

YOUTH HOMELESS COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS



Youth experiencing homelessness are too often mischaracterized, miscounted, and misunderstood. Youth homelessness differs greatly from that of other populations in terms of its causes and consequences. Therefore, in order to appropriately and effectively combat the issue of youth homelessness, we must first refute three primary misconceptions.

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MISCONCEPTION 1:

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS LOOKS THE SAME AS ADULT HOMELESSNESS

Causes of Youth Homelessness:

Youth come to experience homelessness through a variety of pathways that cause major disruption in their lives. While the general public incorrectly attributes youth homelessness to substance abuse and mental health issues, in reality, the vast majority of youth experiencing homelessness attribute their homelessness to one factor in particular—family disruption. Family disruption can include instances such as being rejected or kicked out by family for coming out as LGBTQ+, engaging with or exiting the foster care system, becoming pregnant or parenting, and undergoing family homelessness early in life. Importantly, these triggers of instability are no fault of the youth involved and could potentially be avoided if they had safe, supportive, and stable homes/families to return to.

Experience of Youth Homelessness:

The vast majority of youth experiencing homelessness are invisible to the general public. During the course of one week, many youth experiencing homelessness cycle through several different types of housing/sleeping arrangements (e.g., couch surfing, shelters, and streets). These temporary accommodations are unfortunately extremely unstable, likely to break down due to overcrowding, tension, and/or fear of the head of household losing their accommodations. Too often youth experiencing homelessness who attempt to seek out the services they need are met by a system that is designed for their adult counterparts instead of a system that understands the transient youth experience and meets the individual where they are in their current life trajectory.



MISCONCEPTION 2:

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IS NOT A COMMON OR SERIOUS ISSUE

Defining and Counting Youth Homelessness:

While the U.S. Department of Education recognizes all forms of homelessness that youth might experience, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) takes a much narrower/limited approach. For this reason, official estimates of the number of youth experiencing homelessness are dramatically underestimated. This can lead to a vast disparity in youth-specific funding and youth access to resources, forcing homeless services to turn away young people on a daily basis.

Youth Homelessness Estimates:

Because the government does not count, and the public does not see, youth who are homeless, there is a common perception that youth homelessness is a small-in-scope problem. However, one in 10 youth ages 18-25 and one in 30 youth ages 13-17 experience some form of homelessness. This shocking figure only worsens when one considers marginalized identities such as young parents, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and BIPOC, as well as those who have interacted with foster care, mental health, and juvenile justice institutions. Youth homelessness is an extremely serious national issue and resources must be allocated accordingly.



MISCONCEPTION 3:

YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS ARE DEFINED SOLELY BY THEIR HOMELESS EXPERIENCE

More Than Their Homelessness:

The homelessness that these individuals experience throughout their youth, as well as the trauma that brought them there, does not and will not define them. Youth that experience homelessness are resilient, unique, self-motivated, caring, and hopeful. Youth experiencing homelessness have passions, talents, and dreams that motivate them to work towards the life of stability that has been ripped away from them. They are simply “[t]eens struggling with the issues of life.” The combination of their inspirational intrinsic motivation and the support of local non-profit organizations such as the Night Ministry, Ignite, and La Casa Norte, allow youth to find and/or build the homes and communities of their dreams.

Youth Speaking Up and Giving Back:

Many youth who have experienced homelessness seek out opportunities to use their time, stories, and voices to give back to the communities that helped them along their journeys. They take the initiative to support the programs that supported them during their times of need and make an impact on the next generation of youth who are forced to overcome similar challenges. They use their voices, stories, and experiences to make a positive impact on the world around them and push society forward towards an end to youth homelessness.

Now that we better understand the intricacies of youth homelessness, we must move to action. These youth need you help! How will you get involved, make a difference, and leave an impact? Visit [Insert our website] for more information and suggestions on how to get involved.