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Study Reveals Harsh Life for Homeless Youth in New York

By [JULIE BOSMAN](#)

Many homeless youths in New York City are victims of abuse who grew up in foster care or other institutions and now lack jobs, a high school education, birth certificates and adequate health care, according to a study to be released on Tuesday.

And the study, one of the largest-ever examinations of young homeless people in New York, found that their future did not look much better — because they are dangerously isolated from mainstream channels of work, family life and basic schooling.

The study, conducted by Covenant House, which operates shelters for young people, examined 444 people between the ages of 18 and 21 who entered the [Covenant House Crisis Center](#) between October 2007 and February 2008.

Forty-seven percent of the group said they had been disciplined physically before entering the shelter, 37 percent said they had been victims of physical abuse, and 19 percent had endured sexual abuse. Forty-one percent said they had witnessed violence in their homes.

The vast majority said they found it difficult or impossible to find a good job. Seventy-eight percent said they were unemployed when they entered the shelter. Among those who had jobs, 41 percent said those jobs were “off the books.”

Kevin M. Ryan, the president of Covenant House, a privately financed agency with facilities in 20 cities nationwide, including Philadelphia, Detroit, Newark

and St. Louis, said he hoped the study alerted the public “to the growing crisis of homeless youth in New York City.”

“It is a wake-up call to all of us that we have to be incredibly vigilant on behalf of our kids,” Mr. Ryan said. “Especially in a time of economic crisis, when families are feeling stress and strain that, in many instances, can cause kids to become even more disconnected from school and work and family.”

Adding to the urgency, Mr. Ryan said, was the recent discovery that the number of young homeless people seeking shelter at Covenant House had increased by one-third in the past year.

In 2007, a [study](#) by the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services, an advocacy group in New York, found that on any given night, roughly 3,800 homeless young people were on the street in New York.

Severe cuts in the state budget are threatening the financing for many programs for runaways and homeless youths across the state, said Margo Hirsch, the executive director of the Empire State Coalition. “Every single one of these programs is going to be affected,” Ms. Hirsch said.

Carol L. M. Caton, a professor of clinical public health at [Columbia University](#) and the director of the Columbia Center for Homelessness Prevention Studies, which helped sponsor the 2009 study, said the report exposed at least three major areas that were ripe for further research. They are family relationships, and the events within families that might force a young person out; the impact of institutional experiences like foster care placement; and the challenge of connecting youths to the work force, she said.

“They’re just on the cusp of adulthood,” Dr. Caton said. “And we want to help them transition to adulthood in a way that is positive, so that they won’t go on and continue to have some of these bruising experiences.”

Nearly half of the youths who participated in the 2009 study said they had been arrested, 15 percent had been convicted, and 4 percent were on probation or parole. Twenty-nine percent said they drank alcohol, 20 percent reported

using marijuana on a regular basis, and 36 percent said someone in their family used drugs regularly.

Mr. Ryan said he was concerned that after leaving the shelter, where youths typically stay for just under three months, they would enter the adult homeless system, which can be harsh for teenagers — or even worse, they could “slide into gang affiliation, drugs and despair.”