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# A Youth Homelessness System Assessment for New York City

Executive Summary



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## **A Youth Homelessness System Assessment for New York City**

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago  
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## Executive summary

**This report presents findings from the first youth homelessness system assessment commissioned by New York City (NYC).** This was a rapid, mixed-methods assessment that took place from October through December 2018. It sought to provide new insights into the full range of housing programs and services available to youth experiencing homelessness, the system capacity to deliver services effectively, gaps in capacity, and young people's experiences with the system.

**This work addresses an urgent and complex challenge.** On a single night in 2018, more than 4,500 unaccompanied and parenting youth were counted as experiencing homelessness. NYC has the largest homeless population overall, compared to other cities across the nation, and the third highest number of unaccompanied youth. These numbers don't even include the young people experiencing homelessness in more hidden ways that make them harder to count or who experience homelessness at different times during the year. Still, they represent thousands of young people every day who experience trauma and lack the stability and support they need to thrive during a key developmental period. Additionally, data consistently show that youth of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth; and pregnant and parenting youth face homelessness at disproportionately high rates in NYC and across the country. This context makes clear that fragmented programs and initiatives are not enough. The City needs a coordinated system-level response centered on equity to end youth homelessness.

The assessment advances a public health perspective for assessing and strengthening the City's youth homelessness system, including a strong emphasis on prevention and on using data to define the problem and to identify, evaluate, and monitor solutions. The assessment involved interviews and focus groups with 53 youth with lived experience of homelessness and 45 adult stakeholders with various roles in the system, along with a survey of community-based organizations and data gathering from multiple City agencies.

*I can't really put into words how much it means to me to be in stable housing. Because I mean, I just can't; I just can't explain the gratitude and how grateful I am to have my own place. And that I'm not on the streets.*

– A youth who experienced homelessness in NYC

**The assessment revealed that youth homelessness is emerging as a priority issue for City Government.** The City has contributed increasing resources to address the issue—especially for drop-in centers, shelters, and transitional and supportive housing programs. Over the past five years, the City has grown its drop-in centers from seven to eight with five now operating 24/7. This has strengthened the accessibility of young people's entry points into the system. With an overall increase of supportive housing investments for formerly homeless individuals and families with high service needs, the City has taken efforts to increase young people's access to these resources and to ensure that a proportion of new units is reserved for youth.

There are important areas of progress in the areas of prevention and early intervention. These include improved resources and supports for youth transitioning out of foster care and more community coordinators and other personnel working with students experiencing, or at-risk for, homelessness in schools. Although Homebase—the City's initiative for homelessness prevention—is not specific to youth, it provides important resources overall for New Yorkers facing a housing crisis, and this program has been significantly enhanced in recent years. Furthermore, the City has significantly expanded housing assistance for addressing family homelessness. Given the important intersections between family and youth homelessness—both because family homelessness and housing instability are a common precursor to youth homelessness, and because many youth experiencing homelessness are parenting themselves—these investments likely help address youth homelessness indirectly.

More broadly, the City has recently increased emphasis

on a coordinated response to preventing and ending youth homelessness. The hiring of a Senior Consultant in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services to coordinate efforts on this topic and the establishment of a Youth Action Board and Youth Homelessness Taskforce—while potentially temporary measures—reinforce this emphasis.

**Yet the assessment also reveals critical opportunities to strengthen the system, both with respect to the continuum of services available for addressing youth homelessness and to the capacity to deliver services that achieve results as a system.** In terms of services and supports, the assessment illuminated significant gaps in long-term and affordable housing options for vulnerable youth in the city, prevention and early intervention, mental health services, supports for education and career development, and aftercare services that extend assistance to young people after they exit shelter and housing programs. The assessment identified a need for developmentally appropriate services and supports for older young adults (ages 21 or older) across the continuum. Further, several adult stakeholders felt that, while investments overall had generally increased in recent years, funding remained insufficient to meet the need.

In the course of this work, we found crosscutting system capacity issues. Key issues included the lack of ownership and accountability for a coordinated response by any particular City agency or office, fragmented programming without incentives or infrastructure for coordinated entry and service delivery for youth in crisis, and absence of common and longitudinal outcomes measurement. Further, youth commonly cited a lack of consistent information or guidance on navigating the system and achieving long-term housing stability. Overall, the assessment surfaced the lack of a formalized system of coordinated care for youth experiencing homelessness in NYC, which several stakeholders contrasted to a more unified system of support available to youth transitioning out of foster care.

**Based on the system capacity needs, we recommend the following steps for the City to explore.** Each may require targeted research prior to implementation:

## Prevention

- Examine opportunities to adapt Homebase outreach, access, and programming to further meet the unique prevention and diversion needs of youth, and collect and track data on how well Homebase services engage youth and address their needs.
- Integrate screening and early identification processes for identifying youth at-risk for homelessness in key public systems, such as behavioral health systems, child welfare, justice systems, and education systems, along with processes for coordinating timely supports and services.

## Entry points

- Develop systems, processes, and common screening and assessment tools for youth-specific coordinated entry and ongoing coordination of care. Leverage technology and youth insights.
- Consider devising a public awareness campaign, co-designed with youth with lived experience, to mitigate stigma associated with youth homelessness and direct youth who need help to common entry points to access information and services.

## Shelters, transitional housing, and temporary housing assistance

- Strengthen and evaluate youth housing program models that incorporate wraparound services, such as mental and physical health, education, and career support. Ensure existing residential programs have adequate resources and technical support to deliver or coordinate these services effectively.
- Develop a strategy for coordination, knowledge sharing, and smooth transitions between youth and family homelessness services in the city.
- Pilot and evaluate flexible, quickly deployable non-residential intervention options to complement the current set of shelters and residential programs in the city. Such intervention options might be particularly useful for youth who are more newly homeless and present less need or desire for intensive services through residential programs. Examples could include interagency case management, peer counseling, cash transfers, youth-specific rapid rehousing, and programs facilitating natural supports in the community, or combinations of these approaches.

- Make housing specialists who are sensitive to the unique situations of youth available to youth in shelters and transitional housing.

## Stable housing

- Develop and evaluate follow-up (or “aftercare”) service models for youth following exits from shelters or housing programs.
- Conduct a stocktaking of permanent and affordable housing resources available to youth—through public funding and the private market—and identify opportunities to increase the availability and accessibility of affordable housing for youth.
- Conduct a youth labor market assessment,<sup>1</sup> and identify opportunities to increase skills-to-labor-market matches and career development opportunities for youth experiencing, or at-risk for, homelessness.

## Crosscutting issues

- Identify which City agency/office is responsible for coordinating a collaborative, interagency system response to youth homelessness, and ensure that it has the authority, support, and resources it needs to do so effectively.
- Extend and strengthen currently temporary mecha-

nisms that support a coordinated response to youth homelessness, including a senior-level City official spearheading the coordination, a Youth Action Board, and a Youth Homelessness Taskforce or other collaborative body with diverse perspectives.

- Drawing on lived experience and data, develop a system-level theory of change for preventing and ending youth homelessness that centers youth outcomes, lived experience, and equity.<sup>2</sup> Use this to help develop a strategy for filling key gaps in the inventory of programs and services and a plan for analyzing and monitoring progress at the system level.
- Routinely assess and address equity in access to housing and wraparound supports and system outcomes based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity.
- Plan for enhancing and replicating this type of system assessment over time to track the evolution of the system, and periodically revisit opportunities for strengthening it.

Overall, the assessment revealed a growing commitment to ending youth homelessness among local providers and stakeholders. At the same time, the scale of the challenge continues to outsize the City’s response. There remain many opportunities for the City to strengthen its work to prevent and end young New Yorkers’ experiences of homelessness and related adversity so they can thrive and contribute to NYC’s shared prosperity.

<sup>1</sup> A youth labor market assessment examines the labor supply (labor market activity, occupational preferences, education and skills possessed), demand (employment opportunities, growth sectors, education and skills required, etc.), and conditions of work (quality, safety, hours, and earnings) in a given economy and examines and disaggregates data and trends specifically for youth (ILO, 2013). This kind of analysis allows for tailored and targeted economic policies and programs to promote gainful employment and economic opportunity among youth, particularly more marginalized populations.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a broader homelessness system assessment conducted by Future Laboratories for Seattle/King County identified the lack of a system-level theory of change as a critical gap to the system’s functioning and provided guidance for addressing this gap. The online report can be accessed at: <https://hrs.kc.future.com/actions>.

## Quick facts

- On a single night, 4,584 youth under the age of 25 were counted as sleeping in shelters or on the streets in NYC: 2,142 were unaccompanied and 2,422 were parenting youth (HUD, 2018).
- Parenting youth counted as homeless on a single night were accompanied by 2,810 children (HUD, 2018)
- Youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability in NYC are overwhelmingly youth of color (95%); gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer/questioning (42%); and transgender/gender non-binary (8%) (NYC CIDI, 2018a).
- From 2005 to 2017, rising rents led to the disappearance of over 425,000 apartments renting for \$900 or less (in 2017 dollars) in NYC's housing inventory. Apartments renting for over \$2,700 per month more than doubled (NYC Office of the Comptroller, 2018). In 2017, the vacancy rate for units renting for \$800 or less was about 1% (NYC HPD, 2018)
- At entry points to the system, drop-in centers, and street outreach reported 396 daily touchpoints with youth;<sup>3</sup> three-quarters of these are served through drop-in centers (Survey of Community-based Organizations, 2018).
- Approximately 4,714 youth are served daily through the City's short-term housing and shelter programs. Of these, on a given day, only about 667 (14%) are served through youth or young adult-specific shelter or housing programs, but these rates are higher for younger youth (CIDI, personal communication, 2018; Survey of Community-based Organizations, 2018).
- There are currently 400 units of stable housing reserved for youth through the City's NY/NYIII permanent supportive housing initiative—and additional youth-designated units are coming online through NY 15/15—and some youth may access units that are not specifically designated for youth.
- In 2018, 914 youth received DSS subsidized housing placements; although 8 out of 10 of these subsidized placements went to parenting youth. Additionally, there is a small number of non-City-funded rapid rehousing spaces for youth (about 115 currently) (CIDI, personal communication, 2018; Survey of Community-based Organizations, 2018).
- Only 29% of organizations providing services to youth experiencing homelessness have formal structures for youth voice and leadership (Survey of Community-based Organizations, 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> This estimate cannot be interpreted as a number-of-youth-served because organizations did not provide de-duplicated numbers for youth that had multiple service contacts.



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