

Homeless Children

DEFINITION

Homeless children is the number of children under age 18 who stayed at homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, or transitional housing facilities in Rhode Island with their families. This number does not include homeless and runaway youth who are unaccompanied by their families.

SIGNIFICANCE

In the United States, 2.5 million children (one in 30) are homeless each year.¹ Families can become homeless due to lack of affordable housing, unemployment, low-paying jobs, extreme poverty, and decreasing government supports. Other causes include domestic violence, mental illness, substance abuse, and frayed social support networks.^{2,3,4}

Compared with their peers, homeless children are more likely to become ill (particularly with illnesses such as stomach problems, ear infections, and asthma), develop mental health issues (such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal), experience significant educational disruption, and exhibit delinquent or aggressive behaviors. Homeless children go hungry at twice the rate of other children.⁵

Homeless children are at a higher risk of abuse and exposure to violence. This trauma can lead to an increase in developmental delays and emotional distress and a decrease in academic

achievement.^{6,7} When homeless children are exposed to multiple traumatic events, they may have increased levels of anxiety, poor impulse control, and difficulty developing trusting relationships.^{8,9}

Families who have experienced homelessness have higher rates of family separation than other low-income families, with children separated from their parents due to shelter rules, state intervention, and/or parents' desires to protect their children from homelessness. Homeless children are more likely to have been placed in foster care (12%) than other children (1%). Homelessness also can be a barrier to reunification; it is estimated that more than 30% of children in foster care in the U.S. could return home if their parents had adequate housing.¹⁰

In 2015, 482 families with 988 children stayed at an emergency homeless shelter, domestic violence shelter, or transitional housing facility in Rhode Island. Children made up 23% of the people who used emergency homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transitional housing in 2015. Half (47%) of these children were under age six, not yet school age.¹¹ Other families are on the state's family shelter waiting list, awaiting placement when a slot opens up.

In 2015, United Way 211 received 48,461 calls from individuals and families seeking emergency shelter, 60,798 seeking affordable housing, and 7,140 related to foreclosure prevention.¹²

Rhode Island's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness

- ◆ In 2012, Rhode Island released a statewide strategic plan to transform the provision of services to decrease the number of homeless individuals and families. Rhode Island's plan (*Opening Doors Rhode Island*) is based on a comparable federal initiative called *Opening Doors, the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*.¹³
- ◆ *Zero: 2016* is a national campaign focused on helping communities across the U.S. end chronic and veteran homelessness by the end of 2016. Rhode Island has also set a target of ending family homelessness by the end of 2017.^{14,15,16}

Supporting Homeless Children in Schools

- ◆ Family residential instability and homelessness contribute to poor educational outcomes for children. Homeless children are more likely to change schools, be absent from school, and have lower reading and math scores than children who have housing.¹⁷
- ◆ The federal *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act)* requires that states identify homeless children, allow them to enroll in school even if they lack required documents, allow them to stay in their "home school," provide transportation when needed, and offer services to help them succeed in school.¹⁸
- ◆ The *McKinney-Vento Act* defines a child as homeless if he or she does not have a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence."¹⁹ During the 2014-2015 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 1,031 children as homeless, up from 1,023 the year prior. Of these children, 63% lived with other families ("doubled up"), 28% lived in shelters, 8% lived in hotels or motels, and 2% were unsheltered.²⁰
- ◆ Schools can support homeless families by identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness, ensuring that families and staff are aware of students' rights under the *McKinney-Vento Act*, developing relationships with community agencies serving homeless families, and helping homeless children get clothing, school supplies, tutoring, and referrals to other services they may need to succeed in school.²¹

Table 8. Homeless Children Identified by Public Schools, Rhode Island, 2014-2015 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	# OF CHILDREN IDENTIFIED AS HOMELESS BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PERSONNEL
Barrington	3,288	*
Bristol Warren	3,358	18
Burrillville	2,408	41
Central Falls	2,683	90
Chariho	3,305	29
Coventry	4,854	16
Cranston	10,457	10
Cumberland	4,543	16
East Greenwich	2,412	0
East Providence	5,280	29
Exeter-West Greenwich	1,645	*
Foster	284	0
Foster-Glocester	1,121	10
Glocester	529	0
Jamestown	500	0
Johnston	3,116	*
Lincoln	3,084	*
Little Compton	248	0
Middletown	2,285	120
Narragansett	1,340	*
New Shoreham	118	0
Newport	2,072	53
North Kingstown	4,088	29
North Providence	3,560	20
North Smithfield	1,775	0
Pawtucket	9,057	45
Portsmouth	2,563	12
Providence	23,907	127
Scituate	1,419	0
Smithfield	2,372	31
South Kingstown	3,321	*
Tiverton	1,871	0
Warwick	9,277	85
West Warwick	3,417	12
Westerly	3,022	72
Woonsocket	5,995	100
Charter Schools	5,445	20
State-Operated Schools	1,801	17
UCAP	139	0
Four Core Cities	41,642	362
Remainder of State	92,932	632
Rhode Island	141,959	1,031

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, Public School Enrollment in grades preschool to 12 on October 1, 2014.

Number of children identified as homeless by public school personnel includes children in preschool through grade 12 who are identified by public school personnel as meeting the *McKinney-Vento* definition of homelessness, which includes any child who does not have a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence."

Charter schools reporting include Achievement First Rhode Island, Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, Kingston Hill Academy, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy, and Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts. The only state-operated school reporting is the Metropolitan Regional Career & Technical Center.

The Middletown, Newport, North Kingstown, Warwick, and Woonsocket school districts received grants that provided additional resources to identify and serve homeless students.

*Fewer than 10 students are in this category. Actual numbers are not shown to protect student confidentiality. These students are still counted in district totals and in the four core cities, remainder of the state, and state totals.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

References

- ^{1,4} Bassuk, E. L., DeCandia, C. J., Beech, C. A., & Berman, F. (2014). *America's youngest outcasts: A report card on child homelessness*. Needham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- ^{2,5,10} *The characteristics and needs of families experiencing homelessness*. (2011). Needham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- ³ Aratani, Y. (2009). *Homeless children and youth: Causes and consequences*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, National Center for Children in Poverty.
- ⁶ American Academy of Pediatrics. (2013). Providing care for children and adolescents facing homelessness and housing insecurity. *Pediatrics*, 131(6), 1206-1210.

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