

Cross-System Touches: Youth Homelessness & System Involvement

Authored by the Coalition for Juvenile Justice

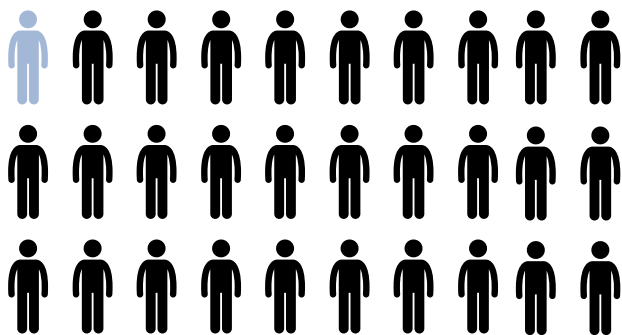
The McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines youth homelessness as youths who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those who:

- Share the housing of others due to loss of housing or economic hardship,
- Live in motels, hotels, or camping groups due to lack of adequate accommodations,
- Live in emergency or transitional shelters,
- Have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for regular sleeping, or
- Are migratory children ¹

Youth homelessness can both result from and contribute to involvement in the juvenile justice system. Youth involved in the system are particularly vulnerable to housing insecurity upon their release. Meanwhile, youth experiencing homelessness are highly likely to be criminalized due to laws governing public space, such as juvenile curfews or anti-sleeping ordinances.



Approximately one in 10 youth ages 18 to 25
will experience homelessness each year.



Approximately one in 30 youth ages 13 to 17 will
experience homelessness each year. ²

The bidirectional relationship between youth homelessness and juvenile justice involvement (or other youth-serving systems like child welfare) requires a collaborative, multi-system approach. Young people must have access to diversion programs tailored to the needs of homeless youth and access to support for securing safe and stable housing when they transition out of the legal system. ³

This brief will outline model programs and federal funding streams that address this unique crossover between youth homelessness and justice system involvement.



Model Programs

Housing Stability for Youth in Courts (H-SYNC)



What:

Developed by the University of Washington CoLab, Housing Stability for Youth in Courts (H-SYNC) is a state-wide partnership between juvenile justice courts and local service providers across six counties in Washington. Designed to be a preventative tool for youth homelessness, H-SYNC identifies youth at risk within the juvenile court system and refers to them and their families to prevention, intervention, and housing services using a stepped-care model that directs resources where they are needed most.

Who:

H-SYNC serves youth between the ages of 12 and 17.5 years old (at intake).

How:

Youth are typically referred to H-SYNC by a Juvenile Probation Counselor. The youth and their family then complete a Triage Tool, which determines risk and need level. Once the resources are determined and the connection is made, an H-SYNC Navigator continues to follow up during a 3-month period to ensure that the youth and their family's needs are met.⁴

The model is designed to be scalable and adaptable, with referrals tiered based on need to ensure resources are focused where they are most needed. H-SYNC also maximizes existing community resources through service mapping.⁵

Impact:

HYSYNC has supported nearly 300 youth and families in six counties throughout Washington.

Risk/Needs Levels and Associated Services

Risk and need levels identified by the housing stability coordinator via the housing stability assessment are broken down into no risk, low risk, moderate risk, high risk, and currently unhoused. See below for associated services for each risk/need level.

No Risk	Low Risk	Moderate Risk	High Risk	Currently Unhoused
*Close case	*Telehealth support services *Phone consultations *Parent coaching	*Selective preventative programs (e.g. Strengthening Families, Guiding Good Choices)	*In home interventions, (e.g. Family Functional Therapy, Multidisciplinary Wraparound Teams)	*McKinney Vento services *Foster care services *Coordinated care through local shelter agencies *Civil legal services

Source: Progress Report: Housing Stability for Youth in Courts (H-SYNC)



What:

Launched in 2023 by the Young Women’s Freedom center, Beloved Village is a California, community-based housing solution for women, girls, and trans people of all genders who have experienced violence, incarceration, poverty, and homelessness. Beloved Youth is an initiative of Beloved Village that involves collaborating with girls and trans youth who are involved or at risk of being involved in the juvenile legal system and their families due to difficulty securing housing. The program aims to:

- Build a continuum of care and support outside of existing systems;
- Provide resources to young people, their families, and the community; and
- Ensure existing system-based solutions support the self-determination of young people and their families.

After three years in the Beloved Youth program, participants are anticipated to experience:

- Long-term safe and stable housing;
- Fewer placements on their journey to finding a permanent home;
- Improved economic mobility and financial stability;
- Less to no involvement in the juvenile justice or foster care systems;
- Stronger relationship with family;
- Expanded community support; and
- Improved health and wellbeing.⁶

Who:

Girls and transgender youth

How:

Beloved assists with placement planning and collaborates with youth to identify potential housing options. The program is a 3-year commitment for both youth participants and their caregivers. Over the three years, Beloved staff provide participants with a variety of resources that address poverty, housing instability, and other drivers of systems-involvement, including:

- Coaching for both the young person and caregiver;
- Court advocacy;
- Systems navigation;
- Family funding;
- Monthly youth stipends;
- Financial literacy;
- Education and employment coaching;
- Referrals to mental health care.⁷

Impact:

- Sixty-three young people have been serviced by Beloved Youth and about half as many caregivers, with 51 youth currently enrolled as of July 2025.
- Four young people who previously would have been incarcerated in California’s prison system have successfully transitioned out of the Secure Youth Treatment Program.
- Over \$5 million has been raised to support expansion across four counties.⁸

What:

Lighthouse Youth & Family Services is an Ohio-based non-profit organization that provides a wide range of services to help young people and families grow and heal.

Services include but are not limited to:

- Safe shelter for youth aged 10-17;
- Outpatient mental health services;
- Residential treatment for youth aged 11-18 with serious emotional and behavioral problems combined with other needs;
- Shelter, housing, case management, and other services supporting young adults aged 18-24 as they work to achieve self-sufficiency, safety, and success;
- Foster care and adoption; and
- Psychiatric care, including medication management.

Lighthouse also provides community juvenile justice services in Hamilton County, Montgomery County, and Ross County that aim to improve outcomes for youth involved in the justice system.

Who:

Youth aged 13-22 with juvenile justice system involvement

How:

Services provided through this program are designed to address root causes and reduce the possibility of reoffending by delivering individualized supports that are holistic, trauma-informed, and strength-based.

Specific services vary by county and include:

- Alternative placement treatment– an intensive program for youth who are being considered for out of home placement in juvenile residential facilities;
- Functional Family Therapy– an in-home family intervention for the families of youth who experience delinquency, emotional or behavior disorders, or substance abuse, typically lasting three to five months;
- Individualized Docket Services (LIDS) and Predisposition Diversion Docket (PDD)— a system of care in which therapists and case managers provide youth-centered, family-focused, and community-based mental health services, including in-home individual and family therapy, case management services, and educational advocacy and coordination;
- Reentry services and intensive aftercare programming that include community engagement activities and workforce development;
- Substance abuse services; and
- Sex offender treatment services.⁹

Impact:

Through all of Lighthouse's combined services, the organization provides housing for 400 children and youth each night and serves 4,000 children, youth, and families each year.¹⁰



Grant Opportunities

Building Local Continuums of Care to Support Youth Success



What:

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's *Building Local Continuums of Care to Support Youth Success* grant supports jurisdictions implementation of a community-based continuum of care for youth at risk of becoming or already involved in the juvenile justice system. OJJDP's Continuum of Care framework describes the process for providing services to youth impacted at every stage of the youth legal system.

How:

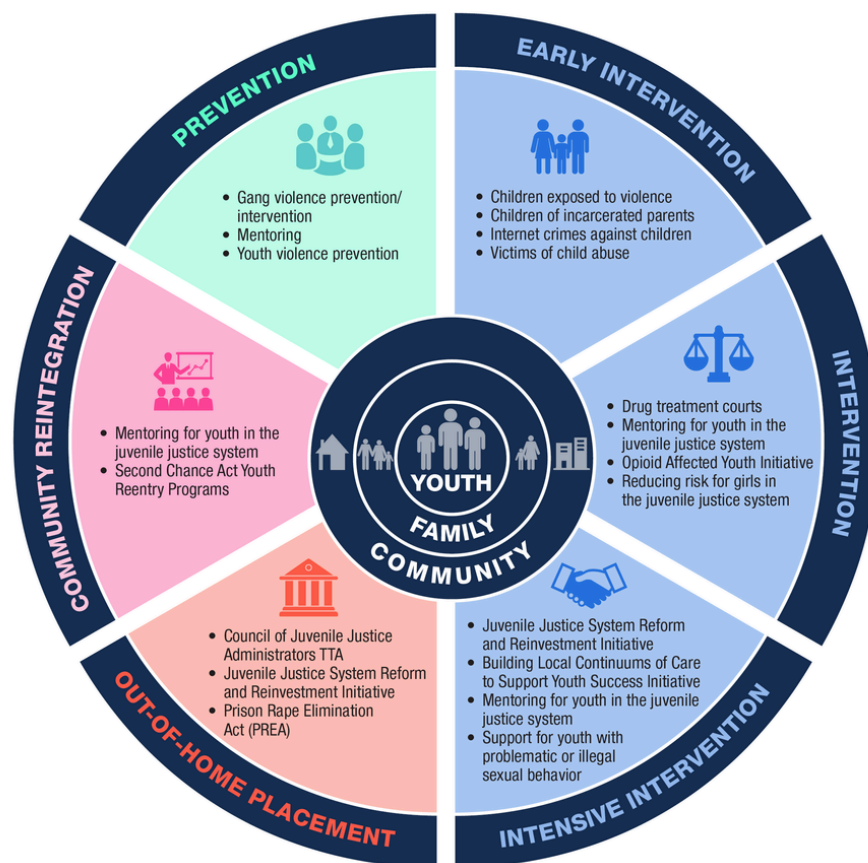
By targeting youth at risk of delinquency or victimization, prevention services can disrupt youth homeless and reduce the likelihood of juvenile system involvement. Meanwhile, aftercare services, such as short- or long-term housing programs, can help youth successfully transition back into their communities and prevent homelessness.

In an effective continuum of care, the majority of youth would be served through prevention and early/low intervention services, with the number of youth being served decreasing at each state in the continuum.¹¹

Impact:

Funding from this grant specifically helps sites with their planning and assessment process, which includes a community asset mapping and gap analyses component, to determine service and support needs targeted toward vulnerable youth.¹²

Continuum of Care Framework



Youth Homelessness System Improvement



What:

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awards their *Youth Homelessness Systems Improvement* (YHSI) grants to support the development of infrastructure to address youth homelessness. The goal of this grant is also to make and improve connections, coordination, and information sharing within and between systems that serve at-risk youth. These systems include but are not limited to education, child welfare, and juvenile justice.

How:

Funded jurisdictions are required to either establish or improve existing response systems for youth homelessness through the following objectives:

- Improving the capacity of youth in the community by developing peer support models, creating Youth Action Boards, or engaging in community training and outreach on how to work with youth in an authentic way;
- Bringing together system partners who work with homeless youth such as Tribes and cultural organizations in the community, K-12 schools, higher education, juvenile justice, child welfare, employment services, etc.;

- Improving centralized or coordinated assessment systems, also known as Coordinated Entry System;
- Improving data collection and use between systems that work with vulnerable youth; and
- Assessing and improving equity in youth homeless response systems.

Impact:

In FY22, YHSI grants ranging from \$200,000 – \$2 million were awarded to 38 communities across 26 U.S. states and territories.¹³





Primary Prevention Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program

What:

The *Primary Prevention Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program*, operated by the Department of Health and Human Services, funds services for youth ages of 12 to 26 in order to prevent homelessness, including those transitioning out of foster care and the juvenile justice system.

How:

Grantees must engage in homelessness prevention efforts such as poverty reduction, anti-violence strategies, and early childhood supports (focusing on housing stability and social inclusion).

This grant requires that applicants collaborate with youth with lived experience in project design, implementation and through local youth advisory boards.

Impact:

Grants of \$100,000 – \$350,000 are awarded to states, Tribes, local governments, and nonprofits to address root causes of homelessness, including poverty, lack of affordable housing, and family instability through cross-system partnerships.¹⁴



Runaway and Homeless Youth Program / Basic Center Program

What:

The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) supports organizations working to promote youth well-being and end youth homelessness through community collaboration. This Bureau oversees the *Runaway and Homeless Youth Program*, which funds street outreach, emergency shelters, and longer-term transitional living.

How:

A key component of this program is the *Basic Center Program*, which provides shelter (up to 21 days), food, clothing, medical care, individual, group, and family counseling, education, employment assistance, and aftercare services to

runaway and homeless youth at risk of entering the child welfare, mental health, or juvenile justice systems.¹⁵

Grantees must use trauma-informed care and integrate aspects of the Positive Youth Development approach into their programs. This approach focuses on giving young people the chance to utilize their leadership skills and become more involved in their communities.

Impact:

As of FY2020, FYSB funds 223 Basic Center grantee programs, totaling more than \$56 million.¹⁶