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# A Comparative Policy Analysis: Policies in Mexico and the United States Serving Youth in Street Situations

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A Comparative Policy Analysis: Policies in Mexico and the United States Serving Youth in  
Street Situations

By

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Discipline in  
Social Work and the Elizabethtown College Honors Program

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**Abstract**

Street-involvement among children and youth is a global social concern. It is challenging to compare policies serving a population which varies in average age, risk factors, and needs, especially where distinct child welfare policies operate. While Mexican youth may remain with the family and work in the street to provide income, the parallel population in the U.S. is runaway, pushed-out and homeless youth, those usually driven away from the family system rather than working for it. Although these two nations have similarly operating policies serving street-involved youth, there are fundamental differences in practice based in cultural and political differences. Analyzing and comparing the relatively recent Mexican and United States policies - their historical, social, political, and economic influences - will inform current practices in considering how to best attend to street-involved youth, as well as develop a framework for social work practice in the U.S. and Mexico.

The moniker ‘street children’ brings with it connotations of the Other: a child in a foreign country, on the streets, barely clothed, thin, dirty and begging. However, being street-involved is relative to culture-specific typologies, and so manifests in diverse presentations, experiences and needs. Cultural context becomes integral to the understanding of the phenomenon as the definition of ‘street youth’ varies globally (Coren et al., 2013; Toro, Lesperance, & Braciszewski, 2011). Often, this diversity remains unacknowledged (Llorens et al., 2005).

In all nations there are varying types of child street involvement, from simply working in the streets to living in them. UNICEF divided potential descriptors into children ‘in’ the street - home-based but working the streets during the day; children ‘from’ the street - sleeping and living there but maintaining family connections; and abandoned children completely street-based with no family ties (Dabir & Athale, 2011; Thomas de Benítez & Hiddleston, 2011). Broadly speaking, street-involved children and youth are those who are connected to the street, be it living, working, or both.

The street environment brings with it common adverse outcomes, such as poor educational achievement (Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006), commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), and a higher risk for health issues, such as sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, and asthma (Child Trends, 2015; Family and Youth Services Bureau [FYSB], 2014; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). Youths living on the street are more likely to be victimized by assault, rape or robbery, experience continued violence, and often abuse substances as a way to deal with the mental and emotional pains of their past and present (FYSB, 2014; Gigengack, 2014b; Herrera, Jones, Thomas de Benítez, 2009).

While Mexico has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the guiding international agreement for child rights, the U.S., a signatory to the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights (UDHR), remains the only UN member to not ratify the CRC. Policies in Mexico are guided and informed by child rights-specific obligations, while U.S. policies are guided only in part by the UN's Optional Protocol to the CRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, which the U.S. has ratified. In the U.S., the street-involved youth phenomenon violates Article 25 of the UDHR, which states that all have the right to an adequate standard of living for one's health and well-being, to include food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in circumstances of social vulnerability, such as in childhood, as well as violating the Optional Protocol due to risk for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE).

In Mexico, street-involvement is commonly initiated and sustained through labor; thus, street-involvement amongst children is a violation of a child's right to protection from economic exploitation and labor that is hazardous, interferes with education, or is harmful to overall child development (CRC; Article 32). Street involvement interferes with a child's right to education (CRC; Article 28), street-living violates a child's right an adequate standard of living (CRC; Article 27) and the phenomenon at all levels reflect a lack of assistance to parents to provide the resources to adequately care for the child (CRC; Article 18).

A comprehensive focus on policy and practice is essential to remedying this social issue locally and globally. To ensure the integral development of youth in vulnerable situations, federal and local authorities and civil organizations must develop programs which effectively serve this population (Borjón Nieto, 2006), and only through effective and informed policy can these services begin to attend to micro, mezzo and macro push and pull factors. Therefore, to provide a condensed analysis of U.S. and Mexican policies, the historical and cultural contexts in each country will be reviewed, and each policy analyzed and compared.

## Mexico

### *Introduction*

Street-involved youth in Mexico is a difficult population to study, develop policies for, and attend to. These youths are generally nomadic, and their situations fluctuate, not matching with any rigid, written definition which misses the fluidity and flexibility of street involvement in Mexico (Jones & Thomas de Benítez, 2012; Long, 2013). However, a working description of street-involved youth and their characteristics, as well as analysis of the federal policy working to protect them, is possible for Mexico.

There is no current estimate for children who are street-involved nationally as comprehensive statistics are outdated, and most recent statistics focus on specific states or cities. Reliable statistics are difficult to develop because children often work in the informal economy, are migratory, and can become almost invisible. Diagnostic research conducted by *Diagnostico de Menores en Situacion de Calle* (DIMESIC) from 2004 to 2008 has supported previous findings in 1999 and 2002 that many street-involved youths are male and that the numbers of street-involved youth have decreased, but found that many now live more permanently on the streets (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2012; El Sistema del Desarrollo Integral de la Familia [SNDIF], 2012). More females are becoming involved in street situations (Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006), as are indigenous youths (Makowski, 2012). Additionally, although no reputable statistics exist, there is a generation of children being born to street-living parents, perpetuating a cycle of marginality, street-linked from birth (Hernández González, 2006; Maldonado Baqueiro, 1999). There remains a substantive lack of research regarding the actual population of children in street situations in the nation.

At present, three street-involved subpopulations exist in Mexico: those who work in the street but maintain ties to their families; those who have abandoned their family to live in the

street; and those at-risk through extreme poverty and family conflicts (Curiel Arévalo, Núñez Noriega, Meléndez Torres, & Ortega Lélez, 2010). Within the Mexican context, street-involvement varies by circumstances, type of work, and other situational factors, including linkages to family, living with friends or living on the street, and supporting the family through street work (Consortium for Street Children [CSC], 2011; Gigengack, 2008). Occupations are often in the unregulated and unprotected informal sector with poor working conditions, including six main types: vendors; trash pickers; beggars; artists and acrobats; supermarket baggers (*cerillitas*); and domestic or factory workers (Fatou, 2012). More specifically, children and youth wash windshields, provide entertainment (acrobatics, fire-eating or clowning), or sell food, clothing, illegal pirated DVDs/CDs (*pirateria*) or other stolen goods (Herrera et al., 2009; Jones & Thomas de Benítez, 2012).

As street-involvement is perceived by policy developers to stem from impoverished and dysfunctional families, interventions focus on micro interventions while ignoring mezzo and macro factors, such as intergenerational poverty, institutional discrimination, and an ill-equipped education system (Pérez García, 2010). Intersecting mezzo and macro forces have begun to alter the profiles of street-involvement and exacerbated the negative impacts on children and youth in street situations. Many of these factors can be discussed within the historical context of the nation, which has reflected consistent wealth disparities, high levels of poverty among families and children, as well as expectations that children and youth work to support the family.

### ***History***

The history of street involvement and social assistance for street working and/or living children in Mexico has been marked by trends of institutionalization, divergent rural and urban practices of child welfare, and the recent development of a child rights policy and practice



framework. Converging with social and political history, these trends provide the foundation through which to analyze current policy attending to street-involved youth by revealing from what context it has been developed and how services for this population have evolved over time.

Initially, recognition of the number of street children as a social problem emerged early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the first group of street-involved youths was called “*niños vagabundos*,” directly translating to ‘homeless children,’ which included street children, delinquents, and orphans of the Mexican Revolution. During the Revolution (1910-1920), institutionalization was employed as the sole intervention, rescuing or saving children through the discipline of an institution (Hernández Landa, 1995). Churches, civil society organizations (OSCs), and government-funded institutions rescued children from public spaces and provided clothing, food, and basic education, while vocational schools provided skills workshops (Guerrero Flores, 2008; Hernández Landa, 1995).

However, the Revolution left many children in need of social assistance, worsened unemployment, and increased need for care in an already exhausted system (Guerrero Flores, 2008). In rural communities, orphaned children were absorbed by relatives or other families looking for extra laboring hands, but in urban areas social assistance only came from formal institutions, which were already overwhelmed (Camarena Ocampo, 2008; Guerrero Flores, 2008). The government began to close institutions, pushing children to poorhouses (*hospicios*) already operating at capacity, or back to the street (Guerrero Flores, 2008).

Regional disparities and social inequalities marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stemming from political and economic unrest and poor social recovery. While the 1930s and 40s were a time in which Mexico experienced a sustained economic growth, the majority of the population did not feel the effects of the healthy economy (López-Alonso, 2006). In the 1950s, 65% of the nation

was suffering extreme poverty; and although this decreased to about 25% of the population in 1995 (Poverties.org, 2012), over half of the entire Mexican population lives below the poverty line and over half of the population living in poverty continue to be under the age of 16 (Hernández Landa, 1992; UN News Centre, 2013). The decentralization and privatization of social assistance programs starting in the 1980s has cut budget costs for social services (Zárate García, 2006). Wealth disparities have grown; poverty increased with economic crises in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, causing extreme poverty to surge to 35% (Poverties.org, 2012). Lower family incomes paired with lack of financial and social support led to early child entry in the labor market so that the children could help support the family financially (Zárate García, 2006). In fact, child workers increased 37% in the 90's as compared to 1986 (Hernández Landa, 1995) and children aged 12 to 14 working rose after the economic crisis of 1995 (Abler & Robles Vásquez, 2002; Tagle López, 2006). Although prohibited by the Federal Work Law in Mexico for most of the century, child labor policies were rarely enforced, especially in the rural context where children were expected to support the family (Camarena Ocampo, 2008).

Though much of Latin America saw a drastic increase in this social issue in the latter half of the century, institutionalization was the primary intervention to rescue youth, and ultimately excluded them from the greater community (Aptekar, 1994; Hernández Landa, 1992;1995). Later, institutionalization was used either in tandem with or separate from family interventions, at the time called family 'reformation' (Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). This preventative discourse emerged in the 60's and focused on families as the nexus of all social problems plaguing Mexican youth (Hernández Landa, 1995). Family reformation interventions birthed from the view that maladjustment in youth stemmed from the dysfunctional family (Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). Therefore, interventions often attended to the

family as a whole, working to avoid family disintegration, familial substance abuse, and intrafamilial abuse and neglect (Hernández Landa, 1995). Psychologists, sociologists and social workers made home visits, provided advice and introduced interventions to modify social behavior (Hernández Landa, 1995). Yet, similar to common stereotypes of U.S. welfare recipients, families became viewed as the source of social problems, rather than as victims of social circumstance. The paternalistic and charitable character of these programs maintained and promoted dependence through pejorative stigmatization and medical model of assessment and treatment (Hernández Landa, 1995).

Throughout the 1980s, more differentiated and practice-informed methods developed (Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). Street education, one of these new practices, was first offered through el Sistema Nacional del Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (SNDIF) during the 70's, but was systemized in 1983 with the “*Menor en Situación Extraordinaria*” (MESE) program, attending to the most vulnerable minors in especially difficult situations; however, it worked from the premise that vulnerabilities were transitory and fleeting, rather than chronic or systemic (Hernández González, 2006; Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013; SNDIF, 1996). In 1992, Mexico City's government instituted the Street Education Program (*Programa de Educación de Calle*) sending 300 educators out into the street to serve youths; this program ended in 1994, but directly led to the creation of civil society organizations (OSCs) which now coordinate street education projects (Hernández González, 2006). Oriented uniquely to reach “*niños callejeros*”, street educators went into work and living spaces to build rapport with youth and convince them to leave the street (DIF, 1994; López, 1990). A new participative methodology in intervention emerged, providing multi-systemic intervention in personal skills, education, vocational training, community outreach and family intervention, a revolutionary

social movement (Rodríguez, 1993; Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). Education has officially been the intervention for ascending social stratification and achieving social mobility, but populations at the highest social risk are the first to be expelled by inflexible and ill-equipped education systems (Hernández González, 2006).

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century loomed, then president Ernesto Zedillo intended to combat an increase of crime by passing the General Law of 1995 which established the National System of Public Security (*Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública*; LSNSP) (Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). In effect, it criminalized street youths by describing their antisocial conduct as the seeds of criminality and a risk to public security. Through the CRC, children had a right to co-exist in public areas, yet children, particularly those in street situations, were persecuted and expelled from those spaces (Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). As in other Latin American countries, the criminalization of this population led to the advent of social cleaning efforts by police forces in urban areas (Melel Xojobal, 2012; Narváez Aguilera, 2012).

With the lack of rights-based public policies, street populations, especially children, cannot establish social capital or reach better conditions of life, and are often victims of systematic policies of forced removal, also called ‘social cleaning,’ or the forced removal of homeless or transient individuals from public spaces (Narváez Aguilera, 2012). A global phenomenon, social cleaning has increased over recent decades for creating a clean and modern urban image, especially when political figures or tourists visit (Melel Xojobal, 2012; Narváez Aguilera, 2012). Street populations are considered an obstruction to that vision of modernity and development (Narváez Aguilera, 2012). Cities will prohibit ambulatory artisan vendors from public spaces or public assembly without permission, and institute fines or otherwise stigmatize and criminalize this population through arbitrary detention (Melel Xojobal, 2012). In Veracruz,

police forces detained children in street situations through such policies in 1999, 2002, 2004, and 2011, and DIF entities in the state forcibly removed indigenous street youths and detained their parents for exploiting them (Narváez Aguilera, 2012). The CRC committee (2006) in reviewing Mexico's fulfillment of its precepts, noted few means to prevent street involvement and protect this population, and that violence was shown by police towards street youth (Pérez García, 2010).

International organizations, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), have been instrumental in changing attitudes and practices in Mexico through annual monitoring of practices and publishing reports about child work and street-involvement. Additionally, the UN recommended introducing an information sharing system to improve services and knowledge, which has since been instituted in Mexico (Equipo del DIF, 2015). Mexico is currently developing modern professional and evidence-based interventions, technically trained service providers and a data collection strategy (DIF, 2006a; Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). However, federal entities often forget that Mexico is obligated to fulfill the CRC convention that it has ratified and promised to uphold. Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, policy efforts have often produced paternalistic, assistantialist, and repressive practices (Borjón Nieto, 2006; Castillo Bertheir, 2008).

### ***El Sistema Nacional del Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (SNDIF)***

*Sistema Nacional de Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (SNDIF), or the National System for the Integral Development of the Family, is tasked with developing and implementing child welfare policies, coordinating services through state and local agencies and promoting family and child rights (Morlachetti, 2013). Birthed in 1977 through a presidential degree, SNDIF

emerged from the fusion of the Mexican Institute for Childhood and Family (*Instituto Mexicano para la Infancia y la Familia*; IMPI) and the Mexican Institution of Child Assistance (*Institución Mexicana de Asistencia la Niñez*; IMAN), and was designed to coordinate the collaborative provision of social services nationwide (Sotomayor Sánchez, 2000; SNDIF, 1996). Bridging and organizing the public entities in charge of assistance, SNDIF was to promote social well-being through brokering health and nutrition services, and investigate the needs of Mexican families and children. Today, DIF's mission is to promote the integral development of the family and the community by combating the causes and effects of vulnerability, in coordination with the state and municipal systems and public and private institutions (Zárate García, 2006). Prior to SNDIF, there was no policy regulating social assistance services or organizations (Zárate García, 2006). This mission statement reflects SNDIF's focus on the family as the fundamental unit of Mexican society and its purpose for promoting family well-being. SNDIF's current mission is published on its governmental webpage and reads:

Hoy más que nunca, la familia debe ser nuestro espacio de paz, apoyo, formación, y bienestar. En el DIF Nacional, nos encargamos de conducir políticas públicas en materia de asistencia social que promueven la integración de la familia. También, promovemos acciones encaminadas para mejorar la situación vulnerable de niños, adolescentes, adultos mayores y personas con discapacidad (SNDIF, 2015).

[Today more than ever, the family should be our space of peace, support, training, and well-being. In the National DIF, we are charged with driving

public policies on social assistance that promote the integration of the family. Also, we promote actions to improve the vulnerable situation of children, adolescents, the elderly, and people with disabilities.]

### *Views of Children*

Children have been viewed in a variety of ways within Mexican society, including as abandoned objects lacking love and in need of paternalistic protection, as well as maladapted and delinquent children (Pérez García, 2010; Rodríguez Gabarrón, 1995). The prevailing view of children in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was that they were suffering from a dysfunctional family and personal maladjustment, the remedy being institutional discipline (Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013). By the 1980s, youths were viewed as rebellious, aggressive, and violent – delinquent – focusing on transgressions and drug abuse in the youth population; this birthed the repressive, corrective solutions, including incarceration (Rodríguez Gabarrón, 1995). Such social distinctions of criminality and personal, moral flaw defined those in need of social services, quickly stigmatizing them. Children coming from impoverished and working class families – those most at risk for street involvement – were expected to have acquired these antisocial and delinquent practices from their exposure to low social strata (Osorio Ballesteros & Arteaga Botello, 2013).

Historically, children were seen as a source of working power. In working families, children were expected to work and be obedient and silent (Camarena Ocampo, 2008). But they were integral to supporting the family salary, and as soon as he could work, at about 8 years of age, a son began to contribute to the family income; daughters remained in the home to complete domestic work (Camarena Ocampo, 2008). Industrialization birthed the new distinction between

minors and adults that denounced the need for family-based child work, and began to develop policies to attend to child maltreatment (Hernández González, 2006).

Additionally, this changing view of protecting children evolved within the family. Family roles changed by the 1960s, as wives remained in the home, children attended school, and technologies altered how factory work was completed, eliminating the ability of, or need for, children in the factory (Camarena Ocampo, 2008). Fathers became sole breadwinners and the family the sole source of socialization to community values (Camarena Ocampo, 2008). Ultimately, middle class families with sufficient income did not need to incorporate their children into the working world.

Under the CRC and based on Mexico's own laws, the nation is expected to avoid or eliminate child labor in all of its forms. While Mexico has policies regulating the work of minors, the historical view amongst families experiencing poverty that children are a source of income remains strong (Orraca, 2014). Although the CRC says that children should be free of economic exploitation and have access to an education, this does not necessarily mean that in Mexican culture child labor is anathema; the issue becomes protecting children from exploitation and hazardous working conditions (Liebel, 2015). Children in Mexico are still expected to work to become prepared for future employment and support the family.

### ***Push and Pull Factors***

Often involvement in the street environment is impacted by biological factors such as sex and age, but can be linked to multiple other causes (Cordera, Ramírez, Kuri, & Ziccardi, 2008). Family disintegration may be a fundamental factor converting a minor into a street child, especially because the family is the first and principal contact with the child and is responsible



for meeting a child's basic needs (Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006). Nevertheless, in reality, family violence and psychological, sexual and/or physical abuse of the child are risk factors for street involvement, and family poverty limits ability to meet family needs (CSC, 2011; Gómez, Sevilla, & Álvarez, 2008; Jones & Thomas de Benítez, 2012; Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006).

Poverty in a family can propel a child to seek personal economic support in the street or to obtain funds to support the family as a sign of familism (BICE, 2011; CSC, 2007; Jones & Thomas de Benítez, 2012; UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), 2008). Poverty and social inequality are paramount social issues in Mexico where poverty is about 50%, 23% of Mexican society is considered marginalized, and workers primarily labor in the unprotected informal sector (*Instituto Nacional para el Federalismo y el Desarrollo Municipal & Secretaría de Gobernación* (SEGOB), 2010; U.S. Embassy, 2014). The National Council on the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (*Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social*; CONEVAL) noted in its 2012 poverty measurement that 21.2 million (53.8%) of the 39.4 million children under the age of 18 were living in poverty (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social [CONEVAL] & la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [UNAM], 2014).

Although Mexico has universalized access to nine grades of education, the average educational attainment is between 5-5.2 years of education, with the largest age group of youth in Mexico (15-19 year olds) having the lowest enrollment rate of all OECD countries (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013a). Not long ago, a child in the richest social stratum had 12 years or more of school while a child in the poorest only completed 3 years (Borjón Nieto, 2006; UNICEF, 2006). Performance gaps remain

significant for children who speak an indigenous language (OECD, 2013b). While school is technically free to enroll in, families are required to pay transportation fees, purchase uniforms, books and school supplies, and provide breakfast (Aguirre Reveles, 2001; Rosenberg, 2008).

Intersecting with an exclusionary school system and diminished earning capacity for parents, many children work. Though no reliable statistics are available for street-involved youths, a related phenomenon – child labor – offers reliable numbers. An estimated 1.5-3 million children work, whether than be in markets, in the home, in stores, in agriculture, or in the street, bolstering the Mexican economy and supporting family income (Borjón Nieto, 2006; Gamboa Montegano & Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2014; INEGI, 2011; OHCHR, 2012). The National Statistic and Geography Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*; INEGI; 2011) notes that 1.2 million (almost 40%) of working children do not attend school; almost three quarters of these child laborers are male (Gamboa Montegano & Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2014). Reasons for entering labor early included financial need in the family (13%), the family's need for labor (30%), and the need to pay for school (26%) (Gamboa Montegano & Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2014).

Poverty, dropping out of school, and child work make a triangle of risk for poor future outcomes (Tagle López, 2006). Dropping out of school leaves youths undereducated and ill-prepared for the formal job economy, without the necessary skills to find a higher paying job or remedy their social situation, perpetuating this cycle of poverty (Aguirre Reveles, 2001). After becoming involved in the street, youth lack opportunities to leave their situation, possibly further traumatized by gang violence or commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and becoming stuck in a familial cycle of poverty (CSC, 2011; Thomas de Benítez & Hiddleston, 2011).

The street can attract children for its flexibility. Groups of street-working or living youth develop a supportive community, building for abused youth a non-blood related family with its

own set of values, roles and rules (CSC, 2011; Gigengack, 2008; Jones & Thomas de Benítez, 2012; Makowski, 2012). Others are pulled into the street by a desire for fiscal freedom, independence, and autonomy (Jones & Thomas de Benítez, 2012; Makowski, 2012).

### *Experiences of Street-Involved Youth*

Though much discussion focuses on the harmful conditions of street involvement, one more neutral experience is that street children exhibit the courage to break with unhealthy family situations, becoming independent and aspiring to live a better life, even though they lack the sufficient skills to survive on the street, relying solely on their intelligence and creativity (Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006). Early abandonment of the home and the responsibility necessary to navigate the street environment propel young children into maturity (Ortiz, 1999; Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006), changing a child's traditional role into one of a young adult. In this growing maturity, youth become resourceful and learn to how to live on their own. However, these children also face barriers to social integration and well-being.

Street youths, working or living there, may feel stigmatized and expelled by institutional systems and the public at large, for, where these youths are excluded from families, schools and other social institutions, they are included in informal work sectors and street groups (Cordera et al., 2008; Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006). Many experiences of street involvement revolve around this social exclusion/inclusion dichotomy, produced by the interaction of many processes and factors impeding youths from achieving quality of life and participating fully in society (Castillo Bertheir, 2008). The street socializes youth to experiences of social exclusion, or the protective experiences of social inclusion.

Street-involved youths tend to live in the present - the here and now perspective - making decisions based in instant gratification or the immediate need to satisfy basic needs, including drug use or using their bodies to obtain necessary resources (Gómez et al., 2008). Sexuality is often acted out in conditions of vulnerability, such as the effects of drugs or alcohol or survival sex, giving rise to unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted illnesses, and risks of commercial sexual exploitation (Gómez et al., 2008; UNHRC, 2008; UNICEF & UCW, 2012).

Substance abuse is common among Mexican street-involved youth, including alcohol and other drugs (Gigengack, 2013; Herrera et al., 2009). Herrera and colleagues (2009) found that drug use, though causing significant harm to the body, allows youths to escape their psychological and emotional traumas through the drugging effects of pleasure or euphoria; it also suppresses the appetite for those hard-pressed to find food and reduces feelings of being cold (Gómez et al., 2008). In addition to substance use, youths can also face external dangers and violence in the street, including risks of being hit by a car or other hazardous work accident, gang involvement, and police repression (CSC, 2007; Herrera et al., 2009).

### ***Mexican Public Policy***

Policies develop within the context of a society, their multiple systems, culture, ideology, and political atmosphere (Zárate García, 2006). In Mexico, policies serving youth have been influenced and shaped by its culture and history. For example, institutionalization, although it violates a child's right to self-determination, has been utilized throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues today. Mexican culture as a whole considers child labor an integral component of child development (Liebel, 2015), and necessary for a family's fiscal sustainability (Orraca, 2014). Mexico's recent child rights policy framework at times conflicts with cultural and social views of

children. However, it has also been, and continues to be, influenced by the child rights movement.

After the global child rights movement and Mexico's ratification of the CRC in 1990, the Mexican government developed a multifaceted plan to support child rights, reduce child labor, and foster cultural respect for child rights (OHCHR, 2012). For example, then Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo initiated the 1995-2000 National Program of Action in Favor of Childhood (*Programa Nacional de Acción en Favor de la Infancia*), which then guided DIF's 1996-2000 Program of Attention to Childhood (*Programa de Atención a la Infancia*). The Program of Attention to Childhood held four distinct goals: to attend to the most vulnerable youths; defend child rights; promote a culture of respect for the child; and consider the uniqueness of each child's circumstances in service provision (SNDIF, 1996). Since then, the federal government has instituted systematic efforts to prevent vulnerability and support youth in street situations.

NGO's and civil society organizations (OSCs) have emerged to work with street-involved youth and further this international movement in Mexico. This network of OSCs is integral to promoting and defending child rights nationally, as well as providing assistance services, especially to street-involved youth; state and municipal DIF entities outsource program funds and responsibilities to these organizations. Casa Alianza, a branch of the U.S.-based Covenant House for homeless youth, works in Xochimilco, Federal District, with children aged 12-18, providing voluntary residential services, a prevention and treatment program for STIs and HIV/AIDS, social work services for counseling, family reunification, and drug treatment, and basic medical care (Casa Alianza, 2015; Immigration Refugee Board of Canada [IRBC], 2011). Matraca, an agency based in Xalapa, Veracruz, offers a variety of educational and recreational opportunities for street-involved youths, and was instrumental in passing state rights-based

policies (MATRACA A.C., 2014). Other foundations and organizations provide day centers in the Federal District for vocational training, temporary shelter, food, clothing, schooling, and health care (IRBC, 2011).

On the road to the current policies coordinating NGOs and OSCs, as well as DIF entities, the first fundamental policy changes occurred in 2000, when Congress adopted the Law for the Protection of the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents (*Ley para la Protección de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes*), a primary child welfare policy in Mexico, which established that children's needs are within public purview, and it is in the social interest of Mexico to guarantee and respect child rights (Morlchetti, 2013). This law's purpose is to protect child rights to ensure full and integral child and youth development according to physical, mental, emotional, social and moral standards. This law defines Mexican youth by age: children are considered birth to age 12, and adolescents, 12-18 years old (Secretaría General de Gobierno [SEGOB], 2013).

The federal government is to promote child rights through the outlined principles, such as the best interest of the child, by requiring the participation of states and municipalities, as well as the private sector, to implement policies and strategies that support child rights as outlined by this law to improve the social status of children and adolescents (SEGOB, 2013). Appropriate support is to be allotted to parents, guardians, and other persons responsible for caring for youth; all persons involved in a youth's life are responsible for protecting youths from abuse and maltreatment and full fulfillment of their rights (SEGOB, 2013). Important here is that teenagers who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances of neglect in the street environment under no circumstances should be deprived of their liberty.

Noteworthy, however, is that some Mexican states have passed a state-level version of the law which they could amend to state needs. For example, the state of Mexico explained in Article 46 of their state Law for the Protection of the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents how state and municipal DIF entities, as well as private institutions, are to establish specific programs to defend the rights, services, and assistance for youth in street situations (Gobierno del Estado de México, 2015). Similarly, Veracruz outlines in Article 92 of its law that these youths have a right to participate in programs to access education and full physical and mental development, and that state and municipal authorities are to establish programs to attend to youths who have not left the family or home, but who maintain activities in the street; those who live in risk in the street, passing the majority of their time there; and those who live there and have broken their link to family (Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 2014). Programs provided to serve street-involved youths should have as characteristics (Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 2014, p. 15):

- Gradual and voluntary withdrawal from life in the street
- Preservation of family ties where appropriate
- Integration into a foster family where appropriate
- Referral to public or private institutions better able to provide required care
- Evidence-based attention and guidance
- Development of educational activities, for development and complete an office job
- Health services and sex education

Using these guidelines, the state government would create centers for children and youth in street situations which offer voluntary services and activities and allow youth to receive guidance, recreation, education, and vocational training (Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 2014).

Among other states, it is not common to have such extensive protections for street-involved youth. Guerrero describes that street-involved youth have a right to nondiscrimination based on their street situation (Congreso del Estado de Guerrero, 2015). Both Puebla (Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 2014) and Sonora (Congreso Libre y Soberano del Estado de Sonora, n.d.) only mention that to be in a street situation makes these youths vulnerable, while in the Yucatan (Gobierno del Estado de Yucatán, 2009), the Secretary of Education is tasked with implementing programs for young workers in informal economic opportunities in the street in order to protect them from exploitation (Article 92). Oaxaca does not mention youth involved in street situations or child workers (Congreso del Estado Libre y Soberano de Oaxaca, 2007).

Following the passage of the Protection Law in 2000, stakeholders began to discuss the possibility of a Program for the Prevention and Attention to Girls, Boys and Youths in Street Situation (*Programa de Prevención y Atención a Niñas, Niños y Jóvenes en Situación de Calle*) (Pérez García, 2001). Policy efforts were grounded in the Mexican Constitution and the CRC, but also influenced by the Protection Law, juvenile justice systems, the Law of Social Assistance, and individual state laws (Pérez García, 2001). This program developed as a strategy, or *temática*, to promote OSCs to care for at-risk children, operated in the Program for the Protection and Development of Children (*Programa para la Protección y el Desarrollo de la Infancia*), discussed in more detail below.



***Current Policy***

Three laws guide social assistance and child welfare broadly in Mexico: the Federal Work Law, the Law of Social Assistance, and the General Law for the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents, recently passed in 2014 and described further below. The Law of Social Assistance outlines the Program for the Protection and Development of Childhood and the types of youths to be served by social assistance: all girls, boys and adolescents, and especially those in situations of risk such as living in the street, victims of labor exploitation, commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), and/or working in poor conditions. The Program is housed in the broader National Program of Social Assistance (*Programa Nacional de Asistencia Social*; PONAS – 2014-2018) within the General Law of Social Assistance. The role of PONAS is diagnostic: to develop a national profile of poverty, exploitation, and street-involvement. Included in PONAS are strategies to promote the rights of the child and support interventions for youths in street situations. As included in PONAS, the Program for the Protection and Development of Children has been administered by SNDIF since 2000.

Recent policy changes have impacted how the Program operates and the general atmosphere for child rights and care policies in Mexico. While the most recent changes to the Program for the Protection and Development of Childhood have created a new national system specifically focused on child rights promotion and evaluation, SNDIF remains the program's executor, and as such is in charge of operating its programmatic component of coordinating assistance for street-involved or at-risk youth.

Recently, Mexico passed the General Law for the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents (2014) which has become the foundation for efforts to protect, defend, and promote standards outlined in the CRC. The General Law for the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents operates as

the Constitutional foundation for child rights, paralleling the CRC, expanding the obligations of national and state authorities to care for vulnerable children, and building an administrative framework for such action. This General Law at the constitutional level, more powerful than the Law for the Protection of the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents (2000) at the federal level, recognizes children and adolescents as rights holders, in accordance with the principles of universality, interdependence, indivisibility and progressiveness, in order to ensure respect, protection, and promotion of rights. Restructuring child care policies across the board, it alters the “who” and “how” for the Program for the Protection and Development of Children. One strong development is Article 39 of the General Law which specifically mentions how authorities are obliged to carry out special measures to prevent, address, and eradicate the multiple, intersecting discrimination for youths in street situations and child workers based in conditions of marginality.

Other tasks include SNDIF creating the Federal Office for the Protection of Girls, Boys and Adolescents, and the federal creation of a National System of Comprehensive Protection of Girls, Boys and Adolescents (*el Sistema Nacional de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes*; SNPI-NNA) which will ensure through their activities protection, comprehensive prevention, and restitution when these rights have been violated (CONEVAL, 2016). In 2016, the Program (S149) merged with S150 Program of Attention for Families and Vulnerable Populations (*Programa de Atención a Familias y Poblaciones Vulnerables*) and S250 Program of Strengthening Prosecutors of Defense of the Minor and Family (*Programa de Fortalecimiento a las Procuradurías de la Defensa del Menor y la Familia*). In FY2016, S149, S150, and S250 will begin operating together, having been merged into S272 Supports for Protection of Persons in Need (*Apoyos para la Protección de las Personas en Estado de Necesidad*). This newly

merged program will grant funds and resources to state and municipal DIF entities and OSCs to support the implementation of works and actions focused on infrastructure, rehabilitation and training, so as to provide material assistance for those who need/want to better their conditions of life, as well as funding infrastructure projects, rehabilitation services, and coordinating work with DIF and OSCs to encourage the implementation of child rights nationally. S272 will be evaluated by a Matrix of Indicators to determine how it achieves its ultimate objective to close gaps in health between different social groups in the country by offering financial supports and projects and specific in-kind benefits to protect persons in a state of vulnerability, explaining in its Rules of Operation that the goal will be measured by the percentage of the population in a state of vulnerability who benefitted from Program projects, received financial supports, proportioned financial subsidies purposed to resolve an emergent problem, and also the percentage of social assistance projects funded by SNDIF compared to those submitted (Secretaría de Salud, 2015).

The General Law develops, for the first time, a system of accountability through the SNPI that includes monitoring and evaluation policies for programs and actions that impact children. SNPI will be in charge of establishing policies, services, and actions that protect child rights and disseminating information that will integrate public and private participation in policy implementation. SNPI must also institute a participatory development process for children and system of data collection. SNPI will implement, in the future, the National Program for the Protection of Girls, Boys and Adolescents in its new form (CONEVAL, 2016). While the SNPI works with studies, evaluation, promotion of rights, building institutional protections, SNDIF will continue to promote the formation, capacitation and professionalization of organizations linked with protection child rights (Pérez Álvarez, 2015).

*El Programa para la Protección y el Desarrollo Integral de la Infancia*

An annual Agreement outlines the Rules of Operation guiding program interventions for at-risk, street-working, or street-living youth. The Agreements (*Acuerdos*) become the legislative manual for how this program will be managed and operated over the fiscal year. The Program for the Protection and Development of Children operates with federal subsidies given to organizations and local DIF entities to provide programming. Its three fundamental program focuses include prevention, attention (intervention/action), and, lastly, institutional strengthening, in accordance with specific themes; most important here are the themes of child labor and street involvement.

The Program's strategy of prevention involves fortifying protective factors and positive conditions in the lives of children, youth, families, and communities in order to avoid social risk factors and situations, including teenage pregnancy, maltreatment, among others. The goal of the Program is, first, to support informative and preventative actions to prevent psychosocial risks, to include activities which develop social capabilities, like adaption and self-care, while also focusing on integration: seeking to incorporate marginalized social groups into health and economic systems so as to support community development (CONEVAL, 2014). The second facet, attention, provides assistance services, including psychological intervention, medical attention, and legal services. Lastly, institutional strengthening is completed through training personnel to implement these strategies, developing investigations, and building infrastructure (CONEVAL, 2014; SNDIF, 2014). A fundamental link between all efforts is the promotion of child rights, through actions that teach children about how exercise and diminish risk factors.

To adequately serve youths through the program, SNDIF supports subprograms which focus on identified micro, mezzo, and macro risk factors affecting physical and emotional well-being. Subprograms have included (CONEVAL, 2014; SNDIF, 2014):

- Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)
- Teen Pregnancy
- Psychosocial Risk
- Child Labor
- Street Situation
- Unaccompanied Migrant Youths
- Addictions
- Promotion of CRC Child Rights

These subprogram themes are allocated a percentage of funds from within the Program's overall federal budget. The specific subprograms are supported by proportions of the overall program's budget. In 2012, the 'Child Labor' subprogram received 24% of the budget, 'CSE' received 9.7%, and the 'Street Situation' subprogram received 8.8%; in 2013, these numbers changed, with 'CSE' falling out of the top three, and 'Child Labor' receiving 21.6% and an increase to 12.8% for 'Street Situation' (CONEVAL & UNAM, 2014). OSCs and state and municipal DIF entities submit a grant proposal to the SNDIF, explaining how their project, or a proposed project, would meet the Program's goals and objects to support youth in one of the above-mentioned areas. Grantees are tasked with provided a strongly preventative services approach to reducing risks through prevention, but also to a lesser extent, providing interventions and services to youth individually, as well as to the family and community (CONEVAL, 2014).

The National Statistics and Geography Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*; INEGI) provided census data in 2010 which outlines that the potential target population for children and youth services is 39,226,774 (CONEVAL, 2014). However, this

count does not outline exactly who is included in it. Thus, although the Program served 2.4 million youths in 2014 (CONEVAL, 2016), there is no reliable count of the estimated target population – those in need of the specific program components related to street-involvement, child labor, teen pregnancy, etc. The target population has not been estimated due to difficulties in identifying the number of children presenting psychosocial risk or other factors; currently, SNDIF does not calculate the number of clients who have benefited from preventative services (DIF, 2014). Additionally, although annual counts are reported by state DIF entities, these reports show wide variations from what is reported by other organizations and offers no demographic data, thus limiting program assessment (DIF, 2014). They had expanded the information system for migrant children to aid in the identification of trafficking and exploitation across nine states (CONEVAL & UNAM, 2014). In 2015, the entire Program attended to a total of 2,383,592 youths, 51% girls, with a decreased budget of \$95 million MXD (a little over \$5.4 million USD) (CONEVAL, 2016).

Programs operating under the theme ‘Street Situation’ (*Situación de Calle*) focus on girls, boys and adolescents up to age 17 and 11 months (SNDIF, 2014). Coordinating efforts between public, private, and social sectors, street situation programs provide services to children and youth and their families through the Strategy of Prevention and Attention to Girls, Boys and Youths in Street Situations (*La Estrategia de Prevención y Atención a Niñas, Niños y Jóvenes en Situación de Calle*; OHCHR, 2012; SNDIF, 2014). The municipal DIF systems and OSCs design and implement projects to serve children living or working in the street, or those vulnerable to *callejerización* due to diverse psychosocial risks. Projects are designed to prevent street involvement for children and youth at risk of entering the street, as well as provide services for those children and youth already in the street environment (SNDIF, 2014). Shelters working with

street-involved youths received a comprehensive catalog of services to help each shelter serve youth more comprehensively. In 2013, this subprogram served 14,197 youth in seven federal entities through 79 projects implemented with 31 DIF entities and 44 OSCs (CONEVAL & UNAM, 2014). At the close of 2014, this subprogram operated in partnership with 52 civil society organizations in 50 municipalities, and had completed 104 projects, serving a total of 15,319 children and youth (SNDIF, 2014).

Programs operating through the ‘Child Labor’ (*Trabajo Infantil*) strategy attend to girls, boys and adolescents 6 years old to 17 years and 11 months who are at-risk for street-involvement or who work in the streets, parks, plazas, public markets, graveyards, in garbage collection (*basurero*), bus and train terminals, and in other public spaces (SNDIF, 2014). Actions focus on multisystem efforts to build community networks and family and individual capacity, and to reclaim the view that the school is the fundamental site for positive youth development (SNDIF, 2014). Services include psychological intervention, medical attention, legal services, and supportive academic scholarships or other cash compensation (SNDIF, 2014). The child labor subprogram provided school scholarships, job trainings or channeled youth to other welfare programs; they provided 5,185 scholarships and 348 trainings in 28 states in 2012 (CONEVAL & UNAM, 2014). At the close of 2014, the Child Labor project had served 80,492 working children, 166,389 at-risk minors, and 130,211 families within 597 municipalities (SNDIF, 2014).

The Program has operated without impact assessments since its initiation in 2000 due to limitations in program design, its operational characteristics, and the limited budget (CONEVAL, 2014; DIF, 2014). CONEVAL and the UNAM (2014) found that at the end of 2014, there were still no impact assessments due to program design and characteristics and budget constraints. Noteworthy is that although the budget had been continually increased since

2006, when it operated with \$93.19 million MXD, hitting its budgetary climax in 2009 with \$150.94 million MXD, it decreased by half to \$94.94 million MXD in 2014 (CONEVAL & UNAM, 2014). An average of \$1.6 million MXD were provided to each entity providing programming (CONEVAL & UNAM, 2014).

Though the Program has no monitoring and evaluation tools for impact, other national entities provide assessment of its goals and activities, using indicators of population coverage, the language of the Rules of Operation, among others. Although the Program works with DIF entities and public and private organizations to provide services to youth in vulnerable situations, its operating goal is to improve coordination and management of activities of its partner agencies (DIF, 2014). CONEVAL and the National Institute of Public Health (*Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública*; INSP) (2009) found that in 2008, the goal was to better position DIF entities and agencies to attend to children in conditions of social vulnerability. CONEVAL and Rubio Soto (2011) found that the purpose of the Program had modified to increase the knowledge of risk factors amongst youth to therefore allow them to avoid situations of risk; the defined population in for the Program was agencies, and to increase their capacity to serve more youth. This illustrated the Program's inconsistency in purpose and program services provided (CONEVAL & Rubio Soto, 2011).

The Program lacked mechanisms to evaluate impact, had no short, medium or long term goals, and had not clearly defined its target population (CONEVAL & INSP, 2009), although it has updated estimates of the potential population by state and has developed an improved method for calculating some indicators through the Matrix of Indicators (MIR) (DIF, 2014; CONEVAL & Rubio Soto, 2011). Similarly, CONEVAL and Colegio San Luis A.C. (2013) found that the Rules of Operation did not include a theoretical or research-based justification for



the Program components and services, had still not been able to define target populations, provided no information on who receives the support of the programs annually, and had no options for gauging client satisfaction. However, the Program utilized effective indicators for management and building agency capacity through Technical Assistance and training (CONEVAL & Colegio San Luis, 2013).

Additionally, although it sought to address important issues, the plethora of subprograms and themes made it difficult to define and quantify the target population as well as program components. By 2009, subprograms were operating in 32 federal entities and attending to 1.7 million clients (CONEVAL & Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2010). This evaluation recommended that the Program develop an operational framework that would develop each subprogram with a purpose, components and specific activities, all with the single, common goal of upholding and promoting the CRC (CONEVAL & Rubio Soto, 2011).

### ***Discussion***

Aspects of the public policy serving street-involved and at-risk youth in Mexico lay a strong framework for service provision and top-down rights protections. For instance, Constitutional law recognizes that children and youth possess rights and should be able to exercise those rights. National authorities are tasked with supporting efforts across systematic levels to ensure rights protections and integral development of youth. SNDIF contracts financial and technical assistance to local DIF entities and OSCs through a community-based strategy that best reflects the cultural foundations for supporting protection and care projects. Community organizations already integrated with the target client base, respected, and coordinated can better implement outreach and intervention projects because they know their communities best and the community trusts them. Moreover, SNDIF can fund effective programs already being practiced.

This policy also reflects the economic need amongst clients, and provides scholarships and, commonly, conditional cash transfers, to families. Economic support can limit the need for children to work, and encourage continued school attendance and academic success.

The Mexican government has been responsive to policy recommendations regarding its fulfillment of the CRC. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) expressed its concern that complex law enforcement systems lead to ineffective and inconsistent implementation of new legislation for children (Morlachetti, 2013). In 2012, a National System of Comprehensive Protection of Children's Rights was proposed by a UNICEF representative, Susana Sottoli (2012), as a solution for such incoherence (Morlachetti, 2013). In a positive movement, the National System of Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents was adopted in 2015 by President Nieto (Equipo del DIF, 2015). Angelica Rivera de Pena, president of the Citizen's Advisory Counsel of SNDIF, explained that such an action evidences that, for Mexico, respect for children is paramount in policy and practice frameworks, and essential to improving quality of life and preparing children for contributing to the nation (Equipo del DIF, 2015).

However, the policy as studied operates with multiple weaknesses, leaving protections and services for street-involved youth inadequate. One important concern in this policy framework is that program components are ineffectively mapped and coordinated by its Rules of Operation and SNDIF. For example, its purpose and goal has changed since 2006 to focus less on guiding effective services and more on building the capacity of local organizations to provide more services. This goal is inconsistent with the actions outlined in the Rules of Operation, program objectives, and indicators for program assessment. Furthermore, the policies which guide the Program itself intertwine with child labor regulation, social assistance policies, and the

laws promoting and protecting child rights and development, reducing its operationalized integrity.

Most important is the current structure of the policy. The Fiscal Year 2016 will be the first year in which policy pieces will operate as merged and transitioned to SNPI oversight, a newly created federal entity. Yet, this drastic revision of the policy must be considered in light of annual evaluations of the Program for the Protection and Development of Childhood, because, although numerous concerns were noted year after year by external evaluators, by FY2015, many of these weaknesses remained unresolved, including lack of client impact assessments and an operationalized results framework, and the undefined target population.

Although the Mexican government must be applauded for its systematic efforts to merge policies and programs that are effectively attending to the same or similar social conditions, making such drastic policy changes, without having solved any programmatic issues, diminishes the integrity of policies and programs, further limiting their effectiveness in practice. As discussed below, Mexico lacks a defined legal, rights-based framework to protect and serve street-involved youth, and is further limited by program design, social context of child labor, poverty, and social cleaning actions (Morales Salazar, 2012). Although Mexico has passed laws and statutes that reflect a political desire to promote child rights and ensure the integral development of youth and families, this top-down approach has accomplished limited advancements into the cultural environment.

The situation for child labor and street-involvement persists. Although the Child Labor subprogram served 80,492 working children through FY2014 (SNDIF, 2014), between 1.5 and 3 million children currently work in Mexico (Gamboa Montegano & Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2014; INEGI, 2011). While the program could, theoretically, attend to millions of children and families

in poverty, involved child workers and street-involved youth, the lack of a defined target population specific to subprograms and lack of a coordinated effort based on estimated numbers, only minimal intervention is supported. This may be due, in part, to the utilization of solely financial and technical support to small, grassroots organizations operating their own programs and with limited capacity, and the restricted operation of subprograms to only a handful of states.

The aforementioned limitations of subprogram operation may be linked to policy budgeting. Over the last eight years, the budget for the Program has fluctuated drastically. The funding increased to its highest point at \$9.4 million USD, and fell in 2014 to its funding level from 2006: \$5.4 million USD. Although the cost of living and the worth of the Mexican peso may be drastically different than in the U.S., this fluctuating range for funding impacts the support to agencies annually, and must limit their ability to provide programming and services they were able to in years past.

Policies for attending to street-involved youth do not outline evidence-based practices or provide a basic framework for what programs attending to working or street-involved youths should look like; this allows for programs to operate without monitoring or evaluation methods and possibly with ineffective services. Lacking standardized intervention and service outlines, and monitoring and evaluation methods for provided services, limits the ability to determine how grantees utilize federal funds, if they are providing interventions that are effective, and if they are the meeting goals and objectives of public policies for serving youth. Additionally, without any framework for programs that match with subprogram strategies, impact assessments or descriptions of services provided cannot be determined at the national level.

Although official programs serve these youths in Mexico, there remains a great abyss between their rights and their social reality in Mexico, and incongruence between policy and its

practice (Tagle López, 2006). Public institutions state that they try to eliminate the structural causes of poverty, but really only alleviate poverty in the short-term through in-kind benefits or scholarships (Zárate García, 2006). Similarly, official programs focus on family reunification, as the family is the fundamental unit of society. Paired also with the commonality of remittance of street-working income to the family, family reunification is the driving value in all policies for street-involved youth. However, strong push factors to street involvement include family dysfunction and sexual, physical or emotional abuse; those youths who reflect these violations and cannot and should not return to their families as a solution (Gómez et al., 2008). Even in recognizing the need for living alternatives if family reunification is not possible, policy does not outline what these alternatives are (Zárate García, 2006). Distrust of this system is common amongst organizations and the youth it aims to serve (Zárate García, 2006).

Street-working and/or living youth are active participants in their daily lives, and experience daily social exclusion and stigmatization. It is imperative that these youths have a voice in both their services and in the policies which aim protect them, especially as they access and practice their rights as inalienable in the CRC. Such a participative approach may inform the operationalization of subprograms and program components to support increased coverage nationally. In such an approach, clients shared that the services they most wanted from a social worker were to provide informational support and help in completing tasks, such as applications and procuring documentation, becoming enrolled in school, locating a stable living situation, and establishing healthy contact and reunification with the family (Martínez Velasco & Silva Arciniega, 2006). To create effective policies to protect youth entities should view clients who receive services as also strategic planning partners; cooperate with various entities to share information and provide multi-systemic, interdisciplinary interventions; and promote full

participation of youth in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs (Castillo Bertheir, 2008).

## **United States (U.S.)**

### *Description*

In the U.S., street-involved youth are categorized as homeless, runaway, and pushed-out youth; they are not described by their relationship to the street (Dabir & Athale, 2011; Thomas de Benítez & Hiddleston, 2011). The term ‘street youth’ is used as an umbrella term for runaway, homeless, or pushed-out youth, or describes youth who have lived on the street for a long period of time (FSYB, 2012; Rahman, Turner, & Elbedour, 2015). However, as in Mexico, typologies are often too rigidly defined to match with actual housing status or reasons for homelessness (Fernandes-Alcantara 2015). About 1 to 1.7 million youths are estimated to be homeless on any given night (Child Trends, 2015; Frenandes-Alcantara, 2013), and represent about 8% of the total homeless population (NAEH, 2015). Yet, the National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH; 2013) estimates that 2.5 million children experience a homeless episode each year, representing an 8% increase from 2012 to 2013.

Youth homelessness is a growing concern in the U.S. because they are the fastest growing and most vulnerable segment of the U.S. homeless population (Cunningham et al., 2011; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth [NAEH CY], 2012; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). According to the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE, 2015), the number of students identified as homeless and enrolled in school has increased 15% over the last three school years, from 113,2853 homeless students in 2011-2012 to 130,1239 homeless students in 2013-2014. They lack the social and political power to effect change in their situations, support the development of services through participative action (UN Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2010), or exercise their internationally recognized rights.

Historically, homeless youth have been classified into four main categories: throwaway/pushed-out youth forced to leave their homes; street youths living in the street; runaway youths; and system youths who run away from or otherwise transition from juvenile justice or foster care systems (Farrow, Deisher, Brown, Kulig, & Kipke, 1992). In fact, foster care youth are 3 to 10 times more likely to experience homelessness (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013), and studies show that 12-36% of emancipated foster care youth will report being homeless at least, approximately 28,000 youth in 2010 (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden, & Rosenau, 2012; NAEC, 2012).

However, these classifications are not mutually exclusive. A street youth might also be a system youth, who might have once been a pushed-out youth, and before that a runaway. Regardless of terminology, these youth lack stable shelter and supervision and care from adults (Cunningham et al., 2011; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015). Effectively counting the homeless youth population is difficult given their vulnerability, limited methods to limit duplicate contacts, and transient movement, thus, most research is situation-specific and limited, studying only those in shelters, schools, or in public spaces (Toro et al., 2011).

Since 1948, the U.S. has been bound by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which codifies the “right of adequate housing” for citizens experiencing economic hardships beyond their control, and specifically addresses the rights of children and youth to have adequate housing (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Though a signatory to the UDHR, the U.S. remains the only UN member to have not ratified the CRC, an international treaty which would otherwise guarantee children the basic human rights that poverty erodes (United Nations, 2015).



### ***Population Profile***

There is great diversity among the experiences of homeless youth, including variations of time away from home, ethnic, racial, and LGBTQ identification, and activities in the street environment (Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007). Among runaways, for instance, several different categories may be apt, including situational runaways who leave after a family conflict, runaways who more consistently leave the home, pushed-out youth, and system youth who leave their care placement (Farrow et al., 1992). Running away even one time decreases the likelihood of graduating from high school by 10% (Aratani & Cooper, 2015).

Homeless youth tend to be equally male and female, a statistic that has remained steady since 2005 (Child Trends, 2015). Unaccompanied youth are largely (87%) 13 and 17 years of age, while younger children are more likely to be accompanied by another older minor if homeless (Child Trends, 2015). Of homeless students counted during the 2013-2014 school year, the majority were sheltered or awaiting foster care (n=186,265), 80,000 were living in hotels or motels, and 42,000 remained unsheltered at night (NCHE, 2015). These students may present with disabilities, have Limited English Proficient (LEP), be transitory or migratory, and/or be unaccompanied (NCHE, 2015). Approximately 20% of homeless youth are LGBTQ; LGBTQ youth are disproportionately African American or American Indian, often from low-income communities, and from poor or working class families; they are also at higher risk for victimization and mental health problems (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2012).

Prevalence of rural homelessness is a growing phenomenon and presents differently than in urban areas. Students in urban areas are less likely to spend a night away from home (12.4%) compared to students in suburban or rural areas (14.6%) (HHS, 2014). Homeless youths in rural

regions often have little to no connection to stable housing and family situations due to community characteristics, such as low employment opportunities, low population growth, and fewer local resources (HHS, 2014). Rural homelessness is less visible, and manifests in couch-surfing - finding short-term, temporary shelter in the homes of friends, neighbors and other relatives (HHS, 2014).

Homeless youth demonstrate a wide range of survival strategies (Aratani, 2009), including panhandling, collecting refundable bottles, informal work (housecleaning, bagging groceries, manual labor, etc.), as well as sex work, shoplifting, selling stolen goods or drugs, as well as becoming pimps for other street-involved youths (Beech, Myers, Beech, & Kernick, 2003; Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). Youths may have held formal employment before, but during episodes of homelessness may work three jobs simultaneously (Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). Youth often engage in “survival sex” to procure shelter, food, drugs, or meet other subsistence needs (HHS, 2012; The National Network for Youth [NN4Y], 2015; Walls & Bell, 2011). More street youths (28%) than shelter youths (10%) report having participated in survival sex (NN4Y, 2015), but runaway and homeless youth are at increased risk for becoming victims of CSE (NAEH, 2011).

Without protections offered by caregivers, young people who live on the streets are at high risk of developing serious lifelong health, behavioral, and emotional problems (HHS, 2008: 2012; NCFH, 2013; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). About half of homeless youth are expected to experience physical abuse, and about a quarter to experience sexual trauma or mental health problems (“Living on the Street”, 2008). Activities of, and experiences in, the street economy are linked to a number of adverse consequences, such as trauma and victimization, HIV infection, and even death. They suffer from high rates of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder, and

are often survivors of physical and sexual abuse prior to and during episodes of homelessness (HHS, 2012). Youth with high levels of substance abuse, including alcohol and other drugs, as well as street-living youths, are more likely to be victimized (Bender, Thompson, Ferguson, & Langenderfer, 2014). Homeless youth are at high risk for involvement in the criminal justice system, especially if they have a history of physical abuse (Yoder, Bender, Thompson, Ferguson, & Haffejee, 2013). In one study, the majority of youth had used substances, been detained by police, or jailed, and many experienced depression and difficulties transitioning to formal employment (Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009).

Homeless youth have often severed bonds to conventional society and its social controls, leaving families and formal institutions behind (Miles & Okamoto, 2008; Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). Yet, having family support youth in finding employment is a protective factor, and, in fact, many youths maintain their commitment to their initially socialized values, accepting and embracing hard work, education and self-improvement, wanting to fulfill the usual American Dream while involved in the street environment (Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). In light of social exclusion, it can become increasingly difficult to fulfill those expectations. At times, barriers are multifaceted and plausibly insurmountable: for example, homeless youth cannot get a job if they cannot provide an address, but to obtain and maintain a job a youth must maintain personal hygiene, difficult to do without stable housing (Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). Additionally, there is social stigma to street-working homeless youth, describing them as criminals, lazy, and drug addicts, and commonly prostitutes (Kidd et al., 2007; Miles & Okamoto, 2008). The impacts of this stigmatization are compounding, dehumanizing these youths daily through public exclusion, as well as inducing negative self-esteem as these youths begin to adopt the stigmas (Kidd et al., 2007).

Being homeless reduces a youth's ability to regularly attend school and attain a quality education, the academic achievement gap for students experiencing homelessness surpasses the gap for economically disadvantaged students (Masten et al., 2012), and missing school and dropping out are associated with failing to develop the educational and job-readiness skills crucial to financial and housing stability (HHS, 2012). Yet, many researchers have also documented the tremendous resiliency of homeless youth, including their ability to develop constructive relationships, structural supportive tools and reliable networks (McKay, 2009). Some students experiencing homelessness are resilient in schools, ranking at or above grade level in core academic subjects such as reading, mathematics, and science (McCallion, 2012; NAEHCY, 2013; NCEH, 2015).

### *History*

U.S. history is a useful tool for understanding the context surrounding how the nation views and defines these youths, and how street-involvement evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sociopolitical contexts over time reveal that there has been, and continues to be, a certain bias against runaway or homeless youths; they are often viewed as delinquent. History illustrates how this viewpoint developed and how it continues to impact policy and practice.

This population has existed in America since its colonialization and has reflected varying typologies, including homelessness and street labor (Smollar, 2007). The needs of runaway and homeless youth were served by child welfare agencies and/or juvenile justice courts in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As youth homelessness expanded mid-century and after, there was a shift to federal oversight for programs supporting this population (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015).

Being homeless was not considered a chronic social problem for youth until the 1970s and 80s when the homeless population began to increase (NCFH, 2013), to include women and

children, as opposed to White men, and became more racially and ethnically diverse (Perl et al., 2013; NASW Delegate Assembly, 2005). Previously, homelessness was relegated to temporary instances of catastrophe, be it economic or natural, including Civil War (1861-65) and the Great Depression of the 1930s (Rahman et al., 2015). Then, the War on Poverty and the Great Society movement illuminated homelessness as a structural problem, requiring a public response (NASW Delegate Assembly, 2005).

Parallel to this growing recognition of youth homelessness, was a growing anxiety regarding youth delinquency which culminated in the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) (P.L. 93-415) in 1974, within it, the original Runaway Youth Act which went on to establish the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act in 1977 (RHYA) (NASW Delegate Assembly, 2005; Rahman et al., 2015). Juvenile delinquency was presented as a social problem to the nation, and these policies were responsible for combatting delinquency (Glassman et al, 2010).

As noted, in the 1980s, the number of homeless Americans significantly increased with federal and state cuts in housing and social services (NASW Delegate Assembly, 2005; Rossi, 1989). A 2010 comparative study of child poverty rates among industrialized nations found that the U.S. had the second highest rate, a consequence of federal and state cuts initiated in rising conservative economic policies in the 1980s and the 1990s (Child Trends, 2010). During that same period, the nation's homeless population increased significantly (Child Trends, 2010).

For several decades between the late 1980s until the early 2000s, the problem of youth homelessness was noted in American social and educational research as a phenomenon confined to U.S. urban centers, where some proposed it was a temporary problem, but it became persistent and pervasive across the U.S. and in urban and rural areas (Hambrick & Johnson, 1998; U.S.

Department of Agriculture, 1996). Additionally, concepts of personal responsibility, connecting strongly with the residual view of social assistance services, emerged as the guiding perspective in policy development, as opposed to homelessness' true causal connection to a multitude of institutional and systemic problems (NASW Delegate Assembly, 2005).

In response to the rising number of homeless youth, the federal government enacted public policy changes to provide services and educational support for homeless youth (Rahman et al., 2015). The Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program (1987) was created within the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (PL 100-77), ensuring that homeless and street youth could access free and appropriate public education (MacKay, 1994). Thus, efforts aimed to remove barriers to education and develop holistic policies expanding access to education and the mental, social and health services and interagency collaboration necessary to ensure effective school integration (MacKay, 1994). As part of the McKinney Act, temporary shelters began to emerge through grant funding efforts to reach homeless youth and their families, and other policy movements, such as one in St. Louis, Missouri, reflect a growing recognition of the needs of the homeless and for expanded shelter services (Johnson, Kreuger, & Stretch, 1989). Shelter care, and shelter services, continue to be the focus of social assistance efforts for runaway and homeless youth in the U.S. (NASW Delegate Assembly, 2005).

The dramatic surge in family and youth homelessness in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is attributed to national recession, lack of affordable housing, unemployment and low wages (NAEH, 2015; NCFH, 2013; Rahman et al., 2015). The core of the homelessness problem can be linked to structural and institutional risk factors, including poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment and underemployment, among many others (NASW Delegate Assembly, 2005). Yet, despite the U.S.'s massive wealth and human rights foundation through

the UDHR and other related conventions, poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, and unequal access to education still prevail, disproportionately impacting disadvantaged children (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty [NLCHP], 2013; UNHRC, 2010). Most policies on have emphasized the alleviation of individual need through in-kind benefits (Jones & Crook, 2001). Shelters provide these in-kind benefits, such as a bed to sleep in, hygiene services, food, and can also provide more comprehensive case management services on a generally temporary basis. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, policies attending to homelessness amongst youth have used the shelter care model in the utilization of community-based resources and organizations, while avoiding making systemic changes to improve efforts to prevent homelessness and provide effective services, such as accessing affordable housing.

### ***Reason for Street-Involvement***

Reasons to leave the home and/or enter the street environment are multifaceted, and often linked to macro, societal institutions failing to adequately serve and protect these youths and their families (Cunningham et al., 2011). The push factors for street-involvement two decades ago are still reflected in the reasons youth currently transition into the street environment (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; MacKay, 1994). For example, to leave the home may come from the dissolution of family system due to loss of economic viability, or, most commonly, family conflict (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015). Nontraditional family structures, such as blended families, parental health issues limiting employment and income, or low educational achievement are risk factors for homelessness (Brackenhoff, Jang, Slesnick, & Snyder, 2015). Additionally, many youth leave home because they have experienced or witnessed high levels of violence or trauma in their homes, with an estimated 83% of homeless children having been

exposed to at least one major violent incident by age 12 (Aratani, 2009; NCFH, 2011a; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010). Abuse is commonly a factor in dysfunctional family environments, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse are all correlated with higher run away rates in youth (Benoit-Bryan, 2011).

Aforementioned economic conditions, such as the recession and unemployment, are also aggravating intergenerational poverty and racial inequality in the U.S. (Bird & Higgins, 2011; Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013). Poverty remains a push factor for youth to abandon the family home, at times an indirect factor. Poverty inhibits the development of stability in the family unit, reduces access to adequate education and increases the probability of dropping out of school; additionally, poverty in the family can exacerbate frustrations and substance abuse, influencing family conflict and abuse. Multiple recessions, limited job development, and inflation have resulted in an increase in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor & Smith, 2011; American Psychological Association [APA], 2011; National Center for Family Homelessness [NCFH], 2011); concurrently, the rising costs of food, fuel, and housing have distressed the middle class and poor families alike.

These youths are often excluded from mainstream institutions, both before and during street-involvement, and remain vulnerable to the attraction of the street environment (Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). A long-term linkage to the street environment, paired with mainstream social exclusion, can often accelerate this transition, as the street and its culture becomes more familiar. The additional barriers to accessing the formal economy, including homelessness, education, disability, stigma, identity, incarceration, and age, push youths into the street where these barriers do not disqualify them from participation (Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). Becoming initiated to the street is influenced by a severe and immediate economic need: little choice but to



the enter the street economy to meet their basic needs, as well as actively being recruited by predatory adults and peers: commercial sexual exploitation, either they became involved because of their own familiarity with the street or others preyed on the vulnerable and mentored them into it; even waiting at service providers in the community (Viorst Gwadz et al., 2009). Thus, it is unsurprising that the street is perceived as more welcoming for those who experience an expulsory mainstream. The street offers opportunities to obtain immediate financial support, meet emotional needs for love, attention, and autonomy, and the social flexibility of unaccountability (Viorst Gwadz et al. 2009).

### *Views on Children*

The idea that society has an obligation to take care of its children, even those who are indigent, delinquent, or “victims of society” can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with the emergence of child labor laws (Posner, 2000), the Great Depression and Social Security Act of 1935, as well as the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Protection Act (JJDP) of 1967 (Glassman et al., 2010). The emerging concern was with the well-being of the child and their legal rights and protections (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014).

For example, children and adolescents worked on farms and in factories without legal protections or age restrictions until more stringent labor laws were passed during and after the Industrial Revolution throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century to regulate child work through greater protections from hazardous working conditions and exploitation (Posner, 2000). Although labor laws now protect children and youth, they also limit the possibility for youths to earn a self-sufficient income (Posner, 2000). Through this evolving social and political discourse for child labor rights, the Children’s Bureau was created in 1912 in the U.S. Department of Labor to

combat child labor and investigate juvenile delinquency for youth aged 10-16 (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014). The Bureau operated alongside policies and services that focused on children who were vulnerable or disadvantaged, orphaned, abandoned, maltreated, or in danger of becoming delinquent.

From 1935 to 1961, there was a shift in attitudes towards social assistance and children's needs, as delinquency research stereotyped homeless youths as substance abusers and criminals, and psychologists defined the concept of adolescence as a period of risky behavior, parental conflict and non-conventional, even antisocial, conduct (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014), culturally transforming the stereotype of the runaway and homeless youth (Posner, 2000). While homeless youth were exposed to, and often victimized by, criminal activity in the street, this linkage spurred research into the criminality of homeless youth: drug use, prostitution, crime, thus constructing an image of dangerous and delinquent homeless youth (Miles & Okamoto, 2008). Children shifted from innocent victims to rebellious, privileged middle-class teenagers who left home and its responsibilities for the freedom in the street or in communities (Posner, 2000). The public policy that developing in congressional committees began to reflect this anxiety and fear of youth culture, focusing more on delinquency as a concern in the youth population (Glassman et al., 2010).

### ***U.S. Public Policy***

Federal initiatives are of critical importance in attending to homeless children and youth. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 1987 (reauthorized in 2001) and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) guide programs serving this population, and playing vital roles in expressing U.S. federal resolve to provide homeless

students with services and supports to address their unique educational, social, and economic conditions (Department of Education, 2010).

The McKinney-Vento Act mandates that state education agencies (SEAs) provide free, appropriate public education to meet the educational needs of runaway and homeless youths (MacKay, 1994), including a public preschool education. They must also review and revise laws, regulations, practices, or policies which limit ability to enroll, attend or succeed in school, such as residency requirements (Aratani, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Furthermore, the basis for this policy is that homelessness should not be sufficient reason enough to bar students from the school environment and these students should have access to the services needed to help them meet their full potential (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

However, more important in this analysis is the RHYA and its subsequent Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (RHYP) because it coordinates services outside of the education system and offers a multifaceted and comprehensive policy for street-involved youth in the U.S. U.S. policy for homeless, runaway, or pushed out youth emerged first with the Runaway Youth Act of 1974, which funded shelters and other street outreach programs but stressed family reunification (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013; Smollar, 2007), and which was later amended in 1977 as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) to serve pushed-out youth - those expelled from the home or abandoned (Smollar, 2007). RHYA provides grants to states and local communities to fund RHY programs: street outreach programs, counseling, drop-in centers, food, clothing, shelter referrals, transitional housing, education support, and mental and health services (Rahman et al., 2015).

*Definitions for Target Population*

The absence of an agreed-upon age definition of homeless youth has added, and continues to add, another layer of contextual ambiguity and complexity to understanding and serving this vulnerable population (Farrow et al., 1992; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015). Youth homelessness is a fluid and heterogeneous phenomenon, including varying levels of transitioning to street living, separation from family, and availability of shelter. The definition of ‘youth’ – e.g. what ages determine service eligibility - impact how policies operate in the national and local context of the U.S., especially as it sets the parameters for funding.

Federal agencies that serve homeless youth operate under their own criteria for age, typology and operational definition for who they will serve, including describing all of the following as target client populations: a homeless individual, homeless child, unaccompanied youth, homeless youth, and homeless families (Perl et al., 2013; Rahman et al., 2015). In general, official definitions of homeless youth make references to an absence of adequate shelter, and tend to focus solely on youth's age and/or degree of contact with the family (Glassman et al., 2010). Homeless children and youth are defined as individuals “who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 1), including children and youth who share housing or are living in a residence not designed for long-term or ordinary use for regular sleeping accommodations, to include cars, hotels, camp grounds, or public spaces (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The McKinney-Vento Act mandates that grantee organizations to provide activities for, and services to, homeless children and youth, including preschool-aged children, and to support enrollment, attendance and success in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Though McKinney-Vento does not outline its age range of operation, as it focuses on school enrollment and support, it is implicitly defined to serve youths

K-12. Lastly, research and data collection can vary by these differing definitions; the State of Homelessness report (NAEH, 2015) defines unaccompanied children as those under the age of 18 who are unattached to a family household, while unaccompanied youth are aged 18 to 24.

RHYA (2008 ACF; SEC. 387, 3A-C) defines homeless youth as those “less than 21 years of age...[or less than 22 if utilizing Transitional Living services]...for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative; and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement.” Runaway youths are defined in the Act as “an individual who is less than 18 years of age and who absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of parents or legal guardians” (2008 ACF, SEC. 387, 4). This definition for runaway youth is based in the assumption that upon reaching the age of majority, parental consent for leaving the home is a moot point (Glassman et al., 2010). Street youths can be defined as all of these typologies, as well as youths who spend a significant amount of time in the street environment or in areas that increase their risk for sexual exploitation (Glassman et al., 2010).

Age determinations vary similarly across agencies and organizations. Each HHS program applies its own age criterion, which varies by program from ages 0 to 5, 0 to 17, 16 to 21, 18 to 20, and 18 to 21; another age eligibility guideline is for children aged 12 or older (HHS, 2007). HUD’s homeless youth age criteria can range between 0 to 16, 16 to 21, 16 to 24, or until age 25 (Perl et al., 2013). The Department of Education’s criteria depends on state age determinations and school grade- age eligibility limits for K-12, unless the student is IDEA eligible; under IDEA, the service eligibility of homeless students with disabilities extends only to age 22 (Perl et al., 2013). A few governmental agencies are beginning to allow service eligibility up to age 24, and other federal and local agencies are extending the upper age range past ages 21 or 22, in order to more effectively support integration and transition to adulthood (NAEH, 2011).

These definitions do not capture the intersectionality of experiences or identities, or the diversity amongst homeless youth (Glassman et al., 2010). Since its inception, RHYA has ignored homeless youth who do not fall into one of these predefined categories, including those not “willing to return to the family or foster care in order to receive support” (Glassman et al., 2010, p. 803). Also, youths can become homeless at 18 when they age out of the foster care system, facing limited resources to transition to independent living (Glassman et al., 2010).

### ***Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA)***

The Runaway Youth Act, Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Protection Act (JJDP) of 1974, was enacted in response to the widespread concern regarding young runaways who were exposed to exploitation and other dangers (Glassman et al., 2010; HHS, 1984). While the JJDP was developed to manage the consequences of deinstitutionalizing young status offenders, mostly runaways, from detention centers, the RHYA was to provide services to the these runaways and their families (Cooper, 2006; “Runaway and Homeless Youth Program”, 1982). Homelessness as a structurally-based social issue, linked to unemployment, educational barriers, and other institutional factors, had little to do with the origination of the RHYA (Elliot & Krivo, 1991). A decade after its development, its primary purpose was to make grants to public and nonprofit private community-based agencies, located outside of the law enforcement and juvenile justice systems, to support existing programs or develop new ones to address the immediate needs of exclusively runaway youth (HHS, 1984).

Today, RHYA, most recently reauthorized by the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008, remains the sole federal program that serves unaccompanied homeless youth (NN4Y, 2013a; Rahman et al., 2015). Programs that prevent homelessness among youths and those that

attend to those already homeless, through such services as family reunification and case management, are key components of the social safety net for vulnerable youth (HHS, 2012). The RHYA and its programs are administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (HHS, 2012). However, the Act expired on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and reauthorization legislation has yet to be passed. As Congress continues to appropriate funds (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015), future funding and program improvements remain in limbo.

Congressional expectations of the operationalization of the act included alleviating the problems of runaway youth and reuniting children with families (HHS, 1984), all outside of law enforcement and justice settings, thereby limiting cost. Congress believed that temporary shelter, along with rapid intervention by caseworkers and other social service providers through a range of services, would enable swift reunification of youths with their families, where such a reunion was deemed appropriate (HHS, 2012). The goal was to care for these vulnerable youths within the home community to better ensure family reunification and family support, because “a kid in trouble is a family in trouble” (“Runaway and Homeless Youth Program”, 1982, p. 12). Parents were contacted for permission, and a youth’s willingness to participate in family counseling was a prerequisite for receiving shelter care (“Runaway and Homeless Youth Program”, 1982). Ultimately, monitoring of local RHYA grantees was implemented to assure that the legislative intent was followed: to provide brief, preventative and relatively inexpensive services at the time of greatest crisis (“Runaway and Homeless Youth Program”, 1982).

The most recent planned outcomes for the program come from its 2008 reauthorization and are paraphrased as follows (HHS, 2012):

- Safety: Youth are to be free of abuse, neglect, harassment, exploitation and abuse, and to feel safe physically, emotionally and mentally
- Permanent Connections: Youth are to have a stable living environment with healthy relationships within the family and in the community
- Well-being: Youth are to enjoy good health and access to care services when needed, including resources for education, mental health stability, and social connectedness
- Self-sufficiency: Youth are to learn and have the skills to live independently

The RHYA message is that these youths have a place to go and are worth more than street involvement (“Living on the Street”, 2008). These program objectives are also tied directly to positive youth development (PYD) that is now interwoven into the philosophy of RHYP. Programs aim to support youth development and transition to adulthood by having youths participate in the treatment planning process, involving youth in program planning, and ultimately utilizing the youths themselves as experts of their experiences (HHS, 2012).

FYSB coordinates RHYA programs through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (RHYP), specifically through: Basic Centers (BCP), Transitional Living (TLP) and Street Outreach (SOP). The BCP programs are for temporary shelter and care services, the TLP assists older youth in transitioning to independent living, and the SOP services connect with youth in the street environment for service referral (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). RHYA also mandates operation of a national communication system - the National Runaway Switchboard, 1-800-RUNAWAY – which handled 105,763 calls in FY12 (HHS, 2014). FYSB operates RHYMIS, an information collection system to track service provision and analyze trends and determine effectiveness (HHS, 2014).



The BCP provides safe shelter and basic necessities for a stay up to 21 days for youth under 18, as well as individual and family counseling focusing on family reunification (HHS, 2012). Family services become very important for BCP clients who often experience family conflict and even violence; about one quarter suffer abuse and neglect in the family environment (HHS, 2012). Additionally, over a third of BCP clients have mental health problems and are coping with impacts of trauma, and a quarter present with substance use issues (HHS, 2012). While family reunification is the primary focus for BCP services, if a BCP determines that reunification is impossible, or not in the best interests of the youth, then it can pursue other solutions, including foster care or transitional living (Glassman et al., 2010; HHS, 2008). In FY2014, 299 grantee organizations served 31,755 youth with a total of \$53 million with counseling services (27,882), basic support (28,065), life skills (20,812), and transition and exit care (25,517) (FYSB, 2016a). However, more than 2,425 youth were turned away because no beds were available (FYSB, 2016d).

For FY2014, the majority of those served in BCP were 12-16 (69%), followed by those aged 17-18 (19.5%) and 12 years or younger (12%) (FYSB, 2016d). BCPs serve slightly more females (52%) than males (47%), over half of all youths served in BCP are White (51%), 20% are Hispanic, and 32% are Black (FYSB, 2016d). For those served in FY12 and FY13, only about 6% of BCP youth were LGB, and 0.2% were transgender, and the majority (83%) ran away or became homeless recently, although 'recently' is not defined (HHS, 2014).

Transitional Living Programs (TLP) were added to the RHYA in 1988 after Senator Simon advocated to develop policies and programs which recognize the diversity within the runaway and homeless youth population (Homeless Youth, 1988). These programs are designed to help older homeless youth transition into mainstream society. TLP allows youth aged 16-22

(FYSB, 2016b) to enter housing, usually an apartment or rented room, for up to 540 days with a possible extension of 95 days (if the youth is not yet 18). The TLP meets long-term needs of older homeless youth who cannot return to their families but are not yet equipped to live on their own by easing the transition into adulthood through housing, skills training, counseling, education and vocational support (HHS, 2008). Youths aged 18-22 most commonly access this service due to age restrictions for legally-binding contractual agreements; according to FYSB (2016d) data for FY14, 40% of those served are aged 17 or 18, about half are 19 or 20, and 10% are 21 or 22, with only 4% of 15 or 16 year olds being served. In 2003, a Maternity Group Homes Program was added to TLP for young people vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and poverty to live with their children in community-based, adult-supervised environments and receive child care assistance and parenting skills training (HHS, 2008; FYSB, 2016b). Operating with 200 grantee organizations and a total funding base of \$43.6 million, in FY2014, TLP helped 2,927 youths transition to live on their own (FYSB, 2016b). However, in FY2014, more than 4,842 youths were turned away because services were unavailable or are now on a waiting list (FYSB, 2016d).

The TLP serves more females (60%) than males (40%), about 10% of youth served are LGBTQ (HHS, 2014), and the racial distribution is as follows for FY2014: White (45%), Black (38%), and Hispanic (15%) (FYSB, 2016d). The majority arrive to TLPs from a private residence (54-57%), 20% from shelters, and 12% from the street or other situations (HHS, 2014). About a third continue to attend school regularly (32-34%), about a quarter have already graduated high school (25-29%), while others have dropped out (20%) or are attending school irregularly (HHS, 2014).

Lastly, the Street Outreach Program (SOP) provides funds to private and nonprofit agencies performing outreach efforts designed to move youth off the streets. Formally known as the Education and Prevention Services to Reduce Sexual Abuse of Runaway, Homeless, and Street Youth Program, SOP was established by Congress to protect young people on the street from trafficking and sexual exploitation (FYSB, 2014). SOP provides education, treatment, counseling, and referrals for runaway, homeless, and street youth who have been or are at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015). Grantee programs attempt to reach runaway, homeless, and street youth who have been subjected to or are at risk of sexual exploitation or abuse by utilizing outreach teams which go to the places frequented by youth, educate them about services available to them, and provide them with basic necessities such as food, clothing, access to emergency shelter, and health care referrals, as well as referrals to other services, including mental health and substance abuse counseling (HHS, 2007:2012). In FY2014, 109 SOPs were operated with a budget of \$17.1 million, and made 461,524 contacts in the street, which includes duplicates (FYSB, 2016c, 2016d; HHS, 2014). Significantly fewer contacts and services were provided in FY14 than in FY13; in FY14, 418,760 health and hygiene products, 752,394 food and drink packages, and 548,665 printed resources were distributed by SOPs (FYSB, 2016d; HHS, 2014). RHYMIS data shares that, in FY2014, 21,378 youths sought shelter for at least one night because of street outreach (FYSB, 2016d).

Through these programs FYSB seeks to help develop safety, success and development of character, including encouraging positive youth development (PYD) to help youth achieve their full potential (HHS, 2014). Runaway and homeless youth programs that promote PYD give youth the chance to exercise leadership, build skills, get involved, and make a difference in their communities (HHS, 2014). Furthermore, 88% of youth leaving TLP and 94% of youth leaving

BCP make safe program exits, meaning they returned to their families or another stable living situation; still, some return to the street situation and more information is needed to understand why (FYSB, 2016d)

### *Proposed Reauthorization Legislation*

The current bill introduced into Congress to reauthorize the RHYA is the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act of 2015, which would reauthorize the RHY programs through 2020. First introduced in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, it was not passed, and was reintroduced in early 2015. The RHYA expired in 2013 and such a reauthorization is paramount to continue providing these necessary services to street-involved youth. The Senate version of the RHYTPA has been referred to the Committee on the Judiciary, while the House bill has been referred to the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, but neither has reached a vote.

The RHYTPA would further protect trafficked and sexually exploited youths through specifically defining this population as eligible for services, outlining methods for collecting data on these victims of human trafficking, and bolstering services through a trafficking and trauma-informed services framework (NN4Y, 2014). Additionally, the bill includes an anti-discrimination clause protecting youths from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Conner, 2015; Kaufman, 2016), as well as extending basic center stays from 21 to 30 days (NN4Y, 2014). This language may reduce the stigma placed upon runaway and homeless youths who are engaged in survival sex or commercial sexual exploitation, those who are trafficked and/or who are exploited through other forms of labor.

*Discussion*

The RHYA is a single piece of legislation that has gone through numerous incarnations and modifications over four decades, adapting to small changes to client definition, scope of practice, funding, among others. Though the RHYA expired in 2013 and reauthorization legislation waits in the wings, programs continue to operate according to the RHYA policy framework. It is concerning that although the RHYTPA has been introduced to reauthorize and update the RHYA, it has yet to pass. The RHYTPA would expand eligibility and services to meet the unique needs of trafficked or exploited youths, and recognize, respect, and protect the diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity for young clients. Due to limited state funding provided for runaway and homeless youth services (NN4Y, 2013b), the RHYP funds options and services for runaway and homeless youths to access services outside of foster care, juvenile and criminal justice systems, and law enforcement (NN4Y, 2013b).

Additions and modifications in previous reauthorizations illustrate the responsiveness of the federal government to this social problem and its changing risks and needs of homeless and runaway youth; however, these additions maintain the view that youth problems are self- or family-generated. The federal government is aware of the growing problems of homeless youth and families, and the structural components which perpetuate it, but the chance to actually tackle the real problems of homelessness, like finding and obtaining independent housing, development of independent living skills, basic health services (physical and emotional), and safety broadly defined, remains a minimal component of the RHYA.

Programs and services of the RHYA are to be provided “outside the welfare system and the law enforcement system” (42 U.S.C. § 570). While defined to meet the RHYA’s original purpose to reduce the pressures on those systems during youth deinstitutionalization, today, a

more inter-connected, inter-disciplinary, and collaborative approach between these systems may be necessary to ensure that all youths eligible for RHYP can be served. For example, a youth who is arrested and charged with prostitution, sometimes even though the youth is under the age of 18 and a victim of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), may be jailed rather than provided the appropriate legal and assistance services, such as transitional living services, if agencies are not effectively communicating. Or, a youth for whom family reunification is not in his/her best interests may need to be connected to the child welfare system if transitional living is not an age appropriate service. To be modified in the proposed RHYTPA legislation, it is essential that programs have avenues to work cooperatively with child welfare and law enforcement systems, to ensure that young clients who are eligible are receiving services even if they have entered the service pipeline from another avenue (e.g. arrest).

The patchwork modifications made to the RHYA have also added to the complexity in defining age and other eligibility requirements for its programs. Homelessness comes in a variety of forms and may not conform to strict definitions outlined by the RHYA or other, intersecting policies and programs, such as housing. Homeless youth is defined by the RHYA as youths 22 years old or less, with no possibility to live in a safe environment with a relative, and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement (FYSSB, 2012). While in practice this may allow for discretion in service provision, as a policy, it limits recourse for young adults aged 18-22 who are pushed out of the family home. A runaway must be younger than 18 years of age to fulfill the requirement of having left the home without parental permission. A street youth is defined as a runaway youth or temporarily or permanently homeless youth, or otherwise a youth who spends a significant amount of time in the street, exposing him/her to sexual abuse or exploitation,

prostitution, or drug abuse (FYSB, 2012). These definitions contradict other agency and policy definitions of age.

Some states have laws barring minors from living in the same housing unit as those aged 18 or older, limiting how many 15-17 year olds can be served by TLP (Glassman et al., 2010). Additionally, states may expand or otherwise modify their eligibility requirements for programs, with some having expanded age eligibility up to 24 or 25, thereby creating vast disparities in services across state lines. Lastly, there are other conflicts with laws and statutes. Contracts signed by minors may not be considered legally binding. Federal legislation plays the major role in the focus and structures of each of these initiatives, but day-to-day operations can have a strong state influence because BCPs and TLPs must be licensed by the state. Much like child-care minimum, licensing standards can create disparities (at times extreme) between states (e.g., training of staff, health and safety codes, notification laws) (Glassman et al., 2010).

The ultimate goal for all RHYA programs is family reunification, and if not possible, transition to independent living. Family reunification is an essential component for RHYP, by law requiring parental contact and/or consent, as well as turning to family services as the first line of defense to extricate the youth from the street environment. Agency staff must contact families and gear all activities towards family reintegration (Glassman et al., 2010). According to most state laws, shelter staff are required to contact the family, as per state law or within 72 hours of a minor's arrival (NAEH CY, 2011). This ultimately diminishes the agency and empowerment these young clients can feel, especially if the family was an original push factor to the street.

However, the RHYA provides an effective framework for programs that serve runaway and homeless youth in their communities. Aside from the well-defined and structured

organization of specific RHY programs, the policy requires annual program evaluations to ensure transparency in services provided, as well as reflect that the programs are working and have positive impacts. It also conducts monitoring and evaluation of the grantee agencies to ensure that they are following programmatic standards and providing informed and effective services. The data on youths served and how the policy is operationalized belie the well-structured format of the policy, and its ease of application and analysis.

One of the policy's fundamental components is its focus on community-based intervention and support. At the outset of the policy, community-based facilities were considered more easily accessible and already integrated into the community to provide youth programs and services ("Runaway and Homeless Youth Program", 1982). Local organizations can leverage community resources and are successful because community organizations can better partner with integral systems, such as the family, the school, and local businesses (NN4Y, 2013b). Community-based organizations are integral to operating the RHYP. The outreach component of the RHYA is essential for reaching the target youths and informing the community about their services ("Living on the Street", 2008).

The resources and programs currently available are insufficient to meet the need for the runaway and homeless youth population. For example, funding for the programs has barely increased over the last 9 years despite a record of turning away 3-5,000 youths seeking services. Due to age restrictions as well as shortages of beds and other services, especially in shelters, youth may be denied assistance (NAEH, 2014, 2015). The scope of these programs is minimal in comparison with the current estimates of children in need daily. Programs do not serve as many youths as who could benefit from services, and, in fact, turn youths away. There has been limited extension of funding, despite the consideration of research in policy development. In budgeting



considerations, too, the RHYP must determine if agencies across the U.S. are operating in all of the areas where there is a noted need, including distribution across rural and urban regions, and how to increase capacity in its grantee organizations.

Lastly, this population is significantly diverse in experiences and requires specialized and informed services, including trauma-informed care, resources to recover from being trafficked and exploited, and culturally competent services for ethnically diverse and LGBT-identified youth (NN4Y, 2013). Although the most recent policy reauthorization discourse has begun to reflect the diversity and experience of its target population, effective interventions must still be developing in an evidence-based and evaluative environment in order to respond to this diversity and difference in practice (Kidd et al., 2007). Short-term runaway youth should not be treated similarly in services to long-term homeless youth, often called street youth, because they have experienced longer-term flexibility in the environment, more autonomy, but yet are only offered through BCP a structured and short-term family reunification and counseling intervention. Youths who have transitioned early to the street and require a more flexible intervention program may not be adequately served by BCPs, but also may be unable to access TLP based on age.

While these youths are often pushed and pulled away from the home by a variety of micro, mezzo and macro sources, the RHYA supports short-term, in-kind, and micro level services to clients (Posner, 2000). Structural and institutional factors are not considered in policy language, but must be included in the future to expand interventions of the policy at the macro and the organizational level. While community organizations can operate and advocate within their specific regions, systematic and institutional issues must be altered at the federal and national levels, such as housing support and vocational training opportunities which would act as primary interventions to prevent homelessness from the outset.

## Comparative Analysis

In the street environment, youth attempt to meet their most basic needs. One of these needs is social integration through positive personal development. However, if they search and strive for better alternatives, their exclusion, vulnerability, and marginality act as a strong, and almost insurmountable, barrier (Morales Salazar, 2012). International conventions and national legislation serving to protect children and youth extends responsibility for care and attention to the government, but does not reduce the responsibility for parents and families to do the same (Borjón Nieto, 2007). Though this is a foundation for both Mexico and the U.S., their policy approaches differ in language, structure, and practice.

In comparing these two policies, it is important to also compare the policy's cultural foundations and influences. Mexican policies for street-involved youth focus on their psychosocial vulnerabilities and building social respect and promotion of child rights. There is a strong legislative vision for child rights, and recently a movement for even greater administrative obligation for increasing state and local capacity. Lastly, such policies have been developed and practiced without participation of actual clients. The Program itself has operated for two decades without client impact assessments or client satisfaction measurements.

While U.S. policies have transparent operations for monitoring and evaluation of policy, program and agency performance, publishes fiscal year results of the youth it serves, and reflects a strong legislative framework through the RHYP, it does not operate from a child rights-based approach. On the contrary, the U.S. has not committed to the CRC or standards of child rights. Parental right to make decisions for their children lays the foundation for the RHYA and is the basis for Basic Center Programs given family reunification is its paramount service.

A foundational component that reveals the essential differences in policy development in both nations is how the policies have developed and continued to be modified in response to programmatic and national needs. The U.S. policy operating today has been reauthorized many times, but has retained its core legislative outline. Policy advancements and changes have built upon the framework of the RHYA, responding to program evaluations, stakeholder recommendations, and evidence-based findings. RHYP readily incorporates incidence rates, the RHYMIS database, and data obtained from the SOP in efforts to extend policy to address new needs of the population. However, retaining this core has also limited how reauthorization legislation can significantly alter the definitions of target populations, improve upon or develop new programs, and focus some part of the RHYA on amending structural and institutional factors of street-involvement.

Mexican policy has been similarly limited in its ability to respond to changing social and administrative contexts. After ratifying the CRC in 1989, it took the nation a decade to institute a law protecting child rights, and another to develop constitutional amendments to respond to its lackluster advancement of rights promotion. The Program's subprograms focusing on child labor and street-involvement were never operationalized, and the objectives of the Program were conflicting with the expectations of the administering agency and the guiding principles of the Program itself. The annual modifications to names of the policy, difficulty in maintaining a linear connection from law, to policy, to program, to services provided, as well as the most recent, and sudden, merger of the Program and two similar programs into a new one, to be administered by an also newly created federal office, reveals the lack of coordination and forward planning for policies attending to the most vulnerable in Mexican society. Impacting the integrity of the policy before and after its merger were annual evaluations that reflected the need

for improved monitoring and evaluation methods that would clearly describe the target population for effective program planning and intervention; however, most statistics on street involvement are a decade old, and there is no national system for data sharing between public and private entities. Study is necessary to design effective and efficient legislation, while DIF also must respond to those youths working in the informal sector of the economy, in the street environment, who present with unique realities, limitations and risks (SNDIF, 1996). The structure and format of these two policies reveals that in one sense, a strongly structured policy can limit flexibility to responding to changes in context and practice, but having a deconstructed policy separated into multiple entities can also provide too much flexibility, reducing the integrity of its actions and monitoring of program components.

Also, these structural characteristics reveal a shared concern for these policies, that is, to serve the majority of the intended population. Yet, both policies are only attending to a small percentage of the target population, due in part to program design, budgetary limitations, and definitions of the target population, or lack thereof in the case of Mexican policy. For example, RHYA has received appropriated funding for the past three fiscal years, and has been budgeted almost the same amount per program since 2006. Although the target population remains high – in the 100s of thousands – the program has yet to receive more funding to increase the number of grantee agencies and increase capacity to serve more youths. Increased funding is not expected in the near future, especially if reauthorization legislation is not passed. Although year after year thousands of youth are denied services to BCP and TLP, increases in funding and capacity have failed to emerge.

Mexico has also faced considerable challenges in funding policies serving street-involved youths. The Program funding fell to \$500,000 USD in 2015, and after its merger with two other

programs, the budgetary expectations are uncertain. However, although the budget rose to a high of \$1.4 million USD, and dropped drastically afterwards, the number of youth served remained the same. Also, the purpose and goal of the Program, in opposition to its expectations in its governing Rules of Operation, focused not on providing certain services to clients, but in building financial and professional capacity of agencies to work with these youth through a child rights framework. The types of services received by clients, and their impact, are also unknown.

On the other hand, a more comprehensive federal program like the RHYP, operating top-down, offers more streamlined policies to guide work with these youths to develop best practices and coordinate clearly between intersecting child welfare, public assistance, and shelter services, something that Mexico finds difficult to do between state SNDIF entities and OSCs and its lack of a comprehensive, clearly-defined federal policy to protect and address street involvement. However, in both policies the buy-in and integration of community organizations into program administration are essential to provide the services outlined in the policy. The public and private entities are within communities that they know and already work in, and are oftentimes already serving the intended population; thus, to involve them in a federally-funded initiative reflects a community-based perspective each nation shares in their political agenda.

However, neither Mexico nor the U.S. offer more than this community-based approach. There are no stipulations or actions that will affect changes at the macro level, alleviating the institutional barriers which perpetuate push and pull factors into street work and homelessness. In fact, it allows the government to say they have a policy in place, but allows each agency to operate by its own rules and continue to intervene at tertiary levels. In Mexico, this culminates in a disorganized system of attention and varying measurement and reporting mechanisms. In the

U.S., this means that states and/or agencies are defining the age of the population they serve, constricting or expanding the purview outlined in the RHYA.

As can be seen in both cases, there is a lack of comprehensive approach to creating one specific policy that is informed and operates in tandem with so many others. For instance, ensuring that all laws currently in practice define ‘children’ and ‘youth’ the same way is essential to ensuring no client falls through the cracks or is treated under laws which do not apply. Other laws and policies intersect with child labor, homelessness, and status offenses (e.g. running away without parental permission), including parental rights policies, detention for loitering or trespassing, and are especially salient for youths engaging in survival sex and are arrested for prostitution.

Thus, it is essential to expand intervention at multisystem levels. By outlining the ultimate goals of an intervention, and how interventions at each micro/mezzo/macro level can reach those goals, a better coordinated and effective policy can be implemented which attends to micro, mezzo and macro factors. For example, by working with social assistance services, such as welfare benefits, a conditional cash transfer program could be operated at the micro/mezzo level, alongside macro-level actions to expand child rights, such as to sign contracts, expanding job opportunities, or by doing outreach and educating the community. From this coordinated and multisystemic approach, monitoring and evaluation can also be developed and implemented in a coordinated fashion. At present, Mexico has no central reporting operation; the U.S. has the RHYA reports, but it provides no data on the intersecting phenomena of child labor or CSE.

### **Implications for Social Work**

This analysis provides a variety of social work practice implications and next steps for evaluating and improving services for this population. There are positive aspects to these policies

that can serve as the basis for drafting policies in other countries, or in modifying current practices. For example, a community-based approach to working with marginalized youth is supported by evidence and practice and is a strong component of both policies. It allows communities to provide multisystemic and integrated services where their clients are located, as well as reaching out into the community that already trusts the agency. While a top-down approach for funding, monitoring, and technical assistance, both policies attempt to provide a grassroots dissemination of programs developed at the macro level, informed by a community's individualized characteristics and resources.

The first step in using this analysis is to facilitate a local, national and international conversation about how we as individuals, as a society, and through policy, define children and youth. In Mexico, this is not necessarily a legal problem, but more of a programmatic one. Matraca, in Veracruz, has in its mission statement the advancement of children and adolescents, but does not aim to serve those over the age of 18; this severely limits their scope of work when trying to serve youths contacted during street outreach activities. Similarly, laws and programs limit eligibility to youths under the age of 18, not unlike many programs in the U.S. Older youths are generally excluded from homelessness programs, but they are still extremely vulnerable and require social support. In the U.S., this is a cultural concern; family reunification is based on the premise that parents and guardians have a right to make decisions for their child. But family can be a significant push factor for youth into the street, and alternatives based in a child rights perspective would empower youth agency.

From the Mexican response to street-involved youth, U.S. social workers can learn how best to approach homeless or runaway youth on the streets. U.S. practitioners can relate future efforts to those of NGO interventions which seek to promote family functioning, access to work

and learning opportunities, and recognize the actions of these youth as attempts to deal with the stress of life events (CSC, 2011). Working from an empowerment perspective, practitioners can treat youth as their own experts, recognize and support their long-lived independence from family life and their desire to retain their independence (Makowski, 2012). Three such solutions that can be translated into U.S. practice are independent living programs, group homes or emancipation, all potential solutions while working to maintain the health, well-being and support of these youths from dangerous living or working conditions. While conflicted between children's rights and those of the parent and family unit, the U.S. must be able to reflect the actual situation of homeless youth in order to create effective strategies that reach the potential root causes of youth homelessness and street work.

It is also necessary to respect the cultural differences amongst clients, their self-identification, and even the impacts of culture on policies and programs. Those of Mexican background living in the U.S., especially for migrants or refugees, continue the labor-based street involvement (Estrada & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011). Yet, other youths are based in the situational lack of housing, and their street involvement is first housing and second, economic. This may also impact the link to family and ease of family reunification, as running away from home or being pushed out is a family-based consequence. Though family reunification in Mexico supports the communally-based Mexican society and values, in the individualistic U.S. society interventions may require modifications away from strong family reunification services, and embrace a child's rights and empowerment perspective.

Mexican policy as written is situated firmly in the prevention of social risk. Policies specifically note as an objective the capacitation of at-risk youth to avoid risky situations, such as dropping out of school or engaging in street labor. Yet, in the U.S., the focus is on tertiary



intervention, after the youth has runaway and after a child is homeless. Expanding services through the RHYA would help to actually reduce the runaway and homeless youth population, while attend to it once a youth has already experienced that situation. In Mexico, the use of preventative services inhibits the policy's ability to develop programs that provide intervention services for youth already involved in the street. While prevention is important, reducing the impacts of a social vulnerability or marginality is essential to effectively serving target clients.

Finally, it is essential that stakeholders, service providers and researchers acknowledge that while the U.S. has named this population runaway or homeless youth, and Mexico calls them street children, there should be no difference in the deference and agency reflected back from policies, programs, and service providers in serving these clients. Presentations and manifestations of street-involvement among youth vary by culture. Thus, the policies developed to serve them must differ to meet this unique variability of experiences and needs, while maintaining the foundation of respect and child rights from which it should be built.

### ***Conclusion***

Throughout this analysis, policies serving street-involved youths in Mexico and the U.S. reveal their differences and similarities, influences social, cultural, and political, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Given the cultural differences, it is important to reflect on the purposes behind each policy, the assumptions they have made about the target population, and about youth in general, and take this reflection and apply it to policy practice. Improvements can be made to both policies so as to ensure that programs can impart the most impact for the most eligible youth in the most efficient and effective manner. Therefore, social workers should take this comparative policy analysis and develop recommendations for serving this population, within the recognition of the policy framework in the cultural and social context.

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