



Creating The Healthiest Nation: Prioritizing Youth at Risk of Disconnection

“OPPORTUNITY YOUTH” refers to teenagers and young adults ages 16–24 in the United States who are disconnected from both school and employment.¹ Research has shown that disconnected youth are at a much higher risk for various long-term social, emotional, behavioral and physical health problems.² Additional information about the public health impacts of disconnection can be found in “Creating the Healthiest Nation: Opportunity Youth.”³

While approximately 11% of young people fit the criteria for opportunity youth in the U.S., youth from historically underserved populations — such as young people who are LGBTQ+, homeless or in foster care — are disproportionately disconnected, with significantly higher rates of disconnection for youth who are also Black, Native and Latinx.⁴ These youth tend to have less access to resources and supportive home and school environments; as a result, they also face higher rates of substance use, suspension and expulsion, all of which puts them at greater risk of disconnection from school and work.⁵ It is imperative that these at-risk youth are prioritized with regard to support systems, policies and practices that can help foster re-engagement and close the opportunity gap.

DISCONNECT IS A RISK MULTIPLIER

Compared with their connected peers, opportunity youth are...

2X as likely to live in poverty⁶

3X as likely to develop depression & other mental health disorders⁷

5X as likely to interact with the criminal justice system⁸

10X as likely to leave high school without a diploma⁹

LGBTQ+ YOUTH

LGBTQ+ youth are significantly more likely than their straight and cisgender peers to experience bullying and harassment related to their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. The compounding effects of targeted bullying, peer victimization and social isolation among LGBTQ+ youth not only takes a significant toll on their mental and physical health, but often leads to avoidance of school. Students who experienced higher levels of victimization in school due to their sexual orientation or gender identity are also nearly twice as likely to abstain from pursuing any post-secondary education.¹⁰

The antagonistic school environments that LGBTQ+ youth face have direct implications on their development and connectivity to both school and work environments. To address the problem, it is critical that public health professionals prioritize policies, practices and local-level interventions that denounce all forms of bullying, harassment and victimization of LGBTQ+ youth. These actions will help foster healthy school environments that protect and affirm the identities and rights of all students.



“I feel as if the school tries to seem like a safe place, but [...] the anti-bullying policy doesn’t say a thing about LGBT youth. [...] It leaves me somewhat apprehensive that [reporting] will get turned right back on me.”¹¹

—ANONYMOUS RESPONDENT, GLSEN 2011 NATIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY

CURRENT ISSUES

71% of LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing bullying, harassment or discrimination related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹² As a result, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to spend time away from school as a mechanism of coping or avoiding bullying, placing them at higher risk of substance use, sexually transmitted infections, mental health disorders and chronic long-term illnesses than their straight and cisgender peers.¹³

In 2019, an estimated 71% of LGBTQ+ youth reported feeling sad or hopeless for at least two weeks and 39% reported seriously considering or contemplating suicide, but existing national data sets are insufficient to produce a comprehensive population estimate of LGBTQ+ youth experiences.¹⁴

Over half of LGBTQ+ students feel school staff are not adequately trained or prepared to deal with issues that arise as a result of bullying or victimization. Over 60% of LGBTQ+ students who reported a bullying, victimization or safety concern to school personnel said the school did nothing in response.¹⁵

Only 8% of students report receiving LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education at school and 17% of students report receiving negative content about LGBTQ+ topics from school staff or teachers.¹⁶

Only 13% of students report that their school had a comprehensive policy prohibiting LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment.¹⁷

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The White House should build on the precedent set by the Gender Policy Council to create a freestanding LGBTQ+ policy council aimed at advancing both gender and sexuality equity in nonbinary terms. While taking a whole-of-government approach, the council should place an emphasis on addressing discrimination and harassment on the basis of gender identity, sexual orientation and gender expression in educational settings from preschool through college.

Federal, state, and local governments should expand administration of the Department of Education School Climate Surveys and Youth Risk Behavior Survey to better understand and respond to health and safety risks among LGBTQ+ youth across districts in all states. To facilitate this work, the Department of Education and CDC should ensure the surveys collect complete data on student gender, transgender identification and sexual orientation.

State and local education agencies should mandate and fund professional development for all school staff aimed at increasing their capacity to support LGBTQ+ students, actively work against anti-LGBTQ+ bias among students and staff alike and co-create an inclusive and empowering learning environment for LGBTQ+ youth.

Congress should pass legislation that funds teacher training on sex education, provides grants for comprehensive sex education to public or private schools and explicitly requires that LGBTQ+ youth are included and reflected in all school-based sex education programs.

Congress should pass legislation requiring school districts to adopt codes of conduct specifically prohibiting bullying and harassment targeting LGBTQ+ youth. Such codes should outline clear and effective systems for monitoring, reporting and intervention to protect student safety and wellbeing.

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT: Success of an LGBTQ+-Inclusive Sex Education Curriculum

Developed by Public Health — Seattle & King County in Washington State, the Family Life and Sexual Health (FLASH) Curriculum is comprehensive and evidence-based educational toolkit for students grades 5–12 designed to teach sex education in a way that supports and respects diverse identities and community values.¹⁸ The experiential curriculum actively integrates the sexual health experiences of the LGBTQ+ community in a way that fosters and promotes diversity through interactive lessons and discussion-based scenario activities, and over 90% of students who engage with the FLASH curriculum feel that this structure has enabled them to apply new skills to real life.¹⁹

Several districts have been found to severely undercount the number of homeless youth enrolled in their schools, limiting access to critical protections and services provided by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.



HOMELESS YOUTH

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness as “lack[ing] a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.”²⁰ By this definition, 3.5 million young adults ages 18–25 — 1 in 10 young adults — experience some form of homelessness each year.²¹ Compared to White youth, Black and Latinx youth are 83% and 33% more likely, respectively, to experience homelessness; compared to their straight and cisgender peers, LGBTQ+ youth are more than twice as likely.²² Within the first year of leaving the system, 22% of youth who were previously in foster care experience homelessness.²³

Because they experience significant instability and hardship during such critical developmental years, youth subjected to homelessness face devastating challenges which place them at a greater risk of bullying and harassment, mental health disorders, and social exclusion. Additionally these youth encounter higher rates of food insecurity, unsafe living environments, alcohol and substance abuse and interactions with the criminal justice system than their housing-stable peers, placing them at greater risk of falling behind and ultimately dropping out of school.²⁴ Developing more robust and comprehensive federal policies to address youth homelessness is critically important to reduce youth disconnection.

CURRENT ISSUES

Definitions of youth homelessness, youth eligibility for financial support services and both the accessibility and availability of resources for homeless youth vary across state and local jurisdictions. This makes it difficult for federal oversight programs to streamline and standardize recommendations and policy guidelines.²⁵

Many programs aimed at supporting homeless youth only offer term-limited support services and temporary housing accommodations.

Only 16% of homeless youth feel they have the resources and supports to attend or graduate college within a five-year period.²⁶

Data show that youth homelessness is largely a product of various underlying determinants, including structural racism, poverty and social inequities.²⁷

In recent years, several districts have been found to severely undercount the number of homeless youth enrolled in their schools, limiting access to critical protections and services provided by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. In 2020 alone, an estimated 420,000 fewer homeless students were identified despite evidence of increasing youth homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

HUD and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness should foster robust partnerships at the federal, state and local levels with the goal of establishing a common mission statement on eradicating youth homelessness, uplifting community-based organizations effectively addressing youth homelessness in various contexts; and leveraging data to identify sustainable solutions.

States and tribal territories should increase funding for youth homelessness programs that connect youth with a network of supportive adults, help youth attain long-term affordable housing and offer sustained assistance in accessing critical supports such as health insurance, primary health care, counseling, and re-integration services.

The Department of Education and HUD should work collaboratively to increase school-based services for homeless youth that can help them persist to graduation, including supplementary academic and social supports and coordination of reliable transportation.

Federal, state and local policymakers should increase funding for public health programming that addresses the root causes of youth homelessness and implement upstream interventions. To set the stage for this work, policymakers at all levels can make formal declarations of racism as a public health crisis, identify hyperlocal structural inequities, and provide interagency training on addressing the social determinants of health.

Districts and individual schools should proactively screen students and train all staff to identify youth who are facing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless, but clearly decouple this work from mandatory reporting processes. Local education agencies should also work to strengthen trust with families to reduce barriers to self-reporting of homelessness and resource instability.

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT: Connecticut's 100-Day Challenge to End Youth Homelessness

In partnership with local leaders, community partners and HUD, Connecticut launched a 100-day challenge to end youth homelessness in 2019. Cities across Connecticut worked on initiatives including collaborations with mayors to implement financial literacy programs for youth, youth homelessness diversion plans aimed at connecting students and families with landlords who will support their pursuit of affordable rental housing, and improved connections between homeless youth and employers, mental health services and other critical resources. Connecticut's 100-Day Challenge resulted in stable housing for 397 youth and young adults and a 15% decrease in youth homelessness across the state.²⁹

YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Whether the placement is with relatives or unrelated foster parents, in group homes, emergency shelters, or in independent living homes, foster care should provide a safe, stable and nurturing environment for youth who are temporarily unable to live with their own families. It is evident, however, that youth in foster care face significantly greater roadblocks to success than youth outside of the foster system, including difficulty maintaining ties with biological parents while attempting to build and maintain their lives in foster care. Youth in foster care report frequently missing school due to mandatory court appearances, living with foster caregivers who don't fully understand their needs, and social ostracization leading to anxiety, withdrawal and other mental health concerns.³⁰ It is important that policymakers support and advance programming that strengthens supports for and addresses disparities in the child welfare system to ensure equitable opportunities for youth in foster care.

CURRENT ISSUES

Black children are separated from their families at a far higher rate than their White peers, accounting for 23% of foster youth in 2019 but only 14% of U.S. children under the age of 18. Black children are also less likely to be reunified with their families and more likely to be placed in group homes and ultimately age out.³¹

Up to 56% of youth in foster care experience placement instability due to high turnover rates in foster parenting.³² In addition, a majority of youth in foster care do not feel their foster caregivers offer a source of emotional support and many report feeling "uncertain" or "ambiguous" about their foster caregivers.³³

Most youth in foster care are unprepared to become self-sufficient by the age of 18.³⁴ Youth who remain in foster care until 21 may be more than twice as likely to attend college than foster care youth who age out at 18.³⁵

Structured group homes for foster youth — known as congregate care settings — lead to demonstrably poorer outcomes than family-based settings. Compared to youth in family homes, foster youth in congregate care settings are more likely to drop out of high school³⁶ and experience emotional and physical trauma.³⁷

Youth in foster care have frequently lived through traumatic and disruptive events, placing them at higher risk for mental health disorders and impeding their educational and career readiness, self-efficacy skills and transition into adulthood.³⁸

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

States should pursue — and Congress incentivize — child welfare reforms that provide a safeguard against individual bias and systemic racism, including moving from anonymous to confidential mandated reporting and explicitly excluding circumstances related to poverty from legal definitions of child abuse and neglect.

The Children's Bureau should work with states and tribal territories to heighten the standard of "due diligence" foster programs must meet in identifying and locating relatives or "fictive kin" for children in need of out-of-home placements, and improve screening to ensure a best-fit match between youth and nonrelated foster caregivers when all options for relative placements have been exhausted.

Congress should increase state and local funding to extend foster care programming for youth ages 18 to 21 in order to provide additional support during a critical period of transition for young people, usually from high school to college or the workforce.

Federal, state and local governments should increase funding to support foster youth placements in family homes while simultaneously investing in stronger oversight of and heightened services for youth in congregate care settings.

State and local policymakers should invest in expanding school-based support services and counseling for foster care youth to ensure they have equitable access to comprehensive mental health care.

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT: Every Child A Priority to Improve Foster Care Outcomes

Originating in Kansas in 2010, Every Child A Priority (ECAP) is a data- and research-driven placement-matching process for youth in foster care. ECAP features a database that uses a complex set of algorithms to determine the best-fit match for foster children and foster parents.³⁹ The matching process allows foster families to engage in more informed decision-making and helps ensure the prioritization of youth safety and stability. Research has shown that foster placements guided by ECAP resulted in a 22% improvement in placement stability and a 53-day drop in median time to permanent placement.⁴⁰

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Improving support systems for young people in the U.S. is perhaps one of the greatest investments we can make and it is critically important that public health professionals advance policies and programs aimed at supporting those youth furthest removed from these systems because of their disconnect from school and work. For those looking for a place to start, prioritizing youth who are disproportionately at risk of disconnection — including LGBTQ+, homeless and foster youth — is a solid first step in working upstream to prevent disconnect and strengthening supports for existing opportunity youth.



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