Partnering to End Youth Homelessness

BY MEGHAN MCCANN

Accurately counting the number of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness is challenging, but regardless of source or methodology, the numbers are alarming. This vulnerable population faces many serious hardships, especially when the causes and consequences of their homelessness are left untreated.

Youth experience homelessness in many ways. Some are on and off the streets, in and out of shelters, or couch surfing. Others are staying with a family other than their own or living independently. Some are in school, while others are fully disconnected from mainstream life.

The complex nature of youth homelessness makes it nearly impossible for any single government entity to effectively meet the challenge. This is reflected in the many definitions of homeless youth used by programs that serve them and studies that attempt to count them.

Officials at all levels of government are working with stakeholders in many sectors—including child welfare, health care, housing, education and criminal justice—to better understand the nature and scope of youth homelessness. Their recent efforts focus on improving collaboration among these systems to better meet the complex needs of youth experiencing homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless.

State Action

Some states are addressing youth homelessness by establishing coordinating bodies to define the problem in their state and study policy options. To do this, some are leveraging existing federal programs while others are establishing new state agencies or councils. The enabling legislation or executive orders identify the state agencies and stakeholders involved, which often include human services, housing, transportation, education, community development, juvenile justice and others.

The federal Housing and Urban Development agency (HUD) funds Continuum of Care programs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and three U.S. territories. These organizations typically operate at the community level; however, five states and two territories have statewide programs. Working with HUD’s definition of homeless, Continuum of Care programs are designed to help people of all ages achieve long-term stability through transitional and permanent housing. This work involves community planning, data coordination and support services. Many state interagency councils on homelessness include Continuum of Care programs in their membership.

States also have established, through legislation and executive order, interagency councils on homelessness modeled after the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). At least 26 states have or had an interagency council on homelessness. Another eight states established other coordinating bodies to address homelessness. Most of these councils and coordinating bodies produce research and recommendations to address youth experiencing homelessness.

In Texas, the legislature passed House Bill 679 (2015) requiring the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and the Texas Interagency Council to partner to end youth homelessness.

Did You Know?

- Youth homelessness is just as common in rural communities as it is in urban communities, as a share of population.
- Definitions of homelessness vary greatly, and these differences affect eligibility for social programs.
- Lack of a high school diploma or GED certificate is the primary predictor of young adult homelessness.
Homeless Youth in America

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) point-in-time counts are one source of data on homeless youth. HUD defines homeless youth as certain unaccompanied individuals under 25 years old. According to HUD’s 2018 data, approximately 160,000 youth experienced homelessness daily that year. HUD’s Voices of Youth Count project, conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, reported 4.2 million young people between the ages of 13 and 25 experienced some form of homelessness during the 12-month evaluation period.

The project also found:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>of homeless youth report having substance misuse problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69%</td>
<td>of homeless youth report mental health problems.</td>
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<tr>
<td>33%</td>
<td>of homeless youth had once been part of the foster care system.</td>
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<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>of homeless youth have been in the juvenile justice system, in jail or detention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td>of homeless youth reported exchanging sex for basic needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>47%</td>
<td>of homeless youth reported being physically harmed while homeless.</td>
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<tr>
<td>27%</td>
<td>of homeless LGBTQ youth reported exchanging sex for basic needs, and 62% of LGBTQ youth reported being physically harmed.</td>
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Council for the Homeless to conduct a study and submit a report with recommendations to the legislature. That report was released in December 2016 with several categories of recommendations, including removing bureaucratic barriers for homeless youth, such as easing access to state identification cards and assisting with higher education and job training. During the 2019 legislative session, Texas considered 12 bills to remove these barriers.

States also have created state agencies, offices or cabinets dedicated to homelessness. As of 2019, Colorado’s Office of Homeless Youth Services and Washington’s Office of Homeless Youth are the only executive agencies focused exclusively on homeless youth. In 2019, five states introduced legislation to follow in their footsteps and create stand-alone offices or cabinets dedicated to homelessness.

Federal Action

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) was created by Congress in 1987 to coordinate the federal government’s response to homelessness. The council works in partnership with 19 federal agencies and a national network of state and local affiliates. In 2010, USICH announced its goal to end youth homelessness by 2020 as part of its Opening Doors Strategic Plan, the nation’s first comprehensive homelessness strategy.

USICH’s 2012 Framework to End Youth Homelessness expands on specific supports and strategies for meeting its goals. In 2015, USICH announced its vision for the community response to youth homelessness, which includes four core outcomes (see box) and instructions for the system collaboration necessary to achieve those goals. In 2017, USICH established criteria and benchmarks to assess progress toward ending youth homelessness and updated them in 2018. USICH again addressed youth homelessness within its 2018-2022 Home Together strategic plan for addressing overall homelessness.

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness: Core Outcomes for Youth

- **Stable housing** includes a safe and reliable place to call home.
- **Permanent connections** include ongoing attachments to families, communities, schools and other positive social networks.
- **Education/employment** includes high performance in and completion of educational and training activities, especially for younger people, and starting and maintaining adequate and stable employment, particularly for older youth.
- **Social-emotional well-being** includes the development of key competencies, attitudes and behaviors that equip a young person to succeed across multiple domains of daily life, including school, work, relationships and community.

**Additional Resources**

- NCSL’s **Homeless and Runaway Youth webpage**
- Federal Support for Homeless and Runaway Youth, **Congressional Research Service**
- **Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs, Congressional Research Service**

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