

Student Homelessness in California:

A Growing Statewide Challenge

Mayra Cazares-Minero, Ph.D.

Grace Ha Eun Kim, Ph.D.

Joseph P. Bishop, Ph.D.



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Introduction

Student homelessness in California has reached historically high levels, presenting urgent challenges for state education systems and research partners. 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 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This report uses the cumulative count of students experiencing homelessness, which refers to the total number of distinct students identified as homeless at any point during the school year under the McKinney-Vento Act,¹ with each student counted only once regardless of moves or multiple enrollments (District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2024). In the school year (SY) 2023–24, approximately 286,853 students were identified as experiencing homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act, representing about 4.8% of total enrollment (Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026). This marks a continued upward trend, including a 16% increase from the previous year and a broader postpandemic surge that reflects both worsening housing instability and expanded, state-mandated identification efforts.²

The upward trend in student homelessness in California mirrors national patterns. In SY 2022–23, approximately 1.37 million students nationwide experienced homelessness, a sharp increase from the prior year and one of the highest totals in the past decade (Cazares-Minero et al., 2025; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). In California, this crisis is further characterized by the prevalence of doubled-up living situations, with 83.4% of students experiencing homelessness staying with others in SY 2022–23. This is substantially higher than the national rate of 75.0% for the same year (SchoolHouse Connection, 2026).³ This pattern highlights the often hidden nature of student homelessness, in which families rely on informal and unstable arrangements that can be difficult to identify and support. For California school districts, these

1 The McKinney-Vento Act (42 U.S.C. § 1143a(2)) was established to remove barriers to accessing education for students experiencing homelessness. It relies on a broad definition of homelessness that includes staying in temporary housing due to loss of housing or economic insecurity, which may include shelters, hotels, motels, campgrounds, in the home of others, or in any place that is not an adequate nighttime residence (e.g., outside, in a car, in a building without water or electricity).

2 AB 2375 (signed into law in September 2022, <https://legiscan.com/CA/text/AB2375/id/2609216>) amended California Education Code §48851 to standardize and expand how schools identify students experiencing homelessness. All local education agencies (LEAs)—not just those receiving federal relief funds—must administer a housing questionnaire to every student/family. The questionnaire is based on state-developed best practices and includes information about students’ rights under the McKinney Vento Act. Before AB 2375, housing questionnaires were not consistently required across all districts and were often tied to specific funding streams like federal pandemic relief, including the American Rescue Plan—Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY).

3 The data in the profiles are based on the federal education definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act.

data point to a growing systems-level challenge that requires sustained attention, particularly in strengthening identification practices and ensuring adequate supports for students in less visible forms of homelessness.

Geographic & Regional Disparities

Importantly, this increase is not evenly distributed across the state but is concentrated in high-need regions and districts where housing pressures, economic instability, and resource constraints intersect (Cazares-Minero et al., 2025). For SY 2023–24, Cazares-Minero & Bishop (2026) identified 10 Los Angeles County (LAC) school districts with the highest proportions of students experiencing homelessness. Among these, the five districts with the highest rates were Norwalk–La Mirada Unified (30.5%), Wilson Elementary (18.3%), Rowland Unified (16.7%), Mountain View Elementary (16.2%), and Bassett Unified (15.4%). Most of these five districts are in the San Gabriel Valley. These findings highlight acute need in LAC, and underscore the importance of examining patterns statewide to identify similarly high-need regions beyond a single county and ensure resources are equitably targeted. The University of California, Los Angeles Center for Transformation of Schools is currently undertaking this effort (Kim & Bishop, 2026).

Drivers of Youth Homelessness

Rising rental costs and declining housing affordability are key drivers of student homelessness in California. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition’s Out of Reach report (NLIHC, 2025), rents in California have increased substantially over time and continue to outpace wage growth for many workers. By 2025, California had the highest statewide housing wage in the nation. A worker needed to earn nearly \$50 per hour to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment, while the median wage across all occupations was just \$27.86 per hour. For full-time minimum wage workers earning \$16.50 per hour, even a modest one-bedroom apartment was largely out of reach, with affordable rent falling well below the statewide fair market rate. According to another recent report by the NLIHC (2026), California ranked third in the nation for the most severe shortage of affordable and available rental housing for extremely low-income renters,⁴ with only 25 affordable and available homes for every 100 extremely low-income renter households. These statistics highlight how student homelessness in California is closely tied to structural housing challenges, particularly rental affordability, which continue to push vulnerable families into unstable living situations.

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.

Purpose of Publication

The goal of this fact sheet is to illustrate trends in student homelessness in California, describe the characteristics of students experiencing homelessness in California, and to understand the educational outcomes (i.e., test scores, high school graduation rates, college readiness) and school climate outcomes of these students (i.e., chronic absenteeism and suspensions). Results of our analyses are designed to inform state and local leaders and educators as they respond to the growing prevalence of student homelessness. Specifically, the findings can help strengthen cross-system coordination, sustain data collection and identification efforts, build the capacity and infrastructure needed to support homeless liaisons and student services, and provide evidence to justify and secure sustained funding for this population.



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Methods

This fact sheet draws on publicly available statewide data from the California Department of Education (CDE) from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25, obtained from CDE’s DataQuest and downloadable research files. Data include homeless student enrollment (according to the McKinney-Vento definition), suspension, chronic absenteeism, academic assessments (English language arts [ELA] and mathematics), graduation rates, and college-going outcomes. Definitions of these measures are provided in Appendix A.

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 housed 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. In addition, pandemic-era disruptions limit comparability across some years, and the analyses presented are descriptive rather than causal. Full methodological details are provided in Appendix B.



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Findings

1. In SY 2024–25, there was a record high of 298,254 students experiencing homelessness in California, marking a 4% jump from the previous school year.

From SY 2017–18 to SY 2018–19, student homelessness was already at a high level, rising from 260,614 to 269,269 students—the first notable peak in the last several years. This was followed by a decline during the pandemic years, dropping to approximately 226,275 in SY 2020–21 and reaching the lowest point in SY 2021–22 (224,191). The percentage of students experiencing homelessness in California decreased from 4.35% in SY 2018–19 to 3.77% in SY 2020–21, the lowest rate observed in recent years. This decline should be interpreted with caution, as it likely reflects a combination of factors rather than a true reduction in need. Pandemic-era housing protections and expansions in safety net programs may have temporarily stabilized some families, potentially reducing entries into homelessness (Kushel, 2026; Leifheit et al., 2021; Leifheit et al., 2026). Alongside this, widespread disruptions to schooling, particularly the shift to virtual learning, likely limited schools’ ability to identify students experiencing homelessness, as evidenced by substantial declines in student identification during the pandemic (SchoolHouse Connection, 2021). Barriers associated with the digital divide—including limited access to reliable internet, devices, or private space to engage in virtual schooling (e.g., students sharing crowded living situations such as motel rooms)—may have further hindered communication with school staff and opportunities for students and families to self-identify (Leifheit et al., 2021; Leifheit et al., 2026; US Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2020;). Together, these dynamics suggest that the observed decline likely understates the true extent of student homelessness during this period.

Beginning in SY 2022–23, the trend reverses sharply. The number rises to 246,480, marking a return to prepandemic levels and forming a second peak. The most striking change occurs in the last two years. In SY 2023–24, the number jumped to 286,853; followed by a new record high of 298,254 in SY 2024–25—the third and highest peak in the series. SY 2024–25 had the highest percentage of students experiencing homelessness in the last several years (5.14%). The largest year-to-year percentage change in student homelessness occurred in SY 2023–24, with a 16% jump from the previous year.

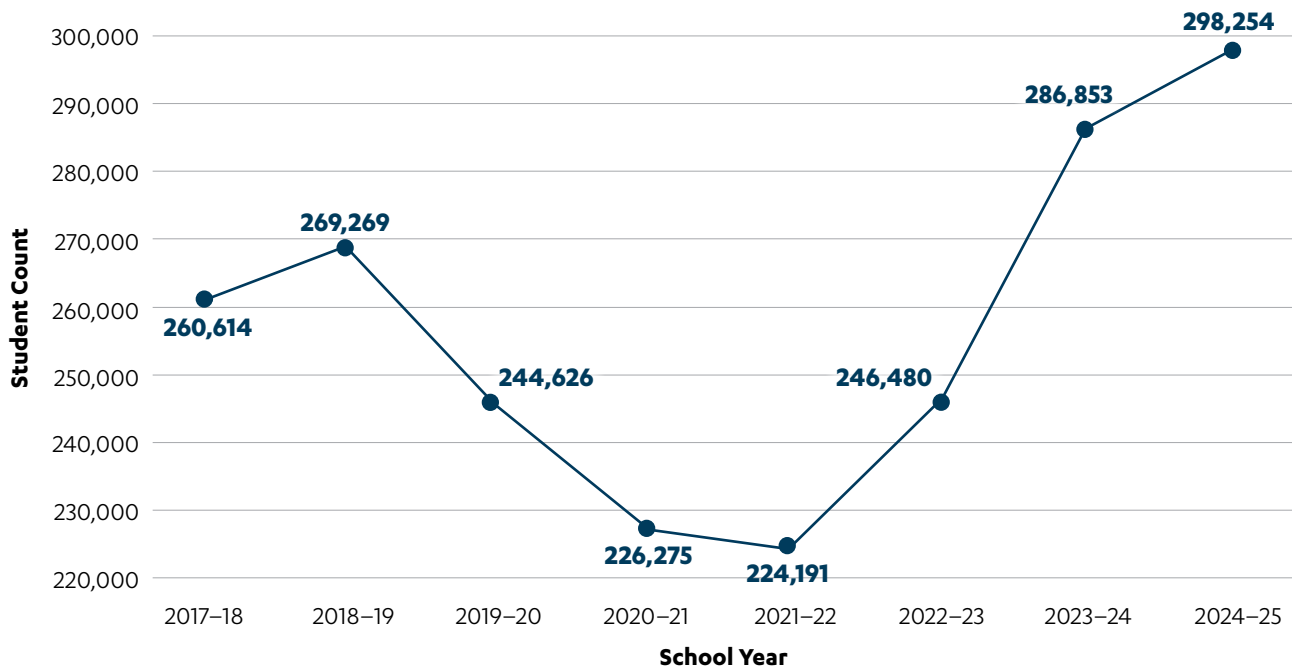
The peak in both the total number and percentage of students experiencing homelessness in SY 2024–25 reflects a convergence of postpandemic factors. Worsening housing affordability (NLIHC, 2025) and economic instability have likely increased the number of students experiencing homelessness, particularly as pandemic-era investments expired, contributing to a sharp rise in child poverty following historic pandemic-era declines (Columbia University Center on Poverty

and Social Policy, 2023; NLIHC, 2026; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). At the same time, expanded identification efforts across districts—supported by one-time federal funding and policies such as AB 2375—have improved schools’ ability to identify and serve students. These investments enabled districts to hire additional staff, strengthen data systems, and expand wraparound supports such as transportation, emergency housing, and tutoring (Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026). Taken together, these factors suggest that recent increases in student homelessness likely reflect both worsening housing instability and improved identification systems across districts, as expanded federal funding and state policies such as AB 2375 strengthened schools’ capacity to systematically identify students experiencing homelessness (Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). **Exhibits 1 and 2** detail student homelessness in California over a 7-year period.



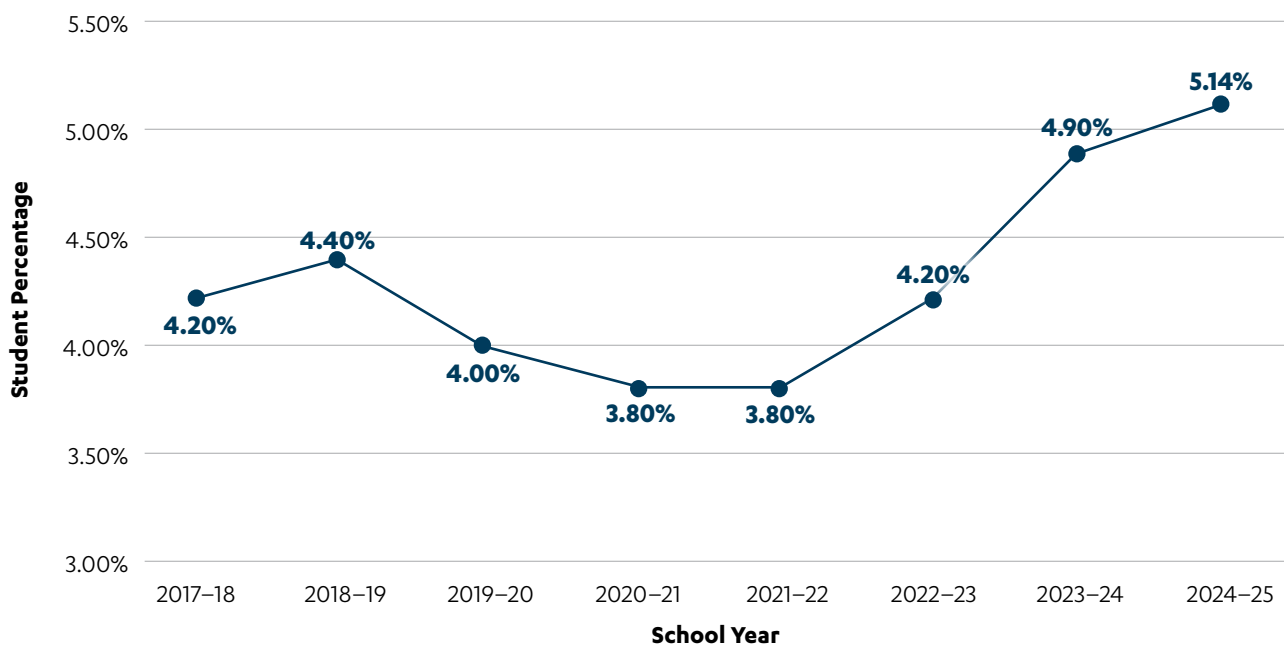
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Exhibit 1. Numbers of Students Experiencing Homelessness in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data for SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25 retrieved from CDE (n.d.–f.) View Row Data as: Academic Year (Multi-Year). Data for SY 2017–18 and SY 2018–19 retrieved from CDE (n.d.–a).

Exhibit 2. Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data for SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25 retrieved from CDE (n.d.–f.) View Row Data as: Academic Year (Multi-Year). Data for SY 2017–18 and SY 2018–19 retrieved from CDE (n.d.–a).

2. Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native students have historically experienced the highest rates of homelessness.

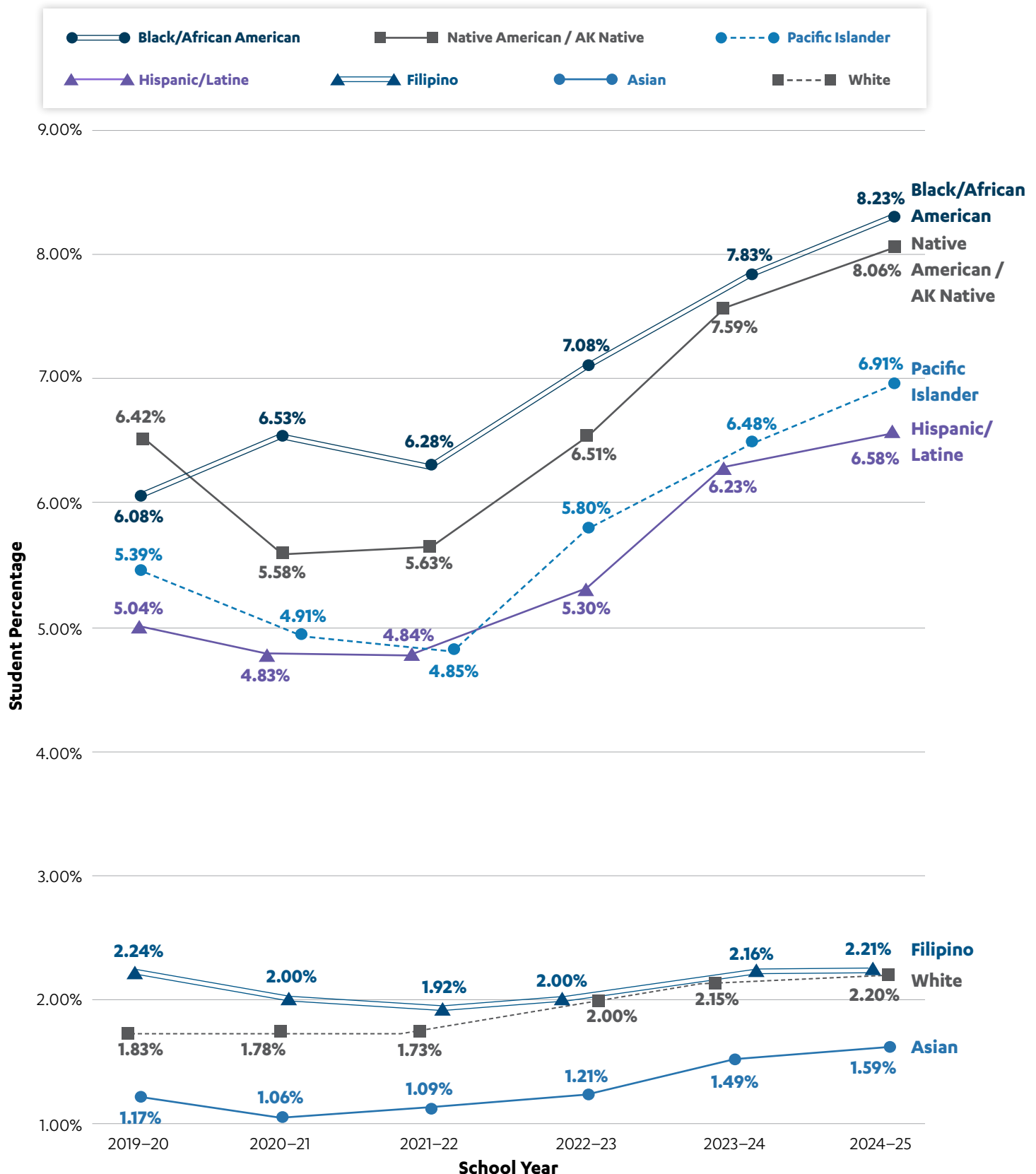
Data demonstrated that racial disparities in student homelessness in California have persisted and widened over time. In SY 2024-25, more than 8% of Black/African American or Native American/Alaska Native students experienced homelessness. In other words, one in every 12 students in either racial group experienced homelessness. The percentage of Black/African American students experiencing homelessness increased by 1.6% between SY 2019–20 and SY 2024–25, and the percentage of Native American/Alaska Native students experiencing homelessness increased between SY 2019–20 and SY 2024–25 by 2.2%.

Persistent disparities are evident across student groups. Between SY 2019–20 and SY 2024–25, rates of homelessness remained above 4.5% for Black/African American, Native American/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Latine students compared to consistently lower rates for Asian, Filipino, and White students (each below 2.5%). In practical terms, fewer than one in 40 Asian, Filipino, and White students experience homelessness, while the rate rises to more than nine in 200 for Black/African American, Native American/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Latine students. Racial disparities in student homelessness have widened over time, with the gap between Asian and Native American/Alaska Native students increasing from 4.54 percentage points in SY 2021–22 to 6.64 percentage points in SY 2024–25. **Exhibit 3** details the data on student homeless in California by race/ethnicity.



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Exhibit 3. Percentage of Students Experiencing Homelessness in California by Race/Ethnicity from SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25

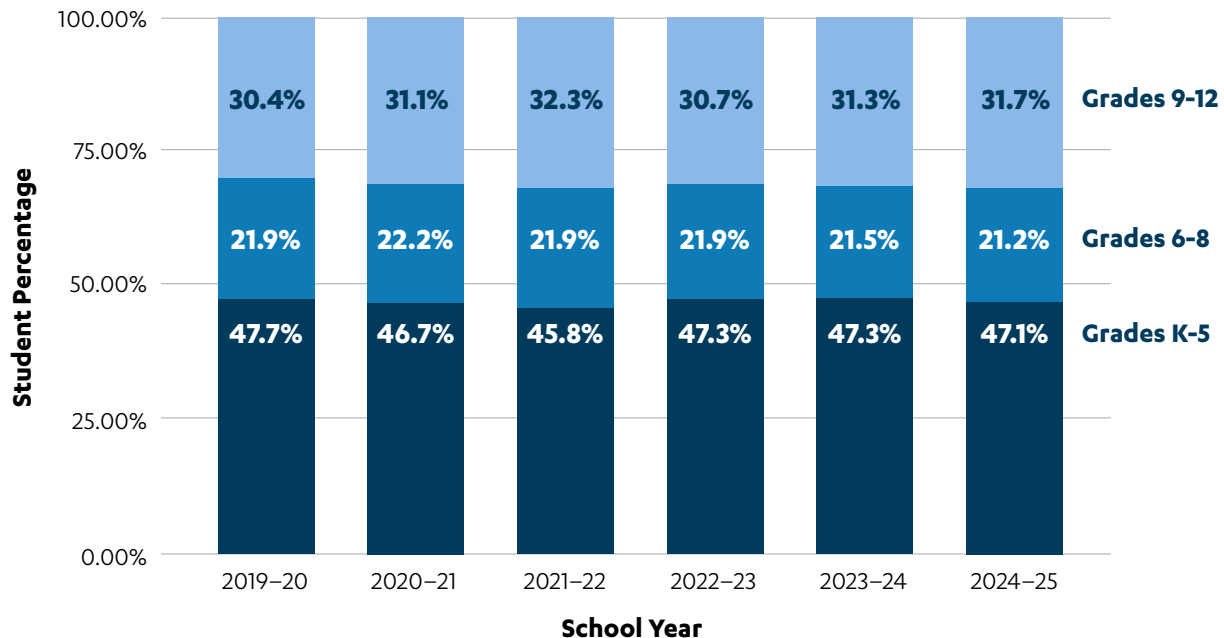


Note. California student homelessness by race data for SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25 retrieved from CDE (n.d.–f), View Row Data as: Race/Ethnicity.

3. Student homelessness affects all grade levels, with persistent concentration in early grades and growth among high school students.

From SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25, the distribution of students experiencing homelessness by grade level remains notably stable (**Exhibit 4**). Elementary-aged students consistently make up the largest share, with students in Grades K–5 accounting for roughly 45% to 47% of all students experiencing homelessness each year. Middle school students (Grades 6–8) also show little variation over time, consistently representing between 21% and 22% of the population. At the same time, high school students (Grades 9–12) comprise a substantial and gradually increasing share, rising slightly from about 30% in SY 2019–20 to nearly 1 in 3 students by SY 2024–25. Overall, while the total number of students experiencing homelessness has increased, the proportional distribution across grade levels has remained largely unchanged, indicating that housing instability continues to affect students across all age groups, with persistent concentration among younger students and a slight upward shift among older youth.

Exhibit 4. *Grade Distribution Among Students Experiencing Homelessness in California, SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25*



Note. California student homeless data for SY 2019–20 to SY 2024–25 retrieved from CDE (n.d.–f), View Row Data as: Grade Level. Transitional kindergarten (TK) counts started to be collected in SY 2023–24. For SYs 2023–24 and 2024–25, Grades K–2 percentages include TK.

4. Students experiencing homelessness trail their housed peers by 20 percentage points in meeting ELA or mathematics standards.

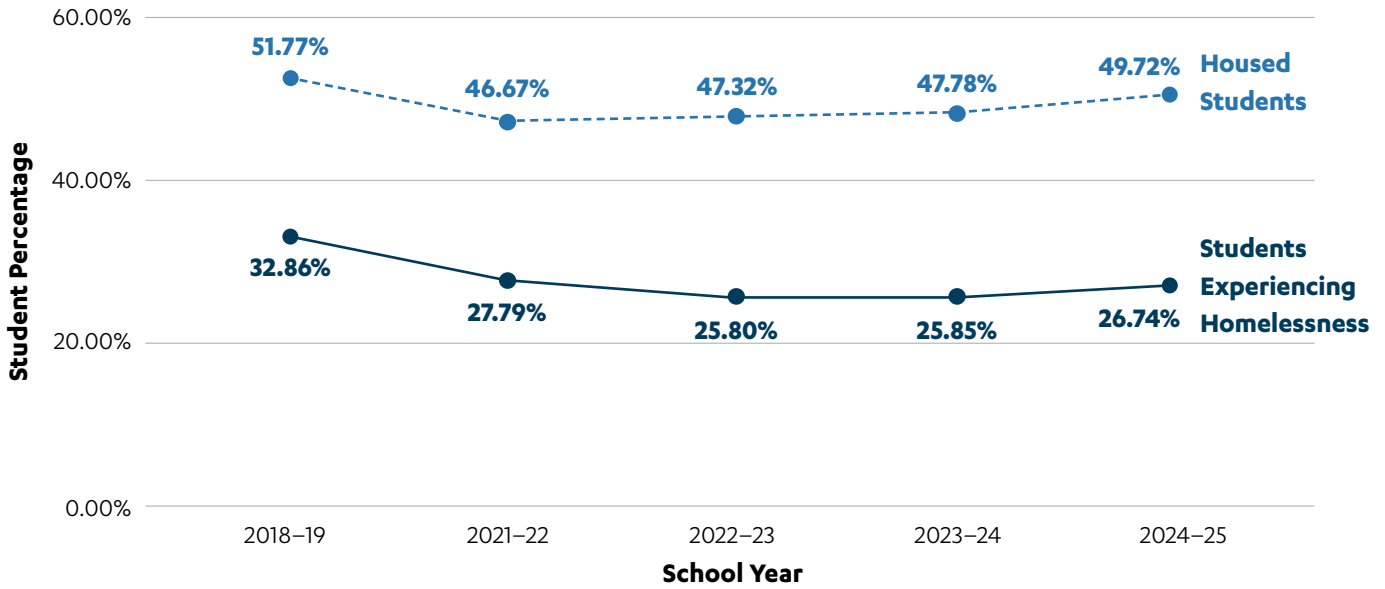
Housed students consistently outperformed students experiencing homelessness in California, with ELA proficiency rates 20 to 23 percentage points higher across most years. There is no data for both groups in SY 2019–20 due to pandemic-related testing disruptions. The gaps in SY 2018–19 and SY 2024–25 remained largely unchanged over time. The relative stability of this disparity indicates that, despite overall improvement, ELA gains for students experiencing homelessness have not kept pace with those of their housed peers.

Across all years shown, students experiencing homelessness consistently exhibited substantially lower rates of mathematics proficiency compared to housed students, with rates between 18 and 21 percentage points since SY 2020–21. Percentages meeting or exceeding mathematics standards have not recovered pre-COVID percentages yet, with SY 2018–19 showing the highest percentages for both students experiencing homelessness and housed students at 22.69% and 40.36%, respectively. While housed students' mathematics proficiency rates are in the mid-to-high 30% range by SY 2024–25, rates for students experiencing homelessness remained below 18%. **Exhibits 5 and 6** show the discrepancies in ELA and mathematics between students facing homelessness compared to their housed peers. According to the CDE (n.d.–c), for ELA and mathematics standards, due to factors surrounding the pandemic, there was no testing in SY 2019–20, and testing participation in 2020–21 varied. Thus, care should be used when interpreting the following results.



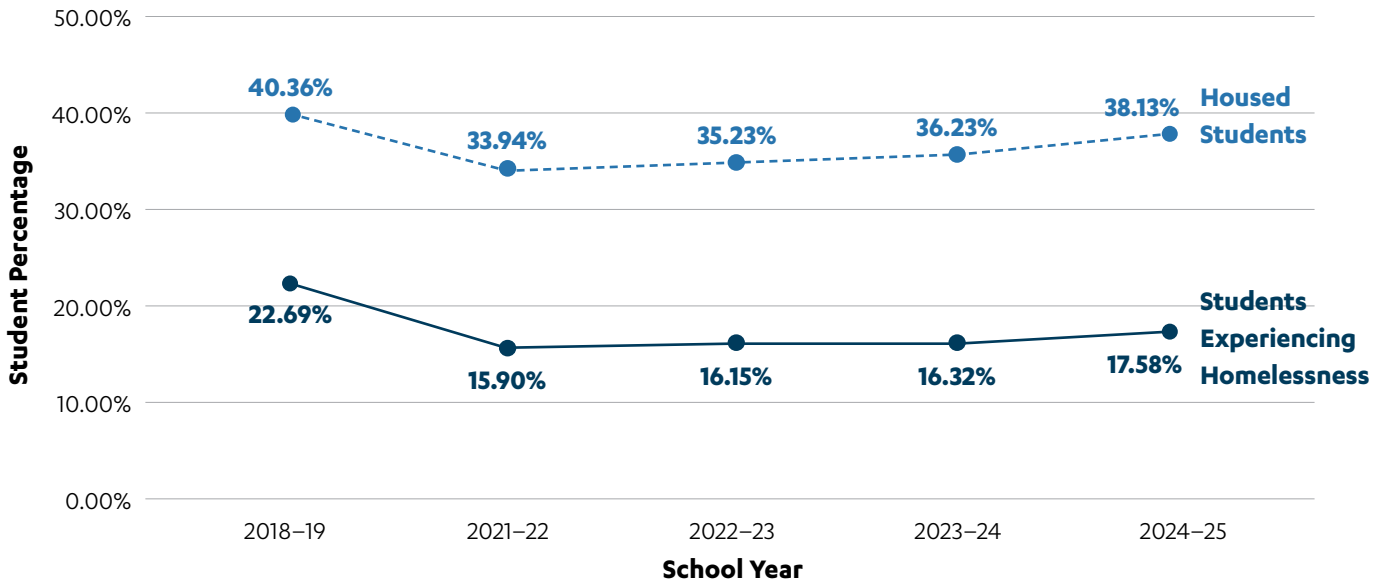
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Exhibit 5. Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students Meeting or Exceeding ELA Standards in California, SY 2018–19 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data for Test Results, ELA/Literacy and Mathematics, Student Group: Homeless Status retrieved from CDE (n.d.-b). Data for the student group of Homeless Status is only available beginning with the 2018–19 administration year. Data for 2020–21 is excluded as only 417 districts completed Smarter Balanced Assessment System testing that year.

Exhibit 6. Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students Meeting or Exceeding Mathematics Standards in California, SY 2018–19 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data for Test Results, ELA/Literacy and Mathematics, Student Group: Homeless Status retrieved from CDE (n.d.-b). Data for the student group of Homeless Status is only available beginning with the 2018–19 administration year. Data for 2020–21 is excluded as only 417 districts completed Smarter Balanced Assessment System testing that year.

5. Students experiencing homelessness have lower graduation outcomes across all measures compared to their housed peers.

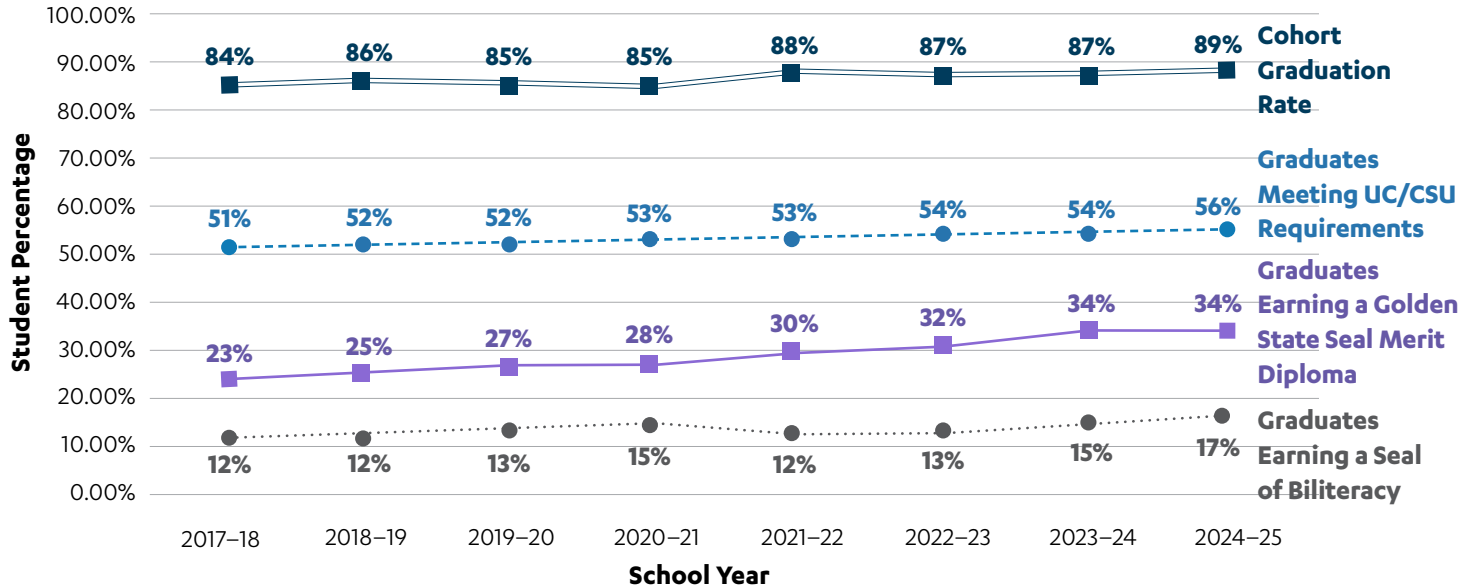
The proportion of students meeting various graduation categories is relatively steady over the last several years for both students experiencing homelessness and housed students in California. The cohort graduation rate of housed students ranged from 84% to 89%, while the cohort graduation rate of students experiencing homelessness ranged from 66% to 76%. Students experiencing homelessness graduate at substantially lower rates than their housed peers, with gaps ranging from 8 to 18 percentage points. This persistent difference highlights the significant barriers to academic success faced by students without stable housing. In SY 2024–25, the cohort graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness (76%) lagged 13 percentage points behind their housed peers (89%), highlighting a substantial and persistent gap in educational attainment. Despite these persistent gaps, students experiencing homelessness exhibited higher increases in graduation rates. Graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness increased by 7 percentage points between SYs 2017–18 and 2024–25 compared to 5 percentage points for their housed peers during the same time frame.

Between SYs 2017–18 and 2024–25, students experiencing homelessness were far less likely to meet The University of California and California State University (UC/CSU) requirements than their housed peers, with only 28% to 30% meeting the benchmark compared to 51% to 56% of housed graduates. Over this period, eligibility rates for housed students increased by 5 percentage points, while students without stable housing saw only a 2-point gain, highlighting persistent disparities in college readiness over time. Additionally, students experiencing homelessness are consistently less likely to earn high-achievement recognitions compared to their housed peers. Between SY 2017–18 and SY 2024–25, 10% to 15% of homeless graduates earned a Golden State Seal Merit Diploma⁵ compared with 23% to 34% of housed graduates. Similarly, 7% to 10% of homeless graduates earned a Seal of Biliteracy versus 12% to 17% of housed graduates.⁶ While the gap is smallest for the Seal of Biliteracy—less than 10 percentage points—the disparity is largest for meeting UC/CSU requirements, exceeding 20 points across all years, highlighting persistent inequities in college and career readiness. **Exhibits 7 and 8** show the data related to graduation rates in California.

⁵ The Golden State Seal Merit Diploma is an honor awarded by the California State Board of Education. It recognizes public high school graduates who demonstrate mastery of the curriculum in at least six subject areas, which include ELA, mathematics, science, US history, and two additional elective subjects.

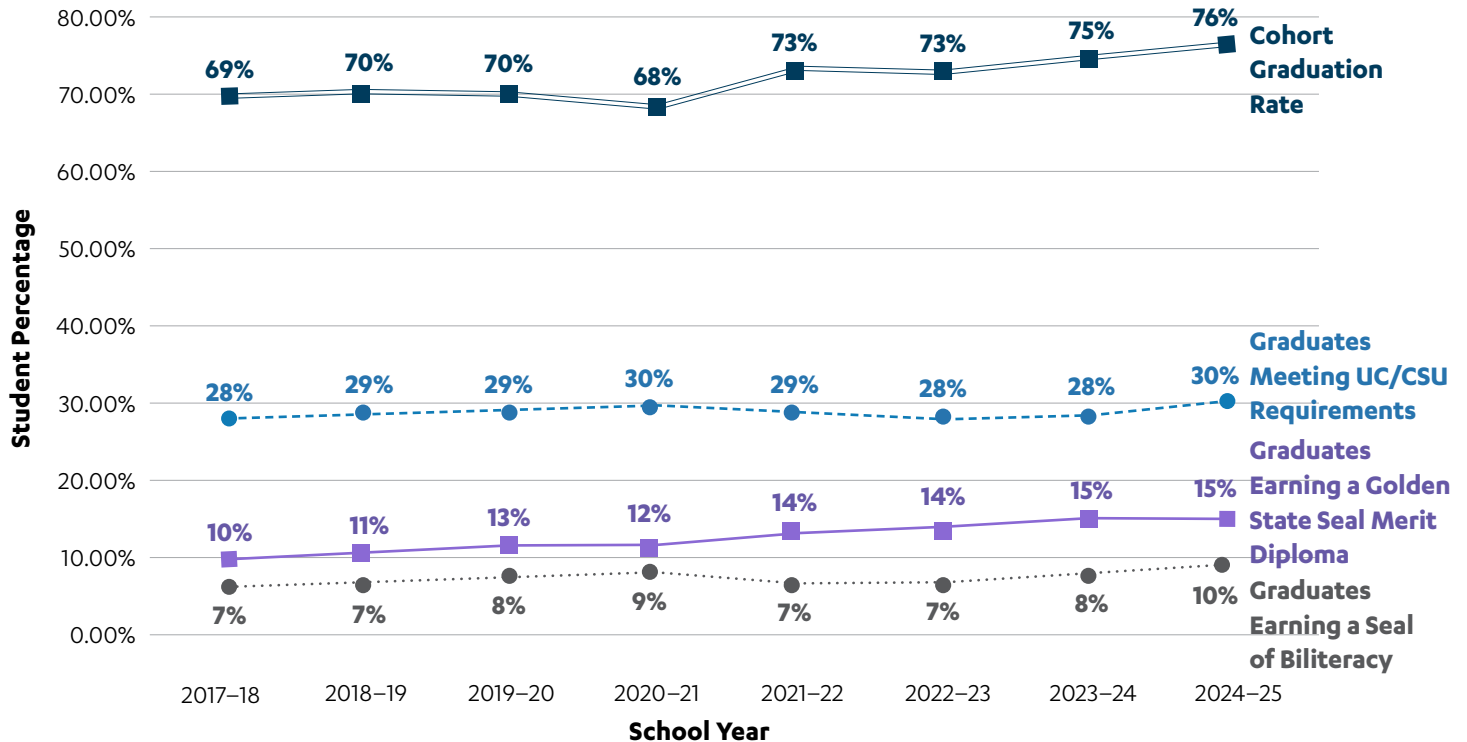
⁶ The Seal of Biliteracy is an academic award that certifies a student's high proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in two or more languages, typically English and another world language.

Exhibit 7. Graduation Rates for Housed Students in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data on graduation rates retrieved from CDE (n.d.–e). View Data Row as: Academic Year, Program Subgroups: Homeless.

Exhibit 8. Graduation Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25

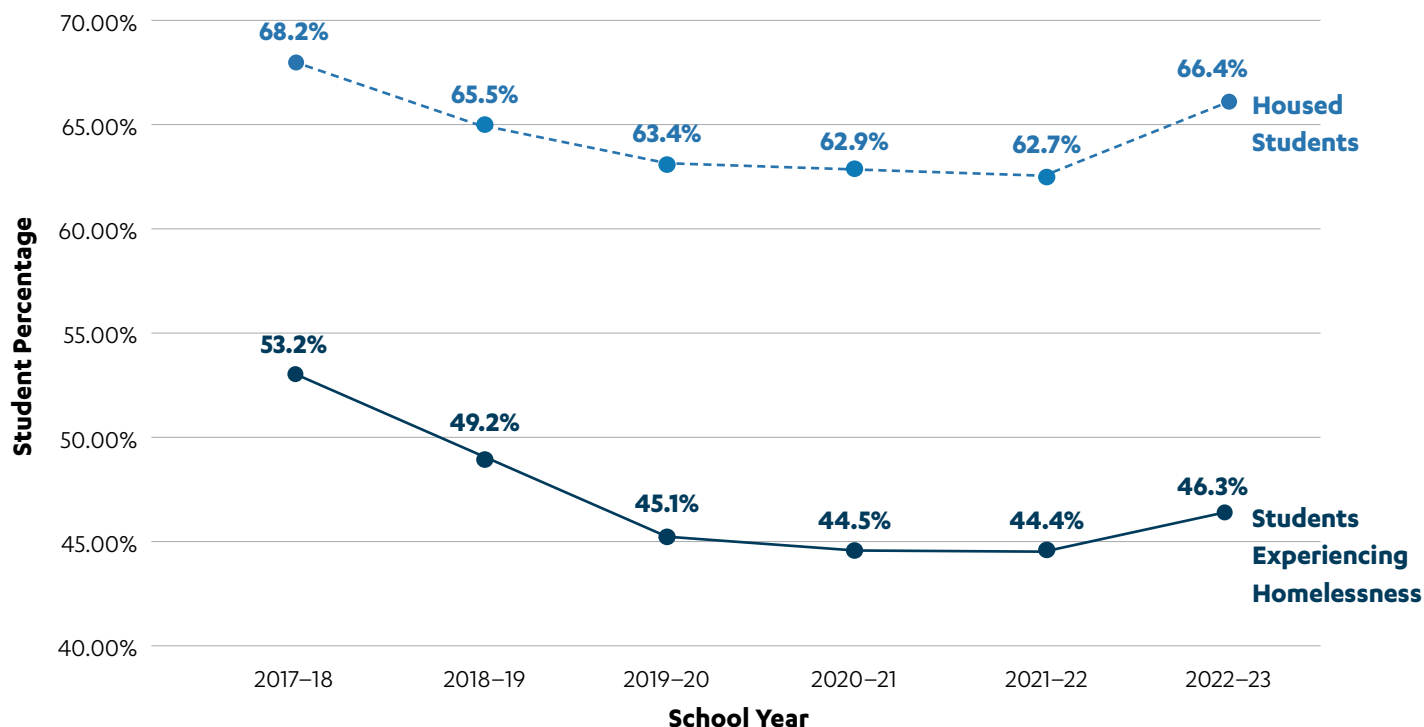


Note. Data on graduation rates retrieved from CDE (n.d.–e). View Data Row as: Academic Year, Program Subgroups: Homeless.

6. College-going rates decreased during the pandemic and rebounded in SY 2022–23, but the gap between homeless and housed students widened to 20%.

College-going rates for both students experiencing homelessness and their housed peers declined from SY 2017–18 through SY 2021–22, before rebounding in SY 2022–23 to 46.3% for students experiencing homelessness and to 66.4% for housed students. Both groups followed similar patterns, with rates peaking in SY 2017–18, declining through the pandemic years, and recovering in SY 2022–23 (**Exhibit 9**). Specifically, housed students' college-going rates ranged from 68.2% in SY 2017–18 to 62.7% in SY 2021–22, while students experiencing homelessness ranged from 53.2% to 44.4% over the same period. Although the lowest rates occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, a decline in college-going had already begun earlier between SY 2017–18 and SY 2018–19. Across all years, the gap between housed students and students experiencing homelessness has been substantial, reaching 20 percentage points in SY 2022–23, underscoring persistent disparities in college access and opportunity for students without stable housing.

Exhibit 9. College-Going Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2022–23

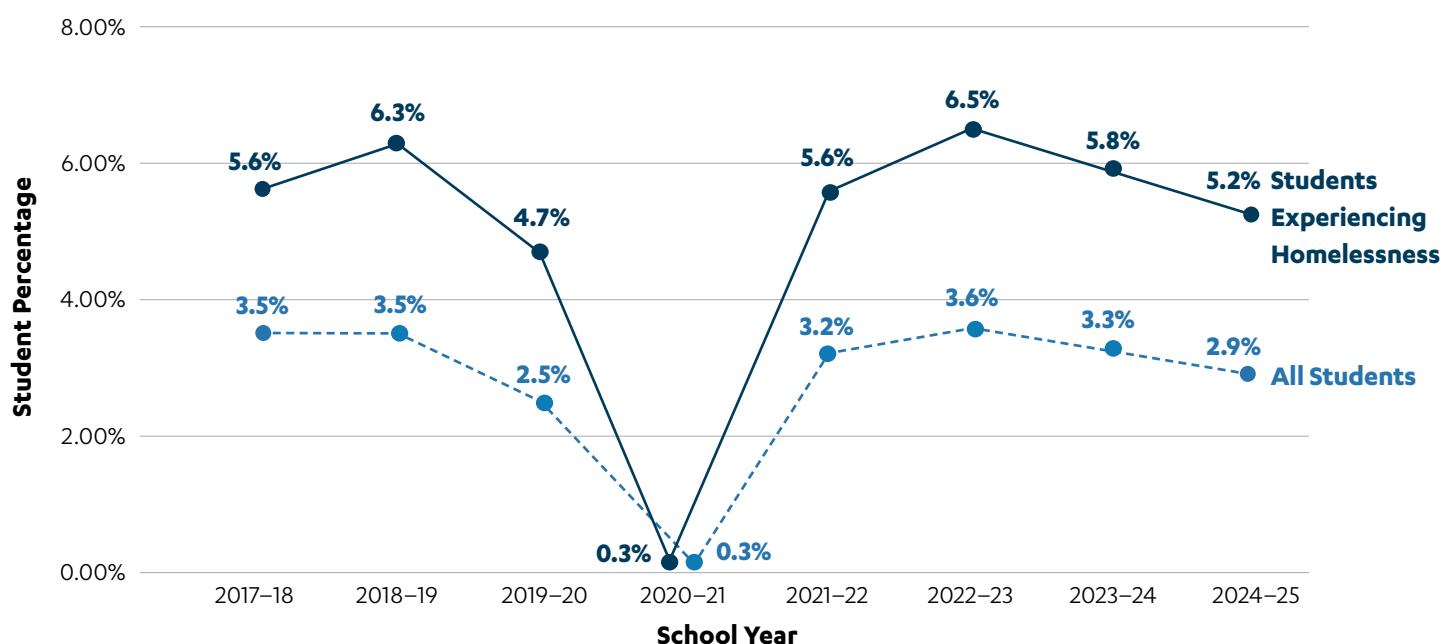


Note. College-going rate data retrieved from CDE (n.d.–d), View Data Row as: Multi-Year, Other Student Groups: Homeless.

7. Students experiencing homelessness face consistently higher suspension rates and maintain a 3-point gap since SY 2022–23.

Suspension rates for both students experiencing homelessness and the overall student population followed similar trends, declining from SY 2018–19 to SY 2020–21, likely due to pandemic-related school disruptions. It then rose to 6.5% in SY 2022–23 for students experiencing homelessness and to 3.6% for all students, before declining again in SY 2024–25 (**Exhibit 10**). Throughout this period, students experiencing homelessness consistently had higher suspension rates than their peers. Notably, from SY 2022–23 to SY 2024–25, students experiencing homelessness continued to have a persistent gap of about 3 percentage points higher for suspension rates than the overall student population, highlighting ongoing disparities in disciplinary outcomes. The recent decline in suspension rates coincides with recent policy changes, including California Senate Bill 274, which amends the California Education Code to prohibit suspensions and expulsions for “willful defiance” in Grades K–12 effective July 1, 2024, and through July 1, 2029 (Cal. Educ. Code § 48900, 2025; Cal. Code § 48910, 2025; California Legislature, 2023). Under prior law, suspensions for willful defiance were permitted for older students, but the new law emphasizes in-school interventions and supports, requiring documentation of corrective measures when staff refer students for willful defiance (CDE, 2025).

Exhibit 10. *Suspension Rates for All Students and Students Experiencing Homelessness in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25*

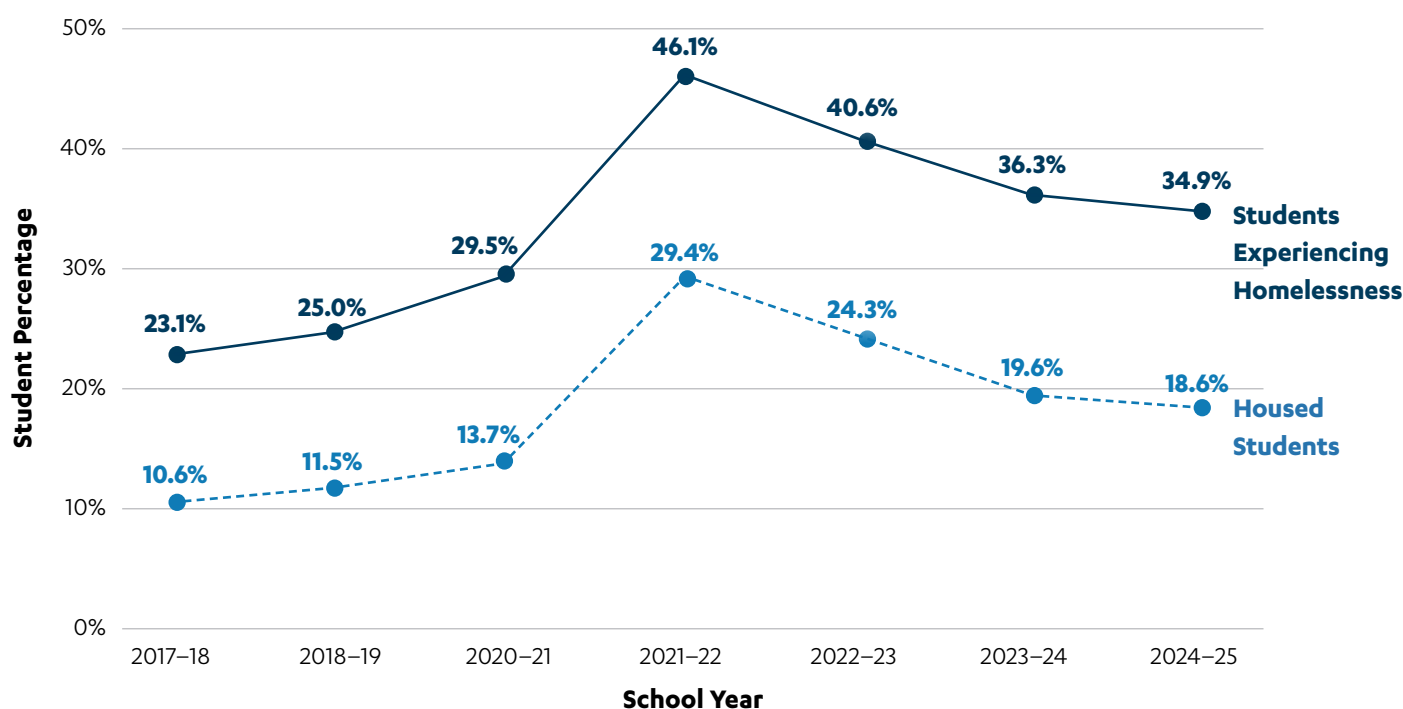


Note. Suspension rate data retrieved from CDE (n.d.–h), View Data Row as: Student Group. There was no option to view suspension rates for housed students. During SY 2020–21, many schools were in remote or hybrid learning, leading to extremely low suspension rates compared to prepandemic years.

8. Students experiencing homelessness face persistently higher chronic absenteeism than their housed peers, peaking at 46% during the pandemic.

Chronic absenteeism rates for both housed students and students experiencing homelessness increased steadily from SY 2017–18 through the pandemic years, peaking in SY 2021–22 at 29.4% for housed students and 46.1% for students experiencing homelessness (**Exhibit 11**). Since then, rates have declined but remain elevated in SY 2024–25 at 18.6% and 34.9%, respectively. Throughout the entire period, students experiencing homelessness consistently had substantially higher absenteeism, with gaps ranging from roughly 12 to 17 percentage points, highlighting persistent attendance disparities. The CDE has determined that absenteeism data are not valid and reliable for the 2019–20 academic year; therefore, it has not processed these data and they are unavailable for public release. Data from 2020–21 should be interpreted with caution because of widespread implementation of distance learning during that year.

Exhibit 11. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25

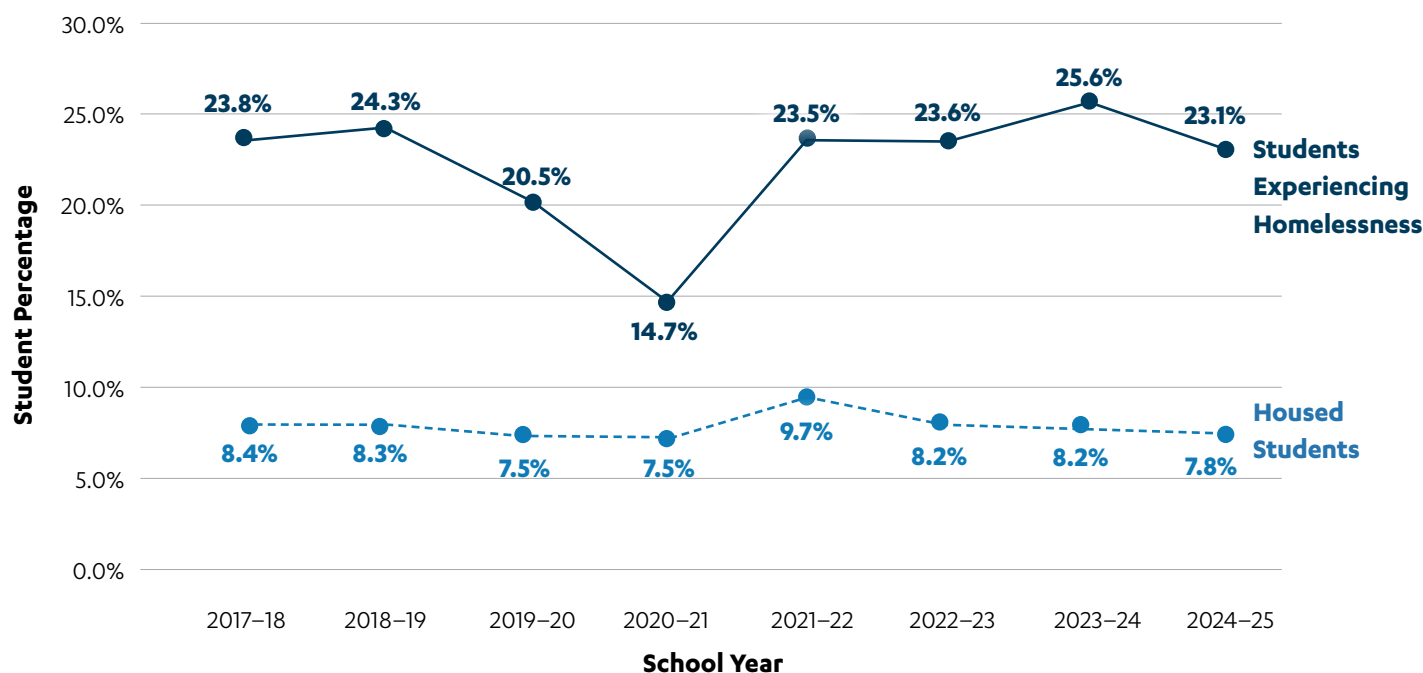


Note. Absenteeism data retrieved from CDE (n.d.–c), View Data Row as: Academic Year (Multi-Year), Student Group: Homeless.

9. Students experiencing homelessness face consistently higher nonstability rates than their housed peers.

Nonstability rates were markedly higher for students experiencing homelessness from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25, exceeding 20% in most years compared with rates below 10% for housed students (**Exhibit 12**). CDE (n.d.–k) defines stability rates as “the percentage of all California public school students enrolled during the academic year (July 1–June 30) who completed a ‘full year’ of learning in one school.” Housed students exhibited relatively stagnant nonstability rates ranging from 7.5% to 9.7% from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25. Students experiencing homelessness saw a decline in nonstability during SY 2020–21 to 14.7%, likely reflecting difficulties in tracking mobility during pandemic closures. Nonstability rates for students experiencing homelessness rose again in subsequent years, exhibiting similar or higher rates compared to prepandemic rates.

Exhibit 12. *Nonstability Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness Versus Housed Students in California from SY 2017–18 to SY 2024–25*



Note. Nonstability data retrieved from CDE (n.d.–g), View Data Row as: Academic Year (Multi-Year), Student Group: Homeless.

Considerations

Student homelessness is not evenly distributed across California. Certain regions, districts, and student populations experience substantially higher rates of housing instability, particularly for Black/African American students, Native American/Alaska Native students, students with disabilities, students learning a second language and foster youth. As a result, statewide solutions must be accompanied by targeted investments and place-based strategies that reflect local conditions and needs. The considerations that follow are intended to support policymakers, local educational agencies, county offices of education, and community partners to strengthen systems of support for students experiencing homelessness while advancing educational stability, opportunity, and well-being across California.

1. Expand the state’s Interagency Council to Prevent and End Homelessness Action Plan to focus more explicitly on housing insecure students.

California should continue strengthening its coordinated, cross-sector approach to preventing and ending family homelessness by building on the statewide infrastructure established through the California Interagency Council on Homelessness (Cal ICH). The council has created a national model for interagency coordination by advancing strategies that (a) expand affordable housing through initiatives such as Homekey and Community Care Expansion; (b) provide communities with flexible, accountable funding through the Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention (HHAP) and Encampment Resolution Funding programs; (c) integrate housing supports into the social safety net for families, older adults, and individuals with disabilities; and (d) expand access to housing and behavioral health services through California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM) and implementation of the Behavioral Health Services Act.

California has made unprecedented investments to address the state’s housing and homelessness crises, investing more than \$40 billion in housing and providing \$27 billion to communities to prevent and end homelessness through initiatives such as Homekey, HHAP, Community Care Expansion, and CalAIM (Cal ICH, 2025). However, Cal ICH’s 2025–2027 Action Plan gives limited attention to students experiencing homelessness and does not explicitly prioritize school-based homelessness data or direct resources to counties with the highest concentrations of students identified under the McKinney-Vento Act. Leveraging Cal ICH as a cross-agency decision-making body—or establishing a dedicated interagency workgroup focused on children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness—could better align housing, education, and health systems to target resources where student need is greatest.

2. Align housing and education systems to better support students experiencing homelessness.

California should strengthen collaboration between the Cal ICH and the California Homeless Education and Technical Assistance Center (HETAC) to better align housing, education, and family-serving systems. While HETAC provides statewide leadership on identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness through technical assistance, training, and implementation of AB 2375, Cal ICH leads California's broader strategy to prevent and end homelessness through cross-agency coordination and housing investments. Despite these complementary roles, student homelessness is not a central focus of Cal ICH's 2025–2027 Action Plan, creating a missed opportunity to integrate school-based data and educational expertise into statewide homelessness planning (Cal ICH, 2025).

Formal collaboration between Cal ICH and HETAC could improve coordination across education, housing, health, and human services agencies by using school-based homelessness data to identify emerging needs, prioritize counties with the highest concentrations of students experiencing homelessness, and better align housing and family supports with educational stability goals. Joint planning could also strengthen referrals between schools and community providers, improve data sharing when appropriate, and ensure that statewide homelessness initiatives explicitly address the unique needs of children and families. Embedding HETAC's expertise within Cal ICH's cross-sector decision making would position student homelessness as a core component of California's homelessness response rather than a separate education issue.

3. Target equity-focused supports for Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native students experiencing homelessness statewide & regionally.

Data show that racial disparities in student homelessness persist and have widened over time. This fact sheet highlights that Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native students experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness compared to other groups. Over the past several years, these disparities have grown, with both groups seeing increases in the share of students experiencing homelessness since SY 2019–20, indicating worsening inequities for these student populations. Recent California research highlights that Black/African American students and Native American/Alaska Native students experiencing homelessness face compounded risks of educational instability linked to chronic absenteeism and district mobility. UC Davis findings show that among chronically absent Grades K–3 students, Black/ African American students experiencing homelessness had the highest probability of changing school districts (approximately 27%); students experiencing homelessness overall also demonstrated elevated mobility compared to their

housed peers (Gee & Chang, 2026). The study from UC Davis further finds that homelessness is an independent predictor of district mobility, and that students who change districts are significantly more likely to remain chronically absent in their new schools, reinforcing patterns of instructional disruption.

Although estimates for Native American/Alaska Native students are more limited due to smaller sample sizes, they are consistently identified among groups with elevated risks of chronic absenteeism and instability, reflecting the disproportionate impact of structural barriers such as housing insecurity, rural isolation, and limited service access (Gee & Chang, 2026). Together, these findings highlight how racial inequities and housing instability intersect to drive repeated school disruption for Black/African American students and Native American/Alaska Native students experiencing homelessness, underscoring the need for coordinated attendance, housing, and school stability support.

These statewide equity concerns are also reflected at the regional level because need is highly concentrated in a small number of counties. In SY 2024–25, Monterey, Trinity, and Santa Barbara Counties had the highest percentage of students experiencing homelessness in California (CDE, n.d.–j). This geographic concentration suggests that statewide equity-focused interventions should be paired with targeted, place-based strategies in these high-need counties because local demographic composition, housing markets, and service infrastructure may differ substantially as a whole from the state. Tailoring outreach and support efforts to the specific racial and ethnic makeup of students experiencing homelessness within Monterey, Trinity, and Santa Barbara Counties—rather than relying solely on statewide approaches—would help ensure that resources reach the students and communities facing the greatest concentrations of need. Targeted interventions—such as attendance support, transportation assistance, school stability protections, and partnerships with trusted community-based organizations—are critical to improving educational outcomes for these students.

4. Close gaps in student learning and strengthen pathways to college and careers for students experiencing homelessness.

For students experiencing homelessness, differences in student achievement compared to housed peers are often driven by chronic absenteeism, school mobility, and unequal access to instructional time and academic supports, all of which limit consistent exposure to grade-level content and reduce readiness for statewide assessments. California schools have responded to these challenges through federal McKinney-Vento protections, attendance recovery systems, and targeted academic interventions aimed at reducing instructional disruption. Districts are increasingly using child

welfare and attendance coordination, Early Warning Systems, and School Attendance Review Boards to identify students experiencing homelessness who are chronically absent and connect them to transportation, counseling, and reengagement supports (CDE, n.d.–i). In addition, federal ARP-HCY funds have supported Homeless Innovative Programs, including tutoring, credit recovery, and academic enrichment designed to stabilize learning trajectories despite frequent school changes. County offices of education, such as those in Los Angeles, San Diego, and Contra Costa, have strengthened their case management and enrollment stabilization supports through homeless education programs. However, media and policy reports continue to note that these strategies are unevenly implemented across districts, meaning access to instructional time and academic interventions remains inconsistent and contributes to persistent testing gaps (The Guardian, 2025; Rancaño, 2019).

At the same time, California has increasingly sought to strengthen postsecondary pathways for students experiencing homelessness by reducing structural barriers to college access and persistence. Through expanded dual enrollment opportunities, California Community College outreach programs, and partnerships between K–12 McKinney-Vento liaisons and higher education systems, districts are working to ensure students experiencing homelessness can participate in early college credit, summer bridge programs, and career pathway initiatives without being excluded because of housing instability. Some programs also provide application fee waivers, priority enrollment supports, and targeted counseling to help students navigate UC/CSU eligibility requirements and financial aid processes, including Free Application for Federal Student Aid completion assistance. Despite these efforts, students experiencing homelessness continue to face lower graduation rates and reduced UC/CSU eligibility compared to their peers, reflecting the cumulative impact of disrupted schooling over time. These persistent gaps underscore the importance of strengthening alignment between K–12 supports and higher education access strategies so that stability interventions, academic recovery efforts, and college-going supports are coordinated rather than siloed across systems.

5. Reduce absenteeism, school instability, and disciplinary disparities for students experiencing homelessness.

Students experiencing homelessness in California face heightened and intersecting risks of chronic absenteeism, school instability, and exclusionary discipline, all of which contribute to reduced instructional time and weaker academic outcomes. From SY 2022–23 to SY 2024–25, these students experienced suspension rates approximately 3 percentage points higher than the overall student population, underscoring how housing instability is linked to increased disciplinary involvement in schools. In SY 2024–25, more than one-third of students experiencing homelessness were chronically

absent, exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Over the past decade, instability rates for students experiencing homelessness have consistently remained above 20%.

These outcomes occur within a broader California context of deeply entrenched racial disparities in exclusionary discipline, where Black/African American students face suspension rates of 12.8% and Native American/Alaska Native students of 16.1% compared to 4.3% statewide, with these disparities persisting across school types and demographic contexts (Corral & Cisneros, 2025). When considered together, these patterns suggest that housing instability compounds existing racial inequities in school discipline, placing students experiencing homelessness—particularly those who are also Black/African American or Native American/Alaska Native—at elevated risk of repeated school disruption and exclusionary disciplinary responses that further limit access to instructional time. To address these intersecting disparities, California schools are increasingly being called to shift toward restorative, equity-centered discipline systems that reduce reliance on exclusionary practices while strengthening student engagement and belonging. Key strategies include expanding restorative practices that emphasize relationship-building and harm repair, integrating social-emotional learning and cultural responsiveness training, using discipline data to identify patterns and guide continuous improvement, and strengthening family and community engagement through partnerships and inclusion of community voice in school climate efforts (Corral & Cisneros, 2025).

Building on these statewide reform efforts, a few California counties have begun implementing more coordinated, place-based strategies that integrate attendance supports, housing stability services, and school climate improvements for students experiencing homelessness. Los Angeles County has expanded efforts to improve attendance, housing stability, and educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness through collaboration among school districts, county agencies, and community organizations (Cazares-Minero & Bishop, 2026). San Diego County has received attention for community school and attendance initiatives that have been associated with reductions in chronic absenteeism and disciplinary incidents, and Contra Costa County has emerged as a statewide leader in homeless education through its role in HETAC helping districts strengthen identification, enrollment stability, and student supports (Contra Costa County Office of Education [CCCOE], 2025; Murphy, 2024). More broadly, the California Community Schools Partnership Program scale-up offers a promising framework for addressing the interconnected challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness. Through a whole-child, whole-family approach, community schools coordinate housing assistance, health care, transportation, mental health services, academic interventions, and family engagement supports—key factors that can improve attendance, reduce disciplinary involvement, and promote school stability.

Conclusion

The findings in this fact sheet highlight both the scale and persistence of student homelessness in California, with a record 298,254 students affected in SY 2024–25 and significant disparities across racial and ethnic groups, grade levels, and academic outcomes. Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native students continue to experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness and elevated risks of chronic absenteeism, suspension, and school instability. Across grade levels, particularly in the early grades and increasingly in high school, students experiencing homelessness encounter substantial barriers to consistent attendance, academic achievement, and successful transitions to postsecondary opportunities.

Students experiencing homelessness in California face persistent and compounding academic and postsecondary attainment gaps that span achievement, graduation, college access, and school engagement outcomes. Students experiencing homelessness trail their peers by roughly 20 percentage points in meeting ELA and math standards, show lower graduation outcomes across all measures, and face ongoing challenges in college access and participation. Even as college-going rates rebounded in SY 2022–23, the gap between homeless and housed students widened to 20 percentage points. These trends underscore the systemic and multifaceted barriers affecting students experiencing homelessness.

This fact sheet is intended to serve as a practical tool for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders to better understand the scope and impact of student homelessness in California and to inform more coordinated, equity-centered responses. By consolidating statewide data on identification, attendance, discipline, academic achievement, and postsecondary outcomes, it highlights where disparities are most persistent and system alignment is most urgently needed. The considerations outlined throughout this fact sheet emphasize that addressing student homelessness requires more than isolated interventions; it depends on sustained investment, cross-sector collaboration, and intentional coordination between education, housing, and community systems. Used alongside ongoing local and state data, this fact sheet can support efforts to strengthen implementation of McKinney-Vento protections, target resources to the highest-need communities, and advance policies that improve stability and educational opportunity for students experiencing homelessness across California.

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Appendix A

Key Terms

[AB 2375](#) (2021–2022, author: Luz Rivas) is a California law amending Education Code §48851 to strengthen how schools identify students experiencing homelessness. It centers on a standardized housing questionnaire that all public school systems must use to locate and support homeless children, youths, and unaccompanied youths. Before AB 2375, only local educational agencies (LEAs) receiving certain American Rescue Plan Act-Homeless Children and Youth (ARPA-HCY) funds were required to use a housing questionnaire to identify homeless students. A 2019 state auditor report found California schools were substantially underidentifying homeless students, meaning many did not receive the services and protections guaranteed under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. AB 2375 responds by removing the ARPA-HCY funding limitation and making robust identification practices mandatory for all LEAs statewide, regardless of federal funding status.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition of homelessness: Homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act 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 (District of 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 Continuum of Care Programs to 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 (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.–b.).

Chronic Absenteeism: The California Department of Education (via California Education Code §60901 and state attendance guidance) defines a “chronic absentee” as a student who is absent for 10% or more of the instructional days in a school year, regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused (CDE, n.d.–c).

Nonstability: Nonstability, as defined by the CDE, refers to students who do not maintain continuous enrollment in a single school for at least 245 days during an academic year or who exit with a disqualifying status, indicating disrupted or incomplete school enrollment (CDE, n.d.–k).

University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) requirements: UC/CSU systems share a common academic foundation for admission through completion of the “A–G” college-preparatory course requirements, which include 15 courses across core subject areas such as English, math, science, and history, all completed with grades of C or better (California State University, n.d.; University of California, n.d.). However, the two systems differ in selectivity and admissions approach. The UC system requires a higher minimum grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 for California residents and evaluates applicants through a holistic review process that considers academic performance, course rigor, extracurricular involvement, and personal insight responses (University of California, n.d.). In contrast, the CSU system has a lower minimum GPA requirement of 2.5 for California residents and relies more on a formula-based evaluation that is centered on GPA and completion of required coursework, with limited emphasis on extracurricular activities or essays (California State University, n.d.). Both systems have moved away from using standardized test scores such as the SAT and ACT in admissions decisions (California State University, n.d.; University of California, n.d.).

Appendix B

Methods

Data

This fact sheet draws on publicly available statewide data from the California Department of Education (CDE), from school year (SY) 2017–18 to SY 2024–25. Data were obtained from the CDE’s DataQuest and downloadable research files, including homeless student enrollment (i.e., McKinney-Vento), suspension, chronic absenteeism, assessment outcomes (English language arts [ELA] and mathematics), graduation outcomes, and college-going indicators. These files compile annual student-level and aggregate counts reported by local education agencies (LEAs) across California 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. Percentages of students experiencing homelessness by race/ethnicity are reported beginning in SY 2019–20 because the CDE does not provide cumulative counts by race for earlier years. For academic outcomes (ELA and mathematics proficiency), analyses begin in SY 2018–19, the first year for which homeless student subgroup data were available. Suspension, chronic absenteeism, and nonstability rates were compared between students experiencing homelessness and housed students using publicly reported subgroup rates.

No interviews, surveys, or primary data collection were conducted. All analyses rely exclusively on administrative data reported by local education agencies to the CDE and made publicly available.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, homeless identification depends on local reporting under McKinney-Vento and may undercount students from stigma, mobility, or inconsistent identification practices across districts. Second, pandemic-related school closures and disruptions (from SY 2019–20 to SY 2021–22) affected data collection, attendance reporting, assessment participation, and mobility tracking, limiting comparability across those years. 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. Despite these limitations, the CDE administrative datasets provide the most

comprehensive statewide portrait of trends in student homelessness and associated educational outcomes in California. These data allow for an updated assessment of how the scale, distribution, and consequences of student homelessness have evolved in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic.