

The new normal?

Years into the economic recovery, and despite statewide efforts, Oregon's homeless student population continues to creep higher



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When Oregon's education department releases its K-12 homeless student count later this month, the report will show a disturbing trend: their numbers aren't coming back down from peak recession levels.

Nearly 20,000 students in Oregon's schools were considered homeless during the 2013-14 school year, the latest state records show.

Federal education guidelines define homelessness as not having access to a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence, which includes those students who temporarily share housing with another family. This is a broader definition than the one used by the federal housing department, which recently reported that the number of homeless families nationwide has gone down. Prominent advocates have challenged that statement, quoting the rising numbers of homeless students around the country.

The most-recent count in Oregon schools is virtually unchanged from those taken over the last five years. It suggests that last year's drop in homeless student numbers — by about 1,000 statewide — likely was an aberration caused by a new counting method.

This means that Oregon has twice as many homeless youths in its schools as it did 10 years ago. In the 2004-05 school year, barely more than 10,000 Oregon students were counted as being homeless. That number climbed steadily but slowly until the recession hit, when it jumped to about 19,000, state records show.

And that is where it has stayed since.

The rise from 2004 to 2008 probably was due to a combination of factors including overall population growth in the state and stricter federal requirements for schools to detect which of their students are

homeless, said Dona Bolt, the state coordinator for Oregon's homeless education program.

But the bump between 2008 and 2010 surely is a result of the recession.

"During the recession, we had a definite increase in clientele who had never dealt with poverty before," said Lisa Mentasana, the homeless liaison for the Beaverton School District. Other school employees

around the metro area echoed that sentiment.

And the numbers haven't gone back down. Beaverton now is one of four districts in the state that has more than 1,200 homeless students enrolled. The other three are Portland, Reynolds and Medford, Bolt said. Having four districts with such high statistics is a first in state history, she said.

Data requested by Street Roots from Portland-area districts under public-records law show that most urban and suburban districts here have about as many homeless students now as they did toward the end of the recession. The only local districts with significant reductions in homeless numbers over that time are small and rural.

The numbers provided by the local districts include some kids who are counted twice as they move across boundaries. The state will find these double-counts, which is why next week's numbers are bound to be just slightly lower than those included in this story.

But behind these trends and numbers lie real hardships for real kids — and the economic future of whole Portland neighborhoods.

Barriers to education

Isabel went to Beaverton schools her whole life. But she was homeless during her last four years in the district. When Isabel was 15, her parents split up and her mother took her to live with an aunt. But living in

such close quarters proved too volatile and the teenage girl ended up having to fend for herself. She stayed on friends' couches, always worried how long each arrangement would last.

"I wasn't able to focus on school," Isabel said. "My problems were so overwhelming."

She was struggling in her classes. Graduation seemed less and less likely.

It's a common pattern for homeless students, said Julie Barbour, who's been teaching in a high-poverty Portland neighborhood for 22 years. Homeless students often have trouble sticking to one task for a long time, she said. Because homeless families move around a lot, the kids may go to many different schools.

"They wonder, 'How long am I going to be here?'" Barbour said.

Homeless students in Oregon

2007-08: 15,859

2009-10: 19,040

2013-14: 19,655

Source: Oregon Department of Education

Districts with the most homeless students in the Portland metro area in 2013-14:

District	Homeless	% of total
Reynolds	1,367	11.7%
Portland	1,367	2.9%
Beaverton	1,249	3.17%
David Douglas	421	3.9%
Centennial	375	6%
Oregon City	341	4.2%
Gresham-Barlow	296	2.4%
Parkrose	259	7.8%

Source: School districts

This affects their social skills. And their previous school may have had a slightly different curriculum. Homeless students have many more barriers to education than do students with stable housing, Barbour said.

"It's really hard to learn when you have so much else you're thinking about," said Molly Frye, a social worker in the Reynolds School District, which has the highest percentage of homeless students in the tri-county area.

"These kids ask themselves, 'When school gets out, where am I going; is my family OK? What are we going to eat tonight?'" Frye said.

Education statistics bear out these observations. Homeless students pass state tests at about two-thirds the rate of the general student population. For example, about 63 percent of all students passed their math tests in the 2012-13 school year in Oregon, according to state records. Only about 39 percent of homeless students did.

Schools provide extra resources for these children, inside and outside of the classroom. The wall opposite from Frye's desk at Reynolds Middle School is lined with metal shelves holding cans of food. Every Friday, about 85 families come in for supplies, Frye said.

Schools Uniting Neighborhoods — or SUN — is a network of support services managed by Multnomah County. It has sites at 80 schools in the county. Christine Rhoney runs the site at an elementary school in the Lents neighborhood. Many families there have to choose between paying rent, paying utilities or feeding their children, Rhoney said. She runs a food bank at the school.

"At least we'll help you feed your kids,"

Rhoney said.

Beaverton has food banks at its schools, Mentasana, the homeless liaison there, said. The district, like others, also offers school supplies to high-poverty and homeless students. It holds clothing drives.

And in the classroom, there are special support services. Homeless students are given extra time to graduate. Districts must direct part of their federal dollars designated for low-income children to support homeless students.

But that money — called Title I funds — isn't enough in the highest-poverty schools, said Barbour. Students from very low-income families, including homeless students, often arrive in kindergarten with limited learning experience. This means they need more attention from teachers.

"But we have 30 or more kids in some kindergarten classes," Barbour said. "The Title I money is too little."

Investing in education is an effective way to break the cycle of poverty that can begin as early as preschool, experts say.

Low-wage jobs

A look at the Oregon economy can provide at least a partial explanation for homeless-student numbers that jumped during the recession and never came back down.

"It's not low-income folks and not homeless folks who have recovered (since the recession)," said Mary Li, a division manager at the Multnomah County Department of Human Services in Portland.

There has been a steady rise in homeless families in Multnomah County, with no reductions after the end of the recession, Li said.

One explanation: The jobs that were added since the recession were mostly at the top and bottom ends of the salary range, according to a report by the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis earlier this year.

There has been growth in the market for management positions, according to the report. Engineers and designers also are in demand. These are jobs that typically require college degrees and experience — out of immediate reach of most low-income families.

The two fastest-growing job sectors overall were personal care and agriculture. These jobs pay around \$20,000 per year, according to the state report.

The report describes a "polarization" of the Oregon job market: medium-wage jobs lost in the recession are replaced in part by higher-wage jobs that require college degrees, or — more often — by minimum-wage jobs.