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## Surfing Without Water: College Students Who Experience Homelessness

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**Surfing Without Water: College Students Who Experience  
Homelessness**

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A Co-Authored Dissertation submitted to  
The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
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### **Abstract**

This study explores the educational experiences and needs of college students experiencing homelessness from the St. Louis metropolitan area. Research has shown that youth experiencing homelessness have difficulties entering college, remaining in college, and graduating from college (School House Connections, 2020). Difficulty accessing services and support coupled with prejudice, discrimination, and lack of knowledge can be detrimental to the homeless students' academic performance (Svokos, 2015). The purpose of this study is to investigate issues of homelessness in higher education as experienced by independent college students identified as homeless in high school and explore the types of support universities offer via the College Cost Reduction and Act (CCRAA). The results from this study provide an understanding of the challenges that homeless independent students face while in pursuit of a postsecondary degree and the types of supports offered via their universities. The six themes noted from interviews with four students included: basic needs, trauma, educational support, connections, adulting, and cultural competence. Recommendations for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: McKinney-Vento, Unaccompanied Youth, Estranged Students, Higher Education Homelessness, College Cost Reduction and Access Act, Independent Students, Racism, Social Theory Network, Social Capital, Intentional and Structural Racism.

### **Dedication**

In loving memory of my mother and father-in-law, who were both blind from retinitis and glaucoma, respectively, but saw much more than the sighted with 20/20 vision. Their blindness heightened my senses, and awareness regarding communication (verbal and non-verbal), social issues, and of people in their environment. They flooded me with insight, wisdom, and knowledge, and gave me multiple views of people through the natural and unnatural lenses. To them, I say thank you for the many meaningful deposits, and for gracing me with the ability to see without physically opening my eyes. Those lessons are priceless!

To my significant other, father, mother-in-law, children, siblings, pastor, church members, family, staff, friends, colleagues, parents, and students, I could not have made this journey without you. Your love, words of encouragement, experiences, motivation, and expectations gave me the extra boost needed when I felt depleted or emotionally bankrupted. Thank you for your intermittent prayers, coaching, therapy sessions, mental gymnastics, and for just being a leaning post during the tumultuous times of the year 2020. Those moments meant more than you know.

My professors and classmates, I appreciate you. You all were a blast from the beginning and past! Our diversity showered us with droplets of adversity and, at times, heated conversations, defensiveness, indirect attacks, and tears. Those experiences carried us throughout the semesters and positioned us for graduation day. We formed cohesiveness, and I pray lifelong transformations. Our journey that taught me so much. It is an honor to call you Friend, and to have shared this learning experience with you.

Then, there was the talk. Many of you have said that I am in the practice of *keeping it real!* Those *keeping it real* moments kept us in outbursts of laughter and intellectual stimulation. There were times when you appeared to be holding on to your intellectual seats. Hey, we all survived. There was never a dull moment, and for that, I say thank you. “Thank you and thank God!” Now, lead with purpose, serve with integrity, and exit with dignity!

Lastly, Dr. Hassler, you are a gem. It was as if God carved you out, perfectly, just for our cohort. It did not matter the challenge nor the topic, you remained in the driver’s seat and guided us individually and collectively. You suffered great loss (Dr. Davis) but steadied the course. You justly provided a full, enriching, educational experience in midst of adversity. You taught us to stand, and not become distracted by the noise called life. The noise is simply a gentle reminder that the work must be done. Thank you for mentoring me with intention and purpose. Continue to be the gem-cutter that Dr. Davis, education, and life experience has shaped you to be. Job well done!

Deidra C. Thomas-Murray, MSW

To my mom, who may not remember anymore what this journey is all about, but who always worked for people, learned new things, and still encourages me. To my husband, who is the best partner I could ever hope to have in life. To my dad, who left this world way to soon, but has made a life-long impact on me. To my son, who I hope will stay curious and will continue to learn how to love and learn. To Dr. Davis, who let me learn and encouraged me. To Dr. Hassler, who kept encouraging us and never lost faith in our work, who encouraged us to graduate despite our procrastination. To my cohorts who helped me understand life as others live it, and who put up with me learning from their experiences. To my 4-H role models, who started me on this journey, have always been encouraging, and will continue with me on this journey. To the University of Missouri for giving me an opportunity to make a difference. To my church family, who keep teaching me about caring and sharing. To Deidra, who I could not have done this without. And especially to the students who gave us their time and stories of surfing without water.

Melissa Scheer

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

“For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.” (King James Bible, 1769/2021, Deuteronomy 15:11). Though the Bible provides this guidance for how to treat the poor, these researchers believe that instead we cast judgment and create systemic hurdles that hinder educational access and security for young people.

### **Unaccompanied Youth**

Unaccompanied youth are a unique population as it relates to educational support pre- and post-secondary education homelessness (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2007). They are usually students who do not live with their parents or legal guardians. These students are tasked with the responsibility of physically, socially, financially, and emotionally fending for themselves. They navigate systems without consistent parental guidance or support (CRS, 2007). These researchers have met students like these who have a wealth of life experience and survival skills they may have learned from trial and error with natural and prescribed consequences from their decision-making skillset. Are their skills enough to survive homelessness, navigate elementary, secondary and higher education, and graduate college?

These students seem to weather life’s storms that would cause a non-homeless person to throw up their hands and quit. These students seem resilient despite their pain, trauma, disappointments, and lack of support and access to adequate resources. They surf without water.

The federal law known as The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in 2015 under Every Student Succeeds' Act, offers students educational rights, protections, provisions, and support to ensure students gain seamless access to schools while enrolled in K-12 settings (US Department of Education, 2018). This law references these students as runaways or throwaways, meaning they left home by choice or were asked to leave by their parents or guardians.

There are other contributing factors that cause students to become unaccompanied youth. They are as follows: death or incarceration of a parent or caregiver, drug addiction, abuse, mental and physical health issues, natural disasters, sexual orientation, lack of parental skills or their parents simply walks away from parenting without giving custody to a relative or friend (US Department of Education, 2018). It is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act that puts these youth on educators' radar, but what happens to them once they graduate from high school? This paper explores the question from the perspective of higher education.

As a Homeless Youth Liaison, Murray, the second author, believes that, when working with these unique populations, school staff often operate in the right now, focusing on grades, test scores, graduation, and career plans. They are not envisioning later, when the students become adults without continued guidance and support, or age-out of foster care systems. Educators facilitate preparation for enrollment into college, but who is there to ensure they graduate after enrolling into college? Students' sense of stability and community from educators and classmates in high school ends upon graduating, and they independently begin to navigate as adults.

Murray sees in her work that many of the students experiencing homelessness do not have access to the necessary life skills for adulting. In high school, students prepare for high school graduation and acceptance into college independent of adults. They are surfing without water.

In her role, Murray knows that teachers work to prepare students for graduation. Many students may have hopes of their students pursuing higher education, but there is no after-care plan for homeless youth. Is it that everyone assumes that students are ready to begin adulting and become financially responsible for themselves? Emphasis is mainly on academics, compliance, and state and federal guidelines in high school. Do educators assume that homeless students and unaccompanied youth have healthy or wealthy consistent adult connections? How realistic are higher education conversations with unaccompanied youth? For example, Murray hears educators sometimes say things like, “If you make the grade, doors will open for scholarships opportunities.” Yet, she knows funding is competitive, inadequate, and in some instances, already delegated to certain populations.

Murray believes that the lack of parental support can be overwhelming for independent students attending high school and college. Each semester students are flooded with the challenges of meeting basic needs and obtaining food, shelter, and safety. Does anyone ever wonder who makes purchases for graduation, special events, prom, or day-to-day clothing of unaccompanied youth? How are homeless students financially navigating in high school as they couch surf? How likely are these students to have transportation to activities and events? Will they have a vehicle, and who will provide them with gas money? Will they hitchhike with their classmates or share the cost

of car rentals? Who sends them care packages? Who attends events in support of them when they are recognized or honored? Where do they get the money to participate in extracurricular activities, or do they simply not participate due to poverty-imposed financial exclusion? Are students homeless during school breaks and closures? Many continue to experience homelessness, but that is their reality. Who can homeless students call when they run short of money, become pregnant and who gives them guidance when faced with educational or emotional challenges?

Casually in conversation, staff will say, “I wonder how ‘so-and-so’ is doing?” It is not easy to forget students who lacked familial or experienced financial hardships. The image leaves lasting questions of, “I wonder . . .” The struggle for students does not end once they are out of the educators’ view. By no design of their own, homeless students grow up and become adults who struggle as well. Once they graduate high school, there is no after care follow-up or support from school districts.

Each May, thousands of homeless students graduate high school from various school districts around the United States (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2020). If these student are like many that Murray meets, they eagerly anticipate an end to their homelessness via the educational red-carpet called graduation only to become more familiar with the unsurmountable, unresolved systemic issues surrounding support.

The question of what happens to students experiencing homelessness once they graduate from high school should be explored. This research seeks to illuminate the challenges of higher education homelessness, its systemic issues, and how best to support this population by bridging gaps.

## **Background**

In the early 1980s homelessness began to increase for school-aged children. Ronald Reagan signed into law the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (US Department of Education, 2018). Before this federal law, one can only assume that the community or family members stood in the gap for loved ones, or they fell through the cracks by dropping out of school. The law was not perfect, but it provided relief to those who experienced housing insecurity while pursuing education, an opportunity that should be afforded to all students (Crook, 2014).

The law was reauthorized in 2000 by President Bill Clinton as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (US Department of Education, 2018). It was reauthorized a third time as part of Every Student Succeeds Act under the leadership of President Barak Obama in 2015 (US Department of Education, 2018). The goal of the law was to provide educational protections for school-age children, as an effort to afford them a sense of stability in one aspect of their lives while other aspects of students' lives remained out of the control of the government, specifically students' household challenges and their mobility rate (Crook, 2014).

## **McKinney-Vento's Definition of Homelessness**

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, per Title IX, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act defines *homeless* as follows (US Department of Education, 2018). The term homeless children and youths is defined as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and includes children and youth who:

- are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals
- have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings
- are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; or
- are migratory children.

This definition is used widely in the United States and is also used in recognizing college students experiencing homelessness (NCHE, 2020).

### **Crisis for College Students**

The high number of college students facing hardships, including homelessness, food insecurity, and housing instability, shows the need to understand the obstacles these students face in achieving in college (Crutchfield et al., 2016; Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Packer, 2008). The following numbers illustrate the extent of the crisis for college students:

- 41,150 – Number of unaccompanied homeless college students (NCHE, 2020).
- 12% – Percentage of college students reporting living in homeless situations (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).
- 60% – Percentage of community college students reporting housing instability (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

- 48% – Percentage of students at 4-year institutions reporting housing instability (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).
- 43% – Percentage of college students reporting being food insecure (Nazmi et al., 2018).

Not only do students face the physical challenges of homelessness, housing instability, and food insecurity, stereotypes about homelessness are also a problem (Ashtari, 2017; Hillard, 2010; Mulrenan et al., 2020). In interviews with students who experience homelessness in college, students report leading double lives and working to keep their homeless situations secret (Hillard, 2010; Mulrenan et al., 2020; SJ, 2015). Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to have academic attainment barriers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA) is the one federal law created to specifically support students who are unaccompanied and homeless (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2007). The CCRAA allows unaccompanied homeless students to independently apply for financial aid, enabling them to realize college funding (CRS, 2007). Researchers (Crutchfield et al. 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016; Packer, 2008) recommend several additional supports that youth experiencing homelessness in college need:

- Simplify the FAFSA application process and make it more accessible.
- Train financial aid administrators to reduce barriers.
- Make federal SNAP and housing benefits more readily available to college students.
- Expand federal student aid for college, including aid during the summer months.

- Encourage states and colleges to increase support for youth experiencing homelessness.

Though the CCRAA has made college a possibility for many youth facing homelessness alone, there is more that could be done (Crutchfield et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016).

Colleges and universities have some flexibility in applying the CCRAA. Because of racial bias, students of color who are also homeless may face barriers in accessing the CCRAA benefits (Edwards, 2020). Students who are homeless are more likely to be Black; 39.8% of homeless people are Black, while Black people make up 13.4% of the population (Henry et al., 2018; Shinn, 2010; US Census, 2019).

Institutional racism can be defined as overt acts that intentionally exclude people because of race or implicit policies and decisions that result in discrimination or harm to people of color (Chesler et al., 2005). Students experiencing homelessness may be impacted by racism because of intersectionality and prevalence of homelessness in groups targeted by racism (Cronley, 2020; DeRango, 2001; Lurie et al., 2015).

These researchers have come together to work toward a better understanding of the experiences of college students experiencing homelessness, and how these students' institutions both support and hinder them.

Deidra Thomas-Murray, the first researcher, works as the Homeless Coordinator and Foster Care Liaison at St. Louis Public Schools, Students-in-Transition office. Each year, over 5,000 students experiencing homelessness receive services through her office (Neale, 2018).

The second researcher, Melissa Scheer, works as a 4-H Youth Development Specialist for the University of Missouri Extension in Jefferson County, Missouri. Scheer's work with youth experiencing homelessness and interest in racial segregation in the region inspired her to join this dissertation team. Scheer grew up and now works in communities with about 95% white, non-Hispanic populations (US Census, 2019b), which surround one of the highest racially segregated cities in the United States (DeRango, K., 2001). As a white woman, she is particularly interested in how the University of Missouri Extension, a predominantly white institution, has history, policies, and culture that perpetuates classism and racism and how that influences the youth and families of Missouri.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to gain insight and understanding into best practices when educating college students experiencing higher education homelessness, explore and understand barriers, and ensure existing supports are adequate to achieve graduation. The study's focus is on the higher education of homeless students from the St. Louis metropolitan area who were homeless while in high school and as college students. Researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four college students who were homeless in high school before enrolling in higher education institutions as independent students. Participants had a zip code in the St. Louis metropolitan area prior to graduating high school, enrolled in college within a year of this study, and were estranged from their parents. Participants were college students identified as homeless as outlined in the CCRAA. The study determined key issues faced by students experiencing homelessness and supports offered by universities via CCRAA.

This research adds to the literature that gives voice to college student homelessness and adds in that we are specifically asking students about their needs as students and what they need from their institution. In a meta-analysis of literature that gives voice to college students experiencing homelessness, Bowes and O'Neill (2019) call for more research with students in four-year college programs, as well as more researched focused on understand how student experiencing homelessness succeed in college and determining what resources will be most helpful to students. This research aims to begin to fulfil that purpose.

### **Theoretical Frame**

This exploratory study used the general theory that homelessness and the attitudes and perceptions about people who are homeless is a challenge to students who are homeless and seeking higher education success. This challenge of homelessness manifests itself as a lack of educational supports and a presence of institutional barriers. One existing framework that can assist in organizing research regarding the unique situation of homeless students is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). In general, Maslow's theory is that basic needs such as food and security must be met before other needs such as education can be addressed. Though Maslow's theory has drawn some criticism over the years for focusing on more individualistic rather than collective needs, the basic premise of having basic needs met first is valuable for youth in college who are facing homelessness (Wilson, Williams, & Leach, 2019).

### **Research Questions**

The overarching questions for this exploratory qualitative case study are as follows:

1. Higher education homelessness: Are educational supports for college students navigating systems without familial and educational supports adequate to ensure students graduate?
2. What supports do universities offer students experiencing homelessness, specifically via the College Cost Reduction and Access Act?

### **Definitions**

- **Adulting:** Actions that would normally be done by adults (Steinmetz, 2016).
- **College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA):** Act of Congress that allows unaccompanied homeless students who are without the financial support of parents or guardians to qualify on their own for college financial aid as well as other supports for students (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2007).
- **Couch Surfing:** Living with a friend or relative, perhaps sleeping on their couch, for short periods of time due to not having another place to live.
- **FAFSA:** Free Application for Federal Student Aid
- **Food Insecure:** Not having funds for food, skipping meals because of the expense of running out of food (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).
- **Homeless Youth Liaison:** School personal designated at each school district to perform the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (CSR, 2007).
- **Housing Insecure:** Difficulty making rent or utility payments or living with friends due to financial issues (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

- Institutional Racism: Overt acts that intentionally exclude people because of race or subtle implicit policies and decisions that result in discrimination or harm to people of color (Chesler et al., 2005).
- McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act: Act of Congress that promotes the identification of students in K-12 schools that are homeless and requires school districts to provide them with certain resources and opportunities (CSR, 2007).
- Unaccompanied or Independent Youth or Students: Youth no longer in the custody of their parents or legal guardians (CSR, 2007).
- Youth: Young people, typically between the ages 14- 24.
- Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Youth living in a variety of circumstances that could include living with friends or relatives due to the inability to afford to live elsewhere or contribute financially to housing expenses, living in a homeless shelter, living in cars or hotels, or living unsheltered (CRS, 2007).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The literature review is a discussion of higher education homelessness in the United States at local colleges and universities. The literature discusses issues surrounding college homelessness, prevalence of homelessness on college campuses, food and housing insecurity, College Cost Reduction and Access Act, educational barriers, and challenges related to students receiving adequate supports from institutions of higher learning. The literature review was organized according to college students' homelessness, prevalence of higher education homelessness, basic needs insecurity, College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, educational barriers, and systemic racism.

### **College Student Homelessness**

In 2018, 17% of college students were homeless, and about half were housing insecure, meaning they had difficulty making rent or utility payments or lived with friends due to financial issues (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). These statistics likely undercount the number of homeless and housing insecure students in college because students voluntarily report their situations, and many may choose not to answer (Dyne, 2017). In addition to homelessness, college students face food insecurity, report difficulties during semester breaks, and experiencing negative stereotypes, which result in barriers to academic achievement (Briggs, 2017; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007; Nazmi et al., 2018).

### **Prevalence of Higher Education Homelessness**

The Hope Center is an “action research center transforming higher education into a more effective, equitable, and impactful sector using a powerful combination of applied

scientific research, technical assistance to colleges and universities, policy advising with state and federal governments, and strategic communications.” (The Hope Center, 2021, para. 1). Their 2018 study surveyed more than 86,000 students at 124 two-year and four-year colleges from 24 states in the US (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Over half of community college students in the United States do not have consistent housing, and 18% are homeless (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). In one study, one-third of students who report being homeless at community colleges in the United States report using loans to live on (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017).

Those interviewed were mature students and youth ages 18-23 during their homeless situations. Mature students were returning to education to better their lives (Mulrenan et al., 2018).

Patrick Murlrenan and colleagues (2018) identified students sleeping on floors and couches, sharing homes with friends and relatives, or living in hostels or local emergency shelters. Researchers found that 14% of students in their School of Social Professions experienced housing insecurity. The researchers noted that an increase in mature students seeking opportunities to get a degree and a better job than they had before corresponded with an increase in homelessness (Mulrenan et al., 2018). The students that were homeless were without adequate income and financial support from family or friends. The students experiencing homelessness had less reliable work schedules, were not employed in fields related to their majors, earned less than \$15 an hour, and did not experience relief of housing woes via financial aid (Mulrenan et al., 2018).

In 2019, in the United States, 41,150 students applied for federal financial aid as students who were unaccompanied homeless youth. This is about 1 out of 500 students who applied for federal financial aid (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2020). This number probably under counts the number of students unaccompanied and homeless because it does not include students that may have said that their parents claim them on their taxes, students who did not want to claim homeless status because of the stereotypes, or students who do not know that they qualify as homeless, such as youth who sleep at a friend's house (Ashtari, 2017; NCHE, 2020).

### **Student Homelessness and Basic Needs Insecurity**

In a meta-analysis of research studies, researchers found that food insecurity for college students in the United States is higher than food insecurity for households (Nazmi et al., 2018). Of the more than 50,000 students included in the studies reviewed, 43% of students experienced food insecurity in 2015, compared to 13% of households (Nazmi et al., 2018).

One of the studies included in the meta-analysis was *The Still Hungry and Homeless in College Report* (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). This report found that 45% of the students who answered the survey experienced food insecurity, which includes not having funds for food, skipping meals because of the expense, or running out of food. The researchers found that students at a community college had more housing instability and homelessness than students at four-year universities (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Approximately 43,000 students from 66 institutions responded (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Students in a variety of geographies, including rural, urban, and suburban, were food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

Students that had been in foster care were more likely to attend community college than a four-year college. Many of the community college students who had been in foster care at some point in their lives experienced food insecurity, 62%; housing insecurity, 68%; and homelessness, 24% (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

In March 2017, Wisconsin HOPE Lab shared the prevalence of community college students experiencing homelessness and hunger (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). The researchers found that two-thirds of community college students that participated in the study were food insecure, and 14 percent experienced homeless (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Two-year college students' responses regarding housing insecurity were almost double those attending four-year institutions, while the food insecurity numbers were similar.

Long breaks between semesters should be a relaxing time or even a time for internships, opportunities for study-abroad trips, or inter-session course work for college students (Briggs, 2017). Amber Briggs (2017), a first-generation college student identified as homeless using McKinney-Vento, reported personal experience with housing difficulties between semesters. As a first-generation college student, Briggs (2017) did not know in advance that on-campus food and housing would close during school breaks. She experienced couch-surfing, taking low-paying summer jobs that offered housing, and trying to sublet apartments to secure housing. Briggs (2017) recommended that colleges do more to consider the needs of homeless students.

A study of students' experiences with homelessness and food insecurity at the University of California (Crutchfield et al., 2016) found that 12% of students were experiencing homelessness and 24% were facing food insecurities. The researchers also

compared the actual situation as reported by student survey, with faculty and staff impressions. Faculty and staff estimated the number of students who were homeless at 8.7% and food insecure students at 21% (Crutchfield et al., 2016).

### **Homeless Stereotypes**

College administrators at universities recognize that students choose not to disclose their homeless status largely because of the stigma that goes along with the status as a homeless student (Ashtari, 2017; Hillard, 2010; Mulrenan et al., 2020). Administrators report that students try to keep their identity as students experiencing homelessness a secret (Ashtari, 2017). A London University survey found that many students experiencing homelessness were ashamed to tell others about their situations (Mulrenan et al., 2018). One example from a student who experienced homelessness firsthand was described by the student himself in the media (SJ, 2015). The student used a first name and just an abbreviation for his last name: Taylor SJ. Taylor SJ (2015), experienced life as a college student who became homeless during his sophomore year of college. SJ identified the stereotypes and then shared the perspectives of those stereotypes, such as “lazy, strung-out, irresponsible, and incapable of leading normal lives,” which turned out to be almost the opposite of how he had to live his life as a homeless student (para. 15). SJ explained that to be a college student and homeless, he had “worked ten times harder to achieve my goals” (para. 15). SJ described not having internet and computer access and living on less than \$5.00 per day for food, books, daily bus fare, and other needs. One story that SJ shared occurred when they were out with friends. A person who was homeless shared a card trick with them in the hopes of receiving a donation. The friends laughed about the homeless person and wondered if he

wanted money for drugs. SJ (2015) was uncomfortable living a double life, and left the friends early in the night to get back to the homeless shelter before the doors locked.

### **Barriers to Academic Success**

The college graduation rate in the United States in 2019 was just 62% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Low-income students continue to graduate at a much lower rate at 13%, compared to students from families with income in the top 25% of whom 62% graduate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). There are several ways student's homeless situation can impact their college academic success including lack of basic needs, trauma, frequent moves, schedule demands, and college financing (Haskett et al., 2021; Harris, 2017; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007; National Network for Youth, n.d.; SJ, 2015; Sackett, 2015).

Young adults who identified as having food insecurity were more likely to have problems with their academic success if they also had deficiencies in sleep and psychological well-being (Haskett et al., 2021).

In 2014, the United States was behind 19 other countries in college completion (Weston, 2014). Students' housing needs are a likely cause for the lag in college completion for students in the United States compared to other industrialized nations (Sackett, 2015).

Social workers recommend that people working with homeless students should understand that homeless students may have a hard time completing homework and studying outside of class (Tulane University School of Social Work, 2018).

Homelessness and frequent moves are a substantial negative impact on students' education (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007). With frequent moves, students

do not have the paperwork and school records to ensure they are placed in the correct classes (National Network for Youth, n.d.). Other paperwork that can be difficult for homeless students include proof of residency, immunization records, and signatures on permission slips, causing barriers to opportunities for youth who are homeless without their parents or legal guardians (National Network for Youth, n.d.). Another barrier for youth without parents or guardians may be the lack of understanding about policies, deadlines, and resources available (National Network for Youth, n.d.; SJ, 2015).

Luke Shaw, the founder of a homeless shelter for college students, reports that some college students do not have family support to fall back on if their financial situation becomes difficult (Harris, 2017). Students who find themselves homeless have problems finding a place to do homework and the stress of homelessness interferes with students' ability to focus on homework (Harris, 2017).

### **College Cost Reduction and Access Act**

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA) impacts youth experiencing homelessness while enrolled in college by removing some financial barriers for students. The CCRAA provided several changes to federal college financial aid, including loan interest rate cuts, increases in support to low-income families, and of particular interest to these researchers, the opportunity for youth who are homeless and without parent support to apply for financial aid independently (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2007). Youth who are homeless and unaccompanied could be living in various circumstances, including living with friends, living in a homeless shelter, living in cars or hotels, or living unsheltered (CRS, 2007). Because of this act, students who are without the financial support of parents or guardians can qualify on their own for college

financial aid (CRS, 2007). In 2019, 41,150 students applied for financial aid as unaccompanied youth is about 0.2% of all students who applied for the FAFSA (NCHE, 2020).

To qualify for independent status as unaccompanied homeless youth, the CCRAA specifies four corroborating sources (CSR, 2007). The first and most common source is the high school or school district from which the student had previously attended. In 2017, 70% of students who completed the FAFSA as unaccompanied homeless students had their status verified by their high schools (NCHE, 2020). Two additional types of agencies that can attest to a student's homeless status are Housing and Urban Development programs and youth and transitional housing programs, which were sources of verification for 21% of unaccompanied homeless youth's completed FAFSA applications in 2017 (NCHE, 2017). The fourth verification can come from the college or university's financial aid office itself, but in 2017, only 8.5% of completed FAFSA applications from unaccompanied homeless youth came from this method (NCHE, 2017). It is unknown how many unaccompanied homeless youth are completing the applications as freshmen versus returning students.

The CCRAA references the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (CSR, 2007). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the law that requires school districts to provide certain services to youth experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act has a broad definition of homelessness that includes youth living in homeless shelters or on the street, and youth living with friends or family because of loss of housing (CSR, 2007). The CCRAA uses the same definition of homeless. School districts must provide (CSR, 2007; Edwards, 2020; Pospichel, 2013):

- A Homeless Youth Liaison at each school district to perform the requirements of the act.
- Identification and reporting of the number of students experiencing homelessness and those unaccompanied by parents or legal guardians.
- Transportation to the student's school of choice – either the school district that the student last attended or the school district in which the student is currently living.
- Other supports to the student, including opportunities like career programs, educational programs, afterschool programs, or extra-curricular programs.
- Enrollment immediately into the school of the student's choice, even if they do not have the paperwork.
- Support for students in completing the FAFSA when seeking financial aid for college.

Individuals who serve in the role of school district liaisons may differ in how they report the number of students experiencing homelessness (Pospichel, 2013; Edwards, 2020; Neale, 2018). School districts have various methods that they can choose to use to identify youth experiencing homelessness, including surveys to families in schools' families, self-report, or recruiting from area homeless service providers (Pospichel, 2013).

In a qualitative study of experiences of Black high school students experiencing homelessness, individuals may or may not be recorded by school district liaisons based on the student's perceived racial bias of the liaison, the student's fear of the liaison contacting child protective services, or the parent's connection to homeless service

providers (Edwards, 2020). Evidence of variability in how high school liaisons choose to report who is homeless may be inferred when comparing the data from one year to the next, and the number of identified homeless youth is less than half of the previous year (Neale, 2018). Another discrepancy could be seen when some school districts in a county report zero homeless youth and others in the same county report hundreds of homeless youth when the free and reduced lunch rates of the school districts are similar (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019; Neale, 2018).

Other than the CCRAA, which provides access to financial aid for college, there is no similar federal law that requires supports like the McKinney Vento Act for youth who are experiencing homelessness in colleges and universities (Dukes, 2013). However, there is federal support through some programs that colleges and universities can use to support their homeless students (Dukes, 2013). These are not required, but instead are available to colleges and universities that apply (Dukes, 2013).

Federal laws and programs that support students experiencing homelessness besides the CCRAA are minimal. However, the federally funded GEAR-UP and TRIO programs are college access programs designed to support youth with low income, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities in attaining college access (Dukes, 2013, Forstadt, et al., 2020). Colleges and Universities apply for federal funding to provide these programs. Some colleges and universities do not have Trio and GEAR-UP programs. Educational support and the delivery of services seem to be administered differently at each college or university (Dukes, 2013).

These federal programs and the College Cost Reduction and Access Act do not do enough for college students experiencing homelessness. Recommendations from

researchers (Crutchfield et al., 2016; Duke-Benfield & Saunders, Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; 2016; Packer, 2008) in the field suggest that colleges supporting students experiencing homelessness need to:

- Simplify the FAFSA application process and make it more accessible
- Train financial aid administrators to reduce barriers
- Make federal SNAP and housing benefits more readily available to college students
- Expand federal student aid for college, including aid during the summer months
- Encourage states and colleges to do more to support youth experiencing homelessness.

Crutchfield, Chambers, and Duffield (2016) interviewed students experiencing homelessness who were attending community colleges. Some students had good experiences, but some colleges require paperwork and homeless verification approval that is not required via the CCRAA. The recommendations of the researchers included more staff training and changing the policies to remove more barriers. The authors specifically mention that Financial Aid Administrators (FAA) may have negative stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness that contribute to the FAA possibly believing that students experiencing homelessness are trying to commit fraud (Crutchfield et al., 2016). The authors in this research proposal are interested in seeing if the students of color have stories relating to their experiences with institutional racism.

### **Intersection of Racism and Homelessness**

In 2018, 39.8% of all homeless people were Black or African American, while Black people make up 13.4% of the population (Henry et al., 2018; Shinn, 2010; US

Census, 2019). Fifty-one percent of families experiencing homelessness were Black compared to 59% of whites when the US population of white people is 72% (Henry et al., 2018; US Census, 2019). Less than 3% of homeless people were another other race besides white or Black (Henry et al., 2018). People who are Black are also likely to have other intersectional ties with other groups more likely to be homeless, including women, LGBTQ people, people with Hispanic ethnicity, people with mental health disabilities, people who have been incarcerated, and veterans (Henry et al., 2018; Lurie et al., 2015). Shinn (2010) found in an international review of homelessness statistics that homelessness was more likely among people who were members of racial and ethnic groups who faced discrimination in many countries.

People who are Black are disproportionately homeless because of discrimination in access to income opportunities, affordable housing, and homeless support services (Cronley, 2020; DeRango, 2001; Lurie et al., 2015). Historical and present-day racial segregation in neighborhoods has led to many financial, educational, employment, and health disparities for people who are Black (DeRango, 2001). Illegal racial discrimination continues to be the practice of home loan lenders, realtors, and rental agents long after the 1960s laws were created (DeRango, 2001; Glantz & Martinez, 2018).

People who are Black and homeless are less likely to receive adequate homelessness support services than white homeless people (Cronley, 2020). Researchers have determined that a common survey that assesses the amount of vulnerability of a homeless person and is then used to determine what services that person is eligible to receive is most likely racially biased (Cronley, 2020). To help people of color out of

homelessness, racial equity in opportunity for services to the homeless, organizational and policy changes, and advocacy needs to increase (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007).

### **Institutional Racism**

Institutional racism can be overt acts that intentionally exclude people because of race, but it is more often subtle, implicit policies and decisions that result in discrimination or harm to people of color (Chesler et al., 2005). One of the first definitions of institutional racism comes from a British report created in response to an incident in which the murder of a Black man was investigated by the police department (Macpherson, 1999). In the report, Macpherson (1999) defined institutional racism of the police department as:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (p. 49).

This definition is now used by the British government in laws, including a law requiring public service institutions, such as British universities, to work towards eliminating institutional racism (Mirza, 2018).

Examples of institutional racism could be relying on certain credentials as requirements for admission, scholarship, or jobs when the required credentials are less available to people of color (Chesler et al., 2005). Another example is to value and uphold cultural traditions or symbols that are from white dominate culture, which may be

historically hurtful to people of color (Chesler et al., 2005). When administrators respond to campus-based racist acts as the fault of a few individuals instead of recognizing a widespread culture of acceptance of racist views and behaviors that may be a form of institutional racism (Chesler et al., 2005). Institutional racism may be the result of policies or actions that on the surface seem fair and non-discriminatory or hurtful yet result in the exclusion of people of color or are in other ways hurtful to people of color (Chesler et al., 2005).

Students experiencing homelessness may be more impacted by institutional racism because of the intersectionality and prevalence of homelessness in groups targeted by racism (Cronley, 2020; DeRango, 2001; Lurie et al., 2015). In this proposed research study, these researchers are interested in the impact of homelessness and racial discrimination on college students.

### **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods**

#### **Study Design**

This study used a qualitative case study design method. Jackson, Drummond, and Camara (2007) define qualitative research as “primarily concerned [with] understanding human beings’ experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach” (p. 21). Qualitative research will offer insight into students’ personal experiences, trials, and triumphs that can be captured through interviews.

One benefit of a qualitative approach is that researchers do not start with defining a rigid hypothesis. Instead, there is flexibility in finding the answers to questions (Yin, 2017). Specifically, the method provides understanding of how participants make meaning of the impacts of homelessness on college students who were homeless in high school. The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. Qualitative research provides the researcher a platform to discuss emerging themes in the qualitative phase noted in the study (Yin, 2017). Qualitative methods research enhanced the research by providing a means of an in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences.

This study is based in the constructivist paradigm which is used to investigate and understand the meanings that people, including the researchers, hold about the experiences being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivists create knowledge through interaction between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), using dialogue and reasoning as the primary methods of investigation.

A case study is useful when researchers are looking for “an in-depth description of a social phenomenon” (Yin, 2017, p. 4). A case study design seeks to answer questions

about how and why, or explain a particular condition (Yin, 2017). These researchers investigated students' experiences with detailed descriptions from each student's perspectives. Researchers explored resounding themes and characteristics that define each case. Case studies provide a more realistic view of participants' responses rather than statistics from a survey. Homelessness is a social problem. Students who experience homelessness can best tell their stories.

Through a qualitative case study, the researchers explored the following:

- Higher education homelessness: are educational supports for college students surfing, meaning navigating systems, without water, meaning, familial and educational supports, adequate to ensure students graduate?
- What supports do their universities offer via the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA)?

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain insight and understanding into best practices when educating college students experiencing higher education homelessness, explore and understand barriers, and discover existing supports are adequate to achieve graduation. The study's focus is on the higher education homeless students from the St. Louis metropolitan area who were homeless while in high school and as college students.

Researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with four college students who were homeless in high school before enrolling in higher education institutions as independent students. The study determined key issues experienced by homeless students enrolled in college and how they are supported at their institutions without familial support.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The participants were a convenience sample that were acquaintances of Deidra Thomas-Murray. The convenience sample was obtained because Murray leads the Students in Transition Office at St. Louis Public Schools and serves as the liaison for homeless students in the district, putting her in a unique position to identify participants. Murray utilized a list of high school homeless students who sought verification letters to enroll in college and remained in contact because they lacked familial support and requested continued personal assistance. Murray contacted six students and a total of four responded, see Appendix B.

Murray also contacted four homeless coordinators within the St. Louis metropolitan area having large homeless populations, see Appendix A. The homeless coordinators were notified of the research study and requested to help identify participants for the study. Murray sent an invitation to the homelessness coordinators of three different high schools in the St. Louis metropolitan area. No students were recruited using this method.

Procedures for safety, identity protection and informed consent were approved by the University of Missouri St. Louis Institutional Review Board (IRB), see Appendix C. Once IRB approved the researchers' application, the study began with recruiting independent students from the St. Louis metropolitan area attending various universities in the United States. Although students are from the St. Louis metropolitan area, several attend college in another city or state.

The students that were experiencing homelessness may have had difficulties that prevented them from participating in the interviews. This could be why more students

did not participate. The students that did choose to participate could have been doing so because of their positive relationship with Murray. Several participants talked about how they did want to help others who were in a situation like themselves which could have been a motivating factor for participation.

Once potential participants were identified, an e-mail was sent to them with the informed consent information. Students were provided information about the method and purpose of the study. The consent information included risks and benefits of the study, as well as information about methods used for confidentiality and participants' rights. Students were informed that their real names and other identifying information would be changed. All data and zoom transcripts would be deleted after the study. Students were notified that their participation was voluntary, and they could end the interviews at any time. Students were also informed that the information shared would not impact their relationship with Murray in a positive or negative way. Students who agreed to the consent information then received details about the interview process.

Participants were college students or recent alumni of two-year or four-year institutions and were identified as homeless as outlined in the CCRAA. Participants had various identities and backgrounds, see Table 1. Participants identified as homeless as outlined in the CCRAA and the McKinney-Vento, at least 18 years old, and estranged from their parents.

**Table 1***Participant List*

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age	College Status
Sponge Bob	Middle Eastern	Male	19	Dual Enrollment
Sandy Cheeks	Black	Female	21	College Senior
Patrick Star	Black	Male	19	College Sophomore
Pearl	Black	Female	24	Recent Graduate

Four students are sufficient for this study because the small sampling increases the likelihood of having enough participants to gather varying subjective perspectives, locating the observer in the world while allowing the researchers the opportunity to review in-depth each participant's experiences. The intent was to gain a view of homelessness from each student, as well as its impact on the educational success of students.

Participants were given pseudonyms related to characters in the SpongeBob SquarePants TV Show, Sponge Bob, Patrick Star, Pearl and Sandy Cheeks (Hillenberg, 1999). These are sea characters who navigated life under water in a children's television show.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In-depth interviews were used to capture the experiences of the four college students who were homeless in high school. One interview with each participant was scheduled and conducted. Interviews were held using the computer-based open meeting platform, Zoom. Participants were able to choose the location of their interviews. All participants participated in the interviews at a private home away from other people. The informed consent documents and their agreements were verified with the participant in real time at the beginning of each interview. Three interviews lasted about one hour.

One student, identified as Sandy Cheeks, completed about two-thirds of the interview questions and then left the zoom call because of other schedule commitments. Her interview lasted about 25 minutes. She was asked follow-up questions. Upon completion of the interview process, students were emailed a \$50 gift certificate to Amazon as an appreciation of their effort. Scheer interviewed three students and an assistant researcher interviewed the fourth student. This method of interviewing students allowed separation for Murray from the students. It also may have allowed the students to open up in a different way since they did not already know the interviewers.

The researchers used a semi-structured interview format, in which questions were asked in a conversational way (Longhurst, 2003). Questions may not be asked in the order presented; follow-up questions were asked based on what the participants said. This approach allowed for continuity and building rapport. Interviews offered insight into the emerging and resounding themes of college homelessness and associations between the four college homeless student participants.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the zoom features. The transcript was corrected for recording errors and identifying information was removed or changed. Transcripts from interviews were analyzed with a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Each researcher manually reviewed the data and coded each comment with themes. Murray used printed transcripts, highlighting and wrote codes in the margins. Scheer used a word file and sorted each comment into the codes. Initial codes were around the topics of educational challenges, effectiveness of existing supports, barriers blocking academic success, and institutional behavior that related to the questions. Additional codes were developed depending on the themes brought up by the participants

(Thomas, 2006). Each researcher reviewed the data from transcripts multiple times, and added and deleted codes each time. Upon each review, the category and code list was expanded or collapsed until the researchers had identified the most important themes (Thomas, 2006). Both researchers worked to create an independent code list and resulting themes. The researchers agreed on the resulting six main themes for inter-reader reliability.

Each researcher had a different but overlapping inquiry interest. In the first researcher's work, Murray researcher explored the impact of the adequacies of familial and institutional supports and the student's skills used to navigate systems independent of adults. Scheer's inquiry reviewed services and resources provided by the universities to the students and highlight which supports are needed by the students. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act requires colleges and universities to work to make higher education affordable to youth experiencing homelessness. The researchers compared the experiences and needs of the students with the support available to students.

### **Interview Questions**

The overarching questions for this exploratory qualitative case study are coordinated as follows: higher education homelessness: are educational supports for college students surfing without water adequate to ensure students graduate? When the authors refer to surfing without water, we mean that students are navigating systems without familial and educational supports.

The specific questions were:

- 1) What past and present experiences have you had with homelessness?
- 2) How does homelessness affect your college experience today?

- 3) How effective are the existing educational support at your institution?
- 4) How often have you contacted the liaison at your school?
- 5) How different are the challenges you are experiencing now from the ones in high school?
- 6) What challenges have you experienced during school breaks and closures?
- 7) What type of supports would make your education experience ideal?
- 8) What types of supports, financial, scholarships, referrals, resources, information from advisors, do you receive from your university?
- 9) Are those resources enough to cover your educational needs? What else do you need?
- 10) How do you find out about resources available to you?
- 11) If not mentioned, did you complete the FAFSA as an independent person? Did someone claim you as a dependent or did you include a parent or guardian's financial information on the application?
- 12) Did anyone help you complete the FAFSA? If so, who?
- 13) How was your experience in working with people at your university?
- 14) Do you think students of a different race or ethnicity than you are treated differently? If so, how?
- 15) Do you think that your status as a youth who has experienced homelessness caused people who work at your university to treat you differently? If so, how?
- 16) What advice could you offer to incoming students who have experienced homelessness?

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations for young adults experiencing homelessness may be different from those for students not experiencing homelessness, and so the following items were included (Ensign, 2003). Participants were reimbursed for their time with a gift card of \$50, an amount that covers the participants' time and inconvenience but was not coercive to prevent the participants from feeling as if they had no choice but to participate (Ensign, 2003). All participants' identifying data were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity. Recordings were deleted after transcription and completion of the project. During interviews, researchers were prepared to refer students to counselors if students became upset at reliving their past experiences with trauma (Padgett et al., 2013). This was not necessary. Researchers also worked to keep in mind the inherently hierarchical nature of the participant-researcher relationship and worked to empower youth to tell their stories (Ensign, 2003).

Ensign (2003) reveals a variety of advice for researchers working with adolescents experiencing homelessness, and though the students in this study are not under the age of consent, other suggestions may still be relevant. Because youth experiencing homelessness may have been involved in incidences of violence or illegal activity, researchers informed participants that researchers are mandatory reporters (Ensign, 2003).

Prior professional relationship could cause role confusion between the roles of the researcher-participant versus client-social worker (Ensign, 2003). For example, the student may be more or less likely to share information because of the researcher's prior role (Ensign, 2003). Students may reveal information because of the positive, trusting

nature of the relationship and include information that they may not want to be included in the final research (Ensign, 2003). The researcher also kept information learned from prior professional relationships separate from information learned in this proposed research (Ensign, 2003). Edwards (2020) explains that when a researcher has a prior relationship with participants, the researcher may need to include additional steps to ensure bias is eliminated, including allowing participants to review themes and having colleagues review the qualitative data analysis. Having two researchers on the team during our analysis made this more possible since Scheer, the researcher without prior knowledge of the students' situations, was the interviewer.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations and limitations were noted in this study. As a convenience sample of students graduating from one school district, as opposed to more than one, limited results could not be expanded to larger sample areas. A larger sample population that would include students from varying geographical areas was not feasible due to the time and expense limitations. This research only includes the stories of students who have experienced homelessness prior to graduating high school and now enrolled in college. The study does not include the experiences of youth who did not pursue college, may have been unable to enroll, or leave after enrolling. This study focuses on specific aspects of students' lives, for example, educational support, resources, while other aspects of the students' lives such as, romantic relationships, supports outside of the university, experience with disabilities; may be of value but may not be discovered or explored (Caplan, & Ford, 2014).

## **Chapter 4: Results & Discussion**

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore whether educational supports for homeless college students are adequate to ensure they graduated and to explore the benefits of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act. This empirical section will provide a brief overview of the participants and an in-depth exploration of themes with highlights of barriers experienced; and then conclude with a summary of findings.

Themes identified from the data guided this empirical section, as well as recommendations for next steps. Themes noted in the interviews included: basic needs, trauma, educational support, connections, adulting, and cultural competence.

### **Introduction to Sponge Bob**

Sponge Bob is a 19-year-old male student. He is from the Middle East but resided in the St. Louis metropolitan area with his father while enrolled in high school and college. Sponge Bob did not physically attend a college campus. He is dually enrolled in high school and in college courses. Sponge Bob maintains an A average. He is an excellent student when not distracted by his personal storms that life has afforded him.

Sponge Bob was employed as a technician. He worked full-time until family conflict spiraled out of control and led to his unemployment. He made a decent salary. Sponge Bob enjoyed working with his brother because he had a sense of support with transportation to work and community. They worked at the same place but in different departments. They had a healthy relationship and were close. Things appeared to be going well for him.

In March 2021, there was a sudden change. Sponge Bob got his ears pierced. His family was not happy about it. They found it offensive. Immediately, Sponge Bob's familial connectedness was interrupted. He began experiencing alienation from his father, siblings, and coworkers.

Once Sponge Bob's family discovered his ear piercings and found out he was gay from a co-worker, he was forced into adulthood. The locks on the door of his family home were changed and he became homeless.

At 18 years of age, Sponge Bob leased an apartment, trying to make the best of an unbelievable situation. Little did he know, his brother would begin to sabotage his employment, and he would soon be unemployed.

The sabotaging, isolation, and alienation took an immediate toll. Sponge Bob became suicidal in what appeared to be a hopeless situation. He was overcome by loneliness, anxiety, depression, and alienation from his family.

His school social worker contacted the student homeless liaison for support. She in turn, contacted Legal Services to explore avenues to get the student out of a twelve-month lease. Her goal was to link him with a shelter for teens and protect his credit history so that he could access affordable housing as an adult.

In the process of trying to end the lease, Sponge Bob expressed wanting to move to another state. There, he said, he had a support system and a female friend whose family was willing to help him mentally recover.

In May, Sponge Bob high school liaison was able to identify funds to terminate the lease. He relocated to the South but stays in contact with his former liaison, Murray.

Prior to Sponge Bob's arrival to the new state, Murray linked him to the high school liaison where he resides. Both liaisons check-in to discuss the student's needs and to ensure that Sponge Bob remains on the path that leads to academic success.

Sponge Bob remains homeless. He continues to battle depression but have found techniques and tools to deter him from self-harm. He dreams of becoming strong advocate for the LGBTIA population.

### **Introduction to Sandys Cheeks**

Sandy Cheeks is a 21-year-old female student. She is from the St. Louis Metropolitan area. Sandy received more than \$20,000 in scholarship funding. She is currently enrolled at a university in the South where she resides in a dorm on her college campus. Sandy is a senior in college. She anticipates graduating in May 2022.

Sandy was homeless in while enrolled in high school and in college. She continues to experience homelessness during school breaks and because of the COVID pandemic. She is an A student and a go-getter. She is purposeful and determined to experience academic success while in pursuit of a better life.

As a young girl, Sandy Cheeks was a caregiver. Her mom became sick at 21 years old before Sandy was born. They always lived with her granddad because mom required assistance. Granddad was the defining male in Sandy's life. He nurtured and guided her development.

When Sandy was in high school, she experienced several tragedies. Her family's home burned down, and grandfather became ill. She became his caregiver, too. Meanwhile, Sandy's mom's health began to rapidly decline, as well. She was hospitalized for several months. Her grandfather died during her mother's

hospitalization. With no one to talk to and grief stricken, she began navigating her own personal storm of homelessness. Sandy lived in the house alone. She secured a job and began paying bills until she could not anymore.

Once mom was discharged from the hospital, they went to live with a cousin. Sandy's grandmother would take care of her mom during the day because Sandy was still in school. Their housing situation was challenging. Sandy described where they lived as a community home. They were always taking in strangers. Sandy says she slept in different places every night.

Prior to graduation, Sandy was introduced to her high school homeless liaison, Murray. She sought verification of her housing status for the FAFSA application. There, she made a meaningful connection and received continued support throughout her enrollment in college. Her liaison provides her with continued guidance, encouragement, tutoring, care packages and intermittent crisis intervention.

Sadly, early in Sandy college career, her mom's health took a turn for the worse. She became weaker and she died of heart disease among other things. Challenges, heartaches, and heartbreaks did not make Sandy Cheeks bitter; they made her better. She became a self-motivated entrepreneur. Sandy started a non-profit organization that emphasized advocacy for heart diseases and clothing line related to heart health for children. She continues to network and self-promote healthy lifestyles.

### **Introduction to Patrick Star**

Patrick Star is a 19-year-old male student from the St. Louis metropolitan area. He was an unaccompanied youth in high school. Patrick is enrolled as a sophomore and attending college the St. Louis metropolitan area. He resides on campus as an

Independent Student. Patrick continues to experience homelessness during school closures, and whenever he visits what he knows as home.

Patrick is a B student who has a thirst for greatness. He is attending a local college on a full academic scholarship. Patrick is involved in extracurricular activities. He has served as the vice president of the student body at his college.

During school breaks, he works part-time, but the money is not enough. He does not have enough money for food or gas. Sometimes, he simply goes without. Lacking basic needs is not new to Patrick. It is very familiar. Patrick's parents had 12 children. He was the oldest of those who lived in the family home. Patrick said he and his sister had to work full time hours in high school once his father lost his job. Mom did not work. She stayed home to take care of his younger siblings. The youngest of them is two years old. Adult responsibilities were thrust upon him whether he liked it or not. The over-crowdedness and adulting became overwhelming. He sought refuge at the homes of relatives, and friends. He says he chose to be homeless but recognizes that their housing was substandard due to severe roof damage.

When Patrick Star returns home, he visits his high school homeless liaison, Murray. He calls and sends text at least twice a month to give updates or sometimes to just say hello. She sends him care packages twice a semester.

Patrick has worked at the same fast-food restaurant for more than four years. When he returns home during school breaks, he works long hours to ensure he can meet his basic needs. He describes school breaks as his most challenging times for him.

**Introduction to Pearl**

Pearl is a 24-year-old female student. She, too, is from the St. Louis metropolitan area. Pearl recently graduated with a BS in Social Work. She attended a PWI in Missouri. Pearl resided in a dorm until the end of her junior year when she became pregnant with her son and eventually moved into her own apartment.

Pearl experienced homeless most of her life. Her mother died when she was a baby; her dad died the next year. Her sister, barely an adult, raised her as best she could. Pearl's sibling was grief stricken but never received professional help to deal with her loss. Family members who attempted to intervene made matters worse.

Pearl's sister was grief-stricken and began self-medicating to manage the pain of her loss of both parents. She became strung-out on drugs for years and left Pearl to care for her minor child. She has been drug-free for six years, now.

It was in elementary school that Pearl realized she was homeless. She routinely slept at different classmates and relatives' homes. Pearl was an A student. She graduated salutatorian and attended a Predominant White Institution (PWI) on a full academic scholarship.

In college, Pearl experienced a host of firsts at her university. She was the first Black homecoming queen, and president of the Black Student Union.

Pearl graduated Magna Cum Laude. She currently works as a social worker at two agencies that provide services to homeless and victims of domestic violence. She now has stable housing. Pearl plans to enroll in a master's degree program in education.

## Major Themes

The major themes identified from the data obtained, guided this empirical section, as well as recommendations for next steps. The six themes noted in the interviews included:

- basic needs,
- trauma,
- educational support,
- connections,
- adulting, and
- cultural competence.

### *Basic Needs, Housing and Food Insecurity*

All students reported about the difficulties of getting their basic needs met including items such as: housing, transportation from school to home, food, furniture, personal care supplies, and childcare. School breaks were cumbersome for most of the participants. A time established for them to refresh and renew until the next semester or to spend quality time with family members did not look the same for these participants. Their reality during school breaks meant for them to prepare to struggle. Patrick describes his experience during summer break:

In the summertime, I am working like a dog so that I can have much of what I need. If I need hygiene products, I want to have hygiene products. Nobody wants be without. I cannot do anything about it because I am not mentally there, yet--- where I have just given up on all possibilities. Yeah, but during those breaks, the biggest challenge is work. I make I was making minimum wage for a minute. They went up from \$9.30 to \$11.00. It is still chump change compared to other jobs. . . . That is the challenge---you know working myself to death.

Those breaks are usually very frightening because their lived reality is basic needs insecurity. Pearl discussed the lack of gas money to home, limited access to meals, and couch surfing the entire school break.

In college, I stay on campus. I do not return home, because I do not have my own place back in my hometown. I don't have a place to go back. I could have stayed with family but it's a crowded house. There's not really much space or room, and I don't have a car to travel home.

Residing on college campuses provide students with access to basic needs, primarily shelter. When campuses closed during the COVID 19 Pandemic, students faced their ongoing reality of homelessness and food insecurity. The government distributed federal relief funds to colleges, Pearl indicated she was the last to know. "By the time I found that out, it was over. I didn't know. I qualified for it, but I got an email after everything over was almost over."

Homeless students continue to lack basic needs. They lack housing, transportation, and food when they returned to their high school communities. To survive or have access to basic needs, they must work and be vigilant about identifying resources or cut cost to remain in school. Sandy shared:

Every semester, I have to figure out my living situation. Moving off campus, I'm able to cut cost on maintenance fees, built-in housing, and meal plans. It dropped my tuition to \$6K, you know. I'm still struggling. I don't know what I'm to do during the breaks but work. I can't afford to live on campus and be enrolled in school too.

Students who relied on university supports such as the food pantry and accessing meals in the school cafeteria discussed its negative impact on their college experience during the pandemic. They also shared that not just the homeless students were experiencing food insecurities, other students were too. Many of them indicated working longer hours to meet their needs than they did pre-pandemic.

*Surviving Grief, Stress, and Trauma*

Homelessness and trauma seem to be synonymous. In that, it is impossible to mention one and not discuss their other, based on the participant's responses. All of the participants in this study shared experiences of grief, stress, and trauma at some juncture of their homeless experience in high school and in college. Sponge Bob specifically mentioned stress impacted his academic success: "I started having a mental breakdown and stuff and, of course, I was not turning in any work at school because I could just could not focus at school or anything." Sandy Cheeks had a serious personal tragedy that she needed help with:

My mom passed away during my freshman year in college. I was making it in one sense then, like, mentally, I knew I needed to address my mental health needs. I needed to just talk or something like that. I needed a shoulder to lean on, you know. I cannot be stressing. You know, it is what it is. That is not how anybody wants to live. I had a lot on my plate. I did not realize what I was dealing with.

Pearl felt like she needed someone to talk to:

Sometimes in college I felt like I didn't have anyone to talk to or to even explain to people what was going on mentally like fight or flight mode all the time, it was like I was surviving instead of living.

For many of the students, their first experience with trauma did not begin in college. Three of them suggested in their biographical narratives a history of trauma at an early age. However, only one of them, Sponge Bob, sought professional help while enrolled in college:

I was starting to like call and email everyone in my phone. I told my teacher it's getting worse. I mean my counselor it's getting worse. She decided to like get me from home and send me to psychiatrist. I went to stay for three or four days it was not that bad you know, like. It took me out of life. I forgot what I was dealing with until I got out of course I was doing better.

Sponge Bob recognized the need for mental help and was able to get the help he needed. He reached out to his high school counselor and embraced the support. Although Sponge Bob continues to struggle with suicidality, he is determined to get well.

In Sponge's interview, he referenced using the techniques learned during his hospitalization when things became overwhelming. Connections to Sponge's school counselor and liaison helped him with the grief and trauma.

### *Educational Supports*

The participants were supported through the College Cost Reduction and Access Act and a few other supports from their universities or communities. All students had financial support that paid for school, though they did not know the details of the College Cost Reduction Act or mention Federal Financial Aid as the specific source of funding for their college education. Sandy Cheeks mentioned the help from the financial aid office: "At college there is this lady who works in the financial aid office, she is for independent students, you know to make sure school's paid for, help me file for different things, with this or that." Patrick Star also had a good experience with financial aid:

So, right now, technically, I'm getting paid to go to school. And I would never have thought, 'yeah you're giving me money' but somebody has given me so much money because I'm independent and because I've worked for my grades, my GPA, all that good stuff.

Though students received financial aid, none of the participants mentioned the details of their educational supports. The College Cost Reduction and Access Acts provides guidance on how colleges should support homeless students but often college's point person seemed not to share knowledge. Pearl was especially affected by the lack of clarity because of the student loan debt she acquired needlessly:

The funny thing is my school literally did not tell me that I had enough scholarship money for all four years. I did not know that I did not have to take out any loans. I found out after it was done, now, I'm \$20,000 in debt.

Students learned of financial aid, scholarship funding, food pantries, prioritized services and first generational supports through trial, error, and networking. Once they became aware of supports for first generation students, their college experience got better for them.

Pearl and Sandy Cheeks found college organizations that supported first generation college students as a resource fair for students. The organizations supported students. As described by Pearl:

“I think [Program Name] was really one of the biggest things that kind of helped me because, they offered classes that were free. They helped us with stuff like resumes, organization, personal development and it was goal-oriented classes, so there was never homework.”

Then, there was supports and connections that students found to be meaningful. Those seemed to change the trajectory of the student's college experience. They seemed to move from surviving to thriving. For example, Sandy Cheeks shared:

Finally, I got a call back from the person who could help me. I connected with the independent student verification coordinator and I got my homeless liaison on the phone call. She did most of the talking---educating them of the law. Ms. H. told me to come to the Financial Aid Office. We met, and it change the direction of things for me. I was going to have to quit school. Ms. H. said you should have been getting financial support.

Educational supports played an integral role with keeping students in school. Financial support kept students in school and decreased their levels of anxiety. It was one less thing for them to worry about and linked them with knowledgeable adults who advocated on their behalf.

*Need for Connections*

Most of the participants in this study were first generation college students. They expressed concerns with trusting strangers when they could not trust their own family members but knew they had made adjustments to survive the college experience. All of these students explained the importance of connections to people who could help them.

They used networking as a form of social capital. Through networking, the participants in this study were able to stay enrolled in school, and one of them managed to successfully graduate college. Sandy explained how she would find resources: “I was working on people go to for help. You know, I would start talking to people like the President of the university. I have been at my university three years. I learned fast, you got to network.” Patrick explained that he learned to be an advocate for himself: “When I got to college, I did not really know how to advocate for myself; talk to people; trust people, but I learned.” Sandy Cheeks recommended that youth in situations like hers should:

Basically, just to go to people, that's all it's really about, it's hard, like some people if you if you got good grades, they know you are serious. I was working on people go to. Start talking to people like the President (of the University). Even the people in front [offices], you know, just for different needs or whatever. You go explain your situation then they're [going to help you] a lot, you know you eat, will be provided meals, you know.

Once students learned of the types of supports available on their college campuses, they seemed to gain a sense of belonging. The connections did not eliminate their challenges but minimized the impact of their living situations. It gave them access to their college community and reduced the feelings of being own their own. Pearl found a connection outside of the traditional college administrators and advisors:

The nurse practitioner and I, we developed a really good relationship. When I had questions about the pregnancy, motherhood or health in general, she was just there for me. I had her personal cell number. She was the one who told me I was pregnant. It was kind of funny because she stuck with me the whole pregnancy.

All of the students talked about the importance of the high school homeless liaison, high school counselors or others that stayed connected to them even though the transitioned away. Pearl shares her connection:

Like in high school, I had my homeless liaison. She helped me a lot in college with understanding challenges and overcoming them. When I went into labor, I called my homeless liaison from the delivery room. We are close. She's supported me since high school.

Adult connections for these students, spoke volumes of hopefulness. It gave them a sense of community and human value. Those connections were a gentle reminder that they were visible.

Pearl seemed surprised that a professional adult was genuinely interested in supporting her. When the nurse practitioner shared her personal contact information to stay connected, it was an awe moment for her. It seemed she was not accustomed to someone sticking with her.

### ***Adulting from Childhood to College***

Most of the participants in this study were required to be self-sufficient throughout their childhood and into young adulthood. They matriculated throughout their young lives with adult responsibilities, caring for others and themselves. Patrick Star explains the stress related to adulting:

My sister and I went to work at [Fast Food Restaurant]. Every two weeks, our checks were for \$225. We were still in high school, and we were paying bills. I got tired of paying the bills, so I left because I got tired of being you know the one they depended on.

Students who do not have familial support experience life through trial and error. Their reference point is limited. They rely on their own limited knowledge base. Pearl explains: “I was not really consulting anyone. I was just making decisions to the best of my ability when certain things came up.”

They viewed enrollment into college as the pivotal point in their status as adults. It is their way out of homelessness. College enrollment seems to be the silent motivator that propels them towards academic success and graduation. They want better living conditions not just for themselves but their families, too. Sandy explained what college meant to her: “I am getting out of not being able to survive. I’m creating a different a route than my family, for my generation, you know.”

Students were not happy about adulting or navigating systems independent of adult support. They expressed frustration and disappointment. Sponge Bob talked about when he was living at a friend’s house, he felt like he might be out on the street if he didn’t do what the family wanted him to do:

They are like you live here. You have the right to do nothing [that you want to do], like they depend on me, It’s like ‘come do this, come do that.’ It’s like I live like a maid here. That’s how I feel sometimes.

### ***Cultural Competence***

Several of the participants had experiences in which they felt that their peers or instructor were not culturally competent. They expressed self-imposed silencing because they did not feel their peers could relate to a childhood of lived homeless experiences. In a classroom discussions, a topic arose about poverty, classmates criminalized the person living in poverty.

Cultural incompetence caused them to become silent, invisible, assimilate, frustrated, or selectively neutral in their educational setting. Pearl questioned the grading system when student she provided helped scored better than Pearl on assignments. Pearl disclosed that she had ongoing conflict and disrespect by the instructor who outed her, publicly.

The student's instructor and classmates matriculated as if they were not cognizant of the classroom composition, but they were. The instructor outed Pearl about her childhood housing status in an open setting. She publicly asked the student about being in foster care as child. Even Pearl's friend noticed the injustice when the teacher seemed to not believe that Pearl was not in formal foster care "My other friend was standing there, just like looking like—'Lady, why are you saying this girl was in foster care when she was not?'" That question was piercing for Pearl, as well as her peers. She self-imposed silencing and assimilation because of their insensitivity, microinsults, and violation of privacy. Pearl goes on to explain:

I really try not to talk too much, or share too much about my personal life or speak from my own perspective. I will speak from the majority perspective. I can imagine what it is like having mom and dad or having stable housing. I will speak from their point of view instead of my own ---not knowing what it is like to have a mom and dad.

Pearl, who attended a PWI, spoke of how loud the racial indifferences were in classes and extra-curricular activities. In class, she had to work twice as hard as her white<sup>2</sup> counterparts, because her facial expressions were found to be offensive, and because she was knowledgeable of racial school topics. It was as if she were constantly defending Blackness. Pearl shared multiple experiences:

It was just things like “I don’t see faces” and you know stuff like that. It was stuff like that, that made me shy away from talking to people. I had a professor that said I should be more like her, the other black girl.

The professor told me that I judge people based off on their facial expressions. I said I find it very funny that the human face has 200 different facial expressions. I asked could you give me one time where I judge someone based on facial expressions.

Students in this study indicated that went along with the majority to get along.

The seemed to grasp the concept that they could not make a person understand or respect cultural differences. They recognized that they were matriculating in a predominant white space within a setting with peers whose experiences were different from their peers.

Pearl shared a story about being elected by the student body as the first Black homecoming queen, then she was accused of cheating. Votes were counted more than three times. Other students had difficulty processing how a Black female could achieve social success in a predominantly white space. Her accomplishment as a Black female was inconceivable to them.

Homeless students’ lived experiences were found to be offensive by their non-homeless peers. In class, two were silenced on social issues or topics. They could not get their peers or instructors to grasp the concept of surviving verses thriving. They reported experiences of becoming invisible or selectively mute when discussing certain topics. Survivors were criminalized in that class. They were survivors who experienced elimination by assimilation. They went along to get along.

### **Summary**

Sponge Bob, Sandy Cheeks, Patrick Star, and Pearl had four different homeless situations in their own experiences, but all were from the St. Louis metropolitan area.

They were identified as unaccompanied youth in high school and independent students in college. Their reasons for homelessness were different. For Sponge, it was an ear piercing and homosexuality; Sandy, long-term parental illness; Patrick, overcrowdedness; and Pearl, the death of both parents, and her sibling caregiver's addiction. All but one of the participants began adulting as children. One participant had both parents in his life at different times. Sponge's mom sent him from his home country to live with his dad when he was 15, and at 18, he was prohibited from entering the family home once he got an ear piercing and they were informed he came out as gay. These students endured a lifetime of substandard living but remained hopeful in conditions that many would deem hopeless.

In their pursuit of hope, college was the pivotal turning point these students. It was their way of finally accessing a mental health break from their lived traumas, being embraced by an educational community, and ending homelessness. Their self-determination was a sure way of changing the trajectory of their future.

Students were quickly reminded that it would take more than enrolling into college to escape housing and food insecurity, educational barriers, anxiety, living in a state of survival and adulting. The supports they were provided in high school did not exist in college. They were on their own. Points of contact to ensure seamless access and provide educational support for homeless students looked different at their colleges.

College staff who were operating in the capacity of support for independent students were solely identifying students for FAFSA. They were not knowledgeable of how to operationalize the College Cost Reduction and Access Act nor familiar with how to support homeless students. Educational supports were basically stumbled upon by

students reacting to barriers out of desperation and the solicitation of support from their high school liaisons. They were literally navigating systems with limited adult support.

For many of them, they experienced trauma, fear, increased anxiety, dehumanization, microaggression, silencing, assimilation, isolation, lack of belonging, shame, mistrust, and the realities of homelessness. Forced adulting became their tool of survival. Their way out was trying to figure out how to stay in school with limited familial support.

Gaps in the educational system did not make it easy for them, either. Students who were attending school on full academic scholarships incurred an unsurmountable debt in student loans. Pearl and Sandy explained that they did not know their scholarships were enough money to cover the cost of their education. They lacked financial literacy. Students were not fully informed of their financial capacity, which caused them to take out student loans. Homeless students should be the last ones to experience misinformation or lack of information about financial support.

Several of the students were first generation students. Their personal reference point of how things should happen on college campuses was minimal. They consulted with other students and matriculated via trial and error. Not only were two of them first generation students but also their birth parents were deceased. These students were adulting most of their lives. They did not know what to ask or whom to ask.

When federal relief funds were distributed to colleges, a general email was sent out to all students. Students experiencing housing and food insecurity, were not prioritized. Students who learned of the potential support did not receive notification

until the monies were gone. It was a first come first serve system; homeless students were overlooked or not considered, at all.

Many of the participants in the study echoed that support in college was different then back home. They made it clear that the support back home may not have been ideal or the best, but it was support from friends, family and fictive kin. In other words, some help beats no help at all.

School breaks were reportedly cumbersome for these homeless participants. A time established for refreshing and renewing was very frightening, because they were continuously faced with their lived reality, housing insecurity. They continued to lack basic needs, mainly housing stability, transportation, and food when they returned to their communities, whether by choice or force such as with the coronavirus pandemic.

Students reported experiences that unfold naturally for their peers were unnatural for them. They were required to hitchhike, beg or borrow gas money, or remain behind in shame sleeping on a classmate's couch. Built-in support for them is over crowdedness at a friend or relative's home and scouting out the nearest food pantries. Homeless students do not have the luxury of planning a school break on the beach in another state or town. Their reality is "working like a dog" in Patrick's words, just to eat and take care of their basic needs.

Fortunately, for many of them, they stayed connected to their high school liaison. Their liaison continued to support them in college and provided the care, nurturing, and guidance they knew once existed in high school.

Some students were more resilient than others they learned to leverage resources and ask for assistance. They grew to know social capital up-close and personally and

began educational relationships with the chief of staff and school president. One formed a long-lasting relationship with her nurse practitioner.

There are supports on college campuses for these students, but the supports are lacking. Basic needs should be the last thing on student's minds, and education should be the first. Traumatization, stress, adulting, and experiences of desperation are not how the educational experience for homeless students should end. Once they are identified as homeless, educational support should be a given, just by the mere fact they are homeless.

One student indicated that she would not send a dog to the school from which she graduated. The student's challenges were not with the curriculum, but the oppressive practices and cultural incompetence. She experienced ongoing exclusion, mistrust, and lacked a sense of belonging at the school.

Not all of their educational experiences were traumatic. Some students formed meaningful relationships, started their own businesses, and became motivated by their pain and trauma. Their surfing taught them to navigate and self-actualize that they are the narrators of their stories.

## **Chapter 5: Recommendations**

Sponge Bob, Sandy Cheeks, Patrick Star, and Pearl were from four different walks-of-life with their own lived homeless experiences, and were from the St. Louis metropolitan area. Their reasons for homelessness were different but each of them shared the commonalities of housing insecurity, working long hours, and a thirst for change. In their pursuit of hope, college was their way of finally accessing a mental health break from their lived trauma, being embraced by an educational community, and ending homelessness.

The students interviewed in this research were identified in high school as unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness and they each qualified for federal support. They also had a supportive homeless liaison who continued to support them after they were no longer students in the homeless liaison's school district. These students were all on their way to graduating from college. These researchers can still conclude that youth experiencing homelessness have unmet needs that could be addressed by institutions and policy.

### **Recommendations**

Researchers (Crutchfield et al., 2016; Duke-Benfield & Saunders, Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; 2016; Packer, 2008) in the field have suggested that additional support for college students experiencing homelessness should include:

- Simplify the FAFSA application process and make it more accessible
- Train financial aid administrators to reduce barriers
- Make federal SNAP and housing benefits more readily available to college students

- Expand federal student aid for college, including aid during the summer months
- Encourage states and colleges to do more to support youth experiencing homelessness.

The students in this study already may have had many of these supports. Students mentioned a variety of things that may contribute to their success. They all had financial support that helped them pay for the expenses of classes and college living. These students did not report barriers to completing the FAFSA application or needing help to get access to student aid. Though Pearl and Sandy did report that they accepted loans that were unnecessary since they had enough funding for college, and additional information from financial aid staff would have been useful for her. Some students specifically mentioned university financial aid staff that were supportive to them as well. We found some of the same recommendations and have a few additional recommendations.

#### ***Incorporate Supports at the Time of Identification of Homeless Students***

It is important for college personnel to understand that homeless students may have limited to no familial support when enrolling into college. Which means it is highly likely that they will lack basic needs throughout their education experience. School personnel, specifically financial aid staff who are responsible for identifying homeless students should be purposeful about linking these students with existing supportive programs on their campus. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act solely requires colleges to identify homeless students and ensure they access the Pell Grant and low interest loans, but they need educational supports, too (CSR, 2007). That means ensuring students are knowledgeable of what services exist on college campuses. Supports noted in the study, but were not limited to food pantries, counseling services, first generation

student, programs, tutoring, medical services, mental health treatment, utility assistance, work-study opportunities, prioritized housing, financial literacy, prioritized housing and year-round access to housing. Services delivered should be based on what the students say they need and not what sounds good for the whole, but homeless specific services. There is a host of recommendations, one of which is important before students enroll in college and the others are throughout their college experience.

### ***Bridge the Gap from High School to College***

Students we interviewed all discussed at length the need for students such as themselves to find human capital, also known as people, who would be able to help them. Both Sandy Cheeks and Patrick Star talked about speaking with the presidents of their universities about their needs. The students also talked about connecting with a variety of staff at the universities including university president, advisor, financial aid staff; high schools including social workers, homeless youth liaison, counselors; and community leaders such as nurses and church leaders; to be able to be connected to resources and have their needs met. Perhaps this is a unique quality of our convenience sample that worked for them. Skobba, Meyers, and Tiller (2018) had similar findings when they interviewed college students who had experienced homelessness and foster care. This suggests the following would be beneficial to students:

- Policy change needs to occur so that high schools and universities have staff who are paid to exclusively support students who are unaccompanied, and homeless throughout high school and college, and especially during the transition from high school to college.

- High school students who are unaccompanied should be taught and coached about how to find people, develop relationships with university advisors, administrators, and community leaders who can help them.
- University advisors and administrators should be well informed about laws, policies resources and support for youth experiencing homelessness since students may seek them out for support.

The unique nature of our sample of students is that they also all had continued support from their high school homeless youth liaison that may not be available to other youth, since this level of support after high school is not required by McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

Two students mentioned programs that may have been or were like federal programs such as GEAR-UP and TRIO. These programs are college access programs designed to support youth with low income, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities in attaining college access (Dukes, 2013, Forstadt, et al., 2020). Based on the student's reports, it is unknown if the programs were funded at the federal, university, or community level. What is apparent is that these programs, and the people in them, were supportive and helpful to the students we interviewed. These programs may help students not only with the academic, structural and physical supports that students need but also by connecting the students to human capital. For example, Pearl was still using the memory foam bed given to her by the director of Mission Graduate.

High school and college liaisons should collaborate on how to ensure that similar supports for basic needs occur on college campuses. Provide students with a list of resources before they arrive on college campuses. Schedule regional quarterly meetings

with high school and college liaisons to discuss best practices and share resources for students who reside in the same state. For students who do not reside in the same state, devise plan of action and process that keep students from falling through the cracks.

***Incorporate the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA) into the Student Orientation Process***

Many colleges provide a wealth of information at orientation about the college experience but fail to talk about homelessness. Students should be educated about the definition of homelessness and informed of support services available to them. Educate them about the benefits of the CCRAA and provisions the Act provides. The Act is more than the identification of homeless students. Its purpose is to make college more affordable for low-income students via the Federal Pell Grant. Financial aid staff is to ensure homeless students have applied for FAFSA, Pell Grants and obtain low interest loans.

***Address the Trauma***

Mental health needs were a reoccurring theme for the students that we interviewed. In addition to the trauma students incurred, related to their homeless situation, students also faced alienation and discrimination. These students were likely to choose not to disclose their homeless status because of the stigma that goes along with the status as a homeless student, similar to the findings from others (Ashtari, 2017; Hillard, 2010; Mulrenan et al., 2020; SJ, 2015).

Policymakers, school administrators of elementary and post-secondary schools should be deliberate and purposeful about supporting unaccompanied youth before they graduate from high school and throughout their college experience. Homelessness was

traumatic to these students, in addition to the personal experiences these students endured throughout their educational process. The lack of natural nurturing support, trauma, and stress of adulting was reported by the students to be cumbersome.

Trauma impacts the structure of the brain, and how young people respond to various levels of stress (Murgia, 2015):

- Positive Stress – Briefly increases heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.
- Tolerable Stress – Serious temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships
- Toxic – Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.

In the first three years of a child's life, the brain is rapidly changing (University of North Carolina School of Social Work, 2012). Children who experience toxic stress, their brain do not develop the capacity to learn, connect and function, normally (Cook et al., 2005).

There is no such thing as teaching past pain, trauma, and damage. Children who experience untreated trauma become teenagers with trauma. That trauma can impact a student's mental health well into adulthood. Traumatic events cause people faced with stress to release one or more of four different chemical (Bowirrat et al., 2010):

1. Catecholamine - natural adrenaline
2. Cortisol - energy
3. Opioids - natural morphine
4. Oxytocin - good feelings

These hormones work differently. They facilitate the flight, fight, or freeze response as

indicated by all participants in this study. Their bodies became numb to minimize pain that they would feel from the trauma. It is the body's natural and automatic response when trying to survive trauma. The hippocampus is a part of the brain which stored memory becomes impaired stored memory (Cook et al., 2005). The trauma impairs the memory and memories become stored in a disorganized function.

It is incumbent upon school districts and colleges to not only identify these students, but to put supports in place that will ensure academic success and minimize continual trauma. The goal should be to reshape the student's brain chemistry through natural nurturing, and a student-specific curriculum that will address adverse childhood trauma. Educators should be educated about trauma and equipped with the necessary tools to interact with trauma survivors. A point person for homeless students should reassess and monitor the needs of homeless students throughout their educational experience.

Homelessness, pain, grief, loss, silencing, anxiety, numbness, educational barriers, lack of familial support, lack of educational support, disconnectedness, continual housing and food insecurity, and surviving Blackness are traumatic. Students who lack the support of adults and educators to modify their living situations are at sea and never able to come ashore. Not because the shore is not their desired destination but because they are held at bay due to disconnectedness of adults, educators, and policymakers.

Untreated psychological trauma is a precursor for certain behaviors, particularly anxiety, edginess, and paranoia (Cook et al., 2005). Try to imagine not just feeling like an outsider but being one, because your life experiences is different than those around you. In attempts to be included, students were excluded, shamed, and silenced. They

were thrust into a lifestyle of needing support with food and housing.

Two participants in this study shared narratives that were different than their peers lived experiences. One story was about a person stealing food to survive. Their classmates, other future social workers began to criminalize the person's actions for survival but the homeless student understood because she had been desperate. Once she realized they would never understand the impact of hunger or need for survival, she muted herself from the conversation. Homelessness is not a cancel culture. It is an awareness culture. Until educators become aware of the mental and emotional impact trauma has on academic success, students will continue to surf, aimlessly.

### ***Increase Cultural Competence***

All students in this study were students of color and all had stories of discrimination and racism. Institutional racism may be the result of policies or actions that on the surface seem fair and non-discriminatory or hurtful yet result in the exclusion of people of color or are in other ways hurtful to people of color (Chesler et al., 2005). Some experiences with racism related to Pearl's experience at her institutions such as Pearl's professor and the vote recounting, and other participants attending a different institution such as fellow students. Patrick Star had a very positive story about the President of his university and her inclusive behavior, alternatively, Pearl said that she would not recommend her university to others. These stories show how difficult it is to tease out specific acts that could be identified as institutional racism. Though students experiencing homelessness may be more impacted by institutional racism because of the intersectionality and prevalence of homelessness in groups targeted by racism (Cronley, 2020; DeRango, 2001; Lurie et al., 2015), this study was able to share youth's stories so

that we can see how the magnitude of these experiences can influence student's education and lives.

Educators and professors should have an opportunity to discuss their biases in a professional development setting. School personnel should not turn a blind eye or ear to students' concerns on college campuses. When an instructor's name repeatedly comes up regarding oppressive practices, address it. Private conversations about students' living situations should be held publicly. When an instructor openly discusses a student's housing status before their peers, the damage is not just to the student. Their blatant action of assaults, insults, dehumanizing, and disrespect also harms the unintended victims such as other students present for the conversatio

Leadership should be purposeful about educating staff on cultural competence to ensure that students with housing insecurity are safe from further harm. It does not matter the intent of their actions, but the impact. For a student to say they would not refer a dog to their previous university exudes pain. One culturally incompetent instructor should not suspend or paralyze college access for future Black or homeless students.

### ***Eliminate Food Barriers Especially During Crisis and Natural Disasters***

Eliminating access to basic needs amid a national pandemic is unfathomable but it happened. It is during a crisis that they need the most support. Many colleges closed food pantries to students. This hardship put students in the position of begging for basic needs. Food pantries were only open on certain days and became less accessible during times of their greatest need.

Establish processes for homeless students when special funding becomes available, such as relief funds. Prioritize these students. Their financial reach and support is limited. They should be the first ones notified when special funding becomes available.

During the Covid19 pandemic, universities received federal resources and funding to support college students. Participants in this expressed being the last to know. Educators must take into consideration the possibility that students may have limited access to the internet as noted in this student. It is common for students who couch surfing to lack access to the internet. Their living conditions in many instances is sheltering in places where those who assist are at or below the poverty line, too.

In the study, one student discovered a public space that offered free WiFi. It was not that he was directed to a particular space or place he discovered free internet services. However, in the interim, he moved about aimlessly in pursuit of resources while faced with the reality that he did not the access needed to survive, academically and socially.

Processes for basic needs should be clear and professionals should deliberate about giving them access. Universities should notify homeless students, first. Then, offer supports to students with lesser needs.

### ***Eliminate Out-Of-State and Application Fees***

Students who have lived a lifetime of homelessness should not be faced with out-of-state fees that further perpetuate homelessness and oppressive practices, as experienced by one student in this study. Colleges should establish practices that support independent students and give them access. If students struggle with food and shelter, the fees are a sure way to wipe them out financially and deter them from even enrolling or

staying enrolled. Colleges must rethink their policies and practices that deny student's access.

### ***Become Knowledgeable of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs***

The stories of these students provide us with a deeper understanding of the needs and resilience of students facing homelessness. These students shared stories of trying to get their basic needs of food, shelter and transportation met. Like other students (Briggs, 2017; (Crutchfield et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018), the students that we interviewed were dealing with food and housing instability. In addition, students noted transportation and childcare were also needs that sometimes went unmet and were a barrier to their success in college. As is recommended by others, it is recommended that colleges continue to do more to support the basic needs of students.

When supporting homeless students, become knowledgeable of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The system of needs facilitate why people act the way they do and how they make choices. Maslow's hierarchy of needs depicts the most basic physiological needs at the bottom, psychological in the middle, and self-fulfillment needs at the top (Maslow, 1943).

To best support homeless students, it is imperative that educators understand the physical, emotional and intellectual needs of students. It is crucial that they fully understand the science that exists in the development of students experiencing homelessness.

Addressing physical needs has been an ongoing challenge for many of the participants in this study. Each of them expressed the need for physical, emotion, and intellectual support as outlined in their resounding themes. Student's enrollment into

college is not the same as meeting their basic needs. To ensure they experience academic success, gain a better understanding their needs, especially a sense of belonging. Who wants to be where they feel unwanted, their safety is threatened, or they are hungry?

Homeless students have mastered the sink or swim framework through trial and error. They have become accustomed to fighting for value and self-worth. Surviving poverty should not be a lifestyle for these students. Certainly, not on college campuses.

Interacting and managing students with care is not just about the students' past traumas, but of how educators' actions or lack of action further perpetuates trauma to fragile populations. Students cannot learn if they are hungry or worried about where they will sleep. The lack of basic needs is a sure way to guarantee failure.

### **Conclusion**

There is no magical moment for students based solely on their enrollment into college. The magic starts when educator become knowledgeable of students' needs, establish and implement practices that ensures academic success. If nothing changes in educators' actions, nothing changes to ensure seamless academic success and sustainability for homeless students. Student's college experience is just that, a college experience of relived trauma. Some may or may not graduate but with what lessons are they really leaving?

Incorporate practices that make homeless students better and not bitter. The work begins with coordination and collaboration between the high school homeless liaisons and colleges' points of contact. In high school, the homeless liaison serves in the capacity of a makeshift parent, but they need support on college campuses, too.

Homeless students need support. Many of the participants in this study began adulting before they enrolled in high school. They thought college would relieve them of adult responsibilities, but it did not. Responsibilities increased because many attended colleges outside of their high school communities and they lacked neighborly support. Students were solely responsible for themselves and continued adulting by trying to figure out the educational experience on their own. They have had a lifetime of trying to find a means to an end.

Policies and practices established to support homeless students should be student-centered, and adequate to ensure students graduate college. Prioritize college homeless students. They are accustomed to being last. Let put them first and adopt practices that say surfing is on water and not at college institutions.

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**Appendix A: Letter to recruit college students through School District  
Homeless Liaisons**

Dear Homeless Coordinator,

Please help us to learn more about the challenges and needs experienced by college students experiencing homeless. We are searching for volunteers for our research study.

Please share the attached flier with former students that have the following characteristics:

- Identified as homeless in high school
- Age 18 or over
- Enrolled in college within the past year

Students will participate in an interview about homeless experiences in college. Interviews are on a secure online method, like Zoom, using a computer or smart phone. Interviews last 1 hour.

Participants will receive a \$50 gift certificate as a thank you for their time.

To participate contact: Deidra Thomas-Murray; Email [dctgw9@umsl.mail.edu](mailto:dctgw9@umsl.mail.edu) Call or Text 504-554-xxxx

Participants with questions, comments, concerns, or if any problem arises from the study, please direct them to contact: Project Investigator by calling Deidra Thomas-Murray 504-554-xxxx, or the Faculty Advisor Dr. Thomasina Hassler 314-516-xxxx

Sincerely,

Deidra Thomas-Murray  
Melissa Scheer

**Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flier****VOLUNTEERS  
NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH STUDY****ARE YOU ELIGIBLE?**

Were you a high school student who experienced homelessness?

Were you enrolled in college homeless?

Are you independent from parents or guardians?

**TO PARTICIPATE CONTACT:**

Deidra Thomas-Murray  
Email [dctgw9@umsl.mail.edu](mailto:dctgw9@umsl.mail.edu)  
Call or Text 504-554-xxxx

**Participants with questions, comments, concerns, or if any problem arises from the study, please direct them to contact: Project Investigator by calling Deidra Thomas-Murray 504-554-xxxx, or the Faculty Advisor Dr. Thomasina Hassler 314-516-xxxx**

**UNDERSTANDING  
THE CHALLENGES  
OF STUDENTS  
EXPERIENCING  
HOMELESSNESS IN  
COLLEGE**

Participants will receive a \$50 gift certificate as a thank you for their time.

**WHAT WILL IT  
INCLUDE?**

Participate in an interview about your homeless experiences in college.

Interviews are on a secure online method, like Zoom, using your computer or smart phone.

Interviews last 1 hour.

**PARTICIPATION IS  
VOLUNTARY**

This study has been approved by University of Missouri St. Louis Institutional Review Board.

**Appendix C: Informed Consent Information**

Department of Education

One University Boulevard  
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499  
Telephone: 314-516-xxxx  
Fax: 314-516-xxxx  
E-mail: xxxxx@umsl.edu

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH  
ACTIVITIES****Surfing without Water: College Students Who Experience Homelessness**

Principal Investigator: Deidra Thomas-Murray \_\_\_\_\_ PI's Phone Number \_\_ 504-554-xxxx

**Summary of the Study**

This is a brief description of the project.

This project is research. Participation is voluntary.

The purpose of this research is to learn educational experiences of being homeless while enrolled in college. One of the research team members will discuss with you your experiences in an interview.

The interview will last about one hour.

Risks to you may not exist or may be minimal. Risk may involve retelling experiences incurred during your homelessness on college campuses that may make you experience discomfort. You may stop the interview at any time. Please let the researchers know if you experience discomfort.

There are not any personal benefits to you for completing the study.

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Deidra Thomas-Murray, Amber Bell-Christian and Melissa Scheer with Dr Thomasina Hassler. The purpose of this research is to understand the challenges and needs of college students who are experiencing homelessness.
2. a) Your participation will involve:

**Participating in an interview about your experiences of being homeless while enrolled in college.** We will send you via text or email a secure link that will connect you with the zoom application, or a similar conferencing app.

You can join the interview on a smart phone or computer that has internet access from any secure location that you choose.  
The interview will last about one hour.

Approximately six college students may be involved in this research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

- b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be one hour and you will receive a \$50 gift card as a thank you for your time. The gift card will be emailed to you.
3. There are certain risks or discomforts associated with this research. They include may include retelling experiences incurred during your homelessness on college campuses that may make you experience discomfort. You may stop the interview at any time. Please let the researchers know if you experience discomfort. There is also a loss of confidentiality risk. To minimize this risk, we will destroy all electronic communications that contain your email address after the interview. We will change your name and remove all identifying information from our research records.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or withdraw your consent at any time. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or withdraw.
6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this study. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection) that would lead to disclosure of your data, such as this consent form, as well as any other information collected by the researcher.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Deidra Thomas-Murray 504-554-xxxx, or the Faculty Advisor Dr. Thomasina Hassler 314-516-xxxx. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research, at 516-5897.

Please let the researchers know if you have any questions.

**I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I hereby consent to my participation in the research described above.**