



National Coalition for the Homeless

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Homeless Youth

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This fact sheet discusses the dimensions, causes, and consequences of homelessness among youth. An overview of program and policy issues and a list of resources for further study are also provided.

DEFINITIONS AND DIMENSIONS

Homeless youth are individuals under the age of eighteen who lack parental, foster, or institutional care. These young people are sometimes referred to as "unaccompanied" youth. The number of the homeless youth is estimated by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the US Department of Justice. Their most recent study, published in 2002, reported there are an estimated 1,682,900 homeless and runaway youth. This number is equally divided among males and females, and the majority of them are between the ages of 15 and 17 (Molino, 2007). According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, unaccompanied youth account for 3% of the urban homeless population, (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). According to the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services, six percent of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) (Molino, 2007). Ten percent of homeless youth were recorded as pregnant (Greene & Ringwalt, 1998).

CAUSES

Causes of homelessness among youth fall into three inter-related categories: family problems, economic problems, and residential instability.

Many homeless youth leave home after years of physical and sexual abuse, strained relationships, addiction of a family member, and parental neglect. Disruptive family conditions are the principal reason that young people leave home: in one study, more than half of the youth interviewed during shelter stays reported that their parents either told them to leave or knew they were leaving and did not care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (a), 1995). In another study, 46% of runaway and homeless youth had been physically abused and 17% were forced into unwanted sexual activity by a family or household member (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (c), 1997).

Some youth may become homeless when their families suffer financial crises resulting from lack of affordable housing, limited employment opportunities, insufficient wages, no medical insurance, or inadequate welfare benefits. These youth become homeless with their families, but

are later separated from them by shelter, transitional housing, or child welfare policies (Shinn and Weitzman, 1996).

Residential instability also contributes to homelessness among youth. A history of foster care correlates with becoming homeless at an earlier age and remaining homeless for a longer period of time (Roman and Wolfe, 1995). Some youth living in residential or institutional placements become homeless upon discharge -- they are too old for foster care but are discharged with no housing or income support (Robertson, 1996). One national study reported that more than one in five youth who arrived at shelters came directly from foster care, and that more than one in four had been in foster care in the previous year (National Association of Social Workers, 1992).

CONSEQUENCES

Homeless youth face many challenges on the streets. Few homeless youth are housed in emergency shelters as a result of lack of shelter beds for youth, shelter admission policies, and a preference for greater autonomy (Robertson, 1996). Because of their age, homeless youth have few legal means by which they can earn enough money to meet basic needs. Many homeless adolescents find that exchanging sex for food, clothing, and shelter is their only chance of survival on the streets. In turn, homeless youth are at a greater risk of contracting AIDS or HIV-related illnesses. HIV prevalence studies anonymously performed in four cities found a median HIV-positive rate of 2.3% for homeless persons under age 25 (Robertson, 1996). Other studies have found rates ranging from 5.3% in New York to 12.9% in Houston. It has been suggested that the rate of HIV prevalence for homeless youth may be as much as 2 to 10 times higher than the rates reported for other samples of adolescents in the United States (National Network for Youth, 1998).

Homeless adolescents often suffer from severe anxiety and depression, poor health and nutrition, and low self-esteem. In one study, the rates of major depression, conduct disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome were found to be 3 times as high among runaway youth as among youth who have not run away (Robertson, 1989).

Furthermore, homeless youth face difficulties attending school because of legal guardianship requirements, residency requirements, improper records, and lack of transportation. As a result, homeless youth face severe challenges in obtaining an education and supporting themselves emotionally and financially.

PROGRAM AND POLICY ISSUES

Homeless youth benefit from programs that meet immediate needs first and then help them address other aspects of their lives. Programs that minimize institutional demands and offer a range of services have had success in helping homeless youth regain stability (Robertson, 1996). Educational outreach programs, assistance in locating job training and employment, transitional living programs, and health care especially designed for and directed at homeless youth are also needed. In the long term, homeless youth would benefit from many of the same measures that are needed to fight poverty and homelessness in the adult population, including the provision of affordable housing and employment that pays a living wage. In addition to these basic supports, the child welfare system must make every effort to prevent children from ending up on the streets.

RESOURCES

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info@nationalhomeless.org.

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[National Network for Youth](#), 1319 F St., Suite 401, Washington, DC 20004; 202/783-7949.