



BRIEF

July 2016

Youth REACH MD: Phase II Findings

"I am really tired of being homeless and without my family and I would do anything to get my life back or start a new good life."

-Youth REACH MD Survey Participant

Background

Often referred to as an "invisible" population, youth who are unaccompanied and homeless have been largely unknown to policymakers and the general public until recently. These youth have diverse backgrounds and experiences and differ from other populations experiencing homelessness, particularly in their lower utilization of services. Consequently, like most states, Maryland lacks reliable data on the number and characteristics of unaccompanied homeless youth. In 2014, the Maryland General Assembly established a demonstration project to identify the number of unaccompanied, homeless youth and young adults in six regions of the state (HB794/SB794), based upon recommendations from Maryland's 2013 Task Force to Study Housing and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. This Demonstration Project became known as Youth REACH MD, the state's first-ever multi-jurisdiction, comprehensive survey and census of youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness. Youth REACH MD seeks to help end and prevent youth homelessness by determining the scope of the problem, the particular challenges facing this population, and the accessibility and availability of services and supports.

Methods

The enumeration unfolded across eight Maryland jurisdictions over a three week period from September 28, 2015-October 16, 2015, and was preceded by intensive planning activities undertaken by the Youth REACH MD Steering Committee. The Steering Committee developed a definition of unaccompanied, homeless youth that included three components and was more expansive than definitions used in the annual Point-in-Time Counts. Only respondents who satisfied each of the three conditions were counted in the surveys. This brief reflects the aggregate findings regarding this diverse population of youth and young adults who were willing to share of themselves by participating in this survey during the first pilot count which occurred between September 28 and October 16, 2015. (Additional results can be found in the Phase 2 Report, available on the Youth REACH MD website.)

In order to be responsive to the unique systems, culture and needs of each region, the Continuums of Care (CoCs) were tasked with developing their own methodology for conducting the survey locally. Some jurisdictions used a geography-based strategy, some a service-based strategy, and some a combination of the two. Methodologies included shelter counts, service-based counts, and magnet events or street counts.

Youth REACH MD Definition of Unaccompanied, Homeless Youth or Young Adult:

- Under 25 years old (24 years of age or younger);
- Not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian; and,
- Lacks a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence.

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Youth REACH MD:
Reach out, Engage, Assist, &
Count to end Homelessness
www.youthreachmd.org

Findings

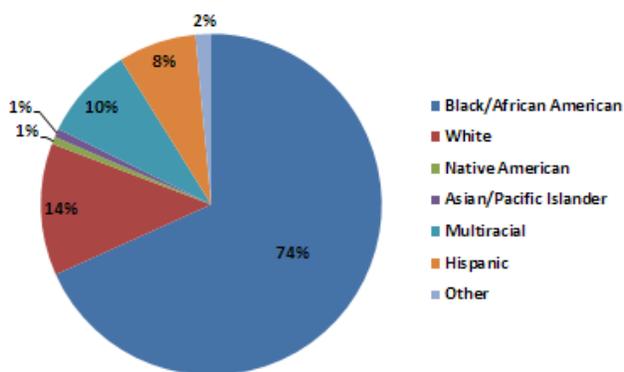
There were 1,223 surveys completed during the survey period. 834 (68%) of the surveys met all three aspects of the definition of unaccompanied homeless youth. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the number of unaccompanied homeless youth who participated in the survey in each region.

Table 1: Counts of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Continuum of Care	Surveys Administered	Unaccompanied & Under 25		With No Stable Housing	
		Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Annapolis/Anne Arundel	67	48	72%	46	69%
Baltimore City	653	574	88%	540	83%
Baltimore County	145	58	40%	54	37%
Lower Shore	35	32	91%	30	86%
Prince George's County	273	135	49%	122	45%
Washington County/Hagerstown	50	46	92%	42	84%
Total	1223	893	73%	834	68%

The majority of the youth in the sample were over the age of 18: 84% of the youth were ages 18-24. Almost two-thirds of survey respondents were black (74%), showing a vast disparity in racial representation amongst youth experiencing homelessness.

Racial & Ethnic Background
 Finding: Overrepresentation of Black/African American Youth



* Does not sum to 100% as multiple categories can be chosen.

Forty-four percent (44%) of youth had not completed high school, but 10% were either in college or had a college degree. Out of the entire sample, 30% reported being in school and 45% of those without a high school degree reported being enrolled in school.

The sample was split evenly between males and females, with 2% of survey respondents identifying as transgender. Of the individuals that responded, 10% identified as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Other. This is a significantly smaller proportion of LGBTQ identifying homeless youth than has been found in other similar surveys. This number almost certainly

reflects an under count of the young, unaccompanied, unstably housed LGBTQ population in Maryland.

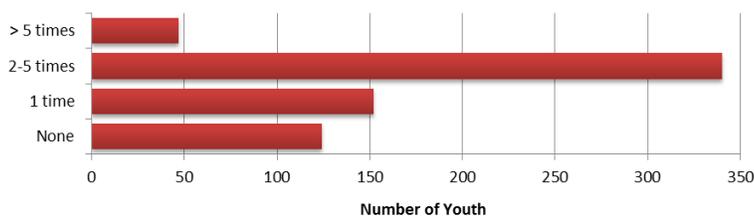
When identifying reasons for not living with a parent or guardian, 73% reported being kicked out, while 49% reported choosing to leave. This indicates that some respondents reported both, which reflects the complexity of the lived experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth, particularly as these experiences relate to family relationships. For such youth, understanding their family separation as a choice rather than as rejection by caregivers may be a self-protective perspective that preserves their own sense of agency and self-worth. It is also important to note that a youth who “chooses” to leave home to avoid abuse or some other untenable situation arguably has not made a free and unencumbered choice. Of those that reported being kicked out, the most common reason was conflict with a parent or guardian (41%), followed by being unable to return (23%) or being told to leave before the youth turned 18 years old (21%). Of those who reported choosing to leave their guardians’ residence, fighting was the most common reason (35%) followed by drug and alcohol use (14%).

Many respondents (34%) reported being a parent, and 5% of respondents reported being pregnant. Of the 267 individuals who responded that they were parents, 123 (46%) have custody of their children. These parents have an average of 1.8 children, which demonstrates a unique service need for these youth.

34% reported being a parent

The most common living arrangement of respondents during the prior two months and the night before the survey was “doubling up” with a friend or extended family member (54% during prior 2 months and 37% last night). The second most common place to sleep was outside or in an abandoned building (41% during prior 2 months and 19% last night). One-third of respondents (34%) respondents felt unsafe in the place that they stayed on the night before taking the survey. Frequent moves were common, with over 50% of respondents reporting 2 or more moves in the last two months.

Number of Times Moved in the Last 2 Months



Unsurprisingly, many youth reported being in contact with multiple agencies and institutions. More than one-third (39%) reported ever being in jail and another third (33%) reported being involved with juvenile services. Almost a quarter (22%) of the youth reported being in foster care. However, the nature, extent, and circumstances of their involvement in

foster care were not determined through this survey, including whether all of the youth were in foster care in Maryland or in a different jurisdiction. Only 15 young adults (2%) reported being in the military.

The majority of the youth had mail services (73%) and health insurance (64%), which can inform the nature of future types of assistance and outreach that may be effective for these youth.

When asked about accessing services, 31% reported not seeking any services at all. However, a sizable number of individuals reported seeking housing support, either in the form of shelter (33%) or long term housing (29%). Food stamps were another common source of support for these youth with 25% reporting seeking SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits. Other services sought included job or life skills training and/or career placement (20%), cash assistance (including Welfare or Social Security Disability benefits) (18%), educational support (17%), counseling or mental health services (15%), health care services (15%), food banks (13%), family support (such as conflict mediation or parenting support (12%), child care (11%), substance abuse treatment (10%), local police officers (6%), and other supports (3%).

I'm 23 years old. I really can't get a place because of evictions and it's hard to figure out how to pay that full amount. It's way too much for me now that I'm experiencing homelessness.

Survey respondents reported a number of barriers to receiving needed support. Transportation was a major barrier (47%), followed by having to wait too long for benefits (37%), not qualifying for benefits (25%), not going to the correct place for benefits (24%), and not hearing back about applications (23%). Others included the youth not following through (18%), not having necessary documentation (17%), not knowing where to go (16%), not feeling comfortable/safe (11%), not wanting to complete paperwork (6%), having a language barrier (4%), and other barriers (6%).

The majority (61%) report no source of income. Family and friends (25%) and part time employment (22%) were the most common sources of income. Hustling (21%), exchanging sex for money, rent or necessities (13%), and panhandling (14%) were also common survival strategies.

61% reported no source of income

Conclusions

The U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) estimated there were 481 unaccompanied homeless youth in Maryland based on HUD's one-day Point-in-Time (PIT) Count of all those experiencing homelessness (Henry, Shivii, deSousa, & Cohen, 2015). The Youth REACH MD findings suggest that the existing PIT count data vastly undercounts the population of unaccompanied homeless youth in Maryland. Furthermore, the difference between the results of the Youth REACH MD count and the HUD PIT count demonstrates the importance of an extended count period and a focus on youth and young adults in order to gain an accurate understanding of unaccompanied homeless youth - both how many currently reside within Maryland as well as the range of their diverse situations and needs for support.

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I'm living a really dangerous life in order to survive. I hope that something changes before I get killed. I just want a regular job and I wanna go to college one day.

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It was critical to develop a definition of unaccompanied homeless youth that could accurately encompass all youth who are experiencing homelessness. While 834 (68%) of the 1,223 youth and young adults surveyed met the Youth REACH MD definition of unaccompanied homeless youth, only 228 (19%) met HUD's more narrow living situation definition of unaccompanied homeless youth, which requires that the youth is under 25 years old, not staying with a parent or guardian, and stayed in a shelter, street or other place not meant for human habitation, or is exiting an institution where the youth was a resident for 90 days or less and the youth resided in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately prior to entering the institution (HUD, n.d.).

It is also important to note that there was a lack of overlap between the population reached through the survey and those who accessed services in Baltimore City. One explanation for this lack of overlap is that many of the youth that meet Youth REACH MD's criteria for "unaccompanied homeless youth" do not identify as homeless and thus may not seek to access the mainstream homeless services system. Other youth may mistrust that system or feel unsafe in it, or may simply be unaware of resources available. This is critical to understanding how best to provide services for these youth which are accessible to them.

In the 6 CoCs, Youth REACH identified 834 youth as unaccompanied & homeless compared to 228 using HUD's definition

Together, these findings point to the importance of regular and multimodal counts of unaccompanied homeless youth in Maryland as well as to need for continued improvements for future Youth REACH MD counts to better understand who these youth are and their needs.

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