YOUTH

Nick Falvo, PhD

Introduction

The manner in which youth are impacted by homelessness requires careful consideration. Not only does homelessness take a serious toll on the lives of youth—youth experiencing homelessness often remain homeless as they become older. Put differently, curtailing youth homelessness can help prevent homelessness in the general population.

The present chapter will first discuss the causes of youth homelessness before shining the light on subgroups who are especially vulnerable. The role of child protection will then be explored, followed by a review of early warning signs in school. An assessment of what happens during spells of youth homelessness will then be offered, followed by a look at some promising practices.

What causes youth homelessness?

A large US study[1] published in 2015 found the following factors to be associated with onset of youth homelessness:

- Multiple runaway episodes
- Nontraditional family structures
- Lower educational attainment
- Parental work limitations due to health

In a different study, Mayock and Parker (2023) elaborate. They note:

> *In the literature, family environment consistently emerges as a dominant theme in the reasons why youth experience homelessness...Homeless youth frequently report difficult or fractured relationships with a parent(s)...and research has also documented step-parent...and sibling...conflict as contributing to young people's early departure from the family home. Substance use in the family home features quite prominently in the literature, with research suggesting that parental substance use can result in family difficulties, disrupted schooling and feelings of anxiety, anger and resentment on the part of young people...*[2]

Also according to Mayock and Parker (2023):

> *While there are clearly a range of factors or 'triggers' that push young people out of home or care, for most, the route to homelessness is not linear and is rarely experienced as a single event. More typically, prior to making a final 'break' from home, youth will have embarked on a pattern of moving back and forth between home and various informal living places, including the homes of friends or relatives where they are invisible to services and systems of intervention...By the time young people enter into the official network of homelessness services, the vast majority will therefore have endured numerous upheavals and very many will have multiple and complex needs.*[3]

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1 Brakenhoff, B., Jang, B., Slesnick, N., & Snyder, A. (2015). Longitudinal predictors of homelessness: Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-97. *Journal of youth studies, 18*(8), 1015-1034.
2 Mayock, P., & Parker, S. (2023). Youth. In *The Routledge Handbook of Homelessness* (pp. 169-179). Routledge. Quote is from p. 170.
3 Mayock, P., & Parker, S. (2023). Youth. In *The Routledge Handbook of Homelessness* (pp. 169-179). Routledge. Quote is from p. 171.

Subgroups who are especially vulnerable

Some groups of youth are more vulnerable to homelessness than others. This is relevant when designing prevention programs, providing services to those already homeless, and providing support to youth in the immediate period after they have been rehoused.

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A nationally representative telephone-based survey in the United States found higher risk of homelessness *"among young parents; black, Hispanic, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) youth; and those who did not complete high school."*[4]

A more recent US study found that youth experiencing homelessness (YEH)

identifying as female; Black or another non-Latinx youth of color; or as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, or another sexual orientation (LGBQ+) were at greater risk of couch-surfing [i.e., "or frequently moving from one tenuous living arrangement to another"] relative to staying in a shelter. YEH who threatened to harm themselves or others in the preceding 12 months or who attributed their homelessness to an abusive relationship were significantly more likely to either be couch-surfing or on the streets.[5]

A Canadian study found that youth reporting particularly high rates of multiple experiences of homelessness include transgender and gender non-binary youth, LGBTQ2S youth, and Indigenous youth.[6]

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4 Morton, M. H., Dworsky, A., Matjasko, J. L., Curry, S. R., Schlueter, D., Chávez, R., & Farrell, A. F. (2018). Prevalence and correlates of youth homelessness in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 62*(1), 14-21. Quote is from p. 14.
5 Petry, L., Hill, C., Milburn, N., & Rice, E. (2022). Who is couch-surfing and who is on the streets? Disparities among racial and sexual minority youth in experiences of homelessness. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 70*(5), 743-750. Quote is from p. 743.
6 Gaetz, S. A., O'Grady, Bill, Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016). *Without a home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

The role of child protection

Most wealthy countries have child protection authorities that monitor for children deemed to be living in unsafe situations. When a child or youth is found to be in such an unsafe situation, they are often removed from the family unit and taken into care.

A Canadian study found more than half of youth experiencing homelessness report having had *"some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past. On average, youth in that study became involved with child protection services at the age of 8.5, and for one third (31.5%) involvement began before the age of 6."*[7]

The same Canadian study found:

> *Youth who left home for the first time before the age of 16 were much more likely to report involvement with child protection services (73.3%). Transgender and gender non-binary youth were more likely to report child protection services involvement than cisgender youth (70.8% vs. 56.9%), and LGBTQ2S youth were more likely to report involvement with child protection services than straight youth (62.8% vs. 55.8%). Importantly, young people who experience forms of adversity prior to becoming homeless, such as child protection involvement, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect, were more likely to experience poorer mental health, suicide attempts, lower quality of life, and negative psychological resilience.*[8]

Unfortunately, as youth begin to 'age out' of child protection, planning arrangements for 'life after child protection' are often lacking.

Unfortunately, as youth begin to 'age out' of child protection, planning arrangements for 'life after child protection' are often lacking. A recent Canadian study found that *"only 30% of participants received assistance while in care for planning their departure from [child protection authorities], with only 13.7% of participants indicating that their risk of homelessness was assessed..."*[9] As a result, many youth 'aging out' of care end up accessing emergency shelters. And since many communities many not have youth shelters, this sometimes means youth end up in adult shelters.

It is important to be mindful that, in many countries, it is common for young adults to continue living with parents into their late 20s and early 30s, especially in communities with expensive housing. Put differently, remaining in the family home is considered perfectly acceptable behaviour in the general population—yet, young people in group homes or foster families are somehow expected to become almost totally independent in their late teens or early 20s.

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7 Gaetz, S. A., O'Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016). *Without a home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
8 Gaetz, S. A., O'Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016). *Without a home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
9 Bonakdar, A., Gaetz, S., Banchani, E., Schwan, K., Kidd, S. A., & O'Grady, B. (2023). Child protection services and youth experiencing homelessness: Findings of the 2019 national youth homelessness survey in Canada. *Children and Youth Services Review, 153*, 107088. Quote is from p. 5.

Early warning signs in school

Youth-serving organizations that offer programs and supports to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness can work with school officials to identify youth who show early warning signs.

Youth-serving organizations that offer programs and supports to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness can work with school officials to identify youth who show early warning signs. There is potential for teachers, guidance counsellors and administrators to be the 'eyes and ears' and connect these young people to agencies that can provide supports and remove barriers to accessing help.

According to a Canadian study of youth experiencing homelessness, *"50% reported being tested for a learning disability while at school, indicating that school staff view these youth as suffering in some way."* Importantly, those who had dropped out of school were much more likely to report learning disabilities (41.8%), ADHD (46.1%), and physical disabilities (47.9%). Strikingly, 83% of youth reported that they had experienced bullying at school either 'sometimes' (37%) or 'often' (46%). This means that homeless youth are approximately four times more likely to have experienced bullying than Canadian youth in general.[10]

The same Canadian study found that:

the age at which a youth became homeless was a statistically significant predictor of having been tested for ADHD. Youth who left home earlier were tested more than youth who left home at an older age. For example, 56% of those who left home when they were under the age of 13 had been tested for ADHD, while only 30.6% of youth who became homeless after they were 20 were tested for ADHD. Similarly, 45% of youth who left home for the first time when they were under 16 had been tested for ADHD, while only 34% of youth who became homeless after they were 20 were tested.[11]

These findings suggest, among other things, that school officials can work with local youth-serving organizations to identify: students with learning disabilities; those with ADHD; students with physical disabilities; and students who have been victims of bullying. Once identified, there can be further screening for actual risk of homelessness (this may involve questions about housing precarity and the youth's relationship with family members). In the case of students who are ultimately identified as being at serious risk of homelessness, early intervention supports should be offered. It is important that these resources and services not only support the youth, but also engage the family (and trusted adults with whom youth are already connected).

10 Gaetz, S. A., O'Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016). *Without a home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
11 Gaetz, S. A., O'Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016). *Without a home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

What happens during spells of youth homelessness?

Once youth begin to experience homelessness, they are further victimized. While homeless, they may experience:[12]

- Declining mental health
- Suicide attempts
- Exposure to sexual and physical violence
- Reduced school participation
- Unemployment
- Criminal victimization (including high rates of sexual assault, especially among young women and transgender/gender non-binary youth)
- Human trafficking (this may include being pressured into drug dealing and sex work, being tricked or being manipulated)[13]

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12 See Gaetz, S. A., O'Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016). *Without a home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
13 Murphy, L. T. (2016). Labor and sex trafficking among homeless youth. *A Ten City Study (Executive Summary).*

Promising practices

In light of the many challenges faced by youth experiencing homelessness, it is important to work towards improving outcomes. What follow are some examples of promising practices.

Extending the age at which youth leave foster care. Extended foster care has been found to be associated with *"improved educational attainment, increased financial assets, reduced receipt of need-based public aid, and decreased homelessness, economic hardship, and criminal justice system involvement..."*[14] It has also been found to reduce the likelihood of teenage pregnancy.[15]

Extending services for youth 'aging out' of child protection. Transitions out of child protection need to be well-supported. Fortunately, some jurisdictions have been thoughtful on this front. Post-pandemic, for example, British Columbia (Canada) *"[i]ncreased age limits for accessing transition supports from 24 to 27, and increased the age that youth can stay in their care placement from 18 to 21."*[16]

Transitions out of child protection need to be well-supported.

Better risk assessment. The Geelong Project in Australia is an example of the use of assessment tools to target youth who are at risk of experiencing homelessness. High school students complete a survey and are scored into three tiers based on results. Those deemed to be at the highest risk (tier 3) are targeted for immediate services and supports.[17]

Specialized supportive housing for youth. Supportive housing—sometimes known as Housing First—involves a subsidy to help a low-income household afford rent, as well as various forms of professional staff support to help a household to function and remain housed. In the case of vulnerable youth, such supports might pertain to:

- education and job-training skills
- income assistance and financial literacy
- parenting support
- assistance in reconnecting with family (this may include reconnecting with a grandparent, aunt, uncle or older cousin)
- legal support
- cultural reconnection

14 Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., & Park, S. (2018). Report from CalYOUTH: Findings on the relationship between extended foster care and youth's outcomes at age 21. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

15 Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., & Park, S. (2018). Report from CalYOUTH: Findings on the relationship between extended foster care and youth's outcomes at age 21. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

16 Pasolli, K. (2023). 2023 International Transitions from Child Protection Symposium (pre-read). Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. https://www.homelesshub.ca/. Quote is from p. 8.

17 Mackenzie, D. (2018). The Geelong Project, Interim Report 2016-2017. Downloaded from: https://upstreamaustralia.org.au/project/the-geelong-project-interim-report-2016-2017/

- human trafficking support
- health care
- harm reduction
- food security

A dedicated building for such supportive housing might include communal space and offices. In some cases, the aforementioned services could be offered on site; in other cases, youth could be told about them and encouraged to partake of them in community.

Youth-specific emergency shelters. Such emergency shelters can offer specialized services, including many of those discussed in the preceding paragraph. Youth can be victims of exploitation and they risk prolonged homelessness if exposed to older persons who have experienced homelessness for longer (e.g., older adults with high chronicity).

Conclusion

Youth homelessness is often preceded by challenges within the family structure. Subgroups particularly vulnerable include racialized youth, young parents, and LGBTQ2S youth.

Many youth who become homeless have had involvement with child protection and also experience challenges in the education system. Those challenges include learning disabilities, ADHD, physical disabilities, and bullying.

Youth homelessness is often preceded by challenges within the family structure. Subgroups particularly vulnerable include racialized youth, young parents, and LGBTQ2S youth.

Once homeless, youth often experience declining mental health, sexual and physical violence, reduced school participation, unemployment, criminal victimization, and human trafficking.

Promising practices in the sector include risk assessment in high school, the extension of the age at which youth leave foster care, the extension of services for youth 'aging out' of child protection, supportive housing (a.k.a., Housing First), and youth-specific emergency shelters.

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Further reading

Blunden, H., Wong, B., Bates, S., Cheung, S. Hsieh, W., & Katz, I. (2023). *Evaluation of the Universal Screening and Support: Final Report.* Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney. http://doi.org/10.26190/936q-fe64

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Gaetz, S., Walter, H. and Story, C. (2021). *THIS is Housing First for Youth. Part 1 – Program Model Guide.* Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

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Mayock, P., & Parker, S. (2023). Youth. In *The Routledge Handbook of Homelessness* (pp. 169-179). Routledge.

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Murphy, L. T. (2016). Labor and sex trafficking among homeless youth. *New Orleans: Loyola University Modern Slavery Research Project.*

Partridge, K., & Kennelly, J. (2024). Talking about homelessness and school: Recommendations from Canadian young people who have experienced homelessness. *Youth, 4*(2), 820-834.

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About the author

Nick Falvo is a research consultant based in Calgary, Canada. He has a PhD in Public Policy and is Editor-in-Chief, North America, of the *International Journal on Homelessness*. He has academic affiliation at both Carleton University and Case Western Reserve University. Prior to pursuing his PhD, he spent 10 years doing front-line work directly with persons experiencing homelessness.

Acknowledgements

About this project

This is Chapter 9 of a sole-authored, open access interdisciplinary textbook intended to provide an introduction to homelessness for students, service providers, researchers and advocates. Focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD, it will discuss causes, solutions, challenges, successes, and innovations in the sector. It will serve as 'launching pad' for people new to the sector, as well as a refresher for experienced practitioners.

In addition to being open access, this book is different from other books in two key ways: 1) by focusing on all English-speaking countries of the OECD; and 2) by providing an overview of recent innovations in the sector—i.e., what's new, and what's working well?—making it useful to practitioners.

- The book's **intent** is primarily to serve as the main textbook for a university course designed for senior-level undergraduate as well as graduate students. It also serves as a resource for senior leadership in the homelessness sector.
- Book's **main themes**: contributing factors to homelessness; health conditions and health care challenges of persons experiencing homelessness; the unique needs of various subpopulations; staffing challenges in the sector; an in-depth examination of innovative practices; and solutions to homelessness.
- Book **objectives**: assist readers in understanding the fundamentals of homelessness; introduce them to both successes and ongoing challenges in the sector; and leave them feeling better-informed, able to make critical assessments, confident and empowered to take action within their own respective spheres of influence.

Table of contents (anticipated)

Target audience

- The book is intended primarily for course use, its primary audience being senior undergraduate students, graduate students and course instructors in English-speaking countries of the OECD. It can also be useful to senior leadership in the homelessness sector (e.g., board members, CEOs and staff).
- The book is intended for courses where homelessness is either the only focus or a major focus. For example, a course on housing and homelessness could benefit from this book. Standalone chapters could also be of great value in various disciplines.
- Some of these courses might be taught outside of the university setting—for example, by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Housing and by its counterparts in other countries, such as CIH Canada.
- The book can be used as either a primary or supplementary text.
- The book is intended to have international appeal, focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- Homelessness is widely researched and quickly evolving, as new approaches to both prevention and response are being developed. Much of the book's content will therefore be new even to experienced researchers and practitioners.

All material for this book is available free of charge at https://nickfalvo.com/. Newly-completed chapters will be uploaded throughout the year. The author can be reached at falvo.nicholas@gmail.com.