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Homelessness and Child Welfare Services in New York City: Exploring Trends and Opportunites for Improving Outcomes for Children and Youth

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Commissioned by *The Administration for Children's Services in New York City*, 2007.

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Homelessness and Child Welfare Services in New York City: Exploring Trends and Opportunities for Improving Outcomes for Children and Youth

A White Paper Commissioned by
The Administration for Children's Services in New York City

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The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of George Gabel, Robert Hill, and Liz Quinn at Westat. The research reported in this paper was supported, through Westat, under a contract with the Administration for Children's Services in New York City. The opinions expressed here represent only those of the authors. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support and assistance of Maryanne Schretzman and Jay Bainbridge of the Department of Homeless Services, Gary Sutnik of the Administration for Children's Services, and Gabriel Brodbar, formerly of ACS, but now with Dartington-i .

Executive Summary

Homelessness and Child Welfare Services in New York City: Exploring Trends and Opportunities for Improving Outcomes for Children and Youth

For over a decade, national research has shown that many disadvantaged youth and families experience both homelessness and involvement in child welfare services. However, prior to the research summarized here, no population-based research had examined systematically the extent and dynamics by which children and youth experience both of these service systems. This white paper for the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) provides a summary of three studies that looked carefully at how these two important social welfare systems have shared a population, and how our improved understanding of these intersecting systems of care can promote better outcomes and improved quality of life for children and youth.

Principal Findings:

Short-term rate of homeless shelter use in adult and family shelters among youth exiting out of home care from 1991 to 1999 (three years):

- The highest rate of homeless shelter use, 19 percent, was observed among those who left foster care in 1991, a rate that declined to the lowest observed rate in this period of 13 percent among those exiting in 1998 and 1999.

- An average of 300 of the youth who exited foster care each year entered either the adult or family shelter systems within three years of their exit from foster care.

- Youth who stayed in Kinship Foster Homes before their final discharge had the lowest rate of homeless shelter use at 9 percent, while one out of five persons discharged from Noninstitutional Congregate Care[1] (20 percent) subsequently stayed in homeless shelters.

- Youth exiting Noninstitutional Congregate Care are at 29 percent greater risk of shelter use than among discharges overall. In contrast, youth

[1] Noninstitutional Congregate Care includes group homes, group residences, Agency Operated Boarding Homes, and Supervised Independent Living Programs.

exiting Kinship Foster Homes are 35 percent less like to be among those staying in shelters than reflected among discharges overall.

- Among youth aged 17 or older who left ACS out-of-home care during the 1990s, 19 percent of those who left out-of-home care through running away entered the homeless shelter system during the following three years, the highest rate among exit types.

- Youth who aged out of care comprised 43 percent of the discharges and 47 percent of those with shelter stays; however, their rate of homeless shelter use was comparable to youth leaving care overall.

- Youth who stay in the youth shelter system administered by DYCD (age 18-21) are not included in these study results, thus the study results likely underestimate the total number of youth exiting ACS who enter homeless shelters.

Long-term rate of homeless shelter use in adult and family shelters among youth exiting ACS care from 1988 to 1992 (10 years):

- Looking at a longer, 10-year rate of opportunity for homelessness, the rate of homeless shelter use was two times higher for persons who experienced out-of-home placement as compared to those who received preventive services only (22 percent vs. 11 percent).

- The 10-year rate of homeless shelter use also varied substantially across the type of final exit, with the runaway subgroup having the highest rate (34 percent), followed by the aging-out group (26 percent), and family reunification group (20 percent).

- The analyses here show substantial differences between genders, with females experiencing homeless shelter stays at over twice the rate of males (25 vs. 11 percent) over the 10-year period. Most women in this study are accompanied by their children.

- Importantly, the risk of homeless shelter use for runaways increases steadily from age 21 forward, further supporting the idea that runaways are a significant risk group for homelessness, and a group whose risk increases into young adulthood.

Overall, these findings suggest that many children with a history of child welfare involvement need continued supports after they leave the child welfare system in order to make a transition to stable living arrangements in adulthood. One such

means of support consists of targeted housing subsidies bundled with education and employment assistance. In 2001 ACS started using such an approach in developing over 200 new units of permanent supportive housing for youth aging out of foster care. In addition, ACS, in cooperation with the New York City Housing Authority, has created and currently manages programs that greatly facilitate access to Section 8 vouchers to all qualified families in the child welfare system and to children aging out of ACS care. Services to strengthen family functioning may also help children discharged to reunification to achieve better outcomes. Such approaches would be consistent with the above findings, and the findings furthermore promise to be beneficial in designing evaluations of these programs and in assessing their impact on homelessness among this target population.

Patterns of adult homeless shelter use by child welfare history:

- Overall, 29 percent of the young adults with stays in homeless shelters had a childhood child welfare history, and 21 percent (74 percent of those with childhood child welfare histories) had histories of out-of-home placement through the child welfare system.

- Thirty percent of those in the family shelter system and 26 percent of those in the single-adult shelter system received child welfare services as a child.

- Childhood out-of-home placement was associated with an increased number of days spent in shelters among family shelter users and with an increased likelihood of experiencing repeated shelter stays during early adulthood in both the family shelter and single adult shelter groups.

- Among family shelter users, those who "aged out" of out-of-home care when they reached adulthood spent an average of 214 days in shelters, compared to 178 days for those whose childhood out-of-home placement ended with family reunification, 180 days for those who ran away from out-of-home care, and 158 days for those who were adopted.

- Among single-adult shelter users, the aging-out group spent an average of 130 days in shelters, which is longer than other subgroups. Those who exited out-of-home placement through running away had more frequent shelter stays than other groups.

Targeting housing and social services to the population leaving out-of-home care is potentially very important to preclude their need to resort to homeless shelters. Children in out-of-home placements who turn 18 may remain in care if they are participating in approved programming, and are otherwise supposed to continue

to receive supervision until they are 21. Providing more extensive support services under the framework of this supervision process and providing more choices for housing options when these children reach adulthood are two steps towards reducing the number of young adults who exit the child welfare system and subsequently enter the homeless shelter system. The New York City Department of Homeless Services recommends, given the special circumstances and needs of young adults who are homeless, that they be provided with targeted housing separate from the general sheltered population (NYC DHS, 2003). Such housing options include transitional living programs as well as permanent supportive housing. In New York City, both ACS and the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development, working in conjunction with non-profit housing providers, have provided a limited supply of such housing, and ACS has a program providing rent supplements and Section 8 rental vouchers for pregnant and parenting youth on trial discharge from foster care. Such housing represents a promising start, but would need to be available on a much larger scale, if these measures were to substantially reduce homeless shelter use among this population. This need for housing and other support services in early adulthood is particularly striking among the group who enter shelters with children. Compared to single adults, homeless families as a group consumed more shelter days per stay and require more resources during their shelter stays. Given average family shelter costs of $35,000 per year, families with a parent who had exited ACS care used approximately $18,000 in shelter service each, which could provide an annual housing subsidy of $9,000 per year for approximately 2 years. Among single adult homeless youth, the average cumulative shelter stays for those exiting care cost approximately $6,800 per person, resources that could similarly be used to support housing placement.

Child welfare system involvement among children in families with homeless shelter stays:

- Among children who have for the first time stayed in the New York City homeless shelter system, approximately 18 percent will eventually be placed in out-of-home care or receive nonplacement preventive services through ACS within five years after their first admission to the homeless shelter system.

- More than one out of every four (27 percent) who had three or more shelter stays, and two out of every five (40 percent) families who had shelter stays longer than six months eventually experienced child welfare system involvement.

- Regardless of the declining admissions to out-of-home care, children with a history of shelter stays consistently accounted for a considerable proportion of those who first entered ACS out-of-home care. Overall, 18

percent of first time admissions to ACS have experienced shelter stays *before* they were placed in out-of-home care.

These findings suggest not only that homelessness among families has wide-ranging effects on family structure, but also that there are considerable public costs associated with these effects across other public services systems. Furthermore, measures taken to prevent homelessness, as well as related housing interventions, may result in a broad range of benefits such as reductions in the demand for child welfare services in the future. Evaluations of housing programs should take into account such potential collateral impacts both in the child welfare system and possibly in other social welfare systems, when assessing the effectiveness of housing for homeless families. The significant prevalence of child welfare system involvement by children with homeless shelter histories clearly indicates the need for service integration between the homeless shelter and child welfare systems so as to create more efficient and effective service provision with the aim of obviating the need for further involvement in either system.

Homelessness and Child Welfare Services in New York City: Exploring Trends and Opportunities for Improving Outcomes for Children and Youth

Introduction

For over a decade, national research has shown that many disadvantaged youth and families experience both homelessness and involvement in child welfare services. However, prior to the research summarized here, no population-based research had examined systematically the extent and dynamics by which children and youth experience both of these service systems. The availability of administrative records in New York City that track use of both the homeless shelter and child welfare systems has made possible a much more comprehensive understanding of how youth and families with children have experienced these dual risks over more than a decade. This white paper produced for the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) provides a summary of three studies that looked carefully at how these two important social welfare systems have shared a population, and how our improved understanding of these intersecting systems of care can promote better outcomes and improved quality of life for children and youth.[2]

The ACS has made significant progress in enhancing the safety and well-being of the City's children: New York City's foster care population has continuously declined since 1991; fewer children have been entering the foster care system; and more children who were in foster care have been placed in permanent homes. However, the well-being of children who depart the child welfare system as youth and young adults remains a concern to policymakers, practitioners, and the public. Many young people making the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency continue to have poor prospects for successful independent living. Separately, it has also become clear that children in homeless families are at great risk for child welfare system involvement, given the economic hardships, housing instability, and psychological distress related to family homelessness. Yet, despite the compelling interrelatedness of these service systems, given their complexity and

[2] The three studies are: (1) Park, J. M., Metraux, S., & Culhane, D. P. (2005). "Childhood Out-of-home Placement and Dynamics of Public Shelter Utilization among Young Homeless Adults." *Children and Youth Services Review, 27,* 533-546. (2) Park, J. M., Metraux, S., Brodbar, G., & Culhane, D. P. (2004). "Child Welfare Involvement among Children in Homeless Families." *Child Welfare, 83,* 423-436. (3) Park, J. M., Metraux, S., Brodbar, G., & Culhane, D. P. (2004). "Public Shelter Admission of Young Adults with Child Welfare Histories by Type of Service and Type of Exit." *Social Service Review, 78,* 284-303.

relative autonomy, neither the child welfare nor the homeless system alone can identify the extent to which they share populations through analysis of their own records. To understand the intersection of these systems and populations, historical data from both systems must be integrated and analyzed; such was the aim of the research reported here.

The three different studies summarized here used data from both the Administration for Children's Services and the Department of Homeless Services to explore the following questions. The Technical Notes at the end provide further details on the databases used, their coverage and omissions, and data matching methodology.

I. Homeless shelter use among youth leaving foster care placements

A. What proportion of youth exiting foster care enter the family or adult shelter systems relatively soon thereafter (within three years), and has their rate of homeless shelter use changed over time?
B. Are exits from varying kinds of foster care placement associated with different risks for entry into the homeless shelter system?
C. Do the circumstances under which youth exit foster care affect their risk for an entry into the homeless shelter system?
D. Are there particular combinations of types of placements and exits from placement that are associated with increased risk for entry into the homeless shelter system?
E. What is the long-term (10-year) risk of homeless shelter use among youth who have exited foster care?

II. Patterns of homeless shelter use among youth exiting foster care

A. What proportion of young adults in the city's shelter system has a history of child welfare system involvement?
B. How long and how often do homeless adults with child welfare histories stay in the shelter system, and does this vary depending on the circumstances under which they exited foster care?

III. Child welfare system involvement among homeless families with children

A. How many of the families with children staying in homeless shelters receive publicly administered child welfare services?
B. What is the sequence by which families in homeless shelters have contact with the child welfare system (before, during or after their homeless shelter stay)?

C. Has the trend in homeless families' involvement with child welfare services changed over time?

While this report focuses primarily on providing the statistical answers to these questions, where possible, results that suggest particular points of interest or policy relevance will be highlighted and discussed. ACS initiatives with particular relevance to housing or homelessness prevention programs are also cited where indicated.

It is important to note that the data on homeless shelter use do not cover all homeless persons or families in New York City (see the Technical Notes at the end of the paper). The shelter data exclude unsheltered persons, shelters for youth under age 21 who do not have children (about 429 shelter beds), and a network of privately operated shelters (approximately 15 to 20 percent of New York City's total shelter beds).

Brief Agency Descriptions:

The New York City Administration for Children Services (ACS). Based on ACS's published mission statement, the goal of the agency is "to ensure the safety and well-being of New York City children."[3] To fulfill this mission the agency provides child protective services, preventive services, foster care placements, youth development and early education services to the City's children. ACS investigates an average of 55,000 cases of neglect or abuse each year. ACS also assists families in obtaining critically needed health and social services with the goal of preventing a need for protective services. In FY '05, the agency provided preventive services through contracted CBOs to approximately 27,000 children; the agency provided preventive services directly to about 5,300 families. Approximately 18,000 children were provided with foster care services. Early education services (Head Start and childcare) served 80,000 children. Finally, a variety of youth development programs assist youth in obtaining education, training and job placement services, as well as peer support. The agency reported in FY 04 that its Housing Policy and Development division received approximately 1,300 applications for housing assistance.[4]

The New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS). DHS states that its mission is "to provide eligible homeless people a safe, supportive environment, in an atmosphere of cooperation and respect…through a continuum of care where the client assumes responsibility for achieving the goal of independent living."[5]

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[3] http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/html/about/about.shtml, March 2, 2006.
[4] Statistics derived from: http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/stats_annual_fy05.pdf, and http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/stats_annual_fy04.pdf, March 2, 2006.
[5] http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/stratplan.pdf, March 2, 2006.

Emergency and transitional shelters are the primary services provided by DHS. A recent census report shows that on March 1, 2006, the city provided public or private shelter to 31,530 individuals on a given night, including 11,888 children in approximately 7,800 families and 8,098 adults in the "single adult" shelter system. In addition to shelter, DHS funds outreach and drop-in services for the unsheltered homeless. On March 1, 2006, the City provided drop-in center services to 1,623 people, and outreach services to 252 persons. The City estimates that on the night of its annual Hope Survey in February, 2005, approximately 4,400 people were "unsheltered," living in outdoor locations, indoor locations not intended for sleeping, or other makeshift accommodations. DHS also provides homelessness prevention services, both through its intake facilities and several new neighborhood-based homelessness prevention programs.

It is important to note that DHS is *not* responsible for providing shelter to unaccompanied youth until the age of 21. Pregnant or parenting youth – mostly young women – *are* provided shelter in the family shelter system. Unaccompanied youth are served in a comparatively small network of youth shelters funded by DYCD, which together had approximately 430 beds in 2004. These beds were *not* included in the research reported here, providing a gap in our full understanding of the extent of homelessness among youth exiting ACS care. In addition, DHS data do not include information on people residing in the small network of faith-based shelters, which on March 1, 2004 reported a census of 403 persons.[6]

Results

I. Entry into the Homeless Shelter System among Youth Leaving Foster Care Placements

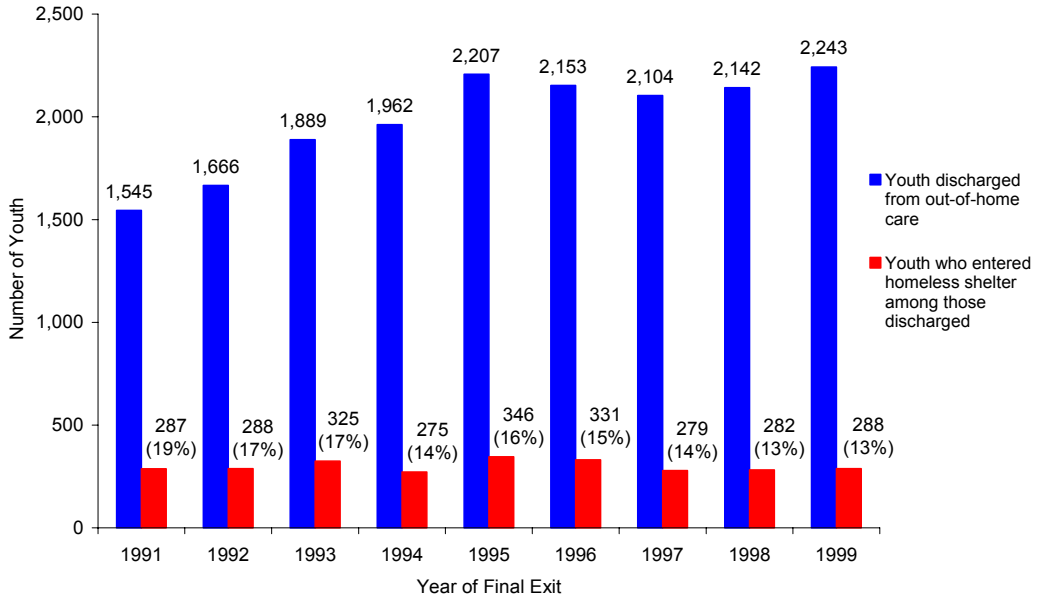
A. What proportion of youth exiting foster care enter the family or adult shelter system relatively soon thereafter (within three years) and has their rate of homeless shelter use changed over time?

Youth aged 17 or older who left ACS out-of-home care during the 1990s were followed for three years each to observe their entry into the New York City adult and family shelter systems. As shown in Figure 1, approximately 15 percent of the entire population of youth leaving foster care in this nine-year period (2,698 out of 17,911) experienced stays in the adult or family shelter systems during the three years following their departure. **The highest rate of homeless shelter use, 19 percent, was observed among those who left foster care in 1991, a rate that declined to the lowest observed rate in this period of 13 percent among those**

[6] Statistics derived from: http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf, , and http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/demographic.pdf, on March 2, 2006.

exiting in 1998 and 1999. Although the number of youth who were discharged from out-of-home care gradually increased during the early 1990s and remained relatively higher during the late 1990s, the number of youth who entered the adult and family shelter systems did not increase during this period, but remained relatively constant throughout the decade. **An average of 300 of the youth who exited foster care each year entered either the adult or family shelter system within three years of their exit from foster care.**

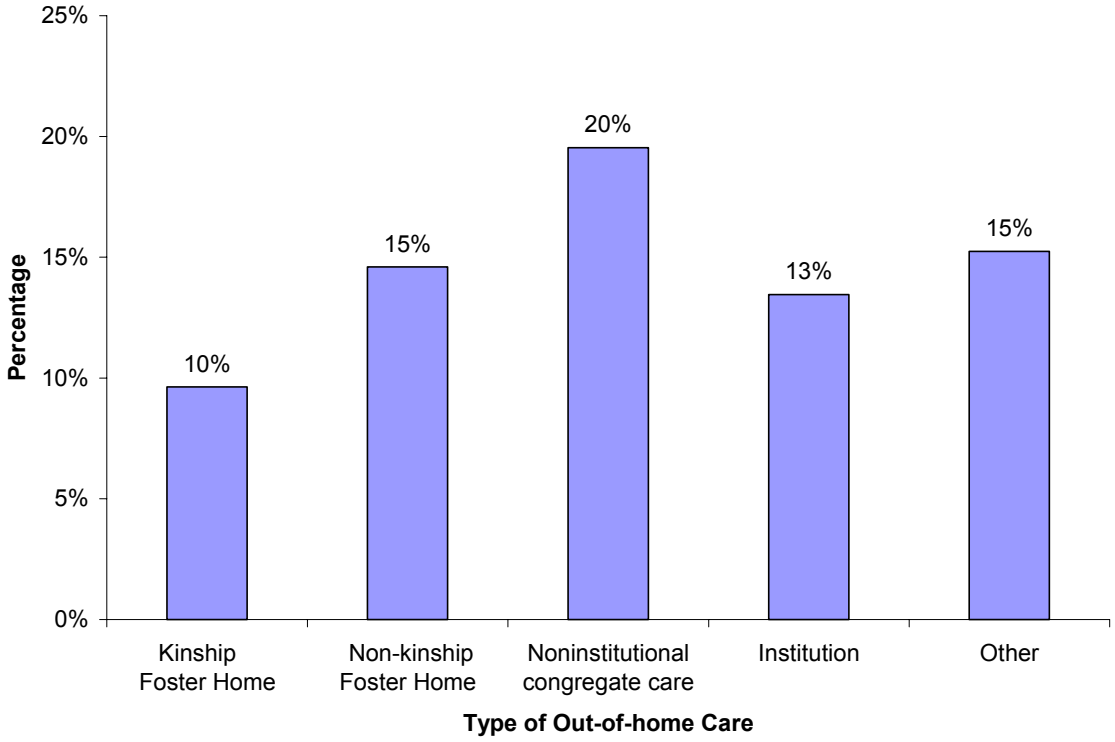
Figure 1. Short-term Rate of Homeless Shelter Use (Three Years) after Leaving Out-of-home Care among Youth Discharged between 1991-1999 (N=17,911)



B. Are exits from varying kinds of foster care placement associated with different risks for an entry into the homeless shelter system?

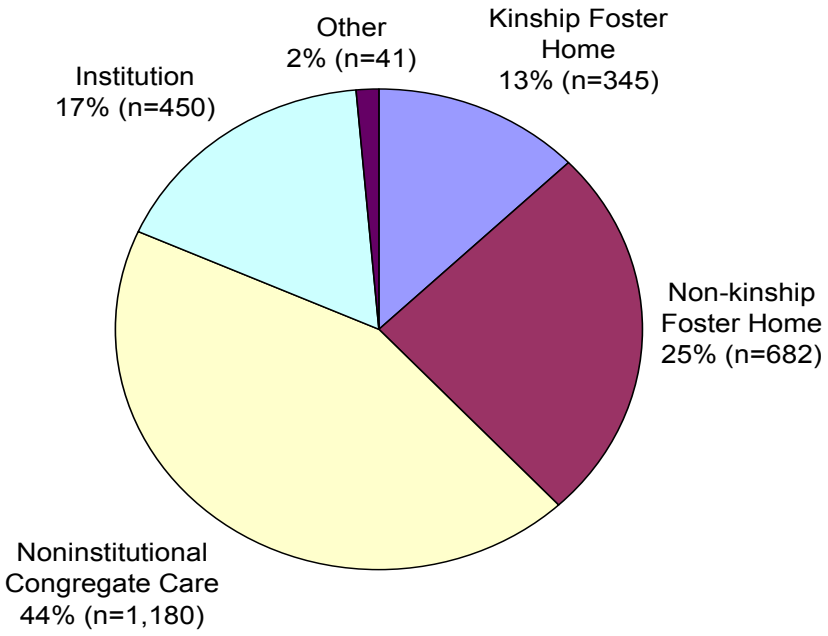
The rates of family and adult shelter admission among the youth who left ACS out-of-home care during the 1990s differed considerably across the type of care they received (Figure 2). **Youth who stayed in Kinship Foster Homes before their final discharge had the lowest rate of homeless shelter entry at 10 percent, while one out of five persons discharged from Noninstitutional Congregate Care (20 percent) subsequently experienced homeless shelter entry**. The rates were 15 percent, 13 percent, and 15 percent for those discharged from Non-kinship Foster Homes, Institutions, and Other types of care respectively.

Figure 2. Short-term Rates of Homeless Shelter Stay (Three Years) after Leaving Out-of-home Care by Type of Care among Youth Discharged between 1991-1999 (N=17,911)



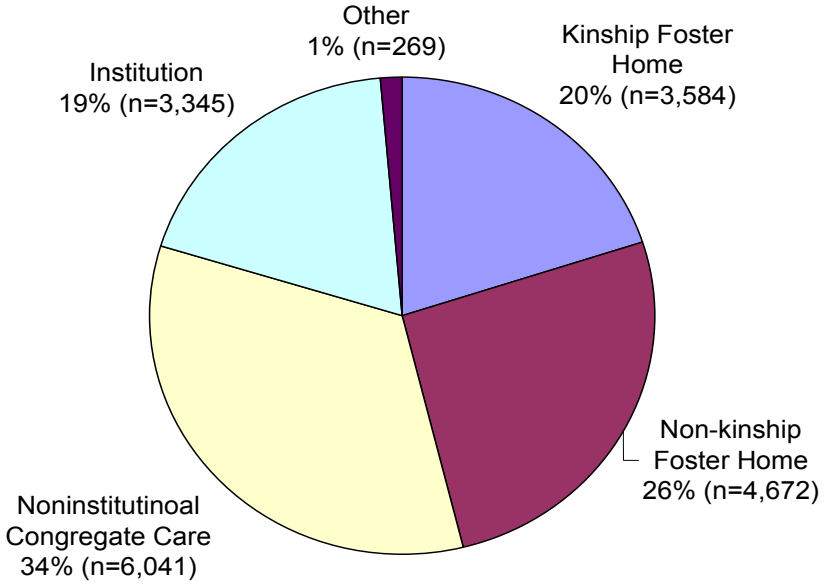
Youth discharged from **Noninstitutional Congregate Care** not only have a higher rate of homeless shelter stay than any other group but they also comprise a substantial proportion of youth who became homeless (Figure 3). Among former out-of-home care youth who entered homeless shelters, 44 percent – or nearly half – were in **Noninstitutional Congregate Care**, 25 percent in Non-kinship Foster Homes, 17 percent in Institutions, and 13 percent in Kinship Foster Homes.

Figure 3. Types of Out-of-Home Care among Former Foster Care Youth Who Entered Homeless Shelters (N=2,698)



For comparison purposes, Figure 4 shows the proportion of youth by all types of exit from foster care during this same period. Dividing the percentage of youth who become homeless according to type of exit, by the percentage of all youth according to type of exit, reveals that only the youth leaving Noninstitutional Congregate Care experience homelessness at a rate greater than would be expected for these youth leaving foster care overall. **Youth exiting Noninstitutional Congregate Care are at 29 percent greater risk of becoming homeless than to be among discharges overall. In contrast, youth exiting Kinship Foster Homes are 35 percent less like to be among the homeless than reflected among discharges overall.**

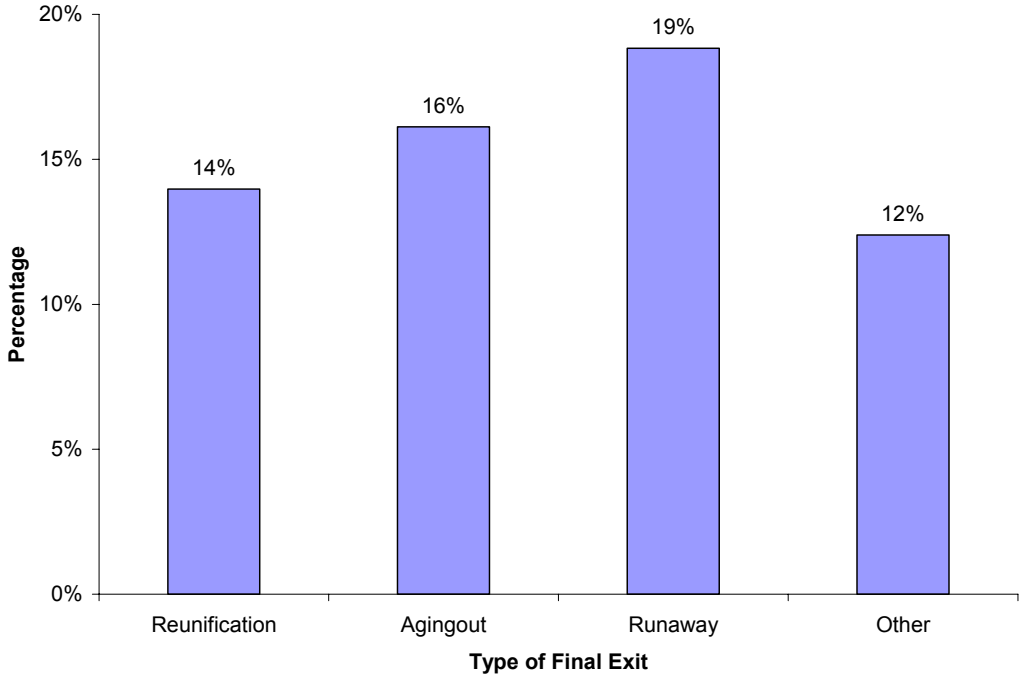
Figure 4. Types of Out-of-Home Care among Former Foster Care Youth (N=17,911)



C. Do the circumstances under which youth exit foster care affect their risk for an entry into the homeless shelter system?

The rate of homeless shelter use also varied across the type of final exit (Figure 5). **Among youth aged 17 or older who left ACS out-of-home care during the 1990s, 19 percent of those who left out-of-home care through running away from ACS care stayed in homeless shelters during the following three years, the highest rate among exit types.** Of youth who "aged out" of care, 16 percent did so. Of the youth discharged for reunification with parents or released to relatives, 14 percent entered homeless shelters.

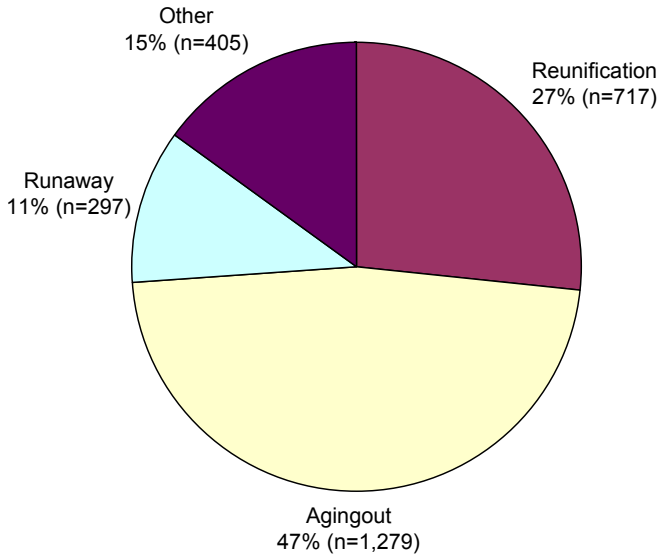
Figure 5. Rates of Homeless Shelter Use within Three Years after Leaving Out-of-Home Care by Type of Final Exit among Youth Discharged between 1991-1999 (N=17,908)



Note: For further information on the type of final exit, see the Technical Notes at the end of this report.

Youth who aged out comprised 43 percent of the discharges but 47 percent of those with shelter stays; however, their rate of homeless shelter use was comparable to youth leaving care overall (Figure 6). The reunification and runaway groups comprised 27 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

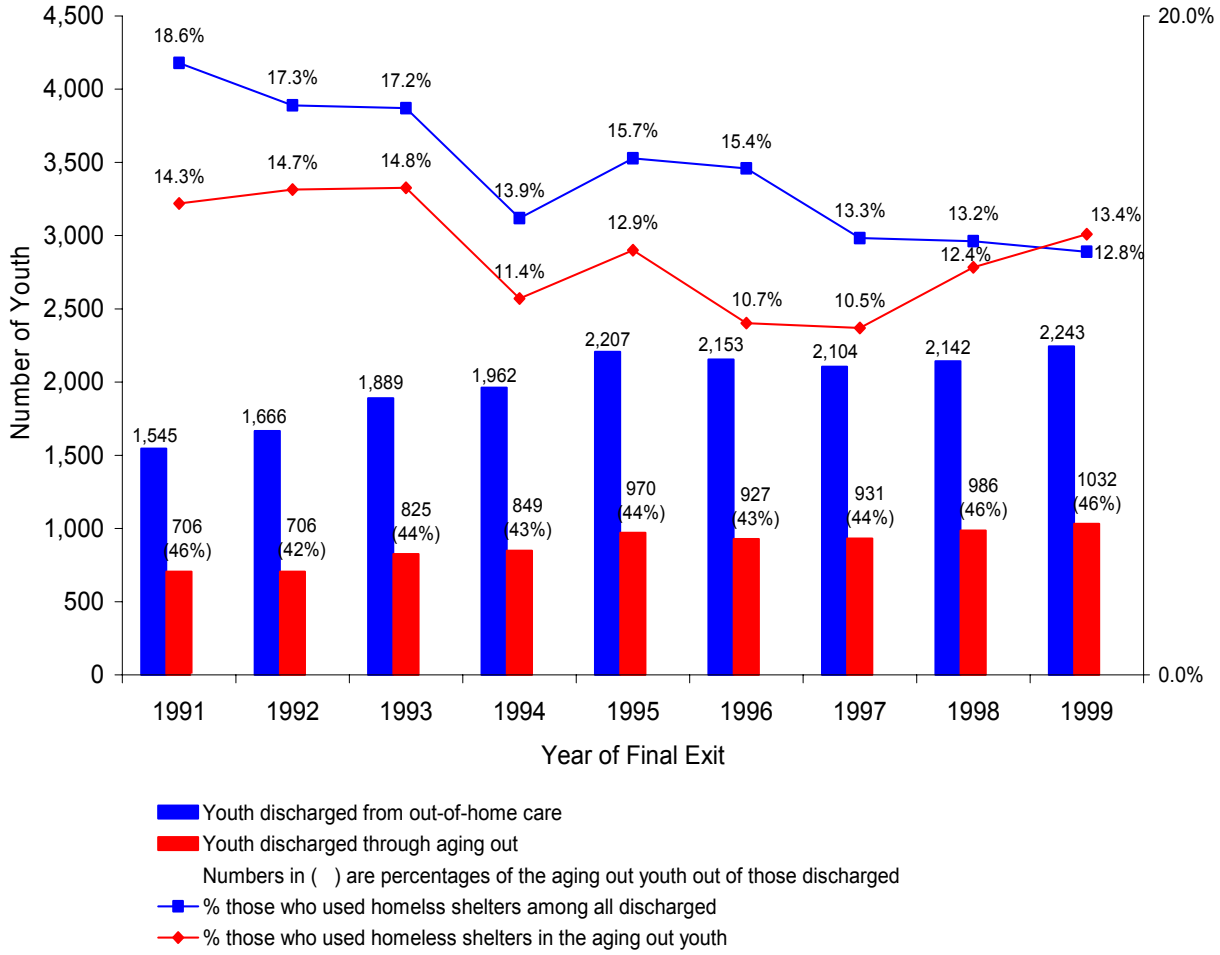
Figure 6. Types of Final Exit from Out-of-Home Care among Former Foster Care Youth Who Had Entered Homeless Shelters (N=2,698)



D. Are there particular combinations of types of placements and exits from placement that are associated with increased risk for an entry into the homeless shelter system?

As noted in response to question I.A., while the rate of youth who become homeless relatively soon after leaving foster care declined modestly over the last decade, the actual number of youth becoming homeless overall has remained relatively constant over this period. As indicated in Figure 7, this is partly explained by a slight increase in the number of youth exiting out-of-home care, in combination with an increasing rate of homeless shelter entry in the aging-out group.

Figure 7. Rates of Homeless Shelter Entry Within Three Years after Leaving Out-of-Home Care among Youth Discharged between 1991-1999



E. What is the long-term (10-year) risk of homeless shelter use among youth who have exited ACS care?

Youth who were in out-of-home care or received nonplacement preventive services through ACS were tracked in the public homeless shelter system for 10 years after they left the child welfare system, in order to examine their long-term outcome regarding homelessness in the adult and family shelter systems as compared to those who received nonplacement preventive services. Among all youth aged 16 or older with a record of final discharge or case closure from the ACS system between 1988 and 1992, approximately 19 percent of them experienced a stay in public homeless shelters over the 10-year period (Table 1). Breaking this overall rate down shows **that the rate of homeless shelter use was two times higher for persons who experienced out-of-home placement as**

compared to those who received preventive services only (22 percent vs. 11 percent). The results show that a childhood experience of out-of-home care is associated with two times greater likelihood of homeless shelter use as an adult.

Table 1. Rates of Homeless Shelter Stay by Selected Characteristics Over a 10-Year Period

	%
History of out-of-home care	
Yes	22
No	11
Type of final exit from ACS	
Exit from out-of-home care to reunification	20
Exit from out-of-home care by aging out	26
Running away from out-of-home placement	34
Exit from preventive services	12
Race and ethnicity	
African American	24
Hispanic	14
Caucasian and other groups	6
Sex	
Female	25
Male	11
Overall	19

The rate of homeless shelter stay also varied substantially across the type of final exit, with the runaway subgroup having the highest rate (34 percent), followed by the aging-out group (26 percent), and the family reunification group (20 percent). About one out of three persons who left out-of-home care as a runaway subsequently spent time in a public homeless shelter. This finding indicates that runaway youth are likely to experience the greatest social adjustment difficulties. They also appear to be the group who is most difficult to engage in services that could prevent adult homelessness.

Non-Hispanic African Americans have a higher rate of prevalence of homeless shelter use than any other racial/ethnic group (24 percent). This result is related to the fact that minorities, especially African Americans, are disproportionately represented among the homeless population nationally. This higher risk for homelessness by race is generally regarded as indicative of the higher rates of poverty and reduced familial resources associated with long-term poverty among African Americans.

The analyses here show substantial differences between genders, with females experiencing homeless shelter stays at over twice the rate of males (25 vs. 11 percent). This gender difference also carried over to disparities between the two homeless shelter systems in New York City. Persons in the study group experienced a shelter stay in the family system at over twice the rate (15 percent) than they experienced stays in the single adult system (7 percent). Females who stayed in a shelter did so predominantly in family shelters, and males, who stayed in shelters in fewer numbers, stayed mostly in single adult shelters. In general, women are at highest risk for shelter use in their twenties and most women become homeless as part of a family (Metraux and Culhane, 1999). Men, by contrast, are at highest risk for shelter use in their thirties and forties, and men overwhelmingly use shelter as individuals when they use them. Given the profile of homeless shelter system users in general, these differences by gender are to be expected.

However, it is important to note that in New York City Department of Homeless Services family shelters provide shelter to females age 16 and over if they are pregnant or enter with children, and single adult shelters usually admit only persons over 21 years of age. Thus, many youth without children, male or female, are generally not admitted to the adult shelter system, and stay in the youth shelter system administered by DYCD. This serves as an important qualification for the study findings in general, particularly for youth without accompanying children. This issue is less significant with respect to the long term impact on homelessness observed here, given the 10-year observation period, whereby all of the youth would be eligible for the adult system. **Nevertheless, it does serve as a caution that youth homelessness is underestimated given the lack of data on youth-only shelters.** This is an area in need of future study, and an area where further data integration efforts among ACS, DHS, and DCCD could prove very informative.

The risk of homeless shelter entry for those with histories of out-of-home placement was highest during the first two years after exiting ACS services and then declined steadily (Figure 8). This result indicates that interventions to address housing difficulty among youth leaving out-of-home care can be effective if provided during the early period after discharge from child welfare. Overall, the risk of being homeless was highest for the runaway group over the 10-year observation period, and was lowest for those leaving care while receiving preventive services (Figure 9). The risk rates were similar for the aging-out and reunification groups.

Figure 8. Instantaneous Likelihood of Homelessness by Histories of Out-of-Home Placement

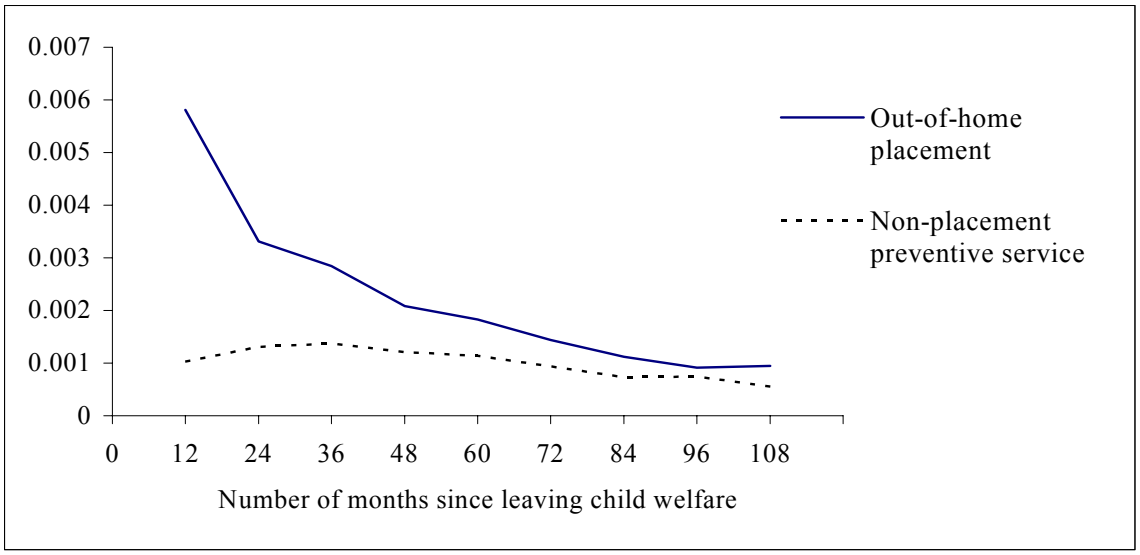
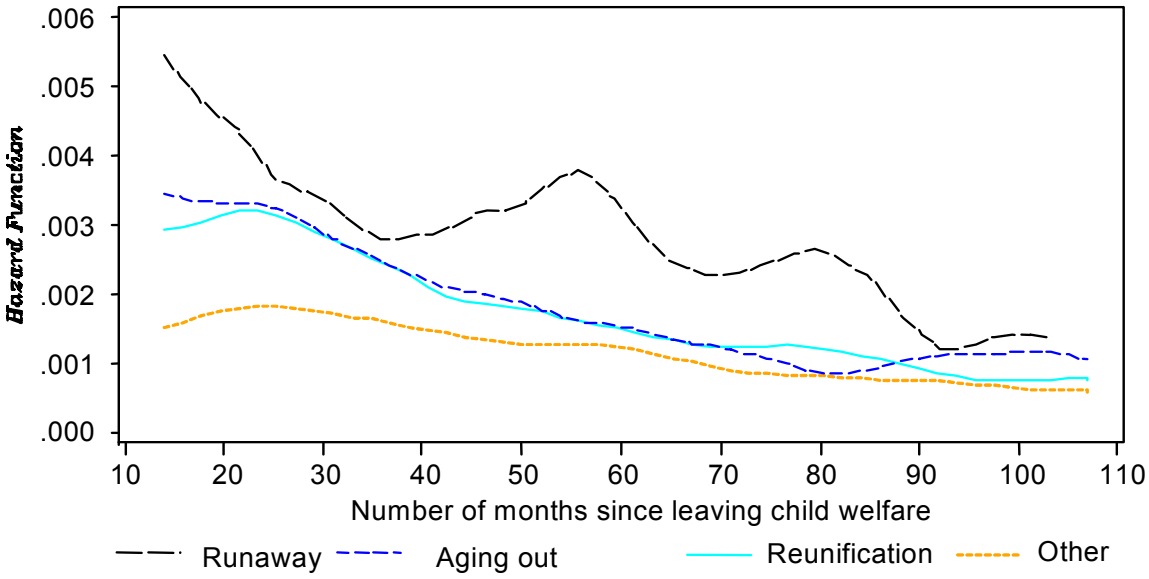


Figure 9. Instantaneous Likelihood of Homelessness by Type of Final Exit from Child Welfare System



Considerable differences exist between genders regarding the risk of homeless shelter entry. The risk rates for females gradually decline over time and look similar to those for the entire study group (Figure 10). The risk rates for males fluctuate going up especially around the 50-60 months after male youth left the child welfare system (Figure 11). Given that youth for this analysis were between the age of 16 and 21 at the time of their final exit, escalated risk rates for males during the middle of the observation period are likely to be associated with the fact that all male youth reached 21 years old by that time and became eligible to stay in single adult shelters. **Importantly, the risk for runaways increases steadily from age 21 forward, further supporting the conclusion that runaways are a significant risk group for homelessness, whose risk *increases* into young adulthood, in contrast to a declining or steady rate of risk among other discharge types.**

Figure 10. Instantaneous Likelihood of Homelessness by Type of Final Exit from Child Welfare for Females

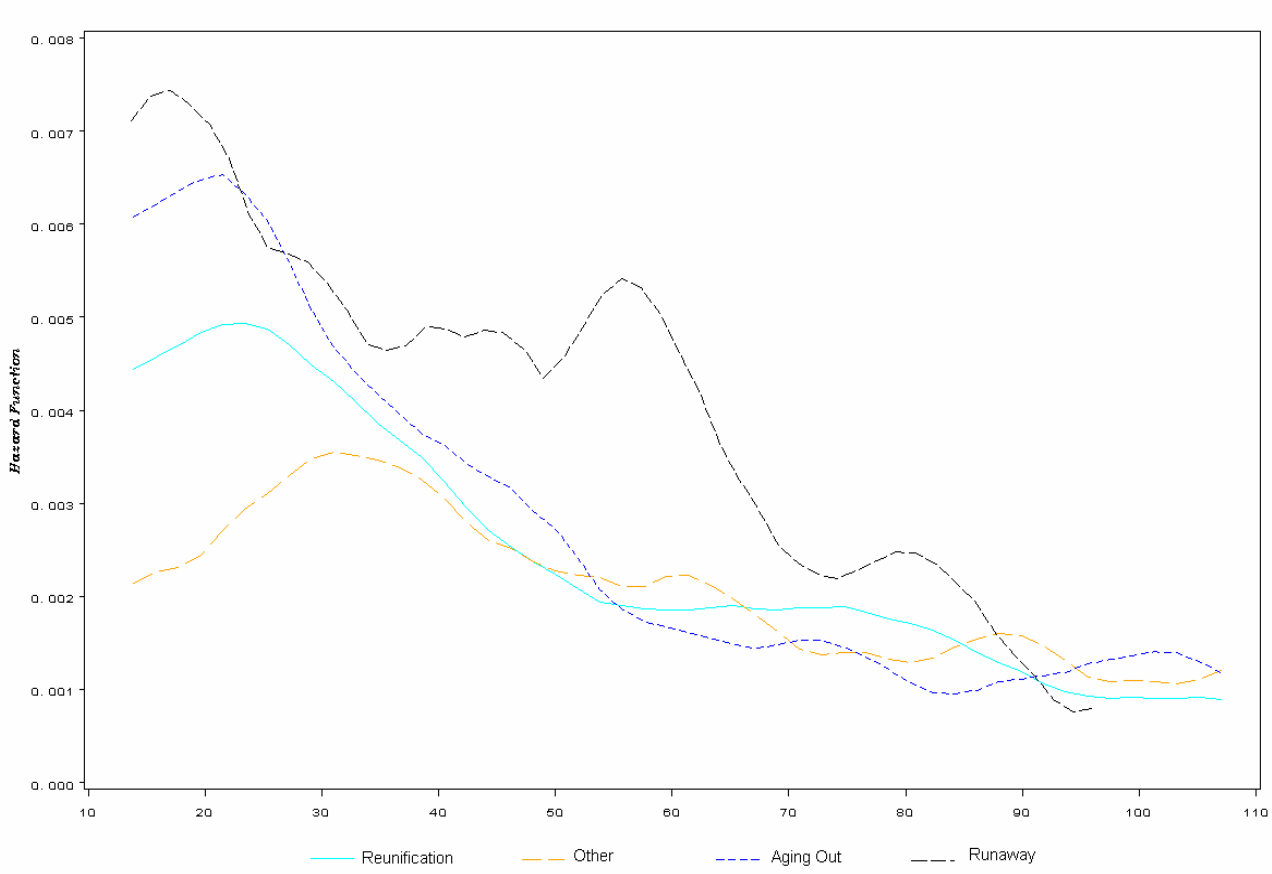
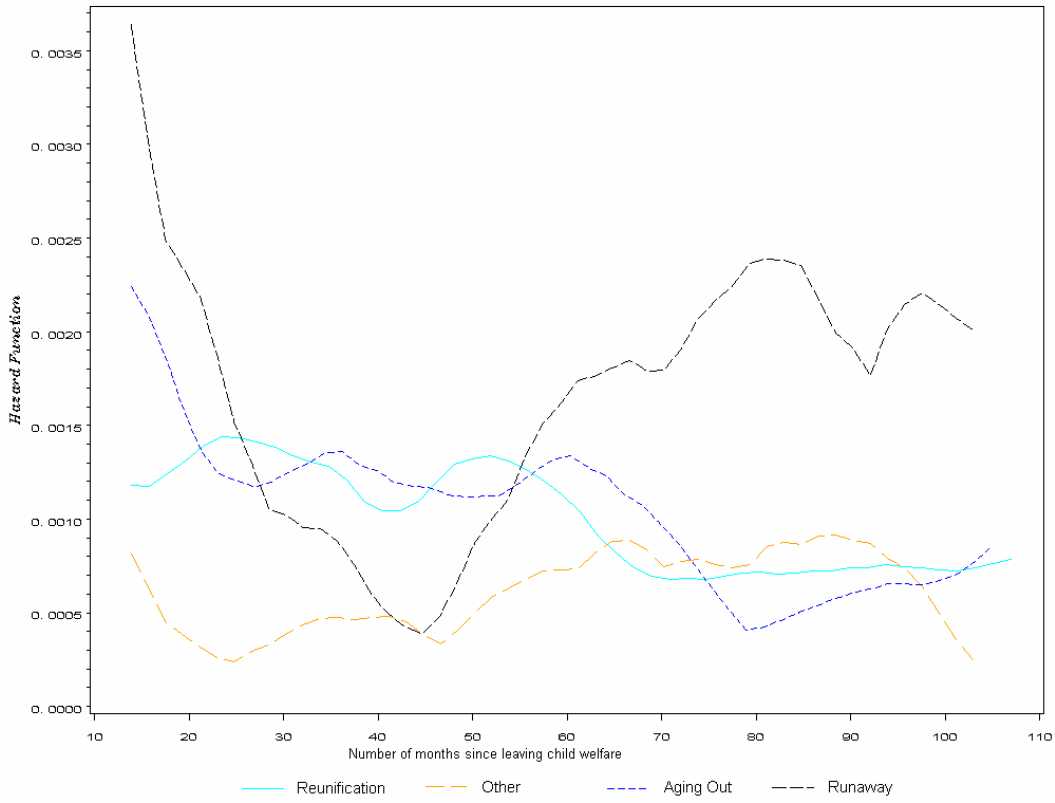


Figure 11. Instantaneous Likelihood of Homelessness by Type of Final Exit from Child Welfare for Males



Overall, these findings suggest that many children with a history of child welfare involvement need continued supports after they leave the child welfare system in order to make a transition to stable living arrangements in adulthood. One such means of support consists of targeted housing subsidies bundled with education and employment assistance. In 2001 ACS started using such an approach in developing over 200 new units of permanent supportive housing for youth aging out of foster care. In addition, ACS, in cooperation with the New York City Housing Authority, has created and currently manages programs that greatly facilitate access to Section 8 vouchers to all qualified families in the child welfare system and to children aging out of ACS care. Services to strengthen family functioning may also help children discharged to reunification to achieve better outcomes. Such approaches would be consistent with the above findings, and the findings furthermore promise to be beneficial in designing evaluations of these programs and in assessing their impact on homelessness among this target population.

II. Patterns of adult homeless shelter use by child welfare history

A. What proportion of young adults in the city's shelter system have a history of child welfare system involvement?

From the perspective of the adult and family shelter systems, it is clear by now that youth leaving foster care represent a significant subpopulation of clients. But how significant? A cohort of 11,401 adults who entered the homeless shelter system between 1997 and 1999 for the first time and who were *under the age of 25* at the time of first entry was followed for two years to assess the associations between a history of child welfare system involvement and the likelihood of experiencing recurrent and extended episodes of homelessness. **Overall, 29 percent of the young adults using shelters had a childhood child welfare history, and 21 percent (74 percent of those with childhood child welfare histories) had histories of out-of-home placement through the child welfare system.**

Considerable proportions of young adults in both the family and single adult shelter systems during this two-year period received child welfare services during childhood (Table 2). **Thirty percent of those in the family shelter system and 26 percent of those in the single-adult shelter system received child welfare services as a child.** (The difference between the family and adult shelter systems may represent what might have been found had the study included data from the youth shelter system, or those who would have entered the adult system if it had a lower age threshold.) The percentages of those who were placed in out-of-home care were 22 percent among family shelter users and 20 percent among single adult shelter users. In both shelter systems, Non-Hispanic African Americans and females had higher rates of childhood child welfare involvement. There were also differences by age, but this at least in part reflects an artifact of the data, as the younger individuals in the study group had longer periods of time in which it was possible to identify a history of child welfare involvement. In addition, the differences across age groups is in part due to the trends of a substantial increase in the overall foster care population in New York City in the latter half of the 1980s and its subsequent decline. The foster care population in New York City was 16,618 in 1985, reached its highest level of 49,163 in 1991, and then declined to 30,644 in 2000.

Table 2. Prevalence of Childhood Child Welfare Service Histories among Young Adults in the New York City Shelter System 1997-1999

	Family shelter system (N=7,698)		*Single-adult shelter system (N=3,703)*	
	Out-of-home care (%)	*Preventive services only (%)*	*Out-of-home care (%)*	*Preventive services only (%)*
Race/ Ethnicity				
African American	25	8	23	6
Hispanic	16	8	17	7
Caucasian and other groups	20	8	10	2
Sex				
Female	22	8	27	7
Male	11	9	17	5
Age at first shelter entry				
20 or younger	27	10	25	6
21-24	16	6	17	5
Overall	22	8	20	6

B. How long and how often do homeless adults with child welfare histories stay in the public shelter system, and does this vary depending on the circumstances under which they exited foster care or by other factors?

Childhood out-of-home placement was associated with an increased number of days spent in shelters among family shelter users and with an increased likelihood of experiencing repeated shelter stays during early adulthood in both the family shelter and single adult shelter groups (Table 3). Among those sheltered adults with out-of-home placement histories, those who aged out of ACS care exited stayed longer in shelters, as a group, than those who exited the child welfare system through other means, including adoption, family reunification, and running away (Table 4).

Table 3. Frequency and Duration of Homelessness During the Two-Year Period after the First Episode of Homelessness

	Family shelter System			*Single-adult shelter system*		
	Out-of-home care (N=1,660)	*Preventive services only (N=6,038)*	*Total (N=7,698)*	*Out-of-home care (N=736)*	*Preventive services only (N=2,967)*	*Total (N=3,703)*
Number of days in shelter (mean)	194	170	176	111	99	101
Percent with Multiple episodes	26%	19%	21%	31%	22%	24%

Table 4. Frequency and Duration of Homelessness by Type of Final Exit from Out-of-Home Care During the Two-Year Period after the First Episode of Homelessness

	Family shelter system (N=1,531)		*Single-adult shelter system (N=696)*	
	Average number of days in shelter	*Average number of episodes*	*Average number of days in shelter*	*Average number of episodes*
Reunification	178	1.3	101	1.4
Running away	180	1.4	120	1.7
Adoption	158	1.2	88	1.1
Aging out	214	1.3	130	1.3
Mean	194	1.3	111	1.4

Users of family homeless shelters, as a group, spent an average of 176 days in homeless shelters during the two-year period following their initial shelter entry. However, the subgroup of individuals with a history of out-of-home care spent, on average, 194 days in a family shelter, which is significantly higher than 170 days among the other family shelter users. Similarly, there were significant differences in the number of discrete stays used by those with and without out-of-home placements: 26 percent of the subgroup with out-of-home placements had multiple shelter stays, while 19 percent of those without a placement history experienced multiple shelter stays. The single adult shelter users, with an average total of 101 shelter days over the two-year study period, consumed less shelter days on average than those in the family shelter group. Moreover, within the single adult shelter group, although individuals with a history of out-of-home care

had a higher average number of shelter days than those with no history, the difference was relatively small. However, having a history of out-of-home placement was associated with the more *frequent* shelter stays. Thirty-one percent among those who were placed in out-of-home care had multiple shelter stays as compared to 22 percent for those without a placement history.

Among those with histories of out-of-home placement, homeless shelter utilization differed by type of exit from the child welfare system. **Among family shelter users, those who "aged out" of out-of-home care for whom the reasons for exit from ACS system were "release to own responsibility" or "adulthood attained" spent an average of 214 days in shelters, compared to 178 days for those whose childhood out-of-home placement ended with family reunification, 180 days for those who ran away from out-of-home care, and 158 days for those who were adopted.** The average numbers of homeless episodes were similar across the groups. **Among single-adult shelter users, the aging-out group spent an average of 130 days in shelters, which is longer than other subgroups. Those who exited out-of-home placement through running away had more frequent shelter stays than other groups.**

Targeting housing and social services to the population leaving out-of-home care is potentially very important to preclude their need to resort to homeless shelters. Children in out-of-home placements who turn 18 may remain in care if they are participating in approved programming, and are otherwise supposed to continue to receive supervision until they are 21. Providing more extensive support services under the framework of this supervision process and providing more choices for housing options when these children reach adulthood are two steps towards reducing the number of young adults who exit the child welfare system and subsequently enter the homeless shelter system. The New York City Department of Homeless Services recommends, given the special circumstances and needs of young adults who are homeless, that they be provided with targeted housing separate from the general sheltered population. Such housing options include transitional living programs as well as permanent supportive housing. In New York City, both ACS and the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development, working in conjunction with non-profit housing providers, have provided a limited supply of such housing, and ACS has a program providing rent supplements and Section 8 rental vouchers for pregnant and parenting youth on trial discharge from foster care. Such housing represents a promising start, but would need to be available on a much larger scale, if these measures were to substantially reduce homeless shelter use among this population. This need for housing and other support services in early adulthood is particularly striking among the group who enter shelters with children. Compared to single adults, homeless families as a group consumed more shelter days per stay and require more resources during their shelter stays. Given average family shelter costs of $35,000 per year, families with a parent who had exited ACS care used

approximately $18,000 in shelter service each, which could provide an annual housing subsidy of $9,000 per year for approximately 2 years. Among single adult homeless youth, the average cumulative shelter stays for those exiting care cost approximately $6,800 over the two year observation period.

III. Child welfare system involvement among children in homeless families

A. How many of the families with children staying in homeless shelters receive publicly administered child welfare services?

Although youth exiting out-of-home care clearly represent a significant population of interest with regard to homelessness, families in the shelter system also represent a population of some concern, as they too may well be among those who have received – or will receive – child welfare services. Given their poverty, and the stressors associated with becoming homeless, one might predict that such families could experience high rates of involvement with the child welfare system. Indeed, it is possible that the homelessness system could represent a significant opportunity for engagement with child welfare services as a means of preventing out of home placements.

Among children who have for the first time stayed in the New York City homeless shelter system, approximately 18 percent will eventually be placed in out-of-home care or receive nonplacement preventive services through ACS within 5 years after their first admission to the homeless shelter system[7]. Given findings that between 3 and 8 percent of children from families receiving public assistance had open child welfare cases or were placed in foster care over a five-year time period (Cowal et al., 2002; Needell, Cuccaro-Alamin, Brookhart, & Lee, 1999), children in sheltered families were at much greater risk for child welfare involvement than those among comparably poor but, in the aggregate, more stably housed populations.

The prevalence rate of child welfare involvement among the children in homeless families varied by demographic characteristics and shelter experiences. As shown in Table 5, teen-aged and elementary school-aged children at the time of first entry into the homeless shelter system are more likely than preschool-aged children to receive child welfare services (23 percent vs. 21 percent vs. 18

[7] The children for this analysis were selected from households that entered the family shelter system for the first time in 1996 and all children included in the analyses were less than 16 years old at the time of shelter entry. Each child was followed for five years for child welfare involvement after its first entry into a family shelter. Of 8,251 children who met these criteria, 467 children had a child welfare history before their first shelter entry and 7,784 children were not involved with the child welfare system before their first shelter admission.

percent). Children in families that become homeless due to domestic violence have a higher rate of child welfare involvement than those in other groups: 24 percent of children from the domestic violence group, compared to 19 percent of those from the economic reason group and 17 percent of those from the other reasons group. Frequent shelter admissions and longer stay in shelters are closely associated with elevated risk for children's entry to the child welfare system: 27 percent of children with three or more homeless episodes received child welfare services, compared to 22 percent of those with two episodes and 17 percent of those with one episode. Forty percent of children who stayed in shelters for more than 180 days during the two-year period entered the child welfare system, which is more than three times the percentage among those who stayed less. **More than one out of every four (27 percent) who had three or more shelter stays, and two out of every five (40 percent) families who had shelter stays longer than six months eventually experienced child welfare system involvement.**

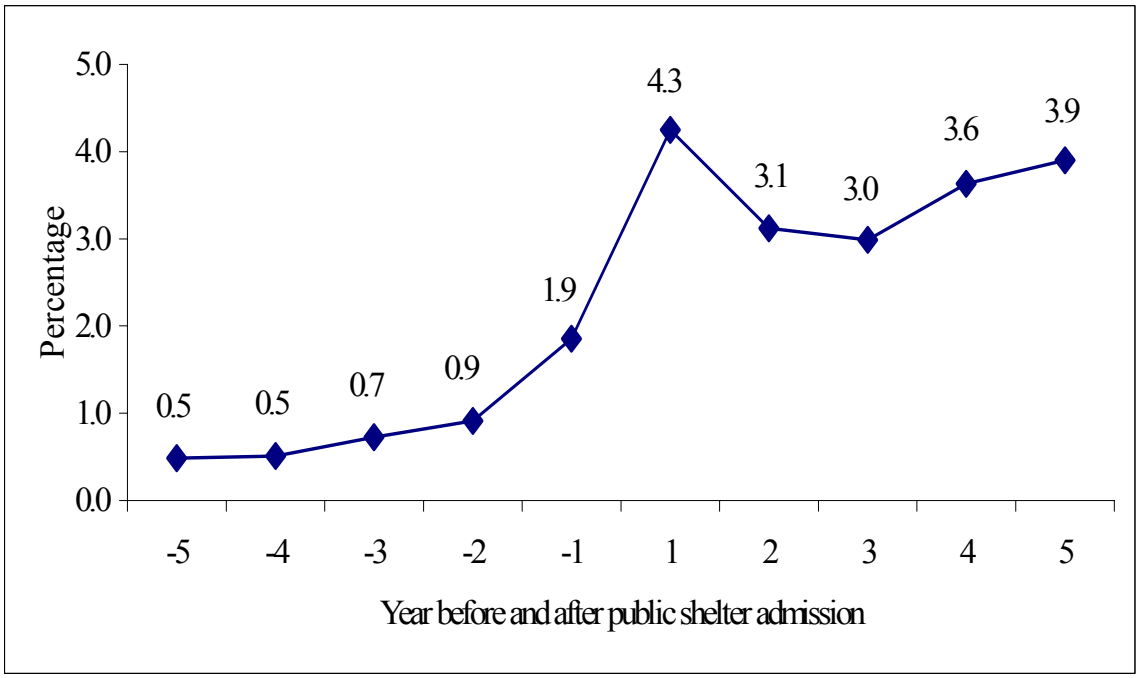
Table 5. Rates of Child Welfare Involvement among Homeless Children without Child Welfare Histories before Shelter Admission (N=7,784)

	Child Welfare Involvement (%)
Age	
Preschool-aged	18
School-aged	21
Teen-aged	23
Reasons of homelessness	
Economic strain	19
Domestic violence	24
Other reasons	17
Number of episodes of shelter stay	
1	17
2	22
3 or more	27
Length of shelter stay for 2 years (in days)	
1 – 60	13
61 – 120	7
121 – 180	13
181 or more	40

B. What is the sequence by which families in homeless shelters have contact with the child welfare system (before, during or after their homeless shelter stay)?

The likelihood of child welfare involvement increases once children enter homeless shelters. The percentage of children who first began to receive child welfare services increased considerably after first episode of shelter entry and remained comparatively high thereafter (Figure 12). More than 4 percent of all children in the study group become involved with the child welfare system for the first time within one year after their first shelter admission, while the rates are less than 2 percent in the years before homeless episodes. Homelessness may also have a lasting, detrimental impact on family stability or may function to magnify familial dysfunctions, even after more stable housing has been regained. Difficulties with fitting into homeless shelter life due to exposure to new residential facilities, lack of privacy, and disconnection from schools and neighbors may also strain relationships between children and parents and necessitate the involvement of child welfare services. Families, once in the shelter system, may also be subject to heightened scrutiny from service providers in homeless shelters and may be more likely to be referred to child welfare professionals. Although it is uncertain how homelessness leads to child welfare service involvement, the temporal order, along with a high rate of crossover between homelessness and the child welfare system suggests the need for service coordination for children in homeless families.

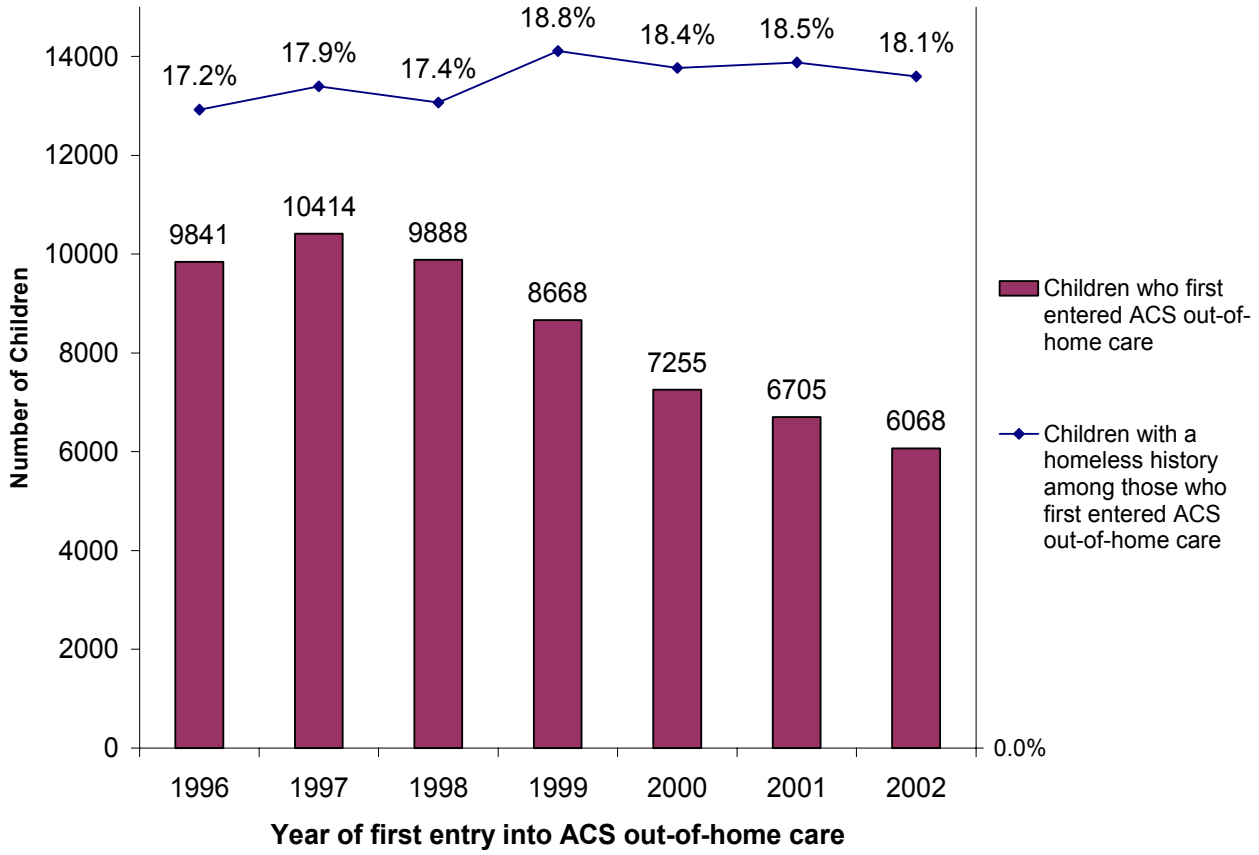
Figure 12. Percentages of Children Who First Received Child Welfare Services before and after First Entry into the Homeless Shelter System (N=8,251)



C. Has the trend in homeless families' involvement with child welfare services changed over time?

First-time admissions into ACS out-of-home care have decreased significantly since 1997. For example, the number of admissions dropped from 10,414 in 1997 to 6,068 in 2002 (Figure 13), a decrease of 42 percent. **Regardless of the declining admissions to out of home care, children with stays in homeless shelters consistently accounted for a considerable proportion of those who first entered ACS out-of-home care. Overall, 18 percent of first-time admissions have experienced homelessness before they were placed in out-of-home care.**

Figure 13. Experience of Homeless Shelter Stay among Children Who First Entered ACS Out-of-Home Care



These findings suggest not only that homelessness among families has wide-ranging effects on family structure, but also that there are considerable public

costs associated with these effects across other public services systems. Furthermore, measures taken to prevent homelessness, as well as related housing interventions, may result in a broad range of benefits such as reductions in the demand for child welfare services in the future. Evaluations of housing programs should take into account such potential collateral impacts both in the child welfare system and possibly in other social welfare systems when assessing the effectiveness of housing for homeless families. The significant prevalence of child welfare system involvement by children with homeless shelter histories clearly indicates the need for service integration between the homeless shelter and child welfare systems so as to create more efficient and effective service provision with the aim of obviating the need for further involvement in either system.

Technical Notes

Data:
The data for the present study are drawn from the Child Care Review Service maintained by the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), and from administrative data of the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS). ACS data contain information about children receiving ACS services. It includes such details as service and discharge dates, movements in foster care, the reason for discharge, and demographic characteristics, as well as identifiers such as name, date of birth, and Social Security number. Since 1986, DHS has tracked public shelter use through the databases covering its family shelter system and its single adult shelter system. The DHS shelter data do not cover unsheltered populations and a network of privately operated shelters that comprise an estimated 15 to 20 percent of New York City's total shelter beds. It should also be noted that another separate category of youth shelters provides another 429 emergency shelter beds collectively (as a point of reference, the single adult and family shelters housed approximately 30,000 persons, including 11,000 children per night in February, 2006). Both DHS databases include information on identifiers, basic demographic characteristics, entries, exits, and subsequent readmission.

Matching:
Observations across the ACS and DHS data sets were considered to match if one of two criteria were met. Both observations must have a matching Social Security number and matching first name, last name, or date of birth. In the absence of matching Social Security numbers, the sex, date of birth, and the initial of the first name and the first four letters of last name must all match. Approximately two thirds of the matched cases were matched on Social Security numbers, and the rest were matched on the second criterion. All matched cases were unduplicated.

Study Groups:
A. Short-term rate of homeless shelter use (i.e., within three years): The study group consisted of individuals who left ACS out-of-home care between 1991 and 1999, who were aged 17 or older at the time of their discharge or case closure. *Types of exit* were categorized as reunification (referring return to natural parent or release to relative or primary resource person), aging out (referring release to own responsibility, adulthood attained), runaway from ACS care, and other. The "other" category includes death, entering military, mental institution, job training or correction institution, and administrative action. *Types of care* were categorized as Kinship Foster Care, Non-kinship Foster Care, Institutional Care, Noninstitutional Congregate Care, and other. "Noninstitutional Congregate Care" includes group homes, group residences, Agency Operated Boarding Homes, and Supervised Independent Living Programs. "Other" covers 80 minor categories (i.e., adoptive homes,

alcoholism facilities, residential drug-free facilities, nursing homes, local health departments, residential treatment facilities, hospitals, youth development centers, intermediate care facilities, correctional facilities, psychiatric centers).

B. Long-term rate of homeless shelter use (i.e., within 10 years): The study group consisted of individuals who had a record of out-of-home care and/or preventive services administered by ACS, who had a record of final discharge or case closure from the ACS system sometime between 1988 and 1992, and who were aged 16 or older at the time of their discharge or case closure. Each individual was tracked for a period of at least nine and up to 10 years. In addition, individuals had listed one of the following reasons for exit from the ACS system: return to natural parent, release to relative or primary resource person, release to own responsibility, adulthood attained, runaway from ACS care, and preventive services not needed. This list of exit types excludes death, moving out of district, case incorrect, entering military, mental institution or correction institution, adoption, and administrative action. These categories were excluded due to their small proportions, ineligibility for the public shelter system in New York City, and lack of clarity in their destinations upon exit.

C. Patterns of homeless shelter use by child welfare history: The study group consisted of individuals who entered the family and the single adult shelter systems for the first time between 1997 and 1999, and who were under age of 25 at the time of first entry. The age limit also allowed for tracking each individual's child welfare service use from age of 10 and thereafter. To give equal opportunity for the development of a shelter pattern, each individual's homeless episodes were observed for the two-year period subsequent to their first stay. The study group for these analyses included 7,698 adults in the family shelter system and 3,703 adults in the single-adult shelter system. Each individual's record of shelter use was augmented, when applicable, with relevant data from ACS records, and his or her shelter episodes were observed prospectively for two years following the initial shelter entry.

D. Child welfare involvement among children in homeless families: The children for these analyses were selected from households that entered the NYC family shelter system for the first time in 1996 and all children included in the analyses were less than 16 years old at the time of shelter entry. The inclusion year ensures that each child has an observation period of five years for child welfare involvement after its first entry into a family shelter. Of 8,251 children who met these criteria, 467 children had a child welfare history before their first shelter entry. For bivariate and multivariate analyses, 7,784 children who were not involved with the child welfare system before their first shelter admission were included. For multivariate analysis, one child per family was randomly selected in order to avoid a violation of the regression assumption of independence among observations.

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Appendix
Selected studies of homelessness and child welfare system involvement (Listed chronologically by date of publication)

Study	Type of Study	Data Collection Date	Data Collection Method	Target Population	Sample Size	Key Findings
A. Studies of homelessness among people with child welfare histories						
Park, Metraux, Brodbar, and Culhane (2004)	L	1988-2002	Administrative data: New York City	Youths who left the child welfare system	N=11,958	22% of former child welfare service users with out-of-home placement histories entered homeless shelters within 10 years of exit from child welfare.
Courtney et al. (2001)	L	1998	In-person interviews mainly; Wisconsin	Youths who exited out-of-home care	N=113	12% of youths exiting out-of-home care experienced homelessness in the first 12-18 months following exit.
Benedict, Zuravin, and Stallings (1996)	L	1993-94	In-person interviews, Baltimore, MD.	Adults who were in out-of-home care as children	N=214	27% were ever homeless at some time in the past.
Cook (1994)	C	1991	Telephone and in-person interview; eight states.	Former foster youths	N=810	25% of the youths were homeless at least 1 night over the 2.5 to 4 years following discharge from foster care.
Barth (1990)	C	1988	In-person interview; San Francisco Bay Area, CA.	Former foster youths	N=55	35% had been homeless or experienced very frequent living arrangements change.

B. Studies of child welfare histories among current homeless individuals

Park, Metraux, and Culhane, (2005)	L	1997-1999	Administrative data: New York City	Young sheltered homeless adults	N=11,401	29% of young homeless adults had a childhood child welfare history and 21% had histories of out-of-home placement through the child welfare system.
Park, Metraux, Brodbar, and Culhane (2004)	L	1996	Administrative data: New York City	Children in homeless families	N=8,251	18% of children in sheltered homeless families received child welfare services over 5-year period following their first shelter admission
Burt et al. (1999)	C	1995-96	Telephone and mail survey; U.S.	Homeless assistance providers and service users	N=4,207	27% of homeless clients lived in foster care, a group home, or other institutional setting during childhood.
Zlotnick, Robertson, and Wright (1999)	C	1991	Self-reported survey; Alameda County, CA.	Homeless adult women with and without children	N=179	25% reported childhood foster care; 33% reported being raised apart from their parents.
Bassuk et al. (1997)	C	1992-95	In-person interview; Worcester, MA.	Sheltered homeless mothers and low-income housed mothers	N=436. Homeless mothers (n=220) vs. housed welfare mothers (n=216)	19.6% of homeless mothers and 8.3% of housed mothers were ever in foster care; foster care during childhood as a risk factor for family homelessness (OR=2.2).
Roman and Wolfe (1997)	C	1994	Case files and self-reported survey; U.S.	Homeless individuals	N=1,134 from case files; N=1,209 from individual surveys	36.2% had a foster care history (client files); 9% had a foster care history (surveys).

Koegel, Melamid, and Burnam (1995)	C	1990-91	In-person interview; Los Angeles, CA.	Service-using homeless adults	N=1,563	25% experienced placement in foster care or institutions; 46% have lived apart from their parents during childhood.
Herman, Susser, and Struening (1994)	C	1985 and 1987	In-person survey; New York City	Sheltered homeless single adults	N=1,849	15.3% reported out-of-home care placement during childhood.
Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt, and Matsueda (1993)	L	1985-1986	In-person interview; Minneapolis, MN	Service-using homeless adults	N=331 (first wave)	39% experienced placement in foster care (cross-section).
Winkleby, Rockhill, Jatulis, and Fortmann (1992)	C	1989-1990	In-person interview; Santa Clara County, CA.	Sheltered homeless single adults	N=1,437	10% of the men and 17% of the women had been placed in foster care.
Mangine, Royse, Wiehe, and Nietzel (1990)	C	1988	In-person interview; Lexington, KY.	Service-using homeless adults	N=74	16% experienced placement in foster care.
Susser, Struening, and Conover (1987)	C	1985	In-person survey; New York City	Homeless men in shelters for single adults	N=223 (entered the shelter system for the first time) N=695 (already residing in shelters)	23% of the first-timers and 17% of those already residing in shelters reported foster care, group homes, or other special residences.

Note. L=Longitudinal Research, C=Cross-sectional research; OR=odds ratio