

Children Experiencing Homelessness

DEFINITION

Children experiencing homelessness is the number of children in preschool through grade 12 who are identified as homeless by public school personnel because they meet the federal *McKinney-Vento* definition of homelessness, which includes any child who does not have a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” including children doubled up with families due to financial hardship.

SIGNIFICANCE

In the United States, 1.4 million school-age children experience homelessness each year, meaning that one in 41 school-age children are homeless. The rate is even higher for young children under age six -- one in 18.¹ Black children and families are more likely to experience homelessness than other racial and ethnic groups.²

For many families living in deep poverty, episodes of homelessness are part of a cycle of housing instability that often includes living in housing that is unaffordable and/or unsafe, doubling up with families or friends, and being evicted. For these families, the shortage of housing that is affordable to them is the primary reason they become homeless. However, family violence is another major factor. More than 80% of women with children who experience homelessness have experienced domestic violence.³

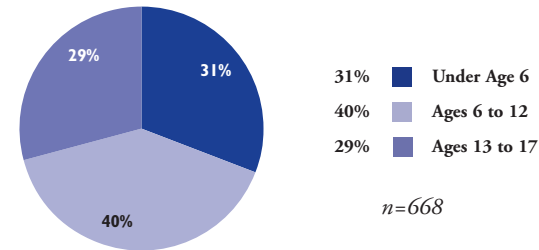
Lack of stable housing is often a

precipitating factor for a family’s involvement in the child welfare system, and unstable or inadequate housing can delay family reunification. Addressing families’ housing needs can reduce child neglect and abuse and help families stay together.^{4,5}

Children experiencing homelessness have higher rates of acute and chronic health problems than low-income children who have homes. Compared to their peers, homeless children have four times as many respiratory infections, twice as many ear infections, and five times as many gastrointestinal problems. They are also at higher risk of abuse and exposure to violence. This trauma can lead to an increase in developmental delays and emotional stress. When homeless children are exposed to multiple traumatic events, they may have increased levels of anxiety, poor impulse control, or difficulty developing trusting relationship.^{6,7,8}

In Rhode Island in 2023, 363 families with 668 children stayed at an emergency homeless shelter, domestic violence shelter, transitional housing facility, or hotel paid for by DCYF. Children made up almost one fifth (18%) of the 3,762 people who used emergency homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transitional housing in 2023. One-third (31%) of these children were under age six. As of January 19, 2024, 86 families with 114 children reported that they had slept outside for at least one night in the previous month.⁹

Children in Emergency Shelters, Domestic Violence Shelters, Transitional Housing Facilities, or Hotels Paid by DCYF by Age, 2023



Source: Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness, 2023.

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 chronically absent from school, and have lower academic achievement than children who have housing.¹⁰
- ★ 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 provide access to all services and programs that the child is eligible for, including preschool, before- and after-school care, school meals, and services for Multilingual Learners.¹¹
- ★ The *McKinney-Vento Act* defines a child as homeless if he or she does not have a “fixed, regular and adequate night-time residence.”¹² During the 2022-2023 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 1,739 children as homeless. Of these children, 66% (1,142) lived with other families (“doubled up”), 17% (288) lived in hotels or motels, 15% (266) lived in shelters, and 2% (43) were unsheltered.¹³
- ★ The number of students identified as homeless is likely a severe undercount. Nationally, an estimated 300,000 students entitled to services are unidentified because there is little national or state enforcement of laws requiring identification of these students and inadequate funding to support schools’ efforts.¹⁴

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Supporting Young Children Experiencing Homelessness

★ Children under age five are the age group most at risk of eviction in the United States.¹⁵ Eviction, crowded housing, frequent moves, and homelessness can all have negative effects on a child's early development.¹⁶

★ Homelessness during pregnancy is associated with low birthweight and preterm births, and homelessness during infancy is associated with language, literacy, and socioemotional delays. The younger a child is and the longer they are homeless the more severe the impact can be.¹⁷

★ Access to high-quality early childhood programs can help mitigate the effects of homelessness on young children, but many families with young children have difficulty accessing these programs. Congress has updated requirements for many federal early care, education, and homelessness programs to increase access. For example, children experiencing homelessness are now categorically eligible for Early Head Start and states must prioritize young children experiencing homelessness for child care assistance.¹⁸

★ In Rhode Island, only 27.3% (about one in four) of young children experiencing homelessness are enrolled in an early childhood program.¹⁹

Table 9. Homeless Children Identified by Public Schools, Rhode Island, 2022-2023 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	# OF CHILDREN IDENTIFIED AS HOMELESS BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PERSONNEL
Barrington	3,405	11
Bristol Warren	2,888	27
Burrillville	2,070	50
Central Falls	2,596	143
Chariho	3,102	25
Coventry	4,267	23
Cranston	10,225	36
Cumberland	4,784	23
East Greenwich	2,543	*
East Providence	5,272	67
Exeter-West Greenwich	1,550	*
Foster	221	0
Foster-Glocester	1,359	*
Glocester	577	*
Jamestown	418	*
Johnston	3,144	24
Lincoln	3,281	30
Little Compton	201	0
Middletown	1,971	93
Narragansett	1,128	*
New Shoreham	131	0
Newport	1,906	36
North Kingstown	3,842	48
North Providence	3,516	50
North Smithfield	1,618	*
Pawtucket	8,056	94
Portsmouth	2,183	*
Providence	20,725	374
Scituate	1,194	*
Smithfield	2,415	43
South Kingstown	2,509	32
Tiverton	1,634	*
Warwick	8,005	78
West Warwick	3,511	27
Westerly	2,296	45
Woonsocket	5,690	215
<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>11,284</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>State-Operated Schools</i>	<i>1,766</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>UCAP</i>	<i>131</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>YouthBuild</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>Four Core Cities</i>	<i>37,067</i>	<i>826</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>87,166</i>	<i>812</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>137,452</i>	<i>1,739</i>

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, Public School Enrollment in grades preschool to 12 on October 1, 2022.

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." This includes children who are living with other families ("doubled up"), in shelters, living in hotels or motels, and unsheltered.

Charter schools reporting include Achievement First Rhode Island, Blackstone Academy, Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, Beacon Charter High School for the Arts, Charette High School, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Excel Academy Rhode Island, The Greene School, Highlander Charter School, Hope Academy, The Learning Community, Nuestro Mundo Public Charter School, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College, RISE Prep Mayoral Academy, Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy, SouthSide Elementary Charter School, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts, and The Village Green Virtual Public Charter School.

State-operated schools reporting include the Metropolitan Regional Career & Technical Center and William M. Davies Jr. Career and Technical High School.

The Central Falls, Middletown, Newport, North Kingstown, Providence, Warwick, West Warwick, and Woonsocket school districts received grants that provide 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 state, and state totals.

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

Rhode Island totals are not the sum of all of the districts because some students move districts during the school year and are counted as homeless in both districts.

(References are on page 176)