

Addressing Youth Homelessness Through State Policies

Missouri State Profile

BY SARAH SCHERER

Each year, an estimated 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness in the United States. As of January 2019, 6,179 individuals of all ages were homeless in Missouri. Of these, 1,359 were under age 18, and 545 were 18 to 24 years old. Among the homeless youth and young adults in Missouri, 477 were unaccompanied by an adult.

Many factors increase a young person's odds of becoming homeless. Demographic risk factors include being Hispanic or Black, a single parent or LGBTQ. In fact, LGBTQ youth are more than twice at risk of being homeless than their cisgender or heterosexual peers. In a March 2019 report, the Congressional Research Service identified family conflict and family dynamics, a youth's sexual orientation, sexual activity, school problems, pregnancy and substance use as primary risk factors for youth homelessness.

Children in foster care face additional factors that increase their risk of homelessness, including the number of foster care placements, history of running away from placements and time spent in a group home. The Voices of Youth Count from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that 33% of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness across the country had previously been a part of the foster care system.

According to 2015 data, 31% of Missouri youth who have spent time in foster care experience homelessness by the time they turn 21. These statistics point to child welfare reforms as a significant opportunity to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults.

Legislative Action

Homeless youth across the nation experience many common systemic challenges. Minors, in particular, are likely to face significant barriers accessing health and mental health services, obtaining government-issued identification cards and birth certificates, and enroll-

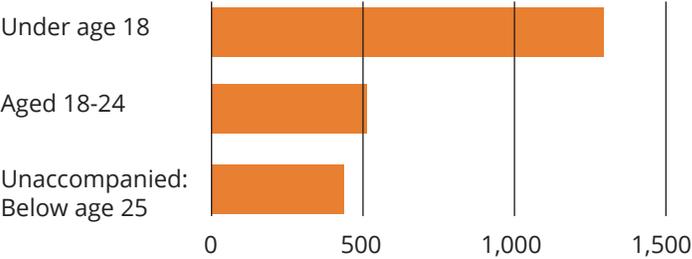


Foster youth in Missouri who experience homelessness by age 21.

Source: Child Trends, 2017

Homelessness in Missouri

2019



Source: United States Department of Housing and Urban Development

ing in school. Homeless youth are also more likely to encounter the juvenile or criminal justice systems. All of these are obstacles to exiting homelessness and achieving a stable living arrangement.

To address some of these challenges, the Missouri General Assembly passed [HB 1414](#) in 2020. This omnibus bill, carried by Representative Sheila Solon (R), passed with bipartisan support. Representative Solon describes the legislation as “one of the most impactful bills” passed in her eight years in the legislature. It was “a bipartisan effort, where we worked together to get it passed and help the children of our state. A big moment for all of us. Everyone was very proud.”

The bill allows unaccompanied youth to receive one copy of their birth record, free of charge, without the consent or signature of a parent or guardian. It also extends Medicaid benefits for youth experiencing homelessness to age 26 and allows homeless youth to contract for and obtain mental health services without the express consent of a parent or guardian. Implied consent can be verified by professionals involved in the youth’s life, including a service provider, local education agency liaison or licensed attorney representing the youth.

Prior to the passage of HB 1414, homeless youth in Missouri were permitted, under Missouri law (Mo. Ann. Stat. § 431.056), to contract for housing, employment, purchase of an automobile, receipt of a student loan, admission to high school or postsecondary school, medical care, establishing a bank account, admission to a shelter for victims of domestic violence, admission to a rape crisis center, and to receive services as a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault. HB 1414 expands this statute to include contracting for mental health services. Also according to Missouri law ([Mo. Ann. Stat. § 167.020](#)), homeless children and youth in Missouri are not required to meet residency requirements when registering for school. These extended contracting rights enable youth to receive services and documents needed to take care of themselves and move closer to achieving permanency and stability.

Republicans and Democrats Working Together for the Children and Youth of Missouri

Representative and Democratic floor leader Crystal Quade describes HB 1414 as “one of the biggest wins for Missouri after... several years of researching and trying to find the right language that works for everyone.” Representative Quade, having introduced similar legislation on her own in previous sessions, credits the hard work of Represen-

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tative Solon, a Republican, and a “bipartisan group of women legislators that all came to the table from different backgrounds, with a similar goal in mind.... HB 1414 was really about the children of Missouri and saying these kids matter too.”

Missouri’s Road Ahead

Like all states, Missouri still has work to do to address youth homelessness, and the [Governor’s Committee to End Homelessness](#) is part of the effort. The committee was established in 1987 by Missouri Governor John Ashcroft in response to the [Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act](#) and the establishment of the [United States Interagency Council on Homelessness](#). Working in alignment with [federal strategies](#) to end homelessness for unaccompanied youth is one of the committee’s goals.

Kids Win Missouri, a children’s advocacy organization, describes increasing transitional living services and supports for youth experiencing homelessness as an urgent priority. Shelters typically allow a maximum of 30-day stays, which often is not enough time to complete a full needs assessment. Furthermore, it can take more than 30 days for youth to receive government-issued vital records necessary to apply for a job. A related priority for Kids Win Missouri is streamlining the process for unaccompanied youth to receive state-issued identification cards, the lack of which creates significant barriers for youth attempting to access services and achieve stability.

Additional NCSL Resources

For more information on preventing youth homelessness and mitigating the negative consequences when it does occur, check out NCSL’s [overview of youth homelessness](#) and [policy scan](#). To search for legislation on youth homelessness, see NCSL’s [Housing and Homelessness Legislation Database](#).



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