HOMELESS YOUTH IN AMERICA: Who Are They?

Jessica left home when she was 15 to escape abuse after her sole source of support, her brother, left to join the Air Force. She didn’t have money for rent so she slept on friends couches in the beginning, then she started sleeping in laundromats or the public library and staying awake all night on the streets to try to stay safe.

Aaron’s sole caretaker, his mother, died when he was a teenager and he had no other family who could care for him. No one stepped in to care for him; not even the child welfare system. Aaron was sleeping at friends’ houses for a bit, but soon ended up homeless and living on the streets.

Charlene’s mom struggled with addiction and when Charlene was 13 years old she became the primary caretaker of her three younger sisters. Charlene became pregnant at age 16 and after her son was born, her stepfather began to sexually abuse and rape her. Charlene found the strength to report her stepfather to the police and he was incarcerated. Soon after, Charlene was placed in foster care with her son. At 18, she exited foster care and became homeless with her son.

Many Factors Contribute to Youth Homelessness

The vast majority of youth do not become homeless by choice. Many different factors contribute to youth homelessness, but studies suggest that some of the primary reasons are family dysfunction, sexual abuse, “aging out” of the foster care system, exiting the juvenile justice system, and economic hardship.

Family Dysfunction

All families have some level of dysfunction, but some families’ experience: violence, heightened family conflict, death of parent/caretaker or parental neglect due to poverty or mental illness. Some parents reject a young person because they are pregnant or come out as LGBTQ.
Sexual Abuse
According to a study conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, 21-40% of homeless youth have been sexually abused prior to running away.1 These young people are fleeing from victimization, violence, and to escape the next traumatic violation against her or his body.

“Aging Out” of Foster Care
Approximately 12 to 36 percent2 of youth ages 18 or 21 exiting the foster care system become homeless, which in 2010 translated to approximately 28,000 youth.3 Though some former foster care youth manage to find decent living situations after emancipation, one study found that 32% youth transitioned more than five times within a two to four year span post-foster care.4 Limited support coupled with low earning potential and a shortage of affordable housing result in youth “couch surfing” in order to remain stably housed.

Juvenile Justice System Involvement
Young people who end up on the streets are often victimized or commit minor status offenses, in order to survive (acquire food and shelter). Unfortunately, these youth end up in the juvenile justice system and upon exit, return to the street with nowhere to go. RHY programs fill this gap in care for the young people that are often treated as disposable and need a safe place to live. Often, if youth enter into RHY programs soon enough, entrance to the juvenile justice system may be avoided entirely.

Economic Hardship
Families facing economic hardship due to poverty and the depressed economic climate are unable to support themselves and their children. Joblessness coupled with residential instability experienced by poverty stricken families due to a lack of sustainable and affordable housing, force many youth to find shelter outside of the traditional nuclear family dwelling.

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Words of Wisdom from Homeless Youth

Homeless Youth want a Connection to Family
I AM A HOMELESS YOUTH. I…
- …may have a connection to my biological family, or a desire to reconnect to them.
- …may come from a poor family, or my family may have money.
- …can still take care of my own child and be a good parent but may need some help in learning how since I may not have had a good role model in my own childhood.

Homeless Youth want a Safe Place to Live
I AM A HOMELESS YOUTH. I…
- …may come from a city. But I may also come from a rural town, suburb, Indian reservation, border colonia, or foreign country.
- …may have traveled miles from home, but I may also have traveled just a few blocks.
- …may have left on my own because it was safer for me to get out. But I also may have been kicked out of home because my family didn’t understand or accept me.
- …may get caught up in the wrong crowd for self-protection. But I am not violent or a gang member. I’m just hanging on the street because I don’t have another place to go.
- …sometimes do things I don’t want to like provide sex in exchange for a place to live, food, or money. My situation can get really desperate.
- …am no different from other youth. I simply don’t have a safe place to live.

Homeless Youth want Self-Sufficiency.
I AM A HOMELESS YOUTH. I…
- …usually just have too much stress and competing priorities to operate at the same pace as my peers with safe places to live. I am not dumb or unmotivated.
- …need to take care of getting a safe place to live and a source of food and clean clothes before I can focus on finding a job or completing school.
- …want to work to support myself. But I probably need some help building work skills and help finding a job, just like any other young person looking for a first job.
- …want to wear clean clothes and take regular showers. If I look grungy, it’s because I don’t have regular access to these basic things.

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5 These words of wisdom came straight from the mouths of homeless youth throughout the United States and the National Network for Youth categorized and compiled their wisdom.
Homeless Youth want Help from Caring Adults.
I AM A HOMELESS YOUTH. I...
  ▪ …may use alcohol or drugs or have a mental illness. But if I do, it doesn’t mean that I don’t want to get help.
  ▪ …sometimes act tough because that is a skill I developed to survive without a safe place to live. But, I know to behave differently if you give me positive attention.
  ▪ …may need your help to fit in with my peer group who have stable housing. Providing me with resources and supports can help make this possible. I don’t want to be an outsider.
  ▪ …may be reluctant to ask for help right away because I may not trust you. So please ask me first if I need help. And be patient while my trust in you strengthens.
  ▪ …have a voice and like to make choices. Don’t assume you know what’s best for me. Ask me what I want before you intercede on my behalf.

Homeless Youth want a Future.
I AM A HOMELESS YOUTH. I...
  ▪ …have dreams and goals. I can succeed in life despite the hardships I have faced.
  ▪ …am not disposable. I am a human being. Be happy I am alive. I am the future.

Effects and Consequences of Youth Homelessness
A wide range of physical, mental, emotional and behavioral issues have been shown to develop as a result of youth homelessness while prior complications are at risk of becoming exaggerated. Homeless youth living on the streets suffer, they:
  ▪ Are at high risk of developing serious, life-long health, behavioral and emotional problems.6
  ▪ Suffer from high rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.7
  ▪ Are more likely they are to fall victim to sexual exploitation when compared to young people who are not living on the streets.8
  ▪ More likely to contract HIV and/or STDs due to increased likelihood of sexual exploitation, rape and sexual assault.9
  ▪ Have higher rates of a variety of mental health symptoms including anxiety, developmental delays and depression resulting in elevated risk for suicide attempts.

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7 Id.
8 Id.
- Resorting to illegal activity such as stealing, forced entry, and gang activity in order to survive.
- Homeless young women are five times more likely to become pregnant and far more likely to experience multiple pregnancies.\(^{10}\)
- Fifty percent of homeless youth ages 16 and older drop out of high school and face extraordinary obstacles in trying to finish.\(^{11}\)

**Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs Change Lives**

For **Jessica**, like many young people, it was difficult to get off the streets. "The hardest thing is basically just getting around and trying to find a job ‘cause it's hard to get a job without an address. If you don't have somebody's address that you can use and say ‘I live here' quote, unquote, then they look at your application and they're like ‘no'.”

A case manager from a Street Outreach program referred Jessica to a youth transitional living program where she established goals: "to stay in stable housing and try to finish my GED. I'm doing that through the program’s school. It's free, which is good. I have some health goals too."

This homeless youth program provided Jessica with "more focus and more stability, which is a very important thing to have. If you get those, then you can do everything else that you want."

Jessica says that if she hadn't found the program she would still be out on the streets. Her long-term plan is to go to college and study sociology. "I want to help people the way they've helped me."

**Aaron** was sleeping on the streets and a Street Outreach worker started talking to him, gave him a meal to eat, and information about a runaway and homeless youth shelter. **Aaron never felt safe on the streets** and he decided to visit the program the next day. Aaron was able to enter a transitional living program for youth where he felt safe for the first time in years and was able to achieve a GED. Aaron is in college where he is studying to become a teacher.

**Charlene** received transitional living assistance from a runaway and homeless youth program where a case manager helped her find an apartment and pay her rent until she was stabilized. She received assistance in obtaining furniture and food, creating a budget, and managing her money. She has earned her GED and is working two jobs to live independently.

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\(^{10}\) *Id.*

Federal Programs Providing Assistance to Homeless Youth in America Remain Chronically Underfunded

- The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) has never had a budget larger than $115 million and this statute funds street outreach, basic centers, and transitional living programs for runaway and homeless youth.

- U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) programs serve many thousands of homeless youth each year; but, the programs do not currently target youth, they use performance measures that may provide an incentive for communities to lower the priority of youth programs for funding, and they are woefully underfunded for the task of preventing and ending homelessness in America.

- The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) provides vital workforce training for youth who desperately need resources and training in order to enter the workforce to become financially independent and support their families.

- The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, a HUD administered program, is only appropriated at $65 million to ensure equal access to education for homeless youth, including transportation to and from school. Given that public education supports over 1 million homeless youth per year, this works out to less than $65 per youth per year.

“Where I stand today is a very important position because it shows how far I have come with the struggles that have occurred in my life. Without the Transitional Living Program, I’d be homeless. This program has given me the first pillow in almost two years to lay my head on and gives us young people a second opportunity in life.”

- RHYA YOUTH BENEFICIARY