

STRATEGIC PLAN TO PREVENT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS BEGINNING IN FOSTER CARE:
BACKGROUND

OVERVIEW

Children and adolescents in foster care face an increased risk of becoming homeless as they age out of the system. Collaborative and strategic interventions are essential in addressing contributors to youth homelessness and establishing long-term, sustainable pathways to housing stability and success in youth.

BACKGROUND

Foster care was originally designed to provide temporary housing and support services to children and adolescents awaiting family reunification, adoption, or emancipation. Ideally, by ages 18-21, all individuals who have been in the system should no longer need these services, as they would either be living with a family or have acquired the skills and support necessary for independent living. However, youth aging out of foster care face an increased risk of homelessness during the transition to adulthood, and between 31% and 46% of youth in foster care will experience homelessness at least once by the age of 26. This vulnerability is further compounded by factors such as race and sexual orientation. Black and Latino individuals are overrepresented in the homeless population relative to their percentage in the overall U.S. population, and LGBTQ+ individuals are 2.20 times more likely to experience homelessness compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. These disparities may reflect the long-term impact of systemic racism and discrimination on young people.

The consequences of youth homelessness are severe, often leading to poor physical and mental health, as well as difficulties in learning, cognition, social skills, and emotional regulation. Moreover, homeless youth are at greater risk of victimization and violence. In fact, within two years of leaving foster care, 25% of youth become involved in the criminal justice system.

Understanding the underlying factors that contribute to youth homelessness is crucial in addressing these disparities and developing effective solutions.

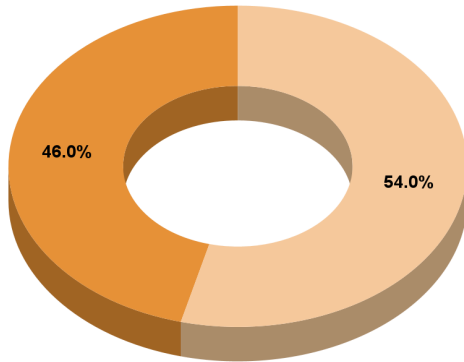
RISK/PROTECTIVE FACTORS

The factors that influence youth homelessness differ in important ways from those affecting adults. For youth in foster care, simply being in the system is a significant risk factor. In addition, many foster youths face challenges that further increase their vulnerability to homelessness, including mental health and substance use issues, a history of behavioral problems, familial trauma, and past experiences of homelessness or running away. Furthermore, foster youth who have experienced poor schooling or failed to complete high school are 1.57 times more likely to become homeless between the ages of 18 and 28 compared to those without such risk factors. The high prevalence of these risk factors among youth in foster care highlights the need for multiple interventions that address these challenges in order to provide comprehensive support to youth in foster care during the transition to adulthood.

Simultaneously, certain protective factors can reduce the likelihood of youth homelessness. General protective factors include living in areas with strong housing support, graduating college by age 25, stable employment, and having strong family relationships. For foster youth specifically, protective factors such as staying in foster care past age 18, connection to a caring adult, a history of being placed with a relative, and achieving a high GPA can significantly decrease their risk of homelessness.

Addressing these risk factors while actively promoting protective ones can help prevent youth homelessness and help support youth in building stable and successful futures.

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“Youths aging out of foster care are at an increased risk of becoming homeless during the transition into adulthood. **Between 31% and 46% of youth in foster care will experience homelessness at least once by age 26.**”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage and Consult the Youth

Youth with lived experiences of homelessness possess a unique understanding and knowledge about youth homelessness. Thus, these youth can provide valuable insight into the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions addressing housing instability in youth. Centering young voices will lead to solutions which better define and meet the needs of homeless youth.

Actions:

- Establish youth advisory boards to identify unmet needs, amplify youth voices, and provide intervention and policy feedback.
- Facilitate communication among unhoused youth to share resources, experiences, and build connections and community. Implementation may include online options and targeting places frequented by youth.

2. Behavioral Therapy and Mental Health Focus

Many unhoused youths possess trauma and/or mental health challenges. Incorporating behavioral therapy strategies in temporary and transitional housing programs may help youth better understand their thought processes and improve their mental health. Addressing mental health challenges may decrease barriers that contribute to their housing insecurity. However, these strategies should not replace traditional psychological or psychiatric management practices if they are available and necessary.

Actions:

- Place an emphasis on trauma-informed care in training service providers.

3. Academic Support

Education is a protective factor against youth homelessness. Encouraging interest in academics and providing academic support can equip youth with the skills and qualifications to succeed in adulthood and avoid or better navigate homelessness.

Actions:

- Train housing program directors to show an interest in residents' education and well-being in school.
- Expand the dissemination of information about academic resources such as tutoring services, school clubs, scholarships, and college application preparation.

Youth homelessness remains a systemic and complex issue. Implementation of evidence-based interventions centering risk and protective factors can help reduce youth homelessness and empower youth to reach their full potential.

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REFERENCES

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Sasha Bruce Youthwork is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides a comprehensive support system for vulnerable youth through a diverse range of residential facilities, empowering young individuals with counseling, educational programs, and valuable resources.

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