

Youth and Young Adult Homelessness: Options to Improve Access to Services

Coming of age is not easy for anyone, but it is certainly harder for [youth and young adults experiencing homelessness](#). With their basic needs such as food, shelter, safety and health care often unmet, homeless youth and young adults frequently struggle to excel in school, obtain jobs and become self-sufficient.

State policymakers have options to improve access to services designed to help vulnerable youth and young adults avoid chronic homelessness and reach their full potential. Whatever options legislators choose will have widespread implications for their communities.

5 Things to Know About Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness

- 1** **Aging out of foster care increases the risk of becoming homeless.** Between [31% and 46%](#) of youth exiting foster care experience homelessness by the time they turn 26. Further, [half](#) the homeless population in the United States spent time in foster care.
- 2** **They face significant barriers to accessing services to meet basic needs.** Unhoused youth often avoid entry to adult homeless shelters due to the presence of drugs and alcohol and risk of theft, violence or sexual assault. Further, a lack of transportation and documents necessary for eligibility also prevents some youth experiencing homelessness from accessing [nutrition assistance](#) at school or through other service providers.
- 3** **Unmet basic needs often lead to criminal activity.** Homeless youth and young adults are often forced to commit [survival crimes](#), such as trespassing to find shelter, shoplifting to obtain food or selling drugs or trading sex for money. They are also more likely to become involved with the justice system through the commission of [status offenses](#)—acts that are only criminal because of their status as a youth. Common examples include truancy, breaking curfew and underage drinking. Inability to pay civil fines for minor crimes frequently leads to outstanding warrants or arrest and incarceration, which can prevent youth from accessing services and taking steps toward permanent housing.
- 4** **Unhoused youth and young adults encounter barriers to obtaining an education.** Youth and young adults experiencing homelessness often lack the [documents](#) needed to enroll in school, such as medical and immunization records, school transcripts and parental consent. For those enrolled in school, a lack of transportation is also a common barrier. Further, the stress of homelessness and unmet basic needs often inhibit students' ability to attend school regularly, pay attention in class and find time to study. Around 86% of students experiencing homelessness [sleep less than eight hours per night](#), including one-third who report sleeping fewer than four hours.
- 5** **They face challenges in accessing health services and experience poorer health outcomes.** Unhoused youth and young adults [experience](#) higher rates of chronic health issues, higher incidences of trauma-related injuries and increased rates of nutritional problems than their housed peers. Youth experiencing homelessness also often lack the ability to either [consent](#) for themselves or obtain parental consent to receive medical, dental, mental or behavioral health care.

5 Options to Improve Access to Services for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness

1

Allow young adults to voluntarily remain in or reenter foster care through early adulthood and continue receiving supportive services.

■ **South Carolina** [HB 3509](#) (2022) allows youth 18 to 21 years old who are in the custody of the state's Department of Social Services to continue receiving services and supports that promote emotional well-being, economic productivity, self-sufficiency, connection to family and community and a successful transition to adulthood.

■ **Washington** [HB 1867](#) (2017) allows youth who have received extended foster care services, but subsequently lost their eligibility, to reenter the extended foster care program one time through a voluntary placement agreement.

2

Make it easier for youth experiencing homelessness to obtain services to meet their basic needs.

■ **Colorado** [SB 82](#) (2023) provides housing vouchers and case management services to homeless youth 18 to 26 years old who have had prior experience in the foster care or kinship care system.

■ **Utah** [HB 371](#) (2019) authorizes homeless youth who are 15 to 17 years old and manage their own finances to consent to temporary shelter, care or licensed services, including assistance to obtain food, shelter, hygiene products or other basic necessities, access to a bed, showering facility or transportation and assistance with school enrollment or attendance.

3

Authorize community-based alternatives to arrest and incarceration for juvenile offenders.

■ **Arkansas** [SB 152](#) (2019) reformed its juvenile justice system by requiring use of validated risk assessment tools, creating a plan for diversion options to maximize the benefits for juvenile offenders and developing a plan for the reinvestment of funds into community-based services.

■ **Connecticut** [HB 6888](#) (2023) requires law enforcement agencies to refer children under 18 to a juvenile review board in accordance with a community-based, pre-arrest diversion system for children to receive prevention, intervention and treatment services provided by a youth service bureau or community-based service provider.

4

Enable children, youth and young adults experiencing homelessness to obtain an education.

■ **California** [SB 400](#) (2021) requires local education agencies to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness and make referrals to supportive services.

■ **Kentucky** [HB 378](#) (2019) established educational coursework alternatives for students who are homeless.

■ **Virginia** [HB 1403](#) (2023) requires public institutions of higher education that offer university housing during scheduled intersessions to provide housing at no cost to students who are registered for the next academic term and meet the definitions and conditions of the federal [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#).

5

Allow minors experiencing homelessness to provide or obtain consent to receive health services.

■ **Arkansas** [SB 340](#) (2019) authorizes McKinney-Vento liaisons to provide consent for medical treatment for homeless minors.

■ **Maine** [SB 395](#) (2019) authorizes minors to consent to all medical, mental, dental and other health counseling or services by proving they are living apart from their parents and are independent of parental support.