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## **New Study Shows Disjointed Policy and Funding Exacerbate Youth Homelessness in Texas**

*Most comprehensive study to date of youth homelessness in Texas finds tens of thousands of youth experience homelessness each year due to inadequate support*

**AUSTIN, Texas** -- The serious problem of youth homelessness in Texas is not adequately being addressed due to a patchwork system of funding and programs, conflicting definitions of “homelessness” and no clear central authority, according to a new study released today by Texas Appleseed and Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS).

The study, *Young, Alone, and Homeless in the Lone Star State: Policy Solutions to End Youth Homelessness in Texas*, is the most comprehensive to date on the state of youth homelessness in Texas and the programs in place to address it. The report sheds light on the multitude of problems that result for youth and their communities when the issue goes unaddressed.

A central finding of the study is that the lack of a cohesive approach to help these youth — many of whom have aged-out of foster care placements, run away from difficult home environments, or were rejected by parents and forced to leave home — too often leads to dropping out of school, involvement with the criminal or juvenile justice systems, and physical and mental health challenges that go unaddressed and grow worse.

The study includes an extensive analysis of existing and unreleased data, and is based on nearly 200 interviews with young people who have experienced homelessness, service providers in schools, law enforcement officials, foster care system representatives and other voices.

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A bright spot, according to the findings, is the promise schools hold for connecting young people with services and supports, and the remarkable work that school-based homeless liaisons and private service providers are doing despite a woeful lack of resources. In the 2014-15 school year, more than 113,000 Texas public school students were identified as being homeless at some point during the school year. That represents a 12 percent increase from the 2013-14 school year which, while concerning, is likely due to better efforts to identify students.

While increased identification of homeless youth is a good thing, it also creates the challenge of finding resources to address the needs of youth once they are identified. The report found a lack of agreement about what even constitutes homelessness, adding to the difficulty of accessing services and supports for young people.

“Despite the best efforts of homeless liaisons and other service providers, the state of Texas is missing a critical opportunity to meaningfully intervene and change the life trajectory of thousands of youth experiencing homelessness,” said Deborah Fowler, executive director of Texas Appleseed. “If these young people are not able to reach their full potential, ultimately the whole community suffers. Thankfully, the state is well-poised to make changes that will both prevent youth homelessness and intervene when youth experience homelessness so that the costs to youth and the community are avoided.”

The report also exposed the myth that homelessness is solely an urban problem. While urban districts have the highest number of students identified as homeless, high rates were often found in rural districts as well. For example, Houston ISD, Texas’ largest school district, had the highest count of unaccompanied homeless students. But the far smaller Hull-Daisetta ISD had the highest rate, with 50 out of 474 enrolled students identified as unaccompanied and homeless.

“There are providers all over Texas doing incredible, research-based work to meet the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness,” said Christine Gendron, executive director of TNOYS. “The state of Texas needs to build on the strengths of its existing programs, and provide adequate funding to address this issue, in order to improve outcomes for young people.”

Schools are one of the few places that Texas youth report a feeling of normalcy compared with life on the streets and often abusive home situations. Despite the potential of schools to provide critical intervention and support, the report found that young people experiencing homelessness face multiple educational challenges: Unaccompanied homeless students are 10 times more likely than non-homeless students to drop out of school, twice as likely to be referred to in-school suspension, 2.5 times more likely to be suspended from school, and five times more likely to be referred to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program.

Youth experiencing homelessness in Texas are also more likely to be pulled into the criminal and juvenile justice systems, often for the criminalization of behaviors that can only be committed by children (i.e., status offenses, like curfew violations) or are linked to lack of secure housing, including vagrancy and panhandling. These issues are compounded by a complex system of programs that often do not cater specifically to youth and lack necessary funds, leaving already overloaded schools and law enforcement to pick up the slack.

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**Additional findings include:**

- Nearly 6,000 children and more than 450 17-year-olds were arrested in 2015 for running away, with Black youth and Hispanic girls overrepresented among those referred to probation. In some counties, runaway youth are detained despite federal law restricting the use of detention for runaways.
- Each year, nearly 1,200 Texas youth “age out” of the foster care system on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, putting them at heightened risk of homelessness. Due to lack of resources and available caseworkers, a state program designed to provide life skills training to youth before they age out often results in just one or two rushed meetings with little follow-up.
- Youth also often identify various health-related problems as a cause of their homelessness, including physical disability, mental illness, and substance abuse. Nearly 47 percent said they had experienced alcohol abuse or addiction. Moreover, 15 percent were pregnant and nearly one in three already had a child when they became homeless.

“These young people are already dealing with the stigma and trauma that comes with homelessness,” said Gabriella McDonald, pro bono and new projects director at Texas Appleseed. “It is not their fault that they often lack traditional familial support. They deserve a comprehensive and adequately-funded statewide system that can anticipate their needs and respond quickly, so that they can reach their full potential.”

Texas Appleseed and TNOYS call for a significant overhaul of state programs to address youth homelessness, including the establishment of a statewide task force led by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and the Department of Housing & Community Affairs. **Other policy recommendations include:**

- The Texas legislature should create dedicated funding streams to support services for youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness and/or who are at risk.
- The state should strengthen prevention and early intervention services for youth.
- The state should invest in initiatives that would raise public awareness about the services that do exist. Texas should also develop a more comprehensive directory with information on services for young people who are homeless or at-risk and ensure that it is widely available.
- Youth-serving systems, including schools, should coordinate and cooperate in “point-in-time” counts that provide information about the extent and contributors of youth homelessness.

*Young, Alone, and Homeless in the Lone Star State* follows a report on the demographics of homeless youth in Texas, *Youth Count Texas!*, which was mandated in 2015 by the 84<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature.

**Full Report**

[https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/YoungAloneHomeless\\_FullReport\\_fin.pdf](https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/YoungAloneHomeless_FullReport_fin.pdf)

**Executive Summary (Online only)**

<https://texasappleseed.atavist.com/young-alone-homeless-texas-nov2017>

**Report Snapshot**

[https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/YoungAloneHomeless\\_Snapshot\\_fin.pdf](https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/YoungAloneHomeless_Snapshot_fin.pdf)

**Frequently Asked Questions**

[https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/YoungAloneHomeless\\_FAQs\\_fin.pdf](https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/YoungAloneHomeless_FAQs_fin.pdf)

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**About Texas Appleseed**

Texas Appleseed is a public interest justice center that works to change unjust laws and policies that prevent Texans from realizing their full potential. The nonprofit organization conducts data-driven research that uncovers inequity in laws and policies and identifies solutions for lasting, concrete change. For more information, visit [www.TexasAppleseed.org](http://www.TexasAppleseed.org).

**About Texas Network of Youth Services**

For more than 30 years, TNOYS has been the leading organization working to enhance services for Texas youth who are homeless, in foster care, or at risk, and to support the providers who care for them. The organization takes a comprehensive systems change approach to strengthen critical services for youth and families, focusing on policy advocacy, training and program development for providers, and youth voice. To learn more, visit [www.tnoys.org](http://www.tnoys.org).

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