



# European Framework for Defining **Youth Homelessness**

“Youth homelessness occurs where an individual between the ages of 13 and 26 is experiencing rooflessness or houselessness or is living in insecure or inadequate housing without a parent, family member or other legal guardian.”

FEANTSA



# European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness

International research and insights from frontline services indicates that young people experiencing homelessness have a different pathway into homelessness and distinct needs while homeless which require specific youth-oriented solutions to exit homelessness. This framework provides a definition of youth homelessness for organisations working towards the eradication of youth homelessness. This definition is intended to be used as a framework which can be tailored to the various European contexts services operate in.

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## Why now?



Young people are generally ignored and failed by the existing policy landscape which does not take account of the specific needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

In Europe we need to re-think how we perceive and define homelessness and in particular youth homelessness. Youth homelessness is primarily the result of social injustice and inequalities manifested in structural barriers and system failures and not the result of individual circumstances or "personal failings".

"Part of the reason why, for example, Nordic responses differ from those of some Southern and Eastern EU member states to homelessness, is arguably about definitions and cultural responses".<sup>1</sup>

Creating a definition of youth homelessness empowers services and policy makers to better understand and respond to youth homelessness.

Preventing and ending youth homelessness necessitates a departure from systems and policies which have historically failed vulnerable youth experiencing homelessness and require clear definitions of youth homelessness, supported by strategies and policies to specifically support youth.

*1. Homelessness Services in Europe, European Observatory on Homelessness, Comparative Research 2019*

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## Note on Homelessness in Europe



The concept of homelessness and homeless services differs across Europe. The definition of youth homelessness in this document should be considered a framework to work with across Europe and reflects the reality which services face in supporting people experiencing homelessness.

"Definitions are important because the wider the definition of homelessness, the wider the range of services and supports that tend to be provided. If homelessness is just defined as people living rough, only a relatively small range of services focused on a comparatively small population is required"<sup>2</sup>.

**A key component to our definition of youth homelessness is recognising that youth homelessness exists in Europe.**

In part the rise of youth homelessness across Europe can be attributed to its hidden dimension, which has resulted in homeless youth becoming an underserved group by both policy makers and service providers. **In the absence of a recognition of youth homelessness and specific strategies and policies targeted to their needs, youth homelessness has risen sharply.**

*2. Homelessness Services in Europe, European Observatory on Homelessness, Comparative Research 2019*

## The Age Range of Youth Homelessness

No young person should be denied a youth-oriented solution to support the best possible exit from homelessness.

In preparing this definition and framework on youth homelessness, FEANTSA consulted with over 100 services across Europe through online surveys and face to face workshops to capture i) the reality of youth homelessness, ii) the legislative framework services operate within and iii) internal policies of services for working with youth. Frequently legislation differentiates between child and a young person. Generally, this distinction is made where a young person is considered homeless at the age of 16 or 18, below this age they are considered a child and are intended to be supported by a different service.

However consistently homeless services reported that as young as 13, and in some services as young as 8, young people were presenting to their services without a parent or guardian nor a stable or safe home. **Our definition therefore comprises people as young as 13, to reflect the reality that homeless services in Europe face.** For example in the Netherlands the Court of Auditors, defines youth homelessness as people aged 12-23 with multiple disadvantages and have no place of permanent residence or safe place to stay<sup>3</sup>.

Conversely however once a person is 18, they are generally considered an adult by existing legislation and if they experience homelessness they are supported by adult services. Insights from

services and international research literature demonstrates that in the transition to adulthood age is only one factor to be considered. Until the age of 23 young people continue to cognitively, emotionally and psychologically develop. Ageing from 17 to 18 does not drastically alter a young person's situation or their required housing supports and they are still in a situation of homelessness where they have lost their home, family connections, community supports, links to education and employment and potentially experiencing significant trauma, poor mental health and substance use problems.

**Insights from our consultation with services across Europe show that organisations that work with young people experiencing homelessness define youth until the age of 26.** However it is important to note that services should not be designed with a cliff edge cut off point, meaning that in advance of turning 26 young people should be supported towards a transition to adult services and in some instances should be allowed to remain in youth services up until the age of 30 as required.

No young person should be denied a youth-oriented solution to support the best possible exit from homelessness.

3. Zwerfjongeren omvang, kenmerken en zorgbehoeften, 2010

## Conflicting Definitions

Most countries don't have a definition for youth homelessness. This results in youth being forgotten from the specific policies and interventions they require. Even within some countries there is conflicting guidance provided to services.

For example in France a ministerial circular from 1990 specifies that young people are defined as 18-30 regarding housing policies. Conversely at local level the French Labour code notes that 'anyone between the ages of 16 & 25 who are in difficulty and faced with the risk of exclusion has the right to support implemented by Local Missions and should include health and housing supports.

## What is a Youth Oriented Solution?

We know young people present to services with a unique set of needs. Services need to be tailored and adapted to these needs to give young people the best possible opportunity of successfully exiting homelessness. Positive engagement with social workers, aftercare workers and homeless services are key indicators of exiting homelessness. A youth oriented solution engages a young person which results in i) bolstering confidence and abilities to engage with different solutions, ii) is linked to fewer and smoother transitions moving towards sustainable housing and iii) a greater awareness of support systems and increased likelihood of using supports if a crisis situation arose. The opposite also bears out in research, negative experiences of services for young people results in poor housing outcomes, anxiety and stress. From a service provider's perspective poor engagement makes it difficult to assess a young person's needs and therefore cannot design an adequate service tailored to the needs of the young person thereby further compounding the situation of homelessness.

## Youth Homelessness as a distinct form of homelessness



**Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness.** Pathways into homelessness, experiences while homeless and exits out of homelessness are different for young people. A number of factors should be considered in designing services that adequately cater for the needs of young people:

1) The majority of young people have left homes and relationships which they were dependent on, for both economic and social wellbeing.

2) Exiting homelessness is not only about a transition to housing but must also include a healthy transition to adulthood and services should be mindful of ensuring that personal, life and social skills are developed to support the transition to independent living.

3) Young people undergo social, cognitive, physical, psychological and emo-

tional development until at least the age of 23<sup>4</sup>.

4) In experiencing homelessness young people have a history of being failed by social services and will avoid homeless services due to fear of authorities.

5) Policies can systemically discriminate against young people in accessing benefits, imposing a lower minimum wage and regulations of rental market can make it more difficult for young people to access housing<sup>5</sup>.

**International research demonstrates that all these factors must be built into youth-oriented solutions or tailored professional supports that include housing, health and broader social service interventions that support young people to manage past traumas and their mental health to not only successfully exit homelessness but to also sustain housing.**

4. *Living in Limbo, Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing*, Mayock & Parker, 2017

5. *Living in Limbo, Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing*, Mayock & Parker, 2017, *Factors that influence homeless adolescents to leave or stay living on the street*, Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004 *Towards housing stability: Exiting homelessness as an emerging adult*, Karabanow, Kidd and Hughes 2016

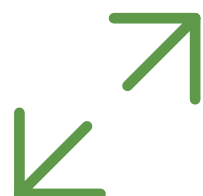
## Diversity of Experiences

While youth homelessness should be considered as a distinct form of homelessness the needs of young people can differ as they are a heterogeneous group of people. This means that services designed for young people must be tailored and flexible to the specific needs of each young person.

Housing is a key requirement of exiting homelessness, but it is not a silver bullet. International research demonstrates that housing alone is not sufficient to ensure a sustainable exit from homelessness for young people. Pathways into youth homelessness are often marked with losing touch with family, education and employment and wider social exclusion<sup>6</sup>. Solutions that support young people towards sustained exits from homelessness should include:

- Building a supportive network of peers.
- Positive engagement with school, education, training<sup>7</sup>.
- Completion of second level education or formal professional or work experience<sup>8</sup>.
- Connecting, where appropriate, with family<sup>9</sup>.
- Awareness of, and connection to, social systems and supports.
- Psychological and mental health supports, where requested by the young person<sup>10</sup>.

Below are some of the diverse experiences homeless youth possess which should be considered when designing services for young people.



6. *Adolescents exiting homelessness over two years: The risk amplification and abatement mode*, Milburn, 2009

7. *Predictors of homelessness among street living youth*, Slesnik, 20018

8. *Predictors of residential stability among homeless young adults: A cohort study*, Roy, 2016

9. *Predictors of homelessness among street living youth*, Slesnick, 2008

10. *Predictors of residential stability among homeless young adults: A cohort study*, Roy, 2016

## Age Range



Between the ages of 13-26 the needs of a young person can differ. The interventions and supports required for a young teen, adolescent and person aged 26 will differ. **Youth also pass through a series of milestones during this period of their life relating to the right to vote, their sexual health, ageing out of state**

**care, accessing benefits, the range of services they are entitled to access, the institutions they work with and how they are treated by agencies and institutions of state including the justice system.** Services and supports must be mindful of the changing needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

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## Youth Leaving State Care

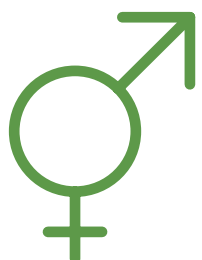


Youth who are in the care of the state as children and “age-out” of child services are at a heightened risk of experiencing homelessness as young adults. This aging-out process is often at eighteen years, when young people go through a series of life changes. Managing this transition alone, since the young person often loses the support of their care worker, is very complex. During this transition period a young person often loses their

social network (which is built up in residential care), housing and their social benefits. The shorter the period of transition the higher the risk of experiencing homelessness, particularly when the system doesn't support or prepare the young person for this transition. **Starting to prepare a young person to be able to leave care, should be done as early as possible.**

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## Intersectionality



Intersectionality is also an important criterion to consider when delivering services for youth experiencing homelessness. Youth can sometimes be only one dimension of the supports required and can intersect with other identities. For example, the **LGBTIQ community<sup>11</sup>, people with disabilities<sup>12</sup>, ethnic minorities<sup>13</sup> and young women<sup>14</sup> face diffe-**

**rent obstacles and multiple forms of discrimination which simultaneously puts them at a heightened risk of becoming homeless** and results in a unique set of life experiences which services need to be competent in addressing to support smooth and swift exits from homelessness<sup>15</sup>.

11. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer Experiencing of Homelessness & Identity: Insecurity and Home(o)normativity*, 2019

12. *The Invisibility of Disability for Homeless Youth*, Collins, 2018

13. *Young & Homeless*, Homeless Link, 2018

14. *Living in Limbo, Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing*, Mayock & Parker, 2017

15. [http://conference.caeh.ca/wp-content/uploads/COH10\\_The-invisibility-of-disability-for-homeless-youth\\_Steph-Baker-Collins.pdf](http://conference.caeh.ca/wp-content/uploads/COH10_The-invisibility-of-disability-for-homeless-youth_Steph-Baker-Collins.pdf)

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## Drug Use



Youth experiencing homelessness often turn to substance use as a coping mechanism. **Eliminating drug use has also been shown to facilitate young people's exit from homelessness and access housing.** For a young person the difficulty arises where the loss of family and/or guardians who provide financial and social support is replaced with peers who are involved in anti-social or

criminal behaviour, often linked to drugs. Peer groups have often replaced family as a supportive unit in the life of young person and this can be a difficult situation to manage, particularly as young people's identity can be tied up in their peer groups. Youth services should be acutely aware of this dynamic when supporting young people to make decisions in their lives.

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## Mental Health



**Young people moving through the homeless system often have experiences of poor mental health which is both a cause and effect of homelessness.** The cycle of sofa-surfing, rough sleeping and moving through emergency shelter has been found to disempower young people, exacerbate mental illness and

lose faith in the system to accommodate them. Worsening mental health can lead to admission to psychiatric institutions where young people are often discharged back into homelessness and unstable housing where their situation further worsens.<sup>16</sup>

16. *Living in Limbo, Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing*, Mayock & Parker, 2017

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## Housing Supply & Discrimination

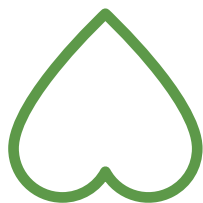


Young people often experience discrimination in the private rental market. This can be indirect discrimination where **landlords request a high deposit on a rental property or multiple landlord references, which young people typically do not possess.** Additionally, they can experience direct discrimination where landlords refuse to rent their property to

students or young professionals. This pushes more vulnerable young people into poor quality housing sometimes without a lease and rights as a tenant or pushes them into homelessness.

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## Sex Work



Sex work can often intersect with the experience of homelessness in particular for young women and LGBTIQ youth. Many young women who are homeless have previously experienced domestic abuse and in addition to seeking emergency shelter need supports to overcome trauma, typically mixed shelters are not an appropriate place for young homeless women to recover. At the same

time emergency shelters are not adapted to the needs of LGBTIQ youth, who often experience homophobia and transphobia. **The inadequacy of existing services results in young people turning to sex work, survival sex & trading sexual favours for shelter and material support rather than engaging with existing services**<sup>17</sup>.

17. *Out on the Streets, LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness in Wales, Llamua, 2019*

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## Family conflict and violence

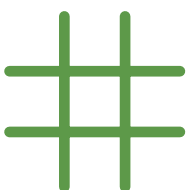


Young people experiencing homelessness can often have poor relationships with their family. Youth homelessness is often marked with either experiences, or witnessing, physical, sexual or emotional violence and/or experiencing or witnessing substance use

in the family home. These are important factors to consider when examining the potential of re-connecting young people to their social networks.

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## Categorising Youth Homelessness



The European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion sets out a broad definition of homelessness and housing exclusion, which should be used in tackling youth homelessness.

- **Rooflessness:**

Where a young person is sleeping rough. Often alternating between rough sleeping and emergency accommodation on a night by night basis depending on the availability and quality of services. In this instance shelters may be not be tailored to the needs of young people or may be of such poor quality that they choose to sleep rough rather than enter a shelter.

- **Houselessness:**

While not sleeping rough, young people who are accommodated in emergency accommodation, B&B, supported or unsupported temporary accommodation can feel trapped in a temporary situation where there is no solution on the horizon to move out of homelessness and

into a home of their own. Young people with unplanned exits from the care system are also at risk here.

- **Insecure & Inadequate Housing:**

Young people are often in insecure and/or inadequate housing before presenting to homeless services and at times after they exit a homeless service. This occurs where young people i) return to their family home ii) take housing without a tenancy or right to reside or iii) sofa surf with friends and family. These all remain volatile situations in which a young person may be at risk of re-entering emergency shelter or sleeping rough in the near future. Insecure housing can also be marked by a chaotic navigation of services where a combination of housing arrears, poor family relations and unfit services for youth mean a young person floats between shelters, rough sleeping, sofa-surfing and short-term housing.

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## Insecure housing

In Finland this is regarded as the largest category of homelessness. A majority of people experiencing homelessness are in insecure housing often a result of debt, money & access to affordable housing. Anecdotal evidence from services indicates that youth experiencing homelessness are outside of official statistics and data gathering mechanisms due to its hidden dimension.

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Young people falling into this category can be difficult for services to reach out to and work with. There is a stigma attached to homelessness and many young people who float between shelters, sofa-surfing and rough sleeping do not view themselves as homeless. This relationship can also be bi-directional, as services can be complicated to access with high levels of bureaucracy and it may be that the services are difficult to reach rather than the people.

## Human Rights Issue

Youth homelessness is a human rights violation.



Youth homelessness is a human rights violation. **A young person experiencing homelessness is not to be blamed for their situation.** Homelessness is not the result of single life occurrence or event in the life of the person experiencing homelessness, rather it is the result of the failure of social policies and systems to adequately protect young people. When discussing youth homelessness and developing solutions it's important to frame the conversation in Human Rights. In experiencing homelessness, a series of human rights violations occur under various European and International treaties.

### European Convention of Human Rights:

- Article 2: Right to life
- Article 3: Prohibition of torture
- Article 6: Right to a fair trial
- Article 8: Right to respect for private and family life
- Article 13: Right to an effective remedy
- Article 14: Prohibition of discrimination
- Article 1 of Protocol 1: Protection of property
- Article 2 of Protocol 4: Freedom of movement, which is relevant in the fight against homelessness and housing exclusion

### United Nations Convention of Economic and Social Rights:

- Article 11: "The right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions"
- Article 12: "The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health"

### United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child:

- Article 16: "No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation"
- Article 19: "States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child"
- Article 20: "A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State"

### European Social Charter:

- Article 13: The Right to Social & Medical Assistance
- Article 16: The Right of the Family to Social and Economic Protection
- Article 17: The Right of Children and young people to Social, Legal and Economic Protections
- Article 19: The Right of Migrant Workers and their Families to Protection and Assistance
- Article 30: The Right to Protection Against Poverty and Social Exclusion
- Article 31: The Right to Housing

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