Brianna DeMaio, 18, is one of more than a million homeless youth in the United States. How do they survive on the streets?

BY ALESSANDRA POTENZA

Brianna DeMaio underneath the bleachers at her old high school, where she's often slept in recent years.
On nights when she can’t crash on a friend’s couch or find a bed at a shelter, Brianna DeMaio has to sleep in a park, huddled up inside a tube slide in a playground, or in a shed or under a bridge. In the winter, she tries to ward off frostbite by wearing gloves and doubling up on socks.

DeMaio, now 18, has been homeless for six years, since she, her mother, and her older sister were evicted from their house in Portland, Maine. DeMaio’s mother struggled with alcohol abuse and couldn’t keep up with the bills. After the family lost the house, DeMaio’s sister went to live with friends, her mother moved in with her boyfriend, and DeMaio was left to survive on her own.

During the day, she kept going to school as often as she could, not telling anyone about her situation. At night, she spent much of her time on the street, often struggling to find enough food. Sometimes she ate at a shelter. Other times, she stole food and soda from stores.

But nothing was worse than sleeping outside. She still remembers the first night she spent in a park, huddled up in a couple of thick blankets in the middle of winter.

“I was scared out of my wits,” she says. “I didn’t know what was going to happen. . . . I never thought it would get that bad for me.”

DeMaio is one of the more than 1 million young people who are homeless in the United States. Many end up on the streets because their parents lost their jobs and can’t pay the rent. Some have run away from poverty, abuse, violence, or alcohol and drug problems, or aged out of the foster care system.

At night, they sleep in parks, alleys, cars, abandoned buildings, and on subways and buses. The lucky ones couch surf with friends or relatives, or find cots in emergency shelters filled with dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of other homeless people. During the day, many go to school or college, or try to find jobs.

Although the overall number of homeless Americans is declining, the number of homeless young people in the U.S. is at an all-time high. According to the Department of Education, about 1.2 million students in grades K-12 are homeless (see map, p. 12)—up 72 percent since 2007.

And this number doesn’t include thousands more homeless youth who aren’t enrolled in school or attending college. Some estimates put the number of homeless youth at 2 million.

The primary culprit in the surge of homelessness is the severe recession that began in 2008. While the economy has improved, 10 million people are still looking for jobs and 15 percent of Americans are living in poverty. Another factor is a shrinking safety net—including federal cuts in affordable housing programs—which caused many families barely making ends meet to slide into homelessness.

“There are some myths out there about homeless youth and about, oh, they are incorrigible kids; they just don’t follow the rules,” says Marian Carney, who runs a youth shelter in Lewiston, Maine. But in reality, Carney says, “their lives are very complicated, they’re full of trauma.”

Regardless of how young people become homeless, they face a lot of the same struggles—including malnutrition,
abuse, addiction, and depression. Every day, they have the incredible stress of finding food and shelter for the night, and for many, hiding their situation from others.

“They’re really hoping to remain invisible,” says Jody Waits, the director of Youth Care, a homeless shelter in Seattle. “They’re embarrassed.”

That was true of Malachi Armstrong, who became homeless at 16 when his grandmother kicked him out of her house in Philadelphia after she caught him alone with a girl. For almost two years, he hopped from couch to couch, at times staying with friends whose homes were so dirty he didn’t dare take a shower. Some nights he slept on park benches, with a bag of chips for dinner if he ate anything at all.

During the day, Armstrong went to school, making up excuses for falling asleep in class while boasting to his classmates that he was partying too hard. It took him almost two years to open up to his teachers and seek help at a local shelter. But sometimes, the sense of isolation wouldn’t go away.

“They know what it means to be homeless, but they don’t know what it’s like to be homeless,” says Armstrong, who’s now 22 and studying for a truck driver’s license in Kentucky.

Apple*, in San Francisco, had a different experience. In California, where she was homeless on and off for seven years, she found a lot of support in the homeless community itself and felt less isolated.

After running away from the foster care system—which moved her into four different group homes in three years—Apple lived on the streets, sleeping in parks, on the beach, or on boardwalks. Most of the time she had the company of other young people. They camped out together at night for protection and sold artwork together in Venice Beach. They traded pins, buttons, and patches with each other in exchange for other commodities, like socks. They became her family.

“With the homeless youth community, there’s kind of this unconscious understanding,” says Apple, 21, who’s now in independent housing in San Francisco and studies biology at a local community college. “We support each other more than people would think. We stand up for each other. We defend each other.”

But this kind of support might be harder to find outside of big cities like Philadelphia and San Francisco. Two in five homeless youth actually live in smaller cities and in suburban and rural areas, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. There, the homeless can be even more

* Apple is her nickname and she requested that her last name be withheld to protect her privacy.
invisible than in big cities, so social programs are often scarce. And those that exist might be hard to access because of long distances and the lack of public transportation.

Joey Perrins-Lane experienced firsthand what it means to be homeless in a smaller city. He was 15 when he found himself on the streets in Eugene, Oregon. His mother kicked him out after discovering he used drugs. With no place to go, he slept on the streets—his first night was in an alley next to an all-night donut shop—and in parks, with a pocket knife to keep safe. In the morning, he hid his few belongings in the bushes and went to school, where he kept silent about his situation for fear of being kicked out.

In August 2012, in search of a new start, he hitchhiked to Columbus, Ohio, and dropped out of school. Addicted to cocaine and Oxycontin, he slept in abandoned buildings, begging for money during the day. But in Columbus—a city five times as big as Eugene—he also found public transportation, soup kitchens where he could get hot meals instead of dumpster diving, and, eventually, a youth program that helped him get off drugs.

“Here in Columbus, Ohio, the homeless don’t go hungry,” says Perrins-Lane, who’s now 18. “I feel more alive now than I did when I was 15 in Eugene.”

The U.S. has been struggling with homelessness for a long time. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, more than 250,000 homeless kids—known as “boxcar children”—rode freight trains across America in search of work. The situation improved as the economy recovered in the 1940s with President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and World War II.

Today, homeless advocates say that not enough resources are devoted to rescue young Americans from homelessness. (Nationwide, there are only 4,000 beds for unaccompanied homeless youth who don’t live with their families.) Too much money, they say, is spent criminalizing homelessness with laws that ban sleeping in public spaces and even in cars, instead of investing in affordable housing.

But the tide may be turning. In 2010, the Obama administration issued a plan to end youth homelessness by 2020, pledging to invest $5 billion in 2014 alone. Federal agencies that address homelessness are starting to collaborate better, and legislation was recently introduced in Congress to require colleges to help homeless students find housing during breaks.

In Maine, Brianna DeMaio found transitional housing at a shelter for a couple of months in the summer. But she eventually left and is on the streets again.

She’s working on getting a copy of her birth certificate and applying for jobs. In the meantime, she’s slowly reconnecting with her mother, chatting with her online every now and then.

“What motivates me every day is thinking about my past and trying to achieve more and succeed,” DeMaio says. “I know that I can do better.”

Where They Sleep
Most homeless students couch surf with friends or other relatives

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