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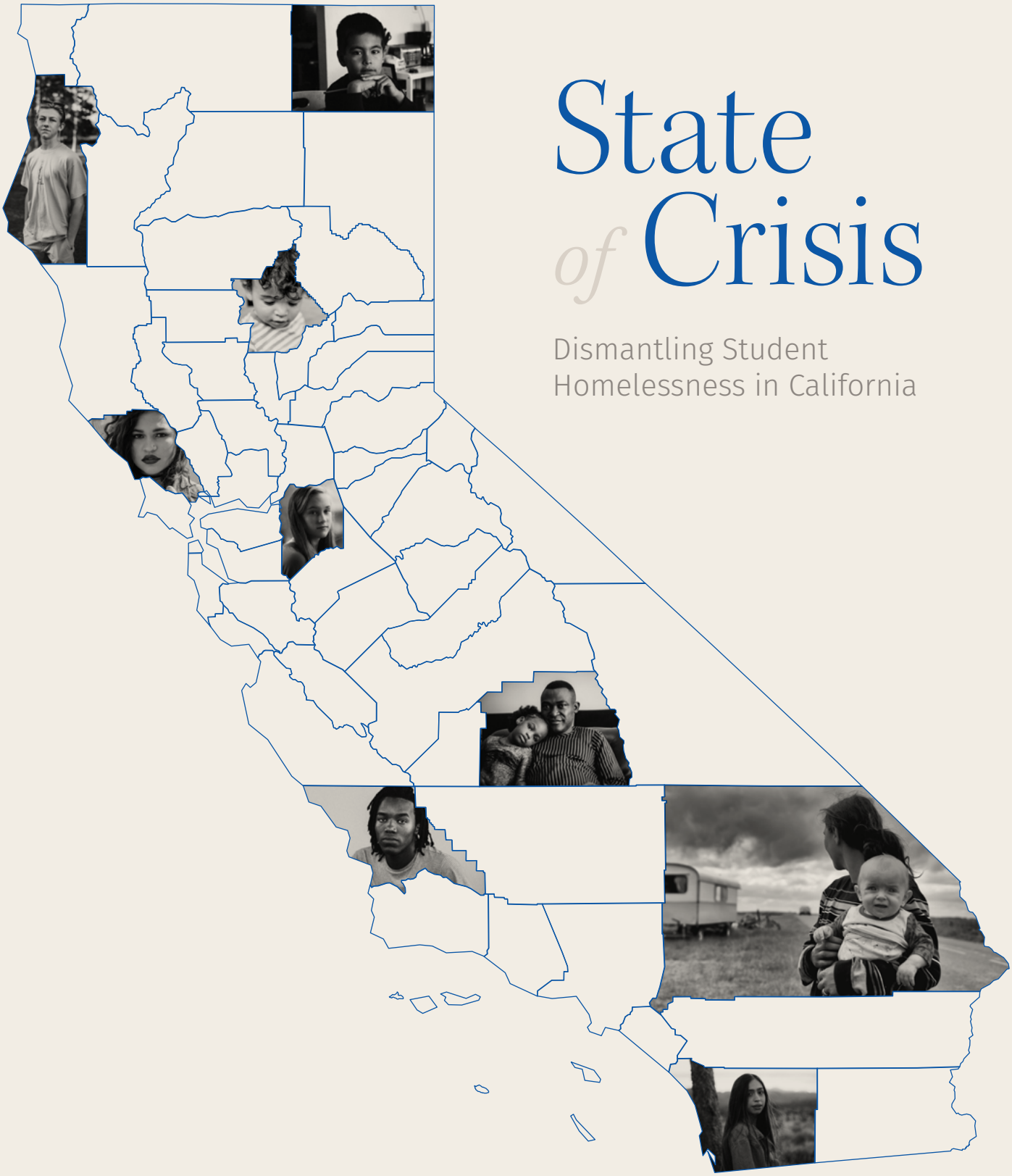

State *of* Crisis

Dismantling Student Homelessness in California

CENTER FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOLS

Joseph P. Bishop, Ph.D.
Lorena Camargo Gonzalez
Edwin Rivera

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Partnership on Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness

This project came about in response to the homelessness challenge impacting 269,000 students in the public school system in California, mainly as it affects Latinx and Black students. The Raikes Foundation, the Stuart Foundation, and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative have generously supported this study. Our work with the Raikes Foundation, SchoolHouse Connection, and Education Leads Home has connected our efforts to a network of states committed to pursuing school-based solutions to homelessness, including Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and Kentucky.

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Special Thanks

Structure of the Report

The goal of this report is to explore the types of educational and social supports that 269,000 students experiencing homelessness in California in K-12 may require to be successful in school and life[1]. We also document the unique needs of children and students experiencing homelessness in early learning settings for grades 0-5 through college, including 1 in 5 community college, 1 in 10 California State University (CSU) and 1 in 20 University of California (UC) students. Section I establishes the underlying challenges impacting educational success for students experiencing homelessness. The parameters for state and federal policies to address student homelessness in California are summarized in Section II. Section III of the report captures key findings based on focus groups and interviews with over 150 stakeholders from across the state including service providers, community-based organizations, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and higher education institutions in the state of California (see Appendix B for research methods). In Section IV, we highlight the perspectives of students who have experienced homelessness, exploring how homelessness has affected their capacity to participate and succeed in school. In Section V of the report, we analyze patterns in state data from the 2018-2019 academic school year for school districts and counties. Specifically, we analyze key indicators that influence student academic success, including 1) suspension rates, 2) chronic absenteeism rates, 3) graduation rates, and 4) UC/CSU readiness rates. Implications for lawmakers at all levels of government to address the student homelessness crisis are presented in Section VI. Lastly, Section VII discusses the connections between our findings in this report, and some of the practices, policies, and priorities that can improve services for the growing number of young people living in poverty and experiencing homelessness in the state of California.

Because of the complexity and scale of the challenges facing students experiencing homelessness in California, policymakers and educators need more accurate methods and greater capacity to identify affected students so that they can develop a strategy for deploying resources and implementing effective support systems. Both focus group participants and individual interviewees overwhelmingly called for an aggressive response to address the growing needs of students experiencing homelessness.

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COVID-19 & Inequality

Poverty and inequality had profoundly shaped the California education landscape long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost two-thirds of the 6.3 million K-12 students in California are economically disadvantaged. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to bring about additional hardships for students and families experiencing homelessness.

COVID-19 stay-at-home orders have led to a surge in job loss and employment rates, at its peak (15.5%) reaching the highest it's been in 50 years (Bohn et al., 2020). Unemployment numbers in Los Angeles County, the state's most populous, reveal that 599,000 residents have filed for unemployment, which could result in significant consequences for 558,000 children who live in households unlikely to be able to pay the rent (Blasi, 2020). Substantial increases in unemployment and other adverse economic repercussions of the virus will likely cause an increase in the number of students who will fit the definition of homelessness under federal laws and thus qualify for homeless educational services.

Across California, school locations closed in March and transitioned to distance learning in an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus. While closing schools was necessary to protect public health, school closures pose real challenges for students experiencing homelessness because many of them depend on support services provided by their local schools. These include a safe space to be and learn during the day for 6-8 hours, school meals, dedicated and caring staff, developmental support for early learning, and expanded learning through before/after school services. For our college-level students, the closing of postsecondary institutions has placed additional stress on young people who have no housing off-campus.

Districts throughout the state have modified services for students experiencing homelessness to adapt to the challenges of coping with COVID-19, both in terms of helping students meet basic needs, and through providing distance learning services. Nevertheless, some of the underlying learning challenges that existed before COVID have only created more stark differences between students experiencing homelessness and those who have a stable living environment. One county official shared her perspective on this issue.

> Most of our families end up in places like motels, because there is very limited housing for them. So they may be in motels for months or years because the permanent housing market is just not there...and that's tough to be in situations where you're in a hotel and trying to learn. That's not optimal learning. If you've got a family of seven living in a one-room apartment for months on end and trying to do online learning, that right there alone, it's very, very difficult, and it's discouraging for a lot of our students. We're pushing education because we know it can be a cycle breaker, but it's discouraging for them.

Many students experiencing homelessness depend on support services provided by their local schools. These include:

- **a safe space** to be and learn during the day for 6-8 hours
- school **meals**
- dedicated and caring **staff**
- **developmental support** for early learning
- expanded learning through **before/after school services**

Some of the modified services that school systems have prioritized in response to COVID-19 include transportation assistance, "home" delivery of learning materials (or other appropriate options), and providing meals and hygienic supplies. Los Angeles County has established 60 'Grab and Go' centers to allow students and families to access two meals each day. Across the state, school districts have modified their nutrition services programs to provide weekly and weekend meals in bulk for entire families. Meal distribution has also provided an effective mechanism for local educational agencies (LEAs) to communicate with families and supply additional educational resources, materials, and pertinent information. In Fresno County, for example, districts are working together with teachers to help develop systems for identifying students who might be experiencing homelessness through 'virtual' indicators presented within distance learning settings. Some districts in the Central Valley are exploring ways to improve instruction for students who lack access to quiet, dedicated spaces for learning and class participation. A county office of education representative explained further.

> For students, let's say, in a motel room, these kids are trying to learn and focus. Quite a few districts are getting headphones so that it cancels out [distractions]. Also, some are actually ordering microphones. So they're really anticipating what students might need.

The abrupt shift to distance learning has presented real challenges for students experiencing homelessness. Challenges for students experiencing homelessness include not only finding safe, stable spaces for them to learn, but also having adequate technology and internet access to participate in class discussions. One Southern California non-profit shared how it has shifted its focus under COVID-19 to distributing hot spots to families, shelters, and motels or hotels, to help students.

> We've made getting hot spots a top priority for our organization to support distance education. Recently we delivered a hotspot to a family, and their little girl started crying. She was just so happy, because she loved doing her homework and that hotspot would allow her to do homework.
>
> There was a hotel owner that worked so well with the county homeless liaison that a partnership was developed between them and a non-profit educational services agency that the hotel owner designated one entire room typically used to rent for students to set up digital devices and virtually meet with teachers and tutors.

As one interviewee shared, these types of collaborations are more likely to be possible when homeless liaisons have served in their positions for several years, are fully and continuously funded, and become familiar enough with the communities they serve to build relationships with students and families. In some instances, because of the dislocation challenges associated with homelessness, teachers and school sites have difficulty communicating with students outside of school, making it difficult to effectively communicate with students outside of school to assess their living situations or educational needs. The cumulative effects of these both known and unknown COVID-19-related opportunity gaps may further exacerbate disparities in achievement between students experiencing homelessness and their non-homeless peers.

In response to COVID, the California Department of Education continues to work closely with county homeless liaisons to ensure that students experiencing homelessness and youth within their county have access to technology and internet access to support distance learning. This report highlights the urgency of responding effectively to the changing needs of students experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, documenting prevailing educational conditions that existed before COVID.

I

Underlying Challenges

Impacting the Academic Success of Students Experiencing Homelessness

CHALLENGE 1

Growth in the Numbers of Students Experiencing Homelessness

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (2019), 27% (151,278) of all people experiencing homelessness, and 53% (108,432) of all unsheltered individuals in the United States live in California.[1] The CDE reports that over 269,000 students in kindergarten through 12th-grade experience homelessness. **That's enough young people to fill Dodger Stadium to capacity almost five times.** However, there is good reason to suspect that the number of students experiencing homelessness could be considerably higher. For example, a recent survey of 700 school districts in California found that many districts do not accurately report the number of homeless students due to factors such as the population's underreporting, high degree of mobility, and instability (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019a). The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) employs an alternative approach to estimating the prevalence of teenage homelessness and measuring various characteristics of student homelessness. YBRS, an anonymous, self-reported survey, estimates population rates for high school students impacted by different housing circumstances to be considerably higher than state rates counts (Cutuli et al., 2019). While YRBS only examines high school students self-reporting on homelessness, it suggests that different measurement methods can produce different population estimates.

According to data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, California has experienced a 48% increase in student homelessness over the last decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2018; See **Figure 1**). Such a dramatic increase in students experiencing homelessness has made implementing strategies for reducing the impact of homelessness on student education challenging to accomplish, especially in districts and counties where there is only one homeless liaison. That's because the responsibilities of a homeless liaison are quite expansive (see **page 4**), including working directly with families or guardians, child welfare agencies, housing agencies, health care providers, school site leadership, district leadership and others to eliminate any potential academic, social, emotional or health barriers for students. Several district and county homeless liaisons who participated in focus groups for this report indicated that larger school districts need more than one homeless liaison to help identify and serve students and families

[1] HUD considers individuals and families sleeping in a place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation (e.g., abandoned buildings, train stations, or camping grounds) as "**unsheltered**" homeless.

experiencing homelessness. All districts are required by law to have at least one homeless liaison. However, interviews with homeless liaisons revealed a common theme: that not all schools serving growing numbers of students experiencing homelessness have a school site liaisons to work in coordination with district liaisons, a best practice recommended by both the United States Department of Education and the California Department of Education. This suggests a need for ongoing funding to support a full-time liaison at individual school sites. Even when districts do have designated homeless liaisons, they often have other responsibilities, which makes it difficult for them to perform the complex tasks essential for someone in this role. When liaisons are not present at schools, students experiencing homelessness must rely upon support from district officials (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019a). One district administrator identified a common challenge for the field: most school staff, including school secretaries and counselors, have not received training on how to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. One educator explained,

> “Our school secretaries and school counselors need more training on how to correctly identify homeless youth so we can better support our youth.

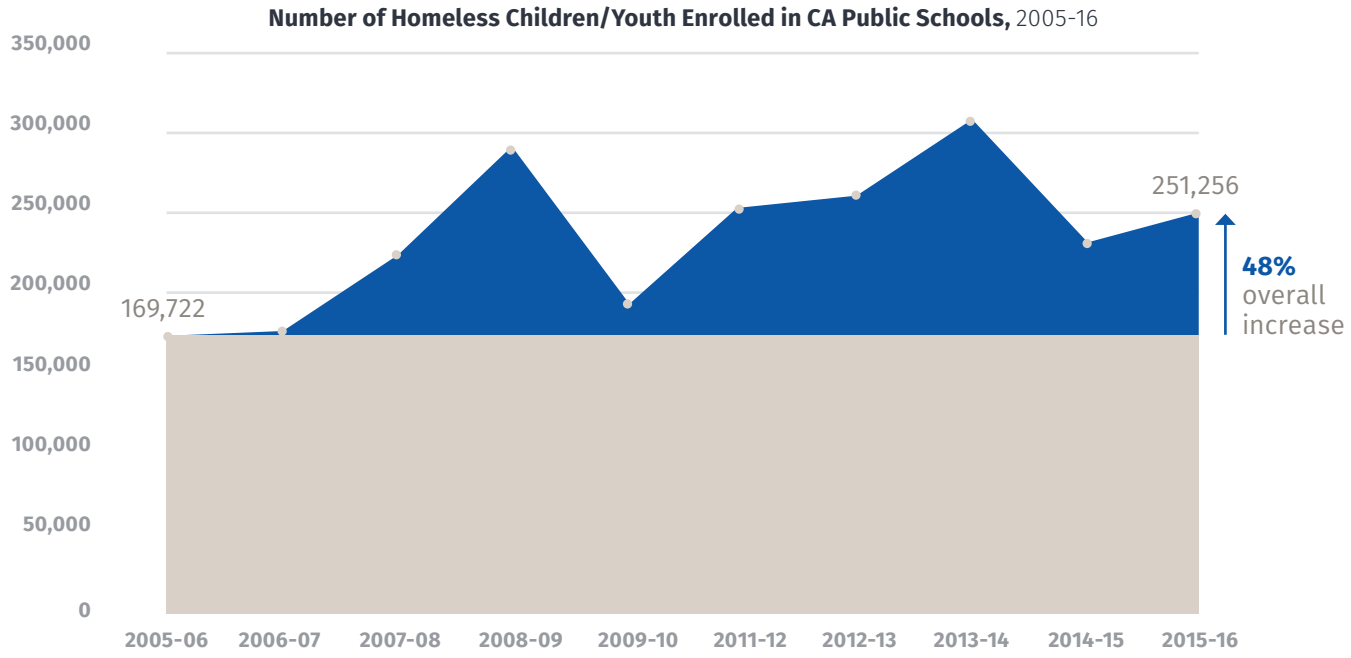
Homeless Liaison Responsibilities

(California Department of Education)

The LEA must designate a Homeless Liaison and ensure that the liaison is able to carry out his/her duties as legally required. The liaison must:

- Ensure homeless children and youth are properly identified and immediately enrolled.
- Review/revise and local policies and practices to ensure that students are not segregated or stigmatized (by school or program) on the basis of their homeless status.
- Participate in professional development and technical assistance activities and ensure that school personnel providing McKinney-Vento services receive professional development and support.
- Assist unaccompanied homeless youth with enrollment, school placement, and obtaining records.
- Inform parent, guardian and unaccompanied homeless youth of educational opportunities available to ensure homeless students have equal access to magnet and summer schools, career technical education, advanced placement, and other LEA programs.
- Disseminate public notice of McKinney-Vento rights in locations frequented by parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth, in a manner and form understandable to parents, guardians, and youth.
- Ensure that preschool-aged homeless children and their families have access to and receive services, if eligible, under LEA-administered preschool programs (may include Head Start, Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and other LEA preschool programs).
- Remove enrollment barriers, including barriers related to missed application or enrollment deadlines; fines or fees; records required for enrollment including immunization or other required health records, proof of residency, or other documentation; or academic records, including credit transfer.
- Ensure students identified as homeless have school stability, and parents and school personnel are informed about how school of origin extends to preschools, receiving schools, and providing transportation until the end of the school year, even if a student becomes permanently housed.
- Inform parent/guardian/unaccompanied homeless youth of all services, including transportation to the school of origin, and the criteria for transportation assistance.
- Coordinate and collaborate with different divisions within the LEA such as special education, migrant education, Title I, nutrition services, transportation, etc. to ensure homeless students are afforded the opportunities and additional resources to have the access of their housed peers.
- Develop and coordinate collaborations with resources, including: public and private child welfare and social services agencies; law enforcement agencies; juvenile and family courts; agencies providing mental health services; domestic violence agencies, child care providers; runaway and homeless youth centers; food banks, providers of services and programs funded under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act; and providers of emergency, transitional, and permanent housing, including public housing agencies, shelter operators, and operators of transitional housing facilities.
- Ensure public notification of the educational rights of homeless students is disseminated in locations frequented by parents, guardians and unaccompanied youths, including schools, shelters, public libraries, and soup kitchens, in an understandable manner and form.
- Ensure that parents and the LEA staff are aware of the importance of the privacy of student records, including information about a homeless child or youth's living situation.
- Mediate school enrollment disputes and attend, as authorized, Student Success Teams (SST), School Attendance Review Team/Board (SART/SARB), Individual Education Plan (IEP), Expulsion and Manifestation Determination meetings.
- Refer homeless families and students to housing services, in addition to other services. Liaisons may affirm whether homeless students meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness in order to qualify for HUD homeless assistance programs.

Figure 1. Student Homelessness in California (U.S. Department of Education; 2018)



Note. The decrease in homeless counts during 2009-10 coincide with the implementation of the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), and the dip in 2014-15 coincides with a change in the way homeless data were collected in CALPADS. Figure 1 enrollment data were retrieved from yearly Consolidated State Performance Reports through the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, 2016.

CHALLENGE 2

Undercounted Students with Varying Definitions and Understandings of Student Homelessness

Students who experience homelessness, many of whom are Latinx (70%) and Black (9%) (California Department of Education, 2018), and LGBTQ-identifying youth (Morton et al., 2017) face significant hurdles to academic success (Cutuli et al., 2013). Instability in housing can result in lost instructional time due to absences. Homelessness can be closely related to lost instructional time and patterns of chronic absence (Van Eck et al., 2017). For example, a recent study of California districts eligible for additional state funds shows that students experiencing homelessness had the highest rate of chronic absence (Gee & Kim, 2019). One major hurdle to academic success for students experiencing homelessness is schools being unaware that students are experiencing homelessness (California State Auditor, 2019). Going uncounted and sometimes unnoticed because of a lack of awareness is not uncommon for students experiencing homelessness. Students experiencing homelessness and their families are often highly mobile and may also have an immigration status that places them or their families at risk of deportation (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019a; Young III et al., 2018). In one instance, a student shared his experience with becoming "unenrolled" or

27%
of all people experiencing homelessness and
53%
of all unsheltered individuals in the United States live in California.

pushed out by his schools because of chronic absence while homeless. In this instance, the school may have not known how his housing situation was affecting his attendance.

Some families and students do not reveal their living situations because they fear the stigma associated with homelessness, or because they do not understand that they may be eligible for additional educational supports and resources. Students, especially youth who often do not consider themselves as homeless or in crisis may not even see themselves as homeless, though they meet the criteria established by law, because they are living with relatives or friends, albeit under suboptimal circumstances.

One typical response we heard is described by a community based-organization staff who participated in a focus group for this report; she explained the complications with self-identification when students are "doubled up," or when multiple families are sharing housing.

> "Many of my students who I know are living with uncles and in bulk houses or in one room of a house don't consider themselves homeless because they have a place to sleep even if it's temporary and really uncomfortable...The school and district [does] not ask them specific questions about their living situation. Housing and rent prices are too high. Families are living bunched up on one property.

K-12 students experiencing homelessness in CA 269,269

Varying Federal Definitions of Student Homelessness Impacts Student Identification

A common obstacle when gathering accurate data on the number of students experiencing homelessness is the varying Federal definitions, regulations, and criteria for determining homelessness. Under the Federal McKinney-Vento Act (MVA), for example, a family in a doubled-up living situation due to economic hardship, loss of housing, natural disaster, or living in a motel or hotel, is considered homeless and qualifies for educational supports. However, under the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD's) regulations around MVA, families in doubled-up living situations, or living in motels or hotels are not classified as homeless. Eligibility differences can also limit the support levels, and types of services students and their families can receive. Out of the 269,000 California students currently identified in our education system as experiencing homelessness, fewer than 20% qualify for HUD services. HUD defines homelessness in the following four categories **(Table 1)**.

Understanding the differences between the McKinney-Vento and HUD definitions of homelessness (e.g., motels, hotels and shelters)–presents considerable challenges for educators and advocates in the field who must assess student needs and direct appropriate services for young people.

Table 1. Homeless Definition for HUD and Mc-Kinney Vento Definition

Children and Youth and HUD's Federal Homeless Definition	Mc-Kinney Vento definition for Early childhood providers and K-12 schools
Category 1: Literal homelessness Individuals and families who live in a place not meant for human habitation (including the streets or in their car), emergency shelter, transitional housing, and hotels paid for by a government or charitable organization. **Category 2: Imminent risk of homelessness** Individuals or families who will lose their primary nighttime residence within 14 days and has no other resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing. **Category 3: Homeless under other federal statutes** Unaccompanied youth under 25 years of age, or families with children and youth, who do not meet any of the other categories but are homeless under other federal statutes, have not had a lease and have moved 2 or more times in the past 60 days and are likely to remain unstable because of special needs or barriers.[2] **Category 4: Fleeing/ Attempting to Flee Domestic Violence** Individuals or families who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking and who lack resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing.	**1.** Children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; **2.** Children and youths who may be living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, shelters; **3.** Children and youths 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 **4.** Children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings, or; **5.** Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are children who are living in similar circumstances listed above. **Students must lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence to qualify as homeless.**

[2] An unaccompanied youth is a young person, not in the physical custody of their parent or guardian. A homeless unaccompanied youth is one that meets that definition as well as the definition of homelessness.

II

Education Policy
& Student Homelessness

California Local Control Funding Formula & Youth Homelessness Resources

In California's K-12 schools, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), has changed how local educational agencies (LEAs) in the state are funded and how local decision makers choose to allocate state education dollars. LCFF directs additional funds to districts based on the number of students who are low-income, English Learners, and in the foster care or child welfare system (California Department of Education, 2019f). 4 million of over 6.3 million students in the state are low-income (66%; California Department of Education, 2019f), 1.1 million are English Learners (19%; California Department of Education; California Language Census, 2019g) and 47,000 students are in foster care (0.7%; California Department of Education, 2019i). Young people experiencing homelessness may simultaneously be in any or all of the previously listed categories. Yet, there is no dedicated state funding stream within the LCFF formula to support students experiencing homelessness (California Department of Education, 2019c), as there are for low-income, foster youth and English Learners. In order to support students who are experiencing homelessness, the California Department of Education currently only funds a limited number of county offices of education and districts through highly competitive limited federal grant dollars through the Education for Homeless Children and Youth grant, and encourages and relies on districts to reserve Title I, Part A funds., and limited federal grant dollars through the Education for Homeless Children and Youth grant.

Many LEAs choose to use LCFF supplemental and concentration dollars to prioritize academic success of students experiencing homelessness as part of the "low-income" student group which, under the law, is reflected in their Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP).[3] LCAPs are one way to monitor interventions and supports being provided to students experiencing homelessness. The California School Dashboard disaggregates by academic performance, academic engagement, and conditions and climate data by student group, including students experiencing homelessness, making it possible to monitor their progress across the state.

California Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

More than 600 districts and 14 pilot school sites are implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS),[4] an effort that the Center for the Transformation of Schools (CTS) at UCLA is co-leading with the Orange County Department of Education and Butte County Office of Education. This systems approach to organizing schools around the needs of students to support learning and promote positive discipline, employs the use of inclusive practices (e.g., curriculum design, drawing from students' experiences and expertise, and fostering respectful environments) to meet students' academic, social and emotional needs. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), aligned to California's Eight State Priorities, provide

[3] The state Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) template can be found here: https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/lc/documents/lcaptemplate2020.docx

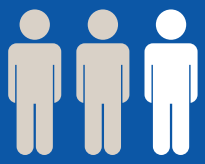
[4] More information about the California MTSS initiative can be found at https://ocde.us/MTSS/Pages/CA-MTSS.aspx

the infrastructure for building a statewide system of support. California's Multi-Tiered System of Support Framework can be a driver for implementation.

MTSS is an evidence-based and comprehensive vision for addressing system-wide and instructional changes necessary to lift up students and families that have been historically underserved by schools. These include including low-income students, students of color, English Learners, foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ-identifying young people, and students with disabilities. While preliminary research shows that MTSS is a promising, multifaceted approach for delivering support to students (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016), several of the individuals we interviewed noted that MTSS implementation could help provide heightened or targeted supports for students experiencing homelessness as an implementation framework for LCFF.

The Federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (MVA)

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, MVA, was reauthorized as part of the Federal Government's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). MVA serves as the primary federal policy mechanism specifically designed to support the educational success of students experiencing homelessness. MVA requires that all students experiencing homelessness age 21 and under, be afforded access to public education. Under the law, all school districts, charters, states, and postsecondary institutions, when applicable, are required to remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, and educational success for students experiencing homelessness. However, merely 106 of 1,037 school districts (9%) in California received federal funding from MVA to meet the mandates of the law. Those 106 subgrants, which total over $10 million (see **Tables 2, 3, and 4**) touch 36% (approximately 97,000 young people) or 1 in 3 youth among the total student population experiencing homelessness. This means that a majority of students and LEAs receive no dedicated federal funds to support the educational success of students experiencing homelessness. **Table 2** shows how the California Department of Education allocates MVA funds. **Table 3** and **Table 4** shows a list of districts in California receiving one and three-year MVA subgrants. This list does not include County Offices of Education who are included in the 106 communities receiving subgrants.



2 out of 3

students experiencing homelessness in California attend schools that receive no dedicated MVA funding.

Table 2. Funding Formula for California McKinney Vento Act Subgrants

Number of Enrolled Homeless Children and Youth	Maximum Funding Amount
50-100	$15,000
101-249	$25,000
250-499	$50,000
500-1,500	$75,000
1,501-2,500	$125,000
2,501-5,000	$175,000
over 5,000	$250,000

Note. Data on this table were retrieved from the California Department of Education, 2020.

Table 3. LEAs that Received One-Time McKinney Vento Funding (2019-20)

District	Homeless Cumulative Enrollment*†	2019-20 Award
Hacienda La Puente Unified	800	$42,000
Lindsay Unified	367	$42,000
East Whittier City Elementary	264	$41,900

Table 4. LEAs that Received 3-Year McKinney Vento Funding (2019-20)

District	Homeless Cumulative Enrollment*†	2019-20 Award
Los Angeles Unified	18,979	$250,000
Santa Ana Unified	6,970	$250,000
Moreno Valley Unified	4,846	$250,000
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified	5,417	$250,000
Pomona Unified	3,061	$175,000
Ontario-Montclair	2,528	$175,000
San Juan Unified	3,305	$175,000
Pajaro Valley Unified	3,208	$175,000
Twin Rivers Unified	3,223	$175,000
Rowland Unified	3,620	$175,000
Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified	3,391	$175,000
Chino Valley Unified	2,696	$175,000
Riverside Unified	2,652	$175,000
Anaheim Elementary	1,966	$125,000
Magnolia Elementary	1,814	$125,000
San Ysidro Elementary	1,390	$125,000
Merced Union High	724	$75,000
Lancaster Elementary	1,371	$75,000
Oakland Unified	1,179	$75,000
Lucia Mar Unified	1,030	$75,000
Escondido Union Elementary	1,320	$75,000
Stockton Unified	2,148	$75,000
Westminster	775	$75,000
West Contra Costa Unified	1,042	$75,000
Manteca Unified	1,082	$75,000
Natomas Unified	375	$75,000
Pasadena Unified	829	$75,000
Elk Grove Unified	725	$75,000
San Luis Coastal Unified	642	$75,000
Robla Elementary	550	$75,000
Fairfield-Suisun Unified	499	$75,000
Palm Springs Unified	2,391	$75,000
Roseville Joint Union High	369	$75,000
Eureka City Schools	366	$75,000
Lynwood Unified	549	$50,000
Center Joint Unified	347	$50,000
Poway Unified	289	$50,000
Little Lake City Elementary	279	$50,000
South Whittier Elementary	148	$50,000
Bear Valley Unified	249	$50,000
Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified	261	$50,000
Ukiah Unified	374	$25,000
Marysville Joint Unified	352	$25,000
McFarland Unified	233	$25,000
San Leandro Unified	157	$25,000
Alameda Unified	94	$25,000
Torrance Unified	223	$25,000
Placerville Union Elementary	79	$15,000

*https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/hs/documents/coeliaisonlist.xlsx

†Cumulative enrollment is calculated at each reporting level (e.g., district, county, etc.) and therefore is not necessarily additive from one reporting level to the next.

A recent survey of over 650 California homeless liaisons found that more must be done to fully fund and implement MVA federal requirements (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019a). The survey revealed that most liaisons have difficulty fulfilling the MVA's requirements to meet student academic needs because of recurring challenges in providing basic needs and services, including access health care, dental services, and mental health and substance abuse services. The extent of liaisons' responsibilities have, in many cases, become so expansive, that more resources and staffing are needed to meet the intent of MVA.

Despite clear limitations with MVA implementation, mostly related to its funding levels, state LEA grantees shared examples of ways that they are using their grant resources to improve the educational trajectories of students experiencing homelessness. Several examples of how LEAs are using funds are highlighted below.

One MVA grantee has been able to use its state grant to hire a full-time liaison who has become an invaluable connection point between students, families, motel managers, faith-based organizations, and nonprofits in the area. Such coordinated efforts are critical to helping students obtain school supplies, securing donations for students, and supporting student attendance in a summer camp after the school year. She explained their strategic use of funds.

> "We've hired a full-time liaison, and that makes all the difference in the world. Her role specifically is she goes to the local motels. She reaches out to the motel managers. She knows those families. She goes and knocks on the doors to faith-based organizations. They were able to send kids, pre-COVID, to summer camp, for instance. So it's really just having a person that's really able to do that. And she has been the person. She's a social worker by trade and makes sure that the resources are connected to the family. But I think it's being in the community. She reaches out and gets donations all the time.

One rural county grantee has been able to reach more than half of its districts as a result of obtaining additional resources and leadership training. It has also been able to support professional learning for classroom teachers and staff through online training.

> We trained over 200 people last year, looking at our data. The issue is it's difficult to get to our registrars, to our teachers, to our bus drivers. Now we actually have online training. So at least now, we're extending that to our teachers, to everyone. And everyone's required to take that training. I'm very excited. It's not the same as in person, but just the awareness and who I contact is huge. So we have 15 districts that could actually use that same program and push it out into their districts. So that's about half of our county.

Several MVA grantees described strategic efforts to boost college preparation and college-going for students experiencing homelessness. One such initiative has been developing an extensive college access resource website for students who are trying to navigate the complexities of college eligibility and application processes.

> We were asking students, do you want to know how to get to college? We developed a 100 page resource site with information. Over and over, we get responses from our students and from counselors and liaisons, that if we had not assisted them, they would not have completed the FAFSA. And they probably would not have gone to college. That's really the truth.

Grantees also shared how they have used MVA subgrants or Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) resources to prioritize mental health services, counseling, after school tutoring, and many other innovative strategies. In the following section, we discuss key findings from additional interviews with stakeholders. They describe some of the challenges in meeting the educational and basic needs of students and families experiencing homelessness.

III

Key Findings from Stakeholders in the Field of Early Childhood Education, K-12 & Higher Education

The authors of this report interviewed over 150 individuals, including service providers, county office of education representatives, district officials, students, educators, homeless liaisons, advocacy, and community-based organizations. To do so, we conducted three statewide focus group meetings, and one-on-one interviews over the course of a year, intending to identify common responses to the following questions:

What services are currently available to students experiencing homelessness in school systems?

What obstacles do students face when seeking services?

How could school systems better serve students experiencing homelessness?

Table 5. Summary of Focus Group & Interview Participants (N=155)*

Interview Settings	Stakeholders	Number of Participants
Focus Groups	Nonprofit organizations, Service providers, Foundation Organizations, State agencies, McKinney-Vento Liaisons, K-12 school staff, K-12 school educators, K-12 District and County Partners, Higher Education partners	119
Individual interviews	Students	13
Individual interviews	Higher Education campus and system-wide leaders	8
Individual interviews	Early Childhood Education partners	7
Individual interviews	Leaders in the department of education	4
Individual interviews	Nonprofit organizations	4

*More detailed research methods can be found in Appendix A.

In reporting our findings, we have also incorporated a discussion of the research literature on student homelessness and the role of early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education systems in mitigating the effects of poverty. We then make connections between the data we collected from our focus groups and interviews and the existing scholarship. A more detailed research methodology description can be found in Appendix A.

Key Findings

A number of themes emerged in focus groups and interviews that the authors further expand upon in this section:

01 **Current professional capacity to support students impacted by homelessness is inadequate:** comprehensive, targeted and coordinated training is needed.

02 **Homeless liaisons are struggling to effectively respond to growing needs in their community,** requiring more resources and staffing.

03 **The prevalence of Latinx and Black youth experiencing homelessness** requires more racially and culturally responsive strategies in education practice and policy.

04 **Students experiencing homelessness are often overlooked or misunderstood** in school settings, which can result in negative educational experiences.

05 **Better coordination is needed between child welfare, housing and education stakeholders** to alleviate barriers for students and families.

06 **Community-based organizations and nonprofits provide a critical function** as part of an ecosystem of support for students and can get out resources to families quickly.

07 **The bookends of education, early education and higher education are an often-overlooked yet essential part** of a coordinated response to student homelessness, from cradle to college.

KEY FINDING 01

Current professional capacity to support students impacted by homelessness is inadequate: comprehensive, targeted and coordinated training is needed.

Additional training focused on common instructional strategies that incorporate student supports such as trauma-informed care, restorative practices, and efforts that promote positive social and emotional development, are essential for schools serving students experiencing homelessness. Educators frequently stated that professional learning opportunities on such evidence-based strategies are too general and not explicitly tailored to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness. One district official explained further.

> Many districts identify homeless students and refer them to dedicated staff, such as a family advocate, but do not necessarily integrate training and knowledge of student homelessness challenges into their regular practices (e.g. counselors need to provide additional services to homeless high school students).

Of those homeless liaisons and district staff interviewed, a common theme was that the responsibility of coordinating services for homeless students has been placed on a single staff member. Having a solitary staff member serve as a homeless liaison was often cited in our focus groups as highly problematic for a range of reasons. Often, such individuals are not based at a single school site, but are serving multiple school sites simultaneously. When homeless liaisons are based within district offices or county offices of education they are often too removed from school settings to play an effective role in supporting homeless children and families to be a part of a student's daily life or play a substantive role in the school's community. County Offices of Education (COEs) and district liaisons are overwhelmed by the number of students in need of direct services to students.

“

I call myself the one-woman band. The funding from the state is nonexistent for homeless education. All of our money comes through the federal government and we have a grant which we have to apply for every three years to receive funding. And so it’s basically me and the county.

As was described by homeless liaisons we interviewed, in some K-12 educational settings, homeless liaisons serve as the lead educator supporting all high-need student populations (e.g., foster youth, homeless youth, migrant youth). Such multi-role arrangements are often necessary due to a shortage of funding. We learned from liaisons interviewed that they frequently struggle to prioritize the educational success of homeless students, given the number of students they are serving and the complexity of student needs (e.g., range of necessary services, academic, social, and emotional supports).

Three different county officials highlighted a desire for more resources that would allow for more professional learning opportunities for homeless education that match that of foster care liaisons, many of whom also wear a homeless liaison hat. One county official explains further.

> I think it would help to just continue to provide deeper support. For instance, in foster care, they have monthly meetings with their regions, and so they are constantly providing them a place to gather and network and support each other. I am part of those, but I bounce around to the foster care meetings just to support the side of homeless. Since a lot of our homeless liaisons are foster liaisons, a lot of our foster liaisons are homeless liaisons.

Families experiencing homelessness often face obstacles early on in accessing services for their students. Navigating these obstacles requires highly trained educators who understand state and federal laws and students' rights. A Northern California official from Head Start, a federally funded early anti-poverty program, explained the urgent need for additional training for people in the field directly working with students and families experiencing homelessness. She stated:

> A lot of expertise is required to serve families experiencing homelessness. You almost have to have a background in social services to handle some of the emotional strain and stress that the families are under.

This Head Start representative was speaking directly to the impact of the 2018 Camp Fire in Butte County, and its effects on displaced families, many of whom are now classified as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act (including doubled up due to economic hardship or in temporary housing, shelters or hotels, and motels). Later in this report, we explore the role of early interventions for students experiencing homelessness like the federally funded Head Start program. Head Start uses the same McKinney Vento Act definition of homelessness, allowing for greater alignment and collaboration opportunities between early childhood programs and K-12 systems. Families with young children face additional, unique challenges dealing with homelessness, especially the emotional distress resulting from fires and home loss that can

impact young children, resulting in anxiety, nightmares, and sleep disorders (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2010). The ability to effectively respond to an array of student and family needs resulting from a traumatic event like the Camp Fire requires that educators possess specialized training and expertise.

Educators also need professional learning opportunities in order to better serve specific populations of students experiencing homelessness, including students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ). A majority of advocacy and community-based organizations who participated in focus groups expressed a need for intersectional training to increase awareness about the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTQ students experiencing homelessness (Quintana et al., 2010; Durso & Gates, 2012, p. 2017; Rush & Santos, 2018). Of the 1.6 million youth who experience homelessness nationally, an estimated "20-40% identify as LGBTQ" (Page, 2017). One of the primary reasons that LGBTQ students experience high rates of homelessness and housing insecurity is "family rejection on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity." Rejection and abuse force many students out of their homes (Durso & Gates, 2012; Page, 2017). LGBTQ students of color face additional challenges related to discrimination and racism (NYC Commission, 2010). Students who are Black and identify as LGBTQ are more likely than other racial groups to experience homelessness (Morton et al., 2018).

Researchers have noted that MVA does not require targeted support for homeless LGBTQ youth (Quintana et al., 2010) or customized training for educators. Currently, California has no required training for professionals who provide services to staff working with LGBTQ youth who may have run away and become homeless as a result of mistreatment and rejection (Rush & Santos, 2018). As one educator noted, "Any school-based adults who support students need training [for LGBTQ identifying students], not just classroom teachers and administrators." Quinatana et al. (2010) call for a targeted standard of care for homeless LGBTQ youth.

A common finding among focus groups was a need for more guidance from county offices of education, where services and expertise are typically housed on strategies for serving students experiencing homelessness. Focus group participants noted that such guidance be should be offered to school districts that have direct contact with students experiencing homelessness and their families. Better communication, resource sharing, and coordination between school districts and counties can help foster a robust, multi-system coordination of care. Currently, educators and homeless liaisons find themselves working mainly in isolation as they respond to students impacted by housing instability. They feel challenged to identify students who need services and connect them to services county-wide or within districts without adequate time and resources to do so.

KEY FINDING 02

Homeless liaisons are struggling to effectively respond to growing needs in their community, requiring more resources and staffing.

The MVA mandates that all school districts and charter schools designate a homeless liaison who can serve as an advocate for homeless children and youth. "Liaisons are broadly responsible for monitoring transportation-related issues, facilitating student matriculations into schools and programs, educating schools and parents about MVA, and consulting parents about how to navigate school systems" (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; Miller, 2011). Homeless liaisons are among the few staff who shoulder the responsibilities for promoting the academic success and well-being of young people experiencing homelessness.

One of the most pressing concerns expressed by district liaisons in focus groups was the need to support students facing housing instability for the entire year, even when schools are closed. One liaison explained:

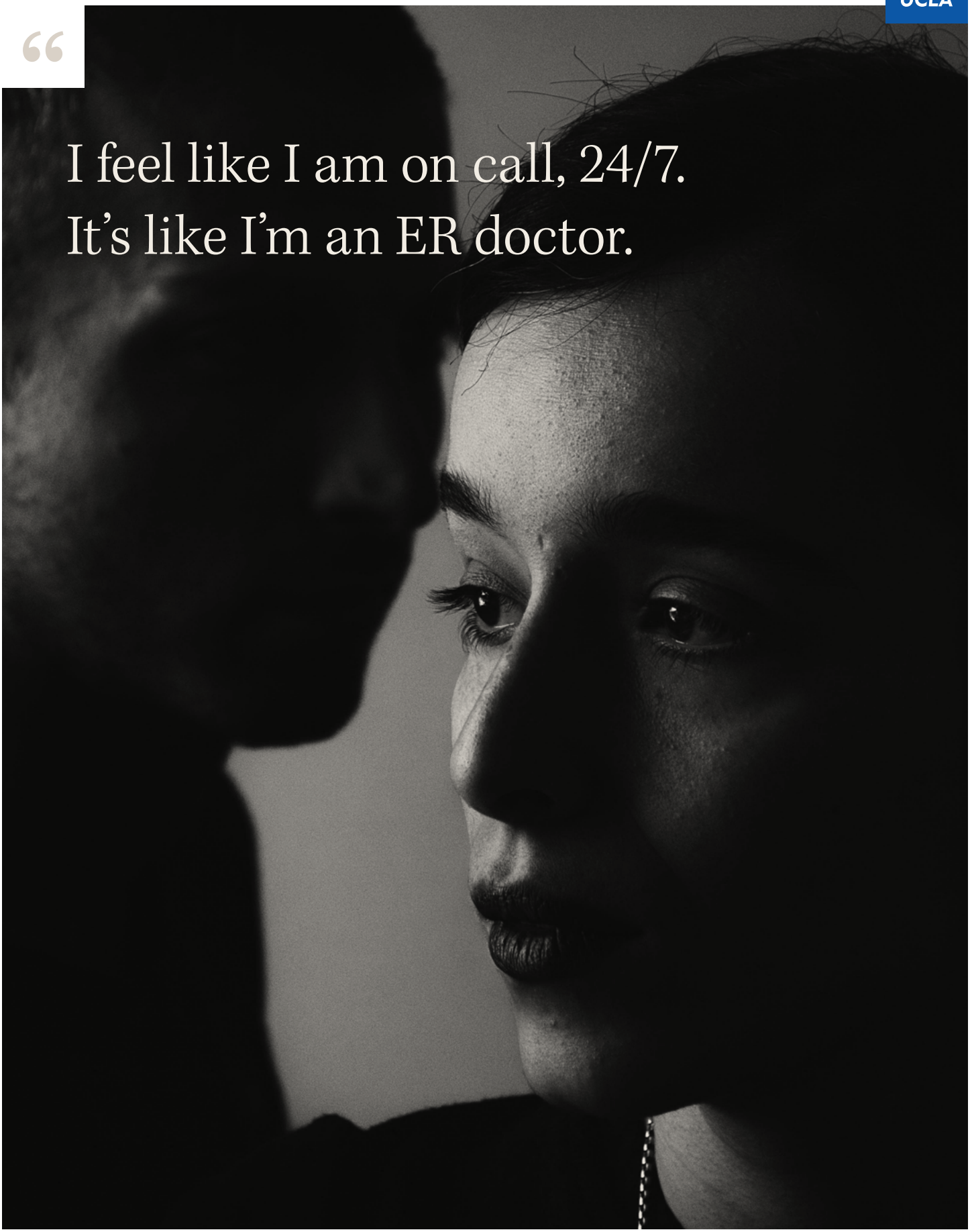
> My position is 9.5 months—this limits the amount of time I work with our McKinney-Vento families. I know, I believe my work requires additional time, 9.5 [months] is not enough.

Minimal federal support can make funding full-time liaisons extremely difficult, particularly for 12-month positions in large county offices, such as Los Angeles County, that are heavily reliant on McKinney Vento subgrants.

However, the increasing responsibilities of liaisons and the growing number of students experiencing homelessness (48% in the last decade in California) now requires more time and resources to support students, not less (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). A prevalent challenge of homeless liaisons interviewed was the all-consuming nature of the role. One participant said,

> We service 80 districts and 350 plus charters with anything that they need, everything from technical assistance support, onsite training, video training now, which we do a lot of, helping them find resources and supplies. We're doing a lot of technical work on legal related pieces. The funding is essential. I just wish again, there was more of it because there's such a high need.

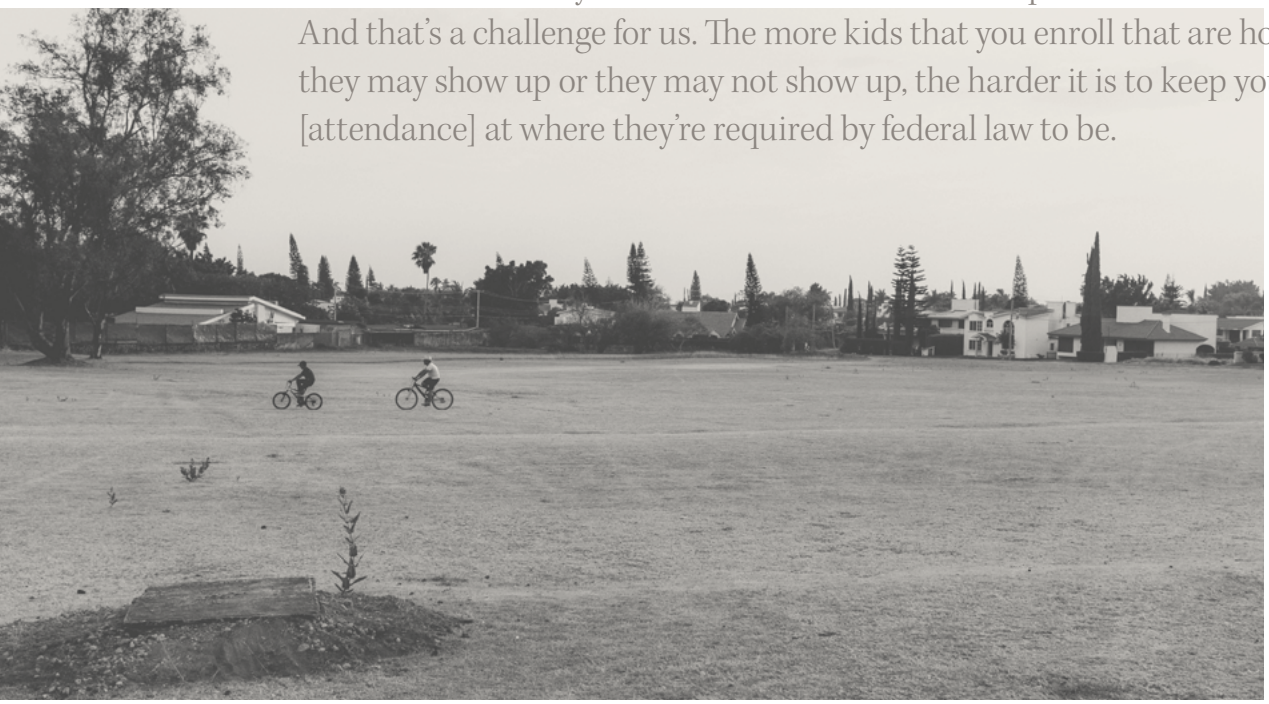
The pressure to address critical unmet needs of students experiencing homelessness and families expressed by this liaison was also reiterated by several of the homeless advocates we interviewed.


I feel like I am on call, 24/7.
It's like I'm an ER doctor.

Shouldering the primary responsibility for not only academic advice for students experiencing homelessness, but also being a strong advocate for young people can be an overwhelming job, an issue that repeatedly surfaced in focus groups and individual interviews with liaisons. A recent report recommended that school districts and the state of California devote more staff time and resources to liaisons so that they can more effectively perform in their jobs (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019a). One study found that 92% of homeless liaisons spend less than 25% of their time carrying out their MVA-related duties (Shea et al., 2010), suggesting that time and availability could be barriers to effective implementation of student supports. A majority of the liaisons interviewed for this report carry out several roles, such as responsibility for providing services to foster youth, migrant students, special education students, and "specialized services" broadly. The authors also heard that time constraints and competing priorities can impede liaisons' ability to distribute resources, including clean clothes, childcare subsidies, health and hygiene supplies, and access to laundry facilities. One liaison in particular explained the importance of being in her position long enough to have built relationships in the community. This has allowed her to successfully spread a message of need to donors to assist students and families.

Another concern expressed by the interviewees and focus group members involves the inability to maintain consistent communication with students and families experiencing homelessness who frequently move between temporary residences and often lack cell phones. Students may move between districts, counties, and across state lines. The CEO of a nonprofit agency that provides early childhood services mentioned it was challenging to provide services to families who did not have a fixed living location. This issue also surfaced with liaisons. Early education programs only receive funding if a student is in attendance and may need to dis-enroll students for missing as little as 10 days in a full year. This dilemma is commonplace in early childhood programs.

> "The kids who are enrolled in our Head Start programs, where they do have a place for children to be during the day, they tend to move around. The kids will be there for a while, then they're not there and we have to keep our attendance at 90%. And that's a challenge for us. The more kids that you enroll that are homeless, they may show up or they may not show up, the harder it is to keep your levels [attendance] at where they're required by federal law to be.



Not only is maintaining consistent communication often difficult to manage, but so is maintaining service continuity among highly mobile families experiencing homelessness. Unstable living situations among the homeless population creates challenges in adhering to federal requirements based on schools and delivering consistent support to children and youth.

These factors collectively—the growth of the student population experiencing homelessness, the broad scope of responsibilities for homeless liaisons, and the complex realities of serving a highly mobile community—speak to the need for multiple layers of support to monitor, manage and appropriately serve students and families experiencing homelessness. Employing only one homeless liaison or staff member is insufficient to accomplish satisfactory performance in most cases. However, it can be difficult to fund more than one staff because of budget constraints.

KEY FINDING 03

The prevalence of Latinx and Black youth experiencing homelessness requires more racially and culturally responsive strategies in education practice and policy;

Researchers who have analyzed patterns related to race and discipline among students experiencing homelessness have found that children of color experiencing homelessness are more likely to have poor educational outcomes. This is reflected in our state analysis across all 58 counties. We found that Latinx (70%) and Black (9%) students who are experiencing homelessness (see **Figure 2**) are almost twice as likely to be suspended (see **Figure 3**) or miss an extended period of school to absenteeism (see **Figure 4**), experience lower graduation rates (16%, see **Figure 5**) and to be less ready for college than their non-homeless peers (27%, see **Figure 6**). The intersection of poor educational outcomes and homelessness present within schools cannot be overlooked (Moore et al., 2019; & Aviles de Bradley, 2015).

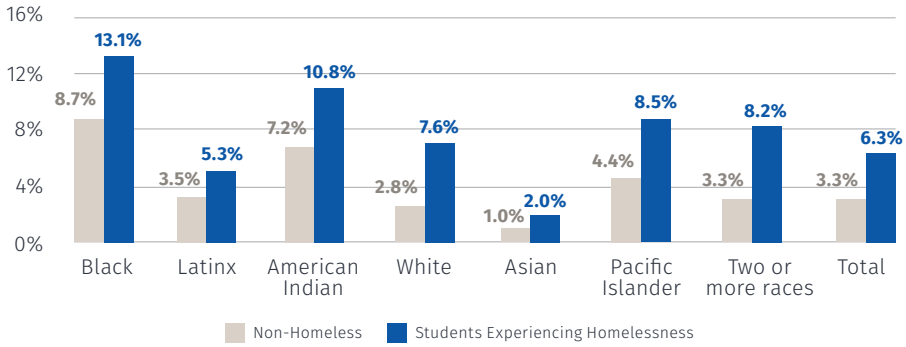
Figure 2. Student Enrollment by Race, 2018-2019

Non-Homeless*		Homeless
54%	Latinx	70%
23%	White	12%
5%	Black	9%
10%	Asian	3%
4%	Two or more races	3%
2%	Filipino	1%
1%	Not Reported	0.8%
0.5%	American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8%
0.4%	Pacific Islander	0.6%

Note. State education data were retrieved from multiple 2018-19 reports created on DataQuest, disaggregated by Homelessness and filtered by "yes" for students experiencing homelessness and "no" for non-homeless students, California Department of Education, 2019b (https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/)

During the 2018-19 school year, **Black, American Indian, White and Pacific Islander students who experienced homelessness received suspensions at higher rates** compared to other student populations **(Figure 3)**.

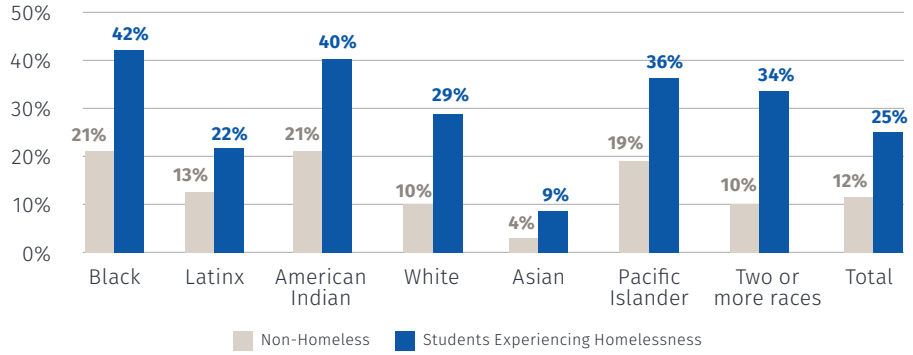
Figure 3. Suspension Rates by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-2019



Note. Suspension rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Suspension Rate, California Department of Education, 2019c.

Across all racial groups, students experiencing homelessness, were chronically absent at higher rates than their peers (Figure 4). During the 2018-2019 school year, two out of five Black and American Indian students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent.

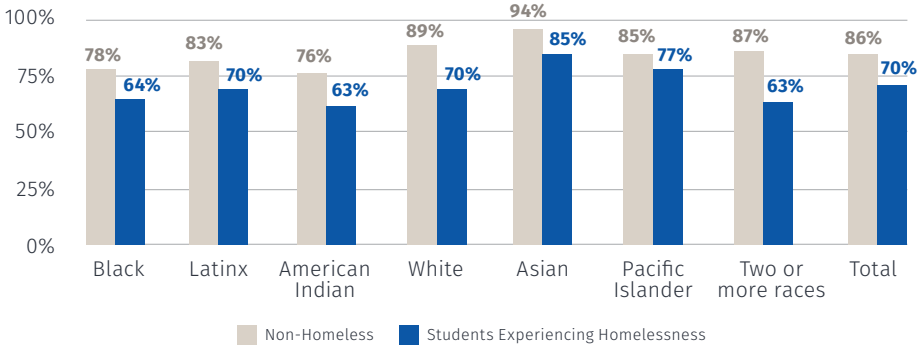
Figure 4. Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-2019



Chronic absenteeism rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, California Department of Education, 2019d.

During the 2018-19 school year, **70% of all students experiencing homelessness graduated, compared to 86% of students who did not experience homelessness (Figure 5)**. Overall, American Indian students saw the lowest graduation rates of all student ethnic groups experiencing homelessness.

Figure 5. Four-Year Cohort* Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-2019

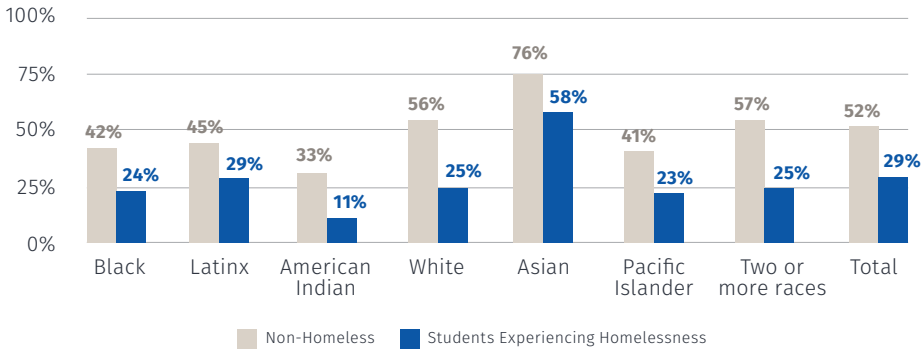


*The four-year cohort is based on the number of students who enter grade 9 for the first time adjusted by adding into the cohort any student who transfers in later during grade 9 or during the next three years and subtracting any student from the cohort who transfers out, emigrates to another country, transfers to a prison or juvenile facility, or dies during that same period.

Note. Graduation rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

The percentage of homeless student graduates meeting UC/CSU requirements was 29% compared to the non-homeless student's 52% overall rate (Figure 6). Students experiencing homelessness not only graduate at lower rates, but also are less likely to meet UC/CSU requirements. During the 2018-2019 school year, fewer than 30% of Black, Latinx, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and White students who experienced homelessness met the UC/CSU course requirements in California.

Figure 6. Four-Year Cohort UC/CSU Requirements Met by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-2019



Note. UC/CSU Requirements Met data were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

Research indicates that when schools respond negatively to student behavioral problems but fail to address their underlying causes, they often end up punishing the most vulnerable students (Gregory, et al., 2012). Despite evidence that Latinx and Black children are disproportionately affected by homelessness, policies aimed at supporting children experiencing homelessness such as MVA are designed to be race-neutral. They tend to ignore the underlying systemic issues (e.g. lack of access to a rigorous curriculum, underfunded schools, high unemployment, and poor neighborhood conditions; Noguera et al., 2019) that most negatively impact students of color. A greater number of students of color experience homelessness compared to the overall population. Ultimately, the nature of these social and systemic patterns determines the effectiveness of policies like MVA. These factors have significant implications in terms of the identification, interventions, and supporting activities required to eliminate barriers to educational success among students experiencing homelessness. Aviles de Bradley finds that "blanket approaches to policy implementation fail to address the racial realities for students of color" (Aviles de Bradley, 2015, p.842).

Consistent with past research (Paris & Alim, 2014; Aviles de Bradley, 2015), our interviews with service providers, educators, and district homeless liaisons suggests the importance of considering how racial discrimination and stigmas associated with homelessness often exacerbate the problems facing students experiencing homelessness and their families. For example, we heard numerous times in interviews and focus groups that students and families of color experiencing homelessness are often described as "helpless," "hopeless" and sometimes characterized disparagingly. Such characterizations tend to negate the high degree of resilience among students and families experiencing homelessness. A student shared with us the stigma associated with being homeless, suggesting that the fear of stigmatization sometimes discourages students from revealing their living circumstances in what should be safe spaces, like schools.

> "There is a stigma towards being homeless. I definitely experienced that stigma. For most of my childhood, I wanted to hide the fact that I was homeless. I didn't want anybody knowing. You're a kid, that's not something you want to go around saying, like, "Yeah, you know, I live in a motel." So, you try to hide that fact about yourself, but then, as I got older, I realized that that was going to be my saving grace and what propelled me into my future.
>
> **DILAN, 19**

Stakeholders we interviewed also stressed that common challenges related to educator bias against homeless youth and families contribute to the difficulties experienced by homeless students. Consistent with recommendations made by other researchers (Rush & Santos, 2018; Piazza & Hyatt 2019a; Edwards, 2019), community-based organizations expressed a desire to challenge the deficit discourses around homelessness and to move towards asset-focused discourses that emphasize the valuable experiences and expertise that students enduring homelessness can bring to the classroom. Youth often feel they have more lived experience than their peers, and in some cases more than some of their teachers, due to their homelessness experiences.

To shift towards a more asset-focused discourse, policymakers and administrators must endeavor to "realign teacher perceptions" of students experiencing homelessness as a homogeneous group (Moore, 2013). A careful examination of personal beliefs about homelessness can help educators move toward better understanding and supporting the needs of students and families. As "Dilan" further explained, sometimes it is challenging for students or teachers to even fathom a student in their class experiencing homelessness. Sometimes denial or even making light of homelessness can make students feel isolated.

> "There's just a lot that I've witnessed growing up and that I realize my peers don't fully understand and even some teachers can't fully grasp it. It's not because they want to be mean about it or because they look down on the person. It's because they're trying to make light of the situation because they emotionally can't wrap their mind around it. Teachers, they don't want to think of their children being in that position.
>
> **DILAN, 19**

Focus group participants suggested that symposia and professional development were needed to improve education practices, and to create "higher levels of awareness among educators related to their biases and understandings of homelessness." Some of these opportunities already exist in training for state networks of homeless liaisons and national conferences of educators who serve students experiencing homelessness. However, more educators could benefit from participating in these networks and professional learning opportunities. The CDE highly recommends Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) grantees use their grant dollars to attend these, but those without the funds are left to find ways to obtain funding needed to attend.

KEY FINDING 04

Students experiencing homelessness are often overlooked or misunderstood in school settings, which can result in negative educational experiences.

Several educators we interviewed shared examples of school staff and teachers who had a lack of familiarity and understanding of the unique challenges of students experiencing homelessness. Those educators we interviewed could say anecdotally that some adults had difficulty establishing positive relationships with their students, or knowing their personal stories. One district leader explained the problem in this way:

> We need to build empathy, [and] ability to think beyond your own life experiences. There are many teachers who do not know about their student's personal struggles. They see the kids in school but have no idea of what they may be going through. They may come off like they are not caring because they really don't understand.

Several educators made similar statements related to a lack of educators' familiarity with the challenges faced by students and families experiencing homelessness. Inadequate training on policy definitions and ways of identification of student vulnerabilities can reinforce educators' stereotypes about homelessness, and heighten students' feelings of isolation. However, promoting caring school environments, when combined with increased training on MVA for all teachers and staff, can help foster quality relationships between teachers and students. Knowing that teachers care about them builds self-esteem and makes students more likely to regularly attend school (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Knowlton, 2006). Additionally, peer acceptance can have a positive influence on attitudes toward school among children who experience homelessness and housing instability (Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008).

> In my junior year I was having difficulties in school because of how I was treated by other students. I was dealing with bullying and then my home situation was really difficult...I had to move schools because of how bad the bullying got. And then I left school. I didn't get to go back and I tried to re-enroll this year and it didn't work out too well. I couldn't make it to school so they unenrolled me. I enrolled in another program and I couldn't make it. So they also unenrolled me. And so I just decided I was going to take my GED instead.
>
> OCTOBER, 18

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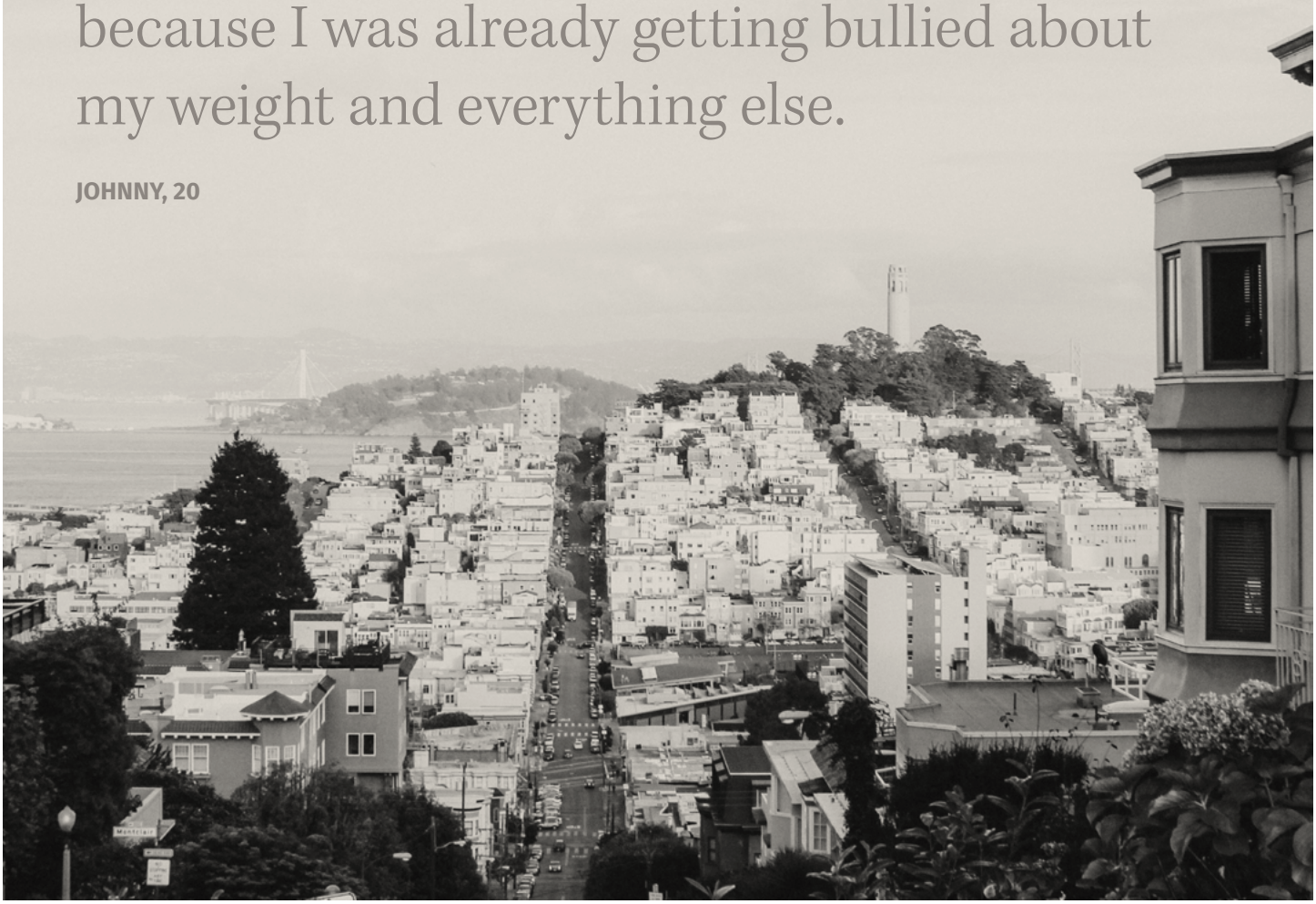
My dad's friend let us stay inside his house. But there were times when they would kick us out. And it would be two or three in the morning, and we would have to leave the house. So, there are times where I will keep Axe spray and just spray myself before I go to school...I kept it [homelessness] to myself because I was already getting bullied about my weight and everything else.

JOHNNY, 20



Empathy and supportive school environments can help to mitigate and reduce disturbing patterns of school-based victimization for students experiencing homelessness. A statewide study of school-based victimization, discriminatory bullying, and weapon victimization by student homeless status (Moore et al., 2019) found that homeless students experience violence at higher rates, particularly in school settings. Two students in individual interviews shared how peer bullying and poor institutional responses negatively shaped their school experiences and outcomes.

These quotes from students remind us that youth who experience victimization in one context (i.e., home) are often at heightened risk of being bullied at school (Tyler & Schmitz, 2018). "Olive" did not give specific examples of the challenges she faced at home, but did refer to her "home situation" as another obstacle impeding her ability to learn and to feel safe at school. In "Johnny's" case, abandonment after staying at a friend's house, coupled with bullying at school about his weight, and "everything else" created a perfect storm of negative experiences during a critical period of his life. He no longer found school to be a safe or supportive setting, which led to him being pushed out of school and not graduating. Further, the school "unenrolling" Olive when she could not make it to school profoundly shaped her academic options.

These findings have critical policy and service intervention implications, underscoring how important it is for educators to be able to identify underlying issues that can make students particularly vulnerable in school. Providers who serve students experiencing homelessness should recognize that not having stable housing may be only one of several challenges that a student may face. Educators and anyone who provides support services to students in school settings need training to know how to respond in these situations to prevent further trauma to students, and to establish systems (e.g., academic support strategies before and after school, peer networks, mentorship, tutoring, counseling, and transportation) that ensure students experiencing homelessness feel welcome, valued and empowered in school settings.

Training on establishing prevention strategies like monitoring student attendance, academic records and communications with parents and caregivers like those identified by the California Department of Education can help educators and support providers establish interventions before they result in more complex academic, social and emotional challenges for students to overcome. Such training could cover issues such as increasing awareness of critical behaviors in students such changes in grades, attendance, "hoarding" food, and changes in mood.

KEY FINDING 05

Better coordination is needed between child welfare, housing and education stakeholders to alleviate barriers for students and families.

To improve outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, numerous stakeholders we interviewed recommended that we shift from a siloed approach wherein different agencies work without coordination to meet the needs of the homeless population, to a full system of support for students impacted by homelessness. A stronger focus on coordination of efforts between schools, community-based organizations, county and state agencies would facilitate an integrated, family-centered response to the problem. One liaison described the issue further:

> We know we need to identify students, but sometimes the students are not identified because it's one person trying to identify versus having a whole system put in place. So it really becomes a whole support network. You need to have all levels communicating and working together.

Several respondents told us that such an approach would make it more likely to disrupt cyclical patterns of homelessness that impact multiple generations of family members. Disrupting the educational trajectory of one student through coordinated interventions can have lasting effects within families. Greater coordination also acknowledges that no single public system can adequately respond to the needs of young people and families (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2011).

Successful interventions must begin by creating linkages between housing, child welfare systems, and public education for three important reasons: (1) the problems that homeless and child welfare-involved families face are too complex for one system to address alone; (2) without stable housing it is extremely difficult to address the other challenging issues families face; (3) schools can perform a role as service hubs that bring educational services and providers to students and families in ways welfare and housing agencies cannot do in isolation.

An example of these linkages to stable housing is already happening in Orange County. A county official explains further.

> Family Solutions Collaborative is our coordinated entry specifically for families. And we work with them on a personal basis, whether it's email or calling them. When we have a family that is struggling with housing, we are able to really tap into resources available. They also have family navigators that we call, Access Points, of different shelter agencies that we have broken up regionally within Orange County.

Several studies have made similar recommendations about the need for greater coordination between school districts and outside service providers (Edwards, 2019; Piazza & Hyatt, 2019a).

Focus groups also reflected the need for greater coordination, with a call for a more centralized process for supporting families that could reduce re-traumatization from being required to tell and retell their stories and describing their needs to multiple agencies. In most communities, housing agencies, K-12, and higher education institutions use their own proprietary data systems to make services available and to monitor the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Navigating the rules and procedures of different agencies creates yet another challenge for homeless students and their families. Often, families must repeat the details of their personal living situations multiple times to various service providers to get help.

A more centralized support process would feature development of common intake forms, better coordination in staffing, shared office space, and funding initiatives that require cooperation between nonprofits, school districts, and county partners. It would eliminate or reduce the burden placed on families from having to travel between offices, and reduce the paperwork required to obtain services and support.

A housing agency provider suggested in a focus group that

> Parents should be given the gift of only having to tell their story once and receive help the first time they ask.

Without alignment of definitions of homelessness at the federal level as part of MVA, it will remain difficult to support a more compassionate response that honors the struggles of families and allow for more strategic use of funds. Creating improved housing, child welfare, and education service linkages for families not only holds the potential to best assist a group of families as they seek to achieve greater stability, but to optimize use of increasingly limited resources.

KEY FINDING 06

Community-based organizations and nonprofits provide a critical function as part of an ecosystem of support for students and can get out resources to families quickly.

Nonprofit organizations play a vital role in many communities to serve students and families experiencing homelessness outside of the regular school day. Our interviews and site visits to community-based organizations revealed a lack of coordination between schools, districts, homeless liaisons, and nonprofits or community-based organizations who may each serve the same homeless student populations. The published research on the fragmented nature of collaborations between homeless liaisons and agencies committed to serving young people experiencing homelessness also highlighted a lack of coordination (Ingram et al., 2017).

Nonprofits serve students who are "most concerned with their basic needs, and sometimes not even contemplating higher education, or even their education," as explained by one Los Angeles area drop-in center. Another CEO within the First5 California network explained the significance of nonprofits as a vehicle for distributing resources quickly that "require[s] less approvals and forms than counties for families with immediate needs, especially families with young children." Another nonprofit CEO suggested that more funds could be funneled through community organizations to get immediate support to young people and their families.

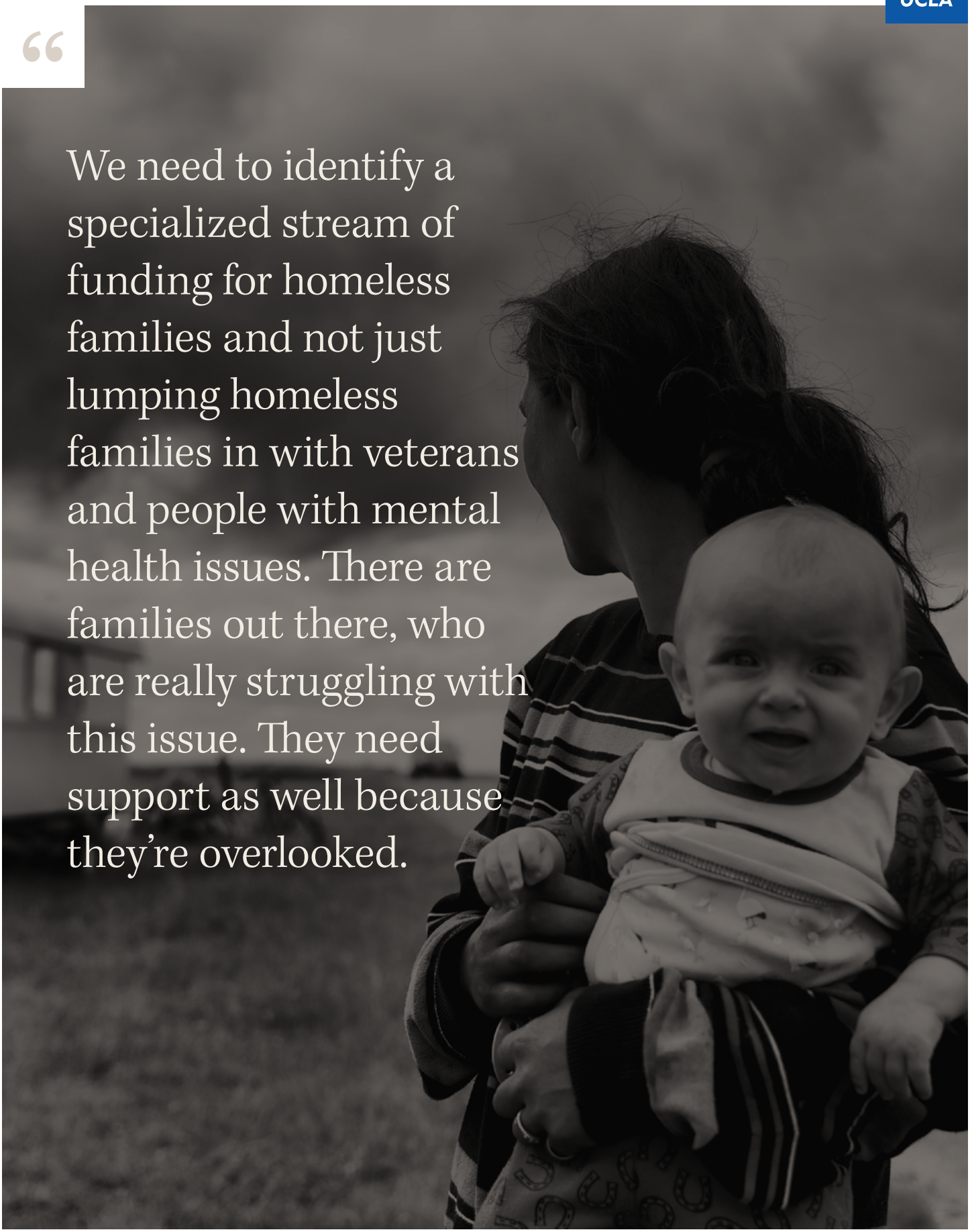
> "I'm a CEO of a nonprofit community-based organization and we can turn on a dime [to get out resources]. And so I would say that the way to get directly to the community is through community-based organizations that collaborate with school districts and the county.

Nonprofit organizations are doing more than providing temporary educational support and basic needs for youth. Instead, they can act as connectors or intermediaries for to other resources, networks, and social capital—opportunities that are harder to obtain if youth are seeking services on their own. In some instances, there are emerging examples of school systems, community-based organizations, faith-based groups, counties, and governments who have been able to "align services and redesign with intentionality" for the benefit of students and families experiencing homelessness. Those collaborative efforts have taken years to build in cities like Anaheim and Los Angeles. We recognize many more of these partnerships exist. However, they require excellent coordination in rural communities and geographically isolated settings that have the highest concentration of students experiencing homelessness in counties like Butte, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and Trinity (California Department of Education, 2019).

Nonprofit organizations can connect with existing communities and understand the challenges faced in particular neighborhoods. For example, a CEO of a nonprofit in South Los Angeles articulated how the community can help each other.

> I'm very fortunate to be in the community that I'm in. We have a very family oriented community. We don't make families come to us. We go out to the home. We do whatever we can to support them if they need to go somewhere, and we have a fleet of vans so we can pick them up and assist them and get them help.

Despite the critical support nonprofit organizations provide for their communities, they lack dedicated funding for supporting students and families experiencing homelessness. A CEO from a nonprofit serving both Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties shared a desire for more direct streams of funding, specifically for homelessness. More direct funding streams could also allow nonprofits to deploy resources and people more quickly.



> We need to identify a specialized stream of funding for homeless families and not just lumping homeless families in with veterans and people with mental health issues. There are families out there, who are really struggling with this issue. They need support as well because they're overlooked.

KEY FINDING 07

The bookends of education, early education and higher education are an often-overlooked yet essential part of a coordinated response to student homelessness, from cradle to college.

The types of challenges facing students experiencing homelessness vary considerably depending on their age and the type of educational institution in which they are enrolled. For example, the needs of children in early childhood settings are quite different from those enrolled in college. Helping schools and colleges to develop their capacity to meet the needs of unhoused students is essential. Distinct and coordinated responses from each education segment (e.g., early education, K-12, and higher education) that can facilitate more seamless educational pathways requires better record sharing and connections across institutions so that students experiencing homelessness encounter minimal disruption to their educational pursuits (Chapin Hall, 2019).

The Early Childhood Education (ECE) Sector

Early childhood educators shoulder a significant responsibility for supporting the academic, social, emotional, and physical health of children and families, especially families experiencing homelessness. A lack of affordable housing, the rising costs of living in California and stagnant wages represent some of the primary drivers for increased rates of homelessness for California families, especially families with young children (California Department of Education, 2019a). Research shows that early interventions and continuous investments in quality school experiences are critical to supporting healthy brain development and meeting students developmental and social needs (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). This is especially true for children from low-income families. Quality early childhood education can also change mobility patterns across generations and break cycles of poverty (Johnson, 2013).

Access to early childhood programs can aid families and students experiencing homelessness since programs are geared at serving the whole child, assisting with medical, job training, and enrollment in higher education. Essential human services are a way to improve the ability of parents to promote learning and the healthy development of their children (Theis et al., 2019). Additionally, helping families develop trust in each other and in their relations in the community and form mutually supportive relationships (Pipher, 1996; Swick, 2000) in ECE settings can have a lasting impact.

As explained by a state education official, early ed programs often function as a feeder to a school, yet there is often lack of continuity in referrals, assessments and academic supports to allow for seamless transitions for families with children experiencing homelessness. The ECE community reinforced this message in focus groups and interviews, making a strong case for prioritizing ECE services as early as possible to address the pervasive nature of inequality broadly and homelessness specifically. There is a desire from the ECE community to do more to address the growing crisis. An early childhood executive explained further.

> We are usually the first connection that homeless families have to schools. If we wait until kindergarten, in some instances, it is too late to get needed services to children. There's a lot more we can do.

Too few of our youngest children experiencing homelessness in California are receiving the benefits of being enrolled in a high-quality early childhood program. In fact, only 8% of young children experiencing homelessness are served by federally funded ECE programs, including Early Head Start, Head Start, or other ECE programs funded by the McKinney–Vento Act, and only 6% in California (Administration for Children & Families, 2017). Several underlying factors can explain low-participation rates in ECE services for families experiencing homelessness. Those include limited outreach to families experiencing homelessness before children enter public schools, a lack of understanding of the child care subsidy system, inadequate training available for early childhood teachers and providers, and a lack of available space in early childhood programs (California Department of Education, 2019a).

Head Start, a federal anti-poverty program, serves 20% of all California students enrolled in preschool **(Table 6)**. However, the federal program does not have dedicated ECE funding to support the delivery of educational services for all children experiencing homelessness as defined by MVA. Head Start programs however, are permitted under the federal guidelines to dedicate resources for families impacted by homelessness. They are also encouraged to collaborate with McKinney-Vento State Coordinators of Education of Homeless Children and Youth and Local Education Liaisons to ensure they have information on the full range of child care services available.

Table 6. Summary of Services Provided by Head Start CA, (Program Information Report (PIR), State Summary by Office of Head Start (OHS), 2018)

Summary of Services Provided by Head Start CA	
Children Experiencing Homelessness That Were Served During the Enrollment Year	4,048
Families Experiencing Homelessness That Were Served During the Enrollment Year	999

One First5 early learning representative in the Bay area described a surging need for affordable childcare and growing housing costs as two drivers accelerating the rate of homelessness for young families. Increasingly, young families are struggling to meet their basic needs, like getting access to diapers, food, clothes, and shelter. This same representative cited the example of "long lines of families waiting in the rain for one package of diapers at 7 a.m. on a Saturday" to reinforce the point that families need additional assistance to secure basic needs. Additionally, families that do qualify for subsidized childcare in some instances are struggling to find childcare locally. Demand for quality childcare options far exceeds supply (First5 Alameda, 2019). Lack of access to affordable childcare constrains the ability of parents to both seek employment and maintain stable jobs while raising young children. Access to quality childcare opportunities and early childhood education programs for young children is essential for working families pursuing upward economic and social mobility.

The Higher Education Community

1 in 5 California Community College (Wood et al., 2016), 1 in 10 California State University (CSU) (Crutchfield et al., 2016) and 1 in 20 UC students (University of California, 2017) experience homelessness. In the California State University (CSU) system, Black students represent the highest number of students with low food security (25%) and very low food security (40.9%) (Crutchfield & Maguire 2018, p. 20). Also, Black students (14%) experience homelessness at a higher rate than other racial and ethnic groups (9.8-11.5%) (Crutchfield & Maguire 2018, p.22) which is different from K-12 settings where Latinx students represent a majority of students experiencing homelessness (70%).

Table 7. Percentage of Students Experiencing Homelessness by Race in UC and CSU schools, 2018-2019*

	Latinx	Black	Asian	American Indian	White	Pacific Islander	Other	Total
University of California	4%	9%	3%	7%	4%	-	4%	4%
California State University	10%	14%	10%	52%	12%	10%	11%	11%

Note. UC homelessness data was unavailable for Pacific Islander students. Adapted from 2018 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) Data Tables, 2018.

CSU homelessness data were retrieved from California State University's 2018 Study of Student Basic Needs, 2018.

1 in 5
California Community College,

1 in 10
California State University (CSU), and

1 in 20
UC students experience homelessness in a postsecondary setting.

During the 2018 school year, University of California results from undergraduate and graduate surveys on food insecurity and housing needs reported that 2,260 students across all UC's experienced homelessness **(Table 7)**. Students who identified as Black experienced homelessness at higher rates than other racial group. Additionally, Latinx students had the highest count of students experiencing homelessness of all student groups.

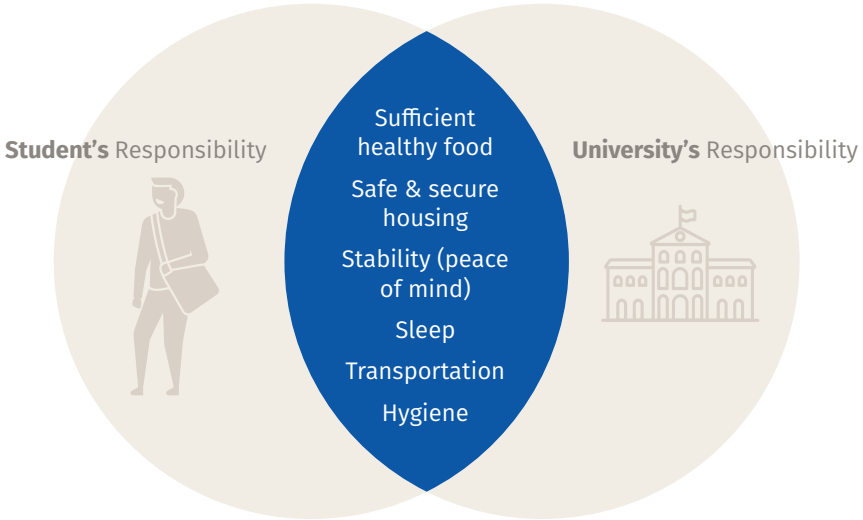
Homelessness can negatively impact all aspects of college students' lives, including their class attendance and academic success (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Hallett, 2010; Silva et al., 2015; Crutchfield et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Compared to their peers, college students experiencing homelessness report lower GPAs (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018), are less likely to persist in their studies (Silva et al., 2015) and are more likely to drop out (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Hallett, 2010). College students experiencing homelessness also report poorer physical health, more symptoms of depression or anxiety, higher levels of perceived stress, and less access to adequate and nutritious food than their peers (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). Yet related issues to student homelessness like food insecurity often do not begin as soon as students set foot on a college campus.

A recent study found that **for students with a childhood history of food insecurity, the odds of food insecurity in college were 7 times higher** compared to students who were food secure as children (Martinez et al., 2017).

California public higher education systems are taking on greater responsibility to support students who are struggling to maintain consistent and secure childcare, and access adequate food and housing in unprecedented ways (Ambrose, 2016). Often, challenges associated with housing instability can exacerbate the problem of food insecurity (Cady, 2016; Crutchfield et al., 2016; Wood, Harris, & Delgado, 2016). HUD (2015) reported that housing costs alone account for 50 percent or more of student expenses at four-year institutions, and over 65% of student expenses for students at community colleges leaving little remaining resources for educational expenses.

Similar to K-12 peers, students struggling to meet their basic needs frequently have a difficult time fully engaging in their postsecondary education (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015; Silva et al., 2017). Some of the key challenges related to homelessness include: balancing access to food and shelter (Hallett & Freas, 2017), and the social implications of housing instability, including a sense of isolation and disconnection from other students on campus (Dill & Lee, 2016; Crutchfield, 2012; Crutchfield et al., 2016) which may further discourage students from seeking out relationships with peers and instructors (Tierney & Hallett, 2012). A recent study has expanded the idea of student basic needs and its relationship to housing and food security to focus on hygiene, sleep, transportation and peace of mind (University of California, 2020).

Figure 7. Definition Of College Students' Basic Needs (University of California, 2020)



In our interviews with campus officials, we learned that many campuses in the California Community College (CCC), California State University (CSU), and University of California (UC) systems are responding proactively to the growth in student populations experiencing food insecurity, homelessness or other related basic needs challenges. Fresno State University is one of 23 CSU campuses that have efforts in place to remove barriers for students struggling to have their basic needs met, including many who are homeless or negatively affected by housing challenges. Those services include either a food pantry or a food distribution program or both.

CSU Fresno officials have not only opened "the student cupboard" on campus to make food available, but also "the closet," making it possible for students interviewing for jobs to have access to professional work attire. Local donations from businesses and philanthropies have helped to sustain these efforts to meet basic student needs.

The California Homeless Youth Project (2020) examined basic needs resources available to college students across all 23 CSU campuses, 9 UCs and 50 of the 116 California Community Colleges. Those basic needs include emergency housing, programs targeting students experiencing housing insecurity, programs targeting foster youth, free groceries, free prepared meals, on-campus CalFresh application assistance, emergency grants, and short-term loans. The services are extensive, but need continues to outpace available resources for college students experiencing homelessness. This point was made in a recent study looking at basic needs and housing instability across the UC system finds that "University basic needs are essential and should be expanded and strengthen to make services more easily accessible" (University of California, 2020).

State law requires higher education homeless liaisons to be identified for each college campus, as well as housing authorities for students experiencing homelessness. The homelessness crisis is prompting postsecondary partners to assemble small teams, including liaisons, to manage the distribution of resources and services, including opening up space for temporary housing both on and off-campus.

Some of those efforts have been accelerated by an annual state $19 million allocation to California's three public post-secondary systems to be used to support rapid rehousing efforts that assist homeless and housing insecure college students.[5] The state also made a one-time $15 million investment to support basic needs partnerships[6] in the CSU to support the following strategies:

- Address **student hunger**
- Leverage more **sustainable solutions to address basic needs** on campus
- Raise **awareness of services currently offered** on campus that address basic needs
- Develop **formal practices and procedures**
- Continue to **build strategic partnerships** with community/statewide partners and CSU campuses

No funding was allocated for basic needs at the CCC or CSU systems for the 2020-2021 state budget. However, UC has an ongoing budget allocation for basic needs.

[5] A factsheet about the college-focused rapid rehousing state investment spearheaded by John Burton Advocates can be found at https://www.jbaforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/AB-74-Fact-Sheet-FINAL.pdf

[6] More information on AB 74 and Basic Needs Partnerships can be found at https://www2.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Pages/basic-needs-partnership-rfp.aspx#:~:text=The%20Basic%20Needs%20Partnerships%20Request,services%20for%20students%20in%20need.

A summary of state allocations in recent years can be found in **Table 8.** Recently, over 700 stakeholders, including over 100 students from all three public higher education segments across the state, convened in a conference and formed a new partnership known as the California Higher Education Basic Needs Alliance (CHEBNA). The partnership has been in operation for several years now, allowing California's higher education segments to share best practices and resources more consistently and to coordinate around strategies for "addressing student wellbeing, including basic needs insecurities." CHEBNA started as a conversation around measurement of basic needs and food insecurity. It has evolved as a collaborative to be more intentional about addressing housing insecurity and homelessness as an interrelated set of issues. One university official explained the value of the collaboration.

> "While you do have some campus specificities, you have some regional differences, you have some political differences in the different environments, there is the commonality, which is the notion that we I think have just begun to understand the real depth and breadth of the issue. That's partly because we've become more aware of the kinds of efforts that each of us are doing.

Table 8. State Investments in Student Basic Needs (Forthcoming Report, John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2020)

	California Community Colleges (CCC)	California State University (CSU)	University of California (UC)
2017/2018	$2.5 million	$2.5 million	$2.5 million
2018/2019	$10 million	$1.5 million	$1.5 million
2019/2020	$3.9 million	$15 million	$15 million (ongoing)
2020/2021	None	None	$15 million

As important as it is to bring about greater coordination in service delivery to students experiencing homelessness, educators must also be able to address other challenges to student wellbeing and engagement to ensure that these students can make academic progress, and ultimately graduate (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2019). One university official stressed this point:

> "I would like to elevate the conversation in our system to more of a concept of continuity, retention, persistence, graduation, and how to do that.

Although this broadening focus on student basic needs and housing represents a significant expansion in the mission of most colleges and four-year campuses, many higher education partners are embracing this challenge because they understand they can play a critical role in bringing vital resources to students. For three of the students we interviewed, college was the first time they had access to consistent support and stable housing. However, challenges still exist on many campuses to broaden student awareness of available services. For example, Jazmin, a business major, explained:

> When I came to college, I was connected to a pantry on campus. When I didn't have food, when I was facing food insecurity, I was connected with that. And then I was connected with Guardian Scholars as well. But it wasn't until after I was already in the program I found out that they did the housing, but most of the work, I would say, and the resources that I found were by myself.
>
> **JAZMIN, 20**

Jazmin, a current undergraduate student at a CSU campus in southern California, highlights the necessity for California higher education systems to identify liaisons on every campus who can distribute meal cards for campus meals and coordinate institutional aid for covering student housing deposits. They can also facilitate early connections to local high school districts to identify students in need and provide academic, social, and emotional support to facilitate more seamless transitions for incoming students who are experiencing homelessness. One cannot presume that students like Jazmin will be able to access all of the campus resources available to them without structure and guidance. However, with efforts like CHEBNA and new state investments like the college-focused rapid rehousing effort and basic needs efforts, the higher education community is modeling new ways that college students experiencing homelessness can get resources that will minimize potential hurdles to degree completion.

IV

Student Perspectives

Student perspectives are essential to reaching a better understanding of how students facing housing instability navigate essential social services available through school systems. We interviewed thirteen students over the age of 18 who had experienced homelessness during their K-12 experience or in college. Half of the students we interviewed were identified by school districts, and the other half were from community drop-in centers. Findings from these interviews further reveal the challenges educators in our focus groups mentioned, such as the need for more dedicated staff and more focused training on identifying students experiencing homelessness. For example, several students said that the services and support provided by their schools had helped to improve their experience in school and outside of school. However, this was not the case for the majority of the students, who did not recall having access to targeted educational resources in their schooling.

Shared Experiences & Educational Patterns

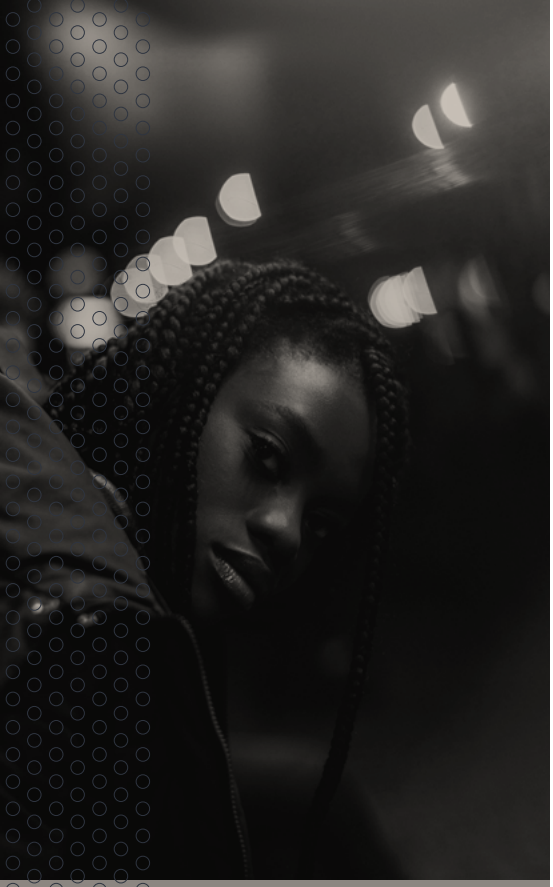
Consistent with existing research, our data indicate that homelessness is not uniformly experienced (Miller, 201; Samuels et al., 2019; Edwards, 2020)—young people come from a wide array of backgrounds and living conditions—each of which has particular implications for the students' broader education opportunities. Student interviews, diverse as they were, can help inform the development of services and supports that are currently lacking.

A lack of early mentorship and stability can fuel a sense of distrust and isolation.

Students reported struggling to identify influential mentors and caretakers, starting from an early age. While some youth have been able to begin forging stronger relationships as adults, many indicated ongoing challenges in finding people who they could trust and ask for advice and help. Students also gave examples of the consequences of not having mentors who could understand and identify with their circumstances. The lack of strong bonds fueled student feelings of isolation and hampered their ability to engage fully in the learning experience.

Adverse life experiences have changed the educational and employment trajectory of students (e.g. death in family, abuse, traumatic life events, loss of school equipment, job loss).

Students shared examples of how a series of "critical conditions" such as the death of a primary caretaker, sibling or parent, abuse from a family member, job loss or essential item in their life (i.e., computer for college classes), profoundly impacted their ability to live healthy, stable, productive lives. In some instances, a series of circumstances and challenges deterred students from pursuing their educational interests (Samuels et al., 2019). October, a youth from Northern California, shared her struggles in balancing her job and school demands.



> I have to work, and I couldn't be at school on time. There's days where I just couldn't get to work. I mean, I couldn't get to school and really was just sitting in the classroom relearning everything I've already learned and just having to go through that and deal with the immaturity of other students and not having the understanding of the other students of the situation I'm in. Teachers didn't understand either. There wasn't that... like they knew, but they couldn't fully grasp it, and they didn't really seem to accept it [homelessness] as real.
>
> **OCTOBER, 18**

October worked to help sustain her educational and living expenses, and described that her peers and teachers sometimes did not understand her situation. Her experience parallels the challenges also mentioned by educators in the earlier sections, in that teachers and school officials often lack training and know-how to support students experiencing homelessness. Equipping educators with these empathetic skills would include preparing them to prevent bullying or unhealthy learning conditions that can result from peers failing to understand their challenging circumstances.

Students experiencing homelessness often lack the supports they need to fully engage in learning, which range from basic needs to emotional and physical safety.

Young people seeking services at homeless drop-in centers struggled to identify trusted adults in their life. They shared common challenges around meeting their basic needs, including obtaining a predictable income, adequate housing, and clean clothes and food. Students also shared stories of traveling great distances just to have their basic needs met. One young man said that he travels 90 minutes on public transportation several times a week to a Los Angeles area drop-in center to obtain food, clothing, and other social services. Another student shared that he chooses to stay in a community with fewer readily available resources for homeless youth that is safer than an area where services are more readily available. Young people under the age of 18 often face difficult choices, such as having to decide if they want to stay with their family in unstable conditions or separate from family and move to more permanent living situations that may not allow for families.

Educational Flexibility & Support

Interviews revealed many examples of students struggling within traditional academic settings, despite being highly intelligent, creative, independent, and socially adaptive in the face of highly adverse conditions (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002). Young people are eager for better educational opportunities and jobs, but often lack the resources to change their trajectories. Furthermore, current educational structures (e.g., school hours, student self-identification for services, and the fragmented nature of service delivery) can present barriers to improving the living conditions of students experiencing poverty.

Students **cannot access the type of educational support** they need.

It was difficult for many of the students who were interviewed for this report to highlight how educators or school systems have supported their academic development or social and emotional well-being. One student explained how he felt like he was just "passing through" the school system, changing schools every six months. He described a need for students impacted by homelessness to have a clearer path to services.

> Make it more easily accessible for youth to acquire services that benefit them in their life and maybe make it also easier for them to see that there's resources. From my position, my perspective, there's no real access to resources that you can really call upon and say, 'Hey, I need some help.'
>
> **CORY, 20**

Despite this common challenge among many of the students we interviewed, some shared examples of strong relationships with schools and educators. For example, Rosie, a current undergraduate student at a CSU campus in northern California shared,

> There's a couple of women that I've met out there that have been basically my counselors. I feel like that [organization skills] was something that I learned with their help when I was a senior, like getting yourself organized and how to budget your money. When you get to college, it's the stuff that you don't learn, but you should know. And so I just really thank her for that because I feel like I wouldn't be succeeding in college without that type of help.
>
> **ROSIE, 20**

For many students like Rosie, high school educators played a critical role in helping to prepare her for college. One Los Angeles area liaison also shared that he drove a student to UC Merced for student move-in day because the young person did not have parents to join him. Stories like these are consistent with those of other students we interviewed who were also connected to robust social services networks and access to adults who could support their educational well-being. Once someone or a team of educators invests in students' educational success, great things can happen.

The dynamic nature of highly mobile students in and out of the foster care system, and moving across localities and even states, requires more flexible and well-coordinated education opportunities (e.g., credit recovery, remediation).

Students experiencing homelessness face unique challenges because they are an unusually mobile population. Transportation and logistics around getting to school is just one of the challenges. They also face difficulties with credit transfers and missing days of school due to instability and mobility challenges. Sometimes appropriate student placement is complicated by an inconsistent or missing academic record by which to assess their knowledge and skill levels. Scholarship on evidence-based education models for educating students experiencing homelessness recommends that schools must allow for flexible schooling experiences and require schools to better structure schedules, coursework, and social organization to better serve unhoused student populations (Murphy & Tobin, 2011, Quint, 1994). In 2014, the California State Assembly adopted Bill 1806[7] to provide flexibility in credit accrual for students experiencing homelessness. However, the challenge still lies with having a consistent implementation strategy across schools. This issue is real for many students who experience housing instability since many will move schools, crossing districts, and sometimes states. In our student interviews, we learned it was common for students to attend various schools during their academic journeys. Ciara's narrative illustrates the experience of highly mobile students. She started moving schools as early as sixth grade up until her senior year in high school.

> My grades fluctuate because they always pull me out of school and put me in a different school and pull me out again and put me in this school. I went to three different high schools, just for a my Sophomore year. It was pretty hard to bounce everything back to where I could graduate or anything. I didn't get to walk the stage. I still got my diploma [GED], but I didn't walk the stage.
>
> **CIARA, 18**

This vignette illustrates the importance of having consistent and flexible credit accrual practices to better support highly mobile students. That flexibility can relieve students from worry about whether pauses in their educational trajectory will negatively impact their learning progress.

[7] AB-1806 Pupil services: Homeless children or youth. (2014). Retrieved June 10, 2020, from https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140AB1806

V

Portrait of California's K-12 Homeless Student Population

In addition to conducting interviews and focus groups with key education stakeholders and students to inform this study, we developed an interactive map, to display statewide data for homeless students enrolled in California K-12 schools.[8] In the interactive map, we identified school suspension rates, chronic absenteeism[9] rates, graduation rates, and UC/CSU readiness rates as key indicators of student learning. Annual cumulative enrollment data for the 2018-2019 school year reveals that approximately 269,000 students experienced homelessness, making up 17.9% of all 1.5 million students experiencing homelessness in the nation (2019).[10]

The following analyses use the California Department of Education 2018-2019 data overlayed across the state's 58 counties to demonstrate demographic patterns among students experiencing homelessness. By correlating data for students experiencing homelessness with non-homeless students, we were able to highlight recurring trends in educational outcomes. State, county, and district data were analyzed to create a detailed educational portrait of California's K-12 homeless student population in relationship to various peer groups and geographies. Results from this analysis reveal two things: first, the number of students experiencing homelessness continues to rise, and second, adverse educational outcomes persist.

CDE data reveals that **negative educational outcomes,** including higher suspension rates **(Figure 9)**, higher rates of chronic absenteeism **(Figure 10)**, lower graduation rates **(Figure 11)** and lower CSU/UC readiness rates **(Figure 12)**, **are common among homeless students, regardless of ethnic/racial identity.**

Figure 8. Student Educational Outcomes for California, 2018-2019*

Suspension Rates	Chronic Absenteeism	Graduation Rates	UC/CSU Readiness
3%	12%	86%	52%
Non-Homeless Rate	Non-Homeless Rate	Non-Homeless Rate	Non-Homeless Rate
6%	25%	70%	29%
Homeless Rate	**Homeless Rate**	**Homeless Rate**	**Homeless Rate**

[8] The homeless student data displayed for California and its 58 counties was compiled from DataQuest, the California Department of Education's (CDE) web-based data reporting tool, for the 2018-2019 school year and is disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

[9] The CDE determines students to be chronically absent if they were eligible to be considered chronically absent at the selected level during the academic year and they were absent for 10% or more of the days they were expected to attend.

[10] The annual cumulative enrollment, discipline, and chronic absentee data are are submitted and certified by Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and charter schools as part of the annual End of Year 3 (EOY 3) submission in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS).

*Data in the infographic were retrieved from multiple DataQuest reports. Enrollment numbers were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate under "Cumulative Enrollment", California Department of Education, 2019d.

Suspension rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Suspension Rate, California Department of Education, 2019c.

Chronic absenteeism rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, California Department of Education, 2019d.

Graduation data were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

Counties

Similar educational outcomes observed for students experiencing homelessness at the state level were observable at the county level. Our analysis of data from the six counties with the largest enrollment of students experiencing homelessness (which comprise 65% of all homeless students in California) reveals that students who experienced homelessness during the 2018-2019 school year were disproportionately suspended **(Figure 9)** and chronically absent **(Figure 10)** at high rates. They are also graduating at lower rates **(Figure 11)** and less likely to meet UC/CSU requirements **(Figure 12)** than their peers. While data for each of the 58 counties in California vary, we found similar patterns in nearly every county. There were five counties in which students experiencing homelessness displayed more favorable outcomes than students who did not experience homelessness. These exceptions were in Northern California counties with fewer than 200 students experiencing homelessness. For example, in Amador County, students experiencing homelessness displayed lower rates of suspensions, and in Inyo and Mono County, students experiencing homelessness had a 0% suspension rate. Another divergent finding is that Nevada County reported higher graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness, while only 9% of this group met UC/CSU requirements upon graduation. This data and data for all 58 counties in California can be further explored using our interactive map.

Table 9. California Counties with the Largest Number of Homeless Students, Homeless Data Snapshot, 2018-2019

County	Enrollment (#)	Suspension (%)	Chronic Absenteeism (%)	Graduation Rate (%)	UC/CSU Requirements Met (%)
Los Angeles	66,566	3.8	23.8	70.6	38.1
San Bernardino	31,180	6.2	22.6	76.6	27
Orange	25,418	4.5	18.2	77	31.4
Riverside	19,675	3.9	24.7	82	33.2
San Diego	20,631	6.2	28.2	57.8	34.6
Sacramento	10,470	11.9	37.5	61.7	17.1
California	**269,269**	**6.3**	**25**	**70**	**29.1**

Note. Data on this table were retrieved from multiple DataQuest reports. Enrollment numbers were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate under "Cumulative Enrollment", California Department of Education, 2019d.

Suspension rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Suspension Rate, California Department of Education, 2019c.

Chronic absenteeism rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, California Department of Education, 2019d.

Graduation data were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

Latinx students make up the majority of homeless student enrollment in most counties with large numbers of students experiencing homelessness. In Orange County, 83% of students experiencing homelessness were Latinx **(Table 10)**.

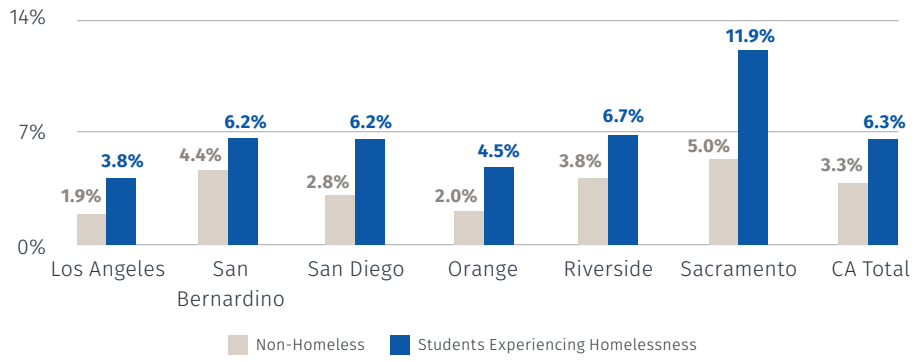
Table 10. Ethnic Composition of California Counties with the Largest Number of Homeless Students, Homeless data Snapshot, 2018-2019

County	Black	Latina/o	White	Asian	American Indian	Pacific Islander	Filipino	Two or more races
Los Angeles	12%	74%	6%	3%	0.2%	0.4%	1%	2%
San Bernardino	12%	69%	10%	3%	1%	1%	1%	2%
Orange	2%	83%	7%	4%	0.3%	1%	1%	2%
Riverside	11%	72%	11%	1%	1%	1%	1%	3%
San Diego	9%	70%	10%	2%	1%	1%	3%	5%
Sacramento	24%	37%	22%	4%	1%	1%	1%	9%
California	**9%**	**70%**	**12%**	**3%**	**1%**	**1%**	**1%**	**3%**

Note. Enrollment numbers were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate under "Cumulative Enrollment", California Department of Education, 2019d.

Of the six counties with the highest number of students experiencing homelessness, Los Angeles reported the lowest suspension rate of 3.8%. This could be related to the counties movement away from punitive suspension models. **In Sacramento county, students experiencing homelessness received suspensions at a rate of 11.9% (Figure 9).**

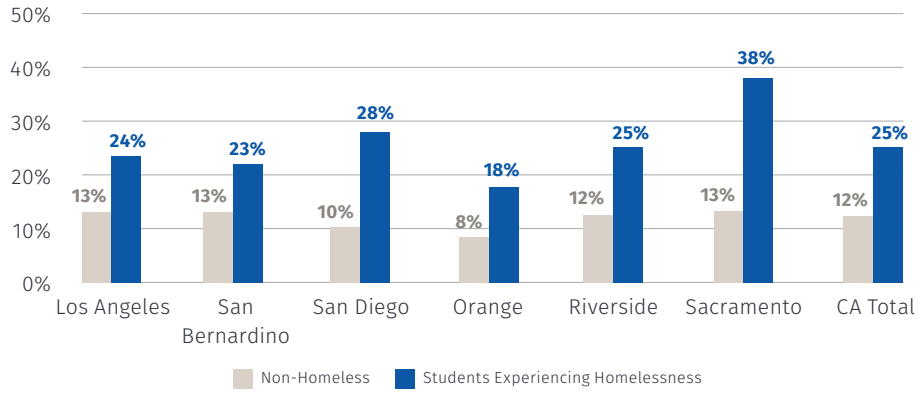
Figure 9. Suspension Rates by County, 2018-2019



Note. Suspension rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Suspension Rate, California Department of Education, 2019c.

In 2018-2019, **25% of all students experiencing homelessness in California were chronically absent** compared to 12% of non-homeless students **(Figure 10)**.

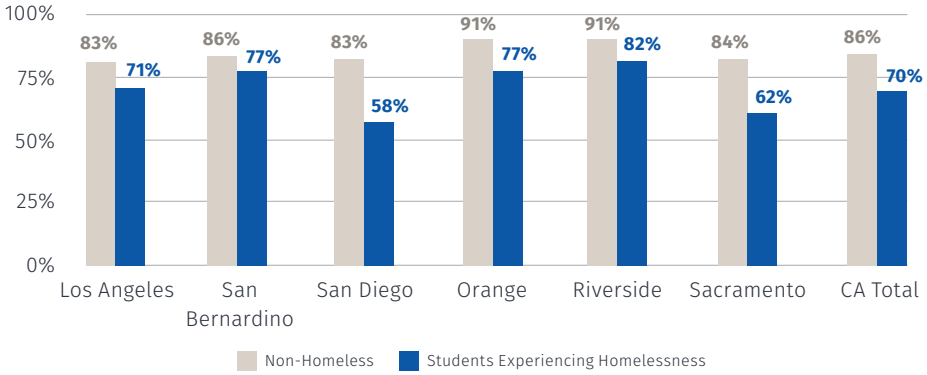
Figure 10. Chronic Absenteeism Rates by County, 2018-2019



Note. Chronic absenteeism rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, California Department of Education, 2019d.

Of the counties with the highest counts of homeless students, **those experiencing homelessness in San Diego were the least likely student group to graduate** and had graduation rates that were the most divergent from their peers **(Figure 11)**.

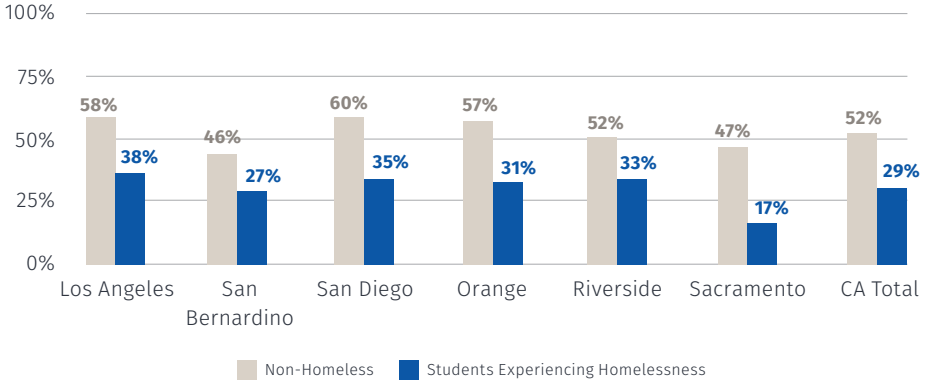
Figure 11. Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates by County, 2018-2019



Note. Graduation rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

Of the California counties with the largest number of homeless students, **San Diego, Sacramento and Orange County had the greatest disparities in the percentage of students meeting UC/CSU requirements (Figure 12)**.

Figure 12. Four-Year Cohort UC/CSU Requirements Met by County, 2018-2019



Note. UC/CSU Requirements Met data were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

School Districts

Districts with the largest populations of students experiencing homelessness, as well as selected districts with high proportions of students experiencing homelessness, are identified in this section. According to district data submitted to the CDE, the ten districts with the highest cumulative enrollment of students experiencing homelessness comprise 25% of all homeless students in California (269,269). Nearly 25% of the students enrolled at Santa Maria-Bonita and Rowland Unified experienced homelessness during the 2018-2019 school year. At Norwalk-La Mirada Unified, 30% of students experienced homelessness. Los Angeles Unified, the largest district in California, reported that 18,979 students experienced homelessness during the academic year **(Table 11)**.

District enrollment rates for students experiencing homelessness reveals where students are located. For example, roughly **40% of San Diego County's students experiencing homelessness are located in San Diego Unified.** Additionally, within San Diego Unified, approximately 8,000 students or 6% of the student population were identified as having experienced homelessness during the 2018-2019 school year **(Table 11)**.

Table 11. Percent of Students Experiencing Homelessness Enrolled at Selected Districts with High Numbers/Proportions of Homeless Students in California, 2018-2019

District	Homeless Enrollment	District Total Enrollment	Percent Enrollment
Los Angeles Unified	18,979	630,838	**3.0%**
San Diego Unified	8,284	131,706	**6.3%**
Long Beach Unified	7,251	76,554	**9.5%**
Santa Ana Unified	6,720	53,235	**12.6%**
San Bernardino City Unified	5,669	58,412	**9.7%**
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified	5,417	18,153	**29.8%**
Moreno Valley Unified	4,846	35,375	**13.7%**
Paradise Unified*	3,307	4,370	**75.7%**
Rowland Unified	3,620	14,996	**24.1%**
North Monterey County Unified	1,702	4,858	**35.0%**

*Paradise Unified data was heavily affected by Butte County's 2018 Camp Fire.

Note. Enrollment numbers were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate under "Cumulative Enrollment", California Department of Education, 2019d.

During the 2018-2019 school year, **students experiencing homelessness had higher rates of chronic absence than their peers** in the highlighted districts. Students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles Unified were chronically absent at a rate of 36%, 18% higher than students who did not experience homelessness **(Table 12)**.

Table 12. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Selected Districts with High Numbers/Proportions of Homeless Students Enrolled in California, 2018-2019

District	Homeless Chronic Absence Rate	Non-Homeless Chronic Absence Rate	Difference in (%) Points
Los Angeles Unified	36%	18%	**18%**
San Diego Unified	29%	11%	**18%**
Long Beach Unified	25%	14%	**11%**
Santa Ana Unified	12%	7%	**5%**
San Bernardino City Unified	25%	18%	**7%**
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified	12%	9%	**3%**
Moreno Valley Unified	21%	16%	**5%**
Paradise Unified*	35%	21%	**14%**
Rowland Unified	11%	10%	**1%**
North Monterey County Unified	15%	14%	**1%**

*Paradise Unified data was heavily affected by Butte County's 2018 Camp Fire.

Note. Chronic absenteeism rates were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, California Department of Education, 2019d.

During the 2018-2019 school year, **only 66% of students experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles Unified graduated in four years**. From the school districts we examined, Norwalk-La Mirada, Moreno Valley, and North Monterey County Unified reported higher graduation rates than the state for students experiencing homelessness **(Table 13)**.

Table 13. Graduation Rate for Selected Districts with High Numbers/Proportions of Homeless Students Enrolled in California, 2018-2019

District	Homeless Graduation Rate	Non-Homeless Graduation Rate	Difference in (%) Points
Los Angeles Unified	66%	82%	**16%**
San Diego Unified	72%	86%	**14%**
Long Beach Unified	78%	88%	**10%**
Santa Ana Unified	80%	90%	**10%**
San Bernardino City Unified	81%	84%	**3%**
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified	89%	93%	**4%**
Moreno Valley Unified	90%	92%	**2%**
Paradise Unified	85%	46%	**-39%**
Rowland Unified	84%	87%	**3%**
North Monterey County Unified	91%	88%	**-2%**

*Paradise Unified data was heavily affected by Butte County's 2018 Camp Fire.

Note. UC/CSU Requirements Met data were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

For the 2018-2019 school year, **students experiencing homelessness had significantly lower rates of UC/CSU readiness rates (Table 14).** Graduating seniors at Long Beach Unified and San Diego Unified had a 24% gap in UC/CSU readiness compared to their peers. Smaller gaps can be seen in Moreno Valley Unified where students experiencing homelessness graduated at 40%, only 2% lower than their non-homeless peers.

Table 14. UC/CSU Requirements Met for Selected Districts with High Numbers/ Proportions of Homeless Students Enrolled in California, 2018-2019

District	Homeless UC/CSU Reqs Met	Non-Homeless UC/CSU Reqs Met	Difference in (%) Points
Los Angeles Unified	50%	64%	**14%**
San Diego Unified	50%	72%	**22%**
Long Beach Unified	37%	59%	**22%**
Santa Ana Unified	35%	48%	**13%**
San Bernardino City Unified	26%	37%	**11%**
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified	40%	49%	**9%**
Moreno Valley Unified	40%	42%	**2%**
Paradise Unified	20%	19%	**-1%**
Rowland Unified	34%	43%	**9%**
North Monterey County Unified	33%	41%	**8%**

Note. UC/CSU Requirements Met data were retrieved from DataQuest 2018-19 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, California Department of Education, 2019e.

Summary

Striking educational differences among students experiencing homelessness are prevalent across race and geography. This consistent underperformance calls for policymakers at all levels of government to consider these factors when prioritizing the distribution of resources.

Examination of educational performance (graduation, college readiness) and school climate indicators (e.g., chronic absenteeism, suspensions) for students experiencing homelessness across the state reveals that students of every racial and ethnic group are struggling academically compared to their non-homeless peers. Black, American Indian, and White students experiencing homelessness have a 19% higher rate in chronic absence rates compared to students who did not experience homelessness **(Figure 4)**. When comparing student graduation rates, a 14% gap exists for Black students and a 19% gap for White students experiencing homelessness **(Figure 5)**. There is an 18% gap in college readiness for Black students experiencing homelessness, and a 31% gap for White students experiencing homelessness statewide **(Figure 6)**.

Of the counties serving the highest proportion of students experiencing homelessness, Sacramento County (25%) and San Diego County (18%) have the most pronounced differences in chronic absenteeism rates. San Diego County students experiencing homelessness (25%) and Sacramento County (22%) have the lowest graduation rates compared to their peers in other counties. Sacramento County (30%), San Diego County (25%), and Orange County (26%) have the largest gaps in college readiness rates between students experiencing homelessness and their peers.

Paradise Unified School District (75.7%) and North Monterey County Unified School District (35%) serve a higher proportion of students experiencing homelessness than any other districts in the state **(Table 11)**. The devastation caused by the 2018 Camp Fire in Butte County can begin to explain Paradise Unified District's high rates of homelessness, as many families are still unhoused as a direct result of the fire. Los Angeles Unified School District (18%) and San Diego Unified School District (18%) have the most significant gaps in chronic absence between students experiencing homelessness and their peers **(Table 12)**. Graduation rates **(Table 13)** are comparatively lower for Los Angeles Unified School District (16%) and San Diego Unified School District (14%) among students experiencing homelessness, and college readiness rates **(Table 14)** for students experiencing homelessness in Long Beach Unified (24%) and San Diego Unified School District (24%).

Future Research & Considerations

Findings from this study largely mirror those of Piazza & Hyatt (2019a) who surveyed over 692 representatives of K-12 school districts, including 547 McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons, reflecting responses from 35% of all K-12 liaisons across California. The authors of that study identified similar patterns around challenges related to identifying students for services, inadequate capacity to support a growing number of students experiencing homelessness and a desire for more dedicated resources.

The conclusions for this study were informed by focus groups and interviews with over 155 key stakeholders (see **Appendix A: Research Methods**), many of whom support the academic success of students experiencing homelessness, including a small sample of county McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons and their counterparts school districts. Future research consideration for philanthropic, private, corporate, state and federal partners are identified below:

1. Limited research currently exists that documents evidence-based strategies for educators and practitioners, including homeless liaisons who devote their work to eliminating educational barriers for students experiencing homelessness. The Center for the Transformation of Schools at UCLA plans to build upon some of the key findings from this report to begin documenting promising models from early education to higher education that can help strengthen schoolwide, campus and community practices for students experiencing homelessness. Many of these approaches will take into consideration how education, housing and child welfare agencies are working in coordination and how districts are leveraging multiple funding sources, including the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to accelerate educational success for students experiencing homelessness.

2. Homelessness impacts Latinx (70%) and Black (9%) students disproportionately and the intersection of poor educational outcomes and homelessness present within schools cannot be overlooked (Moore et al., 2019). There is a need for more research that documents practices and policies that deliberately focus on changing the educational trajectory of students of color experiencing homelessness. California Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) provides a framework for rethinking universal and targeted supports for altering historic patterns of education inequality. However, MTSS is a strategy that hasn't been explored through research as a means to improve academic outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

3. There is a need for future scholarship that explores the impact of the McKinney-Vento Act on state educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. We determined that the federal McKinney-Vento Act is not reaching 2 out of 3 California experiencing homelessness due to limited federal investments, suggesting the importance of future research that explores policies that prioritize the success of students experiencing homelessness.

4. Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) for all 1,037 districts, 58 county offices of education and 1,306 charter schools present another opportunity for further analysis to learn more about the types of strategies, interventions and use of resources to promote the educational success of students experiencing homelessness. While the Center for the Transformation of Schools research team did not review LCAPs for this study, we see value in future research that discerns patterns in the strategic use of Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) resources and how they align to charter, district and county equity schools.

We are hopeful future research from the Center and scholars across the country will continue to shape policy priorities for local, state and federal policymakers and practices for educators committed to supporting students experiencing homelessness. The next section of this report begins to identify policy levers worthy of consideration for lawmakers at all level of government based on our report findings.

VI

Policy Implications

As was the case concerning the Camp Fire disaster, many of the public policy challenges that existed before the onset of the COVID-19 public health crisis are likely to be exacerbated in its aftermath. Although emergency funds continue to be offered by the federal government, a lack of understanding of the nuanced ways in which students experience homelessness and housing insecurity presents an ongoing challenge. To better support children and families experiencing homelessness, aggressive policy initiatives will need to be enacted to reduce the educational, social, and health disparities likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic.

We draw connections to key findings from the report and explain how they can be used to inform the development of public policies. Policymakers at each level of government have distinct responsibilities to address historical patterns of inequality. They must also create greater coordination in the delivery of services to address the growing crisis of student homelessness.

School District Policies

- **Ensure that district resources for students experiencing homelessness are aligned with Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) goals,** taking into account the likely number of students experiencing homelessness and their needs.
- **Encourage the development and sharing of common district-wide strategies for identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness** so that responsibility for doing so does not fall solely upon the homeless liaison. This information sharing could help elevate strategies in place that districts may not know about. Additionally, prioritizing site-based liaisons can help eliminate school barriers to learning.
- **Adopt a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework to organize schools around the needs and learning interests of students experiencing homelessness.** Reduce suspensions that disproportionately impact unhoused students and students of color, and embrace alternative strategies to punitive discipline approaches.

Cities & County Policies

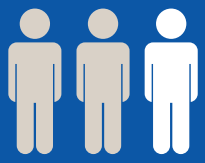
- **Work between school districts, city and county agencies to provide and coordinate access to resources to support students and families experiencing homelessness** (e.g., affordable housing, neighborhood safety, reliable public transportation, and access to job training).
- **Encourage the support of development for after-school programming and community services** from businesses, faith-based organizations, and nonprofits.
- **Improve coordination across city departments to ensure more efficient service delivery and access to basic needs** in neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by housing instability.
- **Focus on improving access to affordable housing options** for young people and families, including college age students.
- **Establish city-led efforts that focus more deliberately on K-12 and college level rapid rehousing partnerships** that meet student basic needs and address housing security challenges early for young people.

State Policies

- **Provide more targeted funding to augment Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)** in counties and districts that have the highest concentration of homelessness, as identified in the CTS state map on student homelessness.
- **Continue to invest in data systems like the Cradle to Career longitudinal data system** and standard procedures for identifying and tracking the educational progress and health of students experiencing homelessness, from birth to employment.
- **Increase access to high-quality early education programs as a foundational strategy** for targeting resources and services for young children and families.
- **Expand investments in the college-focused rapid rehousing and basic needs efforts** to reach more CCC, CSU and UC campuses that are being impacted by the student homelessness crisis.

Federal Policies

Establish a standard definition for student homelessness to improve the identification of young people for targeted support and resources to eliminate confusion that multiple definitions create for educators and school systems.



2 out of 3

students experiencing homelessness in California attend schools that receive no dedicated MVA funding.

- **Adequately fund the McKinney Vento Act (MVA) to allow for federal resources to be directed to the state and local systems at a much larger scale** to support homeless student success and to address the student homelessness crisis across states. Currently, 2 out of 3 students experiencing homelessness in California are not being reached by MVA dollars due to limited federal funding.
- **Expand funding for full-service community schools to support primary health, mental health, and dental care** in schools. Adopt educational models that invest in young people before and after school.
- **Incentivize state efforts through federal funding streams that strengthen coordination** between early childhood education, colleges, housing, employment, and homelessness services providers as part of a whole-family approach to improve both child and family outcomes.
- **Increase financial aid packages to cover the total cost of attendance** for low-income students, including students experiencing homelessness, who often have to cover the majority of the cost of attendance out of pocket.

VII

Conclusion

Our aim in producing this report is to help policymakers and education system leaders to better understand the systemic and social obstacles that adversely impact students experiencing homelessness. We plan to follow-up this report by documenting promising, evidence-based models and practices statewide that have shown healthy academic outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

Although California is one of the wealthiest states in the nation, significant challenges remain for its large and growing homeless population. California remains profoundly economically, socially, and racially stratified (Bohn & Danielson, 2016). Such social stratification contributes substantially to the difficulties of serving this vulnerable population. Interviews with educators, service providers, and homeless students themselves have shown how school and higher education systems (e.g., early education, K-12, postsecondary) are responding to the growing crisis of student homelessness and the nature of obstacles that thwart their progress. Examining the available empirical data makes clear that the problems experienced by homeless students are more pronounced in California than in any other state (HUD, 2016).

Broader awareness about the unique needs of the population of students experiencing homelessness can help improve educational outcomes. Each segment of the education community (early education, K-12, higher education) should adopt a targeted, coordinated strategy, along with a coherent plan for students as they transition along the education pipeline. Local, state and federal lawmakers should act aggressively to address the alarming rates of food insecurity and gaps in basic needs as part of a comprehensive response to homelessness. The COVID-19 public health crisis has led to heightened awareness about the critical role schools play in providing valuable resources such as food and shelter to vulnerable populations.

As schools reopen, they will face an increased need for improved coordination of services for homeless students. Families that were already on the brink of financial and housing insecurity may become eligible for homelessness assistance due to COVID-19.

Schools and higher education institutions play a pivotal role in bringing services, resources, and academic support to students to improve their ability to get educated, find employment and improve their quality of life. Student homelessness is a problem that cannot be solved by educational institutions alone. However, with greater focus, California's education sector can profoundly change the academic trajectory of students experiencing homelessness. Key decision-makers from the public and private sector, including students, educators and lawmakers must be part of the solution to make the best use of increasingly limited resources to address a growing challenge.

We hope that by drawing attention to the perspectives of educators and service providers on the front lines, we can bring greater public awareness to this problem. By highlighting the perspectives of students who experience homelessness, this report can potentially catalyze sustained and strategic action among policymakers, educators, and concerned citizens to ameliorate this growing crisis.

Appropriate Citation: Bishop, J.P., Camargo Gonzalez, L., Rivera, E. (2020). State of Crisis: Dismantling Student Homelessness in California. Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

VIII

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Appendix A

Research Methods

Empirical data collected for this landscape report includes two large focus groups, individual student interviews, and one-on-one interviews with partners in Early childhood, Higher Education, and Nonprofit organizations. Data for K-12 homeless student enrollment was synthesized and analyzed from Data Quest, which is compiled by the California Department of Education.

Summary of Participants *(N=155)*

Focus Group participants: 119
[e.g., Nonprofit Organizations, Service Providers, Foundation Organizations, State Agency Partners, McKinney-Vento Liaisons, K-12 school staff, K-12 school educators, K-12 District and County Partners, Higher Education partners]

Student Interviews: 13

Interviews with Nonprofit Organizations: 4

Interviews with Higher Education: 8

Interviews with Early Childhood Partners: 7

Interviews with leaders in the CA Department of Education: 4

Focus Groups

Key stakeholders representing a range of organizations from early childcare to higher education agencies were convened to reflect on the challenges and barriers they face when trying to better support students and families experiencing homelessness.

Student Interviews

The research team conducted thirteen one-on-one interviews with students over the age of 18 from across the state who have experienced homelessness and housing instability. With the support of colleagues in CDE, local K-12 district offices, and community stakeholders, we were able to interview a total of thirteen students. We asked students to share their experiences with homelessness and housing instability while in school, either in K-12 and/or in Higher Education.

Interviews with Educators, Services Providers, and Nonprofit Organizations

A total of 19 individual interviews were conducted with additional educators and services providers. In our focus groups, we had a majority of K-12 educators and school officials. Therefore we conducted individual interviews with additional early childhood, higher education, and nonprofit stakeholders.

Empirical Data Analysis

Data collected from the focus groups and the interviews were analyzed by the research team using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. We conducted a two-cycle coding analysis (Saldaña, 2015), using In Vivo and Focused codes to generate the findings of this report. Also, after each focus group, we held review sessions where participants provided feedback on preliminary findings.

About California Department of Education Data

Data collection begins at the school and LEA level. Each LEA has a local liaison for homeless education who is responsible for ensuring the identification of homeless students through coordinated activities with other school personnel and community agencies. The liaison is also responsible for working with the LEA's data staff and the State Coordinator to ensure the LEA provides accurate data that meets the required elements outlined by the Secretary of Education.

California K-12 Homeless Student Enrollment Data

The homeless student data presented in section five was was compiled from DataQuest, the California Department of Education's (CDE) web-based data reporting tool. These data are submitted and certified by Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and charter schools as part of the annual End of Year 3 (EOY 3) submission in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). We analyzed K-12 homeless student enrollment data for the 2018-2019 academic year and disaggregated by race and ethnicity. We used the data descriptors used by CDE [e.g., enrollment rates, suspension rates].

Enrollment Rates

This report displays the annual cumulative K-12 public school enrollment by student ethnicity and grade level for the selected report level (state and county) and year. At the time of collection, cumulative enrollment was retrieved from DataQuest's "Chronic Absenteeism Rate" data report under the "Cumulative Enrollment" column disaggregated by program subgroup "Homeless" and filtered by "Yes" for students experiencing homelessness and "No" for non-homeless students (CDE, 2019d). Although no specific cumulative enrollment report exists on DataQuest at the present time, the CDE recently posted cumulative enrollment downloadable files at https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenrcum.asp.

Suspension Rates

Suspension rates were used as the primary indicator for discipline. Suspension calculations include both in-school and out-of-school suspensions in the numerator, and the denominator is determined by cumulative enrollment of all students enrolled at a school during the school year at the selected entity for the selected population using the available filters. The program subgroup was set to "Homeless" and filtered by "Yes" for students experiencing homelessness and "No" for non-homeless students (CDE, 2019c).

Chronic Absenteeism

This report provides a total count of cumulatively enrolled students who were eligible to be considered chronically absent (Chronic Absenteeism Eligible Enrollment) and a count of students who were determined to be chronically absent (Chronic Absenteeism Count). These two counts are used to determine the Chronic Absenteeism Rate (Chronic Absenteeism Count divided by Chronic Absenteeism Eligible Enrollment) at the selected entity for the selected population using the available filters. Students are determined to be chronically absent if they were eligible to be considered chronically absent at the selected level during the academic year, and they were absent for 10% or more of the days they were expected to attend (CDE, 2019d).

Graduation Data / UC/CSU Readiness Rates

Graduation data for this report displays the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) by Race/Ethnicity or Program Subgroup for the selected year at the selected reporting level (state and county) and the number of graduates who met UC/CSU entrance requirements. The four-year ACGR is the number of students who graduate from high school in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. Student UC/CSU readiness is those cohort graduates who a local educational agency determined met all the (a-g) requirements for admission to a University of California or California State University school (CDE, 2019e).

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Educator Demographic Information:
Educator Pseudonym:
Race/ethnicity:
Gender:

1. Please describe your position.
2. In what segment of educational services do you work with students and families experiencing homelessness [e.g.. early childhood, K-12, Higher education]?
3. In your role, do you count and/or identify students experiencing homelessness?
4. If working at a school setting, how do you identify students and families experiencing homelessness?
5. What is your understanding of homelessness?
6. In your role, what are the resources/services you provide to students and families experiencing homelessness [e.g. transportation, housing references, health and mental health support]?
7. Do you interact with a McKinney Vento liaison?
8. If students or families are in need of a service/resource you do not provide, do you know who to refer them to?
9. Are you aware of resources/services outside of the educational space (ex: housing agencies, community centers, advocacy groups, etc)?
10. Share your expertise an thoughts around education promising practices you are currently using and successes you are having in you work to support homeless students?
11. Describe the challenges and barriers that may impede your ability to support homeless students?
12. What resources and support do you need to assist you in better supporting homeless students?
13. What recommendations do you have for educational leaders and local government representatives to better support you in your role of providing services/resources to families and students experiencing homelessness?

Appendix C

Glossary

Glossary of Key Terms*

Homeless

This term is used interchangeably with experiencing homelessness, un-housed, and housing instability throughout the report. In addition, when referring to students experiencing homelessness we are referencing homeless children and youth with families, as well as unaccompanied homeless students. The former constitutes a more substantial proportion of the homeless student population.

Homeless Liaison

Within K-12 education, homeless liaisons are designated by Local Education Agencies (LEA's), and must ensure that liaisons are able to carry out their duties. Homeless liaisons are based within county and district offices, and are typically not working directly on school sites. In higher education, homeless liaisons are typically staffed on each college campus.

LCAP (Local Control Accountability Plan)

A key accountability requirement of the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the LCAP is a three-year plan, which every district and charter school must create and update annually with input from the community. The LCAP is intended to explain how the district will use state funds to improve educational outcomes for all students based on eight state priorities, with special attention to high-needs students for whom the district received additional money.

LCFF (Local Control Funding Formula)

The Local Control Funding Formula, also known as LCFF, overhauls California's school finance system with a per-pupil base grant plus additional money for high-needs (low income, English learner, homeless and foster youth) students.

Signed into law on July 1, 2013, the Local Control Funding Formula, also known as LCFF, overhauls California's school finance system, replacing "revenue limits" and most "categorical funds" with a per-pupil base grant plus additional money for high-needs (low income, English learner, homeless and foster youth) students.

LEA (Local Education Agency)

As defined by the federal government, LEAs are a public board of education or other public authority within a state that maintains administrative control of public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a state. School districts and county offices of education are both LEAs. Under the Local Control Funding Formula, charter schools are increasingly treated as LEAs.

MVA (McKinney-Vento Act)

McKinney-Vento Act (MVA)- The McKinney Vento Act serves as the primary federal policy designed to support the educational success of students experiencing homelessness. MVA requires that all students experiencing homelessness age 21 and under, be afforded access to public education. Under the law, all school districts, charters, states, and postsecondary institutions, when applicable, are required to remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, and educational success for students experiencing homelessness. Most notably, MVA considers students living in a doubled-up living situation due to economic hardship, loss of housing, natural disaster, or living in a motel or hotel, as qualifying for homeless educational supports.

*Source: https://edsource.org/glossary
This is not a comprehensive list of all terms used in the report. These are a few of the terms used extensively throughout the report.