

Sacramento County sees spike in homeless students during recession

dlambert@sacbee.com

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Thirteen-year-old Enjoli Johnson has attended nine schools in the last four years. Emily and Miranda, two elementary-school-age sisters living at St. John's Shelter, have gone to six different campuses.

They are among the skyrocketing number of Sacramento County schoolchildren counted as homeless.

As the region struggled with a dramatic housing crash and painful recession, the number of Sacramento County students without a stable place to sleep shot up 150 percent between 2006 and 2013 – increasing from 4,774 to 11,962, according to California Department of Education data. The majority of these children – 7,423 – are in kindergarten through sixth grade.

Those numbers are significantly higher than the statewide average. California has seen a 45 percent increase in the number of homeless students between 2006 and 2012, the most recent year for which statewide data is available.

Sacramento County schools chief David Gordon doesn't think the number of homeless students in the county has actually increased at a faster pace than the rest of the state, suggesting that Sacramento schools and social agencies have just done a better job of identifying the homeless in order to help them.

The numbers are based on a broad federal definition that includes children of families who "double up," or live with friends and family members because of economic hardship. That definition remained the same through the comparison period.

Although the National Center for Family Homelessness reports that 85 percent of homeless children attend school, there are significant challenges for them. Homeless children are more likely to have physical and mental health problems, including anxiety and depression, according to the report. Most homeless children are not proficient in math or reading, and 36 percent of them must repeat a grade.

The number of homeless students attending Sacramento City Unified schools has more than tripled since 2006, according to district data. The district had 2,494 homeless students last school year – 20 percent of its entire student population.

Monica McRho, the school's homeless liaison, blames the increase on the economic downturn. She said newly homeless students have parents who lost jobs or had their work hours reduced. Many of the families lost their homes to foreclosure.

But unlike past years, most homeless students are now “doubled up,” living with family and friends. Of the school district's 2,492 homeless students, 2,032 fall in that category, compared to 296 in shelters, 105 in motels and 61 unsheltered. Many of the “doubled up” families don't report their status to schools, making it likely the number of them is much higher.

“Years ago, the majority were at shelters and motels,” McRho said.

Emily and Miranda have come to St. John's Shelter in south Sacramento with their mother for the second time. The mother temporarily lost her battle with drug addiction and the family apartment in the process. The girls spend their days at school, evenings at the Boys and Girls Clubs and their nights at St. John's.

The Bee is withholding their last names because the girls said they do not tell friends at their new school that they are homeless. “They've gone to so many elementary schools,” said their mother, Sylvia. “Started over with friends. They adjust well, but they do get sad.”

Enjoli Johnson travels by light rail each morning from St. John's to her latest school, Kit Carson Middle School in east Sacramento. She isn't happy about it and would like to return to her previous school, John Barrett Middle School in Carmichael. But that would require a long commute on multiple buses.

“It's better if you stay in one school,” Enjoli said.

The federal government mandates that homeless families be given the option. Staff from Project TEACH at the Sacramento County Office of Education visits shelters and other places that offer services to the homeless to hand out information about the rights of homeless students, including the right to stay in their school of origin. School districts are required to pay for transportation when feasible.

“Research shows that with each move there is a drop in academic achievement,” said Hilary Krogh, of Project TEACH. “We want to keep them in their schools.” Homeless students also have the right to enroll in school without the immediate need for documentation, Krogh said.

The high number of homeless students can be overwhelming to school district staff, who are required to track them, provide transportation if needed and offer referrals for services. Each district is required by federal law to have a homeless liaison, but most districts have little additional staff. McRho has one part-time staffer, although she hopes to hire another when funding is available.

Definition of homeless students

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act defines homeless children as lacking a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. It includes youth who share housing with others due to a loss of housing, economic hardship or similar reasons: youths who live in motels, hotels, trailer parks or campgrounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; youths who live in shelters or transitional housing; youths abandoned in hospitals or awaiting foster-care placement; youths sleeping in a public place not meant to accommodate human beings; youths living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned building, substandard housing, bus or train stations or similar settings; runaways and youths otherwise unaccompanied by an adult.

Call The Bee's Diana Lambert, (916) 321-1090.