

Chapin Hall Research Brief



Centering Racial Equity in Youth Homelessness

This brief highlights Chapin Hall research to elevate the urgent need for a race equity approach to engaging with and supporting youth experiencing homelessness.

Sarah Berger Gonzalez

Matthew Morton

Sonali Patel

Bryan Samuels

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Youth experiencing homelessness: A picture of disproportionality

Pre-existing economic and housing disparities for young adults ages 18-25 were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to alarming levels of food and housing insecurity especially among Black and Hispanic young people.¹ While much of the public attention during the pandemic has focused on death and disease, youth of color faced exceptional adversities in meeting their basic needs. Among single adult households, Black young adults have faced especially high housing insecurity amidst the pandemic. During the pandemic, about 3.8 million young adults had little to no confidence in their (or their household's) ability to pay the next month's rent; about 1.3 million had no confidence. Among respondents in single adult households, Hispanic young adults were about twice as likely, and Black young adults almost three times as likely, as White young adults to have little or no confidence in their ability to pay next month's rent.

Housing insecurity among Black young people during COVID-19 underscores a larger, hidden truth: youth homelessness and housing instability is a serious problem that disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) youth. Chapin Hall's [Voices of Youth Count](#) research illuminated that youth and young adult homelessness is a broad and hidden problem with serious human capital implications and marked by consequential disparities. About 1

in 30 adolescent minors ages 13 to 17, and 1 in 10 young adults ages 18 to 25 endure some form of homelessness over the course of a year. The challenge of youth homelessness and housing instability is more pronounced among BIPOC youth ages 13 to 25, with 11 percent of American Indian and Alaskan Indian youth experiencing homelessness during a year, 7 percent of Black youth, and 7 percent of Hispanic youth relative to 4 percent of White, non-Hispanic youth.

The intersection of different marginalized identities compounds inequities among youth of color, with [Black youth identifying as LGBTQ](#) experiencing especially high rates of homelessness and adversity.²

Youth belonging to multiple at-risk subpopulations—such as a Black youth who also lack a high school diploma, or is parenting, or identifies as LGBTQ—face compounded risk

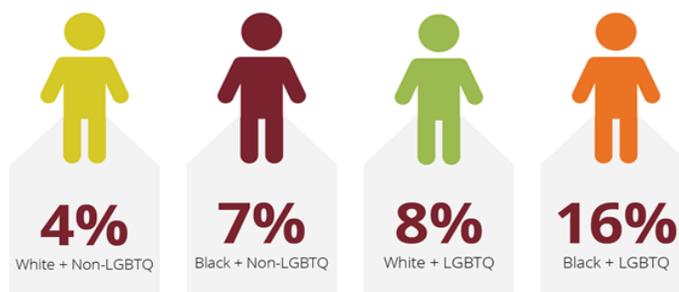
for homelessness. Young people who

identified as both Black and LGBTQ had *four times* the prevalence of homelessness compared to their peers who identified as White, heterosexual, and cisgender (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Youth Who are Black and LGBTQ

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

Explicit homelessness over the last 12 months, self-reported by young adults, ages 18-25. These estimates do not include reports of couch surfing only.



(Source: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago)

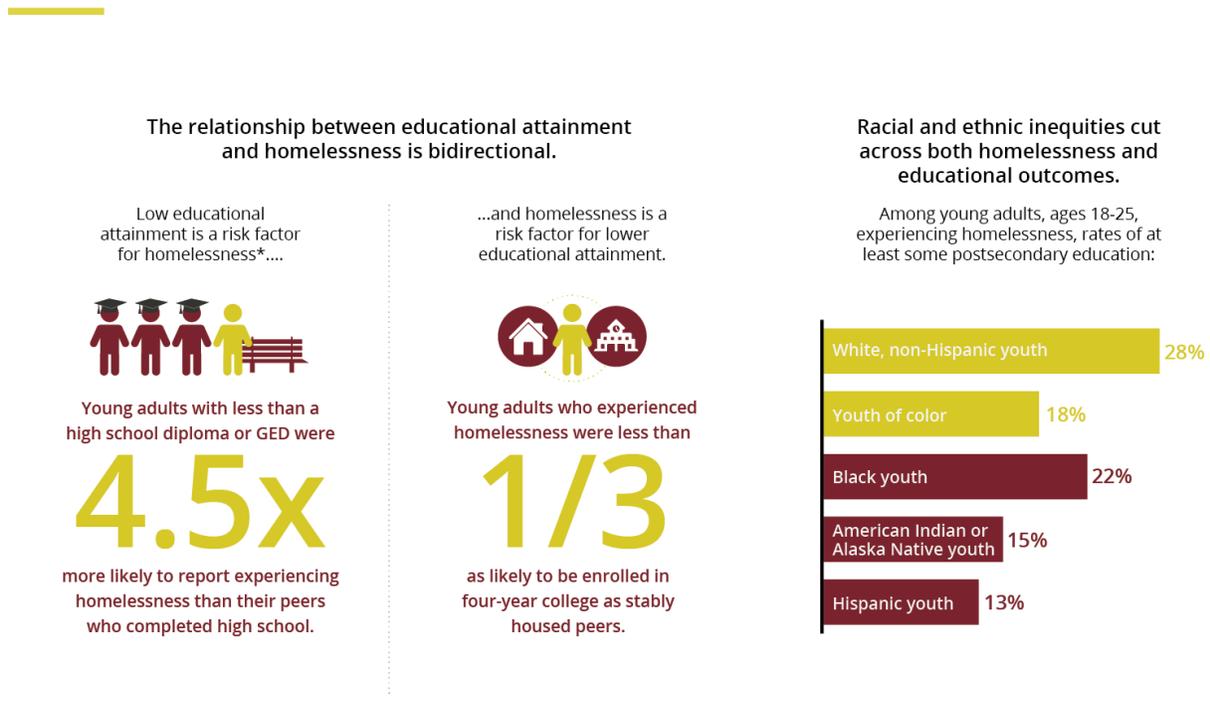
The risks of homelessness and housing instability are not equally shared among young people, with Black and Hispanic youth at greatest risk. While urban and rural youth experience homelessness at similar rates, [Voices of Youth Count national data](#) show that Black and Hispanic youth are at a much higher risk for homelessness and housing instability. Among racial and ethnic groups, Black and Hispanic youth are especially overrepresented, with an 83 and 33 percent increased risk, respectively, of having experienced homelessness over youth of other races. LGBTQ youth are at a 120 percent higher risk of experiencing homelessness, and unmarried parenting youth are at a 200 percent higher risk.

Risk factors for homelessness overlap with risk factors for educational attainment and school dropout, placing BIPOC youth at an even greater disadvantage for exiting homelessness. [Data on educational attainment from the Voices of Youth](#) Count also show that the relationship between educational attainment and homelessness is bidirectional. In general, young adults without a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) are 4.5 times at greater risk of experiencing homelessness compared to peers who completed high school; and youth experiencing homelessness were less than one-third as likely to be enrolled in a four-year college as stably housed peers.^{3,4} Racial and ethnic inequities are also pronounced when looking at educational completion rates among young adults experiencing homelessness (Figure 2). For young people who identify as White, completion rates for at least some

college credits were at 28 percent. They were even lower for those identifying as Black (22 percent), American Indian or Alaska Native (15 percent), or Hispanic (13 percent). For the same subpopulations who had not experienced homelessness, completion rates of at least some postsecondary education were more than double for most groups: 51 percent, 44 percent, 34 percent, and 35 percent, respectively. These statistics reflect the extent to which BIPOC youth experiencing homelessness face insurmountable hurdles to finding a job with a viable income and benefits in an economy that requires higher levels of education.

Figure 2. Relationship Between Education and Homelessness

Data show strong relationships between education and homelessness



*Note: For this figure, the youth of color group includes Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic identifying young adults. The differences between Hispanic and White, non-Hispanic youth and between youth of color and White, non-Hispanic youth are statistically significant. The differences between Black or American Indian and Alaska Native youth and White youth are not statistically significant; this is likely due to smaller sample sizes, which make it hard to reach statistical significance.

*Note: In this infographic, we use explicitly reported homelessness (youth who said they experienced homelessness). We did not include those who reported couch surfing and not homelessness. This is due to analytical limitations with the couch surfing variable, but we present broader couch surfing statistics elsewhere (see the VoYC national estimates brief.)

(Source: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago)

Among youth experiencing homelessness, Black young people experience homelessness and housing instability at much higher rates than their White counterparts. Of the [surveyed youth experiencing homelessness across the 22 counties](#), 47 percent identified as Black or African American while 26 percent identified as White, non-Hispanic. Twelve percent identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 17 percent identified as multiracial or other. When comparing to the general U.S. population, Black and multiracial youth were substantially overrepresented.⁵ Moreover, it is likely that the percentages for youth identifying as Hispanic or Latino are, in fact, higher as the point-in-time counts have shown lower percentages of Hispanic youth overall among those identified as homeless, especially those in shelters. Noteworthy are the high percentage of Black youth that make up the population in large counties.

In Cook County, for example, 52 percent of the youth population is Black and 64 percent of the youth homelessness population is Black.⁵ Disproportionality of homelessness experiences among Black youth mirrors racial disparities documented elsewhere, such as with in-school suspensions, incarceration, and foster care placement. Disproportionalities in other systems, along with a weaker schooling and service infrastructure in predominantly Black communities, likely help explain elevated risk of homelessness, but more targeted research is needed.³

Pathways into and out of homelessness

A central component of [Voices of Youth Count was the in-depth interviews](#) with young people across five counties, where just over half of the participants identified as Black or multiracial. The in-depth interviews captured a broad range of youth perspectives and experiences of housing instability and homelessness. For this portion of the study, 215 young people were interviewed, ages 13-25, in five U.S. counties: Cook County, Illinois; Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania; San Diego County, California; Travis County, Texas; and Walla Walla County, Washington. Most participants (86 percent) were age 18 or older. More than half of the participants identified as Black/African American (31 percent) or multiracial (21 percent), and 23 percent identified as White. Many youth reported gender identities as either male (52 percent) or female (41 percent), and 5.5 percent of youth identified as transgender and 0.9 percent as genderqueer/nonconforming. Youth were able to report their sexual identities on a spectrum. While 58 percent identified as 100 percent heterosexual/straight, 38 percent did not. Among those, 11 percent identified as bisexual, and 10 percent identified as 100 percent gay or lesbian. Nearly one-fourth reported that they were the parent of at least one child. An additional 8 percent of youth reported that they or their partner were currently pregnant.⁵

Conversations with young people highlighted that their pathways into and out of homelessness and housing instability are marked by early family instability and disruptions of home, including entrance into foster care and family homelessness.⁶ When asked, “if you were to think of your housing instability as a story, where does your story begin?”, 24 percent of young people cited early family homelessness with their parents, 44 percent of the young people named displacement from their home via foster care; 52 percent named chronic parent-child conflict or rejection by parent; 35 percent experienced the death of a parent and/or caregiver, and 34 percent named a parent with a mental health condition and/or addiction. When taken together, these answers stress that there is not one single event that causes a young person to experience homelessness. Rather, it is preceded by, and contextualized within, often chronic and deeply complex social and familial challenges related to poverty, cycles of family violence, abuse, or neglect; intra-familial discrimination; parental mental health and addiction; and youths’ own development processes or struggles.

Multilevel challenges and drivers – critical conditions – shape how young people’s pathways through homelessness unfold. While acknowledging that each young person’s pathway and experience of trauma and loss are unique, the in-depth interviews underscored common challenges or

critical conditions that cause young people to leave or get kicked out, to avoid finding a place to stay or to cycle in an out of seemingly stable sleeping arrangements. These challenges included:

- *Individual or personal*, tied to the young person's own attributes. The most common conditions contributing to interruptions in housing stability include mental health challenges, drug use or addiction, and the lack of feeling wanted. Youth also named personal characteristics as getting in the way.
- Relationships with *peers or family*. Peers play an important role in young people's lives: 69 percent of young people note that peers played an important link to services or source of knowledge while homeless; 36 percent of young people also named peers as the primary reason they lost those same resources. When discussing family, 35 percent of youth named the death of a family member and 30 percent cited physical/emotional abuse/neglect or violence as impacting their housing stability.
- *Structural* conditions impact a young person's pathway through homelessness. Among those interviewed, 30 percent of youth identified agency staff as positive critical portals to other formal and much-needed resources. But, once they were receiving services, especially housing, like shelters and transitional living, youth identified practices and policies that felt developmentally out of sync and thus "controlling." They also reported shelters that were unsafe or unsanitary, and policies that caused or required them to disconnect from important and valued relationships. LGBTQ youth also described stigma and discrimination within their immediate communities as critical conditions.

Young people's pathways through homelessness are non-linear and fluid, involving high levels of mobility and constant changes in precarious sleeping arrangements. While navigating the personal, relational and structural challenges, young people described having to move often – from street to street or neighborhood to neighborhood. Most young people (81 percent) moved in and out of their hometowns, though 42 percent of youth never left the county where their hometown was located and 69 percent stayed within the state of their hometown. Young people further expressed that this housing insecurity was only a continuation of the instability they had experienced as a small child. Sleeping arrangements in these locations often varied as well – from shelter to street to couch-surfing – and were often impacted by types of housing services and programs that were available, safe, and accessible to young people ages 18-25.

Finally, Black and Hispanic young people spend longer periods homeless than their White, non-Hispanic counterparts, increasing their risk of re-entering homelessness after exiting. Data from HUD's Continuum of Care Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) have shown that Black and Hispanic youth are at greater risk (16 and 23 percent, respectively) of staying in often harmful periods of homelessness (as opposed to getting housed through self-resolution or family exits) compared to white non-Hispanic youth before being housed. Research shows that the longer young people endure homelessness, the more they are exposed to numerous adversities, traumas, and survival risk behaviors. Data also point to greater risk they are at for re-entering homelessness after getting

housed. For Black young adults, there is a 78 percent increase of re-entering homelessness after exit compared to White non-Hispanic young adults; and for Hispanic young adults, there is a 72 percent increased risk of re-entering homelessness after being housed.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for taking concrete steps toward centering racial equity in preventing youth homelessness and supporting young people of color in exiting homelessness.

Center Youth and Youth Experience in Program Design and Service Delivery

*Runaway and homeless youth programs should **partner with and support Black and Hispanic young people to co-create new programs, services and strategies** for reducing housing insecurity and preventing youth homelessness.* Elevate Black and Hispanic youth voices, experiences and ideas in the design and implementation of programs and services to reduce housing instability, prevent homelessness and eliminate barriers to pathways to thriving.

*Basic center and transitional living programs can **design programs and deliver services that center the experiences of youth of color with intersecting marginalized identities** to meet immediate needs and support appropriate services.* Given the disproportionately high number of LGBTQ young people and youth of color who experience homelessness, there is a strong rationale for putting them at the center of efforts to prevent and address youth homelessness. Service providers and program directors can establish programs and services that support youth of color who also identify or are part of other populations at risk of homelessness (pregnant and parenting, without a GED, and LGBTQ) to ensure services are accessible, safe and appropriate.

***Develop street outreach programs and homelessness identification around young people's fluid housing situations** over time (not just where they were last).* Youth experiencing homelessness frequently move in and out of different sleeping arrangements. Drop-in centers and local community-based programs can establish different types of supports that are designed to engage a young person as they move from couch-surfing to shelter to street and back again.

Understand a Young Person's Pathway into Homelessness to better inform services and support to exit homelessness

*Transitional living and basic center programs can **build in opportunities to better understand past familial traumas and adversities** to inform a more tailored approach to service delivery.* Youth experiencing homelessness can have a history of family trauma. While some of this information may be captured during intake, youth may be reluctant at that initial point to discuss traumas or adversities at length. Shelters and other service providers can build trust over time and establish regular check-ins with young people to better understand familial traumas to develop approaches and services that

support a young person's immediate needs while reconciling with past adversities. Providing early social and economic supports to families in addition to youth can also aid youth homelessness prevention.

*Transitional living programs can **connect youth experiencing homelessness with educational opportunities** through developing tailored solutions to support young people of color to achieve both housing stability and their educational goals. Data on young people experiencing homelessness are often collected through a point-in-time count. While these data are helpful, they do little to inform changes in young people's situation over time. The regular collection of data at multiple points over time will give service providers an opportunity to tailor services to meet young people's needs.*

Collect better data to identify opportunities for addressing racial inequities

*All runaway and homeless youth programs can **collect, use and share data on service usage and access over time disaggregated by sexual orientation, gender identity, race and ethnicity** to better understand who is accessing services and programs (and who isn't and why); how long it takes young people to access services; how long it takes a young person to exit homelessness; and, who is re-entering homelessness. These data can be an important starting point for service providers to understand what changes need to be made to better meet the needs of BIPOC youth.*

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Chapin Hall partners with policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropists at the forefront of research and policy development by applying a unique blend of scientific research, real-world experience, and policy expertise to construct actionable information, practical tools, and, ultimately, positive change for children and families.

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit www.chapinhall.org or @Chapin_Hall.

Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

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Correspondence

Sarah Berger Gonzalez, Senior Policy Analyst, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago
sgonzalez@chapinhall.org; 949-910-4617

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