Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in Rural America

October 2018

The fifth in a series of Research-to-Impact briefs by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago on understanding and addressing youth homelessness.

In Voices of Youth Count's first Research-to-Impact brief, researchers estimated that nearly 4.2 million youth and young adults in America experienced some form of homelessness during a 12-month period. *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in Rural America* highlights research related to the specific experiences of young people who reside in the vast areas of the country that have fewer people and more widely dispersed services. The findings show that rural youth homelessness is just as prevalent as homelessness in urban areas. However, in rural areas, youth experiences of homelessness are more likely to be hidden, and these youth face unique challenges accessing education, jobs, services, and support.

CHAPIN HALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

What makes a place rural?

The answer isn't as straightforward as you might think. There is no single, widely accepted definition of a rural community. Different surveys, agencies, policies, and programs classify areas as rural based on a range of characteristics, such as population size, population density, household density, resident interpretations, and the presence of (or distance from) metropolitan areas.

For example, the U.S. Census Bureau defines counties as rural if more than half of the county's population lives outside of urban areas. About 60% of all U.S. counties, which collectively encompass 14% of the nation's population, meet this criterion. This encompasses 72% of the U.S. land mass. Recently, for the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP)*, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defined rural counties more broadly. The current definition includes counties that are predominantly rural, that lack significant urban areas, or that are located in very rural states; under these criteria, 75% of U.S. counties are defined as rural.

Continued on page 4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voices of Youth: Jesse's Story

Jesse, a 21-year-old white male living in Walla Walla County, Washington, was one of 215 young people who participated in the Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews. Walla Walla County is home to 60,000 people and sits against the state's southeastern border with Oregon. Jesse identified his housing instability as starting at age 18, when his mental health began to deteriorate. His first episode of homelessness occurred when his adoptive mother found syringes in his bedroom and kicked him out.

Jesse recounts that, after he was forced out, he went to the only shelter available in Walla Walla, staying there "off and on" until he was rejected for missing required chapel services while on a date with his girlfriend. After that, "I went off man, on the streets," Jesse said. There were no other shelters available, so Jesse stayed on the streets, camped "away from society," or couch surfed when it was offered by acquaintances. Couch surfing made it possible to shower and rest, but Jesse also found a lot of triggers for drug use among his hosts. This risk was the main reason Jesse spent most nights camping rather than couch surfing: "(Camping is) the only place I can stay clean."

Jesse got food assistance from the federal government and sees a counselor at a local health clinic. He speaks positively about the public resources he receives, but he has not yet obtained permanent housing supports. Recently, he stopped taking his medication. Jesse said that achieving housing stability will require a more concerted effort to improve his mental and physical health and to find a job. He would prefer to find housing first: "I could be better right now if I had a roof over my head."

Voices of Youth Count: Youth Homelessness in Rural America

This Research-to-Impact brief is the fifth in a series that draws on multiple research components from Voices of Youth Count. Adolescence and young adulthood represent a critical developmental window. Every day that young people like Jesse experience the stress of housing instability represents a missed opportunity to support healthy development and transitions to productive adulthood. Voices of Youth Count elevates the voices of young people like Jesse across our nation who lack the necessary support and resources to achieve independence and make unique contributions to our society. Throughout this brief, we raise new evidence on the distinctive issues of youth homelessness among America's vast landscape of rural* communities.

* An asterisk indicates that the term is defined in the glossary

Given the lack of nationally representative data on youth homelessness* in America and the bias of youth homelessness research toward cities, the understanding of the scale and circumstances of youth homelessness in rural America is limited. The Voices of Youth Count research is a significant step in closing the knowledge gap.

Key Findings - Overview

In rural America, youth are diverse and experience homelessness in many ways. Nevertheless, several key findings from Voices of Youth Count about their experiences help point the way to better policies, systems, and services to address the challenge:

- Youth homelessness is as common in rural counties as it is in nonrural counties.
- When compared to urban areas, youth experiences of homelessness in rural counties are perhaps more hidden, with greater reliance on couch surfing* and sleeping in vehicles or outdoors.
- Youth experiencing homelessness in rural counties were more disconnected from education and employment than those in larger, more urban counties.
- In rural communities, changes like the collapse of an industry or the emergence of a substance use epidemic can have profoundly destabilizing effects on disadvantaged families, which, in turn, can shape young people's trajectories into homelessness.
- American Indian and Alaska Native youth have more than double the risk of homelessness as other youth, although most were located outside of rural communities.
- Most rural counties lacked services designed specifically for youth experiencing homelessness, forcing young people to go without help or travel to distant locations to seek support.

These key findings signal opportunities to develop policy actions and community responses to prevent and address the hidden challenge of youth homelessness across rural America.

Moving Toward Solutions

As a nation, we are missing opportunities to ensure that all young people can reach their full potential and contribute to stronger communities and economies across the country. Voices of Youth Count's Systemic Evidence Review (brief forthcoming) includes the most comprehensive synthesis to-date of evaluations of interventions to prevent and address youth homelessness. Among all of the evaluations we identified, none had specifically tested the impacts of programs or practices in rural contexts, though many explicitly assessed interventions in urban areas.

The overall lack of evidence of what works in supporting young people in rural contexts limits our ability to identify effective programs or practices to serve them. This matters. Different program models (or, at least, implementation approaches) may be needed in rural communities. There are unique challenges associated with delivering interventions in rural areas due to limited service infrastructure, greater remoteness, widely dispersed populations, and the unique economic, political, and social realities of rural communities. However, our research highlights critical systemic changes that can be made today to better address youth homelessness in rural America.

Voices of Youth Count identifies implications and recommendations for policymakers, leaders of public systems, and practitioners to make change for and with youth who experience homelessness. We intend for these recommendations to serve as the beginning, not an endpoint, of a conversation about tangible improvements to the nation's laws, regulations, systems, and programs. Voices of Youth Count speaks to the evidence while seeking solutions.

No more missed opportunities.

What makes a place rural?

Continued from page 2

For the National Survey analysis, we use the U.S. Census Bureau classification for rural counties unless indicated otherwise. In other cases, we simply differentiate counties as having relatively small, medium, or large population sizes so that readers can see how features of youth homelessness vary along a rural-urban spectrum. Chapin Hall's Youth Counts compare six counties with relatively small population sizes to seven with medium-sized populations and nine with large population sizes. Our in-depth interviews with young people, which were conducted in five counties, included one of the six small counties*****, Walla Walla County, WA. Although these six counties had relatively low population sizes, three of them, including Walla Walla County, do not meet the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of a rural county.

While the specific definition of rural can differ, the communities we describe as rural share many attributes in common, including fewer people spread over a larger landscape, less access to services and economic opportunities, and greater hiddenness of social problems like homelessness.

VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

Voices of Youth Count is a national research and policy initiative designed to fill critical gaps in the nation's knowledge about unaccompanied homelessness among youth and young adults, ages 13 to 25. Voices of Youth Count involved vast data collection and integrated a wide range of perspectives. The main research components included the following:

- **National Survey:** A nationally representative phone-based survey that interviewed 26,161 people about their self-reported experiences of youth homelessness or the experiences of youth in their households.
- **Youth Counts & Brief Youth Survey:** Point-in-time counts of youth experiencing homelessness in 22 counties across the country, with 4,139 brief surveys of youths' self-reported experiences and characteristics.
- **Continuums of Care & Provider Survey:** Surveys with 25 Continuums of Care (CoCs)***** leads and 523 diverse service providers on services and programs delivered in the 22 Youth Count communities.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Detailed qualitative and quantitative interviews with 215 young people experiencing homelessness in five communities.
- **Administrative Data Analysis:** Analysis of various forms of administrative data from multiple communities, including data from the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) that all HUD-funded homeless services agencies and organizations are required to use; U.S. Department of Education data on student homelessness; and the Foster Care Data Archive—a longitudinal data warehouse containing decades of state data on children in over two dozen states who spent time in foster care—on runaway occurrences.
- **Systematic Evidence Review:** A comprehensive synthesis of evidence on programs and practices from evaluations of interventions to prevent or address youth homelessness.
- **Policy & Fiscal Review:** Analysis of statutory and regulatory entry points for policy action on youth homelessness and focus group discussions with 25 cross-system stakeholders in five communities.

This brief elevates key findings and implications on rural youth homelessness for a broad audience from the range of these research components. We do not give technical detail on methods or results here, but technical information can be found in Voices of Youth Count research papers and reports that have been and will be published. These are posted on www.voicesofyouthcount.org.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reexamine federal programs and funding to ensure that young people in every part of the country have access, within a reasonable distance, to youth-specific homelessness services and supports. **See Findings 1 and 3.**

- Establish ongoing grant programs and technical assistance to address youth homelessness in rural communities. **See Findings 1 and 3.**

- Supplement shelter- and street-based counts, especially in rural areas, with creative methods to identify and count the full range of youth experiencing homelessness. **See Finding 2.**

- Add a priority focus for youth experiencing homelessness to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Youth Development Grant program and Rural Community Development Initiative. **See Finding 2.**

- Develop trauma-informed toolkits for rural youth through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). **See Finding 2.**

- Engage rural school systems and broader youth-serving organizations[1] as leaders and partners in helping to avert young people from homelessness. **See Finding 3.**

- Provide funding to support innovation and rigorous evaluation for tailored housing and service delivery models for youth in rural communities. **See Finding 3.**

- Engage tribal nations, organizations, and young people to devise concrete, culturally sensitive federal policy strategies for both rural and urban communities to address the high risk for homelessness among American Indian and Alaska Native youth. **See Finding 4.**

Four Major Findings

Finding 1. Rural and nonrural communities have similar rates of youth homelessness

Finding 2. Youth homelessness often looks and manifests differently in rural communities

Finding 3. Youth confronting homelessness in rural communities have few services to rely on

Finding 4. American Indian and Alaskan Native youth have high rates of homelessness but are not more likely to be found in rural communities

Finding 1. Rural and nonrural communities have similar rates of youth homelessness

These similar rates might defy common perceptions of where homelessness exists. We found similar rates of youth homelessness among young adults ages 18-25 in rural (9.2%) and urban (9.6%) communities. Among adolescents ages 13-17, household prevalence of some form of homelessness was 4.4% in rural and 4.2% in urban counties.[2] While white youth are in the majority of the population overall as well as within the subgroup experiencing homelessness, black and Hispanic youth in rural communities still experienced homelessness disproportionately.

Although prevalence rates of youth homelessness are similar across rural and non-rural communities, the *numbers* of youth experiencing homelessness are smaller in rural communities because the population sizes are smaller in these communities. The different definitions of "rural" make it challenging to definitively estimate how many "rural youth" experience homelessness. Applying the more narrow Census Bureau definition produces a rate of 9% of young adults reporting homelessness among rural counties. Congress has appropriated two rounds of YHDP funding for HUD to award competitive grants to CoCs for innovative, coordinated responses to youth homelessness involving multiple systems and services.

Using the YHDP criteria for a rural county under the second round of funding, the share of young adults residing in rural communities reporting homelessness increases to 17% (about 1 in 6). While the definition of a "rural" community can significantly alter the number of young people implicated, the evidence is clear that rural youth struggle with the challenges of homelessness as much as urban youth do.

Even within urban counties, many young people experiencing homelessness live in less-densely populated areas that often lack services and resources. In fact, among all young adults reporting homelessness within a 12-month period, we estimated the following:

- 40% lived in zip codes with population densities of fewer than 1,000 people per square mile;
- 20% lived in zip codes with population densities of 1,000 to 3,000 people; and
- 40% lived in zip codes with population densities of more than 3,000 people.

These findings underscore the importance of tailoring strategies for the identification, outreach, and service delivery for young people in less densely populated areas who might otherwise not get the attention they need. CoCs and other public systems can use this information for planning purposes.

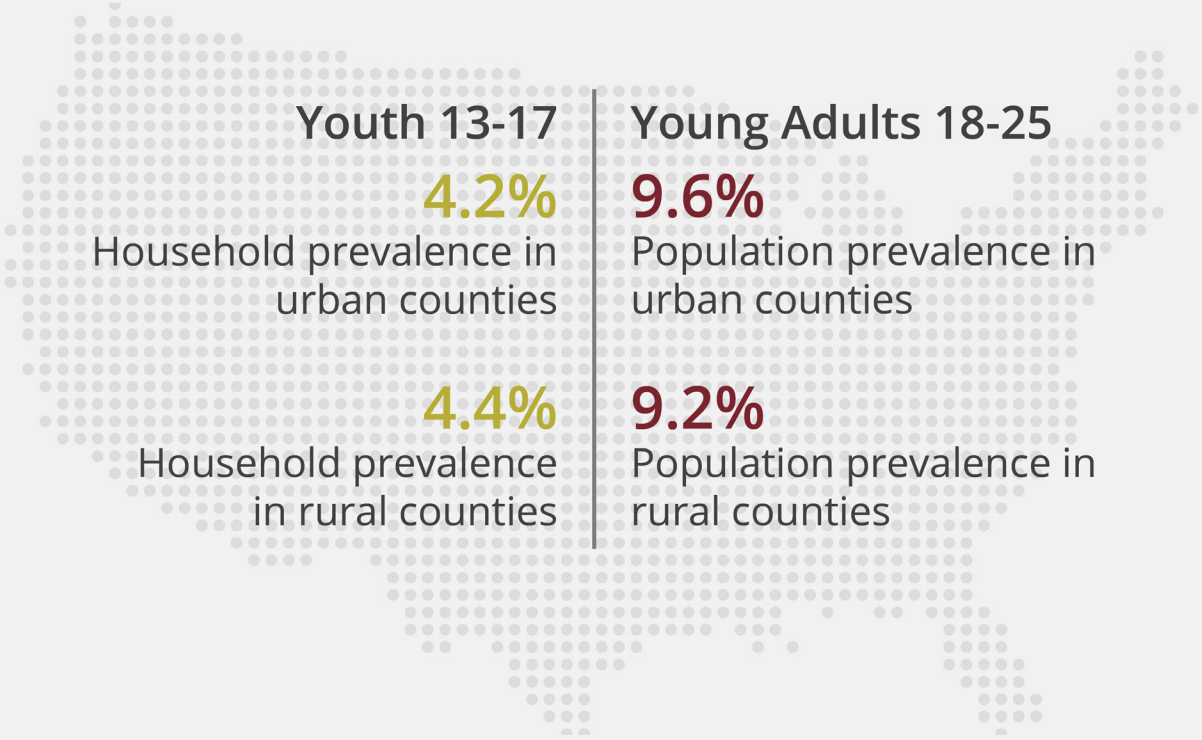
Implications and Recommendations

Federal programs and funding must ensure that youth in every part of the country have access, within a reasonable distance, to youth-specific homelessness diversion, housing, and supports. The findings make clear that youth homelessness is truly a national challenge that affects rural, suburban, and urban communities alike. Any rural community that lacks strategies and services to prevent and address youth homelessness is likely a community with unmet needs and missed opportunities. Federal programs and funding geared to addressing youth homelessness should aim to create equitable opportunities for communities across the spectrum of population density to benefit from those resources.

Federal policy for youth homelessness could emulate the targeted programs and technical assistance provided to rural communities through other federal initiatives. For example, recognizing the unique challenges to health care access and service delivery in rural parts of the country, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) administers the Rural Health Care Services Outreach Program and the Rural Health Information Hub. These are grant and technical assistance programs aimed at promoting rural health care services through enhanced delivery. Focused federal efforts could similarly provide much-needed financial and technical assistance to rural communities combating youth homelessness with unique delivery challenges.

Figure 1. Youth Homelessness Affects Rural and Urban Areas Alike

Rates of youth experiencing homelessness were similar in rural and nonrural areas.



Source: VoYC National Survey

Given the significant unmet need in urban communities, however, any new rural-focused resources and supports should supplement those extended to urban communities, not shift resources from them.

For HUD's YHDP funding, a certain number of grantees had to be rural communities, and HUD's criteria for a rural community were broadened under the second round of funding. These are positive steps to help more rural communities access resources. Moving toward ongoing, rural-focused financial support and technical assistance, such as the rural health care example mentioned above, can usefully build on these developments.

Similarly, HHS offers two programs that, if continued, evaluated, and expanded, could bolster resources for rural communities. The Basic Center Program (BCP) provides short-term shelter, family intervention, and support services for runaway and homeless youth. The Street Outreach Program (SOP) includes outreach and drop-in services at the front lines for youth experiencing homelessness. Innovative responses like rural host homes (BCP) and mobile and technology-based outreach (SOP) might improve supports in rural contexts. Given the unique circumstances of rural communities, federal funding may be more effective by investing in flexible housing arrangements and vouchers, transportation, counseling, education, and aftercare plans instead of, or in addition to, traditional shelter facilities. Further, a stronger partnership between HUD and HHS on rural youth resources and tools would help communities maximize federal resources.

Finding 2. Youth homelessness often looks and manifests differently in rural communities

Youth homelessness in rural communities is especially hidden. The Voices of Youth Count team conducted brief youth surveys across 22 counties within point-in-time counts. Compared with youth in counties with larger populations, youth in small population counties were twice as likely to be staying with others and about half as likely to be staying in shelters. Youth in small counties were also more likely to be sleeping outside.

Specifically, on the night of the count, in large counties, 20% of youth were staying with others, 22% were unsheltered, and 50% were sheltered. By comparison, in small counties, 40% reported staying with others, 28% were unsheltered, and 23% were sheltered. Jesse's reliance on the streets and couch surfing in Walla Walla County exemplifies these trends.

In large counties, half of the youth surveyed were staying in shelters or transitional housing on the night of the count. This underscores the extent to which reliance on services drives identification and count estimates in urban areas. In rural communities, where youth shelter services are generally lacking, youth experiencing homelessness don't have such places to congregate and are thus less visible. Given this higher degree of "hiddenness" in rural communities, administrative data and traditional point-in-time count methods may have a greater risk of underestimating the extent of youth homelessness in these areas.

Issues specific to rural areas can influence young people's journeys into and through homelessness. Previous research showed that poverty rates are higher in nonmetro areas. Rural communities also offer fewer economic opportunities for young people to generate sufficient income to escape poverty and sustain housing stability. The lack of economic opportunities may be a stronger factor in driving homelessness in these communities than in urban ones.

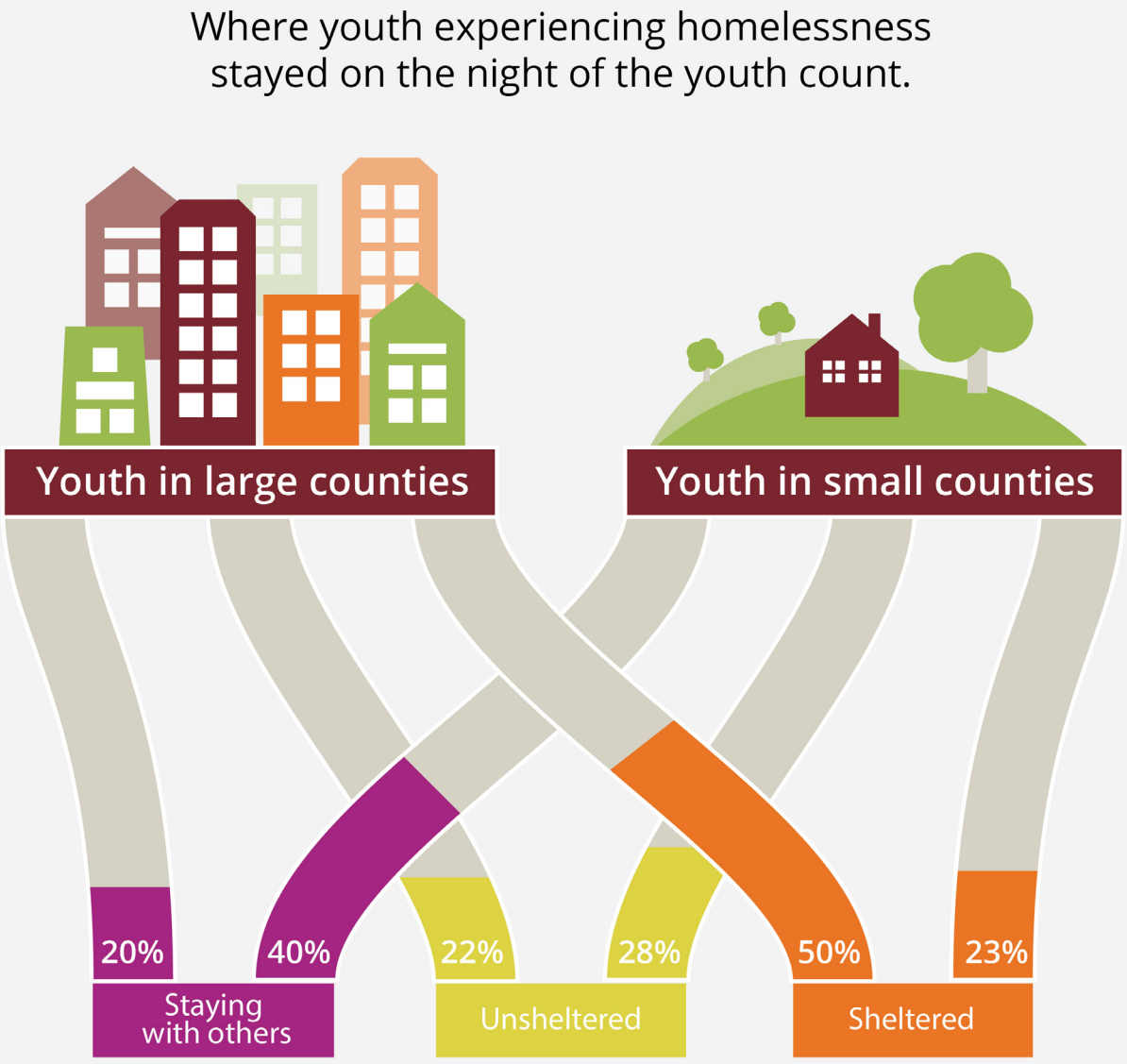
According to our brief youth surveys, 57% of youth ages 16-24 who were experiencing homelessness in small counties were neither attending school nor employed, compared to 46% of youth in large counties. The same survey revealed that 23% of young adults ages

18-25 who were experiencing homelessness in small counties were employed, compared to 35% of peers in large counties. Youth in small counties were also more likely to have been in juvenile detention or prison or jail than those in large counties (52% vs. 43%). These experiences further hinder young people's access to jobs and housing. While these indicators are concerning for all youth experiencing homelessness, they suggest an especially high level of disconnectedness from education and economic opportunity among rural youth.

While trauma, childhood adversity, and family instability and conflict were key drivers of youth homelessness in general, the VoYC interviews in Walla Walla County revealed how such challenges can easily affect entire rural communities. For example, the closing of food canning factories marked a structural jobs transition in Walla Walla. The closures disproportionately affected low-income households and fueled family instability and tensions. Relatedly, a substance use problem gripped much of the socio-economically disadvantaged segments of the county and further frayed family safety nets. These community-level forces played prominently into the Walla Walla youth trajectories into homelessness.

In light of the nation's escalating opioid epidemic, the risk that chemical dependencies will rapidly take hold in more rural communities and contribute to instability is particularly concerning. Indeed, a recent study found that rates of babies born with opioid withdrawal symptoms are rising

Figure 2. Youth Homelessness in Rural Communities is Especially Hidden



Source: VoYC Brief Youth Survey

Figure 3. Rural Youth Experiencing Homelessness are More Likely to be Out of School and Work than Youth in Large Counties

Youth = Ages 16-24
Source: VoYC Brief Youth Survey

much faster in rural and Appalachian areas than in urban ones.[3]

Implications and Recommendations

Rural communities need resources and guidance to employ more creative approaches to identifying and counting youth experiencing homelessness. HUD estimates of people experiencing homelessness rely heavily on shelter and street counts. In rural communities, shelters are generally scarce, particularly for youth. As a result, people who experience "literal homelessness" (i.e., staying in places not meant for human habitation) can be dispersed and hidden (e.g., in vehicles and campgrounds). Traditional count methods can be supplemented by creative identification approaches such as greater collaboration with schools, colleges, other public systems, faith-based organizations, and community service organizations to reach and survey youth. Well-advertised magnet events can also be used to attract youth to specific places to participate in surveys about their housing situation. In addition, when feasible, population-based representative surveys such as those used for the VoYC National Survey can capture a fuller picture of youth homelessness and housing instability.

Youth who experience homelessness, or are at risk for homelessness, need real opportunities to develop skills and careers. The USDA Rural Youth Development Grant program and Rural Community Development Initiative can use the VoYC findings to forge stronger connections to youth experiencing homelessness and support their career development. We recommend that USDA prioritizes a community economic development approach that includes training and sustainable employment opportunities for this population of young people. Additionally, Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act state plans should include targeted approaches for youth experiencing homelessness in rural communities.

Strengthen the rural public health system's ability to address the trauma, substance use, and mental health issues that touch the lives of young people. SAMHSA has resources related to homeless populations overall. However, our findings provide an impetus to tailor those resources to the unique challenges facing youth experiencing homelessness in rural settings. Toolkits—including practical, evidence-based resources and capacity-building materials—for trauma-informed practices with this population would help communities use evidence-based practices across all of their services.

Finding 3. Youth confronting homelessness in rural communities have few services to rely on

There is a stark shortage of programs serving runaway and homeless youth in rural counties. The VoYC provider survey conducted in 22 counties found very few runaway and homeless youth service providers in the small population counties. Half of the six small counties had no programs

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specifically for runaway and homeless youth, and the remaining only had one or two programs.

In general in these counties, broader youth service organizations were the primary service entities for youth experiencing homelessness. None of the small counties indicated any host home or rapid rehousing programs for youth while several medium- and large-sized counties noted at least some instances of these programs. Additionally, the small counties did not report any drop-in centers for youth experiencing homelessness (unlike medium- and large-sized counties), yet these types of services can function as essential access points for youth experiencing homelessness and connect them to a wider array of services.

A lack of services and programs tailored to address youth homelessness shapes young people's struggles with housing instability. In-depth interviews revealed how youth in Walla Walla County faced a community context in which many of the critical supports and resources participants needed were located outside of the town of Walla Walla and, in some cases, outside of the state. Consequently, these youth faced the highest rates of staying in unsheltered places compared to participants in the other four counties (medium/large population; 85% vs. 67%) where we conducted in-depth interviews. For young people in Walla Walla, the contours of their trajectories into housing instability were uniquely shaped by the lack of a robust formal service system and the distance to services.

Implications and Recommendations

Support innovation and rigorous evaluation of tailored housing and service delivery models that serve youth experiencing homelessness in rural communities. The VoYC results demonstrate a significant lack of runaway and homeless youth programs in rural counties. Addressing this service gap requires experimenting with and testing creative approaches that address service gaps in remote and less populous parts of the country. For example, one solution could be to test and expand the use of host home programs. These programs match young people with caring host families, providing additional support to help them find stable housing. Such initiatives may be especially useful in less densely populated areas where youth may otherwise have to travel significant distances to access shelter.

Similarly, scattered site longer-term housing options and rental assistance could provide wider spatial coverage in rural communities than programs that house and support large groups of young people in one building.

Dispersed drop-in centers for youth, roaming youth outreach workers, and navigators could also make accessing homeless services and systems easier for young people in rural areas. Such approaches offer promise for preventing youth homelessness and supporting sustainable exits from homelessness, but federal and philanthropic investments are needed for evaluation to accompany creative experimentation.

School systems can play a leadership role in rural communities, identifying and supporting young people who are experiencing, or at risk for, homelessness. Schools can introduce more robust identification strategies and early warning systems, develop school-based support services, and establish strong links with available community services. School truancy policies should take into account the challenges that young people experiencing homelessness face with respect to school attendance, and focus on supportive rather than punitive approaches to chronic absenteeism.

Cross-agency partnerships are needed to reach youth in rural communities. Because infrastructure built specifically to serve youth experiencing homelessness does not exist in many rural communities, the organizations that do exist—broader youth-serving organizations, faith-based organizations, child welfare systems, schools, colleges, etc.—have an opportunity to work together to weave a robust safety net for these young people.

Finding 4. American Indian and Alaskan Native youth have high rates of homelessness but are not more likely to be found in rural communities

Our national survey found that American Indian and Alaska Native young adults had more than twice the risk of explicit homelessness in the last 12 months as other young adults. During a 12-month period, approximately 9.0% of American Indian or Alaska Native households with 13- to 17-year-olds reported explicit youth homelessness* and 1.6% reported experiences that solely involved couch surfing without a stable living arrangement, or 10.6% overall.

For 18- to 25-year-old American Indian or Alaska native young adults, the 12-month population prevalence estimates were 10.7% for explicitly reported homelessness, 4.6% for couch surfing only, and 15.3% overall.

American Indian and Alaska Native young adults had three times the prevalence rate of explicit homelessness as white, non-Hispanic peers. These rates were somewhat higher than the prevalence rates found among African American or black young people[4] and underscore the substantial vulnerability of American Indian and Alaska Native youth. The findings mirror similar trends related to poverty and other deprivations showing American Indian and Alaska Native populations with some of the worst indicators among racial and ethnic subgroups.[5] Characteristics like low household income, low educational attainment, identifying with more than one race, and parenting status (especially among unmarried youth) were all associated with higher risk for homelessness among American Indian and Alaska Native young adults.

American Indian and Alaska Native youth experiencing homelessness were about as likely as other youth experiencing homelessness to reside in rural counties. Nineteen percent of American Indian and Alaska Native young adults who experienced homelessness resided in rural counties (according to the HUD YHDP criteria) versus 17% of all young adults reporting homelessness.[6]

Figure 4. American Indian and Alaska Native Youth at Greater Risk of Experiencing Homelessness

2.2x

American Indian or Alaskan Native youth

had 2.2 times the risk of reporting homelessness.

Source: VoYC National Survey

While some rural communities around the country certainly have tribal lands with concentrated American Indian or Alaska Native populations, most of the American Indian and Alaska Native young people reside in urban counties. More than three-fourths of American Indian and Alaska Native people in general live outside of tribal areas.[7]

These figures contrast with a common, outdated perception of American Indians or Alaska Natives residing primarily in rural reservations. While in 1930 only 10% of the American Indian population lived in urban areas (compared to over half of all Americans), various social, economic, and policy factors have since contributed to the major urban migration of tribal peoples.[8] Yet, American Indian and Alaska Native young people residing off reservations and in urban areas are much less likely to have access to the small number of federal resources designated for American Indian or Alaska Native peoples, which are mostly available on reservations. The dispersion of American Indian and Alaska Native young people in urban areas also adds to the difficulties of targeting homelessness prevention and response strategies for this high-risk subpopulation of young people.

Implications and Recommendations

Investment in tailored, culturally responsive homelessness prevention strategies and housing resources are critically needed for American Indian and Alaska Native young people. Specific intervention strategies should be devised for both rural reservations, where some American Indian and Alaska Native young people are concentrated, as well as for the large majority of American Indian and Alaska Native young people who are dispersed across urban and suburban communities. Because these youth would comprise small minorities in urban areas, they are likely to be more hidden and overlooked. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), in partnership with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and other relevant federal agencies, can use the VoYC findings to engage the expertise of tribal nations and work together to develop a roadmap for ending homelessness for American Indian and Alaska Native young people. Further, the experiences of American Indian and Alaska Native young people are understudied, and additional research can inform successful intervention strategies.

CONCLUSION

Young people experiencing homelessness in rural communities face a unique set of challenges. The hurdles range from a lack of access to basic youth-centric services and housing options to destabilizing factors at the community level, such as economic transitions and drug epidemics. In spite of these difficulties, young people like Jesse demonstrate resilience and resolve. Jesse's strong desire to improve his situation meant resorting to sleeping on the streets to avoid the substance use triggers he confronted while staying in others' homes. Yet our findings also make clear that young people's resilience needs to be matched by adequate support. This is far from the current reality in rural communities.

Some young people need access to short-term housing during a crisis; others need long-term housing and intensive service options to regain stability. Customizing the design and delivery of such housing models for less densely populated areas spread over broader terrain is critical. It is also important to tailor outreach strategies to better identify and support rural youth whose homelessness experiences can be especially hidden and transient. With fewer formal resources available, helping rural young people build positive connections to caring adults who they can rely on—inside or outside of their families—may be especially important.

Rural areas are especially hard hit by social and economic change. For many of these young people to sustainably exit homelessness, access to evidence-based behavioral health and employment supports that respond to the unique and changing contexts of rural communities must be integrated into service plans. Finally, engaging families early and effectively with economic, parenting, and behavioral health supports could prevent the escalation of difficult situations into homelessness.

Key findings and common themes emerged from this brief that require collective action from all levels of government, from public systems, and from local community leaders and organizations. Together, we can end youth homelessness in America. And we can get there faster by tailoring strategies to specific types of communities and marginalized populations. We owe it to young people like Jesse, and we owe it to our nation's future.

GLOSSARY

Continuum of Care (CoC): A regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals.

Couch surfing: Moving from one temporary living arrangement to another without a secure place to live. While some definitions consider staying with others as homelessness, others place this under a broader concept of "housing instability." We include couch surfing in overall estimates of homelessness but also provide estimates that separate out couch surfing-only experiences where people did not also report "homelessness."

Explicit homelessness: This refers to survey respondents who used the term "homeless" to describe youth experiences. For 13- to 17-year-olds, it also includes reports of having run away from home, or having been kicked out, and staying somewhere else for at least one night.

Homelessness: Generally refers to experiences of sleeping in places not meant for living, staying in shelters, or temporarily staying with others ("couch surfing") while lacking a safe and stable alternative living arrangement. Voices of Youth Count looks at unaccompanied homelessness, meaning the youth is unaccompanied by a parent or guardian while homeless.

Population density: This refers to the population per square mile of a defined geographic area.

Rural county: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, rural counties are those in which at least half of the county's population lives outside of classified urban areas. We use this designation for some national survey results, but in some cases (where indicated) we include a somewhat broader HUD definition of a rural county from the Fiscal Year 2017 Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project.

Small county: We use this designation for the six Youth Count partner counties with the lowest population sizes, which ranged from 15,028 to 119,980. Three of the six partner counties meet the U.S. Census Bureau's criteria for a rural county.

Youth: Varying age ranges are used for youth throughout the world. The most common range internationally is 15-24. We use the age range of 13-25 to align with the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act age range for national estimates, but we refer to two specific subgroups: adolescent minors (ages 13-17) and young adults (18-25).

Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP): This HUD initiative awards funding and technical assistance to communities on a competitive basis to develop and implement coordinated plans to reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness.

ENDNOTES

1. Such as those delivering after-school programs, youth centers, mentoring programs, faith-based programs, and other activities that are not specific to youth homelessness.

2. Because the survey did not interview minors directly, we can only calculate the prevalence of households with 13- to 17-year-olds that reported youth in that age group experiencing homelessness. For young adults, ages 18-25, we have self-reported information and can calculate population-level prevalence, not just household prevalence.

3. Brown, J. D., Goodin, A. J., & Talbert, J. C. (2018). Rural and Appalachian disparities in neonatal abstinence syndrome incidence and access to opioid abuse treatment. *The Journal of Rural Health*, *34*(1), 6-13.

4. See the first VoYC brief, *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America: National Estimates*, for previously reported evidence on the high disproportionality of homelessness among black and multiracial youth.

5. Macartney, S., Bishaw, A., & Fontenot, K. (2013). Poverty rates for selected detailed race and Hispanic groups by state and place: 2007–2011. American Community Survey Briefs. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Available at: https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acsbr11-17.pdf.

6. The difference was not statistically significant.

7. Norris, T., Vines, P.L., & Hoeffel, E.M. (2012). *The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2010*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Available at: https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-cn06.html.

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