

KINE 4359 - 001

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## **Introduction**

Homelessness is a heavily stigmatized topic, one that especially targets vulnerable youth. There are many factors leading to why youth struggle to find security and are left to fend for themselves. Despite the plethora of resources that the government provides for these youth, there are still so many that struggle to escape the cycle of homelessness. An issue that isn't treated with the solemnity it deserves, youth homelessness is on the rise due to stigma as well as the failing of youth on a societal and community level.

## **Definition**

Homelessness is said to be when one cannot find a fixed source of residence to sleep at for the night. In the case of youth, this definition applies to primarily those under 21 (Tompsett et al., 2009). This can be youth being literally thrown out of bodes of living by the homeowner or person in authority, sleeping outside on the streets, running away due to various factors and circumstances, and couch surfing. Staying at shelters is also regarded as being homeless since it is not a fixed residence. About 1 in 10 young adults aged 18 to 25 were said to be experiencing homelessness every year, this number said to have risen post COVID-19; about 42% of this population experience homelessness more than once (Gewirtz et al, 2021).

## **Vulnerability**

Many of these youth are also stripped or ostracized from their communities after they are kicked out, further removing them from their 'homes' (their people). Neighborhood safety and social support networks are a huge social factor of health; the early years set the tone and pace for the rest of a child's life and when they lack stability, it causes the child to grow up with long-term issues. When youth are abandoned by their caretakers and authority figures, they have no one to turn to because those were the people who were supposed to protect them. Other reasons youth

are more vulnerable than adults is because of human trafficking – in 2025, it was reported that 1 in 5 children are trafficked (Cutbush et al, 2025). This number is said to be much larger as transient youth do not leave a trail in many cases. About 420,000 homeless youth were said to be missing, and this number only accounts for those who were reported missing (Cutbush et al, 2025). Without loved ones searching for them, most of these youth tend to be missing to never be found again.

### **Substance Abuse**

Many of the factors that cause youth to become homeless are stigmatized by society already, making it difficult for the youth to reach out to those in authority for help. Mental health and substance abuse are two common reasons that a youth might get ousted by their guardians. From a systemic review compiled from multiple counts of quantitative research, it was shown that discharged rehabilitated youth under the age of 19 were 1.9 times higher to be homeless (Grattan et al., 2022). Even though there is aid provided, the underlying cause for the addiction is never acknowledged nor is it treated as a problem. There is also a lack of focus on the interconnectedness of these factors – addiction is a mental illness, yet it is seen as its own problem.

In current society, taking substances is associated with the homeless – this view does not extend to viewing addiction as a problem, rather it paints a very stereotypical and harmful picture of homeless folk using they receive to buy drugs. This stigma further demonizes youth and makes it difficult for them to seek care or aid without the judgement or bias from healthcare providers (Grattan et al., 2022). The stigma itself makes it difficult for youth to receive the help need to get better or give them the hope that they can recover.

## **Other Factors**

Sexual and gender orientations straying from the cisheteronormative views are also demonized by both families and society, making it difficult for youth to feel comfortable within their own homes as their own self (Grattan et al., 2022). Trans youth or those who didn't identify as their biological sex were the most vulnerable population amongst these youth, with high rates of suicide and abuse reported (Grattan et al, 2025). This population is also the most at risk of being victims of hate crimes as well being forced to prostitute themselves to earn money. Because of government policies that seek to strip the rights away from these youth, they are only more vulnerable to the dangers of living on the streets. Abuse – physical, emotional, mental etc., - is regarded with more respect and severity; yet many young victims have their plights ignored because it is still seen as socially acceptable to abuse children in the name of 'discipline'. To an extent, society encourages control over youth instead of nurturing them – to care for youth, taking them in and providing for them is seen more of a burden than an act of kindness within this same society.

## **Mistrust of the Government and Systemic Racism**

It has been noted that a majority of the youth that are homeless are those from vulnerable families and populations. Systemic racism is a huge factor for this – it has been reported that black American youth are four times more likely to be victims of homelessness compared to any other ethnic groups (Willison et al., 2024). This is only spurred on by the racist policies the specifically target minority populations and preying on their weaknesses. Even now, many communities are still reeling and trying to heal from the government specifically failing them, eg. Hurricane Katrina, immigration laws, the drug epidemic within vulnerable populations as well as new artificial intelligence hubs being built right on top of water sources for poor

minorities (Patel and Schmidt, 2018). Through the lack of consequences faced by the very people who claim to serve these communities, a feeling of distrust is instilled into their audiences from a very young age. This gets passed down from adult to child, taught as a warning so the youth struggle to fully trust those in positions of authority who state they are there to provide. Through the eyes of adolescents and young adults who are still growing, they see the injustices and decide early on that their needs will never be prioritized by these lawmakers.

### **Aversion to Shelters**

Mistrust in the government and the overall stigma associated with being homeless make it difficult for young people to accept resources that could help them or deter them from going to shelters. These youth are especially vulnerable to sexual and physical assault at these shelters, with 32% youth who faced homelessness being subjected to sexual violence (Winiarski et al, 2021). A lot of youth is under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, and they face bigotry within these shelters as well. For many, it is safer on the streets for this reason. Abuse victims and/or those who have struggled with authority figures in the past also do not like shelters due to the strict enforcement of rules (Winiarski et al., 2021). Without a form of transportation or having someone that could transport them means many of these youth cannot even access these shelters; many are not even aware that these resources exist because of their young age and lack of information. In some states, even gaining access to these shelters requires parental or guardian permission.

### **What Can Be Done**

Homelessness as a whole is a societal and government problem. This means that trying to erase homelessness is very difficult, but these problems make it seem like the unhoused do not deserve to be members of society. Criminalizing homelessness only makes it harder for those unhoused, especially young people, to find a place to stay. The promotion of behavioral interventions can

provide a therapeutic change through helping providers understand the negative factors in these youth's lives (Slesnick et al., 2009). For those struggling with addiction from a young age, it is best to approach them with immense empathy as well as encouraging rehabilitation and therapy. Making resources more accessible and promoting them for awareness is also important.

At the root of it all, extending kindness and compassion to these youth, despite what they are going through is the best option. Breaking the stigma associated with being homeless is a huge step towards change. Society does not view those who are homeless in a good light; youth who are homeless are seen automatically as delinquents just from appearances. In many cases, the stigma is what causes youth to return to a life of transience since they are made to believe they will never succeed (Le and Rew, 2025). To an extent, society doesn't stop the cycle or steps in when needed – this is also something that needs to be changed or at least acknowledged as harmful. Supporting safe and affordable housing for the homeless and viewing a home as a basic human right as opposed to something for those who can only afford it would also help.

## **Conclusion**

There is a lack of focus – or even care – for the issues and reasons why so many resources implemented for homeless youth are often ignored by the populations it's meant to be for. While it is expected for these youth to take advantage of these resources, the underlying issues that cause them to be ousted by those that loved them or made them feel unwanted, unsafe is never addressed. It is said that it takes a village to raise a child; when this village refuses to view said child as a child and demonizes them for behaving like a child, it only makes sense that this child feels safety within the unknown and away from the village's painful clutches.

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