RESEARCH IN BRIEF

The State of Youth Homelessness in Southern Nevada

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In this paper we explore data and research that assesses the state of youth homelessness in Southern Nevada. The picture is a disquieting one where the rate of children becoming homeless is increasing while the response is at best not able to keep up with the need. Historically, the most reliable estimates of homelessness did not include reports of unaccompanied youth, making it difficult to even articulate the need. In recent years, with the addition of counts of unaccompanied children and youth to national and local Point in Time (PIT) Count data collection protocols, we can now confirm what service providers in the region have been expressing: that Nevada, and Southern Nevada in particular, is experiencing a crisis. Nevada has consistently ranked 4th in the nation on the most vulnerable population of homeless youth, unaccompanied homeless youth, and 1st on unsheltered unaccompanied youth. Data and research on the extent of the problem and the causes and consequences associated with youth homelessness points to the need to rethink the current response to vulnerable children in the region.

As Southern Nevada leads the nation in the extent of the problem, it must also lead in innovative thinking in the redesign of how to address the problem. The Southern Nevada region has proved itself capable of responding to federal challenges to address problems faced by subpopulations of homeless persons in past years (such as veteran homelessness). The state of homelessness for the most vulnerable in our community demands that the community seek to follow these past successes to enhance the response for youth who are homeless. This needs to include significant changes in several areas including policies and data systems that support addressing gaps, innovative solutions that target the unique issues facing homeless youth in this region, and greater integration among the service delivery system likely to engage youth who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless.

HIGHLIGHTS

In Nevada:

- There is a rising trend of homeless youth

- The state ranks 4th in the nation in total number of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

- The state ranks 1st in the nation in rates of Unsheltered Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

In Southern Nevada:

- The rate of unaccompanied youth homelessness is greater than the state as a whole and far greater than the national average (24.7% compared to 6.54%)

- 2,794 minors were recovered from human sex trafficking by Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department from 1994 through 2016

- The current resources available to provide services for homeless youth cannot keep up with the needs
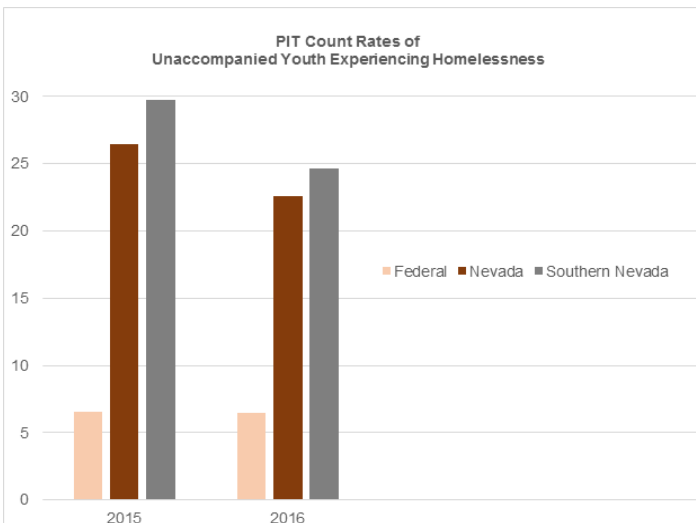
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State of the Data: Prevalence of Youth Homelessness

Establishing the number of homeless youth is difficult as they often engage in day-to-day survival strategies such as couch surfing and living in doubled-up conditions, making them less visible to protocols designed to count an estimate of homeless persons. Acknowledging that it is widely accepted by methodologists that the errors in counting underestimate the problem, data from the most rigorous estimation techniques currently available, Point in Time (PIT) Counts, estimate the number of children experiencing homelessness in Nevada has risen in recent years (Bitfocus 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017). Between 2011 and 2013, data reported by the National Center for Homeless Families reflected a 22% increase in the number of homeless children in the state of Nevada, topping at 23,790 children. The report card for Nevada ranked the state as 44th in the nation on a composite score ranking the extent of child homelessness, policy response, child well-being, and risk for homelessness (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2013).

More recent data from Clark County School District (CCSD) seems to indicate that this growth trend has gone unabated in Southern Nevada. CCSD data reports that the number of families with children and unaccompanied youth who self-identify as homeless has risen over the years from 9,284 children in 2013-2014 to almost 11,000 children in the 2016-2017 school year (CCSD, n.d.).

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Each year HUD releases a national report on the state of homelessness, the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR). These reports are based on Point-In-Time (PIT) counts, which are taken annually in the United States, where in one evening each year outreach teams canvas to count homeless persons. Since 2013, the AHAR report has included state and federal counts of unaccompanied homeless youth. Data from this report reveals a disturbing trend in Nevada and especially Southern Nevada. The state has ranked 4th in the number of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness since 2013 (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013; Henry, Cortes, Shivja, & Buck, 2014; Henry, Watt, Shivja, de Sousa, & Cohen, 2015; Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivja, 2016). The Southern Nevada region fares even worse, ranking 3rd among major metropolitan areas for the number of unaccompanied homeless youth according to the 2016 AHAR report (Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivja, 2016). Nationally the rate of unaccompanied homeless children and youth was 6.54%, but in the state of Nevada it was 22.6% and in Southern Nevada it was 24.7% (see the figure below) (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013; Henry, Cortes, Shivja, & Buck, 2014; Henry, Watt, Shivja, de Sousa, & Cohen, 2015; Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivja, 2016).

According to PIT count data for 2016, there were 1,672 unaccompanied homeless youth under 25 and 292 unaccompanied children under age 18 in Nevada. Even more alarming is the number of unaccompanied homeless youth that go unsheltered. Since the AHAR reports have included counts of unaccompanied homeless youth, Nevada has ranked 1st in the percentage of unaccompanied youth who are unsheltered with over 80% of these youth on the streets, rather than being served in emergency shelters or homeless housing programs (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013; Henry, Cortes, Shivja, & Buck, 2014; Henry, Watt, Shivja, de Sousa, & Cohen, 2015; Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivja, 2016). Table 1 summarizes data on unaccompanied youth in Nevada as reported by HUD in their annual AHAR.

Among homeless youth there are several subpopulations who are overrepresented in the population and can be at heightened risk of victimization, including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ youth, and undocumented unaccompanied youth.

LGBTQ Homeless Youth. Nationally, approximately 40% of homeless youth self-identify as LGBTQ (Durso & Gates, 2015). The 2016 Point in Time (PIT) Count census data indicated that this number was lower for the Southern Nevada region with 22.9% of homeless youth self-identifying as LGTBQ although another 4.2% of respondents opted not to answer this question. The majority of these youth (20.8%) identified as bisexual (Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivja, 2016).

PIT Count Rates of Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Table 1. Unaccompanied Homeless Youth in Nevada

Year	Number of Unaccompanied Youth (Total)	Overall State Ranking	Percent of Unaccompanied Youth Unsheltered	State Ranking of Unaccompanied Youth Unsheltered
2013	1,992	5th	88%	1st
2014	2,448	4th	86%	1st
2015	2,310	4th	88%	1st
2016	1,672	4th	82%	1st

Source: AHAR 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016

Undocumented Homeless Youth. Annually over 8,000 undocumented unaccompanied youth are placed in the United States Department of Health and Human Services custody. These youth may have travelled to the United States unaccompanied fleeing human rights abuses, natural or man-made disasters, they may separate from their family due to abuse, neglect, or deportation of their parent(s), or they may be brought here forcibly due by sex traffickers. Barriers including language/literacy issues and lack of documentation make these youth especially vulnerable to victimization and can inhibit their willingness to seek assistance (McKenna & Julianelle, 2010). While we know these youth may have a more difficult road out of homelessness, the number of homeless youth that are undocumented in the Southern Nevada region is not known. The Las Vegas metropolitan area ranks 14th nationally in the number of undocumented immigrants according to the Pew Research Center (Passel and Cohn, 2017), however, which heightens the concern that a sizable number of homeless youth in the region are undocumented.

State of the Problem: The Lives of Homeless Youth

What data on incidence and prevalence cannot communicate is the painful story of how youth find themselves homeless and the consequences that being homeless causes in their lives. Unaccompanied homeless youth face a social environment that often operates on myths. For instance, youth are often characterized as homeless by choice or having fun in the face of options and not interested in engaging in services, in other words they "just want to be on the streets (Larkin Street, 2013, ¶ 1)." In fact a 2008 study of the perceptions of homeless youth emphasized the importance that shelters and services play in keeping them safe from harm and keeping them alive (Garrett et. al, 2008). In addition, the criminal behavior that homeless youth sometimes engage in on the streets, such as drug use or theft, is characterized as a choice rather than an acknowledgment of the need to survive. The reality that homeless youth dream about the same quality of life that other youth do, a stable loving home life, is often overlooked as people perceive homeless

youth as "different" and unable to be helped (Larkin Street, 2013).

Common Causes of Youth Homelessness

Research on homeless youth tells us is that there are some common factors that contribute to a child's vulnerability to becoming homeless. These causes include family breakdown, financial instability, and economic instability (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007). Poor educational outcomes can also contribute to vulnerability to homelessness. Below we briefly examine the connection of each of these factors to youth homelessness.

Family Breakdown. Family breakdown is one of the most common contributing factors to youth homelessness. Breakdown of the family unit may occur due to persistent sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse, neglect, and parental substance abuse. This abuse can precipitate youth entering the child welfare or foster care system or leaving home without a stable alternative for where to live (Shah, Liu, Mancuso, Marshall, Felver, Lucenko, & Huber, 2015). Recent data on runaway youth reports that 46% of runaway youth report having experienced physical abuse before leaving home, while 38% of runaway youth report experiencing emotional abuse and 17% experienced sexual abuse by a family member before leaving home (NCSL, 2016).

Parental rejection is another factor often cited and can be a particular issue for LGBTQ youth. In a recent national study of organizations serving LGBTQ homeless youth, providers reported that 68% of LGBTQ homeless youth had experienced rejection by their parents due to the sexual identity. These practitioners reported running away because of family rejection of sexual identity and being forced out by parents due to their sexual identity as the top two reasons that caused youth homelessness or risk of homelessness for LGBTQ homeless youth (Durso & Gates, 2015).

Economic and Housing Instability. Family economic insecurity, including lack of affordable housing and unemployment and underemployment, can also lead to

youth becoming homeless, either with their families or on their own: youth who become homeless with their families are also often then separated from them by the shelter and child welfare systems, leaving them unaccompanied. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis on the causes of youth homelessness in JAMA Pediatrics examined studies on youth homelessness from 1990-2013 and found that poverty was the leading cause attributed to youth homelessness across studies (Embleton, et al., 2016). As economic instability is a significant risk factor for youth homelessness, Southern Nevada's economic climate creates a high-risk environment for runaway and homeless youth. During the last 20 years, Nevada, and especially Southern Nevada, has experienced rapid population growth, consistently ranking as the fastest growing state in the nation. However, after years of unprecedented population growth and a momentous housing boom, Nevada was hit particularly hard by the nationwide economic recession, and has also consistently ranked among the country's worst areas for unemployment and housing foreclosure rates since 2008. In 2015, Nevada tied with West Virginia for the highest annual average unemployment rate in the nation, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2016). While the unemployment rate has recently been decreasing, it remains above the US average (BLS, 2017). In 2015, 22.6% of children in Clark County, Nevada were living in poverty, a community indicator closely correlated to high rates of youth homelessness (Center for Business and Economic Research, 2017).

Residential instability. Unstable housing including a family history of living in public housing and a youth's involvement with the child welfare system, also contributes to youth homelessness. According to a National Center for Homeless Education (2006) study, 40% of homeless youth had parents who received public assistance or lived in public housing. A recent Department of Health and Human Services (2014) Street Outreach Program data collection project found that 51% of 656 homeless youth surveyed between the ages of 14 and 21 reported having stayed in a foster home or group home. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 37% of all children in Las Vegas lived in households that spent more than 30% of their income on housing, putting low-income families in unstable and vulnerable housing situations (Center for Business and Economic Research, 2017). Analysis by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) demonstrates the severity of the gap in needed housing in the Southern Nevada region. As of 2017, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Area ranks lowest in the nation for affordable and available rental units for extremely low income renters (ELI) with only 12 units available for

every 100 ELI renter households (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, & Errico, 2017). Homeless youth ages 18-25 are likely to have additional issues with successfully finding adequate housing on their own with little or no work or rental history and unstable employment. In 2014, The National Center on Family Homelessness also ranked Nevada second worst in the United States for rate of home foreclosures, indicating serious housing instability for many families in the region (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014).

Poor Educational Outcomes. Education is a key factor for mobility in the workforce and financial stability. Clark County and Southern Nevada have struggled for years with poor educational outcomes, which is correlated to higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. In 2015-2016, the high school graduation rate in Clark County was 74% compared to the national average of 83%, (NCES, 2017) and trend data demonstrates that Nevada consistently ranks last in education. The Education Week Research Center's annual Quality Counts Report for 2017 ranked Nevada 50th for their "Chance for Success" indicator, which looks at educational conditions predicted to create positive outcomes over the course of a person's life. CCSD's Title I HOPE (Homeless Outreach Program for Education) Office identified 14,598 homeless students enrolled in Clark County schools pre-K through 12th grade in 2015 - 2016, a 30% increase over the year before, and a shocking 111% increase in identified homeless students over the previous four years (CCSD, n.d.).

Consequences of Youth Homelessness

The experience of being a homeless youth contributes to a variety of negative outcomes. Due to a lack of safe shelter beds for youth and age appropriate services in the homeless services system that is designed primarily for adults, few homeless youth are housed in emergency shelters or homeless housing programs: living on the streets instead, they are exposed daily to violence, trauma, and high risk behaviors. Every day a homeless youth spends on the streets increases their likelihood of engaging in substance abuse, developing mental and physical health problems, contracting sexually transmitted infections, experiencing unwanted pregnancies, committing and becoming victims of crimes, getting involved in gangs, dropping out of school, and becoming a homeless adult, creating costly and long-term problems for themselves and their communities. Below is a brief discussion of some of the most common consequences of homelessness experienced by youth.

Exposure to Trauma. Traumatic experiences children face in the shelter system and on the streets can have lifelong effects interfering with their sense of self and safety and can contribute to complex trauma and PTSD (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet, 2010; Hishida & Johnson, 2015). Exposure to abuse and trauma as a child can contribute to risk of lifetime homelessness. One of the most comprehensive frameworks for understanding trauma in children is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. Research tracks eight different adverse experiences including abuse and neglect, witnessing violence, loss of a parent/guardian through divorce or death, parental substance abuse and mental health issues, parental incarceration, and sustained economic hardship. Roos and colleagues (2013) examined adverse childhood experiences in a nationally representative group of 34,643 people over 20 years of age in the US. They found that each type of adverse experience was associated with a greater likelihood of experiencing homelessness in their lifetime.

Research also shows that homeless youth who identify as LGBTQ have heightened risks for many of the negative outcomes faced by their straight-identified homeless youth peers: LGBTQ-identified homeless youth are more likely to become victims of physical and sexual assault, develop mental health problems, practice unsafe sexual behaviors, and attempt suicide (National Alliance to End Homelessness, n.d.). According to a 2015 nationwide survey of homeless youth serving agencies, LGBTQ-identified youth are also more likely to experience homelessness for longer than their non-LGBTQ peers (Durso & Gates, 2015).

Criminal Activity. Without many legal options for earning income to meet their basic needs, many homeless youth turn to criminal or physically dangerous activities as a "strategy for survival"(National Network for Youth, nd, p. 3). National statistics suggest that just over one-fifth of homeless youth report stealing to survive. Additionally, 20% report dealing drugs. Homelessness is also associated with higher substance abuse rates. The National Network for Youth (nd) reports that homeless youth are 18 times more likely to use crack cocaine than housed youth.

Risky Sexual Behavior. Risky and unsafe sex is a common practice among homeless youth and also becomes a common survival technique. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, one out of every three teens on the streets will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home and more than one third of homeless youth engage in survival sex. Homeless youth are 7 times as likely to die from AIDS and 16 times as likely to be diagnosed with HIV as the general youth population. The U.S.pregnancy rate of 13-15 year old

homeless girls is 14% vs. 1% for non-homeless girls (National Network for Youth, n.d.).

Sex Trafficking. Homelessness is the largest risk factor for the commercial exploitation of children and domestic minor sex trafficking (Congo Justice Las Vegas, 2017). Studies from other major metropolitan cities suggest almost half (48%) of homeless youth that have engaged in some form of commercial sex activity did so because they did not have a place to stay (Covenant House, 2013). In Southern Nevada the extent of the problem is not known but domestic minor sex trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children are of particular concern as a result of Las Vegas' high-risk environment of drugs, alcohol, the hyper-sexualized entertainment industry, and a nearby legal commercial sex industry. According to data from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, 2,794 minors were recovered from human sex trafficking from 1994 through 2016 (Congo Justice Las Vegas, 2017).

Education and Work. According to the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness (2017), homeless children are 9 times more likely to repeat a grade and 4 times more likely to drop out of school than their housed peers. The consequences to a homeless youth who cannot successfully complete high school can follow them over their lifetime. According to data from the US Census Bureau the average income for a high school dropout is approximately $10,400 less than a person with a high school diploma contributing to an unemployment rate 3 times higher than a college graduate (Breslow, 2012). Young adults age 18-24 are also more than twice as likely to live in poverty without a high school diploma than their college educated counterparts (NCES, 2011).

State of the Response: Services for Homeless Youth

Mapping the response to youth homelessness is challenging. Providers who work with youth have different service mandates including child protection, education, public safety or direct services to homeless persons. Youth may intersect with the service delivery system through providers who work with all youth including youth who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness such as the child welfare/foster care system, the juvenile justice system, the education system, and providers who help children who are trafficked for sex work. Other organizations work directly with homeless persons, with some whose services are designed to meet the unique needs of youth and others who work with all homeless persons. In the sections that follow we explore how these systems and services impact youth.

Services for all Youth

Child welfare and foster care. The foster care system can be a first line of defense in preventing youth homelessness given that the body of research that has examined the link between foster care and homelessness has concluded that youth aging out of the foster care system are at heightened risk of becoming homeless. Studies have shown that anywhere from 11%-36% of foster youth experience homelessness (Bradford & English, 2004; Reilly, 2003).

Research reported by the University of Chicago Chapin Hall (2016) found that for youth aging out of the systems several factors have been found to increase the risk of homelessness including delinquent behaviors, symptoms associated with mental health disorders, history of physical abuse, history of one or more times running away from a placement, and multiple foster care placements. Males are at increased risk when compared to females. Additional research conducted by Shah et al. (2015) found that of youth exiting foster care those who were African American, are parents or who have a history of frequent school placements were at heightened risk. Conversely they found that being in a foster care placement with a relative and having a high GPA were protective factors guarding against homelessness after exiting foster care.

Recent data on Southern Nevada that tracks child welfare referrals for abuse and neglect suggests that between July 2015-July 2016 there were 22,883 new referrals to child protective services in Clark County (Nevada Division of Child and Family Services, 2016). In 2015, Clark County service delivery data indicated that there was an average of 3,659 cases monthly in the foster care system (Marano, Ruiz-Lee, & Schiller, 2015). In 2013, 39.3% of foster youth in Clark County who were in foster care 3 years or more exited the foster care system without permanency (a place to call home) significantly increasing their risk of homelessness (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

Independent living services are designed to assist youth in successful transitions aging out of the foster care system. In Nevada two federal sources of funding exist to provide these services. While there is an overall lack of needed policy response to youth homelessness in Nevada, the recent passage of Assembly Bill 350 in 2011 is an example of legislation that funded new services that could impact youth at risk of homelessness for children aging out of the foster care system. This bill created additional funding to support services to aid in successful transition from foster care (Marano, Ruiz-Lee, & Schiller, 2015).

Law enforcement and juvenile justice. Data on the intersection between youth experiences with the justice system and homeless youth suggest that partnerships with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system are key in the lives of homeless youth. Research on youth who have been in the juvenile justice system demonstrates that they are at heightened risk of homelessness and that "crossover youth" or those who have been in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system are particularly vulnerable to future homelessness (Legler & Kadwell, 2015).

In 2016, 8,079 youth were referred to the Clark County Department of Juvenile Justice Services. Of the referred youth, 27% were not living with their parent(s) and were instead staying with siblings, extended family or in out of home placements. Just over half had previous referrals to DJJS (Clark County DJJS, 2016). Exit from a correctional facility is a point of heightened risk of vulnerability to homelessness for youth. Statewide studies that track data on youth that exit correctional facilities suggest that between 44-48% exit to an unstable housing condition (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2016).

Once they have become homeless, youth often find themselves susceptible to crime. Recent analysis of national data suggests that among runaway and homeless youth, 44% had been in jail, prison, or a detention center, 62% had been arrested at some time, and 78% had one or more interactions with police (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2016).. Interactions with the justice system are complex. Some interactions result in law enforcement fostering connection to services and providing information and referrals for youth. Other interactions are punitive in nature in response to youth committing "survival crimes" and violating "quality of life offenses" such as violating local ordinances related to public eating, sleeping, or panhandling.

Paying restitution for fees or participation in the justice system can exacerbate problems for homeless youth. Failure to pay fines further exacerbates their problems with the justice system and can result in arrest warrants and future jail or prison sentences (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2016). The inability to pay fines associated with being in a correctional facility has been identified as a national problem. Nevada recently approved $3.6 million aimed at reducing the likelihood that youth become entrapped in the justice system (Rauch, 2016).

The school system. Schools are a community system that has the potential of impacting both youth who are currently homeless and those at risk of homelessness. The Title I federal mandate for publicly funded schools to

provide services to homeless students makes schools one of the key partners in identifying homeless youth and connecting them to services. Identification of homelessness is through self-report and may therefore capture youth who live in unstable conditions where they are doubled up or in inadequate or unsafe housing conditions.

In 2015-2016, CCSD reported 258 Title I schools that receive federal funding through the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act to support addressing the needs of low income families. The CCSD Title I Hope program is tasked with providing services to students who identify as homeless and is an important source of information and referrals for community-based services for homeless youth. In addition they coordinate the provision of curricular support, transportation, and needed resources such as clothing for students.

Services Specifically Designed to Address Homelessness

Shelter and transitional housing. A first line of defense in responding to youth homelessness is the existence of available emergency shelter beds and housing when it is needed. While meeting the immediate needs of housing, food, and clothing, shelter and housing programs can also connect youth with additional services that meet longer term needs and foster future stability. Available bed space in Southern Nevada, however, lags far behind the need. While the Point in Time (PIT) Count data for 2016 estimated 1,531 unaccompanied homeless youth under age 25 there were only 99 transitional housing beds dedicated to this same age group and only 285 beds any type (including emergency shelter plus housing beds) dedicated to this population in 2016 according the Housing Inventory Count (HIC) data for the region (Bitfocus, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

There are shelter and housing facilities designed specifically to help unaccompanied homeless youth operated by organizations including HELP of Southern Nevada and Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY). The largest residential facility specifically designed to house homeless youth, The Shannon West Center, was recently renovated to increase its bed space to 160 beds and highlights community efforts to address the gap. The data however, points to a severe shortage of needed places to sleep forcing homeless youth to look for alternative options such as couch surfing and staying unsheltered on the streets. This severe lack of bed space has contributed over the last 3 years to Southern Nevada's ranking as having the highest number of unsheltered unaccompanied homeless youth in the country (Henry et al., 2014, 2015, 2016).

Supportive Services for Homeless Youth. A number of organizations provide support services for homeless youth in the region, the largest of which is NPHY. NPHY offers a range of supportive services for homeless youth in addition to transitional housing and emergency shelter, including street and preventative outreach, 24-7 mobile crisis intervention, immediate needs services, family reunification services, a drop-in center, crisis counseling, legal assistance, life skills classes, mentorship, education and employment counseling, enrichment activities, and case management by licensed social workers (NPHY, 2015). These services provide a lifeline to unaccompanied homeless youth and are designed to outreach to youth in crisis and connect them with a variety of services that address their needs from the point of crisis and during their journey back to independent living. As is the case with shelter services, the need continues to address the gap between need and the available response further underscoring the need to rethink the response to the problem.

Nationally, interventions to respond to minors being trafficked for sex are often led by organizations and coalitions whose primary mission it is to address sexual violence. In 2013 the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department spearheaded the Southern Nevada Human Trafficking Task Force which connects the efforts of local service providers addressing this issue. These providers include local homeless service providers, local violence service providers, community and faith based advocates and other providers.

The Need For System Intersectionality

The review of available services points to the opportunity that exists across systems to address youth homelessness. The picture however is clear: the needs far outweigh the available resources on the ground in all sectors. The review of responses to youth homelessness points to the reality that separate systems are struggling with related issues but often work parallel to each other rather than fully collaboratively to address the needs of homeless youth. National efforts over the past decades to require communities to create a coordinated response to homelessness have resulted in some strengthening of the response to the needs of homeless populations among service providers whose primary mission is to work with the homeless. This has resulted in the development of such innovations as data sharing across providers through a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Many of the systems that homeless youth intersect with however (such as the foster care system) do not exist primarily to respond to issues related to homelessness. Providers in these systems do necessarily participate in creating a coordinated community response

to the needs of youth at risk of homelessness and they do not have the same data and resource sharing capabilities. Any successful effort to enhance the response to the problem will have to include focused effort on fostering true integration of services and responses to youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. When you couple that with the severe shortage of bed and resource availability, getting existing services to the population becomes a hit and miss proposition in which service providers must work tirelessly just to outreach to the population even before delivering available help.

A Roadmap for Change: The Case for a Dedicated Regional Plan to End Youth Homelessness

Southern Nevada has a demonstrated history in responding to targeted HUD defined outcomes through its Coordinated Community Response and the Southern Nevada Regional Plan to End Homelessness. While comprehensive in nature, the current plan to end homelessness does not provide focused guidance for addressing the challenges inherent in responding to issues related to the unique lives of homeless youth. The need for integration in the service delivery system in which agencies work together for stronger, combined prevention and intervention efforts to better serve youth who experience homelessness still exists. In September 2015, the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) urged that:

the varied and unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness require a range of interventions and solutions that no single funding stream can provide. Collaboration across federal, state, and local partners is needed to provide this full range of solutions (USICH, 2015, p. 3).

Through the creation of a coordinated plan to end youth homelessness, the community can optimize the response to youth homelessness in three key ways:

1) Building a policy response that directly addresses needed supports to address youth homelessness. This review of the state of youth homelessness in our region demonstrates that while there are a few examples of state policy initiatives that have opened up resources for youth that do help those vulnerable to homelessness, in Nevada there exists no targeted policy response designed to prevent and respond to the issue. Building this policy response is key to opening up resources and building needed infrastructure to support innovation in service delivery.

2) Addressing the need for system intersectionality that promotes optimal integration of services. By mapping the network of providers integral to the response and exploring new strategies for integration we can model the ways in which youth move through the system and provide needed supports to help providers address the needs. To enact coordination, new strategies for fostering open communication channels will be needed. Solid communication will foster better sharing of ideas, resource management, and community response.

3) Building more robust data systems that support the work of policymakers, service providers, and community change agents. This review of the state of youth homelessness in Southern Nevada demonstrates from a data perspective the story is as much one of what existing data cannot tell us as what it can tell us. Although there has been valuable effort to increase the focus on surveillance data to count homeless youth and services, there are still many gaps in surveillance data for youth and little data exists to point to how services are impacting outcomes.

By sharing information, knowledge, and potentially resources, service providers will be better equipped to address the complex issue of youth homelessness. With joint efforts, providers can better address the root causes of youth homelessness and therefore better prevent more youth from experiencing homelessness and better identify those who do. Moreover, through collaboration, service agencies can potentially improve intervention services to facilitate a more streamlined response when homeless youth are identified.

Finally, according to the USICH (2015), "When communities come together and mobilize around a goal, dramatic change can happen" (p. 4). With stronger coordination in prevention and intervention services, agencies are well-equipped to provide combined efforts in advocacy and affecting policy. Through coordination, Southern Nevada can design the innovations that are needed to overcome the gaps we currently face. Based on the state of youth homelessness in Southern Nevada outlined in this document, the time is right for change.

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