

BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION

Increasing Access to Higher Education for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: Information for Colleges and Universities



Introduction

Each year, more than a million young people in the United States experience homelessness;¹ some of these young people, known as unaccompanied homeless youth, will face the challenges of homelessness while living on their own without the support of a caring adult.

Unaccompanied homeless youth face the same struggles as other young people: trying to do well in school, “fitting in,” and figuring out what their future will look like.

Without adult guidance and support, however, they will face these struggles while also working to provide for their own livelihoods.

Many of these youth hope to attend college but wonder how they will pay tuition without help from their parents, who will sign important paperwork on their behalf, how they will juggle long work hours and schoolwork, and where they will stay when the dormitories close during holiday and summer breaks.

Fortunately, federal laws provide additional support for this vulnerable population. This brief aims to increase the awareness of postsecondary educators and education administrators of the issue of unaccompanied homeless youth by providing:

- A better understanding of unaccompanied homeless youth and the educational and other challenges they face;
- A summary of federal legislation, including the McKinney-Vento Act, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, and the FAFSA Simplification Act, which give unaccompanied homeless youth access to critical educational supports;

- Samples of promising practices implemented by high schools, colleges, and universities to assist unaccompanied homeless youth in succeeding in college; and
- Additional resources for more information.

Understanding Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

The primary piece of federal legislation dealing with the education of students experiencing homelessness is the McKinney-Vento Act, reauthorized in 2015 by Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act. The Act defines an unaccompanied homeless youth as a youth whose living situation is not “fixed, regular, and adequate” (homeless) and who is “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” (unaccompanied). The Act provides examples of living arrangements that would be considered homeless, including living in emergency and transitional shelters, living doubled-up with others due to loss of housing, and living on the street or in a car (*see sidebar on page 2 for the full definition of homeless*). By far, the most common type of living situation for unaccompanied homeless youth is that of living doubled-up, often bouncing between the homes of different relatives or friends (“couch-surfing”). The U.S. Department of Education’s federal data for the 2021-22 school year show that approximately 76 percent of homeless children and youth identified by school districts live in doubled-up situations. The proportion is higher for unaccompanied homeless youth, 85 percent of whom live in doubled-up situations.

¹ National Center for Homeless Education (2023). *Student homelessness in America: School years 2019-20 to 2021-22*. https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/SY-21-22-EHCY-Data-Summary_FINAL.pdf

WHO IS HOMELESS?

The term “homeless children and youth” —

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 - i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals;
 - ii. 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...;
 - iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 - iv. 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).

The Numbers

Unaccompanied homeless youth include those who have run away from home or have been asked to leave home by a parent or guardian. According to data analysis published by the National Center for Homeless Education, 9% of students experiencing homelessness are unaccompanied, a proportion that has remained stable for seven school years from 2015-16 through 2021-22.²

Additionally, research published by the American Academy of Pediatrics estimates as many as 1 in 20 youth run away from home (including episodes involving a

² National Center for Homeless Education (2023). *Student homelessness in America: School years 2019-20 to 2021-22*. https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/SY-21-22-EHCY-Data-Summary_FINAL.pdf

³ Gambon, T. B., et al. (2020). Runaway youth: Caring for the nation’s largest segment of missing children. *Pediatrics*, 145(2), e20193752. <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/145/2/e20193752/6822/5/Runaway-Youth-Caring-for-the-Nation-s-Largest>.

combination of running away and being thrown out of the home) *annually* in the United States.³ While some of these young people may return home shortly after leaving,⁴ others will live on their own long-term or even permanently.

Difficulty in collecting data on mobile populations and youths’ reluctance to admit their precarious living situations create challenges in determining the true scope of the problem; however, it is likely that numbers are much higher than have been documented.

Paths to Being on Their Own

One of the most common reasons that youth end up unaccompanied and homeless is family conflict. In some instances, youth are forced out of the home by their parents; other times, youth leave home because they feel unsafe or are unwilling to continue living in a difficult home environment. Whatever the reason for the youth leaving home, acute family conflict, which may involve physical, sexual, or mental abuse, is often present.⁴

The circumstances surrounding unaccompanied homeless youth create challenges in gathering precise population-level data. Across studies of homeless youth, 17 to 35 percent of the youth cite experiences of sexual abuse, while up to 60 percent cite experiences of physical abuse.⁵ Some unaccompanied youth also mention the absence of a parent or guardian due to incarceration, deployment, or death.

Further, there is a strong connection between homelessness and foster care. Some children and youth enter the foster care system because, in addition to experiencing homelessness, their parents are unable to care for them. Many youth end up homeless because they run away from foster care with the hopes of reuniting with their biological family or escaping a problematic

⁴ Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America national estimates*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/VoYC-National-Estimates-Brief-Chapin-Hall-2017.pdf>

⁵ Edidin, J. P., Ganim, Z., Hunter, S. J., & Karnik, N. S. (2012). The mental and physical health of homeless youth: A literature review. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 43, 354-375.

foster placement. Numerous others will age out of the foster care system and be launched abruptly into adulthood. Many of these youth will lack the skills necessary for independent adult living and yet also lack a reliable support system to help them make the transition.

The Barriers

Unaccompanied homeless youth often live in high-risk environments, putting them in danger of experiencing a wide variety of problems. In many cases, the youth have been living apart from their parents for several years, either staying off and on with friends and relatives or living on the street. Some of the challenges unaccompanied homeless youth face are:

- **Lack of financial means to live independently and safely.** Unaccompanied youth often are unable to meet their basic needs for shelter, food, clothing, and health care. Many also face barriers created by a lack of transportation.
- **Limited housing options, especially in small towns or rural areas.** Most unaccompanied youth depend on the good graces of friends or relatives who will allow the youth to stay with them for a short time. When living doubled-up is no longer an option, these youth frequently find themselves in unsafe and inadequate housing arrangements.
- **Lack of connection with adults or agencies that could help.** After leaving home, unaccompanied youth often fear being forced to return home or placed in foster care. As young adults, they remain reluctant to seek help or are unaware of available assistance.

Unaccompanied homeless youth also face the following barriers specific to continuing their education:

- **Struggling to balance school and other responsibilities.** Many unaccompanied youth fall behind in school because they are attempting to balance school with the demands of working to provide for their basic needs. Due to high residential mobility or heavy work demands, many unaccompanied youth miss school and lose credits. The time these youth must dedicate to maintaining

PROFILE OF AN UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH

Carl's situation is typical of many unaccompanied homeless youth. His father died when Carl was a baby. Due to abuse by his mother's boyfriend, Carl left home during his senior year in high school and stayed with a variety of family members and friends, most of whom lived outside of his school district. Fearing he would be kicked out of school while doubling up outside his school's residential zone, Carl hid his living situation from school officials.

After graduating high school, Carl decided to work for a year to save money for college. Although his living situation was still unstable, he at least felt like he had enough money to look into enrolling in college. While filling out his FAFSA, Carl noticed multiple places in the application requesting parent signatures or information about parental income and financial contribution. He was relieved to see that the application mentions the term "Independent Student," and it appears that he meets the necessary criteria. However, he doesn't have the proper documentation or know who can determine his independent student status for purposes of the FAFSA.

When he mentioned the issue to the financial aid staff at the local community college, they seemed hesitant to qualify him as an independent student, telling him he must submit his mother's financial records to receive financial aid. He has had only sporadic contact with his mother since leaving home nearly two years ago; any attempts at communication have been met with indifference or hostility. Carl is about to give up on his dream of attending college.

employment often comes at the expense of time needed to focus on their education.

- **Lack of adult guidance and support.** Unaccompanied youth often lack connections with adults who can guide them in the process of preparing for and gaining admission into college. Most lack the presence of a supportive adult to encourage them to have high educational expectations. Many don't know where to apply for college, how to prepare and take the SAT or ACT, or how to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Shelters and other service providers for youth generally lack information on college access. If youth are reluctant to seek help at school, school counselors or local homeless education liaisons (*see callout box on page 6 about school district collaboration*) may not be aware of

their situations and, therefore, unable to provide needed support.

- **Lack of access to parental financial information and support.** Unaccompanied youth often have become estranged from their parents, which leads to difficulty with filling out the FAFSA. In most cases, completing the FAFSA requires youth to provide information about their parents' finances and to have their parents sign the completed form. Fortunately, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act includes provisions to assist unaccompanied homeless youth in filling out the FAFSA. More information is provided later in this document.
- **Inability to be financially self-sufficient once enrolled in college.** Once attending college, many unaccompanied youth struggle to provide for their basic needs. They often maintain rigorous work schedules that impact the amount of time they can devote to their studies. A particular challenge exists during breaks at residential colleges and universities when dormitories close. During these times, unaccompanied homeless students living in the dorms often have nowhere to go and insufficient funds to pay for housing.
- **Failure to access available support systems.** Unaccompanied homeless youth often go unidentified, either due to their own hesitancy to disclose details about their personal lives or lack of knowledge on the part of university staff. Such lack of identification prevents student support services and other staff from helping to address their unique needs.

Relevant Law

THE COLLEGE COST REDUCTION AND ACCESS ACT

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA), signed into law in 2007, includes specific provisions designed to remove barriers to accessing federal financial aid for college, with special considerations for

unaccompanied homeless youth. The Act enables these youth to be qualified as “independent students” for the purposes of filling out the FAFSA, thereby removing the need for these youth to provide parental financial information and a parent signature. Youth must be determined as unaccompanied and homeless, or as unaccompanied, at risk of homelessness, and self-supporting during the school year in which they apply for aid. Because many unaccompanied homeless youth have no contact with their parents or access to their financial information or support, the “independent student” designation is critical to enable them to complete the FAFSA.

Determination of independent student status must be made by one of the following:

1. A school district local homeless education liaison;
2. A U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development emergency shelter program director or its designee;
3. A Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program director or its designee; or
4. A college financial aid administrator

The CCRAA has been law since 2007; during its implementation, administrators of higher education institutions and university systems have realized the need for training and additional guidance for financial aid administrators to help remove barriers to college enrollment. Policy research on the CCRAA has also identified the importance of paperwork to provide documentation of homelessness and students' independence from their parents for financial aid administrators.⁶

THE FAFSA SIMPLIFICATION ACT

The FAFSA Simplification Act took effect in 2023 and is designed to remove barriers to receiving financial aid for higher education. This law has important implications for youth who are 1) unaccompanied and homeless or 2)

⁶ Crutchfield, R. M., Chambers, R. M., & Duffield, B. (2016). Jumping through the hoops to get financial aid for college students who are homeless: Policy analysis of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007. *Families in Society*, 97(3), 191-199.

unaccompanied, self-supporting, and at risk of becoming homeless.⁸ Starting with the 2024-25 FAFSA, a single question on the form asks applicants about unaccompanied and homeless status. A response of “yes” to the question will prompt the applicant to provide documentation about their status from an eligible authority. These authorities include local McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons, directors or designees of programs serving individuals experiencing homelessness, of programs funded under subtitle B of title IV of McKinney-Vento, or of federal TRIO programs or GEAR UP grants, or financial aid administrators at other institutions who previously documented the students’ circumstances. In the absence of a determination from an eligible authority, it is the responsibility of financial aid administrators to review information about applicants’ circumstances and make a determination. A “Dear Colleague Letter” from April 2023 provides additional guidance on eligible authorities and other considerations for youth who are determined independent students on the FAFSA.⁷ The letter also describes a streamlined process for determinations in one award year to carry over to subsequent award years.

The FAFSA Simplification Act has additional implications, including 1) homelessness status does not need to be redetermined each year, 2) determinations of unaccompanied homeless youth should be made as quickly as possible, and 3) more entities are able to verify unaccompanied homeless youth. Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education also specifies the types of documents to be accepted by financial aid administrators and how to make determinations if they are not available from other entities.⁸

KNOWING THE LAW

Knowledge of the content and provisions for unaccompanied homeless youth of both the CCRAA and the FAFSA Simplification Act by financial aid

administrators is particularly critical for youth like Carl (see callout box on page 3 about the profile of an unaccompanied homeless youth). If a youth becomes homeless and unaccompanied after graduating high school and has not stayed in a HUD- or RHYA-funded shelter, they will need to depend on a financial aid administrator to make the independent student determination. A lack of guidance on and standard procedure for determining eligibility has resulted in many financial aid offices denying a youth’s eligibility or requiring inappropriate information to be provided to prove independent status. To this end, the U.S. Department of Education has included specific guidance on the issue in its *Application and Verification Guide* (AVG), available for downloading at <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/fsa-handbook>.

Promising Practices for Institutions of Higher Education

DETERMINATION OF INDEPENDENT STUDENT STATUS

- Become familiar with the U.S. Department of Education’s Application and Verification Guide (AVG). The guide provides instructions and guidance to financial aid administrators on determining the independent status of unaccompanied homeless youth.
- Consider each student’s eligibility on a case-by-case basis. Start by understanding the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of homeless. The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHÉ) provides a helpful brief on determining homelessness, which is available for download at <https://nche.ed.gov/determining-eligibility-for-mckinney-vento-rights-and-services/>.
- Contact the local homeless education liaison in your school district to discuss the McKinney-Vento definition and how it applies to specific students

⁷ Cardona, M. A. (2023, April 14). Dear colleague letter: Unaccompanied homeless youth determinations update. <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2023-04-14/unaccompanied-homeless-youth-determinations-update>

⁸ SchoolHouse Connection (2023). *The FAFSA simplification act: Youth experiencing homelessness and youth with experience in foster care*. <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/the-fafsa-simplification-act/>

(see sidebar to the right).

- If the student cannot be qualified by emergency shelter staff or a local liaison, accept letters from those with whom the student resides or from a professional in the community who can corroborate the student's homeless status.
- Use Making Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Determinations: A Tool for Financial Aid Administrators, available at <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/faa-tool-2023-2024.pdf>.
- Do not require students to disclose personal details about past abuse in their family or other causes for homelessness and separation from their parents.

IDENTIFICATION OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH WHO ATTEND YOUR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

- Place posters and brochures around campus with the definition of homeless and contact information for someone who can link homeless students with support services. A free poster, created jointly by NCHE and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), is available for download at https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/he_poster.pdf.
- Create awareness among faculty and staff about unaccompanied homeless youth and the challenges they face so they can help with identification and support.

SUPPORTING UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH WHO ATTEND YOUR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

- Refer unaccompanied homeless students to support services upon their admission.
- Establish coordination between financial aid offices, student support services, and campus housing.
- Provide financial aid offices and student support services with information on community-based resources for homeless students, such as food and clothing banks and low-cost healthcare providers.
- Create awareness among professors and advisors working with students so they can refer homeless students to additional help when needed; specific signs to look for include excessive absences and

falling grades.

- Establish a food and clothing bank on campus.
- Plan housing for homeless students when dormitories close; ideas include leaving one residence hall open or establishing a list of "host homes" in the community.
- Establish a mentoring program for unaccompanied homeless youth.

SCHOOL DISTRICT COLLABORATION

The McKinney-Vento Act is the primary piece of federal legislation supporting the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The Act guarantees homeless students immediate access to the free, appropriate public education to which they are entitled.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, each state must appoint a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, charged with ensuring the full implementation of the Act in all school districts throughout the state. In addition, every school district in the United States must appoint a local homeless education liaison to ensure the full implementation of the Act in all district schools. State Coordinators and local liaisons are well-versed in the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless (*see sidebar on page 2*). As such, they can be a valuable resource for institutions of higher education for determining independent student status according to the definition and understanding the needs of students experiencing homelessness. To contact your State Coordinator, including to request contact information for the local liaison in your area, visit <https://nche.ed.gov/data/> to view a map and downloadable list of State Coordinators.

The federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth program, authorized under the McKinney-Vento Act, also maintains a federal technical assistance and information center: The National Center for Homeless Education. For additional information about supporting the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, visit the NCHE website at <https://nche.ed.gov/> or contact the NCHE helpline at (800) 308-2145 or homeless@serve.org.

U.S. Department of Education Resources STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Student Support Services programs assist low-income students with staying in college until they earn their degrees. The Student Support Services program was

amended by the Higher Education Opportunity Act to foster an institutional climate supportive of success in postsecondary education for homeless children and youth and students who are in foster care or aging out of foster care. Through a grant competition, the U.S. Department of Education awards funds to institutions of higher education to provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education. In addition, the Student Support Services program authorizes funds to be used for temporary housing during breaks in the academic year for homeless students and students who are in foster care or are aging out of the foster care system.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY CENTERS

The Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC) program is one of the federal TRIO programs, a group of eight outreach programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education, designed to support and assist low-income and first-generation college students in entering or continuing postsecondary education. These centers help people to choose a college, complete applications, improve financial and economic literacy, and access needed financial aid. For more information, visit <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioeoc/index.html>.

Conclusion

Unaccompanied homeless youth often do not have the guidance and support of a caring adult as they prepare for college and navigate the system to access financial aid.

Even if they are able to enroll, they have difficulty providing for their basic needs, which impacts their ability to be successful in the classroom. Supporting these youth in obtaining a college education will enable them to break the cycle of poverty and move towards a brighter and more stable future. Institutions of higher education, in collaboration with public schools and community agencies, can play a critical role in supporting unaccompanied homeless youth in their postsecondary endeavors.

Additional Resources

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE)
<https://nche.ed.gov/higher-education/>
(800) 308-2145 | homeless@serve.org

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)
<https://naehcy.org/higher-education/>

SchoolHouse Connection
<https://schoolhouseconnection.org/topics/higher-education/>