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A Lost Generation

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A Lost Generation

Abstract

America is in immediate danger of throwing away a vast number of our young people; these are kids who have fallen through the gaping holes in our social services net and have landed on our streets. They roam this country by the thousands in search of simple necessities such as food and a warm place to sleep, often trading their bodies in exchange for the most basic of human rights. In the words of Michael Stoops, Director of Community Organizing at the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, DC, "there is a dire need for more shelter beds for homeless youth." In fact, we are in danger of producing another "Lost Generation," and the process is fueled by our own apathy, neglect, and lack of decisive action. Furthermore, it is a damning testimony of abiding intolerance in our society that LGBT young people are wildly disproportionately represented among homeless youth in America. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

LGBT, homelessness, homeless youth, homeless children, LGBT Rally for Homeless Youth

Disciplines

Social Work



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A Lost Generation

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The numbers vary from study to study, and annual "point-in-time" counts by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, amongst other agencies, attempt to number all homeless individuals who can be found on a given winter night in shelters, on the streets, etc. HUD's 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, for example, found that on a single January night in 2013, 138,149 children under the age of 18 were identified as homeless. Another 61,541 were between 18-25 years of age. Of the combined children and youth aged under 25, 46,924 were unaccompanied by an adult; according to this survey, 23,461 of these unaccompanied children and youth were unsheltered in 2013.

These numbers alone are troubling enough; unfortunately, they may not tell half the story of America's new Lost Generation. One of the primary weaknesses of such surveys, of course, is that many people without conventional housing often make it their business not to be identified as "homeless," with all the perils and pitfalls which come with that label. This is even more true for homeless minors, who are often on the street precisely because they found their own homes and government surrogates unsafe or unwelcoming, and who wish to avoid contact with any authorities for fear of falling afoul of law enforcement and being forced to return to places they have fled.

Indeed, many of the front-line social service agencies and organizations dealing with homelessness argue strenuously that such point-in-time numbers can be misleading, at best. The National Coalition for the Homeless, for example, asserts an annual estimate of half a million homeless youth in the United States, 20-40 percent of whom are LGBT. This is a stark reality check considering that, by some counts, we might reasonably determine that there are some 4,000 available beds dedicated to young people in suitable shelters.

Any way you slice it, the need for shelter and services for homeless children and youth far outstrips the supply.

A recent campaign in Cleveland highlighted the epidemic of homeless youth with installations of mannequins designed to raise public awareness: Huddled in public spaces and shrouded by hooded sweatshirts, the hauntingly life-like statues proved invisible to many passers-by, who are inured to the tragedy of homelessness in America, hardened and perhaps terrified by these daily reminders of the shortcomings of the American Dream so common in our urban centers, and increasingly obvious in our suburban and rural areas, as well. The sweatshirts themselves underscored the desperate situation homeless teens often find themselves in, carrying messages steeped in the pathos of this grim reality, such as the iconic and gut-wrenching "Survival Sex Is How I Find A Place To Sleep."

A LGBT Rally for Homeless Youth on Monday June 2, at 6:00 p.m. in Washington Square Park in New York City is intended to raise awareness of the needs of homeless young people in America today. Bringing attention to the problem is an obvious first step in developing pragmatic plans to confront these harsh realities. Moreover, the National Campaign for Youth Shelter is calling for immediate practical action on behalf of our young people, including a national drive to provide, by law, automatic and immediate access to safe shelter to any person under 25. In short, this campaign takes as its operating premise that no young person in America should be forced to live on the streets. In order to attain this goal, this campaign requires a commitment to bringing the available beds and services in the United States into line with the enormous needs and challenges we face as a nation; in the short term, this would require adding at least 22,000 spaces, which is more than five times those now dedicated to homeless youth. Finally, The Campaign for Youth Shelter is fighting for more accurate and comprehensive attempts to enumerate homeless youth in America.

Hope and opportunity should be the birthright of every American; far too many of our children are denied this legacy, and are being shorn of their innocence and thrown away.

The time for action is now.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-fee/a-lost-generation_b_5400625.html