

## **New UCLA Research Finds Student Homelessness Remains a Major Barrier to Educational Opportunity in Western States**

*Studies of Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah reveal persistent disparities in academic achievement, attendance, graduation and school discipline among students experiencing homelessness*

**LOS ANGELES — [September 29, 2026]** — The UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools (CTS) has released new research examining student homelessness across Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah, making clear that housing instability continues to disrupt educational opportunities for students in the West. The research documents persistent disparities in academic achievement, graduation, attendance and school discipline, as well as substantial racial and geographic disparities in who experiences homelessness.

Across the four states, the findings also point to rising housing costs and shortages of affordable housing as important structural factors contributing to housing instability and underscore the need for coordinated responses across education, housing, health, and community systems.

The new research was published by UCLA CTS as part of its ongoing work to detail student homelessness and inform and strengthen educational policy and practice to more effectively address the learning needs of students. CTS is partnering with the American Institutes for Research on the West Comprehensive Center, a federally funded project providing state, district and school leaders support to implement and sustain evidence-based programs and practices, with the goal of improving outcomes for educators and students.

“Across these four states, we see different trends in the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness, but a remarkably consistent pattern in what housing instability means for a student’s education,” said Mayra Cazares-Minero, a research analyst at the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools and lead author of the briefs. “Students experiencing homelessness face substantial barriers to academic achievement, graduation, and educational stability. These findings make clear that identifying students is only the first step. Schools and communities also need the capacity to provide sustained support that helps students remain stable, engaged and on track academically.”

Among the findings for each state:

**California:** Student homelessness has reached a record high in California, where 298,254 students experienced homelessness in the school year 2024–25, a 4% increase from the previous year and 10% above the pre-pandemic peak in 2018–19. Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native students experienced the highest rates, with more than one in 12 students in each group experiencing homelessness in 2024–25. The educational disparities are

equally stark: students experiencing homelessness trail their housed peers by roughly 20 percentage points in meeting English language arts and mathematics standards, have lower graduation and college-readiness outcomes, and face higher rates of suspension and chronic absenteeism. About one in three students experiencing homelessness was chronically absent in 2024–25, compared with roughly one in five housed students. The California findings call for stronger coordination between the state’s education and homelessness systems, sustained investment in identification and data systems, equity-focused supports, and expanded academic and postsecondary pathways.

**Arizona:** Although Arizona identified 14,906 students experiencing homelessness in 2025–26, an 8% decline from the previous year, the number remains elevated compared with pre-pandemic levels after surging nearly 50% to 16,473 students in 2023–24. Persistent racial disparities remain: From 2019–20 to 2025–26, the homelessness rate among Native American/Alaska Native students rose from 1.7% to 4.3%, while the rate among Black students increased from 2.7% to 3.6%. Students experiencing homelessness face an approximately 20-percentage-point proficiency gap in both English language arts and mathematics compared with students statewide, and chronic absenteeism rates ranged from 38% to 45% between 2021–22 and 2024–25. While their graduation rate improved to 62% in 2024–25, substantial educational barriers remain. The study urges state leaders to consider improving annual student homelessness counts, strengthening cross-sector and tribal partnerships, expanding state and local data systems, increasing McKinney-Vento capacity, and investing in transportation and targeted academic supports.

“The data also show why statewide averages are not enough,” said Grace Ha Eun Kim, a research analyst at the Center and a co-author of the briefs. “The burden of student homelessness is not evenly distributed across racial groups or communities. Native American/Alaska Native students face particularly high rates in Utah and persistent disparities across the region, while Black/African American students experience disproportionately high rates in states including California and Nevada. Effective responses have to account for those differences and be shaped by the communities experiencing the greatest housing instability.”

**Utah:** Utah identified 9,622 students experiencing homelessness in 2025–26, a nearly 12% decline from the previous year, though the study cautions that inconsistent district identification practices and reliance on enrollment-based snapshots may leave some students unidentified. Native American/Alaska Native students experience particularly severe disparities: their homelessness rate rose from 9.7% in 2019–20 to 14% in 2023–24. Educational outcomes reveal similarly significant gaps. In 2022–23, just 12.8% of students experiencing homelessness were proficient in mathematics, compared with 40.2% statewide, while 15.6% were proficient in English language arts, compared with 44.4% statewide. Nearly half—48.1%—were chronically absent, compared with 26.5% of students statewide. Graduation rates have improved, reaching 72.8% in 2024–25, but remained 16.1 percentage points below the statewide rate; students experiencing homelessness also experienced suspension or expulsion at more than twice the statewide rate in 2024–25. The authors encourage standardized statewide identification, improved annual counting and public reporting, stronger cross-sector coordination, and more consistent restorative and trauma-informed practices across districts.

**Nevada:** Nevada has experienced a different trend in identified student homelessness, with the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness declining to 9,727, or 2.1% of enrollment, in 2025–26—a 10.4% decrease from the previous year and the lowest count and proportion observed over the last several school years. Yet significant disparities remain. Black students experienced homelessness at rates ranging from 4.7% to 6.2% between 2018–19 and 2025–26, while rates for Native American/Alaska Native students ranged from 3% to 3.8%. Graduation among students experiencing homelessness improved to 68.3% in 2024–25, but remained 18.5 percentage points below their housed peers. Students experiencing homelessness also faced persistent achievement gaps of 18 to 25 percentage points in English language arts and 15 to 20 percentage points in mathematics, along with consistently higher suspension rates. Recommendations include a standardized statewide housing questionnaire, stronger coordination among education, housing and other systems, greater attention to rural and tribal communities, and trauma-informed, relationship-based approaches to school engagement.

“Student homelessness is both a housing issue and an education issue, and our systems need to respond accordingly,” said Joseph Bishop, Executive Director of the Center and principal investigator of the study. “A student who does not have a stable place to call home should not also have to navigate disconnected education, housing, and social-service systems. States have a responsibility to build stronger identification practices and data systems and improve coordination across systems to ensure young people get the education they deserve.”

Across the four states, the studies show that student homelessness cannot be understood through reported counts alone. Differences in state and district identification and reporting practices can obscure the full scale of housing instability, particularly for students living temporarily with other families or in other “doubled-up” arrangements. At the same time, the consistency of the educational disparities across states demonstrates that housing instability is closely intertwined with students’ ability to attend school regularly, meet academic standards, graduate, and remain connected to their schools.

The reports identify several priorities for state and local leaders and youth-serving systems: strengthening and standardizing the identification of students experiencing homelessness; improving data collection and reporting; coordinating education, housing, health, and social-service systems; addressing racial and geographic disparities; and expanding transportation, academic, attendance, and school-stability supports. The findings also emphasize the importance of sustained investment in the protections and services provided under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

Detailed reports for each state are available at:

<https://transformschoools.ucla.edu/research/student-homelessness-in-arizona/>

<https://transformschoools.ucla.edu/research/student-homelessness-in-california/>

<https://transformschoools.ucla.edu/research/student-homelessness-in-nevada/>

<https://transformschoools.ucla.edu/research/student-homelessness-in-utah/>

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