

Community Solutions

The Current State of Youth Homelessness Approaches: *Insights and Observations*

November 2024

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Case Management

Definition

Case management approaches aim to provide youth with a more comprehensive set of coordinated services through thorough assessment, planning/goal-setting, and assistance. To distinguish these services from housing-related services, we focus here on evaluations of non-housing case management interventions, which typically involve case management and mentoring without an explicit focus on housing.

Mapping to Youth Journey

- Before Homelessness
- Entering the System
- Navigating the System
- Exiting the System
- Sustaining Stability

Example Programs/Models

- **Promotor Pathway Program.** This program matches youth with a “promotor” who offers mentorship, advocacy, and intensive case management.
- **Intensive Case Management.** This intervention usually provides 1:1 support for youth with a case manager and usually is for a shorter, time-delineated period.
- **Houvast Program.** This indirect strengths-based program focuses on youths’ strengths and supporting the strengthening of their self-reliance and autonomy.





Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes

← Confidence in Evidence for Specific Outcomes →

Low High

- **Summary:** Eight evaluations have been conducted on non-housing case management approaches, including four randomized trials. While the set of evaluations suggests effectiveness for housing stability, employment outcomes, substance use, and mental health, study designs were highly varied, and several evaluations resulted in mixed or conflicting findings.
- **Future Research:** Future evaluations on case management may benefit from greater design controls related to both the dosage of the interventions and the unit of analysis (e.g., evaluating programs versus evaluating capacity building for case management).

OUTCOMES

-  Housing Stability
-  Employment/Wages
-  Substance Use
-  Mental Health

Implications

- As case management approaches leverage multiple services, there may be opportunities to explore the services Community Solutions communities offer **to consolidate recommended practices for the field.**
- Exploring **types of services offered in communities that have made significant reductions** may deepen our understanding of if, how, and why case management approaches reduce youth homelessness.

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Diversion Approaches

Definition

Direct funding initiatives are designed to help alleviate financial barriers for both service providers and the youth they support. These interventions typically provide money directly to service providers and eligible youth who are either experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. Conditional programs typically entail specific requirements for who can receive the funding and how it is used, while unconditional programs can be used for a wide variety of purposes by youth and their service providers.

Mapping to Youth Journey

- Before Homelessness
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Example Programs/Models

- **Centralized Diversion Funds.** This program provides flexible payments to divert young people from homelessness within 30 days or prevent them from experiencing homelessness.
- **Unconditional Cash Transfer Programs.** These programs provide direct cash transfers to youth without any required conditions.
- **Conditional Cash Transfer Programs.** These programs provide direct cash transfers to youth on the condition that they meet certain requirements (e.g., school attendance).





Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes

← Confidence in Evidence for Specific Outcomes →

Low High

- **Summary:** Despite recent growth in popularity, the evidence base for direct funding initiatives in the US is substantially smaller than it is internationally. That said, a small number of rigorous evaluations revealed some mixed findings with promising results for poverty reduction, mental health, decreased homelessness, and substance use.
- **Future Research:** One challenge with evaluating direct funding initiatives is that they are usually tied to specific aims, meaning that each individual intervention may work for one outcome but not others. More research is needed to understanding the collective effect of direct funding initiatives.

OUTCOMES

-  Decreased Homelessness
-  Poverty Reduction
-  Mental Health
-  Substance Use

Implications

- Community Solutions may be able to work with current partners using a direct funding initiatives (e.g., A Way Home Washington) to lay the foundation for **evaluating the impact of such work.**
- Supporting work to leverage a direct funding approach **will likely necessitate policy and advocacy efforts** to secure the necessary funding for homeless youth and their service providers.

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Housing-Related Support

Definition

Stable housing is crucial for preventing, reducing, and ending youth homelessness. Housing-related support approaches work toward this aim by providing youth with avenues to some form of housing assistance. Typically, these approaches leverage services that support transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, subsidized housing, or other types of housing assistance to youth.

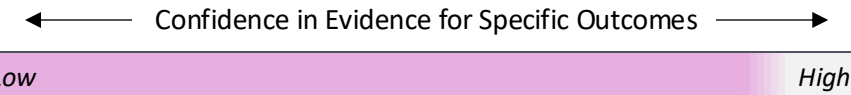
Mapping to Youth Journey

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Example Programs/Models

- **Transitional Living Programs.** These programs, a congregate housing model for youth, provide safe and stable living accommodations and supportive services to youth for up to 21 months.
- **Independent Living Programs.** These programs support young people leaving care and typically focus on independent living and personal development.
- **Supportive Housing Programs.** These programs typically provide youth with immediate housing and support from a multidisciplinary treatment team or intensive case management.

Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes



- **Summary:** Several evaluations have been conducted on independent living programs or transitional or supportive housing models. Evidence from both randomized trials and quasi-experimental designs suggests transitional or supportive housing increases housing stability; evidence from evaluations of independent living programs suggests effectiveness for employment, mental health, and social connection outcomes.
- **Future Research:** High attrition rates across these evaluations make interpretation difficult. Future research should explore ways to limit attrition in evaluations of these models.

OUTCOMES

-  **Housing Stability**
-  **Employment/Wages**
-  **Mental Health**
-  **Social Connections**

Implications

- Given the wide variety of housing models used for youth homelessness (transitional, supportive, independent living, host homes, etc.), there may be opportunities to explore how **Community Solutions' housing systems** work could map out the typology of housing options for youth, specifically, based on the evidence about which models work for which outcomes.

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Outreach and Service Connection

Definition

Outreach and service connection approaches are designed to identify and connect youth with other service providers that can support them through their experience with a broader set of services. These types of models typically involve the use of drop-in shelters that provide youth with greater flexibility and access to services while navigating the homeless response system.

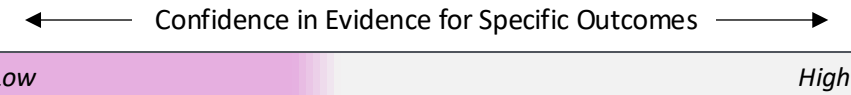
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Example Programs/Models

- **Strengths-Based Street Outreach.** This intervention aims to identify and engage youth experiencing homelessness using a strengths-based approach.
- **Drop-In Center Connections.** These services are sites that provide youth with a place to rest, receive food, and/or shower; they also often connect youth to other more intensive services.
- **National Safe Place Program.** This early-prevention and outreach program connects youth experiencing a crisis to immediate support.

Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes



- **Summary:** Despite the prevalence of outreach and service connection approaches in the field, few formal evaluations have been conducted on interventions in this space. Evidence from evaluations of two variations of strengths-based street outreach suggests possible benefits for substance use, depression, and housing stability, but the evaluation design lacked a control group, making it difficult to speak to causation.
- **Future Research:** Much more research is needed on evaluations of outreach and service connection approaches to be able to speak more conclusively to their effectiveness for preventing, reducing, and ending youth homelessness.

- OUTCOMES**
- Substance Use
 - Mental Health
 - Housing Stability

Implications

- The limited evidence on a fairly common approach used in the field presents Community Solutions with an opportunity to explore **consolidating the types of outreach and service connection programs its current communities use** for addressing youth homelessness and **evaluating the impact of those programs on progress toward functional zero.**

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Family Strengthening Models

Definition

Youth homelessness is intimately connected to the notion of family cohesion and stability. As such, family strengthening approaches work to address youth homelessness by explicitly targeting and engaging the families of either youth at risk of becoming homeless or those seeking to reunify with family members. These approaches typically involve a therapeutic approach to strengthening family dynamics for youth.

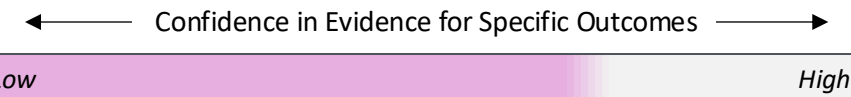
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Example Programs/Models

- **Functional Family Therapy.** This intervention uses cognitive and behavioral intervention strategies to address risk and protective factors within and outside a youth's family.
- **Ecologically-Based Family Therapy.** This intervention uses family systems techniques and aims to address youths' immediate needs, resolve crisis, and strengthen family functioning.
- **Home Free Program.** This program is a trauma-sensitive family reunification intervention and was designed with a youth empowerment framework.

Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes



- **Summary:** Six family-based interventions have been evaluated with highly rigorous, randomized trial designs. These interventions all included services in either the home or an office setting, clinical training, multiple sessions, and graduate-level therapists. Often seen as a “first line of defense”, family-based interventions have shown effectiveness for some dimensions of mental health, family cohesion, and risky/unhealthy behaviors; there is also some preliminary evidence of improvements in housing stability from lower-quality evaluation designs.
- **Future Research:** Despite the evidence of effectiveness of these programs, more research is needed to understand the effect of these approaches for reducing actual homelessness among youth.

Implications

- Given the prevalence of family-related trauma for homeless youth, family-based models need to take extra measures to ensure that youth are not exposed to **past trauma and re-traumatization**.
- There may be opportunities to explore how **Community Solutions' emphasis on cross-sector partnerships** could be brought into family re-unification efforts with adjacent sector partners.

OUTCOMES

- Family Cohesion
- Risky/Unhealthy Behaviors
- Internalizing Behaviors

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Coaching and Counseling

Definition

Individual counseling and treatment programs are designed to target specific mental and physical health concerns that are common among homeless youth. This may include a focus on depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance use/abuse, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and other mental and physical health concerns. Generally, these approaches primarily focus on providing youth with non-housing, non-family-based therapeutic counseling or other health-related treatments.

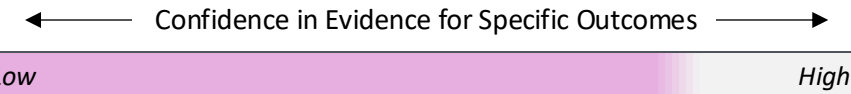
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Example Programs/Models

- **Brief Motivational Interviewing.** This intervention is a goal-oriented process of communicating with youth to strengthen their intrinsic motivation for behavior change.
- **Community Reinforcement Approach.** This intervention is a psychosocial treatment approach that focuses on supporting youth to better engage in their community.
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.** This intervention is a set of therapeutic strategies that aim to change youths' maladaptive cognitions to bring about changes in emotional distress and behaviors.

Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes



- **Summary:** Over 20 randomized trials and quasi-experimental evaluations have been conducted on individual counseling and treatment for homeless youth. Most were short-term, ranging from one week to six months, and varied in terms of intensity, ranging from one to 24 sessions. Across the evaluations, there was strong evidence for improvements in mental health, internalizing behaviors, substance use, and risky behaviors.
- **Future Research:** Future research should focus on closing the gap in evidence on how these types of interventions relate to actual homelessness, housing stability, and longer-term trajectories for youth.

OUTCOMES

- ! Risky/Unhealthy Behaviors
- 🧠 Internalizing Behaviors
- 📺 Substance Use
- 🧠 Mental Health

Implications

- Since individual counseling and treatment approaches often rely on healthcare providers, CoCs may benefit from integrating **health institutions in their coalition of system partners.**
- As few evaluations explore how counseling and treatment reduce actual homelessness, **Community Solutions could explore opportunities to evaluate** the impact of this approach for its communities.

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Economic and Employment Support

Definition

Economic and employment support approaches are designed to help homeless youth either acquire or improve employment and thereby increase their financial earnings. These types of interventions often leverage efforts that couple mental health services with vocational learning about avenues to complete education, pursue different career paths, and improve financial stability.

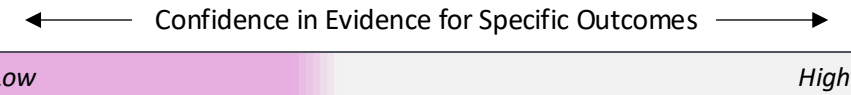
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Example Programs/Models

- **Social Enterprise Intervention.** This intervention uses a community economic development and empowerment-focused approaches to support youth employment and business development.
- **Individual Placement Support.** This intervention provides youth with classroom-based and experiential learning along with mental health services.
- **Workforce Development Programs.** These programs typically focus on strengthening youths' job-related skills to support them in the process of finding employment.

Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes



- **Summary:** Four evaluations on economic and employment approaches have been conducted on the social enterprise intervention and individual placement support using comparison groups and longitudinal data collection. Evidence suggests that these programs may improve employment outcomes, mental health, and family cohesion, but effects were relatively short-term and neither approach outperformed the other.
- **Future Research:** Much more research is needed on economic and employment approaches for addressing youth homelessness, both in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of new and different interventions and the use of actual homelessness as an outcome variable.

Implications

- Given the evidence gap on these approaches, **Community Solutions could explore opportunities to evaluate** the impacts of economic and employment interventions on progress toward functional zero for any current Community Solutions communities leveraging these services for youth specifically.

OUTCOMES

- Employment/Wages
- Mental Health
- Family Cohesion

LANDSCAPE SCAN | Focusing on Prevention

Definition

Prevention is a crucial first step in responding to youth homelessness. Prevention-based approaches are intentionally designed to not target youth that are currently experiencing homelessness, but rather to divert those youth from entering the homeless response system altogether. They may also be used to support the prevention of returning to homelessness after exiting the system. These approaches typically identify at-risk youth and provide supports like casework or counseling.

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Example Programs/Models

- [YV LifeSet](#). This program provides intensive case management with supportive services to youth who transitioned out of the youth justice system or foster care.
- **Behavior Analysis Services Program (BASP)**. This program uses data analytics to identify predictive runaway behaviors among youth in foster care and provide preventative support.
- [The Geelong Project \(TGP\)](#). This program, evaluated in Australia, implemented a homelessness prevention model among schools and community organizations which included universal screening for student risk of homelessness.

Evidence of Effectiveness for Key Outcomes

← Confidence in Evidence for Specific Outcomes →

Low High

- **Summary:** Three evaluations of prevention-based approaches have been conducted, including one randomized trial, one quasi-experimental design, and one single-group time series design. These evaluations showed small but promising effects on housing stability and reduced homelessness.
- **Future Research:** Despite these promising results, the limited number of evaluations coupled with the lack of control or comparison groups for two of the three evaluations reveal an opportunity for further, more rigorous evaluations of this approach.

OUTCOMES

-  Housing Stability
-  Decreased Homelessness

Implications

- There may be opportunities for Community Solutions to explore how to leverage its more advanced data capabilities to support communities in using **predictive analytics** to identify at-risk youth.
- Prevention-based approaches should be **tailored to the contexts in which they are implemented** (e.g., youth justice, foster care, education) so that services are appropriate for the needs of youth.