

FROM RECOGNITION TO ACCESS 2024 MASSACHUSETTS YOUTH COUNT - RESEARCH-TO-ACTION BRIEF



This report was prepared in 2025 for the Massachusetts Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission (UHYC) by Dr. Alice Colegrove, Dr. Laurie Ross, Ayala Livny, and Thaliana Paulino. We gratefully acknowledge the essential contributions of the UHYC whose collaboration and guidance have strengthened the depth and scope of this research.

We also extend our deepest appreciation to the youth and young adults who completed the 2024 Youth Count survey, participated in focus groups and interviews, offered feedback, and shared their lived experiences. Your insights, courage, and expertise have been invaluable in shaping the analysis and recommendations presented in this report.

For questions or requests for additional information, please contact Alice Colegrove, Director of Homeless Youth Services and UHYC Chair, at Alice.J.Colegrove@mass.gov.

This report was designed by **CIVICA
STUDIO.**

INTRODUCTION

Understanding both **who** is experiencing homelessness and **where** supports are available is essential to designing effective and equitable policy and practices. Since 2014, the Massachusetts Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission (UHYC) has overseen the Youth Count, gathering nearly 10,000 responses. The 2024 Youth Count provides the most current statewide picture of young people's experiences, unmet needs, and regional disparities, offering a foundation for translating data into action.

While Massachusetts recognizes youth homelessness across a broad range of experiences, from shelter stays and unsheltered homelessness to couch-surfing and doubled-up living situations, housing resources are limited and must be prioritized. Most federal housing investments, which make up the majority of available housing dollars, are allocated through systems designed to serve those facing the most severe and visible forms of homelessness. As a result, young people who are doubled up or couch-surfing often remain unserved, not because their housing instability is less serious, but because scarce resources are directed first to youth in the deepest crisis.

The [2024 Massachusetts Youth Count](#) highlights the scale of this mismatch and shows where gaps in access are greatest. This brief uses the data to identify opportunities to redesign access pathways, expand flexible housing options, and build a system that responds earlier and more effectively to the housing needs of youth and young adults.

WHAT'S INSIDE



This brief begins with overall findings and key highlights from the 2024 Massachusetts Youth Count, providing a statewide view of youth homelessness trends and demographics. It then delves into two areas of focus:

Couch-Surfing and Identification: How doubled-up youth navigate instability, how self-identification shapes help-seeking, and why many never access housing services.

Housing Access and Regional Disparities: Where youth emergency and transitional housing is available, where it is not, and which regions require urgent investment.

Together, these sections offer a data-driven picture of who is affected, where gaps exist, and how Massachusetts can act to ensure all young people have a safe place to call home.

Note: Throughout this brief, the terms “Youth,” “Youth and Young Adult (YYA)” and “Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (UHY)” are used interchangeably to describe young people under age 25 who meet the Massachusetts definition of unaccompanied youth homelessness.

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 end youth homelessness.

HOW

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



Massachusetts defines an unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) 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.



WHERE

The survey covers all of Massachusetts.



WHO

In 2024 Youth Ambassadors, providers, shelters, state programs, and peers collaborated to collect 1,413 surveys from people aged 24 and under across 147 cities and towns in MA. Among them, 661 from 105 cities and towns met the MA definition of an unaccompanied homeless youth.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS!

TARGETED ACTION WORKS



JUVENILE OR JUSTICE
SYSTEM HISTORY

19.8% IN 2024

Down from **27%** IN 2022



FOSTER CARE

30.7%

Down from **34.7%** IN 2022



YOUTH LEAVING HOME
BEFORE AGE 18

28.1%

Down from **33%** IN 2022



UNSHELTERED YOUTH WITH
FOSTER CARE HISTORY

15.8%

Down from **20%** IN 2022

PROGRESS

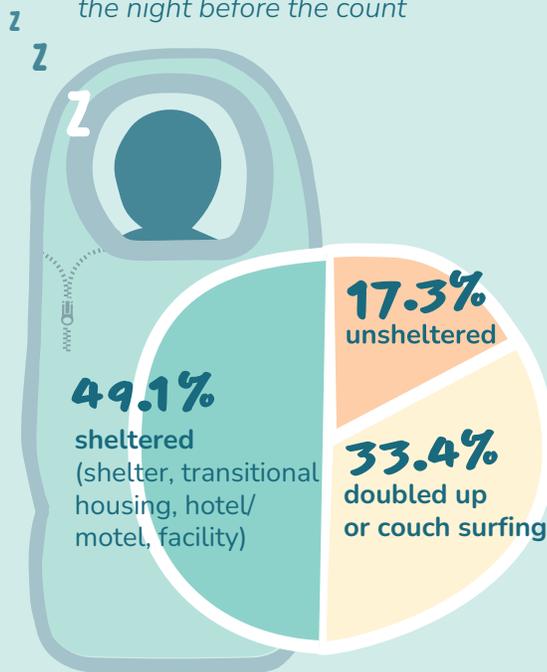
UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH (UHY): IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES¹



**Traded sex or
sexual content for
basic needs**

20% (with more than 1/4 reporting that someone else kept the profits/money)

**Where are UHY SLEEPING:
the night before the count**



¹ Data were collected from April 1-30, 2024. All data presented in this report are in relation to the 661 youth and young adults who met the UHYC definition of unaccompanied youth homelessness.

² Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)



PART 1: COUCH-SURFING AND IDENTIFICATION



“When you are couch-surfing you still have walls to cover you from the weather. I didn’t understand that I was homeless.”

-Youth Count Focus Group Participant

THE ISSUE

Couch-surfing and doubled up youth—those staying temporarily with friends, relatives, or acquaintances—are recognized as homeless under Massachusetts law, yet they remain largely outside the reach of federally funded housing resources as a result of prioritization. Coordinated Entry systems must allocate scarce federal dollars to the most vulnerable, which typically means youth experiencing literal homelessness.

In the 2024 Massachusetts Youth Count, **one in three (220) unaccompanied homeless youth reported couch-surfing** or being doubled-up. Many described constant moves, emotional strain, and the uncertainty of relying on short stays. Only 75 percent of these youth (162 of 220) identified as homeless—often a prerequisite for seeking help through the homelessness system, revealing how stigma, survival strategies, and self-perception can limit access to help they desperately need.

WHO: IDENTITY, HELP-SEEKING, AND WHO GETS SERVED

Youth who are couch-surfing or doubled up experience housing instability in different ways—and they engage with help differently. Youth Count data show that identifying as “homeless” is associated with higher rates of help-seeking, but it does not guarantee that help is received. Many youth who asked for help reported receiving little or none, underscoring that access is shaped not just by self-identification, but by how systems respond.

Identity plays a significant role in this experience. Nearly half of BIPOC youth who were couch-surfing reported gaps in access to services. Black and Multiracial youth were the most likely to ask for help and the most likely to report not receiving it. Latinx youth were the least likely to see themselves as needing help at all, suggesting that cultural norms, stigma, and past experiences influence whether youth engage with systems in the first place.

In focus groups, many Black young adults emphasized that labels like “homeless” or “couch-surfing” mattered less than whether help was actually available. Even when they reached out, the process often felt discouraging or ineffective. These patterns suggest that inequities in access are driven not only by housing status, but by how identity shapes youth’s trust in systems—and how systems respond when youth ask for support.

How Couch-Surfing Youth Report Help with Emergency Shelter by Race

OUTCOME	BLACK	MULTIRACIAL	LATINX	WHITE
Did not need help	20%	33%	41%	38%
Needed help but did not ask	10%	20%	20%	10%
Asked for help but received none	33%	34%	24%	18%
Received some help	20%	17%	15%	20%
Received all help needed	8%	6%	0%	14%

WHY IT MATTERS

Resource Prioritization Limits Access

Couch-surfing youth rarely meet federal prioritization thresholds used by most Coordinated Entry Systems, which means they are unlikely to access HUD-funded housing resources. This is not a reflection of lower need, but of systems designed to direct scarce housing dollars to youth experiencing the most severe and visible forms of homelessness.

Service Design Creates Access Gaps

Youth who are couch-surfing are less likely than youth in shelter to have their needs addressed—not because they are less vulnerable, but because services are most accessible in settings where support is built into the environment. Youth in shelter are physically connected to case management, referrals, and daily problem-solving, while couch-surfing youth must navigate fragmented systems on their own.

Daily Instability Has Real Consequences

Couch-surfing youth reported frequent moves, uncertainty about where they will sleep, and ongoing stress. This instability disrupts school, work, health, and relationships, and makes it difficult to plan beyond the immediate future.

Identity and Trust Shape Engagement

Many youth avoid the word “homeless,” even when their housing is unstable. While distancing from the label can reduce stigma, it can also affect whether youth seek help or see services as relevant to them. These dynamics are shaped by past experiences with systems, perceived risk, and whether youth believe support will actually be available.

Structural Inequities Persist

For BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and immigrant youth, distrust of systems, fear of unintended consequences, and experiences of bias further limit engagement. These barriers compound existing access gaps and help explain why some youth remain disconnected even when services exist.

“I was homeless in every sense—except the paperwork”

–Youth Count Focus Group Participant

ACTION

Recognizing couch-surfing youth as homeless under Massachusetts law was a crucial step, and the state maintains strong access points through Homeless Youth Services (HYS) providers. But access points alone do not guarantee access. Many YYA couch-surfing with friends, relatives, or acquaintances do not see themselves as “homeless,” and as a result they often don’t realize they can use these services. At the same time, most federally funded housing programs must prioritize youth experiencing literal homelessness, leaving couch-surfing youth without meaningful pathways to housing unless or until their situation worsens.

To close this gap, Massachusetts must ensure that YYA understand they can seek support before entering crisis—whether they are couch-surfing, staying somewhere unsafe, or at risk of losing their housing. Outreach, communication, and low-barrier service design are essential to making these connections.



“It’s a constant uneasiness... I know it’s not forever and [this place to stay] could be taken away at any moment.”

-Youth Count Focus Group Participant

The actions below focus on expanding flexible housing options, improving access pathways, and strengthening engagement so that couch-surfing youth can receive support earlier and more effectively.



EXPAND ACCESS THROUGH STATE-FUNDED PATHWAYS

- Ensure Massachusetts Homeless Youth Services (HYS) continue serving couch-surfing YYA without requiring literal homelessness.
- Explore investments in flexible, youth-centered housing that does not rely on federal eligibility, including brief stabilization beds, host homes, transitional housing slots, and rental support for youth before crisis.
- Expand access to housing subsidies for youth exiting DCF and explore subsidies for youth exiting DYS care.



IMPROVE SERVICE DESIGN AND ENGAGEMENT

- Use youth-friendly language that welcomes those who do not identify as homeless.
- Expand mail, transportation, and telehealth supports through drop-in centers.
- Building on the [2018 MA State Plan to End Youth Homelessness](#), explore having at least one state or privately funded, low-barrier young adult drop-in center in every region—either as stand-alone sites or part of existing programs. Some regions have made progress with existing resources that could inform future efforts.³
- Continue to offer training to HYS providers in cultural humility, recognizing racial bias, and trauma-informed care.
- Center youth voices in shaping program language and outreach.



SUPPORT PEER AND COMMUNITY-BASED NAVIGATION

- Develop peer-to-peer models and community-based youth navigators, which are lower-cost and often more effective.



EXPAND OUTREACH AND AWARENESS

- Massachusetts already has strong HYS access points—but many couch-surfing youth do not realize they can use them. Outreach should clearly communicate: *You do not need to be in shelter to get help.*
- Educate existing drop in centers and CE access points about the importance of intakes and access for all YYA under the state definition.
- Include resources for youth who are couch-surfing in public awareness campaigns, and disseminate in schools, libraries, social media, and community spaces.

“I want to keep [the term] ‘homeless’ distant from my identity. But it limited my ability to ask for help.”

³ A statewide list of current youth and young adult drop-in centers can be accessed at: www.mass.gov/info-details/youth-young-adult-resource-drop-in-and-access-centers



PART II: HOUSING ACCESS AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES



“I wish they understood how hard it is being out here in these streets when it’s hot, when it’s cold, when it’s snowing...I really wish they understood everything that we’re going through”

-Youth Count Focus Group Participant

THE ISSUE

In spring 2024, the Massachusetts Youth Count identified 661 young people experiencing homelessness statewide—546 unaccompanied youth and 115 young parents. Of these, 114 were unsheltered and 220 were couch-surfing or doubled up. Conducted over several weeks each spring, the Youth Count engages schools, service providers, and peer outreach to reach a broad range of participants. It captures not only where youth are staying, but also their service needs, help-seeking behaviors, and barriers to accessing resources.

These data provide a more complete picture than the HUD Point-in-Time (PIT) count, which captures only literal homelessness on a single night, and in January 2024 identified 564 unaccompanied youth and young adults and 401 parenting youth experiencing homelessness in Massachusetts, including only 55 unsheltered youth. The PIT Count does not collect data on people who are couch-surfing or doubled-up, so those who stay temporarily with others go uncounted in federal homelessness data.

This brief focuses on the 2024 Youth Count data to examine regional disparities in access to youth-appropriate shelter and housing. When Youth Count data are combined with PIT data and statewide HYS service data, a clear picture emerges: not only is youth homelessness undercounted, but access to youth-appropriate housing varies significantly by region.

⁴ https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_State_MA_2024.pdf

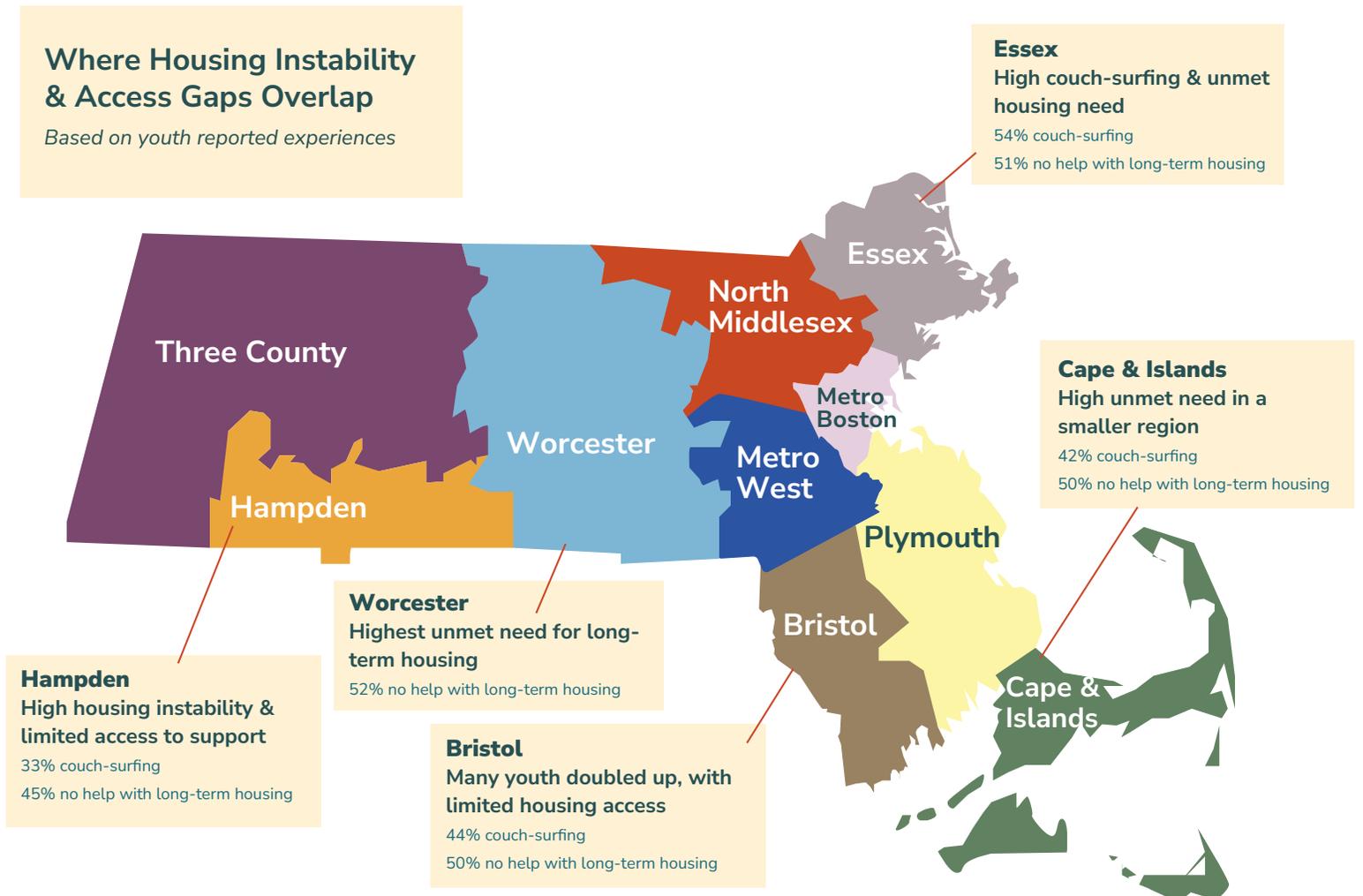
REGIONAL VARIATION IN YOUTH HOUSING AND UNMET NEED

Youth Count data highlight significant variation in housing access and perceived help across Massachusetts.

Region	2024 UHY (n=661)	WHERE UHY REPORTED STAYING					WHERE UHY REPORTED NOT RECEIVING HELP		
		Un-sheltered	Shelter	Transitional	Doubled Up/Couch Surfing	Other	No help with shelter	No help with transitional housing	No help with long-term housing
Metro Boston	164	13%	37%	15%	28%	7%	23%	27%	42%
Bristol	108	19%	21%	9%	44%	7%	28%	38%	50%
Worcester	80	24%	23%	21%	24%	8%	26%	35%	52%
Plymouth	64	16%	47%	6%	25%	6%	19%	29%	35%
Essex	63	17%	17%	2%	54%	10%	39%	48%	51%
Three County	51	16%	33%	18%	29%	4%	20%	23%	34%
Hampden	46	13%	37%	11%	33%	6%	31%	47%	45%
North Middlesex	36	28%	14%	5%	39%	14%	35%	27%	32%
Metro West	27	19%	31%	3%	22%	25%	18%	17%	30%
Cape & Islands	12	8%	8%	17%	42%	25%	20%	64%	50%

Where Housing Instability & Access Gaps Overlap

Based on youth reported experiences



WHY IT MATTERS: REGIONAL GAPS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Geography and Transportation

The availability of youth emergency and transitional beds is uneven statewide. Some regions have no youth-specific emergency shelter/crisis or transitional beds at all, typically leading to large numbers of youth who end up couch-surfing and lack access to formal support.

- In Plymouth County, youth rely on adult shelters (like Father Bill's & Mainspring) due to the lack of youth-specific beds.
- In Worcester County, youth also rely on adult shelters, as there are currently no youth-specific options. The region shows high unmet need for long-term housing, with 52% of youth reporting no help was received.
- In North Middlesex, shelter access was limited during the Youth Count; a new 25-bed crisis-transitional program opened in Lowell shortly afterward.
- Rural regions—including Three County and parts of Worcester County—face extremely limited or nonexistent public transportation, long distances between services, and limited housing stock. These conditions make access far more difficult even when programs exist.
- Essex and Bristol County, and the Cape & Islands have high rates of couch-surfing and youth indicated they receive limited help with long-term housing—highlighting a need for outreach, non HUD funded housing pathways, and non-traditional housing.

System-Involved Youth

- Cross-agency collaboration among DCF, DYS, and HYS programs has improved prevention efforts, but gaps remain. Data indicate that roughly 20% of youth experiencing homelessness had involvement with DYS and 30% with DCF. Many lose housing when exiting DCF or DYS-funded independent living programs but remain ineligible for housing supports and programs until they meet the HUD definition of literal homelessness.

ACTION: CLOSING THE HOUSING GAP

Massachusetts has made important progress in building youth-specific housing and service capacity, but access remains uneven across the state. Youth in some regions have multiple crisis or transitional housing options, while others—particularly rural and under-resourced areas—have none. At the same time, limited housing dollars must be prioritized for youth with the most severe forms of homelessness, creating bottlenecks that make it difficult for couch-surfing youth and system-involved young adults to access stable housing before reaching crisis.

To ensure that young people can move from instability to stability—quickly and equitably—Massachusetts needs a more balanced housing system: one that supports the most vulnerable youth in accessing permanent housing while also offering earlier, developmentally appropriate options for those at risk. This requires flexible crisis and transitional housing, stronger cross-system coordination, and upstream investments that prevent homelessness before it occurs.

Additionally, young people need more than a place to sleep, they need safe, stable environments that support healing, growth, and the ability to build their future. While permanent housing is the ultimate goal, speed and access matter. Youth can't wait months or years for units to become available. Most youth will not require long-term subsidies or Permanent Supportive Housing, but they do need clear, accessible pathways to stable, permanent homes. Transitional housing can play a key role in bridging that gap.

The following actions outline how Massachusetts can close regional gaps, strengthen pathways to housing, and build a youth homelessness response that is both responsive in crisis and preventive by design.



EXPANSION OF CRISIS-TRANSITIONAL HOUSING OPTIONS

- Develop hybrid models combining emergency shelter with medium-term stabilization that can serve both unsheltered and couch-surfing youth, regardless of HUD eligibility.
- Prioritize investment in regions with limited or no youth housing options.



STRENGTHEN CROSS-SYSTEM COORDINATION

- Continue partnerships among DCF, DYS, DMH, CoCs, and HYS providers to better align referrals, explore data sharing, and ensure warm handoffs.
- Explore joint transition planning to help youth move directly from care into stable housing, preventing homelessness before it begins.
- Continue to use flexible funds, rental support, and short term vouchers, such as FYI, to stabilize youth before they reach crisis or age out of care.



IMPROVE ELIGIBILITY PATHWAYS

- Explore the use of *state-funded access points* for couch-surfing and doubled-up youth that follow the Massachusetts definition of youth homelessness.
- Promote access to emergency beds and transitional housing even for youth who do not meet HUD's criteria for "literal homelessness."

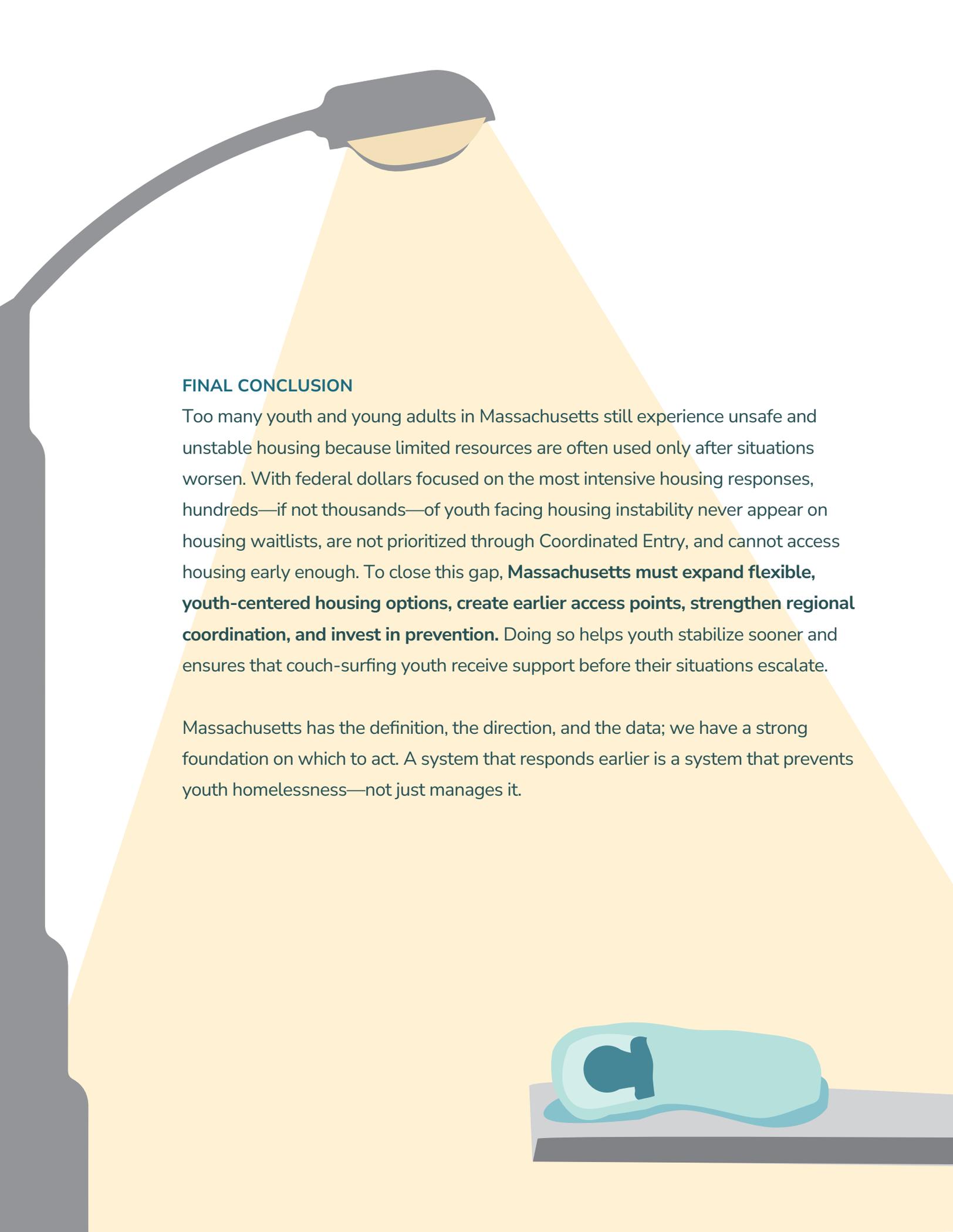


CONTINUE USE DATA TO DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- Integrate data from the 2026 Massachusetts Youth Count, HUD PIT, and HYS programs to build a more complete picture of youth housing needs.
- Use demographic and regional data to support targeting investments where they are most needed and where youth are most underserved.
- Share data back to communities and providers to guide ongoing improvements and local decision-making.

“We need more housing! You can’t bus-pass your way out of homelessness.”

-Youth Count Focus Group Participant



FINAL CONCLUSION

Too many youth and young adults in Massachusetts still experience unsafe and unstable housing because limited resources are often used only after situations worsen. With federal dollars focused on the most intensive housing responses, hundreds—if not thousands—of youth facing housing instability never appear on housing waitlists, are not prioritized through Coordinated Entry, and cannot access housing early enough. To close this gap, **Massachusetts must expand flexible, youth-centered housing options, create earlier access points, strengthen regional coordination, and invest in prevention.** Doing so helps youth stabilize sooner and ensures that couch-surfing youth receive support before their situations escalate.

Massachusetts has the definition, the direction, and the data; we have a strong foundation on which to act. A system that responds earlier is a system that prevents youth homelessness—not just manages it.