



# Youth Homelessness and the Justice System

Collaborative For Change



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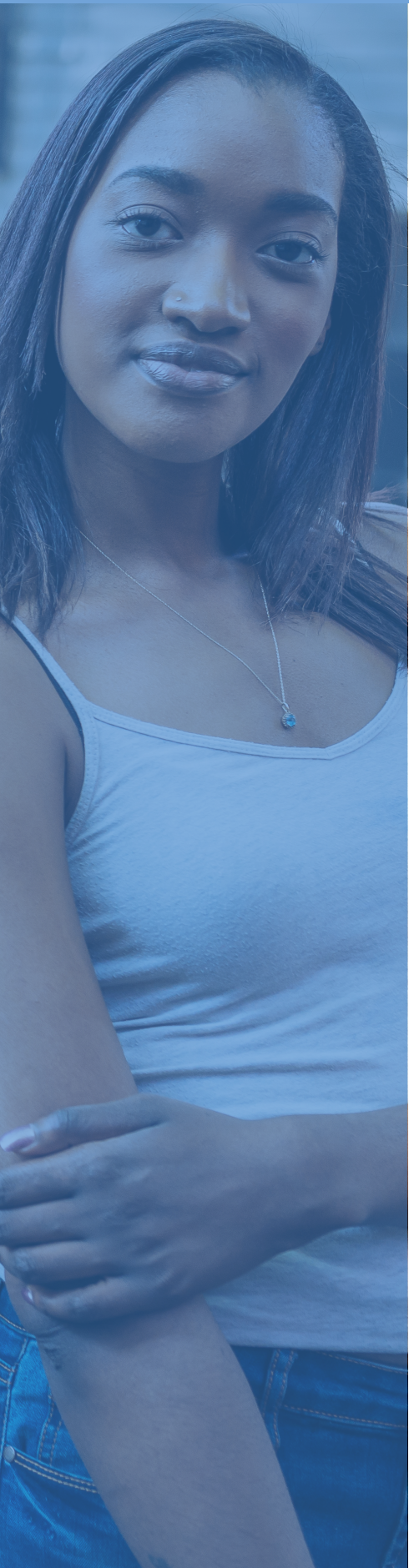
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# Who We Engaged

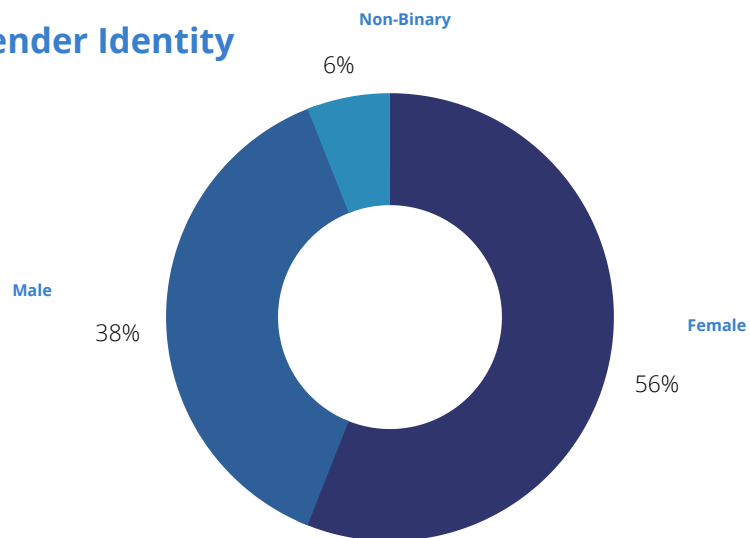


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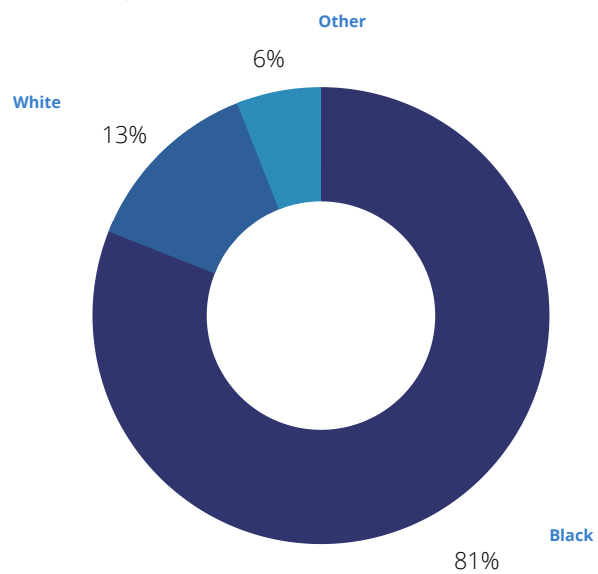
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# Key Themes and Ideas

## 01 Invest in interventions that keep youth from interacting with the justice system

### Action Steps

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- Develop trainings for resource coordinators and social workers in schools on how to support kids experiencing poverty and homelessness
- Provide children experiencing poverty, abuse, or mental health issues with mentors who are equipped to help them navigate current challenges and plan for the future
- Better connect youth experiencing homelessness in suburban areas to shelter and supportive services
- Work to equip youth experiencing homelessness with high quality, wraparound mental health supports that are both culturally competent and representative
- Provide information about shelters and programs for youth experiencing homelessness at public libraries, bus stops, and public bulletin boards
- Focus on de-escalating situations through non-police first responders

# Key Themes and Ideas

## 02 Expand opportunities for the justice system to be a springboard to stability for young people

### Action Steps

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- Train law enforcement to listen to youth and take their experiences and concerns seriously
- Create opportunities for white law enforcement and criminal justice officials to listen and learn from Black young people about their experiences and ideas
- Seek to develop better strategies for helping young people feel listened to and heard by law enforcement and other officials
- Equip law enforcement to refer youth experiencing homelessness to supportive services and shelters
- Provide assistance overcoming financial barriers when relocating children from abusive households to safer family members' homes
- Create opportunities for young people to share their testimony or requests for support in a written form
- Alleviate tension in the courtroom by sharing an icebreaker question to create a safer space



# Introduction

Collaborative for Change (C4C) is an extension of the KEYS to a Future Without Youth Homelessness and is led by the Children’s Law Center, Lighthouse Youth & Family Services, the Family Housing Partnership and Strategies to End Homelessness. C4C seeks to further examine and advocate for policy reforms related to the intersection of system-involved youth and youth experiencing homelessness. While KEYS regularly prioritizes participation and leadership by those with lived experiences, C4C partnered with Cohear to facilitate peer focus groups with young people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness.

Young people make up an alarming proportion of the total homeless population in greater Cincinnati, where an estimated 10% of the homeless population is unaccompanied youth under 18, and 43% is under the age of 25. This is a pressing concern both nationwide and locally, not least because of the multi-faceted correlation between youth homelessness and incarceration. People of any age experiencing homelessness are 11 times more likely, on average, to become incarcerated, and once incarcerated, are even more likely to become reincarcerated in the future. Youth homelessness leads to early encounters with the criminal justice system and a high likelihood of early incarceration--nationwide, as many as 44% of homeless youth have stayed in a jail, prison, or juvenile detention center. This limits their access to education and stable career opportunities, in turn increasing the likelihood that they will experience long-term homelessness and incarceration in adulthood.



# Introduction

The focus of this engagement was to understand the participants' unique circumstances and brainstorm strategies to limit and improve their interactions with the criminal justice system. Cohear hosted two focus groups with 16 youth who have experienced homelessness and conducted five deep-dive qualitative interviews.

In these discussions, they shared their unique stories, as well as their proposed solutions to challenges they faced, which will be detailed in this report. Some examples of ideas they shared include: equipping law enforcement with the resources necessary to direct youth experiencing homelessness to shelters and other support services, training non-police specialist personnel to interact with individuals struggling with mental health, and finding ways to connect those experiencing homelessness in the suburbs to resources that are typically concentrated more centrally. Ultimately, participants felt that their upward trajectory began when they were able to find even temporary shelter and supportive resources, in order to give them a place from which to find housing, work, and a sense of wellbeing and stability.

## In Their Words: Participants' Experiences with Youth Homelessness

**When young people experience homelessness, their vulnerability and powerlessness exacerbate the trauma.**

"I'm 21 and I experienced homelessness from when I was 13 until I was 20. My dad was really abusive and my parents got divorced, so I didn't really have a family. I was living couch to couch and different places until I didn't have anywhere to go, I got myself a car and was living in my car for about 6 months, till I went to the Lighthouse and I got a case manager... they... helped me get an apartment." --CA

**Many young people experiencing homelessness have worked hard to stay on their feet by staying with family and friends, or even on the street, without the help of supportive resources or shelters.**

"I lost my mom at 17... I got forced to come back here to live with my grandma and go to school because I was underage... I was on my way to go to school [to] get my degree, but she decided to go a whole different route and kicked me out when my intention was to go to school. I went from house to house and felt like a burden... I lost my brother last December and that really took a toll on me. He did everything to make sure I had somewhere to go. Then I was really by myself. That's how I ended up here. It was literally my last resort." --D

"I was recently homeless not too long ago for about three months. I was actually supposed to go to JobCorps, but at the last second my parents kicked me out. Then JobCorps called and said my spot has been filled... Then I slept at bus stops and couches. Then my job let me go because I had no address and no real place to go. Eventually, that led me to depression and trying to commit suicide and ended up getting to a facility to get better, and they kind of led me to this place and I applied." --C

**Young Black people who are experiencing homelessness tend to be under particularly intense pressure due to the systemic racism they face when interacting with the criminal justice system.**

"Growing up I've never trusted the police, and that's how it is in the Black community... it's something that's been taught from infants to now, they aren't on our side, and they never will be." --S



## In Their Words: Participants' Experiences with Youth Homelessness

**Systemic challenges become even more intense for those who are experiencing homelessness and have marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ+ youth.**

"I had a lot of fears going in front of a judge, but my experience was an experience that I wish everybody would have. I had a pretty great person representing me, and he listened to me, the judge listened to me, because I wanted to get my name changed... I'm transgender, so most of the time I worry about my safety, especially going out, you know going to the men's bathroom and stuff like that." --T

**Young people who are concerned about their immediate physical safety and survival often do not have the resources to advocate for their own mental health needs.**

"When I look at it really, I look at a lot of homeless youth and I've been around those people that don't allow people to be heard. Especially when you're dealing with all these therapists, psychiatrists, and others. I've been seeing that growing up a lot, especially when I moved out of my mom's house. You get cast out by family, it's not too good." --T

"I told them I was paranoid schizophrenic, and he let me go free and my brother had a warrant and went to jail, and my friend just took me home and told me I was going to learn." --JR

**Though entering shelters has tended to be a last resort, it has also been helpful for many homeless youth and enabled them to begin working toward stable housing.**

"Before my friend died, she told me Lighthouse was how she got her life together. I went to Lighthouse and she ended up getting murdered 2 weeks later. She definitely changed my life, she saved my life, so now I recommend the Lighthouse to anybody from the ages of 18-25 who experience that." --C

"I then moved back to Cincinnati with my dad, and I became homeless here until I turned 22, then I went to the Lighthouse and that helped me out really well." --JR

# Key Themes and Ideas


## 01 Invest in interventions that keep youth from interacting with the justice system



### **Develop trainings for resource coordinators and social workers in schools on how to support kids experiencing poverty and homelessness.**

Create access to support groups, resource coordinators, and other crucial services within public schools and other locations that are easy to access, so that young people are equipped with knowledge of who they can contact, and how, if they find themselves in crisis.

"I feel like we should have more groups or resources for people in poverty, at younger ages, so people can grow up and know what to do and not be lost. I feel like I was lost for a long time, and I feel like I could've changed my life a long time ago but I didn't have the right opportunities or tools to do what I really needed to do. I feel like if we had some type of class or teaching in a school that helped us with what to do that would be better. I feel like poverty causes parents to be a little abusive, because of stress." --C



### **Provide children experiencing poverty, abuse, or mental health issues with mentors who are equipped to help them navigate current challenges and plan for the future.**


Younger children need adults in their lives who are equipped to assist them along their path, rather than being forced to fend for themselves from childhood into adulthood.

"I feel like someone who actually cares needs to be in the middle of these situations like at a rec center, or school." --S

"I think that the most important thing that kids need is support. I feel like a lot of reasons why crime happens are because of poverty and abuse, or stress. If kids have a team of support or someone to be there for them, that would help." --CA

"A big brother program, a little sister program, or something like that could be something great. And positivity is a great thing you can have." --JR

# Key Themes and Ideas



## **Better connect youth experiencing homelessness in suburban areas to shelter and supportive services.**

Services for people experiencing homelessness tend to be concentrated more centrally, making it challenging for youth in further flung locations to obtain the support they need and potentially increasing their risk of negative encounters with law enforcement. Partner with the Youth Outreach Program to extend services to suburban areas.

"It would be nice to have homeless shelters here... Homeless people living up in like Evendale and Mason and all that, they've got nowhere to go... and they're just [going back to court over and over again] because they have no money to pay for those fees." --C

"Out in the area of Forest Park, Evendale, there is no type of shelters. There might be a couple of food banks connected with a church but as far as anything else. I was living in my car. There are no places to turn to.... What really brought me here was I had a friend who went through this program, and she actually got her house and everything. She ended up passing and when she passed, I thought I should really do this." --J



## **Work to equip youth experiencing homelessness with high quality, wraparound mental health supports that are both culturally competent and representative.**

Some have had negative experiences with therapy, particularly when a source of trauma is ongoing or when they have seen rapid turnover in therapists. Work to provide services which help them process and approach current life events, in addition to processing through prior experiences.

"I've been admitted into the hospital twice. I've been prescribed therapy... Honestly, I don't think it's for me. I don't like talking about a situation, especially when it's present. They can't do anything. It's like talking to a brick wall. You can calm me down but it's just a temporary fix." --A

"I've been through about 59 therapists in the last three years because they drop me. They look like they're listening, but I see them laughing. They don't really listen at all. They weren't giving me any solutions. They just kept referring me to other places and they didn't really want to put up with me." --C

# Key Themes and Ideas

"When I got into therapy... I liked it. It was more like I got to get everything out, but I also got to sit back and observe everything that I said, too. The therapists that I've had, we clicked... The things I was talking to her about, I was able to overcome most of those things and to heal. But then when I didn't have a therapist, a lot of those things came back because I was no longer able to express myself and to let it out. With the therapist I know I'm more safe and secure to share than to go tell a friend." --D



## Provide information about shelters and programs for youth experiencing homelessness at public libraries, bus stops, and public bulletin boards.

Many young people described how when they finally found out about supporting services, it changed their lives. It is important to provide access to this information in as many places as possible. Target locations where youth experiencing homelessness tend to gather, in the suburbs as well as more central locations.

"...The library. They should have bulletins of the Bethany House. The Lighthouse. They should have stuff like that up because people will go there and look at it." --A

"And at bus stops. They should put stuff up at bulletin boards." --C



## Focus on de-escalating situations through non-police first responders.


Consider utilizing specialized staff for nonviolent situations or even training the police to handle mental health-related situations without criminalizing those involved.

"I had some interactions with the police, because sometimes my mental health does get out of hand, and I need help. I wish they would send somebody like a firefighter or something, not the police... They were really aggressive with me, speaking to me like a kid; nobody understood that I was schizophrenic back then, so dealing with the police there's a lot of triggers there causing a lot of trouble... I've seen firefighters de-escalate a situation without finding conflict within it. Police just come with guns and everything and you get worried for your life." --T

"To me, it starts with the first responders, with the police officers, then it goes to the judge, and as far as the judge is concerned, they're dealing with criminals all day. To me, it feels like you're guilty before you even see the judge. It's like guilty until proven innocent, I feel like police officers need to start learning how to listen and be a little less aggressive, like putting someone in handcuffs when they're not doing anything." --S

# Key Themes and Ideas

## 02 Expand opportunities for the justice system to be a springboard to stability for young people




### **Train law enforcement to listen to youth and take their experiences and concerns seriously.**

This should come with an added level of care for those they are serving, rather than just going through the motions of 'routine' issues.

"We need more officers that actually care about the situation that they run into. There are officers that have touched so many lives and so many families but I haven't seen any in Cincinnati." --S

"They should pay attention or further investigate child abuse and a lot of other stuff." --C



### **Create opportunities for white law enforcement and criminal justice officials to listen and learn from Black young people about their experiences and ideas.**

Understanding and empathy can come from interaction and exposure. Too many people in the juvenile justice system have only interacted with Black people in that context. It is important to create opportunities for other forms of interaction and engagement.

"A judge told me to my face I was not sorry for my actions. How can you tell me I'm not sorry... I'm crying and everything at this point. She was like 'my daughter, my daughter'... That is very unprofessional... No offense, but she's not Black going through the stuff we're going through right now. No offense to all of you, but there is such a thing as white privilege. There is also white people going through the same thing we are." --J

"Let's say I'm a white judge--and she did have a bit of racism in her because she just didn't want to hear it--she thought everything I was saying was an excuse, when it was really reasons of why I'm here in this position. I would really try to relate the best I can. Say there was a little Black girl right here, I would try to think maybe if I could see myself in her shoes, I could relate more." --J

# Key Themes and Ideas




## Seek to develop better strategies for helping young people feel listened to and heard by law enforcement and other officials.

In order to initiate the proper follow-up in situations involving youth who are truant or experiencing homelessness, it is crucial for officials to take young people's claims of abuse seriously and meaningfully investigate their living situations.

"I tried to talk to [the police] and tell them I could not go back to that house. I'd been abused my whole life... They took me back to my mom's house... [she acted] all concerned, 'oh my God, thank you so much, I just--come here.' I'm like, 'don't touch me', I'm shaking at this point--I wish the police officer had noticed that. I'm not shaking angry, I'm shaking scared... he said, 'I don't see no reason why you can't be here. Here's your citation, I'll see you in court.'" --S

"[Police officers] just look at a situation and judge it. They don't get to know what the real situation is...You can't just judge something by appearance." --C



## Equip law enforcement to refer youth experiencing homelessness to supportive services and shelters.

Ticketing young people experiencing homelessness for their presence in public places is a waste of an opportunity for law enforcement to connect them to supportive services that help them find resources to change their situation altogether. Expand awareness of Hamilton County Juvenile Assessment Center to provide alternatives to incarceration for youth charged with status offenses.

"I would have liked [the police] to refer me to some places that I could stay. The problem was I used to live in Evendale, and there was no homeless shelters at all. I saw at least 50 homeless people, from kids my age and a little bit older." --C

"The police--instead of handing out citations, give them information about these places. Train the police officers to give them information." --C

"I think all law enforcement, in particular, should have resources, be connected, just like the Children's Law Center... It would have been helpful if the judge would have given me help. Or if he would have been like, 'Hey, I want you to go back and live with your mom, but if things are as bad as you say they are, and they're not helping, here's where you can go. This is what can change your life here. Would you like to speak with me in my chambers privately?' If he would've done that, I probably would have ended up somewhere different."--J

# Key Themes and Ideas



## **Provide assistance overcoming financial barriers when relocating children from abusive households to safer family members' homes.**

Particularly in emergency situations, find ways to eliminate court fees as a barrier to removing a child from an abusive situation.

"One thing that I can say about the court system is the emergency removal. There should be no reason why parents should have to pay \$300, \$350, \$400 if their child is in immediate danger from the custodial parent. That made a big impact on the transition from my dad to my mom. My mom had to pay an emergency fee. There was a lot more going on in my dad's house, and my mom needed to have full custody to enroll me in school and it made it a really big problem because my mom didn't have that money." --A



## **Create opportunities for young people to share their testimony or requests for support in a written form.**

Particularly for those youth who are experiencing abuse or neglect, speaking out in front of a full courtroom of unknown adults--potentially including the parties responsible for said abuse or neglect--can be extremely intimidating. Allowing them to write down their experiences and needs might allow them greater freedom to speak their minds.

"[I wish judges would ask what kind of support kids need]. It probably depends on the kid, though, [whether they'd be comfortably saying it in a room full of adults]. Some kids be nervous. [Writing it down] is probably the best idea." --CA



## **Alleviate tension in the courtroom by sharing an icebreaker question to create a safer space.**

Asking an icebreaker question that brings out common interests and universal experiences among those present in the courtroom could help humanize them to one another and ease young people's nerves.

"[Have everybody in court share] their opinion on like what kind of food is out there... you can be a gangster and still love cheesesteak! [There should be icebreaker questions in the courtroom]." --JR



# Conclusion

The ideas everyday experts shared represent a holistic approach to preventing youth encounters with the criminal justice system, through diversion at every step of the process: equipping law enforcement to refer youth experiencing homelessness to supportive services, involving non-law enforcement personnel in crisis situations instead of police, and cultivating empathy among judges who have young people's futures in their hands.

Creating pathways to stability from homelessness in youth and childhood will require a multifaceted approach which requires the buy-in of policymakers, social service organizations, employers, landlords, and more--but we already know that those pathways too often dead-end when they reach the prison cell. It is essential that the systems which criminalize these struggling young people and make it more difficult for them to get on their feet are reimagined as a ramp to a brighter future. To effectively pursue this needed change, we must continue to listen closely when youth experiencing homelessness speak out about their stories, experiences, and ideas.