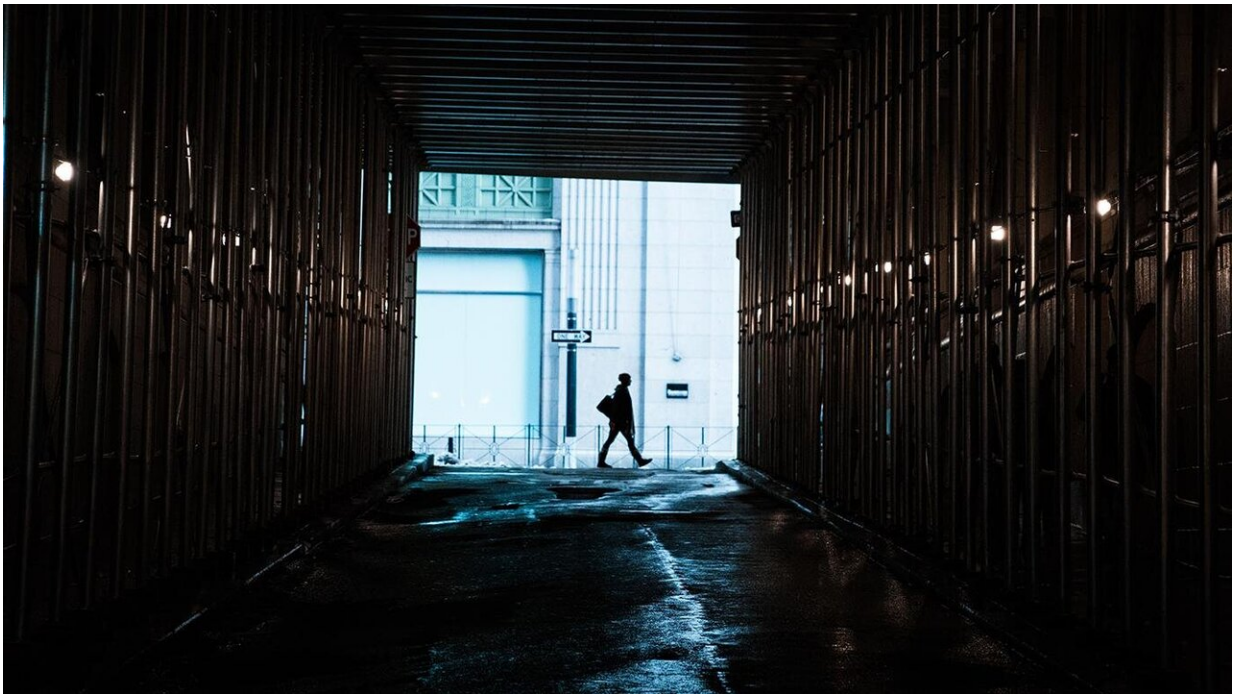


# Family trauma increases likelihood of youth homelessness

June 27 2019, by Jack Wang

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A new report from Chapin Hall uses in-depth interviews to identify factors that lead to youth homelessness. Credit: Ashton Bingham

Each year, more than four million young people in the United States experience some form of homelessness. Identifying exactly when and why that happens could open the door to better solutions.

A new report from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago seeks to do

that, tracing homelessness to factors such as family trauma or the death of a parent or caretaker. Based on in-depth interviews with 215 people between the ages of 13 and 25, the research illuminates some of the root causes of housing insecurity around the country.

"Youth with lived experience of homelessness are a critical source of information about how to address this crisis," said lead researcher Gina Samuels, an associate professor in UChicago's School of Social Service Administration who studies how [young adults](#) are shaped by [foster care](#) and adoption. "We learned from them that their housing instability starts when they are young, and under specific conditions—such as earlier disruptions of home and stability due to family conflict or entering foster care.

"With that knowledge, we now know when and where we have to do more to intervene."

Approximately 35 percent of youth surveyed in the report had experienced the death of at least one parent or primary caregiver. In addition, 44 percent identified their entrance into foster care as the beginning of their housing instability—complicating the popular perception of foster homes as a more stable environment.

Almost half (46 percent) experienced discrimination from members of their family or household, especially LGBTQ and multiracial youth. Nearly a third (31 percent) navigated some sort of mental health issue, while 21 percent mentioned substance abuse as a barrier to obtaining or keeping housing.

The report drew from interviews in Cook County, Philadelphia County, San Diego County, Travis County (Texas) and Walla Walla County (Washington). It is the latest in a series of briefs on youth homelessness from Chapin Hall, which was founded in 1985 to improve the lives of

children through rigorous analysis of data-driven research. Previous Chapin Hall studies found that [one in 10 young adults](#) experience homelessness in a given year, and that LGBTQ youth do so at [twice the rate of their peers](#).

Samuels co-authored the new report with Asst. Prof. Shantá R. Robinson, a fellow SSA faculty member; Sonali Patel, a policy fellow at Chapin Hall; Christine Cerven, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, San Diego; and Susanna R. Curry, an assistant professor at California State University, Sacramento. Samuels also helps lead the Voices of Youth Count, an innovative, national policy research initiative that seeks to better understand and support homeless youth in the country.

The report includes recommendations for lawmakers to better address complex family-based traumas and account for the mobility of [homeless](#) youth, who often move in and out of their hometowns without leaving the state. The authors added specific amendments to the text of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which was first passed in 1974 to establish a federal definition for [homeless youth](#). Last updated in May 2018, the law is due for Congressional reauthorization this year.

"The interviews in this report provide invaluable insight into how and why young people fall into homelessness," said Bryan Samuels, executive director of Chapin Hall. "The vast majority of the [young people](#) we surveyed had experienced trauma and instability at a young age, whether it was entering the foster care system or losing a parent.

"The results reveal clear moments when child welfare officials and social services agencies can intervene to prevent [youth](#) homelessness from happening in the first place."

**More information:** Missed Opportunities in Youth Pathways Through

Homelessness. [www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/...h-Pathways-FINAL.pdf](http://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/...h-Pathways-FINAL.pdf)

Provided by University of Chicago

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