

The State of the System: Ending Youth Homelessness in Boston

On a given night there are at least 360 unaccompanied youth and young adults (YYA) experiencing homelessness in Boston, MA[§].

These young people find themselves without a stable place to live either because home isn't safe, home isn't supportive, or home doesn't exist. **The City of Boston is taking action.** In January 2018, Boston began a rigorous strategic planning process to prevent and end youth homelessness.

Estimates vary concerning the percentage of YYA experiencing homelessness sleeping in sheltered or unsheltered situations: A recent winter count identified 3% as unsheltered[§], while a summer-based count identified 28% as unsheltered[‡]. Recent surveys also reveal that many more YYA are doubled-up or couch-surfing than sleeping in shelters or on the street^{**}, and counts often do not include YYA fleeing or attempting to flee dangerous situations, like domestic violence and sex trafficking, in their estimates. With these groups added, the total number of youth experiencing homelessness on a single night may be significantly higher than 360, though the range is currently too large to provide a useful estimate.

Characteristics of YYA Experiencing Homelessness in Boston (based on our best available data): Between 25% and 29% identify as LGBTQ^{**}. Approximately 50% are Black and between 20% and 35% are Latinx^{†‡‡}. 22-30% of young women are pregnant or parenting^{†§}, and of the total population of YYA in shelters or transitional programs over 45% are pregnant or parenting[†]. 14-18% of unaccompanied YYA experiencing homelessness in Boston are under age 18[§], and the average age of a first experience with homelessness is 16.8 years old[‡]. Over 50% have systems involvement with DCF and/or DYS^{**}. 67% have a HS diploma or equivalent but only 25% are currently connected to any school^{*}. Over 40% report active employment^{†*}.

Shelters & sofas



The majority of YYA experiencing homelessness are doubled up/couch-surfing or staying in adult shelters^{**}.

Youth of Color



50% of YYA experiencing homelessness in Boston are Black^{†‡‡}.

LGBTQ+



25-29% of YYA experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ^{**}.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS: THREE STAGES

1

NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND LAUNCH

What do we currently know? What else do we need to know?

2

RESEARCH AND DRAFT COMMUNITY PLAN

What do we need to do to prevent and end YYA homelessness?

3

IMPLEMENT COMMUNITY PLAN

How do we move from planning to action?

Data Source Key:

† City of Boston, HMIS data

‡ Local YYA providers

§ HUD PIT Count, Boston

¶ MA Youth Count, Boston

* Voices of Youth Count, Suffolk County data

Boston has incredible services available.

One nationally renowned study compared Boston to other medium-sized cities and reported that Boston has more than twice the number of organizations specifically serving YYA experiencing homelessness and twice the number of organizations serving young people generally*. Programs founded and operating in the Boston area serve as models for the country, across housing and shelter, legal services, education, healthcare, employment, and more. However, despite the number of programs and services, Boston doesn't have an easily accessible database for identifying programs, and young people experiencing homelessness report limited access to services and resources that meet their needs. In addition, Boston has too few housing resources that are designed for young people.

Also, while Boston's system has many of the *elements* required to end homelessness among YYA, it does not have an *interconnected* system. Such fragmentation inhibits the ability of the system to be truly functional.

“We need to all let go of turf and remind one another that [ending homelessness for YYA] is bigger than any one agency...” —Stakeholder

Data Gaps.

We need to fill some critical data gaps. We don't know enough about YYA entering homelessness from systems like child welfare, justice, and behavioral health. Our housing data systems report different numbers for units dedicated to youth and young adults, and we know that there are many more not included in a centralized database. Therefore, some of the tasks of the *Data, Modeling, and Metrics Workgroup* are the following: 1) Identify the best available cross-sectional data; identify what data collection gaps exist and how to fill them; 2) Use best available data and current assumptions about how the system works to tell us what we need to get to zero (how many beds etc) 3) Refine our performance measures, set evaluation questions and help determine how to define “success.”

Who Are Unaccompanied Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness?



“A person 24 years of age or younger who is not in the physical custody of a parent or legal guardian, and who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. “Fixed” refers to a residence that is stationary, permanent and not subject to change. “Regular” means a dwelling at which a person resides on a regular basis (i.e. nightly). “Adequate” means that the dwelling provides safe shelter, meeting both physical and psychological needs of the youth. All three components of this definition- age, connection to a parent or guardian, and housing status- must be met in order for a person to be considered an unaccompanied homeless youth.”

-Definition established in 2013 by the MA Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Community stakeholders consistently report interest and readiness in community coordination efforts and have taken steps to create a more coordinated process.

For example, Boston created youth-specific prioritization protocols for access to housing resources and identified the next steps towards building a standardized access, assessment, and referral system that incorporates and connects all youth services. Additionally, a diverse set of stakeholders in multiple and historically siloed systems have begun important conversations with one another in ways that have not happened previously. The Boston Youth Action Board is energized and ready to lend its expertise to understanding the issues and creating the solutions.