

McKinney-Vento & Early Childhood Birth to Five Early Learning for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness

Which children are considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act?

The McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness used by all public schools in the United States includes children and youth who **lack a fixed, regular, and adequate** nighttime residence. This definition includes children and youths who are:

- (i) 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 a human being;
- (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 this subtitle because the children are living in the circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii)³

It is the same definition of homelessness used by Head Start, child nutrition, and other federal programs serving families and youth.

Causes of Homelessness

When working with families experiencing homelessness, it is important to remember that children's health and housing security are closely intertwined. Children experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience chronic diseases, behavioral health concerns, developmental delays, hunger, and malnutrition than those who have homes.

Loss of housing could be due to natural disasters such as a tornado, fires, floods, or storms. Domestic violence can also be a reason that families experience homelessness. The top causes of homelessness among families are lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, low wages, and domestic violence.¹

¹ The United States Conference of Mayors. (2016). *Hunger and homelessness survey: A status report on hunger and homelessness in America's cities*. National Alliance to End Homelessness. https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/US-Conference-of-Mayors-Report-on-Homelessness-and-Hunger_Final.pdf; See also National network to end domestic violence. (2023). *17th Annual Domestic Violence Counts Report*. <https://nnedv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/17th-Annual-Domestic-Violence-Counts-Report-Full-Report-March-2023.pdf>.

Effects of Homelessness

Experiences of homelessness in children aged birth to five are associated with poor early development as well as poor academic achievement and engagement in elementary school.² Additionally, the effects of homelessness include social-emotional delays among young children and poor classroom-based social skills in elementary school.³ These findings highlight the need for families to have access to supports before young children enter elementary school.

What protection do children experiencing homelessness have?

- **Categorical eligibility and priority enrollment:** Children living in temporary housing are categorically eligible for Head Start. They must receive priority enrollment, such as preferred access to available slots and preferential placement on waiting lists (see below for more ideas).
- **Enrollment without records:** Students experiencing homelessness may enroll even if families are unable to produce records normally required for enrollment, or have missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(C)(i)]. Programs must allow families a reasonable amount of time to submit these documents.

How to Best Serve Children Experiencing Homelessness

- Children experiencing homelessness are automatically eligible for Head Start and public preschool programs.
- Programs can prioritize and even hold slots open for students experiencing homelessness.
- If a program has openings, students experiencing homelessness must be immediately enrolled even if they lack the documents typically needed for enrollment (e.g., proof of age or immunization, and even if they missed an application or enrollment deadline).
- For students who become homeless after enrollment, the program where they are enrolled in at that time becomes their school of origin. The same is true for a student who is already homeless and then moves into another homeless situation. In either case, if it is in their best interest, homeless students can remain in that program and are entitled to receive transportation provided or arranged by the local school district, even if they move outside the attendance zone or school district. If it is not in the student's best interest to remain in the school of origin, the program where the child is enrolled should help facilitate the student's transition to a program serving the area where they are currently staying.

² Perlman, S.M. & Fantuzzo, J.W. (2010). *Timing and impact of homelessness and maltreatment on school readiness*. Children and Youth Services Review, 32: 874-883.

³ Brumley, B., Fantuzzo, J., Perlman, S., & Zager, M. L. (2015). *The unique relations between early homelessness and educational well-being: An empirical test of the continuum of risk hypothesis*. Children and Youth Services Review, 48: 31-37; See also Haskett, M. E., Armstrong, J., & Tisdale, J. (2015). *Developmental status and social-emotional functioning of young children experiencing homelessness*. Early Childhood Education Journal, 44: 119-125.

Head Start & Early Head Start Programs

How to identify and verify a child's categorical eligibility as a student experiencing homelessness:

- **Step 1.** Identify children who may be in temporary housing (i.e., homeless):
 - Use a housing questionnaire for all children who apply to your program to figure out who may be living in temporary housing. Click [here](#) for a sample housing questionnaire.
 - Use this [list](#) of sample questions when talking to parents or caregivers about their living situations.
- **Step 2.** Gather documentation about the child's temporary housing:
 - written documentation from a homeless service provider, school personnel, or other service agency that indicates a child is experiencing homelessness;
 - Information gathered on enrollment or application forms (e.g., the housing questionnaire);
 - notes from an interview conducted by program staff; or a statement signed by the parent that his/her child is in temporary housing (e.g., the housing questionnaire).

Note: A child's housing information should be kept confidential to the maximum extent possible. This information should only be shared with Head Start staff members who need the information to make sure that the child's needs are met in the Head Start program. In accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), staff can only speak to others to verify the family's living situation if the parent has given consent.

Resources and Contact Information

Resources

- [ePlan > TDOE Resources](#) > ESSA Information, Guidance, PPTs, & Webinars > Title IX, Part A Education for Homeless Children & Youth > McKinney-Vento Toolkit and Resources 2023
- [National Center for Homeless Education](#)
- [SchoolHouse Connections](#)

Contacts

For more information on McKinney-Vento Services, please contact the McKinney-Vento Grant Manager with the Federal Programs and Oversight Team division of the Tennessee Department of Education at:

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For information on Head Start & Early Childhood, please contact the Head Start State Collaboration Director with the Early Learning Team division of the Tennessee Department of Education at:

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