

K-12 Student Homelessness

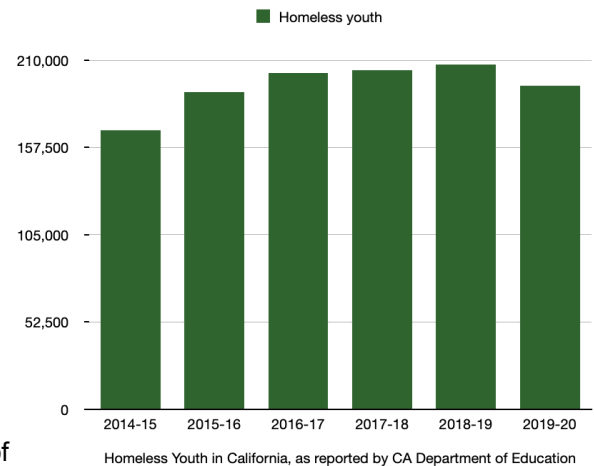
Analysis of Policy Responses to Student Homelessness in CA

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THE ISSUE

For the last five years, the California Department of Education (CDE) has reported a steady increase in homeless K-12 students in the state¹. In the academic year 2018-2019, over 207,000 California K-12 students were without appropriate, consistent and stable housing². Unhoused K-12 students are disproportionately LGBTQ+, migrants, students of color, and students with disabilities, exacerbating existing inequities. Homelessness among young people has also been shown to negatively impact both immediate educational performance and long-term outcomes.

The existing homelessness system of care fails to respond effectively to the scale and scope of this problem. Stigma, lack of funding, unclear eligibility criteria, and disjointed coordination impede youth access to housing opportunities and associated services. As a result, **there is an immediate need for additional resources and programmatic restructuring at both the state and federal levels to offer unhoused K-12 youth the support they need to thrive.**



METHODS

Our research team analyzed the efficacy of policies and practices responding to unhoused students in the state of California and made recommendations for policy and programmatic improvement. Fellows conducted a thorough review of existing literature coupled with an environmental scan of local organizational response. Fellows conducted 16, semi-structured stakeholder interviews with policy experts, practitioners, government agencies and community based organizations, and undertook a case study of student homelessness in the Oakland Unified School District.

FINDINGS

Unhoused K-12 youth slip through the cracks of homelessness prevention and response programs, which fail to provide the housing and supports youth need to survive, thrive and access post-secondary education.

The **Mckinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act** is the primary piece of federal legislation pertaining to homelessness, and is divided into two relevant components administered through separate federal agencies. Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY), administered by the Department of Education, offers legal protections for unhoused K-12 students and disperses funding to each state. The remainder of the Act -- not specific to unhoused students -- is administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and provides funding for local coordinating bodies to run brick and mortar housing programs and operate outreach and assessment systems.

¹ The decrease during the 2019-20 school year is seen as an anomaly in the data as a result of the restrictions caused by COVID-19
² Per CDE DataQuest, <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqccensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cds=00&aggllevel=state&year=2018-19&ro=y>

There are five key drivers of this disconnected and failing system for unhoused students:

a) Insufficient Data Collection and Low Quality

Although EHCY requires school districts to “count” their unhoused students annually, a vast number of such students are uncounted, miscounted and/or fail to report. District level data is incomplete and is housed -- largely disaggregated -- at the school district level. This issue is greatly exacerbated by inconsistent definitions of “Youth.” Some programs fund “youth services” for 18-24 year olds; others consider “youth” to be minors.

b) The Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Response System is Weak

EHCY is the only K-12 youth specific homelessness response program. However, EHCY offers only specific educational supports and services, not housing itself. At the local level, fragmented coordination means that youth homelessness response is overseen by multiple agencies with little to no cross-communication.

c) Youth Cannot Access HUD-Funded Homelessness System of Care

The HUD-funded system of care offers concrete housing and service opportunities. However, youth are often unable to qualify for these opportunities. HUD maintains a more restrictive definition of “homeless” than the Department of Education, disqualifying youth who live indoors (in motels, for example), and deprioritizing youth who have spent fewer months unhoused than chronically homeless adults.

d) A Lack of Youth-Specific Services in California

Youth timelines of recovery and stability are different than adult timelines and homelessness interventions that work for adults do not necessarily work for youth. The system fails to offer youth-specific services.

e) Insufficient Federal Funding and Absent State Funding

Federal funding for youth homelessness is insufficient. EHCY is particularly underfunded: EHCY grants are competitive and not guaranteed for all school districts. Further, State funding in California for youth homelessness is absent.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **To improve policy response**, expand the HUD definition of “homeless” to include those living in hotels/motels or those living doubled up; increase funding with the use of youth set asides; allow more flexible funding for creative, youth-specific services.
- **To address weaknesses in data collection**, reform HUD-funded assessment systems so they no longer de-prioritize youth, and improve local level data accuracy by requiring school districts to count their unhoused students more than once a year.
- **To improve Local Level Responses**, integrate mental health services and substance abuse supports into youth housing programs; expand prevention so that a family can receive rental assistance well in advance of eviction; and lengthen shelter stays and transitional housing programs for youth.
- **To improve inter-agency coordination**, require systems of care to share data on a regular basis; include youth on the Boards of homelessness service coordinating bodies in order to better communicate youth-specific needs.