Supporting Homeless Youth at Risk for Suicide: A Guide for Educators

Homelessness among youth is more than an economic hardship—it is a profound disruption of safety, stability, and community. For educators, understanding how housing instability impacts student mental health is essential, as youth experiencing homelessness are at a significantly higher risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Why Homeless Youth Are at Higher Risk

Research shows that unhoused youth often experience multiple, overlapping risk factors for suicide, including:

- Histories of abuse, neglect, and family conflict
- Chronic exposure to violence, hunger, and unsafe living conditions
- Disconnection from consistent adult support
- Mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD
- Substance use as a coping mechanism

Even brief periods of homelessness can heighten emotional distress, making early identification and intervention critical.

How Educators Can Identify At-Risk Students

Recognize the Signs of Housing Instability

- Frequent absences or tardiness
- Wearing the same clothes repeatedly, poor hygiene
- Falling asleep in class
- Mentioning frequent moves or staying with different friends/family members
- Lack of school supplies or reluctance to go home after school

Look for Emotional and Behavioral Indicators

- Withdrawal from peers or activities
- Decline in academic performance
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Sudden changes in mood or behavior
- Talking or writing about death or suicide

Practical Steps for School Staff

1. Build Trusting Relationships

Homeless youth may have experienced betrayal or neglect from adults. A consistent, nonjudgmental presence from teachers, counselors, or school staff can make a difference.

Tips:

- Greet students by name each day
- Check in privately and respectfully
- Avoid assumptions or public disclosure of their housing situation

2. Collaborate with McKinney-Vento Liaisons

Every school district has a McKinney-Vento liaison responsible for supporting students experiencing homelessness.

- Share concerns with the liaison promptly
- Work together to connect students with transportation, tutoring, and meal programs

3. Create a Trauma-Informed Environment

- Provide predictable routines and clear expectations
- Offer flexibility with deadlines and assignments when stability is disrupted
- Incorporate calming spaces and social-emotional learning strategies

4. Facilitate Mental Health Support

- Know your school's crisis response protocol
- Partner with school counselors, psychologists, or local mental health agencies
- Promote access to confidential crisis lines and resources

5. Engage Peers as Positive Supports

- Encourage peer mentoring programs
- Foster inclusive classroom communities that reduce stigma
- Support student clubs that promote kindness and belonging

Recommended Actions if Suicide Risk Is Suspected

1. **Take all disclosures seriously**—even if they seem casual or joking.
2. **Act immediately** by following your school's suicide intervention protocol.
3. **Ensure the student is not left alone** until they are connected to a mental health professional.
4. **Involve the liaison and counselor** to provide both immediate and long-term support.

Key Message for Educators

A student's housing status is not always visible, but the warning signs of distress often are. By building awareness, strengthening relationships, and ensuring students have access to support, educators can help reduce suicide risk and create a lifeline for some of the most vulnerable young people in their care.

Resources for Educators and Schools

1. Youth experiencing homelessness at risk for suicide: psychosocial risk factors and service use patterns – *BMC Public Health*
   https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-024-21212-2
2. Youth Experiencing Homelessness with Suicidal Ideation: Understanding Risk Associated with Peer and Family Social Networks – *Prevention Science*
   https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7572482/
3. Suicidality in homeless children and adolescents: A systematic review – *Child Abuse & Neglect*
   https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S135917892100029X
4. Homeless/Foster Youth – Los Angeles County Office of Education
   https://preventsuicide.lacoe.edu/high-risk/homeless/
5. Suicide Prevention among Homeless Youth: Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Suicide Prevention within Social Networks of Youth Experiencing Homelessness – USC Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society
   https://www.cais.usc.edu/projects/suicide-prevention-among-homeless-youth/