

New Study Shows That One-Third Shelter Youth Have Been Institutionalized; Almost One-Half Suffered Violence in the Home

New York – In one of the largest-ever studies of homeless youth in New York City history, researchers at Columbia University’s Center for Homelessness Prevention, in partnership with Covenant House – the City’s largest agency serving street youth, offer a stark portrait of youth disconnected from the world of work and education and with intense histories of family violence.

“This has got to be a wake-up call for all of us who care about kids,” said Kevin M. Ryan, President of Covenant House. “Half of our kids are reporting violence in the home. One in five report being beaten by an object. These kids shared experiences with us that no young person should have to experience.”

This joint study is the first released by the Covenant House Institute, established last year to advance research on homeless youth through research partnerships. The study included 444 youth between the ages of 18 and 21 who entered the Covenant House Crisis Shelter for the first time between October 2007 and February 2008.

Other findings from the study revealed much about the path that leads young people to Covenant House in New York:

- 35 percent had a history of foster care or other institutional placement, averaging three placements and an average of four years. The average of the first placement was nine years old.
- 68 percent lacked a high school diploma and 77 percent were not currently enrolled in school.
- 38 percent of youth did not have a birth certificate, 29 percent did not have a social security card, and 57 percent did not have Medicaid.

The report singled out for criticism a budget proposal by New York Governor David Patterson to slash support for runaway and homeless youth services. “It’s appalling,” said Mr. Ryan of the proposed cuts. “Mayor Bloomberg understands we can’t balance the State budget on the backs of homeless youth, and he’s right. We hope the Governor will reconsider after he hears about the suffering so many of these kids have endured.”

“As disturbing as these results are, this collaboration with Columbia University is an incredible step forward in our efforts to help kids and impact policy,” said Bruce Henry, Executive Director of the Covenant House Institute. “This is an in-depth look at who our kids are, their experiences, their backgrounds, and their needs. Four out of five who came to us at Covenant House in New York City are unemployed. It is our job to use this knowledge to build better programs and better policies that these kids need and deserve.”

“This is a ground-breaking study,” said Howard Andrews, Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Biostatistics at Columbia. “I have been involved in many projects that can help inform policy in the long-term. This study has immediate policy implications. This is a perfect example of how academia and an organization that does great work can collaborate to truly inform homeless policy.”

“Early intervention is crucial to prevent at-risk youth from becoming chronically homeless adults,” said Dr. Carol Caton, Professor of Clinical Public Health at Columbia University and the Director of the NIMH-funded Columbia Center for Homelessness Prevention Studies. “The young people in this study are at a critical period in their lives, a time when they are at their most vulnerable. The findings will help us implement programs specifically designed to help young people into the mainstream and make them self-sufficient.”

“For many of the kids who come to our shelter, we have to start over,” said Jerry Kilbane, Executive Director of Covenant House New York. “They come to us with so many needs. But they also come to us with a tremendous spirit, and a desire to be acknowledged as the good people they are. This study gives us a better look at their family environments and will help us develop strategies for connecting them back to the world of work and education. I’m very grateful to our partners at Columbia University for their collaboration.”

Founded in 1972, Covenant House is the largest privately funded agency in the Americas helping homeless kids, providing 24/7 crisis care and ongoing support at 21 facilities, www.NINELINE.org, Covenant House NINELINE (1-800-999-9999) and www.covenanthouse.org.