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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 homeless youth population is estimated to be between 500,000 and 1.3 million young people each year (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003). According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, unaccompanied youth account for 3% of the urban homeless population, (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005).

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, proper 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, 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

Center for Law and Social Policy, *Leave No Youth Behind: Opportunities for Congress to Reach Disconnected Youth*, 2003, pg.57.

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- National Association of Social Workers. Helping Vulnerable Youths: Runaway and Homeless Adolescents in the United States, 1992. Available for \$23.95 from the [National Association of Social Workers](#), 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington DC 20002-4241; 202/408-8600.
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- Roman, Nan P. and Phyllis B. Wolfe. Web of Failure: The Relationship Between Foster Care and Homelessness, 1995. Available for \$8.00 from the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), 1518 K St., NW, Suite 206, Washington, DC 20005-1203; 202/638-1526.
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- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services(a). Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences... Prevalence Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors, 1995. Volume I (the Final Report, including the executive summary) is available for \$48.15; the Executive Summary alone is available for \$3.15. Order from the [National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth](#), P. O. Box 13505, Silver Spring, MD 20911-3505; 301-608-8098.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services(b). Report to the Congress on the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program of the Family and Youth Services Bureau for Fiscal Year 1995, 1996. Available for \$3.15 from the [National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth](#), P. O. Box 13505, Silver Spring, MD 20911-3505; 301-608-8098.

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[National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth](#), P. O. Box 13505, Silver Spring, MD 20911 3505; 301-608-8098.

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