

HIDDEN *in* PLAIN SIGHT:

Fear, Underidentification, and Funding Gaps
for Housing-Insecure Students in Los Angeles County



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GLOSSARY

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| McKinney-Vento Act | A federal law that ensures children and youth experiencing homelessness have immediate access to a free, public education. It removes barriers to enrollment, allowing students to attend school without proof of residency and guarantees transportation, stability, and support services. |
| Title I Funding | The largest federal assistance program for K-12 schools nationwide, providing supplemental funds to districts and schools with high percentages of low-income families. |
| Education for Homeless Youth Grant (EHY) | A federal grant program authorized by the McKinney-Vento Act to ensure homeless students have equal access to a free, appropriate public education. It removed barriers to enrollment, attendance, and success, providing school stability and support. |
| System-impacted youth | Children and young adults (often up to age 24) whose lives, development, and opportunities have been disrupted by direct involvement with the public system. Systems include but are not limited to juvenile justice, child welfare (foster care), and immigration systems. |
| Point-in-time counts (PIT) | A U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) mandated annual census of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness. It is conducted by local communities, identifying demographics and subpopulations to inform federal funding and local strategic plans. |
| School-based homeless liaisons | A designated staff member within a school district or publicly funded charter, required by the McKinney-Vento Act, who identifies students experiencing homelessness and ensures they enroll, attend, and succeed in school. |
| California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data Plan System (CALPADS) | The California Department of Education’s (CDE) secure, digital repository for collecting and managing individual-level student and staff data, such as student demographics, enrollment, and course participation, from K-12 public schools. |
| Aeries Student Information System (SIS) | A secure, web-based platform that provides parents and students with real-time access to student data, including grades, attendance, assignments, and test scores. The most utilized student information system (SIS) across Los Angeles County. |
| Powerschool (SIS) | One of many cloud-based SIS and educational technology providers used in Los Angeles County for K-12 schools is utilized nationwide and manages student data, including grades, attendance, schedules, and health records. |

ABSTRACT

Los Angeles County is facing a rapidly escalating youth homelessness crisis. In the 2023–24 school year, more than 61,000 students experienced homelessness, a nearly 30% increase from the prior 2022–23 school year, with Latine students (75%) and English Learners (34%) disproportionately affected (California Department of Education, 2024; Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026). Despite federal protections under the McKinney-Vento Act, a significant gap persists between policy intent and frontline realities.

This qualitative study draws on interviews with seven school-based homeless liaisons and county officials across five districts to examine identification practices, service barriers, and data systems. Findings show major challenges in accurately identifying students due to inconsistent, subjective processes, despite the statewide requirement of a housing questionnaire. Many families avoid self-identification because of stigma, fear of child welfare or immigration consequences, or confusion about eligibility. Fragmented data systems further hinder verification and coordination, while inadequate federal funding forces reliance on unstable grants and donations. Strengthening trauma-informed identification, integrating data systems, stabilizing funding for direct supports, and formalizing cross-sector partnerships are critical to improving outcomes for unhoused students.



INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles County faces one of the largest youth homelessness crises in the nation, with over 61,000 students experiencing homelessness in the 2023–24 school year—a nearly 30% increase since 2022–23 and the highest total in the last five school years (California Department of Education, 2024; Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026).

This alarming trend mirrors statewide and national increases, and has placed growing pressure on schools to respond rapidly and effectively to young people’s needs. The rise in homelessness is driven by economic instability, the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, housing shortages, and heightened barriers for already vulnerable groups, including Latine students, English Learners, and migrant youth (Bishop et al., 2020; California Department of Education, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Bishop et al., 2020).

Youth who experience homelessness face significant risks to their physical health, mental wellness, and educational attainment (Bishop et al., 2020; Cutuli et al., 2017). Frequent school moves, absenteeism, and disrupted learning are common, and these students often lack access to basic necessities (shelter, food, transportation) and critical educational support (California Department of Education, 2022b). Despite federal mandates such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which aims to provide educational stability, a persistent gap remains between policy intentions and the lived realities of students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County (Bishop et al., 2020; Broslawsky & Schoen, 2020).

Schools are uniquely positioned to support unhoused youth, often serving as the primary point of connection to necessary services and resources. School district homeless liaisons—staff designated to support students experiencing homelessness—play a central role in connecting families to assistance, ensuring academic accommodations, and navigating policy requirements. Yet, their challenges are compounded by under-resourced systems, evolving administrative priorities, and persistent inequities in access and support, especially for students from disproportionately impacted backgrounds (Bishop et al., 2020; Edwards, E. J., 2023; Mansour & Mireles-Rios, 2025). Given the crucial function of these liaisons to act as the district’s primary point of contact for unhoused students and their families, there continues to be extensive research focused specifically on their perspectives, strategies, and the barriers they encounter when serving unhoused youth.



Most existing studies on student homelessness emphasize its prevalence, student demographics, or student-focused outcomes while overlooking staff experiences and frontline insights that are vital to understanding and ultimately improving the implementation of education support systems for unhoused youth (Edwards, 2023; Havlik et al., 2020; Mansour & Mireles-Rios, 2025). This brief explores the perspectives of staff who are charged with supporting the educational success of students experiencing homelessness in six Los Angeles County districts and the Los Angeles County Office of Education, providing timely insights into the effectiveness and shortcomings of current systems during a period of rising student homelessness in the region. Moreover, this research can shape future policy, professional development, and resource allocation in Greater Los Angeles and beyond (Bishop et al., 2020; California Department of Education, 2021; Edwards, 2023; Mansour & Mireles-Rios, 2025).

THE ONGOING CHALLENGE

Despite the explicit mandates of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, several interrelated barriers prevent Los Angeles County districts from delivering effective, sustained support to unhoused youth:

Under-identification and data quality issues:

Youth and their families often avoid self-identification due to stigma, fear of child welfare involvement, or confusion about what “homelessness” and “unhoused” mean. Districts rely on disparate data platforms (*PowerSchool*, *AERIES*, *CALPADS*) that are rarely cross-referenced, leading to incomplete or duplicated records. Although a mandatory enrollment questionnaire was introduced in 2023 to standardize identification countywide, many districts still lack systematic checks that link questionnaire responses to existing data systems.

Funding instability: Federal McKinney-Vento allocations are described as a “very tiny pot of money,” by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), forcing districts to stretch these funds and lean heavily on Title 1 and the federal

Education for Homeless Youth (EHCY) grant. Because these grants are short-term and often expire, programs frequently rely on ad hoc community contributions (e.g., prepaid cards) to maintain basic services, while both McKinney-Vento and EHCY funding are statewide education-specific allocations determined by the cumulative enrollment of unhoused students across Los Angeles County school districts. In the 2025-26 fiscal year, the California Department of Education (CDE) allocated more than \$15 million to support students experiencing homelessness. Districts were eligible to receive up to \$250,000 each, awarded based on the number of students per district and or charter (CDE, 2026). Notably, this current fiscal year (2025-26) marks the second year of the current three-year grant cycle, increasing the uncertainty of funding and long-term program sustainability.

Limited systemic capacity & educational supports:

Districts report limited staff (small liaison teams, high turnover), a shortage of housing, and fragmented collaborative networks, which together diminish the ability to deliver sustained, comprehensive services.

Variations in perspectives & inconsistent application of McKinney-Vento mandates:

Existing literature on youth homelessness is scattered across disciplines and seldom synthesizes the perspectives of frontline staff, leaving a gap in understanding how support systems operate at the school site and district levels. Additionally, throughout Los Angeles County, even when homeless liaisons receive consistent training on the language of the McKinney-Vento Act, individual school districts may interpret and apply those requirements differently, leading to variations in the support students receive.

Together, these gaps create a disconnect between federal policy intent and the day-to-day realities of serving students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County. These challenges underscore the need for a focused qualitative investigation of identification practices, funding structures, and capacity constraints of educational supports across districts.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the lived experiences, practices, and perceived challenges of school-based staff—including homeless liaisons, district coordinators, and county officials—who serve youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County. Specifically, this report will (a) document existing practices and program structures across Los Angeles County schools that support unhoused students; (b) identify systemic and funding-related barriers that impede the implementation and sustainability of these programs; (c) examine how districts collect, verify, and use student data to identify homeless youth; and (d) generate actionable recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are guiding the study:

1. How do Los Angeles County districts identify unhoused students beyond standard enrollment processes?
2. In what ways do existing policy priorities (Title 1, EHCY, McKinney-Vento) shape the design, implementation, and sustainability of programs for students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County?
3. What barriers do homeless liaisons and district leadership encounter in Los Angeles County districts that impact the provision of services for unhoused youth?



LITERATURE REVIEW

Los Angeles County is confronting one of the nation’s most severe youth homelessness crises. The 2023–24 school year recorded approximately 61,000 students experiencing homelessness, a 28.4% increase over the prior year and the highest total in five years (California Department of Education, 2024; Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026).

This alarming surge reflects compounding pressures, including economic instability, lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic housing shortages, and heightened barriers for vulnerable populations (Bishop et al., 2020; California Department of Education, 2024). Historical data underscore the persistence of this crisis: Research dating back three decades has documented high concentrations of runaway and homeless youth in Los Angeles County (Pennbridge et al., 1990; Witkin et al., 2005), revealing a long-standing yet largely unresolved systemic failure.

DEMOGRAPHIC INEQUITIES AND INTERSECTING VULNERABILITIES

The crisis is marked by pronounced demographic disparities. Latine youth constitute approximately 75% of students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County and 72% of students experiencing homelessness statewide. These figures substantially exceed Latine student representation among the general student population of roughly 1.35 million K–12 students in Los Angeles County (4.5% of the county’s total enrollment) and about 4.8 million students statewide (Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026). English Learner (EL) students are similarly over-represented, with up to 50% of homeless students in high-need San Gabriel Valley districts identified as ELs (Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026). Black, LGBTQ+, and system-impacted youth experience disproportionate

rates of homelessness, reflecting intersecting structural inequities rooted in racial discrimination, historical marginalization, and institutional policy failures (Edwards, 2021). These disparities highlight the inadequacy of race-neutral policy frameworks that obscure the compounded barriers faced by communities of color (Edwards, 2021).

DEFINITION, CHALLENGES AND HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS

Defining youth homelessness is foundational to policy and practice, yet remains contested. The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act adopts an expansive definition that includes children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, such as those living in shelters, vehicles, parks, public spaces, or temporarily doubled up with others due to housing loss or economic hardship (Bishop et al., 2020). This inclusive framework captures forms of “hidden homelessness” including couch surfing, frequent residential mobility, and informal living arrangements that are often missed by traditional point-in-time counts. In contrast, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s more restrictive definition excludes many of these circumstances, leading to systematic undercounting of youth experiencing homelessness (Broslawsky & Schoen, 2020).

In Los Angeles County, school districts and youth-serving organizations commonly rely on the McKinney-Vento definition to guide educational services; however, inconsistent implementation across districts results in gaps in identification and access to supports (Bishop et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps requires a shared understanding of how homelessness is operationalized in practice, as well as intentional staff training to improve recognition, identification, and referral processes (California Department of Education, 2022b).

HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

The health impacts of youth homelessness are severe and multifaceted. Unsheltered youth experience heightened risks of early mortality, chronic and infectious disease, and elevated disability rates (Cutuli et al., 2017; Kuhn et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, housing placement processes in Los Angeles introduced or exacerbated racial inequities; Black residents were 19% more likely to return to homelessness after placement in Permanent Supportive Housing compared to white residents, reflecting systemic biases in service delivery (Henwood et al., 2024). Educationally, youth experiencing homelessness face frequent school moves, chronic absenteeism exceeding 33% in high-need districts, and disrupted learning that jeopardizes academic achievement and graduation outcomes (Bishop et al., 2020; Cazares-Minero et al., 2025). Survey data indicate that although 78% of homeless and runaway youth utilize drop-in centers and 40% access shelters, only 28% obtain medical services, 10% receive substance abuse treatment, and 9% access mental-health support (Cazares-Minero et al., 2025), a stark gap reflecting fragmented and under-resourced support systems.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Despite federal mandates under McKinney-Vento, substantial disconnects persist between policy intent and frontline practice (Broslawsky & Schoen, 2020). School-based homeless liaisons—designated staff who connect families to resources and navigate policy requirements—operate within severely constrained systems characterized by fragmented data platforms (*PowerSchool*, *AERIES*, *CALPADS*), inconsistent interpretation of McKinney-Vento mandates, and precarious funding tied to short-term grants (Bishop et al., 2020). Federal McKinney-Vento allocations are described by practitioners as “very tiny,” forcing dependence on temporary Title I and Education for Homeless Youth (EHCY) funding streams that threaten program continuity (Bishop et al., 2020). The absence of integrated, longitudinal data systems further impedes accurate identification, verification of housing status, and coordinated service delivery (Bishop et al., 2020). Sustainable funding mechanisms through policies such as the American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) initiative are essential yet currently insufficient, since access to these funds ended in September of 2024 (California Department of Education, 2021).

The literature collectively demonstrates a rapidly expanding youth homelessness crisis in Los Angeles County marked by pronounced demographic disparities, service utilization gaps, definitional inconsistencies, and fragmented policy implementation. Addressing these interlocking challenges requires adopting comprehensive McKinney-Vento definitions, integrating fragmented data systems, securing stable long-term funding, strengthening liaison capacity through training and support, and scaling youth-informed participatory practices within schools. Understanding how frontline liaisons navigate these systemic barriers is essential for translating policy intent into equitable practice.



METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was conducted using a multi-site qualitative descriptive case study design involving four districts and the Los Angeles County Office of Education. This design was selected because it permits an in-depth, contextual understanding of how district-level staff–front-line liaisons tasked with navigating the complex realities of supporting unhoused youth and their families experience and implement their work on a day-to-day basis. Examining the perspectives of leaders in multiple districts allowed the study to capture meaningful variation in liaison roles, program structures, collaborative strategies, and the resourcefulness with which different sites respond to their particular circumstances.

SITE SELECTION AND RATIONALE

A quantitative pre-screen identified the ten Los Angeles County districts reporting the highest absolute numbers of unhoused students. From this list, the five districts with the greatest enrollment counts were purposively selected for intensive qualitative work: Bassett Unified, Mountain View Elementary, Hacienda La Puente Unified, Norwalk-La Mirada Unified, Rowland Unified, Wilsona Elementary, and the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE). The multi-site approach was deliberately chosen to focus on districts facing the most acute service demands while providing regional decision-makers with evidence about where concentrated resources, collaborative networks, and policy interventions are most needed.



CASE SELECTION AND CONTEXT

Each site (district, school, or community) is described below in sufficient detail to convey context:

Table 1. Student Homelessness Metrics & Demographics, SY 2023–24

| School Site | Total Enrollment (n) | Students Experiencing Homelessness (n) | Students Experiencing Homelessness (%) | EL Students Experiencing Homelessness (%) | Students Experiencing Homelessness with Disabilities (%) | Drop-out Rate for Students Experiencing Homelessness | Students Experiencing Homelessness and High Mobility (%) | Chronic Absenteeism (%) | Latine or Hispanic Students (%) | African-American Students |
|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|--|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Bassett Unified* | 3,053 | 470 | 15.4% | 35.3% | 19.6% | ND | ND | 32.3% | 90.7% | ND |
| <p>Note. Bassett Unified, located in the San Gabriel Valley, reflects the region’s high percentage of enrolled students experiencing homelessness. While Bassett Unified was not a final participant in this study, its student homelessness metrics and demographics for the 2023–24 school year are comparable to those of other San Gabriel Valley districts such as Mountain View Elementary and Rowland Unified.</p> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Mountain View Elementary* | 4,993 | 811 | 16.2% | 55.4% | N/D | ND | 24% | ND | 92.5% | ND |
| <p>Note. Mountain View Elementary, also a focal district of interest, was not included in the final study.</p> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hacienda La Puente | 15,767 | 905 | 5.7% | ND | ND | ND | ND | ND | 75% | ND |
| <p>Note. Hacienda La Puente Unified School District was selected for intensive qualitative study because it serves one of the largest absolute numbers of students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County. Across districts, many families—particularly those of Hispanic descent who are “doubled up” or living in unconventional housing—do not initially self-identify as homeless, creating a significant perception gap.</p> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Norwalk-La Mirada Unified | 15,636 | 4,765 | 30.4% | ND | ND | ND | ND | 26.6% | ND | ND |
| <p>Note. Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District, located in the East region of Los Angeles County, serves an exceptionally high concentration of homeless students, making it a focal point for service demands. The district has a 24-year collaborative support system for unhoused youth, notable for being one of the first McKinney-Vento grant recipients and engaging in extensive partnerships with entities like the City of Norwalk Homeless Task Force, DPSS, and Cerritos College.</p> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Rowland Unified | 14,370 | 2,400 | 16.7% | 44.6% | ND | 8.6% | ND | ND | 63.5% | ND |
| <p>Note. Rowland Unified, in the San Gabriel Valley, reported 16.7% of its students experiencing homelessness, comparable to Mountain View Elementary (16.2%) and Bassett Unified (15.4%) in the same region. However, Rowland’s homeless student population is 63.5% Latine, significantly lower than Bassett (90.7%) and Mountain View (92.5%). Rowland’s total enrollment of 14,370 students is substantially larger than either Bassett (3,053) or Mountain View (4,993) individually. This demonstrates demographic disparities despite geographical proximity.</p> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Wilsona Elementary | 1,430 | 261 | 18.3% | 49.8% | ND | ND | 34.5% | ND | 82.2% | 7.8% |
| <p>Note. Wilsona Elementary, located in the Antelope Valley, is the smallest school district in this study with 1,430 students, yet it has a notable concentration of homeless students at 18.3%, a rate considerably higher than the overall Los Angeles County average. Across districts, many families—particularly those of Hispanic descent who are “doubled up” or living in unconventional housing—do not initially self-identify as homeless, creating a significant perception gap.</p> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) | <p>The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) represented the county-level perspective in the multi-site case study. LACOE staff emphasized that statewide McKinney-Vento funding amounts to roughly \$14 million for EHCY grantees—a limited funding stream—and noted that this grant is not a dedicated funding source; districts must rely on Title I and other unstable federal streams for most of their support. LACOE participated fully in the qualitative research.</p> | | | | | | | | | |

Note: Sites marked with * were included in the original quantitative case study; however, they were unable to participate in the current research study. All presented data are from the California Department of Education (CDE) for SY 2023–24.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Seven participants were recruited—six district-level homeless liaisons and one county liaison—using purposive sampling. All participants held formal liaison positions within one of the selected districts or at LACOE and were able to interview in English. The research team maintained no supervisory relationship with any participant, thereby minimizing undue influence and creating a safe environment for candid discussion of barriers and challenges.

DATA COLLECTION: TIMELINE AND PROCEDURES

Data collection spanned approximately 6–8 weeks, with recruitment beginning in late July 2025 and interviews conducted from late August through early November 2025. All recordings and transcription work were completed by late November. Each interview was conducted virtually (over Zoom or telephone, according to participant preference) and followed a semi-structured protocol developed to balance consistency with flexibility. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes (average ≈ 45 minutes) and addressed identification practices, funding constraints, collaborative networks, and perceived gaps in current support systems. To ensure equal processes across all sites and cross-case comparison, an identical interview script, question order, and timing schedule were used for every district. Audio recordings were securely stored on encrypted university-managed drives, and the transcription process was applied uniformly to each recording. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all personally identifiable information was removed during data cleaning (See Appendix D).



FINDINGS

1. Identifying students experiencing homelessness remains a major challenge across Los Angeles.

This can be explained by multi-layered, non-uniform processes for identification that begin with mandatory questionnaires, but require subjective follow-up conversations and active staff triaging to verify housing status. School districts primarily initiate identification through student housing questionnaires administered during enrollment, but staff often supplement this with probing questions to determine the nature of a family's living situation, such as whether they are "doubling up" or if they are the homeowner. Liaison staff emphasize that the complexity of modern homelessness necessitates further inquiry.

"... we do use the questionnaire, and then it helps us identify, Are you doubling up? Are you, um, homeless? Right? And so, being able to identify them when they do the enrollment packet. Are you... Are you the homeowner? ... if they say no, then we're like, oh, okay, you know, a few more questions of, like, 'Oh, okay. Do you live with extended family? Is it just you in the home, like you and your immediate family, or is it, other family members of yours?. So we just ask a little bit of detail, just so that we can get a better understanding of what the home looks like for the student."

— Wilsona Elementary

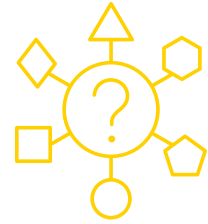
Upon identification of homelessness, the process immediately shifts to case-by-case management. Liaisons are required to conduct needs assessments, either verbally or via a formal tool, to develop an individualized support plan, recognizing that the needs of an unaccompanied youth differ significantly from those in a family structure.

"I can't speak to how all of my 451 school districts and charters do [this]. Once unhoused youth have been identified, then the homeless liaison must have at least one identified McKinney-Vento liaison per district or per charter. Then it's the responsibility of that individual to identify, either they use a housing questionnaire or students self-identify. We generally encourage them (students) to do some type of needs assessment; it's a case-by-case basis. If you're dealing with a young person who's on their own, that's going to look very different than a young person who's in a family structure."

— Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)



2. Student data used for tracking and verification is fragmented across multiple platforms, complicating the process for homeless liaisons who must cross-check disparate data systems to confirm eligibility and status.



District staff are required to cross-reference multiple data management platforms, such as AERIES, CALPADS, and PowerSchool, to verify a student’s unhoused status, indicating a lack of system integration across the county’s educational network.

“Well, you know, we are through the Family Resource Center, so we have a referral system. If a student is identified as unhoused, we verify their status and tag them in our student data monitoring system, which is AERIES. Once their status is verified, we have housing questionnaires that they complete.”

— Rowland Elementary

3. Identification frequently occurs as a reaction to acute crises (e.g., domestic violence, eviction, mental health collapse) or through informal, human-centered referral systems rather than proactive institutional outreach.



Many families self-identify only when they are in crisis and require immediate support. Crucially, successful identification often relies on informal “human systems,” where staff, tutors, or previously supported McKinney-Vento parents recognize physical or behavioral crisis signals and refer the student.

“A lot of the families or students who self-identify are because they are in crisis, and need support. With the student housing questionnaire, it’s part of the enrollment process and even then, not everyone self-identifies. Sometimes they’re afraid that they may not be able to provide for their family, then ask themselves, ‘Am I at risk of losing my family?’”

— Hacienda La Puente Unified

“I get referrals all the time, mostly based on observation. It’s a ‘human system.’ So in the human system, the people-to-people system, there may be tutors, or educators who may see a student in the classroom and they might be wearing the same thing all the time, or may need grooming, they (liaisons) refer to them.”

— Norwalk La Mirada Unified



4. Fear of stigmatization and severe punitive consequences, such as child welfare involvement (Department of Children and Family Services, or DCFS) or involvement with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), is the primary driver preventing families and youth from self-identifying.



Families and youth actively conceal their housing status due to the intense fear that disclosing their situation will lead to the removal of children by the DCFS or trigger immigration enforcement actions. Liaisons recognize this as a “complex problem” linked to the inherent stigma of the “homeless” label.

“A lot of the families or students who self-identify do so because they are in crisis, and they need support.’ Are they going to make a report against me?’ We can’t do that. But yes, that could be the fear.”

— Hacienda La Puente Unified

“A lot of these young people are dealing with a lot of trauma, so they don’t want to be identified. They don’t want to be pointed out; sometimes it’s scary for them, because they think we’re going to report them to the Department of Children and Family Services.”

— Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)

The fear of immigration enforcement consequences extends to housed individuals who might displace unhoused relatives to protect their own household stability.

“I got a call yesterday from a principal, and it had to do with ICE targeting an unhoused family within a multi-family home. The homeowner told the family, ‘You need to get out of here because you have to have a deportation date, and we don’t want ICE to come.’ So now we’re seeing issues where the status of one family may negatively affect other families or community members in a negative way.”

— Hacienda La Puente Unified



5. Unaccompanied homeless youth frequently conceal their status through proxy enrollment via non-parental caregivers, resulting in them being formally identified only after an acute crisis exposes their couch surfing or independent living situation.



For youth who are “very nervous about being identified as being unhoused,” proxy enrollment is common. They use a third party to fill out paperwork as a “caregiver,” completing an affidavit while the youth remains technically unaccompanied. This highly concealed status means the youth is only identified later when an academic or social issue arises, and staff discover they are couch surfing, living in their car, or otherwise on their own.

“We have a lot of unhoused youth who are very, very nervous about being identified as being unhoused. The person will be identified as a caregiver, so that person enrolling will identify themselves as a caregiver and complete a caregiver affidavit. The caregiver will then enroll the young person, only to find out that the young person’s actually couch surfing, and they’re really on their own, staying in their car.”

— Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)



6. A perception gap exists where families, particularly those who are “doubled up” or residing in unconventional housing, do not self-identify because they do not believe their situation meets the definition of “homelessness.”



District staff noted that many families, often those from Hispanic backgrounds who live with extended family or in trailers, fail to self-report because they possess a narrow definition of what constitutes homelessness. Liaisons must engage in detailed conversations to explain that, under McKinney-Vento, not owning the home and being subject to immediate displacement legally classifies them as unhoused.

“We’re, like, 80–85% Hispanic, right? And so, what I have noticed is even if they’re [families] doubled up or in that sense of housing, they don’t think they’re considered homeless. Sometimes you have to explain it a little bit more to our families, for example asking the question of, ‘Are you the primary homeowner? Is this your property?’ Then, in a way, they are unhoused, right? Because the homeowner could kick them out at any time, then they would be left to figure it out.”

— Wilsona Elementary



7. Federal McKinney-Vento specific funding is still inadequate given districts' financial need for students and no dedicated statewide money for supplemental education dollars.



This requires districts to rely on unstable federal grants. The McKinney-Vento grant itself represents a modicum of money for essential learning resources. LACOE staff noted that although districts receive supplemental funding based on low-income student populations, “homelessness is not a category that districts receive additional funding for.” Consequently, districts heavily depend on highly competitive and unstable federal streams, primarily the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) grant and Title I. The instability of these grants is heightened by the possibility of federal policy changes, such as block-granting, which could “technically break the McKinney-Vento requirements”.

“I think McKinney-Vento is interesting because it’s a very tiny pot of money as it is. Homelessness is not a category that we (districts) receive additional funding for, which is an interesting problem, right?”

— Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)

“We only receive about \$14 million in the entire state for homeless education. It is very small; the majority of their (state) funding comes from Title I. Both of those streams of funding are potentially being impacted at the federal level.”

— Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)

8. The mandatory reliance on expiring, short-term grants introduces critical uncertainty for essential direct supports, threatening the long-term provision of key student services.



The financial fragility means that some of the most “successful” and direct interventions for families, such as prepaid cash card assistance for gas or emergency needs, are tied directly to grants like EHCY, which requires reapplication every three years. Districts are currently unsure if funds will be available in future school years, creating uncertainty regarding the sustainability of these critical student resources.

“I mean, one of the things that I feel is very successful within our own district is our prepaid card assistance program, but those cards are purchased through grant money. We are the recipients of the EHCY grant; we’re just not sure what’s going to happen for the 2026-27 academic year and moving forward. So, we are all still on the cusp of waiting to see what will happen.”

— Hacienda La Puente Unified

9. In the absence of dedicated governmental funding, most districts rely extensively on leveraging collaborative networks and community donations to supply basic needs and supplemental student resources.



District McKinney-Vento budgets are severely constrained and unstable. Staff have become adept at developing strong “human systems” centered on local partners, non-profits, and community donations. These external partnerships provide the vast majority of tangible resources for students, including food pantries, clothing closets, shoes, and school supplies.

“We have expanded our program—and in expanding our program—we have connected with big non-profit agencies like Baby 2 Baby and Feed the Children. We’re actually a hub for them right now; I feel like most of our resources and supports have always been through our community partners.”

— Hacienda La Puente Unified

“We have a strong community partnership, including city officials and the Los Angeles County supervisor in our area. The different contracts we currently have with all these big organizations; I think we may not have a lot of money to buy those prepaid cards when that money is gone.”

— Hacienda La Puente Unified



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Los Angeles County is approaching an inflection point in its response to student homelessness.

The qualitative findings in this brief make clear that incremental, compliance-only strategies will not be sufficient. These local realities mirror national evidence that most public systems were not designed to address the intersecting experiences of highly mobile youth and remain siloed, despite the need for coherent, cross-sector strategies that bring together education, housing, health, child welfare, and justice agencies around shared goals.

This context requires an “all hands on deck” approach that moves beyond isolated programs toward a

sustainable, trauma-informed infrastructure to ensure educational stability (Havlik, et al., 2020, Edwards, 2023; Bishop & Willis, 2025; Mansour & Mireles-Rios, 2025). The recommendations that follow are organized around three interlocking pillars: (1) proactive, trust-based identification protocols that reduce stigma and close under-identification gaps; (2) integrated, real-time data systems that connect education and allied services to monitor mobility and coordinate supports; and (3) sustained, multi-year funding and capacity-building, including dedicated English/Spanish bilingual liaison roles and formalized community partnerships, to ensure that the promise of McKinney-Vento and related policies are translated into equitable, durable outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness across Los Angeles County.



A. Refine Identification Protocols: Establish Proactive, Trust-Based Strategies

While mandatory enrollment questionnaires provide a foundation for identification, qualitative findings confirm that current identification methods are often reactive and undermined by systemic barriers such as stigma and fear of child welfare or immigration enforcement involvement. Recommendations must shift identification toward a proactive, trust-building process, especially given the disproportionate impact on Latine (75% of homeless students in Los Angeles County) and English Learner students.



1. Mandate comprehensive identification training focused on nuance and confidentiality. Training for all staff must explicitly address the “perception gap” families hold, detailing the full spectrum of homelessness (including doubling up and couch surfing) to overcome under-reporting. Training must also explicitly integrate trauma-informed practices to address the fear of DCFS/ICE involvement, ensuring staff can effectively communicate confidentiality assurances.

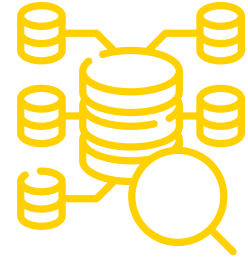
2. Implement proactive, low-stigma screening models. Develop internal processes where trusted staff (tutors, counselors, attendance personnel) are trained to recognize subtle crisis signals and initiate informal, non-punitive screening, reducing reliance solely on formal enrollment documents or acute crises.

3. Establish language- and culture-specific outreach protocols. Develop standardized, yet flexible, protocols for engaging English Learner and Latine students, ensuring all identification materials and follow-up probes are immediately accessible in primary languages and delivered by culturally competent, bilingual staff.



B. Advance Data Integration and Systemic Capacity

The companion quantitative paper, *“Rising numbers, fading resources: Students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County,”* highlights chronic absenteeism (37.2% for homeless students in Los Angeles County) and high non-stability rates (26.5% countywide) (Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026). However, the qualitative findings of this study reveal that effective intervention is hampered by fragmented data systems across districts that cannot verify housing status or track student mobility seamlessly.



1. Establish unified, cross-referenced data

platforms. Advocacy must focus on building a unified data infrastructure across Los Angeles County school districts that automatically connects identification data with student information systems. This data integration must facilitate real-time verification and reduce duplicative manual efforts by liaisons. However, because highly mobile youth often move frequently and may be especially vulnerable, the use of comprehensive, cross-system student data raises significant privacy and security concerns under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Ensuring compliance with FERPA while protecting the sensitive information of these students will be a critical challenge that any data-integration effort must address.

2. Mandate bi-annual cross-system data audits

by liaisons. While systemic integration is ongoing, require liaisons to conduct mandatory bi-annual manual verification checks between local student records (e.g., *PowerSchool/AERIES* tags) and CALPADS records to ensure accurate, quantitative tracking and expose existing data gaps.

3. Integrate qualitative needs assessment data

with student records. Systematically input the qualitative needs assessment summary—which informs individualized support—directly into the student’s primary record system (e.g., *AERIES*) as a verification tag, linking the qualitative service plan immediately to the quantitative student record for accurate service tracking.



C. Stabilize Capacity and Sustain Financial Support

Systemic capacity is strained by small liaison teams and high turnover. Crucially, essential direct services (like prepaid cash cards for emergencies) rely on fragile, short-term EHCY grants, creating uncertainty and service sustainability risk for liaisons. Furthermore, the extreme concentration of high-need students in districts like Norwalk-La Mirada (30.4% homelessness rate) mandates targeted support and stable resources.



1. Expand and stabilize liaison capacity through dedicated roles. Focus on intensive professional development and hiring incentives specifically in the 10 Los Angeles County districts with the highest rates of homelessness. Capacity must be increased by ensuring liaisons are dedicated to providing support mandated by McKinney-Vento, rather than serving in dual roles (e.g., foster youth liaison), which limits their specialized capacity to manage complex needs in high-volume settings.

2. Develop district-managed contingency funds for direct supports. To counteract the extreme funding uncertainty of federal grants, districts must use Title I flexibility to create small, district-managed contingency funds specifically for immediate needs like gas cards or temporary shelter. This stabilizes resources that liaisons identified as highly “successful” interventions.

3. Formalize and incentivize “human systems” collaboration. Districts must formalize the reliance on informal “human systems” (tutors, community partners, food banks) by creating dedicated release time or stipends for liaisons to manage community partnerships. This shifts partnership management from an informal duty to a recognized, essential capacity function.



CONCLUSION

The rise in student homelessness across Los Angeles County represents not only a housing crisis but a multi-systemic failure that threatens the educational stability and long-term academic trajectories of tens of thousands of young people (Kuhn et al., 2020; Pennbridge et al., 1990).

Between the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years, the number of students experiencing homelessness countywide surged by 28.4%, impacting 61,249 youth. Much of the system’s ability to respond has relied on temporary federal relief resources, particularly ARP-HCY–funded liaison positions (Edwards, 2023; Garcia et al., 2014; Henwood et al., 2024; Mansour & Mireles-Rios, 2025). As these short-term supports expire, the fragile infrastructure used to identify and serve students experiencing homelessness faces significant risk. Without sustained funding and institutionalized, trust-based identification protocols, districts will struggle to verify housing statuses proactively, allowing the true scope of the crisis to recede into fragmented, reactive systems (Bishop & Willis, 2025).

Housing instability disrupts nearly every dimension of schooling. These patterns underscore the urgent need for integrated, real-time data systems and trauma-informed educational practices capable of responding to increasing rates of student mobility. The burden falls disproportionately on vulnerable populations. These students often face compounded barriers, including limited access to stable supports and culturally responsive services (Migrant Education Program, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Witkin et al., 2005). At the same time, district liaison teams remain severely under-resourced, with high turnover and limited capacity to meet growing demand.

Compounding these challenges is a persistent gap between federal policy mandates, most notably the McKinney-Vento Act, and the realities faced by frontline practitioners (Mansour & Mireles-Rios, 2025; Broslawsky & Schoen, 2020; Bishop et al., 2020; Havlik et al., 2020). Qualitative evidence indicates that current service systems often function as fragile “human systems,” heavily dependent on short-term grants and informal partnerships rather than stable institutional supports (CDE, 2026). Strengthening data integrity, formalizing locally grounded practices, and ensuring sustainable funding are essential to closing this implementation gap.

Addressing the crisis, particularly the intersecting challenges of fear, stigma, underidentification, and funding instability, requires a coordinated, cross-sector response (Bishop & Willis, 2025; Henwood et al., 2024; Kuhn et al., 2020). Immediate priorities include securing multi-year protected funding streams, institutionalizing proactive and trust-based identification protocols, integrating education and social service data systems, and expanding bilingual liaison capacity through sustained professional development. Only through an “all-hands-on-deck” approach that aligns educators, policymakers, housing and health agencies, and community partners can policy intentions translate into equitable, lasting educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness across Los Angeles County.

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APPENDICES

Interview protocols, coding frameworks, and consent forms

Appendix A

1. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

This appendix presents the semi-structured interview protocol used to guide interviews with district- and county-level homeless liaisons across Los Angeles County. The protocol was designed to align with the study's research questions and to elicit participants' professional perspectives on identification processes, systems of support, cross-sector collaboration, and persistent challenges in serving students experiencing homelessness. While core questions were asked of all participants, interviewers used probes and follow-up questions as needed to clarify responses and allow participants to elaborate based on their roles and experiences.

2. Liaison Interview Protocol

Date:

School:

1. What is your name and your position title?
2. How does your district support unhoused youth?
3. We noticed a surge in unhoused youth in LA County. What do you think is causing the rates to surge?
4. How do you identify unhoused students in your district?
5. Once identified, what is the process of supporting unhoused youth? Please speak about the steps.
6. What other patterns do you notice amongst unhoused youth?
7. Is there anyone you recommend in the district that we should talk to? If so, why?
8. What recommendations do you have for supporting students in the county and across districts?
9. Youth usually self-identify. Do you see any differences in identification?
10. How are schools dealing with funding for homeless youth? How has your district been impacted by reductions in McKinney-Vento dollars at the end of one-time funding?

Appendix B: Qualitative Coding Framework

This appendix presents the qualitative coding framework used to analyze interview data related to district- and county-level liaisons for unhoused youth across Los Angeles County. The coding framework was developed through an iterative, deductive–inductive process informed by the study’s research questions and relevant literature. Codes are organized by parent category and include operational definitions to support analytic transparency and replicability.

Table B1. Qualitative Coding Framework

| Parent Code | Child Code | Operational Definition |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| Challenges & Barriers (CHALL) | Mis/Under Identification of Unhoused | Pride, fear of child-welfare reporting, or misunderstanding of the definition of homelessness, leading to under-identification of eligible students. |
| | Data Quality & Access | Challenges related to data integration, access, annual data cleaning, and inclusion of children ages 0–5 not yet enrolled in school systems. |
| | Funding Uncertainty | Instability in McKinney-Vento, Measure A, or federal grant funding streams and anxiety related to future funding cuts. |
| | Housing Maintenance | Ongoing difficulty maintaining housing after initial placement, including repeated loss of housing. |
| | Staff Capacity | Limited staffing, small liaison teams, high turnover, and insufficient district capacity for case management. |
| | Systemic Deficits | Structural shortages include a lack of shelters for minors, fragmented data systems, limited HUD-mandated supports, and insufficient funding for motel vouchers. |
| Collaborative Networks (COLLAB) | Co-Located Services | Co-location of county or community-based case management staff at schools or coordinated-entry sites. |
| | Community Partners | Formal partnerships with nonprofits, colleges, faith-based organizations, and community agencies supporting unhoused youth and families. |
| | County Office | Technical assistance, professional training, and contracted case-management support provided by the County Office of Education. |
| | Local Taskforce | Participation in city-level or regional homeless task forces focused on cross-sector coordination. |
| | Professional Development | Countywide professional development for educators and administrators on McKinney-Vento identification and service provision. |
| Funding & System Gaps (FIN) | Funding Limitations | Constraints related to funding definitions, allocation, and eligibility across state, county, and federal systems. |
| | McKinney-Vento | Education-focused federal funding is characterized by under-reporting, limited housing resources, and uneven implementation. |
| | Measure A | Local funding measure that supports advocacy efforts but does not directly fund services for unhoused youth. |
| | Supplementary Funding | One-time or supplemental funding from county offices, NGOs, or community partners that fill temporary gaps. |
| | Grant Dependency | Reliance on time-limited grants to sustain essential programs, such as prepaid cards or supply distribution. |
| | State Funding Issues | Constraints related to EHCY and McKinney-Vento funding are administered through state systems with limited flexibility. |

Note. Codes reflect themes derived from interviews with district and county personnel and were applied across all qualitative data sources.

| Parent Code | Child Code | Operational Definition |
|--|-------------------------------|---|
| Identification Process (ID) | Crisis Indicator | Immediate crisis signals (e.g., eviction, sleeping in vehicles or public spaces) trigger rapid intake. |
| | External Referral | Referrals originating from community agencies, partner organizations, or other districts. |
| | Internal Referral | Referrals initiated by school-based staff, such as teachers, counselors, or office personnel. |
| | Observation | Staff observations related to student behavior, hygiene, or attendance suggest housing instability. |
| | School-Specific Systems | Use of formal identification tools such as enrollment questionnaires or student information systems. |
| | Self-Identification | Voluntary disclosure of housing instability by students or family members. |
| | State & District Verification | Verification of housing status through systems such as CALPADS, AERIES, or district data-cleaning processes. |
| Program Structure & Administration (STRUCT) | Data Cleaning | Annual closure of housing-status tags and routine data-cleaning procedures to maintain accurate counts. |
| | Grants & Allocation | Allocation of time-limited grants to support tutoring, prepaid cards, and other services. |
| | School Community Center | Centralization of homeless services within district equity, access, or family engagement offices. |
| | School-Based Support Team | Multidisciplinary teams including counselors, specialists, parent aides, and tutors. |
| | Tiered Model of Support | Tiered service delivery model ranging from basic supports to intensive year-long case management. |
| Recommendations & Best Practices (REC) | Data Integration | Development of unified data platforms integrating enrollment, graduation, and housing data. |
| | Funding Advocacy | Advocacy for stable, increased funding at the state and district levels. |
| | District Voucher Systems | Development of district-managed motel or housing voucher systems. |
| | Relationship Building | Intentional trust-building practices with students and families through consistency and transparency. |
| | Partnership Expansion | Formalization and expansion of partnerships with community-based organizations and service agencies. |
| | Tangible Resources | Distribution of concrete supports such as hygiene kits, clothing, food, and prepaid cards. |
| | Tiered Case Management | Use of structured triage systems to provide intensive support to high-need families. |
| Root Causes of Homelessness (CAUSE) | Economic Pressures | Housing instability driven by rising rents, inflation, and cost-of-living increases. |
| | Familial Conflict | Family instability related to domestic violence, identity-based conflict, or intergenerational poverty. |
| | Mental Health | Unaddressed mental health needs, trauma, and medication disruptions. |
| | Shortage of Assistance | Insufficient housing, shelter capacity, and financial assistance options. |
| Support Mechanisms (SUP) | Academic Support | Tutoring, credit recovery, and academic case management for unhoused students. |
| | Client Relationships | Nonjudgmental, dignity-centered intake and ongoing engagement practices. |
| | Continuity Follow-Up | Structured follow-up through regular check-ins, home visits, and verification of services. |
| | Social Services | Referral or provision of mental health counseling, trauma-informed care, transition support, and college access services. |

Note. Codes reflect themes derived from interviews with district and county personnel and were applied across all qualitative data sources.

Appendix C: Expanded Research Methodology Description

Data Analysis: Two-Phase Approach

Within-case analysis – Each transcript was analyzed individually. Using the qualitative software Dedoose, thematic coding was applied to identify and tag excerpts that reflected recurring ideas such as challenges in identification, barriers to service access, collaborative partnerships, and funding instability. This within-case analysis isolated distinct patterns, strategies, and concerns expressed by each liaison.

Cross-case synthesis – After completing within-case coding, the same codebook was applied across all five district cases and the LACOE case. Themes were synthesized through matrix tables and pattern-matching techniques, allowing comparison of code frequency and nuance across sites. Explanation-building was also employed, interpreting similarities and differences in light of district-level data systems (AERIES, CALPADS) and policy contexts. The final analytical product consisted of case summaries that highlighted both shared findings and site-specific variations.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Credibility – Credibility was strengthened through several complementary strategies. In addition to member checking and triangulation with district records and AERIES/CALPADS extracts, the research team implemented inter-coder reliability procedures. Two additional team members independently applied the coding schema to the transcripts on Dedoose while remaining blind to one another's codes. Overlapping thematic assignments were then compared, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion, ensuring that the final codebook reflected a consensual and replicable interpretation of the data.

Dependability – A comprehensive trail was maintained throughout the project. All recruitment logs, consent forms, raw audio files, transcription notes, coding memos, and analytic matrices were stored on an encrypted Google Drive with systematic version-control.

Addressing Power Dynamics and Transparency – The UCLA CTS research team has pre-established collaborative relationships with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) and several of the participating school districts through prior research initiatives. While such relationships might be perceived as a source of convenience or as introducing power imbalances, they actually enhance transparency and align the study with the partners' own research interests. The longstanding partnership facilitated open communication about study goals and assured participants that their insights would be used to inform shared objectives. By grounding these connections and explicitly acknowledging the potential for power dynamics, the team reinforced the study's ethical integrity and the credibility of its results.

Ethical Safeguards

All procedures were reviewed and approved by the UCLA Institutional Review Board. Participants received an IRB-approved informed-consent form at least 48 hours before their scheduled interview; the form was reviewed verbally at the start of each session, and electronic consent was obtained before recording. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty or impact on their professional standing.

Recognizing the asymmetric power dynamics between researchers and district staff, the protocol emphasized the absence of any supervisory authority, provided private interview settings, and allowed participants to choose between Zoom or telephone formats. Recordings and transcripts were pseudonymized and stored on password-protected, encrypted university drives. Immediate notification procedures were established for any data-security breach, ensuring compliance with IRB and university IT-security requirements.