

State's Homeless Youth Tell Of Struggles

By DENISE BUFFA And DANIELA ALTIMARI, dbuffa@courant.com

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HARTFORD -

Bullied, depressed and struggling with behavioral problems, Jessica Ferreira attempted suicide.

She was cast out by her parents and bounced from a hospital room to a residential housing unit to transitional housing to a homeless shelter in South Norwalk, where, she said, most people were either intoxicated or on drugs. "People were very mean and cruel to me," Ferreira said of her time in the shelter. She was 18 and pregnant.

Ferreira's harrowing and tumultuous life story is, in many ways, typical of homeless teens and young adults in Connecticut. A new survey found that 70 percent of homeless people under 24 reported moving at least twice in the past year, 50 percent were arrested at least once, and 25 percent said they considered suicide in the past year, according to a new study.

The study, entitled "Invisible No More: Creating Opportunities for Youth Who Are Homeless," is being touted as Connecticut's first comprehensive report of its kind. The 50-page report was presented Thursday at a forum at the state Capitol complex in Hartford.

Ferreira was among those testifying at the forum, which also featured lawmakers, advocates for homeless youth and academics.

Researchers interviewed 98 youth from Hartford, New Haven, New London, Bridgeport and lower Fairfield County, including a 17-year-old boy whose father threw him out of the house after learning the teen is gay and a 17-year-old girl who's been staying at a friend's house since her parents separated. Among the findings about the homeless youth:

- 77 percent identified as heterosexual; 22 percent as either bisexual, gay, lesbian, or not sure.
- 32 percent dropped out of school.
- 66 percent were unemployed.
- 57 percent received food stamps.
- 89 percent reported they were sexually active, with an average of nearly six partners.
- 23.5 percent first engaged in sex when they were 12 or younger.
- 8 percent reported they had traded sex for a place to stay.

"The study recognizes that we have kids...who are being victimized and in vulnerable situations -- and we want to do something about that," said Stacey Violante Cote, director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Project at the Center for Children's Advocacy, a Hartford-based nonprofit agency that provides services to low-income children and youth across Connecticut. Attorney Violante Cote co-managed the report.

The lead researcher for the study, Derrick Gordon of The Consultation Center at the Yale University School of Medicine, estimates there could be as many as 11,700 unaccompanied homeless youth under age 24 in Con-

necticut. Noting he's a psychologist, not a demographer, Gordon said he arrived at the figure after crunching some widely available numbers.

"The thing I am interested in is: 1. this population does exist in Connecticut. 2. It wasn't difficult for us to find 100 young people, which suggests the numbers are larger than we think they are," Gordon said.

It remains unclear, however, how many Connecticut children and youth who do not live with their families or legal guardians are homeless, according to officials. It is difficult to track this "invisible population," partly because the kids don't identify themselves as homeless.

"If you asked them if they were homeless, they say, 'No, I have a place to stay.' But that place to stay may be a temporary stay at a friend's house, it may be on someone's couch..." Cote said.

Ferreira said some of her homeless friends preferred "sofa-surfing" or sleeping on the streets to staying at a shelter.

Nationwide, 610,042 homeless people were counted in shelters and out on the street in a survey in a single night in January, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2013 "Annual Homeless Assessment Report." About 4,450 were counted in Connecticut, including 235 unaccompanied homeless children and youth, according to the report.

There is a severe shortage of emergency crisis beds for youths younger than 18. Only 15 shelter beds are available statewide for youth under 18 years old who are not accompanied by adults, based on the report. Those beds are provided by four private agencies in the state -- none of which are in Hartford.

The number of beds available to kids in crisis needs to be increased, according to Alicia Woodsby of the Partnership for Strong Communities, a Hartford-based non-profit that co-managed the report. "There are no safe places for them to go," she said.

The study's recommendations include:

- Developing strategies to better the count of young people who do not have secure housing by boosting collaboration between Connecticut state systems and nonprofit groups and expanding methods to gather the information.
- Documenting the needs of young people with insecure housing as they rely on state and community supports.
- Allowing young people to have a say in the review and development of ways to address housing needs.
- Building on the best practices in other states.

State Rep. Doug McCrory of Hartford said improving services for homeless youth is a matter of priorities as much as funding. "Every year we talk about not having enough money," he said. "If you want to help homeless children, you've got to help homeless families first."

Ferreira's life has improved significantly over the past six years. Now 24, she reconnected with her parents, lives in her own apartment and hopes to get married next year. She sings in her church choir and works as a phone operator for an emergency crisis line. Her son was placed in foster care and has since been adopted but she still sees him; in fact, she will spend Christmas day with him and his adoptive family.

"Life in the shelter was not a good experience," Ferreira said during the forum. "Right now I am really grateful to my higher power that I am not homeless."