

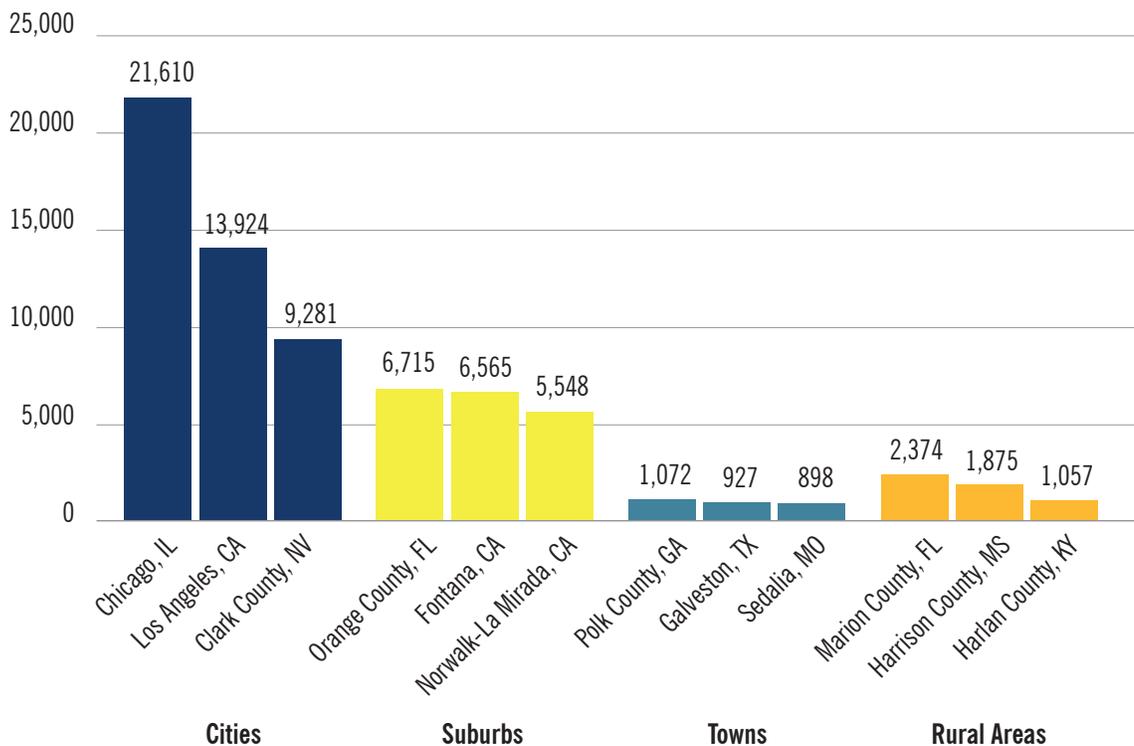
New Data Illustrate Challenges for Rural Homeless Students

by Josef Kannegaard and Chloe Stein

In June of this year, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) released new data on homeless students across the country for the 2013–14 school year. Although data on student homelessness aggregated to the state level has been available for years, this release marks the first time that the numbers have been broken down for individual school districts. This is important for several reasons, the first being that the ED’s more expansive definition of

homelessness (which includes students staying “doubled up” with others in overcrowded living conditions) provides a more thorough picture of family homelessness at the local level than is available through annual point-in-time counts. Secondly, being able to drill down into individual school districts allows service providers and advocates to better target resources to the country’s 1.3 million homeless students.

School Districts with the Most Homeless Students (by population density)



Note: In SY 2013–14, there were 84,171 homeless students in New York City, whose public school system is divided into 32 geographic districts.

U.S. Department of Education. “Homeless Student Enrollment Data by Local Educational Agency: School Year 2013–14” <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/data-files/school-status-data.html>.

Homelessness Not Limited to Big Cities

Looking closer at where homeless students attend school reveals that the current crisis of student homelessness has spread far beyond the nation’s biggest cities. This is not to say that homelessness is not disproportionately high in dense urban areas. Nationally, 46% of homeless students live in cities, despite the fact that cities only account for 31% of the total student population. Besides New York City (whose over 84,000 homeless students were spread across 32 separate school districts), Chicago, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and San Diego all had over 9,000 homeless students enrolled in public schools. As shown in Figure 1, the number of homeless students in urban school districts exceeds the totals seen in even the largest suburbs, towns, and rural areas.

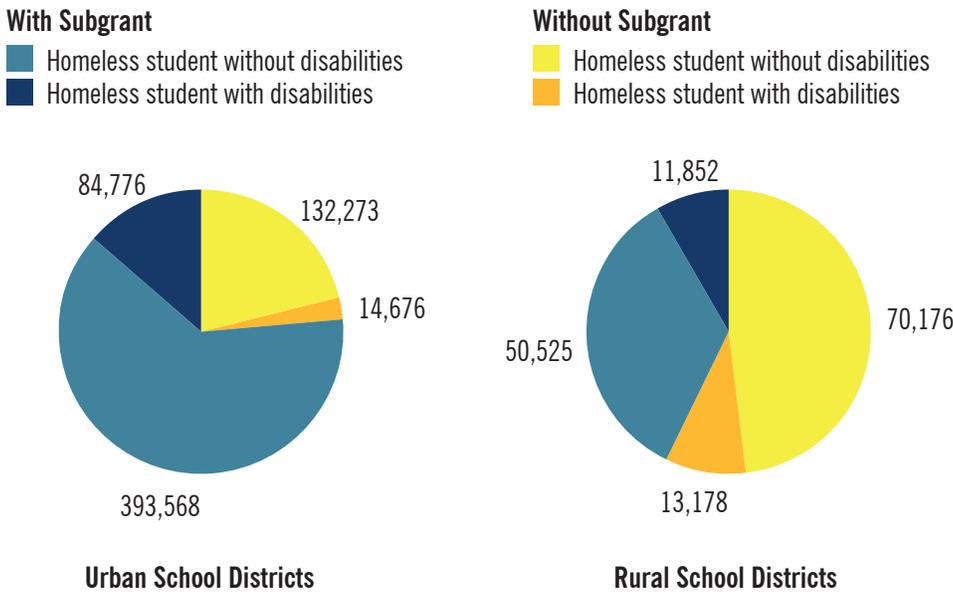
The sheer magnitude of the numbers seen in cities, however, can draw focus away from the fact that student homelessness is also pervasive in small towns and rural areas. In 28 rural school districts, representing 14 states, homeless students made up 25% or more of all students in the district. The largest rural district in the country was Marion County in central Florida north of Orlando, with over 42,000 students – 6% of whom were homeless. Ensuring that homeless students in rural areas receive a quality education can be especially difficult because

there are often fewer homeless shelters or other support services in the area for families to access. For example, students living in shelter made up 21% of all homeless students in the country’s urban school districts; in rural areas, that percentage dropped to 7%.

The sheer magnitude of the numbers seen in cities, however, can draw focus away from the fact that student homelessness is often even more pervasive in small towns and rural areas.

The challenge of reaching homeless students who live in small towns and rural areas is even greater because these students are more likely to have parents who are migrant agricultural workers and therefore move frequently. Nationally, there are over 15,000 migrant homeless students, located primarily in border states like California, Washington, Florida, and Texas. Over 6,000 of these students live in towns and rural areas, including 23 districts where 50% or more of the homeless student population comes from migrant worker families. In one school district, Wagoner County in Oklahoma, the 167 migrant homeless students represented 97% of the total homeless student population.

Homeless Students Covered with McKinney-Vento Subgrants (by disability status)



Source: U.S. Department of Education. "Homeless Student Enrollment Data by Local Educational Agency: School Year 2013–14" <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/data-files/school-status-data.html>; National Center for Education Statistics. "Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data" <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubagency.asp>.

Federal Dollars Cover Fewer Rural Homeless Students

Homeless students living in rural school districts also face an imbalance in how federal funding gets distributed. The primary source of funds specifically targeted to homeless students is the [Education for Homeless Children and Youth](#) program administered by the ED. The program, established under the McKinney-Vento Act, provides grants to state governments, which are in turn awarded to individual school districts via a subgrant application process. As seen in Figure 2, homeless students living in cities were very likely to live in a district covered by a subgrant, with 77% of students (including those with and without disabilities) in these areas. By contrast, only 43% of homeless students in rural areas were covered by a subgrant.

The importance of rural districts receiving adequate funding to support homeless students becomes even clearer when the data gets broken down by a student’s disability status.

The importance of rural districts receiving adequate funding to support homeless students becomes even clearer when the data is broken down by a student’s disability status. Homeless students are more likely to have developmental delays and other learning impairments than their housed peers, and are [entitled to special education services](#) under the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act \(IDEA\)](#). Although IDEA provides its own dedicated funding stream to states, the federal contribution made up only 16% of the total cost of the program in FY13, meaning that many states and school districts are underfunded and thus may be unable to provide services to which students with learning disabilities are legally entitled.

Unfortunately, rural homeless students with learning disabilities are less likely to be covered by McKinney-Vento subgrants than their peers in urban districts. In SY 2013–14, there were over 25,000 homeless students with disabilities in rural areas. Over half of these students lived in districts that did not receive a subgrant through the ED. By contrast, 85% of urban homeless students who had a disability were covered by a subgrant. One encouraging insight, however, was that homeless students were being identified as having a disability at roughly the same rate regardless of where they lived. In rural school districts, 17% of homeless students had a disability, and in cities the rate was 16%. This suggests that, although funding may restrict students’ access to support services, their identification for these services is not impeded by where they live.

A New Window into Student Homelessness

Beyond the insights into the plight of rural homeless students, the data released by the ED represents a new opportunity to think critically about how we address student homelessness across the country. Before we can take the next step of putting knowledge into action, however, we must first learn all we can about the scope of student homelessness itself. To do this, the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness is publishing a series of snapshots examining the geographic patterns of student homelessness in school districts in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Briefs covering Florida, Georgia, New York, and Texas are already available, with more states rolling out soon.

To obtain copies of the available data, please contact: info@ICPHusa.org.

Resources

U.S. Department of Education. “Homeless Student Enrollment Data by Local Educational Agency: School Year 2013–14” <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/data-files/school-status->

[data.html](#). ■ U.S. Department of Education. “NCES Common Core of Data Local Education Agency Universe Survey: School Year 2013–14”

<https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubagency.asp>. ■ Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. *American Almanac of Family Homelessness, 2015.*