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# A Needs Assessment: Exploring the Unknown Needs of the Homeless Unaccompanied Youth Within a West Texas Independent School District

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory study aims to explore the unknown needs among the unaccompanied youth population within a small urban community in West Texas. This cross-sectional study surveyed a convenience sample of 10 unaccompanied youth attending school within an independent school district. Data were collected using a social worker's case load during the spring semester of 2020, during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Findings showed a certain level of need within this community, such as emergency shelters and further research on food insecurity for this population. This implies the need for practice and policy on multiple levels to help this population who is particularly vulnerable in times of crisis. It is observed in the literature that communities should provide comprehensive wraparound care instituted for this population if they do not currently do so. Although the research intended to uncover many unknown needs of this population, the study sample was small and was not representative of the population.

Further research on the needs of this population is recommended using a more rigorous research method in a more stable and predictable time of normal social interactions and functioning.

A Needs Assessment: Exploring the Unknown Needs of Homeless Unaccompanied  
Youth Within a West Texas Independent School District

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of School of Social Work

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

By

Amy Grace Weiss

August 2020

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Amy Weiss, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Science in Social Work

*Donnie Snider*

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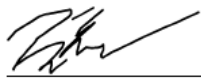
Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs

Date

August 13, 2020

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Thesis Committee



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Heather Melchor

This work is dedicated to Christopher Miller. Thank you for the constant support through everything.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my mother for the support that she has given over the course of my college career.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	LIST OF TABLES.....	iii
I.	INTRODUCTION .....	1
	Nature and Scope of the Problem .....	4
	Research Questions.....	4
	Significance of this Study .....	5
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW .....	6
	Literature Search Strategy.....	6
	Unaccompanied Students.....	7
	Vulnerability of Unaccompanied Youth.....	9
	Substance Use .....	10
	School Performance .....	10
	Legislation Regarding Homeless Youth.....	11
	Schools and Wraparound Services.....	12
	Barriers to Serving Unaccompanied Youth .....	13
	Conclusion of Literature Review .....	17
III.	METHODOLOGY .....	18
	Research Design.....	18
	Sample.....	19
	Ethical Consideration.....	19
	Data Collection .....	20

	Instruments.....	20
	Data Analysis.....	21
IV.	FINDINGS.....	22
	Participants.....	22
	Descriptive Statistics of Major Variables.....	23
	Personal Information.....	23
	Personal Wellbeing.....	25
	Needs Assessment.....	26
V.	DISCUSSION.....	29
	Discussion of Major Findings.....	30
	Implications of Findings.....	31
	Implications for Practice.....	32
	Implications for Policy.....	32
	Limitations of This Study and Implications for Research.....	33
	Conclusions.....	35
	REFERENCES.....	37
	APPENDIX: IRB Approval Letter.....	40



## LIST OF TABLES

1. Table 1: Characteristics of Participants .....	23
2. Table 2: Personal Information .....	25
3. Table 3: Personal Wellbeing .....	26
4. Table 4: Needs Assessment .....	28

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Each year, tens of thousands of school-age youth and their families face severe housing disparities. Millions of American may experience some form of homelessness, even if only sporadic or episodic. It is a forgone conclusion that periods of homelessness hugely impact families and children, health outcomes, emotional stability, and personal development (Hopper et al., 2010). According to the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, roughly 553,000 men, women, and children are homeless (Miller, 2011a).

For unaccompanied school-age youth—a significant subset—these challenges are faced without the supportive resources of a family unit. While children without supportive families may be difficult to imagine, the numbers of unaccompanied youth in school systems across the country are on the rise (Miller, 2011a). Cities, large and small, are searching for resources and developing programs to address the needs of unaccompanied youth arriving at their schools. However, the social, economic, behavioral health, and housing needs of unaccompanied youth are as wide-ranging as the communities where they live and the school districts they attend. The school district that will be the focus of this research is found in a small west Texas urban city.

The Texas city in this study (Abilene Texas) has a high rate of homeless youth for its size. Within the small west Texas independent school district in this location, there are a total of 1,122 homeless students and 264 unaccompanied youth. This number grows

throughout the school year, adding new students to the list every week, according to the ISD data in this community. These youth are identified as homeless and unaccompanied by teachers, counselors, school social workers, and other school staff. The questions categorize students in different areas and levels of severity. Students can be residing in a shelter, RV, or hotel/motel. They can be labelled as *doubled up*, which means they are living with another family, or they can even be *unsheltered*, meaning they have nowhere to go. While every family is given the same urgency once they are identified, some referrals require immediate action. This small town community is a unique place, and has many resources to offer, but student housing is difficult to find in some cases (Miller, 2011b).

Two overarching subsections of this population are homeless youth and unaccompanied youth. When serving a student that falls into either of these, that is the first information needed to proceed forward. Common needs of unaccompanied youth are Medicaid and SNAP applications. However, for unaccompanied homeless youth, those are uncommon and often not as needed. The needs of these two populations are different, and this research is designed to find the differences and gaps within services provided. This research aims to address the gap in services between the two populations and provide information on unknown needs of these youth. Homeless youth are able to apply for and use different services, but it is unknown to the researcher if they are aware of them and able to access them when needed (Miller, 2011a).

Within Abilene Independent School District, the liaison and staff face barriers with this population frequently. When assisting homeless youth, a common barrier is transportation. Many of the families that are affected by homelessness live below the

poverty line, and because of this, transportation can be detrimental to a child's academic wellbeing.

According to the US Department of Education, an estimated 107,675 children under the age of six years old are experiencing homelessness. This rate increases dramatically as students grow older and enter into middle school and high school. Graduation rates for these students fall far behind normal students and students who are economically disadvantaged (Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, & Atwell, 2019). Homeless youth have a higher risk of being involved with and or struggling with a court system, learning disabilities, emotional distress, substance use, etc. (Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Ingram et al., 2019; Randle, 2016; Sulkowski & Michael, 2014; Thompson et al., 2010). When students become homeless, they experience more negative side effects, which manifest and increase their risk for chronic homelessness after graduation.

Another obstacle that is problematic for these youth is proper and efficient identification of their homeless status. Most homeless students are less trusting of adult figures and therefore are unwilling to talk about their situation. This can cause silent suffering for the students who are not identified but being treated as normal students.

In 2016-2017, approximately 1,217 youth were identified as homeless within the Independent School District (Abilene Independent School District, 2017). Ranging in age from two years to 17 years (pre-K to seniors in high school), these youth face tremendous barriers and hardships. According to school district data on pupils identified as unaccompanied students as, living without a legal parent or guardian numbered approximately 268. The officials, recognizing students affected by homelessness face more barriers when attending school, need to target limited resources with greater

precision and effectiveness. In order to do so, a comprehensive assessment of the needs of unaccompanied youth attending AISD schools is required.

### **Nature and Scope of the Problem**

Another obstacle that is problematic for these youth is proper and efficient identification. Most homeless students are less trusting of adult figures, and therefore are unwilling to talk about their situation (Miller, 2011b).

The purpose of this study is to assess the needs of unaccompanied youth in the Abilene Independent School District. This exploratory study illuminates areas for concern and sheds light on issues that are invisible to current faculty working with unaccompanied students. While it is known that this population has more specific needs than their housed peers, the depth of awareness and requisite knowledge is limited within AISD. Within this population the study explores the unknown needs of high school students.

The current services offered by the McKinney-Vento Program within Abilene ISD have been altered the last few years. The addition of a clothes closet specifically designed for the homeless population has been added to services that are provided within the agency.

### **Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the needs that are currently not being met among unaccompanied youth in Texas?
- RQ2: What needs are not currently being met by services that are in place?

### **Significance of this Study**

This study brings in to focus specific needs of unaccompanied youth in AISD and brings clarity to demographics and population-specific circumstances. The aim of this study is to provide community leaders, service providers, educators, and AISD officials with the data necessary to 1) better understand a subset of their student body; 2) inform the selection of social support services; and 3) tailor limited resources to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Literature Search Strategy**

The purpose of this literature review is to gain insight on the target population to better understand the barriers they are faced with and suspected needs. This population is highly vulnerable, and in order to gain information about them, a review of literature and current research is beneficial to further studies.

In a systematic review of literature, the population of homeless youth were studied. In efforts to understand the experiences that homeless youth may face, a holistic approach was taken. This included lifestyle, education barriers, parental involvement, school personnel involvement, resources available to students, lack of resources available to students, substance use, and common life experiences for homeless youth. Both qualitative and quantitative data were previewed to understand the experiences and issues that are faced by this population. Literature searches were conducted through Google Scholar and the Abilene Christian University Brown Library databases, including Academic Complete, One Search, and Social Work Abstracts. These platforms led to finding a plethora of articles and studies that contributed to the literature review. Search terms included phrases such as, “homeless youth within independent school districts,” “unaccompanied youth in school,” and “the needs of homeless and unaccompanied youth.” Keywords such as homeless, unaccompanied, youth, student, school, academic, needs, etc., were used. Different variations and combinations of these were used in order

to narrow down searches. These phrases were the first attempts to find relevant literature. When an article was identified as useful to the study, the researcher used the references from that article to explore other related works. Articles that were not accessible through Google Scholar were searched for through ACU Academic Complete.

Each article had to meet certain criteria. The search was refined to articles that were written in the past ten years. Data included information sheets and peer-reviewed articles from scholarly journals. Each abstract was read and reviewed for appropriate content according to the research topic. Articles were assessed based on the level of information it contained regarding homeless youth and relevant information.

### **Unaccompanied Students**

Although the social problems regarding unaccompanied students have been studied for a long time, there is a lack of agreement in the definition of this population. The definition of *homeless* according to the McKinney-Vento Act, and adopted by the Department of Education, is youth who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (Miller, 2011a). The department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a different definition than the independent school district. They have more specific requirements to be considered homeless. HUD says that to be considered homeless an individual has to be living in a transitional housing, shelter, or a place that is not fit for human habitation (Miller, 2011a). Unaccompanied youth are a subset of the homeless population. These are students who are not accompanied by a parent or legal guardian and can be considered to be on their own. Students are becoming unaccompanied for a varying number of reasons. Julianelle (2008) listed scenarios that could cause a student to become unaccompanied. A student could be kicked out of their home due to a conflict in



family morals, runaways, disagreements with step parents, loss of a parent to death or incarceration, etc. Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, and Williams (2010) identified that youth are forced out of their homes, and use the term Throwaway Youth to describe them. In a study done by Ostyn and James (2019), they found that one in 30 unaccompanied youth under the age of 18 will experience homelessness within a year. That statistic soars to one in 10 after the age of 18 (Ostyn and James, 2019). This could be due to the instability in housing and lack of meaningful adult support. This population experiences higher than normal rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse within the home. These students are far more vulnerable than youth who are homeless and are still united with their parents or guardian (Esposito, 2018; Julianelle, 2008). Unaccompanied youth have a less than a 50% chance of being reunited with their families (Julianelle, 2008). These youth are often unaware that they are considered to be homeless under the No Child Left Behind Act (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). They often do not realize or are not educated that they are protected under the McKinney Vento Act (MVA). These students are less likely to come forward to teachers and counselors because of shame or ignorance of the severity of their situation (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Esposito, 2018). This also creates a barrier to identifying them as homeless, due the lack of knowledge of the Department of Education definition of homelessness (Esposito, 2018). These students suffer from a lack of familial support and a needed sense of love and belonging. Aviles de Bradley (2011) noted that if an unaccompanied youth has any kind of relationship with their family that it can be fragile and too unstable to be maintained. This kind of support is hard to duplicate, but wraparound services assist in closing that gap. Students who identify as LGBTQ+ face more barriers and show higher levels of at-risk behaviors than

other students in this population (Ostyn and James 2019). Although less than one percent of unaccompanied youth identify, they are over represented. Minority students of color are also over represented. According to HUD, they are underrepresented in the student body, but they make up a high percentage of the homeless population.

### **Vulnerability of Unaccompanied Youth**

Camille Randle (2016) did extensive research on the mental health status of homeless and unaccompanied youth. She came to the conclusion that the mental illness rates of students who were experiencing homelessness were much higher than youth who were stably housed with a family. It is seen that 83% of homeless youth are victims of some sort of abuse or neglect (Randle, 2016). The trauma that these youth experience plays a big role as to why some students will leave their home, even with no other safe alternative (McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, & McLeod, 2012). McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, and McLeod (2012) noted that being homeless also raised the risk of their trauma being exaggerated and more damaging.

This population is more susceptible to being diagnosed with different kinds of depression and anxiety disorders. Since they are more likely to experience trauma or abuse, they have symptoms of both depression and 50% of homeless youth suffer from suicidal ideation (Thompson et al., 2010). Thompson et al. (2010) state that while they have higher rates of these illnesses, their ability to cope with them is limited because of the constant stress they are under. They have low self-esteem and often no positive sense of self-worth that to combat the mental battles they are faced with.

## **Substance Use**

In The research of Ferguson and Xie (2012) found that the use of substances is elevated in the homeless population in comparison to their peers. This kind of data is common when researching youth who suffer with homelessness.

Thompson et al. (2011) noted that rates of substance use are high in this population, with 77% of homeless youth who have used marijuana and 79% who have used alcohol at least once. According to Randle, as these youth become older the percentage of substance use is as high as 90% (2016). They also noted that 68% of homeless youth used substances to cope with trauma (Chiu et al., 2010; Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Sulkowski & Michael, 2014; Thompson et al., 2010). Ferguson & Xie (2012) noted that there is a direct correlation between substance abuse and gang membership, truancy, and domestic violence. They also showed a correlation between adult mentorship and adult involvement in the lives of homeless youth having a positive effect on lowering substance use rates.

## **School Performance**

While some of the students experiencing homelessness are able to adapt and their school performance is not affected, a percentage of youth are not supported in ways that allow them to thrive in the school setting. These youth have a commonality of struggling with truancy (Ferguson & Xie, 2012). According to the Michigan League for Public Policy (Ostyn and James, 2019), 50% of homeless students are chronically absent from school, compared to only 20% of their housed peers. They also found that the graduation rate for homeless students is also 50% compared to 80% for non-homeless youth.

Randle (2016) found that 75% of homeless youth transfer schools at least once, if not more, during their K-12 experience. She also found that 50% of youth do not meet state proficiency in academic courses. Mobility can have huge negative effects on a student's academic outcomes. It affects grade retention to where students may have the needed credits to graduate, but due to absences, they are not applied to their final transcript (Randle, 2016). Along with mobility, some students experience long periods where they are not enrolled in school. Miller (2009) saw that this can cause irrecoverable damage to a student's academic career.

Along with truancy, school-related issues include behavioral and social interaction altercations (Miller, 2009). He also said that they more often act out in violence as well as negative behaviors within the classroom.

### **Legislation Regarding Homeless Youth**

The McKinney-Vento Act (MVA) strives for equity for all students who suffer with homelessness while trying to attend school. It is intended to take away all boundaries that could prohibit the unfair treatment of youth who are considered homeless (Donley et al., 2017; Julianelle, 2008). The definition of *homeless* according to the McKinney-Vento Act is those youth who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (n.d.). This includes children and youth who

are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason...who may be living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, shelters...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...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 children who are living in similar circumstances listed above. (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017 p.1)

### **Schools and Wraparound Services**

Children who experience homelessness at any level can have an abnormal amount of stress compared to children who live in a stable environment. This stress can come from the lack of support that they may have in an area of their life. To better serve this population, wraparound services have proven to be effective in many ways. A study showed that when school staff were more involved, comprehensive care was more likely to be given (Ostyn and James, 2019). Methods and programs such drop-in centers are a productive step in the right direction for wrap around care (Ostyn and James, 2019; Thompson et al., 2010). Providing a place for youth to complete normal everyday tasks is vital to the wellbeing of these youth (Ostyn and James, 2019). Temporary housing, education, and counseling services often make a big impact on the likelihood of success (Thompson et al., 2010). Ostyn and James (2019) noted that drop-in shelters have the highest levels of use out of the resources provided to homeless youth and young adults. A program called Starting Right, Now, based in Tampa, Florida, has crafted a way that uses the art of case management to ensure the specific needs of youth can be met. This program pairs youth with a professional mentor that is able to connect with the youth on an individual level. These professionals can connect the youth to resources and give them guidance when needed. They focus on ending homelessness one person at a time. The study conducted by Ostyn and James (2019) concluded that the youth who went through

the Starting Right, Now program found elevated quality of life after completing the program.

### **Barriers to Serving Unaccompanied Youth**

Unaccompanied students need comprehensive wraparound care to ensure that no part of their life is less developed than another (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Juianelle, 2008). Across the board the literature supports collaborative efforts within community services for this population. Miller (2011a) stated that collaborative efforts must involve stakeholders throughout the community that are willing to serve and empower youth. The collaborative relationship between community shelters and agencies are not common according to Miller (2011b), who found that collaboration is easily broken down. Responsibility is a key component in collaborative attempts, and participating agencies do not often establish the tasks for which they are responsible for (Miller, 2009).

Qualitative studies have been conducted on community collaboration, and Miller (2009) pointed out that there is mistrust between school personnel and differing agency case workers. This mistrust causes homeless students to miss out on opportunities that could be beneficial (Miller, 2009). A shared perspective of mistrust is a detriment to this population and their wellbeing.

Consent to work with these youth is important to factor in when involving other community agencies, due to the vulnerability of the population (Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Miller 2011a; Miller, 2011b). Once a community becomes integrated in a helping process, barriers can present themselves and cause difficulties. Support of these youth through casual and structured interaction has been related to positive growth and development and brighter futures (Ferguson and Xie, 2012; Miller, 2011a). This can

create a barrier when students are trying to find a place to live on their own. Because they are students, they are in need of free or low-income housing with access to a variety of services. The difference in the definitions of homelessness cause a gap. This gap creates barriers to housing, because HUD does not consider youth who are able to “couch surf” to be homeless (Miller, 2011a).

While collaboration is important within the community, it is also important to involve the population in creating more effective ways to serve them. Ostyn and James (2019) suggest that youth participation is vital to understanding the needs and barriers that these students struggle with. Utilizing the youth in this process can be a unique form of accountability that can be used as a directional piece (Ostyn and James, 2019).

Agencies within a community are often able to provide mental health services; however, Randle (2016) suggests that these services are not utilized as needed by this population due to other influencing barriers. Due to not being able to use these services, the mental health of these youth often mental health decrease over time, causing serious mental illness.

Caring adults within the community give youth support that is less likely to be given while they are growing into adulthood. Ferguson and Xie (2012) said it has been shown that when youth can go to a caring adult for help, it reduces risks associated with homelessness in adolescents.

In efforts to identify this population within the school district, school faculty must have knowledge of the MVA. Miller (2009) conducted a study that noted that often school staff were not aware of the provisions given by the MVA, so they declined needed services. The MVA liaison is in charge of putting the policy into practice, but often is not

the only faculty member who identifies students who are at risk (Canfield et al., 2014; Donley et al., 2017; Julianelle, 2008). Within this policy, there is written legislation that pushes the school district to ensure that these students are able to attend school. One issue that homeless liaisons come in contact with frequently is transportation (Miller, 2009). Under the MVA students are able to remain in their school of origin even if they relocate out of that attendance zone (Miller, 2009; Miller, 2011a) This can become a complicated process for schools because they have to be able to coordinate buses outside their natural routes, which can be an expense that schools are not willing to pay. These types of responsibilities make collaboration difficult and can create negative perceptions about other service areas within the school district (Miller, 2009.) McKinney-Vento staff advocate within the school system regularly to ensure that the legislation is being upheld, and no student is denied the services that they are given under the MVA. The MVA also allows unaccompanied students to take their education into their own hands. It gives them the ability to enroll themselves and take themselves out of schools if they choose. This allows them more independence, which can have positive and negative outcomes (Miller, 2011a).

Canfield (2016) suggest that MVA does not address all needs that homeless students may have. The MVA strives to remove barriers by making school more accessible for those who fall under their definition of homelessness. Randle (2016) suggests that ensuring that the basic needs of these youth are met is not enough to elevate their mental health to impact the educational and personal aspects of their life.

Donley et al. (2017) concluded that students that were who were transitionally homeless and did not suffer with chronic homelessness. Although they are not



chronically homeless when they are in school, transitional homelessness can lead to a more chronic state of homelessness.

These barriers have been combatted by policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the McKinney-Vento Act. The McKinney-Vento act ensures that children who are identified as homeless are able to attend school without any complicated processes in the enrolling process. The ISD's homeless liaisons have worked diligently over the past four years to change how homelessness is addressed and perceived within the district.

The local homeless liaison, Darrin Cox, has done immense work to break barriers within the ISD (AISD data, 2019). Darrin Cox has worked for AISD for several years, and for the past four years he has been the homeless liaison. During his time in the district he has made a tremendous impact on the program and how it operates. He frequently advertises the needs of the youth through local radio and television appearances. Through this he is able to educate the community on the severity of the issue of youth homelessness. When the local clothes closet burned down, he took it upon himself to start a clothes closet specifically for the youth experiencing homelessness within the district. This service is utilized by hundreds of families within the district each semester.

Within the homeless population, unaccompanied youth present a more specific set of needs. Heather Melchor works as the McKinney-Vento social worker for AISD. For the past nine years she has done case management for the high schools in AISD in order to meet altered needs of this population. Through thorough case management, Melchor has become familiar with the needs of this population. She is able to use the resources

she has to better the lives of this population, but these youth still have needs that have not been met by the McKinney-Vento program.

Within the services that are offered by the ISD homeless liaison office, some needs are not addressed by this agency. Identifying the unknown needs of the high school students is important to optimize the services that are offered to this population currently.

### **Conclusion of Literature Review**

The literature review has identified needs within the population that are not addressed by the McKinney-Vento Act. A lack of emergency resources for youth has been a challenge for case workers and school personnel who work with youth in emergency situations. In order to bridge the research gap, further research is needed to take into consideration the information that was gathered in the literature review and apply it to a meaningful study. This study explores a need for mental health services, along with a need for local emergency shelters. These needs are not currently being well addressed within actual communities.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the unmet needs of unaccompanied high school students. The question guiding this research is “What are the unknown needs of homeless unaccompanied students in high school and middle school, and how can they be addressed by the current McKinney-Vento staff?” Understanding the needs of unaccompanied students will better inform the homeless liaisons with ISDs.

#### **Research Design**

This is an exploratory study that utilizes a cross-sectional research design. The homeless population within the ISD is a vulnerable population with no active guardian or parent in their life. This demographic has challenges within the school system that are not encountered by their housed accompanied peers. While it is known they have more specific needs, it is unknown exactly what they are. Due to this knowledge, the study is categorized as exploratory in nature. Using exploratory methods gives new insight to service providers, in hopes of altering the methods used to assist these youth. This is a onetime survey of the youth participating in the McKinney-Vento Program. The program is in place to level the barriers experienced by homeless and unaccompanied youth within the independent school district. The knowledge that is known about the topic is not extensive, and therefore warrants an exploratory design. This will allow the participants to answer survey questions that will assist in learning what new approaches can be used

with this population. The survey did not ask extensive personal questions, although it did cover the basic needs of students.

### **Sample**

The research sample came from the case load of the homeless liaison working within an independent school district located in a small urban community in Texas. Therefore, sampling method is considered a convenience sampling. The students were surveyed over the course of a one-month span. Data were collected from high school students currently receiving case management services within the ISD. The sample comes from the identified homeless unaccompanied youth within the ISD. In the 2018-2019 school year, 268 students in the ISD were coded as unaccompanied. This population is only a fraction of the students who attend school in this ISD, but they present a diverse set of needs that are not always met by the services offered. Unaccompanied students that range in age from 14-18 were emailed for participation. These students have previously lived and/or currently are living away from a parent or guardian at any point throughout the school year. The youth may live on their own due to a plethora of reasons. They could have been kicked out of their house by a parent due to behavior, unwanted pregnancy, constant arguing or a one-time disagreement. These students could also be living with a friend or relative due to their parents being incarcerated or other factors.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Homeless high school students are at an increased risk of vulnerability than their housed peers. To ensure that these students remain at minimal risk of exploitation, certain precautions must be taken. Interaction with students regarding research must be seen as completely voluntary. The student may feel compelled to take the survey due to a loyalty

to their case worker. This could be an ethical dilemma that needs to be prevented by assuring the student that taking or not taking this survey would in no way affect the current case management services they are using.

### **Data Collection**

The primary researcher applied for the approval for an expedited study. Data were collected when approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. The survey was administered on paper to high school students who already receive regular case management through the McKinney-Vento Act. This assessment included questions that fall under the categories of personal life, personal wellbeing, needs assessment, and identifying demographic information. The survey was administered through a Google document survey (i.e., Google Forms). This online method was designed to ensure confidentiality and no persuasion used to ensure participation.

Information regarding survey participants remained anonymous with no identifying information. The researcher kept the survey records on a password-protected computer on an Excel spreadsheet.

### **Instruments**

For this study, a survey was used as a needs assessment. Through this assessment, four categories will be assessed for the level of need in each.

The first section contains questions that pertain to the student's personal life. Questions regarding personal life include housing information, high schools attended, and whether or not the student has a child of their own. The second section is designed to assess the wellbeing of the student. This information includes questions regarding the emotional, mental, and physical health of the student. Within this section inquiries are

made about the aspects of everyday life, such as employment and food accessibility. The third section is a needs assessment of current services and needs that are not currently met. This ranges from general information, educational needs, medical, and participation in school activities and functions. This is designed to assess what the student perceives as helpful and/or a non-helpful service. The fourth and final section includes non-identifying demographic information.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were utilized for all demographic characteristics of the sample and the distribution of the major variables.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The study explored the different needs of the unaccompanied youth of the independent school district. The study looked at different services that are currently offered to the participants, as well as services to which the participants may not have access.

#### **Participants**

Data were collected from April 14, 2020, to April 28, 2020. The survey was sent to 128 unaccompanied students, and only 12 responded. Two of the responses did not have a completed informed consent, so they were discarded. After removing two cases where the respondents answered “No” to the consent, the working sample included 10 cases.

Table 1 shows the detailed demographic information of the sample ( $N=10$ ). The descriptive statistics show that the average age of the respondents was 16.90 years old. Most (90%) of the sample were female. Within the race demographic African American/Black made up 40% of the study, while 30% were Hispanic and the last 30% were Caucasian. The racial demographics that make up this study sample can be seen as representative of this population. Within this smaller urban West Texas community, more youth of color are considered to be high risk. The largest percentage of this sample is made up of students who are classified as juniors. Although most of this sample are classified as juniors, this is not representative of the entire population. Only one of the

participants did not select English as their first language, creating a minority of only one student as an ESL (English Second Language) student.

Table 1

*Characteristics of Participants (N =10)*

Variable	Category or Range	<i>N</i> or <i>M</i>	% or <i>SD</i>
Age	15 ~ 19	16.90	1.10
Gender	1 Female	9	90.0
	2 Male	1	10.0
Race	1 African American/Black	4	40.0
	2 Caucasian	3	30.0
	3 Hispanic/Latino	3	30.0
Classification	1 Freshman (9th)	1	10.0
	2 Sophomore (10th)	2	20.0
	3 Junior (11th)	5	50.0
	4 Senior (12th)	2	20.0
English, first language	1 No	1	10.0
	2 Yes	9	90.0

**Descriptive Statistics of Major Variables**

The most variables with the highest response rate have proven to be the most relevant. The sample is small and it is not representative of the sample population or the target population as a whole.

**Personal Information**

Table 2 reflects the intricate aspects of the participants’ lives. Information in this table shows where the participant lives, who they live with, and an estimation of how long they have been living there. The responses show that the majority of the participants have lived in the same place for 7-12 months, which shows more stability within this sample. Close to half of the sample lives with a relative, while the others stay with friends or their significant other. This is more representative of this population as a whole;



however, the reasoning for staying at their respective residence is unknown. It is not uncommon for this population to have a higher pregnancy rate than their housed peers; however, that is not the case in this sample. None of the participants had children. It was found that 80% of the youth were enrolled in Medicaid and had access to health care when needed, which is a positive factor for this population. The data showed that within this sample the employment rate is low, which is to be expected due to the stability that is required to be employed during high school. These youth do not have access to emergency shelters or day shelters within their west Texas community. However, the data shows that only half of the participants would utilize this kind of service. This could be due to the lack of knowledge and negative stigma that can be associated with shelters and similar services.

Table 2

*Personal Information*

Question	Answers	<i>N</i>	%
Length of Current Residency	1 7-12 months	6	60.0
	2 Less than 3 months	1	10.0
	4 longer than a year	3	30.0
Residing with	1 Friend	3	30.0
	2 Relatives	4	40.0
	3 Significant other (girlfriend/boyfriend)	3	30.0
Having Children	1 No, I do not have any children.	10	100.0
Having Insurance	1 No	2	20.0
	2 Yes	8	80.0
Access to Health Care	1 No	2	20.0
	2 Yes	8	80.0
Employment Status	1 No	7	70.0
	2 Yes	3	30.0
Job Search	1 No, I am not looking for a job.	5	50.0
	2 Yes, but I would like assistance.	1	10.0
	3 Yes, I am currently looking for a job.	4	40.0
Day Shelter Use	1 No	6	60.0
	2 Yes	4	40.0
Emergency Shelter Use	1 No	5	50.0
	2 Yes	5	50.0

**Personal Wellbeing**

The data given in the table below look at how the student assesses their own wellbeing. Food insecurity along with mental health information is highlighted in this table. The data collected showed that none of the participants struggle with severe food insecurity according to the responses to the questions about food insecurity. Food insecurity is always a concern with students who are considered high risk. It is interesting that only one participant admitted to missing a meal. The second response addresses the involvement of extracurricular activities within school. This variable was designed to look at the need of providing funds for unaccompanied youth to be able to participate in those activities. It is unclear whether the students who responded to the survey desired to

be involved in those activities that required out of pocket expenses. These variables included stress levels at home and school, along with the number of high schools that each student attended. Stress in a school or home setting can be a personal preference for each of the participants in this study. While this sample is small, it was seen that the stress levels were not consistent with each other and can be due to a number of outside and personal factors.

Table 3

*Personal Wellbeing*

Variable	Category	<i>N</i> or <i>M</i>	% or <i>SD</i>
Missing Meals	I always have food to eat	9	90.0
	Once a week	1	10.0
Missing School Activities	Never	6	60.0
	Rarely	1	10.0
	Sometimes	3	30.0
Schools Attended	1 School	7	70.0
	2 Schools	2	20.0
	3 Schools	1	10.0
Stress Level At Home	1	2	20.0
	3	3	30.0
	6	4	40.0
	8	1	10.0
<i>Stress Level At Home (Mean &amp; SD)</i>	<i>1~8</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2.4</i>
Stress Level At School	3	1	10.0
	5	3	30.0
	6	1	10.0
	7	3	30.0
	8	1	10.0
<i>Stress Level At School (Mean &amp; SD)</i>	<i>3~10</i>	<i>6.30</i>	<i>1.95</i>

**Needs Assessment**

The data collected in the needs assessment section of the survey were designed to show the satisfaction that students have with services offered within their school. Not all

of these services were used by each participant, and they had the ability to report when a service did not apply to their experience. It was not anticipated that the response rate of this table would be low. It was seen in the literature review that it could be a possibility that youth in this population struggle with managing their grades, so tutoring is offered to supplement the gap. Within the ISD the participants in this study reported that they were most satisfied with the tutoring that is offered within their schools. It was noticed by the case manager of this specific subset that many students had issues with attendance and therefore often did not receive all of their credits. Within the data shown below, it is seen that the sample was unhappy with the credit retrieval process. This is an important factor to these students because it could hinder them from graduating when they plan to, unless they have all of their needed credits. The lower satisfaction rates come from the programs that were not utilized by as many of the participants, therefore the satisfaction was lower in those areas. The mentoring variable is important to this population because of the lack of positive adult influence that this population may receive. Over half of the sample responded that they did not have a mentor, or it did not apply to them while at school. Since the school day can be the most structure throughout their week, it is vital that they have an adult figure that can be seen as a positive influence and or a mentor.

Table 4

*Needs Assessment*

Needs	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Educational Fees	4	3	5	4.25	0.96
Alternative Education Programs	6	2	5	4.00	1.26
Running Start	2	2	5	3.50	2.12
Credit Retrieval	5	2	5	3.80	1.64
ED Assistance	3	4	5	4.67	0.58
Before School Programs	2	3	5	4.00	1.41
After School Programs	3	4	5	4.33	0.58
Summer Programs	5	4	5	4.40	0.55
Saturday Programs	4	3	4	3.50	0.58
Tutoring	8	4	5	4.88	0.35
Mentoring	4	4	5	4.75	0.50

*Note.* Answer range: 1 (Strongly disagree) ~ 5 (Strongly agree)

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the unknown needs of unaccompanied students within a small urban west Texas community. The research question inquired about these unknown needs. In an effort to assist this population more effectively, the community was assessed for the services that were currently being provided and that the unaccompanied students may have access to.

A literature review was conducted on the needs of adolescents who were identified as homeless unaccompanied within various school districts. The information collected in the literature review was applicable to the sample population and the needs that they appeared to have. Information that was found in previous studies suggested that this population requires a more comprehensive wraparound service model. Wraparound services could be defined as services that address needs in every aspect of a student's life. These services are not often offered within the school district, making it difficult for students to access different services.

Within the ISD very little was known about this specific population. The community has little or no information on what needs unaccompanied youth may have outside what is offered in school. Inspiration for this study came from the lack of knowledge about what this population struggles with most. The research set out to explore the unknown needs of this population through a needs assessment survey. This

exploratory study utilized a survey administered to unaccompanied high school youth within the independent school district.

The initial plan for the research study was to administer surveys to the target population in person during routine case management meeting. It was planned that over 40 participants would respond to the survey. This original research plan was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic halted school attendance which ultimately lead to restructuring the study.

### **Discussion of Major Findings**

While assessing the needs of this population was an exploratory act, some information was seen in the literature while conducting the literature review. This gave the researcher reason to believe that some reoccurring themes may be present.

Some of the information was able to confirm what was already known by the researcher and McKinney-Vento staff working in the ISD. When the results from the survey were analyzed, there did not seem to be as many discrepancies within the population as was seen in the literature. This could be due to the sample size and lack of data that was contributed to the study. The data collected was inconsistent with what was found in the literature review.

It was seen in the literature that this population struggled with issues of basic needs (Canfield et al., 2016), but that was not found within the study. Information that aligned with the literature review could have been identified, but the response rate was not large enough to be representative of the sample. However, most of the participants had not been at their current residence for longer than a year. This piece of data was most consistent with the information found in the literature review. Other than the length of

time the youth had been living at their current residence, there did not seem to be as many concerning responses within the survey.

Another surprising finding within this study was that the youth did not struggle with food insecurity. Food insecurity is a global problem and can be found in all school populations across the country. The findings within this survey regarding food insecurity were not indicative of the entire population, or within the general high school population. The data in this survey is not and does not represent the problem of food insecurity that surrounds this population. The majority of literature finds that food insecurity is a much larger problem than what is seen in this study.

The study was designed to assess the needs that should and could be addressed or needed assistance by the McKinney-Vento social worker. The data that was collected did not show a significant deficit or void of care that could be fixed by the social worker. Each unaccompanied youth that utilizes case management from the McKinney-Vento social worker has a unique set of needs, but those needs were not exposed within the research.

Due to unforeseen circumstances (COVID-19), this research was limited in respondents and exemplified the vulnerability and difficulty of tracking down this specific population. The circumstances exposed this population to risks and more unknown needs that could not have been foreseen or tested for within this research.

### **Implications of Findings**

The significance of the findings will allow community members to see the needs of its unaccompanied population. The findings are also an indicator of what can be improved in future studies, as well as what worked well. This research was partially



conducted during a global pandemic, therefore giving light and insights into what research can look like during a time of social distancing and crisis.

### **Implications for Practice**

Within the scope of practice, the data received within the study did not show a large number of scenarios that could be improved upon. The participants that responded did not answer the survey in a manner that suggested they were lacking in any specific area. Two of the questions asked the participants if they would utilize emergency shelters if they were instituted within their community. These questions revealed that half of participants would utilize the services of emergency shelters if they were made available. This information gives social workers and community members an idea of services that could be useful for the community. Since half of the participants reported they would utilize this service if it were accessible to them, this implies that these participants have been in a situation where this service would have been useful. Since these services were not available, it can be assumed that the participants had to adapt to some form of homeless living situation.

The results of the study did not give the intended amount of specific implications for practice. The study was designed to achieve a representative sample of 40 participants coming from various backgrounds and experiences. This was not achieved within this study.

### **Implications for Policy**

The results of this study can apply and have implications for many levels of policy. Within the ISD system, the policy implications can be found in the way students are able to access credit retrieval. Credit retrieval was responded to in the needs

assessment section of the survey with a lower than average satisfaction rate. This piece of data could be used to revise the procedures within the credit retrieval process.

Implications for the community-level implications can be inferred based off of half of the participants' responses to the survey questions about emergency shelters for youth. Since this community does not offer any services that would assist a youth who fell into immediate crisis, this would be a good adaptation for the community.

Community awareness of this problem is growing, and this research serves to support the growing need for emergency shelters for unaccompanied youth who find themselves homeless, whether it be for one night or a few months.

Implication for the social work profession can be applied in the practice setting in many ways. This research assessed the satisfaction rate of services that were already in place. Some of these services are a testament to the profession and how well the case manager serves this population. The majority of participants were enrolled in Medicaid and were able to gain access to medical help when needed. This is one of the functions of the social worker when working with this population. The issues that were identified by the researcher were the connection between the profession and lack of community resources. Social workers must presume responsibility to involve themselves within coalitions that identify gaps in service.

### **Limitations of This Study and Implications for Research**

Within this research many limitations presented themselves. Some of these limitations were unforeseen; however, some could have been prevented. The largest limitation in this study was the sample size. With only 10 participants, the study was not comprehensive and representative of the population. The small sample size can be

attributed to the researcher being forced to conduct the surveys through Google Forms via email. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted every aspect of social interaction for the months of March, April and May of 2020. This pandemic was the reason that school districts were shut down for the remainder of the 2020 spring semester. Without the monthly routine case management meetings, meeting with unaccompanied students was impossible, so the study was confined to virtual means with absolutely no face to face contact.

Other limitations in the study can be found within the survey and the data it collected. Once the data were collected, it appeared that the information and data collected were not as comprehensive as they could have been. While the researcher intended to keep the survey short and manageable for the participant population, a longer, more comprehensive study would be more beneficial. Questions were raised regarding the participants' grades and academic struggles, as well if the participant intended on going to college. The other questions that could have been useful would have been inquiring about how the participant found themselves homeless and unaccompanied. This information could have better helped practitioners understand how and why this population is made to be vulnerable.

It is recommended that in future research the survey be completed in person rather than remotely online. Other recommendations include creating a more complete tool to survey this population with. Although information on this population is limited, the data found in this study can assist in creating a revised survey tool. Despite the limitations of this study, the collected data can be used to effectively change the way this community addresses the needs of this population.

## Conclusions

Considering the limitations and implications for research, the conclusion of this research study was not the intended outcome. The information collected was not as comprehensive and representative of the sample population. Within the limited data set, few themes were identifiable across the participant responses.

It was found in the literature review that the target population has unique needs. Although this study was able to interact with this population, the results of the study did not show a large gap in services or unknown needs.

This research shows the difficulty of identifying the needs of this population. Although many there were many barriers during this study, the importance of the population's needs is still pressing. During the time of this research a global pandemic threatened vulnerable populations at a higher rate than those less with less vulnerability. Since the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools and programs assisting this population, it became difficult for social workers and service providers to make contact with these youth. It is during these times that unaccompanied youth are hard to track down and identify, which can mean increased risk. While the youth that participated in this survey appeared to have less severe and immediate needs, the sample did not account for the entire identified unaccompanied population. It can be assumed that during the time of a pandemic that many youth do not have the stability and structure that they would normally have. It is important that this population is assessed in a more comprehensive manner, and although this study intended to do so, it was unsuccessful at gathering a comprehensive data set. The needs of this population should still be explored for the

betterment of the community and wellbeing of the unaccompanied youth throughout communities like the city of this study.

Further research into the needs of this population is recommended. The implications discussed the barriers that kept the study from a more comprehensive data set. It is suggested that the methods of research be modified before attempting to duplicate this study.

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## APPENDIX

### IRB Approval Letter

#### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



Dear Amy,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

was approved by expedited review (Category 7 ) on 4/7/2020 (IRB # 20-023 ). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

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