

GAO

United States General Accounting Office

Report to the Honorable
Paul Simon, U.S. Senate

HOMELESSNESS:

Homeless and Runaway Youth Receiving Services at Federally Funded Shelters



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Human Resources Division

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December 19, 1989

The Honorable Paul Simon
United States Senate

Dear Senator Simon:

In your February 10, 1989, letter you expressed interest in our ongoing work on homeless youth and in the need for transitional or independent living programs for these young people.¹ This report analyzes the characteristics of youth who were served by shelters funded under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. Information is presented on the types of problems facing these youth, the services shelters provided to them, and where the youth go after leaving the shelters. Our analysis was based on data collected by the shelters from October 1985 to June 1988. The data comes from interviews with the youth served and other knowledgeable persons. We supplemented this analysis with information from published studies and interviews with shelter personnel and experts on the problems of homeless youth (see app. V).

Background

Originally enacted in 1974, the Runaway Youth Act was designed to serve runaway youth only. When the act was reauthorized in 1977, the Congress added homeless youth as a category of youth to be served by shelters funded under the act.² Accordingly, the act was renamed the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

Results in Brief

A homeless youth, as defined by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), is a person under 18 years old who is in need of services and without a place of shelter where he or she can receive supervision and care.³ HHS defines a runaway as a person under 18 years old who

¹For a definition of terms used in this report, see glossary.

²We are not aware of any other federal statutory program specifically designed to provide assistance for homeless youth.

³The homeless youth who report to runaway shelters are sometimes referred to as unaccompanied homeless youth, which implies that they are unattached to a family unit. These youth are the focus of our report and, unless otherwise indicated, the term homeless youth refers to this group.

There are also homeless youth who are members of homeless families. While this report does not discuss homeless youth in families, more information on this group can be found in Children and Youth: About 68,000 Homeless and 186,000 in Shared Housing at Any Given Time (GAO/PEMD-89-14, June 15, 1989). Other GAO reports on homelessness are listed at the end of the report.

absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of parents or legal guardians.

We found that while there have been reports of a growing population of homeless youth, little information is available on the size or characteristics of either the total homeless youth population or the subgroup seeking assistance from runaway and homeless shelters. This lack of information on the size and characteristics of this population makes it difficult to determine appropriate public and private responses to the problems of such youth.

The following observations emerge from our analysis:

- Homeless youth seem to be a diverse group of people facing many problems.
- The shelter network may not be able to meet some needs of homeless and runaway youth.
- Many youth may not be receiving needed services after they leave the shelters.
- Many homeless youth who do not return to their families upon leaving a shelter move on to living arrangements that appear to lack stability.
- Very few of the homeless youth appear to leave shelters for independent living programs. Because youth who are less than 16 years old and many of those who are very troubled may not be suitable for independent living programs, more information on alternative programs is needed.

Youth May Have Many Serious Personal Problems

Data collected by the centers suggest that some youth receiving shelter services have many serious personal problems, ranging from difficulties in school to mental health and substance abuse problems. Many of these youth experienced physical or sexual abuse and violence in the family setting and had parents who abused drugs or alcohol. Depression was cited as a problem by 61 percent of homeless youth. Problems with school, such as bad grades and truancy, were cited by 43 percent of homeless youth. One-half of older homeless youth are not attending school at all.

However, contrary to some media portrayals highlighting drug abuse or prostitution, the majority of homeless youth were not reported to have such problems. About one-fifth were reported as having problems with drug or alcohol abuse, and a similar proportion were reported as having

problems with the juvenile justice system (see glossary). Fourteen percent of females had problems related to pregnancy or venereal disease. Our analysis suggested that many homeless and runaway youth faced similar problems (see app. II). This suggests that the two groups of youth have similar service needs (see apps. III and IV).

Homeless Youth Have Serious Family Problems

While homeless youth seeking services constitute a small proportion of the total youth population their problems can be serious, especially their family problems. Many come from family situations where the incidence of neglect and drug and alcohol and physical and sexual abuse is high. Homeless youth tend to come from single-parent situations or situations where there is no parent present. Almost one-half do not live with two parents. Shelter workers report youth's relationship with the parent figure (see glossary) or other adult in the home as the primary problem for 61 percent of homeless youth. Over one-third of the youth reported having family problems experienced parental neglect, while one-fourth reported being physically or sexually abused, and nearly one-fifth reported having problems with drug or alcohol abuse. In many families, more than one of these problems occur (see apps. I and IV).

Homeless Youth Population Diverse

The majority of homeless youth are 16 years old or older and male. In addition, the majority of homeless youth are white, although blacks constitute a disproportionate share. A relatively small portion appear to be from families receiving public assistance. Homeless youth seeking assistance were evident in both rural and urban communities and tended to remain near the location of their previous residence. In comparison to homeless youth, runaway youth were younger (the majority are less than 16 years old) and more likely to be female (see app. I).

Number of Youth Receiving Assistance Stable

Our analysis of data reported to HHS by the shelters showed that during the period October 1985 to June 1988, 44,274 youth received services, which included overnight care at federally funded shelters for runaway and homeless youth. Shelter personnel classified almost 21 percent—about 9,000—of these youth as homeless. While the data do not address whether the number of homeless youth who do not seek assistance has increased (despite claims of increasing demand) shelters have not reported increases in the number served (see apps. I and III).

The HHS data base contained a total of 102,280 records. We eliminated the records of those who did not meet the HHS definition of runaway or homeless, were duplicates, or were unusable for our study (see app. V).⁴

Shelters May Not Be Able to Meet Some Needs of Homeless Youth

Programs funded under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act are designed primarily to provide crisis intervention and short-term shelter, limited to a maximum of 15 days. In addition to shelter, programs generally offer individual and family counseling, meals, transportation, some health care and referral to other services. Shelters provide services, directly or through referral that are aimed at alleviating youth problems, reuniting them with their families, encouraging stable living conditions, and helping them decide upon a future course of action. However, available services may not always match the problems of youth who come to the shelters, particularly homeless youth.

Shelters Can Provide Essential Services but Are Not Able to Address Long-Term Needs

Almost all homeless youth receive counseling services while at shelter facilities. However, much smaller proportions receive education, medical, or drug and alcohol abuse treatment. While shelters provided a variety of services, they did not seem to be able to address the long-term needs of many of the youth they served. For example, while 20 percent of youth indicated drug or alcohol problems, only 3 percent reported receiving services that were designed to help them deal with such problems. Most homeless youth were out of school or reported problems with school but only 29 percent were reported as receiving education services. Only 6 percent were reported as receiving employment or job training services. The available data do not permit us to determine why services rendered did not match youths' problems, but resource constraints and the program focus on short-term care are undoubtedly important reasons (see app. IV).

⁴Note that we report only on those youth receiving overnight or on-going nonresidential services, not those seeking all types of assistance. Shelters may offer services, such as telephone hotline or drop-in services that may result in preventing a runaway incident. Many of these youth would be classified as "contemplating running away" or "in crisis but not on the run" and would not meet the HHS definition of runaway or homeless. Thus, many of the over 102,000 records would represent youth who received some services at shelters even though they could not be classified as runaway or homeless.

Many Youths Will Not Receive Needed Services After Leaving Shelters

Shelters are required to prepare a treatment plan for each youth served. The plan is made so that services will continue after a youth leaves the shelter. But such plans were not prepared for almost one-half of the homeless and more than one-third of runaway youth served by the shelters. Education, job training, and assistance with drug and alcohol abuse stand out as major problems for which long-term services need to be planned (see app. IV).

Some Homeless Youth Go on to Unstable Living Arrangements After Leaving Shelters

After receiving care, about one-third of homeless youth return to their parents and another third move into institutional arrangements, such as foster care homes. However, the remaining third move into situations that appear to offer little stability, such as living with a friend, in a runaway/crisis house, on the street, or in situations unknown to shelter personnel (see app. IV). These types of living arrangements may increase this group's health risks, limit their access to needed services, and foster conditions that may lead to criminal activity and entrance into the juvenile justice system.

Independent Living Programs—A Solution for Some but Not All Homeless Youth

In recent years, independent living programs—structured programs designed to develop skills needed by youth to live on their own—have been viewed as model programs for homeless youth. While independent living programs may be appropriate for some homeless youth, for others—those under 16 years old and those with drug and alcohol abuse or other severe problems—this type of program may not be feasible. The data we analyzed did not indicate specifically how many youth entered independent living programs, but we can conclude from the data that the proportion is small (see apps. II and IV).

Concluding Observations

Our analysis of data collected by shelters confirms that there is a sizable population of homeless youth who receive services at federally funded shelters for runaway and homeless youth.

Programs to assist the homeless population generally ignore the population of homeless youth. Foster care programs may not reach many of these youth. Although programs providing assistance to the population of homeless youth may receive support under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, the shelter system supported by the act focuses primarily on runaways. Because the problems of homeless youth can be similar to those of runaways, this system provides needed and valuable services. However, the data we reviewed suggest the existence of gaps

between the extent of homeless youths' problems and the services that shelters are able to provide.

The shelters can be a temporary stop on a continuing journey for many troubled homeless youth. A substantial proportion plan to move from the shelters to living arrangements that offer little stability, and many youth may not be receiving needed services, such as substance abuse treatment, after they leave the shelters. Homeless youth in particular may need longer-term services, such as education and training in job and living skills. In this regard, age may be an important distinction in predicting the need for certain types of aftercare services. Older youth are more difficult to place in foster care, are not as likely to be reunited with their families, and are more likely to plan to live in unstable living situations after leaving the shelter. For some of these older youth, independent living programs may be important in helping them make the transition to stable and productive adult lives.

Advocates and practitioners view independent living programs as model programs for older homeless youth. In fiscal year 1985, HHS provided about \$780,000 in federal funds to operate three independent living programs for a 3-year period. A 1988 amendment to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act authorized grants to establish and operate transitional or independent living programs for homeless and runaway youth. However, no funding has been provided.

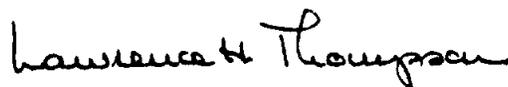
While independent living programs seem to be an important response to the problems of homeless youth, our analysis suggests that such programs currently reach very few youth. Youth under 16 years old are thought to be too young for these programs and many of the youth with more serious personal or behavioral problems may not be successful in these programs.

Careful attention must be paid as to how to best serve the youth who may not be suitable for independent living programs. These youth may be better served by existing public programs and community-based agencies. Better data are needed, particularly from service providers, on how the public and private-sector can respond to the problems of homeless youth.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 15 days after its issue date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the

Secretary of Health and Human Services and to cognizant congressional committees. Copies will also be made available to others on request. This report was prepared under the direction of Joseph F. Delfico, Director, Income Security Issues (Retirement and Compensation) who may be reached on (202) 275-6193 if you or your staff have any questions. Other major contributors are listed in appendix VI.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lawrence H. Thompson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L".

Lawrence H. Thompson
Assistant Comptroller General

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Abbreviations

ACYF	Administration for Children, Youth and Families
GED	general equivalency diploma
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
VD	venereal disease
YIF	Youth Information Form

Basic Characteristics of Homeless and Runaway Youth

Homelessness has been a topic of increasing concern during recent years. While there are no definitive counts of the number of homeless people nationwide, the prevalent views are that their number is increasing, that they are found in all types and sizes of communities, and that they are not homogeneous. The homeless population includes men and women, all ethnic groups, young and old, and families as well as individuals. People become homeless for a variety of reasons.

In general, homeless youth receiving services at federal shelters are 21 percent of the youth served at these shelters. They are usually white males at least 15 years old. They are present throughout the country in both rural and urban states. Most come from broken families. Although similar in many respects to runaway youth, comparisons reveal that homeless youth tend to be older, less likely to be female, less likely to be attending school than runaways, and more likely than runaways to have been away from their legal residence for a longer period of time (more than 5 days).

In recent reports, GAO has discussed several subgroups of the homeless and programs to assist them.¹ Complicating our efforts to identify the characteristics and needs of homeless youth are the different definitions of homelessness currently in use.

Definitions of Homeless Youth Vary

Among the homeless population, homeless youth are the most understudied group. When studies of homeless youth are carried out, varying terms and definitions are used to refer to them. For example, terms such as homeless, runaways, throwaways, pushouts, and unaccompanied youth are all used in discussions and research. Often, the terms homeless and runaway are used interchangeably, but in our study we use the definitions developed by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). HHS defines homelessness as

- a situation in which a youth has no place of shelter and is in need of services and a shelter where he or she can receive supervision and care.²

¹See the listing of GAO reports on homelessness at the end of the report.

²There are often ambiguities in terms often used to describe the homeless youth population. For example, nearly two-thirds of the homeless youth in our population were classified as throwaways or pushouts by shelter staff. HHS uses the terms throwaway or pushout to mean a situation in which the youth leaves home at the encouragement or direction of the parent. In order to determine how shelter staff were interpreting the definition, we contacted staff at a number of locations. Some shelter operators define homeless youth using terms that could fit into HHS's definition of a throwaway or pushout. This implies that a youth first classified as homeless would, almost automatically, be classified as a throwaway or pushout on the survey form. Because of this inconsistency, we could not assess the implications of the data relating to throwaways and pushouts.

In comparison, the runaway youth situation is defined as one wherein

- a youth is away from home without the permission of his or her parent(s) or legal guardian. A situation in which a youth is absent from his or her home or place of legal residence at least overnight without permission.

Estimates of the Homeless Youth Population Vary Widely

No one knows the number of youth who are homeless, and little systematic work has been done to count them. Just as with homeless adults, their lack of connection with a fixed dwelling place and their transient lifestyle make enumeration difficult. Estimates vary widely: One nationwide estimate cites a figure of between 1 and 1.3 million homeless and runaway youth in the course of a year.³ ⁴ In 1988, the U.S. Conference of Mayors' survey reported that 5 percent of all homeless persons studied were homeless youth.⁵

Our analysis of HHS data shows that from October 1985 to June 1988, a total of 44,274 homeless and runaway youth were served at federally funded shelters for youth. About 21 percent—9,179 of these youth—were classified by shelter staff as homeless youth.

The Homeless Youth Population Is Diverse

The homeless youth population includes males and females; at least 90 percent of whom are between the ages of 12 and 17. Homeless youth come from all geographic locations and economic and family circumstances. Shelter staff report these youth have a wide range of personal and family-related problems.

³The National Network of Runaway and Youth Services, 1985. The network is a national, nonprofit membership organization comprised of more than 500 regional, state, and local youth service agencies providing services to runaway, homeless, and other troubled youth. In order to promote improvements in the service systems and public policies that affect these youth, the National Network periodically collects information on the shelters; the services they provide; and the children, youth, and families they serve.

⁴This estimate does not differentiate between homeless and runaway youth.

⁵A recent GAO report, Homeless Mentally Ill: Problems and Options in Estimating Numbers and Trends (GAO/PEMD-88-24, Aug. 3, 1988), notes that estimates of the entire homeless population range from 250,000 to 3 million. Applying the 5 percent estimate by the U.S. Conference of Mayors noted above to this range suggests a total homeless youth population of between 12,500 and 150,000 per year. Another recent GAO report, Children and Youths: About 68,000 Homeless and 186,000 in Shared Housing At Any Given Time (GAO/PEMD-89-14, June 15, 1989), estimates that there are about 68,000 homeless youth in families.

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Most Homeless Youth Are Male, While Most Runaways Are Female

Fifty-five percent of homeless youth are male, while 35 percent of runaways are male. According to one study, girls run away in response to restrictive environments, whereas boys more often deal with detached and rejecting families, which are more apt to create the throwaway youth.⁶ A recent study conducted in New York State reports similar results with regard to the gender difference between homeless and runaway populations.⁷ Earlier studies of homeless youth in shelters report either a more equal distribution of males and females or a greater proportion of female clients.⁸

Homeless Youth Tend to Be Older Than Runaways

Homeless youth also tend to be somewhat older than runaways. In fact, 60 percent of the homeless, as compared with about 40 percent of runaways are 16 years old and older (see fig. I.1). At least 90 percent of the youth in both groups are between 12 and 17 years old.

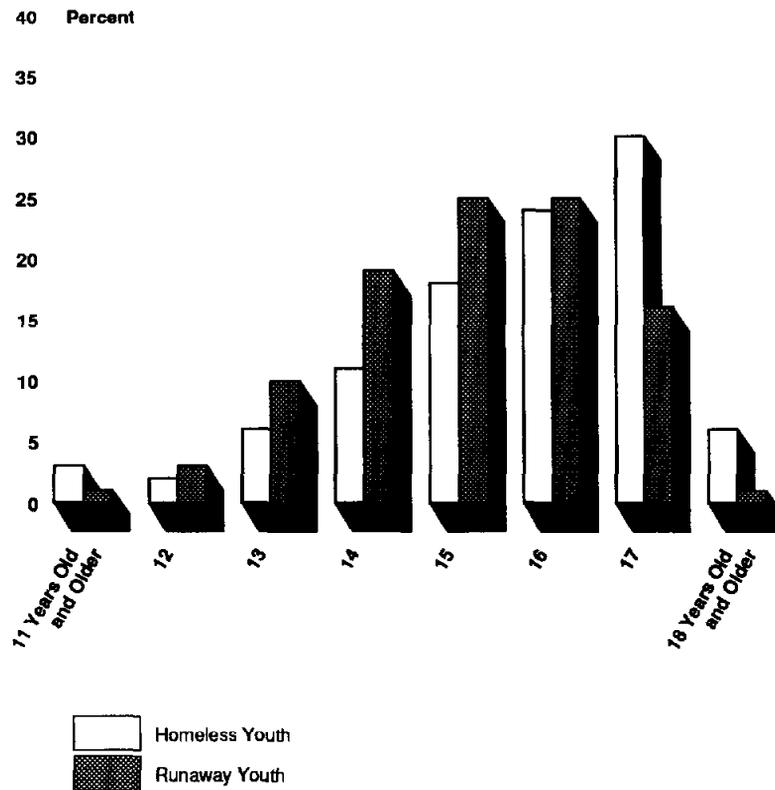
⁶Young, R.L., W. Godfrey, B. Mathews, and G.R. Adams, "Runaways: A Review of Negative Consequences." *Family Relations*, 32:275-281, 1983.

⁷Powers J.L., B. Jaklitsch, and J. Eckenrode, "Identifying Maltreatment Among Runaway and Homeless Youth," presented at the Sixth National Conference on Research, Demonstration and Evaluation in Public Human Services, Washington, D.C., June 1988. The study looked at 223 youth seeking services at nine runaway and homeless youth programs in New York State during 1986-87 who were identified as being maltreated. Sixty-six percent of the youth included in the study were actually classified as runaway or homeless youth. The above findings refer only to this 66 percent.

⁸Robertson, Majorie J., "Homeless Youth: An Overview of Recent Literature," presented at the National Conference on Homeless Children and Youth, Apr. 25-28, 1989, p. 6. This is in contrast to "street" samples, which tend to include more males.

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Figure I.1: Age Distribution of Homeless and Runaway Youth



Most Homeless Youth Are White, but Blacks Are Disproportionately Represented

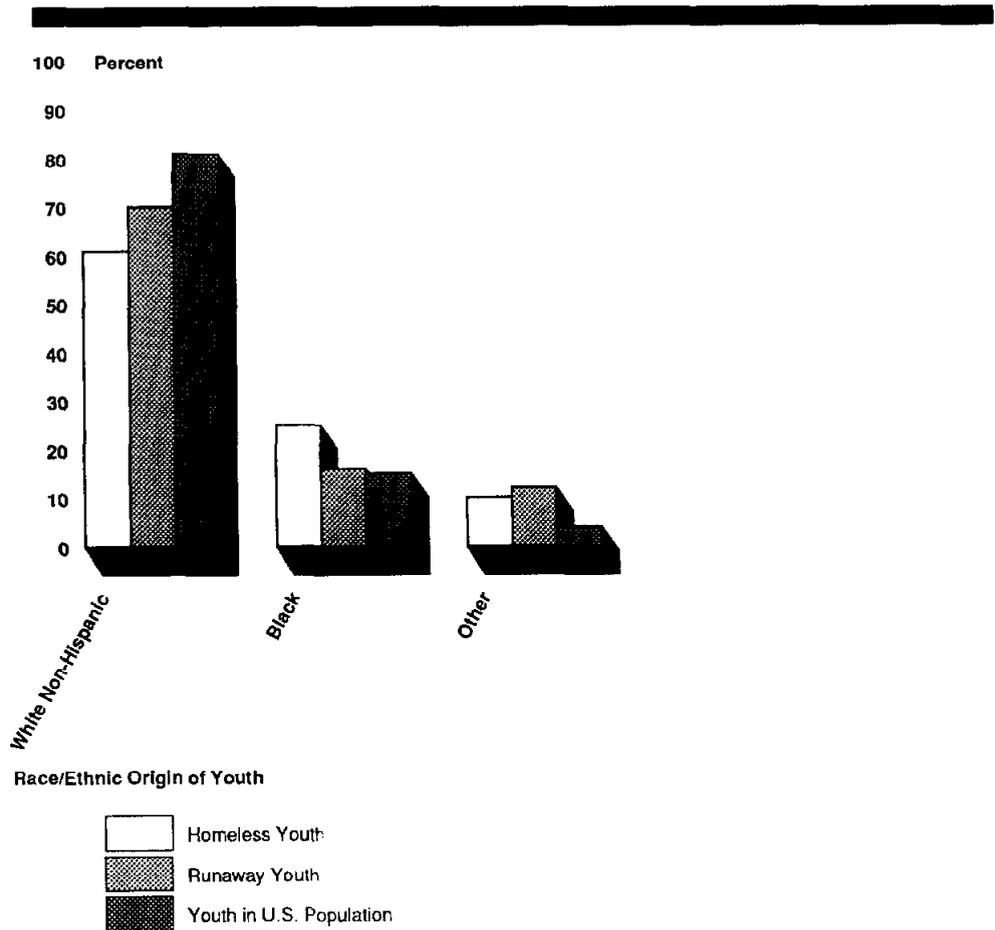
The majority of homeless youth are white. However, as compared with the composition of the national youth population, black youth represent a disproportionate share of homeless youth. Twenty-eight percent of homeless youth are black, compared with 17 percent of runaways (see fig. I.2). Nationwide, 15 percent of the youth population 10 to 17 years old is black.⁹ A similar pattern of overrepresentation of black youths was found in a 1988 study conducted by the Southeastern Network of Youth and Family Services.¹⁰

⁹"Marital Status and Living Arrangements, March 1988," Current Population Reports, table 4. These data exclude youth who are maintaining their own households and living in subfamilies and youth living in institutions.

¹⁰"Issues in Youth Services: Homeless Youth," The Southeastern Network of Youth and Family Services, Aug. 1988, p. 8. This study concentrated on homeless youth who came to runaway and homeless youth centers that were members of the Southeastern Network.

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Figure 1.2: Race/Ethnic Origin of Homeless and Runaway Youth Compared With All U.S. Youth



Note: Other includes Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Indian/Alaskan

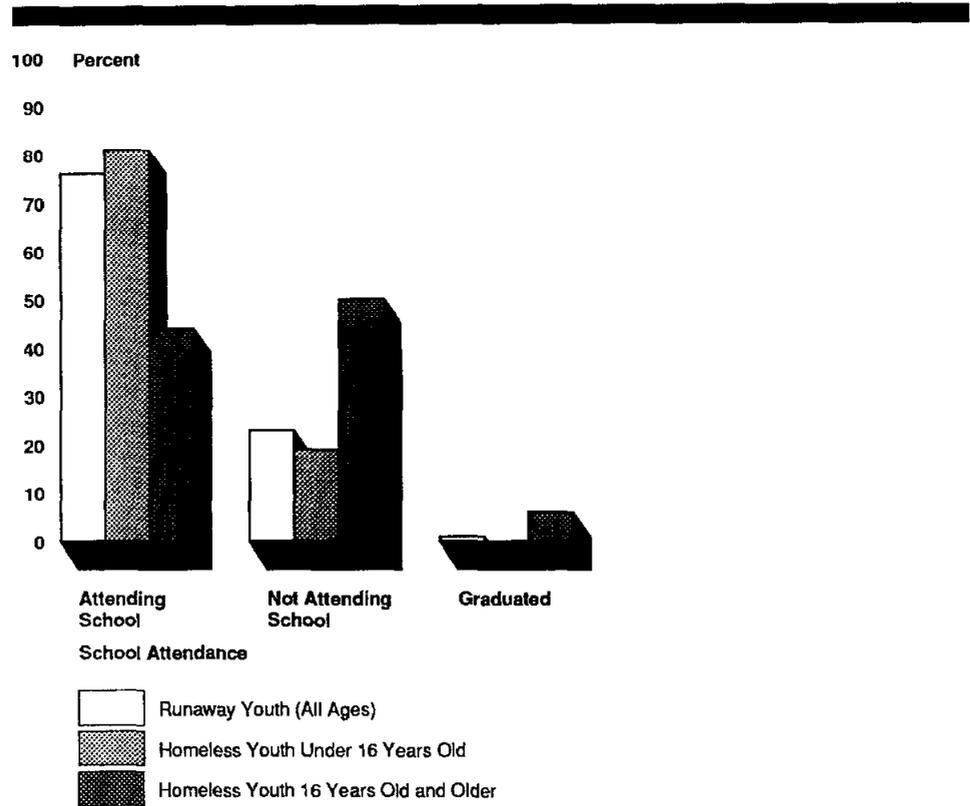
Many Older Homeless Youth Do Not Attend School

Of the homeless youth 16 years old or older, 50 percent had either dropped out of school or been expelled or suspended. When all homeless youth are considered, the percentage not attending school decreases—37 percent are not attending school, while 23 percent of runaway youth are not attending school (see fig. 1.3). In comparison, nationwide estimates on drop-out rates range from 14 to 29 percent.¹¹

¹¹ A 1980 survey by the Department of Education found that 14 percent of high school sophomores drop out before the end of their senior year. Similarly, the Bureau of the Census found that 14 percent of youth 18 to 19 years old had neither completed high school nor were enrolled in it. Finally, the Department of Education's graduation rate indicates that 29 percent of youth entering the ninth grade do not graduate 4 years later. See Robert F. Lyke, "High School Dropouts" Congressional Research Service, Oct. 28, 1988.

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**Figure I.3: School Attendance of
Homeless and Runaway Youth**



Note: Youth not attending school are suspended, have been expelled, or have dropped out.

The longer homeless youth had been away from home, the less likely they were to attend school. Homeless youth who lived on the street or were living independently were the least likely to be attending school when they arrived at the shelter.

**Many Homeless Youth
Come From Broken
Families**

Nationwide, 71 percent of youth 10 to 17 years old were living with both parents in March 1988.¹² In comparison, our analysis showed that only 56 percent of homeless youth and 66 percent of runaways lived with two parents before coming to a shelter.

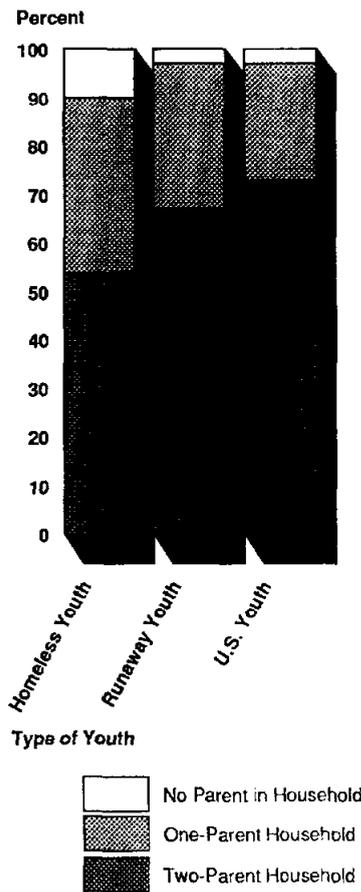
Thirty-six percent of homeless youth come from households with only one parent figure (see glossary). Nearly 10 percent lived in households

¹²“Marital Status and Living Arrangements, March 1988,” Current Population Reports, table 4. These data exclude youth who are maintaining their own households and living in subfamilies and youth living in institutions.

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in which no parent figure was present before coming to a shelter (see fig. I.4). Older homeless youth (those 16 years old or older) are more likely than those who are younger to have been living in a household with no parent figure.

Figure I.4: Family Structure of Homeless and Runaway Youth Compared With All U.S. Youth



Note: The number of cases of homeless and runaway youth is 44,274.

The total number of U.S. youth under 18 years old is 63,179,000.

Homeless and Runaway Youth Come From Varied Economic Circumstances

Less than 10 percent of homeless or runaway youth came from families that receive some sort of public assistance. Younger homeless youth are more likely than older youth to come from such families. Similarly, the Southeastern Network study found that only 11 percent of the homeless

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youth in its sample came from families in which unemployment was a problem.¹³ A 1988 New York State study found that 21 percent of the youth seeking services from runaway and homeless youth programs came from households that received public assistance.¹⁴ These data support the view that runaway and homeless youth come from families in more varied economic circumstances rather than being predominately from poor families receiving public assistance.

Homeless Youth Lived in a
Variety of Situations
Before Coming to a Shelter

Homeless youth, especially older homeless youth, came from much more varied living situations before their shelter episode than runaways. As table I.1 shows, 67 percent of homeless youth, compared with 85 percent of runaways, lived with a parent, relative, or other adult during the past year. Older homeless youth were the least likely to have spent the past year with a parent, relative, or adult or in a foster care or group home. Among this group of older youth, 18 percent (as compared with 7 percent of younger homeless youth) were living in what could be considered unstable living situations—with friends, on the street, or in a runaway or crisis house.

Most Homeless Youth Did
Not Go Very Far

The majority of homeless youth in our population were at a shelter in the same community or county as their legal residence. Although not many youth left for another state, older youth and males were more likely to do so than were younger youth or females. In addition, only 16 percent of the homeless youth went to a shelter that was more than 50 miles from their residence. Thus, contrary to some media depictions, at least those youth who seek services tend not to go to large metropolitan areas.

¹³Southeastern Network, p. 11

¹⁴Powers, Jakditsch, and Eckenrode, p. 8. Except where noted otherwise, these data refer to all youth in the sample, not just homeless or runaways.

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Table I.1: Living Situations of Homeless and Runaway Youth Before Coming to a Shelter

Figures are percentages		
Living Situation	Homeless ^a	Runaway ^b
Parent or relative ^c	67	85
Foster care/group home	12	8
Friends	6	2
Institutions ^d	4	2
Independent living situation	4	1
On the street	6	2
Runaway or crisis house	1	0

^aThe number of homeless youth is 34,921.

^bThe number of runaway youth is 9,125.

^cIncludes living at home with parent(s) or legal guardian, at relative's home, or with another adult.

^dIncludes correctional or other institution.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Geographic Distribution

Urban states and rural states had nearly identical percentages of homeless youth.¹⁵ This seems to indicate that homeless youth who are seeking shelter are present throughout the country, not just in major urban centers, such as New York City.

Runaway and Homeless Youth Differ in Length of Time Away From Home

Before coming to a shelter, runaway youth were away from home for a shorter time than homeless youth. Runaway youth are more likely than homeless youth to have been away from their legal residence 5 days or fewer.¹⁶ In contrast, homeless youth are twice as likely as runaways to have been away from home 11 days or more before coming to a shelter.

The youth's living situation before coming to the shelter is associated with the number of days away from home (see fig. I.5). More than one-

¹⁵The 10 urban states are those with the highest percentage of their population living in urban areas, according to the 1980 census. They are California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Hawaii, Nevada, New York, Utah, Florida, Massachusetts, and Arizona. The 10 rural states are those with the lowest percentage of their population living in urban areas. They are Vermont, West Virginia, South Dakota, Mississippi, Maine, North Carolina, North Dakota, Kentucky, Arkansas, and New Hampshire.

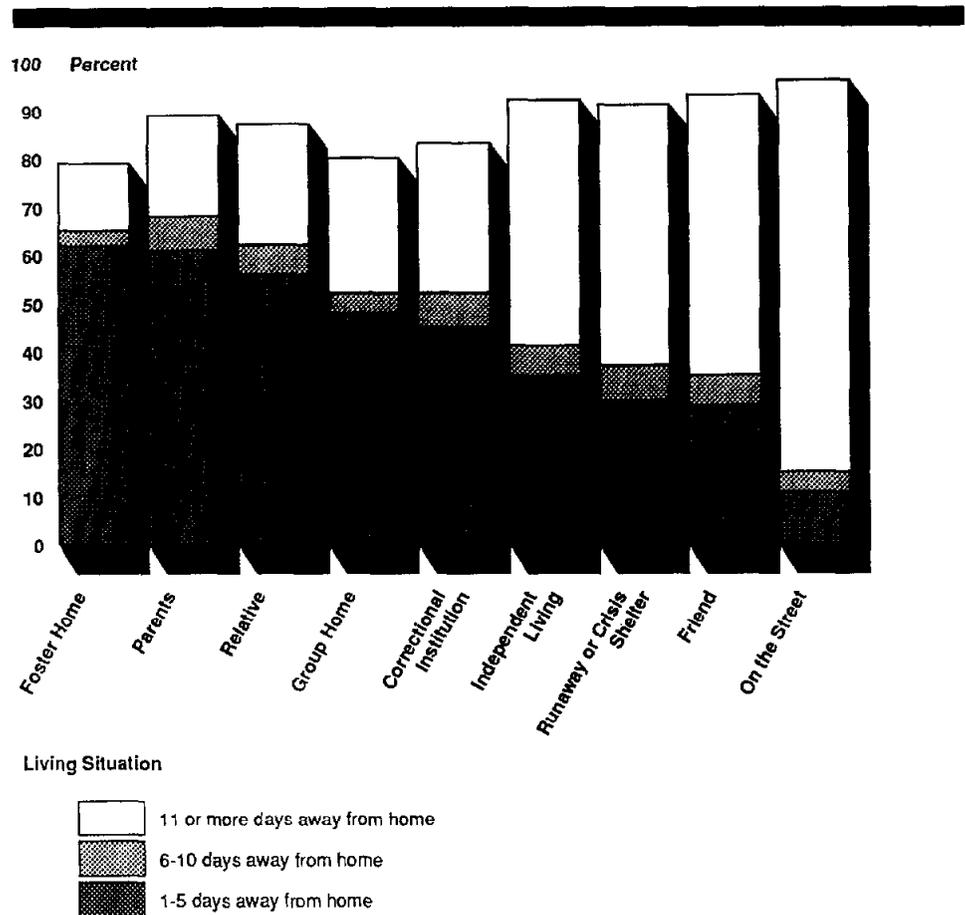
¹⁶We excluded youth who were classified as "not away from legal residence" from this analysis because we found that some youth were considered homeless but not away from their legal residence. Conversations with shelter staff revealed that youth can fall into this category for the following reasons: youth may have been living on the street for a long time, their families may be homeless, or they may be temporary wards of the state and between residences. In all of these cases, youth may be defined as having no legal residence that they can leave.

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half of the homeless youth living with friends, on the street, or in a runaway crisis shelter had been away for more than 11 days. In contrast, about 70 percent of homeless youth living with parents, relatives, or other adults and those living in foster care/group homes were away for less than 6 days.

More than one-half of homeless youth (58 percent) had never been to a shelter before.

Figure I.5: Living Situation for Homeless Youth in the Year Before Coming to a Shelter and Time Away From Home



Note: Unaccompanied homeless youth who were classified as "not away from legal residence" because they had no legal residence which they could leave were excluded from this analysis. Therefore, of the 9,135 homeless youth we studied, 1,100 were excluded.

Problems of Homeless Youth

The Department of Health and Human Services asked shelter staff to describe the problems experienced by runaway and homeless youth. Specifically, they were asked to identify for each youth the primary problem; that is, the one overriding problem with which the youth is having the greatest difficulty, and to identify all the youth's contributing problems as they pertain to the family situation and to each youth.¹

Approximately three-fourths of homeless youth seeking services were characterized by shelter staff as having moderately or extremely severe problems relating to their family and home; outside entities, such as schools and juvenile justice and law enforcement systems; and their physical or mental health.

The degree of similarity in the specific personal and family problems of homeless and runaway youth is striking. These problems can be serious and complex, and they are experienced in both the family setting and by the youth themselves. Included among these problems are physical and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse by both parents and the youth, violence in the family setting, as well as depression and school problems. A majority of both homeless and runaway youth, however, are not reported to experience these serious problems.

Our analysis shows homeless and runaway youth are affected by many of the same problems. Unless otherwise stated, the findings presented below refer to both groups. Results from at least two other studies support our findings regarding these problems.²

¹The response categories given to shelter staff are somewhat overlapping and some problems could be the result of another problem. For example, family crisis (e.g., violence, divorce, remarriage) and relationships with parent figure(s) or other adults in the home. However, interviews with shelter staff showed that they thought that the differences in categories were clear.

²"Issues in Youth Services: Homeless Youth," Southeastern Network of Youth and Family Services, Aug. 1988. This study concentrated on homeless youth who came to runaway and homeless youth centers that were members of the Southeastern Network.

Powers, Jaklitsch, and Eckenrode, "Identifying Maltreatment Among Runaway and Homeless Youth," presented at the Sixth National Conference on Research, Demonstration and Evaluation in Public Human Services, Washington, D.C., June 1988.

The Primary Problem for Many Homeless Youth Is Their Relationship With Parent(s) or Other Adults in the Home

For homeless youth, shelter personnel most frequently cited the relationship with a parent figure or other adult in the home as the primary problem (see table II.1). For runaway youth, the relationship with a parent figure or other adult in the home was even more frequently cited as the primary problem (see table II.1).

Table II.1: Primary Problems of Homeless and Runaway Youth

Figures are percentages

Primary problem ^e	Homeless			Runaway ^d
	All homeless ^a	Less than 16 years old ^b	16 years old or older ^c	
Parent/other adult ^f	61	62	61	75
Other personal problem	20	15	23	12
Family crisis	12	16	10	6
Juvenile justice ^g	4	4	5	4
Children/youth ^h	2	2	2	2
School	1	1	1	2

^aThe number of homeless youth is 9,165.

^bThe number of homeless youth less than 16 years old is 3,632.

^cThe number of homeless youth 16 years old or older is 5,493.

^dThe number of runaway youth is 34,055.

^eThe overriding problem with which the youth is having the greatest difficulty according to shelter staff.

^fIncludes relationships with a parent figure or other adult in the home.

^gIncludes juvenile justice system and law enforcement problems.

^hIncludes relationships with other children or youth in the home.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Our findings are consistent with data from the Southeastern Network study, which show that a relationship with a parent figure or other adult was the primary problem for 57 percent of homeless youth.³

Data presented later in this appendix show that many homeless youth report living with families characterized by domestic violence, neglect, physical or sexual abuse or both, as well as drug or alcohol abuse or both. In light of these findings it is not surprising that the relationship with a parent figure stands out as a problem for many homeless youth.

About the same percentage of older and younger homeless youth have primary problems with parents, other youth, school, and juvenile justice

³Southeastern Network, p. 8

authorities (see table II.1). However, family crisis was slightly more often cited as the primary problem for younger homeless youth; 16 percent versus 10 percent for older homeless youth. In comparison, other personal problems were more often cited as the primary problem for older homeless youth; 23 percent versus 15 percent for younger homeless youth.

Many Homeless Youth Experience Serious Domestic Problems

To find out about a youth's specific problems as they relate to the family situation, shelter personnel were asked to designate contributing family problems. When each problem is looked at separately, our data reveal that many homeless youth come from very troubled family situations. For example, shelter staff reported 26 percent of the homeless youth were physically or sexually abused, 36 percent experienced parental neglect, and 11 percent were subjected to domestic violence. The staff reported that about 18 percent of homeless youth had parents who abused drugs or alcohol (see table II.2).

Table II.2: Specific Family Problems of Homeless and Runaway Youth^a

Figures are percentages		
Type of problem^b	Homeless^c	Runaway^d
Emotional conflict	40	41
Parental neglect	36	18
Other problems ^e	27	24
Physical or sexual abuse ^f	26	29
Drug or alcohol abuse ^g	18	16
Domestic violence	11	8
Parents too strict ^h	20	29
No parental figure	8	3
None of the above	12	14

^aShelter staff could respond in more than one category for each youth.

^bFor definitions of problems cited above see table V.1.

^cThe number of problems reported by homeless youth is 8,887.

^dThe number of problems reported by runaway youth is 42,545.

^eincludes youth wanting to live in household of other parent, parental unemployment, family mental health problems, or homosexual parent.

^fIncludes abuse by parent figure, other family member, or nonfamily member.

^gDrug/alcohol abuse by parent figure.

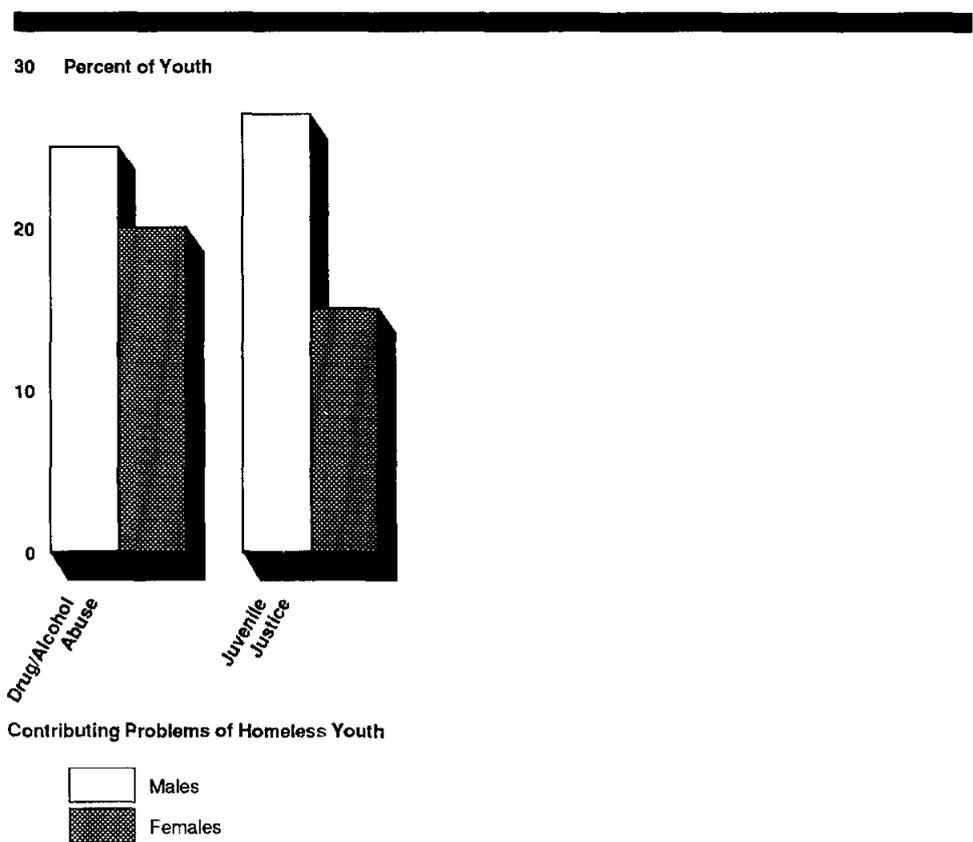
^hIncludes parents who were too strict or protective.

**Appendix II
Problems of Homeless Youth**

The four types of problems discussed above do not occur in isolation. Our analysis shows that for 40 percent of the youth experiencing these problems a combination of problems existed in the family. For 25 percent of the families of these youth, such a combination included three of the four problems cited.

Findings with respect to age differences show that younger homeless youth were more likely to report abuse and neglect in the home setting than older homeless youth. This probably occurs because they were more likely to live at home before coming to a shelter (see fig. II.1).

Figure II.1: Drug/Alcohol Abuse and Involvement With Criminal Justice System for Male and Female Homeless Youth



Note: Juvenile justice includes prostitution or in trouble with justice system.

Number of cases is 3,730.

Sexual abuse by parent figures was reported by 10 percent of homeless females as compared with 2 percent of homeless males. A New York

State study also found that sexual abuse was more likely to be reported by females.⁴

Sexual and physical abuse contributed significantly to the homelessness of adolescents in a recent Hollywood, California, study.⁵ For example, approximately 37 percent of the youth had left home at least once because of physical abuse, while about 10 percent of the youth had left at least once because of sexual abuse. In addition, nearly one-fifth of the sample had been removed from their homes by authorities because of neglect or abuse.

With the HHS data we could not examine how long such problems as abuse and neglect had been occurring in families. However, a New York State study showed that problems, such as parental neglect and abuse, occurred over a substantial period of time, usually a number of years.⁶

A study in New York State also found that in over 80 percent of cases of neglect and two-thirds of physical abuse cases, the abuse was occurring at the time the youth sought services from the program.⁷

Runaway youth experienced many of the same family problems. However, parental neglect was less likely to be a problem for runaways (18 percent compared with 36 percent for homeless youth). Also, having parents who were too strict or protective was more frequently cited for runaways than for homeless youth (29 percent compared with 20 percent).

Depression, Substance Abuse, and Problems With Authorities Are Part of Many Homeless Youths' Personal Lives

In addition to family problems, our study showed both homeless and runaway youth faced a variety of other problems involving school, mental health, and substance abuse problems (see table II.3).

⁴Powers, J.L., B. Jaklitsch, and J. Eckenrode, p. 9.

⁵Robertson, M.J., "Homeless Youth in Hollywood: Patterns of Alcohol Abuse," 1989 (draft), p. Xi.

⁶Powers, Jaklitsch, Eckenrode, p. 11.

⁷Powers, Jaklitsch, Eckenrode, p. 11.

**Appendix II
Problems of Homeless Youth**

Table II.3: Specific Personal Problems of Homeless and Runaway Youth^a

Figures are percentages		
Type of problem^b	Homeless^c	Runaway^d
Depression ^e	61	63
School ^f	43	50
Drug/alcohol abuse	22	20
Juvenile justice ^g	21	17
Possibly suicidal	11	12
Custody change	9	6
Pregnancy/venereal disease ^h	6	6
Other health problems ⁱ	6	3
Sexuality ^j	3	2
None of the above	16	14

^aShelter staff could respond in more than one category for each youth.

^bFor definitions of problems cited above see table V.2.

^cThe number of problems reported by homeless youth is 32,447.

^dThe number of problems reported by runaway youth is 8,514.

^eIncludes depression and poor self image.

^fIncludes bad grades, school attendance/truancy, trouble relating to teachers, and learning disability.

^gIncludes being in trouble with justice system and prostitution.

^hIncludes pregnant or suspected pregnancy or venereal disease.

ⁱIncludes other health problems/ handicap.

^jIncludes homosexual/sexual identity issue.

Depression was the problem most often reported for both homeless and runaway youth. In addition, about 10 percent of both homeless and runaway youth were cited as being possibly suicidal.

For homeless youth, school problems, such as bad grades or truancy, were common (43 percent). Nearly one-half of the younger homeless youth had school problems. The proportion of older homeless youth having school problems was lower, reflecting the fact that one-half of the older youth did not attend school. In comparison, one-half of the runaway youth had school problems. Again, this partially reflects their increased likelihood of being in school.

About the same percentage of homeless and runaway youth had been involved with the juvenile justice system. Further analysis with respect to homeless youth showed this was true for 27 percent of the males and 15 percent of the females (see fig. II.2). As in our study, the New York

State data showed that males were more likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system than females.⁸

Shelter workers reported 22 percent of homeless youth have drug or alcohol abuse problems. About the same percentage of runaway youth were reported as abusing drugs or alcohol.

A closer look at drug and alcohol abuse shows that such abuse is slightly more likely to be reported for homeless males than females. Likewise, drug and alcohol abuse problems are more prevalent among older homeless youth (27 percent) than younger homeless youth (16 percent). In comparison, the New York State study found that drug and alcohol abuse affected 17 percent of the youth; again, males were more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol.⁹ The Hollywood study found that about 26 percent of the youth abused drugs and alcohol.¹⁰

Pregnancy, suspicion of pregnancy, or venereal disease (VD) were cited as problems for 14 percent of homeless females. As an indicator of sexual activity, such problems would be expected to be reported more frequently for older homeless females. Our data confirmed this expectation; this problem was reported for 17 percent of homeless females 16 years old and older as compared with 9 percent of younger homeless females.

The prevalence of sexual and drug abuse, violence, pregnancy, VD, and depression among both the homeless and runaway youth can put them at high risk for serious physical and mental health problems. As a result of their lifestyles and unstable living situations before coming to shelters, such health risks are undoubtedly increased for homeless youth 16 years old and older.

⁸Powers, Jaklitsch, Eckenrode, p. 13.

⁹Powers, Jaklitsch and Eckenrode, p. 12.

¹⁰Robertson, "Homeless Youth in Hollywood: Patterns of Alcohol Abuse" (draft), p. Xii.

Purpose of Runaway and Homeless Youth Program Grants, Referral Sources, and Services Provided at Shelters

Services and Programs Available to Homeless Youth Are Limited

Programs designed to help the homeless population may exclude homeless youth. For example, homeless youth are usually excluded from adult shelters, and, if they are members of a homeless family, they are frequently denied access to family shelter facilities.¹ Though homeless youth may be eligible for foster care, they are generally in an age range that makes them extremely hard to place. If they also have social or psychological difficulties, their placement in foster care is likely to be even more problematic.

In 1977, the Runaway Youth Act, title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-415), was amended to cover services to “otherwise homeless youth” in addition to runaway youth. The act is administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office of Human Development Services, which is under HHS. Under the act, grants are made to states, localities, and community-based agencies located outside the law enforcement and juvenile justice system to develop programs to address the needs of runaway and homeless youth.

The act’s original purpose was to serve runaway youth. Its programs are designed to provide crisis intervention and short-term temporary shelter (limited to a maximum of 15 days) (see glossary). In addition to shelter, programs generally offer individual and family counseling, meals, transportation, some health care, and referral to other services. Many youth seek shelter assistance on their own. Others are referred by personnel at other social service agencies or by law enforcement officers and education counselors. Participation in these programs is voluntary, although youth are required to adhere to shelter rules during their stay.

The purpose of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program grant is to establish or strengthen existing or proposed community-based runaway youth projects to provide temporary shelter and care to runaway or otherwise homeless youth who are in need of temporary shelter, counseling, and aftercare services.

¹Southeastern Network of Youth and Family Services, Aug. 1988. According to the Southeastern Network study, older male youth are often excluded from family shelters because they are perceived as disruptive and unruly by shelter staff. Most adult shelters will not house youth under 18 years old.

**Appendix III
Purpose of Runaway and Homeless Youth
Program Grants, Referral Sources, and
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Runaway and homeless youth shelters are supposed to

- alleviate the problems of runaway youth,
- reunite children with their families and resolve intrafamily problems through counseling and other services,
- strengthen family relationships and encourage stable living conditions for children, and
- help youth decide upon a future course of action.

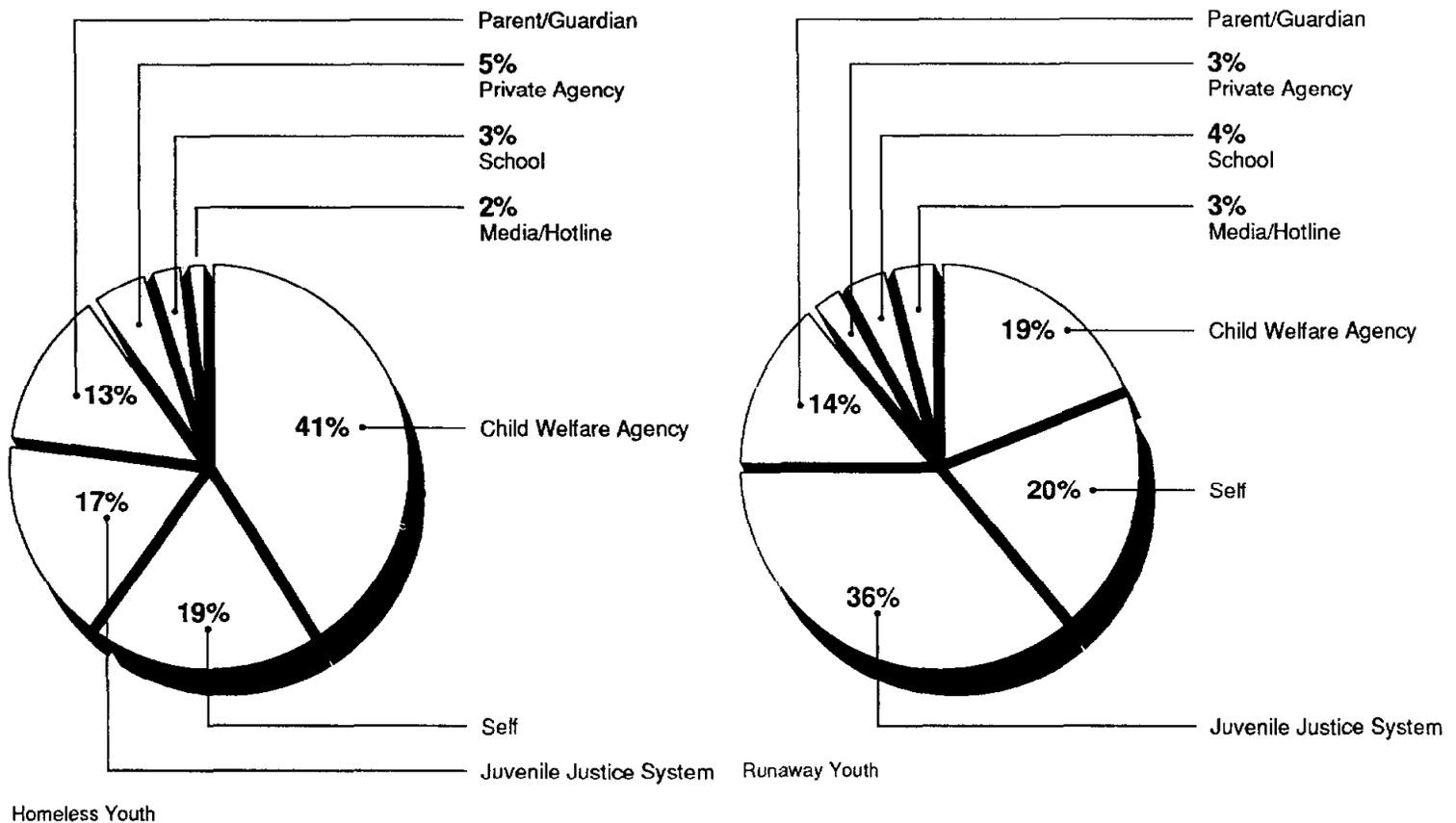
**Many Sources Refer
Homeless Youth to
Shelters**

Homeless youth seeking shelter services do not simply come in off the street. Our analysis reveals that for homeless youth the most frequent referral sources are child welfare and protective services agencies. This is congruent with the Southeastern Network study.² Homeless youth arrive at shelters through a number of referral sources, including parents and guardians, juvenile justice and law enforcement agencies, and other types of public and private agencies. Some youth also go to a shelter on their own (see fig. III.1).

²Southeastern Network, p. 8

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Purpose of Runaway and Homeless Youth
Program Grants, Referral Sources, and
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Figure III.1: Referral Sources for Homeless and Runaway Youth



Note: Child welfare agencies include child protective services, runaway shelters, and other public agencies.

Juvenile justice system includes law enforcement agencies.

Parent/guardian includes legal guardians as well as other adults or relatives.

Media/hotline includes National Switchboard, other regional or local hotlines, and the media.

Like homeless youth, runaway youth are also referred to shelters by a variety of sources. However, in contrast to homeless youth, runaways most often come to shelters through referral by juvenile justice authorities (36 percent). Criminal activities, however, are not necessarily the reason that runaways are referred by juvenile justice authorities. Our analysis of youth problems shows that only 4 percent of runaway youth

**Appendix III
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had problems with the juvenile justice system and law enforcement officials that were viewed as a primary problem. Discussions with shelter officials suggest that juvenile justice referral is another way of saying that police pick up youth suspected of being runaways and bring them directly to shelters. Shelter officials told us that police are often aware of and work with the shelter in their community.

Our analysis also shows differences in the sources referring older and younger homeless youth. For example, about one-half of younger homeless youth are referred by child welfare agencies, while only about one-third of older homeless youth are referred through these agencies. In comparison, one-fourth of older homeless youth decide themselves to go to shelters, while 9 percent of younger homeless youth refer themselves.

Such age differences in referral source reflect the differences in living situations between younger and older homeless youth before referral. For example, 48 percent of the homeless youth that were living in foster care or group homes were less than 16 years old. In contrast, of the homeless youth that were living on the street or with friends, and thus less likely to be in contact with social service agencies, approximately 80 percent were at least 16 years old.

**Youth Receive a Variety of
Services at Shelters**

Shelters may offer a variety of services that include, but are not limited to, individual counseling for youth and families, parent counseling, transportation, assistance in finding alternative living arrangements, employment, family planning, group counseling, job training, educational skills assistance, recreation, medical assistance, psychological or psychiatric services, and drug and alcohol treatment. In addition, shelters may provide aftercare services (see glossary) for the youth and/or his or her parents or legal guardian. Such services occur following the termination of temporary shelter or the resolution of the immediate crisis for a youth served on a nonresidential basis and are part of a formal treatment plan developed by the staff.

While in shelter care, almost all homeless youth receive individual or group counseling (see glossary) or both, either directly at a shelter or through referral to other agencies. Many homeless youth are also provided with transportation, recreation, legal, and financial services (see table III.1).

Appendix III
Purpose of Runaway and Homeless Youth
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According to the HHS data, counseling involving parent or family members is provided for 25 percent of homeless youth. However, the likelihood of receiving such counseling is increased for youth planning to live with families with serious problems, such as drug or alcohol abuse by the parent figure, sexual or physical abuse, emotional neglect, and domestic violence (nearly 45 percent of these youth receive this type of counseling).

Table III.1: Services Provided to Homeless and Runaway Youth Either Directly or Through Referral^a

Services provided	Homeless^b	Runaway^c
Individual/group counseling	95	91
Other services ^d	71	55
Education	29	20
Parent/family counseling	25	46
Alternative living	25	16
Medical services ^e	25	18
Drug/alcohol treatment	3	2
Employment/job training	6	2

^aShelter staff could respond in more than one category for each youth.

^bThe number of services provided to homeless youth is 9,037.

^cThe number of services provided to runaway youth is 34,359.

^dIncludes transportation, recreation, and other services.

^eIncludes family planning, medical, and psychological/psychiatric services.

Services Provided but May Not Match Extent of Need

Our analysis showed that one-third of homeless youth received educational services, such as tutoring by shelter personnel or volunteers, formal schooling in settings operated by the shelter or school system, or help with staying enrolled in a community school.³ Some shelters will provide transportation or pay busfare so youths can get to school. For youth not in school, educational services, such as preparation for a general equivalency diploma (GED) may be provided directly or through referral.

Because a significant portion of the homeless youth are out of school and only one-third receive educational services, it could be expected that youth would benefit from employment and job training services.

³In some cases, state and/or local residency requirements may prove to be a barrier to youth receiving educational services. For example, school districts may not permit youth from another district to enroll. Thus, if the shelter is in a different district, the youth must be returned to his or her school district of origin.

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smaller proportion received medical, alternative living, and other services.

While shelters provide youth with a variety of services either directly or through referral, not all youth receive the services they need. For example, drug and alcohol abuse affects many homeless and runaway youth, but very few of these youth receive treatment or referral. The data do not show why the services rendered did not match youths' problems, but resource constraints and the focus on short-term care are possible reasons.

Youths in families have greater access to some services than those who are on their own. With respect to medical services, the increased access stems from the fact that parental permission is usually needed before medical treatment can be given. Homeless youth are generally not eligible for medical programs and they usually lack funds to pay for medical treatment.

Runaways generally have a greater likelihood of being reunited with families than homeless youth, and this could, in some cases, result in greater access to services.

What Happens After Youth Leave Shelters?

Shelters are supposed to plan for living arrangements and other after-care services (see glossary) appropriate for the needs of their clients. However, our analysis showed that shelters had no aftercare plans for almost half of the homeless youth and nearly 40 percent of runaways. About 16 percent of both runaways and homeless youth planned to live in situations that offered little stability, and shelter staff did not know where 14 percent of the homeless and 11 percent of runaways would go after leaving the shelter.

In addition, our analysis suggests that services provided by shelters and services planned for youth after they leave shelters may not be sufficient to address many problems homeless youth report. This seems to be particularly true for educational and job skill needs and drug abuse problems. Also, homeless youth are less likely than runaway youth to live with a parent or relative after leaving the shelter. Because of their differing potential for family reunification, access to services after leaving shelter may be greater for runaway youth than for homeless youth.

Shelters Are Supposed to Plan Aftercare Services for Youth

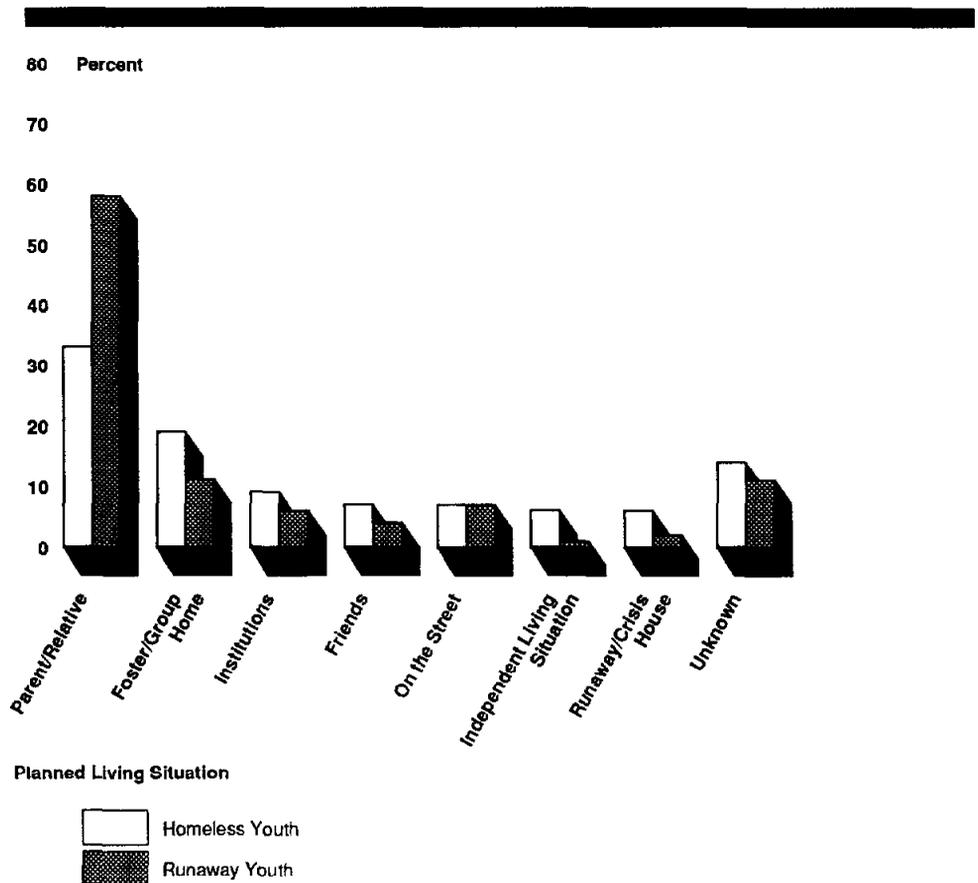
Residence at a federally funded youth shelter is limited by federal regulation to a maximum of 15 days. Shelters are supposed to develop a plan for aftercare services for youth leaving temporary shelter as well as for those youth served on a nonresidential basis who need such assistance. For example, when a youth leaves a shelter another living situation viewed as beneficial to the youth should be planned by the shelter. Shelters also try to help homeless and runaway youth solve their problems after they leave shelter care. For example, shelters may plan for youth to receive medical or educational services after leaving the shelter.

Part of the aftercare planning may include linking the youth with the child welfare system. However, many homeless youth in shelters, especially those younger than 16, seem to be involved in the child welfare system before coming to the shelter. Often these homeless youth are referred by child welfare agencies, stay in shelters while waiting to be placed in foster care or group homes, and pass through shelters when they move from one foster care or group home to another.

Homeless Youth Are Less Likely Than Runaway Youth to Live With a Parent or Relative After Leaving the Shelter

Youth often become homeless because of situations that make it impossible for them to live with their families and, in many cases, to return to them after shelter care. For example, shelter staff told us that many homeless youth cannot go home because of abusive and neglectful family situations. Consistent with our earlier analysis showing the difficult family circumstances experienced by homeless youth, only about one-third of homeless youth planned to live with a parent or another relative when they left the shelter. In comparison, 58 percent of runaway youth planned to live with a parent or another relative upon leaving the shelter (see fig. IV.1).

Figure IV.1: Planned Living Situation of Homeless and Runaway Youth After Leaving Shelter



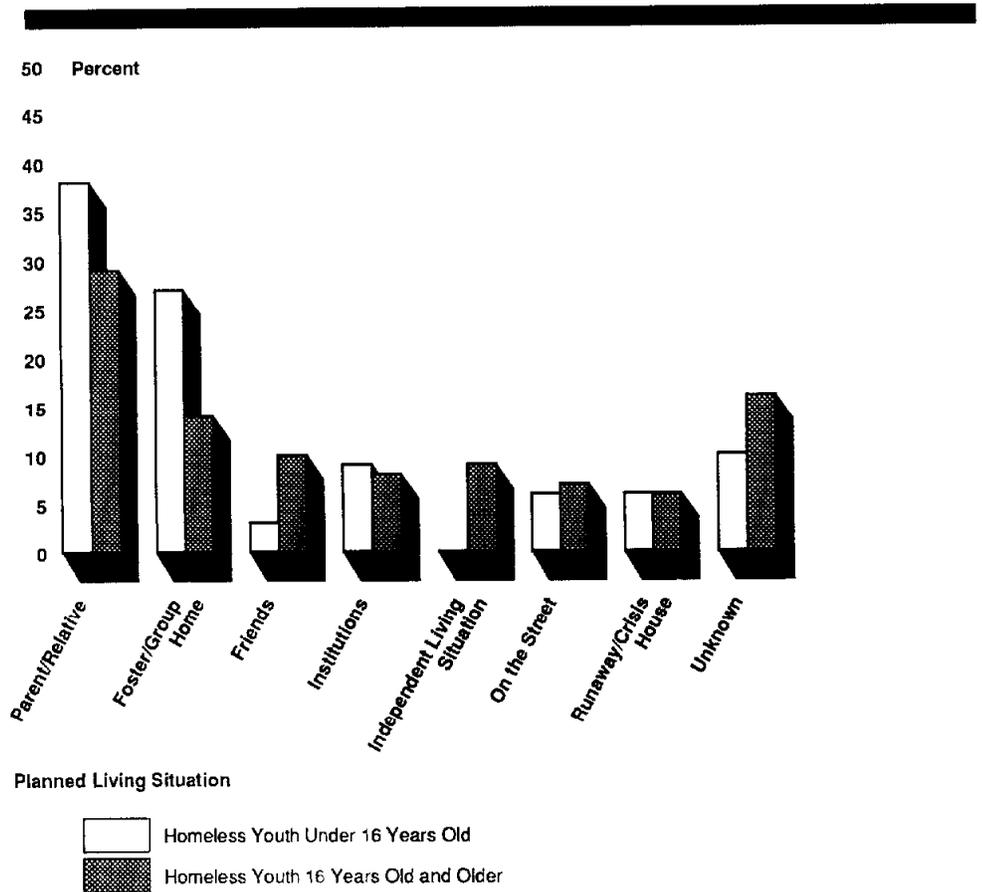
Note: Parent/relative includes home of legal parents, household of other parent-figure, and other relative's home.

Institutions includes correctional institutions, Job Corps, military, boarding school, mental hospital or similar institution.

**Appendix IV
What Happens After Youth Leave Shelters?**

Planned living situations differ for younger and older homeless youth. A larger percentage of younger homeless youth plan to live with a parent or relative upon leaving the center; 39 percent compared with 28 percent of older homeless youth. Plans to live in foster care or group homes are also more likely for younger homeless youth; 26 percent compared with 15 percent of older youth (see fig. IV.2).

Figure IV.2: Planned Living Situation of Homeless Youth, by Age



Note: Parent/relative includes home of legal parents, household of other parent-figure, and other relative's home.

Institutions includes correctional institutions, Job Corps, military, boarding school, mental hospital or similar institution.

Shelters may help youth move to independent living situations. These can range from situations in which the youth has a job and lives on his or her own to structured programs, which may include job training and subsidized housing.

Independent Living Programs: An Alternative to Help Older Teens Learn to Live on Their Own

During recent years, organizations that assist youth have developed programs to help youth who are not part of family units learn the skills needed to live on their own. Such programs are generally termed independent or transitional living programs. Usually the programs provide housing in a group setting and support in finding a job or completing high school (or completing a GED) or both. Additionally, they provide instruction on how to handle personal finances, shop for food, prepare meals, maintain a residence, use public transportation, and eventually secure housing. Youth stay in these programs anywhere from a few months to about a year, until they reach an agreed-upon stage of independence. These programs are directed toward older youth, generally those 16 years old and older.

In fiscal year 1985, HHS provided about \$780,000 in federal funds to operate three independent living programs for a 3-year period. In 1988, an amendment to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act authorized grants to establish and operate transitional or independent living programs for homeless and runaway youth. However, no funding has been provided for implementation of these programs.

Independent living programs are often advocated by youth services professionals as one model for programs for homeless youth. In our study, 6 percent of homeless youth planned to live in independent living situations. Some of these may have been formal independent living programs, while other youth may be living on their own without a specific program to assist them. All of these youth were at least 16 years old. Shelter personnel see 16 as the minimum age at which youth are mature enough to live on their own, although older youth with drug or alcohol problems and pregnant youth are often not eligible for independent living programs.

Many homeless youth planned to live in situations that appear to offer little stability. Approximately 14 percent planned either to live with a friend or on the street, and another 6 percent planned to live in a runaway crisis house or shelter. Some runaway youth also had similar plans. About 11 percent of runaway youth were planning either to live with a friend or on the street. Two percent of runaways planned to live in a runaway crisis house or shelter.

Older homeless youth were more likely to plan to live in less stable types of situations than those who were younger. Nearly one-fourth of homeless youth 16 years old and older planned to live on the street, in a runaway shelter, or with friends. In comparison, about 15 percent of younger homeless youth planned to live in such situations.

About one-third of homeless youth are in unstable living situations; that is, living on the street, with friends, in a runaway shelter, or in an unknown place. Shelter staff do not always know where youth plan to live upon leaving the shelter. This was true for about 14 percent of homeless and 11 percent of runaway youth. Looking more closely at older and younger homeless youth, shelter staff did not know where 16 percent of older homeless youth compared with 11 percent of younger homeless youth planned to go after leaving a shelter.

The Majority of Homeless Youth Do Not Return to the Same Living Situation They Were in Before Coming to a Shelter

The majority of homeless youth (63 percent) do not plan to return to the living situation they were in before coming to a shelter. The homeless youth who did not return to the same living situation had an increased likelihood of planning to live in foster care or group homes or institutions. In addition, the youth in this group had an increased risk of leaving the shelter system without having plans made for their next living situation (22 percent compared with 14 percent of all homeless youth).

Approximately one-third (38 percent) of homeless youth plan to return to the same living situation they were in during the year before their shelter stay. Of these youth, 73 percent had lived with a parent or relative.

Almost One-Half of Homeless Youth Receive No Services After Leaving Shelter

Our analysis shows many homeless youth with serious problems did not have appropriate aftercare services planned for them by shelter personnel. Overall, shelters did not have any aftercare services planned for nearly half (46 percent) of homeless youth.

Shelters plan individual or group counseling aftercare services for approximately one-third of both homeless and runaway youth (see table IV.1). Because runaways are more likely to return to their families than homeless youth, it is understandable that shelters are more than twice as likely to plan parent or family counseling as an aftercare service for runaway youth than for homeless youth (see table IV.1). Similarly, the

**Appendix IV
What Happens After Youth Leave Shelters?**

homeless youth who experience physical/sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence or parental drug/alcohol abuse and plan to live with a parent or relative after leaving the shelter also are more likely to have parent or family counseling planned for them (31 percent compared with 16 percent of all homeless youth).

As we found in our earlier analysis of homeless youths' problems and the services provided youth while they are at shelters, the frequency with which different types of aftercare services are planned does not seem to match the need for such services. For example, while homeless youth are at high risk of leaving school and one-third get educational services while at the shelter, less than 10 percent have educational aftercare services planned. Employment and job training for these youth are almost nonexistent. In addition, although shelters reported that about 20 percent of these youth abuse drugs or alcohol, aftercare treatment for such abuse is planned for only about 4 percent of homeless youth.

Table IV.1: Aftercare Services Planned for Homeless and Runaway Youth^a

Aftercare services	Homeless ^b	Runaway ^c
Individual/group counseling	33	39
Alternative living	20	11
Parent/family counseling	16	36
Other services ^d	15	11
Medical services ^e	10	8
Education	9	5
Drug/alcohol treatment	4	4
Employment/job training	1	4
None planned	46	39

^aShelter staff could respond in more than one category for each youth.

^bThe number of services planned for homeless youth is 8,578.

^cThe number of services planned for runaway youth is 33,168.

^dIncludes transportation, recreation, and other services.

^eIncludes family planning, medical, and psychological/ psychiatric services.

In appendix II we discussed the overriding or primary problems with which youth have the greatest difficulty, according to shelter staff. Upon leaving the shelter, shelter staff indicated that about one-half (54 percent) of the homeless youth had the primary problem resolved. Even though there were differences in the severity of problems experienced,

Appendix IV
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as well as the living situations and sources of referrals for younger and older homeless youth, there was no difference in the percentage of these youth whose primary problem was reported as being resolved. In addition, shelters reported that about one-half of the runaways (57 percent) had their primary problem resolved.

Data and Methodology

The purpose of this report was to develop descriptive information about the population of homeless youth who seek services from shelters receiving funding through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. Specifically, we were interested in demographic information about this population, as well as data concerning personal and family problems that may have led to their homeless status. Because shelter staff and others told us that the number of homeless seeking assistance seems to be increasing, we were interested in measuring changes in the number and types of homeless youth receiving shelter services. Also, since shelter programs were initially designed to aid runaway youth, we wanted to compare the characteristics of runaways with homeless youth to see how similar they are in their needs for services. Finally, we wanted to look at the types of services provided for youth at the shelters.

Our analysis was based on data routinely collected from shelters funded under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. Since 1985, HHS has collected this data using the Youth Information Form (YIF). We analyzed the HHS YIF database, supplemented by a review of the literature and interviews with personnel from several shelters that collect data using the YIF, HHS officials, and researchers.

While data collection using the YIF is voluntary, HHS estimates that more than three-fourths of the grantees, participate in data collection. These shelters represent all states and the District of Columbia. We found no reason to expect bias in the data arising from lack of reporting by a portion of federally funded shelters. The level of reporting by shelters appeared to stay consistent from October 1985 through June 1988, the time period for which HHS provided us with data. Since participation was voluntary, we were also concerned that shelters might complete and submit questionnaires on some youth and not others—runaways and not homeless for instance, or those with solvable problems and not those who are more difficult. To investigate this issue, we spoke to shelter staff at a number of shelters. Consistently, all shelter staff told us that they report on all youth receiving shelter and ongoing services.

The YIF form classifies youth who make use of shelter services in four categories: runaway, homeless, those contemplating running away, and those who come in for a nonrunaway-related reason. For the period covered by our analysis (October 1985 through June 1988), this database contained 102,280 records. Of these, 52,434 records were for youth contemplating running away or who came in for a nonrunaway-related reason or were missing data. We eliminated these records from our database. Of the remaining 49,846 records that pertain to runaway and

homeless youth, we subtracted 291 records that came from territories (Guam, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands) and 5,281 duplicate records. This gave us a total of 44,274 runaway and homeless youth (35,095 runaway and 9,179 homeless).

HHS collects uniform data from federally funded runaway and homeless youth shelters on each client receiving shelter or ongoing services. For each youth seeking services, a shelter worker completes a questionnaire recording (1) basic demographic information, (2) primary and contributing problems (youth and family), (3) services received during the shelter visit, (4) services planned for after leaving shelters, and, as follow-up, (5) the destination of the youth at the completion of shelter services. This information is based on what the youth communicates to shelter staff as well as any additional information the staff has gained from parents, school officials, or others in the course of giving or arranging for services. The database does not indicate whether information is based on youth self-reporting or other sources. Periodically, questionnaires are forwarded to HHS where the data are added to its computer file.

For reporting purposes each youth is given an identification number. When youth make a return visit to a shelter another YIF is filled out using the same number. Because we did not want multiple records for individual youth, we included only one record for each youth. To do this we randomly sampled records for each youth with more than one visit to a shelter.

We gathered additional data through telephone interviews with shelter personnel from several centers that collect data using the YIF.

Each region as well as both rural and urban areas were represented by the centers we called. We included shelters in urban areas such as New York City; Los Angeles; and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, cities viewed as being attractive to homeless and runaway youth.

Data Limitations

In our discussions with experts in the field, we learned of several possible limitations affecting the YIF data and subsequent analysis based on the HHS data. Among these limitations are the following:

- Respondents may not be willing to give truthful answers to questions that focus on highly sensitive issues, such as drug, alcohol, and sexual abuse.

- In completing the YIF, shelter workers are required to respond to all questions, and there is no opportunity to give responses other than those listed on the instrument. Questionnaires with missing information are sent back to the shelter for completion. This could affect the accuracy of some data.
- Some important issues, including questions about the AIDS virus, are not addressed in the YIF.
- Information collected through the YIF reflects the characteristics of youth who seek services; however, there are an undetermined number of homeless and runaway youth who do not seek services (i.e., those living on the street). The youth who do not seek services may be at greater risk for exploitation; criminal activity; and drug, alcohol, and sexual abuse than those who seek assistance. The size of this segment of the youth population is unknown and difficult to count.

We could not assess the extent of these limitations nor their effect on our understanding of homeless and runaway youth. Further research and data collection should focus on some of these limitations. Nevertheless, we believe that the YIF data provide a basis for useful examination of the characteristics and issues surrounding homeless and runaway youth.

**Appendix V
Data and Methodology**

Table V.1: Family Situation: HHS Definitions of Possible Family Problems Contributing to Youth's Need for Shelter Services

Situation	Definition
Sexual abuse by parent figure	The parent figure rapes, engages in incest, or otherwise sexually abuses the youth or threatens sexual abuse.
Physical abuse by parent figure	Parent figure beats, physically mistreats, or threatens youth with physical abuse.
Neglect by parent figure	The parent figure fails to provide basic food, clothing, shelter, medical care, etc. for the youth.
Parent figure too strict/protective	The youth perceives the parent figure as being too strict, overprotective and/or authoritarian.
Parent figure is alcohol/drug dependent	The parent has a chemical dependency on alcohol or drugs that leads to problems in the family.
Homosexual parent	The existence of a homosexual partner of either or both parents represents a problem for the youth.
Domestic violence	Physical conflict among members of the family apart from that specified in other categories.
Physical or sexual abuse by other family members	Physical or sexual abuse (as defined above) by family members other than the parent figure.
Family mental health problem	Any family member that has been institutionalized and/or diagnosed as having a serious mental health problem.
Other emotional conflict at home	Any form of severe disruption not covered on this list.
Wants to live in household of other parent figure	In cases where parent figures are living separately and there is conflict as to where the youth wishes to live.
Physical or sexual abuse by adult who is not a relative or parent	Physical or sexual abuse by adult who is not a relative or parent figure.
No parent figure	This applies only to a youth whose parents are deceased or who does not know who the parents are.

Source: Management Information Systems Branch, Management Support Division for the Family and Youth Services Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office of Human Development Services, Department of Health and Human Services. Agreement to Participate in Submitting the Youth Information Form (A Voluntary Data Collection System for Runaway and Homeless Youth). Washington, D.C., October 1, 1985, p. 9

**Appendix V
Data and Methodology**

Table V.2: Youth Situation: HHS Definitions of Possible Personal Problems Contributing to Youth's Need for Shelter Services

Situation	Definition
Depressed	Youth displays physical and emotional signs of depression.
Possibly suicidal	Youth displays behavioral signs of possible suicide, talks about harming himself or herself, or has attempted suicide before.
Bad grades	The youth is failing in school or has very poor grades or low academic achievement.
School attendance/truancy	The youth is cutting classes or not attending school.
Cannot get along with teachers	The youth fights or has other severe conflicts with his or her teacher(s); a teacher picks on the youth.
Learning disability	Diagnosed as having a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.
Has VD or suspected VD	The youth suspects or knows that he or she has venereal disease.
Pregnant or suspects pregnancy	Female: The youth suspects or knows that she is pregnant. This has caused an unresolvable problem for her. Male: The youth suspects or knows that he has caused a pregnancy. This has caused an unresolvable problem for him.
Alcohol abuse	Youth drinks alcoholic beverages with a frequency or quantity that is determined to cause problems, such as physical, emotional, or social harm to the youth or to others or could lead or has led to chemical dependency, or the youth drinks at inappropriate times; such as during the school day.
Drug abuse	Youth has used drugs to the extent of causing physical, emotional, or social harm to himself (more than casual experimentation).
Poor self-image	The youth does not have positive attitudes or feelings about himself or herself, has low self-esteem, or has feelings of personal failure.
Trouble with the justice system	A warrant is out on the youth for running away; the youth is awaiting a court hearing for incorrigibility; or he or she has been picked up for shoplifting, has been arrested for trespassing, has stolen a car, has violated probation, or has committed or is suspected of other serious offenses.
Prostitution	The youth has received money, support, housing, or gratuities in exchange for sex.
Homosexual/sexual identity issue	Youth has had homosexual encounters or has decided to become a homosexual and is unable to deal with the consequences (family rejection, etc.), or he or she is having severe personal problems coping with the issue of sexual identity.
Custody change	Youth is unable to deal with potential or new custody situation.

Source: Management Information Systems Branch, Management Support Division for the Family and Youth Services Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office of Human Development Services, Department of Health and Human Services. Agreement to Participate in Submitting the Youth Information Form (A Voluntary Data Collection System for Runaway and Homeless Youth). Washington, D.C., October 1, 1985, p. 9.

Major Contributors to This Report

Human Resources
Division,
Washington, D.C.

Laurie E. Ekstrand, Assistant Director
Kenneth J. Bombara, Assignment Manager
Eleanor L. Johnson, Evaluator
Ellen Radish, Evaluator-in-Charge
Paula Bonin, Computer Specialist

Glossary

Aftercare Services	The provision of services to runaway or otherwise homeless youth and their families following the youth's return home or placement in alternative living arrangements which assist in alleviating the problems that contribute to his or her running away or being homeless the problems that contributed to his or her running away or being homeless.
Counseling Services	The provision of guidance, support, and advice to runaway or otherwise homeless youth and their families designed to alleviate the problems that contributed to the youth's running away or being homeless, resolve intrafamily problems, to reunite such youth with their families whenever appropriate, and to help them decide upon a future course of action.
Father Figure	See "Parent figure."
Homeless Youth	A person under 18 years old who is in need of services and without a place of shelter where he or she receives supervision and care.
Juvenile Justice System	Agencies such as, but not limited to, juvenile courts, law enforcement, probation, parole, correctional institutions, training schools, and detention facilities.
Mother Figure	See "Parent figure."
Parent Figure	The adult who fulfills the role of the parent. This may be mother/father, stepmother/stepfather, or other adult. Rather than legal custody, this term refers to the youth's perception as to who constitutes his or her parent figure(s).
Runaway Youth	A person under 18 years old who absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of parents or legal guardians.

Runaway Youth Project

A locally controlled human service program facility outside the law enforcement structure and the juvenile justice system providing temporary shelter, either directly or through other facilities; counseling; and aftercare services to runaway or otherwise homeless youth.

Temporary Shelter

The provision of short-term (maximum of 15 days) room and board and core crisis intervention services on a 24-hour basis by a runaway youth project.

Source: Management Information Systems Branch, Management Support Division for the Family and Youth Services Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office of Human Development Services, Department of Health and Human Services. Agreement to Participate in Submitting the Youth Information Form (A Voluntary Data Collection System for Runaway and Homeless Youth). Washington, D.C., October 1, 1985.

Related GAO Products

Children and Youths: About 68,000 Homeless and 186,000 in Shared Housing at Any Given Time (GAO/PEMD-89-14, June 15, 1989).

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Welfare Hotels: Uses, Costs, and Alternatives (GAO/HRD-89-26BR, Jan. 31, 1989).

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Homeless Mentally Ill: Problems and Options in Estimating Numbers and Trends (GAO/PEMD-88-24, Aug. 3, 1988).

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