

# Living on the street

by BRIAN LOCKHART

There is a series of commercials currently on television, radio, and online from an organization that helps homeless youth.

The TV version is well done and certainly gets their message out there. It shows a young girl, maybe 15 or 16 years old, wrapped in a sleeping bag and trying to stay warm in a bus stop shelter. The commercial asks the question, 'How young do they have to be before you will help?'

It also goes on to say that there are as many as 2,000 young people homeless on the streets of Toronto on a given night.

Many, it says, are out there because their home life is so bad, they feel safer on the street than they would in their own home.

There are around 6,000 kids on the street on any night across the country.

What a tragedy it is, that a kid would feel safer walking the streets in the middle of the night than they would being in their own house.

The organization helps 'youth' between the ages of 13 and 24. To be fair, there is a huge difference between a 13-year-old on the streets and someone who is in their early 20's.

Someone who is 24 years old can fend for themselves a lot easier than some kid who is barely in their teens. A thirteen-year-old on their own is subject to a variety of abuse or exploitation from predators, and that is another tragedy - that people will exploit a kid who needs help.

The majority of people who have children raise their kids in an appropriate manner, provide for them, and try to help them through life so they can be productive adults and citizens - but some don't.

Some people should never have kids at all.

You can't always tell what a family dynamic is like from the outside.

I grew up down the street from a seemingly normal family. They had a nice house with an immaculately kept yard. The mother was a rather proper type of woman who always dressed nicely, and seemed to me, to be a good mother.

The father, however, was a different story. One summer, I was at their house and I heard the father speaking to the oldest daughter in a manner that threatened severe violence. I was shocked and could never imagine my own father threatening to break my arm if I didn't do something he asked. I never went back to their house.

Of that family, the oldest daughter left home immediately after graduating high school and never looked back. The youngest daughter ran away to Toronto when she was just 16 years old. She committed suicide only a few years later.

The brother went on to a distinguished career, then suddenly, without warning, committed suicide.

I always wondered what was really going on in that house that created such a tragic outcome, and could it have been prevented?

Statistics indicate that 49 per cent of youth on the street left home before they were 18 years old, and 59 per cent come from average to upper-income households. Of trafficking victims, 35 per cent are under 18 years-old.

Not everyone who is on the street has been abused or neglected. Some people, for whatever reason, choose that lifestyle.

I saw an interesting documentary on the subject a couple of years ago, that followed one girl who was voluntarily homeless. She lived under a bridge with her, less than upstanding boyfriend.

She thought it was a 'cool' lifestyle for some reason. Her parents were typically middle-class people who provided a decent home and couldn't understand her lifestyle choices, and begged her to come home, to no avail.

For many though, their home life is worse than being on the street.

Having children is a huge responsibility, however, some people just see having children as an inconvenience, and really don't care what happens to them.

But what happens to people who don't do the responsible thing? How can you have a 13-year-old that hasn't come home for several days, and you don't even report to the police that your child is missing? It happens all the time.

A quick look at the online DoeNetwork International Center for Unidentified and Missing Persons, reveals thousands of people, many of them very young, who have simply disappeared, or turned up dead, possibly murdered, and no one has any idea who they are, because no one cares.

Parents who willingly neglect their obligations to their children need to be held accountable for their negligence and the results of child abandonment or abuse.