

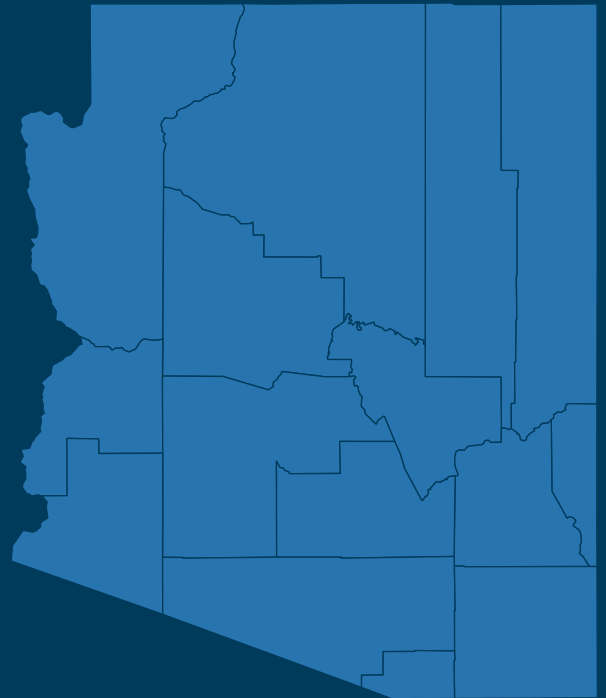
Student Homelessness in Arizona:

Understanding and Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Beyond the Count

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Executive Summary



Rising rents, stagnant wages, and limited affordable housing availability have contributed to increasing student homelessness in Arizona, where a full-time minimum wage worker cannot afford a modest two-bedroom apartment and many low-income families face significant barriers to maintaining stable housing.

We analyzed data from the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) from school year (SY) 2017–18 to SY 2025–26 to understand the prevalence, characteristics, and educational experiences of students experiencing homelessness (under the McKinney-Vento definition), along with policy considerations. Our findings underscore that mitigating student homelessness requires sustained investment and coordinated action across education, housing, health, and community systems. See the full report for a more comprehensive analysis.



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Key Study Findings

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

The largest increase occurred in SY 2023–24, when student homelessness surged nearly 50% to a record 16,473 students. Despite fluctuations, student homelessness in Arizona remains elevated compared with prepandemic levels.

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

Recent trends indicate disparities in the years following the pandemic across racial groups, with Native American/Alaska Native and Black/African American students experiencing continued increases in homelessness rates. For example, between SY 2019–20 and SY 2025–26, rates for Native American/Alaska Native students rose from 1.7% to 4.3%, and rates for Black/African American students rose from 2.7% to 3.6%.

There is a persistent achievement gap of approximately 20–22 percentage points between students experiencing homelessness and the statewide student population in mathematics and English language arts (ELA).

In SY 2024–25, 2 in 5 students statewide were proficient in ELA compared with less than 1 in 5 students experiencing homelessness. In the same school year, 1 in 3 students statewide were proficient in mathematics compared with 1 in 8 students experiencing homelessness.

Students experiencing homelessness have strong postpandemic graduation gains.

During SY 2019–20, 58.3% of Arizona students experiencing homelessness graduated from high school. This rate increased in SY 2024–25 to just above three in five students experiencing homelessness (62.0%). Nonetheless, graduation rates for Arizona students experiencing homelessness remain below the national graduation rate, which was 69.1% in SY 2022–23.

There is a 15 to 18 percentage-point difference in chronic absenteeism rates among all students statewide and students experiencing homelessness.

Although chronic absenteeism rates for all students have steadily declined since the pandemic, they remain elevated for students experiencing homelessness. Between SYs 2021–22 and 2024–25, chronic absenteeism rates for students experiencing homelessness ranged between 38% and 45% compared with 24% to 32% for students statewide.



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Policy Considerations

Align homeless student counting methodologies with federal and state standards.

Arizona primarily reports student homelessness using an October 1 Point-in-Time count, which likely underestimates the number of students experiencing homelessness over the course of the school year. In contrast, federal McKinney-Vento reporting relies on cumulative annual counts that capture all identified students. Expanding the public reporting and use of cumulative annual counts would provide a more complete picture of student homelessness and better inform policy, funding, and cross-agency coordination.

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

Barriers in coordination across schools, housing providers, and community organizations continue to limit timely identification and support for students experiencing homelessness. Strengthening partnerships among education, housing, tribal, and social service agencies and improving data-sharing, staff training, and referral systems can enhance service delivery. Collaboration with tribal governments and Native American- and Alaska Native-serving organizations is especially important to ensure culturally responsive supports and improve identification in rural and tribal communities.

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

Arizona's current data systems provide limited information on school stability, mobility, discipline, and other indicators that influence educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. Expanding longitudinal data systems to better connect homelessness with attendance, mobility, discipline, and academic outcomes would support earlier identification and more targeted interventions. More comprehensive data can also help state education agencies and local education agencies allocate resources more effectively and equitably.



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

Because many Arizona families experiencing housing instability are doubled up and thus do not qualify under Housing and Urban Development's definition of homelessness, schools often serve as the primary point of identification and support. Expanding McKinney-Vento funding, staffing, and training can strengthen identification and services for these students. Better alignment between education and housing systems, including more flexible housing eligibility and stronger referral pathways, can help close gaps in support for families experiencing housing instability.

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

Students experiencing homelessness face significant barriers to attendance and academic success, with transportation challenges contributing to school instability and chronic absenteeism. Additional investments in transportation, tutoring, credit recovery, mental health services, case management, and evidence-based attendance interventions can help students remain engaged and succeed in school. Coordinating these educational supports with housing and social services is essential to promoting long-term educational stability and achievement.



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