Homeless and Runaway Youth: A Unified Systems’ Approach

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Report compiled by Anya Sekino
Juvenile Crime Prevention Manager
Youth Development Council
**Scope and Scale of Youth Homelessness**

Each year, estimates show that, tens of thousands of youth in the U.S. run away from home are forced to leave their homes, or otherwise experience homelessness. Once homeless, these youth face multiple challenges, including poor educational outcomes and lower rates of employment, increased risk of exploitation and victimization, and increased risk of behavioral health issues and traumatic stress. While progress has been made to improve national data, there is still no confident estimate of the scale and scope of youth homelessness. The data show:

- Approximately 45,000 children and youth without a parent or guardian (unaccompanied) under age 25 were living on the streets, in shelter, or in transitional housing on a given night in 2014, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Point-in-Time (PIT) count. The majority of youth captured in the HUD PIT count are over the age of 18. (1)

- More than 90,000 youth experiencing homelessness, while not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian (unaccompanied), were enrolled in public school districts at some point over the course of the 2013-2014 school year, according to Department of Education data. They include, among others, youth who are sharing the housing of other persons, often in the form of “couch surfing,” due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. The majority of youth captured in Education Department data are under the age of 18. (1)

Unaccompanied homeless youth include those who have run away from home or have been asked to leave home by a parent or guardian. The National Runaway Switchboard estimates that between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth experience a runaway/throwaway episode every year. (2) Across studies of homeless youth, 17% to 53% of the youth cite experiences of sexual abuse, while 40% to 60% cite experiences of physical abuse. (3)

**The factors that contribute to homelessness specifically for youth include:**

- Family problems: domestic violence, severe conflict, and unacceptance of sexual orientation
- Economic circumstances
- Racial disparities
• Physical and sexual abuse
• Mental health and substance use disorders
• Involvement with public systems, such as criminal justice and child welfare. (1)

**Homeless Youth in Oregon**

In the 2014-15 school year, 20,524 school-aged youth in Oregon, ages 6-18, were identified as homeless. Oregon’s **Homeless and Runaway Youth** population is defined as non-system youth (youth not being served by – or who are ineligible for – publicly-funded human services) or youth ages 11-24 who have fallen out of state systems of care including juvenile justice, child welfare, education, mental health and substance abuse. (4)

**Homeless youth and young adults** are those youth ages 11-24 who lack a fixed place of residence, lack adult supervision, guidance and care, or have little likelihood of reunification with parents. These are young people who have no homes to return to, either because of irreconcilable conflicts with their families, because they have lost track of their family, or because their family is homeless. (4) According to data received from the Oregon Department of Education, there were a total of 3,324 unaccompanied homeless youth that were students in the 2014-2015 school year. Seniors accounted for nearly half of the unaccompanied homeless students recorded in Oregon and of those 3,324 unaccompanied homeless students, a disproportionate amount of these students were youth of color. (18)

**Runaway youth** are those youth ages 11 through 17 who have left their homes or alternative care placements or remained away without permission and/or have little or no connection with their families or caretakers. Runaway youth have one or more risk factors including family communication problems or other resolvable conflicts; having poor decision making and engaging in high-risk behaviors; being victims of child abuse and/or domestic violence; and chemical dependency and/or mental health problems that interfere with safe behavior and good decision-making. (4)
Key Findings
Homeless youth face numerous other obstacles, including a lack of family resources; lack of skills needed to care for themselves; and they have little or no connection with adults or agencies that could help. They can find themselves struggling to balance school and other responsibilities. These youth and young adults have limited housing options, especially in small towns and rural and frontier communities. They are often involved in other state systems, such as mental health, juvenile justice, or child protective services, and have typically failed to access available support systems. These youths’ families are often homeless with unstable, frequently changing residences, with the result that these youth find it difficult to locate any family members.

Particularly Vulnerable Youth Experiencing Homelessness:
Youth who have been trafficked for sex or labor
Oregon has become a magnet for human trafficking due to its particular mix of lax trafficking laws, relatively permissive interpretations of the State Constitution’s free speech protections for commercial sex enterprises, and high percentages of youth living in foster care and on the streets (including runaway and homeless children). Recently, Portland ranked second for the greatest number of children found in forced prostitution among all U.S. cities participating in a nationwide federal law enforcement sting. 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)

Youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning (LGBTQ)
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 LGBTQ. 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) Put another way, 44% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in the survey also indicated that they are Black, and 26% indicated that they are Hispanic. 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 overrepresented in homeless youth populations, but reports indicate that while living on the streets, LGBT youth are at great risk of physical and sexual exploitation. Unfortunately, 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)

**Pregnant and parenting youth**

Approximately one in four youth served through Health and Human Services-funded transitional living programs are either pregnant or parenting, according to 2014 data from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System. (9)

One third of unaccompanied female youth have been pregnant. Fifty percent 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)

**Homeless Youth and Child Welfare**

Youths aging out of foster care are at high risk for becoming homeless during the transition to adulthood. Oregon ranks 47th out of the 50 states for having the most youth in foster care placements. There is a high correlation between foster care and youth homelessness. Many youth living on the streets have come from, or run from, foster care. (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 for foster youth. (13)

Studies have found high rates of physical abuse among homeless youths, and homeless youths 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 increase in the relative risk of becoming homeless. (13)

**Homeless Youth and Schools**

The primary piece of federal legislation dealing with the education of students experiencing homelessness is the McKinney-Vento Act, reauthorized in 2002 by Title X, Part C, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Act defines an unaccompanied homeless youth as a youth whose living situation is not “fixed, regular, and adequate,” (homeless) and who is “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” (unaccompanied). The Act provides examples of living arrangements that would be considered homeless including living in emergency and transitional shelters,
living doubled-up with others due to loss of housing, and living on the street or in a car. By far, the most common type of living situation for unaccompanied homeless youth is that of living doubled-up, often bouncing between the homes of different relatives or friends (also referred to as “couch-surfing”). 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, less likely to be academically successful, a more likely to be chronically absent and/or truant, and more likely to drop out.

**Homeless Youth and Higher Education**

Unaccompanied homeless youth face barriers specific to continuing their education past high school. As noted earlier, these youth struggle to balance school and other responsibilities. Many unaccompanied youth fall behind in school because they are
attempting to balance school with the demands of working to provide for their basic needs. Due to high residential mobility or heavy work demands, many unaccompanied youth end up missing school and losing credits. These youth often have little to no adult guidance and support. (17)

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA), signed into law in 2007, include specific provisions designed to remove barriers to accessing federal financial aid for college for unaccompanied homeless youth. Among other provisions, the CCRAA confers independent student status on unaccompanied homeless youth, helping to ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth have access to the financial support necessary to pay for college. Gaining entry to college and securing financial aid, however, are only the first steps along the path to degree completion. (15)

Unaccompanied youth often lack connections with adults who can guide them in the process of preparing for and gaining admission into college. They also often suffer a lack of access to parental financial information and support. Unaccompanied youth often have become estranged from their parents, which leads to difficulty with filling out the FAFSA, the federal financial aid forms necessary for college applications. If these youth make it to college, they are often unable to be financially self-sufficient once enrolled. College-going unaccompanied youth struggle to provide for their basic needs. They often maintain rigorous work schedules that affect the amount of time they can devote to their studies. A particular challenge exists during breaks at residential colleges and universities, when dormitories close. During these times, unaccompanied homeless students living in the dorms often have nowhere to go and insufficient funds to pay for housing.

Unaccompanied homeless youth often go unidentified at schools, either due to their own hesitancy to disclose details about their personal lives or lack of knowledge on the part of university staff. This prevents student support services and other staff from helping to address their unique needs.

**Key Evidence-Based and Emerging Practices**

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

1. Stable housing includes a safe and reliable place to call home. Stable housing fulfills a critical and basic need for youth experiencing homelessness. It is essential to enabling functioning across a range of life activities. Lack of stable housing, on the other hand, exposes young people to a multitude of risks.

2. Permanent connections include 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 includes 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 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.

Federal Policy

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau, part of the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families, 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 him or her from participating in those activities. Services can include housing assistance, vocational and college help, and counseling.

The Youth Development Council recommends the following:

- Develop a statewide system of services for homeless and runaway youth developed under the Governor
- Coordinate equitable distribution of state agencies’ resources
- Improve data collection for this population of youth and young adults
- Examine access to and transitions into and out of state systems for all youth
- Create proactive local policies that support families in crisis
- Support service delivery that is culturally relevant, gender specific, and evidence based
- Establish long term goals to identify and address the underlying causes of youth homelessness
- Create more young adult housing and shelter options
- Develop state policies that ensure access to services and community supports for youth whose parents are unwilling or unable to support their service participation
References


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