

Student Homelessness in California:

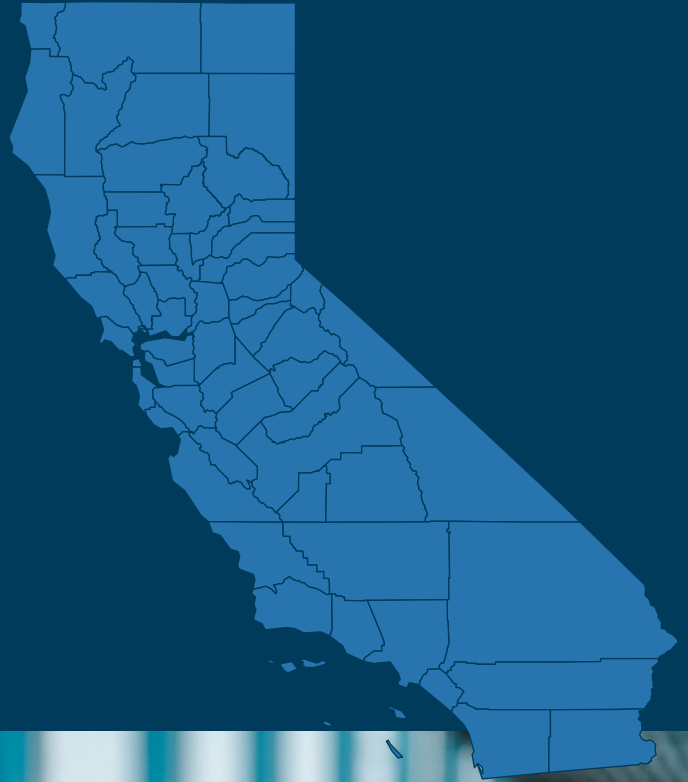
A Growing Statewide Challenge

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Executive Summary



California's housing affordability crisis continues to drive student homelessness, as rising rents, stagnant wages, and a severe shortage of affordable housing leave many families unable to secure stable housing.

We analyzed data from the California Department of Education (CDE) from school year (SY) 2017–18 to SY 2024–25 to understand the prevalence, characteristics, and educational experiences of students experiencing homelessness (under the McKinney-Vento definition), along with policy considerations. Our findings underscore that mitigating student homelessness requires sustained investment and coordinated action across education, housing, health, and community systems. See the full report for a more comprehensive analysis.



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Key Study Findings

In SY 2024–25, there was a record high of nearly 300,000 students experiencing homelessness in California, marking a 4% jump from the previous school year.

The number of students experiencing homelessness in California increased nearly 11% between SY 2018–19 (pre-Covid-19) and 2024–25 (post-Covid-19). The record increase in student homelessness in SY 2024–25 likely reflects both worsening housing affordability and economic instability as well as improving identification after expanded federal investments and California's implementation of Assembly Bill 2375.

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

More than one in 12 Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native students experienced homelessness in SY 2024–25, the highest rates among all racial and ethnic groups. Starting in SY 2019–20, Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native students have experienced some of the largest increases in student homelessness in California.

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

Students experiencing homelessness consistently demonstrated substantially lower ELA proficiency than their housed peers, with achievement gaps remaining largely unchanged over time despite modest postpandemic improvement. Mathematics proficiency also remains below prepandemic levels for both groups, with students experiencing homelessness continuing to trail their housed peers substantially.

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

Students experiencing homelessness consistently graduate at lower rates than their housed peers and are substantially less likely to meet University of California/California State University eligibility requirements or earn academic distinctions, reflecting persistent disparities in college and career readiness. Although graduation rates have improved over time, these gaps remain, underscoring the need for stronger academic and postsecondary supports.

Students experiencing homelessness face consistently higher suspension rates.

Students experiencing homelessness consistently face higher suspension rates than the overall student population, highlighting ongoing inequities in school discipline despite recent policy reforms (e.g., California Senate Bill 274).

Students experiencing homelessness face persistently higher chronic absenteeism than their housed peers.

About 1 in 3 students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent in SY 2024–25 compared with about 1 in 5 housed students, reflecting a persistent attendance gap that has remained throughout the period despite recent declines from pandemic-era peaks.



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Policy Considerations

Strengthen cross-system coordination to address student homelessness.

Students experiencing homelessness remain largely absent from the state's broader homelessness strategy. Explicitly incorporating school-based homelessness data into statewide planning and establishing a formal partnership between the California Interagency Council on Homelessness and the California Homeless Education and Technical Assistance Center (HETAC) would better align housing, education, health, and human services investments with the needs of children and families experiencing homelessness.

Sustain investments in identification and data systems.

Assembly Bill 2375 established a stronger statewide framework for identifying students experiencing homelessness by requiring annual housing questionnaires and strengthening local education agency identification practices. Sustained state funding is needed to support homeless liaison capacity, staff training, and data systems so districts can consistently implement these requirements. Continuing investment in HETAC and leveraging successful county models—including those in Contra Costa, Los Angeles, and San Diego—can strengthen statewide implementation and support more consistent responses to student homelessness.



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Target equity-focused supports for Black/African American and Native American students.

Prioritizing culturally responsive, place-based strategies in high-need counties, including expanded transportation assistance, attendance supports, school stability protections, and partnerships with trusted community organizations, can help reduce racial disparities in educational outcomes.

Strengthen academic recovery and postsecondary pathways.

Expanding academic and postsecondary transition supports (including tutoring, credit recovery, attendance interventions, dual enrollment, college advising, and Free Application for Federal Student Aid completion assistance) and partnerships among Grades K–12 systems, higher education institutions, and McKinney-Vento liaisons can strengthen postsecondary access and success for students experiencing homelessness.

Reduce absenteeism, school instability, and exclusionary discipline.

Advancing restorative, equity-centered discipline practices, improving transportation and attendance supports, and investing in community schools that integrate housing, health, mental health, and family services can promote greater educational stability for students experiencing homelessness.

Scale effective local models.

Several California counties, including Los Angeles, Contra Costa, and San Diego, have demonstrated promising approaches through coordinated attendance initiatives, integrated student supports, technical assistance, and cross-sector partnerships. Evaluating local efforts and investing in the expansion of effective practices statewide and maintaining flexibility to address regional differences in housing markets, student demographics, and service capacity can help strengthen responses to student homelessness across California.



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