

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Invisibility of children experiencing homelessness in OC highlighted in new report

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In this 2017 file photo, a woman and her daughter prepare to move into a homeless shelter after living in an encampment near the Santa Ana River bed. (File photo by Cindy Yamanaka, Orange County Register/SCNG)

It's difficult to count and track the number of homeless people in Orange County, especially children. These children have higher rates of absenteeism and face several challenges in obtaining a well-rounded education.

The 2022 *Point In Time Count* tallied 721 children under the age of 18 in Orange

County who were experiencing homelessness. But a recent OC Grand Jury report notes that number differs greatly from the 23,246 children identified by the county's school districts based on the federal *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*.

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The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires all jurisdictions to complete the Point In Time count every two years; in 2022, Orange County sent teams out over three days to canvas communities to count those living in cars and on the streets as well as calculate the number of individuals and families in emergency shelters and transitional housing programs.

HUD categorizes homelessness as either sheltered or unsheltered. Sheltered homelessness refers to people found in emergency shelters, transitional housing or other temporary arrangements.

“That does not count people who are experiencing homelessness who lack a fixed nightly abode, who fit into potentially staying with another family member, in a motel, in a variety of other settings,” Doug Becht, director of *OC Health Care Coordination*, said. That’s where McKinney-Vento comes in.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law created to support the enrollment and education of homeless students. In contrast to HUD, various other living arrangements meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless, such as youth who are living in motels, recreational vehicles or sharing housing with multiple families.

While there are efforts from the county and school districts to address homelessness and ensure that no student is left behind, homeless children are failing to receive enough support from either to address their unique needs and challenges in getting an education. The OC Grand Jury report says that because the county and schools use different definitions to identify homeless students, children are being undercounted, leading to a negative impact on their education.

“What has happened is the invisibility continues to be persistent because we fail to operate under the national definition of students experiencing homelessness,” Jennifer Friend, CEO at *Project Hope Alliance*, said. “It is the broader definition. Our greatest challenge has been in lifting the invisibility of how many kids there really are in our county experiencing homelessness.”

Schools are not designed to meet every need of students experiencing food or housing insecurity, transportation barriers or mental health crises, Friend said. As a solution, school districts have worked with organizations like Project Hope Alliance to bring resources directly to students.

Project Hope Alliance is an organization that places case managers at school sites for children and youth experiencing homelessness. Case managers identify homeless students and address their basic needs, such as food, clothing or transportation. They also conduct regular check-ins, provide educational support and connect children and families to other resources.

“In the state of California, 21% of all students experiencing homelessness are chronically absent versus only 9.8% of their housed peers being absent. Yet, only 8.3% of all school districts receive any type of money to support students experiencing homelessness,” Friend said. “The invisibility perpetuates the lack of resources, which then results in us failing our kids.”

The organization works with several Orange County districts, including Newport-Mesa Unified School District. Socorro Shiel, an assistant superintendent with the district, said much of what students need is outside of schools’ control, and they rely on strong partnerships with resources such as Project Hope Alliance, which offer ongoing support for homeless students.



“It really is about being a conduit for other community-based organizations, for other city and county services to help families,” Shiel said. “The goal for schools is just to have the strongest families possible because the stronger the family, the stronger the student is and the less adult issues a student has to be worrying about.”

An Tran, director of the *OC Social Services Agency*, said the goals of McKinney-Vento are different from the goals and programs operated within the county. The County of Orange doesn’t have a specific department that targets homeless children because they are picked up with the care for families, Tran said.

“The reason why is many times, individuals, especially children, come with families,” Tran said. “We have programs that we operate on behalf of the state and federal government that provide services to homeless families as a whole. Many of these children come within family units and the entire family unit needs care and needs supportive services.”

The county also works with the *Orange County Department of Education* and school districts to help with transportation and other resources for children in the foster care system, Tran said. Liaisons are in place to help the county coordinate the care and educational needs of the foster children.

Each school district is responsible for helping fulfill the needs of homeless students, OC Department of Education homeless education coordinator Jeanna Awrey said, noting schools provide the resources they can to best support homeless students, but “if there’s not a house, there’s nothing we can do.”

“That’s the biggest challenge because we can help them get to school, we can help them get school supplies, help them to a tu-

tor,” Awrey said. “But, if they don’t have a permanent house that they’re going to on a daily basis, that will make it very difficult for a parent and the child.”

The OC Grand Jury concluded that “public schools are failing far too often in their efforts to educate children experiencing homelessness.”

The jury recommends the OC Department of Education form a joint task force made up of district-level administrators from each school district and leadership from nonprofit organizations that serve homeless families to address absenteeism, low test scores and low graduation rates of children experiencing homelessness.

It is also recommended that local school districts develop a plan that includes yearly mandatory McKinney-Vento Act training for all district and school administrators, teachers, office staff and counselors.

As for the county, the Grand Jury wants to see it develop a plan to increase the number of family shelters, permanent supportive housing and low-cost/long-term housing for families. The jury said the County Board of Supervisors should find financial funding to support all Orange County school districts with enrolled children experiencing homelessness to meet the mandate to equitably educate these students.

Friend believes the solution is for every government agency at every level and community members to join together to build a system that works for homeless children.

“It’s time to build a strategy to meet the needs that students are experiencing outside of the classroom that are preventing them from accessing their education. That’s going to require our community to come together at every level,” Friend said. “It’s going to take all of us,” said Friend.



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