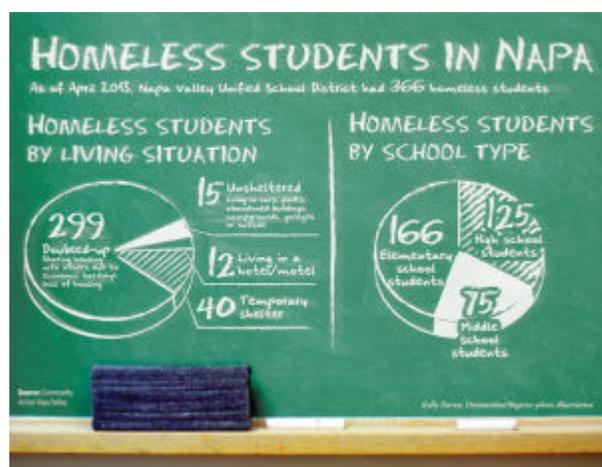


## HOMELESS

## More than 300 Napa-area students qualify as homeless, district reports

Schools provide supports services to reduce stresses on children



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Those who work closely with low-income families in Napa County often state that the “richness” in Napa Valley “camouflages” the poverty. Unfortunately, that poverty is not limited to adults.

As of April, the Napa Valley Unified School District had 366 students — one out of every 49 students — who were considered homeless. Among those students:

- 12 lived in hotels or motels;
- 40 lived in a homeless shelter;
- 299 were in shared housing; and
- 15 were unsheltered, which can mean living in cars or empty buildings.

Among the homeless students, 166 were elementary school kids, 75 were in middle school, and 125 attended local high schools. As high as these numbers might appear, school officials believe they fall short of the full story.

“I’m sure (homelessness is) under-reported,” said Laura Ryan, the district’s administrator of interventions.

Napa Unified is able to gather its count of homeless students when families fill out the residency form in the registration packet at the start of each school year.

To receive federal funding for support services, the district is required to do a count of homeless students every school year.

A school may also learn of homelessness when a child’s behavior or attendance changes abruptly, said Jeannie Puhger, foster and homeless services coordinator for the Napa County Office of Education.

One of the fears parents have about reporting their housing status is that their kids will be taken away by Child Protective Services (CPS), said the Rev. Linda Powers, program director for shelter services at Community Action Napa Valley.

But parents need not fear a call to the authorities. School district employees only contact Child

Protective Services when abuse is suspected — and they do not equate homelessness with abuse, Ryan said.

Drene Johnson, executive director of Community Action Napa Valley, said she did not blame parents for fearing CPS. “If I were homeless, I’d have that fear, too,” she said.

### **‘I had to get out’**

Monique, a mother of two children, ages 7 and 9, was referred to the Napa Emergency Women’s Shelter after years of physical abuse from her children’s father.

Their father, Monique said, would sell and use drugs, spend time with other women and come and go as he pleased. When he came home one day and found her with another man, he struck her and threatened her life with a knife.

“I really thought I was going to die,” Monique, who asked that her last name not be used in this story to protect her children’s privacy, said.

The police arrived but did little to help because she had no physical markings of abuse, Monique said. Their advice was to pack up and leave, she said. She left the next day, explaining to her kids that they needed a better life, and that the situation at home wasn’t healthy.

“I had to get out for me and my kids’ safety,” she said. Her children had never been physically harmed but had witnessed their father’s abuse, she said.

Monique and her two children lived in a Napa shelter for nearly six months. The adjustment wasn’t easy at first, she said, because living at the shelter came with many rules — including an 8 p.m. curfew and chore assignments. But she also described the shelter as being one of the best things to ever happen to her.

After years in an abusive relationship, Monique and her children had found a safe, drug-free environment. And the time at the shelter allowed Monique to get back on her feet.

Her children began attending a local elementary school, and while the transition was difficult, her two social kids were able to make friends quickly, she said.

Monique also has found a job and was able to secure permanent housing early last week.

Monique has wondered if her abusive domestic relationship had anything to do with witnessing domestic violence between her own mother and father. Monique is hopeful her children won’t repeat the cycle of abuse that has existed in her family.

“I want them to be successful adults,” she said. “By breaking away from (domestic violence), I hope I’ve made a difference in their life for the future.”

### **‘No immediate solution’**

Liaisons who work for the Napa County Office of Education, as well as the county’s various school districts, refer homeless families to local Family Resource Centers. The centers provide information, assistance, and referrals for housing options, according to local education officials.

Many families also avail themselves of support programs provided by Napa County Health and

## Human Services.

When working with homeless students, the goal of the Napa school district is to create as little interruption as possible, Ryan said.

To help get homeless children to school, the Napa County Office of Education uses federal grant money to buy monthly bus passes every school year. For high school students, the passes are given out individually. For younger children, the passes are distributed to whole families, because parents often don't want their children riding city buses alone.

The federal grant also supports homeless youth by providing funding for their school lunches, tutoring, field trips, and caps and gowns at graduation.

Federal law requires that students who are homeless are able to access the same educational opportunities as every other student, Puhger said.

"The distribution to schools to support these students is minimal, so any extra funds are spent on bus tickets, school supplies, sometimes clothing for job searches and fees for college applications," Puhger said. "Locally, we have networked with many agencies, service clubs and individuals who have donated these items."

One agency that works closely with local homeless people is Community Action Napa Valley, which runs the Samaritan Family Center. The Family Center serves as a temporary shelter for up to seven families. The shelter is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The maximum amount of time a family is allowed to stay at the shelter is 180 days, or approximately six months, Powers said. Many families are able to get back on their feet within that time frame, but others are less fortunate.

Finding permanent housing for low-income families is a "huge challenge" in Napa, because affordable housing is so scarce and expensive, Powers said. People end up leaving the area simply because they cannot afford the rent, she said.

"We have an issue here but, frankly, not an immediate solution," Powers said.

She said approximately 85 percent of the homeless people in Napa are Napa natives.

"These people went to Vintage High School and Napa High," Powers said. "They're our own."