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Federal Support for Homeless and Runaway Youth

Since the 1970s, the federal government has funded shelter and services for homeless youth unaccompanied by their parents, including youth who run away from home. This brief discusses these and other federal efforts to support this population.

Goal to End Youth Homelessness

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), established in 1987 as part of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (P.L. 100-77), is made up of representatives from several federal agencies. They include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the U.S. Department of Education (ED). USICH created a plan in 2010 entitled *Opening Doors*, which sets out goals for ending homelessness. One of the goals is to prevent homelessness for families, youth, and children, and end it by 2020.

In 2012, USICH amended *Opening Doors* to outline strategies for preventing and ending youth homelessness, including (1) obtaining more comprehensive information on the scope of youth homelessness; (2) building an evidence base of the most effective interventions for different subsets of youth; and (3) improving access to emergency assistance, housing, and supports for historically underserved groups of youth. In recent years, USICH has issued reports on the scope of youth homelessness, gaps in data and research on the homeless youth population, and how communities can coordinate services.

Numbers of Homeless Youth

Estimates of the number and characteristics of homeless youth depend on how counts take place, and may depend on the capacity of researchers and communities to conduct counts. Estimates also depend on which definitions of *homelessness* are used. Definitions vary among studies of these youth and the federal programs that serve them. For example, some do not count youth as homeless if they are staying with others due to an unstable living situation.

USICH and its federal partners are working with communities to develop better estimates of the number of homeless youth who are not accompanied by their parents or guardians. The primary source of data is from point-in-time (PIT) counts. HUD requires communities receiving funds through its Homeless Assistance Grants, which fund housing and services for homeless persons, to conduct annual PIT counts of people experiencing homelessness. HUD's PIT counts include people living in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and on the street or other places not meant for human habitation. They do not include people who are temporarily living with family or friends. These counts identify homeless youth under age 25 who are (1) not part of a family (*unaccompanied youth*) or (2) parents with their children and are not accompanied by an

adult over age 25 (*parenting youth*). In the 2018 PIT count, communities identified 36,010 unaccompanied youth under age 25 (versus 40,799 in 2017) and another 8,724 under age 25 who were homeless parents (versus 9,434 in 2017).

HUD has funded the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall and its partners to collect data through a project known as *Voices of Youth Count*, to better determine the number of homeless youth. A 2017 report summarizes data from a nationally representative phone survey of adults whose households had individuals ages 13 to 25 and respondents ages 18 to 25. The study estimated that approximately 700,000 youth ages 13 to 17 and 3.5 million young adults ages 18 to 25 experienced homelessness within a 12-month period, meaning they were sleeping in places not meant for living, staying in shelters, or temporarily staying with others while lacking a safe and stable alternative living arrangement. The study also found that youth in rural and urban areas are affected by homelessness at similar levels. In addition, certain youth ages 18 to 25 are at heightened risk of experiencing homelessness, including those who are Hispanic or black; parenting and unmarried; or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).

Housing and Social Supports

HHS administers the Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) program, which was created in 1974 under the Runaway Youth Act (P.L. 93-415). It is made up of three components—the Basic Center Program (BCP), Transitional Living Program (TLP), and Street Outreach Program (SOP). It also funds the National Runaway Safeline, which provides counseling and support to homeless and runaway youth and the adults in their lives.

The BCP provides temporary shelter, counseling, and after-care services to runaway and homeless youth under age 18 and their families each year. BCP grants are allocated directly to community-based organizations for a three-year period. Funding is generally distributed to organizations based on the proportion of the nation's youth under age 18 in the jurisdiction where the organizations are located. The 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico receive a minimum allotment of \$200,000. Territories (currently, American Samoa and Guam) receive a minimum of \$70,000. In FY2017, the program served 23,288 youth, and in FY2018 it funded 280 BCP shelters (the most recent figures available).

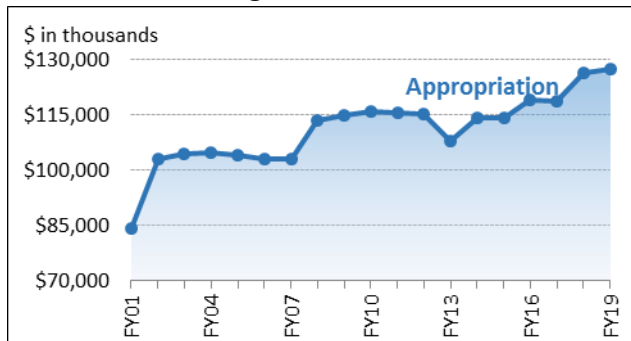
The TLP funds three-year grants to community-based organizations to provide longer-term housing and supportive services—including educational and employment skills, and mental and physical health care—to youth ages 16 to 22 (including pregnant and parenting youth and their children). Youth may remain at TLP sites for up to 18 months, or longer if they are under age 18. In FY2017, the program served 3,517 youth, and in FY2018 it

funded 299 grantees (the most recent figures available). HHS is conducting a study to learn more about the long-term outcomes of 1,250 youth who have used TLP services.

The SOP provides street-based education and outreach to runaway, homeless, and street youth who have been or are at risk of being subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation. The SOP funds community-based organizations to provide crisis intervention, information and referrals, and treatment and counseling in unsheltered locations. As reported in 2016, HHS found through interviews with 656 SOP participants in 11 cities that they were homeless for an average of nearly two years and had substance abuse and mental health disorders and exposure to trauma. In FY2017, the SOP grantees made contact with 24,366 youth.

Other services authorized by the RHY program include a hotline to facilitate communication between service providers, runaway youth, and their families; and technical assistance to grantees. Funding for the program was most recently authorized for FY2019 and FY2020 (P.L. 115-385). **Figure 1** includes funding for FY2001-FY2019.

Figure 1. Appropriations for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program, FY2001-FY2019



Source: CRS, based on data from HHS.

Separately, HUD appropriation laws for FY2016 through FY2019 have included certain directives concerning homeless youth. The laws have directed HUD to set aside funds from the Homeless Assistance Grants appropriation to implement projects that demonstrate how coordination within communities can “dramatically reduce” homelessness for youth through age 24. Grants are to be made available for related technical assistance and “collection, analysis, and reporting of data and performance measures.” In response, HUD awarded \$33 million to 10 communities with FY2016 funds and \$43 million to 11 communities with FY2017 funds. The appropriations laws have also specified that youth through age 24 (including those with children) seeking assistance under the Homeless Assistance Grants are not required to provide third-party documentation to establish their eligibility or to receive services. This language appears to be in response to communities that have reported difficulty determining how youth meet HUD’s definition of homelessness (which varies from the RHY program definition) and what is required in terms of documenting homeless status.

LGBTQ Youth Who Experience Homelessness

In FY2016, HHS began the Transitional Living Program Special Population Demonstration project. The project funded nine grantees over a two-year period that tested

approaches for serving LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth ages 16 to 21 (and young adults who have left foster care after the ages of 18 to 21). Grantees were expected to implement strategies that help youth build protective factors, such as connections with appropriate family members and other caring adults. A process evaluation is to assess how grantees are implementing the demonstration project. HHS also funded a project from FY2012 through FY2014 to build the capacity of TLP grantees in serving LGBTQ youth. Known as the “3/40 Blueprint,” the purpose of the grant was to develop information about serving LGBTQ youth who are homeless, such as identifying innovative intervention strategies, determining culturally appropriate screening and assessment tools, and better understanding the needs of LGBTQ youth served by runaway and homeless youth providers. Separately, HUD and its partners used FY2013 appropriations to provide technical assistance to Cincinnati, OH, and Houston, TX, for identifying strategies to ensure that no young people go homeless because they are LGBTQ.

Educational Supports

The Education for Homeless Children and Youths program was established in 1987 under the McKinney-Vento Act. This program is administered by ED and funds state education agencies (SEAs) to ensure all homeless children and youth have equal access to the same, appropriate education that is provided to other children and youth. Grants made by SEAs to local education agencies (LEAs) under this program must be used to facilitate the enrollment, attendance, transportation to school, and success in school of homeless youth. Funds may be used for services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, health services, and referrals. During school year 2016-2017, more than 1.3 million homeless children and youth were eligible for services (an increase of 6% compared to SY2015-2016). This included more than 118,000 unaccompanied youth. FY2019 funding is \$93.5 million.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) authorizes financial aid and support programs for homeless youth to aspire to, pay for, and graduate from college. For purposes of applying for federal financial aid, a student’s expected family contribution (EFC) is the amount that can be expected to be contributed by a student and the student’s family toward his or her cost of education. Certain groups of students are considered “independent,” meaning that only the income and assets of the student (and not parents or guardians) are counted. This includes youth under age 24 who have been verified by certain education officials or social service providers during the school year as either (1) unaccompanied and homeless or (2) unaccompanied, self-supporting, and at risk of homelessness. The HEA also authorizes the TRIO programs, which are designed to identify potential postsecondary students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including homeless youth, to prepare them for higher education; provide certain support services to them while they are in college; and train individuals who provide these services. FY2019 appropriations for TRIO programs are \$1.1 billion.

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