



Berkeley

Center for
Cities + Schools



Planning and Learning United for Systems-Change
PLUS Research Leadership Program 2025

***Whole Child, Whole Community:
A California Playbook for
Students Experiencing Homelessness***

May 2025

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PLAYBOOK OVERVIEW



Playbook Overview

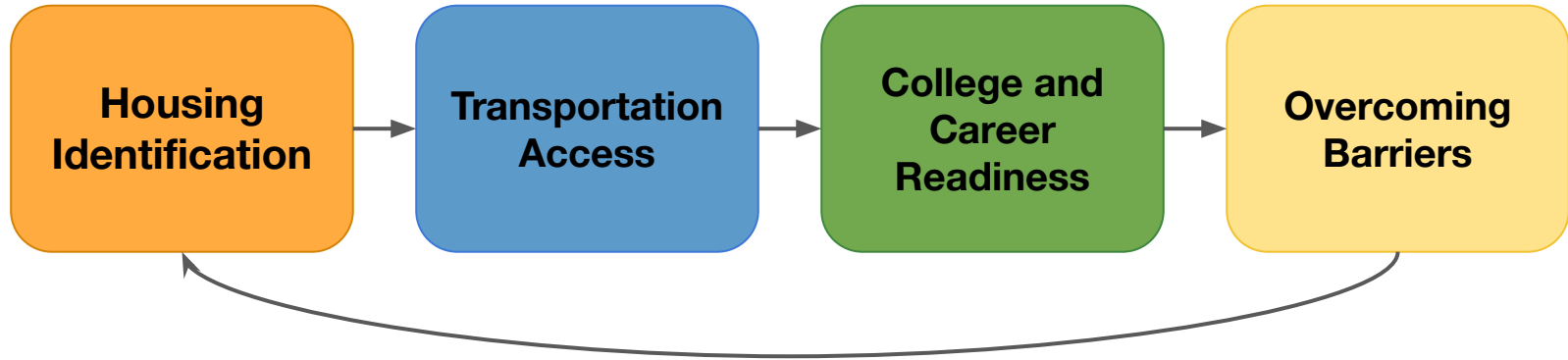
PLUS Leadership Initiative

PLUS (Planning & Learning United for Systems-Change) is a participatory action research initiative that partners graduate students with cities and school districts to better align planning, policy, and education systems in pursuit of equity. As part of the CC+S [Y-HEAR-US](#) initiative, PLUS applies a whole-child approach to improving outcomes for students experiencing homelessness and housing instability—bringing a city planning lens to uncover systemic barriers and inform cross-sector solutions.

In the 2024–2025 academic year, PLUS research focused on how coordinated planning can more effectively support these students across California. Graduate student fellows explored the use of housing questionnaires, the role of transportation in chronic absenteeism, and local efforts to expand college and career access—developing equity-driven strategies to address the complex, intersectional challenges facing the state’s most vulnerable youth.



Program Overview



2024-25 Projects

- **Analysis of California School District Housing Questionnaire Implementation and Best Practices Identification**
Ruth Rodriguez, MPP '26
- **The Impact of Transportation on Chronic Absenteeism Among Highly Mobile Students and Students Experiencing Homelessness**
Tianyue Lang, MCP '26
- **Career-Connected Learning for Homeless Students: Local Strategies**
Lara Pesce Ares, MPP '26
- **Overlapping Challenges Among California's Homeless Students** Astha
Agarwal, MA '24, PhD Candidate



CHAPTER ONE:

HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE



Chapter One: Housing Questionnaire

In alignment with federal and state law, the California Department of Education (CDE) provides LEAs with a Housing Questionnaire (HQ) template to help identify children and youth experiencing homelessness. The HQ's main objective is to help confidentially identify homeless students to provide the services and resources necessary to ensure quality and equitable public education.

Research Goals & Objectives

- Implementation Assessment
- Identification and Support Processes
- Challenges and Barriers
- Best Practice Identification
- Recommendations

Methods

- Semi-structured interviews
 - 4 LEAs across California with rural, urban, and suburban representation
- HQ implementation survey
 - 58 participants



Chapter One: Housing Questionnaire

- Total Student Enrollment in California (2023–24): 6,023,851
- Homeless Student Enrollment: 286,853
 - That means 1 in 20 California students (4.8%) were identified as homeless in the 2023–24 school year

Repeated HQ Implementation

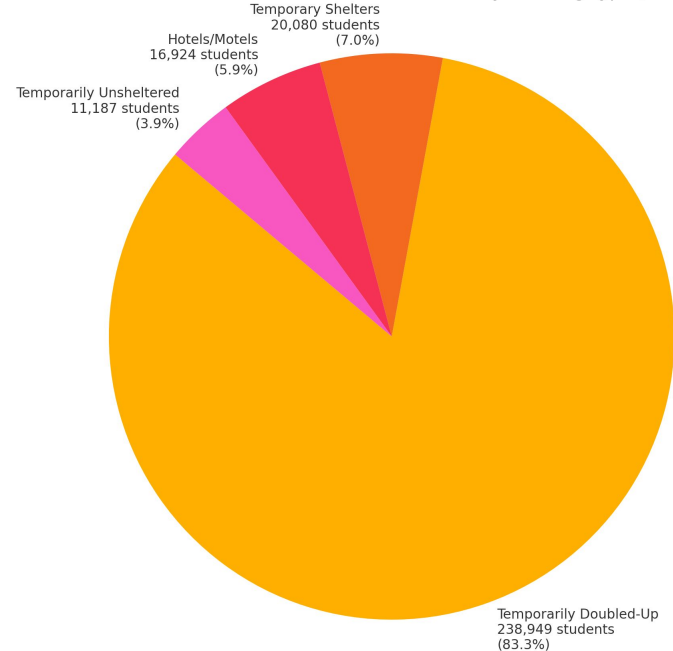
The HQ should be administered at least twice during one school year to increase identification.

Fixing SIS

Schools and Districts must contact Student Information System (SIS) third-party administrators to ensure the system works appropriately.



Statewide 2023–24 Homeless Student Enrollment by Dwelling Type (n=286,853)



Chapter One: Housing Questionnaire

Recommendations

Add resources to the Housing Questionnaire

- Information regarding basic needs centers, after-school programs, and the school homeless liaison will help families obtain support before meeting with an LEA regarding their HQ. This will also help families who are hesitant to fill out the HQ receive support.

Communicate with school districts about HQ professional development training.

- With reminders from the district, schools can implement the HQ into their regular professional development agendas, which can help increase identification numbers.

Create a statewide directory for LEAs

- An online database enabling liaisons to know points of contact in different districts will ease student transition and service continuation.

Provide rural LEAs with funds for official Student Information Systems

- Investing in Student Information Systems (SIS) instead of relying on Excel spreadsheets to keep track of students will ensure more accurate data collection.

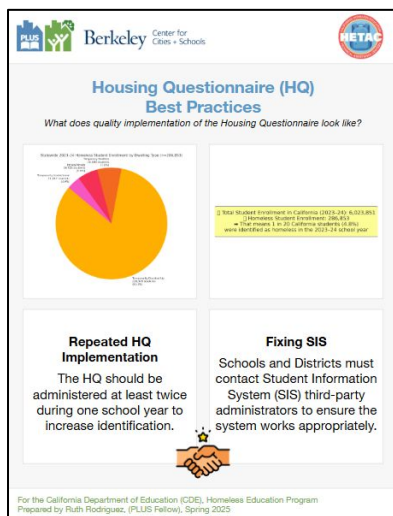
Expand CALPADS Access for all LEAs

- A lack of access creates barriers for staff members to provide better student services and support.

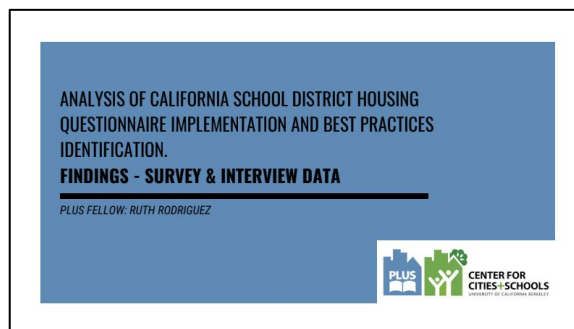


Chapter One: Final Documents

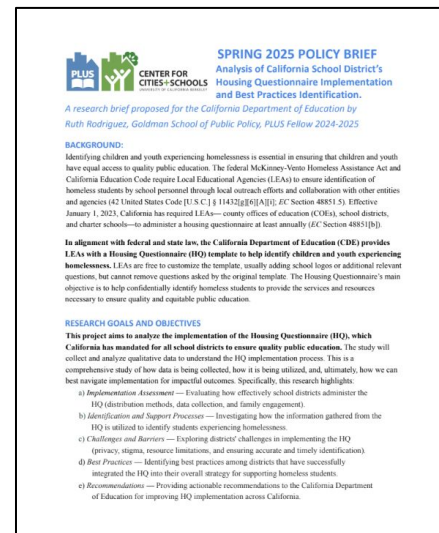
Infographic



Full Report



Two Page Policy Brief



CHAPTER TWO:

TRANSPORTATION LANDSCAPE & POLICY INNOVATION



Chapter Two: Transportation Landscape

*Under the McKinney-Vento Act, local educational agencies (LEAs) are required to provide transportation for students experiencing homelessness to and from their School of Origin (SOO) or any school a non-homeless student in the same attendance zone would be eligible to attend. **For homeless and highly mobile youth, transportation serves as a vital link between home, school, and the broader community.***

Research Goals & Objectives

- Highlighting challenges in transportation
 - Provision of SOO transportation
 - Safety concerns
- Identification of strategy directions
 - Inter-district regional collaboration
- Recommendations

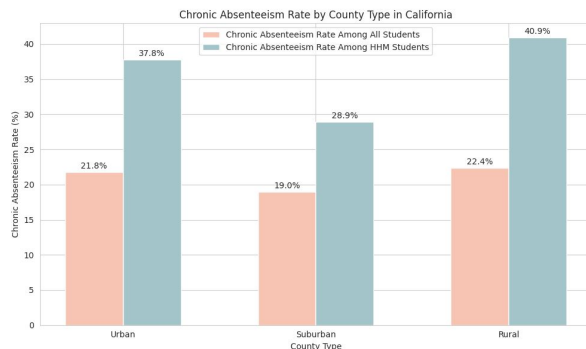
Methods

- Literature review
- Quantitative analysis of 2023-24 chronic absenteeism data
- Semi-structured interviews
 - 5 COEs and 4 LEAs



Chapter Two: WHAT DATA TELLS US ...

The Geography of Transportation Inequities



Rural counties report the highest chronic absenteeism rates, with particularly stark disparities among HHM students. A key factor is the **limited public transportation infrastructure**, which poses significant barriers to consistent school attendance for homeless and highly mobile students. High costs of ridesharing services, like HopSkipDrive further contribute to the disparity.

Challenges of Accessing Public Transportation



1. School districts encounter significant **challenges in loading funds and monitoring individual student usage**

2. Districts must submit detailed lists of eligible students to receive reimbursed. This raises **serious confidentiality and legal concerns**

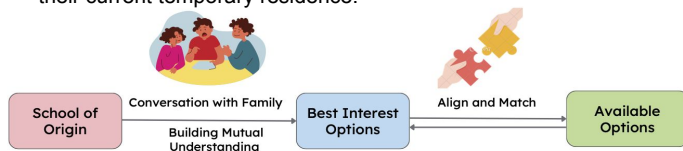
While buses are the primary mode of transportation for students traveling to school, bus agencies are very **localized**. For highly mobile youth, especially those navigating long commutes with multiple transfer points, this solution often falls short.



Chapter Two: WHAT DATA TELLS US ...

Barriers of Provision of School of Origin (SOO) Transportation

While students experiencing homelessness have the legal right to remain in their School of Origin, persistent issues with chronic absenteeism may prompt districts to initiate a Best Interest Determination process. In such cases, local education agencies (LEAs) may recommend that students enroll in schools closer to their current temporary residence.



However, many families are very adamant to stay in the school of origin due to attainment to communities of origin, fear of navigating a new school environment, and uncertainties after being displaced.

Even when families and local education liaisons (LEAs) agree to pursue nearby enrollment as a Best Interest option, it is not always a feasible solution. School placement is often constrained by enrollment periods and capacity

Safety in the Neighborhood, Transportation Journey and School



Many school sites, bus stops or metro stations **lack safe, well-maintained sidewalks, bike lanes, and crosswalks**. The quality of the environment around transportation routes—such as **exposure to noise, pollution, or violence**—also impacts student well-being and ability to travel independently.

The journey of black and brown youth can often be unsafe since they are **more likely to be targets of harassment and suspicion of fare evasion** by transit authorities on buses or BART, even if they are eligible for free rides.



An unsafe school environment may hinder their attendance; students experiencing homelessness are **disproportionately targeted by bullies** and may face challenges at school due to unstable housing, lack of resources, and potential trauma

Chapter Two: Transportation Recommendations

Encourage Creativity at the Local Level

- Provide flexible transportation and virtual learning options for newly relocated HHM students. Some local practices include:
 - District-funded vans can be used by staff to transport students
 - Encourage creative carpooling solutions with support from schools and community partners
 - Example of a community responses solution for neighborhood safe passage : [Tenderloin Safe Passage](#)

Build a Safe and Welcoming School Environment

- Facilitate collaboration between School of Origin and Receiving School to support newly transferred HMY, has transportation access needed
- For example, coordinating and talking with school counselors, social workers, and nurses for additional student support from a wholistic approach.



Chapter Two: Transportation Recommendations

Develop Inter-Agency Regional Strategies

- Collaborate with housing services providers to supporting HHM students navigating housing insecurities
- Collaborate with regional transportation agencies to explore solutions
- Free youth transit access across the Bay Area
- Provide extra afternoon buses on existing routes starting from school sites to support student transportation
- Implement Transit Assistant Program, training community members in conflict resolution to ride key routes, assist bus operators, and help ensure student safety

Foster Inter-district Collaboration

- Propose a shared funding model where counties and cities contribute to collaboratively provide transportation assistance for HHM students
- Contra Costa County of Education:
[Interagency Agreement](#)







Chapter Two: Final Documents

Infographic

Full Report

Two Page Policy Brief







Policy Landscape and Transportation Challenges Facing Highly Mobile Students and Students Experiencing Homelessness

Transportation challenges are a significant yet often overlooked factor contributing to chronic absenteeism. For students experiencing homelessness and highly mobile students, transportation often means long commutes, multiple transfers, and frequent disruptions due to factors such as crowded housing, frequent housing moves, and unavailability after school dismissal. Removing barriers to transportation on a future return will take time between home, school, and the broader community.

The Geography of Transportation Inequities

High school students experience the highest chronic absenteeism rates, with particularly high disparities among LMLA students. As a result in the United States, transportation infrastructure issues, which power the nation's economic growth and connect communities, also power homelessness and high mobility students. High levels of disability services, the high-frequency bus routes contribute to the inequity.




High schools are the primary focus of transportation equity issues, including low-cost, accessible, low-income, and high school students. Transportation is a priority for many schools and districts.

For highly mobile students, transportation is a priority for many schools and districts. Transportation is a priority for many schools and districts.

Barriers of Provision of School of Origin (SOO) Transportation


While students experiencing homelessness have the right to enroll in their School of Origin (SOO), transportation with district boundaries may present obstacles to access to a School of Origin. The Department of Education (DOE) has implemented a policy that requires the SOO to provide transportation for students who are in district closer to their current residence.



School of Origin (SOO) is the school of origin for students who are in district closer to their current residence. School of Origin (SOO) is the school of origin for students who are in district closer to their current residence.


Safety in the Neighborhood, Transportation Journey and School

Many school sites, bus stops and mobile stations lack well-maintained curbside areas, sidewalks, and crosswalks. The quality of the transportation system is a critical factor in determining the safety of the transportation system. The quality of the transportation system is a critical factor in determining the safety of the transportation system.



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For the California Department of Education (CDE), Homeless Education Program Prepared by Tanyue Jiang, (PLUS, FOCUS) Spring 2023



The Impact of Transportation on Chronic Absenteeism Among Highly Mobile Students and Students Experience Homelessness

Tianyue Lang (PLUS, Center for Cities + School)

In Collaboration with Contra Costa County Office of Education,
California Department of Education, Institute of Transportation Studies



Berkeley

Center for
Cities & Schools

Spring 2025 Policy Brief

Thursdays
May 2025

Understanding the Challenges of Transportation for Homeless and Highly Mobile Students

1

I. Background

According to the [California Department of Education](#), in the 2023–24 school year, TK–12 homeless students make up 1% of California’s student population, with a chronic absenteeism rate of 35.9%—nearly double that of their non-homeless peers (5.6%). Transportation challenges are a significant of these students’ barriers to school success. A student who is “highly mobile” frequently moves or does not have a stable place to reside and engage in typical activities such as attending school, developing lasting peer relationships, or forming attachments with caregivers or supportive adults (Bellefleur & Michael, 2020).

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, local educational agencies (LEAs) are required to provide for students experiencing homelessness to and from their school of Origin (SOO) or any school a non-homeless student in the same attendance zone would be eligible to attend, based on the student’s best interest ([California Education Code 49002.2](#)). However, implementing the provisions of this law is often difficult for the LEA to meet the complex needs for homeless and highly mobile students. For highly mobile students, transportation often involves long commutes, multiple transfers, and frequent changes in location, leading to missed school and unmet needs for displacement. Transportation barriers are compounded by geography: urban, suburban, and rural areas each pose unique challenges due to differences in public transit infrastructure. Furthermore, these challenges also vary by age group, with younger students depending more heavily on adults or their siblings for transportation.

For homeless and highly mobile youth, transportation serves as a vital link between home, school, and the broader community. Addressing transportation challenges not only supports these students’ educational access but also offers an opportunity for planners to design infrastructure from the ground up—centered on the needs of a highly mobile student population.

II. Goals and Objectives:

The research explores the transportation challenges faced by homeless and highly mobile students and identifies opportunities for creatives and partnerships to build equitable systems that support transportation access, specific objectives of:

- A. Highlighting the challenges in transportation infrastructure, the provision of school buses, transportation and safety concerns in the transportation journey;
- B. Identifying strategy, directions for local creatives, building user school environment and fostering inter-district regional collaboration

CHAPTER Three:

COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS



Chapter Three: College and Career Readiness

California now channels hundreds of millions of state and federal dollars—Golden State Pathways, Perkins V, Dual Enrollment—to expand Career & Technical Education (CTE), Linked Learning, and other college- and career-readiness programs. Districts still struggle to identify McKinney-Vento (MKV) youth early, steer them into pathways that fit their needs, and coordinate basic-needs and academic supports. Closing that gap is essential.

Research Goals & Objectives

- Highlighting challenges in CTE implementation for special populations, including MKV students
- Recommendations

Methods

- Semi-structured interviews
 - 12 practitioners in CTE, MKV, Linked Learning, continuation schools, and COEs
- Local data reviews
- Document scan



Chapter Three: WHAT DATA TELLS US ...

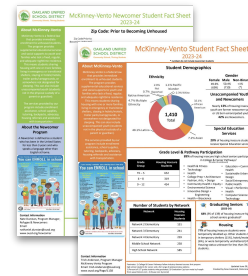
One-on-one CTE Outreach for Unhoused Ninth Graders



At SCUSD, a staff training initiative and individual follow-ups significantly improved CTE enrollment for MKV students.

Public Dashboards Drive Accountability

OUSD's annual MKV fact sheet now tracks enrollment, pathway completion, and special-education overlap. **Pathway participation jumped 13% for unhoused students from 2021-2024.**



Chapter Three: WHAT DATA TELLS US ...

Combining Career Readiness and Remediation



WCCUSD continuation schools are piloting a model that lets students make up academic credits while completing real-world internship projects. The structure allows students to pursue both academic and career priorities

Novel Programs Combine Basic Needs Support and Career-connected Learning

MercedCOE leveraged a grant to create a program for MKV students that addressed immediate needs while building pathways to stability by combining one-on-one support, financial assistance, and paid work experiences.



Chapter Three: College and Career Readiness Recommendations

Connect MKV Students to Career Services

- MKV Practitioners: Advocate for Career and College readiness as a policy priority in MTSS Tier 3 support
- Career and College Services: Prioritize enrollment of special-population youth in pathways that match their interests.
- CDE policy makers: Encourage districts to set MKV outreach benchmarks in career-readiness plans.

Make Career Programs more Accessible

- MKV Practitioners: Identify college and career and readiness programs available to students outside of traditional CTE pathways.
- Career and College Services: Offer flexible entry points and modular coursework that better serve mobile students.
- CDE: Clarify that Perkins V / MKV funds can cover barrier-removal costs tied to CTE.



Chapter Three: College and Career Readiness Recommendations

Use Standards and Data-Driven Strategies

- MKV Practitioners: Incorporate tracking of MKV students pathway enrollment and progress as part of data strategy.
- Career and College Services: Review pathway metrics related to housing insecure and foster students regularly to inform enrollment programs.
- CDE: Incorporate MKV engagement in CTE and dual enrollment into public data dashboard.

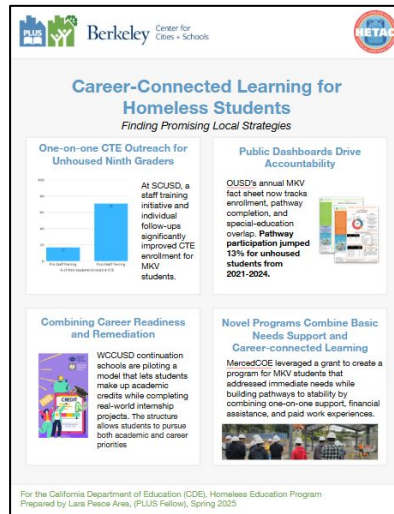
Break Down Silos between MKV and College & Career Services Departments

- MKV Practitioners: Share MKV student trends with career teams each quarter. Find opportunities to collaborate on enrollment efforts.
- Career and College Services: Include MKV staff or other special populations representation on CTE advisory and planning groups.
- CDE: Host a statewide MKV-CCR community of practice to share effective models.

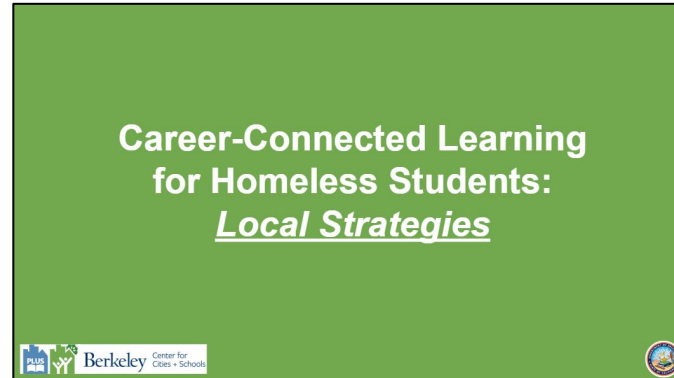


Chapter Three: Final Documents

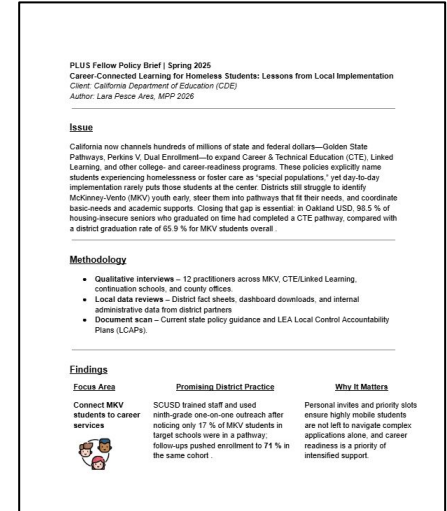
Infographic



Full Report



Two Page Policy Brief



CHAPTER FOUR:

INTERSECTIONALITY



Chapter FOUR: Intersectionality

This project explores how California can better support students experiencing homelessness—particularly those facing additional barriers related to foster care, disability, or justice involvement. It provides a foundation for more coordinated, data-informed policies and practices across education and support systems.

Research Goals & Objectives

Understand and address overlapping student barriers.

- Analyze data on access and outcomes
- Gather insights from school staff
- Highlight effective, equity-driven practices

Methods

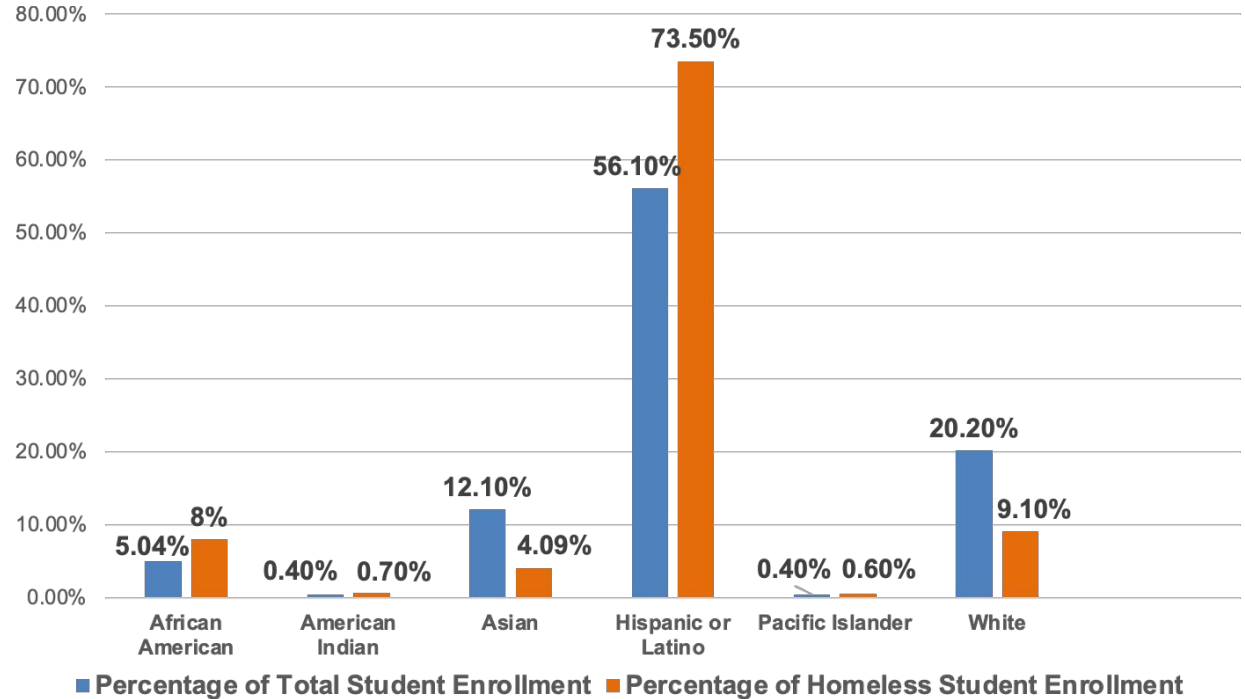
- Quantitative and qualitative data analysis
- Surveys and interviews with school staff
- Review of policy and program documents



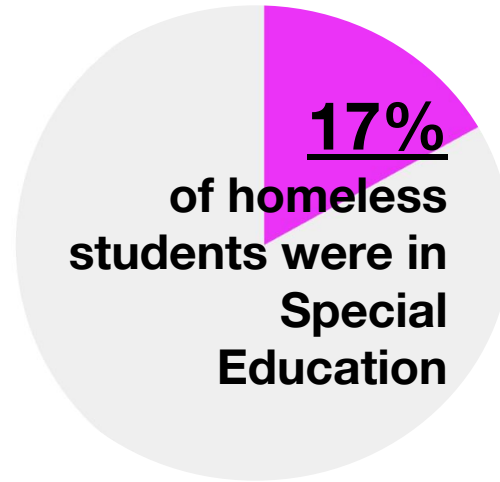
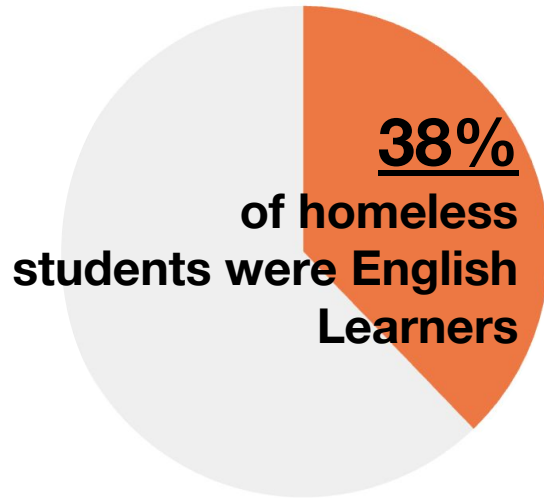
Chapter FOUR: WHAT DATA TELLS US...

Homelessness by Race/Ethnicity:

African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian, and Pacific Islander students were overrepresented in the homeless population.



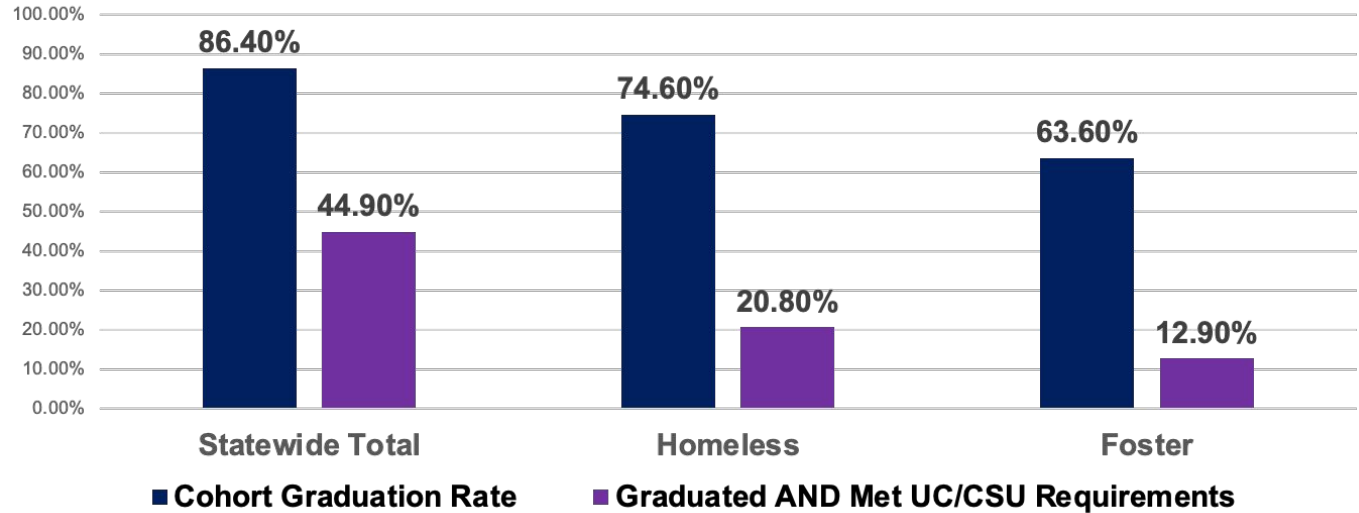
Chapter FOUR: WHAT DATA TELLS US...



Chapter FOUR: WHAT DATA TELLS US...

Graduation and UC/CSU Requirements:

Even among homeless and foster students who graduated, few met course requirements for UC and CSU universities.



Chapter FOUR: Intersectionality Recommendations

When case managing for students, ask about overlapping barriers that may be impacting school success.

- Utilize relationships with local agency partners



Get to know your local data context.

- Look up your county on DataQuest (<https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>).
- Check out the Homeless Student Data report. Navigate to Report Options and select Student Group.
 - How many local MKV students also have IEPs?
 - How many are English Learners?



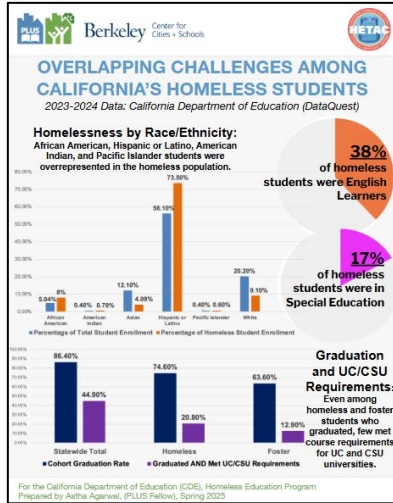
Familiarize yourself with local resources for students experiencing these overlapping barriers.

- Build relationships with local agencies that serve marginalized students to facilitate referrals.



Chapter Four: Final Documents

Infographic



Full Report

**Complex and Overlapping Challenges:
Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness and
System-Impacted Students
(e.g., Foster Care and Juvenile Justice)**

Astha Agarwal, MA
PLUS Fellow 2024-2025
PhD Education 2027

Two Page Policy Brief

2025 Policy Brief
Astha Agarwal
PhD 2027; PLUS Fellow 2024-2025

**Complex and Overlapping Challenges:
Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness and
System-Impacted Students (e.g., Foster Care and Juvenile
Justice)**

I. Background
Highly mobile students—including students experiencing homelessness, foster care, or juvenile justice system involvement—experience a range of barriers to accessing their TK-12 education which can culminate in poor academic outcomes compared to those of their peers who are not impacted by these challenges. Across these groups, highly mobile students experience many of the same barriers to education—such as housing instability, school mobility, and limited access to transportation—in addition to challenges that are unique to their specific identities and experiences. Students may also interact with one or more of these systems over time (e.g., a student experiencing homelessness who later enters foster care or becomes involved with the justice system; a student who is experiencing homelessness after running away from a foster home). Professionals serving homeless, foster, and juvenile justice-involved youth have historically worked in separate agencies supported by separate funding streams and have had limited opportunities to engage in collaboration.

II. Goals and Objectives:
This brief aims to shed light on some of the intersecting identities and overlapping experiences of students experiencing homelessness and foster-care impacted students in California, with the following goals:

- Examine the prevalence of certain intersecting identities among students experiencing homelessness;
- Highlight some of the shared educational experiences and barriers faced by students experiencing homelessness and students in foster care;
- Share best practices utilized by practitioners serving students at the intersection of various identities and systems;
- Present recommendations for supporting students with complex intersecting identities in accessing their education.

III. Methods
This brief utilizes quantitative and qualitative methods to present:

- Data on California's homeless, foster, and socioeconomically disadvantaged student population in the 2023-2024 academic year, obtained from California



TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The California Playbook continues Y-HEAR-US's ongoing efforts to advance systemic change and improve support for highly mobile and unhoused students across the state. Developed through deep partnerships with students, educators, and civic leaders, the Playbook is both a reflection of lived experience and a call to coordinated action.

Looking Ahead:

- CC+S continues to collaborate with the California Department of Education (CDE) and the Homeless Education Technical Assistance Centers (HETACs) to **share findings and elevate promising practices**.
- The Playbook will serve as a **living resource to guide policy, planning, and cross-sector strategies** that address the root causes of educational and housing instability.
- Through the Y-HEAR-US initiative, CC+S will **support the development of local and regional solutions** that center youth voice and advance whole-child, systems-level change.

