

# FACTSHEET: HOMELESS UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH AND EDUCATION

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## Who are homeless unaccompanied youth?



- By law, “homeless” is defined as lacking a “fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.”<sup>1</sup> A homeless youth might be living among the homes of friends and relatives, in a shelter, a group home, a vehicle or outside.
- When a homeless youth is described as “unaccompanied” they are homeless without a parent or guardian and literally **on their own**.
- The term “homeless unaccompanied youth” usually refers to young people up to 21 years of age.
- The average age at which youth first become homeless and unaccompanied in Tucson is 14.<sup>2</sup>

## How prevalent is this problem?

- Studies have found that anywhere from 1 to 3 million youth experience an unaccompanied homeless situation each year in the United States.<sup>3</sup>
- It is estimated that at any given time between 1,000 and 1,500 youth ages 12 to 21 are experiencing unaccompanied homelessness in Tucson.<sup>4</sup>

## How do young people end up in these situations?

- Many leave homes of abuse, drug and alcohol use and violence. Among Tucson’s homeless unaccompanied youth, 63% reported experiencing verbal or emotional abuse, 52% witnessed domestic violence in their household, 50% reported witnessing drug or alcohol abuse, 42% experienced neglect and 25% reported being sexually abused before the age of 18.<sup>5</sup>
- Some youth become homeless *with* their families and then are later separated from them by the shelter system, transitional housing programs or child welfare policies.<sup>6</sup>
- Some exit foster care at age 18 and are suddenly without a support system before they are ready and able to provide for themselves. In Arizona, almost 30% of homeless unaccompanied youth report having been in the foster care system.<sup>7</sup>
- Some have been “thrown out” or “thrown away” because their parents disapproved of their sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy or lifestyle.

## How does homelessness affect the education of these young people?

- **Nationally, nearly two-thirds of homeless youth in high school are not proficient in math and English.** They are more likely than their housed peers to be below grade level, repeat grades and have poor attendance.<sup>8</sup>
- In Arizona, reading and math proficiency rates of homeless students are consistently about 25 percentage points below the corresponding rates for all students.<sup>9</sup>
- Homeless youth are also far more likely to have health problems and to have those health problems go untreated, making regular attendance difficult.<sup>10</sup>
- In a single school year, 12 percent of homeless youth miss a month or more of classes and a third miss at least two weeks.<sup>11</sup>
- **Among high school students, the average daily attendance is 51% for homeless students compared to 84% for their housed peers.**<sup>12</sup>
- To make matters worse, more than half of homeless youth report being suspended several times for tardiness, not wearing the proper uniforms, or being absent too frequently.<sup>13</sup>
- One-half of homeless students transfer schools two or more times in one school year.<sup>14</sup> Each time a child changes schools an estimated three to six months of education is lost due to the disruption.<sup>15</sup>
- The lack of a quiet and safe place to do homework, lack of school supplies and a lack of food all cause additional barriers to education for homeless unaccompanied youth.<sup>16</sup>
- There are emotional barriers as well: "Fatigue can destroy concentration, hopelessness can undermine initiative, and anger can cause bad behavior."<sup>17</sup> One of the most common and serious problems homeless unaccompanied youth face is low self-esteem and depression. They often deal with feelings of rejection, abandonment and loneliness.<sup>18</sup>
- The **McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act** attempts to remove some of these barriers to education for homeless students but schools do not always comply with the law and funding for the program is scarce.<sup>19</sup> Despite the right to education for homeless youth laid out in the law, young people are still often turned away by schools because they lack a parent or guardian and a permanent address. Many youth are not aware of their education rights and may not have anyone to advocate for them.<sup>20</sup>



## Dropping Out

***“Most students don’t wake up on a single morning and decide to drop out of school. Rather, dropping out is the end of a long-term process of disengagement, as students find school to be disconnected from – even at odds with – the rest of their lives”***

-Geoff Garin, president of Peter D. Hart Research Associates.<sup>21</sup>

- Every school day over 7,000 young people drop out of school. Each year this adds up to about 1.2 million students.<sup>22</sup>
- **One study revealed that nearly three-quarters of homeless youth over the age of 16 drop out of high school.**<sup>23</sup>
- One study found that once a homeless youth has dropped out of school, they are less likely to go back to their parent’s home.<sup>24</sup>
- Another study found that formerly homeless youth described leaving school as “a turning point in their lives” and that their situations got much worse after they dropped out.<sup>25</sup>
- **School may be the only stable, secure place for a homeless youth.**
- Working more than 20 hours a week while going to high school *significantly* increases the likelihood that a student will drop out.<sup>26</sup>
- Substance abuse, conflict, financial issues, health problems and frequent moves are all factors that have shown to have a negative correlation with high school completion.<sup>27</sup>
- Lack of parental involvement has also been identified as a strong predictor for dropping out.<sup>28</sup>

**The Silent Epidemic: *Perspectives of High school Dropouts***<sup>28</sup>  
In this national study, dropouts were asked why they left school.

- **47% said the classes weren’t interesting or relevant to their lives.**
- **43% missed too many days and could not catch up.**
- **38% said they had too much freedom.**
- **32% needed to get a job.**
- **26% became a parent.**
- **22% had to take care of siblings or other family.**

***“We believe that many dropouts are capable kids who simply stop coming to school when life becomes overwhelming and school no longer makes sense.”***

-Joan Martin, Co-founder of Touch Point Connection  
(Tucson non-profit teen success coaching program)

## Why is it so important that these students graduate high school?



- In 1971, male dropouts had an average annual income of \$35,087 (in 2002 dollars) but this fell 35% to \$23,903 by 2002.<sup>29</sup>
- **Dropouts are more than twice as likely as graduates to be living in poverty.**<sup>30</sup>
- Dropouts earn about \$1 million less over their lifetime than college graduates and \$260,000 less than a high school graduate.<sup>31</sup>
- In 2001, only 55% of young adults aged 18-24 who had dropped out had jobs.<sup>32</sup>
- **Dropouts are eight times more likely than graduates to be in prison.**<sup>33</sup> 75% of state prisoners and 59% of federal prisoners are high school dropouts.<sup>34</sup>
- Dropouts are also more likely to be unhealthy, divorced, single parents, parents of children who also drop out and are more likely to die prematurely.<sup>35</sup>

### Our communities and nation also pay the price.

- The students of the Class of 2009 that failed to graduate will cost the nation's economy \$335 billion in lost income over their lifetimes.<sup>36</sup>
- Dropouts contribute *half* as much as graduates in state and federal taxes. This adds up to a loss of over \$450 billion *annually* for the 23 million dropouts ages 18-67.<sup>37</sup>
- Dropouts are much less likely to engage in civic activity such as voting and volunteering.<sup>38</sup>
- Four out of every ten young adults lacking a high school diploma are on government assistance.<sup>39</sup>



Young men in an overcrowded prison

- Increasing the male high school graduation rate *only 1%* would save the nation \$1.4 billion annually in crime-related costs.<sup>40</sup>

***“If we fail to act, the consequences will play out for years to come as a generation of lost children grows to adulthood.”***

-National Center on Family Homelessness<sup>41</sup>

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- <sup>8</sup> USC Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis 2008:13
- <sup>9</sup> Arizona Homeless Coordination Office. Current Status of Homelessness in Arizona and Efforts to Alleviate Homelessness. Phoenix, AZ (2007:12).
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