



## Information about Teen Homelessness

Today throughout our nation and state, the face of those who are without a place to call home now encompasses all ages – the elderly, middle aged, adolescents and children. When most people envision the face of homelessness, what comes to mind is that of an older adult sitting on a park bench. Yet, there is a new face, a much younger face to homelessness, and that is of a teenager or a young adult.

Their faces blend into the crowd on subways, streets and even sitting on park benches. Just by the fact they are young and have their life ahead of them, most of us passing by would never expect they are homeless. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that during a year there are approximately 550,000 teenagers and young adults who experience a homelessness episode of longer than one week. Approximately 380,000 of those youth are under the age of 18. According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education of Massachusetts, in the Commonwealth there are 5,853 students experiencing homelessness. Yet, we know the number is much higher than that with the numbers of youth that have dropped out of school and are not counted.

Why are there are so many of teenagers and young adults becoming homeless? Researchers have identified a few main causes of homelessness among teens and youth. They fall mostly into three, inter-related categories:

**Abuse:** Disruptive family conditions are the principal reason that young people leave home and many homeless youth leave home after years of physical and sexual abuse, strained relationships, addiction of a family member, and/or parental neglect.

**Poverty:** With nearly one in six children growing up in poverty, many teenagers become homeless with their families due to the inability to afford housing. There are also a number of teenagers that are becoming homeless simply because their families can no longer afford to have them stay at home.

**Homelessness-Foster Care:** Some youth living in residential or institutional placements become homeless upon discharge – they are too old for foster care but are discharged with no housing or income support. On a national basis it is reported that one in five youth who arrived at shelters came directly from foster care.

Becoming homeless at any age is difficult, but for youth there are very few places to turn. Most youth repeatedly state that they avoid adult shelters because they don't feel safe in them. These places lack

the specific services that they need to become independent. While in a shelter, teenagers are often targets for theft, violence, harassment, abuse and exposure to harmful behaviors. Often, these young people feel safer on the streets than they do at shelters.

The long term effects of homelessness for these youth are enormous. Not only does it rob them of their adolescence, it also can have long term consequences that also have costs to society. Homelessness can negatively impact learning in a multitude of ways, including dropping out of school, the ability to focus in class, feeling safe in the classroom, and coming to school prepared for the day.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has reported that going to school while homeless can result in multiple school transfers, significant educational gaps, frequent absences and tardy arrivals, a lack of supplies and space to do homework and projects, distractions, an inability to attend to lessons, and poor medical, dental and mental health care. The outcome for these youth can be devastating and lead to dropping out of school and undermining their ability to be employed or gain sufficient skills to live independently.

The effects on youth becoming homeless can and often lead to mental health problems. According to facts published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, homeless youth often suffer from severe anxiety and depression. Suicide is a leading cause of death among street youth. It is not surprising that criminal activity for homeless youth is high. Many report that to survive them sometimes need to trespass on a property to find shelter, prostitute themselves or sell drugs to find the income they need to cover their basic needs. The majority of homeless youth also report having to exchange sex for place to sleep and money to meet their basic needs and survive. Also, pregnancy rates among youth experiencing homelessness are much higher than their housed peers.

**Teen Closet is an Initiative of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless**

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