

Youth and Young Adult Homelessness

DEFINITION

Youth and young adult homelessness is the number of unaccompanied youth under age 18 who accessed emergency shelter without their families and the number of youth or young adults ages 18 to 24, including young parents, who accessed emergency shelter.

SIGNIFICANCE

There are three primary causes of homelessness among youth and young adults – family conflict, residential instability after foster care and institutional placements, and economic challenges. Many youth run away from home due to abuse, strained family relationships, substance abuse by a family member, and/or parental neglect. The Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Voices of Youth Count estimated that there are approximately 700,000 homeless and runaway youth ages 13 to 17 and 3.5 million homeless youth or young adults ages 18 to 25 in the U.S., but the exact number is not known.^{1,2}

Youth may become homeless when they run away from or are discharged from the foster care system. Youth who “age out” of foster care without a proper transition plan or permanent families are more likely to experience homelessness. National estimates find that by age 21, 43% of youth who had been in foster care had experienced homelessness.^{2,3}

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/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 physical and sexual assault and exploitation than their heterosexual peers.^{4,5}

It can be difficult for homeless youth to obtain needed food, clothing, and shelter. To meet these basic needs, some turn to sex work and/or selling drugs which can result in trauma, exploitation, arrest, assault, and/or contracting sexually transmitted infections.^{1,2}

Homelessness often has a negative impact on education, employment, and health outcomes for youth and young adults. Homeless youth are more likely than their peers to be chronically absent, face disciplinary actions, be held back, and drop out of school. They are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, pregnancy, substance abuse, mental health problems, bullying, and suicide than youth with stable housing. Homeless youth often have trouble accessing health services because they may lack health insurance, information about their coverage, and/or parental consent for treatment. Black and Hispanic youth are twice as likely to experience homelessness as white youth.^{1,2,4,6}



Homeless Youth and Young Adults in Rhode Island

- ◆ In 2025, 270 young adults ages 18-24 stayed at an emergency shelter, or transitional housing facility in Rhode Island, including 149 unaccompanied young adults, 56 parenting young adults, and 66 young adults who were sheltered with their parents.⁷
- ◆ In January 2026, outreach workers identified 28 young adults ages 18 to 24 who had slept outside or in their cars for at least one night during the previous 30 days, including <5 parenting young adults. No youth under age 18 were identified.⁷
- ◆ During the 2024-2025 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 110 unaccompanied homeless youth who were living in doubled up situations or shelters, more than twice as many as the previous year.⁸
- ◆ On December 31, 2025, there were 11 youth between the ages of 14 and 18 in the care of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families who were classified as absent from care (formerly called AWOL). These youth were absent from either foster care or youth justice placements.⁹
- ◆ In 2021, HUD awarded Rhode Island \$3.5 million in Youth Homeless Demonstration Program (YHDP) funds to support Rhode Island in developing and implementing a coordinated community approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness that centers the voice, agency, and leadership of youth.¹⁰
- ◆ The Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program allows youth in foster care who are ages 18 to 21 the option of continuing to receive services as they transition to adulthood. On December 31, 2025, 97 youth were enrolled in VEC and 38% lived in their own apartment, 16% with a relative/kin, 14% in their former foster home, and 25% in other living arrangements (paid independent living, apartment with a roommate/partner/child, unfunded independent living, dormitory, or semi-independent living).^{11,12}

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