



UNCOUNTED AND DISCOUNTED: HOMELESS YOUTH IN BALTIMORE CITY

OVERVIEW

For most young people, adolescence is a time of budding independence, when they start establishing identities outside the home and family. For Baltimore's homeless and displaced youth, this independence is chronic and involuntary.

These adolescents mostly dwell under the radar—shunning homeless shelters, living on the streets, crashing at a friend or relative's house, or fleeing an intolerable foster care situation—because that's the way they survive. But that survival comes at a high price. Homeless and displaced youth are exposed to many risks that lead to poor health—sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, high rates of current substance use,

survival sex, pregnancy, depression, suicidal ideation, and sexual abuse.

As many as 1.7 million American youth run away from home or are homeless every year. In Baltimore City, the schools estimate 2,289 students are homeless. According to the 2007 Baltimore Homeless Youth Initiative (BHYI), on any given day you will find 166 homeless young people between the ages of 18 and 24.

Surviving on the streets does not prepare homeless youth for adulthood. In fact, the opposite is true—many homeless youth turn 21 in poor health, inadequately educated, and ill-prepared to find a steady job.

BY THE NUMBERS

- ❖ 5,000 die each year as a result of assault, illness, or suicide
- ❖ 40 to 60% experience physical abuse
- ❖ At least 38% reported emotional abuse by a parent figure
- ❖ 46% physically abused by a family member
- ❖ 17% forced into unwanted sexual activity by someone in their household

(SOURCE: NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS, WWW.ENDHOMELESSNESS.ORG)



WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

► GET AN ACCURATE COUNT.

First, we need to know just how many homeless and displaced youth are living in the Baltimore area on any given day. Estimates of homeless youth gathered from schools only capture those students who are in school or have recently passed through the school district. The Homeless Census counts only those young people who appear at the shelters or access services like soup kitchens. Homeless and displaced youth are unlikely to be included in such counts and a recent effort by the BHYI to supplement the 2007 Baltimore City Homeless Census found ten times more homeless youth and

young adults than were identified by the Census.

Being counted means you count. The first step to getting vulnerable youth off the streets and in stable housing is finding out how many there are and where they are hiding. Cutting edge demographic techniques of indirect estimation informed by community input can help identify homeless and displaced youth in the Baltimore area.

► THINK OUTSIDE THE SHELTER.

Next, we need services and transitional housing designed specifically for homeless and displaced youth. Young people avoid traditional homeless shelters for

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WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE (CONTINUED)



various reasons. They may have run away from foster care and do not want to be sent back to the situations they just escaped. Many youth do not fit the stereotype of a homeless person who sleeps and lives outdoors, so they might not think they are “shelter material” because they stay temporarily with friends, family or lovers. They may have distaste for shelter rules or are fearful of being trapped in systems that threaten their autonomy or feel unsafe. Whatever the cause, these homeless youth must have the right resources that will enable them to back away from the edge.

► **IMPROVE DISCHARGE PLANNING.** When young people leave foster care, jail, or a psychiatric facility, they should have a clear discharge plan. This plan should include arrangements for independent housing, medical care, employment, and education. A major barrier to good discharge planning is the inability of many social service databases to “speak” to one another—on the local and state level, policies need to be put in place for better integration of information systems and more centralized resources.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE NOW

1. Recognize the signs of youth homelessness. Clues include: lying about where the parents are or where they are living, poor health/hygiene, hoarding food, inconsistent grooming, not turning in parental consent for field trips.
2. Learn where to send homeless youth to get help. Fellowship of Lights is the only shelter for unaccompanied youth under 18 (410-522-9605). For a list of shelters, visit Baltimore Homeless Services at <http://www.baltimorehealth.org/homeless.html>. Other resources are available through Stand Up for Kids (www.standupforkids.org).
3. Be a supportive adult. Homeless youth are disconnected from their families and often do not trust people associated with the systems designed to protect them. Prove that there are caring and nurturing adults who can help them. Ask them what they need to succeed, and try to locate resources to meet those needs.
4. Contribute to shelters for youth and advocacy groups working with homeless youth. Some local entities include Fellowship of Lights, AIDS Interfaith Residential Services, and the Mid-Atlantic Network of Youth and Families.



5. Learn more about existing prospects. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) is the only federal program targeted exclusively to accompanied youth. Funding for RHYA remained stagnant from 2002-2006, but a \$10 million increase has been approved for 2008. This increase provides an opportunity for Maryland to develop or expand programs for homeless youth.
6. Spread the word. Raise awareness about this issue. Many people wrongly assume youth aren't homeless because the foster care system takes care of them. In fact, each year between 20,000 and 25,000 youth ages 16 and older

“age out” of foster care and usually enter society lacking the skills or a solid plan to live independently.

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An in-depth look at homeless youth can be found on our website, www.jhsph.edu/adolescenthealth, in the “What’s New” section.