



# Falling Through the Cracks: Homeless Students in Rhode Island

By Marjorie Pang Si En





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By Marjorie Pang Si En

## Introduction

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It is my pleasure to introduce you to Marjorie Pang Si En's HousingWorks RI: Scholar Series, "Falling Through the Cracks: Homeless Students in Rhode Island." This work, which Ms. Pang completed for her thesis in Public Policy at Brown University, is an in-depth study of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (MVHAA) implementation in Rhode Island. Ms. Pang was able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the MVHAA's implementation and make recommendations for strengthening the program.

As a researcher and advocate in the field of homelessness, I was very impressed by the intent of the MVHAA, which ensures that the student who is experiencing homelessness continues to progress in their education and is not impeded in their academic and social development by an episode of homelessness. The MVHAA provides funding and mechanisms to help the student experiencing homelessness in areas such as providing transportation to and from the school of origin, providing school supplies and appropriate clothing, tutoring support, and waiving fees for participation in extracurricular activities.

A very strong aspect of the MVHAA is that it recognizes not just the children and youth living with their families in homeless shelters, but also the far greater number living in doubled-up

homeless situations. The doubled-up homeless are those families staying, temporarily, with family or friends. These are the families who are living "under the radar" in terms of accessing help. As you will see in Ms. Pang's work, here is where Rhode Island has challenges in identifying all students experiencing homelessness, including those who are living doubled-up. In 2014-15 Rhode Island identified only 9.7 percent of extremely poor children and youth as homeless instead of the 30 percent, which is the national estimate of the percentage of extremely poor children, and youth in grades K-12 who will experience homelessness.

Ms. Pang has identified some of the reasons for the under identification of children and youth experiencing homelessness in Rhode Island. These reasons include the lack of collaboration with community organizations who are in touch with doubled-up families, the fact that some of the Local Education Agencies (LEAs) do not apply for the MVHAA subgrants that could give the LEAs more money for outreach, and the insufficient training of the LEA liaisons and other school personnel in the art of identifying children and youth who are experiencing homelessness. Ms. Pang's recommendations would enable Rhode Island to greatly extend the reach of the MVHAA and ensure the educational development of children and youth experiencing homelessness in Rhode Island.

# Falling Through the Cracks: Homeless Students in Rhode Island

## Summary

*“Falling Through the Cracks: Homeless Students in Rhode Island”* is a case study which examines the effectiveness of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (MVHAA) as implemented in Rhode Island from a bottom-up perspective and outcomes-based approach. The MVHAA is a federal law that provides children and youth experiencing homelessness with the protections and services that will allow them to enroll in and attend school, complete high school, and continue on to higher education. Some of the provisions of the MVHAA include transportation to and from the school of origin when needed, referrals to community agencies that can provide the needed school supplies including appropriate clothing, tutoring support, fee waivers for participation in extracurricular activities, as well as other services needed to support their academic success and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Rhode Island received \$263,597 for the MVHAA.<sup>2</sup> These funds supported subgrants to five school districts to provide additional resources to identify and serve students experiencing homelessness.

This study finds that the MVHAA implemented in Rhode Island under-identifies students experiencing homelessness, and may therefore impede those students’ access to resources to which they are legally entitled. Under-identification is compounded by the lack of federal and state funding for some of the school districts. A key to the implementation of the MVHAA is the **homeless education liaisons**, and we found that there was limited collaboration between the homeless education liaisons and other service providers for low-income Rhode Islanders in most cities and towns. According to the national study *Out of the Shadows: A State-by-State Ranking of Accountability for Homeless Students*, Rhode Island is one of the worst performing states at identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>3</sup>

Based on these findings and a survey of best practices from other states, this research puts forth the following recommendations:

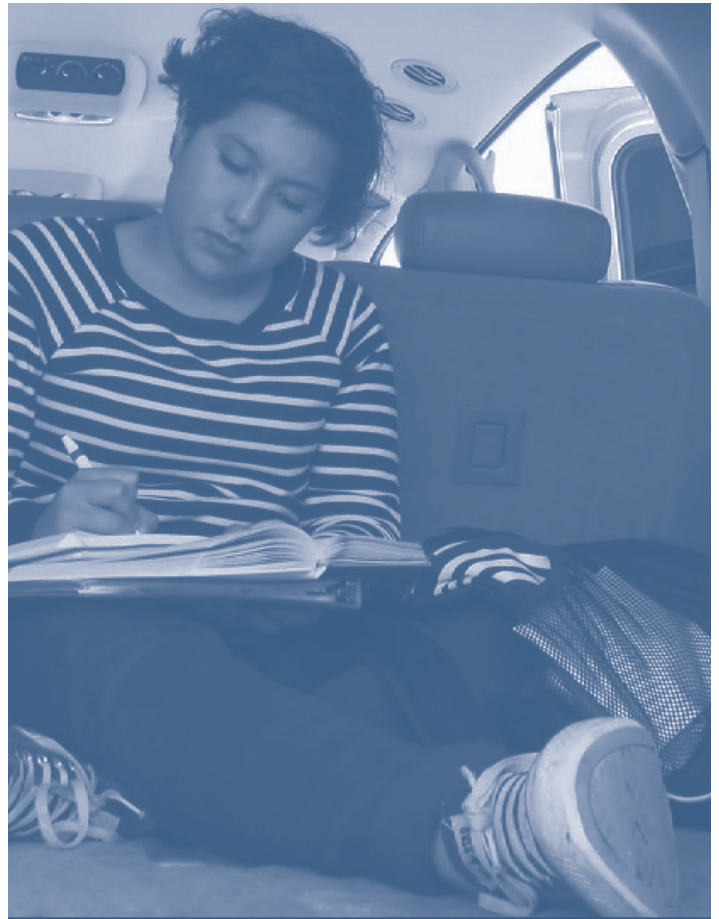
- Improve and increase the contacts between the homeless education liaisons and family shelter staff
- Minimize the barriers to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) receiving subgrants from the MVHAA
- Provide for **school-based** homeless education liaisons in addition to the **LEA-based** homeless education liaisons
- Institute mandatory training regarding child and family homelessness for school personnel
- Increase community awareness about homelessness
- Increase educational support for children experiencing homelessness with an emphasis on youth experiencing homelessness

## Introduction: Child and Family Homelessness

Families with children are among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population.<sup>4</sup> School-age children and youth account for nearly 40 percent of the total homeless population in the United States.<sup>5</sup> According to Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program data, the population of children and youth experiencing homelessness has been steadily increasing. From the 2006-07 School Year (SY) to the 2015-16 SY, the total number of identified children and youth experiencing homelessness in public schools approximately doubled from 679,724 to 1,366,520 students.<sup>6</sup> This is a disturbing trend, as research shows that children and youth experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of negative educational outcomes such as learning disabilities, dropping out, and other behavioral and health problems.<sup>7</sup>

# The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Timely educational intervention is shown to change the developmental trajectories of children and youth experiencing homelessness<sup>8</sup> who require access to a quality education to overcome the many educational challenges associated with homelessness. The MVHAA was intended to mitigate the negative educational outcomes homeless youth experience; it was the first federal law regulating how Local Education Agencies (LEAs)<sup>9</sup> address the educational needs of students experiencing homelessness.<sup>10</sup> LEAs administer the policies and procedures of the MVHAA and decide on the use of funding for the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness in their jurisdiction. Nearly all of the MVHAA requirements fall under LEAs and schools rather than state-level entities. However, despite the provisions of the MVHAA, it is not clear that its implementation has effectively and systematically supported children and youth experiencing homelessness.



## **Under the MVHAA, LEA's are required to offer the following assistance:**

- 1) Students experiencing homelessness, who move, have the right to remain in their schools of origin (i.e., the school the student attended when permanently housed or in which the student was last enrolled, including preschools) if that is in the student's best interest;
- 2) If it is in the student's best interest to change schools, students experiencing homelessness must be immediately enrolled in a new school, even if they do not have the records normally required for enrollment;
- 3) Transportation must be provided to or from a student's school of origin, at the request of a parent, guardian, or, in the case of an unaccompanied youth, the local homeless education liaison;
- 4) Students experiencing homelessness must have access to all programs and services for which they are eligible, including special education services, preschool, school nutrition programs, language assistance for English learners, career and technical education, gifted and talented programs, magnet schools, charter schools, summer learning, online learning, and before- and after-school care;
- 5) Unaccompanied youths must be accorded specific protections, including immediate enrollment in school without proof of guardianship; and
- 6) Parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youths have the right to dispute an eligibility, school selection, or enrollment decision.<sup>11</sup>

The MVHAA is, in theory, the key to positively changing the education trajectory of many children and youth experiencing homelessness. The Act outlines educational services and supports for identified homeless students, and captures more children and youth experiencing homelessness than other federal agencies in its broad definition of homelessness.

The MVHAA defines homeless children and youth<sup>12</sup> as those living in emergency and transitional shelters, doubled-up in homes with relatives and friends, and living in hotels and motels, cars, campsites, parks, and other public places.<sup>13</sup> It includes doubled-up families<sup>14</sup> within the definition of homelessness, which the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) excludes.<sup>15</sup> The term doubled-up refers to a situation where individuals are unable to maintain their housing situation and are forced to stay with a series of friends and/or extended family members.<sup>16</sup> This broader and more inclusive definition of homelessness is important in capturing the majority of children and youth experiencing homelessness, who qualify for support and assistance as, nationally, the majority of identified

homeless students are doubled-up rather than in homeless shelters.<sup>17</sup>

The MVHAA was amended and reauthorized in 1990, 1994, 2002, and 2015 in response to various implementation and structural problems that failed to adequately identify and support children and youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>18</sup> The current MVHAA is based on the 2015 amendment and reauthorization of the MVHAA. The 2015 amendment was promulgated when Congress passed the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. ESSA included tighter regulation for schools and LEAs in the planning and provision of services to students experiencing homelessness, better protections for students facing possible school transfers, and an increase in authorized funding for the EHCY program within the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>19</sup> However, despite the various amendments made, there are still persistent problems with the implementation of the provisions under the MVHAA. Resource allocation, sustainable funding, and compliance with the requirements of the law remain difficult for local jurisdictions.

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## Methodology of the Study

This case study uses a mixed methods approach that includes qualitative interviews with state coordinators, local homeless education liaisons, shelter staff, and families experiencing homelessness, as well as quantitative educational outcomes data from the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). The qualitative data are based on interviews with eight of Rhode Island's homeless education liaisons and 14 mothers experiencing homelessness in two of Rhode Island's four family homeless shelters. There was also frequent

communication with shelter staff in order to set up the interviews. In addition, one meeting of mothers in one of the shelters was observed. To gather insight into the policies and systems overseeing the implementation of MVHAA, three MVHAA coordinators were interviewed. The quantitative data includes educational outcome measures for children and youth experiencing homelessness, which were analyzed within the context of educational outcome measures for all Rhode Island children and youth.



# Implementation of the MVHAA

The lack of an official metric for measuring the effectiveness of states at implementing the MVHAA limits the accountability of states and school districts. However, the Institute of Child, Poverty, and Homelessness published a report in 2017, titled *Out of the Shadows: A State-by-State Ranking of Accountability for Homeless Students* (“The Accountability Study”), to evaluate the performance of states at identifying and supporting homeless students. The Accountability Study used five indicators to measure the effectiveness of states at implementing the MVHAA. The five indicators were: the percentage of children in Head Start who experience homelessness; children experiencing homelessness as a percentage of poor children in pre-kindergarten; children experiencing homelessness as a percentage of extremely poor children in grades kindergarten-12 (K-12); percentage of all students identified as homeless and doubled-up; and percentage of students experiencing homelessness identified as having a disability.<sup>20</sup>

This case study focuses on the *Homeless Student Indicator* which calculates the number of homeless children as a percentage of extremely poor children in grades K-12 as one way to assess how well Rhode Island identifies students experiencing homelessness. Robust identification is the first step to serving students experiencing homelessness, as identification is needed to allocate services and resources to each student.

The *Accountability Study* found that nationally, 30 percent of extremely poor children in grades K-12 are identified as homeless. Assessing the percentage of extremely poor children in each state or LEA, as captured by the U.S. Census’ American Community

Survey (ACS) data, is a standard proxy for the potential number of students experiencing homelessness since the true number of students experiencing homelessness cannot be calculated. The *Accountability Study* assumes that unidentified homeless students live in each state and LEA. Identifying a greater portion of children in extreme poverty as homeless indicates that states or LEAs are more effectively identifying students experiencing homelessness. This measure will help to assess whether states or LEAs are realizing the intent of the law. There is also the possibility that the states with fewer than 30 percent of extremely poor children identified as homeless have an abundance of affordable housing, although that does not appear to be the case in Rhode Island.

One weakness of this measure is that the number and percentage of children living in poverty are *estimates*, not actual counts, as the American Community Survey is a *sample* survey. The reliability of these estimates varies by community. Furthermore, the number of homeless students in each LEA may be influenced by the presence of shelters. Having more shelters in an LEA increases the identification numbers, as shelters have a high concentration of homeless students, who are also the most visible homeless. If LEAs have more shelters, the number of students experiencing homelessness as a percent of the number of children and youth in poverty is likely to be an overestimation of how well LEAs identify students experiencing homelessness.

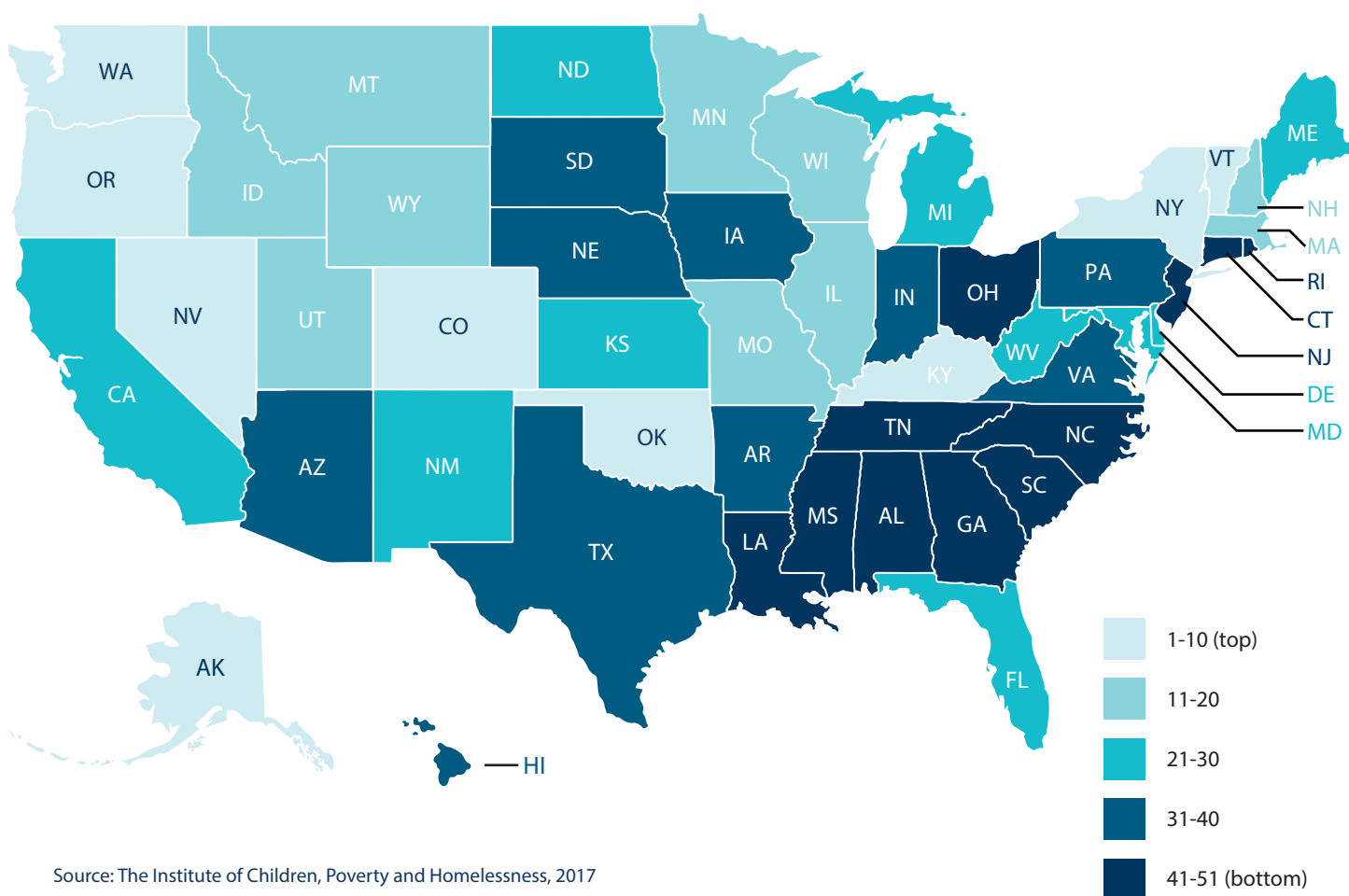
Nevertheless, calculating the number of children and youth experiencing homelessness as a percentage of extremely poor children in each state provides a good estimate of the *relative* performance of states

at identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness. The ranking of states, from the *Accountability Study*, can be seen in the map below.

As illustrated by the map, Rhode Island ranks 42nd in the overall national ranking on the identification of students experiencing homelessness based on the five indicators.<sup>21</sup> The lack of a system-wide mechanism, with strong protocols for homeless education liaisons and school personnel to identify students experiencing homelessness, combined with

insufficient resources given to homeless education liaisons to carry out their legal responsibilities under the MVHAA, has resulted in many Rhode Island LEAs seriously under-identifying students experiencing homelessness. This issue was found to be pervasive in the interviews conducted for this research. None of the homeless education liaisons interviewed followed a standard protocol to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness. A few noted the difficulty of finding families experiencing homelessness.

**FIGURE 1 |**  
**MVHAA in Rhode Island: Findings**  
**Identification Levels of Rhode Island LEAs**





According to the *Accountability Study*, Rhode Island only identified 9.7 percent of the extremely poor children and youth as homeless in the 2014-15 SY. This low identification of students experiencing homelessness indicates a high probability that the true number of students experiencing homelessness is much higher than the reported number.<sup>22</sup> Based on the findings of the *Accountability Study*, “states varied considerably in their ability to identify homeless students, with Alaska, Utah and New York identifying greater than 50% of extremely poor students as homeless, while Connecticut and Rhode Island identifying fewer than 10%.” From 2011 to 2015, there were an estimated 19,432 children and youth in extreme poverty each year. This works out to an estimated **3,945** unidentified children and youth experiencing homelessness in Rhode Island.<sup>23</sup>

More than half of the parents interviewed at both shelters were not connected to a homeless education liaison at the time of the interview, reiterating the under-identification problem. However, it is possible that the parents interviewed had not yet had school contact because their children were too young. According to the Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, 51 percent of the children in Emergency Shelters, Domestic Violence Shelters and Transitional Housing Facilities in 2017 were ages 0-5.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of interviewed parents in shelters had no contact with a homeless education liaison is concerning as sheltered homeless are the most visible homeless. If sheltered families are not connected to homeless education liaisons, then those who are the least visible and often hidden, such as families doubling-up with their family or friends, are very unlikely to be identified.

The identification of children and youth experiencing homelessness was the key challenge that 62.5 percent (n=5) of eight interviewed homeless education

liaisons raised when asked about the challenges they faced in implementing the law. Homeless education liaisons acknowledged that given the population and poverty levels of their LEAs, it is almost certain that they are under-identifying the number of students experiencing homelessness in their jurisdictions. As one local homeless education liaison put it:

*Goodness gracious, are we really helping everyone? We know we are not.*

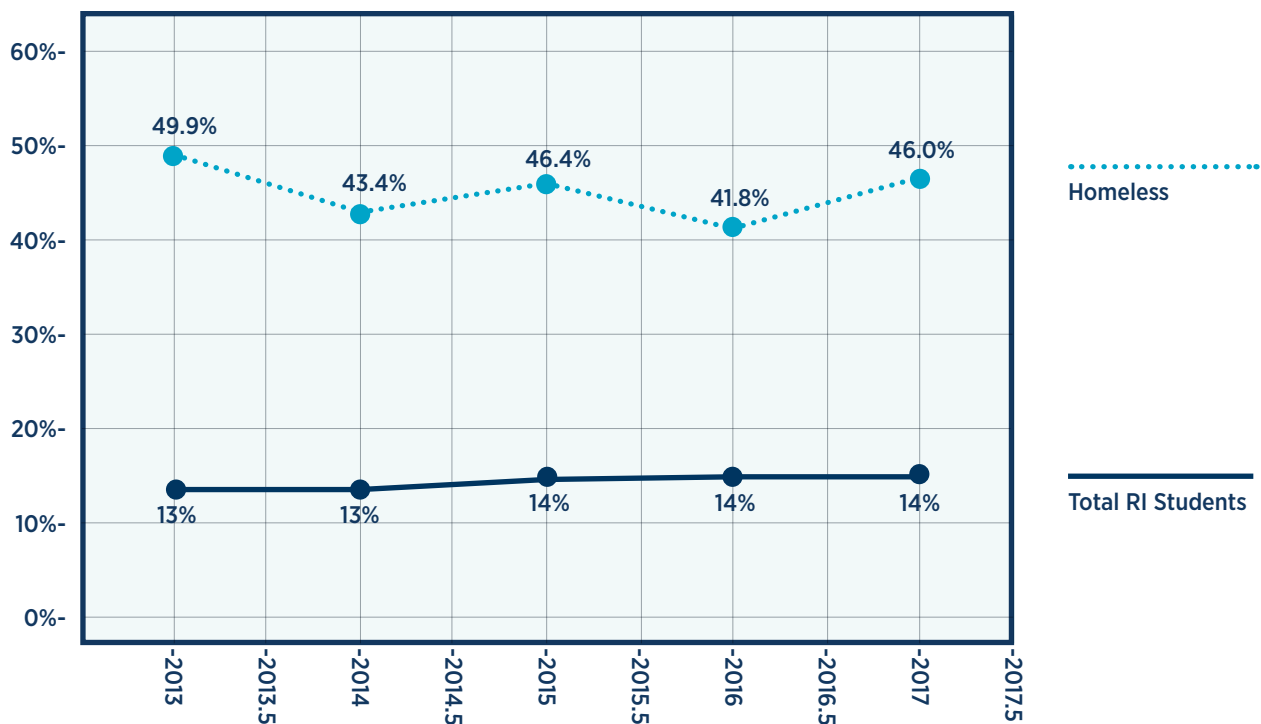
Despite only identifying a portion of extremely poor students as homeless, the number of children and youth identified as homeless in Rhode Island has continued to increase over the past few years. During the 2015-16 SY, Rhode Island public school personnel reported 1,049 preschool-12 students as homeless, a 5.2 percent increase from the 2013-14 SY.<sup>25</sup> This reflects the worsening problem of family homelessness and the urgent need to improve the effectiveness of the MVHAA in Rhode Island.



# Student Mobility

The student mobility rate of students experiencing homelessness decreased slightly by 7.3 percent from 2013 to 2017, even though it has fluctuated over the years. The student mobility rate for students experiencing homelessness in Rhode Island is on average three times higher than that of the total Rhode Island student population.

**FIGURE 2** | Student Mobility of Students Experiencing Homeless vs. the Total RI Student Population

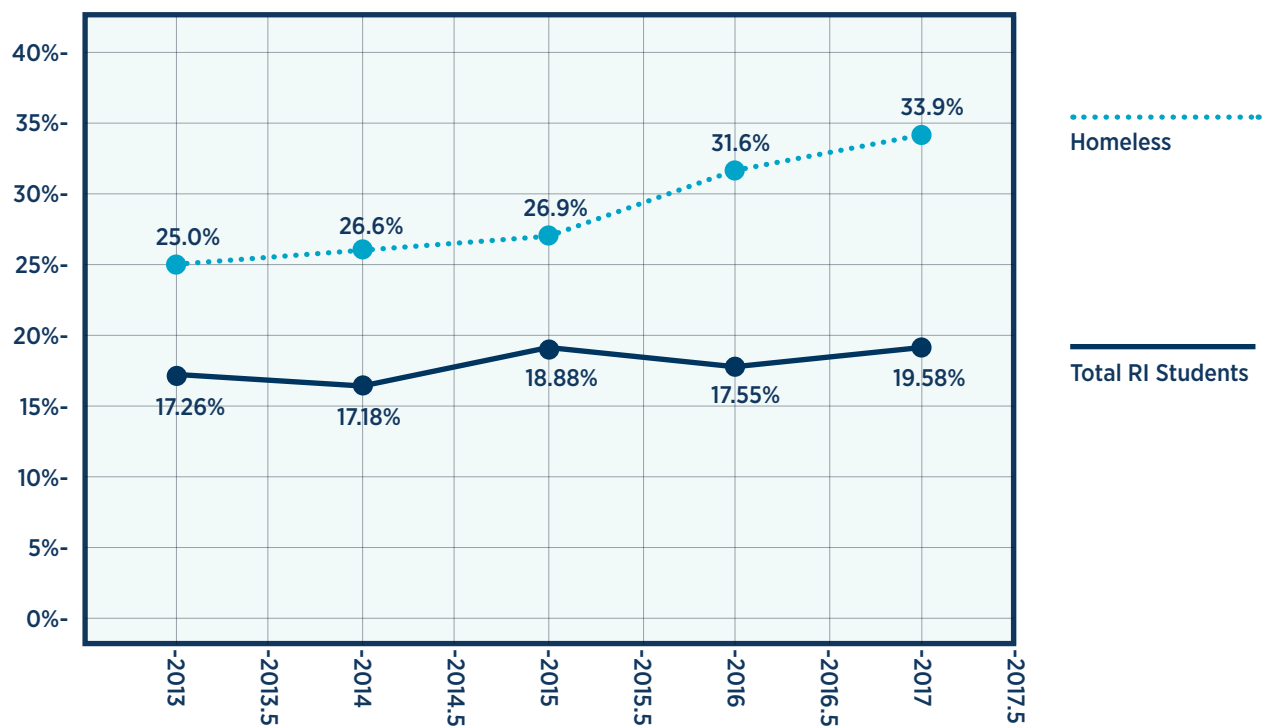


Additionally, it is important to note that students experiencing homelessness and students who are housed are likely to experience different kinds of student mobility. Based on the exit codes, the mobility of students experiencing homelessness is due to transfers to other public schools in the same LEA, a different LEA, or a different state.<sup>26</sup> There were no students experiencing homelessness recorded for transferring to private or charter schools in the exit codes. In contrast, for the general student population, there are likely students recorded in other exit codes, such as transferring to private religiously affiliated, or non-religiously affiliated schools, and charter schools.

# Chronic Absenteeism

The chronic absenteeism rate for the total Rhode Island student population was reported in the Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook for K-3, middle school and high school students separately. The yearly chronic absenteeism rate for all Rhode Island students was calculated manually by taking the total number of students that were chronically absent divided by the number of students in Rhode Island that were enrolled for 90 days or more.

**FIGURE 3** | Chronic Absenteeism of Students Experiencing Homeless vs. the Total RI Student Population

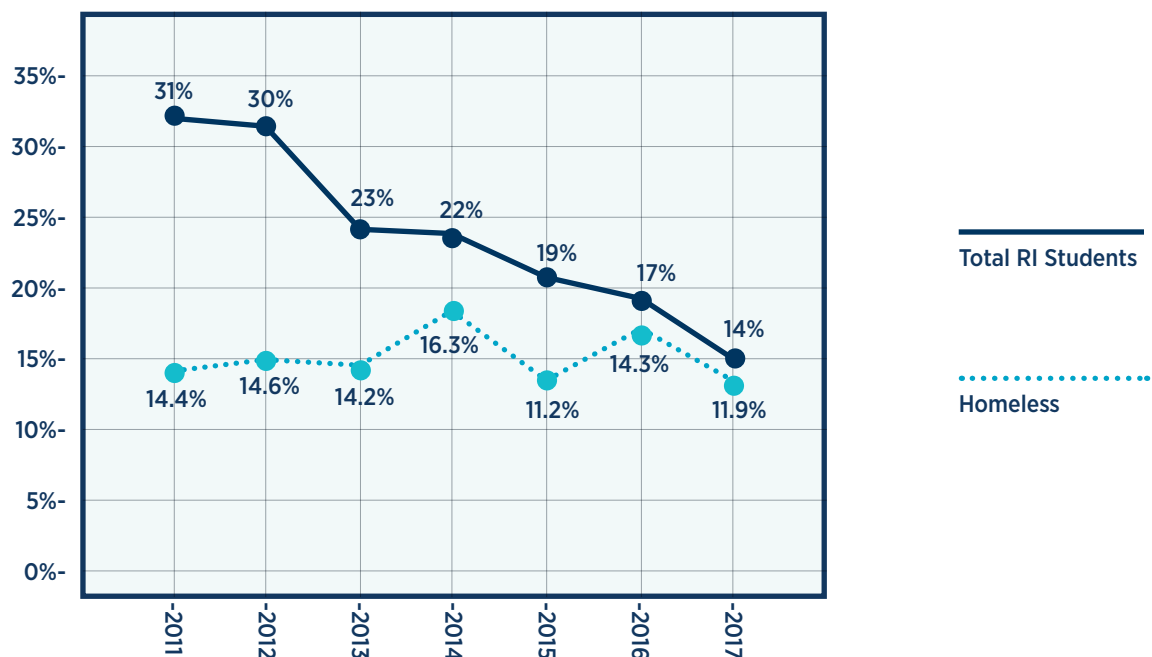


There is a general upward trend in the chronic absenteeism rates for children experiencing homelessness, which has increased by 35.6 percent or 8.9 percentage points from 2013 to 2017. In contrast, the chronic absenteeism rate for all Rhode Island students has had a smaller increase of 13.2 percent. This has resulted in a widening gap in the chronic absenteeism rate for students experiencing homelessness and the total Rhode Island student population from 2013 to 2017.

## Suspension Rates

The suspension rates of students experiencing homelessness decreased by 17.4 percent from 14.4 percent in 2011 to 11.9 percent in 2017, but increased in 2014 and 2016, reaching a high of 16.3 percent in 2014. However, the downward trend in suspension rates of students experiencing homelessness is not conclusive, due to fluctuations over the years and the lack of data after 2017. The suspension rates for the total student population decreased by 54.8 percent over that period. The sharp decline in suspension rates for all students in 2012 is due to stricter Rhode Island laws against suspensions.

**FIGURE 4** |  
**Suspension Rates of Students Experiencing Homelessness vs. Total RI Student Population**



In 2012, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law prohibiting schools from suspending students out of school solely based on their absenteeism.<sup>27</sup> Since then, there have been continued efforts to reduce the high suspension rates. In June 2016, Governor Raimondo signed a bill into law that “restricted the use of out-of-school suspensions to situations when a child’s behavior poses a demonstrable threat that cannot be dealt with by other means and required school districts to identify any racial, ethnic, or special education disparities and develop a plan to reduce such disparities.”<sup>28</sup> This law made it harder for schools to suspend students for minor infractions.<sup>29</sup> The 2012 and the 2016 laws have collectively regulated and lowered the number of suspensions for all Rhode Island students. It is thus worrying that the suspension rates of students experiencing homelessness have not decreased proportionately over time.

## Homeless families interviewed also shared that:

- Problems with the frontline service delivery of the MVHAA include delayed inter-LEA transportation. One parent shared that she waited at least 2 months for state transportation, even though under the guidelines it is supposed to happen within 48 hours. This delay is due to state busing being unable to accommodate these transportation requests, something which education homeless liaisons have little control over. The delay in transportation has led to students changing schools when they moved to a LEA different from their school of origin. Roughly 40 percent (42.9 percent; n=6) of interviewed parents said that their children's education has been disrupted since moving to the shelter.
- Many identified students experiencing homelessness do not get satisfactory educational support, as there are few educational programs for students experiencing homelessness. The majority of the homeless parents interviewed said that their children received no extra educational help in school and several sheltered parents said they received no educational support within the shelter. Older youth in particular have a harder time adjusting in school because few in-school and after-school programs are tailored to them and they face greater social pressures to fit in.
- Parents experiencing homelessness whose children were receiving MVHAA resources said they were able to get school supplies, clothing vouchers, and other necessities for their children. However, homeless students' educational experience differed according to their ages, the length of time that they have experienced homelessness, and whether they had an Individualized Educational Program (IEP). Having a homeless student advocate within the school could greatly improve the support and experience of these students.

## Persistent Implementation Problems with the MVHAA Systematic Underfunding

Since its inception in 1987, many have argued that the MVHAA is chronically underfunded nationwide. While the funding levels have increased since 1987 to reach \$85 million in 2017 through 2020,<sup>30</sup> funding increases are not commensurate with the rapidly growing needs and number of students experiencing homelessness, and the increasing requirements for states and LEAs to abide by the updated versions of the MVHAA.

Very few LEAs in Rhode Island receive subgrants, which shows a systematic failure to seek appropriate resources for assistance. Providence, the largest LEA in Rhode Island, does not receive a subgrant. The homeless education liaison officers said in interviews that this is a "competitive subgrant," requiring extra work for liaison officers. Some liaisons in smaller LEAs with fewer students experiencing homelessness similarly do not apply for it as they think that they will not qualify.

## Uneven Distribution of Subgrants

Exacerbating the underfunding problem, the uneven distribution of MVHAA subgrants throughout the state leads to some LEAs lacking funds and being unable to meet the MVHAA requirements.<sup>31</sup> The federal government requires that 75 percent of funding given to states be distributed to LEAs as three-year local subgrant awards. The state may use the rest to fund their activities related to promoting the needs of children experiencing homelessness in the schools. Each LEA that would like to apply for a subgrant, must comply with federally mandated requirements for the submission of the subgrant application to the State Education Agency (SEA). This competitive application



process for funding McKinney-Vento assistance is a challenge to LEAs that do not have the time or resources to apply. The result is an uneven distribution of funds and implementation of assistance to students experiencing homelessness.

## Limited Collaboration

A lack of collaboration among homeless education liaisons, school administrators, teachers, service agencies, and family members limits the effectiveness of the MVHAA at the local level.<sup>33</sup> Collaboration is defined as having policies and procedures that enable interaction with community agencies to provide essential resources and services to families experiencing homelessness.<sup>34</sup> Collaboration is especially important for implementing the MVHAA as identifying students experiencing homelessness is often challenging and connecting with local service providers expands the outreach to identify students experiencing homelessness. ***This case study found homeless education liaisons interviewed in Rhode Island that exhibited strong collaboration with local agencies had a higher identification rate of students experiencing homelessness.***

Different community agencies are also needed to provide holistic help to families experiencing homelessness, who often have diverse needs. Stakeholders have to acknowledge their shared responsibility and make a concerted effort to collectively identify students facing homelessness and provide them with the appropriate resources.<sup>35</sup>

In theory, collaboration is done through policy-mandated local homeless education liaisons who are required to work with other service providers to promote educational stability and opportunity.<sup>36</sup> However, a study by Hallett, Skrla, and Low found that homeless education liaisons frequently lack key

community connections and familiarity with social processes to adequately support students experiencing homelessness.<sup>37</sup> Lack of collaboration among different actors involved in the implementation of the MVHAA impedes the provision of services to students experiencing homelessness.

## Lack of Knowledge, Limited Capacity, and Weak Accountability of Homeless Education Liaisons

The lack of awareness and knowledge of the MVHAA by local homeless education liaisons, and the fact that many have other administrative jobs within the LEA, reduces their efficiency in implementing the MVHAA.<sup>38</sup> In many LEAs, the homeless liaisons are administrators who wear many hats, such as superintendents or assistant superintendents. While the MVHAA mandates annual homeless education liaison trainings, it is likely insufficient to train homeless education liaisons to properly identify and support children and youth experiencing homelessness. More importantly, homeless education liaisons often lack the capacity to effectively implement the MVHAA. None of the homeless education liaisons in Rhode Island are full-time; they all hold other positions, resulting in insufficient time to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. Of the homeless education liaisons interviewed, 75 percent (n=6) failed to conduct outreach to identify children experiencing homelessness and relied on self-disclosure by families experiencing homelessness, which was the most common way of identification. This may contribute to homeless children and youth going unidentified, especially if homeless parents are reticent about disclosing their housing status. Homeless education liaisons' reliance on self-disclosure is likely unable

to comprehensively identify hidden families experiencing homelessness.

The lack of knowledge and limited capacity of homeless education liaisons is enabled by the lack of accountability, as there is weak enforcement of their responsibilities. There is no official evaluation of the effectiveness of homeless education liaisons at identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness. The quality of support that homeless education liaisons provide to students experiencing homelessness is also, not measured beyond fulfilling the basic requirements of the MVHAA, resulting in limited incentive for homeless education liaisons to perform.

Homeless education liaisons' capacity is limited due to other pressing work commitments. Many homeless education liaisons interviewed do not conduct outreach to identify students experiencing homelessness. Instead, they rely on self-disclosure from families experiencing homelessness. This lack of outreach to identify students experiencing homelessness, who are often hidden and hard to identify, amplifies the problem of under-identification.

Additionally, a lack of awareness about the MVHAA in the community, especially among school personnel that have frequent contact with students, may result in a failure to identify and provide access to MVHAA services for students experiencing homelessness.

## **Parents' Limited Awareness of their Children's Educational Rights**

Despite the provisions of the MVHAA, parents may have limited awareness of the legally guaranteed

assistance under the MVHAA, and thus may not report their homelessness to the school. This contributes to negative outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, especially those doubled-up in homes of family and friends, to be hidden and unidentified. This lack of identification denies students experiencing homelessness access to services and provisions to which they are legally entitled under the MVHAA.<sup>39</sup> It is possible that some parents are reticent about revealing their homelessness due to fears about having their children removed from their care.

This limited awareness among families may also be due to the lack of outreach conducted by homeless education liaisons in Rhode Island. For many Rhode Island LEAs, the main resource that homeless education liaison officers have to reach students experiencing homelessness is MVHAA posters from the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). Even then, only some homeless education liaisons put up these posters in schools.<sup>40</sup> These posters are also likely insufficient to create awareness among the community (both service providers to the homeless and the homeless themselves) about a homeless student's educational rights under the MVHAA.

Additionally, even if identified, parents' lack of awareness of their children's rights may also limit the services that they receive, as some provisions under the MVHAA are not affirmative and must be requested. It is uncertain whether parents or guardians will make such requests when necessary. Parents and guardians may simply be unaware of this provision of the law, or they may be unable or unwilling to make a request.<sup>41</sup>



# Policy Recommendations for Rhode Island

Based on best practices of other states that rank highly in identifying children and youth experiencing homelessness, there are several opportunities for Rhode Island to improve assistance to this population.<sup>42</sup> Below are specific recommendations that are feasible in Rhode Island:

## **1) To improve identification, homeless education liaisons should have direct relationships with local shelter staff and other community workers who operate inside the social network of families experiencing homelessness.**

Stronger relationships between homeless education liaisons and local service providers is necessary to expand the network of identification and service support to students experiencing homelessness. To increase identification, homeless education liaisons should establish ongoing coordination with local shelter staff. In this way, those families with school-aged children, seeking shelter, can be referred directly to a liaison for MVHAA assistance. This is an immediate solution to the under-identified students living in shelters.

For the population of students who are doubled-up, living in cars, couch surfing, or have run away from home, it is more difficult to improve identification. However, it is recommended that liaisons develop strong relationships with social service organizations that touch this population (e.g., outreach workers). For example, collaboration with Head Start programs; Women, Infants and Children (WIC); Department of Human Services; home visiting programs; local shelters; school personnel; and other local service providers can increase identification and implementation of MVHAA services.

## **2) Minimize barriers to LEAs receiving subgrants and increase funding.**

The lack of LEA funding is also compounded by the uneven distribution of subgrants across LEAs in Rhode Island. Currently, many large LEAs with high numbers of children and youth experiencing homelessness do not apply for or receive subgrants. Greater assistance to homeless education liaisons in applying for the subgrant is crucial.

## **3) Rhode Island should have school-based homeless education liaisons in addition to the LEA-based homeless education liaisons.**

The MVHAA program should consider instituting school-based homeless education liaisons, in addition to LEA homeless education liaisons. School-based homeless education liaisons can be the school counselor, or other personnel who have close contact with students. School-based homeless education liaisons can improve identification of students experiencing homelessness and provide immediate access to MVHAA services.<sup>43</sup> Some Rhode Island shelters already recognize the effectiveness of connecting directly with schools by bypassing the homeless education liaisons in order to access services for students in need.<sup>44</sup>

#### **4) Mandatory training for school personnel.**

In order to effectively advance services and supports to students experiencing homelessness, mandatory trainings for school personnel are recommended. Trainings should include requirements of the MVHAA, how to recognize signs of homelessness, and how to direct students experiencing homelessness to homeless education liaisons. This can increase the likelihood of successful identification and referral of students experiencing homelessness to homeless education liaisons. Training is especially important for new principals and secretaries before they start the school year in August, as principals and secretaries receive a lot of calls about families who are either moving into the shelter or come in from outside the community during the school registration period.

#### **5) Greater community awareness about homelessness and support available.**

Building awareness across personnel and the public can increase self-identification and requests for services. Increased general community awareness about homelessness and the resources available under the MVHAA will allow the larger community to guide families that come into homelessness to the appropriate and available resources.<sup>45</sup> A crucial part of community awareness is educating the public that being doubled-up with friends or family, due to loss of housing or economic hardship, counts as being homeless and entitles families to MVHAA services and resources. Additionally, public education must dispel the notion that there will be repercussions for disclosing one's homeless situation,<sup>46</sup> in order to increase self-disclosure by families experiencing homelessness.

#### **6) Increased educational support, especially for older youth.**

Educational support to students experiencing homelessness is lacking in Rhode Island. There needs to be stronger in-school and after-school educational support provided to students experiencing homelessness. It is recommended that Rhode Island targets educational services for students experiencing homelessness, including early childhood education, before and after-school programs, mentoring, and summer programs. Older youth experiencing homelessness may need additional services. In interviews with shelter staff and families experiencing homelessness, it was found that youth in high school often receive little help, contributing to many falling into "bad company" or dropping out.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

The MVHAA has been an excellent addition to the provision of services to Rhode Island's students who are experiencing homelessness. The identification of students experiencing homelessness is a prevailing challenge that LEAs across Rhode Island face, evident from how more than half of the parents interviewed at shelters had no contact with a homeless education liaison. This is despite sheltered homeless families with school-aged children being the most visible of this population. Resource constraints, compounded by the lack of collaboration among homeless education liaisons, service providers, and the community, along with the weak accountability of homeless education liaisons and enforcement of the MVHAA, contribute to the poor identification of and support for students experiencing homelessness.

However, families identified by homeless education liaisons generally experienced few problems trying to obtain MVHAA services, such as intra-LEA transportation and getting school supplies. Yet, few students experiencing homelessness received extra educational support under the MVHAA, especially older youth. The lack of educational support that children and youth experiencing homelessness receive contributes to some homeless students falling behind in school and consequently losing motivation and dropping out.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> United States Department of Education, 2018
- <sup>3</sup> Out of the Shadows: A State-by-State Ranking of Accountability for Homeless Students, 2017. The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH). Retrieved from <http://www.icphusa.org/national/shadows-state-state-ranking-accountability-homeless-students/>
- <sup>4</sup> Wilson, Allison B., Squires, Jane, 2014 Young Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness. *Infants & Young Children* Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 259-271
- <sup>5</sup> Canfield, J. P., Harley, D., Teasley, M. L., & Nolan, J., 2017. Validating the McKinney-Vento Act Implementation Scale: Examining the factor structure and reliability. *Children & Schools*, 39(1), 53-60. doi:10.1093/cs/cdw047
- <sup>6</sup> United States Department of Education, 2016
- <sup>7</sup> Cunningham, M., Harwood, R., & Hall, S., 2010. *Residential instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program: What we know, plus gaps in research*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- <sup>8</sup> Wilson, Allison B., Squires, Jane, 2014 Young Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness. *Infants & Young Children* Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 259-271
- <sup>9</sup> A Local Education Agency (LEA) is a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State to provide administrative control or a service for public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State.
- <sup>10</sup> Canfield, J. P., Harley, D., Teasley, M. L., & Nolan, J., 2017. Validating the McKinney-Vento Act Implementation Scale: Examining the factor structure and reliability. *Children & Schools*, 39(1), 53-60. doi:10.1093/cs/cdw047
- <sup>11</sup> United States Department of Education Fact Sheet: Supporting the Success of Homeless Children and Youths, July 27, 2016. Also see <https://naehcy.org/essa-implementation-best-practice-and-other-technical-assistance-tools/>
- <sup>12</sup> Miller, P. M., 2013. Educating (More and More) Students Experiencing Homelessness: An Analysis of Recession-Era Policy and Practice. *Educational Policy*, 27(5), 805-838.
- <sup>13</sup> 2017 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, 2017. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. Retrieved from <http://www.rikidscount.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Factbook%202017/2017%20RI%20Kids%20Count%20Factbook%20for%20website.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> According to the MVHAA, a doubled-up family is defined as "sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason."
- <sup>15</sup> Hallett, R. E, Skrla, L., & Low, J., 2015. That is not what homeless is: a school district's journey toward serving homeless, doubled-up, and economically displaced children and youth. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28:6, 671-692
- <sup>16</sup> National Health Care for the Homeless Council, What is the official definition of homelessness? Retrieved from <https://www.nhchc.org/faq/official-definition-homelessness/>
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<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Education, 2015

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<sup>22</sup> National Center for Homeless Education, 2009. *Consolidated State Profile*. Retrieved from <http://profiles.nche.seiservices.com/ConsolidatedStateProfile.aspx>

<sup>23</sup> This figure is calculated by taking  $0.203 \times 19432 = 3945$  (rounded up to the nearest whole number).

<sup>24</sup> 2017 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, 2017. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. Retrieved from <http://www.rikidscount.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Factbook%202017/2017%20RI%20Kids%20Count%20Factbook%20for%20website.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> 2017 Housing Fact Book, 2017. Housing Works RI. Retrieved from [https://www.housingworksri.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/2017\\_Housing%20Fact%20Book.pdf](https://www.housingworksri.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/2017_Housing%20Fact%20Book.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> For the mobility of homeless students, data was received from RIDE, which gave every student who switched schools an exit code. Exit codes 1-12, list “the circumstances under which the student exited from membership in an educational institution” RIDE, 2017. However, in the dataset used for this research, only exit codes 1-3 were recorded, which are for transfers to public schools in the same LEA, a different LEA, or a different state, respectively.

<sup>27</sup> Rhode Island Kids Count, 2015

<sup>28</sup> Rhode Island Kids Count, 2017

<sup>29</sup> Bradley, Anthony. “Rhode Island Makes It Difficult to Suspend Students.” Acton Institute PowerBlog. September 21, 2016. Retrieved April 11, 2018. <http://blog.acton.org/archives/89089-rhode-island-makes-it-difficult-to-suspend-students.html>.

<sup>30</sup> National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth; *Authorization and Funding History of the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program*, 2016. Schoolhouse Connection. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/mvhistory.pdf>

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<sup>32</sup> Wixom, M. A., 2016 State and Federal Policy: Homeless youth. *Education Commission of the States*. 7

<sup>33</sup> Wilkins, T. B., Mullins, M. H., Mahan, A., & Canfield, J. P., 2016. Homeless Education homeless liaisons’ Awareness about the Implementation of the McKinney--Vento Act. *Children & Schools*, 38(1), 57-64. doi:10.1093/ cs/cdv041

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Wilkins, T. B., Mullins, M. H., Mahan, A., & Canfield, J. P., 2016. Homeless Education homeless liaisons’ Awareness about the Implementation of the McKinney--Vento Act. *Children & Schools*, 38(1), 57-64. doi:10.1093/ cs/cdv041

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<sup>39</sup> Wixom, M. A., 2016 State and Federal Policy: *Homeless youth*. *Education Commission of the States*.

<sup>40</sup> Personal communication, education homeless liaison, January 12, 2018.

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<sup>42</sup> As referenced in the earlier chapters in my thesis, the ranking of states was done by the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness in the 2017 *Out of the Shadows: A State-by-State Ranking of Accountability for Homeless Students* report.

<sup>43</sup> As referenced in the earlier chapters in my thesis, the ranking of states was done by the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness in the 2017 *Out of the Shadows: A State-by-State Ranking of Accountability for Homeless Students* report.

<sup>44</sup> Personal communication, Jennifer Barrera, Program Director at Lucy’s Hearth, April 3, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication, education homeless liaison, January 18, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Anzilotti, E., 2016, September 29). What it Will Take to Keep Homeless Students in School. Retrieved from <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/09/homeless-students-school-every-student-succeeds-act/502046/>

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