

Fundamental Issues to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness

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Youth homelessness is disturbingly common. Although the prevalence of youth homelessness is difficult to measure, researchers estimate that about 5 to 7.7 percent of youth—about 1 million to 1.6 million youth per year—experience homelessness.¹

Homelessness has serious consequences for youth. It is especially dangerous for youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who do not have familial support. Living in shelters or on the streets, unaccompanied homeless youth are at a higher risk for physical and sexual assault or abuse and physical illness, including HIV/AIDS. It is estimated that 5,000 unaccompanied youth die each year as a result of assault, illness, or suicide.² Furthermore, homeless youth are at a higher risk for anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide due to increased exposure to violence while living on their own.³ Homeless youth are also more likely to become involved in prostitution, to use and abuse drugs, and to engage in other dangerous and illegal behaviors.

This brief reviews the key issues surrounding youth homelessness, including causes and characteristics of homeless youth. It will also explain the youth housing continuum, a model to develop stable, supportive housing to prevent and end youth homelessness in America. For purposes of the brief, the definition of homeless youth includes any youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who do not have familial support and are unaccompanied—living in shelters or on the street.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

Although the causes for homelessness among youth vary greatly by individual, the underlying themes among these causes reveal a strong link between homelessness and broader social issues including:

Family Breakdown. The same factors that contribute to adult homelessness such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, low education levels, unemployment, mental health, and substance abuse issues can also play a role in the occurrence and duration of a youth's homelessness. Beyond those factors, the phenomenon of youth homelessness is largely a reflection of family dysfunction and breakdown, specifically familial conflict, abuse, and disruption.

Youth usually enter a state of homelessness as a result of:

- Running away from home;
- Being locked out or abandoned by their parents or guardians; or
- Running or being emancipated or discharged from institutional or other state care.

Although family conflict also plays a part in adult homelessness, the nexus is more critical for youth since they are, by virtue of their developmental stage in life, still largely financially, emotionally, and, depending on their age, legally dependent upon their families.

Systems Failure. In addition, many youth become homeless due to systems failure of mainstream programs like child welfare, juvenile corrections, and mental health programs. Every year between 20,000 and 25,000 youth ages 16 and older transition from foster care to legal emancipation, or "age out" of the system. They enter into society with few resources and numerous challenges.⁴ As a result, former foster care children and youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population.

Twenty-five percent of former foster youth nationwide reported that they had been homeless at least one night within two-and-a-half to four years after exiting foster care.⁵

Many youth encounter the juvenile justice system while homeless. Without a home, family support, or other resources,

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homeless youth are often locked up because they are without supervision. Homeless youth are socially marginalized and often arrested for “status” offenses—an action that is only illegal when performed by minors, like running away or breaking curfew.⁶ For youth who are released from juvenile corrections facilities, reentry is often difficult because they lack the familial support systems and opportunities for work and housing. Additionally, homeless youth are more likely than the general youth population to become involved in the juvenile justice system.

Characteristics of Homeless Youth

While the youth population is extremely diverse, a review of the research tells us that there are certain similarities among homeless youth, including:

Lack of Self-Sufficiency Skills. Unlike adults who have often lived independently prior to experiencing homelessness, most youth who become homeless have never lived on their own. Lacking financial means, marketable skills, maturity, and independent living skills, this is a task for which they are almost invariably ill prepared.

Lack of Financial Resources. Minimal education attainment and lack of job skills prevent most homeless youth from securing more than low-wage and short term jobs. Many youth are not able to sustain stable housing, much less cover other necessities such as food, clothing, and health care.

Mental Health and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Homeless youth are at a higher risk for anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide due to increased exposure to violence while living on their own.⁷ Homeless young people have high rates of physical and sexual abuse. Approximately 40 to 60 percent experience physical abuse and between 17 and 35 percent experience sexual abuse.⁸ Due to their emotional and financial exploitability, homeless youth are especially vulnerable to coercion and recruitment into “survival sex”—the exchange of sex for survival needs such as food, shelter, gifts, money, or drugs.⁹

Of homeless young people, 40-60 percent experience physical abuse, and 17-35 percent experience sexual abuse.

Physical Health. Chronic health conditions, including asthma, other lung problems, high blood pressure, tuberculosis, diabetes, hepatitis, or HIV/AIDS are prevalent among homeless youth.¹⁰ Homeless young people over the age of 18 report that health care bills contribute to their inability to obtain stable housing.¹¹ Youth are less likely to access health care services due to barriers like limited shelter placement, lack of health insurance, fear of shelters and health care providers, and distrust of highly structured, rule-bound programs.¹²

Substance Abuse. According to national surveys, 75 percent of street youths were using marijuana, about 33 percent were using hallucinogens, stimulants, and analgesics, and 25 percent were using crack, other forms of cocaine, inhalants, and sedatives. Substance abuse rates vary greatly among homeless youth according to gender, age, ethnicity, and current living situations.¹³ Street youth have the highest rates of substance use and abuse, followed by sheltered youth and runaways, and then housed youth. These rates often increase with age.¹⁴

Relationships and Social Networks

Homeless young people often seek relationships and social networks for support and survival. Some deal with their social marginalization by connecting with others on the street. Certain young people may look to familial support from grandparents or siblings for emotional and informational support, such as having someone to share and understand feelings with or being offered advice, information, or guidance.¹⁵ Some older teens will choose to sleep on couches or in spare bedrooms of friends, if only for a day or month at a time, to avoid sleeping on the street. Others will attempt to establish strong relationships with older adults who work within the programs from which they receive services.

It is often these relationships that can prevent homelessness. For example, a trusted advisor or friend can influence and motivate a youth to stay in or access stable housing. Young people who are able to stay in the same community or in the same schools as before they became homeless have a better chance of avoiding the dangerous consequences for youth who do not have familiar support. Yet, many young people find themselves homeless after exhausting all their resources and relationships with people and organizations who could help them access or prevent them from losing stable housing.

Conclusion

In summary, the causes of youth homelessness often include family breakdown and system failure. Many youth become homeless after running away from home, being locked out or abandoned by their parents or guardians, and running or being emancipated or discharged from institutional and other state care. As a consequence of being homeless, many youth lack self-sufficiency skills and financial resources. Most likely, homeless young people will suffer from mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse disorders, and have poor physical health and limited access to quality health-care. Relationships and social networks are very important to the support and survival of homeless youth. Most importantly, strong and positive relationships with adults, programs, or organizations can prevent a homeless episode.

Communities should work to ensure young people—like those transitioning out of the foster care system and those leaving juvenile corrections—have safe, stable, and affordable housing options. Strategies should include housing linked with service delivery models. Across the nation, communities must seek to understand and tailor solutions to the unique needs of homeless youth—only then can we prevent and end youth homelessness.

Youth Housing Continuum: Supportive Housing for Homeless Youth

Housing for young people, homeless or otherwise, is, by nature, transitional. Most youth in their late teens and early to mid-twenties are housed in college dormitories, shared or studio apartments, or are continuing to live at home. Commonly, youth move through any number of such interim housing situations as they transition to adulthood.

Adolescence and its transition to adulthood is a challenging time for youth under the best of circumstances. Homeless youth must develop the financial resources and skills to establish themselves independently and they must do so during a time of great developmental flux. It is a period when youth are establishing their independence, a sense of identity, and the capacity for intimacy. Adolescents who are homeless must take on the adult tasks of securing housing, a livable income, and seeing to their future at a time when their capacity for rational thought and decision making is inconsistent and still developing.

A youth housing continuum incorporates various housing solutions that appropriately

respond to the broad range of needs of youth experiencing homelessness during their transition to adulthood. The design of housing for homeless youth should focus on stability, safety, and affordability.

The goals of any housing model for youth should be placement in stable housing and preparation for future independent housing. A housing continuum is defined as various forms of housing without prede-

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termined time limits that allows youth to transition from one housing program to another according to their individual developmental agendas. Based upon the needs and preferences of a given youth, such housing could take any number of forms from shared homes to scattered-site, independent apartments with or without roommates. Youth should have the flexibility to move among housing programs as they gain greater independent living skills and economic stability, including the ability to reenter housing programs and move back along the continuum if their current needs or abilities change.

It is also important to involve young people in the design of the housing continuum, as it will empower young adults to manage the responsibility of their own housing solutions. Responding to the needs of homeless youth with developmentally appropriate housing models along a housing continuum will increase their ability to live independently in the future. Stable and supportive housing enables young people to make better transitions to adulthood.

Policy Implications

Preventing and ending youth homelessness demands policies and practices at the federal, state, and local levels that close service gaps. In working to end youth homelessness, policymakers must acknowledge the following regarding the youth population:

- For many youth, independence at 18 is unrealistic.
- Homeless youth need self-sufficiency and independent living skills training.
- Homeless youth have special service needs, including mental and physical health issues.
- Relationships and connections to trusted adults, family, and social networks are important.

Public policy and practice should ensure housing models and services for homeless youth are cost effective. For example, it costs the state of Colorado \$53,655 to place a young person in youth corrections for one year and \$53,527 for residential treatment. Comparatively, it costs \$5,378 for the only licensed homeless and runaway youth supportive housing program in Colorado to move a young person off of the streets and perhaps prevent the incurrence of future expenses.¹⁶

A community should invest in addressing youth homelessness through policies and practices that mandate public systems responsibility and develop supportive, stable housing programs as an efficient and cost

effective way to direct youth to a path to independence and productivity.

Federal Legislation

The following policies address youth homelessness:

- Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs include Basic Centers, Transitional Living Programs, and Street Outreach.
- Chafee Foster Care Independence Act provides independent living and after-care services to young people “aging out” of foster care, including Education Training Vouchers.

The Ten Essentials Your Community Needs to Prevent & End Youth Homelessness

The National Partnership to End Youth Homelessness* has developed the following checklist as a guide to help communities identify the minimum requirements for an effective permanent solution to prevent and end youth homelessness.

The essentials are based on the National Alliance to End Homelessness Ten Essentials for Ending Homelessness in Your Community and the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, which draws from over twenty years of research and experience with communities around the country.

The essentials are slightly modified to respond to the unique housing and service needs of homeless youth. No essential is more important than another. All require participation from every sector of the community.

Plan. Your community has a set of strategies focused on ending youth homelessness. A wide range of players, such as government programs, elected officials, homeless providers, etc. have made funding and implementation commitments to these strategies.

Data. Your community has a homelessness management information system (HMIS) that can be analyzed to assess how long youth are homeless, what their needs are, what the causes of homelessness are, how people interact with mainstream systems of care, the effectiveness of interventions, and the number of homeless youth.

Emergency Prevention. Your community has in place an emergency homelessness prevention program that includes crisis counseling, family reunification services, rent assistance, and landlord intervention.

Systems Prevention. Mainstream programs, like child welfare, juvenile corrections, mental health, etc. that provide care and services to youth, consistently assess and respond to their housing needs. Discharge planning includes placement in stable housing for all young people being released from public institutions.

Outreach. Your community has an outreach and engagement system designed to reduce barriers and encourage homeless youth to enter appropriate housing linked with appropriate services.

Youth Housing Continuum. The youth shelter and transitional housing system in your community is organized to reduce or minimize the length of time youth remain homeless, and the number of times they become homeless. Outcome measures will be key to this effort. Your community has skilled housing search and housing placement services available for homeless youth and young adults who cannot be reunified with their families.

Services. When youth are housed, they have rapid access to funded services, and mainstream programs provide the bulk of

these services. They should have direct access to public programs and services for health, mental health, substance use disorders, parenting classes, life skills training, etc. just as any member of the general public.

Youth Development. To better serve youth, agencies and providers engage youth in meaningful ways, shifting their role as a recipient of service to that of a leader and decision maker in program development, delivery and evaluation, organizational management, and advocacy.

Permanent Housing. Your community has a sufficient supply of permanent supportive housing to meet the needs of all chronically homeless youth. Your community is implementing a plan to fully address the permanent housing needs of extremely low-income young people.

Income. When it is necessary in order to obtain housing, your community assists homeless youth to secure enough income to afford rent, by rapidly linking them with employment and/or benefits. It also connects them to opportunities for increasing their incomes through educational and vocational programs.

*The National Partnership to End Youth Homeless (NPEYH) is a consortium of the Child Welfare League of America, National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Foster Care Coalition, National League of Cities, National Network for Youth, and Volunteers of America.

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