



How to End Homelessness and Build Life Prospects for Young Adults

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Young people between sixteen and twenty-four years old often need to make transitions from living with their families, in state custody or foster care, to living on their own. Such young people, often called “transition-age youth,” need housing and support services. The Obama administration’s “Housing First” effort was based on overwhelming evidence that the provision of safe, stable housing is the only way to end homelessness. Despite this, U.S. housing programs still fail to address pervasive inequalities that leave certain groups, including transition-age youth, disproportionately vulnerable to life-upending gaps in housing.

Current Policies Fail Transition-Age Youth

Transition-age youth are particularly vulnerable when, at age 18, they lose access to a number of forms of state assistance that are reserved for minors. As they deal with the same challenges faced by all young adults, these young people simultaneously lack or lose supports to help pay for housing, find jobs, or pay for college. Many wind up relying on homeless services that treat them as both responsible for their circumstances and incapable of self-determination.

Available housing often requires that youth comply with arbitrary rules and can exclude people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Additionally, many homeless service organizations cannot or will not serve those who do not share their religious or moral beliefs; and some of these service providers rely on coercive tactics to further desired behavioral changes, including threatening the people who use their services with eviction or police referrals for rule violations. Penalizing youth who use drugs or are involved in the sex trade by taking away their housing only makes it harder for them to get out of poverty.

The Importance of Long-Term Stability

Many housing providers require participants to work, pushing them into low-wage jobs. A better approach would be to help youth in transition get access to programs that provide opportunities, build credentials, and facilitate economic mobility. Housing providers should not only reduce or eliminate work requirements for transition-age youth, but also collaborate with policymakers to help young people enroll in high school equivalency or college programs and internships to prepare them for future careers.

Harm reduction is an approach that prioritizes the provision of resources to improve health, rather than mandating behavior change. Homeless youth often need access to harm reduction resources, including safer drug use supplies, non-judgmental therapy for trauma, or drug treatment. For those struggling with addiction or mental illness, permanent housing with support services facilitates the best health outcomes, regardless of whether they are in active treatment.

The most successful transitional housing programs for youth support them in pursuit of their self-identified goals, allowing them to move on with education, credentials and savings that can ease their entry into the general housing market. Larkin Street Youth Services in San Francisco offers dorm-style housing for transition-age youth with on-site food and supportive services. Rather than requiring youth to work low-wage jobs in order to pay “rent,” to the organization, some of Larkin Street’s housing programs allow youth to pay into their own savings accounts, which they can access when they move out of the transitional housing at age 25. Youth who have access to savings and relevant work or educational credentials are better prepared for the private housing market and less likely to experience poverty in the future.

Advocates and policymakers who want to end youth homelessness should start by providing housing. But implementing Housing First requires resources. In San Francisco, California, voters recently passed Proposition C, a measure that will generate funds to house homeless people by taxing the city’s largest corporations. This promising approach should be replicated at the state and federal levels.

How Self-Determination and Harm Reduction Ensure Better Outcomes

Young people thrive when they receive respectful care that bolsters their sense of autonomy and self-determination. But many programs, especially those serving youth who have used drugs or been involved in the sex trade, harm young people by limiting their autonomy and applying punishments. These programs fail to keep the most vulnerable participants stably housed, and in the worst cases can serve as a gateway into the criminal justice system.

In contrast, harm reduction-based programs provide no-strings-attached resources and give people the nonjudgmental care they need to be as healthy as possible. The Saint James Infirmary in San Francisco, for example, effectively serves people experiencing homelessness who sell or trade sex, including drug users, and fights stigma. Transition-age youth and others benefit from peer-based education and counseling, as well as culturally-affirming healthcare and resources like food and safer sex and drug use supplies. A different youth-specific organization, the Homeless Youth Alliance, has a mobile outreach van that provides safer drug use supplies and referrals to youth on the streets. In a city where waiting lists for temporary adult shelter surpass 1,000 people every night, harm reduction-based drop in-centers like Saint James and outreach teams like the Homeless Youth Alliance can help the most vulnerable people survive.

By following the example of harm reduction-based providers like Saint James and the Homeless Youth Alliance, existing programs can be made more effective, and new ones can be created to ensure that youth receive the support they need. In addition to allocating resources to create new affordable housing, policymakers can focus on ensuring that existing services are as effective as possible – by funding harm reduction interventions rather than policies and programs that punish and exclude and end up funneling too many people into incarceration.

Read more in Dilara Yarbrough, “Outlaw Poverty Not Prostitutes: Sex Workers Responses to Poverty Management in San Francisco,” Proquest Dissertation Publishing.