

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 one million homeless youth in the U.S., there has not been a standardized definition and standard methodology for measuring homeless youth.^{1,2}

Youth may become homeless when they run away from or are discharged from the foster care system. 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.^{3,4}

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning

(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.^{5,6}

It can be difficult for homeless youth to obtain needed food, clothing, and shelter. To meet these basic needs, many turn to prostitution, theft, and/or selling drugs which risks exploitation, arrest, assault, and/or contracting sexually transmitted infections.^{7,8,9}

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

Homeless Youth in Rhode Island

- ◆ In 2017, Rhode Island conducted a pilot *Youth Point in Time Count* to determine the number of youth who were homeless on a single night in July. The *2017 Youth Point in Time Count* identified 80 young adults ages 18 to 24 and five youth under age 18 experiencing homelessness and also collected information on age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, sexual orientation, history of housing stability, and where the individual spent the previous night.¹⁵
- ◆ During the 2016-2017 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 31 unaccompanied homeless youth.¹⁶
- ◆ In 2017, 184 single young adults ages 18 to 24 received emergency shelter services through the adult emergency shelter system in Rhode Island, compared to 188 18 to 24 year-olds in 2016.^{17,18}
- ◆ In 2016, the National Runaway Safeline handled 75 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 93 in 2015. Nationally, 74% of callers to the Safeline were youth and the remainder were friends, family, and other adults.¹⁹
- ◆ On December 31, 2017, there were 45 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 AWOL, 22 females and 23 males. These youth were AWOL from either foster care or juvenile justice placements.²⁰
- ◆ There were an additional 131 youth ages 13 to 17 who received emergency shelter services with their families in Rhode Island in 2017.²¹ These youth are vulnerable to being separated from their families due to child welfare policies that result in child removal, or shelter policies that do not allow males and females to stay together or otherwise accommodate families.²²

References

^{1,8,10} 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.

^{2,4,7} Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2016). *Runaway and homeless youth: Demographics and programs*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

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