

# Over 1.5 million homeless students in the US

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On the day that US President Donald Trump proclaimed a “a blue-collar boom” in his State of the Union address, the Federal government reported that the number of students experiencing homelessness had hit a record high.

More than 1.5 million public school students, from kindergarten to high school, experienced homelessness at some point in time during the 2017-18 school year, according to a report released Wednesday by the National Center for Homeless Education. The number is the highest recorded since the organization began tracking student homelessness.

In his State of the Union address, Trump presented the United States as a paradise for American workers, declaring “The years of economic decay are over... Gone, too, are the broken promises, jobless recoveries, tired platitudes and constant excuses.”

Trump has consistently pointed to the “booming” stock market as proof that the economic situation of workers “has never been better.” However, the report is just one of many recent social indicators that expose mounting inequality and social distress in the United States.

The three richest people in the US have as much wealth as the bottom half of US society. Life expectancy in the country has declined for three years in a row, driven by overdose, suicide, and deaths of despair. On average, wealthier Americans live almost ten more “disability-free” years, after the age of 50, than the poorest.

The report defines homelessness as individuals who lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate” nighttime residence. This includes students living in hotels or motels, sharing housing with other families, living in homeless shelters, or in inadequate housing such as abandoned warehouses or vehicles.

Compared to the 2015-16 school year, the 2017-18 school year showed a 15 percent increase, from

1,307,656 to 1,508,265, in students reported as experiencing homelessness. The number from 2017-18 was more than double the 680,000 students who experienced homelessness in 2004-05, the first year examined by the organization.

Sixteen states experienced a growth of more than ten percent in their homeless student population, from 2015-16 to 2017-18. Texas saw the largest increase over the period, with its number of homeless students doubling to more than 231,000. Texas, California, and New York account for more than a third of all homeless students. Overall, fourteen states reported a decrease. Only six, however, reported decreases of more than ten percent.

During 2017-18, 74 percent of students experiencing homelessness shared housing with others, due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons. Twelve percent of homeless students lived in homeless shelters. Seven percent primarily resided in hotels or motels, and another 7 percent were identified as unsheltered.

The report noted a 137 percent increase, over a three-year period, in students (totaling more than 102,000) who reported staying in unsheltered places, such as vehicles or abandoned buildings, while homeless. The number of students who lived in hotels or motels increased by 24 percent, while students who “doubled up” with other families increased by 13 percent. In contrast, the number of students in shelters declined by 2 percent.

Further statistics reveal that the severity of the issue has worsened. More children in primary school and early childhood education are homeless than those in middle and high school. Unaccompanied homeless youth, who are often fleeing neglect or abuse, make up nine percent of the homeless student population. Eighteen percent of homeless students are disabled and 31 states reported that at least 20 percent of their homeless students had an identified disability.

Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, school districts are eligible for federal aid to support homeless students. In 2017-18, 4,387 school districts, just under one quarter of the total in the country, received subgrants under the Act. Funding under the McKinney-Vento Act rose by almost \$12 million between 2015 and 2017, with states providing an average \$76.50 per pupil. However, per pupil funding hardly changed, due to the larger number of homeless students.

The insecurity and lack of stability that homeless students face severely impact their ability to learn and assimilate information, in the most formative period of their lives. During the 2017-18 school year, only 29 percent of students facing homelessness achieved academic proficiency in language arts. Only 24 percent achieved proficiency in mathematics, and just 26 percent in science.

Barbara Duffield, executive director of SchoolHouse Connection, a nonprofit based in Washington that supports homeless youth, told the *New York Times* that the causes behind the rise in student homelessness were complex and depended on where students lived in the United States.

The sharp rises in states such as Texas and Florida were driven by natural disasters, including hurricanes and extreme flooding. During the 2017-18 school year, the Gulf Coast was ravaged by storms that destroyed thousands of homes. Duffield also explained that lack of affordable housing, the opioid and methamphetamine addiction crises, and local economic factors, such as factory closings, all influenced the increase in student homelessness.



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