



These Are Our Children

Responding to Youth Homelessness in Santa Cruz County

Summary

The vision statement in *Vision Santa Cruz*, the draft 2018 Santa Cruz County strategic plan, imagines "a healthy, safe and affordable community that is economically and environmentally vibrant for all."^[1] And yet, the *2017 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey* found that there were 588 homeless unaccompanied minor children and young adults in our community.^[2] If Santa Cruz County hopes to become the community imagined in its vision statement, a comprehensive network of services will need to be available to the unaccompanied minor children and young adults who are living unsheltered and uncared for in our community.

The Grand Jury investigated the assistance and support Santa Cruz County provides to our homeless young adults and unaccompanied children, compared to the services available to foster youth aged 18 to 21 who remain in the foster care system as they transition into independence. Based on our investigation, the Grand Jury recommends that the County implement a system of proactive outreach to homeless unaccompanied children and youth as an urgent priority of its program intended to end youth homelessness by 2020.

Background

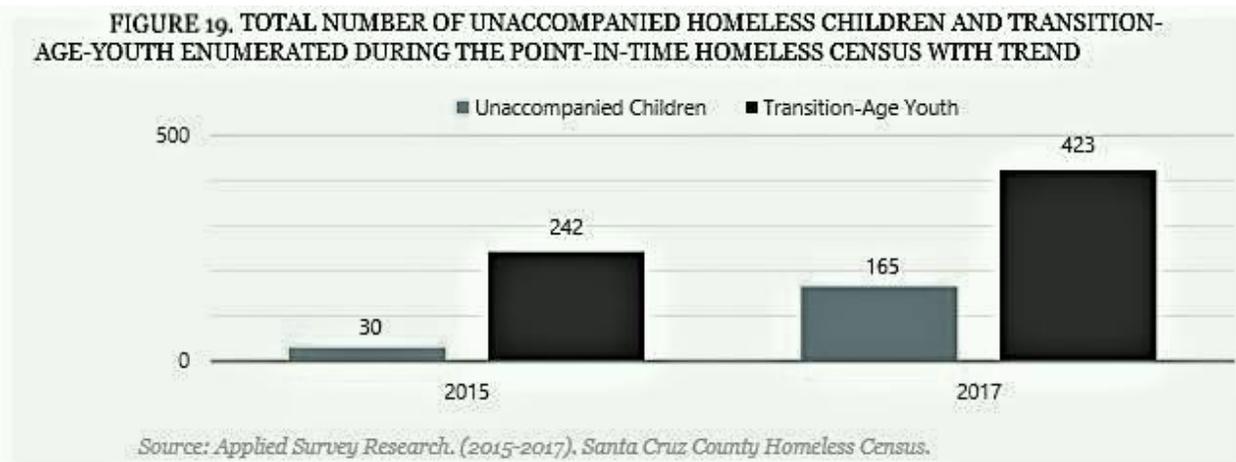
While most young people have access to financial and emotional support systems throughout their early adult years, others lack assistance in developing independent living skills to ease the transition to adulthood.^[3] Over the past twenty years there have been legislative efforts to remedy that missing support for former foster youth. More recently this concern has broadened to include all of the young persons whose lack of independent living skills has resulted in their becoming homeless.

The 1999 *Foster Care Independence Act* increased grants to individual states for independent living programs providing education, training, employment services, and financial support for youths between ages 16 and 18 who were [emancipated](#) from foster care.^[4] However, the Little Hoover Commission, an independent state oversight agency, reported in 2003 that California unemployment rates for emancipated youth were still estimated at fifty percent and that an estimated 2,000 youths had been emancipated from or aged out of the foster care system only to become homeless.^[5] In May of 2017 the National Foster Youth Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to transforming the child welfare system, reported that after reaching the age of 18, twenty percent of the children who were in foster care will become instantly homeless.^[6]

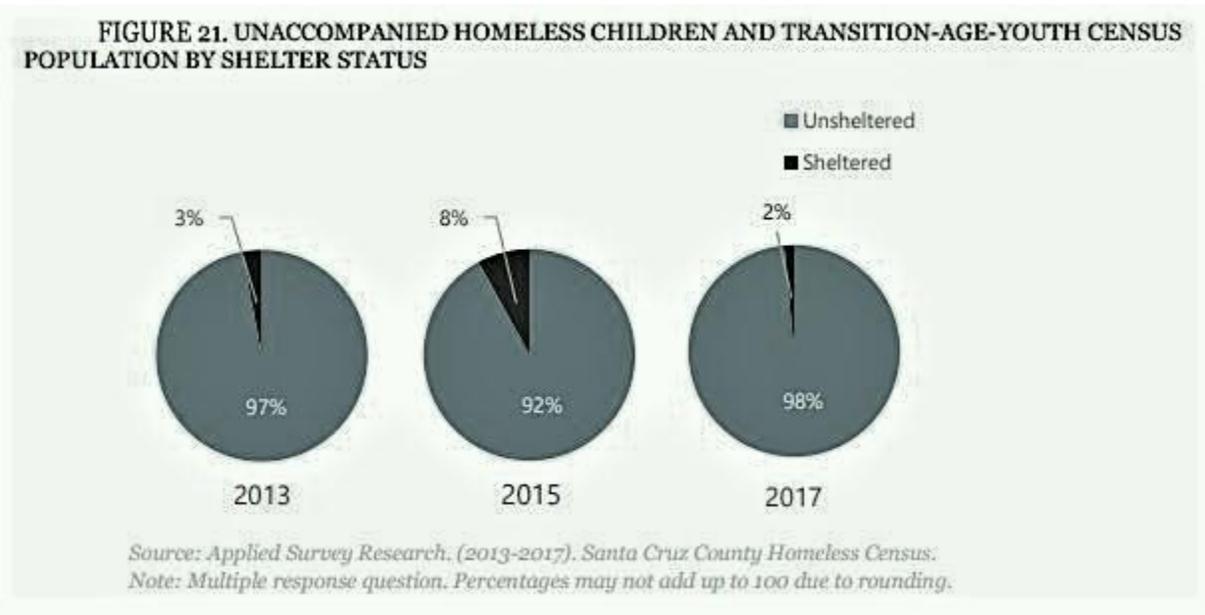
Some former foster youth still suffer severe trauma from their experiences before and while in foster care, which can inhibit their efforts to transition successfully into a productive adulthood. In 2017, from July 1 through December 31, the Creative Community Committee of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH) displayed an exhibition created in conjunction with the Museum of Foster Youth. Entitled *Lost Childhoods: Voices of Santa Cruz County Foster Youth and the Foster Youth Museum*,^[7] the exhibit was a poignant outpouring of the experiences of children while in the foster care system in Santa Cruz County and elsewhere and of the trauma and desperation that awaited them when they left the system.

In foster homes, a lot of stuff is kind of done for you. So when you turn 18, you're not too sure what to do for yourself because you've been crippled by the system. You're just pushed out there. – a former foster youth quoted in "Lost Childhoods".

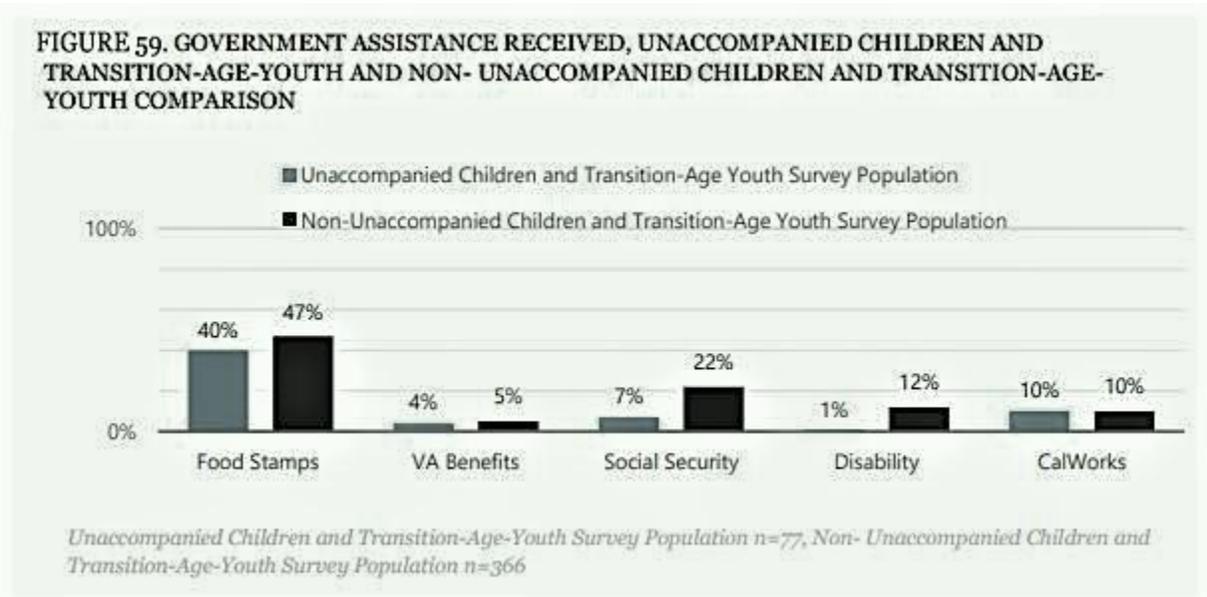
The disturbing increase in the numbers of [homeless unaccompanied minor children](#) (under the age of 18) and young adults (18 to 24) in Santa Cruz County since the previous homeless census in 2015 (Figure 19 below)^[8] underscores the importance of developing an effective response to the County’s heart-wrenching problem of youth homelessness.



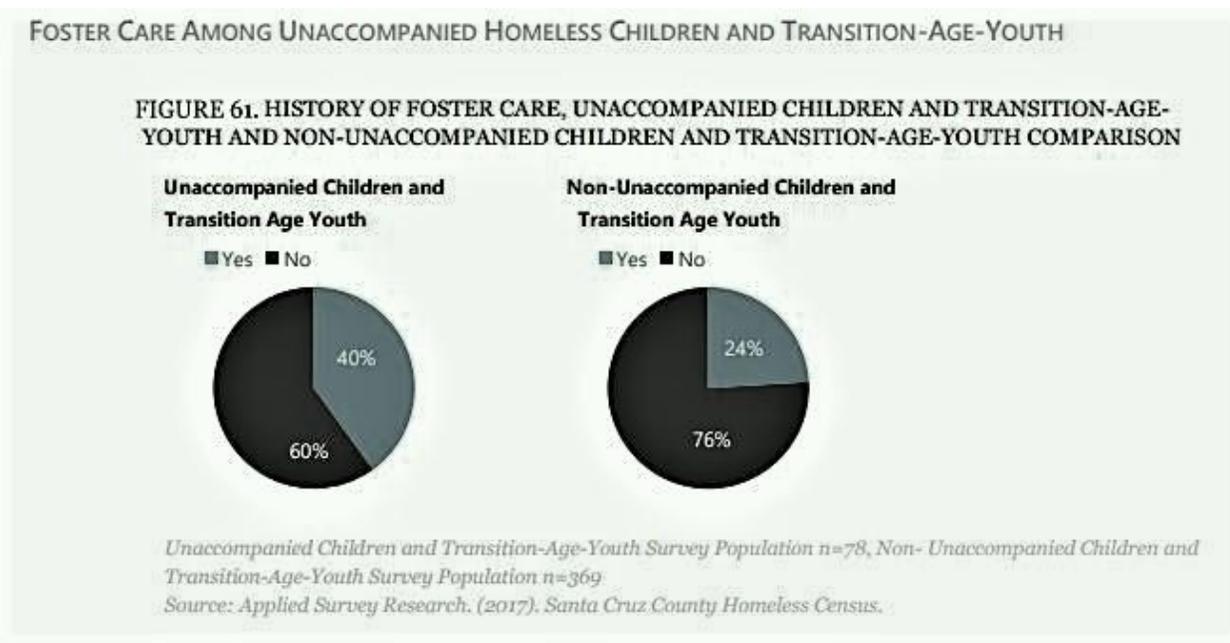
As Figure 21^[9] from the 2017 County Homeless Census and Survey illustrates, ninety-eight percent of the 588 unaccompanied minor children and young adults identified in the homeless census are living without shelter. This means that they lack a fixed, regular, adequate nighttime residence.



Moreover, as the following chart (Figure 59)^[10] from the same Survey shows, fewer than 40 percent of this group receives any kind of government assistance.



The Grand Jury found it significant that forty percent of the homeless unaccompanied children and young adults counted in the County’s Census had a history of foster care (Figure 61).^[11] For whatever reason, the foster care system did not adequately prepare them for life after they exited the system.



Finally, and most importantly, 87 percent of the unaccompanied minor children and 77 percent of the young adults identified in the County's Survey were living in our community when they became homeless. The Santa Cruz County Youth Homeless Demonstration Program Coordinated Community Plan found that it is a false narrative that homeless minor children and young adults come to our community from elsewhere in order to benefit from services.^[12] These are our children.

Scope

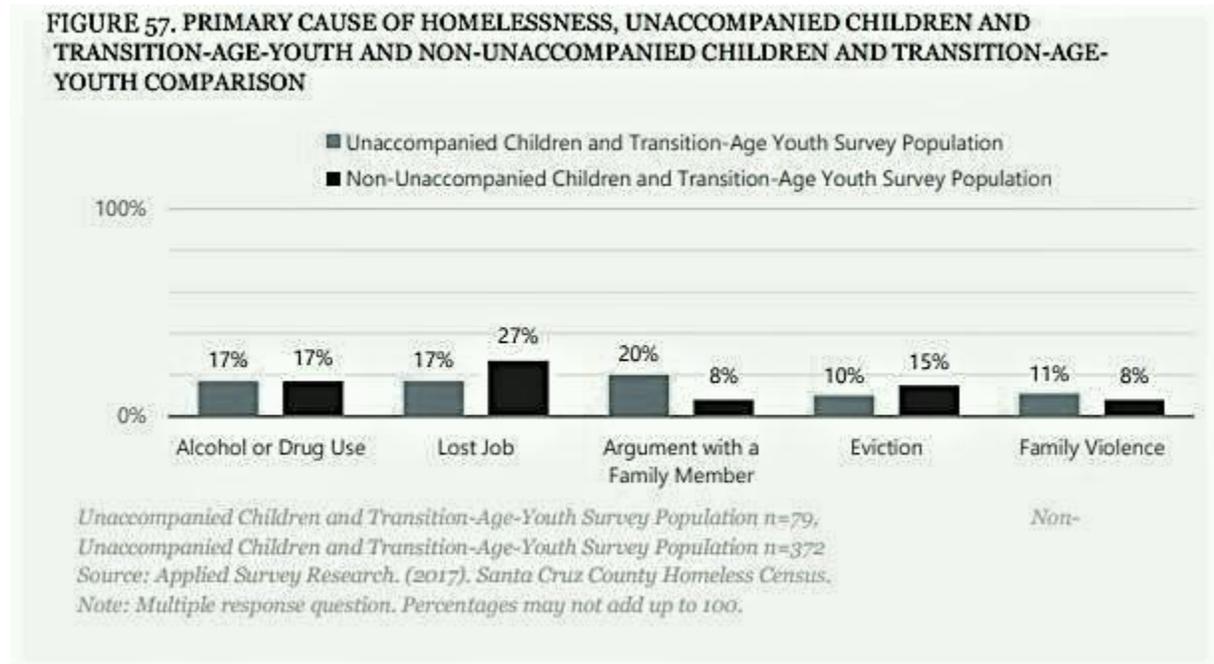
In response to the *2017 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey* data, as well as to the MAH *Lost Childhoods* exhibit, the Grand Jury investigated the efforts being made in Santa Cruz County to address some of the issues raised by the survey and the exhibit. We also reviewed the draft version of *Vision Santa Cruz County*, the County's strategic plan.

The Grand Jury referenced the various federal and State legislation enacted pursuant to the 1999 *Foster Care Independence Act* in particular California Assembly Bill 12: *Fostering Connections to Success*.^[13] We also examined *Opening Doors: The Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness*, the federal strategic plan for ending youth homelessness by 2020.^[14] We reviewed the programs, and the budgets allocated to them, developed by Santa Cruz County in response to the increased funding provided by AB 12 and *Opening Doors*. We reviewed the December 2017 proposal submitted by the County to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the *Invitation for Innovative Proposals* that was issued in February 2018 after HUD approved and funded the County's proposal in January 2018. The Grand Jury also conducted internet research.

We interviewed administrators and staff in the Santa Cruz County Administrative Office, the Human Services Department, and in the County Office of Education (COE); personnel at Encompass Community Services (Encompass), the non-profit agency contracted to provide services to eligible emancipated foster youth; and staff at Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Santa Cruz County. We visited Crossroads (a group home recently reconfigured into a short-term therapeutic facility) and the Independent Living Resource Center (ILRC), a youth drop-in center run by Encompass. In the course of the latter visit the Grand Jury also interviewed youth who utilize the services and facilities of the drop-in center. Some of those interviewed were former foster children who were eligible to receive benefits under AB 12, and others who did not qualify to receive such benefits. Some of the young adults we interviewed had been, or currently are, homeless.

Investigation

We investigated youth homelessness and, in particular, homelessness of former foster youth. The precipitating causes of their becoming homeless are many and diverse, as illustrated in Figure 57 below.^[15]



Of the 2,249 persons identified as homeless in the County's survey, 588 are unaccompanied minor children and transition-age adults. Our goal was to discover how Santa Cruz County is responding to the crisis of child and young adult homelessness confronting our community.

Local Efforts in Response to Assembly Bill 12

AB 12, the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, was signed into law in 2010 and became effective January 1, 2012. The bill allows youth to remain in foster care and receive benefits until they are 21, as long as they meet one of the following criteria:^[16]

1. They are completing a high school diploma or equivalent, or are enrolled in a post-secondary educational institution or vocational school.
2. They are participating in a program or activity that promotes or removes barriers to employment.
3. They are employed 80 hours a month or are incapable of such employment due to a medical condition.

The goal of the legislation was to enable foster youth who would otherwise age out of the system at 18 to maintain a safety net of support, permitting them to experience

independence in a supervised living environment. It also promotes their taking advantage of educational and employment opportunities to better prepare for adulthood and self-sufficiency.

Local cooperation and coordination among city, County, and non-profit agencies in response to AB 12 is an ongoing effort. The COE works with AB 12-eligible youths to increase their educational opportunities by helping them develop educational plans, in conjunction with their birth or foster families, Family and Children's Services (FCS) social workers, CASA advocates, school and college liaisons, and, as needed, therapists.^[17] Santa Cruz County also contracted with Encompass to provide additional mandated services through the Transition Age Youth program (TAY), which offers four programs for various age groups:^[18]

- **Independent Living Program** helps youth aged 15–21 develop independent living skills and achieve educational and vocational goals to successfully transition to self-sufficiency.
- **Independent Living Resource Center** helps current and former foster youth ages 15–24 build the skills, self-esteem, and support systems necessary to make a successful transition to independent living in the community.
- **Transitional Voucher Program** is a joint program of the Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center's Independent Living Program and the Santa Cruz Housing Authority that provides [Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers](#) to a small number of participants, ages 18–20, in the Independent Living Program.
- **Transitional Housing Plus Program** is a supportive housing program serving former foster youth between the ages of 18–24 that helps secure independent housing in the community.

Continuing Problems for Foster Youth That Contribute to Homelessness

Despite positive efforts being made locally, former foster youth still experience homelessness at significant levels.

Social Worker Turnover

FCS social workers are the linchpins in the network of services for children in foster care. Several of the persons interviewed mentioned that frequent turnover of social workers who manage individual FCS cases disrupts the care of children in the foster care system. Heavy workloads and the attendant stress were identified as factors contributing to turnover among FCS social workers, making it difficult for them to be as available as they could be to the children and to other service providers.^[19]

A change in social workers is particularly detrimental to children on the verge of leaving foster care. When such a change results in a failure to provide critical information, such as the opportunities offered by AB 12 to youths aging out of the system, the effects are especially damaging.

Youths must opt in to the AB 12 program six months before they age out of the system. At the six month hearing prior to youths turning age 18, the social worker must have a

plan to ensure that the youths meet at least one of the participation criteria: If youths do not opt in at age 17.5, they are ineligible to receive AB 12 benefits when they exit foster care, increasing the risk that they may become homeless.^[20] It is imperative, therefore, that all foster children nearing that age be fully informed of their options and counseled about the best way to proceed. FCS social workers are the persons responsible for providing information and counseling about this life-changing choice to foster children and for developing a plan to ensure that they meet at least one of the criteria for AB 12 eligibility. The turnover rate among FCS social workers is, therefore, of grave concern in considering how to prevent homelessness among former foster youth.

Relocation

Children in foster care are sometimes removed from foster care placements for their own welfare. Regardless of the reason, removal can be disruptive, especially if it results in a change of school or school district. Social workers, as well as several of the former foster youths we interviewed, mentioned the problems foster children experience as the result of relocation. These difficulties include the loss of social connections and familiar surroundings, loss of school records, and loss of partial course credit if the relocation occurs in the middle of the school year. Such losses contribute to the child's losing interest in school altogether. Some of the young adults we interviewed were able to obtain high school diplomas despite relocation, but others failed to do so or ended up in continuation schools where, as one former foster youth stated:

I didn't get the knowledge I needed, just what the government wanted me to have. I didn't get the right tools. ... I never had a stable nothing.
- a former foster youth^[21]

Children are also removed from foster or group homes by law enforcement because of alleged misbehavior. In some cases, they are moved outside the County.

I had two different social workers. For the most part, they were there. But I was moved around a lot, and sometimes they didn't even know where I was. I was moved out of county without notice. My foster mom would claim that I was disruptive, and the cops would remove me and didn't know where to take me. ... They'd move me out of county, and I would run away because I wanted to come home. - a former foster youth^[22]

In February 2018 a member of the California Assembly introduced a new bill relating to foster care facilities, Assembly Bill 2605 (AB 2605).^[23] Passage of AB 2605 would require each residential facility's emergency intervention plan to provide specific guidance on when and when not to call law enforcement and to specify behavior-management interventions.

Group Home

In 2015 AB 403, often referred to as *Continuum of Care Reform*, called for the end of group homes and established short-term residential treatment centers (STRTC).^[24] The goal was to end the “institutionalization” of youth. The transition of the County’s group home into a STRTC has provided much needed mental health care for foster children in need of such services; however, the conversion means that there is no longer a group home in Santa Cruz County, resulting in some foster children, especially adolescents, being housed out of county.

Even prior to the elimination of the group home, youth were being moved out of county, sometimes out of state, because there were not sufficient group home beds in Santa Cruz County.^[25] These relocations often resulted in reduced contact between children and their families as well as between the children and their social workers.

My social worker was hard to get ahold of. She was very, very busy. When I was in a group home in San Jose, I never saw my social worker.
- a former foster youth^[26]

When the [Dependency Court](#) removed children from their homes, the group home served as a temporary emergency placement until more permanent foster homes could be found. The lack of a non-therapeutic group residence remains an unresolved issue adversely affecting the lives of children in foster care when that lack causes them to be sent out of county. Also, the group home sometimes functioned as an emergency shelter for homeless youths.^[27] The lack of a group home or shelter dedicated to housing homeless youth is a serious problem requiring an immediate response.

Housing

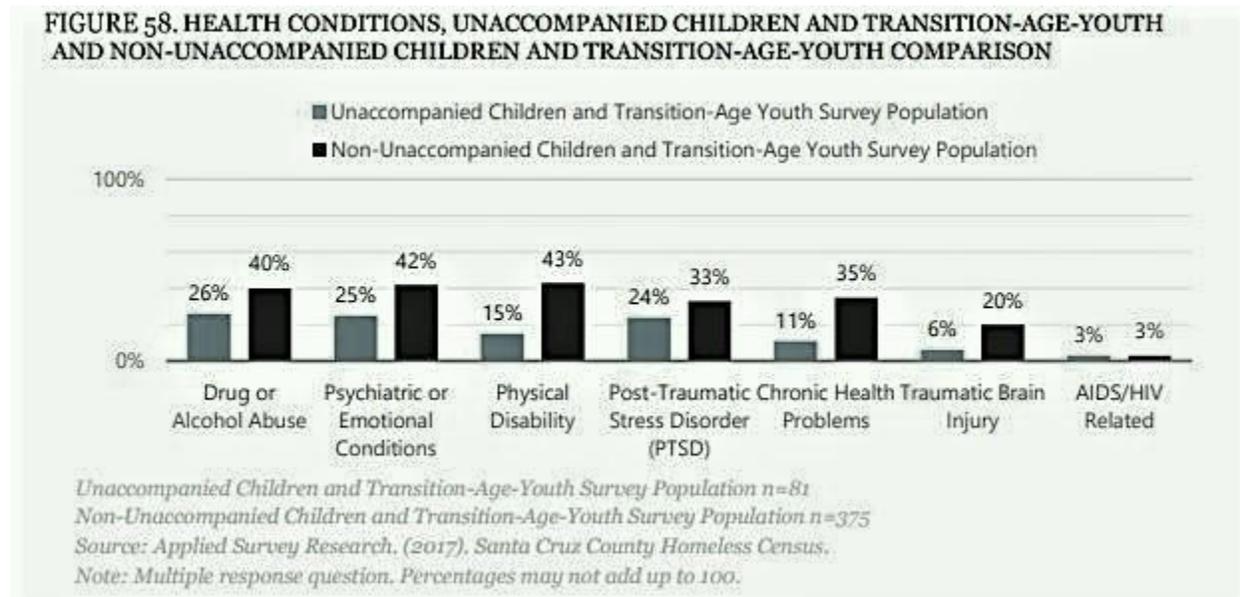
Currently, there are only eight Section 8 vouchers allocated to the TAY Transitional Voucher Program. This fact, plus the overall lack of affordable housing in Santa Cruz County, can exacerbate youth homelessness. Some of the 18–24 year olds receiving AB 12 benefits have moved out of the County, sometimes to other states, in order to find housing. The FCS social workers responsible for overseeing their welfare, however, are required to see them at least once a month. This means that they have to travel to where their clients live, no matter where. The hours devoted to such travel significantly reduce the time they have available to respond to other clients.^[28]

Additional Problems Facing Homeless Youth in Santa Cruz County

Encompass operates a small drop-in center, the Independent Living Resource Center (ILRC), accessible three days each week with limited hours, that welcomes young adults up to age 25. This is the only such center in the County, and it is located in the city of Santa Cruz. The center’s clients typically are struggling with issues that impede their progress to a stable life, such as homelessness, lack of education, and unemployment or underemployment. The Center provides support for daily living, such

as hot showers and kitchen and laundry facilities. It also connects youths to health care, via a nurse on staff and a benefits analyst who can enroll them in State and County services for which they are eligible, including MediCal.

The following chart (Figure 58)^[29] from the 2017 Survey gives an idea of the range of health care that some of the Center’s clients might need:



At the present time, County services are almost nonexistent for homeless young adults who are not AB 12-eligible. There are no shelters in the County, emergency or longer term, dedicated to housing 18 to 24-year old homeless youths.^[30] The shelters intended for adults can be dangerous for young adults, which may account for the County’s homeless survey finding that so many of these youths are living unsheltered.^[31] As for the 165 unaccompanied homeless minor children identified in the 2017 Survey, unless these children come into contact with law enforcement or other [mandated reporters](#), they remain outside any system of care.^[32]

Local Impacts of Federal Attention to the Issue of Youth Homelessness

In June 2010 the Obama administration presented to Congress *Opening Doors*, a comprehensive strategic plan for preventing and ending homelessness.^[33] In 2012 the plan was amended specifically to address youth homelessness. The *Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness* was developed by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness to identify the strategies that should be implemented to improve the educational outcomes for children and youth.^[34] It identified the steps that need to be taken to advance the goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020.

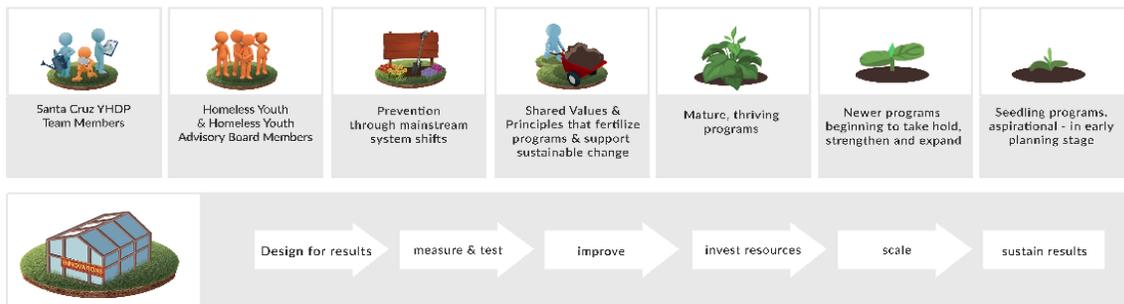
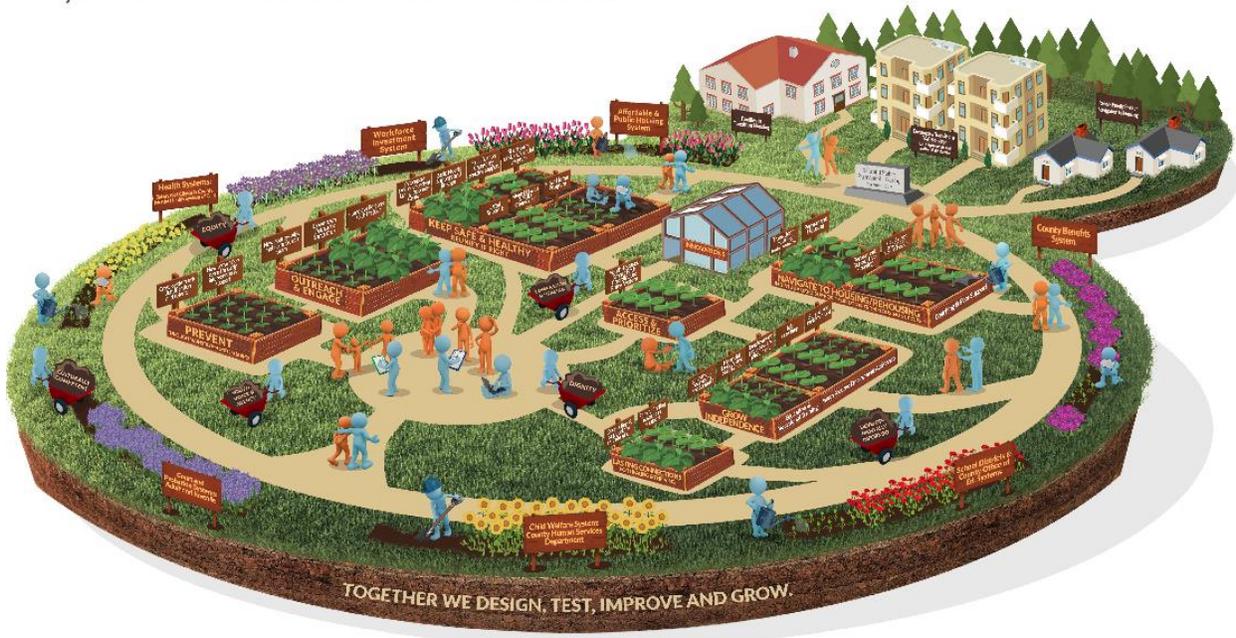
In 2017 the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) chose Santa Cruz County as one of 10 communities nationwide to receive a demonstration grant to

prevent and end youth homelessness. The funding allowed the County to participate in the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program, a multiyear effort to help communities address this issue.

During 2017 the County, Encompass, and other community organization partners, collaborating as members of the Homeless Action Partnership,^[35] completed the process of designing and testing new service models. This effort was guided by a Youth Advisory Board, comprising youth and young adults who were homeless or who had recently experienced homelessness.^[36] The collaborative effort focused on a number of specific, measurable areas, including prevention, outreach, safety and health, housing, independence, and healing. The result was the establishment of a continuum of care for homeless youth or youth who may become homeless. This structure is depicted in the Youth System Map shown below.^[37]

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

Systems to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness



In January 2018 HUD awarded the County a \$2.2 million renewable grant, thus enabling the County to implement the proposed service models illustrated in the Youth System Map. As a result, the County and the Homeless Action Partnership, the coalition of community organizations and partners, issued an “Invitation for Innovative Proposals”.^[38] The Youth Advisory Board and the Homeless Action Partnership serve as the collaboration in Santa Cruz County that funds successful proposals.

Proactive outreach to the homeless children and youth in our community is not part of the services offered by any County agency or agency contracted by the County at this time.^[39] Because there is currently no outreach to the 588 homeless unaccompanied minor children and young adults in Santa Cruz County, until the projects to be funded by the HUD Continuum of Care grant are up and running, these children and young adults will remain unknown and unsheltered.

Conclusion

In September 2017 an article in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* quoted a staff member in the County’s Human Services Department:

We should be housing every youth we see. We should not be walking and stepping over the youth that are lying down or standing around who are homeless. We should be interacting with them, we should be engaging them and thinking about, ‘How can I personally, in Santa Cruz County, contribute to this cause?’ ‘How can I end youth homelessness on an individual basis?’^[40]

More than one in four of Santa Cruz County’s homeless is a young adult or an unaccompanied minor child. They are, for the most part, invisible members of our community. Recognizing the urgency to solve youth homelessness, there have been many well-intentioned efforts at the local, State and federal levels, some of which have been very effective but limited in their scope. Implementation of the HUD Continuum of Care model is a significant step toward resolving the problems identified in this investigation, as well as the other difficulties facing the children and young adults who are homeless in Santa Cruz County; however, while the grants and other funding have addressed some systemic deficiencies, additional resources will be required to achieve the County’s goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020.

Findings

- F1.** The restrictive eligibility requirements of AB 12 exclude some former foster youth from obtaining services available through that legislation and can result in their becoming homeless.
- F2.** Turnover among Family and Children's Services social workers disrupts the care of children in foster care, to their detriment.
- F3.** The location and limited hours of the lone drop-in center in Santa Cruz County restricts the access of homeless young adults to necessary services and available resources.
- F4.** Santa Cruz County lacks an effective means of identifying and locating homeless youth and unaccompanied minor children in order to connect them to available resources.
- F5.** The County has no emergency or long term shelter available to house homeless youth and unaccompanied minor children, placing them at risk in adult shelters and on the streets.

Recommendations

- R1.** The Human Services Department should develop and distribute written procedures for ensuring that eligible foster youth are aware of the requirements and deadlines to opt in to AB 12. (F1)
- R2.** The Human Services Department should review the rate of turnover among social workers in the Family and Children Services unit and conduct a study to identify the underlying causes of FCS social worker departures, including exit interviews. (F2)
- R3.** The County Administrative Officer should expand the Continuum of Care Request for Proposals to include a mid-County drop-in center in addition to the ones proposed for North and South County. (F3)
- R4.** The Human Services Department should initiate a pilot outreach program to homeless unaccompanied minor children and young adults, to be implemented no later than the end of 2018. (F4, F5)
- R5.** The Human Services Department should identify a location for, and the Board of Supervisors should provide funds for, an emergency shelter for homeless young adults, with a separate section for homeless unaccompanied minor children. (F5)

Required Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors	F1 – F5	R1 – R5	90 Days September 17, 2018

Requested Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Santa Cruz County Administrative Officer	F3	R3	90 Days September 17, 2018
Director, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department	F1, F2, F4, F5	R1, R2, R4, R5	90 Days September 17, 2018

Definitions

- **Dependency Court:** the part of the Superior Court that hears cases about children (minors) who are abused or neglected.^[41]
- **Emancipation:** a legal procedure that frees children from the custody and control of their parents or guardians before they reach the age of majority.^{[42] [43]}
- **Homeless unaccompanied minor children:** children as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.^[44]
- **Mandated reporters:** persons whose professions require them, by law, to report all known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect.^[45]
- **Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers:** the housing choice voucher program provides assistance to very low-income families to afford decent, safe and sanitary housing. Housing can include single-family homes, townhouses and apartments and is not limited to units located in subsidized housing projects.^[46]

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