

HOMELESSNESS IN AFTERSCHOOL

Part 1: Understanding School Age Homelessness

NC CCR&R School Age Initiative

www.swcdcinc.org

School Age Homelessness in North Carolina

School age homelessness is a hidden epidemic in North Carolina. Research conducted by the National Center for Homeless Education reports that during the 2020–2021 school year, 22,644 students in the state experienced some form of homelessness (NCHE, *North Carolina State Homeless Data*, 2022). Further data compiled by the United Health Foundation continues – highlighting that in 2020 roughly 1.7% (rank 16 out of 50 states) of North Carolina’s student population lacked an adequate, fixed nighttime residence (United Health Foundation, *Students Experiencing Homelessness*, 2022).

Unlike more visible challenges that affect student success, homelessness is a silent barrier that goes unseen and unreported. Students and families often hide their living struggles because of social stigmas and possible isolation. Some families forgo social service support for fear that they will lose custody of their children or face possible legal punishment. The result of this silence compounds trauma, stress, and struggle for everyone involved.

School age programs are perfect spaces to help families dealing with homelessness. Knowledgeable and empathetic school age professionals can quickly erode any fear associated with being unhoused and link qualifying families to existing support programs. The first step in this process is being informed.

This two-part resource series will equip you with the tools required to help unhoused students and families thrive. Part 1 of this series covers the details of homelessness and its official designation by the federal and state government. Emphasis will be given to the **McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act** and the **Adverse Childhood Experiences Trauma Scale**.

It is recommended that you couple the information obtained from this resource series with the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) **Homelessness Action Plan Guide** and the **DCDEE Homelessness Support Trainings** that can be accessed on the DCDEE Moodle training portal. (<https://www.dcdee.moodle.nc.gov/>)

GET IN TOUCH WITH THE NC CCR&R SCHOOL AGE INITIATIVE

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What is Homelessness?

Take a moment and craft a picture of “homelessness” in your mind. What images come to mind?

There is a misconception that homelessness is a chronic and public condition. Images from entertainment, media, and other outlets often limit homelessness to instances of panhandling, street corner living, and urban tent camps. While these types of homelessness exist for students and families in North Carolina, we must understand a broader definition of what it means to be unhoused. The National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment highlights that homelessness is primarily a private, situational, and isolating experience. Factors like social stigma, abuse, and financial instability move many unhoused individuals to keep their living struggles a secret from employers, family, and friends (NCASE, [Aligning Out-of-School Time Services for Children Experiencing Homelessness](#), 2019).

For school age children, the isolation of homelessness is compounded by limited legal, economic, and personal autonomy. Students experiencing homelessness must rely on their unhoused parents and guardians. In essence, the living, nutrition, and education conditions that these students face is completely dependent on the choices of another person.

Take a moment and reflect on the three different types of homelessness identified by The National Coalition for the Homeless:

Types of Homelessness

1 Transitional Homelessness

Transitional homelessness is defined as a state of homelessness resulting from a major life change or catastrophic event. For families, this type of homelessness might result from loss of employment, divorce, domestic abuse, a natural disaster, or another life changing event. Transitional homelessness can happen to anyone at anytime. It is not simply a socio-economic situation. The key factor for transitional homelessness is the periodic nature of being unhoused. Unlike other forms of homelessness, transitional homelessness is often shorter term and tied to a large life shift. Students dealing with transitional homelessness might find temporary shelter in a domestic abuse shelter, a car, emergency camp, a friend’s house, or a temporary hotel.

2 Episodic Homelessness

Episodic homelessness is defined as a person or family experiencing three or less periods of homelessness within a twelve-month period. This type of homelessness is often linked with disabling conditions like mental health struggles, drug addiction, migratory/temporary work, or domestic abuse. Students dealing with episodic homelessness might temporarily live with other relatives, friends, or acquaintances. They could also sporadically move between different schools or school districts throughout the year.

3 Chronic Homelessness

For an individual to experience chronic homelessness, they must meet two parameters. The first, is that they must be an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition. This condition can be a disability, mental health issue, or a substance abuse problem. The individual must also be homeless for at least a year. For school age students, the effects of chronic homelessness will most likely be the result of a parent or family member meeting these criteria. There are some older students, however, who may fall into this category...especially when considering issues like neglect.

McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act:

The McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act is an important piece of federal legislation that aims to identify and support children suffering from homelessness. McKinney-Vento defines homeless children and youth as those “who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle B, Section 725 Definitions). Children and youth who qualify as homeless under this law are afforded special protections and benefits that are geared to ensure their safety and educational stability.

Below are four broader qualification examples that the McKinney-Vento Act defines as youth homelessness:

✔ Youth share the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason:

There are many factors that might force a child’s family to lose their current residence. Economic hardship, natural disasters, fire/arson, and family incarceration are quick and sudden life events that might force a child to share temporary housing with another family unit. Children whose families flee domestic violence situations also fall into this category.

✔ Have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for use as a regular sleeping accommodation:

Homeless and transitional shelters are public spaces often used as temporary housing for children and families dealing with sudden loss or abuse. These shelters are not set up for long term or regular accommodation and often have strict habitation limitations. Other examples in this category include short term accommodation in churches, community support buildings, and other places of worship.

✔ Are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing and similar settings:

Homelessness forces families to adapt based upon the resources they have on hand. In many cases this means that children and families are forced to live and sleep in cars, campers, or in public spaces like parks or in tent camps. Economic hardship, a lack of available housing, and negligent landlords also force many families to live in substandard housing options where amenities like heating, windows, electricity, and running water are not available. Qualifying children living in these situations are afforded support through McKinney-Vento legislation.

✔ Are considered migratory:

Seasonal and temporary work forces many families to travel to where jobs are located. In locations without viable social services and housing, economic relocation can result in substandard housing or no housing options for workers and their children. Children might also experience migratory homelessness if they are forced to constantly move between friends and family who cannot support their basic needs. This type of homelessness is common for “unaccompanied” students who either run away from home or do not have direct guardian protection.

McKinney-Vento Supports:

Children and families suffering from the effects of homelessness are afforded special educational and social services funded and protected by the McKinney-Vento Act. Student homelessness status is determined by local homeless liaisons for each Local Education Authority (LEA) or charter school. Under the McKinney-Vento act and North Carolina legislation, qualifying school age families who either have or are seeking employment are given priority for NC Child Care Subsidy services.

Students are also immediately enrolled into school and school supported programs, and are given extended time to secure needed documentation, paperwork, and immunization records. Homeless students also have the right to stay in their school of origin even if they move out of the district and if it is in their best interest. For more information on McKinney-Vento Rights:

<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/federal-program-monitoring/title-i-part-improving-academic-achievement-disadvantaged/homeless-education-and-mckinney-vento-programs>.

Effects of Homelessness on School Age Children

Homelessness comes with baggage. School age children dealing with homelessness are more likely to experience negative emotional, physical, and academic stress than their housed peers. The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) highlights that when families experience homelessness, child/student support is often neglected in light of other pressing matters like finding food, escaping abuse, or simply surviving the day (NCHE, [Homeless Liaison Toolkit](#), 2020).

The NCHE, the American Psychological Association, and the National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment collectively state that unhoused students:

- Are more likely to miss substantial portions of the school year, and subsequently perform lower on standardized testing and grade level assessments.
- Have a higher probability to showcase challenging behaviors and experience in school and out of school suspension.
- Are more likely to miss meals and suffer the effects of malnutrition and hunger.
- Have a higher chance of participating in risky behaviors and negative life choices.
- Are more apt to develop respiratory illness and suffer long term effects from communicable diseases.
- Have an increased chance to become a victim of sexual abuse, human trafficking, and physical violence.

(APA, Exploring the Mental Health Effects of Poverty, Hunger, and Homelessness on Children and Teens, Updated 2022; NCASE, Aligning Out-of-School Time Services for Children Experiencing Homelessness, 2019).



Quick facts:

National Healthcare for the Homelessness Council, [Homelessness & Adverse Childhood Experiences](#), 2019.

- 12.3 percent of caregivers within families experiencing homelessness struggle with substance use disorders, which often go untreated.
- 33 percent of children experiencing homelessness have a parent who is incarcerated.
- Children who live below the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) are 5 times more likely to experience ≥ 4 ACE indicators than those who live in financially stable households.
- Children living in poverty, including those experiencing homelessness, are more likely to carry high ACE scores, increasing their risk of developmental challenges and poor health and functioning.

Homelessness and Trauma

A huge side-effect of homelessness for school age students is trauma. Unhoused students are often subject to prolonged exposure to emotional stress, physical abuse, drug abuse, and malnutrition. Many older children may often find themselves being primary caregivers to younger siblings or, in some cases, parents and guardians. Homelessness places students in compromising situations where constant vigilance is needed to survive and exist.

The National Healthcare for the Homelessness Council correlates these stressors to higher levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores. Crafted by research from Kaiser Permanente and leading psychologists, a person's ACE score is determined by exposure to traumatic life changing events during adolescence. Higher ACE scores are directly linked to negative outcomes like hypertension, substance abuse, mental health disease, and early death (National Healthcare for the Homelessness Council, [Homelessness & Adverse Childhood Experiences](#), 2019).

Family Level ACE Types

- Emotional Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Physical Abuse
- Emotional and Physical Neglect
- Domestic Abuse
- Mental Health Disease
- Family Incarceration
- Divorce
- Family Substance Abuse

Community Level ACE Types

- Economic Hardship
- Racism and Discrimination
- Foster Care
- Bullying
- Community Violence

Recognizing Homelessness

The first step to supporting students dealing with homelessness is recognition. Homelessness is an isolating circumstance that students and their families often wish to keep private. Fear of supposed legal ramifications and social stigmas can deter students and their loved ones from making their struggles known...even to trusted friends or staff. There are indicators to look for, however, that are common for most homelessness experiences. Before you start any conversation with someone you feel is dealing with homelessness make sure to truly reflect on any indicators you observe. Don't jump to conclusions or make rash assumptions. Stay objective, professional, and make an effort to record any concerns that you notice. It is also important to keep dialogue open with supervisors or support staff, and approach potential conversations with empathy and confidentiality.

Common Student Homelessness Indicators



Wearing the same clothes every day or constantly wearing clothes that are not cleaned on a regular basis.



Consistent struggles maintaining personal hygiene and bathing. These struggles need to be differentiated from common hygiene lapses.



Extreme changes in weight due to food insecurity. This can be rapid weight loss or weight gain due to poor nutrition. Hoarding food or concerned about not having enough food during non-program times.



Having or appearing to have consistent medical issues that are not addressed. Examples include constant dental problems, illness, and skin conditions that are neglected.



Chronic absences from school.



Constantly carrying a backpack that is full of personal belongings rather than school supplies.



Provides vague answers related to home life questions. Refuses or shies away from conversations about family and home life. Exhibits anxiety about leaving school age programming and going home at the end of the program day.



Frequently moves from school to school. Has trouble connecting to other students for fear that friendships will be short-term.



Extreme difficulty contacting parents/guardians.

For more information about recognizing school age homelessness, visit the US Department of Education's resource page at:

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/supporting-homeless-students/index.html>

Staff and Homelessness

Students and families are not the only populations that might experience homelessness in relation to afterschool programming. Sudden economic and life changes can leave fellow co-workers in situations where they become unhoused.

Sudden events that might contribute to a co-worker facing homelessness include:

- fleeing from domestic abuse
- natural disasters, fires, or community disasters
- economic struggles and loss of family employment
- sudden mental health and physical health difficulty

Co-workers might have difficulty sharing housing situations, especially if they do not feel safe or supported by fellow staff members. Make sure that your program philosophy encourages mutual respect, empathy, and compassion. Crafting a positive workspace environment will help unhoused staff feel safer communicating their challenges and needs. It is also important that administration promotes active listening, confidentiality, and solutions-based approaches to all staff needs.

Starting Conversations

Talking with someone about housing struggles is difficult. Many families and students dealing with homelessness might show hesitancy in talking about their housing situation. It is a very vulnerable topic that is attached to particular biases and stigmas. There will be times, however, when opportunities to have conversations present themselves. It is important to approach these situations carefully and with respect. Below are a few key points to reflect on:

Conversations with Students

- Enter the conversation with compassion. Students dealing with homelessness might present challenging behaviors or poor social skills. Separate these behaviors from the student and approach their situation with empathy and trust. Don't let personal irritations ruin your chance to support.
- Look for the facts. Linking students with the right homelessness, nutrition, and academic supports requires you to truly understand the specific struggles they are facing. Some students dealing with homelessness might live in dangerous situations...knowing the facts is important for their overall safety.
- Active listening is a must. If a student starts a conversation about housing struggles, STOP and really listen to what they are saying. Make sure that your body language and facial expressions are approachable and non-judgmental. In certain cases, it might be acceptable to find a more private space to discuss hard topics away from other peers.
- Reflect on your classroom culture in relation to homelessness. Do the materials, activities, and books you provide support a welcoming and inclusive environment for students dealing with the pressures of being unhoused? Does your schedule provide enough time for homework support, snacks/meals, and rest? Your school age space might be that one special space a struggling student needs during the day.

Conversations with Families

- Make sure that your program has an open-door policy. Allow parents to see and interact with their student as they learn and participate in a safe environment. Make sure that parents have the ability to talk to administration during the program day, and that their conversations are safe and confidential.
- Parent resource areas are essential for family success. Your school age program might be the only medium between unhoused families and the social resources they need to succeed. Keep your parent resource areas well stocked and located in an approachable space that can be easily seen and accessed. Stay connected with your local Child Care Resource and Referral agency and DCDEE consultant for the most up-to-date information for parents and families.
- Know when and how to refer. It is hard to open up to someone about housing struggles. If a parent relays housing difficulty it is important to be a compassionate listener. As trust is formed, reflect on agencies, experts, and organizations that can help turn these conversations into solutions. Once again, school age programs provide the perfect space to link unhoused families to the services they need to thrive.
- Reflect on your personal biases. Make sure that your perceptions about a family, parent, or personality does not get in the way of helping them improve their living situation.

Resources and Research

- Homelessness Among Infants, Toddlers, Preschool and School-Age Children in North Carolina (CCSA. 2021).
- Young Children at Risk of Homelessness in North Carolina (CCSA. 2021).
- Homelessness & Adverse Childhood Experiences (National Healthcare for the Homelessness Council. 2019).
- Exploring the Mental Health Effects of Poverty, Hunger, and Homelessness on Children and Teens (American Psychological Association. Updated 2022).
- Homeless Liaison Toolkit (National Center for Homeless Education. 2020).
- Aligning Out-of-School Time Services for Children Experiencing Homelessness (NCASE. 2019).
- Updated summary of the McKinney-Vento Act (https://hepnc.uncg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/MKVforLabSchools_presentation.pdf).
- Action Plan for an Early Childhood Homelessness Support System (NCDCDEE. 2023).