Homeless and Runaway Youth: A Unified Systems' Approach

In the 2014-15 school year, 20,524 school-aged youth in Oregon ages 6-18 were identified as homeless. These are the programs receiving state and federal funds to support these youth.

Key Findings

- Homeless youth and young adults lack family resources and the skills needed to care for themselves, and have limited housing options, especially in small towns, and rural and frontier communities.
- Youth and young adults who are homeless have little or no connection with adults or agencies that could help, and are often involved in other systems, such as mental health, juvenile justice, and/or child welfare.
- The vulnerability of potential victims, especially minors, to sex trafficking in southern Oregon and rural towns is increasing, with sex crimes involving prostituted children and “survival sex” incidents among runaway and homeless youth on the rise. (5)
- Estimates of homeless youth through the use of interviews or surveys of homeless populations at the state and local level suggest that between 9% and 45% of these youth are LGBT. Population-based studies also indicate that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are more likely to be homeless than their peers. (6)

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Understanding the Population: Who are Homeless Youth?

Family conflict and rejection around sexual orientation and gender identity may need to be addressed for many of the 20%-40% of youth experiencing homelessness who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Estimates of homeless youth through the use of interviews or surveys of homeless populations at the state and local level suggest that between 9% and 45% of these youth are LGBT. Population-based studies also indicate that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are more likely to be homeless than their peers. (6)

Few studies explore the racial diversity of LGBT homeless youth, but those that have explored this issue suggest that LGBT homeless youth are disproportionately people of color. Studies that have focused on self-reported race demographics among LGBT youth are limited, but a 2007 survey of homeless youth in New York City found that approximately 28% of surveyed Black youth and 31% of Hispanic youth identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. (7) The survey also found that approximately 7% of Black homeless youth and slightly more than 4% of Hispanic homeless youth identified as transgender. This works out to roughly 62% of the transgender survey respondents indicating they were Black, and 20% indicating they were Hispanic. (7)

LGBT youth are not only over-represented in homeless youth populations, but reports indicate that while living on the streets, LGBT youth are at great risk of physical and sexual exploitation. Many LGBT homeless youth resort to trading sex to meet their basic needs. Further, just trying to survive in street environments or with transitory and unstable housing can increase mental health problems and disabilities. (8)

According to Oregon Department of Education data, there were a total of 3,324 unaccompanied homeless youth that were students in the 2014–2015 school year. Of those students from grades PK-12, 1,480 were 12th grade seniors, and a disproportionate number of these students were youth of color. (18)

About one in four youth served through Health and Human Services-funded transitional living programs fall into the category of a pregnant and or parenting youth, according to 2014 data from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System. (9)

One third of unaccompanied female youth have been pregnant. Half of unaccompanied youth have had a pregnancy experience. Whether they became pregnant while experiencing homelessness or they became homeless after becoming pregnant or parents, homeless young families find themselves without safe places to live, and without access to many opportunities and supports. Homeless young parents have little to no access to basic needs, have difficulty accessing temporary income assistance, and are largely uneducated in terms of health, sexual safety, and child-raising. Though most unaccompanied pregnant and parenting youth have not completed high school, work requirements imposed on young adult parents (either as a condition for receiving temporary income assistance or out of necessity) take away their chances of completing secondary and post-secondary education, and thus imperil their opportunity for high-paying employment and quality of life. Many unaccompanied parenting youth watch as their children are removed from them and placed in foster care. (10)

Researchers have found a correlation between sexual abuse and pregnancy. Pregnancies caused by sexual abuse are significantly higher in homeless populations than in the general population. (11) Because of high levels of sexual victimization and inconsistent use of contraception among unaccompanied youth, homeless young women are at increased risk for pregnancy compared to their housed peers. (12) Further, sexually abused teens are more likely to engage in survival sex, an act which significantly increases chances of pregnancy. (6)
Federal Policy to Aid Runaway and Homeless Youth

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau, was first enacted in 1974 and is the only federal law that focuses on unaccompanied homeless youth. The RHYA, as currently amended, authorizes federal funding for three programs—the Basic Center Program, Transitional Living Program, and Street Outreach Program—to assist runaway and homeless youth.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 was the first major federal legislative response to homelessness. Title VII of the Act includes provisions to ensure the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school. Under the Act, schools must work to eliminate any barriers—such as transportation—that may prohibit students from attending school, and are required to appoint a liaison to work with homeless students and their families.

The Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program provides states with funding to support and provide services to youth who are expected to age out of foster care as well as former foster care youth ages 18 to 21. Funds from the program can be used for housing, educational services and independent living services.

The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 increased federal funds available to states to extend assistance to foster youth up until age 21 as long as the youth is in school, working or has a medical condition that prevents them from participating in those activities. Services can include housing assistance, vocational and college help, and counseling.

Homeless Youth and Education

The U.S. Department of Education’s federal data for the 2009-2010 school year shows that approximately 72% of homeless children and youth identified by school districts live in doubled-up situations. (15)

A study of homeless students in New York concluded that the educational impacts of homelessness continue even after a student is stably housed. (16) Additionally, homeless students are less likely to graduate from high school, are less likely to be academically successful, are more likely to be chronically absent and/or truant, and are more likely to drop out.

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA) signed into law in 2007 includes specific provisions designed to remove barriers to access federal financial aid for college for unaccompanied homeless youth. Unfortunately, these unaccompanied youth struggle with balancing school and getting their basic needs met. Due to little to no guidance and support, homeless youth have difficulty filling out the FAFSA forms, and if enrolled end up missing school and not obtaining the needed credits to graduate.

*Opportunity Youth (ages 16-24) and Priority Youth (ages 6-15) are disengaged or at risk of being disengaged from education and/or the workforce system.

Homeless & Runaway Youth and Foster Care

Oregon is ranked 47 out of 50 states for youth in foster care placements and there is a high correlation between the number of youth in foster care and homeless youth [5].

Running away while in foster care, greater placement instability, being male, having a history of physical abuse, engaging in more delinquent behaviors, and having symptoms of a mental health disorder were associated with an increase in the relative risk of becoming homeless (13).

Studies have found high rates of physical abuse among homeless youth, and they are more likely to report having been abused than their peers who are housed (14). Additionally, a study has demonstrated that a history of childhood physical abuse is associated with an increased risk of becoming homeless (13).

Aligning Foster Youth Programs and Services: A YDC Mandate

The Youth Development Council (YDC) believes that with the right resources, strategies and practices in place to confront barriers, youth will achieve improved academic and workforce success. Our values are centered on supporting and funding inclusive, evidence- and practice-based programs that use and encourage a sustainable approach to serve *Priority Youth and Opportunity Youth.

The Youth Development Council recognizes that homeless youth are involved with multiple systems, and without proper alignment of these systems (Oregon Youth Authority, the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, the Oregon Department of Education, the Department of Human Services, etc.), a vast majority of these youth will continue to experience negative lifelong outcomes.

Although there are a number of federal policies in place to aid homeless youth, additional supports working collectively can have an impact on moving the dial for homeless youth in Oregon, allowing these unaccompanied youth an opportunity to have better outcomes.
Key Evidence-Based and Emerging Practices

In 2012, the Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness (8) laid the groundwork for coordination across the different disciplines that impact this population. The approach is based on research that shows youth need to achieve four core outcomes to have the greatest chance of success:

1. Stable housing options: Stable housing is a safe and reliable place to call home. It is essential to enable functioning across a range of life activities. Lack of stable housing exposes young people to a multitude of risks.

2. Permanent connections: Ongoing attachments to families, positive adults, communities, schools, health care services, and other positive social networks. Connections support young people’s ability to access new ideas and opportunities that support their ability to thrive and provide a social safety net when young people are at risk of re-entering homelessness.

3. Education/employment opportunities: Participation in and completion of educational and training activities, especially for younger youth, but also including higher education. This also includes starting and maintaining adequate and stable employment, particularly for older youth. Achievements in education and employment increases youths’ capacity to support themselves financially and prevent future homelessness.

4. Social-emotional well-being: This refers to the social and emotional functioning of youth experiencing homelessness. It includes the development of key competencies, attitudes, and behaviors that equip a young person experiencing homelessness to avoid unhealthy risks and to succeed across multiple domains of daily life, including school, work, relationships, and community.

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<td>To address the urgent concerns regarding our homeless and runaway youth in Oregon, the Youth Development Council recommends the following:</td>
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<td>- Develop a system of services for homeless and runaway youth under the Governor.</td>
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<td>- Coordinate equitable distribution of state agencies' resources.</td>
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<td>- Improve data collection for this population of youth and young adults.</td>
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<td>- More closely examine access and transitions of all youth into and out of state systems.</td>
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<td>- Create state policies that support families in crisis.</td>
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<td>- Support service delivery that is culturally relevant, gender specific, and evidence-based.</td>
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<td>- Establish long-term goals to identify and address the underlying causes of youth homelessness.</td>
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<td>- Create more young adult housing and shelter options.</td>
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<td>- Develop state policies that ensure access to services and community support for youth whose parents are unable or unwilling to support their service participation.</td>
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