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HEADLINE: Group Reaches Out to Youth in Atlanta

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## Group reaches out to youth in Atlanta

*Associated Press*

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ATLANTA --- Homeless men and women are easy to spot in Atlanta, lining downtown corners and crowding into city parks day and night.

But those weren't the folks outreach worker Joshua Gray sought Friday.

Instead, he and other volunteers from StandUp For Kids scoured downtown Atlanta for a different type of homeless person -- fiercely independent, easier to overlook and far less likely to admit they don't have a home.

Mr. Gray was searching for homeless teens.

"The adult population, they come right out with who they are," said Mr. Gray, who's trained his eyes to spot homeless teens as head of kid support for the Atlanta chapter of the national nonprofit. "A kid doesn't want that stigma, that label."

Atlanta has channeled millions toward erasing a chronic homelessness problem that officials say is draining city resources.

Yet the city has struggled to locate and house homeless teens, whose age often makes them too old to enter facilities for women and children but too vulnerable for adult shelters.

StandUp volunteers are spending 48 hours this weekend combing the streets for homeless children they'll later steer toward supportive services. The push bookends a recent groundbreaking on a 39-apartment supportive housing complex that will serve homeless youths.

Both efforts target a population experts say could become the chronically homeless adults of tomorrow.

Several factors confound outreach to the underserved population, says Protip Biswas, the head of United Way Atlanta's Regional Commission on Homelessness.

The commission recently organized a youth council that will examine the issue.

"We believe that we undercount the issue of homelessness for youth because they don't show up in large numbers -- we know they're there, but they don't reach out for help," Ms. Biswas said.

Singling them out is tricky.

A homeless teen boy -- somewhat disheveled and prone to loitering -- can be hard to distinguish from the average teen boy.

Mr. Gray's team searches alleys, abandoned buildings, parks, and other public places looking for homeless youth.

They offer those who respond a chance to come to the group's downtown drop-in center for hot meals, showers, computers and -- if they want it -- advice on how to get help.

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Help in Atlanta, however, is limited. Ms. Biswas said there are few beds set aside specifically for youth.

The network of adult shelters, meanwhile, isn't ideal. Family shelters typically restrict youth once they reach teen years for fear of liability issues, explained Nan Roman, the president of the Washington-based National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Left alone in adult shelters, Ms. Roman said teens can quickly become victims of abuse.

#### **BY THE NUMBERS**

One of every 50 American children experiences homelessness, according to a March report issued by the National Center on Family Homelessness.

A March report analyzing data from 2005-06 estimated 1.5 million children were homeless at least once that year.

The same report ranked states' child homelessness per capita, child well-being, risk for child homelessness, and state policy and planning. Georgia was in the bottom five. StandUp estimates at least 2,500 homeless children live in Atlanta.

-- Associated Press