

Youth Homelessness in Austin/Travis County: Presentation to the Public Health Committee

Liz Schoenfeld, PhD • LifeWorks

- LifeWorks' mission is to solve youth homelessness through its housing, mental health, education, and workforce services.
- Primarily serves youth ages 16-26 with histories of homelessness, foster care, early parenthood, or other challenging life circumstances
- Served 2679 clients across 19 programs in FY24
- Currently own and operate two affordable housing communities (The Works I & II; 74 units); The Works III (120 units) will break ground later this year

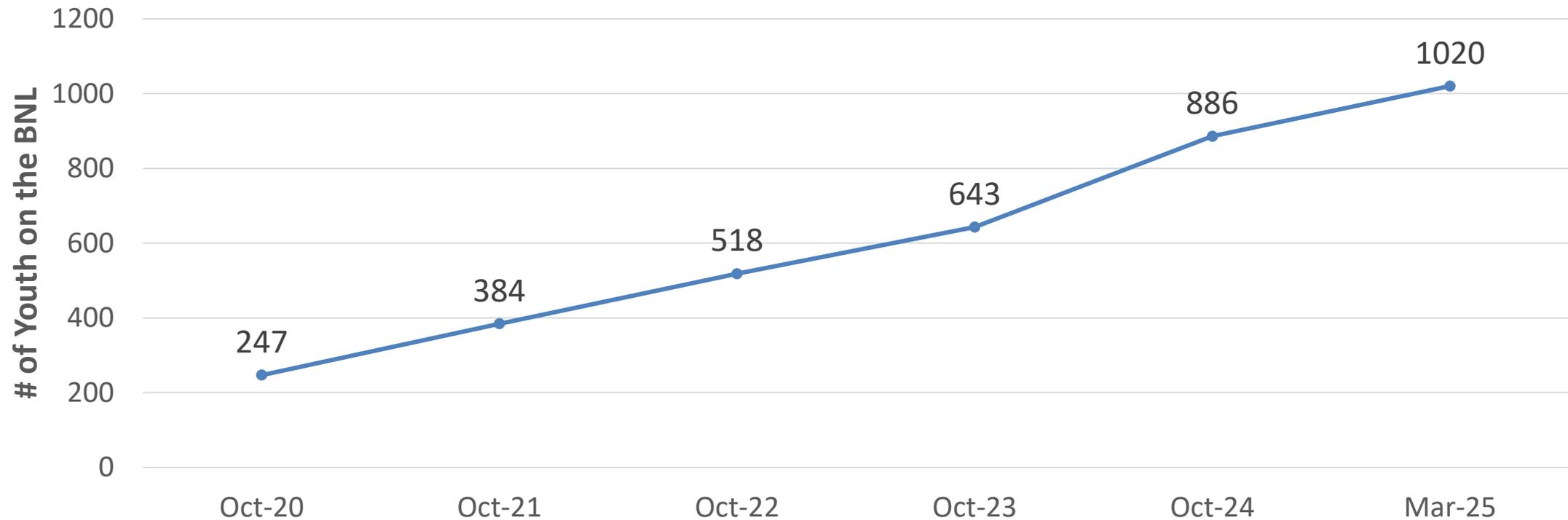
LifeWorks has played a leading role in our community's efforts to address youth homelessness since 2016.

- Definition of youth homelessness
 - Unaccompanied youth aged 24 or younger who are literally homeless or fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence
 - Includes youth who are pregnant or parenting
- Categories of homelessness:
 - Category 1: Literally homeless
 - Category 2: Imminently at risk of homelessness
 - Category 3: Homeless under other federal statutes
 - Category 4: Fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence
- For our purposes, “youth homelessness” does not include youth experiencing homelessness *with* their parents/guardians, nor does it include youth who are at imminent risk of homelessness or who meet other federal definitions of homelessness

- Pathways into homelessness for youth
 - Runaways - left home without explicit permission from their guardian
 - Pushed out - forced to leave home by their guardians
 - Familial loss - death, emotional/physical desertion, or incarceration of a guardian
 - Familial homelessness and housing instability - parental economic instability and the associated financial pressures placed on youth contribute to being pushed out or leaving to alleviate “burden”
 - Systems-involved - became homeless after aging out of foster care or exiting the juvenile justice system

Family disruption and instability are key, underlying factors contributing to youth homelessness.

Youth Homelessness in Austin: 2020 to 2025



On average, 76 youth fall into homelessness each month (compared to 45 in 2020), and an average of 31 youth exit homelessness to permanency each month (compared to 32 in 2020).

Drivers of Youth Homelessness in Austin/Travis County



A disproportionate number of youth experiencing homelessness in our community have been in foster care, the juvenile justice system, or both.

A report conducted in partnership with Chapin Hall in 2016 found that 76% of youth experiencing homelessness in Austin reported a history of systems involvement, relative to 55% in other communities across the United States.

As of January 2025, the proportion has declined to 66.9%, which we believe is a function of the affordability crisis in our community. More than half (56.5%) of youth on the BNL report a history of foster care, and 32.9% of youth on the BNL report a history of juvenile justice involvement.

Characteristics of Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Basic Demographics



Age

- Under 18: 4.8%
- 18-20: 30.7%
- 21-24: 64.5%

Education

53.4% have a high school diploma/GED or postsecondary education

Gender

- Male: 39.7%
- Female: 57.7%
- Another gender identity: 2.6%

Household Composition

- Parenting: 30.8%
- Number of household members: $M = 1.65$; range = 1-6

Race & Ethnicity

- Black: 43.6%
- Hispanic: 37.9%
- Non-Hispanic White: 14.7%
- More than one race/ethnicity: 40.6%

Born & Raised in Austin: 63.5%

LGBTQIA+: 18.0%

Characteristics of Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Additional Information



Homelessness Experience

- 84.6% of youth experiencing homelessness report they primarily sleep outdoors
- 66.3% meet the criteria for chronic homelessness
- 46.8% report experiencing continuous homelessness for a year or longer

Mental Health & Substance Use

- 40.7% report challenges related to their health or mental health that affect their activities of daily living
- 31.4% report they lost their housing due to mental health reasons
- 10.0% report they lost their housing due to substance misuse

- Of the 1,659 youth who transitioned from homelessness to housing over the past 6 years, 62% were served by LW
- 18% of youth on the BNL are currently enrolled in LifeWorks Street Outreach program
 - In FY24, more than 750 youth were served by our Street Outreach program
- 277 youth were served through LifeWorks Rapid Rehousing program in FY24 (across all funding sources)
- 72% exited our Rapid Rehousing services to a permanent destination in FY24 (across all funding sources)

Key Challenge #1: Rapid Rehousing is an imperfect intervention.

Current Initiative: Maximizing utilization of FYI and FUP housing vouchers

- While appropriate for a subset of youth (as evidenced by our outcomes over the past FY), Rapid Rehousing may not be ideal for higher-acuity youth or youth in need of a longer “runway” to achieve stability.
- Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers and Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers provide 36 months of housing assistance.
- Austin is a national leader in utilization of FYI vouchers.
 - LifeWorks has administered 69 FYI vouchers since their inception (this represents 85% of all youth housed via FYI vouchers in Austin).
 - LifeWorks currently has 62 youth with leased-up FYI vouchers and 30 youth with leased-up FUP vouchers.
- Each voucher represents \$24,000 in rental assistance.
- FYI vouchers and FUP youth vouchers are accompanied by an unfunded mandate for supportive services.
- The shifting federal landscape may limit our community’s ability to fully utilize FYI vouchers.

Key Challenge #2: There is a lack of affordable housing options in Austin/Travis County.

Current Initiative: The Works III will create 120 deeply affordable units for youth.

- **Status:** Successfully closed PFC deal; County & City funding closed; expediting closing on TDHCA funding; groundbreaking anticipated early September 2025
- **Design:** 120 units: 45 studios, 50 1-bedroom units, 25 2-bedroom units
- **Service population:** Youth and young adults ages 18-24; 80% of units earmarked for youth transitioning out of homelessness
- **Location:** 0.4 mi from LifeWorks East site; 0.5 mi from ACC Eastview campus; 0.6 mi from HEB; easy access to multiple bus lines
- **Features:** Community room, prep kitchen, shared laundry, game room, outdoor courtyard, service space
- **Site partner:** 3423 Holdings (also providing 342 affordable units and 38 homelessness response units)

Key Challenge #3: The rate of inflow has increased in recent years

Current Initiative: Implementing innovative programming to prevent youth homelessness

- Travis County Transformation Project - in partnership with the District Attorney's Office and the Excellent Project
 - Deflects youth from juvenile justice through respite services, family counseling, case management, and restorative justice circles
 - 3% recidivism rate (versus 50%)
- Launched "Common Ground" in February 2025 - in partnership with Integral Care
 - Peer-run drop-in for youth ages 13-17 who are experiencing mental health challenges
- Piloted flexible assistance & stipends for unstably housed youth
 - Average assistance provided per client = \$3,405 (range = \$1,800 - \$6,100)
 - 94% of youth did not experience homelessness in the 6 months after receiving a stipend
 - Recently secured a 5-year federal grant to continue and expand this work
- Piloting utilization of FYI vouchers with unstably housed youth

Key Challenge #4: More than half of youth experiencing homelessness in Austin have a history of foster care involvement.

Current Initiative: Launched the “Addressing the Foster Care to Homelessness Pipeline” Task Force

- Task force goal: Develop a coordinated set of policy and financing actions to end the foster care to homelessness pipeline in Austin.
- Co-led by LifeWorks and the City of Austin Homeless Strategy Office, in partnership with HR&A Advisors & Good River Partners
 - Includes representation from City of Austin Housing Department, HACA, Travis County, DFPS, St. David’s Foundation, Reissa Foundation, Texas Network of Youth Services, and others

- The number of youth experiencing homelessness in our community is increasing at an alarming rate.
- Youth homelessness is qualitatively different than adult chronic homelessness and requires tailored interventions.
- Our community has a solid understanding of the population, the gap, and potential solutions.
- If adequately resourced, youth homelessness is a solvable problem.