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CALIFORNIA'S HOMELESS STUDENTS: A GROWING POPULATION

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Overview

Children and youth experiencing homelessness encounter many obstacles to their education. During the 2012-2013 school year, **nearly 270,000 students experienced homelessness in California, representing 21 percent of the homeless students in the United States.**[i] Moving between unstable housing arrangements, lacking access to basic necessities such as showers, transportation, and food, and experiencing family conflict, poverty, and stigma can all make it difficult to stay in school and thrive in an educational environment; yet, many do.

This brief identifies what we know about the size of California's homeless youth population in the educational system and provides statewide data on the numbers of homeless youth by county and legislative district, obtained from the U.S. Department of Education's *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Data Collection Summary* for the 2011–12 and 2012–13 school years. The brief concludes with recommendations for improving educational success for homeless students and suggests ways to increase state and local capacity for data collection.

To prevent and end youth homelessness, state-level policymakers must continue to focus on these young people and ensure that the rights of homeless students are upheld throughout California. This report is intended to be used as a tool for policymakers to better understand the size and scope of homelessness at the state, county, and legislative district level.

Education is a Pathway out of Poverty

"I've been on and off of the streets for years. I'm trying to get my GED, so we don't have to sleep outside again…I figure with my GED I have a better shot at receiving more stable jobs, and for sure it's my ticket to college." [ii] Alex, San Jose.

In 2009, the average annual income for someone who dropped out of high school was $19,540, compared to $27,380 for a high school graduate.[iii] People who have not graduated from high school also are more likely to lose their jobs during economic downturns. Students experiencing homelessness often strive to complete school knowing it will lead to better employment, higher income, and ultimately stable housing. Yet, they face many obstacles to academic achievement.

The federal McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth program is designed to eliminate the barriers that homeless children and youth have faced in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school. Reauthorized in 2001 as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, the McKinney-Vento Act: provides homeless students with immediate enrollment in school, even if they lack documents typically required for enrollment; establishes the right to continue attending their school of origin, even if homelessness forces them to move across school or school district boundaries; ensures access to educational services for which students are eligible (e.g. free school meals, transportation, and dispute resolution procedures); requires states and local education agencies[v] (LEAs) to eliminate barriers to homeless students' enrollment, attendance, and academic achievement; and, perhaps most importantly, requires every LEA to designate a liaison to implement the law and ensure that students and parents are aware of their rights. Since the McKinney-Vento Act was last reauthorized in 2001, states and LEAs generally have made significant progress in improving educational stability for homeless children and youth attending school. Recent California legislation has contributed to this progress (see text box below for more information). This state and federal legislation has prompted both the state and LEAs to better serve the needs of homeless students and has helped facilitate the expansion of local support networks to meet those needs.

2013 California Legislation Impacting Homeless Students

SB 177: Homeless Youth Education Success Act (EC § 48850, 48852.5)
Author: Sen. Liu (D – La Cañada Flintridge); Co-Author: Asm. Ammiano (D – San Francisco)
Affirms the education rights of California's homeless students by considering them eligible to participate in extra-curricular activities (i.e. interscholastic sports) even if they don't meet school residency requirements. It also provides youth access to educational support and services by requiring:

- ✓ Immediate enrollment of a homeless child or youth;
- ✓ The California Department of Education and the Department of Social Services to organize a work-group to develop policies and practices to support homeless children and youth and ensure that child abuse and neglect reporting requirements do not create barriers to school enrollment and attendance; and
- ✓ Local educational liaisons for homeless children and youth to ensure public notice of the educational rights of homeless children and youth are distributed in schools.

AB 652: Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act: Homeless Children (Penal § 11165.15)
Author: Asm. Ammiano (D – San Francisco)
Clarifies that the fact that a child is homeless or classified as an unaccompanied minor (as defined by the McKinney-Vento education definition), is not, in and of itself, a sufficient basis for reporting child abuse or neglect.

AB 1068: Pupil Records (EC § 49073, 49076)
Author: Asm. Bloom (D – Santa Monica)
Gives unaccompanied youth age 14 and over the right to access and consent to disclose their school records. It also extends these rights to caregivers who enroll students in school using California's caregiver authorization affidavit. Lastly, it prevents schools from releasing directory information (such as the name, address, phone number, and photograph) of students experiencing homelessness, unless a parent expressly consents.

Homeless Student Data: Methodology

The U.S. Department of Education requires all state educational agencies (SEAs) and LEAs to submit information regarding student homelessness on an annual basis. This reporting provides data to help the Department ensure that states provide children and youth experiencing homelessness access to a free, appropriate public education, as required under the McKinney-Vento Act.

In this report, the term "homeless youth" refers to the McKinney-Vento Act's education definition, which defines a student as homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (see text box for a more detailed explanation). The data presented correspond to the number and percentage of students who were enrolled at any time and who met the definition of homelessness at any point in the school year. Enrolled is defined as attending classes and participating fully in school activities. Data on nighttime residence represent the most recently reported living situation.

McKinney-Vento homeless education liaisons are required to identify the students experiencing homelessness over the course of the school year and record this information in data management systems. In turn, every LEA reports the data once a year to the California Department of Education, where it is compiled, certified, and submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. These data represent the total number of students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade who are enrolled in public schools in California and who are identified as homeless by a McKinney-Vento liaison.

For this report, special tabulation was completed by the California Homeless Youth Project at the California Research Bureau by using the office address of each LEA to categorize the LEAs into state Senate and Assembly districts.

Limitations

The data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education does not include homeless children and youth who are not in school, including students who have dropped out of school due

DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

(McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 – Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act – Sec. 725)

The term "homeless children and youth"—

A. Means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence ...; and

B. Includes—

i. Children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or campgrounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

ii. 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 ...

iii. Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and,

iv. Migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

to circumstances surrounding their homelessness. In addition, preschool-aged children are largely absent from the data, as only a small percentage of young children attend LEA pre-kindergarten classes.

The data also do not include homeless students whose school is not aware of their homelessness. There are many factors that may contribute to schools not identifying homeless youth, including insufficient training on data collection, lack of awareness of homelessness, and inadequate training on McKinney-Vento requirements.[vi] Privacy issues are also a concern as homeless youth or their parents may hesitate to disclose their living situations to school staff due to stigma around housing instability, and lack of awareness of the resources available to children and families experiencing homelessness. Older homeless youth in particular may not self-identify for fear of issues with the law, authorities, and/or reunification with parents/guardians.

As a result of these factors, the numbers do not indicate the full extent of child and youth homelessness in the state or nation. At the same time, some data may be duplicative, as it is possible that multiple LEAs will report a homeless student who moves from one district to another during the same school year. Nonetheless, these numbers are the most comprehensive data available and indicate the scope of homelessness among school-age children and youth.

Findings

California has the largest population of homeless students in the country and twice the rate of homeless students as the national average (4% of California's students experienced homelessness at some point throughout the course of the 2012-13 school year, compared with 2% nationally).[i] Further, the population is growing. In the 2012-2013 school year, California's schools reported 20,000 more homeless students than in the previous school year (an increase of 8%).[i]

Homeless students attend every grade level, with more than half (52%) of all homeless public school students in California enrolled in pre-kindergarten through Grade 5 in the 2012-2013 school year. 21% were in grades 6-8 and 27% in grades 9-12. Older students can be more difficult to identify, particularly those who are unaccompanied and may fear being reported to law enforcement, placed in the custody of child welfare, or returned to an unsafe family situation if they ask for assistance or make their living status known.[vii] In addition, homelessness is among the most significant risk factors related to school dropout, beginning in middle school and continuing into high school.[viii] As a result, these data likely underestimate the extent of homelessness among teenagers and young adults.

Homeless students attend schools in urban, suburban and rural areas. While Los Angeles Unified School District identified the highest overall numbers of homeless students (14,323), rural Trinity County had the highest percentage of homeless students (13.3%). Suburban Assembly Districts such as 40 (San Bernardino County) and 7 (Sacramento) were among the top six in overall numbers of homeless students. In fact, over the past decade, more and more rural and suburban LEAs have identified homeless students. For example, in the 2005-06 school year, 40% of school districts reported having zero homeless students. By 2011-12, only 15% of school districts reported having no homeless students enrolled.[i, ix] Researchers and advocates speculate that the numbers of homeless students have increased dramatically over the last few years as a result of both more complete reporting and an increase in the population of homeless students and families following the economic recession.

As California's population of homeless students rises, the funding to meet their needs has not kept pace. The U.S. Department of Education allocates McKinney-Vento funds according to a formula based on poverty, without reference to the number of homeless students the state identifies. **In the 2011-2012 school year, California schools identified 21% of the homeless students nationwide, yet received only 11% of the available federal McKinney-Vento funds.**[x]

Finally, as the number of homeless children and youth has risen, families and youth have increasingly sought shelter outside the formal shelter system. In California, sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic necessity or a similar reason ("doubling up") was the most common living situation among homeless public school students (86% in 2012-13), as opposed to staying in a hotel/motel (4%) or a shelter (7%). In many communities, there are no family or youth shelters, or they are full.[xi]

The following maps provide homelessness data by county (http://www.kidsdata.org/topic/230/homeless-students/map), Assembly district and Senate district (http://www.kidsdata.org/topic/799/homeless-students-leg/map). They were created by Kidsdata.org and are available at: http://www.kidsdata.org/topic/40/homelessness/summary, where users can download and compare data, as well as view their community's information in more detail.

Figure 1: Percentage of public school enrollees who were recorded as being homeless at any point during the school year, by County (2013).

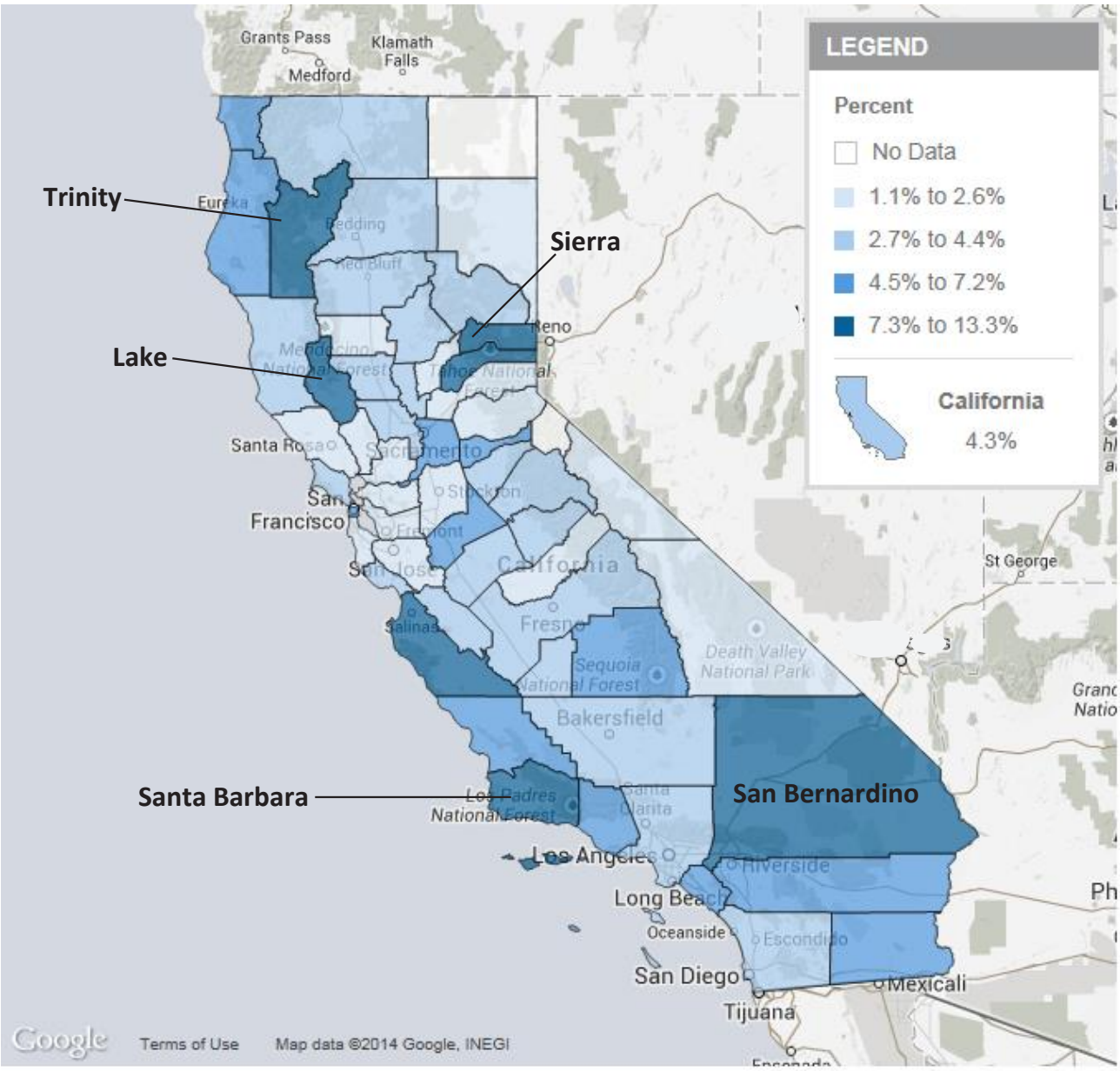


Figure 1.

The five counties with the highest percentage of homeless students are: Trinity (13.3%), Santa Barbara (10.9%), Sierra (9.4%), Lake (8.4%), and San Bernardino (8.1%).

County	Number of Homeless Students	Percentage of Homeless Students
Trinity	215	13.3%
Santa Barbara	7,270	10.9%
Sierra	36	9.4%
Lake	771	8.4%
San Bernardino	33,274	8.1%

Figure 2: Number of public school enrollees who were recorded as being homeless at any point during the school year, by State Assembly District (2013).

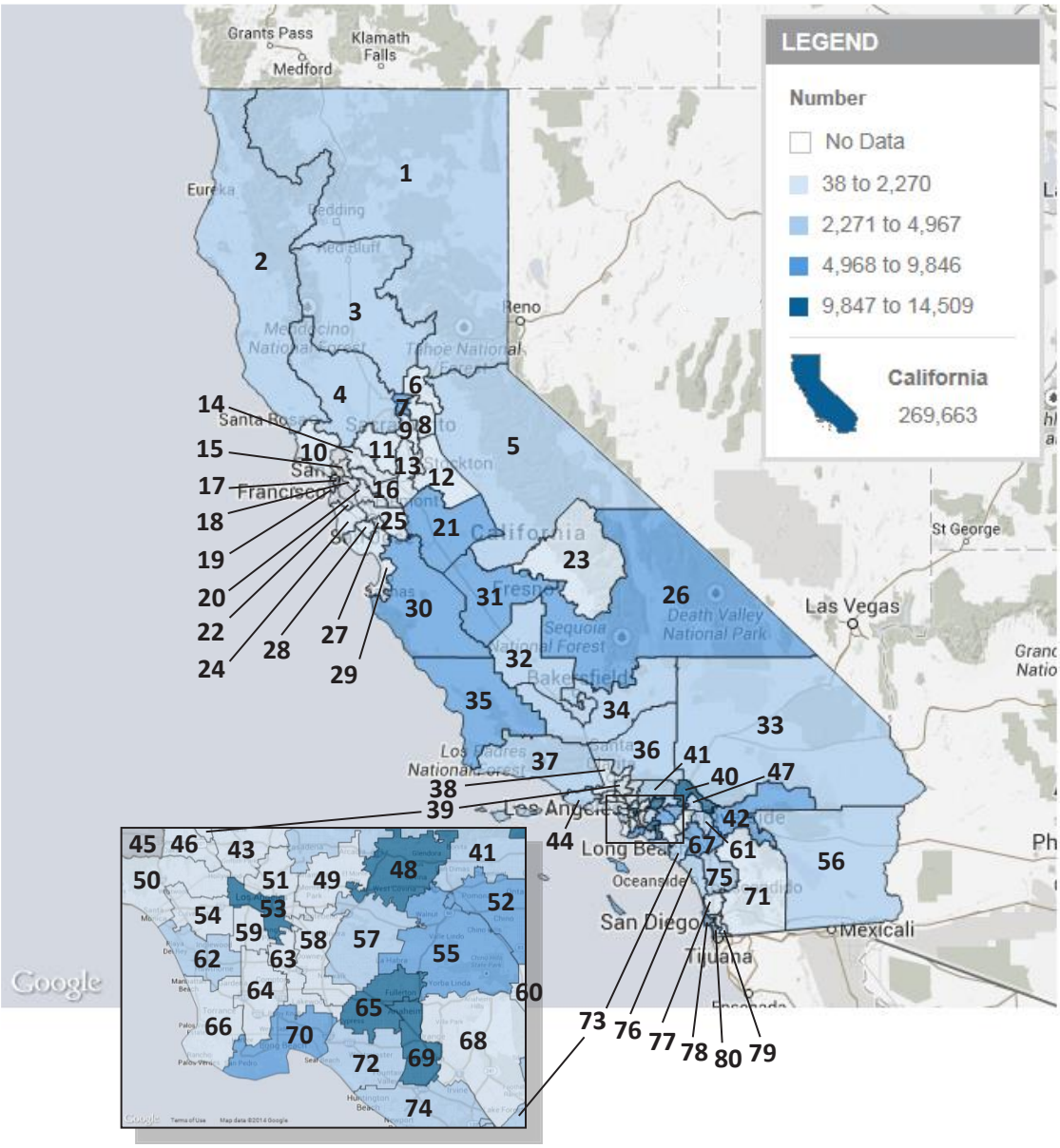


Figure 2.

The top five Assembly districts with the highest number of homeless students (in descending order) are: District 53, District 65, District 40, District 48, and District 69.

Assembly District	Number of Homeless Students	Percentage of Homeless Students
District 53	14,509	5.38%
District 65	13,344	4.94%
District 40	12,965	4.8%
District 48	10,699	3.96%
District 69	9,847	3.65%

Figure 3: Number of public school enrollees who were recorded as being homeless at any point during the school year, by State Senate District (2013).

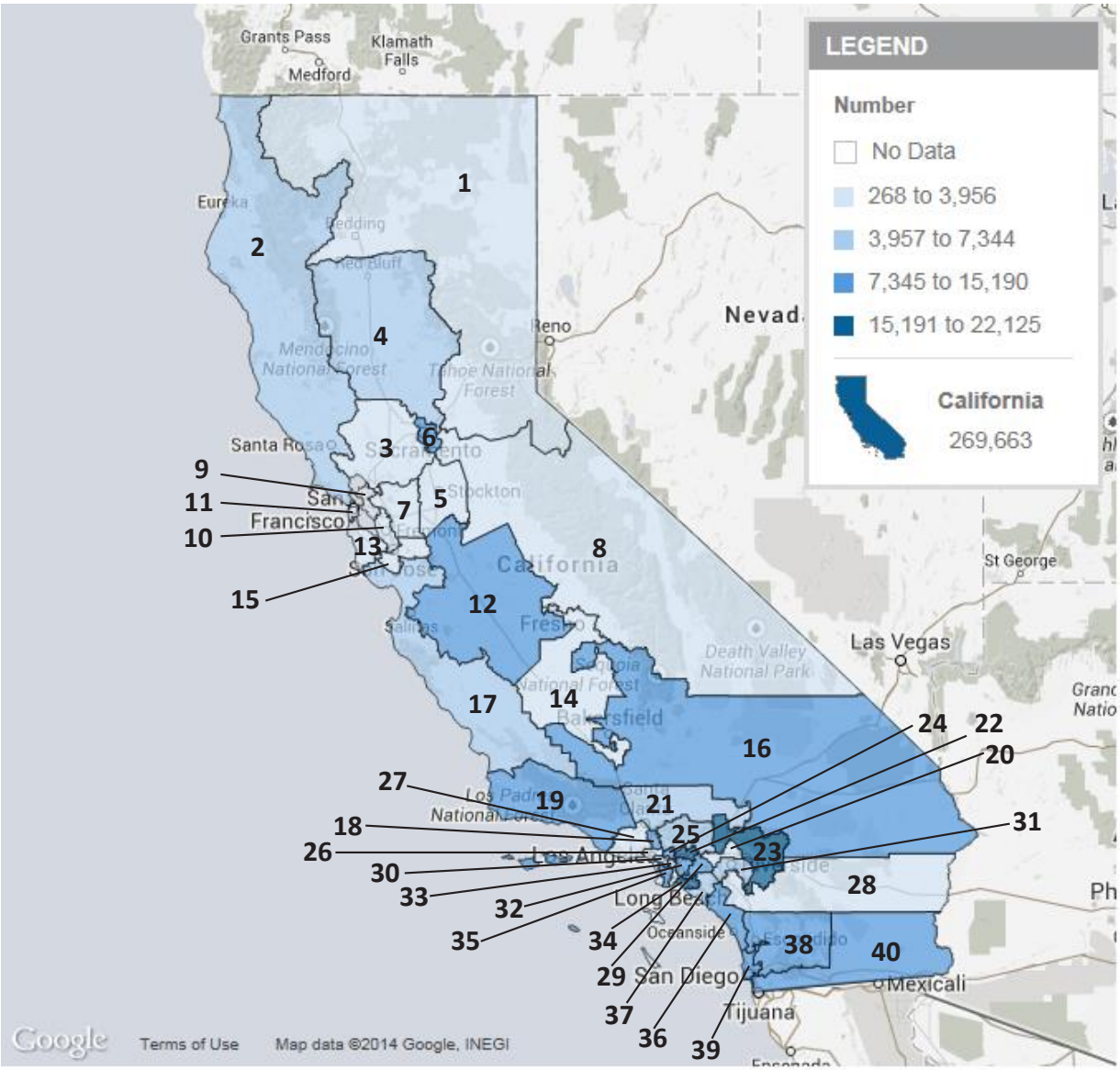


Figure 3.

The top five Senate districts with the highest number of homeless students (in descending order) are: District 34, District 23, District 22, District 19, and District 29.

Senate District	Number of Homeless Students	Percentage of Homeless Students
District 34	22,125	8.2%
District 23	20,917	7.75%
District 22	15,191	5.63%
District 19	13,176	4.88%
District 29	12,854	4.76%

Recommendations

California's 270,000 homeless students attend school and strive for success despite daily struggles to meet their most basic needs. Students know that an education is their surest path out of homelessness and into stable employment and housing as adults. In particular, high school graduation relates directly to employment and future income. One study estimated the loss in lifetime earnings resulting from homeless students dropping out of school to be $5 billion, and the resulting loss to California's economy to be $3.2 billion.

State-level policymakers, the California Department of Education, and LEAs can take actions to assist students experiencing homelessness to succeed in school and graduate from high school. The following recommendations are geared toward improving both the academic achievement of students experiencing homelessness and the data we have about them, in order ultimately to reduce homelessness in California.[ix]

1. Explicitly include homeless students in Local Control and Accountability Plans.

   California's public schools are now funded according to a Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which provides supplemental grants for targeted disadvantaged students, including English learners, low-income students, and foster youth. As part of the LCFF, each LEA in the state is required to prepare a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), which describes how the LEA intends to meet annual goals for all pupils, with specific activities to address targeted disadvantaged students.

   While homeless students are categorically considered low-income, they are not explicitly identified as targeted students in the LCFF and are not included in the LCAP template used across the state. As a result, LCAPs are unlikely to address their unique needs. In fact, of the ten LEAs with the highest numbers of homeless students, ranging from 3,500 to over 14,000 homeless students each, only one mentions a goal or service for homeless students. However, the same LEAs' LCAPs include multiple references to foster youth, with two LEAs proposing multi-million dollar investments in students in foster care. Increasing the academic achievement of homeless students requires that LEAs focus on those students' attendance and success. Including homeless students specifically in LCAPs is the only way to ensure such focus.

2. Increase the accuracy and consistency of data collection and reporting across programs and agencies.

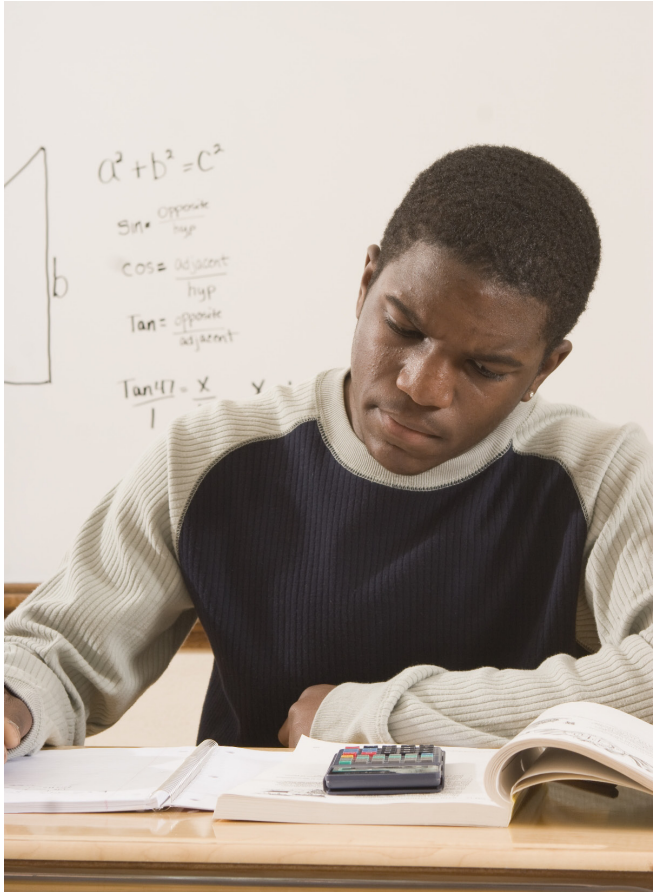
   Various factors limit the accuracy of available data on homelessness: inconsistent definitions of homelessness across agencies hamper efforts at clarity; stigma and sensitivity about homelessness limit identification in schools; and children and youth who are not in school, including young children unable to access LEA pre-kindergarten services, are not counted at all. The following actions would help address these challenges:

   a. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) could report data on the number of children and youth experiencing homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act's education definition as part of its annual Report to Congress and other public data reporting, to provide a more complete picture of homelessness at the federal level.

   b. LEAs could share available information on the number of students experiencing homelessness on the day of HUD's Point-in-Time counts.

   c. The Centers for Disease Control and state health departments could add questions about housing stability to the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey to complement McKinney-Vento data and provide a more complete picture of homelessness and its related threats to health among high school students.

   d. Publicly-funded early childhood programs such as Head Start, Early Start and First 5 could collect and report data on the



number of homeless children they serve to fill the gaps in public schools' reporting of preschool-aged homeless children.

3. Increase McKinney-Vento staffing in LEAs, particularly those with high levels of youth homelessness, to enhance compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act.[ix]

   Designated McKinney-Vento liaisons often juggle many duties and lack the time and capacity to meet their legal responsibilities, including identifying homeless students in the LEA. Inadequate McKinney-Vento funding exacerbates this challenge. Supplemental state or federal funding would assist LEAs in assigning adequate staff.

4. Provide basic information about the McKinney-Vento Act and homeless youth to LEA and school staff.

   McKinney-Vento liaisons in some LEAs have not received training on the McKinney-Vento Act and are ill-equipped to identify, serve, or report accurate data on homeless students. Further, accurate identification requires that school staff who come into direct contact with parents and students understand the definition of homelessness and how to recognize it among students. The following actions would enhance identification of homeless students and increase data quality:

   a. Include information about the McKinney-Vento Act and homeless youth in ongoing, mandatory trainings of McKinney-Vento homeless education liaisons, principals, school counselors, teachers, child welfare and attendance officers, secretaries, school nurses, and other staff.

   b. Expand the McKinney-Vento State Coordinator's "train-the-trainer" program to increase the capacity of County Offices of Education to provide professional development to school districts, and require County Office of Education homeless liaisons to participate.[ix]

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Acknowledgments

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End Notes

[i] California Department of Education. (2014). California Basic Educational Data System, DataQuest; National Center for Homeless Education. (2013). *Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Data Collection Summary*. Retrieved from http://ftp.serve.org/nche/

[ii] Bernstein, N. & Foster, L. (2007). *Voices from the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers.* Retrieved from http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/08/08-004.pdf

[iii] Alliance for Excellent Education (2011). The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools. Retrieved from http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/HighCost.pdf

[iv] According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts in August 2011—four years after the start of the recession—was 14.3 percent, compared to 9.6 percent for high school graduates. Id.

[v] LEAs include school districts, charter schools and county offices of education.

[vi] *Foster, L. (2010). Estimating California Homeless Youth Population.* Retrieved from http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/HomelessYouthPopEstimateReport.pdf

[vii] *Leanne Wheeler, personal communication, 2014.*

[viii] American's Promise Alliance and Center for Promise (2014). *Don't Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People Who Leave High School Before Graduation. Retrieved from* http://gradnation.org/sites/default/files/DCTD%20Final%20Full.pdf

[ix] Julianelle, P. (2007). *The Educational Success of Homeless Youth in California: Challenges and Solutions.* Retrieved from http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/07/07-012.pdf

[x] Still, that 11%, representing over $7 million, is far more than any other state receives, and the national appropriation of $61.7 million is inadequate to meet the needs of the growing number of homeless students across the country.

[xi] Puddefoot, G., California Homeless Youth Project (2011). *Programs Serving California's Homeless Youth: Results of a Point-in-Time Survey*, Retrieved from http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/SUMMARY-Inventory.pdf

[xii] Community Education Partnerships (CEP), "About Homelessness". http://www.calcep.org/about-homelessness.html; information obtained from National Center on Family Homelessness (2010). "America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness", http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/pdf/report_cards/long/ca_long.pdf

[xiii] That LEA is Long Beach Unified, which includes homeless students among other subgroups targeted for an increase in proficiency in math and English language and proposes to offer a summer science camp at California State University to both homeless and foster students.

[xiv] In 2013, there were 58,699 foster children in California – less than a quarter of the number of homeless students.

[xv] Housing questions have been incorporated into the YRBS in Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, and will be added in Texas in 2015.

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