

PERCEPTIONS



**Exploring Youth Homelessness Prevention
and Diversion in the United States**

Provided By



True Colors United

True Colors United implements innovative solutions to youth homelessness that focus on the unique experiences of LGBTQ young people.



SILBERMAN CENTER FOR SEXUALITY AND GENDER

The Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College supports groundbreaking research in sexuality and gender; facilitates events and classes that enhance learning related to sexuality and gender for social workers; advocates for gender and sexual equity; and engages with local communities across New York City, as well as communities nationally and internationally, to increase understanding and exploration of sexuality and gender.



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Executive Summary

Recent literature documents the widespread problem of youth homelessness, particularly among marginalized groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ+) youth and youth who are Black, Indigenous & People of Color (BIPOC). Despite agreement by the majority of service provider respondents that poverty and the lack of affordable housing are causally linked to youth homelessness, the most prevalent response to this social problem has been reactive; the focus of policy, funding and service provision has historically been on providing emergency services once a young person is already experiencing homelessness. There is little research about existing efforts to prevent homelessness among youth or to keep youth out of homelessness systems. This report summarizes findings from an exploratory research study that examined youth homelessness prevention and diversion services in the United States.

Young people with lived expertise of housing instability and homelessness were equal and active partners throughout the research process. How we conduct research activities is as important as what we are researching. The research team sought to enact the values documented in the National LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness Research Agenda, (<https://bit.ly/lgbtqrsrch>) including:

1. Center those most marginalized by systems, particularly transgender youth and youth of color.
2. Remember that youth are the experts.
3. Keep a system level perspective.
4. Make data more accessible to drive change.
5. Build infrastructure for youth-led research and advocacy.

The study consisted of two surveys and a series of focus groups. The surveys included a survey of U.S.-based youth homelessness service providers and a survey of young adults with lived expertise of housing instability and/or homelessness. The focus groups included young people with lived expertise of housing instability and/or homelessness. Key findings are summarized on the next page.



Homelessness has to be thought about as an experience where something happens before the experience of homelessness itself and after experiencing homelessness.



- young adult

1 Variability in definitions of homelessness, homelessness prevention and diversion

Current definitions and common understandings of homelessness tend to focus on the absence of a fixed dwelling, but responses by youth and service providers alike revealed a much more complex way of thinking about homelessness with a specific focus on the uncertainty and insecurity

involved in being homeless. Further, there was tremendous variability in the way respondents defined homelessness prevention and diversion, even amongst agencies, leading to different understandings of the issues and correspondingly different solutions to address them.

2 System failure

Both providers and young adult respondents identified a need for a holistic approach; young adults specifically criticized having to go through a shelter experience to get housing, or having to be literally

homeless before receiving services. Providers also identified the need to look upstream to prevent homelessness and collaborate across multiple systems to truly end and prevent youth homelessness.

3 Challenging current/historical thinking about young people and response to homelessness

Young adults and service providers advocate for challenging underlying assumptions that drive programmatic decision-making. For example, despite the fact that youth continuously identified economic causes of their homelessness (lack of income, unaffordable housing), only 56% of agencies offered rental assistance and 26% offered cash assistance. Providers and young adults pointed to the need to address structural inequities in the

homelessness system, including funding decisions that prioritize reacting to events of homelessness instead of preventing them. Both also identified systemic oppression and racism as contributing to youth homelessness. Further, COVID-19 has created additional challenges and had economic impacts for both providers and young adults.

“ In my experience most young people want support but they are at the bottom and looking up is daunting. **There’s a thousand steps between sleeping on a park bench to getting an apartment and it seems unattainable and that’s a system failure.** ”

— young adult



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About the Study

Background

Recent literature documents the widespread problem of youth homelessness, particularly among marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ youth and BIPOC youth. LGBTQ+ youth ages 18 to 25 are 2.2 times more likely to report experiences of homelessness. Black LGBTQ+ youth in particular report experiencing homelessness at twice the rate (16%) of white LGBTQ+ youth (8%) (Morton et al., 2018). Compared to cisgender, heterosexual youth experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness report about twice the likelihood of experiencing discrimination and stigma within the family, discrimination and stigma from outside the family, and instances of violence and victimization (Morton et al., 2018; Shelton et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2015).

The issue of invisibility of populations experiencing homelessness, and especially LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness, is well documented. Researchers do their best to capture accurate representations of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, with varying degrees of success due to widespread discrimination and stigma, inconsistent response rates to research initiatives, and lack of interest in this information in the first place by governing institutions (Norris & Quilty, 2021).

The prevailing response to this social problem has most often been reactive and short-term - the focus of policy, funding and service provision has historically been on providing emergency services once a young person is already experiencing homelessness. Little is known about existing efforts to prevent homelessness among youth or to divert youth from homeless system involvement. The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine youth homelessness prevention and diversion efforts in the United States, including what services are being offered, how service providers understand prevention and diversion, the perceived effectiveness of prevention services, and perceived barriers to offering homelessness prevention services to youth.



Current Study

This study is an important step in understanding youth homelessness prevention and diversion services in the United States, providing perspectives from both service providers and young people with lived expertise of homelessness and housing instability. The research team included three young people with lived expertise of housing instability and homelessness, a senior staff member at True Colors United and a professor and researcher at the Silberman School of Social Work, Hunter College. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Participants at Hunter College

This exploratory study utilized anonymous digital surveys to gather data from 1) service providers who work with youth at risk of homelessness or youth experiencing homelessness and 2) individuals between the ages of 18 - 30 who either experienced homelessness during their youth (defined as ages 18 - 25) or believed themselves to be at risk of homelessness during this time. The research team worked in partnership with True Colors United, a national organization working to end youth homelessness. True Colors United agreed to allow the research team to recruit participants for the study from their organizational contacts and collaborators via email and social media outreach. Inclusion criteria for the service provider survey included: employment in the field of youth homelessness or self reported close contact with youth potentially at risk of homelessness (school staff, child welfare etc.) and access to an electronic device to complete the survey. Young adults needed to be between the ages of 18-30 and have access to an electronic device to complete the survey. Participants must also have self-reported an experience of homelessness (as they define it) or having been at risk of homelessness and have access to an electronic device to complete the survey.

Data collection for both surveys occurred from July 2020 - October 2020, using the Qualtrics platform. First intended to begin in March 2020, the research team



made the decision to postpone data collection due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic progressed, the research team added COVID-19 related questions to both surveys and moved forward with data collection.

Due to low response rates on the young adult survey, the research team determined it was necessary to include an alternative method of data collection to ensure that the experiences of youth and young adults were adequately captured. Therefore, focus groups were added as an additional means of data collection. The inclusion criteria and outreach plan were consistent with those used for the young adult survey.



About the Participants

Young Adults

A total of 41 young people with lived expertise of homelessness and/or housing instability participated in the young adult (YA) survey. At the time of the survey, YA survey respondents resided in 18 states and the District of Columbia. Virginia and California were most represented, with 4 YA respondents from both states. See table 1 for a list of response rates by state. Approximately one-third (32%) of YA survey respondents were Black or African American, nearly one quarter (22%) were white, and 12% were Hispanic/Latinx. Additional race/ethnicity categories represented include

Asian/Asian American, mixed race, Caribbean, Native American/Indigenous, and Middle Eastern. Nearly one quarter (24%) of YA survey respondents are nonbinary; 22% are cisgender women and 10% are transgender men. An additional 50 young people with lived expertise of homelessness or housing instability participated in a total of 7 virtual focus groups conducted via Zoom. 8 young people participated in a convening in which preliminary data from the provider survey was shared, and young people offered their questions, perspectives and feedback on the preliminary data

analysis. Demographic information was not collected during the focus group or YA convening to eliminate barriers to participation and engagement. See figures 1 and 2 for more information about YA survey respondents' race/ethnicity and gender.

TABLE 1

Young Adult Survey Response Rates by State

Arkansas	1	Montana	1	Tennessee	2
California	4	Nevada	1	Texas	2
Florida	3	New Jersey	1	Virginia	4
Illinois	1	New York	3	Washington	2
Indiana	3	North Carolina	1	Washington DC	2
Massachusetts	3	Ohio	3		
Minnesota	1	Oregon	3		

FIGURE 1

Young Adult Demographics: Race/Ethnicity

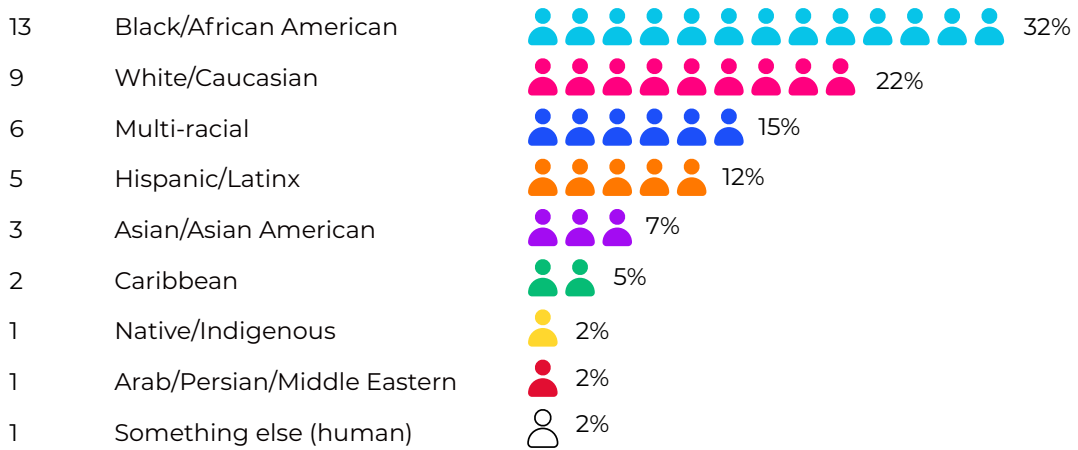
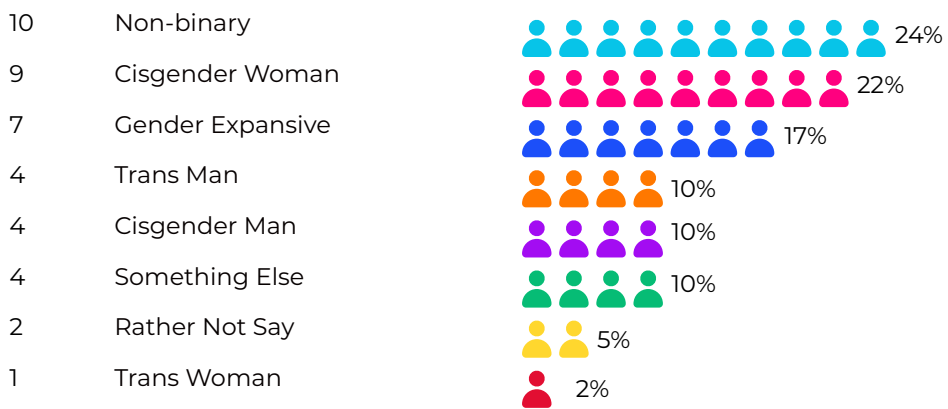


FIGURE 2

Young Adult Demographics: Gender



Service Providers

A total of 274 service providers from 38 states and Washington, D.C. completed the online survey. The state with the largest number of respondents was California (n=39), followed by Nebraska (n=32), New York (n=24), and Texas (n=19). The majority of service provider

respondents reported working in the non-profit sector (91%), with homelessness being the specific focus of their organization’s work (66%). Nearly three-quarters are located in urban areas (69%) and work with all youth (68%), not just youth experiencing homelessness (32%).

TABLE 2

Alabama	3	Maryland	1	Oregon	3
Alaska	2	Michigan	14	Pennsylvania	15
Arizona	5	Minnesota	7	South Dakota	1
California	39	Mississippi	1	Tennessee	4
Colorado	12	Missouri	4	Texas	19
Conneticut	3	Montana	1	Utah	1
Florida	13	Nebraska	32	Virginia	2
Georgia	7	Nevada	1	Washington	12
Idaho	1	New Hampshire	2	Washington DC	4
Illinois	6	New Jersey	4	West Virginia	9
Indiana	3	New Mexico	1	Wisconsin	1
Iowa	1	New York	24	No Response	8
Kentucky	2	Ohio	1		
Maine	4	Oklahoma	1		

FIGURE 3

Geographic Context of Provider Organizations

10%
RURAL

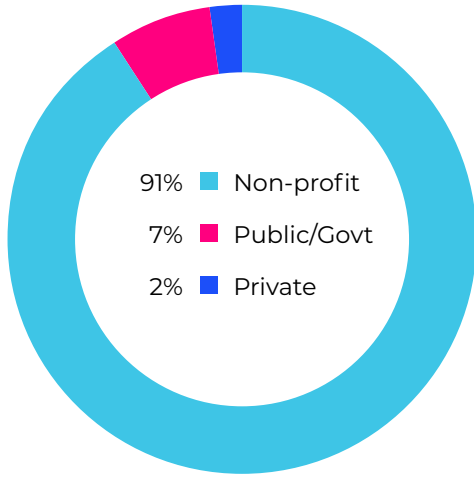
69%
URBAN

13%
SUBURBAN

8%
SOMETHING ELSE

FIGURE 4

Sector Context of Provider Organizations



Services Provided

The organizations represented by the service provider survey respondents provide a range of services for youth considered at risk of or experiencing homelessness. More than three-quarters (78%) of organizations provide case management services and nearly three-quarters provide transportation assistance (72%) and mental health counseling/therapy (71%). Service providers were less likely to report that their organizations provide specific services that are typically considered prevention or diversion strategies, such as rental assistance (56%), hotel vouchers (27%), and cash assistance (26%). Over half (54%) reported providing family reconnection services. See table 3 for a complete list of services provided.

FIGURE 5

Specific Focus Organizations' Work

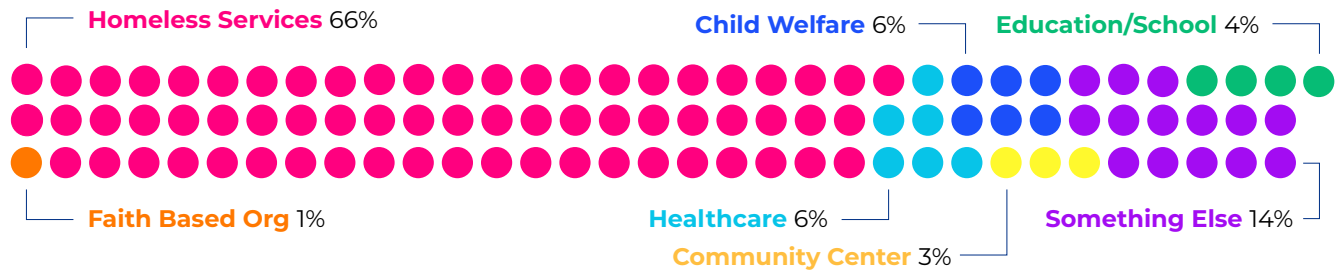


TABLE 3

Services Provided

Cash assistance	26%	Long term crisis shelter (up to 90 days)	39%
Rental assistance	56%	TLP (up to 1 year)	41%
Hotel vouchers	27%	TLP (up to 2 years)	46%
Transportation assistance	72%	Permanent supportive housing	32%
Case management	78%	Rapid rehousing	46%
MH counseling / therapy	71%	Hiring consumers/clients/young people	33%
Healing art therapies	31%	Linking consumers/clients to housing	66%
Family reconnection	54%	Aftercare (up to 6 months)	49%
Parenting support services	49%	Aftercare (up to 1 year)	35%
Short term crisis shelter (up to 30 days)	50%	Aftercare (more than one year)	30%

COVID-19

The research team was prepared to launch the survey in March 2020; however, the launch date was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, the research team added several questions to both surveys regarding the impact of the pandemic. The vast majority of service provider respondents (82%) indicated that the pandemic impacted their ability to support YA in connecting to services,

whether those services were provided directly by the organization or by organizations that they refer YA to for supportive services. Half of the service provider respondents reported an increase in the amount of YA seeking services due to COVID-19, and half also reported that their organizations had to scale back their services due to the pandemic.

FIGURE 7

Has COVID-19 impacted your ability to support young adults?

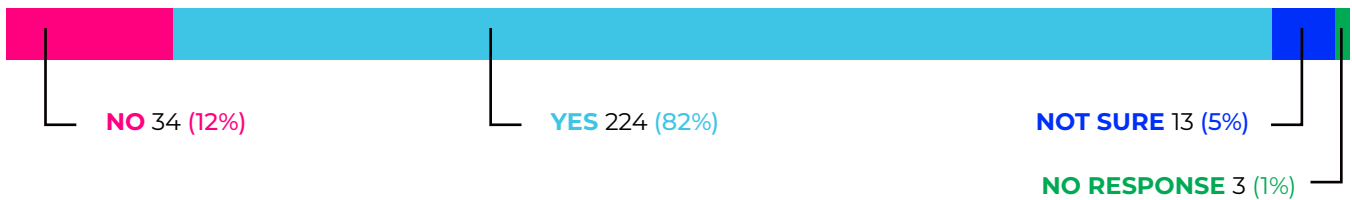


FIGURE 8

Has your organization seen an increase in the amount of young adults seeking services due to COVID-19?

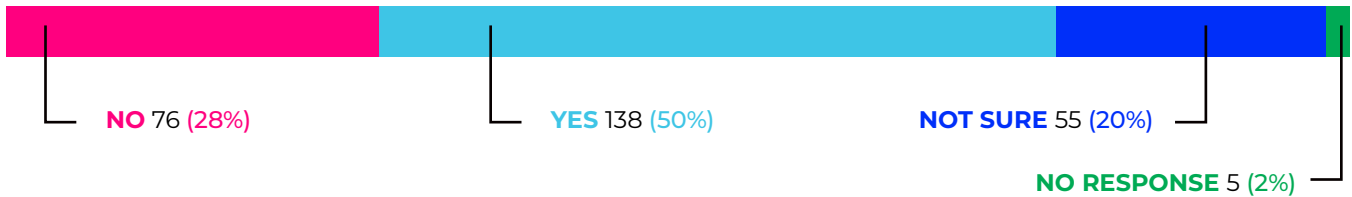
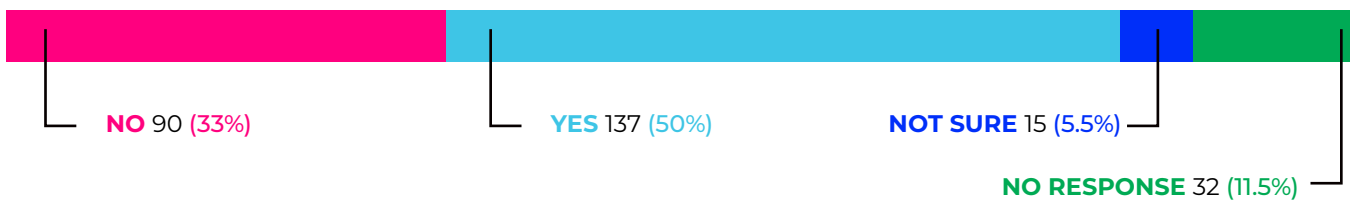


FIGURE 9

Has your organization had to scale back its services due to COVID-19?





“ Some youth programming suffered some structural changes - we had to scale down. We also couldn't open our space for a couple of months, an aspect that impacted services such as laundry, food access, a space to rest/sleep, showers, use of restrooms, among others. ”

— service provider

Of the 105 service providers who elaborated on the ways in which their organizations had to scale back their services, 87% reported modifying their services in some way, while 13% reported having to temporarily close down some aspect of their youth homelessness programming. Some of the modifications reported by service providers included reducing the number of staff on site, reducing the number of YA able to access services, eliminating access to bathrooms and showers, eliminating educational and vocational services, furloughing staff, suspending outreach services, overnight services, and transportation services, and moving all services online. Respondents noted that moving services online resulted in difficulties maintaining contact with young people who did not have consistent access to technology. Multiple organizations had to temporarily close their drop in centers and emergency shelters altogether, some citing staffing issues, funding issues, and COVID-19 guidelines.

Young adults were asked whether or not COVID-19 had affected their housing. The majority of respondents (66%) reported that their housing had been affected by the pandemic. An additional 14.5% said that COVID-19 had not yet affected their housing, but they believed that it would. One-fifth (20%) of YA respondents reported losing their job or being laid off due to the pandemic. An additional 10% had not lost their job or been laid off, but believed that they would be.



No overnight services, no drop in services, no bathrooms / showers / laundry, no onsite services - case management, groups, therapy...



— service provider

FIGURE 10

Have you lost a job or been laid off because of COVID?

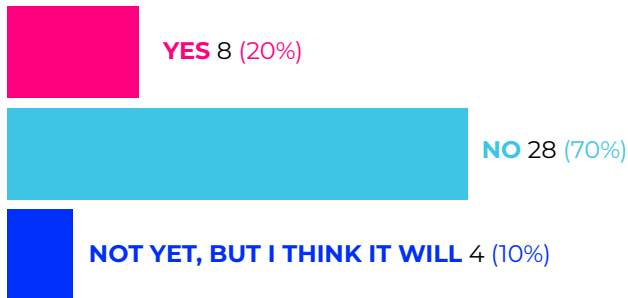
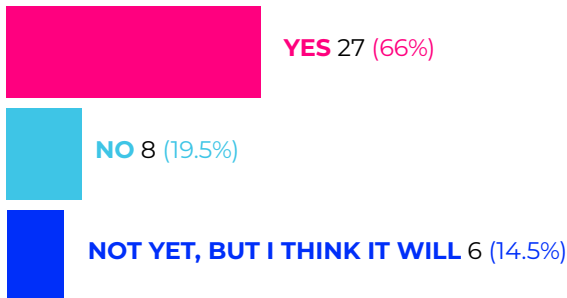


FIGURE 11

Has COVID-19 affected your housing?



Young adults who indicated that COVID-19 affected their housing were provided an opportunity to explain how their housing had been impacted. Of the 27 YA who provided details about the impact of COVID-19 on their housing, nearly half (n=13) made reference to the economic impact of the pandemic. YA reported losing their jobs, a reduction in employment, inability to find a job, and the cost of housing. Additional responses included having to leave a living situation that was not safe, not having a place to live when schools/dormitories shut down, or being forced out of their living situation because someone in the household feared the YA would give them COVID. Multiple YA respondents reported sleeping in their cars for an extended period of time.



Got kicked out of my house because I had to work, and my landlord made me leave because she was worried I'd give my roommate (her daughter) Covid-19.



— young adult



Challenges with COVID include lacking child care as an essential worker. Being a black woman who is feeling the constant frustration of working with people that have the luxury of not giving af or changing to make things equitable.



— young adult



Definitions

Defining Homelessness

“ The definition of homelessness needs to be changed. Homelessness isn't only seen in one particular way, there's a multitude of ways homelessness looks. I had to basically lie and say I was in shelter in order to be provided housing. Even if you had housing previously, you have to be in shelter to be housed again. No youth should go from homelessness to housing and then have to be homeless again in order to be housed again. It's a constant cycle of having to go around and around. ”

— young adult

The adequate assessment of and intervention to address any social problem requires a common understanding of the social problem. In the YA survey and in the YA focus groups, young people were asked to share their definitions of homelessness. While definitions varied, most responses included the notions of uncertainty and insecurity that characterized their daily

experiences, not only their experience of homelessness. A discussion of YA responses follows, including quotations from young people. The findings can help contextualize necessary next steps for systems-based interventions and structural changes meant to address youth homelessness.

Uncertainty and Insecurity

For many YA respondents, homelessness was characterized by conditions of uncertainty, such as not knowing where they will sleep on any given night. YA explained that if a place is not both safe and permanent, it is not considered a home. YA respondents supported the idea that homelessness also exists when there is a threat to housing, and includes “not knowing where you’re going or who will be there” when you get there.

“ Homelessness is when you have to think every day of where you are going to sleep that night. When someone asks you where you live and you don’t know how to answer. Not having a place to go to at any time where you know that you will be safe. ”

—young adult

Several respondents described homelessness as the insecure experience of living outside of any formal shelter. Additionally, several YA respondents specifically noted that temporary shelters are not and should not be considered housing.

“ The idea that when shelters and providers are asked how are they supporting young people into housing and they say by them having access to a shelter bed... but that is not housing .. we have such a focus on getting people into shelters but that has to change, not getting more people into shelters and if people are in shelters getting them housed. ”

—young adult

“ It is losing your sense of security because things can be unpredictable. ”

—young adult



Homelessness is about more than not having a place to sleep. Focus group respondents also noted the importance of having one's own space, having a lease in their name, and having keys, which enables a level of confidence and security, as well as the ability to come

and go. Additionally, to the young adult participants, homelessness means not knowing where your next meal will come from and not having a minimum of financial resources.

“ No place to call your own, open isolation, financial purgatory. ”

— young adult

Defining Homelessness Prevention

“ Homelessness prevention is having somewhere to go when you thought you did not. It is like something falls into place when you thought they were going to fall apart. ”

— young adult

Both homelessness service providers and young people with lived expertise of homelessness named the importance of a holistic approach when discussing homelessness prevention. A holistic approach would include accessible care that addresses the emotional, mental, economic, and health needs of the young

person. Providers and young people also agreed that prevention starts *before the experience of homelessness*, continues through the experience of homelessness to help ensure young people stay housed, and should include follow-up and continued support after the acute experience of homelessness.

“ [Prevention is] support for a youth and who they define as supportive and/or family that prevents a youth becoming homeless or returning to homelessness. ”

— young adult

Young people suggested several additional definitions of homelessness prevention. For example, multiple YA respondents noted that a key component of homelessness prevention involves securing housing *without*

having to go through the experience of homelessness to get it. Both service providers and YA respondents mentioned the requirement of having to be on the street or in a shelter in order to access housing.

“

I asked my case manager how to get supportive housing and they told me I would have to go into shelter in order to get housing.

”

- young adult

“

Youth cannot qualify for most of our housing supports unless they are literally homeless; couch surfing and toxic family environments do not count. The housing system right now is simply not set up to help people with housing stability until they are on the streets, and we lack money, resources, time, staffing, and programming to provide adequate support to people unless they are literally homeless.

”

— service provider

Significant to note is that no responses from young people stipulated means testing in their definition of homelessness prevention. For instance, one focus group respondent criticized the notion that YA have to provide proof that they are at imminent risk of home-

lessness in order to access services. One YA participant explained **“Do you really think someone is gonna run a game on the system when they have other options? It's hard to run the game... why would I go through all that trouble if I have another option?”**

“

Why create a system that creates this hierarchy of need so people have to pimp out their trauma?

”

— young adult

Many service providers and YA respondents also noted that housing insecurity is rooted in structural oppressions, and that effective homelessness prevention must address these structural inequities.

“ Homelessness prevention is advocating for housing as a basic human right...dismantling the institutions that created and work to protect and sustain the inequities that contribute to someone’s increased risk of homelessness. Providing basic services to allow individuals to take the steps that they want to take, if any. Ensuring that all youth have equitable access to all resources such as food, housing, medical care, mental health care, education and employment and uplifting their decisions to access whichever resource feels relevant and important to them at that time.

- service provider

Money and funding are common solutions to preventing homelessness. YA respondents frequently named increased financial assistance and decreased costs of living as most helpful to preventing homelessness. For these resources to be effective at ending homelessness, funding must be intentionally set aside for homelessness prevention, and not just used to fund shelters and other interventions that ultimately serve to perpetuate and prolong the crisis of homelessness. Finally, young people suggest that a shift in public ideology is needed. Whereas poverty has historically been seen as a moral deficiency, and is still thought of in this way by many, YA respondents advocated that we must acknowledge structural reasons leading to youth homelessness, educate public officials, policy makers, and others in positions of power about these structural inequities, and shift our collective focus towards eliminating them.

Prevention Services



The majority (79%) of service provider respondents indicated that their organizations do provide youth homelessness prevention services. When asked about the funding their organizations receive to provide youth homelessness prevention service, the most

common answer (36%) was \$50,000+, followed by 31% of respondents who did not know how much funding their organization receives to provide youth homelessness prevention services.

FIGURE 12

Does your org provide youth homelessness prevention services?

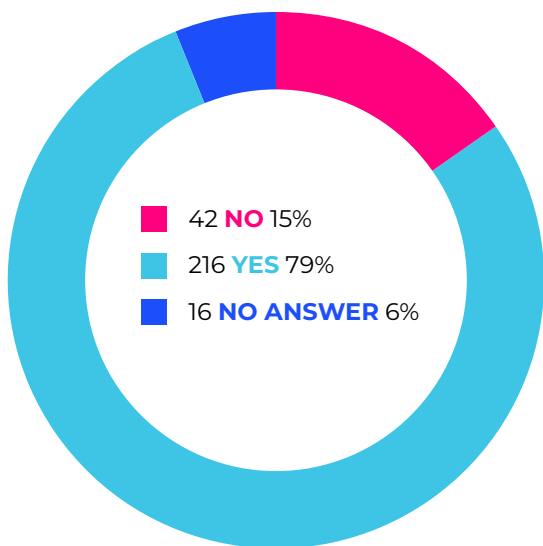
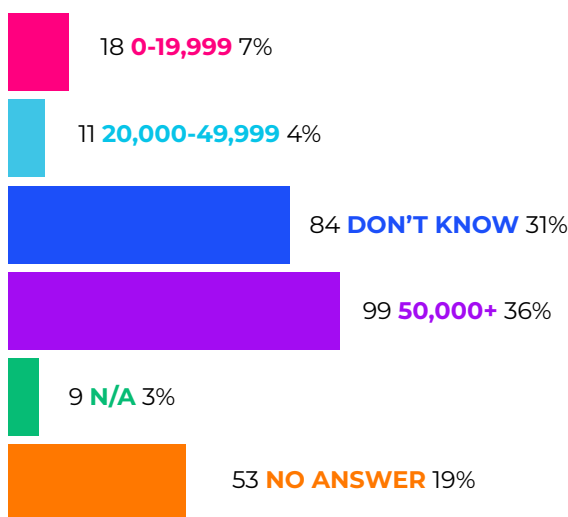


FIGURE 13

Prevention funding



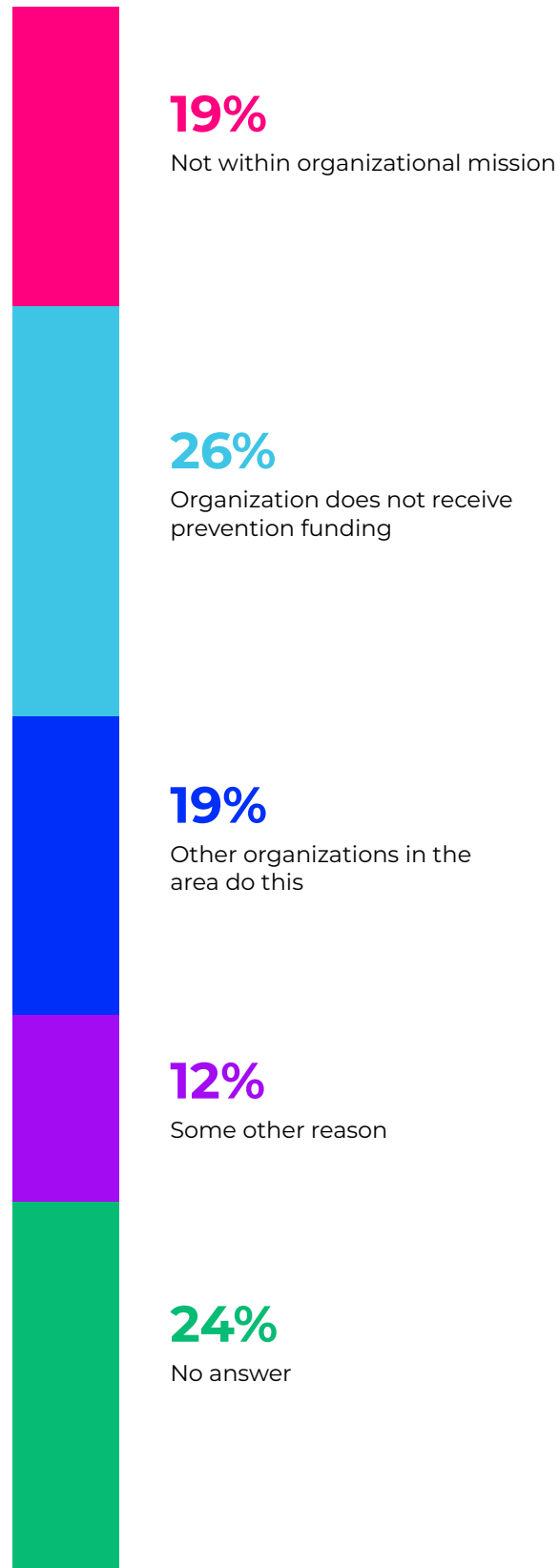
Respondents indicating that their organizations do not provide youth homelessness prevention services were asked to identify the primary reason from a list of options. The most common answer was that their organization does not receive funding to provide pre-

vention services. Additional answers included that providing prevention services is not within the organization's mission and that other organizations in their area provide these services.



FIGURE 14

Reasons for not providing prevention services (n=42)



Organizational Challenges & Shifting Priorities

Service providers were asked about the challenges their organizations face in providing youth homelessness prevention services. The most commonly selected response to a question about the greatest organizational challenge, by almost four-fold, was a lack of funding (37%). The next most commonly selected challenges were a lack of staff (10%) and a scope of programming that does not include prevention services (9%).

Service providers were also asked to document the changes that would need to occur in order for their organizations to prevent youth homelessness. Analysis of this open-ended survey item revealed five common themes, including: funding priorities, cross-sector collaboration, thinking outside of the box, obtaining and utilizing research data, and paying attention to specific populations, such as BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth.

1. FUNDING

The most common response to the question regarding organizational challenges was the need for more funding. Respondents indicated that more funding devoted specifically to prevention services would be a necessary component of their organizations' ability to adequately prevent youth homelessness, rather than funding that is dedicated to providing crisis services once a young person is already experiencing homelessness.

“ We need funding, then staff, preferably only staff that has lived experience and collaborative access to a network of youth affected by homelessness. ”

- service provider

FIGURE 15
Greatest Organizational Challenges



- 37%** 102 Lack of funding
- 10%** 26 Lack of staff
- 9%** 25 A scope of programming that does not include prevention services
- 6%** 17 Inconsistent understanding of what youth homelessness prevention is
- 5%** 14 Difficulty identifying youth at risk of homelessness
- 4%** 10 Some other reason
- 3%** 9 Lack of community support
- 2%** 6 Lack of evidence to support prevention services
- 24%** 65 No response

2. CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Service providers referenced the need for their organizations to work collaboratively in order to adequately prevent youth homelessness. Collaboration is not only necessary for service coordination and identification of young people at risk of homelessness, but is also important for community education and awareness building.

“ We need stronger networks with organizations and services providing direct housing and homelessness prevention. We also need a greater awareness of the housing-industrial complex and urban planning.

- service provider



“ What needs to happen is more collaboration with other shelters, social services, and serious political interest. It will take several agencies and aspects of society to mitigate youth homelessness.

- service provider

3. THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

The willingness to try something new, as well as to challenge existing biases and systemic failings, was noted by multiple service provider respondents. One respondent specifically stated “It would take an effort in thinking outside of the box.” Thinking outside of the box includes shifting the focus more upstream rather than solely focusing on young people that are in the midst of a housing crisis.



“ We would need to dramatically increase our scope. Right now we focus on youth who come to access services, and by that time, most youth are already in crisis. So we can provide minimal prevention assistance. But to TRULY do prevention, it requires a shift of focus/resources to much more up-stream. ”

- service provider

In addition to shifting the focus of services, thinking outside the box includes identifying organizational biases and challenging historical ways of thinking about young people and homelessness. In this way, youth homelessness prevention is about more than providing resources, it is also about challenging underlying assumptions that drive programmatic decision making.



“ [We’d need to be] decolonizing the agency-awareness and understanding of youth we serve as well as changing attitudes and biases against them. ”

- service provider

Thinking outside of the box could also include being open to different interventions, as noted by one service provider: “Be more willing to give members cash, to be able to spend more money on rental assistance and/or deposit.”

4. RESEARCH

Although lack of evidence to support youth homelessness prevention did not emerge as a key organizational challenge, service provider respondents mentioned the need for more research and data when responding to the open-ended question regarding what changes would need to occur within their organizations to prevent youth homelessness. Respondents indicated the need for data about the causes of youth homelessness, information about specific populations, and more research about specific interventions. Multiple respondents emphasized a lack of documentation necessary to prioritize funding for youth homelessness.

“

We could prioritize funding for youth homelessness but currently lack documentation of the need to do so.

”

- service provider

“

We need a deeper understanding of what local factors lead to youth homelessness, what populations are most at risk, and at what point intervention is most successful.

”

- service provider



5. SPECIFIC POPULATIONS

“ Our population comes to us from families that often harm them or force them to leave. A radical shift in acceptance of LGBTQ - TGNC people is needed to keep families together. This is woven into a complex paradigm of racism, violence and poverty that must be addressed holistically, and agencies must hold themselves accountable for participating in it. ”

- service provider

Black young people and LGBTQ+ young people are at increased risk of housing instability and homelessness. Service provider respondents noted the importance of focusing on the needs and experiences of particular groups who experience homelessness at disproportionate rates, due to racism and cis/heterosexism.

Several service provider respondents mentioned the importance of racial equity work, including recognizing homelessness “as the manifestation of race-based oppression.”

Additional service provider comments included:

- We need to think about supporting families differently - specifically Black, Hispanic and Native youth and families
- Center social justice
- Work on furthering our racial justice work within ourselves and agency and community
- More affirming housing options so youth in care have more safe, stable places to go. Our county has six beds total for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness.
- A more candid education for case worker level staff on the risks that queer youth face regarding homelessness and the continued effects of family rejection on disconnected queer youth

YA focus group participants discussed several structural barriers to the successful provision of prevention services. For instance, the issue of funder driven responses to homelessness emerged as a structural barrier in that young people believe that access to certain programs is limited to YA who are “housing ready” that will lead to programmatic “success” as defined by funders.

Young people identified system failures as a barrier/challenge and also discussed services, government, and policies as solutions, stating that the government holds both the responsibility to end homelessness and the risk of contributing to homelessness in their capacity to make policies. If governmental interventions are not examined for the ways in which they may perpetuate racist housing policies, promote neoliberal ideals of “pulling oneself up by their bootstraps” and produce housing instability, their contributions may actually cause additional harm.

“ Most city programs are designed to keep people in poverty. Once you start reaching past certain requirements they won’t help you anymore, so folks are constantly trying to figure out how to keep these services (taking a job off the books). These services need to support folks without the threat of losing the support that’s there. If you lose those resources you’re back to being homeless. ”

— young adult

Young Adults’ Experiences with Homelessness Prevention

The YA survey asked participants to indicate what types of supports they believe would have prevented their experiences of homelessness. First, they were asked to select all of the supports that would have prevented their choices from a list of nine options. YA were also able to write in answers. A follow up question asked participants to select the one support they believed would have most likely prevented their experiences of homelessness. When able to select all, the most commonly chosen responses included more affordable housing and greater income, with nearly three-quarters of respondents selecting these options. Over half of the YA respondents selected mental health supports, and

nearly half selected rental assistance as likely to have prevented their experience of homelessness. Family mediation/counseling and sexual orientation/gender identity supports were selected by approximately 40% of YA respondents. Five YA provided additional supports that were not included on the list. These write-in responses included: better social skills/social support, immigration support, legal assistance, stronger connections with other people, and the youth advisory board.

FIGURE 16

What could have prevented your experience of homelessness? (N=35)

More affordable housing	25	71%
Greater income	24	69%
Mental health supports	19	54%
Rental assistance	17	49%
Family mediation/counseling	15	43%
Sexual orientation/gender identity supports	14	40%
Financial assistance for parents/caregivers	12	34%
School based interventions	11	31%
Substance use support	3	9%

When asked to select one response that would most likely have prevented their experiences of homelessness, greater income was most often selected, followed by more affordable housing.

FIGURE 17

Which ONE would have most likely prevented your experience of homelessness? (N=32)

Greater income	13	41%
More affordable housing	5	16%
Mental health supports	3	9%
Family mediation/counseling	3	9%
Rental assistance	3	9%
Sexual orientation/gender identity supports	2	6%
Financial assistance for parents/caregivers	1	3%
School based interventions	1	3%
Substance use support	1	3%

Notably, in a convening of young people with lived expertise of homelessness assembled to discuss initial data from the service provider survey, family counseling was identified as only serving the adults involved.

YA stated that the young person often has no choice but to attend the counseling, only to return to the experience of homelessness upon completion of the intervention.

“ Family counseling is designed to support the adults in it. It doesn’t center solutions for the young people. Young people might feel that involving their parents is ignoring their wants/needs/without consent from the young person. The young person doesn’t have the ability to decline this service, so it serves the adults, not the young person. ”

— young adult



“Someone Opened up their Heart”

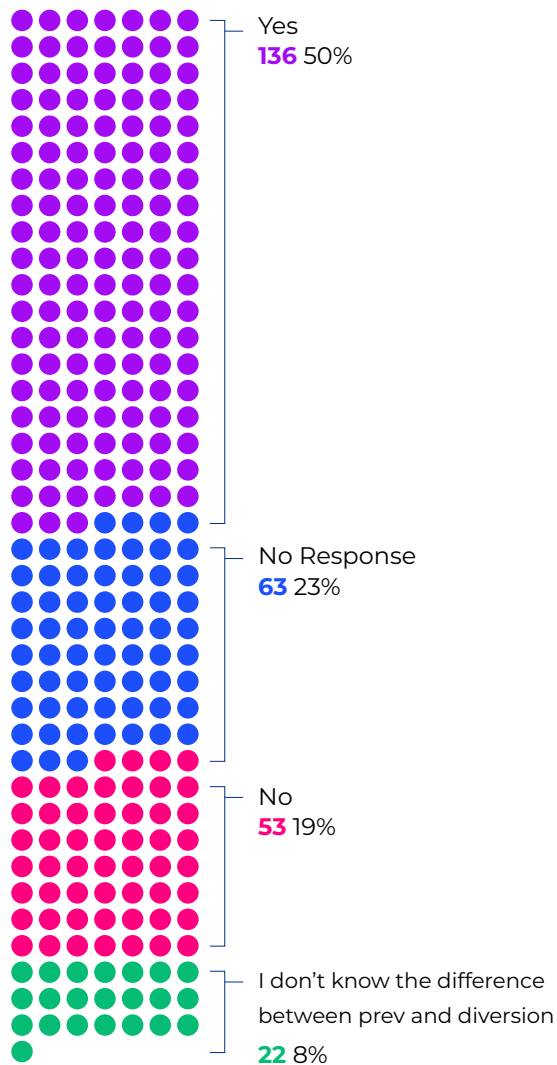
Three-quarters of YA survey respondents reported experiencing a time when they were at imminent risk of homelessness, but were able to remain housed. They were asked to explain what occurred that kept them from an experience of homelessness. Of the 26 YA respondents who answered this follow up question, twelve specifically mentioned friends, community members, or other acquaintances (college professor) as the intervening factor that enabled them to avoid an experience of homelessness. Only two YA made mention of a programmatic intervention. One YA mentioned going from a short term shelter to a family member, then to a transitional living program. Another YA mentioned alternating between couch surfing and shelters as a way to avoid experiencing homelessness.

Diversion



FIGURE 18

Does your organization provide diversion services?



Diversion strategies are meant to prevent people from enduring the stress and trauma that may be associated with accessing an emergency shelter where other housing options can be explored and to ensure shelter beds are used as a resource only when absolutely necessary. Diversion, distinct from Prevention, occurs once an individual has experienced an incidence of homelessness. According to the Institute of Global Homelessness, diversion assists individuals and households in quickly securing temporary or permanent solutions to homelessness outside of the shelter and homeless services system. Diversion services target those who are requesting entry into shelter or housing and have not yet accessed homeless services. In the words of a YA focus group participant: “Homelessness diversion’ works because you can start resources before acute homelessness. For example, if folks have trauma, they are able to navigate away from homelessness without interacting with others with traumas who are accessing supports in group settings that could exacerbate each other’s traumas.”

Half of service provider respondents reported their organizations provide diversion services for youth at risk of homelessness. A small percentage of respondents (8%) indicated that they did not know the difference between prevention and diversion services.

Although many consider diversion as a strategy for preventing people from having to enter into the shelter system, 16 of the service provider respondents who responded to a question about their organization's diversion services specifically mentioned the provision of shelter as one of the diversion strategies offered, indicating some potential confusion between homelessness prevention and diversion strategies.

“

When a youth enters into the homeless services system, we work to explore safe options or quickly re-house them.

”

— service provider

“

We can fund a 1 time rent payment if they currently have a lease and can show us proof with their name on the lease.

”

— service provider

Eighteen service provider respondents mentioned some form of financial assistance when describing their organizations' diversion services. Another common response was the provision of family supports, family counseling and mediation.

Though only half of service provider respondents indicated that their organizations provide diversion services, responses to survey items specific to housing supports, community engagement, and participation in coalitions indicate that organizations are engaged in macro focused and community engaged work towards reducing youth homelessness and housing instability. For instance, nearly half of respondents reported that their organizations actively establish partnerships with landlords to support youth in housing. Nearly 60% of respondents indicated that their organizations partner with local businesses to provide employment/career opportunities for youth. Organizations participate in

community stakeholder meetings and in coalitions working to address youth homelessness at the local (73%), state (57%), and national (41%) levels. Less commonly reported were advocacy efforts around increasing minimum wage (18%) and affordable housing (35%)

FIGURE 19

Organizations & Housing Stability Supports

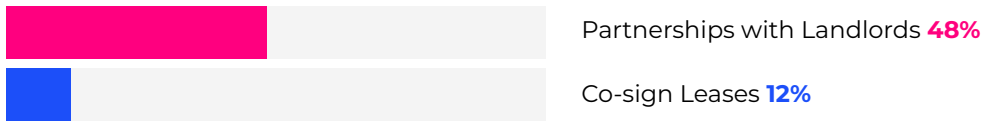


FIGURE 20

Organizations & Community Engagement

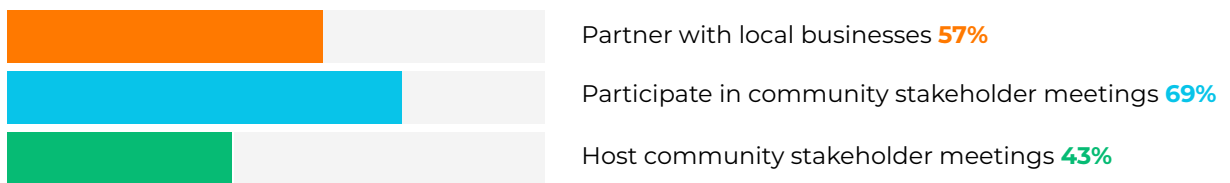


FIGURE 21

Organizations Participating in Coalitions

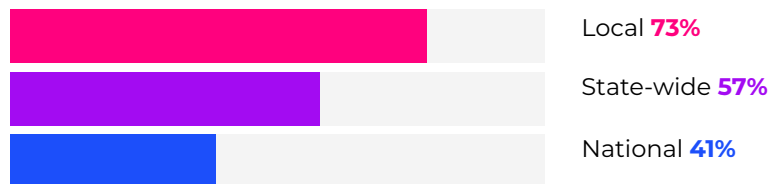
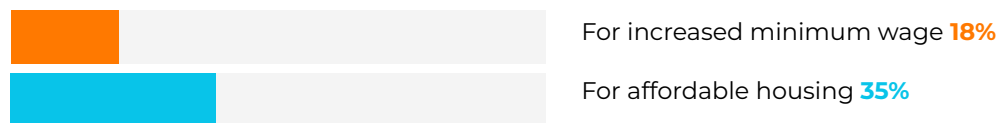


FIGURE 22

Organizations Engaged in Advocacy Efforts



Digging Deeper



To better understand service providers' beliefs about the underlying causes of youth homelessness and, subsequently, their thinking about effective prevention services, the provider survey asked respondents to indicate how much they agree or disagree with statements about a range of topics, including the role of poverty in youth homelessness, affordable housing, and cash assistance; organizational resources; family-based interventions and perceived levels of community awareness. Response options ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree, on a 6-point Likert

scale. The vast majority (78%) of service provider respondents agree that poverty needs to be addressed in order to prevent youth homelessness; 62% of service provider respondents agree that the lack of affordable housing is a primary cause of youth homelessness. Despite these findings, the issue of providing cash assistance to young adults to help them remain housed proved to be somewhat controversial, with not quite half (47%) of service provider respondents indicating agreement with this intervention. See figures 23 & 24 for additional information.

FIGURE 23

In order to prevent youth homelessness, we need to address the issue of poverty.

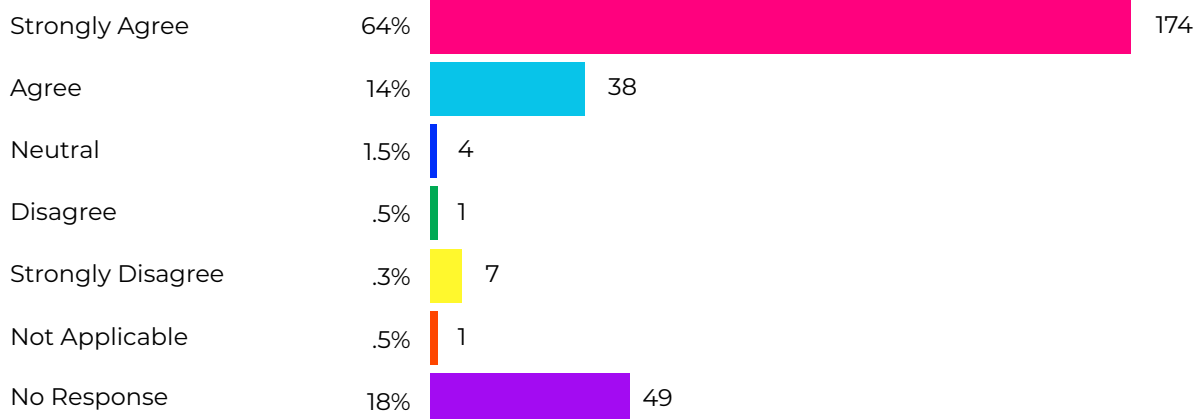


FIGURE 24

The lack of affordable housing is a primary cause of youth homelessness

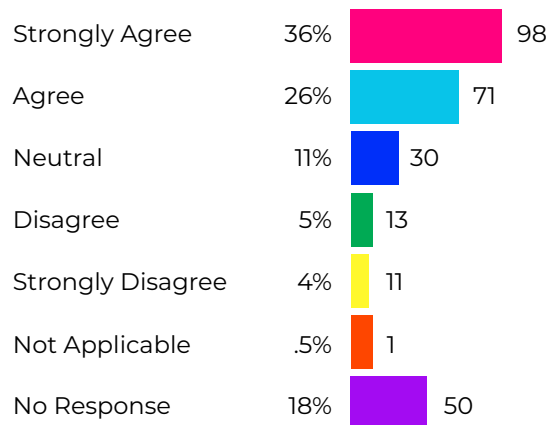


FIGURE 25

Providing cash assistance to youth would help ensure they remain housed

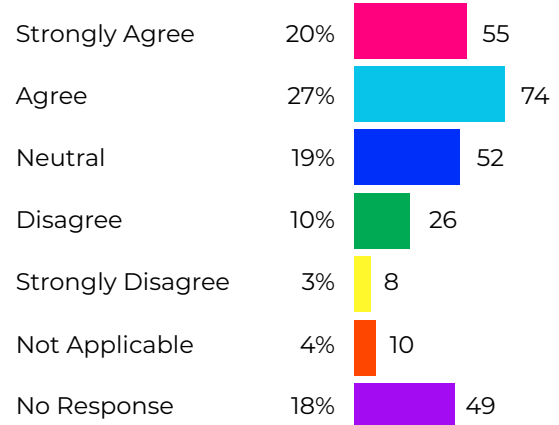


FIGURE 26

Family counseling services would help prevent youth homelessness

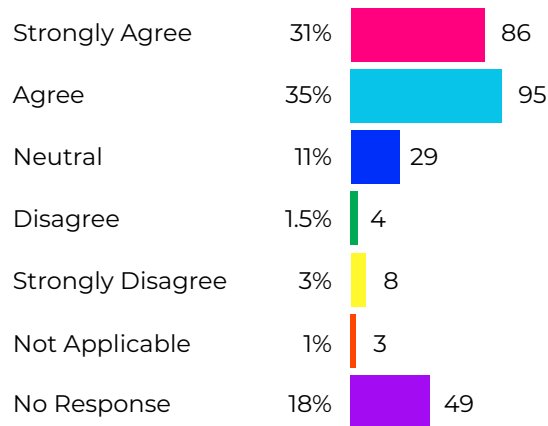


FIGURE 27

Time limited housing programs makes achieving housing stability difficult for youth

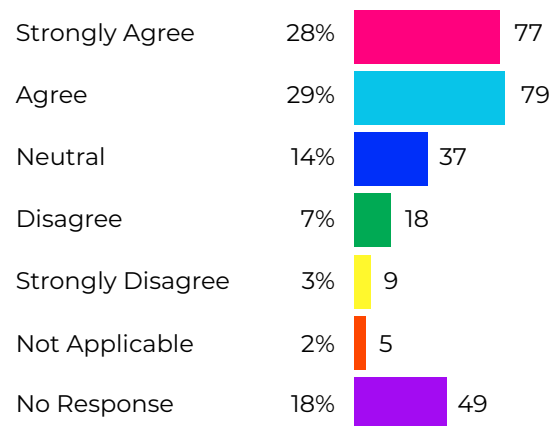


FIGURE 28

Organizational resources are better spent on shelter for youth rather than homelessness prevention for youth

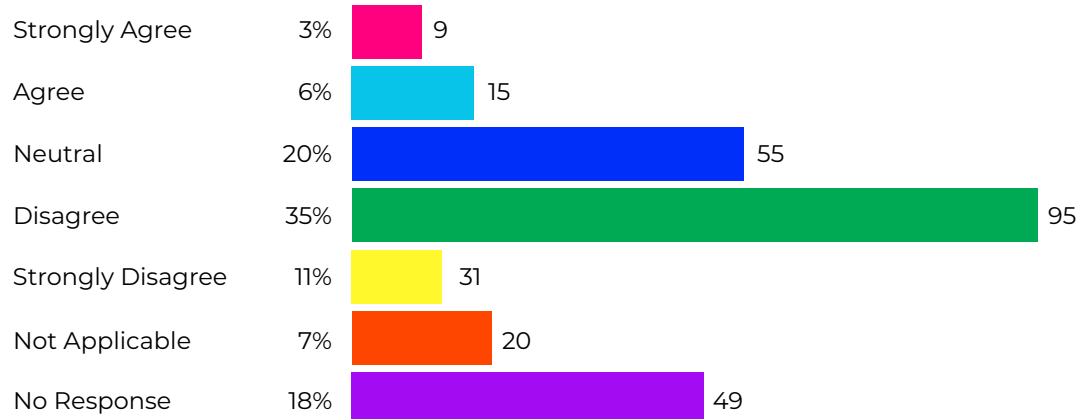


FIGURE 29

The community where I work is aware of and concerned about the issue of youth homelessness

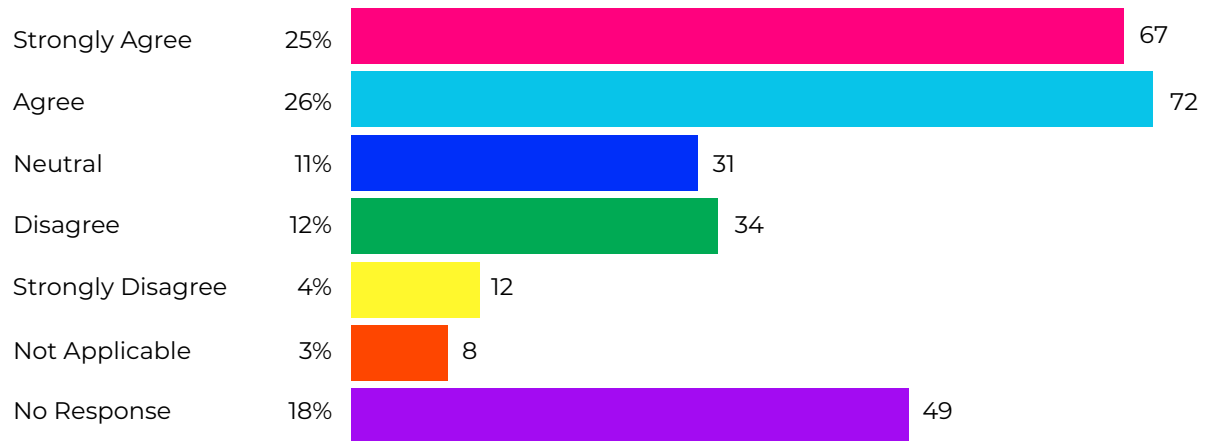
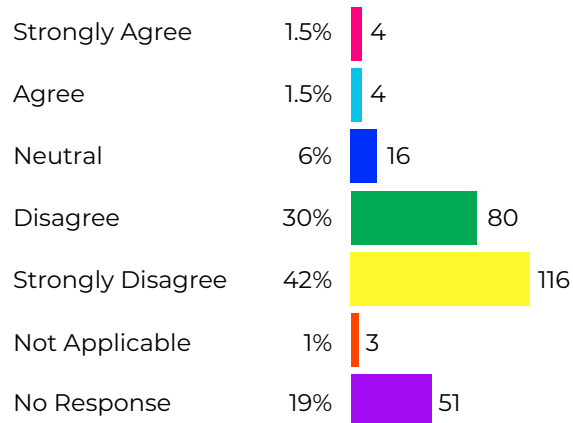


FIGURE 30

There is no way to prevent youth from becoming homeless



Adultism

Important to ending and preventing youth homelessness is naming and interrupting intersecting systems of oppression in this work. In addition to addressing racism and cis/heterosexism in youth homelessness services, adultism must also be interrupted. Adultism is “prejudice toward and discrimination against children and younger adults based on their age.”

“ Accountability and Responsibility. Some youth just want handouts, they are not interested in bettering themselves or their situation. ”

— service provider



Even with the noble intention to prevent youth homelessness, an analysis of responses from the provider survey revealed several adultist sentiments that need to be addressed, indicating a need for all providers of youth services to seriously examine implicit bias and work to interrupt adultism to reduce the risk of further harming an already vulnerable population. For instance, several providers reported that young people need to expand their mindset about success and to focus on bettering themselves. One respondent suggested their organization provide “Adulting 101” workshops for their clients. While they may have positive intentions, the focus on the individual ignores the structural context of prejudice, systematic oppression, and the resulting trauma within which young people are situated.

Youth Action, Youth Power



“

We have to be advocating to get young people in positions of power. I'm Native American, there are limited options for career opportunities for folks on the reservation. Most models are centered on the family support system... but I think we need to figure out how to equip YA to be more self-sufficient, especially when there is no safety net.

”

— young adult



Young people participating in this study frequently discussed power dynamics rooted in white supremacy, cis/heterosexism, and adultism. One significant theme from YA respondents was the importance of YA representation in homelessness prevention work. Often, YA respondents reported, service providers do not share

the racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender identities of YA accessing services. This can be alienating to YA in need of services, especially BIPOC and LGBTQ+ YA. One solution to the inherent distance between YA and homelessness services is to put young people, especially BIPOC and LGBTQ young people, in positions of power.

“

The people who really understand the issue of homelessness are the people who experienced it.

”

— young adult

“

It's really difficult for YA of color to be willing to go into a facility and talk to a white staff about their problems and LGBTQ people to talk to cis het folks. They wanna talk to folks who look like them. This community is mostly black and brown but the staff are mostly white, which is disproportionate and does not create a sense of safety. Folks feel safer with their street family.

”

— young adult

“ I think we need to continue to work on increasing our support for youth leadership and career development internally within our organization. ”

— service provider

Focus group respondents advocated for YA representation in positions of power, and also acknowledged how difficult this work can be. YA must be paid for their expertise and ability to relate to their peers in preven-

tion roles. YA with lived expertise of homelessness are experts on what is needed to prevent homelessness, and they should be valued as such.

“ We need to empower young people who are advocates and in internships and give them accurate pay and emotional care to help support them so they understand how hard it is. Using your lived experience is hard. ”

— young adult

“ Providers think just because we are providing resources we are preventing homelessness. ”

— young adult

Young people also indicated a need for their experiences and needs to be centered in the programmatic offerings of organizations. For instance, when discussing family therapy as a potential strategy for preventing youth homelessness, one young person stated: “assuming that family counseling is a relevant/helpful intervention centers the adults in the situation. The young person should be centered, their experience, wants, and needs prioritized.”

Summary & Recommendations

The findings from this study provide insight into the state of youth homelessness prevention and diversion services from the perspectives of both service providers as well as young people with lived expertise of homelessness and housing instability. While the study did not utilize a representative sample of service providers or young people and the findings are not generalizable to all youth homelessness service providers or young people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, the data reported herein establish a baseline of information that can inform further research, capacity building, policy and programmatic endeavors geared toward the development and implementation of youth homelessness prevention services.

Findings indicate variability and confusion in definitions of homelessness, homelessness prevention, and homelessness diversion. Variability in definitions results in differing strategies for preventing youth homelessness which complicates the development of a comprehensive, cross-system approach to addressing youth homelessness. Clear and agreed upon definitions of youth homelessness prevention and diversion strategies are necessary for the coordination of a national effort to prevent youth homelessness from policy, programmatic, and funding perspectives. This would also enable intervention research necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of youth homelessness prevention and diversion strategies.

Young adult respondents overwhelmingly indicated economic supports (rental assistance, housing vouchers, affordable housing) as necessary to avoid experiences of homelessness. However, few service providers report offering economic interventions for young adults. While providing cash assistance to people living in poverty has been proven to increase positive outcomes, little is known about the ways in which cash assistance can impact the lives of youth ex-

periencing homelessness. A pilot project to address this gap in knowledge is currently underway in New York City. “The Trust Youth Initiative: Direct Cash Transfers to Address Young Adult Homelessness” aims to improve young people’s housing stability and well-being by providing the means to afford the types of housing they choose and the supports to make investments in their own goals, education, and career development (Chapin Hall, 2021).

Young adults emphasized the importance of including young people in the development of solutions to address youth homelessness. Several service providers also acknowledged this as an area for growth within their organizations. Importantly, including young people in this work means more than holding a focus group or providing a suggestion/comment box as ways to solicit their opinions. Organizations addressing youth homelessness must develop authentic partnerships with young people who have lived expertise, compensate them adequately for their work, and be willing to share power with young people. Young adults with lived expertise possess critical knowledge that can contribute to efforts to prevent youth homelessness. When given the space, power, and support to engage in the development of solutions to youth homelessness, young adults with lived expertise have the potential to positively shape our responses to youth homelessness.

From a service provider standpoint, a lack of designated funding was noted as a primary barrier for those organizations that do not provide prevention services for youth. The survey did not inquire about the availability of this funding, nor the efforts service provider agencies have made to attain dedicated prevention funds. This is an area for future investigation.



Reccomendations

1. Trust young people when they say what they need. This may involve examining biases and challenging assumptions about youth experiencing homelessness.
2. Provide meaningful opportunities for young people to engage in the work to address youth homelessness, and compensate them for their expertise. Young adults with lived expertise are making valuable contributions to the movement to end youth homelessness. For inspiration, check out A Way Home America, the National Youth Forum on Homelessness, and the New York Coalition for Homeless Youth.
3. Treat homelessness as a systemic issue. Encourage cross-system collaboration between systems, including housing, employment, education and other supports with a focus on identification of young people at risk of experiencing homelessness and the provision of prevention services.
4. Develop agreed upon definitions of youth homelessness, prevention, and diversion so that programs, policies, and funding mechanisms can be aligned towards the same goals.

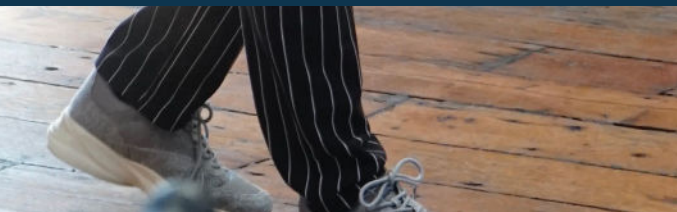


Reccomendations (cont.)

5. Recognize that housing is a human right. Advocate for policies and practices that operate from this perspective.
6. Practice targeted universalism. When the barriers faced by those youth most marginalized by our systems and structures are eliminated, all young people benefit.
7. Advocate for more funding for prevention services. Invest in services that target increasing income for youth, keeping youth housed, and creating more access to affordable housing.
8. Take risks. Just because something once worked or has been widely practiced with limited evidence of its efficacy does not mean it is what we should continue to do. Invest in new ideas and creative solutions.



We need an extensive policy guideline. A new revolutionary, radical way. Stubborn problems require stringent policy.



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