Voices of Youth Count: Missed Educational Opportunities = Youth Homelessness
November 2017

A new report entitled *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America* shines a light on unaccompanied youth homelessness across the country and in Philadelphia County. Based on a national Voices of Youth Count survey conducted by Chapin Hall, the report focuses on youth in 22 counties -- including Philadelphia – who are sleeping on our streets, in shelters, running away, kicked out, and "couch surfing." National findings show that **in any year, one in 10 young adults ages 18-25, and one in 30 adolescents ages 13-17, experience some form of homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian.** The Report concludes "we are missing opportunities to ensure that all young people can reach their full potential and contribute to stronger communities and economies across the country."

Key national and Philadelphia-specific findings from the Report:

- The risk of experiencing homelessness is **346% higher** for youth who lack a high school diploma/GED.

- Youth experiencing homelessness are disproportionately Black and Latin@, mirroring the rates of inequitable access to quality education, racially disproportionate school exclusions, referrals to law enforcement, and placement in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Specifically:
  o Black Youth are at 83% higher risk of experiencing homelessness; Latin@ youth, at 33% higher risk.
  o Of the 569 homeless youth surveyed in Philadelphia,70% were Black, while this demographic accounts for 44% of Philadelphia's overall population.

- LGBTQ youth are at a 120% higher risk of experiencing homelessness. In Philadelphia, 31% of homeless students identified as LGBTQ. In addition to rejection at home, LGBTQ students report experiencing hostile school environments, leading to both direct (*e.g.* suspensions and expulsions) and indirect (*e.g.* drop-out to avoid harassment) school pushout. See GLSEN's 2015 National School Climate Survey.

- Youth who were parenting or pregnant are 200% more likely to experience homelessness. In Philadelphia, 34% of female youth surveyed reported being pregnant or parenting.

- Youth often face prolonged periods of homelessness: 73% of youth surveyed faced more than a month of homelessness at one time, and 42% faced two or more periods of homelessness in one year.

- Youth in Philadelphia are younger and less likely to be sheltered than youth in other counties. Of those youth aged 16-24, 39% were neither in school nor working.

- Traumatic experiences, including abuse, are often a precursor to homelessness. Nationally, 25% of unaccompanied youth reported prior familial homelessness, and one-third had faced the death of a

caregiver or parent. In Philadelphia, 37% of homeless youth had spent time in foster care, juvenile detention, jail, or prison, and nearly 50% were system-involved in some way.

EDUCATION: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

As the Voices of Youth Count Report observed, "**education and underlying factors that support educational attainment could protect youth from experiencing homelessness**." Conversely, lack of education is a contributing factor in youth unemployment. Schools must be welcoming, affirming, and supportive spaces.

ELC recommends the following strategies to support youth to stay in school and be successful:

- *Increase identification of youth experiencing homelessness.* During the 2014-15 school year, the School District of Philadelphia identified 80 students, or 2% of students experiencing homelessness, as unaccompanied homeless youth. The Report indicates that this is a significant undercount.

Recommendation: School staff in all buildings should be trained to recognize the signs of unaccompanied youth homelessness. Youth must be actively encouraged to identify themselves as "living on their own" through posters, announcements, and non-stigmatizing communications and outreach that protects confidentiality.

- *Connect unaccompanied homeless youth to school-based and community support services.* Youth surveyed routinely disclosed that although schools knew about their homeless status, the schools did not connect them to available school services or housing and other supports available in their communities.

Recommendation: Under the McKinney-Vento Act, the District provides a broad array of Title I supports to youth experiencing homelessness (*e*.g., uniforms, counseling services, SAT fees, etc.). Teachers, counselors, and nurses must share this information with students. In addition, school staff can download the Youth Matters Philly App to their phones to share community resources with youth. Community schools provide the best model for connecting youth with services and supports such as housing, healthcare, etc.

- *Revise policies and practices at the school building level to eliminate barriers to instruction.* Many youth experiencing homeliness reported disproportionate punishments or referrals to school discipline for situations related to their homelessness. For example, youth are often unable to access a shelter after leaving in the morning and cannot retrieve their identification but may be excluded from school.

Recommendation: As required by the McKinney-Vento Act, schools must review their current polices, practices, and procedures and eliminate any barriers for youth experiencing homelessness. Ensure that youth are included in this discussion and that school staff are made aware of the new policies and procedures.

- *Provide targeted academic and non-academic interventions to youth experiencing homelessness.* Youth need additional supports and services to engage in and be successful in school.

Recommendation: Youth experiencing homelessness need access to computers to complete assignments which is often unavailable to them outside the classroom. They may also need additional remedial supports,

mentorship programs, and access to extra-curriculars. In addition, all school staff should be ***trained in trauma-informed approaches to learning and school discipline.***