

INTRODUCTION

Accurately Defining Homelessness: A First Step Towards Ending Youth Homelessness

- ▶ introduction (1)
- ▶ current federal definitions of homelessness (2)
- ▶ why definitions matter (4)
- ▶ what research tells us about how youth experience homelessness (7)
- ▶ opposition to changing the definition (9)
- ▶ conclusion (9)

Federal agencies and programs use different definitions to determine who is considered to be “homeless.” These definitions inform the total number of young people considered to be homeless — and therefore how much funding is allocated to serve them – as well as whether programs are allowed to use federal funding to serve individual youth. The perceived prevalence of homelessness – as indicated by reported numbers – has an impact beyond funding, because it shapes the energy, attention, and focus given to addressing homelessness among a particular population. Overly restrictive definitions have contributed to insufficient resources being available for housing and services, thousands of youth being turned away from services each year, and lack of sustained effort to address youth homelessness. New research illustrates that youth homelessness is much more pervasive, and young people’s experiences of homelessness are more varied than previously recognized. In many jurisdictions, youth who are staying temporarily with others or in motels, rather than sleeping on the street, are not provided services because they are considered “at lower risk” and therefore lower priority. However, research using definitions that reflect the ways youth often experience homelessness show increased risks for human trafficking, self-harm and suicide attempts, intimate partner violence, and other negative outcomes across these experiences of homelessness. Spurred by this research, policymakers must reconsider the definitions used to classify and prioritize services and funding to prevent and end youth homelessness. While aligning definitions of homelessness will not guarantee appropriate funding levels on its own, it is a necessary first step as we cannot identify the scope of what’s needed, nor direct funding appropriately, without looking at *all* youth experiencing homelessness.

Throughout this paper, the term “youth” generally includes young people up to age 24, while the term “minors” refers to youth under age 18 and the term “young adults” refers to youth age 18 to 24. Note, however, that research referred to and cited in this document may use slightly different age ranges.

I. Current federal definitions of homelessness

Federal assistance for youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness is carried out and/or funded primarily through three different agencies: the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Education (ED), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). There is currently no single federal definition of homelessness. Instead, there are three different definitions used by HHS, ED, and HUD. The full definitions are reprinted in Table 1, but the key differences in these definitions are a) whether they consider a youth's safety in the broadest sense, or merely require that an environment be fit for human habitation; b) how they treat youth who do not have a permanent and stable home but are staying in others' homes (because they have been kicked out of their homes, due to financial hardship, etc.) without any expectation that they can remain long-term; and c) how they treat youth who stay in motels due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations. Many states also define homelessness in their own statutes.

One definition used by HHS, from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), includes any youth within specified age limits (see chart) "for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative; and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement." Under this definition, it is the safety of the living situation, rather than its permanence or location that determines homelessness.

Both ED and HUD (and HHS, for Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund program) use definitions based on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento), but the ED definition is broader. Both agencies' definitions include an individual "who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" or has "a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation" (e.g., not fit for habitation). HUD classifies individuals experiencing homelessness into categories to determine who can access programming, as discussed below. Only individuals who meet *both* of these criteria, or are living in a shelter or exiting an institution qualify under Category 1. (see Table 1 for additional detail) ED uses the definition in the McKinney-Vento education subtitle, most recently amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2016, which explicitly includes "children and youths who are *sharing the housing of other persons due*

Youth and family homelessness

This paper primarily focuses on unaccompanied youth homelessness, however broadening definitions of homelessness can also help prevent and end family homelessness. Although unaccompanied youth homelessness and family homelessness are distinct experiences, often calling for very different services, it is important to recognize that many children first experience homelessness as part of a family, and later experience homelessness on their own. Some youth may experience homelessness after becoming parents themselves. Others may become homeless because of their family's lack of economic resources, or unaddressed family conflict. Providing services and support to youth and families *individually* and *together* can prevent homelessness, but a broader definition of homelessness is needed to ensure that communities are adequately addressing these issues.

to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals” (emphasis added).

HUD uses the McKinney-Vento definition as amended by the Homeless Emergency and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009.¹ This definition includes individuals who “will imminently lose their housing, including housing they own, rent, or live in without paying rent, are sharing with others and rooms in hotels and motels,” but does not otherwise address staying with other people.² It also includes youth who fall under other federal definitions, in some extremely limited circumstances. Specifically, youth who would be considered homeless under other federal statutes are included if they “(A) have experienced a *long term period without living independently in permanent housing*, (B) have experienced *persistent instability* as measured by frequent moves over such period, **and** (C) *can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time* because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment.” HUD has also added further restrictions through regulation and other administrative action, as discussed below.

Table 1. Youth considered homeless under policies of three federal agencies³

| | Department of Education | Department of Housing and Urban Development | Department of Health and Human Services ⁴ |
|--|--|---|--|
| Source of definition | McKinney-Vento EHCY Act | HEARTH Act, Homeless Assistance Grant (HAG) program | Runaway and Homeless Youth Act |
| Living in unsheltered locations | Yes | Yes | Yes , if youth cannot live with relatives and has no safe alternative |
| Living in emergency shelters or transitional housing | Yes | Yes | Yes , if youth cannot live with relatives and has no safe alternative |
| Living in motels or hotels | Yes , if no alternative adequate accommodations | No , with the following exceptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Paid for by a government program or charitable organization ▪ Lacks resources to stay > 14 days, and has no subsequent residence identified; and lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing ▪ Fleeing domestic violence or threatening conditions in current housing situation with no other residence and no resources to obtain permanent housing | Yes , if youth cannot live with relatives and has no safe alternative |

¹ <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/1715/mckinney-vento-homeless-assistance-act-amended-by-hearth-act-of-2009/>

² 42 USC 11302

³ Table reprinted from: Morton, M., Dworsky, A., & Curry, S. (2017). National prevalence study of youth homelessness: VoYC component report to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall

⁴ Notably, there are two programs administered by HHS that use ED's definition of homelessness: Head Start and Child Care. These are important programs for unaccompanied youth who are pregnant and parenting as well as for homeless families

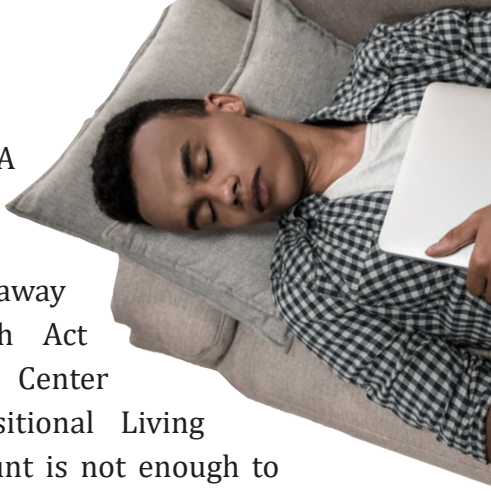
| | Department of Education | Department of Housing and Urban Development | Department of Health and Human Services |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Living in motels or hotels (cont'd) | Yes , if no alternative adequate accommodations (cont'd) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unaccompanied youth or families defined as homeless under other Federal statutes who have experienced (1) a long period without permanent housing and (2) persistent instability as measured by frequent moves and are expected to continue in that status for an extended period; and (3) and can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment | Yes , if youth cannot live with relatives and has no safe alternative (cont'd) |
| Staying with others | Yes , if no fixed, regular, and adequate residence due to a loss of housing, | No , with the following exceptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imminent loss of housing (< 14 days) including housing shared with others and has no subsequent residence identified; and lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing Fleeing domestic violence or threatening conditions in current housing situation with no other residence and no resources to obtain permanent housing Unaccompanied youth or families defined as homeless under other Federal statutes who have experienced (1) a long period without permanent housing and (2) persistent instability as measured by frequent moves are expected to continue in that status for an extended period; and (3) and can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment And, a limited amount of HUD resources may be dedicated to activities serving youth that meet these criteria, and the applicant must justify prioritization of this inclusion in its proposal (including how it has met the needs of all other categories of definition) and receive approval. | Yes , if youth cannot live with relatives and has no safe alternative |

► Note: Adapted by Chapin Hall from: National Center for Homeless Education (n.d.). Definitions of Homelessness for Federal Program Serving Children, Youth, and Families. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from [nche.ed.gov/downloads/defin_chart.doc](https://www.nche.ed.gov/downloads/defin_chart.doc)

II. Why definitions matter

The definitions used by federal agencies dictate whom can be served through their funded programs. Who is “counted” as homeless also impacts the perceived size of a community’s homeless population, which influences how agencies — public and private — target programs and services. As mentioned above, the perceived size of a population also shapes the time and energy of communities in addressing it.

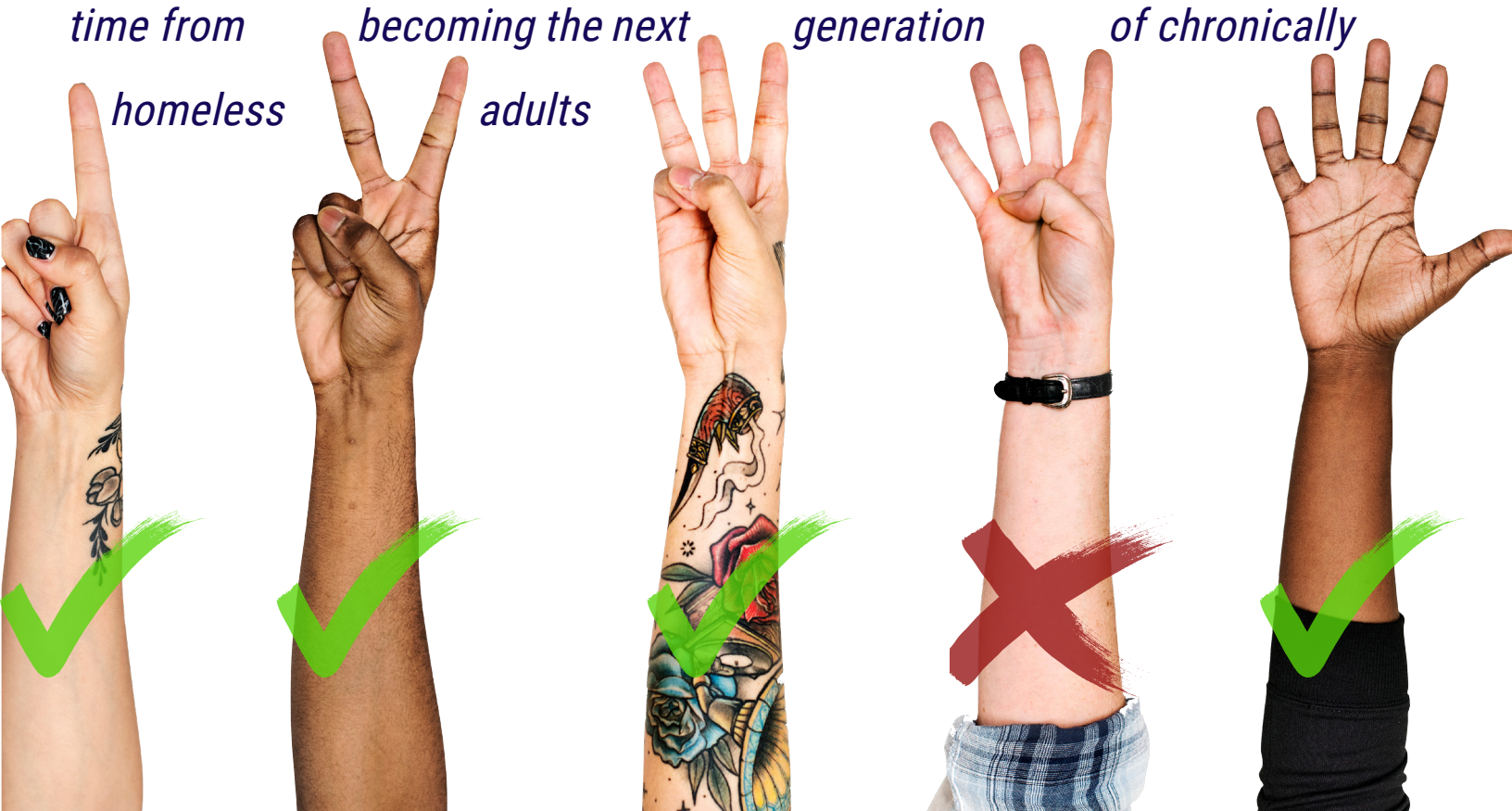
Currently the RHYA definition is used by HHS to direct \$127 million to Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Programs (e.g., Basic Center Programs and Transitional Living Programs). This amount is not enough to meet the need; as a result, each year thousands of youth are turned away from RHYA-funded programs due to lack of beds.



All federal definitions of homelessness should be aligned to include the ways youth and families often experience homelessness, including “couch-surfing” and staying in motels.

photo credit: georgerudy

When definitions reflect the ways adults – and not youth – experience homelessness, youth will be undercounted and underserved. When definitions – or prioritizations based on definitions – include individuals who have experienced some forms of homelessness but not others, *we lose the opportunity to prevent youth who may be facing homelessness for the first time from becoming the next generation of chronically homeless adults*



Over 14,855 youth have been turned away from Basic Center Programs and over 28,488 youth from Transitional Living Programs between FY 2010 and 2014⁵ (the most recent years for which data is available), and of course these numbers only capture youth who are in communities who have these programs, and not youth who do not even have a local program to try to access. Based on National Network for Youth members' experience, many highly qualified programs that apply for RHYA funding are denied due to these resource limitations. Many communities have no program serving unaccompanied homeless youth.

The definition of homelessness in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act is used by ED to fund services to, and enforce legal protections for, children and youth experiencing homelessness through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Higher Education Act. It is also used by other agencies to fund programs which could serve individuals experiencing homelessness, such as HHS' Head Start and Child Care and Development Fund programs (which provide important supports to adolescent parents experiencing homelessness, among others), and Department of Justice programs under the Violence Against Women Act. The Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program is the only federal program other than RHYA specific to unaccompanied homeless youth. It was most recently funded at \$93.5 million, the fully authorized amount, and a 10% increase over the previous year.⁶ Nevertheless, there are not enough resources to meet the need. The National Center for Homeless Education recently found that 1,355,821 students in American public schools experienced homelessness during the 2016-2017 school year, but previous research indicates that only 24% of school districts receive McKinney-Vento subgrant funding.⁷ Congress has demonstrated their support for these students by advancing the bipartisan HCYA from the House Financial Committee in July 2018.⁸

The HEARTH Act definition is used by HUD for its homeless assistance grant (HAG) programs. Of the \$2.38 billion HUD-provided homelessness assistance in 2016, only \$134 million (less than 6%) funded youth-specific services.⁹ **While the statute authorizes HUD to allow communities to serve youth who are considered homeless under other federal definitions (known as "Category 3") under HUD's classifications, HUD has used its administrative authority to limit the eligibility of youth in this category to only a few of its programs.** HUD issued guidance in 2012 stating that communities' Continuums of Care (CoC) may not use HUD funding to serve Category 3 individuals or families (including youth) in their HUD-funded Supportive Housing Program (SHP), Transitional Housing (TH), or Supportive Services Only (SSO) projects, without written approval from HUD.¹⁰ The application for this approval must "explain how using funds to serve Category 3 homeless persons will be more cost effective at" addressing youth homelessness and reducing "the number of homeless households with children," as well as why serving this population is of greater or equal priority for the CoC than serving homeless families with children or unaccompanied youth that are homeless under

5 Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System. (April 2016) Retrieved from <https://extranet.acf.hhs.gov/rhymis/>.

6 For more on education funding for youth experiencing homelessness, see SchoolHouse Connection. "Historic Funding Increases for Homeless Children and Youth in FY18 Act." (March 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/historic-funding-increases-for-homeless-children-and-youth-in-fy18-bill/>.

7 National Center for Homeless Education. "Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness under Title I, Part A." (November 2017) Retrieved from <https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/briefs/titlei.pdf>.

8 <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/a-big-win-house-committee-passes-the-homeless-children-and-youth-act/>

9 Anne Kim. "For Homeless Youth, Statistics and Reality Are Miles Apart." (January 2018) <https://talkpoverty.org/2018/01/24/homeless-youth-statistics-reality-miles-apart/>. (Citing Jasmine Hayes, deputy director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.)

10 HUD, "Notice on Limitation on Use of Funds to Serve Persons Defined as Homeless Under Other Federal Laws." (Notice: CPD- 12-001, Issued: January 17, 2012.)

categories 1, 2, and 4.” Communities must also submit documentation showing that these priorities are part of their strategic plans. Even if a CoC were to be approved, no more than 10% of the community’s HUD funding may be used to serve Category 3 youth. (The guidance also restated that Category 3 youth are not eligible for

HUD’s permanent supportive housing programs.) Between 2010 and 2016, 12 applicants to HUD asked to use the Category 3 definition of homelessness; every single one of these requests was denied.¹¹ **This means that even when youth are technically “eligible” to receive HUD-funded services, they are not actually able to access the specific programs and services HUD is actually funding.**

Eligibility vs. Prioritization

Defining homelessness as including youth who are staying with others or in motels would not mean that those youth would be more or less likely to receive services than other individuals who meet the current definitions (e.g., higher priority). Instead, it means that youth would simply be *eligible* to be assessed and to receive services. Programs could then prioritize youth (or other populations) according to their assessed vulnerability level, or any other factors used to determine service provision. Programs could also use different population specific definitions of vulnerability, to address the fact that what makes an unaccompanied youth more vulnerable may be different than what makes a family or chronically homeless adult more vulnerable.

HUD also allows individuals to receive homelessness services if they are victims of domestic violence, and there are other federal resources directed at victims of human trafficking. However young people (or the service providers trying to help them) may not be able to prove they meet the requirements. Finally, apart from the various definitions, HUD specifically prohibits any category of homelessness other than the pre-HEARTH Act definition of homelessness in the annual Point-In-Time (PIT) count that each CoC must undertake. Thus, the PIT count is essentially limited to people who are visible outside, or who are staying in shelters. This also means that although homelessness has been shown to be equally prevalent in rural and urban communities,¹² rural communities may receive less federal funding because they are less able to “count” all community members experiencing homelessness.¹³ HUD’s methods of defining and “counting” homelessness also have impacts beyond its own \$2.38 billion in funding, as local governments and private funders rely on HUD’s data and definitions.¹⁴

It is important to note that aligning the HUD definition of homelessness is necessary but not sufficient to ending youth homelessness. Once definitions are changed to allow programs to count and serve all individuals experiencing homelessness, significant work and investments will still be needed to increase funding levels to the amounts necessary to meet the needs. **Yet by better prioritizing services among individuals currently experiencing homelessness, and painting a true picture of the overall need, we can interrupt the cycle in which young people experience homelessness, fail to receive needed assistance, and become adults who experience homelessness, often with their own children.**

¹¹ Letter from HUD pursuant to Freedom of Information Act Request; on file with National Network for Youth.

¹² 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.

¹³ This undercount may result both from individuals who are experiencing homelessness but do not meet the HUD definition, and from the impossibility of covering the vast distances that make up a rural service area in the single night allowed in a PIT count. See, e.g., “Testimony by Ms. Millie Rounsville, Chief Executive Officer, Northwest Wisconsin Community Services Agency Inc.” House Committee on Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Insurance. June 6th, 2018.

¹⁴ Testimony of Barbara Duffield, Executive Director, SchoolHouse Connection.” Subcommittee on Housing and Insurance Committee on Financial Services, U.S. House of Representatives June 6, 2018 (and citations therein). Available at <https://financialservices.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hhrg-115-ba04-wstate-bduffield-20180606.pdf>.

III. What research tells us about how youth experience homelessness

In a groundbreaking report released in 2017, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, based on surveys of over 26,000 individuals across the country, estimated that 1 in 10 young adults (age 18 to 25) and 1 in 30 minors (age 13-17) experienced unaccompanied homelessness in a one-year period. This translates to approximately 3.5 million young adults and 700,000 minors.¹⁵ Of these young people, half of young adults and three quarters of minors reported experiences that they explicitly described as “homelessness,” or in the case of minors, as running away or being asked to leave and staying away for at least one night; half of young adults and one quarter of minors experienced homelessness in the form of “couch surfing” only, while lacking a safe and stable alternative living arrangement.

These findings showed how fluid the homelessness experience of young people is — often moving between different types of homelessness from night to night, based on where they can find space, or where they felt safe for the evening. In follow up interviews with a subset of the survey participants, 72% of those who experienced homelessness as “generally, sleeping on the streets, in a car, or in a shelter, also said they had stayed with others” while homeless. Fifty-two percent felt unsafe in these situations. Researchers also conducted additional interviews with a smaller group of respondents and found that 42% experienced homelessness twice or more during the year, 73% experienced homelessness for more than a month at a time. The study also found that youth in rural areas experienced homelessness at approximately the same levels as youth in urban areas.¹⁶ Previous research has also shown that homeless adults often first experience homelessness as minors or young adults.¹⁷

Research has also illustrated that youth experiencing homelessness are not “protected” from the ill effects of homelessness when they are staying with others temporarily. Although the definitions used by researchers vary, studies that have included broader definitions of youth homelessness (which would include sharing accommodations, sleeping in motels, etc.), have found that compared to housed peers, these youth experience higher rates of:

- Depression, self-injury and suicide attempts;
- Intimate partner violence;
- Food insecurity and lack of sleep;
- Early sexual activity (by age 13) and adolescent pregnancy;
- Sexual exploitation and trafficking
- Labor trafficking
- Illegal drug use or prescription drug abuse.¹⁸

“The open sky never made me bleed.”
- Youth who has experienced homelessness

In another study, more than a quarter of youth experiencing homelessness say that they’d agreed to sexual activity with someone in order to have a place to sleep.¹⁹

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Chris Chamberlain and Guy Johnson. “Pathways into adult homelessness.” Journal of Sociology Vol 49, Issue 1, pp. 60 - 77 (November 2011) and Applied Survey Research. City of Seattle 2016 Homeless Needs Assessment.

¹⁸ Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness. “More Than a Place to Sleep: Understanding the Health and Well-Being of Homeless High School Students.” (March 2017) Available at http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/homelessstudenthealth/

¹⁹ Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau. Street Outreach Program Data Collection Project Final Report.

Homeless Situation and Vulnerability

Family homelessness research also shows that the type of homeless situation does not necessarily equate to risk level. Data from families eligible for Chicago's Families in Transition project showed that *scores on a vulnerability assessment tool used by HUD were comparable for families living in shelters and families living with others* (all included families that met the McKinney Vento education definition).²⁰ The data also showed that "compared to HUD-homeless families, doubled-up families had greater mental health needs, higher rates of medical conditions making it difficult to carry out the activities of daily life, and similar rates of other vulnerabilities, such as domestic violence and substance abuse."²¹

IV. Opposition to changing the definition

Although realigning definitions to include *all* youth experiencing homelessness has broad support among agencies and advocates who work with and on behalf of youth, as well as bipartisan support, some organizations and policymakers do not support this change.²² The most commonly cited reason is that resources are scarce and funding needs to be prioritized to serve those most in need. Changing the definition would actually *help* ensure that those in the most need can be prioritized, however. As the research outlined above illustrates, the form of homelessness someone experiences (e.g., sleeping in another person's home, a shelter, a car, or a motel), does not necessarily predict risk. Someone sleeping in an abandoned building may feel (and be) safer than someone staying in the home of someone who is dangerous, or a motel that is infested with vermin and mold. When communities and homelessness service providers can serve *any* individual experiencing homelessness, they can truly use their limited resources to serve those most in need, making decisions based on evidence-based assessments that generate actual risk- and need-levels and local knowledge of who experiences homelessness in their community.

Conclusion

This research discussed above illustrates how fluid homelessness can be for young people – they may be sleeping in a car one night, at a shelter the next, and on an acquaintance's floor the following week. The same young person may be considered "homeless" and eligible to access services under one definition and set of programs, but not another. Solutions to homelessness for young people must address these varied experiences by allowing them to access housing services regardless of where they slept the night before, and adequate resources must be allocated to serve all young people, regardless of how they are experiencing homelessness.

Homeless services providers across the country turn away young people every day because the resources they have are nowhere near what is needed to serve the enormous number of young people experiencing homelessness. The largest amount of funding to prevent and address homelessness flows from HUD to local CoCs, yet many youth experiencing homelessness are ineligible to access, or even be assessed for eligibility to access, services through their CoC due to the limitations discussed above. Youth homelessness service providers

Available at www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/fysb/data_collection_study_final_report_street_outreach_program.pdf

20 Testimony of Barbara Duffield, Executive Director, SchoolHouse Connection." Subcommittee on Housing and Insurance Committee on Financial Services, U.S. House of Representatives June 6, 2018 (and citations therein). Available at <https://financialservices.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hhrg-115-ba04-wstate-bduffield-20180606.pdf>.

21 Ibid.

22 See, e.g., "Hearing entitled 'Legislative Review of H.R. 1511, the "Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2017.'" June 6, 2018. Available at <https://financial-services.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=403529>.

and advocates have long tried to provide an “open front door,” that allows young people to be helped as soon as possible, with services targeted to their needs and situations, rather than waiting until they have experienced “enough harm” due to homelessness, or have been homeless “long enough”. Yet providers often face barriers due to the definitions and prioritizations discussed above. Ensuring that all federal laws and programs use a definition of homelessness that reflects the experiences of young people is essential to preventing and ending youth homelessness.

“The young people we serve who are temporarily staying with others are in inherently unstable situations: they lack certainty over how long they can remain in that setting, their arrangements are subject to change with little-to-no notice, and the people they’re staying with are often unwilling to provide written notice for fear of risking their lease or public benefits.”

▶ *Melinda Giovengo, Executive Director of YouthCare in Seattle, WA and Chair of NN4Y’s Board*

“[I]f we can’t get the number right we can’t know what the resources need to be ...[and] give our communities more flexibility so they can choose how to address this growing problem and give policymakers the information they need to get the resources that we need to combat homelessness.”

▶ *U.S. Representative Steve Stivers (R-OH), speaking on behalf of the Homeless Children and Youth Act, which would amend the definition of homelessness*

“None of the people I lived with would have been willing to document that I was living there. They would have been suspicious and afraid of getting in trouble. Also, many of them I didn’t know well enough to ask them.”

▶ *Brittany K., Ohio*

“HUDs definition of homelessness and its national priorities have created real barriers to helping homeless children and youth. As a result we are perpetuating homelessness; we are guaranteeing that homelessness will continue indefinitely. We must reform HUD homeless assistance to ensure that today’s homeless children and youth do not become tomorrow’s homeless adults.”

▶ *Barbara Duffield, Executive Director, SchoolHouse Connection*



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