



Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness in America

A Thrive by 25[®] Brief

All young people deserve to grow up in a safe and stable home. Yet individual, family, community and system challenges result in 1 in 30 youths ages 13 to 24 and 1 in 10 young adults ages 18 to 25 experiencing some form of homelessness over the course of a year.^{1,2} These youth face instability and trauma during an important developmental period,³ limiting their growth and creating costly effects for them and the communities in which they live.

This brief is the first in a series highlighting challenges and opportunities facing youth ages 14 through 24 as part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Thrive by 25[®] efforts, a set of investments focused on

promoting basic needs, permanent connections, education and credentials, financial stability and youth leadership for young people.⁴

Casey is joining partners in the field, such as Funders Together to End Homelessness, to ensure young people have safe, stable housing while also connecting them with educational and economic opportunities. This brief analyzes youth homelessness and offers recommendations for how systems can make certain every young person has a place to call home — a safe and secure place to prepare for adulthood.



ABOUT YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness among adults and families often is linked to a lack of affordable housing, poverty and, to a lesser extent, personal challenges (such as traumatic experiences, depression or substance use disorders) that disrupt economic stability.⁵ However, youth run away or are forced from their homes when systems are unable to mitigate family conflict related to:

- parental abuse or neglect;
- a parent's or youth's alcohol or drug use;
- the youth's sexual orientation or gender identity;
- youth pregnancy; or
- other challenging household dynamics, including a lack of family financial resources.^{6,7}

Research has established that some groups of youth experience elevated risks for homelessness.⁸ Through its [Voices of Youth Count initiative](#), Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found:

- youth with less than a high school diploma or GED are nearly 3.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than peers who completed high school;
- the risk of homelessness for youth who are single parents is at least two times greater than it is for single youth who are not parents;
- youth from low-income households earning less than \$24,000 annually are 1.5 times more likely to experience homelessness;
- LGBTQ youth have a 120% greater risk of homelessness;
- Black youth are at an 83% higher risk for homelessness compared to other races; and
- Hispanic, nonwhite youth have a 33% greater risk of experiencing homelessness than non-Hispanic young people.

Youth with a history of involvement with foster care, juvenile justice or behavioral health systems also are at high risk of homelessness.⁹ Many of these young people link the beginning of their homelessness to early family instability, including placement in foster care and family homelessness.¹⁰ Youth who are

homeless often belong to groups that put them at a higher risk of homelessness; for example, Black or multiracial young people who also identify as LGBTQ have some of the highest rates of homelessness.¹¹ While youth homelessness may be more visible in cities, youth in rural and nonrural areas experience homelessness at very similar rates, with rural youth left to grapple with a more limited and dispersed safety net and set of service providers.¹²

Understanding the characteristics that make young people more likely to experience homelessness enables families, systems and communities to target prevention and intervention strategies toward the youth most likely to need support.

PREVALENCE OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Because of differing definitions of homelessness and research methodologies, no single data source paints a complete picture of youth homelessness within the United States.¹³ According to Chapin Hall, 3.5 million young adults ages 18 to 25 experience some form of homelessness — whether sleeping on the streets or in shelters or moving between temporary housing situations (often called couch surfing) — in a given year. And 700,000 youths ages 13 to 17 experience some form of homelessness over a 12-month period.¹⁴ Other data augment these alarming statistics:

- U.S. public schools enrolled just under 1.1 million children and youths who were experiencing homelessness in grades pre-K through 12 during the 2020–21 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education.¹⁵
- Nearly 6% of high school students experienced homelessness at some point of the 2018–19 school year in the 27 states that included a housing status question in their 2019 [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey](#).¹⁶
- On a single night in January 2020, 34,210 unaccompanied youths under the age of 25 were reported to be homeless, while another 7,335 young people were homeless and parenting a minor child, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.¹⁷

In addition to inconsistent definitions of what it means to be homeless, other factors impede the collection of reliable data on the number of young people experiencing homelessness. Youth homelessness is fluid by nature. Young people move regularly between different forms of homelessness — such as sheltered, unsheltered and couch surfing¹⁸ — making it necessary to consider multiple data sources for a complete understanding of the prevalence of youth homelessness. And because many young people experiencing housing insecurity remain disconnected from formal support services and may not wish to be identified,¹⁹ many experts believe the available data represent an undercount.^{20,21}

Despite the complexity of accurately defining the extent of the problem, far too many young people each year are navigating unstable and unsafe housing situations that put them at high risk of poor outcomes.

EFFECTS OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Youth experiencing homelessness on their own are more likely than their peers in the general population to endure threats to their health, safety and well-being,^{22,23} including:

- missing school, resulting in higher rates of dropping out, experiencing poverty and becoming involved in the criminal justice system;
- struggling with mental health issues, including suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts;
- abusing alcohol or drugs;
- being beaten up, robbed or otherwise physically assaulted;
- being sexually assaulted;
- being trafficked for sex or labor; and
- resorting to “survival crime,” including stealing, exchanging sex for basic needs or selling drugs.

Adolescence — the developmental period between ages 14 to 24 — is when young people are maturing physically and mentally and ideally learning how to build relationships and life skills. It is also a time when young people need to invest in their own economic self-sufficiency through education or early work experiences leading to financial independence.

Trauma, housing instability and the interruption of pathways to school or work during this time can lead to continued homelessness in adulthood.^{24,25}

These outcomes demonstrate the very real effects on young people when their basic needs are not met. Therefore, it is urgent for policymakers, systems and service providers to prevent homelessness by connecting young people with tailored interventions that meet their unique needs and capitalize on their strengths.

CURRENT U.S. RESPONSE TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Legislative and funding developments have begun to establish a framework for addressing youth homelessness, but much work remains. Insufficient funding targeted to youth homelessness combined with rigid and restrictive policy guidelines governing eligibility for services and permissible uses of funds have allowed youth to fall through the cracks. A youth homelessness response focused almost exclusively on crisis intervention results in missed opportunities to prevent homelessness and its compounding harmful effects for millions of young people each year. Disconnected operations among key human services systems leave youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness to navigate a disjointed and uncoordinated safety net. More must be done to strengthen the response to youth homelessness.





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

To ensure that all young people have a safe and stable place to live and the resources needed to thrive and grow into adulthood, the Foundation makes the following funding, policy and practice recommendations.

Develop a unified definition of youth homelessness

Different and often restrictive definitions of homelessness across U.S. federal agencies have led to challenges in collecting and sharing data across systems; inconsistent messaging about the scope of the issue to policymakers responsible for shaping legislative and funding responses; and many youth being ineligible for services.²⁶ Establishing a unified definition reflecting all the ways youth experience homelessness sets the foundation for more effective data collection, sharing and analysis across systems and an appropriate response to support young people without a safe and stable place to stay.²⁷

Target funding to basic needs and other youth homelessness risks

To end youth homelessness, additional public and private funding must be targeted to address the root causes of the problem, such as ensuring young people can meet their basic needs, have permanent relationships with caring adults, live in financially stable families and have educational and employment opportunities. Public and private funders must invest in more and better evaluation of the housing and service interventions they fund to make certain that ongoing efforts are grounded in evidence.²⁸

Focus on prevention

The longer young people experience housing instability, the more likely they are to face greater levels of adversity and traumatic experiences, with implications for their long-term well-being.²⁹ Further, evidence suggests that youth homelessness is preventable and can be addressed effectively by policymakers, funders, service providers and communities with interventions that capitalize upon young people's strengths and deliver the types and levels of support they need.³⁰ Increasing funding targeted to prevention and improving risk screening and early intervention models can reduce the number of young people exposed to homelessness and its compounding trauma on the individual.

THE GEELONG PROJECT PREVENTION MODEL

The Geelong Project is a model for preventing youth homelessness. It uses a universal school-based survey to screen students for risk factors for homelessness and connect them to needed case management and resources. While the Geelong model originated in Australia, several U.S. community efforts, such as King County, Washington's [Youth and Family Homelessness Prevention Initiative](#), are piloting it.³¹ In early implementation efforts, the Geelong Project demonstrated a 40% reduction in adolescent homelessness and a 20% reduction in the high school dropout rate.³²

Support cross-systems partnerships

Youth experiencing homelessness interact with multiple systems — each meeting some, but not all, of the young person's needs. Successful youth homelessness prevention and intervention requires coordinated efforts across public systems, including homeless response, child welfare, juvenile justice and education.³³ Public and private funding must include investments that extend beyond a single-system function and support sustained coordination across systems.

Advance equity

Ensuring that young people at heightened risk of homelessness receive risk screening, housing and supportive services is a critical strategy for preventing and intervening in youth homelessness. Targeting housing, food, education, health and other assistance to those at the greatest risk for homelessness will help build a more equitable and effective youth homelessness response. To ensure connection of needs to opportunities, a culturally competent and effective outreach strategy must be created to overcome past system failure and youth distrust.

Elevate youth voice

Policymakers, public and private funders and organizational leaders must elevate the voices and critical insights of youth who have experienced homelessness in their program planning and implementation processes. Stakeholders can build on the pioneering efforts of organizations such as [A Way Home America](#) and [Point Source Youth](#) that have found effective ways to empower young people in building solutions.

Transform the justice system response

Youth experiencing homelessness are being pulled into the criminal justice system through laws that criminalize behavior associated with being unhoused (such as sitting, lying down and asking for or sharing food in public) and status offenses (such as truancy, running away and curfew violations). Legislators and service providers must work together to abolish laws that criminalize status offenses and homelessness and, instead, focus on connecting unhoused youth to the housing, public benefits, education and other resources needed to end their homelessness.³⁴

Help young people leaving foster care prepare for adulthood

When child welfare systems fail to secure permanent legal connections for young people and ensure their basic needs will be met before ending support for them, it is common for these youth to experience homelessness. Systems must shift more of their efforts to identifying families who provide emotional and financial support for adolescents prior to adulthood. When the best efforts fail to result in creating these supportive relationships, systems must ensure safe and stable housing for those exiting care and continue providing access to health care and other safety net services.



LOOKING AHEAD

Ending youth homelessness is possible. We can target additional and coordinated investments toward what works. We can focus on prevention. Our strategies can be informed by the perspectives of youth. By working in concert, policymakers, public and private funders, service providers and communities can help young people enter adulthood with the stability, relationships and opportunities they want and need to be able to thrive by 25.

DEFINITIONS AND SOURCES

Programs across the federal government use [one of three definitions of homelessness](#), including the definition established in Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (the education definition used by U.S. public schools), the definition established in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (the RHYA definition) and the definition established by the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act (the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] definition). The education definition is considered the broadest definition of homelessness, while the HUD definition is considered the narrowest definition. How homelessness is defined affects the collection and reporting of data on youth experiencing homelessness and their eligibility for rights and services.

Some national data sources on youth homelessness also provide data at the state and local levels.

- **School data:** Data collected annually over the course of the school year by U.S. public schools are available at the [national, state and territory](#) and [local educational agency](#) levels.
- **Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data:** [State-level data from the YRBS](#) are available for the 27 states whose schools included an optional housing status question as part of their YRBS.
- **HUD data:** Data collected as part of the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's point-in-time count](#) are available at the state and Continuum of Care (CoC) levels. [CoC contact information](#) or a [map of CoC geographical boundaries](#) across the United States also may be accessed.

ENDNOTES

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