

Evidence Summary

Interventions to Prevent Youth Homelessness

November 2019

Highlights

- ▶ A small evidence base suggests that **youth homelessness is preventable**.
- ▶ The more promising findings emerge from studies that combine **evidence-based targeting, youth-centered counseling, and tailored supports and services**.
- ▶ To understand and address the root causes of homelessness, **we need substantially more evidence**. Evaluating prevention is complex, however, research can examine the impact of both policies and programs to prevent youth homelessness.

Overview

The **Voices of Youth Count** initiative's systematic evidence review is the most comprehensive synthesis of evaluation evidence on programs and practices related to youth homelessness to date.¹ This document is one in a series of seven topical evidence summaries derived from the longer evidence review brief. Here, we summarize evaluations of interventions aimed at preventing youth homelessness before it occurs. The evidence here includes only impact evaluations designed to assess measurable changes in outcomes due to specific programs and practices. Other kinds of evaluation, including assessments of program implementation, processes, or participant experiences, will be summarized and reported elsewhere.

Prevention involves a range of policies and programs aimed at identifying youth and children at risk for homelessness and delivering supports and services proactively before the point of crisis. Given the high prevalence of youth homelessness, and the associated trauma, strong prevention strategies and investments are key to addressing the challenge overall.

1. For detailed information about our evidence review methods and findings, please refer to Morton, M.H., Kugley, S., Epstein, R.A., & Farrell, A.F. (2019). *Missed Opportunities: Evidence on Interventions for Addressing Youth Homelessness*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Yet, of the 62 studies of 51 programs included in this evidence review, five studies evaluated only three prevention programs. Each program deployed supportive counseling as the primary intervention.

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Each of the prevention programs led to improvements in housing stability. While encouraging, the results of these prevention approaches should be held in perspective. For instance, the YVLifeSet evaluation demonstrated a six percentage point reduction in youth reporting experiences of homelessness over the previous 12 months (21 percent for the program group versus 27 percent for the control group at 12 months following baseline). This achievement should inspire confidence in the idea that prevention can work. At the same time, it also highlights that broader, more structural policies and programs aimed at the underlying causes of homelessness—such as poverty, unaffordable housing markets, and systemic inequities—are likely needed to prevent homelessness for all youth.

Included Studies of Prevention Interventions

Description	Study design*	Results
YVLifeSet (Valentine et al., 2015; Skemer & Valentine, 2016)		
Intensive case management and transitional support services for youth who had been in juvenile justice or foster care (18-24).	Randomized evaluation (n=1,322)	Improved housing stability, earnings, economic well-being, and mental health; no effects on condom use or substance use.
Behavior Analysis Services Program (BASP) (Clark et al., 2008)		
A functional analytic intervention that uses data analytics to catch runaway behaviors among youth (12-17) in foster care early, understand behavioral patterns, and provide supports to prevent further episodes.	Matched comparison group evaluation (n=39)	Reduced percentage of days on runaway status.
The Geelong Project (MacKenzie & Thielking, 2013; MacKenzie, 2018)		
A place-based collective impact intervention for preventing youth homelessness and early school leaving. It involves coordination between schools and community-based organizations to identify students (12-17) at-risk for homelessness and connect them and their families with tailored supports and services.	Non-randomized evaluation using administrative data to compare outcomes between participating and non-participating schools (n=106)	Reduced the number of students entering the homelessness system and early school leaving.

* All evaluations, even the most rigorous, have some risk of bias. Bias is especially likely when an evaluation lacks a credible comparison group to assess what would have happened without the intervention. Without such a comparison group, we can't know if changes occur (for example) because youth got older, they were already motivated to improve, or due to other influences in the young person's life. We indicate evaluations as "high risk of bias" if they lack a "usual services" comparison or control group, or if the group was created without specific efforts (like statistical matching) to create comparable groups. Without similar comparison groups, findings are interpreted with additional caution. In some cases, it is necessary to rely on less rigorous studies to inform interventions while we await additional evidence.

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