

YOUNG, ALONE, AND HOMELESS IN THE LONE STAR STATE:

POLICY SOLUTIONS *to* END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS *in* TEXAS

A Snapshot of Key Highlights and Policy Recommendations



INTRODUCTION

The lack of a cohesive policy and funding approach to address the problem of youth homelessness in Texas – a broad problem affecting both urban and rural communities – has resulted in high levels of youth who are homeless and poor outcomes for these young people.

That is the overriding conclusion of ***Young, Alone, and Homeless in the Lone Star State: Policy Solutions to End Youth Homelessness in Texas***, which combines cross-systems data and policy analysis with findings from 100-plus interviews with youth who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, conversations with service providers and others, and more than a year of exhaustive research by Texas Appleseed, Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), and pro bono partner Vinson & Elkins LLP. Reducing or resolving the issue of youth homelessness and improving outcomes for young people will require a cohesive approach that brings all child-serving systems together to provide a full continuum of services.

This document summarizes the report findings in four key areas that intersect with youth homelessness – education, criminal justice, foster care, and health – and offers recommendations for how Texas lawmakers can strengthen services and systems to address current shortfalls.



EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Texas schools are on the front lines of this issue, representing enormous potential for prevention and intervention. However, homeless students face challenges that threaten their education. They are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out, be disciplined at school, and be chronically absent — all of which increase their risk for future justice system involvement and repeat bouts of homelessness.

Key Data

- In the 2014-15 school year, the most recent year for which data are available, **more than 113,000 students were identified as being homeless** at some point during the school year in Texas public schools – a 12 percent increase from the 2013-14 school year.
- While urban districts have the highest count of students identified as homeless, **rural districts often had high rates of student homelessness**, exposing the myth that homelessness is solely an urban problem.
- More than one in four Texas districts **did not identify any homeless students** in 2014-15. This may reflect students' reluctance to self-identify and/or funding shortages that create a disincentive for school districts to identify homeless students.
- Each year in Texas, at least 1,000 students who have experienced homelessness repeat a grade and 1,400 drop out. Unaccompanied homeless students are **10 times more likely to drop out of school**.
- Texas students who are homeless are **twice as likely** to be referred to In-School Suspension, **2.5 times more likely** to be suspended from school, and **five times** more likely to be referred to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program.

Contributing Factors

- Unfunded state and federal mandates leave schools without adequate resources to identify and support homeless students. In fact, the federal Government Accountability Office has reported that schools have a **disincentive for identifying students as homeless due to the costs** associated with meeting their needs.
- Some middle and high school students **may not self-identify due to stigma or fear of interaction with authorities**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Texas should provide funding to school districts to **supplement federal funds to serve students who are homeless**, perhaps based on the size of the homeless youth population in each district.
- Local education agencies should increase **their Title I funding** set-asides for services to homeless students. This should include stronger, dedicated funding for homeless liaisons in each district.
- School districts should participate in “point-in-time” counts and create databases of community resources that can be regularly updated and used by homeless liaisons to connect students with supports and services. **Collaboration with educators and service providers should be a requirement** for receiving federal and state funding to serve youth who are homeless or at risk.
- Texas should **keep youth who are homeless in school** by eliminating suspension as a disciplinary option, except in very serious situations, and should create incentives to graduate by eliminating barriers to higher education.

JUVENILE & CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Young people who are homeless are more likely than their housed peers to be victims of crime. At the same time, behaviors associated with youth homelessness — including running away from home and foster care placements — are too often criminalized, and actions linked to lack of secure housing (curfew violations, vagrancy, panhandling, camping) are punished as violations of the law.

Key Data

- Nearly **one in three** young people participating in Youth Count Texas!, a statewide count of youth experiencing homelessness in Texas, reported legal problems or a prior conviction.
- The same survey found **34% of youth experiencing homelessness were victims of child abuse or neglect**, 23% had experienced sexual assault, and almost 17% had been a victim of physical or sexual assault on the streets.
- Nearly **6,000 children (ages 10 to 16) and more than 450 17-year-olds were arrested** in 2015 for running away; of these, about 2,000 came into contact with juvenile probation.
- Similar to trends seen in school data, while urban counties show the highest number of youth referred to probation for running away, **some rural counties have high rates of runaway referrals**.
- The demographics of runaway youth in FY 2015 in the Texas counties with 50-plus runaways referred to juvenile probation show: average age of 15; **Black youth and Hispanic girls are overrepresented among youth referred to probation for running away**; nearly three in four enrolled in school; police were the source of almost all referrals (97 percent).

Contributing Factors

- Young people who are picked up by law enforcement after running away from home are met by varying responses, depending on the county. In **some counties, youth are detained despite federal law restricting use of detention for runaways**.
- Criminalizing the symptoms and survival behavior associated with youth homelessness leads to a **cycle of juvenile or criminal justice system involvement**.
- The **high number of youth in Texas who run away from home more than once** shows that the current response is ineffective. Young people who run away from home are often running from abuse or family conflict and need a therapeutic, rather than court-based, response.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Texas should prioritize and invest in preventing youth from encountering homelessness, while also **training law enforcement officers** on best practices for interacting with homeless youth and the services available in their communities.
- Texas should **remove runaway cases from the juvenile system** and respond instead through a child welfare lens, including by expanding the state's Services to At-Risk Youth ("STAR") program. Detention should not be viewed as a viable housing solution, even short-term.
- Municipalities should **review ordinances and eliminate those that criminalize homeless youth**, including juvenile curfew ordinances, and should instead prioritize connecting youth with supports and services that meet housing and other needs.
- **Transition planning should begin immediately** upon a youth's entry to a secure county or state juvenile facility, and should account for any circumstances that could lead to housing instability.

TEXAS FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Youth in foster care are at high risk of becoming homeless — either by running away from foster care placements, from failed placements with family or failed adoptions, or by aging out of foster care into homelessness.

Key Data

- In FY 2016, **more than 1,000 Texas children ran away** from a foster care placement; nearly 30 percent of these children ran away more than once. It took an average of six weeks to locate each runaway.
- Every year **nearly 1,200 Texas youth “age out” of the foster care system** on their 18th birthday, putting them at heightened risk of homelessness. By the time they reach the age of 19, 25 percent of Texas youth who aged out of foster care reported being homeless in the first two years after leaving the system.

Contributing Factors

- Before a young person ages out of foster care, DFPS is required to provide life skills training and promote developing contacts with supportive adults. Due to **lack of resources and available caseworkers**, foster youth often have only one or two such meetings prior to aging out, with little follow up.
- Texas is **not appropriately tracking the number of youth who run from foster care** placements, and it is taking too much time to locate those who do.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- DFPS should **improve its data keeping** so that it is able to tell in “real time” how many youth are on run-away status, and periodically publish aggregate data and analysis to determine whether improvements need to be made.
- DFPS should **ensure that foster care providers receive appropriate training** to help them create cultures of care and prevent conflicts from escalating to crises. Counseling and/or crisis intervention should be offered at the first sign that a placement is at risk of failing.
- DFPS should work with law enforcement organizations to **develop a protocol** that would better ensure a quick response when a child runs from care.
- Texas should revamp **its programs that prepare youth** in foster care for adult living, with an eye toward individualized case management services that support a youth’s strengths and needs.
- The process for **extending foster care beyond the age of 18** should change to be an “opt out” rather than “opt in” for youth.

PHYSICAL/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Youth who are homeless are one of the most underserved and vulnerable populations when it comes to health care. Many of these young people are not aware of available health services or how to access them — a complex, challenging process at best.

Key Data

- **Youth often identify various health-related problems as a cause of their homelessness**, including physical disability, hospital discharge, mental illness, and substance abuse. Nearly 47 percent said they had experienced alcohol abuse or addiction.
- Among surveyed homeless youth, 15 percent were pregnant and **nearly one in three already had a child**.
- According to Texas Health and Human Services data, **nearly 700,000 children under 18 are uninsured in Texas**. About 90 percent of them are eligible for Medicaid or CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) but are not enrolled. It is highly likely that young people experiencing homelessness are among those eligible but not enrolled in these programs.

Contributing Factors

- Lack of transportation, parental consent requirements, and other **program eligibility criteria** make it difficult for youth who are homeless to find the health care they need.
- **Trauma looms large** in the lives of homeless youth, making them hesitant to seek out help from unknown adults and complex health care systems.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- All staff serving youth who are homeless should receive training on both trauma-informed care and positive youth development. Health care providers must create **youth-centric services and programs** and partner with other youth-based agencies to gain access to youth in need of services.
- Federal, state, and local governments, as well as funders, must **invest in evidence-based prevention and early intervention** to ensure stronger families and consequently, a stronger mental state for youth.
- Texas should **simplify current consent laws** so that youth are able to access and consent to all health care services they require.
- **Federal and state Medicaid and CHIP guidelines should clearly provide for unaccompanied minors** as a population, and ensure that unaccompanied minors can apply. CHIP should be expanded to age 21.



SERVICES, SUPPORTS, & FUNDING

- The existing system of funding and services available to help homeless youth is a patchwork of loosely connected programs and policies, hampering service providers' work and creating confusion for youth seeking help.
- No single piece of legislation or single agency at the state level comprehensively directs and manages the regulations and resources aimed at addressing youth homelessness. Nationally, agencies and programs have no consensus about what situation qualifies as "homeless."
- Texas benefits from a single consistent source of federal funding for providers to serve homeless youth (the Runaway and Homeless Youth program). Other funding sources are not specific to youth programs, have long waitlists, or are otherwise insufficient to address the issue.
- At the state level, Texas has a handful of successful programs that could be expanded to consistently serve youth experiencing homelessness but there are no state funding streams or programs devoted to serving young people who are homeless.
- It is unclear at both the state and federal levels who is responsible for addressing youth homelessness. This ambiguity has resulted in a lack of consistent leadership and accountability.

OVERARCHING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Texas should establish a statewide task force that is jointly led by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Department of Housing & Community Affairs (TDHCA), specifically charged with identifying strategies and solutions to address issues in child-serving systems that may push young people into homelessness.
- The Texas Legislature should create dedicated funding streams to support services for youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness and/or who are at-risk.
- The state should invest in strengthening prevention and early intervention services for youth, including family counseling or other crisis intervention services, as well as parenting skills.
- The state should invest in initiatives that would raise public awareness about the services that exist. Texas should also develop a comprehensive directory with information on services for young people who are homeless or at-risk and ensure that it is widely available and regularly updated.
- Efforts addressing youth homelessness should include stakeholders from child welfare, housing, juvenile justice, education, health care, and nonprofit systems.
- Youth-serving systems, including schools, should coordinate and cooperate in "point-in-time" counts that provide information about the extent and contributors of youth homelessness. The "point-in-time" count process should continue to be evaluated and strengthened in order to better capture appropriate data on youth who are homeless.