



Supporting Unaccompanied Youth: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Youth Experiencing Homelessness On Their Own

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Meet Your Presenters



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Today's Roadmap


- Who are unaccompanied youth?
- Educational rights and supports for unaccompanied youth
- Unaccompanied youth 201 topics
- Resources for more information
- Q&A, discussion, and scenarios



HETAC Resource Spotlight

This HETAC tip sheet:

- provides basic information about unaccompanied youth,
- summarizes the key educational and related rights of unaccompanied youth under federal and California law,
- recommends strategies for supporting unaccompanied youth in school,
- includes federal and state citations for legislative provisions, and
- links to additional informational and implementation resources.




Unaccompanied Youth: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness on Their Own

This California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center (HETAC) tip sheet:

- provides basic information about unaccompanied youth,
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- recommends strategies for supporting unaccompanied youth in school, and
- links to additional informational and implementation resources.

Context

Unaccompanied youth are young people who are experiencing homelessness on their own rather than under the care of a parent or guardian. While these youth face many of the same educational and other challenges as youth experiencing homelessness with their family, they often face unique barriers. To address these unique barriers, federal and California laws include specific provisions designed to ensure access to education and other needed services for unaccompanied youth.



This HETAC tip sheet provides basic information about unaccompanied youth, summarizes the key educational rights of unaccompanied youth under federal and California law, recommends strategies for supporting unaccompanied youth in school, and links to additional informational and implementation resources.

Who are Unaccompanied Youth?

Definition of Unaccompanied Youth

The term *unaccompanied youth* is defined in the [education subtitle of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#) (hereafter *McKinney-Vento Act*) as "a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian" [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6); Cal. Educ. Code § 48850(3)(c)(iv)]. For a child or youth to meet the definition of *unaccompanied youth*, two eligibility criteria must be met:

1. The child or youth's primary nighttime residence must meet the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of *homeless* (see sidebar on page 2) and
2. The child or youth must not be in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

Given these two criteria, schools and community partners may refer to unaccompanied youth as "unaccompanied homeless youth" to underscore that the young person is both unaccompanied and experiencing homelessness.

When determining whether a child or youth meets the McKinney-Vento definition of *unaccompanied youth*, it is helpful to remember the following:

- An unusual custody or guardianship arrangement alone is insufficient to qualify a student as an unaccompanied youth; the student's housing arrangement also must meet the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless*. For more information on determining whether a student's living arrangement

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Who Are Unaccompanied Youth?

McKinney-Vento Act Basics

- Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act
 - Was reauthorized by Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act
 - Establishes the definition of *homeless* and *unaccompanied youth* used by U.S. public schools
 - Addresses the unique educational barriers and challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness
 - Requires state education departments to designate a State Coordinator for Homeless Education and school districts to designate a local homeless education liaison



Who is Homeless?

Children and youth who **lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence**, including

- Sharing the housing of other persons, *due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason*
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds *due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations*
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters, or abandoned in hospitals
- Living in a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings
- Migratory children living in the above circumstances



Unaccompanied Youth

The term “unaccompanied youth” includes a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian



- For a child or youth to meet the definition of unaccompanied youth, **two eligibility criteria must be met:**
 - The child or youth's primary nighttime residence must meet the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homeless **and**
 - The child or youth must not be in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.
- The McKinney-Vento Act does not include age-related eligibility criteria, including for unaccompanied youth

“But the student chose to leave...”

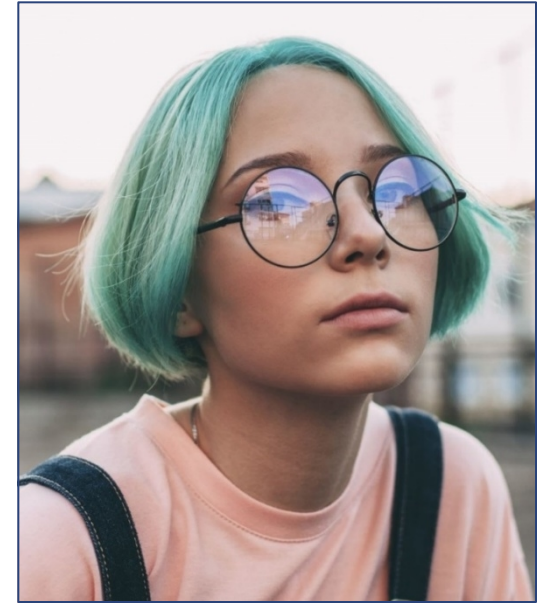


- A student may be considered an unaccompanied youth regardless of whether the student was forced from the home or ran away
- The cause of student/parental separation may not be disclosed readily due to its sensitive or private nature
- Determinations of McKinney-Vento eligibility for unaccompanied youth should be made on a case-by-case basis focusing on the nature of the student's nighttime residence

Causes of Youth Homelessness

Youth may run away or be forced from the home due to family conflict related to

- Parental abuse or neglect
- Changes in family structure, including through the death of a parent or caregiver
- The youth's or parent's alcohol or drug use
- The youth's sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy
- Other challenging household dynamics, including economic hardship



Source: Congressional Research Service, [*Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs*](#)



Risk Factors for Youth Homelessness

Particular subpopulations are at higher risk for homelessness



346%

Youth with less than a high school diploma or GED had a 346% higher risk

120%

LGBT youth had a 120% higher risk

162%

Youth reporting annual household income of less than \$24,000 had a 162% higher risk

33%

Hispanic, non-White youth had a 33% higher risk

83%

Black or African American youth had an 83% higher risk

200%

Unmarried parenting youth had a 200% higher risk



Source: Chapin Hall, [*Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America, National Estimates*](#)



Impacts of Youth Homelessness

The youth–adult pathway is the most common pathway to homelessness, with 35% of people experiencing homelessness as an adult having experienced homelessness in their formative years.

Source: Children and Youth Services Review, [*Direct and Indirect Pathways Between Childhood Instability and Adult Homelessness in a Low-Income Population*](#)

Homeless youth experience disproportionately high rates of

- Unmet basic needs
- Poor physical health
- Untreated mental health issues
- Substance use
- Sexual, physical, or criminal exploitation
- School disengagement

Source: Congressional Research Service, [*Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs*](#)







Education Rights and Supports for Unaccompanied Youth

Education Rights and Supports

Unaccompanied youth have the **same educational rights** under the McKinney-Vento Act as students experiencing homelessness with a parent or guardian

- Immediate school enrollment, even if lacking required documentation
- School selection (school of origin or local school)
- School of origin transportation
- College preparation and readiness assistance
- Comparable services
- Title I, Part A services
- Free school meals
- Removal of barriers



Visit the website of the [California HETAC](#) or the [National Center for Homeless Education](#) for more information

Rights and Supports Specific to UY

- Immediate enrollment, even without a parent or guardian
- Prioritization of the unaccompanied youth's requested school in best interest determinations
- Targeted support from the local liaison
 - Obtaining needed records once immediate enrollment has occurred
 - Accessing school of origin transportation
 - Accessing the McKinney-Vento dispute resolution process



Access to Federal Student Aid

- Local liaisons must inform unaccompanied youth of their **independent student status** on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and assist with verification of this status
- Independent students do not include parent information on their FAFSA, and their federal aid is calculated based only on the student's income and assets

Access a template for documenting independent student status from [SchoolHouse Connection](#)

SAMPLE FORM LETTERS TO DETERMINE INDEPENDENT STUDENT STATUS

For Unaccompanied Youth



Scenario

A student just disclosed to you that they had to leave their home and are currently moving between the homes of a couple of friends. The situations are temporary until the student can figure something out. The student mentions that he is struggling with attendance and experiencing a lot of anxiety.

- *Would you deem the student an unaccompanied youth under McKinney-Vento?*
- *How would you have the conversation with the student about their circumstances and needs?*
- *What do you need to make sure is done at school?*
- *What resources can you offer the student?*

Scenario, Part 2

You receive a call from the student's parent letting you know that the student is not homeless because they could come home if they wanted to but are refusing.

The parent says that the school is enabling the student in this behavior, and they want to disenroll him so that they can enroll the student elsewhere. They also threaten to call the cops if the school continues to "harbor the student".

- *How do you respond to the parent? What do you say?*
- *What, if anything, do you change about the student's homeless determination and enrollment and supports at their school?*





Unaccompanied Youth 201 Topics

Caregiver Affidavit

- A caregiver affidavit
 - Allows a caregiver to enroll a child in school and approve their “school-related medical care” (e.g. immunizations and physical exams, including medical exams conducted at school)
 - Does not affect the rights of the student’s parents
 - Does not require notarization
 - Is not required for all unaccompanied youth; schools cannot require unaccompanied youth to have one on file
 - Does not change or affect the student’s status as unaccompanied
- Visit the California Courts [caregiver’s authorization affidavit webpage](#)



Access to and Sharing of Student Information

Under FERPA, a **parent** means a parent of a student and includes a natural parent, a guardian, or an individual acting as a parent in the absence of a parent or a guardian.

- The **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)** governs access to and sharing of student information
- Parents maintain FERPA rights for minor students; rights transfer to the student when they turn 18
- FERPA permits schools to allow students under age 18 to have access to their education records and provide consent for disclosures, as long as:
 - Those rights do not supersede the rights of their parents.
 - The student is deemed “responsible enough”
- If a parent or guardian is present and attempting to exercise FERPA rights, their rights supersede the rights of others



Child Welfare Involvement

- [Assembly Bill \(AB\) 652](#) (Penal Code [PC] § 11165.15) clarifies that a youth's homeless or unaccompanied status is not, in and of itself, a sufficient basis for reporting child abuse or neglect
- Schools should not report a student to child welfare based solely on the fact that the student is homeless or an unaccompanied youth
- Child welfare reports should be made only when the school knows or reasonably suspects the student may be experiencing abuse or neglect



Special Education



- Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a parent usually serves as the student's educational decisionmaker
- IDEA defines parent as
 - a natural, adoptive, or foster parent;
 - a guardian (but not the state if the child is a ward of the state);
 - an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare

Special Education

For unaccompanied youth with special education needs who do not have a parent who is willing and/or able to act as educational decision maker:

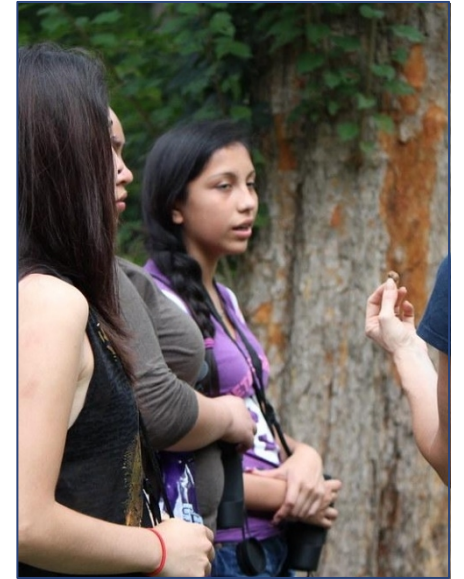
- A **surrogate parent**, who may not be involved with the care or education of the child, should be appointed within 30 days
- A **temporary surrogate parent**, who may be involved with the care or education of the child, may be appointed immediately



Missing Children and Law Enforcement

CA law clarifies that schools are not required to report all minor youth experiencing homelessness on their own to law enforcement in case the youth has been reported missing; rather CA law specifies the following:

- Law enforcement agencies responsible for the investigation of a missing child must inform the LEA or private school where the student is enrolled that the child is missing within 10 days of the child's disappearance. The notice must be provided in writing and include a photo of the child, if available.
- If notified of a missing child by law enforcement, the school must place a notice that the child has been reported missing on the front of the missing child's school record.



Missing Children and Law Enforcement

- If a school receives a record inquiry or request from any person or entity for a missing child about whom the school has been notified by law enforcement, the school must immediately notify the law enforcement authorities who informed the school that the child is missing.
- Upon initial enrollment or transfer of a child into a new public or private elementary school, the principal is urged to check to see if the child resembles a child listed as missing in quarterly missing persons bulletins provided to the school by the CA Department of Justice.

In instances where a school must notify law enforcement of an inquiry about a child reported missing by that law enforcement agency, schools are encouraged to share any knowledge the school has about potential safety concerns in alerting the inquirer about the student's whereabouts.



Who Signs?

- **Work permits:** A parent, guardian, foster parent, caregiver with whom the minor resides, or residential shelter services provider can sign
- **Extracurricular Activity Participation Forms:** The person who signed the student's enrollment forms often sign the student's extracurricular forms (whether the student, a caregiver, or the local liaison or other school official)
- **Medical Treatment:** CA law governs when a minor must or may consent for their own care and opportunities in which other adults may consent to care on the minor's behalf;
[learn more from the National Center for Youth Law](#)



Who Signs?

- **Medi-Cal:** CA law provides that a minor may receive certain services without parental consent; these services are known as minor consent Medi-Cal services and are categorized by age
- **CalFresh:** Minors may apply for CalFresh benefits independently if they are living apart from their parents or guardians and are purchasing, preparing, and eating food separately from others in their household. Minors who are living with a group of people and sharing food with them must apply for CalFresh with everyone in that household.



Scenario

A new student enrolls in the 11th grade in your school. She is living with her aunt and uncle and mentions that she does not have contact with her parents. You learn that she has gaps in her education and school credits.

You also learn that she played on the soccer team at her previous school and is interested in playing at your school.

- *Would you deem the student an unaccompanied youth under McKinney-Vento?*
- *What are the important issues to consider in this situation?*
- *What are your next steps to ensure full school participation and progress towards graduation for this student?*

Scenario, Part 2

The situation with her aunt and uncle fell apart, so the student begins couch-surfing among her friends from the soccer team. With all the stress and uncertainty at home, the student has missed 15 days of school and is at risk of not earning credits.

The parents she has no contact with have her ID and birth certificate that she now needs to apply for benefits like CalFresh and Medi-Cal.

- *What educational supports can you offer?*
- *How can you help the student access needed benefits?*

Strategies for Supporting Unaccompanied Youth in School

- **Policy review, revision, and development**
 - LEAs should review their policies to ensure they remove barriers, including barriers related to guardianship, immediate enrollment, and full participation in school for unaccompanied youth
- **Identification**
 - LEAs should take intentional steps to ensure the identification of unaccompanied youth as a first step to ensuring their access to education and school-based supports
 - *Example:* Coordination with faculty advisors for parenting youth programs and LGBTQ+ student groups



Strategies for Supporting Unaccompanied Youth in School

- **Training**

- Ensure that relevant LEA and school staff receive training on the rights and services available to unaccompanied youth
- CA Education Code and the McKinney-Vento Act require LEA homeless liaisons to offer training at least annually to LEA employees who provide services to students experiencing homelessness

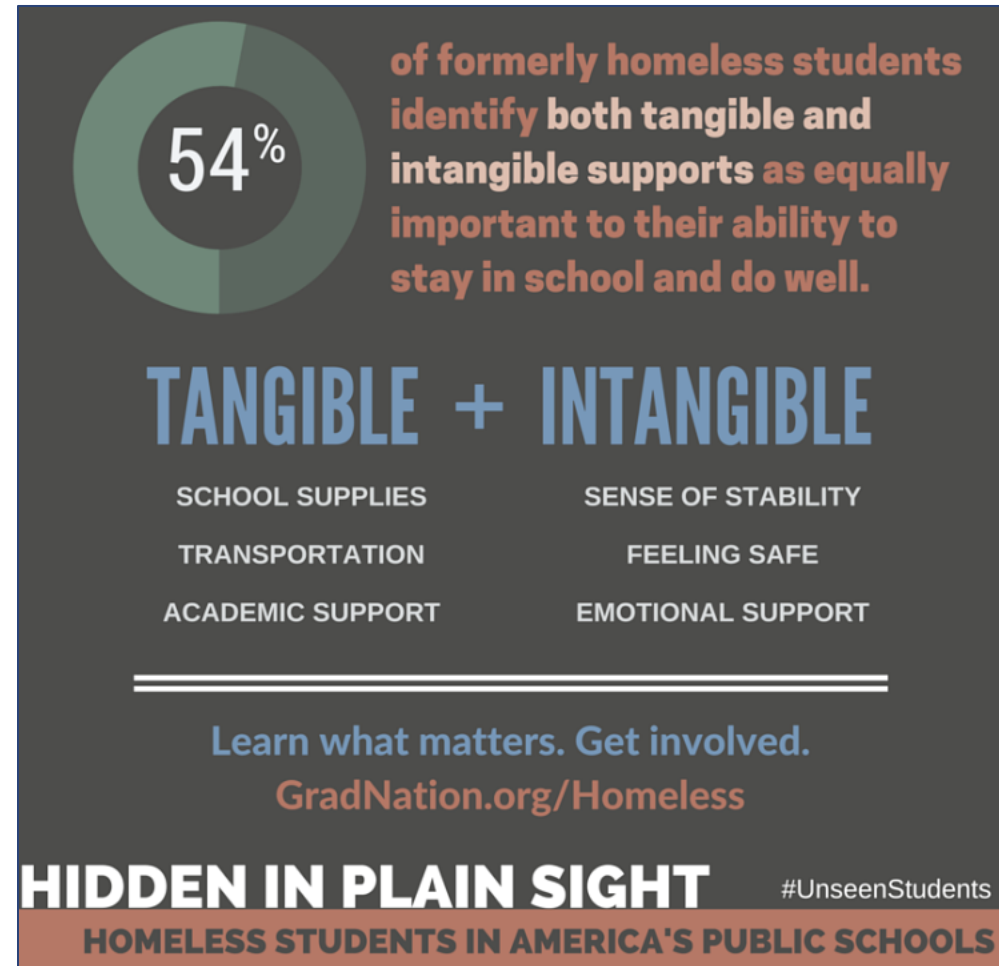
- **Building Trust**

- Create a welcoming and responsive school environment.
- Employ trauma-informed practices



Student Needs

Source: Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America's Public Schools*



Resiliency

**“The deep belief that at one time you
really mattered to another human
being”**

Vincent Feletti, MD





Don't Quit on Me!



Source: [America's Promise Alliance](#)

What Do You Think?

What is one key takeaway from today's session?

What is one action step you'll take as a result of our time together today?



Thanks for Joining!



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