



Homelessness Among Youth

THE PROBLEM

While the exact number of youth experiencing homelessness is difficult to determine given varying definitions of homelessness and the age range considered as youth, the most recent information from the Dept. of Education reports 52,950 unaccompanied homeless youth were supported through school-based programs in 2008-09. According to HUD data, 22,631 young people who live on their own used emergency or transitional housing services in 2009. It is widely agreed this is a serious undercount as unaccompanied youth are often unconnected to services or shelters.

Youth often leave home as a result of a severe family conflict which might include physical and/or sexual abuse. One-quarter of former foster youth experience homelessness within four years of exiting foster care. Too often, youth are separated from other family members when shelter policies force older adolescent males to be housed in adult shelters.

Research shows a high prevalence of depression, suicide initiations, and other mental health disorders among youth who are homeless. Chronic physical health conditions are common as are high rates of substance abuse disorders. Many youth who become homeless have histories of academic difficulties including suspension and expulsion. Homeless youth engage in risky behaviors and have high rates of prior arrests and convictions.

More needs to be known about the costs associated with youth homelessness but we know that high rates of medical and behavioral health care and incarceration are costly. These costs compound over a lifetime as today's homeless youth become tomorrow's homeless adults.

THE PLAN

Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness sets the goal of ending homelessness for youth (along with families and children) in 10 years. While all the objectives in the Plan would affect youth in particular ways, one objective specifically addresses the needs of youth:

Advance Health and Housing Stability for Youth Aging Out of Systems such as Foster Care and Juvenile Justice

Every year, 30,000 youth age out of foster care and 20,000-25,000 age out of the juvenile justice system. Most have limited options for housing, income, and family or other social support. Improved discharge planning that connects youth to education, housing, health and behavioral health support, income supports, and health insurance coverage will improve re-entry back into the community. Targeted outreach to identify the most vulnerable youth experiencing homelessness and improved access to stable health care, housing, and housing supports are also critical strategies in ending and preventing homelessness among youth.

SIGNATURE INITIATIVE

To address the needs of youth who are at extreme risk of becoming homeless, USICH will collaborate with the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs to establish content for the federal website on youth, www.FindYouthInfo.gov, which will be utilized to provide technical assistance and other information about youth homelessness, the needs of youth at risk of homelessness, and federal resources available to support youth who are or who are at risk of becoming homeless. The Solutions Desk, www.solutionsdesk.ou.edu, another project of the Working Group, will incorporate best practices for homelessness prevention, rapid re-housing, and the provision of services for youth who are currently homeless. Looking forward, USICH, with input from the Working Group, will draft a framework for a pilot program to address the housing and service needs of youth in transition.

A 2005 study of 18- to 21-year-old youth experiencing homelessness found that two-thirds had not obtained a high school diploma or a GED certificate at the point of program intake.

(Barber, C.C., 2005)