

Estimating Homelessness Among Pregnant Mothers, Infants, and Toddlers (Prenatal to Age 3) in Illinois

Data sources and estimation methodology

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Summary

No public data system directly counts children ages zero to three experiencing homelessness in Illinois. This paper estimates that population from school data. For each Regional Office of Education (ROE), we compute the McKinney-Vento homelessness rate among first graders (identified homeless first graders divided by first-grade enrollment, aggregated from district-level data) and apply it to the KIDS COUNT population of children ages zero through three in the counties that ROE serves; regional estimates are summed to a state total. Applying this method to 2025 data yields an estimate of 14,123 children, or 2.6 percent of the state's 536,352 children ages zero to three. The estimated rate has risen 35.7 percent since SY2020, peaking at 4.04 percent in SY2024. PRAMS survey data indicate 3.34 percent of Illinois mothers experienced homelessness around the time of pregnancy (2017–2021). Because housing instability is highest at the youngest ages and school-based identification undercounts, the estimate should be read as a lower bound.

1. The Data Gap

Three federal data systems touch child homelessness, and each fails to observe infants and toddlers. HUD's Point-in-Time (PIT) count enumerates people in shelters and unsheltered locations on a single January night, using HUD's narrow definition of homelessness, which excludes families staying temporarily with others due to loss of housing or economic hardship ("doubled up"). In Illinois school data, doubled-up situations account for more than eighty percent of identified child homelessness, so the PIT count structurally misses most homeless families with young children.

HMIS records capture households that enter the homeless services system. Families with infants disproportionately avoid shelters — out of fear of child-welfare involvement, shelter conditions unsuitable for newborns, or simple lack of family shelter capacity — and instead cycle through informal arrangements that never generate an HMIS record.

The McKinney-Vento Act, by contrast, requires every school district to identify students experiencing homelessness under a broader, education-based definition that includes doubled-up families. It is the most sensitive detection instrument that exists for child homelessness — but its coverage begins at school enrollment. Head Start and state pre-K identify some younger children, but participation is partial and identification inconsistent. Children ages zero to three, enrolled in no universal system, are effectively uncoun-
 ted.

The practical consequence is that programs serving young children experiencing homelessness — Early Head Start, home visiting, coordinated entry — operate without a population denominator. This paper describes a method for constructing one from existing public data.

2. Methodology

The estimation strategy rests on a single, transparent assumption: the rate at which children experience homelessness in a given age-year, as observed at the earliest point of near-universal system contact, can serve as a lower-bound proxy for the rate among younger, unobserved age-years in the same region.

2.1 The estimator

The unit of observation is the Regional Office of Education. Illinois's ROEs partition the state into county-aligned administrative regions, each serving the school districts within one or more counties; Cook County's three ROEs (North Cook ISC, West Cook ISC, and South Cook ISC) were grouped together. For each region j , let H_1^j denote the number of first graders identified as homeless under McKinney-Vento across the districts in region j , E_1^j total first-grade public school enrollment in those districts, and P_{0-3}^j the population of children ages zero through three in the counties region j serves. The regional rate and estimate are:

$$r^j = H_1^j / E_1^j$$

$$\hat{N}_{0-3}^j = r^j \times P_{0-3}^j$$

The statewide estimate is the sum of the regional estimates:

$$\hat{N}_{0-3} = \sum_j \hat{N}_{0-3}^j$$

Note that “ages 0–3” spans four single-year age cohorts (ages 0, 1, 2, and 3), so each regional population base is roughly four times a single birth-year cohort. The estimator assumes the regional single-age-year rate r^j applies uniformly across those four cohorts within its region; Section 5 explains why this assumption biases the estimate downward rather than upward.

2.2 Why regional estimation matters

A statewide rate applied to a statewide population implicitly assumes that young children are geographically distributed the same way homeless students are. They are not. Chicago Meanwhile the age-zero-to-three population is distributed according to regional birth rates and family migration patterns that differ from the distribution of school enrollment. Estimating

within regions and summing weights each region's homelessness rate by its own young-child population, eliminating this aggregation bias. It also produces regional estimates as a byproduct — figures directly usable by the Continuums of Care, home-visiting programs, and Early Head Start grantees whose service areas roughly track county and regional boundaries.

2.3 Why first grade

First grade is the earliest grade in which enrollment is both compulsory and effectively universal in Illinois, and in which districts have had a full prior year (kindergarten) to establish McKinney-Vento identification for the cohort. Kindergarten is a plausible alternative anchor, but kindergarten enrollment is not compulsory in Illinois until age six and identification in a child's first year of school contact is known to lag; using first grade avoids both distortions. Pre-K counts are unsuitable as an anchor because pre-K enrollment is voluntary and, in some programs, homelessness is itself an eligibility criterion, which would inflate the observed rate.

2.4 Data inputs

Table 1 lists each input and its source.

Input	Value	Source
Homeless first graders, by ROE (H_1)	District-level counts aggregated to ROE	EdDataExpress; Illinois Report Card Data Library; districts mapped to ROEs using ISBE's ROE/ISC directory (Vali Systems calculations)
First-grade enrollment, by ROE (E_1)	District-level counts aggregated to ROE	Illinois Report Card Data Library, enrollment by grade (district level)
Population ages 0–3, by ROE counties (P_{0-3})	County-level counts aggregated to ROE	Estimate based on Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT®, child population by single age, Illinois counties (ages 0, 1, 2, and 3 summed), aggregated to the counties each ROE serves
Homelessness around pregnancy (contextual)	3.34% (2017–2021)	Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), Illinois, 2017–2021

Table 1. Estimation inputs and sources. School-data inputs are constructed by aggregating district-level figures to the districts' ROE; the population input aggregates county-level KIDS COUNT figures to the counties each ROE serves. PRAMS provides an independent, survey-based measure of homelessness around the time of pregnancy.

3. Results

Summing the ROE-level estimates for 2025 yields 14,123 Illinois children ages zero to three experiencing homelessness — 2.6 percent of the state's 536,352 children in that age range. The regional breakdown accompanying this paper (published as an interactive dashboard) shows substantial variation across ROEs.

Finding	Value
Estimated children ages 0–3 experiencing homelessness, 2025	14,123
Illinois population, ages 0–3 (four age-years)	536,352
Implied statewide 0–3 homelessness rate, 2025	3.34%
Change in estimated rate, SY2020 → SY2025	+35.7%
Peak estimated rate	4.04% (SY2024)
Homelessness around pregnancy, PRAMS 2017–2021	3.34% (2021)

Table 2. Headline results. Estimates constructed from EdDataExpress and Illinois Report Card Data Library school data and KIDS COUNT® population data (Vali Systems calculations); pregnancy figure from PRAMS.

Applying the same method across school years, the estimated newborn-to-three homelessness rate rose 35.7 percent between SY2020 and SY2025, peaking at 4.04 percent in SY2024 before declining in SY2025. The SY2025 decline should be interpreted with caution, as identification effort, migration patterns, and underlying prevalence all changed over this period.

4. The Prenatal Dimension

School-derived estimates cannot reach earlier than birth. The Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), a CDC-state surveillance survey of mothers with a recent live birth, provides a direct measure at that boundary: Illinois PRAMS data for 2017–2021 show 3.34 percent of mothers experienced homelessness around the time of pregnancy. This exceeds the 2.6 percent estimated for children ages zero to three, consistent with the age gradient documented in Section 5.

PRAMS also permits demographic characterization of homelessness around pregnancy — by maternal age, educational attainment, insurance coverage, marital status, race and ethnicity, depression, and experience of partner abuse — that administrative homelessness data cannot provide for this population. These profiles are reported in the accompanying dashboard.

5. Why This Estimate Is a Floor

Four independent lines of evidence indicate that true homelessness rates among children ages zero to three exceed the first-grade rate used here, meaning the estimator is biased downward by construction.

5.1 Housing instability peaks in infancy

The most direct evidence comes from the Eviction Lab's person-level linkage of eviction court records to Census data, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2023. Children under five constitute the largest single age group among people in households receiving an eviction filing, and the most common age at which an American experiences an

eviction filing is in the earliest years of life. More than ten percent of children under five in rental households face an eviction filing each year, and 5.7 percent experience an executed eviction. Households that lose housing through eviction flow into the doubled-up and sheltered arrangements that the McKinney-Vento definition captures. If eviction risk peaks at ages zero to four and declines through school age, homelessness rates among infants and toddlers should exceed the rate observed among first graders.

5.2 Family formation and dissolution dynamics

The arrival of an infant is itself a housing shock: it increases household costs, reduces parental labor supply, strains doubled-up arrangements sized for smaller households, and — as Desmond and colleagues have documented — makes families with children roughly three times more likely to be evicted than comparable childless households, notwithstanding the Fair Housing Act's familial-status protections. Households are at their most economically fragile precisely when their children are youngest.

5.3 The identification instrument itself undercounts

Even at first grade, McKinney-Vento identification is an undercount of the education-defined homeless population: identification depends on family disclosure and liaison capacity, and doubled-up families — the large majority in Illinois — are the least visible to school staff. A rate built on identified first graders therefore understates the true first-grade rate, compounding the conservatism of applying it to younger children.

6. The Service Gap

SchoolHouse Connection's fifty-state analysis of infant and toddler homelessness provides program-enrollment figures for Illinois in SY2022–23: of the estimated children ages zero to three experiencing homelessness, approximately 1,150 were enrolled in home visiting and 631 in Early Head Start, leaving an estimated 15,085 — roughly ninety percent — enrolled in neither program. Children identified and served directly by local education agencies are not reported to EdDataExpress or the Illinois Report Card Data Library, so a small additional served population is unobserved.

Because no universal system enrolls or identifies children in this age range, program capacity and outreach cannot currently be scaled against a known population. The regional estimates produced by this method provide a denominator for that purpose, and the PRAMS demographic profile characterizes the population reachable prenatally.

7. Limitations

The estimate inherits the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, which is broader than HUD's; readers comparing this figure to PIT counts should note the definitional difference is intentional, since the education definition is the one under which doubled-up infants and toddlers are eligible for services. The estimator assumes each region's first-grade rate transfers

to ages zero through three within that region; as argued above, the direction of the resulting bias is downward, but its magnitude cannot be established without direct measurement. Annual-identification data (a duration measure over a school year) is applied to a resident population (a stock), so the estimate is best interpreted as children experiencing homelessness at some point in a year rather than on a given night. Public school enrollment in the denominator excludes private and home-schooled first graders; because homelessness is concentrated in the public-school population, this exclusion keeps numerator and denominator consistent but modestly raises r relative to an all-children base — an effect that partially offsets, and does not exceed, the downward biases described in Section 5. PRAMS figures carry their own caveats: they measure homelessness by maternal self-report around the time of pregnancy, cover 2017–2021 rather than the current year, and are not definitionally identical to McKinney-Vento identification, so the prenatal and 0–3 rates should be compared directionally rather than point-for-point.

Two limitations are specific to the regional design. First, small-area noise: in the least populous ROEs a first-grade cohort may number only a few hundred students, so a handful of identifications moves the regional rate substantially. Regional estimates for small ROEs should be interpreted with caution or pooled with neighboring regions; the statewide sum is far less sensitive, since small ROEs carry proportionally small population weights. Second, boundary alignment: ROEs are defined on county lines, so the county-level KIDS COUNT population maps cleanly, but a small number of school districts cross county boundaries. Assigning each district to its administering ROE, and each county's 0–3 population to the ROE serving that county, keeps the geography consistent to a first approximation; residual misalignment affects the allocation of the estimate across regions more than the statewide total.

8. Conclusion

Using regional first-grade McKinney-Vento rates applied to county-level population data, an estimated 14,000 Illinois children ages zero to three experienced homelessness in 2025, with the estimated rate up 35.7 percent since SY2020. PRAMS data indicate the rate around pregnancy (3.34 percent) exceeds the estimated rate for ages zero to three, and program-enrollment data indicate roughly ninety percent of the estimated population is enrolled in neither Early Head Start nor home visiting. For the reasons in Section 5, the estimate is best interpreted as a lower bound. The method is reproducible from public data sources and can be updated annually and applied to other states.

Sources

Illinois Report Card Data Library and U.S. Department of Education EdDataExpress, district-level McKinney-Vento identification and enrollment data; Vali Systems calculations.

Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT® Data Center, child population by single age, Illinois counties.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & Illinois Department of Public Health, Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), Illinois, 2017–2021.

SchoolHouse Connection, Infant and Toddler Homelessness Across 50 States (Illinois early childhood program enrollment among children experiencing homelessness, SY2022–23).

Graetz, N., Gershenson, C., Hepburn, P., Porter, S., Sandler, D., & Desmond, M. (2023). A comprehensive demographic profile of the US evicted population. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

SchoolHouse Connection & University of Michigan Poverty Solutions, Child and Youth Homelessness Data Profiles (Illinois: doubled-up share of identified students).