

## Why Can't Street Kids Just Get A Life?

We've all asked that question before at some point when walking by a street kid. Why can't they just get off the street? Why can't they grow up and take some responsibility by going to school and getting a job? Well, imagine being that street kid for a second. Getting a life is not a simple snap of the fingers. It isn't easy to just get a job or an education. And they can't always just go home. For street kids, every day is survival. Their life is based on simply getting through it. Finding food and shelter is their job, and even overcoming that doesn't put them in any kind of position to find stability in their lives. Getting off the street is just the beginning. So let's start from the beginning. We'll call this kid Steve. Steve's day starts at sunrise in a public park. The sun hits him dead in the eye and he wakes up shivering. Steve springs up from the bench he slept on to make sure his stuff is still under it. It's almost nothing, a backpack with a couple of sweaters and a thermos in it, but two nights ago he almost got beat up for it. He was walking through a different park across town when three guys sitting on a bench asked him if he had a cigarette. Steve ignored them and kept walking, but he knew they weren't through with him yet. After verbally harassing him, they stood up and moved to surround Steve. He began to shake with fear. Steve told them again that he didn't have anything, but they didn't care anymore. They weren't going to leave without something. They began to step closer to Steve. And closer. One pulled out a knife from their back pocket. Just as another guy tried to grab Steve's backpack, Steve darted through an opening just out of their reach. They chased him for a few steps, but Steve was already far away, his backpack still in his possession. This morning, Steve's exhausted and he needs to get out of the wind. He picks up his backpack and spends the next two hours looking for an alleyway. Hopefully he can find one that's quiet, and, if possible, has boxes or newspapers that he can use to protect himself from the biting chill. Steve scours the alleyways in his area and finally settles on one. It seems perfect and he can't remember why he doesn't sleep there more often. He finds a spot, puts his head down and begins to doze off. The sounds of the city fade. He falls asleep. He dreams. In this fleeting moment, everything is OK. He's in his old home, in a warm bed, everyone's calm and there's breakfast waiting for him when he decides to – "Get up, kid" – says the police officer standing over Steve. Steve opens his eyes as the officer informs him that he needs to clear out immediately. Steve rubs his eyes. Now he remembers the problem with this alleyway. He stands, picks up his things starts his day again. Steve can't stop thinking about his dream. But that's all it was. Nothing like his actual life at home. He can still feel the pain from his father's fists. Hear his mother's screams. Things have been getting worse and worse at home since his father lost his job. It all started when his father came home drunk from the bar one night. Steve remembers the red mark on his mother's face the next morning and refusing to believe what was unfolding around him. But that refusal only made things worse, because Steve could never convince his father that he needed help. So it continued, one incident after another until one night, it wasn't just Steve's mother that was on the receiving end of it. It was him. His mother screamed louder when Steve was being beaten than when she was, and those are the sounds that haunt Steve every single day. The bruises are gone now, but the mental scarring never will be. Steve manages to snap back into reality, but reality isn't any better. Steve has not only had very little sleep in the past couple of days, but also very little food. He really doesn't feel like rummaging through a garbage can this morning. That means it's time to go to the street and beg for change. He'll never get used to doing this, but he's had to learn fast. Having to decide which street corner to sit on and beg strangers for change isn't something he ever envisioned doing. He decides on a busy corner downtown and begins the hike in that direction. He hopes the long walk is worth the extra money he'll receive for being a busier area. At least it isn't winter yet. The very thought of spending all winter on the street sends chills down Steve's spine. He's felt a northern winter before. She can't still be out here by then... can he? When Steve finally arrives, he sits down on the street corner and takes off his toque. He eyes the people walking by and begins to beg. "Change please?" is what he usually says, but today he's a little more desperate. He's painfully hungry and it shows in the anguish in his voice. Steve always tries his best to not worry about what other people are thinking, but it's hard. He can see the way they look at him. People are either scared of him, disgusted by him or they'll ignore him altogether. He's not sure which one is worse, but sometimes it feels like everyone hates him for one reason or another. Today, one person in particular is very aggressive when Steve asks him for change. He tells him that he's a loser and that he should get a job. After a few hours and thousands of passersby later, Steve has \$7.24, just enough for a burger combo. After waiting for a few moments, Steve slowly picks up the change in his toque. He stares at it, scared of what he might do with it. It takes him all the strength he has to not use the money for something else. Two weeks ago, someone else on the street started giving him free "samples". When you're in a dark enough place, sometimes you'll do whatever people tell you will make you feel better. It doesn't matter who that person is. It doesn't matter if deep down you know that what they're offering isn't a way out at all, but another anchor to keep you drowning. On these dark days, hope is replaced by distraction. Steve is constantly tempted to just let go and get away, but today he somehow fights that temptation off. He gets up and makes his way toward the restaurant. When he gets to the front of the line, Steve dumps the change on the counter before ordering. The annoyed cashier counts it as the people in line behind start to get restless. Steve tries to recall the last time he didn't have to pay for something in change, but can't. It's always embarrassing, especially when the line is as long as this. He asks the cashier if she can unlock the bathroom for him and she hesitates. Steve is rarely allowed to use a public bathroom, even as a paying customer. But today, the cashier doesn't want to keep the other customers waiting so she unlocks the door. Steve splashes water onto his dirty face inside the bathroom. He studies his reflection in the mirror. How long can he keep doing this for? When will this nightmare end? No kid should have to live like this. As he rinses, he begins to daydream. He thinks about the feeling of having a nice, long shower in a real bathroom. He steps out onto the cool floor and drive himself off with a soft, fresh towel. Steve is snapped out of his daydream by the sound of the knock and the sink overflowing. He opens the door to find the manager. He has to leave now. Steve puts his head down, grabs his food and heads outside. Later, with his hunger temporarily gone, Steve is back in his only home - the street. Back where he has no hope. There have been days when the shame has been too much, when Steve tried to find a way out. Steve recalls a time a few months earlier when he first started living on the street. He had woken up with a sense of hope that day he never felt before. He had slept in an abandoned warehouse another guy told him about and managed to split some breakfast with someone else staying there. That day, Steve was allowed to have something on his mind besides finding food, finding somewhere to sleep and try not to get mugged. So, he wanted to do what so many strangers have told him to do before - get a job. Steve was walking down the street when he noticed a convenience store with a "Help Wanted" sign in front of it. Steve took a deep breath and walked into the store. He went straight to the cashier at the front and asked about the sign. But all he got back were insults. The owner told Steve that he sees him on the streets every day. He told him his clothes were a mess. He must have been insane to think anyone would hire a stupid, lazy homeless kid. Steve slunk out and glanced back behind him at the "Help Wanted" sign. This had happened before. He didn't understand why no one would give him a chance. He doubted himself to the point where he began to wonder if he would even be able to trust the person who did. That was the day that Steve realized that the hill he had to climb was actually a mountain. Steve hears a car's honk that snaps him back to an all too familiar reality. He's out of money again. He has no place to go. He feels physically and mentally beaten. And soon it will be nightfall. Soon he'll be back at the bottom of the mountain once again. This is just a glimpse into Steve's struggle and the struggle that so many homeless kids face. There is no living, only surviving. And when you're trying to survive on the street, every little thing is an obstacle. Every time you beg for change, every time you go to the bathroom, every time you want to sleep, eat, or drink - nothing comes easy. For many kids like Steve who want a way out, the struggle to meet your basic needs is only the beginning. The coming days, weeks, and months provide hurdles even harder to overcome. The physical pain may lesson when leaving the street behind, but the mental anguish is constant when you're trying to forge a new life. Getting an education, applying for a job, admitting that you need counseling - these are hard for anyone. When you have to do all these things from scratch, the frustration can mount as fast as the confidence can fade. From learning how to stay warm in that first winter on the street, to the first day back at school, from deciding whether to steal food or pass out from hunger, to deciding where to get a shirt to wear for that first job interview, there are endless obstacles for homeless kids.

**That's why.**