

Homeless in Tucson 2005

Youth and Young Adults on Their Own

A Report Prepared for:
**Tucson Planning Council for the Homeless
Tucson, Arizona**

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Youth and Young Adults on Their Own



Photo courtesy of Our Family Services.

Research suggests that homeless youth are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population with a population estimated to be between 500,000 and 1.3 million young people in the United States each year (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2001). Despite the immensity of youth homelessness, relatively little is known about this population. This report provides a current description of the characteristics and needs of Tucson's homeless youth.

About the Research

The Tucson Planning Council for the Homeless (TPCH) Homeless Youth Committee organized a citywide survey of youth who are homeless or living in temporary housing situations. In April and May of 2005, trained volunteers from agencies representing the TPCH Homeless Youth Committee conducted face-to-face interviews with 458 youth. These interviews took place throughout the Tucson metropolitan area, including emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, meal sites, schools, and street locations. An incentive for participation was given to survey respondents in the form of either a phone card or fast food gift certificates. The survey was based on similar surveys of homeless youth conducted in Tucson in 2002 by the TPCH Homeless Youth Committee. Funding for this study was provided by Every Voice in Action™.

What Do We Mean by Homeless?



Photo courtesy of Stand Up For Klds.

The definition used for this study included a broad range of people, including everyone from those on the street to those who are living with friends or family because they have no other place to go, or who are in housing sponsored by an agency or program. For the purposes of this research, homeless youth were defined as youth and young adults between the ages of 12 and 24, who are homeless with their families, or on their own¹.



Photos courtesy of Stand Up For Klds.

¹ Of the 458 surveys that were administered, 18 youth were currently living at home with one or both parents and 14 respondents failed to meet the age requirement of the survey; consequently, these youth were excluded from the survey. Furthermore, 98 youth (less than 25% of the total sample) indicated they were not currently homeless, yet a closer look at their responses suggested that over half of these youth would meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless.

Who are Tucson's Homeless Youth?



Photo courtesy of Stand Up For Kids.

Homeless youth were most commonly 18 years old, Hispanic/Latino or white, heterosexual, non-married and female. The majority of youth (76%) lived in Tucson before becoming homeless, a finding which validates national research suggesting that most homeless youth stay within a 50-mile radius of their prior home (Baggett & Donough, 1988).

Homelessness among “Youth”

Youth respondents varied greatly in age. The average age of homeless youth interviewed was 17.5 years of age. Fifty percent of the youth were younger than 18, with the majority of youth (48%) between the ages of 17 and 19.

Race/Ethnicity

More than half of the respondents were Hispanic/Latino (42%) or white (30%), while 16% classified themselves as mixed race/ethnicity, seven percent as African American, four percent as American Indian, and one percent as Asian. These percentages are similar to those of the homeless youth surveyed in 2002.

Sexual Orientation

Over 80% of youth identified themselves as heterosexual, nine percent as homosexual, seven percent as bisexual, and one percent as questioning. Importantly, 11% said their sexual orientation was a factor in their leaving home this time.

14 The average age at which youth first became homeless

Marital Status

Five percent of the sample has been married. Of those, thirty-nine percent are still married.

Gender

Females represented more than half of the sample (56%). In 2002, 60% of the sample was female. Less than one percent of the sample (.8%) identified as transgender.

Language

English is the first language for 82% of the youth.

Over
75% of the youth said they would not continue to be homeless if they had a choice

Previous Homeless Experiences

Over 60 percent of the youth have been homeless at least twice during their life, with an average 3.5 times in 2005, up from 1.92 times in 2002. Over half of the youth have spent at least one year of their life homeless; currently, half have been homeless for more than 180 days.

The average age at which youth first became homeless was 14. The main reasons cited for leaving home the first time included running away because of problems (24%), being removed by Child Protective Services (21%), and being kicked out or told to leave the home (20%).

Reasons for Becoming Homeless

Conflict and/or problems with parents were the most common reason youth were currently homeless (54%). This included continual fighting with parents, alcohol or drug addiction of a parent, or concerns with the home environment (e.g., parental illness or crowded living environments). Among homosexual youth, 56% reported ending up homeless because of family problems due primarily to their sexuality. Financial problems (15%), abuse and/or neglect (3%), pregnancy (3%), and youth drug and alcohol problems (2%) were also noted as

common reasons. Interestingly, 35% of youth believed they would be allowed to return home if they wanted to, 27% did not know.

Over 75% of the youth said they would not continue to be homeless if they had a choice, including 68% of those 18 or younger and 71% of those 19 to 24. Interestingly, of those who said they would continue to be homeless, many of the reasons noted included explanations of not wanting to go back to abusive and/or “bad” or “dysfunctional” family homes.

Current Living Situation

The majority of youth were currently homeless alone (47%) or homeless with non-significant others (27%). Twenty-six percent were homeless with family members.

Forty percent of the youth spent the night prior to the survey at a friend’s house, 14% spent the night in an unstable environment (e.g., park, wash, car, street, backyard), and 13% spent the night at a family member’s house. Notably, 10% of the youth did not know where they would be spending the night the night of the interview. Moreover, the safety issue of most concern for youth given their current living situation was that they could be thrown out at any time (52%).

Educational Experiences of Homeless Youth



Photo courtesy of Stand Up For Kids.

Half of the youth (50%) were currently enrolled in school or some other type of educational/training program, including 49% of youth who were homeless on their own. This is down slightly from 2002 in which 56% of youth were enrolled in school and/or an educational program. Additionally, a vast majority of youth currently attending school were passing classes (84%).

Over 20% are currently or have previously been enrolled in special education courses, while another 20% felt they could benefit from a special education or ESL course. Almost 75% of the youth reported having an education level of ninth grade or higher. Of those respondents at least 18 years of age, 30% have completed the 12th grade or beyond. Based on the standard breakdown of grade level, 15% of 16-year-old respondents, 32% of 17-year-old respondents, 33% of 18-year-old respondents, and 69% of 19-year-old respondents were currently below grade level.

Of those not currently attending school, the main reasons youth reported for not being in school was due to a lack of a permanent address and/or difficulties with transportation.

Employment and Income

Primary sources of income include money from family and friends (49%), money from parents (27%), employment (26%), panhandling (21%), or money from an agency/stipend (21%). Over 25% of youth received income from steady employment in 2005, down from 41% in 2002. Over 40% of youth were currently looking for employment. Of those youth not looking for employment, 40% reported already having a job, 39% were attending school, 30% lacked appropriate clothing, 29% lacked transportation, and 20% lacked documentation (e.g., ID cards, birth certificate, etc.).

Early Life Experiences



Photo courtesy of Our Family Services.

The experience of homelessness can be personally debilitating for anyone, particularly for youth. Data collected in this study indicates that homeless youth have many serious challenges as they often report difficult life experiences. Homeless youth struggle not only with housing/shelter problems, but also with abusive pasts, health problems, emotional and/or developmental issues, and financial issues. These problems often lead to participation in risky behaviors like substance use and unsafe sex.

History of Abuse and Neglect

A history of abuse and/or neglect during childhood is unusually common among homeless youth (Hagan & McCarthy, 1998). Among the sample of Tucson's homeless youth, 63% reported experiencing verbal/emotional abuse, 52% said they had witnessed domestic violence in their household, 50% reported witnessing drug/alcohol abuse, 44% reported experiencing physical abuse, 42% experienced neglect, and 25% reported being sexually abused

(19% of females, 6% of males) before the age of 18. When asked whether abuse/neglect was ever a factor in their leaving home, 60% of the youth said yes.

The percentage of youth who were physically mistreated before the age of 18 rose from 32% in 2002 to 44% in 2005. Likewise, the percentage of homeless youth reporting they were sexually mistreated as children increased from 20% in 2002 to 25% in 2005.

History of Placements

Before the age of 18, a significant portion of youth experienced an out-of-home placement. Twenty-eight percent spent time in foster care, 41% spent time in a group home, and 17% spent time in a juvenile correctional or mental health facility. Almost 20% of the youth were under Child Protective Services custody at the time of the interview while 21% have been under CPS custody in the past.

Mental Health & Well-Being Issues



Photo courtesy of Stand Up For Kids.

Twenty-seven percent of the youth felt they need therapy or counseling for emotional/mental health issues at the present time; 19% were currently enrolled with a mental health provider. Just over 25% of the sampled youth have parents who have and/or had mental health problems. Disturbingly, 47% of the youth stated they have considered suicide at some point in their life; 28% have attempted suicide. From 2002 to 2005, the percentage of homeless youth reported to have attempted suicide at some point increased from 20% in 2002 to 28% in 2005. In a closer look, over 71% of youth who identified themselves as either homosexual or bisexual reported thinking about committing suicide with almost 63% ever attempting it. These percentages are significantly higher than heterosexual youth in which 42% considered suicide and 22% attempted it. Additionally, 46% of youth 18 or younger have considered suicide and 28% have attempted it.

Twenty-six percent of youth report needing to see a doctor about a physical health problem, including problems such as HIV/AIDS, asthma, tuberculosis, diabetes, and hepatitis. Of those youth who need health care

47%
of youth stated that they have considered suicide at some point in their life

services but haven't accessed them, 43% reported it was because they couldn't afford the services, 43% reported not having insurance to cover the services, and 35% reported not knowing where to go for services. Alarming, almost half of the youth did not get enough food to eat for at least one day out of the week prior to the interview (47%).

Pregnancy & Sex-Related Activity



Photo courtesy of Our Family Services.

Over half of the youth (54%) had intercourse or oral sex within the preceding three months of the survey, including 46% of those 18 or younger. Approximately 46% of the youth indicated always or most of the time using a condom while 29% use other forms of birth control. Fourteen percent reported rarely or never using a condom while 34% never use other forms of birth control. Moreover, 27% of those 18 or younger reported only sometimes, rarely, or never using a condom while 36% never or rarely use other forms of birth control.

Thirteen percent of the homeless female youth were currently pregnant, with 72% currently receiving prenatal care. Thirty percent of the homeless females have previously given birth, while 13% of the males have previously gotten a partner pregnant. Of the females, 77% currently have custody of their children; of the males who had children (10%), 31% currently have custody of their children.

54% of the youth had intercourse or oral sex within the preceding three months of this survey

Substance Use

Seventeen percent of youth have received treatment/services for drug/alcohol use at some point in time (46% have received services while homeless). Ten percent of the youth felt they currently need treatment for drugs/alcohol. Fifty-four percent of the youth used at least one substance in the past 30 days – the most common substances were alcohol and marijuana.

Community Services



Photo courtesy of Our Family Services.

Services rated “most important” to homeless youth include food (27%), housing (16%), medical/health insurance (15%), school assistance (7%), and transportation (6%). The services used most frequently the 30 days prior to the survey include toiletries (50%), help with transportation (42%), food (36%), clothing (34%), and showers/bathrooms (30%). The three services youth feel they don’t have adequate access to include medical/health insurance (12%), housing (8%),

and food (6%) with such barriers as transportation difficulties (48%), agency restrictions due to age (18%), and lack of information on available services (10%). ■

Drawing from a citywide survey, this report presents a closer look at homeless youth in Tucson. For more information about this report, contact Darrell Peoples, Director of Independent Living at Open Inn, at (520)670-9040 Ext.48.

References

Baggett, G. & Donough, B. (1988). *Oregon runaway and homeless youth project*. Portland, OR: Tri-Country Youth Services Corporation.

Center for Law and Social Policy. (2003). *Leave no youth behind: Opportunities for Congress to reach disconnected youth*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

Hagan, J. & McCarthy, B. (1998). *Mean streets: Youth crime and homelessness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

National Coalition for the Homeless. (2001). *Education of homeless children and youth*. Washington, D.C.: National Coalition for the Homeless.

Community Resources

- **1-866-520-TEEN**
- **Our Family Services (South)**
209 S. Tucson Blvd
Tucson, AZ 85716
520-327-4583
1-800-537-8696
- **Our Family Services (North)**
3830 E. Bellevue
Tucson, AZ 85716
520-323-1708
1-800-537-8696
- **Open Inn**
630 E. 9th Street
Tucson, AZ 85705
520-670-9040
- **Youth on Their Own**
1443 W. Prince Road
Tucson, AZ 85705
520-293-1136
- **Wingspan Anti-Violence Project**
425 E. 7th Street
Tucson, AZ 85705
1-800-553-9387
- **Eon Lounge Youth Center**
520-620-6245
- **LeCroy & Milligan Associates**
620 N. Country Club
Tucson, AZ 85716
520-326-5154
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