



# Frequently Asked Questions Related to Youth Homelessness

Texas policymakers are just beginning to grapple with the issue of youth homelessness. Though federal legislation passed in the 1970s and 1980s created a framework for federal initiatives and funding, it wasn't until schools began collecting and reporting reliable data that Texans began to get a more complete sense of the number of young people in the state who experience homelessness or housing instability.

"[T]he general population, unfortunately, hasn't been...educated to the fact that homeless youth do exist. They are usually hidden. They are very good at hiding. So you may not see them, but they are out there."

—North Texas service provider

There are a number of frequent questions that come up about young people who experience homelessness in Texas and nationally. This chapter focuses on those questions as a starting point for this report.

## **FAQ #1: How many homeless young people are there in Texas?**

Unfortunately, there is no single data source that comprehensively and accurately documents the number of “unaccompanied” youth experiencing homelessness in Texas—a youth who is not living with his/her parent or guardian. We instead look to a number of different indicators to give us some sense of the scope of the problem and the age of youth affected. For purposes of this report, we rely on several data sources:

- Data from the Texas Education Agency regarding the number of accompanied and unaccompanied homeless students attending public schools in the state.
- Data from the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) related to the number of young people reported missing to law enforcement each year;
- Data from DPS and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department regarding the number of children and young people who are arrested or referred to juvenile probation for running away;
- Data from the Department of Family and Protective Services related to parents who refuse to accept parental responsibility for a young person or for youth who run away from a foster care placement;<sup>1</sup> and
- Data from *Youth Count Texas!*, the study that included a point-in-time count of youth experiencing homelessness as well as analysis of some of the data sets mentioned above, conducted pursuant to a bill passed by the Texas Legislature in 2015.

While these sources give us glimpses of the problem, they are not comprehensive. For example, while there are approximately **16,000 unaccompanied homeless students** attending Texas public schools, we know the dropout rate is higher for youth experiencing homelessness, and homeless liaisons report difficulty identifying homeless students. Nor does that number include youth who may have become homeless after graduating from high school, as was the case for many of the former foster youth we met. Thus, even this is likely to be an undercount of the number of young people who are unstably housed or unhoused. Similarly, though DPS reports arresting around **6,500** young people for running away, **more than 45,000** young people are reported missing in Texas every year, and not all young people who are without housing come into contact with law enforcement. **More than 1,000** youth are reported as having run away from a foster care placement in 2016—but DFPS acknowledges problems with their own data. And while a point-in-time count is an excellent source of information about youth experiencing homelessness, it is a poor means of quantifying the extent of the problem due to the transient nature of this population, among other variables.

“Just because we’re in an upper-class neighborhood doesn’t mean there are no homeless. You just don’t see them. Either the cops take them in for the night to the county prison or they find a friend’s house to sleep at. But they’re still homeless. It occurred to me, especially when I was looking for places, that there’s nowhere for me to go in this area. There’s literally nothing out here to help homeless people because they want to ignore it. They want to say because we’re an upper-class neighborhood we don’t have it.”

–K.S., Dallas youth

<sup>1</sup> Texas Network of Youth Services sent an open records request and related payment to DFPS for data in July 2016. As of October 2017, the agency still had not fulfilled the request or provided information indicating when it would be fulfilled. We instead rely on the agency’s own reports and secondary sources that report DFPS data.

## FAQ #2: At what age are young people in Texas encountering homelessness and housing instability?

Data from TEA shows that even young children experience homelessness. However, young children generally experience homelessness when their families lose their housing; these children are “accompanied” by an adult or guardian. While younger students are represented in the number of unaccompanied homeless students, the number of unaccompanied homeless students jumps dramatically between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades, according to TEA data.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, data on runaways indicates that children as young as 10 are arrested or referred to juvenile probation for running away—and therefore likely experience some period of time “on the streets” before being picked up by law enforcement or referred to juvenile probation. However, the runaway numbers increase dramatically beginning at about age 13. These numbers are consistent with those reported by DFPS regarding children and youth who ran away from foster care: While DFPS reports children as young as 12 ran away from a placement in 2016, the majority were between the ages of 15 and 17.<sup>3</sup>

Other data sources document a high percentage of youth encountering homelessness after turning 18. For example, just under 50 percent of youth who participated in *Youth Count Texas!* were between the ages of 19 and 24.<sup>4</sup> Almost 29 percent were between the ages of 13 and 18.<sup>5</sup>

“Older youth, 18 to 21, they’re not afraid of going home. They’re adults. Most of them are pretty savvy and know that at 17, you’re not considered a runaway in Texas, and they cannot make you go home. When they come to us for these other services, the 18- to 21-year-olds, there’s no fear. They will divulge any information requested in order to get them into the program. It’s the ones under 18 that are very tight-lipped.”

—Central Texas service provider

## FAQ #3: Why aren’t these kids in foster care?

If a child is under the age of 18 and homeless, and they come to the attention of an adult, particularly an educator or service provider, the adult has an obligation to alert Child Protective Services (CPS) to the child’s homelessness within a certain period of time.

This drives young people to hide—either because they have already had a bad experience with foster care or because they have heard about bad experiences that others have had. Texas’ foster care system has been in crisis for years, with problems making newspaper headlines on a regular basis. If a youth has not already had a bad experience in care, they may be afraid of identifying themselves as homeless because they are aware of the problems that exist with the system.

<sup>2</sup> The very young children who were listed as “unaccompanied” in the TEA data were likely foster youth awaiting placements.

<sup>3</sup> TEX. DEP’T OF FAMILY AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES (DFPS), ANNUAL RUNAWAY AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING REPORT, FISCAL YEAR 2016 7 (2017).

<sup>4</sup> SARAH C. NARENDORF, YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN TEXAS: A REPORT TO FULFILL THE REQUIREMENTS OF HOUSE BILL 679 26 (2016).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

We also heard from young people that we interviewed and from service providers that older youth are not considered a priority population for CPS. So even if they are reported to CPS, they may not be taken into care.

“Seventeen-year-olds are in no man’s land, and it’s really frustrating. At that point, police don’t have to return them to a guardian if they’re a runaway. CPS is also usually hesitant to get involved with a 17-year-old. But they can’t sign a lease and they can’t go into adult shelters. So I feel really stuck when we get a 17-year-old.”

**–Austin service provider**

“I’ve called CPS a few times on a 15-year-old being beaten, and they’ve followed up on it. But because they’ve got so much to do with the young ones, unless those teens are in major abusive situations, there’s just not a lot of action taken. Which I hate to say, but that’s just the reality—they’re going to focus on getting a 5-year-old placed before they are a 16-year-old male.”

**–North Texas service provider**

“You see a lot of young people who just float around between 17 and 18. If they choose to run away from foster care at the age of 17, they’re marked as a runaway, and CPS really doesn’t put a whole lot of energy into finding them. And so then for a year, they’re homeless and they have no options. There’s no program that can take them and so it’s only once they turn 18 that we help. So that’s a huge obstacle for minors: just being willing to identify yourself because a lot of these programs will try to re-unify them with their families if they ran away or will report them to the foster care system, which they don’t want to do.”

**–Dallas service provider**

#### **FAQ #4: Why don't these kids just go to a shelter?**

Few shelters exist for young people under age 18, but those that do require a parent to consent to their child staying at the shelter. Even when a parent consents, funding constraints may limit the amount of time that a minor can stay in an emergency shelter without being in CPS custody. Safety concerns keep young adults from utilizing the adult shelters, a problem that service providers confirm. Older youth report feeling safer on the street than in adult shelters.

"The last place you want a vulnerable teenager is in one of those [adult] shelters. You might as well paint a bull's eye on the kid's back and shove them through the front door."

**-Homeless liaison at a  
Texas school district**

"I stayed in a shelter one time. I really don't like shelters. My first shelter experience...was like a 7<sup>th</sup> realm of hell. It was just so crazy...I was so scared, and after two or three days I said I would never do it again."

**-D.T., Houston youth**

"Most of our youth will not go to the adult shelters. If they have...not all of them have been victimized, but they definitely feel at risk in that situation. That means they're just staying on the streets."

**-Austin service provider**

### **FAQ #5: Why does this report include young adults in the definition of homeless youth?**

The needs, experiences, and policy failures that push young people into homelessness and housing instability tend to differ from those of older adults. And brain science tells us that lumping older youth in with adults ignores developmental differences between an 18-year-old and a 25-year-old. For this reason, rather than focusing solely on children and young people under age 18, advocates and policymakers include youth up to age 24 in discussions focused on youth homelessness.

This also mirrors expectations that we have for our own children: Parents rarely assume that 18-year-olds are truly ready to live completely independently. Instead, most young people continue to need support to help prepare them for adult life into their early 20s.

“[T]his is a really challenging time...There’s a lot of growth and a lot of learning that happens during that time. These are youth that are pretty profound and resilient and have gone through a lot. Homelessness can be very traumatic...Going to school or going to college, and at the same time not having a place to stay during the night while trying to handle and manage all of the ‘normal’ teenage and early 20-something life experiences, it’s just challenging...There are certainly some unique challenges that you face.”

**–Austin advocate**

### **FAQ #6: Are there really that many unaccompanied homeless young people in Texas? I don’t ever see them on the streets.**

Most young people who are homeless in Texas and elsewhere don’t want to be seen. This is true for two reasons: First, there is a stigma associated with homelessness. Consequently, young people said that they worked hard to conceal their status as homeless, something that stakeholders we interviewed also confirmed.

Second, youth under the age of 18 who are without a permanent home fear the consequences of being discovered. Many of them fear being pulled into the foster care system—particularly if they, or other young people they know, have had bad experiences in the foster care system in the past. Others may fear being returned to an abusive home that they fled. This fear of being discovered often means they avoid places where they are most likely to encounter help—they work hard to be invisible.

The desire to avoid detection creates real barriers to connecting youth with available services and supports—this has to be considered when developing policy solutions to end youth homelessness.

“[In Collin County]...people do not believe we have a homeless issue with the youth. So much so that someone actually posted on our website after the homeless youth count came out...‘Where are the youth? I don’t believe that there’s youth because where are they? I don’t see any under the bridge.’ Fortunately, they’re not under the bridge. What they’re doing is they’re doing couch to couch...they may spend a night or two on the street, but then they’re able to get somewhere else.”

–North Texas service provider

“The under 18 population is a lot more hidden. I think a lot of that is fear of system involvement and shame. If they’re in school, they don’t want their peers to know what’s going on. So it’s very difficult for us to locate those youth.”

–Austin service provider

#### **FAQ #7: What are the living situations for most homeless youth?**

There are also misunderstandings about *where* youth experiencing homelessness are living. Often, when we think of homelessness, we think only of people who are unsheltered and living on the street. This misses the scope of the problem, since many who are homeless are in shelters, are living with friends or relatives temporarily (“couch surfing”), or are living in motels or hotels.

While a significant—and likely under-reported—number of youth are unsheltered, many without permanent housing are sheltered, but unstably housed, and at high risk of ending up on the streets. This contributes to the problems associated with identifying the true number of youth experiencing homelessness.

#### **FAQ #8: Why do young people find themselves homeless or unstably housed?**

This report will discuss the way that some systems operate to push young people into homelessness and will offer policy solutions. For example, former foster youth and young people who have had a brush with the law are at higher risk of homelessness. Recognizing this helps formulate better responses to youths’ needs that help avoid this risk.

Other research reveals the myriad reasons that young people may find themselves without permanent housing. According to the surveys youth completed for *Youth Count Texas!*, the most reported causes of youth homelessness were financial reasons. There were a variety of non-financial reasons:

- 19 percent reported “family-related” reasons
- 15 percent reported having been kicked out by family
- 10.5 percent reported foster care or CPS-related reasons
- Almost 8 percent reported having run away from home
- A little more than 7 percent reported having left to protect him or herself or a family member<sup>6</sup>

“All of the years that I’ve been here, I’ve heard, ‘Yeah but your clients don’t want housing. They chose to be homeless.’ That’s just completely false. It might be the best option that they have at this particular moment because they would rather be homeless than go back to an abusive household. On intake, 75 percent of our youth say that they really want to be in housing. Shelter is always a need that youth report when coming in.”

—Austin service provider

### FAQ #9: Are some youth at higher risk of homelessness than others?

Yes. Data collected for this report, as well as other Texas-based studies, shows that young people of color and those with disabilities—particularly mental health problems—are overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness. And while it is not clear that girls are overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness as a whole, there are slightly more girls than boys arrested and referred to juvenile probation for running away.

Research has also shown that a high percentage of young people who become homeless identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).<sup>7</sup> Anecdotally, LGBTQ youth report that they are often forced out of their homes by unaccepting parents or guardians. Though only about 5 to 7 percent of the general youth population identify as LGBTQ, according to surveys completed by youth for *Youth Count Texas!*, 16.3 percent of youth who participated identified as LGBTQ.<sup>8</sup> This is relatively consistent with another Texas-based study by a service provider that indicated that close to 15 percent of youth experiencing homelessness who had been clients identified as LGBTQ.<sup>9</sup> However, national studies have reported up to 34 percent or more of youth experiencing homelessness identifying as LGBTQ, and stigma may prevent young people from self-identifying, particularly in the South.<sup>10</sup>

6 NARENDORF, *supra* note 4, at 29.

7 See NEST COLLABORATIVE TO PREVENT LGBTQ YOUTH HOMELESSNESS, STRATEGIC PLAN 10 (2015).

8 NARENDORF, *supra* note 4, at 26.

9 ELIZABETH A. SCHOENFELD & SUSAN MCDOWELL, VULNERABILITIES & OPPORTUNITIES: PROFILES OF FOSTER AND NON-FOSTER YOUTH SERVED BY LIFEWORKS (2016).

10 ADMIN. FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES (ACF), STREET OUTREACH PROGRAM DATA COLLECTION STUDY FINAL REPORT 45 (2016); NEST COLLABORATIVE, *supra* note 7, at 10.

“We are seeing a huge population of [LGBTQ youth]...The majority of them are saying once they say they’re LGBTQ to their family, then they are being kicked out. It’s become such an epidemic that we’re finally going to pastors and saying please tell your congregation not to.”

–North Texas service provider

A high percentage of youth experiencing homelessness also report having a mental health problem. In fact, the youth who participated in *Youth Count Texas!* reported mental health problems more often than any other health condition. Almost 40 percent of youth indicated they struggled with mental illness, and close to 16 percent reported having post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>11</sup> Of those who reported having a mental health issue, 20 percent reported that it kept them from holding a job.<sup>12</sup> This is consistent with other research, which similarly showed that youth experiencing homelessness struggled with depression and other mental health issues at high rates.<sup>13</sup>

#### **FAQ #10: Why can’t we just get these youth into housing?**

While housing was the resource that many service providers said was most needed, there are barriers to getting young people into housing that don’t exist for adults. If they are under 18, those barriers are legal—a minor cannot sign herself into a shelter, and landlords will not typically rent to them.

For those who are 18 or older, there may be other barriers—a criminal history of any kind can be a barrier to renting an apartment and may be a barrier to public housing. Affordable housing is in short supply throughout the state.

In addition, for this age group, housing is just one piece of the puzzle. Particularly for youth transitioning out of foster care, young people may not have the life skills needed to jump into living on their own in an apartment. They may not know how to go about applying for housing programs or how to find and lease an apartment. Many of them need a supportive adult who can assist them in gaining the life skills that would allow them to live on their own. For this reason, some of the models that work well to assist homeless adults—like rapid rehousing—might need to be re-tooled to work well for young people.

“Homelessness for young people is extremely hard. Most of them have been kicked out of their house. They’re off on their own but they have no idea how to survive out there. Not like people who have been working before. There are some people that do not let their kids work, so when they get kicked out they ask themselves, ‘What do I do now?’ I was always supported by my parents, and now I have nothing. It’s extremely hard to transition from your parents to this.”

–T.H., San Antonio youth

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<sup>11</sup> NARENDORF, *supra* note 4, at 33.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> ACF, *supra* note 10, at 55–57.

“The 18 to 24 population, they have more control, but they don’t have access. They don’t know how to access a lot of things, they don’t have the life skills, and they don’t have the life experiences the older adults have had yet. They’re still learning. Many of them have never had to take care of a house so even when we get them into housing, they don’t think about needing to take the trash on what day and what time. They’ve never cooked a meal for themselves. Adjusting to sleeping in a bed when they’ve been sleeping on a sidewalk for a long time is its own challenge for them. The feeling of isolation and loneliness too. On the streets, you’re always around people, but you never feel 100 percent connected or safe. Then you’re in housing and feel isolated and unsure of how to go forward.”

**–Austin service provider**