



Youth homelessness is a significant problem with serious human capital implications and marked by consequential disparities. Over the course of a year, about 1 in 30 youth ages 13 to 17 years of age experience homelessness and 1 in 10 individuals ages 18 to 25 experienced some form of homelessness.

This brief highlights prior evidence building activities under the Voices of Youth Count and identifies opportunities for the next round of data collection under the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

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Background

Data are an essential tool for understanding and addressing youth* homelessness in the U.S. Federal, state, and local community partners rely on regular and reliable prevalence and correlates data across subpopulations of youth to design systems, allocate resources, course correct, prevent downstream homelessness, and innovate. Often, these partners turn to annual reporting required for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Point-in-Time (PIT) count and Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) to make critical decisions. While these reports have positively transformed the national homelessness response systems over the past 15 years, practitioners and academics have long questioned their accuracy for youth homelessness.^{1,2,3,4}

In 2008, Congress passed the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-378), which reauthorized the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA). The reauthorization bill carved out funding for services and programs specifically for youth homelessness (distinct from adult homelessness) and recognized the necessity of regularly collecting data on the incidence and prevalence of youth homelessness (ages 13 to 25)

* Youth and young adults (YYA) are defined as individuals 13 years old or older and younger than 26 years of age. YYA homelessness is generally understood to focus on households where no one is older than 25 years of age.

(Section 345).[†] Unfortunately, Congress did not appropriate the funds needed to regularly collect and analyze reliable data until eight years after the passage of the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008.

About RHYA

The Runaway Youth Act of 1974 (later amended to include homeless youth) established the largest program to support youth experiencing homelessness or who have runaway. RHYA was originally passed as part of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act and has since been reauthorized nearly every 5 years (the most recent reauthorization was in 2018). 2024 marks 50 years since its passage.

In 2016, in fulfillment of Section 345 of the reauthorization bill, HUD and private philanthropy awarded \$6 million (\$2 million and \$4 million, respectively) to Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to carry out the first national research and policy initiative on the prevalence and incidence of youth homelessness, known as Voices of Youth Count (VoYC). Chapin Hall designed the study to fill critical knowledge gaps and accelerate progress toward ending youth homelessness by informing the development of federal, state, and local policies, improving service provision, and building a foundation for future research. The project involved vast, mixed-methods data collection and integrated a wide range of youth and adult perspectives. Voices of Youth Count data and evidence have changed policy, practice, and public and philanthropic efforts for addressing youth homelessness at the local, state, and federal levels.[‡]

The Imperative

Over the last 5 years, a global pandemic, stagnant wages, interruptions in educational attainment and a deepening housing crisis have exacerbated risk factors for youth homelessness. As one critical warning of a changing paradigm, HUD's recently released PIT count report identified a 15% increase in youth homelessness between 2022 and 2023.⁵ In November 2023, members of Congress introduced a bipartisan bill⁶ to once again reauthorize RHYA (the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act of 2023). **This is an important opportunity for federal policymakers to appropriate critical funding for federal grant programs to address youth homelessness and support more regular and reliable data collection on the prevalence and characteristics of youth homelessness.**

Voices of Youth Count remains the first and only national prevalence and characteristics study on youth and young adult homelessness.

[†] Section 345 requires Health and Human Services, at 5-year intervals, to use "the best quantitative and qualitative social science research methods available to produce estimates of the incidence and prevalence of runaway and homeless individuals who are not less than 13 years of age but are less than 26 years of age; and. . . that includes with such estimate an assessment of the characteristics of such individuals." Statute at Large 122 Stat. 4068 - Public Law No. 110-378 (10/08/2008).

[‡] Data from the Voices of Youth Count have been downloaded more than 15,000 times from the Chapin Hall website and are cited regularly in policy, practice, and programs addressing YYA homelessness.

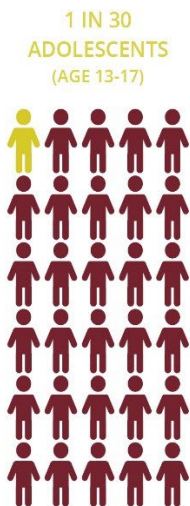
The Next Voices of Youth Count

There is an immediate need to carry out the next youth count. To do this, Chapin Hall highlights the three most critical components of the initial study, what was done, and what can be done to improve the next one.

National Estimate

The national estimate under Voices of Youth Count provided the first and only estimate of 12-month prevalence of youth homelessness in the U.S. for ages 13–25.

Figure 1
Adolescents and young adults experiencing homelessness in a 12-month period



WHAT WE DID

Chapin Hall collaborated with Gallup Inc. to survey a nationally representative sample of adults whose households included 13- to 25-year-olds during the preceding 12 months. Gallup Inc. used their U.S. Politics and Economics Daily Tracking Survey (DTS) and added a 19-item youth homelessness module created by Chapin Hall.

The tracking survey solicited demographic characteristics on all respondents, including age, sex, race/ethnicity, household income, employment, education, county population density, sexual orientation and gender identity, and marital and parenting status. The module asked eligible households about different experiences of homelessness among youth in their households. The tracking survey used a dual-frame (cellular and landline) random digit dial telephone sample to interview a national quota of 500 adults per day.

The tracking survey was administered twice—from July to September 2016 (round one) and May to July 2017 (round two). Each round had different random samples. In the second round of survey administration, Chapin Hall conducted follow-up interviews with a random subsample of respondents 2 to 3 days after completing the survey.

WHAT WE LEARNED

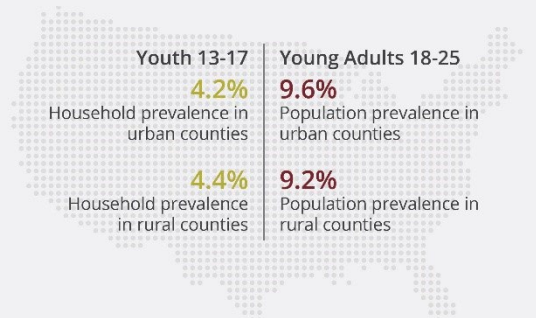
25,492 youth participated in the survey. The sample was broadly representative of the U.S. population with respect to sex, race/ethnicity, income, and employment. Some of the key findings include:

- About 1 in 30 adolescent minors ages 13–17, and 1 in 10 young adults ages 18–25, experience some form of homelessness during a 12-month period (Figure 1).
- Many youth do not fit squarely into a specific type of homelessness; youth homelessness is highly fluid and not as visible (couch surfing is most common).
- Prevalence rates of youth homelessness are similar between rural and nonrural communities, though the number of youth experiencing homelessness is smaller in rural communities because the population

Figure 2

Youth Homelessness Affects Rural and Urban Areas Alike

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



(Source: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago)

sizes are smaller in those communities. See Figure 2.

- There is a heightened risk of homelessness for Black, Hispanic and Indigenous youth, and youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, and asexual (or allies, aromantic, or agender). See Figure 3.
- Young parents—especially those unmarried— had three times the risk of experiencing homelessness compared to nonparenting peers.
- One of the strongest risk correlates for homelessness was a lack of a high school diploma or GED.

WHAT IS NEXT

Any approach to capturing prevalence and incidence of youth homelessness will have limitations. However, the next national estimate should use measures, sampling strategies, and data collection procedures grounded in sound, youth-oriented social science and epidemiological methods that capture the full scale and scope of this phenomenon.

The prior national estimates were based on a brief youth homelessness module added to Gallup’s tracking survey. This module was discontinued in 2017. Despite the absence of the survey going forward, there are now two new opportunities:

1. Develop an updated survey module for capturing self-reported data from young people based on a select set of questions related to their housing situation/homelessness over the last year, characteristics, and past experiences.⁵
2. Support the use of an existing, nationally representative survey or create a new one to capture data from a cross-sectional sample of adolescent minors (ages 13–17) and young adults (ages 18–25).

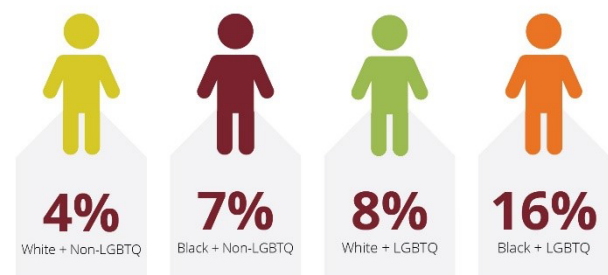
In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interview component took a closer look at the trajectories, experiences, and viewpoints of youth experiencing homelessness across five diverse counties throughout the U.S.

Figure 3

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)

⁵ Examples of survey questions about **housing situation/homelessness experiences** include questions about whether a respondent experienced sleeping arrangements during the last 12 months that would have qualified as different types of homelessness according to the broadest federal definition, the duration and frequency of any homelessness experiences, and whether homelessness experiences within the last year were first-time experiences. Examples of **characteristics** might include age, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, parenting status, marital/relationship status, household structure, employment, education, and income. Examples of **past experiences** might include prior unaccompanied or family homelessness, runaway experiences, and public systems involvement.

WHAT WE DID

Chapin Hall selected five diverse counties throughout the country based on their ability to support extended data collection and their unique housing instability among youth. The five counties that were selected and agreed to participate during the first Voices of Youth Count study included Cook County, Illinois; Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania; San Diego County, California; Travis County, Texas; and Walla Walla County, Washington.

The in-depth interviews were comprised of three key data collection elements: 1) narrative interviews, 2) a housing timeline tool, and 3) background surveys. The interviews focused on several key areas: jobs/employment and access to money; family ties and relationships; friends, peers, intimate partners; connections to school and education; formal or informal services/supports; and health and well-being. Finally, participants completed a background survey that included demographic information as well as additional questions on adversities they may have experienced while stably housed, government benefits and other supports, and factors inhibiting them from achieving housing stability.

To carry out this work, Chapin Hall hired, rigorously trained, and supervised a local field team of interviewers and transcribers in each of the sites. Chapin Hall also used various recruitment strategies to enlist a group of youth diverse in age, school involvement, sexual identity, race/ethnicity, service system involvement, gender identity, and histories of homelessness.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We conducted 215 interviews with youth (more than 40 in each of the five counties). Some of the key findings from the data included:

- Youth homelessness cannot be reduced to a single event. It is preceded by, and contextualized within, complex social and familial challenges related to poverty, cycles of family violence, abuse or neglect, intra-familial discrimination, and parental mental health.
- Over half of the participants reported that their first experience of homelessness occurred during their late adolescence, between the ages of 16 and 18. An additional 21% experienced homelessness between the ages of 13 and 15.
- While each young person's instability was unique, there is a shared set of critical conditions (both positive and negative) that contribute to housing stability. These conditions span across four core areas: individual (personal characteristics, attitudes, core identities, behaviors), peers, family, and structural.
- Youth take a calculated approach (measuring risks) in accessing services and resources (formal and informal).

For youth and young adults living in poverty, transitions to adulthood **do not mirror those of emerging adulthood** in the context of middle-to-upper class family norms of social support, and therefore require a more holistic approach.

WHAT IS NEXT

There is an opportunity to use a similar data collection approach in five different counties throughout the U.S., ensuring that there is representation of rural, semirural, suburban, and urban settings.

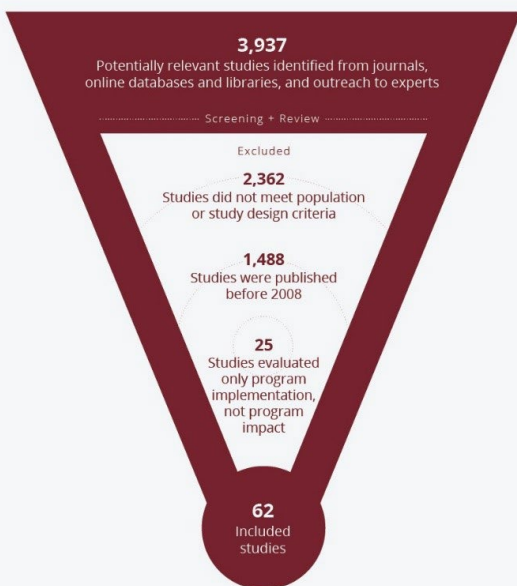
Systematic Evidence Review

The evidence review provided the most systematic and comprehensive review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to prevent and address youth homelessness.

Figure 4

Selection of studies

We started with a large number of potentially relevant studies and then screened and reviewed them to identify those that met all inclusion criteria.



(Source: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago)

WHAT WE DID

Chapin Hall carried out an extensive search of published and unpublished literature between 2008 and 2018 on the effects of any interventions preventing or addressing homelessness (or related outcomes) among youth ages 13–25 from OECD countries. The review excluded studies on non-OECD** populations as the cultural, institutional, and resource differences seemed large enough that they would prohibit comparison. Chapin Hall then defined a clear set of screening criteria for meta-analysis (a descriptive analysis, not a statistical one) and a thematic analysis (across key outcomes).

Using key search terms and parameters, Chapin Hall identified and screened 3,937 relevant publications. Ultimately, 87 publications of evaluative studies were identified and included in the in-depth review: 25 were related to process evaluations and the remaining were publications around 62 unique studies (see Figure 4).

WHAT WE LEARNED

There are several interventions that can measurably reduce the incidence and prevalence of youth homelessness and other common interventions that have not been rigorously evaluated. There is also a lack of evidence around key outcome areas, especially around housing stability and access to resources beyond crisis-response. Additional findings included:

- Most of the studies to date are on individual counseling and treatment interventions, with very little evidence on what works around prevention and outreach and service connection interventions.
- Nearly three-quarters of the interventions are fewer than 12 months in duration, with health (social-

** The OECD, or Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, is an intergovernmental organization with 38 member countries founded in 1961. Most of the member countries are described as very high income, democracies, and have strong cultural ties to the United States.

emotional well-being, access to services) and substance use being the primary outcomes of interest.

- Interventions are most successful if delivered where youth and their families can most easily access them (for example, at school, community centers, or homes), rather than having to go elsewhere to access them.

WHAT IS NEXT

Since the Voices of Youth Count study was conducted, new federal and state funding for programming to prevent and address youth homelessness has increased (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the Chaffee Act, and the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program). Updating the systematic review to include new evidence will further support knowledge of practical and evidence-based solutions to end youth homelessness. It will also help us better identify funding opportunities for new and necessary research to improve our understanding of both current and innovative intervention models.

Table 1 summarizes these learnings. It also proposes timing and a budget for carrying out these activities.

Table 1. Summary of Voices of Youth Count Key Data Collection Components and Opportunities

VoYC Component	Data collection under first VoYC	Opportunities for carrying out the next VoYC	Estimated cost, time for completion
<p>National Survey: Estimate of 12-month prevalence of youth homelessness in the U.S. for ages 13–25</p>	<p>Integration of brief 19-item youth homelessness module into to Gallup, Inc.’s U.S. Politics and Economics Daily Tracking Survey (DTS)</p> <p>Detailed follow-up interviews with a subsample of 150 youth</p>	<p>Develop an updated survey module for capturing self-reported data from youth based on a select set of questions related to their housing situation/homelessness over the last year, characteristics, and past experiences.</p> <p>Create a new, or support the use of an existing, nationally representative survey to capture data from a cross-sectional sample of adolescent minors (ages 13–17) and young adults (ages 18–25).</p>	<p>Cost: \$2 million for national data collection and follow-up interviews with subsample of population</p> <p>Timing: 24 months: 12–18 months for data collection (two rounds of surveys; subsample interviews); 6 months data analysis</p>
<p>In-depth interviews: In-depth interviews to capture the trajectories, experiences, and viewpoints of youth experiencing homelessness across five diverse counties throughout the U.S.</p>	<p>Selection of five diverse counties; recruitment of over 40 youth in each county. Data collection included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:1 interview with youth and young adults • The Housing Timeline Tool (mapping housing experience) • Background survey 	<p>Carry out in-depth interviews with youth in five diverse counties throughout the U.S.</p>	<p>Cost: \$1.5 million for in-depth interviews across five diverse counties</p> <p>Timing: 18 months: 12 months data collection; 6 months data analysis</p>
<p>Systematic Evidence Review: A comprehensive synthesis of evidence on programs and practices from evaluations of interventions to prevent or address youth homelessness</p>	<p>Review of nearly 4,000 relevant publications, narrowed down to 87 relevant publications that met rigorous inclusion criteria. Analysis of core outcomes, rigor of evaluations, research, and evaluation opportunities</p>	<p>Update the systematic evidence review to include evidence on new international, federal, and state investments in youth homelessness</p>	<p>Cost: \$500,000 for updated systematic review</p> <p>Timing: 8–12 months</p>

Policy Considerations

- **Appropriate funds to support youth homelessness counts every 3 years.** A commitment to funding a regular, national count like Voices of Youth Count would offer a significant contribution to the country's efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. Voices of Youth Count data continue to be widely used (they have been downloaded more than 15,000 times) and drive the national discourse. A 3-year update would account for the recent COVID-19 pandemic and experiences of instability for youth in the U.S.
- **Update data collection tools (quantitative survey modules and qualitative data collection tools) to carry out an updated national count on youth homelessness.** Refining current data collection tools will improve data capture on youth homelessness prevalence data for youth ages 13–25 and provide an updated understanding of youth pathways into homelessness.
- **Pass the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act of 2023 to reauthorize funding for critical programs and support regular and reliable data collection.** Renewed commitment to RHYA will provide necessary funding to federal grant programs to address youth homelessness and support regular and reliable data collection (every 3 years) on the prevalence and characteristics of youth.

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