



After growing up in an abusive environment, Han, now 18, sought safety at this youth homeless shelter in Ogden, Utah.

Kim Raff/STUDIO at Getty Images for Junior Scholastic

U.S. Homelessness Crisis

“I Used to Be Homeless”

Hundreds of thousands of American teens will be homeless at some point this year. Find out what it’s like to be one of them—and what you can do to help.

FEBRUARY 18, 2019 By Jessica Press and Rebecca Zissou

*Last names have been withheld for privacy.

The first night Han* slept in a homeless shelter, she cried into her pillow for hours. Then 17, Han had grown up in an abusive environment in Ogden, Utah. According to the teen, her mother often lashed out—both physically and verbally. As a result, Han was in constant fear for her life.

* Adapted from Junior Scholastic

With no family members able to take her in and nowhere else to turn, Han eventually made the gut-wrenching decision to run away. She packed as much as she could fit into a backpack—some clothes, a toothbrush, and a comb—and set out for a nearby homeless shelter.

Looking back on her first night there, Han, now 18, recalls lying on a wooden bunk bed in a room with three other girls. At the time, she was overwhelmed by a combination of fear, sadness, and relief.

“I knew I was finally safe,” says Han. “But at the same time, I felt like I’d just lost everything.”

Homeless Teens Share Their Stories

A video about two teens discussing how they became homeless and how they overcame past challenges Han was just one of an estimated 700,000 American teens ages 13 to 17 who are on their own and homeless each year. Without a permanent home with their families, they’re forced to move from one friend’s house to another or to sleep in shelters, cars, or motels. Sometimes, they have to sleep outside—in parks or alleys.

Like Han, most homeless teens have run away to escape abuse or a family member’s drug or alcohol problems. Others have been kicked out after clashing with a parent over their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

When teens experience homelessness on their own, they face unique—and staggering—challenges. They often suffer from severe stress, depression, addiction, or loneliness. Many of them lack a strong support system, such as trusted friends and relatives they can turn to for help. Some struggle to stay in school, putting their ability to get jobs in the future in jeopardy.

“Young people experiencing homelessness have typically dealt with many forms of trauma and **adversity**,” says David Howard of Covenant House, an organization that provides support for homeless teens. “These young people may not have a home, but they do have hopes, dreams, and determination.”

A Longstanding Problem

The U.S. has been dealing with teen homelessness for generations. In the 1930s, during the **Great Depression**, more than 250,000 homeless kids—known as “boxcar children”—rode freight trains across the country in search of work. Their situation improved as more jobs became available in the 1940s.

* Adapted from Junior Scholastic

Today, youth homelessness appears to be on the rise in many areas of the country. In King County, Washington, for example, the number of homeless teens increased by 700 percent between 2016 and 2017. In San Diego, California, the number jumped by about 40 percent in that time.

One reason for the apparent increase, experts say, is that communities are getting better at collecting data on the number of homeless teens. That's a good thing, notes Howard: Having accurate figures is the first step toward addressing the problem. Still, authorities agree that the number of kids in crisis remains alarmingly high.



HollenderX2

A BRIGHTER FUTURE: Savohn, now a college student in New York City, spent months living on the streets of Orlando, Florida.

Sleeping on the Streets

While the causes vary, homeless teens tend to have one thing in common. Most of them have few people —if anyone— they can rely on for help.

* Adapted from Junior Scholastic

That was certainly the case for Savohn.* The summer before his senior year of high school in Orlando, Florida, Savohn says he had a huge fight with his mom and was kicked out of his house.

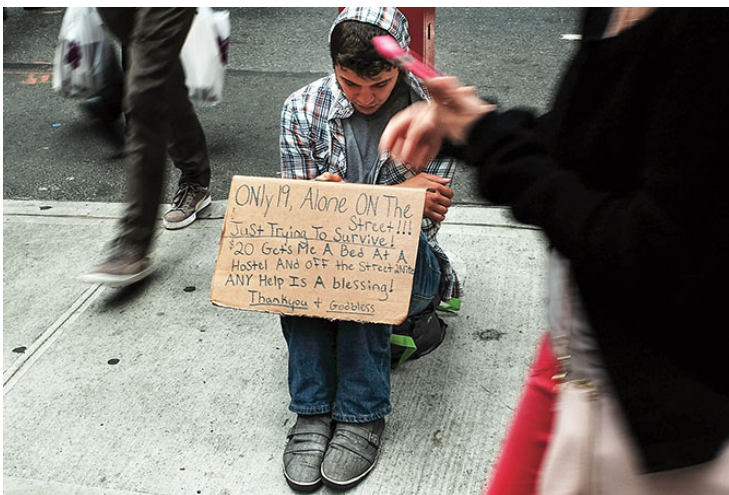
For months, he moved from one place to another, carrying all of his belongings in a tote bag. Sometimes he got lucky and was able to stay with friends or his older sister. But on other nights, he slept on a bench at a bus stop. “It was hard to fall asleep because I was so hungry,” he recalls. “I cried every night.”

Through it all, Savohn continued to go to school. Depending on where he’d stayed the night before, he sometimes walked 20 miles to get to class—a journey that took about 5 hours. He couldn’t afford to take a bus, so on those days he forced himself to wake up at three in the morning to make it to his first class.

At the time, he desperately tried to hide his situation from his classmates. “I didn’t tell anybody,” he says. “I felt embarrassed.”

Still, Savohn remained focused on school and his passion for singing, dancing, and acting. All that hard work is now paying off.

Today, Savohn, now 20, is a freshman at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, a performing arts college in New York City. He says he’s hoping to put the past behind him: “It’s like starting a new life.”



Spencer Platt/Getty Images

HOMELESS AND ALONE: A teen asks for help on the streets of New York.

* Adapted from Junior Scholastic

“Not Broken”

Many experts agree that the U.S. can end teen homelessness—but it will require a lot of work. For one thing, they say, the government must do more to ensure that young people are able to get the help they need before becoming homeless. That includes increasing access to—and funding for—mental health services, counseling for drug or alcohol addiction, and job training.

The country also needs more shelters for homeless teens who are on their own, like Han and Savohn. Nationwide, only 4,000 shelter beds are available to homeless youths who aren’t accompanied by their families.

Working to end stereotypes about homeless people is another important part of the solution, says Howard.

1 in 30

Share of 13- to 17-year-olds in the U.S. who are on their own and homeless in a given year

“There’s often a sense that these young people are sort of broken,” he says. “But these are not broken people. They’re young people who’ve experienced incredible hardships. And we can help them.” (See “How YOU Can Help,” below.)

Despite the challenges ahead, experts say that some progress has already been made. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has awarded tens of millions of dollars to dozens of cities across the country in the hopes of finding **innovative** solutions to teen homelessness. Such strategies could then be shared nationwide.

Last year, for example, San Diego was given nearly \$8 million to help create a system to quickly link homeless teens to housing and other services tailored to their needs.

Never Give Up

Han, the teen from Utah, eventually found the help she needed. During the 11 months she spent at the youth shelter, she met regularly with therapists who coached her through the crisis. With their guidance,

* Adapted from Junior Scholastic

she continued to go to school, even signing up for extracurricular activities to strengthen her leadership skills. And she gratefully accepted the food and school supplies the shelter made available.

That support helped Han graduate from high school at the top of her class and win scholarships to college. Today, she's a freshman at Weber State University in Utah, where she's studying political science. She says her struggle with homelessness taught her about the importance of reaching out for help and, ultimately, her own inner strength.

"You might be at the worst point in your life right now," she says. "But eventually it's going to get better. Never ever, ever give up."

Meet a Changemaker

"You're Never Too Young to Help"

When Jonas Corona, now 14, met a homeless kid his own age, he took action.



Craig Barritt/Getty Images for Nickelodeon

Jonas Corona (right) accepted a Nickelodeon HALO Award from Nick Cannon in 2016.

* Adapted from Junior Scholastic

I'll never forget the first moment I was inspired to help the homeless. I was 6 years old, and my mom had taken me to hand out clean clothes to people living on the streets in Los Angeles, California, not far from our home.

We hadn't been out there long when a homeless kid about my age approached me. He was small and all alone. Unfortunately, we'd brought clothes only for adults. We had to tell him we didn't have anything for him. Watching him walk away with nothing broke my heart.

After that, I wanted to do more to help. My mom encouraged me to start my own group dedicated to the cause. So I founded an organization called Love in the Mirror.

We started small at first, gathering donations like canned fruit, clothes, and soap from kids at my school. Before long, we were delivering truckloads of donations to a local homeless shelter.

We find ways to make sure volunteering is easy and fun. Every few months, I organize a challenge where we try to make 1,000 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in one day to give out to people in need. We also fill backpacks with pens, pencils, notebooks, and other supplies to hand out before the first day of school in the fall. All together, we've helped more than 50,000 homeless people in the Los Angeles area.

I often meet kids who think that if someone is homeless, it's his or her fault. But homeless people are just like you and me. In many cases, something happened to them that they had no control over.

It can be so easy to make a difference. Volunteer at a local shelter, donate goods, or make sandwiches with your friends to pass out on the streets. You're never too young to help.

by Jonas Corona, as told to Nell Durfee