

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SHOULD BE RARE, BRIEF, AND ONE-TIME

Part II: Decreasing the time a youth remains homeless and the percentage of youth who return to homelessness after exiting.

A white paper prepared for the
State of California's Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council

by

The Ending Youth Homelessness Catalyst Group*

of

UC Berkeley's Innovations for Youth (i4Y)
and the UC Berkeley School of Public Health

Natasha Borgen
Julie Lo
Emily Liu
Colette Auerswald

With the support of:

Sherilyn Adams
Mary Kate Bacalao
Shahera Hyatt
Ilsa Lund
Krupa Modi
Haley Mousseau

*The UC Berkeley Ending Youth Homelessness Catalyst Group is a coalition of Berkeley faculty, staff, students and local stakeholders committed to end youth homelessness in the Bay Area and on the Berkeley campus.

**Youth homelessness as we now experience it is relatively new.
We have the tools to end youth homelessness in our lifetime.**

The UC Berkeley Ending Youth Homelessness Catalyst Group proposes that the State of California should employ evidence-based strategies to ensure youth homelessness is:

- **rare**, by reducing the number of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness;
- **brief**, by decreasing the length of time a young person remains homeless; and
- **one-time**, by decreasing the percentage of youth who return to homelessness after exiting.

This paper first provides recommended principles to ensure that episodes of youth homeless are brief and that youth who exit homelessness do not return to homelessness, followed by specific policy recommendations.

Youth homelessness refers to individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (U.S. Department of Education)¹

I. Principles and findings that can inform the the State of California should employ to ensure that episodes of youth homelessness are brief and one-time include:

1. Like housed youth, youth experiencing homelessness (YEH) in California are diverse. They vary in their pathways to homelessness, time on the street, housing status, integration into services, race/ethnicity, family history, age, and individual strengths. LGBTQ youth, African American youth, Latino youth, pregnant or parenting youth, and youth with a history of involvement in the child welfare or criminal justice systems are particularly overrepresented among YEH.^{2,3} Successful strategies to prevent homelessness, shorten episodes of homelessness, and ensure that episodes of homelessness are one-time must include strategies relevant to all youth as well as strategies specific to distinct sub-populations.

2. Our research regarding the life cycle of youth homelessness has policy implications for the State of California. This research suggests that youth who are newly on the street, settled on the street, in crisis, or trying to leave the street have distinct needs.^{4,5,6}

Our research found that 4 out of 10 youth experiencing homeless were experiencing an acute crisis threatening their access to basic needs or safety. YEH in crisis have the highest rates of making choices that may harm their long-term health and wellbeing, including but not limited to the onset or escalation of substance abuse. The consequences of these choices may place them in contact with frontline service providers in multiple sectors (i.e., schools, emergency rooms, police, jails, and libraries) who are well-placed to identify youth in crisis and intervene accordingly.

Similarly, 4 out of 10 youth experiencing homeless were actively trying to leave the street. Our findings contradict the commonly held myth that youth are choosing and prefer to be homeless.

3. Our research and the experience of communities of color illustrate the fact that some subgroups of youth experiencing homelessness do not self-identify as homeless, and therefore may be invisible to providers and policymakers.experiencing homelessness. Youth who do not identify as homeless may not see themselves as targeted by available services.⁷

“I was homeless for a matter of years and I stayed here, there, you know with friends, people I met, wherever. It was scary. I was like fourteen. I never wanted to tell anybody. I had to deal with it by myself because no one knew but me. I thought people would treat me funny or be mean towards me. Like, ‘You’re a bum.’”
-Young African American woman

4. Youth who maintain connections to their family are less likely to make harmful choices or to suffer the negative consequences of those choices. Our work found that youth with such connections or who have connections to people who are not homeless are less likely to have sexual partners who are injection drug users or to become infected with a sexually transmitted disease.⁸

Box 1. In a study of 300 San Francisco YEH, the majority of youth had no regular social contact with anyone stably housed. If they did, they were more likely to practice safe sex.⁸

25%

of female YEH who **were not** connected with their family had an injection drug using partner

0%

of female YEH who **were** connected with their family had an injection drug using partner

5. Our research shows that stigmatizing beliefs and misconceptions about YEH decrease the chance that a young person will reach out for and/or receive the services they need. Stigma operates on multiple levels. Stigmatizing attitudes of service providers, legal authorities, and the public lead to the discrimination, criminalization, and violence against YEH. In turn, the internalization of these attitudes damages the mental and physical well-being of YEH, exacerbating the negative outcomes and disparities that YEH suffer. **A successful strategy to address youth homelessness must intentionally address and eliminate the stigma experienced by YEH.**^{9,10}

“Then you come out here and you have cops beating you awake or taking you to jail for not waking up or taking you to jail for getting high, just to, you know, ease what they already done, it’s just – yeah.”
-Young White Man

II. Policy recommendations that follow these findings:

A. Across all state-funded programs:

Mandate trainings for all staff working in systems that work with youth experiencing homelessness regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, healthy sexual development, issues specific to LGBTQ youth, structural competency (understanding how inequalities result from the social conditions that determine resources), and principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.^{11,12,13}

Broaden eligibility criteria for youth such that youth can report unstable housing without having to identify as being homeless to receive services, particularly when first accessing services.

“He tried to say to everybody, ‘if don’t y’all of you be quiet, all of y’all is gonna be cut out.’ And I said to him, ‘That’s easy for you to say because you have somewhere to go.’”

That’s insensitive as hell to tell people that have nowhere to go that: ‘I’m gonna put you out.’ You know?”
-Young African American Man

B. In the housing sector, California should

Expand the range of youth-specific housing options to meet their diverse needs by:

1. Developing models of subsidized kinship care, host homes with a caring adult, and rapid rehousing to keep youth in developmentally-appropriate, mentored, community-based housing;¹⁴ and
2. Providing shelter on demand to all youth through shelters and navigation centers for youth that are youth friendly, trauma-informed, pet friendly, LGBTQ sensitive, and adhere to principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. One example would be to provide shelters for specific subgroups of youth.¹⁵

Mandate youth-friendly coordinated entry systems.

Most counties employ a scoring system developed for chronically homeless adults that acts as a barrier to housing youth through their coordinated entry system. California should mandate a youth-specific risk assessment score for coordinated entry systems statewide. The screening tool developed by the University of Southern California and Chapin Hall Risk successfully predicted likelihood of continued housing instability.¹⁶ Such a coordinated entry system should minimize wait times for stable housing for unaccompanied minors and young adults (See Box 2).

Box 2. Too many youth face long, harmful waits for housing.

A nation-wide report from Chapin Hall found that every additional day awaiting housing after being screened is associated with a 2% decreased chance that a youth will be successfully placed in stable housing. However, using a youth-specific common risk-assessment score is associated with positive housing outcomes and can help communities prioritize limited resources. California must reform their coordinated entry systems to meet the unique and urgent needs of youth.¹⁶

Provide more than Housing First. Housing first should not mean only housing. Youth need developmentally appropriate supports to make a successful transition to adulthood. This includes access to food; hygiene needs; education; vocational training; transportation; healthcare; unconditional, consistent, trauma-informed mentoring relationships; case management; and access to technology (including cell phone, wifi, and access to a computer). Youth need to be set up for success once they are housed in order to remain housed and become economically self-sufficient.

Box 3. Housing First is not enough.

In our recent study of youth in permanent supportive housing, 50% of youth reported going an entire day without food before they were housed. After being housed, that did not change.

"If I'm really that hungry, I eat out of trash cans."

"When was the last time you ate out of a trash can?"

"Yesterday. I don't have very much food. It's not like I'm not in need."

-Young White Woman

Some youth's food insecurity worsened with housing.

"Before, I had enough to eat but I was homeless. Now, my primary concern is alleviated. But I don't have enough to eat."

-Young African American Woman

C. In the Child Welfare system, California should:

Expand eligibility for foster care and transitional services until the age of 25 to all youth who have been homeless,

regardless of whether they were referred to foster care as minors. It is well-documented that the primary cause of homelessness for youth is significant neglect, abuse, and/or parental rejection (for example, in response to being LGBTQ).¹⁷ In our research in San Francisco and in a national survey, only 33% of YEH had a history of foster care.^{10,18} YEH who have not been in foster care and those who have overall share the same history of family trauma.^{19,20} There is no need to create a new system of supports for youth missed by our child protective systems.

D. In the legal and criminal justice systems, California should:

Outlaw laws and policies that criminalize youth, thereby creating barriers for them to access education, housing and jobs and entrenching them in homelessness. These laws include “quality-of-life” laws and policies, which criminalize youth for being poor, unstably housed or homeless, and status offences, which criminalize minors’ actions simply based on their age. These laws all inappropriately and harmfully move social problems into the sphere of criminal justice.

“Because if you’re homeless, literally, parts of your existence are just illegal.”
-Young White Man

“So this is a bench, which is built for sitting, but we’re not allowed to sit on it. But you guys would be allowed to sit on it. If we sit on it, they hang up a No Loitering sign. So they come and tell us that there’s no loitering on the bench, in a public park.”
-Young White Woman

Staff multidisciplinary outreach teams, including police, social workers, and mental health providers, so police are not in the position of being the front-line workers for YEH. Such a program in Indianapolis, Indiana, led by Faith in Indiana and the Indiana University School of Medicine, resulted in a plummeting of arrests based on police stops.

Provide low-barrier, multi-entry support for YEH to get an ID and provide a statewide secure electronic document repository for opportunity youth

“I was a high school dropout. I had no records to prove who I was because it was all locked in the foster care system; no records of my immunizations, of my school, anything, so it was like starting like an illegal immigrant, from scratch – but I was an actual citizen. To this day, I still don’t even have all my paperwork. I just got my first California ID, and I’m 21 years old, and I just got it last week.”
-Young White Woman

E. In the education and vocational training sector, California should:

Ensure both secondary and post-secondary schools are linked to resources to provide for the basic needs of students experiencing homelessness such as food, transportation to and from school, and learning supports, if needed. An outstanding example at the post-secondary school level is the UC Berkeley Basic Needs Center.²¹

Improve services for homeless students in secondary school by:

- a. mandating yearly trainings of school district superintendents, principals, teachers and other school staff about the rights of homeless and undocumented homeless students under the McKinney-Vento Act; and
- b. increasing Title 1 funding to local education agencies and set asides for services specific to homeless students, including hiring McKinney-Vento Act staff and homeless liaisons in each school district.

Box 4. Homeless youth want to complete their education.

In our sample of street-based homeless youth:

- 7% were currently attending school
- 71% were planning to return to school, of whom over 70% planned to complete an associate, bachelor's or graduate degree.

Improve services for homeless students in post-secondary school by:

- c. applying best practices to address the high rates of homelessness in post-secondary education, including, but not limited to, having a full-time homeless student services coordinator on campus and offering a food bank with diverse and healthy food choices in a non-stigmatizing environment;²² and
- d. integrating post-secondary housing options (i.e. dorms) into the range of housing service options for YEH to maximize the integration of YEH in their campus environments until they complete their education and can transition into independent living.

Maximize access to education by YEH in family, transitional, subsidized or long-term housing by mandating an educational plan specific to each youth.

F. In the healthcare sector, California should:

Mandate substance use treatment on demand for minors and TAY. Ensure access by youth who meet the criteria for being a mature minor (See Box 5).

Box 5. In our research with youth, substance use is the result not a cause of homelessness, as this young man explained:

“Drugs are important ‘cuz they distance you from the reality, your awful reality. I mean drugs, alcohol, they put a shield between you, a temporary shield between you and your problems. You just wanna get away. I don’t know how to describe it. Unless you’ve been homeless, you can’t really comprehend what it’s like.”

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