



Employment Experiences Among First Place-Involved Youth

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The First Place Evaluation

The following brief focuses on the employment experiences of youth experiencing homelessness or with prior experiences of homelessness in Portland, ME. It is the second brief that describes the life experiences of youth participating in Preble Street's First Place program. The first brief examined the housing stability experiences of youth in the program. The Evaluation of the First Place Program examined the experiences of 35 youth who accessed the First Place program between 2015 and 2018. The study included two 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 study examined the characteristics and experiences of youth 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 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. Do First Place services contribute to improvements in housing stability?
3. How do local factors (policy environment, local housing market, job market) affect the implementation of the Transitional Living Program?

Obtaining and retaining employment is an important factor in stabilizing youth experiencing homelessness. Subsequent briefs will focus on other contributing factors such as education, 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. Data Collection Activity and Number of Youth

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 Securing employment rarely leads to immediate self-sufficiency.** Youth struggle with many issues that impinge on their long-term housing and employment stability. Obtaining and even maintaining a (most often) low-wage job may not address the issues that come from entrenched poverty, mental illness, and trauma. Some employed youth at baseline and one year later reported that they did not have enough money to “make ends meet.” While youth served by the First Place program have optimistic expectations of their future, it is rarely possible to solve severe financial instability in a short time period. Connections to career building opportunities that allow youth to earn more than a minimum wage could improve their future financial stability.
- 2 Of First Place youth with known employment experiences, more than half had some connection to the workforce during the study period, but most often only episodically.** Of the 27 youth with known employment experiences, 15 had at least one job during the study period, 5 of whom were stably employed. Ten youth had at least one job, but were often employed only for short periods. Youth identified several reasons for leaving jobs including not getting enough hours, difficulty accessing transportation to the job site, getting fired for behavior issues, or difficulty maintaining employment while addressing mental health issues. Twelve of those 27 youth in the study did not have a job during the study period at all. These unemployed youth were more likely to have experienced homelessness through most of the study period and more likely to have spent some time in a correctional facility.
- 3 Employment is especially difficult to secure and sustain for young people experiencing homelessness.** In Maine, young adults face an unemployment rate of around 11 percent, higher than the national youth unemployment rate of 9.2¹ percent. Young people experiencing homelessness often enter the workforce with additional barriers to employment including histories of childhood poverty and homelessness, trauma, familial instability, and lack of social connection that leads to employment opportunities. First Place youth reported a number of reasons for unemployment, including lacking an address other than the shelter, not having the proper identification, transportation-related issues, and lacking child care.
- 4 Youth employment and housing stability can be self-reinforcing.** Study participants who were in permanent housing (either subsidized or unsubsidized) were more likely to be connected to the workforce when compared to youth who did not have permanent housing during the study period, suggesting that housing stability and employment are self-reinforcing. The findings highlight the critical importance of considering both factors concurrently in helping young people move toward stability and independence.

Insights: Improving Employment Experiences of Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Maine



Young people need access to a range of community-based programs and services that focus on identifying career pathways and not just short-term employment goals.

The most effective job preparation and placement programs combine job search assistance with short-term education and training, but usually place participants in low-wage jobs without benefits. These programs tend to prioritize getting participants into jobs, but often stop short of providing ongoing job retention and advancement strategies. These themes surfaced repeatedly through interviews with First Place youth and local service providers. Promising youth employment models define and implement sustained, supported links to education and services rooted in a mentorship model design that provides ongoing support to a young person. Young people need access to a range of community-based programs and services, and adult assistance and guidance in order to identify career pathways and achieve employment goals.

Mental health services are critical to helping youth achieve employment stability.

A widely cited deficiency in Portland's homeless service provider network was mental health services. Nearly every stakeholder identified mental health as both critical to youth stability and as insufficiently available. Youth themselves identified mental health issues as impeding their ability to maintain employment, often choosing to leave a job when their issues became severe.

Provision of additional housing supports for youth in low wage jobs could help them both maintain employment and sustain housing.

While there are more employment opportunities in Portland than in the surrounding area, housing costs are considerably higher, and unaffordable to people earning a minimum wage. Most of these youth rely on public transportation which can be unreliable and unavailable on Sundays. Youth often reported leaving or changing jobs due to transportation challenges. Providing a shallower subsidy for a longer period of time may help youth stabilize in housing while gaining employment experience.

Promoting supportive relationships can improve employment outcomes among youth experiencing homelessness, especially those with chronic patterns of homelessness.

Creating social support networks may be especially difficult for young people experiencing homelessness because the temporary nature of their living situations, as well as the stigma associated with homelessness, may impact their ability to form meaningful, long-term social networks. This may mean strengthening existing, though weak, relationships that youth already have, or facilitating new relationships between youth and mentors or career-focused service providers. For many young people, the process of leaving the streets and integrating into mainstream housing and employment activities is a gradual process that requires a re-framing of the definition of independence to include participation in and support from mainstream services and employment.





Cassie, 22

Cassie was raised by a single mom, having spent time with her grandparents and in foster care while her mom was in prison. Until she was 13 or 14, her mom was always employed, working full-time at various jobs, such as waiting tables and telemarketing-- anything to keep their heads above water. After two traumatic experiences involving separate boyfriends, “something inside [her mom] broke.” She began spending more time in bars, and employment became less of a priority. During Cassie’s last year in high school, she experienced homelessness for the first time, couch surfing in order to stay in school and graduate. The years that followed involved cycling in and out of homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health issues. Cassie is currently in recovery and has been reliably employed. She believes that her commitment to steady employment is driven by her greater maturity and by her improved sense of self-worth – the belief that she has value. She currently works a single full-time job that covers rent and other expenses after having worked multiple jobs for several years. Nonetheless, maintaining employment is a deliberate process that requires her to stay keenly aware of her mental health, especially signs of relapse, anxiety and depression. In the future, Cassie wants to work with people struggling with mental health issues and addiction.

“It was really hard for a long time because I [couldn’t] take a shower and be clean. It’s so much more than hygienic clean. It’s hard to pretend to be a person in society when you feel like you’re nobody. [Before the First Place program unit], I was working at the gas station and returned to the shelter in the middle of the night and they let me in. Just to get up bright and early and do it all over again the next day. It’s so tiring – you either give up trying or change it. I have friends still out there [who’ve] given up, and some that killed themselves.”

Jennifer, 18

Jennifer grew up moving back and forth between her parents. Both parents worked full-time, sometimes working night shifts or very early morning shifts, but always employed. She became pregnant at 15 which increased already existing tensions in the home, and she was ultimately homeless by age 17. Jennifer struggled to find employment initially due to her young age and need for child care. She was able to obtain employment after receiving public benefits which supported child care (which took several months to secure), and she has been stably employed throughout the study period. She currently has two jobs, both on a temporary basis. Both



employment opportunities provide critical skills that could be used to develop proficiencies that would lead to a career, but neither provide health benefits for her and her two kids. She earns sufficient income to cover rent and expenses—despite taking over the full rent after her ex-partner moved out—and she reports having enough money at the end of the month to make ends meet. She receives food stamps, which provides some financial relief. In addition to her two jobs, Jennifer also participates in national advocacy work, speaking publicly and to legislators about her experiences with homelessness. While she enjoys the advocacy work the most, she is hoping to identify a career path, and the organizers of the advocacy-related work --while emphasizing youth voice in policy-making -- may stop short of helping youth break into that field.

"I think my favorite [work] is the youth engagement stuff... As much as it's about empowering young folks, it's about asking them to do things without the capacity to appropriately support them after [they share their experiences]... I think the [advocacy] organizers see us as having a day job and doing [advocacy] as a cool opportunity. But they don't realize that most of our day jobs are like minimum wage."

Stacey, 19

Stacey grew up living with her mom and brothers, moving frequently. Her mom worked consistently, but also changed jobs frequently or lost jobs due to her alcoholism. While her home life was chaotic, Stacey's mom instilled a sense of responsibility at an early age. Starting at age 14, Stacey babysat and did other odd jobs in order to pay for non-essentials (such as a cell phone) for herself. Even now, Stacey prioritizes her independence by working two jobs, reporting that a job is a comfort to her. It gives her a sense of calm and control. At different points in time Stacey thought about different career paths, from a mechanic to a mortician, carefully weighing the costs of achieving the job (e.g., the type and location of schooling) against what the job would afford her and her daughter. She is approaching her future carefully and with full awareness of her very limited time and resources.

"I haven't wrapped my head around school, work and a child. I'm not sure how to work full time and go to school full time while also seeing my child. I just can't see how that will work. It wouldn't be fair to her."



1. Overview of Employment for Homeless Youth



For many youth experiencing homelessness, a job is more than a pay check. A job contributes to their identity formation, leads to important skill development, and connects youth to social capital.² Conversely, sustained unemployment can be damaging. Youth transitioning into adulthood who remain unemployed risk prolonged poverty, detachment from the labor market and, in severe cases, chronic homelessness.³ Given the critical nature of providing employment opportunities to youth, the First Place program emphasizes employment and income as key goals toward independence.

The following brief examines the employment experiences of youth in the First Place program.

1.1 Labor Market and Context

The participation of young people ages 16 to 24 in the labor market has declined nationally since the early 2000s.⁴ This decline is likely related to a few things, including a steady increase in school attendance, changing labor market characteristics, and shifting cultural expectations around employment.⁵ For many youth, financial independence is expected later on in life than it used to be. According to a Pew Research poll, 67 percent of parents believed their children should be financially independent by age 22, representing a sharp decline from 80 percent of parents in 1993.⁶

Maine has maintained low unemployment rates for all people during the study period, declining steadily from 4.4 percent in 2015 to 3.5 percent in 2018. The unemployment rate for young adults aged 16 to 24, however, has remained around 11 percent during the same period.⁷ This is higher than the national youth unemployment rate of 9.2 percent.⁸ Young men of color are disproportionately affected by declines in employment often as a result of having limited opportunities for exposure to various career paths and social capital.⁹

1.2 Employment Prior to Program Enrollment

Study participants came to the First Place program having experienced childhood poverty, several prior episodes of homelessness, trauma, and familial instability. Most youth spent at least some time in the foster care system, and were dealing with mental health or substance use issues.¹⁰ However, homeless youth-- including those served by the program -- face significant barriers to employment; for many of these young people, a short-term intervention during an 18-month program period will not meaningfully improve their overall economic situation.

The employment trajectories of most study participants were characterized by both structural and personal barriers. Housing instability and homelessness can create simple access barriers to

employment, such as employers requiring a stable address. The challenges to employment faced by homeless youth go much deeper. Histories of trauma and familial instability often leave youth without a support system or access to the same social supports as stably housed youth.¹¹ Homeless youth often spend considerable time and energy meeting their basic needs, such as food and shelter, and are less able to focus on skill-building, widening the opportunity gap between them and their housed peers. Further, a considerable share of youth experiencing homelessness struggle with substance use disorders and mental health issues. LGBTQ youth and youth of color face the additional barriers of discrimination in the labor market.¹²

“Even when you think you have money, you don’t have money. It’s an annoying circle: you can have enough to start, but not enough to sustain. I used to have two jobs and still didn’t have enough. I worked 6 days a week. I would pay \$600 for a room, but didn’t get food stamps. Then I would have to pay for a bus or cabs (if I worked on a Sunday). I was working 40-50 [hours] a week and it wasn’t cutting it.” —Stacey

Employment Status Prior to Enrollment

Most youth reported being unemployed prior to program enrollment. Of the 35 youth in the study, just over a quarter (or 9 youth) reported some employment, and only two youth reported full-time equivalent employment (40 hours or more). Part-time employment is more common in lower-wage occupations, and thus most study participants who reported employment were working jobs that did not fully cover their life expenses.

Youth who reported not working in the week prior to enrollment were asked why they had not worked. Of those 26 youth, 11 (or 42 percent) were actively looking for work, but had not been able to find a job. Reported challenges were not having necessary identification, lack of child care, transportation, employers not wanting to hire someone with the address of the shelter, and lack of experience. However, most were simply addressing the immediate crisis of homelessness and could not dedicate physical or emotional resources to employment.

Other Sources of Income Prior to Enrollment

Beyond employment, young adults experiencing homelessness often rely on other forms of income generation to support themselves, including informal forms (borrowing money from family and friends), formal assistance (utilizing public financial assistance programs), and other strategies to generate income such as spare changing, shoplifting,



dealing drugs, or survival sex.¹³ Five youth self-reported that they had sold sex at some point in the three months prior to enrollment, and four of those five youth reported being a victim of violence at least once in the month prior. Three of the youth that sold sex also indicated that they had substance use disorders, which is common for this subpopulation of homeless youth. Youth were asked again a year later if they participated in survival sex, and two of those 14 respondents reported selling sex within three months. These two were included in the initial group of five.

Very few youth in the study reported income from public assistance programs. Only two study participants reported receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) prior to program enrollment, and only parenting youth reported access to food stamps though many reported applying for them. For many young adults who are experiencing homelessness, it may be difficult to access disability benefits through the Social Security Administration (SSA) due to the administration's narrow eligibility definition of disability.¹⁴ Programs such as SSI/SSDI Outreach Access, and Recovery (SOAR) attempt to connect young people with these benefits in order to promote ongoing financial stability.¹⁵ In particular, young people with disabilities who are aging out of the foster care system may be entitled to SSI payments to facilitate their transition from foster care to independent adulthood.¹⁶ In Maine, many of these benefits were restricted, limiting access to health insurance, food stamps, and general assistance for most of this group during the study period.

1.3 Services Offered

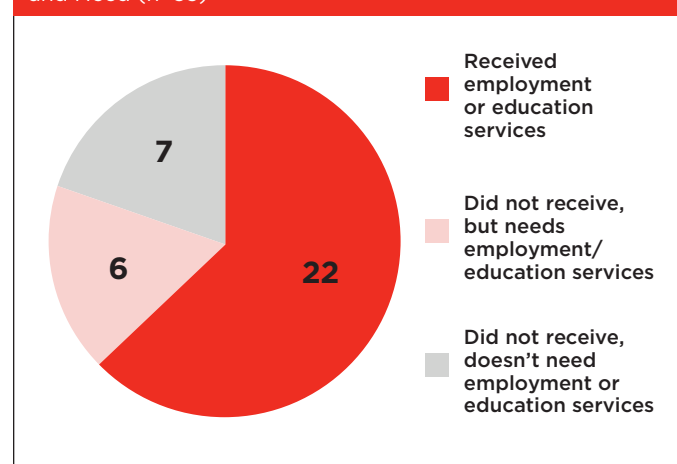
The First Place program provides services and intensive case management to help youth access employment opportunities. Successful employment interventions are often those that promote connections with non-street relationships, and that positively contribute to a young person's engagement in employment services.¹⁷ A positive youth development approach to employment services focuses on the young person's strengths—rather than weaknesses—and is grounded in this context of positive youth-adult relationships.¹⁸ The First Place program uses a Positive Youth Development framework and emphasizes supportive relationships with adults.

Young people involved in the First Place Program are referred to Street Academy, an Adult Education Program administered through Portland Public Schools, for intensive support services aimed at connecting young people experiencing homelessness in Maine to education and workforce training. The program exposed First Place youth to HiSET (high school equivalency) pre-testing and testing, individualized

tutoring, employment preparation and placement, and advocacy to reduce barriers to employment goals.¹⁹

Study participants were asked whether they accessed Street Academy or other employment and education related services at the time of enrollment (see Exhibit 2). Most (22 of 35) had already accessed those services. Of those who reported not accessing them and not needing them, all but one were employed at the time of the interview.

Exhibit 2. Employment Services: Reported Receipt and Need (n=35)



2. Employment Stability



2.1 Employment Situation during Study Period

First Place youth did not easily obtain and maintain employment during the study period. In general, youth cycled in and out of employment situations, sometimes working one or two jobs for very short periods of time. Youth experiencing homelessness can be chronically unemployed, with studies showing that they average more than 8 months of a given year without work.²⁰ As shown in Exhibit 3, 12 youth (or 34 percent) were unemployed throughout the study period, with 6 having made no known progress toward their goals. Employment stability categories were determined through a combination of surveys with youth, interviews with youth, and information recorded by case managers on progress toward employment goals. A small number of youth were stably employed during the entire study period (see Exhibit 3).

Regular employment did not serve as a protective factor against returning to homelessness (see Exhibit 4), emphasizing the complex dynamics of the experience of youth homelessness. Stably employed youth returned to shelter at a rate greater than those with no employment at all. However, this could be due to the small number of youth in the study or may suggest the strength in the relationship between youth and service providers.

“For me [the challenge] is finding a job that is suitable and can offer full time. I’m struggling to find a full-time job, and my resume shows that my jobs weren’t held very long because of couch surfing. That can make it hard for people to continue paying rent and keep housing.”
—First Place participant

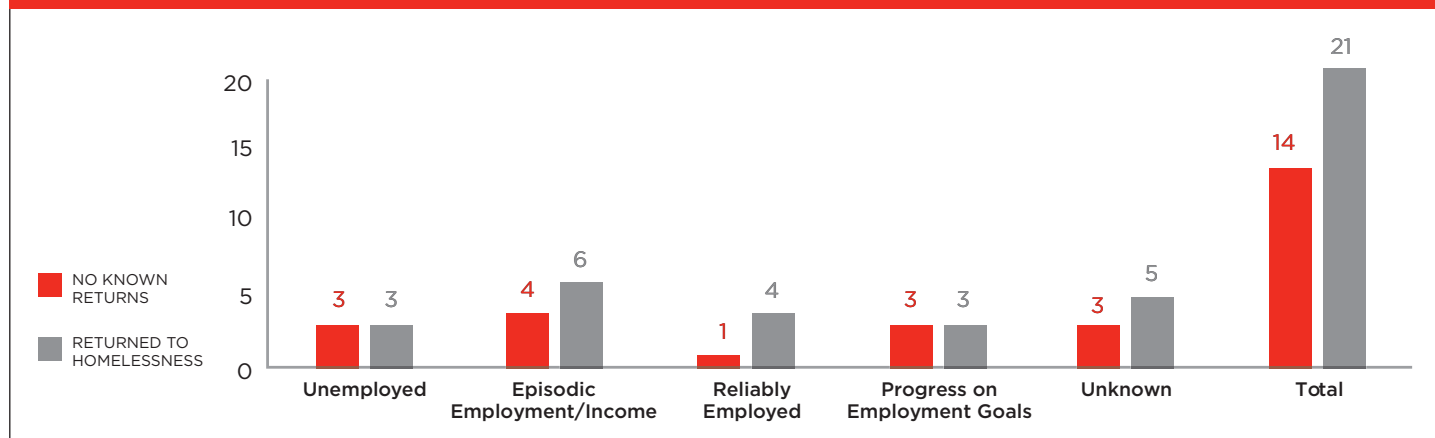
Exhibit 3. Employment Stability Category of Youth

	N	%
Consistently Unemployed: Unemployed at baseline and at follow-up. No noted progress on employment by case managers.	6	17%
No known employment, but case managers noted progress on employment goals.	6	17%
Episodic Employment/Income: Employed at least once but not consistently employed or accessed income benefits at some point during study period.	10	29%
Stably Employed: Employed consistently throughout the study period.	5	14%
Unknown: Unemployed at baseline. No information on employment after initial interview.	8	23%
Total	35	100%

As with housing stability, employment was not easily maintained once secured. Youth interviewed between 24 and 30 months after enrolling in the program reported losing or changing jobs several times in the years following First Place enrollment. Youth reported frequently not being paid enough to meet their basic needs or not getting enough hours to work.

However, as shown in Exhibit 5, data suggest that youth in permanent housing were more likely to be connected to the workforce than those not in permanent housing during the study period. This is possibly due to a bi-directional relationship, where youth with employment were able to maintain housing and youth with housing were better able

Exhibit 4. Accessed Shelter after Program Exit by Employment Stability Category (n=35)





to maintain employment. Employment provides income to support young people in housing, and housing stability is crucial to decreasing economic stress.²¹ None of the youth who remained homeless during the study period were stably employed, and 27 percent (or 3 youth) were episodically employed.

2.2 Barriers to Employment

Youth in the First Place program encountered multiple barriers to employment. Data collection on youth for this study showed that youth faced an average of four critical barriers. Most often identified were substance use, mental health issues, foster care involvement, and prior episodes of homelessness. Several youth in the study reported that the instability of life and prioritizing meeting basic needs made finding or keeping a job difficult. For many young people, particularly those experiencing homelessness, the transition

to adulthood includes family conflict and abandonment and other impediments to healthy and safe development on which data were not collected. The barriers identified are not comprehensive, but are illustrative of the types of issues encountered by youth seeking employment, particularly those with limited prior educational and employment experiences.²² See Exhibit 5 for details on the barriers for youth in the study.

Housing Situation and Prior Homelessness

Youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability, particularly those with long histories of homelessness, face additional barriers to employment. Worry about finding a place to sleep, or worrying about how to get to work once there, can act as a barrier to youth employment. In addition, youth who spend long periods homeless can adopt a “street culture,” making a transition to a more structured lifestyle difficult.²³ Youth in permanent housing were more likely to have some connection to the work force than youth who were not in permanent housing.

Exhibit 5. Barriers to Employment by Employment Category

Barriers to Employment	No Employment or income	Episodic employment /Income	Stably employed	No employment but made progress	Unknown	Total
Total	6	10	5	6	8	35
Housing Situation During Program (n=35)						
Permanent Housing	3	7	4	1	4	19
Homeless/Doubled up	3	3	0	3	2	11
Institutional Setting	0	0	1	1	1	3
Other/Missing	0	0	0	1	1	2
Reported Substance Use Issues at Baseline (n=35)						
No	3	8	4	3	4	22
Yes	3	2	1	3	4	13
Reported Mental Health Issues at Baseline (n=35)						
No	1	1	1	0	3	6
Yes	5	9	4	6	5	29
Foster Care Placement (n=35)						
No Foster Placement	5	4	4	1	3	17
Foster Placement	1	6	1	5	5	18
Criminal Justice Involvement (n=34)						
No	3	10	4	4	4	25
Yes	3	0	1	2	3	9
High School degree (or equivalent) or higher at program enrollment (n=35)						
No	2	3	0	3	0	8
Yes	4	7	5	3	8	27



Mental Health and Substance Use

Higher levels of regular substance use at baseline were found among youth without any known employment, including those chronically unemployed, than were found among First Place youth who had some connection to the workforce (see Exhibit 5). Research has repeatedly shown that mental illness and substance use act as barriers to formal employment for young adults. Substance use can also make it difficult for youth to exit homelessness, and strengthens connections to others with substance use issues who may be disconnected from the workforce.²⁴

Youth with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other trauma-related issues can experience difficulties securing and maintaining employment. Nearly all youth in the study reported mental health issues, with 26 having spent time in a mental health facility. While youth with mental health issues were able to secure employment, many reported maintaining employment and staying healthy as a balancing act, often having to choose one in favor of the other. When asked to recall a positive experience at work, one study participant recounted having a panic attack at work and having her coworkers help her and her manager give her space to recover and get back to work without firing her.

“[We have] issues with experience; Being young, poorer folks don’t know the necessary things like how an interview goes, what you look like during an interview, you go in at a disadvantage; You are dependent on what’s available [at the shelter] like razors or clothes.”

—First Place Participant

System Involvement

Youth with foster care placements are highly susceptible to homelessness, and foster care involvement is related to lower rates of income and employment.²⁵ About half of youth in the study had been placed in foster care at least once, with an average of three placements per youth. Of the five youth stably employed throughout the study period, only one had any foster care placements. However, chronically unemployed youth had similar rates of foster-involvement.

Criminal justice involvement can hinder employment as employers may not want to hire young adults with any criminal background. Just over one-quarter of youth (9 of 35) reported spending time in jail, prison, or juvenile detention. Only three youth who spent time in jail or prison had any connection to the workforce over the study period.



Education

Lacking a high school diploma – and in many places, a college diploma – can make securing employment difficult. The most recent data show that in Maine, people without a high school diploma have an unemployment rate of 7 percent compared to 3.5 percent of all people.²⁶ Just under one-quarter of youth (8 of 35) enrolled in the program without a high school diploma or its equivalent. Of those eight youth, none were stably employed and only 3 had at least one job during the study period.

Social Connection

A barrier faced by all youth entering the labor market is inexperience. However, homeless youth are at an additional disadvantage as they often do not have access to social supports that teach them the “soft skills” needed to secure employment, such as how to prepare, how to conduct an interview, or how to dress. Youth in the program frequently noted that they did not know how to prepare for a job interview or how to prepare a resume. Most youth, when asked to identify positive adult connections, identified case managers of the First Place program.

LGBTQ Youth

Youth in the program disproportionately identified as LGBTQ compared to both the population in Maine and the general homeless population in Maine.²⁷ In addition to being at additional risk of homelessness,²⁸ LGBTQ are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in the hiring process.



2.3 Community Service Provider Perspectives

Homeless service providers were asked what makes it difficult for homeless youth to secure and maintain employment in Portland, ME. Mental health-focused providers identified mental health issues, substance use issues, and prioritizing peer relationships over employment as key challenges. Employment-based service providers pointed to a lack of positive social connections and role models. Many youth grew up “bouncing around,” various foster homes, and didn’t form those connections at a young age. A legal service provider identified the lack of phones and ability for employers to communicate with youth as barriers, as well as housing instability, transportation issues, and lack of training. One service provider noted, “They might wind up miles away because that’s where their friend’s couch they can sleep on is, but transportation makes it difficult to get to the job.” Services that helped mitigate these challenges have declined over the study period.

Early employment is a key factor in higher job quality later in life, and having a range of employment experiences in one’s youth may impact employment and job quality through the 20’s and beyond.²⁹ These early jobs also help youth become comfortable with the job environment. As one service provider noted, “Kids get jobs and really don’t know how to keep them.... they don’t have experience, they don’t know how to work for a boss – they don’t get the communication piece.” Access to social networks that could support their employment pathways can be critical. Programs that provide support to youth as they develop skills and career pathways are needed for all of Maine’s low-income youth, but are particularly important for those youth experiencing homelessness with additional barriers to stability.



3. Expectations of Self-Sufficiency and the Future



Youth Outlook

Financial self-sufficiency may be understood as one's ability to sustain a minimum standard of living through a combination of earned income, family care, and public benefits over the course of a lifetime.³⁰ Study participants were asked about the likelihood of their own self-sufficiency. When asked how likely it would be that they they would get a paid job, all but one reported that they “probably” or, much more commonly, “definitely” will. When asked how likely it is that they will be able to support themselves without the help of a program, most youth (27 of 35) reported they “probably” or “definitely” will be able to support themselves, however “definitely” was not as common a response. A year later, 11 of the 14 reported that they will “likely” be able to support themselves financially – including some who were currently employed -- indicating that while securing employment and achieving self-sufficiency are different concepts, a majority of homeless youth believed them to be possible.

“My favorite job was helping at the Resource Center. I felt like I was helping people and giving back. I plan on making career out of activism or something. For me, it's just about making the world a better place.”

—First Place Participant

There were some additional hopeful signs when asking youth about their monthly finances. Study participants were asked about how much money they had at the end of the month. Of the 14 youth with surveys from both points in time, fewer youth reported not having enough to make ends meet and more youth reported having some money left over. Four of the eight youth with not enough money at program enrollment had money left over at the end of each month one year later. Highlighting employment instability, two youth who reported having some money or just enough money at the end of a month when enrolling in the program had not enough a year later.

Youth were asked if they had responsible adults or mentors that they believed would help them reach their goals at both program enrollment and a year later. A similar share of youth at both points in time (20 and 21 percent) indicated that they did not have such a connection, highlighting the lack of social networks that could support accessing employment opportunities. Many youth who indicated that they did have a supportive connection identified their First Place case manager as that person, illustrating the strong level of trust built between the program staff and youth.

Improving Employment Experiences for Youth

The most effective job preparation and placement programs combine job search assistance with short-term education and training, but usually place participants in low-wage jobs without benefits. These programs tend to prioritize getting participants into jobs, but don't often offer ongoing job retention and advancement strategies.³¹ These themes surfaced repeatedly through interviews with First Place youth and local service providers. Promising youth employment models define and implement sustained, supported links to education and services rooted in a mentorship model design that provides ongoing support to a young person.³² Young people need access to a range of community-based programs and services, and adult assistance and guidance in order to identify career pathways and achieve employment goals.³³

A widely cited deficiency in Portland's homeless service provider network was mental health services. Nearly every stakeholder identified mental health as both critical to youth stability and movement toward independence and as insufficiently available. Youth themselves identified mental health issues as impeding their ability to maintain employment, often forcing them to leave a job when their issues became severe.

Another issue repeatedly identified as a way to improve employment outcomes was promoting supportive relationships. Creating social support networks may be especially difficult for young people experiencing homelessness because the temporary nature of their living situations as well as the stigma associated with homelessness.³⁴ Youth may rely on existing, though weak, relationships, or new relationships with mentors or career-focused service providers. For many young people, the process of leaving the streets and integrating into mainstream housing and employment activities is a gradual process that requires a re-framing of the definition of independence to include participation in and support from mainstream services and employment.³⁵

Finally, additional housing supports for youth in low wage jobs could assist them in maintaining employment and sustaining housing. While there are more employment opportunities in Portland than in the surrounding area, housing costs are considerably higher, and unaffordable to people earning a minimum wage. Most of these youth rely on public transportation which can be unreliable and unavailable on Sundays. A shallower subsidy for a longer period of time may help youth stabilize in housing while gaining employment experience.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm>; https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/BMOC_Employment.pdf
- ² Employment Status and Income Generation for Homeless Youth <https://journals-sagepub-com.ursus-proxy-1.ursus.maine.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0044118X11402851>
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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.

JOHN T. GORMAN
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