

PART 4

ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION

4.1 ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR PRIORITIZING HOUSING RESOURCES FOR YOUTH WHO ARE HOMELESS

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CONTEXT & EVIDENCE

In almost all communities in North America, the number of youth experiencing homelessness exceeds the capacity of the housing resources available to them. This situation leaves communities with the predicament of trying to decide who to prioritize for the precious few spots available in housing programs. For adults, this same dynamic exists and many communities have turned to vulnerability assessment tools to help them make these difficult decisions. Most communities have moved to a coordinated entry system. In such systems, most agencies within a community pool their housing resources in a centralized system. People seeking housing are first assessed for eligibility. Criteria usually include being chronically homeless, in addition to veteran status and vulnerability (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015, 2016). Based on these assessments, individuals are prioritized for housing and placed on waiting lists until appropriate housing becomes available in the community.

In the context of adult homelessness, tools for assessing vulnerability have focused on assessing factors associated with premature mortality (Hwang, Lebow, Bierer et al., 1998; Juneau Economic Development Council, 2009; Swanborough, 2011) or with greatest system costs (Economic Roundtable, 2011). However, since youth under age 24 are unlikely to experience health-related premature mortality or to have created enormous system costs, new assessment tools have been developed in recent years that reflect the needs and realities of youth who are homeless. Most widely used are the TAY Triage Tool (Rice, 2013), developed by the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) and myself, and the Next Step Tool for Homeless Youth,¹ which was developed by Orgcode Consulting (2015) with CSH and myself.

¹ The full name of the tool is Transition Age Youth – Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (TAY-VI-SPDAT).

TAY TRIAGE TOOL

The TAY Triage Tool (see below) is a seven-item (six-point) index based on extensive research conducted by myself in conjunction with CSH. Unlike the adult tools, which are based on developing predictors of system cost or premature mortality, the TAY Triage Tool is anchored in assessing which youth are most likely to experience long-term homelessness. The tool defines long-term homelessness as five or more years of housing instability. We arrived at this definition in consultation with key stakeholders from the systems of care that serve youth in Los Angeles who are homeless. These stakeholders included permanent supportive housing providers and representatives from foster care, juvenile justice, housing, and mental health who met with us to discuss what issues were most salient for youth (Rice, 2013).

TAY Triage Tool Questions

1. Have you ever become homeless because: There was violence at home between family members? (1 point if yes)
2. Have you ever become homeless because: I had differences in religious beliefs with parents/guardians/caregivers? (1 point if yes)
- 3a. Have you ever become homeless because: I ran away from my family home?
- 3b. Have you ever become homeless because: I ran away from a group home or foster home? (1 point if yes to 3a and/or 3b)
4. If you have ever tried marijuana, how old were you the first time you ever tried it? (1 point if youth was age 12 or younger)
5. Before your 18th birthday, did you spend any time in jail or detention? (1 point if yes)
6. Have you ever been pregnant or got someone else pregnant? (1 point if yes)

From TAY Triage Tool Pilots Report (p. 7), by E. Rice and A. Rosales, 2015, New York: Corporation for Supportive Housing. Copyright 2015. Reprinted with permission.

Based on the literature on vulnerability and risk-taking among youth who are homeless (e.g., Milburn et al., 2009; Toro, 2011), we assessed a large number of possible variables to include in the triage tool. Whenever it was possible, we tried to focus on specifications of variables that were likely to precede long-term homelessness in order to avoid complex issues of causality. For example, rather than assessing current levels of alcohol use, we assessed whether the youth had consumed alcohol at age 12 or younger. We chose this specific variable because high levels of alcohol use could lead to long-term homelessness, but long-term homelessness could just as easily lead to high levels of alcohol use, whereas using alcohol before age 12 is unlikely to be a result of long-term homelessness among youth.

In the process of arriving at the final items included in the TAY Triage Tool, we examined approximately 50 possible associations, including 19 different reasons for becoming homeless (e.g., “I experienced sexual abuse,” “my desire for adventure”). Other possible associations included alcohol and marijuana use; first sexual experience at age 12 or younger; foster care involvement; incarceration before age 18; eight different traumatic experiences (e.g., “being hit, punched, or kicked very hard at home”); symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder; employment; dropping out of high school; being HIV-positive; testing positive for other sexually transmitted infections; currently sleeping on the streets; having children; being pregnant (or impregnating someone); trading sex for money, food, drugs, housing, or other resources; sexual orientation and gender; and race/ethnicity. Details about the modelling strategy that resulted in the final scale can be found in the summary report available online (Rice, 2013).

This work was followed by two years of extensive research in various cities that tested the tool’s generalizability and validity. Five additional communities pilot tested the implementation of the tool. Its generalizability was supported by data we collected in Clark County, Nevada, and in Connecticut. The data showed that scores were associated with longer term homelessness in those communities. We used focus groups to assess the face validity of the tool, and in Nevada and Connecticut, we were able to assess construct validity as well. Details of this testing are presented in a report that is available online (Rice & Rosales, 2015).

NEXT STEP TOOL FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

Another targeted assessment tool is the Next Step Tool for Homeless Youth developed by Orgcode Consulting (2015). The development process of this evidence-informed tool involved an extensive review of the scientific literature on vulnerability factors for youth who are homeless and then creating assessment items that capture factors identified in the review. In consultation with CSH and myself, Orgcode incorporated items from the TAY Triage Tool into its larger assessment tool. It is worth noting that some items in the Next Step Tool we eliminated from the TAY Triage Tool because the item did not differentiate between shorter- and longer-term homelessness. An example of this is: “Have you been attacked or beaten up since you’ve become homeless?” Conversely, there are items the Next Step Tool incorporates that were not considered in the development of the TAY Triage Tool, such as “Does anybody force or trick you to do things that you do not want to do?” Neither tool is perfect. Both, however, strive to identify vulnerable youth in order to help communities prioritize housing for youth based on objective criteria known to assess vulnerability.

USING ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO INFORM INTERVENTIONS

Using either or both of these assessment tools to inform an intervention requires several steps:

1. The community decides whether to adopt a coordinated entry system that will screen and assess the vulnerability of youth who are accessing services and who need housing, or whether a single housing agency will use the tool.
2. The tools are then used as part of a coordinated entry system or by a particular housing agency if a coordinated entry system is not in place.
3. Based on the scores, the community decides which youth to prioritize for housing.
4. The community matches youth to particular housing options available in the community.
5. The community assesses the outcomes of youth placed into housing with the tool and in an iterative fashion adjusts steps 3 and 4 to best assist the greatest number of youth.

Because these tools are very new and coordinated entry systems for youth are just now being implemented in many communities, there is still much debate about prioritizing youth and matching them to housing options. These issues and the five steps are discussed in the following sections.

USING A COORDINATED ENTRY SYSTEM

The TAY Triage and Next Step tools can help communities and individual agencies prioritize youth for housing and even match youth to housing resources. Many communities, particularly in the United States, have attempted to create coordinated entry systems for youth and have incorporated these tools into them. These systems usually cut across a continuum of care, in some instances, a single city, county, or even state. Most coordinated entry system efforts involve the majority of providers of basic care to youth who are homeless (e.g., drop-in centres, emergency shelters), as well as housing providers (including permanent supportive housing and transitional-living programs). While I do not have information about every community in the country, I have been on the steering committee of a nine-community collaborative called the Coordinated Entry Learning Collaborative. The group is led by Megan Blondin of MANY, a U.S. network that engages stakeholders across sectors to support vulnerable youth and young adults. The nine communities are Los Angeles and Sacramento, California; the State of Connecticut; King County, Washington; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Washington, DC; Clark County, Nevada; and St. Louis, Missouri. All of these communities are implementing the Next Step Tool and simultaneously collecting information on the specific items that make up the TAY Triage Tool. The plan is to evaluate both tools as the data are collected simultaneously.

ASSESSING VULNERABILITY

Both the TAY Triage and Next Step tools are quick ways to assess vulnerability. The 28-item Next Step Tool can be delivered as is and is available for free from the Orgcode Consulting website (www.orgcode.com). Because the TAY Triage Tool is even briefer, it is recommended that communities embed it within a larger (but still short) assessment. Most communities have a brief screening tool that collects basic demographic and contact information, and that determines program eligibility. This would be an ideal instrument in which to embed the TAY Triage Tool. CSH and I have also posted online an example questionnaire that can be used as is and can be downloaded for free (www.csh.org/TAYTriageTool). Neither tool requires extensive training. The CSH link includes a presentation of the TAY Triage Tool that explains how to implement the tool in a community context. An online video about the Next Step Tool is available at www.vimeo.com/iaindejong.

In my work with the Coordinated Entry Learning Collaborative, one complication has emerged around assessing youth. Not all communities assess the same youth. In some communities, workers are taking the tool with them when they do street outreach, and in other communities, youth are being assessed in drop-in centres. This means that many youth who do not access social or housing services are being reached, but that youth who are entirely resistant to services are not. Other communities are using the tools only when youth present at housing agencies looking for specific assistance with housing. This approach reaches an even smaller number of more highly service-engaged youth. How and where the tools are being used affects the distribution of scores. Communities that use street outreach are seeing more high-scoring youth than those that use drop-in services as assessment points, which in turn see more high-scoring youth than those who use the tools in the context of housing agencies. It is not clear what approach is best; the approach should be determined by the specific needs and resources of a given community.

Based on the research that went into the creation of the TAY Triage Tool, we know that youth who score higher are more vulnerable to long-term homelessness (Rice, 2013; Rice & Rosales, 2015). In the case of the Next Step Tool, this is a general vulnerability, not tied to a particular outcome, and no research has been conducted to date that links this tool to particular outcomes, such as long-term homelessness, substance abuse, or mental health issues. We also know that youth who scored higher on the TAY Triage Tool had higher rates of depression and reported more traumatic experiences and problems with drugs and alcohol (Rice, 2013). An added benefit of the Next Step Tool is that it is based on a scoring system that has been calibrated to match the scoring systems of Orgcode Consulting's tools for single adults and families. This means that in communities where there is no separate coordinated entry system for youth, but where youth are competing for "adult" resources, their vulnerability can be assessed with a youth-appropriate tool that uses the same overall scoring system as the adult tools. The TAY Triage Tool, on the other hand, is a standalone instrument that is not easily comparable to other assessment tools for other populations.

PRIORITIZING YOUTH

Communities or particular housing organizations must decide how to use assessment scores to prioritize youth. The action taken in this step depends largely on the housing resources available to the community. If there is enough housing for every youth who needs it, then a reasonable use of the prioritization tool may be simply as a queueing mechanism for who gets served first, but all youth will get placed. On the other hand, if there is an enormous gap between housing need and available housing, as is the case in Los Angeles, then communities can use these tools to prioritize youth for housing. This process is often painful for many service providers and communities because they want to help everyone.

Determining priority based on vulnerability raises the issue of early intervention. Youth who quickly exit homelessness to more stable housing are less likely to experience mental health and substance use problems (Milburn et al., 2009; Toro, 2011). This finding suggests the importance of intervening early—reaching youth when they first hit the streets, before they begin to accumulate negative street experiences and feel their many effects. Moreover, youth who score high on vulnerability (at least on the TAY Triage Tool) are more likely to have substance use and mental health issues that need more intensive services (Rice, 2013). The benefit of the TAY Triage Tool in this context is that all the items are related to early life experiences that can pre-date the first episode of homelessness and thus can be used to identify youth who are likely to experience many problems later in life, even if those problems have not yet emerged. Helping youth early in their homelessness experiences is important for long-term positive outcomes. How this may complicate the prioritization process is not entirely clear.

MATCHING YOUTH TO HOUSING

Once youth have been prioritized, communities and housing organizations need to determine how to use the vulnerability scores to decide what specific program is most appropriate for each youth. Currently, there is no research to validate the specific cut scores on the TAY Triage or New Step tools. Moreover, there is no research evidence to suggest that cut scores from either tool successfully place youth in particular housing situations. My feeling is that youth who score higher on either tool will likely have the most difficulty successfully transitioning into housing and remaining stably housed. However, both tools make recommendations for housing that are intended to ensure that

highly vulnerable youth are prioritized for intensive housing resources. With the TAY Triage Tool, we suggest that youth who score 4 or higher be prioritized for high-intensity housing services, such as permanent supportive housing, but that may also include high-support or high-intensity transitional living programs. This recommendation was based on our research which found that youth who score 4 or higher have many co-occurring issues, such as mental health and substance use problems and traumatic experiences. These youth are more likely not only to spend longer on the streets without intervention, but also to have various complex issues that require intensive case management in conjunction with housing resources. Orgcode Consulting recommends that youth who score 8 or higher on the Next Step Tool be assessed for long-term housing with high-intensity services (Orgcode Consulting, 2015). This score was decided on to calibrate the youth tool to an equivalent scoring scale in the single adult and family tools.

The assumption behind the TAY Triage and Next Step tools is that youth who are more vulnerable are in greater need of more intensive services, likely permanent supportive housing, whereas youth who score lower need less intensive services or may benefit from non-housing support services. In theory, these assumptions seem reasonable, but there is limited evidence to date to support them. A score of 4 or higher on the TAY Triage Tool does differentiate between youth who have many co-occurring issues and those who have few, and it seems reasonable to assume that those higher-scoring youth will need high-intensity services. But no evaluation research exists to demonstrate that these cut scores are the most accurate reflections of vulnerability and need. Therefore, communities should use these scores with caution, thoughtfully and iteratively, to determine how and when to use them.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES & REFINING THE PROCESS

I cannot stress enough the importance of evaluation, the final step in the intervention process. At the time of writing this chapter, very few communities, even within the Coordinated Entry Learning Collaborative, have placed enough youth into housing with the assistance of these assessment tools to be able to evaluate placement outcomes. Thus, we are in the uncomfortable position of not yet knowing exactly how well this process works. Communities need to conduct extensive qualitative and quantitative evaluations of the assessment, prioritization, and matching processes so they can refine them. The lives of thousands of youth depend on a thoughtful and rigorous implementation of housing interventions.

In the context of outcome evaluations, communities should assess whether the tools are appropriately assessing, prioritizing, and placing all youth. Some high-scoring youth may need only time-limited supports of moderate intensity because they have personal resilience factors that outweigh their vulnerability. For some youth, returning to family homes or short-term rental subsidies may be sufficient. Likewise, some youth who score relatively low may actually need high-intensity services. In my work with the Coordinated Entry Learning Collaborative, I have seen this latter situation with youth who have severe cognitive or developmental delays who may not engage in many risky behaviours but who nonetheless need high-intensity services to thrive. Communities should consider such issues as they plan, evaluate, and iteratively adjust their housing systems for youth.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Scores on these tools should not be translated into housing placement decisions without plans to evaluate and adjust score-based decisions over time. We have recommended that youth who score 4 or higher on the TAY Triage Tool be prioritized for housing with high-intensity services. Orgcode Consulting (2015) has recommended that youth who score 8 or higher on the Next Step Tool be prioritized for such services. However, the jury is still out on whether these recommendations actually lead to successful housing placements and positive youth outcomes. There is no evidence yet on what using these cut points will do for communities or for the youth being placed in housing. We need much more evaluation research. Still, communities must start somewhere and these recommendations were developed very carefully. As communities conduct their evaluation work, they should consider how to adjust these score-based placement decisions based on actual outcomes in their specific programs.

Youth who score higher on these tools are likely to have the most difficulty staying in housing and to have relatively poor outcomes. Communities need to remember that high-scoring youth have many co-occurring issues that include mental health and substance use issues and histories of trauma. These youth face many challenges and need intensive services. The challenges may make it more difficult for them to attain employment or exit housing programs to stable, independent housing. Communities should recognize that program outcomes for the most vulnerable youth may not be as “good” as those for youth who are less vulnerable.

Housing programs should not fill an entire housing program, especially congregate living programs, with only high-scoring youth. Decades of research with high-risk youth show that interventions that incorporate only high-risk youth can increase negative outcomes through what is known as “deviancy training” (Dishion & Dodge, 2005). The most effective youth programs have a mix of high-risk and lower-risk youth with active adult mentoring and supervision. This approach effectively downplays the normative importance of high-risk behaviour and augments the normative importance of pro-social behaviour. Thus, communities must think very carefully about how to house the most vulnerable youth.

KEY MESSAGES FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Assessment tools such as the TAY Triage and Next Step tools can help communities prioritize youth in need of housing.
- These tools support housing interventions for youth who are homeless by assessing needs, prioritizing youth, matching youth with appropriate housing, evaluating placement outcomes, and helping to refine the entire process.
- Most communities are early in the process of adopting these tools and more evaluation research is needed to refine the process.
- To date, no research has evaluated the utility or consequences of the specific cut scores recommended by these assessment tools. Communities must conduct rigorous evaluations of how cut scores are used in the allocation of housing resources.
- Implementation challenges should be considered: specific threshold scores should be adjusted based on evaluation work; youth who score high on assessment tools are likely to face more challenges once they are housed; and placing only high-risk youth together in congregate living programs may increase negative outcomes.

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