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Youth in Foster Care

Youth Involved in the Juvenile Legal System

Often Overlooked but Not Unseen:

An Overview of Highly Mobile Youth in the U.S.

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UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Migrant Youth

TABLE OF CONTENTS

03 FUNDER ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

04 INTRODUCTION

05 GLOSSARY OF TERMS

07 THE ORIGINS OF MOBILITY

09 PURPOSE OF STUDY

10 KEY FINDINGS

1. Racial Disparities: Black and Latine Youth are Overrepresented Among HMY
2. Intersecting Educational Challenges: English Learner and Disability Disparities Among HMY
3. Regional Variations Among HMY
4. Trends in HMY Group Counts From 2013 to 2022
5. Age Distribution and Concentration Among HMY
6. Migratory Youth: An Underserved and Disenfranchised HMY Group
7. Racial and Gender Disparities Among Dual-System Youth
8. Homelessness Among CWS- and JLS-Involved Youth
9. Data Limitations in National Data Sources

33 RECOMMENDATIONS

35 CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION FOR PRIORITIZING HIGHLY MOBILE YOUTH

37 APPENDIX A

39 APPENDIX B

40 REFERENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Research demonstrates that highly mobile youth (HMY) face a number of challenges that can impact their academic *(Cutuli et al., 2013; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007),* **health** *(Braverman & Morris, 2011; Edidin et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2016),* **and economic trajectories** *(Baetz, 2015; Font et al., 2018; Nadon et al., 2022; Sandman, 2022; Skoba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018).*

High mobility refers to having to frequently move and/or not having a stable place to reside and engage in typical activities such as attending school, developing lasting peer relationships, or forming attachments with caregivers or supportive adults *(Sulkowski & Michael, 2020)*. Youth experiencing homelessness, youth in the child welfare system (CWS), migratory youth, and youth in the juvenile legal system (JLS) experience disproportionate rates of high mobility *(Aykanian, 2018; Berger Cardoso et al., 2017; Clemens, Lalonde, & Sheesley, 2016; Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003)*. We will collectively refer to these subgroups of youth as highly mobile youth throughout this paper. Please refer to the glossary in the next page for a list of frequently used terms and their definitions that are specific to HMY. In school year (SY) 2021-22, there were nearly 2 million HMY in the U.S., constituting 2.6% of the 2022 national youth (0-17) population (72.5 million) *(Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2023)*. Statistics continue to highlight disproportionate rates of Black youth among HMY populations *(Children's Bureau, 2022; Puzzanchera et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Child-serving system	A child-serving system refers to a network of organizations, agencies, and institutions that are designed to provide support and services to youth, including their families, across various aspects of their lives, such as healthcare, education, child welfare, juvenile legal system, and mental health services.
Crossover youth	Crossover youth is a general category that describes youths who have experienced some form of maltreatment and who engage in delinquent behaviors *(Lutz et al., 2010)*, although these youth may not be formally known to the child welfare system (CWS) and juvenile-legal system (JLS).
Dual-systems youth	Terms such as dual status, dual systems, dual contact, dually involved, dually identified, dually adjudicated, and multisystem describe different ways youths interact with both the CW and the JL systems *(OJJDP, 2021)*. For the purposes of this brief, we will refer to youths who are simultaneously involved with CWS and JLS as dual-system youth.
English Learner (EL)	An individual who, due to any of the reasons listed below, has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language to be denied the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or to participate fully in the larger U.S. society. Such an individual (1) was not born in the United States or has a native language other than English; (2) comes from environments where a language other than English is dominant; or (3) is an American Indian or Alaska Native and comes from environments where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency *(National Center for Education Statistics)*.
Highly mobile youth (HMY)	The term "highly mobile youth" collectively refers to youth who experience disproportionate rates of high mobility in their living, educational, or social environments. In this brief we include youth experiencing homelessness, youth involved in the CWS, migratory youth, and youth engaged with the JLS under the umbrella term HMY.
Homeless unaccompanied youth	A homeless unaccompanied youth is a youth who is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian and who fits the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless *(NCES, 2023)*.
Immigrant and foreign-born	The terms immigrant and foreign-born are interchangeable and refer to individuals who were not U.S. citizens at birth but may have become citizens through naturalization *(AECF, 2024)*. An immigrant is someone who makes a conscious decision to leave his or her home and move to a foreign country with the intention of settling there. Immigrants often go through a lengthy vetting process to immigrate to a new country. Many become lawful permanent residents and eventually citizens *(International Rescue Committee, 2024)*.
Migrant	A migrant is someone who is moving from place to place (within his or her country or across borders), usually for economic reasons such as seasonal work. Similar to immigrants, they were not forced to leave their native countries because of persecution or violence, but rather are seeking better opportunities *(International Rescue Committee, 2024)*. The main difference between a migrant and an immigrant is that a migrant usually moves from place to place, while an immigrant intends to settle in a new country.

Migrant Education Program (MEP) eligibility	The Migrant Education Program is a federally funded program that provides additional educational support for migrant children and youth. A child is eligible for MEP services if all of the following conditions are met: 1. The child is not older than 21 years of age; and 2. The child is entitled to a free public education (through grade 12) under State law or the child is not yet at a grade level at which the local education agency (LEA) provides a free public education; and 3. The child made a qualifying move in the preceding 36 months as a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher, or did so with, or to join a parent/guardian or spouse who is a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher; and 4. With regard to the qualifying move identified in point 3 above, the child moved due to economic necessity from one residence to another residence, and: a. From one school district to another; or b. In a State that is comprised of a single school district, has moved from one administrative area to another within such district; or c. Resides in a school district of more than 15,000 square miles and migrates a distance of 20 miles or more to a temporary residence *(U.S. DOE, 2024)*.
Youth experiencing homelessness	Children/youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes: (1) students who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; (2) students who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; (3) students who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and (4) migratory students who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because they are living in circumstances described in (1) through (3) above *(https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/)*.
Youth in Foster Care or Youth in the Child Welfare System (CWS)	"Foster care" means 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents and for whom the agency under title IV–E of the Social Security Act has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pro adaptive homes. A child is in foster care in accordance with this definition regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed and payments are made by the State, tribal, or local agency for the care of the child, whether adoption subsidy payments are being made prior to the finalization of an adoption, or whether there is federal matching of any payments that are made *(U.S. DOE, 2024)*.
Youth in the Juvenile Legal System (JLS; LS-involved youth)	Legal system-involved youth are individuals under 18 who have engaged with the juvenile justice system due to alleged involvement in delinquent or criminal activities. This system addresses offenses ranging from status offenses—actions deemed unlawful solely due to the individual's age, such as truancy or underage drinking—to more serious delinquent acts that would be considered crimes regardless of age *(youth.gov)*.
Youth with disability	Those children evaluated as having a disability that adversely affects academic performance, and who, by reason thereof, receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) according to an Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), or a services plan *(National Center for Education Statistics)*.

THE ORIGINS OF MOBILITY

HMY (i.e., youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, migratory youth, and youth in the JLS) share various and simultaneously occurring risk factors that result in their contact and involvement with more than one child-serving system. The factors that help explain disproportionate rates of high mobility among youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, migratory youth, and JLS-involved youth are multi-layered and often overlap across these different subgroups of youth. These risk factors include family poverty, low parental education, language barriers, family dysfunction, low parental engagement and supervision, and a history of childhood maltreatment. There is extensive research supporting the link between childhood maltreatment, homelessness, and CWS- and JLS-involvement *(McGuinness & Schneider, 2007; Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010; Vidal et al., 2017)*.

Youth in foster care, who comprise one group of HMY, have usually experienced child maltreatment, including neglect or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse *(Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010)*. The consequences of childhood maltreatment and other trauma for many youth in foster care includes psychological maladjustment and psychiatric problems in greater proportions than those in the general population *(Burns et al., 2004; Garland et al., 2001; Orton, Riggs, & Libby, 2009; Pilowsky & Wu, 2006)* as well as those in socioeconomically comparable samples *(Pilowsky, 1995)*. Moreover, maltreatment is among the most common risk factors associated with dual-system involvement *(Herz et al., 2012; Mersky, Topitzes, & Reynolds, 2012)*. In other words, youth with prior histories of childhood maltreatment and who are involved in the CWS are also more likely to enter the JLS.

Due to systemic and structural inequities, youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, migratory youth, and JLS-involved youth are at an increased risk for experiencing childhood adversities including but not limited to childhood maltreatment and neglect. For instance, the inequitable outcomes and unequal distribution of risk factors for child

abuse and neglect among Black children and families in particular serve as proof of the structural racism that has created inequitable health, education, and economic outcomes for the Black community. Being Black is not an inherent risk factor for child abuse and neglect. Yet, Black children have the highest rates of child abuse and neglect compared to white, Latine, and Asian children *(U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024)*.

A large body of research also demonstrates that there is a strong social gradient in child maltreatment across both the socioeconomic status (SES) spectrum and racial categories *(Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014; Kim & Drake, 2018; Pelton, 2015; Sedlak, Mettenburg, Basena et al., 2010)*. According to the Fourth National Incidence Study, maltreatment risk was 5.8 times higher for children in lower SES families *(Sedlak et al., 2010)*. In the absence of SES controls, maltreatment risk was observed in the same study to be 1.7 times higher for Black children than for white children *(Sedlak et al., 2010)*. Another study based in California found that the future risk of maltreatment reporting

was 2.5 times higher for newborns on Medicaid than for non-Medicaid recipients, and was 2.3 times higher for Black children than for white children *(Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011)*. The literature strongly confirms that stressors like structural racism, poverty, and discrimination can lead to family dysfunction, which in turn, are associated with negative developmental outcomes such as maltreatment *(Dodge, Greenberg, & Malone, 2008; Beyers, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003)*.

HMY often exit the CWS and the JLS into homelessness and with few stable adult figures to provide them economic and socioemotional support *(Bender et al., 2017; Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015; University of Michigan Poverty Solutions, 2021)*. For unaccompanied migrant youth, they often endure significant pre- and in-transit migration traumas upon placement in local communities, including family separation, limited or interrupted schooling, and unauthorized legal status *(Cardoso et al., 2019)*. During pre-migration, youth often experience poverty, community and/or family violence, and family separations that are linked to increased psychological distress *(Kennedy, 2013; Perreira & Ornelas 2013; Stinchcomb & Hershberg, 2014; Suárez-Orozco, Bang, & Kim 2010)*. During migration, they are vulnerable to hunger, thirst, assault, accidental injuries, kidnapping, and sexual and physical violence *(Aldarondo & Becker, 2011; Infante et al., 2011)*. Following migration, in addition to challenges associated with family reunifications, undocumented young people may struggle with acculturative stress, social isolation, discrimination, unsafe schools and neighborhoods, vulnerability of unauthorized status, and navigation of complex social service and legal institutions *(De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Perreira & Ornelas, 2013; Pumariega & Rothe, 2010)*. These stressors place them at increased risk for mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, and PTSD *(Carlson, Cacciatore, & Klimek, 2012)*.

While children from military families also experience high levels of mobility and face challenges commonly associated with academic difficulties, such as lower parental education levels and eligibility for free or reduced lunch, research shows that these students achieve academic outcomes equal to or exceeding national averages for public schools *(Popp, Stronge & Hindman, 2003)*. Several factors contribute to this success, including positive societal perceptions of the military, which differ from the stigma associated with poverty-related mobile populations, and the strong support systems embedded within the military culture *(Popp et al., 2003)*. These systems foster robust partnerships between schools, families, and the military, emphasizing high expectations for school success and college study, support from well-trained school counselors, and a culture that encourages parental involvement in their children's education. For this brief, we will focus on four more-vulnerable populations of HMY (i.e., youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, migrant youth, and youth engaged in the JLS), who often lack the resources and structured support systems available to children from military families.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Despite the evidence documenting a shared combination of risk factors associated with high mobility for vulnerable youth groups and their contact with multiple child-serving systems, there continues to be a dearth of research on how to best serve these displaced and often traumatized children and youth *(Larson & Meehan, 2011; Masten et al., 2015; Miller & Bourgeois, 2013).*

Many highly mobile youth will interact with multiple systems responsible for meeting the social, health, and education well-being of at-risk youth. Systems can be defined as interacting entities and processes that share organizing principles and are embedded within sectors that focus on a specific set of needs for a population *(Miller et al., 2022)*. For example, the CWS, the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, the MEP, and the JLS are embedded within the sectors of child well-being, health, and education. Although these child-serving systems share many of the same principles, e.g., to enhance the education, social, health, and mental well-being of HMY, the lack of communication and collaboration among these systems impacts the identification of HMY, service provision for HMY, and data collection standards and reporting of HMY. Research underscores the importance of engaging systems across sectors (e.g., health, housing, education) to promote the health and well-being of youth *(DeSalvo et al., 2017)*.

There are few studies explaining how child-serving systems can collaborate to meet the multifaceted needs of these youth, including their health, education, and psychological needs *(see Herz et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2017 for exceptions)*. The lack of cross-systems collaboration in practice extends to the absence of data-sharing processes and protocols *(Collins-Camargo et al., 2013)*. Additionally, a lack of usable data can result in a lack of transparency and accountability among systems *(Collins-Camargo et al., 2013)*. Current data challenges limit our understanding of the overlapping characteristics and needs of HMY.

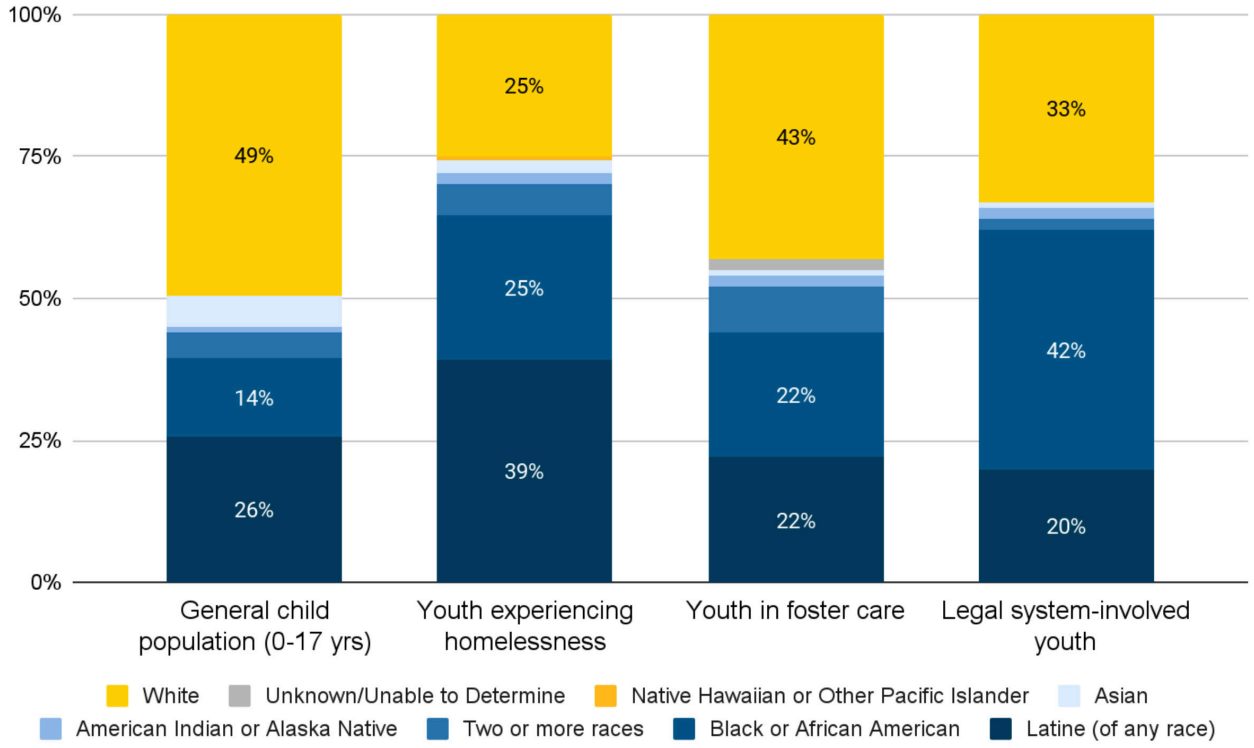
This brief uses publicly available data from national sources and existing literature to:

1. **Highlight the key characteristics of HMY populations, including their racial/ethnic composition, gender composition, grade level and age composition, where in the U.S. they are most concentrated, and their numbers over the last decade;**
2. **Examine the overlapping characteristics of HMY (e.g., English Learner status, disability status, unaccompanied youth status, dual-system involvement, and homelessness); and**
3. **Outline the limitations of national data sources.**

KEY FINDING 1

Racial Disparities: Black and Latine Youth are Overrepresented Among HMY

Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Distribution Among the General Child Population in the U.S., Youth Experiencing Homelessness, Youth in Foster Care, and Legal System-Involved Youth



Note. Data derived from KidsData, 2021; Children's Bureau, 2022; Puzzanchera et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a.

There are notable racial disparities among HMY groups, with a higher representation of racial minorities, particularly Black and Latine youth. As shown in Figure 1, in school year (SY) 2021-22, there were significant racial disparities across HMY populations when compared to the general population of children aged 0-17. Black youth, who account for only 13.8% of the general child population *(KidsData, 2021)*, are disproportionately represented among students experiencing homelessness (25.4%), youth in foster care (22%), and youth involved in the JLS (42%) *(Children's Bureau, 2022; Puzzanchera et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*. Latine youth, who constitute 25.7% of the general child population, are overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness, making up 39.3% of this group *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*. Among LS-involved youth, 67% are from racial minority groups, with Black youth being overrepresented at 42%, followed by Latine youth at 20% *(Puzzanchera et al., 2023)*. While data on the racial/ethnic composition and immigration status for migrant youth is not readily available, the majority of migrant agricultural workers are foreign born, primarily from Mexico and Central America (68%) *(U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023)*. This suggests that the migrant student population predominantly consists of Latine youth.

Other research further supports that Black youth in particular are disproportionately impacted by homelessness, foster care, and the legal system. The Annie E. Casey Foundation *(2021)* reported that Black youth are 16 times as likely to be in custody as their Asian and Pacific Islander peers, four times as likely as their white peers, and three times as likely as their Latine peers. The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine *(2022)* reports that although white youth represent 75% of the population, they make up only 45% of arrests for violent crimes. In comparison, Black youth, who represent 14% of the population *(KidsData, 2021),* are involved in 52% of juvenile arrests for violent crimes. Racial inequities become even starker when looking at gender differences. Black girls are 2.6 times more likely to be referred to law enforcement and almost four times more likely to be arrested than white girls *(National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022).*

Importantly, the COVID pandemic has exacerbated the already large and growing disparities in youth detention rates by race and location *(The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).* Black youth were almost 10 times more likely to be detained than their white peers as of January 1, 2023. Prior to the pandemic, Black youth were detained at more than six times the rate of white youth. Additionally, the overall population of youth in detention centers has returned to its pre-pandemic level, and for Black youth, surpassed it. This is because young people in detention, especially Black youth, are remaining detained for longer periods *(The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).*

KEY FINDING 2

Intersecting Educational Challenges: English Learner and Disability Disparities Among HMY

Table 1. Unique Characteristics Among HMY Groups

	Children with one or more disabilities (IDEA)	English Learner	Migratory status	Unaccompanied youth status
Percentage of enrolled K-12 public school students	10.6%	14.7%	N/A	N/A
Percentage of students experiencing homelessness	19.6%	19.6%	1.3%	9.2%
Percentage of youth in foster care	Est. 30-50%	*	*	*
Percentage of migrant students	8.6%	43.1%	N/A	*
Percentage of LS-involved youth	Est. 56-70%	*	*	*

Note. Percentages represent the proportion of each category within the respective HMY group. Data derived from NCES, 2024; NCES, 2023b; U.S. Department of Education, 2023b; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017; Powers et al., 2012; NCCJD, 2016. The asterisk (*) indicates that data were not available for the given category, and "N/A" indicates that the characteristic is not applicable to the group. It is important to note that a student may fall into more than one HMY group, meaning that students may experience multiple, all, or none of the unique characteristics criteria associated with each subgroup.

Student characteristics such as being classified as an English Learner (EL) and having a diagnosed disability are prevalent among HMY, highlighting the intersecting educational challenges for these groups. In SY 2021-22, 14.7% of public school students in the United States were identified as English Learners *(NCES, 2024)*, and 10.6% of public school students received special education and/or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) *(NCES, 2023b)* (Table 1).

Rates of ELs and students receiving special education services were notably higher for HMY groups than they were for students in the general population. Although disability and EL rates for youth in the child welfare system and JLS are not reported in national data sources, previous research indicates that youth in these systems are identified as eligible for special education services at rates three to seven times higher than other children *(Leone & Weinberg, 2012)*. Estimates report that 65 to 85% of LS-involved youth have a diagnosed disability *(NCCJD, 2016; IRIS Center, 2017)* compared to only 10% of their peers in the general population *(NCES, 2023b)*. Research shows that a significant number of incarcerated youth are disproportionately diagnosed with emotional or behavioral disorders and learning disabilities *(Quinn et al., 2005; Leone & Weinberg, 2012)*, whereas 30%-50% of youth in foster care have disabilities *(Palmieri & La Salle, 2017; Powers et al., 2012)*.

National data sources reveal that youth experiencing homelessness have the third-highest rates of disabilities (19.6%) after juvenile legal system-involved youth and youth in foster care *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*. Additionally, nearly 20% of youth experiencing homelessness were English Learners, suggesting that a portion of these youth come from immigrant Latine families *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*. Data supports this, demonstrating that a little over 1% of youth experiencing homelessness are migratory students *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*. This percentage might be higher given that migratory students may

be less likely to report homelessness than their peers in other HMY groups given their highly mobile lifestyles or mistrust of systems. Nearly 10% of youth experiencing homelessness were unaccompanied youth.

Nearly 9% of migratory students had a diagnosed disability *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023d)*, which was lowest among all HMY groups, and lower than for students in the general population (10.6%). Even though almost 1 in 10 migratory students have a diagnosed disability, there is no research examining how migratory families are supported in managing their child's disability or exploring migratory students' experiences in special education. Moreover, close to half of migratory students are English Learners *(43%; U.S. Department of Education, 2023b)*. Disproportionate rates of disability and ELs among HMY groups indicate a combination of educational challenges faced by these youth compounded by histories of trauma, family disruption and separation, and poverty.

We would like to highlight that although homelessness is a widely experienced issue for all highly mobile youth groups, no national data sources reported homelessness as a unique characteristic for HMY groups. Nonetheless, research and various longitudinal studies demonstrate that youth in foster care and juvenile-justice involved youth are likely to either experience homelessness before entering one of these child-serving systems *(Cowal et al., 2002; Culhane et al., 2003; Foust et al., 2020; Rodriguez & Shinn, 2016)* or to exit one of these child-serving systems into homelessness *(Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2018; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Kelly, 2020)*. Housing for migratory families or the lack thereof has been historically overlooked and understudied *(Parsad et al., 2000)*. For many of these families, a migratory lifestyle is their only option given that they are living in the U.S. without the proper immigration documentation or with expired immigration documentation. When a family, or even one member of a family, does not have proper, up-to-date immigration documentation, it is easier to work for a paid-in-cash job and to move around constantly than to settle into one place and risk deportation, and in many instances, separation of the family. Additionally, although there are good examples of improving agricultural worker housing conditions, such as the Farmworker Housing Program in Washington state, most agricultural worker housing is often substandard or overcrowded *(Vallejos et al., 2011; Washington State Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development, 2005)*.

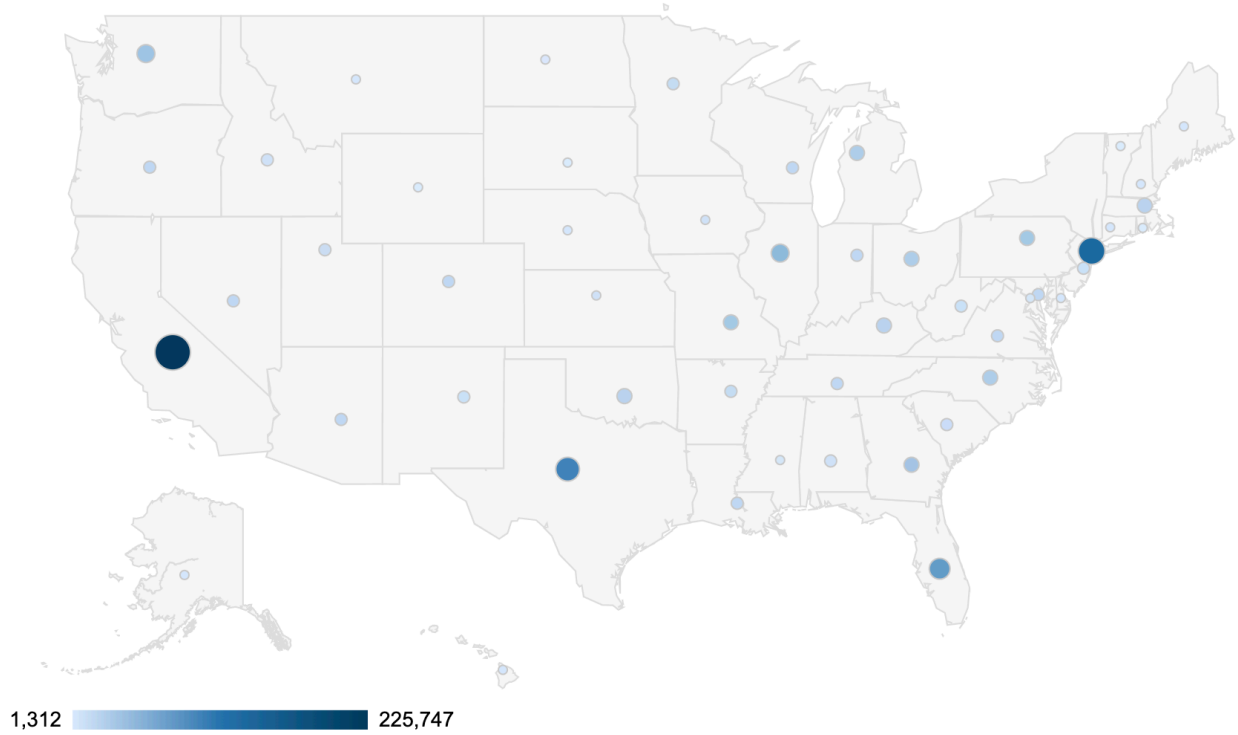
KEY FINDING 3

Regional Variations Among HMY

Looking Across All Four Populations

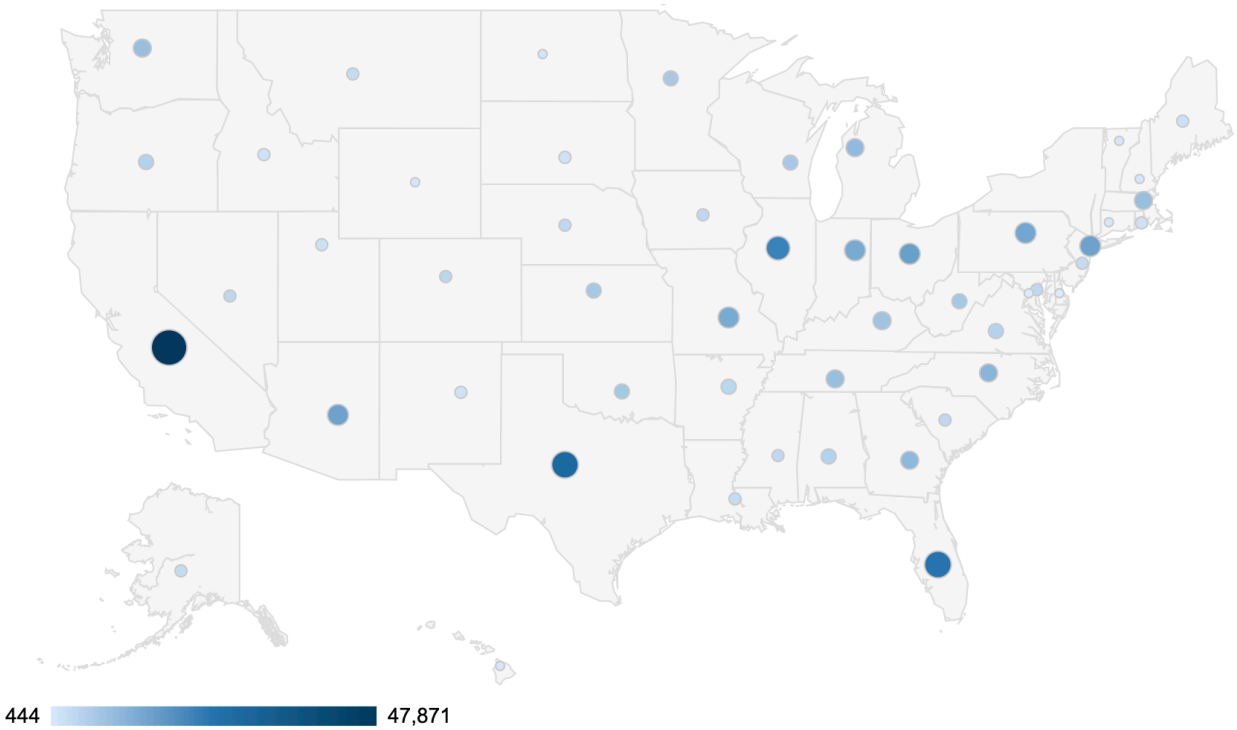
The geographical distribution of highly mobile youth groups reveals notable regional disparities, shaped by factors such as socioeconomic conditions, housing affordability, historical migration trends, and the availability of social services and educational resources. Students experiencing homelessness are predominantly concentrated in states along the West Coast and the Northeastern regions with large cities, as well as in several Southern states *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023c)* (Figure 2). The distribution of youth in foster care in the United States also shows higher concentrations along the West Coast, Southern states, and within the regions in the Northeastern and Midwestern states with larger populations (Figure 3). Migratory youth are predominantly concentrated in states along the West Coast such as California, the Southwestern and Southeastern states, particularly Texas and Florida, and parts of the Midwest (Figure 4). LS-involved youth are predominantly concentrated in the Southern and Midwestern states, with notable numbers also present in states within the Northeastern region (Figure 5). This distribution reflects the influence of employment opportunities, agricultural industries, educational resources, and historical migration trends within the United States.

Figure 2. Homeless Enrolled Students by State, SY 2021-22



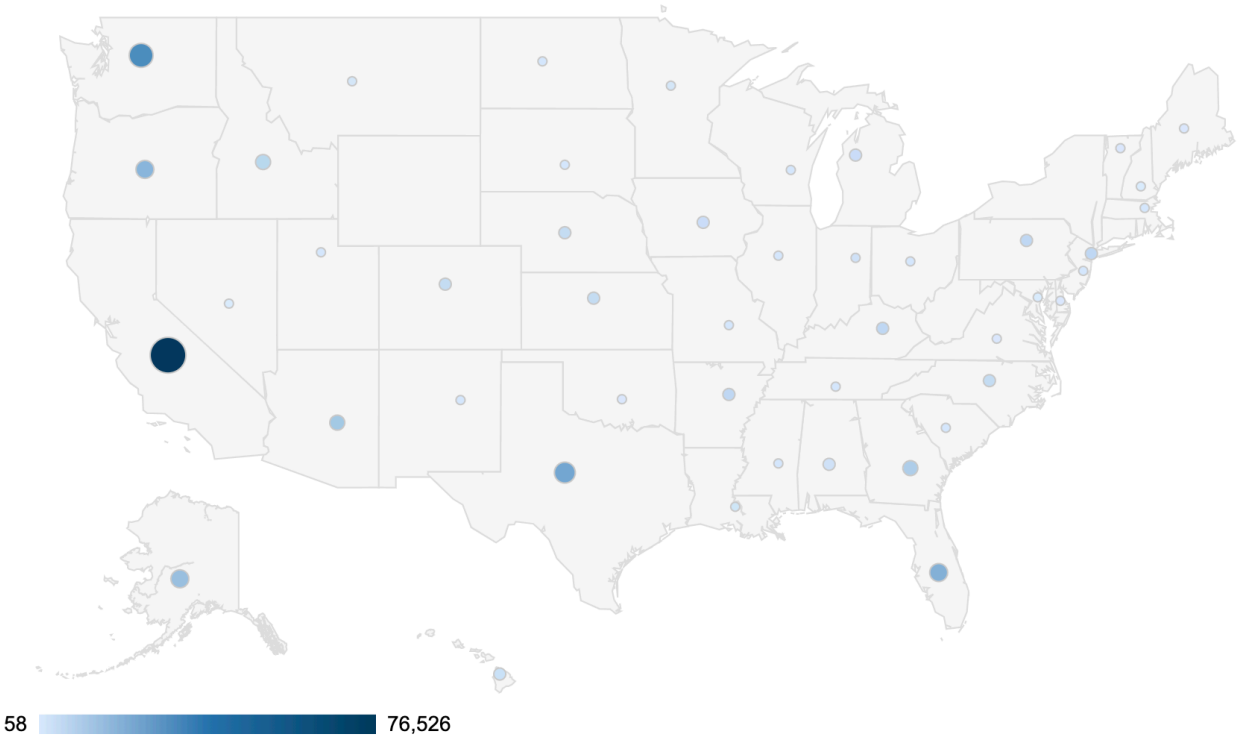
Source: U.S. Department of Education (2023a), "Homeless students enrolled: 2021-2022 SY."

Figure 3. Youth in Foster Care by State, Fiscal Year 2021-22



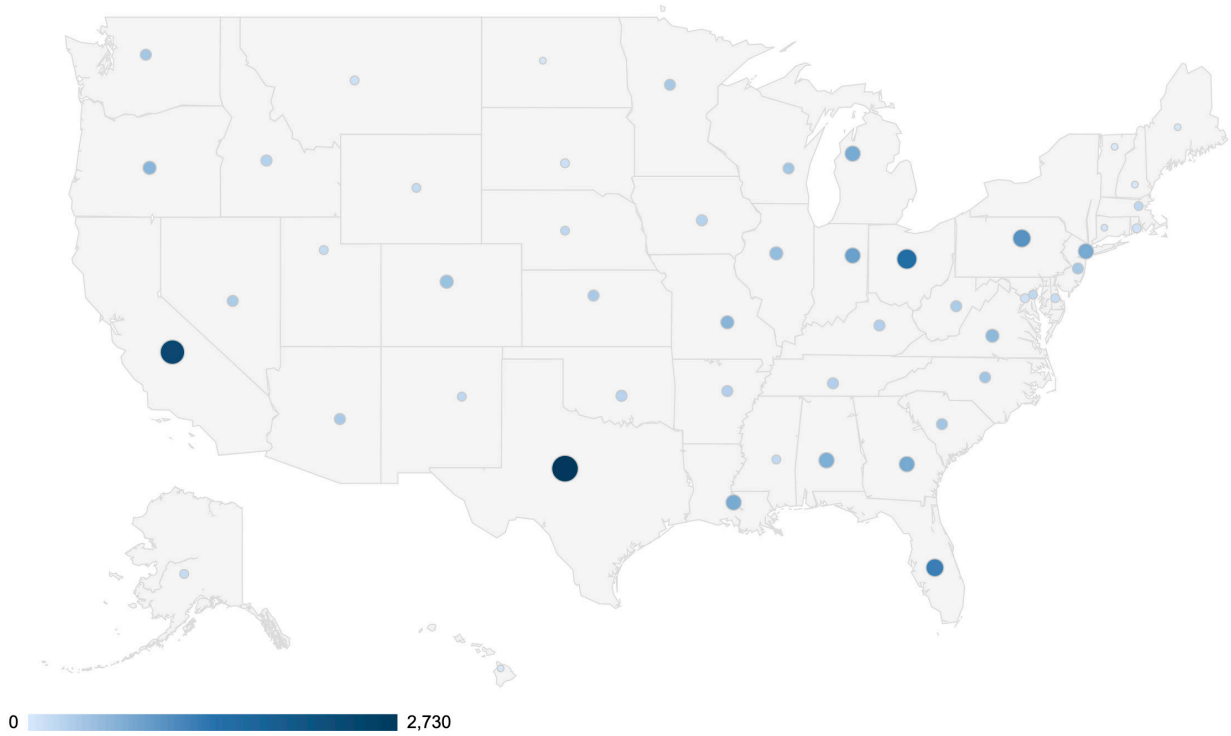
Source: Children's Bureau (2022), "The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #29."

Figure 4. Eligible Migrant Students by State, SY 2021-22



Source: U.S. Department of Education (2023b), "Eligible migratory students — 12 months (MSIX data): 2021-2022 SY."

Figure 5. Youth Residing in Juvenile Detention, Correctional and/or Residential Facilities by State, 2021



Source: Puzzanchera, Sladky & Kang (2023), "Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement."

Students Experiencing Homelessness

The states with the highest estimated count of students experiencing homelessness enrolled in public schools during SY 2021-22 are California (225,747), New York (133,578), Texas (97,279), Florida (77,203), and Illinois (48,395) *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023a)*. In terms of the proportion of school-aged students experiencing homelessness relative to the total enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, the District of Columbia (5.5%), New York (4.9%), California (3.8%), Missouri (3.6%), and West Virginia (3.5%) have the highest rates.

Table 2. Highest *Counts* of Homeless Enrolled Students

State	Count
California	225,747
New York	133,578
Texas	97,279
Florida	77,203
Illinois	48,395

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2023a), "Homeless students enrolled: 2021-2022 SY."

Table 3. Highest *Ratios* of Homeless Enrolled Students to Total Enrollment

State	Ratio
District of Columbia	5.5%
New York	4.9%
California	3.8%
Missouri	3.6%
West Virginia	3.5%

Note. Data calculated based on U.S. Department of Education (2023a), "Homeless students enrolled: 2021-2022 SY" and Fall 2021 enrollment data from National Center Education Statistics (2023), "Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2031."

Students in Foster Care

States with the highest counts of youth in foster care include California (47,871), Texas (28,042), Florida (23,507), Illinois (21,086), and Arizona (14,890) *(Children's Bureau, 2022)*. In terms of proportion, the states with the highest ratios of youth in foster care to the overall population of youth are West Virginia (1,789), Alaska (1,462), Montana (1,188), Kansas (908), and Missouri (863) *(USAFacts, 2023)*.

Table 4. Highest *Counts* of Youth in Foster Care

State	Count
California	47,871
Texas	28,042
Florida	23,507
Illinois	21,086
Indiana	14,890

Source: Children's Bureau (2022), "The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #29."

Table 5. Highest *Ratios* of Youth in Foster Care

State	Per 100,000 youth residents (18 years and younger)
West Virginia	1,789
Alaska	1,462
Montana	1,188
Kansas	908
Missouri	863

Source: USAFacts (2023), "How many kids are in foster care?"

Migrant Youth

The states with the highest estimated count of eligible migrant students during SY 2021-22 are California (76,526), Washington (30,486), Texas (21,587), Florida (18,615), and Oregon (16,893) *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023b)*. When examining the proportion of school-aged migratory youth relative to the total enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, Alaska (9.3%), Oregon (2.3%), Washington (2.3%), Idaho (1.5%), and Hawaii (1.4%) exhibit the highest rates.

Table 6. Highest *Counts* of Eligible Migrant Students

State	Count
California	76,526
Washington	30,486
Texas	21,587
Florida	18,615
Oregon	16,893

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2023b), "Eligible migratory students -- 12 months (MSIX data): 2021-2022 SY."

Table 7. Highest *Ratios* of Eligible Migrant Students to Total Enrollment

State	Ratio
Alaska	9.3%
Oregon	2.3%
Washington	2.3%
Idaho	1.5%
Hawaii	1.4%

Note. Data calculated based on U.S. Department of Education (2023b), "Eligible migratory students — 12 months (MSIX data): 2021-2022 SY" and fall 2021 enrollment data from National Center Education Statistics (2023), "Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2021."

Juvenile Legal System-Involved Youth

States with the highest estimated count of all youth residing in juvenile detention, correctional and/or residential facilities in 2021 include Texas (2,730), California (2,385), Ohio (1,476), Florida (1,221), and Pennsylvania (1,002) *(Puzzanchera et al., 2023)*. When considering the proportion of LS-involved youth relative to the state's youth population, Wyoming (269), West Virginia (202), Alaska (195), Oregon (146), and Louisiana (144) have the highest ratios *(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024)*.

Table 8. Highest *Counts* of Legal System-Involved Youth

State	Count
Texas	47,871
California	28,042
Ohio	23,507
Florida	21,086
Pennsylvania	14,890

Source: Puzzanchera, Sladky & Kang (2023), "Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement."

Table 9. Highest *Ratios* of Legal System-Involved Youth

State	Per 100,000 youth residents
Wyoming	269
West Virginia	202
Alaska	195
Oregon	146
Louisiana	144

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation (2024), "Youth residing in juvenile detention, correctional and/or residential facilities."

KEY FINDING 4

Trends in HMY Group Counts From 2013 to 2022

Between 2013 and 2022, data indicate a peak in the number of students experiencing homelessness and foster care during the 2017-18 school year, followed by a decline in 2018-19. In contrast, the number of migrant students and youth entering the JLS has consistently declined over the past decade (See Table 10).

Table 10. HMY Group Counts and Year-to-Year Percentage Change, from SY 2012-13 to SY 2021-22

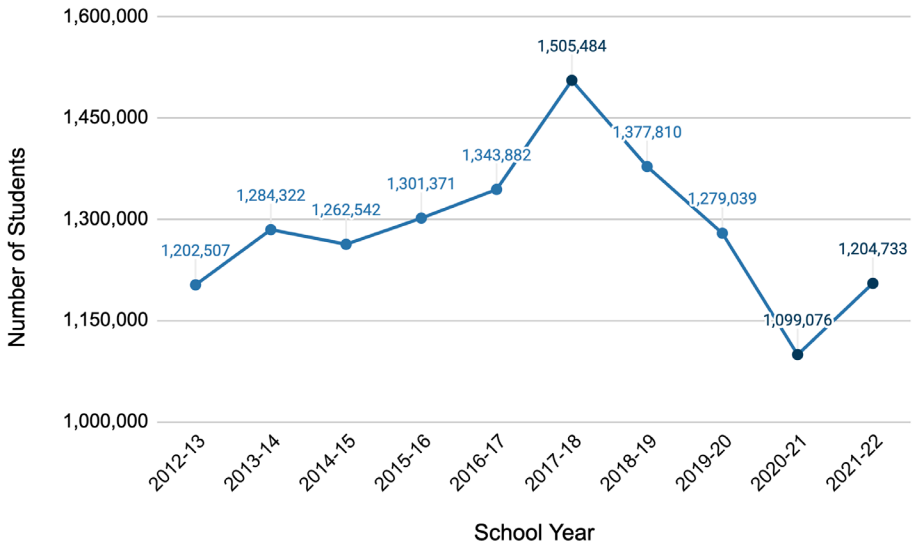
	SY 2012-13	SY 2013-14	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16	SY 2016-17	SY 2017-18	SY 2018-19	SY 2019-20	SY 2020-21	SY 2021-22
Students experiencing homelessness	1,202,507	1,284,322	1,262,542	1,301,371	1,343,882	1,505,484	1,377,810	1,279,039	1,099,076	1,204,733
		+6.8%	**-1.7%**	**+3.1%**	**+3.3%**	**+12.0%**	**-8.5%**	**-7.2%**	**-14.1%**	**+9.6%**
Youth in foster care	396,000	411,000	421,000	430,000	437,000	437,000	426,000	407,000	392,000	369,000
		+3.8%	**+2.4%**	**+2.1%**	**+1.6%**	**(+/-)0.0%**	**-2.5%**	**-4.5%**	**-3.7%**	**-5.9%**
Eligible migrant students	377,914	364,251	348,224	331,861	316,394	304,477	303,760	281,306	270,900	274,258
		-3.6%	**-4.4%**	**-4.7%**	**-4.7%**	**-3.8%**	**-0.2%**	**-7.4%**	**-3.7%**	**1.2%**
LS-involved youth	54,148 (2013)		48,043 (2015)		43,580 (2017)		36,479 (2019)		24,894 (2021)	
			-11.3%		**-9.3%**		**-16.3%**		**-31.8%**	

Note. SY data is not available for LS-involved youth. Data for this group is provided biennially.

Students Experiencing Homelessness

The number of students experiencing homelessness steadily increased between SYs 2012-13 and 2017-18, peaking in SY 2017-18 at 1,505,484 *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023c)* (Figure 6). However, there has been a notable decline since SY 2017-18, with a sharp 14.1% drop by SY 2020-21. Between SY 2020-21 and SY 2021-22, the number of homeless students slightly rebounded, increasing by 9.6%. It is important to consider various factors, such as major natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes and flooding) and broader events like the COVID-19 pandemic, on the fluctuation in the number of homeless students within the context of longer-term trends *(National Center for Homeless Education, 2022)*.

Figure 6. Students Experiencing Homelessness Nationwide, from SY 2012-13 to SY 2021-22

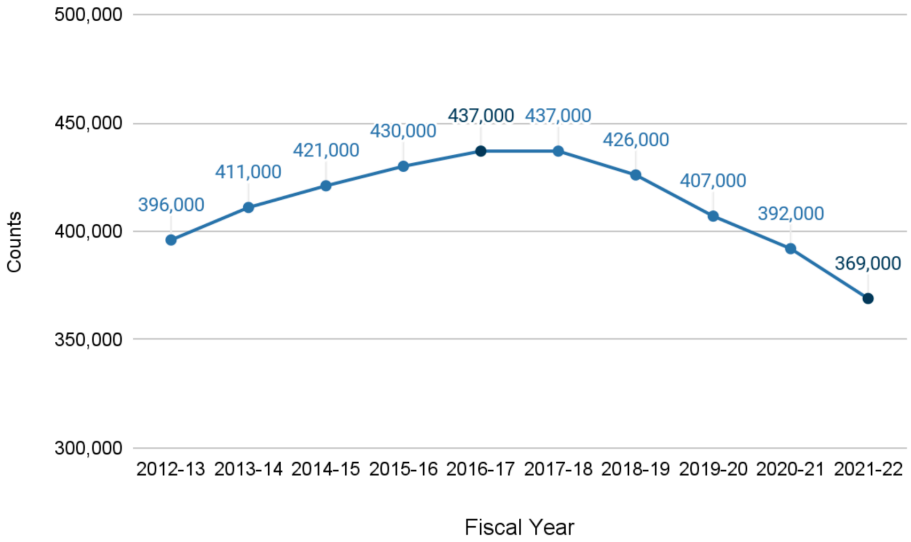


Note. Data derived from U.S. Department of Education (2023c), "Homeless data dashboard: 2021-2022."

Youth in Foster Care

The number of youth in foster care has fluctuated over the last decade, showing an increase between SY 2012-13 and SY 2016-17, followed by a gradual decline since SY 2017-18 (Children's Bureau, 2024; see Figure 7). The number of youth in foster care steadily increased each year between SY 2012-13 and SY 2016-17, with annual increases ranging from 1.6% to 3.8 percent. However, since SY 2018-19, there has been a consistent decline, with a 5.9% drop by SY 2021-22. The decline in the number of youth in foster care can be attributed to the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) focus on family preservation, kinship care, and alternatives to permanent family separation, such as reunification (ACF, 2022). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic, judicial delays, and high workforce turnover have further impacted foster care entry and exit processes, contributing to the observed decrease (ACF, 2022).

Figure 7. Youth in Foster Care Nationwide, from SY 2012-13 to SY 2021-22

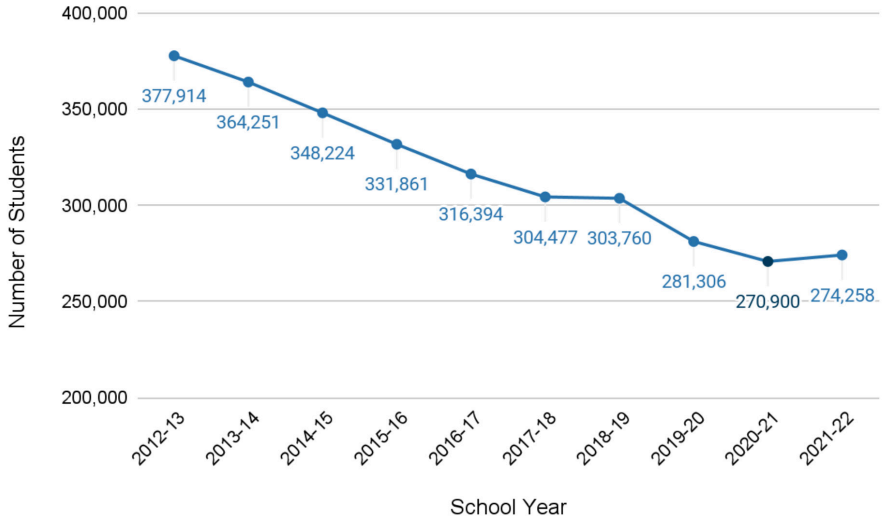


Note. Data derived from Children's Bureau (2024), "Trends in foster care and adoption."

Migrant Students

The enrollment of eligible migrant students in the Migrant Education Program (MEP) has shown a consistent downward trend in the last decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2023d; see Figure 8). Migrant student counts steadily decreased each year, with a 7.4% drop by SY 2019-20. The number reached a low of 270,900 in SY 2020-21 before increasing 1.2% in SY 2021-22. This decline can be attributed to the outdated MEP eligibility requirements that limit the types of children served and the duration of their eligibility, as well as a failure to account for new labor patterns, such as intradistrict moves and emerging industries like construction and landscaping (Madrid, 2019). Additionally, the decrease can be attributed to a fear surrounding immigration status under the Trump administration, which made some migrant families reluctant to sign up for federal programs (Orr, 2019).

Figure 8. Eligible Migrant Students Nationwide, from SY 2012-13 to SY 2021-22

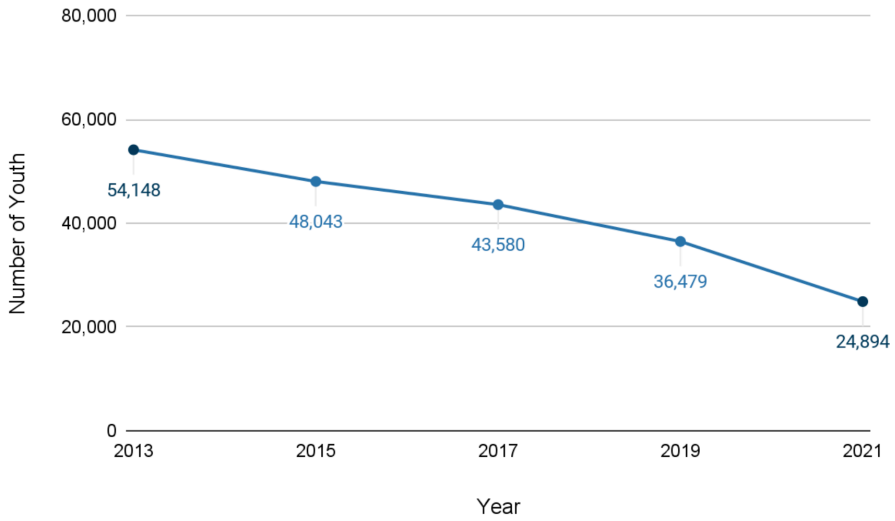


Source: U.S. Department of Education (2023d), "Migrant Education Program data dashboard: 2021-2022."

Juvenile Legal System-Involved Youth

The number of LS-involved youth has shown a consistent downward trend in the last decade (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024; See Figure 9). The number of LS-involved youth exhibited a significant decline, decreasing by more than half between 2013 and 2021. In fact, the number of LS-involved youth placed in a residential facility decreased 65% since 2010 and 74% since 1999. This decline is primarily attributed to fewer youth being arrested and referred to court, rather than systemic changes in how the JLS nationwide responds to such cases (Mendel, 2023). The likelihood of confinement for young people arrested and referred to court in 2019 remained unchanged from 2005, with 1 in 3 facing incarceration. Juvenile legal systems continue to confine more youth for relatively minor offenses compared to serious ones (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Fifty-seven percent of youth were detained or incarcerated for nonviolent offenses in 2019 (e.g., damaging property without the owner's permission, disturbing public order). In contrast, fewer than one-third of youth who were confined were locked up based on a Violent Crime Index offense (i.e., homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, or sexual assault). Additionally, despite the decrease of LS-involved youth placed in a residential facility, throughout the U.S., youth of color continue to be overrepresented at every stage of the JLS (Robles-Ramamurthy & Watson, 2019).

Figure 8. Youth Residing in Juvenile Detention, Correctional and/or Residential Facilities Nationwide, 2013-21



Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation (2024), "Youth residing in juvenile detention, correctional and/or residential facilities."

KEY FINDING 5

Age Distribution and Concentration Among HMY

Table 11. Grade and Age Distribution Among HMY Groups, from SY 2012-13 to SY 2021-22

	Grade Distribution				
	0-5 yrs (not Kindergarten)	**Grades K-5**	**Grades 6-8**	**Grades 9-12**	**Out of school**
Students experiencing homelessness	3% (3-5 yrs)	45%	22%	29%	N/A
Eligible migrant students	12% (birth-5 yrs)	36%	18%	23%	11%

	Age Distribution			
	0-5 yrs	**6-12 yrs**	**13-17 yrs**	**18-20 yrs**
Youth in foster care	42%	30%	24%	4%
LS-involved youth	1%		83%	16%

Note. Data derived from Children's Bureau (2022), "The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #29"; Puzzanchera, Sladky & Kang (2023), "Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement"; U.S. Department of Education (2023a), "Homeless students enrolled: 2021-2022 SY"; U.S. Department of Education (2023b), "Eligible migratory students -- 12 months (MSIX data): 2021-2022 SY."

There are notable age differences across HMY groups, highlighting the need for age- and developmentally appropriate continual support. In the foster care system, there is a comparatively higher concentration of very young children, with 72% aged 0-12, whereas the JLS primarily consists of older youth, with 99% aged 13-20 *(Puzzanchera et al., 2023; Children's Bureau, 2022)*. Youth experiencing homelessness and migrant youth exhibit similar age patterns, with a close split between elementary (K-Grade 5) and secondary (Grades 6-12) education levels. Specifically, 45% of homeless students are in K-Grade 5, and 51% are in Grades 6-12, while 36% of migrant students are in K-Grade 5, and 41% are in Grades 6-12 *(U.S. Department of Education, 2023a; U.S. Department of Education, 2023b)*. Additionally, there is a notable presence of out-of-school migrant students (aged 16-21) who are of compulsory school age but not enrolled in formal education. Out-of-school migrant students have very limited access to resources from federal and state programs and face challenges that often go unnoticed, including low school engagement and educational attainment, early parenthood, language and cultural barriers, poverty, low wages, and unsafe working conditions *(Hill & Hayes, 2007; Lundy-Ponce, 2010)*.

KEY FINDING 6

Migratory Youth: An Underserved and Disenfranchised HMY Group

Migratory youth are among the most disenfranchised and underserved HMY in the U.S. Every year it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of children migrate across the U.S. with their Latine migrant farmworker (LMFW) parents who are seasonally harvesting crops *(Free, Križ, & Konecnik, 2014; Martinez & Cranston-Gingras, 1996)*. According to the National Center for Farmworker Health, in 2019-20, over 60% of all agricultural workers were born in Mexico (63%), 30% were born in the U.S. or Puerto Rico, and 5% were born in Central American countries *(Gold et al., 2022)* indicating that the overwhelming majority of migratory children and youth are foreign-born and Latine.

Many migratory youth (as young as age 10) will work long hours, under dangerous conditions, receiving low pay, while migrating alongside their parents for months at a time *(McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Miller, 2012; Wiggins, 2020)*. Studies show that seasonal migration work results in frequent educational disruptions for LMFW children, which makes it difficult for them to attend school regularly, learn at grade level, accrue credits, and meet all school and graduation requirements *(Berger Cardoso et al., 2017; Green, 2003; Martinez & Cranston-Gingras, 1996)*.

KEY FINDING 7

Racial and Gender Disparities Among Dual-System Youth

Prospective studies have tracked samples of youth in the child welfare system over time to determine how many of these youth enter the JLS, whereas retrospective studies have captured the presence of maltreatment and CWS involvement among youth in the JLS *(Herz et al., 2019)*. Prospective studies report that 7 to 30% of youth in the CWS between ages 10 and 18 eventually cross into the JLS *(Cutuli et al., 2016)*. For example, one study found that 7% of all first-time juvenile offenders in Los Angeles County from 2002 and 2005 were involved with the child welfare system. Dual-system involvement is noticeably higher in retrospective studies ranging from 44 to 67% *(Halemba & Siegel, 2011; Pickard, 2014)*. In King County, for example, 67% of these youth had some type of contact with child welfare either at the time of their arrest or earlier in their lives *(Halemba & Siegel, 2011)*. Across the state of Washington for youth in the juvenile court in 2010 the prevalence rate was 44% *(Pickard, 2014)*.

A variety of studies conducted across the United States consistently report higher levels of overrepresentation for Black youth in dual-system populations compared to single-system populations. The overrepresentation of Black youth in dual-system populations, for example, was more than double that in single-system populations in Arizona *(Halemba et al., 2004)*, Washington State *(Pickard, 2014)*, Los Angeles County *(Herz, 2016)*, and Illinois *(Ryan et al., 2011)*. One study used official Illinois data on arrests occurring between January 1, 2001, and June 30, 2009 *(Ryan et al.,2011)* to examine the percentage of dual-system-involved Black youth. When looking only at Black youth in the JLS–males, females, or both together–a considerably larger proportion of them (from 10 to 27 percent) are also involved with the CWS. This does not indicate a cause-and-effect relationship between CWS and JLS contact. Instead, if arrests for all youth in the CWS are decreased, there will be disproportional decreases in the arrests and detention of Black youth, and thus a reduction in racial disparities in the JLS. Moreover, the impact will be even more significant for Black females than for their counterparts.

Although males are overrepresented among dual-system youth compared to females, females under age 18 represent the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population. Their arrests have increased by 72% since 1983 as compared to 30% for males under 18 years of age *(Snyder, 2002)*. Females are also more likely to be held for technical violations and status offenses as compared to males in the JLS *(Sickmund, 2004)*. Once in the JLS, female offenders are more likely to be identified with mental problems such as PTSD, suicidal behavior, dissociative disorder, and borderline personality disorder *(Cauffman, 1998)*. Other research demonstrates that rates of females in dual-system populations are often compounded when the intersection of race and gender are considered *(Herz et al., 2019)*, specifically for Black females rather than Latinas or white females *(Herz et al., 2019; Herz et al., 2021; Ryan et al. 2011)*.

KEY FINDING 8

Homelessness Among CWS- and JLS-Involved Youth

Extant research demonstrates that youth in foster care experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness than youth in the general population, with rates ranging from 11% to 38% *(Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Dworsky et al., 2012; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Shpiegel & Ocasio, 2015; Stott, 2013)*. Studies also confirm higher rates of JLS involvement among youth experiencing homelessness. One study found that among a sample of 656 young people ages 14–21 who were experiencing homelessness in 11 U.S. cities, nearly 44% had stayed in a jail, prison, or juvenile detention center; 78% had at least one interaction with the police at some point; and nearly 62% had been arrested at least once *(ACYF, 2016)*. There is less research on homelessness among dual-system youth *(see Hirsch, Dierkhising, & Herz, 2018; Onifade et al., 2014 for exceptions)*, but one recent study found that these youth had the highest rates of childhood trauma and lifetime mental health diagnoses compared to young adults without a history of system involvement and compared to young adults in single system populations *(Hirsch, Dierkhising, & Herz, 2018)*.

KEY FINDING 9

Data Limitations in National Data Sources

We identified four significant data limitations in national data sources for HMY:

1. Inconsistent data collection and exchange processes for all HMY groups

2. Variability in definitions and terms for HMY groups

3. Limited data categories/metrics and missing critical information for HMY

4. A lack of longitudinal data to track HMY

Below we provide evidence for each limitation based on national and state data available across different HMY groups (see Appendix B for an overview of national data sources for HMY).

1. Inconsistent data collection and exchange processes for all HMY groups

The accuracy, consistency, and timeliness of national data vary across HMY groups and are largely impacted by state policies as well as data-sharing processes among child-serving systems (e.g., CWS, JLS, MEP, SEAs, LEAs).

Youth in Foster Care

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Education generated youth in foster care data snapshot reports for eight states: California, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, Montana, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin (See Appendix A). Snapshots for only eight out of 50 states suggests that the vast majority of child welfare agencies (CWAs) and state education agencies (SEAs) are struggling to collect and exchange data for their youth in foster care. After reviewing these reports for youth in foster care, we noted considerable state-to-state variability in the data exchange process between CWAs and SEAs, specifically in terms of when and how they exchange data. For example, data exchange in Washington state is a highly automated process that happens nightly, whereas in Texas data exchange happens once a year. In addition, although these reports shared that education data is exchanged between CWAs and SEAs, there was no further detail on what education data was exchanged nor were education outcomes shared in the reports. Only California reported chronic absenteeism rates for youth in foster care.

Migratory Youth

In response to migrant students' continuous moves between schools, Congress required the creation of a student record system as a solution to eliminate the issues – such as enrollment delays – due to a lack of student information *(Senator Sparkman Statement, supra note 133, at 14,327)*. The Migrant Student Information Exchange (MSIX) is the technology that allows states to share educational and health information on migrant children who travel from state to state and who, as a result, have student records in multiple states' information systems. While the student data collection and database requirements were well intended, lawmakers accepted them too quickly as the best solutions even though they have rejected such a student data collection practice and database for all other students (e.g., youth in foster care, LS-involved youth) *(Madrid, 2019)*.

As Congress considers the balance between data collection for research and student privacy concerns, it must fully consider the implications of federally held data for subgroups of populations, like migrant students with a percentage of immigrant families who worry about their legal status *(Madrid, 2019)*. This argument does not negate that MSIX may present an effective solution for migrant students' issues when they transfer between schools. Instead, the MSIX program should be inserted into the broader educational and privacy debate so that more protections may be granted to migrant children, and for other vulnerable student groups in the future *(Madrid, 2019)*.

Juvenile Legal System-Involved Youth

Compared to that of other highly mobile populations, data collection and reporting for youth in the JLS is scarce. Unlike data sources for other HMY groups, the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program (OJJDP) collects data biannually and does not exchange any data with other systems who also serve juvenile justice-involved youth (e.g., SEAs, CWAs). Research demonstrates that many states are hampered in their ability to evaluate their juvenile courts due to a lack of centralized data collection systems, particularly in states with decentralized courts *(Weber, 2022)*. This leads to inconsistent data collection practices and varying data definitions and quality across locales *(Weber, 2022)*. Additionally, less than a handful of states report sharing courtwide or judge-specific data on key court decisions with judges, other system stakeholders and branches of government, or the public, which limits transparency and opportunities for individual and collective system improvement *(Weber, 2022)*.

Dual-System Youth

Research highlights that precise data on the incidence of youth dual involvement is unclear, mainly due to the divergence in how CWAs and the JLS collect and track data. Additionally, the transient nature of youth moving through either of these systems presents challenges in tracking as they cross over *(Felix, 2016; Herz & Dierkhising, 2018; Walsh & Jaggers, 2017; Wright, Spohn, Chenane, & Juliano, 2017; Wylie, 2014)*.

2. Variability in definitions and terms for HMY groups, as well as formulas for calculating HMY groups

Youth Experiencing Homelessness

One major weakness of the literature on the causes and consequences of homelessness among youth is inconsistent definitions and criteria provided for homelessness and youth experiencing homelessness *(Edidin et al., 2012; Morton et al., 2017)*. Another challenge in defining youth homelessness is that there are two major federal funding streams for youth homelessness services and they have different definitions of homelessness *(Jarpe, 2021)*. First, the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) authorizes funding for runaway shelters and transitional living programs (TLPs) for youth experiencing homelessness. The RHYA defines homeless youth for the purposes of living in a TLP to be ages 16 to 21 "for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative; and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement" *(FYSB, 2008)*.

The second definition comes from HUD. With implementation of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (HEARTH) of 2009, HUD defines "homeless unaccompanied youth" as those up to age 25 who have experienced unstable housing in the last 60 days and have either a disability, addiction, or multiple barriers to employment. The different definitions for youth homelessness can drastically affect the accuracy and reliability of data collected for this population, which can then lead to discrepancies when comparing statistics or designing policies based on these numbers.

Youth in Foster Care

Different definitions of children and youth in foster care are used in relation to programs, services, educational entitlements, and programmatic funding supporting foster youth in schools. These definitions can vary at both the state and federal levels and can impact how states define and count youth in foster care. For instance, in the 2022 data snapshots for youth in foster care (See Appendix A), we noted considerable state-to-state variability in terms of how the number of students in foster care is calculated and what yearly data sources were used to calculate the number of students in foster care. For California, the number of students in foster care was based on 2020-21 SY data; for Georgia, the number of students in foster care was based on the sum of district totals for 2019-20 SY, which was not the overall state total due to student mobility; and for Indiana, the number of students in foster care was based on the number of students in foster care enrolled in school on October 1, 2020.

Migratory Youth

According to Madrid *(2019),* the MEP reacts to outdated eligibility requirements, which help define migratory youth, rather than proactively updating and implementing new ones. This limits state MEPs from reaching students who would greatly benefit from MEP services. The current eligibility requirements are outdated because of their restriction of the type of migrant child served and for how long they are served. Additionally, the eligibility standards do not fully reflect new migrant labor patterns, such as the increase in intraschool district moves and other migrant industries (e.g., construction and landscaping) *(Madrid, 2019).* Qualifying move definitions currently delay or limit services for groups like migrant refugees *(Madrid, 2019).* Similarly, MEP's inflexibility for industries beyond agriculture overlooks the labor displacements created by technological advances, while failing to respond to mobility and low-wage issues *(Madrid, 2019).*

Dual-System Youth

Researchers and stakeholders use different terminology for youth involved in both the child welfare system and JLS (e.g., crossover youth, dual-system youth) which impacts our understanding of how they pass through different phases of involvement in either system. Inconsistent terminology impacts data quality, policy development, and intervention design *(Wiig, Tuell, & Heldman, 2013).* Jurisdictions undertaking systems integration and coordination work among the CWS and JLS need to come to a consensus on how to refer to youth involved in both systems to collect accurate data.

3. Limited data categories/metrics and missing critical information for HMY

As described earlier, unique student characteristics and education outcomes for HMY continue to be underreported at both the national and state levels.

Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Compared to data for other HMY groups, education data for students experiencing homelessness capture unique student characteristics, including EL status, disability status, unaccompanied youth status, and migratory status. However, there are other important demographic characteristics that are strongly associated with homelessness that would be important to capture including early parenthood, mental health diagnoses, and histories in the CWS and JLS.

Youth in Foster Care

We noted considerable state-to-state variability in terms of what data categories and elements were exchanged in the 2022 data snapshots (See Appendix A). Of the eight data snapshots, five states collected education data, but education data elements varied from state to state, and states did not elaborate what education data elements were collected or shared with schools. For example, California was the only state to report chronic absenteeism rates for youth in foster care. Georgia was the only state to report the number of students entering or leaving foster care in a given school year.

Migratory Youth

As a condition of receiving a grant of funds under the MEP, each SEA must collect, maintain, and submit minimum educational and health information to MSIX within established time frames. These regulations ultimately help the U.S. Department of Education to determine more accurate migratory youth counts and meet other MEP reporting requirements. Nonetheless, there are key data elements that are unavailable to the public via the MEP data dashboard. Various data elements could be expanded upon in terms of child demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, whether they work in a migrant industry alongside their parents) and family demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, migrant industry they work in, number of moves for work). These indicators have been highlighted in the literature to be associated with important child- and family-level outcomes. Nonetheless, student privacy concerns must be considered when deciding upon which data elements to expand upon, especially when data could jeopardize their stay in the U.S. The ultimate goal of increasing data elements in MSIX and in the MEP data dashboard is to inform policies and practices aimed at promoting the health and well-being of migratory children and youth.

Juvenile Legal System-Involved Youth

Although the OJJDP provides "easy access" to national, state, and county population data for youth involved in the juvenile legal system, it details only age, sex, race, and Latine ethnicity. However, unlike other national data sources for other HMY, OJJDP does not collect any data categories related to education or socioemotional well-being, preventing stakeholders from understanding their needs and effectively responding to those needs.

4. Challenges in collecting longitudinal data for all HMY

Collecting comprehensive, granular, and longitudinal data for all HMY presents a significant challenge, particularly given the transient and highly mobile nature of these youth. The lack of consistent records and tracking mechanisms across districts, regions, and states creates gaps in understanding the mobility patterns and long-term impacts of instability on their educational and socioemotional outcomes.

Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Longitudinal data is essential to capture not only the occurrence of homelessness but also its timing, reasons, and duration. Youth experiencing homelessness often move between districts and states, making it difficult for schools and social services to maintain consistent records. Given their frequent moves across districts and states, longitudinal data systems can reveal how housing instability affects their educational trajectories and access to resources.

Migratory Youth

Longitudinal data could reveal how states that contain large concentrations of migratory youth (i.e., California, Texas, Washington, Florida) can collaborate to serve the youth and families frequently migrating to and from their states. Such data would provide a better understanding of migration patterns among students and families as well as inform SEAs on how to better serve the educational and social needs of this population. This data would minimize the negative impact of mobility on the education outcomes for migrant youth as well as promote better social integration in their schools and inform schools on how to serve migratory students and their families beyond the vicinity of the school.

Youth in Foster Care and Juvenile Legal System-Involved Youth

Similarly, for youth passing through the CWS and the JLS, longitudinal tracking should provide insights into the timing of their contact with these systems, recidivism, and their transitions out of these systems. While research demonstrates that the majority of referrals to these systems are made by schools, it is unclear how SEAs and LEAs are equipped to support students with histories of CWS and JLS involvement or at risk for CWS and JLS involvement. Longitudinal data should also be exchanged between the CWS and JLS to better understand the links between early child welfare involvement and later delinquency, or between delinquency and later child welfare involvement, allowing for more proactive, preventative interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data collection and reporting discrepancies across different child-serving systems make it challenging to identify and serve all HMY. These data inconsistencies are partially attributed to differences in how states and systems collect data. Strategies for cross-systems collaboration cannot be fully developed until these data discrepancies are addressed.

In response to current data challenges and discrepancies, along with comparatively poor education outcomes for HMY, we make the following recommendations to both strengthen existing national and state data, and to ease cross-systems collaboration that aims to identify and invest in the education, success and well-being of HMY:

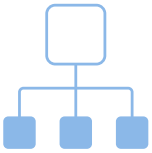
01 Develop centralized and integrated data systems.

Creating centralized data systems that can track HMY across state lines and different systems and tools like the Migrant Student Information Exchange (MSIX) could be enhanced to include more detailed demographic and education information, and similar tools could be developed for other HMY groups, while balancing student privacy concerns. Having centralized and integrated data systems would allow for better tracking of all HMY as they move across systems, regions, and states, improving service delivery and outcome monitoring.

02 Standardize data collection and reporting processes across states and federal systems.

Creating standardized timelines, data-sharing procedures, and metrics to ensure consistency would allow for data exchange processes among all HMY serving systems to ensure that data is routinely updated, shared, and reported. Cross-systems communication and collaboration among CWAs and SEAs in states like California, Washington, and Georgia — where data exchanges are routinely completed — could serve as models to other states with high numbers of youth in foster care. Nonetheless, growing cross-systems work among CWAs and the JLS should continue to be supported and monitored by states and the federal government, and similar cross-systems work needs to be fostered among other child-serving systems, including the MEP and the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.

03 Expand data categories to capture more comprehensive information.



Add additional data elements to existing data categories around education, health, child well-being, and demographics. Having more comprehensive information around various data categories related to the health and well-being of HMY is essential in current efforts to close stark outcome disparities in this population. If systems do not understand how HMY are performing across a spectrum of well-being indicators, it will be very challenging to close existing disparities and to shape current programs and services. Additionally, increasing well-being elements for HMY will better facilitate cross-systems collaboration.

04 Use consistent definitions of HMY across state and federal agencies.

State and federal agencies should work toward aligning their definitions of homelessness, youth in foster care, legal system-involved youth, and dual-system youth. This would reduce state-to-state discrepancies and within-state inconsistencies in how HMY groups are defined. Moreover, harmonizing definitions of HMY between states and within states will lead to more accurate data collection procedures and reporting for HMY. A systematic policy review of the varied definitions for all highly mobile youth groups and their overlap in multiple systems may help pinpoint where there are incoherences and how that impacts cross-systems collaboration.

05 Invest in longitudinal data collection.

Longitudinal tracking would allow states and local governments to understand the long-term impacts of mobility, homelessness, and child-serving systems involvement on the overall health and well-being of HMY. Having a longitudinal picture of how and where youth transition in and out of different systems will help to inform current efforts to uplift HMY, and to inform future policy and program development.

06 Prioritize upstream strategies that focus on prevention, systemic change, and early interventions.

Key upstream strategies include:

- **Strengthening Housing Stability:** Expand affordable housing initiatives and provide emergency housing support to prevent homelessness and reduce frequent relocations.
- **Enhancing Access to Quality Education:** Implement policies for seamless school transitions, such as universal records transfer systems and training for educators on mobility-related challenges.
- **Investing in Family and Community Support:** Offer wraparound services like family counseling, employment assistance, and mentorship programs to build resilient support networks.
- **Increasing Early Intervention Services:** Provide mental health screenings, early childhood education, and access to healthcare to mitigate the long-term effects of instability.
- **Developing National Data Systems and Policies:** Create coordinated data-sharing systems across states and agencies to track and support mobile youth, ensuring they don't fall through the cracks.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION FOR PRIORITIZING HIGHLY MOBILE YOUTH

HMY are among the most vulnerable youth in the country and demonstrate less than optimal educational, socioemotional, and health outcomes compared to their peers in the general population and compared to their low-income peers *(see Blome, 1997; Cook, 1994; Okpych & Courtney, 2021).*

Extensive research points to a combination of systemic and family-level factors that contribute to high mobility for HMY and to negative outcomes. Our findings reveal significant overlap in the characteristics and experiences among HMY subgroups underscoring the need for cross-sector collaboration to identify and serve these youth. Our findings also reveal clear racial/ethnic, disability, EL, and age disparities across all HMY. Black and Latine youth are disproportionately represented in the CWS and JLS, and are more likely to experience homelessness than their non-Black and non-Latine peers. Black youth (both males and females) are overrepresented in dual-system populations compared to their Latine and white peers.

Our findings also demonstrate that over half of youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, and migratory youth are 12 years of age and under; and that more than 80% of LS-involved youth are between 13-17 years of age. This finding underscores the need to invest in long-term supports for HMY, particularly early childhood prevention programs. Our research found regional variations in the concentration of HMY, suggesting state-to-state variability in the services available to these youth. Additionally, we found disproportionate rates of disability and EL status across all HMY highlighting the need for more state and federal investment in their education. Migratory youth, in particular, are among the most disadvantaged and overlooked HMY groups in the U.S. Their migratory lifestyles contribute to high residential and school mobility, making it especially challenging for schools and other child and family programs to engage and serve them. Nonetheless, schools can serve as a focal point for bringing in services from the community that will benefit migratory students and their families.

Our research also highlights the bidirectional association between CWS and JLS involvement and homelessness, underscoring the need for longitudinal and integrated systems data to effectively track these youth across systems. Unfortunately, cross-sector strategies that uplift HMY remain limited, with siloed approaches dominating child-serving systems, and hindering cohesive care and comprehensive support. Significant data limitations further obstruct a full understanding of HMY populations. Inconsistent data collection, gaps in key metrics, and a lack of longitudinal tracking hinder a comprehensive analysis of mobility patterns and long-term outcomes. Addressing these systemic disparities requires a robust, data-driven approach to provide equitable resources and interventions for HMY across all regions and stages of development.

Despite all the challenges HMY have to endure, they display resilience in their will and ability to connect with their communities and to overcome. Their potential is too often hindered by systemic barriers—educational instability, limited access to essential resources, and emotional strains of constant change. By providing greater national attention to their unique circumstances, we can foster equitable opportunities and ensure that mobility does not equate to marginalization. Investing in highly mobile youth is not just a moral imperative but also a societal one. When we prioritize their stability, education, and well-being of our youth, we pave the way for them to contribute fully to their communities and to our nation's future. We must create systems and strategies that reflect the reality that highly mobile youth can no longer remain unseen in our systems; it is time to illuminate their struggles, build off their resilience, prioritize their needs, and ensure they have the tangible support necessary to thrive.

APPENDIX A

Summary of U.S. Department Of Education's 2022 State Snapshots for Youth in Foster Care

State	How is the number of students in foster care calculated?	Number of students in foster care	Graduation rate for students in foster care	Academic achievement for students in foster care	Chronic absenteeism rate for students in foster care	Frequency of data exchange between SEA and CWA	What is the data exchange process between SEAs, CWAs, and LEAs?	What data categories are exchanged?
California	The number of students in foster care and graduation rates are based on 2020–21 SY data, and assessment results are based on the 2018–19 school year data for all grades.	32,359	56%	24% met reading/ language arts standards and 15% met mathematics standards	34.5%	Data exchange happens weekly.	The SEA merges CWA data with the data from the CA Longitudinal Pupil Data System. The SEA makes this data available for LEAs to view in the state data system.	Demographics, education, and child welfare service information
Georgia	The sum of district totals for 2019-20 SY, which is not the overall state total due to student mobility.	11,075	39%	24% met reading/ language arts standards and 23% met mathematics standards	Not available	Data exchange happens annually.	The SEA adds information from the CWA dataset to its Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) using each child's identifier. The SEA then shares data on academic outcomes and demographics with the CWA. A second, separate process is in place for providing monthly updates of students entering or leaving foster care between the CWA and SEA, which is then dissem-inated to LEAs.	Academic outcomes, demographics, and number of students entering or leaving foster care
Indiana	The number of students in foster care enrolled in school on October 1, 2020.	14,500	54%	19.2% met reading/ language arts standards and 16.9% met mathematics standards	Not available	Data exchange happens monthly.	The CWA prepares foster care data which is combined with a food and nutrition database. The SEA merges the data with SEA enrollment data. The SEA shares data with LEAs.	Demographic and education
Michigan	The number of children age 3 and above in foster care in 2020, calculated by using the number of children in care and the age of the children.	9,000	40%	26% met reading/ language arts standards and 16% met mathematics standards	Not available	Data exchange happens every 2 weeks	The CWA uses MI Bridges as a case management system for social services for children in foster care. The Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), a MI govt agency, merges CWA and SEA data. CEPI maintains the CSV file for each LEA that contains info on the number of children in foster care who are enrolled in each school. Each LEA can then download its report (required to do this at least 3 times a year).	The number of children in foster care who are enrolled in each school
Montana	Total students in foster care in the 2020-21 SY.	2,745	68%	20% met reading/ language arts standards and 13% met mathematics standards	Not available	Data exchange happens monthly.	The CWA generates a dataset of children in the foster care system. The SEA downloads the data and removes records for children under age 3 and personally identifiable information for the remaining records. The SEA then searches the SEA Student Information System (SIS) for each child in the CWA dataset and manually enters the CWA data for any search hits. The analyst then adds the SEA data to the CWA dataset for matched children. Finally, the SEA shares the SEA data files with the CWA Program Bureau Supervisor and holds a meeting with all four staff members to review the findings. Once the data is input into the SEA SIS, the LEAs can pull a report from the SIS that identifies which students within their district are in the foster care system.	

State	How is the number of students in foster care calculated?	Number of students in foster care	Graduation rate for students in foster care	Academic achievement for students in foster care	Chronic absenteeism rate for students in foster care	Frequency of data exchange between SEA and CWA	What is the data exchange process between SEAs, CWAs, and LEAs?	What data categories are exchanged?
Texas	The number of students in foster care in the 2020-21 SY.	17,090	61.4%	26% met reading/ language arts standards and 28% met mathematics standards	Not available	Data exchange happens annually.	CWA generates a dataset for students in foster care during the current SY. The CWA sends a standardized computer file to the SEA. The SEA then uses a secure method to store the data in the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Data are matched and then used to create standard reports containing information, including, but not limited to, demographics, grade level, promotion and retention, and disciplinary information. After the SEA creates the standard reports, it sends the standardized secure confidential data reports electronically back to the CWA. Exchanged data are made available to LEAs and schools. LEA and school staff must log into a state data system to retrieve the information about students in foster care and integrate the data into their local data systems.	Demographic and education
Washington	The number of students in foster care in the 2021-22 SY.	4,452	48%	23% met reading/ language arts standards and 9% met mathematics standards	Not available	Data exchange is a highly automated process that happens nightly.	CWA prepares a data file of student data containing the full name, date of birth, and State Student Identification number (SSID). Upon receiving the data file, the SEA performs data matches using the name, date of birth, and SSID variables. If data match on all three variables, SEA sends education data back to the CWA, which it uses to populate the student information system that the CWA caseworkers use. After the data are matched, the SEA uses the data to create longitudinal data reports, which it stores on the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), a data warehouse of education data. District foster care liaisons can run longitudinal data reports to determine which of their students are in foster care. The SEA also shares data with Treehouse, a community-based nongovernmental organization contracted with the SEA to support students in foster care.	Demographic, education, and welfare service info.
Wisconsin	The number of children age 6 and above in foster care in 2020, calculated by using the number of children in care and the age of the children. Wisconsin has confirmed that it does not report a student count for the students in the foster care subgroup.	4,000	53%	14% met reading/ language arts standards and 15% met mathematics standards	Not available	Data exchange happens annually.	The CWA prepares a data file containing foster care student information. The CWA uploads a data file onto a secure FTP site that the SEA can access. The SEA stores matched data in its own confidential database, which organizes the data into tables by specific subjects, such as graduation rate and assessment data.	Demographic and welfare service info.

APPENDIX B

An Overview of National Data Sources for HMY

Youth Group	National Data Source	Data Collection Period	Data Collection Frequency	Demographic Data	Overlap Characteristics Data	Academic Or Socioemotional Outcomes Data
Students in Foster Care	Children's Bureau	AFCARS data was submitted twice a year based on two six-month reporting periods.	Annually	Race/ethnicity, gender, age	Not available	U.S.Department of Education, Performance on Statewide Mathematics/ELA Assessment, File Spec 175, 178
Youth Involved in the Legal System	Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)	Census closes out data collection in mid-July. Processing of the data including error checks, imputation and editing continues until the following September.	Biannually	Race/ethnicity, gender, age	Not available	Not available
Students Experiencing Homelessness	U.S.Department of Education, File Specification 054, Data Group 102	SEAs may begin submitting Education for Homeless Children and Youth data in EDPass in November of each year. Data are submitted on a rotating schedule based on their content and the reports they are used to complete.	Annually	Race/ethnicity, school grade level	English learner status, disability status, migratory status, unaccompanied youth status	U.S.Department of Education, Performance on Statewide Mathematics/ ELA Assessment, EDFacts File Specification 175 & 178; Data Group 583 & 584
Migrant Students	U.S.Department of Education, File Specification 118, Data Group 655	Performance period (9/1-8/31)	Annually	School grade level	English learner status, disability status	U.S.Department of Education, Performance on Statewide Mathematics/ ELA Assessment, EDFacts File Specifications 175 & 178; Data Group 583 & 584

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