

# Fact Sheet

## *Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research*

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### Youth Homelessness

Updated January 2010

#### Prevalence of Youth Homelessness

Approximately 12,000 homeless youth were counted during January 2007 point-in-time counts<sup>1</sup>. An estimated 50,000 youth used the homeless assistance system that same year<sup>2</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>3</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>4</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, approximately 29,000 youth, ages 18 and older, age out of the foster care system.<sup>5</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. 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

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<sup>1</sup> Alliance analysis of 2008 point-in-time counts, provided by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report. 2009.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report. 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy. 2003. Leave No Youth Behind: Opportunities to Reach Disconnected Youth, p. 57.

<sup>4</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>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. Preliminary FY 2008 Estimates as of October 2009. October 16, 2009.

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 700,000 homeless and runaway youth in 2008.<sup>9</sup> Still, HHS reported that over 7,663 homeless and runaway youth were turned away from shelter and housing in 2008 due to lack of bed spaces.<sup>10</sup>

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.

## More Should Be Done

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<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, FY2008 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.

However, even if states used all the federal funding for youth housing, each youth would receive only \$800 per year.<sup>11</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.

In order to better prevent homelessness, particularly for at-risk groups of youth, an increase in housing funds is necessary. Moreover, more investment should be made to better understand both the breadth of the problem and successful intervention strategies for youth experiencing at-risk of homelessness.

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*The National Alliance to End Homelessness' Fact Sheets answer common and frequently asked questions about homelessness policy and research. This series draws on the best expertise, data, and research available. For more information about homelessness, please visit [www.endhomelessness.org](http://www.endhomelessness.org).*

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<sup>11</sup> Chaffee Foster care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106- 169). Courtney, M. and Hughes Hering, 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).