

Housing Stability Among First Place-Involved Youth

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The First Place Evaluation

The following brief on housing stability of youth experiencing homelessness or with prior experiences of homelessness in Portland, ME is the first in a series of briefs on the experiences of First Place program participants. The Evaluation of the First Place Program examined the experiences of 35 youth who accessed Preble Street's First Place program between 2015 and 2018. The study included two core components: an implementation study and a qualitative youth study. The implementation study explored how the program was designed, implemented, and modified over time. The descriptive youth study examined youth characteristics and experiences in the following domains: housing, employment, education, risk behaviors, demographic characteristics, and social and emotional well-being. Program participants were interviewed at the time of program enrollment and again 12 months later to capture changes in youth experiences over the program period. In addition, some youth were interviewed 24 – 30 months after baseline to collect detailed information about their housing, employment, and education experiences. These data were supplemented with in-depth case story interviews with three youth several times over the study period (Exhibit 1).

Together, the series of briefs will address the study's research questions:

1. Do youth who participate in the First Place program transition to independence through improved housing stability?
2. Are First Place services correlated with improvement in housing stability?
3. How do local factors (policy environment, local housing market, job market) affect the implementation of the TLP?

Housing is just one component of stability for young people. The briefs to follow will focus on other factors contributing to stability, such as employment characteristics, education characteristics, social and emotional well-being, and social connectedness. In addition, Abt Associates is working with local research partners to examine the costs associated with various local service use by youth in the study. The results of this work will be presented in a separate brief.

Exhibit 1. Number of Youth by Data Collection Activity

Data Collection Activity	Number of Youth
Baseline Survey	35 youth
12-month follow-up survey	14 youth
24 month survey or 30 month survey	8 youth
Case Stories	3 youth

Key Takeaways

- 1 There was not a single path to homelessness among young people in the study, but there were shared experiences characterized by trauma, familial instability, and lack of positive social supports.**

Nearly all youth in the study reported histories of childhood instability. Familial instability was pervasive, with childhood housing instability often the result. Many youth reported parental substance use, abuse, or neglect. Research has shown that LGBTQ youth and non-white youth are at disproportionate risk of homelessness. Youth included in the study were more likely to identify as LGBTQ or people of color compared to Maine's population. Another factor that is directly related to homelessness is foster care system involvement. Half of youth had at least one foster care or group home placement before the age of 18, with an average of three placements per youth.

- 2 Housing stability was not achieved solely through the provision of permanent housing, but it provided a critical foundation on which to stabilize.**

While critical, housing is just one of the necessary components of stability. Most youth in the study were working on securing and maintaining housing while also working on mental health issues, overcoming substance use disorders, and addressing prior trauma. Safe and stable housing is a starting point for young people to begin to address these other issues. Youth who were provided a First Place unit returned to homelessness at lower rates than youth in other living situations while receiving First Place services. The number of youth in the study was too small to make a definitive conclusion, but it is likely that having a First Place housing unit helped youth remain engaged with the services that helped them stabilize in housing.

- 3 The First Place Program's low-barrier-to-services model prioritized youth choice and permanent connections, which promoted continued engagement among youth.**

Youth in the program had a range of service needs. While most had long histories of housing instability and homelessness, there was considerable variability in health care needs, basic living skills, and education or employment needs. The youth-driven approach met youth where they were, allowing them to identify and prioritize their own needs. This model appears to have worked to build trust and promote engagement, contributing to improved stability.



Cassie, 22

Cassie grew up moving from place-to-place. She spent her younger childhood years in South Carolina moving between foster care, living with her grandmother, and staying with her father while her mother was in jail. Once her mother was out of jail, she received custody of the kids, and moved Cassie and her brother across the country and back again following men she was dating. Cassie moved to Maine when she was 12. She was abused by one of her mom's boyfriends for a period of time, and when Cassie was finally able to tell her mom about the abuse the boyfriend was arrested. Cassie's mom became absent and disengaged.

Staying in Maine, Cassie and her family moved from unit to unit, being evicted for various reasons over 5 or 6 years. The home life was chaotic and filled with drinking, yelling, and anger. After being evicted as a family a final time, Cassie's mom found a unit but didn't have room for both kids. She kicked Cassie out—Cassie was 17 years old. For the next year, until graduating high school, she couch-surfed.

Cassie knew she was smart and was told so by many teachers. Committed to school, she attended one year of community college while experiencing housing instability and homelessness. The costs and stress of being homeless and the trauma of abuse was too much. Cassie dropped out of school. She became addicted to heroin and cycled between jail, mental health facilities, and homelessness.

In 2015, Cassie was connected to housing and services through the First Place program. After receiving rental assistance for 18 months, Cassie has been in permanent housing without assistance for two years, and in recovery for more than two years.

"[My family] told me that I could never survive alone... they lied. I felt betrayed when I realized that I can do it on my own. I wondered why everyone fights this so much – it's ok! They told me I needed someone to carry me through; that I wasn't going to make it, and to find out that wasn't true it was like "wow, the sky is literally the limit, I can do anything." I think that's why I had so [many] issues with anxiety. I had to break the cycle my mom continued from her mom. I had to readjust everything. I could say "no" to things! Full disclosure, my doorbell didn't work for the first year in my apartment. I left it broken because if I didn't know you were coming, I couldn't know you're here. I started setting boundaries with a broken doorbell."

Jennifer, 18

Growing up in Maine, Jennifer spent much of her adolescence moving between her mom and her dad. She moved with her siblings to her dad's house when she was 10, but because her siblings didn't like it there they all moved back with her mom after only a short period. She and her mom did not get along, and at 13 she moved back with her dad. She thought this was the right move, but felt sad and broken after leaving home and her siblings. Once there, with little oversight, she began drinking frequently, getting in trouble, and became pregnant by age 14. Instead of kicking her out, her dad began to make living with him difficult. He would find reasons to argue, and made being there uncomfortable.

Jennifer asked to move back with her mom, although she felt estranged from her mother and she did not get along with her mom's boyfriend at the time. Her mom often had boyfriends that were "authoritative and mean," seeing the kids as causing much of their mother's pain. When she was single, her mom would withdraw. She would sleep a lot and the kids were left unattended. Jennifer would steal food from the local convenience store so that she and her siblings could eat. Once Jennifer's baby was born, things in the home got tense. Jennifer and her mother would get into arguments about having enough food in the house for the family. After a year or so, Jennifer took her baby to a family shelter.

"It was weird going between two absent parents. My mom was absent but authoritative. My dad was hands off and absent. I liked that as a kid. Gosh. Some really bad things happened because of that. Well, at least he always picked me up."





Stacey, 19

Stacey grew up in Maine with her sister, brother, and mom. They moved a lot when she was in school. Her mom was an alcoholic and every time they moved they would get evicted when her mom would ultimately become “a nuisance.” When Stacey was 10 years old her mom went to jail and she and her siblings moved in with her grandmother two hours away. This housing situation was her least favorite. Her grandmother was racist, treated them poorly, and locked them in the basement at one point for two to three days. Once her mom was out of jail, they moved back in with her, but the chaos of her alcoholism remained. When she began high school, her family moved into a building where each unit was occupied by either drug dealers, addicts, or prostitutes. She felt incredibly unsafe there, but knew – even at age 14 – that this building was best for her mother. She could get drunk and scream and nobody would care. To take care of herself and avoid her mom’s drunken rants, she would go out with friends until she was sure her mom was asleep. They lived there the longest of all the places in her childhood housing history.

After she graduated high school, Stacey moved in with a friend for a few months and stayed with her sister for a short period of time. At that point she was pregnant, and instead of going back to her mom’s apartment she went to the teen shelter. She applied for and received a Stability through Engagement Program (STEP) voucher, but lost it when she stayed with family while searching for housing, which the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) considered to be stable housing. Stacey continued looking for housing and found an affordable unit for her and her daughter about 30 minutes outside of Portland. She is working two jobs and, while tight, the rent is manageable and she has no plans to leave in the next year.

“... initially the rent was \$740, which was realistic for me. Rent has risen twice since I’ve been there, and I probably wouldn’t have moved in at that price. It will be \$925 in December. I get paid every two weeks. One check goes to rent and the other I spend on all of the other things we need. So that’s the only problem. Other than that it’s good. Plenty of space for us. It has an elevator. Neighbors mind their own business, it has laundry, a security system. I am paying for those things.”



1. Pathways to Preble Street



Youth and young adults have different paths into and out of homelessness, but they share many experiences. Nearly all youth reported disruption in the family home, including: substance use by their parent, guardian or themselves; mental health issues; and a history of housing instability and system involvement. This section provides information about factors that contribute to young people experiencing homelessness in Portland, ME. Demographic and historical information about young people enrolled in the evaluation is compared with similar information for young people experiencing homelessness nationally.

1.1 Histories of Family and Housing Instability

On any given night in the United States, approximately 40,000 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 are literally homeless—living in shelters or the streets.¹ The national estimate does not account for youth who are “couch surfing” or experiencing other forms of housing instability that often characterize the housing histories of homeless youth. Research shows that as many as one in 10 young adults ages 18 to 25 experience housing instability in a year, but only half experience literal homelessness.² In Maine, there were 199 literally homeless youth. Most (76%) were unaccompanied youth, while 24 percent were people in parenting youth households.³ During the 2015-16 school year (the most recent data available), Maine’s Department of Education identified more than 1,500 students falling into the category of unaccompanied homeless youth.⁴ This estimate includes unaccompanied youth doubling up with friends or extended family.

Youth enrolled in the First Place program reported lengthy histories of homelessness. More than three-fourths of youth enrolled in the evaluation had experienced homelessness in the past (26 youth or 78%). Of those, youth were homeless on average four times prior to enrolling in the program, and couch surfing or doubling up was part of their homeless experience. The cumulative amount of time spent homeless for this group was more than a year. While most of this time spent homeless was unaccompanied, some youth reported periods of homelessness while still living with their families.

Family instability is a major catalyst to becoming homelessness. Instability in the home, including child abuse, neglect, and domestic violence forces many young people out onto the streets before they are adults.⁵ Substance use in the home – either among the parents, youth, or both – was commonly reported by youth in the study. Addictive disorders often have a disrupting influence on relationships with family. Research shows that drug use by a parent or caregiver is frequently experienced by young people who become homeless, and that these behaviors are associated with violence, abandonment, and maltreatment. Often, parental substance abuse impacts a young person’s ability to leave home.⁶ Youth in this study widely reported substance use in the family, and some would go on to abuse substances themselves.

“At 13 years old I had run away from home and ended up staying in the woods [around] the swamp for a month before I went back home; the situation I was living in was volatile.”

First Place Program Participant



¹ US Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2018). The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5783/2018-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us/>

² Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America. National Estimates. Retrieved from: <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/one-in-10-young-adults-experience-homelessness-during-one-year/>

³ US Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2018). The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5783/2018-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us/>

⁴ National Center for Homeless Education: UNC Greensboro. (2017). Federal data summary school years 2013-14 to 2015-16: Education for homeless children and youth. Retrieved from: <https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/data-comp-1314-1516.pdf>

⁵ The National Network for Youth. (2015). What Works to End Youth Homelessness? Retrieved from: <https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/2015-What-Works-to-End-Youth-Homelessness.pdf>

⁶ Roche, S. & Barker, J. (2017). Youth homelessness and its relationship with family conflict: Models for policy and practice. Melbourne: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, and Melbourne City Mission



1.2 Systems Involvement

Foster-care involved youth are over-represented in the homeless youth population, and are more likely than non-foster-care involved youth to become homeless at an earlier age and remain homeless for a longer period of time.⁷ Research shows that 11 to 36 percent of former foster youth experience homelessness at some point in their lives, and that 25 to 50 percent have couch surfed or doubled up. Running away while in foster care, greater foster care placement instability, having a history of physical abuse, and having symptoms of mental health disorders are all associated with an increase in the risk of homelessness.⁸ Just over half of youth enrolled in the evaluation had been placed in foster care, kinship care, or a group home at some point in their childhood (18 youth). Some youth spent time only in group homes or therapeutic group homes, but most reported being placed in at least one foster home. The average number of youth-reported placements was three different foster or group homes before the age 18. Most youth who were placed out of the home at any point did return to the family home prior to becoming homeless. Three youth reported being adopted directly from foster care.

1.3 LGBTQ+/Youth of Color

LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) young people are 120 percent more likely to experience homelessness than non-LGBTQ youth.⁹ Half of all teens get a negative reaction from their parents when they come out to them, and more than one in four are thrown out of their homes. It's estimated that while seven percent of youth in the United States identify as LGBTQ, 40 percent of youth experiencing homelessness are LGBTQ.¹⁰ Just over half of youth enrolled in the evaluation identified as straight or heterosexual at baseline, 11 percent identified as lesbian or

gay, and 14 percent identified as bisexual. More than one in five identified as something other than straight, bisexual, or homosexual (23%), this includes pansexual and asexual.

At baseline, one in five youth (20%) identified their gender as transgender or “something else” such as gender fluid or gender non-conforming. The estimate from the evaluation is larger than the PIT estimates of unaccompanied youth in Maine who identify as gender non-conforming (6%) and considerably higher than national PIT estimates of unaccompanied youth (0.8%). However, comparing these estimates is difficult because there are many challenges associated with accurately estimating the transgender population in the United States, and most jurisdictions count the broader population of LGBTQ individuals without individually tabulating transgender or gender non-conforming individuals.¹¹

Black or African American youth are 83 percent more likely to report homelessness as compared to other races, even when controlling for other factors like income and education. Limited resources for schools and service infrastructure in predominantly black communities may help to explain the elevated risk of homelessness among this population.¹² While studies addressing racial diversity among LGBTQ homeless youth are limited, research shows that LGBTQ youth who experience homelessness are disproportionately youth of color, suggesting that risk of homelessness is increased when gender/sexual minority identity is compounded with racial minority identity.¹³

Youth enrolled in the evaluation were predominantly non-Hispanic/non-Latino and white. More than three in four youth (77%) were white, 11 percent were more than one race, nine percent were black or African American, and three percent (or one youth) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. While unaccompanied youth were much more likely to be white than homeless youth nationally, youth of color were overrepresented in this population compared to the state's racial composition.

“Once I started hormones I had to cut relationships because they weren’t supportive at all... I talked to my mom a few days ago and they think I don’t want to be in the family; it didn’t go well.”

First Place Program Participant



⁷ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2016). Homeless and runaway youth. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/homeless-and-runaway-youth.aspx>

⁸ Dworsky, A., Napolitano, L., & Courtney, M. (2013). Homelessness during the transition from foster care to adulthood. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103, 318-323.

^{9, 10} True Colors Fund. (2018). True Colors Fund: Our Issue. Retrieved from: <https://truecolorsfund.org/our-issue/>

¹¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2012). Supporting Homeless Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth. Retrieved from: <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/supporting-homeless-transgender-and-gender-nonconforming-youth/>

¹² Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America. National Estimates. Retrieved from: <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/one-in-10-young-adults-experience-homelessness-during-one-year/>

¹³ Page, Michelle. (2017). Forgotten Youth: Homeless LGBT Youth of Color and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, 12 Nw. J. L. & Soc. Pol’y. Retrieved from: <http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/njls/vol12/iss2/2>

2. Intervention to Youth Homelessness



2.1 Connections to Housing

Housing Situations of First Place Youth

Youth were connected to one of several possible housing options depending on their level of need and unit availability. The First Place program was designed to serve the highest need population with housing, and assist other youth in accessing other housing assistance options. Accordingly, youth with the most intense needs were provided housing directly by the program if a unit was available. Throughout the study period, 12 youth were provided this resource.¹⁴

All youth were offered assistance applying for other housing resources as soon as they were engaged by First Place staff. Of those surveyed at baseline, one-third were in some stage of applying for a Stability through Engagement Program (STEP) voucher. This state-funded program provides housing assistance to people experiencing homelessness who are able to achieve stability in 12 months.¹⁵ At the time of program initiation, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which administers the program, had a reliable number of vouchers. Soon after the First Place program started, staffing issues at DHHS resulted in a slowdown of application reviews, resulting in fewer youth accessing this program than was anticipated during the program design phase. Another housing resource available and applied for, though not as often, was Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP). BRAP provides rental assistance to people with serious mental health issues until they receive a Section 8 voucher.¹⁶ Four youth in the study were housed using STEP or BRAP while receiving First Place services.

Most youth in the program, including those in permanent housing, experienced multiple housing situations during their enrollment. Nearly one-third of youth served through the program were homeless or cycling between literal homelessness and doubling up during the program period. Others moved between housing situations and homelessness or other institutional settings. Young people who were not connected to housing were provided the same service package as other, housed youth. If they graduated from the First Place program, they received \$300 toward initial housing costs. Exhibit 2 shows the primary housing situation of youth, where youth spent a majority of the program period.

Exhibit 2. Primary Housing Situation During Program Period

Primary Housing Situation During Program	N	%
First Place Unit*	12	34%
STEP or BRAP	4	11%
Other Housing Situation	3	9%
Homeless and/or Doubled up	11	31%
Institutional Setting	3	9%
Unknown/Missing	2	6%
Total	35	100%
*Includes 4 youth provided a FP unit through HHS' Special Population Demonstration Grants		

2.2 Supportive Services to Promote Stable Housing

The First Place program provided housing and supportive services to young people that holistically addressed each young person's specific barriers to longer-term stability. The program adopted a youth-centered approach to service provision in order to promote housing stability. Some key components of this approach are described below. While certain services were required of youth participating in the First Place program, the model's philosophy was youth-driven, meaning that program participants identified their own priorities and accessed services with help from their case manager. All services were intended to help stabilize youths' housing situations and ultimately move toward independence.

Housing First

The First Place program adopted a housing first approach, which HUD defines as "an approach to quickly and successfully connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment or service participation requirements."¹⁷ In keeping with HUD's definition, the First Place program was a low-barrier program

¹⁴ This includes four youth who were provided units through the Department of Health and Human Services' Special Populations Demonstration Grant program funding, which targeted housing and services to LGBTQ youth.

¹⁵ Maine Housing. (2017). Stability through Engagement Program. Retrieved from: <https://www.mainehousing.org/programs-services/homeless/homelessdetail/StabilityEngagement>

¹⁶ Maine Department of Health and Human Services. (2018). Bridging Rental Assistance Program. Retrieved from: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/samhs/mentalhealth/housing/brap/forms.html>

¹⁷ US Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2014). Housing First in Permanent Supportive Housing. Retrieved from: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Housing-First-Permanent-Supportive-Housing-Brief.pdf>



that focused on housing young people irrespective of their situation. Research suggests that youth service programs may consider modifications to the housing first philosophy to maintain fidelity to its core principles while better meeting the needs of youth.¹⁸ Beyond the provision of housing with low barriers to entry, this includes youth choice in housing options, positive youth development, individualized support, and social inclusion and community integration.¹⁹

Youth Choice

Young people enrolled in the First Place program selected and prioritized their own service goals and options. During the assessment process, program staff interviewed youth to understand their situations and respected their choices. Interviews between program staff and youth collected information on youth goals, experience and interest in living independently, and challenges and successes youth have had living on their own. Young people then worked with a caseworker to define their overall goals related to housing, education, health and wellness, employment, general well-being, and family/social relationships.

“It didn’t matter the quality of the housing, but the quality of life itself within the housing. It was always chaos and someone was always in jeopardy. Even when we lived in nicer places, it wasn’t ok inside. It wasn’t terrible every day, but my memory of it as a kid and a teenager was that I was uncomfortable and it sucked. I knew things that other kids shouldn’t know. That hurt my chances of having a normal life. I was worried about who was going to make dinner and wash clothes and other kids are out playing and doing stuff.”

Cassie

Permanent Connections

During the experience of homelessness, young people’s relationships with families and caregivers differ widely. Youth and young adults need supportive connections to caring adults and access to mainstream services that will guide and support them on a path to long-term success.²⁰ Youth service providers are encouraged to focus on building relational competencies in order to model positive connections with youth, while also recognizing that: (a) separation from family is normal in the development of older adolescents; (b) some youth and young adults are able to secure stable housing through familial relationships; and (c) despite efforts to promote positive permanent connections, some young people will return to non-productive and even chaotic or destructive environments.²¹ At program completion, all First Place enrollees worked with Preble staff to discuss what type of ongoing support they may have wanted or needed. While youth do identify supportive adults, few have connections that will help them maintain the rent. First Place staff made themselves available to meet with young people for up to one year after program completion. This engagement facilitated the type of permanent connections that promote ongoing or future stability.

Program participants were provided supportive services to promote stability once in housing. For the evaluation, program participants were asked which services they had accessed within the last 30 days. For any service not accessed, they were asked if they believed they needed it (see Exhibit 3). Mental health counseling was by far the most commonly accessed service, and money management was the service most often identified as not received but needed. Homeless youth are often highly mobile with disparate service needs. Co-locating services such as First Place case management, mental health services, and employment services likely helped promote high levels of access.²²

¹⁸ Kozloff, N, Adair, CE, Palma, Lazgare LI, et al. (2016) “Housing First” for Homeless Youth with Mental Illness. Pediatrics. Retrieved from: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/138/4/e20161514.full.pdf>

¹⁹ Gaetz, S. (2017). This is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide. Retrieved from: <https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/COH-AWH-HF4Y.pdf>

²⁰ National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2018). Youth and Young Adults. Retrieved from: <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/youth>

²¹ Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership. (2016). Exploring “Permanent Connections” for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness. Retrieved from: <https://rhyttac.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/Resources/resources%20-%20exploring%20permanent%20connections.pdf>

²² Aykanian, Amanda. (2018). Service and policy considerations when working with highly mobile homeless youth: Perspectives from the frontlines, Children and Youth Services Review, Volume 84, 2018



Considering how many of the youth were housed at the time of the follow up survey, a relatively high share remained engaged with the program one year later. At 12 months, employment or education related services were the most commonly received services (see Exhibit 3). Counseling and medical care were also commonly identified as either received or needed, emphasizing that housing is a platform on which to build stability, but it is not the only component of housing stability.

There were some differences in the service receipt by housing situation during the program. All of the youth in a First Place

unit reported receiving mental health services within 30 days of the baseline survey. Indeed, youth provided First Place units typically had the most intense service needs since the program prioritized chronically homeless youth and youth with high barriers to housing. By comparison, less than two-thirds of youth who remained homeless or doubled up throughout most of the evaluation period reported receiving mental health services at baseline. Youth who were primarily homeless during the program period were most likely to receive daily living skills services, and least likely to have received money management services (see Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 3. Youth-Reported Service Receipt at Baseline and 12 Months

	Baseline (n=35)				12 month follow-up (n=14)			
Services received in past 30 days	Received		Did not receive, but needed		Received		Did not receive, but needed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Employment/Education	22	62.9%	7	53.8%	8	57.1%	0	0.0%
Mental Health Counseling	28	80.0%	4	57.1%	5	35.7%	3	33.3%
Daily Living Skills	25	71.4%	6	60.0%	4	28.6%	2	20.0%
Money Management	15	42.9%	13	65.0%	5	35.7%	2	22.2%
Legal Services	8	22.9%	4	14.8%	4	28.6%	1	10.0%
Family Reunification	3	8.6%	3	9.4%	2	14.3%	1	8.3%
Medical	24	68.6%	3	27.3%	5	35.7%	3	33.3%

Exhibit 4. Supportive Services Accessed by Housing Situation during Program

Predominant Housing Situation During Program	Medical Care		Employment or Education Related Services		Mental Health Counseling		Daily Living Skills		Money Management	
First Place Unit (n=12)	9	75.0%	9	75.0%	12	100.0%	8	66.7%	5	41.7%
STEP or BRAP (n=4)	3	75.0%	3	75.0%	3	75.0%	2	50.0%	2	50.0%
Other Housing (n=3)	3	100.0%	2	66.7%	2	66.7%	2	66.7%	1	33.3%
Homeless and/or Doubled Up (n=11)	6	54.5%	7	63.6%	7	63.6%	8	72.7%	3	27.3%
Institutional (n=3)	2	66.7%	0	0.0%	2	66.7%	3	100.0%	2	66.7%

3. Housing Experience After First Place

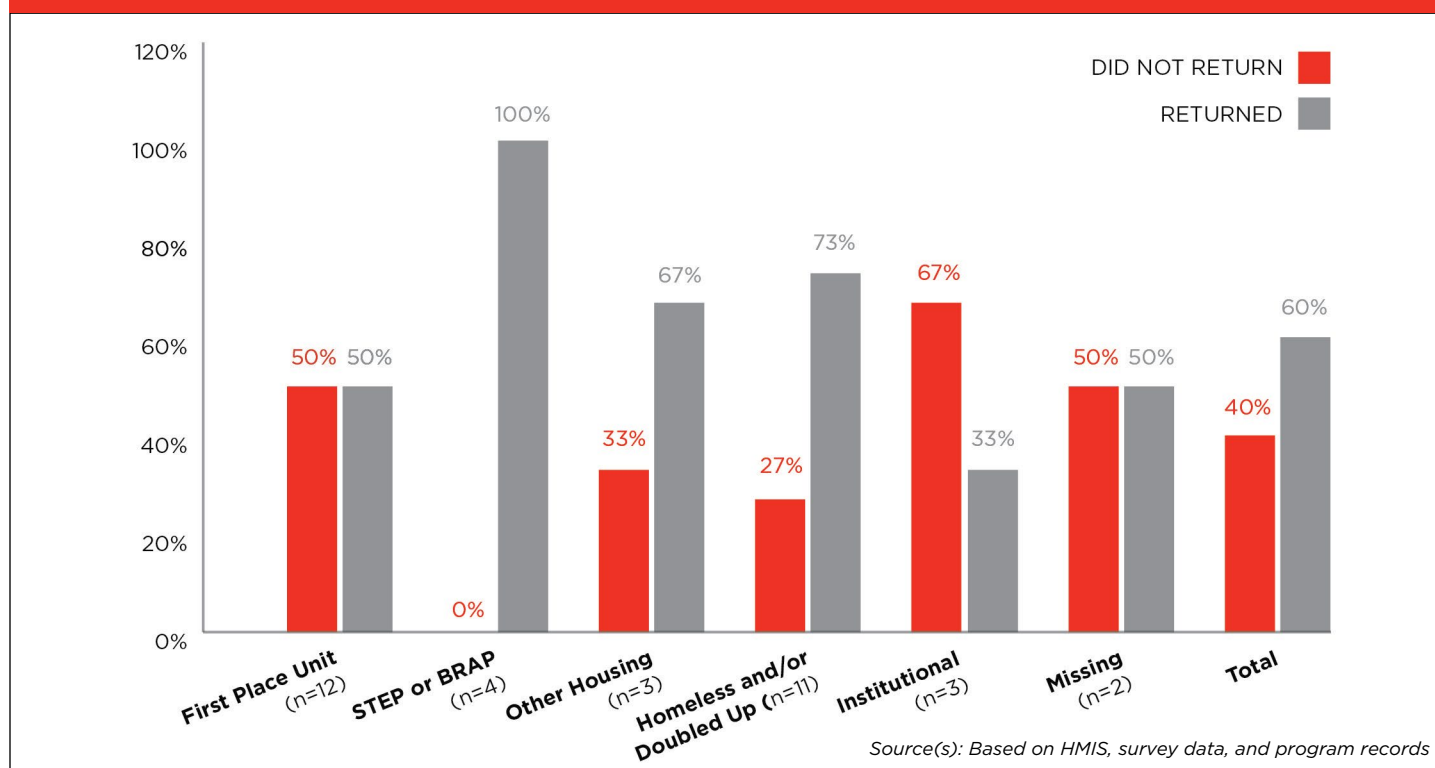


The experiences of youth between program exit and permanent housing were marked by housing instability, with most youth reporting periods of cycling between housing and homelessness, including episodes of doubling up. Half of all youth in the program returned to shelter at some point after program discharge. Exhibit 5 shows the rates of return by primary housing situation during the program period. All youth who received a STEP or BRAP voucher returned to homelessness while half of those who received a First Place unit returned. While this suggests that youth who were provided a First Place unit were more stable in housing than others, the number of youth is too small to draw definitive conclusions. It is possible, however, that youth housed in First Place units were more engaged with (or were provided more access to) services which helped them stabilize in other domains, contributing to increased housing stability.

Youth returning to homelessness does not indicate persistent housing instability any more than non-returns indicated

achieved stability for the people in the study. For example, a few youth—including Cassie and Jennifer—were essentially stably housed at 24 or 30 months after the baseline survey, but they returned to First Place at some point after exiting the program. The routine cycling in-and-out of homelessness is typical among youth who are trying to become independent, particularly if they develop trusting relationships with service providers. Compared to older homeless adults, youth face additional issues when transitioning to independence. Research has shown that a young person's transition from homelessness to stable housing is a gradual process that requires motivation, involves negotiating complex relationships, and includes a reframing of one's perceptions of independence. All of these transitions occur within the context of identity formation that is characteristic of adolescent psychological development.”²³

Exhibit 5. Returned to Shelter at Any Point after First Place Discharge



²³ Garrett, S. B., Higa, D. H., Phares, M. M., Peterson, P. L., Wells, E. A., & Baer, J. S. (2008). Homeless youths' perceptions of services and transitions to stable housing. *Evaluation and program planning*, 31(4), 436-44.



3.1 Difficulties Securing Housing

Many youth in the study reported challenges finding housing units, even when they had financial housing assistance. The two most common issues identified were the costs of housing in Portland and landlords hesitant to rent to them due to their age and limited rental history. During the evaluation period, the rental market became more expensive and maintained a vacancy rate of under four percent. In its 2018 annual report, the National Low Income Housing Coalition identified Maine's rental market as one of the least affordable in the nation. In the Portland HUD Metropolitan FMR Area—the most expensive area in the state—a household would need to earn \$25.92 per hour, assuming a 40 hour work week, in order for a rental unit to be affordable.²⁴ According to the U.S Census Bureau, the median rent in 2017 was \$1,018, up from \$932 in 2014. More than 50 percent of renters in Portland were in unaffordable housing, paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent.²⁵ This combination of increasing average rental costs and a consistently tight rental market contributed to changes in the city including movement of low and middle-income renters out of Portland. For youth, moving out of the city and into more affordable areas of the state means they must move away from employment hubs into areas with less reliable public transit.

As young people transition to independence, they are often forced to navigate the complex service landscape of mainstream benefits and providers. In Maine, there are many systems (child welfare, education, juvenile justice, etc.) that intersect and share a common mission to end youth homelessness; but stakeholders noted a lack of effective coordination among these partners to ensure effective targeting of resources. Maine's tight, high cost rental market and complex service environment are all barriers to securing supportive, stable housing in Portland. Young people are often forced to navigate these barriers with little to no support from family or caregivers.

To overcome some of these issues securing units, Preble Street master-leased units. Preble Street staff developed relationships with a few landlords, which it leveraged to house First Place youth. One landlord interviewed emphasized the importance of having Preble Street as the lease-holder in his initial decision to rent to youth without rental histories or with criminal histories. The landlord reported he would continue to work with Preble Street due to the relationship he developed with First Place staff, and how responsive staff were to any tenant issues that arose. Both the landlord and First Place staff noted the importance of regular communication between the staff, youth, and the landlord,

particularly during the initial transition period. However, in the absence of a master-lease, the landlord noted it would be more difficult to take on what he considered to be the risk of renting to youth in the program. "Our policy is that if your credit score is over 600 then you only pay first and security; [if it's not 600 or higher] then [you pay] all 3 (first, last, and security). That's risk mitigation. Without the master lease we would work to do it that way with [the youth] paying first, last, and security deposit."

3.2 Challenges Maintaining Stability

Despite challenges, many youth did secure permanent housing. More than half (55%) of youth primarily lived in permanent housing (with or without a subsidy) during the program period – or the period of time that youth were receiving First Place services. For those youth with known locations after exiting the First Place program, the share living in permanent housing increased over time. Of the 14 youth who completed 12-month follow-up surveys, 10 were living in permanent housing one year after enrolling in the program (71%). Of the eight youth who completed 24- or 30-month interviews, six were in permanent housing (75%). This increased rate was likely affected by a few things: people in stable housing were easier to locate at the time of follow up, youth were older, and youth had more opportunity to stabilize in housing.

However, housing stability—particularly for people under the age 25 with high levels of need—is not something easily secured and maintained, and is not achieved through housing alone. Most youth were simultaneously grappling with housing instability, mental health issues, substance use disorders, and prior trauma. Safe and stable housing is a crucial starting point for young people to benefit from other services and begin to address these other issues.

Maintaining the unit involved adhering to the basic requirements of the lease, which was often difficult for youth addressing a plethora of other issues. The landlord interviewed reported that noise complaints, cleanliness, and having guests for more than seven days were common reasons to either give the tenants warnings or to involve First Place staff. However, the landlord noted that issues arose for youth at rates similar to other tenants.

"There's such a small vacancy rate and there's so much competition... we'll call 100 landlords and 10 will be willing."

Preble Resource Center Staff

²⁴National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2018). Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing. Retrieved from: https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/OOR_2018.pdf

²⁵United States Census Bureau. (2018). Income and Poverty in the United States: 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-263.pdf>



Five out of six youth in the follow-up survey group that had a First Place unit were still in the unit 12 months later. This is likely because Preble Street can provide at least some amount of housing assistance for up to 18 months. First Place used a modified progressive engagement approach, stepping down the amount of assistance youth receive over time, but adjusted the gradual progression of rent paid by the youth based on their financial situation. One of the youth provided a First Place unit was homeless before the one-year mark. Two youth that were primarily homeless while receiving First Place services were homeless at the time of the follow-up survey (Exhibit 7).

At the one year mark, all but two-thirds (or six of nine) participants in permanent housing were receiving some assistance, either through First Place, STEP or BRAP (most commonly First Place). However, as shown in Exhibit 5, at least half of those youth would return to shelter at some point after leaving the First Place program. For those youth with whom the study team conducted 24 or 30 month interviews, all lived in at least three places in those two and a half years.

The housing costs for youth varied some at the 12 month point. Of those in permanent housing at 12 months contributions toward rent ranged from \$250 to \$1,050 depending on whether youth received assistance. The six youth receiving assistance paid between 20 and 40 percent of their income on rent. At 24 to 30 months, most youth in permanent housing were no longer receiving assistance, but sharing the rent with roommates. Two were still receiving some assistance.

3.3 Perceptions of Safety and Stability

Given the prevalence of past trauma among First Place youth, feelings of safety—particularly in the place they are staying—can enable them to focus on areas of instability. Most youth reported feelings of safety where they were currently staying at baseline, 12 months, and 24 to 30 months (Exhibit 6).

Feelings of safety and stability can be complicated. Cassie reported feeling generally safe in the places she lived, but also was never quite settled. During her 24 month interview she reported, “It’s really hard to adjust from going from finding your next meal and being on survival mode to having a place that is secure and safe. I was always wondering whether it was safe and worth it and — there’s lots of mental stuff around it. Homelessness stays with you afterwards. It’s very traumatic that doesn’t just go away. I still have a back pack I used when I was homeless under my bed. I have no plans to move, but I just can’t unpack it. I haven’t told anyone that. I haven’t looked inside of it in a long time.” At 36 months after baseline, when asked if she still had the backpack she said, “No, I actually just threw that out a few weeks ago! It was huge. My boyfriend knew how much it was affecting me and how important that backpack was in my life. And he was there while I threw it out. He was so supportive.”

Exhibit 6. Feelings of Safety where Youth are Staying over Time

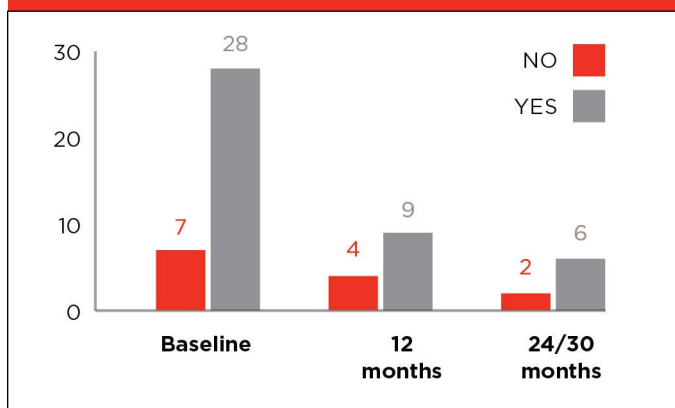


Exhibit 7. Housing Situation during Program by Housing Situation at 12 months

Housing Situation While Receiving First Place Services	Housing Situation at 12 months (n=14):				
	Homeless in a shelter	STEP or BRAP	Other Housing	TLP Unit	Total
First Place Unit (n=12)	1			5	6
STEP or BRAP (n=4)			2		2
Other Housing (n=3)		1	1		2
Homeless and/or Doubled Up (n=11)	2		1		3
Institutional (n=3)	1				1
Total	4	1	3	5	14



The evaluation of the First Place program provides several key insights that contribute to long-term solutions for homeless youth in Maine: (1) housing stability is fragile and requires continuous support; (2) a housing first approach appears to work well; and (3) external conditions can adversely affect homelessness programs and diminish their success.

The results of this evaluation demonstrate that there are many paths into, and out of, homelessness, and once stability is achieved, it can be fleeting. Three out of four young people experienced homelessness prior to enrollment in the First Place program, and one half of young people provided housing interventions through the First Place program experienced homelessness at some point after discharge from the program. Indeed, young people in the study attempted to access and maintain housing while also dealing with mental health issues, substance use disorders, prior trauma, and an increasingly-tight rental market operated by landlords who may be unwilling or hesitant to rent to young people with prior experiences of homelessness. The First Place philosophy recognized that housing stability is not permanent and that returns to homelessness while on the path towards housing stability are not uncommon. **Young people were offered the opportunity to engage with First Place services up to a year after discharge from the program, and this consistent connection was perhaps more impactful and sustaining for future stability than simply the provision of housing.**

Also, research shows that safe and stable housing is a critical, foundational step from which young people may begin to engage with further services and supports to address other issues in their lives.²⁶ **Youth who received a First Place unit returned to homelessness at lower rates than other youth, including those that accessed other housing supports.** Youth provided housing through First Place often stayed in the unit or transitioned to another permanent housing unit where they could continue to address other issues on a path towards housing stability. Of the 14 youth with 12 month follow-up surveys, 10 were living in permanent housing one year after enrolling in the program (71%). Of the eight with 24 or 30 month interviews, six were in permanent housing (75%).

The outcomes for youth enrolled in the First Place program were promising, but as a single program, it cannot solve youth housing instability for Maine's youth. Youth homelessness is complex, and housing insecurity is affected by many external and societal factors like familial histories of trauma and abuse, substance use, an inaccessible rental market, and the broader strains of poverty and inequity. **The First Place program did seem to provide meaningful opportunities for young people to choose their own paths towards a more safe and stable future.** Once placed in a unit or provided housing support, young people in this evaluation were given the chance—perhaps for the first time—to switch from a mindset of survival towards a mindset of stability and security.

²⁶Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America. National Estimates. Retrieved from: <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/one-in-10-young-adults-experience-homelessness-during-one-year/>



John T. Gorman Mission

The John T. Gorman Foundation advances ideas and opportunities that can improve the lives of disadvantaged people in Maine. To achieve the greatest impact, the Foundation has a special interest in strengthening families and helping communities provide them with the supports and opportunities they need to thrive.

One area of the Foundation's work is helping Maine's older youth develop the skills, build the knowledge and gain access to the support systems required to meet key milestones associated with successful adult transition: achieve a post-secondary credential, secure employment, and live independently. Within the scope of this work, we are focused on older youth involved in the juvenile justice system, those aging out of foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, young parents, and youth who are at-risk of or disconnected from school and or the workforce — the young people that research and experience tell us are likely to face the toughest challenges to successful adult transition.

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