

Couch hopping with informal hosts can benefit youth facing homelessness, but more support through policy change and investment is needed



Many young people facing homelessness seek accommodation through couch hopping and other forms of informal housing arrangements. In new research [Mallory VanMeeter](#) finds that informal hosts can play a positive role for those facing housing instability and looks at the financial and policy barriers preventing families from hosting youth in a way that is conducive to creating a positive, stable environment. They write that to create more beneficial hosting environments, policymakers need to include informal hosts in service planning, public benefits structures, and renter protections to confer legitimacy on this type of accommodation.

In 2021, [over half \(58 percent\) of young adults aged 18 to 24 in the US lived with a parent or guardian](#). This natural housing “safety net” is broadly seen as safe and stable. And in some Black, Indigenous and other communities of color (BIPOC), [intergenerational living is not only accepted, but preferred](#). Doubling up among adult-headed households is an effective response to [financial precarity](#), may improve social emotional health, and [distributes child and eldercare responsibilities](#).

By definition, unaccompanied youth and young adults facing homelessness don’t have the option of living with their parents or guardians. Even still, [many of these youth rely on other people in their support network when they need a place to stay](#) – what’s often called couch hopping, couch surfing, doubling up, or informal hosting. But unlike youth who stay with parents or guardians, the assumption is often that couch hopping youth face risky and unstable situations. Research to date has largely focused on short-term couch hopping. Findings confirm that [some couch hopping is indeed uncomfortable or unsafe](#). But this is not the whole story.

Informal hosts can be resources, cheerleaders, and chosen family

I was part of a team of researchers working to build a more complete picture of youth in shared housing situations in the US. To learn more about their experiences, we talked to nine unstably housed youth aged 17 to 23 and ten adult hosts in a Midwestern state. We focused on intergenerational, non-romantic hosting relationships that had gone on for at least three weeks.

[Our research](#) based on these interviews highlights the positive role that some informal hosts play in the lives of youth facing homelessness. Many hosts provided support beyond a bed. They gave youth a sense of belonging and helped them access resources and to plan. And for many youth, informal hosts became like family. Annie, a pseudonym of one young woman we interviewed, described the informal hosting situation as “a home away from home,” and reflected on how she felt early on:

“I think the big thing was, like—I get goose bumps just thinking about it—including me in family, like, I had a family.”

Our work established that some youth stay with caring adults who are an important part of their support network and may be chosen family. This challenges the idea that services should always help youth *leave* couch hopping arrangements. For many of the youth in our study, this would mean isolating them from a positive connection. Instead, we could start imagining ways to invest in positive hosting arrangements, to help stabilize them.

Informal hosts face destabilizing financial and housing challenges

Our second [study](#) dug deeper into the causes of instability in informal hosting. Our goal was to identify whether informal hosting was impacted by material challenges that could be addressed with outside help, as well as policy and systemic change. We found that financial barriers and housing restrictions can make it hard for hosts to stably house youth.

Many of the hosts in our study talked about household financial challenges. These hosts found it particularly difficult to weather the increased food costs and utility bills associated with hosting. One host, Julia, had taken in many young people over the years. She said, “Maybe we can do very well if it was just [me and my husband],” but with the costs of informal hosting, “I’ve been down to \$2.50 in my account before. . . even like this last Christmas.”



Photo by Vlada Karpovich.

Hosts who were renters and those who relied on housing benefits programs came up against restrictions that undermined hosting arrangements and sometimes put their own housing at risk. Leases often restrict how long renters can host guests, [often less than two weeks](#). One renter host, GERALYN, talked about how being a renter rather than a homeowner impacted her hosting:

“[It] would be great if we were homeowners and then we wouldn’t have to worry about [getting kicked out]. Because . . . home ownership is so far from where we’re at today, we just kinda got to sneak around.”

Another host, Jason, was found out by the property management company and given an ultimatum: either the youth leaves, or they all get evicted.

Renter hosts who relied on Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8) or other housing benefits found themselves in a particularly tight bind. If the local housing authority discovered an unauthorized guest in the household, hosts could lose their benefits – a real disaster, when families [wait years](#) on average to get a voucher. This deprives hosts of any hope of making arrangement “above board” and to receive outside support. Denise lamented:

“I have no idea where I could get the support without being honest that I’m on Section 8 and that I can’t have [a youth] there living with me...”

Both hosts and youth were resourceful in trying to overcome these financial and housing challenges. Youth often contributed to the household to help make ends meet. Some chipped in to rent, but most found other ways to help – using their food stamps for groceries, doing chores, and covering their own personal expenses. Renter hosts and those on housing benefits worked around the rules or hosted under the radar. Despite these coping tactics, instability still loomed for many of the youth and hosts in our study.

It's important to recognize that these kinds of financial and housing barriers have a wider impact on communities of color. Black, Indigenous, and other households of color (BIPOC) are [more likely to be renters](#) and [low income](#), compared to non-Hispanic White households. At the same time, BIPOC youth are [more likely to experience housing instability](#) and [to couch hop](#). These patterns are all bound up in historic and ongoing racial injustices, from [red lining](#) to racialized exclusion from [educational](#) and [economic opportunity](#).

Policy and system change is needed to strengthen informal hosting

Low-income hosts and renter hosts are not less caring or generous by nature than other adults. But informal hosting comes with costs, and very little opportunity for outside support. Our homeless service system has few avenues for formalizing or investing in informal hosting. And currently, housing benefits policy and renter protections don't consider the needs of informal hosts. The status quo is especially troubling from a racial justice perspective. If we fail to invest in and protect informal hosts, we also miss an opportunity to grapple with the community-level roots of BIPOC youth homelessness.

Funders, government agencies, service providers, and policymakers need to reimagine their approach to couch hopping. CloseKnit, a core partner in this research effort, recently launched the [Chosen Family Justice initiative](#) to help lead the way. For example, the [Under the Radar, Above Board](#) resource describes the pros and cons of informal and formal hosting for everyone involved, including legal and benefits considerations.

These resources can help service providers play a role in helping families navigate the material barriers to hosting. But in the long term, systems and policymakers need to intentionally include informal hosts in service planning, public benefits structures, and renter protections. These structural changes could help increase community capacity to care for precariously housed youth and address racial disparities caused by generations of government disinvestment.

- *This article is based on the papers '[Beyond a Bed: Supportive Connections Forged Between Youth Who Are Couch Hopping and Adult Hosts](#)' in *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, and "[The Costs of Caring: Navigating Material Challenges When Adults Informally Host Youth Facing Homelessness](#)" in *Youth & Society*.*

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