

Ideas for Action

Education for Homeless Children

Increase Homeless Children's Access to High-quality Early Education

Children experiencing homelessness are at greater risk than housed children for developmental delays, which can have persistent, detrimental effects on their physical and mental health and chance for future success. High-quality early childhood education programs such as Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start (HS) can help offset these risks; however, funding is insufficient to enroll all eligible children. In 2007, homeless students were made automatically eligible for EHS and HS programs and prioritized for enrollment.¹ The proportion of children served by these programs who are homeless subsequently increased from 2.5% in program year 2006–07 to 4.5% in 2013–14 (Figure 1).² This success can and should be replicated in pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs.

- Prioritize homeless children's enrollment in state and local early education programs.
- Train early education providers to identify and serve homeless families.

Until affordable pre-K is universally available, policymakers should incorporate homelessness into programs' eligibility criteria. Among the state pre-K programs that weigh risk factors in determining children's eligibility, for example, 22 of 29 include homelessness or unstable housing as a risk factor (Figure 2). To improve outreach and awareness, state pre-K programs should also support training for pre-K providers; 38% of surveyed school district pre-K providers indicated that they were either not familiar at all or only somewhat familiar with programs and laws that address the well-being of young children experiencing homelessness.

Congress has the power to require early education programs to address homeless children's barriers to enrollment, conduct outreach to homeless families, and provide professional development on serving homeless children in order to receive funding and to require states to give preference in awarding subgrants to early childhood programs with a plan to increase access to homeless children. Federal legislation that would mandate these actions is currently pending, and they could be carried out at the state level as well.³

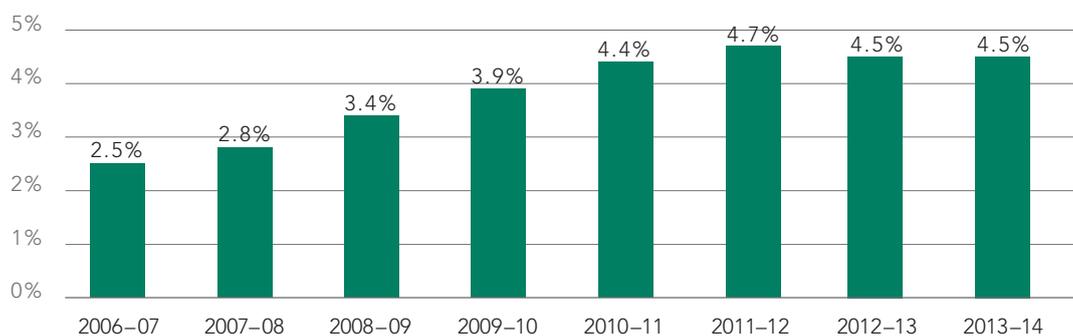
For more information on Head Start, see *Issue 6: Mainstream Social Safety Net Programs*. To learn more about child development in the context of homelessness, see *Issue 4: Educating Homeless Children*. The percent of children in EHS and HS who are homeless and homeless children as a percentage of poor children in pre-K are also included in the State Family Homelessness Rankings.

Increase Funding and Strengthen Provisions to Support Homeless Students in Grades K–12

Funding levels for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, the primary source of assistance for homeless students in elementary and secondary school, have not kept up with inflation or demand. Although the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act (McKinney-Vento) seeks to ensure that homeless students receive an education equal to that of their housed peers, flat funding levels for McKinney-Vento's EHCY program have obstructed that goal.

- Increase federal EHCY funding so that more local educational agencies (LEAs) receive the resources needed to serve homeless students in grades K–12.

Figure 1
Percent of Children Served by Early Head Start and Head Start Who Are Homeless
(by program year)



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Head Start Program Information Report, Survey Summary Report—National Level, 2007–14*.

Congress should amend McKinney-Vento to make federal elementary and secondary education policy more effective for homeless students. Specifically, EHCY funding should be substantially increased. While EHCY funding has remained flat at approximately \$65 million since Fiscal Year 2009 (FY09), the number of homeless students has increased, rising more than 85% from 2006 to more than 1.2 million during the 2012–13 school year. Per-pupil EHCY expenditures fell by half, to \$51.82 over the same time period. In School Year 2012–13, more than one-third of all students nationwide (35.8%) were enrolled in school districts that did not receive federal EHCY assistance.⁴

- Enhance key provisions of McKinney-Vento during the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

The reauthorization of ESEA provides a prime opportunity for Congress to raise EHCY’s authorized funding level. Legislation to reauthorize ESEA, as the Senate proposal does, requires state education agencies to monitor and offer technical assistance to all LEAs, equip homeless liaisons with the time and training to complete their duties, track the academic outcomes of homeless students, develop policies to remove homeless students’ barriers to enrollment, provide homeless students access to all academic and extracurricular programs available to housed students, and improve access to public pre-K programs.⁵

For more information on how McKinney-Vento helps homeless students, see *Issue 4: Educating Homeless Children*. Homeless children as a percentage of extremely poor children in grades K–12 is also included in the State Family Homelessness Rankings.

Help Homeless Youth Apply for Financial Aid and Attend College

Unlike ESEA, the Higher Education Act lacks even the most basic protections to assist college students who are homeless. It should be amended or new legislation should be passed to help homeless students unaccompanied by a parent or guardian apply for financial aid and create a more supportive environment for all students on campus experiencing homelessness.

- Enact federal legislation to reduce barriers for unaccompanied homeless youth to receive federal financial aid for college.

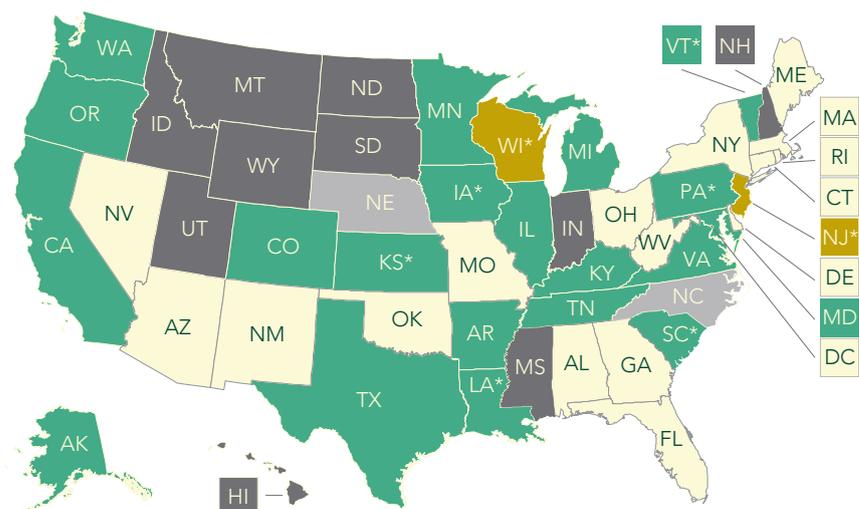
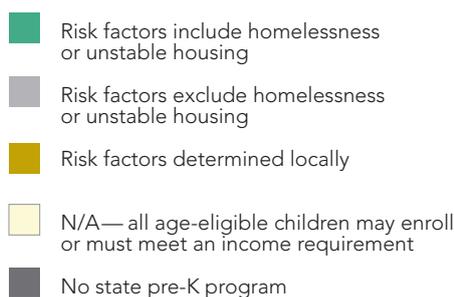
Fewer than half (47.3%) of students who identify as unaccompanied homeless youth on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) receive the verification necessary to apply for federal aid independently, which enables them to omit their parents’ financial information. The Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act, introduced in November 2013, would improve outreach to applicants and reduce barriers for unaccompanied homeless youth to receive financial aid by simplifying the homeless determination process.⁶

- Establish a single point of contact (SPOC) on each college campus to coordinate services for all students experiencing homelessness.

Congress and states can assist homeless youth by enacting legislation requiring colleges and universities to designate a SPOC to help all homeless students attend and complete college, serving a role at the college level similar to that of McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons for grades K–12. Among other duties, SPOCs would coordinate access to housing during semester breaks and between academic terms.⁷

For more information on the share of homeless FAFSA applicants assisted by an educational liaison, shelter, or runaway and homeless youth program, see the State Family Homelessness Rankings.

Figure 2
Risk Factors Used to Determine Eligibility for State Pre-K Programs



* State operates more than one pre-K program. All age-eligible children may enroll in additional programs in Iowa, Louisiana, New Jersey, Vermont, and Wisconsin. Not exceeding an income threshold is a requirement for a third program in Louisiana. Kansas’ second program uses risk factors other than homelessness to determine eligibility. Both of South Carolina’s programs consider homelessness as a risk factor. Of the four programs in Pennsylvania, two use homelessness as a risk factor and two use risk factors determined locally.
Source: National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool 2014*.