

NO PLACE TO CALL HOME

Teen homelessness is on the rise across the country. What can be done about it?

BY JESSICA PRESS AND REBECCA ZISSOU

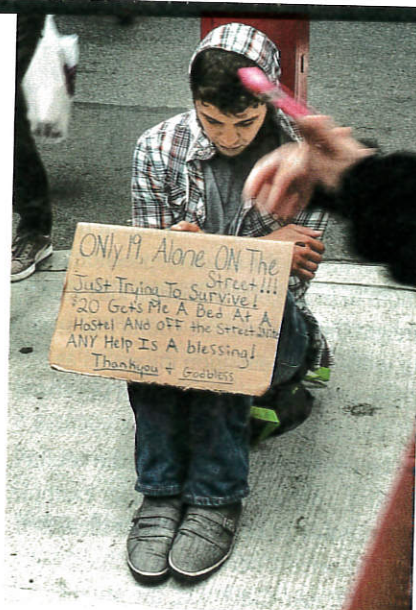
The first night Han* slept in a homeless shelter, she cried into her pillow for hours. Then 17, Han had grown up in an abusive environment in Ogden, Utah. Her mother, she says, would often lash out at her—both physically and verbally. As a result, Han was in constant fear for her life.

With no family members able to take her in and nowhere else to turn, she eventually made the gut-wrenching decision to run away. She packed as much as she could fit into a backpack—some clothes, a toothbrush, and a comb—and set out for a nearby homeless shelter.

Looking back on her first night there, Han, now 18, recalls lying on a wooden bunk bed in a room with three other girls. At the time, she was overwhelmed by a combination of fear, sadness, and relief.

"I knew I was finally safe," she says. "But at the same time, I felt like I'd just lost everything."

Han was one of an estimated 700,000 American teens ages 13 to 17 who experience homelessness each year. In some cases, parents are homeless along with their children. But many teens are on the streets alone. Without a permanent home with their families,



A homeless teen asks for help on the streets of New York City.

they're forced to move from one friend's house to another or to sleep in shelters, cars, or motels. Sometimes, they even have to sleep outside—in parks or alleys.

Like Han, most homeless teens have run away to escape abuse or a family member's drug or alcohol problems. Others have been kicked out after clashing with a parent over their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

When teens are homeless on their own, they face unique—and

*Last names have been withheld for privacy.

Watch a video about two teens who were homeless on UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

staggering—challenges. They often suffer from severe stress, depression, addiction, or loneliness. Many of them lack a strong support system, such as trusted friends and relatives they can turn to for help. Some struggle to stay in school, putting their ability to get future jobs in jeopardy.

“Young people experiencing homelessness have typically dealt with many forms of trauma and adversity,” says David Howard of Covenant House, an organization that provides support for homeless teens. “These young people may not have a home, but they do have hopes, dreams, and determination.”

Sleeping on the Streets

The U.S. has dealt with teen homelessness for generations. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, more than 250,000 homeless kids rode freight trains across the country in search of work. Their situation improved as more jobs became available in the 1940s.

Today, youth homelessness appears to be rising in many areas of the country. In King County, Washington, for example, the number of homeless teens increased by 700 percent between 2016 and 2017. In San Diego, California, the number

jumped by about 40 percent in that time.

The problem even extends to college campuses. A recent national survey found that nine percent of university students were homeless in the last year.

One reason for the apparent increase, experts say, is that communities are getting better at collecting data on the number of homeless teens. That’s a good thing, notes Howard: Having accurate figures is the first step toward addressing the problem. Still, authorities agree that the number of kids in crisis remains alarmingly high.

While the causes vary, homeless

hungry,” he recalls. “I cried every night.”

Through it all, Savohn continued to go to school. Depending on where he’d stayed the night before, he sometimes walked 20 miles to get to class—a journey that took about 5 hours. He couldn’t afford to take a bus, so on those days he forced himself to wake up at three in the morning to make it to his first class.

At the time, he desperately tried to hide his situation. “I didn’t tell anybody,” he says. “I felt embarrassed.”

Still, Savohn remained focused on school and his passion for singing, dancing, and acting. All that hard



Savohn, now 20, spent months living on the streets in Orlando, Florida.

teens tend to have one thing in common. Most have few people—if anyone—they can rely on for help.

That was certainly the case for Savohn. The summer before his senior year of high school in Orlando, Florida, Savohn says, he had a huge fight with his mom and was kicked out of his house.

For months, he moved from one place to another, carrying his belongings in a tote bag. Sometimes he got lucky and was able to stay with friends or his older sister. But on other nights, he slept on a bench at a bus stop. “It was hard to fall asleep because I was so

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Organize a Fund-Raiser Host a charity basketball or softball tournament to raise money for homeless teens. Then donate the funds to a group that helps young people in crisis, such as StandUp For Kids (standupforkids.org) or Covenant House (covenanthouse.org).

Help Prepare Meals Organize a group of your friends or family members to help out at a local food pantry, soup kitchen, or homeless shelter. Not sure where to start? Feeding America (feedingamerica.org) has a network of locations all over the country.

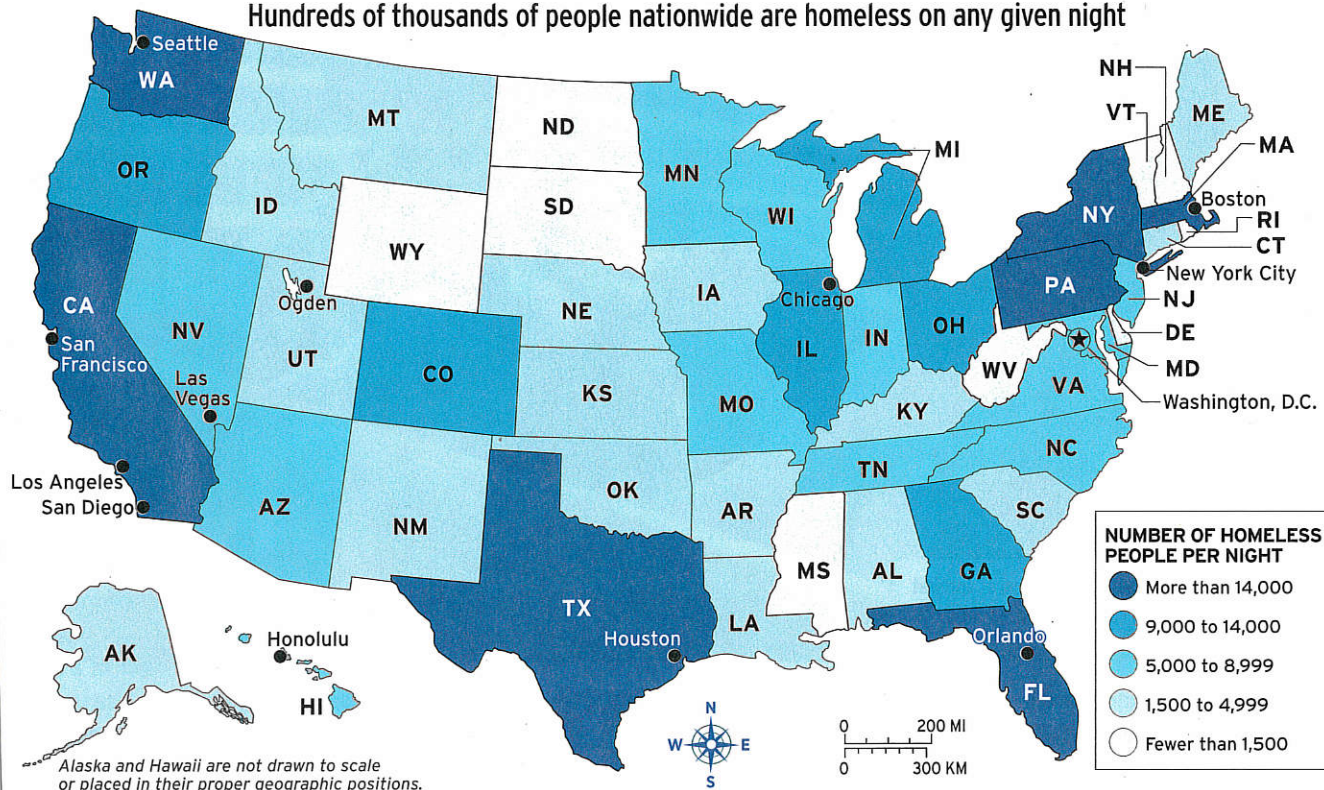
Collect Supplies Gather socks, toothbrushes, or other items to give to homeless people. Visit charitynavigator.org to find a group that distributes goods to the homeless in your area.



Volunteers at a soup kitchen in Camden, New Jersey, bag to-go meals for homeless people in their community.

HOMELESSNESS IN THE U.S.

Hundreds of thousands of people nationwide are homeless on any given night



work is finally paying off.

Today, Savohn, now 20, is a freshman at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, a performing arts college in New York City. He says he hopes to put the past behind him: "It's like starting a new life."

'Not Broken'

Many experts agree that the U.S. can end teen homelessness—but it will require a lot of work. For one thing, they say, the government must do more to ensure that young people can get help *before* becoming homeless. That includes increasing access to—and funding for—mental health services, counseling for drug or alcohol addiction, and job training.

There's also a need for more shelters for homeless teens who are on their own. Nationwide, only 4,000 shelter beds are available to homeless youths

who aren't accompanied by their families, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless, forcing many youths to sleep on the streets.

Working to end stereotypes about homeless people is another important part of the solution, says Howard of Covenant House.

"There's often a sense that these young people are sort of broken," he says. "But these are not broken people. They're young people who've experienced incredible hardships. And we can help them." (See "How You Can Help," facing page.)

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Despite the challenges ahead, experts say that some progress has already been made. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has awarded tens of millions of dollars to dozens of cities across the country in the hopes of finding innovative solutions to teen homelessness. Such strategies

could then be shared nationwide.

Last year, for example, San Diego received nearly \$8 million to help create a system to quickly link homeless teens to housing and other services.

Never Give Up

During Han's 11 months at the youth shelter, she met regularly with therapists. With their guidance, she continued to go to school and signed up for activities to strengthen her leadership skills. And she gratefully accepted food and school supplies from the shelter.

That support helped Han graduate from high school at the top of her class and win scholarships to college. Today, she's a freshman at Weber State University in Utah, where she studies political science. She says her struggle taught her about her inner strength and the importance of asking for help.

"You might be at the worst point in your life right now," she says. "But eventually it's going to get better. Never ever, ever give up." •