The Count That *Misses* Most Homeless Children

One night each winter, volunteers in Buncombe County count the people most of us think of as homeless. On the night of February 10, 2026, the count found 67 children. From 2013 through 2025, almost every child this count found was in a shelter rather than outside. Schools use a wider definition, and they count across the full school year. In 2023-24, the latest school year with published figures for each district, they identified 817 students as homeless. Neither number is wrong. Most of the difference is the definition.

By Step Up AVL

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THE SIMPLE ANSWER

If you find all of this confusing, you're not alone. This started with a simple question: How many homeless children do we have in Buncombe County? Unfortunately, it doesn't have a simple answer or a single number. Different groups use different rules and count for different lengths of time. So what's the answer? ***Too damn many.***

67
Children under 18 in Buncombe County's one-night count on February 10, 2026.
ASHEVILLE-BUNCOMBE CONTINUUM OF CARE

817
Students the county's two school districts identified as homeless in the 2023-24 school year.
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, ED DATA EXPRESS

17×
How much larger the school count is than that school year's one-night count, which found 49 children. North Carolina as a whole comes out about the same.
STEP UP AVL CALCULATION

THE RULE

What the one-night count *includes*

HUD, the federal housing department, requires every **Continuum of Care** to run a **point-in-time** count and sets the rules for who gets counted. A Continuum of Care is the group of local agencies and providers that plans and coordinates a region's homeless services. Buncombe County's is the Asheville-Buncombe Continuum of Care. The point-in-time count covers a single night, which is where its name comes from.

Four places count. An **emergency shelter**. **Transitional housing**, a temporary place to live, run by a program. Somewhere not meant for sleeping, like outside, in a car, in a tent, or in an abandoned building. And a hotel or motel room, *only if* a charity or a government program for people with low incomes is paying for it.

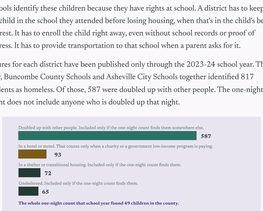
One place that does not count is the most common one for children. A family staying on a relative's floor or in a friend's spare room is not in the count. The rule applies no matter how long they've been there or why.

A child in a shelter counts. A child sleeping in a car counts. A child whose family is staying on a cousin's floor does not.

THIRTEEN YEARS

Almost none of the children are *outside*

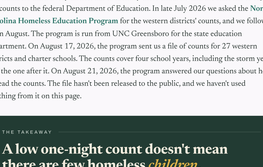
HUD has published an age breakdown of Buncombe County's count for every year from 2013 through 2025. In those figures, the number of children under 18 stayed between 24 and 62, with one exception.



Children under 18 counted on a single night in Buncombe County. The figures for 2013 through 2024 and the completed count for 2025 are HUD's, from the estimates it publishes for each Continuum of Care. The 2026 figure is the Asheville-Buncombe Continuum of Care's own, because HUD has not published a 2026 count yet. January 2022 appears twice because the Continuum's announced total was preliminary and the completed count reported to HUD added the FEMA-paid hotel rooms, as explained below.

The exception is January 2025. Buncombe's Continuum of Care announced a one-night count of 755 people. The same announcement said federal rules require counting people in hotel rooms an agency is paying for, so the final number sent to HUD would be larger. Counting the rooms FEMA was paying for after Hurricane Helene added 1,548 people. In May 2025 the City of Asheville, the Continuum's lead agency, told HUD that FEMA's program had no income test and asked whether those people had to be counted. HUD staff said the City could ignore the low-income wording and that people in those hotels "can be included in the count." HUD's published figure for the same night is 2,303 people and 296 children. The 755 is a preliminary local total and the 2,303 is the completed federal one, so the two don't disagree. To see how the hotel rooms changed the count for people of all ages, read **The Count Is Rising. The Money Is Already Here.**

Leaving 2025 aside, the 2026 figure of 67 children is the highest published for Buncombe County. The previous high was 62, in 2013. Through 2025, almost every child this count found was in a shelter bed or in transitional housing.



Children under 18 recorded as unsheltered in Buncombe County's one-night count, meaning outside, in a car, in a tent, or in a building not meant for sleeping. Source: HUD point-in-time estimates by Continuum of Care, 2013 to 2025.

In those 13 years, the most children the count ever found outside was five, in 2017. In five of those years, the count found none.

That changes what the number of children can tell you. If Buncombe adds beds for families, the number can go up, even if no more families have lost their homes. If those beds close, it can go down. The children are still homeless, but if they end up on a relative's floor, HUD's rules don't count them.

The 2026 count found 824 people in all, and 67 of them were children. Both numbers answer just one question: how many people the count found in those four places. They are ***NOT*** an estimate of how many people in the county had nowhere stable to sleep that winter. That number is probably much higher, since the count covers only those places, on one night a year.

THE OTHER COUNT

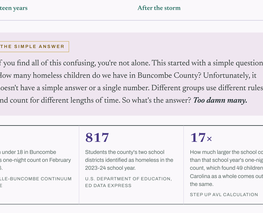
What the schools *find*

Schools run a second count under a different law, the **McKinney-Vento Act**, and it uses a wider definition on purpose. The law itself calls the children it covers homeless. Its test is whether a child has a fixed, regular and adequate place to sleep at night. The definition includes families **doubled up** with other people because they lost their housing or can't afford a place of their own. It also includes families living in a motel because they have no other adequate place to stay.

The reason a family is doubled up is part of the definition. A child living with grandparents because that is how the family lives is not covered. A child living with grandparents because the family lost its apartment is. Districts make that call one case at a time. The school count also runs across the whole school year, so a child who is housed in January and homeless in April is still counted in that year's total.

Schools identify these children because they have rights at school. A district has to keep the child in the school they attended before losing housing, when that's in the child's best interest. It has to enroll the child right away, even without school records or proof of address. It has to provide transportation to that school when a parent asks for it.

Figures for each district have been published only through the 2023-24 school year. That year, Buncombe County Schools and Asheville City Schools together identified 817 students as homeless. Of those, 587 were doubled up with other people. The one-night count does not include anyone who is doubled up that night.



Students identified as homeless by Buncombe County Schools and Asheville City Schools during the 2023-24 school year, by where they were sleeping when they were identified. The four rows add up to the 817 total, with no figures left out in either district. Sources: U.S. Department of Education, Ed Data Express; HUD point-in-time estimates by Continuum of Care.

The one-night count taken during that same school year found 49 children in the whole county. That's 817 to 49, or about seventeen to one. Most of the gap is the definition. Some of the rest is the calendar. A count that runs all year reaches families that a one-night count cannot.

North Carolina as a whole showed the same pattern that year. Its schools identified 34,950 students, while the January count found 2,070 children. That's also about seventeen to one.

AFTER THE STORM

What is still *missing*

The 2023-24 school year ended in June 2024. Helene arrived in September 2024. No figures for individual school districts have been published for any year since the storm.

North Carolina's own statewide school count is more recent: 39,248 students for 2024-25, the highest figure the state has published. But the western districts' share of that number hasn't been published.

The numbers exist. Every district has to identify these children, and the state has to report the counts to the federal Department of Education. In late July 2026 we asked the **North Carolina Homeless Education Program** for the western districts' counts, and we followed up in August. The program is run from UNC Greensboro for the state education department. On August 17, 2026, the program sent us a file of counts for 27 western districts and charter schools. The counts cover four school years, including the storm year and the one after it. On August 21, 2026, the program answered our questions about how to read the counts. The file hasn't been released to the public, and we haven't used anything from it on this page.

THE TAKEAWAY

A low one-night count doesn't mean there are few homeless *children*.

Buncombe County's one-night count found 67 children in 2026. Through 2025, almost every child it found was in a shelter bed rather than outside. That tells you who the count found in four specific places on one night. The larger group of children doubled up in someone else's home is in the school count instead. When you see a homeless count for Buncombe, check which one you're reading and what year it's from.

Will YOU step up?

Every group in our directory is local, vetted, and doing this work right now. Pick one and back it. →

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Sources & notes, and any corrections, are with the piece online: www.stepupavl.org/files/the-count-that-misses-children