



## Youth Homelessness

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### Prevalence of Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness is disturbingly common. Although the prevalence of youth homelessness is difficult to measure, researchers estimate that about 5 to 7.7 percent of youth experience homelessness each year.<sup>1</sup>

### Youth Homelessness a Reflection of Family Breakdown

The same factors that contribute to adult homelessness, such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, low education levels, unemployment, mental health, and substance abuse, can lead to homelessness among youth. Beyond these factors, youth homelessness is largely a reflection of family breakdown.<sup>2</sup> Youth become homeless for varying reasons, including running away from home, being abandoned by their parents or guardians, being emancipated, or discharged from some sort of state care. Homeless youth often flee homes where they experience physical abuse and between 17 and 35 percent experience sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> Although family conflict also plays a role in adult homelessness, the nexus is more critical for youth because they are, by virtue of their developmental state in life, still largely financially, emotionally, and, depending on their age, legally dependent upon their families.

### Youth Exiting Foster Care and Juvenile Correction at Risk of Homelessness

Youth transitioning out of foster care are at high risk of becoming homeless. Every year, between 20,000 and 25,000 youth, ages 18 and older, age out of the foster care system.<sup>4</sup> Without a home, family support, or other resources, homeless youth are often locked up because they are without supervision. Homeless youth are socially marginalized and often arrested for “status” offenses, such as running away or breaking curfew. Twenty-five percent of former foster youth nationwide reported that they had been homeless at least one night

within 2.5 to 4 years after exiting foster care.<sup>5</sup> For youth who are released from juvenile corrections facilities, reentry is often difficult because they lack support systems and opportunities for work and housing.

### Youth Homelessness has Tragic Consequences

Homelessness has serious consequences for young people and is especially dangerous for those between the ages of 16 and 24 who do not have familial support. Living in shelters or on the streets, unaccompanied homeless youth are at a higher risk for physical and sexual assault or abuse and physical illness, including HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, homeless youth are at a higher risk for anxiety disorders, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide because of increased exposure to violence while living on their own.<sup>6</sup> Overall, homeless youth are also likely to become involved in prostitution, to use and abuse drugs, and to engage in other dangerous and illegal behaviors. Substance abuse, however, is not characteristic of the runaway youth population. Additionally, in the case of homeless youth, various studies have found high rates of parental alcohol or drug abuse (24 to 44 percent).<sup>7</sup> Despite all of these setbacks, most homeless youth are still in school. In 2005, a survey indicated that prior to shelter 79 percent of homeless youth were attending school on a regular basis and, of homeless youth in transitional housing, 78 percent were still in school.<sup>8</sup>

### Current Role of the Federal Government

The federal government has multiple programs designed to prevent and end youth homelessness. Local community programs, funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (Department of Health and Human Services-HHS), served over 500,000 homeless and runaway youth in 2005.<sup>9</sup> Still, HHS reported that over 2,500 homeless and runaway youth were turned away from shelter and

housing in 2005 due to lack of bed spaces.<sup>10</sup> Funding for shelter and housing for youth should be increased to ensure no young people in the US sleep on the streets or in an unsafe environment.

### More Should Be Done

The Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (CHCIP) also provides states with funding to support youth who are expected to emancipate from foster care and former foster care youth ages 18 to 21, which helps prevent homelessness for an at-risk group of youth. However, even if states used all the federal funding for youth housing, each youth would receive only \$800 per year.<sup>11</sup> In order to better prevent homelessness, particularly for at-risk groups of youth, an increase in housing funds is necessary. Additionally, housing for youth is cheaper than treatment and jail. While the average cost of foster care, in-patient treatment, or juvenile correction placements average between \$25,000 and \$55,000 per year, the average cost of a transitional living program housing unit for youth is approximately \$11,800.<sup>12</sup>

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Robertson, M.J., and Toro, P.A. 1998. Homeless Youth: Research, Intervention, Policy. National Symposium on Homelessness Research. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy. 2003. Leave No Youth Behind: Opportunities to Reach Disconnected Youth, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Fosburg, Linda B. and Dennis, Deborah L. Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, August, 1999: P. 3-9.

<sup>4</sup> Allen M., and Nixon, R. 2000. "The Foster Care Independence Act and the JohnH. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program: New catalyst for reform for young people aging out of foster care." *Journal of Poverty and Policy*.

<sup>5</sup> Anne E. Casey Foundation. 2004. "2004 Kids Count Data Book." Washington, DC: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Healthcare for the Homeless Clinician's Network. "Protecting the Mental Health of Homeless Children and Youth." *Healing Hands*, 4(1), Feb. 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Healthcare for the Homeless Clinician's Network. "Protecting the Mental Health of Homeless Children and Youth." *Healing Hand*, 4 (1), Feb. 2000. Robertson, M., and Toro, P. (1998) Homeless Youth: Research, Intervention, and Policy. The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, US Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>8</sup> Congressional Research Service, Fernandes, A. (2006) Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics, Programs, and Emerging Issues.

<sup>9</sup> Runaway and Homeless Youth management Information System, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>10</sup> National Network for Youth, Statement for the Record, FY2007 Labor-HHS-Education-Related Agencies Appropriations before the Subcommittee on Labor-Health and Human Services-Education-Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives.

<sup>11</sup> Chaffee Foster care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169). Courtney, M. and Hughes Heuring, D., "The Transition to Adulthood for Youth 'Aging Out' of the Foster Care System" in Osgood, W. et al., eds., *On Your Own Without a New: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> National Network for Youth, Statement for the Record, FY2007 Labor-HHS-Education-Related Agencies Appropriations before the Subcommittee on Labor-Health and Human Services-Education-Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives.

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