

YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS ARE AT GREATER RISK DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

WHY ARE YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS (YEH) AT INCREASED RISK?

Even before COVID-19, California was fighting a battle to combat homelessness. Among the hundreds of thousands experiencing homelessness in California, unaccompanied, unsheltered, and parenting youth, ages 12-24, have the highest risk for a lifetime of pain, trauma, and chronic instability. Research points to increased mortality among YEH and for children in families experiencing homelessness, and a public health emergency such as COVID-19 exacerbates this threat. Particularly in times of crisis, minors and youth will continue to experience housing instability because they are kicked out or need to escape family violence or dysfunction.¹

PRIORITIES DURING PANDEMIC:

- Access to basic needs: food, clothing, etc.
- Access to PPE and sanitation items
- Hotel/Motel stays
- Rental assistance
- Access to technology to continue with educational and mental health supports and connecting with friends and family

The nature of homelessness and housing instability condemns youth to circumstances that increase exposure and complicate attempts to contain the virus:



Unsheltered youth are at higher risk than their sheltered peers for contracting the virus. Youth Experiencing Homelessness (YEH) cannot reduce contact with others when they are in encampments, on the street, or in large congregate shelters. Those who are unstably housed are under conditions where they cannot physically distance, such as when trading sex for a place to stay or for other basic needs.¹



Youth are more medically vulnerable than their stably housed peers. They are more likely to have chronic illnesses such as asthma and other confounding medical issues. Additionally, LGBTQ youth are disproportionately HIV infected and are more vulnerable to this virus.¹



Youth change their sleeping arrangements regularly and are forced to come into contact with more people, more frequently, particularly when they are in areas without dedicated youth shelters.



Youth are more likely to “couch-surf” which increases the number of contacts and the number of households they come into contact with. Additionally, some “hosts” that provided safe shelter for youth may be economically impacted by the pandemic and no longer be able to offer such relief during this time.¹



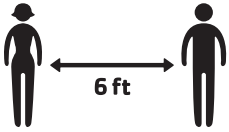
Shelters are not safe places for youth for many reasons, and risk is exacerbated by close contact in shelters during a pandemic. If shelters are available in their areas, most, if not all, are designed to serve individual adults and services are not tailored to meet the unique developmental needs of youth.



Programs and services that are designed for youth face challenges to remaining open and operational due to strain on capacity, and providers need additional resources to continue providing services safely in this new environment.



Many young people that are still working are essential workers and are very concerned about infecting their family or hosts. They are taking measures such as sleeping in a tent in the backyard or other measures displacing them entirely to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their household.



Young people feel much more isolated due to a lack of in-person contact with others and are unsure of what services are available during this time. These circumstances add stress to an already disconnected population and put up barriers to the social connections and mental wellbeing needed to maintain their path to stability.



A recent survey conducted by the Bill Wilson Center found that two-thirds of the 208 young people surveyed do not have employment and are concerned they do not have enough money to meet their basic needs.



Youth lack access to sanitation and personal protective equipment that protect individuals who are unable to practice physical distancing or self-isolate.¹

The economic and educational fallout of COVID-19, like the 2008 recession, will disproportionately impact young people. In 2008, the unemployment rate for young people between 16-24 was two times higher than the average unemployment rate. Early unemployment rates as a result of COVID-19 are starting to show similar trends; youth and young people of color are disproportionately suffering and losing their jobs.^{2,3}

WHAT CAN WE DO TO KEEP YOUTH SAFE?

The safety and stability of YEH must be a statewide priority not only during a pandemic, but as the state comes out of the current shelter in place orders. Youth have unique needs and need unique solutions to end their homeless experiences. Specialized services and supports, including housing, access to basic needs, diversion support, and mental and emotional health are critical components to provide safety and stability.

Ear-mark at least 20% of any funds available to address homelessness at the State and local levels for youth-focused services. Experts agree that youth needs differ from those of chronically homeless adults, and interventions designed to assist adults do not work for youth. To utilize resources most effectively, youth should be targeted separately to divert their trajectories from chronic homelessness to long-term self-sufficiency.

¹ Auerswald, C. (April 2020) For the Good of Us All: Addressing the Needs of Our Unhoused Neighbors During the COVID-19 Pandemic. UC Berkeley School of Public Health.

² Belfield, C.R., Levin, H.M., Rosen, R. (Jan 2012) The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth. Corporation for National and Community Service. Retrieved from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED528650>

³ State of California Employment Development Department - Labor Market Information Division (April 17, 2020) Unemployment Rate by Age Groups. Retrieved from: <https://data.edd.ca.gov/Labor-Force-and-Unemployment-Rates/Unemployment-Rate-by-Age-Groups/bcij-5wym>

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