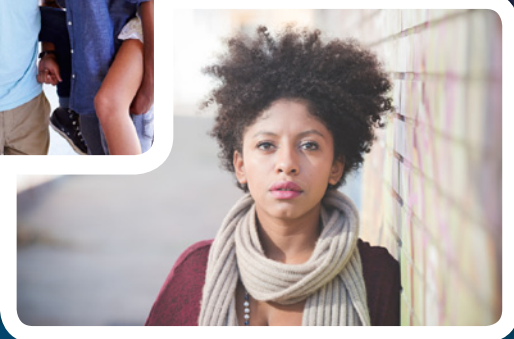




# HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA: FOCUS ON YOUTH

UNITED STATES INTERAGENCY  
COUNCIL ON HOMELESSNESS



## Introduction

To prevent and end homelessness in America, we need to have a clear understanding of who is at risk of homelessness and who experiences homelessness. We also need to be attentive to differences within and between subpopulations of people who are at risk or are experiencing homelessness. In our *Homelessness in America* series, we are summarizing the most relevant data and research regarding different subpopulations to help inform the work we must do, together, across the federal government, states, and local communities, to end homelessness once and for all.

In this *Focus on Unaccompanied Youth* brief, we review data and information that help us answer the following questions:

- What is the scale of youth homelessness?
- What do we know about unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness?
- What do we know about patterns of homelessness among unaccompanied youth?
- What do we know about youths' risks for experiencing homelessness?
- What are the most significant gaps in available data and our current understanding of unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness?

Other briefs in this series focus on Veterans, individual adults, people experiencing chronic homelessness, and families with children.

## What is the scale of youth homelessness?

Approximately 11% of all people experiencing homelessness as individuals on a given night are “unaccompanied” youth. We use the term unaccompanied youth to describe people who are under the age of 25 and are not part of a family with children or accompanied by their parent or guardian during their episode of homelessness.

On a given night, almost 41,000 unaccompanied youth were identified as experiencing unsheltered or sheltered homelessness in America, according to Point-in-Time (PIT) counts conducted in January 2017 by communities across the country.<sup>1</sup> Most of these unaccompanied youth (88% or 36,010 people) were between ages 18 and 25, and 12% (4,789 people) were under age 18. More than half of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness were unsheltered (55%), meaning that they were sleeping outdoors, in cars, or in other places not meant for human

Of the almost 41,000 unaccompanied youth identified as experiencing unsheltered or sheltered homelessness in the January 2017 Point-in-Time count, 88% were between ages 18 and 25 and 12% were under age 18.

<sup>1</sup> The January 2017 PIT count of unaccompanied youth provides a baseline measure that will be used to address future point-in-time trends and to measure progress within the PIT counts toward the goal of ending homelessness for unaccompanied youth.

habitation. PIT count data shows that a larger proportion of unaccompanied youth are unsheltered compared to other individuals experiencing homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, approximately 9,400 parenting youth (under age 25) and their approximately 12,150 children were identified as experiencing homelessness during the January 2017 PIT count. Most (95%) parenting youth and their children identified as experiencing homelessness were in shelters or transitional housing programs, and only about 5% of these young families were experiencing unsheltered homelessness.<sup>3</sup> During 2016, nearly 45,000 people between the age of 18 and 24 were in families with children who stayed in shelters or transitional housing programs at some time over the course of the year.<sup>4</sup> (Families in which the parent is a youth are not included in this brief, but they are described in the *Focus on Families with Children* brief.)

Data reported by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), which is collected by local education agencies (LEAs) about children ages 3 through grade 12 who are enrolled in public schools, including public pre-school programs, showed a 25% increase in the number of unaccompanied homeless youth between the 2015-16 and 2013-14 school years. This data, based on the ED definition which includes students who are sharing housing with other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (commonly referred to as “doubled-up”)<sup>5</sup>, shows that over the course of the 2015-2016 school year, approximately 111,700 students (8.6% of the total homeless student population) were identified as unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

For unaccompanied youth who experience sheltered or unsheltered homelessness, this experience is often part of a larger pattern of housing instability that may also include short stays with friends and family members, often referred to as “couch surfing.” Based on national survey data assessing the prevalence of youth homelessness broadly, researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago estimate that about one in ten young adults ages 18 to 25, and about one in 30 adolescents ages 13 to 17, experience some form of homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian over the course of a year. Most (72%) of the youth who experienced literal homelessness (sleeping in emergency shelters or in unsheltered locations) also spent some time “couch surfing” (staying with friends or family) during the year.<sup>6</sup>

About one in ten young adults ages 18 to 25, and about one in 30 adolescents ages 13 to 17, experience some form of unaccompanied homelessness over the course of a year.

### **What do we know about unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness?**

Studies of unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness provide important insights into the characteristics, needs, risks, and strengths or protective factors among these diverse youth, but it can be

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (December 2017). *The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR) Part 1: Point-In-Time Estimates of Homelessness*

<sup>3</sup> 2017 AHAR Part 1

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (December 2017). *The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR) Part 2: Estimates of Homelessness in the United States*

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Homeless Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. *Federal Data Summary: School Years 2013-14 to 2015-16* accessed at <https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/data-comp-1314-1516.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America. National Estimates*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

challenging to interpret or compare findings from multiple sources because of differences in methodology. Because many youth experience relatively short episodes of homelessness at different times during the year, youth who experience longer episodes of homelessness are more likely to be included in data that is collected at a point in time. Studies that focus on youth who are unsheltered, including youth who have experienced longer periods of unsheltered homelessness (who are sometimes referred to by researchers and service providers as “street youth”), may find higher rates of substance use, risky sexual behavior, and mental health disorders, compared to other studies that may include more youth who are newly experiencing homelessness or those who are staying in shelters or transitional programs. In addition, studies of youth who experience homelessness do not always distinguish between youth who are unaccompanied and youth who are experiencing homelessness with other family members.

Information regarding the demographic characteristics of unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness comes primarily from data obtained from PIT counts, HMIS data, and from performance data regarding students enrolled in public school districts and identified as experiencing homelessness at some point during the school year, as reported in ED’s annual federal data summary of its Education for Homeless Children and Youth program. Voices of Youth Count, an effort led by researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, is designed to generate a more complete understanding of youth homelessness by integrating findings from multiple research activities, including collaboration with 22 partner communities to improve youth count methodology and survey providers who serve youth, in depth interviews with youth in five communities, a national survey of households, and reviews of additional research and evidence.<sup>7</sup> Other research and reports referenced here help provide a deeper understanding of the characteristics and challenges of youth experiencing homelessness.

**Gender and sexual identity:** According to the January 2017 PIT count, the majority of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness are young men or boys. More than two-thirds of unsheltered unaccompanied youth, and 55% of sheltered unaccompanied youth, are male. Young women or girls represent more than one-third (37%) of unaccompanied youth and about 2% of unaccompanied youth are transgender. People who did not identify as male, female, or transgender make up a higher share among unaccompanied youth who are unsheltered (0.5%) compared to those who are sheltered (0.2%).<sup>8</sup>

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender youth are 120% more likely to report homelessness at some time during the year than their peers who identify as heterosexual and cisgender.

Youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender (LGBT) are over-represented among unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness. National survey data indicate that LGBT youth make up about 20% of all youth experiencing homelessness, and a higher proportion of the youth experiencing homelessness in large, urban communities.<sup>9</sup> The risk of youth reporting homelessness at some time during the year is 120% higher for LGBT youth compared to their peers who identify as heterosexual and cisgender.<sup>10</sup> National survey

<sup>7</sup> For more information about this approach see <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/approach/>

<sup>8</sup> 2017 AHAR Part 1

<sup>9</sup> Morton, M.H., Samuels, G.M., Dworsky, A., & Patel, S. (2018) *Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

<sup>10</sup> Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017).

data show that youth who are Black and LGBT, particularly young men, report the highest rates of homelessness.<sup>11</sup>

**Racial and ethnic demographics:** One third (34%) of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness at a point in time are African American, compared to fewer than one in six (15%) of all U.S. residents who are 18 to 24 years old. Nearly half (49%) of unaccompanied youth are white, compared to 54% of U.S. residents in the same age group.<sup>12</sup> One in 25 (4.2%) of unaccompanied youth identify as Native American, compared to about 1% of all U.S. residents ages 18 to 24. And 10% of unaccompanied youth identify as multiple races, compared to about 3% of U.S. resident youth.<sup>13</sup>

For African American youth, the relative risk of experiencing homelessness in the last 12 months is 83% higher compared to youth of other races.

One in four (25%) unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, and nearly one in three (31%) unaccompanied youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness are Hispanic or Latino.<sup>14</sup> In comparison, Hispanic youth are about one in five (21%) of the U.S. population ages 15 to 24.<sup>15</sup>

The relative risk of experiencing homelessness in the last 12 months is 83% higher for African American youth, compared to other races, and 33% higher for Hispanic youth, compared to non-Hispanic youth.<sup>16</sup>

**Geographic distribution of youth who experience homelessness:** National survey data shows that homelessness affects youth living in rural, suburban, and urban communities at similar rates.<sup>17</sup> More than half (55%) of the unaccompanied youth who were counted on a single night in January 2017, and nearly two-thirds (64%) of the unsheltered youth, were in major cities. About one-third of all unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness were counted in smaller cities, counties, and regional CoCs. California accounted for 38% of all unaccompanied youth, and 58% of unsheltered unaccompanied youth, counted in the nation in 2017.<sup>18</sup>

Youth who experience homelessness come from diverse communities nationwide. Some grew up in or near the cities in which they are now experiencing homelessness, while others left their communities when they separated from their families or lost their housing. Youth who experience homelessness in rural communities are more likely to be couch-surfing, compared to youth experiencing homelessness in urban and suburban communities, who are

<sup>11</sup> Morton, M.H., Samuels, G.M., Dworsky, A., & Patel, S. (2018)

<sup>12</sup> Comparison data are retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistic. (2017) "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups" [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_raq.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_raq.asp)

<sup>13</sup> 2017 AHAR Part 1

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2014) "The Hispanic Population in the United States: 2014" Table 2. Population by Sex, Age, and Hispanic Origin. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2014/demo/hispanic-origin/2014-cps.html>

<sup>16</sup> Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> 2017 AHAR Part 1

more likely to be in shelters.<sup>19</sup> This is most likely because there are fewer shelters or programs to serve youth experiencing homelessness in rural communities, although there may be other contributing factors.

**Students who experience homelessness:** As described above, ED collects data about unaccompanied students who are enrolled in public schools through grade 12 identified as experiencing homelessness at some point during the school year, including those who are staying with family or friends.<sup>20</sup> While school can be a buffer for some children who face hardship, conflict, and instability at home, youth who experience homelessness often report that they have had negative experiences with school, and they are less likely to have completed high school. Low school performance increases the risk of homelessness among youth, and is likely to limit access to employment opportunities, increasing financial hardship and barriers to housing stability.<sup>21</sup>

Other youth who are experiencing homelessness are attending college or participating in other post-secondary education and training programs. In Federal Student Aid applications (FAFSA) submitted in 2016-17, more than 32,000 youth under age 24 were identified as experiencing homelessness. This is probably an undercount of the number of unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness and seeking financial aid because of the way this data is collected.<sup>22</sup>

Many college students struggle to meet basic needs, including food and housing. A national survey of more than 43,000 college students at 66 institutions in 20 states and the District of Columbia found that 9% of university students and 12% of community college students experienced homelessness, broadly defined.<sup>23</sup> Many more students, including 36% of university students and 51% of community college students, were identified as housing insecure during the past year. The most common challenges were difficulty in paying rent or under-paying the amount of rent owed in the last 30 days.<sup>24</sup>

Some students were at greater risk of experiencing homelessness, housing insecurity, or food insecurity than others. The students who were at greatest risk were former foster youth. LGBTQ youth were at much higher risk of basic needs insecurity compared to other students. Black, multi-ethnic, and Native American students were significantly more likely to experience homelessness compared to other students.<sup>25</sup>

**Disabilities, health, and behavioral health conditions:** While national data is not available to describe the rates of disabilities or health conditions among unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness, there is some

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<sup>19</sup> Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Reports of data collected by the U.S. Department of Education do not provide details regarding the characteristics of unaccompanied youth. Unaccompanied youth were 8.6 percent of enrolled homeless students during 2015-16, and they are included in the data summary report that describes the characteristics of all students who are identified as experiencing homelessness.

<sup>21</sup> Sznajder-Murray, B., Jang, B., Slesnick, N. & Snyder, A. (2015) "Longitudinal Predictors of Homelessness: Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-97" *Journal of Youth Studies*. 18(8): 1015–1034

<sup>22</sup> For more information see <https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/he/fafsa-homeless-2016-2017.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> For this survey, students were considered homeless if they answered affirmatively to any of five questions focusing on lack of housing, including whether students stayed in a shelter, slept in a place not meant for housing, were evicted or thrown out of their home, or did not know where they would sleep. Students were identified as experiencing housing insecurity if they indicated they had difficulties paying housing costs or maintaining stable housing.

<sup>24</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S. et al. (2018) "Still Hungry and Homeless in College" Wisconsin Hope Lab

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

evidence that these youth experience significant challenges that impact their health, well-being, and academic success. For example, data collected by ED shows that nearly one in five (18%) students identified as experiencing homelessness has a disability.<sup>26</sup> The data does not indicate how many of these students with disabilities are unaccompanied.<sup>27</sup> Students with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness may encounter educational barriers including lack of timely assessment and access to services and lack of continuity of services when they move between schools. For unaccompanied students with learning disabilities, an additional challenge is the lack of support from a parent or other caring adult to advocate for the student to receive appropriate services and reasonable accommodations.<sup>28</sup>

Among youth who experience homelessness, rates of mental health and substance use disorders are significantly higher than among young people in the general population. While studies have not always been limited to youth who are unaccompanied, and they have used varying methodologies, including different definitions of homelessness and different settings for selecting study participants, the findings consistently show high rates of depression, PTSD, suicidal thoughts, substance use disorders, and other mental health conditions among youth who experience homelessness.<sup>29</sup> Many of these youth have co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, which often intersect with issues such as a trauma and risk behaviors.

Among youth who participated in interviews and focus groups for the Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study, almost two-thirds (62%) of participants reported symptoms associated with depression and nearly three-fourths (72%) reported that they had experienced major trauma, such as experiencing or being a witness to physical or sexual abuse. Four in five (80%) reported that they had experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress for more than a month. Nearly three-fourths (73%) of participants reported using alcohol, almost two-thirds (65%) reported using marijuana, and more than one-third (38%) reported they had used hard drugs (intravenous drugs, inhalants, cocaine, or methamphetamine) in the previous 12 months.<sup>30</sup>

Surveys of nationally representative samples of youth produced similar findings. For almost every substance, substance use prevalence rates were substantially higher among unsheltered youth who were living on the streets, compared to youth experiencing sheltered homelessness, and both groups used alcohol or drugs at higher rates compared to youth living in family households, after researchers controlled for demographic differences among these groups. Over half of unsheltered “street youth” reported using illicit drugs other than marijuana, while about one-third of sheltered youth and one-quarter of youth who had recent runaway or homeless experience reported other illicit drug use. High rates of substance use among youth experiencing homelessness

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<sup>26</sup> National Center for Homeless Education. *Federal Data Summary: School Years 2013-14 to 2015-16*

<sup>27</sup> Researchers in Canada are examining the connections between homelessness and intellectual, developmental and/or learning disabilities among youth who experience homelessness. For more information see <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10530789.2018.1480892> and [http://conference.caeh.ca/wp-content/uploads/COH10\\_The-invisibility-of-disability-for-homeless-youth\\_Steph-Baker-Collins.pdf](http://conference.caeh.ca/wp-content/uploads/COH10_The-invisibility-of-disability-for-homeless-youth_Steph-Baker-Collins.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> For more information see [https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/briefs/nav\\_idea\\_mv.pdf](https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/briefs/nav_idea_mv.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> 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)

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau (2016). “Final Report - Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study” retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/resource/street-outreach-program-data-collection-study>

may put these youth at greater risk for HIV infection and for other risks, including survival sex, suicide, and physical victimization, that often co-occur with alcohol and drug use.<sup>31</sup>

Another study of more than 600 unsheltered “street youth” in three cities examined connections between victimization and mental health disorders. Researchers found that youth who experienced victimization on multiple occasions were significantly more likely to meet diagnostic criteria for major depression or PTSD, compared to youth who experienced little or no victimization. Youth who were exposed to “indirect victimization” because they experienced threats and witnessed violence had similarly high rates of risk for depression or PTSD.<sup>32</sup>

**Vulnerability to victimization, exploitation, and trafficking:** Many youth who experience homelessness feel unsafe, and even short episodes of homelessness increase the vulnerability of young people to traumatic events that can have lifetime consequences. Youth who experience homelessness often report that they have been raped or sexually assaulted or that they fear being sexually victimized, and some report that they engage in sex work or “survival sex”, exchanging sex for food or a place to stay.<sup>33</sup>

The Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services administers the Street Outreach Program (SOP), serving runaway youth, youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness, and youth with increased risk of abuse and sexual exploitation. As part of the SOP Data Research Project, researchers from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducted surveys and focus group interviews with of 873 “homeless street youth” ages 14 to 21 in 11 cities. Among youth who participated in the study, victimization was common. More than 60% of these youth reported that they had been raped, beaten up, robbed, or otherwise assaulted. LGBT youth and youth who had formerly been in foster care reported higher levels of victimization, compared to other youth in the study.<sup>34</sup>

Youth who experience homelessness also experience higher risks of mortality, compared to other youth. One study examined rates of mortality among a sample of homeless street youth in San Francisco and found that they experienced a mortality rate more than ten times higher than the state’s general youth population. Most deaths were due to suicide or substance use.<sup>35</sup>

A ten-city study of more than 600 youth experiencing homelessness found that nearly one in five (19%) were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking. More than 14% were victims of sex trafficking, while 8% were trafficked for other forced labor, including forced drug dealing.<sup>36</sup> Some (3%) of the youth were trafficked for both sex and labor. More than half (58%) of youth who were sex-trafficking victims were in situations of force,

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<sup>31</sup> 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

<sup>32</sup> Bender, K., Ferguson, K., Thompson, S. & Langenderfer, L. (2014) Mental Health Correlates of Victimization Classes Among Homeless Youth. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 38 (2014): 1628-1635

<sup>33</sup> Heerde JA, Scholes-Balog KE & Hemphill SA. “Associations Between Youth Homelessness, Sexual Offenses, Sexual Victimization, and Sexual Risk Behaviors: A Systematic Literature Review.” (2015) *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44(1):181-212

<sup>34</sup> HHS (2016). “Final Report - Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study”

<sup>35</sup> 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* accessed at <https://peerj.com/articles/1909/>

<sup>36</sup> Sex trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or any commercial sex act involving a minor who is under the age of 18 years. For more information see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/archive/otip/resource/fact-sheet-sex-trafficking-english>



fraud, or coercion, while other youth (42%) were minors involved in commercial sex and survival sex. One in five young women and more than one in ten young men who participated in the study were victims of sex trafficking. Youth who identified as LGBTQ were twice as likely as non-LGBTQ youth to be trafficked for sex. Young people experiencing homelessness were often desperate for work and reported that other people took advantage of their need. More than nine in ten (91%) of youth who participated in the study reported that they were approached by people who offered work opportunities that were “too good to be true” and turned out to be fraudulent work situations, scams, or trafficking for sex or other labor. Youth who aged out of foster care were particularly vulnerable to traffickers and to engagement in the sex trade, particularly if they experienced homelessness after exiting foster care.<sup>37</sup>

A three-city study of 270 youth experiencing homelessness found that two-thirds (67%) of females and 90% of transgender youth reported being solicited for paid sex. Among youth who reported that they were victims of trafficking, 95% had a history of child maltreatment and nearly half had experienced sexual abuse. Youth who lacked a caring adult in their lives were more likely to be victims of sex trafficking, and most of the youth who were sex trafficked reported some involvement in the child welfare system. More than four in ten (41%) of sex-trafficking victims had at least one out-of-home placement in their lives, and many had experienced frequent moves.<sup>38</sup>

**Normal adolescent development can make unaccompanied youth particularly vulnerable to unsafe situations and risk-taking behaviors when they experience homelessness:** Compared to adults, young people are naturally more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, such as unprotected sexual activity and substance use. The brains of teenagers and young adults are still developing until they are in their early twenties, and this has implications for their skill development and executive functioning, including decision-making, inhibition, planning, and reasoning. Until young people mature, they are more likely to engage in impulsive actions, risk taking, and sensation seeking. These risks and behaviors are not unique to youth who experience homelessness, but young people who are on their own without caring adults are more likely to be exposed to unsafe or risky situations.

Among young people who experience homelessness, exposure to trauma and adversity in childhood may have impacts on brain development that contribute to impairments in executive functioning and impulse control and increase risk-taking behaviors.<sup>39</sup> Homelessness is also associated with several HIV risk behaviors, such as having sex without a condom or having multiple sex partners. Compared to adults who experience homelessness, unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness are more likely to engage in HIV risk behaviors.<sup>40</sup> Youth who

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<sup>37</sup> Murphy, L. (2016) Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten-City Study Full Report. Modern Slavery Research Project, Loyola University New Orleans

<sup>38</sup> Wolfe, D.S., Greeson, J.K., Wasch, S. & Treglia, D. (2018) Human Trafficking Prevalence and Child Welfare Risk Factors Among Homeless Youth: A Multi-City Study. The Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice and Research, University of Pennsylvania

<sup>39</sup> Piche, J, Kaylegian, J., Smith, D. & Scott J. Hunter, S.J. (2018) “The Relationship between Self-Reported Executive Functioning and Risk-Taking Behavior in Urban Homeless Youth” *Behavioral Sciences* 8(6)

<sup>40</sup> Santa Maria, D., Hernandez, D. et. Al. (2018) “Current Age, Age at First Sex, Age at First Homelessness, and HIV Risk Perceptions Predict Sexual Risk Behaviors among Sexually Active Homeless Adults” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15(2): 218. and Santa Maria, D., Narendorf, S.C., Ha, Y. & Bezette-Flores, N. (2015) “Exploring Contextual Factors of Youth Homelessness and Sexual Risk Behaviors: A Qualitative Study” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 47(4): 195-201

experience homelessness are also sometimes forced to engage in unsafe sexual practices when they are being exploited and trafficked.

### What do we know about patterns of homelessness among unaccompanied youth?

Most youth who experience homelessness return home or to other stable housing quickly, often within a few days or weeks, and they often stay housed for long periods. One study of youth experiencing homelessness in a large Midwest metropolitan area found that two-thirds of youth returned to housing, usually their parents' homes, within one month of baseline interviews.<sup>41</sup> Another study of youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles found that 30% returned home within six months.<sup>42</sup> Older youth (ages 18 to 20) were significantly less likely to return home, compared to youth under age 18.<sup>43</sup>

Most youth who experience homelessness return home or to other stable housing quickly, often within a few days or weeks, and stay housed for long periods.

### What do we know about youths' risks for experiencing homelessness?

In recent years, researchers, federal agencies, and community partners have worked to expand our understanding of homelessness among unaccompanied youth, and strengthened data helps us better understand who is experiencing or more likely to experience homelessness. Youth who experience homelessness reflect the diversity of young people living in the United States, but some youth are at significantly greater risk of homelessness. There are both risk and protective factors that increase or reduce the likelihood that a young person will experience homelessness.

Pathways or risk factors that contribute to homelessness for youth include unstable family life, including experiencing housing instability or homelessness as a child, severe family conflict, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or abandonment by parents and caregivers, as well as caregiver and youth substance use and mental health disorders. Youth often report severe family conflict as the primary reason for their homelessness. Some youth may be rejected or abused by their families because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>44</sup>

Children and youth may enter the child welfare system as a result of family conflict, abuse, or a parent or caregiver's behavioral health condition, and out-of-home placement may be part of the pathway that leads to youth homelessness. A longitudinal study of youth who aged out of foster care in three Midwest states found that by age 23 or 24, almost 30% of the youth had been homeless for at least one night since exiting foster care.

<sup>41</sup> Braciszewski, J.M., Toro, P.A., Stout, R.L. (April 2016) Understanding the Attainment of Stable Housing: A Seven-Year Longitudinal Analysis of Homeless Adolescents. *Journal of Community Psychology* 44(3): 358-366.

<sup>42</sup> Tucker JS, Edelen MO, Ellickson PL, Klein DJ. (2011) Running Away from Home: A Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Risk Factors and Young Adult Outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*; 40(5): 507-518.

<sup>43</sup> Milburn, N.G, Rosenthal, D., et.al (June 2007) Newly Homeless Youth Typically Return Home. *Journal of Adolescent Health*; 40(6): 574-576

<sup>44</sup> Hooks Wayman, R. A. (2008) "Homeless Queer Youth: National Perspectives on Research, Best Practices, and Evidence Based Interventions" *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 7 (2: 13). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol7/iss2/13>

Nearly as many reported that they had couch-surfed. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of study participants who experienced homelessness did so within the first year after leaving foster care.<sup>45</sup>

ACYF is funding a multi-phase grant program to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system. While the Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) program is not focused on young people who are currently experiencing homelessness as unaccompanied youth, it will help to inform efforts to reduce the risks or likelihood of homelessness among sub-groups of youth.

States and communities in the YARH program have been engaged in cross-sector data analysis to better understand the connections between child welfare involvement and risk of homelessness, and to identify both risk factors (e.g., number of foster care placements, history of running away from placements, juvenile justice involvement, etc.) and protective factors (e.g., placement with relatives, enrollment in post-secondary education, etc.) that increase or reduce the likelihood that a young person will experience homelessness.<sup>46</sup> Using data from a nationally representative sample of youth, researchers found that multiple runaway episodes prior to age 18 predicted homelessness among youth in early adulthood (by age 25). A single runaway episode, however, was not associated with increased risk of homelessness.<sup>47</sup> Youth who have multiple runaway episodes are likely to face greater individual and family challenges compared to youth who run away once and return to their families.

Young people who age out of foster care face significant risks of experiencing homelessness. For example, in the state of Washington, approximately one in four youth who aged out of care during 2011 or 2012 experienced homelessness over the next 12 months. “Crossover youth,” who had been involved in both the foster care and juvenile justice systems, were more likely to experience homelessness. Youth who had experienced multiple

In one study, more than half of street youth reported that they became homeless for the first time because they were asked to leave home by a parent or caregiver.

placements in congregate care, African American youth, and those who had changed schools frequently, also faced significantly higher risks of experiencing homelessness after aging out of foster care.<sup>48</sup>

Among youth who participated in the interviews and focus groups for the ACYF Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study, more than half reported that they became homeless for the first time because they were asked to leave home by a parent or caregiver. About one in four (25%) reported that they first became homeless because they were unable to find

<sup>45</sup> Dworsky, A. & Courtney, M. (March 2010) Assessing the Impact of Extending Care Beyond 18 on Homelessness: Emerging Findings from the Midwest Study. Chapin Hall, University of Chicago

<sup>46</sup> Christine Ross, C and Selekman, R. (2017) Analysis of Data on Youth With Child Welfare Involvement at Risk of Homelessness. OPRE Report #2017-54 retrieved from [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/yarh\\_analysis\\_of\\_data\\_2017\\_54\\_508\\_compliant.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/yarh_analysis_of_data_2017_54_508_compliant.pdf)

For more information see : <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/building-capacity-to-evaluate-interventions-for-youth-with-child-welfare-involvement-at-risk-of-homelessness>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ford Shah, M., Qinghua Liu, Q., Mancuso, D. et. Al. (2015) Youth at Risk of Homelessness: *Identifying Key Predictive Factors among Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in Washington State*. Department of Social and Health Services | Research and Data Analysis Division. Olympia Washington

a job, and nearly one in four reported that they became homeless because they were being physically abused or beaten (24%) or experiencing problems in the home due to a parent or caretaker's drug or alcohol abuse (23%). On average, youth had been experiencing homelessness for a total of nearly two years (23 months) and reported first becoming homeless at age 15. Fewer than one in three (30%) reported that they had the option of returning home. About half of these youth had been in foster care, and youth who had experienced foster care had been homeless for much longer, compared to youth who had never been in foster care.<sup>49</sup>

Factors associated with multiple or lengthy episodes of homelessness among youth include a history of involvement in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems and a history of exposure to abuse and violence at home.<sup>50</sup> Youth who experience prolonged homelessness are at greater risk for substance use, including use of intravenous drugs, methamphetamine, and other hard drugs.<sup>51</sup>

Other factors associated with prolonged homelessness among youth include being a high school dropout, being unemployed or working "under the table," being unsheltered or moving between cities, having been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant, and having run away from a family home, group home, or foster care.<sup>52</sup> Youth who experience prolonged homelessness also have higher rates of mental health disorders, including depression PTSD, and higher rates of traumatic experiences including physical abuse, sexual molestation, and sexual assault. Mental health disorders, such as psychosis that first becomes symptomatic during adolescence and early adulthood, can increase risk for homelessness.<sup>53</sup> One study of youth experiencing homelessness in Australia found that 44% of youth reported substance use disorders and 42% reported mental health disorders when they first became homeless, and these rates later increased to 66% for substance use disorders and 70% for mental health disorders.<sup>54</sup>

### **What are the most significant gaps in available data and our current understanding of unaccompanied youth who experience homelessness?**

There continues to be a concerted effort to more closely align existing data on youth to better understand the scope, scale, and characteristics of youth homelessness. Federal agencies, states, and communities continue to use the data they have to better understand and respond to local needs. There remains a need, however, for more detailed understanding of the pathways in and out of youth homelessness and precipitating causes. There is also a need for expanded evidence regarding the impact of housing and services interventions on a range of youth-level outcomes and on achieving sustained and stable exits from homelessness.

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<sup>49</sup> HHS, ACF Family and Youth Services Bureau (2016). "Final Report - Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study" (op. cit.)

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/resource/street-outreach-program-data-collection-study>

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation (2017). "Factors Associated with Prolonged Youth Homelessness". Accessed at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/factors-associated-prolonged-youth-homelessness>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation (2017). "Serious Mental Illness and Prolonged Youth Homelessness". Accessed at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/257811/SMIProlongedYouthHomelessness.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Martijn, C., & Sharpe, L. (2006). Pathways to youth homelessness. *Social Science and Medicine*, 62(1), 1-12.

Areas where further data and research are needed include:

### **Data collection and analysis**

- Better nationally representative data, including:
  - A better understanding of geographic mobility among unaccompanied youth and the characteristics of youth who may leave their home communities when they experience homelessness.
  - More information about the prevalence of disabilities among youth who experience homelessness, including developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, and behavioral health conditions.
- Analysis of the thoroughness of PIT, HMIS, and school district data sources in identifying youth experiencing homelessness and the degree to which unaccompanied youth are being appropriately identified and included across multiple data sets, including data from other sources that may include housing status information.

### **Factors contributing to entries into and exits from homelessness**

- Deeper understanding of the impact of race, gender, sexual identity, and other demographic factors on entries into and exits from homelessness.
- Improved documentation of the patterns and trajectories of homelessness among unaccompanied youth living in rural areas.
- More research about housing instability and homelessness among youth who have been involved in child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and about the impact of multi-sector efforts to support system-involved youth as they transition out of public systems and into adulthood.
- Greater understanding of which youth are most at risk of experiencing homelessness to tailor prevention and diversion strategies that include supports from mainstream systems.
- Better understanding of the patterns of homelessness among unaccompanied youth, including:
  - Differentiating among different experiences and risks associated with short-term and long-term homelessness among youth who stay in different types of settings.
  - Understanding which youth who do experience homelessness are at greatest risk for experiencing chronic homelessness.

### **Short- and long-term impacts of homelessness on core outcomes**

- Better understanding of the long-term consequences of youth homelessness, including long-term impacts on adult homelessness, health, and economic opportunity.
- Expanded understanding of the impact on long-term educational outcomes of maintaining student enrollment in schools of origin among children and youth exiting homelessness.
- Expanded understanding of the needs of students who are enrolled in post-secondary education or job training programs and the impact of housing stability on successful completion of these education and training programs.

**Tailored services and housing solutions**

- Stronger assessment and understanding of family interventions that positively impact family functioning, reduce conflicts, and support safe and stable reunification for young people exiting homelessness, particularly among youth most at risk of repeated or prolonged episodes of homelessness.<sup>55</sup>
- Better understanding of the types of housing assistance and program models (e.g., time-limited rental assistance, host homes, transitional housing, non-time-limited supportive housing, etc.) that have the greatest impact on youth-level outcomes associated with stable housing, permanent connections, education, employment, and well-being, and community-level outcomes, including reducing the number of youth experiencing homelessness.
- Longitudinal studies of unaccompanied youth to identify patterns of housing instability and homelessness, characteristics of the most vulnerable youth, and patterns of service utilization and outcomes, to inform the design of interventions that might identify and more effectively serve those at greatest risk for homelessness and housing instability.

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Pergamit, M, Gelatt, J. & Martin, M.C. (2016) Family Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness. Urban Institute. Washington, DC retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/205401/FamilyInterventions.pdf>