

# Educating Homeless Children

Homeless students face complex and interrelated challenges, which are often unique to their experiences living in unstable housing situations. Doubled-up arrangements can end abruptly; children may constantly fear that they will be forced to leave the places where they are staying. Mothers may tolerate abusive relationships to avoid losing housing, placing their children and themselves at risk. Shelter environments can be vastly different depending on the service provider, with some fostering caring environments and others offering less supportive settings. Even the physical structure of shelters varies widely, from large, congregate barracks-style settings to communal living spaces shared by two or three families to private rooms. Homeless children may also encounter the stress of short or medium time limits on how long they can stay. Shelters—and the hotels or motels that homeless families can afford—are usually in less desirable neighborhoods that offer few opportunities for children to safely relax and play. Furthermore, shelter staff tend to focus predominately on the needs of parents in order to resolve their homelessness and often lack the time and resources to address the needs of their children as well.<sup>1</sup>

For these and many other reasons, schools are frequently the only stable environment for children who experience homelessness. Fortunately, federal legislation—sensitive to the particular circumstances of homelessness—protects the rights of students in unstable housing. After covering these laws, this section discusses educational outcomes for both pre-kindergarten and school-aged homeless students and concludes with issues surrounding the co-occurrence of homelessness and the need for special-education or English-language services.

### Laws Governing the Education of Homeless Students

Established in 1987 and reauthorized in 2002 under the No Child Left Behind Act, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act (McKinney-Vento) provides important safeguards to ensure that every homeless student has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education provided to stably housed children and youth. The law gives limited funding to states, distributed to about one in five local education agencies, in order to guarantee the rights of homeless students, establish or designate an office to coordinate such activities within a state educational agency, create and implement a state plan to meet the needs of homeless students, and institute professional development programs to raise awareness of and bolster school personnel's capacity to respond to those needs. The law prohibits the segregation of homeless students into separate schools, classrooms, or programs and the stigmatization of homeless students by school employees.<sup>2</sup>

McKinney-Vento also requires every local educational agency to designate a homeless education liaison to ensure that homeless students are immediately enrolled in school regardless of whether they lack immunization records, parental consent, or prior school or other required documentation. Liaisons can provide homeless students with school supplies, clothing, supportive services or referrals for services, and before- and after-school, mentoring, summer, and other educational programs. Should a parent choose, the liaison must also coordinate transportation to a homeless child's school of origin, regardless of the district in which the child currently resides, to avoid the additional educational disruption of a school transfer. Liaisons also work to connect homeless students with other educational services for which they are eligible and make appropriate referrals to dental, health, and mental health care.<sup>3</sup>

McKinney-Vento mandates that homeless children and youth with disabilities have the right to a free public education comparable to that of their housed peers. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), established in 1975, guarantees rights and services for all children and youth with special needs. Under this federal law, students with disabilities—which can be broadly defined to include five types of impairments: speech or language, cognitive, behavioral or emotional, sensory, or physical—are eligible to receive specifically designed instruction (special education) and related supportive services (such as transportation, physical therapy, and student and parent counseling).<sup>4</sup>

In 2004, IDEA was amended to emphasize child outcomes, focusing on preparing students with disabilities for further education, employment, and independent living. Recognizing the difficulties facing homeless students with disabilities, the 2004 reauthorization called for coordination between IDEA early intervention (Part C) and special education (Part B) programs and McKinney-Vento homelessness-education programs. All states receiving IDEA funds must guarantee that the requirements of McKinney-Vento are met for all homeless children and youth with disabilities, which include both literally homeless and doubled-up children.<sup>5</sup> The reauthorization reinforced the need for timely assessments, appropriate service provision and placement, and continuity of services for homeless and highly mobile students with disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

### Early Childhood Education: Risk and Readiness

The years prior to kindergarten comprise a crucial period in child development. Early years in school are highly predictive of future academic achievement, making it critical that children enter kindergarten equipped for success.<sup>7</sup> School readiness encompasses mastery of a number of cognitive and

noncognitive competencies as well as healthy physical development. Since learning is a cumulative process, young children who lack these foundational skills early often struggle to catch up to their peers. These gaps in school readiness have been shown to persist—and frequently worsen—in later grades.<sup>8</sup>

Children from low-income families encounter more barriers to achieving school readiness than their affluent peers, combating risks associated with poverty such as limited parental education, constrained financial resources, poor health care and nutrition, and exposure to family and community violence.<sup>9</sup> Homeless children are at an even greater disadvantage, experiencing additional risk for developmental delays and health problems due to discontinuity in schooling, disrupted access to services, and stressful housing situations.<sup>10</sup> Young homeless children often have less, and less consistent, exposure to the resources and early engagement necessary to support healthy development.<sup>11</sup> A high-quality early education, however, can help mitigate the confluence of poverty- and homelessness-related risks these children face.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, homeless families are less likely to access these programs. Only one-quarter (24%) of urban homeless or highly mobile young children are enrolled in high-quality center-based care, roughly half the rate of poor but stably housed children (45%) and those at risk of homelessness (55%). Homeless parents are more likely to rely upon informal, relative-provided care (46%) than at-risk (36%) and stably housed (22%) families.<sup>13</sup>

Head Start is the largest federal program providing early childhood education and related services to young children from low-income families, serving more than one million children annually.<sup>14</sup> In analyzing a cohort of three-year-old children who began receiving Head Start services in 2006, the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness found that children experiencing homelessness or high mobility (HHM) began with poorer socio-emotional, cognitive, and health-related outcomes on average than their low-income, stably housed peers. After two years in Head Start, HHM children exhibited varying degrees of improvement, making the greatest progress relative to their peers on measures of socio-emotional development. Overall, however, the gains HHM children made did not increase their scores enough to meet the average low-income, stably housed child's outcomes, leaving a school-readiness gap in place before kindergarten entry.<sup>15</sup>

### **Classroom Performance of School-aged Homeless Students**

Trauma, toxic stress, and other factors such as hunger and poor health negatively impact school-aged homeless students' development and classroom performance. Whether there are differences between the academic achievement of homeless and other poor students is less clear. Several studies have observed no substantial differences, while others suggest that homeless children have more adverse academic outcomes, on average, than poor students. Ultimately, the circumstances of homelessness—in particular, high mobility—make homeless students difficult to study. Additionally, those living doubled up or unsheltered are challenging to research, and most studies are limited to students residing in shelters.<sup>16</sup>

Research has shown, however, that some homeless children are resilient in the face of homelessness and actually meet or

exceed the math and reading achievement scores of housed students. A study of elementary school children in Minneapolis indicated that 45% of homeless students were able to score relatively well; the remainder performed much worse on assessments than other poor and stably housed children.<sup>17</sup>

Many intrapersonal and interpersonal factors foster resiliency. For example, high-quality parenting, characterized by a close and positive relationship, has been linked to higher levels of executive functioning among children, which can profoundly affect their capacity to develop good social skills, build healthy interpersonal relationships, and, eventually, parent their own children effectively.<sup>18</sup> Other resiliency correlates include positive bonds with caregivers, positive relationships with other nurturing adults, and supportive friends or romantic partners. Cognitive and self-regulation skills, as well as positive self-perceptions and -efficacy, and a sense of meaning in life are also important. High-quality communities (defined as neighborhoods with low levels of pollution and violence); cultures that provide positive standards, rituals, relationships, and supports; and bonds to positive sociocultural systems such as schools, all also help children overcome adversity.<sup>19</sup>

All children, regardless of their housing status, have the ability to be resilient when faced with difficult situations. Homeless children can adapt and cope with trauma, as long as the balance between the protective and positive factors within themselves and their environment is manageable.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes, the effects of homelessness are overwhelming for children. Not surprisingly, homeless children have been shown to be less resilient when they experience multiple risk factors, such as being exposed to violence or conflict at home, having parents with substance-abuse or psychological disorders, or being separated from their families. Engaging children in cognitive tasks, even in such adverse circumstances, has been shown to decrease their stress levels.<sup>21</sup>

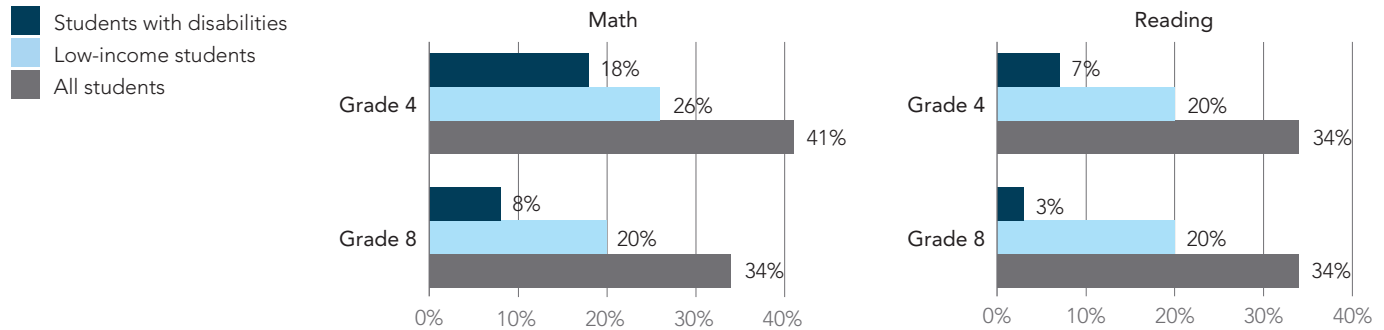
The experiences of homeless children are both diverse and challenging. By providing opportunities and settings in which children can form positive, caring relationships with adults, schools can play a key role in supporting children's resiliency. A school can provide a safe and stable environment, where students are free to explore and learn. Fostering resiliency among homeless students does not require extraordinary talents or resources, but educators need to be aware of the characteristics of resilient children, understand the factors influencing students' capacity to cope, and support students in achieving positive outcomes.<sup>22</sup>

### **Special Education Services for Homeless Students with Disabilities**

The stressors associated with being homeless—housing instability, poor nutrition, and lack of quality health care—negatively impact child development. As a result, homeless children experience twice the rate of learning disabilities (such as speech delays and dyslexia) and three times the rate of emotional or behavioral problems when compared to their housed peers.<sup>23</sup> While numerous studies highlight the educational inequalities experienced by either homeless students or all students with disabilities, research on the co-occurrence of homelessness and disability among students is extremely limited and outdated.

**Figure 1**  
**Percent of Students Proficient in Math and Reading in School Year 2012–13**

(by type of student)



Note: See endnote 24.

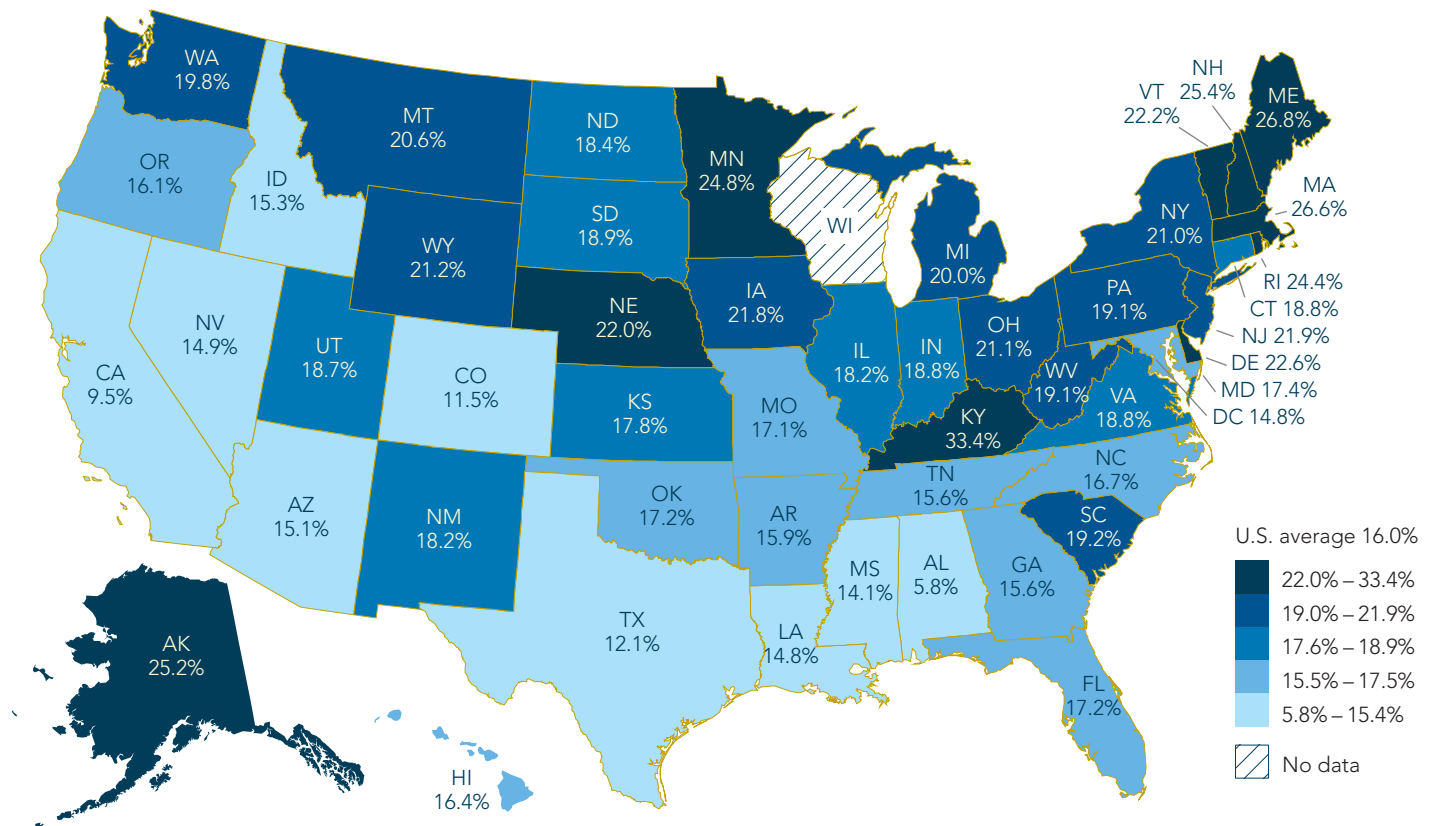
Source: U.S. Department of Education, "ED Data Express," <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>.

While national academic achievement statistics do not exist for homeless students with disabilities, available data suggest that the co-occurrence of homelessness and disability has the potential to greatly hinder students' academic performance and educational outcomes. Students with disabilities score lower on national-level standardized tests across all grade levels and subject areas than the general student population or their low-income counterparts. During the 2012–13 school year, only 18% of fourth-grade students with disabilities scored at or above proficiency level in math and 11% did so in reading.

Eighth-grade students with disabilities performed even worse on national assessments; 8% scored at or above proficiency level in both math and reading (Figure 1).<sup>24</sup>

During the 2012–13 school year, one out of every six (16.0%) homeless students had a disability. Thirty-seven states had rates of disabilities among homeless students that surpassed the national average. States with the largest proportions of homeless students with disabilities were generally found in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast regions (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Percent of Homeless Students with Disabilities Eligible Under IDEA, Part B, School Year 2012–13**



Note: Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states. Data are classified by quintiles. Source: U.S. Department of Education, "ED Data Express," <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>.

Table 1  
**Percent of Students with Disabilities Served Under IDEA, Part B**

(by type of student and school year)

	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13
All students	13.6%	13.4%	13.2%	13.1%	13.0%	12.9%	12.9%
Homeless students	13.5%	14.0%	11.8%	12.3%	12.4%	13.6%	14.2%

Note: Data for homeless students includes only those served in local educational agencies that received McKinney-Vento subgrants. Data for all students from the 2007–08 and 2008–09 school years do not include Vermont.

Source: National Center for Homeless Education, Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary, 2010–13; U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics 2014*.

Kentucky had the highest rate, at one-third (33.4%), while Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Alaska each identified more than one-quarter, or twice the national average, of their homeless students as eligible for services under IDEA, Part B. Alabama had the lowest percentage of homeless students who required special education at 5.8%.<sup>25</sup>

Since homeless children have higher rates of developmental delays and learning impairments, the proportion of homeless students with disabilities is expected to be higher than that of the general student population. However, national rates are similar for the 2012–13 school year—14.2% versus 12.9%—and the previous six school years (Table 1).<sup>26</sup> The lack of differentiation between these two groups suggests that homeless children and youth with disabilities are often not identified as such and are not accessing the educational services they need.

For homeless students with disabilities, the first of many barriers to receiving special education services is identification.<sup>27</sup> For students with disabilities who are identified as homeless, a number of factors—such as chronic absenteeism, missing documentation, and incomplete school records—complicate the special education evaluation process and delay service delivery.<sup>28</sup>

Conditions commonly associated with homelessness, such as sleep deprivation, depression, and hunger interfere with learning and classroom performance. This can lead to a misdiagnosis that will affect a child for the duration of his or her academic career. A student experiencing the adverse effects of homelessness can be incorrectly labeled as having a disability. Conversely, a student’s disability can go unnoticed, with his or her poor classroom performance being attributed to housing status alone. Both errors can lead to children being placed in the wrong classroom setting, hampering their educational attainment.<sup>29</sup>

Since parental consent is required for all special education assessments, parents’ lack of awareness or acknowledgment of their children’s developmental delays or disabilities can postpone or prevent the evaluation process and access to services. The strict timelines and complex paperwork involved with assessments can pose another stressor for homeless families, deterring family members from seeking services. Parents are often poorly informed of their child’s educational rights under McKinney-Vento, including the mandate that allows homeless students to remain in their schools of origin. School transfers may result in delayed assessments and inefficient record transfers and can disrupt the continuity of special education services. On average, homeless students change schools

three times per year, with students taking between four to six months to recover academically from each transfer.<sup>30</sup>

There are many ways in which states and school districts can better identify, evaluate, and serve homeless students who also have a disability, but localities are ultimately constrained by limits on financial resources. Under the initial passage of IDEA in 1975, the federal government committed to support up to 40% of the program’s costs. However, Congress contributed only an estimated 16.1% (\$11.6 billion) in FY13, leaving states and school districts to cover the vast majority of expenses.<sup>31</sup> Sufficient allocations would greatly improve service provision for homeless students with disabilities and encourage their inclusion in the national conversation on education policy.

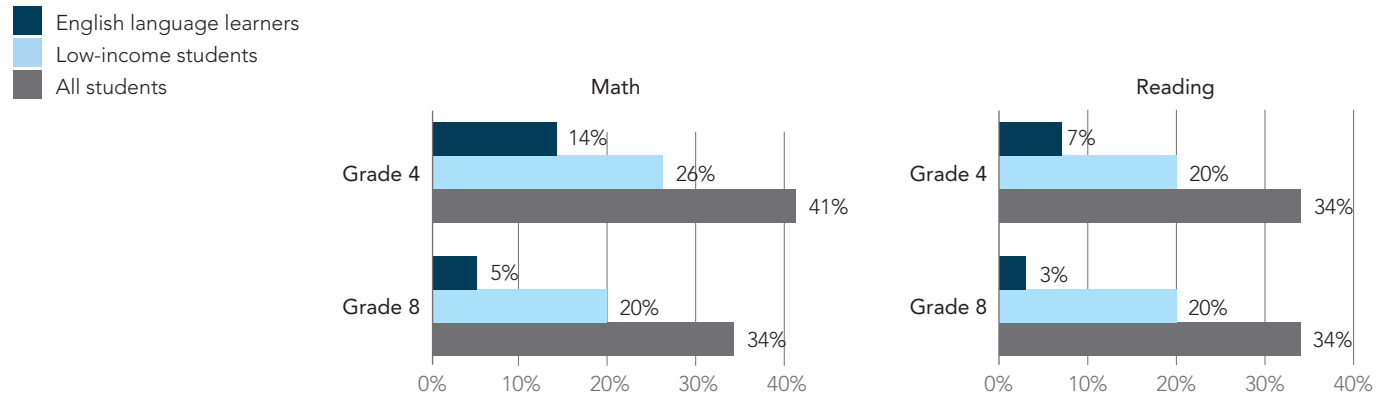
### Lending New Voice: Homeless English Language Learners

Homelessness results in educational disadvantages for students because of factors such as high mobility, poor nutrition, and higher rates of learning disabilities, which are likely compounded for students with language barriers. Most English language learners (ELLs) in elementary schools are second-generation immigrants whose parents and older siblings know only limited English, if any at all.<sup>32</sup> Although the needs of homeless students and ELLs have been studied separately, even basic statistics on the intersection of these two populations are rare.

While national academic achievement statistics do not exist for homeless ELL students, available data suggest that the co-occurrence of homelessness and language barriers may result in significantly diminished educational outcomes. Low-income students are proficient in math and reading at just over half the rate of the general student population in grades four and eight, and studies show that homeless children perform worse academically than their low-income peers (Figure 3).<sup>33</sup> Fourth-grade ELLs also receive lower marks than low-income students, with disparities worsening by eighth grade.<sup>34</sup>

ELLs, or students who qualify for English as a Second Language or Bilingual Education services, comprised 14.2% of the one million students who received homelessness services during the 2012–13 school year, a rate higher than the percentage of ELLs in the overall student population (9.7%). Spanish is the most common language spoken by ELLs at 77%, followed by Chinese, Arabic, and Vietnamese.<sup>35</sup> Among homeless students enrolled during the 2012–13 school year, high concentrations of ELLs in the

**Figure 3**  
**Percent of Students Proficient in Math and Reading in School Year 2012–13**  
 (by type of student)



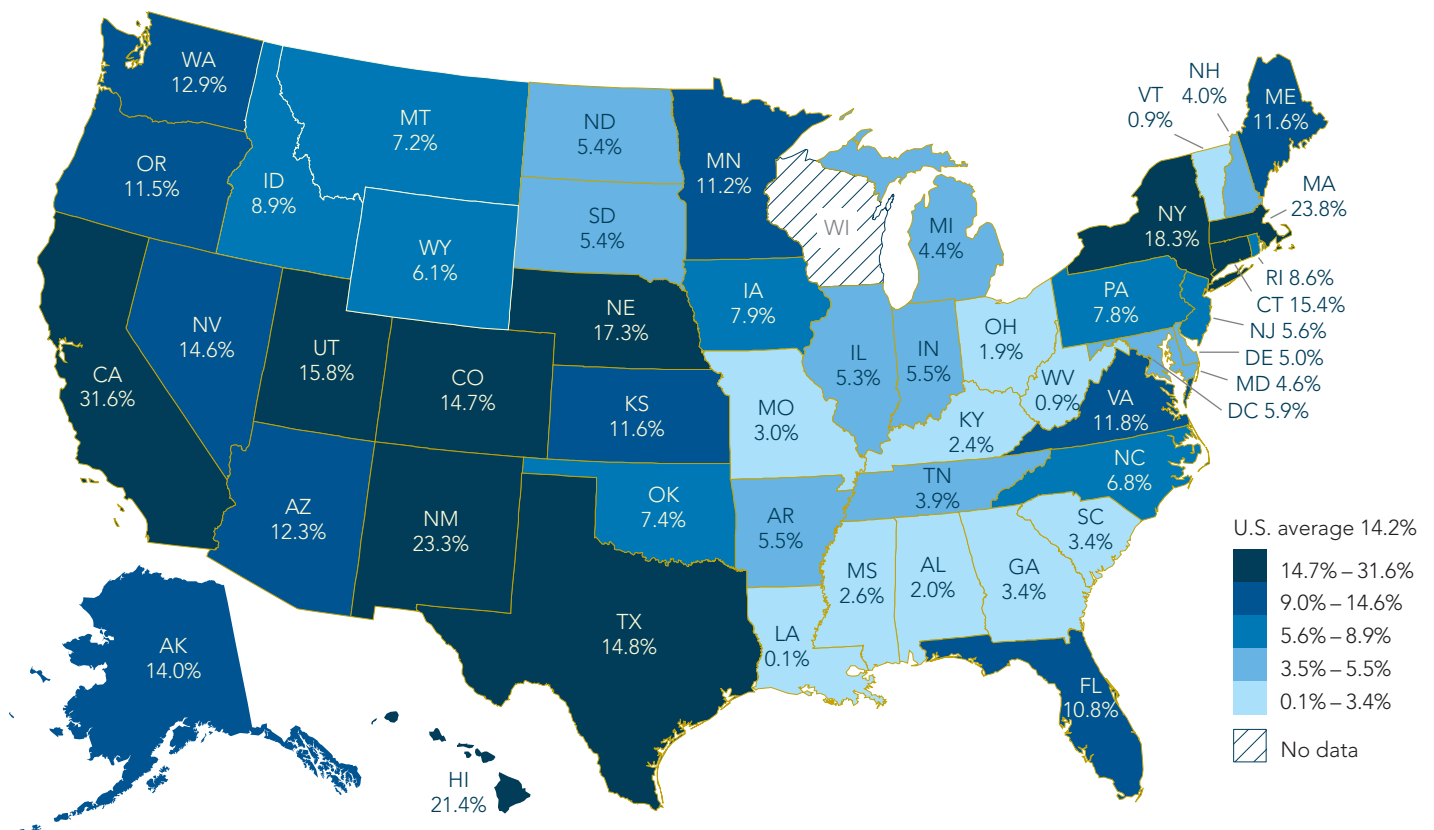
Note: See endnote 34.  
 Source: U.S. Department of Education, "ED Data Express," <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>.

homeless student population are found in the West and Southwest (Figure 4), areas with high concentrations of ELLs in the general student population.<sup>36</sup>

The vast majority (94.5%) of ELLs in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade are enrolled in federally funded language instruction programs. The English Language Acquisition State Grants—originally amended to the Elementary and Second-

ary Education Act of 1967 and renamed by Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—assist ELLs in reaching state academic achievement standards. Funded at \$723.4 million in Fiscal Year 2014, the formula grant gives states flexibility to identify evidence-based practices and develop their own annual measurable achievement objectives.<sup>37</sup> ELL students who are homeless are also eligible to receive critical homeless-specific services under McKinney-Vento.

**Figure 4**  
**Percent of Homeless Students Who Are English Language Learners, School Year 2012–13**



Note: Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states. Data are classified by quintiles.  
 Source: U.S. Department of Education, "ED Data Express," <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>.