



Unaccompanied Youth Overview

Summary Statement

Between one million and three million United States youth experience an unaccompanied situation annually. The term “unaccompanied youth” includes children and youth through age 17 who are living apart from their parents or guardians and young adults ages 18 through 24 who are economically and/or emotionally detached from their families and are experiencing homeless situations.

Unaccompanied youth experience separation from one or more of the key societal institutions of family, school, and community institutions. Their disconnection is accentuated by their lack of a permanent place to live, which is not only disruptive in and of itself, but also indicative of the larger socioeconomic instability they are experiencing.

Unaccompanied youth become detached from parents, guardians and other caring adults – legally, economically, and emotionally – due to a combination of family and community causal factors.

Family Factors – Many of our nation’s unaccompanied youth are compelled to leave their home environments prematurely due to severe family conflict, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by an adult in the home, parental neglect, parental substance abuse, parental mental illness, or parental incarceration. “Worst case” housing conditions, such as overcrowded living spaces or dilapidated dwellings, exacerbate the tensions that exist within some of these already struggling families prior to the youth’s departure, and may forestall their reunification.

For other youth, the values and traditions with which their families operate prescribe that the young person separate economically from the family unit upon reaching the legal age of majority or after graduation, in some cases regardless of whether the youth is actually prepared for independent adulthood. Others are expelled from the home due to parental inability to accept the sexual orientation or gender identity, parenting status, or mental, addictive, or developmental disability of their child. For still other young people, their families are simply too poor to continue to bear the financial burden of providing for the youth’s basic needs. Youth in families that are experiencing homelessness may be separated from the family unit—and become homeless on their own—so that emergency shelter or victim services can be secured for the remaining family members, or to squeeze most of the family into means of habitation that are too small for all of its members.

Community Factors – State custodial and health care systems – including child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, addiction treatment, and developmental disabilities—which have responsibility for ensuring the safety and protection of children and youth who are not under the direct supervision of parents and guardians – are failing in general to accept older youth into their custody due to financial limitations and policy disincentives. Many of the young people who do come in contact with public systems are not adequately prepared for independence and residential stability during their period of custody nor provided an aftercare arrangement to support them after the custodial relationship has ended. Many of these young people have no home environment to which to return. Youth with disabilities and criminal records face discrimination when searching for an independent living



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arrangement. And, states' and providers' ability to secure and ensure the maintenance of housing for their former charges is limited both by a lack of resources and by a diminished sense of responsibility to young people no longer under their care.

Many unaccompanied youth who are psychosocially prepared for independent adulthood are not economically ready for self-sufficiency. Inadequate educational preparation, lack of employment skills, short or non-existent work histories, language barriers, and undocumented immigration status all contribute to the relegation of many youth to unemployment or to low-wage jobs—neither of which generate income sufficient for acquiring affordable housing.

Policy barriers also stand in the way of permanency for unaccompanied youth. In some jurisdictions, youth below the age of majority are prohibited from entering into leases or other contracts on their own behalf. "One strike" laws prohibit individuals with criminal histories from residency in public and assisted housing and prohibit juvenile ex-offenders from returning to their families. And, federal, state, and local public and assisted housing programs rank young people low, if at all, among their priority populations for assistance.

Regardless of the causal factor, unaccompanied youth, when left to fend for themselves without intervention, experience poor health, educational, and workforce outcomes which imperil their prospects for positive adulthood. This undoubtedly results in their long-term dependency on or involvement in public health, social service, emergency assistance, and corrections systems.

Definitions of Terms

The National Network for Youth understands the term "unaccompanied youth" to include children and youth through age 17 who are living apart from their parents or guardians and young adults ages 18 through 24 who are economically and/or emotionally detached from their families and are experiencing homeless situations.

Terms that are used to describe subsets of the unaccompanied youth population are:

- **Runaway youth** – a person under 18 years of age who absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of his or her family.¹
- **Homeless youth** – The term "homeless youth" means an individual—
 - (A) who is—
 - (i) not more than 21 years of age, or, in the case of a youth seeking shelter in a center under part A, not more than 18 years of age; and
 - (ii) for the purposes of part B, not less than 16 years of age;
 - (B) for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative;
 - (C) who has no other safe alternative living arrangement.²
- **Throwaway youth** —
 - (A) Children who were directly told to leave the household;
 - (B) Children who were abandoned or deserted;



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- (C) Children who were away from home, for whatever reason, and wanted to come home, but a parent or other adult household member refused to permit them to return; and
- (D) Children who ran away and whose parent(s) or caretaker(s) made no effort to recover them or did not care whether or not they returned.³

The National Network for Youth avoids the use of this term unless quoting directly, due to its derogatory nature. We substitute this term with more neutral language, such as “expelled youth” or “pushed out youth.”

- **Street youth** – The term “street youth” means an individual who—
 - (A) is—
 - (i) a runaway youth; or
 - (ii) indefinitely or intermittently a homeless youth; and
 - (B) spends a significant amount of time on the street or in other areas that increase the risk to such youth for sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, prostitution, or drug abuse.⁴

Incidence of Unaccompanied Situations

Determining the number of unaccompanied youth is difficult, given the temporary and often hidden nature of their living arrangements and the absence of reliable methods for counting people experiencing residential instability. Estimates for this group of young people vary dramatically for several reasons: 1) there is no common agreement about what constitutes runaway behavior; 2) many unaccompanied youth come from families that fail to report their absences; 3) unaccompanied youth are typically transient and therefore not in a fixed place long enough to be surveyed; 4) research on unaccompanied youth tends to be gathered in urban areas and cannot be generalized to other geographic areas; and 5) unaccompanied youth generally distrust adults and social service systems and hence often choose to avoid them, and therefore are not counted.

That being said, efforts have been made to estimate the size of the unaccompanied youth population. Most recently, the national estimate is that 1.6 million youths ages 12 to 17 had run away from home and slept on the street in the past 12 months.⁵ A 1995 study conducted for the federal government by the Research Triangle Institute reported a far higher figure—an estimated 2.8 million youth.⁶ These and other studies of the prevalence of youth homelessness do not typically include individuals 18 and older within their scope, thus highlighting the special difficulty of determining how many young adults experience homelessness each year.

While incidence data can validate the scope of the phenomenon, debating the actual number of youth who experience an unaccompanied situation annually can deflect attention from the hard reality of the dire circumstances in which so many young people live.



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Demographic Characteristics of Unaccompanied Youth Population

- Age – 68% of runaway youth are older teens, ages 15 to 17.⁷ Government reports typically indicate that those who live on the streets are between 16 and 21 years of age.⁸ These ranges are partially influenced by services provided at the federally-funded runaway and homeless youth Basic Centers, which are restricted to serving youth under age 18, and Transitional Living Programs, which serve homeless youth aged 16 to 21.
- Gender – Female youth served by shelters typically make up about 60 percent of the shelter population; male youth make up the majority of the youth on the streets.⁹
- Race and Ethnicity – Youth of color are over-represented in the unaccompanied youth population. In one study of youth shelter users, 31.7 percent of youth were white, 40.7 percent were black, 19.7 percent Hispanic, and 7.9 percent other. Data collected from street youth also indicated over-representation: 45.9 percent were white, 27.4 percent black, 17.7 percent Hispanic, and nine percent other.¹⁰ Black or African American youth, who comprise 15.4% of the U.S. youth population, are disproportionately represented among homeless youth population.¹¹
- Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity – Available research suggests that between 20% to 40% of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT).¹²

Causal Factors

Unaccompanied youth become detached from parents, guardians and other caring adults – legally, economically, and emotionally – due to a combination of family and community causal factors.

- In one study, fifty-one percent of homeless youth reported they left home because of being thrown out, 37 percent left because of their parents disapproval of their drug use, and 31 percent left home because of parental abuse. Forty-seven percent indicated that they were sexually abused with females reporting significantly higher rates than males.¹³
- A study of youth in shelters indicated that almost half of youth reported physical harm or intense conflict by a family member as a major contributing factor to becoming homeless.¹⁴
- Sixty-two percent of youth indicated that a member of their family or household let them know that they were no longer wanted.¹⁵
- A study for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 46 percent of runaway and homeless youth had been physically abused and 17 percent had been forced into unwanted sexual activity by a family or household member.¹⁶
- Another study for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 38 percent of runaway and homeless youth reported emotional abuse by a parent figure.¹⁷
- A survey conducted for the National Association of Social Workers 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 the previous year.¹⁸ Within 2-4 years of exiting foster care, 25 percent of foster children had experienced homelessness.¹⁹ 58 percent of the shelter youth and 71 percent of the street youth



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surveyed “had been placed or spent time in at least one of the five institutional settings the researchers specified (foster care, group home, psychiatric or mental hospital, juvenile detention, or jail).”²⁰

Consequences of Youth Homelessness

Unaccompanied youth, when left to fend for themselves without intervention, experience poor health, educational, and workforce outcomes which imperil their prospects for positive adulthood. This undoubtedly results in their long-term dependency on or involvement in public health, social service, emergency assistance, and corrections systems.

- While unaccompanied, youth often suffer from poor hygiene, lack of sleep, high exposure to violence (as both victims and witnesses), and difficult weather conditions – which can result in a variety of medical problems. Various studies have found that injuries, malnutrition, and skin infections (such as lice and scabies) are serious health problems for homeless youth.²¹
- The high level of psychological disorders found among unaccompanied youth is not surprising given the reasons they left home, the conditions under which they live, and their lack of familial support and other social bonds. In one study, the rates of major depression, conduct disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome were found to be three times as high among runaway youth as among youth who have not run away.²² Other studies have found consistently higher suicide attempt rates for unaccompanied youth than for domiciled youth.²³ Mental health problems are as much as eleven times higher for homeless youth than for the general population.²⁴
- While living unstably, some unaccompanied youth find that exchanging sex for basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter or protection, is their only chance for survival; in several samples of homeless youth in Hollywood, California, 26 percent of runaways who were clients of a health clinic reported involvement in “survival sex” compared to only 0.2 percent among non-runaway youth. Similarly, about one-third of a Hollywood street youth sample reported ever trading sex for money, food or shelter; 75 percent reported that they only did this when homeless.²⁵
- Unaccompanied youth who engage in survival sex—where multiple partners, increased use/abuse of alcohol and other drugs, and unprotected sexual behaviors are common—are at increased risk for HIV infection. Several studies of runaway and homeless youth have found high HIV prevalence rates, ranging from 5.3 percent in New York City, 11.5 percent in Hollywood, California, and 12.9 percent in Houston, Texas.²⁶ It has been suggested that the rate of HIV prevalence in this population may be as much as two to 10 times higher than the rates reported for other samples of adolescents in the United States.²⁷ The White House report on HIV/AIDS, released in 2000, cited a four-city study which revealed that the median HIV infection rate of homeless youth was 2.3 percent. Some other studies have reported infection rates of more than 10 percent.²⁸ Homeless youth are 7 times more likely to die from AIDS and 16 times more likely to be diagnosed with HIV as the general youth population.²⁹
- In addition to HIV infection, high rates of other sexually transmitted illnesses and unintended pregnancies have also been reported among these youth.³⁰ In one study, more than half of all homeless adolescent girls reported becoming pregnant while on the streets.³¹ A national study of homeless youth found the pregnancy rate of 13-15 year old homeless girls to be 14 percent, versus 1 percent for non-homeless girls.³²



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- Homeless youth encounter many difficulties attending school including legal guardianship requirements, residency requirements, lack of proper records, and inadequate or nonexistent transportation. As a result, many of these young people struggle in obtaining an education and supporting themselves emotionally and financially.³³
- Being homeless can leave many youth in desperate situations. Some youth resort to criminal and illegal activity as part of their survival strategy. Twenty-three percent of youth report stealing, 14 percent report having forced entry into a residence, and 20 percent report dealing drugs.³⁴

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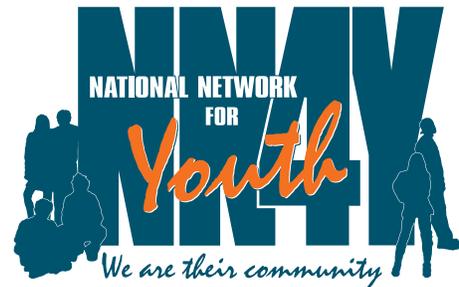
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National Network for Youth

The National Network for Youth (NN4Y), founded in 1974, is a nonprofit membership organization that champions the needs of runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth through advocacy, innovation and member services. NN4Y provides its members and the general public education, networking, training, materials and policy advocacy with federal, state, and local lawmakers. NN4Y is committed to ensuring that opportunities for development and permanence be made available to youth who face greater odds due to abuse, neglect, exploitation, homelessness, lack of resources, community prejudice, differing abilities, barriers to learning, and other life challenges.



NN4Y's membership includes community-based, faith-based, and public organizations that provide an array of services to youth and families in the U.S. states and territories as well as some international locations. NN4Y's organization members provide the full gamut of preventive, interventive, and developmental supports to youth and families in high-risk situations, including street-based crisis intervention, emergency shelter, transitional and independent living arrangements, permanent housing, individual and family counseling, lifeskills, parenting, and health and wellness education, physical and mental health treatment and care, and education, workforce development, arts, and recreation services. Collectively, NN4Y member organizations serve over 2.5 million youth annually. In addition, youth, youth workers, and regional and state networks of youth-serving organizations belong to NN4Y.

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