

Watkins, Ariana N. M.A. For The Kids Who Don't Return Home: A Peek Into Shelters And Organizations Who Serve Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. (2022)
Directed by Cindy Brooks Dollar. 74 pp.

While runaway and homeless youth have constituted a national problem for decades, this significant human trouble has been understudied among sociologists. North Carolina provides a particularly fruitful site for study with over 9,000 youth leaving home annually and over ten organizations operating to serve this population. As a result, the purpose of this thesis was to fill some of these gaps that exist in the literature regarding the experiences of runaway and homeless youth on a state level within North Carolina. Ten interviews were conducted with people who have worked with NC youth in any capacity related to youth homelessness and advocacy. In many cases the youth who need services and support are not able to receive them due systemic barriers. Many of the youth who utilize the services at the shelters and organizations interviewed will be labeled as “delinquents” or “bad kids” due to them exhibiting trauma response behaviors due to their circumstances. The result of this study shows that are dedicated individuals, shelters, and organizations in North Carolina who want to help youth experiencing crises, but more resources and services are needed. Youth in crises need compassion and understanding at the system-level.

FOR THE KIDS WHO DON'T RETURN HOME: A PEEK INTO SHELTERS AND
ORGANIZATIONS WHO SERVE UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Greensboro

2022

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Researchers have estimated that over 2 million adolescents leave home each year and are considered runaways (Hammer et al., 2002). There have been trends in the number of adolescents who go missing each year. Currently, the United States is experiencing a decrease in the number of missing juveniles (NCIC, 2020); the reasoning for this decline is not clear. Due to parents and guardians having the final say in filing a missing person report or not (regardless of any legislation), many instances of juveniles going missing or leaving home go unreported each year (Modica, 2010). Some states have laws that require parents to file missing child reports, but this does not always happen. Annual missing person reports released by the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) are the best estimates to investigate missing person rates. Most missing children or runaway youth return home each year, but a subclass of missing youth remain missing, and their stories are often erased from the missing children's discussions (Modica, 2010). Researchers have understudied the experiences and stories of youth who do not return home and these youth are typically referred to as unaccompanied homeless youth. Youth from minoritized backgrounds (e.g., LGBT+ and Black) are more likely to remain missing.

The present study involves interviewing staff members of shelters that house and support North Carolina's runaway and homeless youth (RHY). Many of these shelters only allow youth to stay in them for up to 21 days, and these youth come from different backgrounds and have had different life experiences (NC Department of Public Safety website provides contact information for runaway/homeless shelters). The experiences of youth who leave home are not homogenous, and researchers sometimes fail to capture the full experiences of youth who do not return home and are unaccompanied (Pergamit & Ernst, 2010). On a national level, researchers have linked child abuse and neglect (Benoit-Bryan, 2011) and family conflict and dysfunction (Brooks

Holliday et al., 2017) to runaway episodes. Several studies have included North Carolina runaway and homeless youth in their samples, but they did not provide information explicitly discussing the experiences of North Carolina RHY, leaving a lot of unanswered questions. For example, the Annual Missing Person report released by North Carolina Center for Missing Persons (NCCMP) does not provide a racial breakdown of the number of youths labeled as runaways. The 2018 report states that most missing youth are voluntary runaways who return home within three days (NCCMP, 2019), and they do not provide further details for alternative cases.

The federal government defines "runaway" as "an individual who is less than 18 years of age and who absents himself or herself from home or a place of legal residence without the permission of a parent or legal guardian" [§11279]. The federal government's definition of this term does not include risk factors or discuss why youth run away from home (Sedlak et al., 2002). The label of runaway is associated with the parent or guardian being unaware of the child's whereabouts or the child failing to return home at a designated time, but this definition leaves out possible risk factors. Youth who have been labeled as runaways have discussed how they do not like the label because "runaway" fails to capture their experiences (Pergamit & Ernst, 2010). Considering the significant correlation between child abuse and neglect by a parent or guardian and runaway episodes (Benoit-Bryan, 2011), more information is needed to understand why juveniles do not return home. The reporting and labeling of juveniles as a "voluntary" runaway does not address any underlying issues that might be impacting the juvenile's decision not to return home or decrease the likelihood of a future runaway episode. Several repeat runaway episodes are reported to NCCMP in any given year, but the North Carolina state government report does not provide any additional details about these repeat runaway episodes.

Research has established that the "runaway" and homeless youth problem in the United States and the connection to child abuse and neglect (child maltreatment) cases in the United States. There is evidence of this problem occurring in North Carolina via the number of grants awarded to RHY organizations in the state provided by the Family & Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) and the number of missing child cases designated as runaway episodes by the NCDPS. Research involving national samples can help predict the type of issues impacting juveniles in North Carolina. Over 5,000 children were victims of child maltreatment in North Carolina (Child Maltreatment, 2019). Researchers cannot study the experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth without studying the experiences of abused and neglected children. In the present study, however, I turn my attention to those who serve this vulnerable population. Specifically, I interview runaway shelter/organization's directors and counselors along with youth advocacy organization employees to gain insight into the experiences of homeless youth who utilize their services or shelters in North Carolina.

Abbreviations

Throughout this paper several abbreviations are used to represent government agencies, reports, organizations, shelters, and different groups. These abbreviations and what they stand for are listed below in alphabetical order by acronym lettering.

- BCP – Basic Center Program
- CPS – Child Protective Services
- FR – Federal Register
- FYSB – Family and Youth Services Bureau
- G.S. – General Statute
- LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

- Nam US - National Missing Person and Unidentified Person System
- NCANDS – National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System
- NCCMP – North Carolina Center of Missing Persons
- NCDHHS - North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
- NCDPS – North Carolina Department of Public Safety
- NCIC – National Crime Information Center
- NCMEC – National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
- NIS – National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect
- P.L. – Public Law
- RHYA – Runaway and Homeless Youth Act
- RHY – Runaway and Homeless Youth
- TLP – Transitional Living Program
- U.S.C. – United States Code

Key Terms

Researchers disagree on a singular definition for runaway, homeless, or throwaway youth. Most definitions are centered around common themes. As mentioned previously, the RHYA definition for runaway youth is "an individual who is less than 18 years of age and who absents himself or herself from home or a place of legal residence without the permission of a parent or legal guardian" [§11279]. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act establishes an additional definition of homeless youth, and it was initially signed into law in 1987. The McKinney-Vento Act extends the criteria for homelessness. The act defines what type of sleeping accommodations are not stable or made for residence or sleeping quarters. The McKinney-Vento Act includes youth accompanied or unaccompanied by a parent or guardian

(Toro et al., 2007). The McKinney-Vento Act defines an unaccompanied minor as "a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian" [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)].

Many of the sections within this paper will use the definitions provided above to discuss runaway and unaccompanied homeless youth and the shelters that serve them.

Additionally, Sedlak et al. (2002) defined a runaway and throwaway incident/episode as:

A runaway incident occurs when a child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight; or a child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to return when supposed to and stays away overnight; or a child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to return and stays away two nights. (Sedlak et al., 2002).

A throwaway incident occurs when a child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight; or a child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight. (Sedlak et al., 2002).

CHAPTER II: MISSING AND HOMELESS YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES

Child Maltreatment

Across the United States, there is an underreporting of crimes, especially crimes involving victimization. Abuse and neglect are forms of victimization that go underreported in the United States each year (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001). Children are less likely to discuss and name acts of abuse, and many will not discuss these experiences until adulthood (National Research Council et al., 2014). The exact number of abused and neglected children is unknown. However, data provided by government agencies can be used to discuss child abuse and neglect in the United States. The federal government releases a Child Maltreatment report each year, and child maltreatment is broken down into the following categories: "medical neglect, neglect, physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and unknown" (Child Maltreatment, 2019, p. 46-47). Some researchers have broken neglect down further into categories like emotional, physical, and supervisory (Coohey, 2003; Turner et al., 2019).

Nationally in 2019, over 7.5 million cases of child maltreatment were reported to state child welfare offices. Most of these children remained in their current living situation at the end of their state's child welfare investigation (Stoltzfus, 2021). Additionally, less than 2 million children received prevention services (Child Maltreatment Report, 2020). Younger children make up the majority of child maltreatment cases since they are the most vulnerable; in many cases, they cannot verbalize what has or what is currently happening to them (Child Maltreatment Report, 2020). The government has identified 12 caregiver risk factors linked to child abuse and neglect (Child Maltreatment, 2019). Alcohol abuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, and financial problems are risk factors that are significantly correlated with child maltreatment. These risk factors will not always lead to child maltreatment or removal of a child

from their home, but in some cases of child maltreatment, youth are placed in the custody of child protection services. Certain racial/ethnic and gender groups are more likely to experience maltreatment compared to privileged demographic groups (i.e., white and male) in the United States.

Abuse in Foster Care

Abused children who are removed from child protective services could experience future abuse or neglect in their shelter or home placement. Several studies discuss the abusive nature of some foster homes and parents, and abuse does tend to occur in these places at higher rates than normative homecare in the United States (Biehal, 2014). However, this does not mean that foster homes are inherently abusive. Most children will not receive an out-of-home placement after a CPS investigation, but Black children are more likely to receive an out-of-home placement (Knott & Donovan, 2010).

Racial Differences

The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) collected between 2005-2006 found racial differences between youth who experienced child maltreatment. NIS-1, NIS-2, or NIS-3 did not find racial/ethnic differences. The data in NIS-1 was collected between 1979/1980, so the findings from NIS-4 could reflect a difference in generations and cultural values. NIS-4 found that Black children were more likely to experience instances of maltreatment than children from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. These findings were across the board in terms of abuse and neglect. (Sedlak, McPherson, et al., 2010; Sedlak, Mettenburg, et al., 2010).

Poly-Victimization

Neglect and abuse in childhood typically occur together (Turner et al., 2019), but neglect is more likely to occur individually compared to abuse (Child Maltreatment, 2019). The term poly-victimization is used to discuss the phenomenon of experiencing several types of traumas like abuse and neglect or other accidents. Poly- victimization includes instances of trauma outside of the typical parental neglect or abuse framework. Traumas included are car accidents, witnessing police brutality, community violence, and are not limited to these examples. Experiencing a singular trauma can negatively impact the life trajectory of a child, so multiple or chronic traumatic episodes can have a devastating impact regardless of how resilient the child has been in the past (Turner et al., 2019).

RHY Legislation

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (*RHYA*; 34 U.S.C. § 11101, 2017) was enacted in 1974 under 34 U.S.C. Title III. The original name for the act was Runaway Youth Act, and homeless youth was added in 1976. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides additional funding and protection for homeless youth. The RHYA was reauthorized in 2018 for the ninth time under the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2018. The RHYA is due for reauthorization by Congress. The RHYA authorizes funding for the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) Runaway & Homeless Youth (RHY) Grant Awards (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). The federal government provided emergency pandemic funding to RHY shelters and organizations via the 2020 CARES Act.

FYSB Runaway and Homeless Youth Funding

The FYSB provides funding for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (RHYP). RHY organizations can receive funding for these FYSB RHY grant initiatives: Basic Center

Program (BCP) grant, Street Outreach Program grant, Maternity Group Homes for Pregnant and Parenting Youth Program grant, and the Transitional Living Program (TLP) grant. (National Clearinghouse on Homeless Youth and Families, 2020). Transitional living facilities have been found to be helpful in combating youth homelessness, over 70% of the youth who utilized these services were able to find stable housing (Covenant House International et al., 2021). Additional information about these programs can be found on the FYSB runaway and homeless youth program fact sheet webpage.

North Carolina Award Grantees. In 2020, seven youth-centered organizations in North Carolina received funding from the Family & Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) to help with the issue of RHY in the state. These seven organizations were recipients of the Basic Center Program grant and/or the Transitional Living Program grants. (Department of Health and Human Services et al., 2018; Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2020). Current FYSB RHY Grantees can be found on the FYSB RHY website (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/grants/north-carolina-rhy>).

The Runaway Problem

The majority of youth who are labeled as “runaway” will return home in less than a week (NISMART-2; Hammer et al., 2002). Youth's reasoning for not returning home and their experiences while away from home are multifaceted. There is not a one size fit all narrative for runaway youth in the United States (Pergamit and Ernst, 2010). Researchers have identified some similarities between subgroups of runaway youth but not all runaway youth will fit into these subgroups. Zide and Cherry (1992) created four subgroups to describe why youth decided to leave home and/or not return, and these groups are: running to, running from, thrown out, and forsaken. Pergamit and Ernst (2010) explain how groups like these unscored the experiences of

RHY and that researchers should allow these youth to explain what caused them to leave home and not return without grouping them into these categories. Many RHY interviewed by researchers do not fit neatly into the groups created by Zide and Cherry (1992).

Nationally, at the end of 2020, there were over 89,637 active missing person reports in the United States (NCIC, 2020). The national compository for missing persons is held by the National Crime Information Center (NCIC); most if not all law enforcement agencies submit their missing persons reports to the NCIC. NCIC lists Hispanic and white people/youth together in their reports, so anytime NCIC data is used in this paper, white/Hispanic will be listed together. During 2020 there were over 125,000 entries of missing Black juveniles (people under 21) and over 197,000 entries of missing white/Hispanic juveniles in the NCIC annual missing person report. The largest percentage of missing youth reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) in 2020 were endangered runaways (NCMEC, 2020). The actual number of RHY is unknown due to various factors like lack of reporting by parents or guardians (Hammer et al., 2002) and the transient nature of RHY (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). Additionally, most runaway and homeless youth will not reach out to a runaway or homeless youth organization or shelter for assistance (Dedel, 2006). Runaways tend to stay with family members or friends close to the youth's primary residence. (Hammer et al., 2002). Unaccompanied homeless minors represent a special sub-class of RHY that typically go underserved¹. In January 2018, roughly 4,790 youth (under the age of 18) were homeless and unaccompanied (United States Interagency Council On Homelessness, 2018). Unaccompanied homeless youth are more vulnerable than youth who have left home and can reside with friends or other family members (Hammer et al., 2002).

¹. Unaccompanied homeless youth typically make up less than one percent of runaway and homeless youth (Morton et al., 2018).

Black, Hispanic, and American Indian youth are overrepresented in runaways statistics (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016; M. R. Pergamit, 2010; Thompson et al., 2003; Wulczyn, 2020). The subsequent sections of this manuscript will reduce the use of the runaway and homeless youth (RHY) term in an effort to reduce the stigma and mischaracterization of youth who are missing, (unaccompanied) homeless, or have not returned home. Runaway and homeless youth may appear when discussing legislation that involves the term.

Street Youth vs. Shelter Youth

Unaccompanied homeless youth can fall into several categories, as discussed throughout this paper. Unaccompanied homeless youth are sometimes labeled street youth. Unaccompanied homeless youth are labeled street youth because they are less likely to 'couch surf' with known family members and friends (Dedel, 2006; Slesnick et al., 2011) or stay in shelters designated for unaccompanied homeless youth. For example, youth who choose to reside in a shelter are more likely to return home or find stable housing than those who continue to inhabit the street (Peled et al., 2005). Most unaccompanied minors who have left home will not access a shelter (Slesnick, 2004). Youth who seek assistance from shelters are more likely to experience short-term homeliness. Youth who have been on the street for longer or have had more runaway episodes/incidences are more likely not to reach out to a shelter or organization for assistance (Peled et al., 2005).

Gender Differences

The average missing youth in the United States is a 14-15 years of age female (Brooks Holiday, 2016). There are several other factors correlated with runaway episodes, but gender and family conflict are the most commonly reported. Gender is an important factor of note when looking at the national missing person data, men are most likely to be missing than women, but

when looking at people missing under the age of 20, girls are the most likely to be missing (NCIC, 2020). Factors leading to boys being labeled as missing or runaway are different from girls. Boys are more likely to be considered street youth since girls are more likely to reach out to shelters (Toro et al., 2007).

Throwaway & Kicked Out Youth

Many unaccompanied homeless youth were kicked out of their homes by their parents and are forced to be homeless or street youth (Ringwalt et al., 1998). Youth kicked out of their homes are referred to as "throwaway" youth in the literature and are often understudied (Walsh, 2010). Throwaway youth exist, and they make up a significant proportion of "runaway and homeless" youth in the United States. Sexual minority (LGBT+) youth are more likely to fit in the category of throwaway youth (Pearson et al., 2017) and are thrown out due to their parent or guardian disagreeing or not condoning their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many throwaway youth reported having issues with being labeled as a runaway since they did not have a choice in their leaving home.

Child Maltreatment & Runaway Episodes

Researchers have found that unaccompanied homeless youth report more instances of child maltreatment and trauma than youth who have never left home (Turner et al., 2019). Girls are more likely to leave home due to some form of abuse at home (Kempf-Leonard & Johansson, 2007; Molnar et al., 1998; Schaffner, 1998; Williams et al., 2001). Teenage girls who left home are more likely to report being sexually abused than runaway boys who have left home (Tyler et al., 2000). Some unaccompanied homeless boys and girls state that they do not return home because they might experience additional abuse upon returning home (Hammer et al., 2002). Not all unaccompanied homeless youth have left home; some of them are now homeless due to

leaving their Child Protective Services' residential placements. This includes unaccompanied homeless youth placed in residential care, foster care, or halfway houses. There is a distinction between youth who have left foster care and youth who have chosen to leave a family residence (Courtney et al., 2005; Finkelstein et al., 2004). Typically, teenagers' reasonings for leaving home placements in foster care are different from teenagers who leave their parent or guardian's homes (Courtney et al., 2005). A large percentage of missing youth are youth who leave their foster care placement (Courtney et al., 2005). System youth or foster care youth typically refer to the same unaccompanied homeless youth group (Slesnick et al., 2011). Teenagers placed in foster care or group homes are more likely to run away than non-foster care teenagers (Sedlak et al., 2002). Youth who leave foster care placements typically report leaving so that they can be with their family and friends. This creates an important distinction between youth leaving CPS placements and youth leaving their parent's or guardian's home. The following section will discuss the most common factors correlated with youth's decision to leave or not return home. This section is not trying to sort youth who have left home into specific categories and is only provided here to discuss risk factors associated with runaway episodes or incidences.

Poly-Victimization or Prevalence of Victimization Amongst Unaccompanied Youth

At-risk and homeless youth typically report experiencing instances of neglect and abuse. Neglect and abuse are typically experienced together and are not purely singular events (Turner et al., 2019). Researchers have found that most unaccompanied homeless youth who have left home have experienced some form of abuse or trauma before leaving home (Bender et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2009; McManus & Thompson, 2018; Wong et al., 2016). Based on past research, these youth will typically experience further abuse and trauma while on the street (Bender et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2010). Street victimization is abuse or trauma experienced while living

on the street or engaging in illicit street activities. For example, human trafficking (Latzman et al., 2019; Middleton et al., 2018), prostitution (Kidd & Kral, 2002), sexual or physical assault (Tyler & Melander, 2015) are forms of street victimization. Many unaccompanied homeless youth engage in survival sex to earn money while living on the street (Heerde et al., 2015; Middleton et al., 2018). Living on the street or in non-structured housing creates further avenues for these youth to be victimized and engage in illicit activities (delinquency) to survive (Chen, 2006; Jeanis, 2019; Thompson et al., 2010). Living on the street can create a cycle of abuse and trauma for homeless youth, which can negatively impact their life trajectory.

Interventions for RHY

Federal, state, and local governments in conjunction with local/state organizations can help address or minimize youth runaway episodes. Waguespack & Ryan (2019) provide several recommendations for state legislatures to address youth homelessness. Many of their recommendations target unaccompanied homeless youth and the need to keep them out of the criminal justice system. Dysfunctional family life (e.g., abuse, neglect, constant arguing) is significantly correlated with runaway episodes. Researchers have looked into family interventions that can reduce runaway episodes for teenagers (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2004). Unaccompanied homeless youth need to have agency in these interventions. For example, they should have some control over the reunification process.

The most efficient ways to reduce the number of unaccompanied homeless youth are addressing the runaway risk factors mentioned earlier and recognizing and supporting these youth's agency. Many youth who continue to live on the streets have stated that they did not reach out to shelters or organizations due to not thinking they need help or not wanting help (Pergamit & Ernst, 2010). In comparison, others do not know where to go for help or how to

seek help (Pergamit & Ernst, 2010). Kurtz et al. (2000) found four types of help services youth received when accessing shelters and organizations in interviews with 12 youth from Georgia and North Carolina. The four types of helping services were: caring, setting boundaries and holding youth accountable, concrete as- assistance, and professional intervention as forms of help (p. 387). Youth stated that in order to seek help, they had to recognize that they needed help, and the person who would become their helper had to be perceived as being trustworthy (pp. 393-395)

Many shelters require minors to be accompanied or have their parents permission to utilize their services (Slesnick, 2004). Restrictions like these impact youth's ability to engage with these services and might make them susceptible to future victimization on the street. The longer youth are on the street, the more likely they are to be victimized by predatory actors and/or to engage in illegal activity (Gwadz et al., 2009). The best placements for youth who have left home are placements where the youth had a say in the placement (Pergamit & Ernst, 2010). This finding is evident for youth victims of sex trafficking (Barnert et al., 2016). Adults making the decisions for youth who leave home and do not return home without any input from them may end up causing more harm than good. One consequence of victimization is the limiting of control. For unaccompanied homeless youth who are leaving situations in which they had limited or lower amounts of agency, not having a say in where they are placed could mirror their abusive situations.

CHAPTER III: MISSING YOUTH IN NORTH CAROLINA

Most homeless youth research was conducted in metropolitan or heavily populated cities and states or looked at national samples. For example, researchers have studied the experiences of unaccompanied and homeless youth in Los Angeles (Witkin et al., 2005) and New York (Thompson & Pillai, 2006). However, less is known about the experiences of these youth in North Carolina. Witkin et al. (2005) mention that RHY shelters are more likely to be found in cruise or metropolitan areas than rural areas. On the one hand, North Carolina is home to several metropolitan areas (North Carolina Data Center, 2013; U.S. Census, n.d.), meaning the experiences of RHY in North Carolina could mirror those of youth in L.A. and N.Y. but on a smaller scale. On the other hand, findings and experiences reported by youth from other parts of the United States might not hold true for children who reside in North Carolina. The current chapter will provide an overview of what is known about missing youth and child victimization in North Carolina.

North Carolina Missing Child Legislation

All laws pertaining to the missing persons and missing children can be found in North Carolina General Assembly Legislation Chapter 14, Article 39 “Caylee’s Law [§ 14-318.5] and Article 13, Part 5, Subpart B [§ 143B-1010]. A missing juvenile in North Carolina is defined as

“A juvenile as defined in G.S. 7B-101 whose location has not been determined, who has been reported as missing to a law enforcement agency, and whose parent's, spouse's, guardian's or legal custodian's temporary or permanent residence is in North Carolina or is believed to be in North Carolina.” [§143B-1014].

North Carolina's version of Caylee's Law states –

“A parent or any other person providing care to or supervision of a child who knowingly or wantonly fails to report the disappearance of a child to law enforcement is in violation of this subsection. Unless the conduct is covered under some other provision of law providing greater punishment, a violation of this subsection is punishable as a Class I felony.” [§ 14-318.5(B)].

North Carolina's version of Caylee's Law was signed into law in 2013 and mostly only applies to missing children under 16 years of age [§ 14-318.5(B)]. Smith (2013) provides more information about new crimes created with the enactment of Caylee's Law. Catrocho (2015).

N.C. Gen. Statute Chapter 14 Article 13 established the North Carolina Center for Missing Person (NCCMP), and the NCCMP is housed under the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS). In North Carolina, when local agencies file missing person reports, they are automatically sent to the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation and the National Information Crime Center, and due to this, all cases found in the NC Annual Missing Person report match what is reported to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). Additionally, all cases involving a missing child must be reported to the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Under North Carolina law [§143B-1014], parents of a missing child can directly report their child missing to the North Carolina Missing Person Center even if they have already filed a report with a local law enforcement agency. Under this law, law enforcement agencies may not "establish or maintain any policy which requires the observance of any waiting period before accepting a missing person report." The current statute does not mention whether or not police immediately have to investigate a missing person report or not. Missing person cases that involve a missing person or child that has been reported missing for over 30 days must be reported to Nam US (National Missing Person and Unidentified Person

System). Due to the dual reporting of North Carolina missing persons cases, several entries may appear on one website (e.g., Nam Us) and not appear on another (e.g., NCEMC).

North Carolina Runaway and Unaccompanied Youth Legislation

The North Carolina General Assembly covers both the topic of "runaway youth" and child maltreatment in Chapter 7B of the North Carolina Statutes. Running away is not a crime for the youth who are running away (North Carolina Judicial Branch, n.d.), but people who aid or harbor these youth could be charged with a crime. In North Carolina, runaway youth are in many cases referred to as "undisciplined juvenile," meaning they are:

- a. A juvenile who, while less than 16 years of age but at least 6 years of age, is unlawfully absent from school; or is regularly disobedient to and beyond the disciplinary control of the juvenile's parent, guardian, or custodian; or is regularly found in places where it is unlawful for a juvenile to be; or has run away from home for a period of more than 24 hours; or
- b. A juvenile who is 16 or 17 years of age and who is regularly disobedient to and beyond the disciplinary control of the juvenile's parent, guardian, or custodian; or is regularly found in places where it is unlawful for a juvenile to be; or has run away from home for a period of more than 24 hours. (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 7B-101, 7B-150).

Under the North Carolina Juvenile Justice statutes, runaway youth and undisciplined juveniles can be held temporarily by the police before being placed back into the care of their parents or guardian, the juvenile justice system, or NCDPS (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 7B-500, 7B-503 & 7B-1903).

North Carolina Child Maltreatment Legislation

Adults in North Carolina have a legal duty to report suspected child maltreatment (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 7B-301) and any violent offense or sexual offense that involves a juvenile (N.C.

Gen. Stat. 14-318.2.). Mason (2013) provides a detailed look at how people should report child abuse and neglect in North Carolina and what procedures are followed after a report has been received based on the North Carolina child abuse and neglect laws of 2013. In 2013, the North Carolina state legislature enacted Kilah's Law to create harsher penalties for child abuse. Gifford et al. (2017) analyzed a sample of North Carolina child maltreatment cases and arrest records from 2005-2010 and found that most arrests for child maltreatment involved misdemeanor charges. The majority of the cases were not adjudicated in the North Carolina Court system. North Carolina General Assembly Legislation Chapter 7B Juvenile Code, Subchapter I. abuse, neglect, dependency (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 7B-1501) provides the state's definitions for abused and neglected juvenile's and can be found at the following web address:

https://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/ByChapter/Chapter_7B.html. North Carolina General Statute Chapter 7B outlines the responsibility of the state, parents, and guardians to protect juveniles within the state.

NC Child Abuse/Neglect

There are roughly 2.3 million youth under 18 who reside in North Carolina (Children's Bureau, n.d.). Physical and sexual abuse account for 50.5% of all reported child maltreatment types for the state of North Carolina in 2019, which differs from the national sample in which neglect accounts for roughly 75% of child maltreatment cases (Child Maltreatment, 2020). In 2019, NCDPS screened in over 50,000 child maltreatment cases and identified 5,000 cases of abuse and neglect (Child Maltreatment, 2020). In North Carolina, there were more cases of maltreatment involving girls than boys (a difference of 263 cases/reports). 21.7% of NC child maltreatment reports in 2019 involved sexual abuse. Most child maltreatment perpetrators were parents. When it comes to child sexual abuse prevention, North Carolina lawmakers tend to gear

legislation and solutions toward sex offenders than parents or family members who are the most likely perpetrators of child sexual abuse (Grady et al., 2015). Child maltreatment is typically a familial or friend issue and is not carried out by strangers. This pattern is suggestive in the people (parents or guardians) typically found guilty by NCDPS of child maltreatment.

Racial Differences

Similar to national trends, Black and American Indian children are more likely to experience maltreatment in North Carolina. Black and American Indian youth are overrepresented in North Carolina child protective services (DePasquale, 2020). Black juveniles in North Carolina are abused/neglected at a rate of 3.2% (per 1,000 Black children), American Indian juveniles in NC are abused/neglected at a rate of 8.0 (per 1,000 American children) which are 1.1% and 5.9% higher than the reported abuse/neglect rate of white children (Child Maltreatment Report, 2019). Over 1,000 Black children were found to have experienced child abuse in North Carolina in 2019 (Child Maltreatment Report 2019). These child maltreatment cases could have major implications for unaccompanied youth in North Carolina.

Runaways in North Carolina

North Carolina Center for Missing Person (NCCMP) reports every new runaway episode or incident as a new case, so some missing juveniles who go missing or leave home chronically will have multiple entries on the NCCMP Annual Missing Person report. Therefore, cases instead of person, people, or children are used to discuss the statistics from these reports. The NCCMP has not released a missing person report since the 2018 NC Annual Report for Missing Persons. There is no specific trend in the number of missing juvenile cases in NC based on readily available reports; during some years, the number of missing juvenile cases increased while the number of cases decreased in other years. As forementioned, parents and guardians

have a legal obligation to report their child missing. However, there is no way to know if most parents or guardians follow this law since a review of missing children and youth who live on the streets in North Carolina has not been conducted or made public. Based on data from national samples (Hammer et al., 2002), it could be hypothesized that many parents do not file a missing person's report for their teenagers who leave home.

Entries to the NCCMP are the best estimates and numbers available to the public regarding the number of missing juveniles. Various reasons can explain why missing juvenile cases increased some years or decreased in other years. Due to sporadic news coverage of missing children and inconsistent missing persons reporting in North Carolina, there is no way to know precisely how many children went missing in 2020 or 2021 since the NCCMP did not release a missing person report for these years. During the 2018-2019 school year, there were over 3,000 unaccompanied homeless students in North Carolina (United States Interagency Council On Homelessness, n.d.). The total number of unaccompanied homeless students increased between 2017 and 2019. In 2018, there were more missing person cases involving girls ages 15-17 and 13 than boys in North Carolina. There were more cases of missing boys between 0-12 and 14 years than missing girl cases. Nationally teenage girls are more likely to run away than teenage boys. (NCIC, 2019; NCCMP, 2019). There are several runaway and homeless youth shelters and organizations in North Carolina (NCDPS, n.d.) Many of these shelters receive funding from the federal (e.g., FYSB) and North Carolina governments.

North Carolina Runaway or Homeless Youth Shelters

FYSB Grant Funded Shelters

In 2021, the FYSB only provided funding to seven North Carolina RHY organizations in the following cities: Asheville, Gastonia, Raleigh, Charlotte, Wilmington, and Greensboro.

FYSB provided funding to two shelters within Charlotte. These seven organizations were recipients of the BCP and TLP grants under the FYSB and had different grant periods. The list of 2021 North Carolina grantees can be found in Appendix A. The FYSB has provided the 2022 RHY grantee list on their website (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/grants/north-carolina-rhy>).

Non-FYSB Grant Funded NC RHY Shelters

An internet search of RHY organizations in North Carolina did not yield any new shelters that were not already found via FYSB funding. However, five additional runaway and homeless shelters were found on the NCDPS website. These shelters are listed in Appendix B. NCDPS uses 'runaway and homeless shelters' to classify shelters that serve youth without adequate housing. The addition of non-federally funded organizations and shelters will allow for a more well-rounded investigation of shelters and organizations that serve unaccompanied homeless youth in North Carolina. Additionally, some of the shelters identified by NCDPS are connected to organizations that received grant funding from the FYSB. Based on FYSB funding information and NCDPS identified shelters, the proposed sampling frame consists of roughly 10-12 'runaway and homeless' youth shelters. An email address or contact box could be found for roughly 8 of the shelters listed in Appendix A & B.

CHAPTER IV: METHODS

Unaccompanied homeless youth who would look to RHY shelters or organizations for support are more likely to

- (1) not have family or friends that they can reach out to after leaving home (Dedal, 2010)
- (2) have had limited educational and health services resources before accessing shelters (Gambon & Gewirtz O'Brien, 2020);
- (3) Find stable housing or return home (Toro et al., 2007)

For these reasons, this population is arguably severely understudied and underrepresented in existing studies on runaway and homeless youth. The current study examined the different services available to youth and adults experiencing temporary or chronic homelessness and child advocacy organizations who serve youth in crises. The issue of running away and homelessness among youth is multifaceted and there is no one-stop-shop to provide all the necessary services that these youth may need. Organizations and agencies throughout North Carolina collaborate with each other to best support youth in crises and experiencing homelessness. The current study consisted of interviewees with current or former employees of homeless shelters who served NC youth and youth advocacy organizations. By interviewing these employees, I was able to gain an understanding of the type of services available to NC youth experiencing homelessness or in crises.

Recruitment Process

Program directors, program counselors, and other relevant personnel of unaccompanied and homeless youth organizations and shelters were sought to be interviewed to gain insight into their services and the unaccompanied homeless youth they serve. Sample characteristics data

will be provided below; however, any identifying information has been omitted for privacy reasons. Pursuant to IRB directives, the consent form and the interview process was careful to make sure that names of persons and the name and locations of their organizations and shelters would be excluded from transcripts and reported results for privacy and confidentiality reasons. In total 11 interviews were conducted, but only 10 interviews were analyzed and presented in this study. One interview was excluded because youth were not the direct population that services were geared towards.

The first round of recruitment involved all shelters identified in Appendix A and Appendix B being contacted to request their participation in the study. There were no responses to the initial recruitment emails, so a follow up email was sent, again to all shelters, reiterating the study and requesting participation. The second round of recruitment emails yielded better results. A second round of recruitment was necessary. This involved emails being sent to a broader audience who served runaway or homeless youth or worked with youth experiencing crises (i.e., recruitment from organizations not defined strictly as shelters). This second tier of recruitment yielded better results with five interviewees having been formerly or currently employed by a homeless shelter that served youth (one of which had two employees participate in the same interview). To be clear, then, due to the non-response from the initial recruitment email, which was sent only to shelters serving runaway and homeless youth, the recruitment net was widened to include *any* organizations or shelters that provide services to “runaway and homeless youth,” “at-risk youth,” and/or abused or neglected youth. Through this revised recruitment strategy, I was able to reach interview participants who served the RHY in NC, including those who presently (or formerly) worked at youth shelters. It is also worth noting that over the course of interviews, I learned that many “runaway and homeless” youth shelters

require parental or legal guardian consent for youth to utilize their services. Based on this information, the study was unable to recruit shelters that served unaccompanied homeless youth who were not in contact with their parent or legal guardian.

Interview Procedures

Kurtz et al. (2000) conducted face-to-face interviews with 12 adolescents in Georgia and North Carolina to analyze how these adolescents navigate being runaways and homeless youth. Several researchers have conducted interviews with directors and staff members of unaccompanied homeless youth organizations to assess a variety of topics (e.g., services provided, experiences, and outcomes of unaccompanied homeless youth). The present study's interview protocol was crafted from these studies (Ferguson & Maccio, 2015; Gwadz et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2017; Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). A semi-structured/conversational interview style was used. Several of the homeless organizations and shelters within North Carolina provide family support and counseling services along with housing options for homeless families and youth. Interviewees who work for organizations that serve homeless families or adults in addition to unaccompanied homeless youth were asked to discuss their general services and the services that are directly geared towards homeless youth.

In this regard, I adopted Maccio and Ferguson's (2016) interview guide for the present study (see Appendix E). My complete IRB approved interview guide is located in Appendix F. As is true with many semi-structured interviews, I probed the interviewees when needed to discuss additional underlying and relevant issues that arose. Interviewees were able to skip any question they did not feel comfortable answering and some questions were reworded to better help the interviewee answer the question.

Sample Characteristics

Many of the participants within this study served as case manager, mental health counselor, liaison, or supervisor within their organization or shelter. Many of the interviewees held college degrees in sociology, psychology, social work, counseling, communications, criminal justice, and criminology. Additionally, several of the interviewees are licensed therapist in North Carolina. Most participants reported their passion for working with youth, especially those who faced hardships and adversity. Many of the interviewees had worked with the youth in different capacities. One participant stated that

“... working with children has always been my passion, umm I say that because their innocent in a lot of things that they do coming into the world, their completely innocent and if they don't have that foundation as far as parents and family support is concerned to mold them into what they can be as adults, it leads them into being umm what society calls a juvenile delinquent.”

This quote reflects the thoughts and beliefs of a lot of the participants, many of them believe that the children they work with are unfairly stigmatized and this fuels their passion to want to work with them.

Interviewees for this study reported working for a variety of organizations and shelters. Every interviewee worked with people, including youth, without adequate housing or youth who were otherwise “in crisis” (e.g. foster care youth, runaway youth, juvenile defendant, abused child). Table 1 provides a breakdown of shelter type, inclusion or exclusion criteria, length of stay, the typical demographics of participants, services provided, and/or service model for the shelters referenced by the interviewees. Table 2 provides details about the organization type, inclusion or exclusion criteria, length of stay, the typical demographics of participants, services

provided, and/or service model for the organizations referenced by the interviewees. Most of the organizations interviewed did not have services directly connected to identity groups (e.g. LGBTQ+, racial ethnic minorities, gender). This was largely because many of the organizations treated each case individually and did not use a one-size-fits-all approach when accessing the needs of the people utilizing their services. (The love and logic model, trauma informed model, and the family justice center model referenced in the table will be discussed further in the results section.)

The organizations and shelters that were interviewed all received funding from several funding entities. The most common ones referenced throughout the interviews were federal and state grants, Medicaid, private and donations. Some organizations were able to receive additional funding through the American Rescue Plan and Federal Government COVID Funding. Federal funding requires certain guidelines to be followed and typically this funding can only be used for certain activities and for specific populations. Several of the interviewees stated that their organization or shelter received funding from The United Way. The United Way is an international organization that provides funding for a variety of projects. The “United Way’s mission is to improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities around the world to advance the common good.” Based on the interviews that were conducted, they have honored this mission and continue to do so.

Analytic Plan

Interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator and analyzed using ATLAS.ti. Due to the lack of initial information on the experiences of runaway and homeless youth in North Carolina an inductive coding scheme was used. Inductive coding took place in two phases. First, an in-vivo coding process was used to analyze the interview data.

Table 1: Informational Table for Shelters Interviewed

| Shelter Type | Inclusion or Exclusion Criteria | Length of Stay | Common Demographic | Services Provided | Service Model |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|
| Temporary Family Shelter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children in parent or guardian's custody Any type of family | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 90 to 120 days unless extenuating circumstances | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly African American Diverse when it comes to religion, gender, sexual orientation, educational background | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private room with kitchenette and private bathroom Life Skills workshops Food pantry and meals Activities for kids | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help people create plan towards stability |
| Adult Shelter (homeless youth 18-21) | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undefined | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outpatient Therapy Psychiatric Services Primary Care Services Job Services Bus Passes | |
| 24-hour Crisis Shelter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent or legal guardian consent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 to 14 days 1 to 30 days if in DSS custody | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black and African American overrepresented Very few Hispanic youth Youth from all ages, sexual orientation, and gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health counseling Connect youth to intensive in-home services, family counseling or out-patient therapy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Love and Logic Model Client Focused and Driven – Individual Treatment Plans for Clients |
| Short Term Emergency Shelter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent or legal guardian consent No self-harm or suicidal ideation Cannot exhibit extremely aggressive behavior or have a history of physical aggression Can't have a history of sexual predatory behavior No auditory or visual hallucinations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically 3 days to 3 weeks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Come from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliation, and gender ~ 40% identify as queer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety planning Supporting youth during parent/child team meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Client Drive and Focused Trauma Informed Model Celebrate Youth |

Table 2: Informational Table for Organizations Interviewed

| Organization Type | Common Demographic | Services Provided | Service Model |
|--|--|--|---|
| School District Homeless Liaison Office Collaboration with Youth Homeless Shelter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homeless shelter: 12-17 years old | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 bed shelter facility Tutoring program for youth at shelter Provided youth with school supplies, clothing, and any other donated items Summer program Life skills workshops Help with FAFSA verification for kids who aged out of the system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow HUD and McKinney Vento guidelines |
| Child Advocacy Center | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically age 7-17 years old^a | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forensic interview with child advocate specialist Child advocate specialist for each subgroup: LGBT+, elder abuse victims, human trafficking victims, and sexual assault victims Summer camp for youth Help find mental health counselor (trauma informed therapy or behavioral therapy) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family Justice Center model |
| Alternative Sentencing Program | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> First time “offenders” Mostly high school age students but some middle school students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with first time offenders stay out of juvenile justice system Monitor assigned youth for nine months to make sure they maintain their grades and stay out of trouble at school and with law enforcement Help them locate any necessary resources like housing, tutoring, or organization to complete community service at | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12-month program in conjunction with county court |
| LGBT Youth Support Program | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10-24 years old Demographics of youth who utilize the services reflect those of the city in which the organization is located | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> LGBT+ youth support group Meet with parents and LGBT+ youth for 10-weeks to help parents understand and support their child Provide community with educational materials and resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Love and support Make sure LGBT+ youth are uplifted and celebrated |

Notes: ^aChildren who are under the age of seven can come to the organization for services but typically these youth have trouble engaging with staff due to the inability to communicate with staff regarding what has happened to them.

In the second phase of coding, interviews were coded using a coding scheme building upon that of Kurtz et al. (2000). Kurtz et al. (2000) identified a variety of primary theme groups, which included: types of help youth received, types of helpers, conditions that facilitated the acceptance of help, and advice to professional helpers. Upon review of the actual transcripts and the context of my communication with interview participants, I was able to relate the codes from the first phase of in-vivo coding with Kurtz, et. al's (2000) themes used in the second phase of coding, resulting in the thematic categories presented in Table 3. Here are the codes that emerged from the second round of coding:

services provided, service model, service gap, governing body, reason/explanation behind needing services, additional organizations, policies/rules, service recommendation, covid/pandemic, impact of covid, demographics, job description, myths/misconception, inclusion/exclusion criteria, supportive stakeholder, reasoning for service gap, service model example/definition, job title, funding for service, entity that refers service, passion for work, barrier, trainings, general recommendation, NC government intervention, runaway/homeless youth stats/facts, downside of service, family dysfunction, degree, life circumstance, service, recommendation example, LGBT youth, issues with definitions, covid funding, impact of life on child, service publicity/people not knowing about service/organization, youth non-disclosure, funding gap, service description, bible belt/ LGBT youth disclosure, foster care, stigma, vulnerable populations, LGBT services, terminology

Table 3: Interview Coding Themes

| Kurtz, et al. Research Themes | In-vivo Atlas.ti. Codes |
|---|---|
| Types of Help Received | Services provided, service model, services model example/definition, runaway/homeless youth stats/facts. LGBT youth, service description, downside of service, inclusion/exclusion criteria, funding gap |
| Types of Helpers | Job title, job description, supportive stakeholder, entity that refers service, passion for work, trainings, degree |
| Conditions that Facilitated the Acceptance of Help (or Reasons Behind Needing Help) | Reason/explanation behind needing services, demographics, life circumstance, impact of life on child, bible belt/LGBT youth disclosure, non-disclosure, foster care, polices/rules, governing body, family dysfunction, vulnerable populations, barrier, additional organizations, myths and misconceptions, service publicity/people not knowing about service/organization, impact of covid |
| Advice to professional helpers | Service recommendation, funding for service, general recommendation, NC government intervention, recommendation example, issues with definitions, LGBT services terminology, reasoning for service gap |

CHAPTER V: RESULTS

The issue of youth homelessness is multifaceted. Many organizations and stakeholder work together to provide services to youth who are experiencing temporary or chronic homelessness. Most of the organizations interviewed were clustered into one region within North Carolina. I elect to organize this chapter in four sections based on Kurtz's et al.'s (2000) four themes mentioned in Chapter IV (i.e., the types of help youth received, types of helpers, conditions that facilitated the acceptance of help, and advice to professional helpers).²

Type of Help Received

Service Models

Many of the interviewees, when explaining the services provided at their organization or shelter, provided names of the service models that they use. The two runaway and homeless youth shelters discuss their use of a trauma informed model and a love and logic model. Both of these models are client driven and allow for the youth who utilize their shelters experience agentic decision-making. The child advocacy organization discussed their use of the family justice center model (FJC model).

Trauma Informed Model. The trauma informed model requires practitioners look at certain behaviors or actions has reactionary instead of being just something the youth does for attention. The trauma informed model is used to understand youth and the causes of their behavior. This model allows the youth to express themselves and be a part of the planning process to improve their situation especially when their trauma response behavior is due to family dysfunction. This model is slightly different from the love and logic model used by the

² Some of the codes related to Kurtz's et al.'s type of helper theme including job title, job description, trainings, and degree, are discussed in sample characteristics section of the Methods chapter and thus will not be discussed in this Results chapter.

other runaway and homeless youth shelter but both models put the youth's agency and wellbeing first.

Love and Logic Model. The love and logic model is centered around allowing youth to make their own choices while teaching them about positive and negative consequences. One interviewee explained the approach like this:

Like we're either going to go to school today or you're not going to go to school today, these are the consequences. This is what happens when you do go to school today. And that gives them a little more freedom to make uhh mistakes, choices, learn about natural consequences umm that type of stuff.

For many of the youth who utilize RHY services, they have had many choices taken from them and are looking for some form of control. Interventions like these allow them to gain that control back. The previously mentioned models were specifically used with runaway and homeless youth while the next model discussed has been implemented to help and serve youth who have been abused more specifically.

Family Justice Center Model

The interviewee who worked at a child advocacy organization for kids who have been abused explained the agency's use of the Family Justice Center model and how this model has helped the organization better serve the people who seek their assistance. One of the interviewee's explained the FJC model like this:

The family justice center model, where it's supposed to be a one stop shop. So it's like you have a baton, law enforcement, DSS hands it, the report over to the [organization name omitted], we do the forensic interview, we do the child advocacy, once the parent is supportive and wants that child to have counseling, we pass the information off to the

[organization name omitted]. And at that point they begin the healing process but there's no gaps in between because that's how the model is setup. So the child won't have to keep repeating their same-- reliving and repeating their abuse so the child can, you know, can go somewhere and not have to just keep repeating.

The switch to the FJC model is used to prevent any gaps that might occur in the care or investigation of their abuse. One interview pointed out that “prior to [FJC model] a lot of those kids fall through the crack because we didn't have that bridge to go through smooth sailing as-- it's just like one stop.”

The implementation of these service models for these agencies puts the focus back on the youth who have been harmed. These services are client driven. According to the interview participants, in many cases, the youth who access these services just want their voices heard and for someone to show that they care about what happens to them. These models allow for youth to have a safe space to detail their experience without shame or stigma.

Types of Helpers

Referral Agents for Services

The most commonly reported recommender of these organization and shelters were counselors and therapists. Several interviewees discussed how other organizations promoted their services to these professions or indicated that people were able to find their organization through Safe Place searches (more information can be found at <https://www.nationalsafeplace.org/about>) or 211. Word of mouth was another answer provided by many interviewees when asked questions how children may be introduced to services. For participants who worked directly with youth crisis, law enforcement and the N.C. Department of Social Services (DSS) were mentioned as common referral sources among youth who used their

organization. One of the interviewees, who worked for a school district, discussed how social workers and school counselors were a very important agent for identifying homeless youth. The interviewee stated:

And you know school counselors and school social workers you know their trained to pick up on things and see some of the identifying signs that you know this student might be experiencing homelessness, they may be on their own you know, clothing and you know sleeping a lot in class and failing behind you know just drastic changes in umm behavior, academics, you know all those things.

Referral agents refer people and youth to services for a variety of reasons just as people and youth will need to utilize the services offered at organizations for a variety of reasons.

One of the biggest referral agents for organizations that help youth experiencing a crisis is therapist. This source of referral raises questions since some youth may go undetected if their school or social network lacks therapeutic assistance. Certainly, not all youth in crisis have equal access to or become involved in therapy. Many children do not have access to mental health counseling or services, and this coupled with stigma or policies and rules requiring parental consent or permission to access services is problematic as it leaves many kids without a supportive stakeholder to recommend resources for them. Many interviewees were very aware of the adversities that the youth (and adults) that utilize their services face. As I speak more about later in this chapter, more open publicity about resources could be provided *before* youth are in a crisis.

One interviewee discussed how many people do not find out about their services until they are in a crisis, but even this can cause issues because in a lot of cases of abuse or neglect, timing is of the essence and a delay in getting in contact with law enforcement or DSS can

impact the support process. Making sure people know about available services before they need them will aid the organization or shelter and those they can serve.

The people who I interviewed reported that their organizations hoped to be a safe place for youth regardless of the youth's status or identity but making sure that youth know these safe places exist is paramount. Despite this, some interviewees indicated that youth decide not to use services, even if they know they exist. One interviewee stated, "now do I feel like services, you know--some kids don't get services...but that's not on us. They are offered, they are just not taken." During this part of the interview, it was suggested that failure to take services may be related to the lack of promotion for services, so a lack of knowledge about services can still inhibit the ability of child/youth advocacy organizations to aid and serve the youth who need their help. It seemed apparent to me that the organizations and shelters want to help the youth and the people that need them, and many have adapted client driven service models to achieve that goal.

Conditions that Facilitated the Acceptance of Help

There are several barriers that impact youth's ability to access services. These barriers come in different forms. The barriers impacting runaway and homeless youth along with youth who are in foster care or aging out of foster care look different from those who may be experiencing abuse and neglect currently. As mentioned previously, the two temporary housing shelters for youth who are experiencing homelessness or have been labeled a runaway cannot access their shelter for more than a day without their parent's or legal guardians' approval. For many youth, this can prevent them from accessing the services they may need, leading them to stay on the street, which in many cases leads to youth engaging in illegal activities and 'survival sex'. In many cases youth are not able to seek out therapy or counseling without their parent's

approval via needing parental consent, and of course, there is also the issue of a lack of funds to pay for their own sessions.

Youth who do not have parental support or youth who parents have “kicked them out and want nothing to do with them” may face additional barriers. This is also the case for youth who have “aged out of the system” or do not know of the post foster care resources available. The goal of many temporary housing shelters for youth is to reunite them with their parents but in many cases this does not happen. One interviewee when answering the question regarding local, state, or federal organizations that have aided or hindered their ability to offer services, they said this:

You know, so from our ends, you know, we really want the guardian to be involved, we want the guardian to be present to do certain things, but it creates that gap of, you know, if someone doesn't have that guardian support, you know, what--what can they access in this state.

Another barrier hindering services for youth and thus youth's ability to access or accept help is organizational funding. Many interviewees talked about the lack of funding for their organizations and programs, which manifests in the lack of workers and/or untrained workers. One interviewee comment captures the view of several of the interviewees.

I just think that there has to be funding, there has to be adults who are willing to help, there has to be umm enough resources and option (sic) for the youth to get help and for there to be a system in place for the adults to be able to help the kids without being hindered either by funding or resources or other opportunities.

Although the above discussion speaks about issues of youth accessing help, it also speaks about youth's ability to accept help when it is available and offered. The interviewee comments shared

above indicate that youth will be facilitated to accept help if they have a parent or legally appointed guardian who supports their entry and/or enrollment into help organizations. In fact, in many cases, this is required in order to receive help.

Reasons Behind Needing Help

Interviewees were asked to describe why people needed to seek services at their shelter or organization and were asked additional questions about the reasoning and explanations that those served provided to them when discussing their need for services. There was a lot of consistency across these answers, meaning that people seeking services at shelters and other supporting organizations were the same. Many of the interviewees discussed how many of the adults and youth who utilized their services had or were perceived to suffer from a mental illnesses or disorder and did not have adequate access to mental health services due to their socioeconomic status and the stigma surrounding utilizing mental health services. The impact of mental illness and disorders will be discussed further in the below Myths and Misconceptions section.

Interviewees also mentioned their population served needing services because “they were in a transitional period” where they lacked access to adequate housing, so they needed to utilize these shelters until they could get back on their feet. Some interviewees also mentioned that many of those people who seek services with them suffer from substance abuse, but substance abuse was not a common factor discussed by all interviewees. Below, I discuss a few of the most common reasons that the interviewees mentioned

Family “Dysfunction.” The interviewees who worked directly with youth in crisis reported family dysfunction a one of the most common reasons for youth needing their services. Many of the youth who ended up at the emergency or temporary “runaway or homeless shelters” had conflicts with their parents that led to them needing a temporary shelter. Family dysfunction

could be categorized as being disagreements or abuse/neglect. Some youth were placed in the shelters to provide their parents and them a time to “cool off,” a period the interviewees called “a respite.” This respite allowed for time to pass between the conflict. Shelter workers were able to work with the parent and the youth to come up with a plan that would help them resolve the conflict.

Interviewees also mentioned that some of the youth ended up in these shelters due to leaving home or foster care placement, being kicked out of their homes by their parent or guardian, or DSS needing to place them in a shelter until another placement could be arranged (in foster care or residential care). One interviewee when discussing runaway and homeless youth stated this about why they decide to leave home:

I've dealt with runaway youth...where they just don't want to be at that home with their parents because that--their home situation is not stable and I don't expect for them to be stable. So that's why they're running away from home. So, you know a lot of times they're running away from a problem--that--no kid just walks out of the door that lives in a four bedroom, five bedroom house, three bathrooms, two car garage, you get three meals a day, you're always going to the dentist, your mama's always making sure you going to school, you're mama always making sure you going to the doctor and got you vaccinations and everything. You got clean clothes, you got school clothes, you got nice shoes, kids are not running away from these homes. Children are running away from problematic homes, where they feel like they're not being heard, they're not getting their basic necessities, and...some of them are just plain spoiled and they just run away from home because they can't get what they want. But a lot of times, that's why children runaway because it a problem there, that needs to be fixed, that needs to be addressed.

And most parents are just not paying attention to their kids and even if they are paying attention to their kids, good kids, good homes, kids still run away too. For whatever reason.

The response above captures the most frequently reported reasoning for youth leaving home. There is an assumption that youth are leaving home because they do not want to listen to their parents (e.g., Sheehy, 2018), but in many cases, children leave due to familial conflict (Holiday et al., 2018; National Runaway Switchboard, 2010). The interviewee above details how the biggest reason for youth leaving home is due to “family dysfunction,” but in her answer poverty is a major contributor. This does not mean that all youth who leave home are doing so because of so-called dysfunction. In fact, the interviewee acknowledges that some youth will decide to leave home because they are rebelling, but youth in this category typically represent a smaller subgroup of all youth who leave home.

Stigma (Myths and Misconceptions)

All interviewees were asked about any myths or misconceptions that they have heard about the youth or other people they serve through their organization or shelter affiliations. Stigma figured prominently in these discussions. A common theme that emerged from these interviews was that youth support workers try to make sure that the youth know that they are not bad or broken. This involved telling them that the children are more than their life circumstance and that this one moment does not have to define who they are or can be. Many of the youth who utilized the services at the runaway and homeless youth shelters were not technically runaways. As mentioned above, the child may have been placed in the shelter as a respite following a family conflict. One interviewee who worked at a child advocacy organization stated that during this “cooling off periods” you know let them, [know] that they’re not broken. Because a lot of

kids come in thinking that their broken or they did something wrong cause somebody did something to them.” In many cases, youth end up at these organizations or shelters due to circumstances out of their control, and many of them live with the stigma and trauma related to their experiences. One interviewee discussed the false societal belief that homeless youth is uncommon and that when the issue arises, there are many resources available.

Umm so I would say the biggest myth is that there isn't homeless youth out there. That there's this belief that it's not that many or if there is, there's a ton of services that meet that need, which isn't true. There isn't a lot of services that umm provide shelter for homeless or runaway youth.

Many interviewees took issue with the labeling of homeless or runaway youth as bad kids, juvenile delinquent, troubled. One interviewee stated, “Kids that are going through things are not bad kids, they just haven't learned, umm, the skills that they need to cope with stressful situation.” Many also mentioned that fear of stigma keeps parents and children from disclosing their living situation to others. Some directly mentioned that “kids who were homeless would hide this status” or not be open to discussing their homelessness due to a perceived shame.

One of the persons I interviewed worked for an organization that specifically works with LGBT youth. This person furthered the conversation of stigma and discrimination by stating that it hinders not only homeless youth or homeless youth who identify with a LGBT identity but all persons.

these kids are the same loving people, you know, as anyone else...if we respect one another then there's really not a lot to talk about or fix, and I think that's true whether it's LGBTQ or disabilities or color, whatever the situation is. We're not that different, and let's respect one another, so hopefully that will get there...the one thing--that--I would

say, I guess in common across all the youth--what do I notice, like, that would be something and every...child, whether their homeless or whether they're not homeless, whether their going through LGBTQ or anything else, they want to know they're okay, they want to know that their loved, and they want--they want to be okay, and they want to be seen and heard.

Practitioners I interviewed whose agencies used the trauma informed model explained above spoke about how they also thought there was a societal myth around homeless and runaway youth seeking attention. They specifically commented on how they did not like this characterization by stating that attention seeking has a negative connotation and ignores why the youth may be acting in some way. To them, seeking attention and wanting to have it is not necessarily a bad thing. The youth were said to be dealing with real issues and that their behavior is a response. These interviewees recommended using trauma response understandings instead of risk behavior ones because risky behavior vilifies the child instead of focusing on addressing the behavior and what caused it. Many of the children who were said to exhibit trauma response behavior were understood to be dealing with problems at home, and since youth are just learning how to deal with stress and life events, they may respond in ways that adults see as inappropriate. Some interviewees also mentioned specific instances where children who have been abused physically or sexually are not believed by their parents or people who are supposed to help them. The interviewee who worked at the children advocacy organization discussed this issue in depth. When asked about the myths and misconceptions regarding the youth they serve they said this:

The huge misconception is that I hear from parents and some community partners, is that the child is not telling the truth that's a misconception. Or the child has come into a

forensic interview, and they didn't disclose, so nothing has happened. That's a misconception. Just because they didn't tell you anything doesn't mean they didn't go through what they have gone through. So a lot of time the misconception of the children that come in here is that they're not telling the truth and their doing it for attention which is not the case. I always revert back to little boy that cried wolf. ... He would go out and holler wolf and everybody come running, nothing's there and he keeps doing it and then the third time, fourth time, he did cry wolf, it was something there. And then he got eaten up [by] the wolf, lo and behold, I don't care if the child tells you something 17 times and we have to interview these children, these 17 times, one time in there might be that time, that something happens to that child and we turn, turn our nose, or turn a blind eye because we have preconceived notions and prejudgments because we don't think this child is telling the truth. I don't care if they do lie and they come in here, we still going to provide these services for them. Who are we to know if that child is telling the truth or not. Like, we don't know that. We wasn't there when it happened. We wasn't a fly on the wall, so that's a huge misconception, and I hear a lot from agencies, and DSS, and social workers, "I don't think they're--" I don't care what you think. Like if that's your personal opinion, that's your personal opinion, but let's not. And when we do that it kind of taints the process and taint how we care for that child and or how we, you know, refer services for that child, and I just, that burns me up. If you want to burn me up, do that to me. Say that to me. They know not to say that to me. I will tell them I don't care. That's not why we are here. If I wanted to be a judge, I would have went to law school.

The sentiment communicated by this interviewee connects to another misconception mention as an overall theme within the interviews, which is that in many cases, youth are

villainized when they act or speak out about the things happening to them. They are told how to respond, which referencing back to the earlier section on the importance of agency, takes away their voices. The interviewees all indicated that youth need to be supported and believed when they communicate what is happening to them. The caveat here is that sometimes the youth are acting out for other reasons like substance abuse, rebuking authority, involved in illicit activities, but interview participants made clear that these are not the most common factors that lead to the child needing services.

The interview data clearly indicate that youth need more support via their community network: parents, school officials, therapist, and doctors. The concept of “It takes a village” was communicated throughout several interviews. It reminds me of an African proverb, which states “If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together.” The interviewees would agree. If we want the youth to go far and be “upstanding” members of society, society cannot allow them to go it alone and without support.

Impact of COVID

One of the most common phrases mentioned when speaking about the COVID pandemic during these interviews was “We never stopped working.” Many of the interviewees discussed how their organizations and shelters stayed open during COVID due to their necessity. One interviewee stated when discussing the employees at their organization: “They never stopped working. Like, you cannot, like, this is like the hospital, like somebody has to be there. Somebody has to be here to intervene with these crises.”

As previously stated, most of these organizations and shelters serve youth in crises and the pandemic did not decrease the amount of youth who needed services. Although organizations and shelters stayed open, many of them had to reduce the total number of people they were able

to serve due to lack of funding, the lack of employees and volunteers, and distancing requirements. Several of these organizations rely on volunteers and community members to run effectively. One facility that has 10 beds had to reduce their bed count by 3 during COVID, although they have returned to their regular bed amount as of 2022. Interviewees also spoke of the additional cost that shelters had to incur related to COVID tests. Several shelters reported doing weekly COVID tests to keep their employees and residents safe. None of the shelters required vaccinations, but safety precautions were taken. People were not allowed to congregate in certain areas; there were social-distancing guidelines had to be followed.

While the need for services was not impacted by COVID, COVID did make it harder for many of these places to function. One interviewee who worked in a family shelter discussed how groups typically donated food to the shelter for its occupants, but COVID changed the manner in which food could be donated. Additionally, being able to provide workshops to occupants was interrupted during COVID, so there were reductions in the classes offered in the shelter due to safety concerns. None of the interviewees stated that shelter struggled to stay open or that operations had to be shut down at any point. Shelters were able to use their networks and funding raising powers to keep their doors open during the tiring times of the pandemic.

Advice to Professional Helpers

Policy and Legislation Recommendations

Interviewees were asked to provide their recommendations for new policies, legislation, or treatments and interventions. This section will discuss their recommendations and comments about government funding or partnerships. Many interviewees discussed the need for resources for youth who are too old for the foster care system. A lot of youth who come out of foster care lack support and resources to integrate efficiently into adulthood due to not having “supportive

stakeholders.” Some interviewees mentioned programs like NC Reach that help youth who have “aged out” of the foster care system and want to go to college. NC Reach and its ability to covers the full cost of college attendance for students up to four years. The general description of NC Reach is as follows:

NC Reach is a state funded scholarship offered for up to 4 years, including fall, spring, and summer school terms. The program funds up to the school’s full cost of attendance after other public funds and scholarships have been applied. NC Reach provides comprehensive student support, including Virtual Mentors, Care Packages, and internships.” (North Carolina Reach, 2022).

Even with funding opportunities like NC Reach (more information found here: <https://www.ncreach.org/about-us>), youth who age out of foster care still have additional hurdles to overcome. Most students do not graduate from college in four years; a six-year graduation rate for students who started their undergraduate degree in 2013 was 63% (NCES, 2021). Low graduation rates for all undergraduate students in the U.S. are now reported with less than 10% of youth who were in foster care graduating from college with a bachelor’s degree (Geiger & Beltran, 2017; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Additionally, former foster care students might not have adequate housing during school breaks. NC Reach does cover funding for summer semester, which could possibly address these concerns, but every student might not be able to take advantage of a summer session because they need to work during the summer to financially support themselves.

Many interviewees participated in additional trainings or professional developments to gain information about other types of programs that could help populations in need. Many have also led trainings that seek to prepare workers in service areas. Legislation around youth services and

advocacy constantly changes, so practitioners have to make sure they stay up to date on these new policies, regulations, treatments/interventions. One of the interviewees who worked at a temporary shelter for “runaway or homeless youth” explained the need for constant training.

Umm, but, it’s always a changing and evolving field that we are in, so umm, just making sure staff are trained currently on all the stuff is always a big challenge, you know, cause you get behind with the latest umm interventions and, you know, procedures and policies, so that’s always a gap is just trying to make sure that the staff is trained umm effectively to treat the youth that come in.

As iterated by this interviewee working with youth requires constantly adapting and staying up to date on new interventions and guidelines and regulations.

LGBTQIA+ Services and Recommendations

Most of people who I interviewed said that their shelter or organization did not have specific services for LGBT+ youth. Many of the interviewees stated that youth do not disclose their sexual orientation, or when they do, their parents do not know. None of the organizations or shelters interviewed barred LGBT+ people or youth from utilizing their services. If LGBT+ youth wanted to talk or receive support for their identity, it was made available to them. Organizations and shelters allow the youth to decide if they want to disclose or not. One interviewee from the child advocacy organization discussed how youth might come out to the child advocate specialist but not their parents. She indicated that many kids do not feel comfortable coming out to their parents for many reasons but said that LGBT+ youth need to be supported on all sides. They need to be supported in school, by teachers, the school system, their parents, community members, and politicians.

The one interviewee who did work at the LGBT+ support organization discussed how typically the more supportive parents are those who have kids under the age of 13, while parents with youth who are 17 and up are more likely to kick their kids out. The interviewee went on to say that many parents need help adjusting to their child being a member of the LGBT community.

Parents are trying to understand and, you know, support their children, but some parents who come in are completely ... opposed to their kids being gay.

[Organization name] will work with these parents to create [a] loving and safe environment. [The supportive parents] want to learn more about what [it] means and how to be supportive and help with understanding.

The interviewee talks about how the North Carolina legislature should focus on more important legislation and issues instead of “policing each other’s personal behavior.” LGBT+ youth face many issues and legislation signaling out their identity as something wrong, which can have negative consequences. The interviewee continues

LGBT+ youth are already facing ...discrimination ... through bullying through maybe religious rhetoric of the old sort ... and then just the overall like you know whenever anything comes up like the Don’t Say Gay Bill, or oh, we’re going to make this huge issue out of you know ... bathrooms or we’re going to make this huge issue of something you know ... that creates division and hate among people.

The interview participant indicated that more legislation is needed to uplift LGBT+ youth. Youth who identify as transgender were said to need the most support. Since transyouth are often told how they should behave and how they should view their identity, a lot of their

agency and control is taken from them. The interviewee discussed the specific issue during the interview they stated:

And umm it's just about wrapping your mind around a new way, and honestly, I would say what they're bringing is the shift ... away from gender and gender roles. So, people ... you know, if I said what is trans really about, or what is non-binary really about, it's about the fact people don't want to be told that you're a girl and that means this, or you're boy and that means that. And know your role and play in your box.

As mentioned, in the Service Model and Myths and Misconceptions sections, the interviewees commonly state that youth should be able to have a say in the decisions made about themselves and that youth will have a better experience when they can be a part of the decision-making process. More work can be done to give this control back to them by letting them express their identity how they choose has echoed above by the interviewee.

Gaps in Service

One interviewee with experience teaching and working for a school district as a homeless liaison discussed some of the obstacles impacting youth who have aged out of the foster care system. Here is what they said regarding the matter:

You know, so that housing piece gets tricky, and then for those who don't have somewhere safe to stay, they might have it when they are in [college], but during holidays and breaks and stuff, where are they going to go? Some universities are good about providing them somewhere to stay, but some universities completely shut down, and they have to figure out where they're going to go while school is on break. So, I think the housing piece is where there is extreme gaps.

Many people experience homelessness for a short period throughout the year. Not everyone who is homeless is chronically homeless. Many people are only homeless for a temporary time. Students without adequate housing for the summer could fall under the chronically homeless or temporary homeless category depending on the agency or organizational definition used to define the terms. The interviewee who worked for a school district addressed two other concerns related to the differences in homeless definitions: Some organizations or agencies might use the HUD definition, while others use a narrower (or broader) definition. Here is what the interviewee stated regarding barriers to assistance and problems with varying definitions:

There is also sometimes gaps to where on the education side we recognized them as having certain rights, but like I said going out into the real world, and HUD, and community based organizations and things like that, they might have a different look at what homelessness looks like. They follow a different definition. So it's like services the district can provide, and we can try to connect you to people, but sometimes people in the community are not willing to, you know, what I mean, honor and acknowledge, because there working off of the HUD definition, and you know sometimes kids struggle to get, like, birth certificates and social security cards. And, you know, I mean things like that that they absolutely need and that presents barriers for them as their trying to, you know what I mean, to get their life in order. And get things together and, you know, move beyond the homeless experience.

This interviewee also discussed how even when services like medical care, therapy, support group, forensic interviews, and extracurricular or summer activities could be offered, there was not always adequate transportation in place. Many of the reasons why youth and

families are not able to access resources, or why youth end up in a crisis situations, is due to low socioeconomic status. Service gaps are thus strongly connected to poverty and financial insecurity. One interviewee explained this by stating, “There are resources there, but a lot of families just can’t afford to get to the resource.” This statement hints at the deep, complexity of economic insecurity, trauma, and health. The interviewees commonly explained that some youth were not able to get medical care, including mental health counseling, not only because of stigma and lack of support from a parent but also because it takes financial resources to initiate the request for services and attend to them. This shows that merely having a service available is not enough. People who need the service may be offered the means by which to access and maintain the service.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

Current research on runaway and homeless youth shows that this is a very vulnerable population. Many youth leave home and end up on the street each year (Hammer et al., 2002). The biggest takeaways from this study is that there are dedicated individuals in North Carolina who want to serve runaway and homeless youth and youth experiencing crises, and that the youth being serve need more compassion and understanding. There is a need for more resources to serve runaway and homeless youth. Shelters have a very limited capacity and are not always able to provide services to youth who need them.

Eleven employees of youth homeless shelters and youth advocacy organizations were interviewed, and these interviews show that North Carolina may not be able to adequately serve unaccompanied homeless youth. Family problems was one of the leading factors that cause runaway episodes according to the interviewees. The current structure of NC legislation also hinders youth of a certain age to access mental health services within parental consent. In addition, many shelters require youth who come off the street to have their parent's or guardian's consent to stay at the shelter. At most, youth are only able to stay at a shelter for a night before they are turned over to law enforcement or DSS if their parent cannot be contacted to sign the necessary paperwork. For many youth, this creates a barrier and stops them from reaching out to shelters and organizations. Youth need a safe place they can go, especially when they are leaving unsafe or harmful homes.

Some NC legislation may encourage certain children to remain homeless and living on the streets. Youth who would be considered "pushed out" or "throwaway" can certainly not access shelter resources due to not having contact with their parents. Additionally, youth who are leaving home due to family problems and specifically abusive and neglectful situations may not

be able to receive shelter and organizational resources that they need, meaning they may find themselves “on the street.” Youth who live on the street are at an increased risk of further victimization and trauma (Bender et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2010). Twenty percent of youth who are on the street will end up being human trafficked (Haynie, 2017; Murphy, 2017). The goal should be to keep youth off the streets. As many interviewees indicated legislation reform is needed to ensure that youth have the best possible path to accessing services and resources regardless of their relationship or contact with their parent or legal guardian.

Researchers have pointed out that COVID might add additional layers to the runaway and homeless youth problem in America, but due to the novel nature of pandemic living there is no way to know COVID’s true impact on youth who choose to leave home and/or not return home. Interviewees were asked about COVID’s impact on their ability to offer services and the demand for services. For both youth shelters, demand did not decrease during the pandemic, but COVID did impact shelters’ ability to maintain full staff and socialization due to a variety of reasons. It is possible that the quarantine restrictions brought on by the pandemic have added a new reason for children to leave home, NCEMC has cited that children ran away out of frustration and wanting social interaction with people besides those in their household (Bischoff, 2020), but it is difficult to know more about this issue. Youth who left home during the pandemic might be a part of the subgroup who quickly return home and are not chronically missing. The pandemic could have increased the demand for respites for youth, while not impacting the number of youth who left home for lengthier periods of time. It is not unusual to suspect that the pandemic would increase the amount of conflict between parents and their children, but COVID’s overall impact is not completely known. Only two interviewees mentioned an issue maintaining contact with the youth who typically utilize their services. One was the person who worked as at the LGBT+

advocacy organization and the other was the person who worked for the school district as a homeless youth liaison. These two organizations mentioned that COVID strongly influenced their ability to maintain connections with those they served because schools were no longer meeting in person. Both said that school was the easiest and most efficient ways for them to connect youth with resources and support, and this was disrupted when youth were no longer in schools. Neither of these organizations stopped working and instead got more creative with how they choose to find or recruit youth for their services.

The interviewees did not state whether a certain racial or ethnic demographic group was overrepresented at their organization or shelter, but when interviewees mentioned race, it was typically Black and African American youth who they said were overrepresented. National samples show that Black youth are overrepresented in missing person and child abuse and neglect cases (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016; M. R. Pergamit, 2010; Sedlak, McPherson, et al., 2010; Sedlak, Mettenburg, et al., 2010). Based on the sample within this study this same finding holds true in North Carolina. This study did not examine why Black youth are overrepresented in runaway and homeless youth shelters, but it does suggest that North Carolina shares some similarities with national samples.

Many interviewees discussed how sexual orientation and gender identity was not a specific criterion for accessing their services, so they rarely asked youth about these issues when resources were utilized. If the youth accessing their resources decided to disclose their sexual orientation, interviewees indicated that they would make sure they got the support or resources that they needed. Youth were given the choice to disclose or not. These findings might have been different in a state that has more laws welcoming of LGBT+ individuals. North Carolina is situated in the “Bible Belt” and has more publicly debated LGBT+ rights for the last several

years. Still, the passing of the Don't Say Gay Bill in Florida shows that the United States is not that progressive when it comes to LGBT+ youth rights. The interview data suggest that LGBT+ youth may need more support and understanding and that legislation condemning discrimination against LGBT+ youth could help add resources to help LGBT+ youth.

Lastly, the importance of definitions came up several times during this study. Many organizations, shelters, and agencies defined homelessness and runaway status in different ways. Persons who worked in the youth shelters that I interviewed were categorized as runaway and homeless youth shelters, but parents had to be present to check their child into the shelter before they could stay temporarily. Additionally, it became clear through the interviews that many youth are unable to access certain services due to not meeting certain standards of homelessness. One interviewee explained the issues with definition like this:

HUD does not recognize, a doubled-up family as somebody who is experiencing homelessness. So, you know, if I lost my house today, and I had to go move in with my sister because I have nowhere to go, or neighbor or friend or whatever, and, you know, by the school definition if we lack fixed, regular, adequate housing, we are homeless. HUD doesn't honor that, you know, and it's the same thing with youth. You know, and they're looking at, alright you are 17, you might be couch surfing but you don't meet our definition of homeless.

A more universal or broad definition that allows of more people without permanent adequate housing to receive resources and support may be helpful. Similarly, youth who have aged out of the foster care or are involved in the juvenile criminal system or who otherwise live without parental supervision are vulnerable, yet they are overlooked when it comes to homeless resources because of the varying definitions of homelessness.

Limitations

The labels that we assign to youth who leave home can have damaging consequences. How researchers choose to describe youth's experiences has an impact on how society and government officials view this population. I have tried to honor the youth being discussed in this study, but I know at times I might have failed at this mission. Due to not interviewing youth who have left home, I am allowing for society in the forms of advocates and shelter/organization employees to speak for them. In the future, researchers should interview NC youth who have left home and did not return. These youth should be given the space to discuss their own experiences and to tell the world what they need and what they needed.

Selection Biases

This study uses a nonprobability and cross-sectional sampling design. A snowball method was also used to recruit personnel who may not respond to the direct recruitment emails. There are over 100 counties in North Carolina, and most of the interviewees came from only a few of these and worked in a specific region of North Carolina, so this sample is not totally representative of all of North Carolina. Additionally, as discussed previously, most unaccompanied homeless minors who have left home or a foster care placement will not reach out to a shelter (Slesnick et al., 2009). I understand that personnel I interviewed can only discuss the experiences of a subgroup of youth who have left home or who were placed in a shelter as respite from home.

Researchers have discussed how rural areas and rural RHY organization and shelters are typically excluded from research studies analyzing youth who have left home and not returned in the United States (Witkin et al., 2005). Based on the sampling frame, this study might add to the

lack of representation of unaccompanied homeless youth who come from rural areas in the literature.

Methodology Assumptions

Marvasti (2011) very nicely lays out some of the major methodology assumptions of interviews. A major assumption of correlational research and surveying/interviewing research is that people are accurate reporters of their experiences, emotions, and understanding (Marvasti, 2011). Additionally, my current methods propose that program directors and counselors have enough basic knowledge to discuss certain aspects of NC RHY that end up in their care (e.g. these reasoning for leaving home and/or not returning). Researchers assume that the people being interviewed hold the knowledge that the researcher needs, but this may not always be the case. The proposed informants may not hold organizational expertise, but I posit them as knowledgeable informants based on their position within these organizations. All organizations proposed to be included will have been recognized as being runaway and homeless youth shelters and organizations by the federal or North Carolina government. Being recognized by state and federal agencies provides some evidence that responses from these respondents are reliable and have been vetted to a certain extent.

Future Research

A variety of North Carolina news outlets reported on a story involving Charlotte-Mecklenburg police department (CMPD) and one of their operations that has led to the return of over 150 missing NC juveniles. These articles are similar to other articles discussed in the missing person literature. First, the articles often report experiences of the missing juveniles found and returning home as being active and willing participants in abuse. Missing girls are typically not discussed as being victims. Scholars have discussed the adultification of girls by

media (Meyers, 2004; Patton & Ward, 2016). Second, news reports, including those discussing this CMPD operation, state that the missing juveniles engage in human trafficking and prostitution (Crump, 2021; Limehouse, 2021), but there is rarely an acknowledgement that these are minors who cannot be engaged in these activities legally willingly. There is a bigger conversation here around victim blaming and agency among abuse victims, especially since it is noted in several articles that most of these girls were under the “supervision” of a pimp or older adult, highlighting their potential victimization. The erasure of victimhood from victims is not only a national issue but one that occurs in North Carolina and the recent reporting of the CMPD operation.

More research needs to be conducted looking at missing children in North Carolina. Right now, the only entities that have widespread control of over the information shared with the public are the North Carolina government and the large news media in North Carolina. Relying on government agencies and mass media outlets to explain the experiences of unaccompanied youth leads to the erasure and misrepresentation of their experiences. In addition, law enforcement and mass media only have so much knowledge about the experiences of these youth. More reliable information may have to come from the youth themselves. Researchers studying missing youth nationally use survey data from shelter personnel, government reports and surveys, and surveys with the missing youth themselves. Future research could interview North Carolina’s previously unaccompanied homeless minors and minors who are still homeless using a variety of definitions. There is room to learn more here in North Carolina.

This study hopes to be a step in the right direction and explain what has been missing from the conversation in one regard. The interview data show that personnel and advocates for homeless youth in North Carolina need more support and better legislation to assist them. Many

youth are experiencing traumatic events and their parents can act as gatekeepers, preventing them from accessing certain services. Youth deserve to have more agency and control in their lives. More research should be done examining how parental or guardian consent can impact runaway and homeless youth's ability to access resources in North Carolina.

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APPENDIX A: FYSB GRANTED NC ORGANIZATIONS

| Basic Center Program Grant Period: 2018-2021 | Basic Center Program Grant Period 2019 – 2022 | Transitional Living Program Grant Period 2017 – 2022 | Transitional Living Program Grant Period 2018 – 2021 | Transitional Living Program Grant Period 2019 – 2022 |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| CARING for Children, Inc. Asheville, NC | Catholic Charities Diocese of Charlotte Charlotte, NC | Youth Focus, Inc. Greensboro, NC | Youth Focus, Inc. Greensboro, NC | Coastal Horizons Center, Inc. Wilmington, NC |
| With Friends, Inc. Gastonia, NC | The Relatives, Inc. Charlotte, NC | Haven House, Inc. Raleigh, NC | Haven House, Inc. Raleigh, NC | |
| Haven House, Inc. Raleigh, NC | Coastal Horizons Center, Inc. Wilmington, NC | | | |

APPENDIX B: NC RUNAWAY SHELTERS

Table 4: NC RHY Organization Details

| Name of Shelter/ Organization/ Program | NCDPS Program Classification | FYSB Funding | Counties Served | Ages Served | Length of Service/Service Details |
|---|---|---|----------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Trinity Place Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Needs • Housing/Shelter • <u>Runaway/Youth Shelters</u> | Maybe – through CARING for Children, Inc. | 100 | 7 – 17 | Length of service: 1 day to 21 days Coed program with a capacity of six. |
| <u>Wrenn House</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Needs • Housing/Shelter • <u>Runaway/Youth Shelters</u> | Yes – through <u>Haven House, Inc.</u> | 3 | 10 – 17 | Length of service: 1 day to 21 days Coed program and capacity unknown |
| <u>Boys and Girls Homes</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Needs • Housing/Shelter • <u>Runaway/Youth Shelters</u> | No | 2 | 10 – 20 | Length of service: less than month Coed short-term shelter |
| Act Together Crisis Care: <u>Emergency Shelter</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Needs • Housing/Shelter • <u>Runaway/Youth Shelters</u> | Maybe – through Youth Focus Inc | 3 | 11 – 17 | Length of service: 1 to 3 months |

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE CONSTRUCTION

Table 5: Interview Guide Question Construction Outline

| Macci and Ferguson (2016) Original Questions | Possible Study Questions | Question Theme/Topic |
|---|---|------------------------------|
| Describe the specific services you provide for LGBTQ youth as a whole. Describe the specific services you provide separately for a) lesbian youth, b) gay male youth, c) bisexual youth, d) transgender youth, and e) questioning youth. | Describe the specific services you provide for runaway and homeless youth as a whole. Describe the specific services you provide separately for a) boys and girls, b) RHY who are between 18-21, c) LGBT RHY, d) throwaway youth | Services/Programs |
| What local/state/federal legislation has helped or hindered service provision for your LGBTQ clients/consumers? | What local/state/federal legislation has helped or hindered your ability to offer services? | Federal or State Legislation |
| Describe the extent to which LGBTQ youth have a voice in developing programs and services at your organization. Could you illustrate with specific examples? | Describe the extent to which RHY have a voice in developing/revising programs and services at your organization. Could you illustrate with specific examples? | Services/Programs |
| In your opinion, what are the top three service gaps or limitations in current programming for the LGBTQ RHY population? | In your opinion, what are the top three service gaps or limitations in current programming for NC RHY? What service or programming areas do you wish you add more funding or trained workers for? | Services/Programs |
| In your opinion, what are your main recommendations for new: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice treatments/interventions with LGBTQ RHY? • Policy changes for LGBTQ RHY? • Research to better understand LGBTQ RHY and their needs? | In your opinion, what are your main recommendations for new: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice treatments/interventions for RHY? • Policy changes for RHY in North Carolina? • Research to better understand RHY and their needs? | Services/Programs |
| Are there any other important questions you think I omitted that I should be asking other organizational directors with whom I speak, or other important people with whom I should speak about these issues? | | General |
| | Do you think there are any myths or misconceptions about RHY? If so, what are they? Are there any understudied areas of RHY? What reasons or explanations do RHY provide to workers when discussing why they left home? Why do RHY decide to utilize your services? Do RHY discuss how they found out about your program or organization? | Reasoning |

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following questions will serve as an interview guide, though respondents' answers may lead to unforeseen questions.

Before I begin, I want you to know that this interview is completely voluntary. If we should come to any questions you don't want to answer, just let me know and we can skip it and move on to another question. The answers that you give will be kept confidential. I am going to ask you to read this document (provide Adult Consent form). Please read this; let me know when you are finished. If there are any questions or concerns please let me know.

Introductory Questions

1. What is your name? What title do you currently hold at this shelter or organization? What made you interested in working here? Do you have any degrees or certificates related to the work you do now?
2. During any point in your youth would you have been considered a 'runaway or homeless youth'?

Services and Resources Provided

1. Describe the specific services you provide for runaway and homeless youth as a whole. Describe the specific services you provide separately for a) boys and girls, b) RHY who are between 18-21, c) LGBT RHY, d) throwaway youth
 - a. What type of counseling or groups do you offer to youth at your organization?
2. Describe the extent to which RHY have a voice in developing/revising programs and services at your organization. Could you illustrate with specific examples?
3. In your opinion, what are the top three service gaps or limitations in current programming for NC RHY? What service or programming areas do you wish you add more funding or trained workers for?
4. In your opinion, what are your main recommendations for new:
 - a. Practice treatments/interventions for RHY?
 - b. Policy changes for RHY in North Carolina?
 - c. Research to better understand RHY and their needs?
5. Why do RHY decide to utilize your services? Do RHY discuss how they found out about your program or organization?
6. From which counties do youth who utilize your shelter or organization come from?
 - a. Are most of these youth local?

Federal or State Action/Legislation

1. What local/state/federal legislation has helped or hindered your ability to offer services?
2. How was your organization funded?
 - a. Or where does the funding from your organization come from?
 - i. Mostly donors or government entities

RHY Reasoning

1. Do you think there are any myths or misconceptions about RHY? If so, what are they?
Are there any understudied areas of RHY?
2. What reasons or explanations do RHY provide to workers when discussing why they left home?
 - a. How do the youth at your organization explain or understand why they are on the street and homeless?
 - b. What reason or reasons do youth give for leaving and not returning home?
 - i. What are the most common reasons(s) that youth give?
 - ii. Would these youth fit under the label of throwaway youth who were kicked out of the home or told by their parents not to come back?

Conclusion Questions

1. Are there any other important questions you think I omitted that I should be asking other organizational directors with whom I speak, or other important people with whom I should speak about these issues?