The Homestretch - Discussion Guide

From the Filmmakers

Five years ago, a young high school student that Kirsten was working with on a theater project revealed to her that he was homeless and completely on his own. It was one of those moments in life when everything just stopped — how could this be? This kid was bright, talented, funny, and ambitious. He was going to school, attending rehearsals, and seemed so normal. But each night he didn't know where he was going to go. He was working hard to make something happen for himself while being alone in an impossible situation, and he was going to great lengths to hide his circumstances. For us, he put a completely unexpected face on homeless youth. And when we discovered that — at that time in 2009 — there were almost fifteen thousand kids registered as homeless in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system, we knew we had to make this film. This was a crisis and nobody seemed to be talking about it.

We started digging into statistics, talking to teachers and principals, and spending time with lots and lots of kids who were experiencing homelessness. We spent time with them at school, riding the trains and buses, in open-door emergency youth shelters, and innovative transitional homes. So many of the kids we encountered along the way were fierce survivors, escaping the horrors of violence, drug addiction, broken family structures, poverty, and crime. Often, they were thrown out of the house because of sexual orientation, were abandoned by parents who were unable emotionally or financially to care for them, or chose to leave because of physical or sexual abuse. Each one of the many kids we spent time with is part of this film — their experiences, stories, insight, struggles, and humor are woven deeply into the fabric of *The Homestretch*. But when we found Kasey, Anthony, and Roque, we were blown away by their powerful journeys and knew we had found the center of our film. And they, we soon learned, were eager for the chance to be heard, to let others who are dealing with the incredible obstacles of homelessness know that they aren't alone.

It is our hope that, through the deeply personal journeys of Kasey, Anthony, and Roque, *The Homestretch* can shine a much-needed light on one of the most hidden and exploited populations in America — unaccompanied homeless youth.

Through making this film, we discovered that the number-one reason why there is not more support given to these youth in crisis is the pervasive negative stereotype that the words "homeless youth" conjure up — that image of the troubled runaway or drug-addicted kid sleeping under the bridge. An image that puts immediate blame on the young person. In reality, this image is a very small part of the story. We were meeting kids who were on a very different path, and who painted a very different picture of what youth homelessness means. We also discovered how the "Homeless to Harvard" story that is so often celebrated can be equally harmful and negatively affects the vast majority of homeless youth with unreasonable expectations. The majority of kids we were meeting were in between these two extremes. We wanted to bring their stories front and center and erase these harmful images, replacing them with something different — something that shows the hard work, resiliency, mad survival skills, smarts, dedication, and struggles the majority of everyday youth face when they try to build a future while being homeless and on their own.

We hope you will walk away from *The Homestretch* with a deeper understanding of youth who are experiencing homelessness, and how we, as a society, can help support them better in their search for a future. We saw how all the kids we met fought hard against harmful stereotypes of homelessness, and as we listened and spent time in their worlds, we saw the surprising ways that they created temporary homes and fly-by-night communities, and reached out for support. We were inspired by their search for relationships and deep drive to build a future. And we sought to make an inspiring film about this devastating crisis.

Anne de Mare   Kirsten Kelly
Director/Producer   Director/Producer

American Graduate: Let's Make It Happen

American Graduate: Let's Make It Happen is a long-term public media commitment, made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), to helping local communities identify and implement solutions to the high school dropout crisis. American Graduate demonstrates public media's commitment to education and its deep roots in every community it serves. Beyond providing programming that educates, informs, and inspires, public radio and television stations — locally owned and operated — are an important resource in helping to address critical issues, such as the dropout rate.

In addition to national programming, public television and radio stations across the country have launched on-the-ground efforts, working with communities and youth to keep students on track to high school graduation. More than a thousand partnerships have been formed locally through American Graduate, and CPB is working with Alma and Colin Powell's America's Promise Alliance and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The *Independent Lens* series on PBS is supporting the American Graduate initiative by sharing documentaries that will inspire audiences and offer tools to foster effective community action to address and dramatically reduce high school dropout rates and ensure greater college success in communities nationwide. Harnessing the power of film to spark dialogue and action, *Independent Lens* is partnering with PBS stations and local leaders nationwide to engage communities in being part of the solution through programming and activities centered around the important stories told in documentaries like *The Homestretch.*

These documentaries and community engagement activities will bring together audiences through powerful stories about what's achievable when youth, parents, teachers, mentors, and leaders come together with a united vision of supporting young people to reach their fullest potential.

Learn more at http://www.americangraduate.org/home.

The Film

The Homestretch follows three youth experiencing homelessness as they fight to stay in school, graduate, and build a future. Each of these resilient teenagers works to complete his or her

education, while facing the trauma of being alone and abandoned at an early age. With unprecedented access into the CPS system, the Crib Emergency Shelter, and Teen Living Programs (TLP), the filmmakers follow these young people as they move through the milestones of high school while searching for a warm place to sleep, a quiet place to study, the privacy to shower. The film goes beyond high school to focus on the crucial transition after graduation, when the structure of school vanishes, a time when youth who experience homelessness usually struggle to find the support and community they need to survive and be independent. Weaving back and forth among the three teens, the film lays out the personal and policy issues these young people face, including immigration, foster care, child custody, and LGBTQIA rights.

The personal stories of Roque, Kasey, and Anthony bring homelessness and its associated problems into stark relief.

Roque

Roque was brought to the United States by his parents from Mexico at the age of five. Due to immigration complications, Roque was forced to separate from his family and fend for himself on and off, beginning in his sophomore year of high school. With an unstable family and housing situation, Roque spent several years bouncing around. After one of his teachers introduced him to Shakespeare and acting, he became inspired to finish high school and apply to college. He has lived with this teacher, Maria Rivera, as part of her family, and with her support has enrolled in college. He hopes to go into theater and psychology and help others through some of the same challenges he has faced.

Kasey

Born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, Kasey experienced episodes of homelessness with her family as a child. After she came out as a lesbian, her family forced her out on her own. Kasey spent over a year bouncing around between friends, family members, and sleeping on the street, ultimately dropping out of high school her senior year. Kasey found a new transitional home —TLP's Belfort House — and reenrolled in school. But in her new living situation, Kasey still felt her mother's rejection. A talented poet and painter, Kasey continues to receive counseling for her psychological problems. She has moved into an apartment that is part of a new program for homeless youth, and while she continues to look for work, Kasey hopes to go to college.

Anthony

Anthony spent his childhood in foster homes, and had an adoptive father who was physically abusive. He left home at the age of fourteen. Unable to concentrate on schoolwork, distracted by worries about where he would sleep or whether he would eat, Anthony committed crimes to get what he needed to live and ended up serving some time in a juvenile detention facility. Afterward, he entered the TLP system, and from there was accepted into the TLP independent living program, Clustered and Scattered Site Apartments (CaSSA). He passed his GED test and was accepted into the Year Up Chicago program, where he learned business skills and technical computer skills. He holds on to his dreams and goals, and hopes to get legal custody of his young son. A talented poet and rapper and an ambitious young man, Anthony never stops planning and working for success.

Agencies and Organizations Profiled in the Film

Chicago Public Schools (CPS)
Chicago Public Schools (CPS) identified and enrolled nearly nineteen thousand homeless children and youth in the 2012-2013 school year (at the time of filming there were over twenty-two thousand students registered as homeless within CPS). All public schools in the United States are required to designate a liaison for homeless students, to carry out educational protections and services. Not every school district has a liaison at every school site. However, due to the pervasiveness of the crisis, CPS has been driven to take this federal mandate one step further by designating homeless liaisons at every school building. CPS's homeless education program is called "Students in Temporary Living Situations" to decrease the stigma associated with the word "homeless" and increase the willingness of families and youth to disclose their situations and receive help.

The Crib Emergency Shelter
The Night Ministry has been a national leader in providing housing and conducting street outreach to Chicago's homeless youth. It opened the Crib in January 2011 to provide 20 overnight emergency shelter beds for homeless young people ages 18 to 24. During the four-month pilot period, the Crib provided shelter to 138 young people. Encouraged by the Crib's success at building relationships with Chicago's street-based youth, the city of Chicago provided funding for the Night Ministry to operate the program seasonally until 2013, when funding from the city of Chicago and private funders made it possible to operate the program year-round.

Teen Living Programs
Teen Living Programs (TLP) builds community, hope, and opportunity for youth who are homeless by addressing their immediate needs and helping them transition to adulthood and achieve independence and stable housing. TLP intensively serves over five hundred young people a year through a continuum of services that includes outreach, prevention, and supportive services, along with three housing programs: a 4-bed emergency shelter for minors; Belfort House, a 24-bed transitional living program; and CaSSA (Clustered and Scattered Site Apartments), a 10-apartment independent living program.

Background Information

Life without a Stable Home

What does "homeless" mean?
Being homeless is not necessarily a permanent or even a long-term condition; however, it is a struggle to be without a roof over your head even for a few days, as is the case for many youth experiencing homelessness. They may bounce around among the homes of friends or relatives, or even strangers, couch surfing for as long as they can. Or, if their family is experiencing homelessness, they may share living quarters with another person, sometimes referred to as "doubling up." Such a temporary fix comes with its own problems, including noise, crowding, instability, and a lack of privacy. It also can be unsafe or illegal.

For most people, the term *homeless* conjures up an image of a dirty, unkempt person panhandling on a city street, or living in a homeless shelter. While that may describe one category of homeless individuals, the term goes beyond that urban cliché and encompasses people in many different geographical areas and in all age ranges, from the very youngest to the very old. It also includes those whose outward appearance and demeanor might not mark them as "homeless." Young people, in particular, are very adept at hiding that they are experiencing homelessness, an experience that can cause them embarrassment and shame.

Individuals like Roque, Kasey, and Anthony are referred to in federal statutes as "unaccompanied homeless youth." An *unaccompanied homeless youth* is defined as a youth or child, 12 to 24 years of age, who may or may not be attending school and is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. (Recent movements in education for youth experiencing homelessness regarding access to higher education have expanded the understanding of *youth* to include individuals up to 24 years of age; this is the age at which a college student is determined to be "independent" for purposes of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid [FAFSA].) Unaccompanied homeless youth are without a safe, stable living arrangement and "include young people who have been thrown out of their homes, run away from home, and/or been abandoned by parents or guardians" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2014). Note: youth experiencing homelessness may not readily identify with the term "unaccompanied homeless youth" and may use other terms to describe their situation.

The vast majority of youth experiencing homelessness do not become homeless by choice, but have left home due to severe family dysfunction, including abuse and neglect. Over two-thirds of unaccompanied homeless youth report that at least one of their parents abuses drugs or alcohol. Approximately 20 to 40 percent of unaccompanied homeless youth have been thrown out of their homes because they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or pregnant (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEHCY], 2014).

Without parental care or social service involvement, youth experiencing homelessness may need to find a variety of ways to get their basic needs met. This could include staying with family or friends, or in emergency shelters, or having to resort to surviving on the streets by sleeping in vehicles and public spaces — in short, any place that offers a temporary place to sleep, eat, and clean up and refuge from the elements.

Young people who do not have the structure of family or consistent adult support are at a higher risk for abuse, sexual exploitation, victimization, substance abuse, mental health problems, and other health issues. Up to 25 percent of homeless preschool children have mental health problems requiring clinical evaluation; this increases to 40 percent among homeless school-age children (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014). Many factors, such as a history of abuse and trauma, lack of basic needs or resources, and dysfunctional relationships can contribute to homeless youth being vulnerable to the lure of criminal activity, exploitation, and the disruption of school success or attendance. Many homeless children struggle in school — missing days, repeating grades, and dropping out entirely (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014).

Whatever form it takes, homelessness is a struggle and a stressful condition for any individual, and an examination of its causes and consequences shows that it is about more than a physical home.

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A Closer Look: Factors Contributing to Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the United States

According to the National Network for Youth (NN4Y), approximately 1.68 million youth in the United States experience homelessness each year ("Homeless Youth in America: Who Are They?"). The most common factors leading to this condition for so many young people are the following:

- **Abuse**: Research finds that 40 to 60 percent of all homeless youth have experienced physical abuse, and between 17 and 35 percent have experienced sexual abuse.
- **Child Welfare Involvement**: Up to one-third of youth aging out of foster care experience homelessness. National studies have shown that between 21 and 53 percent of homeless youth have a history of placement in foster care.
- **Racial Disparities**: Unaccompanied homeless youth come from every race and ethnicity. However, studies in three regions have noted overrepresentation of African Americans in urban areas and American Indians in rural areas.
- **Economy**: The recent recession has had a significant negative impact on youth employment, which impacts levels of homelessness. Just over half of youth ages 18 to 24 are currently employed, the lowest this number has been since the government began collecting data in 1948.
- **High Rates of Child and Family Poverty:** A report by the National Center on Family Homelessness states, "The very large number of children living in poverty in the United States set the stage for child homelessness." More than 45 million people were estimated to be living at or below the federal poverty level in 2013 — a number that remained unchanged from the previous year's estimate. An estimated 20 million Americans account for the "poorest of the poor" — people living at 50 percent or less of the federal poverty level. Poverty rates are highest for families headed by single women, particularly if they are black or Hispanic. While children account for 24 percent of the U.S. population, they represent 34 percent of all people living in poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014).

- **Disconnection from Schools**: Approximately half of homeless youth have not completed high school. This disconnection makes it very difficult for youth to obtain the employment necessary to secure housing and sustain their lives as they transition into adulthood.
- **Juvenile Justice System Involvement**: There is a two-way relationship between youth homelessness and the criminal justice system. Youth involved with the criminal justice system are more likely to report unstable housing (Feldman and Patterson, 2003). And homeless youth report a high level of involvement with the criminal justice system. Much of this is due to arrests that stem from activities associated with daily survival, such as panhandling, loitering, or sleeping outdoors.
- **Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity**: There is an overrepresentation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in the runaway population, due in part to family rejection because of their sexual orientation or gender identification. While research shows a range from 4 percent (Midwest sampling) to 50 percent (New York City sampling), a conservative estimate would be that one out of every five (20 percent) of homeless youth are LGBTQ, or twice the number of LGBTQ youth in the general youth population.

Sources:

- National Center for Children in Poverty. 2014. "Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children under 6 Years, 2012." http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1088.html.

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Foster Care and Homelessness
Children who experience abuse or neglect by their parents often end up being removed by the child welfare system and placed in foster care. Such placement is meant to be a healthy alternative for the child, providing a home where he or she can be protected and nurtured. Because of the trauma they may have experienced in their young lives, about 30 percent of children in foster care have severe emotional, behavioral, or developmental problems. (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2013). Children with foster care experience are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at twice the rate of U.S. war veterans (National Foster Care Coalition).

When foster care ends (in most states, a young person "ages out" at 18 years of age) there are further challenges ahead. One of the biggest challenges is finding stable and affordable housing. One study (Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2012) found that almost 30 percent of the young adults in the study had experienced at least one night of homelessness after leaving foster care. If data from young people who had moved from one temporary housing situation to another is included, the percentage jumps to nearly 40 percent who were without a stable place to live at some point in time. Getting adequate health care is another issue these young people face. Although they are Medicaid-eligible, finding providers who will accept their insurance coverage can be difficult.

The transition to adulthood for youth in foster care is usually an abrupt one, made more difficult by their life experiences — living in a dysfunctional family, having multiple foster placements, and moving from school to school. Without a reliable adult to provide mentoring, guidance, and support to help them face the realities of life after foster care, the outcomes for these young adults are often full of struggles and difficulties. Of the youth who age out of foster care, one-fourth are incarcerated within two years and only half graduate from high school (National Foster Care Coalition). Women who age out experience high rates of (unmarried) pregnancy. In the University of Chicago study cited earlier, two-thirds became pregnant after leaving foster care and two-thirds of those who had ever been pregnant had experienced more than one pregnancy. The evidence points to a need for developmentally appropriate programs for youth in the foster care system that teach basic life skills and prepare them to live independently when they are older. Further, there need to be more and better programs to help and support former foster youth transition to adulthood; master the skills they need for life on their own; and become productive, stable, and thriving adults.

Sources:
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Undocumented and Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

A big news story during the summer of 2014 was the surge of unaccompanied young people from Central America coming across the border into the United States. Many of them were escaping drug and gang violence and were sent by their parents to live with relatives in the United States. Some may ultimately find homes with those relatives; some will be sent back to their countries of origin. Many will spend time in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement at one of the nation's 53 federal centers for unaccompanied minors (*New York Times*, 2012), where they can be housed while their cases are processed. But with the current

years-long waiting time for the adjudication process (*Latin Post*, 2014), many will be released from the centers when they turn 18, before their cases are settled. Without other options, some will live in homeless shelters while they apply for asylum or special visas.

For other unaccompanied minors, homelessness occurs when an undocumented parent is deported and the remaining parent is unable to afford housing. Or, as with Roque in *The Homestretch*, parents and children separate in the hope that being apart will help one or the other (usually the parent) to avoid deportation. As a consequence, the unaccompanied youth is left on his or her own, with nowhere to live.

Roque's story illustrates that youth experiencing homelessness and the lack of lawful immigration status experience particular pressures. Undocumented students have the same right to public education as U.S. citizens, and as immigrant students who are homeless per protections in the McKinney-Vento Act (Kids in Need of Defense [KIND] and NAEHCY, 2010). However, these young people may confront homelessness without a parent or guardian to look out for them and without having the same set of rights, benefits, and resources that U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents have access to. Even if they manage to enroll and attend school and graduate successfully, undocumented students hit a barrier when they try to enroll in college. While no federal law prohibits the admission of undocumented students to public or private colleges and universities, some states and institutions require proof of citizenship as part of the admission process. Furthermore, financing their education can present a huge obstacle. Youth with lawful immigration status, and unaccompanied homeless youth with legal status can apply for federal aid, but undocumented students are ineligible for both federal aid and financial aid in most states.

For more information on tools to help undocumented homeless youth access education and lawful immigration status, read the full brief from KIND and NAEHCY, referenced in the sources.

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Looking at the Numbers

Government agencies and nonprofit organizations that collect statistics on homeless youth acknowledge that counting this population is difficult. Their homelessness is inconsistent, both in duration and location; they move around more than older homeless people; and they are reluctant to admit they are experiencing homelessness. Therefore, they remain undercounted. The numbers

that are reported, however, even if not complete, provide a fuller picture of who these young people are and the trauma and stress they experience during the time they are homeless.

- Nearly 2.5 million children (2,483,539) experienced homelessness in the United States in 2013. This represents one in every 30 children in the United States (information based on pre-K–12 public school data) (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014).

- Public schools identified and enrolled 1,258,182 homeless children and youth in the 2012-2013 school year. Over 80,000 of these students were unaccompanied homeless youth (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2014).

- Every year, 30,000 youth age out of foster care. Within two to four years of exiting foster care, approximately 25 percent of former foster youth experience homelessness. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004).

- Every year 20,000 to 25,000 young people age out of the juvenile justice system (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), 2010).

- A 2013 (published in 2014) survey of young people (ages 14 to 21) who were experiencing homelessness revealed that

  - nearly half of the youth had been kicked out or abandoned by their parents or guardians;
  - roughly 60 percent of these young people had experienced one of the following victimizations: sexual assault or rape, assault with a weapon, threatened with a weapon, or robbery; and
  - on average, respondents had been homeless for a total lifetime rate of 23.4 months and reported first becoming homeless at age 15 (Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), 2014).

- Approximately 40 percent of youth who experience homelessness identify as LGBT (Williams Institute, 2012).

- Nearly 60 percent of LGBT youth experiencing homelessness have been sexually victimized on the street, compared to 33 percent of straight youth (Forty to None Project, 2014).

- A 2005 study of 18- to 21-year-old youth experiencing homelessness found that two-thirds had not obtained a high school diploma or a GED certificate at the point of program intake (USICH, 2010).

- From 2012 to 2013, the number of children experiencing homelessness annually in the United States
  • increased by 8 percent nationally;

• increased in 31 states and the District of Columbia; and
• increased by 10 percent or more in 13 states and the District of Columbia
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Sources:

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SIDEBAR – Facts about Family Homelessness
- A typical sheltered homeless family is comprised of a mother in her late twenties with two children.
- Many family shelters don't accept men and boys into their programs, causing families to separate when they become homeless.
- Children experience high rates of chronic and acute health problems while homeless.
- Children in homeless families experience a great deal of stress:
  - Around 74% worry that they will have no place to live.
  - Approximately 58% worry that they will have no place to sleep.
  - Roughly 87% worry that something bad will happen to their family.

Sources:

- National Center on Family Homelessness. 2011. "The Characteristics and Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness." http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/306.pdf

- Office of Community Planning and Development, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). 2013. "The 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress: Part 1: Point-in-

Time Estimates of Homelessness." https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/ahar-2013-part1.pdf

Educational Needs of Youth in Temporary Living Situations

In September 2014, the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) reported that during the 2012–2013 school year there were over one million homeless children in public schools.

Students experiencing homelessness face several types of challenges. One is meeting the enrollment requirements, such as proof of residency, health records, and records from previous schools. Unaccompanied youth have no parent or guardian to help them through the process. Because of strained economic conditions, these students may lack adequate clothing or school supplies, access to resources for maintaining personal hygiene, consistent nutritious meals, transportation, and quiet places to study. For many of them, poor health, fatigue, and hunger, as well as emotional or mental health problems interfere with learning.

Since 1987, the federal government has required state and local agencies to remove barriers to education created by homelessness and to increase the enrollment, attendance, and success of students experiencing homelessness. All public schools in the United States use the federal definition of homelessness, set forth in the McKinney-Vento Act (see below): "homeless children and youth" includes all "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This definition specifically includes children and youth living in shelters, transitional housing, cars, campgrounds, or motels, or temporarily sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons.

Statistics demonstrate that youth experiencing homelessness face increased barriers to graduating high school. A recent study found that homelessness is associated with an 87 percent increased likelihood of dropping out of school, the highest of all risk factors studied (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Although data on a national level around the graduation rate of homeless students are not currently available, some state-based information is. The Virginia Department of Education reported in 2012 a 67.7 percent on-time high school graduation rate of students who experienced homelessness at any time during high school, compared to a 78.8 percent rate for students who were economically disadvantaged at any time during high school, and an 88 percent rate for all students. Similar trends have been reported in other states, such as Colorado and Indiana (NAEHCY, 2014).

Homeless youth are also likely to experience challenges in pursuing higher education. Many lack support from an adult who may provide guidance on the college selection and application process (like the support that teacher Maria Rivera provides to Roque in the film). Other common obstacles include inabilities to pay for various fees, receiving insufficient financial aid, and difficulties completing forms that require information and signatures from parents (NAEHCY, 2014).

For children and youth experiencing homelessness, whose lives are otherwise chaotic and unpredictable, school can provide a sea of stability. Familiar faces and a regular schedule

combined with appropriate expectations and feedback are a critical — and in some cases, lifesaving — antidote to the seemingly unmoored world that homeless youth experience.

Sources:
- America's Promise Alliance. 2014. "Don't Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People Who Leave High School before Graduation." http://www.americaspromise.org/resource/dont-call-them-dropouts-0

- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY). 2014. "Financial Aid for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: A Survey Report." http://www.naehcy.org/sites/default/files/dl/fafsa-survey-report.pdf

- National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). 2014. "Education for Homeless Children and Youth: Consolidated State Performance Report Data: School Years 2010–11, 2011–12, and 2012–13." http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-1011-1213.pdf

Federal Legislation Related to the Education of Homeless Youth

The McKinney-Vento Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law that provides a spectrum of services to homeless people. It was passed in 1987 and most recently amended in 2001. Subtitle VII-B of the law delineates the requirements of states and local education agencies (or school districts) regarding the education of homeless students, with the aim of removing barriers to education created by homelessness. Key provisions include:

- Every school district must designate a homeless liaison to ensure the McKinney-Vento Act is implemented in the district.
- A school must immediately enroll a homeless student even if the student does not have the documents normally required, such as academic and medical records.
- Students have the right to continue to attend their "school of origin," that is, the school they last attended or the one they attended when they became homeless.
- The school district must provide transportation to and from the "school of origin" if a parent or guardian (or, in the case of an unaccompanied youth, the school homeless liaison) requests it.
- Homeless students must have equal access to the programs, services, and activities available to the other students in the school.

Source:

- National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). "McKinney-Vento — Law into Practice: The McKinney-Vento Act at a Glance." http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/reauthorization.pdf

SIDEBAR

Beyond the City

Homelessness is not just an urban phenomenon. People, including children and youth, experience homelessness in suburban and rural areas as well. Because their numbers are smaller than in cities, homeless youth and families tend to be less visible in rural areas. While the factors contributing to homelessness are the same, rural homelessness comes with its own set of challenges. Services need to cover large geographic areas, making it hard to centralize them. Public transportation is either nonexistent or inadequate, so that access to services is difficult.

In the suburbs of some major American cities, a rise in the numbers of homeless families and youth has followed an increase in poverty. The downturn in housing and employment, especially since 2008, has spurred a demand for services, and suburbs of Denver, Colorado; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Chicago, Illinois; Baltimore, Maryland; and other metropolitan areas have had to scramble to meet the demand (Metropolitan Policy Program, 2013). Rural and suburban areas are not as equipped as cities to deal with large numbers of people experiencing homelessness. Rural communities, for example, may have lower numbers of affordable housing units, causing many individuals and families in need to live in overcrowded conditions or severely dilapidated structures (USICH, 2013). Families often end up living in motels, or staying with others in temporary, unstable situations; some live in their cars. And since homelessness is not perceived as a typical suburban issue, these schools may not be as prepared as their urban counterparts to provide the needed support for their homeless students.

Sources:

- Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings Institution. 2013."Confronting Suburban Poverty in America: Student Homelessness Is No Longer Just a Big City Problem." http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/2013/12/student-homelessness-is-no-longer-just-a-big-city-problem/

- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). 2013. "Rural Homelessness." http://usich.gov/issue/rural_homelessness

http://nationalhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Rural-Homelessness-Fact-Sheet.pdf

Housing Needs of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Unaccompanied homeless youth experience homelessness during a critical stage of maturation — undergoing physical, psychological, and emotional development. Homeless youth will not be able to overcome the crisis of homelessness and achieve housing stability without access to social, health, and educational services. For a large segment of the homeless youth population, the provision of housing or attempts toward family reunification will not be adequate without additional supportive services to address positive development and meet their personal needs.

Youth experiencing homelessness often live in shelters, hotels, or motels or double up or triple up with other people, many unsheltered (NCHE, 2014). A variety of programs run by national nonprofits, faith organizations, and local government agencies address the needs of homeless youth, but finding adequate support is an ongoing issue. Some programs are funded independently through charitable contributions; others receive federal support in the form of

grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Through these various programs, several types of shelter and housing are available to homeless youth:

Emergency shelter is a facility with the primary purpose of providing temporary shelter for people experiencing homelessness. These facilities typically have a limited capacity and often, on any given night, cannot accommodate all the people who need a place to stay. The Crib, featured in *The Homestretch*, is an emergency overnight shelter for youth.

The Street Outreach Program (SOP), administered by HHS's Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), supports work with homeless, runaway, and street youth to help them find stable housing and services. SOP focuses on developing relationships between outreach workers and young people that allow them to rebuild connections with caring adults. The ultimate goal is to prevent the sexual exploitation and abuse of youth on the streets. Among the services offered are access to emergency shelter, survival aid, crisis intervention, and treatment and counseling. The Night Ministry, featured in *The Homestretch*, receives funding from SOP.

Transitional housing is housing where youth may stay and receive supportive services for up to 24 months. Support includes rental assistance; moving assistance; and other services through case management, such as life skills, employment, education and health needs of the youth, and assistance in navigating public systems. The services are designed to enable youth to move toward independent living. HUD is authorized to provide funding for these programs to communities.

Transitional Living Program, also administered by the FYSB, is a program for youth ages 16 to 22 that provides the services of transitional housing. Living accommodations may include host-family homes, group homes, maternity group homes, or supervised apartments owned by the program or rented in the community. Teen Living Programs' (TLP's) Belfort House, featured in *The Homestretch*, is a transitional living program.

Scattered-site housing is a variation of transitional housing and is a more independent situation that is appropriate for youth who do not require intense supervision. Case managers conduct weekly meetings and assist youth participants in navigating public services, provide constructive feedback, and hold them accountable for inappropriate behavior. This is the type of housing Anthony moved into in *The Homestretch*.

Permanent supportive housing, either scattered-site or single-site, offers rental assistance and supportive services without a time limit. Services usually include 24-hour front desk assistance, case management, life-skills training, and referrals to health care appointments. This type of housing is typically reserved for youth with severe mental health or physical disabilities requiring long-term support to maintain a residence in the community. This is the housing that Kasey moved into in *The Homestretch*.

Host Homes are a more recent model of housing for youth experiencing homelessness. In this model, agencies find homes for youth in the community, conducting background checks and often paying stipends to help the family support the youth. These arrangements are voluntary for

the youth and the family. They are of particular assistance in rural or suburban areas where there are no shelters.

Sources:
- National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). 2014. "Education for Homeless Children and Youth: Consolidated State Performance Report Data: School Years 2010–11, 2011–12, and 2012–13." http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-1011-1213.pdf

Federal Legislation Related to Housing for Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act
The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) authorizes grant programs that have provided critical services to homeless and runaway youth since 1974. In every American community, youth run away from home, are kicked out of their home, exit the juvenile justice system with nowhere to go, become orphans, and/or exit the child welfare system with no supports to enable successful transitions to adulthood. The RHYA provides three different grants to communities:
- Street Outreach Programs, so they can reach out to homeless youth on the streets;
- Basic Center Programs, which provide emergency housing with crisis intervention, basic life necessities, and family interventions; and
- Transitional Living Programs, when it is necessary for young people to have longer-term housing options, including Maternity Group Homes.

The RHYA also provides a national hotline for runaway and homeless youth and their families — the National Runaway Safeline (1-800-RUNAWAY) — and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center (RHYTTAC), which provides training and technical assistance for RHYA grantees. Additionally, since 2008, the RHYA has called for a national study on the characteristics, needs, and prevalence of homeless youth in America, which has not yet been funded.

Sources:

Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). 2014. "Runaway and Homeless Youth Program." http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/programs/runaway-homeless-youth

National Network for Youth (NN4Y). 2014. "Public Policy." http://www.nn4youth.org/public-policy

Topics and Issues Relevant to *The Homestretch*

A screening of *The Homestretch* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Developmentally appropriate crisis intervention and housing for homeless youth
- Educational services for homeless youth

- Services for youth experiencing homelessness and runaway, 'throwaway,' and at-risk youth
- Homelessness amongst LGBT youth/identity-affirming care for LGBT youth experiencing homelessness
- Interventions to prevent homelessness and runaway episodes
- Social services for families and youth
- Family disruption/dysfunction
- Poverty and homelessness
- Community-based youth programs
- Abused and neglected children
- Juvenile justice detention and programs

Thinking More Deeply

1. Is there anything in *The Homestretch* that surprises you? Describe what that is and why you find it surprising.

2. What personal strengths do you see in Roque that will help him become a successful adult? What are Anthony's strengths? And Kasey's?

3. Federal regulations have made it easier for students in temporary living situations to enroll in and attend school. Why is it important to ensure that youth in these situations are able to stay in school?

4. Were you surprised by the housing programs for youth experiencing homelessness that Anthony and Kasey were able to access? What do you think was "youth appropriate" or not "youth appropriate" about the different programs?

5. What role should government play in caring for youth experiencing homelessness? Should responsibility be with the federal, state, or local government, or is it a shared responsibility? Explain the reason for your choice.

6. How important is having a supportive adult in helping a homeless young person develop a constructive life? Would it be possible to create that type of life without such support? Why, or why not?

7. People displaced by natural disasters usually get housing and other assistance immediately. Why do you think it is different when it comes to support services for the homeless?

8. Is homelessness just a matter of not having a place to live? Based on what you saw in *The Homestretch*, what other issues need to be addressed in order to adequately care for homeless youth?

9. Have you learned anything new about homelessness from this film? Has the film changed your image of homelessness, or your ideas about who is homeless? If so, in what way?

10. What do you know about the homeless youth population in your community? What services and resources are available? What support do the schools provide to homeless youth?

11. What are the ways you can help youth who are experiencing homelessness in your own school or community?

12. How can *The Homestretch* be used to encourage others in your community (churches, schools, employers, etc.) to learn more about youth homelessness?

13. In the film, we hear Maria Rivera, Roque's teacher, discuss her own challenges while growing up in an unstable living situation. When she saw behavior from Roque that suggested he was experiencing homelessness, she said she couldn't just sit back and watch it happen. Why do you think people might hesitate to reach out to youth, or even adults, who they see experiencing difficulties? What are some ways you can show support for individuals who you think may be experiencing difficulties that may be sensitive and personal?

Suggestions for Action

1 – Find out who the homeless liaison is in your local school district. This information should be available on the school district's website or by contacting the district's central office. Contact that person to learn how you can be supportive of the homeless liaison's work.

2 – Every state is also required by federal law to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education. Visit the National Center for Homeless Education's (NCHE's) website to see state-by-state information and to download a contact list:
http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.

3 – Organize a drive in your community to collect clothing, school supplies, personal hygiene products, and other resource needs identified by the homeless liaison in your school district or other programs that serve youth experiencing homelessness.

4 – Educate yourself and others in your community about the prevalence of youth homelessness in your state and discuss ways that citizens, service providers, policymakers, and other leaders in your community can come together to respond. *America's Youngest Outcasts* documents the number of homeless children in every state, their well-being, their risk for child homelessness, and state-level planning and policy efforts. Read the report at
http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/.

5 – Mentor a young person who is experiencing homelessness. Besides offering stable adult companionship, you can help with such things as learning life skills, schoolwork, and finding proper health care. Research opportunities for mentoring students experiencing homelessness in

your community by contacting schools in your district, local programs for runaway and homeless youth, or youth programs administered through HUD. Before making a commitment, make sure you fully understand the responsibilities and expectations that you must fulfill to be a consistent and supportive adult for a youth in need.

6 – Would you like to mentor other young people who are interested in helping homeless youth? Volunteer Guide provides background on teen homelessness, plus links to educational materials, youth group resources, and a list of suggestions to get you started. Visit the webpage at http://www.volunteerguide.org/hours/service-projects/youth-group. If you are unable to find a readily available youth group, consider starting a new one. The National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth, part of the FYSB (http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/start-a-youth-program), provides a step-by-step guide for setting up a youth-serving nonprofit organization.

7 – Help keep runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth safe and off the streets by volunteering with the National Runaway Safeline (NRS). The NRS offers various opportunities in communities around the country. Find more information at http://www.1800runaway.org/volunteer-match-and-opportunities/.

8 – Support your local community-based homeless youth services providers by volunteering, donating, and participating in any way you can.

9 – Become informed about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth homelessness. Give your support to service providers who support LGBT homeless youth. Consult the Forty to None Project's online directory for welcoming and affirming service providers in your area. Reach out to them to find out how you can lend a hand. See more and find out how to become part of a network of individuals working to end LGBT youth homelessness at http://fortytonone.org/.

10 – Learn about the various campaigns and initiatives around homelessness and the related opportunities to participate and get involved at the national, regional, and local levels through the following organizations:

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)
http://www.naehcy.org/

National Network for Youth (NN4Y)
http://www.nn4youth.org

National Runaway Safeline (NRS)
http://www.1800runaway.org

11 – Build youth awareness efforts in your school or community and engage young people in the conversation and strategies to address youth homelessness. The "Homelessness: Using Technology and Social Media" lesson plan from the Independent Television Services' (ITVS's) Youth Action Guide for the film *The Graduates* provides suggestions for empowering young people to further examine and take action on issues related to youth homelessness and education. Find it at: http://www.itvs.org/educators/collections/graduates/lesson_plans/homelessness.

For additional outreach and engagement ideas, visit
http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/homestretch. For local information, check the website of
your PBS station.

Resources
Note: Each resource's description is primarily adapted from language provided on the
organization's website.

http://www.homestretchdoc.com/ - This is the official website for the film.

http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/homestretch - This is the *Independent Lens* broadcast
companion site for the film.

http://www.familyhomelessness.org/ - The National Center on Family Homelessness website
shows how to access *America's Youngest Outcasts*, a report that ranks the 50 states on how they
are addressing child homelessness, from best (1) to worst (50).

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maria-rivera/homeless-students-exist-i_b_6130128.html –
"Homeless Students Exist in Every School. Is This the Year We Support Them?" is an article
contributed to *The Huffington Post* by film subject and educator Maria Rivera.

Youth-Focused Organizations

http://www.nn4youth.org/ - The National Network for Youth (NN4Y) is the nation's leading
organization advocating at the federal level to educate the public and policymakers about the
unique needs of homeless and disconnected youth. NN4Y is working to create a system of
agencies, people, and resources to ensure that opportunities for growth, safety, and development
are available to youth everywhere.

http://www.1800runaway.org/ - The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) is a crisis hotline
available throughout the United States and its territories, including Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin
Islands, and Guam. The NRS serves as the federally designated national communication system
for runaway and homeless youth, providing education and solution-focused interventions and
nonsectarian, nonjudgmental support; respecting confidentiality; collaborating with volunteers;
and responding to at-risk youth and their families 24 hours a day.

http://fortytonone.org/ -The Forty to None Project, a program of the True Colors Fund, seeks to
raise awareness about and bring an end to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth
homelessness through public education, advocacy, youth collaboration, community building, and
research.

http://naehcy.org/ - The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
(NAEHCY) is a national grassroots membership association that works with educators, parents,

advocates, researchers, and service providers to meet the educational needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The NAEHCY provides professional development, resources, and training and also engages in federal policy advocacy. The NAEHCY's work covers early childhood through higher education.

http://center.serve.org/nche/ - The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education (USED) and serves as the Department's technical assistance and information center for the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, providing research, resources, and information, enabling communities to address the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness.

Homeless Advocacy (Including Youth Homelessness)

http://www.familyhomelessness.org/facts.php?p=tm - The National Center on Family Homelessness, the nation's foremost authority on family homelessness, conducts state-of-the-art research and develops innovative solutions to end family homelessness in America. In 2012,the National Center merged with the American Institutes for Research, one of the world's largest behavioral and social science research and evaluation organizations.

http://www.endhomelessness.org/ - The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States by improving policy, helping localities build capacity, and providing research and data to opinion leaders.

http://www.nationalhomeless.org/ - The National Coalition for the Homeless is a national network of people who are currently or who were previously homeless, activists and advocates, community-based and faith-based service providers, and others committed to preventing and ending homelessness. Programs and policy priorities center around public education, policy advocacy, and grassroots organizing, and are focused on the issues of housing justice, economic justice, health care justice, and civil rights.

Government Programs

http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/homeless - The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) "Homelessness Assistance" page offers a variety of assistance to people, including youth, who are experiencing homelessness.

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/programs/runaway-homeless-youth - Through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program, the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), supports street outreach, emergency shelters, and longer-term transitional living and maternity group home programs to serve and protect young people who have become homeless.

http://usich.gov/ - The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is an independent agency within the federal executive branch that coordinates the federal response to homelessness. Among the work that USICH does is to organize and support states and communities to effectively implement local plans to end homelessness; establish and maintain productive communications with Congress; and establish partnerships with public and private sector stakeholders. The website contains a variety of maps, data, and other tools for communities working to end homelessness.

http://www2.ed.gov/programs/homeless/index.html - The Education for Homeless Children and Youths program is administered by the U.S. Department of Education (USED). Formula grants are made to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. These grants also help school districts ensure that homeless children and youth have equal access to free and appropriate public education.

http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/homeless-and-runaway-youth.aspx - The National Conference of State Legislatures lists legislation pertaining to runaway and homeless youth enacted or introduced by state legislatures, along with federal and state policies and policy options.