

Fact-checking Guide: Reporting on Student Homelessness



(Illustration: Matt Manley for the Center for Public Integrity)

From the Center for Public Integrity, a national news organization reporting on inequality. Our 2022 investigation into how schools serve homeless students identified information gaps that student journalists can help fill.

Student homelessness and housing instability are complex problems. Here are some tips that can help you ensure you report and write fair and accurate stories to help people better understand the issue:

Not sure where to start? Try our process: At Public Integrity, we identify each phrase in a story draft that makes a claim about the truth. This could be simple things, like a date, or it could be something more subtle, like an assertion that an event happened. Add a footnote explaining how you know what you know, with a link to notes, interviews or documents. If you find holes in your reporting, that's okay – keep reporting and only publish what you can prove.

Double-check names and titles: When readers see misspelled names and incorrect titles, they focus on the errors and can lose sight of the issue you're writing about. The same goes for references to the sex or gender of anyone described or quoted in stories. Ask what pronouns they use and how they identify themselves.

Triple-check numbers and calculations: Percentage increase and percentage points are not the same things. Neither are averages and rates. Not knowing the difference can lead to flawed conclusions and data analysis. If you need help, please refer to CPI's guide on data reporting.

Check "facts" against data: Just because someone believes something is true doesn't make it so. If your district tells you student homelessness isn't a concern, ask what the data shows. Sometimes "facts" are incompatible with how schools see themselves and inconsistent with what's really happening.

Reframe fact-checking as shared story-telling: When fact-checking the personal story of a student who has experienced homelessness, explain your motives to build trust. You might say something like, “It’s important to me that we tell your story responsibly, respectfully and accurately, which is why I’d like to understand more about X.” Remember to ask their permission and to take breaks if you are guiding them to recall something that may be difficult.

Consider student privacy: Weigh students’ right to privacy and confidentiality before publishing their names and photos. There is often a stigma associated with homelessness. Even if they agree to be identified, consult people close to the student (parent, guardian, trusted staff member at school) about the potential fallout of naming them.

Aim for fairness with all sources: People named in a story shouldn’t be completely caught off guard when they read or hear your story. When someone is criticized, get a response from them. Don’t include information in your story that you can’t confirm. Better to be safe than sorry.

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More resources: Our [reporting guide](#) has more information and story ideas. Our [data toolkit](#) has a step-by-step walkthrough on a data analysis you can do about student homelessness.

Get in touch: Share the stories you report about student homelessness (we’d love to see them!) or get help from us by emailing education@publicintegrity.org.

How to cite us: If our resources help you report a story, cite [our investigation](#) in your piece in a way that fits into your focus. One example: “Homeless students across the country fall through the cracks of the system intended to support them because their schools fail to identify them as needing help, according to a [2022 investigation](#) by the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit newsroom.”

Collaborate with us: We often partner with other journalists. Sign up for [our collaborator network](#) to hear about partnership opportunities. We’re happy to have student journalists and journalism educators in our network.