



# CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES IN ADDRESSING RURAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Stakeholder Focus Group Findings • October 2020

Chapin Hall's previous groundbreaking research brief, [Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in Rural America \(2018\)](#), found that both urban and rural areas share similar rates of youth homelessness. Despite this similar prevalence, rural youth homelessness remains less visible and less studied. This qualitative study builds on the findings from the earlier brief to explore the unique challenges that rural communities in the U.S. face in addressing youth homelessness, the ways they are responding to those challenges, and opportunities to strengthen rural service delivery models. Findings come from seven focus groups with young adults and other stakeholders from five rural regions with varying levels of services, as well as with national and state stakeholders. For more details see the full report, [Challenges & Opportunities in Addressing Rural Youth Homelessness](#).

## Identifying Youth Experiencing or at Risk for Homelessness

Stakeholders reported that traditional counting methods severely underestimate the number of youth experiencing homelessness in rural areas due to the invisibility of rural homelessness, lack of community awareness, stigma, and distrust of public systems. Focus group participants highlighted the important role of schools in identifying youth, although young adults reported that they were not initially aware they had federally required school-based homelessness liaisons when they first needed support.

### Recommendations

- (1) Support the use of alternative methods for identifying and counting youth experiencing homelessness, such as universal screening, administrative data linkages, and representative surveys.
- (2) Increase the capacity of rural schools to identify youth and raise awareness by funding trainings and devoting additional staff time to youth homelessness.

“  
Even though I was dealing with all this hardship, it took such an effort to like realize that I was indeed homeless and that, you know, I did indeed need help.  
-Young adult stakeholder

“  
If the homeless liaison could get together a few people to go to different classes and just say, hey, this is what this looks like, or this is how this is, then it would just be a lot easier. And it would actually get to all of the students.  
-Young adult stakeholder

---

## Providing Services and Supports

Rural areas reported having insufficient resources to support youth dispersed across vast regions. Key resource gaps included transportation and technology, housing programs and resources, mental health and addiction services, safe spaces where youth can access system navigation support, and education, career, and youth development opportunities. Since many rural youth draw on informal supports, youth and their supporters noted they are seeking guidance on how make the most of these informal arrangements.

### Recommendations

- (1) Provide flexible funding to all communities to ensure that youth in every part of the country have access to coordinated services and supports.
- (2) Support the development and rigorous evaluation of innovative programs for supporting dispersed youth.
- (3) Provide guidance to help youth and their informal supporters engage in safe, legal, and supportive relationships.
- (4) Rewrite state laws to help formalize arrangements, such as by allowing unaccompanied minors to consent to their own shelter.

---

“

There's nowhere to refer [youth]. So yeah, we do kind of look and say, “Do you know anyone who will let you sleep at their house?” And the outcome of that is now we have kids using social media and other very unsafe avenues to find housing, because we can't help them.

-Regional stakeholder

---

## Equity & Inclusion

Young adults reported experiencing racism from rural public systems. They noted the criminalization of homelessness for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in particular by rural law enforcement, education, and child welfare systems. Additionally, regional stakeholders indicated that they lacked data to measure disparities and resources to provide more equitable and inclusive services.

Stakeholders from Tribal nations and marginalized communities reported lacking funding to develop strategies for addressing youth and family homelessness. National stakeholders also emphasized the importance of including Tribal stakeholders in regional and national conversations about rural youth homelessness.

All types of stakeholders acknowledged that rural youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) lack access to affirming supports. They noted this was especially the case for transgender youth in particular. Strategies they highlighted included connecting rural young people with broader LGBTQIA communities and with affirming housing and mental health services.

---

“

It is more common that White people get the help that they need more often, because systems are more likely to handle them, and believe them, but when a Black student or other students of color come forward, they are less likely to want to help them because they want to blame them for their situation.

-Young adult stakeholder

## Recommendations

- (1) Explicitly fund strategies to dismantle systemic racism in rural public systems and better measure equity and inclusion.
- (2) Fund the participation of Tribal nations and marginalized communities in rural youth homelessness conversations.
- (3) Fund rural LGBTQIA-affirming housing programs, mental health services, and flexible supports, and connect rural youth to broader LGBTQIA communities.

“

A lot of these services are being dealt by churches and a lot of youth don't feel comfortable with churches. . . .It's mostly because it is judgmental, and especially if you are a LGBTQIA youth. . .you don't actually feel wanted and then you go into the whole stressing things, suicide, and that goes into the whole mental health issue part.

-Young adult stakeholder

---

## Collaboration

Rural agencies are often overburdened, challenging their ability to build partnerships. Stakeholders from regions receiving federal funding at the community level (as opposed to through an individual agency) reported that this helped facilitate more collaborative cross-systems partnerships and better leverage resources.

Although stakeholders from all participating regions indicated they had made some efforts to seek youth input, they encountered geographic, technological, and funding barriers to engaging in authentic youth collaboration.

## Recommendations

- (1) Target funding to communities, as opposed to individual agencies, to support the development of community-driven collaborative approaches.
- (2) Require and provide explicit funding and effective technical assistance for rural youth action boards (YABs) with meaningful roles and influence, and ensure rural areas are represented on regional and state YABs.

“

I think it is very important in rural communities for partners to realize that the organization they want to partner with may have their own goals, their own paradigms, their own priorities, and their own needs, right? Because a lot of these systems are under resourced.

-National stakeholder

“

We have to have the money to reimburse and compensate the young people [for their collaboration] in an intentional way. We need to have the money to fully employ a staff person or a handful of staff people to actually do it and none of the robust services that we have right now really have the capacity, space, or it's not even allowable to do that.

-Regional stakeholder