



# Creative Youth Development in the Context of Homelessness

Supporting Stability While Creating Structural Change

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More than one million U.S. students experience homelessness (National Center for Homeless Education, 2019).

Although homelessness affects all racial groups, young people experiencing homelessness disproportionately identify as Black or Latinx (Hallett & Skrla, 2017).

These youth, most of whom live in poverty, tend to face a variety of educational challenges (Hallett & Skrla, 2017). Community-based out-of-school time (OST) programs, which often have more flexibility to innovate and meet local needs than traditional schools do, can provide critical support for youth who are overlooked in mainstream educational settings (Baldrige, Beck, Medina, & Reeves, 2017; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011). Community-based OST programs and centers may provide young people who are experiencing homelessness not only with a break from their adverse living conditions but also with access to community resources and opportunities to build relationships.

In particular, creative youth development (CYD) OST programs, which blend a focus on skills, assets, relationships, and development with a purposeful emphasis on creation, inquiry, and expression, may be particularly helpful in contexts of housing instability. Using an afterschool center I refer to as “Metrohaven,” this study explores the potential of CYD in OST programming to support the development of young people experiencing homelessness. Overviews of student homelessness and of the Metrohaven context are followed by findings from my qualitative study of Metrohaven, built around the defining characteristics of CYD programming. My findings lead to recommendations that can help CYD-oriented

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OST programs to work effectively with and for youth experiencing homelessness.

## Student Homelessness

Students who experience homelessness tend to move homes and change schools often (Miller, 2011). The moves, which are often unplanned, can interrupt learning and end relationships with friends, educators, mentors, and service providers (Miller, 2011). Students experiencing homelessness often have difficulty finding places where they can store schoolbooks, clean their laundry, use a computer, or get a good night's sleep (Hallett & Skrla, 2017; Pavlakis, 2018). Like their peers who also live in poverty, they may experience hunger and face stigma at school (Hallett & Skrla, 2017; Miller, 2011). These challenges can culminate in poor educational outcomes such as low achievement, poor attendance, and high rates of dropout and social isolation (Miller, 2011). However, some students experiencing homelessness exhibit resilience—persisting and achieving in school and remaining connected to their schools and communities (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Hallett & Skrla, 2017; Miller, 2011).

In U.S. schools, the rights of students identified as homeless are protected by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which was reauthorized in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. McKinney-Vento defines “homeless children and youths” as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 5). The act covers diverse settings such as shelters, motels, campgrounds, abandoned buildings, and cars; it also includes students who are doubling up with friends, acquaintances, or extended family out of economic necessity (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

According to U.S. Department of Education guidance (2015), McKinney-Vento prohibits segregation of students by housing status, secures the right to immediate school enrollment, and aims to ensure equal access to educational resources and opportunities. Students often have the right to remain in the same school when they move (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). However, research (Miller, 2011;

National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; Pavlakis, 2018) has found that the policy can be implemented unevenly and that many students and families are unaware of their rights. For instance, despite McKinney-Vento, students experiencing homelessness can still face barriers attending school-based extracurricular activities, such as sports and clubs, due to residency requirements or equipment fees (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017).

Factors that affect students' experience of homelessness include their age, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, personality, family composition, and geographic location, as well as the duration of their homelessness and where they sleep (Miller, 2011; Pavlakis, 2018). Scholars aiming to address student

homelessness suggest that schools create safe and stable atmospheres; build close relationships between youth and adults; collaborate to connect families to wide-ranging resources; and use varied practices tailored to individual students' needs, assets, and situations (Hallett & Skrla, 2017; Miller, 2011; Pavlakis, 2018).

Youth experiencing homelessness may spend their time at community-based drop-in centers designed for their needs, in after-school programs held at family homeless shelters, or in the same

OST programs as their stably housed peers. Existing research (Baldrige et al., 2017; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) highlights ways in which community-based OST programs can support youth of color by building their social networks, fostering their identities, and encouraging their awareness of and engagement in social and political concerns. However, more research is needed on community-based OST programs that emphasize youth development and arts education in the context of homelessness.

## Positive Youth Development

According to its strategic plan, “Metrohaven,” the center where I did my research, is built on a positive youth development (PYD) model. Scholars note that the PYD model is based on the assumption that, as human beings develop, their behavior can shift as the result of two-way interactions with their surroundings. A PYD approach aims to support young people's competencies

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and strengths rather than fix their perceived weaknesses. The model assumes that, if young people have trusting, two-way relationships with other people and with institutions, they will become productive and healthy adults. PYD focuses on supporting youth as they grow by recognizing and building their character, confidence, connections, and competence (Hirsch et al., 2011; Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, & Forrest-Bank, 2013; see also Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

Some scholars have critiqued PYD, suggesting that this approach takes the experience of White, middle-class youth as normative, thus discounting the varied identities and experiences of youth of color. PYD approaches may expect young people to change their behavior in order to achieve healthy development—even when political, social, or economic issues, such as racism or classism, stand in the way. These critiques suggest that PYD models, even though they may attempt to focus on assets, can nevertheless ignore the effects of oppression on youth and their development (Baldrige et al., 2017; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

## Creative Youth Development

Sources (Montgomery, 2017; Whinnery, Rafa, & Wolff, 2018) suggest that CYD combines PYD with arts education or other forms of creativity in the arts and sciences. CYD connects PYD's emphasis on asset-based development with an intentional focus on creation, inquiry, and expression. CYD programs move beyond one-time introductions to creative ventures such as taking youth to see a play. Instead, they focus on deep involvement over time, enabling young people to master skills while providing a sense of belonging to a community of practice. The creative element facilitates growth and development (Montgomery, 2017; Whinnery et al., 2018).

Programs based on CYD principles have been around for decades. However, the term has only recently come into use to define a set of program characteristics. The Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC, 2018), among others, defines six characteristics of CYD programming:

1. Creating spaces for youth that are emotionally and physically safe

2. Helping youth forge positive relationships with peers and adults
3. Setting high expectations for learning and growth in the arts, humanities, and sciences
4. Framing youth as assets, resources, and partners rather than as problems
5. Valuing participants' voices and being youth-driven
6. Addressing broad community and social contexts (MCC, 2018)

Though CYD programs generally share these characteristics, each is unique. Some CYD programs provide wraparound services to help meet young people's needs for housing, food, healthcare, or other resources—much as Metrohaven does. Some are driven by social justice and equity concerns (Montgomery, 2017); racial equity and social justice are “core values” of the CYD movement (Creative Youth Development, 2018). CYD can be effective in developing young people's artistic, creative, and academic skills; their self-image and identities; and their social networks and community engagement (Whinnery et al., 2018).

## Research Context

Located in a large Southwestern city, Metrohaven is a secular, community-based afterschool center designed to provide wraparound services for youth experiencing homelessness. All Metrohaven youth experience homelessness alongside at least one parent or guardian; all attend the same low-performing high school. Nearly all identify as

Latinx, Black, or multiracial.

With a large open-plan kitchen and living room, comfortable furniture, a large-screen television, and stainless steel appliances, Metrohaven feels like a home. Besides offering summer programs and special field trips, it is open weeknights from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. The center provides meals, academic tutoring and college counseling, healthcare, skills development, and arts education. For some of its programming, Metrohaven partners with a number of community organizations. The work of three full-time staff members is supplemented by volunteer art educators, musicians, therapists, college counselors, academic

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tutors, and mentors. Metrohaven receives financial and in-kind support from private individuals, companies, and a local church.

Although Metrohaven does not explicitly refer to itself as a CYD program, it embraces many of the foundational characteristics of CYD. It houses an arts studio, a music recording studio, and a grand piano. Art educators and professionals lead projects, mentor participants, and offer music and photography lessons. In addition to providing programming itself, Metrohaven also partners with third-party organizations. For instance, Metrohaven built a strong collaborative relationship with “Lightup” (another pseudonym), an arts education organization that has received national attention for its CYD model. Lightup provides regular and intensive poetry, arts, and creative team-building activities.

## Methods

This study is part of a larger qualitative research project I conducted in 2016 during Metrohaven’s first year of operation. For this project, I conducted 12 interviews with 10 Metrohaven staff members and volunteers and gathered data from 21 young people through a combination of group and individual interviews. During the nine months of this research, I spent 44.5 hours observing programming and meetings. Along the way, I collected documents including Metrohaven’s strategic plan and student rules, as well as ad hoc materials such as flyers.

With respondents’ permission, I audio-recorded all interviews. To analyze the data, I uploaded interview transcripts into NVivo 11, a qualitative analysis software program. I began by reading all the transcripts closely, line by line, to allow themes to emerge. Then I grouped and organized my themes into codes and considered how they connected to the foundational characteristics and values of CYD.

My intersecting identities as a White, middle-class, female university faculty member undoubtedly shaped the research. My race, class, profession, and age most likely created distance between me and the young people I interviewed, none of whom were White. Our differences may have shaped how the respondents spoke with me and what they said. However, I spent many afternoons at Metrohaven and sometimes even participated alongside the youth in activities such as rock climbing, so most of the interviewees knew me. A few young people connected more deeply by chatting with me regularly about their day; a couple

even introduced me to their parents. These bonds may have engendered trust and allowed youth interviewees to speak more openly with me than they might have otherwise. Meanwhile, in many ways my race, class, and age probably facilitated data collection with the majority–White staff and volunteers.

## Creative Youth Development at Metrohaven

My research revealed ways in which Metrohaven applied the six foundational characteristics of CYD (MCC, 2018) in its work with youth experiencing homelessness.

### 1. Safe Space

CYD emphasizes providing safe and healthy spaces for youth (MCC, 2018). Metrohaven had a state-of-the-art physical facility. As participants walked down the hall, they passed the art studio, music recording studio, and counseling rooms. They then arrived at a big open-plan kitchen and living room space with couches, a bookshelf, and framed pictures of the participants and staff. Large tables accommodated communal dinners; at any time, participants could help themselves to healthy snacks, a cabinet full of food, and an oversized fridge. Off the open-plan room were a computer lab, two quiet rooms, a laundry room, showers, and a piano room. Because youth experiencing homelessness often lack a place to store personal belongings, participants had their own decorated cubbies. A dry-erase board that shared the weekly program provided a sense of stability. Written across the wall in large metal letters was the word “HOME,” a powerful term in homelessness contexts.

To Metrohaven staff, the quality of the physical facilities was vital. One staff member noted that the space sent participants the message that “These people do care about me, they want me to succeed’—just like their own parents do.” In informal conversations and interviews, staff said they wanted only the best for participants; all in-kind donations had to be new and of high quality. The goal was to reduce shame and buffer youth from stigma.

Youth participants described Metrohaven as “home-like” because of the “setting that’s in here.” They said in interviews that they felt, as one put it, “It’s safe here.” Participants often noted the importance of access to plenty of good food. The communal dinners typically came from local high-quality restaurants. Sometimes a volunteer family brought in fresh

groceries and cooked dinner with the youth. Some young people noted that they loved being able to cook at Metrohaven—something that families without access to a kitchen often are not able to do (Hallett & Skrla, 2017).

## 2. Positive Relationships

Another CYD characteristic is a focus on positive relationships and social skills (MCC, 2018). Metrohaven often excelled in this area. The high mobility that accompanies homelessness means that, at some point, most Metrohaven youth had moved away from close friends and trusted mentors. Relationship building is particularly important in such a context (Miller, 2011). Beyond the athletic coaches that a few students cited as being important mentors, many Metrohaven youth said that they did not feel particularly close to adults or peers at school. However, they said that trusting relationships were commonplace at Metrohaven.

Metrohaven built strong peer relationships through group activities and challenges that fostered trust. Participants noted that “[we] act like we are siblings,” even though they rarely saw one another at school. They said that Metrohaven had improved their peer relationships. As a staff member noted, “They’ve formed a family.”

Metrohaven also fostered strong relationships between staff and youth. Participants said they voluntarily shared their grades and course plans; staff said that they knew who had exams coming up. Some participants noted that staff members were, as one put it, “like our big mom and ... like our dad.” Many young people said that, because of Metrohaven, they felt more confident and better prepared to negotiate their relationships with adults both at school and with family.

## 3. High Expectations

CYD programs encourage youth to take risks while providing support to enable them to meet high expectations (MCC, 2018). Many Metrohaven youth excelled in the arts; staff said that some were “very talented artists” and musicians who had won state-level awards. Others embraced the arts simply as a way

to express themselves. One Latinx participant noted, “I’m in poetry club. That’s my outlet. I put a huge emphasis on my art.”

Participants consistently praised how Metrohaven shaped their artistic skills. A Latinx youth noted in an interview, “I’ve never had an art room, a place where I could just go do art.... In here, they give you all the materials, and you can express and go more in-depth.... They’ve developed my art skills.” Other young people noted that the art programming was “lots of fun” and that they “love[d] it.” One participant had “gotten very good” at the piano while another had “learn[ed] how to cut and edit videos.”

Beyond extending participants’ artistic skills, arts education at Metrohaven served several other purposes. For one thing, it built community and created a sense of belonging. An art educator explained:

When you are sitting around a table all working on something, you become a community. It’s like a meal.... It’s like anything communal: You become a community, and the economic and age [differences] and everything sort of melts a bit.

Arts education at Metrohaven also allowed youth to “get in the zone” and provided an escape from daily realities. The arts educator noted that work in the arts “transports you out of your problems really for a while. I found, whether you’re a high-paid executive or somebody that doesn’t have a penny, everybody ... needs a release to be transported out of your worries.”

Another benefit of creating art was that participants made physical products that were theirs alone. An arts educator elaborated:

[The art work is] physical. You can throw it away; it belongs to you. That’s the best part. Especially in homelessness, they don’t have a place to put [their art], but it belongs to them. It’s your work, so it’s good to have a place to keep their work that they know it’s safe.

Finally, the arts helped participants learn skills they could apply in other parts of their lives. The arts educator noted that the work “helps them ... to take on challenges that are new and to solve problems.” Working

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alongside professional arts educators, she continued, enabled participants to receive “encouragement” and to get to know role models who “make a life in art.”

Metrohaven staff encouraged participants to take risks while providing them with necessary supports. Some participants entered local poetry contests, for example, after working for an extended time on original poems. Some participants went rock climbing and engaged in trust-building activities and games that not only built bonds among participants but also forged a supportive environment. A staff member explained:

You have all these growth things you need them to learn. At the same time, that fun and exploring needs to be there as well. In all our activities, whether it's the art room or the recording studio or playing board games, we try to add this exploration piece to it by encouraging new forms of art, by teaching them skills in the recording studio—asking questions, learning new fun skills, learning how to interact with your peers, and make a group project.

Thus Metrohaven blended skills development with opportunities for creative exploration.

In keeping with the CYD focus on high expectations, many CYD program cycles culminate in final products or performances presented to an audience. These culminating products allow youth to demonstrate their mastery and be proud of their accomplishments (MCC, 2018). However, Metrohaven's program did not include culminating arts projects. The high mobility and stress of homelessness would complicate the design and implementation of long-term projects. For example, the arts educator I interviewed mentioned one participant who was “a really good artist and a good person, but then he just kind of disappears for a while,” saying that the teen was “feeling really stressed” and worried about his mother. Although most of the young people I interviewed felt that they could turn to at least one adult in their household for advice, research suggests that parents experiencing homelessness can be burdened by the daily challenges of finding housing, food, employ-

ment, transportation, and childcare (Hallett & Skrla, 2017). The unpredictable moves and stress that often accompany homelessness could keep participants or their families from attending final events or hinder participants from finishing their work on time.

#### 4. Asset-Based

In contrast to deficit framings, which highlight youths' risks or perceived weaknesses, asset-based CYD programs frame youth as individuals whose strengths add value to their communities (MCC, 2018). In many ways, Metrohaven tried to emphasize assets. The center's programming focused on uncovering and extending participants' strengths, engaging young people in community service and skill-building activities. Metrohaven's strategic plan saw participants as “the next great composers, artists and thinkers.” In interviews, staff often spoke of participants' wide-ranging talents and sometimes recognized the structural challenges the young people faced because they attended a struggling school.

However, in other ways, Metrohaven fell victim to deficit thinking. For instance, according to the strategic plan, Metrohaven could “help transform [young people] out of the pattern into which they were born or gravitated towards.” Similarly, a volunteer noted, “I really think they want to change.” An emphasis on young people needing to “change”—an underlying concept in some PYD models—can be problematic when working with youth experiencing homelessness. It can ignore the structural obstacles families experiencing homelessness face, such as a lack of affordable housing, racism and discrimination, and labor market obstacles. It can imply that parents choose to be homeless and are unable to care adequately for their children (see Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Hallett & Skrla, 2017). The focus on change can also suggest that youth would be *off-track* without the program (see Baldridge et al., 2017).

By contrast, most Metrohaven youth were close to at least one adult family member, attended school

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regularly, and were engaged in OST programs or sports. If they didn't come to Metrohaven, they said, they would go to the gym to work out, attend tutoring at their school, or spend time with their siblings. While recognizing the important role Metrohaven played in their lives, they painted a picture of themselves as engaged adolescents with diverse support networks. Metrohaven often extended and enriched these networks, rather than creating them from scratch.

## 5. Youth-Driven

In effective CYD programs, young people's opinions and experiences help to shape their program experiences and development. They may, for example, take on leadership roles in the institution (MCC, 2018). Although participants had limited leadership opportunities, staff routinely gathered youth opinions through surveys, feedback forms, and informal conversations. When data suggested that participants did not enjoy the financial literacy programming, staff immediately worked with the external provider to revise it. Similarly, when participants critiqued Lightup's poetry programming, staff not only collaborated with Lightup to alter the programming but also worked with participants to bridge the conceptual gaps among writing, poetry, spoken word, and music.

According to interviews, participants wrote and even enforced Metrohaven's rules, a practice that helped to create a youth-driven atmosphere. Rules included, for example, "no profanity," not using phones during dinner, and cleaning up after oneself. Some of the rules related specifically to coping with housing instability, such as one that prioritized the use of computers for school assignments.

## 6. Broader Context

CYD programs aim to effect change by addressing the context in which youth are situated. To do so, they may coordinate with other community-based organizations or offer activities that respond to local, national, global, or historical concerns (MCC, 2018).

Through partnerships with more than 20 organizations and a range of volunteers, Metrohaven responded to many of its participants' immediate needs, particularly those related to housing instability. For instance, a medical and dental care truck visited routinely. Other partners provided school supplies, clothing, and shoes. The fact that Metrohaven was specifically designed to meet the unique and varied needs of youth experiencing homelessness highlights

its responsiveness to the broader context. Its extensive community collaborations were aligned with research-based best practices on responses to homelessness (see Hallett & Skrla, 2017; Miller, 2011).

Still, though participants engaged in community service projects and prioritized "giving back," Metrohaven had not yet provided opportunities for youth to deeply explore or act on the root causes of issues that mattered to them. For instance, some Metrohaven youth had deep interests in complex topics such as racism and discrimination, voter disenfranchisement, police brutality, homelessness, and immigration reform. One Latinx participant discussed how she thought Latinx people should respond to the debate on building a wall between the United States and Mexico: "What I think is the worst mistake Hispanics could do, like us, would be to make ourselves the victims and not stand up ... like cry about it. I don't want to cry about it. I want to go against it."

With limited exceptions, Metrohaven's programming did not encourage participants to discuss, explore, or act on sociopolitical issues. Exacerbating this gap in programming was the racial misalignment between staff, volunteers, and board members, who were majority White, and participants, who were majority Latinx and Black. In keeping with critiques of PYD approaches, in interviews, staff noted that most program role models were "White Anglo-Saxon" and that youth did not see "a lot of people who look like" them.

## Recommendations

Study findings suggest recommendations for OST CYD programs that serve children and youth experiencing homelessness, whether they are specifically designed for homelessness contexts or not. These recommendations highlight the importance of collaborating, adapting CYD to the context, and harnessing CYD's core values.

### Prioritize Collaborations

In order to support youth experiencing homelessness, Metrohaven collaborated extensively with individuals and organizations. Research suggests that cross-sector collaborations are vital to providing holistic supports for children and youth experiencing homelessness (Miller, 2011). OST centers can support participants by building deep neighborhood connections and thinking creatively about ways to foster mutually beneficial partnerships with individuals, nonprofits, and for-profit companies. They can also learn about the needs and assets of families and can co-design partnership

opportunities with adults whom youth identify as important to them.

### **Adapt CYD to Program Contexts**

As Metrohaven often demonstrated, to serve youth experiencing homelessness, CYD programs have to remain flexible and responsive. Rather than forgoing culminating events, as Metrohaven did, programs may instead consider adapting culminating events or performances to allow for the transience that often comes with housing instability. Perhaps they could use technology to enable both young people and audiences to participate remotely, both asynchronously and in real time. To ensure that events are convenient and welcoming, providers could consult with youth and families about location and about needed supports such as childcare, food, and transportation. Culminating events could also be opportunities to assist and to learn from participants and their families. A provider might, for example, have a medical van stationed outside the event venue, hand out information on employment and training opportunities, or distribute feedback forms adults could use to share insights about their families' needs and assets.

CYD programs should learn as much as possible about participants' housing status through such means as in-house surveys or data sharing agreements with schools or other providers. Furthermore, the Metrohaven example demonstrates the importance of providing access to food, places to cook and store belongings, hygiene items, and showers. CYD programs should consider the importance of these resources to ensure that youth experiencing homelessness can fully participate in the programming. To foster feelings of belonging, providers should consider extending "lifelong membership" to young people who attend at any point—even if they move. Safe social media outlets, such as the closed forums Metrohaven uses, can be helpful in connecting alumni to staff and peers regardless of distance. In order to advocate for participants, providers should also learn about McKinney-Vento.

OST centers can support participants by building deep neighborhood connections and thinking creatively about ways to foster mutually beneficial partnerships with individuals, nonprofits, and for-profit companies.

### **Harness CYD's Core Values**

Art and arts education have been used to heal trauma and facilitate social reform (see Eaton, Doherty, & Widrick, 2007). According to the CYD National Blueprint (2018), "racial equity and social justice, youth voice, and collective action" are "core values of the CYD movement" (p. 3).

In some ways, Metrohaven youth were already applying the arts in restorative ways. Still, Metrohaven may have been missing opportunities to tap the action-oriented potential of the creative arts. If youth in CYD centers are interested in addressing local housing instability, for example, they could use art, multimedia, and historical sources to build awareness of the history of racism and discrimination in housing. Alongside artists, scientists, and educators, they could create maps of affordable housing, foreclosures and evictions, and public transportation. They could examine local policies; devise potential solutions; and produce creative works to share their lived experiences, knowledge, and action plans for housing stability.

Such opportunities, co-designed thoughtfully and flexibly by programs and youth together, can enable young people to develop skills through creative inquiry, connect with their communities, and act on contextual barriers that shape their development. In this way, CYD programs can support stability while creating structural change.

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