

Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America

National Estimates

The first in a series of Research-to-Impact briefs by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago on understanding and addressing youth homelessness.

Missed Opportunities: National Estimates highlights results from a national survey on unaccompanied youth homelessness in America. The study captures youth homelessness broadly, including sleeping on the streets, in shelters, running away, being kicked out, and couch surfing. Overall, findings show one in 10 young adults ages 18-25, and at least one in 30 adolescents ages 13-17, experience some form of homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian over the course of a year. As a nation, we are missing opportunities to ensure that all young people can reach their full potential and contribute to stronger communities and economies across the country.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voices of Youth: Natalie's Story

At age 14 in a small town in Washington State, Natalie's experience with homelessness began. Natalie's dad left her family, and her mom fell into depression and started using methamphetamines. "[I]f she wasn't drunk or high, she was gone," Natalie noted in one part of Voices of Youth Count's research efforts. For the next six months, Natalie cared for her four younger siblings. She started to miss school and ultimately dropped out. The stress of her circumstance mounted. Through friends, she encountered meth, a drug that had become tragically common in her community. She started using. This only added to conflict with her mom, and, after a fight with her mom's new boyfriend, Natalie was kicked out.

Natalie then cycled between couch surfing and trap houses, where illegal drugs are sold. She exchanged sex with an older man so that she could "have a roof over [her] head." Natalie traveled to other cities for housing and informal support. By 17, when chemical dependency had taken a strong hold, she stayed for extended periods in the shed of someone she knew. Natalie found herself regularly returning to juvenile detention—where she says she was grateful for a bed to sleep in and respites of safety. When Natalie was interviewed, she was about to embark on a residential treatment program. Asked about her future, she said, "I want to be home with my mom, and I want to stop using, and I want to be clean with my mom. I want to be able to see my siblings."

Adolescence and young adulthood represent a key developmental window. Every day of housing instability and the associated stress in the lives of young people like Natalie represents missed opportunities to support healthy development and transitions to productive adulthood. Voices of Youth Count gives voice to young people like Natalie across our nation who do not have the necessary supports to achieve independence and make their unique contributions to our society.

Voices of Youth Count

Through multiple methods and research angles, Voices of Youth Count sought to capture and understand the voices and experiences of thousands of young people like Natalie. While the deprivation of housing stability was the common thread in Voices of Youth Count research, the stories of youth homelessness—and the opportunities for intervention—rarely centered on housing alone. Every experience, every youth, was unique. Yet, with the data gained through Voices of Youth Count, we can begin to better understand the scale and scope of the challenge and the patterns that can guide smarter policy and practice.

Since 1974, when Congress first passed what is now known as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), the nation has recognized its shared responsibility to care for young people who live on the streets or apart from a safe and stable home. This landmark legislation, subsequent changes within statutes across multiple federal agencies, and ongoing national initiatives support a basic set of services for youth who experience homelessness and are at risk of homelessness. In 2012, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) amended the national plan to end homelessness to include a specific Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness, outlining steps that need to be coordinated across Federal agencies to advance the goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020. However, despite important national actions—and many efforts at the state and community levels—a sizable percentage of American youth continues to experience homelessness. The problem is solvable, but much remains to be done.

Missed Opportunities: National Estimates summarizes the results of the Voices of Youth Count national survey that estimates the percentage of United States youth, ages 13 to 25, who have experienced unaccompanied homelessness at least once during a recent 12-month period. Results show that approximately one in 10 American young adults ages 18 to 25, and at least one in 30 adolescent minors ages 13 to 17, endures some form of homelessness.

Key to understanding these estimates is the fact that young people—like Natalie—often shift among temporary circumstances such as living on the streets and couch surfing in unstable locations.

The Voices of Youth Count national survey also reveals that urban and rural youth experience homelessness at similar rates and that particular subpopulations are at higher risk for homelessness, including black and Hispanic youth; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth (LGBT); youth who do not complete high school; and youth who are parents.

Previous research shows that the longer youth experience homelessness, the harder it is to escape homelessness and contribute to stronger families, communities, and economies. To exit homelessness permanently, youth require housing and support services tailored to *their unique developmental needs*. Although many factors drive youth from their homes, including economic hardship, conflict, abuse, and neglect, the young people thrust into this situation share difficulty and uncertainty.

Moving Toward Solutions

Until now, one major challenge to putting solutions in place has been the lack of credible data on the size and characteristics of the youth population who experience homelessness and a way to track how this population changes over time. Without credible numbers and deeper understanding, it has been difficult for

the nation to develop a well-resourced and tailored response to address this problem in our communities. It has also been impossible to reliably track the nation's progress toward its goal of ending youth homelessness.

Missed Opportunities: National Estimates provides Congress with new foundational evidence for understanding the scale, scope, and urgency of youth homelessness in America.

Voices of Youth Count will bring forward more evidence in the months to come. Look for Research-to-Impact briefs related to trajectories into homelessness, the dynamics between interactions with systems like child welfare and youth homelessness, synthesis of the evidence regarding interventions to address youth homelessness, and deep explorations of the experiences faced by specific subgroups of young people.

Beyond the findings, Voices of Youth Count will offer implications and recommendations intended to focus the attention of Congress on existing policy opportunities—like the RHYA and others—that might be leveraged to make change. Recommendations are intended to be the beginning of a dialogue about tangible changes to the nation's laws, regulations, and programs, not an end point. In each brief, Voices of Youth Count will speak to the evidence while seeking solutions.








No more missed opportunities.



Adolescence and young adulthood represent a key developmental window. Every day of housing instability represents missed opportunities to support healthy development and transitions to productive adulthood.

No more missed opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

-  Conduct national estimates of youth homelessness biennially to track our progress in ending youth homelessness. [See Finding 1.](#)
-  Fund housing interventions, services, and prevention efforts in accordance with the scale of youth homelessness, accounting for different needs. [See Finding 1.](#)
-  Federal policy should encourage assessment and service delivery decisions that are responsive to the diversity and fluidity of circumstances among youth experiencing homelessness. [See Finding 2.](#)
-  Build prevention efforts in systems where youth likely to experience homelessness are in our care: child welfare, juvenile justice, and education. [See Finding 3.](#)
-  Acknowledge unique developmental and housing needs for a young population, and adapt services to meet those needs. [See Finding 3.](#)
-  Tailor supports for rural youth experiencing homelessness to account for more limited service infrastructure over a larger terrain. [See Finding 4.](#)
-  Target strategies to address the disproportionate risk for homelessness among specific subpopulations, including pregnant and parenting, LGBT, African American and Hispanic youth, and young people without high school diplomas. [See Finding 5.](#)

A NATIONAL SURVEY APPROACH

Quantifying the number of youth struggling with homelessness presents a challenge due to the transitory and hidden nature of youth experiences. For example, after Natalie was kicked out of her home at 14, she found shelter in varied locations such as on other people's couches, in a trap house, or in a shed. Because she didn't stay on the street or in a shelter, she might not have been included in a community effort to capture the extent of youth homelessness.

To gain a fuller picture, Voices of Youth Count primarily draws on a nationally representative phone survey for national estimates in this brief, but we also include some insights from other research components—like in-depth interviews and brief youth surveys that took place during local Youth Counts across the country.

The national survey interviewed 26,161 people, who were broadly representative of the population of the nation, during 2016 and 2017. The study interviewed adults whose households had youth and young adults ages 13-25 over the year *and* respondents who were ages 18-25. The respondents then answered questions about occurrences of different types of youth homelessness experienced by the respondents themselves (if ages 18-25) or by young people (ages 13-25) who were in the household. Page 15 includes key terms for this study.

The survey sought to identify how common, or *prevalent*, youth homelessness is in America. The study also aimed to collect information on the characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness and identify subpopulations at higher risk of homelessness. Voices of Youth Count chose this approach to national estimation of youth homelessness not only because of its technical strengths, but also because of its cost efficiency and replicability.

The Voices of Youth Count national survey was reinforced through follow-up interviews. A random sample of 150 people who reported on any youth homelessness were called in an effort to learn more. Details on the methodology of the national survey, along with its strengths and limitations, are reported in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* article titled "Prevalence and Correlates of Youth Homelessness in the United States." This brief also draws on more than 4,000 in-person brief youth surveys in 22 counties and 215 in-depth interviews with youth in five counties who had experiences of homelessness.

Figure 1. Prevalence of Youth Homelessness in America

1 in 10

young adults ages 18-25 experienced a form of homelessness over a 12-month period.

That's 3.5 million young adults. About half of them involved explicitly reported homelessness while the other half involved couch surfing only.

1 in 30

youth ages 13-17 experienced a form of homelessness over a 12-month period.

That's about 700,000 youth. About three-quarters of them involved explicitly reported homelessness (including running away or being kicked out) and one-quarter involved couch surfing only.

Five Major Findings

Finding 1. Youth homelessness is a broad and hidden challenge

Finding 2. Youth homelessness involves diverse experiences and circumstances

Finding 3. Prevention and early intervention are essential

Finding 4. Youth homelessness affects rural youth at similar levels

Finding 5. Some youth are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness

Finding 1. Youth homelessness is a broad and hidden challenge

The survey results revealed that the nation has a serious and substantial challenge with youth homelessness. As shown in Figure 1, over a 12-month period, 3.0% of households with 13- to 17-year-olds reported explicit youth homelessness (including running away or being kicked out) and 1.3% reported experiences that solely involved couch surfing, resulting in an overall 4.3% household prevalence of any homelessness. We estimate that this translates to a minimum of 700,000 adolescent minors, or 1 in 30 of the total population of 13- to 17-year-olds.

The prevalence climbs even higher when looking at homelessness among young adults (ages 18-25). Twelve-month population prevalence rates for young adults were 5.2% for explicit homelessness, 4.5% for couch surfing only, and 9.7% overall. The estimated count reveals more than 3.5 million, or 1 in 10, young adults experienced homelessness in a year. It could be that the size of the difference in rates between the younger and older youth was due partly to underestimation of the minors because they were not contacted directly. However, this upward trend is consistent with broader public health research that shows increased levels of vulnerability during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

In addition to showing a broad national challenge, these estimates reveal a largely hidden problem of youth homelessness. A large share of youth

included were couch surfing or otherwise staying with others while lacking a home of their own. These experiences are the most invisible. Previous research shows that couch surfing generally takes place early in people's struggles with homelessness, with sleeping more on the streets happening at later stages of homelessness. Our estimates also capture large numbers of young people that are hidden to other counts and data. For example, our estimates for adolescent minors are larger than those produced by data collected by school officials because our survey included out-of-school youth, and it does not depend on the strengths or limitations of school identification systems of student homelessness. Our estimates are bigger than those from point-in-time counts largely because we capture experiences over a year, rather than on one night. Our survey approach also includes more hidden homelessness of youth who are not in the streets or shelters at the time of a point-in-time count.

Implications & Recommendations

These national estimates reveal that key systems and federal programs need to be significantly better resourced to address the scale of youth homelessness. For example, according to 2014 data collected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 50,000 youth were served by the two major runaway and homeless youth programs involving short- or longer-term housing in 2014. Per the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) 2016 Annual

Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, there were 21,000 beds or housing spaces under different HUD-funded programs targeted to unaccompanied and parenting youth in 2016. Even if we conservatively assume that only a small share of youth experiencing any homelessness in a year needs short- or long-term housing interventions, these numbers fall well short.

Now, with the first national estimate of youth homelessness complete, Congress has a solid foundation for conducting future estimates. The national survey has significantly advanced understanding of the scale and characteristics of this previously hidden challenge. It also achieved these insights through an underlying approach that is replicable and cost-efficient. At the same time, it was a first effort that can be fine-tuned through more detailed measures and additional approaches to collect information directly from adolescent minors in the future.

Voices of Youth Count encourages Congress to act quickly to refine RHYA language, and appropriate necessary funds, to allow for subsequent national prevalence and incidence estimates every two years, in alignment with the frequency of HUD biennial point-in-time counts, to ensure Congress has up-to-date evidence for tracking and decision making. The language and appropriations should reinforce the importance of collecting information on both adolescent minors—an especially key stage for prevention—and young adults. In this way, the nation can track progress toward preventing and ending youth homelessness.

Finding 2. Youth homelessness involves diverse experiences and circumstances

While the concept of “homelessness” might seem straightforward, in reality it takes many forms in terms of situations, acuity, safety, needs, and duration of events. The survey confirms a scenario of American youth homelessness in which a shifting population of young people uses temporary

situations to get by when they cannot stay in a home of their own.

One 19-year-old interviewed, for instance, shared the following experience of staying at a friend's before returning to sleeping in a car: *“[My friend] had a small bed, so I just crashed on the floor. She had a boyfriend... and he would stay over a lot of the time, so it was just, I felt as an inconvenience to them. So I—although they didn't force me out of their house—I kind of fibbed and said that I was planning on getting an apartment so that they weren't worried about me, and I moved back into my car for a bit.”*

According to analysis of the national survey follow-up interviews, the vast majority—72%—who experienced “literal homelessness” (generally, sleeping on the streets, in a car, or in a shelter) also said they had stayed with others while unstably housed.

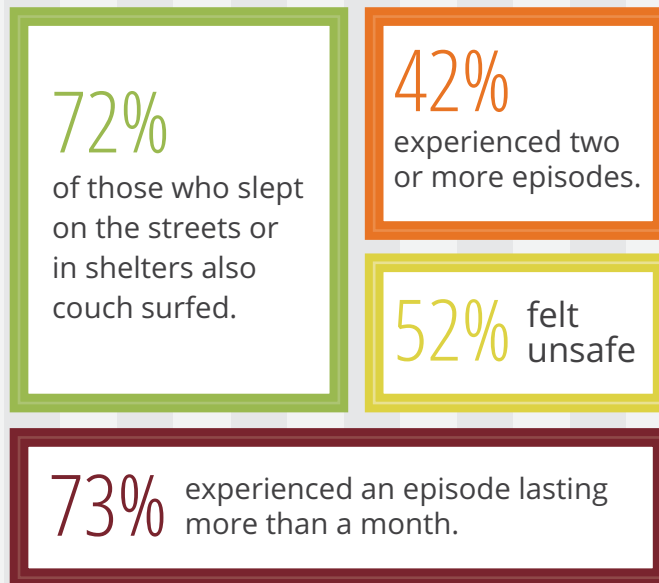
In looking at safety, about half of the follow-up interview respondents believed that the youth was unsafe during their experiences of explicit homelessness or couch surfing. These youth need access to rapid family reconnection supports when appropriate, safe brief respites (such as trauma-informed youth shelters or host homes), or long-term safe and stable housing options, depending on their needs and preferences. Yet many youth self-organize temporary housing through informal networks—such as couch surfing with a friend or relative—that is safe, if unstable. In these cases, youth may need supports to get on a path to housing stability while not necessarily needing formal short-term shelter or respite housing.

Among other youth surveyed, supports beyond housing are warranted to ensure sustainable exits from homelessness. For instance, 29% of youth were reported as having substance use problems, and 69% were indicated as having mental health difficulties, while experiencing homelessness. Just as Natalie's story highlighted, having safe and stable housing is the critical

Figure 2. Range of the Homelessness Experience

While the concept of “homelessness” might seem straightforward, in reality it takes many forms in terms of situations, acuity, safety, needs, and duration of events. The survey confirms a scenario of American youth homelessness in which a shifting population of young people uses temporary situations to get by when they cannot stay in a home of their own.

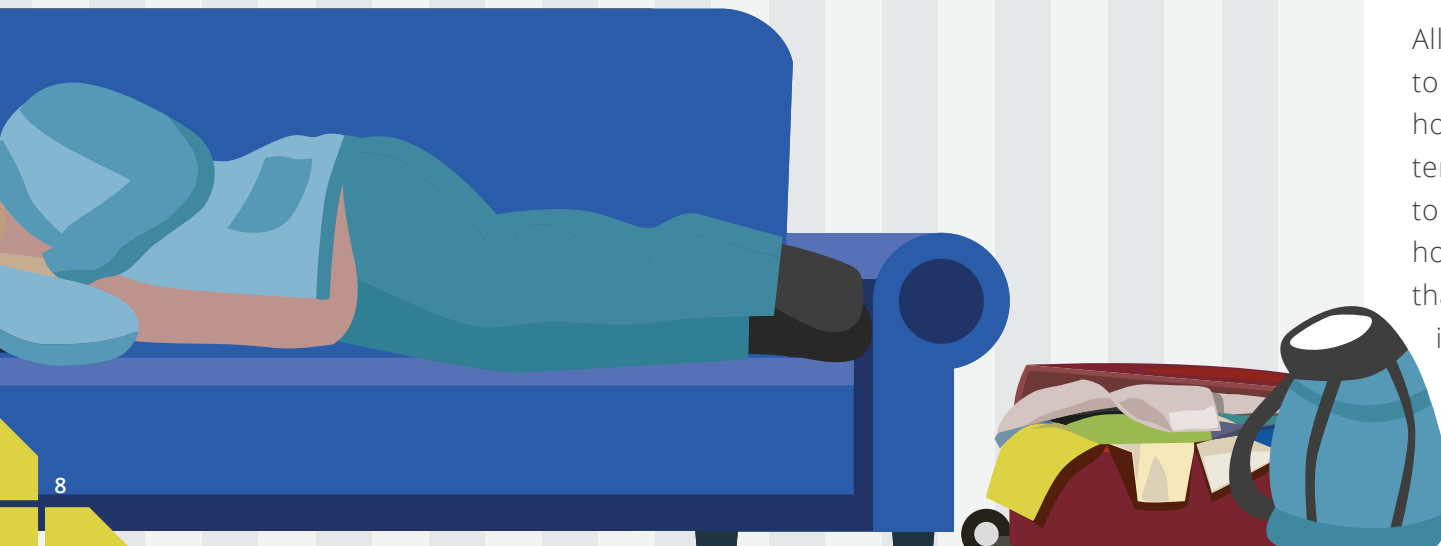
Data depict the experiences of youth (13-25), over a 12-month period, as described during the survey follow-up interviews with a smaller sample of respondents.



starting point for youth to benefit from other services. Often, arranging safe and stable housing involves working with the family. In other cases, it involves ensuring that young people have access to other long-term, low-barrier housing options. In addition to stable housing, integrating meaningful services tailored to individual youth needs is essential to help them exit homelessness for good.

For still others, situations are temporary and nonrecurring during the year, and these experiences and circumstances likewise require different responses. For example, according to analysis of the follow-up interviews, at least one in four young people who experienced some form of homelessness had experiences of housing instability lasting less than one month. During a one-year period, over half of the youth with any experiences of homelessness only had one episode. Older research has also shown that most runaway/kicked out experiences among minors tend to last for less than a week.

All of these experiences can expose youth to risks and can be warning signs of future homelessness. But many may not need long-term housing interventions so much as access to supports to stay safely housed during homelessness spells and services to ensure that they never have to relive homelessness in the future.



Implications & Recommendations

Given the differences among youth homelessness situations in acuity, needs, and duration, we recommend Congress encourage well-rounded assessments of young people's overall circumstances to inform access to housing and support services and to develop better service delivery models.

To deliver well-tailored support and services, these assessments should take into account young people's sleeping arrangements over time, the conditions of these arrangements, age-appropriate risk and protective factors, relationships and family history (where appropriate), and individual preferences. Federal policy should also encourage authentic youth collaboration in any funding or program addressing youth homelessness, to ensure that young people's lived experience contributes to smarter strategies to address their needs and aspirations.

Finding 3. Prevention and early intervention are essential

The national survey revealed that a large number of youth come into homelessness for the first time throughout the course of a single year. In fact, *about half* of the young people in the study, ages 13 to 25, who were homeless during the 12-month period studied experienced homelessness for the first time in their lives. This dynamic cannot be fully addressed with reactive policies and programs alone.

Prevention and early intervention solutions are needed to stop the flow of youth into homelessness experiences; this point was reinforced by the Voices of Youth Count's in-depth interviews in five communities. The majority of young adults (ages 18-25) interviewed had experiences of homelessness or housing instability that started in childhood or adolescence. For many young people interviewed (ages 13-25)—nearly a quarter—unaccompanied experiences had precursors in the context of family homelessness. Over one-third of youth experienced the death of a parent or caregiver, underscoring early trauma and disruptions that can contribute to paths of instability and, ultimately, homelessness. These insights from in-depth interviews reinforce the extent to which early actions to address risks and boost youth resilience can help curb the trajectories of young people into homelessness.

Figure 3. Incidence of First Time Homelessness

About half of the youth who experienced homelessness over a year faced homelessness...

...for the first time.



Further, key systems present undertapped opportunities for actions to prevent youth homelessness. Across 22 counties, more than 4,000 in-person brief youth surveys showed that nearly one-third of youth experiencing homelessness had experiences with foster care and nearly half had been in juvenile detention, jail, or prison. While these statistics do not reveal the nature of relationships between systems and homelessness, they do suggest that these systems offer important entry points for preventing large numbers of youth from becoming homeless.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings suggest that local, state, and national prevention strategies and resources are essential. No one system alone can address the multiple needs of these vulnerable young people. Policies that cut across federal programs are necessary to build a strong prevention safety net to avoid homelessness before it begins, and to ensure that any experiences that do take place are brief and nonrecurrent. With close engagement of multiple federal agencies, the USICH could facilitate development of a specific cross-sectoral strategy on prevention of youth homelessness, and Congress should consider appropriating necessary resources for its implementation.

Congress has an essential role to play in shaping federal programs for youth at high risk of homelessness. They can act to emphasize the importance of prevention and early intervention in legislation. They can also encourage that programs that serve youth experiencing homelessness use an age-appropriate developmental lens in creating services and support systems.

Furthermore, Congress should consider expanding stronger homelessness prevention and early intervention capacities to other public systems like child welfare, schools, and justice that

already play a role in ensuring health and well-being, especially for adolescent minors. Voices of Youth Count brief youth surveys further documented that young people who have been in child welfare or justice systems, or lack a high school diploma, are at especially high risk of homelessness. Public systems can and do have an impact.

In particular, Congress should encourage these systems to develop and implement plans that identify youth at risk of homelessness or housing instability and initiate service referrals. The most obvious mechanisms for Congress to leverage include the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (for child welfare), and adequately supporting identification and assistance measures for youth homelessness present in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, for education).

Finding 4. Youth homelessness affects rural youth at similar levels

Before Voices of Youth Count, little was known about the degree of youth homelessness in rural areas compared to urban areas. The results indicate that, apart from more visible homelessness such as youth asking for help on city corners, youth in rural, suburban, and urban counties experience very similar prevalence rates of homelessness. In predominantly rural counties, 9.2% of young adults reported any homelessness while, in predominantly urban counties, the prevalence rate was 9.6%. Household prevalence of any homelessness among adolescents ages 13-17 was 4.4% in predominantly rural counties and 4.2% in mainly urban counties.

Said differently, this means that as a share of the population size, youth homelessness is just as much of a challenge in rural communities as it is in more urban communities. Of course, the number of youth experiencing homelessness in urban and suburban areas is much larger than the number in rural areas

because a larger share of the US population lives in urban and suburban areas. As a country, we need tailored strategies to reach all of these young people.

One interesting distinction is that youth in rural communities seem to rely more on couch surfing, probably due to a lack of shelter and housing services in their communities. The national survey suggests modestly higher rates of couch surfing in the least densely populated counties when compared to those with the highest density. But the national survey did not show where there might have been heavier reliance on some sleeping arrangements over others because its aim was to assess whether a youth couch surfed at all. The 4,000 in-person Youth Count surveys across 22 counties, on the other hand, show sleeping arrangements on a given night. This component of the research found that youth experiencing homelessness in rural counties were twice as likely as youth in medium and large population counties to be staying with others, rather than in shelters or on the streets, on the night of the count. These cross-component findings underscore how hidden many young people are who experience homelessness in rural settings and the need for more creative identification and outreach approaches to support them.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings highlight that youth in rural jurisdictions require a strong set of tailored supports. Rural areas face unique challenges given that youth homelessness is spread across a larger space with greater hiddenness and more limited services infrastructure. Federal programs addressing youth homelessness should encourage and support coordination and peer learning across communities with rural geographies to enhance the supports provided to youth.

Through legislation like RHYA and the HEARTH Act, policymakers could also consider targeting a set of resources to allow for a tailored provision of services in rural communities, building on lessons from previous pilots funded by HHS and HUD. Congress should also consider supporting the evaluation of tailored services delivered in rural communities to ensure interventions are meeting the needs of this group of young people.

Figure 4. Youth Homelessness Affects Rural and Urban Areas Alike

Rates of youth experiencing homelessness were similar in rural and nonrural areas.

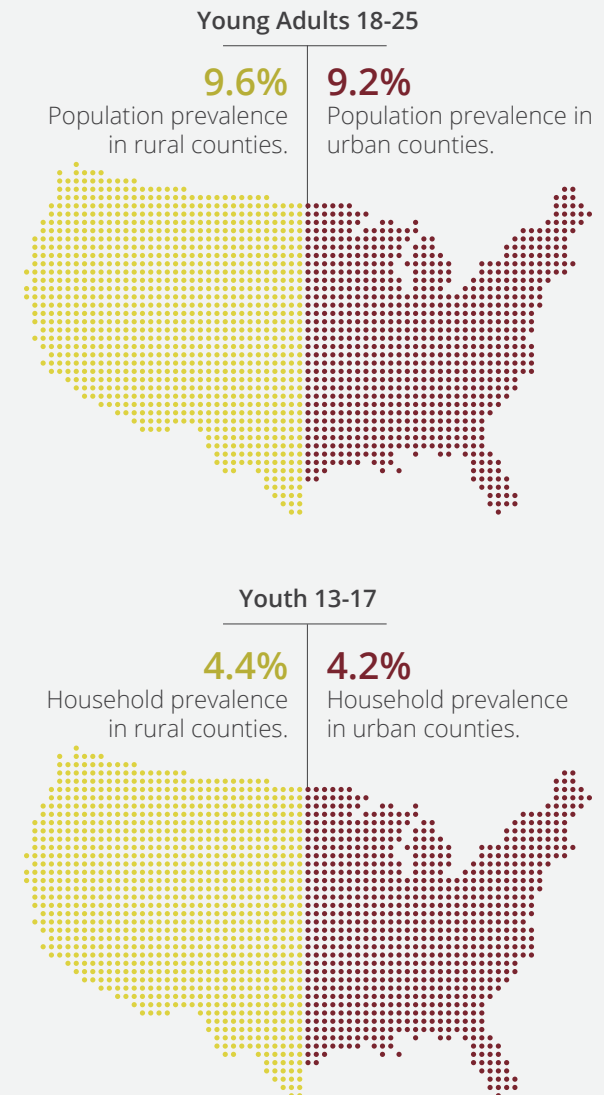


Figure 5. Youth at Greater Risk of Experiencing Homelessness

Statistics describe the relative risk of certain groups of young adults, 18-25, having reported “explicit homelessness” in the last 12 months.



346%

Youth with less than a high school diploma or GED

had a 346% higher risk than their peers who completed high school.

162%

Youth reporting annual household income of less than \$24,000

had a 162% higher risk of reporting homelessness.

33%

Hispanic, non-White youth

had a 33% higher risk of reporting homelessness.

120%

LGBT youth

had a 120% higher risk of reporting homelessness.

83%

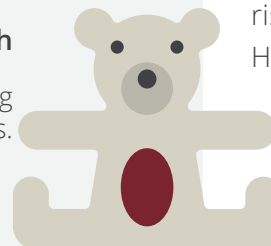
Black or African American youth

had an 83% higher risk of reporting homelessness.

200%

Unmarried parenting youth

had a 200% higher risk of reporting homelessness.



Finding 5. Some youth are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness

Understanding that certain groups of young people are more likely to experience homelessness can prompt targeted strategies to speed progress toward ending youth homelessness (see Figure 5). Voices of Youth Count analysis offered additional information about comparative risks of different subpopulations of young adults ages 18-25 of experiencing “explicit homelessness.”

Among racial and ethnic groups, African American youth were especially overrepresented, with an 83% higher risk of having experienced homelessness than youth of other races. Higher risk of African American youth compared to other races remains even when we control for other factors like income and education. Disproportionality of homelessness experiences among black youth mirrors racial disparities documented elsewhere, for example in school suspensions, incarceration, and foster care placement. It is likely that disproportionalities in other systems, along with a weaker schooling and service infrastructure in predominantly black communities, help explain elevated risk of homelessness, but more targeted research can help pinpoint causes.

Hispanic youth were also found at higher risk of experiencing homelessness than non-Hispanic youth. Further, while Hispanic youth comprised 33% of 18- to 25-year-olds reporting explicit homelessness (compared

to 25% of young adults not reporting homelessness), only 19% of youth served by federally funded runaway and homeless youth programs in 2014 were Hispanic. Point-in-time counts have also shown lower percentages of Hispanic youth overall among those identified as homeless, especially those in shelters. As such, our national survey results suggest that Hispanic youth are especially hidden among those experiencing homelessness.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth had a 120% higher risk of experiencing homelessness than youth who identified as heterosexual and cisgender. These findings reinforce growing evidence on the heightened risk of experiencing homelessness among LGBT youth. This often stems from a lack of acceptance that young people experience both in and outside of the home.

Young parents—especially those unmarried—had a three times (200%) higher risk of experiencing homelessness than non-parenting peers. This finding is alarming, not only because of the risks posed to young people themselves, but also to their children. Housing instability in early childhood can have lifelong consequences. For these young people, approaches to prevention and services need to reflect the developmental needs of the young people, their children, and the holistic needs of their families.

Above and beyond these demographics, education was strongly related to risk of

homelessness. In fact, of all of the indicators assessed, the lack of a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) was the most strongly correlated with higher risk. These young adults had a 3.5 times higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness than peers who completed high school. Although we cannot say whether lower education causes youth homelessness, this finding reinforces the extent to which education, and underlying factors that support educational attainment, could protect youth from becoming homeless.

At the same time, the data also show that many youth experience homelessness while enrolled in school. According to national survey follow-up interviews, 29% of young adults who experienced homelessness were enrolled in college or another educational program at the time that they experienced homelessness. These struggles often go unknown to faculty, administrators, and others who could be in a position to help.

Young people with lower household income were more likely to experience homelessness. However, and perhaps less obviously, when Voices of Youth Count controlled for income, unemployment was not strongly correlated with homelessness. Taken with findings from Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews and brief youth surveys, which show significant levels of work experience among youth experiencing homelessness, we can see the difficulties underpinning homelessness. Put simply, the



Disproportionality of homelessness experiences among black youth mirrors racial disparities documented elsewhere, for example in school suspensions, incarceration, and foster care placement.



There are no silver bullets, but the efforts and investments to end youth homelessness are worth it—for Natalie, for the millions of youth who share her struggle, and for our country, which stands to gain from helping all of our young people achieve their full potential.

problem is not that these young people are not working. Many are. It may be, however, that quality of work and the income associated with gainful employment (and perhaps education and other supports), may be more important for lifting youth out of homelessness than simply having a job.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings reinforce the need for targeted strategies to address the disproportionate risks for homelessness among certain subpopulations.

This starts with ensuring that systems and programs collect and use data to track whether some high risk subpopulations are served less frequently, or less effectively, than other young people. Informed by continuous monitoring, systems and programs can better tailor outreach, staff recruitment or development, and service delivery models to prevent higher risk of homelessness among some groups and to provide safer, more inclusive services that meet their needs for exiting homelessness.

These findings suggest an opportunity to strengthen an array of statutory areas—such as RHYA and HEARTH Act—by incorporating in each the importance of using data and tailoring outreach, staff recruitment or development, and service models mindful of race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and pregnancy or parenting status. Homelessness spaces and services supported by federal funding need to be safe and specific to adolescents and young adults and appropriate

for the youth subpopulations who need to access them.

Going forward, Voices of Youth Count will explore each of the overrepresented groups—black, Hispanic, LGBT, youth who do not complete high school (as well homelessness among in-school youth), and youth who are parents—in further detail in upcoming Research-to-Impact briefs. Implications and recommendations for policy, programs, and practice will be drawn out for dialogue and action.

CONCLUSION

Missed Opportunities: National Estimates offers unprecedented national insights into the scale, scope, and characteristics of youth homelessness in America. Although every experience is unique, Voices of Youth Count finds that 17-year-old Natalie is far from alone in her struggle with homelessness. The challenge involves a scale that requires greater coordination and resourcing of multiple systems and programs—behavioral and physical health, child welfare, education, employment, housing, justice, and outreach—at local, state, and federal levels to drive these numbers toward zero.

There are no silver bullets, but the efforts and investments to end youth homelessness are worth it—for Natalie, for the millions of youth who share her struggle, and for our country, which stands to gain from helping all of our young people achieve their full potential.

TERMS

Couch surfing: Moving from one temporary living arrangement to another without a secure place to be. While some definitions consider staying with others homelessness, others place this under a broader concept of “housing instability.” We include couch surfing in overall estimates of homelessness but also provide estimates that separate out couch surfing-only experiences in which people did not also report “homelessness”.

Explicit homelessness: This refers to survey respondents who used the term “homelessness” to describe youth experiences. For 13- to 17-year-olds, it also includes reports of having run away from home, or having been kicked out, and staying somewhere else for at least one night.

Homelessness: Generally, experiences of sleeping in places not meant for living, staying in shelters, or temporarily staying with others (“couch surfing”) while lacking a safe and stable alternative living arrangement. Voices of Youth Count looks at unaccompanied homelessness, meaning that the youth is unaccompanied by a parent or guardian while homeless.

Household prevalence: The percentage of households with youth members in the specified age groups in which any of those members had experienced homelessness in a year. Because this survey was administered to adults (ages 18 and over), we could directly estimate only household prevalence for the 13-17 age group. We use household prevalence to calculate a minimum number of adolescent minors 13-17 who experienced homelessness in the US. These numbers are probably low, since some households could have multiple youth experiencing homelessness, and adults might not report as accurately on youth experiences as youth would themselves.

Incidence: The percentage of youth who experienced homelessness in the last year for the first time in their lives.

Population prevalence: The percentage of the youth population of the specified age group that experienced homelessness in a year. For young adults ages 18-25, we could calculate both household and population prevalence.

Youth: Varying age ranges are used for youth. The most common internationally is 15-24. We use the age range of 13-25 to align with the RHYA age range for national estimates, but we refer to two specific subgroups: adolescent minors (ages 13-17) and young adults (18-25).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief is the result of a collaboration between Voices of Youth Count, based at the Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, and many partners. The authors wish to acknowledge important contributions from Elizabeth Dierksheide, Marianne McMullen, Sonali Patel, Bryan Samuels, and Jennifer Vidis, as well as the methodological and technical expertise provided by the Voices of Youth Count Technical Advisors. Data collection for the national survey and follow-up interviews was conducted by Gallup, Inc. alongside of its US Politics and Economics Daily Tracking Survey. Professional services were provided by Bowerbird Communications, LLC and Forum One.


Voices of Youth Count is made possible through a grant from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (Office of Policy Development and Research) and generous support from other funders including Chapin Hall, Arcus Foundation, Ballmer Group Philanthropy, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Champion Foundation, Casey Family Programs, Dr. Inger Davis, Elton John AIDS Foundation, Melville Charitable Trust, and Raikes Foundation.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.



Missed Opportunities: National Estimates offers unprecedented national insights into the scale, scope, and characteristics of youth homelessness in America.

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Voices of Youth Count is an unprecedented policy research initiative to understand, address and prevent youth homelessness in America. Infused with youth voices and strengthened by reach into nearly 30,000 U.S. households and 22 diverse communities, the research provides robust information to support effective policies, practices and programs that will end youth homelessness. More information can be found online at voicesofyouthcount.org.