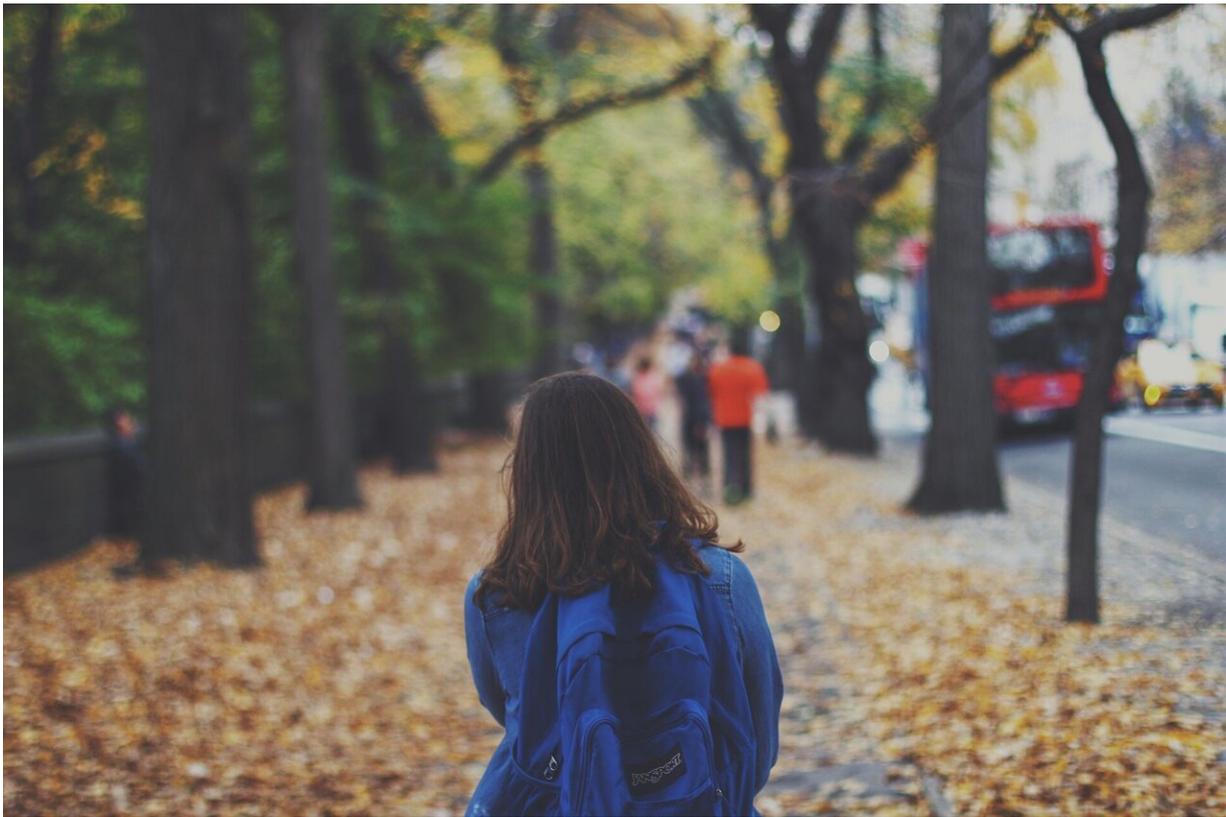


# Nearly 9 out of 10 unhoused Detroit students not identified by schools

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Homelessness has a lasting impact on educational outcomes for K-12 students, and up to 88% of Detroit children experiencing homelessness are not identified by their schools and offered extra support, according

to new analysis from the University of Michigan's Poverty Solutions.

The new databook, "The Educational Implications of Homelessness and Housing Instability in Detroit" offers insights into the underidentification of students experiencing homelessness in Detroit and the connections between homelessness and chronic absenteeism, mid-year [school](#) transfers, graduation and dropout rates, school discipline rates, access to public assistance, and likelihood of entering the foster care system.

Across educational indicators, students who experienced homelessness struggled more than their housed peers—and these challenges persisted even after stable housing was found. However, the data show exceptions to this overarching trend, which indicates schools' responses can make a difference for students who have been [homeless](#).

"These findings can help schools decide how to spend the additional \$800 million designated in the American Rescue Plan Act for identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness. The funding provides a real opportunity not only to identify [children](#) who are homeless and support them in school, but to connect families with resources that could fundamentally end their homelessness," said Jennifer Erb-Downward, lead author of the databook and senior research associate at Poverty Solutions who studies child and family homelessness.

The databook provides previously unavailable data comparing the educational outcomes for students who have experienced homelessness with their housed peers at Detroit Public Schools Community District, Detroit's charter schools and statewide for school years 2009–10 through 2017–18; these are the most recent research-ready data available that include a [student](#)'s housing status.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act guarantees equal access to public education for homeless children and youth. The act defines [homeless children](#) and youth as those who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This includes children who—due to loss of housing or economic hardship—are staying in hotels, motels, trailer parks, campgrounds, doubled up in another person's housing, emergency or transitional shelters, or any place not meant for human habitation (such as cars, public spaces or abandoned buildings).

Students experiencing homelessness have certain educational rights under the McKinney-Vento Act, such as the right to immediately enroll in school, even if they don't have all the required documents; to remain in their school of origin, even as their housing situation changes; transportation to and from school; priority in early education; participation in extracurriculars; and other additional supports as needed, like tutoring or school supplies.

"Failing to identify when students experience homelessness deprives children of their legal rights to an equal education. Underidentification of homeless students also means educators and schools don't have essential information about the barriers that children and their families may face," Erb-Downward said.

The data show the negative impact of failing to identify students experiencing homelessness. Key findings from Erb-Downward's analysis include:

- Underidentification is a problem. While Detroit schools identified 1,785 children as homeless in SY 2017–18, between 7,000 and 14,000 school-age children are estimated to have been homeless that year. This means up to 88% of those children were not identified as homeless by their school.

- In Detroit, Black students were at a greater risk of homelessness than their peers of other races, accounting for 86% of students who were homeless but only 82% of students overall. The history of discriminatory financial and housing policies is visible in the housing struggles faced by families today.
- Suspensions and expulsions in Detroit accounted for 12% of all disciplinary actions statewide despite the fact that students in Detroit only made up 6% of all students in the state. Formerly homeless students in Detroit face the highest disciplinary action rates, with 1 in 4 suspended or expelled in SY 2017–18.
- Only 50% of Detroit students who were homeless during high school graduated on time, compared to an average graduation rate of 73%. Just over half (55%) of students who experienced homelessness during middle school graduated after four years of high school, even when students were housed throughout their high school years.
- Statewide, students who were homeless in SY 2014–15 were 14 times more likely to enter foster care in SY 2015–16 than students who were not homeless the previous school year. Homelessness and poverty alone are not supposed to be reasons to remove children from their families, so understanding why rates of foster care entry are so much higher for children experiencing homelessness is critical to the state's child welfare system.

The databook also includes recommendations on how to improve supports for students experiencing homelessness, drawing from the knowledge of educators at schools that see better [educational outcomes](#) for those students.

"The databook provides a comprehensive understanding of the scope of homelessness within Detroit's school system. The information will assist Detroit's school system and homeless systems to strengthen the work

happening to ensure all children experiencing homelessness in the Detroit school system are properly identified as such and provided with the resources they're entitled to," said Catherine Distelrath, manager of CAM, Detroit's local coordinated entry system for homelessness assistance.

Supported by the McGregor Fund and Skillman Foundation, the databook has been in development since 2019 as part of Poverty Solutions' broader homelessness agenda. Initial analysis for the databook revealed the underidentification of students experiencing homelessness in Detroit, which led to a new automatic referral system that connects the city's homeless shelter system and school homeless liaisons.

"Students and families experiencing homelessness have fallen through the cracks for too long, even when there is a federal framework guaranteeing their right to continuity of education and related resources," said Vanessa Samuelson, director of learning and reporting at the McGregor Fund.

"The McGregor Fund's investment in this foundational analysis was made to draw attention to the significant consequences an experience of homelessness can have for students and provide accurate and actionable information to spur the development of the necessary responses."

**More information:** The report is available online:  
[sites.fordschool.umich.edu/pov ... -in-Detroit-2021.pdf](https://sites.fordschool.umich.edu/pov...-in-Detroit-2021.pdf)

Provided by University of Michigan

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