

---

# Youth Homelessness Overview

6/18/2019



Each year, an estimated 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness, of which 700,000 are unaccompanied minors, meaning they are not part of a family or accompanied by a parent or guardian. On any given night, approximately 41,000 unaccompanied youth ages 13-25 experience homelessness.

The Voices of Youth Count from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago also found that:

- One in 10 young adults ages 18-25, and at least one in 30 adolescents ages 13-17, experience some form of homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian over the course of a year.
- 29% of homeless youth report having substance misuse problems.
- 69% of homeless youth report mental health problems.
- 33% had once been part of the foster care system.
- 50% of homeless youth have been in the juvenile justice system, in jail or detention.
- 27% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youth who are homeless reported exchanging sex for basic needs compared to 9% of non-LGBTQ youth who reported having to exchange sex for basic needs.

- 62% of LGBTQ youth report being physically harmed while experiencing homelessness while 47% of non-LGBTQ youth reported being physically harmed while homeless.
- The lack of a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) is the number one correlate for elevated risk of youth homelessness.

## Causes and Consequences of Youth Homelessness

Many factors increase a young person's odds of experiencing homelessness. Demographic risk factors for becoming homeless include being Hispanic or black; parenting and unmarried; or LGBTQ, with LGBTQ youth having more than twice the risk of being homeless than their cisgender or heterosexual peers. In a March 2019 report, the Congressional Research Service identified family conflict and family dynamics, a youth's sexual orientation, sexual activity, school problems, pregnancy and substance use as primary risk factors for youth homelessness. Also noted in the congressional report, females are more likely than males to run away, and among white, black and Hispanic youth, black youth have the highest rates of running away with approximately half of youth running away before the age of 14.

Children in foster care face multiple factors that increase their risk of homelessness, including the number of foster care placements, history of running away from placements and time spent in a group home. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, over 500 children in the United States ran away from their foster care home or other placement in 2017. Youth in congregate care are also more likely to run away from care than youth in traditional foster care or out of home placement. The age at which a youth enters foster care also influences their risk of running away from care. Youth who are age 15 when they first enter foster care have the highest risk of running away while in care.

Human development also plays a role. Rational decision-making, inhibition, planning and reasoning are all stifled until young people mature, making young people biologically more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, such as unsafe sexual activity and substance use, than more mature adults. Without safe and permanent homes and caring adults, runaway and homeless youth are at even greater risk of engaging in high-risk behaviors or putting themselves in unsafe or risky situations.

The consequences faced by youth experiencing homelessness are vast and require coordination across the education, child welfare, juvenile justice, health and human services systems. Runaway and homeless youth are vulnerable to multiple threats, including not having their basic food and shelter needs met, untreated mental health disorders, substance use, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, sexual exploitation (including survival sex to meet basic needs), physical victimization and suicide. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one in three teens on the street will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home and the American Academy of Pediatrics finds suicide is the leading cause of death among unaccompanied youth. Also, youth who are homeless often experience a significant disruption in their education due to the transient nature of homelessness.

# Definitions

The definition of homeless youth varies across state and federal agencies and leading national organizations. For example, the National Alliance to End Homeless defines homeless youth as unaccompanied individuals ages 12 to 24, while the National Coalition for the Homeless defines homeless youth as individuals under the age of 18. Others define youth as individuals between the ages of 13 and 25.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act defines homeless youth as individuals under the age of 18 or between the ages of 16-22, depending on the program the youth is participating in. Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, “homeless children and youths” are broadly defined, without a specific age range.

Researchers also categorize homeless youth into typologies, which itself fosters debate. Typologies include: runaways, throwaways, street youth, systems youth, transient but connected, high risk and low risk. These terms reflect the diversity of experiences and backgrounds among homeless youth, who often do not fit into a single category.

# Federal Policy

The Runaway Youth Act, signed into law in 1974, is the only federal law focused on unaccompanied homeless youth. Later renamed the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, the legislation has been reauthorized five times. The act is administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The act, as amended, authorizes federal funding for three programs—the Basic Center Program, Transitional Living Program and Street Outreach Program.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 was the first major federal legislative response to homelessness. Title VII of the act includes provisions to ensure the enrollment, attendance and success of homeless children and youth in school. Under the act, schools must work to eliminate transportation barriers and other impediments that may prohibit students from attending school. Schools also must appoint a liaison to work with homeless students and their families.

The Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program provides states with funding to support youth expected to age out of foster care and youth ages 18 to 21 who were formerly in foster care. Funds can be used for housing, educational services and independent living services. The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 increased federal funds available to states to extend assistance to foster youth until age 21 as long as the youth is in school, working or has a medical condition that prevents them from participating in those activities. Services can include housing assistance, vocational and college help, and counseling.

\*Federal timeline adapted from the Congressional Research Service report on Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs

# Federal Youth Homelessness Policy Timeline

---

● **1912** Children's Bureau established to investigate and report on all matters related to children's welfare.

● **1933** Federal Transient Bureau assists states in developing aid for homeless children and adults. Civilian Conservation Corps. establishes camps for more than 1 million older youth.

● **1950** Social Security Act is amended (PL 81-734) to permit use of child welfare funds for the return of a runaway child under the age of 16.

● **1958** Social Security Act is amended (PL 85-840) to provide federal funds for the return of a runaway child under the age of 18.

● **1974** The Runaway Youth Act as Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (PL 93-415) is enacted. The legislation establishes what is now referred to as the Basic Center Program.

● **1977** Congress and the president reauthorize the Runaway Youth Act (PL 95-115) and broaden its scope to include "otherwise homeless youth."

● **1988** Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized (PL 100-690). A provision is added to establish the Transitional Living Program.

● **1999** The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized (PL 106-71). Funding and administration of the Basic Center Program and Transitional Living Program are merged under the Consolidated Runaway and Homeless Youth Program.

**2003** The Runaway, Homeless and Missing Children Protection Act (PL 108-96) is enacted to

- reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act for FY 2004 through FY 2008.
- **2008**  
The Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act (PL 110-378) is enacted to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act for FY 2009 through FY 2013.
- **2015**  
Runaway and Homeless Youth program grantees begin reporting demographic and outcome data on program participants to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a database used by homeless assistance providers that receive funding through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- **2018**  
The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized (PL 115-385) for FY 2019 and FY 2020.

The United State Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) was created by Congress in 1987 to coordinate the federal government’s collaborative response to homelessness. It works in partnership with 19 federal agencies and a national network of state and local affiliates (see graphic below). In 2010, USICH announced its goal to end youth homelessness by 2020 as part of its Opening Doors Strategic Plan, the nation’s first comprehensive homelessness strategy.

USICH’s 2012 Framework to End Youth Homelessness expands upon specific supports and strategies for meeting its homeless youth goals. In 2015, USICH announced its vision for the community response to youth homelessness, which identified four core outcomes and instructions for the system collaboration necessary to achieve those goals. In 2017, USICH also established criteria and benchmarks to assess progress toward ending youth homelessness. The criteria and benchmarks were updated in 2018.

<b>U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness</b>				
<b>19 Federal Member Agencies</b>				
Department of Health and Human Services	Department of Education	Department of Labor	Department of Housing and Urban Development	Department of Veterans Affairs
Department of Agriculture	Department of Commerce	Department of Defense	Department of Energy	Department of Homeland Security

Department of Interior	Department of Justice	Department of Transportation	Department for National and Community Service	General Services Administration
Department of Management and Budget	Social Security Administration	United States Postal Service	White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative	

## State Legislative Activity

States have adopted a variety of policies to combat youth homelessness. Some policies address the educational needs of homeless and runaway youth while others appropriate money for shelters and transitional housing. Other policies include counseling and outreach services to homeless youth or youth at risk of becoming homeless.

Since January 2019, at least 30 states have introduced legislation. Topics include:

- Addressing the educational needs of homeless youth.
- Housing for postsecondary students who are homeless.
- Appropriating funds for homeless youth services.
- Creating a state office of homeless youth.
- Requiring a state plan to address youth homelessness.
- Requiring youth in public systems be discharged to stable housing.
- Enabling homeless youth to obtain identification cards, drivers licenses and birth certificates.

Other legislation would allow minors to consent to medical, mental, dental and other health counseling and services without a parent or guardian. Fourteen states enacted legislation in 2019:

- Arkansas amended a law concerning consent to medical treatment to authorize a liaison under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to consent to medical treatment for a homeless minor.
- Colorado passed legislation permitting school mental health professionals to identify food insecurity, homelessness and other issues affecting students and make referrals to services within the community, and bring those services into the school setting where possible.
- Georgia passed a resolution recognizing and commending the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) for its contributions to the academic success of 1.3 million children and youth experiencing homelessness throughout the nation for more than 30 years.
- Indiana established that homeless youth may have access to their birth certificate, photo identification and driver's license without charge or the consent of a parent, guardian or custodian, if the homeless youth provides proof of ownership of a policy of motor vehicle insurance, pays all costs of the policy of motor vehicle insurance and presents required paperwork. This legislation also outlines the primary responsibilities of the office of the coordinator for education of homeless

children and the duties of the local liaisons of every local educational agency, regardless of whether it receives a McKinney-Vento Act grant.

- Kentucky established alternatives for educational coursework completion for students who are homeless children or youth and established that homeless individuals under a certain age shall not have to pay a fee to obtain a copy of their birth certificate. The legislation also established that a qualified mental health professional may provide outpatient mental health counseling to any child over a specified age upon request of such child and without the consent of parent(s) or guardian(s).
- Maryland repealed a provision requiring a county superintendent of schools to allow a child awaiting foster care placement not subject to certain educational stability provisions of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to attend school in the county, even if the child is not currently domiciled in that county. The legislation also updated certain provisions of law to include references to the educational stability provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- Maryland also established the “Workgroup to Study Shelter and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Minors.” The workgroup is required to identify and compile information on unaccompanied homeless minors and make recommendations regarding policy initiatives to address their needs, including funding requirements. The legislation requires the Senate Chair and House Chair of the Joint Committee on Ending Homelessness to serve as cochairs of the workgroup. The workgroup must report its findings to the governor and General Assembly by Dec. 1, 2019.
- Minnesota appropriated funds to the Office of Higher Education for a matching grant program to support eligible institutions with a demonstrable homeless student population. The legislation requires the appropriation to be used to meet immediate student needs that could result in a student not completing the term or their program, including but not limited to emergency housing, food and transportation.
- Nevada passed a bill requiring each public and charter school to develop a procedure to identify and review the academic plan for each homeless student, unaccompanied pupil or pupil who lives in foster care and adjust the plan as appropriate to maximize the accrual of credits and progress towards graduation for each pupil. The legislation also established that unaccompanied pupils or pupils who live in foster care receive full or partial credit for a specific course of study without satisfying any attendance requirement for the course if the pupil completes the coursework in compliance with procedures adopted by the board of trustees of a school district or the sponsor of a charter school.
- Nevada created the position of the liaison for postsecondary education for homeless pupils, established the duties of the liaison and authorized the Board of Regents of the University of Nevada to grant certain waivers of fees for homeless or unaccompanied pupils.
- New Jersey established the Office of Homelessness Prevention in the Department of Community Affairs. The legislation requires the department to establish and support a comprehensive program for homeless youth by contracting with licensed organizations and agencies that provide street outreach or center-based shelter or transitional living services for homeless youth. The legislation also permits the governing body of a county or municipality annually to appropriate funds to a private, nonprofit organization to provide services to runaway or homeless youths and their families.

- Tennessee requires a degree-granting postsecondary educational institution to designate a staff member to serve as a homeless student liaison to assist homeless students who are enrolled, or are planning to enroll, in the institution, and to develop a plan to provide homeless students who are enrolled in the institution access to housing resources.
- Texas passed a bill regarding the determination of appropriate disciplinary action to be taken against a public school student who is in foster care or who is homeless.
- Utah established the ability of homeless youth to consent to temporary shelter, care or services and modified the circumstances under which a person who provides temporary shelter to a homeless youth is subject to a criminal penalty. The legislation also allowed a homeless youth to consent to temporary shelter, care or services under certain circumstances.
- Virginia aligned provisions relating to when a homeless child or youth is deemed to reside in a school district.
- Washington passed six bills relating to youth homelessness:
  - SB 5324 revises provisions relating to support for students experiencing homelessness, expands award criteria for state grants, requires school districts receiving grants to monitor and report on the academic outcomes of students experiencing homelessness served by the grants and revises criteria for a grant program to link homeless students and their families with stable housing and revises eligibility criteria for students.
  - SB 5800 establishing the Helping Homeless College Students Act, which provides for a pilot program to assist students experiencing homelessness and to students who were in the foster care system when they graduated from high school. The legislation also allows college districts to establish plans to develop surplus property for affordable housing to accommodate the needs of students experiencing homelessness and students who were in the foster care system when they graduated high school.
  - HB 1599 revises the minimum requirements for High School and Beyond Plans, which ensures courses taken are aligned with the student's goals for education or training and career after high school. The bill also requires such plans include information specific to students who are or are at risk of being homeless.
  - HB 1657 adds a definition of street outreach services to provisions relating to services provided by the Office of Homeless Youth Prevention and Protection Programs.
  - HB 1893 helps certain postsecondary students, including students experiencing homelessness, remain enrolled in school by providing access to food or transportation.

## Additional Resources

The resources below are for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the positions of NCSL.

- National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, *Alone Without a Home: A National Review of State Laws Affecting Unaccompanied Youth*
- United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, *Homelessness in America: Focus on Youth*



- United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, Homelessness Statistics by State
- Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Youth Homelessness
- Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Voices of Youth Count
- School House Connection, State Laws on Minor Consent for Housing Related Services
- Congressional Research Services, Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs
- National Network for Youth, Fact Sheets and Issue Briefs
- Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, an Office of the Administration for Children & Families, Building Capacity to Evaluate Interventions for Youth/Young Adults with Child Welfare Involvement At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH), 2013-2019
- HUD Exchange, Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program
- Raikes Foundation
- National Alliance to End Homelessness
- A Way Home America
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
- American Bar Association, Commission on Homelessness & Poverty
- Homeless Youth Handbook
- True Colors Fund, State Index on Youth Homelessness

---

## About This NCSL Project

NCSL's Denver-based Children and Families Program conducts research and analysis on human services issues, tracks legislation and provides learning opportunities, consultations and technical assistance for legislators and legislative staff. Denver staff can be reached at (303) 364-7700 or [cyf-info@ncsl.org](mailto:cyf-info@ncsl.org).

NCSL staff in Washington, D.C., track and analyze federal legislation and policy and represent state legislatures on issues before Congress and the administration. Washington staff can be reached at (202) 624-5400 or [cyf-info@ncsl.org](mailto:cyf-info@ncsl.org).