Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in Worcester, Massachusetts

An analysis of 2011 Point in Time Data and Service Provider Referral Networks

Celeste Arista
Emily Corbett
Moses Dixon
Steph Henderson
Derrick Mathieu
Miranda Muro
Sydney Olberg
Jeanette Roach
Michelle Smith
Professor Laurie Ross
Clark University
Community Development and Planning Program

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Introduction

Supporting Worcester's ongoing effort to understand and address youth and young adult homelessness, the Worcester Teen Housing Task Force in conjunction with the Compass project and Clark University conducted the third annual Point in Time survey during October of 2011. Out of the 535 young people ages 13-25 surveyed, 102 (19%) identified as homeless. We define homeless to include young people in shelters, staying with others temporarily (i.e. couch surfing) or on the streets. In addition to these 102 young people, another 137 youth who were housed reported that they had a friend who was homeless.

Part One of this report provides a quantitative overview of the 2011 findings. Part Two highlights four key issues that both contribute to and perpetuate youth and young adult homelessness in Worcester. Part Three discusses barriers young people face in accessing services as well as providers’ insights as to why some of these barriers persist. Part Four suggests recommendations for strategically correcting these issues, as well as ideas for future research.

Brief Methodology and Limits

The Teen Housing Task Force (Taskforce) set October 19th as the date for the 2011 Point in Time count of homeless youth and young adults. Clark students then outreached to area shelters, homelessness service providers, and youth-serving organizations to notify them about this year’s survey. After revising last year’s survey tool in consultation with the literature and with representatives from the Taskforce and the Compass Project, the class piloted the survey and had the tool translated into Spanish. On October 19th, the class and volunteers from the Taskforce and Clark conducted the survey with as many youth aged 13-25 as possible. However, due to inclement weather, the team was unable to do street outreach. Therefore, survey administration took place over the duration of approximately two weeks; however, as we had not planned for this, we had difficulty recruiting volunteers to do the needed street outreach. This may have contributed to lower numbers of youth reached this year.

Young people were surveyed at city shelters, youth programs, outside of schools, in parks, and on the streets of Worcester. The data were entered into Microsoft Access and analyzed with Stata. Due to the non-random nature of the data collection, the results can only be used to describe the sample and cannot be generalized to all youth and young adults in Worcester. Also, adding new questions on generational homelessness and barriers young people face when accessing services yielded important new information, however, the length of the tool and some of the formatting may have resulted in a higher number of incomplete surveys and missing data.
Part One: Point in Time Data

2011 Overall Demographic Information

- 535 youth ages 13-25 responded to the survey.
- 102 (19%) respondents were identified as homeless (living in a shelter, car, abandoned park or building, or couch surfing (See Figure 1).
- 31 (6%) respondents were living in a foster care facility or residential program.
- 53% homeless respondents were female while 37.5% homeless respondents were male and 1% homeless respondents were transgendered. Gender was missing on roughly 10% of the surveys.
- 79% of homeless respondents identified as straight, 7% bisexual and 2% gay or lesbian. 76% of housed respondents identified as straight, 11% bisexual and 4% gay or lesbian.
- Homeless respondents tended to be older than housed respondents. The average female homeless respondent was 20.7 years old, compared to the average age of housed female respondents, 16.7 years. The average male homeless respondent was 21.1 years old, compared to the average age of housed male respondents, 17.9 years.
- 40% of all respondents had at least one friend who was homeless. 137 (35%) housed respondents had at least one friend that was homeless.
- Homeless respondents moved 5 or more times in the last year 6 times as frequently as did their housed counterparts (19%:3%).

Residency and Citizenship Status

- 52% of homeless respondents were born in Worcester.
- 76% of homeless respondents have lived in Worcester for more than six months.
- Of those respondents in a foster care facility or residential program, 26% were born in Worcester and 71% have lived in Worcester for more than six months.
- 78% of homeless respondents were U.S. citizens.
2011 Highlights

Findings relative to the status of homeless youth and young adults have been similar over the past three years. For example, we have found that the majority of the homeless sample has been living in Worcester for more than 6 months and more than half of them were born in Worcester; hence, the majority of these youth are Worcester’s youth - our youth.

One way to understand the vulnerability of homeless youth is to compare them to the housed population (See Table 1). Compared to the housed youth sample, far more homeless youth experience violence in the home and between partners. Similarly, homeless respondents moved far more frequently than housed respondents over the last year; nearly a fifth of homeless youth have moved 5 or more times. Moreover, homeless youth surveyed are parenting at approximately four times the rate of their housed counterparts- contributing to a new generation of instability. Finally, a third (33%) of homeless youth respondents had parents who had been homeless. This is three times the rate of parent homelessness noted by housed respondents (11%).

Homeless youth are also report having difficulties accessing services. According to a new set of questions asked on the 2011PiT survey, close to 40% of homeless youth who sought help from service providers did not get the help they needed. The main reasons they cited for not getting needed help was that they were put on waitlists (19%); they didn’t have transportation (19%); they didn’t hear back from a provider (15%); they were told they didn’t qualify for a service (14%); or they didn’t know where to go (14%).

It is clear that youth homelessness is a serious, persistent problem in the City of Worcester- one that is all of ours to fix. If steps are not taken to help stabilize these young people’s lives now, they will become a new generation of chronically homeless adults. We can begin to address this issue by understanding the unique conditions that drive youth homelessness and by harnessing the power of the vast array of service provider in Worcester.

Part Two: Factors contributing to and perpetuating youth homelessness

The results of the Point-in-Time surveys over the past three years indicate the persistence of four major issues contributing to youth homelessness in Worcester:

- **Family conflict and instability**
- **Youth leaving out-of-home placements**
- **Disconnections from education and employment**
- **Lack of vital records and other challenges to accessing services**
Each of these issues creates obstacles to achieving stability and contributes to youth homelessness. These issues do not exist in isolation, but are interconnected; the root causes of many of these issues are not in the youth’s control but rather are structural and institutional. While this is not a pleasant reality, it is one which we must acknowledge and attempt to change if we are to help these young people achieve stability.

**Issue 1: Family Conflict and Stability**
Youth who are living in more stable homes are less likely to become homeless. Survey results revealed a number of issues facing homeless youth that impact stability in the home. These issues include: family conflict, housing instability, violence, mental health issues, and early parenting.

**Family Conflict**
Youth homelessness is inherently linked to family instability, and is often directly tied to a youth’s relationship with their parents. This link is reflected in the point in time data:

- When respondents were asked about why they did not currently live with their parents, 38% of homeless respondents’ reasons were due to some form of family instability.
- 14% of homeless respondents indicated that their parents had kicked them out of the house.
- 8% of homeless respondents indicated that they were no longer living with their parents due to a fight.
- 8% of homeless respondents reported they were kicked out because of their pregnancy.
- 8% of respondents who were homeless reported their reason for not living with their parents was because their parent had abused them.
- Of the homeless respondents, 18% said that a beneficial service to youth would be family conflict mediation.

**Housing Instability**
In addition to issues of family conflict, homeless youth also tend to have experienced greater housing instability over the course of their lives:

- 33% of homeless respondents indicated that their parents had been homeless, compared to 11% of housed respondents.
- 19% of homeless respondents indicated they moved five times in the past year, compared to 3% of housed respondents.
- Only 20% of homeless respondents indicated having not moved in the past year, compared to 62% of housed respondents.

**Violence**
Violence can be traumatic and have ramifications for mental and behavioral health as well as make living conditions unsuitable and undesirable for youth to the point that they may opt to leave (Ararani 2009; Hammel 2011; National Resource Center on Domestic Violence 2009; Shulkin 2011). Homeless youth with childhood experiences of abuse are more likely to have attempted suicide, experience symptoms of trauma, develop mental health problems, abuse substances, and experience victimization on the streets (Ferguson 2009). Furthermore, these youth have a higher risk of becoming victims of abuse and other crimes later on (Winland, Gaetz, Patton 2011). The data below identifies violence as an issue faced by Worcester’s homeless youth:

- 23% of homeless respondents experienced violence at home compared to 17% of housed respondents.
• 21% of homeless respondents experienced dating violence compared to 11% of housed respondents.
• 8% of respondents who were homeless reported their reason for not living with their parents was because their parent had abused them.

Mental Health
Mental illness is one of the most widely identified factors which serves as a challenge and predictor of the homeless youth population (Ararani 2009). Homelessness increases the risk of developing mental illness and also exacerbates existing mental health symptoms (Hobbs et al 2000). Many homeless youth might not have health insurance, complicating their access to available resources. This theme of mental health issues among homeless youth is reflected in the point in time data:
• 25% of homeless respondents, compared to 14% of housed respondents have received mental health services.
• 13% of homeless respondents, compared to 3% of housed respondents have received substance abuse services.
• 30% of youth respondents reported that youth need better access to mental health resources, and drug and alcohol counseling.

Parenting and Pregnant Youth
Pregnancy can be both a direct and indirect contributing factor to youth homelessness. Unmarried teen mothers are at a greater risk for disconnection and homelessness, representing about 29% of highest-risk population (Weisstein and Traub 2010). In addition to beginning the next cycle of generational homelessness, each of these additional factors can increase the risk of disconnection and homelessness for their children.
• Four times as many homeless female respondents reported they were currently pregnant compared to housed respondents (6:1.5%).
• Homeless respondents were more than four times as likely to be parents compared to housed respondents (48:11%).
• 8% of homeless respondents reported they were kicked out because of their pregnancy.
• 30% of homeless respondents indicated that youth need more access to condoms.

Issue 2: Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Placements
Approximately one in four youth released from foster care, a group home, or a juvenile detention center spend the first night following their release either in a shelter or on the street (Nellis and Wayman 2009). As a result, this subsection of homeless youth in particular needs focused, immediate intervention strategies to get them off of the street and into a safer space. Studies of homeless youth demonstrate the connection between youth exiting out-of-home placements and homelessness, particularly those who exit the systems directly into independence (Nellis and Wayman 2009; Park, Metraux, and Culhane 2005). These youth are often discharged without the skills or the supports needed as they face the many challenges of transitioning to adulthood.

Two populations of youth in out-of-home placements are of particular concern: youth “aging out” of the foster care system and youth who are involved with the juvenile and criminal justice system. According to the 2011 Point in Time Survey:
• 38% of the homeless respondents had previously been in an out-of-home placement compared to 12% of the housed respondents.
• 26% of the youth surveyed with a history of juvenile justice involvement were homeless and 22% were residing in foster care or a group home.
• Youth in the homeless sample were nearly twice as likely as youth who were not homeless to have been in the custody of social services (24% vs 13%).
• 37% of respondents in foster care or a residential program had been released from jail or juvenile detention in the last 2 years. While not currently homeless, this is a highly vulnerable group to become homeless.

Youth Exiting Foster Care
Youth transitioning out of foster care, or “aging out of the system,” often do so with few resources and without familial connections or supports. Even select state laws that extend the age limit to 21 don’t take into account the numerous restrictions placed on foster care youth (i.e., foster care youth can only stay overnight with families who’ve passed a C.O.R.I) that may not be appropriate for the 18-21 age range. Studies have demonstrated the prevalence of negative outcomes for former foster youth who “strike out” on their own. These outcomes include: a significant lack of stable housing; high rates of criminal activity; a lower likelihood of graduating from high school; failure to achieve and maintain employment; high rates of poverty; and a lack of basic independent living skills (Atkinson 2004; Courtney 2005). Many of these outcomes have been identified as risk factors for disconnection and homelessness. This risk increases in tandem with the number of placements a youth goes through while in care (Roman and Wolfe 1995). These outcomes point to the critical need for identifying the foster youth who are aging out of the system and who do not voluntarily extend their involvement as youth at highest risk for homelessness.

• The 2011 Point in Time Survey found that 11% of the homeless sample reported “aging out” of foster care.
• A 2008 study of youth leaving care in Massachusetts found 37% had experienced homelessness since turning 18 (Hughes et al 2008).

Department of Youth Services & Criminally Involved Youth
Nationally, 100,000 young people exit formal custody of the juvenile justice system each year (Nellis & Wayman 2009). These youth typically do not receive adequate support services necessary for successful reentry. DYS and criminally involved youth encounter the barriers of a criminal record and limited access to public housing assistance upon their release, as well as a lack of stable and positive family support, income or independent living skills or rental and employment histories (Nellis & Wayman 2009). Given these conditions, youth involved with the criminal or juvenile justice systems face several barriers to attaining stable housing and are therefore at a greater risk for homelessness (Ammerman et al 2004).

• In Worcester, 11% of the homeless youth sample had been released from jail or juvenile justice system in the last 2 years.
• Approximately one in four youth involved with the juvenile justice system were homeless in the sample (26%).
• Youth involved with the juvenile justice system were more than three times more likely to have been in the custody of social services than the youth who are not involved (52% and 15%).

Risk Factors of Youth in Out-of-Home Placements
The 2011 Teen Housing Taskforce Point in Time Survey of homeless youth revealed that youth residing in out-of-home placements display several risk factors for disconnection and homelessness.

• Youth surveyed in residential placements reported experiencing violence at a much higher rate than both the housed and homeless respondents. For the youth in residential placements, violence was experienced:
At home (48%)
In their neighborhood (45%)
At school (42%)
Between friends (32%)
With a partner (26%)

- 48% of the sample in residential placements has moved three or more times in the past year.
- Survey respondents in residential placements are almost four times more likely to have received mental health services than the housed sample (53% and 14%). 32% of the juvenile justice involved respondents had received mental services and 22% received substance abuse services, compared to 17% and 4% the respondents who are not involved.

### Issue 3: Disconnections from Education and Employment

#### Education

Experiencing homelessness as a youth detracts from his/her ability to receive the benefits of education and perpetuates the cycle of homelessness (low wage jobs, excluded from higher education). In the 2011 Point in Time survey, homeless respondents identified educational support as a primary need. It is important to note here that the homeless respondents in the sample were older than the housed sample, which may slightly skew results of educational attainment.

- 48% of the homeless sample, compared to 72% of the housed sample, was currently in school.
- 27% of the homeless sample had attained a GED, compared to 10% of the housed sample.
- 12% of students in two high schools in the WPS system are homeless (Binienda and Lyons 2011).
- 55% of homeless respondents stated that “education” resources were needed
- Of the homeless youth who sought out resources, 26% sought education support.

#### Employment

The connection between educational attainment and employment is clear. Without a high school diploma or GED, youth are less likely to get a job, a fact that is exacerbated for those who are homeless. In addition, the employment opportunities for these youth are generally lower wage and low-skill jobs that do not offer health benefits. These jobs are inadequate for providing a means for living, thus homeless youth are more likely to depend on public assistance as a supplemental form of income in order to get by. This is reflected again in the 2011 Point in Time data:

- Housed respondents were five times more likely than homeless respondents to have a full-time job (10:2%).
- 22% of housed and 13.5% of homeless respondents had a part-time job.
- 33% of homeless respondents cited receiving welfare assistance (DTA), and 48% of homeless respondents cited receiving food stamps.

Not only does the data illustrate that employment is an issue for homeless youth, but the youth from the point in-time survey indicated that they need more resources for employment:

- 57% of homeless youth cited “employment” as a needed service.
- Of the homeless youth who sought out resources, 26% sought job training, and 14% sought career placement.

This data illustrate that homeless youth are in need of employment, more so than housed youth. Similarly, the youth are seeking assistance to access employment and need help to be more successful in these efforts.
**Issue 4: Lack of Vital Records and other Challenges to Accessing Services**

Once youth become homeless, they often face various barriers which make it difficult to reach a state of stability. As has been learned through research of existing literature, the Point in Time Surveys, and an analysis of available resources in Worcester, these barriers include:

- Lack of proper identification or paperwork, transportation, documentation of address, phone, or computer access, some or all of which are needed for accessing services and finding employment.
- Dealing with the stigma of being homeless, as well as the mental distraction of not knowing where they will be sleeping or where they will get their next meal or shower.
- An overall lack of support networks to assist in overcoming these challenges of being homeless; often times homeless youth become their own support systems. This is also connected to a difficulty trusting adults and authority.

Hence, while there are a number of individual issues which contribute to homelessness, there are many challenges which make accessing services difficult once youth have become homeless, or when homelessness is imminent. This is extremely problematic for these young people and such barriers may exacerbate the crisis they are already experiencing.

**Part 3: Service Barriers**

There are an extensive number of agencies in Worcester that provide an array of services to young people—including health, mental health, employment, education, and recreation. However, our analysis of existing services has revealed access challenges and several service gaps—most notably a lack of organizations specifically targeting youth who are homeless.

- Close to 40% of homeless youth reported they did not get help they sought from service providers. Youth reported long waitlists (19%), they didn’t hear back from the agency (15%), and a lack of transportation (15%) as challenges they had accessing services.
- Extensive eligibility requirements and program regulations which place restrictions on age, gender, parenting status, level of education, or other characterizing factors compound the barriers to accessing services for youth who do not fit in program requirements.
- Youth find it difficult to learn how to access or use many programs or services; youth need help navigating this complex system of services. Additionally, given that they are in a state of crisis, homeless youth may not be able to advocate for themselves and need more consistent support in the process of accessing services.
- Our own research into services proved to be frustrating due to numerous broken links to websites.
- Oftentimes services require a referral. Such a requirement poses a barrier for youth who are in need of immediate attention and who lack previous involvement with the system.
- Agencies have trouble coordinating or communicating with each other and it can be difficult to foster communication when agencies are competing for the same sources of funding.
- There is an overall lack of emergency/temporary housing and shelter for unaccompanied homeless youth. Currently, the only two emergency housing options for this population are the Triage and Assessment Center, which serves homeless individuals age 18 or older, and the LUK Emergency Shelter for youth under the age of 18, which has just four beds available to youth in Worcester county. This limited availability of youth-designated emergency shelter poses a challenge as homeless youth often do not feel comfortable accessing services at adult-designated facilities. The challenges in accessing needed services makes it all the more difficult to exit homelessness and achieve stability.
Part 4: Recommendations

We make two categories of recommendations: 1) future research and 2) strategic service enhancements. Our overarching recommendation is to develop a coherent synergistic network among service providers who work with homeless youth. Such a service network is the only way to ensure that every homeless youth is treated effectively and rapidly as they seek the services they need, now and in the future. Although such a network may currently exist informally, we suggest throughout the section the development of a more formalized network among providers.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to increase access to the “hard-to-reach” homeless youth, those who are living on the street or couch surfing, we recommend the following improvements to the current Point in Time strategy:

- Create a brief survey to be distributed at service provider organizations that work with homeless youth year round as a standard part of the intake process at all of these locations.
- Rather than have the count occur on one day, consider making it a month-long activity. This is a practice we found to be common among other homeless youth counts across the nation, given the discreetness of youth homelessness (Empire State Coalition 2009). This month would include:
  - One day that is dedicated to distributing a 1 to 2 page survey to all Worcester youth ages 13-25.
  - Month-long targeted street outreach efforts to distribute more detailed, interview-style surveys to a smaller group of homeless youth to gain a deeper understanding of their situations and to provide referrals. This would ideally be completed by individuals who are experienced in this field, such as service providers and street outreach workers.

LONG-TERM SERVICE

- Continue to focus on family mediation as a prevention effort, which is a core component of the Compass Project.
- Develop the prevention model advocated by the Compass Project
- Develop a “one-stop” service center and shelter (or warming center)
  - This site would link homeless youth to the appropriate services providers while also providing the emergency assistance of a bed, food, and shower and the transitional assistance of transportation, mailing address, and identification. Ideally, this location would house intake specialists from service providers who are in the homeless youth network, in order to make it easier for youth to access services that are most appropriate for their specific needs.
  - This would also entail long term supportive case management so that individuals receive support throughout the duration of their journey to stability. This case manager would act as a stable source of support for the youth and ease the barriers they face when navigating the system. This practice is part of the Compass Pilot project.
  - This site would be specifically designed for homeless youth, which would serve as a solution to the current lack of such an environment in Worcester.

Conclusion: Cater Services to Homeless Youth’s Needs

Homeless youth are often treated as though they are adults because their lives have presented them with adult situations. The services that are available to them fall short of recognizing the full spectrum of their needs as young people. At the same time, they are different from the majority of other young people their age. The trauma and complexity of their lives requires individualized support and attention with a focus on helping them develop trust in organizations that can help them to enjoy stability and success in their lives.
References


Appendix Guide

Appendix A: 2011 Point in Time Survey
Appendix B: Site Locations of Point in Time Survey Distribution
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1. Abby's House
2. Boys and Girls Club, Main South and Greatbrook Valley
3. Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance: HomeBASE Intake and the Village at Cambridge Street
4. Crystal Park
5. Doherty High School (outside)
6. Downtown (Stand Up for Kids)
7. Dynamy Youth Academy
8. Edward Kennedy Health Center Youth Ed Program
9. Family Health Center Teen Health Clinic
10. Friendly House
11. HOPE Coalition
12. Inter-hospitality Network of Greater Worcester
13. Jeremiah’s Inn
14. Lake Park
15. Lincoln Village
16. Mustard Seed
17. Salvation Army
18. South East Asian Coalition
19. South High School (outside)
20. South Middlesex Opportunity Council
21. The Bridge of Central MA: Safe Homes and Ives St Program
22. Willis Center: Shepherds Place I and II
23. Worcester Community Action Council
24. Worcester Housing Authority Transitional
25. Worcester Public Library (outside)
26. Worcester Youth Center
27. You Inc
28. Youth Grow
29. YMCA of Central Massachusetts