

Almost Home Discussion Questions

This discussion guide was created by the students of the Education Justice Project (EJP), an educational program based at Danville Correctional Center, a men's state prison about 35 miles east of campus. EJP students take upper-division U of I courses at the prison and participate in a range of other educational programming. EJP is a unit of the College of Education.

The following EJP students contributed to this discussion guide:

- Robert Garite, 37, is from the Northwest suburbs and was once a homeless teen. He has since reconciled with his family. "I look forward to working with kids in a similar situation so that they don't make the same mistakes I did."
- Andre D. Slater, 36, is from Rock Island. He's very interested in learning about social dynamics that impact communities in negative ways.
- Fabian Harty, 47, grew up on the west side of Chicago. He found the stories in this book to be "tragic, painful, and yet too familiar."
- Joseph Bigsby, 57, was born in Chicago and was not a homeless teen, "but many of my childhood friends were homeless."
- Otilio Rosas, 47, is from Moline, IL. He had friends that were foster children and others that were foster parents.
- Johnny Page, 41, was born and raised on the southeast side of Chicago. "This book changed my perception of what being homeless looks like."

The Challenge of Teen Homelessness

When you first picked up this book, did you have any preconceptions or stereotypes about the homeless or about shelters for youth? What were they?

Did this book challenge those ideas?

According to Ryan and Kelley, what are the forces that contribute to homelessness? Would you add any forces to this list? Which forces do you believe are most instrumental in contributing to homelessness?

On page 4 the authors enumerate 9 adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that harm children's long-term health and wellbeing. Can you think of any more?

Personal Reflections

Rob was homeless as a teenager and recalls the feeling of freedom and independence associated with being on the streets. Have you ever had a longing for freedom from rules, home, and convention? Do you suspect that this longing figures frequently into the problem of homelessness? If so, what are healthier, safer ways to address this longing?

Several of the EJP students reflected that it's sometimes difficult to recognize the symptoms of teen homeless, even among one's friends. For example, Johnny recalled that one of his childhood acquaintances used to ask him for food from his kitchen and Johnny would stuff pieces of chicken into his pocket when his mother wasn't looking to share with him. He now wonders if this friend was homeless. Can you recall instances when acquaintances engaged in behavior or said things that you now recognize as possibly being an indication of homelessness?

To several of the EJP students, the idea of a parent kicking a child from the family home was unimaginable. Did you have a similar response? To what extent do you believe cultural attitudes towards family and home might contribute towards homelessness?

Book Organization and Style

Who is the intended audience of this book? Do you think this book would help a homeless youth?

Several of the EJP students missed having a bibliography and footnotes. Did you? Did you find yourself wanting further confidence with respect to any of the figures or statistics cited in the book? Which ones, in particular?

Almost Home interspersed personal narratives with “callouts” that spoke to national trends, the background of specific topics, and organizational histories. Some EJP students found this distracting. Others weren’t bothered by it. What did you think about the organization of the book?

What We Can Do

The book lists several things that individuals can do to support youth. EJP students noted in this section, and throughout the book, the authors seem to put little emphasis on the role of neighbors and communities. Such interventions might include taking responsibility to keep an eye over all children in the block, or committing to being curious about children who appear to be in need or who have no parental support. What do you think about the role of the neighborhood community?

Covenant House employs a promise: the staff promise to help the residents and the youth promise to help themselves. Do you feel this is enough? Some EJP students were inclined to add an addendum to the covenant. Did you also want to add more? If so, what would it be?

Chapter 8, “What You Can Do,” lists eight steps to help homeless thrive. Would you add any additional steps?

Fabian noted that the youth in the book who ended up homeless had parents who also had multiple needs. The problem of homeless youth appears to be connected to poor parenting. He suggested that support for youth might usefully include support for parents. Do you have a response to widening the circle of support in this way?

Would you consider becoming a mentor for homeless youth? If so, what would be your motivation? If not, why not?