



# Rising Needs, Limited Resources:

Homelessness and Colorado's Children



## KEY FINDINGS

### More public school students are experiencing homelessness.

STUDENTS PK-12 EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS,  
2018-24



Source: Colorado Department of Education

### Households with children experiencing financial hardship, 2023



Source: UnitedForALICE

### ★ More Colorado children are experiencing homelessness.

- Nearly 23,000 PK-12 public school students experienced homelessness during the 2023-24 school year — a 28% increase from the year before.

### ★ Most children experience homelessness alongside their families, who are struggling to find or maintain affordable housing and achieve financial security.

- Colorado was the tenth-least affordable state in the nation for renters in 2025.
- About 28% of Colorado households with children experienced financial hardship in 2023.

### ★ While Colorado has invested in a range of approaches to reduce homelessness, there is a need for more solutions that are tailored to the needs of children and families.

### ★ Colorado must take steps to make homelessness among children rare, brief and non-recurring by:

- Addressing the root causes of homelessness, including housing affordability and families' lack of economic security.
- Improving support for kids and families who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Expanding efforts to create access to additional housing in Colorado.

Sources: Colorado Department of Education (2023-24 school year);  
National Low Income Housing Coalition (2025); UnitedForALICE (2023)



Colorado children are facing a worsening homelessness crisis. The number of children experiencing homelessness or unstable housing has increased significantly, and the state's resources and supports are not fully meeting the growing need. In just one year, between 2023 and 2024, the number of children living in a shelter or on the street more than doubled.

Periods of homelessness have significant effects on children's long-term health and well-being. Children who have experienced homelessness are less likely to graduate from high school on time<sup>1</sup> and are more likely to experience traumatic events.<sup>2</sup> They are also at a higher risk for lifelong social-emotional and physical health challenges.<sup>3</sup>

Children most commonly experience homelessness alongside their family,<sup>2</sup> often because of economic insecurity and difficulty affording housing.<sup>4</sup> While Colorado has invested in a range of approaches to reduce homelessness, many are not tailored to the unique situations of children. Colorado's policymakers and communities can take steps to make sure every child grows up with the stability of a home by addressing the most common root causes of homelessness. **Solutions to end homelessness for Colorado's children must promote economic stability, expand affordable housing, and be designed with the specific needs of families with children in mind.**

## Homelessness and Colorado's Children:

### What the Data Show

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Understanding just how many children are experiencing homelessness is challenging. Definitions vary across data sources, and families or children who are experiencing homelessness may not have touchpoints with organizations trying to collect information. For this reason, Colorado relies on multiple sources, including schools, state agencies, and federal counts, to track the scope of the issue. While each source has limitations, it is clear that **too many children are experiencing homelessness, and the need for targeted supports is growing.**



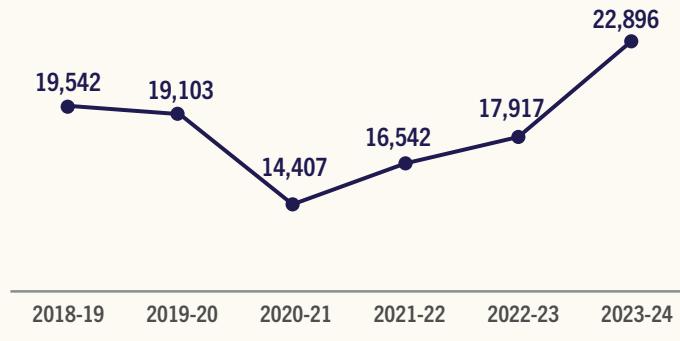
## Colorado Department of Education: McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program is a federally funded program that serves public school students experiencing some form of unstable housing, including those living in shelters, hotels, motels, or doubled-up arrangements with a friend or family member. This program provides the most consistent and robust measure of children ages 4 to 18 experiencing homelessness.



**In the 2023-24 school year, 22,896 public school students experienced unstable housing. That was roughly 5,000 more students than the year prior, or a 28% increase.** Most of these students (90%) were living with their family, often in a doubled-up arrangement.<sup>5</sup>

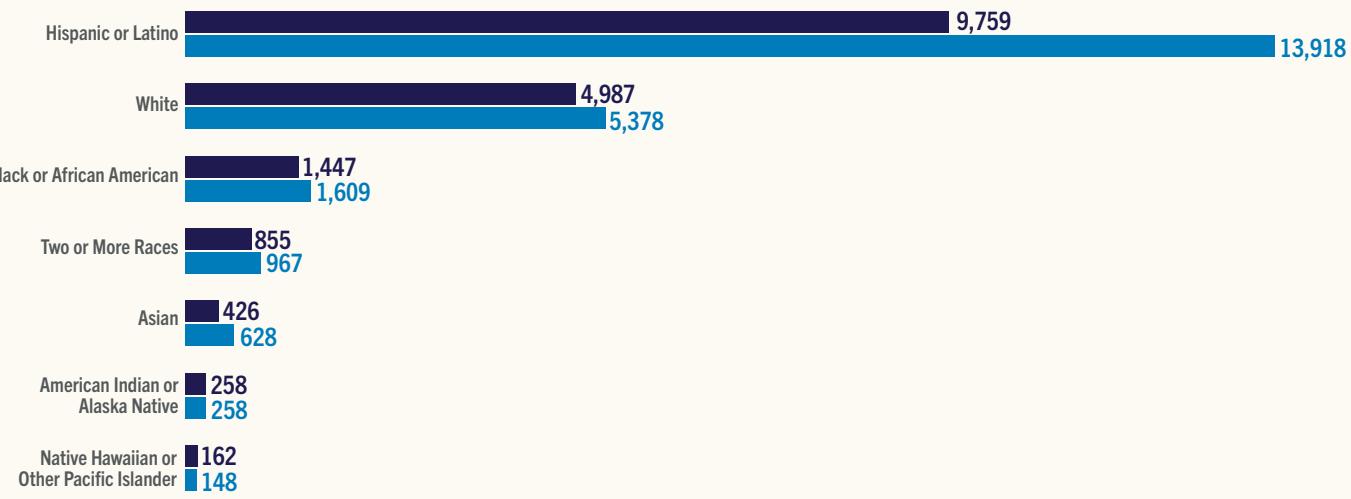
### Students PK-12 Experiencing Homelessness, 2018-24



Source: Colorado Department of Education

**More than half of the students served by the McKinney-Vento program were Hispanic or Latino, and most of the growing need between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years was among this group.** In the 2023-24 school year, Hispanic and Latino students accounted for 61% of students served by the McKinney-Vento program (13,918), even though they represent just 36% of Colorado's public-school population. The number of Hispanic and Latino students experiencing homelessness increased by roughly 4,000 in a single year, accounting for about 80% of the growing need in that year.<sup>5</sup>

### Students PK-12 Experiencing Homelessness by Race & Ethnicity, 2022-24



● 2022-23 school year ● 2023-24 school year

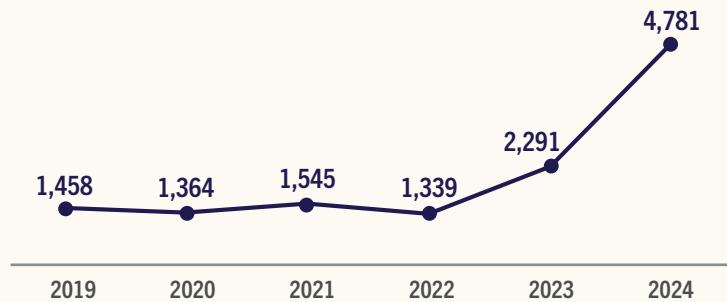
Source: Colorado Department of Education



## U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development Point-in-Time Count

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires localities to conduct a Point-in-Time Count of people experiencing homelessness each January to track trends over time. Colorado's Point-in-Time Count found that **between 2023 and 2024, the number of children experiencing sheltered or unsheltered homelessness more than doubled**, from 2,291 to 4,781.<sup>6</sup> This count includes children who were staying in an emergency shelter, safe havens, or in unsheltered locations.

### Children Experiencing Sheltered/Unsheltered Homelessness in Colorado, 2019-24



Source: U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, Point-in-Time Count

HUD attributes the increase to a mix of factors, including the affordable housing crisis, rising inflation coupled with stagnating wages, and the end of homelessness prevention and economic support programs that were put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the expanded child tax credit. In Colorado, the rise was due in part to an increase of immigrants and asylum seekers in Colorado who could not find affordable housing during that time period. Between 2022 and 2024, Denver was one of the largest contributors to the 43% increase in sheltered homelessness nationwide. New research estimates that nationally, asylum seekers accounted for about 60% of that increase.<sup>7</sup>

## Other Measures of Homelessness

In 2025, a group of Colorado researchers looked across multiple state departments to more accurately describe the number of teens without a stable home. They estimated that **between 2018 and 2022, some 33,041 children ages 14-17 experienced homelessness**. Hispanic and Black children were disproportionately more likely to experience homelessness than white children.<sup>8</sup>

There is limited data on children under 5 experiencing homelessness, in part because many are not yet in school. However, national studies suggest that younger children are at an elevated risk for unstable housing.<sup>9</sup> For example, one study estimated that 42% of U.S. children experiencing homelessness were under the age of 6.<sup>10</sup> A more recent Colorado survey estimated that 10.3% of Coloradans who gave birth in 2023 lacked stable housing, suggesting that their young children might also experience housing instability.<sup>11</sup>



## Common Causes of Homelessness Among Children

Children most commonly experience homelessness alongside their family,<sup>2</sup> often because of economic insecurity and difficulty affording housing.<sup>4</sup>

Many Colorado families do not make enough money to pay for basic needs like rent, utilities, and child care. In 2023, nearly 30% of Colorado families with children were facing financial hardship.<sup>12</sup> This economic insecurity can lead to periods of homelessness as families struggle to consistently afford housing alongside other costs like child care and food.<sup>3,13</sup>

Even families who are working face difficulty affording housing because their wages are too low to keep up with growing expenses.<sup>4</sup> One national study estimated that almost one in five parents experiencing homelessness worked in the week prior to entering a shelter. Among those who were unemployed, many said they were having trouble finding a job.<sup>14</sup>

Some families have difficulty finding reasonably priced housing in the first place, and some are evicted from their current home because they cannot pay their rent. Many Colorado communities have a shortage of housing options that are affordable for residents. **Colorado was ranked the tenth least affordable state in the nation for renters in 2025.**<sup>15</sup> In 2023, Colorado had a shortage of more than 134,000 affordable and available units for people living at or below the federal poverty level.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, households with children are more likely to be evicted than adult-only households,<sup>17</sup> and low-income families are the most likely to face eviction.<sup>18</sup>

### Households with children experiencing financial hardship, 2023



Source: UnitedForALICE



### UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH

Some children experiencing homelessness are unaccompanied minors, or children living without caregivers. This type of homelessness is of a different nature than children experiencing homelessness with their family. Unaccompanied youth most often experience homelessness because they run away from home or are kicked out following extreme family conflict, such as abuse or neglect.<sup>19</sup> This could also include migrant youth. In the 2023-24 school year, about 10% of students served by the McKinney-Vento program were living without a parent or guardian.<sup>5</sup> Youth in the foster care system and LGBTQ youth are also at a higher risk of homelessness.<sup>20,21</sup>



## Existing Support & Services

In Colorado, there are a range of state-level efforts to support people who are experiencing or at risk of being unhoused and to prevent homelessness. But **many services are over capacity, under-resourced, and not designed to specifically target the unique needs of children and families.** Nationally, only 39% of families living in a shelter received dedicated assistance to help them access more stable housing.<sup>22</sup> Nearly 80% of low-income U.S. households with children who were eligible for federal rental assistance did not receive it.<sup>23</sup>

Homelessness among families with children is often different in cause and nature than homelessness experienced by a single adult. But many services in Colorado are tailored to and more frequently used by single adults.<sup>4</sup> For example, most emergency shelters do not accept children or do not have safe environments for infants. Families often instead opt for more informal help, such as staying in a doubled-up arrangement with family or friends.<sup>24</sup>

Colorado has limited consistent state-wide support designed specifically for children and families. Local nonprofit organizations often take on the responsibility of helping children experience homelessness. While experts in the field, these organizations struggle to keep up with demand.

### PROMISING PRACTICE: NEXT STEP 2-GENERATION RAPID RE-HOUSING

The Next Step 2-Generation Rapid Re-Housing program aims to help improve housing stability and academic outcomes for children and families in Colorado. The Office of Homeless Youth Services within the Colorado Department of Local Affairs Division of Housing and the Colorado Department of Education partner to support students and their caregivers at risk of or experiencing homelessness through rehousing and wraparound supports such as move-in assistance, temporary rent support, and case management.





## Statewide Support to Addressing Homelessness

PROGRAM/SERVICE	WHO IT SERVES	WHAT IT PROVIDES	TARGETED TO KIDS
<b>McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program</b>	Students with unstable housing	Transportation, healthcare, and mental health programs	Yes
<b>Next Step 2-Gen Rapid Re-Housing</b>	Families with school-aged children and unaccompanied students ages 18 and older	Rehousing and wraparound supports	Yes
<b>Family Unification Program</b>	Families with children involved in the child welfare system and youth aging out of foster care or experiencing homelessness	Housing vouchers	Yes
<b>Eviction Legal Defense Fund</b>	Households facing eviction	Grant program that supports legal assistance for households facing eviction	No
<b>Emergency Rental Assistance</b>	Households facing eviction	Temporary rental assistance for households facing eviction. In addition to statewide efforts, there are multiple local governments that provide additional emergency rental assistance.	No
<b>Affordable Housing Support &amp; Financing (Proposition 123)</b>	People at risk of homelessness or needing affordable housing	Dedicates revenue to housing support for people experiencing homelessness, homeownership programs, and funding for affordable housing development.	No
<b>Housing Choice Voucher Program</b>	Low-income households	Federal housing subsidies to individuals and families.	No
<b>Judicial Branch Eviction Filings Dashboard</b>	Households facing eviction	Data on eviction trends across Colorado to help identify housing needs and where to target resources	No
<b>Inclusionary housing efforts (e.g., Denver's Expanding Housing Affordability program)</b>	Renters and buyers in participating cities	Require new developments to have a certain number of affordable units while providing financial and zoning incentives to developers	No
<b>Housing Development Grant Funds</b>	People needing affordable housing	Provides funds to preserve and expand affordable housing supply.	No





## Opportunities to Better Support Children & Families

Colorado's policymakers and communities can help make homelessness among children rare, brief, and non-recurring. To do so, they must **address the root causes of homelessness for families, expand targeted supports for children and families, and increase affordable housing options for families.**

**Colorado leaders have many opportunities to better support children and families experiencing homelessness.**

### ► **Address the root causes of homelessness, including housing affordability and families' lack of economic security.**

Colorado leaders must support housing stability for families through policies that promote economic security and housing affordability, including:

- Income support: Colorado must protect programs that put cash directly into the pockets of low-income families and maximize their impact. Such programs include cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and health coverage through Medicaid.
- Housing assistance: Colorado must protect and maximize funding for emergency rental assistance programs and housing subsidies available to low-income households, and explore ways to increase access to housing assistance for families with children.
- Tax credits: Colorado must ensure families continue to have access to refundable tax credits that increase family income, including the Child Tax Credit, Earned Income Tax Credit, and Family Affordability Tax Credit, that help families afford the cost of necessities.
- Child care: Colorado must expand access to safe, affordable child care for low-income families, so parents can work to provide for their children and continue growing their careers, and so that child care does not take over families' budgets, leaving little left to afford other needs, including housing.

### ► **Improve support for kids and families who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.**

Colorado must make families with kids and youth a focus of housing instability and homelessness policies and programs, including:

- Improve access to services during an episode of homelessness: Colorado must improve access to services that support youth and children who are experiencing homelessness, including early childhood programs, wraparound supports like home visiting, and school-based and out of school time programs. Increased coordination among state agencies that serve children and families can increase access to these types of supports. Colorado must also include a focus on children and families who are facing particularly significant barriers to housing stability, including supports for unaccompanied youth and newcomer families.
- Include a focus on children and families in new and existing housing programs: Colorado must expand the scope of existing services, such as supportive housing programs, to include a focus on the unique needs of families with children.
- Improve data on family homelessness and housing instability: Colorado must continue to improve the collection and publication of data on eviction trends and other indicators of housing instability across the state to illuminate the resources and policy solutions needed to address and prevent homelessness and housing instability for families.



## ► Expand efforts to create access to additional housing in Colorado.

Colorado must expand affordable housing options throughout the state. To be successful, efforts must:

- Both develop and preserve housing options that are affordable for families living in poverty.
- Develop housing that includes 2- and 3-bedroom units for families with children.
- Expand zoning for affordable multi-family housing to include neighborhoods with quality schools and access to child care and other services.

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