

# MERCED COUNTY HOMELESS YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT 2022



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## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Surveys</b>	<b>2</b>
• <b>General Findings From Youth Survey</b>	<b>2</b>
• <b>General Findings From School Staff Survey</b>	<b>10</b>
• <b>General Findings From Community Organization Survey</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Review of Other Data</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Progress on Previous Actions</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Chapter 4: New Suggestions for Action</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Closing Statement</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>27</b>

## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this document is to present recent information about Merced County's homeless youth population, so that service providers can better understand the demographics, circumstances, and needs of this challenged population.

In 2018, the Merced County Office of Education (MCOE) conducted its original homeless youth needs assessment with funding from the California Department of Education (CDE). In July 2021, MCOE received funding to update the assessment, compare it to the 2018 findings, and provide a progress report. The activities required for this update (including interviews, surveys, research, and analysis) took place between November 2021 and May 2022 and resulted in this document. The intended audience for the assessment is service providers throughout Merced County, including school staff, community agencies, government agencies, faith-based organizations, and any other entities or individuals who regularly interact with and provide services to homeless youth. For the purposes of this assessment, "youth" are defined as individuals ages birth to 24 years of age and homelessness is defined according to the Federal McKinney-Vento Act.<sup>1</sup>

Through the activities conducted to create this assessment, much was learned about the local homeless youth population. Those learnings culminate in a series of suggested, concrete actions on how best to meet the needs of this population. MCOE is hopeful that service providers will utilize these suggestions to improve services and outcomes for homeless youth.

**With questions or comments about this document, please contact  
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## Chapter 1: Surveys

Three surveys were conducted for this assessment: one of school staff, one of community agency staff, and one of homeless youth ages 13 - 24. The surveys were offered online via the Survey Monkey website and were available from March 1 - April 15, 2022. In order to complete the surveys online, respondents needed access to a computer with internet capabilities. All school staff and community agency staff have such access through work. Homeless youth who participated used computers at their school sites, at the sites of community agencies where they were receiving services, or on their personal electronic devices. The option existed for paper versions of the surveys to be made available, but none were requested.

### General Findings from Youth Survey

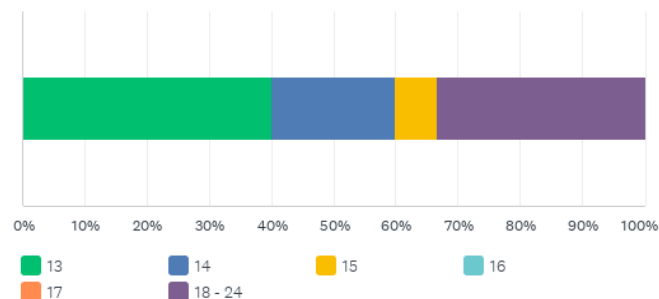
#### Survey Demographics

The youth survey was designed to be completed by youth ages 13 - 24. After conducting research and literature reviews, the decision was made not to survey homeless children under age 13 as it would be difficult to frame the required questions in developmentally appropriate ways, based on the sensitivity of the topics being covered. Logistically, it would also have been difficult for younger students to navigate the online survey format without help from an adult, thus compromising the validity and anonymity of the responses. The Youth surveys were distributed by K-12 school sites, higher education school sites, and a variety of community agencies that work with homeless youth. Youth were assured of the complete confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

#### Age

67% of respondents were ages 13-18 and 33% were 18-24 years of age. This represents a shift in responses since the survey was conducted in 2018, when only 17% were 18-24. This does not appear to be indicative of an overall shift in the age representation of homeless youth, as indicated by the fact that the proportion of Merced County's homeless population ages 18-24 is almost unchanged since 2018 (6.8% in 2022 as compared to 6.9% in 2018).<sup>2,3</sup> More likely this shift is due to the survey reaching greater numbers of youth at this age level.

Q17 How old are you



## Gender and Sexual Orientation

Youth respondents were asked which gender and which sexual orientation they most identify with. These questions were considered important not only to paint a demographic picture of respondents, but also because a wide body of research suggests that non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming youth have a higher rate of homelessness than their straight/gender conforming counterparts. National estimates are that while LGBTQIA+ individuals make up approximately 10% of the overall population, they account for anywhere between 20% and 40% of the homeless population.<sup>4</sup> In the survey conducted for this assessment, 28% of respondents identified as non-heterosexual, as compared to 16% in the 2018 survey. No students identified as gender non-conforming, which was also the case in 2018. According to the California Healthy Kids Survey,<sup>5</sup> approximately 11% of Merced County youth identify as LGBTQIA+, which means that non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming youth are disproportionately represented in the local homeless population. When asked to specify their gender, 53% of respondents identified as female and 47% as male. This is in contrast to national data that shows that males are much more likely to be homeless, and Merced County data that shows that 72% of homeless people are male.<sup>3</sup>

## Race

Respondents were also asked what race they most identify with. While Merced County racial demographics have barely changed since 2018, the race of the homeless youth survey respondents has shifted, with the number of Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and Native American respondents increasing and all other races decreasing. The contrast between the racial demographics of youth enrolled in public schools across Merced County versus those who are homeless is notable. Hispanic, Asian, and White youth are underrepresented in the homeless population that responded to the survey, while all other groups are overrepresented. This is consistent with the findings of the annual homeless count conducted by the Merced County Continuum of Care.<sup>3</sup> In that count, Hispanic and Asian individuals were found to be underrepresented as compared to the overall population of the county.

Race	Merced County Public School Students*	Homeless Youth Survey Participants*	
		2018	2022
Hispanic	75%	35.7%	57.1%
Black	2.6%	14.3%	7.1%
Asian	5.3%	10.7%	0%
Pacific Islander	0.2%	3.6%	7.1%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.5%	3.6%	7.1%
Filipino	0.5%	0%	0%
White	13.8%	10.7%	7.1%
Two or More Races	1.9%	17.9%	7.1%
Did not respond /unreported	0.6%	3.5%	7.1%

\* These results were rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent.

## Cause of Homelessness

Cause of Homelessness	Percentage of Respondents	
	2018	2022
People in my household are unemployed	17%	8%
I was asked to leave/ got “kicked out” because of family conflict	14%	8%
I left voluntarily because of conflict with family members	14%	15%
People in my household are employed, but housing is too expensive	5%	23%
Me or someone in my family is sick or disabled (physically or mentally)	0%	0%
Me or someone in my family has a substance abuse problem	0%	0%
Me or someone in my family needed to escape an abusive situation	0%	0%
Someone in my household has been evicted in the past, making it difficult to find housing	0%	0%
Someone in my household has been convicted of a felony, making it difficult to find housing	0%	0%
I’m not sure	27%	8%
Other (not specified)	23%	38%

Nearly 50% of respondents either weren’t sure about the cause of their homelessness, or felt the survey options did not capture it (very similar to the 2018 results). Identifying the cause of homelessness is an important step in crafting programs and services to help prevent and ameliorate homelessness, but it is understandable that many young people, especially younger teenagers, may not fully understand or be privy to the exact reasons for their homelessness. In some cases the cause may simply be unknown to them, and in others it may be too complex for them to fully explain or understand. Setting aside the respondents for whom the cause was unknown or unidentified, the top causes are family conflict (23%) and housing being too expensive (23%), a finding that has grown considerably since 2018. These results track both with what the research tells us about the causes of homelessness (an international review of data found that 32% of homeless youth were homeless due to family conflict),<sup>6</sup> and with housing market changes that have taken place over the last 4 years. Specifically, housing prices in

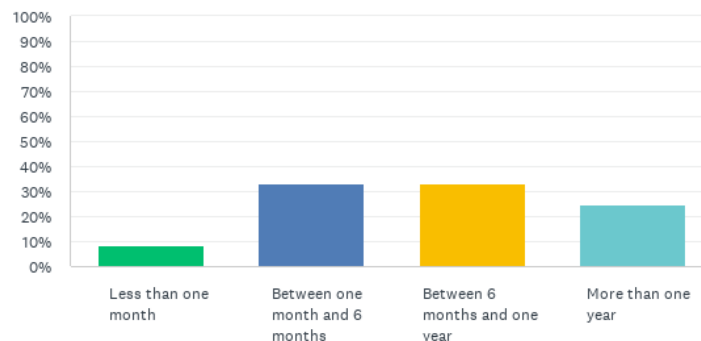
Merced County have increased 45% since 2018, 66% of extremely low-income households are paying more than half of their income on housing costs, and Merced County has been ranked as the 15th least affordable county in the U.S., based on the median income compared to the median housing cost.<sup>7,8</sup>

### Geographic Residency During Homelessness

62% of respondents said they were living in Merced County when they first became homeless, while 38% were living elsewhere. In 2018, the results were 50% and 43% respectively, with 7% not being sure of their residency status, an expected response from those who first became homeless at a young age. This topic can be of interest if there is reason to believe either that homeless individuals move to the County seeking services, or that a person’s homeless experience is directly linked to their residency in the County (if they previously had secure housing). The results of the survey show us that most residents were already living in the county when they became homeless.

### Duration of Homelessness

Q3 About how long have you been homeless this current time?



The length of homelessness for survey respondents is quite varied. 8% say their current bout of homelessness has lasted less than one month, 33% between one and six months, 33% between six months and one year, and 25% for more than one year. These results are in stark contrast to the 2018 survey, when 43% of respondents said less than one month and 28.5% less than six months. Put simply, many more of this year’s respondents report being homeless for 6 months or more. Short term bouts of homelessness and long term bouts can have drastically different effects on the children experiencing them. According to a report published by the the National Center on Family Homelessness at the American Institutes for Research, “in the short term, homeless children are hungry and sick more often, and worry about their family’s situation and future.” In the long term, according to the report, homelessness can have a “devastating” effect on children, leading to “changes in brain architecture that can interfere with learning, emotional self-regulation, cognitive skills, and social relationships.”<sup>9</sup> Knowing that



these distinctions exist can assist communities in developing different strategies and policies for serving homeless youth that take the duration of homelessness into account.

### Current Shelter

According to the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homelessness, a child or young adult does not need to be unsheltered to be considered homeless. For the purposes of the Act, and for this assessment, youth living in motels, hotels, cars, abandoned buildings, or any other places not tantamount to a “fixed nighttime residence”, are homeless.<sup>1</sup>

The vast majority of survey respondents (80% the night before they were surveyed and 80% over most of the previous month) reported staying with a friend or family member, a situation the Federal Government refers to as being “doubled up”.<sup>1</sup> This corresponds with the national estimated rate of “doubled up” for homeless youth, which is 76%,<sup>10</sup> and is very similar to the 2018 results, which were 78% and 74% respectively. None of the respondents reported living in a hotel/motel, shelter, vehicle, outdoors, or in a building not meant for sleeping (such as an abandoned building). This information is important for targeting services to homeless youth, since the types of support young people need can be closely associated with their nightly living situation.

### Accompanied and Unaccompanied Youth

In targeting services, it is also important to understand the support systems homeless youth have available to them and what their living circumstances are related to family and friends who may be accompanying them.

73% of respondents to the survey reported that they are accompanied by one or both of their parents and 53% reported that they are accompanied by another adult relative such as an Aunt, Uncle, or Grandparent. These numbers are considerably higher than the 2018 responses, which is encouraging, as evidence shows that homeless youth who remain united with their families will experience better outcomes.<sup>11</sup> 7% reported being accompanied by another adult they are not related to, such as a friend or romantic partner, and 7% reported being accompanied by a child not related to them. As there is some overlap in these categories (for example, some youth are accompanied by multiple family generations, or by a mix of friends and family members), the total percentages here equal more than 100%.

The most concerning category of respondents are the 7% who indicated they are completely unaccompanied. While they represent a small proportion (similar to the 2018 number of 8%), of the homeless youth who responded to this survey, they are the young people who are most at risk of the long-term deleterious effects of homelessness.<sup>11</sup> Still, this number is lower than the national data that estimates that 17% of homeless youth are unaccompanied minors.<sup>12</sup>

## Access to Health Care

Nationwide, homeless youth experience higher rates of chronic health problems, trauma-related injuries, and nutritional problems. Lack of health insurance also means that homeless youths' health conditions often go untreated, and some studies have suggested that the mortality rate for homeless youth may be as many as ten times that of their housed peers. Homeless young people's increased likelihood to engage in risk-seeking behavior means they are more likely to become substance addicted, experience physical violence and sexual abuse, and are more likely to become pregnant.<sup>13</sup>

Of respondents to the Merced County survey who have ever been ill or injured while homeless, 57% reported that they were able to access the medical care they needed, either through a doctor's office, clinic, hospital, or school nurse. This is in stark contrast to the 2018 results, when 81% said they were able to access the care they needed. 43% were not able to get medical care when needed, and for most of those, the reason was lack of insurance (as opposed to 2018, when the primary reason given was lack of transportation). This tracks with a national study that shows that lack of transportation and lack of insurance are the top reasons homeless youth do not regularly access medical care.<sup>14</sup>

## School Attendance

100% of respondents report that they attend school regularly ("regularly" was defined for the purposes of the survey as being present at school at least 90% of the time that school is in session). This tracks with the results of the 2018 survey, when 97% of respondents reported regular attendance. This is an encouraging result, but must be viewed with the survey methodology in mind. Since school sites were one of the primary means by which the survey was distributed, it makes sense that many respondents would be those regularly attending school. Attendance data from the CDE does indicate that Merced County homeless students in grades K-12 have markedly lower attendance rates than their housed counterparts, with the most recent data showing that homeless students are absent almost twice as often as other students (an average of 35.2 total absences per year for homeless students compared to 19.4 for all student groups).<sup>15</sup>

80% of respondents report being enrolled in middle school or high school and 20% in college or a vocational school.

## Traumatic Experiences

Epidemiological studies of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) provide compelling evidence of the long-term devastating impact of early trauma. “When infants, children, and adolescents are exposed to neglectful, threatening, frightening, harmful, and traumatic experiences, they are at greater risk for poor behavioral and medical outcomes as adults.”<sup>16</sup> And as devastating as early trauma can be, homeless children are both more likely to be exposed to it, and also less likely to have the familial and community support necessary to withstand it. Research has shown that “children experiencing homelessness face additional risks associated with residential instability, hunger insecurity, and often unremitting stress. These children commonly witnessed violence in their family and community, and are frequently separated from primary caregivers. Without the comfort, responsiveness, support, structure, and guidance from their caretakers during times of stress, these children are likely to feel less safe and to manifest more symptoms.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the responses to the survey conducted for this assessment indicate that nearly all the homeless youth who participated have experienced trauma. Specifically, 71% said they had been emotionally abused and 43% had been physically abused by a family member, friend, or other trusted person (compared to 92% and 33% in 2018, respectively). 0% reported having been sexually abused by a family, friend or other trusted person, and 28% had suffered some form of abuse (emotional, physical, or sexual) by an acquaintance or a stranger (compared to 17% and 17% in 2018). Knowing that so many homeless youth have suffered these traumatic experiences can inform the types of support offered to this community of young people, and can increase the understanding of what their particular challenges might be.

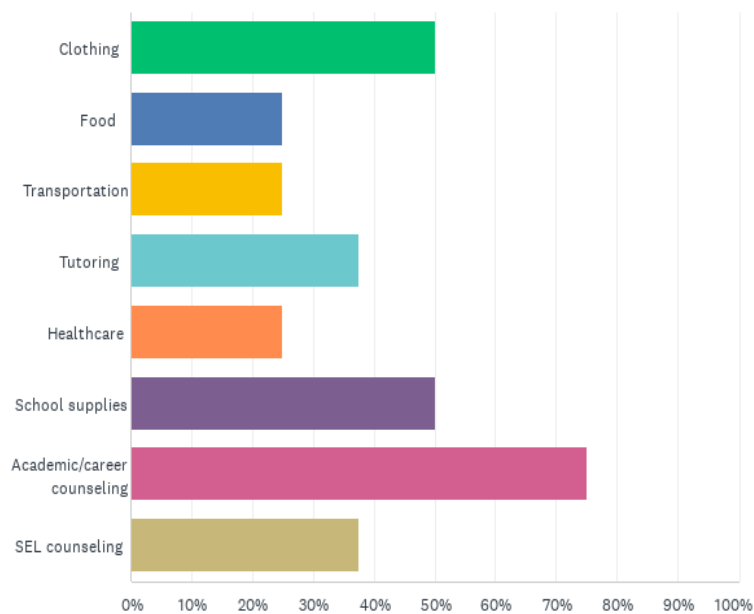
## Shelters

Survey respondents were asked whether they have ever stayed in a homeless shelter. 25% said they had stayed in a shelter, 25% said they have not needed the services of a shelter, and 50% said they could not utilize a shelter for unspecified reasons. This demonstrates an increase in shelter utilization since 2018, when none of the respondents had used a shelter. This increase may be attributed to the increase in shelter bed capacity. According to the Continuum of Care point-in-time count, the number of shelters increased from 13 to 17 and the number of shelter beds increased from 202 in 2018 to 487 in 2022.<sup>2,3</sup>

## School Services

Survey respondents who reported having been homeless while attending a public school were asked to describe which of the following services were provided to them by their school. This information can be helpful in determining to what degree students are accessing services. Respondents reported a higher level of service utilization in every category in 2022 as opposed to 2018.

Q14 If you have ever been homeless while attending public school, which of the following services did the school provide to you? Please check all that apply.



## Community Services

Respondents were asked to rank the following services according to which would have been most helpful to them during their most recent bout of homelessness. The rankings of importance of services have changed significantly, with the only consistency being that access to free/affordable housing and transportation assistance are still highly ranked.

<b>Service</b>	<b>Ranking 2018</b>	<b>Ranking 2022</b>
Substance Abuse Recovery Services	1	10
Childcare	2	11
Access to Free or affordable Housing	3	1
Transportation Assistance	4	4
Support from my school or at my school site	5	9
Academic Assistance	6	6
Legal Assistance	7	8
Food Assistance	8	2
Access to Healthcare	9	3
Employment Assistance (for self or parent)	10	5
Social-Emotional Support	Not asked	7

### **General Findings from School Staff Survey**

The purpose of the School Staff survey was two-fold: 1) to capture information and observations from school staff about all homeless youth they serve, and 2) to particularly capture information about students under the age of 13, since they would not be independently surveyed. School Staff members from public school districts throughout Merced County responded to the survey during the six week period it was available. The respondents included Teachers, Principals, School Counselors, Homeless Liaisons, School Office Staff, School Nurses, Paraprofessionals, Youth Engagement Specialists, Social Work Interns, and Behavioral Support Assistants.

## Ages Served

Respondents were asked what age groups they typically served in their capacity as public school staff. These results are important because while the survey set out to capture a range of ages, it was particularly important to ensure that observations and information about homeless youth under the age of 13 were included, since those students would not have provided their own survey responses. Fortunately, approximately 90% of the staff that responded serve youth in grades pre K - 8, which captures the students not included in the youth survey.

## Referrals

School Staff were asked about their ability to provide referrals to homeless students who need care or services that are not provided at the school site. This question is important because schools are the primary venue for identifying homeless students and their needs, and one of the many responsibilities schools have to their homeless students is to coordinate and collaborate with outside agencies on their behalf and to provide appropriate referrals.<sup>18</sup> If schools can not consistently refer homeless students to needed resources this demonstrates either an availability problem (referrals are not provided because outside services do not exist), or an information problem (outside services do exist, but schools are unaware of them or how to connect students to them).

Only 16% of School Staff who participated in the survey said they are “consistently” able to provide referrals for homeless students to outside services (virtually unchanged since 15% chose this answer in 2018). 54% said they are “sometimes” able to provide referrals and 16% said they are “rarely” able to provide referrals (compared to 46% and 20% in 2018). The remaining respondents said that providing referrals is not part of their role at their school site. This result shows that there is still considerable work to do in ensuring that all school staff have the knowledge, training, and resources required to consistently provide appropriate referrals to homeless students.

## Barriers to School Success

School staff were asked to report what the primary barrier is to the school success of homeless students they serve (apart from their homelessness). Respondents were asked to pick the primary barrier from the following choices:

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>% of School Staff that ranked it #1* in 2018</b>	<b>% of School Staff that ranked it #1** in 2022</b>
Lack of Healthcare	0%	10%
Lack of Childcare (if student is a parent)	0%	0%
Student Employment interferes with Schooling	2%	0%
Substance Use/Abuse	2%	4%
Lack of Adequate Clothing or Supplies	10%	11%
Lack of Academic Support	12%	8%
Lack of Adequate Nutrition	12%	4%
Lack of Transportation	25%	44%
Lack of Social-Emotional Support	34%	14%

\* 3% did not choose a number 1 barrier

\*\* 5% did not choose a number 1 barrier

This information is important in determining what the primary needs of homeless students are, and how the limited resources available in schools and communities can best be used to meet those needs. In evaluating the main differences between the 2018 and 2022 results, we may consider, as one possible explanation, the effect that the COVID pandemic (and related federal and state funding) has had on the availability of various resources. The American Rescue Plan of 2021 provided historic funding that directly benefited homeless youth and their families in a variety of ways, including:

- \$800 million to support the identification, enrollment, and school participation of children and youth experiencing homelessness, including through wrap-around services.<sup>19</sup>
- \$21.5 billion in emergency rental assistance to help millions of families keep up on their rent and remain in their homes.<sup>20</sup>
- \$5 billion in emergency housing vouchers for individuals and families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.<sup>20</sup>
- \$5 billion in homelessness assistance and supportive services programs to help create housing and services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.<sup>20</sup>

This influx of funding, and the services schools and community agencies chose to support with it (enhanced academic and social-emotional support at the school level, for example), has likely had an effect on the shifts in identified service gaps in the community.

### Causes of Homelessness

Respondents were asked to determine, based on their direct knowledge and observations, what is the primary cause of student homelessness in Merced County. This question is important for capturing information related to students who did not complete their own surveys or for students who do not know or understand the basis of their homelessness, and in determining how schools can assist families and students in addressing these root causes.

The top causes of student homelessness identified by School Staff were unemployment of parents (24%) and housing being too expensive in Merced County relative to wages (24%) followed by substance abuse of students or their parents (10%). These were also among the top responses in 2018.

### Reasons Students Do Not Attend School Regularly

School staff were asked to identify the reasons homeless students do not attend school regularly. Understanding reasons for student absences is an important step in identifying ways to ameliorate those causes and improve student attendance and school success. As in 2018, transportation and student lack of interest in school remain the top answers.



<b>Reasons Homeless Students Do Not Attend School Regularly</b>	<b>% of School Staff who Identified as #1 Reason in 2018</b>	<b>% of School Staff who Identified as #1 Reason in 2022</b>
Lack of or Unreliable Transportation	26%	28%
Student Doesn't Like School/Is Not Interested in School	25%	37%
Lack of Social-Emotional Support	23%	2%
The student is taking care of other children (their own children, siblings, or others)	13%	2%
Lack of academic support	7%	13%
The student has a job that interferes with school	2%	2%
Illness of the student or a family member	2%	9%
The student lacks clothing or supplies needed for school	2%	7%

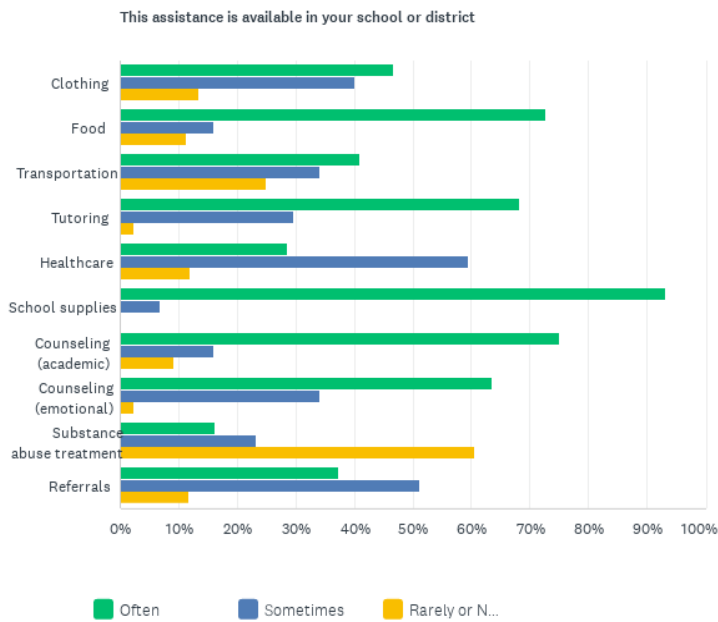
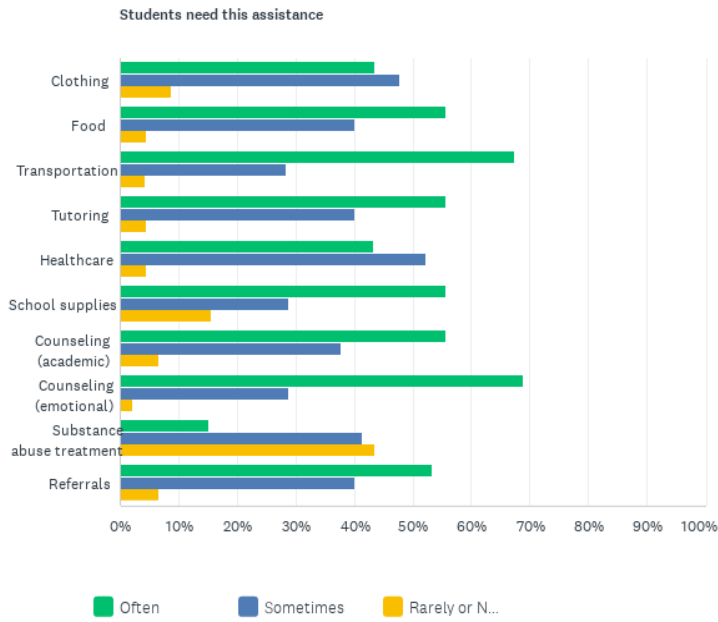
Traumatic Experiences

Mirroring the results of the Youth survey, respondents to the School Staff survey report that many of the homeless students they interact with have suffered from the trauma of abuse. 81% (compared to 87% in 2018) said that physical, emotional, and sexual abuse are significant problems facing homeless youth. This information is important so that schools can target services and interventions designed to address the myriad issues that result from Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Availability of Resources

66% of respondents said they do not have enough resources in their school or district to meet the needs of their homeless students (as compared to 57% in 2018), underscoring the need to make sure that the limited resources that do exist are used judiciously, as well as the need to draw more resources into the community and leverage existing outside services. Respondents were also asked to consider specific services for homeless youth and comment on how often they are needed versus how often they are available.

Q9 Please describe the need for and availability of the following services:



The largest gap between need for service and availability of service is in transportation. 67% of respondents said it is often needed, but only 41% said it is often available. Other notable gaps include healthcare (43% often needed compared to 28% often available) and referrals to outside agencies (53% often needed compared to 37% often available) In 2018, the top identified gaps were in counseling (emotional), transportation, and substance abuse treatment/counseling. Interestingly, for many services the inverse was true: availability was widespread but need was not. For example, 73% said food assistance is “often” available, but only 56% said it is often needed by students. And while 93% said school supplies were often available, only 56% said students often needed them. This information is important in possibly identifying areas where some resources could be shifted away from services that, while important, might be “overfunded”, and towards services where there are noted gaps. To further bolster this premise, when School Staff were asked what area they would devote additional funding to, Transportation was the number one selection (it was also the area with the largest identified gap between need and availability).

### **General Findings from the Community Organization Survey**

The purpose of the Community Organization survey was two-fold: 1) to capture information and observations from staff of community organizations about all homeless youth they serve, and 2) to particularly capture information about students under the age of 13, since they would not be independently surveyed. Staff members from community organizations throughout Merced County responded to the survey during the six-week period it was available.

#### Ages Served

Respondents were asked what age groups they typically served in their capacity as Community Organization staff. These results are important because the survey set out to capture a range of ages so as best to include observations and information about all homeless youth, but particularly those under the age of 13 who would not have provided their own survey responses. 87.5% of the staff that responded stated their organization serves youth under age 13.

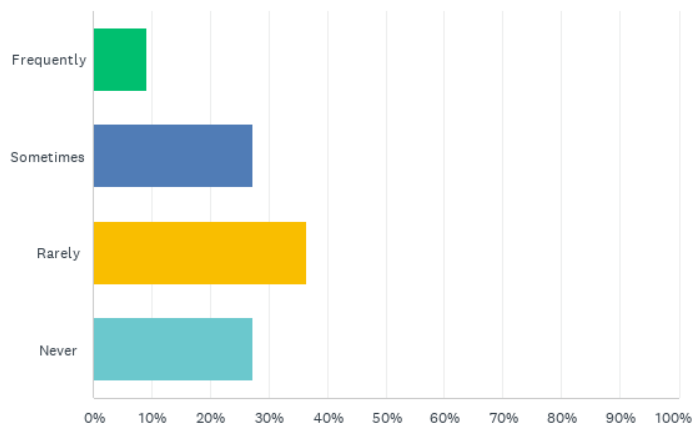
#### Services Offered

Community Organizations were surveyed as to the types of services they offer to homeless youth. This information is important for a variety of reasons. Knowing what services are available can assist schools in filling service gaps for their homeless students. This information can also be combined with that about student needs to determine if Community Organizations might have an opportunity to allocate their resources in a way that better addresses identified needs. For example, 56% of Community Organizations report that they offer transportation services and 22% offer healthcare. As these were the top two gaps in service identified by school staff, there may be untapped opportunity for the schools and Community Organizations to better collaborate to bring needed services to students.

## Referrals

Community Organization staff were asked how often they receive referrals from public schools. One of the responsibilities public schools have to their homeless students is to collaborate with community agencies on their behalf and to provide referrals as appropriate. Gauging how often this occurs is important in determining if improvements can be made to the collaboration and referral process between schools and community agencies.

Q4 How often do the public schools in your area refer homeless youth to you for services?



Only 9% of the respondents said that public schools frequently refer homeless students to their organization, and 64% say public schools rarely or never refer homeless students for services (as compared to 47% in 2018). This could be due to a variety of issues: school staff may be unaware of the services offered, they may not believe their students could benefit from the services offered, there may not be a smooth process for communicating referrals, or other factors may be at play. This data indicates that there are widespread untapped opportunities to address service gaps, since many Community Organizations offer the exact types of services schools have said their students need.

## Barriers to Success

Community Organization staff were asked to identify what they believe is the primary barrier to success for homeless students. These results differ a fair amount from the barriers identified in 2018. In the survey four years ago, respondents overwhelmingly cited unemployment as the largest barrier to success. In the most recent survey, not a single respondent named unemployment as the primary barrier, and the current top answer is lack of social-emotional support. The unemployment rate in Merced County was 10.8% when the survey was conducted in 2018 and it is currently 7.7%.

Barrier	% of Community Organization Staff who named this as the #1 barrier to youth success	
	2018	2022
Lack of Healthcare	0%	0%
Lack of Childcare	0%	9%
Lack of Educational Attainment	0%	9%
Lack of Transportation	9%	0%
Lack of Social-Emotional Support	14%	36%
Lack of Adequate Clothing or Supplies	15%	18%
Substance Use/Abuse	17%	9%
Lack of Adequate Nutrition	18%	18%
Unemployment	37%	0%

Causes of Homelessness

Survey respondents were asked to name the primary cause of homelessness among the youth they serve. The primary cause cited was housing being too expensive relative to wages (37%) followed by youth voluntarily or involuntarily leaving the home due to family conflict (33%). This corresponds with the results of the youth survey, where 23% cited family conflict and another 23% cited housing costs as the reason for their homelessness. School staff also cited housing costs as the primary reason for student homelessness.

Reasons Students Do Not Attend School Regularly

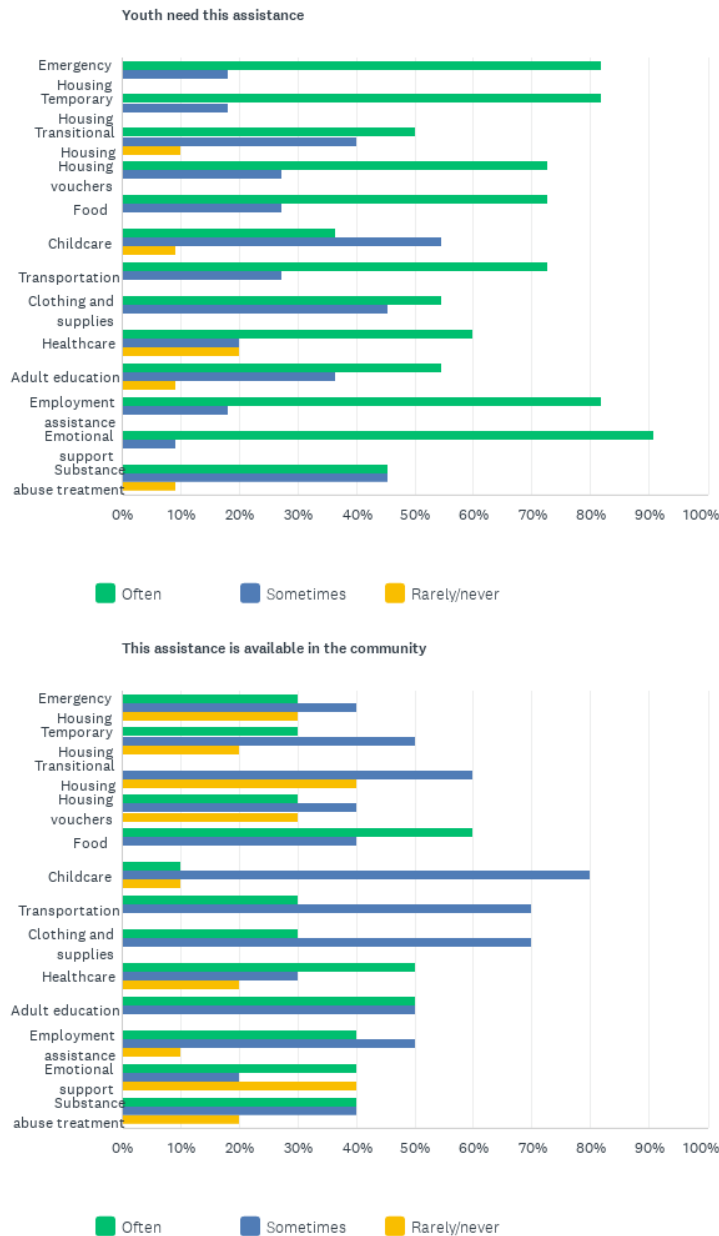
Respondents were asked reasons why their clients may not regularly attend school. The primary reason cited was lack of transportation (36%). This was also the number one barrier to school success cited by school staff.

Traumatic Experiences

Mirroring the results of the Youth survey and the School Staff survey, 82% of Community Organization survey respondents report that physical, emotional, and sexual abuse are a “significant” problem facing homeless youth. This information is important so that organizations can target services and interventions designed to address the myriad issues that result from Adverse Childhood Experiences.

## Availability of Resources

Q10 Please describe how often homeless youth you serve require these types of assistance. Comment on how often the need is met (whether by your agency or another organization). This will allow us to identify local gaps in service.



64% (as compared to 80% in 2018) of respondents said they do not have enough resources in their Community Organization to meet the needs of their homeless students. This finding underscores the need to make sure that the limited resources that do exist are used judiciously, as well as the need to draw more resources into the community and leverage existing services.

Respondents were also asked to consider specific services for homeless youth and comment on how often they are needed versus how often they are available. This information is needed to identify gaps in services so that the schools and the wider community can strategize ways to address those gaps.

Community Organizations were asked to comment on the availability of various types of housing services (emergency housing, temporary housing, transitional housing, and housing assistance, such as vouchers). This area was where respondents identified the greatest gaps between the level of assistance needed and the level of assistance that is actually available in the community. Large gaps were noted, including 82% saying that emergency and temporary housing is often needed but only 30% saying it is often available. Following large gaps in housing assistance availability, the next largest gaps were in the need-versus-availability of Social-Emotional Support programs (90% say they are often needed, but only 40% say they are often available) and Transportation (30% saying it is often needed, but only 14% saying it is often available). These are the areas that community agency staff identified as having the largest gaps in 2018 as well.

This information is important in possibly identifying areas where some resources could be shifted away from services that, while important, might not be as urgently needed as others where there are noted gaps. When asked how they would choose to spend additional resources, Community Organization survey results correspond with the gaps identified: most respondents would spend additional funding on the various types of housing assistance (emergency, temporary, transitional, and vouchers), followed by transportation and social-emotional support.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Other Data**

The surveys conducted specifically for this assessment are one source of valuable information about the demographics, circumstances, and needs of Merced County's Homeless Youth. However, surveys can only impart so much. Due to the transience and disenfranchisement that is endemic to their lives, many homeless youth will not have had the opportunity to complete a survey, or may have declined to do so for complicated social-emotional reasons. These are the same reasons that studying homeless youth has historically been such a challenge for many agencies. In order to provide the most complete picture possible of homeless youth in Merced County local surveys must be considered alongside other available information. Below is a selection of pertinent data gleaned from a variety of local, statewide, and national sources.

### California Department of Education (CDE)

All schools in California are required to count their homeless students, determine their housing situations, and report these statistics to CDE via CALPADS (the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System). However, for years it has been known that this process is not uniformly adhered to across the state and has resulted in undercounts of homeless youth. To ameliorate this problem, the California State Legislature passed Assembly Bill (AB) 27 in the Fall of 2021. AB 27 is designed to help school districts perform a more uniform count of

homeless students and to better document their living situations. The new law requires school districts, County Offices of Education and charter schools to administer an annual housing questionnaire and report the results every year to CDE. While many schools have distributed housing questionnaires in the past, their use was not required statewide prior to AB 27. The result of these new procedures should be a more accurate annual count of homeless students attending public schools, making schools and communities better able to connect those students to the resources and supports that they need. Any new data stemming from AB 27 will be added to DataQuest (the CDE’s data clearinghouse) beginning in the summer of 2022.<sup>21</sup> Until then we will rely on CDE’s current data as the best available estimate of the number of homeless youth from grades Kindergarten-12.

<b>Homeless Students in Merced County K-12 Public Schools By Housing Situation</b>	
Housing Situation	% of Total
“Doubled Up”	84%
Hotel/Motel	7.2%
Temporary Shelters	1.5%
Temporarily Unsheltered	7.3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>



<b>Homeless Students in Merced County Public K-12 Schools By Grade Level</b>		
<b>Grade</b>	<b>2021-2022</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Kindergarten	83	7%
1	62	5.2%
2	82	7%
3	69	5.8%
4	68	5.8%
5	57	4.8%
6	54	4.9%
7	36	3%
8	45	3.8%
9	87	7.4%
10	133	11.3%
11	183	15.5%
12	218	18.5%
<b>Total for all Grades</b>	<b>1,177</b>	<b>100%</b>

In the 2021-2022 school year, there were a total of 59,066 K-12 public school students in Merced County and 1,177, or 2% of them, were homeless (compared to 3.5% in 2018). Historic trends in homelessness are that numbers drop slightly in the middle of the elementary school years, then begin rising again in grade 9, with numbers increasing drastically each year from grades 9 -12. Currently, 52.7% (compared to 56% in 2018) of homeless public school students in Merced County are in High School. Information about the housing situation of homeless youth was mirrored by the responses to the Youth Survey conducted for this assessment. Among survey respondents, 80% reported living in a “doubled up” situation. According to CDE numbers, the Countywide total for homeless public school children living “doubled-up” is 84%.

In addition to the known undercounting issues that inspired the passage of AB 27, several major studies have shown that the COVID pandemic has led to additional difficulties in obtaining an accurate count of homeless students. According to the National Education Foundation “Usually,

any reported drop in the number of homeless students in the United States would be welcome news – but not when the decline can be attributed to an inability to identify and enroll these students. Unfortunately, the under-identification of homeless students – a long-standing issue before the COVID-19 pandemic – has only worsened.....There is significant evidence that public schools were dramatically under-identifying homelessness even before the pandemic. ... Prior to the pandemic, public schools have been identifying only slightly more than half of high school students experiencing homelessness, meaning that as many as one million students experiencing homelessness have not been receiving services they need, and to which they are entitled under the federal McKinney-Vento Act<sup>22</sup>. These findings must be taken into account when considering the apparent drop in the number of homeless students in Merced County public schools since the last assessment was conducted (from 3.5% of enrolled students to 2%). While overall homeless student identification and enrollment appears to be down, the number of children and youth experiencing homelessness has likely increased due to the economic and social crises that have arisen since 2020.

### Merced County Continuum of Care (CoC)

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires local jurisdictions receiving Continuum of Care funding for homeless persons to conduct a “one night point-in-time” homeless count every year during January. The most recent count for Merced County for which data was available at the time this document was being created occurred in January 2022.

According to HUD criteria, a person was considered homeless for the point-in-time count only if they were residing in: 1) places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, and abandoned buildings; 2) an emergency shelter; or 3) transitional or supportive housing for homeless persons who originally came from the streets or emergency shelter. HUD does not consider individuals who are living in “doubled-up” situations or in hotels/motels to be homeless, so in that sense it is a stricter definition and will not include as many people as a count using McKinney-Vento standards. Federal legislation introduced in 2021 would change the homelessness definition of HUD to align with the McKinney-Vento Act so more children, youth, and families can have access to housing assistance. This change would also lead to more accurate data. For example, in 2019-2020, according to the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, there were 1.28 million homeless public school students in the country, but in that same year, according to its parameters, HUD only classified 106,364 children under 18 as being homeless. This distinction is critical, as HUD is the primary provider of direct governmental housing assistance for homeless children and families. The current disparity between the definitions of homelessness used by these agencies leaves as many as 90% of homeless youth lacking access to critical resources.<sup>23</sup>

Unless and until the legislation passes, the best method for accurately estimating the number of homeless youth in Merced County who would not be counted in public schools is to try to align the CoC count with the McKinney-Vento criteria. To do this, we must extrapolate. The CoC count conducted in January 2022 counted only 5 children under age 18. Instead of relying on

that number to estimate how many homeless youth ages birth to 18 are in Merced County, this assessment will use CDE numbers combined with an extrapolation below. For youth ages 18 - 24, since they are not captured by CDE numbers, we will extrapolate using the CoC count. CoC counted 25 homeless youth ages 18 - 24, but again, this only included youth meeting the strict HUD criteria and does not include those doubled-up or living in hotels/ motels. We know from CDE information that in the K - 12 population, 91.2% are doubled up or in hotels/motels. If we apply that proportionality to youth 18 - 24, we come up with a total estimate for the group (using McKinney-Vento standards) of 284.

Extrapolating the number of Homeless Youth ages 0-5

Counting the number of children ages birth - 5 who are homeless is a notoriously difficult pursuit. These children would not be captured by CDE numbers unless they had occasion to be enrolled in a public school program, which few would. These children would only be captured by the Continuum of Care Point-In-Time Count if they were unsheltered or living in an established homeless shelter or transitional housing program where a count was conducted. During the 2022 Point-In-Time Count, only 5 children were counted.

If using the broader McKinney - Vento definition of Homelessness, one can attempt to extrapolate an estimated number of very young homeless children. According to the US Census, in 2021 there were 22,057 children in Merced County ages 0-5. If we assume that the proportion of school age children who are homeless (2%, according to CDE) is approximately equivalent to the proportion of very young children who may be homeless, then we can estimate that the number of homeless youth ages birth to 5 in Merced County is 441.

Estimating the Total Number of Homeless Youth ages Birth to 24 in Merced County

By combining actual homeless counts and estimates, the following total number of homeless youth in Merced County can be proposed:

Ages Birth to 5 (estimated):	441
Ages 5 to 18 (actual count using McKinney-Vento criteria)	1,177
Ages 18 to 24 (actual count using HUD criteria plus additional estimate)	284
<hr/>	
TOTAL	1,902

Summary of Findings

Based on the surveys conducted for this assessment and the review of other data and literature available, we know the following about Merced County’s Homeless youth:

- Based on actual counts and estimates, and using the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, there are approximately 1,902 homeless youth in Merced County. This represents approximately 1.7% of the total County population age 24 or younger.

However, research strongly suggests that this can be assumed to be an undercount, and that the actual number of homeless youth is higher.<sup>22</sup>

- Most homeless youth in Merced County are sheltered, many in a doubled-up situation.
- Homelessness increases dramatically during the high school years
- The most common reasons for youth homelessness are that housing is unaffordable in Merced County, and that youth have left their homes (voluntarily or involuntarily) due to family conflict
- Non-heterosexual youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population
- Hispanic, Asian, and White youth are underrepresented in the homeless population while all other racial groups are overrepresented relative to the general population.

### **Chapter 3: Progress on Previous Actions**

The 2018 assessment culminated in three recommendations for actions to address identified needs and gaps in service. Those actions and the progress that has been made in addressing them are summarized below.

Suggested Action #1: Improve Communication and Collaboration between Schools and Community Agencies. Improving communication and collaboration between and amongst schools and community agencies was an issue identified throughout the 2018 assessment: that schools are not always utilizing the services available from community agencies. Agencies reported few referrals from schools, even though many of the services school staff said their students needed most were being offered by those agencies. The reasons for this disconnect weren't entirely known, but some possible explanations included school staff not having current, accurate, or complete information about community resources, the system for communicating referrals being flawed, or school staff being overwhelmed with other work.

A solution proposed to address this problem was the creation of a new position within the Merced County Office of Education that would be responsible for establishing better communication between schools and outside service providers, establishing a universal process for referrals, making sure schools have the most up-to-date information on the community services available, and providing a host of other services to the schools to ensure that they are meeting the needs of their homeless students and fully utilizing community resources.

Progress on Action #1: In 2021, MCOE received funding from CDE to provide an array of services to homeless youth. Part of this funding is earmarked to support a .5 FTE Youth Services Specialist (YSS). Lucia Tejada was hired to fill this role in October 2021, and her responsibilities include those proposed in the above action. In her short tenure in this role, Ms. Tejada has provided professional development training for school districts on McKinney-Vento laws and identification strategies for homeless youth. Data from the 2018

Homeless Youth Needs Assessment was also shared to bring awareness about the gaps between the needs of homeless youth and the services available. Regular meetings with district and school homeless liaisons are planned for the 2022-23 school year to ensure the same information and resources are being shared at the school site level along with how to refer and connect students and families to appropriate and available community agencies. In 2018, MCOE also created a Homeless Youth Resource Directory, highlighting the various agencies throughout the County offering services to homeless youth and information on how to access those services. A paper version of the directory was distributed to schools and community agencies in the county for use by their own staff and to be distributed to homeless youth, and an electronic version was posted to the MCOE website and shared. The directory was updated in 2022, and to date, hundreds of paper copies have been distributed.

Suggested Action #2: Devote More Resources to Social-Emotional Support for Homeless Youth

The number one gap in service identified through the 2018 assessment was the need for social-emotional support for homeless students. Suggestions for addressing this gap included 1) improving communication and collaboration between schools and community agencies (see Action #1) to ensure that those social-emotional programs and services that *are* available in the community are being fully utilized, 2) schools and community agencies undertaking an evaluation of their current programs, using the assessment as a guide, to determine what activities they are currently spending funding on that are in low demand, 3) shifting resources from the less-needed services towards social-emotional services, and 4) providing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) training to all Homeless Liaisons in the county, who could then train other school staff and community agency representatives in how to utilize the ACE concepts with homeless students.

Progress on Action #2: Action #2 has also been addressed through the hiring of the Youth Services Specialist, who is tasked with building collaboration between schools and community agencies. Additionally, all organizations providing services to homeless youth had to reevaluate and reprioritize their services once the pandemic began, and one of the tasks of the YSS is to assist schools and agencies in continuing that process (using this assessment as one resource to guide decision making). The YSS is also tasked with bringing local agencies together to leverage existing resources and attract new resources to build the local capacity to serve homeless students. Additionally, the CDE funding MCOE received in 2021 is supporting ACE and other trauma-informed trainings for all Merced County Homeless Liaisons (and other district and school staff). Overall, the large amounts of state and federal funding that have become available in the last two years to support social-emotional services for youth have led to better availability of these vital resources. Evidence of this can be found in the survey results, which show that while there are still gaps in social-emotional services, those gaps are smaller than they were four years ago, and fewer respondents reported a lack of these resources.

### Suggested Action #3: Devote More Resources to Transportation Assistance

Transportation assistance was also identified throughout the 2018 assessment as a significant gap. Lack of transportation was preventing homeless youth from accessing emergency shelter, healthcare, and numerous other programs and services. It was suggested that schools and community agencies evaluate their spending on homeless youth programs to identify opportunities to free up funding for transportation.

Progress on Action #3: As with all school and community resources, the pandemic and its associated socio-economic consequences have impacted transportation availability. While state and federal funding that could support transportation services for homeless youth has been more plentiful, other related factors, such as transit shutdowns, bus driver shortages, and other outcomes have negatively affected this action. Transportation issues are systemic and can often seem intractable, especially in rural communities, but one step towards better addressing these issues is to bring the appropriate agencies to the table to communicate, plan, and leverage resources, and this is one of the responsibilities of the YSS who, among many other types of collaboration-building, is charged with convening an advisory board to address these topics. To provide more immediate relief to homeless youth, MCOE is also utilizing CDE grant funds to provide direct support to homeless youth so they may utilize the transportation options already available in the County.

### **Suggestions for New Actions**

Based on the findings of the assessment and the progress on previous action items, the following are the new suggested focus areas:

#### Action #1: Continue to build a robust system for referrals.

While some concrete actions have been taken in this area since 2018, such as creating the Homeless Youth Resource Directory and hiring the YSS, the survey results show that this is still a huge area of need. School staff do not feel they have the appropriate information or tools to provide referrals, and community agencies report receiving very few referrals from schools. This disconnect should be further explored and evaluated by the YSS, with contributions from the Advisory Board and Homeless Liaisons, so that a truly useful system for referrals can be designed and implemented.

#### Action #2: Continue to build a robust system for transportation assistance

Transportation continues to be named by all stakeholders as an ongoing need for homeless youth, and lack of access to transportation has consistently been identified as a main barrier to success. The YSS and collaborators from throughout the County should prioritize planning and funding for transportation, and look to successes in similar areas for learnings that may apply to Merced County.

### Action #3: Prioritize connecting students to housing assistance

Housing affordability for employed individuals is a much bigger issue than it was four years ago, and has been identified by stakeholders as a primary reason for youth homelessness. There may be housing resources in the community that are underutilized. If so, they should be identified and a robust referral process applied to them. For cases where resources do not exist, the YSS and all stakeholders should ensure that the appropriate community agency and government representatives with a direct line to housing resources are “at the table,” included in the Advisory Committee, and made an integral part of all planning and resource allocation discussions. The Rapid Rehousing Toolkit from the National Alliance to End Homelessness (<https://endhomelessness.org/resource/rapid-re-housing-toolkit/>) is just one resource that could serve to guide this work.

### **Closing Statement**

The problem of youth homelessness is a continuing issue in Merced County. The socio-economic factors that contribute to homelessness in the county also create a climate in which there are limited local resources to address homeless youth needs. Therefore, all organizations that provide services to homeless students should utilize their resources to address the issues on which they can have the biggest impact. Most public schools and local non-profit agencies can not single-handedly alter the primary causes of homelessness, such as inadequate transportation systems and housing affordability, but they can set attainable goals to provide impactful services to ameliorate homeless students’ most immediate needs. The purpose of this document is to identify those immediate needs and provide actionable suggestions for confronting them. Comments or questions about this assessment and the suggestions herein should be addressed to Lucia Tejeda at [ltejeda@mcoe.org](mailto:ltejeda@mcoe.org) or (209) 381-5156.

### **References**

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  - sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as doubled-up)
  - living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations
  - living in emergency or transitional shelters
  - abandoned in hospitals
  - Children and youth 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
  - Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings
  - Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.The full text of the legislative definition is available at <https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/>
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