

Youth On The Streets and On Their Own

Youth Homelessness in Illinois



A Report by the
Chicago Coalition for the Homeless
September 13, 2001

“It’s hard to be homeless. There’s not a lot of people who care about you and nobody to turn to. I had to grow up on my own. It’s taken me a long time to get where I am, and I’m still struggling to get myself and my family stable.” — Jessica, 21, a formerly homeless youth

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I. Executive Summary

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) estimates that over the course of a year, approximately 26,000 youth in Illinois experience homelessness. This is slightly more than reported in a 1985 state-funded study. Homeless youth are between the ages of 14 and 21, have left home because of serious family problems, and are not in a safe and stable living situation. Youth that experience homelessness are likely to experience abuse and neglect both before and after becoming homeless.

We estimate that forty-five percent, or approximately 12,000, of these youth have chronic homeless experiences. Youth in this category live outside and in other public places for prolonged periods, face sometimes insurmountable obstacles to returning home, and have an especially high likelihood of being abused and victimized while they are homeless.

Available housing resources for homeless youth do not come close to meeting the need for these services. A CCH survey found that 42 percent of youth seeking shelter from state-funded Homeless Youth programs were turned away last year due to lack of resources. Eighty-eight percent of state-funded crisis intervention programs for youth responded that they need additional residential resources for homeless youth.

Abuse (physical, emotional, and/or sexual), substance abuse by a parent, absence of a parent, and long-term family economic problems are all common family experiences among youth that experience homelessness. Pregnant and parenting teens, former and current wards, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning (LGBTQ) account for a highly disproportionate segment of the population of homeless youth.

Homeless youth, particularly those with chronic experiences, have a difficulty meeting their basic needs, as well as a high likelihood for physical and sexual victimization, engaging in substance abuse, engaging in unprotected sexual activity, and delinquency. Many are not enrolled in or regularly attending school, and these youth have limited access to services for their physical and emotional health care needs.

Due to a 1999 increase in funding for programs serving homeless youth, however, the State of Illinois has made some progress in recent years with regard to providing shelter and supportive services for this vulnerable population. For example, in fiscal year 2000 IDHS spent \$4.17 million on programs specifically for homeless youth and served 2,105 youth. In 1996, when the state spent half as much on these programs, only 986 youth were served. Between 1986, when the state started funding programs for homeless youth, and 1994 the state only spent about \$1 million annually for these programs.

We recommend that the State of Illinois increase expenditures for emergency, transitional, and long-term supportive housing for currently homeless youth, in order to assist these youth in becoming self-sufficient, productive adults. We also recommend that more resources be put into the prevention of youth homelessness through early intervention with at-risk families. Finally, we call for the expansion and implementation of policies that promote the long-term economic and social stability of families.

II. Introduction and Major Findings

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) estimates that over the course of a year approximately 26,000 youth in Illinois experience homelessness. Homeless youth are between the ages of 14 and 21, have left home because of serious family problems, and are not in a safe and stable living situation.

Youth who have “run away” and have been “thrown away” are both included in this definition. The living situations of youth experiencing homelessness include “couch surfing” (moving between friends, family and acquaintances), staying in shelters, and/or living outside or in public places.

We estimate that forty-five percent, or approximately 12,000, of all youth that experience homelessness have chronic homeless experiences. Youth with chronic homeless experiences are more likely to live for prolonged periods in public places (e.g., abandoned buildings, parks, or on the street). They have a higher likelihood than homeless youth in general of being abused and victimized. The obstacles they face to being reunited with their families are sometimes insurmountable. In many cases returning to one’s family is not an appropriate option.

Based on CCH surveys of service providers who work with homeless youth around the state and data provided by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) we can now report that:

- Available housing resources for homeless youth do not come close to meeting the need for these services. We estimate that forty-two percent of youth, or about 1,500 youth, seeking shelter from IDHS-funded Homeless Youth programs were turned away during fiscal year 2000 due to lack of resources. Most of these turnaways occurred in Chicago.
- Due to a 1999 increase in funding for Homeless Youth programs serving homeless youth, however, the State of Illinois has made some progress in recent years with regard to providing shelter and supportive services for this vulnerable population. For example, in fiscal year 2000 IDHS spent \$4.17 million on programs specifically for homeless youth and served 2,105 youth. In 1996, when the state spent half as much on these programs, only 986 youth were served. Between 1986, when the state started funding programs for homeless youth, and 1994 the state only spent about \$1 million annually for these programs.
- CCBYS is an IDHS-funded, statewide program that provides crisis intervention services for minors who are at risk of involvement in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system, including youth who are homeless and at-risk of homelessness. Eighty-eight percent of Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services (CCBYS) programs report that they need additional resources for residential placements for youth in need of housing.

Prior to this report, the most recent population estimate of the number of youth that experience homelessness in Illinois each year was completed in 1985 by the Governor’s Task Force on Homeless Youth. Using a substantially similar method (see Appendix A), the task force estimated that 21,535 youth experienced homelessness over the course of a year. The 1985 estimate and the 2001 estimate are close enough to conclude that the number of youth who

experience homelessness in Illinois annually has gone essentially unchanged during the past 16 years.

In this report, unlike the 1985 estimate, we draw a distinction between youth who have experienced homelessness of any duration and youth who have had a chronic, or more serious and prolonged, experience of homelessness. We can draw this distinction because of the methodology used to reach our population estimate. A large part of the population estimate is based on estimating the number of youth who do not come into contact with any social service system. To make this estimate, we use statistics from a national survey by the U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services completed in 1995.¹

The federal survey asked youth whether they had experienced homelessness and whether they had made use of a shelter. There was a large difference in the number of youth who had not accessed shelter depending on whether the youth was currently on the street or in the general population of youth in the United States. Only 25% of youth in the general population who had had a homeless experience used a shelter, whereas 54% of youth on the street had used a shelter.

Because of the large difference in the figure, we can assume that youth in the general population who experienced homelessness would include a broad range of experiences — from being without a place to stay for one night to being chronically homeless. The street sample of youth, by contrast, most likely represents a population of youth who have had more chronic experiences. Therefore, the larger figure we estimate — 26,000 homeless youth in Illinois — represents a broad range of experiences of homelessness. The smaller figure we estimate — 12,000 youth with chronic experiences — represents a narrower definition that is more likely to include a longer period of homelessness with time spent on the street.

The Stories Behind the Numbers

The data and research presented in this report tell an incomplete story about youth homelessness. A more complete picture must include the stories of youth who experience homelessness. While stories vary, what each youth shares is a need for stable housing and a supportive environment. Throughout this report we provide a few stories of youth who are moving successfully from youth into adulthood and youth still struggling with homelessness. The names of the youth whose stories we share have been changed. These stories were told to us by service providers and by youth themselves.

III. Method for Determining Population Estimate

The estimate that approximately 26,000 youth experience homelessness each year in Illinois (26,619 exactly according to our method) was determined by determining the size of the following populations:

- The number of youth served by Homeless Youth programs funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) during fiscal year 2000.

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- The number of youth who sought services but were turned away by IDHS Homeless Youth programs due to the lack of program resources during fiscal year 2000. This figure was estimated based on a survey of these programs conducted by CCH.
- The number of youth served by Homeless Youth programs providing residential services that were not funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services during fiscal year 2000.
- The number of youth served by IDHS-funded Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services (CCBYS) programs who experience homelessness and were not served by, and did not seek services from, IDHS-funded Homeless Youth programs during fiscal year 2000.
- The number of 18 to 21 year olds in adult shelters in Illinois during fiscal year 2000.
- The number of youth who experience homelessness, but never come into contact with the social service system. This number is based on 1995 national study sponsored by the Family and Youth Service Bureau of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.ⁱⁱ The study found that only 25 percent youth with homeless experiences make use of youth or adult shelters.
- The number of youth with chronic homeless experiences (12,077 youth) was based on a 54 percent shelter utilization rate of youth living in public places, or “street youth”, as determined by a survey of street youth for the federal study previously cited.

Unless otherwise noted, the source of all data was the Illinois Department of Human Services. More specific information regarding the methods used for determining the population figure can be found in Appendix A. Results of the population estimate are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Population Estimate For the Number of Youth who Experience Homelessness in Illinois over the Course of a Year

| Population | Number of Youth |
|---|------------------------|
| Youth served by IDHS funded Homeless Youth programs | 2,105 |
| Youth denied services by IDHS funded Homeless Youth programs due to lack of resources | 1,500 |
| Youth served by Homeless Youth programs not funded by IDHS | 307 |
| Youth served by Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services (CCBYS) programs who experience homelessness and are not served by, or seek services from, Homeless Youth programs | 654 |
| Youths who are 18 to 21 year old and stayed in adult shelters in Illinois | 1,956 |
| Subtotal | 6,522 |
| Youth that experience homelessness who never come into contact with the social service system | 19,929 |
| Youth who experience homelessness over the course of a year in Illinois | 26,396 |
| Youth with chronic homeless experiences who never come into contact with the social service | 5,556 |
| Youth that have a chronic homelessness experience over the course of a year in Illinois | 12,077 |

IV. Family Background And Homeless Experiences

Family experiences of homeless youth

Any youth who lacks a stable living situation, whether on the street or “doubled-up,” is homeless. A differentiation has often been made between youth who “run away” and those who are “thrown away,” but both groups lack stable housing.

Homeless youth are not isolated in one geographic area or to a certain social class, race, or ethnicity. Because of the city’s size, numerically most of Illinois’ homeless youth are to be found in Chicago. However, data suggests that on a per capita basis youth homelessness is equally prevalent in places such as Rockford, Peoria, Aurora, Springfield, Champaign, East St. Louis, and Marion.ⁱⁱⁱ

Research about youth homelessness in general has shown that the great majority of homeless youth come from families suffering from instability.^{iv} A 1992 national survey of service providers identified the range of problems that youth experienced prior to becoming homeless.^v Long-term family economic problems were among the most prevalent problems, as were involvement in the foster care system, absence of a parent, abuse (physical, emotional, and/or sexual), and substance abuse by a parent.

Pregnant and parenting teens, former and current wards, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning (LGBTQ) have a highly disproportionate representation in the population of homeless youth. (*See the sections, “At High Risk for Homelessness,” below.*)

Little research has been completed to determine which factors lead to youth having what we define as “chronic” homeless experiences” compared to youth with less severe experiences. We can expect that the life experiences of youth with chronic experiences are worse.

Experiences while homeless

Youth who have experienced homelessness have difficulty meeting their basic needs, as well as a high likelihood for physical and sexual victimization. Interviews conducted with almost 200 youth by CCH for *Alone after Dark: A Survey of Homeless Youth in Chicago* found that 33 percent of the youth had been physically attacked, 20 percent had been raped or sexually assaulted after leaving home, and 12 percent had engaged in prostitution.^{vi} Studies of national samples of homeless youth and surveys in other urban report have similar findings regarding physical and sexual victimization.

As one can imagine, when basic survival is a challenge, it is difficult for homeless youth to stay in school. For homeless youth, problems in school often mean that they will leave school and not return. A 1999 study of homeless youth in four Midwestern cities found that 42 percent of the boys and 32 percent of the girls had dropped out of school.^{vii}

Youth experiencing homelessness are also at high-risk of carrying weapons and engaging in criminal activities. In *Alone after Dark*, almost one-third of the youth interviewed reported

carrying a weapon to protect themselves. Eight percent of the youth interviewed reported dealing drugs and 9 percent reported that they had stolen to meet basic survival needs. These self-reports likely greatly underestimate the actual prevalence of these occurrences.

Youth that experience homelessness are also at high-risk for substance abuse. In *Alone after Dark*, one-third of the youth interviewed reported symptoms of alcoholism, such as not remembering the events of the previous night. These youth often first come into contact with people engaging in substance abuse within their families before they leave home. The 1992 national survey of service providers found that among homeless youth, 29 percent had an alcoholic parent and 24 percent had a drug-abusing parent.^{viii}

Youth that experience homelessness also have a high risk of engaging in unprotected sexual behavior. Nine percent of youth survey for *Alone after Dark* reported having sex with intravenous drug users and ten percent reported having unprotected sex.

Homeless adolescents often suffer from severe anxiety and depression, poor health and nutrition, and low self-esteem. In one study, the rates of major depression, conduct disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome were found to be 3 times as high among runaway youth as among youth who have not run away.^{ix} Eighteen percent of youth survey for *Alone after Dark* reported having attempted suicide. Homeless youth are at a greater risk of contracting AIDS or HIV-related illnesses — as much as 2 to 10 times higher than the rates reported for other samples of adolescents in the United States.^x However, few health care and mental health care resources are available for homeless youth, particularly minors who cannot legally consent to most services.

The Stories Behind the Numbers

Caroline, 21 years old, first experienced homelessness when she was 13. While living with her father she was physically abused. She could not live with her mother because of her mother's drug addiction. She was made a ward of the state, but never was provided with a permanent placement. After falling out of foster care, she spent time a lot of time in shelters and on the streets, developing her own drug addiction, and having three children. Eventually, at 19 she found employment and got off drugs. She was stable for almost two years. However, she was recently laid off from her job. Since then she has been moving from friend to friend, caring for her own children, and uncertain of her future.

V. At High Risk for Homelessness: Pregnant and Parenting Teens

Youth who are parents make up an ever-growing part of the homeless youth population. In a 1996 survey of Illinois homeless youth providers, 30 percent identified services for pregnant and parenting teens as their greatest unmet need. Nationally, homelessness among families with children has been increasing. The U.S. Conference of Mayors' report on Hunger and Homelessness released in 2000 reports that 72 percent of cities surveyed had an increase in shelter requests from families. Among all cities in 2000, the demand increased by 17 percent.^{xi}

Why are pregnant and parenting teens more likely to become homeless than single youth?

Pregnant and parenting teens often face difficulties with their families due to their pregnancy. In many cases, families that are already facing overcrowding cannot make room for another child in the house, thereby forcing the teen mom to move out. In other cases, conflict arises over the teen parent's choice of partner or simply over the pregnancy itself.

Domestic violence is another factor contributing to homelessness of pregnant and parenting teens. According to a 2000 study by the Center for Impact Research, 55 percent of low-income teen mothers receiving welfare in Chicago had been abused by their boyfriends in the past 12 months (474 teens were interviewed). Many teen mothers are living with their boyfriends and become homeless when trying to escape abuse. In a pilot program to address the level of domestic violence experienced by teen mothers in the south suburbs of Chicago, the most important resource gap identified by service providers was housing, both temporary and permanent.^{xii}

According to the Ounce of Prevention Fund, childhood sexual abuse increases the likelihood that teens will become pregnant. That 15 percent of homeless youth have been sexually assaulted by their parents, suggests there is a correlation between teen homelessness and teen pregnancy.^{xiii}

What can be done to prevent homelessness among pregnant and parenting teens?

- Support educational programs to prevent teen dating violence.
- Support increased access to education around family planning and birth control options
- Support increased funding for housing programs for homeless teen parents and teen parents experiencing domestic violence.

The Stories Behind the Numbers

Dave first came into contact with the YMCA Network in Alsip when he was 16 after being kicked out his parent's house. Initially staying with friends and trying to go back home, Dave eventually found himself sleeping behind dumpsters and in south suburban forest preserves. At the YMCA Network, he was able to reside in one of the 20 scattered-site apartments that the agency leases which provided the structure and support necessary for his success. At 22, Dave was in technical college and planning a career in computers.

VI. At High Risk for Homelessness: Wards

Research conducted across the country has consistently shown that youth who "age-out" or who are emancipated from the foster care system often lack the independent living skills and the personal support networks that are necessary in order to establish and maintain a household. Moreover, many youth in the child welfare system flee their foster care placements while still wards of the state. Example of research on this issue include:

- In *Alone after Dark: A Survey of Homeless Youth in Chicago*, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless found that 44 percent of the youths surveyed had been wards.
- A federal study of former foster care wards found that one-fourth had experienced homelessness after being in the child welfare system.^{xiv}
- As many as 56 percent of the youth in the foster care system reported having run away from a foster care placement, on average as many as 5 different times.^{xv}

Why are wards more likely to become homeless than non-wards?

It has not been shown that foster care causes homelessness. Rather, it seems that the sort of experiences that lead to one being placed in foster care are the same sorts of experiences that can lead a youth to become homeless. These experiences include physical and sexual abuse, parents with substance abuse problems, and the absence of a parent. However, while the foster care system is set up to remove youth from the harm they face in their families, the system has not historically been designed, or been given the resources, to ensure that youth in foster care will be able to live self-sufficient, productive lives as adults.

What can be done to prevent homelessness among wards?

- Implement prevention programs that keep children out of the foster care system. For example, voluntary home visiting programs that build stronger families and develop healthier children.
- Once children are in the foster care system, family reunification or adoption should be a priority. Illinois is making some progress in this area. In 2000, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) arranged for the adoption of 7,040 children (an 83 percent increase from 1998) and placed 1,500 foster children with legal guardians (an 800 percent increase from 1997).^{xvi}
- Provide support services for youth who “age out” of the system, such as employment and education assistance, and housing subsidies.

VII. At High Risk for Homelessness: LGBTQ Youth

Youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning (LGBTQ) make up a disproportionate percentage of youth who experience homelessness. In Houston, Los Angeles, and New York City, for example, studies of homeless youth living on the street have found that between 16 percent and 38 percent identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Commonly cited figures estimate that 10 percent of the adult population identifies as gay or lesbian.

Why are LGBTQ youth more likely to become homeless than heterosexual youth?

- LGBTQ youth are more likely than heterosexual youth to experience persistent conflict and harassment at home, school and elsewhere. These experiences are associated with homelessness. One study showed that 80 percent of LGBTQ experienced verbal abuse, and 41 percent had been victimized by violence.^{xvii}
- Many studies suggest that LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for experiencing violence at home, depression, suicide, and alcohol and drug abuse — all risk factors for homelessness.
- LGBTQ youth are often forced to leave home due to family conflicts over their sexual orientation. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force reports that that 26 percent of gay males are forced to leave home because of conflicts over their sexual identity.^{xviii}
- According to Human Rights Watch, harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the public schools affects as many as two million students nationwide.^{xix}

What can be done to prevent homelessness among LGBTQ youth?

- Support legislation and school district policies that explicitly prohibit harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- LGBTQ youth often lack safe spaces in which to come into contact with people who are nonjudgmental and non-threatening in regards to sexual orientation and gender identity. Safe spaces do not have to be solely focused on issues of sexual identity, but they must have an environment where homophobia is not tolerated and a youth knows that he or she can receive support when he or she needs it. Safe spaces can be in a family, among friends, in a church, a youth center, or an outreach program for LGBTQ youth.
- Support funding for programs that serve LGBTQ youth and other youth experiencing homelessness.

The Stories Behind the Numbers

Sherry, 18 years old, was referred to the Springfield's Youth Service Bureau (YSB) after her mother died and she had no place to go with her 16 year-old sister. Honoring her mother's wishes, Sherry took custody of her sister, so Sherry did. Sherry was able to remain in her mother's home, with the help of rent assistance and other financial aid through YSB, and her sister was able to continue school. While working with YSB, Sherry became a nursing assistant and now works at a nursing home. She is in the process of getting financial aid to go to nursing school.

VIII. Resources Currently Available for Homeless Youth

Available housing resources for homeless youth do not come close to meeting the need for these services. State government, through the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), funds most existing programs that address the needs of homeless youth. The federal government funds

Runaway and Homeless Youth programs through the Department of Health and Human Services, but in Illinois this funding stream goes almost exclusively to programs that are state-funded. There are a handful of programs with other funding sources.

According to a survey of IDHS-funded Homeless youth programs conducted by CCH, 42 percent of youth seeking shelter from IDHS-funded Homeless Youth programs were turned away during fiscal year 2000 due to lack of resources. Most of these turnaways occurred in Chicago. Overall, IDHS-funded Homeless Youth programs served only 8 percent of the total population of homeless youth.

Due to a 1999 increase in funding for Homeless Youth programs, however, the State of Illinois has made some progress in recent years with regard to providing shelter and supportive services for this vulnerable population. These programs include those that provide emergency shelter for up to 120 days, transitional residential programs that last for up to two years, independent living programs, drop-in centers, and street outreach programs. For example, in fiscal year 2000 IDHS spent \$4.17 million on programs specifically for homeless youth and served 2,105 youth. In 1996, when the state spent half as much on these programs, only 986 youth were served. Between 1986, when the state started funding Homeless Youth programs, and 1994 the state only spent about \$1 million annually for these programs.

Another way that homeless youth are served by the state is through Comprehensive Community-Based Youth Services (CCBYS) programs. CCBYS is a statewide program serving youth aged 10 to 17 who are at risk of involvement in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system, including youth at-risk of homelessness. In fiscal year 2000, IDHS funded 74 CCBYS grantees. During that year, CCBYS programs served 12,722 youth. CCBYS programs attempt to reunify youth with their families and, when necessary, secure shelter and social services for youth.

Based on a survey of CCBYS agencies by CCH, 9 percent of the 12,722 youth served statewide during fiscal year 2000 met the definition of homeless used in this report, as they were not in a safe and stable living situation and are were not living with a parent or guardian when they first came into contact with the CCBYS program. Fifteen percent of the youth were in need of a residential placement for at least one night. For residential placements, CCBYS agencies reported using licensed foster parents, youth shelters, motels, juvenile detention centers, and group homes. However, eighty-eight percent of respondents reported that they need additional resources for the residential placement of youth.

IX. Comparing the 1985 and 2001 Population Estimates

Prior to this report, the most recent population estimate of the number of youth that experience homelessness in Illinois each year was completed in 1985 by the Governor's Task Force on Homeless Youth. Using a substantially similar method (see Appendix A), the task force estimated that 21,535 youth experienced homelessness during that year. The 1985 estimate and the 2001 estimate are close enough to conclude that the number of youth who experience homelessness in Illinois annually has gone essentially unchanged during the past 16 years. According to census figures, both the 1985 and 2001 homeless youth population estimates

represent slightly less than 2 percent of the total population of 14 to 21 year-olds in each respective year.^{xx}

That the number of youth that experience homelessness each year in Illinois in 2001 is about the same as in 1985 may be surprising to some. During the last few years welfare caseloads and child poverty rates in Illinois have decreased, as have the number of youth in substitute care. Teen birth rates are down and high school graduation rates are up.^{xxi}

The following points provide possible explanations as to why the number of youth experiencing homelessness has remained stable.

- Important causes of youth homelessness, such as the incidence of absence of a parent, abuse (physical, emotional, and/or sexual) by a parent or guardian, and substance abuse by a parent, and discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ youth are not adequately measured by common indicators of economic and social well being.
- Youth who become homeless represent youth from families with the most complex and difficult problems in our society — families that are not impacted by the marginal improvements in certain measurements of economic and social well-being that have been realized over the last few years.
- According to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), decreases in the number of youth in substitute care were primarily realized by moving children out of the foster care system and into permanent homes, primarily through adoption.^{xxii} Because the great majority of youth who become homeless are older adolescents, and many are over 18, adoption is not a realistic option for this population.
- To the extent that economic well being is a factor contributing to youth homelessness, poverty rates do not accurately reflect the costs of maintaining a home, and in turn, the economic well being of families. A 2001 report by the Economic Policy Institute, *Hardships in America: The Real Story of Working Families*, found that “poverty line” income is not sufficient to support most working families. For example, for a two-parent two-child family the poverty line is \$17,643. The researchers found that the income necessary to pay for a safe and decent standard of living for the same size family in the Chicago metropolitan area is \$39,464 annually. In rural areas, families of this size need \$33,075 to meet the basic family budget.
- Decreases in the number of families receiving welfare does not mean that families who formerly received welfare, or who are no longer eligible for welfare, have improved their standard of living overall. A 2000 study by the Illinois’ Work, Welfare, and Families coalition, *Living with Welfare Reform: A Survey of Low-Income Families in Illinois*, assessed the effects of welfare reform on low-income persons across Illinois. The study found that 64 percent of former TANF recipients who left TANF for work were living at annual incomes below the federal poverty level for their family size. They also found that many TANF clients reported having being cut from benefits to which they remained entitled.

The Stories Behind the Numbers

Susan, 19 years old, came from a suburban Chicago family with a history of drug abuse and developed her own heroin addiction in her early teens. She became homeless soon after. Many of the youth she first knew while homeless are still using drugs, are involved in prostitution, or have disappeared. However, greatly beating the odds against her due to her own perseverance and the support of friends and outreach workers, Susan recently celebrated her two-year anniversary being off drugs. Her relationship with her family has improved, but home is not a good place for her, and she still has no place to live. She has recently began part-time work doing outreach to current drug users, plans to get her GED, and wants to eventually get the college education necessary to work as a counselor for youth struggling with drug addiction.

X. Recommendations

Meeting immediate needs

Youth that experience homelessness most often come from families where abuse and instability are part of life and their experiences while homeless put their lives and futures at-risk. Our priority must be to get homeless youth into shelter, and to provide the services necessary so that they can move into productive and self-sufficient adulthoods.

For youth currently experiencing homelessness, funding should be increased for all programs serving homeless youth, so that more youth can receive services. The appropriate services for any particular youth depend on the circumstances that led them to become homeless, the appropriateness and likelihood of family reunification, the age of the youth, and other factors. A comprehensive continuum of care for homeless youth includes the following types of services:

- **Crisis Intervention and Reunification:** To reunify youth at-risk of homelessness with their families or to find another appropriate placement.
- **Outreach Programs:** Reaching youth on the streets and in the places they stay to let them know that help is available.
- **Drop-in Centers:** Providing an initial point of contact with a broad range of services and referrals.
- **Emergency Shelters:** Getting youth into a safe environment to evaluate their needs and determine an appropriate long-term program.
- **Transitional Living Programs:** Providing longer-term housing, often group living or supervised apartments, from which youth can finish their education, learn independent living skills, and gain employment.
- **Independent Living Programs:** Enabling youth to live on their own in the community with a range of support services until they are fully stable.

- **Permanent Affordable Housing:** Promoting the long-term stability of individuals and families.

Measuring Program Outcomes

IDHS does not currently track the outcomes of these types of state-funded programs. Based on a CCH survey of Homeless Youth programs, many programs are successful at returning youth to their home or moving youth to independence. Table 2 shows the outcomes for three state-funded transitional living programs during fiscal year 2000. Success rates, where the youth returned home or moved into an apartment, ranged from 63 percent to 81 percent.

Table 2: Success rates for selected IDHS Homeless Youth programs during fiscal year 2000

| Children’s Home Assoc. Peoria | YMCA Network Alsip | Youth Service Bureau Springfield |
|--|-------------------------------|---|
| ➤ Youth Leaving Program: 48 | ➤ Youth Leaving Program: 19 | ➤ Youth Leaving Program: 58 |
| ➤ Returned Home: 10 | ➤ Returned Home: 5 | ➤ Returned Home: 14 |
| ➤ Moved into an Apartment: 26 | ➤ Moved into an Apartment: 7 | ➤ Moved into an Apartment: 33 |
| ➤ Success Rate: 75% | ➤ Success Rate: 63% | ➤ Success Rate: 81% |

Additional research should focus on what types of programs and services successfully meet the needs of homeless youth, and on the development of best practice models for these programs.

Long-term recommendations

Increasing family stability is the best way to prevent youth homelessness. One way to define stable families is to say that stable families help develop the emotional competence of their children so that children can focus on doing well in school, get along with peers and adults, delay gratification, and bounce back quickly after stressful experiences. Parents who grew up in stable families themselves are more likely to be able to care for their children in such a way as to develop their children’s emotional competence.^{xxiii}

Evidence is strong that economic and community-level factors influence the ability to develop emotional competence. Illinois took two small but important steps to promote the economic stability of families in 2000 by doubling the state's income tax personal exemption from \$1,000 to \$2,000 and establishing an Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The state EITC is equal to 5 percent of the federal EITC and reduces the amount of state income tax due for families with incomes under \$31,500 and individuals with incomes below \$15,000. Illinois can make the state EITC stronger by making the EITC refundable, basing EITC on a higher percentage of the federal credit, and making the EITC permanent.

Combined with safe and decent affordable housing for everyone, living wage jobs, quality education, universal health care, and other resources needed to succeed in our society, one day there may be a nation where family stability is maximized and homelessness no longer part of our vocabulary.

The Stories Behind the Numbers

Ryan was 17 years old when he came to the Children's Home Association of Illinois in Peoria. His mother was in prison and his father's whereabouts were unknown. Ryan had goals for himself, such as finishing high school and getting a job, but was unsure of how he would accomplish his goals with no place to call home. With the support of the Homeless Youth Services program, he was able to pay his rent with rent subsidies, find employment, finish school, and develop a dependable support system while he worked on improving his relationship with his mother.

Appendix A: Detailed research methods for population estimate

The current population estimate was determined by determining the total size of the following populations:

- *The number of youth served by Homeless Youth programs funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) during fiscal year 2000. Source: IDHS.*
- *The number of youth denied services by IDHS Homeless Youth programs due to the lack of program resources during fiscal year 2000. This figure was estimated based on a survey of these programs conducted by CCH. Ten of 20 programs responded to the survey. For agencies that did not respond to the survey, it was assumed that they did not turn away any clients. To avoid duplication of youth in Chicago (the only part of the state with multiple programs), the number of youth denied services was based on the response of the single provider with the largest number of youth denied services.*
- *The number of youth that experience homelessness served by Homeless Youth programs that provide residential services that were not funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services during fiscal year 2000. This figure was based on a CCH survey of known programs. Five of six programs responded.*
- *The number of youth served by IDHS-funded Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services (CCBYS) programs who experienced homelessness and were not served by, and did not seek services from, Homeless Youth programs. IDHS was the source for the total number of youth served during fiscal year 2000. Other figures were determined based on a CCH survey of CCBYS agencies. Forty-seven percent, or 33 out of 70 programs, responded to the survey.*

To identify youth who are experiencing homelessness we asked the CCBYS agencies what percentage of the youth with whom they work with are not living with a parent or guardian and not in a safe and stable living environment. An overall estimate of 9 percent of CCBYS clients who are not living with a parent or guardian and not in a safe and stable living environment was determined by weighting individual responses by program size.

To avoid duplication with youth served by, or denied services by, all Homeless Youth programs, the total number of youth served by these programs was subtracted from the total number of youth served by CCBYS programs before determining the number of CCBYS clients that experienced homelessness.

One complication of this process was that CCBYS programs serve youth from 0 to 17 years old while Homeless Youth programs serve youth 14 to 21 years old. Based on data from IDHS, in 2000 approximately 64 percent of the 12,722 youth served by CCBYS programs were aged from 15 to 17, or 8,131 youth. Based on a survey of providers, for the Homeless Youth programs it was assumed that 35 percent of the youth served and seeking shelter were from 14 to 17 or 1,369 of 3,912 youth. The number of CCBYS youth who experience homelessness was based on the figures adjusted for the client age.

- *The number of 18 to 21 year olds in adult shelters in Illinois. This figure includes 18 to 21 year-olds who are not unaccompanied youth (i.e., those with their parents or guardian), but we believe this number to be minimal. Source: IDHS for fiscal year 2000.*
- *An estimate of the number of homeless youth who never come into contact with the social service system. This number is based on a 1995 national study sponsored by the Family and Youth Service Bureau of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Through an interagency agreement between the Administration on Children, Youth and Families and the National Center for Health Statistics, the researchers added a series of questions regarding runaway experiences to the Youth Risk Behavior Supplement of the National Health Interview Survey. The survey had 6,496 respondents 14.8 percent of who had a runaway experience. The findings were published in *Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence of Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors*.*

The study determined that only 25 percent of youth 12-17 who had a runaway experience made use of a youth or adult shelter. Youth were defined as having had a runaway experience if they had spent at least one night in one of the following locations during the previous 12 months: a youth or adult shelter, a public place, an abandoned building, outside, with someone they did not know because they had no place to stay, or in a subway or other underground public place. Because this definition was based on the youth's housing status, for the purposes of this report these youth can also be said to have had a homeless experience.

- To acknowledge that youth who experience homelessness have variable types of experiences, we have attempted to identify the number of youth have what we define as chronic homelessness experiences as a subset of the overall population of homeless youth. The federal study cited above determined that 54 percent of "street youth," surveyed made use of shelter services. This difference in our estimates of the number of youth who have prolonged homeless experiences and the number of homeless youth overall was based on the different utilization rates found in the household and street surveys.

Comparison of research method with the 1985 Governor's Task Force study

The above method is very similar to the method used by the Governor's Task Force on Youth Homelessness in 1985 to develop a population figure for homeless youth. Through a survey conducted by the task force of social service providers working with homeless youth and youth at-risk of homelessness, the task force determined the number of homeless youth currently served and the number of youth denied services by existing providers. Based on then current academic studies, the task force estimated the number of homeless youth who have no contact with social service agencies. The sum of these three populations (youth served, youth denied services, and "no contact" youth) was 21,535. The task force's estimate of the "no contact" youth was based on the assumption that 25 percent of youth who experience homelessness make use of the social service system — the same utilization rate used for the current study.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Jody M. Greene et al. *Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence of Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors*. (Family and Youth Service Bureau of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1995).
- ⁱⁱ Jody M. Greene et al. p. 14-6.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Report to the Governor* (Task Force on Homeless Youth. State of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1985). p. 15.
- ^{iv} Les B. Whitbeck and Dan R. Hoyt. *Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and their Families*. (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999). p. 6.
- ^v Deborah Bass. *Helping Vulnerable Youth: Runaway and Homeless Adolescents in the United States*. (Washington, DC: NASW Press, 1992). p. 9.
- ^{vi} *Alone after Dark: A Survey of Homeless Youth in Chicago* (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 1992).
- ^{vii} Les B. Whitbeck and Dan R. Hoyt. *Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and their Families*. (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999). p. 77.
- ^{viii} Deborah Bass. p. 9.
- ^{ix} Marjorie Robertson. *Homeless Youth in Hollywood: Patterns of Alcohol Use*. (Berkeley, CA: Alcohol Research Group, 2000).
- ^x *Toolkit for Youth Workers: Fact Sheet. Runaway and Homeless Youth*. (National Network for Youth, 1998).
- ^{xi} *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 2000*. (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000).
- ^{xii} *Helping with Domestic Violence: Legal Barriers to Serving Teens in Illinois*. (Center for Impact Research, 2000).
- ^{xiii} *Heart to Heart: An Innovative Approach to Preventing Child Sexual Abuse*. (The Ounce of Prevention Fund).
- ^{xiv} Fred Bayles and Sharon Cohen. "Chaos Often the Only Parent for Abused or Neglected Children." (AP) Los Angeles Times, (April 30, 1995).
- ^{xv} Richard Barth. "On Their Own: The Experiences of Youth after Foster Care." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, (1990).
- ^{xvi} *Illinois Kids Count 2001*. (Voices for Illinois Children, 2001). p. 6.
- ^{xvii} SL Hershberger, and AR D'Augelli. "The Impact Of Victimization On The Mental Health And Suicidality Of Lesbian, Gay, And Bisexual Youth." *Developmental Psychology* (1995). 31:65, p. 74.
- ^{xviii} *Information about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Youth*. (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force).
- ^{xix} *Hatred in the Hallways: Discrimination and Violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students in U.S. Public Schools*. (Human Rights Watch, May 2001).
- ^{xx} In that year, the Governor's Task Force on Homeless Youth, using a substantially similar method but only counting all those under the age of 20, estimated that as many as 21,535 youth may be homeless in Illinois. If the 1985 estimate had included 21 year olds it would have been approximately 13 percent higher, about 24,500 homeless youth, based on the age distribution of the general population in Illinois in 1985. The number of youth under 14 who meet the definition of a homeless youth as defined in this report is believed to be minimal. According to census figures, in 1985 1.65 percent of persons age 14 to 21 experienced homelessness as defined in this report. In 2000, the figure was 1.79 percent. See Appendix A for more information.
- ^{xxi} *Illinois Kids Count 2001*. (Voices for Illinois Children, 2001). p. 2.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.* p. 6
- ^{xxiii} *Ready to Succeed: The Lasting Effects of Early Relationships*. (The Ounce of Prevention Fund).