

STUDENT HOMELESSNESS AT A NEW HIGH

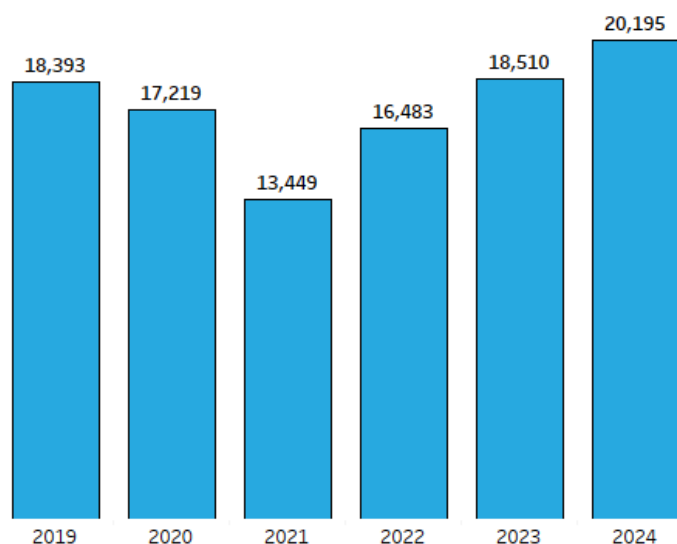
The reported number of homeless students hit a high mark in Wisconsin's public schools in the 2023-24 academic year, likely due to both an increase in family homelessness and improved identification of existing need. In light of these reports, school districts and communities may wish to draw on the available data and develop targeted supports for these high-risk students.

The number of students in Wisconsin's public schools identified as homeless increased to 20,195 during the 2023-24 school year (see Figure 1). This is the highest number since 2019 – the first year for which data are available from Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction – and represents a 9.1% increase over the previous year despite the total number of enrolled students declining 1.1%.

With homeless individuals often among the least connected to institutions like schools, obtaining accurate counts can be difficult. The state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) relies upon the definition of “homeless” included in the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which was first passed in 1987 and establishes the educational rights and services for homeless students from pre-kindergarten through high school (see textbox).

Figure 1: Student Homelessness Reaches New High

Reported number of homeless students in Wisconsin's public schools



Source: Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

The federal [McKinney-Vento Act](#) defines homeless children and youth as those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those:

- sharing housing due to loss of housing or economic hardship
- living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or campgrounds due to lack of alternative accommodations
- living in emergency or transitional shelters
- sleeping in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, or substandard housing

Among other provisions, the Act enumerates the rights of homeless students and the obligations of school districts to meet their educational needs. For example, students who lose their housing may continue to attend their original schools even if their temporary housing is no longer in the school's territory, and districts are responsible for providing transportation from the temporary housing to the schools of origin.

This definition is more expansive than the one used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which creates wide discrepancies in the counts reported by these two agencies. Most notably, the McKinney-Vento definition includes students who are “doubled up” – that is, living with friends or family due to a change in financial, family, or employment status. Those situations are not included in the federal definition, contributing to the state figures for homeless students in Wisconsin being much higher than the federal figures for all homeless individuals in the state. Despite the count differences, however, both agencies show recent increases in homelessness, as our [previous research has shown](#).

TRENDS OVER TIME

The number of reported homeless students in Wisconsin increased for a third consecutive year in 2023-24 (referred to in this brief as 2024) after hitting its lowest level on record at the height of the pandemic in 2021. That low point and subsequent increase coincide with the trend across the country as [reported](#) by the National Center for Homeless Education. National data from 2023 and 2024 are not yet available.

Local school officials we interviewed credit some of the 2021 decline to COVID-era financial support and housing policies such as eviction moratoriums. However, they attribute much more of the decrease to underreporting due to virtual learning, which is how most districts began that school year. In virtual school settings, there are fewer opportunities for districts to identify students with unstable housing. Some of these opportunities occur during day-to-day interactions between students and school staff members. In addition, many families self-identify as homeless during annual enrollment periods when transportation needs are determined. When virtual learning greatly reduced transportation needs in 2021, the disclosure of housing instability was also diminished.

School officials we interviewed expect the recent growth in reported homelessness to continue, in part due to insufficient housing but also because of improved reporting. They cite a lack of affordable housing in their communities, especially family-appropriate housing such as three-bedroom apartments. However, some of the increased homelessness may be the result of

improved identification methods. Awareness of student homelessness has grown in school communities since the state began reporting on it six years ago.

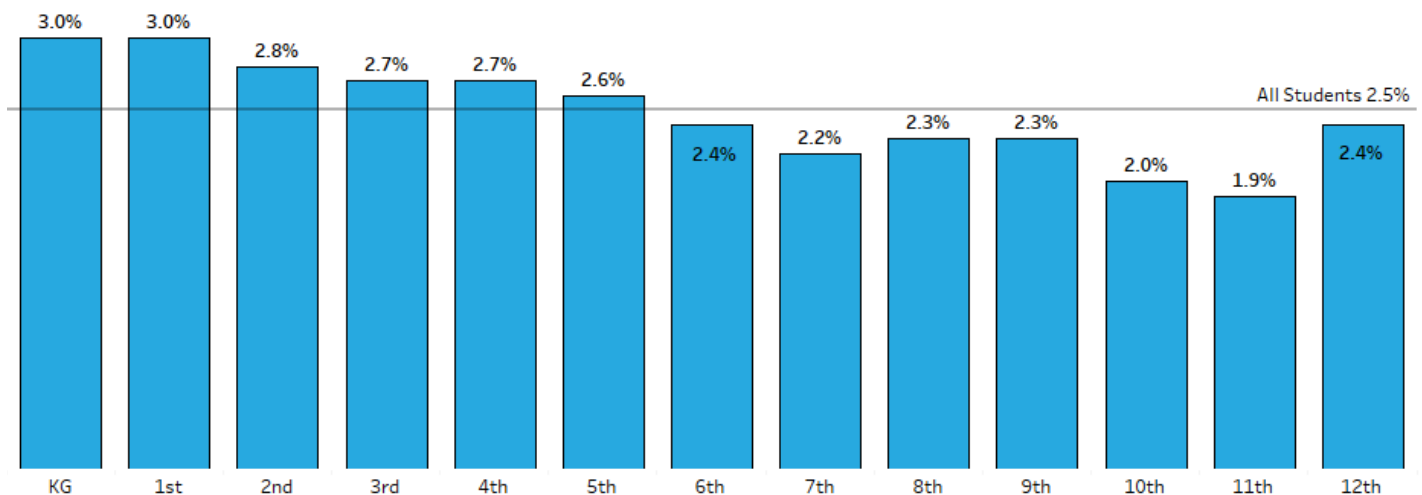
Intentional efforts to improve identification and reporting procedures have been made in districts across the state through the Department of Public Instruction's [Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program](#). That program works with designated homeless liaisons in local school districts to ensure their students receive the resources they are guaranteed under the McKinney-Vento Act. It also allocates about \$1 million of federal funds annually to support services for homeless students through a competitive grant program. Grants are used to educate school communities about student homelessness and to improve student identification procedures. Currently, 40 districts across Wisconsin are receiving funds through this program.

DIVERGENCES AMONG STUDENT GROUPS, DISTRICT TYPES

In 2024, the average rate of homelessness among Wisconsin public school students was 2.5%, but homelessness was much more prevalent among certain groups. For example, English learners and students with disabilities had rates of 5.6% and 3.9%, respectively, while the rate for students of color was 5.5%.

The reported rates of homelessness also differ by the age of students. Figure 2 shows that reported rates generally decrease as students grow older until twelfth grade, when the rate jumps up. This phenomenon also occurred in previous years and may be influenced by

Figure 2: More Younger Students are Reported as Homeless
Homelessness rate by grade level for Wisconsin public school students, 2024

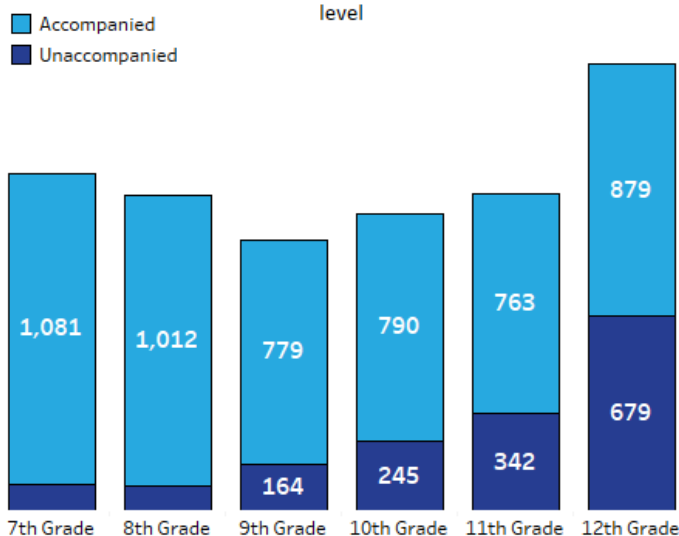


Source: Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction



Figure 3: Unaccompanied Homelessness Rises Among Students as They Age

Wisconsin students in the class of 2024 reported homeless, by grade level



Source: Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction

several factors. First, school officials have fewer interactions with families as students age, which reduces opportunities to identify homelessness. This changes in twelfth grade when students and schools increase their communication to prepare for graduation and other post-secondary plans. Another possible reason for the large increase in the final year of high school is that many students turn 18 that year and become legal adults. At that point, they may leave difficult living situations even if they do not have adequate housing options.

This fact might help to explain why there are more unaccompanied students in twelfth grade than in eleventh grade. The majority of homeless students in Wisconsin's schools are members of family units, but a significant share – 11.2% in 2024 – are unaccompanied by parents or guardians. The reported data show that the proportion of unaccompanied students is very low in the elementary school years but gradually grows as students get older, with a large increase in twelfth grade.

For example, the graduating class of 2024 had 337 more unaccompanied students in twelfth grade than in eleventh, a 98.5% increase. As Figure 3 shows, that class experienced gradual increases of unaccompanied homeless students even in years when its total homeless population decreased. By their senior year, 43.6% of the homeless students in that class did not live with a parent or guardian. This trend played out in a similar way for the other student cohorts, and it is

reasonable to assume that it will continue in the same fashion for future classes.

Unaccompanied students are a particularly vulnerable subset: those without stable housing often have poorer educational outcomes, but unaccompanied students have the additional burden of not having an adult to advocate for their needs or offer guidance and support.

The share of unaccompanied homeless students appears to be disproportionately greater in more heavily populated school districts, meaning those in urban and suburban locales. However, this effect is influenced to some extent by the outsized impact of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

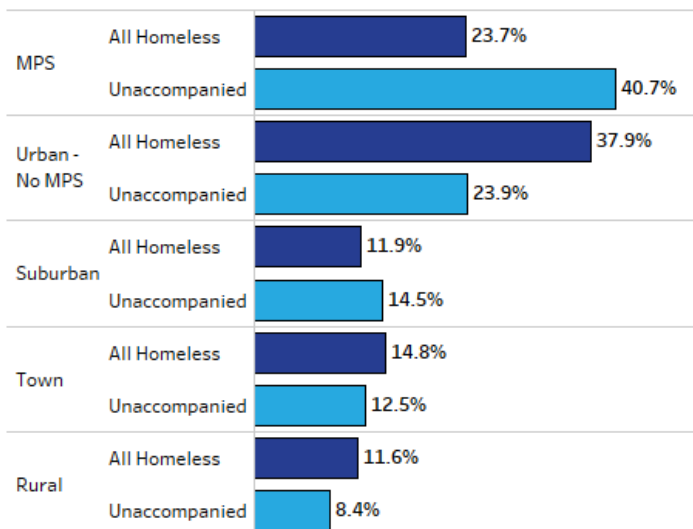
In 2024, MPS served 40.7% of the state's reported unaccompanied students, despite working with only about one-quarter of its overall homeless student population. For reference, 8.2% of Wisconsin's public school students were enrolled in MPS that year. In MPS, 7.4% of students were homeless in 2024, or three times more than the statewide average.

Separating MPS from the other urban districts reveals that those other districts have a much smaller share of the state's unaccompanied students (see Figure 4). School leaders should keep this small but significant and vulnerable group of students in mind as they consider policies that address the needs of their homeless students.

The state also reports the type of overnight shelter that homeless students use. From 2019 to 2024, the

Figure 4: More Homeless Students, Especially the Unaccompanied, in Milwaukee and Urban Districts

Share of Wisconsin students reported homeless by category and locale



Source: National Center for Ed. Statistics, Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction



majority of these students, 77%, were doubled up or living with family and friends due to financial hardship. About 10% found shelter in hotels and motels, and another 10% were in transitional housing or shelters. Those remaining were either unsheltered (2%) or had unknown overnight shelter (1%). Though small, the number of homeless students who are unsheltered has almost doubled, from 308 in 2019 to 593 in 2024.

Doubling up is the most common reported shelter type for homeless students across urban, suburban, and rural locales. However, students in urban districts use shelters and transitional housing at disproportionately high rates, while those in suburbs and towns use hotels and motels at higher rates. Students in rural districts have disproportionately high rates of doubling up.

CONCLUSION

Reported student homelessness is on the rise in Wisconsin, with more students identified as homeless in 2024 than in any of the previous five years. Our analysis shows that housing instability exists throughout the state and in the majority of its school districts, though it affects some groups more than others, including elementary school students, unaccompanied high school seniors, and students in Milwaukee and other large urban districts.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and local public school districts throughout the state are not in a position to end student homelessness directly, but they can take steps to mitigate its effects on education. Historically, students with unstable housing have had worse educational experiences than their peers, including lower rates of attendance, academic success, and graduation. They may also be more likely to switch schools, another obstacle to learning.

Although homeless students face many challenges, there are compelling reasons to focus on increasing their school attendance rate. First, school attendance is a natural prerequisite to accomplishing any other academic goal. All other initiatives depend on students showing up to school and not repeatedly switching schools.

Second, chronic absenteeism is a particularly acute problem for homeless students because regular attendance at the same school is challenging for students with unstable housing and fluctuating transportation needs. Education leaders who want to lower chronic absenteeism may wish to consider approaches that are effective for their homeless

students, especially in districts with more of those students.

Among homeless students, many educational barriers may be common, such as a lack of internet access and reliable transportation, but effective responses must be individualized. School staff may wish to develop relationships and forms of communication with students and their families so that their needs are known and met.

School leaders we interviewed suggested strategies they use to meet the individualized needs of their students. Some have staff dedicated to working with their homeless students to ensure that they accomplish specific goals such as graduation. Some also acknowledged that homeless students may face barriers to accessing the programs that districts already offer. To remedy this, they give those students preferential treatment when registering for school programs, such as academic remediation.

The number of students affected by homelessness has grown and is likely to continue to remain high in the near future as an insufficient supply of affordable housing remains a lingering problem throughout the state. Addressing the needs of this high-risk group of students could benefit not only them but also Wisconsin's educational outcomes overall.

