

Invisible youth

When a youth is living in a runaway shelter, or abandoned building, or on the streets, life is a daily struggle to survive.

The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates there are 1.6 million homeless and unattached youth in the United States ages 16 to 21. About 2 percent of the total youth population fits this category. Although statistics are difficult to track, there are an estimated 35,000 youth unattached from families in Indiana. They are more likely to experience unplanned pregnancies, drop out of school, abuse drugs, suffer from serious illness and be victims of crime. Some even commit criminal acts to obtain basic necessities.

Cheryl Hall-Russell of the Indiana Youth Services Association examines the plight of these unaccompanied youth who seldom have adults in their lives to depend on.

The association urges the legislature to:

- Adopt a legal definition of unattached youth.
- Form a commission to study the problem in Indiana.
- Extend the time limit for notifying parents when a homeless, runaway or unattached youth has an encounter with a formal agency from 24 hours to 72 hours to match federal guidelines.
- Give teens the same priority response as younger children to allegations of abuse.
- Study how other states in the region handle issues of unattached youth.

INDIANA LAW

• "Homeless" and "runaway" are not defined by law in Indiana. If children or youth leave home without reasonable cause and without permission from parents or guardian, they are classified as delinquent.

• Runaways can be taken to a place designated by juvenile court, with parents notified immediately. Children or youth can be declared delinquent and placed under supervision by Department of Child Services or probation department.

• An emergency shelter for children may not operate without a child-caring institution license from Department of Child Services.

• The child-caring institution must document efforts to notify parents, guardian or placing agency within 24 hours of a child's admission. If parents or guardian cannot be located, the shelter must notify the local Child Protection Services office within 24 hours.

• No data on unaccompanied youth are collected statewide.

Source: Indiana Youth Services Association