Number Of Homeless, Unaccompanied Youth In Mass. Soars, Even As Many Go Uncounted

Lucas Spearing sits in his room at a residence for homeless youth run by the nonprofit Bridge Over Troubled Waters in Boston. He says he slept on benches, in soccer fields and a full year in a friend's closet in Chelsea during his teenage years. He is now in college.

Meredith Nierman/WGBH News

By Jenifer B. McKim

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When Lucas Spearing was a teenager, he suffered bouts of homelessness.

The former soccer goalie from Somerville High School said he didn’t get along with his adoptive parents. So he sometimes slept on benches, in fields and a year in a friend’s closet in Chelsea.

Yet Spearing, now 21, says for much of that time, he kept his situation hidden from school officials. “I just didn’t think they could help me,” he said.

Spearing is one of a growing number of young people in the state living on their own without a stable home. About 1,400 Massachusetts students were identified as both homeless and unaccompanied by a parent or guardian last academic year, nearly double the number counted by school officials a decade ago, according to recently released state data.

The numbers released by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education are growing partly because of improved awareness and identification by schools, homeless advocates say. At the same time, most agree the data is still an undercount because most people like Spearing stay under the radar.

“These numbers are just a tip of the iceberg for unaccompanied youth,” said Kelly Turley, associate director for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. “There’s more that needs to be done. We know that young people can’t wait.”

Young people don’t want to be identified because they are embarrassed, scared, don’t want to get their parents in trouble or don’t want to be put into the social services system, according to interviews with homeless youth and people who help them.

There are also not enough services to motivate them to seek help. Sarah Slutterback, the state’s homeless education coordinator, says school and state
“This is a population that is hard to identify and hard to engage,” she said. “Until there are sufficient services in place to serve them, there’s little reason for them to come forward.”

Homeless students include LGBTQ youth, youths fleeing abusive homes or left alone when their parents were deported, jailed, or hospitalized, specialists say. They include a growing number of immigrant youth who came to the United States on their own and were placed with sponsors who didn’t work out, interviews and data show.

School districts are required to identify homeless youth through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, a **federal law** enacted in 1987 to help homeless students succeed in school. The law defines homelessness as the lack of a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” and it includes youths living in motels, shelters, cars or shared housing. Students are defined as unaccompanied if they don’t live with a parent or guardian.
on their own last academic year while the Boston Public Schools, about three times the size, reported just 41, according to state data.

The vast majority of the state’s 400 school districts identified so few unaccompanied students — each less than 10 last year — that state officials declined to release numbers citing privacy issues.

Among them were the cities of Somerville, Cambridge and Chelsea. Officials from each of these school districts acknowledged their reported numbers are not realistic. Boston Public School officials say they have been ramping up efforts to identify and help homeless youth over the last several years.

Elisabeth Jackson, executive director of the nonprofit Bridge Over Troubled Waters that works with homeless youth, says the needs are urgent. Her nonprofit deals every day with young people seeking help. Among them, up to 30 young people between the ages of 14 and 24 — about 4,000 visits a year — stop by an outreach van parked in the Boston Common each weeknight to get supplies and other assistance.

“There's a lot of young kids in high school right now, in 7th, 8th grade, that didn't get something to eat, that slept in a car or slept on someone's couch,” she said. “We see that all the time.”

Spearing says he left home because he couldn’t get along with his adoptive parents but declined to provide more details. He said he grew increasingly depressed and anxious sleeping in his friend’s closet, lying on a thin comforter, eating food from the local convenience store. He constantly worried about paying his $400-a-month rent and other expenses.

“I had to worry more about my housing, my car, my health insurance, my bills,” he said, “all that rather than my grades.”
2018, according to the federal National Center for Homeless Education. But a 2017 study by researchers at Chapin Hall, the University of Chicago’s center on child wellness, estimates that about 700,000 children ages 13 to 17 experience homelessness without a parent or guardian each year.

Barbara Duffield, executive director of the national nonprofit SchoolHouse Connection that works to prevent homelessness, said homeless children are at a higher risk of dropping out or being exploited by labor or sex traffickers and more likely to be homeless as adults.

As part of McKinney-Vento, school districts are required to have a homeless liaison that works to identify and help homeless students and train staff about signs of risk. Duffield says there’s a direct correlation between how much time and resources liaisons have to identify and help youth and how many they find.

“If they're not even aware that there's an issue with student homelessness, then they're not likely to be aware that their schools are undercounting, under identifying, and under serving these children and families,” she said.

**Identifying homeless youth**

There are many reasons why young people do not want to be identified.

Marie said she was 15 years old when she was kicked out of her father's Everett home. She moved in with her grandmother but said she couldn't stay because her uncles were doing drugs and she was provided neither a bed nor food.

Instead, Marie said she spent nights dozing in the park or walking the streets. She didn’t tell anybody at school and eventually dropped out.

“I didn’t want to get put in the system,” says Marie, now 18, who is using her middle name to protect her privacy. “I pretended like everything was fine.”
He moved at least seven times, sleeping on friends’ couches and in a series of rented rooms, constantly worried about money, food and shelter. He worked three jobs while watching his grades plummet at his Jamaica Plain high school.

Franklin, 19, sits outside of his home, a residence for homeless youth run by the nonprofit Bridge Over Troubled Waters in Boston.

It wasn’t until a landlord suggested he trade sex for lodging that Franklin sought help from school officials who connected him to Bridge Over Troubled Waters. He first lived in a youth shelter and now resides at a Bridge-run home and is attending college nearby.

Franklin said he would have sought help sooner but was afraid of getting his father into trouble. He also declined to provide his full name to protect his
“I just wanted to keep everything to myself until I got better,” said Franklin, now 19, during a recent interview. “It never got better.”

Boston Public School officials say the district has ramped up efforts to identify and help students like Franklin over the last several years, placing a homeless liaison in each of its 125 schools.

School official Brian Marques, who works with homeless youth, estimates the district has more than a hundred unaccompanied homeless youth in the system, more than twice the number identified last year. Marques says part of the challenge of reaching youth is the lack of available services. Young people 18 and older can head to an adult shelter, but many say they don’t feel safe there. The average homeless youth says they first experienced homelessness at 16, a recent report shows.

“There are not enough shelter beds that are specific for youth,” he said. “And going into an adult shelter can be a very scary place.”

Statewide, it’s not just high schoolers who are experiencing unaccompanied homelessness: 165 students from kindergarten to eighth grade also were identified as homeless, according to state data.

Slautterback, the state homeless coordinator, says many young people become homeless after a parent is deported, hospitalized or imprisoned. They may be taken in by a neighbor or family friend, she said, but they have no official guardian to pick them up from school, approve a field trip or sign an evaluation for special education.

“Oftentimes they're taken in by friends or relatives who have no legal decision making rights for them,” she said. “It falls on school districts to be keenly aware of what's going on.”
There’s no place that reports a higher number of unaccompanied homeless youth than Lynn.

A young woman named Blandina says she’s like many other youths in Lynn struggling to survive. She recently told her story in Spanish in a coffee shop run by the nonprofit Haven Project in Lynn that works with unaccompanied homeless youth.

She says she fled her native Guatemala at the age of 17 after being threatened by a local gang. Picked up by immigration officials in Texas, she was flown to Lynn to live with a sister while waiting for her day in immigration court.

She says her sister's family couldn’t support her and she had to work to pay her bills, caring for children and washing dishes in a restaurant. After a family dispute, she moved out and rented a room. She eventually dropped out of high school.

She's gone without food to pay her bills and spent nights sleeping in her car. Blandina also is using her middle name to protect her privacy.

“Many young people are in the same situation,” she said. “They have to find a way to study and to work, because if they don’t work, they don’t have a place to sleep.”

Tracey Scherrer, the homeless liaison for the Lynn Public Schools, says she’s seen an increasing number of young people from Central America placed with family members who are unable or unwilling to care for them.

Instead they are renting rooms or living in groups, working long hours and trying to complete high school.

Scherrer believes she has identified most of the homeless youth enrolled in the
She says by at least knowing who these students are she can sign documents
they need to stay in school, provide services or school supplies and connect
them with nearby nonprofits. Many of them are fending for themselves, she
says. “No matter where you’re from or who you are, at 16, 17 years old, that’s so
difficult,” she said.

Like Blandina, many young immigrants were transported to Lynn by the federal
Office of Refugee Resettlement that releases unaccompanied children to willing
sponsors in the U.S. while their cases wind through the immigration courts. Last
year, 1,747 unaccompanied youth were released to people in Massachusetts
under this program, more than double the number the year before, federal data
shows.

But the government is not responsible for following up after a young person
leaves its custody, says Patrick Fisher, a spokesman for the Office of Refugee
Resettlement.

And too often those matches don’t work, according to people who work with
homeless youth.

Emily Urbina, director of client services at the Haven Project in Lynn, says
service providers are overwhelmed by the number of young people who need
help. Many students are dozing at their desks, trying to graduate from high
school while working long hours, housing advocates say.

“We have a very limited number of housing opportunities,” she said. “It's
nothing for the hundreds of young people that need a place to go.”

**Helping homeless youth**

Eight years ago, the state legislature created a Special Commission on
Unaccompanied Homeless Youth and soon after conducted the first-in-the-
In 2018, the commission released a six-part plan to end youth homelessness and tasked regions across the state with learning more about how to help this fragile community of young people. Earlier this month, the commission reported that 3,789 unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 25 were identified by different programs that year.

Black and Latino youths are more likely to be homeless than their white counterparts; nearly a quarter identified as LGBTQ.

The state has about 550 housing units and shelter beds specifically meant for young people but needs to create 1,200 more to meet the need, the report said. Massachusetts also needs to improve mental health and substance abuse services for youth and help them find work.

Linn Torto, head of the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, says the to-do list is large but the will is there. She said the state allotted $5 million to address youth homeless this fiscal year and plans to do the same next year.

“I won't say in how many years, but, in a reasonable amount of time, with an earnest effort and continued targeted and focused investment, we can end youth homelessness,” she said. “It's a doable thing.”

Meanwhile, nonprofits across the state are doing what they can. On a recent February evening, Bridge homeless outreach worker Claudia Lent drove a white van onto the Boston Common equipped with pink lemonade, clean clothes, bandages and “survival kits” including mylar blankets.

She parked the vehicle emblazoned with lettering offering “free medical and support services” for homeless and runaway youth near the Park Street train station and waited for clients like she does every weekday night.
lemonade and others stepped inside for medical services or to receive supplies like shampoo, tampons or toothpaste as the sun set and the temperature fell.

Lent says the Bridge program is intended to reach out to some of the region’s most vulnerable — people often reticent to seek help.

“We try to be that first touchpoint, that friendly face of being able to say, ‘You can get your needs met and still be respected,’” she said.

Spearing is grateful he finally did ask for help. At the age of 19, concerned that the family he lived with no longer wanted to rent him the closet, he said he reached out to a social worker who referred him to Bridge. He moved into an emergency shelter and now resides at a Bridge home when he is back from college.

“It’s definitely better than the closet and it’s definitely better than outside,” he said. “It’s a place where I can sleep and it’s relatively quiet. It’s a blessing.”

Former NECIR intern Rachel Rock and current NECIR intern Lena Novins-Montague contributed to this story.

Clarification: This story has been updated to note that the number of visits to the Bridge Over Troubled Water outreach van is 4000 a year.
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