

Health Issues in the Homeless Youth Population

Meera S. Beharry, MD, FAAP

Approximately 2 million youth in the US experience homelessness annually. A hidden and high-risk population, these youth have unique medical and psychosocial needs that contribute to or are a result of their homelessness.

Homeless youth often share temporary shelter with others, or congregate in secret locations due to fear of being discovered by parents, legal guardians, or law enforcement. Therefore, counts of homeless youth have yielded widely disparate numbers. The most commonly cited figure is that 1.5 million to 2 million American youth will experience homelessness each year.

Recent data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimate that about 8,000 children younger than the age of 18 years and an additional 50,000 to 100,000 young people age 18 to 24 years are homeless on any given night.¹

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HOMELESS YOUTH'S DEFINED

There are a variety of ways to define this population. Legal definitions of homelessness are provided by the McKinney-Vento Act and HUD. According to the McKinney-Vento Act, "homeless" people "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This definition includes children and young people who are living in shelters, hotels, bus stations, and cars. It also includes children in migratory and homeless families.²

HUD defines youth who are "unstable housed" as "unaccompanied youth who have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in at least 90 days, have had three or more moves in the past 90 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed." While these definitions are helpful in program development, they are rather dry and of limited clinical use.

Clinicians and researchers who work with homeless youth have developed terms to reflect the etiology of homelessness. Youth who run away only for a few nights and return home are termed "situational runaways." When these young people no longer return home, they are called "run-aways." "Throw-aways" are young people who were kicked out of their homes for any reason. Youth generally cite family discord and abuse, family financial problems, or social differences from their family, such as teen pregnancy or different sexual orientation, as a reason for being thrown out. "Systemic youth" refers to young people who become homeless after exiting the foster care or juvenile justice system.³

Depending on the etiology of their situations, homeless adolescents will present with differing medical and psychosocial problems. However, for fear of being

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