



# What Educators Can Do: Homeless Children and Youth

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You might not realize it, but you may have children who are experiencing homelessness in your school. The stereotype of homelessness is often the “bag lady” or single man living on the street. When we think of this population, we most often envision children living in shelters in large cities. We fail to realize that students living in doubled-up accommodations, campgrounds, motels, and in rural shelters may be considered homeless as well.

During the past three decades, large numbers of children have experienced homelessness. Media coverage, advocacy efforts, and the passage of federal legislation to protect the educational rights of children and youth who are homeless, and the efforts of local homeless education liaisons have increased awareness among educators of the important role schools can play in supporting children without stable homes. Teachers play a vital role in ensuring these children are appropriately identified, have access to educational programs, and that they meet with success in the classroom.

Recognizing who is homeless remains a challenge. Some families choose not to describe themselves as homeless. Families may be reluctant to share their homeless condition due to discomfort with their current living situation. They may fear that their children will be moved to another school or stigmatized by thoughtless remarks. In addition, parents may not attempt to enroll their children, assuming they would not have the necessary documents. Parents may not realize that they have protections under federal legislation, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act.

This information brief offers suggestions for identifying homeless children in your school and working with these students more effectively.



Joseph, age 9. Wellsboro, PA  
HUD Poster Contest 1999

## Possible Signs of Homelessness

- History of attending many schools
- Inadequate or inappropriate clothing for the weather
- Hunger and hoarding food
- Hostility and anger
- Needy behavior (seeking attention) or withdrawn behavior
- Poor hygiene and grooming
- Lack of preparation for class
- Sleeping in class

While these signs could indicate many other problems, they provide a basis for further exploration and discussion.

## Education Plays a Critical Role in the Lives of Students Experiencing Homelessness

Education is a vital element in breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness. Schools provide a safe haven of consistency and caring for children whose lives are marked by instability and uncertainty. Educators can open doors to possibilities and futures — to dreams and accomplishments for children whose lives have been restricted and confined.

**The child’s classroom may be the only place where the child can experience quiet, interact with children his/her age, and experience success...School is the most normal activity that most children experience collectively...For homeless children it is much more than a learning environment. It is a place of safety, personal space, friendships, and support. (Oakley & King, in Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000)**

### What Teachers Can Do to Help Students Experiencing Homelessness Succeed in School

| Students Experiencing Homelessness May                         | You can help by:<br><i>(Other Information Briefs)</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Strategies you can use include:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Need positive peer relationships</b>                        | <b>Facilitating a sense of belonging</b><br><br><i>(Tips for Supporting Highly Mobile Children)</i>                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing cooperative learning activities.</li> <li>• Assigning a welcome buddy to support transition to a new environment.</li> <li>• Providing activities that promote acceptance of diversity.</li> <li>• Maintaining a relationship when the student leaves by providing self-addressed stamped envelopes and stationary.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Move frequently and lack educational program continuity</b> | <b>Addressing special learning needs</b><br><br><i>(Unlocking Potential: What Educators Need to Know about Homelessness and Special Education) and (Unlocking Potential: What Families and Shelters Need to Know about Homelessness and Special Education)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediately beginning to plan for the next transition.</li> <li>• Assessing present academic levels quickly.</li> <li>• Providing necessary remediation/tutoring.</li> <li>• Upholding challenging academic expectations.</li> <li>• Contacting the school previously attended to help with placement decisions.</li> <li>• Expeditiously following up on any special education referrals or services.</li> <li>• Reminding parents to keep copies of educational records and IEPs to share with a new school upon arrival.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Often come to class unprepared</b>                          | <b>Meeting basic needs in classroom</b><br><br><i>(Tips for Supporting Highly Mobile Children)</i>                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing school supplies if necessary (pencil, paper, etc.) that can be shared with the student privately.</li> <li>• Making sure the student has a chance to have a class job/role.</li> <li>• Avoiding the removal of student possessions as a disciplinary measure.</li> <li>• Sharing a set of texts for each grade level with the local shelter.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                      |

| <b>Students Experiencing Homelessness May</b>                                                               | <b>You can help by:</b><br><i>(Other Information Briefs)</i>                                                                                                                                  | <b>Strategies you can use include:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Often have high levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem due to the stress of homelessness</b> | <b>Addressing these needs and related behavioral considerations</b>                                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforcing positive behaviors.</li> <li>• Teaching and modeling skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and cooperative learning.</li> <li>• Supporting and recognizing individual accomplishments.</li> <li>• Increasing the frequency distribution of earned reinforcers.</li> <li>• Maintaining the privacy of the child.</li> <li>• Letting the student know you are glad he/she is in school.</li> <li>• Helping the student identify selected work samples and assemble a portfolio.</li> <li>• Enlisting support of community organizations and health and social services agencies.</li> <li>• Enlisting services of school personnel (e.g., school counselor, school psychologist).</li> </ul> |
| <b>Live in shelters and homes that house more than one family and are often noisy</b>                       | <b>Compensating in the classroom</b><br><br><i>(Tips for Supporting Highly Mobile Children)</i>                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing quiet time during school hours.</li> <li>• Having a “New Student Packet,” containing a few school supplies and a welcome card from the class, for all new students.</li> <li>• Allowing the child to do homework at school.</li> <li>• Assigning the student a personal space.</li> <li>• Having a “safe place” for student belongings.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Have parents who may be embarrassed by their homelessness</b>                                            | <b>Respecting and supporting parents</b><br><br><i>(Questions and Answers for Supporting the Academic Success of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness-written for administrators)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making parents feel valued as partners in their child’s education.</li> <li>• Providing parents with assessment results and related goals and objectives prior to their next move.</li> <li>• Providing an informal support system in which they feel it is safe to discuss parenting issues or concerns.</li> <li>• Allowing parents extra time to pay for trips or assisting in accessing resources to help pay for special events.</li> <li>• Helping parents become familiar with services available for homeless students, including outside agencies.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                              |

Project HOPE-Virginia has numerous information briefs that go into greater detail on strategies and research on the topics introduced in this table. These information briefs are available on our website or by request.

## The McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act

Congress enacted the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in 1987. It was revised and reauthorized in 1990, and in 1994 was further amended and incorporated into the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. In 2001, the Act was renamed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle VIIB and is Title X, Part C of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

### Key Provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act (§ 725) defines homeless children and youth as:

- Children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes children and youth 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 lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
  - are living in emergency or transitional shelters;
  - are abandoned in hospitals; or
  - are awaiting foster care placement.
- Children and youth with 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.
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.

NCHE Resources Available at [http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/educ\\_mobile.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/educ_mobile.php)

 [\*Classrooms with Revolving Doors: Recommended Practices for Elementary Teachers of At-Risk and Highly Mobile Students\*](#)

 [\*Classrooms with Revolving Doors: Recommended Practices for Middle Level and High School Teachers of At-Risk and Highly Mobile Students\*](#)

 [\*Effective Teaching and At-Risk/Highly Mobile Students: What Do Award-Winning Teachers Do?\*](#)

 [\*Reading on the Go!\*](#)

### Helpful Websites

National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE (NCHE), <http://www.serve.org/nche>

Virginia Department of Education, Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program  
(Project HOPE-Virginia), <http://www.wm.edu/hope>

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