



Research to Impact: Federal Actions to Prevent & End Youth Homelessness

*Recommendations based on research
and a national convening of experts
and stakeholders*

October 2019

Recommended Citation

Morton, M. H. & Horwitz, B. (2019). Federal actions to prevent & end youth homelessness: Recommendations based on research and a national convening of experts and stakeholders. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Acknowledgements

This paper and the associated national convening were funded by Campion Fund, Liberty Mutual Foundation, Melville Charitable Trust, and Raikes Foundation. Chapin Hall would like to extend its appreciation to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness for their partnership in developing and supporting the national convening.

Disclaimer

The substance and findings of this work are dedicated to the public. Chapin Hall is solely responsible for the accuracy of the opinions, statements, and interpretations contained in this publication and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Government or any of Chapin Hall's partners.

Contact

Matthew Morton, Principal Investigator
mmorton@chapinhall.org
1313 East 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637

© 2019 by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago
ISSN: 1097-3125

04	Introduction
06	Voices of Youth Count
07	Methodology
10	Toward a comprehensive approach
14	Recommendations for federal action
14	Prevention
21	Crisis response
26	Stable housing
29	Cross-cutting issues
32	Research & data
35	Conclusion
36	References



CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION

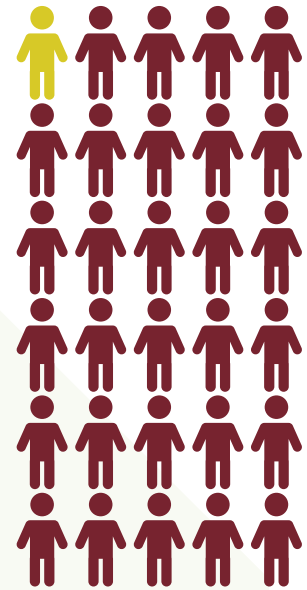
Youth homelessness in the United States is a serious challenge. Recent national research by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found concerning rates of homelessness among adolescents and young adults ages 13–25. An estimated one in 30 adolescents (ages 13–17) and nearly one in 10 young adults (ages 18–25) experienced some form of homelessness during a 12-month period (Morton et al., 2017; Morton, Dworsky & Samuels, 2018).

Previous research shows experiences of homelessness can have significant developmental implications. This makes these rates particularly concerning. Indeed, a major new report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine underscores adolescence as a key formative stage of the lifecycle, both biologically and socially. This stage can be hampered by differences in access to opportunities, services, and supports (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). The report highlights the ways that “economic, social, and structural disadvantage” lead not only to reduced access, but also expose youth to greater risks and stresses. Further, young people who experience homelessness are at high risk for exposure to a range of physical and mental health problems, violence, early pregnancy, dropping out of school, substance use, and early death (Medlow, Klineberg, & Steinbeck, 2014; Hodgson, Shelton, van den Bree, & Los, 2013; Heerde, Hemphill, & Scholes-Balog, 2014; Greene & Ringwalt, 1998; Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1997; Auerswald, Lin, & Parriott, 2016). Researchers have also documented youth homelessness as a foremost pathway into adult homelessness (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013). This reinforces the urgency to develop and use quality evidence to inform sound solutions to this problem.

This paper represents the culmination of significant research, policy analysis, and discussion about the challenge of youth homelessness. There is a longer story to tell, one that involves researchers whose work we have learned from and built on, federal agency staff who have worked to integrate evidence into programs they oversee, and members of Congress who invested in better research to inform the nation’s lawmaking. Here, we present a set of recommendations for federal action, rooted in findings from Chapin Hall’s Voices of Youth Count (VoYC), that emerge from those collective efforts. These recommendations result from ample discussion prior to, during, and after a convening of stakeholders and experts. A range of federal and national partners and youth with lived experience of homelessness informed the recommendations presented in this policy paper.

Adolescents and young adults experiencing homelessness in a 12-month period

1 IN 30
ADOLESCENTS
(AGE 13-17)



1 IN 10
YOUNG ADULTS
(AGE 18-25)



Voices of Youth Count is a public-private partnership and the most comprehensive national research initiative to date focused on youth homelessness in America. Chapin Hall designed this research in response to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA; Public Law [P.L.] 110-378). In RHYA, Congress called for replicable national prevalence and incidence estimates of youth homelessness and data concerning the population's needs and characteristics using quantitative and qualitative methods.

This policy paper offers an evidence-informed roadmap to help guide the work of the federal government, in partnership with other stakeholders, to prevent and end youth homelessness. We intend it as an opportunity to strengthen and refine interagency and Congressional efforts to successfully address this complex challenge.

The federal government cannot end youth homelessness alone. Other stakeholders, such as state and local governments, philanthropy, and community-based organizations, have a role to play in helping to catalyze and support federal actions. For example, philanthropy can invest more flexibly in developing and evaluating innovations that the federal government could subsequently help take to scale. While this document focuses on guiding federal actions, we are cognizant that ending youth homelessness is a collective responsibility that will take collective effort to ensure all of our nation's youth reach their full potential.

Adolescence and young adulthood present key opportunities for intervention that can profoundly affect the developmental trajectories of young people. Young people who lack safe and stable housing also lack the freedom to act fully on their unique assets and potential. Each day that a young person spends sleeping on the streets, staying in shelters, or moving between people's couches, not knowing whether or where they will have a place to stay the next night, creates accumulated trauma. Failing to address the needs of youth and support their healthy development leads to further disparities in adulthood and undermines the nation's growth and competitiveness. These missed opportunities make us all lose out.



This policy paper offers an evidence-informed roadmap to help guide the work of the federal government, in partnership with other stakeholders, to prevent and end youth homelessness.



VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

VoYC was a national, multicomponent research and policy initiative designed to fill critical knowledge gaps about unaccompanied homelessness among youth and young adults, ages 13 to 25. VoYC aimed to accelerate progress toward ending youth homelessness by informing the development of federal, state, and local policies related to youth homelessness, improving service provision, and building a foundation for future research.

The main VoYC research components included the following:

- **National Survey:** A nationally representative phone-based survey that interviewed 26,161 people about their self-reported experiences of youth homelessness or the experiences of youth in their households. Detailed follow-up interviews were also conducted with a subsample of 150 people who reported any youth homelessness or couch surfing (staying with others and lacking a safe and stable living arrangement).
- **Youth Counts & Brief Youth Survey:** Point-in-time counts of youth experiencing homelessness in 22 counties across the country with 4,139 brief surveys of youths' self-reported experiences and characteristics.
- **Continuums of Care & Service Provider Survey:** Surveys with 25 Continuums of Care (CoCs) leads and 523 diverse service providers on services and programs delivered in the 22 youth count communities.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Detailed qualitative and quantitative interviews with 215 young people experiencing homelessness in five communities.
- **Administrative Data Analysis:** Analysis of various forms of administrative data from multiple communities. Data sources included: the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) that all U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-funded homeless services agencies and organizations are required to use; OrgCode, Inc. intake assessment and homelessness systems data; U.S. Department of Education (ED) data on student homelessness; and the Foster Care Data Archive—a longitudinal data warehouse containing decades of state data on children in over two dozen states who spent time in foster care—on runaway occurrences.
- **Systematic Evidence Review:** A comprehensive synthesis of evidence on programs and practices from evaluations of interventions to prevent or address youth homelessness.
- **Policy & Fiscal Review:** Review of statutory and regulatory entry points for policy action on youth homelessness and consultations with a range of system stakeholders.

A multidisciplinary team worked to analyze, distill, and integrate findings from across the research components. Products include academic articles and reports and a series of Research-to-Impact briefs geared toward a diverse audience of stakeholders. These papers include key findings and implications specific to subtopics of youth homelessness, such as national estimates; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth homelessness; pregnant and parenting youth who experience homelessness; and rural youth homelessness.

These and other resources are available at www.voicesofyouthcount.org.



METHODOLOGY

This paper describes recommendations for federal action that build from VoYC research findings. These recommendations emerged from an iterative, multistep process that included national organizations, federal partners, and young people with lived experience of homelessness, along with Chapin Hall staff. Participants carefully reviewed VoYC research and surfaced and discussed policy implications. As such, these recommendations reflect the collective thinking and feedback of these partners and stakeholders.

Step 1. Chapin Hall conducted the VoYC research and published scholarly papers and reports along with a series of Research-to-Impact brief reports.

These user-friendly brief reports integrate evidence from across the VoYC research components and distill key findings and policy implications for a range of subtopics related to youth homelessness. To date, Chapin Hall has published Research-to-Impact brief reports on the following subtopics:

- National estimates
- LGBTQ youth homelessness
- Homelessness among pregnant and parenting youth
- Conducting youth counts
- Rural youth homelessness
- Youths' pathways into and through homelessness
- Pathways from foster care to homelessness

In preparing each Research-to-Impact brief report, Chapin Hall and A Way Home America cofacilitated consultations with national partners to review the report's key findings and solicit input on the policy implications of those findings.

Step 2. Chapin Hall organized the findings and policy implications that emerged from VoYC research to date and shared them with a diverse group of national organizations, federal partners, and young people with lived experience.

Information was consolidated into a summary matrix and package of background materials. Stakeholders were encouraged to review the materials carefully, ask questions, and electronically share initial reflections on policy implications of VoYC research.



These recommendations emerged from an **iterative, multistep process** that included **national organizations, federal partners, and young people with lived experience of homelessness**, along with Chapin Hall staff.

Step 3. In October 2018, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and Chapin Hall held an in-person convening of federal staff from multiple agencies, along with research experts, national organizations, advocates, youth and young adult leaders, and funders to discuss research findings from VoYC and ideas for federal actions.

The convening offered the opportunity to organize a collective conversation among key partners and stakeholders, centered on a first-of-its-kind body of research, to form federal policy recommendations.

Participating organizations included the following:

- A Way Home America
- American Bar Association
- Campion Fund
- Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago
- Child and Family Services of New Hampshire
- Coalition for Juvenile Justice
- Funders Together to End Homelessness
- Heartland Alliance
- Housing Assistance Council
- Liberty Mutual Foundation
- Melville Charitable Trust
- National Alliance to End Homelessness
- National Center for Homeless Education
- National Network for Youth
- Raikes Foundation
- School House Connection
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- U.S. Department of Justice
- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness
- Voices of Youth Count Youth Advisory Council
- Washington, D.C. Interagency Council on Homelessness
- Youth Collaboratory

Attendees participated in breakout groups clustered around VoYC findings and developed ideas for evidence-driven recommendations for consideration for federal action and for federal member agencies of the USICH Interagency Working Group on Ending Youth Homelessness. The research team identified the following set of topic clusters to organize the VoYC findings for discussion purposes (these have no other strategic purpose):

- Accessing services
- Disproportionalities
- Education and economic opportunity
- Family experiences
- Identification
- Pregnant and parenting youth
- Rural realities
- Systems involvement

For each breakout group, participants were asked to develop ideas for federal action and to consider the following questions:

- 🌟 How is the idea supported by/linked to specific VoYC research finding(s)?
- 🌟 What type of federal action is needed (e.g., coordination, clarification, piloting, appropriations, regulatory change, statutory change, research/data investments)?
- 🌟 Whose action is needed (e.g., which agencies or branches of federal government)?
- 🌟 What are the possible drawbacks or downsides of the idea?



Participants developed a wide array of evidence-driven recommendations through this process.

Step 4. Federal partners and other convening attendees reviewed a set of preliminary recommendations synthesized and organized by Chapin Hall.

Chapin Hall created a table of findings and recommendations for federal action that emerged from the previous steps—especially the convening—and shared this back with federal agencies (through USICH’s facilitation) and the other national partners that participated in the convening. Chapin Hall asked stakeholders to review the recommendations for accuracy and for any significant implications for federal action that had been missed or omitted.

Step 5. Chapin Hall used the revised set of recommendations to prepare this policy paper.

This document was reviewed both internally and by USICH for accuracy. It aims to provide a high-level roadmap, rooted in research and lived experience, to support cross-agency, interagency, and legislative efforts in the federal government to end youth homelessness. This report is an important culmination of the VoYC public-private partnership initiative.



A high-level roadmap, rooted in research and lived experience, to support cross-agency, interagency, & legislative efforts in the federal government to end youth homelessness.





TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

This paper urges taking a comprehensive approach to the challenge of ending youth homelessness.

The field of public health has influenced this approach. It emphasizes evidence-driven solutions to achieve population-level impact on complex problems (Mercey, Rosenberg, Powell, Broome, & Roper, 1993; Frieden, 2010). A public health approach involves creating and using credible evidence and data to define the full scope and characteristics of a problem in order to adequately address it (Mercey et al.). This is what VoYC set out to do.

Much of current federal policy on youth homelessness is organized around a crisis response. Over several decades, advocates and legislators have recognized that young people lacking a safe and stable place to stay is an unacceptable injustice. This situation makes youth more vulnerable. However, the policies put in place have largely been crisis-oriented. Advocates and legislators acted to establish or expand developmentally appropriate services to respond to this crisis in the most direct ways possible (for example, street outreach, youth shelters, family crisis intervention, and transitional housing programs). Being responsive to youth in crisis is critical to address the immediate needs of young people and prevent continued trauma and adversity.

At the same time, as for many public health problems—ranging from violence, to obesity, to HIV/AIDS—it is increasingly clear that a crisis response on its own will not end the problem. VoYC evidence underscores youth homelessness as a significant problem at the population level with multiple risk and protective factors and complex causal pathways. This warrants a public health approach to achieve substantial and sustained reductions in both prevalence and incidence of youth homelessness.

As illustrated by the “health impact pyramid” proposed by Frieden (see Figure 1), a public health approach situates the greatest potential for population impact at the base of a tiered action framework. The bottom tiers of the pyramid notably place the focus of action on the environment rather than the individual, and largely focus on prevention. This includes tackling a problem’s underlying socioeconomic determinants, such as structural racism, poverty, and inequality. As long as broader determinants of a problem like homelessness remain, the prospect of truly and sustainably addressing the problem at the population level is likely to remain elusive. Furthermore, VoYC research shows that youth homelessness will only be



A public health approach is critical to ensuring we are addressing current needs and preventing future experiences of youth homelessness.

solved if these determinants are addressed; half of youth experiencing homelessness in a 12-month period experienced it for the first time (Morton et. al., 2017). A public health approach is critical to ensuring we are addressing current needs and preventing future experiences of youth homelessness.

Similarly, the next tier up involves preventing public health problems by changing the context in more targeted ways that support positive outcomes as the “default.” For example, putting fluoride in the public water supply made better dental health a default outcome. With youth homelessness, second tier approaches might include funding to develop housing options that are affordable at varying income levels. These options would help make housing stability the typical outcome for those who would otherwise be at risk of homelessness. Or, approaches might include screening, assistance, and aftercare supports for housing stability for all youth exiting systems—like behavioral health, child welfare, or juvenile justice—so that stable and successful transitions are the default outcome. Second tier approaches might also focus on strengthening families with the tools and resources they need to successfully navigate conflict and challenges so that youth have safe and stable living situations and can more often remain in their homes.

Further up the pyramid, action is focused on more individually targeted interventions. These interventions may include efforts to prevent individuals at high-risk from experiencing a negative outcome, preventing someone from experiencing the same negative outcome again, or minimizing the adverse effects of having experienced a negative outcome. The public health approach puts these individually targeted actions into perspective: by themselves, they are inefficient for achieving overall and lasting population impact.



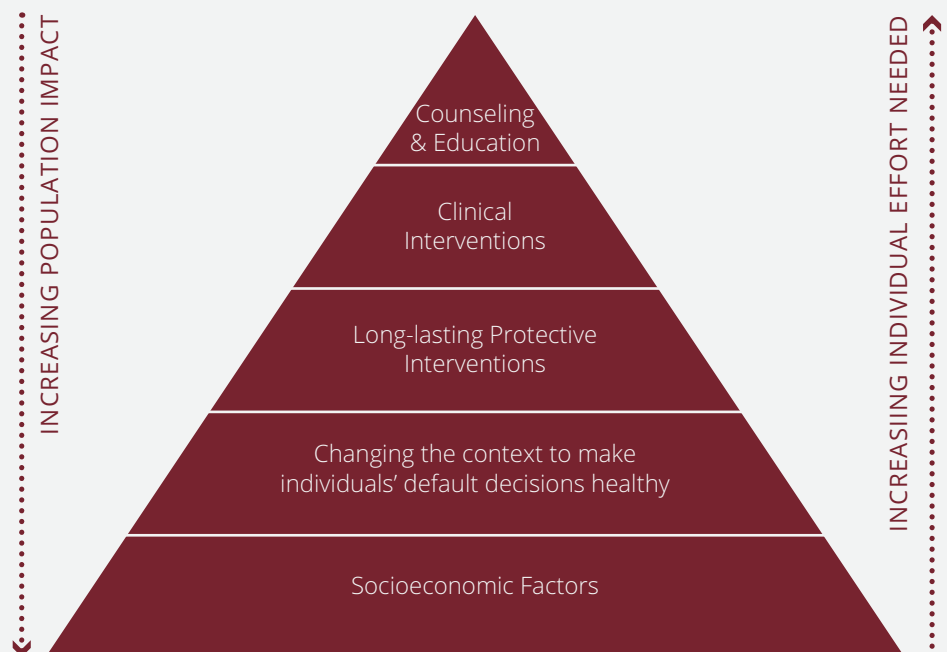
one
half

of youth experiencing
homelessness in a
12-month period
experienced it for the

first
time

Figure 1.
The health impact pyramid

(Source: Frieden, 2010)





Too often, we view youth homelessness as an individual problem, one in which youth and families are at fault.

Too often, we view youth homelessness as an individual problem, one in which youth and families are at fault. Decades of research in public health challenge the idea that complex problems emerge from a sole source or are the “fault” of an individual or even a single system. Contemporary public health theory emphasizes the multiple contexts from which challenges emerge and focuses on the role of society and public systems to prevent problems, reduce their duration and harm, and examine root causes to get to sustainable solutions. In the case of youth homelessness, the public health approach focuses on a range of supports offered at multiple levels. The approach envisions meeting the needs of young people and considering them as part of, rather than in isolation from, their natural or chosen families. VoYC research underscores this interconnectedness. For many of the young people experiencing homelessness who were interviewed, friends and strangers were major sources of information about how to access resources, underscoring that a young person’s community and context matters for policy action.

A public health approach also places significant emphasis on prevention and elevates the importance of broad ownership of the challenge in society and across multiple systems. VoYC research highlights the importance of collective action to prevent and end youth homelessness. This starts with investments in strong and thriving communities and families, improving labor and housing markets so that everyone can afford adequate housing, strengthening education and health systems, ensuring social safety nets for the vulnerable, and tackling structural inequities. It further involves identifying and supporting youth that are already in vulnerable situations and preventing these from escalating into homelessness. For example, more than one in three youth experiencing homelessness included in VoYC in-depth interviews experienced the loss of a parent or caregiver. This suggests loss as an early warning sign and critical condition for pathways into homelessness. These are opportunities to intervene early with timely supports.



A public health approach also places significant emphasis on prevention and elevates the importance of broad ownership of the challenge in society and across multiple systems.

A comprehensive approach is consistent with federal guidance on preventing and ending homelessness. The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness's Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness and Home, Together: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness call for a coordinated community response designed to ensure that youth homelessness is "rare, brief, and one-time." To this end, USICH advises communities to:

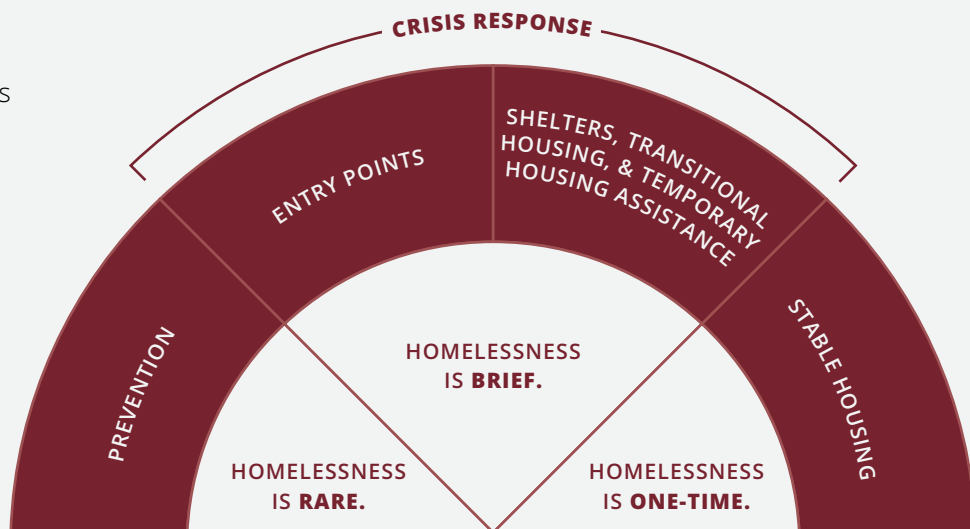
- ✦ **Make the incidence of homelessness rare. Use prevention and diversion strategies wherever possible.**
- ✦ **Make homelessness brief. Build coordinated entry processes to effectively link all youth experiencing homelessness to "choice-driven" crisis housing and service solutions tailored to their needs and to act with urgency to "swiftly assist youth to move into permanent or non-time-limited housing options with appropriate services and supports."**
- ✦ **Make homelessness one-time. Have resources, plans, and system capacity to continue to prevent and quickly end future experiences of homelessness.**

Policies are needed to support a comprehensive system approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness that achieves each of these goals. This paper builds from the USICH framework and organizes the recommendations for policy actions identified at the VoYC convening according to each of the segments of a comprehensive approach, including prevention, crisis response, and stable housing (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. A comprehensive approach to ending youth homelessness

- Define the problem
- Identify causes, risk & protective factors
- Develop & test interventions
- Scale-up evidence-based solutions
- Monitor implementation





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL ACTION

In this section, we outline the recommendations for federal action. These recommendations emerged from the process described above, involving federal agencies, national partners, and youth with lived experience. Convening attendees, along with the Chapin Hall research and policy team, developed recommendations that Chapin Hall subsequently synthesized, provided back to attendees for review, and organized through this policy paper.

Informed by a public health approach, the USICH framework, and the input and feedback offered by convening participants, we frame these recommendations in line with the “health impact pyramid”:

PREVENTION

which is largely inclusive of the bottom three tiers of the health impact period (socioeconomic factors, changing the context to make individuals’ default decisions healthy, and long-lasting protective interventions);

CRISIS RESPONSE

which a public health approach would consider “clinical interventions,” to respond effectively to someone who has already experienced homelessness to minimize its duration or effects;

STABLE HOUSING

which ideally includes a combination of contextual changes to facilitate more sustained exits from homelessness along with individually targeted supports that account for increased adversity accumulated through prior experience of homelessness.

Further, we include a section on cross-cutting issues. This section emerged from the fact that a number of findings—such as racial disproportionalities and young people’s engagements with public systems—have implications for multiple facets of a comprehensive approach to youth homelessness. Racial disproportionalities, for instance, have implications for prevention (addressing the causes of disproportionalities), crisis response (ensuring that homelessness services and supports are well tailored and targeted), and stable housing (tracking and facilitating equitable results in terms of sustained exits from homelessness). Lastly, we end with a section on research and data recommendations to encourage the federal government, in partnership with private funders, to support more and better evidence to inform future policies and practices that hasten progress toward ending youth homelessness.

For most of the recommendations, we indicate the appropriate federal agencies or branch of government that might carry them out. These are only suggestions that emerged from convening inputs and the research team’s considerations of natural linkages. We hope that the federal government will continue to revisit these recommendations and consider creative ideas regarding who and how to best carry out the actions to fulfill the intent of the recommendations. In many cases, this ideally involves collaborative actions between and among different federal agencies and Congress, and in partnership with other stakeholders.



Within each of the subsections below, we organize the material by key findings followed by additional supportive evidence from VoYC and a bulleted set of recommendations.

PREVENTION

PREVENTION

Homelessness prevention represents a wide array of efforts to prevent housing crises from occurring and to prevent people who do experience such crisis from experiencing homelessness. A public health approach emphasizes that prevention can occur at different levels. At the broadest level, prevention includes addressing underlying socioeconomic conditions, such as structural racism, poverty, and inequality, to prevent risk in the first place. Prevention can also include more targeted measures that aim to reduce the likelihood of those already at different degrees of risk from experiencing homelessness. Similarly, in Home, Together, USICH describes prevention strategies as falling into the following categories:

- ◆ activities that reduce the prevalence of risk of housing crises within communities;
- ◆ activities that target and support individuals or households at risk of housing crises—for example, because of certain life experiences or circumstances or involvement in specific systems—to prevent their risk from escalating to crisis; and
- ◆ activities that target assistance to prevent housing crises that do occur from leading to homelessness.

The VoYC research and convening underscored many opportunities to prevent crises from occurring in the first place. These recommendations complement the existing homelessness prevention focus on policies and programs that “divert” those in crisis from experiencing homelessness or the homelessness response system.

Five Major Findings

◆ Family instability & conflict are common precursors to youth instability & homelessness.

◆ The experience of youth coming out as LGBTQ can increase risk for homelessness.

◆ Youth with low levels of educational attainment have higher risk for homelessness.

◆ Histories of foster care are common among youth experiencing homelessness.

◆ Histories of justice system involvement are common among youth experiencing homelessness.

Finding: Family instability and conflict are common precursors to youth instability and homelessness.

The VoYC in-depth interviews found that youth experiencing homelessness typically link the beginning of their experiences of homelessness to early family instability and disruptions, including entrance into foster care and family homelessness. Most youth said that their first experience of homelessness grew out of volatile or unsafe family contexts that, over time, erupted into parental rejection, being kicked out, or fleeing family conflict.



Congress and several federal agencies could collaboratively pilot and evaluate social & economic interventions to strengthen families.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Congress and several federal agencies could collaboratively pilot and evaluate social and economic interventions to strengthen families. Sometimes these need to address family functioning, parenting skills, and conflict resolution, among others, as critical risk factors for youth homelessness. In other cases, family instability is due to more material hardships—such as a lack of affordable housing and household poverty—that need to be addressed. Interventions should be evaluated specifically on their effectiveness in preventing or reducing youth homelessness, as well as their uptake and scalability.
- ✦ Congress, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and HUD could increase the flexibility and capacity of basic center programs (BCPs) and CoCs to deliver effective and promising interventions to strengthen families. This could include a combination of modifying funding opportunities and rules as well as enhancing technical assistance offered to grantees. For example, Congress (through statutory change) and HHS (through technical assistance) could encourage connections between the home-based services offered under the BCPs and the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) to allow for intensive, shorter interventions focused on eliminating crisis. Services currently listed in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) are not as crisis-oriented. If the home-based services do not fully meet the needs of youth and families, the services under RHYA should be treated as a precursor to services that child welfare may be able to offer longer term.

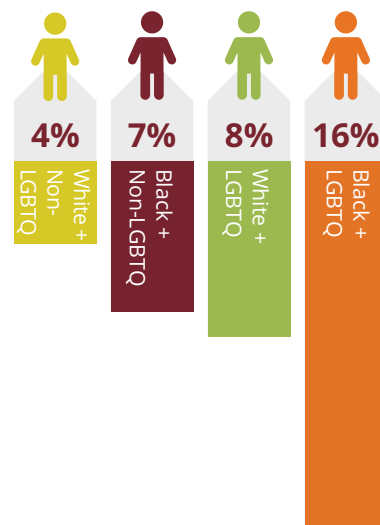
Finding: The experience of youth coming out as LGBTQ can increase risk for homelessness, often compounding broader family instability and conflict.

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) have more than twice the risk of experiencing homelessness as heterosexual and cisgender peers. According to VoYC in-depth interviews, homelessness

was rarely an “event” in which young people immediately or abruptly shifted from stable housing to homelessness. Youth typically described a gradual escalation of parent-child conflict over time or a growing sense of rejection in the home. Discrimination and rejection related to a youth’s sexual orientation and gender identity often layered on top of other difficulties, such as family instability or conflict, rather than serving as the sole factor leading to a young person’s departure from the home.

Additionally, youth of color who identified as LGBTQ had higher rates of homelessness than white youth who identified as LGBTQ or youth of color who identified as heterosexual and cisgender. This underscores the importance of ensuring that LGBTQ-oriented prevention interventions with families, shelters, and housing programs are culturally attuned to the needs and norms of different racial and ethnic subpopulations that are at high risk for homelessness. VoYC research, like broader research on inequities in adolescence (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019), emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing intersectional inequities that result from multiple identities involving unique or compound risks in young people’s lives.

Youth who are black and LGBTQ reported the highest rates of homelessness.



Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Congress could incorporate the importance of safe and affirming spaces for all young people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or ethnicity, in federal statute to make services more accessible and effective for all young people.
- ✦ Federal agencies, such as HHS and HUD, with support from Congress, could build on earlier efforts related to LGBTQ youth homelessness prevention to pilot and evaluate culturally safe and tailored family-strengthening intervention models that can be implemented among communities of color. This could be through the HUD-funded LGBTQ youth homelessness prevention initiative. These models could be used to develop and test strategies to prevent or mitigate family conflict and preserve relationships between youth and caregivers, taking into account the unique circumstances and challenges that LGBTQ youth and their families have to grapple with.
- ✦ Several federal agencies, such as ED, HHS, and HUD, could jointly or independently provide guidance and examples of practices and policies that help promote safe and affirming environments and programming for LGBTQ youth in communities of color. They could also offer child welfare and runaway and homeless youth funding designed to foster supportive family environments for LGBTQ youth by ensuring that these interventions are safe, affirming, and appropriate for different racial and ethnic groups.

Homelessness was rarely an “event” in which young people immediately or abruptly shifted from stable housing to homelessness.

Finding: Youth with low levels of educational attainment have higher risk for homelessness and school systems are the most common service infrastructure to reach youth before crisis.

The VoYC national survey results showed that young adults, ages 18–25, without a high school diploma or GED are 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness as their peers who have completed at least a high school level of education. While this does not necessarily mean that a lack of education causes homelessness, it shows a very strong correlation between the two outcomes. It also shows the need to address the issues that underpin such a strong relationship between low educational attainment and homelessness.

Schools emerged in communities as the most common access point for identifying and engaging young people at risk for homelessness before they reach the point of crisis or enter the homelessness system. This further underscores the potential role of educational systems in prevention of and early intervention in youth homelessness. This is especially the case in rural communities, which especially lack other service entry points for youth.



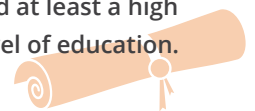
Young adults, ages 18–25, without a high school diploma or GED are

4.5x

MORE LIKELY TO

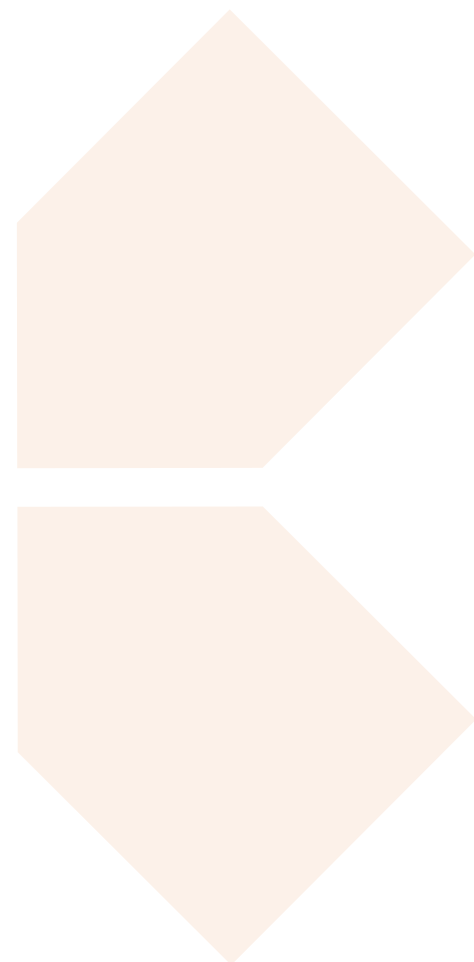
EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS

as their peers who have completed at least a high school level of education.



Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Congress and ED could promote the role of schools in acting on their critical opportunity to identify youth at risk for homelessness and offer youth and families relevant services or connections to services, particularly in rural areas. This could include exploration of opportunities for Congress to modify, or ED to clarify, federal policy about sharing, use, and consent pertaining to educational records and screening surveys in schools. Examining policy in this area will facilitate better identification of students at-risk for homelessness while ensuring the rights and protections of students and their families.
- ✦ To significantly increase schools' capacity to help identify students as early as possible, Congress could better fund schools and McKinney-Vento school services to more effectively play early identification and support roles for students experiencing or at-risk for homelessness.
- ✦ ED could promote youth homelessness prevention by encouraging the use of restorative and supportive practices rather than punitive actions that can contribute to a youth's pathway into instability, such as suspension or expulsion, whenever possible.



Finding: Histories of foster care are common among youth experiencing homelessness; for many, foster care was a part of a broader pattern of instability.

Based on the VoYC brief youth survey data collected during youth counts in 22 diverse counties across the country, 29% of youth experiencing homelessness had ever been in foster care. In-depth interviews conducted in five of those counties revealed that while some young people with a history of foster care who experienced homelessness had aged out of the child welfare system, others had exited foster care through reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship. Moreover, regardless of how they exited, these young people frequently described their out-of-home care placement as the beginning of their experience with homelessness and part of a larger pattern of instability in their lives. Further, an analysis of administrative data from child welfare systems in 21 states found that 16% of 13- to 17-year-olds who entered out-of-home care for the first time in the years 2009 through 2011 ran away during their first out-of-home care spell. Black youth were significantly more likely to run away than white youth.

29%



of youth experiencing homelessness had ever been in foster care.

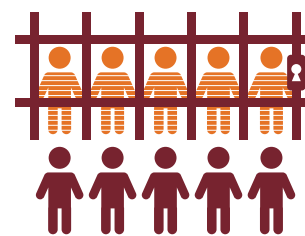
Recommendations for federal action

- Given significant knowledge gaps, Congress and HHS could invest in better research and evaluation on how to best provide housing to unaccompanied minors outside of the foster care system.
- Congress could consider requiring states to extend federally funded foster care to age 21 so that young people across the country are better prepared for the transition to adulthood.
- HHS and HUD could work together to identify the kinds of housing and supports that impact stability and reduce homelessness. They could help promote awareness of these practices among states, including how to pay for them using federal funding. Congress could make more funding available to support targeted services to youth and families who have been involved in the child welfare system (including those youth who have been reunited with families or adopted) to increase long-term stability and well-being.
- HHS could identify and promote opportunities to leverage provisions in the FFPSA that impact housing stability and prevent homelessness.
- Congress could expand funding allocated under the Chafee Successful Transition to Adulthood Program so that states that extend federally funded foster care to age 21 have the resources needed to provide Chafee-funded services to youth until age 23 (as allowed under the FFPSA).
- If Congress and HHS invested in research on the factors that drive youth of color and LGBTQ youth to run away from foster care at disproportionate rates, and on developing and testing data-driven interventions, child welfare systems and practitioners can be better prepared to prevent this from occurring. Similarly, the federal government could invest in an assessment of what is happening in different jurisdictions and whether efforts to mitigate running away from foster care—especially among youth of color and LGBTQ youth—have any impact.

Finding: Histories of justice system involvement are common among youth experiencing homelessness.

Based on the VoYC brief youth surveys conducted during youth counts, 46% of youth experiencing homelessness had been in juvenile detention, prison, or jail. This does not include the young people who had been involved with juvenile or criminal justice systems but were not incarcerated. Further, considering the significant racial and ethnic disproportionalities in juvenile and criminal justice contacts and sentencing (McCoy & Pearson, 2019), inequities associated with justice systems involvement likely contribute to disproportionalities in homelessness.

Additionally, the VoYC in-depth interviews reflect the complicated interplay between justice system involvement and homelessness. The criminalization of status offenses and homelessness too often leads to justice involvement. The failure to adequately plan for the transition when youth leave justice systems too often leads to homelessness. This dual-layer problem requires dual-layer solutions that both prevent justice involvement for youth experiencing homelessness and prevent homelessness for justice-involved youth. Furthermore, just as youth homelessness involves stark racial disparities, so too does involvement in the justice system. These systemic disparities are likely to be mutually reinforcing.



46%

of youth experiencing homelessness had been in juvenile detention, prison, or jail.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) could issue guidance to states and local jurisdictions on implementing alternatives to court or justice system responses to address certain kinds of offenses, including status offenses such as truancy. DOJ could similarly encourage states and local jurisdictions to implement efforts to expunge records so that young people's involvement with justice systems do not continue to impede their ability to access education, jobs, and services and thereby contribute to a greater risk for homelessness. Consistent with Home, Together, HHS, HUD, ED, and DOJ could encourage and guide organizations and systems receiving federal funds for youth experiencing homelessness to work with law enforcement on reducing the criminalization of homelessness.
- ✦ DOJ or Congress could identify opportunities to embed data collection and reporting requirements focused on housing stability and housing outcomes within justice systems' accountabilities for federal funding. For example, when young people are involved in justice systems, support or require screening for risk of homelessness and housing instability and linkages with HUD- and HHS-funded service providers that can provide appropriate services to youth experiencing, or at risk for, homelessness.
- ✦ DOJ or Congress could encourage individualized transition planning and support processes for all youth and young adults in juvenile or criminal justice systems, which include planning and service linkages related to housing stability.

CRISIS RESPONSE

CRISIS RESPONSE

Crisis response includes identification, outreach, and entry points to help youth experiencing a housing crisis access supports and services. A housing crisis might take forms that are youth-specific, such as running away or being kicked out of the family home. It also might take forms that apply to youth and adults alike, such as being evicted or otherwise unable to access or afford safe and stable housing. Crisis response services can include a range of interventions, such as shelters, transitional housing, temporary rental assistance, case management, and family reconnection or reunification, among others. Behavioral health and harm reduction interventions are often offered to youth in crisis as well. However, Housing First principles underscore that young people need immediate access to low-barrier, safe, and stable housing to benefit fully from treatment and supports for other needs.

Four Major Findings

✚
Youth have to rely on limited and fragmented sources of information.

✚
Rural youth homelessness is just as prevalent as urban youth homelessness.

✚
There are significant intersections between youth & family homelessness, yet scarce resources available.

✚
Many youth experiencing homelessness are enrolled in post-secondary education.

Finding: Youth have to rely on limited and fragmented sources of information on how and where to get help, typically relying on word-of-mouth.

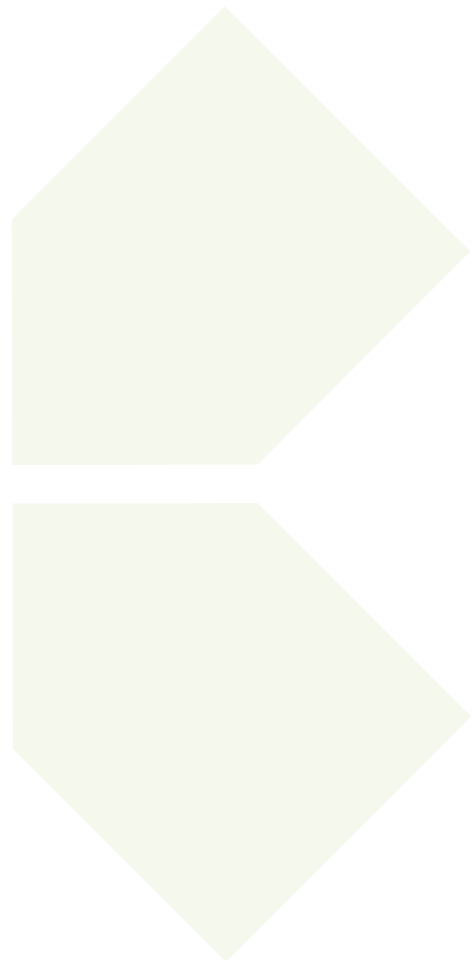
According to the VoYC Continuums of Care and service providers' survey, runaway and homeless youth service providers reported that they most commonly received referrals from other homeless service providers and youth who experienced homelessness themselves. Other common referral sources included schools, street outreach programs, child welfare agencies, and law enforcement. Few communities had implemented youth-specific coordinated entry and assessment systems that offer common entry points to, and navigation assistance through, the community's spectrum of supports and services. This absence leaves young people largely reliant on fragmented information and programming in times of crisis. They have to go from one service provider to the next to share their information and seek the services they need, rather than being able to go to one place or contact to get connected with the full range of resources that might be available to them in the community. This absence forces young people to engage multiple people and organizations—often retelling their stories and situations—until they get the help they need or give up trying.



Congress could guarantee youth-centered outreach infrastructure in every community.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Congress could guarantee youth-centered outreach infrastructure in every community. This includes better resourcing of outreach and drop-in services with the flexibility to meet a range of communities' needs, and requiring or incentivizing the coordination of these entry point services across a community so that young people have a coherent system of support.
- ✦ HHS, HUD, or Congress could invest in promising strategies to reach young people and help them navigate and access services, such as youth-centric drop-in centers, peer-based approaches, and technology-based solutions. As surfaced by USICH's Home, Together, this could include guidance and resources for youth-specific coordinated entry and assessment systems that reflect young people's needs, circumstances, and preferences.
- ✦ HHS and HUD could require or encourage federal grantees to engage youth with lived experience in devising strategies that best respond to how youth receive and use information and assistance. Similarly, in making information nationally available to young people, HHS and HUD should engage youth with lived experience in informing how these informational resources are designed and delivered.



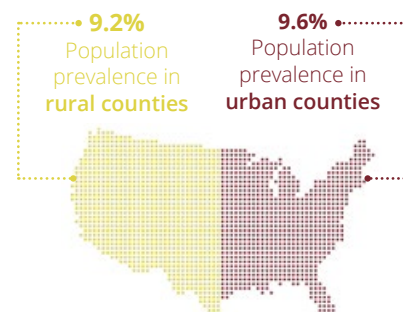
Finding: Rural youth homelessness is just as prevalent as urban youth homelessness, but it is more hidden and has a weaker, more geographically distributed, service infrastructure.

According to the VoYC national survey, the estimated prevalence of youth homelessness in rural and urban counties is essentially equivalent. At the same time, youth homelessness appears to manifest differently in rural and urban counties. In the VoYC brief youth surveys, youth experiencing homelessness in the smallest (most rural) counties were about twice as likely to be staying with others (e.g., couch surfing or doubling up), and half as likely to be staying in shelters, as youth experiencing homelessness in the largest (most urban) counties on a given night. These data suggest that, while youth homelessness is just as common as a share of the population in rural counties, the problem is more hidden in rural parts of the country.

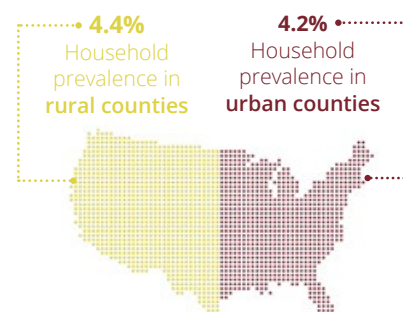
The lack of service infrastructure exacerbates the challenge of rural youth homelessness. The VoYC service provider survey showed much more limited youth-specific shelter and housing programs in counties with the smallest population sizes. VoYC in-depth interviews further illuminated the significant adversities young people faced because of a lack of youth-specific shelters, housing supports, and programming near their communities in times of crisis. This forced many young people to rely on precarious or unsafe sleeping arrangements and sources of support in rural communities.

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

YOUNG ADULTS 18-25



YOUTH 13-17



Recommendations for federal action

- ◆ Federal agencies, with resource support from Congress, could identify, rigorously evaluate, and expand innovative rural outreach and service delivery models. Examples might include mobile outreach, host homes, colocated services, school-based interventions, and scattered site housing and support interventions. Similarly, USICH’s Home, Together calls for federal efforts to “strengthen capacity in rural and suburban areas to maximize outreach efforts tailored to the unique challenges posed by geography and population distribution.”
- ◆ Congress could increase dedicated grant funding and technical assistance to less densely populated areas and enable communities to contour services according to local needs. Consider HHS’s Rural Health Access Grant program as an example of a dedicated source of funding and technical assistance to help rural communities develop better systems for service delivery for their unique challenges.
- ◆ Congress could encourage the development of programs that help youth obtain drivers’ licenses and access to transportation to address the constraints youth face with accessing services, education, and employment opportunities in rural areas where services tend to be more dispersed and public transport tends to be lacking.

Finding: There are significant intersections between youth and family homelessness, yet scarce resources available for young parents and their families—especially minors.

Among the youth who participated in the VoYC in-depth interviews, about one in four had prior experiences of family homelessness. Furthermore, many youth experiencing homelessness were themselves pregnant or parenting. About 44% of young women, ages 18–25, indicated they were pregnant or a parent; about 18% of young males, ages 18–25, indicated they were parents or had a pregnant partner. For many youth, becoming pregnant or a parent often placed strain on family relationships and contributed to family rejection.

Despite these intersections, there is often poor coordination between youth and family homelessness systems and services. Further, resources specifically available for young parents and their families are often lacking, especially for minors. In response to the VoYC service provider survey, very few communities reported the availability of programs for parenting minors experiencing homelessness.

Many youth experiencing homelessness were pregnant, had a pregnant partner, or were parenting.

44% OF YOUNG WOMEN
(AGE 18-25)



18% OF YOUNG MEN
(AGE 18-25)



Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ In partnership with philanthropy, USICH and other federal agencies could host a cross-sector convening around youth and family homelessness to identify intersections and opportunities for more effective policy and service delivery strategies.
- ✦ ED and HHS could encourage automatic screening for housing stability at schools and health centers when youth are identified as pregnant or parenting. Schools and health centers should also have partnerships and referral protocols in place to connect young parents experiencing or at risk for homelessness with timely and developmentally appropriate supports and services.
- ✦ Congress could increase funding for shelter, housing, and service models that are responsive to the mental health, trauma, and developmental needs of young parents and their children. This should include specific resources for parenting minors, including single fathers, and young families that are inclusive of another parent or partner.
- ✦ Congress could allow education to count as a work requirement for federally funded childcare eligibility.
- ✦ HHS and HUD could issue guidance—codeveloped with young parents with lived experience of homelessness—on the unique needs and challenges facing pregnant and parenting youth and on accommodating the option for parents and significant others to stay together. Include tailored guidance for LGBTQ-identifying youth who are parenting and may have additional needs for supportive and affirming programming.
- ✦ Congress could ensure that maternal group homes also serve single fathers and nonbinary identifying parents and revise the program nomenclature accordingly.
- ✦ HHS and HUD could encourage or require that programs provide or connect youth who are pregnant and parenting with prenatal and postnatal care, parenting training, and home visiting.
- ✦ Congress, HHS, and HUD could support the development and evaluation of multigenerational housing and shared housing models. Consider innovation grants to spur collaboration around housing, services, and education models for supporting pregnant and parenting youth and their children.

Finding: Many youth experiencing homelessness are enrolled in post-secondary education.

According to the VoYC Continuums of Care and service providers' survey, It is important to consider the roles that postsecondary education can play in crisis response and early intervention. While lower levels of education were associated with higher risk for homelessness, many young adults experiencing homelessness were enrolled in college. VoYC national survey data show that, among 18- to 22-year-olds reporting homelessness within the past 12 months, approximately one in four were enrolled in college, indicating that many young people who struggle with housing stability are also trying to attain higher education. These young people's housing instability could threaten their ability to complete their education and fulfill their aspirations.

Among 18- to 22-year-olds reporting homelessness within the past 12 months...



...approximately one in four were enrolled in college.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Congress could require that publically funded postsecondary institutions create and promote single points of contact at these institutions for students experiencing homelessness, similar to McKinney-Vento liaisons in primary and secondary schools. ED could highlight examples of states that have mandated single points of contact for homelessness in postsecondary institutions.
- ✦ ED, HHS, HUD, and Congress could support the development and evaluation of housing models for people in postsecondary education who struggle with housing security. The models would combine housing and educational supports. These might involve supporting collaborations between housing providers and postsecondary education institutions, especially, but not limited to, community colleges, which tend to enroll higher rates of youth of color and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- ✦ The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), in collaboration with HHS and HUD, could share best practices with states on how to help homeless students access Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits without having to work 20 hours a week. This would help ensure that students' commitments to their educational pursuits do not exclude them from receiving this assistance. SNAP eligibility could be expanded so that education and internships count toward that requirement.

STABLE HOUSING

STABLE HOUSING

Various formal and informal resources can help young people achieve stability and sustained exits from homelessness. Many youth experiencing homelessness have histories of trauma and adversity. They are also navigating increasingly unaffordable housing markets. It is often unrealistic to expect youth to make sustained exits from homelessness after leaving temporary housing programs without investing in the skills, resources, and opportunities they need for long-term stability. Long-term housing stability can be buoyed while young people are in shelters or temporary housing programs (e.g., by investing in their education, skills, career development, and natural supports). Stable housing also can be fostered through permanent or sustainable housing solutions and other follow-up services and supports.

Two Major Findings

✦
Youth struggle to access affordable housing options for long-term housing stability.

✦
Youth experiencing homelessness need a career track.

Finding: Youth struggle to access affordable housing options for long-term housing stability.

VoYC in-depth interviews illustrated how a lack of affordable housing options and supports led to homelessness for youth struggling with family conflict and instability. This makes sense in the context of broader research showing escalating housing costs outpacing income growth across much of the country and placing particular burden on young people's transitions to independence (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2016). In light of increasingly unaffordable housing markets, the share of young adults who continue living with their parents has doubled over the last decade. For many youth, that family safety net does not exist or does not provide adequate, consistent, or safe housing support to prevent them from falling into homelessness (Federal Reserve, 2018).



A lack of affordable housing options & supports led to homelessness for youth struggling with family conflict & instability.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Through federal investments, Congress could encourage and incentivize housing developers to create more housing stock targeted and tailored for very low-income young adults and those experiencing homelessness (both unaccompanied and parenting). This should be part of an overall strategy to increase availability of, and access to, housing for people experiencing and exiting homelessness, as encouraged by USICH's Home, Together.
- ✦ Congress could increase housing vouchers and other affordable housing options available to youth after they leave shelter and temporary housing programs funded by HHS and HUD.
- ✦ Congress and HUD, in partnership with HHS, could invest in rigorous evaluation of interventions to be availed through the recently announced Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative. FYI targets housing assistance and supportive services to young people with a child welfare history who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This presents an important opportunity for structured experimentation and learning to identify effective and scalable solutions for preventing and addressing homelessness among youth who had been in foster care.

Finding: Youth experiencing homelessness need a career track (not just a “job”) with viable income to exit homelessness sustainably.

The analysis of VoYC national survey data found that lower household income was associated with higher risk for homelessness. Youth who had a household income of less than \$24,000 were 2.6 times more likely to experience homelessness. Further, while unemployment was correlated with higher risk for homelessness among young adults, this correlation was no longer significant once controlling for income. This suggests that income may be more important than employment. Relatedly, while youth experiencing homelessness were more likely than stably housed youth to be unemployed, according to the responses to the VoYC brief youth surveys, a sizeable share of youth experiencing homelessness had jobs while homeless.



Youth who had a household income of less than

\$24k

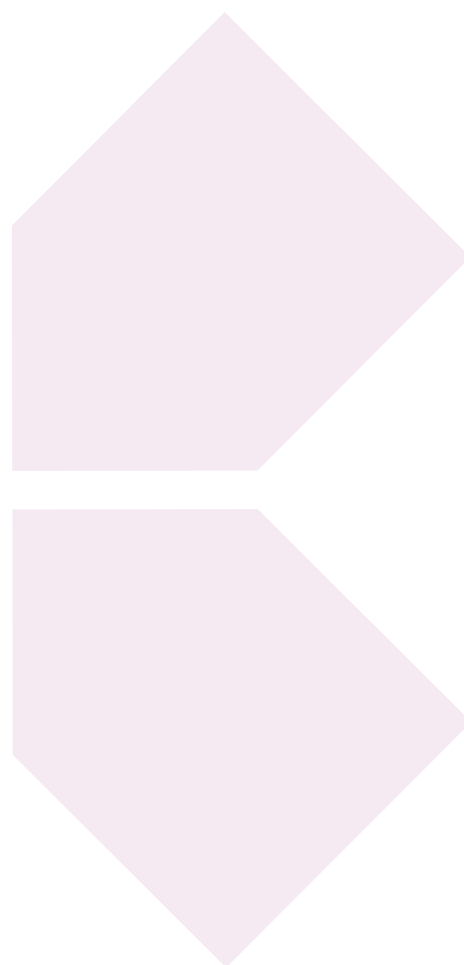
were

2.6x

more likely to experience homelessness.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), HHS, and HUD could collaborate to develop, evaluate, and disseminate approaches to help youth experiencing homelessness, or at risk for homelessness, get into a career track.
- ✦ DOL could disseminate lessons and examples to Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)-funded training providers, given that homeless youth are specifically designated by statute as an eligible population for their services.
- ✦ HUD and HHS could encourage CoCs and FYSB-funded runaway and homeless youth organizations to track educational outcomes such as enrollment and attainment, especially for youth, and to consider educational outcomes on par with employment outcomes given the importance of education for long-term career and earnings prospects.
- ✦ Congress, ED, HHS, and HUD could support the development and evaluation of housing models for youth that combine housing and educational or training supports.



The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), HHS, and HUD could collaborate to develop, evaluate, and disseminate approaches to help youth experiencing homelessness, or at risk for homelessness, get into a career track.

CROSSCUTTING

CROSSCUTTING ISSUES

In this section, we outline crosscutting issues and federal policy actions that surfaced through VoYC and the convening. A public health approach elevates the importance of broad ownership of the challenge of youth homelessness in society and across multiple systems. These findings address the need for communities, with support from federal and state policy, to work across systems to prevent and end youth homelessness.

Finding: Youth homelessness is alarmingly prevalent and involves significant consequences during a key developmental period.

The VoYC national survey results reveal that approximately 1 in 30 adolescents ages 13–17, and 1 in 10 young adults ages 18–25, experienced some form of homelessness in a 12-month period. The survey was conducted during 2016 and 2017. These prevalence rates are particularly concerning given prior evidence that homelessness has multiple and significant effects on young people during a key developmental period of life. These effects diminish young people's ability to contribute to vibrant and economically productive communities.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ In partnership with private funders, the federal government could invest in a large national public awareness campaign (e.g., public service announcements) about youth homelessness. Public health-style messaging around youth homelessness could destigmatize the experience, foster awareness among the general public, strengthen broader commitment to prevention, and elevate what we know about key risk and protective factors underlying young people's experiences of homelessness. This messaging should include leveraging social media and better advertising existing hotlines for runaway, homeless, trafficked, and LGBTQ youth.
- ✦ HHS and HUD, in collaboration with other federal agencies, could provide training and technical assistance to support communities' knowledge and capacity to devise and deliver effective, coordinated prevention and response systems centered on quality data, racial and LGBTQ equity, and the voices of youth with lived experience to prevent and end youth homelessness.

Finding: The scale and scope of youth homelessness requires a coordinated response from multiple sectors and systems.

Youth homelessness is a broad and hidden challenge. Young people have high rates of contacts with, and need supports from, multiple public sectors and systems. These include: runaway and homeless youth programs, single adult and family homelessness services, child welfare, justice systems, education systems, workforce programs, and physical, mental, and behavioral health systems, among others.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Working across federal agencies and with national partners, USICH could articulate a vision and guidance for how different agencies' programs—especially HHS- and HUD-funded programs and services—could best complement each other to collectively provide a comprehensive approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Experiences and lessons learned from HUD Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program communities could inform such a document.
- ✦ USICH, in partnership with private funders and national partners, could sponsor an independent group of youth and young adults with lived experience of homelessness who advise federal decisions and actions pertaining to youth homelessness across the Interagency Working Group on Ending Youth Homelessness members.
- ✦ USICH, in partnership with relevant federal agencies, private funders, and national partners, could convene a meeting or working group on collaboration across public systems to prioritize youth homelessness prevention strategies and outcomes for both unaccompanied minors and young adults. Informed by the discussions, each federal agency could publish a plan for how it intends to help prevent youth homelessness.



USICH, in partnership with private funders and national partners, could sponsor an independent group of youth and young adults with lived experience of homelessness who advise federal decisions and actions pertaining to youth homelessness.

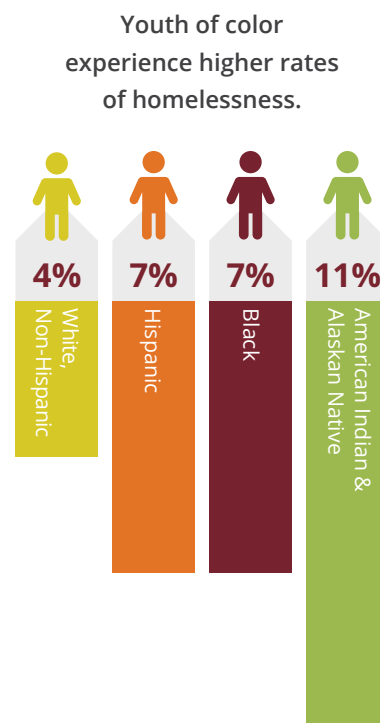
Finding: Youth of color, especially those who identify as LGBTQ, experience higher rates of homelessness.

The VoYC national survey data show that American Indian and Alaska Native, black, Hispanic, and multiracial youth had significantly higher rates of homelessness than youth who identified as white. Youth of color who identified as LGBTQ had even higher rates of homelessness. For instance, the prevalence rates of homelessness within the last 12 months were about twice as high among black non-LGBTQ-identifying youth compared to white

non-LGBTQ-identifying youth. The rates were approximately four times higher for black LGBTQ-identifying youth compared to white youth who identified as heterosexual and cisgender.

Hispanic youth tend to be underrepresented as a share of their population size in shelter counts and point-in-time counts of those experiencing homelessness. Yet, they were overrepresented as a share of their population size among the VoYC national survey respondents reporting homelessness. This suggests that Hispanic youth are experiencing homelessness at high rates but in ways that are more hidden (e.g., avoiding shelters and formal systems). American Indian and Alaska Native youth had the highest rates of homelessness among racial and ethnic groups documented in the VoYC national survey. Further, contrary to popular beliefs, the majority of American Indian youth experiencing homelessness—like the majority of these youth overall—live in urban communities across the country. This suggests that strategies focused on rural areas and tribal lands alone are insufficient to address the problem. While the magnitudes differed, the VoYC youth counts similarly showed youth of color to be disproportionately represented among youth experiencing homelessness on a given night.

These findings point to the need to acknowledge and address structural racism and biases that have led to these disproportionalities. Yet, because structural racism and biases can also manifest in crisis response systems themselves, we present this as a crosscutting issue that applies to both prevention and response.



Recommendations for federal action

- ◆ Organized by USICH, and with considerable input from youth with lived experience of homelessness and national leaders of color, federal agencies should review their historic roles in perpetuating racial and ethnic biases. The agencies should engage in meaningful discussion on racial equity. Building on such a review and series of meaningful discussions, the federal government should develop a clear strategy and accountability measures for interrupting cycles of oppression, discrimination, and disenfranchisement in their engagement of racially marginalized youth and communities.
- ◆ All federal agencies funding programs and services for youth homelessness should require collection, reporting, and analysis of data that addresses equity by race (including nuanced measurement approaches that account for

complex and multiracial identities), sexual orientation, gender identity, and other factors—including youth-level, agency staffing, and systems data.

- ◆ The Interagency Working Group on Youth Homelessness could engage groups working with American Indian and Alaska Native populations, such as the Interagency Working Group on American Indian and Alaska Native Homelessness and the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs, to develop nuanced policy strategies to prevent and end experiences of homelessness. They could work with tribal nations, organizations, and young people to devise concrete, culturally sensitive federal policy strategies for both rural and urban communities.

RESEARCH & DATA

VoYC established an expansive and much-needed body of evidence to strengthen the nation's knowledge of the scale, scope, characteristics, and experiences of youth homelessness in America. At the same time, it also clarified directions for future research and data efforts, and key knowledge gaps remain. We cannot end youth homelessness in the dark. Federal commitment to continue to strengthen and expand evidence through targeted research and data actions is needed to help facilitate progress.

Finding: Using social science methods and youth collaboration improves enumeration of youth homelessness.

The VoYC national survey used a nationally representative survey methodology that revealed a broad and hidden challenge of youth homelessness that is inadequately captured by conventional administrative data and point-in-time counts alone. These approaches provide important insights into the number and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness who engage systems and who are more readily identifiable. They are not designed to capture prevalence and incidence of homelessness experiences among the general youth population. Further, the VoYC youth counts suggest that engaging youth with lived experience and substantial efforts to engage broad coalitions in the community can yield better counts and surveys of youth experiencing homelessness.

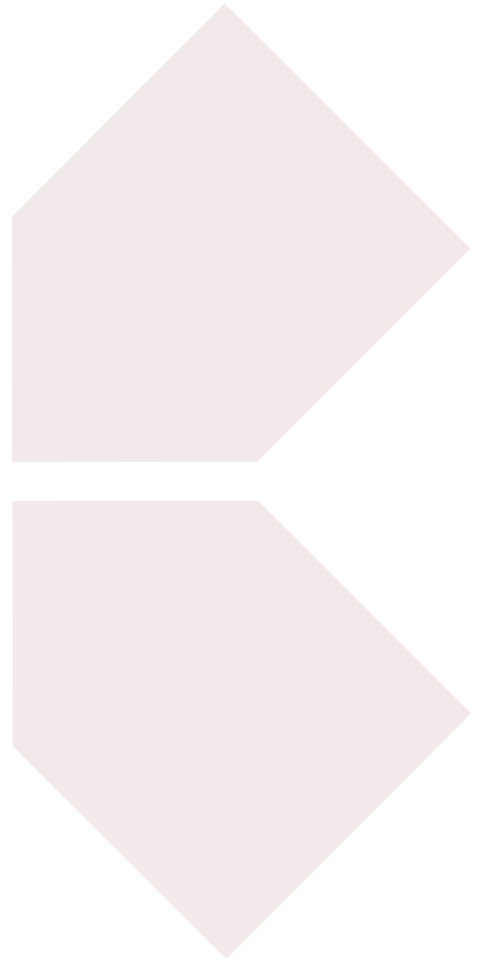
Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Congress could support replication of national data on the prevalence, incidence, characteristics, and experiences of youth homelessness so that we can track our progress as a nation toward the goal of ending youth homelessness and tailor strategies as needed. Private funders could partner with the federal government by investing in complementary research into more targeted subtopics, such as understanding how disproportionalities come about or the needs and preferences of specific subpopulations of youth, or investing in similar data at state or local levels.
- ✦ School systems could improve identification and estimates of homeless students with increased McKinney-Vento educational resources by Congress to support greater identification and by ED, with Congressional support, exploring options such as population-based screening methods to better capture homelessness experiences.



Congress could support replication of national data on the prevalence, incidence, characteristics, and experiences of youth homelessness so that we can track our progress as a nation.

- ✦ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) could make homelessness questions standardized and mandatory in its Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), which takes place in public high schools across the country.
- ✦ HUD-required point-in-time counts could be made more inclusive with respect to youth through increased federal interagency collaboration—for instance, building on existing guidance to engage youth with lived experience more concertedly in planning and carrying out counts. ED could continue to encourage schools to participate in point-in-time counts, and HHS could encourage runaway and homeless youth programs to play active roles in the counts. Given that youth experiences of homelessness reflect a fluidity that is not necessarily captured in a point-in-time count, federal agencies should continue to disseminate and promote messaging that encourages communities to understand and use the range of existing homelessness data to help them better design their local response. For example, USICH and federal agencies could issue guidance on the kinds of data that can supplement point-in-time count data to provide a clearer picture of the scope and scale of youth homelessness.



Finding: There are significant gaps in the evidence base on programs and practices to prevent and address youth homelessness and how young people exit homelessness.

The VoYC systematic evidence review demonstrates significant growth in evaluations of programs and practices to address youth homelessness over the last decade. This expanding evidence base shows that a number of interventions have positive effects on a range of youth outcomes and some have even succeeded in preventing or reducing youth experiences of homelessness. The systematic review also shows that, as a nation, we have significant blind spots in our knowledge of how to solve youth homelessness.

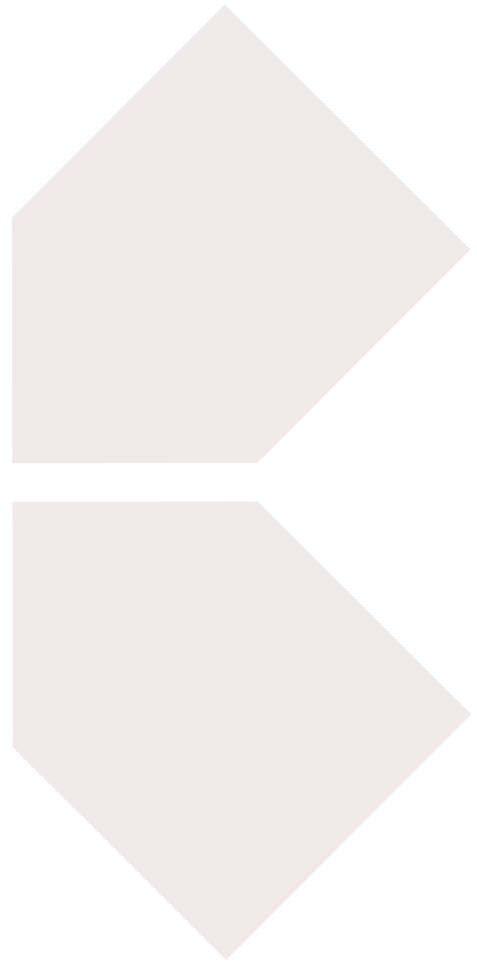
In general, most evaluations have assessed counseling, therapeutic, and case management interventions on young people's behavioral health and well-being outcomes. Relatively few evaluations have assessed the impacts of interventions to prevent or reduce experiences of homelessness and housing instability. HHS has broader funding streams—particularly through child welfare—to support family strengthening interventions for vulnerable children and youth, but these are largely untested with respect to preventing or reducing youth homelessness. The vast majority of public spending through HHS and HUD to address homelessness goes to shelter and housing programs. Yet, most of these models have been subject to very little, if any, rigorous evaluation for youth. While the evidence gaps are substantial overall, there is even less evidence as to what types of intervention approaches work, and do not work, in rural contexts, where different service delivery models are likely needed.



Relatively few evaluations have assessed the impacts of interventions to prevent or reduce experiences of homelessness and housing instability.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Congress and federal agencies could invest in improving the evidence base on what works, and what does not, to prevent and address youth homelessness. They should partner with philanthropy and research institutions to incubate, evaluate, and accelerate promising programs and build the capacity of systems and services to implement them.
- ✦ Congress, HHS, and HUD could invest in understanding the patterns of homelessness among unaccompanied youth, including differentiating among experiences and risks associated with short- and long-term homelessness and understanding which youth who do experience homelessness are at greatest risk for experiencing chronic homelessness.
- ✦ HHS and HUD could require or encourage more routine efforts to collect outcomes information, including reasons for returns to homelessness (when applicable), at least 3–6 months after program exits. Congress could provide additional resources for this so that federal grantees could build a stronger programmatic and data collection infrastructure for follow-up services and check-ins with youth.
- ✦ HHS and HUD, perhaps supported by Congressional appropriations or private funding, could increase and use longitudinal research and evaluation to determine the appropriate duration and design of aftercare services needed to foster sustained housing stability for different youth following exits from shelters, transitional housing, and temporary housing assistance.
- ✦ Use formative research and rigorous evaluation designs to develop and test innovative outreach, housing, and service delivery models for youth in rural areas.



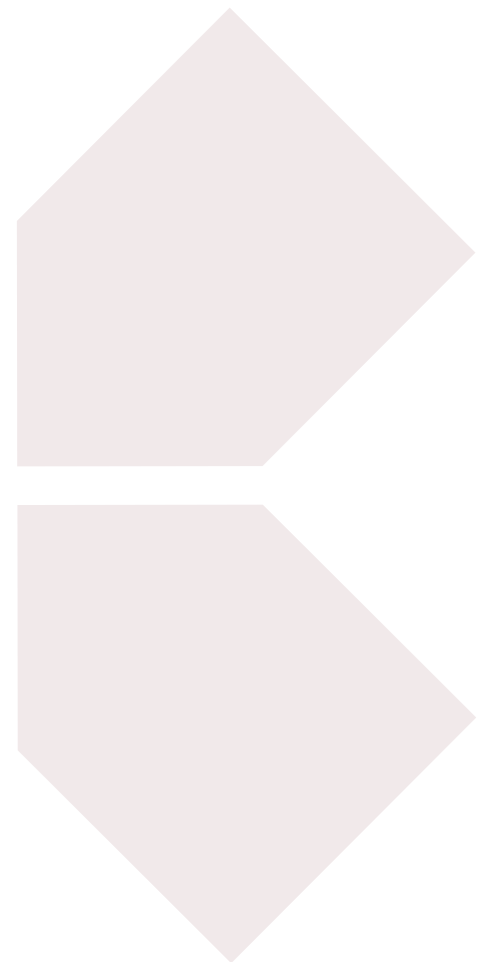
Congress and federal agencies could invest in improving the evidence base on what works, and what does not, to prevent and address youth homelessness.

Finding: Many youth experiencing homelessness have been involved in other public systems.

According to the VoYC brief youth surveys, 29% of youth experiencing homelessness had been in foster care and 46% had been in detention, jail, or prison. VoYC in-depth interviews show that pathways from systems to homelessness can be multifaceted. For instance, most youth who had been in foster care and experienced homelessness did not exit foster care into homelessness; rather, they were often reunified with their families or adopted and later experienced homelessness. Further, both secondary and postsecondary education systems engage with many youth experiencing or at risk for homelessness. Additionally, the VoYC in-depth interviews found that many youth moved around within their states while experiencing homelessness. Yet, data sharing across systems and between CoCs, even when contiguous, remains limited and challenging, undermining the ability to track youth outcomes holistically.

Recommendations for federal action

- ✦ Different federal agencies, such as HHS, HUD, ED, and DOJ, could issue guidance and community examples of cross-sector data sharing to improve identification of, and service delivery for, youth experiencing homelessness. They could facilitate data sharing, and data matching, to examine multisystem involvement and follow youth through different systems.
- ✦ To better respond to young people's mobility across communities, HUD could identify opportunities for better tracking of young people across different CoCs. ED could explore similar opportunities for better tracking the mobility of students across schools or districts.
- ✦ Congress could revise the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), or ED could issue guidance related to these laws, to remove real or perceived barriers to data collection and data sharing for the purpose of identifying, preventing, and addressing youth and family homelessness.
- ✦ DOJ could provide guidance to states on how justice systems could better gather information on housing status and risk for homelessness and coordinate supports when needed.
- ✦ Agencies could create shared priorities on data and outcome measures across federal programs and align grant mechanisms and outcome expectations accordingly. Congress could require, and HUD and HHS could support, CoCs and FYSB-funded runaway and homeless youth grantees to track specific outcomes consistent with the USICH core outcome areas to monitor and set goals for young people and to share data and lessons.





CONCLUSION

The breadth and depth of insights produced by VoYC illuminate the benefits of a comprehensive, mixed-methods approach to studying youth homelessness that draws on many different perspectives. None of it would have been possible without the partnerships of public and private funders, the impetus from Congress to fund better evidence to help address the problem, VoYC's 22 partner communities across the country, and especially the youth themselves, who gave their time, expertise, and voices at multiple stages of this endeavor.

VoYC findings reveal youth homelessness as a broad and hidden challenge as well as a complex problem with deep roots in family adversities and structural inequalities. At the same time, youth homelessness is a solvable problem. The VoYC evidence review revealed interventions that have demonstrated measurable reductions of youth homelessness, and several VoYC research components shed light on key entry points in the lives of youth and across public systems. Early identification and action to prevent youth homelessness and coordinated efforts to ensure that early episodes do not devolve into recurrent and high-acuity situations are critical. Ending youth homelessness takes a coordinated community response and the investment of individuals and communities. It takes greater resources, but it also takes smarter, more coordinated actions across systems and services supported by similarly comprehensive and coordinated federal policy actions.

Efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness are worthy of prioritized attention and investment. Indeed, ample research documents adolescence and young adulthood as key developmental windows. Every day of housing instability represents missed opportunities to support healthy development and transitions to productive adulthood. The success of our young people has a direct impact on the success of our country. As long as millions of youth do not live up to their potential as individuals due to homelessness, housing instability, and related adversities, we do not live up to our potential as a nation. We can do better, together.



Youth homelessness
is a **solvable problem.**

REFERENCES

- ✦ **Auerswald, C. L., Lin, J. S., Parriott, A.** (2016). Six-year mortality in a street-recruited cohort of homeless youth in San Francisco, California. *PeerJ*, 4, e1909.
- ✦ **Chamberlain, C., & Johnson, G.** (2013). Pathways into adult homelessness. *Journal of Sociology*, 49(1), 60–77.
- ✦ **Federal Reserve.** (2018). Report on the economic well-being of U.S. households in 2017. Washington, DC: Consumer and Community Development Research Section of the Federal Reserve Board's Division of Consumer and Community Affairs.
- ✦ **Frieden T. R.** (2010). A framework for public health action: the health impact pyramid. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(4), 590–595. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2009.185652
- ✦ **Greene, J. M., & Ringwalt, C. L.** (1998). Pregnancy among three national samples of runaway and homeless youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 23(6), 370–377.
- ✦ **Greene, J. M., Ennett, S. T., & Ringwalt, C. L.** (1997). Substance use among runaway and homeless youth in three national samples. *American Journal of Public Health*, 87(2), 229–235.
- ✦ **Heerde, J. A., Hemphill, S. A., Scholes-Balog, K. E.** (2014). "Fighting" for survival: A systematic review of physically violent behavior perpetrated and experienced by homeless young people. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19, 50–66.
- ✦ **Hodgson, K. J., Shelton, K. H., van den Bree, M. B., & Los, F. J.** (2013). Psychopathology in young people experiencing homelessness: A systematic review. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(6), 24–37.
- ✦ **Joint Center for Housing Studies (JCHS) of Harvard University.** (2016). The state of the nation's housing: 2016. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- ✦ **Karcher, M. J. & Johnson, D. A.** (2011). Final technical report: An evaluation of advocacy-based mentoring as a treatment intervention for chronic delinquency. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojtdp/grants/250454.pdf>.
- ✦ **McCoy, H., & Pearson, E.** (2019). Racial Disparities in the Juvenile Justice System. In *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.1288
- ✦ **Medlow, S, Klineberg, E., & Steinbeck, K.** (2014). The health diagnoses of homeless adolescents: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Adolescence*, 37(5), 531–542.
- ✦ **Morton, M. H., Dworsky, A., Matjasko, J. L., Curry, S. R., Schlueter, D., Chavez, R., & Farrell, A. F.** (2017). Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- ✦ **Morton, M. H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G. M.** (2018). Prevalence and correlates of youth homelessness in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 62(1), 14–21.
- ✦ **National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NAS).** (2019). The promise of adolescence: Realizing opportunity for all youth. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25388>.

