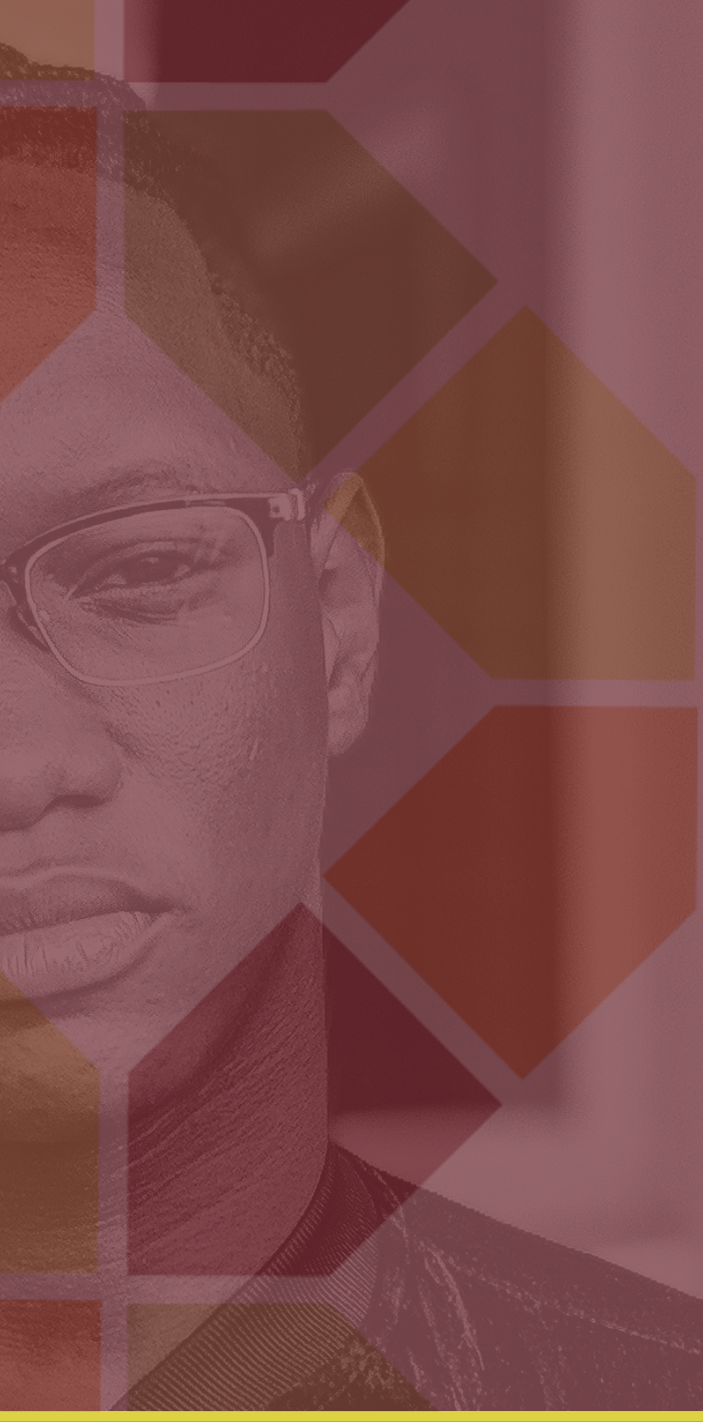


Missed Opportunities: Pathways from Foster Care to Youth Homelessness in America

July 2019

The seventh in a series of Research-to-Impact briefs by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago on understanding and addressing youth homelessness.

Each year, nearly 4.2 million adolescents and young adults in America experience some form of homelessness. *Missed Opportunities: Pathways from Foster Care to Youth Homelessness in America* focuses on the subset of young people who experience homelessness after spending time in foster care. We found that between one-quarter and one-third of youth and young adults experiencing homeless had a history of foster care. Our findings also reveal that young people's entry into foster care was often part of a larger pattern of family instability and was perceived by some young people as the beginning of their experience with homelessness. Finally, we found that there are multiple pathways to homelessness from foster care.

CHAPIN HALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voices of Youth: Alanna's Story

Alanna is a 23-year-old woman living in Philadelphia.[1] She was placed in foster care* at the age of three, along with three siblings, because her mother was using drugs. Alanna and her siblings spent 7 years in foster care. They were initially placed together in a foster home that Alanna described as abusive. According to Alanna, the child welfare agency "did nothing" the first time Alanna reported the abuse. After she reported the abuse a second time, she and her siblings were removed from the foster home and split up. Alanna and a sister were placed with foster parents who were "really nice." Alanna attended the same school during most of her time in foster care, and she was considered a gifted student.

At age 10, Alanna was reunited with her parents and siblings. However, her mother, who has schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, was physically abusive. Her father worked multiple jobs and was often not present. The child welfare agency did not check on Alanna and her siblings to make sure they were safe, nor was her family offered post-reunification services.*

Despite feeling unsafe at home, Alanna was class president, on the track team, in the debate club, and interned at the school district. She decided to leave home at age 16 because her mother put her "on punishment" for a month for no apparent reason. After leaving home, she stayed with a sister who lived in transitional housing and then with an uncle whose home was in foreclosure. Like many young people, she experienced literal homelessness and couch surfed with a friend.

Alanna continued to attend high school and do "the stuff that I liked to do" despite not having stable housing. Her internship introduced her to a program that provided youth* experiencing homelessness* with basic resources like food, clothing, and assistance with job preparation and college applications. With the program's help, Alanna successfully applied to and attended Penn State University. However, she experienced housing instability during holidays and summer break when she had to return to Philadelphia. Even after earning her bachelor's degree, Alanna struggled financially and was unable to afford a place of her own.

Nevertheless, Alanna appeared to be on track to succeed. Just before we interviewed her, she was offered a full-time, salaried position with the School District of Philadelphia. She had just moved into her own apartment and said she finally felt stable because she would earn enough money to pay her bills and "be able to. . .eat and put clothes on my back." Alanna was also pursuing a master's degree and serving as a mentor to and advocate for other youth experiencing homelessness.

Voices of Youth Count: Pathways from Foster Care to Youth Homelessness in America

The goal of the child welfare system is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. When it is unsafe for children to remain at home with their families, they are removed and placed in foster care. When that occurs, the child welfare system is required to make reasonable efforts* to reunify children with their families by providing services that address the circumstances that led to their placement and reduce the risk for future maltreatment. If reunification is not possible, the child welfare system must find children permanent homes through adoption or legal guardianship. When these efforts to achieve permanency* fail, children remain in foster care until they emancipate* or age out between 18 and 21 years old, depending on the state where they live (See Key Child Welfare Policy #1).

The child welfare system is also required to provide "independent living services" to all older youth (age 14 and older) in foster care. These services, which typically include assistance with money and household management skills, educational assistance, and employment preparation, aim to help older youth become independent and self-sufficient young adults. Importantly, this includes helping older youth in foster care achieve permanent and meaningful connections with caring adults.

*** An asterisk indicates that the term is defined in the glossary.**

Alanna proved to be very resilient in the face of multiple challenges and adversities. She was also fortunate. Alanna was placed with a caring foster family, received some support from her uncle and sister, and had an internship that connected her with a local program that helped her get into college. At the same time, Alanna's story illustrates what happens when the child welfare system misses opportunities to provide youth who were in foster care with the services and supports they need to live up to their potential and make a successful transition into adulthood. Because Alanna exited foster care at age 10, she was ineligible in college for the independent living services and other programs, such as the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program or the Family Unification Program (FUP), that youth who exit foster care at an older age may receive. Additionally, no effort was made to provide Alanna's family with postreunification supports* or to ensure that Alanna was living in an environment conducive to healthy adolescent development after she left foster care.

This *Research-to-Impact* brief is the seventh in a series of briefs that presents key findings from Voices of Youth Count. It elevates the voices of young people like Alanna whose pathways into homelessness included time in foster care and points to opportunities for prevention and intervention.[2] It also highlights ways in which federal policies and programs can be leveraged so that young people like Alanna don't experience homelessness.

Key Findings - Overview

The high percentage of young people experiencing homelessness who have been in foster care underscores the critical need for child welfare systems to play a central role in ending homelessness among youth.

- A history of foster care is common among young people experiencing homelessness.
- There are multiple pathways from foster care to homelessness. Some young people become homeless after aging out* of foster care, but youth who were reunified with their families or adopted also experienced homelessness.
- Youth who experience homelessness who have been in foster care differ from their peers who have not, particularly with respect to their history of adverse events.
- Many young people perceived their entry into foster care as the beginning of their own experience with homelessness and their foster care placement was often part of a larger pattern of instability that included homelessness with their family.

This research highlights actions that child welfare systems can take to prevent young people who are or were in foster care from becoming homeless, regardless of how they exited.

Moving Toward Solutions

Currently, we are missing opportunities to ensure that young people with a history of foster care successfully transition into adulthood. Child welfare systems can play a critical role in preventing homelessness by providing all young people who are—or were—in foster care with the services and supports they need to reach their full potential. Child welfare systems can also provide services to families experiencing homelessness to prevent their children from entering foster care and to families with children who have been reunified or adopted so that real permanency is achieved. The child welfare system cannot solve the problem of youth homelessness by itself; but, together with other public systems and nonprofit organizations, it can prevent young people with a history of foster care from becoming homeless.

Voices of Youth Count identifies the implications of our research and makes recommendations for policymakers, leaders of public systems, and practitioners. We see these recommendations not as an end point, but as the beginning of a dialogue about tangible changes to the nation's laws, regulations, systems, and programs. Voices of Youth Count speaks to the evidence while seeking solutions.

No more missed opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve preparation for independent living
- Expand housing assistance
- Help youth develop meaningful, permanent connections with caring adults
- Provide trauma-informed services
- Address family homelessness
- Prevent entry into foster care
- Support reunified or adoptive families
- Build the evidence base on how to prevent homelessness among youth who have a history of child welfare involvement

Key Child Welfare Policy #1

Fostering Connections Act

In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act by providing states the option to extend the age of eligibility for federally funded foster care to 21. While some states already had similar, state-funded programs, this change in federal policy provided states with financial support to allow young people to remain in foster care until their 21st birthday.

For states to qualify for Title IV-E reimbursement, young adults in extended federal foster care (EFFC) must meet at least one of five eligibility requirements:

- Completing high school or a program leading to an equivalent credential
- Enrolled in postsecondary or vocational education
- Participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment
- Employed at least 80 hours per month
- Incapable of doing any of the above because of a medical condition

States have considerable latitude with respect to how they define each of these criteria and how they verify if young adults are meeting at least one.

VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

Voices of Youth Count is a national research and policy initiative designed to fill critical gaps in the nation's knowledge about homelessness among unaccompanied youth and young adults, ages 13 to 25. The main research components included the following:

- **National Survey.** A nationally representative phone-based survey of 26,161 adults about homelessness and couch surfing among youth and young adults in their households during the past year and follow-up interviews with a subsample of 150 respondents who reported any youth homelessness or couch surfing.
- **Youth Counts & Brief Youth Survey.** A brief youth survey of 4,139 youth experiencing homelessness conducted in conjunction with point-in-time counts in 22 counties across the country.
- **Continuums of Care & Provider Survey.** Surveys of 523 diverse service providers and 26 Continuum of Care (CoCs) leads in the 22 Youth Count counties.
- **In-depth Interviews.** Detailed qualitative and quantitative interviews with 215 young people experiencing homelessness in five of the 22 Youth Count counties.
- **Administrative Data Analysis.** Analysis of administrative data from multiple sources, including the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) that all HUD-funded homeless services agencies and organizations are required to use; OrgCode, Inc. intake assessment and homelessness systems data; U.S. Department of Education data on student homelessness; and data from the Foster Care Data Archive—a longitudinal data warehouse containing records for children in over two dozen states who spent time in foster care.
- **Systematic Evidence Review.** A comprehensive synthesis of evidence on programs and practices from evaluations of interventions to prevent youth homelessness or improve the outcomes of homeless youth.
- **Policy & Fiscal Review.** Analysis of statutory and regulatory entry points for policy action on youth homelessness and group discussions with 25 stakeholders representing youth-serving systems, including child welfare, juvenile justice, and education from five of the 22 Youth Count counties.

Four Major Findings

Finding 1. Many young people who experience homelessness have spent time in foster care

Finding 2. There are multiple pathways from foster care to homelessness

Finding 3. Young people experiencing homelessness who have been in foster care differ from their peers who have not

Finding 4. Many young people perceived their entry into foster care as the beginning of their own experience with homelessness and their foster care placement was often part of a larger pattern of instability that included homelessness with their family

Finding 1. Many young people who experience homelessness have spent time in foster care

Twenty-nine percent of the 13- to 25-year-olds experiencing homelessness who completed the Voices of Youth Count brief youth survey (BYS) reported that they had spent time in foster care. By comparison, approximately 6% of children in the U.S. enter foster care at least once between birth and age 18.[3]

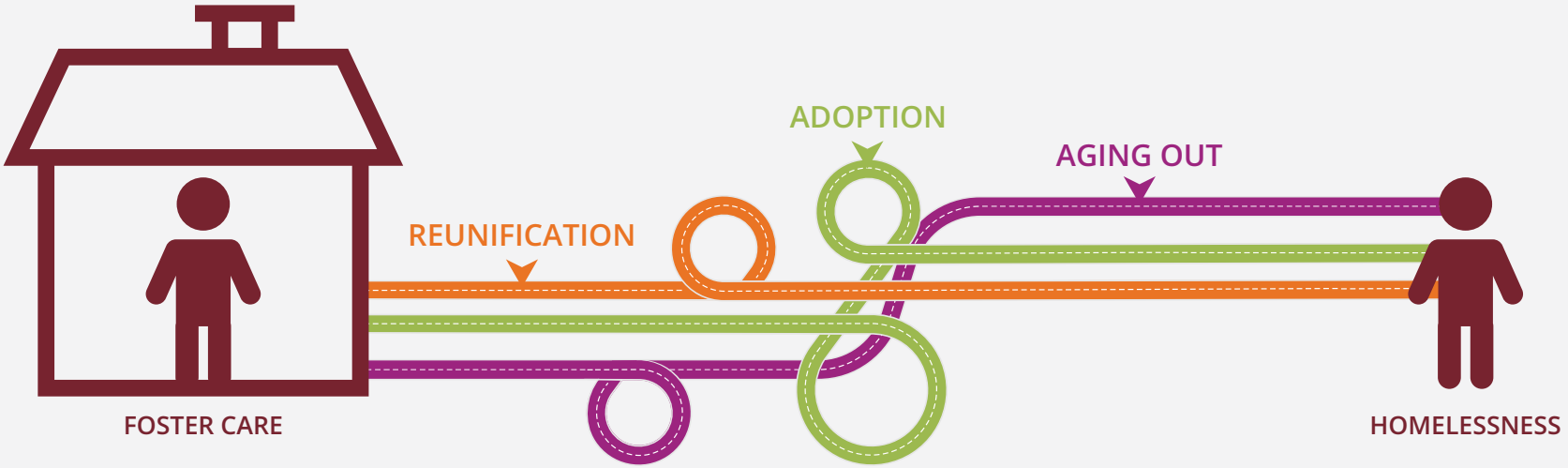
We also learned about the foster care histories of young people who experience homelessness through the Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews. **Ninety-four, or 44%, of the 215 young people we interviewed indicated that they spent time in foster care.** Some entered foster care for the first time at a very young age while others entered at adolescence. Although their experiences while in foster care were diverse, many of these young people described being moved from one foster or group home to another, running away from their placements, and cycling into and out of foster care multiple times.

Finding 2. There are multiple pathways from foster care to homelessness

Previous research documents the high rate of homelessness among youth who age out of foster care.[4] However, **the Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews indicate that aging out is not the only pathway from foster care to homelessness. About half of the young people we interviewed who spent time in foster care exited through reunification or adoption**. These young people achieved permanency in the eyes of the child welfare system, but still found themselves on pathways into homelessness.

Although every young person's story is unique, some general patterns emerged when we explored the experiences of the young people who exited foster care in different ways.

Figure 1. Pathways from foster care to homelessness



(Source: VoYC In-Depth Interviews)

Aging Out

Some young people aged out of foster care with no transition plan and became homeless immediately upon exit. Others had a plan at exit, but the plan went awry, sometimes due to their behaviors (such as drug use). Several young people described feeling unprepared to live independently. Their basic needs had been taken care of while they were in foster care, and they felt they were always being told what to do. Once they were on their own, they were unable to keep themselves stably housed.

Leo, a young woman from Chicago, was living in her own apartment that her transitional living program helped her get when she aged out of foster care. "They helped me sign my lease, got my keys, help me understand the different ways to pay a light bill, a gas bill, open a bank account." However, her living situation fell apart after she let a friend stay with her. After they got into a fight and Leo kicked her friend out, her friend "broke into my house, stole my stuff, the window got broken, the property manager got mad and she just told me to move out."

Reunification

More than half the young people we interviewed who exited foster care through reunification described returning to parents who were engaged in the same problematic behaviors that led to their removal (i.e., substance use, physical abuse, or neglect). Some of those who were reunified began using drugs—a few with their substance-using parent—which led to justice system involvement and attempts at rehabilitation. Some of the young people who were reunified became homeless after being kicked out or running away to escape what they perceived to be an unsafe family situation. Others had nowhere to go after being released from a correctional or treatment facility or after their family was evicted.

Brandon, a 22-year-old from Walla Walla, WA, described what happened after he was returned home from foster care at age 15: "Mom kinda like went in this downward spiral after [my grandmother died] and she started using. . . .My mom was getting really bad into drugs, and she had too many people over that were affiliated with the drug use, and cops were showing up, and our landlord ended up kicking us out."

Adoption

About a third of the young people we interviewed who were adopted reported abuse by an adoptive parent or other family member. In some cases, the abuse began after their adoptive parents divorced or one had died. The stories of these young people commonly included a combination of drug use and justice system involvement, which sometimes led to being kicked out of their adoptive home. Several young people described contentious relationships with adoptive parents. Others felt they did not belong, did not fit in, or were treated differently than their adoptive siblings. Most of these young people became homeless after running away, sometimes to a biological parent or other family member.

James, a 24-year-old from Philadelphia, was kicked out by his adoptive mother after he was caught shoplifting. "That was the final straw. . . . [It] gave her the reason why 'I'm putting you out. There's no ifs ands or buts about it.' But we disagreed. . .about a lot of things, and I just didn't like how she did certain things, so I was more defiant about certain things that may have come up."

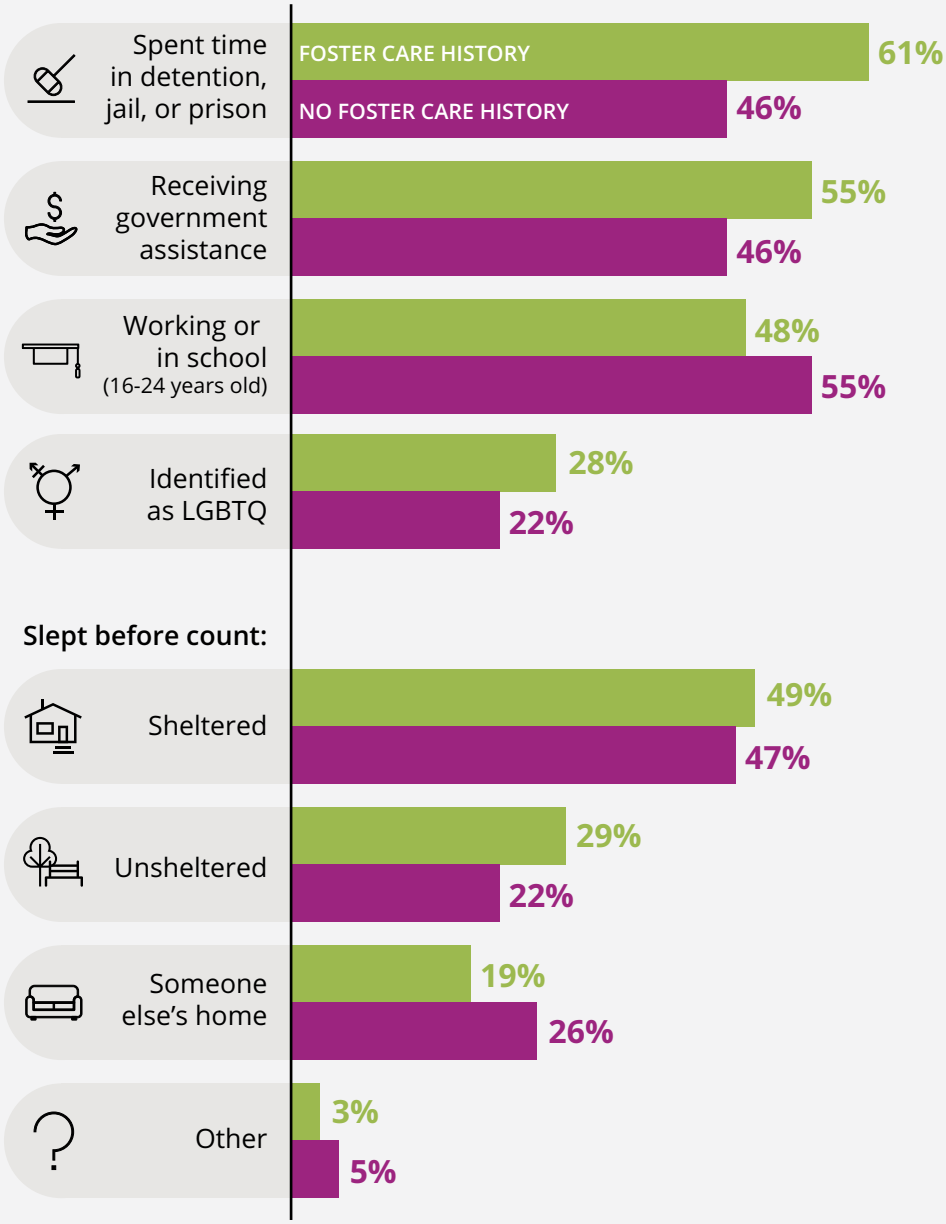
Finding 3. Young people experiencing homelessness who have been in foster care differ from their peers who have not

We found several important differences among youth experiencing homelessness between those who had a foster care history and those who did not. Most notably, when we asked the young people who participated in the Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews to indicate which of eight adverse experiences they had,[5] **those who had been in foster care experienced significantly more adverse events, on average, than their peers who had no foster care history (means of 3.2 and 2.5, respectively)**. In fact, the young people who had been in foster care were more likely to have experienced seven of the eight adversities.

The Voices of Youth Count Brief Youth Survey revealed other differences between youth experiencing homelessness who had a foster care history and their peers who did not. **Specifically, those who had been in foster care were more likely to have spent time in juvenile detention, jail, or prison; more likely to identify as LGBTQ; less likely to be in school or employed; and more likely to be receiving government assistance such as food stamps.** Additionally, although the two groups were equally likely to have been sheltered* the night before the count, **those with a history of foster care were less likely to have slept in someone else's home and more likely to have been unsheltered* (e.g., sleeping outside) than those without a foster care history.**

Youth in foster care are disproportionately African American[6] and have a higher rate of pregnancy and parenthood,[7] and a lower rate of high school completion, than their peers in the general population.[8] However, among youth experiencing homelessness who completed the Voices of Youth Count Brief Youth Survey, we found no differences between those who had a foster care history and those who did not with respect to race or ethnicity, the prevalence of pregnancy and parenthood among young women, or the high school completion rate among 18- to 25-year-olds.

Figure 2. Differences between youth experiencing homelessness with and without a foster care history



(Source: VoYC Brief Youth Surveys)

Finding 4. Many young people perceived their entry into foster care as the beginning of their own experience with homelessness and their foster care placement was often part of a larger pattern of instability that included homelessness with their family

For most of the young people with a foster care history who participated in the Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews, foster care was part of a larger pattern of instability involving abuse and neglect, parental struggles with mental illness or drug addiction, and poverty. Particularly striking was the fact that nearly half (47%) of the young people who had been in foster care had first experienced homelessness with their birth family compared to just 6% of their peers who had no foster care history. The higher prevalence of prior family homelessness among youth with a history of foster care may reflect the fact that some of the factors that contribute to family homelessness (e.g., parental mental health and substance use problems, poverty, and domestic violence) also contribute to foster care placement. It may also reflect the reality that homeless families are more visible to service providers who are mandated to report* suspected maltreatment.

Mike, a 17-year-old from Walla Walla, WA, described being "frequently in and out of foster care. . . .My mom, who didn't have like anywhere to really stay. . . .We did stay in studio apartments or a couple of hotel rooms or sometimes just in a tent. And that went on for a few years, and then I would get back into foster care for a few years. Then my mom would get me, and then we would move around a bunch."

Figure 3. Homelessness and foster care placement is often part of a larger pattern of instability

(Source: VoYC In-Depth Interviews)

After being removed from their families, young people often "bounced" from one foster home or group care placement to another. This was especially true for young people who entered foster care at a very young age and had been without a permanent home for much of their lives.

Gohan, a 19-year-old from Austin, TX, had been placed in foster care when he was an infant because his mother was dealing drugs. While in foster care he "really just bounced around from foster house to foster house. . .I tried counting [the number of placements I had been in]; I got to like 22, I think."

Adding to their instability, many young people ran away from placements or repeatedly re-entered foster care after being returned home.

The Whiz, a young man from Austin, TX, entered foster care multiple times as a child. "From when I was like one all the way up until I was like 13, I was back and forth between my mom and Child Protective Services—just back and forth, back and forth. Like, I'd be at my mom's for at least four or five months throughout the year, like, each year. And, then I would go to another placement, another foster home, stuff like that."

Nearly half (44%) of the 94 young people with foster care histories who participated in the Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews identified placement in foster care as the beginning of their experience with homelessness.

El Chapo, a young man from Chicago, said his experience with homelessness "pretty much started at three because I was actually in foster care. And you know, sometimes foster parents want you, sometimes they don't. Sometimes youth might do a little something off the wall; they send you to another house. . . .I have been in at least seven or more houses, so you know it can be pretty emotionally and mentally traumatizing."

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many young people experiencing homelessness have spent time in foster care. This is not surprising because prior studies have reported similar results. For example, the Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study, which collected data from 656 youth served by street outreach programs in 11 U.S. cities, found that 51% had ever been in foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). **Far more significant, it could be argued, are the multiple pathways into homelessness we found among young people who had been in foster care. Homelessness is experienced by youth who exited foster care through reunification or adoption as well as by youth who age out.**

This finding matters for two reasons. First, the vast majority of children and youth who exited foster care during the 2017 federal fiscal year were reunified (49%), adopted (24%), or placed with a legal guardian (10%); only 8 percent aged out.[9] Given that youth who are reunified, adopted, or placed with a legal guardian are also at risk for homelessness, the population of youth in foster care who are at risk for homelessness is far larger than previously assumed and we are missing far more opportunities to prevent youth homelessness than prior discussions would suggest.

In the sections that follow, we describe how existing policies and programs could be leveraged to prevent youth homelessness. We begin with opportunities to better support young people who are or were in foster care during their transition to adulthood. Next, we turn to the role that the Family First Prevention Services Act (see Key Child Welfare Policy # 3) could play in preventing homelessness among youth. We conclude with current efforts to develop evidence-based practices and recommendations for future research.

Enhance Supports During the Transition to Adulthood

Improve preparation for independent living

Child welfare systems need to do a better job of preparing youth in foster care for their transition to adulthood and helping them navigate the challenges they face during that transition. States are allocated federal Chafee funds (see Key Child Welfare Policy # 2) to provide a wide range of services and supports aimed at helping young people who are or were in foster care develop independent living skills and become economically self-sufficient. The types of services and supports youth receive depend on both their individual needs and the state (or in some cases, the county) in which they live but commonly include assistance with education, employment preparation, and training in basic life skills such as money management. Our findings suggest that the services and supports youth receive are either not effective or that youth are not receiving the services and supports they need.

Our findings also underscore the importance of providing Chafee-funded services to all eligible youth regardless of how they exit foster care. The Chafee program is generally thought of as a program for youth aging out of foster care. However, **some young people exiting foster care through reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship are also eligible for Chafee-funded services and supports and vouchers for postsecondary education or training, but they may not be aware of their eligibility**. Additionally, because states may decide not to spend their limited Chafee or ETV dollars on those youth, Congress should consider increasing the funding that states receive to provide youth with Chafee-funded services or ETVs. We are missing opportunities to prevent homelessness when we do not provide those same services and supports to all eligible youth.

Key Child Welfare Policy #2

Chafee Foster Care Independence Act

The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. The Chafee Program is the primary source of federal funding that states can use to provide services to prepare youth in foster care for their transition to adulthood. Several groups of youth are eligible for Chafee-funded services:

- Youth in foster care become eligible for services at age 14 and remain eligible until age 21.
- Youth who age out of foster care between ages 18 and 20 remain eligible until age 21.
- Youth who exit foster care through adoption or legal guardianship at age 16 or older remain eligible until age 21.
- Youth who are reunified at age 14 or older may receive services until age 21.

States that have extended Title IV-E foster care to age 21 may provide Chafee-funded services to all of these youth until age 23.

States have a great deal of latitude with respect to how they use their Chafee funding, but at least some of that funding must be used to provide services to youth who exited foster care on or after their 18th birthday and are not yet 21 years old. Additionally, states may spend up to 30% of their funds to assist young adults with room and board after they have exited foster care.

A 2001 amendment to the FCIA created the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program. This program provides financial assistance for postsecondary education or training to youth who are eligible for Chafee-funded services. Youth may receive up to $5,000 per year to cover the cost of attendance. ETV funds may be used to pay for tuition, books, school supplies, and other qualified expenses, including room and board. Youth are eligible for assistance until age 26 or for a maximum of five years, whichever comes first, as long as they are making satisfactory progress toward program completion.

Almost half of the young people we interviewed who had been in foster care first experienced homelessness with their families.

Expand housing assistance

Assistance with housing is particularly critical to preventing homelessness among youth who have exited foster care. States can use up to 30% of their Chafee funding to help those youth with housing. This support typically takes the form of help finding an apartment, assistance with start-up costs, monthly rent subsidies, or emergency assistance. Because states have considerable discretion with respect to how they spend their Chafee allocation, the percentage spent on helping youth with housing varies widely, and previous research indicates that the majority of states spend far less than 30 percent.[10] Perhaps some youth homelessness could be prevented if more states spent 30% of their Chafee allocation on housing.

Another source of housing assistance for youth exiting foster care is the Family Unification Program (FUP), which serves both youth and families (See Key Child Welfare Policy #4). FUP provides 36 months of housing assistance plus supportive services to youth who exit foster care at age 16 or older and are homeless or at risk for homelessness. **If FUP vouchers were provided to all eligible youth, the number of young people experiencing homelessness could be reduced.** However, FUP is a relatively small program. Many communities have no FUP vouchers, and those that have FUP vouchers may use them exclusively for families, without setting any aside for youth. Recent changes to the program require Continuums of Care to prioritize and refer eligible youth to FUP as part of their coordinated entry process. Improved coordination may increase youth access to the program, but we will miss opportunities to prevent youth homelessness as long as the number of youth in need of vouchers exceeds the supply. Moreover, the program has yet to be rigorously evaluated, so its ability to prevent homelessness among youth who had been in foster care is still in question.

Connect youth with caring adults

For many years, state efforts to prepare youth in foster care for their transition to adulthood have focused on economic self-sufficiency. However, Chafee dollars can also be used to help those youth develop meaningful, permanent connections with caring adults. Our findings suggest that young people who had been in foster care were less likely to have family members willing to provide them with a place to stay. **Unless child welfare agencies do a better job of helping youth in foster care develop and maintain relationships with immediate and extended family members and fictive kin,* we will continue to miss opportunities to prevent youth homelessness.**

Provide trauma-informed services

Adversity is a fact of life for far too many young people experiencing homelessness. Trauma exposure often starts long before they become homeless, in the form of family dysfunction and system failure, and it continues after their homelessness begins. Our findings suggest that exposure to trauma is even more common among youth experiencing homelessness who have been in foster care. This is not surprising given that most youth in foster care have histories of trauma, including, but not limited to, child abuse or neglect. It also means that **it is critical that services be provided to youth experiencing homelessness using an approach that is sensitive to their trauma history and avoids re-traumatization, especially if those youth have been in foster care.**

A number of organizations have issued valuable guidance on the use of trauma-informed approaches[11] with youth experiencing homelessness. The Family and Youth Services Bureau, an agency within DHHS that oversees the federally funded runaway and homeless youth programs, published a resource tip sheet for runaway and homeless youth programs on the value of using trauma-informed approaches. Other organizations, such as the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, have also issued recommendations for providing youth experiencing homelessness with services that are trauma-informed.[12,13] Moreover, given that exposure to trauma can disrupt normative development, impair functioning, and adversely affect well-being, providers that serve youth experiencing homelessness might consider making trauma screening a routine part of their intake process. Screening can help identify youth who might need to be referred for treatment.

Key Child Welfare Policy #3

Family First Prevention Services Act

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) allows states to use Title IV-E funds to provide prevention services for up to 12 months to the families of children at imminent risk of foster care placement (i.e., "candidates for foster care") and to pregnant or parenting foster youth beginning in federal fiscal year 2019.

Among the types of services that are eligible for Title IV-E reimbursement are mental health and substance abuse treatment, parenting skills training, parent education, and individual and family counseling. However, the services must meet certain evidence-based requirements to qualify for reimbursement (i.e., "promising practice," "supported practice," or "well-supported treatment").

To be eligible for prevention services funding, states must implement other reforms designed to reduce the use of congregate care except for qualified residential treatment programs. FFPSA also allows states to provide postreunification services to families whose children have been returned home for up to 15 months.

Key Child Welfare Policy #4

Family Unification Program

The Family Unification Program (FUP) is a special-purpose Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that serves two target populations:

1. Families for whom a lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in the imminent placement of children in out-of-home care or in the delay of children in out-of-home care being returned home.

2. 18- to 24-year-olds who left foster care at age 16 or older or who will leave foster care within 90 days and are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

FUP vouchers are awarded through a competitive process to public housing agencies (PHAs) that administer the program in partnership with public child welfare agencies (PCWAs). PHAs are responsible for determining voucher eligibility and issuing vouchers. PCWAs are responsible for referring FUP-eligible youth and families and are encouraged to work with local Continuums of Care (CoCs) to incorporate the identification of FUP-eligible youth into the CoC's coordinated entry process.

Youth with a FUP voucher are limited to a maximum of 36 months of housing assistance payments; FUP vouchers for families are not time-limited. PCWAs are required to provide, or contract with another organization to provide, supportive services to youth for 18 months but may provide supportive services to families.

Address the Needs of Families

Interrupt family homelessness

Almost half of the young people we interviewed who had been in foster care first experienced homelessness with their families. We don't know how much family homelessness might have contributed to foster care entry. However, research has consistently found a higher rate of child welfare system involvement among families who are homeless (or precariously housed) than among demographically similar but stably-housed, low-income families, even after controlling for factors that might explain this difference.[14] **Intervening with families experiencing or at risk for homelessness could help prevent youth homelessness by reducing unnecessary foster care entries.**

One approach, already being used by some states, is to offer modest amounts of cash assistance or housing-related services to help families at risk for or experiencing homelessness to stabilize their living situation. For example, California, Florida, Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio obtained Title IV-E* waivers that allow them to use federal child welfare dollars to provide families with time-limited rental or utility assistance or help meet other basic needs. In Illinois, families may be eligible for housing advocacy services and assistance paying for security deposits, first month's rent, or other essential items if that assistance would prevent their children from entering foster care (or enable children who are in foster care to be returned home).[15]

Alternatively, families may be eligible for FUP vouchers if their children are at risk of being placed in foster care or cannot be reunified due to a lack of adequate housing. Many homeless families could potentially benefit from FUP, particularly if they are likely to require a long-term housing subsidy. However, as noted above, the program is relatively small and does not exist in all communities.

Prevent foster care entry

For decades, most of the child welfare funding that states have received from the federal government has been for costs incurred *after* children have entered foster care. **States have received comparatively little funding to prevent children from entering foster care in the first place.** This imbalance in investments means that we have also been missing opportunities to prevent youth homelessness.

Rather than trying to prevent youth from becoming homeless after they exit foster care, we can do more to strengthen and stabilize families so that children never need to be removed from their homes. The Family First Prevention and Services Act (FFPSA) will allow states to use federal child welfare funding to provide evidence-based preventive services for up to 12 months to the families of children at risk of foster care placement (see Key Child Welfare Policy #3). Although the impact of this funding on foster care entries remains to be seen, its potential to prevent youth homelessness should not be overlooked.

Support reunified or adoptive families

Our findings suggest that when youth exit foster care through reunification or adoption supports may be needed to help stabilize the family. FFPSA also includes several provisions designed to prevent children who have been reunified or adopted from re-entering foster care. States will be able to provide federally funded family reunification services to children who have been returned home with for up to 15 months to ensure that reunification is successful. States will also be able to use federal child welfare funds to provide preventive services to children whose adoption or guardianship is at risk of disruption* or dissolution.* These funds are in addition to the various federal and state funding streams that states already use to provide adoption support and preservation services. **Although the FFPSA was not intended to prevent youth homelessness, supporting the families of children who have been reunified or adopted could have that effect**.

Child welfare agencies should also consider engaging in follow up activities to ensure that permanency has been achieved when youth exit foster care through reunification or adoption. For example, child welfare agencies could be required to verify that adoptive families are continuing to care for and support their children for as long as adoption assistance payments are made—something they are not currently required to do.

Build the Evidence Base

Currently, there is very little evidence on how to prevent homelessness among youth who have a history of child welfare system involvement. Recognizing the need to build an evidence base, the Children's Bureau,* an office within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), awarded two-year (2013–2015) planning grants to 18 public agencies and nonprofit organizations to develop comprehensive service models as part of the multiphase Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) program.
Six of those grantees received three years of additional funding (2015–2018) to implement and refine the models they developed during the planning phase. A third phase may be funded to conduct summative evaluations that assess the effectiveness of the comprehensive service models in preventing homelessness among youth who have been involved in the child welfare system. Until that time, it is unclear what lessons we can draw from the YARH program about how to prevent homelessness among youth who have been involved with the child welfare system.

Nearly everything we know about homelessness among youth who had been in foster care comes from studies of youth who aged out. Few, if any studies, have examined homelessness among young people who were reunified or adopted.
Although conducting research on homelessness among young people who were reunified or adopted presents a number of challenges, our findings suggest that such studies are needed to inform efforts to prevent homelessness among this population.

CONCLUSION

Missed Opportunities: Pathways from Foster Care to Youth Homelessness offers insights about how child welfare systems can prevent homelessness among young people who are or have been in foster care. Child welfare systems can do a better job of preparing all youth in foster care, not just those who are expected to age out, for the transition to adulthood. Regardless of how they exit, youth in foster care need resources, support, and guidance to successfully navigate that transition. We are missing opportunities to prevent youth homelessness if we do not address these needs.

Child welfare systems can also invest more in strengthening and stabilizing families so that fewer children ever need to enter foster care and ensure the families of youth who have been reunified or adopted receive post-permanency supports. We are missing opportunities to prevent homelessness among young people like Alanna if we don't take these steps by leveraging various federal funding sources, including funding that will soon become available as a result of the Family First Prevention Services Act.

Child welfare systems cannot solve the problem of youth homelessness by themselves. Many young people at risk for homelessness are not eligible for the kinds of services and supports that young people who are or were in foster care are eligible for. However, by collaborating with other public systems and private sector service providers, child welfare systems can play a critical role in preventing and ending youth homelessness.

No more missed opportunities.

GLOSSARY

Aging out: Young people age out of (or emancipate from) foster care when they become too old to remain in state care according to state law. In about half of the states, young people age out on or shortly after their 18th birthday. In the remaining states, young people do not age out until they are 21 years old.

Children's Bureau: The Children's Bureau is an office within the Administration for Children and Families, an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Bureau's focus is on improving the lives of children and families through programs that reduce child abuse and neglect, increase adoptions, and strengthen foster care.

Disruption: An adoption is said to be disrupted if the process ends after the child is placed in an adoptive home but before the adoption is legally finalized.

Dissolution: An adoption is said to be dissolved if the legal relationship between the adoptive parents and the child is severed, either voluntarily or involuntarily, after the adoption is legally finalized.

Fictive kin: Fictive kin are close family friends who may be considered relatives but are not related by blood or marriage.

Foster care: Foster care (also known as out-of-home care) is a service provided by states or counties for children who cannot live safely with their families. Children in foster care may live with relatives or with unrelated foster parents, in group homes, residential care facilities, emergency shelters, or in supervised independent living settings.

Homelessness: Homelessness describes the experience of sleeping in places in which people are not meant to live, staying in shelters, or temporarily staying with others ("couch surfing") and not having a safe and stable alternative. Voices of Youth Count focuses on homelessness among youth who are not accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Mandated reporters: These are individuals who, because of their profession, are legally required to report any suspected child abuse or neglect to the relevant authorities.

Permanency: A safe, legally permanent family is the goal for every child who is placed in foster care. Permanency can be achieved through reunification (or return home), adoption, or legal guardianship.

Postreunification Services: Child welfare agencies may provide services to families after children who had been in foster care have been returned home.

Reasonable efforts: Federal law requires state child welfare agencies to demonstrate that reasonable efforts have been made to prevent the removal of children from their homes and to make it possible to return home children who have been placed in foster care. Reasonable efforts is not defined in federal law. Judges must determine on a case by case basis whether the services and supports provided to preserve or reunify families are accessible, available, and culturally appropriate.

Sheltered: HUD defines youth as sheltered if they are staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing.

Title IV-E Foster Care Program: Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (SSA) provides funding for states and tribes to assist state and tribal welfare agencies with the costs of foster care maintenance payments for eligible children; administrative expenses for managing the program; and training for staff and foster parents.

Unsheltered: HUD defines youth as unsheltered if they are staying in places not designed or ordinarily used for sleeping such as in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, or on the sidewalk or street.

Youth: We define youth as individuals between 13 and 25 years old to align with language in the 2008 reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this brief, we use pseudonyms that young people chose for themselves to protect their identities.

2. Our focus in this brief is specifically on youth experiencing homelessness who had been in foster care, not the larger population of young people who had some involvement with the child welfare system that did not result in their being removed from home, such as young people who were the subject of a child maltreatment investigation or recipients of in-home family services.

3. Wildeman, C., & Emanuel, N. (2014) Cumulative risks of foster care placement by age 18 for U.S. children, 2000–2011. *PLoS ONE 9*(3), e92785. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0092785

4. Dworsky, A., Napolitano, L., & Courtney, M. (2013). Homelessness during the transition from foster care to adulthood. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*, 318-323.

5. The eight adverse experiences were being physically harmed, harming someone else, being forced to have sex, experiencing the death of a parent or other caregiver, being stigmatized or discriminated against, exchanging sex for basic needs, and belonging to a gang.

6. Wulczyn, F., Gibbons, R., Snowden, L., & Lery, B. (2013). Poverty, social disadvantage, and the black/white placement gap. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*, 65–74.

7. Svoboda, D., Shaw, T., Barth, R., & Bright, C. (2012). Pregnancy and parenting among youth in foster care: A review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 867–875

8. Dworsky, A., Smithgall, C., & Courtney, M. (2014). *Supporting youth transitioning out of foster care. Issue brief 1: Education programs*. OPRE Report # 2014-66. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

9. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2018). *The AFCARS report*. Preliminary FY 2017 Estimates as of August 10, 2018 - No. 25. Washington, DC: USDHHS.

10. Pergamit, M., McDaniel, M, & Hawkins, A. (2012). *Housing assistance for youth who have aged out of foster care: The Role of the Chafee Foster Care Independence program.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

11. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/fysb/trauma20120829.pdf

12. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2014). *Complex trauma: Facts for service providers working with homeless youth and young adults*. Los Angeles, CA, & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. Available at https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//complex_trauma_facts_homeless_youth.pdf

13. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2007). *Culture and trauma brief: Trauma among homeless youth*. Los Angeles, CA, & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. Available at https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//trauma_among_homeless_youth.pdf

14. Dworsky, A. (2014). *Families at the nexus of housing and child welfare.* Washington, DC: State Policy Advocacy and Reform Center Available at https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Families-at-the-Nexus-of-Housing-and-Child-Welfare.pdf.

15. Families eligible for these services may also qualify for a waiver to apply for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) if they have a child in out-of-home care who is expected to be reunified within 90 days.

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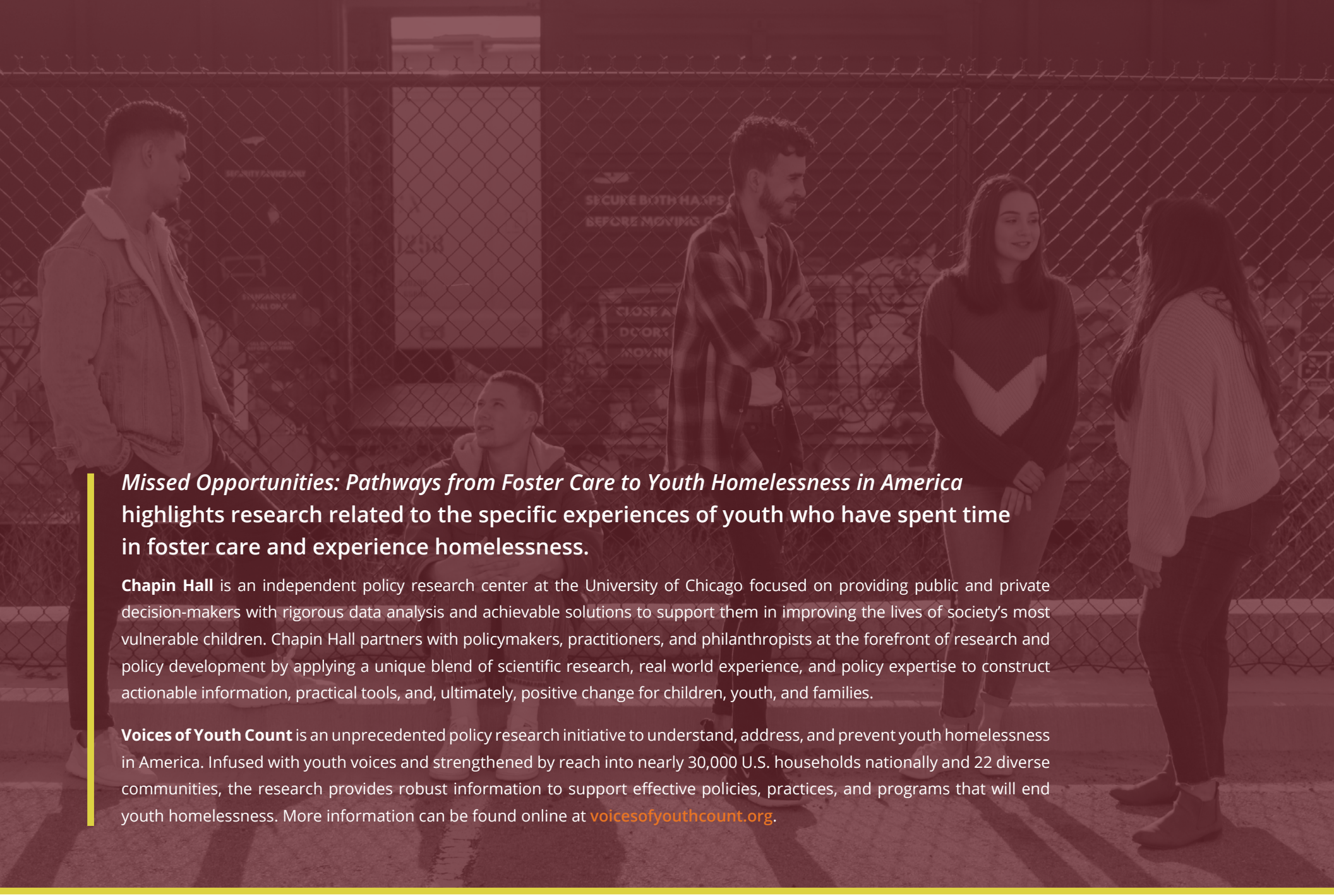

Missed Opportunities: Pathways from Foster Care to Youth Homelessness in America highlights research related to the specific experiences of youth who have spent time in foster care and experience homelessness.

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