



Developing a Definition of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

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Why is a clear definition important?

- Identify scope of the problem
- Identify key demographic characteristics
- Inform the development of targeted interventions and the identification of strategies to remove barriers to housing/services
- Develop a common language used across sectors serving at-risk and homeless youth
- Target resources effectively

Existing Definitions

■ McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

- lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including sharing housing or living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or campgrounds due to lack of alternative accommodations; living in emergency or transitional shelters; and living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar places.

■ HEARTH Act

- An individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; is living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or is exiting an institution where they temporarily resided. The primary change from existing practice is that people will be considered homeless if they are exiting an institution where they resided for up to 90 days (previously 30 days), and were homeless immediately prior to entering that institution.
- An individual or family who is losing their primary nighttime residence, which may include a motel or hotel or a doubled-up situation, in 14 days (previously seven days) and lacks resources or support networks to remain in housing.
- Unaccompanied youth and families who are homeless under other federal statutes who have experienced a long-term period without living independently in permanent housing, have experienced persistent instability as measured by frequent moves, and can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time due to chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of childhood abuse, the presence of a disability, or multiple barriers to employment.

■ Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

- individuals who are not more than 21 years of age or not more than 18 years of age if seeking shelter in a center, or not less than 16 years of age if seeking services in a transitional living program, and for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative, and who have no other safe alternative living arrangement.

What we know

- **Data is limited**, especially for those under age 18
- 1.7 million children under 18 have a runaway or homeless episode each year - 400,000 remain homeless more than 1 week
- 150,000 youth age 18-24 use adult homeless service system each year
- 60,000 families headed by a young parent age 18-24 use adult family system each year.

- **Heterogeneous group:**
 - Those who chose to leave parental home
 - Those who were asked to leave parental home
 - Street youth engaging in criminal or other dangerous activities
 - Those who aged out of foster care or other state systems

- Most have very brief homeless episodes (estimate: 450,000)
- Others have unstable connections to family/school or limited capacity to live independently without ongoing support (estimate: 29,000 – 43,000)
- A small subset of youth (chronically disconnected, chronically/episodically homeless) require intensive assistance to achieve stability (estimate: 38,000 – 52,000)

Recent MA Efforts

March 2012 - Lt. Governor Tim Murray charged the ICHH Advisory Board with convening a working group on unaccompanied homeless youth to recommend a definition, a counting methodology, and best practices in interventions

March - September 2012 - ICHH Advisory Board working group comprised of 13 providers, advocates, state agency representatives, and youth from across MA developed a recommended definition of unaccompanied homeless youth for adoption statewide

July 2012 - Establishment of *Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth*

October 2012 - Department of Mental Health through its PATH program sponsored a day-long conference on homeless unaccompanied youth, presenting information and discussion on definitions, best practices in service delivery and housing, etc.

ICHH Working Group Proposed Definition

A person 24 years or younger who is not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian and who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

Components of Proposed Definition

1. **Age Range** – trends in developmental research, legal theories, public interest policy, and governmental policy suggest a definition that goes up to and includes age 24.
2. **Status of Connection** – “unaccompanied” refers to the relationship between the youth and his/her parent, legal guardian or the state.
3. **Location** – uses the McKinney-Vento definition. Intended that all 3 criteria (fixed, regular, adequate) must be met for a youth to be considered housed.

Emerging Typology

- When working to end homelessness among a subpopulation it has helped to (1) enumerate the population, (2) establish a typology to assist with scaling resources, and (3) measure progress.
- NAEH introduced a framework for thinking about how to characterize subsets of the heterogeneous unaccompanied youth population:
 - Temporarily disconnected
 - Unstably connected
 - Chronically disconnected
- Focuses on relationship to family or other caring adults and time spent away from those adults

Service Implications

- Little research comparing interventions and none examining how different interventions address needs of different subpopulations.
- However, practical outcomes from RHY providers show that family reunification is an important strategy, particularly for youth under 18 who are temporarily disconnected or unstably connected.
- For chronically disconnected youth who cannot return home transitional living and transitional housing programs serve as a platform from which youth can become independent adults.
- Young adults over 18 who can't return home or aren't interested in returning home can legally establish their own tenancies, and, thus take advantage of rapid rehousing, transitional housing, or supportive housing.

Outstanding Questions

- If using a broad definition, how can a typology help us gain greater specificity about the needs and assets of subpopulations?
- What are the most effective and cost-efficient interventions (services and housing models) for youth with varying backgrounds and circumstances?
- How can public and private funders more effectively target their resources to the youth who could most benefit?



DISCUSSION

Next Steps

- Present proposed definition to Special Commission
- Research promising practices
- Identify value of using a typology in MA



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