THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

POPULATING THE RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH ACT:
GOVERNANCE, VULNERABILITY, AND POSITIVITY IN US FEDERAL POLICY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE CROWN FAMILY SCHOOL

OF SOCIAL WORK, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2026

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the runaway and homeless youth (RHY) population is produced through U.S. federal policy as an object of governance rather than recognized as a preexisting social group. Drawing on a historical and genealogical approach, I analyze legislative hearings, statutory language, Federal Register documents, service regulations, senatorial archives, and selected media representations to trace how youth housing instability becomes intelligible as a coherent and actionable federal population. Rather than treating policy as a neutral response to an already existing social condition, I examine how federal legislation, administrative practice, and developmental expertise assemble runaway and homeless youth through practices of abstraction, designation, and intervention.

The dissertation traces three related processes. Chapter 1 details how the runaway and homeless youth population is produced as an abstraction through legislation, services, testimony, and research. Focusing on the Runaway Youth Act of 1974 and subsequent reauthorizations, it traces how heterogeneous experiences of youth housing instability are rendered legible as a distinct population by stabilizing characteristics such as vulnerability, family dysfunction, and risk. Second, I argue that vulnerability functions as a governing designation rather than an inherent condition of youth. Across policy and media, vulnerability organizes recognition through racialized and gendered forms, differentiates care from punishment, and delimits intervention while obscuring the structural conditions that produce youth homelessness. Third, I examine Positive Youth Development as a governing rationality that reframes youth homelessness as a developmental problem to be addressed through self-regulation, resilience, and future orientation, narrowing the scope of state obligation while stabilizing a self-managing

subject as the normative horizon of intervention.

Taken together, these chapters argue that youth homelessness is governed through administratively legible categories that shift attention away from housing, poverty, racism, and economic precarity and toward the management of populations through vulnerability, developmental deficiency, and self-sufficiency. By tracing how the RHY population is made thinkable, recognizable, and actionable in federal policy, this dissertation reframes youth homelessness not simply as a social problem to be solved, but as a problem continually reorganized through the terms of its governance. In doing so, it contributes to social work scholarship by showing how policy categories shape the forms of care, intervention, and recognition available to young people, and by pointing toward responses grounded less in contingent designation and developmental management than in housing, material support, and structural redress.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have many people to thank for making this dissertation possible.

I would like to thank my advisor and dissertation chair, Reuben Miller, for his guidance throughout this project. His intellectual generosity and close contact shaped this dissertation in countless ways. I am also grateful to my committee members, Charles Tocci, Gina Samuels, and Mark Courtney, whose questions and insights challenged me to think more carefully about the history, theory, and implications of this work. I extend an additional thank you to Rob Chaskin, Julie Henly, and Robin Bertram for reacting to the proposal and defense of this dissertation with care and insight.

I am grateful to the many colleagues, youth service practitioners, and young people whose conversations, experiences, and questions shaped how I came to understand youth homelessness. Their insights and generosity continue to influence both this dissertation and my thinking about social work. Thanks for keeping it cute.

I would like to thank the many librarians and archivists that made my research possible, including Connie Fleischer at the D'Angelo Law Library at the University of Chicago, Kate Cruikshank at the Indiana University Library, Malisa Culpepper at the George W. Bush Presidential Library among others. Thank you for your time and direction.

Thank you to my friends at InterFuture: Intercultural Studies for the Future and to Paul Conner whose extraordinary vision and hard work put me on this trajectory.

I am especially grateful to my sweet family -- Alex, Samuel, and Minju -- for sustaining me through this work. To my parents, Susan and Stephen Round, thank you for passing on the value of education and your continued encouragement. To Victor and Penny Bernstein, thank you for your support.

INTRODUCTION

A set of clipboards rested on the reception desk along one side of the main room of the drop-in center for youth experiencing housing instability. Each clipboard corresponded to different services: showers, laundry, meals, afternoon activities, and so on. At any given moment, someone was looking for one of the lists or referring back to it. Staff would man the desk, hanging out with young people as they signed up for this or that, joking and chatting. Young people added their names, crossed themselves off, or scanned the sheets to find someone to swap with. Volunteers checked the lists to find out whose laundry was in the dryer or whose turn it was to be escorted to the donation closet. The clipboards moved in and out of hands, continuously organizing the flow of the day for staff and signators.

While most young people wrote their full names on the sheets, one young person approached the desk and marked an X instead. The arrangement had been worked out previously, though the staff member on duty hesitated, unfamiliar with it. After a brief exchange, the X remained.

On one level, the clipboards served an obvious purpose. They helped coordinate the use of resources—whose turn it was, what had already been done. But they also did something less visible. Entries were also data. The sheets became records of service provision: used for audits, funding requirements, and annual reports. In this sense, the clipboards did not simply organize the room, but scaled participation into measurable and verifiable results.

Within this system, the X sat with slight unease. It held a place just as a name would and allowed the young person to access services with only slight disruption. At the same time, it resisted the terms through which that access was recorded, marking a presence without fully submitting to identification. It was unclear what happened to the X later–whether it remained as it was, was replaced with a name, or was counted at all. It was also unclear how much this mattered. The system required numbers—meals served, showers taken—not necessarily the identities attached to them. The act of writing a name, however briefly, linked the provision of care to a form of legibility that extended beyond the room. The X as a small refusal required additional labor, repeated in quiet negotiations like this one, each time the young person approached the desk.

The clipboards were part of the order of the room: they distributed, organized, and made services manageable. But that order did not extend beyond the space itself. It did not scale into something like stable housing, nor did it account for the particularities that shaped how young people moved through the room—their preferences or paranoias. Within the system, each entry registered as one more instance of service provided. In this process, the young person who marked an X was rendered largely indistinguishable from others receiving services. For me, there was a dissonance between what was neatly counted and the messiness that remained unaddressed.

This dissertation emerges from questions about what happens when processes designed to serve young people also act upon them. In the drop-in center, this took a small but concrete form: the young person required extra explanation to protect their privacy when signing up for services. The clipboard was local, but the logic and practices of it were not. It belongs to systems of documentation, funding, eligibility, and accountability that shape what can be offered by determining what must first be presented. To understand arrangements like these—and why youth homelessness is organized in these particular ways—I turned to the history of federal legislation, where categories are defined, services are authorized, and the population becomes available as an object of intervention. The shift to federal archives is therefore not a departure from the scene, but a way of tracing the conditions that make it, and many scenes like it, possible. Examining these conditions at the federal level makes visible how youth homelessness is constituted as a problem in advance, shaping the terms through which young people can be recognized, counted, and served.

In this project, I use a genealogical approach to examine federal archival materials , specifically tracing the ways that categories of personhoods become thinkable and governable through historically contingent processes. I show how runaway and homeless youth became recognizable as an object of federal concern, and how the terms through which this population was known and governed shifted over time. I use 1974 as the central entry point of the project, the year that the Runaway Youth Act was passed as the first sustained federal effort to name, fund, and administer runaway youth as a population. I explore the pre-1974 period in order to show the ways that youth who would now be included in the population were distributed across other categories. I explore the 1980s to show critical productions of difference as the population emerges from national concerns. Finally, I turn to the 2000s to explore the prevailing governing rationalities of the population.

Within this genealogical orientation I focus on governance, the processes through which distributed rationalities, expertise, and techniques produce the populations they govern (Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1991). Through Foucault (1991) and subsequent work by Rose and Miller (1992), governmentality studies focus on broad assemblages of knowledge, policy, professional expertise, and administrative practices that make a population knowable and governable. Across the three chapters, the analysis traces the formation of runaway and homeless youth as a distinct population, the emergence of vulnerability as a designation through which intervention becomes possible, and the incorporation of Positive Youth Development as a governing rationality organized around self-regulation, resilience, and future-oriented subject formation.

While I am concerned with material conditions as a response to the formation of the runaway and homeless youth population, it is not a Marxist analysis. While the same archival materials, with some additions from the Office of Management and Budget, could have provided an analysis of economic inequality and the changing welfare state, those concerns seemed secondary to the ways that young people were produced and made manageable, to the historical conditions under which they become thinkable, and to the forms of expertise through which their selves emerge (Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1999). A genealogical approach was particularly well suited to these materials because the archive consisted largely of congressional hearings, Federal Register documents, statutory language, service regulations, and developmental frameworks—texts concerned less with the causes of youth homelessness than with defining problems, establishing eligibility, allocating intervention, and organizing youth as objects of federal concern.

My concern with the production of the neoliberal subject, for example, explores the ways personhood is organized around self-management, responsibilization, and entrepreneurial self-development. From a Marxist perspective, this subject can be understood as historically specific to neoliberal capitalism, insofar as it shifts the burdens of structural insecurity onto individuals while obscuring the political-economic conditions that produce that insecurity in the first place. However, in this dissertation, the neoliberal subject is both a primary aim and effect of governance, rather than capitalist restructuring. My concern is not the redistribution of material insecurity, but the ways that federal policy, developmental expertise, and service interventions produce particular forms of youth personhoods organized around vulnerability, self-regulation, and future-oriented self-sufficiency. Further, governance also provided a more direct account of consequences of intervention: the ways young people are assessed, classified, monitored, and encouraged to cultivate themselves as resilient, self-sufficient, and future-oriented subjects, and the ways assistance itself becomes contingent upon demonstrating vulnerability, readiness, or developmental progress.

This project examines how the runaway and homeless youth population emerges in U.S. federal policy not as a self-evident social group, but as an effect of governance. It takes an interpretive historical approach, drawing on the federal archives to examine how this population is made intelligible over time. Rather than treating policy as a neutral response to an existing social condition, I consider legislation as a site that actively assembles a population through defining, characterizing, and intervening. I argue that the ways the population is produced also shapes how it can be managed and responded to, delimiting what can be recognized as the problem and what forms of intervention become possible.

I develop this argument through three related processes. I examine how the population is formed as an object of policy through practices that form and stabilize the population; how that population becomes characterized as vulnerable; and an intervention that this formation and characterization enables. Together, I show that federal policy does not simply respond to youth homelessness, but organizes it as an administratively legible problem. This problem is addressed through limited interventions, often displacing systemic conditions like housing inequality and economic precarity, and narrowing intervention to forms that address individuals rather than the conditions that produce homelessness.

In Chapter 1, I examine the historical emergence of the runaway and homeless youth population as an abstraction within U.S. federal policy. Drawing on legislative hearings, statutory language, and administrative documents, I trace how diverse experiences of youth housing instability are rendered legible as a coherent and governable population. Rather than treating this population as a pre-existing group, this chapter shows how it is assembled through practices that demarcate and stabilize particular qualities—such as family dysfunction, risk, and need—across time. These characteristics do not simply describe young people; they are produced as elements of the population itself, enabling intervention while delimiting what can be recognized as a problem. The chapter further demonstrates how broader national concerns, most consistently mediated through the figure of the family, are incorporated into the population's defining features, situating youth homelessness within shifting anxieties about social order.

Chapter 2 analyzes vulnerability as a governing designation through which the runaway and homeless youth population is made intelligible and actionable. Reading across federal policy and media representations, the chapter shows how vulnerability operates not as an inherent condition but as a classificatory logic that structures recognition and access to care. Across historical moments, vulnerability is differently configured—at times stabilizing youth as innocent and in need of protection, and at others entangled with delinquency and threat—yet it consistently functions to sort youth into systems of intervention. In doing so, it establishes the terms through which care becomes possible while constraining alternative forms of recognition and response. The chapter also demonstrates how vulnerability is rendered legible through racialized and gendered forms, in which whiteness operates as a condition of visibility, shaping how vulnerability is recognized and extended across the population.

Chapter 3 examines "positive youth development" as a governing logic that organizes federal responses to youth homelessness around the cultivation of self-regulating, future-oriented subjects. Rather than treating Positive Youth Development (PYD) as a discrete framework, the chapter traces “positive youth development” as a broader and shifting arrangement of developmental assumptions, policy practices, and administrative techniques emerging across federal discourse since the 1970s. It shows how this logic reconfigures youth homelessness as a problem of individual capacity and development, to be addressed through interventions that promote resilience, self-regulation, and future orientation. In this formulation, responsibility for exiting homelessness is increasingly relocated onto young people themselves, while structural conditions—such as housing inequality and economic precarity—are displaced. By tracing these shifts across political formations, the chapter demonstrates how federal policy stabilizes a developmental understanding of youth homelessness that narrows the scope of state obligation while producing a normative horizon of the self-managing subject.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that the runaway and homeless youth population is not a stable or self-evident object of policy, but is continuously produced through overlapping practices of abstraction, designation, and intervention. While each chapter examines a distinct set of governing techniques, they collectively show how the population is stabilized as an object of knowledge and action even as its defining characteristics shift across time. This approach reframes youth homelessness not as a fixed social condition to be addressed, but as a problem that is continually reorganized through the terms of its governance, shaping what can be known, who can be recognized, and what forms of intervention become possible.

This study employs an interpretive historical analysis of U.S. federal policy archives to examine how the runaway and homeless youth population is produced as a governable abstraction. Drawing on the Federal Register, legislative hearings, senatorial archives, and media sources, I examine the ways the population is assembled and reconfigured over time. Rather than evaluating policy outcomes, this approach traces how practices of classification, measurement, and intervention constitute the population. The specifics of this arrangement determine how the runaway and homeless youth population is recognized as a social problem, which determines which kinds of responses become possible.

This study is limited to federal policy archives because its analytic focus is on how the runaway and homeless youth population is constituted as an object of governance at the level where categories, services, and measures are defined and authorized. Statutory language, Federal Register entries, or media sources show how youth homelessness is rendered legible as a problem that can be governed. For this reason, the project does not examine how policies are implemented or experienced in practice, does not center the voices of young people, and does not capture variation at state and local levels. These limits reflect the analytic focus of the study: to examine how policy formation shapes the conditions under which funding, evaluation, and intervention become possible, setting the terms for the practices that happen to and for young people.

By reframing the runaway and homeless youth population as an effect of governance, this dissertation points toward the need to reconsider how youth homelessness is defined and addressed in policy and practice. When homelessness is organized through administratively legible categories—such as vulnerability or developmental deficiency—intervention is oriented toward crisis management and individual capacity-building rather than the material conditions that produce housing instability. A shift in focus toward housing, economic resources, and structural inequality would reorient policy away from the management of populations and toward the conditions that shape youth homelessness itself. Such a reorientation does not reject existing services, but situates them within a broader framework that centers material need rather than the abstractions through which populations are governed.

CHAPTER 1. POPULATING THE RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH ACT: ABSTRACTIONS IN THE US FEDERAL ARCHIVES

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Senator Birch Bayh, co-author of the proposed Runaway Youth Act (RYA), encountered a surprise objection during the congressional hearings over which he presided. Philip Rutledge of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) argued that existing legislation—the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1968 and the Social Security Act of 1935—already funded a range of youth services from which runaway youth would benefit, including shelters, probation programs, or school-based interventions. While acceding runaway youth were a social problem, Rutledge criticized the RYA's "single categorical approach" and instead advocated for coordinating existing, already funded services.

Bayh's response reframed the issue: "Would it not be helpful… if we had one single vehicle with which we could arouse public opinion and public support?" (Rutledge, Edwards, & Foster 1972).

Federal legislation, research, and service provision approach runaway and homeless youth as a self-evident population: a recognizable group of young people defined by shared traits such as vulnerability, family dysfunction, and risk. This population is treated as given, as if it names a stable kind of young person whose characteristics precede intervention. Yet, as the exchange between Bayh and Rutledge makes clear, this was not inevitable. In 1972, young people experiencing housing instability could have been organized through existing categories—juvenile delinquency, social welfare, or other youth services—rather than consolidated into a distinct population: a "single vehicle." That consolidation did not simply name a group; it established the terms through which young people could be recognized, studied, and served.

I argue that the runaway and homeless youth population does not precede policy, but is produced as an abstraction through interrelated practices of governance, including legislation, service provision, and knowledge production. Across federal policy, services, and knowledge production, the population and its subjects are co-constituted. These processes do not unfold sequentially; rather, they operate as overlapping sites through which the population is continuously brought into being. The chapter does not trace how a population is discovered, but how it is produced as a coherent and actionable object of governance.

I use abstraction to name the process through which governance renders diverse experiences legible as a population. The abstraction circulates across policy and research sites, operating as an object in its own right—carrying a history, traits, and logics that persist across contexts, often independent of the particular experiences it organizes. The runaway and homeless youth population, in this sense, is not a pre-existing social group, nor is it assembled from stable traits such as family dysfunction, living conditions, or demographic identity, but is marked by those traits. These features render the population intelligible, measurable, and actionable within policy. By treating abstraction as an ontological formation that moves across decision-making sites, this analysis shows how the population is continuously reconstituted through the very practices that make it available for intervention.

The exchange between Bayh and Rutledge makes this process visible. Rutledge treats runaway youth as already encompassed within existing administrative categories—juvenile delinquency, social welfare, education—and therefore as governable through dispersed programs. Bayh, by contrast, argues for the creation of a "single vehicle," not merely a new program, but a distinct population that can be named, consolidated, and acted upon as such. This disagreement turns not on whether runaway youth constitute a social problem, but on how that problem is organized. Bayh's proposal does not simply respond to youth housing instability; it establishes the conditions under which it can be recognized, measured, and addressed.

What is at stake, then, is not the identification of a population, but the terms of its governance. The "single vehicle" marks a shift from dispersed intervention to the consolidation of a population, rendering runaway youth legible as a distinct object of knowledge and action. This shift reorganizes how youth are governed through a dispersed set of practices through which some young people are made thinkable and actionable. Governance here operates not by discovering a pre-existing group, but by producing a field of visibility in which certain forms of youth become legible as "runaway" or "homeless," differentiated from other young people through administratively defined characteristics. These characteristics do not precede intervention, but emerge from the practices—classification, measurement, and service provision—that make the population governable. In this way, the population is stabilized as an object of knowledge even as it is continuously produced through the techniques designed to manage it.

As an abstraction, the population does not merely represent young people; it organizes them. The categories through which the population is constituted enable particular forms of response—interventions—while foreclosing others. They shape what can be recognized as a need and what kinds of action become thinkable within federal policy. When youth are constituted as delinquent, courts and legal oversight follow; when they are framed as traumatized, counseling and therapeutic services emerge as appropriate responses. In this way, the population does not simply describe youth—it structures the terms through which they can be addressed.

The abstraction also carries more than its immediate social problem. I argue that the emergence of the population is not only a response to youth housing instability, but a site where broader national concerns are organized and expressed. Concerns about family breakdown, crime, and social order are folded into the population, shaping the traits through which it is defined. The population thus extends beyond the conditions it names, carrying with it a set of anxieties about the stability of the social order more broadly. In this paper, I examine how U.S. federal policy defines and organizes the population of runaway and homeless youth. I further ask how youth characteristics are identified and defined within policy; how research and data practices contribute to defining the population; how broader political concerns appear in that formulation; and how services are developed and structured in relation.

To explore these questions, I analyze federal policy archives—legislative hearings, statutory language, Federal Register documents, and program materials—not as neutral records, but as sites where categories are assembled, stabilized, and made actionable. This approach makes it possible to trace how the population emerges across time through specific practices—hearings, definitional thresholds, reporting requirements, and research mandates—and how it is maintained as an object of knowledge and intervention.

This reframing shifts the problem from identifying and serving a population to understanding how that population is constituted and what that produces. Doing so reveals how the categories used in federal policy shape what can be recognized as a need and what kinds of responses become possible.

METHODS

In this paper, I analyze how the runaway and homeless youth population is produced as a governable abstraction through federal policy, services, and knowledge practices. Drawing on legislative hearings, statutory language, Federal Register documents, and programmatic materials, I trace how young people's experiences are extracted and assembled into a legible population, how this population is stabilized through federally funded service infrastructures, and how it is proliferated and refined through research, statistics, and expert discourse. Rather than taking the population as given, I examine the sites and practices through which it is made actionable, showing how the category both enables federal intervention and delimits the forms of recognition and response available to young people.

To construct this analysis, I approached multiple archives as a strategic surface through which the runaway and homeless youth population was produced as a governable object. Rather than treating individual documents as discrete units of analysis, I read across concurrent documents to trace how distinctions were continually drawn and redrawn in time. I first accessed various versions and the amendments of the Runaway Youth Act (RYA) and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RYHA) through ProQuest Legislative Insight database; ProQuest Congressional database, and later through the Office of the Law Revision Council's United States Code database. I composed these versions into a single text tracking the changes of each set of amendments. I then moved on to the Federal Register and the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), accessed through Hein Online. I conducted a full-text search of the Federal Register using the term "runaway," which captures both runaway and (after 1980) homeless youth, and included all instances of "runaway" within the CFR, where statutory provisions are formalized into administrative rules. From these results, I selected approximately 200 entries spanning notices, rules, proposed rules, grant announcements, and responses to public comment.

Documents were included if they substantively addressed the runaway and homeless youth population or related services, excluding irrelevant uses of the term (e.g., references to machinery, animals, or adult populations).

While evaluating these materials, I chose to focus on key moments in 1974, the early 2000s, and the active legislation from 2018, while also incorporating adjacent documents—such as earlier hearings and debates—that shaped these developments. This approach traces shifts in governmental rationalities over time without claiming to provide an exhaustive history. Rather than accounting for all policy activity related to runaway and homeless youth, the analysis follows one governmental narrative as it is articulated through federal documents, offering insight into how the state produces, stabilizes, and revises the population over time.

All documents were cataloged in a structured dataset using Google Sheets, with entries organized by year, document type, citation, keywords, and analytic notes. This database enabled both chronological and thematic analysis. The analysis proceeded through a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Initial codes were derived from the research questions and theoretical framework, while additional themes emerged through iterative engagement with the materials. I then searched for themes gathered inductively within the full set of entries. Core codes included services, population, eligibility, religion, Native American/Indigenous populations, and programmatic reach, or the expansion of services into domains such as school-based provisions.

Analytically, I examined the frequency and clustering of these themes across time periods, identifying patterns in how the population was constructed under different political and administrative contexts. For example, references to substance use and drug intervention intensified in the 1980s, while religious organizations and faith-based service provision became more prominent in the 2000s. These thematic concentrations were not treated as cumulative developments, but as historically specific configurations that reorganized the terms through which the population became legible and actionable.

Based on these results, I analyzed full transcripts of congressional hearings from 1972, 1980, and 1988, which provide insight into the problematization of runaway and homeless youth and the extraction of population characteristics in legislative contexts (a transcript for the 2018 reauthorization was not available at the time of this research). These hearings were read in full to trace how youth were described, questioned, and made legible through testimony, as well as how policymakers, service providers, and youth themselves participated in articulating the population's defining traits, risks, and needs.

Archival research further contextualized these materials through an examination of Senator Birch Bayh's papers at Indiana University, specifically within the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency files (1963–1978). Working within the legislative working files, I reviewed materials related to housing and youth, including internal memoranda, correspondence, draft legislation, and supporting documents that informed the development of the Runaway Youth Act. These materials provided insight into the policy formation process, including how concerns were framed, negotiated, and translated into legislative action prior to formal hearings and statutory language. Together, these archival sources allowed me to situate the Act within a broader field of political discourse and administrative preparation, extending the analysis beyond formal policy texts to the conditions under which the legislation was assembled.

As a final technical note, I use the term Runaway Youth Act (RYA) to refer to the law prior to its 1980 amendment and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) thereafter, using the terms interchangeably when referring to the broader historical span.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How is the runaway and homeless youth population defined?

1. How are youths' characteristics identified and defined within policy?
2. How does research and data assist in defining the population?
3. What broader political concerns appear in policy discussions?
4. How are services developed and structured?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Governance & Population

This study draws on governance scholarship to argue that the runaway and homeless youth population is not a pre-existing social group, but an effect of the practices that seek to identify and intervene upon it. I take this approach because it allows an examination of how the population is produced as an object of knowledge and intervention. Michel Foucault (1991 [1978]) conceptualizes modern power as operating not only through law or repression, but through the management of populations—what he terms governmentality. In this formulation, populations emerge as objects of knowledge through administrative practices, statistical reasoning, and institutional interventions that seek to regulate life, health, and conduct. Rather than governing individuals directly, power operates by shaping the conditions under which individuals come to understand themselves and be understood by others. Building on this, Rose and Miller (1999) shows how contemporary governance works "at a distance," mobilizing expertise, institutions, and non-state actors to align individual conduct with broader social objectives. Taken together, this scholarship shifts the analytic focus from discovering populations to examining how they are made intelligible and governable through dispersed practices, which is the focus of this study.

From this perspective, categories such as “runaway and homeless youth” are not simply descriptive, but constitutive. As Ian Hacking (1986) argues, systems of classification do not merely describe people, but participate in “making up” kinds of persons by stabilizing the categories through which individuals are known and acted upon. These classifications shape not only how populations are understood, but also the forms of intervention that become possible and appropriate. I build on this insight to examine not how individuals come to inhabit categories, but how categories are assembled across policy, administrative practices, and cultural forms to produce a population as a coherent object of intervention. In this paper, I show how vulnerability functions as a key classificatory logic through which the runaway and homeless youth population is produced, differentiated, and governed. Focusing on vulnerability allows me to trace how recognition is organized and how intervention is delimited, rather than treating vulnerability as an inherent condition of youth. While the development of the population over time might be instructive, it also treating the population as a stable object that becomes clearer over time, obscuring how its coherence is an effect of governance. Instead, a Foucaultian approach directs attention to the contingent practices through which populations are made intelligible and governed.

To further specify how populations are made governable, I draw on scholarship on legibility. Scott (1998) argues that modern states render complex social realities into simplified, standardized forms that can be known, managed, and governed through practices such as classification, measurement, and record-keeping. I use this framework because it clarifies how simplification is not merely descriptive, but productive, actively reorganizing social life around what can be seen and counted. Forms of knowledge that do not fit these schemes are often obscured or excluded. In this sense, the federal project of making the runaway and homeless youth population legible works through statutes, funding, and research that stabilize it into a reproducible federal object. This helps explain how the same population can appear continuous across shifting political contexts, even as its defining characteristics change.

Runaway and Homeless Youth

Literature on runaway and homeless youth literature helps to render the population as a stable and recognizable object. In doing so, they provide necessary coherence for the practice of research and intervention, even as I argue that stability is not given but accomplished through a range of practices that make the population appear coherent. The literature establishes definitional thresholds that render heterogeneous experiences legible as a single population. Runaway youth are often minimally defined as those who have spent “at least one night” away from home without a guardian (Braciszewski et al. 2016, 361), while federal policy definitions delineate homeless youth as individuals under a certain age (depending on state law) “for whom it is not possible to live safely with a relative, and who ha[ve] no other safe alternative living arrangement” (Staller 2014, 183). These definitions are supplemented by subcategories such as “street youth,” who are described as spending significant time in high-risk environments or “throwaway youth” who are kicked out of their homes. Yet, as Staller notes, “it is clear that youth leave home for different reasons and for different amounts of time, and that they have different opportunities for returning” (2014, 183). Despite this acknowledged heterogeneity, these thresholds and typologies stabilize the population as a coherent object in legislation.

While Staller (2014) makes the argument that “runaway and homeless youth have always been present” even as their labels—from half-orphans and newsies to flower children—have changed (179), this continuity is only one possible way—albeit a common one—of organizing the past. Examining these links between youth populations—and the processes that connect them—shows the ways that different figures connected across time can constitute a singular, enduring population gathered under a common name. In this sense, the runaway and homeless youth population does not endure, but emerges through recognition, shifting meanings and boundaries across historical time. Janus (1987) more closely recognizes these historical shifts as he traces the changes in attitudes towards the runaway and homeless youth population, where they were thought of first as urban nomads, changed into high risk predators, then shifted to coming from high risk from homes and being at-risk of delinquency; finally being understood as victims of "physical and sexual abuse, both at home and on the street, and with the dangers of prostitution, drug abuse, pornography, and physical assault" (13). These shifts appear through evolving knowledge about a consistent group, but also show the population reconstitutes through changing social concerns.

The recognition and misrecognition of a population has consequences. For instance, Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) proffered that running away and homelessness required a life course developmental approach where runaway and homeless youth grow through cumulative developmental processes shaped by family context, early adversity, and subsequent environments. The life course approach suggests that youth who runaway, are homeless, or both are often pushed into a trajectory that continues into their young adulthood developing persistent pattern of antisocial behaviors (11-12). Thus, the population is reified into a different type of person, a distinct and distinctly non-normative population, as they grow into adulthood.

While this literature provides important insight into the characteristics, trajectories, and service needs of runaway and homeless youth, it largely takes the existence of the population as given. Definitions are treated as necessary starting points, sampling strategies as neutral methods of access, and categories such as "runaway" or "homeless" as descriptive of an already-existing group. Even when scholars acknowledge variation or instability within the population, the analytic focus remains on explaining its causes, outcomes, and effective interventions rather than interrogating how the population comes to be constituted. As a result, the processes through which youth are rendered legible as a coherent population—through definitional thresholds, institutional sorting, and administrative practices—remain underexamined. This paper addresses this gap by shifting the analytic focus from the characteristics of runaway and homeless youth to the formation of the population itself, asking how it is produced as an object of knowledge and intervention through U.S. federal policy and related discursive and institutional practices.

FINDINGS

Pre-Population Formations

The runaway and homeless youth population is often treated as a continuous or pre-existing group, a framing that is necessitated by research and service provision. Building on this work, I approach the population as assembled through a series of legislative practices that extract and stabilize youth characteristics across time. Prior to the passage of the Runaway Youth Act (RYA) in 1974, young people experiencing housing instability appeared intermittently across federal and state policy, not as a coherent population, but within broader categories of delinquency, dependency, and welfare. These earlier formations demonstrate how youth are configured differently across historical moments, making it possible to trace how the population takes shape through shifting policy practices.

In 1899, homeless youth appeared within the Illinois Juvenile Court Act (IJCA), a foundational document that helped to establish the modern juvenile court system. Here, homelessness was not treated as a distinct condition but subsumed within a broader classification of "dependent" and "neglected" children. The IJCA stated:

> For the purposes of this Act the words 'dependent child' and 'neglected child' shall mean any child who for any reason is destitute or *homeless* or abandoned; or dependent upon the public for support; or has not proper parental care or guardianship; or who habitually begs or receives alms; or who is found living in any house of ill fame or with any vicious or disreputable person; or whose home by reason of neglect, cruelty or depravity on the part of its parents, guardian or other person in whose care it may be, is an unfit place for such a child; and any child under the age of 8 years who is found peddling or selling any article or singing or playing any musical instrument upon the streets or giving any public entertainment (Ill. Rev. Stat. ch. 37 (1899); emphasis added).

The 1899 Act conflates what would today be distinguished as a child welfare population, a juvenile justice population, and a homeless population. This formulation did not isolate homelessness as a defining characteristic, but arranged a larger set of children. The juvenile court created one population through which the child is mandated through their (1) status (destitute, homeless, or abandoned); (2) behaviors (begs, neglected by a parent, receives welfare; or sings); or (3) location (in an ill-famed or dirty house). The homeless child was drawn from within a class of young criminals. Without traits particular to homelessness, interventions were left to the discretion of the courts.

The 1935 Social Security Act (SSA), which Rutledge would later call on, reconfigured the IJCA's distinctions without stabilizing a distinct population. Through the SSA, the Children's Bureau was assigned responsibility "for the protections and care of homeless, dependent, and neglected children, and children in danger of becoming delinquent" (49 Stat. 620 (1935)). The SSA marked a moment of differentiation without full abstraction—it separated "homeless" youth from other kinds of youth (endangered, dependent), but did not yet render them legible as a distinct, governable population. Compared to the IJCA, homelessness was partially differentiated—no longer embedded solely within delinquency, but elevated as one category within a broader population of vulnerable youth. Yet this distinction remained demographically and analytically vague. Federal funding was not allocated to a clearly defined group, but to a generalized population requiring "protection and care," leaving the terms of intervention diffuse and unspecialized. Without stable characteristics to anchor recognition, homeless youth did not yet cohere as a distinct object of governance, but remained an abstraction in formation—partially differentiated, but not yet fully legible or actionable as a population.

In 1950, amendments to the SSA introduced the runaway child (under 16) for whom federal funds could now be used to return them "to his own community in another State" when "those expenses could not otherwise be met" (Fed. Reg. 16, no. 89 [May 1951]: 4200). This provision did not assemble a population through a stable set of traits, but instead isolated a narrow, administratively actionable condition: geographic displacement coupled with lack of financial means. The runaway child was thus constituted not as a member of a broader population, but as a minor logistical problem—defined by distance, mobility, and economic insufficiency—and paired with an equally narrow intervention: return. In this formulation, governance operated through episodic correction rather than population-level management. Rather than stabilizing runaway youth as a coherent object of knowledge and intervention, the amendment recognized youth through logistical, administratively resolved cases.

Although runaway and homeless youth are understood today as a given population, they would only emerge as such with the passage of the 1974 RYA. The population that is recognized today cannot be found in several major legislative acts where they would be placed based on contemporary understandings. They are absent from the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1968, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and the Child Abuse Prevention and

Treatment Act of 1974. This absence is striking given the population's current association with delinquency, housing instability, and family harm. Rather than indicating that such youth were not present, it suggests that they had not yet been assembled into a distinct and administratively actionable population within federal policy.

Initial Arrangements of the Population and its Characteristics

The passage of the RYA in 1974 marked a decisive shift in this process, not simply by recognizing runaway youth, but by assembling them into a distinct population through new administrative arrangements. As Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA), the RYA reorganized federal governance in tandem with the population it produced. While the broader Act established the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) within the Department of Justice (DOJ), the RYA was housed within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), creating a bifurcated structure of oversight. This division, along with the mandated coordination between HEW and the DOJ and the expansion of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, did not merely support an existing population. Rather, these institutional arrangements co-constituted the population as an object that could be funded, managed, and referenced within federal governance (see Fig. 1). The population came into being alongside the administrative capacity to oversee it.

Figure 1 shows that the passage of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) in 1974 established the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) within the Department of Justice (DOJ) to administer most provisions of the Act. Title III—the Runaway Youth Act (RYA)—was administered separately through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), specifically within the Office of Youth Development (OYD).

Both components of the Act were funded through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), which had been established earlier under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968. The figure also indicates increased points of coordination between HEW and the DOJ and distinguishes between pre-existing offices and those created by the Act.

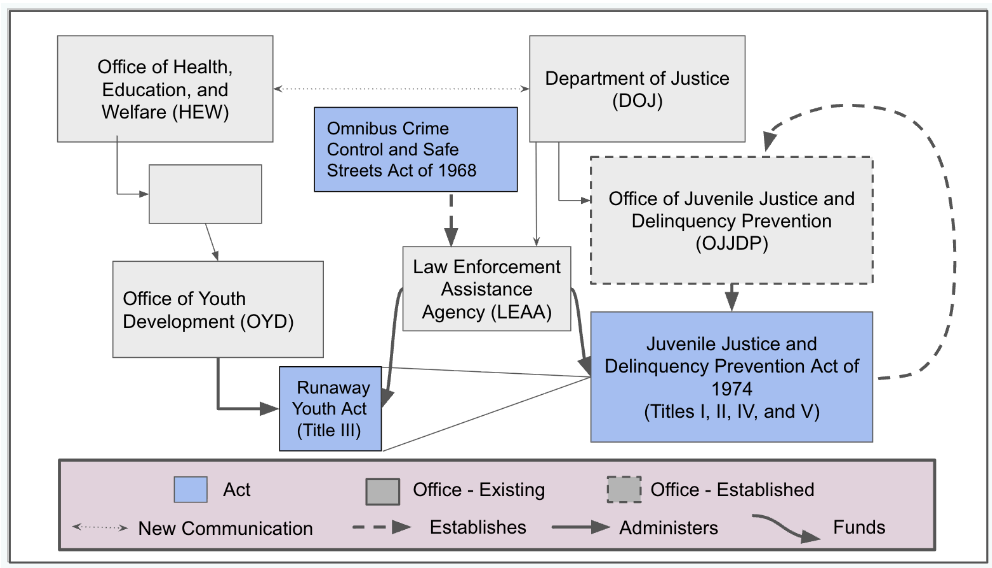

Fig. 1 - Organization of federal oversight for runaway services, 1974

This structure shows that the consolidation of runaway youth into a "single vehicle" was not merely a new label for young people, but a reorganization of federal administration in order to support the category. The Act redistributed administrative authority, expanded existing offices, and established new ones to manage and fund services. The creation of the OJJDP formalized delinquency within the DOJ, while HEW—through the Office of Youth Development—took on new responsibilities for administering runaway youth programs. In doing so, the RYA altered the institutional landscape of federal youth policy, embedding runaway youth within distinct administrative, funding, and procedural structures all to create the runaway youth as a kind of person.

The formation of this population did not rest on a single definition, but on the development of multiple, coordinated processes within the federal government that collectively demarcated who counted as runaway and homeless youth and who did not. Through funding criteria, eligibility requirements, interagency coordination, and reporting mandates, federal policy established boundaries that distinguished this population from adjacent categories such as delinquent youth, dependent children, or general welfare recipients. These distinctions were not simply descriptive, but operational: they determined access to services, structured institutional responsibilities, and organized how youth were recognized across administrative sites. In this way, the population was not defined once and for all, but continuously produced through the alignment of bureaucratic practices that rendered it both distinguishable and governable.

The reorganization and production of administrative offices established the institutional conditions through which the population could be managed, while congressional hearings operated as a parallel site in which its defining characteristics were elicited and stabilized. In congressional hearings the population was produced through extracting defining characteristics, where testimony did not simply reveal pre-existing experiences, but organized them into administratively usable traits through the structure of questioning itself. For instance, In 1972 hearings, Senator Bayh asked a young service recipient if they felt "you just had to run away because of some spirit that moved you, or was it a matter of not being able to communicate with your parents…?" (Treaner, Lovelace, and Norris, testimony on Investigation of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States 1972).

This question did not and could not solicit an open account of experience because it pre-structured the terms through which experience could be made meaningful. By delimiting the response to two possibilities—individual pathology ("some spirit") or family dysfunction (failed communication)—it produced a narrow set of recognizable characteristics in advance. Testimony was thus not the source of the population's traits, but the medium through which those traits were elicited, stabilized, and made available for aggregation. The act of speaking "from personal experience" became a process of translation, in which lived experience was reorganized into standardized deficiencies that could define the population.

By 1980, the process of producing the population had become sufficiently stabilized that it no longer depended on direct elicitation through questioning. Testimony began to reproduce the abstraction in its own terms. As one shelter director stated, "We see different youngsters…He or she is about 17 years of age or younger. He is habitually absent from school" (Scanlon, testimony on Reauthorization of the JJDPA 1980). Here, the individual was not described in their specificity, but immediately rendered as a unit of the population, defined through standardized, shared traits. The population now functioned as a template through which individuals were recognized and made legible.

In some cases, this internalization was even more pronounced. A participant named Kitty testified in 1980. Her account closely aligned with the established characteristics of the population; she said:

> I was adopted at the age of 6. I was both sexually and physically abused by my parents. I was also very neglected. At the age of 13, I had enough, so I left home and I went to child welfare. They put me in my first youth home. I have learned that youth homes are really very good because they have given me the love that I have never got at home. They gave me a happiness. They have given me food and clothes and shelter. For a while, I was living out on the streets. It was about 3 months. I really couldn't make it because I didn't have any money, I couldn't eat. I was suffering from malnutrition for a while. I went back to the [runaway shelter]. I didn't know it, but I had hepatitis. They paid for my hospital bill and everything. If it wasn't for youth homes, I may not be around right now, you know. I probably wouldn't. I don't know ("Kitty," testimony on Reauthorization of the JJDPA 1980).

While Kitty was exceptional to have told her personal story in such a way before Congress, I use this as an example to delineate the ways that experience works through abstraction. Abuse, neglect, material deprivation, service intervention, and eventual restoration, work through the logic of the policy, where a linear narrative of a harmful home, a period of instability, and the intervention of services as both rescue and resolution. This observation is not meant to diminish the significance or difficulty of the testimony, but to highlight how the available terms of recognition shaped what could be said and heard within this setting. This structure demonstrated that the population's defining characteristics had become the terms through which experience could be articulated and made replicable. Testimony no longer needed to be shaped through questioning alone, but was formed through the characteristics of the population.

Taken together, these legislative and testimonial practices demonstrate that the runaway and homeless youth population was not discovered fully formed but abstracted from prior knowledge and governmental rearrangement. Across shifting policy formations, youth were repeatedly reorganized into new configurations, changing the boundaries of the population, until administrative organization and congressional hearings translated individual experiences into a seemingly concretized abstraction. Through this movement into abstraction, the population was rendered legible as a governable object—one that could be measured, funded, and acted upon—laying the groundwork for its subsequent stabilization through services, national concerns, and knowledge production.

Populating Through Services

How the runaway and homeless youth population is abstracted matters because it shapes both the services that are made available and the terms through which youth become eligible for them. The qualities that come to define the population—such as experiences of abuse or family dysfunction—are not unique to these youth, but are widespread. They become analytically and administratively salient because, when attached to the population, they help organize it for particular forms of intervention. In this sense, the population does not simply precede services; rather, services and the population are defined in relation to one another, each contributing to the coherence of the other. For example, crisis-oriented services rely on the ability to identify youth as "in crisis." This is not to deny that some young people require immediate care, but to suggest that policy and service frameworks tend to prioritize forms of need that can be recognized within these terms, often emphasizing immediacy and short-term response.

This relationship has implications for how support is structured and accessed. Because services are organized around particular traits, young people must often be recognized through those traits in order to qualify for assistance. What appears as need is therefore shaped in advance: youth are more readily incorporated when they can be understood as vulnerable, at risk, or developmentally in need in ways that align with available interventions. This does not determine individual experiences, but it does structure the terms through which access is negotiated. In this way, abstraction not only organizes services, but helps shape the conditions under which young people can be recognized and assisted. Given this, the following section examines the types of services authorized through the RHYA.

Basic Centers

Since 1974, federal funds have supported a network of locally operated facilities called Basic Centers that provide short-term shelter, typically limited to twenty-one days, alongside counseling and other services. While these services respond to youth need, they also formalize the conditions under which youth become eligible for care.

The additional funding and subsequent expansion of Basic Centers contributed to stabilizing the runaway and homeless youth population through the terms of service provision. The use of Basic Centers comes with a set of expectations: youth agree to participate in counseling, to pursue family contact where required, and, in some cases, to be returned to correctional systems from which they have absconded. Through these obligations, the traits associated with the population—psychological crisis, family rupture, or delinquency—are both anticipated and reiterated within the processes designed to respond to them. Thus, services do not simply respond to pre-existing needs; they help define the terms through which those needs are recognized and addressed.

The provision for counseling through Basic Centers is grounded in historical presumptions about the population. Based on an enduring notion that the runaway was pathological, 1970s congressional hearings constructed the population as symptomatic—desperately in need of approval, easily falling victim to others, inexperienced, and neglected. Counseling was meant to address these deficits by dealing "with the root causes of the young person's problem" (U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency 1972). Over time, therapeutic intervention came to function as a generalizable response to youth housing instability. This is not to suggest that young people would not seek or benefit from therapeutic support, including spaces for coping, comfort, or processing. Rather, as a primary intervention, therapy was positioned to address conditions that often exceeded its scope, particularly when young people remained embedded in ongoing instability or harm. Framing psychological distress as the root cause of housing instability inverted this relation, locating the problem within the individual rather than in the material and structural conditions shaping their lives. Through the medical model of therapy, the population was rendered legible through diagnostic processes aimed at identifying and stabilizing underlying psychological conditions, often in place of addressing material needs.

These presumptions persist even as the language of intervention shifts. In 1996, the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) wrote:

> The tasks of youth services providers are seen…not as correcting the "pathologies" of troubled youth, but rather as providing for the successive developmental needs of maturing individuals: The psychological need to develop a clear self-identity; the sociological need to resolve disagreements through talking and negotiating; the economic need to prepare for and enter into a career; and the familial needs for sharing, for trusting, for giving love and receiving love, for commitment, and for all that establishing a family entails. This developmental approach is fundamental to all of FYSB programs and activities (Fed. Reg. 61, no. 245 [December 1996]: 67030).

Although this formulation began by rejecting pathologization, it ultimately reorganized—rather than abandoned—it. Youth were no longer explicitly described as disordered, but were nonetheless presumed to lack the developmental capacities necessary for adulthood. Counseling remained the primary means of intervention oriented toward cultivating self-identity, relational competence, and economic productivity. In the shift from pathology to development, deficiency was reframed rather than resolved. Successful therapy did not simply secure housing, but produced a subject that was self-regulating, emotionally coherent, and economically oriented. The persistence of counseling as a central service thus indicates not the resolution of youth need, but the durability of the assumptions that organize it. Rather than diminishing over time, these presumed deficiencies are reproduced and extended through the interventions designed to address them.

Substance Education & Prevention

In the 1980s, interventions targeting substance use became a key site through which the runaway and homeless youth population was defined and organized. Through the Drug Abuse Prevention Program (DAPP), authorized by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, federal funds supported a wide range of services aimed at preventing or reducing illicit drug use among "such youth" (42 U.S.C. § 5714-2). While there was no evidence that runaway and homeless youth were uniquely or disproportionately affected by the 1980s drug epidemic, legislation nonetheless constructed substance use as a central concern by providing for drug-intervention focused individual, family, and group counseling; peer counseling; community education efforts; support for rural service provision; training and coordination of local services; and research into youth drug use, including its relationship to family substance use and suicide. Framed as responses to substance use, these programs simultaneously positioned it as a defining feature of the population.

This alignment was further institutionalized through research initiatives that presupposed the very conditions they sought to measure. The JJDPA funded a four-phase study on illegal drug use among runaway and homeless youth, asserting that they were "extremely likely to become involved in these [illegal drugs and delinquent] activities unless intervention occurs" (Fed. Reg. 53, no. 191 [October 1988]: 38926). The first phase of the study was to "assess relevant information on illegal drug use and other high risk activity" among the population (Guernsey et al., 1980). Here, anticipated risk justified investigation, and investigation, in turn, reinforced the presumption of risk, producing a circular logic in which intervention and knowledge production stabilized the very characteristics they were meant to identify.

At the same time, this framing of risk extended beyond services into the expansion of penal oversight. The War on Drugs intensified the convergence of service and penal systems, as federal guidance positioned law enforcement as the primary point of contact for “street youth,” identifying police as best equipped to address illicit drug use, sexual activity, and AIDS associated with running away (Fed. Reg. 53 [October 1988]: 39826–38931). In response, HHS emphasized coordination between shelters and law enforcement, requiring plans for interaction and, when necessary, the return of youth to correctional facilities (Guernsey et al., 1980). Concurrently, the Department of Justice funded studies on law enforcement practices for runaway and missing children. Through these developments, the absence of the family—already established as the primary site of care—authorized the expansion of penal intervention, such that services did not displace criminalization but operated alongside it, drawing correctional logics into the governance of youth.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that substance use was not simply identified among runaway and homeless youth, but incorporated into the terms through which they became eligible for intervention. Services oriented toward prevention, treatment, and education presupposed a population at risk of drug involvement, already aligning youth with a set of behavioral and health-related deficiencies that justified continued intervention. The provision of these services thus helped stabilize substance use as a characteristic of the population, regardless of evidence that runaway and homeless youth were uniquely or disproportionately affected. In this way, intervention did not follow from identified need, but participated in producing the conditions it was meant to address, organizing the population through the characteristics its services presumed and reproduced.

Transitional Living Programs

In 1988, a second permanent type of services—Transitional Living Programs (TLPs)—were added to basic centers, becoming eligible for grants through the RHYA. TLPs provided housing services for a maximum of 540 days, approximately 18 months, with provisions for exceptional cases. TLPs offered a more expansive set of interventions including training in basic life skills, interpersonal development, educational advancement, job attainment, and physical and mental health care, as well as accommodations for pregnant and parenting youth (Fed. Reg. 81, no. 244 [December 2016]: 93030). In congressional testimony, experts endorsed these programs as necessary responses to the conditions faced by "street kids," who faced "incredible dangers in their everyday existence, ranging from AIDS to drugs to alcohol dependency." As such, Congress was pushed to "develop methods to protect them" in order that they become "productive individuals in our society" ((Walker testimony on the Reauthorization of the JJDPA of 1974 (1988); Leland testimony on the Reauthorization of the JJDPA of 1974 (1988)).

But the emergence of TLPs did not simply extend services to an already defined group of homeless youth. Instead, it helped constitute that group as a distinct segment of the population. This shift was made possible by the 1980 inclusion of "homeless youth" within the RHYA, introducing an abstraction described by one witness as "hard-core street youth" who spent "twenty-four hours a day on the street and literally has no home" (Saltonstal, testimony on the Reauthorization of the JJDPA of 1974 (1980)). In contrast to earlier depictions of runaway youth as temporarily displaced or wayward, this population was increasingly understood as persistently unstable and in need of longer-term intervention. TLPs both responded to and reinforced this characterization by organizing services around a broad array of presumed deficiencies in relationships, life skills, education, and employment, alongside heightened risks related to substance use, health, and sexuality. Through this alignment of traits and interventions, homeless youth were produced as subjects requiring extended supervision, developmental training, and social rehabilitation, such that TLPs did not merely serve a pre-existing population, but helped bring it into being through historically established characteristics of the abstraction.

While young people experiencing housing instability may want counseling or encounter substance use and addiction, legislation stabilizes these as defining characteristics of the population through the structure and limits of services. In becoming legible as runaway or homeless, youth are rendered "hard-core," drug-involved, or sexually-promiscuous—conditions that must be recognized or confessed in order to access support. The accumulated histories through which the population has been defined—its longstanding association with aberrance—converge in the 2018 amendments to the RHYA. Here, the population is described as "…at risk of developing, and have a disproportionate share of serious health, behavioral, and emotional problems [and]…may live on the street for extended periods thereby endangering themselves and creating a substantial law enforcement problem for communities in which they congregate" (RHYA, 2018). This formulation folds together earlier constructions: the pathological subject of the 1970s and the pessimistic, risk-laden figure of the 1980s in a new configuration. What began as provisional or unsubstantiated traits becomes sedimented as common sense, rendering the abstraction deficient in both enduring and actionable ways. These historically layered characterizations define the terms through which youth can be configured and recognized in order to receive services.

Populating Through National Concerns

The population is also continually populated through shifting national concerns. They are constitutive of the population itself, shaping the traits, risks, and interventions through which runaway and homeless youth became legible to policy. National anxieties become legible problems through the population, where the family serves as the primary mechanism for this translation. Diffuse concerns—related to social order, public health, or economic stability—are rendered visible and actionable, organizing how youth are identified, differentiated, and governed. While the content of these concerns—and the normative form of the family itself—shifts over time, the family remains a consistent site of mediation. Long understood as central to the organization of social life, the family has been theorized as a key unit through which governance operates: not simply as a private domain, but as a locus of intervention, regulation, and the reproduction of broader social relations (Donzelot 1979; Barrett and McIntosh 1991 [1982]). Here, federal policy mobilized the family in this capacity, translating national concerns into the defining characteristics of the runaway and homeless youth population across time.

Family, the Abstraction, and the 1970's

Federal policy consistently demonstrated this dynamic by locating the "runaway and homeless youth problem" within the family, framing it as both the site where broader social pressures manifested and the point at which they were to be resolved. As the 1978 Code of Federal Regulations stated, the runaway population was the result of the "problems and pressures throughout America which manifest themselves within families and ultimately cause the breakup of these families" (95 Cong. Rec. 15502 (1977)). This formulation established a governing logic in which diffuse national concerns were rendered actionable through the family, producing runaway youth as a legible object of intervention. The family appeared simultaneously as under threat and as the mechanism through which that threat became knowable.

The services authorized under the 1974 RYA made this logic operational. Their stated purpose was “to reunite runaway youth with their families,” without exception (Fed. Reg. 41, no. 240 [December 1976]: 54296). This goal did not simply address an interpersonal rupture, but indexed a broader political problematization in which juvenile delinquency was framed as “a growing threat to the national welfare,” due to its economic costs, its implications for personal security, and its waste of human resources (U.S. Public Law 93-415 (1974)). Within this framing, runaway youth were constituted not through intrinsic or pre-existing characteristics, but through a causal sequence that linked national threat to family breakdown and, in turn, to youth separation. The traits attributed to the population—family disruption, susceptibility to delinquency, and the need for correction—emerged as the localized expression of national concerns.

The family thus functioned as the mediating mechanism through which national anxieties were translated into population-level distinctions and interventions. Positioned as both the origin of disorder and its resolution, it organized how youth were rendered intelligible: separation from the family marked a failure of normative social organization and justified intervention oriented toward reunification and behavioral regulation. In this way, the population was not simply composed of youth experiencing housing instability, but was produced through distinctions between stability and breakdown, dependence and autonomy, conformity and resistance—distinctions that were anchored in the family as a governing unit. As such, the characteristics that defined the runaway and homeless youth population did not adhere to a fixed group, but were arranged through the national concerns that policy sought to manage, taking form through the interventions designed to address them.

Family, the Abstraction, and the 1980's

In 1980, the Runaway Youth Act (RYA) was amended to include homeless youth, becoming the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA). This change in title expanded the scope of the law and marked a reconfiguration of the population through its relationship to the family. As one witness testified during the reauthorization hearings:

> The change in the title of the act from the Runaway Youth Act to Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is a welcome one. It recognizes the changes in fact and image of the population of youth that we serve. We no longer see young people who have run great distances in search of adventure or freedom… While some are still runaways, we see a lot of young people who are thrown out by their parents… These are youth in crisis… reacting to severe problems in their families, to alcoholism, physical and sexual abuse and divided families torn by marital stress and by economic pressures (Davis, testimony on Reauthorization of the JJDPA 1980).

This testimony did not simply describe a changing population, but participated in its redefinition through its relation to family. The figure of the runaway—characterized by adventure, choice, and freedom—was eclipsed by a youth who was thrown out or rejected by their family. At the same time, the family itself was rearticulated as a site of severe dysfunction—marked by abuse, addiction, and economic stress—which in the 1970s was merely the initial site of "parental permission" (U.S. Public Law 93-415 (1974)). Thus, the 1980s family was the acute locus of enduring forms of family crisis.

By the late 1980s, this reconfiguration was further stabilized through programmatic language that located both runaway behavior and homelessness in "dysfunctional family situations." As the Department of Health and Human Services stated:

> One of the major causes of runaway behavior and homelessness among youth is dysfunctional family situations. Family treatment programs can be successful to the extent of helping families remain the primary care giver of their children. While integrated treatment may not dispel deeply rooted dysfunction, it can assist in developing a level of maintenance that permits the family to remain as the primary caregiver for the youth (Fed. Reg. 53, no. 169 [August 1988]: 33701).

While family reunification remained the central goal, the terms under which it operated had shifted. The family was no longer positioned as a site strained by broader social pressures, but as a locus of enduring dysfunction that could be managed but not resolved. This shift reflected a rearticulation of national concerns in which the preservation of the family, even in a degraded form, was prioritized as a matter of social and economic stability. Rather than restoring an idealized family unit, policy aimed to secure its continued function as the primary site of care, thereby limiting the need for more extensive state intervention. Youth, in turn, were constituted as persistently at risk—both within and outside the family—requiring ongoing intervention calibrated to sustain, rather than transform, familial arrangements. The objective of services was thus recalibrated: not to resolve underlying conditions, but to maintain the family as a minimally viable unit of responsibility, capable of absorbing the costs and obligations of care.

This pessimistic view of the family is related to the heightened national concern over substance use—particularly crack cocaine—and its responding War on Drugs. Anti-drug policy became pervasive in the 1980s, reshaping how the runaway and homeless youth population and their families were understood. A Drug Abuse Prevention Program (DAPP) for runaway and homeless youth was authorized through the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 (42 U.S.C. § 5714-2). The Act funded programs aimed at preventing or reducing illicit drug use among "such youth," including individual, family, and group counseling; peer counseling; community education; rural service provision; and research into youth drug use, including its relationship to family substance use and suicide. Situated within a broader legislative effort that expanded law enforcement, increased penalties, and funded prevention and treatment across multiple levels of government, the DAPP produced runaway and homeless youth through a national anti-drug agenda.

With the expansion of "substance use" under the JJDPA to include alcohol, the scope of intervention widened alongside the characteristics attributed to the population and their families. Runaway and homeless youth were described as having drug and alcohol problems and as coming from "alcoholic parents" (Guernsey, Freemand, McGarry, Lyss, and Schroeder, testimony on Reauthorization of the JJDPA, 1980). Their families were characterized as unhealthy and dangerous, marked by divorce, death, separation, and various forms of abuse. These assertions did not simply describe family environments, but stabilized a linkage between family dysfunction, youth homelessness, and substance use, reinforcing the conditions under which intervention appeared necessary.

These conditions were not established through comparative evidence demonstrating that such factors disproportionately affected runaway and homeless youth. Rather, they functioned to differentiate this population from others by reclassifying common social conditions—alcohol use, family disruption, economic strain—as indicators of heightened risk and dysfunction when attached to these youth. In this way, substance use operated both as an explanatory cause and as a defining characteristic of the population, organizing how youth and their families were rendered legible to intervention.

Family, the Abstraction, and the 2000s

In the 2000s, the family remained a central institution in policy, but its recognized forms expanded. Legislative and legal developments—including the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Affordable Care Act, and the legalization of same-sex marriage and adoption—reconfigured the normative boundaries of the family. These changes did not diminish the family's governing role; rather, they multiplied the forms through which it could be recognized and regulated. As family norms diversified, so too did the scope of state engagement, extending governance across a broader range of intimate and caregiving arrangements.

By 2016, the RHYA reflected this shift while maintaining its longstanding orientation toward the family. Its stated aim was "whenever reasonably and safely possible, to return youth to their family homes for support until they can find their own longer-term solutions, or, when reunification is not possible, to assist youth in establishing more permanent arrangements" (45 CFR 1351 (2016)). While family reunification remained an objective, it was no longer singular or absolute. The family was repositioned as one option among others, invoked as a preferred but not always attainable site of support. In its place, policy emphasized a set of alternative arrangements framed as "longer-term solutions" or "more permanent" outcomes, shifting responsibility toward youth to secure and maintain their own housing, often with limited assistance.

Across these shifts, the runaway and homeless youth population did not simply refer to a stable group of young people and their relationships to their families. Rather, the population was continuously reorganized through prevailing national concerns—whether around social stability, criminality, public health, or individual responsibility—as these concerns were translated into policy objectives and intervention strategies. The population thus functioned as an abstraction that both reflected and operationalized broader problems of governance, integrating changing national priorities into the traits, risks, and expectations that defined youth over time.

Populating Through Knowledge

The runaway and homeless youth population also emerges through research and statistical practices. Statistics do not simply describe a pre-existing group, but function as a central mechanism through which the population is rendered visible and governable. As Foucault argued, statistics operate as an "essential means of rendering visible the whole field of behavior and the whole population" (2008, 77) by transforming dispersed experiences into a coherent field of intervention. In this process, measurement establishes norms against which youth can be assessed and addressed through services. Statistical uncertainty is also functional, filling gaps, elaborating possible characteristics, and sustaining the population as an object of concern even where data remains indeterminate. Additionally, anecdotal and expert testimony functions alongside statistical practices to render the population legible.

The 1970s & Gathering

Knowledge production was a central component of the 1974 RYA's services to the population. The Act mandated that "States, localities, and private entities… carry out research, evaluation, demonstration, and service projects…designed to increase knowledge concerning, and to improve services for, runaway and homeless youth" (34 U.S.C. 11243). This included a provision for a national clearinghouse for "centralized research efforts," a hotline that both provided assistance and gathered data on its callers, and required annual "statistical summaries describing the number and characteristics" of the population. In this way, statistics did not operate as a description of the population, but as a constitutive feature of the service infrastructure itself: youth became knowable as a population through the practices designed to serve them.

Prior to 1974, this population was repeatedly described as unknown. In the 1972 congressional hearings, witnesses asserted the absence of organized national research, relying instead on FBI arrest data and a handful of localized studies, acknowledging the limits of the numbers. Not all police departments reported to the FBI; most studies were small and not generalizable; and many runaway youth had no contact with law enforcement. Yet this uncertainty did not weaken the case for intervention. Rather, it was mobilized as evidence that existing data captured “only the tip of the iceberg,” allowing the unknown to expand the perceived scale of the problem and to justify the need for comprehensive federal research (U.S. Congress 1972). The absence of knowledge thus functioned productively, authorizing the expansion of both inquiry and intervention.

Despite the lack of data, testimonies produced a specific portrait of the population. Runaway youth were described as “young, inexperienced kids” migrating to urban centers; predominantly female; increasingly younger; motivated by a search for companionship; and vulnerable to gangs, drugs, and disease (U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary 1972). These claims coexisted with assertions of insufficient data, demonstrating that uncertainty did not preclude the attribution of traits, risks, or needs. Instead, statistical gaps and anecdotal assertions operated together, allowing the population to be both indeterminate in scope and highly specified in character. This dual movement—of not knowing and knowing in detail—enabled the population to emerge as both expansive and actionable.

These seemingly contradictory positions shared the same effect: both the lack and proliferation of knowledge intensified the demand for intervention. Increasing specificity allowed for more targeted services, while persistent uncertainty sustained the need for continued research and funding. This dynamic formed part of an ongoing project of legibility, in which the population was continually rendered more knowable—and therefore more governable—through successive acts of measurement and description. Whether the population was framed as unknown or precisely characterized, it remained an object that required further inquiry.

The first national report mandated by the RYA, *The Incidence and Nature of Runaway Behavior* (1975), exemplified this process. Drawing on national probability samples and survey data, the report segmented youth into distinct types, including the "freedom-seeking," "highly delinquent," and "psychopathological" runaway. These categories were presented as capturing the "full diversity" of the population, stabilizing a heterogeneous set of experiences into discrete, measurable forms. Yet these classifications did more than describe variation; they linked particular traits to corresponding interventions. Counseling, already central to RYA services, appeared as the appropriate response to these typologies, while delinquency justified closer surveillance. Research thus operated not as neutral observation, but as a mechanism through which the population was differentiated and aligned with specific forms of governance.

This abstraction also shaped how services were calibrated, often translating statistical averages into fixed administrative limits. In 1977, HEW determined that runaway houses could accommodate youth for up to 15 days, a figure established in response to a public inquiry seeking greater specificity around the meaning of "short-term." This limit was derived from the average number of nights youth occupied shelters prior to 1974, based on admittedly limited data (Fed. Reg. 43, no. 229 [November 1978]: 55635). As an average, fifteen days may have been adequate for some youth, but was necessarily insufficient for others. Subsequent testimony underscored this mismatch: in 1980, one witness stated that "the 2-week residency requirement is unrealistic," noting that many youth required one to three months of support to address their circumstances (Ritter 1980). Yet despite these critiques, the temporal boundary persisted—and was later extended only slightly, with RHYA provisions allowing for stays of up to 21 days. In this way, statistical aggregation did not simply inform services but structured their limits, translating decontextualized averages into standardized constraints. Measurement and intervention thus remained mutually reinforcing: data justified program design, even as those designs generated the data through which the population continued to be defined and managed.

The 1980s & The Rise of Expertise

Increased research eventually enabled claims of expertise for the population. Through these knowledge practices, runaway and homeless youth became an object that experts could speak for and about. This expertise did not depend on the production of a complete or unified dataset. By 1980, witnesses routinely claimed authority through proximity rather than statistical certainty: years of service provision, regional program reports, and direct encounters with youth became sufficient grounds for knowledge claims. Witnesses could draw from “over 8 years of experience” as both an agency director and counselor; others cited reports from regional networks or invoked the authority of shelter staff who could “attest” to the nature of runaway youth (Clement, Lyss, Maxton 1980) .

The proliferation of service sites multiplied the locations from which the population could be known. Providers reported serving hundreds or hundreds of thousands of youth, offering increasingly specific claims about their characteristics, risks, and behaviors across local and national contexts. Runaway and homeless youth were described as “extraordinarily vulnerable,” concentrated within particular age ranges, emerging from homes marked by substance use or abuse, and exposed to prostitution and exploitation (Myers, Benton, Davis, Freeman, Maxton, and Parales, testimony on Reauthorization of the JJDPA 1980). These claims were uneven, partial, and geographically dispersed, yet together they produced a dense field of knowledge that rendered the population both widespread and internally consistent. Knowledge expanded not necessarily in depth or completeness, but in volume and reach, as more actors contributed observations that accumulated into a seemingly coherent whole.

The 1980 reauthorization further institutionalized this process by requiring increasingly detailed forms of reporting. Service providers were obligated to document "the number and characteristics" of youth served, the activities offered, and their effectiveness in alleviating homelessness and preparing youth for self-sufficiency, education, employment, and independent living . These measures relied on highly interpretive categories—such as "effectiveness" and "ability"—yet translated them into quantifiable outputs (JJDPA Amendments 1980). In doing so, the processes of government became measurable, allowing administrative activity to stand in for knowledge about the population. Where direct knowledge remained partial, these reporting practices supplied a continuous stream of data that sustained the population as an object of evaluation.

Uncertainty did not disappear under these conditions; rather, it was reorganized through expert processes that tamed it. In 1980, when Senator Bayh asked a Department of Justice representative whether the government had learned anything about early prevention within families, the witness did not provide substantive findings. Instead, he pointed to the existence of government infrastructures: "[the DOJ's Coordinating] Council has met on several occasions," with multiple agencies involved in efforts "to begin a pool of knowledge as well as resources," supported by HEW funding (U.S. Congress 1980). The response did not resolve the question of prevention but displaced it, substituting the presence of coordination, funding, and ongoing inquiry for evidence of outcomes. This non-answer was made possible by the processes that had been established around the population—interagency councils, research initiatives, and dedicated funding streams—which allowed uncertainty to be managed rather than eliminated. In this way, the absence of knowledge was not a barrier to governance but was absorbed into its operations, as the existence of professionalized, funded processes functioned as a proxy for knowledge and a promise of its eventual production.

In this way, expertise did not resolve uncertainty but rendered it actionable. The population became increasingly knowable not through the completion of knowledge, but through the expansion of the practices that promised to produce it. Through proximity, reporting, and institutional coordination, runaway and homeless youth were constituted as a population that could always be known more fully in the future—and therefore governed more intensively in the present.

The Certainty of the 2000s

Decades of research also enabled administrative certainty across adjacent domains of youth, including migration and foster care. In 2019, the Department of Homeland Security detained migrant youth arriving from Central and South America, at times separating them from their families. When children left these facilities without authorization, they were categorized as "runaways," a designation that accounted for 0.5 percent of youth discharges from federal detention centers (Fed. Reg. 84, no. 164 [August 2019]: 44509). In this context, the runaway category did not signal a breakdown in state control but rather maintained the appearance of order amidst chaos: departure was recorded as a type of release rather than an absence to be accounted for. Youth did not exit governance; they were reclassified within it.

A similar logic appeared in foster care regulation. In 2020, federal guidance instructed adoption and foster care workers to "indicate 'runaway'" when a child unlawfully left a placement (Fed. Reg. 85, no. 87 [May 2020]: 26482). Here again, disappearance was not registered as system failure. Instead, the designation of "runaway" stabilized the event within an existing administrative category, allowing responsibility to be redistributed rather than ruptured. Across these domains, the category absorbed uncertainty—where a child had gone, why they left—into a legible and governable form. In doing so, it ensured that youth remained within the reach of intervention, even as they moved across institutional boundaries.

Taken together, these practices demonstrate that statistics did not simply describe runaway and homeless youth, but participated in producing them as a coherent and governable population. Through counting, estimation, and reporting, heterogeneous experiences were rendered into stable categories, even as uncertainty persisted. This uncertainty did not undermine the population's coherence; rather, it sustained ongoing inquiry, justified intervention, and enabled the continual attachment of traits, risks, and needs. In this way, measurement and governance operated in tandem, each reinforcing the other in the ongoing production of the population.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argued that the runaway and homeless youth population did not exist prior to the policies designed to address it, but is produced continuously through services, nation building, and knowledge production—forms of governance through which a population is formed. The population emerges as a coherent and actionable object not because it is inherently unified, but because it is made legible to intervention. These practices do not simply respond to youth experiencing housing instability, but organize a population that can be known.

Services play a central role in this production by stabilizing the population through institutional encounters. Youth become recognizable as "runaway and homeless" through their interaction with shelters, counseling programs, and administrative systems that define eligibility, duration, and appropriate forms of care. At the same time, national concerns—most consistently organized through the figure of the family—provide a framework through which these youth are made intelligible as a social problem. Shifting anxieties about family breakdown, morality, and social order are translated into interventions directed at youth, allowing broader political concerns to be articulated at the level of individual lives.

Statistical practices further consolidate this abstraction by rendering the population measurable and comparable across time and space. Through estimates, typologies, reporting requirements, and program evaluations, heterogeneous experiences are transformed into bounded categories with identifiable traits, risks, and outcomes. Yet this process does not depend on complete or stable knowledge. As the archival record demonstrates, uncertainty—whether framed as a lack of data or as uneven, localized knowledge—remains a persistent feature of these efforts. Rather than undermining the population's coherence, this uncertainty proves generative, justifying continued research, expands funding, and enables the attribution of additional characteristics to the population. Measurement and intervention thus operate in tandem, each reinforcing the other in an ongoing process of population-making.

Taken together, these practices reveal that the runaway and homeless youth population is not simply an empirical group awaiting discovery, but an effect of governance. Its apparent stability is an accomplishment, produced through the alignment of services, knowledge production, and political concern. At the same time, this population remains open-ended, continually redefined through new data, emerging expertise, and shifting institutional arrangements. The population is therefore both stabilized and unsettled—made sufficiently coherent to govern, yet never fully known.

This analysis suggests a broader implication for social policy. Policy populations are not neutral reflections of need, but organize attention around problems that are administratively actionable. In the case of runaway and homeless youth, governance does not center housing instability as a material condition, but reframes it through domains such as family dysfunction, individual development, and service provision. Attending to these limits does not require abandoning policy populations, but recognizing how they delimit what can be known and addressed. In doing so, it becomes possible to ask different questions—ones that foreground housing and the lived needs of young people rather than the administrative logics through which they are governed.

CHAPTER 2. THE PROBLEM OF VULNERABILITY: MAKING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH LEGIBLE TO CARE

INTRODUCTION

In 1978, while discussing the 1974 Runaway Youth Act (RYA), President Jimmy Carter observed that "in our country there has been an absence of adequate distinction between those juveniles who commit serious crimes…and those who commit crimes that are no threat to their neighbors, like being a runaway child" (43 Federal Register 12651). Carter's statement captures a central function of the RYA: the differentiation of system-involved youth into distinct types. Introduced as part of broader juvenile justice reform in the early 1970s, the RYA separated those deemed deserving of care from young people who were threatening, diverting runaways from the US juvenile justice system towards newly established social services for runaways.

Carter's statement did more than describe an institutional distinction; it helped to produce it. Speaking as the sitting US President, he delineated runaway (and later homeless) youth as non-threatening, contributing to their consolidation as a benign population deserving of care rather than punishment. Through the RYA and its proponents, like Carter, runaway and homeless youth were produced as vulnerable, a designation that ordered how youth were recognized and acted upon. This distinction did not rest on behavior alone—running away—but granting the status of vulnerability, which acted to separate and keep separate those apprehended as non-threatening from those aligned with delinquency. Vulnerability, then, did not precede classification but functioned as the condition through which the population became intelligible as distinct. In this sense, vulnerability separated and stabilized the population by becoming the basis for intervention.

But Carter's statement is complicated by an early episode of a popular sitcom The Andy Griffith Show that aired in 1960. A young boy named Tex runs away from home and travels through the wholesome and idyllic town of Mayberry on his way to Texas to become a cowboy. Tex—a young white boy coded as suburban and middle-class—encounters the upstanding Sheriff Taylor, who responds not with punishment but with gentle humor and patient guidance, like asking how Tex will carry the many sandwiches he will need for his journey. As a result, Tex agrees to return home because while he does not like being asked to pick up his toys or take a bath, he loves his mother, who cooks dinner each night, and his father, who plays catch with him.

In this episode, Tex is recognized as vulnerable—unprotected and open to harm—and is responded to through this designation. While Tex has technically committed a status offense, making him eligible for juvenile court, the town's sheriff absorbs the act through his discretion. Tex was thus deferred entirely from Mayberry's justice system. This protection was not determined by behavior—running away, traveling alone, and refusing parental authority—but by the terms through which that behavior was understood. His age, race, gender, and family's economic position helped render his actions intelligible as temporary and benign—even laughable—as grounds for incarceration, allowing a resolution outside the formal mechanisms of the state. A fictional and minor example, this scene still circulated as a popular early image of runaway youth and their characteristics.

In this chapter, I am interested in the designation of vulnerability in relation to the runaway and homeless youth population in the US. I treat vulnerability not as an internal state, but as a designation of governance—one that selects, interprets, and organizes particular instances of precarity as recognizable and actionable within policy. As a designation, vulnerability operates as a status conferred on the population, but whose effects are unevenly distributed across demographic categories. Additionally, this designation differentiates the runaway and homeless youth population from others, organizing how youth are recognized and governed. I argue that its distribution depends on the characteristics through which youth are recognized—age, gender, class, and race—conditions that emerge tacitly in Congress and explicitly in popular media. Thus, I ask how the runaway and homeless youth population is designated as vulnerable in the US—how the designation is produced and what it makes possible.

To explore these questions, I read across federal archival materials and corresponding media as a shared surface of legibility through which the runaway and homeless youth population emerges. Legislative hearings, Codes of Federal Regulation, and Federal Register entries provide the administrative and classificatory framework through which vulnerability is stabilized, organizing how youth are recognized and governed. Media, on the other hand, is not treated as a point of comparison or distinct evidence of social reality, but as a site that renders explicit what remains unarticulated in the color-blind RYA: the raced, gendered, and classed conditions through which vulnerability is recognized, as in the case of Tex. Thus, media does not stand outside the federal archive but reveals the conditions of recognition through which vulnerability can emerge.

I further argue that vulnerability is produced through historically variable processes that distinguish certain youth as in need of care rather than punishment, while keeping them tethered to the possibility of delinquency. As a designation, vulnerability is relational, emerging through processes of possibility and recognition that are unevenly distributed. Although the RHYA is formally color-blind, vulnerability is structured through race, gender, class, and age, making youth legible as deserving of care in sometimes surprising ways. At the same time, reliance on vulnerability limits intervention. It orients responses toward short-term stabilization through immediacy and exposure to imminent harm. Thus, as much as it stabilizes the population, its recognition remains unstable—misrecognizing or failing to recognize youth in time. Taken together, vulnerability simultaneously produces the population, is distributed unevenly, and delimits the scope of intervention—logics that become visible through a reading of federal archival materials and media.

METHODS

In order to explore vulnerability and the runaway and homeless youth population, I conducted an interpretive historical analysis of legislative and media archives in order to analyze how vulnerability functions as a designation within federal policy. Rather than treating vulnerability as an inherent attribute of select young people, which would reproduce the assumptions that I critique, I analyze how the population is designated as vulnerable, produced through policy and other social texts. This approach allows the analysis to attend to the conditions under which vulnerability becomes legible and actionable, rather than presuming its existence in advance.

My legislative sources include transcripts of congressional hearings related to the Runaway Youth Act (RYA) and its subsequent reauthorizations as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), entries from the Federal Register, and associated rules codified in the Code of Federal Regulations. These materials were selected because federal policy plays a central role in stabilizing populations as objects of governance. They were accessed primarily through HeinOnline, ProQuest Congressional, and ProQuest Legislative Insight. I compiled a dataset of Federal Register entries returned by the term “runaway” from 1936 onward in order to capture the longer regulatory history within which the RYA emerged. I filtered these entries for those concerning children and youth (for instance, eliminating machines, animals, and adults). Each entry was logged with its year, issuing agency, action type, summary, and analytic notes regarding tone, omissions, and key discursive features. I excluded entries that reissued existing policies without substantive change so that the analysis focused on moments where the population or its characteristics were actively articulated.

To contextualize these materials, I conducted close readings of legislative hearing transcripts and committee reports producing technical memos for each document. Rather than relying on purely extractive coding, this approach preserves interpretive complexity and traces how meanings accumulate across documents. These memos recorded source information, central arguments, and preliminary analytic observations. Through an inductive coding process, I tracked recurring themes across the archive, including vulnerability, delinquency, innocence, and implied racial and gendered distinctions. I used an inductive approach because the analysis did not begin with a fixed definition of vulnerability, but instead traced how its meaning shifted across contexts.

In tandem, I analyzed representations of runaway and homeless youth in US produced media, including films, television programs, documentaries, and literary narratives. Media texts were included to explore race, gender, and sexuality in relation to the color-blind language of the RHYA, which does not match demographic data or parts of legislative discussions. I compiled a table of media featuring runaway and homeless youth using general internet keyword searches (e.g., “runaway youth,” “homeless youth”), eliminating those not set in the US but initially treating running away and homelessness broadly (like institutionalized fostered youth for instance). This selection strategy allowed for a set of media that was geographically relevant to

US policy, but did not foreclose a diverse interpretation of running away or homelessness. Each text was catalogued by release date, format, media location, and description. I viewed or read each narrative, eliminating irrelevant material and identifying recurring figures, narrative arcs, and visual tropes, and returned to selected scenes for transcription and detailed analysis. This close reading approach was necessary to examine not only what was represented, but how vulnerability was narratively and visually constructed.

Across both legislative and media archives, analysis proceeded inductively and comparatively. I identified themes through patterns of repetition, shifts in tone and framing, and notable absences. In the legislative archive, I examined how problem definitions, categories, and criteria of eligibility were articulated across texts, and how these stabilized particular ways of recognizing and intervening with youth. In the media archive, I examined how recurring figures—such as the sexualized or adventuresome runaway—were assembled across texts and stabilized as recognizable types, allowing me to trace how vulnerability adhered to some figures while being withheld from or redistributed across the population.

From this inductive analysis, the materials presented three historical arrangements: the 1970s, marking the passage of the RYA; the 1980s, characterized by heightened concern with drugs, sexuality, and youth delinquency; and the early 2000s, including the current RHYA. These moments were selected not to provide a comprehensive legislative history, but to examine points at which vulnerability was reconfigured. Within each period, I analyze how legislative and media texts converge to produce recognizable and actionable figures of runaway and homeless youth. Focusing on these shifts allows the analysis to show how vulnerability functions not as a stable attribute, but as a historically contingent designation through which the population emerges as vulnerable.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How is the runaway and homeless youth population designated as vulnerable in US federal policy?

How is this designation produced?

What does this designation allow?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vulnerability

Scholars have approached vulnerability through several overlapping but distinct analytic frames. For Judith Butler, vulnerability names a fundamental condition of embodied life: a constitutive "vulnerability to the other" through which subjects are always exposed to injury, dependency, and loss, such that one is "given over, without control, to the will of another" (Butler 2004). While this condition is universal—"part of bodily life"—it is differentially intensified through social and political arrangements, especially those structured by violence, making vulnerability a potential ground for ethical recognition. In contrast, Estelle Ferrarese critiques such accounts for remaining too closely tied to an ethical register, arguing that they risk foregrounding shared human exposure at the expense of analyzing how vulnerability is actively produced, distributed, and governed. Ferrarese insists that vulnerability must be understood as a political problem, shaped by institutions, power, and material arrangements that differentially expose populations to harm, and calls for "collective political action aimed at transforming the social conditions that produce and distribute it" (2016, 154). A complementary intervention is offered by Robert Castel, who conceptualizes vulnerability not as an individual attribute but as a "space of instability and of turbulences," emphasizing processes of social disaffiliation and insecure relations to work and institutions (Castel 2003). Taken together, these approaches shift vulnerability from a condition of exposure to a problem of social organization, while leaving open the question of how it is taken up and operationalized within specific institutional settings.

In this paper, I focus narrowly on vulnerability as a status through which the runaway and homeless youth population is produced. Drawing on Ferrarese and Castel in particular, I treat vulnerability as something that is produced, distributed, and stabilized through institutional practices. Using vulnerability narrowly, I examine how it is used—how it is assigned, to whom, and with what effects. In this context, vulnerability functions as a classificatory logic that renders certain youth legible to systems of care while simultaneously abstracting and standardizing their experiences. This analytic shift allows the study to account for both recognition and misrecognition, tracing how vulnerability justifies intervention while delimiting the forms it can take and how it is used. In doing so, the paper sets aside vulnerability as a normative foundation for policy in order to analyze its role as a mechanism of governance, through which the runaway and homeless youth population is produced and managed.

I also turn to Vulnerability Theory, which foregrounds the role of institutions in structuring human dependency. Beginning from the premise that vulnerability is universal and inescapable, this approach argues that the state has an obligation to respond by providing the institutional resources necessary for individuals to survive and thrive (Fineman 2025, 7). Rather than grounding claims in abstract ideals such as rights or formal equality, Vulnerability Theory emphasizes the material and embodied conditions of human fragility, positioning the state as a necessary and potentially just actor in redistributing resources and mitigating harm. As Fineman writes, “Vulnerability Theory seeks to articulate a state responsive to the needs of the individual…” (Fineman 2025, 3). Relatedly, Erinn Gilson emphasizes that vulnerability is not only universal but ethically binding, tying individuals to one another even as social and cultural conditions often lead to its denial rather than an attentive response (Gilson 2013). Extending these insights sociologically, Bryan S. Turner (2006) argues that vulnerability is both embodied and institutional, shaped by the uncertain and changing conditions of collective life (26). Together, these approaches treat vulnerability as a foundational condition that grounds ethical claims and justifies institutional response applicable to this study on runaway and homeless youth.

Runaway and Homeless Youth

While there are significant overlaps between youth experiencing unstable housing and those who come into contact with the juvenile justice system—including histories of unstable placements, abuse, and marginalization along gender, sexual, and racial lines (Almquist & Walker, 2022)—these populations do not elicit the same institutional responses. I argue that vulnerability functions as the key differentiating designation through which some youth are rendered eligible for care, while others are constructed as delinquent and subject to punitive intervention.

Existing research on runaway and homeless youth consistently explains the characteristics, causes, and needs of this population, treating it as a relatively stable and pre-existing social group—a framing that is both analytically and practically useful. Although scholars acknowledge definitional instability, noting variation in population counts depending on how homelessness is defined (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler 2007, 4; Allen & Davies 2017, 6), this uncertainty is typically managed rather than destabilizing. Researchers accommodate definitional variation through the use of aggregate estimates (Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro 2010, 1365), while also situating runaway behavior as a widespread developmental phenomenon (Boesky, Toro, &

Bukowski 1997, 19), even as many youth experience homelessness only briefly (Boesky, Toro, & Bukowski 1997, 25). In this way, the population is rendered sufficiently coherent for the purposes of measurement, comparison, and intervention. Explanations for runaway and homeless youth are correspondingly consistent, most often attributed to family conflict, abuse, and neglect, as well as disengagement from institutions such as schools (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler 2007, 6; Allen & Davies 2017, 5; Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro 2010, 1365; Boesky, Toro, & Bukowski 1997, 21).

Within this literature, the population is frequently defined through its layered exposure to harm and heightened psychosocial risk, often described as a "constellation of lifetime risk factors" (Leonard et al. 2017, 443). Studies emphasize that runaway and homeless youth "have multiple, overlapping problems often including poor physical and mental health, frequent street victimization, and histories of physical and sexual abuse" (Allen & Davies 2017, 4), with prior victimization compounding these conditions such that youth are "both more likely to experience abuse on the streets and suffer more serious psychological consequences" (Allen & Davies 2017, 7). Similarly, homeless adolescents are described as being "at risk for multiple problems including depression, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and sexual victimization" (Boesky, Toro, & Bukowski 1997, 30), as well as exposed to "chronic stress, poverty, neglect, trauma, violence, and victimization which place them at grave risk for future victimization, involvement in the street economy (e.g., selling drugs, sex work), incarceration, and physical and mental health problems after leaving home" (Leonard et al. 2017, 443). Taken together, this body of work coheres around a characterization of runaway and homeless youth as a population defined through vulnerability and cumulative harm.

At the same time, this designation is not evenly applied. Research has shown that white children are more likely to be treated as vulnerable—receiving levels of empathy and protection not afforded to children of color (Bernstein 2011; Muhammad 2011). They are less subject to "adultification" and are more likely to be viewed as innocent for longer periods of time, receiving protections aligned with their chronological and developmental ages. They are also treated more appropriately by authority figures and more often perceived as cooperative and non-threatening (Skiba et al. 2002; Goff et al. 2014; Blake & Epstein 2018; Morris 2018), lowering their likelihood of being criminalized in contrast to the harsher treatment directed toward children of color (Skiba et al. 2002; Blake & Epstein 2018; Davis 2012). These patterns suggest that vulnerability is not simply a descriptive condition but a selectively applied designation, unevenly distributed across populations. It shows that vulnerability is entangled with the production of whiteness, which operates as the implicit norm through which vulnerability becomes legible and actionable.

Research on interventions for runaway and homeless youth similarly indexes this framing, emphasizing structured, developmentally oriented programming tailored to youths' varying levels of vulnerability. Core program elements are often described as including "physical and psychological safety; clear and consistent structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; opportunities for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; positive social norms; and integration of family, school, and community efforts" (Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro 2010, 1366). Interventions are further differentiated by age and developmental stage, with "younger adolescents… at greater risk for some types of problems" and thus "better suited for interventions designed for family-oriented services," while "older adolescents… may be more seriously engaged in a struggle for autonomy than their younger counterparts" (Boesky, Toro, &

Bukowski 1997, 31–32). Together, this literature frames intervention as a process of aligning developmental supports, relational environments, and age-specific needs to promote stability and growth.

Osborne's (2019) study of adult Housing First eligibility reiterates how vulnerability categories become concretized through the interaction of organizational tools and staff judgment. In her account, instruments such as the VI-SPDAT do not simply identify need, but reinforce normative expectations about who counts as "truly vulnerable," easily recognizing women with children and veterans as vulnerable while rendering others less legible as deserving (403–404).

In this study, I focus on the classificatory logics that produce and stabilize the population in response to their vulnerability, which determines how young people are differentiated in recognition and intervention. This specifically racialized form of vulnerability still operates through the color-blind RHYA, producing vulnerability and its distributions even while leaving racialized practice unarticulated.

Color-Blind Policy

Scholarship on color-blindness has consistently shown that the absence of race in policy does not signal neutrality, but reorganizes how racial inequality is sustained. Early legal debates framed this shift as a move toward prohibiting the explicit use of race in decision-making (Kull, 1992), but subsequent critiques demonstrate how such interpretations obscure ongoing inequality by treating race-conscious interventions as themselves discriminatory (Gotanda, 1991). Rather than eliminating race, color-blindness rearticulates it through formally neutral principles that displace attention from structural conditions to questions of classification. In this framework, constitutional commitments to neutrality shift debate away from substantive inequality (Siegel, 2004), while doctrines of formal equality disregard the conditions that produce racial disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1988). At the same time, legal and policy scholarship shows that these ostensibly neutral frameworks actively reproduce racial hierarchy: law protects accumulated advantage as "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993), and race itself is continually produced through legal processes that appear neutral on their face (Haney López, 1994).

Building on these insights, socio-legal and sociological scholarship extends the analysis beyond doctrine to the broader operations of the state. Rather than treating race as absent, this work demonstrates how racial ordering persists through institutions that disavow explicit classification. The state, in this sense, operates as a "racial state" (Goldberg, 2002), in which race is embedded in the organization of governance itself, while public policy sustains a "possessive investment in whiteness" through the uneven distribution of resources (Lipsitz, 2006). Taken together, this body of work shows that race is not removed under conditions of color-blindness, but reorganized through the very structures that claim to exclude it.

Thus, while the RHYA does not make explicit statements on youth demographics, it continues to structure the population through racial logics. In this framework, the absence of racial classification does not indicate neutrality but indexes the interventions that nevertheless carry racialized effect. Given this silence, I take up media to explore demographic practices.

Media & State

To examine how vulnerability is differentially recognized despite the formal neutrality of policy, I turn to media as a corresponding site through which the racialized terms of governance become visible. Media and legislation emerge from the same social terrain, shaped by overlapping norms, anxieties, and desires, and are best understood as co-constitutive rather than causally linked. In conversation over time, narrative media and the RHYA participate in stabilizing dominant ways of recognizing and responding to youth vulnerability. As a formally color- and gender-blind policy, the RHYA does not omit these categories so much as leave them unmarked, thereby sustaining whiteness and heterosexuality as implicit norms (Flagg 1993; Chow & Knowles). Media, by contrast, renders these otherwise unmarked assumptions visible. Through recurring narrative forms, it supplies concrete figures of vulnerability—often disproportionately white, cisgender, and heterosexual—through which care, sympathy, and intervention are organized. Where the law leaves its subject unspecified, media makes that subject legible, allowing whiteness to function as the default condition through which vulnerability is recognized and addressed. In this way, media provides analytic access to the racialized social field through which a formally neutral policy like the RHYA works across historical moments.

This approach departs from a well-established body of scholarship that examines media's influence on politics. Early work on propaganda emphasized media's role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing democratic participation (Lasswell 1927), while later research on agenda-setting showed how media directs attention toward certain issues and away from others, influencing what enters political discourse (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Studies of framing further demonstrate how media shapes the interpretation of social problems, with episodic narratives encouraging individual attribution and thematic narratives fostering structural explanations (Iyengar 1991). Extending beyond news, scholars have argued that fictional media can shape collective understandings of social reality, even supplanting historical memory (Lang 2002; Graber 2001). Work on welfare, for example, shows that public attitudes are often shaped less by empirical realities than by racially coded media portrayals (Gilens 1999). While this literature demonstrates the power of media to influence political attitudes and policy agendas, my analysis shifts the focus from influence to co-formation, examining how media and state discourse together participate in producing the racialized terms through which vulnerability is recognized, distributed, and acted upon, as well as what it meaningfully names.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory is concerned how naming forms subjectivity, for example understanding deviance not as an inherent quality, but as the outcome of social processes that define and respond to certain behaviors as deviant. Under this theory, deviance is produced through the application of rules and labels by others, such that "deviant" persons are those who have been successfully labeled as such (Becker 1963). This was based on earlier distinctions between primary deviance—initial acts that may be situational or minor—and secondary deviance, which emerged when individuals internalized and organized their identities around the labels imposed on them (Lemert 1951). Extending this insight, Erving Goffman (1963) examined how such labels became socially visible and enduring through stigma, marking individuals as fundamentally different and shaping their interactions with others. Taken together, labeling theory shifts attention from the characteristics of individuals to the social and institutional processes through which categories of deviance are produced, stabilized, and made consequential.

While labeling theory provides an important foundation for understanding how categories of deviance are socially produced, it is not the primary framework guiding this analysis. Classical labeling theory tends to focus on how individuals are designated and come to internalize deviant identities through social interaction, emphasizing processes of stigma and secondary deviance. In contrast, this study is less concerned with identity formation at the level of the individual and more with how populations are constituted through institutional practices. Building on this shift, Ian Hacking (1986) advances the concept of dynamic nominalism to argue that classifications do not simply label preexisting kinds of people but actively participate in bringing those kinds into being. Crucially, these categories and the people they describe evolve together in what Hacking terms a "looping effect," as individuals respond to, resist, or inhabit classifications, which are then revised in turn. This approach moves beyond labeling theory by situating classification within broader systems of knowledge, governance, and intervention, making it particularly suited to analyzing how the category of "runaway and homeless youth" is produced and stabilized through policy, research, and practice.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Developing Vulnerability as a Designation

As the runaway and homeless youth population was constituted as a governable object, vulnerability emerged through shifting relations among threat, scale, and intervention over time. In the 1970s, it was produced through proximity to threat; by the 1980s, it became strained as the population expanded in scale; and by the 2010s, it was stabilized as a technical mechanism through which youth were measured and prioritized. Across these moments, vulnerability marked the terms through which the population became legible and actionable.

Like most legislation, the first RYA, passed in 1974, opened with findings that defined how the authors understood the social problem the Act was meant to address. For the RYA, the first finding was that,

> the number of juveniles who leave and remain away from home without parental permission has increased to alarming proportions, creating a substantial law enforcement problem for the communities inundated, and significantly endangering the young people who are without resources and live on the street (Pub. L. No. 93-415, Title III, 1974).

In this problem definition, runaway youth existed in "alarming proportions," a formulation that scaled individual acts into a population-level condition and produced a generalized sense of alarm without specifying its source. Affect preceded explanation, casting the population as a diffuse threat. At the same time, this scale strained institutions—overwhelming communities and taxing law enforcement—while positioning youth as at risk: deprived of resources and exposed to harm. Finally, the finding did not offer an image of who youth were, allowing policymakers to imagine the population through existing gendered and racial logics found in the popular imagination. Taken together, these elements did not simply describe runaway youth, but organized them through a relation between disruption and endangerment, where vulnerability emerged through, rather than in opposition to, threat.

As Carter's opening distinction between delinquent and non-threatening youth suggests, vulnerability depended on maintaining a separation from threat. Yet in the RYA's founding logic, this separation was unstable where the population was produced through its relational tension. The finding performed a rhetorical sleight of hand in which youth appeared as both the source and object of harm: they increased in number, strained institutions, and endangered themselves by living "without resources." Causality was thus narrowed to youth behavior, displacing the conditions that may have produced it. Vulnerability emerged here not as protection from threat, but as its corollary—produced through proximity to both present disruption and anticipated harm.

The population was defined through departure and disobedience. As such, they were already out of place, resisting "parental permission," which drew on guardians' legal authority to govern children's movements and rendered departure a statutory offense. The statute invoked an idealized parent-child relationship in which parents were presumed to be the rightful arbiters of their children's movements, positioning youth who left as disobedient and proximate to delinquency. The RYA's finding thus operated as a formally sanctioned narrative, locating causality in youth behavior while excluding widely recognized conditions—abuse, neglect, poverty, racism, or expulsion—that precipitated leaving. This silence did not merely omit context but reattributed cause, making departure appear as poor judgment rather than a logical or necessary response to untenable conditions. Within this frame, young people appeared oppositional—willfully leaving, generating disorder, and placing themselves and others at risk—rather than acting in response to constraint or harm. Vulnerability, in this configuration, did not attach to those conditions but to the act of disobedience itself, rendering youth vulnerable because they departed, rather than because of what made departure necessary.

Vulnerability's reliance on threat comes from understanding it as an unruly but manageable future condition. The RYA—issued as Title III of the JJDPA—was conceived as a diversionary program, emerging in relation to both social services and juvenile justice. Senator Bayh made this logic explicit when he said:

> Although running away is a serious problem, we have not responded to the clear need to provide services for these children. We are concerned with juvenile crime…But we have too often failed to realize the need for prevention. We have developed very few programs to help our young people before they become serious lawbreakers. The runaway is a strong potential candidate for juvenile delinquency and a life of adult crime. If we help the runaway deal with the problems that caused him to run, we can prevent many runaways from becoming truly delinquent (Bayh 1971, 6).

In this formulation, runaway youth were situated within a temporal sequence that moved from present behavior to anticipated criminality. The problem was not only that youth had left home, but that their departure indexed a trajectory toward future delinquency, one that could still be interrupted through timely intervention. Prevention operated here as a temporal strategy, acting on youth in the present in order to avert a projected future.

Within this frame, the threat attributed to runaway youth did not arise from their present conduct alone, but from a deferred future embedded within them. Youth were not simply at risk from others, but contained the possibility of harm within themselves, requiring early intervention. Vulnerability thus functioned as a preemptive designation, marking youth as subjects for intervention before threat fully materialized. The child was rendered vulnerable not apart from delinquency, but through its anticipation, as a future that had to be managed in the present.

If the 1974 problem statement cast runaway youth as straining institutions through their "alarming proportions," this logic intensified in the 1980s as the population increasingly appeared at scale and a proliferation of knowledge. If, in the 1970s, vulnerability was produced through proximity to threat at the level of individual conduct, in the 1980s it was increasingly produced at the level of the population—through scale, repetition, and the appearance of growth. Vulnerability remained tethered to threat, but now as a function of volume, where the population appeared both at risk and as a risk in itself.

This expansion was driven in part by the increase of statistical knowledge, which rendered runaway youth visible as numerous, mobile, and repeating. By 1988, policymakers regularly cited figures suggesting that "over one million youth runaway each year" (Kildee 1988, 4), a marked shift from earlier studies based on small, localized samples—such as the federally commissioned 1975 study of 141 youth in Colorado (Incidence 1975). Administrative reports similarly emphasized volume and circulation: in the same period, the Family and Youth Services Bureau reported that 307 youth centers had served approximately 340,000 young people, including 85,000 in overnight shelters and 255,000 through drop-in services (FYSB 1988, 6). Presented as evidence of growth, these figures did not simply quantify runaway youth but produced the population as expanding and ongoing—an object of concern that appeared to exceed the capacity of existing institutions.

Media representations registered this shift, often depicting runaway youth as loosely organized groups moving through urban and suburban spaces, where disorder appeared collective rather than situational. Films such as Suburbia (1983) and Venice Beach (1982) portrayed youth as itinerant white collectives, defined less by individual motivation than by aimlessness and aggression. Here, vulnerability did not disappear but became more difficult to stabilize at the level of the individual, as threat attached more readily to the population as a whole, recasting youth as both at risk and as a diffuse source of the social disorder that defined the 1980s.

At the same time, as the population appeared to grow, its defining characteristics became more narrowly fixed within institutional frameworks. In the 1988 hearings, only two young women were invited to testify—one as an adult—and the questions directed to them focused on system involvement, substance use, and family instability. Vulnerability was not elicited as an open-ended condition but structured in advance through these categories, narrowing the terms through which youth could be recognized. Their responses often took the form of brief, generalized accounts—references to “financial problems” or not having “anybody to talk to”—that were readily absorbed into an existing framework of concern. As knowledge about the population expanded in volume, the range of recognizable experience contracted, aligning vulnerability with system involvement and risk.

By the 2010s, the designation of vulnerability was fully operationalized. The Transition-Age Youth–Vulnerability Index–Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (TAY-VI-SPDAT), also known as the "Next Step Tool for Homeless Youth," illustrated how vulnerability came to function as a stable and measurable feature of the runaway and homeless youth population. Developed in the 2010s for use within coordinated entry systems, the tool assumed vulnerability as given and measured its degree, structuring the population in advance of assessment. Through a standardized checklist—capturing unmet basic needs, medical and emergency service use, encounters with police, and reliance on crisis systems—it translated diffuse conditions of hardship into quantifiable indicators of risk (OrgCode, 2015; USC Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society, 2018). Here, vulnerability operated as a mechanism of commensuration, converting qualitatively different experiences into comparable units that could be ranked and acted upon. Discursively ambiguous conditions—"being at risk," "facing inequity," or "needing support"—were recast as rankings of need. Vulnerability was no longer treated as uncertain or interpretive, but rendered legible through score, scale, and threshold, where uncertainty appeared managed through calculation. This process produced not only a sense of certainty about the population and its needs, but the population itself as a stratified field of intervention, enabling service providers to act and report on youth.

Through this formalization, vulnerability appeared objective, neutral, and policy-ready. By translating complex social conditions into measurable indicators, these systems produced vulnerability as a reliable basis for intervention while masking the logics that shaped its application. Its flexibility as a designation allowed it to absorb a wide range of political priorities, even as it misrecognized conditions and produced exclusion under the guise of neutral assessment.

In the 2000s and 2010s, vulnerability was reorganized within administrative and developmental frameworks as a technical designation. Operationalized through standardized categories and assessment tools, it narrowed what counted as vulnerability, aligning recognition with what could be measured and intervened upon. In doing so, vulnerability did not simply describe youth conditions, but constituted the population as legible through administrative metrics, producing both the population and a sense of certainty about who these youth were and what their needs entailed—certainty that relied on racialized and mediated forms of recognition that policy did not name.

Racial and Gendered Conditions of Vulnerability

Vulnerability is produced through racialized forms of recognition that are unevenly distributed across the population, even when not explicitly named. Although the RHYA is formally color-blind, the designation of vulnerability depends on the terms through which youth become legible, with white childhood functioning as its primary condition of visibility. The logic does not operate through racial recognition, but racialization is one way that vulnerability is allowed to emerge. Across time, this structure remains consistent even as its content shifts: earlier representations frame running away among white boys as a temporary departure or opportunity for growth. Later depictions cast youth, who are still white, as more risky subjects, with vulnerability operating to manage and defer that threat. Media plays a critical role in making this structure visible. As both a site of circulation and a point of reference within the federal archive. Evident in recurring invocations of figures such as Huckleberry Finn, the archive reveals racialized terms of recognition that policy leaves unarticulated. In this sense, vulnerability is not simply unevenly distributed but is organized through an imagined population centered on white childhood, a framing that enables the extension of protection at the level of policy while possibly remaining misaligned in the racial legacy of service outcomes.

I approach race in this section not as an explicit category within policy, but as a condition of recognition that operates through what Stuart Hall (1995) describes as inferential racism, where racial meanings circulate precisely by remaining unspoken. This perspective is paired with bell hooks's (1996) argument that media centers whiteness as the normative frame of visibility, shaping the terms through which subjects become legible. Taken together, these foundational accounts, contemporaneous to the material, allow me to analyze how vulnerability emerges through racialized conditions of legibility without relying on explicit racial classification. I draw on these frameworks in order to glimpse how racial meaning operates indirectly across policy and media, making them particularly suited to a formally color-blind archive.

In a 1971 congressional hearing, Senator Birch Bayh, the principal architect of the RYA, invoked Huckleberry Finn in opening the session. The invocation of Huck Finn—as both a cultural reference and framing device—anchored vulnerability within the terrain of white American boyhood, where mobility signified innocence and growth rather than danger. At the same time, the figure functioned as a foil, marking the limits of that framing as emerging anxieties about youth, race, and urban life exceeded what could be contained. Thus, Bayh's statement is worth quoting at length as a critical entry point into the demographic logics that undergirded the authorship of the RYA, making visible how the population was rendered intelligible through historically specific forms of recognition. Bayh began:

> Today we open hearings on the problem of runaway children. When Mark Twain pictured Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer floating down the Mississippi River he was responding to a well-established American tradition. Running away has always been a part of America's folklore. For many of our young people, it has served as part of their rite of passage into adulthood (US Congress, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency 1971, 5).

In this nostalgic vision, running away was a site of growth and self-formation, where departure was a meaningful rite of passage rather than a crisis. That a legislator so central to institutionalizing the population drew on Huckleberry Finn suggests that runaway youth were understood—and would continue to be understood—through this literary lens. Running away thus appeared not as a rupture requiring intervention, but as a threshold through which youth encountered challenge and returned transformed. This configuration did not simply reference a familiar cultural figure; it stabilized a form of risk that could be interpreted as worthy of understanding and care, while remaining contingent on gendered and racialized conditions of recognition.

Huck's racialization as white was important, providing assumptions about him that absorbed risk without being defined by it, and allowed mobility to signify freedom rather than danger. Historically, a tramp and a vagrant were distinct figures governed through different legal frameworks. Tramp Acts, such as Pennsylvania's 1879 law, targeted primarily white, male itinerant laborers who traveled in search of work, framing their mobility as a moral and economic failure tied to norms of masculinity and independence. By contrast, anti-vagrancy laws, developed earlier in the post–Civil War South, were designed to control the movement of newly freed Black people, criminalizing mobility itself as suspicious or threatening under ostensibly race-neutral statutes. While both figures were regulated through color-blind law, the tramp was associated with waywardness and failed self-sufficiency, while the vagrant was racialized as inherently suspect, reflecting different logics of governance around labor, race, and mobility.

At the same time, In 1974, the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs issued a "protective regulation" granting local police officers the authority to take Indigenous children into custody if they had "reasonable grounds to believe that the child [was] a runaway." Detention was further authorized on the basis of perceived vulnerability, where a child could be apprehended if they were "suffering from illness or that the child's surroundings [were] such as to endanger his health, morals, and welfare" (39 Fed. Reg. 33293–33498). Framed as protection, this policy granted broad discretionary power to police over Indigenous youth, allowing vulnerability to be inferred from environment, behavior, or proximity. While protections were being extended for some young people, it increased punishment for those who were not recognized as vulnerable.

Bayh continued his speech by contrasting modern runaways to Huck Finn. He said:

> Today, however, running away is less likely to be a healthy striving for adulthood than an anguished cry for help from a child who has nowhere to turn. Experts agree that most runaways are not involved in a healthy search for a mature self-identity. Instead they are escaping from the reality of serious problems at home, at school, or within themselves (US Congress, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency 1971, 5).

In this passage, the earlier framing of running away as a site of growth is explicitly disavowed and replaced with a language of distress, recasting departure as "an anguished cry for help" rather than a developmental act. Vulnerability is thus rearticulated not as a capacity to encounter risk productively, but as evidence of underlying damage located within the child's social and psychological environment. The invocation of "experts" stabilizes this shift, transforming what had been a culturally legible practice into a diagnosable condition grounded in family dysfunction, institutional failure, or individual pathology. Running away no longer signified movement toward independence, but flight from already existing harm, situating youth as reactive rather than proactive. At the same time, this reframing does not fully abandon the earlier narrative of potentiality. Instead, vulnerability is produced in tension with it, preserving the figure of the child as both in need of care and as a subject whose trajectory must be managed to prevent further decline. In this sense, the passage does not simply describe a change in the nature of running away, but reorganizes its meaning, rendering vulnerability as the condition through which the population becomes intelligible and actionable within policy.

Bayh then went on to produce vulnerability in the lack of institutional response, stating there were very few private agencies or shelter facilities. Instead, a young person home against their will was framed as a postponement rather than a solution, while the legal status of running away exposed youth to arrest and confinement in juvenile or even adult facilities. This located vulnerability not only in the child's distress but in the absence and misalignment of institutional response. Returning to this account, vulnerability emerged at the intersection of need and response: youth were recognized as in crisis, yet routed through systems oriented toward control rather than care. The scarcity of private agencies and shelters further intensified this condition, leaving few alternatives to punitive intervention. Vulnerability thus did not reside solely within the child or their circumstances, but was produced through a landscape in which care was limited, coercion was readily available, and institutional responses failed to resolve the conditions they purported to address.

Senator Bayh finished by saying:

> Unlike Mark Twain's era, running away today is a phenomenon of our cities. Most runaways are young, inexperienced suburban kids who run away to major urban areas…The children who run to these cities look for companionship, friendship, and approval from the people they meet. Instead, they often become the easy victims of street gangs, drug pushers, and hardened criminals. Without adequate shelter and food, they are prey to a whole range of medical ills from upper respiratory infection to venereal disease. One wonders what a modern version of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn would be

> like, or even if it would be permitted reading in our Nation's high schools (US Congress, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency 1971, 5).

In this reframing, Finn no longer simply signifies innocence, adventure, and moral development, but becomes a contrast through which a more troubling contemporary figure is made visible—one shaped by danger, urbanization, and racialized threat. The runaway is implicitly positioned as white and suburban, while the city emerges as a site of racialized danger. By the 1970s, "suburban" had become a proxy for whiteness, produced through decades of federal housing policy that facilitated white migration and exclusionary development (Lipsitz 1995; Kelley 1997), and sustained by representations of suburbs as refuges from the crime, dependency, and disorder associated with the racialized inner city (Squires 2007, 103). Within this spatial and racial organization of postwar life, mobility carries different meanings depending on who moves and where. While the runaway narrative remains acceptable—even romantic—when tied to pastoral or suburban contexts, where whiteness secures its legibility as development, it becomes unspeakable when transplanted into the urban landscape. Within this framework, Bayh's invocation of Huck becomes particularly telling: the figure that once rendered mobility as developmental is now mobilized to mark its dangers, implicitly contrasting the white suburban runaway with the environments he is imagined to enter. The same figure once used to celebrate youthful independence is thus reoriented to signal degradation, disease, and risk. Most strikingly, Bayh's suggestion that a contemporary Huck Finn might be unfit for high school classrooms underscores a contradiction: the conditions he casts as too disturbing for the Nation's students to read are already lived by young people of high school age, including those who run away or continue attending school while navigating homelessness.

Taken together, Bayh's statement produced vulnerability not in a single declaration but through a sequence of moves that redefined both the act of running away and the youth who performed it. Running away was first reclassified from a culturally intelligible practice—long embedded in American folklore—into a sign of distress, an "anguished cry for help" that demanded attention. It was then situated within a causal narrative, attributed to problems at home, at school, or within the self, thereby locating vulnerability in the child's circumstances and rendering it intelligible as a condition requiring intervention. Finally, this vulnerability was aligned with institutional response, where care and control coexisted: youth were recognized as in need of protection, yet remained subject to arrest, return, and confinement in the absence of adequate services. Within this configuration, vulnerability operated unevenly. As earlier invocations of white boyhood made clear, running away could still be interpreted as a forgivable transgression—akin to minor lawbreaking—calling for empathy, instruction, and patience. Here, vulnerability did not signal danger but secured leniency, allowing risk to be absorbed without redefining the child as delinquent. White childhood was thus constituted through a series of excusable departures, reinforcing the idea that even in error, some youth remained fundamentally innocent and worthy of care, while others were more readily aligned with threat.

The figure of the young, white male runaway as an adventurous and formative subject appears in a 1962 episode of The Virginian, a western drama set within the mythology of the American frontier of the 1800s. In the episode, Mike, a boy who has run away from a difficult stepfather, joins a group of ranchers driving cattle across the West. Though initially unskilled, he is taken on as a cowhand and, through labor, hardship, and endurance, earns the respect of the crew. When his stepfather arrives to retrieve him, the men briefly conceal his presence, raising questions about parental authority and autonomy. In this exchange, running away is reframed not as disobedience or risk, but as an early exercise of independence, where "every man has a right to make his own decisions." Set against the open US landscape, Mike's departure becomes legible as a necessary stage of self-making. Vulnerability, here, is not a condition requiring protection but a temporary state through which growth is achieved, allowing exposure to risk to be absorbed into a narrative of development rather than danger. By the episode's conclusion, Mike returns home transformed, his departure, struggle, and return resolving in reintegration rather than punishment.

This configuration draws on broader configurations of mobility and independence that are central to both individual and national development. As Stuart Hall (1997) observed, the adventure narrative functions as a tacit narrative of colonial expansion, rendering struggle as moral development and movement as self-making. Within this framework, whiteness and maleness operate as the conditions that makes such transformation possible. The wandering boy—whether Mike or Huck, or even Tex—can absorb risk without being defined by it, his missteps reframed as growth rather than delinquency. Vulnerability is thus not eliminated but rearticulated: attached to hardship and exposure, yet oriented toward eventual incorporation into social and economic life. Crucially, this form of vulnerability is unevenly available depending on the recognitions that work through race and gender, where precarity is also freedom.

In the meantime, scattered through the Federal Register from 1938 to 1949, there is an absent figure known only through the small coins I do not think they would have chosen to leave behind. In these particular entries, entitled only "Indians," children indigenous to the United States have run away from their boarding and day-schools. These schools aimed to "kill the Indian in order to save the Man," as Captain Richard Henry Pratt put it in 1892 —a formulation that called for the eradication of Indigenous languages, cultures, kinship ties, and identities in order to forcibly assimilate children into white, settler norms. In the record, these little boys and girls are simply gone - nameless, faceless, exceptionally excepted. In their stead is a rule about the handling of any monies they may have left behind. Funds were to be transferred to the Indian Reservations superintendent, after the school deducted any outstanding costs for the child's food, clothing, schooling costs, or expenses incurred in trying to retrieve them (25 CFR, 1938 ed. 25 CFR, 1949, 47).

In the context of federally funded boarding schools, the vulnerability of Indigenous children was misrecognized. They were positioned as vulnerable to their own languages, traditions, and familial ties, rendering them subject to state intervention under the guise of protection. "Runaway" became a state-imposed designation that obscures the conditions of their disappearance, collapsing acts of escape, coercion, and even death into a single administrative category. Here, vulnerability did not authorize care but facilitated the systematic disruption of Indigenous life, targeting cultural identity as the object of reform. Rather than marking a condition to be alleviated, vulnerability operated as a justification for sustained violent interventions.

This rule for "Indians" is what Michel-Rolph Trouillot might describe as "silencing by banalization," wherein profound violence is reduced to routine administrative practice (1995, 26). The archival record's focus on the management of abandoned funds—rather than the absence of the children themselves—transforms disappearance into procedure, displacing the emotional and moral weight of these acts. In doing so, the archive reveals not only what is recorded, but how power operates through what is minimized, omitted, or rendered ordinary.

In 1988, Huckleberry Finn was once again called to the congressional floor by multiple speakers, but functioned less as a contemporary analogy than as a marker of what had been lost. A shelter director remarked that "the number of Huckleberry Finns on Boston's streets has decreased sharply and the flower children have vanished altogether" (Saltonstall 1980, 503).

Huck, the adventurous youth, thus became emblematic of a more innocent past, transforming him into a bygone ideal against whom contemporary youth were found wanting. In this way, Huck persisted as a cultural shorthand, but one that marked the erosion of innocence rather than its presence. Vulnerability was recalibrated through contrast with the past: its loss did not eliminate vulnerability, but made it more difficult to locate within the present.

At the same time, Congressman Thomas C. Sawyer invoked Huck to emphasize the darker elements of his story—his father's alcohol abuse, violence, and the fear that structured the home—aligning the narrative with 1980s problem frameworks. Here, Huck's story was no longer centered on adventure, mobility, or frontier possibility, but on familial breakdown, substance abuse, and harm. The runaway narrative was thus stabilized through a familiar cultural reference even as its meaning shifted, where Huck's "salvation, ultimately, was the support of his community" (Sawyer 1988, 4). Through this reframing, the figure of Huck was retained, but reoriented to support a different understanding of vulnerability and its appropriate forms of intervention.

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Running parallel to the white male adventurer in media is the oversexualized white teen girl. This runaway figure appeared as early as 1954's Susan Slept Here (1954)--where a teen girl who has runaway is "given" to an older male film producer by the police in order to tell her story–and moved through the 1970s in films like The Hitchhikers (1972), Teenage Tramp (1973), Born Innocent (1974), Little Ladies of the Night (1977), or Diary of a Teenage Hitch-Hiker (1979). Through this girl, vulnerability becomes highly legible as her body is placed in unsafe settings, like a dingy hotel room in Hollywood Vice Squad (1980) or being stripped naked on a dance floor in Suburbia (1984). These scenes did not just depict danger, but organized ways of seeing through which the character becomes vulnerable to other characters, but also to the audience as a consumable image.

This figure is convenient because of the ease with which she becomes complicit in her own endangerment, as her choices produce her vulnerability. In the award-winning documentary Streetwise (1984), for example, a teen named Kimberly explained that she entered prostitution after learning how much money another girl was making, framing the danger she encounters as one of choice and opportunity. In the fictional Hollywood Vice Squad (1980), a mother describes her daughter Lori to a detective as “just a little girl”—naïve, sheltered, and in need of protection. Yet the film’s visual logic unsettles this framing as Lori appears in lingerie, drinking and engaging with an older man, positioned within a world of prostitution and heroin use. As the voiceover insists on her innocence, the image renders her both vulnerable and implicated, creating a situation of choice and refusal of the suburban mother she could return home to. This is not to negate young women’s agency, but reveals a logic in which vulnerability is understood through the subject’s own decisions, displacing responsibility for structural conditions. This figure works to collapse the distinction between victimhood and culpability, recasting vulnerability as optional, risky, and sexual. Vulnerability is thus not located in coercion alone, but reinterpreted through narratives of choice that render exposure to harm intelligible as self-directed.

The figures of the adventurous young runaway and the sexualized teenage girl remained relatively stable over time, even as demographic knowledge of the population shifted. In 1975, a federally commissioned study based on 141 youth in Colorado reported a population that was 57% female and 35% male, while collapsing the “small numbers of ethnic minorities” into a single category—“Black/Chicano/Other Minorities,” comprising 22% of the sample compared to

78% identified as “Anglo” (Incidence 1975). By the 1980 legislative hearings, the population was described as slightly more female than male, with an average age of 15, while racial categories were more explicitly disaggregated—comprising 17% Black youth, 8% Hispanic, and 6% Asian or Native American, all of whom were overrepresented relative to national population averages. Yet these shifts in demographic detail did not fundamentally reorganize how vulnerability was recognized. Instead, the same figures continued to anchor the population’s intelligibility, with the young white female runaway remaining the most visible and narratable subject of vulnerability. In this way, vulnerability did not emerge directly from demographic findings, but was stabilized alongside them, allowing it to extend more broadly across the population. Because this figure was anchored in whiteness, it rendered vulnerability more widely recognizable and politically actionable. At the same time, the terms through which vulnerability was recognized shaped how interventions were distributed, introducing distinctions in care and control that would be organized along racial lines.

Evaluating Vulnerability as a Basis for Policy

Vulnerability functions as an unstable mechanism for organizing need—one that does not ensure equitable access to services and is prone to misrecognizing populations along political lines. It currently allows for the runaway and youth population to be recognized and incorporated into a broad range of services: through the RHYA, youth are eligible for time-limited shelter programs and street outreach; they qualify for educational protections under the McKinney-Vento Act; they are eligible for “endangered runaway” status in Amber Alerts; special availability to workforce development programs, school nutrition assistance, or specialized post-disaster tracking categories (47 CFR § 10.400 [2022]; 20 CFR § 686.400

[2015]; 7 CFR § 240.2 [2023]; 87 Fed. Reg. 15253). But, in this configuration, vulnerability acts largely as a mechanism of aligning administratively legible needs to pre-existing service categories, rather than undergirding a systemic and equitable response to youth homelessness.

Since at least the nineteenth century, responses to runaway and unhoused youth have been organized along racial and gendered lines, demonstrating that vulnerability does not produce equitable access to care. The establishment of the House of Refuge for Colored Children in 1849, for example, emerged in response to the exclusion of Black youth from white reformatories, where European immigrant children were deemed rehabilitatable while children of color were treated as inherently criminal (Span 2002). A century later, similar dynamics appeared in federal hearings. In 1972, a shelter director, gesturing to two former clients—a white young woman and a Black young man—remarked, “If you are white, you go to a mental hospital. If you are Black, you go to a reform school… that seems to be the thrust of the whole system” (Treanor 1972, 15). Within these arrangements, womanly whiteness aligned with treatment and protection, while Black masculinity was met with punishment. Vulnerability thus operated not as a universal basis for care, but as a sorting mechanism that translated narrative distinctions into materially different pathways of intervention.

Anecdotally, these patterns persist in contemporary contexts, where vulnerability continues to organize divergent forms of response. The documentary Homestretch (2014) complicated earlier tropes while reproducing familiar distinctions in how vulnerability was interpreted and acted upon. In one scene, the filmmakers lost contact with Kasey, a young Black woman, only to discover that she had been placed in a state mental health facility. Reflecting on her institutionalization, she noted, “I never thought I would end up in a mental institution… There’s a little piece of me that’s different now.” Here, vulnerability was interpreted through a therapeutic frame, positioning her as a subject in need of treatment and care. Despite her racial positioning, Kasey's trajectory echoed the pathologization historically associated with white female runaways, demonstrating how the template of vulnerability—anchored in feminized and often white-coded innocence—perhaps extends its protections to structure recognition across time.

In the same film, Anthony, a young Black man describes a trajectory shaped by criminalization. Attempting to meet his basic needs, he recounts turning to theft, being arrested, and entering the juvenile justice system before eventually accessing a Transitional Living Program. His pathway—moving from criminalization to conditional rehabilitation—mirrors longstanding patterns in which Black male youth were more readily processed through punitive systems. Here, vulnerability does not anchor recognition but follows punishment, becoming legible only after institutional discipline has been imposed. While his story was framed as an opportunity for growth and self-improvement, it remained structured by control rather than care.

Across these historical and contemporary contexts, vulnerability did not function as a neutral designation but as a differentiated mechanism of sorting. It organized the population internally, producing distinct pathways of care and control that persisted across time even as their forms shifted. Even as policy abstracted the population into a universal category, the distribution of care and punishment continued to follow deeply embedded racial and gendered logics. In this way, vulnerability rendered the population governable not through uniform inclusion, but through differentiated and historically durable forms of intervention.

Basis for Policy

The uneven distribution of the designation of vulnerability makes it a poor basis for policy. It relies on who is considered vulnerable and to what. Vulnerability can be mislabeled and misrecognized, as in the aforementioned case of indigenous Americans. Vulnerability can also be misapplied or underapplied. For instance, in 2018, the Department of Homeland Security expanded the public charge rule, broadening the criteria used to deny or revoke visas based on applicants' economic standing (83 Fed. Reg. 51114). The rule penalized the use—or the projected future use—of public services such as shelters, food assistance, and Medicaid, recoding need as evidence of risk. Therefore, the vulnerability of those immigrating to the US could be misrecognized, operating as a basis for exclusion, marking those most in need as least eligible for support.

In the same year, Executive Order 13831 reframed religious service providers as vulnerable victims of discrimination that prohibited them from applying for public funding. This redefined harm for powerful organizations, some whose executives were direct advisors to the President.

Thus vulnerability does not operate as a fixed or neutral condition, but as a flexible designation that can be mobilized to include or exclude, protect or punish. Its instability underscores the limits of vulnerability as a basis for policy, revealing how recognition itself is reorganized in ways that redistribute care along shifting political lines.

ANALYSIS

Across these historical shifts, vulnerability does not simply persist as a recurring feature of discourse, but operates as a governing designation that produces the runaway and homeless youth population by organizing how it can be seen, differentiated, and acted upon. It does not describe a preexisting condition of youth, but establishes the terms under which youth become recognizable as subjects of care in the first place. In doing so, vulnerability functions less as an attribute than as a mechanism of classification, sorting youth into distinct pathways of intervention while stabilizing the population as a coherent object of governance.

This designation works through a double movement. First, it differentiates youth internally, separating those who can be apprehended as vulnerable—and thus eligible for care—from those aligned with delinquency, threat, or disorder. This distinction is not fixed, but continually negotiated, as vulnerability is repeatedly reconfigured in relation to the possibility of danger. Second, vulnerability stabilizes the population externally by rendering it legible through a limited set of recognizable figures. Across policy and media, these figures—whether the adventurous white boy, the endangered white teenage girl, or later, the administratively assessed at-risk youth—provide concrete forms through which vulnerability can be seen and responded to, even as they simplify and constrain the range of experiences they are meant to represent.

What changes across time is not the function of vulnerability, but the form through which it operates. In the 1970s, vulnerability organizes recognition through narratives of innocence and recoverability, allowing youth to be diverted from punishment while remaining tethered to the threat of future delinquency. In the 1980s, this configuration becomes unstable, as vulnerability must absorb the very dangers it once distinguished, producing youth as simultaneously in need of protection and as sources of risk. By the early 2000s, this instability is managed through administrative formalization, where vulnerability is translated into measurable indicators and standardized assessments, producing the population as knowable, comparable, and governable through technical means.

Across these configurations, vulnerability operates relationally not only in relation to youth, but in relation to the conditions it displaces. By locating harm within the individual—whether as distress, risk, or developmental deficit—it obscures the structural arrangements that produce youth homelessness, including housing inequality, racialized poverty, and institutional exclusion. At the same time, by anchoring recognition in familiar and often white-coded figures, vulnerability makes the population broadly legible and politically actionable, extending the appearance of universality while leaving underlying inequalities intact.

In this sense, vulnerability does not simply enable intervention; it organizes its limits. It produces a population that can be seen, measured, and managed, while constraining how that population can be understood and what forms of response become possible. Rather than a neutral or descriptive category, vulnerability emerges as a historically contingent technology of governance—one that makes care possible, but only within terms that it has already defined.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that the runaway and homeless youth population does not precede the policies and practices that address it, but is produced through the designation of vulnerability. Rather than an inherent condition, vulnerability functions as a mechanism of recognition that renders certain youth intelligible as subjects of care while organizing how they are differentiated, measured, and governed. Across legislative discourse, media representation, and administrative practice, vulnerability stabilizes the population by anchoring it in recognizable figures and translating heterogeneous experiences into a coherent, actionable category.

At the same time, this designation is neither neutral nor evenly distributed. It operates through historically specific forms of recognition—structured by race, gender, class, and age—that shape who can be seen as vulnerable and how that vulnerability is interpreted. While the dominance of familiar, often white-coded figures allows vulnerability to circulate broadly and secure political and institutional support, it does so by simplifying the population and obscuring the structural conditions that produce youth homelessness. Vulnerability thus makes the population visible while delimiting what can be known about it.

As a basis for policy, this designation proves both generative and limiting. It enables access to services, resources, and institutional attention, but does so by aligning need with pre-existing categories of intervention rather than transforming the conditions that produce that need. Its instability further complicates its use: vulnerability can be expanded, narrowed, or redefined, authorizing care in some contexts while justifying exclusion or control in others. In this way, vulnerability does not reliably secure equitable recognition or consistent access to support, but instead redistributes care along historically embedded and politically contingent lines.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that vulnerability is best understood not as a condition to be addressed, but as a technology through which populations are produced and governed. Recognizing this shift has implications for both policy and practice. Interventions grounded solely in vulnerability risk reproducing the very limitations they seek to remedy—privileging legibility over equity, and immediacy over structural transformation. A more adequate approach might shift the basis of intervention from designation to entitlement, grounding policy in rights rather than contingent recognition. Such an approach would treat access to housing, care, and material support not as responses to recognized vulnerability, but as guaranteed conditions, reducing reliance on the variable and uneven processes through which youth are made legible as deserving. This shift does not abandon the need for support, but reframes it—moving from the management of vulnerable subjects to the provision of enforceable claims, and reorienting policy toward the structural conditions that produce youth homelessness rather than the characteristics through which youth are recognized.

CHAPTER 3. DEVELOPING POSITIVITY:
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND LOGICS OF SELF-RELIANCE

INTRODUCTION

Since its adoption in the 1970s, US runaway and homeless youth policy has, to varying degrees, framed youth homelessness as a problem of poor decision-making. When youth choose to “leave and remain away from home without parental permission,” running away and homelessness become legible as a matter of individual capacity and self-management within a moral framework of good and bad choices (Pub. L. No. 93-415, 1974). Intervention thus centers on cultivating forms of subjectivity oriented toward better decision-making—through means like mental health counseling or substance abuse education. Such developmental supports can play an important role in young people’s lives, particularly in navigating instability and its effects. However, as it is, they often take precedence over addressing material and structural conditions such as affordable housing, working poverty, family court practices, racialized inequality, or exclusion from housing, employment, and social protections. As a result, the solution to homelessness is disproportionately located in fostering self-sufficiency and regulation, rather than in transforming the conditions that produce housing instability. Youth homelessness is thereby defined as a deficit of individual capacity, shifting responsibility for exit onto young people and elevating resilience and coping over systemic redress—a governing logic that is consolidated in the current and prevailing developmental framework of Positive Youth Development (PYD).

Positive Youth Development (PYD) names a relatively stable youth development framework adopted by federal youth services in the early 2000s, and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) specifically in its 2008 amendments. As a developmental framework, PYD embeds a series of values, assumptions, and theories about how youth change, positioning itself in contrast to deficit-based models of intervention. PYD claims and emphasizes the cultivation of strengths, competencies, and supportive relationships, often citing youth as “resources to be developed rather than problems to be managed” (Lerner et al. 2005, 3; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2003, 172). It advances an ecological understanding of development, in which individual capacities are expected to emerge through alignment with positive environments such as families, schools, and communities. In this formulation, intervention centers on fostering skills, resilience, and future orientation, with success measured through the development of self-regulating, socially integrated, and productive future adults. So, I ask why PYD was taken up in the 2008 RHYA and what conditions made its adoption possible. I further ask what PYD proposes as the causes and solutions to youth homelessness.

In this analysis, I distinguish PYD–a developmental youth framework adopted in 2008–from the broader language of “positive youth development”--a general phrase that has appeared in federal entries since the 1970s. “Positive youth development” is a shifting configuration of knowledge, expertise, and intervention strategies. PYD is one, albeit currently dominant, configuration through which runaway and homeless youth are made legible as a governable population. PYD aligns with a longer-standing modes of governance indexed by “positive youth development” that locate the problem of homelessness at the level of youth activity. However, since the passage of the Runaway Youth Act (RYA) in 1974, “positive youth development” functions less as a discrete program than as a flexible cluster of commitments that take different institutional forms across time, organizing how youth’s responsibilities, environments, and futures are understood and acted upon at the federal level.

Thus, I approach this longer trajectory of "positive youth development" not as a neutral service ethos, but as a logic that contributes to the production and governability of the homeless youth population across time. Drawing on Foucault (1976), governance operates through the organization of knowledge practices that render populations manageable. Within this framework, "positive youth development" does not simply describe how youth change, but participates in defining what the population is, what problems the population are understood to have, and how those problems can be addressed. Across shifting political formations, it is assembled and reassembled through changing administrative priorities, expert authorities, and policy concerns, producing distinct ways of knowing and intervening upon the population while maintaining its coherence as an object of governance. Thus, I also ask, What are the relationships between PYD, the population, and their governance?

The power of "positive youth development" lies partly in what the term facilitates across historical arrangements. Its language—"community," "belonging," or "contribution"—is normatively compelling and difficult to oppose, yet sufficiently elastic to accommodate changing institutional priorities. Rather than treating these terms as descriptive, I analyze how they are organized through three interrelated governing logics: responsibilization, environmental intervention, and moral futurity. By responsibilization, I refer to the ways youth are understood as actors who must develop the capacities to manage their own trajectories, particularly through decision-making and self-regulation. Environmental intervention refers to the role of families, programs, and communities as sites in which youth development is expected to occur—contexts that can be structured, enhanced, or aligned to support positive outcomes. Moral futurity captures how youth are oriented toward the future, where development is measured through their anticipated ability to become self-sufficient and socially integrated adults. These terms name recurring ways that "positive youth development" organizes youth, their environments, and their trajectories, without assuming that they operate identically across time. In what follows, I track how these logics are assembled in different configurations across federal policy, shaping how the population is defined and addressed.

The tenets of "positive youth development" inform how federally funded services are organized, where services center skill enhancement over stable housing. The Act does provide for short-term emergency shelters (generally fewer than 21 days) and transitional living programs for longer but still time-limited stays (up to 540 days). Alongside these temporary housing arrangements, programs fund counseling in life skills, educational advancement, job attainment, and health services, while street outreach programs identify youth and connect them to services. Beyond housing, the bulk of programming centers on case management, family reunification, workforce preparation, and behavioral health services. Even when framed as trauma-informed or evidence-based, these interventions operate primarily at the level of individual capacity-building: they seek to strengthen decision-making, improve employability, foster resilience, and repair interpersonal relationships. Material assistance remains temporary and conditional, oriented toward moving youth toward self-sufficiency rather than ensuring long-term housing stability. Intervention is thus organized less around transforming structural conditions than around cultivating the competencies that enable young people to navigate them. Constituted as a developmental population rather than as a materially dispossessed one, youth homelessness is rendered actionable through behavioral intervention and subject formation rather than structural redress. In this formulation, policy does not resolve homelessness, but reorganizes it into a problem of individual transformation, narrowing the horizon of political responsibility.

The analytic focus, then, is not that "positive youth development" is a discrete policy innovation that persists unchanged over time, but that it indexes a broader and more durable set of governing logics. Long before PYD was formally named, federal youth policy already operated through a rationality that imagined young people as responsible for their situations; in places that contributed to their uplift or downfall; and as future-oriented subjects whose present conduct determined their eventual productivity and civic worth. What PYD provided was not a wholly new vision of youth, but a reorganized apparatus through which this rationality could be articulated, justified, and operationalized. It gathered together existing commitments—to autonomy, self-regulation, contribution, and developmental progression—and rendered them coherent under the banner of strengths-based, ecological intervention. These logics differentiated the population from other youth--distinguishing runaway and homeless youth as a kind of person, different from other young people; and differentiated them from the ways they existed in other times.

To examine the different iterations of "positive youth development," I analyze what I call the strategic surface of the archive—the sites through which the runaway and homeless youth population becomes visible and actionable. By reading across documents organized roughly by presidential administrations, I explore where the social problem of runaway and homeless youth were rendered legible in historical context. My archive includes congressional hearings, statutory texts, regulatory guidance, and presidential statements related to the RHYA, with particular attention to the Federal Register as a key site of emergence. The archive is thus not a neutral record, but an arrangement of knowledges, practices, and strategic alignments through which the population emerges.

The analysis proceeds through three interrelated logics. The first traces how "positive youth development" reorganizes responsibility onto youth themselves, locating the causes and solutions to homelessness in their capacity for self-regulation and developmental progress. The second examines how environments are configured as sites of intervention—not as terrains of redistribution, but as adjustable infrastructures designed to shape youth conduct and outcomes. The third analyzes how policy orients youth toward a moralized future subject, in which success is defined through self-sufficiency, productivity, and civic integration. Together, these logics translate material precarity into developmental work, continually reconstituting runaway and homeless youth as a governable population while redistributing responsibility onto youth and their environments and narrowing the scope of state obligation.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs historical and interpretive research to examine how "positive youth development" organizes federal approaches to runaway and homeless youth across time periods roughly aligned with presidential administrations. The project does not evaluate program effectiveness, assess policy outcomes, or reconstruct legislative intent, but considers how configurations of knowledge, expertise, and intervention gather as "positive youth development." In this sense, the object of analysis is not a single program but the governing rationalities used to address and produce runaway and homeless youth services.

Across time, "positive youth development" does not remain conceptually fixed, but it accommodates shifting forms of expertise and intervention—ranging from sexual abstinence initiatives to community-based anti-poverty strategies—while maintaining a developmental frame. By examining regulatory and administrative materials, the study identifies how different kinds of knowledge emerge, consolidate, and coexist within federal youth governance. Thus, the population of runaway and homeless youth is structured through changing arrangements of responsibility and developmental expectation.

Federal Register and Administrative Archive

To examine how "positive youth development" becomes operationalized within federal governance, I accessed the Federal Register Library on HeinOnline. The Federal Register is a daily publication by the federal government, documenting its proposed rules, final regulations, funding announcements, administrative notices issued by federal agencies, or responses to public comments. Because these entries provide formal justifications for administrative action—explaining the reasoning, statutory authority, and policy objectives behind regulatory decisions—the Register offers insight into how the federal government narrates and legitimizes its own interventions. I searched the full database–in which federal activities have been recorded daily since 1936, alongside the Codes of Federal Regulations (CFR), which codifies the rules and regulations issued by federal agencies—for the term "positive youth development," which returned entries beginning in 1976. This included associated notices, proposed rules, final rules, funding announcements, and relevant sections of the CFR.

I logged each entry chronologically into a Google Docs table documenting the year, presidential administration, issuing agency, citation, and entry type (e.g., notice, rulemaking, grant announcement). I then used an inductive thematic approach to analyze the archive. I first organized the entries chronologically. For each entry, I documented what appeared substantively significant, including how the problem was defined, what kinds of expertise were invoked, what interventions were prioritized, and what expectations were placed on youth. Themes were not predetermined but emerged through repeated review of the archive. From this, divisions between presidential administrations became obvious. Within each administration, I identified entries that were conceptually dense or marked shifts in definitional language, programmatic emphasis, or evaluative criteria. These entries were selected for closer reading and initial notes addressing the study's guiding questions. After completing the initial review, I returned to the full table to compare entries across presidential administrations, grouping documents according to shared patterns in problem framing, developmental aims, and program structure. This comparative process allowed identification of recurring configurations as well as shifts in how "positive youth development" was organized within federal youth governance.

I also conducted targeted searches within the Federal Register Library related to 4-H program policy and public statements associated with Laura Bush, both of which/whom were included in the emergence of Positive Youth Development (PYD) as a formal federal framework in 2008. In addition, I corresponded with the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, submitting a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for correspondences to and from Anita McBride (former Chief of Staff to the First Lady) and Mike Leavitt (former HHS Secretary); and reviewing archival materials made available by other FOIA requests.

Literature Review and Conceptual Formation of PYD

Alongside archival work, I conducted a structured review of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature to trace its conceptual formation prior to and following its formal federal adoption in 2008. The review began broadly, surveying foundational works frequently cited in PYD scholarship. From this initial mapping, I added peer-reviewed articles and books central to the theory.

Using iterative reading and memoing, I tracked the emergence and stabilization of core PYD constructs, including safety, belonging, competence, resilience, independence, and contribution. Particular attention was paid to how authors defined thriving, how developmental success was measured, and how youth were positioned in relation to risk, responsibility, and productivity. Articles were coded for their normative assumptions, underlying models of citizenship, and implicit economic or moral expectations.

I used digital tools, including Scrivener, Google Sheets, NotebookLM, and ChatGPT, for organization, outlining, and synthesis. I engaged primary and peer-reviewed sources for all interpretations, coding decisions, and analytic conclusions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does the runaway and homeless youth population emerge through "positive youth development" in time?

What does PYD propose as the causes and solutions to youth homelessness?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emergence of PYD as a Developmental Science

Positive Youth Development (PYD) has become a central organizing framework in U.S. federal youth policy, structuring both the conceptualization of youth and the design of interventions. The developmental framework of PYD articulates itself as a strengths-based approach to youth intervention that centers asset building rather than the remediation of developmental problems. While PYD theorists occasionally acknowledge that adversities exist—from learning disabilities to affective disorders, smoking cigarettes to economic deprivation—it nonetheless "begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute," and thus "aims at understanding, educating, and engaging children in productive activities rather than at correcting, curing, or treating them" (Damon 2004, 15). When applied, PYD envisions helping young people "navigate adolescence in healthy ways and prepare them for their future," promoting normative development while recognizing youths' need for both support and opportunity (Roth 2003, 172). In this formulation, PYD foregrounds the cultivation of capacity, participation, and the preparation of youth as future contributors to society. In this formulation, PYD foregrounds the cultivation of capacity, participation, and the preparation of youth as future contributors to society, with development serving as both a primary means and a central goal of intervention.

As the prevailing framework, PYD is often presented as a coherent developmental science that emerged in the 1990s and was incorporated into US federal youth policy (including the RHYA) in the 2000's. This stabilizes a more diffuse history of "positive youth development," which circulated as a federal logic before—and through which—PYD emerged. In part, PYD codified an already operative set of assumptions about youth, their environments, and futures that existed across federal domains. "Positive youth development" worked to distinguish runaway and homeless youth from other populations and also themselves at different periods of history. So while the literature reviewed here engages PYD as a developmental framework, the analysis that follows shows how "positive youth development" functioned as a governing logic shifting across historical arrangements to produce youth populations before PYD.

<u>Origins of PYD</u>

In the late 1990s, PYD drew on several established bodies of research, including deficit-based models, resilience research, and developmental systems theory. Rather than displacing these approaches, PYD brought their assumptions into new relations to articulate its orientation to youth intervention. Read in this way, these frameworks are not prior stages of PYD, but as a shared conceptual terrain through which PYD is able to make claims about youth subjects, their development, and appropriate interventions. The discussion that follows therefore does not attempt a comprehensive intellectual history, but instead attends to PYD's awareness of itself in the literatiure that presents and organizes different bodies of work in relation to itself.

PYD sees itself as a corrective reaction to the deficit-based models of youth that had dominated the 20th century, variously attributed to criminal justice models, child psychoanalysis, reductionist ideas of biological determination, mass media, and "the public mind" (Lerner 2005, 3; Damon 2004, 14). In deficit-based models, "young people are seen as potential problems that must be straightened out before they can do serious harm (Damon 2004, 14) At best, it reduced "positive youth development" to the "absence of negative or undesirable behaviors" (Lerner 2005, 3; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2003, 171). In response, PYD reconfigured deficits as "countervailing influences which can interfere with healthy development, limiting access to external assets, blocking development of internal assets, or easing the way into risky behavioral choices" (Benson 1990, 19). In this sense, PYD was tasked with removing deficits, which were barriers that disrupted the alignment of internal capacities and external supports and increasing the likelihood of risk.

These ideas of alignment—the matching of internal assets with nurturing environments—drew on the resiliency research of the 1980s, itself a reorientation of deficit-based models. Early resiliency research explored how some youth could thrive in the face of adversity. Resiliency theories explored and universalized the ways that some young people achieved "good developmental outcomes despite high-risk status" (Werner 1995, 81). Resiliency introduced the concept of "protective factors or mechanisms that moderate (ameliorate) a person's reaction to a stressful situation or chronic adversity" (Werner 1995, 81), suggesting that positive life outcomes could be achieved by identifying the internal and external conditions that buffer the effects of stress and its negative impact on development. These "protective buffers" were thought of as universal, transcending "ethnic, social class, and geographic boundaries" (Werner 1995, 82), allowing resiliency theory a universal generalizability across populations. However, PYD theorists sought to move beyond resilience's continued framing of youth through "high-risk status," in which strengths were understood primarily as adaptive responses to danger rather than as normal features of young people (Damon 2004, 16). PYD aimed to position all youth—not only those facing adversity—as capable of thriving. As such, it took up the idea of alignment—where "a good fit between the strengths of youth and the resources for positive growth found in families, schools, and communities" promotes development (Lerner 2005, 20)—alongside attention to "internal assets" as the "commitments, values, and competencies that help an individual thrive competently and responsibly when 'on one's own'" (Benson 1990, 7).

PYD was also made possible through developmental systems theory (DST), which had been coalescing since the 1950s. DST emphasized "the plasticity of human development" and the centrality of "relations between individuals and their real-world ecological settings" (Lerner 2005, 2). In this view, "human development is the natural unfolding of the potential inherent in the human organism in relation to the challenges and supports of the physical and social environment" (Hamilton et al. 2004, 3). Within this applied science, the human development process was seen as "a relational one involving mutually influential relations between the developing individual and… the ecology of human development" (Lerner 2005, 8), which shifted the focus from fixed traits or isolated risks to dynamic interactions across contexts. This framework reconceptualized development as ecological and relational and carried an application-oriented implication: because development was plastic and shaped through individual–context relations, interventions could promote positive outcomes by aligning youths' strengths with supportive features of their environments (Lerner 2005, 27). Taken together, these three fields enumerate the core elements of PYD.

<u>PYD Explained</u>

Internal Assets

PYD posits that the alignment of individual strengths (internal assets) with environmental strengths (external assets) produces optimal, thriving youth subjects. Internal developmental assets are conceptualized as the individual capacities and qualities—like a positive view of oneself, positive values, or a commitment to learning—that enable youth to develop and function effectively (Benson 1990, 10; Scales 2004, 6; Damon 2004, 17). Internal assets are described through a variety of metaphors: the "social and ecological 'nutrients' for the growth of healthy youth" (Lerner 2005, 27) or "the building blocks that all youth need to be healthy, caring, principled, and productive" (Scales 2004, 5), for example. Through these metaphors, it becomes clear that internal assets are not simply something youth have, but are compelled to cultivate or build upon. Internal assets entreat their bearers to constantly expand their positive attitudes and proper behaviors.

Internal assets always aim towards a self-regulating and productive future subject. These qualities "develop internally that help [youth] become self-regulating adults" (Scales 2004, 5), future subjects with "the capacity to contribute importantly to the world" (Damon 2004, 15). In many ways, PYD does not center youth, but the adults they are expected to become. Adolescence is reduced to a transitional stage in which external supports are gradually replaced by internal self-regulation, preparing youth to act independently and responsibly in the future, where youth is "the bridge between a childhood surrounded by networks of external support, and adulthood, in which these networks are partially supplanted by the internal checks and balances that enable the individual to make wise choices when beyond the reach of childhood' protective cocoon" (Benson 1990, 7). In this formulation, the protected stage of adolescence allows for the internalization of capacities that will allow youth to "thrive competently and responsibly when 'on one's own'" (Benson 1990, 7). Under PYD, adolescence is fundamentally a protected and dependent stage, aimed towards a independent temporal horizon.

Environmental Intervention

The other side of development are youth's external assets, i.e. the qualities of the environment that promote positive youth development like family support or neighborhood safety. These can be "human, material, and social resources," anything from "relationships and opportunities that adults provide" to "creative activities" (Lerner 2005, 40, Scales 2004, 5; Hamilton et al. 2004, 9). These assets are categorical and quantifiable in a deeply moral game, where "the more of these assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in risky behavior… and the more likely they are to engage in positive behaviors" (Scales 2004, 7). Additional external assets add up to better outcomes in a one-to-one ratio. When developed correctly, the environment creates "interlocking systems of support, control, and structure" that provide "webs of safety and love important for stimulating and nurturing healthy development" (Benson 1990, 7).

In this formulation, environmental assets are a prime site of intervention. The bounty of the environment directly effects the development in youth. Like internal assets, external assets are understood to be "readily alterable… given a certain will and commitment" (Benson 1990, 7). Families, schools, and community institutions are therefore tasked with optimizing themselves to support the development of youth's internal capacities. Yet the aim of this intervention is not to address systemic inequities or redistribute material resources, but to enrich and align environments where youth will develop on their own accord.

Outcomes: The 6 C's

The primary indicators of successful developmental outcomes are measured through the 5 C's: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring/compassion. These are the demonstrable measures of a "flourishing, healthy young person" (Lerner 2005; Lerner et al. 2011, 1108; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2003, [XX]; Hamilton et al. 2004, 6). Positively developed youth are "healthy, caring, principled, and productive" measured by their "school success and maintenance of physical health behaviors"; their ability to demonstrate their "bonding, resilience, competence, self-determination… and belief in the future"; or gains in interpersonal skills, self-regulation, and academic engagement (Scales 2004, 5; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2003, [XX]; (Catalano et al. 2004, [XX]). This is sometimes further measured by a sixth C—contribution—which is the ability of young people to give back to their "family, community, and the institutions of civil society" (Lerner 2005; Lerner et al. 2011, 1109). In short, young people have a tremendous task to accomplish and continuously demonstrate their health, thriving, beliefs, and adjustment to society.

Young people are meant to do this through self-determination, an avowed component of PYD. Intentional self-regulation——goal-directed, effortful processes through which individuals manage their behavior in relation to the environment— is a finding that was used to resolve an admittedly circular logic within PYD's framework. As a principle architect of PYD, Lerner acknowledged the circularity of the 6 C's, where developmental "assets" may not be clearly distinguishable from the outcomes they are meant to produce (Lerner 2005, 28). For instance, confidence—a positive sense of self—might be both an already present protective factor and one that is a positive outcome of PYD's environmental interventions. To resolve this , Lerner privileged intentional self-regulation as the primary driver of development, a framework that locates change within the individual's capacity to manage their relationship to the environment, rather than understand assets as provisions of the environment (Lerner 2005, 51-2). In other words, self-determination is a process within youth that "will enable her to productively interact with the different environments in which she is located" (Clonan-Roy et al. 2016, 99).

<u>Translation Into Policy</u>

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, the PYD framework migrated into large-scale policy in government and nonprofit settings. The Family and Youth Services Bureau adopted a PYD stance as a guiding architecture in the early 2000's and the RHYA explicitly incorporated PYD into its 2008 amendments. It stated that:

> (3) services to [youth who have become homeless or who leave and remain away from home without parental permission] should be developed and provided using a positive youth development approach that ensures a young person a sense of—
> (A) safety and structure;
> (B) belonging and membership;
> (C) self-worth and social contribution;
> (D) independence and control over one's life; and
> (E) closeness in interpersonal relationships (34 USC §11201).

These five domains closely correspond to the 6 C's of positive youth development—competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring/compassion, and contribution—reorganized here into administrative categories. Framed as a young person's "sense of" safety, belonging, self-worth, independence, and relational closeness, these qualities become targets of intervention, as well as objects of programmatic assessment.

Although PYD's codification in the 2008 RHYA was a significant change—shifting both the discursive field and audit practices—I argue that its real work was to formalize longstanding governmental logics of self-reliance, resilience, and productivity into explicit programmatic expectations. The adoption of the framework was simple in the sense that it rendered visible—and made administratively available—an emphasis on cultivating individual capacities rather than reorienting structural conditions. It authorized an already existing vision of childhood, partially through future proposing successful adulthood defined through autonomy, labor market participation, and normative social contribution.

Along this terrain, the standardization of PYD in federal policy was made possible through large-scale studies and their publications. These positioned PYD as both scientifically grounded and programmatically actionable, enabling the evidence to justify its uptake across the US. In the mid and late 1990's, Benson's Search Institute created a 40 Developmental Assets framework that was widely implemented in schools and community programming in the early 2000's. In 2002, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine commissioned a two-year synthesis of research on PYD. This study standardized PYD's developmental domains and positioned PYD as an evidence-based framework for program design and evaluation. Lerner's longitudinal research on 4-H programs, implemented in the early and mid-2000's, provided empirical evidence that PYD's developmental constructs effected long-term outcomes and reinforced their credibility within evidence-based policy environments. Taken together, these efforts—and others—did not simply advance a body of academic knowledge, but stabilized PYD as a measurable, generalizable, and policy-relevant framework.

A Critique of Policy Studies

Beyond stabilizing PYD, these processes of legitimization had consequences for youth governance. For instance, the HHS commissioned 2-year study mentioned earlier produced a document called *Putting Positive Youth Development Into Practice* (2007) for those "interested in youth development" (2). The booklet presented a coherent model of PYD in deeply simplified public-facing language, meant to be implemented across institutional settings. The last third of this public-facing booklet contains two instruments: a self assessment for management and organizations; and six ready-made guides for businesses, schools, youth service professionals, media, and state and local governments, which the reader is invited to copy and distribute. Each of these handouts (entitled *A Guide for the Media* and so on) gives site specific tips to promote PYD: businesses are entreated to "Ask youth to train older employees on new technologies" (33), while state and local governments can "Start a youth court in which juvenile offenders are judged by their peers, who act as judge, jury, prosecutor, and defense" (41). The booklet also contains a self-assessment for youth services leadership and organizations, containing questions like "What proactive steps have I taken in the past 6 months to enhance the organization's capacity to improve youth services and policy?" (44). Taken together, these tools index a redistribution of responsibility to develop youth moving from the government to youth, families, and community institutions. This is what Rose and Miller call "governing at a distance," where rule happens through an indirect exercise of power by activating and coordinating otherwise independent actors and institutions (1992, 181). Taken as a whole, the evidence-producing study of PYD entreats different sectors of public and private life to manage young people's development, systematically redistributing both responsibility and failure.

While this production diffused responsibility across multiple actors, knowledge was also produced circularly. Lerner's 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development was a large-scale, longitudinal research project that was both funded by and evaluated the programming of the National 4-H Council. Launched in the early 2000s, the study followed approximately 3000 parents and fifth-graders across multiple sites in the US. The study used survey instruments and structural equation modeling to assess developmental outcomes and their ecologies (Lerner et al. 2005, 18, 27). The study found that participation in PYD programs were associated with greater development of the Five C's and greater contribution to "self, family, community, and civil society" (Lerner 2005a, 24), strengthening the evidence base for PYD.

However, 4-H clubs and their participants are not neutral sites of study but are formed through institutional arrangements that have long sought to cultivate productive, family-centered, and civically engaged subjects through federal agricultural policy and funding. Rosenberg (2016) shows that as part of the New Deal farm economy, 4-H emerged through concerns about rural "degeneracy," population decline, and the loss of white farm youth to urban life, where 4-H did not simply respond to these anxieties but helped organize a field of intervention. Youth were positioned as the site through which rural families could be stabilized, managing agricultural productivity, and normative forms of gendered and heterosexual life. The 1936 Farm Credit Administration authorized loans through complex financial apparatuses—notes, inspections, and trust agreements—where adult sponsors supervised and held youth fiscally responsble through administrative systems of credit and labor. This does not invalidate Lerner's findings on 4-H and PYD, but argues that its results are conditioned by the federal, normative, and capitalist logics of its production.

Critical Scholarship

Critiques of PYD range from identifying its limitations to delineating the neoliberal logics that underpin it. One thread of critique argues that while PYD positions itself as a response to deficit thinking, it does not displace deficit logics. Since “many youth outcomes, both positive and negative, are affected by the same risk and protective factors” (Catalano et.al. 2004, 101), PYD research often studies the same factors as deficit models. Thus, youth continue to be implicitly framed as “lacking, deviant, and pathological,” insofar as development is measured through the cultivation of normatively valued behaviors (Coussee Rotest and DeBie 2009). Others, like Arnold and Silliman (2017), suggest minor programmatic changes like more robust theories of change to better translate between research and practice (16-18).

Still another thread of critique proposes more generally equitable practices. Gonzales et al. (2020) argue that PYD produces primarily individualistic forms of contribution and propose incorporating critical consciousness—as an individual competency—to better address structural inequality. Clonan-Roy, et al. (2016) similarly posit that PYD be combined with Critical Race Feminism to create supportive environments for girls of color, building on their strengths and fostering a deeper critical awareness in them (16). Tyler (2014) argues that in a framework of privilege and oppression, youth vary in their critical awareness by race and class. Thus, the PYD measure of this awareness does not consistently align with traditional measures of thriving—suggesting the need for more contextual support and a broader, more inclusive definition of youth development. (768-9).

Neoliberal Youth

The main critique of PYD situates it within a broader political-economic framework, delineating its neoliberal form of subjectivity. The neoliberal subject is a self-governing individual who is incited to regulate their own conduct in line with market rationalities, taking responsibility for managing risk, optimizing capacities, and securing the future. Governance is diffused through norms of autonomy, choice, and self-improvement, such that individuals become both the subjects and objects of intervention, internalizing and enacting these norms upon themselves (Foucault 1988; Rose 1999). Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) argue that PYD pursues this subject by breaking from traditional visions of youth, "driven in large part by neoliberal ideology and human capital theory," where young people are constructed as "assets" and "resources" oriented toward market needs (2015, 676). In this account, adolescent development is directly linked to "the workplace, the market and economy at large," where the youth is a "tool and technology for managing social and economic change" (2015, 16), (Tannock 2001, 23–31; Sukarieh & Tannock 2015). The authors argue that emphasizing resilience and competence is ultimately a distraction from structural inequalities, displacing responsibility onto individuals, families and local communities (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015, 23).

Extending this critique to youth programming, Coleman (2021) shows how these logics are operationalized through neoliberal accountability regimes that sustain entrenched inequity and produce a "disconnect between professional youth development practice and the lived experience of marginalized youth" (907). Under pressure to demonstrate fiscal responsibility, programs succumb to market-oriented program assessments that leave "little room for building relationships with marginalized communities or developing critical consciousness in youth" (919). In this context, ongoing relationships and experience with youth are subordinated to the bottom line, resulting in practices that devalue and silence youth and community voices (919–921), even while holding them responsible for their outcomes.

Responsibilization

A central feature of neoliberal governance is responsibilization, the shift away from direct state provision toward the activation of individuals, communities, and institutions as sites of governance. As David Garland argues, its "primary concern is to devolve responsibility… onto agencies, organizations and individuals which are quite outside the state," governing instead through collaborative networks (Garland 1996, 452, 454) . Within this framework, responsibility is both dispersed outward and intensified inward, as individuals are constructed as autonomous agents who must manage their own risks and outcomes. As Ronen Shamir notes, neoliberal responsibilization assumes a subject for whom "the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them" (Shamir 2008, 8) . Governance thus operates not simply by reallocating responsibility, but by producing subjects capable of "undertak[ing] and perform[ing] self-governing tasks" (Shamir 2008, 8) .

At the same time, responsibilization entails the active shaping of conduct through institutional and affective mechanisms. Contemporary governance "organises the conditions…within which social actors can assume responsibility," often through "public-private assemblages" and techniques that encourage individuals to constantly evaluate and improve upon themselves (Peeters 2017, 54) . These processes operate "up close and personal," using socialization, participation requirements, and psychological influence to align individual behavior with broader policy objectives (Peeters 2017, 15) . In this sense, responsibilization involves "manufacturing attitudes and manipulating choices" so that individuals assume responsibility for self-care in accordance with governmental aims (Peeters 2017, 56) . Together, this literature shows that neoliberal governance does not withdraw, but reorganizes power through the production of self-regulating subjects, making individuals and institutions responsible for managing social risks that were once addressed collectively. These dynamics are not confined to abstract formulations of governance, but are clearly visible in the literature on runaway and homeless youth, where positive youth development frameworks organize both the explanation of homelessness and the interventions designed to address it.

Youth Homelessness Literature

The literature on runaway and homeless youth consistently identifies the origins of homelessness in family conflict, abuse, and neglect. Studies report that "parental drug and alcohol use, family violence, neglect, and abuse are frequently cited by homeless young people as reasons for their departure" (Paradise & Cauce 2002, 229), and that youth whose home relationships are "characterized by abuse, neglect, and conflict are at increased risk for homelessness" (Heinze, Jozefowicz & Toro 2010, 1366). Across these studies, homelessness is explained primarily through strained or abusive family relationships that lead young people to run away or be pushed out of the home. Once away, youth encounter a material reality structured by the need to secure shelter, food, and income, often through services authorized by the RHYA.

Within this context, interventions for homeless youth are largely informed by PYD, which shifts attention from the conditions that produce homelessness to the capacities youth must develop to exit it. Homelessness is treated as a disruption to developmental trajectories, requiring interventions that restore pathways to autonomy, stability, and future independence (Gwadz et al. 2018). Services are thus tasked with providing "supportive relationships, engagement, and empowerment that support healthy developmental processes impeded within their other life contexts" (Heinze 2013, 280), while cultivating internal capacities such as "adaptive attitudes and skills" and "a positive self-view, hopeful expectations for the future, and constructive coping skills" (Heinze 2012, 279). Programs and shelters function as sites for producing these capacities, promoting the "development of personal strengths and resources, such as self-esteem and social competency" (Heinze, Jozefowicz & Toro 2010, 1366), alongside "environmental protective factors such as community support and mentoring" (Taylor-Seehafer 2004, 36). Within this framework, successful intervention is measured through the cultivation of internal assets that "facilitate healthier outcomes" (Heinze 2012, 279), including "decreases in distress and increases in life satisfaction," greater "investment in their own goals," and "positive growth into adulthood" (Heinze 2012, 284; Gwadz et al. 2018, 203; Taylor-Seehafer 2004, 37).

The literature rarely considers how this figure—the resilient youth endowed with internal resources and developmental potential—comes to be constituted as the central subject of intervention, nor how "positive youth development" reorients attention toward young people's internal lives rather than their material conditions. Nor does it examine how responsibility for exiting homelessness is distributed across youth, their environments, and the programs that serve them, or the role of the federal government within this framework. Rather than addressing systemic processes—such as discriminatory housing markets, labor conditions, and economic policy—homelessness is reframed as a developmental problem addressed through strengthening skills, relationships, and resilience. Within this formulation, interventions operate not only by providing services but by responsibilizing young people, intervening in their environments to maximize their capacities, and encouraging them to develop into self-governing and future-oriented citizens.

This study takes up these absences by examining how "positive youth development" operates not simply as an intervention strategy, but as a governing logic that produces the very subjects it seeks to serve. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of PYD-informed programs, I analyze how this framework organizes the intelligibility of youth homelessness—how it defines the problem, delineates appropriate forms of intervention, and distributes responsibility across youth, their environments, and the state. Drawing on a genealogical approach, the analysis traces how the figure of the resilient, self-developing youth emerges across federal policy as an object of knowledge and intervention. In doing so, it shows how responsibilization, environmental intervention, and moral futurity are not merely features of service provision, but structuring logics that shape what can be known, said, and done about youth homelessness. By situating PYD within these broader configurations of governance, the study reorients attention from the evaluation of programs to the conditions under which particular forms of youth, intervention, and responsibility become possible.

DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

Across decades of federal youth policy, "positive youth development" functions as an organizing logic through which youth experiencing housing instability are rendered legible, governable, and morally intelligible. The population becomes a site of future productivity to be optimized through calibrated environments and developmental intervention. By emphasizing self-sufficiency, internal transformation, and success narratives, PYD constructs homelessness not as a structural crisis rooted in poverty, housing exclusion, or other inequalities, but as a developmental challenge located within the individual. Homelessness' redress is not systemic, but internal—states susceptible to training, resilience, motivation, and self-management. In this configuration, self-sufficiency becomes both a practical outcome and a moral marker, signaling proper self-care and readiness for civic and economic contribution.

In this chapter, governable does not simply mean administratively visible or eligible for services; it names a mode of subject formation in which the homeless youth population is responsibilized for its outcomes, a site fully formed through their environment, and marked by the futurity of its moral subject to be self-sufficient. In this arrangement, needs are translated into developmental deficits, systemic barriers reframed as unfilled capacity, and political claims displaced by therapeutic or managerial intervention. This redistribution of causality recodes systemic failures in housing and labor markets as shortcomings of resilience or skill. The consequences are normative as well as descriptive: when homelessness is defined as developmental, modest investments in counseling and training appear sufficient, policy minimalism is legitimized, and a single endpoint—productive, self-managing citizenship—is stabilized as the proper future. Governability secures administrative order, but at the cost of redistributing responsibility and displacing systemic change.

Rather than demonstrating continuity in youth governance, this chapter examines how the recurring invocation of "positive youth development" generates new differences in how runaway and homeless youth are understood and governed across different historical arrangements. Through repeated appearances across shifting political and administrative contexts, the term participates in an ongoing differentiation process—producing new subject formations, redistributing responsibility, and reorganizing the environments through which youth are expected to develop.

The neoliberal subject that centers "positive youth development" operates as a national value, though it is articulated differently across administrations. Market-oriented presidencies foreground personal responsibility, workforce readiness, and cost efficiency; more socially liberal administrations emphasize equity, opportunity, and trauma-informed care. Yet across these shifts, the expectation of self-activation and eventual productivity remains intact. PYD's benign and capacious language absorbs variations while preserving a consistent logic of responsibilization, managed environments, and moral futurity. To make this continuity visible, the analysis proceeds thematically rather than chronologically, where responsibilization traces how "positive youth development" internalizes causality into youth; how the environment is to be technically managed for optimization, moral-futurity orients youth toward a moralized national hereafter. Together, these operations reveal how developmental discourse translates material precarity into individualized work while permitting the federal government to appear responsive even as it displaces accountability while helping to produce and sustain systemic conditions.

Responsibilization

Statutory language allows the runaway and homeless youth population to appear relatively stable across decades. Phrases such as "develop adequate plans," "remain away from home without parental permission," and "temporary shelter with counseling services" appear nearly verbatim from the 1974 enactment through the present. This continuity produces the appearance of a fixed object of policy—an identifiable population whose behaviors, needs, and interventions might be continuously addressed through a stable legislative framework. Yet across time, the problem of youth homelessness is embedded in markedly different political and administrative arrangements that reshape its presumed causes and the sites at which redress should occur. Because these governing logics are not immediately visible within runaway and homeless youth legislation itself, this section situates the policy within the broader field of federal youth policy to identify three organizing logics that operate through the discourse of "positive youth development": the responsibilization of youth, the management of environments through which youth are shaped, and an orientation toward a completed moral future. These shifts do not simply represent new ways of governing the same population; they reshape the population itself, altering what runaway and homeless youth are understood to be, what they can or should do, and who is responsible for addressing their circumstances.

The first governing logic that emerges across federal youth policy is the responsibilization of runaway and homeless youth. Although the vocabulary of "positive youth development" remains relatively stable, it organizes expectations about who must manage social harm shift across different historical arrangements. Developmental terms such as competence, autonomy, resilience, and decision-making capacity consistently frame youth as subjects whose futures depend on the cultivation of internal capacities. Across time, the promotion of "positive youth development" reorganizes the responsibility of youth by relocating the management of social risk from structural conditions to developmental capacities of young people themselves. Youth challenges, including homelessness, are thus rendered into developmental problems to be addressed through the cultivation of self-regulating, future-oriented subjects.

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The earliest federal articulation of "positive youth development" appears in the mission of the Office of Youth Development (OYD), established by HEW during the Ford administration. Two years after the 1974 RYA, the office was coordinating federal efforts serving runaway youth and their families. As such, the OYD's mission was "to assist in the removal of barriers to positive youth development, so that young people will be able to assume responsible and productive roles in society" (HEW 1976, 247). In this formulation, "positive youth development" is defined not as a direct programmatic outcome but as the clearing away of obstacles that might impede youth's presumed developmental trajectory. The state's role is therefore facilitative: it works with youth-serving organizations and coordinates services in order to remove barriers that obstruct an otherwise self-propelling path toward adulthood.

This arrangement distributes responsibility asymmetrically between the state and young people. Government intervention is framed as external and conditional—helpful in addressing environmental impediments but not responsible for ensuring particular outcomes. Youth, by contrast, are positioned as the primary agents of their own developmental transformation. The anticipated endpoint is a citizen who is both "responsible and productive." Within this framework, the state is responsible to clear the path that young people are expected to traverse, converting the removal of barriers into future participation in the social and economic order.

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During the 1988 hearings on the RHYA, policymakers repeatedly framed youth homelessness through the language of individual self-worth rather than social provision. Although "positive youth development" was not cited during the Reagan administration, it maintained a strong emphasis on internal transformation as the central aim of intervention. To open the proceedings, Subcommittee Chairman Dale Kildee reflected on a previous visit to an adult prison in Michigan, concluding that many of those incarcerated were there "for one reason: they did not like themselves. They did not see their own dignity, didn't have good self-esteem" (1988 Hearings, 2). Kildee then extends his erudite observation to homeless youth, blaming homelessness on their deficits in self-regard, deficits that could be remedied through developmental intervention.

Throughout the hearings, this framework positioned the cultivation of self-worth as the primary site of policy action. Kildee emphasized that “every human being has dignity… and when we help that person attain self-esteem and respect for their own dignity, they are more likely to respect the dignity of others, their life and property, and all society is safer when that happens.” In this formulation, the benefits of intervention radiate outward: repairing the individual’s moral self-conception becomes the mechanism through which social order is secured. He urged programs to “look beyond the physical needs, shelter needs,” and instead prioritize building “self-esteem and dignity” as the central work of intervention. Homelessness is therefore addressed less as a condition requiring material stabilization than a problem of subject formation. Counseling, life-skills training, and employment preparation appear as tools for restoring proper self-regard, while structural conditions such as poverty, racialized exclusion, and housing precarity entirely recede. In this way, responsibility for overcoming homelessness is relocated to the youth themselves, who must cultivate the dignity and self-sufficiency necessary to secure their place as productive members of society.

This responsibilizing logic is also visible in how program success is measured. At the 1988 congressional hearings, service providers emphasized the effectiveness of Independent Living Programs by highlighting the proportion of youth who had personally overcome their circumstances. One provider reported that “88% of the homeless youths… have conquered homelessness” and that more than two-thirds had “successfully established complete independence.” The conclusion drawn from these figures was that, “given a specialized program which includes employment and life skills training and support… they are able to become self-sufficient adults” (1988 Hearing). In this formulation, the success of homeless services is demonstrated through the youth’s own transformation: homelessness is something to be "conquered," and independence is achieved through the acquisition of employability, life skills, and personal responsibility. Programs provide guidance and training, but the decisive work of exiting homelessness is attributed to the youth themselves. The effectiveness of intervention is therefore measured not by structural change but by the production of self-sufficient subjects capable of defeating homelessness through their own conduct.

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The 1996 Clinton era Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) worked through a different set of responsibilization logics. It framed youth—particularly teenage parents—through a logic that relocated the causes of poverty from systemic conditions to individual conduct and family formation. In its findings, Congress linked welfare dependency to unmarried parents, declaring that "marriage is the foundation of a successful society" (PRWORA 1996, 1–2). As such, it positioned the family structure as the primary determinant of children's well-being and social stability. Poverty thus appears less as the outcome of labor markets, housing conditions, or racialized inequality than as the consequence of improper personal and familial decisions. Within TANF, this diagnosis became operationalized through behavioral requirements directed at young parents: unmarried recipients under eighteen had to remain in school or an approved educational program and were required to live in an adult-supervised setting, typically with a parent or guardian, in order to receive assistance (PRWORA 1996, 206–207). These provisions transformed welfare from a mechanism of social protection into a technology for governing conduct—requiring young people to demonstrate educational participation, proper domestic arrangements, and responsible reproductive behavior as conditions of aid. In doing so, the policy constructed youth poverty as a problem to be solved through the self-management and proper morality, positioning young parents themselves as responsible for correcting the familial and behavioral conditions through which poverty was said to arise.

The absence of "positive youth development" in the Clinton era welfare reform does not indicate the disappearance of its governing logic, but rather clarifies the specific function the term performs. In youth policy discourse, "positive youth development" organizes responsibilization around moral futurity: youth are governed as subjects still in formation whose environments must be arranged so that they can become responsible and economically productive adults. Responsibility is therefore anticipatory, oriented toward cultivating a future worker-citizen. By contrast, Clinton-era welfare reform governed youth retrospectively. Teenage parents receiving assistance were treated as already accountable for prior decisions, and policy required them to correct those choices through schooling mandates, supervised living arrangements, and behavioral compliance. The persistence of responsibilization without the developmental vocabulary thus reveals that "positive youth development" is not simply another name for individual responsibility; it is a particular way of organizing responsibility around the promise that youth can still be properly formed into future citizens.

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Lawmakers incorporated Positive Youth Development (PYD) into the RHYA as a developmental framework towards the end of the Bush administration in 2008. This specific definition of PYD comes at a time when "positive youth development" is and has been most expansive. Under Bush, "positive youth development" reaches across youth populations where a wide range of behaviors were addressed through the language of development. For example, in one administrative notice where "positive youth development" was invoked without corresponding youth-centered programming. A 2006 funding announcement from the

Administration for Native Americans lists “positive youth development” among several discretionary initiative areas—including healthy marriage promotion, fatherhood, and disaster assistance—yet the substance of the program centers on marriage education, relationship mentoring, and research on the benefits of marriage. In this instance, youth development appears less as a defined programmatic framework than as a generalized policy aspiration attached to initiatives oriented primarily toward adult relationships and family structure. Such usage suggests a broader bureaucratic inflation of the term, in which “positive youth development” circulates as a flexible justificatory label even where interventions are only indirectly related to youth themselves. Under Bush, “positive youth development” promoted distinctly moral project of civic virtue for its self-managing subjects. It continued to provide a flexible moral vocabulary through which youth could be governed: the central task of policy became fostering the capacities of young people to manage their deficits and their futures responsibilities. PYD thus fit neatly within—and capped off— the political logics of the period, translating systemic problems into matters of personal development and positioning youth as responsible for cultivating the dispositions necessary to overcome adversity through emphasizing autonomy, self-regulation, moral character, and connection to community.

What appears as neutral developmental vocabulary is thus capable of carrying highly specific moral prescriptions. Because “positive youth development” presents itself as the cultivation of broadly valued capacities—health, success, responsibility—it can accommodate shifting definitions of what those outcomes entail. Its power lies in this generality. The framework does not specify the content of a “healthy” or “successful” life, allowing those terms to be filled with the normative commitments of a given political moment. This pliability becomes visible in federal guidance clarifying the Community-Based Abstinence Education

Program, where the Family and Youth Services Bureau stated that “for the purposes of this announcement, a positive youth development approach shall mean programs that help young people to abstain from sexual activity until marriage” (HHS 2005). Rather than abandoning the language of PYD, the guidance redefines it, tethering developmental support to a specific moral and sexual ethic. The episode illustrates that PYD functions less as a fixed programmatic model than as a flexible governing vocabulary through which particular normative expectations can be advanced.

Runaway and homeless youth policy during this period illustrates how “positive youth development” functioned simultaneously as reformist language and a regulatory technique. In 2002, runaway, homeless, and street youth service providers became eligible for additional federal funds for training and technical assistance to facilitate a “positive youth development” approach that emphasized “a young person's competence, connection to community, altruism, control, autonomy and identity as an alternative to adolescent health and behavioral risks,” and promoted it as the basis for developing “long range youth development strategies” (Federal Register 2002, 8028). Few would oppose fostering competence, autonomy, or community connection among young people and it is framed as a practical adjustment to service delivery—supported through staff training, model dissemination, and improved coordination among youth-serving organizations. As an alternative to deficit models—confusingly described in this entry as “as an alternative to adolescent health and behavioral risks”—shifts from correcting deviance to fostering autonomy, self-regulation, and civic orientation within the young person. As a general youth strategy “positive youth development” is hard to contest, but in the context of youth experiencing housing instability is wholly inadequate to address material conditions.

Further, the language of "positive youth development" as applied to the runaway and homeless youth population does not fully convey the moral depth of the Bush administration's youth policy agenda. Federal policy toward Native youth during this period reveals a far more explicit deficit-driven project. Under the Social and Economic Development Strategies for Native Americans—framed as promoting "positive youth development"—HHS funded:

> projects to develop and implement comprehensive culturally and socially appropriate projects to help youth practice personal responsibility; reach a balance in their lives by learning how to set and meet short and long-term goals; and to practice healthy lifestyles with the goal of decreasing gang activity, school drop out rates and juvenile delinquency (HHS 2004).

The language is unmistakably corrective, presuming that Native youth do not practice personal responsibility, cannot sustain balanced goals, and lack the capacity to maintain healthy lifestyles. Risk is thus preemptively located in the young person's character: the anticipated gang member, dropout, or delinquent subject is already embedded in the policy's design. "Positive youth development" here functions less as neutral developmental support than as a project of moral repair. What disappears in this formulation are the historical and structural conditions shaping Native communities. Rather than addressing the systemic and historical conditions of Native communities, the policy locates the solution to social and economic insecurity in character formation. Stability is achieved through internal balance, goal-setting, and lifestyle discipline rather than through structural redress. In this way, the neoliberal moral subject reaches deeply into Indigenous governance: social and economic development is reframed as a measure of Native youth's virtue.

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In 2009, the Obama administration again mobilized the language of "positive youth development," describing it as an approach focused on "building the strengths of youth to promote the likelihood of positive outcomes," in the context of a mentoring initiative for youth involved in the juvenile courts. Participating youth would be paired with "a caring and supportive adult mentor who would share information and insight, listen to the youth, and provide encouragement" (Federal Register 2009). Within this framework, contact with the justice system is not addressed through reforms to policing, sentencing, or material conditions shaping youth contact with the courts. Instead, delinquency becomes legible as a developmental trajectory requiring guidance, encouragement, and exposure to pro-social adults. The intervention operates less through legal transformation than through developmental redirection, extending PYD's governing logic into the administration of juvenile justice.

Under the Obama administration, responsibilization also appeared in program guidance that framed homelessness as a matter of individual decision-making. Grantees were required to conduct outreach that would "encourage runaway, homeless, and street youth to leave the streets and to make other healthy personal choices regarding where they live and how they behave" (HHS 2010, 35479). In this formulation, housing instability was implicitly configured as the outcome of youth's personal choices. Outreach thus operated not only as a service intervention but as a behavioral corrective, tasked with encouraging youth to make the "right" decisions about their living situations and conduct, positioning homelessness as something that could be mitigated through improved individual judgment rather than systemic change.

Environmental Management

Across different historical arrangements, even the focus on changing or shaping environments does not release young people from responsibilization. Instead, the environment becomes an object of technical management of young people's subjectivity to varying degrees.

Rather than a stable context, it is treated as a site of intervention through which social conditions can be organized to shape conduct and development, ultimately producing self-managing individuals. How it is shaped varies. But, the environment is continuously understood as adjustable—calibrated through coordination, professional training, evidence standards, and administrative integration. Yet it is rarely imagined as a terrain of redistribution or structural redress. Instead, it is engineered to cultivate competence, belonging, autonomy, and behavioral alignment, qualities that youth are expected to internalize, maximize, in order to fulfill their potential.

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In 1976, two years after the passage of the RYA, the runaway youth environment under President Ford was administrative: the central role of the Office of Youth Development was "the development and implementation of programs serving runaway youth—and their families." As such, the office would "coordinate intradepartmental activities in the field of runaway youth." What is being organized here is not only a set of services but the administrative environment to identify and treat a population. By coordinating activities within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Office of Youth Development assembled programs, information, and expertise into a single policy domain. This intradepartmental integration helped consolidate knowledge and institutional capacity around runaway youth, stabilizing them as a recognizable field of federal intervention. At the same time, the environment of intervention was defined to include families, extending the scope of governance beyond the individual adolescent to the familial context through which youth conduct was to be addressed (HEW 1976, 247).

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In 1980, under the Carter administration, federal youth policy approached youth problems through the management of the institutional environments in which young people developed. Although the initiative does not address runaway youth directly, it reveals the broader policy logic through which youth problems were being governed: institutional environments such as schools were treated as adjustable infrastructures capable of producing commitment, belonging, and conformity. As the OJJDP increased its responsibility in alternative schools, it created them as a delinquency-prevention infrastructure, positioning them as institutional environments whose structure and interactions could be reorganized to shape youth development and reduce delinquent behavior. In the "Working Assumptions" section—where premises are rendered as fact—of the *Prevention of Delinquency through Alternative Education* initiative, the text states that "delinquent behavior *evolves from social environments which limit positive youth development* in the areas of social competence, a sense of belonging and usefulness" (DOJ 1980, 9831, *emphasis added*). Rather than locating delinquency directly in individual pathology, the program frames the problem as one of environmental arrangement that results in individual deficits. Schools—identified as the major socializing institution after the family—are described as settings whose "structure and educational processes" can be altered to "minimize the school's contribution to delinquency." Intervention therefore focuses on modifying institutional environments so that youth encounter "positive and supportive experiences," including improved interactions between adults and students and opportunities for alternative educational pathways. Within this framework, environments are treated as adjustable developmental infrastructures: their organization is expected to produce commitment to schooling, conformity to institutional expectations, and investment in achievement. Youth who lack such a "stake in achievement" are described as more likely to become alienated, engage in delinquent activity, and face unemployment. The desired outcomes—social competence, belonging, and usefulness—remain internal dispositions, but they are understood to emerge from properly configured social settings. Authority thus operates through the management of institutional environments, which are reorganized to cultivate the attitudes and capacities associated with a stable future citizen-worker.

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"Positive youth development" reappeared in the administrative environment over a decade later during the Clinton administration, where it was operationalized as a coordinating strategy across a range of federal initiatives addressing youth crime, health, and prevention. At this time, PYD was taking shape within the academy as a developmental framework, even as it had not yet been formally incorporated into federal policy. Within federal policy, "positive youth development" worked across sectors to produce expert knowledge, coordinate federal prevention initiatives, and embed youth risk management within national health and safety interventions and the knowledge that informed them. At the programmatic level, "positive youth development" operated through a set of interagency initiatives that linked juvenile justice, public health, and community-based prevention.

"Positive youth development" coordinated programmatic initiatives spanning juvenile justice, recreation, education, and prevention science. Its promotion was used in the OJJDP's SafeFutures demonstration sites organized community prevention, intervention, and graduated sanctions within a continuum of care. It was used to justify the National Recreation and Park Association's reframing of public recreation into a site of delinquency prevention, and as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration advanced juvenile courts as mechanisms for accountability and competency development. At the same time, large-scale trials funded through the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention supported early elementary interventions designed to promote coping competence and reduce risks for conduct problems, substance use, and school failure (DOJ 1995, 21854; National Parks and Recreation Association 1994; OJJDP 1997, 11115).

These initiatives were reinforced through federal knowledge production, evaluation, and interagency coordination drawn together by "positive youth development." The OJJDP funded an evaluation on programs promoting "positive youth development" through the National Academy of Sciences, disseminating its "Fact Sheet" across agencies. HHS incorporated PYD into the adolescent health benchmarks of Healthy People 2010, embedding youth development within national health performance objectives. Federally commissioned research also informed HIV prevention guidance for queer youth issued by the CDC, framing youth development as an evidence-based strategy for risk reduction. Through these programmatic, evaluative, and knowledge-building efforts, "positive youth development" was consolidated within a broader federal health and safety agenda linking juvenile justice, public health, and national performance frameworks (OJJDP 2000, RIN No. 1121-ZB86; HHS 2000, 42192; CDC 2001, 1163; DOJ OJJDP 1999, 4941).

A similar logic appeared in federal statements on juvenile delinquency prevention, which framed the environment—specifically the availability of legitimate social roles—as the primary determinant of behavior. The DOJ sought "to strengthen the most powerful contributing factor to socially acceptable behavior—a productive place for young people in a law-abiding society," noting that prevention efforts could operate broadly through "positive youth development" or target youth considered at high risk for delinquency (DOJ 1996–1998, 35251). Drawing on the logics of juvenile delinquency as preventable, it is the absence of a stable, socially recognized role through which young people could participate in lawful society that turns them into delinquents. The role of policy in delinquency prevention then was not on transforming the processes that generate inequality, but to create environmental niches in the lawful order in which young people might produce.

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"Positive youth development" resurfaced in federal policy discourse in 1993 through the Clinton administration's Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities Program (EZ/EC). The EZ/EC initiative advanced a comprehensive, place-based strategy for addressing poverty by linking economic investment, community development, and social services within a limited number of neighborhoods. Within this framework, youth problems such as drug abuse, delinquency, and school failure were framed as inseparable from broader conditions of concentrated poverty, violence, and neighborhood deterioration. In this way, the administration appeared to shift attention away from individual deficiency and toward the environmental contexts that shape housing instability.

This environmental framing was made explicit under the policy heading "Strengthening Community Supports for Youth Development," where the administration argued:

We must begin devising policies and programs that respond not just to problems, not just individuals, not just families, but to whole communities as the client and subject of our concern. Large numbers of youth will not succeed until the environment within a local community supports positive youth development and a sufficiently strong social infrastructure exists to provide special help to those youth who need it (HHS 1994, 11273).

Treating "whole communities as the client" appears to move beyond individualized welfare logics by acknowledging that youth outcomes are shaped by broader social environments. Yet the passage frames communities primarily as environments that must be arranged to enable youth success on scale - no matter the individual youth's deficiency - and promote "positive youth development." Strengthening communities is justified not to redress systemic inequities, but as a means of producing successful youth.

This dynamic appears clearly in the statute establishing the 1994 Youth Gang Drug Prevention Program, which shows how environmental reasoning ultimately returns to the individual subject. Under the heading "Youth Agenda Within the Context of the Social Environment," the notice argues that prevention strategies must be "comprehensive, intensive and multidimensional," reaching "across all aspects of a youth's social environment to effect individual change." Although the document acknowledges the influence of neighborhood conditions, it frames these environments primarily as developmental contexts whose arrangement directly determines youth behavior. Delinquency is attributed to the "vast social isolation and alienation from the wider society" experienced by youth in communities marked by poverty, unemployment, "weak family structures," and violence, while those with "little or no family and/or community supports" are described as especially prone to adolescent childbearing, gang involvement, and school dropout. In this account, social environments appear less as a site of political and economic inequality than as settings that fails to transmit the supports, norms, and opportunities necessary for successful development—a familiar "culture of poverty" argument that links poverty-related harms to actor-deficient behaviors and lack of norm-following rather than unjust structural arrangements.

In the program's formulation, the "environment" refers to the total social field in which youth develop—families, peer networks, neighborhood institutions, and community norms—and in this instance marks them as sites of concentrated poverty, unemployment, violence, and weakened family supports. Under familiar "culture of poverty" reasoning, these conditions are wrongly presented as mutually reinforcing forces that shape youth behavior and life chances, producing isolation from the wider society and increasing the likelihood of delinquency. Environments here are not political and social arrangements, but wholly social contexts marked by deficient supports, distorted peer dynamics, and weakened normative guidance. Because youth are understood to be embedded within this environment, intervention must extend "across all aspects" of their surroundings, coordinating families, community institutions, and local leadership in order to reshape the conditions under which their individual development occurs. Environmental intervention is not a challenge to structural inequities, but a direct and total production of individual change. Again, youth are responsibilized for cultivating self-regulatory capacities to avoid delinquency and assuming productive roles in society.

Methods of service delivery for runaway and homeless youth were also affected through alterations to the human environment . Where "even experienced staff and agency leadership need to enhance their existing skills and develop new ones," they needed to be trained in "a positive youth development approach [that] has gradually emerged," (HHS 2002, 8028). In this formulation, "positive youth development" is not for the youth themselves, but is meant to develop the institutional actors responsible for their care. "Positive youth development" is presented as an evolving framework that requires continuous adaptation among service providers, positioning frontline workers and administrators as participants in the same developmental project that they must cultivate in youth. The language of emergence, enhancement, and skill acquisition thus reorganizes the service environment around ongoing training, coordination, and professional recalibration. In this way, positive youth development does not simply guide intervention with runaway youth; it constructs an administrative milieu in which practitioners themselves are expected to develop their capacities in order to produce changes within youth.

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In the 2000s, under the Bush administration, the rationale of “positive youth development” expanded across federal youth policy, functioning as a broad justificatory framework. Even relatively mundane program components, such as subsidies for after-school snacks, were described as promoting positive youth development (Department of Agriculture 2007, 41602). This expansive logic is visible in funding announced by the Department of Health and Human Services for demonstration projects serving youth with developmental disabilities. Several priority areas were organized around the creation of “inclusive environments,” including service-learning programs in which high school students assist children with developmental disabilities and community initiatives designed to ensure that individuals with developmental disabilities “feel welcome and able to make contributions.” A fifth priority called for the expansion of “positive youth development activities” and “positive community college experiences for young adults with developmental disabilities” (HHS 2003, 37818). Across these initiatives, the environment remains the primary site of intervention, yet it is defined in notably diffuse terms. Rather than the coordinated service infrastructures and cross-agency partnerships emphasized in other policy configurations, the environment here is framed largely through affective and moral qualities—being welcoming, inclusive, and supportive. Intervention is therefore imagined less as the construction of complex institutional arrangements than as the cultivation of positive settings presumed to encourage appropriate developmental behavior. In this formulation, the social environment functions as a relatively simple lever of governance: by fostering inclusive and supportive contexts, policymakers assume that individual conduct will follow.

"Positive youth development" also appeared in federal initiatives targeting other youth populations said to be at-risk. A mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents promoted "positive youth development," here specified as providing youth with "safe and trusting relationships," "healthy messages about life and social behavior," and guidance from a "positive adult role model." Rather than contend with the systemic conditions of parental incarceration, the program effectively equated a parent's legal failing with a moral one, funding an intervention designed to reconstruct the child's developmental environment through administratively managed relationships with carefully screened mentors. Instead of presuming that incarcerated people would want to spend time with their children and creating pathways to support those relationships, the program assumed that proper "messages," role modeling, and civic orientation had to be supplied by externally vetted adults. The solution offered was not family reunification, income stabilization, or structural reform, but the insertion of a sanctioned mentor who could provide "healthy messages" and model appropriate civic participation (HHS 2003, 26624). In this arrangement, the mentor functioned as a moral substitute for the absent parent, reinforcing the idea that stability flowed from exposure to properly ordered adult behavior rather than from material security or transformed carceral policy. Family itself was thus reconfigured as a governable service network—mentors, caregivers, and program staff—responsible for producing the developmental environment presumed necessary for the child's proper formation. Even in the domain of criminal justice, social policy turned toward character formation rather than structural redress, extending the administration's developmental template across another population of youth.

The environment for the runaway and homeless youth population was not only defined as a social setting, but also as the institutional and professional systems responsible for serving them. In 2002, HHS released funds for training and technical assistance to programs for staff at organizations funded by the RHYA. The notice observed that many programs lacked staff with "the full range of skills required to carry out the ever changing responsibilities" of youth services and that effective program models were not being adequately used. Moreover, "even experienced staff and agency leadership need to enhance their existing skills and develop new ones" as "a positive youth development approach has gradually emerged" as an alternative to health and behavioral risks. Finally, these trainings would address the "need to partner with states, local, government, foundations, and community based organizations to establish and support effective long range youth development strategies, funding and policy information" without giving details on how these partnerships would emerge (HHS 2002, 8028). Through this training, staff and administrators were incorporated into the developmental project of "positive youth development," positioned as actors who must continually cultivate their own competencies in order to create the kinds of environments believed to foster youth. Under this logic, the service workforce itself became part of the environment to be improved, meant to build competency and create multi-level partnerships for positive long-term youth outcomes. In this way, intervention did not operate through the direct provision of housing, but through the refinement of the professional capacities and organizational systems expected to generate developmental change. In this arrangement, homelessness appears less as a problem of material provision than as an outcome to be addressed through the optimization of service environments and their human resources.

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Under the Obama administration, “positive youth development” was operationalized through interventions into the human environment surrounding youth. The OJJDP proposed mentoring initiatives emphasizing relationships with supportive adults and participation in community activities. Within juvenile drug courts, mentoring was proposed as a structured component through which youth would receive guidance, encouragement, and support from adult mentors. Programs were encouraged to pair mentors and mentees in efforts to address social issues, participate in community service, or engage in civic projects, practices that research suggested reduced delinquency and strengthened community attachment (Federal Register 2009, 62826). In this configuration, developmental change happened through changes in the relational environment— cultivating supportive interpersonal community-based relationships would keep kids off drugs.

At the same time, “positive youth development” functioned as a coordinating logic across institutional domains. The mentoring initiative was designed to build upon existing partnerships with Reclaiming Futures/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, embedding "positive youth development" within an already established network of courts, treatment providers, and philanthropic actors (Federal Register 2009). Rather than creating a standalone program, the initiative extended developmental governance through these institutional arrangements. “Positive youth development" provided a shared vocabulary—emphasizing strengths, relationships, and supportive environments—through which legal, therapeutic, and community organizations could align their interventions. In this way, developmental programming was integrated into a broader administrative ecology linking juvenile justice, substance abuse treatment, and philanthropic reform efforts.

This relational and institutional logic extended into the Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods initiative. The program sought "to improve significantly the educational and developmental outcomes of children in our most distressed communities, and to transform those communities" through coordinated interventions and civic participation (DOE 2010, 24676). Promise Neighborhoods also operated as a coordinating framework across institutional domains, linking schools, social services, community organizations, and local governments to a proposed neighborhood transformation. Among the proposed activities were opportunities for residents—including youth—to participate in community decision-making and engage in "positive youth development activities such as service-learning" addressing neighborhood challenges. Here, the environment functions simultaneously as the object and instrument of intervention. Like Clinton's EZ/EC's, the program assumes that improving youth outcomes requires transforming the communities in which they live. Yet, in this case, the environmental transformation requires the participation of youth in their environments: by engaging in civic activity, service learning, and community problem-solving. Thus, youth development is framed as a reciprocal process in which reconfigured social environments cultivate developmental capacities that, in turn, contribute to the transformation of those environments.

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From 2020 to 2024, under the Biden administration, "positive youth development" appears less as a signature initiative and more as a normalized component of administrative infrastructure. Like under the Bush administration, grantees for Runaway and Homeless Youth Program funds must participate in technical assistance and training in a range of areas, including those like "aftercare services," "trauma and the effects of trauma on youth," or "risk and protective factors related to youth homelessness." Among this list is "positive youth development." None of these trainings are obligatory, but each staff member must develop through a combination of trainings that are "sufficient to meet the state core-competencies of youth workers" (45 CFR 213512024). (45 CFR §1351, 2024 ed.). "Positive youth development" thus becomes incorporated and normalized as part of a collection of competencies—alongside fiscal management, crisis intervention, and culturally sensitive services—that qualify and professionalize the runaway and youth homelessness profession. "Positive youth development's" presence is no longer rhetorically foregrounded or politically redefined; but embedded within the regulatory expectations that structure everyday service provision.

This placement signals a shift in "positive youth development"'s status. Rather than serving as a newly emerging framework or a vehicle for broader moral articulation, it functions as a routinized element of professional training and program compliance. "positive youth development" becomes part of the technical grammar of homeless services—one competency among many that staff "who work directly with youth should receive training" in order to meet core standards. In this iteration, developmental governance is neither dramatically expanded nor ideologically rebranded; it is institutionalized, folded into the administrative baseline of federally funded youth services.

Moral Futurity

The third governing logic is moral futurity: the organization of intervention around the production of a particular kind of future subject. Within this logic, youth are not simply understood in relation to their present conditions, but are evaluated in terms of the futures they are expected to realize. "Positive youth development" orients policy toward a normative endpoint in which young people become self-sufficient, productive, and civically integrated adults. This future is not open-ended but structured through the figure of the neoliberal subject—a self-managing individual who assumes responsibility for navigating risk, optimizing their capacities, and securing their own economic and social stability. Moral worth becomes tied to this anticipated trajectory, such that success is measured by the extent to which youth internalize and enact these expectations. Intervention is therefore organized not only to address immediate needs, but to shape the dispositions, orientations, and conduct required to achieve this future. In this way, moral futurity aligns present intervention with a projected horizon of productivity and self-regulation, stabilizing a singular vision of what youth should become.

At its endpoint, positive youth development orients youth toward a self-regulated future whose moral content shifts—at times emphasizing independence from welfare, at others healthy marriage, civic participation, or community contribution—while its governing logic remains relatively stable. Youth are positioned as the site through which the nation secures its continuity, their development tethered to the maintenance of economic productivity, social order, and collective optimism. Early formulations framed the task of youth policy as enabling young people "to assume responsible and productive roles in society," while more recent articulations emphasize the development of a "healthy, successful life" (HEW 1976, 247; HHS 2010, 35479). While the moral vocabulary shifts—from responsibility and productivity to health and success—the temporal orientation remains the same: youth policy governs the present by projecting the future adult subject it seeks to produce. In this sense, "positive youth development" operates less in the intention of youth well-being than as a projected moral horizon in which the successful development of young people secures not only their own futures but the stability of the social order. Youth are governed as future citizens whose anticipated productivity, civility, and civic participation promise the continuity of the nation itself. To develop "positively," within this framework, is to become embedded within prevailing social and economic arrangements, where need is alleviated through development and self-management.

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In 2000 under the Clinton administration's culture of poverty argument, the environment was also charged with cultivating the dispositions of future citizens: it had to provide opportunities for youth to establish their self-worth and receive affirmation of their importance to society (Youth Gang Drug Prevention Program 1994, 23868). Within this formulation, the task of policy was to structure developmental settings that would foster recognition, belonging, and moral orientation toward the social order, positioning affirmation not simply as a psychological good but as a mechanism through which youth were prepared to assume their place within society.

The Clinton administration also identified a set of core strategies to involve youth in more socially positive and productive future behaviors. Consulting with experts—representatives from programs, foundations, research institutions, and universities—returned policy to a delinquency prevention logic. They recommended prevention strategies grounded "within a youth development framework rather than the usual problem-oriented approach," shifted attention from the management of present delinquency to the cultivation of the future non-delinquent subject (Youth Gang Drug Prevention Program 1994). Within this formulation, delinquency prevention was reframed as a developmental project: rather than responding to misconduct as it occurred, policy sought to shape the environments and capacities through which youth would come to embody socially productive forms of conduct over time.

At the same time, FYSB, in its effort to help runaway and homeless youth become "self-sufficient," stated that its primary aim was to "provide positive alternatives for youth, ensure their safety, and maximize their potential to take advantage of available opportunities to develop into healthy, productive adults" (ACYF 2000, 1351). Within this formulation, homelessness appeared less as the outcome of systemic processes, such as public disinvestment, than as a matter of navigating choices among available alternatives. Youth were imagined as actors who, if properly guided, would develop the sense to select more constructive paths and take advantage of opportunities placed before them. The state's role was cast as protective—tasked with ensuring safety—though what forms that protection might take remained unspecified and potentially expansive. At the same time, the injunction to maximize youth potential presumed that health and productivity would follow from appropriate choices, positioning the successful transition to responsible adulthood as the natural outcome of proper development. What fell outside the frame was the systemic production and unequal distribution of the opportunities youth were expected to seize. Policy attention thus centered on preparing young people to navigate existing economic and social arrangements rather than interrogating or restructuring the labor markets, housing systems, and public investments that determined which opportunities existed, for whom, and on what terms.

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In a 2008 proclomation—the same year PYD was codified into the RHYA—George Bush defines "positive youth development" in the most minimal terms, where the Helping America's Youth initiative is "dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of positive youth development by keeping children connected to family, school, and community" (Proclamation 2008, 8321). "Positive youth development" is an added component within a broader list of political accomplishment, placed alongside support for pro-life legislation, tax reductions, and parental choice in education. Its brevity underscored how little elaboration was required for the concept to carry political significance. Despite this paucity of definition, positive youth development was nonetheless linked to shaping the "character and future of our Nation." The statement thus relied on a widely legible moral logic: that properly connected and guided youth would mature into responsible adults who would secure the nation's future. In this way, the management of young people's relational attachments in the present became a quiet but consequential component of national futurity.

> For Bush, the future of children and families was directly tied to nation-building: When children are connected to family, community, school, and places of worship, they are more likely to make good choices and reach their full potential…Strong, loving families help young Americans grow into successful adults and build a Nation shining with optimism (Pres. Docs. 2007, 54809).

The passage situates youth development within a broader project of moral futurity. By linking children's moral formation within families and communities to the promise of a "Nation shining with optimism," the statement casts youth development as a technology of nation-building, where the cultivation of responsible, self-governing individuals becomes the means through which the nation secures its future.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that PYD's incorporation into the RHYA is best understood not as a discrete policy innovation but as the consolidation of a longer-standing governing rationality. "Positive youth development" emerges as a flexible yet durable logic through which youth experiencing homelessness are rendered intelligible as future-oriented, self-regulating subjects. It rearranges across political administrations—used to promote a battery of policies concerning abstinence, prison mentoring, or service learning—yet it continuously hinges on the production of subjects capable of self-regulation, productivity, and normative participation in social and economic life.

Even while mutable over time, “positive youth development” consistently orients toward a neoliberal subject across administrations—self-regulating, adaptable, and perpetually improving. Whether framed as prevention, empowerment, resilience, or readiness, its iterations preserve a future-directed ideal of the able citizen-worker. As latent potentialitalities awaiting proper guidance and investment, homelessness is simply a developmental deficit—the result of insufficient planning, regulation, or skill formation—rather than the result of wage stagnation, limited housing services, or discrimination. Thus, the government’s role is not to provide equitable economic and material resources, but mentorship, corrective guidance, and “positive development” opportunities.

Even when homelessness is not seen as a material condition, but a developmental disruption, “positive youth development” is ill-suited to address it. PYD imagines–and studies–adolescence as a protected developmental stage in which youth gradually acquire the skills needed for independent adulthood. This presumption collapses for young people who are already navigating survival on their own, without the temporal or material buffer that such a trajectory requires. Its core architecture positions the nuclear family as a primary site of support, guidance, and attachment, even though for many young people it is a site of conflict, violence, or rejection. It relies on privilege forms of participation that can be inaccessible to youth who are working, underemployed, transient, and always focused on meeting basic needs.

More fundamentally, however, youth homelessness is not a developmental disruption, but a material condition that may be rooted in any number of systemic and enduring problems like housing scarcity, labor precarity, and racialized dispossession. While capacities like self-regulation, resilience, and self-determination may shape how young people experience these conditions, they are wholly insufficient to resolve them. Young people cannot effort their way out of homelessness in the absence of material and social supports, like stable housing. Framing homelessness as a problem of development is a misguided understanding homelessness' causes and its solutions. Directing attention toward individual capacities rather than the structural conditions that make stability unattainable narrows the scope of intervention to what youth must change about themselves, rather than what must be changed about the conditions in which they are living.

Young people should not be reduced to their deficits, but neither should their real internal and external obstacles be erased. No one would argue against promoting young people's autonomy, ensuring they feel supported, or recognizing their contributions. However, within neoliberal logics, these values are reconfigured: autonomy becomes self-management, support becomes a means of behavioral alignment, and contribution is tethered to future economic and civic productivity. Responsibility is thus redistributed both inward and outward, as young people are expected to overcome systemic and historical adversities far beyond their control and at fault when they do not. When development is defined in terms of productivity, contribution, and self-sufficiency, young people are valued insofar as they approximate the ideal of the worker-citizen. What is at stake, then, is not whether youth should feel supported, but how support is conceptualized and to what ends. A critical intervention for runaway and homeless youth does not abandon attention to their strengths, but disentangles those strengths from the imperatives of normalization and productivity—making space to value young people beyond what they can contribute, while foregrounding the provision of material resources necessary for thriving.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, this dissertation has argued that the "runaway and homeless youth" population is not a pre-existing social group, but one that is produced through the interrelated practices of abstraction, designation, and intervention. Across federal policy the diverse experiences of youth housing instability are rendered legible as a coherent and actionable population. This process does not simply describe young people, but organizes, produces, and makes people eligible for address.

In this project, I have examined three processes through which this population is brought into being, where federal policy assembles the population as an abstraction, vulnerability is designated to it, and youth are tasked with their own exits from homelessness through self-development. While analytically distinct, these processes operate in concert, not simply stabilizing the population, but securing its coherence as an object of governance even as its defining features shift across historical moments. The way the population is constituted sets the terms of intervention in advance, delimiting what can be recognized as a problem and what responses can be brought to bear. This orientation shifts analysis from evaluating interventions to examining the conditions under which intervention becomes thinkable, with consequences for both the theory of and policy for youth homelessness.

Some Implications for Social Work Theory

Within social work, the standard categorization of the runaway and homeless youth population as a pre-existing group is useful. It serves as a necessary entry point for intervention and organization, stabilizing the population sufficiently to coordinate services and define eligibility. As existing literature demonstrates, definitional thresholds and typologies render heterogeneous experiences legible as a single population, enabling measurement, comparison, and service provision despite acknowledged variation .

But, as I have shown, these categorizations do more than describe youth—they organize the problem of youth homelessness in ways that shape the responses that become possible. In stabilizing the population, social work theory often locates the causes of homelessness within young people themselves, whether through causal explanations or developmental trajectories. As a result, youth homelessness is apprehended through developmental and psychological frameworks—risk, vulnerability, or capacity—which align the population with particular forms of intervention while drawing attention away from material and systemic conditions. The way the problem is framed shapes what interventions come into view: when homelessness is understood through development, responses center on cultivating individual capacity. Attending to how the population is defined, however, makes visible the conditions such framings exclude, allowing systemic and material causes to emerge as possibilities for intervention. In turn, rethinking the population reconfigures how responsibility is distributed: when homelessness is located within youth, responsibility is organized around self-management and development, whereas understanding the population as produced through policy, services, and broader social arrangements distributes responsibility across institutional and structural conditions alongside individual experience.

Attending to how populations are constituted can expand how social work theory engages with intervention and evaluation. By treating populations as given, the conditions under which they are produced remain unexamined, and alternative formulations—particularly those that locate youth homelessness in housing markets, economic inequality, or institutional arrangements—remain underdeveloped within the field. This framing also shapes how knowledge is produced: the forms of evidence that circulate—risk factors, developmental indicators, and service outcomes—reproduce the classifications that organize intervention. Interrogating the production of the population shifts social work theory from treating needs as self-evident to examining how they are produced, stabilized, and aligned with particular forms of response. Rather than abandoning existing categories, this approach situates them as effects with consequences, making visible how dominant problem formulations privilege interventions such as skill-building and behavioral change while rendering material responses, such as direct housing provision, less central or less thinkable. In this sense, attending to how populations and their associated interventions are formed—rather than assumed—opens space to consider responses that are not organized solely around the development of the subject, but around the provision of the material conditions that make stability possible.

Attending to population formation also engages questions of equity. Within formally color-blind policy, race is not absent but embedded in the terms through which vulnerability is recognized, with whiteness operating as an implicit norm that shapes who can be seen as in need of care. Existing approaches often treat race as a demographic characteristic or a site of disparity within a given population, focusing on unequal outcomes while taking the population itself as given. By contrast, treating race as embedded in the production of the population shifts attention to how vulnerability is assigned, how subjects are differentiated, and how interventions are organized. This shift changes how inequality is addressed: rather than focusing only on equitable access or outcomes, it becomes possible to examine how categories such as vulnerability, risk, and eligibility organize unequal recognition and response from the outset, shaping who is seen as in need, who qualifies for services, and how support is allocated. From this perspective, addressing the material conditions of youth homelessness—particularly access to housing—cannot be separated from addressing the inequitable structures through which those conditions are produced. Anti-racism, anti-sexism, and queer support therefore extend beyond improving representation within existing frameworks to intervening in the material conditions and classificatory logics that structure both vulnerability and response. This analysis thus shifts the treatment of race from a characteristic of the population to a condition of its production, even as the consequences of that production remain materially real.

Some Implications for Policy

The findings of this dissertation have implications for how youth homelessness is defined and addressed at the level of policy. Federal policy organizes youth homelessness through administratively legible categories—vulnerability, risk, and developmental capacity—that orient intervention toward short-term stabilization and individual development. Services are structured accordingly: crisis shelter, time-limited programming, and interventions designed to cultivate self-sufficiency and future orientation. While these interventions address immediate needs, they operate within a framework that leaves the material conditions of youth homelessness largely unchanged.

Within this arrangement, housing is positioned as an outcome to be achieved through successful development rather than as a condition that precedes and enables stability. This framing narrows the scope of state obligation, directing policy toward the management of individuals rather than the provision of material resources. As a result, policy design prioritizes interventions that assess readiness, track progress, and measure independence, while comparatively underdeveloping approaches centered on direct and sustained housing provision.

From this perspective, the implication is not to abandon existing services, but to reconfigure their relation to material provision. Policies could shift from treating housing as a downstream achievement to establishing it as a baseline condition, for example through expanded access to supportive housing, longer-term or non-time-limited programs, and reduced eligibility thresholds tied to behavioral or developmental criteria. Similarly, funding structures could be adjusted to support housing-first or low-barrier models that do not require demonstrated readiness or compliance as a condition of access.

Taken together, these findings suggest that policy plays a central role not only in addressing youth homelessness, but in shaping what it is understood to be. Reframing the population at the level of policy—away from development and toward material conditions—expands the range of interventions that can be funded, implemented, and sustained, even as existing services continue to operate within those constraints.

This is not a call to abandon intervention, but to reconsider its terms. When the population is taken as given, responses remain tethered to its logic—organized around development, risk, and individual capacity. When those terms are made visible as effects, their limits also come into view, along with alternative ways of thinking about response. Youth homelessness, in this frame, is no longer reducible to the attributes of young people, but appears as a site where administrative practices, social conditions, and political rationalities converge.

The significance of this shift is practical as well as analytic. How youth homelessness is defined shapes what can be done about it: whether intervention centers on changing young people, or on altering the conditions in which they live. Attending to how these definitions are produced does not resolve that tension, but it makes visible the choices embedded within it. In doing so, this analysis opens space for responses that extend beyond the current terms of intervention.

Some Implications for Practice

Just as runaway and homeless youth are not a pre-given population, adolescence is also a historically situated category, not a self-evident biological stage. Further, adolescence is a moral category, the current iteration “an expression of distinctive values relating to children and the family that originated in America as early as the 1830s” (Kett 1977, 7). In this sense, the interventions authorized through the RHYA—including developmental services, transitional programs, life-skills training, family reunification, and self-sufficiency models—do not respond only to homelessness as a material condition, but to historically specific ideas about who adolescents are and the best way for them to proceed into adulthood. As a moral historico-political category, it organizes tensions between dependence and autonomy, vulnerability and resilience, and present need and future potential. Within these binaries, I look to Amster’s (2008) concept of a “third way” between conservative abjection of the individual and liberal insistence on structural causation, “that credits structural explanations yet seeks to preserve individual autonomy and promote a spirit of contestation” (13) even while acknowledging that choice is a complex notion amongst a marginalized population. Taking adolescence as a moral category extends questions about governance, changing the kinds of interventions that can become imaginable for a morally-inscribed social formation, rather than a developmental fact.

Dependence and autonomy

The historical tensions between the levels of dependence and autonomy expected of young people present a range of implications. Current interventions for runaway and homeless youth presume that the proper endpoint of services is independence–more specifically, non-reliance on the state, whether it be through family reunification or the proper cultivation of job readiness and its subsequent financial liberation. Certainly, where violence is not prohibitive, tailored family-based interventions have proven useful (Braciszewski, Toro, and Stout (2016)). But in the absence of interest in or possibilities of family reunification, I argue that youth homelessness interventions should be less concerned with moving young people toward individualized self-sufficiency and directed more towards collective solutions.

Kett (1977) points out that modern adolescents are fashioned as consumers rather than producers. In contrast to earlier labor arrangements like apprenticeships or service positions that required children and teens to leave home, young people are now expected to reside with the family, attend school into adulthood, and remain dependent on others during this time (7, 36, 170). In this sense, the conditions of runaway and homeless youth are somewhat anachronistic, and certainly lacking the social systems and labor opportunities of earlier historical arrangements. Somewhat contradictory, the 20th century also introduced greater age segregation from adults, where young people spend more of their time among other young people than in intergenerational settings (Kett 1977, 3). Taken together, these historical facts have implications for how youth housing might be imagined.

If the runaway and homeless youth population works against the prolonged dependence of modern childhood, but fully participates in peer association, responses to homelessness could make greater space for collective and semi-collective peer-based living. In his ethnography of adult homelessness, Desjarlais (1997) found that the best housing arrangements were those in which people live “in privacy within communities of others” (242)--providing individual arrangements within collective spaces. Kett’s (1977) discussion of voluntarism points to a broader history of youth association that, by the early twentieth century, had increasingly taken secular and adult-scaffolded form in organizations such as the Boy Scouts (Kett 1977, 215). These organizations were not free of adult supervision or civic pedagogy; rather, they show that collective youth life has long been organized through a mixture of peer association, moral training, and citizenship formation. In that sense, the relevance of voluntarism to runaway and homeless youth housing is not that it offers a model of ungoverned youth autonomy, but that it suggests adolescence has historically included collective forms of living and association not reducible either to privatized family residence or to individualized service provision. Considering youth-driven, collective living arrangements might allow runway and homeless youth might sit more comfortably within the historical organization of contemporary adolescence.

Finally, in his discussion of adult homelessness, Amster (2008) emphasizes the political significance of spaces beyond the shelter. For him, the presence of unhoused people in parks, on sidewalks, and in other public places reveals urban poverty not as a failure of capitalism, but as one of its outcomes. Cities, in turn, often attempt to manage that visibility through exclusion, criminalization, and displacement. In this account, the political force of homelessness lies partly in public presence itself—in the ability to gather, linger, and remain visible outside the terms of formal incorporation (13). While young people most likely do not want to be visible in these ways, one implication is the cultivation of public and semi-public spaces where all young people can gather, socialize, rest, and build community without being immediately folded into institutional settings, like shelters or schools. Such spaces may offer material respite, alongside opportunities for autonomy and sociality that are not wholly organized by adult rules, service plans, or developmental supervision.

Vulnerability and resilience

Chapters 2 and 3 detail how homeless youth receive services through the recognition and designation of vulnerability while simultaneously being asked to demonstrate self-management and developmental promise. One way to begin loosening this tension is to separate housing from the demand that young people either perform injury or demonstrate resilience in order to receive support. Amster's attempt to hold individual autonomy together with broader structural redress is useful here, as is Desjarlais's insistence that "any therapeutic or social services should generally be made available to people rather than forced upon them" (1997, 242). These interventions suggest that youth services might be organized less around the treatment of presumed pathology and more around voluntary access and material supports, sometimes provided in community. This is not to suggest that therapeutic services, STI education and testing, or substance use treatment are unnecessary, since young people may want or need such services. Rather, these services should be decentralized as the organizing rationales of interventions, nor should mental health, substance use, or sexual health be treated as the central explanation for youth homelessness itself. Support can be made available without becoming compulsory, and housing can be offered without requiring young people pathological or developmentally deficient subjects.

More fundamentally, however, this tension points toward the need for a rights-based approach to youth housing. Rather than distributing housing through increasingly fine-grained assessments of vulnerability, a rights-based framework would begin from the premise that safe, stable, and adequate housing should not depend on a young person's ability to embody the proper degree of injury, risk, or future potential. Such an approach would not eliminate differences in need, but it would shift the purpose of intervention away from the street-level bureaucracies that determine who most deserves housing, but that all youth that need housing have it.

Osborne's (2019) analysis shows that when access to housing or services depends upon recognizable performances of vulnerability, interventions risk reproducing narrow expectations about who can legitimately claim support. One implication, then, is that responses to youth homelessness should be cautious about tying care too tightly either to the performance of injury or resilience. The problem is not that differences in need are unimportant, but that under conditions of scarcity those differences become the basis for determinations of need by degree. When housing is distributed as a limited benefit rather than secured as a right, assessments of vulnerability or developmental promise begin to sort young people into hierarchies of deservingness, determining who is vulnerable enough to warrant immediate support and who is resilient enough to be deferred, redirected, or managed through less stable arrangements. A shift toward collective or community-based forms of living may create more room to accommodate different needs without requiring young people to continuously compete for resources.

Present needs and future potential

I have shown that youth homelessness is not seen as a housing issue, but rendered as a developmental deficiency, a threat to future productivity, and a site for intervention into education, employment, health, sexuality, and family life. As a result, young people are asked to orient themselves toward future self-sufficiency, future stability, and future adulthood even when their most immediate needs might be for shelter or safety. This temporal organization of intervention is especially visible in positive youth development practices, which treat the present as a period of managed transition oriented toward a more successful future self.

One implication is that youth housing policy might give greater weight to the present by moving away from time-limited interventions. In Cox's (2015) ethnographic study of a Detroit youth shelter, one resident, Florine, reflects on the shelter's time limits by insisting, "I think we should stay in the shelter longer" (105). This comment echoes across archival material that shows an arbitrariness to time limitations and dissatisfaction with their brevity (see Chapter 1). Longer or rescinded time limits might allow for services oriented more towards current needs than future resiliencies.

While the future is currently located on an individualized horizon—stable employment, educational attainment, self-sufficiency, resilience, and successful adulthood—it takes a different form when imagined collectively. Rather than centering the developmental advancement of an individual young person, a collective future should concern itself with the systemic conditions that produce youth homelessness in the first place, including housing markets, underemployment, and racism. Hopper (2003) documents how "advocacy for the homeless poor in the United States has spanned a wide range of activities: from disruptive street theatre and mass demonstrations; to drafting and lobbying for legislation in local, state, and federal precincts; to protracted legal proceedings; to scholarly articles and popular broadsides; to the auto-instruction implicit in volunteer work" (177). Read in this light, the alternative to future-oriented developmental intervention is not the abandonment of futurity, but a different future politics: one organized around housing advocacy, collective demands, and alliances between young people and adult supporters. To foreground present needs, then, is not to refuse the future, but to relocate it—away from the production of resilient subjects and toward the political capacities, collective claims, and structural transformations through which youth homelessness might be addressed as a shared socially and politically.

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