



Consequences of Youth Homelessness

The Consequences Faced by Unaccompanied Youth & the Cost to Society

As a result of their homelessness, unaccompanied youth face devastating harms and barriers in life, all of which hinder their ability to re-assimilate into society, depress their motivation, and inhibit their becoming independent, successful, and contributing members of their families and communities. The consequences of homelessness bring despair to youth in the form of mental health problems, substance use, victimization and criminal activity, unsafe sexual practices, and barriers to education and employment. These problems further burden society with the cost of finding ways to take care of these youth. If these youth are not helped, they will likely become an addition to the population of chronic homeless adults.

Unaccompanied Youth Need Harm Reduced & Homes Found

Unaccompanied youth face a rough life when unstably housed, but they can be helped if their needs are addressed. Homelessness as an unaccompanied youth involves the horrors of survival sex, victimization, substance abuse, worsening mental health conditions, and barriers to education that turn into barriers to employment, and housing. Policymakers should put an end to the unjust consequences borne by homelessness by investing in more affordable housing and supportive services for unaccompanied youth.

The Consequences of Youth Homelessness

1. Mental Health Problems

Unaccompanied youth are faced with the debilitating effects of mental health problems, caused by or made worse by homelessness. Half of all unaccompanied youth report mental health problems, which are predictors of chronic homelessness¹. In studying these homeless youth, one finds that their mental health problems come in many forms. "Homeless adolescents often suffer from severe anxiety and depression...and low self-esteem. The rates of major depression, conduct disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome were found to be three times as high among runaway youth"⁴ as among the general youth population. "Self-harming behaviors (cutting, burning, self-tattooing, etc.) are quite common"⁵ among unaccompanied youth, as are suicide attempts. "Suicide is the leading cause of death among street youth."⁵ Unfortunately, while mental health problems are prevalent among homeless youth, it is only a very small portion of these youth (a mere nine percent, at best) that have accessed mental health services.³



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2. Substance Abuse

Many unaccompanied youth turn to substances to help deal with the stress and desperation caused by unstable living arrangements. Studies show that substance use among youth increases as living situations become “more stressful and less stable.”³ “Between 30 and 40 percent of unaccompanied youth report alcohol problems in their lifetime, and 40 to 50 percent report drug problems.”¹ Unaccompanied youth are significantly more likely to use marijuana, crack cocaine, and other harmful substances than the general youth population.³ Unfortunately, while the number of unaccompanied youth who turn to drugs and alcohol is high, the number of unaccompanied youth who find treatment is low (less than 15 percent).³ Drug and alcohol abuse among unaccompanied youth is dangerous, as it causes impairment, which leads to poor decision making.

3. Criminal Activity & Victimization

Homelessness leaves unaccompanied youth in a desperate situation, leading some to become involved in criminal activity. Many unaccompanied youth resort to illegal activity as part of their strategy for survival. For example, unaccompanied youth seeking shelter might break into an abandoned building, while youth seeking income to meet basic needs might prostitute themselves or sell drugs. One-fifth of unaccompanied youth report stealing. More than ten percent of homeless youth have forced entry into a residence. As many as half of homeless youth have participated in gang activity.¹⁰ However, “while homeless youth often engage in criminal activity, research shows they are more likely to be the victims of crime rather than the perpetrators.”⁵ Trauma and rape rates among unaccompanied youth are two to three times higher than those of the general youth population. Unaccompanied youth often find themselves the victims of physical and sexual assault and robbery.¹⁰ Regardless of their connections to crime, it is more effective to view delinquent unaccompanied youth as “young people in need of assistance, rather than as criminals.”² Many times, youth are arrested by police officers who have no other ways to help. The criminal justice system is then used “as a means to assist youth [but] is generally counterproductive. Too often the youth is further stigmatized and exposed to additional criminal sophistication. The juvenile justice system is overwhelmed with violent and chronic offenders, and does not have the time or resources to devote to these [youth] or their needs.”² Further, the costs of placing a homeless youth in the criminal justice system for one year (\$53,665), a burden to be paid for by taxpayers, is significantly more than the cost (\$5,887) of “permanently [moving] a homeless youth off the streets.”⁶ The poor decisions made by government and society regarding how to deal with unaccompanied youth (delinquent or not) has resulted in a large and rather unnecessary loss of money and resources, with little to no benefit to the youth.

4. Unsafe Sexual Practices & Results

Many unaccompanied youth turn to prostitution for survival. This is known as survival sex, where sex is exchanged for money, shelter, food, or other necessities. The majority (95%) of homeless youth report being sexually active, with 13 years as the median age of first coitus. Over one-third of homeless youth report exchanging sex for food, shelter, or drugs.⁷ Of the youth who engage in prostitution/survival sex, the overwhelming majority trade sex for money. Approximately half also trade sex for temporary shelter, and one fifth trade sex for drugs. Most all homeless youth report that they engage in survival sex only when they are homeless.¹⁰ Pregnancy rates among homeless youth are much higher than the rates of the general population, and seem to increase with the instability of a youth’s housing situation. About 50% of street youth have had a pregnancy experience compared to about 33% living in shelters. Less than 10% of household youth have had a pregnancy



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experience.¹⁴ “Homeless youth are three times as likely as national samples of youth to be pregnant, to have impregnated someone, or to already be a parent. Pregnancy may be the result of having no way to obtain money other than through prostitution (survival sex).”¹ To compound the problem, most homeless youth do not have access to information regarding sexual health and safety. “Homeless teen mothers showed a profound lack of knowledge or interest regarding birth control and reproductive health. 50% did not believe birth control was important.”¹² With such high numbers of unaccompanied youth engaging in sex, it is dangerous to allow this population to continue to go without sexual health and safety education. Another result of this is the high rate of HIV and sexually transmitted illnesses in the homeless youth population. Because HIV prevention programs have been targeted at school-based youth, most unaccompanied youth are missed by these efforts.⁷ Young people living on the street make up one of two groups classified by the US Center for Disease Control as having the highest HIV prevalence in the United States.⁵ Unaccompanied youth are significantly more likely to be diagnosed with HIV or die from AIDS as the general youth population. Studies find that, at any given moment, between 5 and 13 percent of unaccompanied youth are living with HIV. 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.⁴

5. Barriers to Education & Employment

Unaccompanied youth face access barriers to education, keeping many of them from completing high school degrees or post-secondary education. Such barriers include school attendance policies, credit accrual, legal guardianship requirements,⁹ residency requirements, proper records, and lack of transportation.⁵ These barriers can cause youth to be denied enrollment, often resulting in a youth remaining out of school for long periods of time.⁹ It is because of this that homelessness can interrupt education and normal socialization processes that are developed during youth. This affects a young person’s future ability to live independently,¹⁰ and also results in the development of learning problems and interpersonal communication problems, leading youth to have future troubles integrating into society. These problems, coupled with the lack of a degree, lead youth to face “severe challenges” in supporting themselves emotionally and financially.” Without proper education or degree, unaccompanied youth find themselves contributing to unemployment rates in America. Those who can find jobs often don’t make livable wages. Society will eventually feel the additional effects of uneducated and unemployed youth. “Youth who are out of school and out of work are not acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to replace the skilled, educated, and experienced adult workers who will be retiring in the coming decade.”¹¹



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Further Statistics Concerning Consequences of Homelessness

❖ Consequence: Mental Health Problems

- “Forty-five percent of homeless youth reported mental health problems in the past year.”¹
- 50 to 56 percent youth reported mental health problems over their lifetime.”¹
- “A mere 9 percent of [all] homeless youth [have] accessed mental health services.”³
- Mental health problems are as much as eleven times higher for homeless youth than for the general population.⁵
- The rates of major depression, conduct disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome are 3 times as high among runaway youth as among the general population of youth.⁴
- 32% of homeless youth have attempted suicide. ²

❖ Consequence: Substance Abuse

- Homeless youth are 3 times more likely to use marijuana, and 18 times more likely to use crack cocaine than non-homeless youth.³
- Between 30 and 40 percent of homeless youth report alcohol problems in their lifetime, and 40 to 50 percent report drug problems.¹
- Studies show that a mere 10 to 15 percent of all homeless youth are ever treated for drug and alcohol related problems.³

❖ Consequence: Criminal Activity

- 23 percent of homeless youth report stealing.¹⁰
- 14 percent of homeless youth have forced entry to a residence.¹⁰
- 20 percent of homeless youth report dealing drugs.¹⁰
- Runaway and homeless youth experience rape and assault rates 2 to 3 times higher than the general population of youth.¹⁰
- It costs \$53,665 to maintain a youth in the criminal justice system for one year, but only \$5,887 to permanently move a homeless youth off the streets.⁶

❖ Consequence: Unsafe Sexual Practices

- 95 percent of homeless youth have engaged in sexual intercourse.⁷
- 13 years is the median age of first intercourse among homeless youth.⁷
- More than one third of homeless youth engage in survival sex.³
- 75 percent of youth who engage in survival sex report only doing so while they are homeless.¹⁰
- Of the youth who engage in survival sex:
 - ❑ 82 percent trade sex for money.¹⁰
 - ❑ 48 percent trade sex for food or a place to stay.¹⁰
 - ❑ 22 percent trade sex for drugs.¹⁰
- Homeless youth are 7 times as likely to die from AIDS and 16 times as likely to be diagnosed with HIV as the general youth population.³
- About 50% of street youth have had a pregnancy experience compared to about 33% living in



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shelters. Less than 10% of household runaway youth have had a pregnancy experience.¹⁴

- 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.¹³
- 50 percent of homeless teen mothers did not believe birth control was important.¹²
- 41 percent of homeless teen mothers did not know they were pregnant until the second trimester.¹²
- HIV rates among homeless youth range from 5.3 percent to 12.9 percent.⁴
- 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.⁴
- There are 162,000 homeless youth estimated to be victims of commercial sexual exploitation in the United States.²
- The average age of entry into prostitution is fourteen.²
- One of every three teens on the street will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home.²

Youth Need Housing and Access to Specialized Programs & Treatment

1. Affordable Housing

Government and communities should offer more affordable housing to unaccompanied youth. Subsidized housing targeted to youth and young adults is imperative. Getting youth off the street and into a more stable housing situation will decrease the consequences associated with homelessness. Studies show that more stable housing situations decrease pregnancy rates and drug use among unaccompanied youth. Permanent housing will also take youth away from streets where mental health deteriorates, give them permanent residency status which makes them eligible for public school enrollment, and will help prevent chronic homelessness. Housing would also prevent many unaccompanied youth from being victimized on the streets.

2. Programs and Treatment

Government and communities should offer more access to educational programs and treatment programs for homeless youth. Unaccompanied youth have need of assistance to help them deal with the consequences of homelessness. Youth would benefit from more substance abuse programs and treatment for mental health problems. In addition, unaccompanied youth would profit from safe sex education, and assistance in enrolling in other education programs. Easier access to basic needs (food, clothes, etc.) would also decrease survival sex rates and crime rates among unaccompanied youth.



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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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