Guest Editor's Introduction

Youth Homelessness: Research Insights for Coordinated Community Response

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This symposium brings together research from different methods and perspectives to inform coordinated community responses to youth homelessness. Coordinated response efforts have played important roles with other populations experiencing homelessness (for example, veterans and chronic homeless adults). In most communities, however, the concept is more nascent for addressing homelessness among youth and young adults, and systems and services need to be attuned to young people's circumstances and preferences.

Homelessness is not unique to youth and young adults, but it does have unique implications for this developmental period of the lifecycle (Gaetz et al., 2013). Neuroscience and developmental research have shown that brain structure changes into early adulthood and that adolescence and young adulthood may be a particularly sensitive period for socioemotional development (Dumontheil, 2016; Fuhrmann, Knoll, & Blakemore, 2015).

High brain plasticity and sensitivity to social cues during youth present both opportunities and vulnerabilities. With positive, stable environments and social supports, adolescence and young adulthood offer a highly formative period for gaining skills and experiences that pave pathways into healthy and productive adulthood. On the other hand, such a significant developmental period becomes a vulnerability in the context of homelessness, instability, and exposure to related trauma. For example, Australian researchers found that the longer young people experienced homelessness, the harder it was for them to escape as they became further entrenched in street culture and the social risks associated with instability in the absence of safe and stable housing and positive connections (Johnson and Chamberlain, 2008). They also found that youth homelessness was the single most common pathway into adult homelessness, underscoring the importance of early intervention at this stage (Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013).

Recent U.S. efforts have expanded our understanding of homelessness among youth and young adults and provided new opportunities to make greater headway. These include significant research undertakings as well as policy actions supporting more coordinated, systems-level actions to address youth homelessness.

Voices of Youth Count, for example, is a national research initiative led by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago on youth homelessness, from which results have recently started emerging. Among other research components, it included a nationally representative population-based survey to capture prevalence and incidence of homelessness among youth and young adults, ages 13 to 25.

The researchers estimated that at least 1 in 30 adolescent minors (ages 13-17), and 1 in 10 young adults (ages 18-25), experience some form of homelessness during a 1-year period (Morton, Dworsky, and Samuels 2017; Morton et al., 2018). While these experiences vary in risk, frequency, and duration, they nonetheless reflect a broader and more hidden challenge than previously documented. Furthermore, the research underscored substantial inequities beneath the surface of the problem.

American Indian and Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic youth, and young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), were far more likely than non-Hispanic White youth who identified as cisgender and heterosexual to face homelessness. The evidence points to the need to understand and address systemic inequities that underlie much of our nation's youth homelessness challenge. Relatedly, young people who lack a high school diploma and those with histories of child welfare and/or juvenile or criminal justice systems involvement—where the same racial and ethnic minorities are also disproportionately represented—are at much greater risk for experiencing homelessness (Morton, Dworsky, and Samuels 2017).

Since 1974, when Congress first passed what is now known as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, federal policy has formally acknowledged the need to support young people experiencing homelessness. Among other things, this legislation came to include a set of federally funded programs administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to help address youth homelessness, including the street outreach program, the short-term basic centers program for younger youth, the longer-term transitional living and maternity group home programs for older youth, and a national switchboard for runaway youth to seek help. Later, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 expanded on the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth program to provide additional supports for students experiencing homelessness to enroll in and attend school, complete their high school education, and continue on to higher education.

Recent policy actions have placed increasing emphasis on coordinated responses to the complex challenge of youth homelessness. In 2012, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) amended the national plan to end homelessness to include a specific Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness, outlining steps that need to be coordinated across federal agencies to advance the goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020. More recently, USICH released updated *Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness* (USICH, 2018). The document outlines essential elements and metrics for communities' collective efforts to address youth homelessness, underscoring the importance of pivoting from program-based approaches to coordinated, cross-agencies and cross-systems identification and service delivery models better suited to match the scale and complexity of the problem.

Further, over the last 2 years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has administered the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP), which involves grant funds and technical assistance awarded through a competitive selection process to communities for advancing innovative, coordinated responses intended to dramatically reduce the number of youth who experience homelessness in those communities. HUD has also provided funding for technical assistance to a number of communities across the country to devise and implement 100-day challenges—brief, coordinated, catalytic efforts—to build momentum and make measurable progress in addressing youth homelessness locally.

Taken together, emerging national evidence on the scale, scope, and characteristics of youth homelessness, coupled with new federal direction and resources elevating collective, cross-systems efforts to address the challenge, present a unique moment for our country. While much more is needed, communities have unprecedented evidence, guidance, and (in some cases) resources as impetus to craft and execute coordinated strategies to make faster progress toward ending youth homelessness.

This *Cityscape* Symposium responds to this national moment.

We invited new and relevant research that, in a variety of ways, and from different perspectives, could inform communities' efforts to devise coordinated responses to addressing this problem. In addition, we invited international commentaries from leading subject matter experts in Australia and Canada to give reflections that would allow readers to consider the findings from this symposium's collection of studies in the context of how other countries have come to understand and address the issue of youth homelessness.

Each research paper was subject to double-blind peer-review by at least three scholars with relevant expertise. All manuscripts were recommended by reviewers for acceptance conditional on varying degrees of revisions, and the guest editor reviewed all final manuscripts for satisfactory integration of, or response to, reviewers' feedback. We greatly appreciate the time and valuable inputs from 19 reviewers, which contributed to a stronger symposium.

The first two papers in the symposium (Shelton et al. and Samuels et al.) help to deepen and anchor our understanding of youth homelessness with respect to the roles of young people's complex identities. As discussed previously, a growing evidence base underscores that homelessness does not afflict everyone equally, even when we control for income or poverty. For communities and policy-makers to make serious strides toward ending youth homelessness, there needs to be a stronger understanding of, and grappling with, the systemic inequities that disproportionately push youth of color and LGBTQ youth into homelessness.

Shelton and colleagues draw lessons from a seven-city survey of LGBTQ young adults experiencing homelessness. Given the targeted and relatively large sample, the study offers unique insights into understudied subpopulations, including bisexual and transgender young people specifically, and the intersections of race and ethnicity with sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, while being kicked out or asked to leave the family or foster home was the most commonly cited cause of homelessness among LGBTQ young people as a whole, this was particularly common for

transgender young people. Further, transgender young adults commonly faced a double burden of discrimination related to both gender identity and sexual orientation. Similarly, LGBTQ young people who identified as Black or Hispanic reported high levels of discrimination related to both their LGBTQ-identity and to their race or ethnicity. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how intersecting identities can shape and compound young people's experiences of exclusion in their day-to-day lives.

Through qualitative and quantitative methods based on indepth interviews in five communities with young people experiencing homelessness, Samuels and colleagues explored young people's experiences with navigating services and supports in their communities. The analysis delivers a nuanced understanding of "youth logics of engagement" with formal and informal resources that are informed by weighing perceived emotional, psychological, and relational risks associated with specific services against the risks of continued homelessness. Selective engagement of services was the most common form of engagement among youth in the sample, and identities like being LGBTQ played into young people's decisions about whether and when to engage available resources.

The research reveals how young people face multiple layers of discrimination related to different marginalized identities in the contexts of their families, communities, employment, and housing markets. It is important that coordinated responses to youth homelessness involve hiring, training, and rewarding staff across the continuum of services in accordance with their ability to ensure that young people feel safe, affirmed, and well-supported with respect to all of their identities—especially those identities that are frequently subject to discrimination and stigmatization.

The subsequent two papers (Rice et al. and Henwood et al.) include new evidence for systems providing housing-based interventions to young people experiencing homelessness. Rice and colleagues directly examine a key tenant of system-level crisis response: coordinated entry and assessment for youth experiencing homelessness and seeking housing and support. Based on intake assessment and longitudinal administrative data from 16 communities in 10 states, the study explored communities' use of scores from a common risk assessment tool—the TAY-VI-SPDAT: Next Step Tool for homeless youth—and how well the scores predicted young people's risk of remaining homeless or returning to homelessness once housed. Overall, the authors find that the instrument successfully identifies young people with higher odds of returning to homelessness without formal housing intervention, as well as promising evidence of even young people assessed as high-risk remaining out of the local homelessness system once placed into housing and service programs.

Henwood and colleagues' qualitative study offers a more vivid understanding of the changes that occur as young people participate in one of these types of housing programs, permanent supportive housing. The research reveals how supportive housing fosters a sense of "ontological security" characterized by a sense of well-being that stems from a sense of constancy, control, and routine. This, in turn, enables young people to engage in positive identity formation and cultivation of different types of social relationships. The research also points to opportunities for supportive housing interventions to better mitigate the risk of some participants still feeling insecurities about the future and social isolation.

The last two papers of the series (Dworsky et al. and Walker et al.) investigate two broader public systems that are critical to coordinated efforts to ending youth homelessness: child welfare (Dworsky et al.) and juvenile justice (Walker et al.). While a robust, youth-sensitive crisis response system is critical to effective and efficient *outflow* of youth from homelessness, this, by itself, does little to curb *inflow* into homelessness.

To this end, Dworsky and colleagues analyzed a large, multi-state foster care data archive and found that a sizeable share (17 percent) of youth who entered foster care as adolescents ran away during their first out-of-home spell. In turn, running away from foster care is a well-documented risk factor for more entrenched forms of future homelessness. Equity concerns reemerge, with Black and Hispanic youth having been more likely than non-Hispanic White youth to run away from care. Moreover, adolescents who had greater instability in foster care placements, and those placed in congregate care settings, were at greater risk for running away. While these analyses are observational in nature (we cannot assume causality between placement instability or congregate care arrangements and running away, though the associations are clear), the findings point to the potential for avoidance of these situations for youth in foster care helping to mitigate young people's risk of running away and, ultimately, falling into homelessness.

Walker and colleagues took a mixed methods approach that explored both administrative and qualitative data. These researchers used juvenile court data from Washington state and qualitative data drawn from stakeholder meetings to better understand the decision-making circumstances related to addressing the risk of justice-involved youth for homelessness. Here again, we observe high rates of running away or being kicked out of the home, with 20 to 50 percent of juvenile court-involved youth reporting at least one episode. The qualitative research elevates tensions for a juvenile justice system addressing issues that can be seen as outside of its mandate, as well as needs and opportunities to improve identification of youth experiencing, or at risk for, homelessness, and connecting those young people with intensive family interventions to mitigate risks.

In their international commentaries, both Gaetz (Canada) and MacKenzie (Australia) speak to how the symposium papers' findings resonate or differ from their own country contexts. Critically, they both highlight the pivoting of national research and policy frameworks toward a greater emphasis on prevention of youth homelessness in coordinated efforts involving multiple public systems.

This symposium's papers collectively draw attention to the many facets and complexities of comprehensive coordinated responses to the challenge of youth homelessness. They make it clear that the problem will not be solved by quick fixes or simplistic interventions.

The research, however, should also inspire a sense of optimism. Shelton et al. and Samuels et al. both find resilience among even the most vulnerable young people and willingness to engage supports when delivered in ways that counter the discrimination and stigma they face elsewhere in society and value their individual agency. Rice et al. reveal promising results for housing-based resources and the most commonly used assessment tool to help allocate them for youth. Henwood et al. illuminate the important sense of security and well-being that housing stability makes possible for young people during a key developmental stage. Articles by Dworsky et al. and Walker et al. both point to broader public systems beyond homelessness and housing systems that have

the potential to make major contributions to curbing the inflow of youth into homelessness. This would reduce the burden on crisis response systems in the future while helping young people to get onto a path to thriving earlier. Gaetz and MacKenzie both elucidate country examples of how political paradigms and will, influenced by research and advocacy over time, can in fact move toward a big picture, comprehensive approach to ending youth homelessness that includes a strong focus on upstream actions.

Much remains to be done, but the efforts and investments are worth it for young people, their families, and the communities in which they live. This symposium should be leveraged as a starting point for national and local dialogue on what we know, and what we still need to know, to advance momentum for coordinated responses to ending youth homelessness.

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