

# A Snapshot of Homelessness and Housing Instability in Michigan Schools

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## Overview

Children need stability to thrive, but for the more than 36,000 children in Michigan’s elementary, middle and high schools who face homelessness, stability is often elusive. Under federal education law all children and youth who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” are homeless.\* These children not only lack a stable place to call home, they are more likely to transfer schools, have long commutes, struggle with poor health, and be chronically absent than their non-homeless peers.<sup>1</sup> All of these daily challenges place homeless students at a greater risk for not meeting grade-level standards and for dropping out of school.<sup>2</sup> Recent research in the State of Michigan has shown homelessness among children to be a key factor predicting student achievement in both rural and urban areas,<sup>3</sup> yet little attention has been given, thus far, to understanding where homeless students in Michigan attend school and how their needs might differ depending on their geographic location.

This policy brief seeks to fill that gap so that policymakers and local stakeholders can begin to think about the impact of homelessness in their area and to identify resources to support some of the State’s most vulnerable children. Data for this brief comes from school year 2015-16 administrative records collected by every school under the mandate of the Federal McKinney-Vento Act, a law which guarantees homeless student’s right to an education.<sup>4</sup>

## Key Findings

- **Michigan has one of the largest populations of homeless students in the United States.** In school year 2015-16, Michigan ranked 6<sup>th</sup> among states for the most homeless students. By comparison, Michigan ranked 10<sup>th</sup> for overall student enrollment.
- **Homelessness in Michigan is a statewide issue impacting children in rural, suburban and urban areas.** Ninety-four percent of Michigan’s 540 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) reported students struggling with homelessness and housing instability in their area.<sup>5</sup>
- **While the total number of students reported as homeless is higher in Michigan’s more urban areas, some of the highest rates of homelessness among students were found in the state’s smallest school districts.** In 12 school districts, from 14-25% of students experienced homelessness during the school year. These school districts all served fewer than 1,400 students.
- **A significant proportion of low-income students in Michigan also struggle with homelessness and housing instability.**<sup>†6</sup> In over 40% of Michigan’s LEAs, at least one out of every ten low-income students was also homeless during the school year.

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\* The McKinney-Vento Act defines homeless children and youths as those who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” this includes children and youths who due to loss of housing or economic hardship are living in hotels, motels, trailer parks, camping grounds, another person’s housing, emergency or transitional shelters or any place not meant for human habitation (such as cars, public spaces, or abandoned buildings).

† Low-Income students are defined as students who are eligible for free lunch. Homeless students are included in this group as they are categorically eligible for free lunch.

## A Statewide Issue

Ninety-four percent of all LEAs reported students experiencing homelessness.

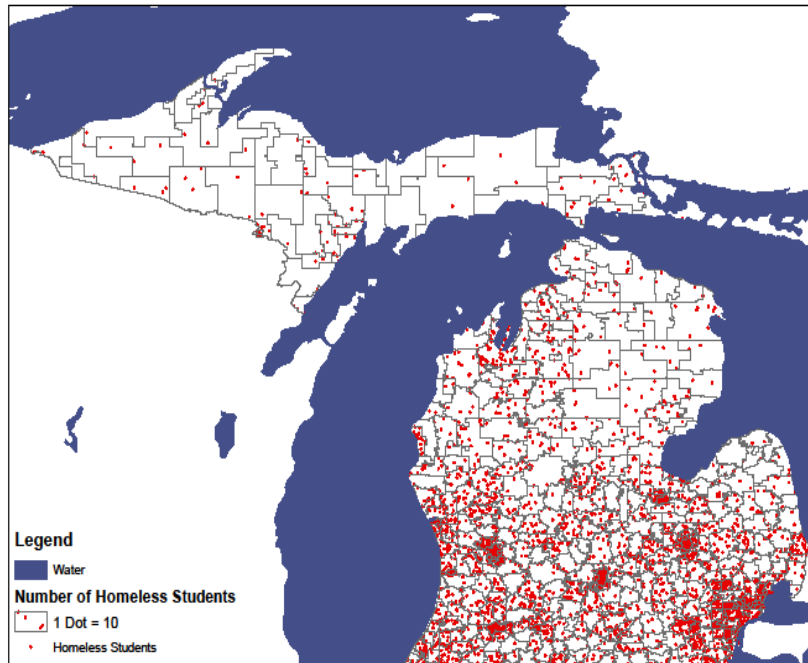
Over 70% of homeless students were enrolled in schools located outside of Southeast Michigan – the state’s most populous region.

The LEAs with the largest number of homeless students included eight districts where the rate of homelessness was higher than the state-wide average (3%) and two districts where the rate of homelessness was lower than the state-wide average.

Despite serving close to four times more students overall than Kalamazoo Public School District and having a poverty rate that was 14 percentage points higher, Detroit Public Schools Community District identified roughly 300 fewer homeless students in its schools. This suggests the possibility of a large undercount of homeless students is taking place in Detroit, an issue for further investigation.

Student homelessness is not exclusively an urban problem. Students struggling with homelessness are enrolled in schools in every region in Michigan – in both the lower and upper peninsula.

Number Students Homeless in Michigan School Districts School Year 2015-16



Note: Dots represent the density of homelessness within each school district, not the exact location of students within each school district.  
 Source: U.S. Department of Education. "Homeless Student Enrollment Data by Local Educational Agency: School Year 2015-16"  
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/data-files/school-status-data.html>

Districts Reporting the Most Homeless Students			
School District Name	Homeless Students	All Students	Percent Homeless
Kalamazoo Public School District	904	12,616	7%
Lansing Public School District	644	11,120	6%
Grand Rapids Public Schools	632	16,246	4%
Detroit City School District	605	46,616	1%
Traverse City Area Public Schools	484	9,625	5%
Flint City School District	426	5,412	8%
Ann Arbor Public Schools	368	17,233	2%
Pontiac City School District	362	4,254	9%
Port Huron Area School District	354	8,938	4%
Berrien Springs Public Schools	342	3,209	11%

## Impacts Across the State

While the total number of homeless students was larger in Michigan’s urban areas, the districts with the largest proportion of homeless students were primarily located in small towns and rural areas.

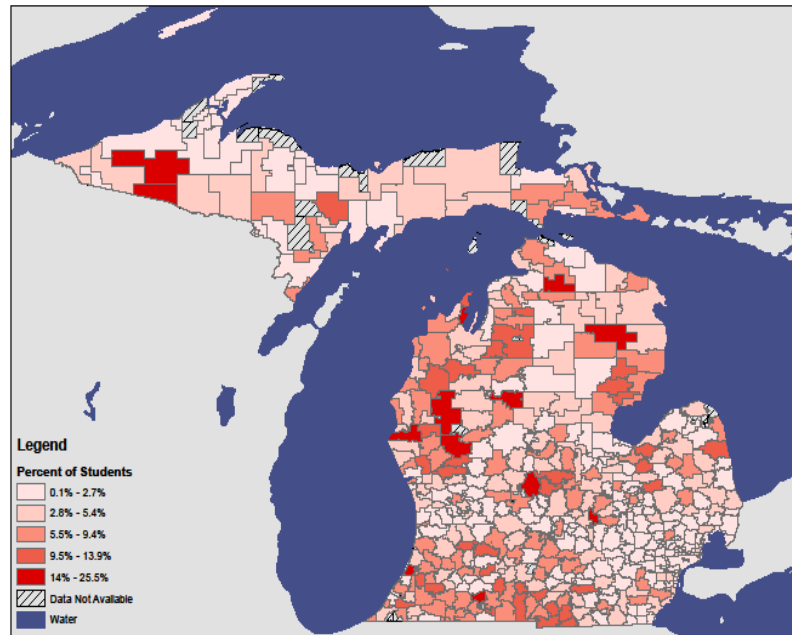
On average, roughly 3% of Michigan students were homeless, but by school district this ranged from 0% to 25%, or one out of every four students enrolled.

In in 50 school districts (10%), at least one out of every ten students enrolled experienced homelessness during the school year.

In 12 school districts, one out of every seven or more students enrolled struggled with homelessness and housing instability during the school year.

The top ten districts for the highest percent of students homeless were all located in the northern and central regions of the state.

Percent of Students Homeless in Michigan School Districts School Year 2015-16



Note: Data not available means that either the total student enrollment for the district was less than 30 students, or that enrollment data for that district was not available.  
 Source: U.S. Department of Education. "Homeless Student Enrollment Data by Local Educational Agency: School Year 2015-16" <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/facts/data-files/school-status-data.html>; National Center for Education Statistics. "Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data" <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedsdatacenter/pubagency.asp>.

### Districts Reporting the Highest Rate of Student Homelessness

School District Name	Homeless Students	All Students	Percent Homeless
Baldwin Community Schools	142	557	25.5%
Marion Public Schools	95	499	19.0%
Watersmeet Township School District	28	148	18.9%
Hart Public School District	247	1387	17.8%
White Cloud Public Schools	176	990	17.8%
Fairview Area School District	48	292	16.4%
Suttons Bay Public Schools	97	604	16.1%
Wolverine Community Schools	43	272	15.8%
Morrice Area Schools	78	515	15.1%
Carson City-Crystal Area School District	135	911	14.8%

## Poverty, Homelessness, and Housing Instability

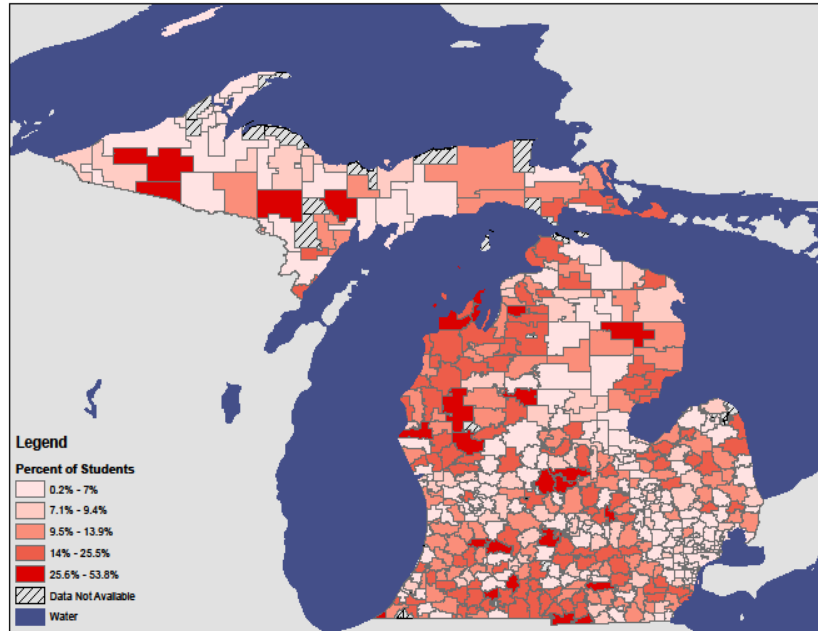
Not only do the data on student homelessness show that the extent of homelessness among students in Michigan’s public schools is broad, they also shed new light on the depth of poverty faced by families with children across the state.

Over 490,000 public school children (37%) were identified as low-income, and therefore eligible for free lunch.

On average, 7% of all low-income school age children also struggled with homelessness.

Overall, in 40% of Michigan’s Local Education Agencies at least 1 out of every 10 low-income students was simultaneously struggling with housing instability and homelessness.

Percent of Low-Income Students Homeless in Michigan School Districts, School Year 2015-16



Note: "Low-income" is defined as students who are eligible to receive free lunch. Data not available means that either the total enrollment of low-income students for the district was less than 30 students, or that enrollment data for that district was not available.  
 Source: U.S. Department of Education. "Homeless Student Enrollment Data by Local Educational Agency: School Year 2015-16" <http://www2.ed.gov/about/initiatives/ed/facts/data-files/school-status-data.html>; National Center for Education Statistics. "Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data" <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedsdatacenter/ipedsdatacenter.asp>.

### Districts Reporting the Highest Rate of Low-Income Student Homelessness

School District Name	Homeless Students	Low-Income Students	Percent of Low-Income Students Homeless
Northport Public School District	21	39	54%
Suttons Bay Public Schools	97	257	38%
Mendon Community School District	83	227	37%
Athens Area Schools	66	191	35%
Morrice Area Schools	78	229	34%
Watersmeet Township School District	28	83	34%
Carson City-Crystal Area School District	135	401	34%
Glen Lake Community Schools	47	140	34%
Hart Public School District	247	745	33%
Mid Peninsula School District	24	73	33%

## Policy Implications

Homelessness and housing instability among families with children is much more widespread across the State of Michigan than some calculations suggest.<sup>47</sup> During just a single school year more than 36,000 Michigan families did not have a stable home. The Department of Education's homelessness count provides actionable information on not only how many families are living on the street or in shelters, but about also how many families are unable to access stable, affordable housing -- a reality that impacts not only their lives, but also their children's health, education and future.

## Recommendations

**Increase the accessibility of data on homelessness locally.** Access to existing data on homelessness at the local level (city, county, and congressional district) is critical to enabling policymakers, communities and schools to develop programs and policies that meet the needs of children and families struggling with homelessness and housing instability.

**Identify and Address Potential Undercounts of Homeless Students in Michigan.** Analysis of student homelessness by school district suggest that in some districts homeless students are not being effectively identified. The identification of all students experiencing homelessness is a critical first step to guaranteeing every student's rights to an education and to connecting vulnerable children and youth to needed support services.

**Build Connections Between Policymakers in Other Domains.** More awareness is needed across agencies and sectors of government about the impact that homelessness and housing instability has not only on children's education, but also on their health and overall welfare. To effectively address homelessness in the state, stronger collaboration across governmental agencies overseeing housing, transportation, health, child welfare, nutrition, workforce development, and education is necessary.

**Support the Development of Community Partnerships with Local Schools.** Homelessness and housing instability impact educational outcomes in ways that schools are not always well equipped to address. Developing partnerships to meet the additional support needs of children and families struggling with housing instability could help to fill these gaps.

## Conclusion

In order to for the State of Michigan to thrive, its families and children need a stable place to call home. As Michigan strives to become a leader both educationally and economically, identifying ways to stabilize families and prevent homelessness is a critical priority. It is also important that policies implemented to address homelessness be flexible so they can be tailored to the local context of every region of the state. The needs of students in rural areas where homelessness is concentrated but total student enrolment is small are likely very different than the needs of students in urban areas where more students experience homelessness, but those students represent a smaller proportion of the entire student body. Recognizing and effectively implementing policies that support the differing challenges that rural, suburban, and urban homeless students and their families face is crucial.

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<sup>47</sup> The Point in Time Count (PIT) is a count of all people sleeping in shelters, on the street or in other locations not meant for human habitation on one night of the year.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Megan Sandel et al. "Unstable Housing and Caregiver and Child Health in Renter Families," *Pediatrics* 141, no. 2 (2018): 1-10. ; Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness. "The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2016," (2016): 1-155. [http://www.icphusa.org/new\\_york\\_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-york-city-2016/](http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-york-city-2016/) (accessed January 30, 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness. "The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2016," (2016): 1-155. [http://www.icphusa.org/new\\_york\\_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-york-city-2016/](http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-york-city-2016/) (accessed January 30, 2018).
- <sup>3</sup> Joshua Cowen. "Who Are the Homeless? Student Mobility and Achievement in Michigan 2010–2013," *Education Researcher* (2017): 33-43.
- <sup>4</sup> The National Center for Homeless Education. "The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless," <https://nche.ed.gov/legis/mv-def.php> (accessed January 29, 2018).
- <sup>5</sup> Michigan Department of Education. "Number of Public School Districts (ISDs, LEAs, and PSAs) in Michigan," <http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-6605-36877--,00.html> (accessed January 24, 2018).
- <sup>6</sup> The United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services. "National School Lunch Program: Program Fact Sheet," <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/national-school-lunch-program-nslp> (accessed February 16, 2018).
- <sup>7</sup> Washtenaw County Office of Community & Economic Development. "Washtenaw County 2017 Point-in-Time Count," <http://www.ewashtenaw.org/government/departments/community-and-economic-development/human-services/continuum-of-care/2017-pit-count-debrief> (accessed February 2, 2018).