TNOYS' Listening and Learning from Youth, Young Adults, and Providers on Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of youth-serving organizations that partners with youth and young adults (YYA) for meaningful systems change to better serve Texas' most vulnerable and resilient youth. TNOYS partnered with the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) in October 2021 to hear from YYA and providers to better understand and center the needs of young people experiencing homelessness in the upcoming federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness.

Understanding Youth Homelessness in Texas

There are more than seven million youth under the age of 18 in Texas, 70 percent of whom are youth of color.[1] The Texas Education Agency reported that 78,000 students were experiencing homelessness statewide in the 2019-2020 school year, and some school districts reported as many as 26 percent of students being homeless. Nationally, over a one-year period, 1 in 10 young people ages 18-25 experience homelessness.[2]

YYA can become homeless for several reasons. YYA might run away from home to escape harm or other unsafe living situations, be kicked out of a home for their gender identity or sexual orientation, experience the loss of a parent or caregiver, age out of government systems, or experience familial homelessness. Young adults may be unable to support themselves and lack supportive networks or communities. Experiencing homelessness can lead to adverse outcomes for YYA, including an increased risk of enduring mental health concerns, in-patient and outpatient hospital readmissions,[3] substance use disorders, and a high risk for sexual exploitation and victimization.[4]

It is largely documented that YYA experiencing homelessness frequently have past or current child welfare and/or juvenile justice involvement. Some studies report that 37-39 percent of homeless YYA have child welfare histories, and 40 percent of those YYA turned 18 while in foster care and aged out of the system.[5] In one survey of young adults experiencing homelessness, 33.3 percent reported past involvement with the juvenile justice system and 49 percent reported past criminal justice involvement. Further, exiting the justice system has negative consequences and stigma that exacerbates the risk of homelessness.

LGBTQ+ youth also face disproportionate impacts and are more likely to be homeless than youth from the general population. These youth face discrimination and stigmatization and loss of familial support, increasing their risk of becoming homeless. Annually around 1.6 to 2 million youth ages 12- 24 experience homelessness in the United States,[6] and LGBTQ+ youth make up approximately 40 percent of this population. Since a significant pathway to homelessness is aging out of government programs, it's important to note that LGBTQ+ youth of color are also overrepresented in those systems.

Additionally, youth who lack integral family and community supports face a higher risk of trafficking victimization because they have no one to whom they can turn. The estimated rate of commercial sexual exploitation of youth (CSEY) among homeless youth in Texas is 25 percent, much higher than the national average of 10–15 percent.[7] YYA who become commercially and sexually exploited report their first CSEY experience happening after they had nowhere to go.

Listening and Learning from Youth, Young Adults, and Providers to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness

TNOYS asked a series of questions about youth homelessness at two listening sessions; one with 50 providers, and another with 13 young people with lived experiences. The purpose of these listening sessions was to center those closest to youth homelessness in Texas to better understand their needs and make recommendations to prevent and end youth homelessness. The listening sessions provided several emergent themes (outlined below) that support the data around the needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

Strong need to focus on older youth and young adults aging out of foster care and exiting the justice systems.

In the listening sessions, providers and YYA expressed concern for older youth approaching the age where certain services and housing opportunities are no longer available to them, increasing their risk of becoming homeless. Youth worried about turning 18 in the child welfare system and resources being "cut off," while providers recommended that YYA aging out of foster care automatically receive housing funding vouchers.

Many of the youth who come here aged out of foster care the week before, and they have nowhere to go.

– Courtney Sellers
Montrose Grace Place

Providers also discussed the needs of YYA exiting the justice system. Since some YYA who have been incarcerated lack familial support and will become homeless, we should prioritize their needs, and provide them with housing as they exit juvenile or criminal justice lockups.

HUD being the most stringent (on their definition of homelessness) makes it really difficult for youth to be eligible to qualify for services before they experience quite a bit more trauma on the streets.

– Erin Whelan
LifeWorks

Need to align definitions of homelessness.

Federal definitions of youth homelessness should be aligned and should include young adults so that young people get the support they need sooner. Educators use the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, which includes youth who are couch surfing, in unconventional housing, families doubled-up in housing, etc. However, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition that housing providers use has four categories that lack specifications for youth.

Need for more YYA-specific resources.

YYA in our listening sessions expressed safety and quality concerns for the housing their vouchers could afford, and providers echoed these concerns. It can be challenging to find housing that fits the needs of young people because landlords either don't understand the needs of youth or are unwilling to participate. It can also be challenging to find housing in the community where the youth live.[8]

YYA also said that there could be more innovative and effective ways of distributing information to them to ensure resources do not go unused. For example, using online chat technology could be an option.

Youth need housing without barriers.

The time that it takes for a YYA to receive resources and housing is problematic for YYA. Both providers and YYA agreed that there are too many barriers to safely house young people experiencing homelessness in appropriate settings. Young people who become homeless face an increased risk of mental health issues, substance use disorders,[9] and an increased risk of sexual exploitation and victimization.[10] Yet YYA are denied housing for mental health issues, rental history, juvenile and criminal records, lack of identification documents, and a lack of landlords that accept vouchers.

Identification documents hold up the process.

Easy access to identification documents (IDs) was a concern of both YYA and providers. Particularly for YYA, it is a time-consuming, arduous process to get documentation that proves their "homeless" status and then wait for and receive their IDs. Further, providers lack the staff capacity to help YYA get IDs and other necessary documents like birth certificates and social security cards in a timely fashion.

Need for more youth involvement in decision making.

Both groups said that listening to young people with lived experiences of homelessness has proven valuable in providing services and that YYA should have decision-making power about when and how they receive resources. One of the ways to prioritize youth voice is through youth-adult partnerships (YAP) where adult allies join in collaborative, mutual and equitable activities with young people, and share power and accountability with youth. During YAP, adults are working "with" youth rather than on their behalf or "for" them. These partnerships prioritize the voices that are marginalized and those who face health and housing disparities such as YYA of color and LGBTQ+ identifying YYA. To center equity and support equitable access and outcomes, the federal government must support and bolster the ability to develop YAP at the local level.

Overrepresentation of Black youth experiencing homelessness.

Of particular concern is the dramatic disproportionality of homelessness among YYA of color and the failure of multiple systems to provide equitable resources and opportunities across systems.[11] Even though African Americans only comprise 12 percent of the US population, 53 percent of those experiencing homelessness are Black.[12]

Providers and youth expressed a desire for increased government funding to support community initiatives to prevent and end youth homelessness that is centered around racial equity. Youth also

indicated seeing and experiencing systemic racism and biases toward Black youth in the child welfare system, which contributes to the lower rates of placements and adoptions that youth of color experience.

Decriminalization of homelessness.

The criminalization of homelessness is a barrier toward preventing and ending youth homelessness. 1 in 3 YYA experiencing homelessness report prior involvement with the justice system.[13] Further criminalizing their survival mechanisms encourages YYA to hide and discourages them from reaching out for help and assistance.

Cross-systems collaboration/coordination with health and mental health providers.

A lesson that providers learned during COVID was the benefit and the need for more cross-systems collaborations with important stakeholders such as providers, healthcare networks, and YYA. Both listening sessions discussed the importance of collaboration and initiatives to prevent and end homelessness. During the pandemic youth more frequently utilized counseling services because virtual options made it more accessible for some. At the same time, the pandemic helped create new community partnerships, bringing health networks to the table. Community partnerships, with robust data systems and data sharing across systems, help remove barriers and house YYA, especially those with behavioral health needs.

> *I feel like there should be less funding toward police arresting people experiencing homelessness and criminalizing and banning camps. There should be more funding for resources for those experiencing homelessness instead of leaving them with nowhere to go. The criminalization of homelessness leads to less support not only for homeless adults but also youth and more negative stigma.*
>
> *– Grace, Age 19*

Sources

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