



## HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

### Policy Brief

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# Measuring Success in Housing Programs for Homeless Youth: **The Need for Youth-Specific Performance Measures**



## YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AS A FEDERAL POLICY ISSUE

With the release of *Opening Doors*,<sup>1</sup> the comprehensive plan to prevent and end homelessness in the United States, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) identifies homeless youth as a priority population (one of four) and establishes the goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020. The USICH has developed a preliminary model for intervention with youth experiencing homelessness – their approach clearly articulates that youth experiencing homelessness are not the same as homeless adults, requiring different

interventions and services, and emphasizes that in order to end homelessness for young people we need to address their housing needs, support them in their transition to adulthood, and prepare them for independence and self-sufficiency.

In order to achieve these goals for youth, we need to re-tool our existing homeless assistance programs and develop appropriate objectives and performance measures to monitor the impact of housing and services on young people experiencing homelessness. The purpose of this brief is to identify some of the limitations of existing outcomes and indicators and advocate for the development

This Policy Brief, *Measuring Success in Housing Programs for Homeless Youth*, is part of a series developed by the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) to advance policy and practice recommendations focused on preventing and ending youth homelessness. This brief emerges from *No Way Home: Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Homeless Youth in Hollywood*, a report released by the HHYP in November 2010 presenting findings from a multi-method needs assessment conducted with 389 homeless youth ages 12 to 25 in the Hollywood community.

of trauma-informed, youth-specific objectives and performance measures to ensure greater effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability in housing programs serving youth. Once developed and implemented, data from these measures can effectively inform decisions about strategies, services, and resource allocation; enable communities to assess their efforts; and help determine if we are advancing our agenda of ending youth homelessness.

## UNDERSTANDING HOMELESS YOUTH

### Magnitude of the Problem and the Diversity of the Population

It is difficult to know how many youth are homeless. Best available data suggest that between 1.3 and 2.1 million youth ages 12 to 24 experience homelessness each year in the United States.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no single reliable resource for data on homeless youth. The numbers of youth and their profiles differ depending on the source of the data and the different definitions of homelessness used, age ranges of youth surveyed, and sampling strategies and methods employed.<sup>3,4</sup> These methodological issues exacerbate the difficulties inherent in quantifying the homeless youth population and underscore the critical need to obtain reliable data on the prevalence and characteristics of homeless youth through point-in-time (PIT) counts and other research and data collection strategies.

### Trauma and Unique Challenges Faced by Homeless Youth

Homeless youth face unique challenges that affect their stability and participation in services and point to the kinds of housing and resources they need. Homeless youth consistently identify conflict with their parents as the primary reason for their homelessness.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Many homeless youth have fled intolerable home situations, characterized by physical/sexual abuse, domestic violence, homophobia/transphobia, or parental mental illness/substance abuse; or have been kicked out or abandoned by their parents/guardians.<sup>8,9</sup>

While prevalence varies depending on the data source, a significant proportion of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT); are pregnant or are already parents; and have prior involvement with the dependency and delinquency systems.<sup>10,11,12,13</sup> Many homeless youth report interrupted education, being held back in school, having received remedial or special education, and having dropped out of school or been suspended or expelled.<sup>14,15</sup> Homeless youth also report higher rates of mental health and substance abuse problems than their non-homeless peers.<sup>16,17,18</sup>



## FEDERAL OUTCOME INDICATORS AND LIMITATIONS

There are limited federal resources dedicated to housing for homeless youth. The two major sources of funding are the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HHS funds street outreach, emergency shelter and transitional housing for youth through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and structures its services around a youth development framework. HUD, by far the more significant source of housing support for homeless youth, particularly transition age youth ages 18 to 25, does not have a youth-specific housing model nor a designated funding stream for youth. HUD allocates funding for street outreach, emergency shelter and services, rapid re-housing assistance, and prevention through the Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) Program, and for permanent housing, transitional housing, and supportive services through the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program.

The 2012 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for the CoC Program is the first competition administered under HUD's new interim rule. Homeless assistance programs funded through this NOFA will be measured by the objective "of ending chronic homelessness and moving families and individuals to permanent housing." Performance indicators are focused on keeping individuals permanently housed; moving individuals from transitional into permanent housing; securing employment for individuals exiting programs; utilizing mainstream resources; creating new permanent supportive housing beds for chronically homeless individuals and families; and decreasing the number of homeless.

## MEASURING PERFORMANCE IN HOUSING PROGRAMS SERVING YOUTH

The preliminary intervention model developed by USICH for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness incorporates risk and protective factors that impact outcomes for youth; prioritizes the need for data and research to drive decisions regarding services and resource allocation; and presents a data strategy to build our knowledge base. But USICH also acknowledges the serious gaps and limitations in what we know about homeless youth and what interventions work with different populations of youth, which complicates efforts to define appropriate objectives and measures of success.



These indicators are solution-focused and appropriate for adult populations, particularly chronically homeless adults, but have limited relevance for young people experiencing homelessness. As a result, monitoring and outcome data collected from CoC-funded programs through HUD's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and shared through CoC applications and annual progress reports, will provide limited information, at best, on service delivery, resources, and outcomes for homeless youth.

**We need a sub-set of quantitative objectives and measures specific to unaccompanied transition age youth to fully assess a community's efforts and progress towards ending youth homelessness.**

The four (4) core outcomes for youth identified by USICH – stable housing, permanent connections, social-emotional well-being, and education/employment – provide a useful framework for establishing priorities and developing objectives. It is time to move forward and develop and adopt youth-specific outcomes, with valid and reliable measures, to evaluate the impact of housing programs serving youth and determine if our interventions are effective in helping youth achieve stability and self-sufficiency.

### **Goal 1: Stable Housing.**

Youth under age 25 rarely think about residential permanency, whether or not they are homeless. They are in flux, can move frequently as needs/circumstances change, and usually don't have incomes that support living independently. Homeless youth face distinct challenges: they often are unable to live with parents or family; no one in their peer group has the resources to maintain an apartment; and they face significant barriers to employment.



Existing measures of residential stability often fail to reflect what it takes to get a youth from the streets into stable housing (either transitional or permanent) and to keep them in a housing program, nor do they recognize the incremental steps and small changes that characterize youth's movement from the streets to stability. HUD's focus on permanent housing reflects the assumption that permanent housing is the most appropriate and desired housing model for ending homelessness, but youth need access to a full continuum of housing resources. In particular, transitional housing programs offer a developmentally appropriate housing model for homeless young people who do not have families who can support them or resources to live independently, and who have significant needs for supportive services but do not qualify for permanent supportive housing programs.

We need performance indicators for youth that measure retention in transitional housing, in contrast to an exclusive focus on moving youth into permanent housing. We also need indicators that assess reductions in length of homeless episodes and recurrences of homelessness for youth exiting housing programs, to evaluate successes in increasing the housing stability of youth.

### **Goal 2: Permanent Connections.**

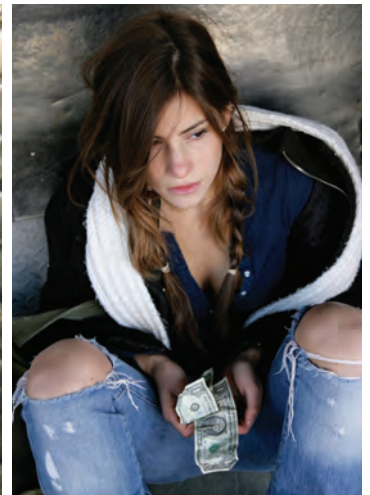
All adolescents and young adults face specific developmental tasks – gaining independence, developing trust with peers, developing a sense of personal identity, and moving towards autonomy and self-sufficiency. For most youth, parents, schools, faith organizations, and other social institutions help them navigate through these stages; master skills and competencies; learn to cope with challenges; and help buffer the effects of poverty, adversity, and negative peer and social influences. Homeless youth, however, are often left to face these challenges alone.

We need indicators sufficiently sensitive to reflect youth's gradual disengagement from the streets, and their increasing connection to the community and relationships with non-homeless peers, helping professionals, and mainstream service systems.

### **Goal 3: Social-Emotional Well-Being.**

Social and emotional well-being includes the ability to manage one's emotions, develop positive relationships, care for oneself and others, and plan for the future. Adolescents and young adults generally gain these skills through their positive interactions with – and attachments to – parents, caregivers, and other significant adults, and their involvement with schools, faith organizations, and other social institutions. Homeless adolescents and young adults who have experienced trauma and disrupted relationships with adults and caregivers are at significant risk for mental health problems and decreased social and emotional well-being.

We need indicators of well-being that reflect youth's increasing stability and their healing and recovery from the trauma they've experienced. Relevant indicators should include measures to assess youth's participation in services and treatment, and their increased ability to manage activities of daily living, increased coping skills, reductions in substance use, increased ability to manage mental health symptoms, decreased impulsivity, improved planning and goal-setting skills, and increased self-esteem and self-efficacy.



### **Goal 4: Education or Employment.**

Most transition age youth are still in the process of defining who they are and feel anxious about their future in a society where unemployment is high, college tuition costs are increasing and job prospects are limited. Many youth, regardless of whether or not they're attending school

or working, are financially dependent on their families. Homeless youth face almost insurmountable challenges to economic stability. Many have significant educational deficits, have never completed high school, and are seriously behind their non-homeless peers in terms of educational achievement. They also have limited employment experience and the work that they have done has often been “under the table” or in jobs one can’t list on a traditional resume.

HUD tracks the number of participants in CoC-funded projects who are employed at program exit as one of their primary outcome indicators. This is an insufficient outcome for youth. We need to develop measures to track youth’s educational progress and readiness for adulthood including specific skill-building, work readiness, and career planning progress. We need to: 1) monitor youth’s progress in completing high school or pursuing post-secondary education; 2) monitor youth’s participation in and completion of employment-related skills training programs and their success in acquiring new employment-related skills; and 3) monitor communities’ efforts to collaborate with agencies to address the educational and employment needs of transition age youth.

In their 2010-2015 Strategic Plan, HUD stresses the importance of partnering with the Department of Labor and collaborating with state and local organizations to coordinate job skills training and job placement. To meet this goal, federal agencies need to develop job skills training programs specifically targeted to homeless youth, particularly youth who have not graduated from high school or obtained a GED, along with youth who do not have employment-related skills, do not have a work history, may struggle with substance use, and may have trouble participating in traditional employment-related programs. While this is a policy issue beyond the scope of this brief, it will be difficult to positively impact youth’s educational and employment status and skills without changes in mainstream programs.

## MOVING FORWARD

The work of designing trauma-informed, youth-specific measures is only one component of a comprehensive action plan for ending youth homelessness, but the focus on objectives and measures allows us to articulate the special needs and circumstances of youth, the results we want to achieve, and the impact we want to have. Clear performance measures will yield data we need to help us better understand youth participation in programs, build an evidence-base for developing effective interventions for youth that will help them achieve stability and self-sufficiency, and determine if we are progressing in our efforts to end youth homelessness.

Developing youth-specific objectives and performance measures, and achieving consensus across agencies and institutions requires commitment, dedicated resources, and significant expertise. We call on USICH to convene a multi-sector group of key stakeholders (federal agencies, researchers, and youth providers) to establish objectives and performance measures both for youth-specific housing models and for youth housed in adult programs, along with measures for other youth outcomes; and to develop mechanisms to test their validity, reliability, and feasibility. Once tested, we need USICH to establish a concrete plan for ensuring wide-scale adoption of measures by federal agencies in their homeless assistance and youth development programs.

We need to work on multiple levels, with federal, state, and local collaboration, to end youth homelessness by 2020. Our current approach to funding and service delivery for homeless youth will not get us to this goal. At the same time we’re addressing measurement issues, we need to affect changes in mainstream service systems and establish mechanisms for working across sectors and systems. We must be prepared to re-tool existing homeless assistance programs, create new models for serving youth, and significantly expand funding for youth-specific programs. All of this will take political will and resources, but if we commit to this work, we can safeguard the future for young people in our communities and ensure that no young person in the United States is without a home.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) is a collaboration of homeless youth-serving agencies in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles, California, working together to prevent and end youth homelessness through direct service, research, policy and advocacy, and training and capacity building. The HHYP is a national leader in developing a trauma-informed approach to services for homeless youth, and in adapting and testing evidence-based interventions for risk reduction and health promotion with homeless young people. For more than a decade, the HHYP has worked collaboratively with public and private agencies to strengthen emergency services for homeless youth; provide stable housing; address the health,

mental health and substance abuse treatment needs of youth; promote improved educational and employment outcomes; and advocate for policy and program changes to prevent and end homelessness for young people.

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This brief was written by key leaders of the HHYP and their consultants, with valuable input from community experts and external reviewers.

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We wish to also thank the young people whose experiences helped shape the content and recommendations of this policy brief. We hope that we have adequately captured their needs and offered strategies and solutions for safeguarding their futures.

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