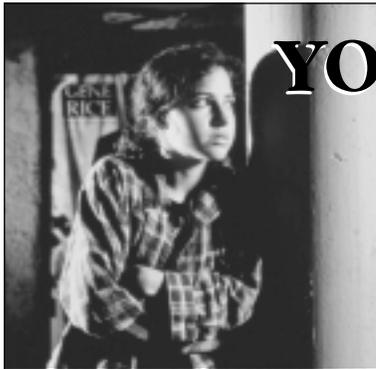




Photo by Chuck Cherney, Chicago Tribune



YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

by Bob Palmer

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) estimates that, over the course of a year, more than 25,000 youth in Illinois experience homelessness.ⁱ Homeless youth are between the ages of 14 and 21 who have left home because of serious family problems, are not in a safe and stable living situation, and cannot be reunited with their families.

Any youth who lacks a stable living situation, whether on the street or “doubled-up,” is homeless. A differentiation often has been made between youth who “run away” and those who are “thrown away.” However, all of the following youth have a common problem—no place to call home.ⁱⁱ

- A 17-year-old girl who has been homeless on and off since first grade and became a chronic runaway at 14 primarily due to physical abuse by her father.
- A 20-year-old male with substance abuse problems who is living in his car after being kicked out of his home.
- A 14-year-old boy in a cycle of separation and reunification from a family that does not have the economic or emotional resources to provide for him.

Who are homeless youth?

Homeless youth are not isolated to one geographic area or to a certain social class, race, or ethnicity. Because of the city’s size, most of Illinois’ homeless youth are to be found in Chicago. However, data suggests that on a per capita basis youth homelessness is equally as prevalent in places such as Rockford, Peoria, Aurora, Springfield, Champaign, East St. Louis, and Marion.ⁱⁱⁱ

The great majority of homeless youth come from families suffering from instability.^{iv} A 1992 national survey of service providers identified the range of problems that youth experienced prior to becoming homeless.^v Long-term family economic problems were among the most prevalent problems, as were involvement in the foster care system, absence of one’s father, abuse (physical, emotional, and/or sexual), and substance abuse by a parent.

The following data provides a rough idea of how many families in Illinois live in situations such as those identified in the 1992 survey:

- In 1999, the child poverty rate was 13.8, meaning that 487,363 children lived in poverty.^{vi}
- Of families in poverty, 69 percent are single parent families, almost all headed by a single female.^{vii}
- There were 32,668 indicated reports of child abuse or neglect in 1998.^{viii}
- In June 1999, 37,960 children were in foster and substitute care—one of the highest caseloads of any state.^{ix}

Also prevalent were educational and school problems. For homeless youth, problems in school often mean that they will leave school and not return. A 1999 study of homeless youth in four midwestern cities found that 42 percent of the boys and 32 percent of the girls had dropped out of school.^x

A family’s inability to accept a GLBTQ youth (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning) can also lead to homelessness. A study of young gay males found that 26 percent of those surveyed were forced to leave home because of familial conflicts over their sexual identity.^{xi}

What is life like on the street?

Based on interviews conducted by CCH for *Alone after Dark: A Survey of Homeless Youth in Chicago*, the longer a youth stays on the street, the more likely it becomes that he or she will be victimized. Among the almost 200 youth interviewed for the report:

- 33 percent had been physically attacked.
- 20 percent had been raped or sexually assaulted after leaving home.
- 75 percent had been asked to sell drugs.
- 12 percent had engaged in prostitution.

One youth quoted in the report described his descent to life on the street by saying, “There was never enough food [at home]. I knew what to do. I told them I’d see

them later . . . I slept in vacant apartments for about two or three weeks . . . But I couldn’t keep enough food in my mouth, so I approached getting money in the wrong manner—I started selling dope.”

What resources are currently available for homeless youth?

State government, through the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), funds most existing programs that address the needs of homeless youth. However, these programs do not have sufficient funding to serve the needs of all youth on the streets.

Comprehensive Community-Based Youth Services (CCBYS) is a statewide program serving youth ages 10 to 17 who are at risk of involvement in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system, including youth at-risk of homelessness. In fiscal year 2000, IDHS funded 57 CCBYS grantees with \$13.37 million in state funds. During that year, CCBYS programs served 12,722 youth. CCBYS programs attempt to reunify youth with their families and, when necessary, secure shelter and social services for youth.

During fiscal year 2000, IDHS also spent \$4.17 million to support 20 privately run Homeless Youth Programs. Programs include those that provide emergency shelter for up to 120 days, transitional residential programs that last for up to two years, drop-in centers, and street outreach programs. These programs served 1,910 homeless youth during fiscal year 2000.

Long-term policy recommendations

Increasing family stability is the best way to prevent youth homelessness. One way to define stable families is to say that stable families help develop the emotional competence of their children so that children can focus on doing well in school, get along with peers and adults, delay gratification, and bounce back quickly after stressful experiences. Parents who grew up in stable families themselves are more likely to be able to care for their children in such a way as to develop their children's emotional competence. Evidence is also strong that economic and community-level factors influence the ability to develop emotional competence.^{xii}

By supporting the following campaigns, and others like them, we can move in the direction of creating a society where every family is stable.

- The National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Campaign works to create a source of revenue for the production of 1.5 million units of affordable rental housing by 2010. Information at www.nhtf.org.
- The National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support advances effective policies to reduce poverty and increase economic security, including securing an increase in the minimum wage. Information at www.nationalcampaign.org.
- Voices for Illinois Children strives to expand funding for voluntary home visiting programs that build stronger families and develop healthier children. Information at www.voices4kids.org.
- The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is working to educate the public about the issues

faced by GLBTQ youth and to nurture and support youth activism. Information at www.ngltf.org.

Short-term policy recommendations

As we work to maximize family stability, we must increase funding for the continuum of care for homeless youth so that more youth can receive services. During fiscal year 2000, IDHS Homeless Youth Programs only served 7.6 percent of the total estimated population of homeless youth (see sidebar).

A comprehensive continuum of care includes the following types of services:

- **Crisis Intervention and Reunification:** To reunify youth at-risk of homelessness with their families or to find another appropriate placement.
- **Outreach Programs:** Reaching youth on the streets and in the places they stay to let them know that help is available.
- **Drop-in Centers:** Providing an initial point of contact with a broad range of services and referrals.
- **Emergency Shelters:** Getting youth into a safe environment to evaluate their needs and determine an appropriate long-term program.
- **Transitional Living Programs:** Providing longer-term, often group living, or supervised apartments where youth can finish their education, learn independent living skills, and gain employment.
- **Independent Living Programs:** Enabling youth to live on their own in the community with a range of support services until they are fully stable.
- **Permanent Affordable Housing:** Promoting the long-term stability of families.

WHY MORE RESOURCES ARE NEEDED

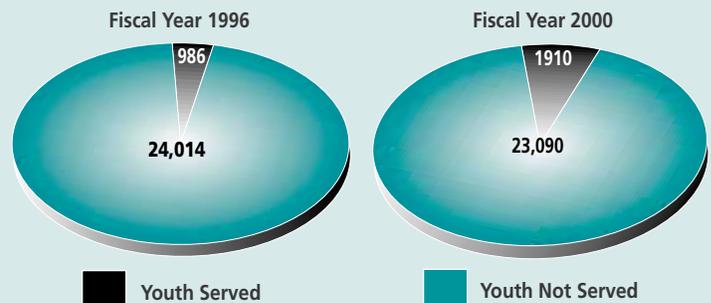
1. Homeless Youth Programs have to deny services due to lack of resources.

A survey of state-funded residential programs for homeless youth found that these programs have to regularly turn away youth because of lack of resources. Among the 10 programs surveyed, out of 20 existing programs, 1,041 youth received services during fiscal year 2000. An estimated 2,125 youth were denied services during the same period. In short, for every youth served, two youth were denied services.

2. Increases in state funding result in more youth being served.

In fiscal year 1996, Illinois spent \$2.049 million on Homeless Youth Programs and served 986 youth. As a result of CCH's Statewide Homeless Youth Campaign, since fiscal year 1999 Illinois has spent just over \$4 million annually on Homeless Youth Programs with a corresponding increase in the number of youth served. During fiscal year 2000, 1,910 youth received services. However, this is still only 7.64 percent of the 25,000 youth statewide who experience homelessness each year.

Homeless Youth Served by IDHS Homeless Youth Programs



At current funding levels, the State of Illinois is clearly underserving one of our most vulnerable populations. CCH will continue to work to ensure that the state appropriately funds programs serving homeless youth.

Note: Based on the estimated annual population of 25,000 homeless youth in Illinois.

i CCH's estimate is based on the Governor's Task Force on Homeless Youth 1985 estimate of 21,535 homeless youth in Illinois and on more recent surveys of homeless youth service providers. We are currently working to update our population estimate.

ii More information about these particular youth can be found in *Alone after Dark: A Survey of Homeless Youth in Chicago* (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 1992).

iii Task Force on Homeless Youth, Report to the Governor (State of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1985), p. 15.

iv Les B. Whitbeck and Dan R. Hoyt, *Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and their Families*. (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999), p. 6.

v Deborah Bass. *Helping Vulnerable Youth: Runaway and Homeless Adolescents in the United States* (Washington, DC: NASW Press, 1992), p. 9.

vi *2000 Report on Illinois Poverty* (Illinois Poverty Summit), p. 6.

vii *Ibid.*, p. 16.

viii *Illinois Kids Count, 1999-2000: Communities Helping Families* (Voices for Illinois Children, 2000).

ix *Ibid.*

x Les B. Whitbeck and Dan R. Hoyt, p. 77.

xi Information about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Questioning Youth, (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force).

xii *Ready to Succeed: The Lasting Effects of Early Relationships*. (The Ounce of Prevention Fund).