



Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania:

New Evidence of Under-Identification and Inequity

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I. Introduction

As RFA found in 2018, Pennsylvania schools have a [history](#) of under-identifying students experiencing homelessness, denying likely hundreds of students the educational rights afforded by federal law each year. Now the state, along with the whole nation, is facing multiple crises as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, from healthcare to job and housing loss. The aftershocks of this pandemic are likely to bring more families to the [tipping point](#) of overcrowding, temporary housing, and homelessness. PA schools will need to support these growing numbers of students experiencing homelessness (“SEH”) over the next few years.

Why is it important to identify SEH? Not only are school districts legally liable to identify SEH, but these highly mobile students have also been through [traumas](#) and require additional resources to serve [effectively and achieve academically](#). Due to [systemic barriers](#), students of color, LGBT students, older youth living on their own, and students who are expectant or parenting are overrepresented among SEH. And SEH are [especially vulnerable](#) in the era of remote or mixed-delivery instruction, since they often lack a stable place to learn during the day. As a result of these and other barriers, [SEH have](#) lower academic achievement, higher truancy rates, lower high school graduation rates, and higher dropout rates. This makes timely identification and support all the more important.

In our [2018 brief](#), we summarized schools’ federal and state legal responsibilities toward SEH, highlighted the Pennsylvania statewide technical assistant and monitor’s findings of under-identification of SEH, and used national data to show that, relative to overall student poverty, Pennsylvania schools had among the lowest identification rates for SEH in the country. We concluded with promising practices to better understand and improve how SEH are being identified and served. Those practices and recommendations remain relevant.

Since then, new data have been released to the public. Since the onset of COVID, remote and hybrid learning models are adding new challenges to the already difficult task of identifying students experiencing homelessness.

In this brief, we provide some evidence of improvement in identification of SEH in PA since our last report. However, rates vary by school community and **Pennsylvania overall ranks only 36th out of 50 states in identification of SEH per school-aged children in poverty**. Data indicate that Philadelphia — the city with the highest overall population of people experiencing homelessness — is particularly under-identifying SEH, especially in its charter school sector. Meanwhile, in cyber charter schools across the state enrollment of SEH has increased dramatically over time. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the growing rural student homelessness population in PA, a trend that brings to light the statewide nature of the student homelessness crisis.

Student Homelessness Data Sources Used in This Report

Data from the U.S. Department of Education’s [EdFacts Initiative](#) are used to define students experiencing homelessness overall and by housing status, special population, and charter status. This dataset represents a yearlong count of students who were identified as homeless at any point during the year.

In section VI: Mid-Year Enrollment of Students Experiencing Homelessness, a [state dataset](#) that provides a snapshot of student enrollment on October 1st is also used for comparative purposes.

Defining Students Experiencing Homelessness

Students are considered to be experiencing homelessness if they “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” Many SEH are identified based on living in inadequate/substandard housing, which can be infested or lacking heat, water, electricity, or a working kitchen or bathroom. The following categories describe the living situations of SEH:

Sheltered: Living in a shelter or transitional housing.

Hotel: Living in a hotel or motel.

Unsheltered: Living in a place not meant for human habitation, such as a car or abandoned building.

Doubled up: Temporarily sharing another person’s housing due to a lack of housing or economic hardship. This is the most common living situation for students experiencing homelessness.

Students’ housing status is recorded based on their first reported experience of homelessness during the school year.

Source: McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless 42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2).

Educational Challenges of Students Experiencing Homelessness (SEH) During COVID

SEH are particularly susceptible to additional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. A higher risk of [asthma](#), overall poorer health, and inability to properly socially distance due to conditions in [homeless shelters](#) or [overcrowded doubled-up settings](#) make these students and their families particularly likely to be affected by COVID. Furthermore, SEH are more likely to lack a stable place to do schoolwork, a high-quality internet connection, and 1:1 devices that can connect to the internet. Even when students start the year with these resources, their mobility and housing challenges make it difficult to maintain a stable connection or working device for the full year. For these reasons, it is now even more crucial that students' homelessness status is identified and schools address these additional support needs.

The **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act** outlines the requirements of states in supporting SEH, including mandates to identify SEH and provide them with transportation and educational supports to alleviate the negative impacts of homelessness; for example, states must have procedures to identify and remove barriers to accruing credits for full or [partial coursework](#) completed at a prior school. The McKinney-Vento Act also includes mandates for schools to identify and support SEH to enroll and succeed in school. All McKinney-Vento protections and requirements [remained in effect](#) during COVID shutdowns – including the mandate to [identify](#) students experiencing homelessness – even during school closures and remote instruction. While the requirements under the McKinney-Vento Act are largely [unfunded](#), states and LEAs could [choose](#) to use the additional COVID emergency funds to support schools in identifying and meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

II. Key findings

- Over 31,000 PA students were identified as homeless in 2018-19 (1.8% of the total student population). This represents a 37% increase since 2013-14, while during the same time period, overall student enrollment declined by 1%.
- Identifying SEH is the first step to providing needed academic supports. However, PA schools identified just 10.1 SEH per 100 school-aged children in poverty, while in the nation overall, 15.7 SEH were identified per 100 in poverty—indicating that PA likely under-identifies SEH overall.
- Philadelphia SD has the lowest rate of identification of SEH among the 20 largest school districts in the nation (only 4 SEH per 100 in poverty).
- The percentage of SEH in cyber charter schools increased from 0.4% in 2013-14 to 3.0% in 2018-19. There are now over 1,100 SEH attending PA's cyber charter schools.
- Enrollment of SEH increases over the course of a school year in public school districts and cyber charter schools, but not in Pennsylvania's brick-and-mortar charter schools.
- Student homelessness in Pennsylvania is consistently higher in cities, however from 2013-14 to 2018-19 student homelessness in suburbs/towns and rural areas grew at higher rates than in cities (55%, 50%, and 19% increases respectively).

III. Under-Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania

Over 31,000 PA students were identified as homeless in 2018-19. This amounted to 1.8% of the total student population, while in the nation overall, 2.8% of students were identified as homeless. Meanwhile, PA's rate of school-aged children in poverty and the share of households that are rent burdened are only slightly below the nation overall (20.8% to 22.9% [children in poverty](#); 48.4% to 50.2% [rent burdened](#) paying 30% or more of income on rent). These data indicate that many SEH are remaining undetected, unable to access the educational protections to which their housing status entitles them.

In this brief, we revisit the rate of identification of students experiencing homelessness (SEH), previously used by RFA and other research organizations. As shown in Figure 1, this rate compares the number of SEH to the overall number of school-aged children in poverty reported by the U.S. Census.¹ Comparing the share of SEH out of school-aged children in poverty rather than the total student population offers a better indicator of whether a state is accurately identifying SEH.

Identifying Students Experiencing Homelessness (SEH)

“Public schools [nationwide] are identifying only slightly more than half of high school students experiencing homelessness. As many as one million students experiencing homelessness are not receiving services they need, and to which they are entitled under the federal McKinney-Vento Act.”

-Schoolhouse Connection

Who identifies SEH? Schools have a proactive legal duty to identify eligible students; the burden is not on families to self-identify. To support schools in meeting this duty, states are required to appoint a coordinator for homeless education to oversee identification of SEH and implementation of other McKinney-Vento mandates statewide. Additionally, every LEA must assign a Homeless Education Liaison to oversee implementation in local schools.

How are SEH identified? SEH are [identified](#) through numerous strategies including housing questionnaires at the school, outreach to families, referrals from community agencies, and trained school staff who are able to recognize the signs of homelessness. Some districts also have data-sharing agreements with local shelter systems that allow them to match SEH real-time.

Figure 1. Calculating the Rate of Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness, 2018-19

	Students Experiencing Homelessness (SEH)	÷	School-Aged Children in Poverty	=	Rate of Identification of SEH
PA	31,179 (1.8%)	÷	308,245 (20.8%)	=	10.1%
Nation	1,432,030 (2.8%)	÷	9,120,981 (22.9%)	=	15.7%

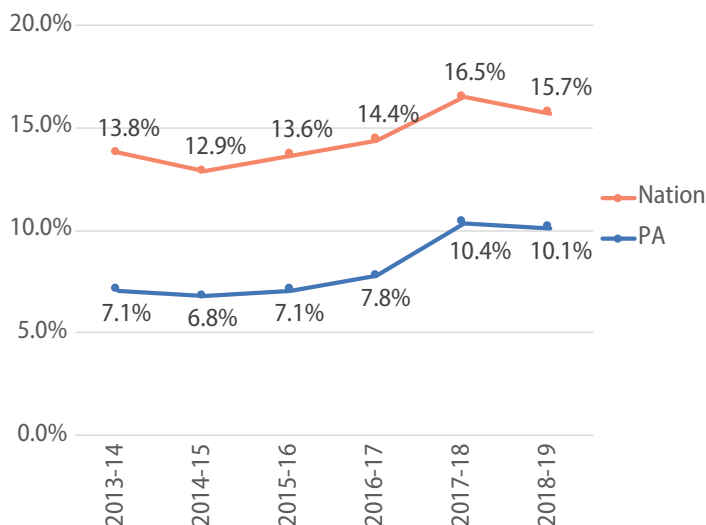
Note: All LEAs are included regardless of type (district, charter, or other).

- PA schools identified just 10.1 SEH per 100 school-aged children in poverty, while in the nation overall, 15.7 SEH were identified per 100 school-aged children in poverty.

Using this rate of identification, we compare Pennsylvania to the nation over the past six years in Figure 2, and in Figure 3 we demonstrate Pennsylvania's most recent ranking among all 50 states.

¹ SEH includes 3-5-year-olds attending public pre-Kindergarten programs. SEH data were suppressed if LEAs reported 2 SEH or fewer; we assume 1 SEH per suppressed value. SEH data are from: U.S. Department of Education, EdFacts Initiative, Homeless Students Enrolled (Data File C118), 2018-19. School-aged children in poverty includes children aged 6-17 years old. Poverty data are from: U.S. Census Bureau, 5-year American Community Survey (ACS), Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months by Sex by Age (Table B17001), 2018.

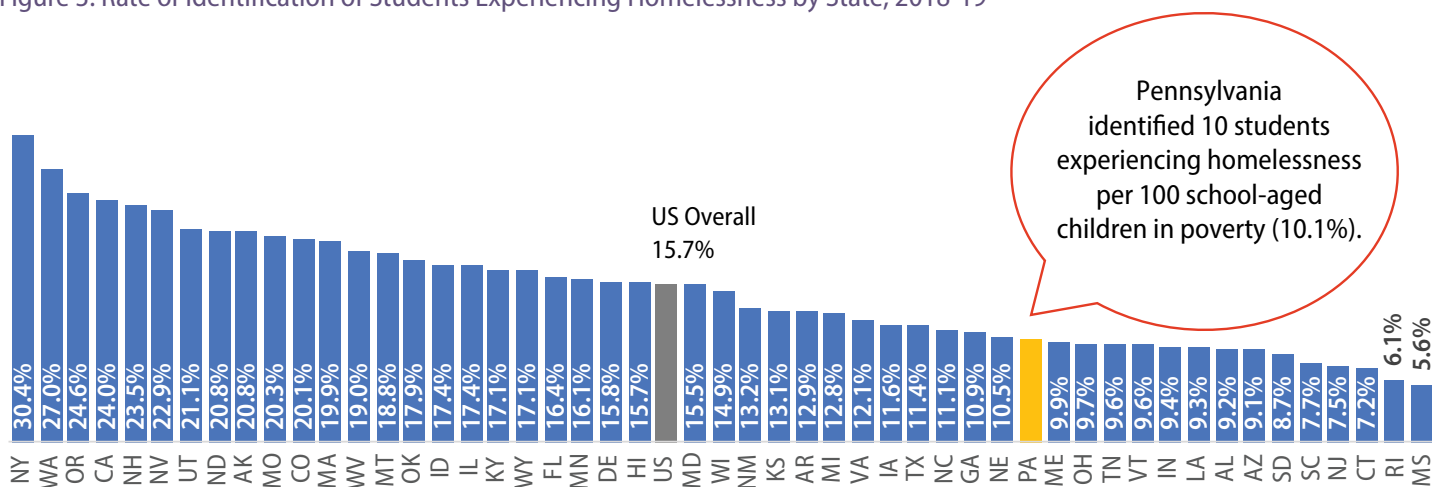
Figure 2. Rate of Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania and the Nation, 2013-14 to 2018-19



- Despite an increase in recent years, Pennsylvania continues to identify a much lower rate of SEH compared to poverty than the nation's schools overall (10.1% to 15.7%).

Note: All LEAs are included regardless of type (district, charter, or other).

Figure 3. Rate of Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness by State, 2018-19



- PA ranked 36th out of 50 states in this identification rate of SEH, identifying fewer SEH per school-aged children in poverty than most states.
- This was an improvement from the 2013-14 to 2016-17 school years, when PA ranked among the worst in the nation (44th-46th out of 50 states).
- PA had a slightly higher identification rate (10.1%) than the bordering states of NJ (7.5%) and OH (9.7%) but a lower rate than the bordering states of MD (15.5%), DE (15.8%), WV (19.0%), and NY (30.4%).

Federal data also reports student homelessness rates by type of housing status and by youth characteristics. Figure 4 presents this data for Pennsylvania, including how rates changed from 2013-14 to 2018-19.

Figure 4. Percent (and Number) Change in Students Experiencing Homelessness and Total Enrollment in Pennsylvania, by Housing Status and Special Populations, 2013-14 to 2018-19

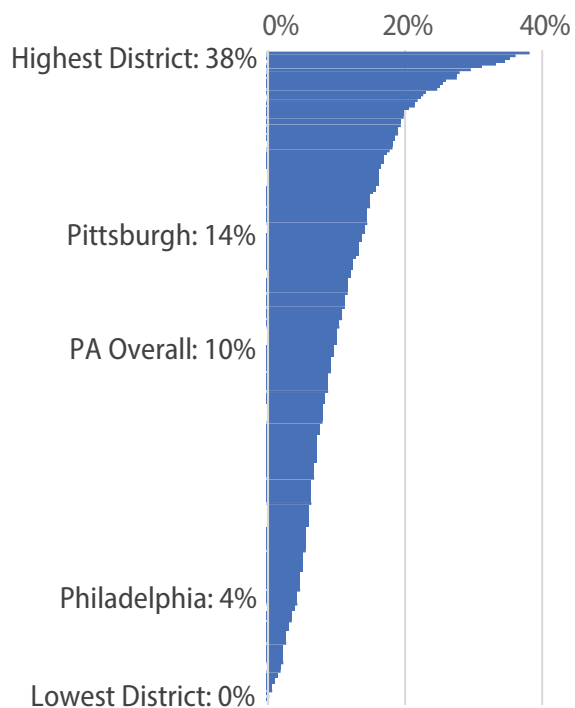


Note: Percentages shown in the chart are the percent changes in the number of students from 2013-14 to 2018-19. Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of students in 2013-14 and 2018-19. All LEAs are included regardless of type (district, charter, or other). Students may belong to more than one special population. Students by housing status and special populations are as reported by the U.S. Department of Education's EdFacts Initiative.

- While the total student enrollment declined by 1% (from 1,734,286 to 1,710,571), the total number of SEH in PA increased by 37% from 2013-14 to 2018-19 (from 22,718 to 31,179 students).
- SEH living doubled up (+61%), in hotels/motels (+85%), unsheltered (+120%), and unaccompanied (+179%) increased by the largest percentages over this time period. (Doubled-up students increased from 13,429 to 21,561; hotel/motel increased from 1,143 to 2,116; unsheltered increased from 178 to 214; unaccompanied increased from 2,103 to 3,754.)
- There was a 19% decline in SEH living in shelters, representing 1,128 fewer students (from 5,851 to 4,723).²

² The number of students in shelter declined in both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh (-336 and -138 students respectively) which account for 42% of the overall statewide loss. PDE [state reports](#) corroborate this decline. The Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services also [reports](#) a decline in homeless families with children living in shelters as well as in the number of available beds for homeless families with children. Finally, this decline in PA mirrors a nationwide decline in the number of SEH living in shelters (a 14% decline between 2013-14 to 2018-19).

Figure 5. Pennsylvania School District Rates of Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness, 2018-19



- Rate of identification of SEH ranges widely by PA School District Community. This suggests that there are identification practices working well in some communities that LEAs across the state could learn from.
- Pittsburgh's rate of identification of SEH is closer to the national average and over three times higher than in Philadelphia (14% to 4%).
- One PA district identified up to 38 SEH per 100 school-aged children in poverty (similar to the rate in New York City), while 15 districts identified only 1 or less SEH per 100 school-aged children in poverty. We focus on Philadelphia's SEH counts in the following section; however, these data show that there are many other high-poverty communities in PA with low identification rates of SEH.

Note: 106 school district communities are excluded due to unreliable U.S. Census data on the number of school-aged children in poverty ([RSE](#) > 30%). The remaining 393 PA school district communities are included.

IV. Philadelphia’s Under-Identification and Low Rates of Students Experiencing Homelessness

In this section, we examine data for schools in Philadelphia, the largest school system in Pennsylvania and sixth largest in the country. As with most large American school systems, Philadelphia public schools are comprised of school district schools and independently operated charter schools. In Figure 6 we detail the SEH identification rate for schools in Philadelphia SD compared to the nation’s 19 other largest school districts. Findings suggest that Philadelphia, despite the highest poverty rate of these 20 school communities, significantly under-identifies SEH. We then compare SEH rates in Philadelphia SD and charter schools.

Figure 6. Rate of Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness in the Nation’s 20 Largest Public School Districts, 2018-19

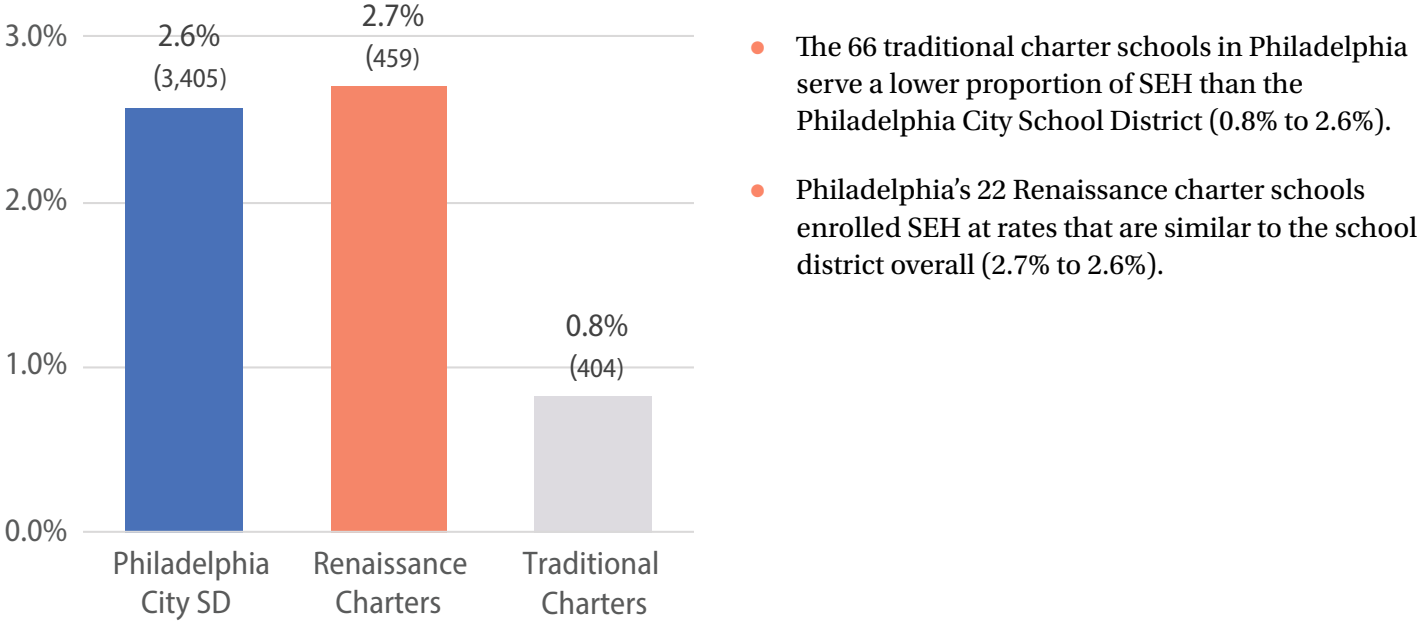
	SEH per School-Aged Children in Poverty	Percent SEH	Percent School-Aged Children in Poverty
New York City, NY	38.7%	12.0%	37.2%
Clark County, NV	21.5%	4.2%	23.8%
Wake County, NC	18.8%	2.4%	13.6%
Fairfax County, VA	18.1%	1.3%	8.2%
Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC	16.1%	3.1%	20.5%
Chicago, IL	15.8%	4.7%	41.2%
Hawaii Dept. of Education, HI	15.7%	2.0%	13.3%
Orange County, FL	14.6%	2.9%	27.1%
Palm Beach, FL	13.1%	2.3%	22.1%
Duval County, FL	12.6%	2.9%	28.8%
Houston, TX	12.1%	4.4%	52.8%
Miami-Dade County, FL	11.5%	2.8%	30.9%
Broward County, FL	11.1%	2.0%	21.8%
Montgomery County, MD	10.5%	0.9%	9.2%
Hillsborough County, FL	10.4%	1.9%	24.3%
Prince George's County, MD	9.6%	1.1%	13.2%
Los Angeles, CA	9.4%	3.5%	38.2%
Gwinnett County, GA	7.5%	1.1%	18.7%
Dallas, TX	5.5%	2.2%	50.0%
Philadelphia, PA	4.4%	2.6%	56.4%

Note: SEH per school-aged children in poverty is the number of SEH reported by the U.S. Department of Education divided by the number of school-aged children in poverty reported by the U.S. Census. The 20 largest public school districts were identified based on total student enrollment for the 2018-19 school year reported by the National Center for Education Statistics.

- Philadelphia SD has the lowest rate of identification of SEH among 20 largest districts in the nation (4%).
- While Philadelphia SD has the highest percentage of school-aged children in poverty of the 20 largest districts, it ranks only 10th in the percentage of SEH.

Comparing district schools and charter schools. Philadelphia’s 305 public school buildings include 217 district schools and 88 brick-and-mortar charter schools. There are two different kinds of brick-and-mortar charter schools: 66 **traditional charter schools**, which give equal enrollment preference to students from anywhere in the city, and 22 **Renaissance charter schools**, which are former district neighborhood schools converted to operation by a charter management organization. Renaissance charters are commonly located in some of the city’s highest-poverty neighborhoods and are required to give enrollment preference to students residing in their neighborhood catchment. As shown in Figure 7, enrollment rates of SEH are similar in district schools and the 22 Renaissance charter schools, but significantly lower in the 66 traditional charter schools.

Figure 7. Percent (and Number) of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Philadelphia by Type of Public School, 2018-19



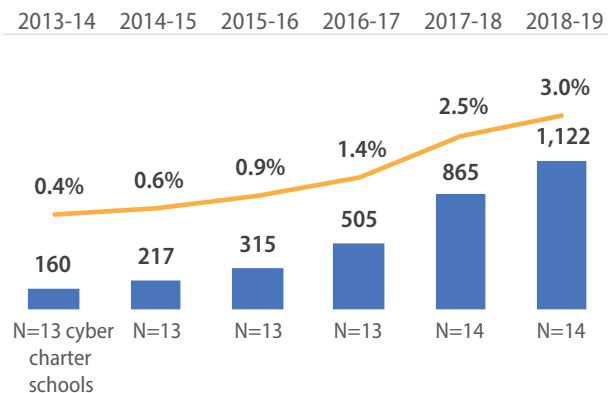
- The 66 traditional charter schools in Philadelphia serve a lower proportion of SEH than the Philadelphia City School District (0.8% to 2.6%).
- Philadelphia’s 22 Renaissance charter schools enrolled SEH at rates that are similar to the school district overall (2.7% to 2.6%).

Note: Includes brick-and-mortar charter schools only (66 traditional charters and 22 Renaissance charters). Excludes two cyber charter schools located in Philadelphia that serve students from all across the state.

V. High Rates of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania's Cyber Charter Schools

Much research has questioned the [efficacy](#) of PA's cyber charter schools in light of [poor student outcomes](#) and high [student transfer rates](#). Yet, as displayed in Figure 8, enrollment of SEH in cyber charter schools has grown over the past six years.

Figure 8. Number and Percentage of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania Cyber Charter Schools, 2013-14 to 2018-19



- The percentage of SEH in cyber charter schools increased from 0.4% in 2013-14 to 3.0% in 2018-19.
- The 1,100 SEH attending cyber charter schools now comprise 3.5% of the 31,179 SEH in PA's public schools.

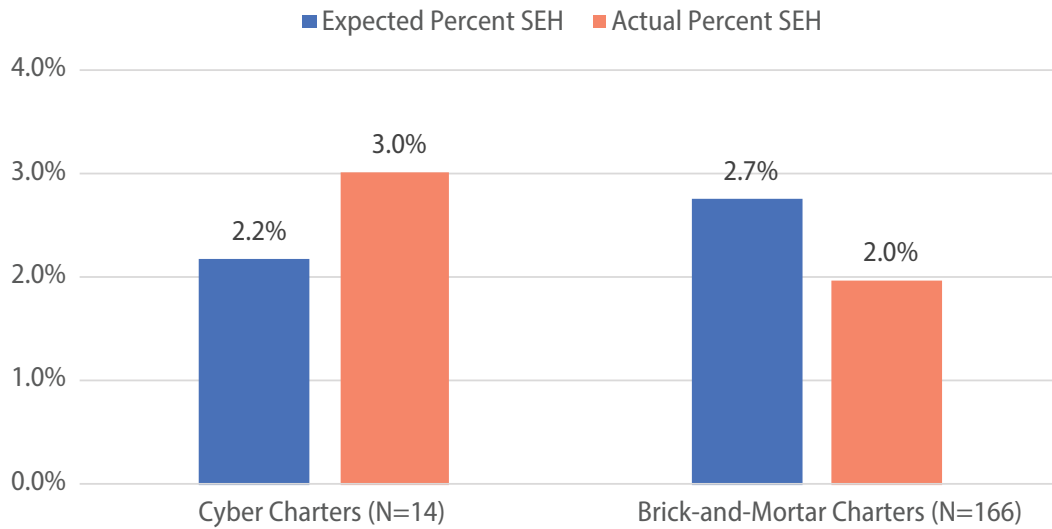
Note: N indicates number of cyber charter schools.

Given that SEH are particularly vulnerable, highly mobile, and require additional academic supports, policymakers should examine whether cyber charter schools are capable of providing the educational supports that SEH need, and whether they are taking appropriate steps to foster adequate educational settings for high numbers of SEH, including ensuring consistent access to online schooling for these highly mobile students. Policymakers should also examine the pressures that are pushing families of SEH to enroll in cyber school environments, in particular whether brick-and-mortar schools (district or charter) are removing all barriers to enrollment and offering needed supports to SEH as legally required.

Meanwhile, cyber charter schools serve students from districts across the state. Thus, to understand the enrollment of SEH in cyber charter schools, RFA computed an expected percentage of students experiencing homelessness. The expected percentage is the average percent homeless in charter students' districts of residence weighted by the portion of students from each district.³ The expected and actual rates for both cyber and brick-and-mortar charter schools is shown in Figure 9.

³ The expected percentage homeless by charter school is the weighted average of the percent homeless in charter schools' sending school districts, or the districts in which the charter school's students reside. Each district's share of students in each charter school statewide, made available by PDE, was used to calculate weights. This weighted average is a closer estimate of the expected percent homeless enrollment for each Pennsylvania charter school than would be achieved by simply comparing percentages based on the location of charter schools.

Figure 9. Actual to Expected Percentage of Students Experiencing Homelessness in PA Charter Schools, by Cyber Status, 2018-19



Note: N indicates number of LEAs. Out of the state's 166 brick-and-mortar charter schools, over half (88) are located in Philadelphia. See footnote 3 for explanation of expected and actual percent SEH.

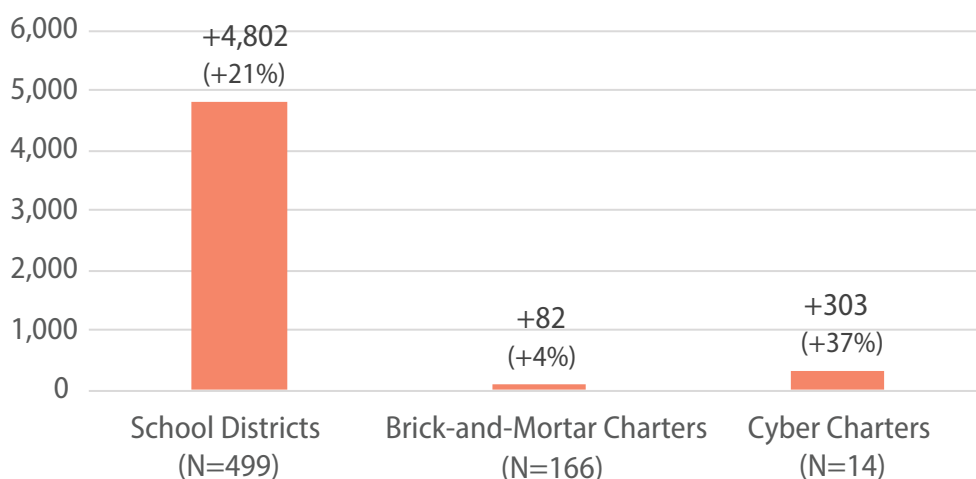
- Compared to the expected rate, or weighted school district average, of 2.2% SEH, cyber charter schools over-enrolled SEH at 3.0%.
- Meanwhile, brick-and-mortar charter schools under-enrolled SEH (2.7% expected to 2.0% actual), a pattern that is driven by the Philadelphia trends shown in the previous section.

VI. Mid-Year Enrollment of Students Experiencing Homelessness

There are two different public data sources that report the number of SEH attending Pennsylvania schools: (1) a [state dataset](#) that provides a snapshot of student enrollment on October 1st, and (2) a [federal dataset](#) that provides a yearlong count. The yearlong count is generally larger because in addition to SEH enrolled at the beginning of a school year it also captures both students who experienced homelessness at a later point during the school year and new SEH who enrolled mid-year.

Unless otherwise stated, this brief uses the yearlong count. However, here we use both counts to estimate the mid-year change in SEH for local education agencies. Figure 10 displays results for school districts, cyber charter schools, and brick-and-mortar charter schools.

Figure 10. Increase in Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania Schools from October 2018 to Yearlong Count, 2018-19 (with Percent Increase)



Note: Numbers shown in the chart are the increases in the total number of students experiencing homelessness from October 2018 to the yearlong count for 2018-19. Percentages in parentheses are the percent increases in students experiencing homelessness.

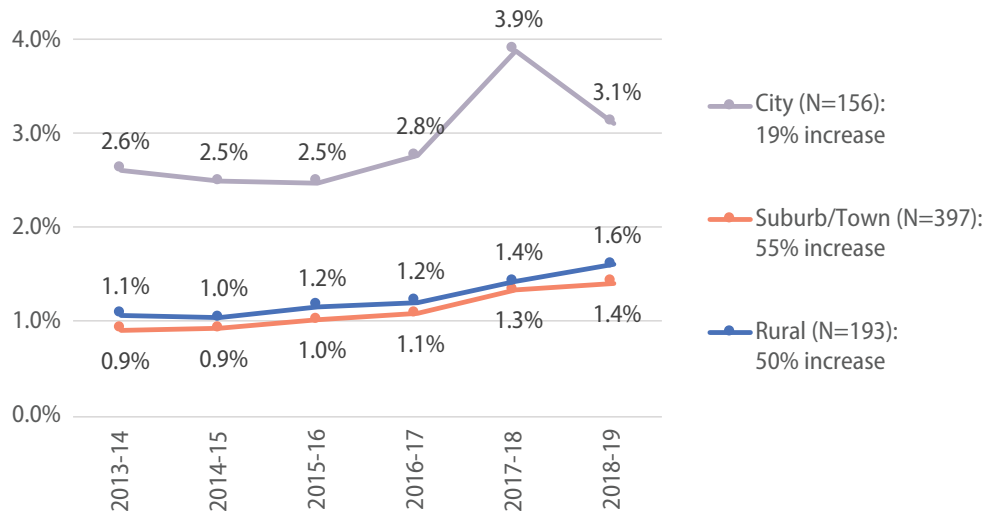
- The percentage of SEH increased mid-year in PA school districts, brick-and-mortar charters, and cyber charter schools.
- Cyber charter schools showed the largest percent increase in the share of SEH (37% increase), followed by school districts (21% increase).
- There was virtually no mid-year increase in brick-and-mortar charters (4% increase).

SEH are known to be among the most highly mobile of any student population. This fact underlies the policy rationale of the federal McKinney-Vento Act which provides SEH a right to immediate enrollment in any LEA in which they currently reside regardless of the time of year. These data provide evidence that district schools and cyber charter schools either enroll new SEH who are mobile during a school year or identify students who experience homelessness mid-year. In contrast, the data suggest that Pennsylvania's brick-and-mortar charter schools generally do not. More research is needed about what factors are causing these patterns, including whether SEH face barriers to mid-year enrollment in brick-and-mortar charter schools.

VII. Increasing Rates of Student Homelessness in Rural Pennsylvania

Student homelessness in Pennsylvania does not only affect large urban districts. In fact, PA mirrors a nationwide trend of increasing numbers of rural student homelessness—a particularly challenging group to identify. PA was identified as one of 38 states in which [rural homelessness](#) has grown in recent years. And, families experiencing homelessness in rural settings are often [undercounted](#) because they are more likely to live in unsheltered settings. Our data below confirm this increase in rural homelessness in PA and the characteristics of students experiencing homelessness in rural LEAs.

Figure 11. Percent Students Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania, by Geographic Type, 2013-14 to 2018-19



Note: All school districts and charter schools included. Charter schools that closed prior to 2018-19 were included in the years they were operating. N indicates number of LEAs. Geographic type was identified by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

- Although the overall percentage of SEH is consistently higher in cities, student homelessness in suburbs/towns and rural areas increased at higher rates than in cities (55%, 50%, and 19% increase respectively from 2013-14 to 2018-19).
- These increases may be driven by changes in identification practices.

VIII. Conclusion

Lack of access to permanent, adequate, and affordable housing is a statewide problem affecting students across Pennsylvania and their families. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, this problem is only getting worse, impacting the educational futures of tens of thousands of Pennsylvania students each year.

Unfortunately, our analysis of updated national data on SEH and comparison to overall poverty continues to provide compelling evidence that Pennsylvania schools are significantly undercounting SEH and that SEH are not evenly distributed or identified—a necessary precursor to providing needed educational supports. The problem is most evident in Philadelphia, which is the state’s largest school system. Despite its status as the poorest big city in the country, city schools have the lowest identification rates of SEH of any big school system. In addition, the data suggest further investigation is needed to determine why brick-and-mortar charter schools are not enrolling new SEH mid-year, one of the rights provided to SEH under the federal McKinney-Vento Act.

Still, the new data indicate some progress in Pennsylvania’s overall identification rate of SEH. This provides an opportunity to learn from LEAs that are more successful in identifying students experiencing homelessness. PA should study and expand the trainings, expertise, and other best practices used in those high-identification LEAs, including the use of universal screening [tools](#) which have been effective in other jurisdictions. In addition, especially as COVID-19 presents new challenges for students, all schools and communities should improve supports to SEH, including the availability of quality shelter care and additional educational resources to ensure the ability of students to participate in remote or hybrid learning.