



# Massachusetts Youth Count 2019

## Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

The Massachusetts Youth Count is an annual survey used to learn about the scope and needs of youth and young adults under the age of 25 who are unstably housed or experiencing homelessness. The Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (Commission) provides oversight for the Count and is responsible for annual reports on its progress to the Governor's Office, the Legislature, and the Office of the Child Advocate. The Commission defines an unaccompanied homeless youth or young adult (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.**

From April 12 through May 12, 2019, the Commission conducted the sixth annual Massachusetts Youth Count. The survey was administered online and by service providers, Youth Ambassadors, and street outreach workers at drop-in centers, meal programs, programs for youth experiencing homelessness, and other places where young people congregate. In 2019, a total of 3,176 surveys were collected. Of these surveys, 1,957 were included in the analysis and 529 survey respondents met the Commission's definition of an unaccompanied young person experiencing homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

### Highlights of the 2019 Count include:

- 30.2% of respondents who met the Commission definition left home permanently before the age of 18; the average age of those who left home before 18 was 14.9 years old.
- 12.3% who met the Commission definition were unsheltered, meaning they were staying outside, in an abandoned building, in a car, or in another location not meant for human habitation.
- 55% of respondents who met the Commission definition had a high school diploma or equivalent; but 19.1% of them had no diploma and were not in school.
- Most respondents had access to income through employment or benefits; however, 13.4% relied on illegal or informal income sources.
- 84% of respondents reported having received some or all of the help they sought; however of the 63 respondents who said they did not seek help, 73% of them were doubled-up or unsheltered.

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<sup>1</sup>The Executive Office of Health and Human Services allocated \$150,000 from its FY'19 administrative line item (4000-0300) to continue the state's commitment to understand the scope of homelessness among unaccompanied youth. This report is submitted as part of those efforts. The Massachusetts Youth Count involves extensive collaboration, including in the development of this report. Analysis and writing of this report was completed by Laurie Ross, PhD, Professor of Community Development and Planning at Clark University, with consultation and involvement from the network of regional youth homelessness service providers, Continuums of Care (CoCs), Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (Commission), and the Commission's Identification and Connection Working Group.

<sup>2</sup> Surveys from respondents over the age of 24, duplicates, and surveys with missing housing status were removed. If it was not clear whether a survey was a duplicate, it was included in the analysis.

## Major Findings

Of the 1,957 young people under the age of 25 who responded to the Youth Count survey, 1,151 of them—**or nearly 60%**—had experienced homelessness at some point in their life. As compared to respondents who were housed and never homeless, in 2019, UHY were almost 7 times more likely to be pregnant or parenting; 6.5 times more likely to have had foster care involvement; and 8 times more likely to have had justice system involvement. The vast majority of these young people sought and received at least some help, but many of them faced barriers accessing the resources they needed.

Nineteen percent (19%) of the UHY were not in school and did not have a diploma, but only 3% of housed, never homeless youth were in this situation. Unsheltered youth were even less likely to have a diploma, suggesting that they may have had a path to homelessness that involved greater levels of disconnection from school and other formal supports. Thirteen percent of the UHY relied on illegal or informal income sources; in some cases even while holding down a part-time or a full-time job. Youth under the age of 18 were much less likely to have stayed in a shelter the night before the survey. These young people were more likely to not be with their family due to family substance use, fighting with caregivers, and their own substance use.

Young people experiencing homelessness demonstrate a great deal of resilience. For example, 34% of the UHY were in either high school or post-secondary education, indicating that in spite of housing instability, many of these young people were engaging in education. Over one-third of the UHY had a part-time job or a full-time job. Eighty-eight percent of the UHY sought and received help over the past 12 months. In addition to basic needs of shelter and food, many young people wanted the type of help that could improve their situation, such as job training, health care, education, and mental health support. Their considerable resilience comes through even in a point-in-time survey.

Holding both their vulnerabilities and resilience in mind, we highlight several areas from the 2019 Count that can help guide future interventions.

- 1. Focus on family situations.** There is a lot we can learn from examining the reasons that the young people were no longer with their families. The primary factors associated with unaccompanied youth homelessness continued to include family conflict and economic instability. Yet, certain factors took on more salience for the different sub-populations. For example, for youth with foster care involvement prominent factors included abuse or neglect and having a parent or caregiver die. For youth with justice system involvement, more salient factors included being released from jail or detention, being told to leave, and parental substance use. A noticeable reason for LGBTQ+ youth included not feeling safe in their home. What is also compelling is looking at the reasons that emerged

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as less important. For example, youth with foster system involvement or justice system involvement were less likely to not be living with their families because they wanted to leave.

2. **Social networks matter.** Thirty-one percent (31%) of the UHY stayed with a friend, a relative, or a partner the night before the survey. Being doubled-up or couch surfing can expose young people to additional risks and increase the likelihood they may have to exchange sex for a place to stay. Yet, we can also understand these social networks as a valuable resource that many youth possess that can help them when they cannot or prefer not to access more formal housing resources. What is also interesting to look at are patterns within the UHY group in terms of being doubled-up. For example, young people with foster care involvement were more likely to be staying with a friend than other UHY, but less likely to be staying with a relative. Young people with justice system involvement were much less likely to have been in shelter, transitional housing, or a relative's or friend's home. Respondents with justice system involvement appeared to have less connection to formal resources as well as social networks that could provide them with a place to stay.
  
3. **Taking a deeper look at unconnected and disconnected youth.** There were some interesting data points in the 2019 Youth Count results that illustrate dynamics of connection and disconnection. For example, we saw a 43% increase in the number of youth and young adults in transitional housing. Pregnant and parenting UHY were much more likely than the UHY as a whole to be sheltered. Sheltered youth were considerably more likely to get some or all of the help they sought as compared to unsheltered and couch surfing youth. These data suggest encouraging movement in youth getting connected to formal services and the positive outcomes associated with connection.

Yet, we also saw ways that lack of connection increases youth's vulnerability. For example, unsheltered and couch surfing youth were much more likely to rely on hustling, drug dealing, sex work, and panhandling than sheltered youth. Unsheltered respondents were least likely to be in school and have a diploma. We found that 12% of UHY did not seek help over the past 12 months. Of those that did not seek help, 73% were doubled-up or unsheltered.

For those that did seek help, we saw interesting differences in what they were looking for. Unsheltered respondents sought health care, family support, and substance use treatment at higher rates than other groups of young people based on shelter status. Couch surfing respondents were more likely to seek education support, mental health counseling, sexual assault counseling, and no help than other groups. These young people's service needs reinforce the idea that they are experiencing significant life challenges on top of being homeless, such as sexual assault and substance use. Youth under 18 also were much less likely to be sheltered. These young people were also less likely to report seeking help, which helps to explain the challenges providers face trying to connect with them during the Youth Count.

***The Youth Count provides important insight into the situations of unconnected and disconnected youth. It is important to highlight that these young people tended to be recruited to take the survey through Youth Ambassadors, service providers, street outreach workers, and education programs. Meeting these young people where they are at appears to be an important connection strategy. Solely relying on shelter counts would decrease our ability to understand and intervene in the situations of these very vulnerable young people.***

## **Conclusion**

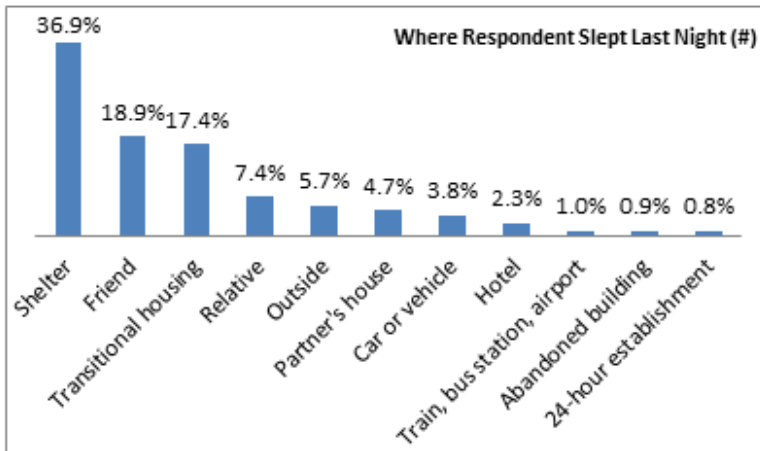
After conducting the Youth Count for six years, we have learned a great deal about the scope of the problem and service needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. Yet, we continue to have at least three gaps in our knowledge base. One, there are many cities and towns from which we receive no surveys. There is likely a correlation between these places and availability of services for young people experiencing homelessness. Two, while we have made great strides in developing robust Youth Ambassador and street outreach procedures, these lessons have not been applied across the state, decreasing our connection to young people who are doubled-up, couch surfing, unsheltered youth, or under 18 years old. Finally, the MA Youth Count process has been largely unsuccessful connecting with unaccompanied youth under the age of 18. While 23% of all surveys collected are from youth under 18, in 2019 only 6% of them met the Commission definition. The data tell us that the average age UHY left home permanently was 17.5 years old and that over 30% of youth left home permanently before the age of 18; yet our Count strategies are not reaching youth under 18 who meet the Commission definition. Specific strategies will be needed to address these three gaps.

Massachusetts remains committed to ending youth and young adult homelessness. As the MA State Plan to End Youth Homelessness rolls out, we are already seeing improvements in young peoples' ability to access supports, services, and resources such as transitional housing. It is clear that young people connected to formal housing resources also get connected to services and other supports that increase their ability to exit homelessness permanently. The Youth Count makes visible the situation of less connected youth. Vigilance will be needed to connect with these young people so that we can achieve our goal of ending youth homelessness in the Commonwealth.

*Please just help me get on my feet! I'm done not being  
somewhere where I can call home.*

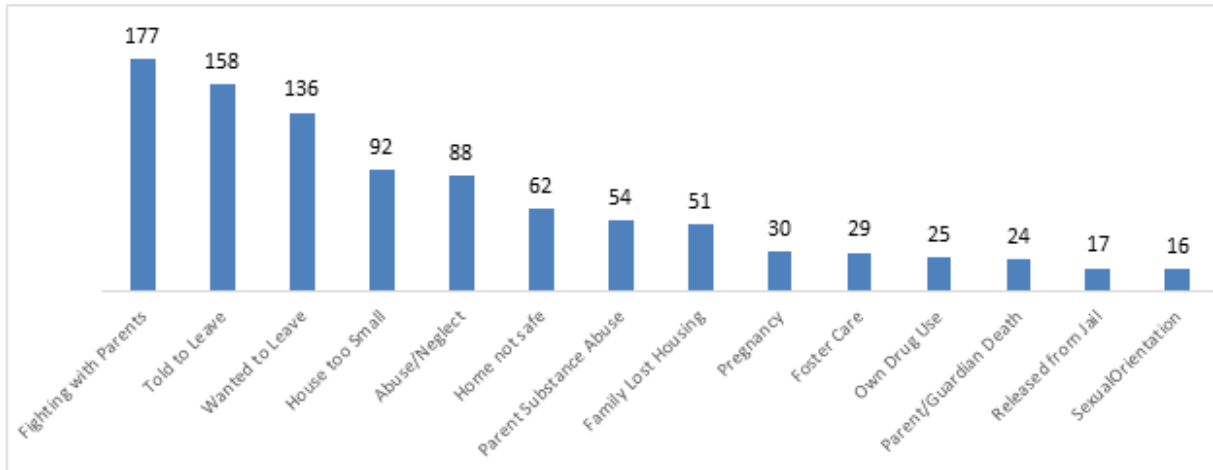
*--19-year old Latinx cis-female from Westfield*

## Massachusetts 2019 Youth Count |

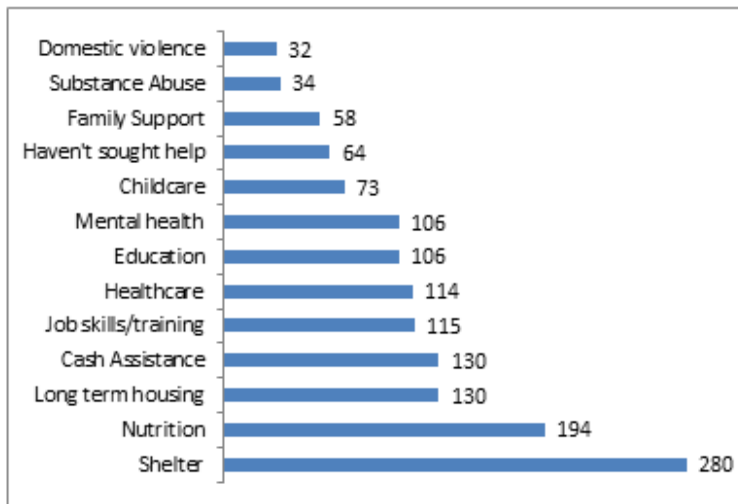


	2019 State
Total # Surveys	1957
Total # HUD definition	422
# currently housed but homeless in past	501
Total # Commission Definition	529
# Under 18	31
# LGBTQ	131
# Foster care	165
# Juvenile/ Criminal Justice	133
# Parenting with custody/Pregnant	127
Not in school/No diploma	101

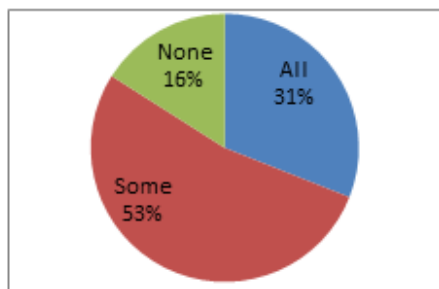
### Reasons Not With Family (#)



### Service Needs (#)



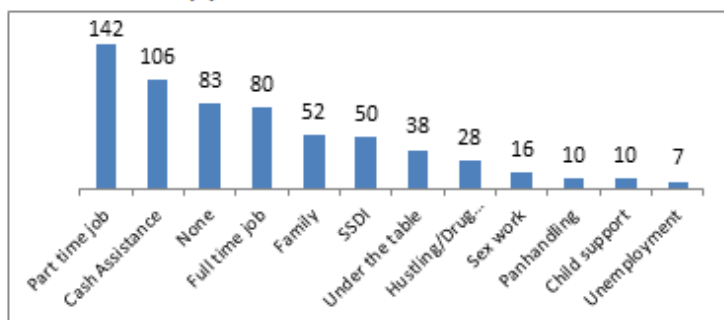
### Received the Help Needed?



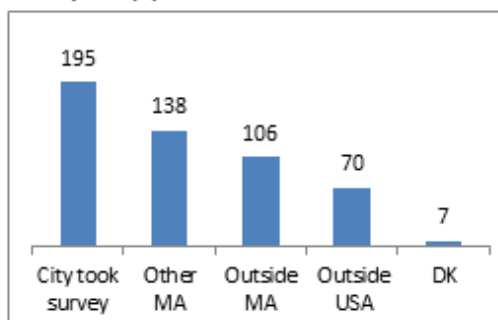
#### Top Service Barriers

- Waitlist
- Transportation
- Didn't hear back
- Didn't have money
- Didn't know where to go

**Income Sources (#)**



**Birthplace (#)**



Individual Characteristics	Total number	% Total	# 2019 Commission Definition	% 2019 Commission Definition
<b>Total</b>	1957	NA	529	27%
Under 18 Years Old	672	34.3%	31	5.9%
Average age (current)	18.8	1.0%	20.8	
Asian	58	3.0%	7	1.3%
Black / African American	390	19.9%	108	20.4%
Hispanic / Latino / Latina	427	21.8%	153	28.9%
Middle Eastern/North African	16	0.8%	3	0.6%
Multiracial	317	16.2%	85	16.1%
Native American / Pacific Islander / Native Hawaiian	10	0.5%	3	0.6%
White	585	29.9%	149	28.2%
Other	4	0.2%	2	0.4%
Female	928	47.4%	267	50.5%
Male	797	40.7%	223	42.2%
Agender	6	0.3%	2	0.4%
Genderqueer	37	1.9%	8	1.5%
Transgender	44	2.2%	11	2.1%
Two-Spirit	10	0.5%	2	0.4%
Straight	1289	65.9%	369	69.8%
Gay / Lesbian	101	5.2%	27	5.1%
Queer	22	1.1%	8	1.5%
Bisexual	249	12.7%	71	13.4%
Asexual	14	0.7%	3	0.6%
Pansexual	69	3.5%	11	2.1%
Questioning / Don't Know / Other	38	1.9%	9	1.7%
Pregnant/Parenting <i>has custody</i>	234	12.0%	127	24.0%
Foster care involvement	325	16.6%	165	31.2%
Juvenile or criminal justice involvement	279	14.3%	133	25.1%
Not in school, no diploma or equivalent	181	9.2%	101	19.1%
Ever exchanged sex for money, housing	143	7.3%	63	11.9%
Average age left home first time		0.0%	16.8	
Average age left for good		0.0%	17.5	
# ever in military	41	2.1%	12	2.3%

MA Youth Count is an effort of the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth to assess the number and needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults in MA who experience housing instability.