



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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### **Homeless Youth: Risk Factors of the Vulnerable | OAS Episode 74**

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Our topic today is youth homelessness. We are with Patricia Julianelle, who is the director of Program Advancement and Legal Affairs at SchoolHouse Connection. Patricia, welcome to “Our American States.”

Patricia: Thanks so much, Gene. I’m happy to be here.

*Time Marker (TM): 0:41*

Gene: Patricia, let’s start off with painting a picture for our listeners. Tell us who makes up the homeless youth population in America and how many are out there.

Patricia: Sure. We actually have some pretty good data on this now. The largest study of youth homelessness was completed in 2017 by Chapin Hall in Chicago and gave us some good data and some very shocking data that hopefully rallies people to action.

Chapin Hall found that 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness over the course of the year on their own, so completely separate from parents or guardians, and that includes 700,000 youth who are under 18 years old. So that’s about 1 in 30 youth under 18 years old experiencing homelessness over the course of a year.

The same study also found that the prevalence of youth homelessness is the same in rural and suburban areas and urban areas, and I think that’s another area of surprise for a lot of people. If the numbers don’t shock you, then probably the idea that there are, percentagewise, just as many youth experiencing homelessness in a rural community as there are in Seattle, Los Angeles or Dallas just based on the prevalence. So it is a problem that is everywhere, not just in kind of the urban centers, which is what we most stereotypically think of.

*TM: 1:58*

Gene: Are we talking mostly about teenagers here? What ages make up the population?

Patricia: Sure. So most studies and most policymakers will look at ages between 12 and 24 to consider as youth and young adults. So that's what the Chapin Hall study looked at and that 4.2 million number would include youth who are homeless, again, on their own. This doesn't include young people who are homeless with their parents; this is just youth on their own between the ages of 13 and going up to 24.

*TM: 2:25*

Gene: And what is your experience, Patricia, on why these youth are homeless? Where do they come from?

Patricia: Yeah, that's a good question. Most youth who are homeless on their own have reasons for not being with their parents. What we see with young people that we work with and with the agencies we work with is they're usually leaving an abusive or a dangerous situation with their parents. So parents may be using drugs in the home, they may be engaged in prostitution or other illegal activities, and young people are saying this is a dangerous place, this is an inappropriate place, I need to leave.

There are also large groups of young people who are forced out of their homes by their parents, they're kicked out, oftentimes because they're pregnant. Almost half of young homeless women have a child, so there's a lot of overlap between pregnancy and youth homelessness, particularly among women. And also a lot of youth are kicked out if they come out as LGBT.

*TM: 3:16*

Gene: You touched on this before: When it comes to public policy, how are homeless youth defined and how do you believe they should be defined?

Patricia: I'm glad you asked that because it actually is a complicated question. Federally, the Department of Housing and Urban Development or HUD, they have a definition of homelessness that's really based on the services that are available, so it's kind of a circular definition. I mean, it's really focused on the kinds of homelessness that are more common in urban areas. So they're focusing on people who are living outside and people who are living in shelters.

But we know there are really few youth shelters compared to the demand, so if we're only counting shelter beds, then it's kind of a circular situation where we're counting the services that we have, but we're not really counting the people who need those services.

So if you look at HUD data, you'd think half the country doesn't really have a homeless youth problem even though, again, we know from national research that that's not true.

So the definition that we use at SchoolHouse Connection because of our mission is the definition that is used by the Department of Education, and it's also similar to the definition used by Health and Human Services, the Department of Justice and other agencies. And it's really looking at the reality of: Where do youth stay when they get kicked out of their home

or they have to leave their home for safety reasons, and what's going to be available for them to stay?

So it includes, of course, shelters and of course youth are living outside, but it also includes youth who might be staying on a couch or on a floor or in a garage or just wherever they might happen to land a place to sleep for a night or a week, and it also includes youth who might be staying in motels, low-cost motels, because again, they don't have anywhere else to go and there aren't any services available in their area.

So that's a definition that's real. It's really serious about where homeless youth actually are sleeping and how homelessness looks in different communities, so a homeless situation in Los Angeles might look different than something in rural California or in North Carolina or Tennessee.

So it's also really taking a count of the vulnerability. When you have a teenager who ends up sleeping on someone's couch, sometimes that someone is a nice person who is being supportive and is providing safe shelter, but a lot of times that person is a trafficker or someone who is forcing that youth to exchange sex for a place to sleep. So sometimes our most vulnerable youth are living in those kinds of situation.

*TM: 5:35*

Gene: So yes, that was my next question: What are the dangers to being youth and homeless in America?

Patricia: We've looked at the data. There's a survey that's done in high schools all over the country under the auspices of the Centers for Disease Control. It's called the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. And we've been looking at that data for about a year. And what we can do with that data is we can look at health risk behaviors of high school students and we can compare the risk behaviors of students who are experiencing homelessness to those who are housed.

And so we've been able to look at things like attempted suicide, dating violence, substance abuse. We've been able to look at rape and other kinds of sexual assault and determine that homeless students are at much higher risk than students who are housed.

We've also been able to look at the data across living situations. We've been able to compare students in shelters versus students who might be sleeping on a couch versus students who might be in a hotel and, again, we found that that vulnerability is comparable across all of the different living situations.

So these are really serious risk factors. I mean, for example, youth experiencing homelessness are seven times more likely to attempt suicide. They're more than five times more likely to be raped. Really serious consequences of the vulnerability and the instability that they're experiencing in their lives.

*TM: 6:52*

Gene: And I suppose there's a group of youth who are actually homeless with their families?

Patricia: Absolutely, absolutely. And there is significant overlap between those two populations. Something that I have seen over the past few years that is really concerning to me is an increased division between youth homelessness and family homelessness. And so you have organizations and policymakers working on youth homelessness and they're not really thinking about or talking about family homelessness and vice versa.

And I think that's a really shortsighted approach because we know, again, from the Chapin Hall study that most youth experiencing homelessness, if you ask them where their homelessness started, they will talk about volatile family relationships, parental rejection, getting kicked out at home. They'll talk about having experienced homelessness with their families before they became homeless on their own as youth.

So there is so much overlap between those two populations that really, if we want to address youth homelessness, I think we really have to look at both of those.

There's also that issue of young adults who are homeless and are pregnant or parenting, so we have, again, homeless youth who actually also are homeless families; they're the head of their own family. So again, it really requires looking at: What are the needs of their babies and their infants and toddlers and are we meeting those needs so that we can prevent those young children then from becoming the next generation of homeless youth 15 years in the future?

*TM: 8:15*

Gene: Let's talk about the services that are available to this population. Are there some government-imposed barriers such as state laws that either intentionally or unintentionally prevent youth from receiving services to escape homelessness?

Patricia: Definitely. There are a number of services available, certainly not sufficient. I guess what I would start with would be public education. Public education is just about the only system that exists everywhere. Every community has a school; every student has to be able to have a seat in a classroom.

And there actually is a federal program called the McKinney-Vento Act, Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, which provides students experiencing homelessness with a number of rights and services so that they can enroll in school immediately, even if they're missing documents, and they can stay in one school even if they're moving around because of homelessness, and they can get a number of support services. So that's a tremendous support for students.

It's also really important, you know, some people say, OK, that's education; that's nice for those students who are in school. But what does that really do about youth homelessness? And so there's a really important, again, kernel of research from that Chapin Hall study that I keep going back to. They looked at risk factors for youth to experience homelessness and the No. 1 risk factor that they found of everything that they looked at was lacking a high school diploma.

Youth lacking a high school diploma were 4.5 times as likely to experience homelessness as young adults than those who had a diploma. So that's part of why SchoolHouse Connection has the mission we have of ending homelessness through education, because if we can help students get that high school diploma, then that's providing them with a tremendous protective factor against experiencing homelessness as young adults, and then of course into adulthood. So I would definitely focus on education.

Other government services—there's the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act; there are some services provided through HUD, but again, HUD's definition creates a tremendous barrier because most youth experiencing homelessness aren't eligible for HUD assistance because they're not considered to be homeless under HUD's definition.

That's something that a broad coalition of advocates is working on; we're trying to get that definition fixed through a bipartisan bill called the Homeless Children and Youth Act. But for now HUD's policy is what it is.

Gene: We'll continue our discussion on youth homelessness with Patricia Julianelle right after this short break.

BREAK

*TM: 11:40*

Gene: So I probably should have started off with this, Patricia. Tell us a little bit about SchoolHouse Connection and what you do there.

Patricia: Sure. SchoolHouse Connection is a national nonprofit advocacy organization. As I said, our mission is to end homelessness through education. We work on federal and state policy advocacy. We also work in very close partnership with educators and service providers and young people around the country, providing them with technical assistance and support to implement state and federal policies to support children and youth experiencing homelessness, and that includes youth up through higher education and starting at birth.

So we look at early childhood, K-12 education and higher ed, and also other systems like housing and health care, etc.

*TM: 12:24*

Gene: And how long have you been in this field, Patricia?

Patricia: I've been working specifically with children and youth experiencing homelessness for about 19 years.

*TM: 12:32*

Gene: And I'm sure that during those 19 years you've heard some incredible stories about youth homelessness. Is there a particular person or story that you think about often in the course of your work?

Patricia: Oh, there are so many; there are so many, Gene. We have youth leadership and scholarship programs, so every year we award scholarships to ten high school seniors and then we support those students throughout their post-secondary education and then beyond into the workforce and their lives.

So after having done this for so long, I'm friends with young people today who are in dental school, they're in law school, they're out in the workforce, they're parents, and I've known them since they were teenagers and their lives were in upheaval and instability. The resilience that you see in young people who go through these kinds of struggles is just incredible.

So I've worked with youth who came from extreme physical and sexual abuse in their home, they got out of that situation because, again, it was just so unsafe they just couldn't take it anymore. And then they became homeless and had more victimization as homeless youth. But they stayed in school, they graduated, they went to higher ed.

I can think of one young woman who is in dental school right now and I was just visiting her a couple of months ago helping her practice on her little fake dental head, and I was working as her dental hygienist while she was practicing her dental work. So it's really amazing to see the strength and the resilience.

So every day I'm texting and messaging and snapping with youth, sometimes because they have a financial aid problem I'm trying to help them with, sometimes because they're trying to talk through some job prospects, or sometimes they're just telling me: Hey, I'm so excited. I did great on this test. Or I just finished an Ironman, or whatever is going on in their life.

It's a real joy to share that with them. It's a real honor to share that with them.

*TM: 14:20*

Gene: You've talked a little bit already about what is going on at the federal level. Is there something that state legislatures should be paying attention to in terms of what the federal government is doing and ways to tie in and address youth homelessness?

Patricia: Yeah. In terms of how states can get involved in federal level issues, I would say states can take a look at the HUD definition that I talked about and the Homeless Children Youth Act and share whatever their concerns or positions are on that with HUD and with their own congressional delegation to let them know sort of what their thinking is on the definition and how that affects their state.

Also, states can supplement what the federal government is already doing. So, for example, I talked about the McKinney-Vento Act, Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program. One state, for example, Washington has created a program that's virtually the same program, but they've created it at the state level, which gave them the ability to make some adjustments that they felt were more appropriate for their state, and they put some

funding to it. So they're able to take that federal policy and provide school districts with more support to help implement it. That's one example.

A number of states that we've been working with over the past year or so also have passed state legislation to facilitate implementation of that federal law. So, again, federal education law obviously is looking at things from a higher level. So much of the implementation specifics are really for the state to determine.

So state legislation that can say, for example: OK, the federal McKinney-Vento Act says that we need to award partial credits for students experiencing homelessness. Now how are we going to do that in Nevada? How are we going to do that in Kentucky? How are we going to do that in Indiana? And so state legislatures can take a look at that and operationalize it in their states.

We worked just this year on legislation related to high school graduation that passed in Nevada, Kentucky, Indiana, Connecticut, and we also worked on some higher ed legislation, again, so we've got our students out of high school, they still are vulnerable; the vast majority of them are first-generation college students. So what kinds of support can we put in place to help them succeed in higher education?

We had some bills pass in Tennessee, Nevada, California in higher ed as well. So looking at how to support federal education law appropriately for the context of that particular state, as well as providing more services such as shelter, medical and mental health services, etc., for youth experiencing homelessness.

We do have the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and it's a great program, but it's so limited. The vast majority of communities do not have a runaway and homeless youth act facility. So putting supplemental state funds into the mix to help provide more services is really important.

*TM: 17:05*

Gene: So what other things should state policymakers be thinking about in terms of addressing youth homelessness? What types of questions should they be asking?

Patricia: Well, I think one important category of questions I would say is: How are youth under 18 accessing services? You asked early on how many of these youth are teenagers, and it's about 1 in 30 based on the national study. So our laws usually are set up that when a child under 18 needs something, their parent has to get that for them; that's kind of the way our laws usually set things up.

So the question becomes: When you have a youth who has been kicked out because they're gay or pregnant, or you have a youth who left home because mom is using drugs in the home or whatever, and now they're very vulnerable—they need shelter; they probably need mental health and medical care; they might need consent to access a variety of services. How are we going to do that when their parents either are unavailable or are unwilling to help that child access those services?

Traffickers and people who are looking to take advantage of youth, they're not paying attention to parental consent. So we're really forcing our teenagers into the hands of dangerous people when we don't provide a legal structure for reputable service providers to be able to take care of them and keep them safe.

So that's something that we've been talking to a lot of state policymakers about is: How can we make sure that our youth who are experiencing homelessness can access the services that they so desperately need?

*TM: 18:38*

Gene: So, Patricia, this may be an unanswerable question, but is it possible to end youth homelessness?

Patricia: You know, of course I want to say yes. I always want to be optimistic and positive and of course that's always what we're working for. But I don't think we do ourselves any favors if we pretend that this problem is less complex than it is. I think truly ending youth homelessness requires addressing complex issues of poverty and family dynamics, education policy, employment policy, transportation policy, children's rights.

So it's a complex picture with a lot of different facets that all really need to be addressed at the same time. And, as I talked about earlier, it also requires addressing family homelessness. So if we're ending homelessness for every young person who is homeless in the United States, which would be a wonderful thing to do, we're still going to have new youth coming into homelessness over time. So it really requires looking at families. It requires looking at prevention as well.

So I do think we can do so much more to prevent homelessness. We can break down silos between youth and family systems. We can build partnerships between schools and housing and homeless services. We can create developmentally appropriate service continuums, recognizing that young people are young people and they need support and they need time to get on their feet.

And I think if we do all of those things, we can make sure that when young people do become homeless, it's a very brief experience and that they have safe options to hopefully avoid the worst kinds of trauma and vulnerability that we see.

*TM: 20:08*

Gene: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you believe state legislators and state legislative staff should know about this issue?

Patricia: Well, I think I would say two things. First, I would say... I would suggest listening to the experts within your state, and absolutely I would include young people in that. Young people know what their experiences are, they know what they're going through, they know the barriers they face, and they have very good ideas for how to fix things and how to make them better.

So I think any policymaker who is thinking about doing something around youth homelessness in his or her state, it would be a great idea to sit down with some youth who either are or have experienced homelessness and get some real information direct from them, as well as sitting down with people from your school districts, from youth service providers and ask them what are the barriers they're seeing.

Even us as an advocacy organization, before we do any state policy work, we conduct surveys and we ask people in the state: What are your barriers? What are your problems? What are you seeing? Because it's not a one-size-fits-all kind of solution.

And I guess the only other thing I would be remiss if I didn't say: We have a lot of resources at our website. We have examples of laws that are in place in other states that policymakers can take a look at and say oh, this law, I can see maybe adapting that for my state; or you know what, this doesn't apply to my state at all.

So we have a lot of resources to kind of provide options and menus and we're more than happy to talk to people and provide support and guidance on any resources we can at SchoolHouse Connection. So that's just [schoolhouseconnection.org](http://schoolhouseconnection.org).

Gene: We've been talking with Patricia Julianelle, the director of Program Advancement and Legal Affairs at SchoolHouse Connection. Patricia, thanks so much for sharing your expertise with us.

Patricia: Thank you, Gene. It's been a real pleasure.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.