

# STUDENTS NAVIGATING HOUSING INSTABILITY: A SUMMARY OF THREE RESEARCH BRIEFS

## SUMMARY: STUDENTS NAVIGATING HOUSING INSTABILITY SERIES

Housing instability, defined as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, has been a persistent and pervasive crisis across the country, and Oregon is no exception. The lack of affordable housing, compounded by the pandemic, wildfires, increased cost of living, and other social and political issues has resulted in Oregon having the highest rate of families with children and unaccompanied youth navigating housing instability in the nation and the second highest rate of houselessness overall.<sup>1,2</sup> The large number of children in unstable housing is of considerable concern as houselessness and its associated conditions have been found to negatively impact individuals' social, psychological, and physical development. In addition, the lack of stable housing is known to adversely affect children's education experience and attainment.

In a series of three research briefs, ODE researchers explored the issue of Oregon students navigating housing instability (SNHI) in depth. Brief 1 presents an educational overview addressing the identification of students navigating housing instability, prevalence rates across the state, student demographics and disparities, and educational outcomes. In Brief 2, longitudinal data from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) was used to examine students' experiences prior to, and after, the formal identification of houselessness in order to shed light on the educational impact of prior life stressors in relation to formal identification, service provision, and subsequent education outcomes. And in Brief 3, McKinney-Vento liaisons across the state completed surveys, and school and district staff from selected districts were interviewed, in order to provide a more detailed look at the supports provided to students and families navigating housing instability, and the challenges and barriers staff faced in finding and providing services and supports.

1 Hayden, N. (2023). "Oregon has the highest rate of homeless families in the country." The Oregonian.

2 The terms "students navigating housing instability" and "houseless" are used synonymously throughout this document.

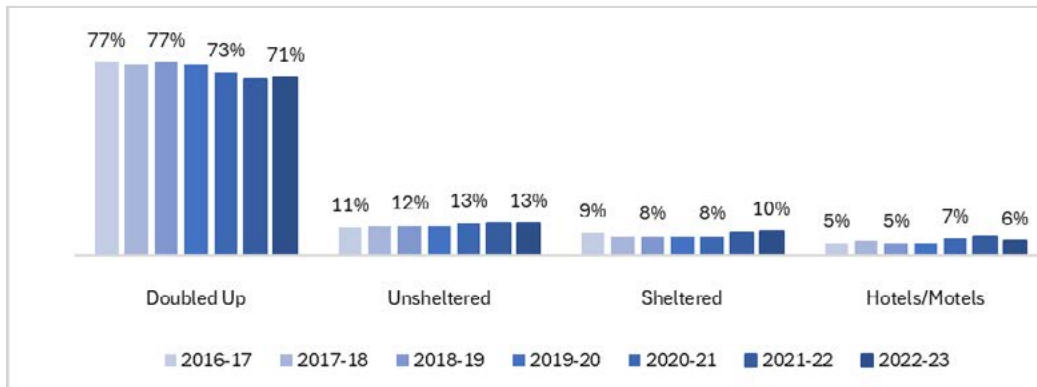
# BRIEF 1. STUDENTS NAVIGATING HOUSING INSTABILITY: EDUCATION OVERVIEW<sup>3</sup>

Authors: Isabella Jacoby, Marisa Molnar, Alesia Valdez

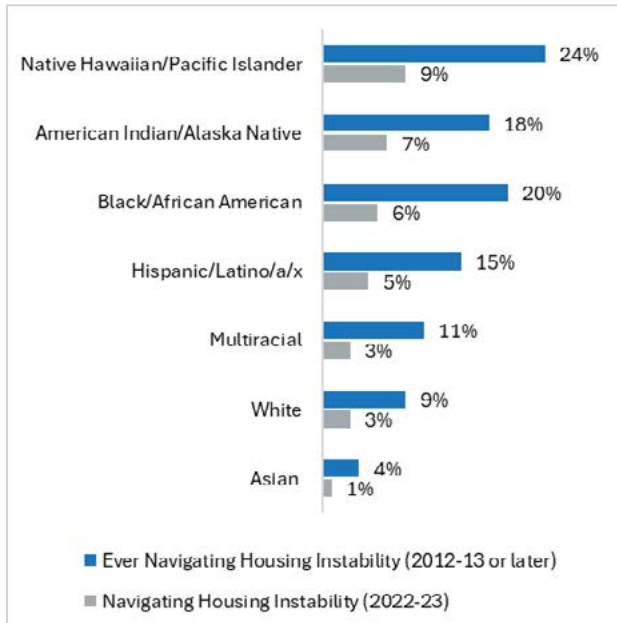
Although the overall population of SNHI varies from year to year, typically around 21,000 students in Oregon are formally identified in any given year as lacking “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” representing approximately 3% of all students.<sup>4</sup> In addition, more than one in ten students (10.6% in 2022-23) navigated housing instability at some point during their education. These numbers likely underestimate the true scope of the problem as they only reflect students who are enrolled in the public education system and are identified by education staff.<sup>5</sup> Of the four types of residences considered to be unstable, *doubled up* housing (or shared housing with others) represented by far the most common form of housing instability experienced by students, accounting for 71% - 77% of the houseless student population from 2016-17 through 2022-23.

**Figure 1: Doubled Up, Still the Most Common Nighttime Residence Type, is Decreasing in Prevalence**

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS NAVIGATING HOUSING INSTABILITY REPORTING EACH TYPE OF NIGHTTIME RESIDENCE



**Figure 2: Percentage of Students Navigating Housing Instability by Race/Ethnicity**



An examination of the demographics of SNHI indicated significant disparities across a number of focal student groups,<sup>6</sup> including racial and ethnic disparities, and disparities for students navigating foster care, students with an experience of incarceration or detention, recent arrivers, migrants, and emerging bilingual students. In addition, students navigating housing instability were prevalent throughout the state. While the majority of students were located in or near large population centers, when examining the percentage of students by county, coastal and rural areas were disproportionately impacted by houselessness.

Of considerable importance to the education system are answers to two important questions: (1) Are SNHI regularly attending school? and (2) How are SNHI performing on common education outcome measures? Regarding attendance rates, houseless students were considerably less likely to regularly attend school (i.e., attended 90% or more of school days). Not surprisingly, these students were also less likely to be on-track to graduate in the 9th grade and less likely to graduate within four years.

3 <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/StudentSuccess/Documents/SNHIResearchBrief1.pdf>

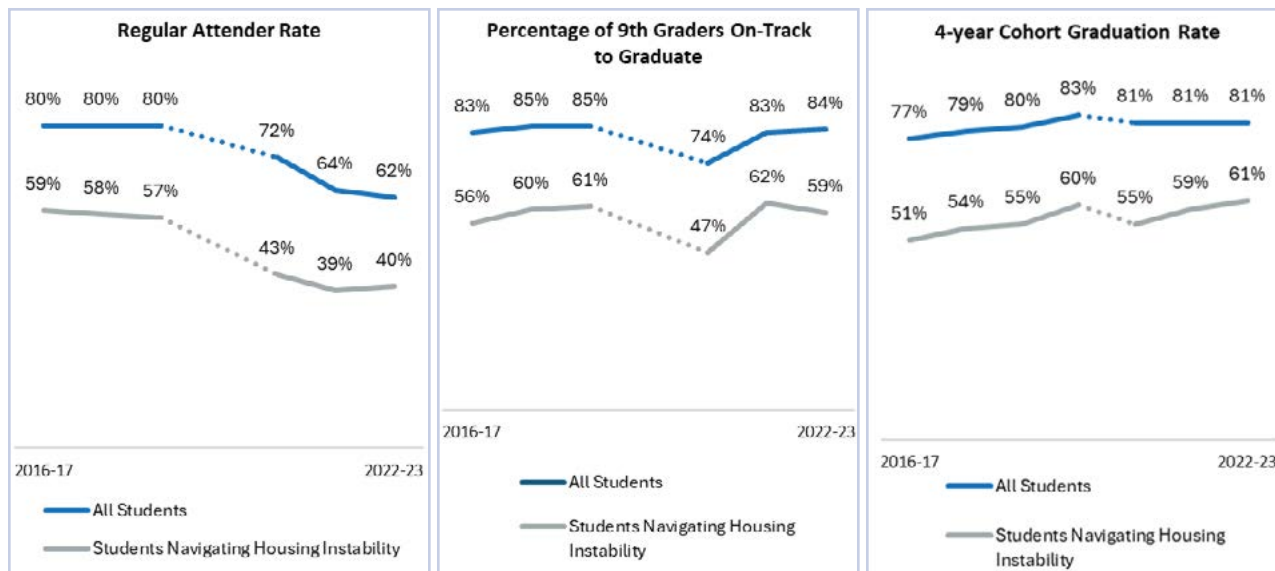
4 McKinney-Vento definition of homeless: Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. National Center for Homeless Education, 2024, available at [nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition](https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition).

5 Identifying Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: <https://nche.ed.gov/identifying/>

6 Focal student groups include students of color; students with disabilities; emerging bilingual students; students navigating poverty, houselessness, or foster care; migrant students; students recently arrived; LGBTQ2SIA+ students; students with experience of incarceration or detention; and other students who have historically experienced academic disparities.

**Figure 3: All Students Have Higher Educational Achievement Rates than Students Navigating Housing Instability**

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ON THREE SELECTED OUTCOME MEASURES



In the final section of Brief 1, challenges in the identification of students for McKinney-Vento supports were addressed. For example, students and/or families generally must self-identify as having unstable housing, and going through the eligibility process and receiving supports may feel threatening, embarrassing, or otherwise distressing. Students and/or families may wish to avoid being identified due to perceived stigma associated with the status.

An alternative method of identifying students in need without relying on self-identification, and one that might identify students prior to their becoming houseless, would potentially be beneficial. ODE researchers explored this issue by examining internal data of students' addresses as a possible proxy or early indicator

for having significant housing challenges and needs. Students with the highest average number of addresses across multiple school years (i.e., high address instability) but not identified for McKinney-Vento supports (i.e., not SNHI) were compared to students already identified as SNHI and a control group with stable housing over a number of years. Data indicated that students with high address instability had regular attendance and 9th grade on-track rates slightly higher than students identified for McKinney-Vento supports, with both groups having significantly lower rates than those with stable housing. High address instability, therefore, may reflect a need for services for a larger group of students, and/or a need at an earlier point in time. Although the research was exploratory, it opens an avenue of potentially important future research on the topic.

## **BRIEF 2: UNDERSTANDING THE FORMAL IDENTIFICATION OF HOUSELESSNESS AS A CULMINATION OF STRESSORS<sup>7</sup>**

*Authors: Jennifer Bevers, Tom George, Isabella Jacoby*

In Brief 1, students navigating housing instability were shown to have persistently lower educational outcomes than other students. Housing instability can present many challenges to academic success, including challenges with transportation to school; lack of educational resources and individualized supports; lack of access to a quiet and private place to study; lack of positive peer interactions; and unhealthy environments. However, given that houselessness and housing

instability are rarely isolated events in a student's life, Brief 2 examined how much of those impacts can be attributed to houselessness and housing instability itself, and how much can be attributed to a broader set of stressors. Substantial research has indicated a variety of stressors often precede houselessness and housing instability, including but not limited to economic stressors and domestic violence. In addition, children have also been found, in some cases, to have a history

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/StudentSuccess/Documents/SNHIResearchBrief3.pdf>

of direct or collateral stress, maltreatment, and trauma prior to becoming houseless.<sup>8</sup>

Although housing instability is often discussed or addressed in ways which suggest an isolated, discrete, or temporary negative experience, the literature has indicated this is rarely the case. Increasingly, housing instability is being viewed as “chains of risk” in which one exposure to stress is likely to lead to another, in a snowball effect. This model suggests housing instability is produced when a cascade of negative events accumulates into a whole that’s bigger than the sum of its parts<sup>9</sup> - referred to as “cumulative effects.”

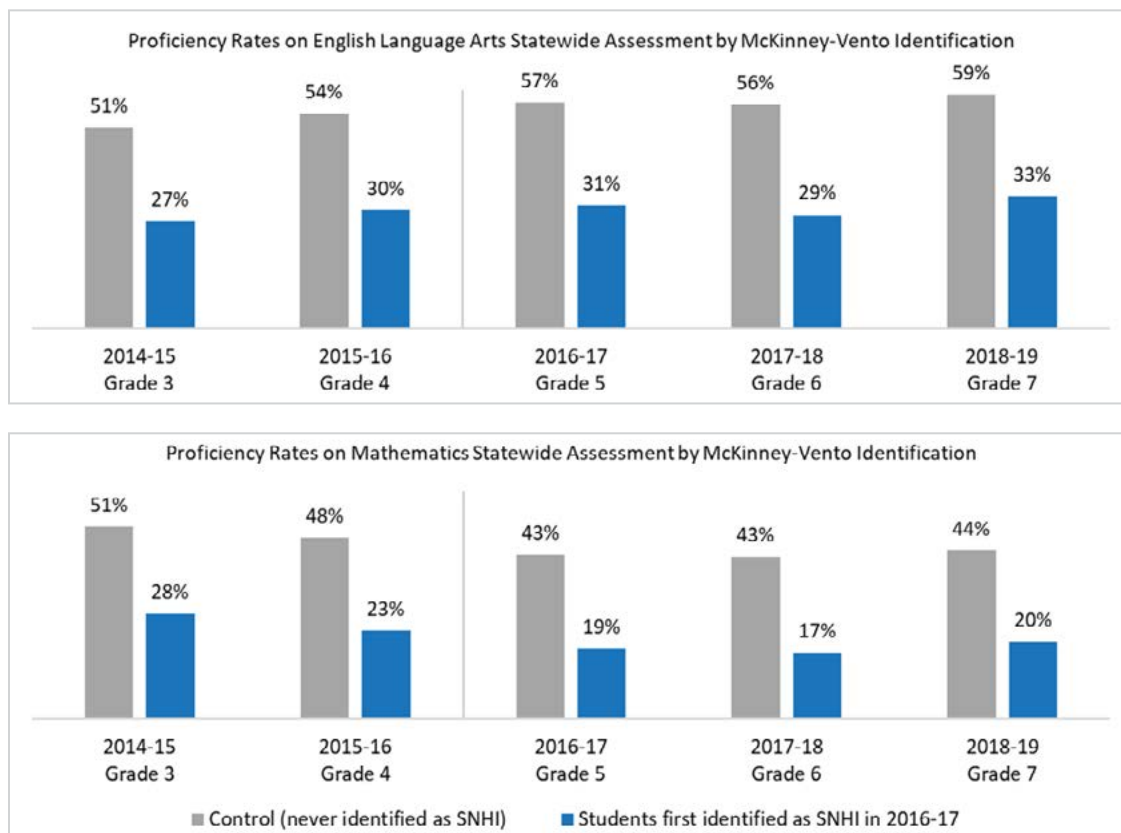
Brief 2 tested the cumulative effects model of housing

instability by examining children’s educational achievements leading up to and after experiencing their first formal identification as houseless. Student achievement data were examined over five years. One group of students was identified as houseless midway through the timeframe studied, and the comparison group was not.

Results indicated that students who would be identified as houseless had significantly lower statewide assessment scores, rates of regular attendance, and 9th grade on-track rates than the comparison group, including in the years prior to formal identification of houselessness.

**Figure 4: Proficiency on Statewide Assessments is Consistently Lower for Students Experiencing Economic and Domestic Stressors Even Prior to Formal Identification of Houselessness/Housing Instability**

PROFICIENCY RATES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT BY MCKINNEY-VENTO IDENTIFICATION



8 Coates, J., & McKenzie-Mohr, S. (2010). Out of the frying pan, into the fire: Trauma in the lives of homeless youth prior to and during homelessness. *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, v. 37 (4), article 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3561>. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol37/iss4/5>.

9 Ben-Shlomo, Y., & Kuh, D. (2002). A life course approach to chronic disease epidemiology: conceptual models, empirical challenges and interdisciplinary perspectives. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, v. 31 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/31.2.285>

Results from Brief 2 were consistent with a cumulative effects model of houselessness and housing instability in which economic and domestic stressors accrue up to the point of a houseless experience and beyond, impacting a student’s educational performance and opportunities all the while. Prior to their first formal identification of housing instability, young students were already displaying signs of needing additional support through lower scores on statewide ELA and math assessments, lower attendance, and a decreased likelihood of being academically on track in ninth grade. However, there was no evidence of an additional drop in educational achievement coinciding with formal identification of houselessness. These findings suggest three things: 1) economic and domestic stressors themselves may be greater contributors to the gaps in student achievement than the specific experience of becoming houseless, 2) earlier identification of housing instability may be beneficial as supports could be provided at the first sign of houselessness, and 3) complex life situations likely require comprehensive supports, and for a longer period of time, in order to reduce achievement disparities.

### **BRIEF 3: “WHATEVER WE NEED TO DO FOR THEM”: A CASE STUDY OF MCKINNEY–VENTO SERVICE PROVIDERS AT FOUR OREGON SCHOOL DISTRICTS**<sup>10</sup>

*Authors: Marisa Molnar, Richard Bargielski*

Briefs 1 and 2 identified key demographic characteristics, demonstrated significant gaps across educational achievement measures, and indicated the need for comprehensive supports for students who were, or would be, navigating housing instability. Brief 3 took a deeper look at currently provided supports, and existing barriers, by surveying and interviewing key personnel in districts across the state to understand what supports were typically provided to SNHI, how those supports were accessed, and what barriers continued to exist that made it difficult to support students effectively.

ODE researchers collected data for Brief 3 by engaging in two primary methodologies in two stages. In the first stage, researchers sent a 14-item electronic survey consisting mostly of open-ended questions to all McKinney-Vento liaisons in Oregon. McKinney-Vento liaisons are responsible for identifying houseless students within their district and providing resources and supports to promote consistent attendance and academic achievement. Information gleaned from the survey indicated many liaisons had little to no experience serving students navigating housing instability, yet the liaisons were heavily relied on within their district to both a) identify and support students and families, as well as b) provide trainings and supports to school staff. A variety of barriers to support provision were also identified in the survey, including the re-identification process for eligible students across multiple school years, a persistent lack of resources, and linguistic, cultural, and knowledge barriers.

For the second stage of the study, ODE researchers, informed by survey results in stage one, developed and conducted semi-structured interviews with McKinney-Vento liaisons, school administrators, and other staff providing related supports such as school counselors or mental health professionals.

Results of the analysis fell into three broad categories: supports, barriers and unmet needs, and additional systemic challenges. As for supports, every district offered some level of transportation support either directly (i.e., bussing) or indirectly (e.g., gas cards), clothing access, and food services, some of which extended to families as well. As for direct housing assistance, districts occasionally paid for hotel stays during emergencies, but more often referred families to community organizations.

School and district staff named a multitude of barriers they had to work to overcome while supporting students and families. Barriers included families lacking phone, cell, or internet services; language and cultural barriers; lack of bilingual/bicultural service providers; complexity of navigating the system; and a lack of trust, and hesitancy to seek and accept services, among students and families navigating housing instability due to general suspicion of government services and the sensitive nature of houselessness.

A number of school and district personnel mentioned the importance of developing strong relationships for effective service provision. Liaisons indicated they must develop strong relationships not only with students and families, but also with other staff members, as well as local organizations and community support providers. Clear and constant communication with involved parties was mentioned as necessary for a smooth, well-functioning, and less stressful experience as it helped others understand the complex system of housing supports, kept all parties on the same page and working together, and kept the process moving in a timely manner so the end goal of adequate service provision and housing stability for students and families was achieved.

<sup>10</sup> Link to be added. Likely “<https://www.oregon.gov/ode/StudentSuccess/Documents/SNHIREsearchBrief3.pdf>”

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, the three research briefs demonstrated the complex challenges facing both students and families navigating housing instability, as well as the McKinney-Vento liaisons and staff who support them. Housing instability is a pervasive problem in the state, and the toll it and other prior and current life stressors take on students' physical, emotional, and cognitive development is significant. Results from these studies indicated that the negative impact on students' educational achievement has resulted in substantial gaps in comparison to the overall student population. These gaps were apparent not only during the period in which students were formally identified as experiencing housing instability, but in the years prior as well. Early identification of housing instability and/or other significant life stressors is paramount in effective service delivery, and coordinated, ongoing supports across multiple systems is likely necessary to reduce academic disparities. McKinney-Vento liaisons face the daunting task of identifying students and families in need of supports, developing trust and strong relationships with them and other district and community partners, coordinating and providing a variety of services, and educating and training staff. Given there is often only one McKinney-Vento liaison serving an entire district, typically with little experience and few resources, working with vulnerable and often traumatized families, and responsible for an array of challenging tasks, it is not surprising that stress and burnout become an additional challenge to the system. The McKinney-Vento liaisons and staff that support communities care deeply for the students and families, and it is disheartening when they are unable to get the families the resources they need. Reducing educational disparities, especially for those in the midst of complex life challenges, requires a concerted effort among legislators, educators, service providers, and other educational partners to provide the resources necessary to develop a comprehensive system of supports where providers and recipients work seamlessly and collaboratively together toward the educational and life success of all students.

## RESOURCES

While there are many resources that support students navigating housing instability prekindergarten to post-secondary school transitions, it is important that these services consider each student's dynamic and complex needs. The following resources may be used by a variety of professionals including McKinney-Vento liaisons, school systems, and additional civic groups, which support students to holistically thrive through a high-quality education. Governor Kotek reinforced, "... student educational outcomes are impacted by many factors, and that's why I am committed to improving housing affordability and behavioral health support in Oregon so families and children can experience the stability that is necessary for students to be able to learn..."<sup>11</sup> With local, state, and federal systems working to enact systems-level improvement, Oregon continues to strengthen capacity to serve students and families navigating housing instability.

### OREGON DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND PARTNER AGENCIES<sup>12</sup>

✓ **Oregon Department of Education: Oregon McKinney-Vento Contact Lists**

[oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/esea/mckinney-vento/pages/default.aspx](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/esea/mckinney-vento/pages/default.aspx)

*Category: Oregon Contact List*

Contact information for the McKinney-Vento liaison for every school district in Oregon (see [School year] McKinney-Vento Contact Lists section)

✓ **Oregon Department of Education, Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care: *Supports for Early Learners Experiencing Housing Instability***

[oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/ESEA/McKinney-Vento/Documents/W00063591\\_ODE\\_DELC-MKV%20One%20Pager\\_2023%20v7.pdf](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/ESEA/McKinney-Vento/Documents/W00063591_ODE_DELC-MKV%20One%20Pager_2023%20v7.pdf)

*Category: Early Learners - 0 to 5-years old*

This quick reference guide provides resources for early learning services and programs serving housing instability, including childcare assistance. Specific information from Oregon's Department of Education and the Department of Human Services offer ways to ensure a high-quality education and overall well-being and health of children and families experiencing housing instability.

11 Office of the Governor of the State of Oregon. *Letter to the House Bill 2656 Advisory Committee Members from Governor Tina Kotek*. 3 December 2024. [oregon.gov/ode/accountability/Documents/12.03.24\\_Accountability%20Advisory%20Committee.%20Governor%27s%20Letter.pdf](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/accountability/Documents/12.03.24_Accountability%20Advisory%20Committee.%20Governor%27s%20Letter.pdf)

12 ODE McKinney Vento Webpage, which contains even more resources: <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/esea/mckinney-vento/pages/default.aspx>

- ✓ **Oregon Department of Education, Office of Indian Education and Office of Teaching and Learning: *Connections in Services Provided for Our Native Community and the McKinney-Vento Program***  
[oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/ESEA/McKinney-Vento/Documents/MV%20-%20OIE%20one%20pager%20W00069~1.pdf](https://oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/ESEA/McKinney-Vento/Documents/MV%20-%20OIE%20one%20pager%20W00069~1.pdf)

*Category: Tribal Housing Insecurity and McKinney-Vento Programmatic-Educational Services*

This one-pager provides support for Tribal families with attendance, community partnerships, and culturally-sustaining district support.

- ✓ **Oregon Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority: *Supports for Immunization Services for Students Experiencing Housing Instability***  
[oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/ESEA/McKinney-Vento/Documents/W00071275\\_ODE\\_McKinney-Vento-Immunizations\\_2024-web.pdf](https://oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/ESEA/McKinney-Vento/Documents/W00071275_ODE_McKinney-Vento-Immunizations_2024-web.pdf)

*Category: Immunizations*

This one-pager provides information on Oregon laws and partnerships to prevent the spread of disease in school and in the community. Likewise, this resource assists school systems navigate the differences between immunization rules for students participating in the McKinney-Vento Program and those who do not. Guidance for the creation and maintenance of immunization records are also addressed.

## SCHOOLHOUSE CONNECTION<sup>13</sup>

- ✓ **SchoolHouse Connection: *The FAFSA Simplification Act: Youth Experiencing Homelessness and Youth with Experience in Foster Care***  
[schoolhouseconnection.org/article/the-fafsa-simplification-act-youth-experiencing-homelessness-and-youth-with-experience-in-foster-care](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/article/the-fafsa-simplification-act-youth-experiencing-homelessness-and-youth-with-experience-in-foster-care)

*Category: Post-secondary education*

Guidance: Supporting unhoused youth and students navigating the foster care system

- Free Application for Federal Student Aid
- Determinations of unaccompanied houselessness and foster youth status

- ✓ **SchoolHouse Connection: *The Ten Legal Duties of the Homeless Liaison or district staff liaison***  
[schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-Ten-Legal-Duties-of-the-Homeless-Liaison.pdf](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-Ten-Legal-Duties-of-the-Homeless-Liaison.pdf)

*Category: McKinney-Vento liaison/District staff liaison*

This one-pager explains the duties and responsibilities of the McKinney-Vento Liaisons and Student and caregiver rights.

- ✓ **SchoolHouse Connection: *McKinney-Vento Quick Reference (English)***  
[schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/McKinney-Vento-Act-Quick-Reference-August-2024.pdf](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/McKinney-Vento-Act-Quick-Reference-August-2024.pdf)

*Category: Federal educational rights and services*

This one-pager for PreK-12 children and youth experiencing houselessness describes eligibility, participation, enrollment, and required supportive services for educational stability. In addition, federal fund use, financial aid for post-secondary education, credit accrual, and dispute resolution.

- ✓ **SchoolHouse Connection: *McKinney-Vento Quick Reference (Spanish)***  
[schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/imported-files/The-McKinney-Vento-Act-Quick-Reference-Spanish.pdf](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/imported-files/The-McKinney-Vento-Act-Quick-Reference-Spanish.pdf)

- ✓ **SchoolHouse Connection: *McKinney-Vento Quick Reference (Haitian Kreyol)***  
[schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-McKinney-Vento-Act-Quick-Reference-Haitian-Kreyol.pdf](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-McKinney-Vento-Act-Quick-Reference-Haitian-Kreyol.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> SchoolHouse Connection is a national non-profit working to overcome homelessness through education. <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/>

## NATIONAL CENTER FOR HOMELESS EDUCATION<sup>14</sup>

- ✓ **National Center for Homeless Education: *Determining Eligibility for Rights and Services Under the McKinney-Vento Act***

<https://doe.sd.gov/title/documents/EligRights.pdf>

*Category: Determinations*

Research Brief: McKinney-Vento eligibility, rights, and services

- Resource for State McKinney-Vento Coordinator, liaisons, school systems, and additional entities that support SNHI
- Provides best practices for implementation of supportive services
- Questions to ask students and caregivers

- ✓ **National Center for Homeless Education: *Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Students Experiencing Homelessness***

<https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/youth.pdf>

*Category: Education, housing, and unaccompanied youth*

Research Brief: Supporting unaccompanied youth

- Strategies to minimize-eliminate challenges and barriers
- Key supportive services to educational success

14 National Center for Homeless Education: <https://nche.ed.gov/>

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DEPARTMENT OF  
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