



HOMELESS AFTER FOSTER CARE: Young, Vulnerable, and On Their Own

What Does it Mean for a Youth to be “Homeless”?

There are varying explanations of what the term “homeless youth” actually means. The age range of this population is typically considered to be somewhere between 12 and 21, but many studies have included young adults up to age 24. “Homelessness” sometimes acts as an umbrella term, including those who “couch surf” from one friend’s or relative’s home to another, live in a motel, or are temporarily staying with a relative, friend, or acquaintance. Sometimes it includes only those who literally have no safe place to sleep and primarily reside in public parks, bridges, abandoned buildings, or other high-risk areas. Even federal and state agencies differ in their definitions of “homeless youth.” Many have elected to use the term “unaccompanied youth,” which is defined more broadly as youth who lack a safe, stable living arrangement and are detached from their parent or legal guardian.

Homelessness and the Foster Care System

Researchers agree that youth with experience in the foster care system are vastly overrepresented in the population of homeless youth. Although inadequate research prevents a full understanding of the scope of this problem, studies estimate high percentages of youth overlapping both categories. Two of the most comprehensive studies of youth aging out of foster care, the Casey National Alumni Study and the Midwest Evaluation of the Functioning of Former Foster Youth, found that nearly 40% of these youth had experienced at least one night of homelessness since aging out.^{1,2} In contrast, an estimated 2% of all children in the United States are homeless each year.³ To illustrate the local impact, **a one-night count of homeless youth in Nebraska revealed that 51% of the 267 young people experiencing homelessness on January 25th had been in the foster care system.**

Causes for the relationship between homelessness and foster care experience are likely related to several other outcomes for which youth in the foster care system are at risk including: lack of preparation and training for employment, lower graduation rates, lower wages, and increased risk of dangerous behavior (substance abuse, criminal activity, early pregnancy).⁴ For many, the sudden loss of support from the state coupled with the lack of permanent connections is too much. **They simply have nowhere to turn.**

The Dangers of Youth Homelessness

Youth who are homeless often lack the financial, social, and emotional resources all individuals need when living on their own. Many youth don’t know where to go for help. Others fear that asking for help will result in detention or placement into a facility. Residing in a high-risk, unpredictable environment, coupled with youths’ natural vulnerabilities due to age, developmental level, history, and current support systems, place them at risk for:

- ★ Self-medication or substance abuse^{5,6}
- ★ Sexually risky behaviors or “survival sex” (the selling of sex to meet basic needs)^{15,16}
- ★ Physical or sexual victimization^{9,10}
- ★ Unemployment⁷
- ★ Incarceration⁸
- ★ Academic struggles (including enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school)^{11,12}
- ★ Health risks and lack of health care services^{13,14}
- ★ Psychological issues, including major depression, anxiety, PTSD, or even suicide^{17,18}
- ★ **General distrust of people in general, serving as a deterrent to reaching out for assistance from service providers or others¹⁹**

¹ Dworsky, A. & Courtney, M. (2010). *Assessing the Impact of Extending Care Beyond 18 on Homelessness: Emerging Findings from the Midwest Study*, available at www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/publications/Midwest_IB2_Homelessness.pdf

² The Foster Care Alumni Studies (2003). *Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study*, available at www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/CaseyNationalAlumniStudy_FullReport.pdf

³ National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (n.d.). *Homelessness & Poverty in America*, available at www.nlchp.org/hapia.cfm

⁴ Smith, C. (2010). *A growing problem: Fresh out of foster care and homeless*, available at www.seattlepi.com/local/article/A-growing-problem-Fresh-out-of-foster-care-and-886284.php

⁵ Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice & Appleseed Washington, D.C. (2012). *Issue Brief on the Education of Homeless Youth*, available at www.massappleseed.org/pdfs/ma_appleseed_uhy_policy_brief.pdf

⁶ Id. 4

⁷ Id. 5

⁸ Id. 5

⁹ Id. 5

¹⁰ Id. 4

¹¹ Id. 5

¹² Id. 4

¹³ Id. 5

¹⁴ Id. 4

¹⁵ Id. 5

¹⁶ Id. 4

¹⁷ Id. 5

¹⁸ Id. 4

¹⁹ Id. 4

Federal Legislation Targeting Youth Homelessness

Although no laws focus specifically on the growing problem of former state wards becoming homeless, many provide varying levels of assistance to older youth in foster care and all youth at risk of homelessness:

The **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) of 1974** authorizes federal funding for three different types of programs:

- 1) Basic Center Programs meet immediate needs of youth and their families (e.g. short-term shelter care);
- 2) Transitional Living Programs provide longer-term shelter care, educational, and counseling services;
- 3) Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs (or Street Outreach Programs) provide street-based services to youth who are homeless and at-risk of sexual abuse, prostitution, or sexual exploitation.

In Nebraska, five agencies receive funding for RHYA programs: Boys Town (Grand Island), CEDARS (Lincoln), Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (Lincoln), Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska/Panhandle Community Services (Gering), and Youth Emergency Services (Omaha).²⁰

The **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987** funds local, regional, and state homeless assistance programs and promotes the education of youth experiencing homelessness by eliminating barriers to enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school.

In Nebraska, nine school districts received \$223,000 in the 2010-2011 school year.²¹ Most districts assign a Homeless Student Liaison to assist homeless students, regardless of whether or not they receive funds.

The **Foster Care Independence Act of 1999** provides assistance to states through the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which offers funding for transitional and independent living skills programs for older youth in care and those who recently aged out, and the Chafee Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program, which provides young people who aged out of care with vouchers for postsecondary education.

In Nebraska, \$1,661,642 in Chafee Allocation and \$562,082 in ETV Allocation was provided in 2011.²²

Fostering Connections: Preventing Homelessness After Foster Care

Commonly referred to as the most expansive piece of legislation targeting child welfare in over a decade, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (“Fostering Connections”) was unanimously passed by Congress in 2008. This Act, among other things, offers federal matching funding for states to extend voluntary foster care services in a developmentally appropriate, young adult-directed manner. **Under Fostering Connections, states are able to create a more comprehensive system of care to act as a “safety net” for young people to help them make the transition out of foster care and into adulthood.** Services for eligible young adults would include health care coverage, housing support, and young adult-directed case management services. Nebraska has not yet created such a program, although child advocates, senators, and other key stakeholders have been exploring this option in preparation for the coming legislative session.

Fostering Connections also requires that a transition plan be created for all youth aging out of foster care. The 2011 passage of LB 177 (Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-1311.03) in the Nebraska Legislature enhanced this portion of Fostering Connections by requiring that transition planning begin at age 16 and include specific options for housing after discharge from the system, giving both youth and case professionals plenty of time to make future preparations. **In short, all youth ages 16 or older in Nebraska’s foster care system are required to have a written transition plan.** Addressing the needs of youth both before they age out (with adequate and comprehensive transition plans) and after (with extended services and support) has great potential to ensure that foster care alumni enter adulthood with the knowledge and skills necessary to avoid homelessness.

SPEAK OUT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE:

Help Nebraska Take Full Advantage of Fostering Connections

- ★ Contact your Senator, the Governor, and the Department of Health and Human Services today! Ask them to **extend services and support to age 21** for young people who age out of foster care. Let them know:
 - 1) Nearly 40% of youth experienced at least one night of homelessness after aging out of the foster care system.^{1, 2} These young people face many **challenges** and **dangers** as they make the difficult transition into adulthood.
 - 2) Nebraska **can** and **must** do better than this. Federal law allows states to create a “safety net” of extended services and support for young people who age out of foster care. By taking advantage of this opportunity, we can offer these young people a brighter tomorrow.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (n.d.). *Locate a Runaway and Homeless Youth Program*, available at www2.nsfy.com/locate/ne.htm

²¹ Nebraska Department of Education (2011). *Nebraska Award Summaries: 2010-2011 McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Grants*, available at

²² National Resource Center for Youth Development (n.d.). *State Pages: Nebraska*, available at www.nrcyd.ou.edu/state-pages/state/ne