

# Students Experiencing Homelessness in California

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Experiencing homelessness can have a lasting impact on students' educational outcomes and well-being.<sup>1,2</sup> In California, housing costs, the limited availability of affordable housing, and natural disasters have contributed to a growing number of students experiencing homelessness in the state.<sup>3</sup> School districts are required by the federal McKinney-Vento Act<sup>4</sup> to address barriers to education faced by students experiencing homelessness, but they do so with limited resources and supports.<sup>5</sup> As a result, many students go unidentified and ultimately do not receive the supports and services to which they are entitled.<sup>6</sup>

Students experiencing homelessness face barriers attending and engaging in school. For example, students experiencing homelessness may have difficulty purchasing required school supplies and/or may have difficulty accessing transportation to school due to changes in temporary housing. They also experience competing demands on their time and attention (e.g., uncertainty about where they will go after school, food insecurity, etc.), which make it more challenging to attend and participate in educational activities. The COVID-19 pandemic and wildfires throughout the state introduced new challenges for districts meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness—challenges districts continue to address today.<sup>7,8</sup>

In this brief, we provide data on students experiencing homelessness in California, drawing on data from 2018–2024 to capture changes since the COVID-19 pandemic and historic wildfires. Throughout the brief, we explore (1) how many students were identified as experiencing homelessness across the state, (2) how well California districts identified students experiencing homelessness, and (3) the funding that was available for districts to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness. We conclude with a summary of implications and recommendations followed by a detailed summary of the data sources included in the brief.

## Findings

### More than 200,000 K-12 students in California were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2024.

In 2024, 210,907 or 3.6 percent of all K-12 students in California were identified as experiencing homelessness. While California typically identifies a greater number of students experiencing homelessness than other states,<sup>9</sup> there is a great deal of variability at the district level because of differences in local

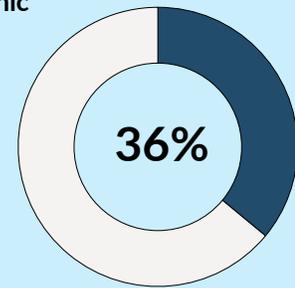
#### The McKinney-Vento Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act) was established to remove barriers to accessing education for students experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act relies on a broad definition of homelessness that includes staying in temporary housing due to loss of housing or economic insecurity, which may include shelters, hotels, motels, campgrounds, in the home of others, or in any place that is not an adequate nighttime residence (e.g., outside, in a car, in a building without water or electricity).

economies and housing markets. Natural disasters, such as the 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles, can also displace families.<sup>10</sup>

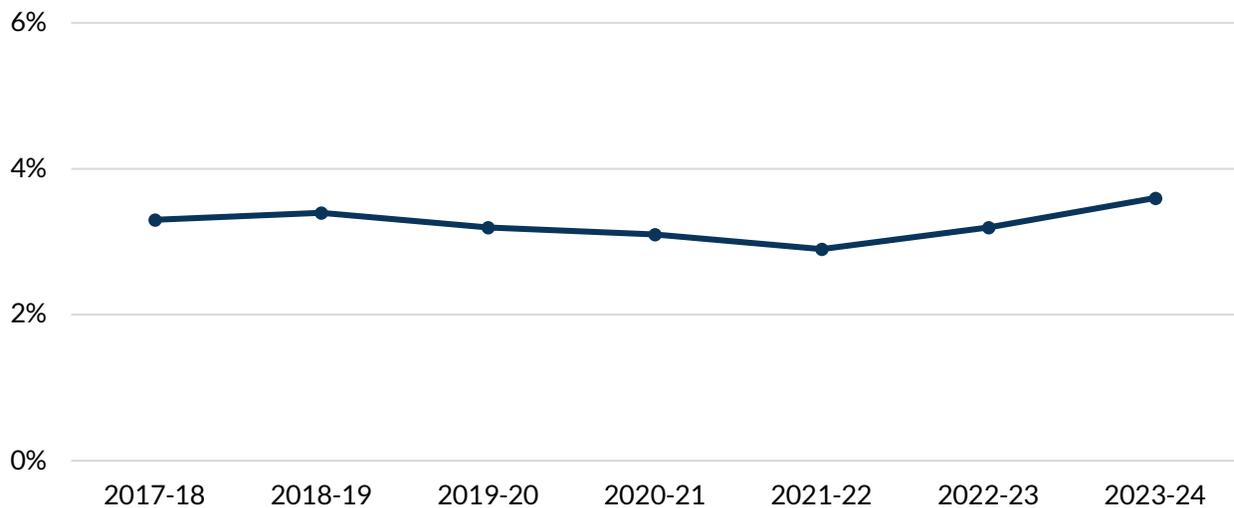
**More than a third of students experiencing homelessness also experience chronic absenteeism in California.**

Across California, rates of chronic absenteeism continue to rise—but students experiencing homelessness experience chronic absenteeism at almost double the rate of all students in the state. In 2024, **more than a third (36%) of students experiencing homelessness also experienced chronic absenteeism** compared to 1 in 5 (20%) of all students in the state.



Source: California Data Quest, California Department of Education

**Figure 1.** Rates of students experiencing homelessness in California, 2018-2024



Source: California School Dashboard Census Day Enrollment Data 2018-2024, California Department of Education

Note: Enrollment totals reflect the number of Transitional K/K-12 students enrolled on Census Day, occurring on the first Wednesday in October in each school year.

**Districts in California have improved their identification of students experiencing homelessness since 2018, but more than half (54%) are still likely under-identifying students experiencing homelessness.**

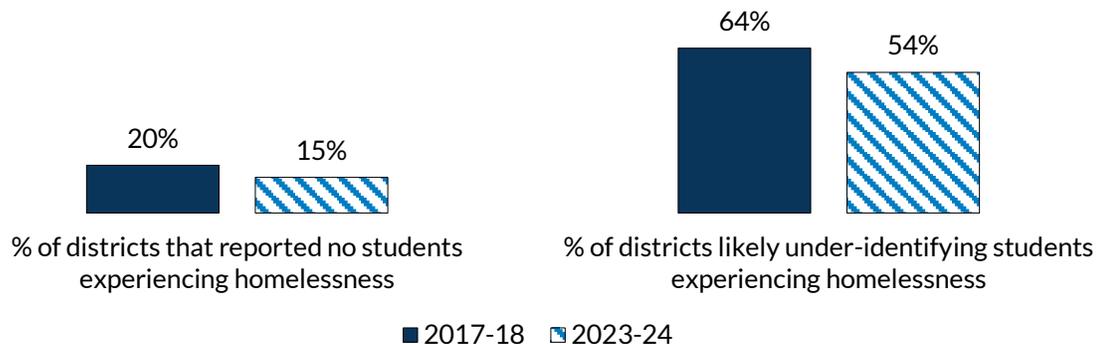
Despite the high number of students identified as experiencing homelessness across the state, these numbers likely do not reflect the total number of students experiencing homelessness in California. Schools have limited resources, training, and support to identify students experiencing homelessness.<sup>11</sup> And, students and caregivers may not feel comfortable disclosing their housing needs due to fear of stigma or

child welfare system involvement.<sup>12</sup> This means that many districts are under-identifying students experiencing homelessness or who are otherwise eligible for McKinney-Vento supports and services.

In 2019, the California State Auditor released a report highlighting that districts throughout the state were under-identifying students experiencing homelessness.<sup>13</sup> That year, almost two thirds of districts (63%) were likely under-identifying<sup>a</sup> students experiencing homelessness, and approximately 20 percent of districts reported **no** students experiencing homelessness—a statistic that is, unfortunately, highly unlikely.<sup>b</sup>

In 2024, the proportion of districts that reported **no** students experiencing homelessness decreased to 15 percent, and 54 percent were likely under-identifying students experiencing homelessness (See Figure 2). While identifying students experiencing homelessness seems to be improving in some districts, more than half of districts are still likely under-identifying students experiencing homelessness, and more work is needed to ensure that all students who are experiencing homelessness and eligible for McKinney-Vento are identified and connected to supports and services.

**Figure 2.** Percent of school districts likely under-identifying students experiencing homelessness, 2018-2024



**Source:** California School Dashboard Census Day Enrollment Data 2019 & 2024, California Department of Education

**Note:** Enrollment totals reflect the number of Transitional K/K-12 students enrolled on Census Day, occurring on the first Wednesday in October in each school year.

## While most students experiencing homelessness in California are staying doubled-up with other families, almost 4 percent are temporarily unsheltered.

In 2024, the vast majority (83.3%) of California students identified as experiencing homelessness were living doubled up—or staying with friends, family, or others temporarily due to loss of housing or economic hardship.<sup>14</sup> While families living doubled up are not eligible for homeless services and supports under certain agencies<sup>c</sup> – they are eligible for supports and services under McKinney-Vento. The differences in

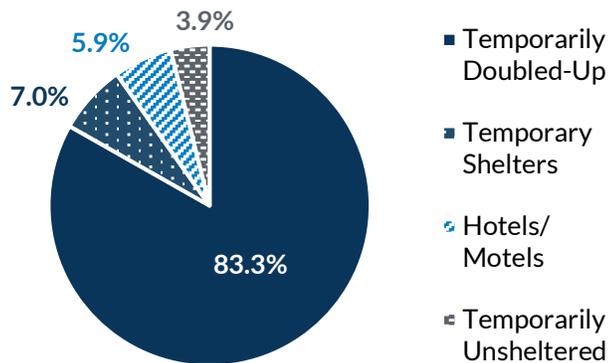
<sup>a</sup> To calculate under-identification rates, we used a commonly accepted approach in the field that assumes that between 5-10 percent of students identified as “economically disadvantaged” or who receive free and reduced lunch are likely experiencing homelessness (Auditor for the State of California, 2019). For our analysis, we compared the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness to 5 percent of students identified as “economically disadvantaged”—when the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness was less than 5 percent of students identified as “economically disadvantaged,” the district was flagged for under-identifying students. In districts where 5 percent of the “economically disadvantaged” student population was less than 1 student, we rounded down to zero students.

<sup>b</sup> Based on our analysis of the data, in the 2023-2024 school year, only 8 percent of districts likely had 1 or fewer students experiencing homelessness based on the conservative estimate that 5 percent of students who are “economically disadvantaged” also experience homelessness.

<sup>c</sup> For example, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) does not include families who are living doubled up in their eligibility criteria for many of their homeless assistance programs.

eligibility across programs also can result in confusion when determining eligibility for McKinney-Vento.<sup>15</sup> Given the large proportion of families who report staying doubled up—and the fact that families who are displaced due to a natural disaster,\* like the wildfires, may also be more likely to stay with others while doubled up temporarily—it is especially important for California school districts to receive training and support around identifying students who are staying doubled up temporarily. It is also important to note that 4 percent of all students experiencing homelessness in the state are doing so without access to shelter of any kind—a challenge that could be exacerbated by natural disasters.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 3.** Temporary residence of students experiencing homelessness, 2023-2024



Source: California DataQuest 2023-2024, California Department of Education

## Despite the large number of students experiencing homelessness in California, districts receive limited funding to address students' needs.

Districts receive limited funding specifically designated to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness (e.g., transportation, uniforms, school supplies, food pantries, and laundry and hygiene products). There are no dedicated state funds for students experiencing homelessness in California, and in 2024, only 13.4 percent of all California school districts received a McKinney-Vento subgrant. While these subgrants are an important mechanism for meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness, they do not provide enough funding to meet all the educational needs of students experiencing homelessness. Statewide spending per student experiencing homelessness increased from \$30.12 a year per student identified in 2018 to \$44.30 a year per student in 2023.<sup>d</sup> The funding per student in California, however, is still significantly lower than the national average. For example, in the 2019-2020 school year<sup>e</sup>, the average funding per student experiencing homelessness nationally was \$77.78—almost double that of California's spending per student in 2023.<sup>17</sup> Given that transportation alone can cost a district thousands of dollars in addition to the other resources needed to support students (e.g., laundry, hygiene products, food pantries, school supplies), the state is not currently providing districts with adequate resources to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness.<sup>18</sup> This limited funding also does not provide districts with the flexibility to respond to the increased number of students who may be displaced following a natural disaster.

### Impact of the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires on the Pasadena Unified School District

While complete data on the effects of the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires on students' housing status were not available at the time of the report—data from the Pasadena Unified School District provide an example of the devastating effects from the fires. More than 10,000 students (out of 14,000) and 1,300 employees were evacuated from their homes—many of whom lost their homes. Many of these students would be eligible for McKinney-Vento supports and resources.

<sup>d</sup> Cost per eligible student was estimated by taking 75 percent of the funds allocated to the McKinney-Vento Act State Agency program and dividing that amount by the number of California students experiencing homelessness as reported by EdData Express. States are allowed to set aside 25 percent of their funding for state-level activities. This is the same approach used by the National Center for Homeless Education in their report, *Addressing homelessness in America: Serving students with McKinney-Vento funding*.

<sup>e</sup> Note that this funding pre-dated additional funds set aside for students experiencing homelessness through the American Rescue Plan and only include funding allocated through McKinney-Vento subgrants.

## Implications and Recommendations

In California the resources and supports available through McKinney-Vento are not sufficient to meet the demand for services. Considering ongoing challenges related to housing affordability and availability in California, and in the aftermath of the Los Angeles wildfires, districts may benefit from additional supports, resources, and training to identify and support students experiencing homelessness.

## Acknowledgements

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# Appendix: Methods and Data Sources

We use a variety of publicly available data throughout this factsheet. For each data source, we present the data for all of California and highlight differences by district. The table below shows a breakdown of each data source, the measures from the source, and years of data available.

Note that enrollment estimates may vary across data sources due to differences in data collection methods and reporting criteria. DataQuest reports cumulative enrollment for schools and districts serving grades Transitional Kindergarten (TK) through grade 12. These totals reflect all students enrolled at any time during the academic year.

In contrast, the California School Dashboard reports snapshot enrollment based on Census Day—the first Wednesday in October of each school year. These estimates include only TK through grade 12 students actively enrolled on that specific date as recorded in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). Additionally, the Dashboard may suppress data for student groups with fewer than 11 students to protect student privacy.

Data source	Years	Measures	Definition of the Measure
Census Day Enrollment, <a href="#">California School Dashboard</a>	2018-2023	Student enrollment	Enrolled in K-12 education
		Students experiencing homelessness	Students who meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness
		Socioeconomically disadvantaged	Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals and/or whose parents/guardians did not receive a high school diploma
<a href="#">California DataQuest</a>	2018-2024	Living arrangement	<i>Temporarily Doubled Up:</i> A temporary residence where a homeless family is sharing the housing of other persons <i>Temporary Shelters:</i> A temporary residence provided for homeless individuals who would otherwise sleep on the street <i>Hotels/Motels:</i> A temporary residence for homeless individuals usually requiring payment or vouchers for lodging <i>Temporarily Unsheltered:</i> A type of residence for homeless individuals that is not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings, campgrounds, trailer parks, bus and train stations, or persons abandoned in the hospital
		Free and reduced-price meal	Students eligible for free or reduced-price meal
		Chronic absenteeism	The percentage of students who miss 10% or more of instructional days
		Graduation rates	4-year adjusted graduation rate
		Suspension rates	Rate of students with at least one out-of-school suspension
Education Data Express	2018-2023	EHCY program funding	McKinney-Vento funding amounts per eligible student.

# Endnotes

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