

LIVING ON THE EDGE



ILLUSTRATION BY RUPERT KINNARD

Portland's invisible homeless youth

by Natalie Shapiro
Photos by Marty Davis

To most people, they're invisible. But between 2,000 and 3,000 of them are in downtown Portland each day and night. Most have been thrown out of their home or have been physically, verbally and sexually abused. They are Portland's homeless youth.

"Youth end up on the street for a variety of reasons: abuse, neglect, abandonment or drug abuse by the youth or the family. With most of the kids I work with, there has been violence in their families," explains Favor, who until recently worked as a service coordinator at Outside In, an advocacy group that assists homeless youth and adults.

There's another reason kids end up on the street. "Many, many times the family cannot accept that their kids are gay," says Favor, who specializes in working with sexual minorities.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one in four gay and lesbian teens are forced to leave home because of a conflict about sexual orientation. A 1998 study conducted by the Oregon Research Institute of 600 street youth in Portland revealed 11 percent of males and 41 percent of females self-identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

"There's a higher percentage of sexual minority youth on the streets and in shelters because their home situations are intolerable or they have been kicked out," states Ken Kerr, associate program director for the Willamette Bridge Program, part of Janus Youth Services, which works with homeless youth.

John Duke, Outside In clinic manager, adds: "Often taking to the streets is a positive step for kids getting out of a bad home situation. Or sometimes it's their only choice, as with families that cannot accept that their child is gay."

Chantel, 17, identifies as bisexual but left home because of other conflicts. She has been living on and off the streets since she was 13.

Stephanie and Brandy, both 16, also have been on the streets for a long time. To the casual observer, they don't appear homeless.

They dress neatly and lack the desperate demeanor many homeless adults have. But once they open their mouths, it's painfully clear

they are far more mature than their actual age would suggest.

"We deal with different things than other kids—our issues are pregnancy, drugs," Chantel says. "We grow up really fast."

Stephanie adds: "My mind is not a 16-year-old's. I feel much older."

Chantel has been in foster homes all her life. She hints at an interest to return home, but difficulties with her parents, as well as her drug use, make that an unrealistic choice.

"If my parents tried raising me now—there's no point," she says. "I can't be stable there, but I can't be stable here, on the streets."



Appreciated by merchants and shoppers, police presence in downtown is not welcome by street youth

Whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or straight, these kids face similar hardships. To endure life on the streets, they band together as a family and rely on state-run youth programs for their basic needs.

Safety, drugs, health and violence are among the challenges they face. The key to survival seems to be in meeting the right people.

"When they first come downtown on the streets, it's hard to be safe," Favor says. "The first couple weeks on the street are the hardest—they don't know people, who to trust, finding the resources."

Former U.S. Rep. Edith Green was one of the founders of the Greenhouse drop-in center

EDITH GREEN
1910 - 1987
"SHE CARED"
--THE GREENHOUSE KIDS

Chantel says she was lucky when she first got on the streets. "I met the right people."

These friends were what she calls gutter punks. "They stink, they're fuckin' hard-core—mohawks, baggy pants," she laughs. "I trust them."

Access to health care presents another challenge to homeless youth, Duke says. The system is designed for those who know how to use it—making appointments, being insured and having a home address.

"So, with homeless youth, without a home or mailing address, it's a no-win situation," he says. "Without health care you can use the

pounds these risk behaviors. The Oregon Research Institute study found that young women and girls on the streets had a 20 percent annual incidence of pregnancy, a 12 percent rate of chlamydia and a 25 percent rate of herpes; 11.5 percent of homeless boys had hepatitis C.

Mental illness is also prevalent among homeless kids. The study found that 23 percent of the girls and 6 percent of the boys were diagnosed with depression. Of those, 46.5 percent of the girls and 34.5 percent of the boys admitted to past suicide attempts.

Being a sexual minority youth compounds the risk of suicide. In one study, 53 percent of gay-identified street youth had attempted suicide compared with 32 percent of street youth overall.

Homeless gay young men have a higher risk of health problems. "It's a paradox," Duke says. "They're gaining self-respect by being a gay male. In our culture being gay is often seen as a function of sexuality. So oftentimes adolescents come out, embrace the stereotypes. They gain confidence being gay—they come out like they couldn't in schools. There is also more risk-taking, with increased numbers of sex partners, increased amount of drugs with sex."

He pauses. "The paradox is—before they came out, they had less risk behavior, but their mental health was in worse shape."

Another big problem for street kids is drugs. Drugs are part of the street culture, and they are easy to acquire.

Chantel herself is a heroin addict. "When I first got on the street, someone handed me a packet of heroin. I had never seen it before. Drugs are a main part of our lives. They are so easily found down here. My drug use is a lot of why I am down here."

Chantel's story is echoed by many other street youth. The Oregon Research Institute study found that 98 percent of Portland's homeless youth experimented with drugs and alcohol and that 40 percent experimented with intravenous drugs.

Sexual minority homeless youth are also at a higher risk for drug use. "When struggling with sexual identity, kids use drugs to gain acceptance and to deal with it," Favor says.

emergency room but are turned away unless it's truly an emergency. If you go to doctors, you get bills that you can't pay, then you are afraid to go back."

Without proper access to health care, compounded with harsh living situations, street kids are at high risk for myriad illnesses. Duke says the Outside In clinic most commonly sees upper respiratory infections. "This comes from exposure to rain and cold, poor nutrition and not being able to sleep at night."

Although youth in general tend to take risks and feel immortal, living on the streets com-