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Teen Homelessness In Hampton Roads

By Ray Boetcher, Publisher

"Monk" lives on the streets. He secures shelter where ever he can find it. Sometimes in a doorway, sometimes in the woods.

He learned the hard way that it's not safe to fall asleep in a dumpster. He was once awakened early in the morning when a waste management truck began to lift the bin in which he was sleeping to empty it.

"Monk" was kicked out of his father's apartment. For the last four years, his father has had a difficult time keeping a job. Living on welfare, he often drinks himself to sleep each night. His alcoholism got to be too much for "Monk" to live with.

It finally got to a point that "Monk" would argue with his dad to stop drinking. His dad told him to hit the road on his seventeenth birthday.

When the sun dips into the west and the streets of Hampton Roads come aglow with tiny yellow lights, Jon heads home.

He and a friend climb in between the rafters of a highway overpass, crouching as they sit under the concrete structure that rumbles with every car crossing overhead.

Stretching out a battered old sleeping bag, it is where Jon will sleep tonight. It is where he can live in peace after escaping from an abusive home. Jon is fifteen.

No one would know that Tina was homeless.

Her mom works nights and an uncle would come over and rape her. The second

time that happened, she ran-a-way from home.

While her friends went to school, she spent her days at the mall. Now that its summer, she and her friends can be found at the beach ... just like hundreds of other teens during the day.

Each evening she returns to her best friend's house, where she hides away on a couch in her girlfriend's bedroom. Her friend's parents don't have a clue as to what is going on. They know Tina's mom works nights, and think she is just crashing for the evening.

I saw her coming out of the corner of my eye. She walked up to the four of us as we were moving furniture out of a garage into a truck. She was about 14 years-of-age, looking for a place to stay.

I didn't know of any ministries at the time to refer to her. When I suggested that we call the police or social services for help, she disappeared as quickly as she came.

That was my introduction into the world of homeless teens. I was so naïve, I didn't realize what a serious problem it was all across the United States.

As the publisher of the Church Guide, I thought there was an answer, a Christian ministry or a resource, for just about anything that might arise. But I was wrong. In fact, there are very few resources in the Hampton Roads area ministering to homeless teens.

Since that time, I have learned that behind the face of every homeless young

person is another heart-breaking story – a teenage boy abused by his drug addicted parent, or a pregnant girl rejected by her guardian, or a teenager trying to escape gang membership or a life of forced prostitution.

In case after case, the main cause of youth homelessness is physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse from parents or guardians.

And the numbers are staggering. Did you know that more than 2 million kids in America will face a period of homelessness every year?

10 Facts About Homeless Youth

- 1 out of every 3 homeless people are under the age of 18.
- 1.6 to 1.7 million people under 18 will experience homelessness each year.
- The majority of homeless and runaway youth are between the ages of 15 and 17, however three out of 100 runaways are under the age of 10, and 11 out of 100 are between the ages of 11 and 13.
- Up to a third of runaways have been forced to perform a sexual act against his/her will.
- Approximately half of all runaways were physically abused before fleeing home.
- Half of all runaways left home because of a disagreement with a parent or guardian.
- A third of all runaways will attempt suicide.
- Homeless youth are up to ten times more likely to have or contract HIV than non-homeless adolescents.
- A tenth of homeless and runaway females are reportedly pregnant.



- This year, one in 260 runaways and homeless youths will die from assault, illness & suicide.

Sources: National Coalition for the Homeless National Runaway Switchboard

In Virginia Beach alone, there are 500 to 800 homeless teens, and those numbers swell in the summer months as teens crash into the resort area along with the tourist.

According to the National Runaway Switchboard, a history of early childhood trauma, mental, sexual and physical abuse, occurring in mostly broken homes, is by far the most common trait found among the teenage homeless.

These teens trade home environments of alcohol and drug abuse, mixed with crime, poverty and violence for similar conditions on the streets.

Teens who are forced out of their homes due to reasons such as unruliness, lack of resources, parental or sibling conflicts, self-injurious behavior or criminal behavior are called throwaways, because they were "thrown away" by their parents. The factors leading to teenage homelessness mentioned above still apply, with the added forced removal from the home or family environment.

Runaways, as opposed to throwaways, leave by choice. Many teenage homeless have run away from child protective services or foster homes after being forced to leave home by court order. Courts will remove a child from a home either for his own actions or, more commonly, the actions of the adults living in that home environment.

Street teens are more vulnerable to venereal disease and disease in general as they are far more likely to engage in prostitution as a means of survival, according to a Stanford University study conducted in 1991. Many street teenage homeless hold a fear of institutional assistance that may result in being returned to the home environment they left or being placed in the custodial care of a therapeutic foster home or group home.

Teens living in a shelter do not have it much better statistically than the street teens; virtually all are sexually active and about half abuse drugs. But unlike the street teens, the shelter teens rarely resort to prostitution.

Covenant House is a national agency that gives shelter to homeless teens and responds to their most pressing needs.

Last year alone, over 70,000 kids got help from Covenant House programs. They provide the following statistics which further shed light on the seriousness of teenage homelessness:

- 57% of homeless kids spend at least one day every month without food.
- In the United States, as many as 20,000 kids are forced into prostitution by human trafficking networks every year.
- According to a study of youth in shelters, nearly 50% reported intense conflict or physical harm by a family member as a major contributing factor to their homelessness.



- Over 25% of former foster children become homeless within two to four years of leaving the system.
- 50% of adolescents aging out of foster care and juvenile justice systems will be homeless within six months because they are unprepared to live independently, have limited education and no social support.
- Almost 40% of the homeless in the United States are under 18.

When that young lady approached me and asked if I knew of a place she could stay, it turned my world upside down. I felt so bad that I wasn't able to help her at the time. And with her disappearing so quickly, I began to wonder if she was real or imagined.

Maybe she was an angel sent to help me realize the significance of this problem and to do something about it. I don't know. But I do know one thing, I don't ever want anyone in Hampton Roads to not know there is help and assistance for homeless teens right in our area. There is also additional help just a phone call away.

From this issues of The Church Guide forward, there will always be a listing of the ministries and resources available for "Teens in Need" provided in the "You Are Not Alone" resources printed in this newspaper every month (and online). So if there is a need, pick up a copy or go TheChurchGuide.com

Seton Youth Shelters (SYS)

Seton Youth Shelters leads the way in delivering critical help to teens in crisis throughout Southside Hampton Roads.

Each year, Seton Youth Shelters provides a safe haven for runaway or homeless teens, or youth experiencing a crisis within their family, school or community. They provide food, clothing, counseling, and operate two shelters in Virginia Beach ... one for boys and the other for girls.

The young people seeking their care are not in trouble with the law, nor are they being forced to come to Seton Youth Shelters by the court system. They want to be there. They seek the security and protection that Seton Youth Shelters has to offer.

Counselors on staff work with the individual teens, and the family whenever possible. Residents are provided youth advocacy and individual/family crisis counseling.

Case management activities facilitate coordination of services, community referrals and aftercare follow-up.

The agency reports that 94% of the young people who receive shelter and counseling services, return to their families more enabled to resolve their own conflicts, deal with problems, and demonstrate great self-esteem and independence.

They operate a 24-hour crisis hotline (757-498-4357).

Learn more at www.setonyouthshelters.org.

The Crow's Nest

Seton Youth Shelters also operates a street outreach program in conjunction with Stand Up For Kids and the Virginia Beach United Methodist Church.

Working together, they provide a safe haven at the Virginia Beach oceanfront where young people up to the age of 21 can crash or get some help. Trained professionals and volunteers provide entertainment, food, drink, crisis counseling, access to emergency shelter, clothing, hygiene items, referrals, substance abuse education, a G.E.D. study hall, employment posting board, and a Family/Runaway Message Board.

Most of all, the young people that come to the Crow's Nest can make friends and find unconditional love.

The Crow's Nest is located on the second floor of The Potter's House which is next to Domino's Pizza, on the corner of 18th Street and Pacific Ave. It is open every Tuesday night from 7:00 pm till 11:00 pm. During the summer months, the Crow's Nest is open even more nights to minister to and offer assistance to the many teens coming into the resort city.

Van Outreach Program of SYS

What makes the world of homeless teenagers different is that they can blend into the world around them. They don't always stand out in society. Because they look and act like the average teenager, they can be hiding in plain sight.

But David Mount, Coordinator of Seton Youth's Van Outreach, and his crew make it a point to get to know the youth on the street who might be at risk or in a crisis situation.

They travel by van to eighteen neighborhoods throughout Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Portsmouth. The purpose isn't just to identify homeless kids who are interested in staying in a shelter, they are looking for kids of all ages in trouble.

They know first hand the kids without a home. Kids out all hours of the night because there is no parent at home. Kids who are starving because there is no food in their home. Kids with STDs or so depressed that they are considering suicide.

The van stops and he and his crew hand out food or drinks if they have them. They strike up conversations with neighborhood kids in order to learn if any of their friends might be kicked out of their homes or contemplating taking drugs or experiencing signs of depression.

They counsel those young people who might be living on the streets but are afraid to go to a shelter. Perhaps they have a police record and fear incarceration, or are afraid they will be sent back home ... to more abuse, or other conflict.



Photo by SGallagh

Stand Up For Kids

SUFK is a national organization with chapters in major cities across the U.S. The mission of Stand Up For Kids is to go into the streets and find and help homeless and street kids improve their lives. The Hampton Roads chapter works closely with Seton Youth Services in their Van Outreach program and works with Virginia Beach United Methodist Church and SYS to provide volunteers to man the Crow's Nest safe haven at Virginia Beach.

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10 Causes of Teen Homelessness

Foster Care

Studies estimate that 20% of youth who arrive at shelters came directly from foster care, and more than 25% had been in foster care in the previous year. These youth age out of the foster care system and are discharged with no housing or income support.

Prison/Juvenile Corrections System

For youth who are released from juvenile corrections facilities, many become homeless because they lack support systems and opportunities for work and housing.

Abuse

Some homeless youth have run away from homes where they were the victims of physical, sexual or emotional abuse. One study reports that more than four in ten youth report being beaten by a caretaker, and a quarter were either sexually abused or feared being sexually abused.

Substance Abuse in the Home

Others are running away from alcohol and drug abuse in the home. More than 40% of homeless youth report that one or both of their parents had at some point received treatment for alcohol, drug, or psychological problems.

Substance Abuse by Youth

A number are homeless because of their own addictions to drugs and/or alcohol. One study in the Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment contends that 85% of homeless youth have substance use disorders.

Pregnancy

A large number of homeless young women either ran away or were kicked out of the home due to pregnancy. A tenth of homeless/runaway girls are reportedly pregnant.

Sexual Orientation

Other homeless youth are forced to leave home because of their sexual orientation, that is, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. As many as 25% of gay teens are rejected by their families, and many end up homeless on the streets.

Unaffordable Housing

There are homeless youth that are employed but still can't afford rent, food and other basic needs.

Neglect

Neglect and lack of emotional and financial support from their families can also cause youth homelessness.

Mental Illness

Mentally ill youth may end up homeless because they don't have access to supportive housing and/or other treatment services.

Sources: National Coalition for the Homeless National Alliance to End Homelessness

Teen Homelessness

(Continued from pages 10 and 11)

Seton Youth Shelters & Stand Up For Kids are doing everything they can with their limited finances, counselors and volunteers to come to the aid and assistance of young people on the streets.

They could use your help.

Furthermore the churches in Hampton Roads need to come together to minister to the needs of homeless youth and street kids. Although a number of churches support Seton Youth Shelters, more needs to be done.

Many of the Hampton Roads cities have no shelters designed

specifically for just teens & kids. There is a need for more a lot more shelters to house the thousands of homeless youth throughout Hampton Roads.

Frequently during the winter months when temporary shelters are provided, they have no beds. So there is a need for beds.

And with the exception of The Crow's Nest and the Van Outreach program of SYS, there are no church ministries going out into the streets to identify and provide assistance to those teens and youth who are at risk and

homeless. More needs to be done.

There are three or four Christian Foster Care ministries in Hampton Roads that are in need of Christian foster parents. (especially teens). You can find a listing in our "You Are Not Alone" pages in this issue of The Church Guide. Please call them and volunteer or support them in other ways. We will address Christian Foster Care in our October issue.

See our *You Are Not Alone* section for more contact information for Teens In Need. Please email us your ministries.

11 Effects of Teenage Homelessness

Instability

Homelessness leaves affected youth with no permanent address, making it virtually impossible to attend school, obtain employment, secure food and shelter, and survive.

Physical Health

Due to poor diet, malnutrition and exposure, homeless youth are at greater risk of suffering from chronic health disorders like asthma and diabetes.

"Survival Sex"

Because of their age, many have few legal means by which they can earn enough money to meet basic needs. As a result, many homeless adolescents find that exchanging sex for food, clothing, and shelter is their only chance of survival on the streets.

Reportedly, one in four youth have traded sex for survival means.

AIDS/STDs

Homeless youth are at greater risk of contracting AIDS, HIV-related illnesses, and other STDs. It has been suggested that the rate of HIV prevalence for homeless youth may be as much as two to ten times higher than the rates reported for other samples of adolescents in the United States.

Mental Health

Homeless youth are more likely to suffer from anxiety disorders, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder and suicide due to the increased exposure to violence while living on their own. About a third of all homeless youths will attempt suicide.

Violence

Youth are at increased risk of being physically and sexually abused while on the streets. This year, one in 260 runaways and homeless youths will die from assault, illness and suicide.

Substance Abuse

Homeless youth are more likely to use and abuse drugs, and to engage in other dangerous and illegal behaviors. According to national surveys, three quarters of street youths were using marijuana, a third were using hallucinogens and stimulants, and a quarter were using crack, other forms of cocaine, inhalants, and sedatives.

Juvenile Justice System

Homeless youth are more likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system. They are frequently arrested for nuisance crimes like loitering and trespassing.

Education

Homeless youth have a hard time attending school because of legal guardianship requirements, residency requirements, proper records, and lack of transportation so it is difficult for them to get an education. Studies report that as many as three quarters of homeless youth have or will drop out of school.

Lack of Self-Sufficiency Skills

Homeless youth typically lack many skills that are crucial to life in the adult world. For example, most lack the education and job skills needed to secure more than a low-wage, short-term jobs so it's very difficult for them to become financially self-sufficient.

Learning Disabilities

According to one study, the number of homeless youth diagnosed with learning disabilities is double the rate of other children. Another study found that 28% of homeless youth have ADD.

Sources:

National Coalition for the Homeless National Alliance to End Homelessness

The Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

The National Symposium on Homelessness Research

