

RESEARCH TO ACTION: MA YOUTH COUNT 2022



This report was prepared in 2024 for the Massachusetts Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission (UHYC) by Dr. Alice Colegrove, Dr. Laurie Ross, and Ayala Livny.

We acknowledge the indispensable contributions of the UHYC and our state partners, whose collaboration and support have enriched the depth and breadth of our research findings. The authors would also like to express special appreciation to all the youth and young adults who took the Youth Count survey, participated in focus groups and interviews, provided feedback, and contributed to this important undertaking. Your willingness to share your insights, experiences, and expertise has been invaluable in informing our analysis and recommendations.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the **MA Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission (UHYC)** is to study and make recommendations regarding policy and services for unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults in Massachusetts and to provide, in partnership with **Homeless Youth Services (HYS)**, comprehensive and effective responses to the unique needs of this population.

The Massachusetts Youth Count is an annual survey to understand the demographics and needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults under age 25 who lack stable housing or are homeless in MA. Since its inception in 2014, the UHYC has overseen the collection and analysis of the data, with nearly 10,000 surveys completed. In 2023, the UHYC decided to transition the survey to an every-other-year model to delve deeper into previous years' data.



The UHYC defines an unaccompanied homeless youth or young adult as a person who:

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

The 2022 data highlighted three particularly vulnerable groups facing prolonged homelessness and encountering significant barriers to services:

- 1) Unaccompanied minors
- 2) Youth who have dropped out of school
- 3) Unsheltered youth.

In line with this, the UHYC presents its first MA Youth Count Research to Action brief, summarizing the 2022 survey findings¹ and providing research on vulnerable subgroups' characteristics and experiences. It concludes with action-oriented recommendations to better serve them.

¹ Additional data and the initial 2022 Youth Count report may be accessed on the UHYC webpage at: www.mass.gov/doc/2022-youth-count-report/download

WHAT

The MA Youth Count is an annual survey by the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (UHYC). It aims to understand the number, characteristics, and needs of youth experiencing homelessness in the state.



WHY

Gathering accurate data helps the UHYC make better decisions about policies, funding, and programs to prevent and address youth homelessness.

WHERE

The survey covers all of Massachusetts.



HOW

Youth took the survey online or in person and received \$20 for participating.



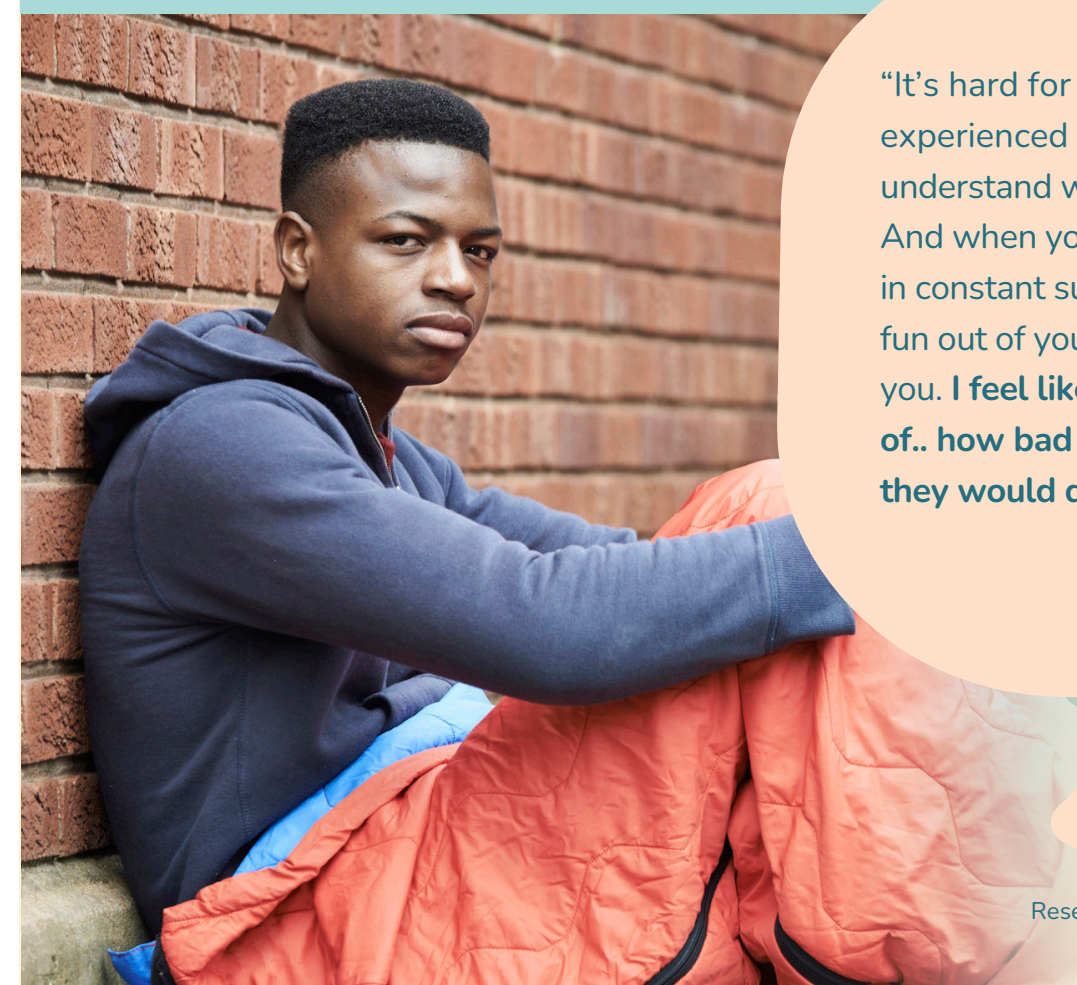
WHO

In 2022 Youth Ambassadors, providers, shelters, state programs, and peers collaborated to collect 1,083 surveys from people aged 24 and under across 111 cities and towns in MA. Among them, 634 were classified as Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (UHY).



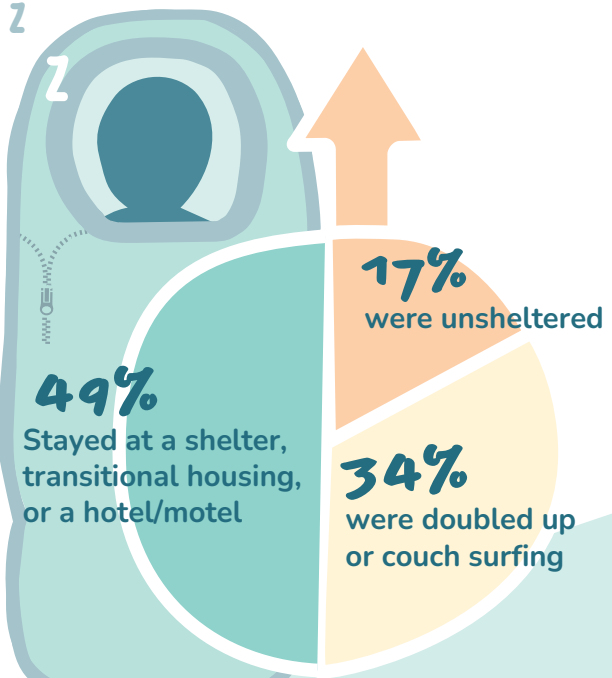
"It's hard for people that haven't experienced homelessness... to really understand what you're going through. And when you're in a situation like this you're in constant survival mode it kind of sucks the fun out of your life and everything around you. **I feel like if they knew more of our side of.. how bad it really is sometimes, maybe they would do more or try to do more.**"

– UHY who first experienced homelessness as a minor



UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH (UHY):
IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES²

Where are (UHY) SLEEPING:
the night before the count



BIPOL³
60%

JUVENILE
OR CRIMINAL
JUSTICE HISTORY
27%

FOSTER CARE
34.7%

1/3 left
home before
the age of
18, at an
average age
of 15.6
years old



EDUCATION
25.8% HAD DROPPED
OUT OF SCHOOL

PREGNANT/
PARENTING
20.6%

LGBTQ+
30%

EMPLOYMENT NEARLY 50%



were working a full-or
part-time job and yet
could not access safe
and stable housing.



NEARLY 1 OUT OF 5
UHY said they had traded sex or sexual
content to meet their basic needs

² Data were collected from April 4-May 4, 2022. All data presented in this report are in relation to the 634 youth and young adults who currently met the UHYC definition of unaccompanied youth homelessness (see text box). However, the survey reveals an additional degree of homelessness and housing vulnerability among the 1083 total respondents. For example, 114 YYA were experiencing homelessness and accompanied by a parent or guardian; 32 of the housed respondents reported not having a safe place to stay for the next 14 days; another 364 respondents reported experiencing homelessness at some point in the past but were currently housed.

³ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)



UNACCOMPANIED MINORS



“When we’re young, nobody takes us seriously. They think we’re a joke. They see us as less important, that we’re not valuable to the community. But when we’re younger...**the first thing we are is afraid.** We don’t have the resources or the knowledge to actually figure out **Where do we go? How do we start? Where do we start?** And me as a minor, there was a lot I had to figure out... I didn’t know where to start.”

—Youth Count Focus Group Participant



THE ISSUE

Approximately one-third of unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) report leaving home permanently before turning 18, generally before their 16th birthday. Once experiencing homelessness, young people reported that they try to remain invisible until they reach 18, often facing challenges accessing shelters, support services, and education opportunities due to their age and legal restrictions. This invisibility stems from a fear of being targeted by authorities, exploitation, or further conflict, compelling them to navigate their circumstances alone until they reach adulthood.

WHO ?

In this report, we present data based on three distinct groups:

- Youth currently experiencing homelessness who are unaccompanied and under the age of 18, referred to as ‘minors’
- Young adults experiencing homelessness who reported leaving home permanently as a minor but are not currently under 18, referred to as ‘young adults who left home as minors’
- Young adults experiencing homelessness who reported leaving home permanently after the age of 18, referred to as such

Minors currently experiencing homelessness were twice or more as likely than all UHY to:

- Be Black
- Be unsheltered
- Have dropped out of school
- Not have any income

Among the one-third of minors currently experiencing homelessness who reported a history of foster care, 50% identified as Black and nearly 30% identified as Multiracial.

Young Adults who left home as minors were more likely than other UHY to:

- Be Latinx
- Have juvenile or criminal justice involvement
- Have previously been in foster care⁴
- Have exchanged sex or sexual content to meet their basic needs
- Be unsheltered
- Have dropped out of school
- Experience more years of homelessness than those who left home after age 18

⁴ The Youth Count survey asks, “Have you ever been in foster care?” *Yes * No *Unsure



WHY?

Minors experiencing homelessness are at the crossroads where familial instability, socioeconomic hardships, and systemic inequities converge. Minors encounter unique challenges due to their age when dealing with family conflict or unstable housing, challenges that other populations may not face. In Youth Count focus groups, young adults who experienced homelessness as minors expressed feeling undervalued and fearful, unsure where to turn or who to trust for support. Black youth, in particular, expressed deep-seated distrust toward institutional systems, fearing that any potential benefits may be outweighed by negative consequences.



“It’s more like you don’t want to reach out because then that’s affecting your family life. Because to get [SNAP benefits] and stuff like that... when your mother has that, it takes [benefits] away from her. You have a rocky relationship to start and that hurts it even more. And so, you’re like, ‘I’m just going to have to do everything else the hard way, by myself’.”

-Youth Adult who experienced homelessness as a minor

On the Youth Count survey, UHY consistently cited family conflict as a key reason for leaving home. Many reported feeling too overwhelmed to seek help, didn’t know where to turn, or didn’t feel safe asking for assistance. Some youth, despite facing challenging family dynamics, chose not to seek help and opted to remain with their families, fearing potential strain on familial relationships and also harboring doubts about the effectiveness of available resources. Other youth who ultimately left home as minors described leaving stressful, unsafe, and unstable home environments, and instead of finding the help they needed, they often encountered further trauma. Regrettably, minors were the least likely among all UHY to receive assistance with family support, such as conflict resolution.

When minors facing family or housing instability lack necessary support, they become susceptible to further trauma and may resort to risk-taking behavior, such as trading sex, for survival. Notably, justice system involvement appears to be more likely after a young person experiences homelessness rather than preceding homelessness, suggesting that housing instability increases the likelihood of justice involvement and not the other way around.

ACTION

The UHYC is working towards a future where experiences of youth homelessness are rare, brief, and non-recurring. To meet this goal, **we must increase the likelihood a minor experiencing housing instability or homelessness will ask for help when they need it and that the help they need will be available, appropriate, and accessible.** Identifying and connecting minors in need of support before they are in full-blown-crisis will have significant benefits for these young people later on in life.

To do this, we need to work across secretariats to:

- Develop and strengthen policies that improve a minor’s ability to access services
- Improve practices, especially in conjunction with high schools, so that when minors are experiencing housing or family instability they are identified and quickly connected to support services, with special attention and sensitivity to Black and Latinx youth
- Services and resources must include family support, Basic Center Programs, employment and income support, and other age-appropriate services.
- Increase awareness of and access to safe shelter options for minors, such as the Basic-Center Programs
- In partnership with Department of Children and Families (DCF), clarify mandates and improve communication channels so that service providers and school personnel are clear on their individual and collective response when unaccompanied homeless minors are identified.

Additionally, the data clearly highlights the racial inequalities and vulnerabilities of BIPOC minors. To help address this, the UHYC must work strategically with state and community partners, including the UHYC Youth Advisory Council, to ensure that the next statewide awareness campaign includes:

- Significant efforts to reach communities of color and high schools in predominantly Black and Latinx districts
- Messages that destigmatize youth homelessness and housing instability and promote connection to trusted resources



EDUCATION

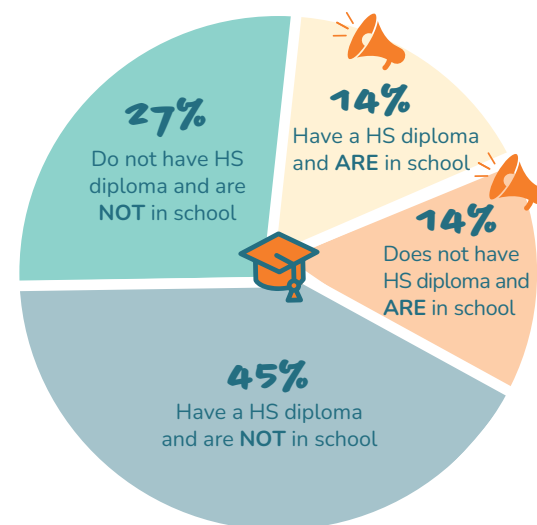


“[Massachusetts] should help with food and education, I want more education but **no one helps**, [not] even the government.”

—Youth Count Survey Respondent

THE ISSUE

After years of reporting steady increases in school completion among unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY), the trend reversed in 2022. **More than one in four UHY respondents reported being out of school and without a high school diploma**, marking a 36% increase since before the pandemic. National research underscores that lacking a high school diploma is a major predictor of homelessness. In the 2017 national study *Voices of Youth Count* by Morton, Dworsky, and Samuels, it was found that youth without a high school diploma were 346% more likely to experience homelessness⁵.



Twenty-eight percent of unaccompanied homeless youth were enrolled in educational programs, spanning from high school to professional training or college. This highlights the remarkable resilience and determination of these young individuals, who, despite their experience of homelessness, continue to actively pursue their education.

⁵ Morton, M., Dworsky, A., and Samuels, B. (2017) *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America*. Retrieved from <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Voices-of-Youth-Report.pdf>



27% of unaccompanied homeless youth had dropped out of high school

WHO?

Youth experiencing homelessness who had dropped out of school were more *likely* to:

- Be Black and Latinx than UHY as a whole
- Leave home for good at age 17
- Be unsheltered
- Be pregnant or parenting
- Have previously been in foster care
- Have no income
- Be born in the city/town where they took the survey

WHY?

UHY who dropped out of school cited various obstacles to getting support for their education, including lack of transportation, financial constraints, unfamiliarity with resources, confusing paperwork, waiting lists, and feeling overwhelmed. Those without a diploma or GED/HiSET found obtaining help with their education as challenging as securing long-term housing assistance. Some struggled to identify helpful resources, expressing fear, confusion, and “not even knowing where to start.”

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act ensures that students facing homelessness receive essential educational support. Within this act, every school district is mandated to designate a local homeless education liaison who acts as the primary point of contact for homeless education matters. These liaisons are entrusted with specific responsibilities outlined in the Act. Among these responsibilities is providing transportation to and from the student’s original school upon request by the parent, guardian, or, in the case of unaccompanied homeless students, the liaison themselves. However, it’s crucial to note that students must be identified as homeless before they can access these services.

Youth who had dropped out of school were the least likely of all UHY to be doubled up or couch-surfing. During focus groups, they revealed initially attempting to stay with family or friends to remain in school. Interestingly, many didn’t even self-identify themselves as homeless while couch-surfing. One individual shared, “**I didn’t even realize I was homeless until I ran out of couches to sleep on.**” Both Black and Latinx youth shared experiences of families lacking the means to accommodate them. For instance, one Black young man explained, “My grandmother took me in for a while, until there were just too many other mouths to feed, and I didn’t want to be a burden... so I bounced. I crashed in my friend’s parent’s garage near the school until I graduated.”

When their temporary arrangements fell through, some struggled to balance school with meeting their basic needs for shelter and food. Consequently, they prioritized work over education.



ACTION

The stressors faced by youth and young adults dealing with family conflict and housing instability greatly increase the likelihood of dropping out of school. **We need to improve the chances that high school students will ask for help when they need it, and ensure that help is available, appropriate and accessible.** The UHYC is committed to continuing collaboration with the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and other youth-serving agencies to promote services that support housing stability and academic success.

We need to work across secretariats to:

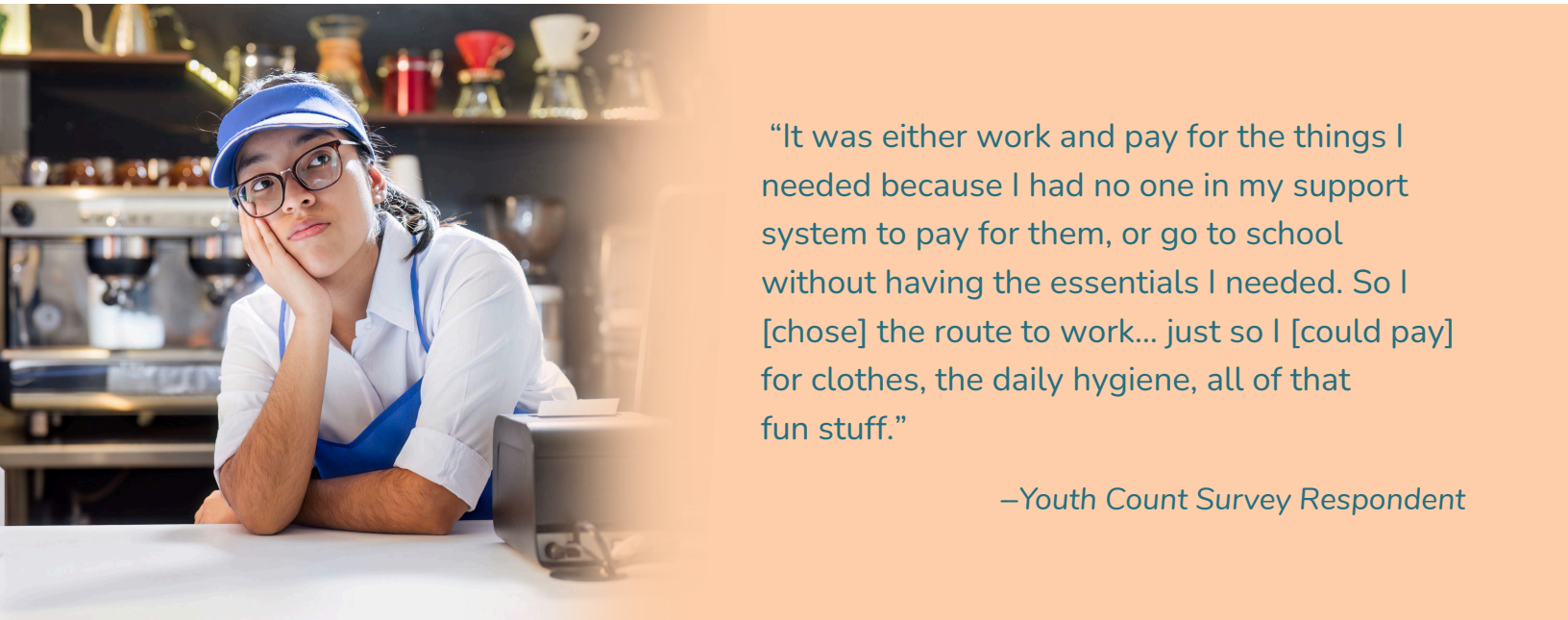
- Improve practices, including training for high school staff, so that when minors are experiencing housing or family instability, even if they do not self-identify as homeless, they are identified and quickly connected to support services; with special attention and sensitivity to BIPOC youth
- Use DESE data to examine regional differences in school absenteeism, dropout and graduation rates based on housing status, race/ethnicity, and child welfare involvement to inform where targeted additional support and training may be needed
- Increase awareness of and access to safe shelter options for minors, such as the Basic-Center Programs

To increase awareness of available services we must:

- Distribute the next UHYC statewide awareness campaign in schools, especially those located in predominantly communities of color.
 - Campaign must include connection to resources that are also available for minors, including family support and Basic Center Programs.

Finally, **transportation** was cited as the biggest barrier to getting help by youth who had dropped out of school and were experiencing homelessness. As mentioned earlier, McKinney Vento Homeless Liaisons can organize transportation to and from a student’s original school and provide access to additional services. However, students must first self-identify or be identified as experiencing homelessness. Working towards a solution, the UHYC will:

- Collaborate with DESE, state agencies, and community partners to ensure that all high school students, regardless of housing status, are informed about Homeless Liaison services, promoting inclusivity and awareness in the school community.
- In addition to transportation to school, the UHYC will support DESE and Homeless Liaisons to connect a transportation plan to additional services such as shelter and housing support.
- To add additional support and reduce transportation-burdens, there should be increased collaboration between schools and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) situated near the schools. By partnering with local CBOs, schools can enhance their support network for students facing housing instability, complementing the services provided by Homeless Liaisons and EOHHS-funded Homeless Youth Services providers.



“It was either work and pay for the things I needed because I had no one in my support system to pay for them, or go to school without having the essentials I needed. So I [chose] the route to work... just so I [could pay] for clothes, the daily hygiene, all of that fun stuff.”

—Youth Count Survey Respondent



SHELTER



“We don’t have a [shelter and housing] system that can handle the demand right now... And then we’re the ones suffering because of it.”

-UHYC Youth Advisory Council Member

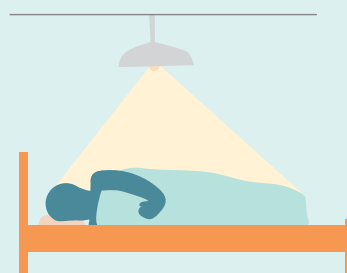
THE ISSUE

There’s a pressing need for safe and accessible shelter for unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY), and it seems to be worsening. In 2022, the percentage of unsheltered youth rose by 36% compared to 2019⁶, while the percentage of sheltered youth dropped by 13%⁷. This highlights the urgency to create shelter and housing solutions for these young individuals, who are often forced to sleep in unsafe places like alleyways, cars and abandoned buildings.

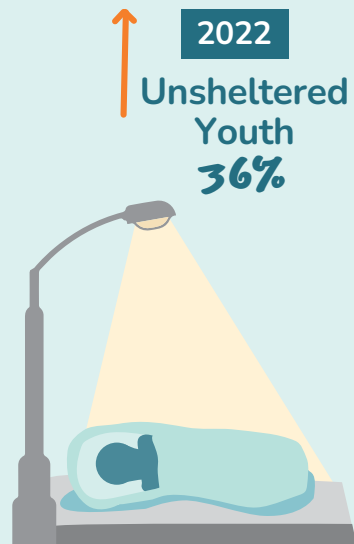
2019 Sheltered Youth 13%

Young Adult shelters are tailored to the unique needs of young adults & offer:

- Safety
- Access to basic needs
- Case management & support
- Housing assistance



2022 Unsheltered Youth 36%



WHO

The table below illustrates the demographic breakdown of where UHY slept on the night before the survey.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF WHERE YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS SLEPT THE NIGHT BEFORE THE SURVEY										
	All UHY (n=634)	Black	Latino	Multiracial	White	Foster care	Justice system	Minors	Young Adults who Left home as minors	LGBTQ
Sheltered (n=314)	49%	51.7%	45.1%	62.7%	41.2%	49.5%	41.6%	42.9%	46%	52.9%
Couch surfing/doubled-up (n=216)	34%	28.3%	41.6%	24.5%	39.8%	30.4%	38.7%	26.2%	36%	35.1%
Unsheltered (n=104)	17%	20%	13.3%	12.8%	18.9%	20%	19.6%	30.9%	18%	12%

Unsheltered youth experiencing homelessness were more likely to:

- Be Black or White
- Have previously been in foster care
- Have had juvenile or criminal justice involvement
- Have experienced homelessness as minors

WHY?

A significant number of unsheltered youth and young adults reported that they did not know where to go or how to access shelter. In focus groups, some described how limited transportation options or awareness of the options hindered their ability to secure shelter and necessary services. Furthermore, transportation challenges are compounded by the considerable distances young people must travel to reach crisis or transitional housing and young adult shelters, often leading to a disconnect from their broader support networks. Failure to access shelter may diminish their connection to essential stability-promoting resources such as housing, employment, education, and food. Conversely, unsheltered youth and young adults are at heightened risk of violence, victimization, and exploitation.

The demand for shelter, transitional housing, and long-term housing outpaces supply. Of those young adults who did stay in a shelter, 39% reported being there for 6 months or longer. If young people cannot access transitional or permanent housing, they cannot exit emergency shelter in a timely way. In addition to the extended lack of stability for these individuals, longer shelter stays mean a reduced turnover in available space for other young adults in need of emergency shelter.

⁶ In 2019, of the 529 young people experiencing homelessness, 65 reported being unsheltered; in 2022, of the 634 young people experiencing homelessness, 104 reported being unsheltered.

⁷ In 2019, of the 529 young people experiencing homelessness, 300 reported being sheltered; in 2022, of the 634 young people experiencing homelessness, 314 reported being sheltered.



Additionally, in Youth Count focus groups, many young adults who self-described as “never staying in shelters” said that they did not want to access shelter if it was only on a night-by-night basis. One young woman, age 21, said, “If I’m homeless I’m more looking for a place to stay long term instead of a place just for the night. If you’re telling me I can only sleep there one night, I’d rather sleep in my car and make sure my stuff is safe.” Young adults also mentioned the expense of traveling and were hesitant to invest time and money if they couldn’t stay and receive “real help” during the day.

ACTION

The UHYC is working towards a future where experiences of youth homelessness are rare, brief, and non-recurring. To meet this goal, **we must increase the likelihood that youth and young adults experiencing homelessness will ask for help with shelter when they need it and that the shelter and housing resources they need will be available, appropriate, and accessible.**

To this end, the UHYC recommends working across secretariats and engaging stakeholders to:

- Use the 2024 Youth Count data to inform the geographic and population-based need, then develop recommendations to meet the need for:
 - age-appropriate shelters and other crisis housing
 - transitional and non-time-limited housing options for young adults
 - transitional housing connected to state systems of care
- Work with youth-serving state agencies and the Youth Advisory Council to improve transition planning in for youth exiting state custody, including ensuring connections to housing and support services

- Partner with the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities and EOHHS Homeless Youth Services providers who offer young adult shelter to establish a shelter protocol focused on bolstering transition planning and housing search initiatives during daytime hours. Additionally, ensure prompt enrollment of all young adults into coordinated entry systems immediately following shelter intake for streamlined access to housing resources.
- With such a significant percentage of UHY identifying as LGBTQ+ all youth systems and shelter providers must ensure they have both reputations and practices as safe spaces that offer affirming accommodations and services.
- Develop a statewide awareness campaign that helps destigmatize experiences of housing instability among youth and young adults, in addition to connecting them to resources
 - Ensure that resources are comprehensive and have the capacity to support both current and new youth who reach out looking for services

“When I was a teen, I was ashamed because I didn’t want anyone from school to see I was homeless. When I got older, I didn’t have the resources, and I did not want to tell anyone I was couch-bouncing and homeless. I didn’t really reach out to as many people as I should have. It wasn’t something I really wanted known... Me specifically, I kinda keep the secret. I didn’t know what resources or shelters were out there. It is hard to find that the shelters are good. The stereotype that it’s an uncomfortable place to be. A bunch of strangers in the building.”

- Young adult who has never stayed in a shelter, Age 21



CONCLUSION

The 2022 Youth Count data underscore the urgent need to improve identification and support for young people experiencing homelessness; notably, unaccompanied homeless minors, youth at risk of dropping out of high school, and unsheltered youth and young adults. Addressing the needs of these three vulnerable groups is pivotal for advancing towards the UHYC's goal of ending youth homelessness in Massachusetts, making it rare, brief, and non-recurring. Achieving this will require stakeholders to implement a combination of strategies focused on addressing risk factors, providing support services, raising awareness of resources, and, crucially, amplifying the voices of youth of color and the UHY community as a whole.

Equity must be the cornerstone of all initiatives. The data underscores stark racial disparities among youth experiencing homelessness, necessitating proactive measures from the UHYC to ensure services are not only tailored to the realities of youth of color but are also readily accessible in their communities. Furthermore, collaborating with the UHYC Youth Advisory Council and regional Youth Action Boards remains crucial. Empowering young people to actively participate in shaping solutions that directly affect them is paramount. By prioritizing their insights and lived experiences, we can forge more inclusive and impactful strategies to tackle youth homelessness head-on.



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