Youth in Foster Care

Youth Involved in the Juvenile Legal System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Often Overlooked but Not Unseen:

An Overview of Highly Mobile Youth in the U.S.

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UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Migrant Youth

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INTRODUCTION

Highly mobile youth (HMY) represent the most underserved and marginalized youth populations in the U.S. (i.e., youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, migratory youth, and youth in the JLS).

A youth who is "highly mobile" frequently moves or does not have a stable place to reside and engage in typical activities such as attending school, developing lasting peer relationships, or forming attachments with caregivers or supportive adults *(Sulkowski & Michael, 2020)*. We provide an overview of four highly mobile youth groups in the U.S.: youth experiencing homelessness, youth in the child welfare system (CWS), migratory youth, and youth in the juvenile legal system (JLS). Extensive research points to the subpar outcomes of HMY, including low academic achievement *(Cutuli et al., 2013; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007)*, negative health outcomes *(Braverman & Morris, 2011; Edidin et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2016)*, and economic disadvantage *(Baetz, 2015; Font et al., 2018; Nadon et al., 2022; Sandman, 2022; Skoba et al., 2018)*. In school year (SY) 2021-22, there were nearly 2 million HMY in the U.S., constituting 2.6% of the 2022 national youth (0-17) population (72.5 million) *(Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2023)*. Notably, Black and Brown youth are disproportionately represented among HMY *(Children's Bureau, 2022; Puzzanchera et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*.

INTRODUCTION

HMY share a combination of risk factors that result in their contact and involvement with more than one child-serving system, including poverty, low parental education, language barriers, neighborhood violence, and childhood maltreatment. It's important to note that family- and community-level factors stem from systemic and structural inequities. For instance, the inequitable outcomes and unequal distribution of risk factors for child abuse and neglect among Black children and families in particular serve as proof of the structural racism that has created inequitable health, education, and economic outcomes for the Black community. Being Black is not an inherent risk factor for child abuse and neglect. Yet, Black children have the highest rates of child abuse and neglect compared to white, Latine, and Asian children *(U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024)*.

While children from military families also experience high levels of mobility and face challenges commonly associated with academic difficulties, such as lower parental education levels and eligibility for free or reduced lunch, research shows that these students achieve academic outcomes equal to or exceeding national averages for public schools *(Popp et al., 2003)*. In this executive summary, we will focus on four more-vulnerable populations of HMY, who often lack the resources and structured support systems available to children from military families.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Child-serving system	A child-serving system refers to a network of organizations, agencies, and institutions that are designed to provide support and services to youth, including their families, across various aspects of their lives, such as healthcare, education, child welfare, juvenile legal system, and mental health services.
Crossover youth	Crossover youth is a general category that describes youths who have experienced some form of maltreatment and who engage in delinquent behaviors *(Lutz et al., 2010)*, although these youth may not be formally known to the child welfare system (CWS) and juvenile-legal system (JLS).
Dual-system youth	Terms such as dual status, dual system, dual contact, dually involved, dually identified, dually adjudicated, and multisystem describe different ways youths interact with both the CW and the JL systems *(OJJDP, 2021)*. For the purposes of this brief, we will refer to youths who are simultaneously involved with CWS and JLS as dual-system youth.
English Learner (EL)	An individual who, due to any of the reasons listed below, has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language to be denied the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or to participate fully in the larger U.S. society. Such an individual (1) was not born in the United States or has a native language other than English; (2) comes from environments where a language other than English is dominant; or (3) is an American Indian or Alaska Native and comes from environments where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency *(National Center for Education Statistics)*.
Highly mobile youth (HMY)	The term "highly mobile youth" collectively refers to youth who experience disproportionate rates of high mobility in their living, educational, or social environments. In this brief we include youth experiencing homelessness, youth involved in the CWS, migratory youth, and youth engaged with the JLS under the umbrella term HMY. During the 2021-22 SY, there were 1,895,509 HMY in the United States. This group included 1,205,259 homeless youth enrolled in public schools; 391,098 youth in foster care; 274,258 youth served by migrant education programs; and 24,894 youth residing in juvenile detention, correctional, and/or residential facilities. *Data source: Children's Bureau (2022); Puzzanchera et al. (2023); and U.S. Department of Education (2023a, 2023b)*.
Homeless unaccompanied youth	A homeless unaccompanied youth is a youth who is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian and who fits the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless *(NCES, 2023)*.
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children, supports early intervention services for infants and toddlers and their families, and awards competitive discretionary grants. *Source: U.S. Department of Education, "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)". https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/individuals-disabilities/idea*.
Immigrant and foreign-born	The terms immigrant and foreign-born are interchangeable and refer to individuals who were not U.S. citizens at birth but may have become citizens through naturalization *(AECF, 2024)*. An immigrant is someone who makes a conscious decision to leave his or her home and move to a foreign country with the intention of settling there. Immigrants often go through a lengthy vetting process to immigrate to a new country. Many become lawful permanent residents and eventually citizens *(International Rescue Committee, 2024)*.

Migrant	A migrant is someone who is moving from place to place (within his or her country or across borders), usually for economic reasons such as seasonal work. Similar to immigrants, they were not forced to leave their native countries because of persecution or violence, but rather are seeking better opportunities *(International Rescue Committee, 2024)*. The main difference between a migrant and an immigrant is that a migrant usually moves from place to place, while an immigrant intends to settle in a new country.
Migrant Education Program (MEP) eligibility	The Migrant Education Program is a federally funded program that provides additional educational support for migrant children and youth. A child is eligible for MEP services if all of the following conditions are met: 1. The child is not older than 21 years of age; and 2. The child is entitled to a free public education (through grade 12) under State law or the child is not yet at a grade level at which the local education agency (LEA) provides a free public education; and 3. The child made a qualifying move in the preceding 36 months as a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher, or did so with, or to join a parent/guardian or spouse who is a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher; and 4. With regard to the qualifying move identified in point 3 above, the child moved due to economic necessity from one residence to another residence, and: a. From one school district to another; or b. In a State that is comprised of a single school district, has moved from one administrative area to another within such district; or c. Resides in a school district of more than 15,000 square miles and migrates a distance of 20 miles or more to a temporary residence *(U.S. DOE, 2024)*.
Youth experiencing homelessness	Children/youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes: (1) students 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 the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; (2) students 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; (3) students who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and (4) migratory students who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because they are living in circumstances described in (1) through (3) above *(https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/)*.
Youth in Foster Care or Youth in the Child Welfare System (CWS)	''Foster care'' means 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents and for whom the agency under title IV–E of the Social Security Act has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pro adaptive homes. A child is in foster care in accordance with this definition regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed and payments are made by the State, tribal, or local agency for the care of the child, whether adoption subsidy payments are being made prior to the finalization of an adoption, or whether there is federal matching of any payments that are made *(U.S. DOE, 2024)*.
Youth in the Juvenile Legal System (JLS; LS-involved youth)	Legal system-involved youth are individuals under 18 who have engaged with the juvenile justice system due to alleged involvement in delinquent or criminal activities. This system addresses offenses ranging from status offenses—actions deemed unlawful solely due to the individual's age, such as truancy or underage drinking—to more serious delinquent acts that would be considered crimes regardless of age *(youth.gov)*.
Youth with disability	Those children evaluated as having a disability that adversely affects academic performance, and who, by reason thereof, receive special education and related services under IDEA according to an Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), or a services plan *(National Center for Education Statistics)*.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Despite the evidence documenting a shared combination of risk factors associated with high mobility for vulnerable youth groups and their contact with multiple child-serving systems, there is limited research on how to best serve these displaced and often traumatized children and youth *(Larson & Meehan, 2011; Masten et al., 2015; Miller & Bourgeois, 2013).*

Additionally, there are very few studies explaining how child-serving systems can collaborate to meet the multifaceted needs of these youth, including their health, education, and psychological needs *(see Herz et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2017 for exceptions)*. Current data challenges limit our understanding of the overlapping characteristics and needs of HMY.

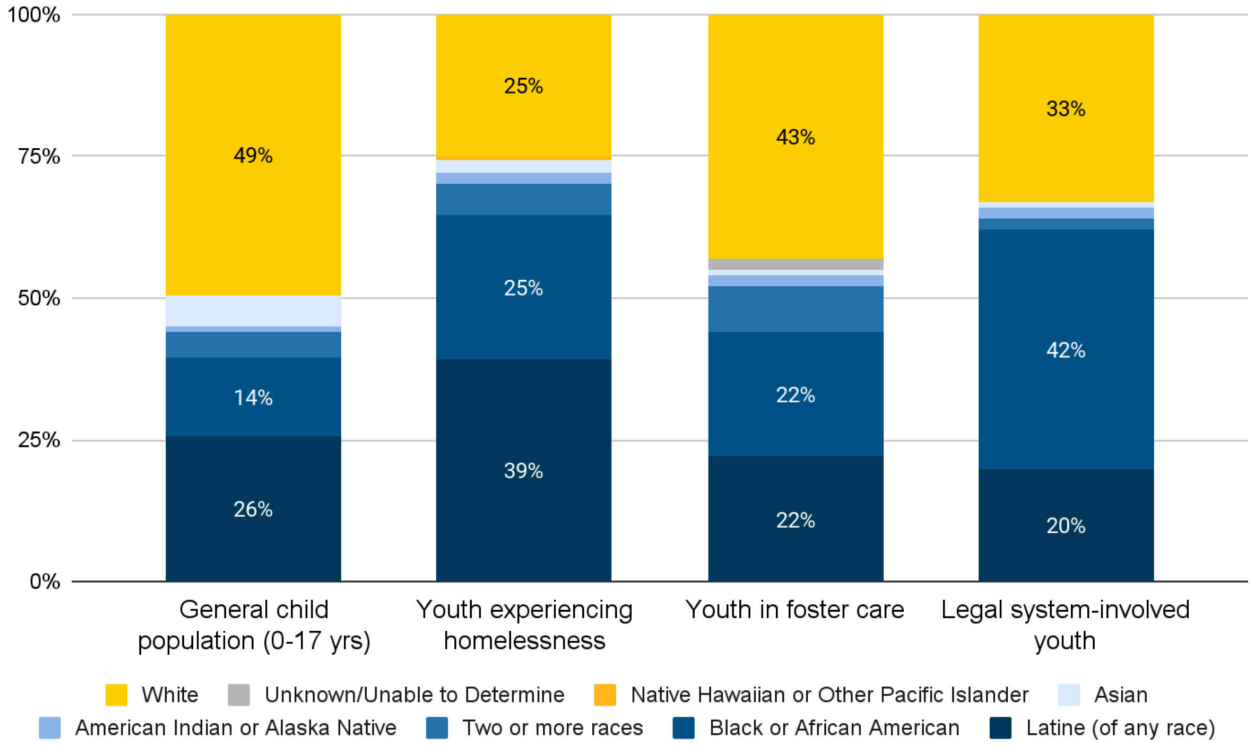
This executive summary uses publicly available data from national sources and existing literature to:

1. **Highlight the key characteristics of HMY populations, including their racial/ethnic composition, gender composition, grade level and age composition, where in the U.S. they are most concentrated, and their numbers over the last decade;**
2. **Examine the overlapping characteristics of HMY (e.g., English Learner status, disability status, unaccompanied youth status, dual-system involvement, and homelessness); and**
3. **Outline the limitations of national data sources.**

KEY FINDING 1

Racial Disparities: Black and Latine Youth are Overrepresented Among HMY

Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Distribution Among the General Child Population in the U.S., Youth Experiencing Homelessness, Youth in Foster Care, and Legal System-Involved Youth



Note. Data derived from Children's Bureau (2022); KidsData (2021); Puzzanchera et al. (2023); U.S. Department of Education (2023a).

There are notable racial disparities among HMY groups, with a higher representation of racial minorities, particularly Black and Latine youth. Black youth, who account for only 13.8% of the general child population in the U.S. *(KidsData, 2021)*, are disproportionately represented among students experiencing homelessness (25%), youth in foster care (22%), and youth involved in the JLS (42%) *(Children's Bureau, 2022; Puzzanchera et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*. Latine youth, who constitute 26% of the general child population in the U.S., are overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness, making up 39% of this group *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*.

KEY FINDING 2

Intersecting Educational Challenges: English Learner and Disability Disparities Among HMY

Table 1. Unique Characteristics Among HMY Groups

	Children with one or more disabilities (IDEA)	English Learner	Migratory status	Unaccompanied youth status
Percentage of enrolled K-12 public school students	10.6%	14.7%	N/A	N/A
Percentage of students experiencing homelessness	19.6%	19.6%	1.3%	9.2%
Percentage of youth in foster care	Est. 30-50%	*	*	*
Percentage of migrant students	8.6%	43.1%	N/A	*
Percentage of LS-involved youth	Est. 56-70%	*	*	*

Note. Percentages represent the proportion of each category within the respective HMY group. Data derived from NCCJD (2016); NCES (2023a, 2023b, 2024); Palmieri & La Salle (2017); Powers et al. (2012); U.S. Department of Education (2023a, 2023b). The asterisk (*) indicates that data were not available for the given category, and "N/A" indicates that the characteristic is not applicable to the group. It is important to note that a student may fall into more than one HMY group, meaning that students may experience multiple, all, or none of the unique characteristics criteria associated with each subgroup.

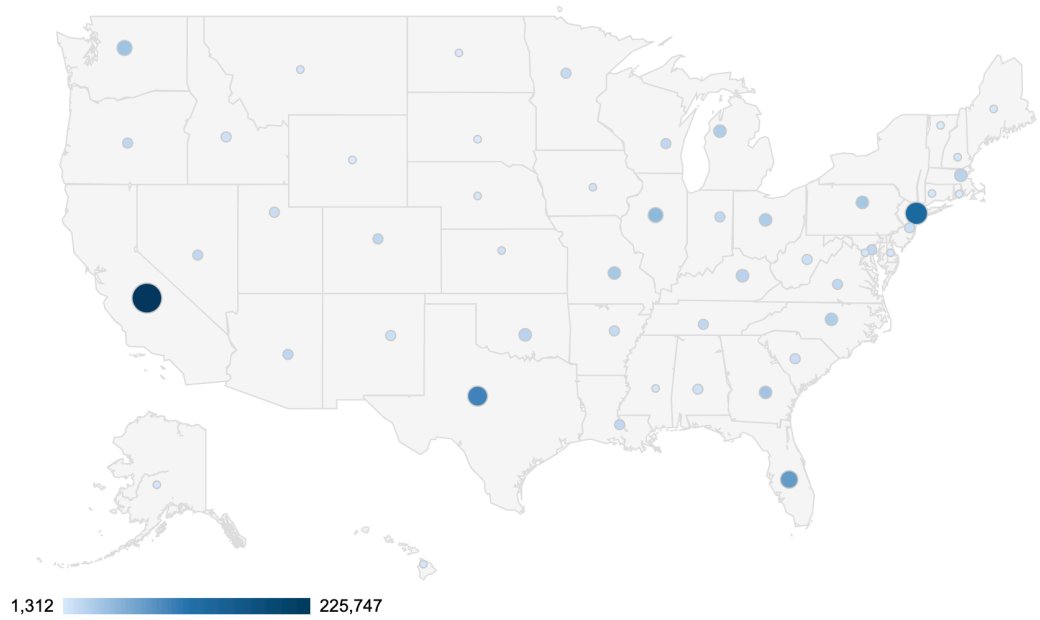
Student characteristics such as being classified as an English Learner (EL) and having a diagnosed disability are prevalent among HMY, highlighting the intersecting educational challenges for these groups. Rates of ELs and students receiving special education services were notably higher for HMY groups than they were for students in the general population. Although EL and disability rates for youth in the child welfare system and JLS are not reported in national data sources, previous research indicates that youth in these systems are identified as eligible for special education services at rates three to seven times higher than other children *(Leone & Weinberg, 2012)*. Additionally, data demonstrate that nearly 10% of youth experiencing homelessness are unaccompanied.

KEY FINDING 3

Regional Variations Among HMY

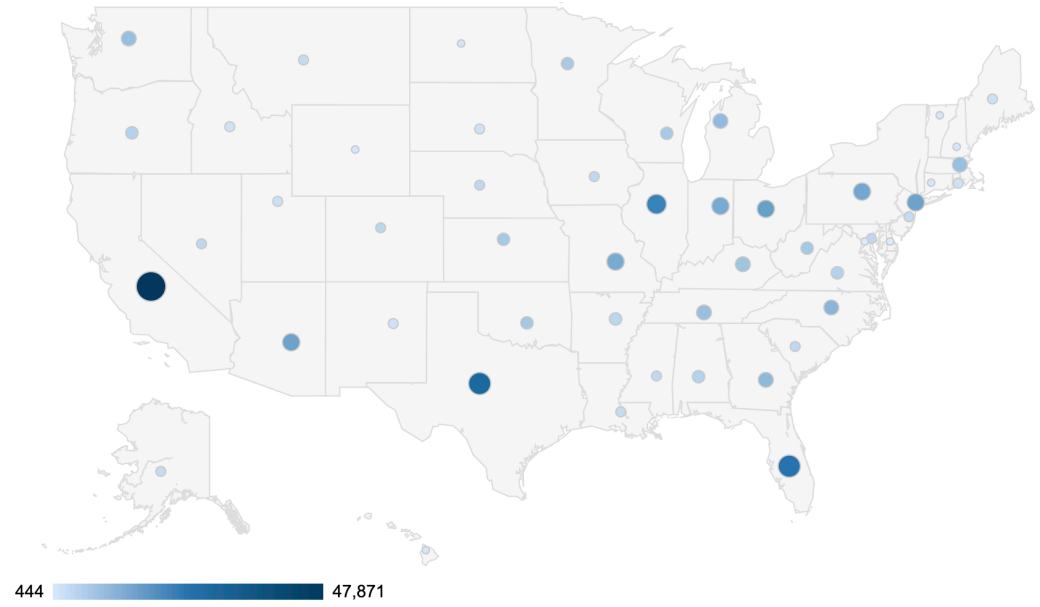
The geographical distribution of HMY exhibits significant regional disparities influenced by factors such as socioeconomic conditions, housing affordability, historical migration patterns, and the availability of social services and educational resources. Notably, California, Texas, and Florida rank among the states with the highest concentrations of HMY.

Figure 2. Homeless Enrolled Students by State, SY 2021-22



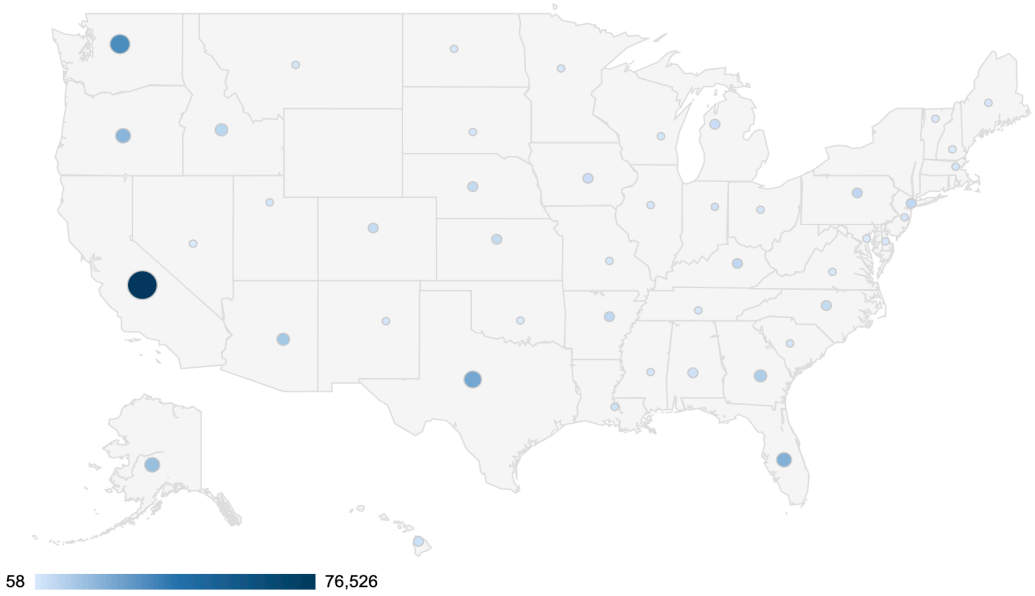
Source: U.S. Department of Education (2023a), "Homeless students enrolled: 2021-2022 SY."

Figure 3. Youth in Foster Care by State, Fiscal Year 2021-22



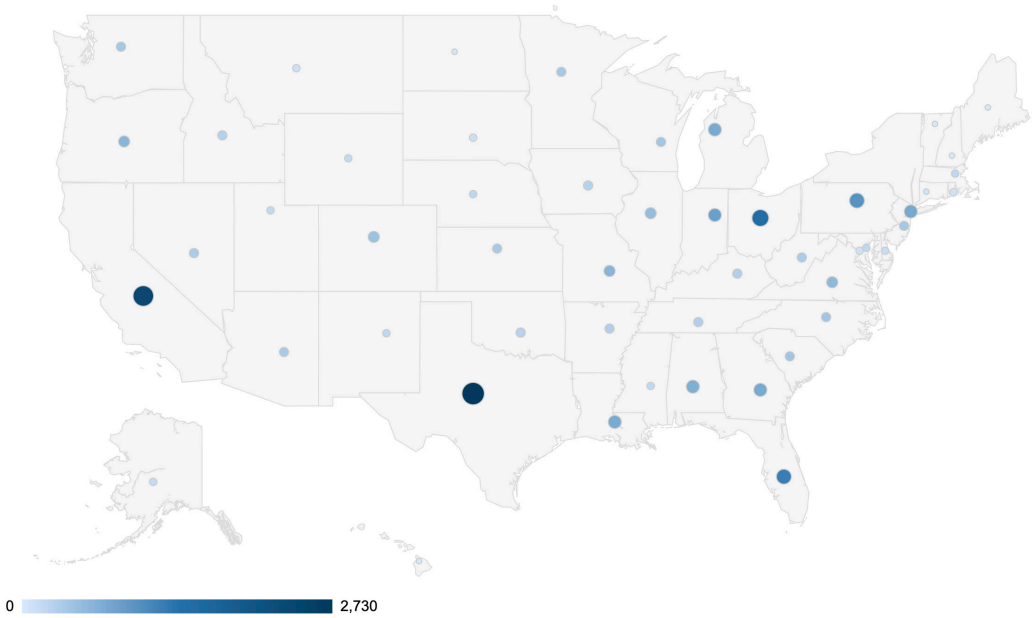
Source: Children's Bureau (2022), "The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #29."

Figure 4. Eligible Migrant Students by State, SY 2021-22



Source: U.S. Department of Education (2023b), "Eligible migratory students — 12 months (MSIX data): 2021-2022 SY."

Figure 5. Youth Residing in Juvenile Detention, Correctional and/or Residential Facilities by State, 2021



Source: Puzzanchera, Sladky & Kang (2023), "Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement."

KEY FINDING 4

Trends in HMY Group Counts From 2013 to 2022

Data demonstrates a peak in the number of students experiencing homelessness during the 2017-18 school year and a peak in the number of youth in foster care in the 2017-18 fiscal year. The number of both students experiencing homelessness and youth in foster care has experienced a steady decline since the 2017-18 SY/FY. In contrast, the number of migrant students and youth entering the JLS has been steadily declining over the past decade (See Table 10).

Table 10. HMY Group Counts and Year-to-Year Percentage Change, from SY 2012-13 to SY 2021-22

	SY 2012-13	SY 2013-14	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16	SY 2016-17	SY 2017-18	SY 2018-19	SY 2019-20	SY 2020-21	SY 2021-22
Students experiencing homelessness	1,202,507	1,284,322	1,262,542	1,301,371	1,343,882	1,505,484	1,377,810	1,279,039	1,099,076	1,204,733
		+6.8%	**-1.7%**	**+3.1%**	**+3.3%**	**+12.0%**	**-8.5%**	**-7.2%**	**-14.1%**	**+9.6%**
Youth in foster care	396,000	411,000	421,000	430,000	437,000	437,000	426,000	407,000	392,000	369,000
		+3.8%	**+2.4%**	**+2.1%**	**+1.6%**	**(+/-)0.0%**	**-2.5%**	**-4.5%**	**-3.7%**	**-5.9%**
Eligible migrant students	377,914	364,251	348,224	331,861	316,394	304,477	303,760	281,306	270,900	274,258
		-3.6%	**-4.4%**	**-4.7%**	**-4.7%**	**-3.8%**	**-0.2%**	**-7.4%**	**-3.7%**	**1.2%**
LS-involved youth	54,148 (2013)		48,043 (2015)		43,580 (2017)		36,479 (2019)		24,894 (2021)	
			-11.3%		**-9.3%**		**-16.3%**		**-31.8%**	

Note. SY data is not available for LS-involved youth. Data for this group is provided biennially.

KEY FINDING 5

Age Distribution and Concentration Among HMY

Table 11. Grade and Age Distribution Among HMY Groups, from SY 2012-13 to SY 2021-22

	Grade Distribution				
	0-5 yrs (not Kindergarten)	Grades K-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12	Out of school
Students experiencing homelessness	3% (3-5 yrs)	45%	22%	29%	N/A
Eligible migrant students	12% (birth-5 yrs)	36%	18%	23%	11%

	Age Distribution			
	0-5 yrs	6-12 yrs	13-17 yrs	18-20 yrs
Youth in foster care	42%	30%	24%	4%
LS-involved youth	1%		83%	16%

Note. Data derived from Children's Bureau (2022), "The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #29"; Puzzanchera, Sladky & Kang (2023), "Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement"; U.S. Department of Education (2023a), "Homeless students enrolled: 2021-2022 SY"; U.S. Department of Education (2023b), "Eligible migratory students -- 12 months (MSIX data): 2021-2022 SY."

There are notable age differences across HMY groups, highlighting the need for age- and developmentally-appropriate ongoing support. Data demonstrate that in the foster care system, there is a higher concentration of very young children, with 72% aged 0-12 *(Children's Bureau, 2022)*. In contrast, the JLS primarily consists of older youth, with 99% aged 13-20 *(Puzzanchera et al., 2023)*. Students experiencing homelessness and migrant students exhibit similar age patterns, with a close split between elementary (K-Grade 5) and secondary (Grades 6-12) education levels.

KEY FINDING 6

Migratory Youth: An Underserved and Disenfranchised HMY Group

Migrant students, one of the most underserved HMY groups, often face systemic barriers that result in insufficient resources and support *(Free et al., 2014; Martinez & Cranston-Gingras, 1996)*. Migrant students are predominantly Latine and are often the children of Latine migrant farmworkers (LMFW). Research demonstrates that seasonal migration disrupts their education, making it challenging to attend school regularly, learn at grade level, accrue credits, and meet all school and graduation requirements *(Berger Cardoso et al., 2017; Green, 2003; Martinez & Cranston-Gingras, 1996)*. Many migrant youth also face exploitative labor conditions, working long hours for low pay while migrating with their families *(McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Miller, 2012; Wiggins, 2020)*.

KEY FINDING 7

Racial and Gender Disparities Among Dual-System Youth

A variety of studies conducted across the United States consistently report higher levels of overrepresentation for Black youth in dual-system populations compared to single-system populations. The overrepresentation of Black youth in dual-system populations, for example, was more than double that in single-system populations in Arizona *(Halemba et al., 2004)*, Washington State *(Pickard, 2014)*, Los Angeles County *(Herz, 2016)*, and in Illinois *(Ryan et al., 2011)*. Although males are overrepresented among dual-system youth compared to females, females under age 18 represent the fastest-growing segment of the juvenile justice population *(Snyder, 2002; Sickmund, 2004)*. This trend highlights the need for gender-specific interventions within both the juvenile legal and child welfare systems.

KEY FINDING 8

Homelessness Among CWS- and JLS-Involved Youth

Extant research demonstrates that youth in foster care experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness than youth in the general population, with rates ranging from 11% to 38% *(Berzin et al., 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Dworsky et al., 2012; Dworsky et al., 2013; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Shpiegel & Ocasio, 2015; Stott, 2013)*. Studies in 11 U.S. cities also confirm high rates of JLS involvement among youth experiencing homelessness *(ACYF, 2016)*.

KEY FINDING 9

Data Limitations in National Data Sources

We identified four significant data limitations in national data sources for HMY:

1. There are inconsistent data collection and exchange processes for all HMY groups.

The accuracy, consistency, and timeliness of national data vary across HMY groups and are largely impacted by state policies as well as data-sharing processes among child-serving systems (e.g., CWS, JLS, Migrant Education Program, state education agencies, local education agencies).

2. There is variability in definitions and terms for HMY groups.

The different definitions can drastically affect the accuracy and reliability of data collected for these groups, which can then lead to discrepancies when comparing statistics or designing policies based on these numbers.

3. There are limited data categories/metrics and missing critical information for HMY.

Unique student characteristics and educational/socioemotional outcomes for HMY continue to be underreported at both the national and state levels. These indicators include early parenthood, mental health diagnoses, histories in the CWS and JLS, and chronic absenteeism.

4. There is a lack of longitudinal data to track HMY.

Collecting comprehensive, granular, and longitudinal data for all HMY presents a significant challenge, particularly given the transient and highly mobile nature of these youth. The lack of consistent records and tracking mechanisms across districts, regions, and states creates gaps in understanding the mobility patterns and long-term impacts of instability on their educational and socioemotional outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings revealed that data collection and reporting vary across child-serving systems and from state-to-state, making it challenging to understand who HMY are and how to best reach and serve them. In efforts to strengthen existing national and state data, and to strengthen cross-systems collaboration that aims to identify and invest in the education, success, and well-being of HMY, we make the following recommendations:

01

Develop centralized and integrated data systems to allow for better tracking of all HMY as they move across systems, regions, and states. This will improve service delivery and outcome monitoring.

02

Standardize data collection and reporting processes across state and federal systems to solidify data exchange processes among all HMY-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, state education agencies, juvenile legal system).

03

Expand data categories to close disparities in education, health, and well-being among HMY by capturing more comprehensive information, such as mental health diagnoses, early parenthood, and chronic absenteeism.

04

Use consistent definitions of HMY across state and federal agencies to reduce state-to-state discrepancies in terms of how HMY are defined.

05

Invest in longitudinal data collection to better understand the long-term effects of mobility, homelessness, and experiences within child-serving systems on the education, health, and well-being outcomes of HMY.

06

Prioritize upstream strategies that focus on prevention, systemic change, and early interventions such as training for educators and social workers, expanding affordable housing programs, and providing targeted mental health resources.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION FOR PRIORITIZING HIGHLY MOBILE YOUTH

HMY are among the most vulnerable youth in the country and demonstrate less than optimal educational, socioemotional, and health outcomes compared to their peers in the general population and compared to their low-income peers
(see Blome, 1997; Cook, 1994; Okpych & Courtney, 2021).

Extensive research points to a combination of systemic and family-level factors that contribute to high mobility for HMY and to negative outcomes. Our findings reveal significant overlap in the characteristics and experiences among HMY subgroups underscoring the need for cross-sector collaboration to identify and serve these youth. Our findings also reveal clear racial/ethnic, disability, EL, and age disparities across all HMY. Black and Latine youth are disproportionately represented in the CWS and JLS, and are more likely to experience homelessness than their non-Black and non-Latine peers. Black youth (both males and females) are overrepresented in dual-system populations compared to their Latine and white peers.

Our findings demonstrate that over half of youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, and migratory youth are 12 years of age and under; and that more than 80% of LS-involved youth are between 13-17 years of age. This finding underscores the need to invest in long-term supports for HMY, particularly early childhood prevention programs. Our research found regional variations in the concentration of HMY, suggesting state-to-state variability in the services available to these youth. Additionally, we found disproportionate rates of disability and EL status across all HMY highlighting the need for more state and federal investment in their education. Migratory youth, in particular, are among the most disadvantaged and overlooked HMY groups in the U.S. Their migratory lifestyles contribute to high residential and school mobility, making it especially challenging for schools and other child and family programs to engage and serve them. Nonetheless, schools can serve as a focal point for bringing in services from the community that will benefit migratory students and their families.

Despite all the challenges HMY have to endure, they display resilience in their will and ability to connect with their communities and to overcome. Their potential is too often hindered by systemic barriers—educational instability, limited access to essential resources, and emotional strains of constant change. By providing greater national attention to their unique circumstances, we can foster equitable opportunities and ensure that mobility does not equate to marginalization. Investing in highly mobile youth is not just a moral imperative but also a societal one. When we prioritize their stability, education, and well-being of our youth, we pave the way for them to contribute fully to their communities and to our nation's future. We must create systems and strategies that reflect the reality that highly mobile youth can no longer remain unseen in our systems; it is time to illuminate their struggles, build off their resilience, prioritize their needs, and ensure they have the tangible support necessary to thrive.