
No Place to Call Home: Baltimore's homeless youth population is growing; despite increased attention, critical service gaps persist.

By Megan M. Lucy

Introduction

More than 1,400 young people in Baltimore City under the age of 25 are without their parents or guardians and without a safe, stable, and affordable place to call home.¹ Known as “unaccompanied homeless youth” (UHY), these young people take pride in their ability to persevere, often hiding their homelessness at all costs, even if that means not seeking or receiving the help they need.² They may sleep in abandoned buildings, on the street, with friends and family — or even with strangers — just to have a place to stay for the night.

Unaccompanied homeless youth are a highly disconnected population, often slipping through the cracks of our existing service array. Many community members, service providers, and policymakers remain unaware that youth homelessness is a significant issue affecting our communities. Sustainable progress toward preventing and ending youth homelessness has been stymied by lack of political will, strategic investment, and coordination.

At the same time, however, a strong community of advocates has been diligently working for more than 40 years in Baltimore City to improve outcomes for unaccompanied homeless youth. There is also growing recognition at the federal, state, and local levels that a coordinated system

wide response is key. In just the last three years, the Maryland General Assembly has increased higher education access for UHY, created a task force to study the needs of UHY, and funded Youth REACH MD, a youth count demonstration project in six jurisdictions across the state to gather data on the extent and causes of youth homelessness and the needs of homeless youth.³

The recent focus on ending youth homelessness presents a great opportunity for Baltimore City. While it is critical to continue increasing awareness of the issue, it is equally important to maintain the momentum generated by ongoing advocacy, improved data, and new funding opportunities. Grounded in interviews with local stakeholders, national research on best practices, and the most recent demographic data available, this report provides a comprehensive overview of youth homelessness in Baltimore City, and a research-driven framework for guiding future funding and service delivery decisions.

This report also complements existing efforts to address the challenges of youth homelessness in Baltimore. The young people who experience homelessness and the dedicated individuals who serve them are the experts when it comes to the needs of this vulnerable population. Experiences and

Baltimore City's Unaccompanied Homeless Youth:

Subpopulation Snapshot (2015): The Youth REACH MD survey data captured the lived experiences of over 500 unaccompanied homeless youth in Baltimore City. While any experience of homelessness is traumatic, many of Baltimore's UHY are also part of other vulnerable subpopulations.

 = Approximately 52 people under the age of 25

22 percent were involved in the foster care system at some point



22 percent did not identify as straight/heterosexual



38 percent were involved in the juvenile justice system at some point



35 percent were parents



47 percent had been in jail at some point



expertise from both groups frame this report and provide the best starting point for any effort to improve the lives of unaccompanied homeless youth in Baltimore City.

Baltimore City's Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: Undercounted and Underserved

By any measure, the number of unaccompanied homeless youth in Baltimore City is increasing.⁴ In October 2015, Baltimore City participated in Maryland's first multi-jurisdictional effort to survey the number of youth experiencing homelessness across the state, known as Youth REACH MD.⁵

According to the Youth REACH MD findings, 1,421 young people in Baltimore were under the age of 25; unaccompanied by a parent or guardian; and without a safe, stable, and affordable place to call home.⁶ Even though the count's methodologies differed from previous surveys, the Youth REACH MD findings represent a substantial increase from the 640 young people identified during the last targeted effort to count Baltimore's unaccompanied homeless youth in 2011.⁷

Of the 1,421 youth counted via Youth REACH MD, 881 were identified through Baltimore City's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a database that collects client-level data from 40 service providers across Baltimore City on the provision of housing and other homeless services. An additional 486 youth were identified via the street outreach component of the survey, and 54 young people were identified through both methods.⁸ The lack of overlap between the two data sources shows that there is a distinct population of UHY who are not seeking — or cannot access — homeless services from mainstream providers.⁹

The Youth REACH MD survey also captured valuable data on the demographics and actual experiences of Baltimore City's unaccompanied homeless youth. In line with national research, African-American and LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in Baltimore City's UHY population, and many are also members of other vulnerable populations, such as current and former foster youth, trafficked youth, and parenting youth.¹⁰ While any young person experiencing homelessness faces significant challenges, young people who are part of one or more of these vulnerable subpopulations often have experienced greater trauma, face additional challenges, and require targeted interventions to overcome their homelessness.¹¹

Baltimore City's Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Continued:

31 percent
of the youth surveyed
report staying
with strangers



40 percent
reported feeling unsafe
where they stayed the
previous night



53 percent
of youth surveyed
reported doubling up
or couch surfing



46 percent
reported staying in
abandoned buildings or
public spaces



Even though 881 of Baltimore City's UHY had accessed some type of homeless service according to HMIS data, a significant number of unaccompanied homeless youth in Baltimore City still reported living in high-risk living situations. When asked about where they had stayed within the two months prior to the Youth REACH MD count, 53 percent of youth surveyed reported "doubling up" or couch surfing, and 46 percent reported staying in abandoned buildings or public spaces.¹²

Disconnection and Legal Definitions Limit Data Collection

The Youth REACH MD results are the most representative data on the experiences of homeless youth to date. Young people helped lead the planning and implementation of the survey, as well as guide development of the survey tool, plan magnet events, and identify the best strategies for identifying and connecting with unaccompanied homeless youth. This extensive local planning, youth engagement, and peer-to-peer strategies were key components of Youth REACH MD.¹³

Even with the most comprehensive data on UHY to date, our understanding remains limited. Not only are unaccompanied homeless youth largely disconnected from traditional homeless services and often difficult to identify, but inconsistent legal definitions for determining programmatic and/or survey eligibility also make it difficult to compare data across years.¹⁴ As a result,

the already high number of unaccompanied homeless youth cited by the Youth REACH MD findings is likely much higher.¹⁵

One of the most significant challenges in identifying unaccompanied homeless youth (for both data collection and service provision) is that they often do not want to be identified as homeless. They may fear becoming involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, or want to avoid the stigma attached to their homeless status.¹⁶ As a result, unaccompanied homeless youth often do not seek support from homeless-services providers who are required to collect data on a community's homeless population.

Shelter counts and other service-based sources of data are further limited because many unaccompanied homeless youth also avoid traditional homeless services out of fear or discomfort accessing services meant for adults. While there are some youth-specific homeless service providers that can be a source of data, there are very few — and most are typically at capacity. As a result, their data only provide a limited snapshot of the UHY population in Baltimore.

Advocates and service providers in Baltimore City emphasize that many unaccompanied homeless youth remain disconnected because they do not realize their housing situation would be considered homeless for the purpose of qualifying for certain resources. Additionally,

Figure 1: Existing Homeless Youth Services by Service Type

Permanent and/or Transitional Housing

- **AIRS City Steps** is the only provider of youth-focused housing options for young people between the ages of 18 and 25. City Steps has three transitional and permanent housing programs (Restoration Gardens, Carriage House, and the Geraldine Young Family Life Center) that also provide supportive services such as case management, job counseling, and connections to educational or employment opportunities. The combined capacity across City Steps' programming is around 80 units; however, City Steps will expand its permanent housing program, Restoration Gardens, by 42 units in fall 2017.
- **The YES Drop-In Center** recently received funding for a rapid re-housing pilot program. It will serve up to 10 youth households through July 2017.

Emergency Shelter

- **Loving Arms** is Baltimore City's only emergency shelter for youth under 18, with a capacity of just eight beds. Because Loving Arms is considered a "Basic Center" and is funded by the federal government, the shelter may only provide a limited 21-day stay. In addition to its emergency shelter services, Loving Arms also works to reunify youth with their families using mediation and counseling.

Drop-In Services

- **Youth Empowered Society (YES) Drop-In Center** is Baltimore City's only drop-in center for young people experiencing homelessness or housing instability. YES provides basic services, referrals, counseling, case management, and much more. The YES Drop-In Center also serves as a hub for other services for homeless youth.

Legal Services

- **The Public Justice Center's Education Stability Project** helps ensure that homeless youth and their families receive their rights under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.
- **The Homeless Persons' Representation Project's** Homeless Youth Initiative focuses specifically on providing legal assistance to UHY who meet the definition used in this report.

Health Care

- **Healthcare for the Homeless' Pediatric and Adolescent Clinic** provides primary care services to young people who are homeless or unstably housed.

While all vulnerable populations should have access to adequate housing it is especially important that unaccompanied homeless youth have access to a variety of service-rich, youth-focused housing options.

stakeholders stress that UHY are hesitant to identify as homeless during data collection efforts because there is little incentive for them to do so. There are often no immediate benefits for participating, and the long-term policy and service implications of youth counts seem unlikely and intangible. Without an understanding of how identifying as homeless allows them to access services, or how youth counts can help increase a city's service array, unaccompanied homeless youth are unlikely to seek support from homeless services or participate in data collection efforts.¹⁷

Baltimore City's Existing Service Array: Inadequate and Inaccessible

Even with the limitations to data collection, it's clear the capacity of Baltimore City's existing service array remains inadequate for addressing the needs of its growing UHY population. Among Baltimore City's myriad homeless-services providers, only six have programs specifically designed for meeting the needs of homeless or unstably housed youth.

AIRS City Steps, Loving Arms, Youth Empowered Society (YES), Healthcare for the Homeless, Public Justice Center, and the Homeless Persons' Representation Project are the primary homeless-services providers for youth in Baltimore City. Every provider is consistently at capacity. In fact, AIRS City Steps, Loving Arms, and YES (Baltimore City's only permanent and transitional housing, emergency shelter, and drop-in center options for UHY) must all turn away youth every day due to lack of space and staff capacity.¹⁸

Service Gaps

The most significant service gap facing unaccompanied homeless youth in Baltimore City

is a lack of safe, stable, and affordable housing options, ranging from emergency shelters for transition-aged youth to permanent housing options with supportive services.

Take AIRS City Steps, for example. It offers permanent and transitional housing specifically designed for UHY, but its programs consistently have a waitlist of 60 to 80 young people, with new applications coming in every day. Moreover, City Steps only offers housing for young adults over the age of 18. Currently, there are no transitional or permanent housing options for unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 18 in Baltimore City. The only emergency shelter option for youth under 18 is Loving Arms, with just eight beds.

While all vulnerable populations should have access to adequate housing it is especially important that unaccompanied homeless youth have access to a variety of service-rich, youth-focused housing options. Because they are still developing socially, emotionally, psychologically, and physically, unaccompanied homeless youth are in a highly vulnerable stage of their lives in which any trauma can impact their life trajectory. Communities must ensure that UHY have a continuum of housing options and supportive services that correspond to their unique developmental stage.¹⁹ Additional service gaps identified by Baltimore City service providers and Youth REACH MD participants include youth-specific shelter options for 18- to 24-year-olds, increased drop-in center availability, job-training opportunities, family supports and other preventive services, mentoring and peer support, and access to education and mental health services.²⁰

Figure 2. Limitations to Baltimore City's Existing Service Array

Too Few Existing Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six service providers that explicitly serve UHY • Programs at daily capacity
Access Barriers Limit Existing Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrictive legal definitions and eligibility criteria • Transportation barriers • Lack of cohesion across providers • Developmentally inappropriate programs and policies
Significant Service Gaps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe, stable, affordable housing • Emergency shelters for transition-aged youth (ages 18 to 24) • Permanent and transitional housing options with supportive services • Increased drop-in center availability • Job-training opportunities • Family supports and preventive services • Mentoring and peer support • Educational opportunities • Mental health services

Access Barriers Limit Existing Services

Legal definitions, transportation barriers, and an overall lack of cohesion among services limit Baltimore City's existing service array, as well as young people's ability to access the help they need.²¹

The specific definition of homelessness utilized by a service provider often

determines whether a young person is eligible for its services. In Baltimore City, most housing providers that receive funding from Baltimore City's Continuum of Care (COC) are required to utilize HUD's most restrictive definition of homelessness, known as Category 1 homelessness.²² Under this definition, only young people "who live in a place not meant for human habitation (including the streets or in their car), emergency shelter, transitional housing, or hotel paid for by a government or charitable organization" are eligible for services. This definition does not include youth who are "doubled up" or couch surfing, which make up the vast majority of UHY in Baltimore City. Because of this requirement, many young people who may be in unsafe or unstable living situations are prevented from accessing important services as a result.

Information gathered through the Youth REACH MD survey and stakeholder interviews also shows that transportation issues and a lack of cohesion among providers further limit service accessibility. Nearly half (49 percent) of the young people identified via Youth REACH were unable to seek services to help them out of homelessness because of transportation barriers, such as providers not being located near public bus lines or an inability to afford getting to the services.²³ Furthermore, because most services are at full capacity, young people often have to piece services together across different providers. This makes it difficult for them to access the services they need and exacerbates other barriers such as transportation limitations.

The Costs of Youth Homelessness

For any young person, the experience of homelessness is traumatic in and of itself, but the effects of housing instability are far greater than the immediate experience of homelessness. Because young people's primary focus when they're homeless is survival, their ability to progress through normal stages of development is stunted. It's hard to empower a young person to look

beyond tomorrow (to go to school, to graduate, to find a job) when where he or she will sleep each night is uncertain. Without adequate services and prevention measures, the effects of youth homelessness are dire not only for the individual, but for the community as well, because homelessness hurts a young person's opportunities for personal growth and his/her ability to contribute to society as a whole.

Research on youth development clearly shows that unaccompanied homeless youth face substantial traumas that put them at a disadvantage during their transition to adulthood. For instance, they are disproportionately more likely to drop out of school, experience unplanned parenthood, face unemployment, and become chronically homeless adults.²⁴ Unaccompanied homeless youth also face greater risks of physical abuse, mental health issues, and addiction, and they are significantly more likely to die at a prematurely young age.²⁵ The high school drop-out rate for UHY is as high as 75 percent, and nearly 5,000 homeless youth die each year due to violence, health issues, or suicide.²⁶

While homelessness severely limits individual outcomes, the effect of youth homelessness on the larger community cannot be overstated. Whether it's the cost associated with lost tax revenue, services for chronically homeless adults, or increased crime and emergency room visits, city and state governments often bear the long-term financial costs associated with the consequences of youth homelessness. Chronically homeless adults can cost the state up to \$40,000 a year,²⁷ and research estimates that the total cost of youth homelessness can be as high as \$3 million per youth in additional services and missed economic opportunities.²⁸

Best Practices

By investing in a range of best practices that prioritize housing, a comprehensive service delivery system, and collaboration among government agencies and service providers, Baltimore City can avoid the individual, societal, and financial consequences of youth

homelessness. Not only have the following best practices been shown to effectively meet the needs of homeless youth, but they also provide communities with a strong return on their investment in homeless youth services.

1. A comprehensive and strategic housing and service delivery system: Local service providers and national research support establishing a robust service array that better supports unaccompanied homeless youth and prevents homelessness from occurring in the first place. Because unaccompanied homeless youth face a myriad of barriers that limit their ability to successfully transition to adulthood, it's important to provide a variety of services and a continuum of affordable housing options that respond to the full spectrum of needs and developmental milestones.

A comprehensive service delivery system also must respond to the unique needs and experiences of UHY who may also be a part of other vulnerable populations, such as formerly systems-involved youth, LGBTQ and parenting youth, youth with physical and/or developmental disabilities, and trafficked youth. These young people are more likely to have experienced significant traumas and to lack additional support systems in their lives compared to their peers, and they often require targeted interventions as a result.²⁹

The National Network for Youth has developed a Proposed Service Delivery System to End Youth Homelessness tool that helps communities identify the housing and supportive services they can provide UHY by stage of intervention (prevention, early intervention, long-term solutions, and aftercare).³⁰

An example of state support for a cost-effective, comprehensive service delivery system can be found in Oregon. Though the state received federal funding to serve youth older than 18, it lacked a comprehensive plan for addressing youth

A best practice for effectively helping young people overcome their experience of housing instability is to ensure they have stable housing before addressing other issues. This approach, known as “housing first,” is both cost-effective and provides young people with the stability necessary to overcome their homelessness.

homelessness and funding to serve youth under 18. After extensive feedback from advocates, the Oregon State Legislature invested \$1 million during its 2007 to 2009 budget cycle to help eight counties develop services for runaway and homeless youth under 18.³¹ Local communities were required to match 10 percent of the funding they received to provide prevention and early interventions, engage homeless youth to get them off the street, and foster self-sufficiency with education and training. These communities were also required to report on outcomes related to improving community partnerships and increasing youths’ safety and connection to resources and education.

The results were promising: The total number of youth served increased from 1,829 (between April and December 2008,) to 3,047 (between January and June 2009). Further, across the eight counties that received funding, the vast majority of youth served by the newly funded services exited into stable living situations. Both Deschutes and Lincoln counties saw 100 percent of the youth that participated in their programming exit into stable living situations. A cost-benefit analysis of the initiative showed that communities could expect up to \$4 in savings for every \$1 invested.³²

Another critical component of a comprehensive homeless youth system of care is a coordinated entry (CE) and/ or centralized intake system that matches youth with services that best fit their developmental stage and level of need.³³

While any CE system will help connect young people with services, it is important to develop a youth-focused process that includes youth-specific access points and screening and referral procedures grounded in trauma-informed, positive youth development, and culturally competent principles.³⁴ A youth-specific CE system lowers the burden on youth for accessing services and expands access to the full range of services available. By centralizing service referral and delivery, coordinated entry systems also provide local communities with up-to-date data on the availability and capacity of services.³⁵

2. **A “housing-first” approach³⁶:** Most unaccompanied homeless youth have issues in their life that need to be addressed in addition to their housing instability, such as finding employment, social-emotional well-being, and dealing with mental health or substance abuse issues. However, effectively resolving these problems is nearly impossible without a safe, stable, affordable, and long-term place to call home. A best practice for effectively helping young people overcome their experience of housing instability is to ensure they have stable housing before addressing other issues. This approach, known as “housing first,” is both cost-effective and provides young people with the stability necessary to overcome their homelessness. Research estimates that first providing housing and then focusing on service provision — as opposed to providing services while a young person remains homeless — can save up to \$40,000 of public funds per person each year.³⁷

One approach that prioritizes permanent and stable housing is rapid re-housing: a housing-first model that provides homeless individuals with rapid access to housing and time-limited assistance paying rent and meeting other move-in costs before connecting them with case management and other services.³⁸ Though rapid re-housing has been most frequently used as an intervention for homeless adults, recent efforts have shown the approach to be successful for youth as well.³⁹ For instance, in Columbus, Ohio, one of the first communities to apply the rapid re-housing model to youth, 91 percent of participants maintained their housing for longer than six months.⁴⁰

Effective rapid re-housing programs require the provision of supportive services and strong relationships with landlords who are willing to rent to youth with little to no rental history, poor credit, and criminal records. For instance, Milwaukee's Pathfinder Q-BLOK Program works with a single landlord that trusts the program's decisions on youth eligibility.⁴¹ Furthermore, the Q-BLOK program provides its youth with intensive case management grounded in a client-centered, trauma-informed, and harm-reduction approach. The program has had zero evictions and 87 percent of the program's clients maintained permanent housing.⁴²

It is important to note, however, that a housing-first approach isn't limited to rapid re-housing. For instance, while rapid re-housing provides short-term assistance paying rent, Housing Choice Vouchers (also known as "Section 8") provide rent subsidies that are not time-limited. Either type of housing is compatible with a housing-first approach, and both should be components in a continuum of permanent, supportive housing options that meet the full spectrum of youths' needs.

3. Housing that is connected to services, and services that are connected to housing:

Helping UHY overcome their experience of homelessness is more than just connecting

them to housing; it also includes helping young people maintain their housing for the long term by ensuring they have access to services and income. When housing is connected to services, access barriers (such as transportation issues or not knowing where to access services) are eliminated, and young people can better connect with the support they need to succeed. Housing supports (such as rental assistance and eviction-prevention funds, utility assistance funds, and legal assistance) help young people both access and maintain their housing, while case management services and access to health and mental health care, job training opportunities, and education allow young people to develop stability and increasing levels of independence.

Transitional Living Programs (TLP) are an example of programs that effectively integrate housing and supportive services for youth. These programs are federally funded by the Family and Youth Services Bureau, and provide young people between the ages of 16 and 22 with up to 21 months of affordable housing paired with supportive services. In 2015, 88 percent of youth across the country moved into safe, stable, and affordable long-term housing at the completion of their TLP.⁴³

4. Effective outreach strategies and low-barrier, drop-in services: Street outreach and low-barrier, drop-in services are the first steps to engaging unaccompanied homeless youth. This model of outreach and service provision is characterized by an informal atmosphere that can be appealing for young people who avoid services because of the stigma attached to their status.⁴⁴

Baltimore City's Youth REACH findings show the importance of a youth-driven approach to street outreach. The majority of young people who were identified via the street outreach component of the survey had not accessed the city's homeless-services

system. This shows that not only are there many young people who we are not reaching through services, but also that street outreach (especially using peer-to-peer strategies) is effective in engaging disconnected young people.⁴⁵

Drop-in centers further facilitate a low-barrier approach to engagement because they provide a range of services (such as case management, counseling, and legal assistance) in a more informal environment. Drop-in centers also serve as effective hubs for the provision of other supports and services. For instance, Healthcare for the Homeless brings a clinic van to Baltimore's YES Drop-In Center, and the Homeless Persons Representation Project (HPRP) hosts twice-monthly legal services clinics at this location. By interacting with young people at the places where they go to meet their most basic needs, service providers can progressively engage them, thus better connecting them with more intensive services over time.

One example of effective outreach is the national Safe Place Program, an outreach and prevention program in 41 states that provides unaccompanied homeless youth, or those on the verge of homelessness, with immediate help.⁴⁶ In King County, Washington, the Safe Place program partners with 28 local businesses to conduct direct outreach to youth ages 12 to 17. If a young person is experiencing a crisis, he/she can either call a toll-free number to be connected to a staff member or access one of more than 1,800 designated Safe Place sites to seek help — 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. According to the program's most recent evaluation, 30 percent of its clients avoided a homeless episode by calling Safe Place when they were at risk of spending a night on the street.⁴⁷ In addition, 86 percent of the youth served by the program were successfully connected with stable

housing, and 30 percent were reunited with their families.⁴⁸

5. Family support and reunification when appropriate:

Family instability and/or rejection (often due to a family's economic hardship or a young person's sexual orientation or gender identity) are among the leading causes of youth homelessness.⁴⁹ When safe and appropriate, family reconnection through mediation and counseling can be an effective way to resolve and prevent homelessness among youth, especially for those under the age of 18. If a young person's homelessness is due to the family's unstable economic situation, supports to the whole family unit — such as housing and financial assistance — can also provide the economic and familial stability necessary to facilitate reunification.

Two examples of effective family support and reunification programs are Eva's Initiatives in Toronto and Cocoon House in Washington State. Eva's Initiatives is a multi-service agency that includes emergency housing, life-skills programs, job training, and an award-winning family reconnection program.⁵⁰ In 2014, Eva's Initiatives Family Reconnect program helped 84 youth repair their relationships with their families, and prevented or ended their homeless experience.⁵¹ As a result, the program estimates that they saved the public more than \$821,000 (Canadian dollars) in shelter costs.⁵²

Cocoon House's Project SAFE program offers phone consultations, workshops, and a resource library to help parents learn how to improve communication and build trust with their children. Considered a National Best Practice by the National Alliance to End Homelessness,⁵³ Cocoon House Project SAFE program provided family support seminars to 180 adults and phone consultations to more than 280 parents during fiscal year 2015.⁵⁴

Recommendations for Improving the Outcomes of Baltimore City's Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

It's critical to invest in our youth. Their ability to pursue healthy, stable, and productive futures directly impacts not only their own success, but also the health and wellbeing of their communities. Many young people in Baltimore City, however, are limited in their ability to contribute to their community and transition to adulthood because they are unsure where they will sleep each night.

Grounded in national research on best practices and the experiences and expertise of service providers and youth, the following recommendations provide a framework for addressing youth homelessness in Baltimore City.

1. Systematically and strategically prioritize ending youth homelessness. Many community members, service providers, and policymakers are unaware that youth homelessness is a significant issue affecting our communities. This, however, does not lessen the importance of addressing youth homelessness. In fact, it underscores that preventing and ending youth homelessness should be a priority.

While there are systematic and strategic plans for ending adult and veteran homelessness in Baltimore City, there is no such plan for ending youth homelessness. Furthermore, attention paid toward the issue at a systems level tends to be disjointed and infrequent. In order to most effectively improve outcomes for UHY, Baltimore City's mainstream child-serving agencies (such as the child welfare, juvenile justice, workforce development, and education systems) must develop internal procedures for better identifying and responding to youth experiencing homelessness. They must also deepen their partnerships across agencies and create a more coordinated service delivery system that is specifically designed to support unaccompanied homeless youth.

Finally, youth must also be prioritized as federal funding shifts toward new approaches to service delivery, such as rapid re-housing. As funding priorities change, it is important to make sure that new types of services are available to address the unique needs of young people.

2. Address Baltimore City's youth-specific housing and service gaps. Housing is the most significant service gap affecting unstably housed youth in Baltimore City. Baltimore City should support the expansion of existing programs — such as those provided by City Steps and Loving Arms — while also supporting the development of new programs and models that work for youth, such as rapid re-housing and transitional living programs.

Baltimore City must also evaluate whether its existing service delivery system provides the correct array of services to meet the needs specific to its homeless youth population. The National Network for Youth's Proposed Delivery System tool — highlighted on page 7 — provides a useful starting point. Collaboration among government agencies, service providers, and young people with experiences of homelessness is key to the success of this process.

In addition to identifying and resolving specific service gaps, Baltimore City's stakeholders can also employ a variety of strategies that further mitigate service gaps, such as:

- **Build the capacity of existing systems and services.** The capacity of Baltimore City's emergency youth shelter for minors, permanent and transitional housing options for young people, and youth-specific drop-in center is inadequate to meet the needs of the growing number of UHY in Baltimore. Further compounding this issue is that many of the adult service providers that youth seek support from

when the youth providers are full often lack the proper training and environment to effectively serve young people.

Baltimore City must build the capacity of its existing youth-serving systems and service providers, in addition to increasing the overall number of services available. Providers need training in youth development; programs need greater monitoring to ensure safety and effectiveness in serving youth; and all programs must be trained to respond to the needs of marginalized youth, such as LGBTQ youth and youth of color.

- **Increase prevention efforts.** Greater funding needs to be allocated for services that prevent a young person from falling into a pattern of homelessness. Effective prevention efforts include increasing funding for eviction prevention, expanding family-support services, and investing in rapid re-housing. Baltimore City's service providers also suggested the creation of a rental security deposit fund to help young people who have trouble finding a place to rent because of the high costs of security deposits. Although there is currently a housing stability flex fund that pays for security deposits, furniture, and utilities, it is only available to youth who are permanently housed in Baltimore City's Continuum of Care (COC) programs. Baltimore City should both increase its investment in the existing flex fund and create a similar source of flexible funding for youth not served by the COC.
- **Ensure youth are paired with services that match their level of need.** Service "gaps" may not necessarily be due to a lack of services. Instead, a gap in available services may be due to a young person's inability to identify and access the type of service that is most responsive to his/her specific need and developmental stage.

Though Baltimore City is in the process of developing a Coordinated Access

System for homeless service providers in its Continuum of Care⁵⁵, this centralized intake is not youth-specific. As Baltimore City continues to expand its homeless youth system of care, the city must also develop a youth-specific triage tool that not only directs young people experiencing homelessness to the services that best fit their specific needs, but does so in a manner that is responsive to their developmental stage.

3. **Identify and engage disconnected youth and young adults.** Unaccompanied homeless youth are, by definition, a highly disconnected population. Efforts to improve outcomes for unaccompanied homeless youth should begin with a focus on re-engaging and re-connecting with these young people, and engaging them in overall advocacy efforts to reduce youth homelessness. This not only builds the developmental and leadership capacity of our community's future leaders, but it also improves the effectiveness of data collection and service delivery. In addition to being the most qualified to speak to the needs of UHY, these young people are also experts in the strengths and weaknesses of the current services and system meant to support them.
 - **Improve outreach efforts.** As seen during the Youth REACH efforts, peer-to-peer outreach is one of the most important strategies for effectively identifying, engaging, and serving unaccompanied homeless youth. Effective outreach efforts also connect with young people in the locations they typically frequent while meeting basic needs, such as drop-in centers, DSS offices, etc. By responding to a young person's hierarchy of needs and applying targeted outreach to specific subpopulations of UHY (former foster youth, parenting youth, LGBTQ youth, etc.), effective outreach efforts build trust with youth experiencing homelessness, better connect them to services, and improve data collection.

As Baltimore City continues to expand its homeless youth system of care, the city must also develop a youth-specific triage tool that not only directs young people experiencing homelessness to the services that best fit their specific needs, but does so in a manner that is responsive to their developmental stage.

4. Support ongoing and improved data

collection. Consistent and accurate data are critical for effectively targeting funding and service provision. As Maryland prepares for the second Youth REACH MD survey in spring 2017, Baltimore City should invest in supporting youth engagement and developing youth leaders during the development and implementation of the count, especially the street-based count and survey components.⁵⁶ Baltimore City should also increase its cross-systems data sharing, particularly between its Continuum of Care and its education, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems.

5. Increase investment. Finding greater and more sustainable sources of funding is necessary to ensure that Baltimore City can create the comprehensive youth-focused housing and service array it needs.

- **Maximize federal funding opportunities.** Baltimore City and its community of advocates should collaboratively strategize how they can maximize federal funding opportunities, such as the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program submission in November 2016.⁵⁷ In line with national research on best practices, this particular funding opportunity will provide \$33 million in total funding to 10 communities (each will receive a minimum of \$1 million) to implement innovative service models and a comprehensive plan for addressing youth homelessness in their community.⁵⁸ Other federal funding opportunities are available through the Runaway & Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), the McKinney-Vento Act, and the U.S. Department of Housing and

Urban Development (HUD). For instance, Houston's Continuum of Care recently received an \$8 million increase in their HUD funding for local homeless services, which includes a new rapid re-housing program for homeless youth between the ages of 18 – 24; their total 2016 HUD funding allocation for homeless services is now over \$32 million.⁵⁹

- **Increase state investment in youth homeless services.** Baltimore City stakeholders must also continue to advocate for additional funding for youth homeless services at the state level. Because of the dire need for additional services, any amount of increased funding will be advantageous. However, it is critical for stakeholders in Baltimore City to identify the types and amount of services that are necessary to serve Baltimore City's UHY population. The sooner this planning takes place – and the sooner stakeholders can specify the amount of funding that is necessary – the better Baltimore City can fundraise and allocate additional funding towards homeless youth programming.⁶⁰
- **Identify more flexible sources of funding.** Increasing investment in youth homeless services is more than just acquiring greater funding, however. Because a young person's eligibility for a particular program is often tied to the definition of homelessness that is attached to that program's funding, it is important to identify sources of funding that will allow service providers to expand their definition of homelessness and offer services that

are more preventive in nature, such as youth outreach, engagement, and peer-to-peer service models. Furthermore, because most federal funding is limited to programs serving older youth, it is also critical to identify public and private funding sources for services targeting youth under 18.

One way to increase funding for youth homeless services is to collaboratively leverage new funds and maximize existing sources of financial support. The Raikes Foundation's systems-focused grant making in King County, Washington, is testament to how the combined efforts of advocates and funders can leverage funding and increase service provision. Since 2011, more than 100 stakeholders have developed a comprehensive plan for reducing youth homelessness and leveraged nearly \$5 million in new funding.⁶¹ Baltimore City should look to King County's collective impact approach as a model and incorporate lessons learned from the region's collaborative efforts.

Conclusion

Advocates in Baltimore City have built a strong foundation for improving services and for increasing awareness of youth homelessness at the city and state levels. As efforts continue to help young people avoid or overcome experiences of homelessness, better data, greater coordination, and increased investment are necessary in order to ensure that every young person in Baltimore City can live a happy, healthy, and successful adult life — and contribute to the larger fabric of our community. After all, in the words of one young person in Baltimore: “Youth are the future. If we're not taking care of the youth, then where's our future?”

About the Author

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- 2 For the purposes of this report, “unaccompanied homeless youth” refers to young people between the ages of 14 and 25 who lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” and who are “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian”. This definition was developed in 2013 by Maryland's Task Force to Study Housing and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth and is the baseline for other definitions of UHY across the state. See Appendix I for further information regarding state and federal definitions of youth homelessness.
- 3 <http://www.youthreachmd.com/>
- 4 In recent years, four different methods have been used to collect data on the number of unaccompanied homeless youth in Baltimore City, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. See Appendix II for more information.
- 5 Shannahan, et al., *Youth Reach MD Phase 2 Report*: 3-4.
- 6 Shannahan, et al., *Youth Reach MD Phase 2 Report*: 3-4.
- 7 Astone, N. and Pologe, R., *Homeless Young People in Baltimore: A Parallel Count Accompanying the 2011 Homeless Census*. (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Adolescent Health.). Available: http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/_includes/_pre-redesign/2011%20Parallel%20Homeless%20Youth%20Count%20Report-FINAL.pdf. The 2011 survey of Baltimore City's UHY was conducted by advocates and Johns Hopkins researchers during a single point in time. While this survey is helpful for putting the Youth REACH data into context, the findings of the two counts cannot be directly compared. In addition to utilizing slightly different methodologies and definitions of youth homelessness, the two surveys took place over different time periods: the Youth REACH surveys were collected over a two-week period, whereas the 2011 Hopkins data are from a single night. Youth homeless counts were also conducted during the 2013 and 2015 HUD point-in-time (PIT) counts. These efforts, however, did not include youth who are couch-surfing or doubled up and vastly undercounted the number of unstably housed youth.

- 8 Shannahan, et al., *Youth REACH MD Phase 2 Report*: 19.
- 9 Shannahan, et al., *Youth Reach MD Phase 2 Report*: 19-20.
- 10 Baltimore City, Baltimore City Youth REACH Data – 2015 Count.
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- 13 Shannahan, et al., *Youth Reach MD Phase 2 Report*: 9.
- 14 See Appendix I for an overview of the various legal definitions for “unaccompanied homeless youth”..”
- 15 Shannahan, et al., *Youth Reach MD Phase 2 Report*: 12-13.
- 16 Maryland Governor’s Office for Children.Task Force Report; Bardine, D., *What Works to End Youth Homelessness* (National Network for Youth., 2015). <https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/2015-What-Works-to-End-Youth-Homlessness.pdf>.
- 17 Additional barriers to effectively identify UHY cited by Baltimore City’s service providers include: insufficient funding for outreach efforts, a lack of awareness among non-homelessness service providers regarding the importance of the counts, and inadequate time prior to street-based counts to build trusting relationships with young people and encourage them to participate.
- 18 Additional providers that support homeless youth include Youth Opportunity (YO) Baltimore, which provides GED prep and job training for young adults between the age of 17 and 24, and the University of Maryland’s STAR TRACK program, which provides psychosocial and health care care for young adults who have, or are at risk of contracting, HIV.
- 19 Bardine, D., *What Works to End Youth Homelessness*.
- 20 Thirty-one percent of the unaccompanied homeless youth identified via Youth REACH had tried accessing education services. Baltimore City, Baltimore City Youth REACH Data.
- 21 Additional barriers that limit service access include: an overall lack of awareness regarding available services among youth and mainstream social services providers; restrictive eligibility criteria (i.e., disability, income, or parenting requirements); and program policies that are developmentally inappropriate and/or inconsistent with housing-first principles. For example, curfew requirements may discourage certain youth from accessing services because they prioritize autonomy. These kinds of policies may also lead to youth being terminated from the program and cycling back into homelessness.
- 22 See Appendix I for all four categories of homelessness defined by HUD.
- 23 Shannahan, et al., *Youth Reach MD Phase 2 Report*: 18.
- 24 Bardine, D., *What Works to End Youth Homelessness*.
- 25 Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services, *Stronger Youth and Smarter Communities: An Analysis of Oregon’s Investment in Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs* (Portland, OR: Portland State University, 2009): 17 <http://commons.pacificu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=casfac>
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- 27 Slesnick, N., et al., “How to Open and Sustain a Drop-in Center for Homeless Youth.” *Children and Youth Services Review* 30, no. 7 (2008). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2440711/pdf/nihms52832.pdf>
- 28 Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services, *Stronger Youth and Smarter Communities: An Analysis of Oregon’s Investment in Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs*
- 29 Maryland Governor’s Office for Children,Task Force Report: 12.
- 30 Bardine, D., *What Works to End Youth Homelessness*.
- 31 Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services, *Stronger Youth and Smarter Communities*. \$1 million is a relatively small appropriation for a statewide initiative and is not enough to meet the demand. For instance, 20 Oregon counties requested more than \$4 million during the state’s initial request for proposals, and only eight counties received a total of \$1 million in funding. The Oregon initiative, however, has the most comprehensive cost analysis, research on outcomes, and longitudinal data available. Other examples of states that have explicitly invested in expanding youth homeless services statewide are Massachusetts and Minnesota, which have recently authorized \$2 million and \$5 million in funding, respectively.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Coordinated entry processes are defined by standardized screening, assessment, prioritization, and referral processes for connecting homeless individuals with services.
- 34 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Youth Specific FAQs for Coordinated Entry*, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Coordinated-Entry-and-Youth-FAQs.pdf>
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 “Housing first” refers to an approach to service delivery that prioritizes helping homeless individuals secure permanent housing before addressing other issues such as an individual’s need for substance abuse or mental health counseling or other supports. National Alliance to End Homelessness, *Housing First*. http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/housing_first
- 37 Point Source Youth, *Organization Overview*.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 National Network for Youth, *Recommendations for Youth Centric Rapid Re-Housing: Working within the HUD CoC Funding Regulation..* <https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/NN4Y-Youth-Centric-Rapid-Re-Housing-October-2015.pdf>
- 40 Ibid, 9. Advocates in Columbus, Ohio, emphasized that in order for rapid re-housing to be effective for young people, the program must “reward positive behaviors, promote independence, include life skills training, and prepare youth for independence by diminishing assistance over time.” Ibid, pg. 9.
- 41 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Rapid Re-housing for Youth: Program Profiles*, Pathfinders Q-BLOK Program in Milwaukee, WI, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/RRH-for-Youth-Pathfinders-QBLOK-Program-Profile.pdf>
- 42 Eighty-one percent of Q-BLOK’s participants also obtained or maintained employment while enrolled in the program. Pathfinders, Q-BLOK. <http://pathfindersmke.org/what-we-do/programs/q-blok>
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- 49 Bardine, D., *What Works to End Youth Homelessness*: 7.
- 50 Point Source Youth, *Organization Overview*: 7.
- 51 Ibid. Effective family reunification can also provide positive benefits that impact the rest of a young person’s life. Research has shown that effective family reconnection can lead to better education, employment, and mental health-related outcomes for unaccompanied homeless youth.
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54 Cocoon House, *2015 Annual Report*. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/559abb26e4b06639d24a982c/t/578fc12e37c581a5629a6313/1469038910535/Annual_Report_2016_FINAL.PDF

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56 A large component of Baltimore City's success during the first Youth REACH MD count was its high level of youth engagement during the planning and implementation of the survey; young people with histories of homelessness helped guide the development of the survey tool, plan magnet events, facilitate surveys, and identify the best strategies for connecting with young people experiencing homelessness.

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60 It is also important for advocates and funders to work together to use existing funding in the most effective and efficient manner. This can be achieved by better matching youth with services according to their level of need and by identifying proven and cost-effective interventions.

61 Raikes Foundation, *Preventing and Ending Youth and Young Adult Homelessness: Lessons from Five Years of Systems-Focused Grantmaking in King County, Washington*. http://www.raikesfoundation.org/sites/default/files/RaikesSystemsChangeCaseStudy_0.pdf

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No Place to Call Home:

Baltimore's homeless youth population is growing; despite increased attention, critical service gaps persist.

By Megan M. Lucy
November 2016

About the Abell Foundation

The Abell Foundation is dedicated to the enhancement of the quality of life in Maryland, with a particular focus on Baltimore. The Foundation places a strong emphasis on opening the doors of opportunity to the disenfranchised, believing that no community can thrive if those who live on the margins of it are not included.

Inherent in the working philosophy of the Abell Foundation is the strong belief that a community faced with complicated, seemingly intractable challenges is well-served by thought-provoking, research-based information. To that end, the Foundation publishes background studies of selected issues on the public agenda for the benefit of government officials; leaders in business, industry and academia; and the general public.

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Appendix I: Federal and State Definitions of Youth Homelessness

Federal Definitions of Homeless Youth

There are three main definitions for youth homelessness at the federal level determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the U.S. Department of Education (ED):

- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): A young person who is “under the age of 25 who lacks a stable living situation in the present and near future”¹ and fits into one of four HUD categories of homelessness: individuals who live in a place not meant for human habitation (including the streets or in their car), emergency shelter, transitional housing, or hotel paid for by a government or charitable organization (Category 1); individuals who will lose their primary nighttime residence within 14 days and have no other resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing (Category 2); unaccompanied youth under 25 years of age, who do not meet any of the other categories but are homeless under other federal statutes, have not had a lease, and have moved two or more times in the past 60 days and are likely to remain unstable because of special needs or barriers (Category 3); or individuals who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, and who lack resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing (Category 4).²
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS): “...individuals who are ‘not more than 21 years of age...for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative and who have no other safe alternative living arrangement.’”³ This includes youth “who are runaways, street youths, or at risk of disconnecting from their parent(s) or legal guardian(s).”⁴
- U.S. Department of Education (ED): Accompanied or unaccompanied “school-aged youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” including shelters, transitional housing, and “public or private places not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.”⁵

¹ Acuña, R., et al., *Maryland Unaccompanied Homeless Youth and Young Adult Demonstration Project: Phase One* (Baltimore, MD: The Institute for Innovation & Implementation, University of Maryland School of Social Work, 2015): 5.

<http://www.youthreachmd.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Youth-REACH-MD-Phase-I-Report.pdf>

² <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HUDs-Homeless-Definition-as-it-Relates-to-Children-and-Youth.pdf>

³ Youth.gov. Federal Definitions. <http://youth.gov/youth-topics/runaway-and-homeless-youth/federal-definitions>

⁴ Acuña et al., *Maryland Unaccompanied Homeless Youth*: 5.

⁵ National Center for Homeless Education, *The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless*. <http://nche.ed.gov/legis/mv-def.php>

Acuña et al. (2015) offer a helpful chart that delineates the different living situations covered by these various definitions of homelessness. Also, although these categories include a wide array of homeless experiences, the majority of funding that providers receive from the federal government is typically for supporting individuals experiencing HUD's most limited definition of Category 1 homelessness.⁶

Maryland Definitions of Homeless Youth

The definition of an unaccompanied homeless youth in Maryland varies depending on the program, funding, data collection effort, or state law. However, most providers' definitions of unaccompanied homeless youth are aligned with HUD's definition of Category 1 homelessness for funding reasons.

- Task Force to Study Housing and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth and Tuition Waiver: An individual who is between the ages of 14 and 25 years; lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.
- Youth REACH MD Count Demonstration Project: Any young person under the age of 25 who is not in the physical custody of a parent or legal guardian, and lacks a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence.
- 2011 Point-In-Time Count by Johns Hopkins: Youth and young adults between the ages of 13 and 25, on their own, and apart from parents or guardians. This includes 1) young people who are living in shelters or transitional housing, 2) "unstably-housed youth" who are couch-surfing (staying temporarily with friends, extended kin networks, or lovers), and 3) young people who were in foster care or the juvenile justice system but left without placement.

⁶ Ibid.

Appendix II: Counting Baltimore City's Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

1. **Youth REACH MD** is the most recent, comprehensive, and youth-focused effort to identify homeless youth in Baltimore City and Maryland to date. The Youth REACH MD demonstration project was established by the Maryland General Assembly in 2014 and took place in six jurisdictions across the state in 2015. This count was different from the other efforts to identify homeless youth because of its extensive youth-engagement and planning processes at the local level. Initial data were released in 2016, and state funding has been allocated to continue the pilot project. A second count is expected to occur in 2017.¹

One of the greatest strengths of Youth Reach MD—in Baltimore City, specifically, and as a whole—was the level of youth engagement during the planning and implementation of the count. In Baltimore, young people helped guide the development of the survey tool, plan magnet events, and identify the best strategies for identifying and connecting with unaccompanied homeless youth.

A short planning period, however, limited the Youth REACH MD efforts. More time to educate communities about the count and its importance might have increased count turnout, resulting in a more accurate reflection of the number of youth experiencing homelessness in Baltimore. Not only does it take time to build enough trust with young people to encourage them to participate in the count, but the short planning period and the count's complexity also made it difficult to engage other youth-serving agencies.²

2. **Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)** collects client-level data from 40 service providers across Baltimore City on the provision of housing and other homeless services. This database includes information on both adult and youth outcomes, and is used by the Mayor's Office of Human Service to track homelessness across the city.³

One of HMIS's strengths is that it is a constant source of data on homelessness service provision in Baltimore City. Any service provider that receives funding from Baltimore City's Continuum of Care is required to report data via HMIS.

¹ Youth Reach MD. <http://www.youthreachmd.com/what-is-youth-reach-md/>; Shannahan, et al., *Youth REACH MD Phase 2 Report*: 3-4, 21. <http://www.youthreachmd.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Youth-REACH-MD-Phase-II-Report.pdf>

² Shannahan, et al., *Youth REACH MD Phase 2 Report*. "Due to the complexity of this process and the fact that this occurred during the lead-up to the new school year, the official memo from the Office of the State Superintendent requesting the participation of local school systems was not disseminated to local superintendents until September 21, 2015. Some local school systems required additional local approval, which contributed to a further delay in implementation. In order to allow additional time for schools to disseminate opt-out notices to parents and prepare their staff, the survey period was extended from one week to three weeks".." Findings from Maryland's First Unaccompanied Homeless Youth & Young Adult Count: Youth REACH MD Phase 2 Report. (Baltimore, MD: The Institute for Innovation & Implementation, University of Maryland School of Social Work.).

³ Mayor's Office of Human Services. <http://human-services.baltimorecity.gov/homeless-services/hmis/about>

Despite being one of the most consistent and constant sources of data, however, Baltimore City's HMIS system is limited in two important ways. First, the system does not include all of the services that a homeless young person may access; it only includes information from homeless service providers that receive funding from the city's Continuum of Care, which is typically limited to HUD's most restrictive definition of Category 1 homelessness. Many young people may seek support from more unconventional sources not included in, or required to contribute to, this data-tracking system, such as churches, friends, families, or even strangers. Second, HMIS data is limited because unaccompanied homeless youth tend to be disconnected from services altogether, regardless of whether those services are required to report data via HMIS or not.

- 3. Point-In-Time (PIT) counts** refer to efforts to count the number of homeless individuals on a particular night (typically during the last week of January). Although the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires cities to conduct PIT counts of their unsheltered homeless populations every other year, HUD only started requiring communities to collect data on homeless young adults (between the ages of 18 and 24) in 2013. Even though UHY were not required by HUD to be counted in the 2009 and 2011 PIT counts, advocates and researchers in Baltimore City used these opportunities to conduct parallel, youth-specific counts of Baltimore City's UHY population at these times.⁴

The timing of PIT counts is one of its greatest weaknesses. Far fewer homeless individuals are out on the streets or in shelters in January because many secure temporary housing situations during the colder months. As a result, many advocates and researchers argue that PIT counts vastly underestimate the number of people experiencing homelessness on any given night. Homeless young people are even more likely to be undercounted during PIT counts because of their overall tendency to avoid staying on the street or sleeping in shelters, regardless of the time of year.

Additionally, many UHY remain uncounted during PIT counts because couch-surfing and/or "doubling up"—how the majority of UHY find shelter—is not considered homeless under HUD's more restrictive definition of homelessness, which is utilized during these counts. As a result, PIT counts become more of a reflection of shelter capacities than the actual measure of homelessness in a community.

- 4. School-level data** are mandated by the federal McKinney-Vento Act, which requires local school systems to identify and collect data on the number of students experiencing homelessness in their schools. Although schools are a significant point of contact for many young people, school-level data on homeless youth rely on self-reporting from teachers and administrators. Due to inadequate training and an overall lack of awareness regarding youth homelessness, school-level data also tend to be limited.

⁴ Maryland Department of Legislative Services, Overview of Homelessness and Homeless Services in Maryland (September 2015): 3.

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