

Student Homelessness in Utah:

Trends, Disparities, and Opportunities for Action

Mayra Cazares-Minero, Ph.D.

Grace Ha Eun Kim, Ph.D.

Joseph P. Bishop, Ph.D.

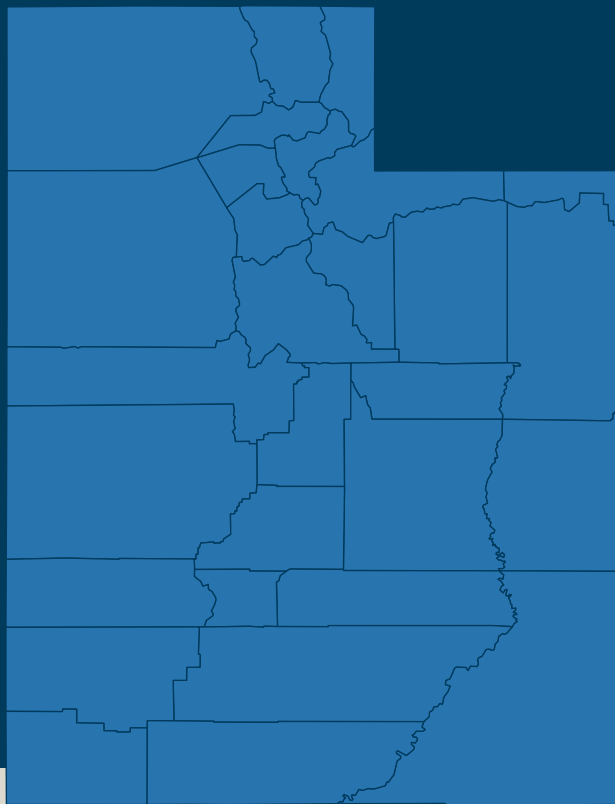


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Introduction

After declining during the pandemic, the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness in Utah rebounded to 10,804 in school year (SY) 2024–25, the second-highest count since SY 2018–19, before decreasing to 9,622 in SY 2025–26. Utah’s student homelessness rates have historically been lower than those observed in many other states and nationally, but thousands of Utah students still experience homelessness each year.

In federal fiscal year 2022, the number of individuals across Utah experiencing homelessness for the first time increased by 10%, while the number experiencing repeated episodes of homelessness increased by 5% (Utah Office of Homeless Services, Department of Workforce Services, 2023). The state’s 2023 Point-in-Time data found that 10.9 out of every 10,000 Utah residents were experiencing homelessness (on a single night), up from 9.6 per 10,000 residents in 2020 (Utah Office of Homeless Services, Department of Workforce Services, 2023). The report attributed these increases, in part, to rising housing costs and limited access to affordable housing. However, these estimates likely understate the full extent of housing instability affecting children and families because they are based on homeless services and Point-in-Time (PIT) count data, which generally capture individuals experiencing immediate homelessness and exclude many families who are temporarily doubled up with others due to economic hardship or housing loss. As a result, the number of students experiencing homelessness in Utah schools may be substantially higher than estimates derived from homeless service system data alone.

Utah does not require students to submit a standardized statewide housing questionnaire to identify those who are experiencing homelessness, unlike states such as California and Arizona. Instead, local education agencies use their own identification procedures under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.¹ While the Utah State Board of Education provides school leaders with sample eligibility and referral questionnaires, school districts choose whether and how to incorporate housing or residency questionnaires into their enrollment processes. For example, Jordan School District, located primarily in southwestern Salt Lake County, administers a Residency Questionnaire² during student enrollment and makes the form available in both English and Spanish, helping families self-identify children who may qualify for McKinney-Vento services. Other districts do not administer this questionnaire. This district-level approach illustrates how identification practices can vary across Utah and may contribute to differences in how students experiencing homelessness are identified and served by districts.

¹ 42 U.S.C. § 1143a(2).

² <https://studentsupport.jordandistrict.org/services/mkv/eligibility>

Geographic & Regional Disparities

Student-level data demonstrate that in SY 2022–23, the majority of students experiencing homelessness in Utah are facing doubled-up situations or living with others (83%) (SchoolHouse Connection, 2026).³ In the McKinney-Vento definition, “doubled up” refers to children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2026). These students are not in shelters or unsheltered settings, making them less visible and more difficult to identify and contributing to the likelihood that overall counts underestimate the true scope of student homelessness in Utah. Also in SY 2022–23, Salt Lake County enrolled the largest number of students experiencing homelessness (6,936), reflecting its large overall student population and urban density. Although its homelessness rate was only modestly higher than the statewide average (3.3% and 1.9%, respectively), the county’s high count suggests significant systemwide demand and concentrated need in an urban housing market in which costs and shortages can drive instability. Students experiencing homelessness in Salt Lake County were slightly more likely to be doubled up than statewide (85.1% and 83.0%, respectively). The county also served a higher share of Hispanic students experiencing homelessness than the state overall (51.9% and 45.7%, respectively). Unlike the statewide population, none of the county’s students experiencing homelessness were classified as rural.

San Juan County reflects a distinct rural and Indigenous context of student homelessness. In SY 2022–23, San Juan County’s student homelessness rate (17.8%) was more than nine times the statewide rate. Students experiencing homelessness in San Juan County were less likely to be doubled up than statewide (approximately 66% and 83%, respectively), suggesting that a large share experienced living situations such as shelters, hotels or motels, or unsheltered settings. San Juan County also differed markedly from the state demographically: Native American students represented 90.7% of students experiencing homelessness compared to 4.8% statewide. Additionally, all students experiencing homelessness in San Juan County attended rural schools compared to 7.1% statewide of similar students. These patterns point to housing instability shaped by rural housing shortages, limited rental availability, and structural inequities affecting Native American communities rather than urban housing pressures.

Utah, Davis, Weber, and Washington Counties have experienced notable increases in student homelessness in recent years, coinciding with rapid population growth and rising housing costs. News reporting on Utah’s school homelessness data found some of the largest recent increases in Washington and Utah Counties, with additional growth in Weber and Davis Counties (Alberty, 2022).

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

There is, however, limited recent county-level analyses specifically focused on student homelessness. The data in Exhibit 1 are based on the federal education definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act; it focuses on a select set of counties in which student homelessness rates are above the state average (i.e., doubled-up data above the state average or with recent increases in student homelessness).

Exhibit 1. *Characteristics of Utah 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
San Juan	536	17.8%	65.7%	90.7%	3.9%	4.1%	100%
Salt Lake	6,936	3.3%	85.1%	1.6%	51.9%	30.2%	0%
Davis	1,811	2.2%	85.8%	1.3%	36.0%	46.6%	0.3%
Washington	920	2.2%	76.8%	4.0%	38.8%	43.2%	1.5%
Weber	578	1.2%	64.4%	3.5%	53.5%	32.0%	0.0%
Tooele	215	0.8%	85.6%	2.3%	26.0%	57.2%	0.5%
Utah	679	0.4%	80.7%	1.0%	60.4%	30.8%	0.1%
Utah Statewide	13,049	1.9%	83%	4.8%	45.7%	35.4%	7.1%

Note. Data retrieved from SchoolHouse Connection (2026, n.d.)



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Drivers of Youth Homelessness

Rising homelessness in Utah is primarily attributed to structural housing challenges, including increasing housing costs and a shortage of accessible and affordable housing (Utah Office of Homeless Services, Department of Workforce Services, 2023). Although Utah's median household income (\$96,700) is among the highest in the nation, housing affordability remains a significant challenge for many renters. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC, 2025), a worker must earn \$29.29 per hour to afford a modest two-bedroom rental home, yet the average renter in Utah earns only \$20.52 per hour. For workers earning Utah's minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, affordable housing is even further out of reach. Utah ranks as the 24th most expensive state in the nation for two-bedroom rental housing, which highlights the ongoing affordability pressures for low- and moderate-income households. Thus, despite Utah's relatively high median household income and moderate national ranking in rental costs, housing affordability remains unrealistic for many low-income families. Utah's high levels of housing cost burden for extremely low-income renters⁴ results in nearly four in five people (79%) spending more than half of their income on housing (NLIHC, 2026). This leaves many households vulnerable to housing instability and homelessness. Together, these data indicate that student homelessness in Utah is largely driven by broader housing instability, with many families struggling to afford and maintain stable housing.

Purpose of Publication

The goal of this report is to provide a comprehensive, data-informed picture of student homelessness in Utah. Specifically, the report examines trends in student homelessness over time; the demographic and geographic characteristics of students most affected; and disparities in educational outcomes, including academic proficiency in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, chronic absenteeism, and school discipline. By integrating these findings, the report aims to move beyond simple counts to better understand how housing instability shapes students' educational experiences and opportunities in Utah. The findings are intended to inform state and local policymakers, educators, and community partners as they work to strengthen the identification of students experiencing homelessness and improve the policies, practices, and supports that promote educational stability and success in Utah.

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 the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and Ed Data Express from SY 2017–18 through SY 2025–26, obtained from State Superintendent’s Annual Reports and downloadable research files. Data include homeless student enrollment (i.e., McKinney-Vento), academic assessments (i.e., ELA and mathematics), graduation rates, chronic absenteeism, and school discipline. 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; data compares 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. 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 USBE datasets rely on PIT 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.



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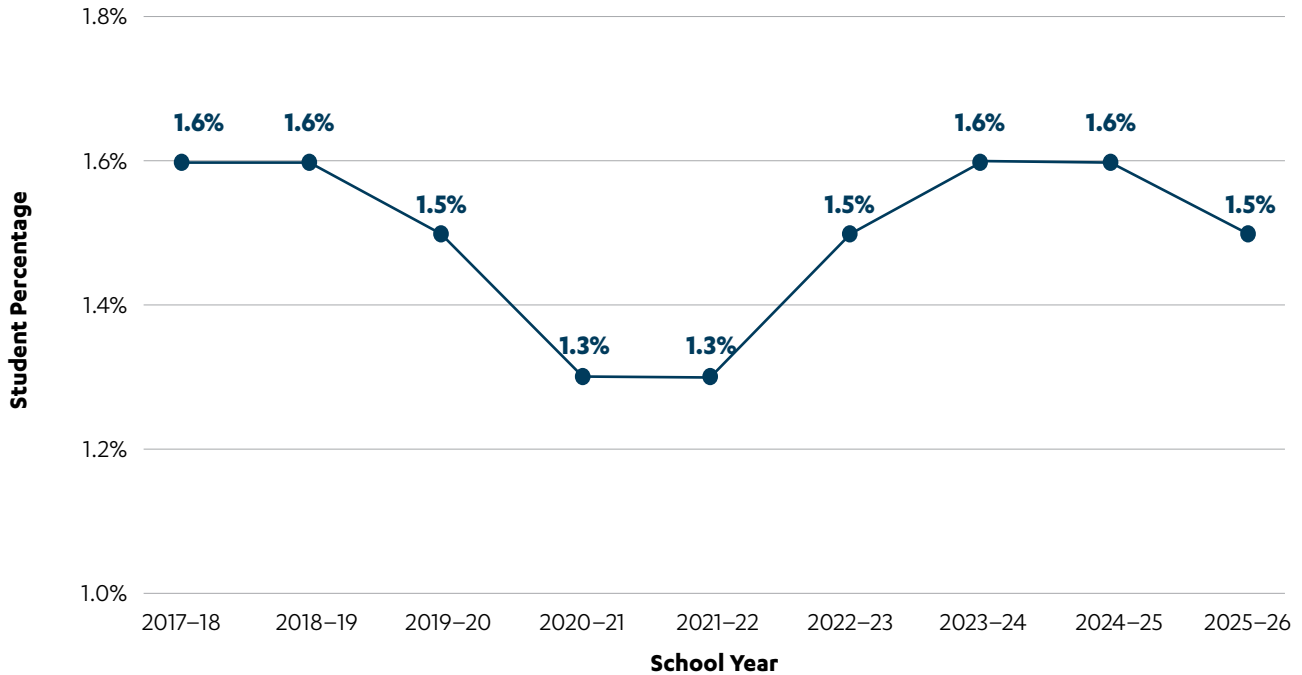
Findings

1. Student homelessness declined in SY 2025–26.

Student homelessness in Utah has fluctuated over the past decade but generally affected between 1.3% and 1.7% of all enrolled students (Exhibit 2). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number and rate of students identified as experiencing homelessness peaked at 10,856 students (1.65%) in SY 2018–19 (Exhibit 3). Both measures declined during the pandemic, reaching a low of 8,731 students (1.31%) in SY 2020–21. After the pandemic, student homelessness steadily increased, rising to 10,804 students (1.62%) in SY 2024–25, nearly matching the state’s prepandemic peak. Between SY 2024–25 and SY 2025–26, however, the number of students experiencing homelessness declined by nearly 12%, falling to 9,622 students, while the student homelessness rate decreased from 1.62% to 1.47%. In SY 2025–26, approximately 1.5% of Utah students were identified as experiencing homelessness compared to the national rate of 3%.

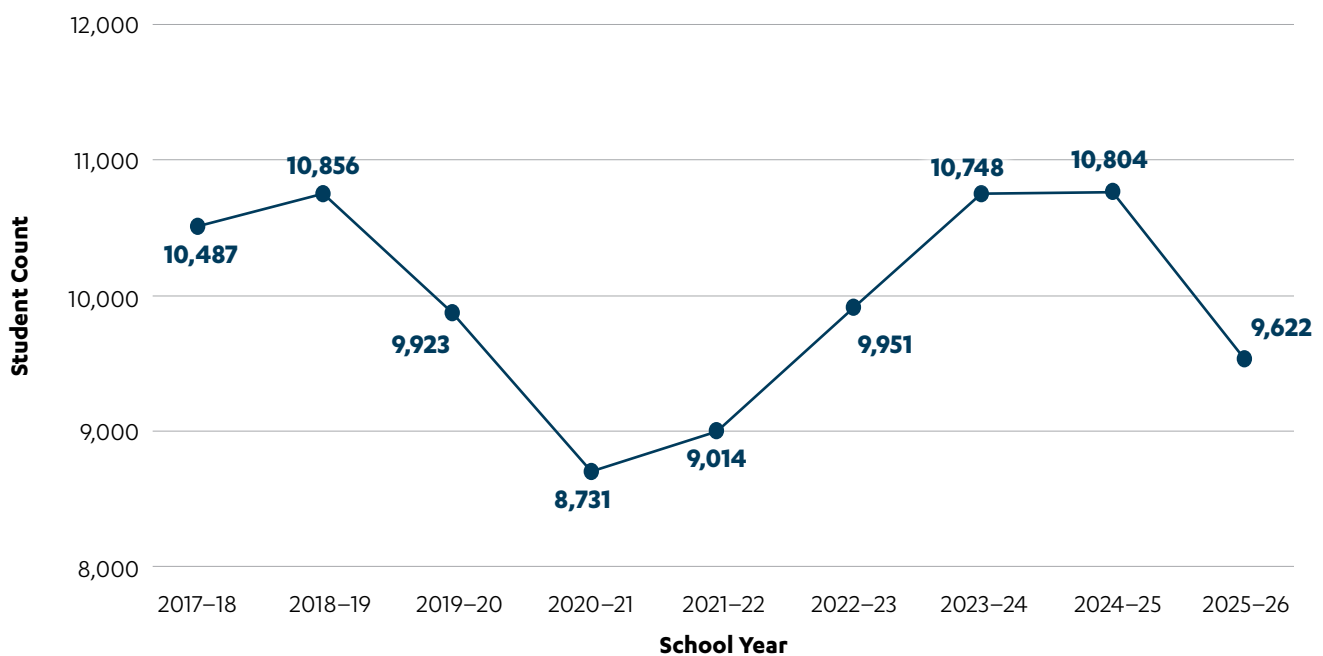


Exhibit 2. Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Utah, SY 2017–18 to SY 2025–26



Note. Data from 2017–18 to 2025–26 retrieved and calculated from Excel file, https://schools.utah.gov/datastatistics/_datastatisticsfiles/_reports/_enrollmentmembership_/2026FallEnrollmentGradeLevelDemographics.xlsx.

Exhibit 3. Numbers of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Utah, SY 2017–18 to SY 2025–26



Note. Data from 2017–18 to 2025–26 retrieved from Excel file, https://schools.utah.gov/datastatistics/_datastatisticsfiles/_reports/_enrollmentmembership_/2026FallEnrollmentGradeLevelDemographics.xlsx.

2. Native American students experience the highest rates of homelessness in Utah.

Significant racial and ethnic disparities characterize student homelessness in Utah. Hispanic students represented the largest group of students experiencing homelessness throughout the period, increasing from 4,678 students in SY 2019–20 to 8,106 students in SY 2023–24 (Exhibit 4). Their homelessness rate rose substantially, from 4.2% to 6.4%, indicating growing housing instability among Hispanic families (Exhibit 5). Native American students experienced the highest rates of homelessness of any racial or ethnic group, increasing from 9.7% in SY 2019–20 to 14.0% in SY 2023–24, nearly nine times the state rate of 1.6%. Although the number of Native American students experiencing homelessness was smaller than that of Hispanic students (891 students vs 8,106 students in SY 2023–24, respectively), the consistently high rates highlight disproportionate vulnerability among Native American communities. Pacific Islander students also experienced elevated rates of homelessness, ranging from 4.7% to 6.0% during the period. In comparison, white students experiencing homelessness (5,259 in SY 2023–24) had the lowest homelessness rate, remaining about 1.0% throughout the period. Black students experienced homelessness at rates between 3.1% and 4.6%, while rates among students identifying as multiple races ranged from 2.4% to 3.0%. Asian students consistently had the lowest homelessness rates, remaining below 2.0%.



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Exhibit 4. *Numbers of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Utah by Race, SY 2019–20 to SY 2023–24*

School Year	Native American/ AK Native Students	African American/ Black Students	Asian Students	Hispanic/ Latine Students	Multiple Race Students	Pacific Islander Students	White Students
2019-20	656	369	179	4,678	525	610	6,206
2020-21	265	285	150	3,845	445	493	4,812
2021-22	754	330	177	4,594	562	511	4,969
2022-23	756	408	196	5,964	489	620	4,616
2023-24	891	415	184	8,106	553	590	5,259

Note. Data from 2019–20 to 2023–24 retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.). Prepandemic data (i.e., before 2019–20) are not available.

Exhibit 5. *Percentages of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Utah by Race, SY 2019–20 to SY 2023–24*

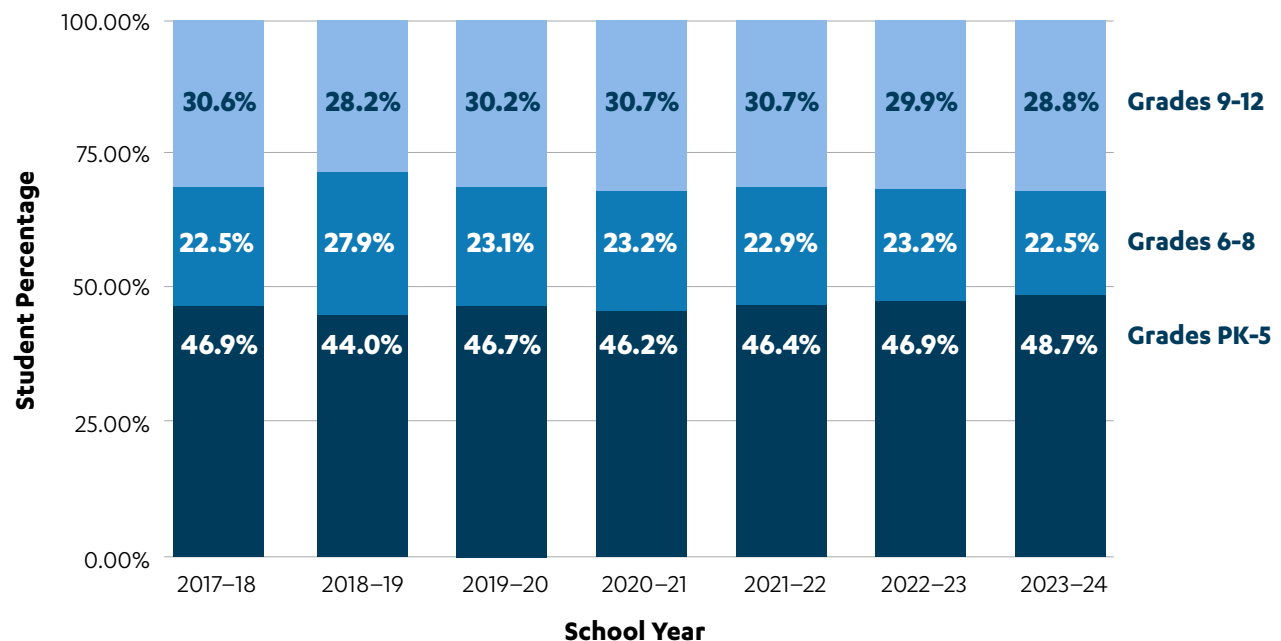
School Year	Native American/ AK Native Students	African American/ Black Students	Asian Students	Hispanic/ Latine Students	Multiple Race Students	Pacific Islander Students	White Students
2019-20	9.7%	4.0%	1.6%	4.2%	3.0%	6.0%	1.3%
2020-21	3.9%	3.1%	1.4%	3.4%	2.4%	4.7%	1.0%
2021-22	11.3%	3.5%	1.6%	3.9%	2.8%	4.8%	1.0%
2022-23	11.3%	4.4%	1.7%	5.0%	2.4%	5.8%	0.9%
2023-24	14.0%	4.6%	1.7%	6.4%	2.5%	5.4%	1.1%

Note. Data from 2019–20 to 2023–24 retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.) and Excel file https://schools.utah.gov/datastatistics/_datastatisticsfiles/_reports/_enrollmentmembership_/2026FallEnrollmentGradeLevelDemographics.xlsx. Prepandemic data (before 2019–20) are not available.

3. Nearly half of Utah students experiencing homelessness are in elementary school.

The grade-level composition of students experiencing homelessness in Utah has remained relatively stable over the past decade (Exhibit 6). Students in Grades PK–5 consistently represented the largest share of identified students experiencing homelessness, accounting for between 44.0% and 49.0% of all students experiencing homelessness. This share increased slightly over time, from 46.9% in SY 2017–18 to 48.7% in SY 2023–24. Middle school students (Grades 6–8) accounted for approximately one-quarter of students experiencing homelessness, ranging from 22.5% to 27.9% across the period. High school students (Grades 9–12) consistently represented about 29% to 31% of students experiencing homelessness, although their share declined modestly from 30.6% in SY 2017–18 to 28.8% in SY 2023–24. Overall, these trends indicate that younger children comprise nearly half of Utah’s students experiencing homelessness, underscoring the importance of early intervention and support for families with elementary-aged children.

Exhibit 6. *Grade Distribution Among Students Experiencing Homelessness in Utah, SY 2017–18 to SY 2023–24*



Note. Data from 2017–18 to 2023–24 retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.).

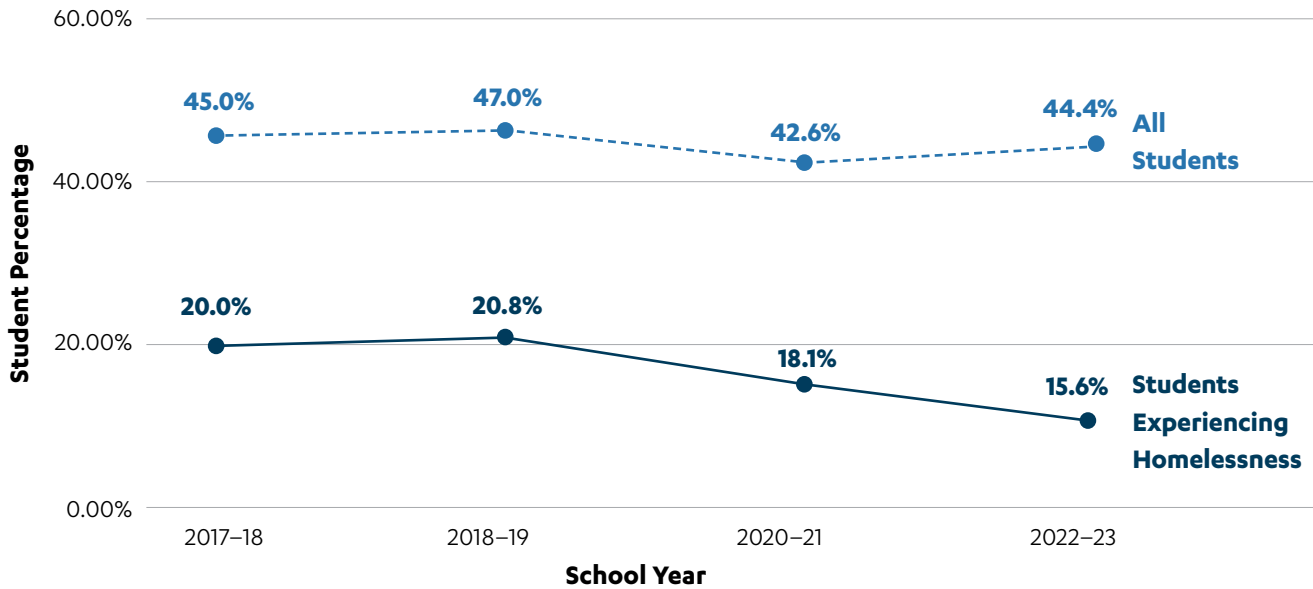
4. Achievement gaps persist for students experiencing homelessness in Utah.

Students experiencing homelessness in Utah consistently perform well below the statewide average in both mathematics and ELA. In SY 2022–23, only 12.8% of students experiencing homelessness were proficient in mathematics compared to 40.2% of all students statewide. Similarly, only 15.6% of students experiencing homelessness were proficient in ELA compared to 44.4% of all students statewide. Achievement gaps have persisted from before the pandemic. Between SY 2017–18 and SY 2022–23, ELA proficiency fell among students experiencing homelessness from 20.0% to 15.6% (Exhibit 7) and math proficiency declined from 19.8% to 12.8% (Exhibit 8). These trends suggest that students experiencing homelessness faced greater academic challenges before the pandemic than all students statewide and have yet to regain the academic ground they lost during the pandemic. For Exhibits 7 and 8, data for SY 2019–20 are unavailable and SY 2021–22 data are suppressed because of data-quality concerns. Data availability varies for Exhibits 9–11, as noted with each exhibit. We compare unhoused to all students, which limits our understanding of the impact of student homelessness on these outcomes.



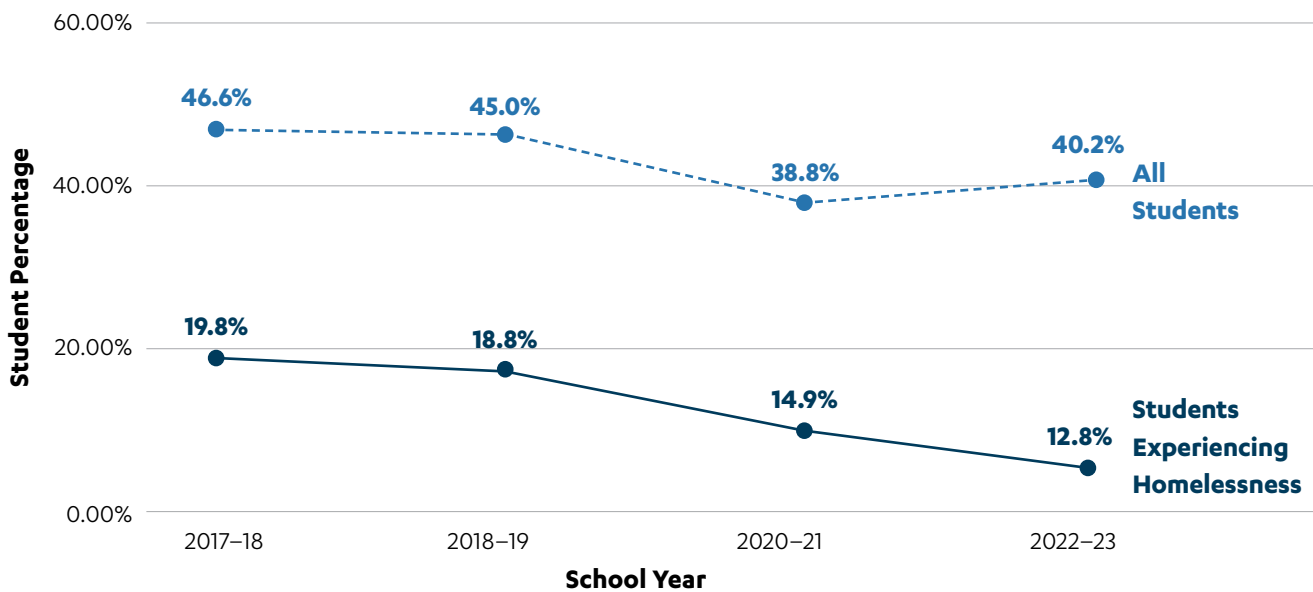
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Exhibit 7. Percentages of Students in Utah Proficient in ELA, SY 2017–18 to SY 2022–23



Note. Data from 2017–18, 2018–19, 2020–21, 2022–23 retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.).

Exhibit 8. Percentages of Students in Utah Proficient in Mathematics, SY 2017–18 to SY 2022–23



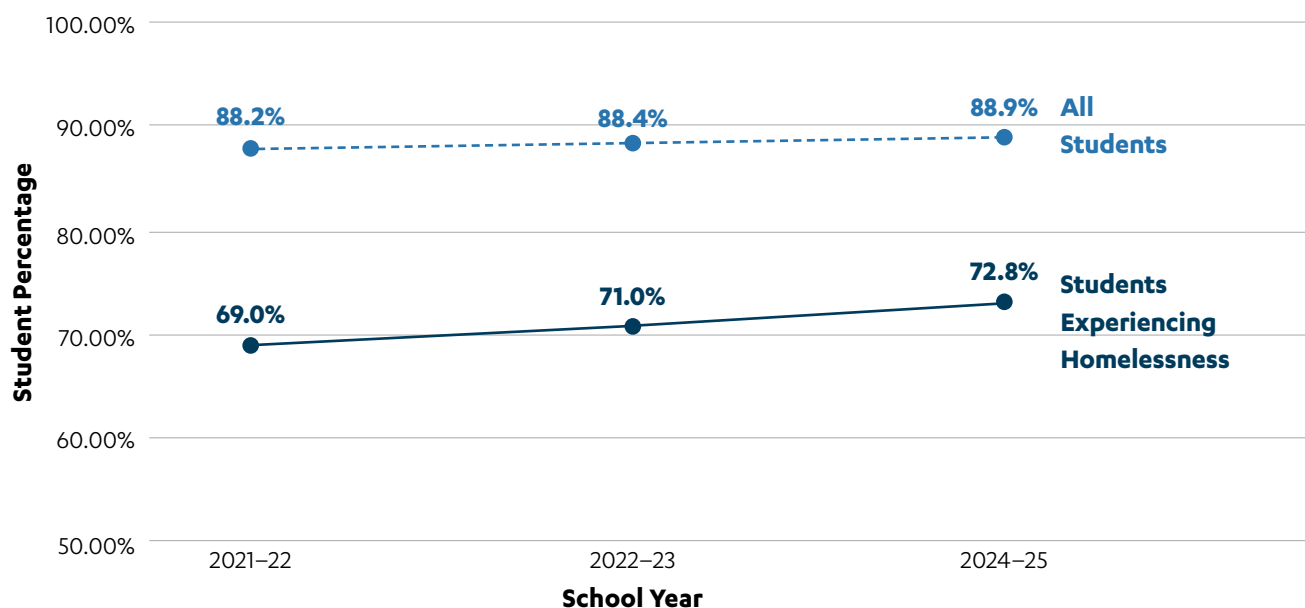
Note. Data from 2017–18, 2018–19, 2020–21, and 2022–23 retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.).

5. Graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness in Utah show steady improvement, but a substantial gap remains.

Graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness in Utah have improved steadily in recent years, although they continue to lag well behind all students statewide (Exhibit 9). Graduation rates for all students remained relatively high and stable, ranging from 88.2% to 88.9% between SYs 2021–22 and 2024–25. Rates for students experiencing homelessness, by contrast, started substantially lower but showed more notable gains over the same period, increasing nearly 4 percentage points (69.0% to 72.8%).

Despite this upward trend, a persistent graduation gap remains between students experiencing homelessness and all students, narrowing only slightly from 19.2% in SY 2021–22 to 16.1% in SY 2024–25. While the consistent improvement among students experiencing homelessness is a promising sign, the continued double-digit gap underscores that housing instability remains a significant barrier to on-time high school completion, reinforcing the need for sustained, targeted support to help close this gap further. Data from the US Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.) are available through SY 2022–23, and there are no data on graduation rates of students experiencing homelessness in Utah for SY 2023–24. As we noted earlier, Utah data does not differentiate data by housed and unhoused, our comparison of students experiencing homelessness with all students limits our understanding of the impact of student homelessness on these outcomes.

Exhibit 9. Graduation Rates for Utah Students in High School, SY 2021–22 to SY 2024–25

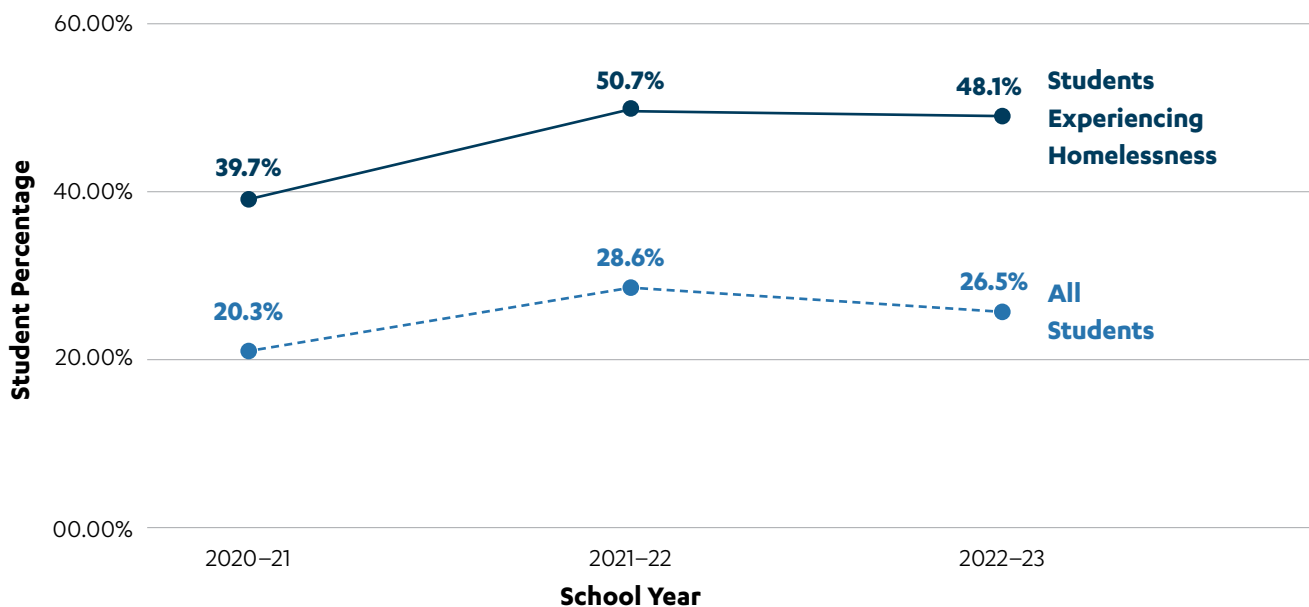


Note. Data for 2021–22 to 2022–23 retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.), and data for 2024–25 retrieved from https://www.schools.utah.gov/datastatistics/_datastatisticsfiles/_reports/_graduationdropoutrates_/2025GraduationRates.pdf

6. The percentage of Utah students experiencing homelessness who are chronically absent is nearly twice that of all students.

Students experiencing homelessness in Utah are substantially more likely to be chronically absent than all students statewide. In SY 2022–23, nearly half (48.1%) of students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent compared to just over a quarter (26.5%) of all students statewide (Exhibit 10). Chronic absenteeism increased sharply following the pandemic for all students, increasing from 20.3% in SY 2020–21 to 28.6% in SY 2021–22, before declining slightly to 26.5% in SY 2022–23. Rates among students experiencing homelessness followed a similar pattern but remained much higher, increasing from nearly 40.0% in SY 2020–21 to 50.7% in SY 2021–22 before improving modestly to 48.1% in SY 2022–23. Across all years, students experiencing homelessness were nearly twice as likely as all students statewide to be chronically absent, highlighting the significant educational disruptions associated with housing instability.

Exhibit 10. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Utah Students, SY 2020–21 to SY 2022–23

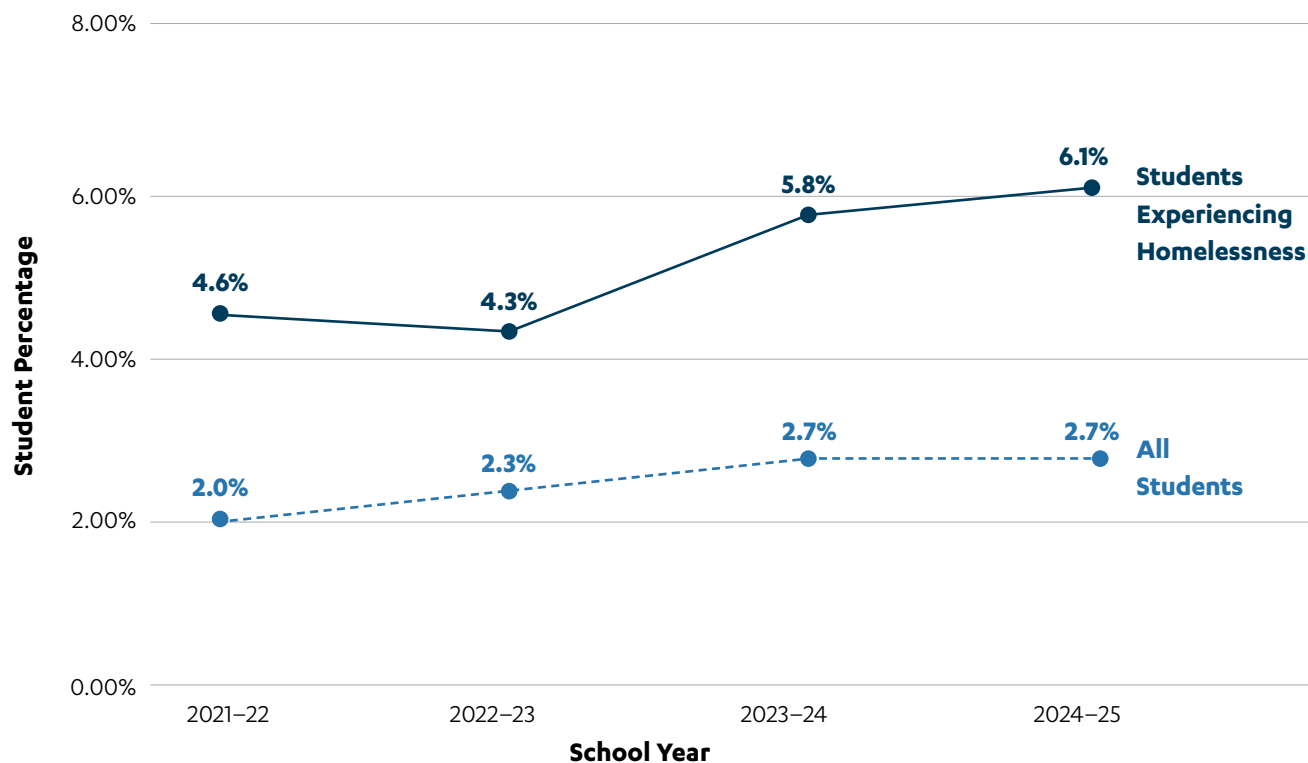


Note. Data from 2020–21 to 2022–23 retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.).

7. Utah students experiencing homelessness have suspension and expulsion rates more than twice those of all students statewide.

Discipline (i.e., suspension and expulsion) rates have gradually increased for both students experiencing homelessness and all students statewide (Exhibit 11). While discipline rates for all students statewide have increased less than 1 percentage point between SY 2021–22 and SY 2024–25, discipline rates for students experiencing homelessness have increased 1.5 percentage points, from 4.6% in SY 2021–22 to 6.1% in SY 2024–25. Among the four years of data available, three years show discipline rates of students experiencing homelessness more than twice that of all students statewide. Higher rates of suspension and expulsion may reflect the challenges associated with housing instability, including increased stress, school mobility, and disruptions in academic and social supports. According to the data sources for Exhibit 11, disciplines in Utah are administered as suspensions and expulsions, and suspensions can be both in-school and out-of-school. Data on discipline rates for homeless students are not available before SY 2021–22.

Exhibit 11. Discipline (Suspension and Expulsion) Rates for Utah Students, SY 2021–22 to SY 2024–25



Note. Data for 2021–22 to 2024–25 retrieved from Utah State Board of Education (2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025b).

Considerations

1. Standardize statewide student housing identification practices.

A recommendation in this report is that Utah could strengthen the identification of students experiencing homelessness by adopting a standardized statewide housing questionnaire administered to all families during student enrollment and annual registration. Currently, school districts have considerable discretion in how they identify students experiencing homelessness, which may result in inconsistent screening practices and underidentification of eligible students, particularly those living in doubled-up arrangements. The USBE could develop a statewide questionnaire informed by successful district practices, such as Jordan School District's Residency Questionnaire, available in English and Spanish, and by statewide models implemented in neighboring states such as Arizona and California. A uniform screening process would promote more equitable identification across districts, improve the quality and comparability of statewide data, and help ensure that students experiencing homelessness are connected to the educational protections and supports available under the McKinney-Vento Act.

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

Utah currently relies primarily on an October 1 PIT count to publicly report on student homelessness. While this approach is useful for providing an annual snapshot, it likely undercounts the total number of students who experience homelessness over the course of the school year. In contrast, federal reporting based on McKinney-Vento Act requirements emphasize cumulative annual counts that capture all students identified as experiencing homelessness at any point during the year. Some states, including California and Washington, report both PIT and cumulative annual data explicitly in public-facing materials, providing districts a more complete understanding of housing instability among students. Greater reliance on cumulative annual reporting in Utah's public data would improve consistency with federal standards, enhance comparability across states, and better reflect the full scope of student homelessness over time. This, in turn, could strengthen policy planning, funding allocation, and cross-agency coordination.

3. Strengthen data systems and public reporting to improve identification and support students experiencing homelessness.

Comprehensive, timely, and accessible data are essential for understanding and addressing student homelessness, yet Utah's current data infrastructure has notable gaps in both availability and usability. Much of the most complete publicly available data is drawn from federal sources, such as Ed Data Express from the U.S. Department of Education, which often lag by several school years, limiting the ability to assess recent trends or evaluate the impact of current policy and recovery efforts. At the state level, up-to-date data on students experiencing homelessness is not consistently or easily accessible through the USBE, creating barriers for researchers, districts, and policymakers. Improving the timeliness, transparency, and organization of publicly reported data, along with more frequent updates and clearer presentation of key indicators—such as academic outcomes, chronic absenteeism, and discipline—would strengthen Utah's ability to identify needs and monitor outcomes. Strengthening data systems in this way would support more informed decision making and more equitable allocation of resources for students experiencing homelessness.

4. Initiate statewide cross-sector coordination to address student homelessness.

Utah has multiple systems that intersect with student homelessness, including McKinney-Vento education supports, Continuum of Care programs, and the Utah Office of Homeless Services, but these efforts function largely in parallel rather than as part of a unified cross-sector framework. Coordination between education and housing systems is primarily indirect and relies on local partnerships, referral networks, and participation in broader homelessness planning processes rather than a formalized statewide structure specifically designed to align identification, data, and service delivery for students experiencing homelessness. As a result, Utah has not yet fully developed an integrated cross-sector framework that systematically connects education and housing systems around student homelessness. This lack of integration is mirrored in the state's advocacy landscape, in which efforts related to youth and homelessness remain similarly fragmented. Advocacy is primarily embedded within broader homelessness or youth service systems, with limited coordinated statewide focus on student homelessness as a distinct policy area. While youth-led groups, such as the Youth of Utah Advocacy Coalition, and service providers, such as Youth Futures, elevate related issues at the local level, Utah does not currently have a unified advocacy infrastructure that aligns across education, housing, and youth systems to advance a cohesive student homelessness agenda.

5. Address disproportionate rates of homelessness among Native American/Alaska Native students in rural communities.

Native American and Alaska Native students in Utah experience homelessness at disproportionately high rates compared with peers of other racial/ethnic groups and are also more likely to be enrolled in rural schools, where access to housing supports and youth-serving services is more limited. These disparities highlight the need for continued, targeted efforts to strengthen identification and improve supports for Indigenous students experiencing housing instability. Rural geography, combined with limited service infrastructure and transportation barriers, further complicate consistent school attendance, service linkage, and access to emergency housing resources. Strengthening culturally responsive identification practices under McKinney-Vento, improving coordination with tribal governments and Native American-serving organizations, and expanding rural service capacity are critical to addressing these inequities. Continued attention to disaggregated data and Indigenous-led approaches is essential to ensure that policies and interventions effectively reach and support Native American and Alaska Native students experiencing homelessness.

6. Evenly adopt restorative practices across school districts.

Students experiencing homelessness in Utah face persistently disproportionate rates of chronic absenteeism and exclusionary discipline, highlighting compounding barriers to school engagement and stability. In SY 2022–23, nearly half of all students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent compared to just over a quarter of all students statewide. Students facing homelessness are nearly twice as likely as their housed peers to miss significant amounts of instructional time. Rates of suspension and expulsion for students experiencing homelessness have increased since SY 2021–22, with the gap between students facing homelessness and the overall student population continuing to widen, suggesting that housing instability is increasingly associated with both disengagement from school and punitive disciplinary responses.

Utah's current response to these challenges is primarily embedded in broader, nonhomelessness-specific frameworks rather than a unified statewide strategy targeted to this youth population. Schools commonly implement prevention-based systems such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which emphasizes reinforcing positive behavior and establishing consistent schoolwide expectations to reduce exclusionary discipline; and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which uses tiered academic, behavioral, and attendance interventions to identify and support students at risk of disengagement, including those with chronic absenteeism. In addition, Utah's larger and more urban school districts have adopted restorative practices to address

behavioral incidents through repairing harm rather than exclusion, and trauma-informed approaches that train educators to understand student behavior in the context of stress and trauma. However, these approaches are not uniformly implemented across districts and are not specifically designed or consistently aligned with the needs of students experiencing homelessness under McKinney-Vento. As a result, while Utah has prevention-, restorative-, and trauma-informed elements within its broader education system, they function in a fragmented and uneven way that does not fully mitigate the growing disparities in attendance and discipline outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

Utah could establish a statewide framework that integrates McKinney-Vento requirements into existing PBIS, MTSS, and restorative- and trauma-informed initiatives. Providing consistent guidance, training, and accountability for districts would help ensure that students experiencing homelessness are identified early and connected to appropriate supports, making it less likely they would experience chronic absenteeism or exclusionary discipline. A coordinated statewide approach would promote more equitable implementation across districts and better address the educational barriers associated with housing instability.



Conclusion

Despite fluctuations in statewide identification rates, student homelessness remains a persistent challenge in Utah affecting nearly 10,000 students annually and continuing to disrupt educational opportunity. Although the numbers and percentages of students identified as experiencing homelessness have remained relatively stable in recent years, housing instability continues to be closely associated with poorer educational outcomes. Students experiencing homelessness consistently demonstrate lower academic proficiency, lower graduation rates, higher rates of chronic absenteeism, and greater involvement in exclusionary discipline than their housed peers.

The findings also reveal important disparities across student populations and geographic regions. Native American and Alaska Native students experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness in Utah compared with other racial and ethnic groups and are disproportionately represented in rural communities. Additionally, the majority of students experiencing homelessness are living doubled up, which highlights that homelessness in Utah is frequently hidden and may not be readily visible to schools or service providers.

The findings highlight several opportunities to strengthen Utah's response to student homelessness. Standardizing statewide student housing identification practices, aligning homeless student counting methodologies with federal reporting standards, and strengthening data systems and public reporting would improve the identification, monitoring, and understanding of student homelessness across the state. Utah could also benefit from establishing a statewide cross-sector framework that better coordinates education, housing, tribal, and community partners to support students experiencing homelessness. Targeted investments in culturally responsive, place-based services for Native American and Alaska Native students, particularly in rural communities, would help address persistent disparities. Finally, more consistent implementation of preventive-, restorative-, and trauma-informed practices across school districts could reduce chronic absenteeism, exclusionary discipline, and other barriers to educational 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 (US Department of Education, 2016).

US 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 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).

Appendix B

Methods

Data

This report draws on publicly available statewide data from the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and Ed Data Express from the U.S. Department of Education, covering school year (SY) 2017–18 to SY 2025–26 (for years available). Data were obtained from the USBE’s downloadable research files from Data Gateway and the State Superintendent’s Annual Reports. Data were also obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.).

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.

No interviews, surveys, or primary data collection were conducted. All analyses rely exclusively on administrative data reported by Ed Data Express or local education agencies to the USBE 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 (SY 2019–20) affected data collection on assessment participation, limiting comparability. Third, there are missing years of data due to unavailability either on Ed Data Express or USBE. Fourth, 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.