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Youth homeless backers rap lack of Conn. housing

By Stephen Singer, Associated Press

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HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — A lack of available safe housing for young people in crisis is to blame for youth homelessness in Connecticut, advocates said Thursday as they called for more and better housing.

They released a report that says 40 percent of young people interviewed said they were in their current living situations for less than three months and two-thirds said they moved twice or more in the past year.

The report, "Invisible No More" by Derrick M. Gordon and Bronwyn A. Hunter of the Yale University School of Medicine, stems from the first comprehensive study on youth homelessness in Connecticut, advocates say. It was based on interviews with 98 people younger than 24 in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven and New London.

The report offered sharp criticism of Connecticut policies, saying that "no state system or institution takes ownership or obligation."

A spokesman for the Department of Children and Families did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Gordon estimates that 11,700 young people in Connecticut are homeless based on numbers nationally and in the Northeast.

Advocates say only 15 shelter beds are available in Connecticut for those younger than 18 and boys are not allowed in family shelters.

Homeless kids often consider suicide, trade sex for money and a place to sleep, and often don't even see themselves as homeless, the report said. Because of their age, they are vulnerable to assaults on streets and at adult shelters, which have a high prevalence of health problems such as HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. And for nearly a quarter of homeless youth, their first sexual encounter occurs at age 12 or younger.

Two groups account for homeless youth and children: homeless families with children and youth with no accompanying adult. Unaccompanied children and youth account for as many as 1 million to 3 million youth or children, or 1 percent of the urban homeless population.

Experts cannot easily get an accurate count, saying that being young and homeless is often the same as being invisible. Youngsters with nowhere to live "couch surf" at friends' homes for short periods and are counted differently or not at all by state agencies.

"We've had some challenges getting our heads around the numbers," said Robert Pulster of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Jessica Ferreira, a New Britain advocate, said she was forced to move to a shelter in South Norwalk after her parents rejected her.

"My parents wanted nothing to do with me," she told about 100 participants at a gathering of advocates and others at the Capitol.

Before the shelter, she said, she and her boyfriend tried unsuccessfully to live with his stepmother.

"Things fell through the cracks," Ferreira said.