

# CHILDREN IN THE SHADOWS: BRINGING OUR HOMELESS CHILDREN INTO SIGHT

Issue # 1

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## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

Child homelessness faces policy makers with a large and growing problem. Over 1 million homeless children exist in the United States. Unaffordable housing, poverty, and higher unemployment lead to homelessness. The minimum wage rate barely covers rent and living expenses, which leaves individuals living week to week. Over 20 percent of the people in emergency shelters are families, many are single mothers. The National Coalition for the Homeless (2006) ranks Las Vegas the 5th meanest city in the U.S. for homeless persons. The National Center for Family Homelessness (n.d.) ranks Nevada as the 45th worst state for homeless children and 40th for children at risk for homelessness. Over 100,000 children in Nevada live in poverty, where more than 10,000 experience homelessness.

Homeless students score lower on proficiency exams than other students. Some homeless children will never receive their high school diploma. Without basic education, these children earn less throughout their lives, raising their chances of becoming homeless as adults. Clark County has identified about 6,000 homeless children attending its schools. Almost every school enrolls one or more homeless children. Schools and their faculty attempt to

help the children in need. Sometimes this assistance keeps these kids from going hungry.

## *STATEMENT OF ISSUE*

Who are the homeless youth? Defining a homeless youth varies depending on jurisdiction. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.) defines homelessness as follows: “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1))”, including-

- (i) “children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;”
- (ii) “children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C));”
- (iii) “children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces,

abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and”

(ii) “migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii)” (United States Department of Education, 2001).

The State of Nevada (NRS 244.424) defines a “runaway or homeless youth” as a youth who:

- (i) “Is under 18 years of age; and
- (ii) “Lives in a situation described in 42 U.S.C. 11434a(2)(B)(ii)-(iii) with or without the consent or knowledge of his parent, guardian, or custodian” (State of Nevada, 2007).

### *BACKGROUND OF PROBLEM*

A variety of reasons cause people to become homeless. Homeless and runaway youth usually leave home because of unlivable conditions, such as physical and sexual abuse. Roughly 40 to 60 percent of youth experience physical abuse before leaving home and around 17 to 35 percent experience sexual abuse (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). Poverty, lack of affordable housing, lack of education, unemployment, and mental health disabilities can contribute to children or youth homelessness. Some homeless youth live with their family in shelters, motels, or with friends. Of the homeless people social services agencies assisted in 2009, an average of 10 percent lost homes to foreclosure (Goodman, 2009). Most were low-income

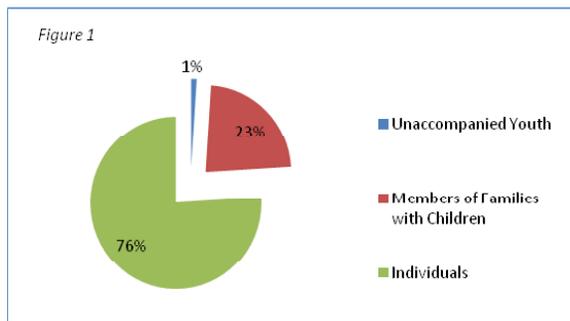
renters whose landlords stopped paying their mortgages. Up to 25 percent of homeless youth engage in survival sex. Of those, 48 percent report exchanging sex for housing or food, 22 percent trade sex for drugs, and 82 percent trade sex for money (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010).

### *UNITED STATES*

About 1.3 million children are homeless in the United States. In 2003, youth under 18 years old comprised 39 percent of homeless people. Forty-two percent were kids less than 5 years old and only 15 percent of those kids are enrolled in preschool during 2000. Thirty-eight percent of homeless people earn less than a high school degree by age 18. Fifty percent of homeless people drop out of school during their education (National Law Center on Homeless and Poverty, 2010).

The three most commonly cited causes of homelessness for families include lack of affordable housing, poverty, and unemployment. The top three causes of homelessness among individuals include substance abuse, lack of affordable housing, and mental illness (Hunger and Homelessness Survey, 2008). During 2007, members of families with children made up 23 percent of persons using emergency shelter and transitional housing programs in urban areas. Unaccompanied youth comprised 1 percent. Individuals made up 76 percent (Hunger and Homelessness Survey, 2007).

### Sheltered Homeless in Surveyed Cities



Source: *Hunger and Homelessness Survey, 2007*

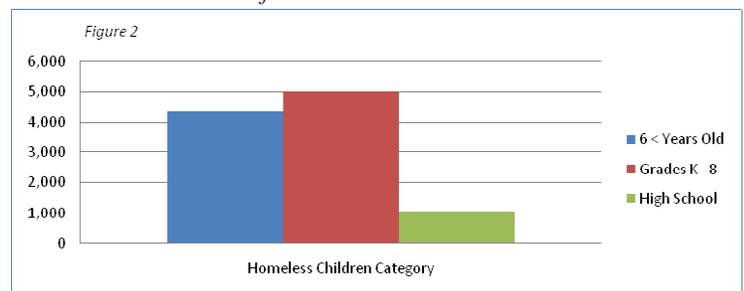
### NEVADA

The National Coalition for the Homeless rated Las Vegas as the 5th meanest city in the United States for homeless individuals in 2005 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). This ranking results from the following criteria: anti-homeless laws in the city, enforcement of those laws and severity of penalties, general political climate toward homeless people in the city, local advocate support for the meanest designation, city’s history of criminalization measures, and pending or recently enacted criminalization legislation in the city. Using data from 2005-2006, the National Center on Family Homelessness ranked all the 50 states based on homeless children in the state, quality of life (food security, health, and education), children at risk of becoming homeless, and the state’s homeless policy and planning. Only five states ranked worse than Nevada for child homelessness. Nevada ranked 36th in the percentage of homeless children and 23rd in child well-being. Nevada also ranked 40th for children at risk of becoming homeless. State policy and planning for the homeless is deemed inadequate (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010).

Nevada has about 109,000 children living in poverty (National Center on Family

Homelessness, 2010). Of those children, roughly 10 percent, or 10,434 experience homelessness each year. Around 4,380 homeless children are less than six years old. Roughly 5,000 are enrolled in grades K-8 and another 1,040 homeless kids are enrolled in grades 9-12. About 1,319 homeless youth are unaccompanied. The exact number of homeless youth is difficult to count. Most homeless children try to blend in and do not ask for help from their schools or peers (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010).

### Number of Homeless Youth



Source: *National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010*

### EDUCATION

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in 2005 suggest homeless students in Nevada experience deficiencies in reading and math. About 60 percent of homeless students enrolled in grades 3 through 8 took a state reading assessment test. Only 31 percent scored proficient in reading. Roughly the same percentage of homeless students in grades 3 through 8 took a proficiency test in mathematics. Of those students, 35 percent scored proficient by NAEP standards (National Center for Homeless Education, 2005-06). Many homeless high school students did not take reading and math proficiency tests. Test scores for high school students eligible for the National School Lunch Program were used in place of homeless students’ scores. Students eligible for the NSLP come from families that

are at most 185 percent above the Federal Poverty Level. Of the students eligible for the NSLP, 12 percent scored proficient in reading, and 13 percent scored proficient in math. Nevada receives about \$37 for each youth from the federal government to address education for homeless children (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010).

About a \$200,000 difference in lifetime earnings occurs between a high school graduate and a high school dropout. A lifetime contribution to society from a high school graduate is estimated to be \$127,000 higher than a non-graduate. Assuming less than 25 percent of the 1,040 homeless high school students eventually graduate, they will lose about \$160 million in lifetime earnings as a group. Nevada will lose about \$100 million in potential tax revenue from them.

### *HEALTH*

About 16.8 percent of children in Nevada do not have medical insurance. Twelve percent of children in homeless families were reported by their parents as having moderate or severe difficulties with emotions, concentration, behavior, and social skills. Ten percent of homeless children witness violent behavior by their parents. Roughly 5 percent of homeless children in Nevada are reported to have asthma. Health related problems with Nevada's homeless children may be understated. Only 6 percent of homeless families are likely to report that their child has moderate to severe health problems (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010).

### *HOUSING*

Nevada's minimum wage is \$6.55 (United States Department of Labor, 2010). The average monthly rent in the Las Vegas area is

\$766 (MSN Real Estate, 2010). For a single parent working a 40-hour week, about 73 percent of income goes to rent, leaving less than \$300 for food, utilities, transportation and other expenses. Section 8 vouchers and public housing are the two main ways homeless families can access housing. Data from the Public Housing Authority show that over 80 percent of families on the Section 8 waiting list have extremely low incomes and nearly all have children. At an annual cost of about \$38 million, Section 8 housing vouchers could fill the gap between income and housing costs for homeless families. Section 8 vouchers currently cover 25 percent of homeless families (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010).

### *CURRENT POLICIES*

Clark County School District (CCSD) Title I Hope is a federally funded program that helps guarantee children the rights to an education and protection. By the end of the 2009 school year, there were 5,708 identified homeless students in the CCSD (Clark County School District, 2009). Nearly all of the schools in the district have at least one homeless student. To qualify as homeless, the CCSD students must live in temporary housing, which means living on the streets, motels, hotels, plug-in RV parks, and "couch surfing." The Las Vegas area is divided into five regions. Each region employs a facilitator to watch over the homeless teens pursuing their diploma. Every school in the CCSD has an advocate who is assigned to the homeless children at that school. Homeless students in the district can receive free backpacks, school supplies, breakfast, and lunch. The Title I Hope office gave out 1,600 backpacks filled with supplies during the first month of the 2010 school year. Eligible students in grades K through 8 can receive clothing through donations. High

school students can receive gift cards for their clothing needs. Three district high schools have homeless centers that are staffed with counselors that offer tutoring services, resume building, counseling, computers, gift cards, clothing, toiletries, bus passes, and a place to relax. The centers even fill up students' backpacks with enough food to last them through the weekend. One high school offers food and clothing to qualifying students despite lacking a homeless center (Emerson, 2010).

### CONCLUSION

Homeless youth are a hard group to study. They are usually less noticeable than homeless adults. Many homeless youth attend school during the day and "couch-surf" at night, rather than ending up directly on the streets. Homeless youth attending school have an incentive to keep their unsheltered lives a secret. They fear their peers. Programs such as Title I Hope are an important part of keeping homeless children in school and healthy. An equally important part in keeping homeless children in school and safe are the volunteers who donate their compassion and energy to helping these children. A shortage of awareness exists concerning child homelessness in our community. Improved awareness of child homelessness and the issues associated will help give these children a better chance to grow up and lead normal, healthy and contributing lives.

"You can easily judge the character of a man by the way he treats those who can do nothing for him".

**Malcolm Forbes**

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