

Increasing Access to Higher Education for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: Information for Colleges and Universities

Introduction

Each year, more than a million young people in the United States experience homelessness; some of these young people, known as unaccompanied homeless youth, will face the challenges of homelessness while living on their own without the support of a caring adult. Unaccompanied homeless youth face the same struggles as other young people: trying to do well in school, “fit in”, and figure out what their future will look like. Without adult guidance and support, however, they will face these struggles while also working to provide for their own livelihood.

Many of these youth hope to attend college, but wonder how they will pay tuition without help from their parents, who will sign important paperwork on their behalf, how they will juggle long work hours and schoolwork, and where they will stay when the dormitories close during holiday and summer breaks.

Fortunately, federal laws provide additional support for this vulnerable population. To increase the awareness of post-secondary educators and education administrators of the issue of unaccompanied homeless youth, this brief will provide:

- A better understanding of unaccompanied homeless youth and the educational and other challenges they face;
- A summary of federal education legislation, including the McKinney-Vento Act and the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, that gives unaccompanied homeless youth access to important educational supports;
- Samples of promising practices implemented by high schools, colleges, and universities to assist unaccompanied homeless youth in succeeding in college; and
- Additional resources for more information.

Understanding Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

The primary piece of federal legislation dealing with the education of students experiencing homelessness is the McKinney-Vento Act, reauthorized in 2002 by Title X, Part C, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The



Who is homeless?

(McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act – Title X, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 1. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
 2. 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...
 3. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 4. 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).

Act defines an unaccompanied homeless youth as a youth whose living situation is not “fixed, regular, and adequate,” (homeless) and who is “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” (unaccompanied). The Act provides examples of living arrangements that would be considered homeless, including living in emergency and transitional shelters, living doubled-up with others due to loss of housing, and living on the street or in a car (see sidebar on page 1 for the full definition of homeless). By far, the most common type of living situation for unaccompanied homeless youth is that of living doubled-up, often bouncing between the homes of different relatives or friends (“couch-surfing”). The U.S. Department of Education’s federal data for the 2009-2010 school year show that approximately 72 percent of homeless children and youth identified by school districts live in doubled-up situations¹.

The Numbers

Unaccompanied homeless youth include those who have run away from home or have been asked to leave home by a parent or guardian. The National Runaway Switchboard estimates that between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth experience a runaway/throwaway episode annually². While some of these young people may return home shortly after leaving, others will live on their own long-term or even permanently.

Difficulty in collecting data on mobile populations and youths’ reluctance to admit their precarious living situations create challenges in determining the true scope of the problem; however, it is likely that numbers are much higher than have been documented.

Paths to Being on Their Own

One of the most common reasons that youth end up unaccompanied and homeless is family conflict. In some instances, youth are forced out of the home by their parents; other times, youth leave home because they feel unsafe or are unwilling to continue living in a difficult

home environment. Whatever the reason for the youth leaving home, acute family conflict, which may involve physical, sexual, or mental abuse, is often present³. Across studies of homeless youth, 17 to 53 percent of the youth cite experiences of sexual abuse, while 40 to 60 percent cite experiences of physical abuse⁴. Some unaccompanied youth also mention the absence of a parent or guardian due to incarceration, deployment, or death.

Further, there is a strong connection between homelessness and foster care. Some children and youth enter the foster care system because their parents, in addition to experiencing homelessness, are unable to care for them. Many youth end up homeless because they run away from foster care with the hopes of reuniting with their biological family or escaping a problematic foster placement. Numerous others will age out of the foster care system and be launched abruptly into adulthood. Many of these youth will lack the skills necessary for independent adult living and yet also lack a reliable support system to help them make the transition.

The Barriers

Unaccompanied homeless youth often live in high-risk environments, putting them in danger of experiencing a wide variety of problems. In many cases, the youth have been living apart from their parents for several years, either staying off and on with friends and relatives or living on the street. Some of the challenges unaccompanied homeless youth face are:

- **Lack of financial means to live independently and safely**
Unaccompanied youth often are unable to meet their basic needs for shelter, food, clothing, and health care. Many also face barriers created by a lack of transportation.
- **Limited housing options, especially in small towns or rural areas**
Most unaccompanied youth depend on

1 National Center for Homeless Education. [2011]. *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary*. Retrieved April 18, 2012, from http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/data_comp_0708-0910.pdf.

2 National Runaway Switchboard. [2010]. *Why They Run: An In-depth Look at America’s Runaway Youth*. Retrieved August 9, 2010, from <http://www.nrcrisisline.org/media/whytheyrun/report.html>.

3 Moore, J. (2005). *Unaccompanied and homeless youth: Review of literature (1995-2005)*. Retrieved August 9, 2010, from http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/uy_lit_review.pdf.

4 National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2010). *America’s Homeless Youth: National Policy Update March 2010*. Retrieved August 9, 2010, from http://www.endhomelessness.org/files/2421_file_FY_2011_Appropriations_RHYA_3.10.pdf.

the good graces of friends or relatives who will allow the youth to stay with them for a short period of time only. When living doubled-up is no longer an option, these youth frequently find themselves in unsafe and inadequate housing arrangements.

- **Lack of connection with adults or agencies that could help**

After leaving home, unaccompanied youth often fear being forced to return home or placed in foster care. As young adults, they remain reluctant to seek help or are unaware of available assistance.

Unaccompanied homeless youth also face the following barriers specific to continuing their education:

- **Struggling to balance school and other responsibilities**

Many unaccompanied youth fall behind in school because they are attempting to balance school with the demands of working to provide for their basic needs. Due to high residential mobility or heavy work demands, many unaccompanied youth end up missing school and losing credits. The time these youth must dedicate to maintaining employment often comes at the expense of time needed to focus on their education.

- **Lack of adult guidance and support**

Unaccompanied youth often lack connections with adults who can guide them in the process of preparing for and gaining admission into college. Most lack the presence of a supportive adult to encourage them to have high educational expectations. Many don't know where to apply for college, how to prepare and take the SAT or ACT, or how to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Shelters and other service providers for youth generally lack information on college access. If youth are reluctant to seek help at school, school counselors or local homeless education liaisons (see sidebar on page 5) may not be aware of their situations and, therefore, unable to provide needed support.

Profile of an Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Carl's situation is typical of many unaccompanied homeless youth. His father died when he was a baby. Due to abuse by his mother's boyfriend, Carl left home during his senior year in high school and stayed with a variety of family members and friends, most of whom lived outside of his school district. Fearing he would be kicked out of school while doubling up outside his school's residential zone, Carl hid his living situation from school officials.

After graduating high school, Carl decided to work for a year to save money for college. Although his living situation was still unstable, he at least felt like he had enough money to look into enrolling in college. While filling out his FAFSA, Carl noticed multiple places in the application requesting parent signatures or information about parental income and financial contribution. He was relieved to notice that the application mentions the term "Independent Student", and it appears that he meets the necessary criteria, but he doesn't know who can determine his independent student status for purposes of the FAFSA.

When he mentioned the issue to the financial aid staff at the local community college, they seemed hesitant to qualify him as an independent student and told him he must submit his mother's financial records to receive financial aid. He has had only sporadic contact with his mother since leaving home nearly two years ago; and, any attempts at communication have been met with indifference or hostility. Carl is about to give up on his dream of attending college.

- **Lack of access to parental financial information and support**

Unaccompanied youth often have become estranged from their parents, which leads to difficulty with filling out the FAFSA. In most cases, completing the FAFSA requires youth to provide

information about their parents' finances and to have their parents sign the completed form. Fortunately, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act includes provisions to assist unaccompanied homeless youth in filling out the FAFSA. More information is provided below.

- **Inability to be financially self-sufficient once enrolled in college**

Once attending college, many unaccompanied youth struggle to provide for their basic needs. They often maintain rigorous work schedules that impact the amount of time they can devote to their studies. A particular challenge exists during breaks at residential colleges and universities, when dormitories close. During these times, unaccompanied homeless students living in the dorms often have nowhere to go and insufficient funds to pay for housing.

- **Failure to access available support systems**

Unaccompanied homeless youth often go unidentified, either due to their own hesitancy to disclose details about their personal or lack of knowledge on the part of university staff. This prevents student support services and other staff from helping to address their unique needs.

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA), signed into law in 2007, includes specific provisions designed to remove barriers to accessing federal financial aid for college for unaccompanied homeless youth. The Act enables these youth to be qualified as "independent students" for the purposes of filling out the FAFSA, thereby removing the need for these youth to provide parental financial information and a parent signature. Youth must be determined as unaccompanied and homeless, or as unaccompanied, at risk of homelessness, and self-supporting during the school year in which they apply for aid. Because many unaccompanied homeless youth have no contact with their parents or access to their financial information or support, the

"independent student" designation is critical to enable them to complete the FAFSA.

Determination of independent student status must be made by one of the following:

1. A school district local homeless education liaison;
2. A U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development emergency shelter program director or its designee;
3. A Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program director or its designee; or
4. A college financial aid administrator

As the implementation of the CCRAA moves forward, administrators of higher education institutions and university systems have realized the need for training and additional guidance for financial aid administrators. A thorough knowledge of the Act and its provisions for unaccompanied homeless youth by financial aid administrators is particularly critical for youth like Carl (see sidebar on page 3). If a youth becomes homeless and unaccompanied after graduating high school and has not stayed in a HUD- or RHYA-funded shelter, he or she will need to depend on a financial aid administrator to make the independent student determination. A lack of guidance on and standard procedure for determining eligibility has resulted in many financial aid offices denying a youth's eligibility or requiring inappropriate information to be provided to prove independent status. To this end, the U.S. Department of Education has included specific guidance on the issue in its *Application and Verification Guide (AVG)*, available for downloading at http://www.serve.org/nche/ibt/higher_ed.php#avg.

Promising Practices for Institutions of Higher Education

Determination of independent student status

- Become familiar with the U.S. Department of Education's *Application and Verification Guide (AVG)*. The guide provides instructions and guidance to financial aid administrators on

determining the independent status of unaccompanied homeless youth.

- Consider each student's eligibility on a case-by-case basis. Start by understanding the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homeless. The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) provides a helpful brief on determining homelessness by the definition, which is available for downloading at http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/det_elig.pdf.
- Contact the local homeless education liaison in your school district to discuss the McKinney-Vento definition and how it applies to specific students (*see sidebar to the right*).
- If the student cannot be qualified by emergency shelter staff or a local liaison, accept letters from those with whom the student resides or from a professional in the community who can corroborate the student's homeless status.
- Use Making Student Status Determinations for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: Eligibility Tool for Financial Aid Administrators, available at http://www.serve.org/nche/pr/faa_tool.php.
- Do not require students to disclose personal details about past abuse in their family or other causes for homelessness and separation from their parents.

Identification of unaccompanied homeless youth who attend your college or university

- Place posters and brochures around campus with the definition of homeless and contact information for someone who can link homeless students with support services. A free poster, created jointly by NCHE and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) is available for downloading at http://www.serve.org/nche/pr/he_poster.php.
- Create awareness among faculty and staff about unaccompanied homeless youth and the challenges they face so they can help with identification and support.

School District Collaboration

The McKinney-Vento Act is the primary piece of federal legislation supporting the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The Act guarantees homeless students immediate access to the free, appropriate public education to which they are entitled.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, each state must appoint a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, charged with ensuring the full implementation of the Act in all school districts through the state. In addition, every school district in the United States must appoint a local homeless education liaison to ensure the full implementation of the Act in all district schools. State Coordinators and local liaisons are well-versed in the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless (*see sidebar on page 1*). As such, they can be a valuable resource for institutions of higher education for determining independent student status according to the definition and understanding the needs of students experiencing homelessness. To contact your State Coordinator, including to request contact information for the local liaison in your area, visit http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.

The federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth program, authorized under the McKinney-Vento Act, also maintains a federal technical assistance and information center: The National Center for Homeless Education. For additional information about supporting the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, visit the NCHE website at <http://www.serve.org/nche/> or contact the NCHE helpline at (800) 308-2145 or homeless@serve.org.

Supporting unaccompanied homeless youth who attend your college or university

- Refer unaccompanied homeless students to support services upon their admission.

- Establish coordination between financial aid offices, student support services, and campus housing.
- Provide financial aid offices and student support services with information on community-based resources for homeless students, such as food and clothing banks and low-cost healthcare providers.
- Create awareness among professors and advisors working with students so they can refer homeless students to additional help, when needed; specific signs to look for include excessive absences and falling grades.
- Establish a food and clothing bank on campus.
- Plan housing for homeless students when dormitories close; ideas include leaving one residence hall open or establishing a list of “host homes” in the community.
- Establish a mentoring program for unaccompanied homeless youth.

U. S. Department of Education Resources

Student Support Services

Student Support Services programs assist low-income students with staying in college until they earn their degrees. The Student Support Services program was amended by the Higher Education Opportunity Act to foster an institutional climate supportive of success in postsecondary education for homeless children and youth and students who are in foster care or aging out of foster care. Through a grant competition, the U.S. Department of Education awards funds to institutions of higher education to provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education. In addition, the Student Support Services program authorizes funds to be used for temporary housing during breaks in the academic year for homeless students and students who are in foster care or are aging out of the foster care system. For more information, visit <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/index.html>.

Educational Opportunity Centers

The Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC)

program is one of the federal TRIO programs, a group of eight outreach programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education designed to support and assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds in progressing through the academic pipeline from middle school to attainment of a post-baccalaureate degree. Educational Opportunity Centers located throughout the country primarily serve displaced or underemployed workers from families with incomes under \$33,075. These centers help people to choose a college and access needed financial aid. For more information, visit <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioeoc/index.html>.

Conclusion

Unaccompanied homeless youth often do not have the guidance and support of a caring adult as they prepare for college and navigate the system for accessing financial aid. Even if able to enroll, they have difficulty providing for their basic needs, which impacts their ability to be successful in the classroom. Supporting these youth in obtaining a college education will enable them to break the cycle of poverty and move towards a brighter and more stable future. Institutions of higher education, in collaboration with public schools and community agencies, can play a critical role in supporting unaccompanied homeless youth in their post-secondary endeavors.

Additional Resources

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE)
Ph: (800) 308-2145
homeless@serve.org
http://www.serve.org/nche/ibt/higher_ed.php

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)
Barbara Duffield, Policy Director
Ph: (202) 364.7392
bduffield@naehcy.org
http://www.naehcy.org/higher_ed.html

College Goal Sunday
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National Partners in Homeless Education

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE)
<http://www.serve.org/nche>

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)
<http://www.naehcy.org>

Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.



Local Contact Information: