**Homeless youths face struggles in Shasta County. Here's one couple's story**

[Nada Atieh](https://www.redding.com/staff/3150132001/nada-atieh/)

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Had it not been for California Heritage YouthBuild Academy, Caryn, a 21-year-old transitional housing resident at Lutheran Social Services, could be homeless today.

She sat beside her 19-year-old boyfriend and watched their 2-year-old daughter scurry across the LSS office as she recounted how she ended up in a transitional housing facility for youths between the ages of 18 to 24.

“My parents were never in the picture. I lived with my grandparents. My parents always chose drugs over their kids,” Caryn said, fighting back tears in between long moments of silence.

The number of homeless minors in Shasta County has swelled over the years and while the education system offers some support to this demographic, it is constrained by obstacles and limited community resources to successfully address the whole issue. Moreover, because of red tape surrounding working with homeless minors, organizations in the community struggle to support these youths.

Caryn is one of the hundreds of young people who have faced homelessness while living in Shasta County. Statistics show the number of homeless minors has grown in Shasta County in recent years. According to the California Department of Education and Shasta County Office of Education’s most recent data, the number of youths who identified as homeless at some point during the school year between 2016 and 2020 climbed from 652 to 768 in that four-year period.

Educators are on the front line when it comes to dealing with youth homelessness, said Austin Preller, director of youth support services at the Shasta County Office of Education.

At least one designated homeless liaison is present at each school to connect students to services like CALFresh, Cash Aid Assistance, transportation and the internet.

However, due to the stigma and other factors surrounding homelessness, kids and young adults are hesitant to share that they struggle with this issue. Many are flying under the radar, undetected, Preller said.

When a school administrator does find out a child is homeless they share that information with teachers, said Kelly Rizzi, director of school and district support at Shasta County Office of Education.

The state provides funding on a district level and schools provide financial support, free and reduced lunches, and other services unique to each district.

Some schools have even gone so far as to fix a family’s car so kids can have transportation.

Young people who are becoming homeless are either with their families, staying in cars or at relatives' houses, or have been turned away from home and are in hiding. They are couch surfing at friends’ homes, living in motels, trailer parks, shelters, public spaces or substandard housing.

They don’t admit they’re homeless to teachers or friends to avoid ridicule by their peers, said **Meagan Sedley**, case manager for the youth at **Lutheran Social Services**.

There’s so much shame they feel and a sense of responsibility to protect the family, Rizzi said. "For the parents who are doing things that they shouldn’t be, those are the ones we don’t have valid data on."

"The scary thing is so many go unreported because parents don’t want Child Family Services checking them out so they try to hide the fact that they’re living in their car or staying with their relative. So just know that the number is much higher than is actually reported," Rizzi said. "For the parents who are doing things that they shouldn’t be, those are the ones we don’t have valid data on."

Other referrals come through Shasta Community College, probation offices and food insecure committees, Watson said.

Homeless minors can become vulnerable to sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and criminal victimization, said Stacy Watson, transitional housing case manager at the Hill Country Health and Wellness Center.

Watson has worked with numerous young people who have become homeless and are being exploited. She recounted how one of her clients was given permission to live in a home if they gave their CALFresh and resources to their host.

"We had a young man who was living in the corner of someone’s living room in a home that should have been condemned and he was paying them $400 a month to keep his stuff in the corner. There’s a lot of stories like that and they’re so desperate that they just do it," Watson said.

Some of Watson's referrals come from the California Heritage YouthBuild Academy, the school Caryn attended when she was referred to LSS.

Caryn became pregnant while she and her boyfriend, Nick, attended CHYBA. After her grandmother found out, she turned Caryn away from her home so she could raise her child with Nick, as a separate family. Caryn and Nick were 19 and 17. Both were in high school.

The young couple bounced from trailer to apartment to house, between Nick's parents, relatives and friends. It wasn't until Caryn told her teachers at CHYBA that she was referred to Lutheran Social Services in 2019.

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"Now people are aware of the program and now some of the kids come up to me on their own and talk to me and say 'Hey, are you the homeless helping lady,'" Watson said. “There’s not really good awareness to the general population about how bad it is and what’s really going on.”

While resources and support are available to students and families experiencing homelessness, liaisons can’t force students to accept the assistance, Preller said. There seems to be a disconnect when it comes to implementing resources to support the demographic.

“I think what happens is it’s almost like services and resources exist in pamphlets, but not in practice. That’s not to say they don’t exist, but the system is incredibly difficult to navigate, particularly for someone who doesn’t have the skill or reading level to navigate it,” he said.

There are a lot of issues that pop up when it comes to creating shelters to house homeless minors, he added. For one, there is no way to identify that a youth is an unaccompanied minor in a homeless situation and not just running away from home. Then it’s difficult to give housing vouchers to minors rather than adults. Someone under 18 doesn’t have the legal authority to sign off on a lease agreement.

They can be turned in to foster care if identified, he said. However, many times unaccompanied youths who are becoming homeless in Shasta County are runaways from the foster care system who choose to go into hiding.

Other common cases include LGBT+ youths who are shunned from their families, physical or emotional abuse victims looking for protection, or children whose needs are neglected because of substance abuse, said Sedley, of Lutheran Social Services.

In 2018 in Shasta County, there were 17.6 substantiated allegations of child abuse per 1,000 children as compared to the California average of 7.6 per 1,000 children. In 2019 there were 20 substantiated allegations of child abuse per 1,000 children, compared to the California average of 7.7, according to the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at the University of California at Berkeley.

The substantiated allegation types in Shasta County were mostly general neglect, followed by emotional abuse and severe neglect, according to the California Child Welfare Indicators Project.

As for Caryn, she is grateful to be in a transitional housing program, where she is learning to be an independent, responsible parent and partner, and how to raise her young daughter in a stable environment.

Both Caryn and Nick graduated with their high school diplomas earlier this year. They hope to build a stable household for their child and say they feel fortunate to be where they are today.

The young couple have friends who are still struggling to find a place to live, Nick said.

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*Nada Atieh is a* [*Report For America*](https://www.reportforamerica.org/) *corps member and education reporter focusing on childhood trauma and the achievement gap for the Redding Record Searchlight. Follow her on Twitter at* [*@nadatieh\_RS*](https://twitter.com/nadatieh_RS)*. Help local journalism thrive by* [*subscribing today*](https://cm.redding.com/specialoffer?gps-source=CPNEWS&utm_medium=onsite&utm_source=news&utm_campaign=NEWSROOM&utm_content=nadaatieh)*!*