

# Missed Opportunities: Youth Pathways through Homelessness in America

*Foundational evidence for understanding the scale, scope, and urgency of youth homelessness in America*

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As a nation, we have an obligation to ensure that all young people have the best possible start in life and to take action when youth are in harm's way. This report reflects the findings from 215 in-depth interviews with youth who did not have the best possible start—the adversities they faced led to homelessness. We learned from them that young people experience significant disruption and loss both before and during their homelessness. These adversities can serve as warning signs for future housing instability.

Across any 12-month period, more than 4.2 million young people between the ages of 13 and 25 in the United States experience some form of homelessness. Through interviews with 215 young people in five locations—Cook County, IL, Philadelphia County, PA, Travis County, TX, San Diego County, CA, and Walla Walla County, WA—we learned about their paths to and through housing instability.

We found that 35% of the youth experienced the death of at least one parent or primary caregiver, that a large proportion of the youth had been in foster care, and that nearly a quarter were homeless with their families before experiencing homelessness on their own. By identifying the common experiences that lead to homelessness, we also identify where, when, and with whom we need to intervene to prevent homelessness.



## Multilevel Critical Conditions

**Families play a critical role in...** providing stability, safety, and nurturance. Family systems are important for creating dynamics that promote and protect the growth, wellness, belonging and healthy development of their members.

**Young people play a critical role...** as resilient actors making meaning of their lives and identities, fully engaging and contributing to their communities, building or strengthening their capacities for decision making that facilitate and protect their own wellness and health.

**Systems + communities play a critical role in...** offering developmentally and culturally attuned supports and services, ensuring safety and stability even across transitions, as portals to other services and resources that promote healing, growth, recovery and economic health in communities, families and children.

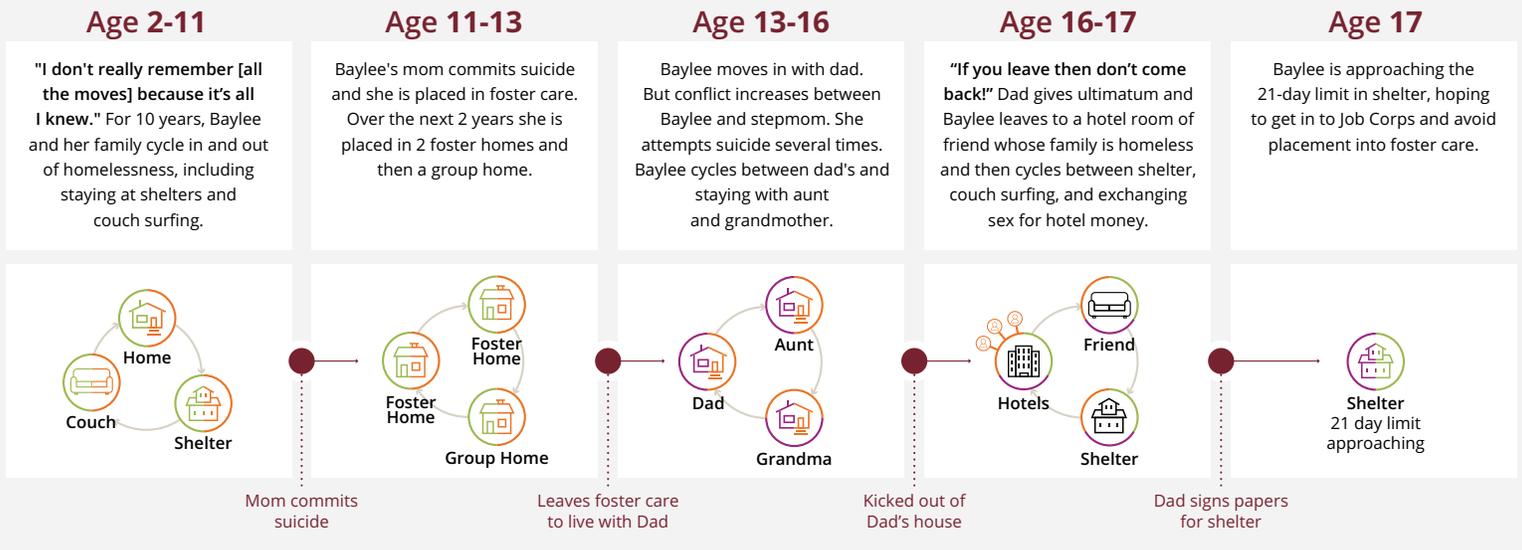
**Peers play a critical role in...** supporting sense of belonging and family/kinship, providing social support, and as portals to accessing resources, information and for skill development.

Baylee is one of the youth we interviewed. The illustration below shows how personal, relational, and structural conditions intersect to influence her path into homelessness, and identifies key tipping points in her journey.

## Baylee's pathway through homelessness

 **Baylee**  
 Age 17 Female  
 San Diego County Latina & White  
 100% Straight

Critical conditions driving Baylee's tipping points: ■ Structural ■ Relational ■ Personal



## Recommendations

**Address family-based trauma:** The Runaway and Homeless Youth statute needs to acknowledge the universality of trauma among youth experiencing homelessness and support evidence-based practices to address complex family-based traumas. This includes youth experiencing stigma and discrimination from family members. We need increased coordination across federal programs and increased emphasis on training for and providing trauma-informed care. And we need to address the grief and losses associated with the death of family members through home-based services.

**Apply a developmental lens:** Young people need opportunities to make mistakes and recover and learn from them, and they need services that nurture their positive identity development. A system designed for this would include training for providers, greater flexibility in entry, exit, and re-entry policies within Transitional Living Programs, and extra support during transitions and experiences of loss.

**Policy should match the mobility of the homelessness experience:** Within a single week, a young person can move from couch surfing, to a car, to the street. Yet most youths' pathways stayed within a single state. Policy and programs should be attuned and responsive to these patterns of mobility.

**Coordinate with child welfare to enhance prevention:** Shelters and other service providers can and should actively coordinate with local child welfare officials to identify prevention services for youth and their families.

**Improve engagement and share data:** Use the internet and social media channels to communicate about services, and require federally funded programs to open up pathways for in-state sharing of data and information.