

National Perspective

How Effective is Your Community at Identifying Homeless Children?

by Matt Adams

It is relatively straightforward to determine the number of children who are living in shelter. However, it is much more difficult to assess the number living night-to-night in a hotel or motel (because that is the only housing their parents can afford), doubled up with another family member or nonrelative (because they cannot pay for their own place to live), or on the streets. Children without stable homes are at greater risk for worse academic outcomes than those with permanent places to live, but all too often they are not identified and remain disconnected from the services that would help them thrive in school. With this in mind, the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH) developed a ranking system to measure how well states

are identifying and providing services to homeless children from birth through young adulthood.

The State Education Rankings, released as part of the *2015 American Almanac of Family Homelessness*, use publicly available data to illustrate important differences among states, but more detailed information is often available within states that can be used to determine progress at the district, school, or program level. ICPH hopes that states and communities will use their local data to discover what some programs are doing well and to improve those that may be underperforming. The five indicators that comprise the State Education Rankings, arranged by target age group, are shown in the following table:

State Education Ranking Indicators

| Age | Indicator |
|-------------|---|
| Birth–pre-K | Percentage of children in Early Head Start and Head Start who are homeless |
| | Homeless children as a percentage of poor children in pre-kindergarten |
| Grades K–12 | Homeless children as a percentage of extremely poor children in grades kindergarten through 12 |
| | Number of school-aged children living doubled up for every school-aged child staying in a shelter |
| College | Percentage of unaccompanied homeless FAFSA applicants assisted by a homeless program |

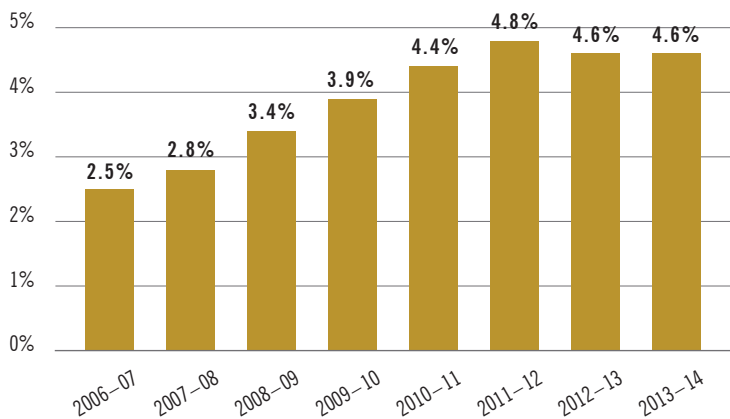
Increasing young homeless children’s enrollment in high-quality early education programs can help prepare them for school and position them for success later in life. Low-income children who participate in high-quality early childhood education programs are more likely to graduate from high school, be employed, and have higher earnings as adults. Since a federal effort was made to enroll young homeless children in Early Head Start and Head Start, the percentage of participating children who are homeless increased from 2.5% in program year 2006–07 to 4.6% in 2013–14 (Figure 1). Head Start State Collaboration Offices can work to further increase enrollment by targeting local programs where the percentage of homeless children served is low. Other high-quality early childhood education programs, administered primarily by states, can do the same. Comparing the number of homeless children attending pre-K with those who are poor indicates how well homeless children are being identified. Nationwide, 5.3% of all poor children enrolled in pre-K also experienced homelessness during the 2013–14 school year (Figure 2).

A similar approach can be undertaken to increase the number of homeless students identified in elementary and secondary schools. As with pre-K, state and local educational agencies can compare the number of homeless students to the number of school-aged children who are extremely poor (living at or below 50% of the poverty level, which amounted to \$9,895 for

a family of three in 2014). Nationally, 30.0% of all extremely poor students were homeless during school year 2013–14 (Figure 3). Since homeless children living doubled up for economic reasons are challenging to identify, school administrators can use a second, complementary measure to ensure that more homeless students receive essential services. Dividing the total number of doubled-up students by those living in shelter can help determine jurisdictions that are likely not as effective at identifying homeless students in doubled-up situations. Nationally, for every student living in a shelter, there were nearly five (4.9) staying doubled up during the 2013–14 school year (Figure 4).

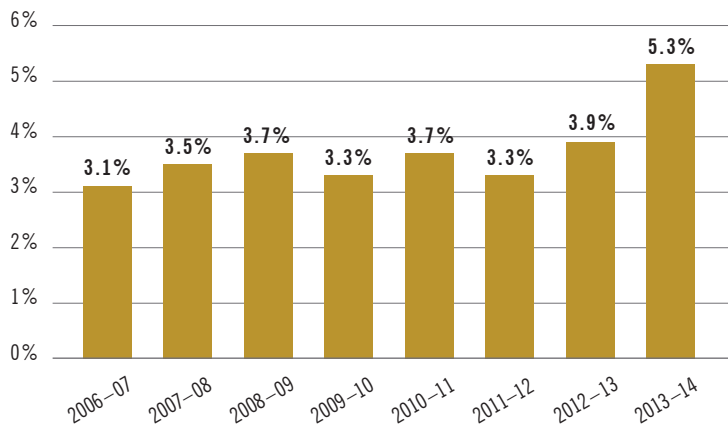
The only national data on college students experiencing homelessness is collected through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Homeless youth who are unaccompanied by a parent or guardian do not have to provide their parents’ financial information if their situation is verified by a school district homeless liaison or by the director of a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-funded shelter or Runaway and Homeless Youth program. College financial aid administrators must make a determination for youth who do not have access to one of these three authorities. Half (50.4%) of all unaccompanied homeless students who filed the FAFSA during the 2013–14 application cycle were verified as independent students, considerably reducing their likelihood of securing the financial aid necessary to help make college a reality (Figure 5).

Figure 1
PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN EARLY HEAD START AND HEAD START WHO ARE HOMELESS
(by program year)



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Head Start Program Information Report, Survey Summary Report—National Level, 2007–14.*

Figure 2
HOMELESS CHILDREN AS A PERCENTAGE OF POOR CHILDREN IN PRE-KINDERGARTEN
(by school year)

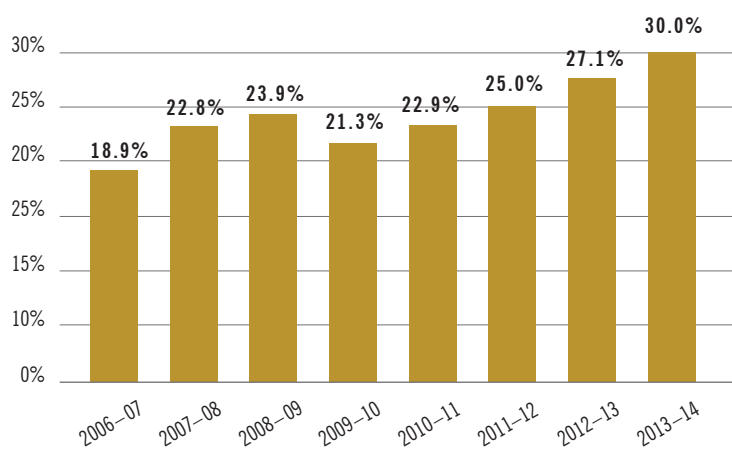


Source: U.S. Department of Education, “ED Data Express,” <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov>; U.S. Department of Education, *Consolidated State Performance Reports: School Year 2006–07*; U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 1-year Estimates, 2007–14.*

For the State Education Rankings, ICPH carefully selected five indicators that directly relate to actions that can be taken to improve access to education for homeless children of all ages. ICPH hopes that administrators at the state, district, school, or individual program level will find these indicators to be a valuable way to measure how well—and how many—home-

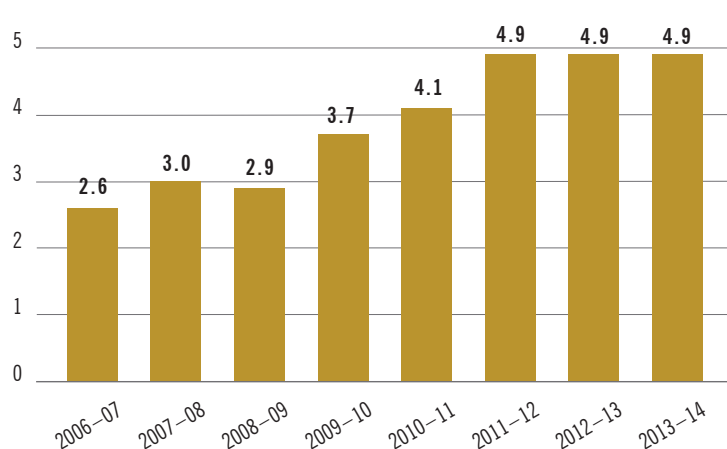
less children are currently being served. Using local data would reveal the differences in the student homelessness landscape within communities and enable resources, technical assistance, and support with outreach and identification to be targeted more effectively to localities with the greatest need. ■

Figure 3
HOMELESS CHILDREN AS A PERCENTAGE OF EXTREMELY POOR CHILDREN IN GRADES KINDERGARTEN THROUGH 12 (by school year)



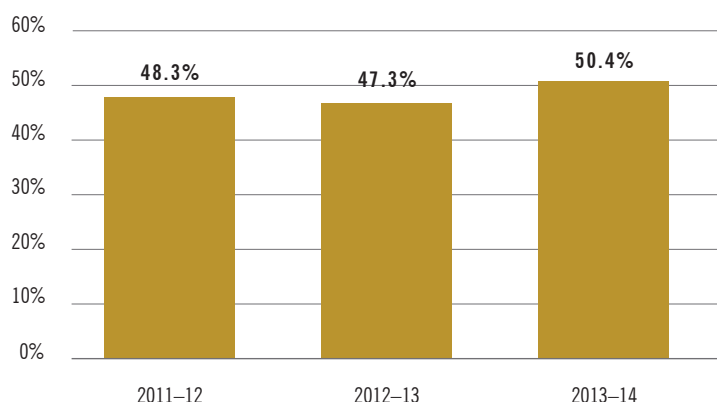
Source: See Figure 2; National Center for Homeless Education, *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary, 2010-14*.

Figure 4
NUMBER OF SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN LIVING DOUBLED UP FOR EVERY SCHOOL-AGED CHILD STAYING IN A SHELTER (by school year)



Source: National Center for Homeless Education, *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary, 2010-14*; U.S. Department of Education, "ED Data Express," <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov>.

Figure 5
PERCENTAGE OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS FAFSA APPLICANTS ASSISTED BY AN EDUCATIONAL LIAISON, SHELTER, OR HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAM (by application cycle)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid, "Applicants with Homelessness Indicated on the FAFSA by State and Application Cycle" (unpublished data).