

## Homelessness grows in Monroe County

Written by Alicia Smith  
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After dealing with drug addiction and going to jail, Bridgette found herself homeless. Bridgette Battles decided she and her daughter, Gabrielle Brownlee, should move into the YWCA. The transition to not having a home was difficult for the 12-year-old.

"She wasn't happy. She was very withdrawn," Battles said.

For many homeless youths, the assurance that shelter awaits them at the end of the day is an unfamiliar feeling.

"They're never settled. It's like being nervous all of the time," said Elaine Spaul, executive director for the Center for Youth in Rochester.

According to data provided by the Rochester-Monroe County Youth Bureau, 890 youths in Monroe County received emergency housing through the Monroe County Department of Human Services Emergency Housing Unit in 2010.

Of that group, 621 had subsequent stints of homelessness, resulting in 1,511 placements in youth shelters, adult shelters or hotels. In addition, there were 316 children placed in shelters with their teenage parents who were not included in the overall totals.

Nationwide, the number of homeless youths is on the rise. According to statistics from the National Center on Family Homelessness released earlier this month, one in every 45 children in the U.S. is homeless. The number of homeless children has risen 33 percent, to 1.6 million children, compared with 1.2 million in 2007.

### Population grows

The group also reported that in New York, the number of children who are homeless rose from 45,195 in 2006 to 142,084 in 2010. The National Center on Family Homelessness defines childhood homelessness as being with a parent or caregiver, but living in trailer parks or motels, awaiting foster care placement, living in public spaces and sharing housing with other people. The definition does not include runaways or throwaways. According to the National Center for Homeless Education, throwaways are generally defined as a young person who is asked to leave home by a parent or guardian and must sleep elsewhere overnight.

The Center for Youth, 905 Monroe Ave., provides shelter, counseling and education to Rochester-area youths. It had to turn away about 150 kids in the past six months from their shelters because of lack of space.

"The inn has been full," Spaul said.

Carrie Michel-Wynne, housing director of the Rochester YWCA, said the number of children in houses has quadrupled in the past year. She has noticed a particular increase in the number of children under the age of 3 entering the shelter.

Because of the economy, Michel-Wynne said it is getting increasingly difficult to survive.

"Families are one paycheck away from being homeless," she said.

Although the National Center on Family Homelessness defines homeless children as those in the company of their families, there are many young people in the Rochester area who find themselves alone without a home. Spaul said many 16- to 21-year-olds seem to be "disconnected," which leads them to stray from home and responsibilities.

"They're not tethered to family, school or their community," she said.

Spaul said that by age 16, some teens begin to act in ways that result in leaving home or being put out by their families. Of those between the ages of 16 and 20 in Monroe County, the most common explanation for homelessness among those polled in 2010 was a lack of independent living or life skills. Substance abuse, conflict with parents, education-related issues and serious mental health concerns followed.

"Kids are saying, 'I just can't take it anymore,'" Spaul said.

The youth bureau reported that about 45 percent of Monroe County youths who stayed in youth shelters in 2010 were 16 or 17 years old.

In addition to the number of homeless youths being on the rise, some shelters have found that young people are staying at emergency shelters for longer periods of time. At the Center for Youth's Center House, the average length of stay increased over recent years. In 2008, youths stayed for an average of 11.5 days. By 2010, 16 days became the norm.

As young people are extending their stays, shelters have greatly reduced the number of kids they can house because of consistently occupied beds.

To make matters worse, governmental decisions don't always work in favor of diminishing the problem of childhood homelessness.

### **N.Y. ranked 45th**

The report from the National Center on Family Homelessness ranked the 50 states in different aspects of homelessness, including the extent of the problem, the well-being of children in the state, state policy on the issue and overall risk for homelessness. New York was ranked 45th in the country in the extent of its homelessness. In 2006, New York was ranked 22nd in this category. New York also ranked poorly in state policy, ranking 47th in the country in policies meant to prevent childhood homelessness.

In 2007, the state was supporting services for approximately 70 programs with an appropriation of \$6.8 million. Between 2007 and 2010, that number was reduced by 30 percent. For 2011-12, the budget was reduced by another 50 percent, down to \$2.35 million.

Sal Guzman, a triage counselor at the Center for Youth who has been working with young homeless individuals for more than 20 years, said she was disheartened by the shrinking budget in light of the growing homeless population.

"We could always use another shelter," she added.

Kendra Drake, 23, also emphasized the need for more space. When Drake was 17, she stayed in the Center for Youth's shelter after a conflict with her family.

"It was a 'don't come back here' situation," she said.

After staying there for about two weeks, she moved into the program's independent living facilities until she was 17.

She completed her undergraduate degree in criminal justice at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and is now a graduate student at The College at Brockport. Drake also serves on the Center for Youth's board of directors and hopes to do more nonprofit work after she receives her master's degree.

"How do you expect a not-for-profit organization to serve its community with a lack of funding?" she said.

About \$338,212 was allocated to Monroe County under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act in 2004. The budget has fluctuated up and down each year, but the allocation proposed for 2012 is \$152,446.

"We won't feel the full impact for another year or so," said Garth Freeman, the youth in transition coordinator for the Rochester-Monroe County Youth Bureau.

### **'Challenging time'**

The YWCA, which relies primarily on the state for funding, was notified a few weeks ago that it would have about \$130,000 cut from its budget. Michel-Wynne described the news as "staggering."

"This is a very, very challenging time," she said.

Fortunately, generosity among local residents also gives hope to those working to end childhood homelessness in Rochester.

Michel-Wynne said nearly 100 families at the YWCA had been sponsored and provided with gifts for the holidays.

At the Center for Youth, volunteers cook meals, donate clothing and play games with the children who stay there to ensure they have as comforting an experience as possible. "The human spirit is powerful," Spauld said. "We believe kids can make it."

Brownlee and her mother are getting there: they plan to move into an apartment in January. This year, the seventh-grader made the honor roll.

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