

HOMELESS

Youth Living on the Streets

Gail Snyder





About the Author

Gail Snyder is a freelance writer and advertising copywriter who has written more than twenty-five books for young readers. She has a degree in journalism from Pennsylvania State University and lives in Chalfont, Pennsylvania, with her husband, Hal Marcovitz.

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For more information, contact:

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CHAPTER 1

Why Do Some Young People Lack Homes?

Natalie grew up in a rural region of Washington State, yet “big-city” problems found her after the fourteen-year-old’s father left his family. Upset by her husband’s abandonment, Natalie’s mother found comfort in drugs and alcohol, leaving Natalie in charge of her four younger brothers and sisters. “If she wasn’t drunk or high, she was gone,”⁶ Natalie says. As any young teenager would, the girl struggled with the responsibility of meeting her needs and those of her family members. The middle school student soon fell behind on her schoolwork.

She dropped out of school and became friendly with people who used methamphetamine, a popular drug that is highly addictive and known to cause users to lose their ambition. By the time she was seventeen, Natalie was no longer welcome at home, particularly by her mother’s new boyfriend. Natalie was homeless. She was willing to go wherever she could find a place to stay, sometimes exchanging sex for a place to sleep. Sometimes she slept in an outdoor shed. Her situation was so dire that when she ended up in juvenile detention after being arrested, a development that most teens would dread, she found herself welcoming the experience because she knew she would have a bed and food to eat. Still, she dreamed about the normal life she had known before her father left and her mother fell into addic-

tion. She says, “I want to be home with my mom, and I want to stop using, and I want to be clean with my mom. I want to be able to see my siblings.”⁷

The circumstances that led to Natalie’s homelessness and its horrors are not unique. They are shared by many other young people who find themselves enduring a chaotic home life, parental abandonment, mental health issues, addiction, and reliance on criminal activities to earn money.

“I want to be home with my mom, and I want to stop using, and I want to be clean with my mom. I want to be able to see my siblings.”⁷

—Natalie, homeless teen

Homelessness Among the LGBTQ Community

One common characteristic among many young people who live on the streets is that they feel like outcasts from society. Often this feeling arises even before they become homeless. This is true of many LGBTQ youth, who leave their home because they find themselves no longer accepted by their parents and other family members.

Young people in the LGBTQ community make up a small fraction of the teen population—just 7 percent—but they account for up to 40 percent of homeless youth. When young people come out to their parents—meaning they disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity—as many as half of them find their news is met with disapproval, according to the New York City–based advocacy group True Colors United. Says Nick Seip, a True Colors United staff member, “Conflict within the family is one of the most frequently cited reasons young people experience homelessness. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, the conflict is often around their sexual orientation or gender identity.”⁸

Among the young people in the LGBTQ community who left home was Elegance Bratton. When he was sixteen years old, his parents learned he was gay. They soon pressured him to start dating girls. Unwilling to live his life according to their expectations, Bratton chose to leave his family’s home in Jersey City, New Jersey. Bratton fled to nearby New York City, where he



Young people in the LGBTQ community account for up to 40 percent of homeless youth. This is because they leave their homes when they find themselves no longer accepted by their parents.

discovered a community of other people like him—people who were Black and gay—in the city’s Christopher Street area.

Bratton spent the next ten years of his life wandering New York City streets—homeless yet at least feeling part of a community of other young people who shared his lifestyle. “I landed in a place where, for the first time in my life, people were excited to see all of me,” he says. “The fact that I was gay was celebrated; the fact that I was a Black male was celebrated. It was the first time in my life where my intersectional identities were really able

to co-mingle, and I felt like a complete person.”⁹ Bratton was eventually able to find a career and a home. He enrolled in college, and after graduation he pursued a career as a filmmaker.

“The fact that I was gay was celebrated; the fact that I was a Black male was celebrated.”⁹

—Elegance Bratton, former homeless teen

As a young Black man, Bratton was a member of another demographic pushing him toward homelessness. Black youth

have an 83 percent greater chance of being homeless than young people who are White. Poverty is one reason for widespread homelessness among the community of young Black people, but financial hardship is not the sole reason for homelessness among Black youth. Additional problems that factor into the higher rate of homelessness for Black teens are issues such as housing discrimination, higher rates of incarceration among Black family members, a higher school dropout rate, and a greater likelihood that a Black youth will have spent time in the criminal justice system or foster care. Says a report by the MacArthur Foundation, a Chicago, Illinois-based organization that studies social issues, “More than one-third of homeless youth report prior involvement with the juvenile justice system and more than half reported being arrested since turning 18. . . . Youth of color make up one-third of adolescents in the US but two-thirds of juveniles who are incarcerated.”¹⁰

The Failures of Foster Care

Among the factors that lead young Black people, as well as many other youths, into homelessness are the failures of the foster care system in America. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, about 437,000 young people were living in foster care in 2018. And according to a study by the Baltimore, Maryland-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, in 2018 Black youths made up 14 percent of the childhood population in America, yet they accounted for 23 percent of the young people in foster care.

The foster care system is intended to provide a safety net for young people whose parents can no longer care for them. These reasons may include the death of parents or other caregivers, such as grandparents—circumstances that occur in the lives of one-third of youths in foster care. Other reasons that lead to young people being sent to foster homes include physical abuse by their parents, drug or alcohol addictions by their parents, abandonment by their parents, and the incarceration of their parents.

When these factors occur, local social services agencies run by city or county governments step in—often at the direction of the courts—to take custody of the young people and find homes for them with foster parents.

Foster parents awarded care of young people are provided with financial assistance from those government agencies to meet the needs of the youths in their care. Social workers are assigned to each case. They find foster parents willing to care for young people—sometimes in private homes but other times in group homes, which provide housing for several foster youths.

Foster care parents are legal guardians until the young person's parents can resume responsibility for his or her care or the young person in their care reaches age eighteen. The arrangement is not meant to last, and its temporary status makes it more difficult for young people to experience stable home lives. And while many young people do develop healthy and loving relationships with their foster parents, many young people never find themselves comfortable in their foster homes. Certainly, some foster parents fail to do an adequate job of meeting the needs of the young

“A foster child is already taught that you don’t speak up. It’s dangerous.”¹¹

—Amy, former foster child

people in their care. And some foster care placements end up being as traumatic as the original situations that led to the child or adolescent being removed from the care of their parents. A young woman named Amy says she spent seven years in several foster homes and seldom found foster parents to

be loving individuals. Instead, in her experience, her foster parents were often stern and demanding. She says, “A foster child is already taught that you don’t speak up. It’s dangerous. And don’t forget that mom or dad already gave you up, so best to shut your mouth, or you could end up moving again.”¹¹

Aging Out of Foster Care

Even in the best cases, though, in which young people in foster care do find loving and caring environments, when they reach age

Coming Out Cost Him His Home

Each year about 550,000 youths and young adults under age twenty-five spend at least a week in homelessness, according to the Washington, DC-based nonprofit, the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Chasten Buttigieg, a gay youth, was one of them. In high school he tried to keep a low profile. Still, his fellow students made homophobic comments. After starting community college, Chasten summoned the courage to tell his parents he was gay. Rather than speak to them, he told them in a letter.

Chasten, who is now married to US secretary of transportation Pete Buttigieg, recalls that his mother wept at the news, his father was silent, and his brothers made loud objections. The resultant tense atmosphere led Chasten to abruptly leave home. For a few months, he cobbled together a hasty arrangement of couch surfing and living in his car, until his mother begged him to come home. His parents were able to accept his homosexuality, but the rift with his brothers has endured. His younger brother Dustin says, "We never got over it. I want the best for him. I just don't support the gay lifestyle."

Experts note that being gay is not a lifestyle. It is as much a part of who a person is as one's height, weight, and hair color.

Quoted in Ellen McCarthy, "Chasten Buttigieg Has Been a Homeless Community College Student and a Starbucks Barista. Now, He Could Be 'First Gentleman,'" *Washington Post*, May 1, 2019. www.washingtonpost.com.

eighteen they no longer qualify for foster care. Once they reach that age, the social service agencies cease providing financial aid to their foster parents. In most cases this means they must leave the system and go out on their own, even though they may be unprepared to live independently. Some twenty-three thousand young people a year find themselves aging out of the foster care system, and many of them become homeless. That is how Kevinee Gilmore found herself scared, homeless, and without skills at age eighteen. Her foster mother could no longer keep her once her living expenses were no longer covered.

Gilmore had been placed in foster care when her mentally ill mother and abusive stepfather were deemed unfit parents and

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ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

www.chapinhall.org

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago works with government, nonprofits, philanthropists, and others to research challenges experienced by children and families. Its website offers reports on homelessness and foster care youth, ways the pandemic is affecting families, and more.

Covenant House

www.covenanthouse.org

The nonprofit Covenant House offers housing and support services to seventy-four thousand young people each year. Its website offers information on the factors that lead to youth homelessness and how Covenant House is addressing them and shares stories of teens who have benefited from the agency's services.

DoSomething

www.dosomething.org

DoSomething describes itself as a global movement of young people making positive change. Homelessness and poverty are two of the many social ills the organization deals with. Students can find information on understanding youth homelessness, a sheet containing eleven facts about homeless teens, and multiple ways students can get involved with helping out local homeless shelters.

National Alliance to End Homelessness

<https://endhomelessness.org>

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to prevent and end homelessness in the United States. Its website offers information on the causes

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