



Infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool years are full of exciting milestones. For tens of thousands of Michigan children, however, this development is disrupted by homelessness and the toxic stress that comes along with housing instability. Without needed supports and services, homelessness for a small child can have a lifelong impact on their ability to thrive in school and life. It is essential that children facing homelessness are not left behind as state and local leaders strive to move Michigan from number 37 in the country for education to the top ten by 2030.¹

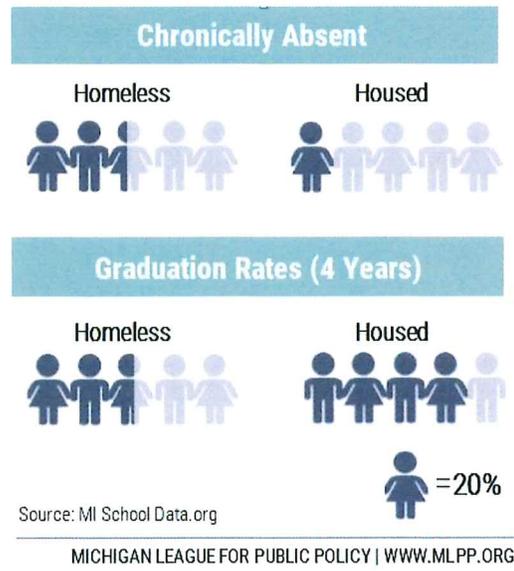
This report uses Michigan Department of Education data analyzed by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan to explore homelessness between birth and age 4 and makes policy recommendations to ensure all children can enter kindergarten ready to learn.

Why This Matters

It is during the earliest years of life that the very architecture of children’s brains is built in ways that can affect their emotional and cognitive development, as well as their later outcomes in school and life. Trauma such as homelessness can change the makeup of a developing brain, leading to lifelong educational implications before a child even starts school.² Because of this, the achievement gap that is seen in high school is already observable in children as young as 9 months old.³

Enrollment in an early education program can counteract some of these outcomes, but children facing homelessness are significantly less likely to participate in home visiting or center-based programs. Of those who are in preschool, 54% of children experiencing homelessness present with a major developmental delay, compared with only 16% of their housed peers. These trends continue throughout elementary school, where classroom engagement and math proficiency in third grade are correlated with homelessness during infancy and toddlerhood.⁴ By age 17, half of children who were formerly homeless have repeated at least one grade, and over 21% have repeated two grades, a rate at almost three times higher than their housed peers.⁵

In Michigan, public school children experiencing homelessness are distinguishable from their housed peers in several categories. Nearly half of children facing homelessness were chronically absent last school year, compared with only 19% of housed children.⁶ Likewise, only 57% of high school seniors identified as homeless graduated in 4 years, while 81% of housed seniors attained this accomplishment.⁷



About the Data

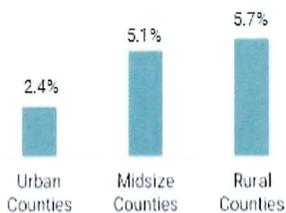
This report is based on data analysis conducted by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan and data from the Michigan Department of Education⁸ to provide a conservative estimate of the number of children from birth through age 4 who are experiencing homelessness. The data is based on the number of public school first graders who were identified as homeless during the 2016-17 school year. This estimate assumes that the same percentage of children of each age are homeless, and comes to a total of 15,565 children from birth through age 4.⁹ However, research suggests that children are most likely to be homeless between birth and age 6, as much as 51% of the total population of children facing homelessness.^{10,11,12}

Note: According to the Poverty Solutions report, *A Snapshot of Homelessness and Housing Instability in Michigan Schools*, Wayne County was likely undercounted significantly due to data collection issues in Detroit Public Schools Community District.¹³

The full data set used in this report will soon be available on the Kids Count Data Center.¹⁴

Early Childhood Homelessness in Michigan

Average Percentage of Children 0-4 Experiencing Homelessness by County Size



Source: Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan

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People experiencing homelessness are difficult to count for a number of reasons, especially those who are not yet enrolled in school. First, the stigma and potential

consequences related to homelessness deter many people from identifying themselves in this way. Second, multiple definitions of homeless mean that a person who would be considered homeless under one definition would not be categorized that way under the other.

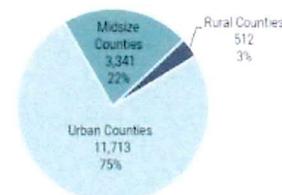
The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) considers individuals homeless if they are living in a shelter, in transitional housing, or in places not meant for human habitation. In 2017, this accounted for almost 6,000 children in Michigan from birth through age 4.¹⁵ However, educational institutions use a broader definition of homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which includes all children who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.¹⁶ Based on this definition, an estimated 15,565 children from birth through age 4 are homeless in the state of Michigan—over two-and-a-half times more than what is reported by the shelter system.

Homelessness is an issue that impacts young children and their families in all 83 counties in Michigan, ranging from 1% in Oakland and Dickinson counties to a high of over 13%.¹⁷ The three counties with the highest percentages of young children in situations of homelessness are Alger (11.1%), Lake (12%), and Arenac (13.3%), all very rural counties.

Of the 15,565 young children estimated to be experiencing homelessness, over 75% live in urban counties. However, children are about twice as likely to experience homelessness during their first four years of life if they are living in a rural or midsize county.

While some children may be enrolled in more than one program, about 3,110 children between the ages of birth

Number of Children 0-4 Experiencing Homelessness by County Size

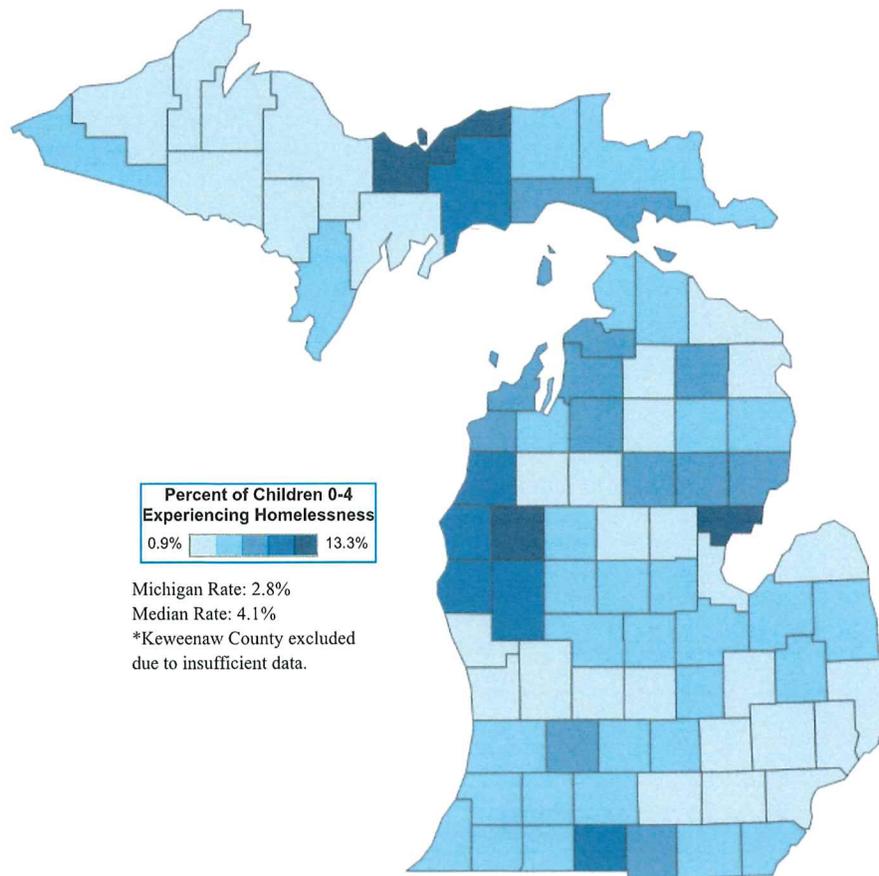


Source: Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan

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and 5 who are experiencing homelessness are enrolled in a state- or federally-funded early childhood program.¹⁸ During the 2017-18 school year, 602 children enrolled in the state's Great Start Readiness Program¹⁹ experienced homelessness.²⁰ Likewise, *Early On*²¹ served 85 children²², Early Childhood Special education served 396²³, and Early Head Start and Head Start served a combined 2,027.²⁴ This means that at least 12,455—or 4 of every 5—children who are experiencing homelessness are not engaged in one of these early childhood programs.

Homelessness in Early Childhood by County



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NOTE: THIS RESEARCH RESULT USED DATA STRUCTURED AND MAINTAINED BY THE MERI-MICHIGAN EDUCATION DATA CENTER (MEDC). MEDC DATA IS MODIFIED FOR ANALYSIS PURPOSES USING RULES GOVERNED BY MEDC AND ARE NOT IDENTICAL TO THOSE DATA COLLECTED AND MAINTAINED BY THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (MDE) AND/OR MICHIGAN'S CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND INFORMATION (CEPI). RESULTS, INFORMATION AND OPINIONS SOLELY REPRESENT THE ANALYSIS, INFORMATION AND OPINIONS OF THE AUTHOR(S) AND ARE NOT ENDORSED BY, OR REFLECT THE VIEWS OR POSITIONS OF, GRANTORS, MDE AND CEPI OR ANY EMPLOYEE THEREOF.

SOURCE: POVERTY SOLUTIONS AT UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

What We Do About It

Adequate Data Collection

An accurate picture of early childhood homelessness is difficult to capture, as many children are not engaged with agencies that collect this data. This incomplete picture makes it difficult for state and local policymakers to determine what resources are necessary to support the population.

State lawmakers can implement a unified database that captures information regarding a family's housing situation from the wide array of organizations they may be involved with. Agencies such as the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), Women, Infant, Children (WIC) programs, the Michigan Department of Education, Intermediate School Districts, shelters, local hospitals, childcare centers, and public schools interface with families of young children and can contribute to a more accurate count of those who are experiencing homelessness based on the McKinney-Vento definition. A clearer understanding of the scope of the issue, as well as any disparate impact to individuals based on their race or ethnicity, can lead to proper development and funding of resources to serve this population.

Coordination of Services

The Northwest Michigan Students in Transition Empowerment Program is a hub for coordinating services in the Traverse City area. This regional McKinney-Vento grantee serves individuals from birth through age 20 in 20 school districts throughout a five county area. Through cross-training, a collaborative intake questionnaire and individualized referrals, a comprehensive approach to serving children has enhanced the connections between community agencies that serve children and families in situations of homelessness.

Families facing homelessness may work with agencies to secure food, shelter, transportation, education and healthcare services. In a disjointed system, families spend a great amount of time in the process of securing these services. Communities should enlist a system of care approach to coordinate two-generational, multidisciplinary services that include food banks, homeless and housing service agencies, early childhood providers, and organizations that offer physical and mental health services.²⁵

Policymakers can support a common application and coordination of case management services, which would eliminate barriers of entry for families and allow agencies to use their resources more efficiently. A system of care approach creates an environment where a single case manager can work with a family to coordinate referrals based on

individual needs, allow families to enroll in programs quicker, and offer seamless transitions between agencies based on changes the family may experience.

Early Childhood Education Opportunities

Early enrollment into a research-based program that focuses on building protective factors, such as executive functioning, self-regulation and early literacy skills, can support the development of a young child's brain and is essential for those who have stressful experiences in early childhood that often impact typical development. Through a community needs assessment, local lawmakers and agencies can determine the need for additional services and rally local and statewide support for such programming.

It is imperative that those experiencing homelessness be prioritized as state and local lawmakers build the capacity to serve young children in early education programs. Lawmakers must include mechanisms to ensure programs conduct targeted outreach to recruit children facing homelessness so they are able to benefit from the enrichment early childhood programs provide.

Housing Discrimination

While protections for children facing homelessness are necessary to support their growth and development, helping families secure safe and stable housing is the most sustainable way to support young children. The Housing Choice Voucher program, funded by HUD, helps very low-income families by subsidizing rent costs. There are 28,000 vouchers available throughout the state of Michigan.²⁷ In 2018, 44% of voucher recipients were adults with children.²⁸ Although the voucher program is a valuable way to assist families, those who receive them often have a difficult time securing housing due to source of income discrimination. Landlords can choose not to accept vouchers, thus keeping families out of high-opportunity neighborhoods with quality schools and ample employment opportunities.

In Kent County, a multidisciplinary and collaborative effort to support families of children under the age of 5 led to a ballot initiative that created new dedicated, sustainable funding for early childhood programs through a property tax millage. The millage is expected to generate approximately \$5.7 million a year over six years for a total of \$34.2 million. The funds will be used to pay for services like home visiting, play and learn groups, developmental screenings and navigation to help families access these resources, all in the interest of ensuring that children are healthy and ready to learn when they start school.³¹

Lawmakers must support a source of income discrimination bill, which would make it illegal for landlords to reject potential tenants based on their income source. The cities of Ann Arbor, Lansing, East Lansing, Grand Rapids and Jackson have enacted policies that support those with alternative sources of income, but there is not a statewide policy that takes action against these discriminatory practices. In areas where this discrimination is legal, voucher recipients are denied at a rate of up to 78%, compared to only an average of 35% in municipalities where protections are in place.²⁹ Adopting a source of income discrimination bill would help families secure safe and stable housing.

As state and local leaders strive to move the needle in education, it is essential that the connection between school outcomes and social issues for the state's most vulnerable population is recognized and addressed simultaneously. Without addressing issues of child welfare, the Family Independence Program, affordable housing, healthcare and fair wages, among others, there will continue to be disparities between those with the tools to thrive and those without.

Home at Head Start

The federally-funded Head Start program is a two-generational model that provides early education and social service opportunities to our nation's most vulnerable families. The program serves families living below the federal poverty level, as well as those who are involved in the foster care system, receiving cash assistance or identified as homeless through the McKinney-Vento definition.

In January 2019, Dr. Deborah Bergeron, the Director of the federal Office of Head Start, began a campaign to increase the number of children enrolled in the program who are considered homeless. While the Head Start Program and Performance Standards have always required programs to reserve slots for immediate enrollment of a family who has been identified as homeless, this campaign seeks to increase enrollment of the near 2 million children under the age of 6 nationwide who are estimated to be experiencing homelessness. By increasing awareness of the issue, providing professional development and networking opportunities, promoting non-traditional recruitment strategies, and accurately identifying those who are already enrolled and have become homeless, she hopes to see 10,000 more children identified as homeless enrolled in Head Start by the end of this school year.