

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At least one out of every twenty high school students enrolled in the School District of Philadelphia has experienced homelessness or has been kicked out or has run-away from home. Left unaddressed, these experiences place these youth at increased risk of dropping out of high school, unemployment, and adult homelessness. In spite of this, little is known about these youth or their experiences. Information on the prevalence and experiences of youth homelessness is needed to inform the development of interventions and policies that promote positive well-being for this vulnerable population.

The purpose of this report is to share data from a Philadelphia-based study of youth homelessness. This report presents responses from Philadelphia public high school students who participated in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in 2009 and 2011. Most of the survey questions focus on risk behaviors ranging from smoking to symptoms of depression. In 2009, three questions related to housing were added to the Philadelphia YRBS:

- Where do you typically sleep at night?
- During the past 30 days, did you live away from your parents because you were kicked out, ran away, were abandoned, or removed from your parents?
- Have you ever considered yourself to be homeless?

Study analyses revealed the following key findings:

- Approximately eight percent of all Philadelphia public high school students reported having experienced homelessness, and almost 11% reported that they had been kicked out, run-away, or been abandoned.
- Youth who reported having ever been homeless and youth who reported having been kicked out, having run away, or having been abandoned, evidenced disproportionately higher rates of physical, mental, and sexual health risk behaviors and higher rates of substance use.
- The percent of youth who reported typically sleeping away from home with a parent more than doubled from 2009 to 2011. The percent of youth who reported typically sleeping away from home

without a parent, i.e., “unaccompanied youth,” more than tripled in the same timeframe.

- The percent of youth who reported being kicked out, having run away, or having been abandoned more than doubled from 2009 to 2011.
- Compared to housed youth, youth who were homeless with their families were:
 - 2.6 times more likely to be forced to have sex;
 - Over three times more likely to get pregnant; and
 - Three times more likely to have attempted suicide.

In addition to data from the YRBS, key stakeholder interviews were conducted to develop a better understanding of the YRBS findings, and how they can be used to inform interventions and policies addressing the needs of youth experiencing homelessness. Many of the stakeholders’ suggestions would cost little or nothing. The YRBS findings, coupled with information from key stakeholders, offer Philadelphia 34 practical solutions that could help homeless and run-away youth both now and in the future. Some of the solutions are:

- Extending after hours school building usage to serve community needs by, for example, engaging parents through community meetings, dinner, and services, etc.
- Including both youth and parents in interventions.
- Ensuring that school staff, social service providers, and families are aware of available resources, including online databases, e.g., <http://www.211sepa.org/>.
- Developing a strategy to effectively reach out to homeless students who are not in shelter through a collaborative process that includes community leadership, students, and families.
- Placing social workers and psychologists in schools.
- The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness using the YRBS in its data strategy to better understand the prevalence and characteristics of youth.
- Developing a safe space for students in each school, and keeping “a door open”



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