

RESEARCH SUMMARY:

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH ADVOCATES TO PREVENT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS



The National Runaway Safeline

The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) operates 1-800-RUNAWAY as 24/7 hotline funded by the government to help young people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. They offer crisis intervention services and referrals through phone calls, texts, chats, emails, and an online forum. NRS staff are available 24/7, all year round, to provide support without judgment.

Youth homelessness is a big problem in the United States with 4.2 million young people experiencing homelessness each year. Alarming, the number of young people who are homeless on their own continues to grow.

NRS worked with the American Institutes for Research to study data collected from more than 100,000 people who interacted with the crisis intervention services program from 2019 to 2023. The study looked at the experiences and challenges of young people using NRS services. It aimed to find out the differences between those in crisis, at risk of homelessness, and already homeless. This information can help communities better support young people and prevent youth homelessness.



Homelessness Risk Status

42% were in crisis, which involved a problem requiring resolution but did not involve housing instability

32% were at imminent risk, meaning they mentioned running away or being forced to leave home

26% were homeless, meaning they did not have a safe or stable place to live





What Did We Find?

DEMOGRAPHICS:

Most of the young people who contacted NRS were under 18 years old, female, and White/Caucasian. More than half were at home and 17% had been homeless before.

HOMELESSNESS RISK STATUS:

Young people in crisis often faced issues like lack of transportation, mental health challenges, and threats of human trafficking. Those at risk of homelessness often dealt with family problems and emotional abuse. Young people who were homeless faced challenges like finding jobs and housing, accessing transportation, risks related to crime and substance use, experiences of neglect, and interactions with the child welfare system.

REFERRALS:

NRS staff help young people find support from family, friends, police, and community services. Young people in crisis were less likely to get referrals than those who were at risk or experiencing homelessness. Young people in crisis—when compared to those who were homeless—were more likely to discuss talking with members of their natural support network and to get referrals to police.

What Do These Findings Mean for Youth and Young Adults Who Are Experiencing or At Risk of Homelessness?

The findings highlight ways for young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness to get the supports they need and ways to contribute to improving youth homelessness systems.

WHEN INTERACTING WITH COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS, YOUNG PEOPLE CAN:

- Reach out to NRS or a local service provider to discuss their challenges with the goal of preventing housing loss.
- Be clear with service providers about their specific needs with the goal of getting connected to the right services.
- Join a local youth advisory board or council to share their experiences and those of other youth and young adults across communities.

WHEN LOOKING TO IMPROVE THEIR STATE AND LOCAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SYSTEMS, YOUNG PEOPLE CAN:

- Share community-based resources with friends who may be encountering challenges that could lead to homelessness.
- Join technical assistance calls hosted by nonprofit organizations focused on youth and young adult homelessness to stay informed, build connections and learn about effective practices and policies across the country.
- Network with peers and colleagues on these calls, at community events, or through advocacy spaces to build relationships, exchange ideas, and collaborate with key stakeholders toward shared goals.
- Remember that experiences of homelessness can be different for everyone, so it is important to look for opportunities to change the narrative and de-stigmatize youth homelessness.