

## 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. While there are estimated to be more than 1 million homeless youth in the U.S., there is no standardized definition and standard methodology for measuring homeless youth.<sup>1,2</sup>

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. Youth who “age out” of foster care without permanent families are more likely to experience homelessness.<sup>3,4</sup>

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. LGBTQ homeless youth experience greater levels of violence and physical and sexual exploitation while on the streets and in shelters than their heterosexual peers.<sup>5,6</sup>

It can be 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, which risk arrest, assault, and/or contracting sexually transmitted infections.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Homelessness often has a negative impact on education, employment, and health outcomes for youth. Homeless youth are more likely to be chronically absent, face disciplinary actions, be held back, and drop out.<sup>10</sup> They experience higher rates of physical and mental health problems, substance abuse, chronic physical conditions, and mortality than youth with stable housing.<sup>11,12</sup> Homeless youth often have trouble accessing health services because they may lack health insurance (or information about their coverage) and/or parental consent for treatment.<sup>13</sup> They may also face difficulties attending school due to a lack of required enrollment records, as well as lack of transportation to school.<sup>14</sup>

## 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.<sup>15</sup>**
- ◆ **During the 2015-2016 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 36 unaccompanied homeless youth.<sup>16</sup>**
- ◆ **In 2016, 44 single youth ages 18 to 20 and 144 young adults ages 21 to 24 received emergency shelter services through the adult emergency shelter system in Rhode Island, compared to 47 18 to 20 year-olds and 125 21 to 24 year-olds in 2015.<sup>17,18</sup>**
- ◆ **In 2015, the National Runaway Safeline handled 93 crisis phone calls and online crisis chats regarding youth ages 21 and under who were homeless, runaways, or at risk of homelessness in Rhode Island, down from 148 in 2014. Nationally, 72% of contacts to the Safeline were youth and the remainder were friends, family, and other adults.<sup>19</sup>**
- ◆ **On December 31, 2016, there were 36 youth in the care of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families between the ages of 13 and 19 who were classified as unauthorized absences/runaways (AWOL), 17 females and 19 males, the same total number as last year. These youth were AWOL from either foster care or juvenile justice placements.<sup>20</sup>**
- ◆ **There were an additional 119 youth ages 13 to 17 who received emergency shelter services with their families in Rhode Island in 2016.<sup>21</sup> These youth are vulnerable to being separated from their families due to child welfare policies that result in child removal due to homelessness or shelter policies that do not allow males and females to stay together or otherwise do not accommodate families.<sup>22</sup>**

## References

<sup>1,8,10</sup> Ingram, E. S., Bridgeland, J. M., Reed, B., & Atwell, M. (2016). *Hidden in plain sight: Homeless students in America’s public schools*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises & Hart Research Associates.

<sup>2,4,7</sup> Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2013). *Runaway and homeless youth: Demographics and programs*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

(continued on page 183)