

Factors Associated with Prolonged Youth Homelessness¹

Most youth who become homeless return to their parent(s) or guardian(s),¹ though some experience multiple or lengthy episodes of homelessness. Because research on this latter group is quite limited, ASPE commissioned a project to summarize what research is available on these youth. This project aims to help service providers and policymakers more effectively target resources to prevent or end prolonged episodes of homelessness among youth, as well as to support researchers in identifying areas for further research to supplement our understanding about prolonged youth homelessness.

The number of youth experiencing multiple or lengthy episodes of homelessness is not well known. One estimate comes from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, which applied typologies of youth experiencing homelessness from smaller studies to national data, and estimated that 500,000 youth experience at least one homeless episode, about 80,000 of whom experience longer or multiple episodes.²

This brief examines what is known about factors associated with prolonged homelessness among youth, namely involvement in the child welfare and criminal justice systems; histories of child maltreatment; substance use and mental health challenges; dropping out of school; unemployment and informal work; unstable housing and living situations; and family relationships, health, behavioral and demographic factors.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUTH EXPERIENCING PROLONGED HOMELESSNESS

The literature identifies a number of characteristics and experiences associated with young people who experience prolonged homelessness. Key findings are described below, with additional context provided, in some cases, by reflections from a few key informants. Several of these informants suggested that further validation and testing of a standardized risk assessment, such as the Transition-Age Youth (TAY) Triage Tool, may identify those at risk of prolonged homelessness across youth-serving systems. For more details on the methods used for this project, please see the text box on page 2.

Involvement in The Child Welfare and Criminal Justice Systems

Youth experiencing homelessness with a history of foster care involvement are more likely to report longer durations of homelessness.³ For example, youth who had been away from home for more than

Because there is no consensus as to the most appropriate way to define extended durations or multiple episodes of homelessness among youth, this brief uses the term "**prolonged homelessness**" as an umbrella term to cover any related concept. It also notes a few areas where literature identified a relationship between a risk factor and repeated, as opposed to prolonged, homelessness.

The literature uses multiple terms to describe this experience. For example:

- The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines *chronic homelessness* as including those with a disability who experience 12 or more months of homelessness. This definition is typically applied primarily to adults, though it can also be applied to youth.
- The six-item Transition-Age Youth (TAY) Triage screening tool is designed to predict which homeless youth are most likely to experience *long-term homelessness*, with "long-term" defined as five or more years. Each item is associated with an increased risk of long-term homelessness; youth who have experienced four or more of the items are considered to be at the highest risk.ⁱⁱ

ⁱU.S. Office of the Federal Register National Archives and Records Administration. (2015). Homeless emergency assistance and rapid transition to housing: Defining chronically homeless. *Federal Register*, 80(233/Notices [December 4]), 75791–75806. Retrieved June 17, 2016 from <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Defining-Chronically-Homeless-Final-Rule.pdf>.

ⁱⁱRice, E (2013). *The TAY Triage Tool: A tool to identify homeless transition age youth most in need of permanent supportive housing*. Retrieved December 21, 2015 from http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02?TAY_TriageTool_2014.pdf.

¹This is an ASPE summary of work under the project An Examination of Young People Experiencing or at High Risk for Homelessness, conducted by ICF Macro under contract number GS-23F-9777H to ASPE.

six months total were more likely than newly homeless youth to report that the state or foster parents were their legal guardians.⁴ A study using the TAY screening tool found that half of youth at highest risk for long-term homelessness had been involved in foster care, compared with 36 percent of those with less risk.⁵

Prolonged homelessness is also associated with involvement in the criminal justice system. One study found a positive relationship between length of time youth spent homeless and self-reported criminal involvement.⁶ Researchers have also found a relationship between longer periods of youth homelessness and likelihood of having been arrested.⁷ These arrest rates also translate into incarceration. Youth who had spent time in a jail or detention facility prior to age 18 were 1.86 times more likely to experience five or more years of homelessness than those who had not.⁸

Histories of Child Maltreatment

The relationship between family conflict and youth homelessness of any length is well-documented.⁹ This review suggests that neglect may be related to both prolonged and repeated homelessness among youth. Several studies have associated prolonged homelessness with a history of exposure to abuse and violence.

Youth who had experienced violence at home between families members were 2.23 times more likely than other youth to experience five or more years of homelessness, and youth at highest risk of long-term homelessness were also more likely to report physical abuse (65% vs. 40%), being physically molested, (46.7% vs. 23%), and being forced to have sex against their will (42.6% vs. 19%).¹⁰ Childhood physical neglect has also been associated with longer durations of homelessness among homeless youth with a history of foster care.¹¹

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

This brief is part of a project to systematically gather, in one location, the sum of knowledge about prolonged homelessness among youth. The project sought to understand: 1) the characteristics and experiences of these youth, 2) the intersection between mental illness and prolonged homelessness among youth, and 3) potential interventions for this population. This brief focuses on the first of these research questions.

The project included a systematic literature review across several scientific databases on prolonged homelessness among youth. Using peer-reviewed, government, and non-profit sources, the team reviewed literature from the runaway and homeless youth, education, juvenile justice, mental health, and child welfare domains. Of the 1,682 abstracts initially reviewed, 216 articles were deemed relevant for full article review. Most of the limited peer-reviewed literature did not focus explicitly on prolonged youth homelessness, instead describing the association between key characteristics and experiences, such as duration of homelessness or number of homeless episodes, or interventions that have been shown to be effective with similar high-risk populations.

Using semi-structured discussion guides tailored for practitioners and researchers, ICF also conducted phone conversations with ten key informants to elaborate on or clarify the information and gaps identified from the literature review. Information from these discussions should be interpreted with caution, as the sample of key informants was too small for results to be generalized.

A history of neglect may be related to both prolonged and repeated homelessness among youth.

Repeated episodes of homelessness have been linked to neglect as well. A longitudinal study found that child maltreatment, lack of parental warmth, and parental rejection all have a direct effect on the likelihood of running away repeatedly.¹² Another study suggested that youth who had run away repeatedly had a higher proportion of parents whose parenting style was characterized as lenient and somewhat less supportive than youth who ran away only once.¹³

Key informants identified a pattern of trauma and re-traumatization among homeless youth that may contribute to prolonged homelessness. They observed that many youths already traumatized by family conflict enter systems like child welfare or juvenile justice in which they may not always receive appropriate treatment. In some cases, these systems may fail to protect youth from further victimization and abuse, resulting in additional trauma. These informants reiterated that when youth eventually run away from or exit these systems, they may be exposed to further trauma by being forced to engage in sex, crime, or drug use in exchange for a place to stay.

Substance Use and Mental Health Challenges

Youth who experience prolonged homelessness are at greater risk for substance use. One study, for example, showed that youth living away from home for more than six months used more

intravenous drugs than newly homeless youth,¹⁴ while another study associated longer durations of homelessness with hard drug use.¹⁵ These findings parallel research in adults that associate high rates of substance use disorders with chronic homelessness.¹⁶ Youth who reported using marijuana before age 12 were also 3.05 times more likely to experience five or more years of homelessness.¹⁷

The higher rates of mental health challenges associated with prolonged experiences of homelessness in youth similarly parallel findings among adults. Compared to lower-risk groups, youth at highest risk of experiencing five or more years of homelessness reported more mental health issues, including depression (67% vs. 51%) and posttraumatic stress (47% vs. 30%).¹⁸

While none of the studies identified by this project focused specifically on serious mental illness, the evidence is stronger for chronic homelessness among adults. About 30 percent of adults experiencing

These findings parallel research in adults that associate high rates of substance use disorders and mental health challenges with chronic homelessness.

chronic homelessness have serious mental illness,¹⁹ and about three-quarters of chronically homeless adults have reported serious mental illness, substance use disorder, or both.²⁰

Some experts also suggested that prolonged homelessness could result from untreated mental illness, and that as youth stay longer on the streets, homelessness itself may be very stressful and traumatic, possibly contributing to mental illness. They also reported that older homeless youth may exhibit more symptoms of mental illness than younger youth.

Higher School Dropout Rates

Repeated homelessness was associated with even greater likelihood of dropping out of school than a single runaway episode.²¹ Similarly, youth at highest risk for five or more years of homelessness were more likely not to have a high school degree or GED than those at lower risk levels (43% vs. 34%).²² In addition, youth who had been away from home for more than six months were less likely to be attending school than their newly homeless peers.²³

Higher Rates of Unemployment and Informal Work

Prolonged homelessness may also be related to employment challenges. Those at highest risk of long-term homelessness were more likely to have a job that was “under the table” than those at lower risk levels (16.7% vs. 6.8%).²⁴ Another study found that those who experienced longer time on streets were two percent more likely to be unemployed.²⁵

Unstable Housing and Living Situations

The degree of instability in housing and living situations may be even greater for youth who experience prolonged homelessness than for other homeless youth.

One study found that street youth tend to experience both longer and more frequent episodes of homelessness than sheltered youth.²⁶ Another study of homeless youth with a history of foster care found that more moves between cities and primarily living with others (e.g. family, friends, or foster parents, as opposed to primarily living on the streets or in shelters) were both related to longer time periods since youth had last left home.²⁷

Family Relationships, Health, Behavioral, and Demographic Factors

Other factors found to be related to prolonged youth homelessness using the TAY Triage Tool included health and family stability experiences. For example, youth at highest risk for long-term homelessness were 1.65 times more likely to report having run away from a family home, group home, or foster home and 2.62 times more likely to report differences in religious beliefs with parents/guardians/caregivers

compared to youth with less risk. They were also 1.94 times more likely to have been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant,²⁸ mirroring other findings.²⁹

Other studies have also associated risky sexual behaviors, low self-control, and older age with prolonged homelessness.³⁰

Relationship between Youth Homelessness and Adult Homelessness

The literature review identified almost no research that examined whether there is a link between extended youth homelessness and subsequent adult homelessness. While additional research in this area is clearly needed, one analysis of Australian administrative data does provide some support for the concept that addressing homelessness among youth may prevent long-term homelessness in adulthood. This analysis showed that being homeless at age 18 or younger was the largest (35 percent, almost double the next-largest) of five pathways into adult (ages 21 or older) homelessness.

Not only had 42 percent of these individuals in the "youth to adult" homelessness group been in foster care, but they were more likely to have experienced traumatic family experiences, such as sexual and physical abuse, parental drug addiction, and family violence; in addition, 88 percent in this group had experienced two or more episodes of homelessness, and 85 percent (the largest percentage across all five pathways) reported experiencing 12 or more months of homelessness.³¹

CONCLUSIONS

- Although significant additional research is needed on this population, including whether the factors identified above help cause, or result from, prolonged homelessness among youth, this brief demonstrates what we do know about this phenomenon.
- In designing strategies to prevent and end prolonged homelessness among youth, policymakers should consider that such youth have high rates of system involvement and behavioral health challenges.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Although the literature search used in this project identified many experiences and characteristics associated with prolonged homelessness, the identified studies generally focused on associations, rather than causal pathways, between these factors and prolonged homelessness. In addition, because the total number of identified studies was small, definitive conclusions will require substantially more research.

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² National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2012). *An emerging framework for ending unaccompanied youth homelessness*. Retrieved December 23, 2015 from <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/an-emerging-framework-for-ending-unaccompanied-youth-homelessness>.

³ Bender, K., Yang, J., Ferguson, K., & Thompson, K. (2015). Experiences and needs of homeless youth with a history of foster care. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 55, 222–231; Roman, N. P., & Wolfe, P. B. (1995). *Web of failure: The relationship between foster care and homelessness*. Retrieved December 22, 2015 from <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=571283>.

⁴ Milburn, N., Rotheram-Borus, M.J., Rice, E., Mallett, S., & Rosenthal, D. (2010). Cross-national variations in behavioral profiles among homeless youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 37(1-2), 63-76.

⁵ Rice, E. (2013). *The TAY Triage Tool: A tool to identify homeless transition age youth most in need of permanent supportive housing*. Retrieved December 21, 2015 from http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TAY_TriageTool_2014.pdf.

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⁸ Rice, E. (2013). *The TAY Triage Tool: A tool to identify homeless transition age youth most in need of permanent supportive housing*. Retrieved December 21, 2015 from http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TAY_TriageTool_2014.pdf.

⁹ Thompson, S.J., Bender, K., Windsor, L., Cook, M. S., & Williams, T. (2010). Homeless youth: Characteristics, contributing factors, and service options. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 20 (2): 193–217.

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