

The National Perspective

Lending New Voice

A Primer on Homeless English Language Learners

by Matt Adams and Anne Clark

Homeless children who are English language learners (ELLs) are a particularly high-need population of students. The educational disadvantages of homelessness—such as high mobility, poor nutrition, and higher rates of learning disabilities—are likely compounded for students with language barriers. Most ELLs in elementary schools are second-generation immigrants whose parents and older siblings speak English poorly if at all. The research community has studied the needs of homeless students and ELLs separately; even basic statistics on the intersection of these two populations are rare. The following is what we know to date.

ELLs, or students who qualify for English as a Second Language or Bilingual Education services, comprised 14% of the more than one million students who received homelessness services in the 2010–11 school year, roughly the same percentage of ELLs in the overall student population (13%). Spanish is the most common language spoken by ELLs at 69%, followed by Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese, and Hmong (a language spoken by an ethnic group from China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand). High concentrations of ELLs in the homeless student population are most commonly found in the West and Southwest (see Figure 1), areas with corresponding high concentrations of ELLs in the general student population. However, New Hampshire and Massachusetts have the highest percentages of ELLs among their homeless students (35% and 29%, respectively), even though the prevalence of ELLs in the general population in those states is well below the national average. In fact, New Hampshire has one of the lowest rates (2%) of ELLs in the general student population in the country.

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

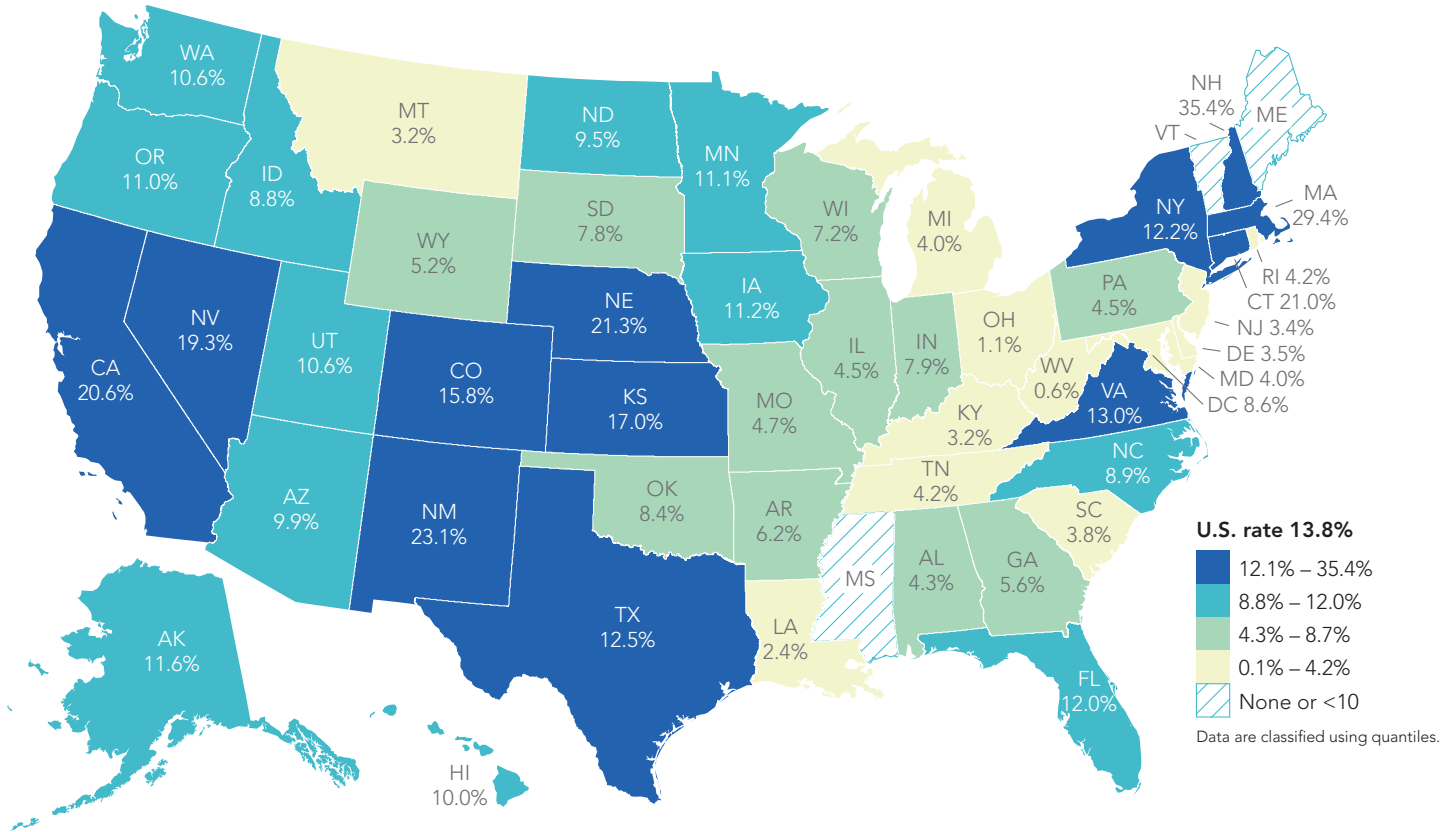
students are proficient in math and reading at just over half the rate of the general student population in grades four and eight (see Figure 2), and studies show that homeless children perform worse academically than their low-income peers. Fourth-grade ELLs also receive lower marks than low-income students, with disparities worsening by eighth grade.

The vast majority (88%) of all ELLs in kindergarten through 12th grade are enrolled in federally funded language-instruction programs. The English Language Acquisition State Grants—originally amended to the Elementary and Secondary 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 \$733.5 million in Fiscal Year 2011, the formula grant gives states flexibility to identify evidence-based practices and develop their own annual measurable achievement objectives. ELL students who are homeless are also eligible to receive critical homeless-specific services under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act.

Young children of immigrants and children from Hispanic families enroll in early childhood education programs at comparatively low rates, which means that many ELLs enter elementary school already behind their peers. However, a study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that when prekindergarten programs are housed in public elementary schools, ELLs enroll at higher rates than the general student population. Improving access to enrollment in private and other public early childhood programs is necessary to help ELLs, including those experiencing homelessness, take their first steps toward educational success. Still, this is not enough. Little is known regarding the co-occurrence of homelessness and ELLs among students of all ages; much more research is needed to better serve these vulnerable children. ■

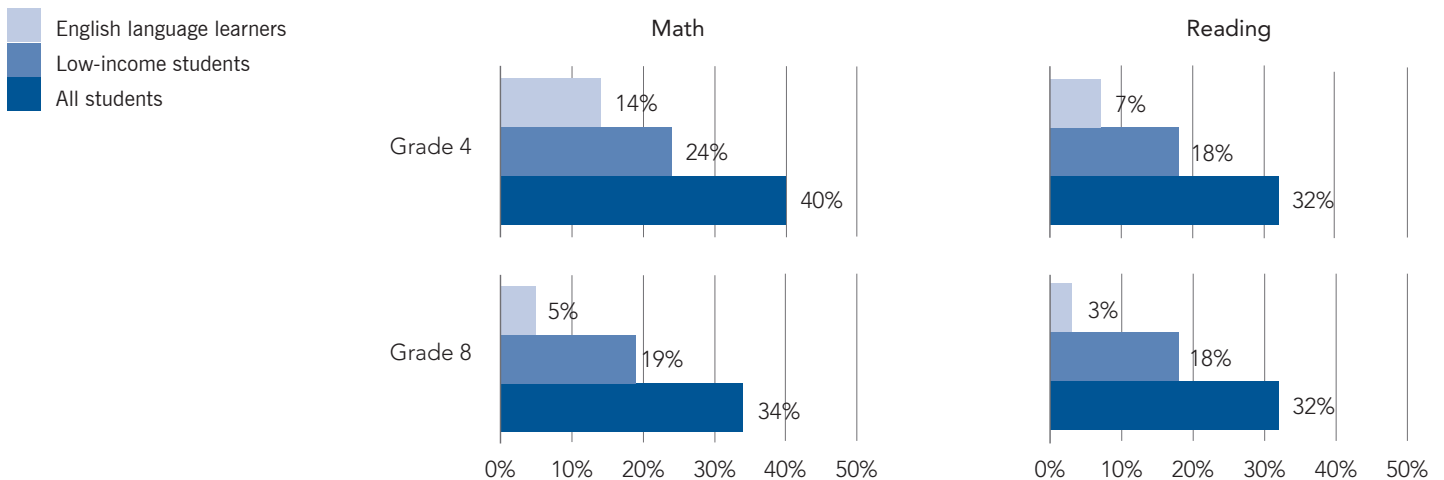
on the Homefront

Figure 1
PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS STUDENTS WHO ARE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS
 (2010–11 school year)



Note: Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states.
 Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Consolidated State Performance Reports, School Year 2010–11*.

Figure 2
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PROFICIENT OR ABOVE IN MATH AND READING IN SCHOOL YEAR 2010–11
 (by type of student)



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