



How COVID-19 Affected the Identification of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania

Experts Offer Reasons Why There Was a Significant Decline in the Number of Children Identified as Homeless

August 2022 Brain Gain

By Kathy Desmond, President, People's Emergency Center (PEC)

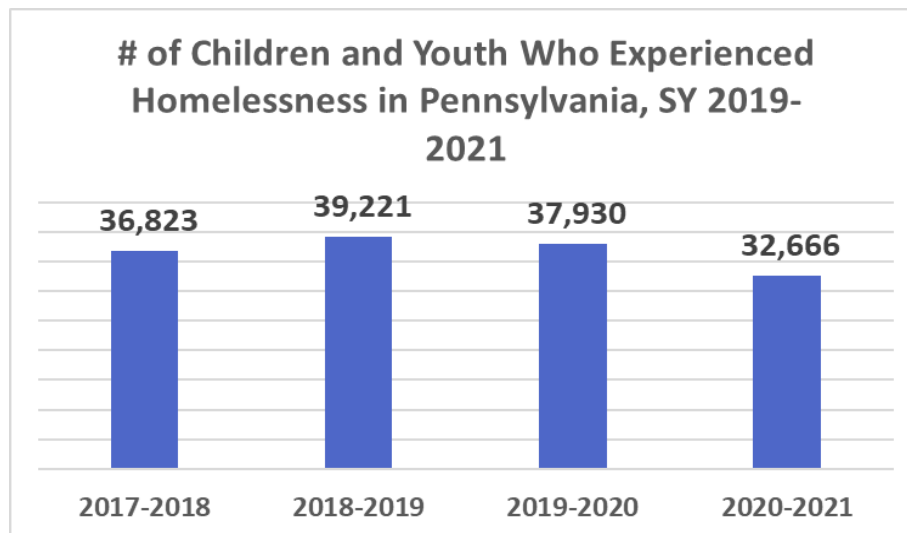
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Introduction

This report, prepared by policy leaders at People’s Emergency Center (PEC), aims to understand how COVID-19 affected the education system’s ability to identify children and youth who experience homelessness in Pennsylvania.

The reported number of children and youth experiencing homelessness declined by 11 percent between School Year (SY) 2018 and SY 2021[*] according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s (PDE) evaluation of its Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program (ECYEH). The PDE reports do not offer an analysis of why the numbers changed, but the single largest factor that occurred during this time is COVID-19. To help learn why these numbers changed, we surveyed experts from throughout the Commonwealth who work with children and youth experiencing homelessness.



See Appendix B for county and city data.

Background

The national advocacy group **SchoolHouse Connection** wrote on their website:

"... you don't see children, youth, and families in the same way that you see adults who experience homelessness. Most children and youth experiencing homelessness are not visible in shelters or on the streets, but rather moving from place to place: couches, basements, motels, cars, and wherever they can find temporary refuge." (from <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/the-issue/>)

In addition, organizations¹ throughout the United States have commented those public systems undercounted children experiencing homelessness prior to COVID-19. If child homelessness was invisible prior to COVID-19, then the pandemic seems to have driven it further from public view as the education system's data suggests. Undercounting inhibits local responses to ending family homelessness.

As part of PEC's annual review of publicly available education data regarding students experiencing homelessness for planning purposes and public discussions, we asked experts who work with children experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania for their informed opinion as to why the numbers changed during the time of COVID-19.

We distributed our survey to 100 experts in public health, early learning systems, homeless housing, and academia between June 19 and July 12, 2022. Forty-one experts responded: 25 from the homeless housing system, 12 from K-12 education, two early childhood education, one legal expert, and one researcher. We believe many K-12 system experts did not respond due to schools closing for the year. PEC will reach out to them again when school is in session and compare responses in an updated report.

Survey Response Summary

In reference to years with decreased numbers of students experiencing homelessness, SY20 and SY21:

1. Most respondents cited that **COVID-19 negatively affected** a school's ability to identify students who experienced homelessness.
2. Other responses identified these reasons for **decreased** numbers:
 - the **eviction moratorium** decreased the number of homeless families,
 - **absence of in-person** school attendance,
 - backlogs in housing services,
 - and the misunderstood **definition** of homelessness.

¹ See <https://bit.ly/3yJv8LS> and <https://bit.ly/3RiktyS>

School Year 2019 showed an increase in students experiencing homelessness. In reference to that year, some experts opined that **increased** numbers represented:

- lack of **job opportunities** that led to increasing family homelessness,
- improved **methods** of identification,
- increasing **costs of housing**,
- and lack of **childcare**.

We also asked the survey panel **what different action steps *not currently*** implemented by school districts and community groups would **strengthen the capacity** to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness. These are their suggestions:

- Spread **awareness** of the McKinney-Vento Act.
- **Advocate for funding** for school and school institutions to specifically help with housing; emergency rent, funding for first/last month and security deposits, funding to assist with temporary hotel stays, etc.
- **Create more capacity** within ECYEH programs to work directly with shelters and people who are living doubled up with others.

Survey questions and detailed responses are in Appendix A. For more information, contact policy@pec-cares.org.

About People's Emergency Center (PEC): PEC has served the community for 50 years. PEC and its affiliates, PEC Community Development Corporation and Youth Service, Inc., uplift our community by providing housing, social services, and quality of life supports that empower people and encourage more prosperous and safer neighborhoods for all residents of Philadelphia. Learn more at www.pec-cares.org.

Appendices

Appendix A

Survey Questions and Detailed Responses

Question 1: The numbers of homeless children and youth declined or increased from 2018 to 2021. Specific to your school district, county, or region, in your opinion, why?

Summary: Most respondents cited that numbers decreased due to COVID-19, which affected a school's ability to identify students who experienced homelessness. Other repeated responses identified the eviction moratorium responsible for decreasing the number of homeless families. Respondents citing increases noted that those increases were due to improved methods of identification of homelessness.

Of the respondents who cited that numbers decreased due to COVID-19:

- COVID-19 has changed the look of the family unit when one or both [parents] have died as the result of this virus. Families have taken on a different look when forced to divide their unit with some of the children living with other relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, or young adults be put out on their own.
- The pandemic has wreaked havoc in our region. Simply put. This current year—the numbers are trending up—but last year saw numbers unlike any I have previously seen.
- Our methodologies were significantly compromised due to capacity relating to COVID-19 surges and cases in the city.
- The shift to different modes of enrollment during the 2020–2021 SY may also have posed barriers to identification upon enrollment.
- We could not identify what we could not see.
- For our cyber school I attribute this to not clearly identifying all students who qualify.
- I feel that the number of homeless children is increasing, and many do not report that they are homeless due to the stigma associated with homelessness.

- It is important to note that the number of homeless children may not be accurate due to the misunderstanding of the definition of homelessness.
- The transition to remote learning created many opportunities for homelessness to go unnoticed or unreported. For example, in-person classes were not available, and students could potentially log in from any location (or never log in) without declaring homelessness. Families were also more isolated and had fewer touchpoints with community resources who could assist with enrollment.

Some respondents credited **eviction moratoriums**, homelessness prevention services and diversion programs with leading to a **decrease** in the overall number of homeless families and children.

- I think the [homeless housing system] has **diverted** families into **rapid rehousing** or other homeless prevention services. I also think that **more families are living doubled up** and not identifying as homeless.
- One respondent noted that **hurricanes** in previous years might have boosted up previous years that resulted in children from Florida and other states entering Pennsylvania.

For respondents who said their numbers increased:

- The number of homeless children and youth increased due to **lack of job opportunities**.
- Ours did not decline. It increased. Reasons: **hot housing market, overheated rental market, lack of affordable housing, corporate landlords raising rent, lack of new housing starts to accommodate all who need housing**.
- We are seeing increased numbers of homeless households, including those with children, as a result of the fall-out of COVID policies and changes in the economy and housing market. We are seeing more households unable to locate childcare, as there is less childcare and less childcare teachers available to meet child/adult ratios. We are seeing increasing prices on rental and home ownership options, cutting people out of affordable homes.
- I think it's partially due to increased awareness and screening but also possibly because **rising housing prices have pushed more people into unstable housing situations**. Our HUD definition [of] homelessness population has decreased by virtually all measures during the same time period.

Question 2. Please add more details as to the specific reasons why the numbers in your school district, county, or region increased or decreased.

Summary: Responses included absence of in-person school attendance, backlogs in housing services, and low-wage jobs as other reasons why numbers changed dramatically.

- Yes, there are jobs available but they are barely minimum wage compounded by the increased [cost] in goods and services. There is also lack of affordable child care.
- I believe the number of students who could be identified is higher than ever. It is just a matter of finding those students. Many did not come back into a building this year. Those who were identified prior to the pandemic, in many cases were just lost. Either did not want to come back or felt that they could not come back due to the sheer volume of what had been lost. Remember, these were students who were already so vulnerable.
- For the Youth Count, prior to the pandemic, we used to have 15 street teams go out to 13 different zones split between 3 shifts throughout the day. In 2021, we did not have any street teams and instead used a model of Come and Be Counted and 2022 we only had 5 street teams for one shift conducting surveys. We know through research and experience, youth don't often come to us or come to events for the larger adult population of people experiencing homelessness.
- We are seeing backlogs in housing, from shelter services through permanent housing. Lack of affordable units or landlords who will accept households with low income, no/bad credit, or prior evictions is at an all-time low because demand is so high for housing. This locks people out of stable housing, even with support from programs to help them stabilize income and housing. This results in larger numbers of households experiencing homelessness for longer periods of time.
- Students being in school in person versus online allows for a more accurate count of homelessness.
- [Our district] ... specifically went from identifying about 1,000 children a year to identifying about 300 in the 20/21 school year. Additionally, as families remained remote, they didn't always feel the need to identify their housing instability. Since they did not need transportation in order to get education, they were not willing to disclose homelessness. I also believe that we saw a decrease in numbers due to the eviction and utility moratoriums.
- It is possible that many families who would otherwise declare homelessness (by the McKinney-Vento definition) did not do so in the absence of needing to secure

transportation to/from locations other than a fixed home address or place where they are doubled up. Warning signs of homelessness (truancy, behavioral changes, basic needs not being met, etc.) may be difficult to detect in a virtual environment, so there could have been fewer opportunities for intervention.

- We were not able to do home visits and I feel this impacted identification.

Question 3: What different action steps (not currently being implemented) should school districts and community groups do together to strengthen the capacity to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness?

Most respondents cited the need for improved communications and coordination. Comments included:

- Spread awareness of McKinney-Vento so that families can self-identify and be counted.
- Advocate for funding for school and school institutions to specifically help with housing; emergency rent, funding for first/last/security, funding to assist with temporary hotel stays, etc. More direct collaboration with homeless service providers via the CoC is greatly needed.
- Offer preschool child care for children in school; offer child care for pre school and pre K settings. Offer swing swift child care for those individuals working third or split shifts. Subsidize child care for all. Provide training for child care workers and pay them a decent wage.
- The LEA's [local education agency. i.e., school districts and charters] and community agencies must support each other if we are going to bring students back into the classroom. Housing agencies can support LEAs by contacting Liaisons for enrollment and registration resources and implementation. LEA-Liaisons must reach out to contacts in the housing agencies to learn who is in residence-are they enrolled? If so-wonderful, if not-get it done. Transportation, enrollment and inter-district collaboration is a must to be successful.
- There needs to be better communication between social work agencies, school counselors, and teachers who work with children experiencing homelessness.
- The methods we use to count youth are imperfect at best and are impacted by inconsistencies in homeless definition, and lack of coordinated data collection. We have reports from ECYEH, HMIS, and independent research from firms such as Chapin Hall. The data varies significantly between them.

- Create more capacity within ECYEH programs to work directly with shelters and people [who are] doubled up. Specifically, working with families who make it out of homelessness in order for them to stay out of homelessness.
- Have a community task force to work together across disciplines in order to compare the data collected, how it differs, and how we can align methodologies.
- This is such an important topic. We have seen in our HMIS entries of who has served, there are far more youth accessing services than are counted in the annual Youth Count and represented in other data sets, and we know there are more people who need services to access them.
- Districts should work more closely with their Continuums of Care to understand programs that are out there.
- All McKinney-Vento liaisons and all school staff should get a refresher on the mandate to proactively identify eligible children, provided with a sample universal screen, and provided with supports when needed. PDE needs to recommend the use of a universal screen, as the USDOE has done, and provide TA to schools to implement the screen. More media campaigns should be done to ensure families know their rights. Districts need to have more resources to support liaisons.
- The state and federal governments need to provide more funding for school districts to hire social workers to work with kids and identify youth going through a housing crisis.
- Create more layers of integration between schools, child welfare, family strengthening programs, as well as entities providing homeless diversion and homeless housing support.
- The term homeless is too engrained ... Should be evolving to families in transition.
- ... universal screening (<https://www.chapinhall.org/project/leading-on-youth-homelessness-prevention/>). This is great for districts where there are resources available both to identify students currently exp. housing instability, as well as those who may be at risk. However, it is resource intensive, should be done periodically (not just once) and should be done carefully as to not traumatize or harm students. Also, integrated data systems.
- Schools should definitely connect with community resources (all over the city for charters). Parents experiencing homelessness are asking for monies and services sometimes above the capacity of schools; while they appreciate the supports to the

students, they oftentimes do not see our supports as beneficial to the parents' overall needs.

- ... some kind of legislative advocacy to add more housing resources to school systems or find a way for them to connect with general homeless services and increase funding appropriately. We already struggle to serve all of our HUD definition people at current funding levels, so just adding more people to this with no additional resources would probably be catastrophic.
- Communities need to understand the educational definitions of who is considered homeless and accept them as valid. HUD language around "literal homelessness" - a definition that often excludes unaccompanied youth, substandard housing, and those who double and triple up, are more well-known and oppose education definitions, impacting incorporation/acceptance of the broader categories of homelessness. The stigma around Unaccompanied Youth - particularly teens, needs to be a PRIMARY focus, as they are most at risk.
- There desperately needs to be an alignment of federal definitions of "Homelessness," at a minimum for children and youth. HUD having a different definition makes identification difficult and most people do NOT see the education definitions as "valid."
- Schools can create safe spaces and relationships with families so that they feel comfortable disclosing housing issues.

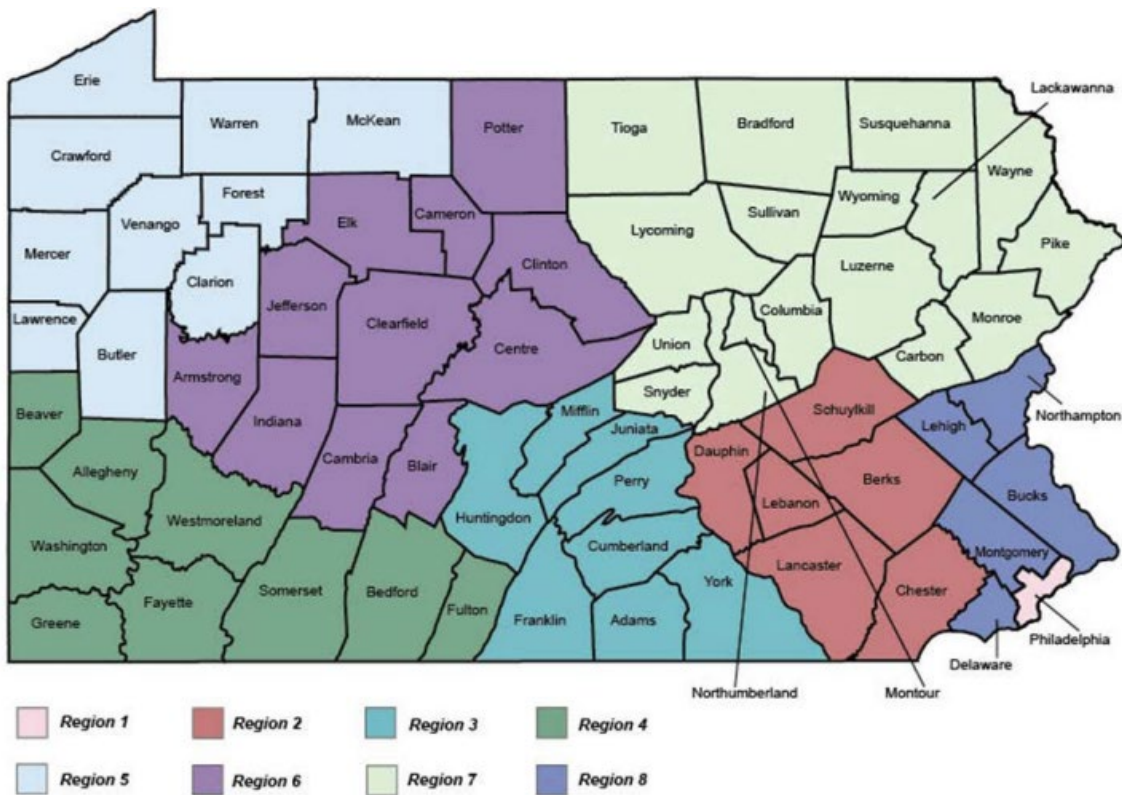
Appendix B

Charts and Tables Detailing the Information in PA DOE's Report

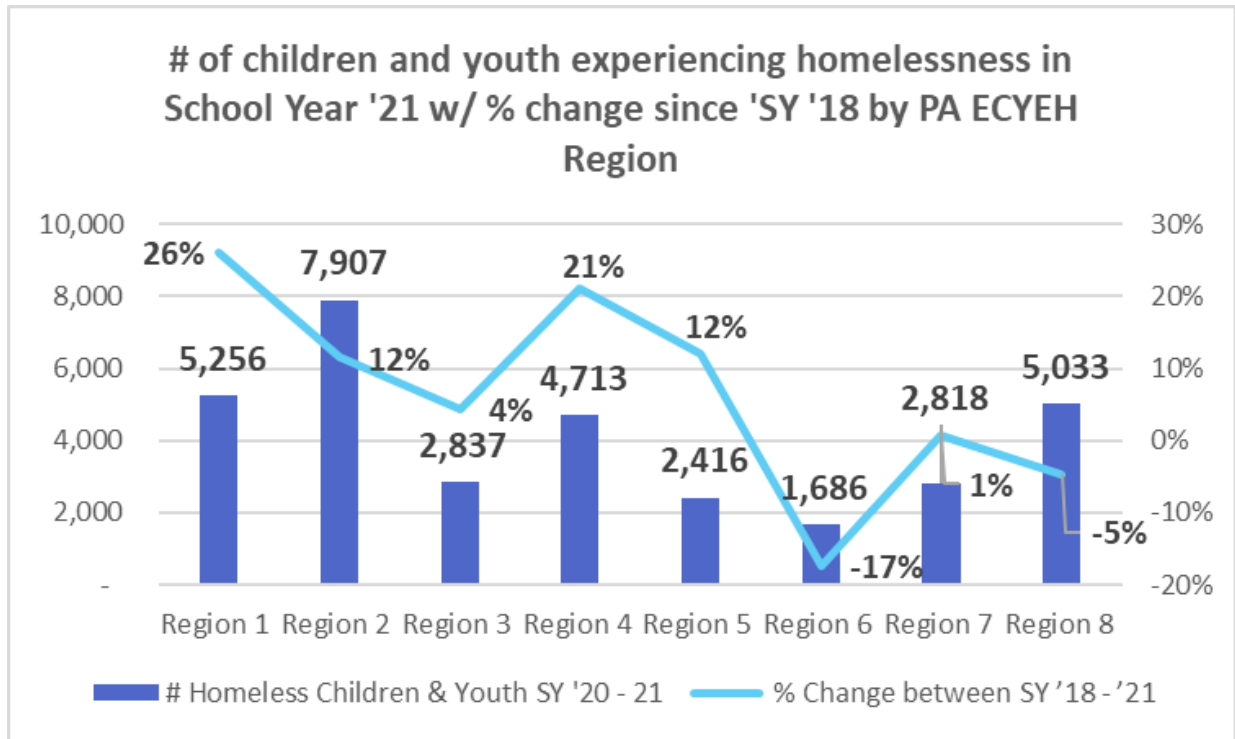
The source of the following data can be found here [Homeless Education \(pa.gov\)](http://Homeless Education (pa.gov))

PA Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Regional Map

The Pennsylvania Department of Education's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness has eight regions.



Charts on Data Identifying Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania School Year 2018 to School Year 2021



Children and youth experiencing homelessness attributed in School Year (SY)18 – SY21, by PA County/Region

County Name	Children & Youth SY17-18	Children & Youth SY18-19	Children & Youth SY19-20	Children & Youth SY20-21	% Change between SY18- 21
Adams	341	318	233	198	-42%
Adams/York	19	42	*	*	*
Allegheny	4,128	3,451	3,212	2,836	-31%
Armstrong	173	203	228	136	-21%
Armstrong/Indiana	*	not on list	not on list		*
Beaver	595	814	955	836	41%
Bedford	94	130	200	133	41%
Bedford/Somerset	*	not on list	not on list		*
Berks	2,279	2,013	1,849	1,652	-28%

Blair	315	512	526	379	20%
Bradford	136	149	193	132	-3%
Bradford/Tioga	236	129	*	304	29%
Bucks	788	1,050	713	743	-6%
Butler	268	349	405	435	62%
Cambria	192	239	225	224	17%
Cambria/Somerset	not on list	27	not on list		*
Cameron	*	18	15	23	*
Carbon	89	111	122	62	-30%
Carbon/Monroe/ Pike	*	20	17		*
Centre	181	187	169	148	-18%
Chester	1,292	1,447	1,601	1,780	38%
Clarion	161	147	119	105	-35%
Clearfield	160	203	262	346	116%
Clearfield/Jefferson	*	*	not on list	346	*
Clinton	57	61	110	102	79%
Columbia	94	160	205	150	60%
Columbia/Montour	31	not on list	not on list	*	*
Columbia/Sullivan	32	25	17	13	-59%
Crawford	192	265	226	176	-8%
Cumberland	388	502	584	497	28%
Dauphin	1,602	1,421	1,557	1,325	-17%
Delaware	827	1,205	1,199	1,577	91%
Elk	24	40	63	57	138%
Erie	1,187	868	778	761	-36%
Fayette	307	280	269	191	-38%
Forest	52	51	52	46	-12%
Franklin	332	367	284	280	-16%
Fulton	*	*	12	16	*
Greene	36	40	43	36	0%
Huntingdon	37	55	32	38	3%
Indiana	171	174	164	128	-25%
Jefferson	100	106	86	89	-11%
Juniata	43	49	64	69	60%
Lackawanna	383	454	426	501	31%
Lackawanna/ Susquehanna	not on list	74	*		*
Lancaster	2,684	2,574	2,547	2,186	-19%
Lawrence	242	238	391	192	-21%
Lebanon	722	744	701	611	-15%
Lehigh	1,396	1,278	1,228	822	-41%

Luzerne	668	919	500	640	-4%
Luzerne/Wyoming	*	*	*		*
Lycoming	244	259	253	171	-30%
McKean	176	217	248	163	-7%
Mercer	244	311	271	292	20%
Mifflin	86	111	142	125	45%
Monroe	461	465	373	335	-27%
Montgomery	984	1,413	1,282	1,310	33%
Montour	22	43	23	16	-27%
Northampton	814	890	674	581	-29%
Northumberland	161	218	119	159	-1%
Perry	56	103	93	101	80%
Philadelphia	7,112	7,847	7,881	5,256	-26%
Pike	51	81	79	105	106%
Potter	53	47	42	53	0%
Schuylkill	358	436	370	353	-1%
Snyder	37	42	48	51	38%
Snyder/Union	not on list	*	*	*	*
Somerset	129	100	96	75	-42%
Sullivan	not on list	*	*	*	*
Susquehanna	54	60	59	46	-15%
Tioga	28	51	55	43	54%
Union	17	25	23	16	-6%
Venango	158	205	222	170	8%
Warren	70	146	124	71	1%
Washington	264	322	441	213	-19%
Wayne	50	58	60	46	-8%
Westmoreland	409	503	464	377	-8%
Wyoming	34	25	*	13	-62%
York	1,667	1,712	1,889	1,526	-8%
State Total	36,823	39,221	38,899	32,988	-10%
* Signifies a count under 10 people according to the reports, or did not report					

PA ECYEH School Districts Where Between 100-499 Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Were 'Attributed' in from School Year (SY)18 To SY21

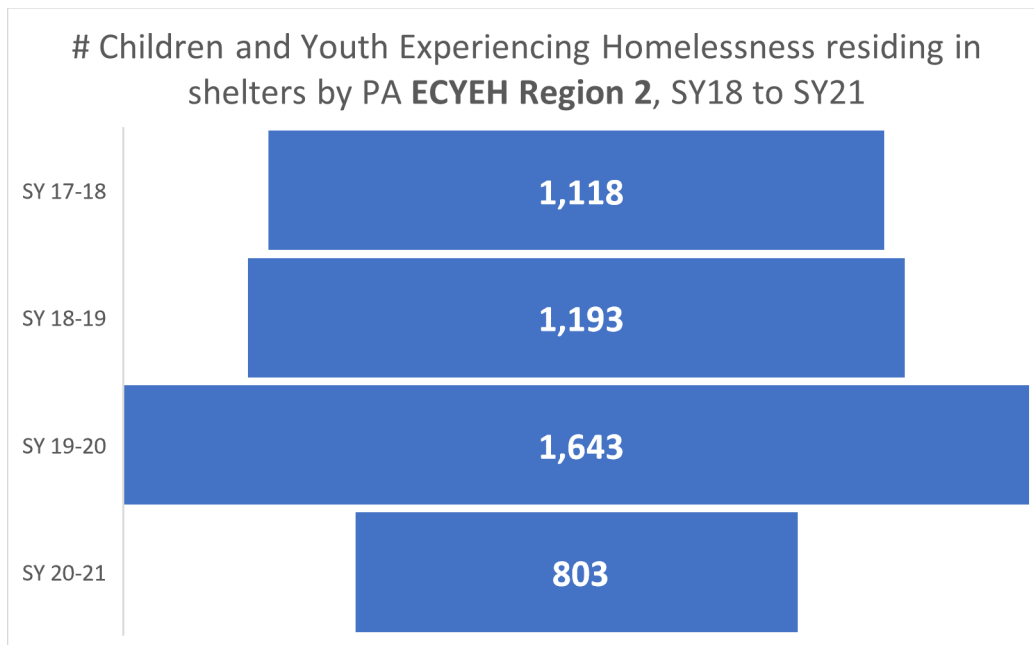
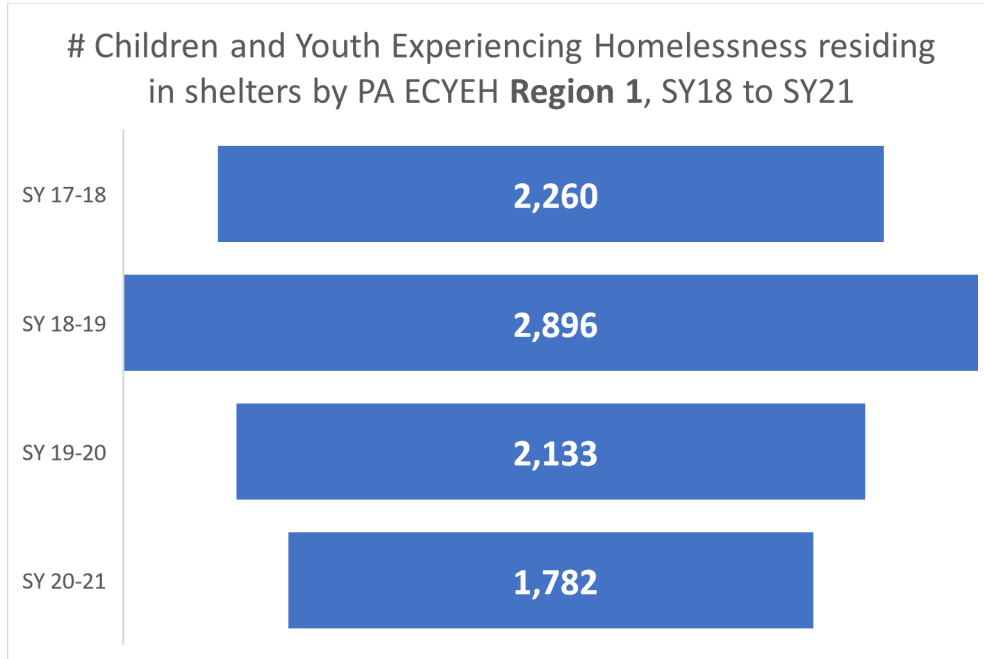
School District	Homeless Children & Youth SY17-18	Homeless Children & Youth SY18-19	Homeless Children & Youth SY19-20	Homeless Children & Youth SY20-21	% Change between SY18-21
Agora Cyber Charter (Montgomery)	122	201	236	193	58%
Altoona Area (Blair)	124	248	221	173	40%
Ambridge Area (Beaver)	48	80	102	115	140%
Armstrong (Armstrong)	62	93	107	87	40%
Avon Grove (Chester)	107	126	157	174	63%
Bensalem Township (Bucks)	170	156	114	68	-60%
Bethlehem Area (Northampton)	453	407	345	237	-48%
Bristol Township (Bucks)	150	190	156	99	-34%
Butler Area (Butler)	82	95	136	163	99%
Central Dauphin (Dauphin)	242	259	235	156	-36%
Chester Community Charter (Delaware)	191	267	434	434	127%
Chambersburg Area (Franklin)	190	150	130	78	-59%
Columbia Borough (Lancaster)	72	74	95	107	49%
Coatesville Area (Chester)	189	194	115	134	-29%
Cumberland Valley (Cumberland)	82	94	91	122	49%
Commonwealth Charter Academy CS (Dauphin)	88	119	135	151	72%
Conestoga Valley (Lancaster)	142	157	144	132	-7%
Conneaut (Crawford)	42	80	128	82	95%
East Stroudsburg Area (Monroe)	140	157	107	59	-58%

Easton Area (Northampton)	183	173	145	134	-27%
Erie City (Erie)	269	149	190	136	-49%
Exeter Township (Berks)	60	49	107	93	55%
Harrisburg City (Dauphin)	747	482	541	353	-53%
Insight PA Cyber (Chester)	65	104	137	254	291%
Kennett Consolidated (Chester)	158	263	248	230	46%
Highlands (Allegheny)	96	130	102	75	-22%
Lebanon (Lebanon)	542	500	518	423	-22%
Manheim Township (Lancaster)	70	87	128	116	66%
Mifflin County (Mifflin)	86	110	118	91	6%
Norristown Area (Montgomery)	152	200	175	159	5%
North Penn (Montgomery)	121	95	83	107	-12%
Oxford Area (Chester)	65	111	112	99	52%
Penn Manor (Lancaster)	129	141	118	104	-19%
Pennsylvania Cyber Charter (Beaver)	300	337	307	259	-14%
Pottstown (Montgomery)	151	161	130	102	-32%
Reach Cyber Charter (Dauphin)	19	38	47	139	632%
Red Lion Area (York)	98	106	103	110	12%
Scranton (Lackawanna)	284	235	244	126	-56%
Shippensburg Area (Cumberland)	51	79	99	118	131%
Solanco (Lancaster)	98	111	117	95	-3%
Upper Darby (Delaware)	173	226	289	276	60%
Washington (Washington)	62	55	106	11	-82%
West Chester Area (Chester)	90	120	117	146	62%
Wilkes-Barre Area (Luzerne)	214	142	168	169	-21%
William Penn (Delaware)	43	72	114	123	186%
Williamsport Area (Lycoming)	198	191	215	146	-26%

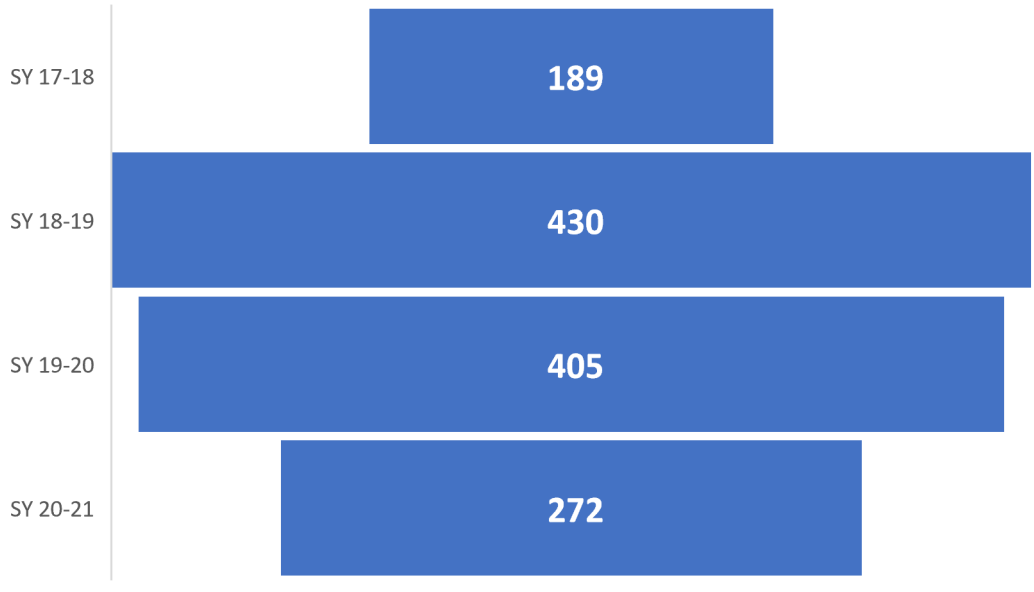
Woodland Hills (Allegheny)	232	168	142	137	-41%
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Analysis	
# School Districts reporting 10 or more homeless children and youth	435
<i>Increasing</i> counts of homeless students reported by county from SY20 to SY21	20 counties
<i>Decreasing</i> number of homeless students reported by county from SY20 to SY21	47 counties
# children/youth identified as residing in shelter in FY21	6,873
# children/youth identified as residing in shelter in FY18	4,484

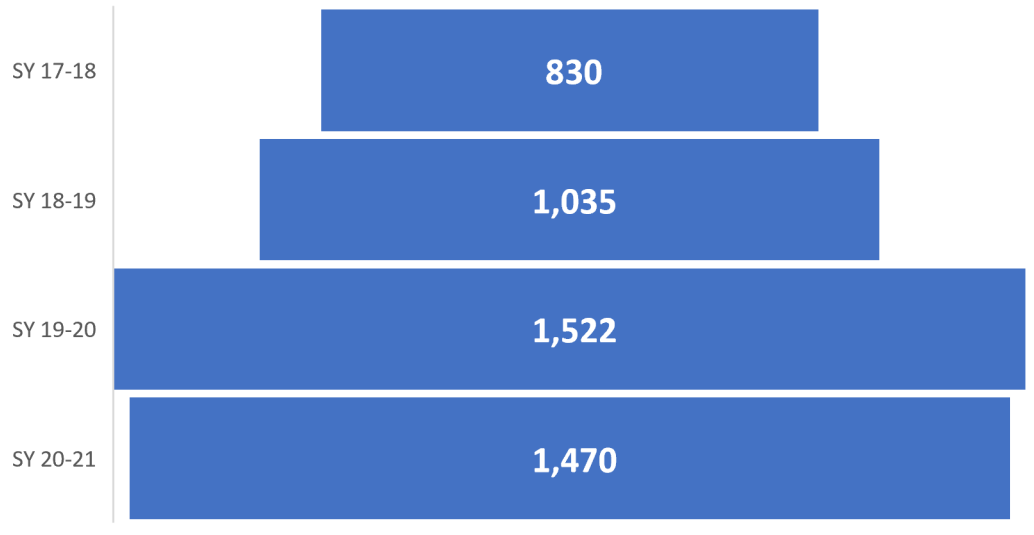
The following charts show the number of children and youth as reported by the *shelter system* to the education system in the regions noted.



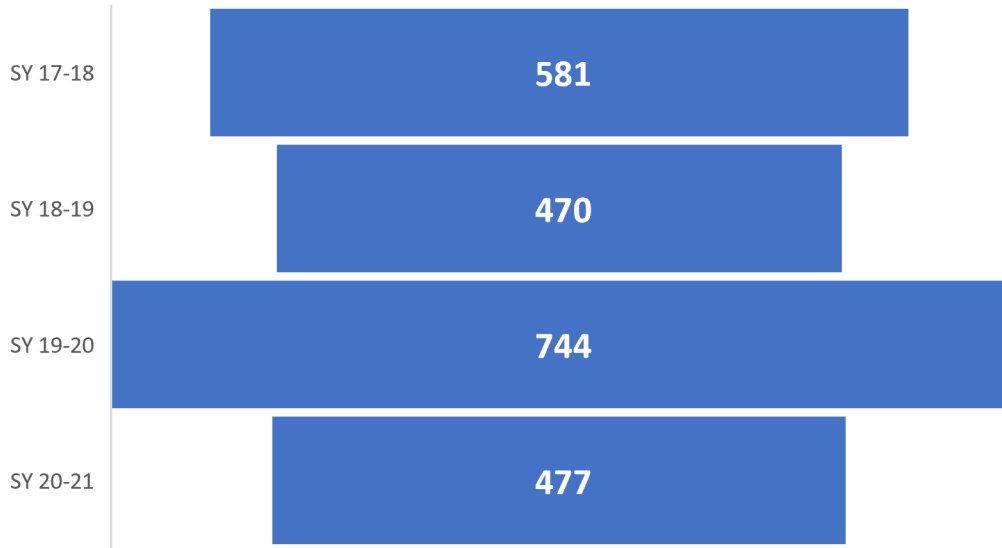
Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness residing in shelters by PA ECYEH Region 3, SY18 to SY21



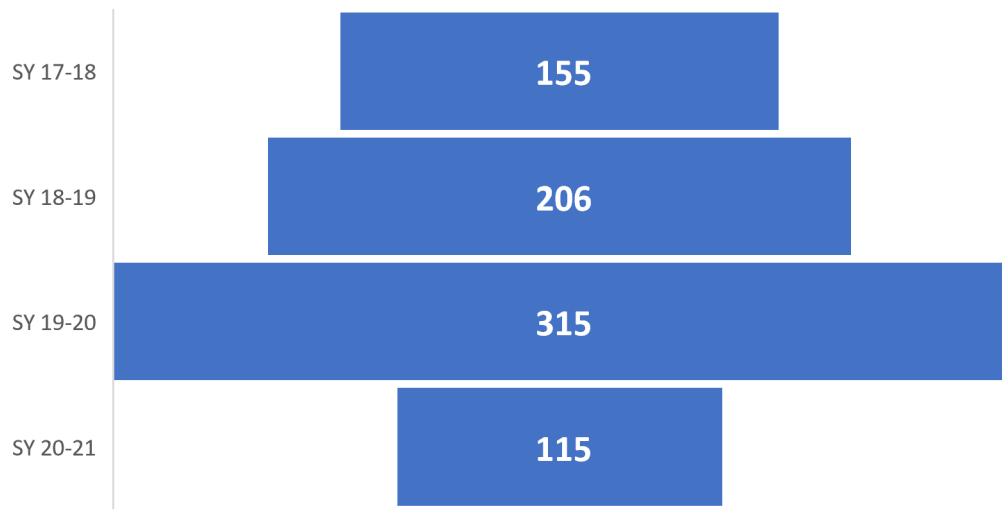
Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness residing in shelters by PA ECYEH Region 4, SY18 to SY21



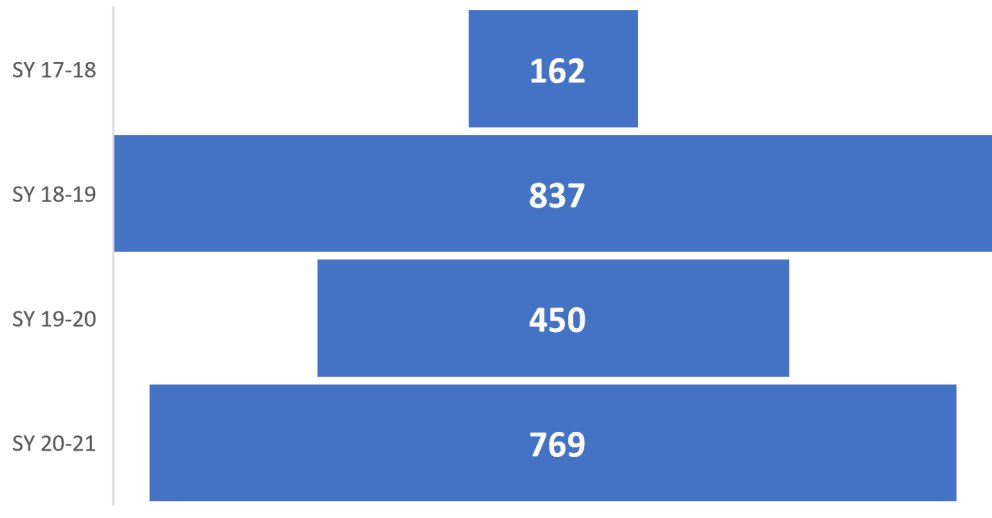
Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness residing in shelters by PA ECYEH **Region 5**, SY18 to SY21



Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness residing in shelters by PA ECYEH **Region 6**, SY18 to SY21



Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness residing in shelters by PA ECYEH Region 7, SY18 to SY21



Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness residing in shelters by PA ECYEH Region 8, SY18 to SY21

