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KUOW NEWS

Homeless Youth: Stories From The Streets Of King County

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10/19/2010

Young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 are among the fastest–growing segments of the homeless population. Some estimate 2 million young people become homeless nationwide each year. There are about 1,000 young people on the streets in King County on any given night. InvestigateWest, in collaboration with KUOW, takes a look at the lives of some of these young people. Carol Smith reports.

TRANSCRIPT

It's just after 8:00 p.m. at the Bellevue YMCA. Parents circle the parking lot in their Mercedes SUVs and their Honda Elements. They're picking their kids up after swimming and basketball practice. But just after 8:30 p.m., a very different second shift appears. Young people come up from the skate park below the Y. They come out of the nearby woods, like smoke. These guys aren't looking for a workout. They're looking for a place to sleep tonight. Colton is one of the young people waiting on the steps outside the Y. He explains what happens next.

Colton: "Yeah, it's called a lottery. What happens is basically they allow 16 people in a night. So they basically pick out numbers and whichever numbers they pull, get in. Whichever numbers they don't, don't get in."

Shelter worker: "Brent! Curtis!"

As their names get called, the young people head inside and start making beds on the floor. During the day, this room is a teen rec center and a coffee lounge for seniors. At night, it turns into a makeshift shelter called The Landing. It's run by an Eastside nonprofit called Friends of Youth. Shelters like The Landing are turning away record numbers of young people. They call it being "lotto'd out."

Colton: "I've probably been lotto'd about 100 times. And it completely sucks 'cause shelters are too far apart. You don't really know where you're going to stay the night, or where to go."

So they sleep in woods and under bridges. And they hope someone will give them a break.

Colton: "You have to rely on somebody who's willing to let you stay in their restaurant or store for a little bit or sleep out front."

Another guy joins the group waiting. Ian is 20. He's been coming here for the last four or five months. He's usually lugging a backpack stuffed with books. Young people have been especially hard hit in this economy. That's what brought Ian to The Landing.

Ian: "Lost my job. Just a string of bad luck mainly."

Smith: "What were you working at?"

Ian: "I was working at the — it's called the Window Installation Specialist. It's a window company that works on all the high rises out here in Bellevue. Due to the lack of high rises springing up, we lost a lot of our workers."

Many young people in today's economy rely on their parents for support well into their 20s. These young people don't have that luxury. Denise Wallace is a mental health counselor at The Landing.

Denise: "What I see mostly is — 80 percent of the kids that I see here are from the foster care system and they aged out at 18."

At age 18, the state stops paying for their support. Many of these former foster youths have already had lives of turmoil and abuse. Half don't graduate from high school. Forty percent of the young women get pregnant within a year of aging out of foster care. Getting cut off at 18 almost guarantees they'll wind up on the street.

Denise: "The instability comes from going from foster care home to foster care home, and then at 18, not really being connected anywhere and so just being out on the street with no coping skills at that point."

Despite their numbers, these homeless youth are largely unseen and unheard. They blend in so well with their peers that many people — especially in affluent suburbs — aren't even aware they're homeless. This is Shane. He's 23.

Shane: "Earlier — I'm walking across the street from Safeway and this girl in a vehicle. And she's just sitting there, probably singing along to her music, whatever, and I look at her."

He made eye contact with her, and she smiled.

Shane: "And she waved at me as she was about to drive by. Well, she had no clue I was homeless. But fact that she was kind of cute, or maybe somewhat interested or just flirting, whatever it was? Fact is, she was flirting with a homeless guy. You know, not knowing it. But it didn't matter, she was driving away. Probably won't see me again. It's nothing really."

But it is something, really. Shane and Ian and Colton and others like them — they act tough, but the way people treat them can get them down.

Smith: "What kinds of myths or stereotypes do people have about young people who are homeless?"

Various young people: "Dirty. Freeloaders. (laughter) Apparently, though, we just got that one. Nasty — wasn't that what we heard? Nasty. Yeah, nasty."

When you're young and homeless, you do what you have to survive. Some steal for a bed. They barter the goods for a chance to sleep on someone's couch. Some shoplift to have enough to eat.

For these young adults, The Landing is a place to figure out how to, as some of them put it, "get off their feet." In other words, to break the cycle that's keeping them from getting ahead. Being asked to move along all day is exhausting. Many of them arrive at the shelter with foot and back problems most people don't develop until a much later age. Getting off their feet means making progress toward a better life. Here's Shane again.

Shane: "The thing about being homeless is you get stuck in one spot. Everything becomes very repetitive. It becomes more of a game of life, of survival. You don't progress or move forward. Might get a little more money in your pocket the next day, but you're still going to be broke."

Megan is 21. She recently got a job at Taco Bell. She commutes 45 minutes by bus to work six days a week. Most weeks she puts in about 40 hours. But even that's not enough to get her into housing.

Megan: "So there's a background check, and there's the whole credit thing. And it's hard getting a place. I mean, most places are a grand a month. And they want first, last and deposit. So between 120 bucks a month for the bus, my $55 phone bill — And on weekends, me and my boyfriend have nowhere to go, so we stay under a bridge. And every payday weekend, we stay in a hotel. And that runs about $250 a month."

So the rest of the time, she winds up here at The Landing, sharing floor space with guys like Brent. Brent is 21 and working

on his GED. He has ambitions of being a mechanic or a photographer. Or maybe a pro–skater. He just got in for the night.

Shelter worker: "Do you want to take a shower tonight?"

Brent: "Yes. Please."

Shelter worker: "Do you want an early wake up?"

Brent: "No."

Before he can go all the way in, he's got to get his bag checked. Brent explains.

Brent: "You gotta take everything out just to make sure you don't have weapons on you, or guns. So you can be safe in here, so no one can hurt you. Cell phone, iPod, phone charger, iPod charger, three lighters, some pieces of paper, transfer that fell on the ground, skateboard and some free passes to Deja Vu, everyone. Whoo!"

The shelter director is Velvet Heaps. She's part den mother, part confidante, part disciplinarian. But one of her primary roles is to dole out beds. She hates not having enough.

Velvet: "It's awful. It's awful. The worst thing in the world to have to turn people away. And especially, these are kids that I know and that I see every night. I mean, we're close with each other and so watching them walk out is even sadder than it would be, I think, turning people away on the phone."

For the ones that do get in, the routine is the same. They get dinner. They can see a nurse, or talk to the counselor. They get showers, shoot pool, and maybe watch a movie.

Soon, though, the room starts to quiet down. Many of them have already crashed. They're sleeping hard.

YMCA PA: "Members and guests, the time is now 10:00 p.m. The Bellevue Family YMCA is now closed. Please wrap up your workouts and start heading for the exits. Thank you. And we'll see you tomorrow morning at 5:00."

Sound: (birds chirping)

It's just before dawn, back in the parking lot of the Y. The shelter room is still dark, but a vigorous step class is underway in a brightly lit workout room just underneath it. Just before 7:00 a.m., the young people start to stumble out, still groggy. Ian is one of the first to leave. Breakfast was a cup of coffee. He knows what he's going to do today: Same as what he did yesterday.

Ian: "Pretty much wander around. I think today I'm going to be bouncing around all over Seattle applying at fishing companies in Alaska."

But his first stop is usually the library.

Ian: "Yeah, actually, I have like 25 books in my backpack right now."

Smith: "Do you like to read?"

Ian: "Yeah, I think that knowledge is the only true possession that we have."

Members of the YMCA start trickling in for their early morning lap swims. The parking lot is filling up again. Ian and the others have to be off the property by 7:00 a.m. The young people head out as they came in: on foot.

I'm Carol Smith reporting.

Produced in collaboration with InvestigateWest, a nonprofit investigative journalism center in Seattle.

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