

# Who are the Youth Experiencing Homelessness?



*Oregon Alliance members are a dynamic group of community-based organizations providing many services to serve children, youth, and families at various stages of their lives. Every child and youth's experiences are different, but here are fictional, broad brush strokes, statistics, and recommendations for how to serve some youth populations.*



Kendra is a 6-year-old Black girl who lives with her mom in their apartment in North Portland. Her mother lost her job recently and couldn't afford the rent anymore. They are now in a homeless shelter, using its programs and services to help get Kendra's Mom back on her feet.

- According to [America's Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness](#), a report released by the

National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research, the typical family experiencing [homelessness](#), consists of an African-American mother under the age of 27 with two small children.

- 51% of children who experience homelessness are under the age of six. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, and other types of interpersonal violence are widespread among this group of mothers; 90% have experienced severe trauma.
- "We know from the Adverse Childhood Experiences study that childhood trauma has lifelong negative effects on physical and mental health," said Dr. Bassuk, main author of the report. "These children are typically facing multiple adverse events before they even enter school".

**PRIORITIES: Family Preservation, Safe and Stable Housing, Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), Services for the Mother Addressing Trauma and Possible Substance Use**

**YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IS THE [NUMBER ONE](#) PREDICTOR OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS IN ADULTHOOD.**

## Definitions Matter

These examples of homeless youth have different circumstances and need very different interventions. The traumatic experiences faced by youth experiencing homelessness are vast and require coordination across the education, child welfare, juvenile justice, health and human services systems. But, even homelessness itself is defined in a number of different ways by those systems.

The definition of homeless youth varies across state and federal agencies and leading national organizations. For example, the National Alliance to End Homeless defines homeless youth as unaccompanied individuals ages 12 to 24, while the National Coalition for the Homeless defines homeless youth as individuals under the age of 18. The Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) defines homeless youth as individuals under the age of 18 or between the ages of 16-22, depending on youth's program participation.

Researchers also categorize homeless youth into typologies, which itself fosters debate. Typologies include: runaways, throwaways, street youth, systems youth, transient but connected, high risk and low risk. These terms reflect the diversity of experiences and backgrounds among homeless youth, who often do not fit into a single category.

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Bobby is a 15-year-old who identifies as queer. They ran away from home two years ago because of physical violence at school and alcohol use by his dad at home. They have been living on the streets of Eugene or 'couch surfing' with friends.

- Youth who run away or are homeless for a [range of reasons](#), but involvement in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems, abuse, neglect,

abandonment, and severe family conflict have all been found to cause youth becoming homeless. These youth, between the ages of 12-17, are extremely vulnerable to a range of negative experiences including exploitation and victimization.

- Current studies suggest that LGBTQ+ youth are significantly overrepresented in homeless populations, with a [recent study](#) finding that LGBTQ+ young adults experience homelessness at more than twice the rate of their peers.
- As many as 50% of homeless youth struggle with mental health or drug addiction issues. Major depression is the most common mental illness, and it's not uncommon for a homeless young person to cope with substance abuse at the same time, [according to PEW Charitable Trusts](#).
- The lack of a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) [is the number one correlate](#) for elevated risk of youth homelessness.

**PRIORITIES: Timely and Direct Interventions, Supportive Shelter and Permanent/Flexible Housing, Mental Health Services, GED Certification, Life Skills Coaching and Peer Support, Family Reunification if Appropriate.**



Maria is a 19-year-old Latina who has been in foster care since she was sixteen. She just exited the foster care system and her foster parents are taking in someone else. She is worried she won't be able to still afford her classes at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, where she's working to get her Associates degree. She's currently sleeping in her car since she can't afford an apartment, tuition, and food.

- According to an article published in [the American Journal of Public Health](#), "between 11% and 36% of the youths who age out of foster care become homeless during the transition to adulthood," and up to 46 percent had experienced at least one episode of homelessness by age 26.
- One of the biggest obstacles faced by those aging out of the foster care system is the ability to support themselves financially. According to [Children's Rights](#), in a study spanning multiple states, it was found that up to 47% of children who were in foster care are currently unemployed and 71% make less than \$25,000 per year.
- According to the [Children's Home Society of Minnesota Social Services](#) the estimated number of unplanned pregnancies experienced by those who age out of the foster care system is incredibly high, "approximately 7 in 10 girls who age out will become pregnant before age 21."

**PRIORITIES: Foster Care Reform, Improved System Navigation + Resources for Aging Out of Foster Care, Peer Support, Job Opportunities, Mental Health Services, Enhanced Independent Living Program (ILP)**