



YOUTH REACH MD

Defining “Unaccompanied Homeless Youth”

The purpose of this guidance is to orient you to the definition of unaccompanied youth¹ homelessness and to assist Youth REACH MD staff and volunteers in identifying unaccompanied homeless youth. This guidance is not inclusive of all scenarios you may encounter, meaning it is meant to capture the more common examples of unaccompanied youth homelessness. This guidance is meant to be used by planning workgroups to inform their outreach activities. **During the count, the Youth REACH MD survey (not this guidance) will be used to determine whether youth meet the definition for unaccompanied youth homelessness.** Please note that this guidance is solely intended to provide clarification on the definition for the purposes of counting unaccompanied homeless youth, and not to place shame, value-judgements, or any other unwanted attention on youth or their parents or guardians.

Youth REACH MD defines an “unaccompanied homeless youth” as a person who is:

1. 24 years of age or younger,
2. Not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian, and
3. Lacks a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence.

The definition for unaccompanied homeless youth is comprised of three specific parts: **Part 1) Age**; **Part 2) Unaccompanied**; and **Part 3) Housing status**. Each of these three conditions must be met in order to satisfy the definition. The specific parts are discussed in greater detail below.

PART ONE: A person 24 years of age or younger

There is no lower age limit for this definition. Young adults who are ages 25 years or older should not be counted.

PART TWO: A person who is not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian

This part is used to define the “unaccompanied” component of the definition. Any youth who is not living in the physical custody of their parents or legal guardians should be considered unaccompanied. The definition for unaccompanied youth homelessness may include youth who are unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian and who are “doubled up,” meaning they are living in a residence with extended family, friends, or with other non-relatives. In order to satisfy the definition, **these youth must still meet Part 3 of the definition: lacking a fixed, regular, or adequate residence.**

For the school-age population, youth who are doubled-up are often in some form of informal kinship care with a relative because their parent/legal guardian is facing a specific hardship (e.g., loss of housing, economic hardship, incarceration, drug addiction, etc.). **Youth in informal care arrangements should be considered unaccompanied.**

¹ For the purposes of this guidance, “youth” will be used as a universal term that means any of the following: Child, minor, juvenile, transition-age youth, teens, and young adult.

Youth who are pregnant or parenting are considered “unaccompanied” if they are not in the physical custody of their parent/legal guardian. However, a parenting unaccompanied youth’s children are not, given that they are in the custody of their parent/legal guardian.

Youth who have been kicked-out by their parent/guardian and are only permitted to return based on some ultimatum or condition (e.g., must take medications, must stop using drugs, etc.) meet the definition for unaccompanied. The term unaccompanied also applies to youth who are no longer in the care of their parent or guardian by choice.

PART THREE: A person who lacks a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence

This part is used to define the “housing status” component of the definition.

- **“Fixed”** is defined as a residence that is **stationary and not subject to change**.
- **“Regular”** means a dwelling at which a person resides on a **predictable, routine, or consistent basis (i.e., nightly)**.
- **“Adequate”** means that the dwelling provides **safe shelter and meets the physical and psychological needs of the youth**.

Can the youth go to the **SAME PLACE** (fixed), **EVERY NIGHT** (regular) to sleep in a **SAFE AND SUFFICIENT SPACE** (adequate)? If not, then they meet the criteria for part three of the definition.

Youth who are living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, motels, hotels, camping grounds or places not meant for human habitation (the streets, cars, vacant or abandoned properties, parks, etc.) are included in the definition.

Youth who are **“couch surfing”** are included as well. Couch surfing is defined as having no other place to stay other than on someone’s couch, and is designed to indicate a precarious housing situation where the only other option is a homeless shelter or sleeping on the street.

Runaway youth (i.e., youth who absent themselves from their home or place of legal residence without the permission of a parent or legal guardian) are included as well, along with youth who spend a significant length of time on the street or in other areas that increase their risk for sexual abuse or exploitation, prostitution, or drug abuse.

The definition also includes unaccompanied youth who are at **imminent risk** of losing their primary nighttime residence within 14 days and have no other resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing, as well as youth who have moved multiple times (i.e., at least twice) in the past 60 days and are likely to remain unstable because of special needs or barriers.

Youth who are doubled-up in unsafe living environments and have no other safe alternative living arrangement should also meet the criteria for part three of the definition.