UNACCOMPANIED ADOLESCENTS & HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness exists when people lack safe, stable, and appropriate places to live. Sheltered and unsheltered people are homeless. People living doubled up or in overcrowded living situations or motels because of inadequate economic resources are included in this definition, as are those living in tents or other temporary enclosures.

Introduction
Each year between 2–3 three million people in the United States experience an episode of homelessness (Caton et al., 2005). The psychological and physical impact of homelessness is a matter of public health concern (Schnazer, Dominguez, Shrout, & Caton, 2007). Psychologists as clinicians, researchers, educators, and advocates must expand and redouble their efforts to end homelessness.

The APA Presidential Task Force on Psychology’s Contribution to End Homelessness, commissioned by James Bray, PhD, during his tenure as APA’s president, mission was to identify and address the psychosocial factors and conditions associated with homelessness and define the role of psychologists in ending homelessness.

Background
Some adolescents run away from home due to abuse, while others who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered may be told to leave when they express their sexual orientation (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). Other adolescents have aged out of foster care or juvenile justice placements and have no home or community to return to (Haber & Toro, 2004). With few job skills and limited income, adolescents experiencing homelessness can rarely obtain safe and affordable housing. Living on the streets can amplify maladaptive behaviors (Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999).

- Approximately 7.6% of 12–20-year-olds spend at least one night per year in a shelter facility (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McFeeters, 1998).
- 82% of 14-25-year-olds experiencing homelessness report psychological symptoms including depression, anxiety, and aggression; 43% reported having attempted suicide (Klee & Reid, 1998).
- Youth who exit foster care, either by running away from placements (Nesmith, 2006) or aging out upon turning 18, are likely to end up without stable homes and resort to living on the streets or elsewhere (Mason et. Al, 2003)
- Among a sample of adolescents who ran away, 44% were arrested (Thrane et. al, 2008).

Physical & Mental Health
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects as many as one third of adolescents without homes (Whitbeck, Hoyt, Johnson, & Chen, 2007), as does the co-occurrence of depression and anxiety symptoms with PTSD (Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, & Strauss, 2007).
- Behavioral problems, such as conduct or oppositional defiant disorder, may be even more prevalent than mental health problems (Cauce et al., 2000; McCaskill et al., 1998; Toro & Goldstein, 2000).
- Adolescents without homes who perceive a need for mental health services may not know where or which services to access (Solorio, Milburn, Anderson, Trifskin, & Rodriguez, 2006).
- Because youth lack legitimate sources of income, some may engage in behaviors such as sex work that place them at greater risk for harm (Cauce et al., 2000; DeRosa, Montgomery, Hyde, Iverson, & Kipke, 2001).
- Sexually experienced adolescents without homes for longer periods of time engage in more HIV/AIDS–related high-risk behaviors (Milburn et al., 2006).

Child Welfare & Foster Care
A strong association exists between child welfare involvement and homelessness. Families without homes are more likely than those that are housed to have their children removed and placed in the foster care system (Bassuk et al., 1997).
- Severing bonds between parents and children, including through foster care placement, is a strong predictor of homelessness and emotional dysfunction across the life span (Choca et al., 2004; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002; Herman et al., 1997; Koegel et al., 1995; Rosenfeld et al., 1997).
- Certain shelters that restrict adolescents or male children over a certain age facilitate the breakup of families.
- Adolescents who age out of foster care, especially those removed from their families for long periods of time, may lack a stable home to which to return (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001; Choca et al., 2004).