

## Why GAO Did This Study

Homeless youth and youth in foster care are often unprepared for the transition to adulthood. Given the economic benefits of college, GAO was asked to examine the college experiences of these vulnerable youth.

GAO examined (1) college enrollment and completion for foster and homeless youth, (2) the extent to which challenges these youth face affect their ability to pursue college, and (3) the extent to which program barriers hinder these youth from obtaining federal financial assistance for college. GAO analyzed the most recently available Education data—two enrollment data sets, for 2011-2012 and 2013-2014, and data on college completion from 2009; reviewed relevant federal laws and guidance; interviewed officials from Education and HHS, as well as external groups knowledgeable about higher education, foster youth, and homelessness; and held discussion groups with foster and homeless youth.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to Education and HHS to improve homeless and foster youth access to financial assistance for college, including centralizing college information for these youth on Education's website, clarifying Education guidance, and considering legislative proposals to simplify federal requirements for homeless and foster youth. HHS agreed with these recommendations while Education generally did not agree or disagree, but described actions it was taking in response to the recommendations.

## HIGHER EDUCATION

### Actions Needed to Improve Access to Federal Financial Assistance for Homeless and Foster Youth

## What GAO Found

Available research suggests that a lower percentage of youth who have been in foster care enroll in and complete college compared to other youth, but little is known about homeless youth. While the Departments of Education (Education) and Health and Human Services (HHS) administer programs that can help them with college, Education data from 2009 (the latest available) indicate that a lower percentage of foster youth complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years (14 percent) compared to other students (31 percent). Education has begun to collect data on homeless youth and plans to have some college completion information by 2017. Education data also show that homeless and foster youth who attend college pursue an associate's degree to a greater extent than other students.

Homeless and foster youth experience challenges, such as weak academic foundations, limited family support, and lack of awareness of available financial resources, making it harder for them to pursue college, according to stakeholders GAO interviewed. With few adults in their lives, homeless and foster youth in GAO discussion groups said it is hard to navigate complex college application and financial aid processes. Education officials and other stakeholders told GAO that these youth are often not aware of financial resources for college. Federal law requires Education to provide accessible information on financial aid, but its website has limited information on college resources directed towards homeless and foster youth. The lack of easily accessible and tailored information can make it difficult for these youth to learn about and obtain federal assistance for college.

Burdensome program rules can make it more difficult for unaccompanied homeless youth (those not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian) and older foster youth to obtain federal financial assistance for college.

- **Homeless youth:** Unaccompanied homeless youth are required by law to have their status verified by either an official of specified federal homeless programs or a college financial aid administrator each time they apply for federal grants and loans. Obtaining documentation from specified program officials after the first year of college can be difficult because these programs generally do not serve homeless youth throughout college and because Education guidance on the role of these officials is unclear. Further, according to Education officials and other stakeholders, financial aid staff are often reluctant to determine that a student is unaccompanied and homeless without making extensive documentation requests, yet homeless youth living in a car or tent can find it difficult to document these tenuous living situations.
- **Foster youth:** Age criteria in federal law can hinder access to an HHS program that provides a voucher for college expenses to foster youth up to age 23, but only if they were receiving the voucher at age 21. Foster youth who start college after age 21 are not eligible for the voucher.

These barriers to accessing financial assistance contribute to the challenges these youth face trying to attend and complete college, but Education and HHS have not developed legislative proposals to address them.