



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



Connecting Schools and Displaced Students Brief Series

## Meeting the Educational Needs of Students Displaced by Disasters: Youth on Their Own

This NCHE brief

- describes the challenges faced by youth on their own who have become homeless due to a disaster;
- explains basic provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act relevant to serving unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness; and
- provides strategies for local educational agencies (LEAs) and relief agencies to put into place to serve unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness before and after a disaster occurs.

### Introduction

Disasters, such as floods, fires, and storms, can devastate communities and the lives of people who live in them. During a disaster, youth may be separated from their parents or guardians. Parents who have lost their homes may place youth temporarily with friends or relatives, or youth may become separated from their families during an emergency evacuation. Additionally, some youth may have been on their own before the disaster occurred. Unaccompanied youth who lack a caring adult to link them with supports and resources may have many unmet needs and be unsure how to seek help during a time of disaster.

For youth separated from their parents or guardians because of a disaster, school provides a stable and secure environment, offering structure and supports to help them overcome the trauma they have experienced and regain their academic, social, and emotional footing. Therefore, schools and school districts or local educational agencies (LEAs) and relief or service agencies in a community impacted by a disaster should work together to ensure that unaccompanied youth, including those experiencing homelessness as the result of a disaster, are identified, linked to services, and enrolled in school.

Unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness may not know how to access emergency services provided through agencies, such as housing, food, medical, and trauma support; therefore, coordination between schools and LEAs and relief or service agencies will ensure that youth who are on their own and homeless find the most expedient path to 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).

## The McKinney-Vento Act

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in 2015 by Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (42 U.S.C § 11431 *et seq.*; hereafter referred to as the McKinney-Vento Act), ensures educational protections for children and youth in homeless situations, including those who have become homeless due to disaster. The McKinney-Vento Act provides stability and support for students by requiring public schools to enroll eligible students immediately; presume it is in a student's best interest to remain in their school of origin, unless it is against the parent's or guardian's wishes or (in the case of an unaccompanied youth) the youth's wishes; assess their needs; and provide or refer them to additional services, as needed.

(For an overview of children and youth experiencing homelessness, download NCHÉ's brief, *Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: An Introduction to the Issues* at <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/introduction.pdf>. Also, for more information about best interest and school selection, see NCHÉ's brief, *School Selection* at [https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/school\\_selection.pdf](https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/school_selection.pdf).)

### McKinney-Vento Eligibility for Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Children and youth who are experiencing homelessness as the result of a disaster often live in a variety of unstable, temporary arrangements.

The McKinney-Vento Act's definition of *homeless* (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)) includes a range of living situations that are not fixed, regular, and adequate and, therefore, qualify as homeless (see the McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless textbox on page 1 for the complete definition). Housing set up by relief agencies may qualify, as well. Students who are displaced by disasters generally will meet the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless*; yet each student's and family's situation must be reviewed by the LEA's local homeless education liaison (or designee) on a case-by-case basis for an appropriate determination of eligibility for services.

The McKinney-Vento Act defines an *unaccompanied youth* as a youth who is "not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian" (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)). In practical terms, this means a youth who is not living with a parent or guardian. For an unaccompanied youth to be eligible for McKinney-Vento rights and services, their living arrangement must meet the Act's definition of *homeless*.

### Provisions in the McKinney-Vento Act for Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

The McKinney-Vento Act requires that LEAs designate an appropriate staff person to serve as the local homeless

education liaison (hereafter referred to as the local liaison or liaison) (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(J)(ii)). While the local liaison's responsibilities apply to all children and youth experiencing homelessness, there are certain duties that apply specifically to unaccompanied youth, such as the following:

- helping them choose and enroll in school after considering their wishes (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(B)(iv));
- providing them with notice of their right to appeal a school district's enrollment or school selection decision (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(B)(iii)) and ensuring they are enrolled in school immediately pending the resolution of a dispute (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(E)(iv)); and
- informing them of their rights to transportation, including transportation to the school of origin, and helping them access transportation (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(viii)).

(For more information on how schools and LEAs serve unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, download NCHÉ's *Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Students Experiencing Homelessness* at <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/youth.pdf>.)

### Serving Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

The best strategy for serving unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness during a time of disaster is to make sure policies and procedures are in place to meet their needs before a disaster occurs. Having well-thought-out processes in place before a disaster occurs will help schools, LEAs, and relief and service agencies implement strategies during a disaster efficiently.

Before a disaster occurs, local liaisons should ensure that

- the LEA conducts outreach to identify youth experiencing homelessness who are not attending school (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(F)(ii)), including displaying posters in the school and in the community where youth congregate (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(vi));
- school registrars and front office staff understand the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homeless and unaccompanied youth and the Act's requirement to enroll unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness without a parent or guardian;
- the LEA has policies and procedures in place to address situations for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness where a parent's or guardian's signature is needed;
- administrators and staff members are familiar with state and local policies related to unaccompanied

youth, such as for what types of medical and mental health care minors can provide their own consent;

- the LEA has policies and procedures in place to assess the needs of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness and connect them to services and supports to enable them to attend, participate fully in, and succeed academically in school, including participating in extracurricular activities (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(ii) and 42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(F)(iii));
- school staff members are trained to assess the emotional or mental health challenges of youth and link them to needed services (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(iv)); and
- youth are connected to agencies and services to address their basic needs, such as housing, clothing, food, and medical and mental health needs.

Relief agencies can ensure that

- staff members have contact information for the local liaison in the LEA or LEAs in the community served by their agency;
- the agency displays posters on the educational rights of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness (NCHE posters are available at <https://nchehelpline.org/>);
- staff members are familiar with the educational rights and services guaranteed by the McKinney-Vento Act;
- policies are in place to refer unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness to the local liaison in the LEA or LEAs served by their agency, including consent to share information as part of the agency's intake form to facilitate this referral;
- information on community resources has been compiled to link unaccompanied youth in need quickly to housing, food, clothing, and medical and mental health services; and
- a list of adults who are trained and willing to provide mentoring, guidance, and emotional support for youth is available.

### **Serving Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness who are Impacted by Disasters**

When a disaster occurs, additional challenges for serving unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness and linking them to schools and services may include

- youth who are on their own and do not know where to turn for help, making these youth particularly vulnerable to recruitment into human trafficking and other forms of victimization;
- youth who have been separated from their parents or guardians and want to be reunited;

- school and medical records that have been lost or damaged at the school or facility where they were stored and are unavailable;
- youth who are on their own and in need of housing, food, clothing, and medical help; and
- youth who are traumatized and need mental health services.

To plan for these circumstances, school districts and relief agencies are encouraged to work together to develop or expand a district's emergency operations plan to identify processes and policies to address prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts as they relate to youth who are homeless or displaced. By having plans in place to keep students and staff safe, LEAs and their community partners, such as relief agencies, play a key role in taking preventative and protective measures to stop an emergency from occurring or reduce the impact of a disaster.

Federal guidance on developing such plans corresponding to before, during, or after an emergency or disaster can be found in the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* at [https://rems.ed.gov/docs/School\\_Guide\\_508C.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/School_Guide_508C.pdf). Such plans can serve to marshal staff and resources on short notice to address the needs of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. Moreover, addressing the needs of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness should be part of the community's overall plan for disaster preparation and response. The federal guidance helps ensure all planning is aligned with local, state, and national emergency planning. In collaboration with their local government and community partners, LEAs and individual schools can take steps to plan for these potential emergencies through the creation or expansion of an emergency operations plan.

### **NCHE Resources**

NCHE operates the U.S. Department of Education's technical assistance center for the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program. NCHE provides publications and trainings (on site and online via tutorials and webinars) on a variety of homeless education issues, as well as customized technical assistance through its homeless education helpline (800-308-2145 or [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org)).

- NCHE has two additional briefs in this three-part series called *Connecting Schools and Displaced Students*:
  - *What School District Administrators Should Know About the Educational Rights of Children and Youth Displaced by Disasters* ([https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/csds\\_admin.pdf](https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/csds_admin.pdf))
  - *What Relief Agencies Should Know About the Educational Rights of Children and Youth Displaced by Disasters* ([https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/csds\\_relief-agencies.pdf](https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/csds_relief-agencies.pdf))

- NCHE briefs on a wide range of topics that impact children and youth experiencing homelessness are available at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.
- NCHE tutorials are available at <https://nche.ed.gov/self-paced-online-training/> and a schedule of free webinars is at <https://nche.ed.gov/group-training/>.
- The following four handbooks comprising NCHE's *Connecting Schools and Displaced Students* series can be ordered at <https://nchehelpline.org>. They address the challenges faced by families and youth impacted by disasters and explain how the McKinney-Vento Act applies to these children and youth and how the Act can assist them and their families.
  - *After the Storm: Information for Parents on How Schools Can Help After Disasters (A Handbook for Parents)*
  - *Disaster Relief Agencies and Schools: Working Together to Ensure School Enrollment and Success*
  - *From the School Office to the Classroom: Strategies for Enrolling and Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness*
  - *School as a Safety Net: Connecting Displaced Children with Educational and Support Services (A Handbook for Relief Agency Staff and Volunteers)*
- NCHE's Disaster Preparation and Response webpage (<https://nche.ed.gov/disaster-preparation-and-response/>) provides links to additional NCHE resources, information on helping students cope with disasters, and federal resources.

## Reference

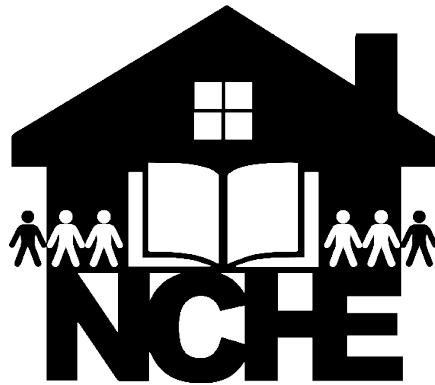
Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 11431 et seq. (1987 & rev. 2015).  
<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim>

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

Local Contact Information:

