



Potential Warning Signs of Homelessness

Note: While these are considered warning signs, please recognize that they only offer *general* guidance. There is significant variability within the school-age homeless population. Individual students may differ significantly from the following general characteristics.

Lack of Continuity in Education

- Attendance at many different schools
- Lack of personal records needed to enroll
- Inability to pay fees
- Gaps in skill development
- Mistaken diagnosis of abilities
- Poor organizational skills
- Poor ability to conceptualize

Poor Health/Nutrition

- Lack of immunizations and/or health records
- Unmet medical and dental needs
- Increased vulnerability to colds & flu
- Respiratory problems
- Skin rashes
- Chronic hunger (may hoard food)
- Fatigue (may fall asleep in class)

Transportation and Attendance Problems

- Erratic attendance and tardiness
- Numerous absences
- Lack of participation in after-school activities
- Lack of participation in field trips
- Absences on days when students bring special treats from home
- Inability to contact parents

Lack of Privacy/Personal Space After School

- Consistent lack of preparation for school
- Incomplete or missing homework (no place to work or keep supplies)
- Unable to complete special projects (no access to supplies)
- Lack of basic school supplies
- Loss of books, other supplies on a regular basis
- Concern for safety of belongings

Social and Behavioral Concerns

- A marked change in behavior
- Poor/short attention span
- Poor self esteem
- Extreme shyness
- Unwillingness to risk forming relationships with peers and teachers
- Difficulty socializing at recess
- Difficulty trusting people
- Aggression
- “Old” beyond years
- Protective of parents
- Clinging behavior
- Developmental delays
- Fear of abandonment
- School phobia (student wants to be with parent)
- Need for immediate gratification
- Anxiety late in the school day

Poor Hygiene

- Lack of shower facilities/washers, etc.
- Wearing same clothes for several days
- Inconsistent grooming – well-groomed one day and poorly groomed the next

Reaction/Statements by Parent, Guardian, Child

- Exhibiting anger or embarrassment when asked about current address
- Mentions staying with grandparents, other relatives, friends, or in a motel or comments:
 - “I don’t remember the name of our last school.”
 - “We’ve been moving around a lot.”
 - “Our address is new; I can’t remember it.” (may hide lack of permanent address)
 - “We’re staying with relatives until we get settled.”
 - “We’re going through a bad time right now.”
 - “We’ve been unpacking, traveling, etc.,” to explain poor appearance and/or hygiene.

(These warning signs were adapted from flyers developed by Illinois and Pennsylvania Departments of Education, and may be found on the homeless education website, www.serve.org/nche.)

Jonathon's Heart, a teacher education curriculum,

was funded by a grant from Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL and compiled by Dr. Maylan Dunn-Kenney, education professor in collaboration with



IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND:

Keep in mind that most homeless students and their families would rather not have their homelessness discovered. First of all, it's embarrassing.

They also fear intervention by child welfare authorities, although the authorities should only intervene in cases of abuse or neglect. The families also fear that their children will be removed from school because of their homelessness. The federal law protects students who are homeless, so this fear is theoretically unfounded.

If you do discover a student is homeless, it is important to offer sensitive and confidential assurance that their circumstances will not get them or their parents in trouble or that the student will be kicked out of school. Communicate with your district's HOMELESS LIAISON (a position required by law) about the best way to help the student.

As with any law, people may be ignorant of the various aspects of it or, in some cases, knowingly violate it. If you feel that the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is being violated, you may contact the toll-free hotline at 800/308-2145, or homeless@serve.org. Knowledgeable professionals will assess the situation and guide the caller or emailer.



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