

What Does the Evidence Say about Youth Homelessness?

White Paper for the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council

Submitted on behalf of John Burton Advocates for Youth

Introduction

While individuals under age 24 comprise 9.5 percent of the homeless population in California, there is little state policy and even less state funding to address their needs. This is due in large part to the State's approach to youth homelessness, which has historically mirrored that of the federal government, prioritizing the chronically homeless and veterans. The creation of the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council is an important opportunity to take a new, fresh and decidedly Californian approach to youth homelessness. Instead of waiting for individuals to become chronically homeless, this approach recognizes the strategic value of addressing homelessness earlier, to prevent chronic homelessness and create opportunities for stability and prosperity in adulthood. The purpose of the current white paper is to inform the approach to be developed by the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council by summarizing the most recently available research on homeless youth and recommending specific policies to incorporate into the state's plan for action.

Finding #1: Youth homelessness is more prevalent than previously understood.

Historically, the number of homeless youth in California and nationally has not been well known. Homeless youth were not included in the annual Point-in-Time count required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) until 2015 and when they were included, it was well understood that the methodology resulted in a considerable "undercount." The exact size of this undercount was not known until 2018 when the first national estimate of youth homelessness was conducted by the University of Chicago at Chapin Hall. This study, known as *Voices of Youth Count* found that the prevalence of homelessness among minors and young adults, age 18 to 25, is much higher than previously thought. This landmark study concluded that over a 12-month period one in 30 minors and one in ten young adults aged 18 to 25 experience homelessness. Based on this prevalence, 308,700 minors and 3.5 million 18 to 25 years-olds experience homelessness each year in California. These figures are considerably higher than the number of unaccompanied minors in the most recent HUD Point-In-Time Count (2018), which found that there were 1,426 homeless minors and 10,970 homeless individuals aged 18 to 25.

Policy recommendation:

- **Ensure state investment is proportionate to need:** The policy implication of this finding is that considerable state investment is required to address youth homelessness. The current \$1 million ongoing annual state investment is not adequate.
- **Incorporate homeless youth in every strategy developed by the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council:** For every strategy developed by the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council, it must consider this large, historically overlooked population and include provisions to meet their diverse needs. This is in contrast to a single "homeless youth" program.

Finding #2: Youth without a high school diploma are much more likely to experience homelessness, along with unmarried parents, low-income, LGBTQ, Black and Hispanic youth.

Due to a lack of research on homeless youth, the experiences of different subpopulations of youth are largely unknown. This has resulted in a failure to develop specific, evidence-informed interventions to meet the needs of subpopulations of homeless youth who are more or less vulnerable to homelessness. For example, the main source of federal funding for homeless youth, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, requires grantees to demonstrate competency in youth development generally, but does not have different programs and specific interventions to address the needs of youth who are known to be more likely to experience homelessness. Likewise, the only source of ongoing funding to address youth homelessness is the Homeless Youth and Exploitation Program which provides \$1 million annually to four organizations. This funding is targeted to “homeless youth” generally without any requirement or strategy to serve youth who are disproportionately, at risk.

The release of *Voices of Youth Count* dramatically increased the knowledge level about specific populations of homeless youth and provided important information about those subpopulations who are considerably more likely to experience homelessness than others. The study found that youth with less than a high school diploma or GED are most at risk of homelessness, a full 346 percent higher risk than their peers who completed high school. Second most at risk are unmarried parenting youth, who had a 200 percent higher risk of reporting homelessness. Also at heightened risk were youth who reported an annual household income of less than \$24,000 (162% higher), identified as LGBTQ (120% higher), were Black or African American youth (83% higher) and were Hispanic, non-White youth (33% higher).

Policy recommendation:

- **Target highest risk groups:** Given newly available research about the disproportionate prevalence of homelessness for specific subpopulations of youth, it is important that the policies and programs developed by the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council specifically target these groups, notably youth with less than a high school diploma or GED who are the most at-risk of any subpopulation.
- **Engage the K to 12 system to identify highest risk youth:** This research highlights the opportunity to address youth homelessness by working with K-12 partners to identify and assist youth who are not on track to complete high school or receive their GED. It also underscores the importance of adding the California Department of Education to the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council, which is currently under consideration in the State Legislature.

Finding #3: Many minors become homeless due to maltreatment.

Historically, the primary explanation for youth homelessness has been family conflict. A 2007 review of the literature found that the most commonly cited causes of conflict included, “step-parent relationships, sexual activity, pregnancy, sexual orientation, school problems, and alcohol or drug use.” While family conflict is certainly an important aspect of youth homelessness, new research indicates that abuse and neglect play a larger role in youth homelessness than previously thought. A 2015 study examined the experiences of homeless youth in three cities: Denver, Los Angeles and Austin and found that 79 percent of homeless youth had experienced two or more forms of abuse prior to becoming homeless. Slightly under half of the sample (45.8%) reported a combination of physical and emotional abuse, while nearly one third (30%) reported experiencing all three types of victimization (emotional, physical, and sexual abuse) before leaving home.

Policy recommendation:

- **Improve risk assessment for adolescents:** In most counties in California, the risk assessment tool used to evaluate adolescents is not differentiated from the risk assessment used for younger children. This approach fails to identify circumstances that pose a genuine safety risk for adolescents and leads them to leave their home and become homeless before they can be served by the system designed to meet the needs of maltreated children, California's dependency system. As the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council develops its approach to addressing youth homelessness, it should actively engage the California Department of Social Services and evaluate alternatives to better identify maltreatment among adolescents in the community.
- **Improve access to the child welfare system and coordination between the child welfare and homelessness response systems:** Minors who have experienced what meets the legal definition of maltreatment should not be served by a homelessness response system, but rather by the dependency system. To enable this, the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council should include requirements for coordination, integration and training for any funding for homeless minors.

Finding #4: While homeless, youth experience high rates of victimization.

While being homeless is dangerous for all individuals, it poses unique risks to the personal safety of homeless youth, including sexual exploitation. The finding that homeless youth are at a heightened risk for victimization is consistent throughout the literature on homeless youth. Among the many studies that have drawn this conclusion is a 2016 study, which examined the experience of homeless youth participating in the Street Outreach Program (SOP), administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), Administration on Children, Youth and Families. The study found high rates of victimization: 14.5 percent of participants had been sexually assaulted or raped, 32.3 percent had been beaten up, 18.3 percent had been assaulted with a weapon, 40.5 percent had been threatened with a weapon, and 40.8 percent had been robbed. Almost two-thirds (60.8%) had experienced at least one of these types of victimization. The study also found that for every additional month spent homeless, the likelihood of being victimized while homeless increased by three percent.

The same multi-city study noted earlier also found high rates of victimization: 33.4 percent of participants reported one form of street victimization and 28 percent reported two forms. Physical assault was the most commonly reported form of victimization (79 percent of those who were victimized). In addition to victimization, homeless youth are at a heightened risk for death. A 2016 study examined the six-year mortality rate and found that homeless youth in San Francisco experienced a mortality rate more than ten times that of the state's general youth population.

Policy recommendation:

- **Invest in emergency housing:** Given the tremendous risk youth face while homeless for even a short period of time, it is essential that the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council invest in emergency housing at a level that will ensure homeless youth can reasonably access it on their first night of homelessness, particularly for minors. Currently in California, we are very far from this goal. There are just 11 runaway and homeless youth shelters for minors, statewide.

- **Transform youth shelters into family service centers:** Unlike adults, homeless minors are still attached in some capacity to their families. Modern practices in youth shelters have adapted to this reality and are providing a range of services both for the individual youth and often their extended family. For example, Bill Wilson Center in Santa Clara County commonly has homeless youth in their shelter for minors, who are the older children of homeless families. Many more examples exist, where shelters for minors are assisting the larger family system, with the goal of safety reunifying the child with their family. Given this, the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council should consider formalizing and funding this approach.

Finding #5: The experience of homelessness for a youth increases their likelihood of experiencing a drug or alcohol disorder.

Homeless youth experience high rates of drug and alcohol use: a 2018 nationwide representative study of homeless youth found that 29 percent of youth were reported as having a substance use problem. Additionally, there is evidence that the experience of being homeless positively contributes to the likelihood that youth will develop a substance abuse problem. Researchers point to a several factors that contribute to this, including the impact of victimization while homeless and transient. A 2011 study found that individuals who enter adult homelessness from youth homelessness are more likely to develop a substance abuse problem than those who become homeless through other channels. Specifically, they were 15 times more likely to develop a substance abuse problem than those who enter homelessness through a housing crisis, over three times more likely to develop a substance abuse problem than those who enter homelessness through family crisis and 2.7 times more likely to develop a substance abuse problem than those who enter homelessness due to a mental health issue.

Policy recommendation:

- **Proposition 64 is an appropriate use of funding to address youth homelessness:** There are many studies that substantiate the finding noted above, which establish the unique relationship between youth homelessness and substance abuse problems. Given this, preventing homelessness among youth has the effect of preventing a substance abuse problem, which is a stated goal of Proposition 64. In both the Findings and Declarations and Intent sections, Proposition 64 states that its intention is to provide substance abuse treatment and prevention for youth. Given this, the Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council should work actively to access this important source of funding to address youth homelessness in California.

Finding #6: Evidence about “what works” to prevent or address youth homelessness is limited.

In the last decade, the amount of information about who experiences youth homelessness, why they experience it and what the experience entails has grown. However, there is not a research-informed consensus about what housing interventions effectively reduce youth homelessness. This is in contrast to adult homeless, which research has concluded is positively impacted most significantly by Rapid Rehousing, permanent affordable housing and housing approaches that incorporate the principals of Housing First. The federal government acknowledges this lack of consensus in its Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program, which has granted \$151 million to 36 communities across the county to develop and evaluate approaches to addressing youth homelessness. Over the next five years, this federal investment in evaluation will hopefully shed new, much needed light on the most effective, evidence-based strategies to address youth homelessness. Until then, however, there remain unanswered questions about how to prevent and address youth homelessness.

Policy recommendation:

- **Test a range of approaches for homeless youth:** It is important that a range of approaches to address youth homelessness are tested. This includes the interventions historically funded by HUD, such as Rapid Rehousing, permanent supportive housing and others. It also includes new approaches that may be developed with the specific needs of homeless youth in mind.
- **Include funding to rigorously evaluate tested approaches:** The lack of evidence to endorse specific housing interventions for homeless youth speaks to the importance of investing state funding to rigorously evaluate early approaches so that the best, most effective strategies can be selected for long-term investment. This is both a responsible use of scarce public resources and an ethical approach to addressing youth homelessness.

REFERENCES

Auerswald CL, Lin JS, Parriott A. 2016. Six-year mortality in a street-recruited cohort of homeless youth in San Francisco, California. *PeerJ* 4:e1909.

Auerswald C, Lin J, Petry L, Hyatt S. Hidden in plain sight: An assessment of youth inclusion in point-in-time counts of California's unsheltered homeless population. Sacramento CA: California Homeless Youth Project; 2013.

Bender, Kimberly, Brown, Samantha M., Thompson, Sanna J., Ferguson, Kristin M. & Langenderfer, Lisa. (2015) Multiple Victimization Before and After Leaving Home Associated With PTSD, Depression, and Substance Use Disorder Among Homeless Youth. *Child Maltreatment* Vol. 20(2) 115-124.

Chamberlain, Chris & Johnson, Guy (2011). Pathways into adult homelessness. *Journal of Sociology*, Volume 49(1): 60–77.

Ferguson, K. M., Bender, K., & Thompson, S. J. (2013). Predictors of transience among homeless emerging adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29, 213–240.

Greene JM, Ennett ST, Ringwalt CL. Substance use among runaway and homeless youth in three national samples. *Am J Public Health*. 1997;87:229–35.

Heerde JA, Hemphill SA, Scholes-Balog KE. Fighting for survival: A systematic review of physically violent behavior perpetrated and experienced by homeless young people. *Aggress Violent Behav*. 2014;19:50–66 HHS (2016). "Final Report - Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study."

Medlow S, Klineberg E, Steinbeck K. The health diagnoses of homeless adolescents: A systematic review of the literature. *J Adolesc*. 2014;37:531–42.

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.