

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 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 abuse, strained family relationships, substance abuse by a family member, and/or parental neglect. While data collection efforts such as the *Voices of Youth Count* have estimated there to be more than four million homeless youth in the U.S., the exact number is not known due to the residential instability of these youth and overlap among the homeless and runaway populations.^{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 and/or selling drugs which risks exploitation, arrest, assault, and/or contracting sexually transmitted infections.^{7,8}

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.⁹ They are also more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, substance abuse, mental health problems, bullying, and suicide than youth with stable housing.^{10,11} Homeless youth often have trouble accessing health services because they may lack health insurance, information about their coverage, and/or parental consent for treatment.¹² They may also face difficulties attending school due to a lack of required enrollment records, as well as lack of transportation to school.¹³



Homeless Youth in Rhode Island

- ◆ In 2018, Rhode Island conducted the second annual *Youth Point in Time Count* to assess the number and characteristics of Rhode Islanders ages 14 to 24 with experiences of current, former or potential housing instability or homelessness. The *2018 Youth Point in Time Count* identified 173 young adults ages 14 to 24 experiencing current, former, or potential housing instability, 67 of whom were currently homeless. Information was also collected on age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, sexual orientation, unsafe conditions, pregnancy and parenting, and barriers to services.¹⁴
- ◆ During the 2018-2019 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 12 unaccompanied homeless youth.¹⁵
- ◆ In 2019, 144 single youth ages 18 to 24 stayed in emergency shelters and transitional housing programs (not including those in the domestic violence system). Thirty-two of these young adults were in households with children.¹⁶
- ◆ In 2017, the National Runaway Safeline handled 64 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 75 in 2016. Nationally, 73% of callers to the Safeline were youth and the remainder were friends, family, and other adults.¹⁷
- ◆ On December 31, 2019, there were 37 youth in the care of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families between the ages of 13 and 20 who were classified as absent from care (formerly called AWOL), 12 females and 25 males. These youth were absent from either foster care or juvenile justice placements.¹⁸
- ◆ An additional 68 youth ages 13 to 17 stayed in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, or domestic violence shelters with their families in Rhode Island in 2019.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

References

^{17,9} 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.

²⁴ Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2019). *Runaway and homeless youth: Demographics and programs*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

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