

Life on the streets for Utah kids - a growing problem

Community » As the number of homeless youths jumps 68 percent, one young woman says, 'I don't want this life anymore.'

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The girl sitting behind the crumpled cardboard sign, panhandling across the street from the Bees stadium, doesn't know where she's going to sleep tonight. She doesn't know how she's going to buy her next meal. But she knows that little Monica Allen, growing up in West Valley City, never thought her life would turn out this way.

"I'm stuck," she says, smacking the word with emphasis.

She sporadically finds apartments, but almost always gets kicked out. Jobs end abruptly, often because she quits. Last year, Allen gave birth to a son who was taken into state custody at 11 days old. She never got him back.

Now 22 and known on the streets as Rogue, she is part of a community of homeless teens and young adults whose numbers are rapidly escalating. Though state officials have made reducing chronic homelessness a high priority, the focus has been on adults and seniors -- an emphasis some advocates want to shift.

Little has changed for the hundreds of teenagers and 20-somethings who cluster by the Gallivan Center and the City Library, and sleep in the canyons, parks and yards of the state's capital city.

At the Homeless Youth Resource Center, a day center in Salt Lake City for homeless youth under age 23, the tally of users is up about 68 percent: More than 800 teens and young adults stopped by during the past year. And recently, staff have noticed an unusual spike of pregnancies: They are now mentoring more than five moms-to-be. A survey completed earlier this year found that about one-third of homeless youth in Utah are parents.

"If you think the problem is large now ... those kids are having kids," said Salt Lake City police Sgt. Michelle Ross. "It's like you're damning another generation."

The street kids, as they often call themselves, rotate in and out of homelessness over months, if not years. They typically prefer the safety of their street "brothers and sisters" to the downtown homeless shelter, intended for adults over 18 and for families. They insist they are different than most of the weathered grown-ups inside.

"We're actually trying to better our lives and get off the streets," Allen said.

Susie Allen, Allen's mother, hopes her daughter succeeds. Before moving to Alaska in March, she gave her mobile home to Allen and another daughter -- which they lost when they didn't pay the bills. The single wide is where Allen grew up.

"It was the only thing I had to give my children to try and give them something stable to get on their feet," said Susie Allen, who now works two jobs, seven days a week, in Kenai.

"Sometimes when ... I was young, I went without eating for days between paychecks so my kids could eat," she said. "I would eat what was left on their plate if they couldn't finish. Life has been tough for my family."

It hurts that her youngest daughter can't take a shower every day, be warm, comfortable and safe. She wants Allen to have enough money to take care of her abscessed teeth.

"I'm not one of those parents who say, 'You made your bed, now lie in it -- I don't give a damn.' I do," she said. "I haven't always made the right choices, either. I'm just darned lucky I didn't have to live on the street."

'Spare anything shiny? » In the beginning, Allen saw being homeless as a way to protect herself. At 18, she didn't feel safe living with her mom's boyfriend, who she says punched her after a New Year's Eve party.

Her story is typical. Of 131 street kids surveyed this winter by Volunteers of America in Utah, 82 percent said they were sexually, physically or emotionally abused before becoming homeless.

On Allen's first night on the streets, she slept in a trench by a gas station. Since then, she has drifted between apartments, friends' and relatives' houses, and the street. One time Allen had so many people living in her one-bedroom apartment that someone slept in the walk-in closet. The crowd was selling drugs and sex to help pay rent -- but she lost the apartment after the first month because she hadn't gathered enough cash.

Marijuana possession finally landed her in jail in June, just as she was coming off a methamphetamine binge. When she got out, her latest round of homelessness began smack in the middle of the worst recession in decades.

Ironically, the economic downturn has helped expand the number of housing choices for the homeless: places like a boarded-up motel, which a developer hoped to turn into condos. Young squatters have even slept in the old Newspaper Agency Corporation building, once home to printing presses for Salt Lake City's daily newspapers.

Other than a small transitional home for seven teenage girls between 16 and 19 years old, Utah does not have a permanent shelter for homeless youth.

One night this summer, Allen slept in the backyard of a house downtown before stealthily exiting at dawn with her 37-year-old fiance, who goes by the unusually spelled street name of Gohst . Sleep brings little peace when there's no door to lock.

"I never really fall asleep all the way," Allen said. "You got to be able to get out of places quick if you need to." Being homeless, particularly for women, means it's safer to be with other people. Many of the women say they're propositioned for sex when they walk down the street.

"If you're a female and you're by yourself squatting or whatever, it's easier for people to prey on you," Allen said. "I've never been by myself when I've been on the streets."

She and Gohst, otherwise known as James Day III, travel as a team. Like most of the other street youth, they were unemployed this summer. Whenever Allen wanted a job before, she could always land something -- a call center or a gas station graveyard shift -- in less than two weeks. Not this time.

She and Day both recently applied for custodian jobs, and they're talking to the state about going back to school. Their addiction and mental health issues likely qualify them for help. About 83 percent of the homeless youth surveyed by the VOA have been diagnosed with a mental illness; attention deficit disorders and depression top the list.

Allen has also struggled with erratically treated ailments, such as kidney stones, which at times make working difficult.

For now, the couple can often be seen asking Bees fans for spare change, "spanging" in street lingo. On a recent night, their friends had "reserved" the corner across from the stadium until Day and Allen showed up after a support group meeting for former meth users.

"Spare anything shiny tonight?" Allen asked passers-by.

A cardboard sign falsely announcing Allen was pregnant -- for a while she thought she was -- didn't seem to boost donations. Free burrito coupons for a place miles away, not dollars, were the main profit.

"I'm sick and tired of having to beg for change to eat," she said. "I don't want this life anymore."

Do you have a champion? » Decades ago, life was even harder for homeless street kids.

Day, who says he's been on the streets on and off for about 10 of the past 23 years, went Dumpster diving for dinner when he was younger. Now, the homeless youth day center offers two meals and snacks five days a week, though youth say stealing to eat remains a fact of life for many.

Day stops by the center with Allen, but he can't go inside -- he's way beyond the age limit. Come January, Allen will be, too. In a way, she feels like she's being punished for getting older.

The youth center provides a safe haven where street kids can access everything from donated clothing and food to flashlights and tents. Responding to the growing need, the center was open seven-days-a-week this winter, thanks to a grant. It's also adding a new employment specialist.

About a year ago, Salt Lake County helped start a pilot program in which about 20 homeless youth have been placed in subsidized housing and given counseling. State officials are also studying the link between aging out of foster care and homelessness. Half of the surveyed homeless youth said they had been in the foster care system.

"The key to this is...do you have a champion who can get to the table the right people, to have them identify

this as a priority?" asked Kerry Steadman, Salt Lake County's community services manager. Some community leaders are questioning whether it's time to provide more help to families and youth, said Kathy Bray, president of Volunteers of America in Utah.

"We need more large government funding to build a system that's big enough to accommodate enough kids to make a dent in the population," she said. "A little bit here and a little bit there is helping, but it's not enough." As of this winter, about one-third of the homeless youth said they were couch surfing, typically staying briefly at a friend or relative's place. And 21 percent were camping; 24 percent were sleeping in an abandoned building. Most of these youth are between 18 and 20 years old. And they're not all miserable. Earlier this summer, Desiree Ogborn, 20, and Chris Boyce, 22, spent a weekday afternoon looking for a place to camp by the Jordan River. They had left a squat in an abandoned building near State Street hours before. It was a beautiful day to wander by the water.

"We're not like everyone else," Ogborn said.

"No bills!" Boyce added.

Homeless on and off for the past three years, Ogborn, whose 4-year-old son lives with her mom, described her lifestyle choice as "following her heart."

"Not everyone who lives in a house who has nice things who lives in luxury, basically, is happy," she said. "It's a way of knowing you don't have to do anything, and you're free to do what you feel is right."

'Not the plan' » Months, years and decades pass, and some street kids wake up one day as the homeless adults they once swore they were nothing like. "Papa Bear," a well-loved fixture of the downtown homeless scene, started living on the streets at 15. He's now in his 40s, and Allen calls him "Dad."

"It wears on you. It's tiring. It's not the way to live," said Albert Baer. "The young kids, a lot of them on the street look a lot older."

Though Allen continues to battle her urge to use methamphetamine, this is her self-proclaimed year of change. "I'm more focused on getting my life straightened out," Allen said. "I know my son is taken care of." The little boy was adopted by her cousin.

She and Day hope to come up with \$450 to rent an apartment Day heard about when he was in jail. But they won't be broadcasting their new address.

"We don't want all the drama of downtown following us home," Allen said.

In September, an occasional job at a call center transformed her into the calm voice on the phone, the girl making \$8 an hour and asking people how they'd vote.

During the calls, Allen was no longer the street kid begging for dinner, sleeping in the park and screwing up. She could be anyone she wanted.

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Homeless youth surveyed

Between October 2008 and February, Volunteers of America surveyed 131 Utah youth. Among the findings:

- » 11 percent of youth said they were younger than 18.
- » 42 percent of youth said they were not heterosexual.
- » 49 percent of youth said they had quit school before 12th grade.
- » 28 percent of youth said they tried to commit suicide three times or more.

How to help

Do you want to help homeless youth?

Call Volunteers of America at 801-363-9414 ext. 104 or visit their Web site at www.voaut.org.