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Runaway and Throwaway Youth: Time for Policy Changes and Public Responsibility

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Introduction

A quick glance at Cindy (name and other identifying information have been changed) and one would guess she was in her late 20s, maybe her early 30s. Looking closely, there was no sparkle in her eyes and her demeanor was sad with little affect; she just looked tired and worn out, her hair stringy as it fell to her shoulders from underneath a dirty and worn wool cap. But Cindy was not in her mid-to-late 20s or early 30s; she was 16 years old. She had been thrown out of her home by her mother two years earlier. It was a cold January night when she was first told to leave. She went to a friend's house and stayed for a couple of days before her friend's parents told her she needed to "go home and make things right," which Cindy tried to do. After a few weeks, Cindy's mother told her to leave home and never come back again. Cindy spent the next few nights sleeping in the backyard of her friend's house; her friend's parents did not even know she was there. Cindy then left her hometown and headed for a large city, where she first moved from public building to public building, using the bathrooms for her "personal bath" and "just to have a place to hang." Cindy tried to get into a homeless shelter but was turned away because she had no caretaker with her. She contacted a program for homeless youth, but they could not do anything for her because she was under age 18 and did not have "parental consent" to be there. Food was difficult to come by; she tried to eat at various church programs but again was turned away because she was an unaccompanied minor. She had no one to turn to until she met "D-man," who took her in, fed her, and gave her clothes. Soon, she was "tricking" for him, and now, at 16 years of age, Cindy was HIV-positive.

The traditional American dream of owning a home, obtaining a college education, and working at a good, paying job is only that, a dream, for scores of homeless youth in America today. There is a growing street population of young people who have been thrown out of their homes by their caretakers or their families, and who face life-threatening situations each day. For these youth, the furthest thing in their lives is reaching the so-called "American Dream;" and their most immediate need is survival, simply living out the day in front of them. They have few options that lead to a decent and safe living environment. Their age, lack of work experience, and absence of a high school diploma make it most difficult to find a job. As a result, they turn to other means for survival; runaways and throwaways are most vulnerable to falling prey to the sex trade, selling drugs, or being lured into human trafficking, and some steal or panhandle. Street youth end up spending their nights in bus stations or finding a room

in an abandoned building or an empty stairwell to sleep. Sometimes they are taken in by a stranger, as Cindy was.

Attempting to identify a specific number of homeless youth is difficult at best, but what is even more perplexing is our continued inability to effectively protect our children. We are left with a basic question framed by the fundamental tenets of justice: what is a community's responsibility to its youth who, for whatever reason, end up living on the streets or in unsafe, abusive environments?

The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the characteristics of homeless youth, in particular differentiating between throwaways and runaways; explore the current federal response to homeless youth; and finally, address the nagging question that swirls around all children: can we aggressively aspire to be a community where every child is healthy and safe, and able to realize his or her fullest potential?

Basic Definitions

Homeless Youth. There is no one, clear cut agreed upon definition for runaway, throwaway, or homeless youth. Further compounding the lack of clarity in the national discourse regarding homeless youth is the absence of differentiation between runaway and throwaway youth. Using the broader construct of homeless youth or street youth, policy makers often do not recognize the significant difference between these two population groups. Without such differentiation, policies risk being misdirected and not focused on the unique needs and contexts for these two groups. Clearly there are very different contexts for a runaway and throwaway although both are identified as homeless.

The term "homeless youth" or "street youth" typically is the broader construct that encompasses all youth on the street, including runaways, throwaways, homeless children, and push-outs. Even here, however, there is a lack of consensual definition. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (42 U.S.C. 5701) defines a "homeless youth" as an "…individual under the age 18 who [is] unable to live in a safe environment with a relative and lack(s) alternative housing; or, individuals ages 16 to 21 without shelter."[1]

According to the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Left Behind Act, "…[a]n unaccompanied youth is a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian" and this includes youth "living in runaway shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, on the streets, or in other inadequate housing…children and youth denied housing by their families…and school-age unwed mothers, living in homes for unwed mothers, who have no other housing available."[2]

Many state and national non-profit organizations directed at helping homeless youth have their unique operational definition for homeless youth, and these too mirror in some ways federal descriptors but also add other characteristics. For example, the California Department of Education identifies a homeless youth as an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence;[3] the National Coalition of the Homeless defines homeless youth as "…individuals under the age of eighteen who lack parental, foster, or institutional care" and are "…sometimes referred to as 'unaccompanied' youth."[4]

Runaway Youth. The U.S. Department of Education defines a "runaway" as a youth who leaves home and stays away overnight without caretaker permission. The Department of Education further notes that a runaway chooses not to come home when expected.[5] Greene et al.,[6] in a report published by the federal Department of Health and Human Services, add that a runaway is a youth who leaves home on his/her "volition without the consent of their caregiver."

A consensus seems to have emerged in the literature among the various federal programs and national/local non-profit social service agencies to rely on data provided by the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The OJJDP has published two separate reports entitled *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children* more commonly referred to as NISMART. The first NISMART report was published in 1988 and NISMART II was released in 2002. In the spring of 2010 the OJJDP issued a call for proposals for an updated report, to be entitled NISMART III.

A runaway, according to NISMART II[7], meets one of the following criteria:

- A child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight;
- A child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to come home when expected to and stays away overnight; or,
- A child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to come home and stays away two nights.

Throwaway Youth. Throwaway youth, also referred to as *thrownaway* youth, are defined as youth whose caretaker has "…induced them to leave against their will and made no effort to find them once they left home."[6] Wagner[8] defines throwaways as "…minors who are forced by the parents or legal guardians to leave their homes." In a similar vein, the Child Welfare League of America defines a throwaway as an individual

who has "been told or forced to leave home or deserted by parents or guardians."[9]

Again referring to the 2002 NISMART report,[7] a throwaway is a youth who meets either of the following two criteria:

- A child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.
- A child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.

Two basic differences emerge between a runaway and a throwaway. First, a throwaway has no choice in the matter and is forced to live elsewhere with in-place guardian consent; and, second, a runaway is, in contrast, an individual who chooses to live elsewhere without legal guardian consent. A review of the various definitions, as shown above, demonstrates that there is no consensus regarding age. This is important from a legal perspective, as age becomes a determining factor in the ability to access social services including crisis, temporary, or transitional shelter.

The Numbers

Trying to find an accurate "count" of the number of homeless youth is problematic and confusing, with estimates showing wide differences. An older 2002 federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention study estimated 1.65 million youth lived outside of their homes,[7] while a decade earlier 2.8 million youth per year were identified as runaways.[10]

Fernandes,[1] writing in a 2007 research report for Congress, estimated that the number of homeless youth fluctuates between 1 million and 1.7 million, though for the same time period Daniels and Brennan[11] place the number of homeless youth in any given year between 1.3 and 2.8 million. In an undated factsheet published by The National Coalition for the Homeless[4] the number of homeless youth is reported to be approximately 1.7 million, a number similar to that reported in a 2009 *New York Times* article that estimated upwards of 1.6 million youth living on the streets between 2008 and 2010.[12] More recently in 2010, the National Conference of State Legislatures identified a lower number of youth, 1.3 million, living on the streets.[13]

A 2001 study of homeless youth in Midwestern states found that 60% were female. White youth accounted for 60% of youth living on the street, while 24.1% were African American, 3.3% Hispanic, and 10% identified themselves as biracial.[14] The National Runaway Crisis Switchboard reported that 72% of calls were from females in 2008-2009, though not all calls made were from street youth.[15] The Illinois Gender Advocates reported that a study of Illinois homeless youth found that 35% self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered.[16]

Providing an overview of runaway and homeless youth, the National Conference of State Legislatures[13] reported in 2010:

- One in seven young people between the ages of 10 and 18 will run away;
- Youth age 12 to 17 are more at risk of homelessness than adults;
- 75% of runaways are female;
- Estimates of the number of pregnant homeless girls are between 6 and 22%;
- Between 20 and 40% of homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning (GLBTQ);
- 46% of runaway and homeless youth reported being physically abused, 38% reported being emotionally abused, and 17% reported being forced into unwanted sexual activity by a family or household member; and,
- 75% of homeless or runaway youth have dropped out or will drop out of school.

Determining an accurate number of homeless youth is difficult at best. Fernandes[1] correctly asserts that, "[t]he precise number of homeless and runaway youth is unknown due to their residential mobility…Determining the number of homeless and runaway youth is further complicated by the lack of a standardized methodology for counting the population and inconsistent definitions of what it means to be homeless or a runaway. The various reports from 2001 to 2010 identify as few as one million to as many as 2.8 million runaways and throwaway youth. Policy makers, agency providers, and funders should recognize the impossibility of accurately "counting" street youth. At the same time, we must recognize that the numbers do offer a glimpse into the diversity, complexity, and magnitude of those youth living on the streets. We must also understand that the reported numbers are underestimates of the actual homeless population. The NISMART I study estimates that only 21% of all caregivers report a missing child, while Urbina[12] writes that up to 75% of runaway cases are not reported by the caretakers simply

because the parent is too angry to report the case or they would prefer the young person no longer stay in the home. As Daniels and Brennan[17] note, the official records for the most part are incomplete and misleadingly low and, as a result, should be cited with caution.

Life on the Street

Even as we struggle to gain a firm and accurate count of homeless youth, research clearly shows that runaway and throwaway youth are confronted with a range of physical, social, emotional, and health threats. Specifically, homeless street youth experience:

- Increased likelihood of high-risk behaviors, including engaging in unprotected sex, having multiple sex partners and participating in intravenous drug use. Youth who engage in these high-risk behaviors are more likely to remain homeless and be more resistant to change;
- Greater risk of severe anxiety and depression, suicide, poor health and nutrition, and low self-esteem;
- Increased likelihood of exchanging sex for food, clothing and shelter (also known as "survival sex") or dealing drugs to meet basic needs. Forty percent of African American youth and 36% of Caucasian youth who experienced homelessness or life on the street sold drugs, primarily marijuana, for money; and,
- Difficulty attending school due to lack of required enrollment records (such as immunization and medical records and proof of residence), as well as lack of access to transportation to and from school.

Additionally, homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning (GLBTQ) youth are more likely to exchange sex for housing or shelter, are abused more often at homeless shelters (especially adult shelters), and experience more violence on the streets than homeless heterosexual youth.[13,18-22]

Federal Policy Response

Just how do we approach the need for proactive social services for street youth? The federal government has enacted four major public policy regulations that provide direction and support for homeless youth programs and services. The primary policy supporting unaccompanied homeless youth is the *Runaway and Homeless Youth Act*. Administered by the federal Department of Health and Human Services' Family and Youth Services Bureau, the act authorizes federal funding for three

programs: the Basic Center Program, Transitional Living Program, and Street Outreach Program, to assist runaway and homeless youth.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act focuses federal attention on the homeless population as a whole. Included in the McKinney-Vento Act are provisions for open enrollment opportunities for homeless youth in public school, by requiring public schools to eliminate barriers that prohibit school-age eligible youth from attending school. This includes such things as ensuring transportation to and from school is available.

Two other major federal policies focus on foster care children. *The Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program* targets resources to foster care youth who are aging out of the system as well as former foster care youth ages 18 to 21. Funds from the program can be used for housing, educational services, and independent living services. Building on the Chaffee act, the *Fostering Connections Act* increases federal funds to states to extend assistance to support foster youth up until age 21. Key to this act is that, in order to receive assistance, the foster youth must be in school, working, or have a medical condition that prevents him or her from participating in those activities.

While there are some federal policies in place to support programs for runaways and throwaways, the immediate need for safe and secure emergency shelter is left in the legal abyss. The balance between family rights and a community's obligation to care for abused and neglected children is in constant flux and difficult to maintain. In general, youth programs and shelters are not able to provide services unless caretaker consent is provided. If a caretaker is absent, however, the street youth is left to fend for him or herself. For the throwaway, this is even more problematic as the legal guardian is the one who severed their ties.

Concluding Thoughts

The descriptions and stories of homeless youth present horrific portrayals of lives filled with grief and torment, and certainly suggest a continued future of uncertainty and despair. Sexual exploitation, in particular survival sex, violence, homophobic reactions to GLBTQ youth, and increased risks to sexually transmitted diseases, are all part of the homeless youth experience on the street. Typical of the articles describing life on the streets is a 2006 news article describing the life of former foster care children in Pasadena, CA, "[l]ike thousands of former Los Angeles County foster youth who have left state care homeless, penniless, ready-made targets for drug dealers and sexual predators."[23]

Our communities can no longer afford to turn their backs away from and ignore runaway and throwaway youth. Our moral obligation is to create both prevention programs and emergency care options. While prevention programs are crucial, they, by themselves, will not eliminate runaway and throwaway incidents. As a result, our communities must first and foremost work to create emergency sheltering options for youth to ensure immediate safe and secure housing. All shelters must be guided by one over-arching outcome: to provide all youth with safe and secure housing. This basic premise is non-negotiable, and every community should ensure that youth shelters are available for all runaways and throwaways regardless of adult involvement or caretaker permission. A community must also ensure that alternative housing options are available for those youth who pose a threat to themselves or to others. In addition to emergency shelters, a community's continuum of housing for runaways and throwaways should include group homes, residential treatment, host homes, shared homes, and community-based transitional living programs. Policymakers should consider research that clearly shows that youth housing programs are more cost-effective than alternative out-of-home placements such as foster care, juvenile corrections facilities, treatment centers or jail.[13,24-25]

Once safe and secure housing is in place, we need to seek ways to expand support for programs that offer mental health counseling, life skills training, and pathways for attainment of formal education. Built into such programs should be appropriate child care for teen parents as well. Specific shelter programs must be developed targeting two specific street populations: GLBT youth and youth who age out of foster care and the juvenile justice system. GLBT street youth have and continue to be subjected to bullying, homophobia, and sexual abuse. Their issues are complex and, as with all street youth, must be proactively addressed. Similarly, foster care youth and young people released from the juvenile justice system have long been neglected by our communities. Public officials have long rationalized that, as 18 year olds, these youth are adults and, as such, not under the province of state supervision.

The bottom line regarding our youth is simple: under no circumstances should we allow a child to be forced to live on the streets. Issues of family rights, obligations, responsibilities, and accountability should be dealt with, but only after the young person is in a safe, secure environment.

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