

The scandal and the vice

Mary Hampshire takes to the streets of New York to see how outreach workers are helping the city's 15,000 homeless children

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At first glance, 20-year-old Philip Esposito looks like any other young, middle class New Yorker. But his fresh complexion, soft brown hair, gentle eyes and smart dog-tooth suit jacket are shockingly deceiving. A closer glance reveals his clothes are soaked. His skin is freezing. He shivers and his eyes dart around nervously during conversation. The previous night Philip slept on the pavement, the one before with a client. Before that "I can't remember," he admits, cupping his hands around a bowl of noodle soup, "I was too high."

Philip is one of 15,000 estimated 'street kids' (aged between 16 and 21) who rely on outreach services such as SafeSpace for food, showers, contraception and medical care including psychiatric referrals and HIV testing. Many are homeless because of childhood abuse. Others are casualties of the drugs subculture. "The problem's got worse in recent years," says Carl Siciliano, director of homeless services at The Centre for Children and Families, which runs SafeSpace.

"There's a whole generation who grew up during the AIDS and crack epidemics which hit the inner cities in the 1980s." But currently, there are approximately 300 emergency beds available for them. "The focus in this city tends to be on adults or children, not those aged between," continues Carl Siciliano, also on the New York Taskforce on Homeless Youth which is currently trying to kickstart a census on the exact number of homeless youth. "The city council imagines," he adds, sarcastically, "there's several 100 so they can justify that current services is enough. Although the level of outreach services is good, the foster care and shelter system is just not adequately equipped to deal with these kids. There are not enough beds."

Councillor Ken Fisher (a Democrat for Brooklyn) chairs the Council Committee on Youth Services, and is alarmed by the problem. He is currently liaising with the Department of Homeless Services to come up with initiatives, such as long term housing. Last year, Coun Fisher convened three hearings where outreach agencies testified. "It was the first time in 10 years city officials were willing to acknowledge the problem." Street kids, says Coun Fisher, are ignored because they are invisible. "They look like any kids walking the street. It's hard to pick them out. Many originate from New York."

He acknowledges: "In the short term we need emergency beds. But to stop kids winding up on the streets in crack houses or as prostitutes we need to look at why they are doing so and provide long term care. A large percentage of homeless youths have been through the foster care system. So, the wrong choices they are making with their lives come on the heels of the wrong choices made by adults responsible for raising them whether it was their parents or

foster parents. Homelessness is the last step in a long line of problems," he adds. "Just providing emergency beds does not address these issues or stop them from hitting the streets again. I'd like to see more long term housing." But so far, he admits: "There's been a lack of political will."

Ximena Rua-Merkin, spokeswoman for Covenant House, the main bed facility for homeless youths in the city, agrees long term solutions need to be expanded. "It's important to provide transitional living and job training programmes." Covenant House, funded by state grants and private donations, has 150 emergency beds and 150 transitional living beds and provides job training. The Centre for Children and Families was due in May 1999 to open 30 emergency beds and also to become the first drop-in centre in New York to open 24 hours. Additionally, it provides education training, job skills, mental health assistance and can refer those with HIV to a 12-bed unit for upto 24 months.

Young homeless have severe behavioural, drugs and alcohol abuse problems. Some become prostitutes, others drug dealers or they pick pocket. "They are frustrated, angry and difficult kids," adds Carl Siciliano, "who don't fit into institutional programmes because they've developed a hard pathology from being repeatedly exposed to street life. "They may go through 10 to 15 foster care placements if they get one. Many don't." As another case worker bluntly put it: "They think: 'Fuck your institution. Look what I'm going through'."

On a rainy Friday night at 8.30pm the SafeSpace team of three led by George Santana crawl around Manhattan, The Bronx and Spanish Harlem until the early hours offering food, showers, clothes and contraception. They pass Time Square where enormous advertising billboards pulse with flashing lights competing for attention. Stretch limousines roll by and hoards of people stride down Broadway, lined with theatres, gearing up for a night out. The comparison between the wealthy and underprivileged could not be more starkly illustrated than in Manhattan where people live in close quarters.

Philip, from Long Island, took to the streets four years. "My mother has drug problems and was abusive," he continues. "I couldn't take it anymore. I left with one change of clothing and my wallet. I came to Greenwich Village when Gay Pride was on. It was exciting. I'd never seen that many people before. I no longer felt alone. But when it finished I had nowhere to go. So I slept on the pier with 12 others. We were like a family. We called ourselves the Pier Queers. It wasn't easy trying to get a job. I did manage it for two weeks once. I'd sleep on heating vents by a hospital, then change my clothes and go to work at a pharmacy. Other times I slept in the subway or when I could afford it, in a hotel room. I tried a shelter in Brooklyn but someone was shot and it really messed me up. I soon realised I could pull in good money from prostitution, upto £200 for a couple of days work. I got into heroin. Drugs became my only comfort because I didn't feel worth anything. When I didn't have the money I'd steal. Now there are warrants out for my arrest for possession with intent to sell and prostituting. I've tried to go back home," he sighs sadly. "But it didn't work. I've found out I caught HIV from my lover," he says, getting up and shuffling away.

"Get the condoms out," yells SafeSpace worker Tisha Riley, at 9.45pm as Philip leaves. "Bye, bye baby. Take care." A group of three 16-year-old boys climb aboard. "We got regular, lubricated or juicy fruit and vanilla flavoured. Now would you rather live hopefully or safely?" she asks. Meanwhile, George Santana, 39, and a married father-of-four - a humorous, larger than life character dressed in jeans, t-shirt and a baseball cap - is joking with people on the pavement. He hands out some leaflets and pours noodle soup for the three who leave. Behind the wit and joviality is an understanding of what they're going through. For George is a hard case who turned himself around.

"I loved drugs," he says. Tisha flashes a disapproving look. "I'm only being honest" he says, shaking his head. "If I could get high right now, I would. But I can't. It would ruin my life again." He left a good home and family after being addicted to heroin, and cocaine and was homeless from 1987 until 1990. "It started with beer and marijuana. I became a real, bad boy," he says, in retrospective shock at his previous antics. "I was a drug dealer. I lived in a park and got arrested with guns. Stuff like that. I ended up in prison for two years. That's where I got clean with the help of Phoenix House. I've been clean for 10 years." He adds: "I can relate to a lot of these kids. But it does get frustrating when they tell me they don't have a problem and they're high or they get abusive and say: 'I don't need your fucking help'. All I feel like doing is bustin' their arse. How do I deal with it? I talk to my wife.. But it kills me to see some of them."

The glamour of downtown Manhattan fades as the van slowly makes its way north through Spanish Harlem. Kids hang out on street corners outside graffiti-splashed shops. It moves on to Hunt's Point, where goods from all over the world are transported. In the past it has been a notorious prostitution haunt. It's a dead zone, its broad streets lined with garages and barbed wire. Barely anyone is out, apparently because of the rainy weather. "They'll all start popping out soon," says George, confidently. A prostitute, a pretty woman in black flares and a leather jacket, suddenly pulls up in the middle of the road and hops on to collect some condoms. "I think a lot of cops are out tonight," she says, explaining the eerie silence on the streets. Around the corner, an older man on a bike is talking to a well-dressed girl who wears a nervous look. She is half his age, and looks totally out of place. "She'll be on the game too," says George, nonchalantly. "What else would she be doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"

There are some street kids who wind up with a new life, though they may be few and far between. Christopher Planes, 20, is one of them. It's a midweek afternoon at the Centre for Children and Families, on 46th street, and he's helping others as a peer educator. He graduated with a high school diploma and is going to university to study for an education degree with financial support from his foster parents. Christopher left home at 16 and was homeless for four years and was put into 14 foster homes. "I disappeared so many times they called me 'Houdini'," he laughs. A former gang member, Christopher still wears his blue, white and black necklace with pride and shows scars on his hands and arms where he was injured in fights. "It's a territorial thing, and I was young. When you're on the streets the other gang members are like your family,"

explains Christopher, who is now waging another battle - with leukaemia. Even when he was homeless, he says, he still turned up for school and was even a Montessori teacher at 17. It was a teacher who saw his potential and egged him on to keep attending. It's hard to get off the streets, he acknowledges. But he says: "I see kids who come in here and expect everything to be given to them. I've had to fight. If you really want to survive, you have to do something for yourself as well. You can always make something a little bit better."

Philip has tried drug rehabilitation but not yet succeeded. To keep himself sane he sings and writes poetry. "Let me write a poem on your notepad," he says before leaving. 'Another Day, Another hazy memory. Struggling to keep some sense of resilience. Street kid. Hooker. Dope whore. All the while dreaming of something more. Pray for me. Save me. Give me a change. Soon the heroin will take away my name.' "Right now," he adds, frankly. "I wish I was dead."