

Addressing Youth Homelessness Through State Policies

Washington State Profile

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Each year, an estimated 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness in the United States. For Washington, that number reaches nearly 13,000 unaccompanied youth and young adults per year.

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, 33% of Washington youth who have spent time in foster care experience homelessness by the time they turn 21. These statistics point to child welfare reforms as an opportunity to significantly reduce homelessness among youth and young adults.

Legislative Action

Establishment of the *Office of Homeless Youth* by SB 5404 in 2015 was an integral milestone in Washington's effort to address youth homelessness. Housed in the Department of Commerce, the office allocates state funding and shapes youth homelessness policy and practice. The office is funded through legislative appropria-



33%

Foster youth in Washington who experience homelessness by age 21.

Source: Child Trends, 2017

tions and the governor's office.

The Washington Legislature passed additional legislation more recently to address youth homelessness. Among the bills, SB 6560 was enacted in 2018 to ensure no youth is discharged from a public system of care (i.e., behavioral health, foster care or juvenile justice) into homelessness.

In 2019, in an effort to provide assistance for postsecondary students experiencing food insecurity or homelessness, legislators also passed HB 1893, which established an emergency assistance grant program to provide money for unforeseen emergencies or situations that affect students' ability to attend classes. The legislation also directs the Department of Social and Health Services to request a waiver from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to allow students to use electron-

ic benefit transfer cards at on-campus food retail establishments at Washington's public and private institutions of higher education.

In 2016, Washington tackled the [disproportionately low educational attainment](#) for youth experiencing homelessness. To address these disparities, legislators enacted the [Homeless Student Stability and Opportunity Gap Act](#) to improve educational outcomes for homeless students through increased in-school supports, expanded housing stability resources, and increased identification services to help [stabilize students in their schools and communities](#).

Other recently enacted legislation includes [HB 2607](#), which waives the cost associated with receiving a state identification card and increases the age youth can receive free identification cards from 18 to 25. [SB 5324](#) provides support for students experiencing homelessness by expanding award criteria for state grants, requiring school districts receiving grants to monitor and report on the academic outcomes, and revises criteria for a grant program to link homeless students and their families with stable housing. [SB 5800](#) created a pilot program to assist homeless students who were in foster care when they graduated high school. [SB 6274](#) created the Passport to Careers Program to help improve postsecondary outcomes for foster youth and unaccompanied youth by encouraging the youth to complete higher education or an apprenticeship program. [HB 1444](#) helps facilitate on-time grade-level progression and graduation for students experiencing homeless. [SB 5290](#) eliminates the use of the valid court order exception to place youth in detention for noncriminal acts, such as truancy, breaking curfew or running away from home, a practice which, in the past, made Washington the leader in locking up homeless youth.

Private–Sector Initiative to Combat Youth Homelessness

The [Anchor Community Initiative](#), an effort by A Way Home Washington, is attempting to end youth and young adult homelessness in four counties by 2022. The initiative operates under “yes to yes”

and “functional zero” models. Yes to yes reflects commitments from communities to ensuring when a youth agrees to come inside and get off the streets, the systems are in place for the community to say “yes, come inside, we have a place for you.” Functional zero means if someone wants to come inside, a bed will be available for them. The model aligns with the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness [criteria and benchmarks for achieving the goal of ending veterans’ homelessness](#).

In 2019, the Washington Legislature appropriated \$500,000 for the initiative’s centralized diversion fund, which helps prevent youth from ever becoming homeless and diverts them out of homelessness if they are homeless. The year before, the legislature appropriated \$4 million to build capacity in the four participating counties.

More Work Ahead

Advocates and legislators agree there is more work to be done to prevent and respond to youth homelessness in Washington. Leaders in the effort report that engaging youth in developing solutions is essential and support from the philanthropic community is necessary to turn policy into action. Priority issues include extending foster care beyond age 21, creating effective transition plans for youth exiting foster care and implementing [SB 6560](#) to ensure no youth is discharged from a public system of care into homelessness. They also include ensuring foster parents and social workers have the support they need to effectively care for youth and succeed in their jobs, meeting the developmental needs of youth in shelters, and securing additional funding for behavioral health services and supportive housing.

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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