

DEFINITION

Homeless and runaway youth is the number of youth in Rhode Island who accessed emergency shelter services without their families or who were absent without leave (AWOL) from state care placements (including youth in child welfare and juvenile justice community placements).

SIGNIFICANCE

There are three primary causes of homelessness among youth – family conflict, residential instability resulting from foster care and institutional placements, and economic problems. Many youth run away due to physical and sexual abuse, strained family relationships, substance abuse by a family member, and/or parental neglect.^{1,2}

Youth may become homeless when they run away from or are discharged from the foster care system. Homeless youth with foster care histories often become homeless at an earlier age and remain homeless longer than their peers.³ When youth “age out” of foster care at age 18 without permanent families, they are more likely to experience homelessness.⁴ While there are estimated to be nearly 1.7 million U.S. youth experiencing homelessness annually, less than 5% of federal spending on homeless programs is for homeless children and youth.^{5,6}

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) are overrepresented in the homeless youth population, some of whom report being forced out of their homes by parents who disapprove of their sexual orientation or gender identity.^{7,8} LGBTQ homeless youth experience greater levels of violence and physical and sexual exploitation while on the streets and in shelters than their heterosexual peers.^{9,10}

It is often difficult for homeless youth to obtain needed food, clothing, and shelter, so many turn to prostitution, theft, and/or selling drugs to provide for their basic needs. Consequently, homeless youth face risk of arrest, pregnancy, and/or contracting sexually transmitted infections.^{11,12}

Homeless youth often are disconnected from education, employment, medical, and mental health care.^{13,14} They are more likely than their peers to be suspended, expelled, repeat grades, and drop out.^{15,16,17} Homeless youth experience higher rates of mortality and depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and other mental health problems than youth with stable housing.^{18,19} Homeless youth also have trouble accessing physical and mental health services because they may be asked for a permanent address, health insurance information, or parental permission for treatment.^{20,21}

Homeless Youth in Rhode Island

◆ **Blackstone Valley Community Action Program runs a Basic Center Program and two drop-in centers for unaccompanied and runaway homeless youth in Rhode Island. The drop-in centers are located at the Blackstone Valley Community Action Program’s main site in Pawtucket and at the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence in Providence. They offer food, clothing, hygiene products, and preventive services and connect youth to host home opportunities. This site became a federal Family and Youth Services Bureau grantee on October 1, 2014.**²²

◆ **During the 2014-2015 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 37 unaccompanied homeless youth.**²³

◆ **In 2015, 47 single youth ages 18 to 20 and 125 young adults ages 21 to 24 received emergency shelter services through the adult emergency shelter system in Rhode Island, compared to 97 18 to 20 year-olds and 266 21 to 24 year-olds in 2014.**^{24,25}

◆ **In 2014, the National Runaway Switchboard handled 148 crisis-related calls regarding youth ages 21 and under who were homeless, runaways, or at risk of homelessness in Rhode Island, up from 104 in 2013. Nationally, 62% of callers to the Switchboard were youth and the remainder were friends, family, probation officers, and other adults.**^{26,27}

◆ **On December 31, 2015, there were 36 youth in the care of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families between the ages of 12 and 18 who were classified as unauthorized absences/runaways (AWOL), 23 females and 13 males, down from 52 last year. These youth were AWOL from either foster care or juvenile justice placements.**²⁸

◆ **There were an additional 160 youth ages 13 to 17 who received emergency shelter services with their families in Rhode Island in 2014.**²⁹ These youth are vulnerable to being separated from their families due to shelter or child welfare policies.³⁰

References

^{1,3,10,11,13,17,30} National Conference of State Legislatures. (2013). *Homeless and runaway youth*. Retrieved February 23, 2016, from www.ncsl.org

² Bardine, D. (2015). *What works to end youth homelessness*. Washington, DC: The National Network for Youth.

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