

Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness

Emerging Evidence from a National Study

Based on Fowler, P. J., Marcal, K. E., Zhang, J., Day, O., and Landsverk, J. (2017). Homelessness and aging out of foster care: A national comparison of child welfare-involved adolescents. Children and Youth Services Review 77: 27-33. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.03.017, and Fowler, P.J., Marcal, K. E., Zhang, J., Day, O., & Landsverk, J. Defining Homelessness in the Transition to Adulthood for Policy and Prevention. Manuscript in preparation.

Youth homelessness is a critical issue in the United States, particularly for young people who have interacted with the child welfare system. Although the child welfare system has implemented several programs to prevent youth homelessness, the impact of these programs is not well understood, and the system's approach to preventing homelessness does not have a significant evidence base. Two recent studies have attempted to address these gaps by exploring and defining the child welfare system's responses to the issue of youth homelessness.

Background

Housing insecurity during the transition to adulthood is a growing concern for policymakers and organizations attempting to prevent and end homelessness. Emerging adulthood represents a highly transient time with moves corresponding to burgeoning adult responsibilities such as school or work (Arnett, 2004). However, this transience can contribute to a range of housing problems if youth face additional barriers or lack supports as they experiment with adult roles and responsibilities.

Youth involved in the child welfare system are particularly vulnerable to housing issues during early adulthood. Each year more than 20,000 youth age out of foster care and lose their safety nets overnight (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). When foster youth turn 18—or, in some states, 21—they lose access to the financial, educational, and social supports provided through the child welfare system. These youth fare poorly compared to their peers in domains such as mental health problems, substance abuse, and underemployment (Fowler, Toro, and Miles, 2011).

Emerging adults depend on parents to provide housing at some point in young adulthood, while they also receive emotional and financial supports that allow them to engage in

developmentally appropriate risk-taking behaviors. Strained relationships among foster youth with caregivers have the potential to jeopardize the family safety nets that protect adolescents against dire consequences of mistakes, such as failing to pay rent on time, getting behind on utility payments, or overspending budgets. The abrupt disruption of services at age 18 combined with unreliable family connections elevate the risk for housing problems among aged-out emerging adults (Osgood, Foster, and Courtney, 2010).

Research Approach

Two studies explored youth homelessness using data from the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II), a nationally representative longitudinal survey of child welfare-involved families (Dowd et al., 2012). Participants in the survey provided information that included demographic data, their current and past living arrangements, their exposure to child welfare policies and services, educational and behavioral outcomes, and physical and mental health. Researchers used a number of analytic strategies to assess the interactions of these variables.

The studies focused on identifying the relationships between participant experiences with the child welfare system and their experiences with housing instability. Researchers explored housing experiences of youth who aged out of the foster system, youth who were reunited with family members after being placed out of home, and youth who were never placed out of their homes.

Additionally, researchers focused on the types of housing insecurity that youth who interacted with the child welfare system faced. Researchers explored different markers of housing insecurity, including missed rent, eviction, and mobility, to understand how to categorize or conceptualize different types of housing instability.

Emerging Findings

Frameworks and Definitions of Youth Homelessness

While homelessness is a very visible type of housing issue, the housing troubles that youth face are multifaceted, and it is important to recognize the distinctions between them. Many researchers and policymakers use the following terms to distinguish between housing situations:

Literal Homelessness: lacking a regular place to sleep, residing in shelters, facing imminent eviction, or fleeing dangerous situations including domestic violence (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, 2009).

Hypermobility: having lived in many different locations over a short period of time, such as having moved three or more times in a twelve-month period

Housing Instability: a general state of having unreliable, precarious, or frequently changing housing, including hypermobility and literal homelessness. Factors may also include a lack of safety of housing options, or the inability to safely reside with family for youth under the age of 21 (Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), 2008).

In addition to multiple definitions of housing issues, multiple frameworks for understanding these issues have been employed by the researchers, policymakers, and service providers who work on behalf of youth experiencing housing instability. For the studies described in this brief the researchers identified two approaches

to homelessness prevention that dominated research and policy related to youth homelessness. These two approaches, a developmental framework and a continuum conceptualization, are described below .

These studies found little evidence to support the continuum conceptualization of homelessness. The findings of the study suggested that housing insecurity occurs in meaningful patterns among subgroups of emerging adults, which conforms to the perspective of the developmental framework of youth homelessness. Policies to prevent youth homelessness do not currently align with this framework. Implications for potential policy and practice change are discussed in the final section of this brief.

Independent Living Programs

Federal policy response to the high rates of homelessness among foster youth has focused on preparing youth for adulthood through training in education, employment, financial literacy, and other areas necessary for independence. The Independent Living Program (ILP) of 1986 provides states with funds to prepare adolescents age 16 and up in foster care for the transition to adulthood, however the content and quality of these programs varies widely across the country (Stott, 2013).

Despite the policy emphasis on preparation for adulthood, little evidence supports the effectiveness of independent living programs. Randomized controlled trials find few differences in key areas, such as education, employment, and delinquency between youth referred for independent living programs versus youth who receive other services (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2015). These studies did not find that ILPs had an

	Developmental Framework	Continuum Conceptualization
Conceptualizations of youth homelessness	Divides youth into subgroups who experience different types of housing problems over time	Conceptualizes youth homelessness on a continuum from least severe to most severe
Definitions of youth homelessness	Focuses on the pathways by which youth become homeless and patterns of housing experiences over time	Focuses on youth's current housing status
Usefulness for prevention and intervention efforts	Contributes to both prevention and intervention efforts for youth	Primarily contributes to efforts to intervene with youth already experiencing literal homelessness
Primarily employed by	Researchers and Service Providers	Federal and State Policies

effect on housing stability. ILPs are particularly prominent in current child welfare policy. The lack of impact demonstrated by the research of these programs suggest a need to refocus policies to more effectively prevent youth homelessness.

Foster Care Extension Policies

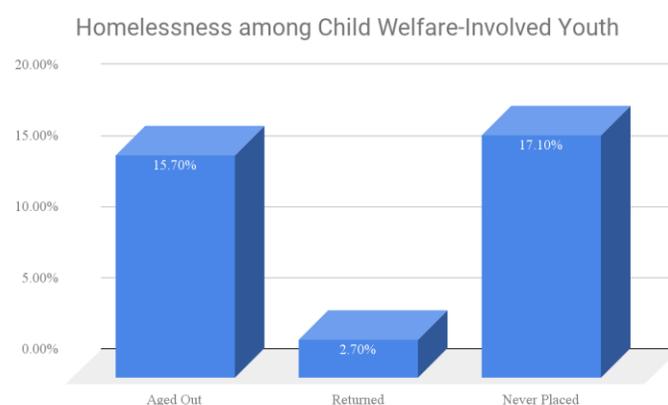
Another strategy for reducing rates of homelessness among youth aging out of the foster care system has been to extend the age at which youth can receive foster care services. For example, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) incentivizes states to extend foster care services for youth up to age 21. As of 2015, more than 20 states and Washington, D.C. opted to extend foster care (Williams, Mbengue & Mccann, 2015). Because legislation supporting this approach is recent, few studies have tested the impact of extending foster care on young adult outcomes. Preliminary evidence regarding the program's efficacy for homelessness prevention is inconclusive. These studies did not find any effect of foster care extension on housing stability.

A need exists for representative data documenting homelessness risk in the transition to adulthood and the influence of current programs and policies. Limited large-scale data exist on child welfare populations, and no existing studies compare housing outcomes of aged-out to other child welfare-involved youth. Federal policies target youth aging out of foster care without empirical evidence of benefits. Greater understanding of risks is necessary to develop effective, developmentally informed interventions.

Benefits of Returning Home on Housing Stability

These study demonstrated that reunification with families among adolescents placed into foster care was associated with the lowest probability of housing problems, compared with youth who aged out of the foster care system, and those who were never placed out of their homes (see figure above). This finding highlights the potential of families for promoting housing stability (Fowler et al., 2011). Families provide an essential safety net for youth to avoid homelessness risk through offering places to stay, rent assistance, and advice as adolescents practice independence (Schoeni and Ross, 2005).

Most adolescents who are the subjects of child welfare investigations experience some strain in their family relationships. Reunification suggests relationships between adolescents and parents improved to the extent that youth were able to return home. This improvement in late adolescence could bolster the natural safety net provided by families as youth engage in normative risk-taking and gradually take on greater responsibilities and independence .



Reunification with families is associated with the lowest probability of housing problems among youth involved in the child welfare system

Implications for Policy and Practice

Current policies focusing on children involved in the CWS and preventing youth homelessness largely adhere to the continuum conceptualization of youth homelessness. This approach leads to a greater focus on addressing literal homelessness, and does not sufficiently address the need to prevent youth homelessness before it occurs. Research and policy that works within the developmental framework of youth homelessness has the potential to provide a more nuanced understanding of the causes of youth homelessness and allow for the creation of policy which promotes prevention of housing issues among youth .

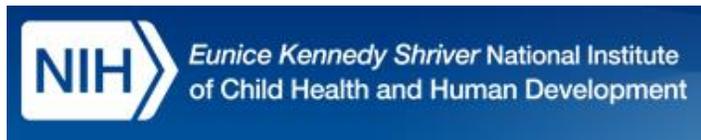
Currently, Federal agencies set eligibility criteria which all share the assumption that housing problems fall on a continuum of severity. Under this assumption, youth only receive services after an experience of literal homelessness. While these policies range in restrictiveness across federal agencies, all conceptualizations fall along a continuum; a housing experience that meets a designated level of severity warrants intervention, while all other youth remain ineligible. However, no studies empirically evaluate these thresholds of severity. The continued use of the continuum approach to determining eligibility for housing services is troubling, both because of a lack of evidence supporting the approach, and because it limits researchers' opportunities to assess the full scope of the problem of youth homelessness.

For example, the current policy emphasis on independent living skills without consideration of family supports does not reflect our understandings of normative development; the lack of evidence that these programs are effective may be due in part to an unrealistic assumption that skills training can hasten development, especially in vulnerable populations.

Child welfare services that emphasize family functioning could help to reduce homelessness risk while also reflecting research on child and youth development. Additionally, extending foster care eligibility past age 18 may provide youth greater time to reunify with their families, bolstering natural supports. Additional time to work with families could give caseworkers greater opportunities to address barriers to youth returning home. More stable family connections could leverage natural supports that reduce risk for homelessness. Greater research and longer follow-up is needed to investigate these mechanisms .

Acknowledgements

The project described was supported by Award Number R03HD066066 (PI Fowler) from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute Of Child Health & Human Development or the National Institutes of Health.



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