



National Home Visiting
Resource Center



SchoolHouse
Connection

Understanding Homelessness Among Families in Home Visiting

Data in Action

SEPTEMBER 2026

Introduction

Homelessness in infancy is linked to delays in language, literacy, and social-emotional development; with the cumulative impact increasing the younger a child is and the longer they experience homelessness (Sandel et al., 2018). Research shows these developmental impacts persist even after families are stably housed and can affect children's long-term trajectory (Bonner Septein et al., 2024). School-age children who experience homelessness have among the lowest high school graduation rates of any student group—70.1 percent in the 2023-24 school year (SchoolHouse Connection, 2026). Youth without a high school diploma are 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness as young adults, contributing to a cycle of housing instability (Samuels et.al, 2019).

Homelessness also creates practical barriers to the very programs designed to help. High mobility, lack of documentation, lack of transportation, and distrust of service systems keep families out of many early childhood programs (Shaw, Hirilall, & Halle, 2020). Among infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness, only 10 percent are identified as receiving support from any federal early childhood development program (SchoolHouse Connection, 2025). In short, the children who stand to benefit most from early support are the least likely to receive it, unless services are designed to reach families where they are.

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Home visiting offers a critical access point for understanding families' housing circumstances. Because home visitors meet with families regularly in their homes or temporary living environments, they are well positioned to observe changes in living situations, identify unmet needs, and support families in navigating periods of instability (Bruning, et al., 2023). Under the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV), local agencies collect data on homelessness, creating structured opportunities to learn about families' housing challenges and use those insights to tailor services and referrals. This brief explores what available data reveal about families experiencing homeless and how home visiting programs can strengthen their support by addressing four central questions:

- ✔ What do we know about homelessness among families with young children and those receiving home visiting?
- ✔ How do living arrangements vary in families experiencing homelessness?
- ✔ What factors may influence variation and prevalence of homelessness in home visiting recipients?
- ✔ How can home visiting further support families experiencing homelessness?

Defining Homelessness

The education subtitle of the [McKinney-Vento Act](#) defines homelessness as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes:

- Shelters/transitional housing, including domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, youth shelters, and trailers provided by FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- Staying in motels/hotels due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations, regardless of who pays for the motel/ hotel room.
- Staying with other people due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as “doubled up,” or “couch-surfing”)
- Staying in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.

Although there are other federal definitions of homelessness, Head Start, Early Head Start, Child Care, Early Intervention (IDEA Part C), and MIECHV programs all use the definition of homelessness in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act for reporting purposes.

We can examine patterns among home visiting participants experiencing homelessness and explore opportunities to expand support to families by drawing on data from MIECHV awardees—a subset of all home visiting models—and national information about young children experiencing homelessness.

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV)

[MIECHV](#) supports states and territories in providing voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services to new and expectant parents. It is designed to promote evidence-based practice while giving states the flexibility to invest in what works for them locally and to meet the needs of communities that face greater risks and barriers to positive maternal and child outcomes.

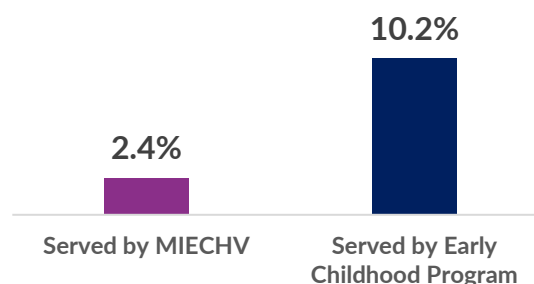
Awardees must use the majority of MIECHV funds to implement one or more home visiting models with proven results and report on benchmarks to monitor their progress.

What do we know about homelessness among families with young children and those receiving home visiting?

An estimated 450,000 children aged birth through three experienced homelessness during the 2022-2023 program year—about 3 percent of all children birth through three (SchoolHouse Connection, 2025), as shown in exhibit 1. Of those young children experiencing homelessness, only 10 percent were identified as being served by any early childhood program (e.g., Early Head Start, home visiting).ⁱ

Within home visiting, national MIECHV data show programs are reaching families experiencing homelessness. In 2023, an estimated 2.4 percent of prenatal participants and children under age threeⁱⁱ served by MIECHV programs were identified as experiencing homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite prioritizing services for children facing challenges such as poverty or homelessness, our analyses show MIECHV-funded programs are serving less than 3 percent of families experiencing homelessness.

Exhibit 1. Children Experiencing Homelessness Served by MIECHV and Early Childhood Programs

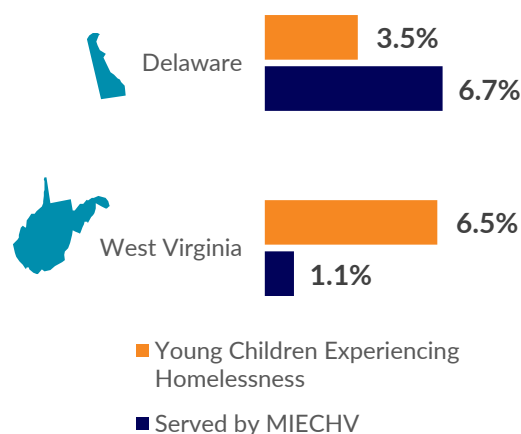


State Variation in Rates of Homelessness and Service

Estimated rates of young children experiencing homelessness also vary by state with estimates ranging from 1.1 in Nebraska to 9.1 percent in Washington DC in 2023. MIECHV data show similar variation. In 2023, the percent of young children experiencing homelessness ranged from 0 in Puerto Rico to 9.3 percent in Massachusetts.

Differences between state estimates young children experiencing homelessness and the percent served by MIECHV suggest that some state MIECHV programs may be identifying or serving proportionately fewer—or more—children experiencing homelessness. For example, in West Virginia an estimated 6.5 percent of young children are experiencing homelessness while 1.1 percent of MIECHV participants prenatal to age three identified as homeless. Conversely, some states may be reaching a comparatively larger share. In Delaware, an estimated 3.5 percent of young children are experiencing homelessness, yet 6.7 percent of MIECHV participants prenatal to age three identified as experiencing homelessness (exhibit 2). (See Appendix for state-level estimates for the percentage of young children experiencing homelessness and those served by MIECHV.)

Exhibit 2. Differences in Percentage of Children Experiencing Homelessness and Those Served by MIECHV



The goals of MIECHV include improving maternal and infant health, preparing children for school, strengthening family economic well-being, and connecting participants to services such as housing supports. These aims position MIECHV as an important access point for families experiencing homelessness. Yet data shows that relatively few are being identified as experiencing homelessness within home visiting programs. This pattern suggests opportunities to strengthen how home visiting programs identify and enroll families experiencing homelessness.

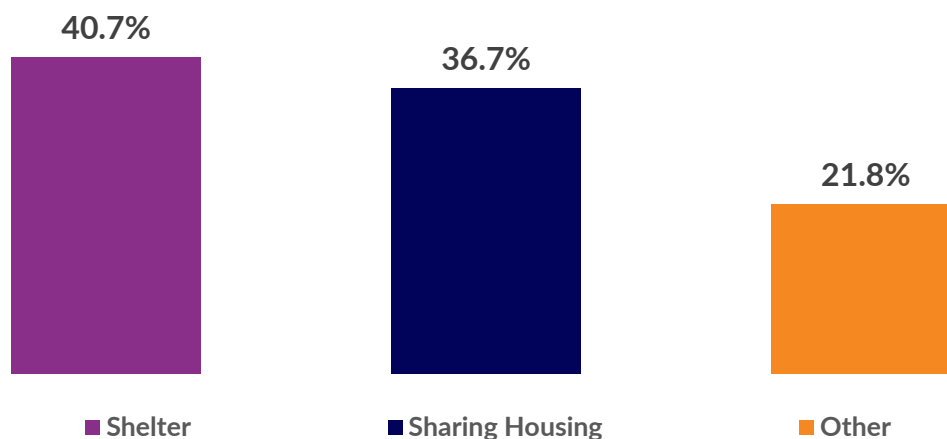
“When home visitors prioritize flexible service delivery for families experiencing homelessness, they are not only meeting clients’ needs in the moment, but also supporting the sustained development and well-being of families beyond their experience of homelessness.” —Nia Parillo-Kell, LCSW, Chief Program Officer of Youth Service Bureau of St. Joseph County

How do living arrangements vary for families experiencing homelessness?

Families' living arrangements while experiencing homelessness vary considerably—from staying in emergency shelters, temporarily with other people, in public spaces, or in cars. Lack of shelter capacity in many communities, and fear of seeking shelter, mean that many families stay in hidden homeless situations. According to federal education data, most (74.4 percent) children and youth identified as homeless by public schools were staying temporarily with other people when they were first identified as homeless; only 12.7 percent were in shelters. (SchoolHouse Connection, 2026).

MIECHV data capture a narrower set of families' experiences with homelessness, including only three reporting categories: sharing housing, stays in emergency or transitional shelter, and other arrangements. Caregivers identified as experiencing homelessness in MIECHV programs reported living in shelters (40.7 percent) most often, followed by sharing housing (36.7 percent), with 21.8 percent in another arrangement that would be considered as experiencing homelessness (exhibit 3). This suggests that MIECHV home visiting programs may be identifying a different mix of living situations than what is reflected in federal education data, with a larger share of MIECHV-identified families reported as staying in shelters even though shelters represent a smaller portion of all families experiencing homelessness.

Exhibit 3. Caregivers Experiencing Homelessness in MIECHV Programs Were Most Likely to Report **Living in Shelters**, Followed by **Sharing Housing**, and **Other Arrangements**.



The three homeless categories captured in MIECHV reporting are not aligned with the federal education definition of homelessness. For example, one housing category is “lives with family—not homeless.” However, some of these situations may be considered homeless, particularly if they are not fixed, regular, and adequate and if the parent is only staying there because they have no other alternative. These circumstances qualify as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act but can be difficult for programs to assess and capture within the reporting structure.

What factors may influence variation and prevalence of homelessness in home visiting recipients?

A key factor in understanding the prevalence of homelessness in home visiting relies on the accurate identification of homeless families. Screening and assessment practices vary across models and states, including when questions about housing are asked and how they are revisited as home visitors form deeper relationships with families. This can lead to inconsistencies in who is considered homeless, children and families being miscategorized, or missing access to services. Training can also influence whether home visitors can recognize and document families' living arrangements consistently. In addition, home visitor comfort in [discussing sensitive topics](#) such as housing instability may affect their ability to collect sensitive information.

MIECHV requires states to report on homeless status, but model and other program data systems may not be equipped to capture and report that information. The ability to accurately document housing status can also hinder programs from connecting families to services. Beyond MIECHV, most home visiting programs are not required to collect or report housing status, resulting in inconsistent data across models and funding streams.

Families with young children who experience homelessness may also be hesitant to disclose or discuss their living situation. Fear of law enforcement or child welfare involvement, stigmatization, and even lack of knowledge that a situation qualifies as homeless can deter families from self-identifying. Together, these factors shape how—and how often—homelessness is identified and reported across home visiting programs.

“Home visitors are often the first to know when a family may be moving in temporarily with a family member or into an extended stay motel, so following a broader definition of homelessness allows them to link to community resources that may have otherwise been inaccessible.”

—Roddey Jones, Senior Training Specialist/Associate for Policy and Partnerships, National SafeCare Training and Research Center

How can home visiting further support homeless families?

When infants, toddlers, and families experiencing homelessness are identified, they are more likely to receive services that can mitigate the impacts of homelessness on child development. To ensure this identification happens as early as possible, Home Visiting programs can:

- ✔ Provide regular training and support for home visiting practitioners, including the McKinney-Vento definition, signs that a family might be experiencing homelessness, and resources for conducting respectful conversations about living situations.
- ✔ Utilize consistent housing questionnaires and screening tools to determine if a family is experiencing homelessness. The most effective housing assessment tools avoid “yes/no” questions about homelessness and instead ask families to select a living situation that applies to them. SchoolHouse Connection developed a conversation guide that can be adapted to support home visitors. [Sign up to receive the guide.](#)

Strong, two-way relationships between home visiting providers and community partners help ensure families receive timely, coordinated support that addresses housing, health, education, employment, and other essential needs. By building trusted referral pathways and maintaining ongoing communication with community partners, [home visiting providers can help reduce barriers to accessing services](#) and improve continuity of care.

- ✔ Partnering with homeless service providers is especially important for families experiencing homelessness, as these organizations can connect caregivers to housing navigation and other stabilization services.
- ✔ Coordinating with broader early childhood and human service systems further strengthens support for families experiencing homelessness by creating a more integrated and responsive network of care. For example, collaboration with early intervention programs, local childcare resource and referral agencies, pediatric care providers, public assistance agencies, behavioral health services, and family resource centers helps ensure families can access comprehensive supports that promote child development, family well-being, and long-term stability.
- ✔ In addition to referral pathways to service providers, Home Visiting programs can establish ways to receive referrals *from* community partners if they are working with a family experiencing homelessness who could benefit from home visiting services.

Improving how homelessness is identified in home visiting requires stronger, more consistent data systems. Strengthening data foundations can improve the accuracy of homelessness identification and enhance how home visiting programs support families.

- ✔ Shared definitions and reporting practices across states and models would reduce variation in how homelessness is captured and allow for clearer comparisons.

- ✔ Better tracking of homelessness and service connections would help programs understand families' needs more fully and monitor whether referrals lead to stable housing supports.

Coordinated Approach to Serving Homeless Families in home Visiting: An Example from Michigan

Michigan's Maternal Infant Health Program (MIHP) offers a statewide example of how coordinated infrastructure and cross-sector partnership can strengthen supports for families experiencing homelessness. Operating 95 sites across local health departments, federally qualified health centers, hospital-affiliated programs, independent providers, and Tribal communities, MIHP's broad reach creates multiple opportunities for conversations about housing status in diverse settings. MIHP integrates Infant Mental Health specialists into its service model, ensuring that home visiting addresses both infant development and parent needs, including bonding, attachment, and access to social supports. Home visitors use MIHP's Maternal and Infant Health Risk Identifier tools to identify needed services—such as housing resources—and all program data align with the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness.

MIHP's partnership with the Youth Policy Lab at the University of Michigan through the Healthy Moms Healthy Babies Pilot Project further shows the impact of coordinated systems. Families identified as highest risk received enhanced services, including additional care-coordination time during home visits and a dedicated discharge visit to support transitions as infants aged out. The pilot produced significant reductions in homelessness, leading the Governor to approve a statewide rollout of these enhanced services and Michigan Medicaid began reimbursing the enhanced services statewide (University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab, 2024). Michigan's experience shows how strong local infrastructure, paired with state leadership, can deliver lasting improvements for families most in need of coordinated supports.

Future Learning Opportunities

Future learning opportunities can deepen understanding of how home visiting programs identify and support families experiencing housing instability. Evaluating the effectiveness of promising outreach, enrollment, and partnership practices for homeless families in home visiting can shed light on replicable and effective strategies. In addition, exploring how home visiting connects families to housing-related supports can clarify the role programs play in linking families to community resources and stabilizing living situations.

Summary

Home visiting programs offer a meaningful access point for understanding and responding to families' housing instability, yet current data show gaps in how homelessness is identified and documented across states, models, and reporting systems. Variation in identification practices, how homelessness definitions are applied, and how living arrangements are captured all shape what we know—and do not yet know—about families experiencing homelessness in home visiting. These patterns suggest that while MIECHV-funded programs are reaching some families facing housing instability, opportunities remain to strengthen identification, improve data quality, and ensure families experiencing homelessness are served at levels comparable to other early childhood programs.

Looking ahead, deeper learning can help clarify how home visiting programs identify, engage, and support families experiencing homelessness. Evaluating promising outreach and enrollment strategies, strengthening partnerships with homeless service providers and early childhood systems, and improving data foundations can all enhance the role of home visiting in addressing housing instability. Continued attention to these areas will support more consistent identification, stronger referral pathways, and better-coordinated services—ensuring that families experiencing homelessness receive the early supports most likely to improve long-term outcomes for children and caregivers.

Notes

ⁱ To arrive at an estimate of the prevalence of homelessness among infants and toddlers, the percentage of 1st graders identified as homeless in each state during the 2022-2023 school year was applied to Census age groups for 0, 1, 2, and 3 year olds. See the [methodology](#) section of the SchoolHouse Connection report for more information.

ⁱⁱ National homelessness estimates reflect children prenatal through age 3 (i.e., children under age 4), while MIECHV estimates include prenatal to age 3 (i.e., children under age 3). This difference stems from MIECHV's age group reporting structure, which does not align exactly with national estimates of early childhood homelessness. Even with these differences, comparing the two data sources remains valuable, as this analysis has not been conducted previously and offers meaningful insight into how programs can better serve families.

ⁱⁱⁱ We used fiscal year 2023 (FY2023) data collected from 47 MIECHV awardees as part of the 2024 Home Visiting Yearbook to estimate percentage of children prenatal to three identified as experiencing homelessness. Visit the [methodology section](#) of the 2024 *Home Visiting Yearbook* for information about how data was collected.

To estimate the percentage of children under age three experiencing homelessness in MIECHV during FY2023, we used state-reported counts of children, caregivers, and pregnant women served. First, we identified the share of all children served who were under age three. Because homelessness is recorded at the adult level in MIECHV, we applied this share to the number of adults (caregivers and pregnant women) identified as homeless to approximate the number of young children likely experiencing homelessness. This approach assumes that a child's housing status aligns with that of their caregiver. We then divided the estimated number of homeless children under age three by the total number of children served to calculate the percentage of young children experiencing homelessness in MIECHV.

Appendix

Percentage of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness Served by Home Visiting and National Estimates of Homeless Young Children by State

State	Young Children Experiencing Homelessness (%)	Served by MIECHV (%)
Alabama	1.8	0.6
Alaska	2.5	4.0
Arizona	1.8	1.3
Arkansas	4.1	3.7
California	4.4	1.7
Colorado	2.3	1.7
Connecticut	1.1	2.2
Delaware	3.5	6.7
District of Columbia	9.1	N/A
Florida	4.0	3.0
Georgia	2.7	1.7
Hawaii	2.5	2.7
Idaho	3.7	1.8
Illinois	3.2	3.7
Indiana	2.3	1.3
Iowa	1.7	N/A
Kansas	1.9	2.0
Kentucky	3.6	1.0
Louisiana	2.7	0.6
Maine	2.4	N/A
Maryland	2.2	1.2
Massachusetts	2.9	9.3
Michigan	2.6	2.0
Minnesota	2.4	2.6
Mississippi	1.2	1.7
Missouri	3.9	6.8
Montana	4.3	4.3
Nebraska	1.1	4.2
Nevada	4.2	N/A
New Hampshire	2.4	9.2
New Jersey	1.3	2
New Mexico	3.4	N/A
New York	6.3	2.9
North Carolina	2.4	1.1
North Dakota	2.0	0.4
Ohio	2.0	2.7
Oklahoma	3.6	0.8
Oregon	4.0	5.4
Pennsylvania	2.7	1.0
Puerto Rico	1.6	0.0

State	Young Children Experiencing Homelessness (%)	Served by MIECHV (%)
Rhode Island	1.1	1.7
South Carolina	2.0	1.2
South Dakota	1.9	1.0
Tennessee	2.6	1.0
Texas	2.3	N/A
Utah	2.0	1.2
Vermont	2.2	8.3
Virginia	1.6	1.8
Washington	4.1	2.0
West Virginia	6.5	1.1
Wisconsin	2.6	4.5
Wyoming	2.2	3.9
National	3.0	2.4

Sources: Young children experiencing homelessness nationally gathered from *Infant & toddler homelessness across 50 states: 2022-2023*. SchoolHouse Connection (2025, April). Served by MIECHV percentages based on author calculations using data collected from 47 MIECHV awardees. See end notes for more information about calculations.

Note: National homelessness estimates reflect children prenatal through age 3, while MIECHV estimates include prenatal through age 3 based on how MIECHV reports children served. This difference stems from MIECHV's age-group reporting structure, which does not align exactly with national early childhood categories.

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