

Student homelessness rising in Georgia again, after a fall during COVID



Credit: HYOSUB SHIN / AJC

A Gwinnett County school bus drops off a young child at the entry of an extended-stay hotel in Duluth on Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2023. It was one of at least 10 school buses that stopped there that afternoon. Student homelessness is rising. Under federal law, students who live in extended-stay hotels are considered to be homeless, and school districts must transport them to the school they attended before becoming homeless, or to the school they chose after. That means multiple buses from many schools visiting each such hotel. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

By [Ty Tagami](#) and [Leon Stafford](#)

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The hotel room in Duluth that Tameka Duncan called home had two queen beds, a two-coil stove, a microwave oven, a sleeper sofa and one bathroom.

She shared it with six other people: her four children and two grandkids.

As Duncan described her situation one morning in early November, a baby fought for her attention. “Sometimes,” the 43-year-old said then, “it can be overwhelming.”

Because they lived in a hotel, Duncan’s three younger kids, who are still minors, were counted [as homeless under federal law](#). In the 2022-23 school year, roughly 9,000 Georgia students were living in similar conditions. Add to them the more than 29,000 who were “doubled up” in housing with other families, as well as those on the streets, and schools counted more than 40,000 students who were defined as homeless at some point last school year.

Despite a steep plunge in the numbers when many schools went remote early in the pandemic, the rate of student homelessness has bounced back higher than it was before.

In Gwinnett County, the state’s largest school district, the tally was 2,083, or 1.14% of enrollment.

That’s up slightly from the 1,995 reported during the 2018-19 school year, before COVID-19. But it’s a huge increase from 2020-21, in the depths of the pandemic. That year, Gwinnett’s count fell to 1,227 students — or 0.69% of enrollment.

Theories about the sudden increase abound, with many pointing to rising rents and an end of pandemic-related federal assistance.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution obtained the annual counts for all Georgia school districts from the 2018-19 school year through last spring then compared them against enrollment to calculate annual homeless rates. What happened in Gwinnett is also happening across the state, according to the analysis.

Rates of student homelessness, by metro Atlanta school systems

The rate of homelessness among Georgia students has risen sharply in metro Atlanta since the pandemic. The percentage of enrolled students considered homeless plunged during COVID-19 but bounced back and is now generally higher than in 2019, the year before schools closed. It's also higher statewide than it was before the pandemic.

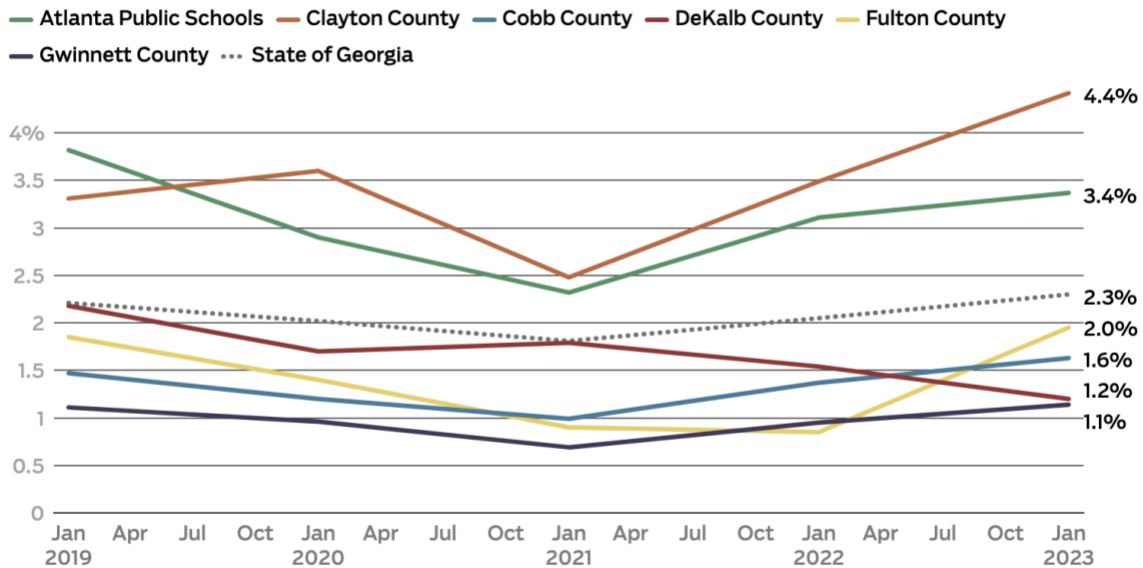


Chart: Ty Tagami & Pete Corson/The Atlanta Journal-Constitution • Source: Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis of homeless counts and enrollment numbers reported annually by school districts to the Georgia Department of Education.

Altogether, 2.3% of the nearly 1.75 million students in the state reported homelessness last school year, up from 1.8% during the worst of the pandemic and 2.2% before it started, the analysis of the data obtained from the Georgia Department of Education showed.

In Atlanta, there were nearly 1,700 homeless students this past school year; in Clayton County, nearly 2,300; in DeKalb County, nearly 1,100. And Cobb and Fulton counties each had more than 1,700.

“It’s probably underreported, so the actual rate’s likely higher,” said Kim Skobba, a University of Georgia associate professor who has studied the problem.

Pressures impact kids

The impact of homelessness can be profound.

In the 2022-23 school year, these students were absent more often, and they were suspended more often, said [a draft 2023 state DOE report](#).

Their rate of expulsion was twice that of other students.

It can be hard to focus on algebra or English syntax when it's unclear where the next meal will come from, or whether there will be a bed to lie in that night.

"I speak weekly with moms in their cars, with their children in their cars," said Mariel Risner Sivley, director of housing initiatives for St. Vincent de Paul of Georgia.

Compounding the problem, often those without a home move from place to place, shuffling kids from school to school. The dislocation severs relationships with teachers and friends who might have offered emotional support. The stigma attached to homelessness doesn't help either.

Duncan moved her family from Gwinnett to Newton County then back.

The instability made her children anxious, she said.

"It does affect their academics because they're not really focused," she said, adding that they were prone to emotional outbursts at school.

Duncan said her son was expelled from school in Newton last year, when he was 13.

Some children thrive in a particular school despite a lack of stable housing, putting pressure on parents to stay nearby, said Darryll Starks, founder of the Clayton-based housing stability nonprofit Ujima Way.

Starks said he's working with a homeless mother who knows she could get more help if she moved out of neighboring Henry County but doesn't want to because her son plays basketball in the district and is happy.

"It's a struggle, but some kids have a little more resilience and are able to push through in spite of their circumstances," Starks said.

Factors work against families

So why are more students becoming homeless?

Some point to soaring costs.

"Our average households live paycheck to paycheck," said Crystal Baskerville, the director of Health and Social Services for the Gwinnett County Public Schools.

"A lot of people think, 'Oh, you know, this family may be homeless just because they made some bad decisions or, you know, there's some underlying issues,'" she said. But some just couldn't keep up with the cost of living, she said.

Theresa Taylor, a single mother of four, moved in 2020 to Georgia from Florida, where she'd experienced homelessness and domestic violence.

She worked two jobs to pay rent on an apartment in Cobb, enrolling her daughter and three sons in the county schools.

But in 2021, she lost both jobs and was evicted, despite the COVID-era eviction moratorium.

“Right before the eviction was finalized, I was able to move my children right around the corner” to another complex, said Taylor, who now works part time for T-Mobile. “What I didn't know was that, although it was just around the corner, it was a different school district.” So they switched schools again.

Then, a year later in 2022, her landlord declined to renew her lease, forcing her to move again, this time to Mableton and back to the Cobb schools.

“Their grades have plummeted,” she said. “It has really messed them up mentally and emotionally.”

For many families, rents have risen to \$1,200 or even \$1,400 a month when “they were struggling just to maintain when it was \$800,” said Monica DeLancy, the founder of We Thrive on Riverside Renters Association in Cobb.

But some suggest that, while rising costs might be contributing, the reason the statistics are fluctuating could be simpler. They speculate that the 2020-21 numbers are inaccurate.

Schools rely on parents to report if they are homeless, and maybe parents didn't do that as much when schools went remote, said Baskerville, the Gwinnett administrator.

The Washington, D.C. group SchoolHouse Connection and the University of Michigan [surveyed school districts](#) about that during the 2020-21 school year.

The vast majority of respondents, 69.7%, attributed the decrease in homelessness primarily to “Inability to identify families/youth due to distance learning/school building closure.”

How school districts help

The federal [McKinney-Vento Act](#) attempts to blunt the effect of homelessness for students.

The 1987 law requires every school district to provide a liaison for homeless students. They provide everything from counseling and clothing to tutoring and transportation across school district lines.

For instance, in July, when water was cut off at an apartment complex in Clayton, the school system's homeless liaison, Sonia Davis, tracked down students there to ensure they could remain in their schools, regardless of where they ended up if forced to move.

“School stability was our No. 1 concern at that point,” she said, adding that the water service was restored when the landlord paid overdue bills.

In Gwinnett, the liaison coordinates with the district's 50 social workers and 15 nurses, Baskerville said. The district also allies with foundations and organizations that supply gas and transit cards and other cash equivalents. The social workers deliver them along with toiletries.

The district hires tutors for these students and connects them with medical and mental health services. It also supplies vouchers for extended-stay hotels, typically for up to a week, she said.

The [McKinney-Vento Act](#) requires that schools allow homeless students to remain in their school even if they move out of the attendance zone. If it means sending a school bus to another community to get the child, then so be it.

On a recent afternoon, at least 10 school buses stopped outside that Duluth hotel where Duncan was living. Over the course of more than an hour, each delivered one, or two or a few children at a time to parents waiting in the parking lot.

Others offer assistance

People are trying to help.

Groups like St. Vincent de Paul subsidize rental deposits and negotiate with landlords to overlook problematic rental histories.

And an organization called the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation is trying to whittle down the number of evictions by helping tenants fight landlords. Some landlords file for eviction if residents complain about poor living conditions, said Pierce Hand Seitz, a lawyer with the organization. Many tenants fail to respond in court, so the landlords win, he said, noting that many low-income people lack the resources and skills to engage in the legal process.

The group put lawyers in some high-poverty Atlanta schools where they were most likely to connect with parents facing eviction. Some of those parents said they would have had nowhere to go had the lawyers been unable to stop their eviction, said Seitz, who helped run the project.

“I think that our laws that have been passed are really pro-landlord,” said Seitz, co-director of the foundation’s Safe and Stable Homes Project. He predicts that more Atlantans will become homeless as the courts clear a backlog of eviction cases.

Duncan said her housing problems started when her lease ended on a deteriorating apartment in Lilburn, amid a court dispute with her landlord over the conditions. She then moved the family in with her father in Newton, helping to pay the rent on his house using COVID-era subsidies. But then his lease ended. She tried sharing a house and the rent with another family back in Gwinnett, in Lilburn, until that relationship soured.

She moved her family to that Duluth hotel room in April. Seven months later, in mid-November, she moved nearby to another hotel with a larger suite.

Then, a couple days before Thanksgiving, she got great news: a Realtor friend had found a landlord who would take her.

In December, Duncan will move her family to a house in Snellville. It has four bedrooms, four bathrooms and a four-burner stove.

Her eldest will drive to the same high school next semester, but Duncan said she’ll probably move her younger daughter and son to a middle school near the house. She thinks her son will be fine with that, but she expects his sister will be upset about moving away from friends again.

Duncan is looking forward to having a place she can call her own. But she feels for people who remain behind in the hotel, unable to find permanent housing because landlords are weary of the black marks they've accumulated.

"They don't believe in second chances," Duncan said. "Knowing how the economy is, nobody is wanting to do the second chance."