GUIDE TO GIVING
Improving Outcomes for Homeless Youth

How to use this guide
Are you interested in helping homeless youth? This guide will help you assess the effectiveness of the programs you are considering supporting. It is based on Social Impact Research's SIR methodology for analyzing programs, which identifies the best approaches for addressing the targeted social issue. For more information, read SIR's social issue and state reports on improving outcomes for homeless youth.

Understanding the recommended approach to improving outcomes for homeless youth
SIR recommends that donors interested in improving outcomes for homeless youth support flexible and individualized approaches. These approaches seek to provide youth with stable housing while assisting them in building skills and social supports that will allow them to return home or live independently. Services for homeless youth are comprised of three components, outlined below.

Step 1

Evaluate the program's effectiveness through the lens of the recommended approach

A. Evaluate the quality of extensive outreach

Programs actively find and connect with homeless youth, who are often afraid to look for assistance or unaware of services available to them, and help them engage with appropriate programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Implementation</th>
<th>Ineffective Implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Street outreach team goes at regularly scheduled times to at least one location frequented by homeless youth</td>
<td>✗ Street outreach team has no fixed schedule and goes to locations on an ad hoc basis with little attention to which areas are frequented by homeless youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Drop-in center (where youth can eat, use a computer, or have a safe place to sit for a few hours) located in an area convenient for homeless youth</td>
<td>✗ Drop-in center location chosen without regard for ease of youth access and does not have regularly scheduled hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DEFINITION
Homeless youth, also called unaccompanied youth, are defined by the McKinney-Vento Act as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This report focuses on youth aged 15-24 who are separated from their families or guardians. They do not have serious mental health or other issues that require long-term residential care. With support, housing, and training, they can become capable of living independently.

COMPONENTS OF THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH
Youth homelessness programs vary widely. SIR has found that high-quality programs have the following components:
- **Extensive outreach** to effectively find and connect with homeless youth through multiple channels
- Based on individualized needs assessments, programs should be able to support youth in one of the following two paths:
  - **Proactive family reconciliation** programs for youth who can and want to return home
  - **Youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services** to provide long-term services, including housing, for youth who cannot return home

Examples of exceptional implementation

Program uses formal system for tracking the homeless youth population and changes outreach locations to better fit population needs

Program trains staff in effective street-based case management

1. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 USC 11302 103 (a).
B. Evaluate the effectiveness of proactive family reconciliation

Programs give youth a safe place to reside while working with the whole family to ensure that youth can resolve the problems that caused them to leave so they can eventually return home to a more supportive environment.

**EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION**

- Program has youth-specific temporary shelter
- Youth are assigned case managers who
  - Conduct needs assessments to determine whether youth are better off returning home or entering a long-term housing program
  - Oversee youth’s services for duration of the program
  - Work with youth to develop individualized written service plans
- On-site individual and family counseling and crisis response services are available to all youth; staff are trained in crisis response

**INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION**

- Program houses youth in adult shelter or does not offer youth any temporary housing
- Case managers
  - Are not assigned to specific youth
  - Do not assess youth’s existing social support networks or help build relationships
  - Do not support youth in contacting family
  - Have case loads of more than 20 youth

C. Evaluate the effectiveness of youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services

These programs help youth who cannot return home by providing a flexible and individualized array of services to help youth take control of their lives and eventually become independent. The four services described below are subcomponents of youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services.

i. Case management and social support development

These programs assign youth to case managers who support them in multiple ways.

**EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION**

- Youth are assigned case managers who
  - Oversee all youth services for the duration of the program
  - Help youth to connect with people and community resources that can support them (i.e., mentoring programs, support groups, local sports teams)
  - Help youth maintain contact with their families if desired
  - Have case loads of no more than 20 youth

**INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION**

- Case managers
  - Are not assigned to specific youth
  - Do not assess youth’s existing social support networks or help build relationships
  - Do not support youth in contacting family
  - Have case loads of more than 20 youth
### ii. Housing

These programs offer youth multiple transitional housing options to accommodate different needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION</th>
<th>INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Several transitional housing options with varying levels of supervision depending on youth's level of independence; one option should be that the program assists youth in renting their own apartments in the community</td>
<td>✗ Program refers all youth to same type of housing without assessing their level of independence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### iii. Basic needs

These programs help youth meet their basic needs through a variety of services.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION</th>
<th>INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Regular allowance provided to youth for food, transportation, rent, and other living costs</td>
<td>✗ Financial assistance provided irregularly or only at youth's request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Program has formal partnership with a doctor who holds regular hours at the program facility; program staff assist youth in finding specialized and emergency medical care if needed</td>
<td>✗ Program refers youth to outside medical providers on a limited basis; program staff do not assist with finding specialized medical care if needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Individual counseling offered with counselors who have experience working with at-risk youth</td>
<td>✗ No behavioral healthcare or counseling offered to youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Services provided to assist youth with overcoming legal challenges if applicable (i.e., obtaining government identification, handling criminal charges)</td>
<td>✗ Little or no support provided to youth in dealing with any legal issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION**

- In-house medical clinic offers scheduled appointments and is open at all hours for emergencies
- Individual and group counseling options offered to youth with staff who have specialized training in issues including social reintegration, substance abuse, LGBTQ issues, and any other population-specific needs
D. Evaluate outcomes and impact

Programs should track indicators in three outcome areas: housing stability, educational attainment, and employment retention. These are considered the most important basic steps on the path to self-sufficient adulthood. Appropriate indicators may vary for different types of programs, and it is important for interested donors to have a conversation with organizations regarding how they track the success of their programs as they relate to participant outcomes. Below are examples of indicators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of the Approach</th>
<th>Outcome Indicators</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outreach</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing stability:</td>
<td>Percentage of youth who enroll in housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational attainment and employment retention:</strong></td>
<td>Percentage of youth who enroll in long-term services, including education or job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reconciliation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing stability:</td>
<td>Percentage of youth who remain stably housed and have not run away from home again 12 months after program exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional Housing and Supportive Services</td>
<td>Housing stability:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of youth who make a transition to independent housing and remain stably housed 12 months after program exit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational attainment:</strong></td>
<td>Percentage of youth showing educational advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment retention:</strong></td>
<td>Percentage of youth who gain employment during the program and remain employed 12 months after program exit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these three outcomes, other more subjective outcomes, such as stability and level of social support, are difficult to measure, and experts are working to develop metrics. More funding is needed to enable the field to better evaluate homeless youth programs.
### A. Evaluate financial sustainability

Evaluating an organization’s health and stability will provide insight into its structure, capacity, and ability to carry out its mission. It is important to consider at least two factors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Sustainability</th>
<th>Financially Sustainable</th>
<th>Financially Unsustainable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Organization’s debt-to-equity ratio is less than 1.5, meaning its debt is manageable given its assets</td>
<td>✓ Debt-to-equity ratio is greater than 1.5; substantial amount of assets are directed to paying off debt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Organization’s current ratio is equal to or greater than one, meaning its assets are greater than its short-term debt</td>
<td>✓ Current ratio is less than one; the organization will continue to accumulate short-term debt as its assets are not enough to cover its debt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Organization maintains three to six months in cash reserves, so it can withstand brief financial downturns</td>
<td>✓ Organization maintains fewer than three months in cash reserves, leaving it susceptible to economic shocks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Program funding comes from a variety of sources, including philanthropies and government, and might rely on partnerships with legal services organizations or private pro bono support</td>
<td>✓ Funding is dominated by one source or type of funder; if funding comes entirely from federal sources, the programs’ ability to serve all at-risk populations or assist in all types of law may be restricted</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### B. Evaluate management and governance

Management and governance indicators describe the capacity of senior staff and board members to expand an organization and deliver on and hold themselves accountable to the mission.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Management and Governance</th>
<th>Effective Implementation</th>
<th>Ineffective Implementation</th>
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<tr>
<td>✓ CEO is an active leader in the field; management team brings extensive experience with issues faced by homeless youth</td>
<td>✓ Inexperienced CEO and management team with no plans to build capacity; management team cannot convey program or model succinctly, has limited experience working with youth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Three- to five-year goal-driven planning with measurable indicators, concrete time frame, and industry analysis; various stakeholders engaged in the process, including current and former youth participants</td>
<td>✓ Board is comprised of individuals with similar—not diverse or complementary—skills and experience; meetings are rare; members play little or no role in fundraising, oversight, or planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Organization involves youth participants and program alumni in planning and staff hiring</td>
<td>✓ Planning occurs ad hoc; for example, in an annual meeting where possible changes are discussed informally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A. **High-performing organizations**

These organizations are running youth homelessness programs that focus on providing youth with a set of services tailored to their particular needs and helping youth build the skills and social supports they need to become self-sufficient adults. These organizations are financially sound with excellent leadership and governance. Donors can feel confident that an investment in such an organization will be used effectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk / Reward</th>
<th>Low risk/high reward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommended level of involvement</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of investment opportunities</td>
<td>Support research to provide evidence of what works and build the field, donate furniture or other supplies to help furnish youth apartments in a transitional housing program, provide funding to train other organizations, support implementation of growth plans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STEP 4 Evaluate the Organization’s Ability to Foster Systemic Impact

**A. Evaluate growth plans**

Evaluate growth plans to understand the organization’s capacity to further its mission and reach more people:

- Organization has a realistic growth plan with adequate funding and measurable goals
- Organization continuously seeks to manage its network of partner organizations to better provide support services and create a sense of community for homeless youth
- Organization takes input from current and former youth participants into consideration as it assesses its program and plans for the future

**B. Evaluate community partnerships**

Evaluate community partnerships to understand the organization’s ability to collaborate and drive greater change:

- Organization continuously seeks to create partnerships with others serving homeless and at-risk youth to cover gaps in services and create a sense of community for homeless youth
- Organization participates in boards, committees, and professional organizations to exchange information about what works with peer organizations and advocate for and create a comprehensive public policy agenda to address the issue of youth homelessness

**C. Evaluate field-building activities**

Evaluate field-building activities to understand an organization’s role in driving system change:

- Organization shares lessons learned and best practices with others actively working in the field by conducting research on its own programs and making data publicly available
- Organization regularly advocating for systemic and policy changes to support homeless youth

STEP 5 Interpret your Evaluation and Determine How to Provide Support

**A. High-performing organizations**

The preceding four steps helped you gain a holistic understanding of an organization and its youth homelessness programs. To make a decision about the best way to provide support, determine where your organization fits among the following three categories.

- **High-performing organizations** meet the majority of the criteria outlined above
- **Developing organizations** meet some, but not all, of the criteria outlined above
- **Low-performing organizations** meet few to none of the criteria outlined above
B. Developing organizations

These organizations may be doing some things well but need improvement in other areas. Often these are young organizations, but they can also be established organizations that are undergoing a transition. Investment in these organizations can be challenging yet exciting for donors who are interested in helping them improve.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk / Reward</th>
<th>Moderate risk/high reward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommended level of involvement</td>
<td>Medium to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of investment opportunities</td>
<td>Support research on program effectiveness, pilot improved program models, expand effective services, recruit staff experienced in working with homeless youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. Low-performing organizations

These organizations have room for improvement in all areas. Investment in a low-performing organization with a good management team that is dedicated to improving its programs can be an exciting opportunity for donors who want to support organizational development. Investment in low-performing organizations that are not dedicated to improving is not recommended.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk / Reward</th>
<th>High risk/reward varies based on organization’s desire to improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommended level of involvement</td>
<td>High, if the organization is strategically working to improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of investment opportunities</td>
<td>Support strategic or business planning, support research to determine needs of local homeless youth population, secure technical assistance to improve programs, hire staff with significant expertise, help connect the organization with strong partners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Supporting Emerging Social Innovations

HIGH RISK WITH THE POTENTIAL FOR HIGH REWARD

Donors may also wish to consider organizations that are testing innovative approaches that could eventually lead to breakthroughs in addressing the targeted social issues. Such organizations should be able to articulate why they are diverging from the proven approach and how they see themselves improving upon that approach.

Testing new models for family reconciliation is one example of needed innovation in the youth homelessness sector. Experts agree that family reconciliation is important—data shows that most homeless youth return home, whether or not their home situations are healthy. Therefore, it is important that programs are able to help youth and their families create a more positive home environment. This will prevent youth from becoming homeless multiple times. Limited early evidence exists about effective methodologies for family reconciliation, but more data and research are needed about the best tools for this path.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SIR thanks the following organizations that have made valuable contributions to this guide:

Bridge Over Troubled Waters
BOSTON, MA

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Rediscovery, Inc.
WALTHAM, MA

Tempo Young Adult Resource Center
FRAMINGHAM, MA

Urban Peak
DENVER, CO
Social Impact Research (SIR) is the independent research department of Root Cause, a research and consulting firm dedicated to mobilizing the nonprofit, public, and business sectors to work collaboratively in a new social impact market. Modeled after private sector equity research firms, SIR conducts research on social issues and independent analysis of program performance to provide leaders and funders with the rigorous, actionable information they need to make strategic decisions about creating and investing in social impact.