

# YOUNG AND HOMELESS IN WAIKIKI

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## What Do They Need?



**L**ooking around the small living room packed with 17 adolescents sitting on a couple of worn couches and on the floor leaned up against walls, they seemed like any group of normal kids at a social gathering. A few of them looked a little distressed. One had several large abrasions on his arms and another had extremely dilated eyes and was waif thin, but mostly these kids looked like typical American teens. It was hard to imagine them living on the streets of Waikiki.

We met for an early evening focus group to discuss their lives. The tangible incentives for them to come were pizza and free movie tickets, but their relationships with each other also drew their attendance. Most of them are friends who have developed strong bonds; they have shared intimacy by surviving on their own together in Waikiki. Not all of them spoke when we met. Some were more talkative than others who were a little shy, but they were all friendly. They smiled easily and their eyes met when they laughed. They were optimistic young people. Several weeks after the focus group, some of them also filled out surveys providing more information about their lives.

Homeless youth is a growing problem in Hawai'i where "we have seen a nearly 200% increase in runaway arrests for both males and females" in the last decade. (Kassebaum, et al.1997 p.9). Hawaii's runaway increase, and resulting homeless children, reflects a growing world wide problem. The World Bank's Street Children Initiative reports that "the number of street children in the major cities of the developing

world represents as much as 3 percent of the population” (Schechter, 2000 p. 8). Sadly, “the official response is often to ignore street children or, at best to warehouse them in orphanages and detention centers; in the worst cases, they are simply killed” (Id.). While we don’t kill our Waikiki street children, we do generally ignore them. They do not fit in with current urban development plans.

Waikiki is one of the world’s most popular tourist attractions. Scruffy looking homeless kids hanging around are inconsistent with affluent travelers enjoying their vacations in paradise. Imagine 17 year old Keoki who carries all his belongings in an over stuffed backpack as he walks down Kalakaua Avenue one bright sunny afternoon. The trade winds are gently blowing; the turquoise ocean is lined with small lacey white surf and dotted with many surfers. The sidewalk is full of mostly Japanese tourists who are excitedly walking, snapping photographs, and enjoying the sights, while local residents are moving with purpose to their destinations.

Keoki has been living on Waikiki streets since he ran away from home about four months ago. Right now he’s looking around for a place to sit down and rest, but what he’d like most at the moment is to get on a surfboard and paddle out to the small surf. Immersing his body in the soothing salt water and riding some waves would be heaven to him right now. He hasn’t had a hot shower for two days and he’s sore from sleeping on a thin beach mat. Unfortunately for Keoki, there is a police officer sitting in his Cushman vehicle watching him. Keoki knows the cop will not allow him to sit down here on Kalakaua Avenue. Besides even if he did have a surfboard, there is no place for him to safely stash his backpack and other



belongings. Keoki trudges on, he picks up his pace a little and thinks maybe he’ll find some of his friends further down the road where he can sit under some trees and rest. Although Keoki is only a fictional character, his experience is typical for many homeless youth in Waikiki.

### Who are the homeless kids?

The youth interviewed for this article were mostly from predominantly low-income areas on Oahu. One was from Molokai and another was from California. Their ages ranged between 14 and 22. Most were about 17 years old. All of them have been homeless in Waikiki. Most of them ran away from home.

Many of their parents abused drugs or alcohol. All but one said that they have used a wide variety of illegal drugs including marijuana, crystal methamphetamine, cocaine, Ecstasy, LSD and heroin. One adolescent reported his being *drug free* as something that would make his life better. He also reported that he had been diagnosed as *hyperactive* as a child which he took medication for. The average age these adolescents began using drugs was 14, but the age range that they began using drugs was between a low 5 years and a high 18 years.

The majority of these youth reported that the state child protective services agency (CPS) was involved with them at some point in their lives, but over half of them said that CPS did not help their situations. Most homeless kids in Waikiki dropped out of school and usually quit by the eighth or ninth grade. They said that they quit school because they were “kicked out,” “too old,” “didn’t want to go anymore,” “left home,” “not enough credits,” or “wanted to drink and use drugs.”

### Why did they come to Waikiki?

These young people came to Waikiki to meet their basic needs for food, sleep, safety and human relationships. Their needs are consistent with Maslow’s hierarchy that begins with biological,

safety and attachment needs. (Zimbardo & Gerrig, 1999) First, according to the kids, Waikiki meets their biological needs because it's a place they can "sleep" and "there's food." Most of them said that "jobs" or "money" would make their lives better in Waikiki. They complained that the Honolulu Police Department (HPD) has a policy of not letting them sit down "anywhere on Kalakaua and Kuhio Avenues." They said that "not being able to sit" on these two main Waikiki streets was a serious problem for them.

Their need for safety is also met in Waikiki, but only where there are "street lights." They don't travel down certain streets or alleys where there are known dangers like drugs and crime. The kids also feel safe "in the ocean and at the beach," at "YOs" (the Youth Outreach Center) and "along the Ala Wai" except where it's unlit.

YOs is a youth outreach program administered jointly by the Waikiki Health Center and Hale Kipa, two non-profit service agencies. YOs is not a shelter, but on certain days it provides homeless youth with food, phones, showers, and lockers for their personal belongings, a nurse practitioner, and other necessities. Many of the youth cited "YOs" as the place they "feel safest in Waikiki."

Finally, the kids find their need for human relationships and belonging in Waikiki. According to Maslow, the need for attachment is the third basic human need. These kids say that "Waikiki is a place you know you can always find people. Someplace you can always find your people." Family is the most basic unit of social interactions for humans. We're a group-oriented species. When your parents are addicted to drugs and not providing support or even asking you to leave the family, it is necessary to create attachments outside the biological family.

For those with dysfunctional families the ability to create a "formed family" is vital. "Friendship isn't a product that can be obtained for cash. People need friends

today more than ever, but friends are harder to make in a world where people are busy, moving and isolated. Some people don't have the skills. They are shy, abrasive or dull" (Pipher, 1996). Most of the youth in this small study have developed positive social skills. And while it certainly must be a challenge for adolescents to create their own "formed family" in Waikiki, many of these Waikiki homeless youth have.

That these kids have developed caring relationships with others is an indication of their resiliency. The Kauai Longitudinal Study showed that the ability to detach from unhealthy families and establish emotional connections with others were protective factors for at-risk youth. (Werner and Smith, 1992).

The homeless youth of Waikiki are socially skilled, they have to be in order to survive, but they also need friendships for a good life. "There is no doubt that well-being is deeply attuned to relationships, and that consciousness resonates to the feedback we receive from other people." (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). The majority of Waikiki homeless youth interviewed here value relationships and care for each other. Almost all of them indicated it was friendships and relationships with others that brought them to Waikiki.

### **What do homeless youth find good and bad about Waikiki?**

The majority of the kids think Waikiki is a good place because the "people are nice, even the bums are nice," but a few of them think that it "sucks because people are mean." Most of the kids, however, believe that the people in Waikiki "have heart" and "aloha."

Waikiki homeless youth believe that HPD and security officers from hotels and businesses, are unfriendly and "out to bust" them. Except for two HPD officers who knew one of the kids for many years, none of the police were viewed as allies. The kids did think that most of the

*bouncers* who work for the clubs were friendly and seem to care about them. That these kids perceive the police negatively is unfortunate. This view is consistent with the situation in New York City which Geoffrey Canada writes about in *Fist Stick Knife Gun* where youth also view the police as a threat instead of a resource. Most functional middle class neighborhoods use the police to their advantage. The Waikiki street youth say that the police “harass you even when you’re doing good.” They “will tell you in a heartbeat you can’t go to the beach and they’ll harass you about curfew.” Although a children’s law center, Na Keiki, opened on Oahu several years ago it is now under funded and only provides limited assistance to youth. Although kids could get some advice on police harassment from Na Keiki, they are unlikely to test their constitutional rights and challenge the police. Under age runaways want no problems with the police and will do anything to avoid them.

### The Homeless Youth think Waikiki would be a better if . . .

Waikiki needs “coconut trees,” “the chess tables returned” and elimination of the “the dope dealers.” The kids believe that the police are more interested in arresting the “bunkers,” those who sell “fake drugs” rather than “catching the real dope dealers.” These homeless youth think that Waikiki would be better without drug dealers in the community.

The kids want more things that they can do in Waikiki. They want activities that they can engage in at no cost. Currently, their most favored activity is going to movie theaters. They love movies and the safety of a theater. But they want other activities to do. One wondered if “the zoo could be open once a month for us at no cost, so we could go there.”



They also support restoration of the Natatorium as a place they could go at no cost.

University of Chicago psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied thousands of people over the years attempting to measure the quality of their lives. He uses the word *flow* to describe activities that make the best human experience. “To improve life, one must improve the quality of experience.” (Csikszentmihalyi,

1990). The homeless youth of Waikiki want flow in their lives. They recognize that activities can improve the quality of their lives and they want access to these opportunities.

### What do the Homeless Youth Need?

According to Jeff Kaplan, the long-time coordinator of YOs, an emergency shelter specifically for homeless youth would help them the most. “We have no emergency shelter for homeless youth on Oahu. The kids are afraid and won’t go to IHS [Institute for Human Services] the only emergency shelter on the island for the homeless.” They are afraid of IHS because “adults stay there who prey on them.” The need for more youth shelters for runaways was also identified in *A Plan for Prevention, Resolution and Controls for the Problem of Youth on the Run*, a 1997 detailed plan developed by The Center for Youth Research at the Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawaii.

Why don't we have a shelter for homeless youth in Waikiki? Some believe that it would attract more homeless kids to Waikiki. The police already have enough problems trying to keep the kids off the beach and out of this attractive tourist area. It is feared that a shelter would only draw more kids to Waikiki. Unfortunately, this response to homeless and runaway youth simply ignores the problem and in long-term hurts the community.

Waikiki should learn from the experience of other communities and respond proactively. In 1991 New York City suffered from too many prisoners in its city jails. (Canada, 1995). To solve the jail over crowding problem, there was a proposal for the city to buy a barge and put the prisoners on it out in the water. Rather than put more money into prison space, then mayor of New York City, David Dinkins, instead chose to invest the money in better education for children. As a result of this decision, Beacon sites were opened in New York City's most depressed areas. The Beacon sites are often in schools. The "sites are places that combine comprehensive services with activities based on a youth development model. Schools are a natural place to house Beacon programs because when designed correctly, a Beacon is more than just a bunch of services for children and families, it is a community development strategy. We have realized that you cannot save children without saving their families, and you cannot save families without rebuilding communities" (Canada p. 1995).

Kaplan says that in addition to a homeless shelter for homeless youth, they need jobs. They want to work and become self-sufficient. Unfortunately, because they don't have permanent home, addresses or many job skills, finding employment is difficult. Kaplan says that many of the youth who have found employment have proven to be good reliable workers.

Na Keiki Law Center (Na Keiki) project coordinator Annabel Murray who only works for the agency part time now,

reports that the children's law center has received dozens of referrals about homeless children. The referrals often come from the children themselves. Na Keiki provides free legal services to these children whenever possible and believes that the best way to help them is to find them safe homes where they can live until they are eighteen. Na Keiki will file court petitions for guardianship on behalf of any child who can find an adult who is willing to provide them with a safe home and become their legal guardian. Unfortunately, the system does not make this easy and a legal guardian will not receive any financial assistance from the state unless the child is related by blood or marriage. There are very few families who can take on the extra expense of a teenager without any financial help. Na Keiki was recently successful in getting a Honolulu Family Court judge to order a parent to pay child support to the newly appointed guardians of his son, whom he had kicked out of the house many months earlier. This child could easily have ended up homeless, but for the guardians' willingness to open their home to the boy and the Court's ordering the parent to provide financial assistance for his child. Awarding child support, however, is only helpful when the parents have the capacity to pay. Most homeless youth come from poor families. They would benefit from a change in current public welfare laws to allow unrelated guardians to receive financial assistance when housing these teens. All barriers preventing homeless children to find homes need to be removed, through legislation and/or Court orders. The state should facilitate the placement of these homeless children in safe and nurturing homes by providing them with financial support. Na Keiki has anecdotal evidence that CPS does not consider





these children to be high priority for placement in foster care.

### ***E Makua Ana Youth Circles: A Step toward Homelessness Prevention***

In April 2004 the Department of Human Services, which administers the state CPS system implemented a new restorative justice intervention for youth like those who end homeless in Waikiki. The *E Makua Ana Youth Circle* program can help prevent homelessness by addressing the needs of the youth aging out of state custody.

*E Makua Ana* is Hawaiian for *becoming an adult*. The E Makua Youth Circle Program is an individualized group process for youth coming out of foster care and correctional facilities and can be used for any teenager in the CPS system aged 16 through 18.

The Circles are completely youth driven, which begins by being totally voluntary. The state refers a case to the private agency providing the Circles, but if a teenager doesn't want one, it is not imposed on them. Within one month of the program's implementation ten referrals were made and out of those only one teen chose not to have a Circle. "I felt honored they asked me if I wanted a Circle," reported one youth who spoke about her experience.

"The program provides a group process for teenagers to celebrate their emancipation from state custody and to assist them in planning for their independence. Ideally, a teenager will have three (3) Youth Circles by the time they age out of state custody" (EPIC, Inc., *E Makua Ana Youth Circle* brochure).

Teenagers who decide they want a Circle also decide who will attend the Circle. Their social worker and the facilitator are the only people the youth has no choice in inviting. Otherwise they can invite anyone to their Circle. Usually this includes parents who lost custody of the teenage years before when they were determined to be unable to care for the

child and the state took custody. It is vital that the youth have supporters to assist them in making plans for independence. "Who can you live with if you have no place to go?" is something the youth and his or her supporters address at the Circle.

Teenagers decide where and when their Circle will be held and what food will be served. The teenagers also decide how they want to open the Circle, which usually includes a song, words of inspiration or prayer with special meaning to them. Most important, however, at the Circle the teenager decides on his or her own individual plan for transitioning out of state custody. The Circle participants help generate options for housing, education, financial needs, employment, transportation, but it is the teenager who chooses what path they will follow. The Circles focus on the teenager's strengths; problems are not discussed unless the teen brings it up for discussion. When comments like "He's so bad with money management" are made the facilitator reframes it into a positive strength by saying something like: "You really want him to succeed in becoming independent."

E Makua Ana Youth Circles are solution-focused and based on the work of Steve deShazer and Insoo Kim Berg, a social worker who has written a stack of books and who goes all over the world teaching people how to focus on what they want in life instead of complaining about what they don't want. The solution-focused approach is being successfully applied in CPS (Berg & Kelly, 2000), drug treatment (Berg & Reuss, 1998), domestic violence (Lee, Sebold, Uken, 2003), schools (Metcalf, 2002) and criminal justice interventions (Walker, 2003).

### ***Waikiki Youth Circles: A Solution Focused Goal Setting Group Process***

In 2005 an experimental solution-focused group process was designed and conducted for nine evenings, one hour a time, over 18 weeks at YO's. Sixteen participating homeless youth set goals for

themselves, and seven of these youth (44%) reached their goals, which included filling out job applications; making appointments; looking in the newspaper for rentals; and getting a medical clearance to get back on methadone. One former foster youth found a home, and another former foster youth found a full time job. Surveys collected after each Circle showed participants were highly satisfied with the process. The youth who found a home, said that the Circles: “Helped me get things done in which I would procrastinate. I appreciate being helped with my goals in life.”

## Conclusion

Waikiki will always have some homeless youth. It's a place that offers them something more than where they came from. Waikiki has potential compared to life with drug-addicted parents, abuse and neglect. It offers at-risk kids some hope.

Martin Seligman, psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania has studied depression and resiliency for the last 30 years. His research verifies how optimistic children are more resilient than their pessimistic counterparts. Dr. Seligman has coordinated the Penn Prevention Project that began in 1990, which teaches kids cognitive skills for preventing depression. An important element of the project is teaching kids the difference between “feeling good versus doing well.” Teaching kids to do well, to be persistent in the face of adversity, will make them more resilient than simply increasing their self-esteem. Most of the homeless kids in Waikiki want to work. They are resilient. They came to Waikiki hoping to meet their basic human needs. Their optimism is evident by their smiles, laughter and concern for each other in spite of being homeless.

If we want to help homeless kids we need to make Waikiki and the other communities on Oahu, places that provide for children's needs. Homeless kids need places where they can live, work, play, get an education, and drug treatment when necessary. If we want to prevent youth homelessness we need to promote programs like the Waikiki Youth Circle and E Makua Ana Youth Circle programs.

In the end when we care for our youth and they become self-sufficient, it increases the quality of life for us all and makes our communities better places for everyone.



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