

Adolescent Homelessness:

A Roundtable Discussion

Where do homeless adolescents come from? Are there more homeless youth today than ten years ago? How do we help these youth? What do they need? Last December, these questions formed the core of a MPR roundtable discussion featuring: State Representative Michael Quint; Dana Totman, deputy director of the Maine State Housing Authority; Christine O'Leary, coordinator of Portland's Preble Street Resource Teen Center; Bob Rowe, executive director of New Beginnings in Lewiston, and Brad Coffey, chair of the board of Bangor's Shaw House from 1994-1998. 🐟 In their wide-ranging discussion, the participants focused on the varied circumstances that lead to adolescent homelessness, the need for expanded low-barrier services to help these youth, and the need for some state entity to be responsible for and responsive to the unique needs of homeless adolescents. However, the participants caution that when designing policy solutions, it is important to involve adolescents. Furthermore, it is vital that everybody understand this problem because at its core, adolescent homelessness is a community problem that requires state and local investment. At risk, the participants note, is the vitality of Maine's most important future resource—its young people.

Maine Policy Review (MPR): Where do homeless adolescents come from?

CHRISTINE O'LEARY: Most of the adolescents I see come from very poor families; some of them have parents who are in jail, or who are on the streets themselves, or who simply live in a variety of impossible conditions in which to be a parent. The issue of poverty is enormous and central to the problem of homelessness. A very poor family that is in conflict may not have the resources to get it together in a way that is going to help them stay together—so the kid leaves.

MICHAEL QUINT: My experience has been there is usually a substance abuse component as well. Either their parents are using, or their parents are addicts. Interestingly enough, the reasons for a kid's homelessness often boil down to the issue of not feeling safe. It's not that he or she thinks it would be cool to go and live on the streets and hang out with friends. These kids leave situations that are unacceptable, and the streets feel safer to them. This frightens me because it's very scary on the streets; these kids are vulnerable and at great risk of having someone take advantage of them. But it needs to be recognized that, for some very good reasons, being on the streets is a safer environment for them than being in their own home.

BOB ROWE: We recently conducted a survey of the unaccompanied (by their parents) adolescents in our shelters, drop-in centers, and street-outreach programs. We found that 15% of the youth were members of ethnic minorities and 20% were members of sexual minorities. These are important factors as well; some of these kids may be subject to homophobic behaviors or bias either in their homes or in their communities or schools.

You know, it's also worth noting that in the 1980s I worked at the Dover Children's Home in New Hampshire. The Home was founded in 1895 by the Women's Temperance League out of a desire to help the children of alcoholics. In the attic of our building we found the records of the placements that occurred between 1895 and 1925. Kids were being placed out of home in what was—at that time—called an orphanage because their parents had disruptive lives, had fallen into economic decline, or were in familial conflict. So adolescent homelessness is a problem with a history. It hasn't changed significantly over the years—although we no longer place kids in orphanages.

DANA TOTMAN: Today, there are five different places that kids who are homeless or very near homeless live, and they move around among the five. Home is one obvious option; their own apartment is another option; group homes or some sort of supported living arrangement—where there is a level of supervision, support, or case management—is the third option; bouncing from shelter to shelter to shelter is the fourth option; and, literally, living on the streets is the fifth option. With the exception of the fifth option, any one of the other four can be right or wrong for these kids at any given time. Obviously, living at home with parents is the ideal, but if they are being abused or preyed upon then that's not acceptable. Having their own apartment might be right, but if they are unable or unready developmentally, then this isn't acceptable either. Living in a group home might be right, but if the youth is disruptive then that won't work. The shelters often can help kids get to a more appropriate place, but their function is largely transitional. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, there's nothing to be gained from living on the streets. Our real challenge as service providers is to try to help these kids get to whichever of the first four placements is best for them.

MPR: Are there more homeless youth today than there were ten or twenty years ago?

BRAD COFFEY: Over the last eighteen months in Bangor, the number of kids coming to the shelter has been down. But our outreach workers say they continue to see the same number of youth on the streets. (We have two people who go out on the streets every day to try and help homeless youth access the services that are available to them.)

CHRISTINE: I think there are more homeless kids now than ten years ago. However, it may only seem like the problem is increasing because eligibility requirements for programs are becoming more strict. Changes in eligibility requirements mean we have fewer programmatic options for the kid whose only identifying situation is that they are homeless. At this time they don't have a mental illness, and they haven't stolen a pair of jeans from the mall; they simply come from a family whose earning potential might be ten, eleven, or twelve thousand dollars per year. They are fourteen years old and they leave home because mom's in rehabilitation, or dad's in jail, or there was abuse and neglect in the home, and it was an appropriate, good choice for them to leave. Yet they as individuals have no earning potential, usually very little skills, and hardly any choices but to sort of try and raise themselves.

BOB: The significant change for me has to do with how funding in Maine has become more centered on those youth identified by state departments as “theirs.” I’m seeing more youth that don’t fit into any of these departments and they are unserved and more vulnerable to all of the things that were just described.

DANA: The data we compile at the Maine State Housing Authority suggest the number of homeless people in Maine is holding steady for both adults and youth. On any given night there are roughly 480 persons staying in a shelter—of which about one-third are youth. Of that third, roughly half are young children who are there with a parent, and roughly half are on their own. However, we estimate that on any given night the number of homeless people is double what we see in the shelters. The half we don’t count are on the streets, or sleeping on someone’s couch, or in an abandoned car, or somewhere else again. So our numbers are holding steady, which is bad news: We have more service options for people today than we did ten years ago, and we’re getting more successful at helping people transition out of homelessness. Yet we have some sort of feeder system that keeps our numbers from decreasing. The demographics have to be factored in as well. There are not as many kids in today’s “boomlet” era as there were during the baby-boomers’ era. While we should be seeing real declines in the number of homeless youth, we’re not.

MPR: Structurally, how should we address this problem?

BOB: One of the things that makes public policy difficult when it comes to homelessness is we’re always having to rely on anecdotal information. The Maine State Housing Authority has the responsibility of counting the number of persons who stay at shelters but the Authority is not a child welfare agency. We need to take this problem seriously by designating a responsible entity for these youth and funding the necessary studies to determine how many kids are living in each of the situations Dana described earlier.

MICHAEL: We’ve tried to deal with the adolescent population by adding them to adult services or children’s services—but they don’t fit in either category. The result is that we don’t really know who these kids are. However, one thing I do know for sure is that when they hit the homeless shelter, it’s not the first time we’ve seen them in our process. We have known who

these kids are for a very long time and somehow our system of social supports has failed. Some people say we know exactly who these kids are at age five—whether they are going to be homeless or involved in the correction system at some point. Either the early indicators were ignored, or we didn’t have the resources to intervene appropriately. And then the child ages out of children’s services and falls into this hole called adolescence.

CHRISTINE: There are too few social services in place that serve as a low-barrier point of entry to adequately intervene when these kids are not connected to a home or a family. Once they leave they’re viewed as individuals—but not adults—and so there are very few choices for them. For example, I could advocate to help a youth get \$32 worth of food stamps per month. But he or she is twelve, thirteen, or fourteen years old. He or she doesn’t have the money to buy a can opener, and doesn’t have anywhere to cook the food once it’s bought, and doesn’t even have a place to store the food until he or she can find a can opener. A fourteen-year-old kid can’t get an apartment nor can he or she get a job. Maybe I can convince the American Red Cross to waive the \$25 fee for their baby-sitting course. But how many people employ homeless kids as baby-sitters? We’re dealing with the nitty gritty in terms of basic services and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

MPR: There seems to be a level of compassion for homeless adults and families that does not extend to adolescents. What do you think?

BRAD: In Bangor we recently had a young woman who ran away, and her particular case attracted a lot of media attention. Her parents publicly vocalized their dissatisfaction with the Shaw House; there was some suggestion that she would not have left home if the Shaw House didn’t exist, that the shelter was a magnet for kids who sought a safe haven from rules and that sort of thing. So I think when the average parent—who is trying his or her hardest to raise a child—reads this type of story in the newspaper, and then thinks of the Shaw House as an “out” for the child who doesn’t want to put up with a curfew, or some imposed disciplinary measure, it’s disconcerting. I think that’s why there is some empathy for the parent rather than the adolescent. But my experience has been that it’s truly the exception when a well-functioning family has a child run away. Most children who come from well-functioning families are not eager to go and be with other children who have a confirmed mental health diagnosis, or who are dangerous, or who are simply very different from them.

MICHAEL: I agree: kids do not leave good healthy families to live on the streets and hang out with a bunch of kids that have substance abuse problems, or mental health problems, or who don't know where their next meal is coming from. They just don't do that. They might disappear for a couple of days, but they don't give it up. They are not stupid. Kids leave home a majority of the time for very good reasons.

BOB: For a long time a lot of people said the reason there was so much violence in the home was because women didn't behave—they weren't taking care of the family and fulfilling their role. But the advocacy and public communication efforts that have come along with women's domestic violence shelters have changed a lot of people's beliefs. It's the same thing with adolescents. Blaming the victim has a long history and adolescents are not particularly easy for many people to identify with. Adolescents seem to feed our fantasies of people who are out of control—even though most crimes are committed by adults on youth, not youth on adults.

DANA: The issue of "blaming the victim" isn't a whole lot different from the suggestion that the availability of unemployment insurance makes people not work, or the availability of welfare keeps people needing welfare, or the availability of substance abuse services makes people turn to drugs and alcohol. It's a parallel argument. Kids rarely say: "OK, I'm out of the house and I'm going to the shelter." Instead, there are some friends along the way, there are some relatives. Indeed, there are a whole series of steps before a kid ends up in a shelter.

BRAD: I've got some fairly conservative family members, and I think they feel like there's a certain sense of lawlessness in our society today—that there are no rules and society has broken down. I think there is some justification for that view, but I also think it has led to the misguided notion that there are services and programs for youth providing them with safe havens for engaging in lawless types of behavior. So, I don't think the issue is just about blaming the victim. In part, it's a backlash against 1960s liberalism.

MICHAEL: These kids don't just wake up one morning and say "I'm leaving." Generally their relationship with their parents has deteriorated significantly even though they want things to work out. I remember talking with one boy who had lived all over the country. I asked him how he came to live in Maine. It turns out

his mother was an addict—but he loved his mother, so he got on a bus and came to Bangor with her in spite of a history of things not working out. He was on the streets in two days because she was arrested and put in jail. I am always struck by that conversation. Kids want to be with their parents.

CHRISTINE: In the last two years, I have met more than six hundred kids. Yet I have met only three parents or family members. These visits include one parent who was inebriated and wanted to drag his kid away by the hair (we had to call the police). We publish our location on our answering machine (which is 17 Chestnut Street in Portland). We are more than happy to meet with parents, community members or anyone who is concerned about a kid at our shelter. But the majority of time their parents are just not around—it's as if the parents are the ones who have run away.

MPR: What are the greatest hurdles you face?

MICHAEL: On some level, our response to adolescent homelessness has been to say: "Oh, the family needs to deal with it." We are not acknowledging adolescent homelessness as a public welfare issue. All of these kids have special needs. For some youth, the next step after homelessness is the Maine Youth Center. If a youth is in need of services all he needs to do is steal a pair of jeans; then he earns a trip to the Maine Youth Center, where he can get fed, have a bed to sleep in, and get the treatment he might need. About 53% of the kids at the Maine Youth Center have special education needs, and I would bet 75% of them have mental health needs. The thing that is frustrating for me is that we know how to deal with 95% of the things that are going on for these kids, yet there's a reluctance at the state level to get heavily involved in helping them. I've had members of state departments say to me, "we've never been responsible for homelessness." I'm always surprised when I hear that. There's a belief that communities should deal with the problem. I always respond by saying, "they are dealing with it, but they can't do it all by themselves."

BOB: Nationally, studies show a direct correlation between out-of-home child placements (i.e., foster care, group homes), and homelessness as an adult. So the state may not want to take responsibility but may be responsible—in part—for the numbers of people who are homeless. How we transition youth—who have grown up in out-of-home placements—into adulthood needs close attention.

DANA: We all know homeless persons are among this state's most in need. Yet we place a real burden on those who are working with this population. Our human-service programs remain physically removed from the homeless population. In my five years with the Maine State Housing Authority, I have not had a single social service agency or state department come to me and say, "How can we get our substance abuse services better connected to the people staying at homeless shelters, or how can we get our job training programs to better reach homeless persons, or how can we get the bus system to serve more homeless persons?" Instead, homeless shelter staff are expected to help these neediest of needy persons show up on the providers' doorsteps. This is the traditional manner of doing business—bring the clients to the service providers. But it places a tremendous burden on the people who are working with the homeless.

BOB: I can provide an example: There is a law called the McKinney Act that gives children who are homeless the right to an education. But that law is not being enforced, and the schools have been quite uncooperative. Under the auspices of needing to meet performance objectives, absentee policies have become much more restrictive. As a result, they exclude transient youth. There have been many times we have tried to enroll a youth who came to our shelter, yet they were refused admission because it was the middle of a semester. Even when the youth has said, "I'll work anyway," school officials have said, "No, you can't attend until the next term." Well, the next term never comes for many of these youth, and the alternative school options are limited or unavailable. To a youth, education is the adult equivalent of work: even when an adult is struggling with substance abuse, work is often the last thing to go. Likewise, once a youth is disconnected from school they are really in trouble. There's a very low rate of return. Over half of the youth we surveyed recently had not completed more than a ninth grade education.

BRAD: Unfortunately, there are members of every community who see these kids on the street corner smoking a cigarette and they ask, "Why isn't that kid in school?" It reinforces their view that these kids are lawless—too bad they don't know what that kid has to go through just to get back in school.

MPR: So, what do these kids need? What types of approaches work in terms of helping them get off the streets and back in school?

DANA: As service providers, the first thing we need to do is to go to them and at least make a connection. We can't stay in our offices saying, "Send the homeless kids down here and we'll serve them."

MICHAEL: If I do nothing else in my term on the human services committee, it will be to push for low barrier services for these kids. We get a shot at helping these kids once or twice—maybe three times—and we've got to be there when they hit the system. We've got to be there when they are ready, when they ask for help, when they are ready to make a choice in their lives to go back to school, or access the services they need.

CHRISTINE: These kids have been failed: In some way they have been left, exploited, abused, or neglected by the adults in their lives. And—given the level of failure they've experienced in their lives—it is a miracle when they ask an adult for help. They can't believe that adults aren't going to hit them, or want to sexually exploit them, or want to get them high. It's not within their experience. So, if the adults in this world could just take ownership for what other adults might have done to these kids, we would be able to make progress in helping them. These kids make shamefully appropriate requests: "Will you return my phone call? Will you give me a ride? Will you help me find tampons?" No matter what these kids ask for, people need to understand it is a miracle they asked at all, and it's not going to happen again. You have to be right there to provide exactly what they ask for. You need to trust that what they ask for is very reasonable, cheap, tangible, makes sense, and is easy to deliver. In the long term, I really think the answer to helping these kids is to get them engaged in some kind of educational or vocational training.

The other part of the issue we need to deal with has to do with how abuse and neglect are perceived. The home is used as a measurement by which to determine the level of abuse or neglect. But we have no way to assess whether a kid who is alone and living on the streets should be eligible for services. Low-barrier services is the answer. We have to find a way to remove the barriers for a fourteen-, fifteen-, or sixteen-year-old to become eligible for services as an individual. I always think of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Those of us working at the shelters can do the basic stuff: We can make sure they don't have lice anymore; we can help them get into counseling and school; we can teach them how to

take care of themselves; and we can provide basic casework services. But they're not going to be an adult for two, three, or four more years. What do we do next? What can we offer them when they hit rock bottom and need a thirty-day rehabilitation program? We don't have the resources to fund that level of care and need more support from existing systems.

BOB: I have been advocating for a Maine Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. The Act would identify a statewide entity responsible for services to families who don't meet the Department of Human Services' criteria for service eligibility. It would provide funding for the kinds of services Christine was talking about. Where would the funding come from? Well, maybe it ought to come from the families who have let these kids down. Maybe we should set of a system like we do with child support payments where families' wages are attached. Then, when I have a thirteen-year-old who has run away from home, and his family is in conflict, and the parents say that he cannot come home, and his three weeks are up at the shelter, and the state says that he doesn't meet our criteria for intake, and I am about to put him back on the street, somebody attaches the families' wages, which pay for a stay at an institutional setting, and in the meantime we figure out a long-term strategy for helping this family.

BRAD: Two-and-a-half years ago we consciously made an effort to provide additional services on site at the Shaw House. But our license doesn't permit us to offer services on-site. So we obtained a waiver—basically a letter from Commissioner Concannon that says to go ahead and do it anyway. We've been operating with that permission ever since. In the past we received a fair amount of General Assistance Funding; however, in recent years we've received much less from that program, primarily because the state has put up so many barriers to accessing the money. Fortunately, the United Way has increased its funding over the years and thus we're able to provide some services with their help.

BOB: There's been a lot of recent discussion about innovative services. Yet to some, innovation still means that another professional is reimbursed to provide care for this population. To me, innovation means that the services provided by shelters are low-barrier, and that they are designed in partnership with youth. Our youth are a resource to be developed and, much

like our forests, they need constant care and development. We've got to get away from this approach to innovation that recognizes the need for more psychiatrists and social workers—where the focus is on solving the youth's problems—and place equal attention on youth and community development. We've got to help these youth get involved in their communities and see them as resources, not just as recipients of services focused on their underlying problems.

For example, let me tell you about a couple of young women who came into our transition program: Both were homeless, they got involved in our HIV prevention program, and they became HIV-prevention peer educators, where they work with other youth. For the last two years they have been providing—for free—HIV peer education to youth in our shelter. These young women were sixteen when we first met them, and are now in their early twenties. One of them works for us as a street outreach worker. The other one is part of our overnight staff at the shelter. They have helped us make policy decisions and design new programs. They have gone through many of the developmental stages you would hope would happen in a family. They are partners in our work today and this is very satisfying to see.

CHRISTINE: At the Preble Street Resource Center we run a low-barrier, drop-in shelter for youth. The only eligibility requirement is you must be less than twenty-one years old to enter; services are absolutely voluntary. Immediately you can feel the community say, "Oops, no rules." But in order for the concept of low-barrier to work, every person there must be able to consume services in a space that is safe and respectful. We don't have a long list of rules per se (i.e., no bullying, no standing on chairs, no swearing), but we do interpret and apply meaning to the words "safe and respectful." There are bumps, and occasionally we have to ask someone to take a walk for the rest of the afternoon. But for the most part I'm amazed we don't have brawls happening every day. These kids are in a primal state of need. Still, once they become invested in maintaining a safe and respectful space for themselves, they're ready to make better choices on their own behalf. And you know, when youth don't have to meet eligibility requirements in order to consume a service (i.e., casework, drug and alcohol counseling, school), they're more apt to seek help. We have a program called the Street Academy that allows kids to work toward their GED. Once kids realize the program is voluntary, available to them, and they can work at their own pace, we see them every day. When you give kids choices, they instinctively do the right thing.

We're also very aware at the drop-in shelter that kids have the opportunity to learn from the adults who work there. These kids are able to watch and learn from functioning, healthy, non-addicted, non-abusive, non-exploitive adults. Very often, they haven't been in a home that had electricity in the last twelve months; they haven't seen anyone maintain a phone number for longer than two to three months. We're always working to intervene in ways that help kids acquire these basic life skills—how to maintain an address, how to create a bank account, etc.

MPR: There is federal debate to recriminalize status offenses, which include truancy and running away. How would this affect your work?

BOB: I'm very concerned about S-10 (the bill in Congress that didn't pass in the last session but will be brought up again). One of the things we've never done successfully is to separate juveniles from adults. There have been attempts (good attempts in Maine), but one of the things that happens when you criminalize status offenses is youth end up incarcerated with adult predators—adult criminals. The prison industry may benefit from building more jails, but the “education” of these unattached youth while in the criminal system will grow exponentially if we recriminalize status offenses. When we put youth in prisons, we're providing them with an education of the wrong kind. In effect, we're allowing them to learn the prison trade rather than something productive and positive. It's hard enough to keep kids and adults separated on the street; trying to do it in prison would be a nightmare. That's my biggest and strongest objection to S-10.

My other problem with this debate is that we've never seriously tried to create the alternatives that were required by the de-criminalization of status offenses in 1977. The social services and support systems necessary to help these youth are not well developed. The effect of S-10 on New Beginnings would be direct and immediate: We'd go out of business. Our program is strictly voluntary; our mission is to serve people who choose to exercise the use of our services. We don't provide any services that are mandated or required. We would close our doors.

BRAD: In no way, shape or form will recriminalization solve the problem. This is just a reaction to the concept or theory that there's a growing lawlessness among youth.

MICHAEL: But that public perception of lawlessness fuels the debate and clogs our ability to provide the appropriate level and kind of services for these youth—not to mention to be creative or increase funding. It's incredible that until this year the state's funding of homelessness was \$500,000 for ten years in a row. We certainly went through some tough times, but to be level funded at that amount for ten years is significant. Compared to adults, kids are cheap to take care of. But if their health and mental health needs are ignored, we end up paying more later.

DANA: If this legislation were passed we might have to reallocate to the Department of Corrections 10% of the one million we currently spend on homelessness. It costs a lot more to keep someone in a correctional facility than it does to provide them with a bed in a homeless shelter. The legislation would not have a positive effect programmatically or financially.

MPR: How do we make our current system work better?

DANA: One of the keys to improving our community resources is getting the money and decision-making authority down to the lowest possible level. Decisions about who is going to pay for some kid's counselor should rest with the caseworker rather than someone tucked away in the state's Medicaid reimbursement office. Every single homeless person has a unique set of needs, so it's silly to think the decisions about how best to serve different individuals should be made by one person hundreds of miles away. Seven years ago the Legislature decided to make it much more difficult to receive General Assistance. The state now spends twelve million fewer general assistance dollars each year on emergency housing-type services. We simply need to make our programs more accessible and responsive—not less.

CHRISTINE: We need to lower the eligibility requirements so that kids can have more direct access to services, and encourage the reinstatement of the Runaway Homeless Youth Act.

BOB: Once a person becomes homeless they need to have an opportunity to change that circumstance. This requires public commitment and sensible public policy. First we need to recognize there's a problem. In 1992, I was on a panel that asked the governor to acknowledge a state of emergency for youth who were

homeless. This did not occur nor has it occurred yet. No governor has ever shown an inclination to acknowledge adolescent homelessness as a serious human development problem in the state. I think that recognition would help a great deal.

BRAD: We've got to do more to educate the people who send in their tax-paying dollars to these various programs. There is a real stigma attached to homelessness, and I really believe that many people don't completely understand the problem. We can't simply go to the Legislature and say, "You've got to fund this more." We need everybody to get behind this problem.

MICHAEL: Structurally, we need to more clearly and definitively separate adolescent services from services for children and adults. Good, sound public policy comes when you clearly identify the needs of your population. Rather than say "Oh by the way, adult services, you'll be doing this too," or "Here you go child welfare services, we're giving you this component as well," we need to focus on adolescents in a way that is meaningful and not bureaucratic. Only when we start the debate on this premise will we achieve the levels of funding, programming, and responsibility that clearly are needed. Finally, these adolescents need to be involved in the solution. It's become very clear to me that every step along the way they can play a very valuable and important role in helping us to shape the solution to this problem. Unthinkingly, we exclude them from our processes, and they should never be left out. 🐟



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Christine O'Leary is a social worker who has worked with youth in a variety of settings. Currently, she coordinates The Teen Center for the Preble Street Resource Center in Portland. She is committed to being a life-long advocate of youth.



Bob Rowe is executive director of New Beginnings in Lewiston. He has worked with youth in community settings since 1971. He is currently a member of the Maine Coalition for the Homeless and has previously served on several statewide advisory committees dealing with child welfare issues.



From 1994-1998, J. Bradford Coffey was chairperson of the board for Shaw House, an adolescent homeless shelter located in Bangor. He is also a lawyer and shareholder in the firm of Farrell, Rosenblatt & Russell in Bangor.



Dana Totman is deputy director of the Maine State Housing Authority. He chairs the Maine Interagency Task Force on Homelessness and Housing Opportunities. His twenty-year professional career has focused on maximizing the public sector's efforts to help Maine's disadvantaged citizens.