The Current State of Youth Homelessness Approaches:

Insights and Observations

January 2024

ORSIMPACT

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the many organizations and individuals who played a part in making this work possible. First, we are immensely grateful to the youth with lived experience, community leaders, and organizational leaders who participated in the interviews and focus groups we conducted to inform this report. Their willingness to participate, insightful perspectives, and compelling testimonies were paramount in creating the content throughout this document.

Second, we are grateful to the funders of this work, whose financial support and ongoing input enabled us to collect and analyze data from a wide diversity of sources. The generosity shown by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Schultz Family Foundation, and The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc. has been paramount in ensuring that this work could take place and that the content generated could be disseminated broadly for the field. That said, the conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, based on their understanding of the findings from the data analyzed, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these funders.

Third, we would like to thank our project leadership at Community Solutions, who served as a steering committee throughout our efforts. Community Solutions leaders played a pivotal role in shaping the scope of work for this project, fostering connections with community and service provider leaders, and stewarding the work along our timeline to ensure that actionable learnings were disseminated in 2024. Their contributions and feedback throughout our data collection, analysis, and report development process were tremendously valuable.

Finally, we would like to thank the staff and subject matter experts at ORS Impact, without whom we would not have been able to complete this work. Namely, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of our project members: Terri Akey, PhD, Scott Campanario, PhD, Charlotte Goff, AM, Aubrey Lawrence, MSc, and Cassidy Webb, MA. For any additional inquiries related to this report, we encourage all readers to contact Scott Campanario (scampanario@orsimpact.com).

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Introduction

As of 2018, researchers have estimated that over 700,000 adolescent minors, or 1 in 30 of the population of 13- to 17-year-olds, have experienced homelessness. These numbers are even more alarming when looking at young adults ages 18-25, of whom approximately 3.5 million, or 1 in 10, have experienced homelessness. Furthermore, these rates are even higher for LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC youth, who have a 2.2X and 1.8X greater risk of experiencing homelessness compared to all other youth, respectively.[1]

Since 2015, Community Solutions has supported organizations working in this space through its Built for Zero (BFZ) initiative, a movement of over 100 communities working to produce demonstrable evidence that population-level reductions in homelessness are possible. Through this model, Community Solutions not only provides foundational coaching and assistance to communities, but further supports the development of a national systems-change framework to sustainably ending homelessness for all populations across a diversity of complex ecosystems and geographies. When adopted at scale, the organization sees this approach as a primary way to create a "tipping point" in which the conditions are primed across communities to create an equitable and lasting end to homelessness.

To reach this "tipping point", Community Solutions focuses their model on a number of key drivers that serve to catalyze the field in adopting this coordinated, systems-change approach to homelessness prevention and response. For instance, the BFZ model focuses on leveraging high-quality data, system improvement, and collaboration across systems to create the local conditions for any community to end homelessness. It also places a great deal of emphasis on transforming homeless and housing systems to be person-centered and equitable in process and outcomes, as well as on creating tools to improve housing systems and increase supply of quality, affordable housing. From an influence perspective, the BFZ model also entails efforts to create enabling conditions for solving homelessness at scale through strategic partnerships, network-building, resource mobilization, shifting narratives, policy change mechanisms, and mechanisms to hold leaders accountable for population-level reductions.

Altogether, these different aspects of the model serve to generate overwhelming proof that homelessness is solvable as demonstrated by a critical mass of diverse communities who have credibly and sustainably ended homelessness. Within this initiative, Community Solutions currently supports over 30 U.S. communities working on youth homelessness efforts in particular. Tangibly speaking, these communities receive supports such as targeted 1:1 coaching, data-related technical assistance, a variety of peer learning and connecting opportunities, and opportunities to secure additional catalytic or flexible funding among other supports and resources.

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[1] Morton, M., Dworsky, A., Samuels, G. M., Patel, S. (2018) "Voices of Youth Count Comprehensive Report: Youth Homelessness in America." https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Voices-of-Youth-Report.pdf

As a part of their ongoing support to these 30+ communities, Community Solutions seeks out opportunities to elevate effective practices and approaches across the field. Toward that end, they engaged ORS Impact, a strategy and evaluation consulting firm, to conduct a current state assessment of interventions, practices, and broader strategies to prevent, reduce, and end youth homelessness. **The purpose of this project was to deepen our collective understanding of the effectiveness of different approaches for preventing and ending youth homelessness at scale,** with the goal of sharing guidance with both Community Solutions and the broader homeless response sector. This document is the culmination of that effort. In the following pages, we share information about our approach to this project, select insights and recommendations from our assessment, and an appendix detailing our methodological approach to this work.

Our Approach to this Work

Our first step in this effort was to align with Community Solutions leadership around a set of core areas of inquiry for our assessment activities. These focal questions (see below) would serve as the guiding parameters informing not only what information we look for, but also where we look and how we collect and analyze that information. In partnership with Community Solutions leaders, we landed on a set of guiding questions that were designed to equip us with a robust, well-rounded collection of learnings and insights that could be a useful and responsive resource made available to the field.

As described in greater detail on the following page, the six areas of inquiry we used in this project include: (1) definitions of youth homelessness, (2) evidence of effectiveness of youth homelessness interventions, (3) the role of adjacent system partners in youth homelessness strategies, (4) strategies for youth subpopulation, (5) implications for adult populations, and (6) broader implications for the youth homelessness field.

To address these areas of inquiry, ORS Impact outlined a 4-phase approach beginning in April 2023 and ending in early 2024, building from initial kick-off activities to a series of data collection, analysis, and sensemaking activities with Community Solutions leadership. At a high level, the activities across these four phases (described below) allowed us to engage in a robust assessment of the current state of youth homelessness interventions across the field.

Starting with **Kick-Off and Shared Vision** activities allowed us to collaboratively align around a consensus for how and why we're conducting this work and how we could best share our learning and recommendations with the youth homelessness field. Subsequently, the **Landscape Scan** and **Direct Data Collection** activities equipped us with a diverse, rich body of information and data from which we could begin to develop a deeper understanding of what works for youth homelessness strategies and why.

Finally, the **Collective Sensemaking** activities with Community Solutions leaders helped us to refine our observations into the set of key learnings and recommendations we share here.[2]

Key Areas of Inquiry Guiding this Work

Area of Inquiry	Description
1 *The Definitions of Youth Homelessness*	How does the field define youth homelessness? What are the age parameters and criteria for inclusion in this population?
2 *Effective Youth Homelessness Interventions*	What types of approaches, strategies, or interventions across the field have proven to be effective for reducing, ending, and preventing youth homelessness?
3 *The Role of Adjacent System Partners*	How do homeless response systems partner with cross-sector systems such as foster care, youth justice, social services, healthcare, state agencies, and education?
4 *Strategic Approaches for Youth Subpopulations*	How do the appropriateness and effectiveness of youth homelessness approaches vary by race, sexual orientation, youth age range, and other subpopulation identities?
5 *The Implications for Adult Populations*	What existing learnings from youth homeless response system efforts can be applied to the design of a homeless response system for adult populations?
6 *Broader Implications for the Youth Homelessness Field*	What broader implications exist for the sector as a whole and for Community Solutions as an organization in their work supporting youth homeless efforts?

Four Phases of Work for this Effort

1. **Kick-off and Aligning around a Shared Vision:** Aligning with Community Solutions on the purpose, scope of work, and timeline for the project; reviewing relevant strategy materials related to past Community Solutions efforts to support communities addressing youth homelessness.

2. **Landscape Scan of Youth Homelessness Literature:** A review of both the academic research and publicly available frameworks, tools, and resources on youth homelessness interventions, their effectiveness, and their appropriateness for specific contexts and subpopulations of youth.

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[2] See Appendix A: Methodology for detailed information about the methodology used in Phase 2: Landscape Scan of Youth Homelessness Literature and Phase 3: Direct Data Collection with Key Youth Homelessness Voices.

3. **Direct Data Collection with Key Youth Homelessness Voices:** Qualitative interviews and focus groups with a diverse sample of participants, including youth with lived experience of homelessness, leaders working in adjacent systems (e.g., healthcare, foster care), intermediary organizations that play a bridging role between different system actors, and community leaders.

4. **Collective Sensemaking and Strategic Thinking:** Two facilitated strategy workshops to engage in sensemaking and solution brainstorming with Community Solutions leaders as a direct input into our report development process as well as our dissemination strategy for the broader field.

Throughout these phases of work, we collaborated with Community Solutions leaders in an ongoing manner to share and explore our collective learnings and observations about existing evidence, field-leading approaches, and community practices related to youth homelessness. Our goal was to provide both Community Solutions and the homeless response sector as a whole with recommendations and guidance to prevent, reduce, and end youth homelessness.

The insights we gained from this process and the accompanying recommendations we hope to share with the field are provided in the subsequent pages, structured in short sections that correspond to our six areas of inquiry.

Insights and Strategic Guidance from an Assessment of Youth Homelessness Strategies

In the following pages, we provide a summary of learnings and recommendations from the activities described in the prior section. Each of the subsections shown here corresponds to one of the six areas of inquiry listed on page six. Within each subsection here, we first provide a high-level summary of the insights we gained from our assessment, followed by a short set of recommendations and implications for the broader field to explore. A detailed description of our methodological approach to generating this content can be found in Appendix A.

Area of Inquiry #1: The Definitions of Youth Homelessness

Definitions of youth homelessness matter a great deal for a community's ability to respond to the needs of their clients.

The definition of youth homelessness used within a community has direct implications for that community's youth homelessness counts, eligibility criteria for youth seeking services, capacity of providers to respond, and public narratives around the magnitude of the problem.

Select Insights and Observations

Most communities use one of two definitions for youth homelessness. **The two most widely utilized definitions in the field come from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Department of Education's McKinney-Vento Act**. Each definition uses a slightly different set of criteria to define who is considered homeless and therefore, who is eligible for services. The definition from HUD is largely viewed by the field as being more restrictive, likely as a byproduct of its intentional focus on those with the highest levels of need and urgency—unsheltered youth. Conversely, the McKinney-Vento definition is seen as more inclusive of youth who may not necessarily be unsheltered but are, nonetheless, in need of supportive services to progress toward long-term, stable, and safe housing.

While each definition has its strengths and limitations, **the lack of a single, nationally recognized definition of youth homelessness creates several challenges for communities.** First, having multiple definitions of youth homelessness contributes to conflicting prevalence statistics within a community; statistics that rely on the McKinney-Vento definition will almost invariably be larger

than those relying on the HUD definition of youth homelessness given its more inclusive criteria. These conflicting prevalence statistics may subsequently contribute to misinformation and inaccurate public narratives about the magnitude of youth homelessness in a given community. As a result, communities may then struggle to create a cohesive story around both the need for and the impact of funding and services for homeless youth in their area.

In addition to these community-level challenges, **having multiple definitions in use can also create unnecessary barriers for youth seeking services needed to progress toward long-term housing.** The youth homelessness definition from HUD focuses primarily on literal homelessness, meaning that young people living with friends or couch-surfing may not qualify for HUD-funded services, despite not having a stable, long-term housing solution in place. As a result, these young people are often incentivized to "hoop jump" to get around these eligibility criteria (e.g., sleeping in a shelter for one night to formally qualify for HUD-funded services). This not only delays their access to services, but further risks retraumatizing youth as they work toward housing stability.

Conversely, **the McKinney-Vento definition uses more inclusive criteria for youth homelessness and is, therefore, largely seen as more culturally responsive by providers.** The McKinney-Vento Act's definition of youth homelessness is more likely to include youth who may not be literally homeless, but nevertheless need support to find stable housing. In doing so, this definition is more likely to capture the broader diversity of young peoples' experiences with homelessness (e.g., couch surfing, doubling up). Furthermore, recent research suggests that BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ youth disproportionately experience homelessness in these ways that are discounted by the HUD definition[3], meaning that using more inclusive definitions (e.g., McKinney-Vento) could help to counteract these systemic biases which unintentionally discount specific groups of youth experiencing homelessness. For these reasons, it is viewed by many providers as being more developmentally and culturally responsive, conscious, and appropriate for youth.

Nevertheless, **while the McKinney-Vento Act definition is more inclusive, it also brings additional costs, and there may be times where narrower definitions are more appropriate.** For instance, some programs may simply require the use of the HUD definition to be able to qualify for HUD funding. Providers are often limited in their ability to adjust the definition used in these cases. Other times, it may make strategic sense to use the HUD definition given the focus of a program, such as programs that are intentionally designed to focus on street outreach for youth

> *"We are using the HUD definition—not because we don't know about or acknowledge McKinney-Vento, but because we're already saying 'no' to people who are literally homeless… We have to say 'no' because we don't have enough and are literally triaging for someone who may die first."*
>
> *- Community Leader*

[3] Petry, L., Hill, C., Milburn, N., & Rice, E. (2022). Who is couch-surfing and who is on the streets? Disparities among racial and sexual minority youth in experiences of homelessness. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *70*(5), 743-750.

experiencing literal homelessness. Finally, given that the McKinney-Vento definition translates to more youth accessing services, the HUD definition may at times be more appropriate in cases where limited resources require providers to prioritize those with the most urgent and critical needs, often those who are experiencing literal homelessness.

Guidance and Implications for the Field

1. **Create the data infrastructure to track prevalence statistics based on different definitions of youth homelessness.** At a minimum, communities need to ensure that public reports of their youth homelessness data clearly articulate the criteria for who is included, regardless of the definition used. Beyond that, communities should also explore how they can work toward a data infrastructure that tracks all unstably housed youth, even if not all are reported as homeless. This would allow the community to generate youth homelessness estimates under different definitions and would serve to further ensure the community's counts of youth homelessness are an accurate reflection of the number of young people who qualify for and are able to access services.

   → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent do our data systems allow us to filter to the number of young people who are homeless under HUD's definition? Under the McKinney-Vento Act definition? To what extent do we clearly define which youth do and do not get included in the prevalence statistics we share publicly?

2. **When considering more inclusive definitions, engage in thorough planning to ensure that the supply of provider services can meet the increased demand from youth.** More inclusive definitions like the McKinney-Vento Act means that more youth will be entering the system and seeking services. Communities that may consider using this definition need to engage in thorough planning to be able to respond to that increased demand. Providers, who are already stretched thin, must be prepared for a greater number of clients, which necessitates access to flexible capacity-related funding and a strong number of support services for youth clients.

   → **Prompts for the Field:** What would an expansion of our definitions to include youth who are not literally homeless mean for the number of young people served in our community? What steps could we take now to plan for that expansion in future years?

3. **When possible, use more inclusive definitions to ensure all youth can access services.** Youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability fall on a spectrum of need and vulnerability. Those who are literally homeless may be in situations more urgent and critical than those who are doubling up or couch surfing. That said, all youth in these situations need the services that a homeless response system offers, and restrictive definitions may disproportionately hurt BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ youth who are more likely to experience forms of homelessness that don't meet

the criteria for literal homelessness. When possible, communities should use inclusive definitions to ensure that all youth are not only counted but are being directed to the services they need.

→ **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent do our criteria and definitions for youth homelessness provide an accessible pathway to services for all youth, including those who may not be literally homeless according to the HUD definition?

Area of Inquiry #2: Effective Youth Homelessness Interventions

The wide array of interventions used across the field necessitates thoughtful consideration from communities about which interventions are best suited for which needs.

Communities rely on a range of interventions, but coordinated entry, case management, and diversion are crucial components of an effective response system for youth. Other interventions used by communities include drop-in centers, transportation services, community support groups, family engagement programs, counseling and mental health support, and employment assistance programs.

Select Insights and Observations

Coordinated entry is step one for youth—and an absolute necessity for communities. Without it, youth are left to navigate the system alone. Many communities are well aware of the importance of a coordinated entry system for effectively connecting youth to appropriate providers and system partners. That said, it is important to call attention to the importance of designing a coordinated entry system that is culturally appropriate for the unique needs and experiences of young people. Specifically, a youth coordinated entry system must measure dimensions of vulnerability that are specific to youth, as opposed to adult populations. To identify these dimensions, communities should seek input from diverse groups of youth with lived experience, lifting up their perspectives in determining what these dimensions of vulnerability are and how to best measure them using a coordinated entry prioritization tool.

After entering the system, **case managers are vital for ensuring that youth don't "fall through the cracks" but rather are stewarded toward the services they need.** Youth experiencing homelessness are often not fully aware of a community's available services and how to access them. This is where case managers can play a critical role—they help youth learn about the ecosystem of services available across a community. In doing so, case managers are well-positioned for cultivating trusting and consistent relationships with their youth clients, laying the foundation for their ability to provide ongoing support in meeting basic needs. This role is

particularly important for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ youth who are more likely to experience barriers to service and discrimination from both peers and providers.[4] For these individuals, the importance of a case manager is even more pronounced as they not only must search for available services, but also may find it difficult to discern which spaces and services are safe and welcoming. This also underscores the importance of having youth work with a consistent case manager throughout their journey through the system as it allows for a deeper relationship.

Through this process of deciding which services to pursue first, diversion can be a powerful approach for preventing youth from entering the homeless system "at the door" by empowering them in decision-making about what services to pursue. Diversion programs are designed to assess immediate needs of youth clients and rapidly connect them to available services.[5] Models that embody this approach give youth decision-making power in identifying the services they need to avoid entering the homeless response system. Doing so not only centers their voices and perspectives but enables a faster and less-strained response system that more efficiently connects youth to available services. This is largely accomplished through access to flexible funding for providers, partners, and the youth they serve, which further democratizes capacity building in communities by taking advocacy work for capacity funding off the plates of providers.

> ### Sidebar: Diversion Approaches
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> *Diversion is both a targeted intervention and a set of guiding principles for how to empower youth while diverting them from entering into the homeless response system. These approaches emphasize that youth should be driving early decisions about services to pursue and how to find alternatives to emergency housing or shelter services. They also emphasize the importance of access to flexible funding to empower timely, client-centered actions to prevent youth homelessness. While the principle of empowering clients in decision-making can be embedded throughout the journey for youth, diversion is key early on as it diverts young people from entering the homeless response system altogether. Overall, the success of this approach depends on genuine valuing of clients' perspectives and a commitment to putting youth in the driver seat.*

One specific intervention that is often described in the context of diverting youth from entering the system are cash transfer programs, which provide youth with a direct channel to financial resources to use at their discretion and have shown promise in select communities across the US. These programs empower youth with direct funding and decision-making power about how to best meet their needs. In contrast to public concerns about misusing funds for "temptation goods" (e.g., drugs, alcohol) or increased dependency on public subsidies, the research on these programs suggests no evidence that they disincentivize youth employment or lead to increased

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[4] Shelton, J., DeChants, J., Bender, K., Hsu, H. T., Maria, D. S., Petering, R.,Ferguson. K., Narendorf, S. & Barman-Adhikari, A. (2018). Homelessness and housing experiences among LGBTQ young adults in seven US cities. *Cityscape*, *20*(3), 9-34.
[5] National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2010). "Diversion." https://endhomelessness.org/resource/diversionexplainer/

use of temptation goods; in fact, they may actually contribute to less engagement in illegal activity by reducing incentives for selling and distributing temptation goods. Other research on these programs have shown promising evidence that cash transfer programs can contribute to reductions in poverty and homelessness duration, as well as improvements in wellbeing.[6]

As young people navigate and explore services available within the homeless response system, **finding stable housing is the top priority, and housing options vary in type, quality, and availability.** Youth seeking housing services may engage with a variety of housing options, from emergency shelters to permanent supportive housing, but the solution must match the individual's needs, which often extend past housing. For that reason, case managers must be aware of the wraparound supports offered through different housing options and how those supports can be leveraged as a part of a young person's progress toward stability. Likewise, it is important for case managers to also be cognizant of the limitations of different housing options for specific groups, such as the discrimination and often unsafe conditions of emergency housing options for LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and pregnant and parenting youth.[7] Nevertheless, these considerations all rest on the assumption that housing options exist at all. To increase the housing supply for youth specifically, communities lifted up the importance of innovating around landlord engagement, master leasing, and efforts to repurpose vacated buildings as housing solutions.

That said, in addition to finding a long-term housing solution, **youth also need support to meet basic daily needs—support that can be overshadowed by the important focus on housing at times.** In addition to more traditional programs (e.g., drop-in centers) to help youth meet basic needs, communities can also support youth with daily needs through transportation services. These types of services, such as subsidized transportation passes or volunteer-based rideshare services, are highly desired by youth as they improve access to food security, employment, and other related services. Other support services such as drop-in centers offer a safe place for youth during the day when many shelters are unavailable; they provide temporary security and access to much needed resources (e.g., food, restrooms, case manager information).

Other highly important services for youth may focus on building community support, offering counseling or treatment services, and equipping youth with employable skills. For instance, **having a community of supportive adults and peers is highly important for the resiliency of youth who are experiencing the trauma of homelessness.** Many of these young people do not have the same peer and familial support networks with mentors they can trust compared to their counterparts. For that reason, community support and family engagement models that aim to

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[6] Morton, M. H., Chávez, R., Kull, M. A., Carreon, E. D, Bishop, J., Daferede, S., Wood, E., Cohen, L., & Barreyro, P. (2020). *Developing a direct cash transfer program for youth experiencing homelessness: Results of a mixed methods, multistakeholder design process*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

[7] National Network for Youth. (2023). "Policy Brief: LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness". 23-LGBTQ-Policy-Brief.pdf (nn4youth.org)

foster meaningful connections can be helpful for cultivating a circle of support for youth navigating the system. This may include peer support groups, services that build relationships with trusted adults, and efforts to engage youth's family members.

Likewise, **counseling and treatment-related services can help youth recover and proactively plan for the future.** Not dissimilar from adults navigating the homeless response system, many young people experiencing homelessness also face a variety of clinical needs. As such, youth can benefit from counseling and treatment services that address these clinical concerns. At the same time, we heard from youth that these types of services not only help with resolving clinical needs, but further promote skill-building, personal growth, and proactive planning for the future. These services require trained, trauma-informed, and culturally competent staff.

Finally, **building employment skills is vital for youth transitioning into long-term housing.** While the clinical concerns noted in the prior point may need to be addressed first, building employable skills is paramount for youth experiencing homelessness. While some programs may focus exclusively on employment, communities should also explore ways to embed skill-building into programs and services youth are utilizing for their wraparound support and housing solutions. Specifically, programs that find ways to provide opportunities for job training, skill development, and work experience are highly desired by youth.

Guidance and Implications for the Field

1. **There is a wide array of interventions for communities to consider, but the solution must fit the needs of the client and put youth in the driver seat, empowering them to determine the services they need.** Community leaders may feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of intervention types in use across the field, especially when trying to find solutions that are scalable, replicable, and effective for moving youth out of homelessness. In navigating these decisions, it is important to ensure that the services recommended adequately match the needs of youth clients. A diversion approach can be highly impactful toward that end as it gives youth decision-making power early on before entering the system. Communities should consider the diversion model and the principles underlying it when designing a comprehensive response system for youth.

    → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent does our response system for homeless youth empower youth clients to co-design their pathway toward long-term stability? How can we better empower youth to own the decision-making processes about what services are most appropriate for their current contexts, needs, and challenges?

2. **Invest in the most critical components of a strong youth homeless response system: a youth-centered coordinated entry system and consistent care from case managers.** A coordinated entry system is often the first stop for a young person entering the homeless response system, followed by being connected with a case manager to help them navigate the services available to them. These two components of a response system are foundational; without them, youth are left to navigate an unfamiliar system without the resources, support, and connections to access the services they need. Coordinated entry must be informed by youth with lived experience, designed with an eye for the dimensions of need and vulnerability that are most salient for youth. Moreover, sufficient funding and training need to be offered for case managers to not only be able to help youth access the services they need, but to fully invest in consistent, caring, and trusting relationships with the youth they serve.

   → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent do we engage youth for input in designing our coordinated entry system? To what extent does that system measure dimensions of need and vulnerability that are specific to youth? How well are providers, adjacent partners, and case managers represented and supported in our coordinated entry system?

3. **Housing first can't be housing only, but housing at all requires an innovative approach to building the housing supply.** While a housing solution is often key to a youth's successful exit from homelessness, housing in and of itself is simply not sufficient. Youth need wraparound support and guidance to move along the journey toward housing stability. It is also important to consider how well a given housing option matches the needs and context for youth. A strategy for youth housing support should consider not only what is effective, but also what is realistic and developmentally appropriate for each individual. That said, all of this requires a steady supply of housing options in a community. Community leaders and funders should think innovatively about new and different ways to improve their housing supply. This can include options like landlord engagement strategies, master leasing, or repurposing existing housing options for youth.

   → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent and in what ways are we incentivizing private landlords and property owners to participate in housing models for homeless youth? What other innovative ideas (e.g., master leasing, repurposing vacated buildings) could we explore to expand our housing supply? For the housing options we do provide, to what extent are we embedding wraparound support for youth?

4. **Explore the feasibility of investing in the broad suite of additional youth services—drop-in centers, transportation services, peer support groups, employment programs, and counseling services.** There is no shortage of wraparound support service options a community can explore, and many communities are innovating each year to develop new and more responsive services to address the daily challenges that youth face. While communities must work within the funding and

capacity parameters they face, they should continuously explore ways to support the infrastructure and ability of providers to offer these types of services. Additionally, funders and community leaders should intentionally seek out opportunities to support historically overlooked and underfunded organizations, as well as those that share the identities and life experiences of youth navigating homelessness, as these organizations can operate with greater cultural competency and shared lived experience that their youth clients desire and deserve.

→ **Prompts for the Field:** Looking across the providers and programs offered for youth in our community, where are there gaps or opportunities to better assist youth in addressing their basic daily needs? Which of those gaps could we realistically close, and what would it take to close them?

Area of Inquiry #3: The Role of Adjacent System Partners

Coordinated efforts via structural partnerships are crucial for a community to be able to identify youth in need and create a response system that closes gaps to services.

Cross-system coordination with adjacent systems of care (e.g., education, youth justice, healthcare) is challenging but critical for sharing data, information, and resources as well as for identifying at-risk youth and planning for a continuity of services that prevents inflow and returns to homelessness.

Select Insights and Observations

Coordination and collaboration between adjacent system partners and core service providers are crucial for a systematic response to youth homelessness. The needs of youth and young adults entering the youth homeless response system span a variety of topic areas in addition to the need for housing. For that reason, comprehensive support to young people in the homeless response system necessitates coordinated and collaborative efforts among partners who can respond to these diverse needs—partners working in areas such as mental health, youth justice, foster care, legal services, the education system, and others. Without this coordination, youth are left to navigate multiple systems alone, placing additional barriers and burdens on them.

These coordinated efforts require community leaders to bring a diverse group of voices to the table. **Many systems can play a role in responding to youth homelessness—traditional and nontraditional partners alike.** Communities most commonly refer to education, foster care, youth justice, healthcare, and state agencies when thinking of cross-sector coordination for youth. That said, nontraditional partners can also play a key role in coordinating a response to youth

homelessness. These partners may include organizations like Planned Parenthood, employment centers, athletic facilities, organizations that work with BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ youth specifically, etc. Each plays a different role, but collectively they can support housing solutions for youth.

Furthermore, these adjacent partners can also play an important role in the upstream prevention of youth homelessness. Coordinated efforts between adjacent system partners can be a highly impactful way to identify youth at risk of homelessness and prevent their entry into the youth homeless response system. When youth

> "I think getting more connected outside of our traditional places of connection. And there are programs that are starting to do it well, showing up where folks are, being able to go to encampments and things. And I think it's still an area we can stretch into a little bit…"
>
> - Adjacent System Partner

transition out of an adjacent system of care, it is not uncommon for them to transition directly into homelessness or experience homelessness shortly thereafter. For instance, one 2016 estimate suggested that over 25% of youth previously involved in the foster care system experienced homelessness within 2 to 4 years of exiting foster care[8], which later research has suggested is even higher for American Indian and Alaska Native youth.[9] As such, prevention efforts in these adjacent systems are highly important. Communities are exploring ways to support these adjacent system prevention efforts, such as improved data sharing to more accurately identify youth at-risk of homelessness or supporting homelessness prevention specialists in schools and healthcare systems. This focus on prevention requires a mindset shift from crisis response to shared responsibility for youth after exiting systems of care.

Of course, this coordination across adjacent system partners can be challenging for a number of reasons. These challenges include the obvious culprits like the staff time and capacity to actually work with adjacent systems. For youth specifically, however, there are additional challenges related to data-sharing limitations for minors, poor accountability mechanisms given the lack of a collective responsibility mindset for youth, and pervasive siloes across the systems that work with youth. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative partnerships characterized by trust, sustained communications, and high-quality engagement.

Another challenge common to coordinated efforts between partners pertains to the nature of the relationships between the individuals operating with those organizations. Specifically, there is an overreliance across the field on personal, 1:1 relationships as opposed to formal, structural partnerships between adjacent system partners and youth homelessness service providers.

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[8] Administration for Children and Families. (2016). "Family and Youth Services Bureau Street Outreach Program: Data Collection Study Final Report."
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fysb/data_collection_study_final_report_street_outreach_program.pdf
[9] Watt, T., & Kim, S. (2019). Race/ethnicity and foster youth outcomes: An examination of disproportionality using the national youth in transition database. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *102*, 251-258.

Providers and leaders working within the homeless response system understand the importance of partnerships across the continuums of care in which they work. However, few communities have the dedicated staff, time, funding, and capacity necessary to effectively cultivate these structural partnerships. Without that resourcing in place, individuals working in the system often take it upon themselves to find and build personal, 1:1 relationships with others across the community.

While these personal relationships may be a helpful, temporary solution for providers and partners to become better coordinated, they may inadvertently become a significant liability to the operations across a continuum of care. This is largely due to these personal relationships being less resilient to staff turnover, compared to more formal partnerships, which are more capable of weathering changes in staffing. In other words, when two organizations are only connected by way of a personal relationship between staff, the departure of either or both of those individuals then leaves both organizations with a loss in data, information, and knowledge sharing, coordinated processes, and connective access points for youth.

To address the challenges with personal, 1:1 relationships that end with staffing transitions, funders play a critical role in supporting more resilient coordinated partnerships. Communities see a key role for funders to play in addressing the prior point about the fragility of personal, 1:1 relationships. Specifically, funders can promote resilient partnerships by emphasizing their importance in grant requirements. This could take the form of formally covering the costs associated with relationship building, dedicating staff funding for relationship coordinators, investing in systems that allow for transition planning within adjacent partners, and supporting cross-system case management positions for youth.

Sidebar: System Resiliency is Key

Relying on personal relationships as opposed to structural partnerships is problematic, but it often is emblematic of a larger challenge across the field—the prevalence of fragile systems. Fragile systems lack the infrastructure and foundational safeguards to "weather the storm" of unexpected shocks or changes to how a system operates. These shocks or changes can be related to personnel and turnover but go beyond staffing to include policy changes that affect if and how services are offered, financial shocks such as losing a funding source, national and environmental emergencies that change what services are prioritized, and many others. While some of these shocks might be outside of a system's control, they highlight the importance of intentionally investing in system resiliency, the opposite of system fragility. While shocks will happen, resilient systems are those that have the necessary foundations to anticipate, react to, and recover from unexpected change. Efforts to deepen and diversify resourcing, formalize partnerships, invest in continuity of talent, and support a focus on monitoring, learning, and improving are all examples of potential ways to strengthen the resiliency of a community's response to youth homelessness.

1. **Think expansively about bringing a diverse set of partner voices to the table.** Homeless response systems require coordination with the different systems, institutions, and organizations that clients utilize. For youth specifically, communities should think expansively about how they can bring the comprehensive range of diverse system partners to the table. In addition to core service providers, this should include both the traditional actors like education, youth justice, foster care, etc. and nontraditional actors like job centers, athletic centers, Planned Parenthood facilities, and organizations working with BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ youth specifically.

    → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent are we engaging systems and their leaders who may not be traditionally considered homeless response system providers? How can we better engage nontraditional partners in our response to youth homelessness?

2. **Invest in the development of formal, structural partnerships with adjacent systems.** Coordinated efforts with adjacent partners need to be embedded structurally into a community's response to youth homelessness. One way that communities can take this effort on is by spreading the relationships with adjacent partners across entire teams, making the partnership more resilient to the transition of one individual. Yet, communities may not have the capacity or bandwidth to have a full team investing in one given partnership. For that reason, funders should account for the importance of these partnerships in their grant terms and include the development of structural partnerships as an explicit focus in their grantmaking.

    → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent are our current relationships with adjacent systems formally documented as a part of a structured response to youth homelessness? To what extent are we (communities and funders) fully investing in the development of structural partnerships with new and existing adjacent systems of care?

3. **Move from a mindset of crisis response toward one of collective responsibility for preventing youth homelessness.** Adjacent partners are well-positioned to support efforts to prevent youth homelessness before it occurs as many young people engaging in these systems are at a higher risk of exiting into homelessness. Communities should explore ways to not only identify and track these youth, but to further cultivate a mindset of shared responsibility—a mindset that adjacent systems are responsible for supporting youth beyond their formal exit from those systems.

    → **Prompts for the Field:** How are we leveraging our connections with adjacent system partners to identify youth at-risk of homelessness and plan for their transitions from a system of care? To what extent do our adjacent system partners and service providers demonstrate a mindset of collective responsibility for youth after they have exited adjacent systems of care? How can we better cultivate that mindset?

Different subpopulations of youth such as LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC youth have unique experiences and needs that require tailored approaches and cultural competency.

There are specific subpopulations of youth facing not only higher rates of homelessness, but also increased trauma, discrimination, and long-held prejudice and oppression within our social institutions. Responding to the unique needs of these young people requires culturally competent services that meet youth where they are while embracing the intersectional identities they hold.

Select Insights and Observations

LGBTQIA+ youth experience unique challenges related to prejudice, discrimination, and bullying, making the focus on **services and housing solutions that offer safe and affirming spaces a necessity for this group.** LGBTQIA+ youth not only face higher rates of homelessness, but also higher rates of health concerns and trauma. For instance, many LGBTQIA+ youth often find themselves pressured to sleep on the streets or in other unsafe spaces to avoid services and shelters where they have previously experienced discrimination, rejection, or victimization by peers and staff.[10] For these reasons, safe and affirming spaces that are maintained by trained staff are critical, as unsafe environments can deter these young people from pursuing the services they need. Implementing these spaces requires cultural competence and expansive coordinated entry to connect LGBTQIA+ youth with safe, secure, and welcoming services.

Similar to LGBTQIA+ youth, **BIPOC youth also face disproportionately higher rates of homelessness, a pattern that continues to be a pervasive struggle for communities.** In addition to the systemic barriers experienced by BIPOC youth throughout society, we also heard from youth that young Black men in particular are often neglected and "fall through the cracks" of the homeless response system, reinforcing a continuous cycle of returns to homelessness. For indigenous youth, there are similar challenges with higher risks of homelessness and barriers to services, but communities may also struggle in terms of outreach for these young people in particular, given the nuances of engaging youth across counties and tribal affiliations. Communities are well aware of these challenges, but more work is needed to close these gaps.

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[10] Durso, L.E., & Gates, G.J. (2012). Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth who are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund and The Palette Fund. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80x75033

Another subpopulation of homeless youth with unique needs is pregnant and parenting youth. **Youth who are either pregnant or currently parenting often face additional daily challenges and burdens that most traditional homeless response services do not support.** Specifically, in addition to supporting their own individual needs (e.g., food security, transportation, housing), pregnant and parenting youth also must provide for their current or planned children. This translates to additional needs and services such as childcare, diapers, or baby food, in addition to a general need for heightened safety and security in housing services. To account for these unique needs, some communities are prioritizing pregnant and parenting youth in coordinated entry and are providing specialized assistance from experienced staff, but many expressed how there is a noticeable gap in available services for these young people.

> *"Young parents in particular really want community. I think parenthood can be a really isolating experience, and navigating the transition out of homelessness could be a really isolating experience."*
>
> *- Community Leader*

Services for homeless youth must also be developmentally appropriate. For instance, **services for unaccompanied minors are often not appropriate for adolescents, which may not be appropriate for emerging adults ages 18-25.** Subpopulations of youth at these different age ranges have unique developmental needs, challenges, and priorities for their progress toward long-term stability. For instance, unaccompanied minors would be developmentally ill-suited to use services that place a good deal of expectations for self-sufficiency on the client—services that emerging adults may be more capable of utilizing. Likewise, there may also be legal and regulatory limitations to what services can be used by which age ranges (e.g., age-restricted housing options). To account for these needs, communities are exploring ways to document age-specific information and priorities in coordinated entry systems and foster partnerships with providers offering age-specific and developmentally appropriate services.

In addition to the groups of youth listed above, **there are other subpopulations of youth that communities may need to find ways to support.** For instance, sex trafficking is a significant issue across youth homelessness. Youth falling in this subpopulation require supports and services beyond what is traditionally offered; they require additional safety and security measures, options for private housing, and services that offer specialized clinical and mental health support to aid in their recovery and healing. Other groups with unique needs include youth with developmental disabilities, who require more enhanced support that involves better coordination with health providers and trained case managers to address their unique needs.

Guidance and Implications for the Field

1. **Create the data infrastructure to be able to measure prevalence and outcome gaps across subpopulations.** The findings above are only possible because communities have invested in the data infrastructure to be able to measure prevalence and outcomes by demographic variables like age, race, sexual orientation, etc. These variables and other measures of identify need to be tracked in a community's data systems to make meaningful progress in addressing the disproportionality in outcomes for these groups. This is a crucial first step in providing services for different subpopulations—understanding the state of subpopulation needs in the community.

> → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent does our data infrastructure allow us to accurately track the prevalence of different subpopulations of youth in our community? How can we better measure and track disproportionality in outcomes for these subpopulations?

2. **Invest in the capacity to address the needs of each subpopulation.** Greater investment in funding and staff capacity are needed across the field, but these needs are even greater and extend beyond dollars and headcount for addressing the challenges of subpopulations specifically. Communities are stretched thin, but the services and programs for specific subpopulations were described as particularly limited across the field. Funders and community leaders need to explore how they can best support these programs and services, either through investing in funding and staffing for existing programs or exploring gaps in services and ways to create new offerings to close those gaps.

> → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent does our community offer services specific to unique subpopulations of homeless youth? How can we better support existing services for these subpopulations and the development of new services unique to their needs?

3. **Subpopulation-specific service providers need training in cultural competence and matters of identity and equity.** While funding and staff capacity are crucial for serving specific subpopulations, the capacity to respond to youth subpopulations requires more than only funding and staffing. When working with youth from different walks of life, experiential histories, and cultural identities, it is essential that providers are able to meet youth where they are, showing empathy, openness, and individualized consideration. This requires an inclusive attitude about cultures, an awareness of one's own cultures, knowledge of other cultures, and cross-cultural skills. Funders and community leaders must explore ways to support these skills across providers, in addition to supporting through traditional funding and staff capacity investments.

> → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent do our service providers demonstrate a strong level of cultural competency for working with different subpopulations of youth? How can we better support these cross-cultural skills for providers?

In-Depth Insights on the Role of the BFZ Model

Youth, community leaders, and their partners shared several important insights about the current state of youth homelessness efforts for this report. Many of these themes—whether successes, challenges, opportunities, or needs—underscore the importance of intentional investment and support for communities to develop equitable and sustainable systems for preventing, reducing, and ending youth homelessness. This investment and support can come from a variety of sources, such as federal or state agencies, intermediary support organizations, philanthropy, and others. Community Solutions operates as one of these sources of support for communities and the broader field, offering the BFZ model as a hypothesized framework for how communities can achieve and sustain equitable reductions and an end to youth homelessness. Toward that end, several components of the BFZ model are worth describing here given their relevance and potential responsiveness to the insights shared throughout this report.

A High-Level Description of the BFZ Model

Community Solutions works with communities spanning small, rural, midsize, suburban, and large city geographies, as well as regional and statewide efforts. The organization's BFZ model focuses on strengthening and transforming homeless response systems in these communities, with the north star of a **sustainable and equitable reduction and end to homelessness for all populations.** To achieve this vision, the model emphasizes three primary "building blocks" that communities can work toward:

1. **Building an Effective, Resilient Homeless Response System.** The core of the BFZ model rests on an effective and resilient homeless response system. This requires foundations for system improvement, such as a shared commitment from partners, sufficient capacity and leadership, and the infrastructure for data, implementation, and accountability. It also necessitates new ways of working across partners to deepen relationships and trust across the community.

2. **Implementing Strategies to Achieve and Sustain Reductions.** With the foundations and new ways of working in place, youth homeless response systems are better positioned to implement multiple parallel strategies that collectively function to achieve equitable reductions in the number of young people experiencing homelessness and eventually, an end to homelessness for everyone. These strategies include

Core Components of the BFZ Model

Building an Effective, Resilient Homeless Response System
⇩
Implementing Strategies to Achieve and Sustain Reductions
⇩
Creating the Desired System Conditions for Population Changes
⇩
North Star: Sustainable, Equitable Reductions and End Homelessness for All

preventing youth homelessness from occurring, housing youth currently experiencing homelessness, and ensuring those housed through the system can stay stably housed.

3. **Creating the Desired System Conditions for Population Changes.** Finally, to build an enabling environment to sustain these reductions, the youth homeless response system must also strive to influence the broader system conditions that enable or erect barriers to change. Through policy, narrative change, resource mobilization, and cross-sector collaboration, the system can better work toward creating the enabling conditions for sustainably and equitably ending youth homelessness.

Overall, the BFZ model aims to equip communities with the essential features for a local homeless response system to equitably and sustainably end homelessness. This primarily happens through accelerating exit rates (e.g., housing), reducing entries into the system (e.g., prevention), and strengthening the local implementation and problem-solving capabilities of the community.

Potential Impacts of the BFZ Model for Youth Homelessness Efforts

Communities that enroll in this model receive a suite of support designed to help them establish this strong and resilient system to accelerate progress toward ending homelessness. These supports, described in detail in Table 1 on the subsequent page, range from 1:1 coaching for targeted improvement to broader resources related to field-level leadership and guidance. Through these services, the aim of the BFZ model is to create a "tipping point" in which the conditions are primed to create an equitable and lasting end to homelessness, which is recognized as a crucial public health issue.

That said, communities are often at different places in terms of capacity, progress, funding, system complexity, and other factors that influence the way in which BFZ can have an impact for efforts related to youth homelessness specifically. For that reason, while the BFZ model described above entails a set of common or core components, the specific supports offered are often tailored to the unique needs and contexts of each community. This typically entails adapting BFZ's service delivery model to fit the current state of a community's progress, capacity, and infrastructure, the complexity of the local system in which they operate, and the specific populations they are prioritizing.

As Community Solutions and its BFZ model continues to play a role as both a field catalyst and intermediary support for local implementation, the organization is continuously enhancing its current supports and developing new offerings to respond to the needs of communities. This continuous improvement is heavily informed by both the organization's thinking about its strategy and vision for ending youth homelessness alongside the valuable perspectives, insights, and successes happening in communities.[11]

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[11] Community Solutions' efforts related to youth homelessness have seen recent successes in the Gulf Coast region of Mississippi and in Rockford, Winnebago, and Boone counties in Illinois. ORS Impact, the strategy and evaluation partner for the BFZ initiative, will be highlighting these successes in future case studies which will be shared via Community Solutions' online publications.

Table 1 | Core Supports Offered through the BFZ Model

Service or Resource	Description
Targeted 1:1 BFZ Coaching	1:1 coaching from BFZ coaches with deep local expertise can help communities with **strategic planning, problem solving local challenges, and stakeholder engagement.**
Access to a Peer Learning Network	The BFZ model **connects communities with similar peers** to share resources, knowledge, best practices, and relevant examples from Community Solutions' history of working to end homelessness.
Infrastructural Data Support	Data support offered through BFZ provides communities targeted improvement support related to establishing **quality data through a by-name list, data systems, and analytics/data visualization.**
Community Capacity Funding Opportunities	BFZ offers a variety of funding opportunities such as **capacity grants** for human capacity, **catalytic grants** for programs, and **unrestricted flex funding** to address local community barriers to housing.
Policy and Advocacy Tools and Support	BFZ staff support communities in **educating policymakers and identifying government funding opportunities** through public resources and tools for monitoring federal grant avenues.
Strategic Campaigns and Communications	Tools, guidance, and support from BFZ staff for communicating success can help communities accelerate progress and gain buy-in through **local campaigns, social/earned media, and case studies.**
Housing Systems Support	**The BFZ Housing Systems Team** supports efforts related to property engagement, centralized housing systems, property incentivization, underutilized vouchers, housing development, and more.
Access to BFZ Senior Leadership	**Senior leaders at Community Solutions coordinate with community leaders** to support engagement with system leaders and decision-makers, elected officials, and other key stakeholder groups.
Field-Level Access and Guidance	Engagement in the BFZ model offers communities access to **sector influencers, other national networks, and thought partnership** for navigating unexpected and/or challenging systems-level conditions.

While homeless youth have needs that require a different approach from what is often used with adults, there are some guiding principles and processes that are transferable to work between these two populations.

Efforts with homeless adult populations may benefit from insights and observations based on youth homelessness efforts related to supporting an infrastructure for sustainable work, centering the voices of the clients being served, and integrating a focus on prevention across a community's strategy.

Select Insights and Observations

One category of observations from youth homelessness efforts that could inform efforts with adult populations is the importance of building a sustainable infrastructure, the most obvious component of which is the need for both private and public funding commitments to support a community's long-term staff capacity to respond. Providers working with both youth and adult populations share in this common need for funding. While the specific programs that use the funding will likely be different between adults and youth, funders of adult systems may benefit from learning about the needs expressed by youth providers related to investments in provider skill development, education and training, and access to flexible funding that allows for timely responses to the needs of their clients.

Another way to support a more sustainable infrastructure for both youth and adult populations is through structural partnerships. This observation within the youth homelessness space is similarly important for adult populations. Communities need support and investment in creating long-term, structural

Sidebar: *Sources of Youth Funding*

Finding sources of funding to support youth homelessness efforts can feel like patchwork. Most commonly, communities rely on federal grant programs (e.g., HUD's YHDP grants) for resources, though these often come with restrictions on how funds can be used. At a state level, diversion programs like Washington State's Homeless Prevention and Diversion Fund or Youth Diversion Infrastructure Project offer more flexible sources of funding, but these may not be available in every state. Other traditional sources of funding include private donors, foundations, and community leaders; while these provide additional funding, they each can bring individual requirements and restrictions that communities need to navigate. Finally, some communities have also explored ways to advocate for tax policies that commit tax dollars specifically to youth homelessness services.

partnerships. When relationships are personal as opposed to structural, staff transitions and turnover create a loss of coordination, knowledge flows, and access points for clients. These relational losses are not unique to work with youth populations—they can and do happen in work with adult populations as well. As such, efforts with adult populations might benefit from this realization that response systems need support and investment in building formal, structural relationships between partners and providers.

One final way to support a sustainable infrastructure is through efforts to build aligned systems. As many described in our interviews, **efforts for both youth and adult homeless populations would benefit greatly from investments in aligning practices and procedures across system actors.** This means finding ways to cultivate buy-in from system actors to pave the way for the system to begin to coalesce around a more coordinated approach. These practices and procedures can show up across a variety of topic areas such as data and information sharing, outcome definition and measurement, the creation of collective accountability mechanisms, and the implementation of the diverse suite of interconnected programs and services.

In addition to supporting a sustainable infrastructure, a second category of insights from youth homelessness efforts that could inform work with adult populations is the importance of centering client voices. Efforts with adult populations may benefit from exploring how **the principles of youth diversion models could put adult clients in the driver seat of their journey through the homeless response system.** Diversion models that empower clients in determining services before entering the system have shown promising results with youth and could be beneficial for adult populations as well. Adult population providers should explore how they can best embody diversion principles and center their clients' voices in connecting them to services.

In addition to empowering clients, **finding ways to leverage their lived experience in a community's strategy is another essential way to center their voices, regardless of the population.** The practice of engaging youth with lived experience in decision making and for programmatic feedback was described at length in our conversations with communities. This not only helps communities improve their services, but further aligns those services with the actual needs and experiences of the individuals using them. For both youth and adults, to the extent that clients can meaningfully inform programs and policies with minimal risk of traumatization, engaging individuals with lived experience can be highly impactful,

> [My community] *"would do this program once or twice a month… where youth could come and voice what they were liking about the current youth programs, what they didn't like, and what they wanted to change."*
>
> *- Youth with Lived Experience*

especially when lifting up the voices of youth from groups that have been historically marginalized, silenced, and oppressed.

Communities can also center the voices of adult population clients by offering the same level of flexible, tailored solutions that they strive to offer youth. Given the diversity of experiences and challenges within the population of homeless youth, communities are cognizant of the importance of flexible services that can be tailored to the specific needs of the clients using them. This flexibility can be similarly important for efforts with adult populations. The unique and evolving needs of adult clients engaging in the homeless response system would benefit from a similar level of flexibility and individualized focus in services and programs.

Finally, a third category of insights from youth homelessness efforts that could inform work with adult populations is the importance of focusing on prevention. For instance, **monitoring and identifying youth at risk of becoming homeless is a practice that could also benefit adult populations.** Adults entering adjacent systems of care often face similar risk factors in terms of exiting or returning to homelessness. The same focus on prevention used with youth in this context could also be beneficial for adults. This requires work to foster coordination with adjacent systems of care, investments in data systems to monitor adults at risk of homelessness, and efforts to support transition planning to mitigate inflow and returns to homelessness.

Another insight from youth prevention efforts that could benefit work with adult populations is to **think expansively and creatively about a community's future housing supply.** Communities working with youth and adult populations alike understand the importance of affordable housing to meet the needs of their clients. That said, this need for more affordable housing necessities new and innovative ways to improve the housing supply, regardless of the population being served. While youth and adult housing options may differ in terms of eligibility criteria and age-specific regulations, the strategies of engaging landlords and exploring novel leasing options with youth populations could be beneficial to integrate into housing strategies with adult clients.

Guidance and Implications for the Field

1. **Support the infrastructure needed for a sustainable response to homelessness**. Systems-level efforts to address both youth and adult homelessness require a healthy supply of investment into the capacity of the systems' organizations, structural partnerships between those organizations, and the alignment of procedures and policies across those organizations. Communities and funders working with adult populations might benefit from exploring how their support and funding mechanisms go beyond operational support (though, that is important too) to build a collective and aligned response to homelessness across the system of community actors.

   → **Prompts for the Field:** For both adult and youth populations, how can we best support the creation of an aligned system response to homelessness? To what extent are providers and partners bought into the belief that homelessness is solvable? To what extent and in what ways are policies and procedures aligned across those system actors?

2. **Center the voices of the clients you serve.** The idea of engaging clients with lived experience permeates both youth and adult homelessness efforts. In the youth space, communities often spoke about how this practice can manifest through traditional forms such as advisory boards or feedback solicitations, but one particularly powerful model is the diversion approach as clients are preparing to enter the system. Based on the principle that clients should be the ultimate decision makers about the services they receive, this approach could be helpful to divert adult and youth populations from the system altogether. Communities working with adult populations should explore if and how they can integrate the principles of diversion into their efforts.

   → **Prompts for the Field:** To what extent does our community's response to adult or youth homelessness embody diversion principles of empowering the voices of the clients we serve? How can we better center the perspective and lived experience of our clients?

3. **Embed a focus on upstream prevention and planning across your response to homelessness.** Efforts to respond to both youth and adult homelessness benefit from an explicit focus on preventing homelessness before it happens and intentional planning for the housing availability conditions that would ensure that homelessness is rare and brief when it does happen. These forward-looking practices are transferable across populations of homelessness as they serve to simultaneously mitigate inflow while creating the necessary conditions to maximize outflow.

   → **Prompts for the Field:** Do our current systems and practices allow for accurate monitoring and identification of clients at risk of becoming homeless? How could we better focus on the prevention of homelessness at an individual level? At a systems level, to what extent are we creating the conditions for a healthy supply of affordable housing for our clients?

Area of Inquiry #6: Broader Implications for the Youth Homelessness Field

Our discussions with a diverse sample of voices in this field surfaced a number of additional guiding principles and recommendations for the field to consider.

Conversations with communities, adjacent system partners, intermediaries, and the youth they serve lifted up a number of broader implications for the field. These cut across mindset shifts, ways of working, training and education needs, and the roles of funders.

In our interviews with community leaders, adjacent system partners, and youth with lived experience, we asked explicitly about any advice, guidance, or requests they would lift up or share with the broader field of youth homelessness providers. In honoring their voices and perspectives, we have included a set of themes and topics representing the many recommendations and principles they expressed below.

Recommendations From the Field, for the Field

Recommendation #1: It's time for providers to step out of "their youth" and step into their clients'. Homeless response system providers must move away from adultism toward trust-building and caring communications. Youth often described pervasive adultism across providers as prejudice or negation of their experiences simply because of their younger age. In this field, it's not uncommon for young people—even those who are above 18 years old—to enter the system and feel as though their experiences and concerns are neglected under a guise of "we adults know what's best for you." To combat this, youth want providers who are invested in building meaningful relationships with their clients. This goes beyond simply treating youth with respect. It also means empowering them to make decisions, creating psychological safety for them to ask questions and be vulnerable, and genuinely valuing their perspectives and input. This requires providers to step out of their assumptions and experiences and into those of their clients.

In their words…

"I recommend all the adults look at what youth are having to deal with and stop relying on their past experience to guide us… We're in a new day where we are dealing with more than our moms and fathers and grandfathers and grandmothers… I encourage all adults to open up their minds and get out of their childhood and step into ours so they can understand what's going on."

- Youth with Lived Experience

Recommendation #2: Communities and their service providers need to shift away from a strategy of generalized, one-size-fits-all models and toward a model of tailored, individualized support. Youth experiencing homelessness face challenges across multiple domains of life, making one-size-fits-all approaches insufficient for addressing these specific needs and challenges. While those more generalized types of strategies may be helpful for scaling to maximize reach, the cost of that expanded reach is less attention to responding to unique, client-specific needs. For that reason, communities lifted up the importance of focusing on individualized support, which requires acknowledging the limitations of given services and working to connect youth clients with the supports and resources that are best suited for their individual needs.

In their words…

[Individualized support is] "putting the supports in place that youth identify would help them be successful and giving them the power to try and the possibility to fail. And if things don't work out, we come back to the table and we try again."

- Adjacent System Partner

Recommendation #3: A shift is also needed to enhance and center the principles of trauma-informed care for youth services. Communities simply can't have enough trauma-informed care. Early trauma is particularly common for homeless youth, especially BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ youth. This necessitates a community response that is not only sensitive to past trauma but is intentional about preventing re-traumatization. To address this, communities need more training and resources on how to embed the principles of trauma-informed care into their services. Services that focus on building trusting relationships, encouraging empathy and attention to client experiences, and identifying the core strengths of homeless youth are a good first step, but investment in the capacity and skills of a community's providers to leverage this form of care is crucial.

Recommendation #4: Communities engaging youth as a way to qualify for federal funding need to "walk the talk" and find ways to more deeply value the voices of youth beyond simply extracting programmatic feedback. Engaging youth with lived experience can take many forms, such as youth advisory boards, focus groups, or feedback surveys. Of course, this requires communities to respect if and how youth want to engage at all (some youth may not engage as the experience can be re-traumatizing or they may be in crisis). Nonetheless, communities lifted up the importance of going beyond experiential feedback to more genuinely empower their youth clients in decision-making and strategic planning for a community's response system. This can help build further trust with that community's youth population and better align the system's services to the needs of its clients.

Recommendation #5: Youth value diverse staff with lived experience. Finding ways to recruit and support staff with lived experience can be a helpful way to promote trust and support with clients. Hiring staff with both diverse walks of

In their words…

"We need more trauma-informed training. You can't have too much trauma-informed training, especially if you are in a position where you're helping youth. You have to know how to handle those situations effectively in a way where you can set boundaries and be firm, but not shut youth down."

- Youth with Lived Experience

In their words…

"You can't really do good or authentic youth work if you're not collaborating and listening to youth at minimum, and at maximum, they're at the top – they're driving."

- Community Leader

life and lived experiences can help in building trust with youth clients as these individuals are able to better understand and empathize with the diverse experiences, challenges, and needs of their clients. As such, communities shared their hopes that providers intentionally prioritize hiring staff who have experienced some form of homelessness or housing instability in their past. That said, the past trauma that these staff members may have experienced necessitates a commitment from communities to both support their growth and be mindful of the risk of re-traumatization when working in this field. Such a commitment likely includes dedicated time and resources to openly checking in with staff about their well-being, offering flexibility and time for self-care, empowering staff to shape programs that affect them at work, and formalizing all of the above in an organizations policies and practices.

Recommendation #6: Providers need cultural competency to be able to meet youth where they are and ensure that services are appropriate for the individuals using them. Youth navigating the homeless response system come from unique walks of life, and for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ youth in particular, they bring specific identities that have been historically marginalized, silenced, or outright ignored. Providing services to the wide diversity of youth identities requires cultural competency from providers, which helps to ensure that services are accessible and inclusive for each young person experiencing homelessness. Communities and youth with lived experience encouraged the field to explore ways to strengthen provider skills in practicing cultural awareness, inclusivity, cross-cultural skills, and self-awareness. Additionally, efforts to improve the demographic diversity of provider staff across communities can increase the likelihood that providers and youth have some shared aspects of identity, which further helps providers empathize with and understand the diverse experiences of young people navigating the system.

In their words…

"We have a lot of staff with lived experience... It's good. When they meet with people, they can say, 'I know what you're going through.'"

- Community Leader

In their words…

"The people providing services need to be compassionate and let people present in whatever way they wish. Cultural competencies need to be on point in terms of gender fluidity and sex. This next generation is just so open, and we have to keep showing up for them in that way."

- Community Leader

Recommendation #7: Communities should explore new and innovative ways to reach homeless youth and build their awareness of what services may be available. Youth experiencing homelessness are often not fully aware of the available suite of services and how to access them. Coordinated entry systems and case managers can help direct youth to those available services, but many young people may not know where to start or how to enter the coordinated entry system altogether. To account for this, youth and community leaders expressed a desire for more innovative outreach strategies such as points of contact in schools and mass communications (e.g., social media, radio) to improve youth awareness and ability to access services.

In their words…

"If we sent out more surveys via social media or had a Snapchat, or Instagram, or TikTok, or a radio station… I feel like that would be awesome and we could get more exposure."

- Youth with Lived Experience

Recommendation #8: Communities need buy-in and shared accountability mechanisms to ensure that youth are cared for across systems of care. As discussed elsewhere in this report, coordination between partners and providers is clearly important for responding to youth homelessness. That said, effective coordination in a systems-wide approach requires buy-in, funding, and shared accountability across system actors. These system alignment components serve to create a better user experience for youth navigating the system, and communities are hopeful to see greater buy-in and formal alignment of policies and procedures to create a responsive and accessible system for youth.

In their words…

[We need] "buy-in… How do we get agencies bought in so that the folks on the ground have the freedom to work not just in their lane, but between lanes? And buy in means funding to support alignment."

- Adjacent System Partner

Recommendation #9: Shared definitions, data, and outcomes across systems in accessible, transparent ways can set the stage for engaging in shared learning. The systems-level nature of this work highlights the importance of building alignment around shared outcomes, definitions of those outcomes, and data to measure progress toward those outcomes. Communities noted the importance of work to build a shared data system to allow for accessible information flows, real-time tracking between providers and partners, more rapidly shared learnings, consistent definitions and policies for collecting youth demographic data, and more accurate and systematic counting of youth.

In their words…

"If there was some way to incentivize a streamlined structure for cross-system data sharing… There are pros and cons to having centralized resources, but I think that having some sort of centralized resource would be nice."

- Community Leader

Recommendation #10: Funders play a crucial role in advancing the field toward a collective response, but their impact is amplified through flexibility in how communities can use the funds they receive. Funders play many roles in this field. They offer flexible funding to address evolving community needs, promote coordination among siloed systems, incentivize aligned strategies and approaches across systems, and support continuous improvement and learning through capacity investments for providers. Communities noted the importance of these various funding mechanisms, but called particular attention to the importance of flexibility in how funds are used. This flexibility allows communities and their providers to adapt more quickly and provide a more responsive set of services to their clients.

In their words…

"We try to think about our funding capacity to be as flexible as possible so organizations in our community can be as responsive as possible."

- State Agency Leader

Concluding Thoughts

Youth homelessness is solvable, but doing so requires commitment, collaboration, and a willingness to innovate from all actors in the system. In this report, we offer several insights into what it might take to prevent, reduce, and ultimately end youth homelessness. For example, we discuss the importance of inclusive definitions of youth homelessness, a variety of interventions communities can explore (and key considerations for each), the role of cross-sector partnerships across adjacent systems of care, the unique needs of specific subpopulations of homeless youth, and specific recommendations for the field from community leaders and the youth they serve.

Progressing toward an end to youth homelessness necessitates commitment from all involved, but the reward is a world where youth homelessness is rare, brief, and nonrecurring. This vision is within reach, and achieving it requires a field that works together: community leaders investing in client-centered, coordinated systems; providers fostering a system-wide culture of meeting youth where they are with empathy and cultural competency; adjacent system partners embracing a mindset of shared responsibility and accountability for youth entering and exiting their systems of care; funders, intermediaries, and state agencies offering flexible support, resources, and investments in capacity building and alignment; and policymakers creating the conditions for a sustainable response to youth homelessness. It is only through a coordinated, system-wide approach across these actors that we can solve this issue, and the insights shared in this report are intended to serve as guideposts for doing just that. What role will you play?

Appendix A: **Methodology**

ORSIMPACT

Our methodology

Our methodological approach leveraged resources from four primary sources of information:

4. **Review of Academic Literature:** Synthesizing evaluation evidence on youth homelessness approaches

5. **Review of Applied Materials:** Synthesizing content from field-leading institutions, including briefs, reports, and frameworks

6. **Review of Strategy Materials**: Synthesizing content from Community Solutions describing efforts of BFZ communities working on youth homelessness

7. **Direct Qualitative Data:** Qualitative interviews from adjacent sector partners, community leaders, and youth with lived experience, as well as a focus group with intermediaries and state agencies

Review of the Literature and Materials

Our review of materials included content from academic literature, applied materials, and strategy materials from Community Solutions communities currently working on youth homelessness.

Desk Research and Literature Review

- **Databases:** University of Washington library of academic databases, Google Scholar, public reports from field-leading organizations

- **Search Terms:** youth homelessness, intervention, support, minority, LGBTQ, youth of color, rural, literature review, effectiveness

- **Filters:** published in 2009 - 2023

- **Materials:** reviewed 57 materials in total (29 academic articles from peer-reviewed journal outlets, and 28 applied reports and briefs from field-leading organizations)

A Note on Definitions from the Field

Across the content reviewed, there were **several definitions used in the field**. For our review of literature and content, we used the following:

- **Youth:** young people ages 13-25

- **Homelessness:** the situation of a youth living on the street, in shelters, or transitional housing…[or] in other precarious housing situations that are outside of HUD's homeless definition (e.g., couch surfing)

- **Approach:** a broad category of programs and/or interventions that share a set of principles, aims, or practices for addressing youth homelessness

Qualitative Data Collection Approach

In our qualitative data collection, we spoke with individuals from four groups. First, we conducted "rapid" (30-minute) interviews with **adjacent system partners** from institutions that may not be operating within a continuum of care's (CoC) leadership but play important roles in preventing and monitoring risks for youth homelessness (e.g., health providers, foster care, education, youth justice system). Second, our interviews with **CoC and service provider leaders** lifted up the perspectives of core agencies, nonprofits, and providers comprising the work of local CoCs. Third, we engaged **intermediaries and state agencies** in a 90-minute focus group to hear from institutions providing support to multiple youth homelessness nonprofits in conjunction with state agencies. Finally, we engaged **youth and young adults with lived experience of homelessness** in 60-minute interviews to better understand their needs, experiences, and feedback about how the current system and its strategies operate. We provide a brief summary of the sample size for each of these groups in Table 1 below.

Table 1 | Qualitative Sample Characteristics

	Adjacent System Partners	CoC and Provider Leaders	Intermediary and State Agencies	Youth with Lived Experience	Total
Invited	15	19	3	6	**43**
Interviewed	12	12	3	6	**33**
Response Rate	80% (12 of 15)	63% (12 of 19)	100% (3 of 3)	100% (6 of 6)	77% (33 of 43)