



## **Executive Summery**

# **From the Streets to Stability: A study of youth homelessness in the District of Columbia**

**November 2011  
Margaret Riden**



## Mission and Vision

The DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA) is a coalition of youth-engaged organizations, youth and concerned residents formed to ensure that all children and youth in the District of Columbia have access to high-quality and affordable developmental opportunities. We accomplish this mission by crafting policy recommendations, providing structured advocacy opportunities for our members and allies, networking and empowering youth.

At DCAYA, we envision a District of Columbia where no young person is considered to be “at-risk”. Where all children and youth are respected as valued members of their communities, and where our city’s leaders actively represent the interests of young people.

DCAYA was founded in 2004 and since then has grown into a vibrant and diverse membership organization. We currently boast more than 120 members, who all share our vision for a city committed to all of its citizens.

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The night was beyond cold. It must have been in the low twenties. I didn't have a watch, but I think it was around two o'clock. I couldn't go back to sleep. I had about four blankets and I was still shivering. I woke up and waited by the edge of the park for the sun to rise. From where I was I could usually see the large clock on the church across the street. It felt like a lifetime, but I was able to make it. The sunrise still gives me hope to this day.

The sun warmed me just enough to walk down to So Others Might Eat (SOME). I went there to eat breakfast. It's good to know there are places to go for food, plus there, I could stay out of the cold for a while. It was Monday, so I had to wait till noon for the library to open. The blankets kept me somewhat warm, despite the wind. Once the library opened I knew I would be fine for at least eight hours.

The library seemed to be the only place I could find solace. I would just read books on everything, even the encyclopedia. Religion and politics were my favorites, but I loved to read books on science and psychology as well. The reading was a diversion from the cold, the lack of food and sleep, and even the people who would bother me at night. I loved reading about activists the most. It impressed me how they were able to make so many positive changes, even when it seemed like the whole world was against them. It let me know that I could get out of my situation in due time.

One night hit and the library closed I went back outside. I headed towards the food van from Martha's Table. They would give out food sandwiches and warm soup. Walking back to the park wasn't fun at all. The cold blistery wind made sleeping almost impossible. I couldn't stand the people constantly bothering me; men and women of all ages always asking me if I wanted to make some money, or if I was looking for a friend. They acted like they cared, but all they wanted was to exploit me. At least I would see less of them during the colder months. After it finally got quiet I went back to sleep, and my whole day would start once again.

This was my life for quite some time. I had already been in and out of homelessness for a couple of years. I spent a lot of time figuring out what I wanted to do, till I decided I wanted to help people. It was arduous though. Not too many places want to hire a homeless person or even offer an internship. So I spent my time helping with different political actions and other projects when I could. I still wished I could help in the community and still make a living, however. I still had hope that I could work things out.

Things got better when I finally decided to do something I rarely even do to this day, trust others. Over time I would hear about different opportunities from people I had met. Eventually I was able to get an opportunity with an organization called the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA). They were conducting the first ever survey of homeless youth in the District. It sounded like a great way to help in the community and get my foot in the door in the non-profit world. Helping with the survey helped me a great deal with myself. It gave me hope that others were really trying to make a difference in Washington DC. All volunteers and workers treated me like a person, not a homeless ethnically ambiguous youth. Also I was able to learn and see just how bad it is for homeless youth in Washington DC. It hurts to know that so many other youth are facing the challenges of being homeless. But at least I have hope that with help from others, they can get out of their situations.

—JR 24, MALE

## Introduction

Over a two week period in Mid-March, the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates interviewed almost 500 youth and young adults aged 12-24 who were either at significant risk of becoming, or were already, homeless and disconnected from their family of origin. The youth were contacted through existing programs, schools and through street outreach. The findings of this effort are designed to enhance the District of Columbia's understanding of scope of the problem, the factors which lead to homelessness among youth and the unique barriers to stability they face so that the community, policy makers, providers and advocates can better support these vulnerable young people.

### *Defining "Homeless Youth?"*

Definitions for "homeless youth" vary widely across state and federal agencies and non-profit organizations. For the purposes of this study, DCAYA drew from a variety of definitions developed by the National Network for Youth, the Minnesota Point in Time Count and Baltimore Youth Point in Time Survey. Homeless Youth are in this report are defined as:

*Children and youth through age 17 who are living apart from their parents or guardians and young adults between 18-24 who are economically and/or emotionally detached from their families and lack an adequate or fixed residence. This includes: children and youth who are unstably housed, living in doubled up circumstances, in transitional housing programs, emergency shelters, or on the street.*

### *The Prevalence of Youth Homelessness in DC*

The number of DC youth who experience homelessness at some point each year is staggering. During the two weeks of the survey, DCAYA surveyed 490 unaccompanied youth between the ages of 12 and 24. Three hundred and thirty (330) of those youth were by our established definition "homeless" on the night they were contacted. They were therefore either staying in a shelter, a transitional housing program ( 171) or were living on the street, or couch surfing the night before they completed the survey ( 159). Of the remaining 160 not "homeless" on the day they were contacted, 50 of these youth had been without a place to stay at some point in the two weeks prior to completing the survey. Even acknowledging that this study did not interview or identify every homeless youth, we now know that during the month of March, at least 380 youth spent at least one night homeless. We also know that in the month of March alone, over 200 of these youth did not have a safe, secure place to sleep or adequate food and protection.

This finding is of great consequence for policy makers and the social services community. We know from research done that repeated instances of homelessness as an adolescent is a significant risk factor for chronic homelessness in later adulthood. Fifty percent of chronically homeless adults report becoming homeless for the first time as an adolescent. **Investing in front-end services that provide shelter, stability and wrap-around supports to this vulnerable population at the first instance of homelessness is a necessary and worthwhile investment that will have a lasting impact on the issue of homelessness in the District.**

## Summary of Findings

### *Describing the Population*

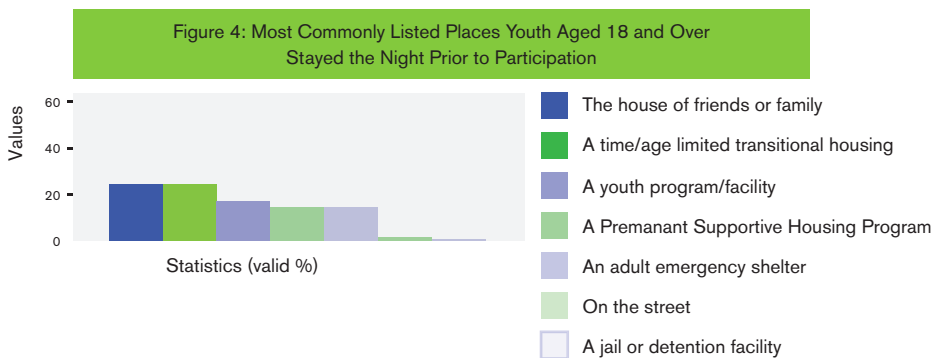
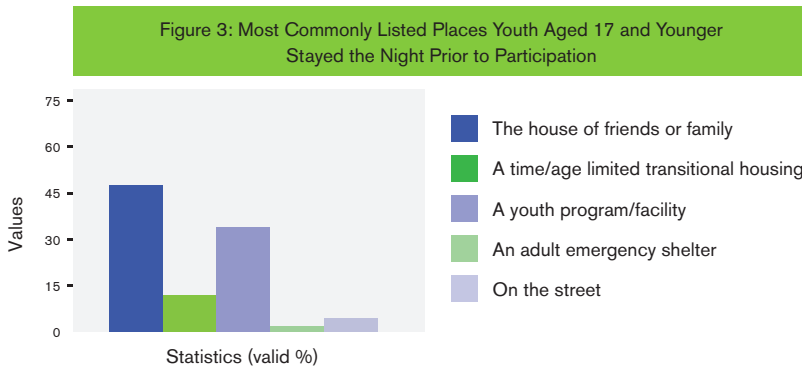
The study was designed to gain a deeper understanding of the scope and the basic demographic features of unaccompanied homeless youth, isolate common causal factors which lead them become

homeless and identify the services they utilize, gaps in service availability, and the unique barriers youth face in achieving stability. What we found was a dynamic group of young people struggling to secure basic needs, while also trying to acquire the skills necessary to make the already difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood. The findings are extensive and nuanced, with assets, challenges and opportunities which shift depending on a variety of factors with age and parenting status being the most predominant.

A general picture of this population can be derived as follows.

Figure 1: Age Range	
Age Range	Valid Percent
12-17	21%
18-20	41%
21-24	38%

Figure 2: Gender		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Male	136	42.5%
Female	182	56.9%
Transgender	2	0.6%
Missing	10	–
Total	330	–



In our survey, young women slightly outnumbered young men- a gender breakdown that seems somewhat unique to DC. The overwhelming majority, 90%, identified as African American or Black. 47% were parents themselves, adding an additional 242 children to the 330 youth who were surveyed. Family conflict, and abuse or neglect, were the most commonly identified reasons leading youth to leave their home of origin and almost 40% of participating youth had been in a residential placement through either Child and Family Services Agency or the Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services. Youth reported staying at a variety of locations- shelters, transitional or permanent housing programs and on the street. However, the most frequently cited response across age groups was couch surfing (staying with friends or extended family for short periods of time). Access to housing programs did change depending on age. Youth over 18 years of age reported utilizing transitional housing programs or emergency housing services with greater frequency than younger youth, a finding that is in keeping with the availability of programs and services for those over vs. under 18 years of age.

Figure 5: Education Participation Rates

Age Group	General Youth Population of DC(American Fact Finder Database, 2005-2009)	Homeless Youth
15-17	93.6%	48.9%
18-19	82%	52.5%
20-24	42.8%	39.7%

Figure 6: Reasons for educational disengagement prior to completion of high school or GED

Reason Cited	Youth is not in school, under 19 years of age and has not completed 12th grade or obtained a GED	Youth is over 19 years of age, has not completed 12th grade or obtained a GED
Not Interested	27.8%	2.6%
Not sure where to enroll/No documentation	8.3%	18.5%
Lack of Money	11.1%	15.8%
Most common qualitative response	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applying/seeking programs</li> <li>• Lack of child care</li> <li>• Need to work/find employment</li> </ul>

Almost half of the respondents reported participating in some type of educational programming. Engagement and interest differed significantly across age groups suggesting the need for an array of policies or interventions. **Youth over 19 years of age indicated a much stronger desire to re-engage in educational programming, with only 2.6% of those over 19 years of age stating they were not interested in participating in any type of educational or job training opportunities.** The District must recognize this opportunity and continue to develop an array of academically appropriate programs that are able to reengage those youth who have already left school, or who are seeking post secondary education opportunities. At the same time, those under

19 reported a lack of interest in educational programming at a higher rate. This finding combined with the drop out rate, and the responses on negative experiences when last in school for younger youth all indicate that **the District must be more intentional in the provision of early intervention strategies that keep youth successfully in school.** Increasing access to both academic and social-emotional supports is a critical element of this strategy

Figure 7: Unemployment Statistics

Age Group	General Youth Population of DC(American Fact Finder Database, 2005-2009)	Homeless Youth
16-19	30.6%	81.1%
20-24	16.6%	76.9%

Figure 8: Barriers to Employment

Reason Identified	Percent
Actively seeking, but unable to find employment	45.3%
Lack the necessary job skills	15.7%
Lack the proper identification or documentation	11.2%
Does not know how to obtain a job	5.8%

The vast majority of participants, 81%, were unemployed, a reality that is not surprising given the current economic climate and circumstances. However, a combination of factors identified in this survey, including but not limited to educational attainment, suggests that the low rate of employment is not just a result of the economy; this population of young people are struggling to enter and successfully remain in the labor market because they lack both hard and soft employment skills. Identifying opportunities to help youth develop and practice these skills is necessary if they are to succeed in the workforce.

Youth saw their largest needs as being increased access to housing programs, job training and supported job placement services and access to affordable child care (for parenting youth). This was reflected in their largest use of available resources which were education, job training and health care. What was particularly telling in this section of the findings was that despite commonly held assumptions that youth, particularly homeless youth, are reluctant to seek out services or supports, this was not the case in our findings. Youth reported refusing services at very low levels, and consistently indicated that they actively seek out resources, programs or supports but are struggling to find available or appropriate opportunities. The importance of this finding cannot be overstated in that **it highlights the need for a more services and for a diverse array of supportive services and programs. It also indicates that the motivation among this population is a real asset; youth are interested in using supports and services to help them achieve stability.**

Figure 9: Young Parents Demographics	
Percent of Respondents	47%
Median Age	20.86
Gender	75% Female / 25% Male
Total number of additional children	297
Percent with physical custody of their child	78%

Figure 10: Young Parents Causal Factors	
Primary and Secondary Causal Factors	Percent
Evicted from their home	40%
Home was too small for everyone to live there	40%
Family of origin lost their housing	39%

It is important to note that the findings related to young parents did differ from non-parenting peers. The factors contributing to homelessness were the first primary difference. Parenting youth most frequently reported that economic factors were what led them to leave their home of origin. Interestingly, pregnancy or parenting status was not as frequently identified as cause of homelessness as the researchers anticipated. Only 37% of young parents identifying this as a primary factor, of those that did, 86.44%, were female. This suggests that pregnancy or parenting is a greater determinant for homelessness among young women. The sheer rate of young parents becoming homeless reinforces the need for more intentional pregnancy prevention efforts, as well as the need for increased services and supports for young parents that help them to maintain stability and prevent homelessness. The second and third differences between parenting and non-parenting youth were the barriers to education and employment and the primary gaps in services cited by young parents. **Young parents consistently identified the lack of accessible and affordable child care as a significant barrier and major need.** Clearly, investment in affordable and accessible child care will enhance young parents' employment or educational participation rates and facilitate their successful transition out of shelter or transitional living programs and into self sufficiency.

My name is JA and I am a 21 year old male. I am a father of a 2 year old boy who still remains in my life, but lives with his mother. I was going through some difficult times in a period of my life when I got involved with the Street Outreach Program at LAYC. They found me a place to live in the Covenant House Crisis Center and worked with me to get other resources. Now I am getting a second chance on education by enrolling into the LAYC WISE program. The WISE program provides me with a GED class and job readiness training. When all said and done, LAYC accepted me like a family member and helped me in my time of crisis. I am working on a great life of independence.

-JA, 21, MALE

In addition to a better overall understanding this population, the findings provide additional insights into the opportunities for prevention, the scope of service needs and strengths that can be strategically leveraged to achieve better outcomes for homeless youth.

# Implications for Policy and Practice

## Understanding the Risk Factors and Opportunities for Early Intervention

The data supports the reality that there is no single causal factor leading to youth homelessness. Instead, the findings suggest that there is a nuanced relationship between the environmental or community conditions, familial functioning and increased risk for homelessness.

The vast majority of youth indicated either neglect/abuse or conflict in the home as the primary factors leading them to leave their home. The transitions from childhood to adolescence and adolescence into early adulthood are often associated with familial conflict. For the most of young people, these age appropriate behaviors do not culminate in an adolescent choosing to leave, or being thrown from their home. So the question becomes, what is different for these youth? Though we do not have all the answers from this survey, the findings do highlight a number of factors that should be considered in discussions related to prevention.

Figure 11: Race/Ethnicity Breakdown of Survey Sample and District Wide Population under 18 years of age.

	Number	Percent of survey participants	District wide race/ethnicity demographic characteristics of children and youth under 18 Years of Age (DC Action for Children, 2009)
Black	262	90%	62%
Hispanic	16	5.5%	12%
Multi-Race	8	2.7%	3%
Other	2	0.7%	3%
White	3	1%	20%
Missing	39	–	–
Total	330	–	–

Figure 12: Race/Ethnicity Breakdown of District Children Living in Poverty

	Percent of survey participants	Percent of survey participants
Black	90%	46.7%
Hispanic	5.5%	28.8%
Other	3.4%	24.9%
White	1%	4.8%
Missing	–	–
Total	–	–

First, the reasons youth cite for leaving the home must be understood in the context of the demographic characteristics revealed in this sample, and those of the District-wide population. This information

illustrates that there continue to be pockets of the District, largely based on racial or ethnic lines, experiencing social and economic marginalization. The parallel between this information and the demographics of our sample suggest that this marginalization may be further contributing to the economic hardships, family conflict and family disruption that are leading youth to run from or be thrown from their home.

The rate at which system-involved youth and young parents are represented in this sample indicate two other significant risk factors for youth homelessness. Youth with a history of system involvement are typically overrepresented in samples of homeless youth, but the rate of system involvement in our sample is slightly higher than even national estimates suggest. This reality drives home the need for effective discharge planning that focuses on healthy community connections, stronger family functioning and supports, and the development of both hard and soft skills necessary to successfully transition from youth to young adulthood. These systems of care must provide enough time for the development and execution of a discharge plan that provides bridge supports to the youth and family as they reenter their community or family of origin.

The findings related to the prevalence of teen parents or young heads of household in the study indicate that unplanned pregnancy or young parenting status puts youth at a particularly acute risk of homelessness. Expansion of family planning supports, and teen pregnancy prevention efforts and enhanced community based supports for young parents are important interventions in the arena of youth homelessness prevention.

Youth with a history of repeatedly running from the home must be understood to be at an increased risk for homelessness. Developing mechanisms to effectively identify and serve these youth within the community based array of resources is essential to address the root causes of the youth's running behavior. There are promising practices which can be nurtured to cultivate lasting stability and diminish the likelihood of repeated or chronic homelessness for these youth.

### *Achieving Stability and Supporting the Transition to Intra-dependent Adulthood*

The study clearly points to the need for expanding availability to supported housing programs and to affordable housing for youth and young adults is needed. The study clearly demonstrates that the need for supported transitional housing programs for those youth who cannot go back to their home of origin significantly exceeds the number of available beds. It is important to note that stable long term housing in the context of this sub-population does not only mean an emphasis on permanent supportive housing as best practice, as is true with adult homelessness policy. For youth and young adults, developmentally appropriate housing programs can be transitional and should be varied to meet the distinct needs of youth.

Supporting the transition to healthy adulthood does not, of course, end with housing. There are a range of skills and experiences that youth must gain to successfully transition into self sufficient adulthood. The level of educational disengagement and rates of unemployment reflected in this study reinforce the need to flood this population with a broad array of supportive resources beyond just housing. Doing so will facilitate their completion of secondary education programs, allow youth time to obtain soft and hard employment skills, develop independent living skills and achieve the degree of maturity necessary to successfully support themselves. Furthermore, given the depth and scope of necessary supports a continuum is needed. Youth require longer lengths of stay in programs that gradually decrease the level of support (financial, as well as practical day to day support) and increase the degree of self-reliance and healthy connections as skills are attained and developmental benchmarks are achieved.

## Youth As Assets

The data revealed that youth are actively pursuing various services or training opportunities but have been unable to have access due to extensive waiting lists, a lack of understanding on how to navigate various systems or how to manage various logistical hurdles. Systematically identifying and removing barriers, simplifying service referral and access and expanding capacity are critical to improving outcomes for homeless youth.

## Conclusion

The Survey of Unstably Housed Youth garnered new and useful information about DC's homeless youth and young adult population. This information has clear utility to policymakers as the District moves forward in strengthening structures and services designed to mitigate the issue of youth homelessness. Understanding how youth come to experience homelessness, what services they do and do not use, their educational and work backgrounds, and various other factors will help to inform how the District can strategically invest resources to help prevent youth from leaving their homes of origin, or achieving self sufficiency and stability if they have already done so. This study is an important first step, one that DCAYA recommends be repeated annually. In doing so, the District will be poised to assess the status of the District's homeless youth population and track the impact of implemented policy and systems change on this issue. The data collected from a longitudinal effort, combined with outcome data tracked by service providers will be critical to identifying those strategies that have had proven themselves and will facilitate the District's ability to expand promising practices and effectively leverage resources. There are few cities in the country that have done as extensive a survey as has been done by DCAYA and its implications for policy and practice improvement are clear.

There are many paths in life and sometimes you can't choose the one you end up on no matter how much you try to control your destiny. As I learned this the hard way with my parents, at age 17 I was kicked out and \*disowned\* by the very family that raised me. Why? Do you ask, well it was because of my sexuality. I've learned through my struggles that it was not my fault nor should I be ashamed of whom I am, and in the end the things that I have gone through have made me the person I am today. It's not who did it or why they did it; it is about YOU, and how strong YOU are to get through and grow from your struggles.

—JN, 19, FEMALE