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### Time to Acknowledge Homeless Youth

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## Time to Acknowledge Homeless Youth

Madison Frey

**Abstract:** Today, there are many wicked problems that we face. Climate change, phone usage, substance use, and many others. This may lead to us then neglecting some of the other wicked problems that do not directly relate to us. Homelessness is a wicked problem that has been faced for generations, and many have overcome it and went on to talk about their hardships. What is not spoken about so often is homelessness in youth. It is an ugly truth that needs to be recognized and talked about. They face several issues with not only various parts of their health, but aspects of their daily environment. Many may think there is no solution to it or that the solution will not come until the future, but the truth is we can begin fixing this problem right now. There is no single solution to this, but that is what makes it a wicked problem. The clearest solution to homelessness in youth is to use resources like Covenant House and to expand them to more areas so they are more easily accessible for homeless youth. Covenant House not only provides them with everything they need, but they gain the trust of the ones staying with them to maximize their potential success.

**Keywords:** Homeless youth, health, illnesses.

In today's world there are many wicked problems, and many tend to be overlooked with no sense of urgency. Dr. Luke Houghton (2013) defines a wicked problem as a problem that has many different moving parts and complexities, and because of this, there is no single easy solution for the problems. A wicked problem I would like to address is homeless youth. They face several challenges on a day-to-day basis that they are not prepared for with virtually no

help. That may be due to them not knowing of the resources offered to them, or it could also be due to their lack of trust in the system. I believe the first step to the solution is to spread information on homeless youth and the resources offered to them. Many people will see or interact with youth experiencing homelessness at some point in their life, but they may not know what to say or how to help. If someone can say to them “hey, I know of this really good shelter for homeless youth that is not too far from here,” that could change the course of their entire life.

Many issues may stem from homeless youth not using the resources offered to them. One of them being untreated and/or undiagnosed mental illnesses. Winiarski et al. (2020) says homeless youth are at higher risk for experiencing challenging or traumatic events, so they are in more urgent need of mental health services. The researchers conducted a study where they provided counseling sessions for homeless youth who were willing, and they found that the three most common issues throughout each session were depression, anger, and adjustment disorder. The biggest downfall with this study is that most of the people who went for the intake session, or the first session, did not return after that. Though some had continued to return, it begs the question “why did they not come back?” The researchers believe it was because of the length of their sessions (2-3 sessions/week and 4 hours/session), and that a shorter session may have brought them back. They also say homeless youth are more worried about their physical health and sexual health but believe they don’t need treatment for their mental health (Winiarski et al. 2020).

Of course, depression, anger, and adjustment disorder are not the only mental illnesses they may be susceptible to. Being at higher risk for more traumatic situations would ultimately put them at higher risk for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and anxiety. Also, since those who

are homeless and suffer from schizophrenia are under high amounts of stress almost all the time, those who have not experienced schizophrenic episodes before would be likely to have them now. Homeless youth need an easily accessible and secure way to receive mental health treatment, so they learn how important their mental health is.

Another challenge that homeless youth is experiencing is managing their sexual health. Two big obstacles they face are getting access to birth control and preventing the spread of STDs. Santa Maria et al. (2020) found that homeless youth are 6-12 times more likely to get HIV, 2-6 times more likely to get chlamydia, and 1.3-41 times more likely to get gonorrhea, compared to youth not experiencing homelessness. This is due to them acting with more risk than reason. Being at higher risk for STDs means they need to be more careful than others and have their sexual health checked more often to make sure their reproductive organs are still healthy. Kachingwe et al. (2019) discovered during a study on birth control for homeless youth one of the reasons condoms are not often used amongst homeless youth is because they do not have a consistent place to have sex, which factors into why they are at higher risks for STDs. Their study was about showing the process to go through to properly pick birth control for homeless youth and showing what forms of birth control they prefer. The researchers found that they preferred the long-term birth control, like an IUD that needs to be replaced every 3-12 years, instead of the daily pill because they do not trust themselves to take it (Kachingwe et al. 2020). The girls who participated in the study had expressed their gratitude for the health care workers at the end because they did not just provide them with birth control. They gained the trust of each girl and taught them about the different forms of birth control and their sexual health, as well as providing support for them once they have begun. Taking birth control is not as

easy as it may seem because many times it affects a woman's body and their mind, and they realize the girls that are participating need the support system.

Aside from mental illnesses, and sexual health, there are other parts of health that homeless youth must be cautious of as well, like their general health. Beharry (2012) says that homeless youth in a tight living situation with many others (like in a run-down shelter or living in a hotel room with other homeless youth) are at higher risk for several illnesses. Those being asthma, influenza, tuberculosis (20 times higher), hepatitis A, scabies, pneumonia, and lice. Because they mostly rely on fast food to eat, they are also at higher risk for anemia or malnutrition than youth with a stable living condition. Apart from those illnesses, homeless youth has a high rate of substance use. It was found that 70-90% of homeless youth use substances with tobacco in the lead. Also, 33% of them reported injecting the drugs into their veins, but it is the older youth who are more into using crack and/or heroin rather than the younger kids (Beharry 2-3). Homeless youth need more accessible options to keep up with their general health while they are stuck in this tragic situation.

Up to this point, I have been talking about health issues homeless youth are at risk for. I would like to address some of their external conflicts as well. Many of the people I have asked (neighbors, family, and coworkers) think the easiest way to beat homelessness is for them to get a job. There are several holes in the "easy plan." For starters, many of the states in the U.S. require minors to have working papers, which can be obtained (most of the time) in their high school. If a homeless minor is trying to get a job in one of these states and they do not have working papers they will be turned away for employment. Another issue that homeless youth encounter when seeking employment is not a matter of their age but their living status. On every

job application, there is a place where you put your address and, in the past, I never thought about what would happen if I could not fill that space in.

In the summer of 2020, I spent a great deal of time with a close friend who has been suffering from homelessness on and off since high school. That summer I tried to help him get on his feet, but it seemed that his lack of a home address stopped him from getting several jobs. Some employers flat out told him they did not think he would show up. After some time he had found one employer that would accept his friend's home address who also worked there and another employer who was willing to pay him under the table (in cash, rather than through payroll), and neither is ideal or truthful. Some may think that is better than nothing, but homeless youth, and homeless people of any age, deserve to get a fair shot at a job like people who are in stable living conditions. According to Sarah Golabek-Goldman (2017), who attended Yale Law School, my friend, and the many others who experience discrimination in the workplace because of homelessness, should have been protected under both "Title VII in the Civil Rights Act of 1991," and the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act). The point of this article is that the author is trying to promote a "Ban the Address" campaign. It aims to make sure homeless people will no longer be discriminated against by employers because of their living status with both legal and non-legal (meaning not involving law enforcement) tactics. The homeless do not have to deal with this obstacle alone, but it is going to take widespread public support to put a stop to what employers are doing.

Another external struggle that homeless youth must deal with is police interactions. Where I come from there is no reliable shelter for homeless youth. The homeless youth tend to group up, and they bounce around in town from place to place, usually to avoid town law enforcement. Most of the homeless youth I know end up having negative interactions with the police, many

times resulting in criminal charges. Many of the situations started because someone complained about their whereabouts and because the people in our town tend to stick their noses up at the homeless youth. They usually are at the park, one of the gas stations, or one of the laundromats, and if they are at any of the places for too long people do not like it, and it is proven by the frequent police complaints.

Aside from just bad luck, there are other reasons as to why homeless youth would have higher police interactions. Jamie Rae Yoder et al. (2013), a group of social workers from various colleges, found that homeless youth had engaged in higher levels of criminal activity. Homeless youth engage in things like violence, substance use/abuse, prostitution, selling drugs, panhandling, and theft. A number of these crimes could have stemmed from a belief made by suffering from childhood abuse. For example, some homeless youth feel that violence is a crucial part of life to defend themselves, and that may be because they experienced violence in their home while growing up. Another reason for their higher risk of criminal activity is because of the people that the homeless individual is surrounding themselves with (Yoder et al. 7). To find a solution to the higher levels of criminal activity in homeless youth, one would have to change the mindset and thought process they have. Homeless youth are not committing crimes because it makes the day go by faster or because they think it is fun. They commit certain crimes because many times they believe it is their only choice and they do not know what else to do. This is not an issue of character, but it is an issue caused by their environment and their adapted behaviors. The proper solution to this issue, along with many of the others, would be to seek out a counselor.

I have addressed some of the issues that homeless youth face. They face issues with mental health, sexual health, general health, substance abuse, finding employment, increased police

interactions, and many more. An entire book could probably be written about the different challenges that homeless youth face. The question is, what are we going to do about it? Besides taking in the information so you could help homeless youth one day and sharing information about various free clinic counselors, there is a resource that benefits homeless youth in many ways called, Covenant House.

Covenant House is a non-profit youth-based homeless shelter that comes with many opportunities. It of course provides the necessities like food, a shower, a bed, and water. Upon arriving their immediate medical needs are taken care of first, including obtaining health insurance, and then follows the food (available when they come in at any time). Along with physical health treatment, they also provide mental health treatment in the first medical meeting they have. Once the initial needs are taken care of, they begin to have the youth work more in-depth with their counselors. They focus just as much on their mental health as they do their physical health.

Apart from the healthcare, they provide resources that could open up the possibility for better opportunities. One of the resources they provide is legal help from a Covenant House lawyer for those who had received criminal charges before arriving. They also provide other resources like educational programs, job training, and transitional housing. Their educational programs provide tutoring and a GED program, as well as college prep. courses for those who would like to pursue higher education. Their job training program provides appropriate clothing for job interviews, practice resumes and practice interviews, vocal preparation, and assistance finding employment. Finally, their transitional housing stage provides a sense of semi-independence for homeless youth, while also giving them the support they need from Covenant House. They call this stage the “Rights of Passage,” and when accepted into it this transitional housing typically lasts for up

to 18 months. While living semi-independently the individuals can learn how to do things for when they are on their own like buying groceries, cooking and cleaning, and maintaining a house. Covenant House requires those in the “Rights of Passage” to have steady employment and attained their educational requirements. While someone is in transitional housing Covenant House takes a portion of all their checks and puts it in a savings account to be returned when they leave, and they continue to provide counseling along with the various other programs.

While we could sit and come up with various solutions for homeless youth, I think the best one is Covenant House. Each of the issues I spoke about in this paper is addressed and treated by Covenant House. They help with mental health, physical health, legal troubles, educational attainment, occupational attainment, and gaining independence. It is still an expanding resource that has houses in various parts of the world (mainly the U.S.) and this is where our part comes in. If there is an area with a high rate of homeless youth, then think about reaching out to Covenant House for them to build a house near the town that needs it. Since Covenant House is only one company, also think about reaching out to other non-profit youth-based homeless shelters to expand to your town as well. The goal is to address the needs of homeless youth in hopes of ending the cycle. I believe the widespread expansion of youth-based homeless shelters with a variety of programs and resources that better the future of those coming in it would be the best solution for homeless youth.

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