



2020 CRISIS SERVICES & PREVENTION REPORT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1 IN 10
YOUNG ADULTS
AGES 18 - 25
& 1 IN 30
YOUTH
AGES 13 - 17
EXPERIENCE
HOMELESSNESS
EACH YEAR

I. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that 4.2 million young people, ages 13 to 25, experience some form of homelessness each year in the United States¹, with considerably more young people experiencing crises that put them at risk of facing similar housing insecurity. Think about it this way: in a classroom of 30 students, at least one of them will experience homelessness this year, without a safe living environment to call home and forced to couch surf, bounce among relatives and friends, live in shelters, or stay on the streets.

The potential impact of such instability goes beyond having a place to call home, as experiencing homelessness can lead to struggles to find consistent food, to care for one's mental, emotional, and physical health, to complete school, and to avoid dangerous and violent situations. Because homelessness is associated with these and other negative outcomes, including physical and sexual abuse, substance use, and premature death^{2,3,4}, it is critical that youth in crisis and experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) homelessness are connected to resources that can help them find safe and stable housing, access supports, develop a plan, or reunite safely with their families.

¹Morton, M. H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G. M. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

²Auerswald, C. L., Lin, J. S., & Parriott, A. (2016). Six-year mortality in a street-recruited cohort of homeless youth in San Francisco, California. *Peer Journal*, 4, e1909.

³Hodgson, K. J., Shelton, K. H., van den Bree, M. B., & Los, F. J. (2013). Psychopathology in young people experiencing homelessness: a systematic review. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(6), e24–e37.

⁴Medlow, S., Klineberg, E., & Steinbeck, K. (2014). The health diagnoses of homeless adolescents: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Adolescence*, 37(5), 531-542.

INTRODUCTION

NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE SERVICES

For more than 50 years, the National Runaway Safeline (NRS) has served as a critical resource, working to keep youth who have run away, are experiencing homelessness, or are at risk of other adverse outcomes safe and off the streets. With support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), NRS serves as the federally supported national communication system for youth ages 12-21 who are contemplating running away, or have run away and are experiencing homelessness.

NRS operates the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline and online crisis services at 1800RUNAWAY.org, including live chat, email, and forum. These free, confidential crisis services are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Trained staff and volunteers provide non-judgmental, non-sectarian, and non-directive support to empower youth and their families to develop a plan of action to address their crises.

Examples of services that the NRS crisis team offers to those who reach out include: facilitating conference calls with family members or connecting youth with community-based agencies; using a messaging service where youth or family members can indirectly connect as a first step towards a mediated conversation; and accessing the Home Free program, offered in partnership with Greyhound Lines, Inc., which helps youth safely reunite with their family or travel

to an alternate living arrangement through a free bus ticket. In addition, NRS maintains a database of over 6,500 resources across the country to help youth and families access local support such as counseling, shelter, mental health, and substance abuse and behavioral health treatment, which may be offered as referrals during crisis connections.

Along with these resources, NRS also provides unique education tools for youth, families, service providers, teachers, public health professionals, and community members to learn about prevention strategies, including the *Let's Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum*. This 14-module, interactive curriculum is designed to help youth build critical life skills and seek assistance from trusted contacts to avoid becoming homeless in the first place. Annually, NRS has hundreds of thousands of contacts with individuals seeking information, support, referrals and crisis intervention and prevention resources.

This report examines the characteristics of the individuals who contacted NRS in calendar year 2020, the channels through which these individuals connected with NRS, the problems identified that warranted crisis intervention, the services that NRS provided, and how connections with NRS differed before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data in this report provides critical information about the needs of youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, and how NRS can best meet the needs of youth in crisis and those who care about them.

INTRODUCTION

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to nationwide shutdowns, limiting access to key services – including shelters, transportation, and school-based resources and supports – for young people. Most youth could no longer attend school in person, while adults were temporarily forced to work remotely. For youth living at home in unsafe or uncomfortable conditions, being forced to quarantine with family members may have exacerbated unhealthy family dynamics that led them to consider leaving home. According to findings from the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, nearly 5 million young people ages

18-25 reported considerable challenges affording food, and nearly 4 million reported concerns about paying rent⁵.

Notably, these challenges were heightened for Black and Hispanic young adults, with Black young adults reporting twice the rate of food insecurity and three times the rate of concerns about paying rent when compared with white young adults. These findings highlight the significant challenges that young people who faced the first waves of the pandemic, especially youth from underserved populations.

DATA ANALYSIS

NRS uses one data collection form to capture relevant information disclosed during calls, emails, and forum posts, and uses a separate data collection form to capture information from chats. NRS does not use a survey or interview tool to collect standardized data from crisis intervention contacts. Instead, NRS collects information that contacts voluntarily self-report in the context of crisis intervention exchanges. NRS staff and volunteers collect information from calls, emails, chats, and forum posts, with information reported varying based on what individuals choose to share. As a result, the percentages drawn in tables and figures throughout this report

are based on the number of individuals (N) who chose to provide information on each data point, with the amount of missing data ranging from 0% to 88% across the data points analyzed.

In 2020, NRS collected records for 36,907 contacts from hotline calls, emails, chats, and forum posts involving youth age 21 and younger. This report's analysis includes records for 36,107 contacts, excluding 800 records for the following reasons: 774 cases with no data, 22 records involved adults in crisis over the age of 22, and 4 records did not have valid ID numbers.

⁵Morton, M. H., & Daniels, E. (2021). *Untold Stories: Young Adults and Racial Dimensions of COVID-19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

II. NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE 2020 CRISIS CONTACTS REPORT

WHO CONTACTS THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE?

In 2020, 27,546 individuals reached out to NRS through the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline and the various digital services offered through 1800RUNAWAY.org (live chat, email, and forum).

Most of those who contacted NRS were youth seeking help for themselves (81%). However, concerned individuals also reached out on behalf of youth, such as parents (6%), friends (5%), and adults (4%), among others, including relatives, agency representatives, and police or probation officers (see Table 1).

The majority of crisis intervention contacts who reported their race/ethnicity were white/Caucasian (51%). Twenty percent identified as Black/African American, 16% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 7% identified as multiracial, 5% identified as Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, and 1% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native.

Of contacts who reported their gender identity, females were more than twice as likely as males to reach out for support. Sixty-nine percent of contacts identified as female, 24% identified as male, and 7% identified as transgender or non-binary.

Table 1. Relationship to Youth (N = 27,546; missing n = 8,561, 24%)

Contact Relationship	N	%
Youth	22,383	81%
Parent	1,636	6%
Adult	1,267	5%
Youth's Friend	1,149	4%
Relative	696	3%
Agency	271	1%
Other	100	<1%
Police	44	<1%
Total	27,546	100%

Many of those who connected with NRS in 2020 also shared information about their age, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. The majority of these contacts took place with youth under the age of 18 (69%). Notably, just under half of these contacts (48%) occurred with 15-17 year olds. About 3% of contacts were under the age of 12, 19% were ages 12-14, 15% were ages 18-21, and 15% were over the age of 22 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Contacts

Contact Characteristics	N	%
Age^a		
Under 12	619	3%
12-14	4,734	19%
15-17	12,076	48%
18-21	3,894	15%
22+	3,890	15%
Race/Ethnicity^b		
White/Caucasian	8,747	51%
Black/African American	3,446	20%
Hispanic/Latinx	2,734	16%
Multiracial	1,323	7%
Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	812	5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	209	1%
Gender Identity^c		
Female	14,736	69%
Male	5,058	24%
Transgender/Non-binary	1,537	7%

^a Age: N = 25,213; missing n = 10,894, 30%

^b Race/ethnicity: N = 17,271; missing n = 18,836, 52%

^c Gender identity: N = 21,331; missing n = 14,776, 41%

HOW DO CONTACTS REACH THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE?

Of the four methods of contact offered through NRS crisis services, including hotline, live chat, email, and forum posts, the most common forms of contact in 2020 were the chat service (53%) and the hotline (29%), accounting for over 80% of all crisis intervention connections. Fewer than 20% of contacts connected with NRS via online forum posts (11%) or email (7%, see Table 3.) While visitors posted to the forum 3,985 times in 2020, it should be noted that NRS saw over 432,000 visits to the forum in the same period. This high level of website traffic and user engagement indicates that the forum serves as an invaluable information resource, even when visitors do not post their own questions on the forum in the process.

Table 3. Method of Contact (N = 36,107; missing n = 0, 0%)

Method of Contact	N	%
Chat	18,956	53%
Hotline call	10,506	29%
Forum post	3,985	11%
Email	2,660	7%
Total	36,107	100%

Most contacts (82%) learned about NRS through the internet, highlighting the importance of NRS' targeted outreach, advertising, and awareness campaigns through digital sources, including social media. Six percent of contacts learned about NRS through word of mouth, and 4% were following up from a previous call (see Table 4).

Table 4. How Contacts Learned of NRS
(N = 26,335; missing n = 9,772, 47%)

How Contacts Learned of NRS	N	%
Internet	21,656	82%
Word of mouth	1,551	6%
Previous call	1,078	4%
Social service agency	611	2%
School	453	2%
NRS Let's Talk curriculum	389	1%
NRS partner organization	178	1%
Law enforcement	137	1%
NRS promotional material	118	<1%
Directory service	112	<1%
Public service announcement	52	<1%
Total	26,335	100%

**IN 2020 OVER
432,000
PEOPLE VISITED THE NRS FORUM
WHERE THEY ACCESSED VALUABLE INFORMATION,
RESOURCES, AND ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

WHY DO CONTACTS REACH THE NATIONAL RUNAWAY SAFELINE?

Young people who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of becoming homeless face numerous challenges that lead to their reaching out to NRS for support. In 2020, crisis contacts typically reported one or more “presenting problems,” or reasons for seeking crisis intervention services, with nearly three-quarters of NRS crisis intervention contacts reporting at least one presenting problem. By far, the most common presenting problem was family dynamics (88%), including conflict with rules, problems with parents or siblings, blended family, divorce or custody issues, death of a family member, or teen parenting. Other common presenting problems were emotional abuse (31%), peer/social issues (27%) - including problems with friends, internet relationships, gang or cult involvement, sexual activity, relationship problems, and independence - and mental health problems (17%, see Table 5).

Table 5. Reasons for Crisis Intervention
(N = 25,846; missing n = 10,261, 28% missing)

Reasons for Crisis Intervention	N	%
Family dynamics	22,837	88%
Emotional abuse	7,934	31%
Peer/social	6,880	27%
Mental health	6,099	24%
Physical abuse	4,706	18%
Economics	3,444	13%
Neglect	3,295	13%
Youth/family	1,802	7%
School/education	1,781	7%
Transportation	1,408	5%
Alcohol/substance use	1,382	5%
LGBTQ	1,278	5%
Health	1,239	5%
Judicial system	916	4%
Sexual abuse	773	3%
Exploitation	148	1

Note: Because these categories were not mutually exclusive and contacts could report multiple presenting problems, a total N is not included in this table.

Despite the problems faced by youth reaching out to NRS for crisis services, many contacts presented important opportunities for preventing a crisis from escalating to youth leaving home in the first place. Over two-thirds of youth who were the subject of an NRS contact were at home at the time of connecting with NRS (68%). Contacts reported that youth who were not at home were primarily staying with a friend (10%, see Table 6).

Table 6. Youth's Location at Time of Contact
(N = 20,342; missing n = 15,765, 44%)

Youth's Location	N	%
Home	13,925	68%
Friend	2,064	10%
Street/payphone	1,191	6%
Relative	909	4%
Unknown to caller	879	4%
Other	494	2%
Shelter	344	2%
School	140	<1%
Recent acquaintance	131	<1%
Detention/police	122	<1%
Greyhound	101	<1%
Work	30	<1%
Pimp/dealer	12	<1%
Total	20,342	100%



While two-thirds of youth were still at home at the time of contact, many still faced a crisis when reaching out to NRS. Forty-one percent of youth were described as being in a state of crisis, and another 37% were contemplating running away when connecting with NRS. An additional 12% had already run away, 7% were homeless, 3% had been asked to leave, and less than 1% were suspected to be missing (see Table 7).

Table 7. Youth's Crisis Status at Time of Contact
(N = 25,974; missing n = 10,133, 32%)

Youth's Crisis Status	N	%
Youth in crisis	10,687	41%
Contemplating running	9,508	37%
Runaway	3,238	12%
Homeless	1,772	7%
Kicked out	722	3%
Suspected missing	47	<1%
Total	25,974	100%

These figures indicate the importance and impact of the services offered by NRS. While home may not always be the best or safest option for youth facing challenges, most youth who connect with NRS seek support prior to experiencing homelessness. Just as NRS offers resources and

referrals to support youth who are homeless, these data highlight the importance of NRS' prevention and education efforts in hopes of avoiding the dangers and risks associated with runaway or homeless incidents.

A relatively small number of total crisis contacts (12%) indicated how the youth was surviving at the time of contact. The majority (86%) reported that friends and family networks were the primary modes of survival, while 21% survived through personal funds, and another 7% relied on shelters or soup kitchens (see Table 8).

Table 8. How Youth Survived While Homeless
(N = 4,335; missing n = 31,772, 88%)

How Youth Survived While Homeless	N	%
Friends/relatives	3,681	86%
Personal funds	920	21%
Shelter/soup kitchen	318	7%
Employment	168	4%
Panhandling	81	2%
Survival sex	48	1%
Detention/police	45	1%
Sex industry	25	1%
Stealing	24	1%
Selling drugs	14	<1%

Note: Because these categories were not mutually exclusive and contacts could report multiple means of survival, a total N is not included in this table.

**41% OF YOUTH SUBJECTS
WERE DESCRIBED AS BEING IN A
STATE OF CRISIS
AT THE TIME OF CONTACT**

RESOURCES & OUTCOMES

REFERRALS

The primary goal of NRS' crisis intervention services is to help support youth in crisis and those who care for them. After assessing the reasons for reaching out to NRS and the nature of the crisis, NRS staff and volunteers discuss services, resources, and supports that contacts might pursue to resolve the crisis at hand. This solutions-focused approach led to 74% of crisis intervention contacts discussing options for referrals or next steps, with many contacts discussing multiple referral options (see Table 9).

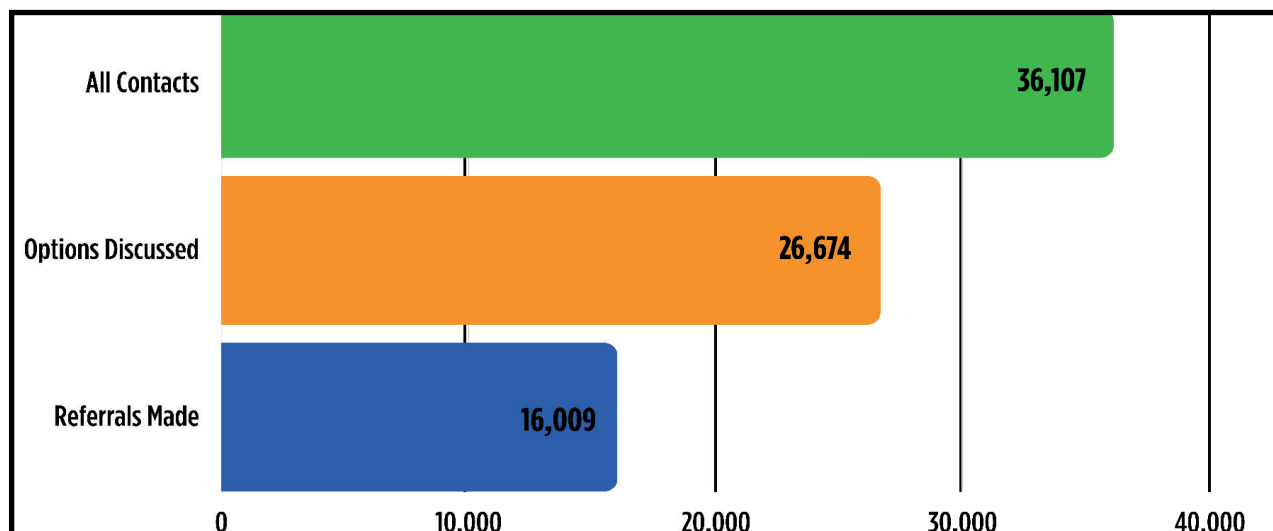
NRS frontline staff and volunteers recommended additional NRS services for nearly all crisis intervention contacts who were interested in learning about referral options (99%). This included the NRS message service, conference calls, and the Home Free program. Other referral options discussed with crisis intervention contacts included family (44%), police (42%), and friends (37%). Of the 36,107 total crisis intervention contacts in 2020, 44% ultimately obtained referrals (see Figure 1).

Table 9. Referral Options that Contacts Discussed with NRS Staff and Volunteers (N = 26,674; missing n = 9,433, 26%)

Referral Options	N	%
NRS services	26,280	99%
Family	11,763	44%
Police	11,240	42%
Friend	9,998	37%
Alternate youth housing	8,370	31%
Child abuse reporting	5,631	21%
Social services	5,521	21%
Adult	4,495	17%
Self help	2,905	11%
Legal services	3,575	13%
Mental health professional	3,290	12%
Transitional living program	2,858	11%
School personnel	2,798	10%
Home Free	1,433	5%
Social worker	1,078	4%
Health professional	495	2%
Juvenile court	466	2%
Missing child number	444	2%
211 United Way	428	2%
Religious organizations	242	1%
Transportation	36	<1%

Note: Because these categories were not mutually exclusive and contacts could report multiple referral options, a total N is not included in this table.

Figure 1. Referral Options and Referrals Obtained



HOME FREE PROGRAM

One referral option referenced above is the Home Free program. This service, offered by NRS in partnership with Greyhound Lines, Inc., offers runaway and homeless youth a free bus ride home or to a safe alternative living environment. In 2020, NRS made 1,433 referrals to Home Free. Of those referrals, 839 individuals started the process for using the Home Free program, resulting in 310 bus tickets being issued to youth ages 12-21, along with an additional 13 tickets issued to parents/guardians or trusted adults who escorted youth to their destination. While NRS

and Greyhound aim to provide as many tickets as possible to youth in need, there are several reasons why requests do not always result in an issued ticket, including: situations in which youth and their family do not agree on reunification; youth and/or family members do not call back to complete the ticketing process; youth do not have a safe location identified to which they could travel; youth and/or family find alternative transportation; or transportation is not available in a particular location.

Table 10. Home Free Referrals, Uptake, and Outcomes

Referral Options	N
NRS referrals to Home Free	1,433
Contacts in Home Free form	839
Youth tickets issued	310
Parent/guardian tickets issued	13



III. UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on how people live. From sequestering people inside their homes to preventing them from working and struggling with financial challenges as a result, the pandemic has affected the safety and mental health of youth and families served by NRS. This report does not contain a trend analysis, so it is not certain whether changes in the use of NRS services from 2019 to 2020 are due to the pandemic or some other explanation.

However, NRS staff and volunteers have noted several shifts in the nature of crisis contacts since March 2020: contacts have reported more severe reasons for reaching out - youth in need of shelter with limited to no availability of shelter resources; limited to no access to transportation to safe housing and shelter; heightened anxiety and limited access to support systems at schools, drop-in centers, case management and other resources; having to remain at home or in their

current living arrangement with an abuser or other potentially unsafe living situation; increase in suicide and other mental health-related contacts; an increase in contacts from youth under the age of 12; and an overall increase in the level of intensity and length of time needed for each crisis connection.

Understanding how young people and their families used NRS' services in 2020 illuminates the challenges faced during the pandemic. Below, we highlight notable differences in the use of NRS' services from 2019 to 2020 based on the data. Together, these findings highlight differences before and during the pandemic in how contacts reached out to NRS, what challenges became more prevalent, and how NRS staff and volunteers supported youth who were homeless, youth contemplating running away, and youth at risk of becoming homeless and their families.

Contacts skewed younger. The number of contacts under the age of 15 increased from 3,500 in 2019 to 5,353 in 2020, an increase of 53%. This included youth under the age of 12 reaching out 619 times in 2020, as compared to 284 times in 2019.

Digital services are becoming increasingly preferred for youth reaching out for crisis support. The number of contacts using the chat service grew from 16,361 in 2019 to 18,956 in 2020, an increase of 16%. The number of contacts connecting through the hotline, forum and email all decreased slightly in the same period.

Reasons cited by contacts for reaching out to NRS align with the challenges presented by the pandemic. In 2020, 88% of contacts reported family dynamics were a reason for crisis intervention, compared with 57% of contacts in 2019. Notably, in 2020, the "family dynamics" category included contacts indicating they were reaching out specifically because of COVID-19 over 500 times. In addition, the number of contacts who cited mental health as a reason for reaching out to NRS grew from 4,690 in 2019 to 6,099 in 2020, an increase of 30%.

Contacts were more likely than ever to reach out from home. The number of youth residing at home at the time of contact grew from 10,986 in 2019 to 13,925 in 2020, an increase of 27%. A similar trend was noted in youth contemplating running away: in 2019, 8,372 young people indicated that they were considering leaving home, while in 2020, this rose to 9,508, an increase of 14%.

Youth needed more help securing local referrals in times of crisis. NRS staff discussed referral options with 500 more contacts and made 500 more referrals in 2020 than in 2019.

III. 2020 HIGHLIGHTS*

REPORT SUMMARY

81% of contacts were youth who connected directly with NRS on their own behalf

Nearly half of contacts were between the ages of 15 and 17

53% of contacts used NRS' chat option and 29% called the hotline

88% of contacts reported family dynamics as a reason for seeking crisis intervention services

At the time of outreach, 68% of youth were still at home

41% of youth were described as being in crisis and 37% were described as contemplating running away

74% of contacts discussed referral options with NRS staff and volunteers

44% of contacts received a referral

2020 BY THE NUMBERS



10,506 hotline calls



18,956 crisis chats



2,660 crisis emails



3,985 forum posts



432,930 forum visits



16,009 referrals provided



323 Home Free tickets issued

* All data collected was voluntarily self-reported in the context of crisis intervention exchanges. NRS staff and volunteers collect information from calls, emails, chats, and forum posts, with information reported varying based on what individuals choose to share.



The National Runaway Safeline (NRS) is a national non-profit organization committed to ensuring that runaway, homeless and at-risk youth are safe and off the streets.

Founded in 1971, NRS serves as the national communication system crisis line for youth and families, providing critical crisis intervention 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Each year, NRS makes hundreds of thousands of connections to help and hope through hotline (1-800-RUNAWAY), online (1800RUNAWAY.org) and prevention services.

For additional information, visit www.1800RUNAWAY.org or follow us @1800RUNAWAY on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.



Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center at the University of Chicago that provides public and private decision-makers with rigorous research and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of children and families.

Chapin Hall partners with policy makers, practitioners, and philanthropists at the forefront of research and policy development by applying a unique blend of scientific research, real-world experience, and policy expertise to construction actionable information, practical tools, and ultimately, positive change for children and families.

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness.

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The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) within the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) supports organizations and communities that work to reduce the risk of youth homelessness, adolescent pregnancy and domestic violence.

FYSB envisions a future in which all our nation's youth, individuals and families — no matter what challenges they may face — can live healthy, productive, violence-free lives.

For more information about the Family and Youth Services Bureau, visit www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb.

