

10 Things Secretaries / Enrollment Personnel Can Do for Students Experiencing Homelessness

1. Learn to identify the following tell-tale signs of homelessness:
 - Chronic hunger or tiredness
 - Erratic attendance at schools
 - Attendance at multiple schools
 - Poor grooming or clothing that draws attention
 - Lack of records, such as birth certificates, immunization record, pre-school physical, and school records, or incomplete records
 - Parent who seems confused when asked about the last school attended
 - Low-income motel address on enrollment form
 - Statements from family when enrolling, such as: "We've been having a hard time lately." "It's a new address. I can't remember it." "We move a lot and are staying with friends until we find a place."
2. Assure families that children can enroll if you think that they are experiencing homelessness. (This is mandated by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, P.L. 107-110.)
 - Enroll the child immediately (even without records). Ask for the name and city of the last school attended; then call that school and ask to have the records sent.
 - Arrange for the child to take a placement test if records are not available.
3. Take the family to a private place to fill out enrollment forms.
4. Offer to assist with filling out the enrollment forms. Hesitation may indicate an inability to read.
5. Assist with filling out free and reduced-price meal program forms. Arrange for lunch that day.
6. Have copies of the school/class supply lists.
7. Provide a welcome pack with paper, pencil, pen, and crayons (younger grades).
8. Privately and confidentially alert the child's teacher and guidance counselor of the student's living situation.
9. Before a student leaves, prepare a parent pack, a 9" x 12" (laminated, if possible) mailing envelope with photocopies of the student's records (scholastic, social security, immunization, etc.). Share a copy with the family, and be prepared to share records with the new school quickly to expedite appropriate placement.
10. Be sensitive, patient, calm, and reassuring. YOU can make a difference!

For more information, contact your school district's homeless education liaison. Adapted from Maryland Department of Education Flier.



Common Signs of Homelessness

Lack of Continuity in Education

- Attendance at many different schools
- Lack of records needed for enrollment
- Gaps in skills development

Poor Health/Nutrition

- Lack immunization and/or Immunization records
- Unmet medical and dental needs
- Chronic hunger (may hoard food)
- Fatigue (may fall asleep in class)

Transportation and Attendance Problems

- Erratic attendance or tardiness
- Inability to contact parents
- Numerous absences
- Avoidance of class field trips

Poor Hygiene

- Wearing the same clothes for several days
- Lack of shower facility or washers to stay clean

Not Ready for Class

- Lack of basic school supplies
- Concern for the safety of belongings
- Incomplete or missing homework

Social and Behavioral Cues

- Change in behavior
- "Old" beyond years
- Protective of parents
- Poor/short attention span
- Poor self-esteem
- Difficulty or avoidance of making friends
- Difficulty trusting people
- Need for immediate gratification

Reactions/Statements by Parent, Guardian, or Child

- Anger or embarrassment when asked about current address
- Mention of staying with grandparents, other relatives, friends, or in a motel
- Comments such as:
 - "I don't remember the name of my previous school."
 - "We've been moving around a lot"
 - "Our address in new: I can't remember it" (may hide lack of a permanent address).
 - "We're going through a bad time right now."

Note: These are general guidelines. There is significant variability among the school-age homeless population.

Warning signs adapted from flyers developed by the Illinois and Pennsylvania Department of Education.

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Who are Homeless Children and Youth?

Before schools can be certain they are complying with legislation related to educating students experiencing homelessness, they must understand who can be considered homeless.

The McKinney-Vento Act (Section 725) defines “homeless children and youth” (school-age and younger) as:

- Children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including children and youth who are:
 - Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.
 - Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodation.
 - Living in emergency or transitional shelters.
 - Abandoned in hospitals.
 - Awaiting foster care placement.
- Children and youth 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.
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar setting.
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.
- The term *unaccompanied youth* includes a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. This would include runaways living in runaway shelters, abandoned building, cars, on the streets, or in other inadequate housing: children and youth denied housing by their families (sometimes referred to “throwaway children and youth”); and School-age unwed mothers living in homes for unwed mothers because they have no other housing available.

In determining whether or not a child or youth is homeless, consider the *relative permanence of the living arrangements*. Determinations of homelessness should be made on a case-by-case basis

Who is Homeless?

Key Provisions

- The term *homeless* is broadly defined by the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.
- Pre-school children, migrant children, and youth whose parents will not permit them to live at home or who have run away from home (even if their parents are willing to have them return home) may be identified and homeless.

Homelessness is a lack of permanent housing resulting from extreme poverty. Two trends are largely responsible for the rise in homelessness over the past 15-20 years: A growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty. There is an increasing gap between income and housing costs for low-income individuals. A minimum wage worker cannot afford the fair-market rent for housing in any jurisdiction in the United States. To afford the national median fair market rent for a two-bedroom rental unit, a minimum wage worker would need to work 97 hours per week.

Yet, despite the obvious need, the supply of affordable housing has dwindled. By 1995, the number of low-income renters in America outstripped the number of low-cost rental units by 5-4 million units. The lack of affordable housing has resulted in an increase in the number of employed people who become homeless. A survey of 30 in U.S. cities found that almost one in four homeless persons is employed.

The changing character of homelessness means that children and youth in homeless situations often do not fit society’s stereotypical images. Only 33% of students experiencing homelessness live in shelters. Most students share are housing with friends or relatives or stay in motels or other temporarily facilities. Yet, these children and youth may not immediately be considered homeless and are sometimes denied the protections and services of the McKinney-Vento Act. Therefore, the Act now contains a specific definition of homelessness that includes a broad array of inadequate living situations. This definition can help educators and families understand who is entitled to the Act’s protections.

The issue brief entitled *Identifying Students in Homeless Situations* found In Appendix G provides strategies to locate and serve children and youth living in a variety of homeless situations. Consult other issue briefs in this series for legal provisions and implementation strategies to ensure children and youth in homeless situations can choose their school, enroll in school immediately, access transportation services, have disputes resolved quickly and access Title I and other educational services.

Note: All definitions are contained in McKinney-Vento Act se. 725 (20): 42 U.S.C. 11435(2). Sources for affordable housing and poverty data: National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2000). *Out of reach*. Retrieved from www.nlihc.org/oor2000. Daskal, Jennifer, (1998). In search of shelter. The growing shortage of affordable rental housing. To obtain a copy e-mail center@center.rbpp.org. U.S. Conference of Mayors. A status report on hunger and homelessness in America’s cities: 1998. U.S. Conference of Mayors. A status report on hunger and homelessness in America’s cities: 1998. U.S. Department of Education. (1997). Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Report in Congress.