

# Homelessness Among Young Adults in Washington, DC

A Qualitative Study



**NATIONAL CATHOLIC SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SERVICE**

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### Introduction

In Spring 2016, Pathways to Housing DC<sup>1</sup> explored the possibility of partnering with the Catholic University of America (CUA), National Catholic School of Social Service to undertake a study to explore the experiences and service needs of young adults (between 18 and 30) who are homeless, living on the streets, or in unstable housing in the Washington, D.C. area. The Pathways DC outreach teams had observed that the population of people living on the streets was getting younger, and they wanted to better understand the experiences that contributed to homelessness among this younger population. They also wanted to hear from young adults themselves about the specific services that would best support them in getting off the streets and/or into stable housing.

In the fall of 2016, a CUA graduate course on homelessness was adapted to accommodate this research project. Along with the professor, the class included six social work students: 5 pursuing a master degree and 1 pursuing a PhD. Between October 14<sup>th</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, the research team conducted 57 interviews with young adults who were living on the streets or in unstable housing. This document reports on the outcome of those interviews.

### Methodology

Students received training on homelessness, research methods and administering the interview guide. They were also trained by Pathways staff on how to identify and approach young adults on the street who appear to be homeless. Training took place in both the classroom and the field. In total, 23 interviews were conducted with young adults on the streets around Union Station, and the Martin Luther King library and the Portrait Gallery, both in the Chinatown area. Fourteen interviews were conducted at the Monday night Sasha Bruce Drop-in program located at First Congregational Church, also in the Chinatown area. The remaining 20 interviews were conducted at the Sasha Bruce Day program located at 741 8<sup>th</sup> Street, SE. Participants were given a \$10 gift card to McDonald's as a 'thank you' for participating in the study.

#### Where did the team talk to young adults who were homeless?

- 23 interviews      On streets by Union Station, MLK Library, Portrait Gallery
- 14 interviews      Sasha Bruce Drop-In program, 945 G Street, NW
- 20 interviews      Sasha Bruce Day Program, 741 8<sup>th</sup> Street, SE

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pathwaystohousingdc.org>

## Profile of Young Adults Who Participated in the Study

Fifty-seven (57) young adults participated in the study. Eligible participants included anyone who was homeless and under the age of 30. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 32, with an average age of 22. (One 32 year old person was included in the study due to his affiliation with a young adult community living near Union Station.)

In terms of gender, 37 participants identified as men, 18 as women, and 2 declined to answer the question. Seven participants identified as belonging to the LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> community, and interestingly, some participants were unfamiliar with the acronym and needed clarification.

The majority of participants (41) identified as African-American, 10 reported being of mixed ethnicity, 2 identified as Latina/o, and 6 preferred to be classified as “other.” Some participants selected multiple categories for their race.<sup>3</sup>

Sixteen of the participants reported having children. Of those with children, 10 were men and 6 were women. Only 3 of the 16 parents had their children in their care; two were women and one was a man.

Twenty-two (22) of the participants reported a history of having been in foster care, and 33 reported having been incarcerated at some point in their lives.

Participants reported having been homeless between 4 days and 15 years; however, the average length of time in homelessness among the 57 young adults was 3.3 years.

Twenty-seven (27) participants reported that this was their first-time experiencing homelessness. Five reported it had been their second time, and 21 reported having experienced homelessness “on and off” for many years.

Total Participants	57
Average Age	22
Gender	5
Men	37
Women	18
No answer	2
LGBTQ Status	
Yes	7
No	46
Unknown	4
Race	
African-American	41
Latina/o	2
Mixed	10
Other	6
Have children?	
Yes	16
No	37
Unknown	4
Are children in your care?	
Yes	3
No	13
Ever in Foster Care?	
Yes	22
No	35
Ever incarcerated?	
Yes	33
No	24
Average Time in Homelessness	3.3 years
How many times homeless	
First time	27
Second time	5
More than twice	2
On and off	21

<sup>2</sup> This is in reference to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer community

<sup>3</sup> Selection of multiple race categories accounts for why the numbers in the ‘race’ category add up to more than 57.

## Current Experiences of Homelessness

### Where do Young Adults Stay Most Evenings

The majority of participants (19) reported that they stay and sleep on the streets overnight. While acknowledging the shelters as an option, several people expressed concerns that the available shelters were neither safe nor clean places to stay. Many participants shared and that they only resort to shelters during extreme weather conditions or for other random reasons. One individual mentioned that “the vibe is wrong” in shelters.

Another mentioned that the shelter hours were inflexible and unaccommodating. One person expressed: “they kick you out early and their schedule doesn’t fit with mine.” Several participants indicated that they stay outside near Union Station, near the Verizon Center, or in front of the White House. One individual sleeps on the grate outside Forever 21 in Chinatown. Many people sleeping outside are in the company of friends to be able to protect one other.



Despite the concerns about the shelters, ten young adults indicated they stayed in one of the adult shelters such as the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV), 801 East or a Safe Haven shelter. Ten participants reported sleeping at the homes of family and friends such as a cousin, adopted grandmother, aunt, friend, or mother. Even when staying with friends, some expressed feeling vulnerable:

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“If it’s not your real blood family, they can put you out whenever they want. They can want money from you. They can steal from you. They say they can take your shit. They say that since you’re living in their house, things you have [you] gotta share. Until you get fed up and leave.”

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Nine participants reported that they had no regular place to stay. One participant indicated that his housing situation ‘fluctuates between hotels, outside, friend’s house, grandfather’s truck, with friends or in a shelter.’ Someone mentioned that his living situation varies among staying at family members’ houses, empty buildings, hotel lobbies, Laundromats, and community rooms in apartment buildings. Another individual mentioned living house-to-house with different friends. Six people mentioned staying in abandoned houses or houses that are being renovated. One person mentioned sleeping in the bus station, and another in his car.

## What Precipitated Most Recent Experience of Homelessness?

The majority of participants related their most recent experience of homelessness as being caused by or related to negative experiences with their biological or foster family. Twenty-one (21) participants reported that they were ‘kicked out’ of their family home. There were a variety of situations associated with these experiences. One person was kicked out because of his sexual orientation. Several people were kicked out due to becoming pregnant or causing someone else to become pregnant. One woman reported being raped by her mother’s boyfriend and the mother put her out as a result. Several young adults reported having issues with anger that caused them to get kicked out by their family.

Ten of the young adults left their homes by their own choice. Three individuals left due to sexual or physical abuse perpetrated by a parent or a parent’s boyfriend. Several participants reported feeling unsupported by and a burden to the household. Two people left their family homes due to feeling that the house was too crowded. As a result, they wanted to give their siblings more room and felt it would be better if they weren’t there.

- Family kicked me out 21
- Left 12
- Death of family mbr 7
- Lost job 4
- Got out of prison 5
- Aged out of foster care 3
- College issues 3

Seven of the young adults reported that their experience of homelessness was caused by the death of a parent or grandparent they had been living with. Each young adult in this situation lost their home due to not being able to afford the rent. In one case, a participant reported running away from her home when, after her mother died, her mother’s surviving boyfriend continued to sell drugs in the house, resulting in an unsafe environment for that youth. Four people became homeless when they or a parent lost their job. In some cases, the job loss created a condition where the family had to separate to find shelter or access services.

Five participants reported that their homelessness was caused by being released from prison without a secure place to stay. Three participants specifically mentioned aging out of foster care ‘without a plan.’ Three young adults reported having started college, but then were forced to drop out of school due to not having the funds they needed to continue. In these cases, their parents could not take them back into the home, and they became homeless.

## Other Factors that Contributed to Their Homelessness

In addition to learning about the most recent factor causing their current episode of homelessness, we asked participants to share other factors that contributed to their homelessness. Individuals gave a range of answers. The most commonly mentioned responses related to finances, such as having no income, not being able to find a job, losing a job, or financial burdens, all which contributed to homelessness (10). Others mentioned having no support or being abused by family or friends (8). Other factors included discrimination due to disability, race or sexual orientation (3). Several participants reported receiving poor re-entry planning as they transitioned from foster care (4) or jail (2). Others dropped out of high school or college (4).

Lastly, participants mentioned the need for basic services and skills such as securing a social security card or photo ID, obtaining new clothes, or receiving assistance to complete a job application.



Of the 57 participants, only four mentioned long-standing histories of homelessness. Although only one individual mentioned victimization as a contributing factor to their experience of homelessness, several participants indicated that sexual abuse, rape, and physical abuse were parts of their life experiences.

Friends/Family	23
Arts, Entertainment & Healthy Living	21
Access Available Services	18
Just Get By	16
Set Goals for Self	12
Faith/Spirituality	11
Maintain Job	6
Keep Positive Attitude	5
Get Help from Strangers	5

### Strategies Used by Young Adults to Cope or Survive on the Streets

Participants in this study reported a variety of strategies to cope or survive while living on the streets or in unstable housing. Twenty-three (23) people described relying on friends or family for a variety of supports, such as occasional meals, showers, or a place to stay. Many participants mentioned engaging in artistic endeavors like singing, dancing, drawing, or writing poetry. Several people mentioned engaging in efforts to stay healthy by playing basketball, working out, and eating well. One individual reported playing video games, and another shared that she attends festivals.

Eighteen participants reported taking advantage of available social services. Many people mentioned Sasha Bruce and how important the drop-in center is to them in terms of offering support and structure

for their lives. Others mentioned showers, shelters, and meals offered by providers in addition to participating in free programs available throughout the city.

Sixteen people expressed that they did what they had to do to survive, i.e., to ‘just get by.’ A couple of people admitted to stealing or selling drugs. One person mentioned using ‘weed to ease

my mind from doing something crazy.’ Another person mentioned being ‘creative about finding places to sleep.’

Twelve of the young adults talked about the importance of continuing to set goals for themselves to maintain hope for the future. Some of these goals included finding housing and employment, reuniting with children, or ‘becoming an entrepreneur.’ Eleven people mentioned their faith as an important coping strategy. One person said “God keeps me alive.” Several people talked about prayer and reading the Bible to help them survive.

Six participants shared that they were able to maintain their jobs while homeless, and they reported that having employment was helping to keep them focused. Five people reported trying to keep a positive attitude, and not letting their current situation get them down because something could be waiting for them right around the corner. Finally, five people talked about relying on strangers for food or money (through panhandling).

### Most Significant Source of Support

Participants identified friends, family, self, social service agencies, and faith as the most significant sources of support while living on the streets. Participants reporting having friends they lived with on the street who provided support and safety on a day-to-day basis. Some individuals also mentioned staying from time-to-time with friends who are housed who sometimes give them a place to sleep, a meal, or to provide other necessities, and that friends were also available to talk by phone when they felt down. Participants described support given by family members as similar to what friends provided, i.e., an occasional meal, bed, and listening ear.

Friends	26
Family/Self	16
Social Services	16
Faith	8

Three participants mentioned that all they had was themselves. One individual reported that he does not rely on others, “I just deal with it.” Another said “I just go day-to-day and keep my head above water.” Three people mentioned receiving support from other people who are homeless and living on the street.

Sixteen people mentioned social services, particularly the Sasha Bruce Drop-in Center and, specifically, the care and attention of its director “Miss Pam” (Pam Lieber). One person mentioned shelter, and another mentioned food stamps as their most significant source of support. Several people mentioned God. For example, one person said: “God... showing me a way, not forsaking me.”

Despite finding some support through friends and family, several participants expressed a sense of isolation, and sometimes saw others as potential hazards or impediments. One person shared:

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“If I’m your friend and I know you’re homeless, I wouldn’t just let you stay on the street. When you’re homeless, friends don’t invite you to dinner or invite you to stay over. [And] when you have money they want you to spend it on them or with them.”

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## What Service Providers Could Do

### Primary Service Needs

When asked about primary service needs, housing and a job were the top two things mentioned. Seventeen participants mentioned needing help with clothing and basic necessities such as shoes, transportation, cosmetics, personal hygiene items, and a phone. One individual shared that it was humiliating to get hand-me-down clothes. He would rather get gift cards so he can pick out clothes that are “right for me.”

Twelve participants mentioned the need for better access to food, meals, water, and food stamps. Nine people expressed needing help to obtain their GED, receive literacy training, re-enroll in college and/or access some other educational support. Four people mentioned needing assistance with child care or reunifying with their children. Others expressed needing access to mental health therapy, and health care.

Housing	38
Job/Income	33
Clothing/Basic Necessities	17
Food/Nutrition	12
Education	9
Childcare/ Reunification	4
Therapy	4
Health care	4

### The Single Most Important Thing That Would Help You Find Stable Housing

Echoing the primary service needs identified above, participants reported that the single most important thing that would help them get overcome homelessness and unstable housing is the availability of more affordable housing. Several of them mentioned specific ways to obtain housing such as making vouchers or the rapid-rehousing program more available to them, improving shelters, or converting abandoned buildings into affordable housing. Generally, participants felt that more funding needed to be directed toward affordable housing, particularly for their age group. Several people expressed frustration that the housing support that does exist is not accessible to their demographic. One respondent felt that housing assistance was only geared toward people who have a mental illness or some kind of disability. One person stated “People like me who actually work and try to improve ourselves never get the help we need to get our lives in order.”

Housing	39
Job	19
“Actual help”	12
Education	8
Food	3

In addition, many individuals expressed frustration at the length of time it takes to secure housing. Many feel that the process is very confusing and that there is limited availability of housing to begin with. Most participants stated that the single most important thing the city or service providers could do would be to help them navigate the housing process and push for more housing availability to result in a faster and smoother route to housing.

Nineteen (19) participants expressed a desire for employment, job training, or job supports. One person implored “just take a chance on me and give me a job opportunity.” Others felt that if they were able to address their education needs (e.g., GED, college enrollment) they would be able to find a job and secure their own housing.

Several participants expressed the need for more services where the providers could ‘help me rebuild by life’ or where they could find a ‘good social worker to tell me what to do.’ Many young adults offered specific praise for the services offered by Sasha Bruce, and suggested that the City needed to build “more Sasha Bruces” when asked about the single most important thing the City or service provider could do to help young adults who are homeless. While offering praise for Sasha Bruce, several people expressed frustration with other programs. One person expressed:

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“Service providers should put more effort into actually helping you and working *with* you. They should try to get to know you and understand you.”

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Another person said:

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“Providers should stop judging clients based off how they look. Providers need to hire people who are passionate about their work. A lot of the people just don’t care.”

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And still another comment:

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“The City should pay more attention and notice how many young people are homeless.”

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## Advice

In addition to providing housing, employment and counseling, support, and social services to help young adults get out of homelessness, the participants offered the following words of advice:

- “Listen to young people experiencing homelessness”
- “Never give up; agencies should keep helping.”
- “Don’t give up... sometimes I give up on myself.”
- “Pay more attention to homeless youth.”
- “Give us what we ask for and not what you think we need”
- “Take a chance on people. I just want someone to take a chance on me. Not everybody is trying to get one over on the system.”
- “Help more. Pay more attention. Try to think from the inside out and not from the outside looking in.”
- “Help people to look after themselves. Help people to get better at helping themselves.”
- “Focus on hands up, not handouts, and help people develop skills.”
- “Use more peer outreach workers. There is nothing like talking to someone who has been through it and can relate to your story on some level.”



## Recommendations

The majority of participants in this study were between the ages of 18 and 24, the developmental period called ‘emerging adulthood’<sup>4</sup> where many young people are building a foundation for employment and relationships that will sustain them into adulthood and become core to their sense-of-self and their place in the world. The young people in this study were extremely resilient, resourceful, and wise about their needs. Despite their unique experiences of hardship, and the unstable, uncertain, and often chaotic living situations they were experiencing, many of the young adults continued to set goals for themselves and maintained hope for their future. In addition to being wise about their needs, they were wise about the systemic barriers that limited their opportunities to obtain stability and provide for themselves and their families.

Many of the young adults could describe a time when they were living in more stable housing. More stable times often included living with an adult (parent-figure) who was working (including, in one case, foster care). The young person was attending school, and had connections to relationships that felt loving to them. The majority of participants expressed a desire to create that kind of stable environment for themselves and for their families in the future, and many thought they could, if given the chance.

As mentioned earlier, the “single most important things” identified by the participants to help them overcome homelessness were: housing, employment, and social and emotional support, which one person referred to as “actual help.” These ‘things’ echo the core outcomes listed in the Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness<sup>5</sup>: stable housing; permanent connections; education/employment; and social-emotional well-being. In addition, the young adults in this study also expressed a need for help gaining basic items like clothing, important documentation, food (especially dinner), access to health and child care. Finally, many of the young adults mentioned the services at Sasha Bruce as being important to their lives, which speaks to the need for more developmentally and culturally appropriate services geared toward this particular age group. Each recommendation below emerges from our conversations with young adults who participated in this study. Due to time limitations, it does not include a full review of the existing literature on youth homelessness.

### Recommendation #1: Housing

Create a variety of affordable housing options for young adults between the ages of 18 to 24. This includes short, medium, and long-term housing options that range from therapeutic crisis beds for those needing immediate response escaping a traumatic event to long-term vouchers

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<sup>4</sup> Arnett, J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5 p. 469-480.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Interagency Council for the Homeless. (2015). Preventing and ending youth homelessness: A coordinated community response. Available here: <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/coordinated-community-response-to-youth-homelessness>

where young adults can live independently and permanently. Participants in the study expressed a desire for a range of housing options that included a supervised housing program that provided structure, developed skills, and prepared, connected, and supported young adults in employment. Others expressed a desire for vouchers to be able to afford their own independent apartment or single room. One participant, who learned that she was pregnant, expressed a desire for more group homes where whole families could live together and support one another.

### **Recommendation #2: Employment and Education**

Create supportive employment opportunities for young adults who have little to minimal work experience. This would include offering pre-employment skills (resume writing, interviewing, completing job applications) and cultivating relationships with prospective employers who are interested in and willing to ‘take a chance’ on the young adults and give them a supportive employment experience, and connecting young adults to those employers. Additional GED and apprenticeship or certificate programs that prepare young adults for existing jobs with good wages would benefit this population.

The majority of participants expressed a desire to work and support themselves. They also identified a number of barriers to employment that included needing: a GED or high school diploma, help finishing their college education, and help with preparing a resume and completing a job application. Several participants talked about the discrimination they experienced in seeking employment, based on race, disability, or appearance. So programs that help young adults overcome these systemic hurdles would help give them confidence to succeed.

### **Recommendation #3: Trauma-Informed Mental Health and Social Support**

Offer several accessible, caring, and trauma-informed programs where young adults can feel accepted, understood, and supported with mental health services that help them heal from the trauma they have experienced thus far in their lives. The majority of participants reported having lived in unstable and often abusive home environments. While none of the participants exhibited serious mental illness, many of them reported experiences of trauma, e.g., rape, sexual assault, physical assault, emotional abuse and other tragic life events such as the death of family members and loss of homes, jobs, and supports. Few mentioned currently receiving mental health counseling to help them heal and to develop strategies for moving forward. Several mentioned the need for this type of service.

### **Recommendation #4: Documentation Services**

Several of the participants expressed a need for help getting important documentation such as state IDs, social security cards, driver’s licenses, medical records, and birth certificates. Many respondents described frustration with being denied employment and benefits because they could not produce the proper documentation. One possibility is to provide a monthly mobile document center which travels to many of the known clusters where young adults who are homeless gather to support them in applying for government-issued documents.

## Recommendation #5: More Drop-in Centers

Many of the participants talked about the importance of Sasha Bruce in providing a safe space where one could find some structure and support. Additional drop-in centers that are developmentally and culturally appropriate could serve as entry points for advancing education, job skills, mental health recovery, and social connectedness.

## Recommendation #6: Critical Time Intervention<sup>6</sup> for Young Adults Exiting Foster Care or Incarceration

Adopt the use of Critical Time Intervention (CTI) with young adults exiting foster care or incarceration. CTI is an empirically-supported practice intended to reduce the risk of homelessness after discharge from an institution. It has been applied to a range of populations including veterans, individuals suffering from mental illness, people re-entering from prison, and to a lesser extent, youth transitioning from foster care. The model has several components that include: addressing a period of transition, a time-limited phased approach, decreasing in intensity over time, community-based, harm-reduction, and small caseloads. It was developed out of the Center for the Advancement of Critical Time Intervention<sup>7</sup> at the Hunter School of Social Work in New York City. Catholic University of America would be happy to invite the CTI folks to D.C. to talk about the model and to facilitate a training or study on the use of this approach in foster care or the D.C. Jail or prison.

## Recommendation #7: Prevent Homelessness by Supporting Families and Developing Strong Transition Plans from Institutions

Forty out of 57 (70%) of the young adults participating in this study talked specifically about challenging family environments that precipitated their most recent experience of homelessness. Some of them were kicked out of their homes, and some left on their own because the environment was deemed as either too crowded or too toxic. For some it was the death of a family member that caused the loss of income, loss of home and the downward spiral into homelessness. Eight respondents mentioned either aging out of foster care or coming home from prison without a good plan as precipitating factors for their homelessness. Therefore, we need to continue to help families address the root causes of homelessness, such as the lack of affordable housing, and the lack of living wage jobs with benefits, and to create programs that foster community engagement and support within neighborhoods. ‘ We also need to address the racism and implicit bias within the various structures such as, law enforcement, housing, employment, social service, that prevent create barriers for young adults-of-color to fully thrive and flourish.



<sup>6</sup> Herman, D. B. & Mandiberg, J. M. (2010). Critical Time Intervention: Model description and implications for the significance of timing in social work interventions, *Research on Social Work Practice*, 20, 502-508.

<sup>7</sup> [www.criticaltime.org](http://www.criticaltime.org)

## Limitations

Given the limited timeframe for this study (one semester), the original design called for interviews with 30 young adults. Due to the support of Pathways and Sasha Bruce, and the dedication and commitment of the CUA students, we were able to complete 57 interviews. While we exceeded our target number, 57 remains a very small sample. For example, research shows clear links between gender identity and sexual orientation status and youth homelessness. However, only 7 people identified with the LGBTQ community and only three of those 7 people attributed their homelessness in some degree to the lack of acceptance by family members regarding their sexual orientation. Similarly, the research shows correlations between foster care and youth homelessness. In this study, 22 of the 57 young adults (39%) had been in foster care, and only 3 of them attributed their homelessness to aging out of foster care without an adequate plan. To gain an even fuller understanding of this population, we would need more time and some financial support to engage in a broader study with a greater cross-section of young adults experiencing homelessness in the District of Columbia.

## Acknowledgements

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