



## Homelessness Policy Research Institute

# Literature Review: Emerging Youth Intervention Practices

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## BACKGROUND

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Youth homelessness in the United States is a national challenge. Estimates indicate that 1 in 30 adolescents, ages 13-17, and nearly 1 in 10 young adults, ages 18-25, have experienced some form of homelessness during a 12-month period (Morton et al., 2018). In this study, Morton and co-authors found that being young parents, Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, and not completing high school were each associated with higher risk of youth homelessness. Marginalized youth, particularly LGBTQ+ individuals, are disproportionately unhoused. Youth of color are the majority of these LGBTQ+ individuals; and in a recent New York survey of homeless LGBTQ+ youth, 44% identified as Black and 26% identified as Latinx (Freeman & Hamilton, 2008).

In 2022, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) estimated that 69,144 people are experiencing homelessness at any given day in Los Angeles, representing a 4.1% rise in homelessness since 2020. Of these individuals, 2,960 are between the ages of 18 and 24, qualifying as unhoused youth (LAHSA, 2022). The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) provides a starkly different measure, estimating 51,287 housing-insecure youth in LA County (Barnes, 2022). This elevated measure is at least partially attributable to LACOE's broader definition of unhoused youth that not only includes those residing on the streets, within shelters, or within cars but also those without fixed, stable, or adequate nighttime residence (Barnes, 2022).

With youth homeless and housing insecurity on the rise, potential interventions must also account for the correlated unique health outcomes. Youth homelessness is associated with elevated risk for a swath of negative mental health outcomes, such as mood disorders, suicide attempts, and post-traumatic stress disorder. For youth who have spent time unsheltered, the risks are even higher as they are more likely to experience stressful situations. Along with this, unhoused youth are more likely to have substance use disorders. It is difficult, however, to understand the direction of causality between mental health disorders and youth homelessness (Toro et al., 2007).

## INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

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Identifying proven and effective intervention strategies to mitigate the growing number of unhoused youth is a still-growing body of research. Because the unhoused youth population is incredibly heterogeneous, research has yet to understand how various interventions impact minority groups, like Black and Latinx youth, former foster youth, and LGBTQ+ youth. Scholars

from across the world have been conducting studies, analyzing experimental results, and presenting findings to pinpoint successful and unsuccessful interventions that prevent the onset of youth homelessness or contribute to the transition into stable housing.

### **School Based Interventions**

Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987), states can receive federal grants to provide services and programs that address the education of unhoused children and youth and help in the identification of these individuals. However, around three-fourths of homeless youth surveyed in 2008 by the California Homeless Youth Project were not in school (Hyatt, 2013), perhaps highlighting a limitation of school-based interventions. Given that not having a high school diploma or GED increases the risk of homelessness by 346% (Voices of Youth Count, 2017), school-based interventions present a critical opportunity to prevent youth homelessness before it occurs or for early intervention.

There are a multitude of pieces of statewide legislation that seek to engage unhoused, or housing-precarious youth through education policies and programs, such as AB801 (which requires qualifying higher education institutions to have a Homeless and Foster Student Liaison) (Pearl et al., 2021). In partnership with the LA Homeless Services Authority, schools in the LA Community College District have Campus Peer Navigators, who connect housing insecure community college students to homeless services in the county through the Youth Coordinated Entry System. This increase in staffing will hopefully result in stronger partnerships with service provider organizations and boost the ability of higher education institutions to identify, connect with, and serve their students who are housing insecure or experiencing homelessness. More recently, in April 2022, the Los Angeles Community College District allocated \$1.5 million toward launching a pilot initiative aimed at offering housing support to over 100 students facing homelessness or housing instability. (Shalby, 2022). This endeavor is representative of a new trend in education institutions getting more involved in providing or subsidizing housing for housing insecure students, often looking to repurpose old buildings or unused land on their campus to create housing.

### **Housing Based Interventions**

Housing Based interventions intend to prevent and end youth homelessness by providing immediate transitional or permanent housing options.

Host Homes have been identified by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development as an effective early intervention to provide shelter because of their flexible and cost-effective nature (2016). In this program model, families and individuals offer their homes as temporary shelter for youth on the verge of homelessness. This mitigates the fear and apprehension that can arise from the common occurrence that youth are often rehoused in shelters far away from their community, friends, and school (Schwan et al, 2018). Host Homes can efficiently cut the costs of developing and maintaining costly emergency shelters and eventually, serve as a longer-term housing option (U.S. Department of Housing and Development, 2016). They have proven particularly effective in rehousing LGBTQ+ youth in New York through the [Point Source Youth](#) program.

A systematic review of studies involving housing interventions of emergency crisis centers on unhoused youth indicated that those centers helped to secure a number of short-term benefits including employment, education, housing, mental health services, permanent connections, health care, and legal support (Detlaff et. al., 2017). Dostaler and Nelson (2003) assessed the outcomes of young women, age 12 to 20, at an emergency shelter that emphasized an individualized approach on independence in its services. Results were promising; youth reported improvements in housing, independence, and life satisfaction, and shelter staff reported pride in helping youth secure housing and develop skills toward independent adulthood (Dostaler and Nelson, 2003). Dostaler and Nelson (2003) further noted that age discrimination and prejudice were potential factors for housing situations remaining unchanged or worsening for some of the youth.

The focus of the previous study on promoting autonomy and independence within housing interventions has since become a research focus, and results show positive outcomes increase among homeless youth when programming emphasizes autonomy. Curry et. al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive review of housing interventions, analyzing 47 studies with 3,112 youth and 495 staff participants. A common theme highlighted among the studies was the ways in which organizational and administrative factors were viewed by youth participants and adult staff; fluidity in policy, flexible enforcement of policy, elimination of “zero-tolerance” policy, and youth involvement in policy development all proved effective methods at bolstering youth engagement and easing program implementation (Curry, 2021). Studies for decades have cited the tension that often develops between staff and participants within housing interventions and the delicate balance between enforcing rules strictly and allowing youth the freedom to develop their own routine and structure (Curry & Petering, 2017; Munson et al., 2017; Schwartz-Tayri & Spiro, 2017; Ungar & Ikeda, 2017).

In an effort to provide more flexible housing services, California passed SB 1380 in 2016, which required the Housing First model across all housing programs in the state. By reducing certain barriers in the screening process, such as criminal-legal involvement and sobriety, Housing First increases access to safe and stable housing, addressing the basic need of shelter. However, access to social services and service coordination is vital to supplement housing stability and improve quality of life (California Department of Housing and Community Development, n.d.). Within the purview of Housing First, transitional living programs (TLPs) are a strategy used by the federal government. Youths aged 16 to 22 who are either unhoused or living in a shelter are eligible for TLPs, which provide community-based housing for up to 21 months (Benefits.gov, n.d.). The Housing First model has also proven to improve housing stability for youth with mental illness (Kozloff et al., 2016). In a study based in Chicago, residents of TLPs reported that they found a sense of “family” and support through their residential community, something many participants had lacked before becoming homeless. Furthermore, participants felt that this community-based model prepared them to emotionally and financially transition into independent living (Holtschneider, 2016).

### ***Mental Health and Counseling Interventions***

Literature shows that mental health and counseling interventions are typically considered the most effective at preventing the onset and endurance of youth homelessness. The risk factors of becoming homeless and developing mental health issues, including poverty, abuse, school truancy, and familial issues, often overlap (Schwan et al., 2018). Early intervention can mitigate adverse potential outcomes and to remove access barriers to programming (Kidd et. al., 2014). Young people who are able to transition from homelessness relatively quickly are less likely to develop mental health and substance abuse issues, which once developed, increase the barriers to housing stability (Milburn et al., 2012; Toro, Lesperance, and Braciszewski, 2011)

Current research reinforces the importance of physical space design in the success of mental health interventions. Elements of interior design, including images of nature, utilization of color, and inclusion of plants, reduce stress and increase youth engagement within counseling environments; similarly, ambient interventions to these environments, including calming sounds, music, lighting, and smells, accomplish the same outcomes (Jovanović et al., 2019, Novotná et al., 2011). Detlaff et al. (2017) also finds that representation of prominent figures with the same identities as homeless youth in counseling environments contributes to feelings of safety.

The process of intervening to prevent the onset and endurance of youth homelessness is often difficult on the mental health of caretakers and system workers implementing interventions. Caretakers of young people in the child welfare system report high levels of stress and difficulties coping with the responsibilities of the job (Day and Paul, 2007; Herman et al., 2011). Evidence suggests that internal programming and structure to support the wellbeing of caregivers and system workers can improve successful outcomes to mitigate youth homelessness, increasing successful transitions for young people out of the child welfare system (Herman et al., 2011).

For families, interventions that attempt to strengthen their bonds are also proven to be successful. Family separation and familial conflict are strongly associated with youth poverty, insecurity, and abuse. As an important intervention to address youth homelessness, family reunification is associated with greater emotional and financial support (Milburn et al., 2005).

The Home Free Program, established by the National Runaway Safeline as a “multi-component trauma-sensitive family reunification intervention based in a youth empowerment framework” that targets runaway youth, has proven to improve family communication, relational dynamics, and child behavior while also decreasing the risk of future runaway episodes (Harper et al., 2015).

However, there are differential characteristics that predict family reunification amongst runaway, throwaway, and independent youth. Runaway youth are those that leave home for at least one night without permission or knowledge of parents or guardians. Throwaway youth are defined as youth who leave home because of parental encouragement or force. Independent youth are those who feel that they have no “home” because of irreconcilable differences, no contact with family, or their families are homeless. Family characteristics were the most predictive for runaway youth, risky behaviors for throwaway youth, and individual characteristics for independent youth (Thompson et al., 2001). This indicates that interventions should be conscious of the characteristics and needs of each group. In LA County, family reunification efforts are integrated into programs such as Rapid Re-Housing, Crisis Housing, and Street Outreach. As of 2021, LAHSA has defined the scope of services that are required for their Youth Family Reconnection Program for Transition Age Youth, a family reunification strategy that specifically targets this population (LAHSA, 2021).

### ***Outreach and Trust-Building***

Qualitative studies, consisting of surveys to unhoused youth, have reinforced the notion that mechanisms to build trust and brighten first impressions between staff and homeless youth encourages engagement and participation at every stage of intervention programming. Studies highlight fears of being judged, labeled, and looked down upon as a “troublemaker” were commonly cited reasons that some youth voiced for not engaging with or accessing services in the community (Black et al., 2018; Clemens et al., 2018; Dixon et al., 2011; Garret et al., 2008; Ryan and Thompson, 2013; Shelton, 2015; Tierney et al., 2008). Similarly, homeless youth often exhibit persistent distrust of service providers because of past neglect and trauma from adults (Curry et al., 2021). The first encounter is especially important in establishing a relationship built on trust and respect and maintaining long-term engagement; studies have shown that youth feel that trust and respect more deeply when the initial meeting feels more like a conversation than part of an administrative checklist (Curry et al., 2021).

Rather than focusing on unhoused youths’ deficiencies, a strength-based approach where each individual’s strengths, talents, aspirations, and opportunities are highlighted has proven to be effective in outreach across various vulnerable populations (Hartman et al., 2008; Krabbenborg et al., 2015; Schelbe et al., 2018). For youth in particular, a strength-based approach positively impacts self-esteem, emotional distress, and risky behaviors (Saewyc and Edinburgh, 2010). Studies have also found that when staff are “warm, open, nonjudgmental, and caring” (Pedersen et al., 2016), youth feel encouraged to continue to seek services.

### ***Direct Cash Transfers***

Direct cash transfers (DCTs) are a promising policy intervention for improving economic security and well-being while reducing childhood poverty (Berger et al., 2022). Unconditional DCTs offer a “flexible and fungible tool that gives individuals and families the ability to best meet their needs and pursue goals that they value” (Berger et al., 2022). Additionally, DCTs can allow young adults and youth experiencing homelessness to quickly access safe, stable housing and can assist with transitions to adulthood, particularly for youth of color (Berger et al., 2022).

Many young people face a range of adversities including a lack of familial support, which can lead to homelessness. These young people are disproportionately Black, brown, and LGBTQ+ youth (Morton et al., 2020). To implement a successful DCT program, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ youth who face discrimination and exclusion through existing systems must have their needs at the center of the program (Morton et al., 2020). Ultimately, DCT programs can help young people exit homelessness and make creative investments in their own lives (Morton et al., 2020).



### **Youth Transitions Partnership**

The Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP) combines service coordination, intensive case management, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to help Transition Age Youth in foster care by engaging them with support systems, and improving their outcomes in employment, financial literacy, and fostering permanent connections (Packard Tucker et al., 2020). Chapin Hall conducted a formative evaluation of YTP in Alameda county and engaged in Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) activities to support program implementation. California's Alameda County implemented the YTP resulting in significant positive changes in employment, financial literacy, and permanent connections among participating youth (Packard Tucker et al., 2020). Additionally, participating youth experienced significant gains in their acquisition and use of DBT coping skills (Packard Tucker et al., 2020). A majority of surveyed youth expressed positive feelings about DBT, the coping skills they learned, and their increased ability to regulate their emotions (Packard Tucker et al., 2020). Furthermore, youth generally described relationships with their coaches as positive, supportive, and consistent (Packard Tucker et al., 2020). Having a well-managed CQI process ensured that the data needed for the formative evaluation were available, produced meaningful knowledge about the program, and informed ongoing changes to the program that contributed to its successful implementation (Packard Tucker et al., 2020). The study found that pairing intensive case management with DBT is a promising approach for supporting youth in foster care as they transition to adulthood (Packard Tucker et al., 2020).

### **Greater Investments in Postsecondary Education and College**

Despite federal and state investments in programs that promote postsecondary educational attainment among young people in foster care, *Using Research to Improve the Postsecondary Educational Outcomes of Community College Students in Foster Care* reveals that community college students are not receiving the necessary supports from the child welfare or education systems to succeed in school (Havlicek et al., 2021). Findings show that 86 percent of young people in foster care who enroll in college are community college students and only 8 percent of those who enrolled in community college graduated (Havlicek et al., 2021). Additionally, students struggled during high school, were under-prepared for college, navigated the transition to college with little professional guidance, and did not fully understand how financial aid works (Havlicek et al., 2021). Ultimately, students want community colleges to tailor supports to address their unique needs, but community college administrators face barriers to providing those supports (Havlicek et al., 2021). Recommendations include increasing collaboration between education and child welfare systems, minimizing school changes and other disruptions during high school, building caseworker capacity to support young people's college aspirations, increasing access to information about financial aid, training community college personnel on the needs of students who experienced foster care, and establishing campus-based support programs and single points of contact at community colleges (Havlicek et al., 2021).

Another study found that 2-year colleges are the most common entryway into college, and the majority of youths with foster care backgrounds did not complete their first two semesters of college (Okpych et al., 2022). The study also reveals that students who first enrolled in public 4-year colleges fared much better in terms of retention compared to students who enrolled in public 2-year colleges (Okpych et al., 2022). Ultimately, these findings can also be used to call for greater investments in services that support youth with care backgrounds, such as campus-support programs (Okpych et al., 2022).

### **Independent Living Program**

Foster youth often face trauma of child abuse or neglect and being removed from their homes. Transition Age Youth either currently or formerly in foster care experience greater school instability, housing instability, difficulty finding employment, difficulty maintaining employment, health challenges (behavioral and physical), and difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships with people they can rely on compared to youth without foster care experience (Children Now, 2023). Independent living programs (ILPs) are designed to help youth aging out of the foster care system in their transition to adulthood. California's ILP helps Transition Age Youth currently or formerly in foster care move forward on a path to successful adulthood by providing services and support in the areas of education, employment, financial skills, and housing assistance (Children Now, 2023). Youths report positive experiences with ILPs. A majority of youths that responded to

Children Now’s survey claimed that ILP helped them prepare for adulthood, however some challenges were also reported. ILP impact could be improved by expanding the age of eligibility from 16-21 so that counties serve eligible youth ages 14-26 (Children Now, 2023). Additionally, increasing ILP funding is critical so that counties can provide more robust services and supports, lower staff caseloads and turnover, and offer more housing support (Children Now, 2023).

### **Reduce Criminal Legal System Involvement**

Several studies have found that transition-age foster youth are more likely than their non foster peers to engage in “delinquent behaviors” and become involved with the criminal legal system (Park et al., 2020). More specifically, Black youth experience higher rates of arrests and overall criminal legal system involvement than youth in other racial groups (Park et al., 2020). Because most youth offenses are not serious felonies, California has made an effort to prioritize rehabilitation and community-based programs for young people over formal processing and incarceration, which has resulted in more youth being diverted from the criminal legal system (Park et al., 2020). Therefore, realigning resources to emphasize prevention, treatment, and supervision would benefit transition-age foster youth (Park et al., 2020).

### **Extended Foster Care**

Several studies have found associations between participation in foster care and reduced risk of homelessness. *Memo from CalYOUTH: Predictors of homelessness at age 21* reveals that about a third of youth had ever been homeless between ages 17 to 21 (Feng et al., 2020). Additionally, males and LGBTQ+ youth in foster care have a greater risk of experiencing homelessness than their peers (Feng et al., 2020). Histories of neglect by caregivers and congregate care placements before age 18 are associated with increased odds of homelessness. Conversely, having a tangible social support system and staying in care after age 18 is correlated with a reduction in against the risk of homelessness (Feng et al., 2020). In fact, each year a youth spent in extended foster care reduced their estimated odds of experiencing homelessness by about 33 percent (Feng et al., 2020). These findings reveal a positive association between extended care participation and reduced risk of homelessness and call for additional efforts to assess the utilization and effectiveness of different living arrangements to prevent homelessness (Feng et al., 2020). Further research is still needed to assess the utilization and effectiveness of different housing options in terms of preventing homelessness (Feng et al., 2020).

## **NECESSARY TOPICS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

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While the body of literature on transitional-age youth homelessness is continuing to grow, there is a lack of research on successful intervention strategies for specific minority communities, particularly for Black and Latinx youth, former foster youth, and LGBTQ+ youth (Morton et al., 2020). Focusing on the efficacy of homelessness services and programs amongst these populations, which are more vulnerable to youth homelessness, allows the consideration of varying socioeconomic aspects. Furthermore, the literature largely emphasizes housing-based, school-based, and counseling-based interventions. Future research should conduct studies on job placement and employment interventions. Additionally, the DCT model as an intervention strategy also offers valuable insights for “basic income” and “guaranteed income” projects, which can also be explored in further research.

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