

So what are the signs of homelessness?

from

<https://classroomcaboodle.com/teacher-resource/recognizing-homeless-kids-classroom/>

K Through 6+

Younger students are much less able to “hide” things than their older counterparts. They just aren’t aware enough of the clues they provide to keep anything secret for very long.

Observations and awareness

- Backpacks are very full since they have no place to keep their stuff
- Clothes are not consistently clean
- Hygiene may be an issue if they have no access to regular bathing
- Food hoarding (e.g. keeping extra field trip lunches)
- They don’t get haircuts
- Their medical and dental issues (even significant ones) are not addressed
- Frequent or extended absences
- A long list of schools they have attended

From the mouths of children

- Discussions of living locations change, sometimes frequently: relatives, friends, or moving rental houses (“jumping rent” when their lack-of-payment grace period expires).
- Stories or comments about living arrangements don’t ring true or are inconsistent (homeless children may have been instructed to lie about what is going on).
- Discussions of home involve the fact of two, three or more families sharing a residence. Be aware of cultural differences in this area; not everyone has been raised to regard extensive personal space as a standard.

Pay attention to writing and illustrations. When homeless children share from their own experience they often reveal underlying truths, even when the story is imaginary.

Listening to parents

Calling to advise of long absences, often tied to “visiting relatives” when in reality they don’t have transportation.

Grades 7 through 12

7th graders are not much older than elementary students, so there is some crossover of signs and signals from the list above. However, from 7th grade forward (6th grade in some districts), the situation has changed with the rotating of classes and it becomes increasingly difficult for a teacher to receive as many clues on family status. Concurrently, it becomes easier for homeless students to slip through the cracks unnoticed, so student-teacher relationships become even more critical.

Observations and awareness

- Attendance is really big part of tracking at this level. Observant, student-centered teaching will reveal if a student is missing from your class; if they are, follow up, because they may be missing from others. Ensure that the office or counselor is tracking it. Frequent extended absences are the most problematic.
- Lack of cleanliness. Being more socially aware, older kids may make more effort on showering, but the condition of clothing can be a giveaway.
- Medical and dental issues (even significant ones) are not addressed.
- School work taking a turn for the worse with no particular explanatory occurrence.

From the mouths of youths

This gets harder as the kids get older since they just don't share as much with teachers – but other kids may. While the middle or high school classroom community is not the same as at the elementary level, an open and approachable atmosphere may create the necessary space for someone to share that a particular student is having homeless family issues.

- At least once a quarter, a student should hear that they have confidential options for homelessness. This may or may not happen in home room (if your school has that program). So I encourage any teacher of any subject to make sure that students hear regularly how to let someone know that they – or a friend – needs help.
- Really notice details when talking to a youth about anything in the classroom; hints can still spill out in spite of their possible desire to remain “under the radar” on homeless family issues.
- Listen to conversations between students... it's how I knew for sure one student of mine needed help – her friends were planning a rotation of houses for the girl to stay at.

Listening to parents

You won't have the same spontaneous contact with parents at this level as your elementary teacher peers (bus line, regular parent/teacher conferences, etc.) But if you do speak to a parent on the phone about any issue in the classroom, listen for many of the same story lines as outlined for elementary families: explanations for absences or homework lapses that don't quite make sense, etc.