

Student Homelessness in California:

A Growing Statewide Challenge

A research brief from the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

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Introduction

286,853

students identified as experiencing homelessness in California, school year (SY) 2023–24

4.8%

of total statewide enrollment

16%

year-over-year increase from the previous school year

83.4%

of California students experiencing homelessness were doubled up in SY 2022–23, above the national rate of 75.0%.

Student homelessness in California has reached historically high levels.

Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, homelessness includes students without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, such as those in shelters, motels, cars, campgrounds, doubled-up housing, or temporary couch-surfing situations.

The recent surge reflects both worsening housing instability and expanded, state-mandated identification efforts under Assembly Bill 2375, which requires every district to administer a housing questionnaire.

Source: Cazares-Minero & Bishop (2026); Rivas (2022); SchoolHouse Connection (2026).

Introduction



Geographic and Regional Disparities

- Student homelessness is unevenly concentrated in high-need regions, where housing pressures, economic instability, and limited resources intersect.
- In SY 2023–24, several Los Angeles County school districts reported exceptionally high rates, led by Norwalk–La Mirada Unified School District (30.5%); many of the highest rate districts are in the San Gabriel Valley.
- These disparities underscore the need for statewide identification of homelessness hotspots to ensure resources are equitably targeted.

Drivers of Youth Homelessness

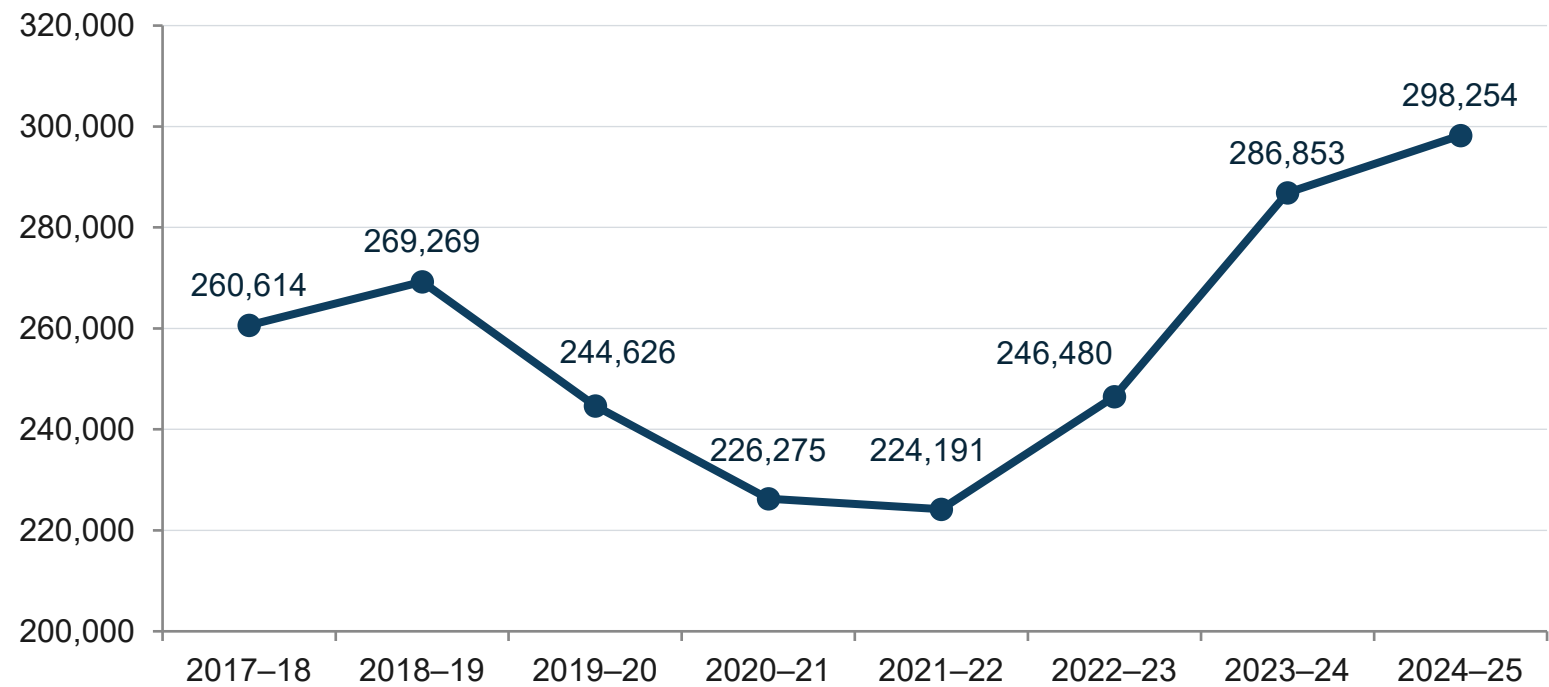
- Rising rents and declining housing affordability are major structural drivers of student homelessness in California.
- In 2025, California had the nation's highest housing wage: Nearly \$50/hour was needed to afford a modest two-bedroom rental, compared with a \$27.86 median hourly wage.
- California also faces a severe affordable-housing shortage, with just 25 affordable and available homes per 100 extremely low-income renter households, increasing housing instability for vulnerable families.

Source: Cazares-Minero et al. (2025); Cazares-Minero & Bishop (2026); Kim & Bishop (2026); National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC, 2025); NLIHC (2026).

Finding 1. A new record high in SY 2024–25

California identified 298,254 students experiencing homelessness in SY 2024–25, a 4% jump from the prior year and the highest total in at least 7 years.

Number of Students Experiencing Homelessness in California From SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data from California Department of Education (CDE) DataQuest, 2017–18 through 2024–25.

5.14%

of total enrollment, the highest rate in recent years

+16%

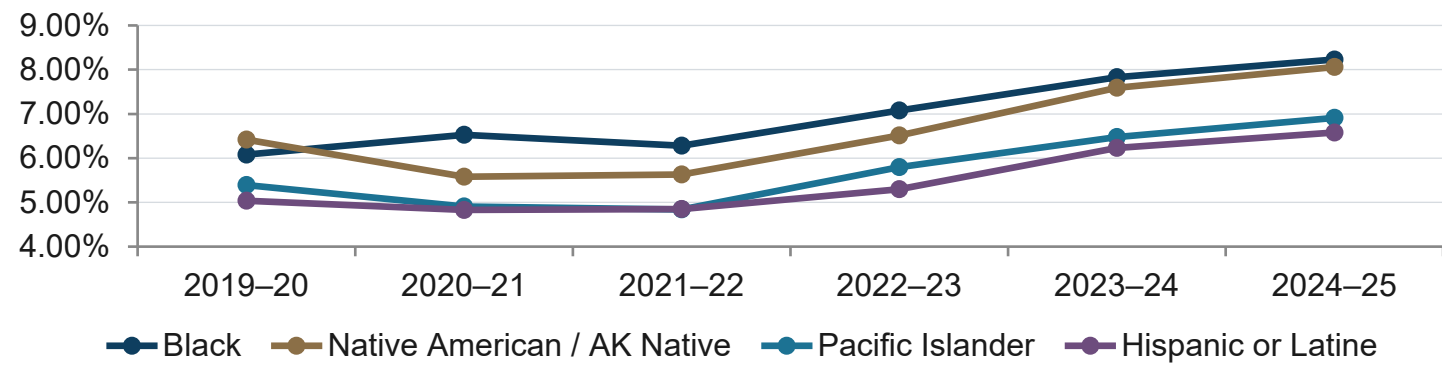
year-over-year jump in SY 2023–24, the largest change in the series

Finding 2. Racial disparities persist and have widened.

Black/African-American and Native American/Alaska Native students consistently experience the highest rates of homelessness in California.

Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness in California From SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25, by Race/Ethnicity

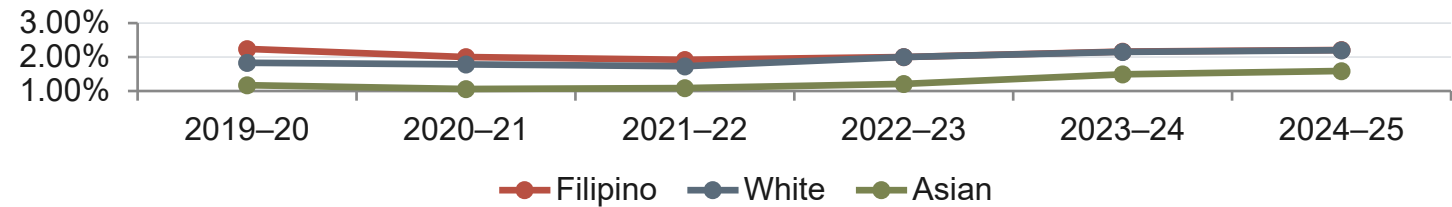
Rates 4% to 9%



More than 2 in 25

Black/African-American or Native American/Alaska Native students experienced homelessness in SY 2024–25.

Rates 1% to 3%
Y-axis break between 2.5% and 4%.



Widening gap

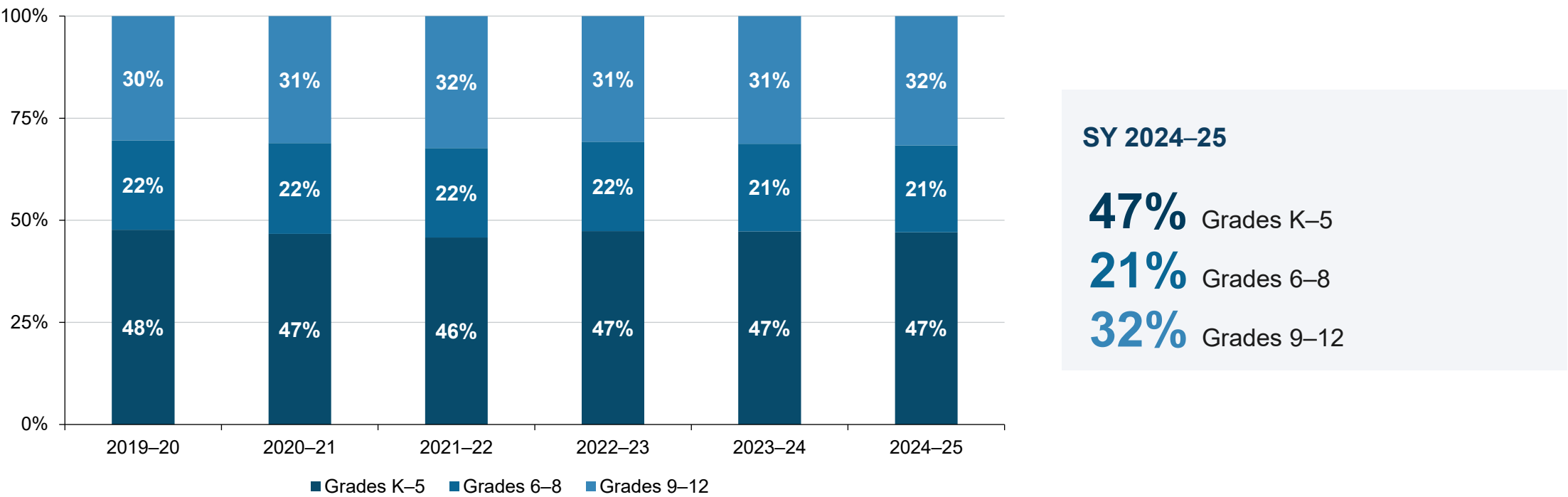
The Asian to Native American/Alaska Native gap grew from 4.54 to 6.64 percentage points between SY 2021–22 and SY 2024–25

Note. Two-panel chart with y-axis break. Source: CDE DataQuest, race and ethnicity, 2019–20 through 2024–25.

Finding 3. Housing instability affects every grade level.

The proportional distribution across grade levels has stayed largely stable, with concentration in the early grades and a slight upward shift in high school.

Grade Distribution Among Students Experiencing Homelessness in California, SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25

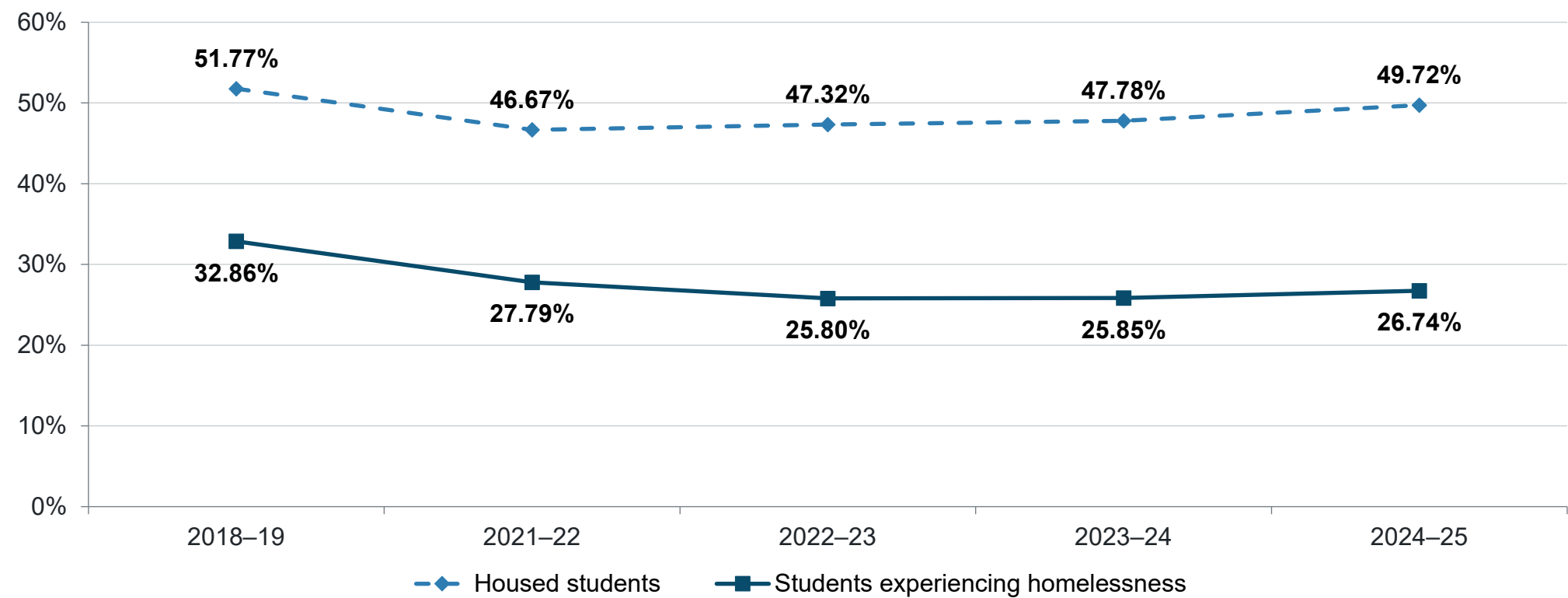


Note. Bars sum to 100% within each school year. Transitional kindergarten counts are included in Grades K–5 beginning in SY 2023–24. Source: CDE DataQuest.

Finding 4a. A 20-point achievement gap in ELA

Students experiencing homelessness trail their housed peers by roughly 20 percentage points in meeting English language arts (ELA) or mathematics standards.

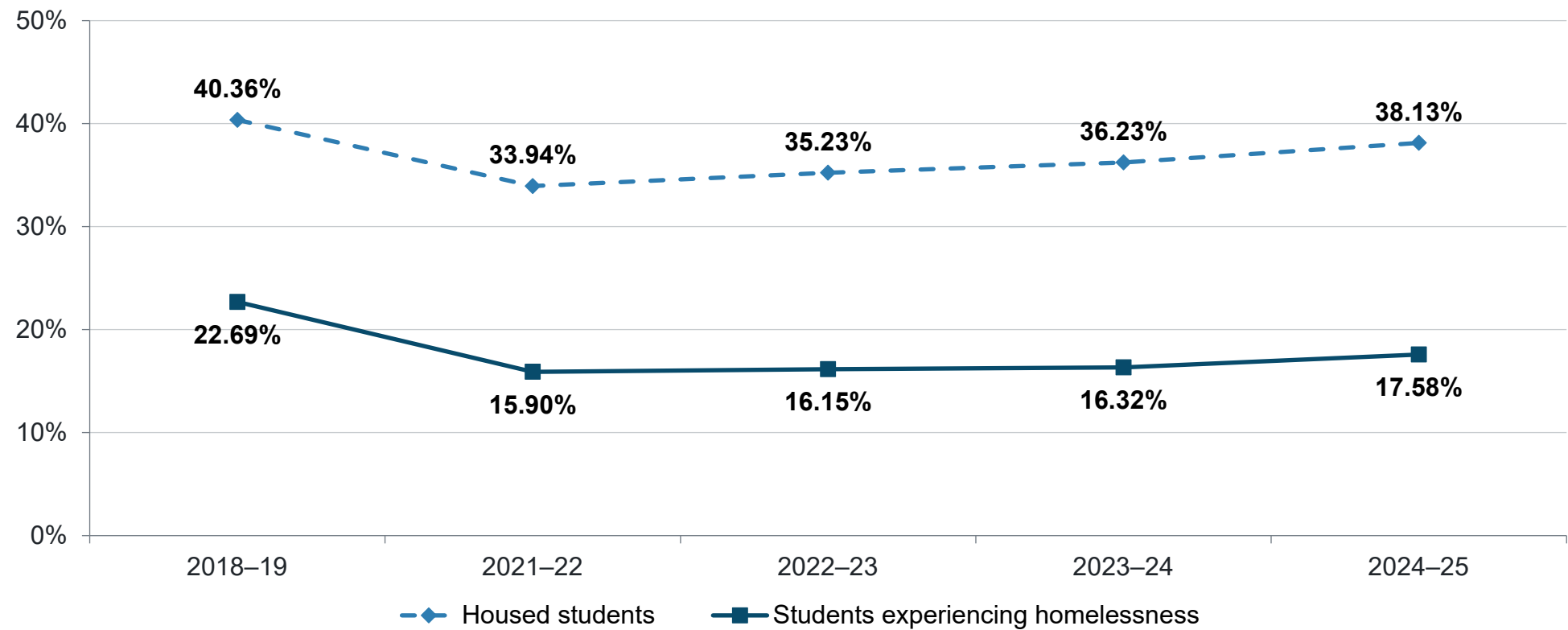
*Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students Meeting or Exceeding **ELA** Standards in California*



Finding 4b. A 20-point achievement gap in math

Students experiencing homelessness trail their housed peers by roughly 20 percentage points in meeting English language arts (ELA) or mathematics standards.

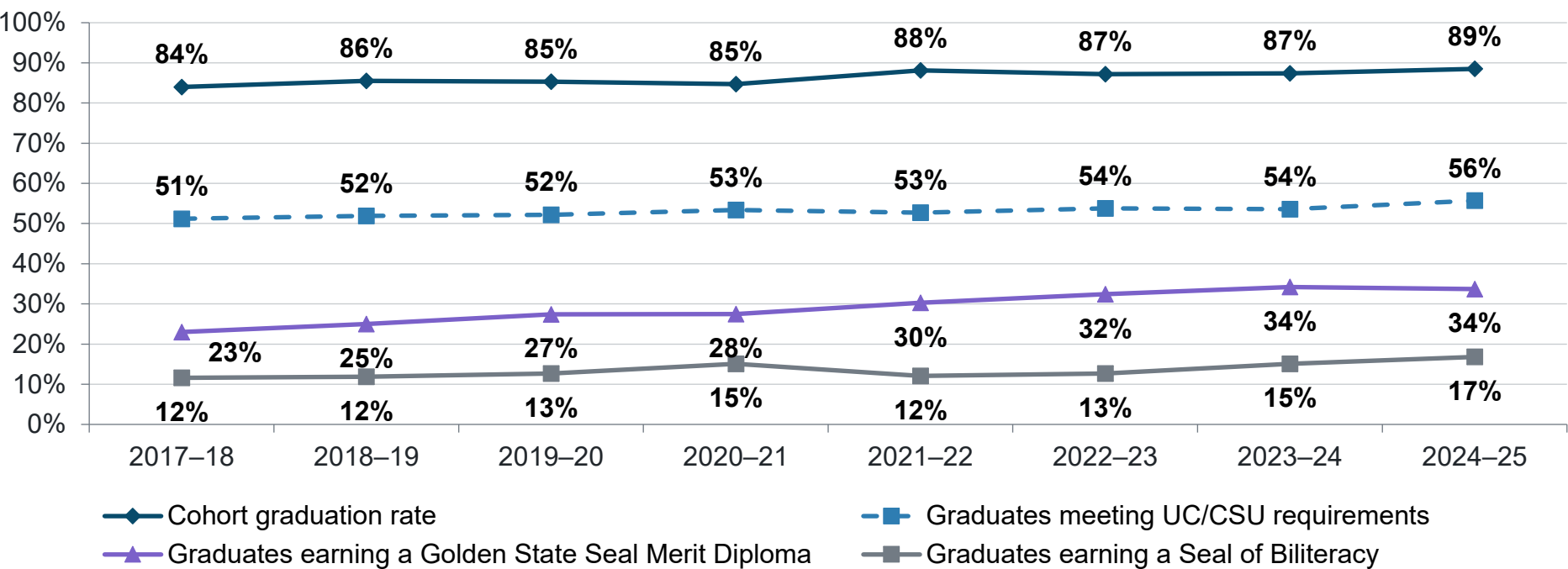
Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students Meeting or Exceeding **Mathematics** Standards in California



Finding 5. Graduation gaps across every measure

Students experiencing homelessness graduate at lower rates and are far less likely to meet University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) eligibility or earn state honors.

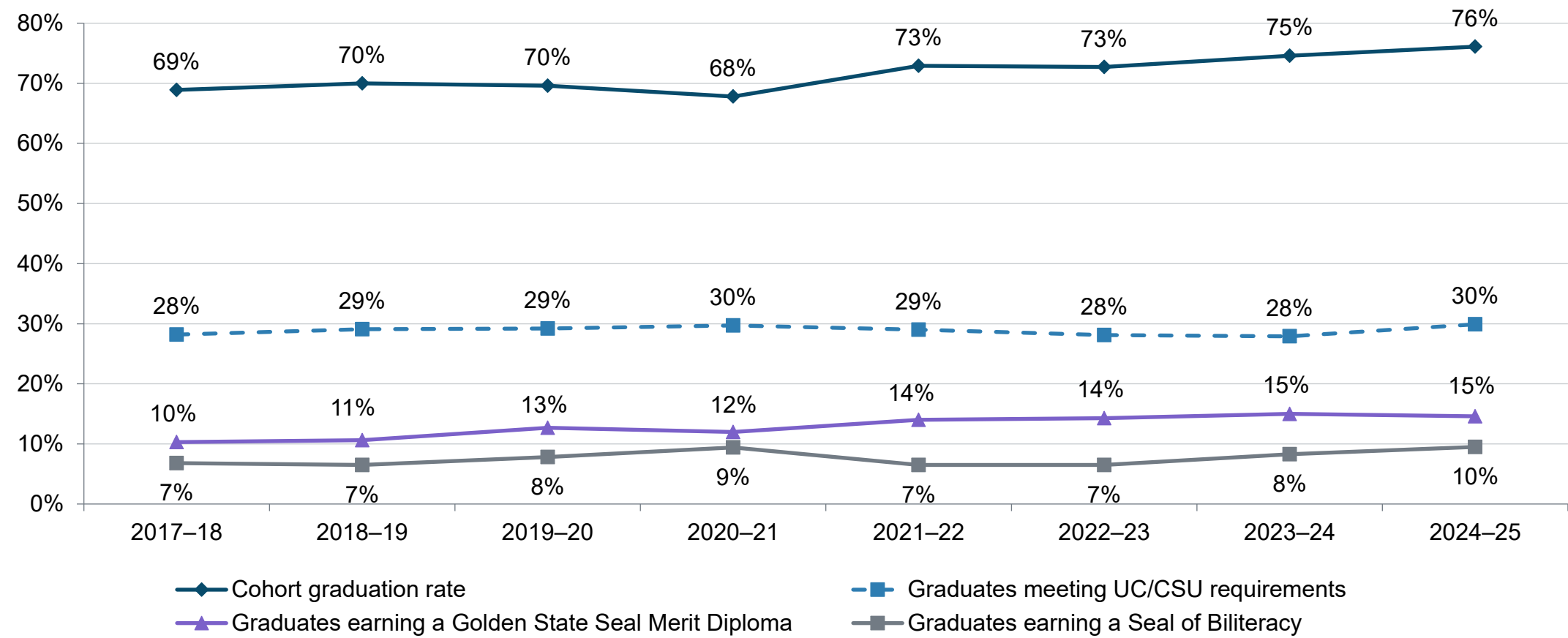
Graduation Rates for Housed Students in California



Between SY 2018–19 and SY 2024–25, graduation rates among students experiencing homelessness rose 7 percentage points, compared to 5 percentage points among their housed peers.

Finding 5. Graduation gaps across every measure

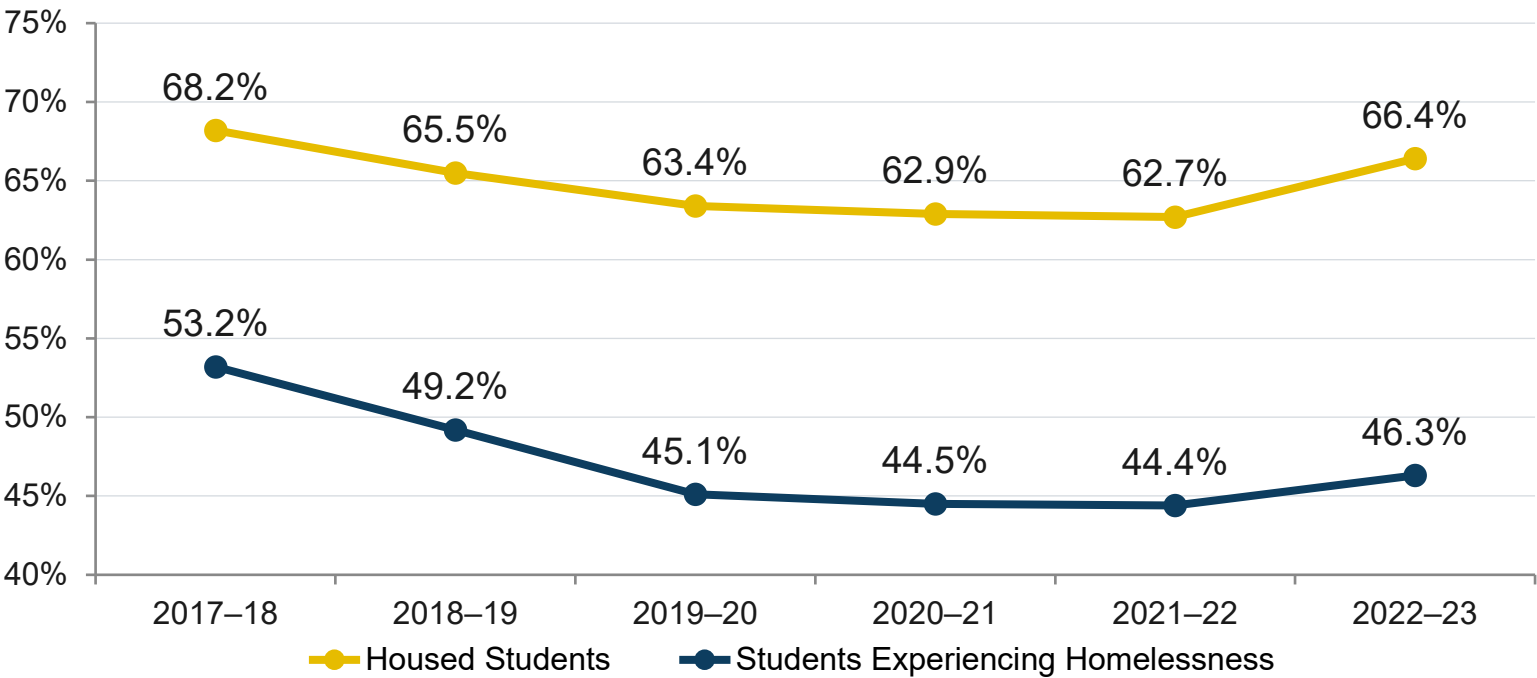
Graduation Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness in California



Finding 6. The college-going gap widened to 20 points.

Both groups' college-going rates declined during the pandemic, but only housed students recovered to near pre-pandemic levels. In SY 2022–23, rates among students experiencing homelessness remained 20 percentage points lower than among their housed peers.

College-Going Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students in California From SY 2017–18 to SY 2022–23



SY 2022–23

20 pts
college-going gap

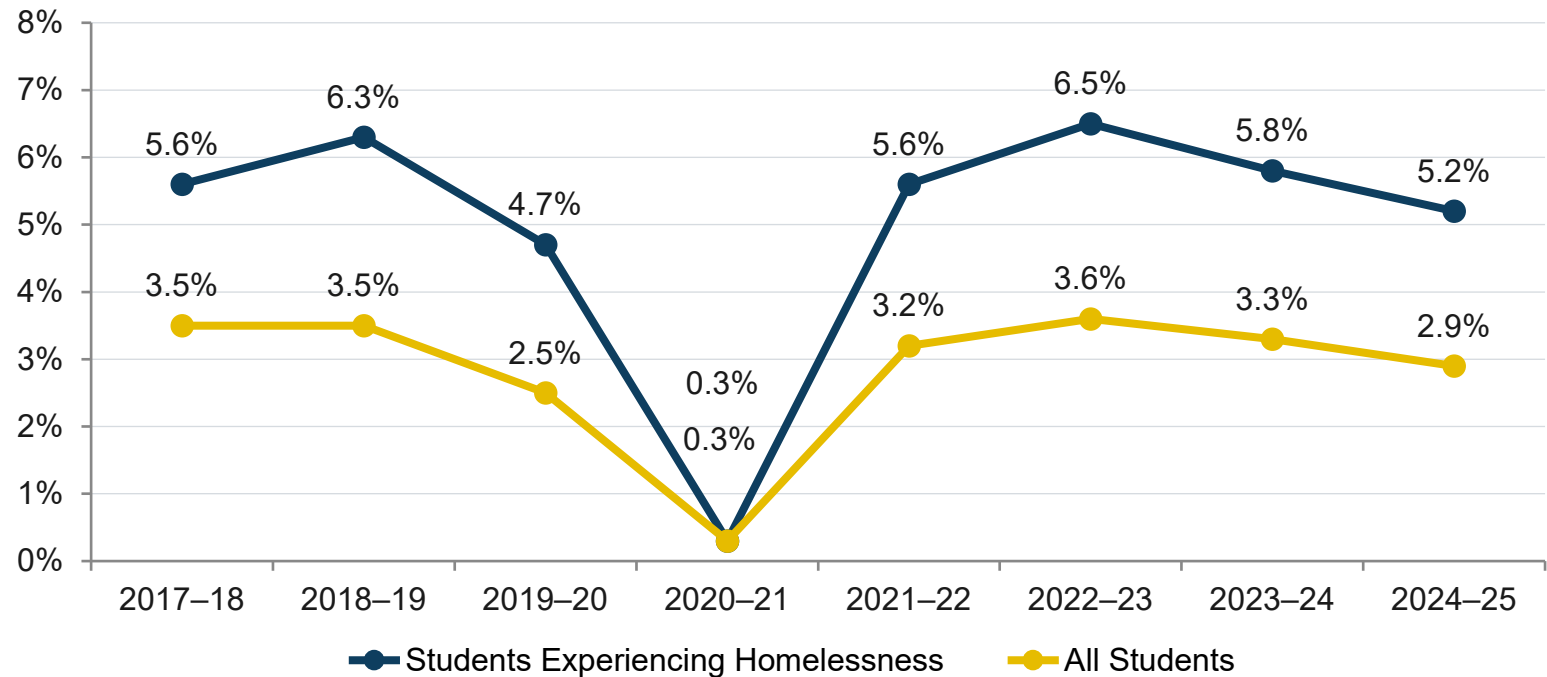
66.4% housed students
46.3% students experiencing homelessness

Source: CDE DataQuest, college-going rate, homeless subgroup.

Finding 7. A persistent 3-point suspension gap

Students experiencing homelessness are suspended at higher rates than their peers. Since SY 2022–23, the gap has held steady, near 3 percentage points.

Suspension Rates for All Students and Students Experiencing Homelessness in California From SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



SY 2024–25

5.2%

students experiencing homelessness

2.9%

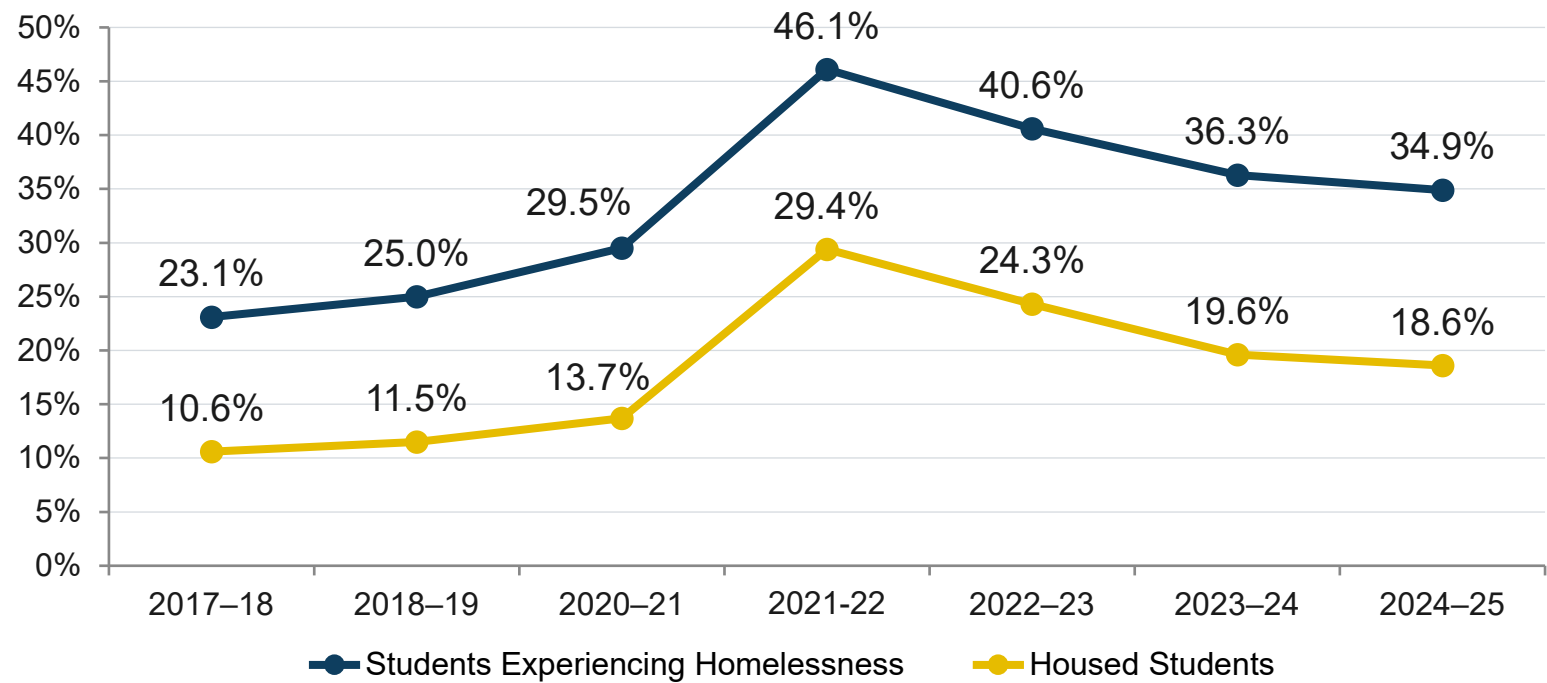
all students

Note. Housed student rates unavailable; overall student rate used for comparison. During SY 2020–21, many schools were in remote or hybrid learning, leading to extremely low suspension rates compared to pre-pandemic years. Source: CDE DataQuest, suspension rate, homeless subgroup.

Finding 8. Chronic absenteeism hit 46% during the pandemic.

Rates for both groups have declined since the pandemic peak but remain elevated. Since SY 2021–22, rates among students experiencing homelessness have remained 16 to 17 percentage points higher than those of their housed peers.

Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students in California From SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



SY 2024–25

34.9%
students experiencing homelessness

18.6%
housed students

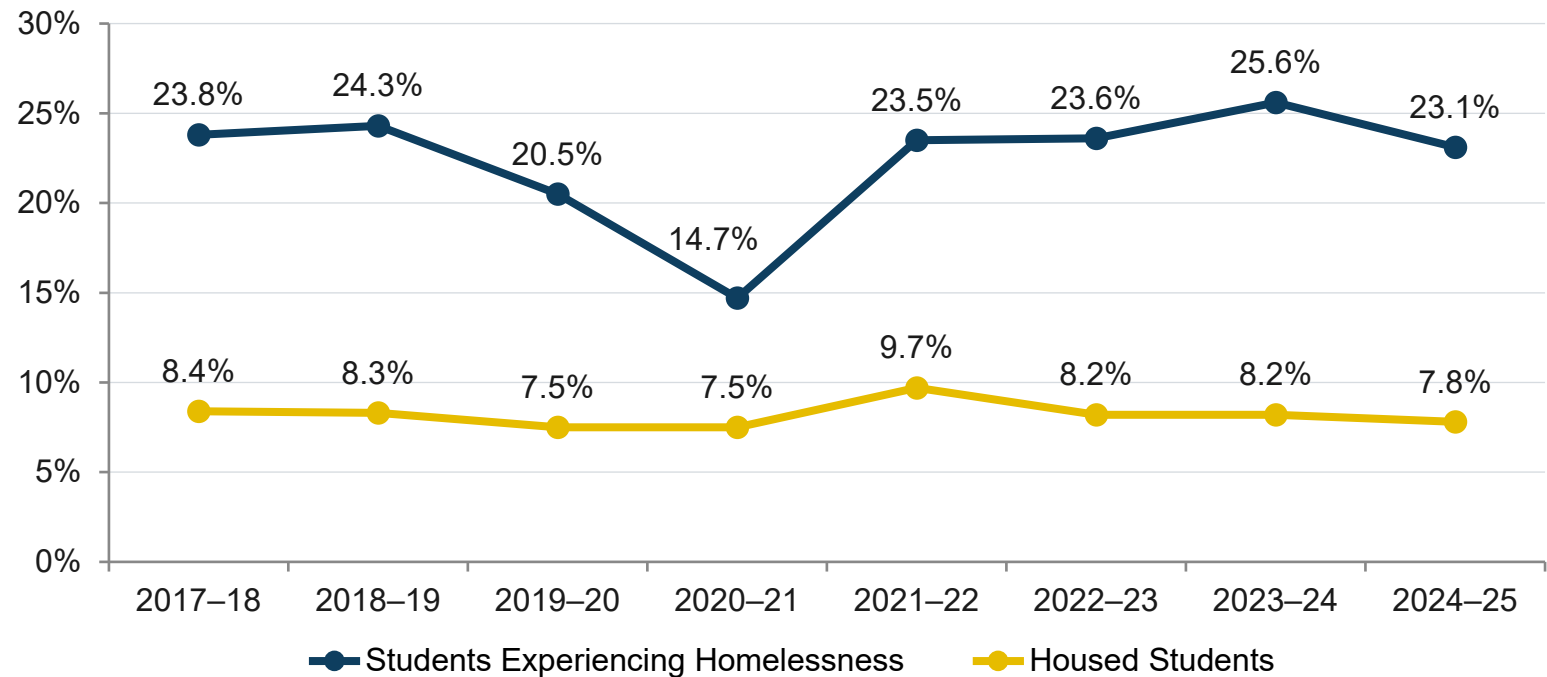
More than one in three students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent, above pre-pandemic levels.

Note. 2019–20 data unavailable per CDE. Source: CDE DataQuest, chronic absenteeism rate, homeless subgroup.

Finding 9. School nonstability is markedly higher.

Students experiencing homelessness are far more likely to have their school year interrupted. Nonstability rates have exceeded 20% in most years.

Nonstability Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students in California From SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



SY 2024–25

About 3x higher

23.1% of students experiencing homelessness did not complete a full year in one school in SY 2024–25.

7.8% for housed students

Note. CDE defines stability as a full year of enrollment in a single school. Nonstability rates have exceeded 20% in most years and are at least three times higher than those of their housed peers. Source: CDE DataQuest, stability rate, homeless subgroup.

Considerations for policymakers and practitioners

Statewide solutions must be paired with targeted, place-based strategies. Five priorities emerged from the analysis:

1

Expand the state's homelessness action plan.

Focus the California Interagency Council on Homelessness (Cal ICH) 2025 to 2027 Action Plan more explicitly on housing-insecure students.

2

Align housing and education systems.

Formalize collaboration between Cal ICH and the California Homeless Education and Technical Assistance Center (HETAC).

3

Target equity-focused supports.

Direct resources to Black and Native American or Alaska Native students statewide and in high-need counties.

4

Address learning and college gaps.

Coordinate K–12 stability supports with higher education access strategies rather than working in silos.

5

Reduce absenteeism, instability, and discipline gaps.

Scale restorative, equity-centered practices through the California Community Schools Partnership Program.

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Read the full brief:

Download the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools factsheet on student homelessness in California.

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