For more information on issues related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, contact the NCHE helpline at 800-308-2145 (toll-free) or homeless@serve.org.

Local Contact Information: