

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Donors and funders use Social Impact Research (SIR) reports to learn about social issues affecting at-risk populations and identify high-performing organizations that are addressing such concerns. Drawing on current research and interviews with experts representing government, academia, nonprofits, and foundations, these reports provide an overview of the issue,

populations affected, approaches to address, and investment recommendations on how donors and funders can take action. The report is complemented by state reports that frame the issue in the local context and a guide to giving that provides criteria to evaluate organizations working to address the issue.

DEFINITION

Homeless youth, also called unaccompanied youth, are defined by the McKinney-Vento Act as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”¹ This report focuses on youth aged 15-24 who are separated from their families or guardians. They do not have serious mental health or other issues that require long-term residential care. With support, housing, and training, they can become capable of living independently.²

SOCIAL ISSUE REPORT SUMMARY

Investment in programs to help youth exit homelessness and build positive lives presents a significant opportunity for social impact:

- Homeless youth are at a far higher risk than their housed peers for substance abuse issues, poor health, and unemployment. The negative effects of experiencing homelessness as a young person last a lifetime. **For more on the long-term effects of youth homelessness, see page 2.**
- High-performing organizations use a flexible approach to help youth access housing, finish their educations, acquire life skills, and build social supports that will enable them to become self-sufficient adults. **For more on the recommended approach, see page 3.**
- Emerging evidence in the field shows that effective programs can yield a high return on investment for homeless youth in many areas. Youth who ran away from home at least once before the age of 18 were 50 percent less likely than their housed peers to have a GED or high school diploma.³ **For more on the return on investment, see page 5.**

FACTS: YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES

Several studies have found that homeless youth and formerly homeless youth experience more negative outcomes than their housed peers:

Homeless youth in Los Angeles are
6 to 12 times more likely
to become infected with HIV⁴

Homeless youth in Minnesota are
5 times more likely
to have undergone treatment
for alcoholism or drug abuse⁵

Throughout the U.S., individuals who
ran away from home as youth are
2.5 times more likely
to be arrested as adults⁶

SOCIAL ISSUE INDICATORS

It is difficult to estimate the number of homeless youth in the United States. The federal government counts homeless adults annually but does not conduct a count of homeless youth. Many nonprofits serve youth aged 15-24, but existing sources do not collect data about this specific population. Counting homeless youth is a complex endeavor that requires a thorough knowledge of the facilities and neighborhoods homeless youth use, as well as a methodology for reaching hard-to-find youth who may be living with friends or actively hiding. Despite this lack of data, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) has developed two methods for estimating the number of homeless youth in the United States.

The first method extrapolates from the national count of homeless adults, known as the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR), which includes data on individuals over age 18. Using this data, NAEH estimates that there are 150,000 homeless youth between ages 18 and 24.⁷ The AHAR estimate probably undercounts homeless youth because it focuses on areas used by homeless adults, which are often not the same as those used by youth.

The second method uses the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway⁸ Children (NISMART), a survey of youth aged 10-18 conducted by the Department of Justice.⁹ In 1999, NISMART counted 1,682,900 youth who ran away and experienced homelessness.¹⁰ This is a useful estimate, though it includes children who are not in the target age group of 15-24.

Combining these two numbers, NAEH estimates that there are approximately 1.8 million homeless youth in the United States.

Youth homelessness takes several forms. In some cases, youth live on the streets or take refuge in shelters. Other young people without stable housing may stay in motels or “couch surf”—moving around to stay with various friends or relatives.¹¹

Most cases of youth homelessness can be divided into two categories: short- and long-term homelessness. Short-term homeless youth may stay on the street, with friends, or at youth emergency shelters. They usually return home after one or two weeks at most but often run away more than once for short periods.¹² To exit homelessness, these youth need assistance in resolving the conflicts with their families that caused them to leave home.

A smaller number of youth cannot return home and end up homeless for longer than one month. These long-term homeless youth become street-dependent, making homes for themselves in abandoned buildings, under bridges, or in parks. To exit homelessness, these youth require a continuum of housing options and more comprehensive services.

Family discord, often a result of physical, verbal, or sexual abuse, is the most common cause of youth homelessness. Parents’ substance use or mental health issues can also cause youth to run away. Families may throw youth out as a result of the youth’s behavior or substance abuse. In some cases, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are expelled from their homes because of family members’ prejudice about their sexual orientation.¹³ (See box to the upper right: Common Risk Factors Youth Face for Becoming Homeless.)

After leaving home, youth are likely to experience more physical and psychological trauma on the streets or in unstable housing situations. Homeless youth are more likely than their housed peers to become dependent on drugs or alcohol.¹⁴ To earn money, youth may steal or engage in survival sex—the exchange of sex for shelter, food, or other resources.¹⁵ Runaway youth can also become human trafficking victims as they are lured into forced labor with promises of a place to stay and income.¹⁶

In addition to these short-term risks, youth homelessness can result in a lifetime of negative outcomes. One national study found that individuals who experienced homelessness as youth are more than three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts as adults than those who have not experienced homelessness.¹⁷ Another study of homeless youth under age 21 in Minnesota showed that homeless girls were 20 times more likely than their housed peers to have been pregnant.¹⁸

Another factor contributing to the challenges faced by homeless youth is insufficient social support. Youth between ages 15

COMMON RISK FACTORS YOUTH FACE FOR BECOMING HOMELESS

Segments of the youth population at highest risk of becoming homeless, often as a result of family discord and a lack of social support, include:

- Victims of physical, verbal, or sexual abuse at home
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth
- Former foster youth
- Youth exiting the juvenile justice system
- Pregnant or parenting youth

FOSTER YOUTH

Studies estimate that 21 to 53 percent of homeless youth have histories of foster care or other state placement.¹⁹ The federal government’s John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program has special funding for housing and supportive services for youth exiting foster care,²⁰ but many of these youth still lack the financial and social supports they need to transition into adulthood. For the approximately 24,000 youth per year who “age out” of foster care at 18 or 21 (depending on state of residence), the services and income that they are accustomed to receiving stop abruptly when they leave the system.²¹ In addition to losing these material supports, the instability of foster placements often does not provide youth with enough opportunities to forge positive social relationships and learn the life skills they need to become independent.²²

and 24, often referred to as transition-age youth, are expected to learn life skills and finish their education to become self-sufficient adults. Most youth learn these skills from their families or peers and teachers at school. Homeless youth, however, are often trying to progress into adulthood with limited resources. Once homeless, youth may also become disconnected from school and non-homeless peers. Therefore, homeless youth have few supportive friends or role models to teach them the skills they will need as adults.

Youth homelessness programs can help homeless youth obtain housing, develop the skills they will need as adults, reconnect with their families, and/or develop alternative social supports within their communities. With these programs, youth can learn to be self-sufficient and successfully transition into adulthood.

YOUTH AS MINORS OR ADULTS

Youth under 18 are often separated from older youth because of legal requirements for working with minors and because they are typically at different developmental stages. However, age divisions are not fixed. All components of SIR’s recommended approach can be used for youth of all ages. For youth under 18, program administrators are legally required to contact their families and the state to work with them. State authorities assess whether it is safe for youth to return home. For youth 18 and older, no such requirements exist because they are legally adults and can choose to enter services themselves.

RECOMMENDED APPROACH FOR SUPPORTING HOMELESS YOUTH

Assisting homeless youth requires an approach that is flexible and individualized. The path to independence differs for everyone, and youth enter homelessness programs at varying ages and with diverse needs. Experts recommend two main paths for youth exiting homelessness: proactive family reconciliation and youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services. High-performing organizations use an approach that includes both of these options, as homeless youth need one or the other.

- **Proactive Family Reconciliation**, which is often used with short-term homeless youth under 18 (See box on previous page: Youth as Minors or Adults), focuses on counseling youth and their caretakers to manage the problems that caused the youth to leave home. Family reconciliation aims to improve family relationships so that youth can go home to more supportive environments. Family reconciliation is particularly important because the majority of runaway youth return home.²³ When conducted effectively, family reconciliation lessens the likelihood that youth will leave home again or experience long-term homelessness. It is important to note that family reconciliation is not appropriate in all cases, as the home environment can be unsafe for the youth.²⁴
- **Youth-Centered Transitional Housing and Supportive Services**, usually for long-term homeless youth over age 18, provide housing, supportive services, and guidance for youth who cannot return home. These programs aim to help youth develop the life skills necessary to become independent adults. Individualized case management and needs

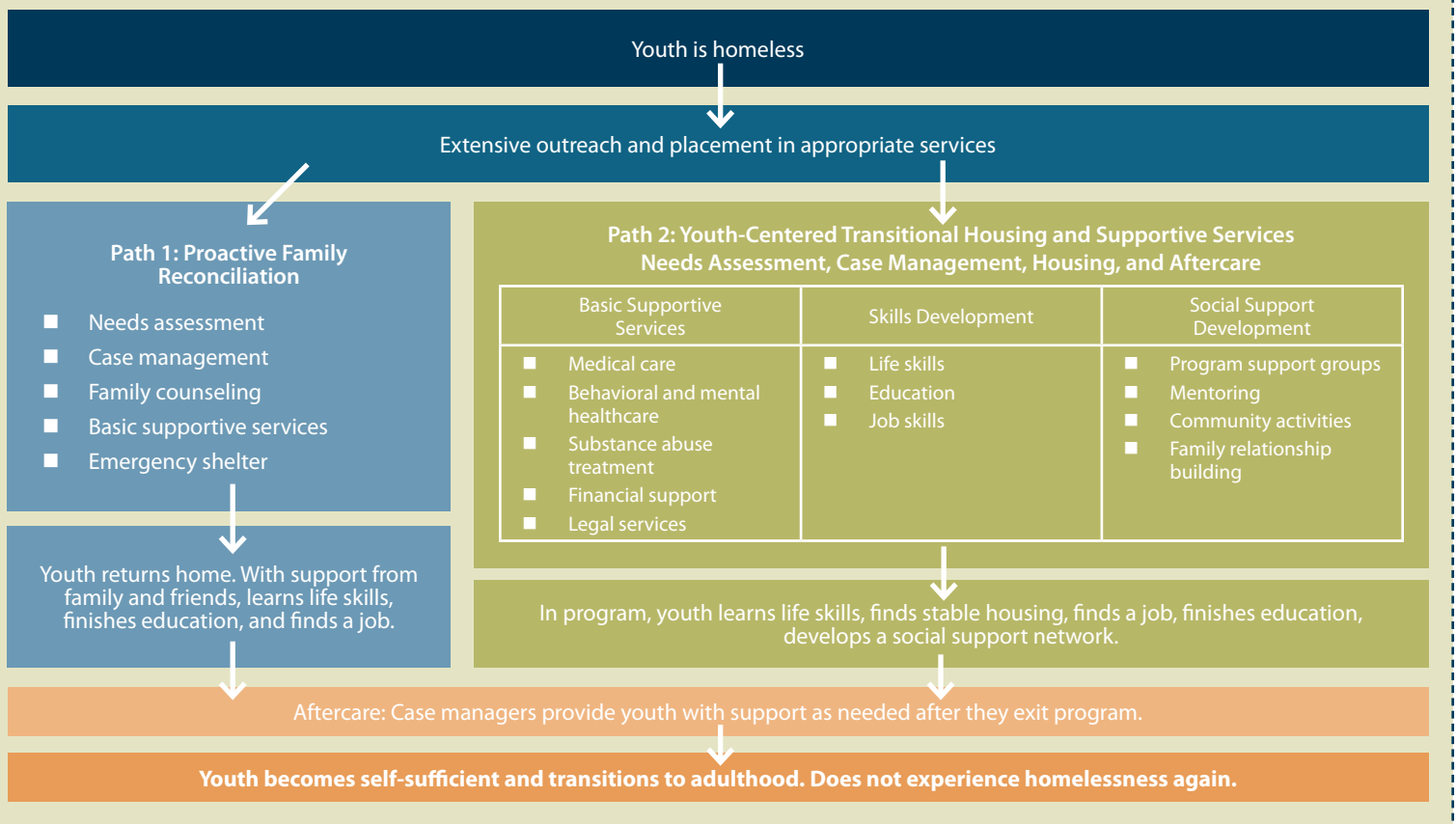
assessments are essential in designing an effective array of services to meet the particular needs of each youth.

SIR's research showed that for both of these paths, effective programs are based upon these five principles:

- **Positive Youth Development:** Focusing on youths' strengths and personal goals, guiding them to make healthy choices, and helping them build confidence.²⁵
- **Flexibility:** Creating a program of services to fit each youth's individual needs and adapt as their needs change over time,²⁶ tolerating mistakes and encouraging youth to learn from their missteps within the safety of the program instead of immediately expelling them.
- **Relationship Building:** Encouraging youth to build positive, stable relationships with caring adults and peers inside and outside the program.²⁷
- **Cultural Competence:** Providing youth-specific services, recognizing that youth needs are different from those of adults; understanding the homeless youth population and designing programs for specific groups (subgroups of homeless youth, such as LGBTQ youth, former foster youth, or parenting youth, often need specialized services).
- **Trauma-Informed Care:** Providing services appropriate for youth who have experienced abuse in their homes and/or trauma on the streets.

This type of care often includes mental health services to help youth manage negative life experiences and their overall health.

FIGURE 1: OVERVIEW OF APPROACH TO SUPPORTING HOMELESS YOUTH



COMPONENTS OF THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH

The two paths included in the recommended approach, Family Reconciliation and Transitional Housing and Supportive Services, both include extensive outreach. After outreach, the paths differ significantly. Experts agree on the overall structure of these two approaches, but the specifics of best practices for each approach are still evolving. The information below outlines the best existing models.

- **Extensive Outreach:** Effective youth homelessness programs are proactive about finding and connecting with homeless youth through multiple channels on the streets, in schools, and through government agencies. This is important because homeless youth are often afraid to look for assistance or unaware of services available to them. Outreach is a valuable tool for building relationships with homeless youth and connecting them to long-term services. Recognizing that some homeless youth may not be ready or willing to enter long-term housing or service programs, outreach staff can address immediate needs with food and basic first aid while encouraging them to eventually utilize services and exit homelessness.

Family Reconciliation or Transitional Housing and Supportive Services

- **Path 1: Proactive Family Reconciliation** An initial needs assessment, consisting of several formal and informal conversations with program staff, is essential to understanding why youth left home. If the needs assessment determines that youth want to and can safely return home, family reconciliation programs provide short-term crisis services, including emergency housing, case management, basic supportive services (such as medical care), and, most importantly, family counseling. This approach is most commonly used with youth under 18, but should be made available to all youth regardless of age. Many youth and families are resistant to counseling and help from program staff, so it is important for programs to design methods for engaging them.

Emergency shelters typically allow youth to stay for up to three weeks. During this time, youth are assigned case managers who, along with program counselors, work with youth and families to resolve problems. Effective programs provide aftercare services that make home-based counseling and other services available after youth leave the shelter. While there is consensus that family reconciliation is an important approach, there are few well-developed models for implementation, and experts are still conducting research to determine best practices.

- **Path 2: Youth-Centered Transitional Housing and Supportive Services** For youth who cannot return home, these programs provide housing, a community, and supportive services. They aim to help youth take control over their own lives and eventually become independent.

This path is typically used with youth 18 or older. When youth enter transitional housing, staff conduct initial needs assessments to determine the appropriate services. In high-performing organizations, the assessment consists of several formal and informal conversations designed to determine the following: cause of homelessness, level of self-sufficiency, education level, medical and behavioral health needs, existing social supports, and life goals.

High-performing programs make the following menu of services available to youth in-house or through partnerships with outside organizations.

- **Case Management and Aftercare:** Effective programs assign each youth a case manager to oversee and coordinate all aspects of services for the duration of the program and provide support for youth as needed after they exit the program
- **Social Support Development:** Case managers help youth develop a social support network within and outside of the program. Methods include support groups and mentoring programs, assisting youth as they rebuild family relationships, or connecting youth with community activities such as sports teams.
- **Housing:** Well-designed programs have several transitional housing options, with varying levels of supervision and independence, to accommodate youth at varying levels of self-sufficiency. More independent youth may be immediately ready to move into their own apartments with temporary financial assistance. They require fewer services and check in weekly with case managers. Less independent youth may need support in learning to cook, clean, and care for themselves. They might live in their own rooms in a shared house with live-in staff.
- **Basic Supportive Services:** Effective programs provide supportive services including medical care, behavioral and mental healthcare, substance abuse treatment, legal services, and financial assistance. Mental health services are often important for homeless youth who have had past negative experiences.
- **Skills Development:** Effective programs help youth develop their educational, job, and life skills. They require that youth enroll in some type of education or have a job, as both are necessary for becoming independent. For education, programs provide GED classes or help youth enroll in local schools. For job skills, effective programs offer training in resume writing, interviewing, and job searching. Effective programs also help youth learn life skills such as cooking, budgeting, and using public transportation. Skills are often taught through structured classes and individual, informal conversations with program staff.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Supporting high-performing organizations dedicated to helping homeless youth will produce significant improvements for this at-risk population. As individuals, youth who experience homelessness pay a high cost. Experts have used the Risk Amplification Model to explain the risks and negative outcomes associated with youth homelessness. This model posits that once youth are homeless, the instability of living on the streets and becoming disconnected from family and community does not have one particular negative effect, but rather amplifies risks in many areas of life. Homeless youth are more likely than their housed peers to experience negative outcomes in health, education, employment, and criminal involvement throughout their lives.²⁸ A 2010 Urban Institute study using a data set from a national sample of 1,168 youth over six years found that youth who ran away more than once and experienced repeated episodes of short-term homelessness also showed more negative outcomes.²⁹ Therefore, organizations that help youth exit homelessness quickly and permanently yield a high return on investment.

Several studies suggest that programs following SIR's recommended approach to youth homelessness provide many benefits. Findings from a 2009 study of 183 homeless youth in

Los Angeles suggest that youth involved in programs that provide the comprehensive social and educational support included in the Transitional Housing and Supportive Services model are more likely to exit homelessness successfully.³⁰ Researchers from the University of Southern California conducted a randomized control trial of a specific methodology for family reconciliation, known as the Support to Reunite, Involve, and Value Each other (STRIVE) model. STRIVE is a promising methodology for further codifying family reconciliation. Researchers found that STRIVE helped youth successfully return home with their families and prevented them from running away again.³¹

The exact cost to communities of youth homelessness is difficult to calculate because of the lack of data on this issue. However, it is clear that the costs of caring for homeless youth who experience negative outcomes are high. The juvenile justice system is one example—according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, homeless youth are more likely than their housed peers to enter the juvenile justice system. Providing homeless youth services and positive supports in transitional housing is more cost-effective for communities than the juvenile justice system,³² as outlined below.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Investment in programs that assist youth to exit homelessness have the potential to yield high returns for youth and their communities. The statistics below relate to homeless youth specifically, as they are a unique at-risk population. While few studies have been done on the return on investment for helping homeless youth, there has been significant research regarding at-risk youth in general. Such research has shown investment returns in high-performing programs for at-risk youth include increased tax revenue and decreased welfare costs.³³

Individuals

- Youth who ran away from home at least once before age 18 earned about \$8,823 less per year over their lifetimes than youth who remained at home. They were also 50 percent less likely to have a GED or high school diploma.³⁴
- Living in harsh conditions with little access to healthcare, runaways were almost twice as likely as non-runaways to have generally weak health, which can hinder daily life and employment. This includes “health issues that prevent them from doing moderate activities,” such as moving furniture or vacuuming.³⁵
- Runaways were 53 percent more likely than their housed peers to have a sexually transmitted infection³⁶ and over three times more likely to attempt suicide as adults.³⁷

Communities

- Lighthouse Youth Services in Cincinnati, a city with affordable housing, has several transitional housing options. The most expensive costs \$85 per day for each youth housed in a group apartment with live-in staff.³⁸ According to the Justice Policy Institute, it costs an average of \$216 per day to house a youth in a residential juvenile justice facility in Ohio.³⁹

Investment in programs that use the recommended approaches has a significant positive impact on individuals and communities. Effective youth homelessness programs apply the following five principles:

- Positive Youth Development
- Flexibility
- Relationship Building
- Cultural Competence
- Trauma-Informed Care

This is an emerging field. While some research has been done, it is still very important to continue to conduct research to understand what works and solidify evidence for best practices.

SIR recommends providing unrestricted or flexible funding to organizations that are implementing the recommended approach. This allows them to use funds for a wide range of activities, including delivering programs, building their infrastructure, and spreading best practices. Organizations can also use these funds to implement a more precise data tracking mechanism to improve program effectiveness or choose to engage in research, publishing, and convening to spread successful program information to others in their field.

COMPONENTS OF THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH

To serve homeless youth with diverse needs, high-performing programs should have the following components:

- **Extensive Outreach** to effectively find and connect with homeless youth through multiple channels
- Based on individualized needs assessments, programs should be able to support youth along one of the following two paths:
 - **Proactive Family Reconciliation** for youth who can and want to return home
 - **Youth-Centered Transitional Housing and Supportive Services** to provide long-term services, including housing, for youth who cannot return home

TAKE ACTION

In addition to offering financial support to programs working with homeless youth as part of a direct services portfolio, donors and funders may provide support through other channels.

Fund Research

Policy makers, practitioners, and academics all agree that more data about homeless youth and effective interventions would significantly improve the field. There are two key ways donors can fund research.

- Partner with an organization to fund an evaluation of a particular youth homelessness intervention (i.e., an outreach or transitional housing program). The organization should find an outside research firm or academic with a history of high-quality research published in peer-reviewed journals to conduct the evaluation. Randomized studies are one of the most reliable types of research.
- Fund a high-performing youth homelessness program with its own internal research and evaluation department to evaluate one of its projects or track outcomes over several years for youth who exit its programs. Some programs have staff who are trained to conduct research but do not have the funding to gather data or conduct a study.

Stay Informed about New Developments in the Field

- Because youth homelessness is a rapidly changing field, keep track of the latest research and developments. For current information on public policy, high-performing organizations, and best practices for serving homeless youth, use resources including:
 - The National Alliance to End Homelessness Youth section (<http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/issues/youth>)
 - The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Youth Framework (http://www.usich.gov/media_center/blog/ending_youth_homelessness/)

Connect Youth to the Community

- Volunteer as a tutor or mentor for a homeless youth and help connect the youth to community resources (i.e., sports leagues, book clubs, school-based activities, other common-interest groups).

Provide Youth with High-Quality Housing

- Lease or donate apartments to transitional housing for youth.
- Donate furniture or household items to help furnish new youth apartments.

REFERENCES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

ORGANIZATION

Homelessness Resource Center

National Alliance to End Homelessness

National Network for Youth

National Runaway Switchboard

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

WEBSITE

www.homeless.samhsa.gov/Channel/Youth-31.aspx

www.endhomelessness.org

www.nn4youth.org

www.1800runaway.org

www.usich.gov

ENDNOTES

1. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. 42 USC 11302 103 (a).
2. It is important to note that there is a significant population of homeless youth who, because of mental illness or other issues, require permanent supportive care and housing. This report does not address homeless youth who need permanent care, but here are several resources that provide more information about this population: Larkin Street Youth Services, "Routz: For Homeless Youth Needing Additional Mental Health Support," www.larkinstreetyouth.org/programs/housing/routz/; A. M. Cauce et al., "The Characteristics and Mental Health of Homeless Adolescents: Age and Gender Differences," *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 8(4) 2000; Corporation for Supportive Housing, "Supportive Housing for Youth: Key Considerations," Oct. 2008, asmhc.org/members/a76/attachments/E20-YouthKeyConsiderations.pdf.
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8. "Throwaway" or throwaway youth are those whose families throw them out of their homes, as opposed to "runaway" youth who choose to leave.
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16. Covenant House, "How Human Trafficking and Child Slavery Hurt Homeless Kids," www.covenanthouse.org/help-homeless-youth/human-trafficking#Editorial.
17. Benoit-Bryan, "The Runaway Youth Longitudinal Study."
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