

Student Homelessness in Arizona:

Understanding and Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Beyond the Count

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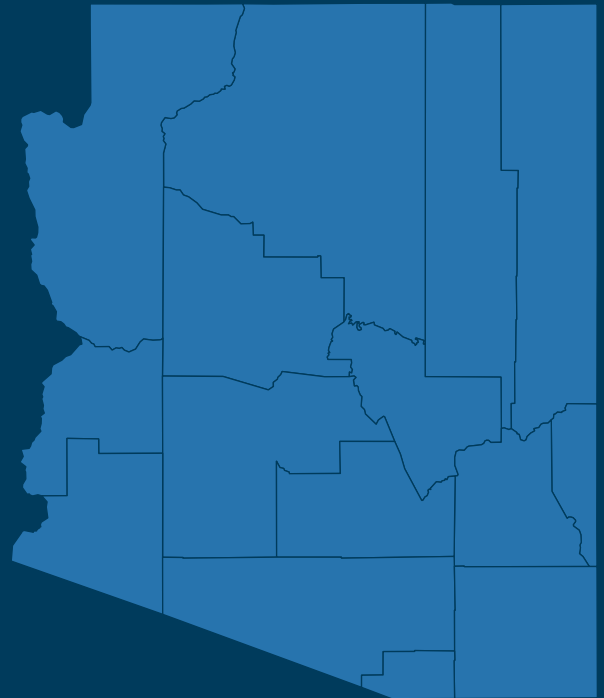


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Introduction

In Arizona, thousands of students are identified each year as experiencing homelessness, though available data suggest this population is likely undercounted (Arizona Department of Education [ADE], 2023). Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, local education agencies (LEAs) are required to proactively identify students experiencing homelessness and remove barriers to their enrollment and success, with designated liaisons responsible for ensuring compliance.

In Arizona, LEAs are required to use standardized tools, such as the Arizona Student Residency Questionnaire and Educational Rights of Homeless Children and Youth, to support identification at enrollment (ADE, 2024).¹ However, because identification ultimately depends on local implementation, capacity, and outreach practices, the consistency and effectiveness of identifying students experiencing homelessness may still vary across districts. Broader housing data underscore the scale and urgency of this issue. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Arizona experienced one of the largest increases in homelessness nationally between 2020 and 2022, with the January 2022 Point-in-Time (PIT) count² identifying more than 13,550 individuals experiencing homelessness—a nearly 25% increase since 2020 (ADE, 2023). Arizona also ranks fourth in the nation for the number of identified unaccompanied youth (ADE, 2023). These HUD figures, however, primarily capture individuals in shelters or unsheltered settings and do not fully reflect the broader and often less visible forms of homelessness experienced by students.

Given these broader housing pressures, it is critical to understand how student homelessness is defined and measured within the education system. This report uses ADE homeless student enrollment data, which identify students reported in the Arizona Education Data Standards system as homeless on October 1 of each year. Because homelessness is often episodic and changes throughout the year, Arizona's October 1 count may miss students who become homeless later in the school year.

1 It is important to highlight that the Arizona Student Residency Questionnaire content, including its sequencing, was intentionally developed in conference with the US Department of Education, the National Center for Homeless Children and Youth, and SchoolHouse Connection to support LEAs in removing barriers and streamlining the process to identify and immediately enroll children and youth experiencing homelessness. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §11432 (g)(1); (g)(3); (g)(6).

2 The PIT count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. HUD requires that Continuum of Care programs conduct an annual count of people experiencing homelessness who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night. The HUD system uses annual PIT count surveys of sheltered and unsheltered persons on a single night to produce the national homelessness estimate (U.S. HUD, n.d.-b).

In contrast, the McKinney-Vento’s cumulative count methodology captures the total number of distinct students identified as homeless at any point during the school year, with each student counted only once regardless of moves or multiple enrollments (District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2024). As a result, the figures presented in this report likely underestimate the true number of students in Arizona experiencing homelessness. This undercount is further compounded because nearly three in four students experiencing homelessness in school year (SY) 2022–23 were doubled-up, or temporarily staying with others (SchoolHouse Connection, n.d.).³ Because these students are not in shelters or unsheltered settings, they are less visible and more difficult to identify, contributing to the likelihood that overall counts underestimate the true scope of student homelessness.

Geographic & Regional Disparities

Patterns of hidden homelessness are not evenly distributed across the state and may be more pronounced in certain regions. Available data show clear differences across counties in Arizona, particularly when considering rurality, doubled-up living arrangements, and the concentration of Native American students (SchoolHouse Connection, n.d.). In Northern Arizona counties—especially Apache, Navajo, and Coconino—student homelessness is closely tied to rural and tribal contexts. Apache County stands out as the most rural (74.8%) and has one of the highest shares of Native American students experiencing homelessness (49.5%), along with a relatively high rate of doubled-up living (38.8%). Navajo County shows a similar pattern, with nearly half of all students experiencing homelessness identifying as Native American (49.9%) and a high reliance on doubled-up housing arrangements (60.5%). These percentages suggest that housing instability is often managed informally within households rather than through visible homelessness. Coconino County also shows a majority share of Native American students experiencing homelessness (55.8%) and high doubled-up living (59.2%), even though its rural classification is lower (7.1%) than other counties, indicating that tribal geography rather than rurality alone is a key driver.

In contrast, more urban counties such as Pima show a different profile. While Pima has a lower rural share (11%) and a smaller proportion of Native American students (11.9%), it still has a high rate of doubled-up living (75.2%). It also has a majority Hispanic/Latine student population (55.1%). This suggests that in urban settings, student homelessness is more closely associated with Hispanic/Latine populations and crowded household arrangements rather than rural isolation or tribal geography. Southern and western counties such as Yavapai and La Paz further illustrate variation. Yavapai has

³ The data in the Child and Youth Homelessness Data profiles are based on the federal education definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and are used in the following exhibits.

the highest student homelessness rate overall (5.3%) and the highest doubled-up rate (82.5%), but a relatively low rural share (28.9%) and a majority white student population (54.8%). La Paz, meanwhile, shows a more mixed profile with high rurality (47.5%), substantial Hispanic/Latine representation (50%), and moderate Native American representation (22.5%), along with elevated doubled-up living (65%).

Exhibit 1 shows that student homelessness in Arizona is not uniform but shaped by distinct geographic contexts. In rural and tribal counties, particularly in the north, homelessness is more closely associated with Native American students and high levels of doubled-up living arrangements. In urban counties, particularly in the south, homelessness is more heavily concentrated among Hispanic students and is also largely experienced through overcrowded housing. Across all regions, doubled-up living is the dominant form of homelessness, underscoring that housing instability is often hidden within shared households rather than visible in shelters or street homelessness.

Exhibit 1. *Characteristics of Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness by County, SY 2022–23*

County	Student Homelessness Count	Student Homelessness Rate	Doubled-Up	Native American Students	Hispanic Students	White Students	Rural Students
Yavapai	1,238	5.3%	82.5%	2.9%	32.1%	54.8%	28.9%
Coconino	561	3.3%	59.2%	55.8%	17.6%	16.6%	7.1%
Navajo	435	2.4%	60.5%	49.9%	9.7%	18.2%	40%
Apache	206	2.1%	38.8%	49.5%	12.1%	32.5%	74.8%
Pima	2,842	1.9%	75.2%	11.9%	55.1%	16.3%	11%
La Paz	40	1.8%	65%	22.5%	50%	0%	47.5%
Arizona Statewide	20,027	1.7%	70.9%	11.4%	48.8%	20.4%	9.3%

Note. Data retrieved from SchoolHouse Connection (2026, n.d.) The data in the profiles are based on the federal education definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act. This analysis focuses on a selected set of counties with student homelessness rates above the state average.

Drivers of Youth Homelessness

Rising rental costs and declining housing affordability are key drivers of student homelessness in Arizona. The state has experienced one of the largest increases in youth homelessness nationally, a trend closely linked to rising rents and housing demand (InvisiblePEOPLE, 2023). According to the Out of Reach 2025 report (National Low Income Housing Coalition [NLIHC], 2025), rental costs in Arizona have increased substantially over time, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2025, a worker needed to earn over \$34 per hour to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment. In contrast, the state's median wage across all occupations is \$23.89 per hour; a full-time minimum wage worker earning \$14.70 per hour could afford less than half of the statewide fair market rent. Wages have not kept pace with rising rents, leaving many Arizona renters cost-burdened and unable to afford stable housing without working multiple jobs. The state also faces a severe shortage of affordable housing, with only 26 affordable and available units for every 100 extremely low-income renter households (NLIHC, 2026),⁴ ranking Arizona fourth worst nationally. Together, these trends show that student homelessness in Arizona is strongly driven by structural housing affordability challenges.

Purpose of Publication

The goal of this report is to provide a comprehensive and data-informed picture of student homelessness in Arizona. Specifically, this analysis examines trends over time, the characteristics of students most affected, and the educational and school climate outcomes associated with homelessness, including academic performance (English language arts [ELA] and mathematics proficiency), high school graduation, and chronic absenteeism. By bringing these elements together, the report aims to move beyond simple counts to better understand how homelessness shapes students' educational experiences and opportunities. The findings are intended to support state and local leaders, educators, and community partners in responding to the growing prevalence of student homelessness.

4 According to the NLIHC (2026), "low-income renters" are defined as households with incomes at or below the federal poverty guideline or 30% of the area median income, whichever is higher. Extremely low-income renters often include seniors and people with disabilities, working adults with low wages, single parents and caregivers, and students and families with unstable incomes.

Methods

This report draws on publicly available statewide data from ADE, from SY 2017–18 to SY 2025–26, obtained from ADE’s State Reports and downloadable research files. Data include homeless student enrollment (McKinney-Vento), chronic absenteeism, academic assessments (ELA and mathematics), and graduation rates; definitions of these measures are provided in Appendix A. There are limited measures because no data were available on school instability, suspensions, and grade or age distribution of students experiencing homelessness.

Analyses are descriptive, examining year-to-year trends in student homelessness statewide and by race/ethnicity, and comparing key outcomes between students experiencing homelessness and their nonhomeless peers. No primary data collection was conducted.

Findings should be interpreted with caution. Student homelessness is likely undercounted due to inconsistent, though improving, identification practices; pandemic-era disruptions limit comparability across some years, and analyses are descriptive rather than causal. Differences across data sources also reflect variation in reporting methods. While federal McKinney-Vento data represent cumulative counts of students identified over the full school year, some ADE datasets rely on PIT count or enrollment-based snapshots (e.g., October 1), which may result in lower counts and limit direct comparability. Full methodological details are provided in Appendix B.

5 Cumulative count of students: Under the McKinney-Vento Act, districts report the total number of distinct students identified as homeless at any point during the school year, counting each student only once regardless of moves or multiple enrollments (District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2024).

Point-in-time (PIT) count: The Point-in-Time (PIT) Count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. HUD requires that CoCs conduct an annual count of people experiencing homelessness who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night. The HUD system uses annual PIT surveys that count sheltered and unsheltered persons on a single night to produce the national homelessness estimate (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.b.).



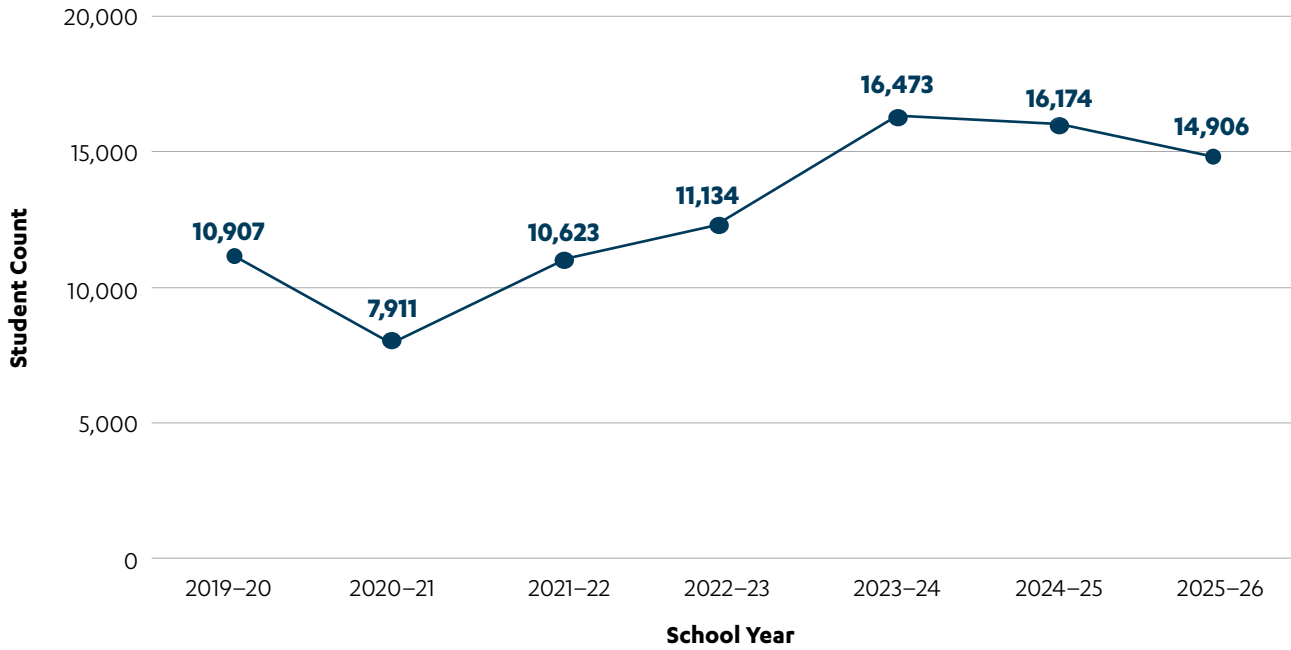
Findings

1. In SY 2025–26, there were 14,906 students experiencing homelessness in Arizona, marking an 8% decline from the previous school year.

The two most significant shifts in student homelessness in Arizona occurred during the pandemic-related decline and the postpandemic surge. The sharpest decrease took place between SY 2019–20 and SY 2020–21 (–27.5%), likely reflecting widespread underidentification during remote learning, when schools had limited visibility into students’ housing situations. In contrast, the most dramatic increase occurred in SY 2023–24, when student homelessness rose by 48% from the previous year. This surge was likely driven by worsening housing affordability, inflation, and the expiration of pandemic-era protections (Koutavas et al., 2023; NLIHC, 2026). It may also reflect improved identification and reporting practices, including expanded and more consistent use of the Arizona Student Residency Questionnaire and McKinney-Vento enrollment procedures, which could have increased the documented identification of students experiencing homelessness. A subsequent decline between SY 2023–24 and SY 2024–25 (–9.5%) may indicate a modest improvement in housing stability though it could also reflect changes in identification practices. However, it is difficult to definitively determine the extent to which this decline reflects actual decreases in student homelessness versus shifts in reporting, awareness, or identification practices.

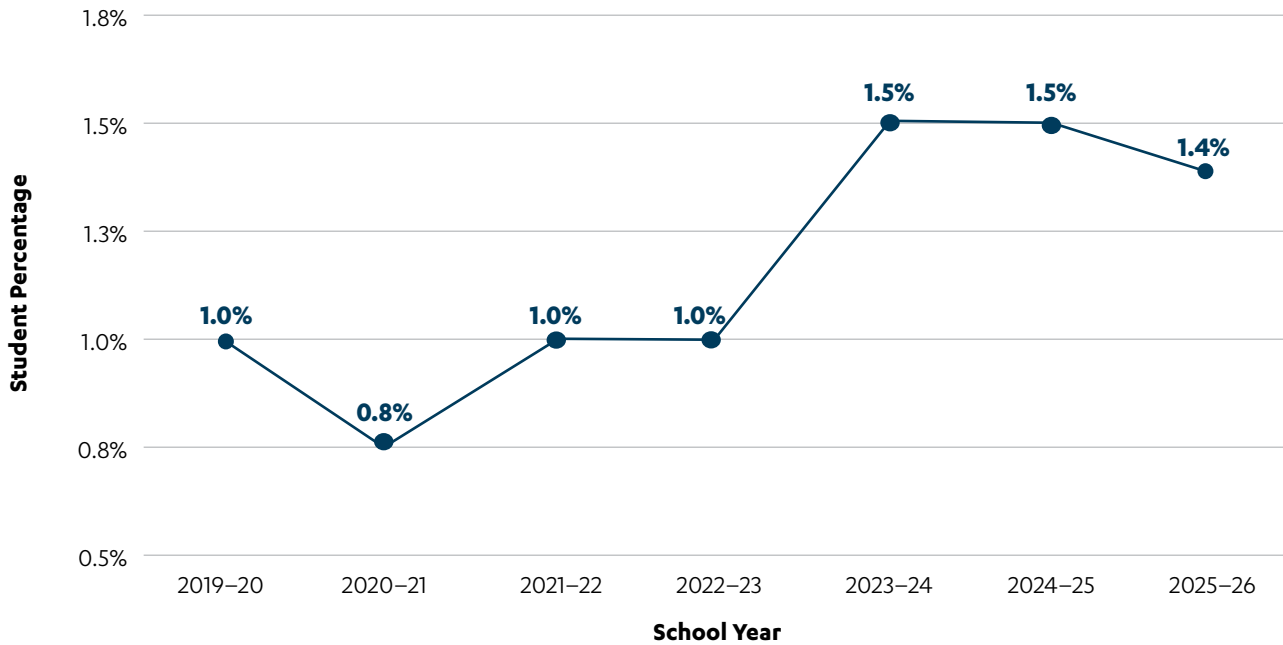
In terms of overall counts, 7,911 students were identified as experiencing homelessness in SY 2020–21, followed by a strong uptick to 10,623 students in SY 2021–22 (**Exhibit 2**). The increase in SY 2021–22 may reflect both the return to in-person schooling and strengthened identification and outreach efforts supported in part by American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth funding, which is designed to improve the identification and enrollment of students experiencing homelessness. However, state-level reporting does not explicitly attribute changes in Arizona’s counts to this funding, and the relative contribution of improved identification versus changes in underlying need cannot be precisely determined. Growth stabilized in SY 2022–23 at 11,134 students, before rising sharply to 16,473 students in SY 2023–24, the highest count in recent years. This increase is also reflected in the share of students experiencing homelessness. The percentage rose from 1.0% in SY 2022–23 to 1.5% in SY 2023–24, marking the highest rate observed over the period (**Exhibit 3**). Overall, despite some recent fluctuation, student homelessness in Arizona remains elevated compared to prepandemic levels, underscoring ongoing challenges for schools and communities.

Exhibit 2. Number of Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness, SY 2019–20 to SY 2025–26



Note. Data retrieved from ADE (n.d.-b.), Enrollment Data, SYs 2019–20 through 2025–26.

Exhibit 3. Percentage of Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness, SY 2019–20 to SY 2025–26



Note. Data retrieved from ADE (n.d.-b.), Enrollment Data, SYs 2019–20 through 2025–26, and calculated.

2. There are persistent racial disparities in student homelessness over time, especially for Hispanic/Latine, Black/African American, and Native American/Alaska Native students.

Trends show both pandemic-related disruption and persistent racial disparities in student homelessness over time. Across nearly all racial groups, there is a clear dip in the number of students experiencing homelessness in SY 2020–21, followed by an increase in SY 2021–22 (**Exhibit 4**). This decline is most pronounced among Black/African American, Hispanic/Latine, and white students, likely reflecting underidentification during remote learning rather than a true reduction in homelessness. By SY 2021–22 and SY 2022–23, counts stabilized, suggesting a return to more consistent identification practices across districts.

Between SY 2022–23 and SY 2023–24, there was a sharp and widespread increase across nearly all racial groups, with particularly large jumps among Hispanic/Latine (from 5,597 to 8,420), Black/African American (from 1,356 to 2,180), and Native American/Alaska Native students (from 1,155 to 1,826; **Exhibit 5**). This pattern points to worsening housing instability, likely tied to rising housing costs and the expiration of pandemic-era supports (Koutavas et al., 2023; NLIHC, 2026). Hispanic/Latine students consistently represent the largest share of students experiencing homelessness, while Native American/Alaska Native and Black/African American students appear to be disproportionately affected relative to their overall student populations, indicating persistent structural inequities.

In the most recent years (SY 2024–25 and SY 2025–26), trends are mixed. Hispanic/Latine and white students show moderate declines (0.16 and 0.04 percentage points, respectively), while Native American/Alaska Native and Black/African American students continue to increase or remain elevated, indicating uneven recovery (**Exhibit 5**). Notably, the percentage of Native American/Alaska Native students experiencing homelessness rose from 1.7% in SY 2019–20 to 4.3% in SY 2025–26, while rates for Black/African American students increased from 2.7% to 3.6% over the same period. Smaller populations, including Asian and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, fluctuate more due to their size but follow the broader pattern of pandemic-era decline and postpandemic increase.



Exhibit 4. *Count of Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness by Race, SY 2019–20 to SY 2025–26*

	Asian	Native American/ Alaska Native	Black/ African American	Hispanic/ Latine	White	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	Multiple Races
2019-2020	*	811	1,688	5,865	2,492	51	583
2020-2021	17	661	956	4,519	1,737	21	458
2021-2022	40	1,108	1,390	5,763	2,263	59	472
2022-2023	76	1,155	1,356	5,597	2,380	52	518
2023-2024	111	1,826	2,180	8,420	3,112	56	768
2024-2025	101	1,794	2,454	8,212	2,821	45	747
2025-2026	92	1,881	2,309	7,259	2,550	72	743

Note. Data retrieved from ADE (n.d.-b), Enrollment Data, from SY 2019–20 to SY 2025–26.

* Data for Asian students in 2019–20 is not available from ADE.

Exhibit 5. *Percent of Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness by Race, SY 2019–20 to SY 2025–26*

	Asian	Native American/ Alaska Native	Black/ African American	Hispanic/ Latine	White	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	Multiple Races
2019-2020	*	1.7%	2.7%	1.1%	0.6%	1.3%	1.3%
2020-2021	0.1%	1.5%	1.7%	0.9%	0.4%	0.7%	0.8%
2021-2022	0.1%	2.3%	2.2%	1.1%	0.6%	1.4%	1.1%
2022-2023	0.2%	2.4%	2.1%	1.0%	0.6%	1.3%	1.1%
2023-2024	0.3%	3.9%	3.4%	1.6%	0.8%	1.4%	1.6%
2024-2025	0.3%	4.0%	3.8%	1.5%	0.8%	1.2%	1.5%
2025-2026	0.3%	4.3%	3.6%	1.4%	0.7%	1.9%	1.5%

Note. Data retrieved from ADE (n.d.-b), Enrollment Data, from SY 2019–2020 to SY 2025–26, and calculated.

*Data for Asian students in 2019–20 is not available from ADE.

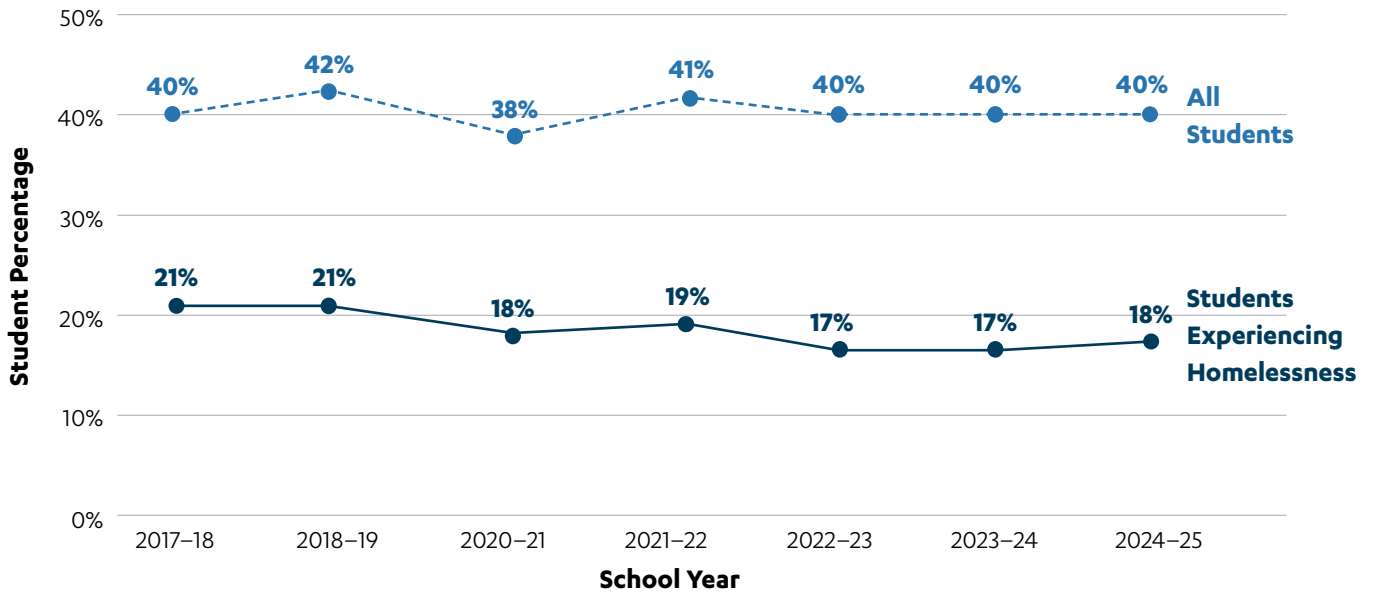
3. There is a persistent 20-point achievement gap between students experiencing homelessness and their housed peers in mathematics and ELA scores.

Housed students consistently outperformed students experiencing homelessness, with proficiency rates in both mathematics and ELA roughly 20 percentage points higher across most years. The gaps in SY 2018–19 and from SY 2020–21 to SY 2024–25 in both subjects remained largely unchanged. From SY 2022–23 to SY 2024–25, the proficiency gap between housed and unhoused students remained large, about 22 to 23 percentage points in ELA and 20 to 22 percentage points in mathematics. The relative stability of this disparity indicates that ELA and mathematics gains for students experiencing homelessness have not kept pace with those of their housed peers.

ELA proficiency for all students has remained relatively stable over time, hovering around 40% from SY 2018–19 to SY 2024–25. In contrast, students experiencing homelessness consistently perform at lower levels, with ELA proficiency rates in the upper-teen range prior to the pandemic and declining by 3 to 4 percentage points after SY 2018–19. Students experiencing homelessness typically experienced sharper postpandemic learning losses in many states (e.g., California, Nevada), where declines in academic performance have been pronounced and recovery uneven. In Arizona, however, ELA proficiency among students experiencing homelessness declined by a relatively modest 3 to 4 percentage points following SY 2018–19 and has remained comparatively stable since. This suggests that, unlike national patterns in which pandemic-related learning loss for this group was often more severe, Arizona did not experience a similarly large postpandemic drop in ELA outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

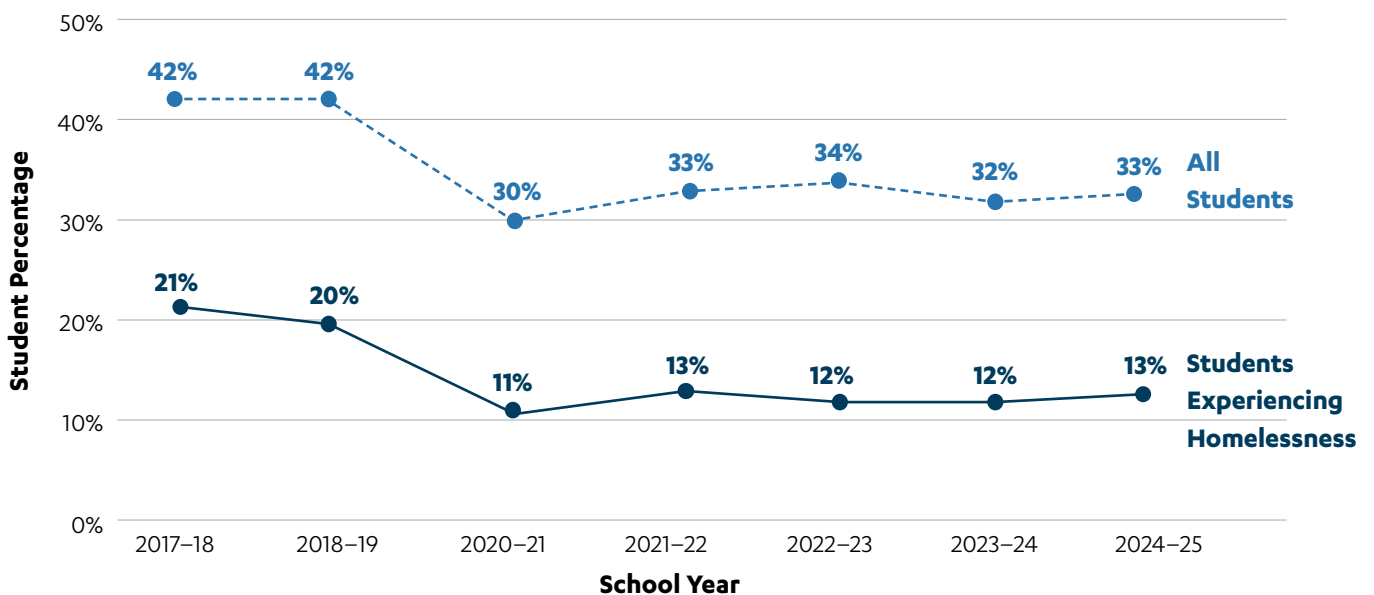
In mathematics, both students experiencing homelessness and their housed peers had notable declines following the pandemic. For all students, proficiency fell from the mid-30% range in SY 2018–19 to the mid-20% range by SY 2024–25, a drop of about 9 percentage points. Students experiencing homelessness saw declines in proficiency from about the 15% to 19% range prepandemic to roughly around one in ten students in recent years, representing a 7 percentage point drop. Although the decline was slightly smaller for students experiencing homelessness, their overall proficiency rates remain substantially lower than those of their housed peers, underscoring ongoing and significant disparities in academic outcomes. The gaps in ELA and math performance are shown in **Exhibits 6 and 7**.

Exhibit 6. Percentages of Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus All Students Proficient in ELA, SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data from SY 2017–18 to 2024–25 retrieved from ADE (n.d.-a), “Student Achievement in State Academic Assessment Detailed Results,” tabs Chart, Trend, and Data for ELA. Data for SY 2019–20 not available due to COVID-19.

Exhibit 7. Percentages of Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus All Students Proficient in Mathematics, SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25 retrieved from ADE (n.d.-a.), “Student Achievement in State Academic Assessment Detailed Results,” tab Trend for math. Data for SY 2019–20 not available due to COVID-19.

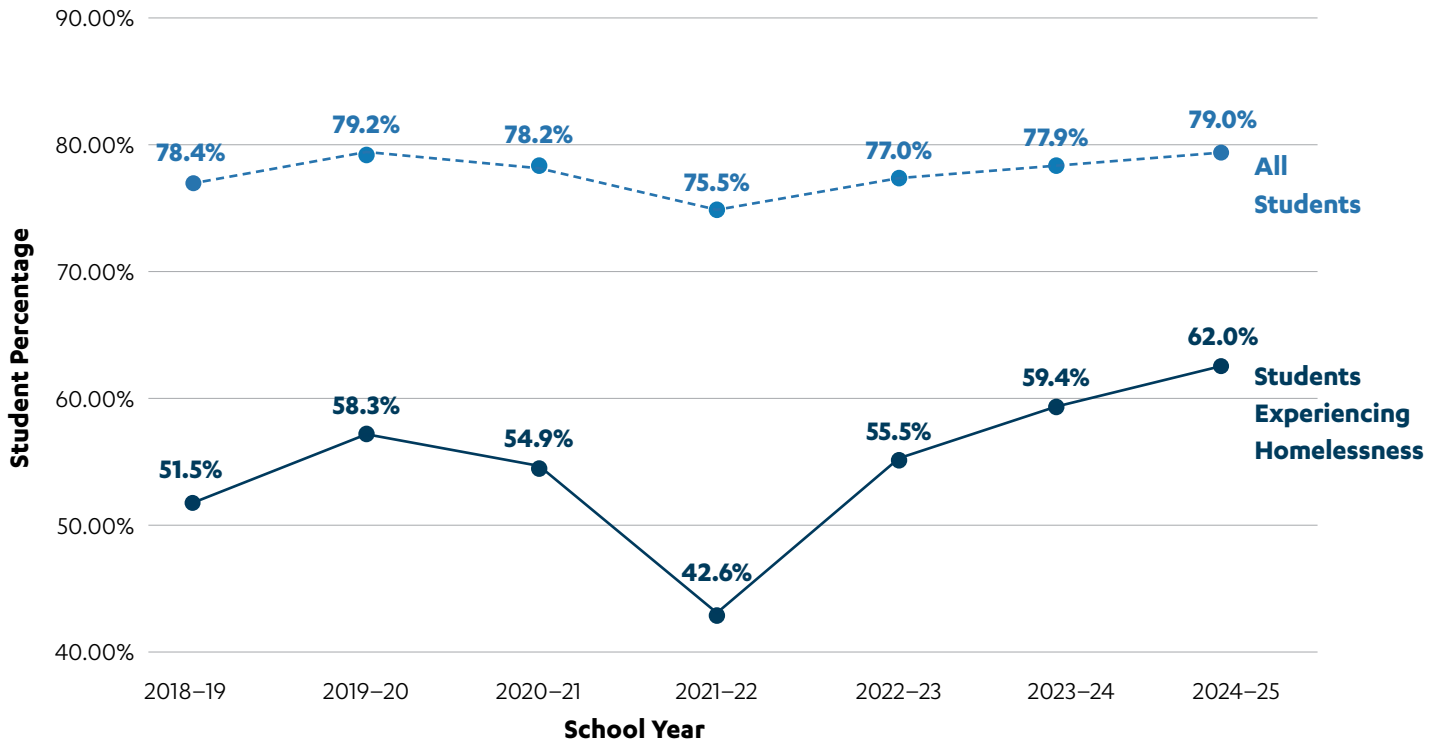
4. Students experiencing homelessness have strong postpandemic graduation gains.

Graduation rates for all students in Arizona remained relatively stable over time, fluctuating within a narrow range of about 75% to 79% from SY 2018–19 through SY 2024–25 (See **Exhibit 8**). After a slight dip in SY 2021–22, rates gradually recovered and reached 79% in SY 2024–25, returning to pre-pandemic levels. In contrast, graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness showed much greater variability, increasing from 51.5% in SY 2018–19 to 58.3% in SY 2019–20, then declining through the pandemic period to a low of 42.6% in SY 2021–22.

Following this decline, graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness rebounded strongly in the post-pandemic years, rising to 55.5% in SY 2022–23, 59.4% in SY 2023–24, and 62% in SY 2024–25. Importantly, this most recent rate represents a substantial improvement over pre-pandemic levels, surpassing both SY 2018–19 (51.5%) and SY 2019–20 (58.3%), indicating meaningful gains in high school completion for students experiencing homelessness. This increase may reflect both a smaller and potentially more stable population of identified students experiencing homelessness, as well as improvements in school-based supports and interventions that have helped more students persist to graduation. It is also possible that one-time federal pandemic relief funding through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program contributed to these gains by enabling districts to expand academic recovery efforts, tutoring, counseling, attendance supports, and other targeted services designed to reengage students and promote on-time graduation. While this reflects meaningful improvement over time and surpasses pre-pandemic levels, Arizona’s most recent rate remains below national performance benchmarks. In SY 2022–23, the national graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness was 69.1% (SchoolHouse Connection, 2026).

Despite this recovery, substantial disparities remain between student groups. The graduation rate gap has consistently favored the statewide population of students, reaching its widest point during the pandemic at over 35 percentage points, before narrowing in recent years to approximately 15–17 percentage points. Although the gap has decreased as outcomes for students experiencing homelessness have improved, it remains persistent and sizable, underscoring ongoing inequities in educational attainment. Because Arizona maintained its statewide graduation requirements during this period, these gains do not appear attributable to broad state-level changes in graduation policy. However, additional research would be needed to determine the extent to which improvements reflect changes in student supports, identification practices, or population characteristics among students experiencing homelessness.

Exhibit 8. High School Graduation Rates for Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus All Students, SY 2018–19 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data from SY 2018–19 to 2024–25 retrieved from ADE (n.d. -a), “Four Year Graduation Rate,” tab Trend.



5. Students experiencing homelessness consistently face much higher rates of chronic absenteeism than their housed peers.

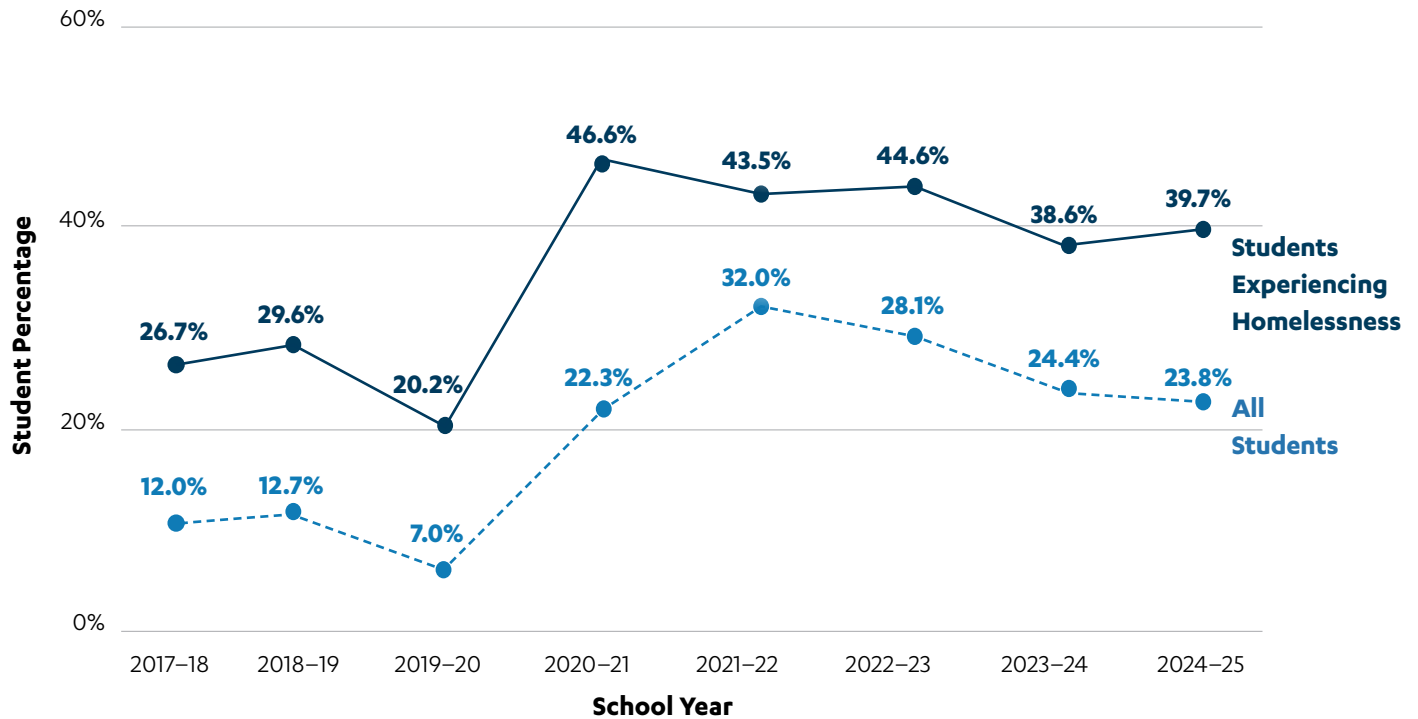
Chronic absenteeism for all students was relatively low and stable prior to the pandemic, at about 12% to 13% in SY 2017–18 and SY 2018–19, before dropping to 7% in SY 2019–20, likely due to disruptions in attendance tracking during school closures. Rates then surged during the pandemic, peaking at close to one in three students in SY 2021–22; rates have since declined but remain elevated at nearly one in four students in SY 2024–25, which is still well above prepandemic levels.

For students experiencing homelessness, chronic absenteeism has been consistently much higher and more volatile than for their housed peers. Rates rose from 26% in SY 2017–18 to nearly 30% in SY 2018–19; it then dropped to 20% in SY 2019–20 but then spiked dramatically to 46% in SY 2020–21. Although rates declined slightly in subsequent years, they remained persistently high, hovering between 38% and 45% from SY 2021–22 to SY 2024–25. These statistics indicate ongoing and significant barriers to consistent school attendance.

Chronic absenteeism disparities for students experiencing homelessness and their housed peers have remained large and persistent over time. Prior to the pandemic, the gap ranged from about 14 to 17 percentage points, but widened significantly during the pandemic, peaking at over 24 percentage points in SY 2020–21. However, homelessness was likely underidentified during that school year, meaning the reported 46.6% chronic absenteeism rate may reflect a smaller and more selective group of students experiencing homelessness, which could skew the observed disparity upward. Although the gap has narrowed somewhat in recent years, it remains substantial—typically around 15 to 18 percentage points—indicating that students experiencing homelessness continue to face disproportionately higher rates of absenteeism despite broader systemwide improvements. **Exhibit 9** shows the chronic absenteeism rates for students in Arizona.



Exhibit 9. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Arizona Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus All Students, SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25 retrieved from ADE (n.d.-a), “Chronic Absenteeism,” tab Trend.



Considerations

1. Align homeless student counting methodologies with federal and state standards.

Arizona currently publicly reports student homelessness using an October 1 PIT count, an approach that likely undercounts the full number of students who experience homelessness over the course of the school year. Unlike states such as California and Washington, which also produce PIT count snapshots (i.e., October) but more explicitly foreground cumulative annual McKinney-Vento counts in public reporting, Arizona's public-facing homelessness data more prominently reflects an October 1 count, which as noted can underestimate the full extent of student homelessness over the school year. In contrast, federal McKinney-Vento reporting requirements rely on cumulative annual counts that capture all students identified as experiencing homelessness at any point during the year. Reliance on PIT count reporting for state analyses and public data may create inconsistencies across systems, complicate cross-agency comparisons, and obscure the full scope of student homelessness. Expanding the use and public reporting of cumulative annual counts could provide a more complete picture of student homelessness in Arizona to better inform policy, funding, and service coordination decisions.

2. Strengthen cross-sector collaboration to improve identification and service delivery, including meaningful partnership with tribal communities.

ADE notes that persistent barriers in coordination across schools, community-based organizations, and housing and social service systems limit timely identification and support for students experiencing homelessness (ADE, 2023b). Examples of these barriers include limited awareness of McKinney-Vento requirements among LEAs; inconsistent data-sharing and reporting practices across agencies; difficulties connecting families to services; and weak partnerships between schools and community-based organizations that support identification, enrollment, and service delivery. This report highlights challenges related to transportation, access to basic needs, and families' limited awareness of available rights and supports. Arizona has sought to address some of these challenges through a statewide McKinney-Vento liaison infrastructure; expanded professional development and technical assistance; standardized referral and transportation guidance; and increased emphasis on school–community partnerships and wraparound supports that connect students and families with housing, healthcare, and other stabilization services (ADE, 2023b). Additionally, LEAs are required to use standardized tools, such as the Arizona Student Residency Questionnaire and Educational Rights of Homeless Children and Youth, to support identification at enrollment (ADE, 2024).

Policy considerations include further strengthening cross-system coordination among education, housing, tribal, and social service agencies; expanding training for school staff and McKinney-Vento liaisons; improving data-sharing and referral systems to support earlier identification; increasing investment in school–community partnerships; and expanding wraparound supports such as transportation, after-school programming, and family outreach services. These efforts should also include intentional collaboration with tribal governments and Native American–serving organizations, particularly in areas with large Native American student populations. Partnering with tribal education departments, housing authorities, and community health providers can help align practices and support culturally responsive outreach. Given unique jurisdictional contexts and historical mistrust, effective collaboration requires tribal consultation, respect for sovereignty, and community-informed approaches to better identify and support Native American students in rural and tribal communities in which homelessness is often underrecognized.

3. Improve local and state data collection to better understand and serve students experiencing homelessness.

Current data systems in Arizona lack comprehensive publicly reported information on school instability, suspensions, and grade- or age-level distribution for students experiencing homelessness. This significantly limits the ability to understand the full scope of challenges the population of homeless students faces and to design targeted interventions. Although Arizona collects some mobility and discipline information at the statewide level, these indicators are neither consistently integrated into the McKinney-Vento homeless student reporting system nor routinely analyzed for students experiencing homelessness. In part, this reflects federal reporting requirements that prioritize identification, enrollment, attendance, and academic outcomes over broader measures of school stability and student well-being. Arizona’s Homeless Education Program Comprehensive Needs Assessment highlights ongoing challenges related to data-sharing, coordination, and local staff capacity, which can make integrating longitudinal data across systems more difficult (ADE, 2023).

Without more comprehensive data, it is difficult to identify which students are most at risk of falling behind, experiencing repeated school disruptions, being pushed out of school through exclusionary discipline, or facing compounding barriers to stability. Arizona could invest in expanding its longitudinal data infrastructure to better connect homelessness, attendance, mobility, discipline, and academic outcomes across agencies and districts. Strengthening integrated data systems could improve early identification efforts, support more targeted interventions, and help state education agencies and LEAs allocate resources more equitably. For example, tracking grade-level distribution could reveal whether younger or older students are disproportionately affected, and suspension data could illuminate school climate barriers that may further destabilize students experiencing homelessness.

4. Expand McKinney-Vento capacity and align housing services to better reach doubled-up families.

Rising housing costs continue to drive student homelessness in Arizona, with many families living in doubled-up situations that fall outside the HUD definition of homelessness. Through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, schools often serve as the primary system identifying and supporting these students. Arizona is working to expand McKinney-Vento capacity primarily through a school-based identification and liaison model, in which every district and charter school is required to designate a McKinney-Vento liaison responsible for identifying students experiencing homelessness, ensuring immediate enrollment, and coordinating access to services. State of Arizona guidance further strengthens this infrastructure by requiring annual training for liaisons and emphasizing strategies to identify students in doubled-up or otherwise highly mobile living situations, which are often the most difficult to detect (ADE, 2023). However, coordination between education and housing systems remains largely indirect, with liaisons serving as the primary bridge to community-based organizations rather than through integrated eligibility or referral pathways tied directly to housing assistance programs.

Expanding McKinney-Vento capacity through increased funding, staffing, and training can improve identification of and support for students in these less visible situations. At the same time, housing and service providers can play a critical role by broadening eligibility criteria or adopting more flexible program models that recognize doubled-up and overcrowded living arrangements as forms of housing instability. Greater alignment between education and housing systems is essential to closing gaps in support for students experiencing homelessness, particularly given the scale of housing affordability challenges and the reliance on school-based systems to identify and serve these students.

5. Strengthen transportation and targeted supports to improve educational stability and academic success.

Students experiencing homelessness face significant barriers to consistent school attendance and academic success. Establishing targeted funding and programmatic supports aimed at improving attendance and learning outcomes for students experiencing homelessness should reduce barriers to school attendance and improve academic success. Priority strategies include arranging transportation to maintain school stability, expanding access to tutoring and credit recovery, integrating mental health supports, and including school-based case management to coordinate services across systems. Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, students experiencing homelessness have the right to remain in their school of origin when it is in their best interest, even when their housing situation changes (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(A)). LEAs are also required

to provide transportation to and from the school of origin at a parent's or guardian's request, or at the request of the local liaison for unaccompanied youth (42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(J)(iii)). These provisions are intended to reduce attendance issues caused by school mobility and promote educational continuity for students experiencing homelessness.

Transportation challenges are a major contributor to educational instability among students experiencing homelessness. Research has shown that barriers related to transportation and residential mobility increase absenteeism, disrupt school participation, and negatively affect academic achievement (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Miller, 2011). Students experiencing homelessness are significantly more likely to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism and lower academic performance than housed peers due in part to frequent school changes and difficulties accessing reliable transportation (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). School stability is associated with stronger attendance, higher engagement, and improved academic outcomes, underscoring the importance of transportation supports that enable students to remain connected to their school community. However, transportation costs and logistical challenges can strain district capacity, particularly in geographically large or resource-constrained communities. Additional state investments could help districts meet federal transportation obligations while minimizing school disruptions that negatively affect attendance, engagement, and academic performance.

Districts serving higher concentrations of students experiencing homelessness should receive additional resources to implement evidence-based attendance interventions, such as attendance liaisons and family outreach efforts. Improving attendance and learning for students experiencing homelessness requires aligning educational supports with broader housing and social services because schools cannot address these challenges in isolation. Coordinated, sustained investments are necessary to ensure that students not only remain enrolled but also are consistently engaged and given the opportunities to succeed academically.



Conclusion

Student homelessness in Arizona remains a significant and evolving challenge. In SY 2025–26, there were 14,906 students who were identified as experiencing homelessness. While a decrease from the previous school year may suggest modest improvement or stabilization, overall levels remain elevated compared to prepandemic years. In the current school year, persistent racial disparities continue to affect students: Hispanic/Latine, Black/African American, and Native American/Alaska Native students experience disproportionately high rates relative to their overall enrollment. Hispanic/Latine students represent the largest share of these populations.

Academic outcomes reveal enduring inequities. Students experiencing homelessness consistently trail their housed peers, with a persistent achievement gap in both mathematics and ELA proficiency that has remained largely unchanged over time. Nevertheless, there are signs of progress in high school completion: graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness have rebounded strongly since the pandemic and have surpassed prepandemic levels. However, despite these gains, a notable gap compared with housed students remains, underscoring that improvements have not been sufficient to close longstanding disparities.

Attendance patterns further highlight ongoing barriers to student success. Chronic absenteeism remains elevated postpandemic for all students, but especially for those experiencing homelessness. The gap between groups remains substantial, reflecting continued challenges related to homelessness, mobility, and access to consistent transportation. Taken together, these findings show that while there has been some recovery in key areas, students experiencing homelessness in Arizona continue to face systemic disadvantages that impact their educational stability and success.



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Appendix A

Key Terms

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition of homelessness: Homelessness under McKinney-Vento is defined broadly to include students who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence—those staying in shelters, motels, cars, campgrounds, or “doubled-up” with other families, as well as “couch-surfing” situations in which a child moves frequently between temporary homes (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness: HUD defines homelessness as the lack of a decent, safe, and sanitary place to live. HUD counts people who are (a) living in emergency shelters or transitional housing; (b) unsheltered (e.g., sleeping in places not meant for human habitation); or (c) at risk of losing housing and residing in “doubling-up” arrangements that do not provide adequate space (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.-a).

Cumulative count of students: Under the McKinney-Vento Act, districts report the total number of distinct students identified as homeless at any point during the school year, counting each student only once regardless of moves or multiple enrollments (Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2024).

Point-in-Time (PIT) count: The PIT count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. HUD requires that Continuum of Care programs conduct an annual count of people experiencing homelessness who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night. The HUD system uses annual PIT surveys that count sheltered and unsheltered persons on a single night to produce the national homelessness estimate (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.-b).

Chronic absenteeism: The State of Arizona identifies a student in Grades 1–8 as chronically absent if the student misses more than 10% of the school’s calendar days. A typical school calendar is 180 days; therefore, a student missing more than 18 days would be considered in this category (Arizona Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Appendix B

Methods

Data

This brief draws on publicly available statewide data from the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), covering multiple school years from school year (SY) 2017–18 through SY 2025–26 (for years available). Data were obtained from the ADE’s State Reports and downloadable research files from Accountability and Research Data for homeless student enrollment (i.e., McKinney-Vento). These files compile annual student-level and aggregate counts reported by local education agencies (LEAs) across Arizona and represent the most comprehensive statewide administrative data available on K–12 students experiencing homelessness.

Analyses

Analyses were primarily descriptive and relied on publicly reported subgroup-level administrative data. We examined year-to-year changes in counts and percentages of students experiencing homelessness statewide and by race/ethnicity. Counts and percentages of students experiencing homelessness are reported beginning in SY 2019–20; ADE does not provide such information for earlier years. For academic outcomes (i.e., ELA and mathematics proficiency), analyses begin in SY 2017–18.

No interviews, surveys, or primary data collection were conducted. All analyses rely exclusively on administrative data reported by LEAs to ADE and made publicly available.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, homeless identification depends on local reporting and may undercount students due to stigma, mobility, or inconsistent identification practices across districts. Second, pandemic-related school closures and disruptions (i.e., SY 2019–20) affected data collection on assessment participation, limiting comparability. Third, the data do not allow for causal inference regarding the relationship between homelessness and student outcomes; analyses are descriptive and do not control for confounding factors such as poverty, disability status, or English learner status. Fourth, there is no data available on school instability, suspensions, and grade or age distribution of students experiencing homelessness, limiting the depth of analysis and the ability to identify targeted interventions for the most vulnerable subgroups within this population.