



Hidden in Plain Sight:

Homeless Children & Youth Steering Committee 2025 Annual Report



OKLAHOMA
COMMISSION ON
CHILDREN AND
YOUTH

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Members of the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee (HCYSC) and partner organizations representing parent voice, youth leadership, higher education, state government, and the private sector convened around a shared goal: supporting children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness.

Pictured (left to right): James Ray, OCCY Parent Partnership Board; Venicesa Sampson, Member Experience Officer, Oklahoma's Credit Union; Tammy Killman, Assistant Vice President of Member Experience, Oklahoma's Credit Union; Jae Burley, OKC Youth Action Board; Natalie Dickson, Senior Research Assistant, OU E-Team; Lisa White, Senior Project Coordinator, OU E-Team; Jennifer Weins, SRAE Parent Education Specialist, Oklahoma State Department of Health; and Marcellus Seals, OKC Youth Action Board.

▶ Executive Summary

Homelessness among children, youth, and families in Oklahoma is increasing and remains significantly under-identified. Most Oklahoma children and youth experiencing homelessness are not in shelters; they are doubled up with relatives or friends (often referred to as “couch surfing” or “couch homeless”), staying in motels, or moving frequently between temporary arrangements. These “hidden” situations make homelessness harder to detect and harder to address.

Under 10 O.S. § 601.6c, the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth (OCCY) is required to review data, identify barriers, and present policy recommendations annually to state leaders. This 2025 report provides a concise overview of current trends, system gaps, existing strengths, and actionable strategies to improve outcomes.

In 2025, the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee (HCYSC), convened by OCCY, adopted a statewide 2025–2027 Strategic Plan to strengthen policy, partnerships, and data-driven approaches to preventing and ending child and youth homelessness. This report aligns with that framework and provides annual legislative findings required under 10 O.S. § 601.6c.

Key Findings

- Data from the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) show that the number of public school students identified as experiencing homelessness has risen substantially in recent years, increasing from 21,988 students in the 2021-22 school year to 26,673 students in 2024-25, a growth of approximately 4,685 students (about 21%) statewide. (OSDE, 2022; 2025).
- Infants, toddlers, and unaccompanied youth remain the most undercounted and least served groups.
- Most Oklahoma students experiencing homelessness are in doubled-up living situations and do not access shelters, making their homelessness less visible and more likely to go unidentified, delaying access to transportation, educational stability, and other McKinney-Vento supports.

- Transportation, documentation, and mental health access are major barriers across the state.
- Oklahoma has expanded efforts in identification, statewide screening for student housing instability, access to required educational documentation (such as enrollment and immunization records), and cross-system coordination.

Priority Recommendations

- Strengthen identification in schools, childcare, and state systems.
- Reduce barriers to accessing pre-kindergarten and other early childhood programs for children and families experiencing homelessness.
- Expand youth-specific housing and supports.
- Improve transportation and documentation access.
- Increase behavioral health resources tailored for youth and families.
- Strengthen prevention strategies statewide.
- Support coordinated, data-driven decision-making across systems.

▶ Statutory Charge & Definitions

Statutory Charge (10 O.S. § 601.6c)

The Legislature directs OCCY to:

- Review data on homeless children and youth;
- Identify barriers and propose solutions;
- Engage state agencies and community partners; and
- Report findings annually to the Senate President Pro Tempore and House Speaker.

Definition of Homeless Children & Youth (State + McKinney-Vento)

A homeless child or youth in Oklahoma is 21 or younger and meets one or more of the following:

- Lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence;
- Lives in motels, hotels, shelters, transitional housing, or public/private spaces not designed for sleeping;
- Is doubled-up due to economic hardship or loss of housing;
- Is unaccompanied and without stable shelter; or
- Lacks a guardian willing and able to provide adequate housing.

These definitions include infants, toddlers, school-age children, unaccompanied minors, and transition-age youth.

▶ Oklahoma Landscape & Data Overview

Overview

Homelessness among Oklahoma children and youth is increasing. Schools, youth organizations, early childhood programs, and behavioral health providers all report higher need, more complex cases, and limited resources. Most homelessness remains hidden, occurring outside traditional shelter systems.

School Data (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act)

Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, school districts are required to identify and support students who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including students who are doubled up, staying in motels, or living in shelters.

- Oklahoma school districts identified 26,673 PK–12 students as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence in SY 2024–2025 (OSDE, 2025). Last count information.
- The majority (83%) of Oklahoma’s McKinney-Vento-identified students were in doubled-up living arrangements due to economic hardship or eviction (OSDE, 2025).
- Transportation remains the most common request for McKinney-Vento supports across districts, especially in rural communities.

In addition to statewide counts, districts report emerging trends based on information submitted by local McKinney-Vento liaisons to the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), including annual and ongoing program reporting:

- Families experiencing eviction or severe cost burden;
- Students staying in motels; and
- Rural homelessness where no shelter options exist.

Implementation of the Universal Residency Questionnaire has strengthened identification; however, gaps remain in consistently identifying students experiencing couch homelessness, highly mobile families, and students in rural districts where staffing, training, and access to services are limited.

Infants and Toddlers (0–5)

- Young children (0–5) remain the least likely to be captured in statewide data systems, as most are not yet connected to public schools.
- Housing instability is consistently identified as one of the top three barriers to consistent child-care attendance and early learning engagement (OKCCR&R, 2024).
- Early childhood providers report increases in:
 - Families cycling between motels, temporary stays, or doubled-up arrangements;
 - Infants and toddlers missing developmental screenings due to mobility;
 - Families unable to secure child care due to lack of documentation or transportation.

Unaccompanied Youth (Ages 14–24)

- An estimated 450 unaccompanied youth (ages 14–24) experienced homelessness in Oklahoma in 2024 (Read Frontier, 2025).

- Oklahoma has 329 youth-specific shelter and transitional housing beds, leaving a clear gap between need and available capacity (Oklahoma Memo, 2024).
- Youth providers report a rise in young people sleeping in cars, storage units, tents, or rotating among friends' homes.
- Youth avoid adult shelters due to safety concerns, trauma histories, and environments not designed for adolescent or young adult needs.
- Rural youth face additional barriers, including no youth shelters, limited transportation, and long distances to services.

Behavioral Health Indicators

- Oklahoma students experiencing housing instability report 2–3× higher rates of depressive symptoms compared to their housed peers (YRBS, 2024).
- Students experiencing homelessness are four times more likely to report suicidal ideation (YRBS, 2024).
- Housing-unstable youth also show higher rates of:
 - Chronic absenteeism;
 - Substance use;
 - Exposure to violence or unsafe environments.

Point-in-Time (PIT) Count

- The 2024 PIT Count identified 5,497 Oklahomans experiencing homelessness on a single night (HUD, 2024).
- Of these, 810 were unaccompanied youth ages 18–24 counted in households without children (HUD, 2024).
- The PIT Count is widely understood to undercount youth and families, as it excludes:
 - Doubled-up living arrangements;
 - Motel stays;
 - Many rural households experiencing hidden homelessness.

Community Trends

- Providers across the state note rising family homelessness linked to evictions, domestic violence, cost burden, and unstable employment.
- Youth Services of Tulsa documented its highest crisis-housing demand in over a decade (YST, 2025).
- Oklahoma City youth providers report increases in youth sleeping in vehicles, couch-surfing, or remaining unsheltered after aging out of supports.
- Rural communities report:
 - No youth shelters available in many counties;
 - Very limited rental availability;
 - Lack of public transportation; and
 - Higher reliance on doubled-up situations not captured in data.

➤ Key Gaps & Barriers



Darryl Savell experienced homelessness with his then four-year-old daughter after losing his job and employer-provided housing at a hotel in Oklahoma City. During the winter months, they faced limited shelter options, as many emergency shelters were full or served only women and children, creating significant barriers for a single father seeking family shelter. With support from City Rescue Mission, Darryl and his daughter secured temporary shelter and received wraparound services and comprehensive case management. Although the family is now stably housed, Darryl continues to share his lived experience to educate policymakers and stakeholders about gaps in family shelter capacity and the importance of trauma-informed supports in schools and service systems.

Under-Identification

- Hidden homelessness is common and difficult to detect.
- Inconsistent screening across schools, early childhood programs, and agencies.

Limited Youth-Specific Housing

- Very few shelter beds for youth 16–24.
- Limited safe spaces for pregnant/parenting youth.
- Rural areas often have no youth housing options.

Documentation Barriers

- Lack of birth certificates, IDs, or Social Security cards limits access to school, work, health care, and housing.
- Youth exiting foster care or juvenile justice often leave without essential paperwork.

Community Resistance

- Misunderstanding about youth homelessness can delay shelter expansion or local services.
- Neighborhood concerns often overshadow the needs of youth.

Transportation Challenges

- Long distances in rural areas; no public transit.
- School transportation support can require extensive coordination.
- Families lack reliable vehicles or car seats.

Mental & Behavioral Health Access

- Waitlists for child and adolescent therapy.
- Limited trauma-informed care for youth experiencing homelessness.
- Few behavioral health providers embedded in shelters or schools.

Fragmented Systems

- Minimal data-sharing across education, child welfare, housing, and health.
- Eligibility confusion prevents timely access to services.
- Transition planning varies among agencies.
- Limited Pre-K availability and enrollment requirements often prevent children experiencing homelessness from accessing early learning opportunities.

➤ Current State Efforts & Strengths

Oklahoma has built meaningful infrastructure to support children and youth experiencing homelessness; however, these efforts are not yet sufficient to meet the scale, complexity, and growth of need statewide. While this progress reflects momentum, increased coordination, and growing alignment across education, early childhood, housing, behavioral health, and youth services, significant gaps remain, particularly for children and youth experiencing “couch homelessness,” those in rural communities, and families requiring prevention-focused supports.

Cross-System Collaboration (HCYSC)

OCCY’s Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee (HCYSC) brings together state agencies, school personnel, behavioral health partners, community providers, parents, and youth with lived experience. The Committee’s work has improved data sharing, elevated parent and youth voice, and established a unified statewide framework through the 2025–2027 Strategic Plan.



Susan Agel, Chair of the OCCY Homeless Children and Youth Subcommittee, emphasized the importance of cross-system collaboration to strengthen supports for youth experiencing homelessness.

Universal Residency Questionnaire (URQ)

The statewide adoption of the URQ has significantly improved early identification in schools and early childhood settings. Districts report more consistent screening practices, earlier detection of housing instability, and stronger alignment with McKinney-Vento eligibility requirements.

McKinney-Vento Liaisons

District liaisons continue to be a cornerstone of Oklahoma’s response to student homelessness. They provide direct support for identification, transportation, enrollment, and school stability, particularly in rural districts where families face long travel distances and limited public transit.

Homeless Youth ID Program

Oklahoma’s youth identification program has removed common documentation barriers for unaccompanied youth. Fee waivers, clearer eligibility processes, and interagency cooperation have increased access to IDs, birth certificates, and essential records necessary for school, employment, and housing.

Early Childhood Coordination

Early childhood programs, including Early Head Start, Head Start, Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, and home visiting services have strengthened capacity to identify families facing housing instability. Providers report improved collaboration with school districts and increased referrals for developmental screening and family support.

Legislative Engagement & Interim Study Leadership



Rep. Daniel Pae, R, represents Oklahoma's 62nd District.

- Representative Daniel Pae sponsored an interim study on youth homelessness, with OCCY and partners coordinating presenters and statewide data. The study elevated youth homelessness as a bipartisan legislative priority.
- OCCY hosted a town hall with Senator Brenda Stanley, Representative Pae, and a staff representative from Congresswoman Stephanie Bice's office, strengthening state and federal engagement on youth homelessness.

Community Innovation

Examples of community-led innovation include:

- Youth Services of Tulsa expanding crisis response, drop-in supports, and short-term housing options, reaching the highest demand in more than a decade.
- Pivot, Inc. operating one of Oklahoma's only youth-focused tiny home communities, providing safe, stable, developmentally appropriate housing paired with case management, education and employment supports, and wraparound services. Pivot's model has received national attention as a scalable and cost-effective approach for transition-age youth.
- Rural nonprofits piloting mobile outreach, transportation supports, and motel-based stabilization strategies in communities without youth shelters.
- Oklahoma's Credit Union partners with youth programs to provide financial literacy and banking support for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, offering practical skills that promote long-term stability.
- Faith-based and volunteer groups offering meals, clothing drives, mentoring, and transportation supports that fill gaps in rural counties.
- Positive Tomorrows opening three Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms exclusively serving children experiencing homelessness, providing trauma-informed early learning, family supports, and stability during a critical developmental period.

Together, these community-driven models reflect Oklahoma's capacity for innovation and highlight opportunities to scale effective practices statewide.

Youth and Parent Engagement with Lived Experience

OCCY integrates youth and parent voice into statewide planning and policy development. Individuals with lived experience, including those who have faced housing instability, provide critical insight into real barriers and systems gaps. This engagement strengthens decision making and aligns Oklahoma with national best practices for responsive, effective policy.

- The OCCY Parent Partnership Board elevates parent voice to inform system improvements and family-centered practices.
- OCCY is launching a statewide Youth Advisory Council in 2026, developed in partnership with youth who have varied lived experiences, including homelessness.
- Youth and parents contribute to HCYSC discussions and listening sessions, ensuring that recommendations reflect real experiences and practical needs.

► Policy & Practice Recommendations

These recommendations support the statutory purpose outlined in 10 O.S. § 601.6c, reflect the findings of this report, and align with the priorities established in the HCYSC 2025–2027 Strategic Plan, including strengthening policy, expanding partnerships, and improving data and continuous improvement.

1. Strengthen Early Identification and Reduce Access Barriers

Early and consistent identification is crucial for connecting children, youth, and families to supports.

Recommended Actions

- Ensure school districts receive ongoing McKinney-Vento and URQ training, with particular support for rural districts.
- Expand identification efforts for infants and toddlers (0–5) through early childhood programs, home visiting, CCR&R agencies, pediatric providers, and child welfare partners.
- Streamline or eliminate documentation requirements (e.g., proof of address, guardianship paperwork) that prevent families or unaccompanied youth from accessing services, child care, or enrollment.
- Improve access to transportation support for students experiencing homelessness, especially in rural and high-poverty areas.

2. Expand Youth Housing, Crisis Response, and Family Stability Supports

Oklahoma's current housing and shelter capacity is insufficient to meet statewide need.

Recommended Actions

- Support efforts to increase youth-specific crisis beds, transitional housing units, and host-home programs, prioritizing regions with no youth shelters.
- Strengthen family stability strategies that help prevent homelessness, including eviction prevention assistance, flexible crisis supports, and landlord mediation strategies.
- Promote youth-centered models (e.g., drop-in centers, transitional living, wraparound staffing) that are developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed.
- Strengthen behavioral health access for youth experiencing homelessness through mobile teams, telehealth, and community partnerships.

3. Advance Cross-System Collaboration and Partnerships

Ending child and youth homelessness requires coordinated, aligned action across state, tribal, and community systems.

Recommended Actions

- Continue to strengthen the work of the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee, including cross-agency initiatives and shared priority setting.
- Foster partnerships between schools, early childhood programs, youth-serving organizations, higher education, faith communities, and local housing providers.
- Support local communities in developing regional coalitions to address rural homelessness, transportation barriers, and service gaps.

- Encourage opportunities to leverage federal grants, philanthropic partners, and private sector collaborations to expand supports for children and youth.

4. Improve Data Quality, Sharing, and Continuous Improvement

Accurate data is essential for understanding need and measuring progress.

Recommended Actions

- Strengthen statewide data coordination for children and youth experiencing homelessness, including schools, child welfare, early childhood, health, and behavioral health systems.
- Encourage communities to use both quantitative and qualitative data, including youth and family voice, to identify trends and inform system improvements.
- Strengthen efforts to identify early childhood homelessness and barriers to early childhood education through consistent screening practices and coordinated training.
- Improve rural data collection methods that capture “hidden homelessness” such as doubled-up living and motel stays.

5. Reduce System Barriers That Disproportionately Impact Unaccompanied Youth

Unaccompanied youth face unique legal and logistical challenges.

Recommended Actions

- Remove administrative barriers that prevent unaccompanied youth from obtaining necessary documents (IDs, birth certificates, medical records, school transcripts).
- Expand training for youth-serving providers, schools, and housing partners on youth rights and consent frameworks.
- Improve access to education, employment, and postsecondary pathways for youth experiencing homelessness.

➤ Conclusion

This report is titled *Hidden in Plain Sight* because the homelessness experienced by Oklahoma’s children and youth often goes unnoticed, despite its presence in every corner of our state. The data make clear that thousands of young people, infants, students, and unaccompanied youth, are living in unstable, unsafe, and temporary conditions that jeopardize their well-being and their futures. Most are not in shelters. They are doubled-up, staying in motels, or moving from place to place, situations that fail to meet their basic needs and remain largely invisible in traditional data systems.

Oklahoma has strong partners, committed agencies, and community organizations working tirelessly on behalf of these children and youth. Yet the scale and urgency of the crisis now demand more than the current system is resourced to provide. Families facing eviction, toddlers missing critical developmental screenings, and youth sleeping in vehicles or rotating among friends’ homes illustrate the real human impact behind the numbers.

Oklahoma now has a clear roadmap - the **HCYSC 2025–2027 Strategic Plan** - to strengthen policy, partnerships, and data-driven solutions. What has been hidden in plain sight can no longer remain unseen, and this report’s findings complement the Plan’s call for coordinated statewide action. Legislators have a pivotal opportunity to advance both the annual recommendations required by statute and the longer-term strategic priorities endorsed by stakeholders statewide. The decisions made now will shape outcomes for thousands of Oklahoma’s children and youth. They are counting on us to act with urgency, clarity, and commitment.

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