

Families on the Edge:

Homeless Young Parents and Their Welfare Experiences A Policy Brief

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Homeless young parents live life on the edge. Many have escaped abusive and neglectful home situations. They and their children are often in unsafe situations with poor access to basic resources like adequate food, clothing, and health care. Some struggle with substance abuse and mental health problems. As some of the most vulnerable members of society, homeless young parents need access to public services, including welfare.

Passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 transformed welfare policy in the United States. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, a system of cash grants for eligible low-income families, was replaced by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which places a 60-month lifetime limit on federal assistance to families and emphasizes work over education as the means toward family self-sufficiency. As a block grant program, TANF gives states significant responsibility—and flexibility—to design and implement their own welfare programs.

A new report from the National Network for Youth (National Network) and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), *Families on the Edge: Young Homeless Parents and Their Welfare Experiences*, focuses on the experiences of homeless young parents with the TANF program. For young parents, TANF can be an important tool—a “leg up”—in helping these families achieve long-term stability and economic self-sufficiency. Most low-income young parents struggle to secure child care and transportation, to continue their education, and to find reliable jobs that pay livable wages. Homeless young parents face the additional challenge of locating permanent and safe housing.

This brief summarizes *Families on the Edge: Young Homeless Parents and Their Welfare Experiences. A Survey of Homeless Youth and Service Providers* by Bob Reeg, Christine Grisham, and Annie Shepard. To view the full 36-page report, including complete findings, policy recommendations, and references, visit the CLASP website at www.clasp.org. To order a printed copy of the full report, call (202) 906-8000.

Young parents may receive their own TANF assistance grants if they meet certain eligibility criteria. Like their older counterparts, young parents seeking TANF assistance must agree to adhere to certain rules, such as cooperating in the collection of child support from the non-custodial parents. In addition, the TANF statute has two rules that apply only to minor teen parents (typically, those under 18 years of age). It mandates that states deny federal assistance to *minor* parents unless they adhere to rules related to their living arrangements and to participation in education/training. The minor parent living arrangement rule prohibits states from providing federal TANF assistance to unmarried, custodial, minor parents unless they live with a parent, legal guardian, or another adult relative, or in an alternative living arrangement approved by the state. The minor parent education/training rule prohibits states from using federal TANF funds to assist unmarried, custodial, minor parents caring for a child 12 weeks of age or older unless the parent has completed high school (or its equivalent) or is participating in an appropriate educational activity (i.e., standard school or an approved alternative, including a training program).

One reading of the minor parent provisions views them as well-intentioned efforts to address the special educational and housing needs of young parents. Other interpretations understand them to be either clumsy tools to establish disincentives to childbearing among young people, or worse, as means to keep young families out of the TANF program. In any event, emerging research suggests that too many minor parents are being denied TANF support because states are not exercising their flexibility appropriately or because the minor parent provisions are misunderstood by TANF eligibility workers, suggesting that a second look is needed by governmental agencies and youth advocates at how the TANF program rules are impacting young families.

Between 1.3 million and 2.8 million youth live on the streets of the United States each year. Research with the homeless youth population reveals that typically they are fleeing or are currently finding themselves in situations that endanger their physical and/or mental health. In most cases, their homelessness is a means of escaping numerous problems that exist in the home environment. Severe family conflict, physical and sexual abuse, and parental alcohol and other drug abuse remain the key causal factors for homelessness among youth. Young parents who are homeless frequently report being thrown out of their homes by family members who disapprove of the youth's parenting status or who are unable to cope emotionally or practically with the presence of a child (or an additional child) in the home. While it is impossible to state definitively how many homeless youth are parents, one study reported that 5 percent of runaway and homeless youth had children.

The new report examines the experiences of homeless young parents—both minor parents and older young parents (typically, ages 18 through 21)—with the TANF program. While young parents have been a focus of the

TANF program, the effect of the program's rules on *homeless* young parents has not been examined. Young parents who are homeless face complex life circumstances, such as limited family and community support and lack of access to income, that TANF is intended to address. A public assistance program that fails to serve them can hardly be hailed a success.

With these issues in mind, the National Network and CLASP surveyed homeless young parents in order to learn about their knowledge of TANF and their experiences in applying for and receiving TANF assistance. We also surveyed organizations providing residential services to homeless youth to capture their observations about the effectiveness of their states' TANF programs in reaching and serving homeless young parents.

The National Network and CLASP believe that the survey responses offer important insights into whether and how TANF is helping homeless young families.

“I was able to feed us better and get him things he needed like diapers, wipes, clothes, etc.”

—a homeless young parent on the value of a welfare cash benefit

However, this study has a number of limitations. First, while young parents and the organizations that serve them have been asked to comment on the TANF program, we did not survey state or local welfare agencies. Second, it is important to note that the survey of homeless parenting youth was not conducted using random sampling, nor was the sample size very large. As a result, the findings of this survey cannot be considered statistically representative of homeless young parents.

Nevertheless, this survey breaks new ground because homeless young parents—and the organizations that serve them—have scarcely been asked to participate in *any* survey. That over 100 such parents voluntarily participated in a survey at a chaotic time in their lives merits commendation. What these young people have to say about how the TANF program does or does not address their needs and aspirations should be instructive to decision-makers.

Findings

The main findings of the survey include:

- ❑ **Most homeless parenting youth would likely meet the basic eligibility requirements to receive TANF benefits.** In fact, 84 percent of homeless parenting youth surveyed who applied were eligible.
- ❑ **However, many homeless youth did not even know they might be eligible to receive welfare assistance.** Fully one-half of homeless youth surveyed who had never applied for TANF did not even know about the program. And less than 40 percent of survey respondents reported receiving TANF assistance at the time of the survey.
- ❑ **Even when homeless youth know about TANF, they have trouble accessing or keeping benefits.** Fourteen of the 20 service providers surveyed said that the homeless parenting youth they served had problems accessing TANF. Further, 36 percent of homeless parenting youth who had received TANF reported having been sanctioned or terminated from the program, although most thought they were complying with program rules.
- ❑ **The living arrangement rule may, in fact, be operating as a barrier to TANF services rather than as an opportunity to help provide homeless young parents with the resources to find safe housing.** Thirty-one percent of TANF-receiving respondents who had been subject to the living arrangement rule reported that it actually put them in an unsafe situation.

“I moved back with my real parents, but they were still using drugs and selling them.”

—a homeless young parent on the perils of the minor living arrangement rule

ing eligibility and participation requirements. The National Network and CLASP offer policy and practice recommendations for the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, state TANF agencies and local TANF offices, youth-serving organiza-

tions, and young parents. While the recommendations were written with homeless young parents in mind, they would likely benefit all young parents. The five main recommendations are:

- ❑ **Improve the TANF program rules for young parents** by allowing for a “transitional compliance period” where minor parents are given time to come into compliance with the TANF minor parent rules; permitting the time limit for assistance to commence at age 20 for young parents who are complying with the education/training rule; instituting more specific policies on sanctions protections; and ending the limit on vocational education as an allowable activity for state work participation rates.
- ❑ **Strengthen the TANF minor parent living arrangement rule** by ensuring states provide adequate alternative living arrangements, expand the definition of organizations that can act as alternative living arrangements, and consult with young parents regarding their housing preferences.
- ❑ **Increase community outreach efforts** and the availability of supportive services for young parents and their families.
- ❑ **Collect comprehensive data on young parents** (both recipients and non-recipients of TANF) and the effects the TANF minor parent rules have on families.
- ❑ **Ensure staff members at state and local TANF offices are trained in program provisions affecting young parents**, by increasing the availability of technical assistance for TANF workers about program rules, as well as about the research on outcomes for young parents and their families.

Recommendations

The results of these surveys of homeless young parents and the service providers working with them reveal that homeless young families often experience difficulty both in accessing the TANF program and in meeting its ongoing

Families on the Edge: Homeless Young Parents and Their Welfare Experiences

A Survey of Homeless Youth and Service Providers

CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national, nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children. CLASP's policy analysts and lawyers are experts on a host of family policy issues, including welfare reform, workforce development, education and training, child care, child welfare, child support, reproductive health/teen parents, and couples and marriage policy.

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NATIONAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH

The National Network for Youth is a membership organization comprised of community-based youth-serving organizations, young people, youth workers, and youth advocates who seek to ensure that young people can be safe and lead healthy and productive lives. The National Network and its members focus their work with and for youth, especially those who, because of abuse, neglect, family conflict or disconnection, community prejudice, disabilities, lack of resources, or other adverse life circumstances, need greater opportunities and supports to become contributing members of their communities.

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