

Beyond Shelter:

Advancing Collaborative Solutions for
Homeless Children and Youth in Oklahoma



**OKLAHOMA
COMMISSION ON
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

Homeless Children &
Youth Steering Committee
2024 Annual Report

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An Evolving Response to Youth Homelessness

The Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth (OCCY) was created by the legislature in 1982 as a result of the “Terry D. Case,” which exposed the horrific conditions children in state custody faced while living in state institutions.¹ OCCY is an independent agency charged with overseeing and supporting child-serving systems in Oklahoma.

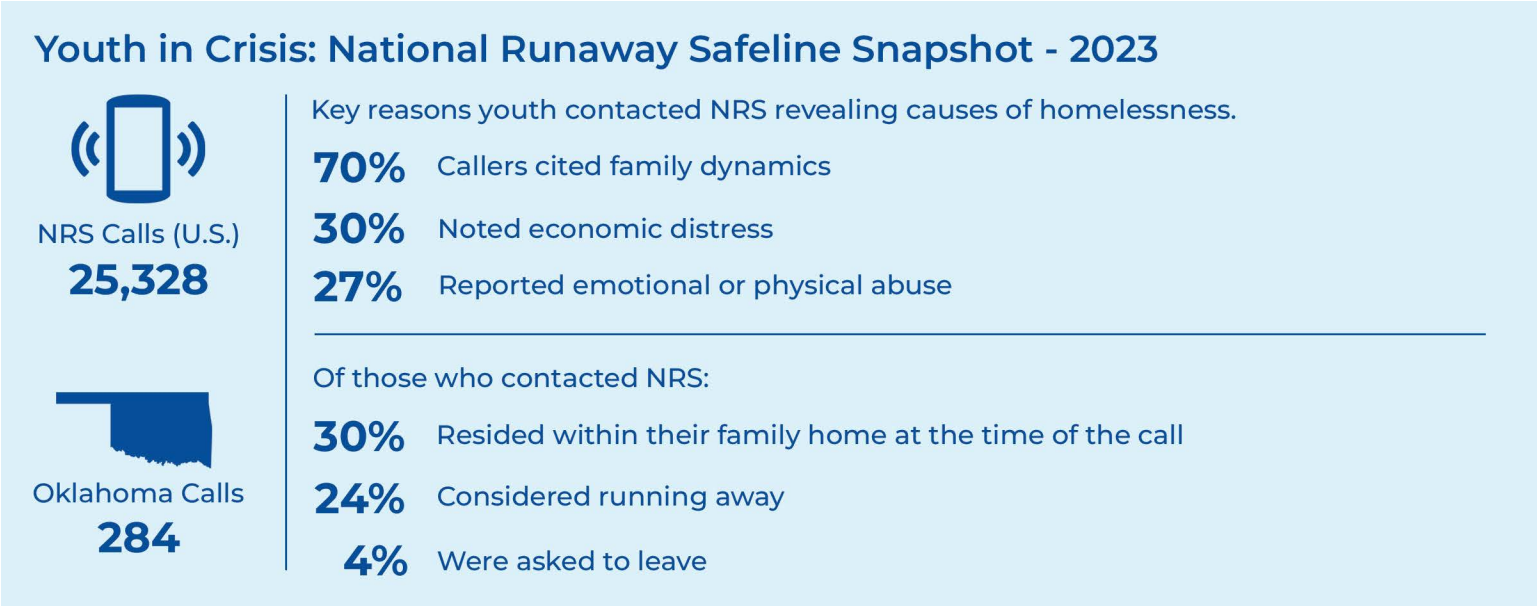
In 1990, the legislature established the Office of Planning and Coordination for Services to Children and Youth within OCCY.² A primary objective of the office is to facilitate collaboration between child-serving state agencies, other public and private sector service providers, and stakeholders to effectively address deficits in these systems. In 2015, the legislature directed the office to “Review data and propose policy solutions relating to the issue of child homelessness. . .”³ In response, the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee (HCYSC) was established to study trends in the number of children and youth reported to be homeless and to examine the state’s role in providing services to this population and those at risk of homelessness.

OCCY has taken this charge a step further and strategically engages public and private partners to identify barriers, influence policy, and improve outcomes for this population. Beginning in spring 2024, partners from the HCYSC held seven listening sessions with stakeholders, including community action agency staff, McKinney-Vento liaisons, unaccompanied youth, service providers, and unhoused mothers currently in shelter. Utilizing this community input, the committee held a one-day summit on November 6, 2024, engaging ninety-five participants hailing from all four corners of the state in strategic planning to determine opportunities for alignment and priority areas moving forward. These conversations highlighted three unique populations that consistently are impacted by homelessness to be targeted for treatment and intervention: endangered youth, parenting youth, and preschoolers.

The activities, findings, and outcomes described throughout this report reflect efforts and developments that took place during calendar year 2024.

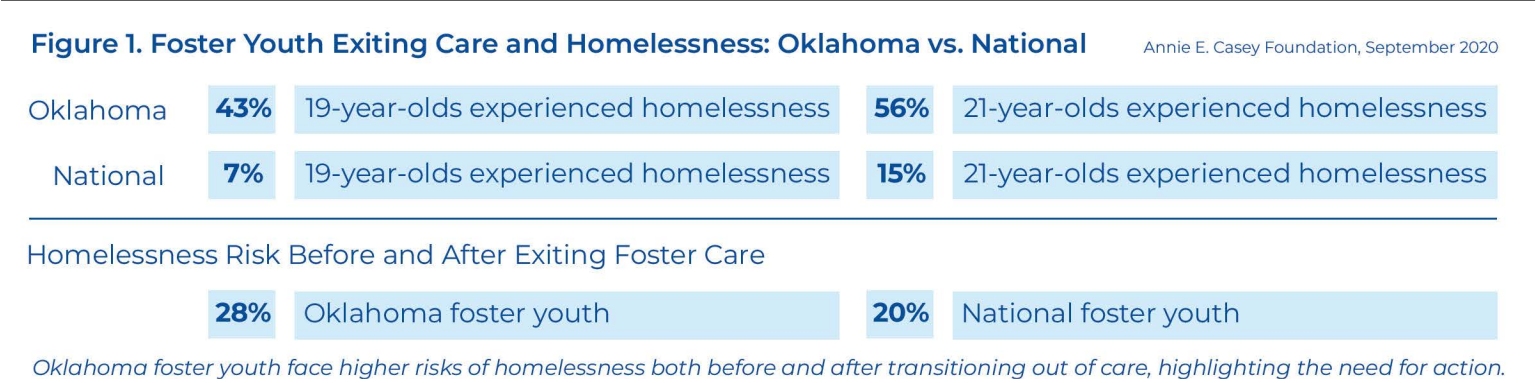
Endangered Youth

For fifty years, the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) has received federal and private funding to support endangered youth through a hotline of trained volunteers tasked with crisis intervention. These services support youth most at risk of homelessness in an effort to keep them in safe, stable homes with their natural families or connect youth to local resources to achieve stability. As part of this process, NRS collects data at state and federal levels regarding the clients that access the hotline, providing a glimpse at the root causes of homeless youth.⁴



In 2023, NRS received a total of 25,328 calls, with 284 coming from individuals in Oklahoma. Upon contact, volunteers collected key data regarding the crises youth are experiencing. When asked for the reason for the call, 70% of callers cited family dynamics, 27% indicated emotional or physical abuse, and 30% noted economic distress. Of those calling, 30% were residing within their family home. Of these, 24% contemplated running away from their home and 4% were asked to leave.⁵ Though NRS does not collect specific information regarding youths' involvement in state systems, the National Youth Database provides valuable information on housing outcomes for youth after exiting from foster care at both the national and state levels.

For those exiting care in Oklahoma, the risk of homelessness far exceeds the federal level. In 2018, 43% of 19-year-olds and 56% of 21-year-olds reported experiencing homelessness since exiting care. Nationally, these numbers are much lower at 7% and 15%, respectively. The dangers of homelessness begin prior to exiting care, with 28% of Oklahoma youth in foster care having ever experienced homelessness by age 17 as compared to 20% nationally.⁶



The Voices of Youth Count echoes these statistics and extends the research to include information on the connection between homeless youth and involvement in both juvenile justice and child welfare systems. This study surveyed youth experiencing homelessness in cooperation with shelters nationwide, including Cleveland County, Oklahoma. On a national scale, 46% of youth surveyed indicated involvement with juvenile justice, and 29% experienced foster care at some point in their lives. The Cleveland County data mirrors that of the National Youth Database; 31% of Oklahoma youth have had juvenile justice involvement, and 43% experienced foster care.⁷ While the data is not inclusive of all endangered youth voices in Oklahoma, it calls attention to opportunities to improve our current systems and adulthood support for youth who are at risk for homelessness. Each experience with a state system provides an opportunity to intervene and disrupt the cyclical nature of poverty, homelessness, and adverse childhood experiences.

Creative Collaborations to Drive Change

Homeless Youth ID Program

OCCY strategically engages partners to influence policy and connect services to support youth exiting state systems of care. A result of these partnerships is the Improving Employment and Education Outcomes for Homeless Youth Act, authored by Senator Brenda Stanley and Representative Mark Lawson, which provides an opportunity for unaccompanied youth ages 14-21 to receive a REAL noncompliant state identification card at no cost to the youth. For youth ages 14-17, certain professionals can verify their status as unaccompanied in lieu of a parental signature. This partnership was successful due to Service Oklahoma’s commitment to collaboration and willingness to cover the cost of identification through pre-allocated funds. Accessing this essential document allows the youth to provide identification to gain employment and education, allowing them to become self-sufficient for their long-term success.



Mark Lawson
Oklahoma State Representative



Brenda Stanley
Oklahoma State Senator

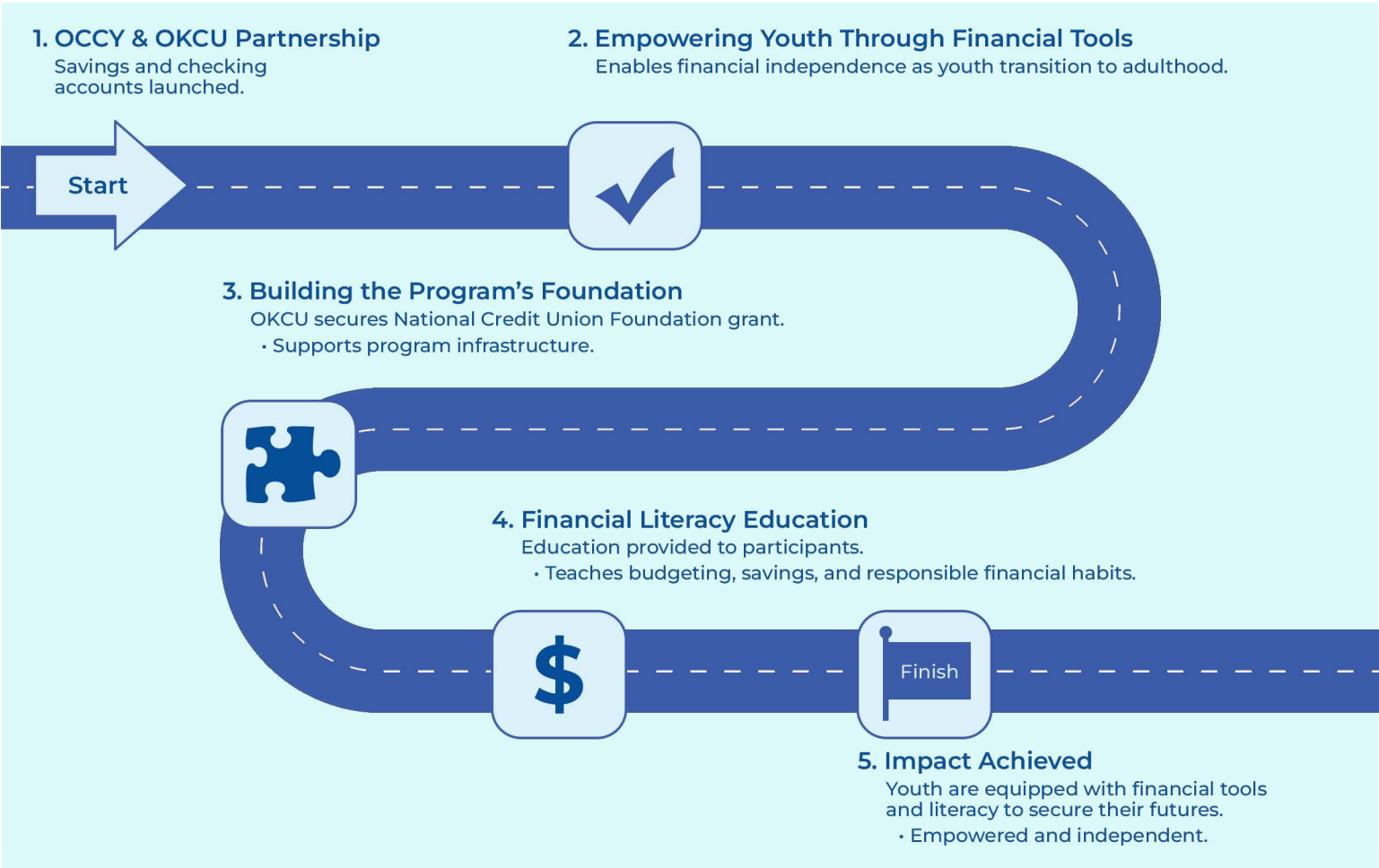
“Accessing this essential document allows the youth to provide identification to gain employment and education.”



Oklahoma Youth Financial Literacy Program

OCCY also partnered closely with Oklahoma’s Credit Union (OKCU) to offer savings and checking accounts to unaccompanied minors without needing parental signatures and identification documents, allowing youth to establish financial independence as they shift to adulthood (Figure 2). OKCU worked closely with the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee to overcome barriers, simplify the application process, and accommodate the unique challenges of unaccompanied youth. The credit union’s commitment to embodying their motto, “Happy to Help,” surpasses investing time and effort into the program. OKCU financially invests in every participant by depositing funds into the accounts on behalf of the young people to cover opening costs. As quality assurance and to provide the best experience, OKCU trains staff on the program and seeks external training to implement trauma-informed approaches. At the end of 2024, OKCU secured grant funding from the National Credit Union Foundation to provide backbone support for the banking program and provide financial literacy education to participants, including financial incentives for completing program modules.⁸

Figure 2. The Path to Financial Independence for Unaccompanied Youth



Oklahoma Youth Action Boards

While interagency partnerships have increased, OCCY has formed relationships with leaders within the populations we serve to drive results, including the Tulsa and Oklahoma City Youth Action Boards (YAB) members. Comprised of youth who have experienced homelessness, the YABs were a product of the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program Grant funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), an initiative designed to reduce youth experiencing homelessness. The YAB serves in an advisory capacity for youth-serving programs, provides outreach and educational support, and are credible messengers of state- and city-wide initiatives.⁹



Recommendations to Support Youth at Risk for Homelessness

- Support youth voice by providing permanent support and funding to a state-wide Youth Action Board, including identifying a lead agency and allocating funds for a full-time staff support person.
- Extend foster care services to 21, providing independent supportive housing and case management for a graduated release to adulthood to youth as an optional service.
- Actively involve leaders with lived experience in legislative processes, including interim studies and bill introductions by engaging OCCY's Parent Partnership Board.

"43% of young women experiencing homelessness are either pregnant or parenting, and parenting youth are three times more likely to become homeless than their peers."

Parenting and Pregnant Youth

In 2023, Healthy Teens Oklahoma reported a national birth rate of 13.2 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19. Oklahoma's birth rate exceeded the national rate at 20.6 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19, indicating many Oklahomans in this high-risk group.¹² The Voices of Youth Count specifically surveyed youth in Cleveland County receiving housing case management services and discovered that 29% of female respondents were either pregnant or parenting. Oklahoma County-based shelters SISU Youth Services and Pivot reported a combined caseload of 50 parenting youth served in fiscal year 2024, citing an increase in parents served due to increased housing units through Pivot's tiny home expansion project.

The need for support and the opportunity to make a two-generational impact is evident in this data. Community-based work is underway to support this population. Tulsa Public Schools and Oklahoma City Public Schools engage parenting students and provide services such as case management, education support, and tangible resources like diapers, childcare, and more. These groups have leveraged federally funded family support services, with Oklahoma City Public Schools partnering with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) through Oklahoma Human Services to provide on-site case management and social services.

The support for young families extends to the state level, with several state systems expanding services for parents. Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat and Representative Marcus McEntire authored an amendment to the Choosing Childbirth Revolving Fund Act, allocating an additional \$18 million in grants to be distributed by the Oklahoma State Department of Health to nonprofits that support motherhood and parenting, bringing the Choosing Childbirth Fund to a total of \$26 million. Shelters, family resource centers, home visiting services, and other organizations are eligible for this funding if they are registered as a nonprofit with the state.

Oklahoma has further invested in reducing negative social determinants of health by establishing value-added benefits through the new SoonerSelect managed care plans. The additional resources provided by SoonerSelect are critical to supporting young parents and include benefits such as car seats, maternal mental health care, lactation support, and financial incentives for pre- and post-natal care. The expansion to these state programs promise significant benefits to Oklahoma both short and long term; however, additional monitoring is needed to evaluate the results.

Recommendations to Support Pregnant and Parenting Youth

- Establish an Expectant and Parenting Youth Collaborative Workgroup composed of public and private agencies, including a full-time, funded coordinator position to improve outcomes for parenting youth and children.
- Reintroduce Oklahoma House Bill 3319, authored by Representative Andy Fugate in 2024, which proposed adjusting work activity participation for parenting youth to support educational attainment and other specific requirements imposed on unmarried minor participants.
- Leverage McKinney-Vento and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding, distributed by the Oklahoma State Department of Education and Oklahoma Human Services, respectively, to embed caseworkers into schools that can provide wrap-around support to pregnant and parenting youth and those at risk for homelessness without financial investment from the local school district.

Children and Preschoolers

According to SchoolHouse Connections, infancy is the age at which a person is most likely to live in a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) shelter, and half of the children staying in HUD housing are under six years old.¹³ While HUD housing and shelter does not expressly indicate homelessness, participants are prioritized by income, especially those that fall under 50% of the area median income of an area, indicating significant economic limitations to housing independence. Examining these populations further, an estimated 364,390 children birth to age 3 in the United States experience homelessness, with 6,409 of these preschoolers residing in Oklahoma.¹⁴

“Nationally, children represent more than 40% of all individuals facing eviction. In 2023, Oklahoma County reported 61% of households with an eviction ruling included children.”

Nationally, children represent more than 40% of all individuals facing eviction. In 2023, Oklahoma County reported 61% of households with an eviction ruling included children.¹⁵ These numbers were mirrored in Tulsa County, with pre-kindergartners and kindergarteners appearing on Tulsa County eviction dockets more often than any other student population. This early exposure to housing instability can yield devastating, life-long results. In addition to high transience and chronic absenteeism, homeless children are more likely to experience later child welfare involvement and early school failure.

Compared to their peers, these children access quality early childhood development programs at a lower rate. These early childhood programs include special education services through SoonerStart, Head Start, Early Head Start, home visiting, and more. Nationally, approximately 11% of homeless preschoolers are served by such a program; in Oklahoma, the number is even less at 9%.¹⁶ Federally funded programs available to the early childhood populations each have their requirements; however, many explicitly prioritize children experiencing homelessness utilizing McKinney-Vento guidelines to determine status. The Child Care Block Grant calls for an expedited enrollment process, while Head Start and Early Head Start provide categorical eligibility for this group. Additionally, Head Start mandates proactive outreach, reserved slots, and special provisions around immunization documents to ensure the program is accessible to families.

To more effectively determine the number of homeless students and children in Oklahoma, OCCY and its partners proposed House Bill 1029 (2023), which requires a universal McKinney-Vento reporting form to be utilized by all public schools in the state and the results reported to the State Department of Education. The form explicitly guides the respondent through a series of questions based on the definition of homelessness as provided in the McKinney-Vento Act and asks the respondent to list all children under 21 years old currently living with the family, regardless of school enrollment, in alignment with the definition of homeless children and youth in Oklahoma Statute Title 10. The law will allow schools to accurately capture the number of students experiencing

homelessness as well as any other children, such as preschoolers, allowing McKinney-Vento liaisons and school support specialists to identify the unique needs of the family and make appropriate referrals.

To support this specific subset of preschoolers, innovative partnerships and solutions have arisen throughout the state. To best serve families, Shelterwell, in collaboration with OCCY and the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness through the Preschool Development Grant, has created a statewide resource list to connect tenants to landlords accepting Section 8 housing vouchers.¹⁷

In Tulsa, lack of housing opportunities for families surfaced when ImpactTulsa first began exploring chronic absenteeism within Tulsa Public Schools (TPS). What started as a project to support school success led the group to the eviction dockets in Tulsa County, revealing the correlation between absenteeism and appearance on the dockets. Software was then developed to scan court documents for eviction information which then goes through the TPS Eviction Alert, matching information from the docket to Tulsa Public School's student information system. When a match is identified, the TPS McKinney-Vento staff and the student support department contact the family to offer families assistance at a crucial stage in the eviction process.

Recommendations for Data Collection and Reporting Improvements

- Require all early childhood programs to utilize the universal student residency questionnaire and report the data to one central location. These programs include Head Start, Early Head Start, Oklahoma Human Services Licensed Childcare, SoonerStart, and home visiting programs.
- Centralize residency information for preschool populations through Child Care Resource and Referral to coordinate referrals and enhance community collaboration.
- Digitize and update court dockets to scale the work being done by ImpactTulsa across the state, allowing for more schools to efficiently match eviction docket data to their student information systems and proactively support families in need.

Conclusion

OCCY remains steadfast in its commitment to strengthening public and private partnerships to address the pressing issue of homelessness among children and youth in Oklahoma. Through collaborative efforts, the Homeless Children and Youth Steering Committee has identified key priorities for advancing outcomes for endangered youth, pregnant and parenting youth, and preschoolers. These priorities underscore the need for coordinated action, innovative solutions, and strategic investments to address the systemic barriers faced by one of our state's most vulnerable populations.

The data is clear: homelessness disproportionately impacts Oklahoma's youth, with 43%-56% of young people exiting foster care experiencing homelessness, and nearly 6,409 preschool-aged children in Oklahoma living without stable housing. These realities drive OCCY's efforts to bring together stakeholders—including professionals, policymakers, and those with lived experiences—to craft meaningful solutions. From empowering unaccompanied minors with financial independence to leveraging community-based initiatives like the Youth Action Boards, OCCY continues to build frameworks that foster resilience and opportunity.

OCCY invites all citizens to join this effort. By participating in OCCY's committee and work group meetings, individuals can help shape policies that reduce homelessness and strengthen the services and support systems that children and youth depend on. Together, we can disrupt cycles of poverty and instability, ensuring every young person in Oklahoma has the tools they need to succeed.

OCCY's collective work will not only address the immediate challenges of homelessness but also create a foundation for a stronger, more compassionate state. OCCY calls on all partners, leaders, and community members to unite in this mission, proving that when we work together, Oklahoma's children and youth can truly thrive.

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