



Graduate College of Social Work  
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# EXPERIENCES WITH POLICE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS WITH HOUSING INSTABILITY

Study Findings



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# BACKGROUND

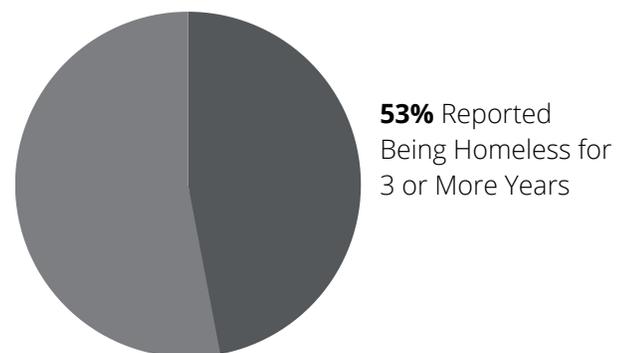
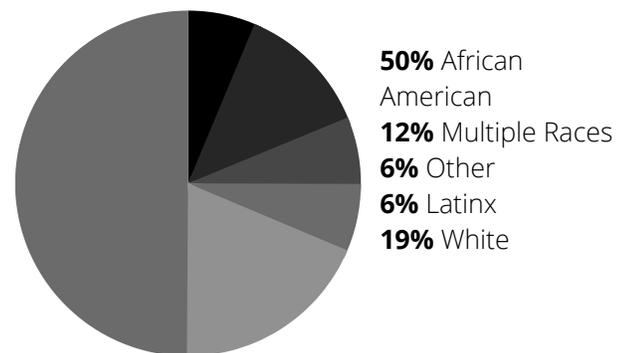
## Young Adult Experiences

Young adults who experience housing instability in the United States are at an increased risk of experiencing negative encounters with law enforcement personnel.

- Approximately 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness (National Conference of State Legislators).
- Young adults with housing instability experience increased contact with law enforcement compared to those the same age who are housed (Hayle, Wortley & Tanner, 2016).
- Young adults with housing instability may experience being targeted by law enforcement as a result of the increased tendency to engage in survival behaviors (Baron, 2016; Boyd, Fast & Small, 2016; Hayle, Worley & Tanner, 2016; McCandless, 2018).

This study utilized focus groups to explore young adults' experiences and perspectives about interactions with law enforcement, the challenges they encountered in reporting victimization, and potential solutions to engaging with law enforcement.

## Study Participants (n=30)



**39%** Reported Having Been Arrested While Homeless

**45%** Reported Negative Interactions with Police

**39%** Reported Positive Interactions with Police

# RESULTS

## Pathways to Homelessness Involve Law Enforcement Interaction

Study participants shared a range of experiences that had led them into experiencing housing instability, such as family dysfunction, abuse, child welfare involvement, substance use, mental health challenges, interpersonal violence, and lack of family acceptance of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

**"After I got abused ...one of our school teachers looked at us and they called the cops and they called CPS, which they dealt with it. I don't know how, and I don't know what got into them, I just know they helped."**

## Situations of Homelessness Generate Law Enforcement Interactions

Being homeless led youth to engage in criminalized behaviors, led them into encounters with others who were engaging in criminal behaviors, and also led to them being profiled by police who stopped them often.

**"You think you'd be able to sleep at a church as a homeless person ... he told me I have five minutes to get my stuff and get off the property or he was gonna put me under arrest."**

## Making Sense of Interactions: They Are Never On Your Side

Participants described numerous interactions that they perceived to be negative largely when police did not listen or treated them more harshly than needed. Positive interactions involved police showing humanity and going above and beyond their jobs.

**"They're never on your side. They're obviously always on the side of people who doing the call."**

## Reporting Victimization: Police Really Aren't Trying to Help Us

We asked participants whether they would call the police if they were victimized. Overwhelmingly, participants stated that they would not. They conveyed that calling the police often makes situations worse and they are treated as perpetrators rather than victims.

**"Because the police, if we are too afraid to call the police, we're afraid the situations gonna get worst, because we feel like the police aren't gonna do anything, and then there's no point of the police and officers to be there."**

## Strategies for Managing Law Enforcement Interactions: I Try to Stay Off the Radar

Participants described strategies they used when managing law enforcement interactions including staying out of their way, being compliant, or actively bringing others in as witnesses by recording. Some participants expressed an understanding of the difficult job of the police and a recognition that the structure of their jobs contributes to difficult situations.

**"I just try to stay to myself"**

## Solutions: More Respect

It was difficult for many of the participants to identify how the situation with the police could be improved. A few suggestions included better training for officers, better screening prior to hiring, and trying to get officers to build relationships and show more respect.

**"I'm just being honest with you. I really just feel like honestly just think there is nothing we can do about it...The best thing you can do is just stay out the way, just fall in line like you said."**

# Summary

Young people with experiences of housing instability had many encounters with police prior to actually being homeless

Police interactions were problematic for both sides - police had to enforce laws but ended up making youth situations that generated their law breaking in the first place even worse.

Police were rarely called to protect these young adults even though this group experiences high rates of victimization.

# Conclusion

This study identified several drivers of problematic interactions between law enforcement and young adults experiencing homelessness. Findings from our study suggest multiple points of intervention:

- Training for police specific to homeless populations and creative policing strategies to improve encounters
- Investments outside of legal systems to ensure we more effectively address root causes such as family disruption
- Reforming laws that criminalize homelessness
- Building community response alternatives that can operate outside of the legal system

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