



National Center for Homeless Education
Supporting the Education of Children and
Youth Experiencing Homelessness
www.serve.org/nche



MCKINNEY-VENTO LAW INTO PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES

Identifying Children and Youth in Homeless Situations

INTRODUCTION

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §§ 11431-11435, hereafter referred to as *The McKinney-Vento Act*), reauthorized in 2001 by Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act, ensures educational rights and protections for children and youth experiencing homelessness. The most critical step in ensuring the provision of needed services and supports is for local educational agencies (LEAs or school districts) to identify children and youth who are eligible under the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of *homeless*. This brief explains the key provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act related to the identification of homeless children and youth, explores challenges with identifying homeless children and youth, and provides strategies to increase LEA capacity to identify all children and youth experiencing homelessness.

MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT PROVISIONS ON IDENTIFICATION

- The McKinney-Vento State Plan must describe procedures that the state educational agency (SEA) will use to identify homeless children and youth in the state and to assess their special needs [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(1)(B)].

Who is homeless?

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (as reauthorized by Title X, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 1. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
 2. children and youths 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...
 3. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 4. migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

- Every LEA must appoint a local homeless education liaison (hereafter referred to as *local liaison*) to fulfill the duties of the position established by law [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(1)(J)(ii)]. One of these duties is to ensure that children and youth in homeless situations are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(6)(A)(i)]. Once these students are identified, the local liaison must ensure that they receive the services and supports they need in order to enroll in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, school [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(6)(A)(ii)].
- Local liaisons must ensure that public notice of the educational rights of homeless children and youth is disseminated in schools, family shelters, soup kitchens, and other places where these children and youth receive services [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(6)(A)(v)].

(See [Legislative Excerpts Related to Identification](#) below for the text of the law.)

CHALLENGES TO IDENTIFYING HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children and youth experiencing homelessness are difficult to identify for many reasons and often go unnoticed by school personnel. Identification challenges include the following:

- Students and parents may try to hide their homelessness because they are embarrassed or fear they will be judged or stigmatized.
- The fear of losing custody of their children often prevents homeless parents from revealing their living circumstances to school officials.
- Unaccompanied homeless youth may not report their homeless status for fear of being returned to unsafe family environments or taken into the custody of the child welfare system.
- Schools and service providers may be unaware of children and youth who are not

enrolled in school and are living in places other than shelters, such as doubled up with another family or in a hotel or motel, due to homelessness.

- Homeless families and unaccompanied homeless youth may not realize that their circumstances fit the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless*.
- School personnel may not understand the nature of homelessness or the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless* and may not recognize signs that a student has lost housing.

STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFYING CHILDREN AND YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

LEAs must make their best effort to ensure that all eligible children and youth are identified and provided the rights and services the McKinney-Vento Act guarantees. The following strategies will assist LEAs and local liaisons in developing a comprehensive and proactive approach to identifying homeless children and youth in their community.

- **Use data to determine if the LEA is under-identifying homeless children and youth.** One question that local liaisons frequently ask is whether or not the LEA is identifying all children and youth who are experiencing homelessness in the community. Because LEAs are required to collect data on homeless students annually for submission to the U.S. Department of Education, local liaisons should be able to use this data to identify trends in the number of homeless students identified and to compare the data to other data sources, such as Census poverty data, percentage of students participating in the National School Lunch Program, or data on homelessness collected by community agencies. Data comparisons such as these can help local liaisons determine whether the number of homeless children and youth the LEA identified is consistent with past years and aligns with what other data sources indicate about homelessness and poverty in

the community. If a significant discrepancy exists between LEA and other data, the local liaison should review and revise the LEA's identification strategies accordingly.

- **Create community awareness.**

Local liaisons should reach out to local agencies to collaborate on identifying homeless children and youth. Local liaisons should disseminate awareness posters with their contact information to these agencies and explain what services are available to ensure school access and support for homeless children and youth. Types of agencies appropriate for collaboration include social service providers, shelters, soup kitchens, food banks, transitional living programs, housing agencies, medical clinics, laundromats, libraries, and faith-based organizations. Local liaisons also should provide information to community youth programs and law enforcement agencies who may encounter homeless youth in need of being connected to school.

- **Develop interagency partnerships.**

Some federal programs are mandated to identify and serve homeless children and youth and to coordinate with LEAs. These programs include Head Start, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C - Early Intervention program (Child Find), and housing programs funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Local liaisons should contact these agencies and discuss ways to coordinate referrals for homeless families with children and for unaccompanied homeless youth. A coordinated approach to serving homeless families and youth, perhaps including a memorandum of agreement, will improve the identification of homeless students and help these agencies meet their federal requirements.

- **Train school staff.**

The local liaison should train all school administrators, teachers, and support staff on a regular basis. Staff should know what indications of homelessness to look and

listen for when interacting with parents, children, and youth; how to discuss sensitive issues in a discreet and respectful way, such as avoiding using the word "homeless;" and what the protocol is for referring students to the local liaison.

NCHE offers a variety of useful resources related to awareness and identification, including a brief entitled *Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: An Introduction to the Issues*, an online tutorial called *Homeless with Homework: An Introduction to Homeless Education*, and *Appendix 12.B Common Signs of Homelessness* in NCHE's *Homeless Liaison Toolkit*. See [Additional Resources from NCHE](#) below for links to these resources.

Also, see [Appendix A: Preparing LEA Role Groups to Identify Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness](#) below for a list of specific school role groups, ways they may encounter homeless students, and training suggestions to assist them in identification.

- **Provide information to parents.**

The LEA should create a welcoming and supportive environment for parents to disclose their homeless situation. Strategies to accomplish this include incorporating information on the definition of *homeless* and rights and services under the McKinney-Vento Act in parent informational materials, adding this information to the school district's website, and displaying this information prominently on posters in the school where parents are likely to see them.

- **Reach out to youth.**

LEAs should ensure that youth perceive school as a safe place to disclose family challenges and homelessness. Not only will youth experiencing homelessness be more likely to seek assistance, but other youth in the school will feel more comfortable reaching out to a teacher or counselor on behalf of a student who is homeless. LEAs should consider the use of social media to create awareness of services for youth experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the local liaison should provide awareness materials for youth in places in

the community where they are likely to congregate, such as youth shelters, malls, libraries, and street outreach centers.

- **Provide tools to assist with identifying homeless children and youth, including:**
 - » **A student residency enrollment form.** Most LEAs use an enrollment form for all students that requests information about living arrangements for the purpose of screening for possible homelessness. (Note that the forms should not use the word “homeless.”) If a parent indicates that the family is living in a situation that may qualify as homeless, the registrar or school secretary can refer the parent or youth to the local liaison for further discussion regarding McKinney-Vento eligibility. For an example of a student residency enrollment form, see *Appendix 3.A Sample Residency Information Form* in NCHE’s *Homeless Liaison Toolkit* or visit NCHE’s Enrollment webpage and look under *Sample Forms, Materials, and Policies*. See [Additional Resources from NCHE](#) below for links to these resources.
 - » **NCHE’s *Determining Eligibility for Rights and Services under the McKinney-Vento Act* brief.** This brief provides a clear explanation of the definition of *homeless* in the McKinney-Vento Act and includes helpful questions that a school or LEA staff member can ask when trying to determine if a family or youth is experiencing homelessness. See [Additional Resources from NCHE](#) below for a link to the brief.
 - » **A list of addresses of shelters, motels, transitional living programs, and camping grounds.** Local liaisons should provide school registrars with a list of addresses of areas in the community in which homeless families or youth are likely to reside. If the registrar notes that an enrolling student lists one of these addresses or

that a current student has changed his or her address to one on the list, the registrar can refer the student to the local liaison.

- **Be aware of disasters or catastrophic events in the community that may cause homelessness.**

A natural or man-made disaster can result instantly in many families losing their homes and experiencing significant trauma. When a disaster occurs, local liaisons should be proactive by preparing schools to enroll large numbers of homeless students and arranging for additional staff to assist with the identification and enrollment process as needed. Each student’s eligibility for McKinney-Vento services must be determined on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, local liaisons should notify agencies working with the families of how schools will enroll and serve eligible students. See [Additional Resources from NCHE](#) below for more information on disaster preparation and response for schools.

Catastrophic events include factory closings that result in widespread unemployment or other impacts of a severe economic downturn, such as foreclosures and evictions. Local liaisons should publicize the rights and services of homeless students directly to the impacted families, as well as to those who are assisting the families. Local liaisons can display posters or distribute brochures on McKinney-Vento rights in the impacted factory, or they can disseminate brochures to law enforcement officials to provide to evicted families or to bank foreclosure officials for parents who are losing their homes.

CONCLUSION

The identification of children and youth in homeless situations is the first step to ensuring that these students receive the services and supports needed to enroll in, attend, and succeed in school. The McKinney-Vento Act,

therefore, requires all school districts, led by the local liaison and in coordination with school personnel and other agencies, to identify students in homeless situations. Local liaisons should reach out to school personnel and community agencies on a continual basis and conduct trainings to make sure that people who encounter homeless children, youth, and families understand the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless* and know the ways that homeless children and youth can be linked to school services. As a result, schools and communities can share a joint commitment to identify homeless children and youth and help these children and youth overcome the devastating impacts of poverty and homelessness through educational success.

LEGISLATIVE EXCERPTS RELATED TO IDENTIFICATION

- (6) Local Educational Agency Liaison
- (A) Duties – Each local educational agency liaison for homeless children and youths, designated under paragraph (1)(J)(ii), shall ensure that–
- (i) homeless children and youths are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies;
 - (ii) homeless children and youths enroll in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, schools of that local educational agency;
 - (iii) homeless families, children, and youths receive educational services for which such families, children, and youths are eligible, including Head Start and Even Start programs and preschool programs administered by the local educational agency, and referrals to health care services, dental services, mental health services, and other appropriate services; ...
 - (v) public notice of the educational rights of homeless children and youths is disseminated where such

children and youths receive services under this chapter, such as schools, family shelters, and soup kitchens.

42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(6)(A)(i)-(iii) and (v)

(g) State Plan

- (1) In General – Each State shall submit to the Secretary a plan to provide for the education of homeless children and youths within the State. Such plan shall include the following: ...
- (B) A description of the procedures the State educational agency will use to identify such children and youths in the State and to assess their special needs.

42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(1)(B)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM NCHE

- *Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: An Introduction to the Issues* | <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/introduction.pdf>
- *Determining Eligibility for Rights and Services Under the McKinney-Vento Act* | http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/det_elig.pdf
- Educational Rights Posters | http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/er_poster.php
- *Homeless with Homework: An Introduction to Homeless Education* | <http://servepres1.serve.org/hwh>
- *Homeless Liaison Toolkit* | http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/liaison_toolkit.php
- NCHE Disaster Preparation and Response webpage | http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/dis_prep.php
- NCHE Enrollment webpage | http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc_enroll.php

REFERENCES

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001. 42 USC §§11431–11435. (2001).

Role Group	Connection to Homeless Students	Training
Administrators and teachers	May notice if a student is suddenly falling behind in school; coming to school fatigued, hungry, or wearing the same clothes; hoarding belongings; or having uncharacteristic discipline problems	Awareness of homelessness and behaviors that might indicate trauma and crisis related to homelessness, understanding of ways to discuss homelessness with students, familiarity with protocol for referring the student to the local liaison
Social workers, counselors, and nurses	May encounter students who are experiencing academic, behavior, health, or hygiene problems that may be related to homelessness	Awareness of homelessness and behavioral, mental, and physical health problems that might indicate trauma and crisis related to homelessness; understanding of ways to discuss homelessness with students; familiarity with protocol for referring the student to the local liaison
Secretaries and registrars	Often are the first people in a school to meet a family, child, or youth who may be experiencing homelessness when enrolling a child or youth; see addresses the family lists or multiple school enrollments that could indicate a homeless situation	Understanding of the definition of <i>homeless</i> ; awareness of what a parent or child might disclose that could indicate homelessness; understanding of how to determine if a family living doubled up may be homeless; proficiency with discussing homelessness discreetly and respectfully; familiarity with protocol for referring a family, child, or youth to the local liaison
Cafeteria workers	May see a student who is not eating because he or she did not bring lunch or did not have money to buy lunch, seems inordinately hungry, is asking peers for food, is taking large portions, or hoarding food; may overhear that a student is homeless; may have a special rapport with a student who discloses homelessness	Understanding of possible indicators of homelessness related to food, proficiency in discussing homelessness with students, familiarity with protocol for referring a student to the local liaison

Bus drivers	May see a new child on the bus route living with another family, which could indicate doubling up due to homelessness; may overhear that a child is experiencing homelessness; may see uncharacteristic discipline problems from a child; may have a special rapport with a child who discloses homelessness	Understanding of possible indicators of homelessness at the bus stop or on the bus, ways to discuss homelessness with students, familiarity with protocol for referring a student to the local liaison
Truancy and attendance officials	Can detect patterns of absences that could indicate mobility or other attendance challenges due to homelessness; may talk to parents, children, or youth who disclose their homelessness	Understanding of ways that homelessness can impact attendance; proficiency with discussing homelessness with students; familiarity with protocol for referring a family, child, or youth to the local liaison

This brief was developed by:

National Center for Homeless Education

800-308-2145 (Toll-free Helpline)

<http://www.serve.org/nche>

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.

Local Contact Information: