

# Students Experiencing Homelessness in Washington's K–12 Public Schools

2016–2023 Trends, Characteristics, and Academic Outcomes

## Executive Summary: Key Findings, Takeaways, and Building Changes Responses

The number of students experiencing homelessness in Washington has surged to the highest level ever recorded. This comprehensive report analyzes state data to reveal the educational challenges faced by unhoused students and ways in which these challenges can be addressed. Each of the 42,436 unhoused students in Washington has their own individual story, but they are all young people who do not have a safe, stable place to live. These data represent real students who have unlimited potential and are facing tough odds; it is up to all of us to help them reach it.



### A Closer Look at Local Data

In addition to providing the statewide data presented in this report, we updated our online dashboard as a resource for viewing student homelessness data, broken down by school district, legislative district, and county.

- The dashboard features data for:
- Number and percentage of students experiencing homelessness.
- Percentage of students experiencing homelessness who are students of color.
- Number and percentage of students experiencing homelessness by grade band.
- Percentage of students experiencing homelessness by nighttime residence.
- Outcome rates for students experiencing homelessness—with comparisons to their housed peers—in attendance, English language arts proficiency, mathematics proficiency, and on-time graduation.

Visit the dashboard at [buildingchanges.org/resources/local-data-and-outcomes](https://buildingchanges.org/resources/local-data-and-outcomes)



## Key Takeaway 1

The count of students identified as experiencing homelessness is the highest that Washington has ever seen.

■ Number of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Washington, 2009–2023

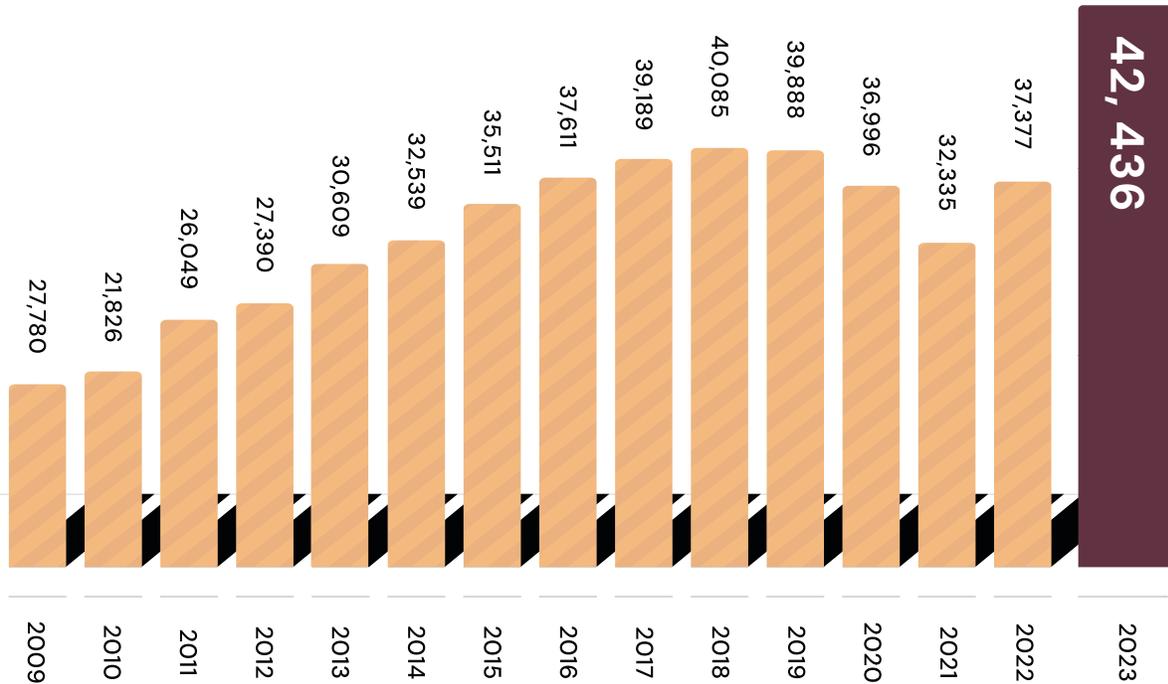


Fig T1.a

After a steep decrease after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness in Washington has climbed to the highest number since consistent data publishing began—over 2,000 more students than the second highest count on record (2018). Multiple factors may play into this increase such as increased need, increased ability for districts to identify students, and an expiration of pandemic-era policies meant at preventing homelessness. Washington had the sixth largest number of homeless students in the country and the fifth highest rate.



## Key Takeaway 1

### State and National Percentages for Students Experiencing Homelessness, 2010–2022 (Department of Education and National Center for Homeless Education)

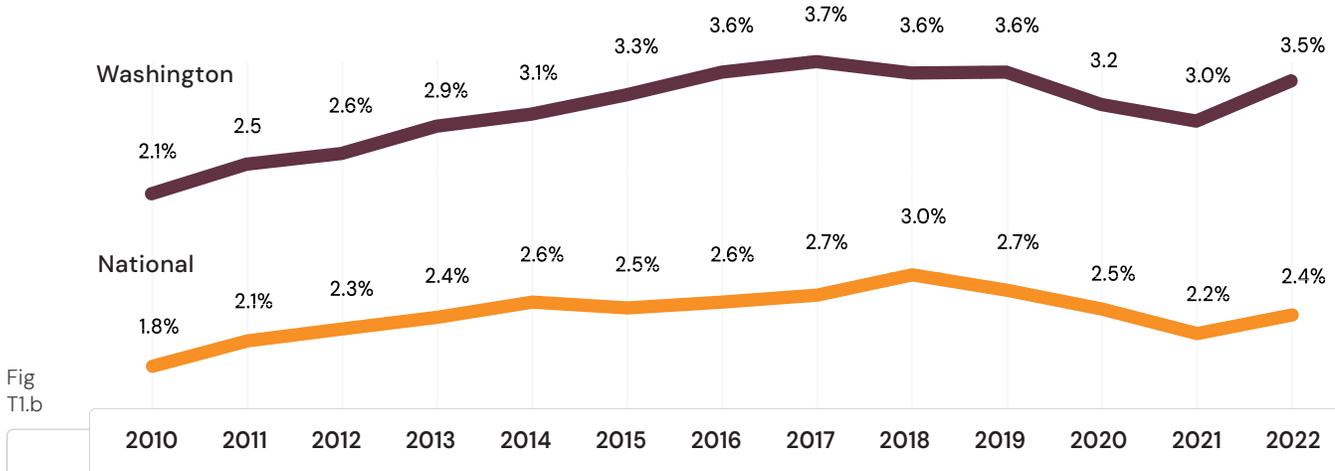


Fig T1.b

### Number and Percentage of Students Experiencing Homelessness by State, 2023 (Dep. of Ed.)

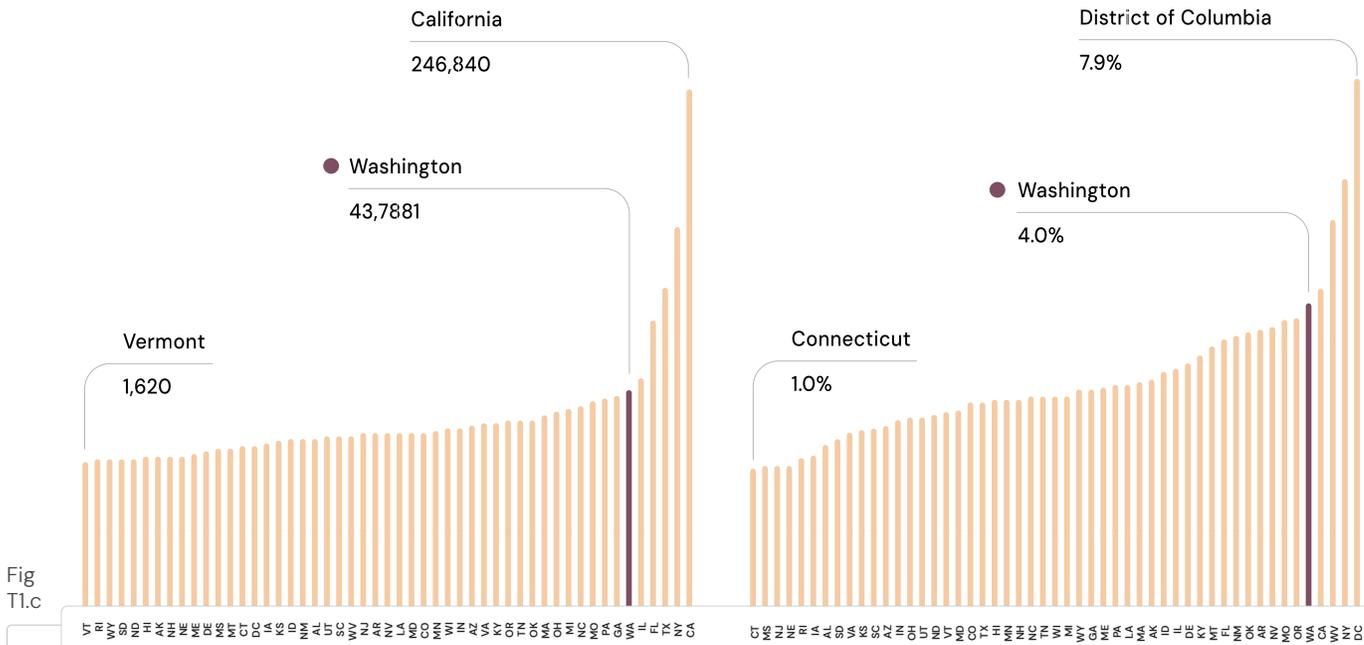


Fig T1.c

## Key Takeaway 1

### Building Changes Reponds

The rise in students experiencing homelessness may reflect an actual increase in homelessness, but is also likely influenced by improved identification within school districts. While the overall numbers are concerning, more accurate identification increases those students' eligibility for services.

Student and family homelessness is often hidden from public view, commonly resulting in narratives that center homeless adults. To build public support for policies that better serve these underrecognized students, Building Changes is prioritizing narrative-shifting efforts to educate the public about the reality of "hidden homelessness."

To support school districts' identification and student assistance efforts, Building Changes developed the [Assessment and Building Capacity \(ABC\) Tool](#). Designed specifically for McKinney-Vento liaisons (dedicated staff responsible for identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness), this tool helps districts create actionable plans that improve student success. To date, Building Changes has worked with 19 school districts and 1 charter school to implement it, and partners are reporting notable improvements, particularly in identifying students eligible for support.

To meet growing needs, Building Changes also plans to expand the use of the ABC Tool, providing additional support to districts facing an increase in students experiencing homelessness.

Further, beyond direct support, Building Changes has made increasing funding for student and youth homelessness services a policy priority in 2025. With more students experiencing homelessness than ever before, securing additional resources is more critical than ever.

## Key Takeaway 2

### Students of color experience homelessness at disproportionately high rates.

Percentage of Students by Housing Status, 2023

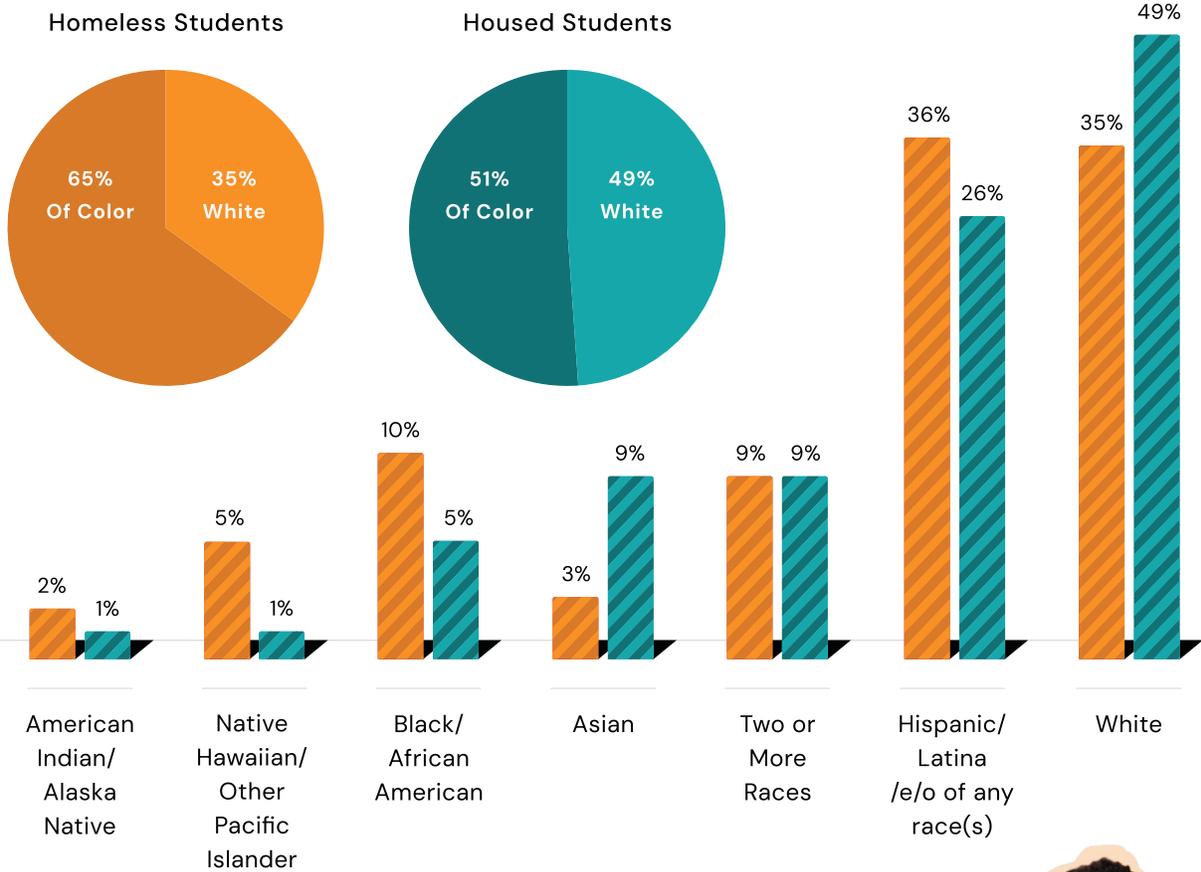


Fig T2.a

In all, 65% of students experiencing homelessness in 2023 were students of color, compared to 51% of the overall housed student population. The rates of student homelessness were highest among Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (13.3%), American Indian/Alaskan Native students (9.0%), and Black/African American students (8.4%). The largest increase in student homelessness from 2022 to 2023 was among Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students and Black/African American students.



## Key Takeaway 2

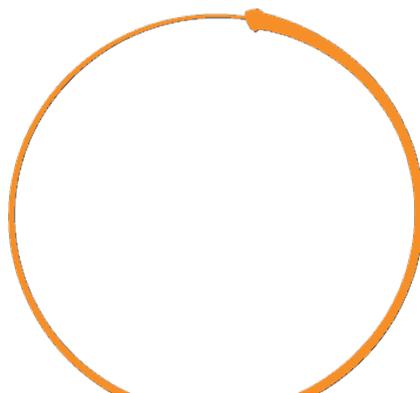
### Building Changes Reponds

Students of color face unique barriers that contribute to their overrepresentation among students experiencing homelessness. Addressing these disparities requires an intentional focus on racial equity rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Building Changes applies a targeted universalism lens (coined by John A. Powell) to our work, which acknowledges equity rather than equality. In our training, technical assistance, grantmaking, and use of the ABC Tool, we prioritize the needs of students of color by identifying their barriers and co-creating innovative strategies with communities to better support them.

Public funding structures are beginning to reflect the need for racial equity. The Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) authorizing statute prioritizes funding for organizations that demonstrate a commitment to developing and implementing evidence-informed strategies, ones that address racial disparities in student homelessness.

Aligning with HSSP priorities, Building Changes plans to expand our grantmaking to organizations working to address racial inequities. The REACH Center, which recently expanded its HSSP program through a partnership with Chief Leschi Tribal School, is among early successes.



### Key Takeaway 3

## Cities have the largest number of students experiencing homelessness, but rates are highest in rural locations.

Percentage and Number of Students Experiencing Homelessness in Washington by Location, 2023

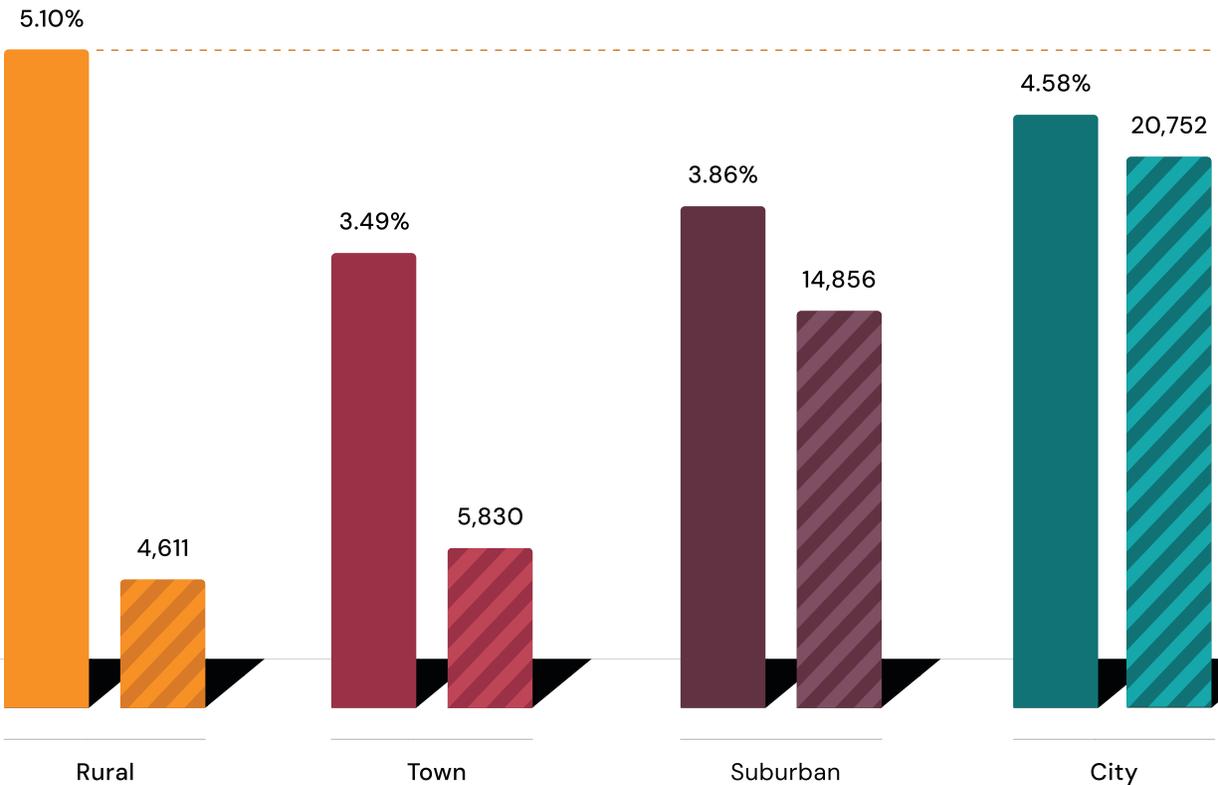


Fig T3.a



About 45% of students experiencing homelessness in 2023 were enrolled in school districts located in cities. On a per-capita basis, however, 5.10% of students in rural school districts were experiencing homelessness, compared to 4.58% in city districts and 3.86% in suburban districts. This trend may be changing, however, as from 2022 to 2023, the per-capita rate of students experiencing homelessness in city districts had the highest increase of 1 percentage point while the rate in rural districts stayed the same.

### Key Takeaway 3

■ Number of Students Experiencing Homelessness by Location, 2016-2023

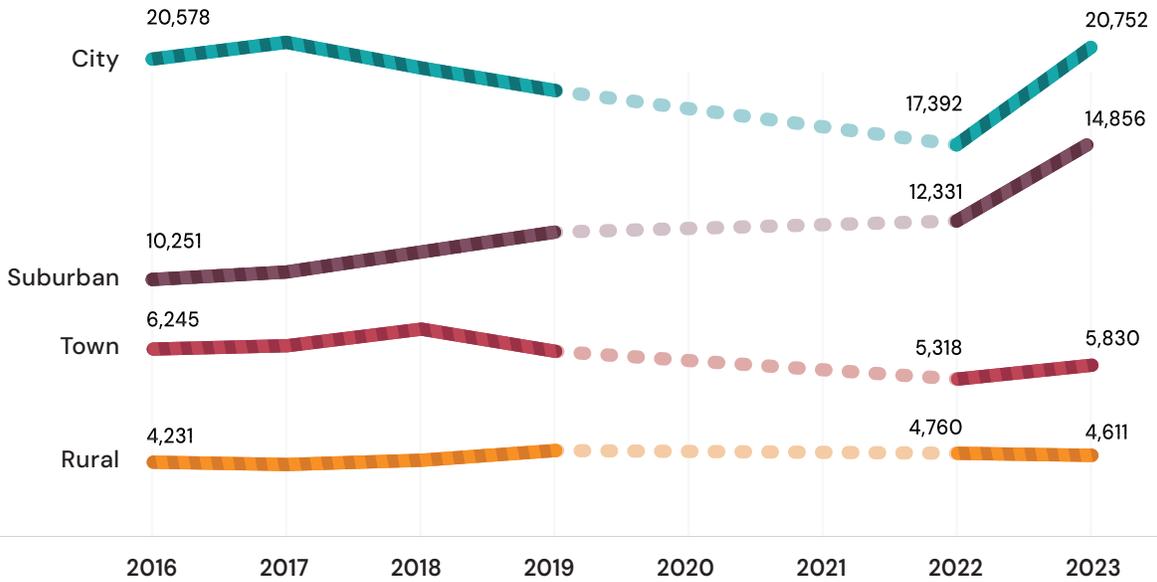


Fig T3.b

■ Rates of Students Experiencing Homelessness by Location, 2016-2023

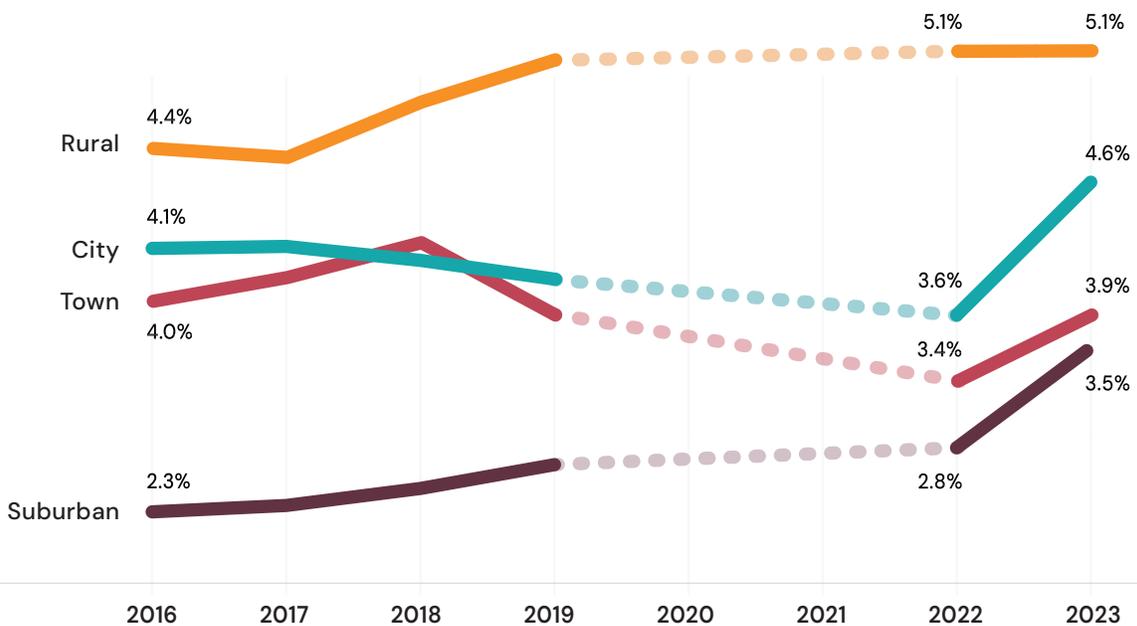


Fig T3.c

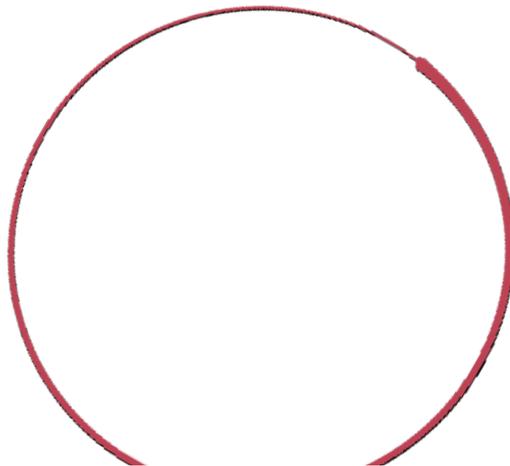
## Key Takeaway 3

### Building Changes Reponds

While urban areas report the highest total number of students experiencing homelessness, rural communities face the highest rates of student homelessness relative to their population size. This means that although fewer students overall may be affected in rural areas, homelessness is a more widespread challenge within these communities.

Rural students experiencing homelessness often face additional barriers, such as limited access to shelters, fewer support services, and greater transportation challenges. Schools in these areas may also struggle with fewer resources to identify and assist students in unstable housing situations.

Building Changes prioritizes geographic equity when granting to agencies through the Washington Youth & Families Fund (WYFF) and Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP). Likewise, we are working to expand support in rural districts by strengthening partnerships, increasing funding for community-based solutions, and providing targeted training and technical assistance so that rural schools can support students experiencing homelessness more effectively.



## Key Takeaway 4

### Academic outcomes for students experiencing homelessness remain well below those of students who are housed.

■ Proficiency Rates by Housing Status and Income, 2023

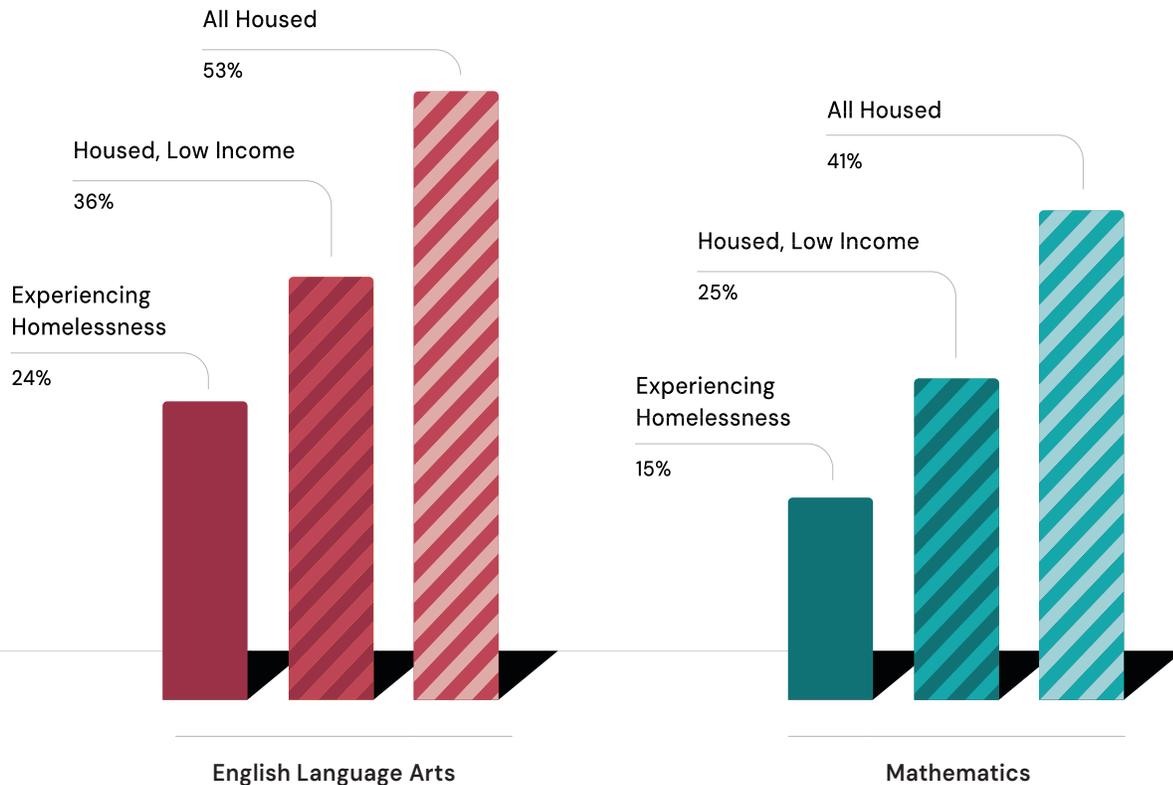


Fig T4.a

Most academic outcomes for students experiencing homelessness showed little to no change from 2016 to 2019 and significant drops from 2019 to 2022. Although little has changed from 2022 to 2023, students experiencing homelessness still see outcomes far below their housed peers. For example, in 2023, less than one-quarter (24%) of students experiencing homelessness were proficient in English language arts, compared to 53% of housed students. In that same year, fewer than one in seven or 15% of students experiencing homelessness were proficient in mathematics, compared to 41% of housed students.



## Key Takeaway 4

English Language Arts Proficiency Rates by Nighttime Residence, 2016–2023

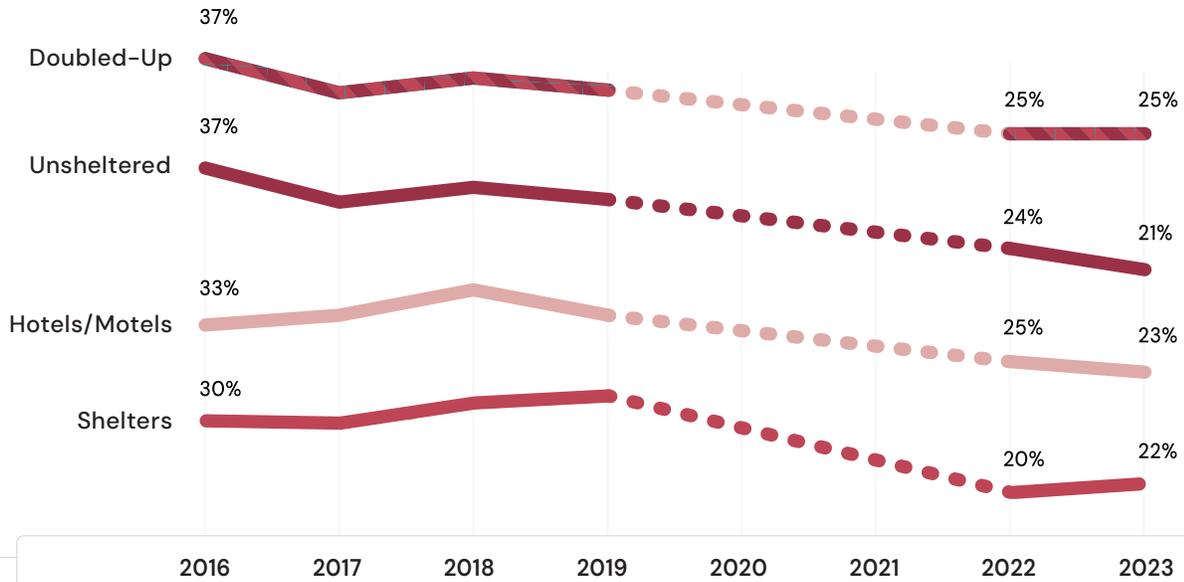


Fig T4.b

Mathematics Proficiency Rates by Nighttime Residence, 2016–2023

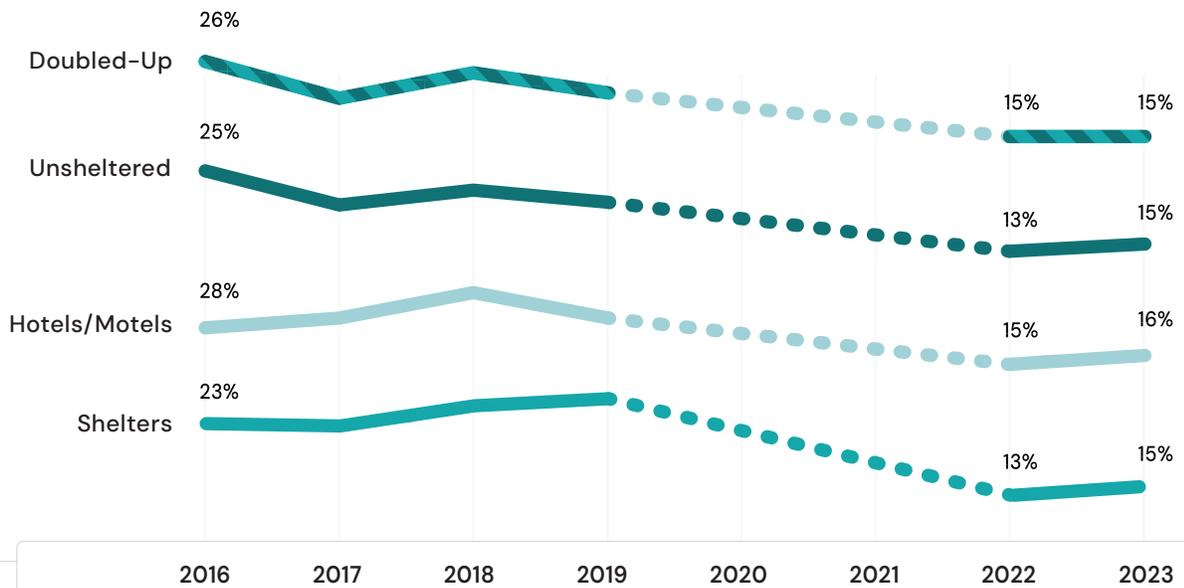
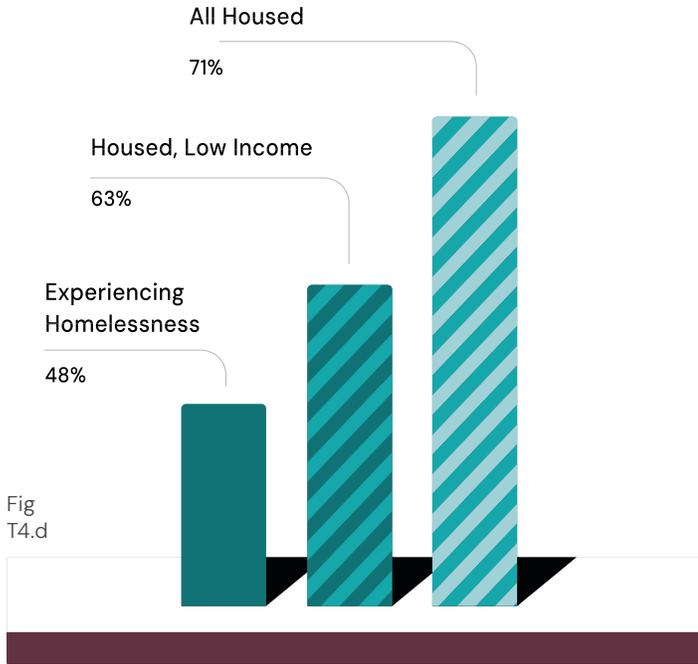


Fig T4.c

## Key Takeaway 4

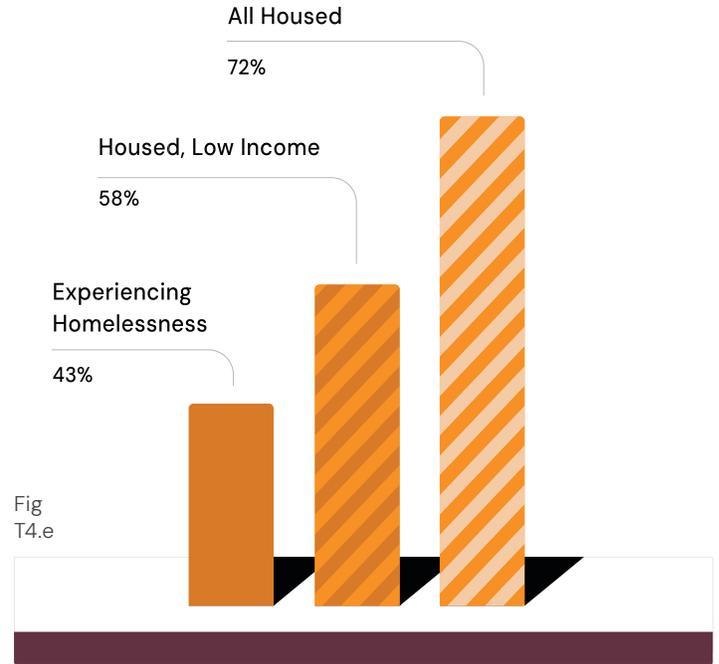
■ Regular Attendance Rates by Housing Status & Income

2023



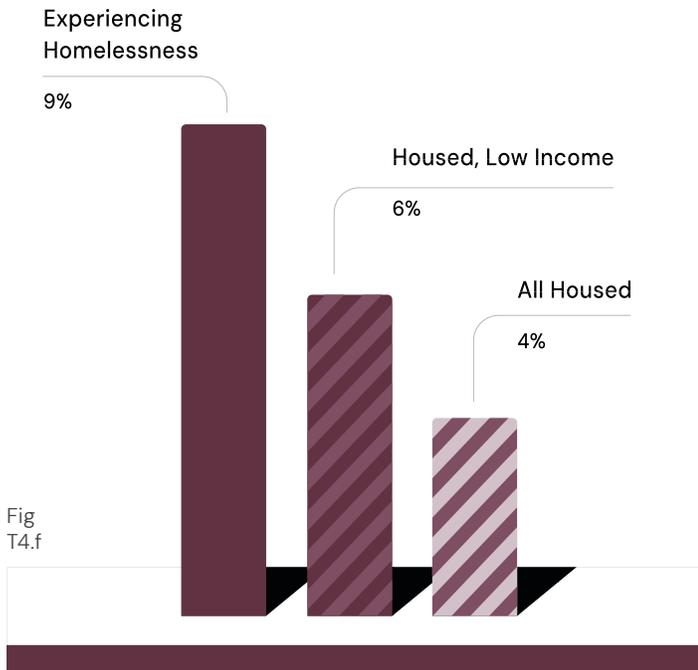
■ 9th Grade On-Track Rates by Housing Status & Income

2023



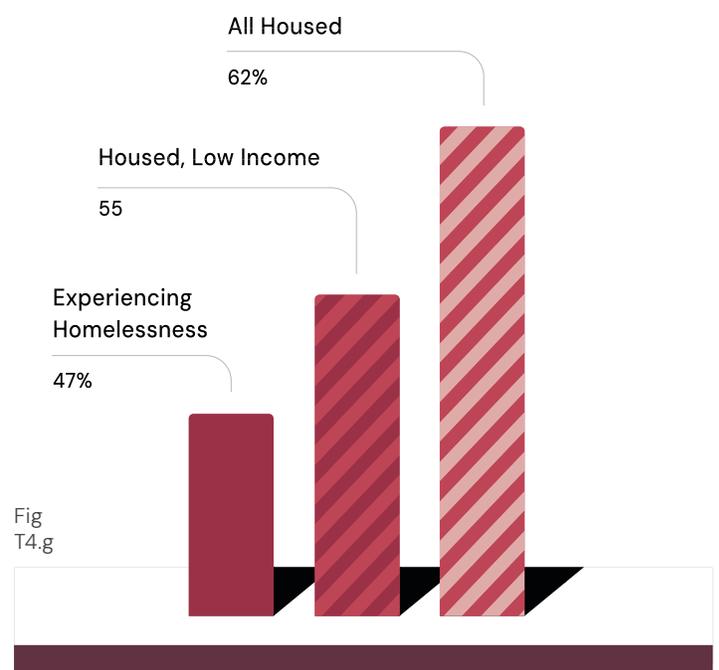
■ Suspension Rates by Housing Status & Income

2023



■ Dual Credit Rates by Housing Status & Income

2023



## Key Takeaway 4

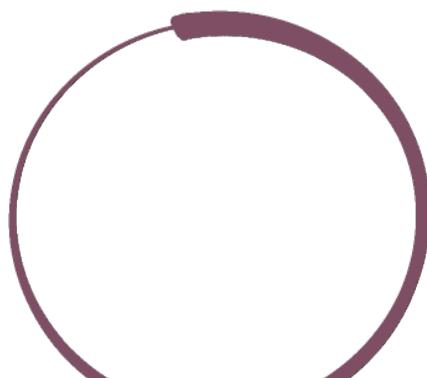
### Building Changes Reponds

Students experiencing homelessness often face significant educational challenges, including frequent school disruptions and limited access to study resources. One-on-one and group-based tutoring programs have emerged as essential supports in helping these students succeed academically.

Many school districts using the ABC Tool have prioritized after-school tutoring as a key intervention. Some provide one-on-one tutoring, using McKinney-Vento funds to cover both tutoring services and transportation. Others have established tutoring clubs in schools with high numbers of students experiencing homelessness, offering both academic support and a greater sense of belonging.

Community-based organizations also play a vital role. For example, Communities in Schools of Lakewood uses Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) grant funding to run a free after-school program where staff help McKinney-Vento students complete homework while their parents finish their workday.

Building Changes will continue promoting these strategies to ensure students experiencing homelessness have the academic support they need to thrive.



## Key Takeaway 5

**Students experiencing homelessness who are living doubled-up have academic outcomes that are similar to those living in hotels/motels and shelters, and those who are unsheltered.**

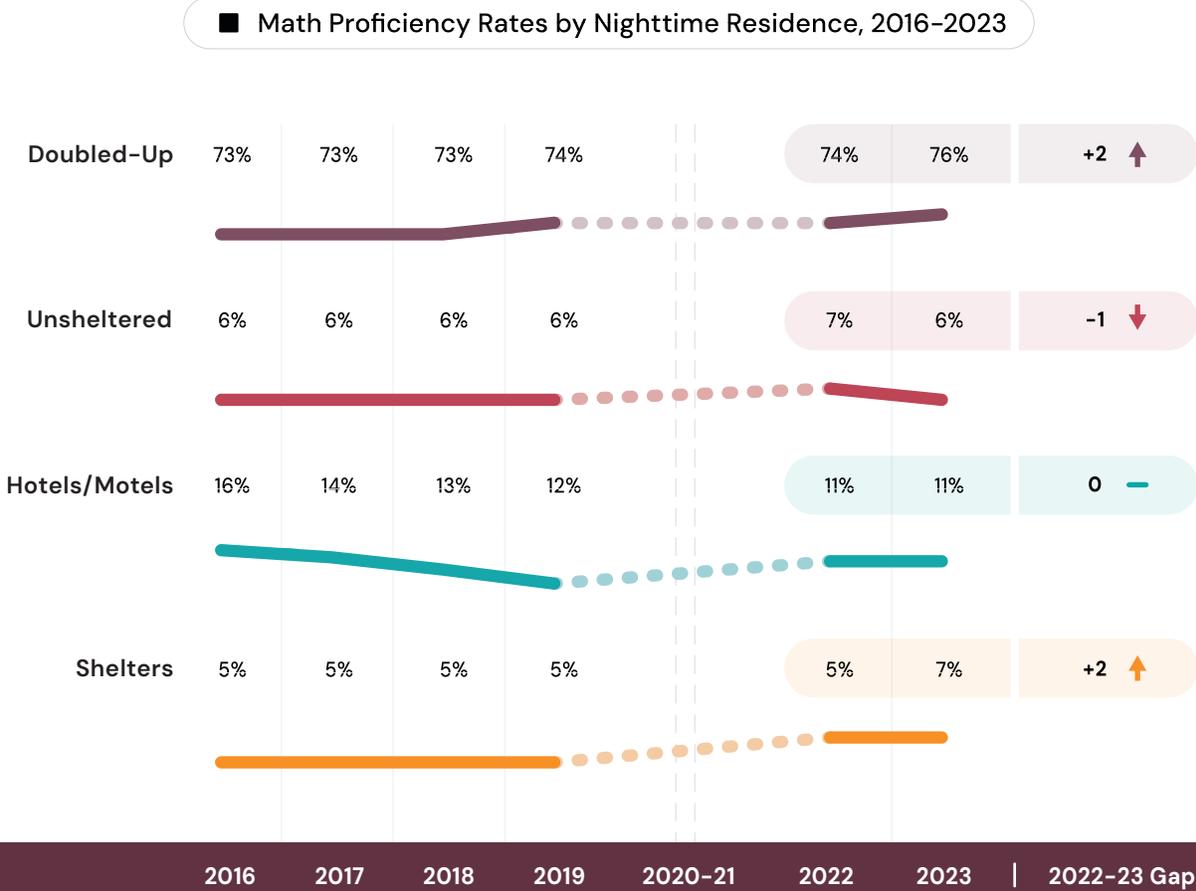


Fig T5.a

For example, the math proficiency rate for students living doubled-up in 2023 was 15%, while rates for students experiencing homelessness in other types of nighttime residences ranged between 15% and 16%, all well below the rates for housed students (41%) and housed, low-income students (25%). Other outcomes show a similar pattern.



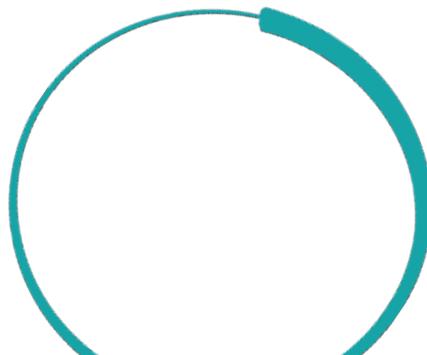
## Key Takeaway 5

### Building Changes Reponds

Many students experiencing homelessness are in doubled-up situations—living temporarily with friends or extended family due to housing instability. Despite being one of the most common forms of student homelessness, these students often face barriers to receiving support.

The Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) is the only government funding source that allows for housing-related assistance for doubled-up students, such as helping cover a household’s utility bill. Expanding HSSP coverage to additional high-need areas—such as Kitsap County—and aligning it more closely with the Homeless Student Stability Education Program (HSSeP) are key priorities for Building Changes.

By strengthening and expanding these funding sources, more families—including those in early learning programs like Head Start and Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP)—will have access to critical housing supports.



## Key Takeaway 6

**There is still much to learn about the way the education system is serving students experiencing homelessness post-remote learning.**

■ Four-Year (on-Time) Graduation Rates by Housing Status and Income, 2016–2023

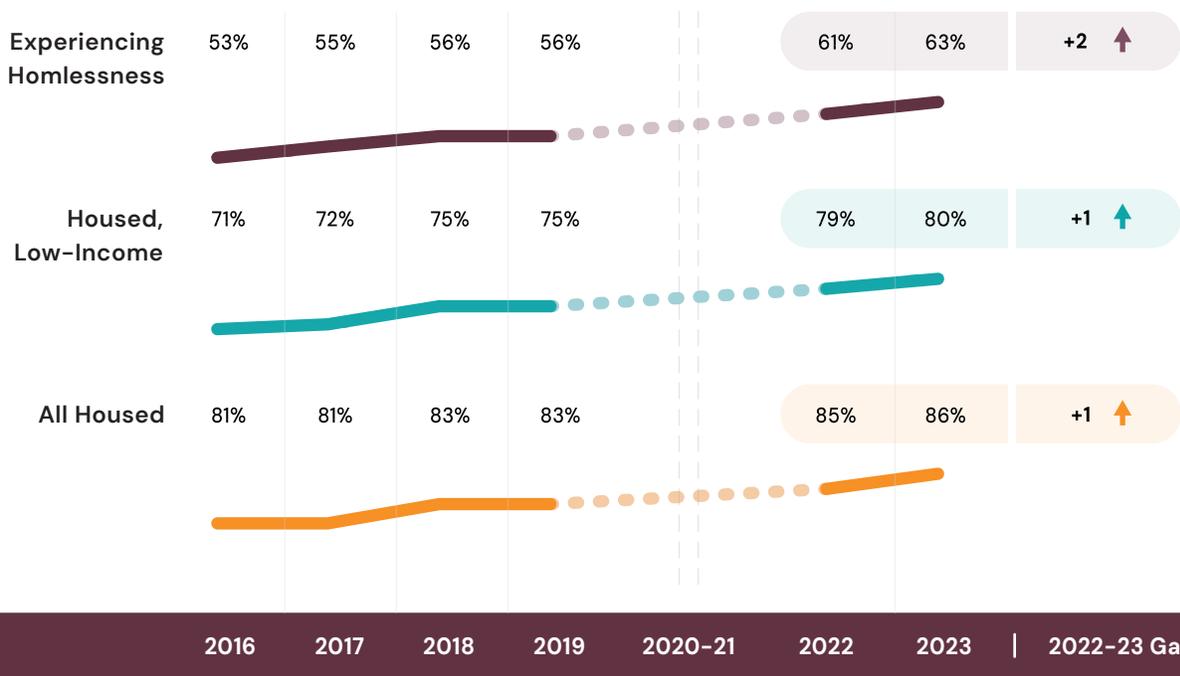


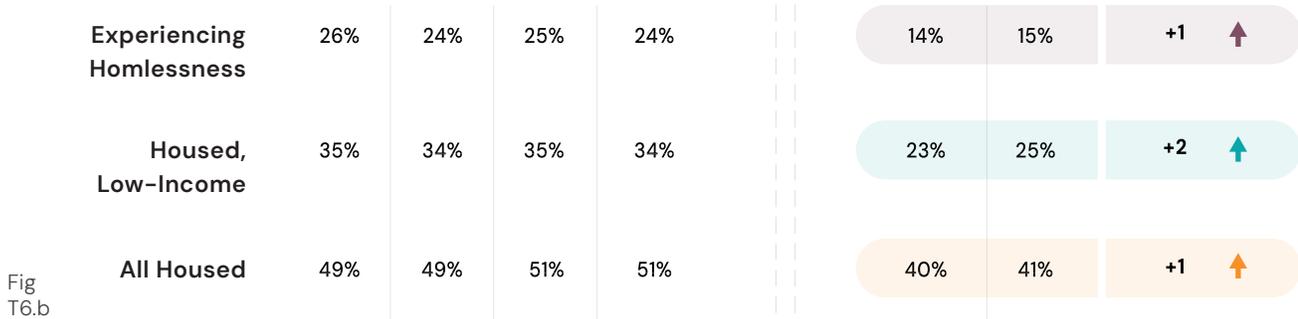
Fig T6.a

From 2019 to 2022, the changes in gaps between students experiencing homelessness and their housed peers across outcomes varied widely. From 2022 to 2023, that variance continued—some gaps widened, others closed, and some stayed the same or similar to historical trends. With many pandemic-era relief programs still in place, it is difficult to discern where students experiencing homelessness will be once these programs expire. Greater monitoring of these outcomes as well as more research to understand the impacts of such policies will be important moving forward.

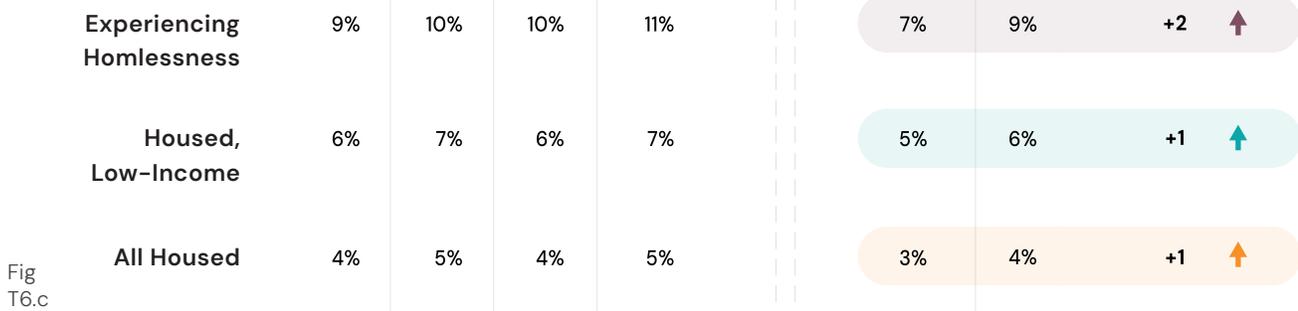


## Key Takeaway 6

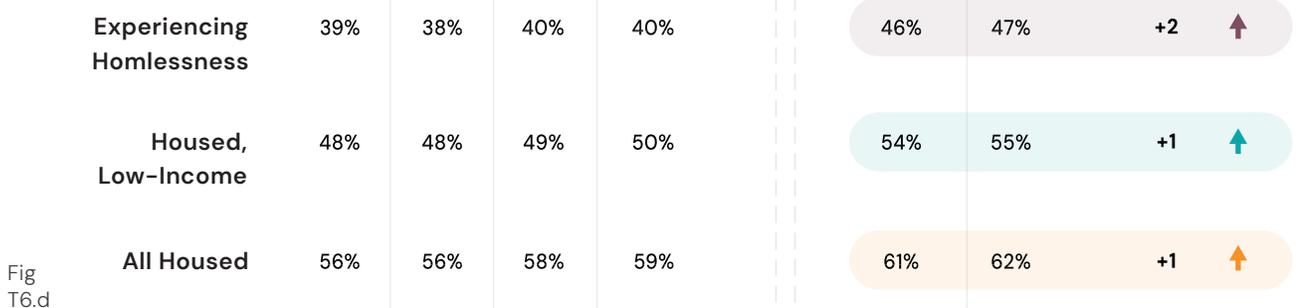
### ■ Rates by Housing Status and Income, 2016–2023



### ■ Mathematics Proficiency



### ■ Suspension Rates



### ■ Dual Credit Enrollment

## Key Takeaway 6

### Building Changes Reponds

The lasting effects of the pandemic continue to impact students—both academically and socioemotionally. Youth suicide rates, mental health crises, and substance use are at an all-time high, and school district partners emphasize the urgent need for stronger mental health supports.

Building Changes uses data from the Healthy Youth Survey to guide our approach and is prioritizing cross-systems collaboration to meet these needs. One example is leveraging Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) program funds to establish school-based health clinics and on-site treatment options for students experiencing homelessness.

Beyond mental health, academic recovery remains a critical challenge. Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs have proven to be a valuable support, offering waived fees and flexible enrollment for students experiencing homelessness. Data shows that students who complete three or more CTE courses have a 78.9% graduation rate, compared to just 61.3% for those who take fewer than three courses.\* Expanding access to CTE programs is a key priority.

To strengthen these efforts, Building Changes facilitates a peer-learning group for McKinney-Vento liaisons, school staff, and community partners. These monthly meetings provide a space for peer support, resource sharing, and problem-solving while also helping Building Changes amplify the voices of those working directly with students and families to inform policy and advocacy efforts.

\*Lewis, Kristen. A Disrupted Year: How the Arrival of Covid-19 Affected Youth Disconnection. New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2022.