



**National Network  
For Youth**

## Issue Brief

# Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Reauthorization

### Background

While it is difficult to estimate the number of youth who experience homelessness, evidence suggests that the size of the homeless youth population is substantial and widespread. The U.S. Department of Justice estimated that in 1999, nearly 1.7 million youth had a runaway/throwaway episode.<sup>1</sup> In 1995, the Research Triangle Institute reported a significantly higher number, estimating that 2.8 million youth experience a runaway or homelessness episode over the course of a year.<sup>2</sup>

Youth consistently report family conflict as the primary reason for becoming homeless. Many are compelled to leave their home environments prematurely due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by others in the home. Across studies of homeless youth, rates of sexual abuse range from 17 to 53 percent, and physical abuse ranges from 40 to 60 percent.<sup>3</sup> Others are forced out of the home due to parental disapproval of the pregnancy, parenting status, sexual orientation, school problems, drug or alcohol use, or other circumstances of their children.

Young people who live on the streets have difficulty meeting their most basic needs. In a study of Hollywood street youth between the ages of 13 and 17, 57 percent reported having spent at least one day in the past month with nothing to eat. Homeless youth have difficulty obtaining medical care, continuing their education, finding clothing and maintaining healthy personal hygiene.<sup>4</sup>

Studies have shown that homeless youth are extremely vulnerable to victimization while living on the streets. In a sample of street youth in Hollywood, 42 percent had been physically assaulted and 13 percent had been sexually assaulted.<sup>5</sup> Street youth are also at an increased risk of sexual exploitation. Some homeless youth find that exchanging sex for basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter or protection, is their only chance for survival.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) programs are essential in preventing the victimization of homeless youth and ensuring their access to education, employment training, health care, drug and alcohol treatment, and other social services.

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<sup>1</sup> Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., Sedlak, A. (2002). *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>2</sup> Greene, J., Ringwalt, C., Kelly, J., Iachan, R., Cohen, Z. (1995). *Youth with Runaway, Thrownaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors*. Volume I: Final Report. Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, M., and Toro, P. "Homeless Youth: Research, Intervention, and Policy." Fosburg, L. and Dennis, D. (Eds.), *Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*. Washington, DC:

<sup>4</sup> Greenblat, M. & Robertson, M.J. (1993). Homeless Adolescents: Lifestyle, Survival Strategies and Sexual Behaviors. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 44: 1177-1180.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The RHYA Basic Center program provides grants to community-based nonprofit and public organizations to support emergency shelter (no greater than 15 days) for youth under age 18, and counseling for youth and their families in order to assist them in reuniting with their families or connecting them to alternative supervised settings.

The RHYA Transitional Living program provides grants to community-based nonprofit and public organizations to support longer-term residential supports (up to 18 months), as well as life skill supports to youth ages 16-21 who are unable to return home safely, in order to promote their successful transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency.

The RHYA Street Outreach program (a.k.a. the Sexual Abuse Prevention Program or the Runaway Prevention program) provides grants to community-based nonprofit and public organizations to support street-based outreach and education to runaway, homeless, and street youth who have been sexually abused or are at risk of sexual abuse. The program gets the most vulnerable youth off the streets and connected with services that will ensure a safe and healthy future.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act also establishes and authorizes funding for a national communications system for runaways and their families; regional training and technical assistance for RHYA grantees, youth workers, and other youth-serving agencies; an information clearinghouse; outcome and performance measurement; peer monitoring of grantees and youth development research and demonstrations.

### **New Provisions in Public Law 108-96**

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act was reauthorized and signed into law in October of 2003. The following are significant changes in the law:

- The formula for appropriations will state that Transitional Living Programs may receive no less than 45 percent and no more than 55 percent of the consolidated account. Raising the minimum on funds that TLP can receive from 20 percent to 45 percent is essential to the growth of the program, which has seen increased demand over the years.
- Maternity Group Homes are added as a specific allowable use of Transitional Living Program funds;
- Youth in Transitional Living Programs who are not yet 18 years of age, but have exceeded their 540 day time-limit in the program, will be provided an extension until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday;
- A new plan on strategies to end youth homelessness will be jointly submitted by the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness;
- A new evaluation of the Transitional Living Program will be conducted to identify best practices and measure long-term housing outcomes of participants exiting the program;
- Federal coordination will be strengthened in order to provide youth with greater access to federally funded programs and services, including those under the Workforce Investment Act, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, Medicaid, and McKinney-Vento's Education for Homeless Children and Youth;
- The 20-bed maximum in Basic Centers can be exceeded when "a state or local regulation requires a higher maximum to comply with licensure requirements for children and youth serving facilities";
- Basic Center programs may not provide shelter to youth over age 18;
- The RHYA program will be authorized at \$105 million for FY 2004, and "such sums as necessary" for FY 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008.

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