



Spring 2024

## **POLICY BRIEF** RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH ACT

Every year, 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness on their own. 700,000 are ages 13 to 17 and 3.5 million are young adults ages 18 to 25.<sup>1</sup>

All of us need support on the journey to adulthood, but for youth experiencing homelessness, that climb can be particularly steep. As young people become adults, they need to be plugged into support networks that power their growth and success, but young people in homeless situations are often disconnected from these networks.

The federal government provides targeted support for youth experiencing homelessness primarily through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), a program administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Other federal programs that support youth experiencing homelessness include the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Act and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Youth Homeless Demonstration Program.

RHYA became law in 1974 as Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act to provide youth-specific community-based services as an alternative to involvement in policing and incarceration systems for youth status offenders (a noncriminal act that is a violation of the law because of the youth's age, e.g. running away, staying out past curfew, truancy). Instead of a punitive response, RHYA programs connect young people with support services that promote positive youth development, create healthy connections with caring adults, and aid in life skills development, education, and employment. It was last reauthorized in 2018 (P.L. 115-385).



# About RHYA

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RHYA provides base funding to communities across the country to develop community-based housing and service responses to youth and young adult homelessness. These local systems of care are based on the unique needs of each region, their available resources, and local priorities. Unfortunately, RHYA programs have been chronically underfunded since their inception, despite these programs costing less to operate than other systems that many youth experiencing homelessness encounter.<sup>2, 3</sup>

## RHYA Provides Three Primary Grants Directly to Communities

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**Basic Center Program (BCP)** provides short-term crisis housing (up to 21 days) with essential needs such as food, personal hygiene products, and clothing; connection to counseling services and strength-based family interventions to reunify youth under the age of 18 with their families when safe and appropriate; and aftercare services to ensure youth remain in safe and stable housing.



**Transitional Living Program (TLP) and Maternity Group Homes (MGH)** provide long-term housing for youth ages 16-22, coupled with supportive services such as employment, education, and mental health services to help youth achieve successful and sustainable self-sufficiency. Maternity Group Homes support pregnant and parenting youth experiencing homelessness.



**Street Outreach Program (SOP)** funds street outreach and drop-in centers for youth workers to connect with young people to prevent them from being sexually abused or trafficked, and to refer young people to housing and essential services.

## RHYA Also Allows Funding for

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- National Communications System (NCS), also known as the National Runaway Safeline (NRS), to facilitate communication between service providers, runaway youth, and their families
- National, regional, and local training and technical support for grantees
- Program evaluations
- Demonstration grants, including rural-specific demonstration projects
- National research on the prevalence, needs, and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness
- Federal coordination relating to the health, education, employment, and housing of these youth

The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) is a toll-free hotline, online, and offline service that works with youth and families in crisis. NRS is funded through RHYA. Using a 24/7 hotline, texting service, online chat, email service, and online forum, NRS supports youth who have run away, who are at risk of running away, or are otherwise in crisis; supports the parents and guardians of these youth; provides training and technical assistance to homeless youth providers; and offers training and raises awareness to help prevent youth from running away and to end youth homelessness. NRS makes over 100,000 connections with youth, guardians, and service providers each year.

## Who is Eligible for Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Programs?

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RHYA defines eligible participants as follows:

- **Homeless youth**, for the purposes of the BCP, includes individuals under the age of 18 (or older, if permitted by state or local law) who cannot live safely with a relative or other alternative living arrangement.
- **Homeless youth**, for the purposes of TLP and MGH, includes individuals ages 16 through 22 who cannot live safely with a relative or other alternative living arrangement. Twenty-three year olds may take part if they enter the program before age 22, and meet other requirements.
- **Runaway youth** includes individuals under the age of 18 who absent themselves from their home or legal residence at least overnight without the permission of their parents or legal guardians.
- **Street youth** are runaway or homeless youth who spend a significant amount of time on the street or in other areas that increase the youth's risk for sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, prostitution, or drug abuse.
- **Youth At Risk of Separation from the Family** are youth under the age of 18 who have a history of running away; whose parent, guardian, or custodian is not willing to provide for their basic needs; or who are at risk of entering the child welfare or juvenile justice systems due to the family's inability to meet the youth's needs as a result of insufficient availability of services.

There is not one uniform definition of homelessness across federal agencies and programs. Program definitions are very important because they determine who can receive support from those programs, and are used to guide how much federal funding is allocated to address homelessness. Contradictory and narrow definitions of homelessness can prevent young people from accessing shelter, housing, and support services, and have made it extremely difficult to complete an accurate count of just how many young people in our country need access to housing options and supportive services.

## Impact of Homelessness on Youth

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Youth experiencing homelessness frequently lack access to essential networks of support needed for healthy development. By not offering support during this pivotal time in a young person's development, we risk setting up our youth and communities for long-term consequences including increased rate of homelessness and increased economic burdens. Furthermore, we risk deepening disparities between marginalized groups, who are disproportionately affected by homelessness.



## Racial and Social Inequities

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Many factors contribute to homelessness among young people, but research shows that specific subpopulations of youth and young adults face a higher risk for homelessness:<sup>4</sup>

- Black youth face an 83% increased risk over their white peers.
- Hispanic youth face a 33% increased risk over their white peers.
- LGBTQ+ youth face a 120% increased risk in comparison to non-LGBTQ+ youth.
- Young, unmarried parents are twice as likely to experience homelessness compared to their non-parenting peers.
- Youth without a high school diploma or GED are four and a half times more likely to experience homelessness than peers who completed high school.
- Youth whose parents or caregivers have died face an increased risk for homelessness.
- Youth involved in the foster care, juvenile justice, or criminal justice systems are more likely to experience homelessness.

Racial and social inequities, including discrimination and economic inequality, are reflected in the youth and young adult homeless population. As such, **young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be people of color or identify as part of an additional marginalized group.** We need to sharpen our focus on the inequities in our systems and in the implementation of programs and policies to fully support all youth as they become adults.

## Increased Likelihood of Experiencing Homelessness as an Adult

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Studies have found that childhood and adolescent experiences can have a significant impact on an individual's likelihood to experience homelessness as an adult. These factors include unstable housing during childhood, running away as an adolescent, and dropping out of school.<sup>5</sup> The experience of homelessness as a young person can have severe long-term consequences, negatively impacting an individual's ability to maintain stable housing as an adult.<sup>6</sup>

Cities across the country have conducted in-depth surveys of their homeless constituents and have found that many of their chronically homeless adult populations first experienced homelessness as a young person. In Los Angeles, 20 percent of unsheltered homeless adults reported that they first experienced homelessness when they were under age 18, and an additional 25 percent reported that they first experienced homelessness when they were between the ages of 18 to 24.<sup>7</sup> In Seattle, 22 percent of adults experiencing homelessness reported that they first experienced homelessness when they were under 18, and 26 percent experienced homelessness for the first time between 18 to 25 years old.<sup>8</sup> Statewide surveys from Minnesota found that 28 percent of adults experiencing homelessness first experienced it under age 18, and an additional 24 percent between ages 18-24.<sup>9</sup>

This data spotlights that **the experiences of being homeless for many chronically homeless adults first began when they were under the age of 25.** Knowing this, it becomes clear that increasing investments in housing and support services that target young people under age 25 are necessary (and most practical) to reduce chronic homelessness in adults. The severe lack of investment in RHYA works directly against what is needed: to support youth experiencing homelessness' healthy development into adulthood to in turn reduce the number of chronically homeless adults in America.

## Long-Term Economic Effects

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Providing young people experiencing homelessness with developmentally appropriate and effective housing and service interventions can reduce greater, long-term economic burdens on federal, state, and local governments. Investing in young people as they transition into adulthood helps ensure they can join the competitive workforce as contributing taxpayers, experience the benefits of socioeconomic mobility, and participate in their communities as civically engaged individuals. Alternatively, not investing in support services for young people experiencing homelessness can increase the likelihood that their homelessness will extend into adulthood; increase the likelihood that they will have contact with juvenile and criminal justice systems;<sup>10</sup> and increase the likelihood of substance use and poor mental health outcomes,<sup>11</sup> addressing all of which costs a significant amount across different agencies and programs.

Research has found that the real cost of youth homelessness for taxpayers is an estimated \$24,326 per year, per individual, and \$351,985 over the lifetime of that individual.<sup>12</sup> The social cost of youth homelessness, which includes other associated costs such as lost earnings, lost tax payments, public crime expenditures, victim costs, welfare support programs, excess tax burden, and public housing support, is an estimated \$26,433 per year, per individual, and \$869,647 over the lifetime of that individual.<sup>13</sup> If we apply the annual social cost per youth of \$26,433 to the 4.2 million American youth who experience homelessness every year, the taxpayer burden is over \$111 billion per year. Over the lifetime of those 4.2 million youth, the economic burden of homelessness and its related social costs is over \$3.6 trillion.

Through increased investments to RHYA and other youth-serving programs, we can connect youth experiencing homelessness with the supports, services, and systems they need to exit homelessness and lead successful lives. These reconnected youth will then have the opportunity to become part of the solution to ending homelessness, and can contribute to their community's wellbeing.

## Funding for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

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RHYA is not adequately funded to meet the needs of our young people. The funding levels appropriated to the RHYA program each year are far from supporting the large number of youth in need of either short- or long-term support and housing. Further, the annual allocation each RHYA grantee receives is not enough to cover the full expense of providing the housing and services required to support healthy development in all young people.

**Increasing RHYA's authorized amount to at least \$304 million will enable programs to support more youth with short- and long-term services.** When institutions and systems work together to address homelessness, we have a more robust economy. When all youth have the opportunity to succeed, they reach higher for their own wellbeing, avoid intergenerational poverty, and build stronger communities.

### Focusing on Prevention

The Runaway and Homeless Youth-Prevention Demonstration Program (RHY-PDP) was instituted in Fiscal Year 2023, and awarded \$350,000 grants to 11 community-based organizations across the country to implement programs that prevent youth homelessness. These organizations identify youth and young adults at risk of becoming homeless and connect them with services necessary to prevent homelessness. In Fiscal Year 2024, RHY-PDP will fund up to 10 new organizations. All RHY-PDP recipients will be evaluated after a three-year period. Prevention and early intervention is critical to ending youth homelessness, and to ensuring that young people never have to experience the potentially life-altering effects of homelessness.

**Table 1: RHYA Spending Per Youth Experiencing Homelessness**

| Fiscal Year (FY)              | Funding Amount | Number of Grants Awarded     | Total Spending Divided by the 4.2 million Youth in Need |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|---|
| FY 2020                       | \$132 M        | 672 <sup>14</sup>            | \$31 per young person/year                              |
| FY 2021                       | \$137 M        | 682 <sup>15</sup>            | \$33 per young person/year                              |
| FY 2022                       | \$140 M        | 658 <sup>16</sup>            | \$33.3 per young person/year                            |
| FY 2023                       | \$146 M        | 657 <sup>17</sup>            | \$35 per young person/year                              |
| FY 2024                       | \$146 M        | 791 (expected) <sup>18</sup> | \$35 per young person/year                              |
| <b>NN4Y's FY 2025 request</b> | \$304 M        | 1,300                        | \$71 per young person/year                              |

**Table 2: Funding for RHYA Programs and Funding Requests for the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act (RHYTPA)**

| RHYA Programs  | FY 2020 <sup>19</sup> | FY 2021 <sup>20</sup> | FY 2022 <sup>21</sup> | FY 2023 <sup>22</sup> | FY 2024 <sup>23</sup> | President's Budget FY 2025 <sup>24</sup> | NN4Y FY25 Request                                 | RHYTPA Bill Language                                |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| Basic Center Program (BCP)                                       | \$63 M                | \$64 M                | 120.3 M               | \$66 M                | \$66 M                | \$66 M                                   | \$100 M (would fund approx 400 BCPs)              | \$100 M (would fund approx 400 BCPs)                |
| Transitional Living Program (TLP) and Maternity Group Home (MGH) | \$51 M                | \$53 M                | 120.3 M               | \$59 M                | \$59 M                | \$59 M                                   | \$125 M (would fund approx 500 TLPs/MGHs)         | \$125 M (would fund approx 500 TLPs/MGHs)           |
| Street Outreach Program (SOP)                                    | \$19 M                | \$20 M                | 20 M                  | \$21 M                | \$21 M                | \$21 M                                   | \$75 M (would fund approx 500 SOPs)               | \$75 M (would fund approx 500 SOPs)                 |
| Periodic Estimate  | -                     | -                     | -                     | -                     | -                     | -  | \$4 M   | \$2 M   |
| Prevention Services Program                                      | -                     | -                     | -                     | -                     | -                     | -  | -   | \$67.5 M  |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>\$132.4 M</b>      | <b>\$136.8 M</b>      | <b>\$140.3 M</b>      | <b>\$146.3 M</b>      | <b>\$146.3 M</b>      | <b>\$146.3 M</b>                         | <b>\$304 M (would fund approx 1,400 programs)</b> | <b>\$369.5 M (would fund approx 1,400 programs)</b> |

# Performance of RHYA Grantees

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The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) requires that RHYA grantees collect data to assess the outcomes experienced by youth who accessed RHYA-funded programs.<sup>25</sup>

## Basic Center Program (BCP)

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BCPs provides short-term crisis housing (up to 21 days) for youth in need. They also connect youth to counseling services and strength-based family interventions to reunify youth under the age of 18 with their families when safe and appropriate, and provide aftercare services to ensure youth remain in safe and stable housing.

In FY 2022, national outcomes for BCPs were as follows:

- 87 percent of youth participants had a safe exit rate, which is discharge from the program into an immediate living situation that is both safe and appropriate (one of 28 specified living situations). The FY22 target rate for this measure was 91 percent.
- 68 percent of youth participants attended school regularly, graduated from high school, or obtained a GED at exit. The FY22 target rate for this measure was 71 percent.
- 29 percent of youth participants were employed or looking for work at exit. The FY22 target rate was exceeded for this measure.

## Transitional Living Program (TLP)

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TLPs provide long-term housing for youth ages 16-22, coupled with supportive services such as employment, education, and mental health to help the youth achieve successful and sustainable self-sufficiency. Maternity group homes support pregnant and parenting youth experiencing homelessness.

In FY 2022, national outcomes for TLPs were as follows:

- 91 percent of youth participants had a safe exit rate. The FY22 target rate was met for this measure.
- 70 percent of youth participants attended school regularly, graduated from high school, or obtained a GED at exit. The FY22 target rate was exceeded for this measure.
- 82 percent of youth participants were employed or looking for work at exit. The FY22 target rate was exceeded for this measure.

## Street Outreach Program (SOP)

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SOPs fund street outreach and drop-in centers for youth workers to connect young people with effective services. In FY 2022, 71 percent of youth contacted by SOPs engaged in a deliberate case plan or client assessment, a 3 percent increase over the previous year. The FY22 target for this measure was greatly exceeded.



## National Communications System (NCS)

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The NCS program is a toll-free hotline, online, and offline service that connects youth with their families, legal guardians, and service providers.

In FY 2022, national outcomes for NCS were as follows:

- 74 percent of connections were from youth in crisis.
- 20 percent of connections were from parents, family members, or other caring adults.
- 6 percent of connections were from a youth's friend or a social service agency.

Family dynamics are the most common issue reported by youth (77 percent). Emotional abuse was reported at 28 percent, mental health-related issues at 25 percent, and peer and social issues at 17 percent.

## America Can and Should Do Better

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For youth experiencing homelessness, the path to adulthood and a healthy, safe, and successful future can be fraught with difficulties. These individuals need support to find their footing. In order to support our young people as they grow to adulthood, we must invest in them now.

## For FY25, Congress should appropriate at least \$304 million for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

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**Support approximately 1,400 RHYA projects** in communities across the United States that meet our young people where they are. These youth are not eligible for HUD homeless assistance because of HUD's narrow and complex eligibility requirements, and the hidden nature of homelessness among youth.

**Allow approximately 49,034 young people to access housing, and connect with 70,000 youth via street outreach and drop-in centers.** While the current actual need exceeds these numbers, this target would significantly increase our ability to end youth homelessness. It would also put us well on the way to saving the lost \$111 billion per year from the social costs of youth homelessness.

**Ensure that our young people are not left out of national efforts to end homelessness.** The voices of youth with lived experience of homelessness are invaluable as we seek to make policy changes. We must ensure that they are part of all conversations regarding youth homelessness.

**Target \$4 million toward a regular and reliable youth count in FY25.** This count will help update the incidence and prevalence estimate of homeless youth and ensure that federal programs that support homeless youth are well-targeted and grounded in evidence-based practices. Given the heightened need for services, the \$4 million should be directed from the Secretary's budget to ensure robust RHYA funding and no reduction from program grants.

## The 118th Congress should pass the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act (RHYTPA)

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RHYTPA will reauthorize this vital program and improve RHYA in the following ways:

- Extend the allowable length of stays in BCPs from 21 to 30 days (or longer, as state law allows), and increase the number of allowable beds per facility to more than 20.
- Ensure young people have access to completion assistance for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.
- Increase the age eligibility for TLP services to include individuals up to the age of 25.
- Improve comprehensive nondiscriminatory practices across all RHYA funded programs.
- Include a prevention services program in RHYA funding to prevent youth from experiencing homelessness.
- Ensure that RHYA programs provide training to their staff on human trafficking, trauma, sexual abuse, and assault.
- Increase the capacity of BCPs and TLPs to conduct outreach and offer services to victims of trafficking and sexual abuse, as practicable.
- **Increase the total authorized appropriations level to at least \$300 million, but ideally \$369.5 million annually.**

### TO LEARN MORE

- Visit <https://nn4youth.org/policy-advocacy/rhya-reauthorization>
- Contact Darla Bardine at [darla.bardine@nn4youth.org](mailto:darla.bardine@nn4youth.org)

# Endnotes

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# Evolution of Federal Policy on Runaway and Homeless Youth

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| Children's Bureau established to investigate and report on all matters related to children's welfare. | 1912 | Social Security Act (P.L. 74-231) is enacted and for the first time, the federal government provides grants to states for child welfare. | 1935 | 1950 | Social Security Act is amended (P.L. 81-734) to permit use of federal child welfare funds for the return of a runaway child under the age of 16. | 1954 | Division of Juvenile Delinquency is established in the Children's Bureau. | 1954 | 1955 | Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency first examines problem of runaway youth. | 1955 | Social Security Act (P.L. 85-840) to provide federal funds for the return of a runaway child under the age of 18. | 1958 | 1961 | The Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act (P.L. 87-274) is enacted drawing on the recommendation of the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime regarding the economic and social underpinnings of delinquency. | 1968 | The Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act (P.L. 90-445) is enacted which provides funding to four runaway youth centers. | 1968 | 1970 | The Youth Development and Delinquency Prevention Administration (the predecessor organization to the Family and Youth Services Bureau) is created within HHS to provide leadership in youth issues. | 1970 | 1972 | Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Delinquency holds two-day hearings on problems facing runaway youth. Senate passes runaway legislation, but House does not act. | 1972 | 1974 | The Runaway Youth Act as Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (P.L. 93-415) is enacted. The legislation establishes what is now referred to as the Basic Center Program. | 1974 | 1977 | Congress and the President reauthorize the Runaway Youth Act (P.L. 95-115) and broadens its scope to include "otherwise homeless youth." | 1977 | 1988 | Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized (P.L. 100-690). A provision is added to establish the Transitional Living Program. | 1988 | 1994 | Street Outreach Program is established by the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act (P.L. 103-322). | 1994 | 1999 | The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized (P.L. 106-71). Funding and administration of Basic Center Program and Transitional Living Program merged under the Consolidated Runaway and Homeless Youth Program. | 1999 | 2003 | The Runaway, Homeless, and Missing Children Protection Act (P.L. 108-96) is enacted to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act for FY 2004 and FY 2008. | 2003 | 2010 | The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) releases its National Strategic Plan to End Homelessness, which includes the goal of ending homelessness for youth by 2020. | 2010 | 2015 | Runaway and Homeless Youth program grantees begin reporting demographic and outcome data on program participants to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a database used by homeless assistance providers that receive funding through HUD. | 2015 | 2018 | The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (P.L. 110-378) is enacted to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act for FY 2009 through FY 2013. | 2018 |
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Source: Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2019). Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs (CRS Report No. RL33785). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33785/55>