**Fiscal Facts: Student homelessness at a new high**

The reported number of homeless students hit a high mark in Wisconsin’s public schools in the 2023-24 academic year, likely due to both an increase in family homelessness and improved identification of existing need. In response, school districts and communities may wish to develop targeted supports for these high-risk students.

The number of students in Wisconsin’s public schools identified as homeless increased to 20,195 during the 2023-24 school year. This is the highest number since 2019, the first year for which data are available from Wisconsin’s Department of Public Instruction. It represents a 9.1% increase over the previous year, despite the total number of enrolled students declining 1.1%.

Obtaining accurate counts of homeless students can be difficult. The state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) relies upon a definition that is much more expansive than the one used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Most notably, the definition used by DPI includes students who are “doubled up” – living with friends or family due to a change in financial, family, or employment status. Despite the differing definitions, both agencies show recent increases in homelessness.

The state also reports the type of overnight shelter that homeless students use. From 2019 to 2024, 77% of these students were doubled up, or living with family and friends, due to financial hardship. About 10% found shelter in hotels and motels, and another 10% were in transitional housing or shelters. Those remaining were either unsheltered (2%) or had unknown overnight shelter.

School officials we interviewed expect the recent growth in reported homelessness to continue, in part due to what they describe as a lack of affordable housing in their communities. In addition, some of the increased homelessness may be the result of improved identification methods. Intentional efforts to improve identification and reporting have been made across the state through the DPI Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.

In 2024, the average rate of homelessness among Wisconsin public school students was 2.5%, but homelessness was much more prevalent among certain groups. For example, English learners and students with disabilities had rates of 5.6% and 3.9%, respectively, while the rate for students of color was 5.5%.

The reported rates of homelessness also differ by the age of students. Reported rates generally decrease as students grow older until twelfth grade, when the rate increases. This may be influenced by factors including that school officials have fewer interactions with families as students age, thereby reducing opportunities to identify homelessness.

The number of students affected by homelessness has grown and is likely to continue to remain high in the near future as an insufficient supply of affordable housing remains a lingering problem throughout the state. Addressing the needs of this high-risk group of students could benefit not only them but also Wisconsin’s overall educational outcomes.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*