



## Executive Summary

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*Youth REACH MD:  
Reach out, Engage, Assist,  
& Count to end  
Homelessness*  
[www.youthreachmd.com](http://www.youthreachmd.com)

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# Maryland Youth Count 2017

*A summary of the findings from Youth REACH MD's second survey of unaccompanied youth & young adults experiencing homelessness*

In 2017, thousands of youth and young adults in Maryland were on their own and unsure of where they would sleep at night. Youth and young adults experience homelessness or housing insecurity for a variety of reasons, many of which are beyond their control. Research has shown that youth experiencing homelessness are resourceful, and so typically are not found at adult shelters, are less likely to seek out supportive services, and often do not identify as homeless.<sup>i</sup> Even so, they face significant challenges, including increased risk of behavioral health disorders and suicide; criminal activity, victimization, and trafficking; and, barriers to completing education or maintaining employment.<sup>ii</sup> These challenges require policymakers and service providers to learn how to engage effectively with youth and young adults in order to understand what services and interventions will best meet their needs and prevent youth homelessness going forward.

The Youth REACH MD Youth Count, first conducted in the fall of 2015 and again in the spring of 2017, allows Maryland to document and better understand the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, with a goal of improving policies, services and interventions by enhancing local and state system capacity to connect with, engage, and have actionable data to inform the development of services for youth. By counting the number of youth experiencing homelessness in Maryland and documenting their unique experiences, Maryland is better able to focus resources to end and prevent youth homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

## The Youth Count Process

Youth REACH MD uses a stakeholder-informed, collaboratively-developed, uniform, and inclusive definition of unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults. This definition is comprised of the common elements across definitions used by educational institutions, homeless service providers, and the federal government.<sup>1</sup> This definition was developed, in part, because there are many youth and young adults who experience housing instability or homelessness and yet do not meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD's) Category 1 definition of homelessness, which often must be met to access homeless services.<sup>2</sup>

**Youth REACH MD defines *unaccompanied homeless youth* as those individuals who are:**

- Under the age of 25;
- Not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian; and,
- Lacking a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence.

<sup>1</sup> Ending youth homelessness means that any experience of homelessness by a youth or young adult should be rare, brief, and non-recurring. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2015, June). *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*. Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> The HUD Category 1 definition of homelessness requires that an individual be living in a place not meant for human habitation, emergency shelters, transitional housing, or hotels paid for by a government or charitable organization. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2014, October). *HUD's Homeless Definition as it Relates to Children and Youth*. Retrieved from HUD Exchange: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/4062/huds-definition-of-homeless-as-it-relates-to-children-and-youth/>. In contrast, the most unaccompanied youth reported living "doubled up" with friends in both the 2015 and 2017 Youth REACH MD youth counts.

In the first Youth Count in 2015, 834 youth were identified as unaccompanied homeless youth within six Continuums of Care (CoCs) representing eight of Maryland's 24 jurisdictions.<sup>i</sup> These findings were nearly double the 481 estimated by HUD for the entire State of Maryland.<sup>i</sup> The Youth REACH MD Steering Committee built upon the findings and initial lessons learned and conducted an expanded pilot Youth Count in the spring of 2017. Ten CoCs participated in the second Youth Count, representing 18 of Maryland's 24 jurisdictions. These CoCs were encouraged to develop creative strategies for connecting with and engaging youth in their area, in conjunction with community partners and local youth. CoCs employed a variety of outreach strategies, including magnet events, street outreach, school-based surveying, and site- or service-based surveying.

#### Continuums of Care that participated in the 2017 Youth Count:

- Anne Arundel County
- Baltimore City
- Baltimore County
- Carroll County\*
- Howard County\*
- Lower Shore (Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester Counties)
- Mid-Shore (Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, and Talbot Counties)\*
- Prince George's County
- Southern Maryland (Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties)\*
- Washington County

\* CoC conducted its first Youth Count in 2017

## Findings and Implications

1,830 surveys were completed by youth and young adults across all 10 CoCs participating in the 2017 Youth Count, which took place over a two-week period selected by each CoC between March 1 and April 15, 2017. Of those surveyed, **865 met the Youth REACH MD definition** for an unaccompanied homeless youth. **Incorporating the annual homeless services administrative data from eight of the CoCs, the total number of youth identified increased to 2,425.** Only 5% of the youth appeared in both the Youth Count survey results and the administrative data. These data demonstrated that **youth homelessness exists in every jurisdiction in Maryland and at higher total levels than previously identified.**

**2,425 unaccompanied homeless youth** were identified via the Youth REACH survey or local annual homeless services data

The number of youth identified through the surveys only decreased slightly from 2015 to 2017. While 309 more youth were surveyed in the CoCs that participated in both 2015 and in 2017, there were 43 fewer youth who met the definition as both unaccompanied and homeless in these jurisdictions. This small reduction in youth identified as unaccompanied and homeless in these jurisdictions suggests that **initial efforts to address youth homelessness may be beginning to reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness.**

**Demographics.** As in 2015, **youth who identify as black/African American were disproportionately overrepresented** in the number of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. More than two-thirds of the youth identified as Black/African American, 26 percentage points higher than the percentage of youth identified as Black/African American in the latest local census data. **LGBTQ youth also were overrepresented** among the youth surveyed.

Twenty-three percent (23%) of the youth and young adults identified as LGBTQ, compared with approximately 7% of youth who identify as LGBTQ in the general youth population.<sup>iii</sup> Almost half (42%) reported not having a high school diploma or GED; however, **over a quarter (28%) of youth (and almost three-quarters of those under 18) reported being in school, of which most (64%) were in high school.** Many of the youth surveyed were pregnant and/or parenting. **Four percent of the youth reported being currently pregnant, and of the quarter (26%) of youth who reported having children, almost half (46%) reported that their**

**Pay attention, not many kids will actually express their problems.**

- 2017 Survey Participant

**children were living with them.** These findings suggest a need for **focused interventions that prevent and end homelessness among youth and young adults who identify as black/African American, LGBTQ, are in high school, and/or are pregnant or parenting.**

**Life Experiences.** Youth reported a variety of contact with public systems, **including juvenile services (25%), child welfare (21%), correctional services (30%), and the military (3%).** Of the youth who reported foster care histories, the

largest percentage of youth (39%) reported leaving foster care between the ages of 16 and 18, and an additional 19% reported leaving the foster care system after the age of 18. **Child- and youth-serving systems may be able to develop tools to identify youth experiencing or at-risk of homelessness and provide supports that will prevent homelessness** for youth. The number of youth who left foster care at the age of 16 or older and experienced homelessness prior to age 25 suggests a **need for additional supports for transition-age youth in the child welfare system** to reduce their risk of experiencing homelessness.

**Living Situations.** A key characteristic of youth and young adult homelessness is the prevalence of staying with a friend or acquaintance, known as **doubling up or couch surfing**. **In both 2015 and 2017, this was the most frequently reported housing strategy (45%)**. Shelters, and sleeping outside or in vehicles were also common living situations, though staying in a shelter or motel surpassed staying outside or in an abandoned building as the second most common response in 2017. Notably, **32% of youth reported staying outside, in a car, abandoned building or other places not meant for human habitation**, and 15% report staying with a stranger in the two months prior to the survey.

Youth also reported **high frequencies of instability in their current living situation**. Most (43%) reported not knowing how long they could stay at their current location, with many more (27%) reporting they did not believe they could

People like me need jobs and a place to live and to feel safe.

- 2017 Survey Participant

stay longer than a week or two, and several (7%) reporting they had already left. This instability in the youths' current living situation led to reports of frequent relocation. **Over half of the youth (55%) reported moving multiple times in past two months**. In 2017, there was also a substantial increase in the number of youth reporting moving six or more times in the last two months, from only 6% of the unaccompanied homeless youth surveyed in 2015 to 28% in 2017. The increasing number of moves within two months and

the substantial level of instability of living situations reported by youth indicate that **investment in evidence-informed housing programs such as Rapid Re-Housing is needed** to ensure that youth are able to move quickly into safe, affordable housing.

**Arguing or fighting** with their parent, guardian, or foster parent was the most commonly reported reason for youth no longer living with their parent, guardian, or foster parent (40%), which was frequently reported in combination with other reasons for leaving that may have contributed to the conflict in the home. Twenty percent of youth also reported **substance use**, either by their parent/guardian or by themselves, as a factor in them not currently living with their parent or guardian. The frequency with which youth reported family conflict and substance use as a reason for not currently living with their parent or guardian suggests a **need for supportive therapeutic services and substance use treatment services** for youth and families as a means of preventing youth homelessness.

**Sources of support.** **Nutritional assistance (36%), short-term housing (31%), health care (29%), and mental health services (26%) were the types of support most often sought** by youth and young adults surveyed. Job training and educational supports were also frequently sought, each by almost one-quarter of the youth who responded. Compared with 2015, an increased number of youth reported seeking out particular services, with the largest increases seen in number of youth requesting health care, nutritional assistance, and mental health care services. The largest decrease was in long-term housing.

Through my last two years I spent homeless, self-confidence and a meal were the hardest part...It's easy to feel like a burden.

- 2017 Survey Participant

Youth reported fewer barriers to accessing services in 2017; however, **56% of youth who sought out services reported that they did not receive all of the help they needed**. The most common barriers to receiving help in both 2015 and 2017 were **lack of transportation and being put on a waiting list**. The number of youth reporting not receiving the help they needed, despite increases in youth reporting attempts to access services suggests that there is an overall **lack of services that meet their particular needs and/or that these youth and young adults are not referred to the appropriate services for a number of possible reasons**.

When asked about sources of income, **one-third (33%) of the youth reported no source of income**, and only 37% reported employment as an income source. The most common sources reported were a part-time job (19%) or money from family and friends (15%). There was a small increase in the number of youth reporting a source of income in 2017, with the largest increase seen in part-time or temporary employment (82 youth in 2015 to 160 youth in 2017).

## Important Lessons Learned

### *More Youth Are Identified in a Youth-Specific Count.*

When comparing the 2017 Youth Count results to the 2017 Point-in-Time count conducted by CoCs to count all individuals (regardless of age or family status) who are homeless according to the primary HUD Category 1 definition<sup>2</sup> (i.e. living in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation), more youth were identified through the Youth Count.

There are others out there like me.  
- 2017 Survey Participant

This remains true even when only counting youth who would meet HUD's Category 1 definition. While only 192 youth were identified in the Point-in-Time count across the 10 CoCs, 449 were identified as meeting the same definition through the Youth Count. This illustrates the **importance of having a Youth Count designed with and for youth**, that engages youth meaningfully in the planning and execution of the Youth Count, cultivates a **broad array of diverse community partners** and utilizes their local knowledge and expertise, and employs a definition of youth homelessness that recognizes the difference in experiences between youth homelessness and other types of homelessness.

### *Youth Counts Provide an Opportunity to Engage Youth Experiencing Homelessness*

The 2017 Youth Count also demonstrated **the importance of utilizing Youth Count outreach efforts to connect youth with supports and services**. Through the Youth Count, several youth were connected with housing and other assistance. Youth have also learned that they can reach out to those involved in the Youth Count for support, and some CoCs report receiving calls from youth needing assistance and referencing the Youth Count months after the Youth Count concluded. This points to the importance of targeted outreach for youth and the value of using the Youth Count as a catalyst youth outreach efforts throughout the year.

### *Youth Counts Increase Awareness of and Interventions to Address Youth Homelessness*

Through two pilot youth counts, Youth REACH MD has increased awareness of youth homelessness in Maryland and strengthened the understanding and knowledge of how many youth are experiencing homelessness, who they are, their experiences, and the barriers they face to achieve safe and stable housing. Numerous stakeholders, including youth and young adults, local community members, and federal, state, and local constituencies, have been engaged in preventing and ending youth homelessness through Youth REACH MD. **This increased awareness, along with other state and local efforts to end and prevent youth homelessness, has led many local jurisdictions to utilize data, findings, and relationships developed and enhanced through Youth REACH MD to inform new local projects to help address youth homelessness in their area.** Several CoCs have utilized data from Youth REACH MD in pursuing additional funding opportunities, and several are currently pursuing projects to expand or develop new focused supports for youth, including the following:

- Carroll County is forming a joint committee with the CoC and Local Management Board to better connect with youth and provide needed support, possibly including the development of a drop-in center for youth.
- Anne Arundel County has begun the process of creating a CoC youth advisory board and is currently pursuing funding to establish the county's first drop-in center for youth.
- The Lower Shore has applied for and received federal funding to provide permanent supportive housing units for youth, and is pursuing additional federal funds to provide rapid re-housing units for youth.
- Baltimore City has increased federal and private funding to address youth homelessness, expanding rapid re-housing and other services for youth and launched Baltimore's first emergency shelter for youth.
- Prince George's County and Baltimore City applied for a competitive federal HUD grant and are now eligible to receive federal assistance to develop a strategic community plan to address youth homelessness.
- Baltimore County is developing a strategic plan to address youth homelessness and is hiring an outreach worker dedicated to youth outreach.



## Recommendations

Maryland has an opportunity to harness what has been learned and developed through the Youth Counts to help ensure Maryland continues to improve on its ability to help youth experiencing homelessness and ultimately end youth homelessness in Maryland. **Continuing the work of Youth REACH MD improves the understanding of youth homelessness over time; bolsters local efforts to address youth homelessness; monitors the effectiveness of those efforts; supports a collaborative, community-based response to youth homelessness; and, ultimately, is likely to provide return on investment by preventing youth homelessness and maximizing federal, state, local, and private resources to address youth homelessness.** In addition, there are three key strategies are recommended to help build on the state and local efforts begun through Youth REACH MD.

*Invest in Housing and Supportive Services for Youth Experiencing or At-Risk of Homelessness.* Existing housing resources and support services for youth experiencing homelessness in Maryland fall far short of meeting the need. A growing number of states are committing additional funds to housing and supportive services for youth experiencing homelessness for both fiscal and humanitarian reasons. According to the National Council of State Legislatures, “Expanding long-term housing options and providing supportive services —such as food, clothing and counseling— are examples of ways that states can help homeless youth...It is important to note that youth housing programs are more cost-effective than alternative out-of-home placements such as juvenile corrections facilities, treatment centers or jail.”<sup>iv</sup> Youth REACH MD should inform a similarly comprehensive strategy for investment of state resources in housing and support services for youth.

*Support Continued and Improved Monitoring of Youth Homelessness.* As local and regional capacity grows, the Maryland General Assembly should consider legislation requiring all CoCs to conduct an annual Youth Count. A statewide effort is the only way Maryland can have the most accurate understanding of youth experiencing homelessness across the state and the effects of local efforts to end and prevent youth homelessness. In conjunction with their Youth Count, jurisdictions should begin to maintain an active list of youth experiencing homelessness in their area to be updated and reviewed regularly. Data sharing agreements should also be forged with state agencies to continue to build a multi-agency data collaborative at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, to provide quality, up-to-date, longitudinal data and information related to overall efficiency and effectiveness in serving youth and young adults experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness across Maryland. These data will assist Maryland in tracking the effectiveness of its efforts as well as in responding to funding opportunities through the federal government or private sector. These are all key components of the United States’ Interagency Council on Homelessness’ recommendations for assessing whether and how a community can meet the criteria for ending youth homelessness in accordance with their 2015 amended Opening Doors strategic plan to end homelessness.<sup>v</sup>

*Grow Local and Regional Capacity.* A key component of ending and preventing youth homelessness in Maryland is to grow local and regional capacity to assess and address the needs of youth in their community, and measure the community’s progress in doing so. Further development and refinement of successful tools and strategies for youth engagement and outreach should continue, with particular emphases on certain populations of youth and young adults who are still not easily identified during the Youth Count, including youth who are couch surfing, doubled up, or staying in vacant buildings, and are not connected to homeless services. CoCs should also be guided in (1) assessing their capacity to continue the work of Youth REACH MD as a year-round effort that culminates in an annual Youth Count, and (2) developing strategies and seeking out additional funding sources to support growing their youth outreach and service efforts and expanding community partnerships to support youth experiencing homelessness.

## Conclusion

Youth REACH MD has shown that a Youth Count that recognizes the unique nature of youth homelessness and uses a variety of youth-centered strategies provides a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of youth homelessness in Maryland. The findings from the 2017 Youth Count illustrate the wide variety of experiences and challenges of youth experiencing homelessness, and the challenge in fully and accurately capturing this diversity of experiences. While, the 2,425 youth identified as unaccompanied and homeless is almost certainly still an underrepresentation of the true scope of youth homelessness, it illustrates the critical need to address youth

homelessness in Maryland. By better understanding the scope and nature of youth homelessness, and the unique challenges faced by youth experiencing homelessness, Maryland can prioritize and focus resources, services, and supports to address this issue. More work needs to be done to continue to improve the efforts begun through the Youth Counts and to better connect with and engage youth, particularly those who may be more disconnected from services or systems. In response, Youth REACH MD continues to grow and improve, informed by youth and young adults, guided by experience and best practices, and focused on ending youth homelessness collaboratively across state, local, and non-profit partners. The Youth Count helps support efforts to address youth homelessness locally and to implement the diversity of collaborative strategies needed to prevent and end youth homelessness in Maryland.



<sup>i</sup> Shannahan, R., Harburger, D., Unick, J., Greeno, E., & Shaw, T. (2016). *Findings from Maryland's First Unaccompanied Homeless Youth & Young Adult Count: Youth REACH MD Phase 2 Report*. Baltimore, MD: The Institute for Innovation & Implementation, University of Maryland School of Social Work.

<sup>ii</sup> National Network for Youth. (2008). *NN4Y Issue Brief: Consequences of Youth Homelessness*. Retrieved from [http://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/IssueBrief\\_Youth\\_Homelessness.pdf](http://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/IssueBrief_Youth_Homelessness.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Jones, R., & Cox, D. (2015). *How race and religion shape millennial attitudes on sexuality and reproductive health: Findings from the 2015 Millennials, Sexuality, and Reproductive Health Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/PRRI-Millennials-Web-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> National Council of State Legislatures (2016). *Homeless and Runaway Youth*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/homeless-and-runaway-youth.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2015, June). *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*. Washington, D.C.