



# INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

RESEARCH BRIEF | December 2020

## Young, unsheltered and in harm's way: Promoting health and development through disentangling youth violence, homelessness, and criminal justice

### WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

Homelessness among youth under age 25 is a national crisis, with recent estimates finding 4.2 million US youth experience homelessness annually.<sup>1</sup> And youth experiencing homelessness (YEH) in US cities, are in harm's way. YEH experience high rates of violence, including physical assault, sexual assault, and property loss.<sup>2</sup> Further, YEH are often criminalized for trying to survive by status offense laws, juvenile curfews, "quality of life" ordinances, and the punishment of crimes linked to survival.<sup>3</sup> While these structural and systemic factors significantly contribute to poor outcomes for YEH, the focus of research, policy, and interventions commonly focuses on influencing the individual decision-making of YEH and changing their behavior. This approach neglects to address the factors that directly impact the wellbeing of YEH, limiting their access to safe, healthy, and necessary resources to meet their basic and health needs.

While researchers and social service providers that are concerned with the health of YEH have identified access to social services and basic needs resources as a fundamental concern, little is known about how the vulnerability of YEH to structural barriers in accessing these services or the violence and criminalization that may disrupt their access. In order to understand how violence, criminalization and homelessness interact to affect the health and wellbeing of YEH, we engaged a team of youth researchers who solicited narratives from YEH. Our overall research question was: "Where do YEH feel safe and where do they report being in danger?"

### HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

Using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model, we worked with YEH for guidance on developing our research questions, the design of the research, and implementation of our project. The project team included young leaders in YEH advisory boards and UC Berkeley undergraduate students. The team developed interview protocols, conducted interviews, and participated in data analysis and dissemination. From July – November 2018, the team conducted 43 semi-structured, street-based, qualitative interviews in San Francisco with young people ages 15-24 who had experienced homelessness in the previous six months. Participants physically walked and took photos or digitally mapped the neighborhoods where they spend their time, giving a "tour" and sharing their expertise and experience. They were asked about places, spaces, and people connected to violence or safety for YEH. The interviews were transcribed and coded using modified grounded theory. Photos were linked to some of the memo excerpts as

### KEY FINDINGS

- Service providers, police officers and business owners don't always use their considerable power to help youth experiencing homelessness.
- Youth experiencing homelessness must travel through unsafe spaces in order to meet their basic needs.
- Stigma and dehumanization of youth experiencing homelessness limit their access and ability to maintain jobs, shelter, and resources.

## Violence, Safety, and Resources for Youth Experiencing Homelessness in San Francisco

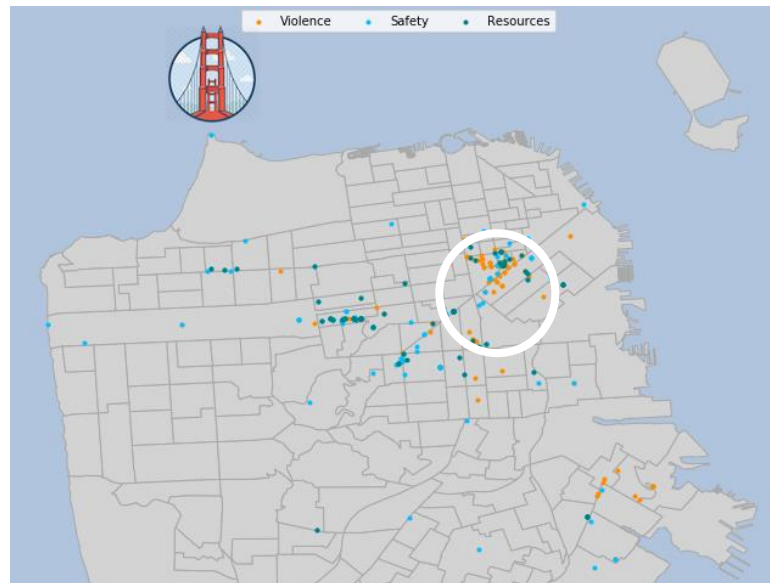


Figure represents the geolocation of spaces participants identified as places of violence, safety, and resources.

illustrations. Interview transcripts were reviewed for descriptions of geolocatable places and were mapped to identify places of violence, safety, and resources.

### WHAT WE FOUND

We found that the decision-making power of service providers, police, businesses, and property owners was incredibly important. They have authority to limit or grant access to services, resources, and even freedom of movement for YEH and was a central factor in how YEH found resources and navigated safety. YEH described how this power was often misused, arbitrary, and motivated by personal feelings, interpersonal relationships, or randomness. For example, participants described police officers using dehumanizing language, threats and use of physical violence and involuntary psychiatric custody laws, and selective enforcement of laws criminalizing homelessness. YEH lacked voice and decision-making in their own lives.

We also found that the locations of violence, safety, and resources are connected and require YEH to navigate them physically and socially to meet their basic needs. Service agencies were the primary places for YEH to find resources, but they are exclusively located in areas with high rates of violence against YEH. As circled in the chart, violence (orange dots) and resources (green dots) are clustered together near dense urban neighborhood centers. However, safe spaces (blue dots) tend to be further away. YEH feel forced to leave their safe places in order to find resources needed for daily survival.

Local policies that criminalize homelessness were identified as primary sources of structural violence.

These policies lead to police enforcement and restrictions in access to water and restrooms. They prevent access to sleep and shelter due to hostile architecture and policies that restrict “camping”.

### WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

#### Locate Services in Safe Places and During Needed Times

The dynamics of violence, safety, and resources require YEH to move throughout the day, “commuting” from safe, under-resourced areas where they may have slept to unsafe, resourced areas of the city, then back. Policies on housing, services, and other supports must consider where those services are located, making clear and intentional decisions to prioritize the safety and health of those individuals directly and indirectly affected. Programs can make better decisions about the location of services by engaging YEH on where basic needs resources should be located to maximize access and safety. The times that those resources are available are also an important consideration. Providing access to food, water,

**“They put up a ‘No Loitering’ sign at the park. What the f\*\*\* are you supposed to do in a park? Loiter!”**

— Youth Experiencing Homelessness

and hygiene resources during the same times every day--including weekdays and weekends-- provides YEH the opportunity to schedule and plan ahead for commuting into and through unsafe spaces where those resources are located. These measures ensure services for YEH are located where they are, where they spend their time, and where they are safe.

### **Make Decision-Making Transparent**

The health and wellbeing of YEH are critically influenced by the decisions of those with power, like service providers, police officers, private business, and property-owners. Shifting how YEH are seen, treated, and valued will improve their access to services and outcomes. Even one harmful or dismissive decision can mean a young person might be exposed to violence or may not be able to eat that day. Transparency in decision-making processes that affect YEH, such as program eligibility and inclusion and disciplinary protocols, could improve outcomes and access to needed services. When YEH have been involved in the development and implementation of the rules governing their access to resources, they understand the rules and they don't feel arbitrary. As a result, disciplinary responses become clear, have transparent steps, and can be simply and accessibly described to YEH. While disciplinary actions are sometimes necessary, maintaining access to basic needs and resources are key to ensuring continued health and wellbeing. When a young person is suspended from receiving services in a location, procedures or protocols can continue to ensure they are able to meet their basic needs. For example, providing bagged meals and hygiene supplies for pick-up will keep YEH from entering the spaces where they were suspended, but maintain their ability to care for themselves.

### **Humanize Youth & Train Providers**

Humanizing interactions with YEH is critical for safety and health. Research has found that YEH are not only more likely to come from marginalized social backgrounds, but those from marginalized backgrounds experience higher rates of violence and resource deprivation. Structural issues, such as institutional racism and implicit bias, play an important role in the lives of YEH. Participants described experiences of stigma, discrimination and subsequent violence. These experiences can be particularly acute for young people of color, queer and transgender young people, and disabled young people. Understanding bias and its impacts on service

delivery and decision-making is critical to increased safety and access to resources. Training in person-centered approaches, including motivational interviewing, implicit bias, and restorative justice, may be particularly useful for police officers and service providers. A deep understanding of adulthood and respecting the self-determination and humanity of young people would be an important component of any training. Our findings suggest the need for these trainings to also include identifying when trainees are using their power and implementing strategies to prevent barriers to resource access.

### **Decriminalize Being Homeless**

Reconsideration of municipal ordinances that are designed to limit or prevent the presence of people experiencing homelessness, sometimes called "quality of life" ordinances, is necessary. The criminalization of homelessness prevents individuals from meeting their basic needs and finding safety. While the public ordinances criminalizing homelessness are enacted by government agencies, how they are regulated is a question of law enforcement. Our study illustrates the harm that is sometimes inflicted on youth when police are first-responders to YEH. To support the health and wellbeing of YEH, resources to strengthen and integrate service providers, community organizations, and other municipal authorities are necessary. Centering funding and developing engagement strategies to connect YEH to social workers, nurse practitioners, and service providers would increase access to basic and health needs.

### **Our Work Continues**

The implications and recommendations emerging from our study have been grounded in collaborative approaches to policy and program development. Engaging with YEH, youth advisory boards, service providers, law enforcement agencies, and municipal authorities to disseminate our research findings emphasizes this collaboration. We continue to establish partnerships with community, police, and municipal representatives and these relationships will provide a venue for pursuing these recommendations.

<sup>1</sup>Morton, M., Dworsky, A., Samuels, G. M., & Patel, S. (2018). Voices of Youth Count Comprehensive Report: Youth Homelessness in America. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3615864>

<sup>2</sup>Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., & Buccieri, K. (2010). *Surviving Crime and Violence: Street Youth and Victimization in Toronto*. <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/29374>

<sup>3</sup>Robinson, T. (2019). No Right to Rest: Police Enforcement Patterns and Quality of Life Consequences of the Criminalization of Homelessness. *Urban Affairs Review*, 55(1), 41–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087417690833>

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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