

State Education Ranking

Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children

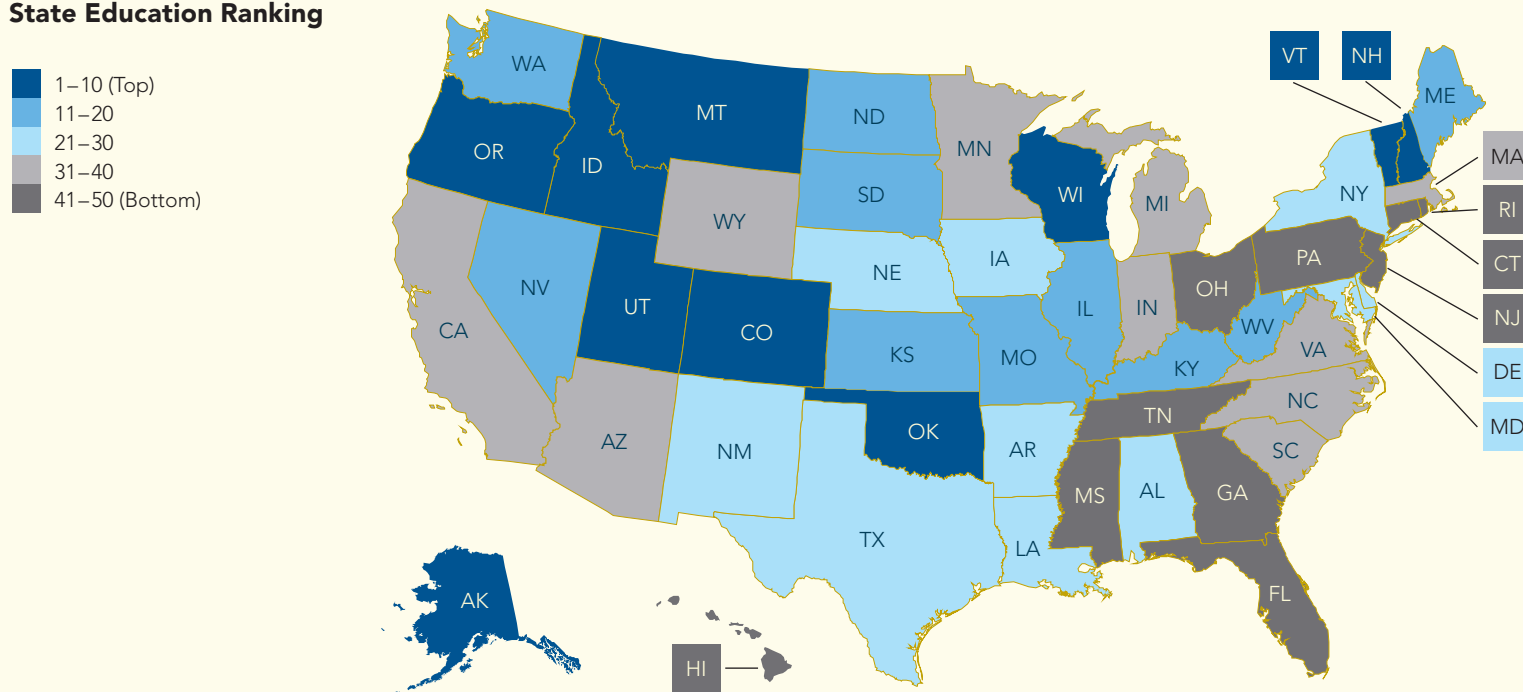
While homelessness can impact many aspects of a child’s life, including health and socio-emotional development, the experience can also be detrimental to their education. Students experiencing homelessness may have difficulty attending school regularly, and bring with them to the classroom a variety of worries and distractions that can make learning difficult. Therefore, it is vital not only that homeless students are identified, but also that the services and resources that they need are available to help mitigate the negative impacts that housing instability can have on their educational experiences.

The ICPH State Education Ranking examines how effective states are in identifying and assisting students experiencing homelessness, from birth through college. Conventional wisdom would suggest that the state with the lowest number or percentage of homeless students should be ranked highest. However, that number tells only part of the story. A low number may reflect that a state truly has few homeless families, or it might indicate that not enough effort has been made to identify homeless students. Given this, the

State Education Ranking uses indicators that provide more context and better approximate the efforts that are being made in each state to address homeless children’s educational needs. In addition, the number of states that are above or below the national average for each of the indicators is provided as a basis for comparison.

The State Education Ranking measures, shown in Table 3, indicate that the majority of states have difficulty identifying homeless children of all ages. As a result, many children are not accessing the educational services that can prevent the intergenerational cycle of homelessness. Aside from last-ranked **Hawaii**, the states ranked lowest on the combined five education indicators are located in the southeastern, mid-Atlantic, and northeastern regions of the country, with **New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Connecticut** ranked 46th through 49th (Figure 1). The states most successful at identifying and enrolling homeless children tend to be in the western-most sections of the country—**Alaska, Oregon, and Colorado** are the three highest ranking states—with the exception of **Vermont** and **New Hampshire**, both ranked in the top ten.⁵

Figure 1
State Education Ranking



Source: See endnotes 4 and 6–10.

Table 2
National Averages on the State Education Indicators

Age	Indicator	U.S. average
Birth–pre-K	Percentage of children in Early Head Start and Head Start who are homeless ⁶	4.6%
	Homeless children as a percentage of poor children in pre-kindergarten ⁷	3.9%
Grades K–12	Homeless children as a percentage of extremely poor children in grades kindergarten through 12 ⁸	27.1%
	Number of school-aged children living doubled up for every school-aged child staying in a shelter ⁹	4.9
College	Percentage of unaccompanied homeless FAFSA applicants assisted by a homeless program ¹⁰	47.3%

Table 3
State Education Ranking (by indicator)*

State	State Education Ranking	Birth–pre-K				Grades K–12				College	
		Percentage of children in Early Head Start and Head Start who are homeless		Homeless children as a percentage of poor children in pre-K		Homeless children as a percentage of extremely poor children in grades K–12		Number of school-aged children living doubled up for every school-aged child staying in a shelter		Percentage of unaccompanied homeless FAFSA applicants assisted by a homeless program	
		Rank	Indicator	Rank	Indicator	Rank	Indicator	Rank	Indicator	Rank	Indicator
AK	1	2	11.9%	8	7.2%	1	69.4%	40	2.5	4	66.0%
OR	2	6	10.2%	2	10.2%	8	38.3%	17	7.3	10	59.5%
CO	3	16	7.7%	3	9.4%	6	43.3%	25	5.9	8	59.8%
ID	4	5	11.1%	33	1.8%	16	30.7%	8	9.6	7	60.8%
WI	5	20	6.3%	1	17.3%	20	27.0%	27	5.4	26	50.3%
NH	6	13	8.4%	15	3.8%	10	36.7%	16	7.6	14	58.4%
VT	7	4	11.1%	19	3.0%	35	19.8%	18	7.2	9	59.7%
UT	8	11	9.0%	27	2.3%	2	48.0%	2	15.9	37	45.1%
OK	9	32	4.7%	7	8.5%	11	36.0%	24	6.3	16	57.9%
MT	10	1	12.0%	47	0.5%	31	20.8%	29	4.9	12	59.1%
ND	11	9	9.6%	48	0.3%	7	38.5%	31	4.1	17	57.1%
NV	12	17	7.6%	12	6.4%	17	29.9%	15	7.7	28	48.7%
ME	13	3	11.7%	41	1.2%	38	18.0%	41	2.5	1	67.9%
KS	14	23	5.4%	20	2.9%	15	32.1%	6	11.1	13	58.5%
SD	15	14	8.2%	22	2.6%	40	17.5%	33	3.7	3	67.6%
MO	16	34	4.5%	24	2.5%	14	32.8%	13	7.9	5	62.7%
IL	17	31	4.8%	13	5.5%	21	26.9%	12	8.1	15	58.4%
WA	18	10	9.3%	16	3.8%	9	37.6%	35	3.2	27	49.8%
WV	19	27	5.4%	11	6.8%	18	27.5%	39	2.7	6	62.4%
KY	20	33	4.6%	4	9.0%	5	44.8%	37	3.1	35	46.4%
NM	21	40	3.9%	6	8.6%	26	23.1%	7	10.8	33	47.3%
DE	22	43	3.2%	32	1.8%	12	34.2%	4	12.6	20	54.8%
TX	23	45	3.1%	10	7.2%	33	20.5%	19	7.1	22	54.0%
MD	24	25	5.4%	9	7.2%	19	27.3%	14	7.8	45	41.5%
IA	25	18	6.8%	23	2.6%	32	20.7%	34	3.3	11	59.3%
NY	26	26	5.4%	5	8.7%	4	45.4%	48	1.5	24	52.5%
AL	27	42	3.3%	17	3.7%	13	33.3%	9	9.4	36	46.0%
NE	28	15	7.7%	28	2.2%	39	17.9%	45	1.8	2	67.7%
AR	29	30	4.9%	37	1.6%	34	19.8%	21	6.7	23	52.7%
LA	30	48	2.1%	14	3.9%	29	21.4%	3	13.0	29	48.7%
MN	31	12	8.6%	21	2.9%	23	24.2%	47	1.6	19	56.6%
MI	32	29	5.0%	26	2.3%	24	24.1%	36	3.2	25	52.3%
WY	33	8	9.7%	50	0.0%	30	20.8%	44	1.9	21	54.7%
MA	34	7	10.1%	29	2.1%	28	21.7%	50	1.4	18	56.7%
VA	35	24	5.4%	18	3.1%	27	22.5%	28	5.2	44	41.8%
CA	36	44	3.2%	39	1.3%	3	45.4%	5	12.6	50	32.3%
NC	37	37	4.4%	43	1.0%	42	16.5%	11	8.3	34	46.6%
IN	38	19	6.7%	46	0.9%	43	15.7%	20	6.8	46	41.3%
SC	39	41	3.3%	30	2.1%	44	13.3%	23	6.4	38	44.4%
AZ	40	35	4.5%	38	1.5%	25	23.7%	38	2.7	32	47.3%
MS	41	50	0.9%	49	0.3%	41	16.6%	1	22.2	31	47.4%
FL	42	46	3.0%	25	2.5%	22	24.7%	26	5.5	48	38.3%
GA	43	47	2.3%	34	1.7%	36	19.2%	22	6.4	42	42.5%
TN	44	49	2.0%	44	1.0%	46	13.1%	10	9.0	40	43.7%
OH	45	38	4.0%	42	1.1%	45	13.3%	32	3.8	41	43.0%
NJ	46	39	3.9%	40	1.2%	49	8.7%	30	4.7	43	42.3%
PA	47	36	4.4%	35	1.7%	47	12.9%	42	2.0	30	48.2%
RI	48	22	6.0%	45	0.9%	50	8.1%	46	1.8	39	44.1%
CT	49	21	6.1%	36	1.6%	48	8.9%	43	2.0	47	38.6%
HI	50	28	5.0%	31	1.9%	37	18.3%	49	1.5	49	33.6%

*Colors correspond to results by quintile and are the same for the overall State Education Ranking as for each of the five indicators.

Educating Homeless Children from Birth to Preschool

According to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 24 million children under the age of six in the United States in 2013. While one quarter (25%) lived below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), or \$19,530 for a family of three, it is not known how many of these young children experienced housing instability by living doubled up with another household, in a hotel or motel, in a shelter, or on the streets.¹¹ Economically disadvantaged children, including those experiencing homelessness, benefit from high-quality early childhood education; the percent of homeless children who access these programs, however, is also unknown. Given these limitations, the State Education Ranking uses two indicators as surrogates for the number of young homeless children in a state: the percent who access Head Start and the percent enrolled in pre-K.

Low-income children who participate in high-quality early childhood education programs are less likely to repeat a grade or be placed in special education, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to be employed and have higher earnings later in life.¹² High-quality early education programs are particularly critical for young children experiencing homelessness, who are more at risk than their housed peers for developmental delays and behavioral, emotional, and mental health issues.

Although the total number of homeless children under the age of six is unclear, 4.6% or 50,992 out of 1.1 million children who participated in Early Head Start (EHS), for children zero to three years old, and Head Start (HS), for children ages three to five, were homeless during the 2012–13 program year. Low-income families participating in these federally funded early childhood development programs also have access to supportive social services to address education, health care, nutrition, parenting, and, for families experiencing homelessness, housing needs. With the passage of the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, all homeless children were made automatically eligible for EHS and HS programs, and states were directed to identify and prioritize homeless children for enrollment.¹³

In addition to Head Start, pre-K programs offer another early education setting in which homeless children can get the tools they need to be ready for school. However, only 2.9% or 37,598 out of 1.3 million children ages three to five who attended a pre-K program were homeless during the 2012–13 school year, a rate less than that of children in kindergarten and first grade (3.1% and 3.1%, respectively). Given that the incidence of homelessness is greatest among children under six and that the risk and rate of homelessness decrease as children grow older, the low percent of homeless children among pre-K students compared with other grades suggests that many homeless children are not enrolled in public pre-K.¹⁴

Comparing states on the first education indicator, the State Education Ranking demonstrates that the percent of all children enrolled in either EHS or HS who were homeless varied significantly in 2012–13, ranging from a low of 0.9% in **Mississippi** to a high of 12.0% in **Montana** (Example 1). In 33 states, homeless children's enrollment exceeded the national rate of 4.6%. Northwestern states, including **Alaska** (11.9%), **Idaho** (11.1%) and **Oregon** (10.2%), as well as those in northern New England, such as **Maine** (11.7%), **Vermont** (11.1%), and **Massachusetts** (10.1%), generally enrolled higher rates of homeless children in EHS or HS. The lowest rates were observed across the southeast in **Mississippi** (0.9%), **Tennessee** (2.0%), **Louisiana** (2.1%), **Georgia** (2.3%), and **Florida** (3.0%).¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of EHS and HS, including barriers to enrolling homeless children, see *Issue 6: Mainstream Social Safety Net Programs*.

Example 1 Montana's Head Start

In Montana, 12.0% (or 657) of the 5,472 children enrolled in Head Start during the 2012–13 program year were homeless, the highest rate of any state that year. Although 38 states served more total children in Head Start than Montana, only 25 states enrolled more homeless children in the program.

During the 2012–13 program year, Montana had 29 Head Start programs: nine Early Head Start, 20 Head Start, and no migrant and seasonal Head Start program. These programs served 564 homeless families, 190 of which (or 33.7%) acquired housing during the year, about the same as the national rate of 33.5%. As in most states, the number of homeless families enrolled in Head Start has increased in Montana since the passage of the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007. Since the 2007–08 program year, the number of homeless families served by Head Start in Montana has risen 38.2%. While that percent increase is less than half the national average (80.2%), Montana has been improving on an already strong foundation, having had, at 8.2%, the fourth highest percentage of homeless Head Start students of any state during the 2007–08 program year.¹⁵

To assess how states are faring on the second education indicator—facilitating access to pre-K—the State Education Ranking compares the number of homeless children with the number of poor children attending pre-K. The numbers of homeless children and poor children are compared with each other, rather than with all children, in order to control for the effects of poverty in a particular state; greater proportions of poor children could be the reason why higher percentages of homeless children are enrolled in pre-K. Nationwide, 3.9% of all poor children enrolled in pre-K also experienced homelessness during the 2012–13 school year. Only 14 states had rates that surpassed the national average, with the percentage ranging from a high of 17.3% in **Wisconsin** to a low of 0.0% in **Wyoming** (Example 2).

Example 2 Wisconsin's Pre-K

During the 2012–13 school year, 1,887 homeless children between the ages of three and five were enrolled in a state pre-K program in Wisconsin. As a percentage of all poor children enrolled, homeless children made up 17.3%, the highest rate of any state. Although a greater number of poor children were enrolled in pre-K in 27 other states, only three states served more homeless children than Wisconsin. The state's commitment to improving early childhood education has been recognized on the national level when the state was awarded a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant from the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2012. RTT-ELC is a competitive federal grant program to support states in developing high-quality early education systems, and Wisconsin is using the funding to increase consumer outreach, among other priorities.¹⁷

The existence of well-funded state-financed preschool programs did not necessarily guarantee greater access for young homeless children. This was the case with **Vermont**, **Florida**, and **Oklahoma**. These states enrolled children in state pre-K programs at the highest rates nationwide during the 2012–13 school year (46%, 40%, and 37%, respectively). While **Oklahoma** ranked seventh among states on the State Education Ranking's second education indicator—homeless children as a percentage of poor children in pre-K—these results did not translate to **Vermont** and **Florida**, ranked 19th and 25th, respectively, and both states' rates fell below the national average. States ranked 46th through 50th—**Indiana**, **Montana**, **North Dakota**, **Mississippi**, and **Wyoming**—all lacked state public pre-K programs. Homeless children could only enroll in local public or private pre-K in these states.¹⁸

Identifying and Serving Homeless Children in Grades Kindergarten through 12

In 2013, the U.S. Census Bureau counted 49 million children between the ages of six and 17. One-fifth (21%) of these school-aged children were poor.¹⁹ According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1.3 million students experienced homelessness during the 2012–13 school year.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act (McKinney-Vento) guarantees homeless students the right to the same quality of education that their housed peers receive. McKinney-Vento requires that every local education agency (LEA) appoint a liaison to identify and serve homeless students, including those who are living in shelters and those in doubled-up living situations. This is an inadequately funded mandate however, as fewer than one in four of the more than 16,000 LEAs receive subgrants from the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth program, the primary source of funding to support homeless school liaisons' work. The few LEAs that are funded enroll roughly two-thirds of all students identified as homeless each year.

Despite limited resources, dedicated liaisons across the country have heightened outreach efforts to homeless students and have been particularly successful at identifying those in doubled-up situations, who are more difficult to account for and who often do not view themselves as homeless. The majority of the 85.1% increase in the number of homeless students between the 2006–07 and 2012–13 school years was due to a 122.4% rise in the number living doubled up.²⁰ Identifying doubled-up students is critical given that shelter capacity is limited; 17 of 24 cities surveyed for the U.S. Conference of Mayors' 2013 *Hunger and Homelessness Survey* reported turning away homeless families due to a lack of available shelter beds.²¹ Families sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason may have insufficient access to basic necessities and supportive services to help them secure their own housing. Children living doubled up often move frequently as their parents exhaust their network of family, friends, and other non-relatives for places to stay. Homeless mothers may endure relationship violence to maintain these temporary living situations.²² For a detailed discussion of trends in the number of homeless students, see *Issue 1: Definitions, Demographics, and Trends in Student and Family Homelessness*.

The State Education Ranking uses two complementary measures to assess how well states are identifying and serving homeless students from kindergarten through grade 12: homeless children as a percentage of extremely poor children and the number of children living doubled up for every child staying in a shelter.

As with the percent of poor children in pre-K who are homeless (the second education indicator), the State Education Ranking compares the number of school-aged homeless children with those who are extremely poor (living at or below 50% of the FPL, which amounted to \$9,765 for a family of three in 2013), in order to control for the effects of poverty across states. While not all families experiencing homelessness are extremely poor, the overwhelming majority of homeless families are.²⁴ Therefore, states with higher rates of school-aged homeless children in comparison with those of extremely poor children are likely more effective at identifying and enrolling homeless students.

The national rate of homeless children as a percentage of extremely poor children was one-quarter (27.1%) during the 2012–13 school year. In other words, one out of every four school-aged children who lived in extreme poverty experienced homelessness. Led by **Alaska** (69.4%), **Utah** (48.0%), **California** (45.4%), and **New York** (45.4%), 19 states surpassed the national average on this third education indicator (**Example 3**). **Rhode Island** (8.1%), **New Jersey** (8.7%), and **Connecticut** (8.9%) had the lowest ratios of school-aged homeless to extremely poor children, indicating that these states are

**Example 3
Alaska’s Homeless Students**

At 69.4%, Alaska had the highest ratio of school-aged homeless to extremely poor children of any state during the 2012–13 school year. More than two out of three school-aged children who lived in extreme poverty were identified as homeless.

In the 2012–13 school year, 59% of homeless students were identified as living doubled up, 23% in shelter, 8% in hotels or motels, and 10% unsheltered. Since the rate of doubled-up students is near the national average, Alaska has been successful in identifying students living in doubled-up situations, despite only five of the 54 LEAs in Alaska receiving funding through McKinney-Vento subgrants. For LEAs with and without subgrants, the difference in identified homeless students is stark: 3,882 versus 161, respectively. This may be a reflection of the population concentration in Alaska, where the vast majority of people reside in a few areas of the state.²³

less successful in conducting outreach to and identifying homeless students.²⁵

**Example 4
Mississippi’s Doubled-up Students**

Mississippi identified the most children living doubled up (11,655) compared to children staying in shelter (524) of any state during the 2012–13 school year. For every school-aged child living in shelter, Mississippi identified 22 school-aged children living doubled up.

One explanation for Mississippi’s high sheltered-to-doubled-up ratio could be that homeless school liaisons are working diligently to identify vulnerable students despite receiving limited federal assistance to carry out this mission. Only 18 of Mississippi’s 151 LEAs received McKinney-Vento subgrants in School Year 2012–13.²⁶ Another possible explanation is that the limited availability of family shelters in the state forces many homeless families to stay with friends and family members.²⁷

Since the percentage of students living doubled up (75.5%) is about five times higher than that of those living in shelter (15.5%) nationwide, states with high numbers of sheltered students compared with doubled-up students are likely not as effective at identifying homeless students in doubled-up situations. The national number of school-aged children living doubled up for every school-aged child staying in a shelter—the fourth education indicator—was 4.9 in school year 2012–13. In other words, for every school-aged child living in a shelter, there were nearly five (4.9) school-aged children staying doubled up with another household due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. Twenty-eight states were above the national average, led by **Mississippi** (22.2), **Utah** (15.9), and **Louisiana** (13.0) (**Example 4**). **Massachusetts** (1.4), **Hawaii** (1.5), and **New York** (1.5) identified the fewest students living doubled up compared with those in shelter.²⁸

Encouraging Unaccompanied Homeless Youth to Attend College

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 21 million students enrolled in college, graduate, and professional schools in 2013, and almost one-quarter (24%) of these students were living in poverty. Completing higher education benefits students' future employment and earnings. In 2013, college graduates were three times less likely to be poor and two times less likely to be unemployed than adults with only high school diplomas. Over the course of 40 years, adults with bachelor's degrees earn nearly twice as much as workers with high school diplomas.²⁹ What is not known, however, is the number of college students who are homeless. The State Education Ranking uses the number of homeless students unaccompanied by a parent or guardian who file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is the only available data on college students experiencing homelessness.

The college admissions process can be overwhelming for any young adult. For youth experiencing homelessness, the fees associated with applying to college—Advanced Placement exams, entrance exams such as the SAT, and college applications—can be barriers to applying. An additional challenge for homeless students is filing the FAFSA, typically completed in late winter or early spring of the year in which students plan to enter college. In order to be evaluated for federal student aid, students or their parents must complete the FAFSA, which requires parents' financial information. Students experiencing homelessness, and unaccompanied homeless youth in particular, may not be able to provide this information and may be denied aid for submitting an incomplete application. Unaccompanied homeless youth can have this requirement waived and apply for aid as an independent student if a school liaison, shelter staff, or a runaway and homeless youth program administrator can verify that they are homeless.

Not all unaccompanied homeless students applying for financial aid are assisted by a school, shelter, or youth program. Less than half (47.3%) of college-bound unaccompanied homeless students nationwide received help filing the FAFSA during the 2012–13 application cycle. On this last education indicator, 33 states had rates higher than the national average, with school, shelter, and youth program representatives in **Maine** (67.9%), **Nebraska** (67.7%), **South Dakota** (67.6%), and **Alaska** (66.0%) aiding the highest percentage of applicants (**Example 5**). The lowest rates were found in **California** (32.3%), **Hawaii** (33.6%), and **Florida** (38.3%).³¹

Example 5

Maine's Help on Filing the FAFSA

Of the 299 unaccompanied homeless students in Maine who completed the FAFSA during the 2012–13 application cycle, 203, or 67.9%—the highest percentage in the nation—were assisted by a school liaison, shelter staff, or runaway and homeless youth program administrator. The number of FAFSA filings in Maine is low overall; only 17 states had fewer applications from homeless students and 13 states had fewer total students completing the FAFSA. Predominantly rural states with fewer students completing the FAFSA generally had the highest rates of unaccompanied homeless FAFSA applicants assisted by a school, shelter, or youth program—after Maine, the highest rates were found in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Alaska.³⁰