

# First Build Trust

Helping Homeless Youth



Participants in YouthCare's job training program learn how to brew espresso.

Maggie Jones

**E**stimates suggest that on any given night in Seattle between 500 and 1,000 young people are without a safe place to sleep. These youths range from age 12 to 24 and come from all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Unlike homeless adults, youth are rarely on the streets because of personal economic hardships. More often they have identified the streets as a safer option than their homes. A study conducted in 2000 by the University of Washington found that of the youth entering shelters in King County, where Seattle is located, more than half of the respondents indicated that family conflict was a key reason they had left home. Often abuse or neglect was a source of this conflict, according to Michael Kabsich, program director at YouthCare, a Seattle service organization working with homeless youth. Other commonly cited underlying reasons for youth homelessness include difficulties placing youth in safe, quality foster care environments and the high cost of housing, especially in large cities such as Seattle.

## Public health costs

Once on the street, young people are at high risk of becoming severely injured or ill from such things as assault, HIV/STIs, drug overdosing, and airborne illnesses. Without a support structure and means to access necessary resources, homeless youth are also more likely to become involved in high-risk behaviors, such as crime, sex work, and drugs. Aside from physical health risks, the stresses of street life, in addition to any childhood trauma, interfere with positive adolescent development, potentially resulting in long-term mental health issues, chronic homelessness, and addiction.

The societal and public health costs of not providing services to homeless youth are mostly long term. As youths become accustomed to street life, they are less likely to pursue education

or to start a career. This tendency, coupled with the increased likelihood that they will become injured, ill, or involved with high-risk behaviors, raises the potential for increased public costs in the form of incarceration, emergency hospital care, and welfare assistance. Because of the individual health risks of life on the street and of the long-term societal costs, early intervention is crucial for both homeless youth and society.

## Serving youth

YouthCare, a Seattle nonprofit founded in 1974, was the first shelter for homeless youth in the western United States. To meet the needs of this vulnerable population, YouthCare offers a variety of services including street outreach, residential housing, and employment training. Kabsich conservatively estimates that YouthCare serves about 1,000 youths each year—about 800 through the Orion Center (its drop-in center), 200 through its housing programs, and 50 in its barista training and education program. Additionally, it makes 14,000 outreach contacts a year. The programs are funded through a combination of government support and private donations. YouthCare is the City of Seattle's biggest partner in providing services to homeless youth.

The comprehensive services provided by YouthCare are a major strength of the organization. Kabsich states, "When everything is internal, you have much more control over the referral process. For example, if we had only the drop-in center, we could refer kids to housing but couldn't be sure of the occupancy or the process for applying. This uncertainty could add barriers for the kids." Although it is difficult to measure the long-term effect of services provided to this transient population, Kabsich believes that "by offering diverse services, we can simplify the process for the kids and see them through the entire

## Homelessness Defined

Homelessness for this population is defined as not having a consistent residence over the past 30 days or not being certain they can stay in their current residence for the next 30 days (for example, sleeping on a friend's couch).

continuum of services—from being homeless to having a job and finding an affordable apartment at a market price.”

To engage youth in these services, staff at YouthCare must work to build rapport and relationships with them. Kabsich notes “We have a small window of time to establish rapport with these kids.” Initially youth come to YouthCare because they hear about services. However, they continue to use the services only if they make a connection with the staff. The youths become invested in a program when they have a trusting relationship with staff, and they identify the environment as a safe place.

This relationship, although vital, is not always easy to cultivate. Homeless youth often associate adults with their negative experiences at home, leading to a distrust of all adults. Kabsich believes that “ultimately, to exit street life, the youth need to be able to connect with adults in a positive, healthy way.” He adds that this may be the *most* important skill for the youth to learn. At the Orion Center, Kabsich says, “Initially, we don’t ask the kids to trust us, but we let them know that we will work to earn their trust.” If staff successfully build rapport with a youth during the first visit, that youth is more likely to become invested in one of YouthCare’s programs.

Each of YouthCare’s programs has a different purpose, but overall, the nonprofit aims to establish rapport with homeless youth, stabilize their current situation, and help them move to the next step by identifying concrete goals—to help youth “work on their stuff.” Because youth are on the street for many different reasons and have different needs, this process is individualized through case management.

Since the services have an individual focus, YouthCare measures the organization’s success by the success of the individuals using their services. This entails reviewing the youths’ current situation and assessing what they have accomplished. For example, two months of sobriety for someone struggling with a methamphetamine addiction might be a huge success; but for an occasional user, it might be insignificant. Success is measured by individual progress and forward momentum.

In Seattle, Kabsich believes, “The biggest unmet need for homeless youth is the opportunity to develop marketable skills that will enable them to afford market-rate housing.” YouthCare addresses this need through its Youth Barista Training and Education Program. YouthCare focuses on barista training because, in Seattle, barista positions tend to be low-barrier jobs with frequent job openings. Although the barista program is successful, additional opportunities are needed for youth to develop marketable skills that will help them make a livable wage. In King County, to afford a

one-bedroom apartment, a person needs to make about \$12 an hour. Even if youths are working full time at a minimum wage job, they will be unable to afford independent housing. A livable wage is fundamental for young people to be able to afford housing and get off of the street.

Housing, education, and employment training services are crucial to help homeless youth transfer out of street life, but frontline emergency—or crisis intervention—services are still, arguably, the most important services to provide. Before youths can take advantage of the education and employment training, their situations first need to be stabilized. Crisis intervention services help stabilize youth and provide them the physical and emotional space to focus on long-term planning, such as finding housing and employment.

### Implications for public health

In the past decades, the image of street youth has changed. As a result, outreach and programs for this population need to be marketed differently. Currently, in King County more than half of the youth entering shelters and accessing other services are white. However, homeless youth advocates stress that this does not mean that more white youth are homeless. Many young people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, although living in inadequate conditions (such as sleeping on a relative’s couch), do not identify as being homeless. When they walk into a drop-in center and see groups of primarily white youth who identify with street culture, they do not feel like they belong there and often feel an element of shame as a result of being categorized as homeless. Agencies serving the homeless youth population need to consider whom they are serving and whom they need to be serving and customize their outreach approaches and programs accordingly.

Regardless of whether homeless youth are on the street or couch-surfing, everyone working with this population needs to remember that we cannot shortcut relationship building. Building rapport takes time, but to successfully offer services to this vulnerable population, we must first build trusting relationships. ■

### Selected Seattle Organizations Working with Homeless Youth

Catholic Community Services.  
[www.ccsww.org/aha/homeless.php](http://www.ccsww.org/aha/homeless.php)

Mockingbird Society.  
[www.mockingbirdsociety.org](http://www.mockingbirdsociety.org)

New Horizons Ministries.  
[www.nhmin.org](http://www.nhmin.org)

Peace for the Streets by Kids from the Streets.  
[www.psk.org](http://www.psk.org)

YouthCare.  
[www.youthcare.org](http://www.youthcare.org)

### Author

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### Resources

Background on Homeless Youth. Seattle Human Services Department.  
[www.seattle.gov/humanservices/fys/homelessyouth/default.htm](http://www.seattle.gov/humanservices/fys/homelessyouth/default.htm).

Homeless Youth Fact Sheet. National Coalition for the Homeless (June 2006).  
[www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/youth.pdf](http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/youth.pdf).

Sanchez RP, Waller MW, Greene JM. Who runs? A demographic profile of runaway youth in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 2006; 39:778–781.