



# Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee

## 2023 Legislative Report

### Background

The Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth (OCCY) was created by the legislature in 1982 as a result of the “Terry D. Case,” which exposed the horrific conditions children in state custody faced while living in state institutions. (10 O.S. § 601.1) OCCY is an independent agency charged with overseeing and supporting child-serving systems in Oklahoma.

In 1990, the legislature established the Office of Planning and Coordination for Services to Children and Youth within OCCY (10 O.S. § 601.6a.) A primary objective of the office is to facilitate collaboration between child-serving state agencies, other public and private sector service providers, and stakeholders to address deficits in these systems effectively. In 2015, the legislature directed the office to “Review data and propose policy solutions relating to the issue of child homelessness. . .” (10 O.S. § 601.6c.) In response, the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee was established to study trends in the number of children and youth reported to be homeless and to examine the state’s role in providing services to this population and those at risk of homelessness. The legislature directed that a report with findings and recommendations be submitted by December 31 each year to the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

### Defining Homelessness

The definition of homeless children and youth under the U.S. Department of Education McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. It includes children and youth living temporarily with others or in a shelter, car, park, public space, or abandoned building. It also includes individuals who live in substandard housing.

Oklahoma Statute also defines “homeless children and youth” as “a person 21 years of age or younger who is:

- unaccompanied by a parent or guardian, and
- without shelter where appropriate care and supervision are available, or
- without a parent or guardian who is willing and able to provide shelter and care, or
- without a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence...” (10 O.S. § 600)

### Impact of Homelessness on Children and Youth<sup>1</sup>

#### Education

- Increase in school absences
- Increase in changing schools multiple times
- Increase in school suspensions
- Poor grades
- Lower graduation rates

#### Safety

- Higher rates of victimization – including sexual and physical abuse and trafficking
- Higher rates of being bullied

#### Physical & Mental Health

- Frequent worry, depression, and anxiety
- Less access to health and dental care
- Inadequate nutrition and access to food
- Increase odds of suicidality, substance and alcohol abuse

1. Gultekin LE, Brush BL, Ginier E, Cordon A, Dowdell EB. Health Risks and Outcomes of Homelessness in School-Age Children and Youth: A Scoping Review of the Literature. *The Journal of School Nursing*. 2020;36(1):10-18. doi:10.1177/1059840519875182

## Counting Homeless Children and Youth

Estimating the *total* number of children and youth in our state who are homeless is a challenge. Data for students enrolled in public schools is more readily available, although, in Oklahoma, it is believed to be an undercount. For the 2021-2022 school year, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) reported 21,988 homeless students enrolled in Oklahoma schools. Only half of the state's 500 districts reported having any homeless students.

Data for 2021, published by the United Health Foundation in its 2022 America's Health Rankings Annual Report, shows that 3.2% of Oklahoma's students lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, which places us 44th in the country. Our neighbor to the north, Kansas, ranks 7th with 1.2%, while our neighbor to the south, Texas, ranks 24th with 1.7% of its public-school students reported homeless. The U.S. average is 2.2%.

The 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress prepared by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sheds some additional light on the overall numbers of homeless families with children and unaccompanied youth in Oklahoma. After conducting a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night, it is estimated that 788 people in families with children less than 18 years old and 374 unaccompanied youth less than 25 years old experienced homelessness in 2022. The report notes that Oklahoma had one of the most significant increases, up 84 or 29.0%, in the number of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness from 2020 to 2022.

## Creating Change

In April 2022, OCCY convened the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee (HCYSC) strategic planning session. The meeting included lived experience leaders and representatives from various community sectors across the state. The session included reviewing existing services, resources, capacity-building efforts, and opportunities for systems change. Work groups were established, including 1) data, 2) policy, and 3) community resources. Over the last year, work group efforts have focused on pursuing legislation and strategic partnerships to improve the identification of homeless children and youth.

Homeless children and youth are undercounted in Oklahoma. To better understand the scope of the problem, the committee asked Rep. John Talley to request an interim study on the subject in the fall of 2022. Members of the House committee to which the study was assigned heard testimony from McKinney-Vento (homeless) liaisons from rural and urban public school districts, service providers, and young adults who shared their experiences as homeless students in Oklahoma. The study highlighted how data coordination can aid policymakers in identifying systems improvement and where resources need to be targeted.

As part of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the OSDE provides a form to school districts to help identify enrolled homeless children and youth. Still, the school districts could adopt their versions of the form. The committee believed that requiring a standardized form to be used by all districts could minimize the chances that a homeless child or youth will be overlooked and provide a more accurate count. It is important to note that districts can still ask supplemental questions based on the needs of students and their families in that community.

During the 2023 legislative session, Rep. John Talley and Sen. Brenda Stanley authored HB 1029. The bill directs "the OSDE in conjunction with the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee to adopt a standardized form to identify children who are homeless. The form is to be used by all school districts and starts at the beginning of the 2024-25 school year. The bill also requires school districts to report the result to the Department of Education no later than June 1 each year. Beginning July 1, 2024, the Department of Education must compile an annual report on the number of students identified as homeless by school district and grade level."<sup>2</sup> The bill was enacted and went into effect on November 1, 2023.

The Oklahoma Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is a statewide survey that monitors health-risk behaviors that contribute to the leading cause of death and disability among youth and adults. The Oklahoma YRBS is part of a more extensive Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), which includes a national school-based survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Oklahoma YRBS is administered by the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) Maternal and Child Health Service. Fifty public schools statewide are randomly selected every other year to participate in grades 9-12.

In 2021, the YRBS included one question related to youth homelessness. A strategic partnership between the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee and the OSDH YRBS Advisory Committee included an additional question related to youth homelessness in the 2023 YRBS. This additional question can provide information outside of what OSDE currently captures about unaccompanied homeless youth attending public schools. OSDH will release 2023 YRBS findings in the spring of 2024.

## Recommendations

As the OCCY Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee continues its efforts, opportunities exist for continued system transformation.

- Improve joint planning and service coordination. Children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness interact with multiple systems. A coordinated approach is vital to preventing or reducing homelessness.
- Support school and community-based prevention and early intervention programs. “Research has shown that prevention and early intervention are crucial to breaking the cycle of homelessness for children, youth, and families. Children and youth who are identified and given access to services are more likely to experience positive outcomes in physical and mental health and education.”<sup>2</sup>
- Expand partnerships with youth and families with lived experiences. Their unique experiences, ideas, and feedback inform equitable and effective policy and practice.
- Explore strategies to better meet the needs of families with young children and pregnant women who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. A person in the U.S. is most likely to experience homelessness in the first year of life. A person is next likely to experience homelessness at ages 1-5.<sup>3</sup>

The OCCY Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee and work groups meet regularly. Additional strategic planning is scheduled for late spring or early summer in 2024.

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3. Leconte Lee, “Five Facts Educators Need to Know about Student Homelessness - and Actions to Take,” SchoolHouse Connection, September 22, 2021, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/five-facts-educators-need-to-know-about-student-homelessness/>.

4. Gubits, D. et al. (2015, June). U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development | Office of Policy Development and Research. HUD User. [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/FamilyOptionsStudy\\_final.pdf](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/FamilyOptionsStudy_final.pdf)