

A 'choose-your-own' activity

EXPLORING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS



CATHOLIC CHARITIES
of St. Paul and Minneapolis

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Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis serves those most in need. We are a leader at solving poverty, creating opportunity, and advocating for justice in the community.

This special tool was created by Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis to actively engage participants in learning about the realities facing youth experiencing homelessness in our communities. The 'Choose-Your-Own' activity makes homelessness experiential and personal. Participants are invited into the life struggles of a youth's story, and asked to make decisions about how to handle their situation. This activity was created by Angela Butel and Marty Roers of the Community Engagement and Leadership Development Team.



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—Activity Instructions—

In this activity, you are invited to walk in the shoes of a youth experiencing homelessness.

- By yourself or with a small group, read through the scenarios and think through your decisions.
- Begin with page one and follow the instructions for next steps at the end of each page.
- Try to put yourself in the shoes of the youth in this story.**
- Consider your options.
- With bold questions, take a few moments to pause, think about, and discuss.
- Take note of any helpful points to your discussion on scratch paper (please do not write in the booklet).
- Make decisions as realistically as you can while also making them quickly in order to move through the activity as if you were living out the experience.

***Keep in mind that this is the reality for many youth in our Twin Cities community. Although we do not use names or identifying features for the youth in this activity to protect their privacy, the events and dilemmas presented in this activity do come from true stories as told to us by Catholic Charities clients and staff.*

An estimated 4,080 Minnesota youth experience homelessness on any given night.*

Youth become homeless in many different ways and under a variety of complex circumstances. While every youth's experience of homelessness is unique, there are certain themes that are common in many youths' stories.

In real life, none of us has the option to select the families into which we are born and grow up. For the sake of this activity, you will start by rolling dice to select where your story begins. The first step in your journey is to determine your starting point:

Roll your die

Proceed to the corresponding page, according to the number you roll

If you roll a 1 or 5: go to page 6

If you roll a 2: go to page 7

If you roll a 3 or 6: go to page 8

If you roll a 4: go to page 9

**The actual number of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness is likely even higher because these young people remain invisible and are difficult to count due to informal shelter arrangements such as couch hopping.*



You have grown up in a family living below the government poverty line (\$23,850 for a family of four – that’s about \$16 per person, per day, to pay for everything your family needs to survive).

Your family has been fortunate, though, to have made it into the Section 8 housing program, which is a special government program that helps subsidize the cost of an apartment so that your family can afford it. Waiting lists for this program are often very long, but after waiting and scraping by for a couple of years, your family finally got into an apartment. You have all worked very hard to make sure your family is able to stay here, in spite of difficult landlords and the dangers of living in this rough neighborhood.

Today it is your 18th birthday! Congratulations, but instead of celebrating, your family is told you need to move out. A county worker has come to your home to inform your family that the rules of getting Section 8 assistance specify that once you are 18, and technically an adult, you can no longer stay with your family in their apartment. If you stay living in the apartment, your family will lose their Section 8 assistance and hence lose their housing.

Even though you are still finishing up high school and don’t feel ready to be supporting yourself, you find yourself in a really difficult place. You don’t want everyone else in your family to be homeless because of you. It just seems so unreal. For the sake of your family, you know you need to move out, but you just don’t have a place to live or a plan. You pack up whatever you can carry with you and leave.

- **What emotions are you feeling now (especially knowing that if you stayed, your entire family would lose the apartment and be homeless as well)?**
- **How would losing your housing and the support of your parents or other adults in your life affect your ability to trust adults and institutions?**

(PAUSE to reflect and discuss)

Next Step: Go to Page 10



You live in a 2-bedroom apartment with your parents and three younger siblings. It's been hard to share a bedroom with your three younger siblings. Times have been tough for your family.

Then your aunt and uncle lose their housing and need a place to stay. Family has always been crucial, so there's no question of leaving your aunt, uncle, and your cousins out in the cold. Your parents invite them to move in with your family. Your two youngest siblings move into your parents' bedroom, and your room is given to your aunt and uncle. You and your brother now share the living room, alternating between sleeping on the couch and the floor.

As a 17-year-old with needs for your own space, this has been a difficult living situation to say the least. With so many people in such a small space, tempers have been running high. You and your dad keep getting in fights and lately he's been blowing up at you over everything. You just can't take the cramped space, the whining kids, sleeping on the floor, and not having any privacy. Today you come home from school, and your dad goes ballistic, yelling at you to "get out and never come back."

Being on your own has to be better than this, you think to yourself as you quickly grab a few things and leave.

- **What emotions are you feeling now?**
- **How would losing your housing and the support of your parents or other adults in your life affect your ability to trust adults and institutions?**

(PAUSE to reflect and discuss)

Next Step: Go to Page 10.



You have grown up in foster care, and you've never really had a place you felt at home. You have been moved around to several different families over the years. Though many of your friends have had good experiences in foster families, you always seem to have the worst luck: a crowded home with several other foster children, foster parents who seem to only care about making an extra buck off the system by taking you, new schools, having to continually make new friends, and feeling like you are always starting over again. Nowhere has ever really felt like home.

Your current foster family has been the hardest of all. You don't get along well with your foster parents or the other kids. You're tired of all the fighting. Not getting enough to eat. Not receiving much support; in many ways you're already left to fend for yourself.

Today is your 18th birthday. You have the choice now that you are a legal adult to opt out of the foster care system and live on your own. Given the length of time you've been essentially caring for yourself already, this seems better than staying in such a toxic environment. You decide to leave your foster home and try it on your own as you quickly grab a few things and head for the door.

- **What emotions are you feeling now?**
- **How would losing your housing and the support of your foster family or other adults in your life affect your ability to trust adults and institutions?**

(PAUSE to reflect and discuss)

Next Step: Go to Page 10



You grew up in a low-income community on the South Side of Chicago. Your mom worked hard raising you and your siblings, usually working two or three jobs trying to make ends meet. You all did your best, taking care of each other when your mom was out at work, but it wasn't easy. The neighborhood has become increasingly violent with drugs and gang activity. You have had several friends and neighbors killed in drive-by shootings. The violence is everywhere. You have been repeatedly stopped and harassed by the police over the past few months for no other reason than the neighborhood you live in.

Just the other day, your older cousin, who was an inspiration and role model to you, who was getting A's in school and always talking about getting out of the neighborhood and going to college, was killed right in front of you. What can you do? If you stay in this neighborhood, you'll be in jail or dead before you are 18.

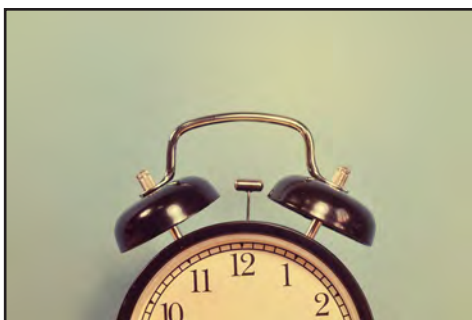
You could lose your life before you even start it—OR—you have heard of several other neighborhood youth leaving town, taking the Megabus to Minneapolis to start a new life. It has to be better than here, if only you can get away from the violence and get a second chance.

You grab a few things and take off before your mom and siblings get home. After several hours waiting in line, you luck out by getting a really cheap one-way ticket on the next Megabus out of town.

- **What emotions are you feeling now?**
- **How would losing your housing and the support of your parents or other adults in your life affect your ability to trust adults and institutions?**

(PAUSE to reflect and discuss)

Next Step: Go to Page 10



TAKE A DEEP BREATH!

You need to compose yourself and figure out a plan.

For youth experiencing homelessness, the first 24 hours are a crucial time – a time when they can either connect with services to help them, or become extremely vulnerable to people who want to take advantage of them.

In these next few pages, you will need to assess your situation and make some immediate decisions to address your most basic needs.



Finding yourself without a home is still hard to imagine, but standing here on the side of the road is not helping the matter. You need to find somewhere to stay. You are not exactly sure where to go, but you start walking.

There is never a good day to set out on your own, but today really was not the day. The weather today in Minnesota is decidedly unhelpful.

NOTE: If you are doing this activity in November through March, then examine the conditions outside from the photograph above on the left-hand side. If you are doing this activity in April through October, then examine the conditions outside from the photograph above on the right-hand side.

It's cold and miserable out. After walking for about 15-20 minutes you need to reassess.

Consider the items that you have with you right now.

- **How prepared are you for being outside today in this Minnesota weather?**
- **Are you wearing socks and shoes that are warm enough for being outside for a long time?**
- **Did you bring a raincoat or winter jacket?**
- **Do you have heavy gloves and a hat if it is below zero out or an umbrella and boots if it's raining?**
- **How long do you think you can realistically stay outside?**

PAUSE to reflect on your inventory of items and discuss your current situation before proceeding to the next steps.

Next Step:

Proceed to next page.



YOU ARE GETTING REALLY COLD

Thank goodness, you find a bus stop with a shelter to get out of the wind for a moment and to assess your next move.

You are not only cold, but you are also starting to feel really hungry.

- **When was the last time you ate? What and how much did you eat at your last meal?**
- **Do you have any food with you? Or in your backpack or locker?**
- **How long do you think you can go before needing to get something to eat again?**

PAUSE to reflect on your inventory of items and discuss your current situation before proceeding to the next steps.

Next Step:

Proceed to next page.

Sitting in this bus shelter, you realize that you really need to find a restroom soon. Really soon!

- **Where can you go to find a public restroom?**

(PAUSE to reflect and discuss your current situation before proceeding to the next steps.)

You have determined a good option of where to go to use a restroom. As you head over to the restroom, you see the following sign on the door:



OUT OF ORDER! WHAT?! You can't believe it. You really need to use a restroom, and realize that none of the other options you thought of are nearby or easy to access from here. You head back to the bus shelter to think. You realize that you'll need to go somewhere else to find another option.

Next Step:

Proceed to next page.



Walking back to the bus stop, you realize that you can't spend much more time outside, especially walking around. You are cold, tired of this bus stop, and still in need of a restroom. This bus stop is not helping you to meet your immediate needs.

You know you also eventually need to find somewhere to stay for the night. You are not exactly sure where to go, but even once you figure that out, how will you get there?

- **Do you have some form of identification on you?**
- **Do you have any cash on you?**
- **Do you have a bus card/metro transit card?**
- **Do you have a phone to call a cab? Oh, you forgot your cell phone was disconnected when you left home.**
- **Do you have access to a car? How much gas is currently in it?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss your current situation and the pros and the cons of your options before proceeding to the next steps

Next Step:

Proceed to next page.

YOU MUST DECIDE

You need to make a decision about the next place you will go.

What are some indoor places where you're allowed to hang out and warm up, without needing to buy something or having a reason for being there?

Where would you go to stay safe and warm while you plan your next move?

Given the places you have considered, select from the choices below:

RIDE THE LIGHT RAIL

If you decide to hop on the light rail for a few hours,

Go to Page 30

FIND A RELATIVE

If you decide to seek out a relative who might help,

Go to Page 23

SLEEP OUTSIDE

If you decide to find a place to sleep outside for tonight,

Go to Page 27

PUBLIC LIBRARY

If you decide to go to the public library,

Go to Page 16

MALL OF AMERICA

If you decide to go to the Mall of America,

Go to Page 20

FIND HOMELESS SHELTER

If you decide to go to a homeless shelter,
Go to Page 19, but **ONLY** if you can give the address or bus route number to a youth homeless shelter in the Twin Cities



You go to a public library, where you can warm up and maybe use the computers to do some research on where to get some help. You get into the library, and it feels so great to be out of the cold. You head over to the computers.

Do you have your library card or an ID with you so that you can use a computer?

You luck out. You find an open computer and can get on without having to show your ID. You settle in, figuring you can hang out here until the library closes. They have a restroom you can use. You pull out a little food you found in your pocket, and start surfing the Internet. It doesn't get any better than this.

Some youth nearby computer are talking loudly, laughing, and apparently watching some YouTube videos. They are being so noisy that the librarian comes by and tells them they all need to leave. The youth start arguing with the librarian. The argument heats up quickly. Just then a library security guard walks over, "You heard the librarian. We don't need any trouble around here, so pick up your things and go." The security guard points at you, and calls out "And you too!!!"

You make a gesture of protest and shock. "What???" The security guard shouts back, "I said you need to leave with your friends as well. I'm tired of you all coming in here, making a mess, eating at the computers, and causing trouble. Now pick up your things before I have to call the police."

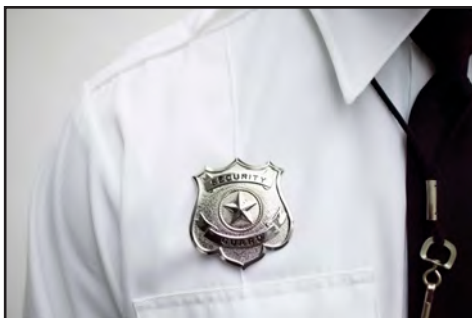
- **What are your feelings in this moment?**
- **What options do you have? And what are the pros and cons of your options?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

Next Step:

It comes down to a few choices. Write down some thoughts about what might happen in each case before you make your decision.

- a. Stay and try to explain your situation with the librarian and security guard. Maybe you can explain your situation and get help. Go to page 17
- b. Decide to move on and avoid trouble. Go to page 18



You decide to try to explain your situation to the librarian and security guard with the hope that maybe they can help you.

“Sorry,” you begin to explain. “I really need some help. I... I, uh.”

- **What do you say to them?**
- **Will they really believe you?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

Before you can get your thoughts and words together, the security guard shouts back, “You should have thought about that before you and your friends started causing trouble. Look the mess you made! Disturbing everyone else! You come in here thinking you own this place and have all these rights. I’m tired of you coming in here causing trouble. So I am going to warn you one last time to pick up your things and leave, or I will call the police.”

Next Step:

What choices do you have? Think about and discuss what might happen in each option before you make your decision.

- a. Stay and ask the security guard for help. Go to page 35
- b. Decide to move on and avoid trouble. Go to page 18



Near the doors of the library, you notice a kind-looking woman handing out brochures to people around your age.

She approaches you and hands you a brochure, saying that she is handing out this information in case anyone you know may be able to use it. She'll be nearby if you have any questions, she says.

What is she selling? Should you just head for the door before you get into any more trouble?

You glance down at the brochure, which is for Catholic Charities Hope Street, a shelter for youth experiencing homelessness. You read a little more: that they house 28 youth in situations like yours, that people usually stay about 50 days, and that they have other transitional programs available as well. They provide help with basic needs like food and clothing, and counselors to help with making a plan for the future. This seems like a good place to get back on your feet.

You're wary of trusting authority figures, especially after how little understanding the librarian and security guard just showed you. Will this woman really help you?

What are the potential dangers of confiding in an authority figure in this situation? What do you stand to gain if you talk to her?

Next Step:

- a. Talk to the woman about finding a place at Hope Street. Go to page 19**
- b. Move on and find somewhere else to go. Go to page 15**



Youth shelters provide an important source of safe shelter for youth experiencing homelessness, as well as help connecting to other resources so youth can make their way out of homelessness. However, there simply isn't enough shelter space. Hope Street can get up to 40 calls a week for an average of 3 open spots. Getting a spot depends a lot on timing and luck. There are about 100 beds for youth under 21 in Minnesota, but on any given night there can be more than 4,000 youth experiencing homelessness.

You are already pretty lucky, having this opportunity to see whether there will be a spot at Hope Street. What happens now depends on many factors out of your control; there is no waiting list, so it's the luck of the draw on whether the shelter will happen to have a spot open at the moment you ask.

Next Step:

- *Roll your die to determine whether Hope Street will have an open bed.*
- *If you roll a 1 or 5, congratulations! You have been lucky enough to get a spot in the shelter in one of their only open spots all week.*

If you got a bed at Hope Street Shelter, go to page 24

If NOT and you choose to stay in an adult shelter until you can try again, go to page 25

To evaluate your other options, go to page 15



You go to the Mall of America, where you know there will be lots of people and plenty of spaces where you can sit down and think. Here you can blend into the crowd and stay warm while you figure out what to do next. You head to the food court hoping to warm up and maybe find some food.

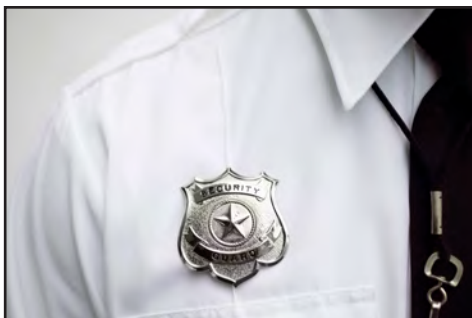
Some youth are hanging around at a nearby table laughing, playing music, and throwing food around. Just then a security guard walks by. He steps in and tells the youth to quiet things down or leave. The youth just laugh it off and keep messing around, which makes the security guard angry. He begins to escort them out of the mall, calling for backup on his radio. You're surprised when, as he passes you, he says gruffly, "You, too – come on," and motions for you to join the group being escorted out.

- **What are your feelings in this moment?**
- **What options do you have? Should you try to explain that you're not with this group, or just go along with the guard's instructions to avoid trouble?**

Next Step:

Stay and try to explain your situation to security. Go to page 21

Agree to leave peacefully and move on to avoid trouble. Go to page 22



You decide to explain your situation to the security guard with the hope that maybe he can help you.

"Sorry," you begin to explain. "I really need some help. I...I, uh."

- **What do you say to him?**
- **Will he really believe you?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

Before you can get your thoughts and words together, the security guard shouts back, "You should have thought about that before you and your friends started causing trouble. Look the mess you made! Disturbing everyone else! You come in here thinking you own this place and have all these rights. I'm tired of you coming in here causing trouble. So I am going to warn you one last time to pick up your things and leave, or I will call the police."

Next Step:

What choices do you have? Think about and discuss what might happen in each option before you make your decision.

Keep trying to ask the security guard for help. Go to page 35

Agree to leave peacefully and move on to avoid trouble. Go to page 22



Leave and avoid trouble. Smart thinking. As you're making your way to the exit, you notice a young man a few years older than you who looks familiar. You remember that he used to go to your high school; though you didn't really know him, you knew who he was. He seems to recognize you, too, and comes over to say hello.

It's fun hanging out with him, and good to have someone there to help take your mind off your situation. He's even nice enough to buy you lunch! He tells you about how well he has done since graduating from your high school – how much money he's earning in his job, and how great his place is. He even has an extra bedroom!

After you've been hanging out for a while, he suggests, "Why don't we get out of here and head back to my place? I have some friends coming over; you can join us for dinner."

- **What do you say? Can you trust this new friend?**
- **If you don't go with him, what are your alternatives for finding dinner and a place to stay tonight?**

Next Step:

Think through some pros and cons of your options before you make your decision.

- Yes, stay with this new friend. Go to page 28*
- No, stay on your own. Go to page 15*



Surely there must be a relative that you can stay with? After thinking through your limited options, you figure that your aunt might be the best option. You could ask her if you can stay there, at least for a little while.

You know she lives near the light rail line. She doesn't get home from work for another 4 hours, but you can ride around on the train to stay warm until then. Once you pay your fare, your transfer lasts for two hours only, so to keep riding until your aunt gets home, you would have to pay twice (adding up to \$4). Paying this fare will cut into any cash you might have on you; or, you could hop on the light rail without paying – you've ridden it before and never seen them check anyone's tickets. Then you could save your \$4 for food or other needs.

- **What options do you have? Do you even have a Metro Transit card or cash to pay for the fare?**
- **What do you do?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

Next Step:

Use your Metro Transit (bus) card:

If you have a Metro Transit card on you, go to page 31

Pay your fare:

If you have the cash on you and you decide to pay the fare, go to page 31

Don't pay:

If you decide to hop the light rail and not pay a fare:

Go to page 30



You arrive at Hope Street shelter for youth, where you do an initial intake with a staff person who gets to know you a little bit and helps assess your needs. You're assigned to your room, and given a few days to settle in, get your bearings, and start participating in day-to-day life in your new environment.

Then, once you're feeling more settled in, you meet with a case manager to start working on a plan and goals you'd like to set. He asks about your interests, your hopes, and how you see yourself getting there. One important decision you must make is if you want to focus on getting a job and earning money to support yourself, or on going back to school.

You'll have the rest of your 50-day stay at Hope Street to keep working with your case manager on this plan, but keep in mind that after a few months you will likely need to move on to the next step of your housing plan.

What are the pros and cons of focusing on working right now? Of focusing on going to school? Is 50 days enough time, or should you try to stay at the shelter longer? Make some notes about what each decision could mean before moving on.

Next Step:

Find a job:

Go to page 33

Go back to school:

Go to page 34

See if you can get a bed at Hope Street again:

Go to page 19

Unfortunately, you didn't get a space in the youth shelter tonight. Instead, you head for the main homeless shelter that you have heard about, the Dorothy Day Center in downtown St. Paul. You get in line with a lot of other people hoping to get a bed for the night. It looks like there are nearly 200 people in line ahead of you, but you are still hopeful you will get a place to sleep. Once at the door, you get a better look inside the shelter, as seen in the photo below:

You can see adults already getting prepared to sleep on the floor on thin mats. It's a crowded and noisy place. It's a bit overwhelming to say the least. You can see that people are dealing with a variety of complex challenges, from addictions to mental illness. You are hopeful you will get a place to sleep, because at least this would be a place to sleep, protected from the weather and elements tonight.



- **What are your feelings in this moment?**
- **Will you be safe? Comfortable? What other options do you have?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

You are so exhausted and hopeless. A staff member asks you to show an ID and take a breathalyzer before entering. Then they ask, "How old are you?"

Next Step:

Check your character's story at the very beginning to confirm your age.

If you are 18, you can decide whether to spend the night at the adult shelter.

If you are younger than 18, the staff will inform you they legally cannot allow you to stay at this adult shelter. They unfortunately need to ask you to leave the adult shelter, but not before discussing a few options with you, including possible youth shelters where you can try to stay.

You have to decide. Do you (can you) stay at Dorothy Day Center tonight?

- *If you are younger than 18: Go to page 19*
- *Stay at Dorothy Day Center: Go to page 26*
- *Leave Dorothy Day Center: Go to page 27*



You stay at Dorothy Day Center for the night. You are relatively safe and warm, but it's been a really rough night. You barely slept. It was crowded, noisy, smelly, and the person on the mat next to you snored all night.

Now it's before 6 a.m., and everyone has been woken up. You are informed that on weekdays, they don't serve a breakfast. Everyone has to leave Dorothy Day Center during the day, so you gather up your belongings and make your way back out onto the street and into the cold.

What are your feelings at this moment?

How will you get through the day being so tired and disoriented?

You notice a group of people standing around outside the building, talking to pass the time. You walk over and join them.

You chat with them for a while, and start to relax a little bit – it's nice to talk to people who can understand how difficult the experience you're going through is. As you're talking, a new person you haven't met joins the group. You start talking with him, and he says that he has some work he's looking for someone to help him with. He says he thinks you seem like a great candidate; he's willing to hire you right on the spot. You know you've just met this person, but this seems like a ticket out of the shelter, which you're willing to give just about anything for.

What could happen if you accept his offer? What could happen if you don't?

Next Step:

Accept your new friend's offer: Go to page 28

Refuse the offer: Go to page 25



You resign yourself to sleeping outside tonight. This will just be temporary, you assure yourself, until you can figure out a different plan.

You're not sure where would be best for outdoor sleeping, but you've always seen homeless people sleeping on park benches in the movies, so you head to a nearby park. As you're staking out a bench, a young woman comes over and asks if she can sit next to you. You're too exhausted to protest, so you just nod.

She sits down and begins talking, and after a while you give in and start talking back. It actually is nice to have something to take your mind off your situation, and she seems friendly enough. You soon find out that she, too, is homeless: she was kicked out of her house when she came out to her parents as gay. She's been homeless for a while, and sometimes sleeps outside when she can't crash with a friend or find a bus driver who will let her ride through the night. She has plenty of suggestions for where to sleep – inside park slides, in the heated entryways of apartment buildings, in tents when she can get her hands on one, or even in Port-a-Potties, which have doors that lock.

She suggests going to get something to eat. You don't have much money, you say – you'd rather not. "No problem!" she says. You'll just shoplift some food from a convenience store; she does it all the time. You're still skeptical, so she gives you an ultimatum: either you come along and help shoplift some food, proving your worthiness to hang with her, or you have to go your own way, leaving behind the potential of a new friend who knows more about surviving the elements

What do you choose—the potential for new friends and allies or following the law? Make some notes about your thought process for this decision before moving on.

Next Step:

Shoplift with your new friend: Go to page 39

Go your own way: Go to page 41



Your new friend takes you back to his apartment, and treats you and several of his friends to dinner. Being in a home, with people around you laughing and joking with each other, is such a relief – it feels almost normal. You feel lucky to have made this connection.

Things continue to be great for a while. After that first evening, you're feeling comfortable enough to confide more details about your situation, and he offers to let you stay in his guest bedroom until you can get back on your feet. He gives you a job in his business, selling magazines door-to-door so you can make some money.

You're still very grateful and have a great time hanging out with him, but slowly some strange things begin to happen. After the first couple of weeks, he starts asking for part of your paycheck; you figure he's offering you room and board, so that seems only fair, but the amount starts to creep up and up until he's controlling your finances. He's also very strict about letting you go out on your own, and wants to know where you are at all times.

One evening, he has a different group of friends over than you've met before. He's talking about you to them in ways that are making you uncomfortable – like you're not there in the room, like you can't hear them. You try to brush it off – it's probably nothing, he's your friend! But you can't get rid of a nagging feeling in your gut. You're scared to bring it up with him; you get the sense he wouldn't like it very much if you complained about his hospitality or tried to leave.

What do you do – stay with this friend who has given you so much already, in a situation that is stable and meets your basic needs? Or trust your instincts and move on?

Next Step:

Runaway: Go to page 15

Stay: Go to page 29



Gradually, you realize that your “friend” is a master manipulator. He continues to build up your trust and friendship until you are emotionally and financially dependent on him. It becomes extremely difficult for you to refuse anything he asks of you, because you genuinely care about him and don’t know how you would survive without him.

The things he asks of you continue to grow and grow. Your paycheck was just the start; it grows to the point that when he begins selling you to his “friends” for sex, you almost don’t question it. You’ve internalized the rationale he always gives you: “I’m doing so much for you, this is the least you could do in return.”

Now you are realizing that things have gone way too far. This “friend” is using you as a money-generating scheme for his own profit; he doesn’t see you as a friend! You’re stuck in a cycle of human trafficking!

Hesitantly one evening, you try to raise the idea of your moving on. “I have an aunt who’s been in touch with me – she says I could go stay with her for a while. You’ve been so kind; I should let you have your apartment back to yourself.” This does not go over well. He becomes extremely angry, shouting at you, forbidding you to talk to outsiders, and threatening what he and his cronies will do to you if you try to leave.

What are you feeling in this moment? What are your options? Do you leave and risk the retaliation of your friend? Do you go to the police, hoping they will believe you and not assume you are mixed up in this illegal activity? Or do you stay here, where you are relatively “safe?”

Next Step:

Runaway, hoping to avoid retaliation: Go to page 27

Report your “friend” and his group to the police: Go to page 36

Stay here: Go to page 44 for final reflection questions



You decide to go ahead and hop on the light rail. You know they don't always check for tickets; in fact, in all the times you've ever been on the light rail, you've never seen anyone coming around asking to see people's tickets. You figure you'll be fine, and decide not to pay the fare.

The light rail is clean and warm. It's nice to have a little space to collect your thoughts. Suddenly, though, a couple of Transit Police officers enter the car you're in. Your heart starts beating faster. What do you do?

What choices do you have? Think about and discuss what might happen in each option below before you make your decision.

Next Step:

Get off the light rail and quickly as you can:

Go to page 12

Try to explain you situation to the police officer and ask for help:

Go to page 36

You have an ID on you and decide to talk your way out of the situation:

Go to page 37

Decide to admit your fault, ready to face ticket or potential arrest:

Go to page 38



You make it to your aunt's house. Though her two-bedroom apartment is already crowded, she agrees to allow you to stay with her, at least until another plan can be arranged. Unfortunately, you will have to sleep on the couch in the living room, which everyone has to go through to get to the kitchen or bathroom; you will have no privacy. Also, she wants you to know that this will be no free ride. You will have to help out with chores around the house: cooking, cleaning, doing the dishes, helping out with babysitting the three kids, and generally pitching in to help out. Things are already really tight for her and the kids, and you can tell she isn't particularly thrilled about trying to squeeze you in. With this lukewarm welcome, what do you do?

- **Do you stay at your aunt's house?**
- **What are the pros and cons?**
- **What other options do you really have?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

Will you stay at your aunt's house, with a guarantee of somewhere to sleep, or will you try going out on your own again in hopes of finding a better situation?

Next Step:

Stay with your aunt: Go to page 32

Leave to look for somewhere else: Go to page 15



You settle in at your aunt's house as best you can. It is crowded and you miss your privacy, but at least you have a roof over your head.

You can quickly see it's going to be a lot of work taking care of your cousins. The baby needs constant care and the other two kids are a real handful. You return to school in hopes of finishing your senior year, but it's tough to keep up with all the expectations you have at home.

One evening as you're sitting down on the couch to start some homework, your aunt rushes in and plops the baby in your lap. "He needs his diaper changed; I have to get to an appointment." You look down to the baby, into the kitchen where your cousin is asking you to make her a snack, and then over to your pile of homework, now shoved aside. You can she really needs the help, but what about your needs and goals?

- **Will you be able to accomplish your dreams if you keep living here?**
- **How long do you think you will be able to live like this?**
- **How will living like this affect your grades in school?**
- **What alternatives do you have?**

Unfortunately for many youth experiencing homelessness, there are few housing options to consider. For example, a 2012 study by the Wilder Foundation revealed that 42 percent of these youth report experiencing physical abuse. 27 percent report been sexually abused. 30 percent of youth surveyed reported having stayed in an abusive situation because they had no other housing options.

Next Step:

Do you stay at your aunt's house, with a place to sleep, but uncertain about your own future, or will you try to find a better situation?

Stay with your aunt: Go to page 44

Leave to look for other options: Go to page 15



With the help of your supporters at Hope Street, you find a job; it doesn't pay much, but while you're staying at Hope Street you're able to save up much of what you make. Your manager at work says you're showing promise and may be promoted to shift manager soon.

After 50 days, your time at Hope Street is coming to an end; they need your spot so they can help someone else who is in the situation you were in so recently. Throughout your time there, you've been working with your case manager on a plan for when you leave. They have offered to help you pursue several different options: finding your own place to rent, for example, or reconnecting with family or friends who might let you stay with them. You've made contact with one of your aunts, who seems cautiously open to letting you stay with her for a little while if needed.

Which plan did you choose? Where will you go next?

What would be the benefits of renting your own place, and what would be the benefits of living with a relative? What are the possible drawbacks of each situation?

Next Step:

Find your own place: Go to page 42

Stay with your aunt: Go to page 31



With the help of your case manager at Hope Street, you return to school to work toward earning your diploma. The school district's Homeless Student Liaison works with you to make sure you get the support you need, like enrolling for free school lunch and finding spaces and times where you can get your homework done.

It is challenging to keep up in school with all the other uncertainty and upheaval in your life, but you are making it work. However, you are coming to the end of your 50-day stay at Hope Street; they need your spot so they can help someone else who is in the situation you were in so recently.

Hope Street has a transitional living program call The Cottage. The program is for youth who are ready to live more independently, but there are only a handful of spots. You would have to be lucky to get one of those spots, but if you did, you would be able to maintain the support you have had so far from the staff, and continue working on your school goals.

If you don't get a spot in The Cottage, you will have to decide where to go next: will you rent your own apartment, or see whether you can stay with a relative for a while? Your case manager has helped you reconnect with one of your aunts, who seems cautiously open to letting you stay with her for a while if needed.

You will need to roll a 3 on the die to get in to the Cottage program, if that is what you decide to try for. If you don't roll a 3, where will you go? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each option?

Next Step:

If you roll a 3: Go to page 43

Find your own place: Go to page 42

Stay with your aunt: Go to page 31



Things are not going the way you had planned. How did it come to this? Before you've even realized it, the police have arrived. You now find yourself in a situation of having to deal with law enforcement.

The police officers begin asking you a lot of questions. What are you doing here, how old are you, where is your identification, where do you live, and what's the phone number of your parents?

**What do you say to them?
Will they really believe you?**

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

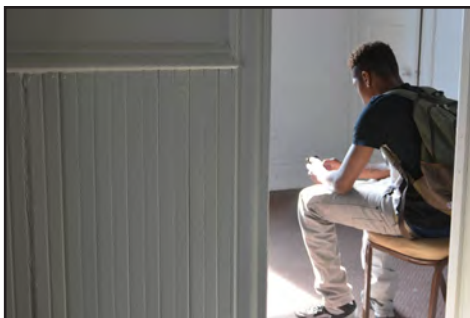
What choices do you have? Think about and discuss what might happen in each option below before you make your decision.

Next Step:

Try to explain your situation and ask the police for help. Go to page 36

You have ID and agree to answer their questions: Go to page 37

You DON'T have ID or you decide to admit your fault: Go to page 38



You decide to try to explain your situation to the police officers with the hope that maybe they can help you.

“Sorry,” you begin to explain. “I really need some help. I...I, uh.”

What do you say to them?

Will they really believe you?

PAUSE to reflect and discuss.

The officers at first are reluctant to believe your story, and think you are just trying to talk your way out of trouble. You must win some of their sympathy, though, because they don't try to take any action against you; they simply give you a warning to stay out of trouble. They tell you about Catholic Charities Hope Street, a shelter for youth experiencing homelessness. If you are really homeless, they say, then Hope Street can help. They offer to call the youth shelter to see if they have a bed, if you are interested.

What choices do you have? Think about and discuss what might happen in each option below before you make your decision.

Next Step:

Find out if Hope Street has a place for you tonight: Go to page 19

Decide to leave and check out other options: Go to page 15



You answer the police officers' various questions, show them your identification, and thankfully you don't have anything on your record. They decide to release you with a stern warning to stay out of trouble.

You walk away relieved that you have not been arrested, but you're still facing the question:

Where will you find a place to stay tonight?

Next Step:
Go to page 15



Being on the streets is getting really frustrating and tiring. You don't want to try to argue your way out of this. Given your situation, it doesn't look very good for you; you can tell the police are suspicious. The way things have been going, you wonder to yourself:

"Why would the police believe you anyway?"

"What if you give in and allow yourself to be taken in by the police? None of this is your fault anyway. Surely they will understand."

"Surely the 'system' will assist you in getting the help you need?"

- **What are the pros and cons of allowing the police to take you in?**
- **Will you get a place to stay and meals to eat?**
- **Will you get the help you need?**
- **What could be the long term consequences of getting arrested?**
- **What options do you have?**

You are resigned to letting the police take you in. It just seems a lot easier right now. Maybe getting arrested will at least help you to meet your immediate needs of food and shelter for tonight? It sure beats having to figure out being homeless on your own. Given your day, this might seem very appealing right now.

For many homeless youth, getting arrested is not really a choice, but something that they get "caught up" in. The juvenile justice system hopefully is there as a safety net for youth like you, but it can also greatly complicate your current and future situation. Being in detention is not as easy and appealing as it might seem. Dealing with law enforcement, being locked up, having to work through the court system, and potential future consequences of having this on your record, can potentially add barriers for a youth experiencing homelessness to get out of their situation.

Next Step:

Go to page 44



You and your new friend decide to shoplift some dinner from a convenience store. You have agreed to go along and help, hoping to gain acceptance from someone who seems to have more knowledge about surviving on one's own than you do.

You pick a store that looks pretty busy and head for the back, picking items that are filling, but will fit in your pockets. You are nervous as you head for the door, but you try to look as innocent as you can to avoid attracting attention.

- **Will you be caught? Roll your die to find out whether you will get away safely or not.**

Next Step:

If you roll a 1, 2 or 3:

You have been caught by the store owner, who calls the police. Go to page 35

If you roll a 4, 5 or 6:

You get away unnoticed. Go to page 40



You and your friend cautiously celebrate your escape as you walk back to the site where she has been camping. You feel bad about stealing, but you are excited to finally be able to eat more than you have in quite a while.

This initiation cements your friendship, and you and your friend stay together for several weeks, camping in different places each night so you won't get caught or occasionally staying on couches or floors of people your friend knows. You befriend those people, too, and a few other young people you meet while camping, and you start to feel like you have a support system. You all look out for each other, surviving together.

Then, one day when you are at a drop-in center that offers a free lunch, a case manager comes over to you. He mentions that he has seen you here a few times, and asks whether you would be interested in working with him to find a spot in a youth shelter. You know how hard it is to get into a shelter, how unlikely you are to find a spot, but this case manager seems willing to support you, which is more support than you've had before. Maybe, just maybe, it could work.

Taking the shelter spot would mean leaving your friends; you would be entering a new crowd of people where you don't know anyone, and your current friends might see you leaving as a betrayal.

• What would it mean, for your friendships and your future, to try to get into a shelter? Reflect on the pros and cons before making your decision.

Next Step:

Try and get into shelter: Go to page 19

Stay with your friends:

Go to page 44 for reflection questions.



You strike out on your own, looking for a place where you can safely spend tonight before trying again to find a more permanent situation tomorrow. You remember the young woman you met mentioning sleeping in a Port-a-Potty, because it shields you from the wind and has a door that locks.

You find a handicapped-accessible Port-a-Potty in a nearby park, which will at least allow you a little bit of room to lie down. You settle in for the night.

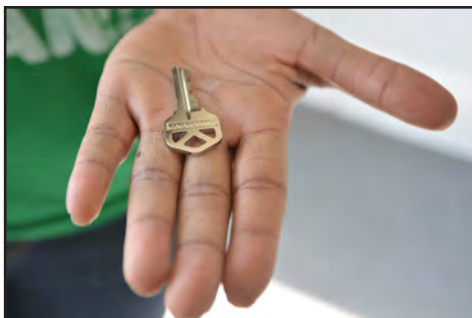
You don't get a great night's sleep, but you must have dozed off at some point, because you startle awake and realize that you can't feel your toes at all. You peel off your too-thin socks and see that your feet are definitely not the right color.

You hobble out to the street, where you ask someone for directions to an urgent care center. Luckily there is one nearby, but the walk there is painful. You finally make it there, and after waiting for quite some time you are seen by a doctor, who treats you for frostbite. He gives you some phone numbers for places that will provide you with thicker socks, and then releases you back out onto the street.

• What are you feeling right now? How has this most recent experience affected your spirits and how will it affect the decisions you make from now on?

Next Step:

Go to page 15.



You decide to move into your own place, with the little bit of money you have saved up and some support from government programs that try to help house youth experiencing homelessness.

You search through the options for something affordable, and eventually find a small studio apartment. It's not in a very nice neighborhood, but it is close to bus lines and it is pretty clean, and now it is yours! You settle in, enjoying having the space to yourself and the feeling of owning a key to a door that you can lock behind you when you come home.

One evening as you are walking home, some men grab your bag, knocking you down, and run away. That bag had your most important documents in it, and the money you were planning to use to pay this month's rent!

You report the theft, but the police aren't able to recover the bag. With the cost of replacing the documents in the bag and the loss of your rent money, you aren't able to pay rent. You try explaining the situation to your landlord, but she is not sympathetic and gives you two weeks' notice to move out. With an eviction on your record, it will be harder from now on for you to get into your own home.

Where will you go from here? Do you try to go back to Hope Street to get back on your feet? Or should you get in touch with your aunt, to see if you can stay on her couch for a few weeks while you search for a new place?

Next Step:

Try Hope Street: Go to page 24

Stay with your aunt: Go to page 31



Congratulations! You have been extremely lucky and got a spot in the Hope Street Cottage, where you can stay for a longer period of time and finish working on your school goals and getting on more stable footing for the future.

With the ongoing support of your case manager and peers at Hope Street, you stay in school and make it to graduation day. Walking across the stage to receive your diploma is the proudest moment of your life so far.

With your diploma, you have more job options available to you, and are able to find a job and eventually move out on your own. The job doesn't pay much, but you work hard and your manager says you show promise for eventual promotion.

Life still isn't easy – with rent, bills, grocery, transportation, and all the other costs, it's still hard to make ends meet. You're still relying on some support programs, like subsidized rent and SNAP (food assistance) to get by.

But you have hope for your future. You know nothing is ever sure, and a significant setback could put you back in the situation of searching for housing, but you have managed to build yourself a somewhat more solid foundation, and you will continue to build on it.

Next Step:

Go to page 44 for final reflection questions

—Final Reflection Questions—

In this activity, you are invited to walk in the shoes of a youth experiencing homelessness.

Looking at your experiences while participating in this activity:

- What is a “feeling” word(s) you would use to describe the experience?
- What struck or shocked you most in this activity?
- What were some of the experiences you had?
- Which were the most challenging?
- Where did you find support?

Looking at the choices and decisions you made:

- What different factors did you have to account for when making decisions?
- What did your character in the story have to think about that you don’t often think about in your “normal” life?
- Who else did your character encounter in the story? What roles did these other people play in where you ended up?

Looking at the learnings of the experience:

- How did your story “end”? Where did you end up?
- How do you feel about where you ended up?
- Did you notice any patterns/themes in your experience?
- What do you take away from this experience?

