# A MIXED BLESSING: ROLES OF FAITH COMMUNITIES IN ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN



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#### **BACKGROUND**

This is one brief in a series of two¹ on faith-based action to end violence against children globally. These briefs are intended for faith actors, development practitioners, policymakers, and donors. Both briefing papers summarise key findings from a 2018 scoping study commissioned by the Ending Violence against Children (EVAC) Hub of the Joint Learning Initiative for Local Faith Communities.

This three-stage process reviewed academic and grey literature, called for case-study submissions, and carried out direct consultations with practice-based experts in this field. 172 documents were reviewed, 6 case studies were collated, and 14 experts were interviewed. The study explored the contributions of faith communities to ending violence against children<sup>2</sup> and their roles in wider child protection systems. It was published as a compendium of three interdependent reports in June 2019.<sup>3</sup> The study adopted a multi-faith lens and covered a range of geographic regions and faiths as well as interviewing experts within Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim contexts. Senior researchers in two collaborating academic institutions in the Global North and South conducted the work.

This brief highlights the potential and current roles faith communities play in responding to violence against children, as well as critically analysing some of the challenges for faith communities that emerged from the scoping study. Finally, it shares key issues for practice and policy, and recommendations for future research.

#### **KEY FINDINGS**

- 1. Faith communities are critical actors in ending violence against children. Faith leaders provide support to families and children and engage formal child protection systems locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally. They have crucial roles to play in the prevention and referral of child abuse cases.
- 2. Faith communities can also be complicit in and perpetrate forms of violence against children. They have a responsibility to publicly acknowledge and challenge this in all its forms.
- **3.** Some faith communities assign children to a position of inferiority in comparison to adults, with fewer social rights and less legal protection. This is a root cause of violence against children. The contribution of faith communities in perpetuating these norms needs to be recognised and challenged.
- **4.** Child participation is a key mechanism for sustainably changing these norms. This requires faith responses to move away from rescue and rehabilitation approaches to child-centred approaches that link protection and participation, as well as equipping children as active agents.
- **5.** Secular and faith actors need to collaborate to develop comprehensive, multisectoral responses, build trust, and avoid the instrumentalisation of faith actors.
- **6.** Violence against children takes on new forms constantly and its interrelated nature means faith communities need to understand and engage with some of the hidden and emerging forms of violence against children, if they are to be effective actors in prevention and response.

## 1. HOW FAITH COMMUNITIES ARE PART OF THE SOLUTION IN ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Faith communities can have an impact at multiple levels of the socio-ecological spectrum. Their involvement can play an important cross-cutting role.

#### EMPHASISING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND TRADITIONS THAT REDUCE VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

All religious traditions contain protective elements focused on marginalised and vulnerable people, and children are commonly included as part of these groups. This plays a major role in promoting protective attitudes and practices in communities globally.

Local faith communities (LFCs) often play formal and informal teaching roles with families on parent/child relationships and in shaping religious and ethical beliefs over their lifetime. Family is the most significant level of engagement for local faith communities (LFCs) around violence against children and especially through parental support, capacity building, providing nurture family safety nets, and strengthening family units.

Reimagining how parents can engage with their children to develop trust rather than fear is an essential part of the task to end violence against children. This requires reshaping this relationship away from traditional hierarchies to a child rights approach through creative forms of intergenerational engagement. One expert working with faith leaders across Muslim, Christian, and traditional communities in East Africa to help them play a key role in developing community-based child rights clubs noted:

(T)he good prevention model is ... a child rights community-based approach. You involve both parents and the children, so you have a group of children where you teach about the four key areas of child rights, protection, development, and you do the same to the parents so they know that the children need to participate and need to be developed and protected. The entire community of parents, guardians, for the children and the other stakeholders in the community [is reached] (Male, Interfaith, Tanzania).

#### ROLE OF FAITH COMMUNITIES IN RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

LFCs often play an indirect role in strengthening the multi-institutional system of child protection and ending violence against children. However, there is a danger in expecting religious leaders to become experts on violence against children or for faith leaders to be seen as a catch-all solution. One child protection expert from a medium sized faith-based organisation noted:

We cannot be all things to all people, you cannot rescue every vulnerable person, every child with a disability or that has been abused, we cannot do everything" (Male, Christian, United Kingdom).



Religious leaders can play 'triage' roles as local first responders to recognise, provide emergency support, counsel, report and refer, as well as cascade important information on ending violence against children to congregations. This requires them to be effectively connected to other child protection systems in the community. A comprehensive, multisectoral approach enables a range of faith leaders, especially those working directly with children, to step into appropriate roles without becoming overwhelmed.

Faith communities provide a range of interventions along a spectrum of violence prevention, advocacy, direct care interventions and service provision, as well as survivor support. Three main practical responses are:

- 1. Informal small-scale grassroots local responses These emerge from visible needs, are often care and support driven and part of community-based approaches, as well as focused on families or communities. Robust documentation is needed to demonstrate causality and to ensure root causes are tackled strategically.
- 2. Semi-formal top-down approaches with a prevention focus These capacity building models utilise the social networks of faith communities, often driven by international agencies, developing high-level research, toolkits, and global campaigns. Further research post-intervention is needed to see sustained evidence of change at the local level.
- 3. Formal provision of social services especially in fragile, conflict, or rural areas are sometimes tied to religious mandates. Religious organisations holds long-established social roles in many societies of service provision to vulnerable children. They hold significant institutional power with schools, health facilities, and care institutions reaching many children.

In these ways, LFCs have various windows of opportunity to engage with, and disrupt, the wider cycles of abuse and neglect so many children still encounter today. Steps to equip local faith institutions to help prevent violence against children, and not only to respond to it, are essential.

#### The study indicates that faith communities can:

- · Provide important, informal roles to bridge the gap between a child and the formal system
- · Hold an ongoing role with perpetrators of child violence regarding counselling and accountability
- Form a safety net for vulnerable children who may fall through other systems of care
- Play a role in building resilience in children over many years as a regular presence in childhood
- Work at all levels of engagement to prevent and respond to violence against children, from the level of the child, to the family, community, institution, and national/international advocacy levels.

#### THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN EGYPT

The Orthodox Church in Egypt has developed a comprehensive program working with both parents and children separately around 11 types of locally identified violence against children. They note that in their programs, "we teach parents to look for symptoms, how to talk about things if something has happened, how to trust them and believe them [children reporting sexual abuse]" (Female, Christian, Egypt). Detailed toolkits were developed in collaboration with recognised religious scholars that engaged individually and together with both Christian and Islamic sacred texts around specific issues of child abuse such as child marriage. These messages were disseminated through a cascade training model using faith infrastructures to reach over 6,500 children and youth and nearly 20,000 parents.<sup>4</sup>

#### CHILD PARTICIPATION IS CENTRAL TO ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Child empowerment, and its potential to change adult behaviour, was viewed by experts across various regions as an essential part of ending violence against children. Changing mindsets within faith communities on the status of children requires respectful dialogue using resources such as sacred texts reinterpreted in ways that recognize the importance of children and their participation. Nurturing child resilience, while still recognising the psychosocial distress that violence causes, allows children to be seen as active survivors and partners in preventing violence against children, and not only as victims. Local faith communities play a role in prevention at the level of the child with campaigns and workshops held directly with children, as well as programs that seek to surround children with trusted adults and safe spaces to build resilience and to educate them about violence, abuse, and their rights. Informal community-based prevention models from below can often fly under the 'evidence' radar.

#### CLAVES: BUILDING RESILIENCE AND ENGAGING CHILDREN'S VOICES

Claves is a Christian organisation based in Uruguay. It partners with local organizations, such as religious communities, educative centres, and civil society organizations that work directly with children and adolescents. Their child-centred methodology is entitled "we strengthen ourselves through play to face adverse situations." This involves training and mobilising educators to strengthen protective factors in children and adolescents. They do this by building children's resilience in a positive way that empowers children to identify potential abuse or risks and to find ways of resolving these together with a trustworthy adult. Their workshops have been shown to reduce the vulnerability of children in the face of maltreatment, sexual abuse, trafficking, and sexual exploitation, and to promote the effective exercise of their rights. Over 19,500 children and 1,300 educators in 19 countries have been reached through the programme. Their motivation is that faith communities should recognize the value of children made in God's image and therefore have the inherent motivation to deal with issues deeply affecting children and adolescents.<sup>5</sup>

#### Two types of child participation insights emerged from the study:

- 1. Child participation as a means of protection from violence against children
  - · Involve children in community and family decisions to challenge patterns of hierarchy and submission
  - · Equip children to break the silence on their own abuse and the abuse of others safely
  - · Equip children as agents of change within adult programs in non-violent ways
- 2. Leveraging child participation as practitioners
  - Use faith spaces and traditions to create healthy intergenerational spaces for engagement between adults and children
  - · Nurture resilience in vulnerable children who may have experienced adversity or trauma
  - · Listen to children as beneficiaries to ensure programs and research are responsive to their needs
  - · Involve age-appropriate, play-based methodologies in all program responses
  - · Involve children in the reinterpretation of sacred texts that have been used in harmful ways
  - Build child-friendly spaces in religious programs to model a different approach to punitive hierarchies

#### SECULAR AND FAITH ACTORS NEED TO COLLABORATE MORE IN MEANINGFUL WAYS

There is a risk of instrumentalising faith communities to achieve a predefined end without engaging them as equal partners on their own terms. The unique value addition of faith communities to end violence against children can be lost

when this approach is used. Secular actors may not possess the skills, knowledge, or positive attitudes to understand and engage effectively with the complex and diverse nature of faith communities.

Faith communities have been critiqued for not having sufficient child protection training, for not sharing all the values commonly held in the child protection field, and for being overly focused on survivor care as opposed to challenging fundamental beliefs that contribute to violence against children. To counteract the danger of superficial engagement, it is vital faith actors receive capacity-building and training in relation to child protection knowledge, and that secular actors engage in religious literacy<sup>8</sup> to better understand the faith premises that underlie the identities of faith communities. Larger faith-based organisations have an important capacity-building role.

(T)hey [religious leaders] are doing great works in faith communities...but they need more capacity, as most of them are doing it from their experience...(t)hey will refer to the Bible... but they also need to know that there are cases they need to refer to other stakeholders...to know their countries' laws about child abuse and neglect. They can do their bit... Most of the victims they can be willing to open up to the faith leaders because of trust and they cannot open up to others like the police (Male, Christian, Tanzania).

#### ADVOCACY AT NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL POLICY LEVEL

Certain religious leaders around the world have become high profile ambassadors on issues like child marriage and the physical punishment of children in homes and schools. This offers evidence of an emerging global movement for change within faith spaces that more faith leaders could join. For example, throughout Latin America, the legal prohibition of corporal punishment has been linked to support by faith institutions. However, other faith actors still seek to hold back similar reforms in the name of religion as seen recently in South Africa. Faith communities hold political capital that can be directed towards either eliminating or sustaining violence against children.



## 2. FAITH COMMUNITIES CAN ALSO BE PART OF THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The scoping study found faith communities represent an effective and positive resource in combating violence against children, and are, or have been, directly involved in the perpetration of violence. One child protection expert referred to the religious sector as a "mixed blessing," noting, "...when they are supportive of non-violent child rearing then it can be very helpful, but to get them there is difficult" (Female, Christian, South Africa).

### BREAKING THE SILENCE - RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AS THE PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Evidence confirms historical and current cases of unreported violence against children within religious institutions across multiple faiths. Driven by a desire to protect their own religious community's reputation or a lack of recognition that certain practices constitute violence can lead to reluctance to create internal mechanisms for handling complaints, or hesitancy to engage constructively with other sectors and services. As a result, faith institutions can become havens for abusers.

The most prominent types of violence against children mentioned in this regard were—corporal punishment and sexual abuse. Overt sexual abuse in religious institutions was reported to take place across global regions and religions. The disturbing nature of these acts includes silencing or ignoring victims and covering-up abuse, often to protect religious leaders or the reputation of the institution. A recent study in South Africa noted that "Communities and churches are often silent on the issue, implying apathy and acceptance of sexual violence. This often prevents survivors from feeling able to disclose and seek support and justice."<sup>10</sup>

A shift in this damaging pattern of silence requires faith actors to acknowledge the issue and recognise where there are risks in their work supporting children. Suggestions from the scoping study include developing alternative models of responding to the needs of children, closing high-risk residential programs, and developing and implementing minimum standards of care consistently. Both children and faith actors need to be empowered to challenge violence that occurs in faith communities. The first step is to acknowledge complicity in violence against children where this has occurred:

(T)hey organised a conference on the faith-based organisations and the sexual abuse of children and the engagement and they called it "breaking the silence" with the intention of bringing a strong message that we need to end the silence around this topic because there was a feeling that in Peru it is still very much a taboo and that faith leaders don't want to talk about it (Female, Interfaith, Panama)."

#### CHALLENGING THE BELIEFS THAT PERPETUATE VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Religious endorsement of parenting and teaching approaches that legitimate violent practices of child discipline are a further way in which faith communities are often implicated in violence against children.

This is also reflected in the use of punitive images of the divine, which can be used to create fear in children. The scoping study also notes the complex and diverse interpretations of certain practices, which are not necessarily seen by some faith communities as forms of violence against children, but are perceived by some communities to be in the best interests of the child. Early child marriage is one such example. The interwoven nature of cultural and religious influences and the diverse underpinnings of religious justifications for both eliminating, as well as promoting, certain types of violence is recognised as an ongoing challenge for faith communities across all major faith traditions and regions.

Faith actors can nurture positive protective faith beliefs about children and challenge ongoing faith beliefs and practices that sustain violence against children. This requires engaging sacred text interpretations, religious rituals, and holding religious institutions and leaders accountable. Where faith communities continue to provide support and care, they must also evaluate and reassess the social values and beliefs they promote to ensure their credibility with other child-focused organisations. Using credible religious scholars and leaders to correct misinterpretations of sacred texts is recommended.

#### THE INTERRELATED, HIDDEN, AND CHANGING NATURE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Some faith communities can focus only on addressing one type of violence. However, these communities need to recognise that multiple forms of marginalisation and social exclusion intersect and create situations of vulnerabilities that are complex, interwoven, and difficult to address. A narrow approach to addressing just one factor, or an attempt to work without cooperation with other child protection structures will lead to limited impact. Children experiencing one or more risk factors are more likely to also be at risk of other forms of violence and marginalisation.

A further challenge is the tendency to subsume violence directed against girls under the umbrella of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) through, for example, a focus on sexual violence, early child marriage, and FGM/C. This approach highlights some of the common underlying patriarchal roots of how girls and women are viewed, but it also risks other violence against girls becoming lost under the broader focus on women. In addition, it may introduce an inadvertent gender bias in that boys are excluded as boy children can get lost in a VAWG framing or be targeted only as potential perpetrators. Their own vulnerabilities to gendered abuse or violence against children can escape investigation, and they can become systematically marginalised across the many programs focused only on girls.

Several areas in relation to violence against children are noted as hidden, increasing, or largely ignored by many FBOs. Some forms of violence against children may become normalized and invisible whereby they are no longer recognized as such. Violence within families is often hidden from view. Faith actors often have significant influence here. Other child protection sectors are engaged in these to some extent, but many faith communities continue to lag behind.

- Online and digital forms of violence against children: Cyber-bullying, online sexual exploitation, and pornography are newer forms of violence against children. Many faith communities are unsure of how to monitor and protect children from these forms of digitally facilitated violence or to hold their leaders accountable in this space. Initiatives in the child protection field are beginning to engage FBOs on this form of violence against children, but more needs to be done for faith communities to counter it.
- Children as perpetrators of violence: Physical, emotional, and sexual violence between peers, older and younger children, and group bullying was often hidden from sight in current programs to end violence against children, including those run by faith communities. One expert suggested that up to 35% of the violence against children they see may be related to peer-to-peer abuse. Violence within schools, streets, and residential spaces between children requires urgent attention, going beyond a simplistic lens that views all children as exclusively victims.
- LGBTQ+ issues: Silence around this issue in the faith sector was noted with only two studies and one expert making reference to what remains a largely taboo subject in faith communities. However, adolescents who identify as LGBTQ+ often experience a disproportionate amount of violence, marginalization, and exclusion from faith communities: "the risk of homelessness among LGBTQ youth is 120% higher than the risk among their peers."
- Child abuse linked to faith, beliefs, and witchcraft-related violence: This was noted in both the literature review and expert interviews as an example of violence against children perpetuated within a harmful community narrative which contains both spiritual and cultural elements. Children are particularly vulnerable if they are seen to be different in some respect, such as children with a disability or albinism:

"One of the things I have learnt, which was not there for some time, is the killing of young albinos the children who are young. It is connected to witchcraft, so we see in some of the areas we are working with here that this child who was albino was killed or some of the body parts were taken (Male, Interfaith, Tanzania).

#### 3. FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

Many promising initiatives remain at an informal and undocumented level, which implies that robust and detailed documentation on impact and causality must be a priority and should underlie all initiatives in this area.

A need for further research emerged in several areas:

- 1. Child participation in faith communities as a mechanism to challenge and combat violence against children: Further investigation is needed to understand the underlying beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate the limited roles children often play in faith communities, and the ways in which children's voices, experiences, and opinions can be heard.
- 2. Facilitating mutual and respectful engagement and expertise sharing between faith and other child protection actors: There is little research on how to overcome barriers between these sectors and how to do this in a manner that avoids the instrumentalisation of faith leaders and communities.
- 3. Interfaith collaboration to address specific violence against children: Some successful initiatives exist both at community and global levels, but further research is needed to better understand the diverse contexts, practical barriers, and modes of working that can lead to effective outcomes in the long-term.
- 4. Rigorous documentation and evidence gathering of Ending Violence Against Children initiatives across multiple faiths: It is vital that effective responses are rigorously documented and an evidence-base to guide decision-making is developed. As part of an action research, evidence-based approach, this facilitates a deeper understanding of effective ways for faith communities to counter violence against children.

#### LESSONS LEARNED FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

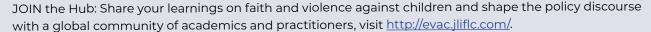
- Break the silence. Faith communities must take the lead to break the silence and deal constructively with negative faith beliefs used to justify or hide abusive practices. They must develop mechanisms to assess and mitigate risks in faith communities related to child safeguarding and work to establish internal child-friendly reporting and accountability mechanisms.
- Promote positive and protective faith beliefs and interpretations. Work with religious leaders to leverage their social and spiritual capital to prevent and eliminate violence against children. They can identify and condemn harmful practices based on religion and reaffirm the religious imperative to protect children. Work with credible religious scholars to correct misinterpretations of sacred texts perpetuating violence and promote positive and protective faith beliefs and rights-based interpretations about children. Mobilise faith actors to engage the mechanisms of faith in people's lives to end violence against children.
- Empower Children. Recognize children as partners in preventing and ending violence against them. Increase opportunities for child participation, involve children in decision-making, ensure child-friendly spaces in religious communities, and foster intergenerational dialogue in families.
- Place hidden and emerging forms of violence against children on the agenda. Faith communities should recognize and understand hidden and emerging forms of violence against children to strengthen engagement and appropriate responses, e.g., online forms of exploitation, children as perpetrators of violence, violence affecting LGBTQ+ children, child abuse directly linked to faith and beliefs.
- Build multisectoral engagement. A welfare approach to violence against children may not change the structural drivers of violence. Instead, multisectoral engagement is needed to address root causes through social norms and systemic engagement. This requires challenging beliefs that may alienate faith communities from meaningful collaboration with the wider system of child protection.
- Build and strengthen expertise. Provide faith communities access to technical child protection expertise across the continuum of the child protection system to support the development of minimum standards of care and address the root causes of violence against children.
- Increase religious literacy. Secular child protection actors require improved religious literacy in order to avoid faith instrumentalisation and to engage with faith actors in meaningful partnerships.

## ABOUT THE JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE ON FAITH AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities (JLI) is an international collaboration of academics, practitioners, and policy makers on research and evidence around faith groups' activities in humanitarian action and development: <a href="https://www.jliflc.com">www.jliflc.com</a>.

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- <sup>1</sup> Eyber, C. and Palm, S. (2019) 'A mixed blessing: roles of faith communities in ending violence against children.' Briefing Paper. Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending Violence Against Children Hub. Available at: <a href="https://jliflc.com/resources/a-mixed-blessing-roles-of-faith-communities-in-ending-violence-against-children/">https://jliflc.com/resources/a-mixed-blessing-roles-of-faith-communities-in-ending-violence-against-children/</a>
- <sup>2</sup> The UN defines violence against children, following the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. 'Child protection' is directly linked to this, and refers to preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children, acknowledging that these violations occur in every country and inhibit child survival and development. Violence against children is widespread, often within home and community settings and by trusted adults. https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx.
- <sup>3</sup> Palm, S., Rutledge, K., Colombo, F., and Eyber, C (2019) 'Scoping Study on Faith actors' involvement in the prevention, elimination and perpetuation of violence against children.' Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, https://jliflc.com/2019/06/evac-scoping-study-published/.
- <sup>4</sup> Palm, S. and Colombo, F. (eds.) (2019) 'Scoping Study on Faith actors' involvement in the prevention, elimination and perpetuation of violence against children. Case Studies.' Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities: JLI Ending Violence Against Children Hub.
- <sup>5</sup> Palm, S. and Colombo, F. (eds.) (2019) 'Scoping Study on Faith actors' involvement in the prevention, elimination and perpetuation of violence against children. Case Studies.' Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, pp. 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Palm, S. and Eyber, C. (2019) 'Why faith? Engaging the mechanisms of faith to

- end violence against children.' Briefing Paper. Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending Violence Against Children Hub.
- $^7$  Robinson, M. and Hanmer, S. (2014) Engaging Religious Communities to Protect Children from Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation. Child Abuse & Neglect. April, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 600-611.
- Religious literacy is defined as the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. A religiously literate person will thus possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place. See, Moore, D.L. (2014) Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: Expanding the Boundaries of Religious Education, Religious Education, vol. 109, no. 4, pp. 379-389.
- <sup>9</sup> https://forsa.org.za/for-sa-defends-parental-rights-before-the-constitutional-court/.
- <sup>10</sup> For confidentiality, all individuals are anonymised and the names of their respective organisations are not shared. However, an indication is given in the quotations as to the main region and faiths with which they currently work.
- <sup>11</sup> Lai-Smith, C. (2016) Protecting Children from Online Sexual Exploitation: A Guide to Action for Religious Leaders and Communities. ECPAT International & Religions for Peace.
- <sup>12</sup> Choi, S.K., Wilson, B.D.M., Shelton, J. and Gates, G. (2015) Serving Our Youth 2015: The Needs and Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth Experiencing Homelessness. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund; Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A. and Samuels, G.M. (2017) Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

