



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

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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

The number of Americans experiencing homelessness as well as the demographics of this population, has changed dramatically in the last 30 years. As the Federal Interagency Council on Homelessness notes, “The loss of affordable housing and increase in foreclosures, wages and public assistance that have not kept pace with the cost of living, rising housing costs, job loss and underemployment, and resulting debt, and the closing of state psychiatric institutions without the concomitant creation of community based housing services” (US Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010) have all contributed to this shift in the number and characteristics of those without stable housing.

The number of people experiencing chronic homelessness due to mental illness or drug abuse has continued to rise, as has the rate of veterans without stable or supportive housing. Concurrently, the number of families, children and unaccompanied youth without housing has emerged as a rapidly growing and especially vulnerable sub-population of homeless individuals. Children and youth experiencing homelessness face significant challenges and barriers to appropriate psycho-social and educational development. School attendance, academic progress and psycho-social development decrease when children, even those still connected to families, are not in stable housing. The negative impacts are even more extreme for young people who are homeless and no longer connected to their family of origin. For a young person who has exited or has been “kicked out” of their home, healthy and productive activities such as: succeeding in school, obtaining employment, and developing the skills necessary to successfully make the transition from adolescence into stable adulthood become especially challenging. This reality makes prevention and early intervention services for this population critical.

The District of Columbia is not immune to these realities and addressing homelessness in DC has been a top priority for the Mayor, the DC City Council, government agencies, community organizations and the advocate community. As government and community stakeholders have mobilized broadly around the issue of homelessness, the lack of concrete data able to provide insight on the scope and needs of homeless children and youth, and particularly those who are no longer connected to their families or community of origin, has become increasingly clear. Local providers report that pre-recession, approximately 1,400 homeless youth were served in the District annually. As the economy has faltered, providers have reported a consistent increase in the number of unaccompanied (those who have disconnected from their family of origin) youth and young heads of households seeking housing support services. Service providers readily recount stories of not having the capacity to serve youth in precarious situations or those couch surfing (staying with friends or extended family for short periods of time). Although anecdotal and program specific data are useful, these estimates do not provide more nuanced information on the distinct characteristics or needs of homeless youth in the District. The methods the District utilizes to obtain information on the scope of the homeless adult population are not readily applicable to the youth population, as discussed later in this report.

Having access to more detailed information is a critical first step in the development of a continuum of care and infrastructure of supports that are able to move these young people into stable intra-dependent adulthood. To alleviate this deficiency in information, the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA), with the support of the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness (DC-ICH) and in partnership with the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy at the George Washington University, conducted an in-depth unaccompanied (those who have disconnected from their family of origin) homeless youth survey in March 2011. Over the course of 2010, DCAYA worked with member organizations and the DC-ICH to develop a comprehensive survey designed to identify:

- *Basic demographic information;*
- *Causal factors leading to homelessness;*
- *Health and behavioral risk factors;*
- *Services utilized and barriers to stability that homeless/unaccompanied youth experience.*

Via partnerships with over 60 community-based organizations at over 70 sites, nearly 500 youth completed surveys between March 7-21, 2011.

This report details the steps taken to execute this study and the findings to provide a clearer picture of youth homelessness in the District. The first section will provide background on the process, explore the methodology and means of data collection, and discuss specific limitations which may have affected data results. The second section will detail the findings of this study and potential policy recommendations. The findings of this study are intended to provide a baseline of information related to the homeless youth population that will inform future policy and systems change and if repeated annually, will create the basis for a data driven approach to assessing the impact of these changes in both preventing and ending youth homelessness.

### *The Information Gap on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth*

While DC does participate in the annual point in time survey (PIT) mandated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the limitations imposed by the definition of homelessness HUD applies, combined with the hidden nature of homeless youth, has limited the capacity of this tool to assess the unaccompanied youth population.

Historically, the definition HUD has used for homelessness has failed to account for the distinct realities of youth homelessness. The general definition HUD utilizes to identify a homeless individual does not include individuals who are living in “doubled up” situations or those who are couch surfing (staying with friends, extended family or neighbors for short periods of time), two strategies homeless youth utilize frequently. Furthermore, the definition related specifically to youth conditions homelessness on either the length of time spent homeless, the frequency of moves in a set time period or the existence of either a physical or mental disability or a history of neglect or abuse. This definition does not account for the strategies youth use when shelter options are not available, does not reflect the high mobility (youth who leave home repeatedly but only for short periods of time before leaving permanently) of this population, nor does it recognize the variety of factors that may lead a young person to exit their home of origin.

The inclusion of youth in PIT studies is further complicated by the hidden nature of homeless youth. Youth are wary of the stigma associated with staying in an adult shelters and are highly cognizant of their increased risk of victimization. As a result, even those who are over 18 years of age who could utilize an adult shelter if couch surfing is not an option avoid them in hopes of obtaining shelter at a location serving only youth. Thus, youth tend to be absent from the adult shelters participating in PIT studies, and in the overall daily census taken at adult shelters. While youth shelters and transitional housing providers can and do participate in the annual PIT survey, the number of youth without stable housing vastly exceeds the number of beds available via youth specific agencies. As a result the count is consistently limited to the few young people able to obtain a bed in a youth shelter. Lastly, while the PIT study does include a street outreach component, given the general reluctance of youth to self-identify as homeless, or their actual age if their status as homeless is evident, they likely remain underrepresented in this effort. The 2011 PIT survey clearly demonstrates these limitations: only 26 unaccompanied youth were identified. (Metropolitan Washington Council of Government’s Homeless Services Planning and Coordinating Committee 2011, p.34).

DC does employ other avenues to gauge the size of this population. The District of Columbia Public School System (DCPS) (through its Office of Youth Engagement) and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) have developed mechanisms to track and report data on homeless youth who are still in school. The federal McKinney-Vento Act requires DCPS to track and provide services to those children, youth and families who self-identify as homeless. In February 2009, DC Public Schools reported that 462 homeless children and youth were registered in the system (Glod, 2009). Nicole Lee-Mwandha of the Office of Youth Engagement reported that by October 2010, that number had reached 1,169 (personal communication November 10, 2011). In an effort to obtain a more accurate picture on the number of homeless children and youth in DCPS, OSSE piloted an extensive research project over FY10-11. This study, which has not yet been released, worked with shelter providers to count the number of children and youth living with families in shelter or transitional housing programs.

However, the capacity of DCPS or OSSE to identify or track unaccompanied homeless youth is limited. Since the DCPS data set relies on school engagement and self identification, this system cannot account for youth who have disengaged from traditional academic programs, those who are unaware of the services available if they notify their school of their housing status, or those who simply choose not to self identify. The OSSE research project's data set focuses predominantly on children still connected to their families of origin and residing in a shelter. This means that unaccompanied couch surfing or street youth were not included.

Recognizing these information gaps as well as the structural limitations of each of the aforementioned data collection tools, the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) Strategic Planning Committee encouraged DCAYA to conduct a study of unaccompanied homeless youth. Concurrently, the ICH Strategic Planning Committee formed the Youth Sub-committee and tasked it with identifying policy recommendations related to preventing and ending youth homelessness for inclusion into the District's Strategic Action Plan to End Homelessness. The development of this committee and execution of this study were intended to be complementary. The findings of the study will support a data driven approach to any systemic or continuum of care shifts that are developed by this committee while also providing a baseline of data by which the efficacy of these changes can be assessed in coming years.

## Research Design and Methodology

### *The Study Population and Development of the Survey Protocol:*

Given that the HUD definition of youth homelessness was too narrow in scope, and recognizing that other definitions State and Federal agencies and non-profit organizations vary widely, DCAYA decided to examine the range of definitions to develop one appropriate for this community. DCAYA ultimately drew from inclusive definitions developed by the National Network for Youth, the Minnesota Point in Time Count, and the Baltimore Youth Point in Time Survey to define "unaccompanied homeless youth" as:

*Children and youth through age 17 who are living apart from their parents or guardians and young adults between 18 and 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, on the street or in a space not designed for human habitation.*

The survey instrument (Appendix A) was based primarily on the survey conducted in Minnesota and modified by DCAYA with input from the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy at George Washington University. The decision to model the instrument on the Minnesota protocol was made because of the depth of information this instrument was able to capture. The survey gathered basic demographics, as well as detailed information on the youth's current and previous housing status, youth's family, health, educational and employment history, services that the youth access and gaps in service delivery. The survey was reviewed by homeless youth at three community providers in the month of January. However, due to a variety of factors, the number of youth who participated in the review process was less than ten. The survey was designed to maintain the confidentiality of all participants. To diminish the possibility of replication, a unique identifier was used for each respondent. This identifier was the youth's first and last initial followed by the month and year of their birth.

The survey protocol was submitted for and received Institutional Review Board approval through the George Washington University Review Board. This approval, and the review process it entails, ensures that the survey protocol and methodology are sound and that the construct and execution of the study posed minimal risk to participants. As part of this process, DCAYA had to develop a strategy to obtain informed consent from minors and create a protocol on managing confidentiality in instances where participants may be divulging sensitive information that in most contexts would require reporting to relevant state agencies (abuse/neglect for a minor, a minor on the run from a state facility, or a criminal activity).

Informed consent was obtained from the respondents of legal age. However, since some of the study's respondents were in the age of minority and detached from their family of origin, informed consent from a parent or legal guardian was not a viable option. DCAYA used two approaches to satisfy informed consent for unaccompanied minors. First, DCAYA followed the guidelines produced by the US Department of Health and Human Services guidelines related to human subjects which states that children and youth who have been subject to abuse and neglect by their parents do not need parental consent to participate in research studies. For those minors who had left the home without a history of abuse and neglect, DCAYA applied the concept of mature minors developed by Levine (1995) and Rew et al (2000). This approach is based on research demonstrating that the ability to effectively reason and apply logic develops during the middle and high school years and that by age 14, youth have developed basic reasoning abilities commensurate with those of adults (Leffert et al, 1999). On this basis, Levine (1995) and Rew et al (2000) argue that applying the mature minor criterion on an individual basis for adolescents who wish to consent to ideographic or epidemiological research that poses minimal risk can be a legitimate consideration.

To maintain the confidentiality of the respondents, participants were not asked to sign an informed consent document. Instead, trained volunteers and program staff read a statement of explanation and asked questions designed to assess understanding, mental clarity, and competency as well as confirm assent to participation (Appendix A). The statement included a description of the survey, identified the purpose of the survey, and included a proclamation that no personally identifiable information would be collected. It is important to note that this statement did assure respondents that all responses would be kept confidential unless they made any remarks indicating intent to harm themselves or others. It was made explicit to participants how those types of statements would be responded to by adults conducting the survey (to assess the validity of the threat or statement), what steps would be taken if statements of this nature were made and how this may impact the confidentiality of the participant.

### *Data Collection*

Adapting promising practices from homeless surveys executed in New Haven, Baltimore, Denver and Minnesota, DCAYA developed its own design for conducting a survey of homeless and unstably

housed youth in DC. The survey was conducted over the two-week period of March 7-21, 2011. The decision to use a two-week time period was consistent with recommendations that the highly mobile nature of the youth homeless population requires an extended timeline (Toro, 2006). The timing of the survey for mid-March was two-fold. First, this timing allowed for a more formal partnership with Trachtenberg School of Public Policy at George Washington University allowing DCAYA to utilize the expertise of local graduate students. Second, research has suggested that population movements for homeless youth typically occur after the holiday season and during seasonal variations (Burt et al, 1999).

On the basis of promising practices in other communities, and emerging research and recommendations on the utility of mixed method data collection to adequately query populations that are traditionally difficult to identify or engage with, DCAYA adopted a dual approach to data collection using a combination community based locations or hub sites to engage potential participants and street outreach.

Partnerships with community based locations serving as hub sites were developed in the months preceding the study. Participating sites included shelters and transitional housing programs as well as other places or locations where youth congregate including: recreation centers, schools, afterschool programs and community based organizations as well as other multiservice providers. DCAYA made every effort to disperse hub sites across the city's eight Wards. In total, over 70 sites from 60 community providers participated in the survey. Street outreach teams were led by three local organizations specializing in outreach to homeless and at risk youth, the Latin American Youth Center, Sasha Bruce Youthwork and Covenant House of Washington, and supported by trained volunteers. When possible, street outreach teams were matched with a community site where youth could congregate to complete the survey. Street outreach was conducted on ten of the 14 days/evenings the study was executed. Each site and street outreach team had an identified point person, typically a staff member or program manager, who supported volunteers and provided site-based logistics. This individual collected and secured all completed surveys which were then picked up by a DCAYA staff member and transported to George Washington University for data entry, cleaning and initial analysis.

To administer the surveys during street outreach sessions, and to support the completion of the survey at participating communication locations, volunteers from social work and psychology programs in DC area universities, and volunteers working with participating agencies were recruited. All of the volunteers participated in a training session where they were introduced to the survey instrument, given survey administration instructions and participated in an abbreviated training on engaging at risk youth, and how to manage potential crisis or other issues that could arise. The content of this training was based on similar curriculum used at Covenant House Washington, the Latin American Youth Center and Sasha Bruce Youthwork. An actively homeless youth was present at all volunteer training to ensure that there was a youth voice in the training that could provide first hand insight and feedback to all volunteers. Volunteers were also given a handout that provided bulleted points based on the orientation/training and DCAYA T-shirts to wear while conducting the survey to ensure they could be easily identified by youth and other volunteers.

The surveys were intended to be read aloud and filled in by the survey administrators. This method was applied to minimize literacy barriers and the potential for errors in the skip pattern. However, due to the personal nature of many of the questions, youth often agreed to participate only if they could fill out the survey independent of an administrator. As the study began and this issue came up, administrators were instructed to continue reading the opening statement to ensure the youth understood the study. They were also asked to remain nearby in case the participant had any questions. This did result in some issues in data clarity which is discussed in more detail later in this report. The survey protocol

was provided in both English and Spanish and Spanish speaking survey administrators were available at specific locations and during a handful of street outreach sessions.

Participating youth were not offered an incentive to participate, although during street outreach efforts there was often food available. The decision not to provide an incentive was based on two primary factors. First, the provision of an incentive was not possible due to financial constraints. Second, the use of incentives in studies of this nature can complicate the data collection and accuracy by increasing the potential of youth completing the survey multiple times in multiple locations to obtain the provided incentive. Participating youth were given a resource card that included the contact information for the primary researchers on the project, the contact information for the Institutional Review Board at George Washington University as well as the address of various emergency and multi-service providers throughout the city. The resource cards were business-card sized to ensure youth could keep them on their person.

### *Limitations*

Due to the nature of the surveyed population and overall design of the survey instrument, a number of limitations were inherent. The most immediate limitation is that it is simply impossible to assess the entire homeless youth population. As a result, it is not possible to determine the number of respondents needed to achieve a statistically secure representative sample. It is important to acknowledge the possibility that the youth who did not participate in the survey may have different characteristics from those who chose to participate. Despite this, given the total size of the District youth population, (American Community Survey, 2009) 330 respondents is a robust sample and we were able to garner strong insights that can be compared to the general DC youth population and publicly available information on youth identified as homeless via schools, government systems, and private service providers both in DC and in other communities. Beyond the difficulty in surveying a transient and notoriously difficult to reach population, the primary limitations were the:

- *Mode of survey administration;*
- *Length and complexity of the survey;*
- *Difficulty in ascertaining the target population;*
- *Nature of self-reported data;*
- *Generalizability of the results.*

### *Mode of Survey Administration*

From the onset, the survey was intended to be read aloud to the respondents by trained volunteers. However, when the surveys were collected, it appeared that many of had been filled out by the respondents, without the assistance of a survey administrator. Volunteers and organization staff reported this was done in part due to time constraints, but also because youth were more willing to participate if they could complete the survey independently<sup>1</sup>. Although reading the opening statement was heavily stressed to administrators it is impossible to confirm that this happened in every case where the survey was self-administered. Given the complexity of the survey instrument, this did create issues related to the accurate completion of the survey and inconsistency noted in the skip patterns during the data cleaning and initial analysis.

### *Length and Complexity of the Survey*

As previously mentioned, the survey instrument was based primarily on the survey conducted in Minnesota in an effort to replicate the depth of information gathered there. However, given that this was the survey's first implementation in DC, and the nature of the population, the current survey may have been too lengthy at a total of 10 pages and 38 questions. In addition, when taking into account all of the various sub-questions, survey respondents were to answer anywhere from 70 to

<sup>1</sup>It is likely that some youth were dissuaded by having to be read the survey aloud and did not participate.

110 questions if completed correctly. The time it took to answer the survey in its entirety with a survey administrator was between 30-40 minutes, when observed by the researchers. With such a lengthy survey, it was difficult to keep youth engaged.

There were also issues related to the complexity of the survey. Many questions included sub-questions and directions to “skip” to various sections/questions were appropriate. It seemed as if many of the respondents were either not fully aware that these “skip patterns” existed or they were unsure of how to follow them. Many respondents often answered “skip” questions that they were not supposed to, given their initial answers. In addition, some of the survey language may not have been appropriate for the audience resulting in confusion about the meaning of certain questions. For instance, question 16j, used the word “immigrated.” Many respondents did not appear to understand this terminology marking immigration as a reason for unstable housing while also indicating they had lived in DC most or all of their lives. Finally, there seemed to be issues with some of the question instructions. For example, respondents would put a check in question blanks rather than numbers as was intended<sup>2</sup>. These issues likely decreased the reliability, or accuracy, of the results. The construct validity of the study was also compromised by these survey limitations; that is, the survey questions may not have accurately measured what its designers intended.

### *Difficulty in Ascertaining Target Population*

The limitation previously mentioned regarding the unclear wording of various questions was perhaps most obvious and most problematic in question seven of the survey. This was unfortunate because question seven was one of the most important since it inquired about respondents’ current housing status<sup>3</sup>. The most common errors the researchers encountered were that many respondents checked they had stayed “last night” in multiple places, which was unlikely, while many other respondents only checked boxes in the column asking where they stayed the “last three months.” Presumably, the respondents meant that they not only stayed in the corresponding place the “last three months,” but also the “last two weeks” and “last night.” However, the researchers were unable to draw these conclusions.

### *Nature of Self-Reported Data*

Another limitation of the study was that all of the information gathered was self-reported data. Any time self-reported data are used there is a chance that the data are not accurate. A number of the questions were very personal, and some even asked about illegal activity. Although the respondents were assured all of their answers would remain confidential, the possibility exists that they did not answer all questions truthfully, especially if they were giving answers out loud to a survey administrator. One example took place during the survey observation session at the Latin American Youth Center. At this time, the researchers saw one youth initially answer questions, then change the answer when prompted by the survey administrator who happened to know the youth personally. This specific survey administrator knew the youth’s background and thus knew when the individual was misunderstanding the questions and answering incorrectly. However, this was definitely not the case for all respondents and there was no way to verify that the data collected were in fact true.

### *Generalizability of Results*

The last category of limitations involves the generalizability of the results. As mentioned previously, over 70 sites in the DC area participated in the survey of unstably housed youth. However, the researchers were unable to analyze how many completed surveys came from each site due to inconsistencies in the identification of locations. For example, some respondents identified their location by the name of the organization they were affiliated with rather than the location of the particular site. Since some organizations had multiple sites, this made identifying the dispersion of respondents across the city impossible. In addition, even though a large number of sites throughout DC participated in the survey,

<sup>2</sup>See questions 8 and 27b in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup>See Appendix A.

it is unlikely that the sites were in locations that covered all unstably housed youth. If some youth never seek services from the participating sites, they would have likely been left out of this survey.

In addition, results from the survey may not be generalizable across time. The survey took place in March based on recommendations from experts in the field and recommendations cited in surveys conducted in other communities. The timing of the survey created three important limitations. First, it is important to note that youth who are homeless or unstably housed at other times of the year may have different characteristics from those queried in this study. Furthermore, the results cannot predict the characteristics of homeless youth in the future, thus it is possible that the results may be somewhat biased and not representative of all unstably housed youth in DC. In addition, in focus groups conducted with volunteers and street outreach teams following the study it was communicated that the March execution may not have been the best fit for DC. Volunteers cited weather conditions as potentially limiting factor. The two week period during which the survey was executed was unseasonably cold, and as a result, youth avoided open air areas where outreach teams would typically find and work with youth. Outreach staff from participating organizations anecdotally reported that in the past few years the greatest influx of homeless youth on the street seems to occur during early summer and fall. Despite the limitations, the study did obtain a vast amount of previously unknown information from a diverse group of homeless youth and young adults.

## Findings

Unless otherwise noted, the initial findings reflect responses of the 330 youth who met the DCAYA criteria for homeless the night prior to completing the survey. While the remaining 160 youth are not directly reflected in this information, it is important to note that over 50% of these youth reported a lack of stable housing in the two weeks and three months prior to the survey, DCAYA still considers them at high risk for a repeated instance of homelessness.

### Demographic Characteristics

Figure 1: Age Range

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

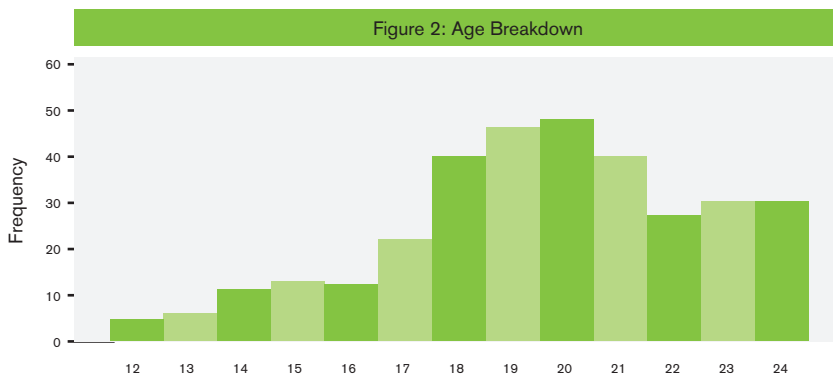


Figure 3: Gender		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Male	136	42.5%
Female	182	56.9%
Transgender	2	0.6%
Missing	10	–
Total	330	–

Figure 4: Sexual Orientation		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
LGBT	19	6.1%
Straight	294	93.9%
Missing	17	–
Total	330	–

Figure 5: 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 5a: 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	–	–

The age dispersion of respondents was generally consistent with the results from surveys conducted in other communities. While the age range of respondents was broad spanning 12-24, the average age was 19.44 years old and the median age was 20 years old. The slight over representation of females in the sample is surprising given that on the national level homeless youth are more often than not thought to be mostly male (CRS, 2007). In the context of DC however, this finding aligns with anecdotal and program census data which reveals that young woman, particularly young mothers are heavily represented in the local homeless population. It is important to note that the LGBTQ is likely underrepresented in the findings. The two participating sites that focus predominantly on LGBTQ youth were unable to complete the survey with the youth they worked with during the two-week period. Finally, the majority, over 75%, of respondents, had lived in DC for 1-20 years with only 7% indicating they had lived in the District for less than two years. Given the average age of the population, this indicates that many of the respondents grew up in the District.

Immediately obvious in these finding is the overrepresentation of African American youth in this sample, compared to the larger demographics of the city as reflected in Figure 5 It is possible that the race/ethnicity findings of the report are the result of a number of situational factors including, sampling size and the geography of the survey sites[1]. However, the researchers hypothesize that African American youth are over-represented in the youth homeless population writ large. A few different data points support this hypothesis.

First, as of 2006, 96% of homeless youth served in DC were African American (Comey, Smith, & Tatian), which suggests that historically African American youth have historically comprised a large majority of the homeless youth population. Given the racial make-up and economic disparities that occur often along racial lines in Washington, DC, the low number of Caucasian youth in this sample is not surprising. However, given that high rates of poverty in the District that exist among communities of color in general and not just the African American community, the extreme over-representation of African American youth and concurrently low rate of Hispanic/Latino youth reflected in this sample is curious. This is assumed in part because of the composition of participating sites with fewer participating sites focused on this population and/or located in areas of the city where Hispanic/Latino communities reside. In addition, anecdotal reports suggest that the social norm within these local communities lends itself more toward Hispanic and Latino youth and families living in doubled up circumstances where they may have less connection to the range of homeless services and thus remain under-reported in this data set.

Another possible explanation of why African American youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless youth population is their involvement in state systems of care. The DC Child and Family Services Agency(CFSA) produced a report in 2009 which demonstrated the over-representation of African American children and youth throughout the child welfare system. Conversely, Hispanic and Caucasian children and youth were under represented. Statistics from the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services (DYRS) are equally disproportionate with 97% of DYRS youth identified as African American, 2.5% as Hispanic and 0.3% Caucasian.

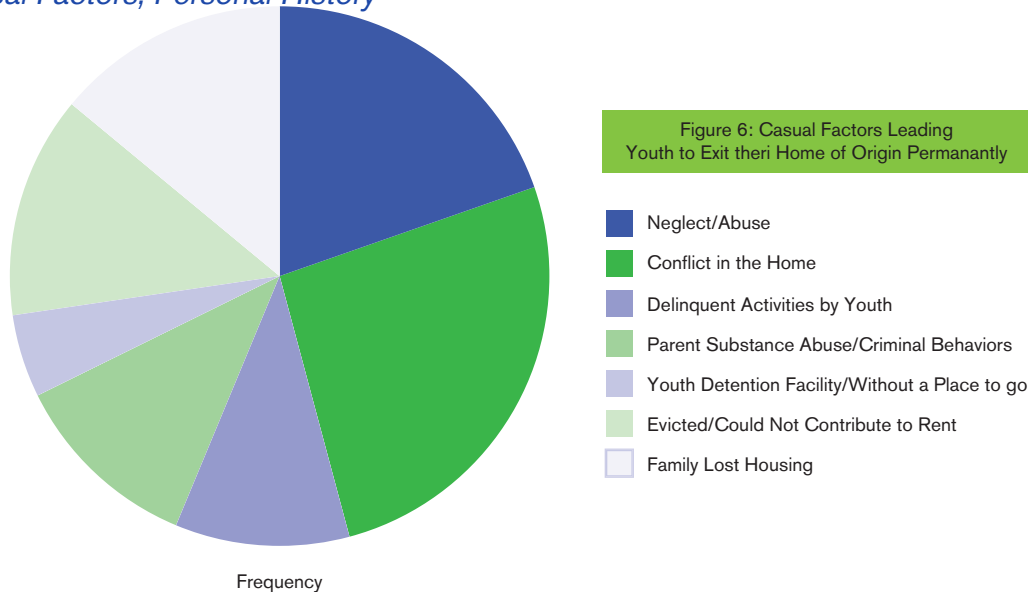
The overrepresentation of African American youth in these two systems of care forms a theoretical link to their overrepresentation in the homeless youth population. It is widely acknowledged that youth aging out of the foster care system are more likely to experience a period of homelessness following their exit from care. This finding is attributed to three risk factors: 1) parent and family, 2) community and 3) organizational or systemic failures (Hill 2006).

Children, youth and families living in poverty are more likely to experience similar disruptions, and much

like their overrepresentation in child welfare statistics and juvenile justice statistics, youth of color are equally overrepresented in the District's statistics on child poverty as illustrated in Figure 5a. What these findings ultimately suggest is that there continue to be pockets of the District, largely based on racial or ethnic lines, which experience social and economic marginalization and this marginalization is likely contributing to the economic hardships, family conflict and family disruption that lead youth to leave the home.

## Characteristics of Homeless Youth

### Causal Factors, Personal History



Causal factors were identified by asking youth to indicate the primary and secondary factors that led them to exit their home of origin permanently. For non-parenting youth, the causal factors leading youth to exit the home were most frequently family conflict or neglect and abuse in the home. This response rate adds depth to information the survey collected on the age at which youth are leaving their home of origin permanently and patterns of running away exhibited prior to leaving their home permanently. The median age at which youth reported they left home to be on their own permanently was 16.2 years, with both young men and youth with a history of system involvement leaving home a full year earlier (at 15 years of age) than young women or non-system involved youth. The rate at which youth exhibited a pattern of runaway behavior prior to leaving permanently was equally telling. Thirty-six percent of youth respondents indicated that they had run away from their homes an average of 4.25 times before leaving permanently. These findings corresponded with research conducted by the University of Chicago which found that youth who have run away once are more likely to do so again. (Courtney, 2005). Respondents indicated a history of involvement with either the child welfare or juvenile justice systems at a higher than national average. Over 39% reported having been placed at a residential facility through either Child Family Services Agency or the Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services at some point in their childhood or adolescence. This population is discussed in more detail below. Frequent running away, system involvement and recurrent family conflict all increase a youth's risk of experiencing homelessness. As discussed later in this report, identifying the risk factors that are associated with youth homelessness may help to define opportunities for early identification of at risk youth, and facilitate prevention opportunities before youth exit the home permanently.

## Where Youth Stay and Services Utilized

Figure 7: Most Commonly Listed Places Youth Aged 17 and Younger Stayed the Night Prior to Participation

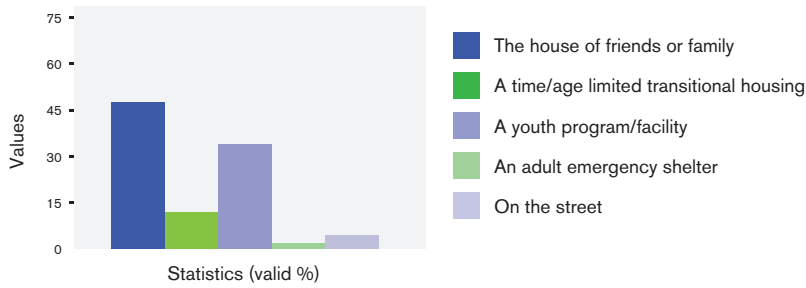


Figure 8: Most Commonly Listed Places Youth Aged 18 and Over Stayed the Night Prior to Participation

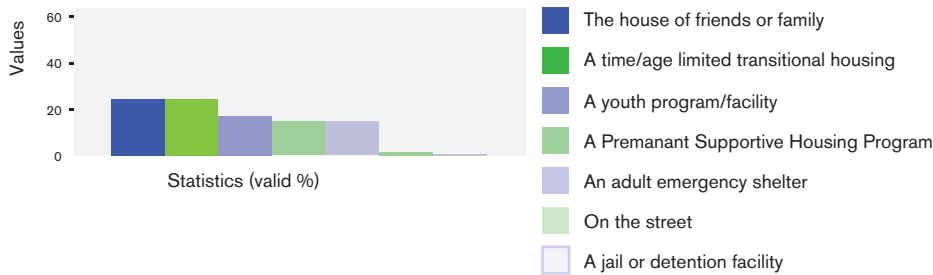


Figure 9: Most Commonly Utilized Services

Services Utilized	Percent
Shelter Services	61%
Educational Support (to remain engaged or to re-engage)	51.4%
Health Care Services	45%

The findings related to where youth stayed and the how youth are accessing services are interrelated with the most frequently utilized service being housing programs (emergency, transitional housing or permanent supported housing programs). The response rates related to youth access of emergency, transitional or permanent supportive housing programs is consistent with the number of available youth beds for each of these programs. That the majority of the remaining respondents across the age ranges reported couch surfing is important for two reasons. First, it highlights the importance of developing housing options specific to youth. While a higher rate of couch surfing is done by youth under 18 can be explained by the lack of access to emergency or shelter programs for those under 18, many could argue that shelter or emergency housing utilization among those respondents over 18 would increase once able to use these services. However, what is evident is that non-parenting youth are largely unwilling to stay in emergency or other housing options that are open to individual adults. Individual respondents (non-parenting) over 18 years of age consistently reported a vehement reluctance to using emergency shelter services for the adult population citing safety concerns and

reporting they only used adult shelters when absolutely necessary (weather was extreme) and when they had a group of peers/friends to go with.

The second interesting insight this findings supports is that youth have, and are utilizing, networks of supportive individuals, a finding reiterated in responses on how youth connect to critical services and discussed below. While connections to community networks are important, expecting youth to rely on, and succeed within this type of unstable and short term housing is unrealistic. Constantly moving does not afford the consistency youth need to achieve lasting stability, and as the drop in this type of housing strategy for those over 18 suggests, it does not last into perpetuity. Short term shelter does not create long term stability. Clearly DC must continue investing in a diverse continuum of housing programs that are tailored to youth and able to provide shelter and supports that bridge the transition from adolescence into early adulthood.

Additional questions related to the types of services and supports youth utilize were multifaceted. The format of this question was intended to isolate the services youth access with the most frequency, gaps or barriers in service access as well as to identify how youth are connecting to needed resources. Figure 9 illustrates the most frequently utilized services for non-parenting youth. The most commonly cited service needs included: job training programs, job placement programs and increased access to supportive housing programs tailored to young adults and/or young parents. A lack of access to affordable childcare was identified as a major need and a frequently cited barrier to self-sufficiency (job access or education engagement) for many young parents and is discussed in more detail below.

Although participation rates in many critical areas such as educational programming, job training, mental health supports etc. are fairly low, this does not seem to be the result of youth refusing services<sup>4</sup>. This is an important distinction given the general assumption that homeless youth are reluctant to engage in services or community based supports. Instead, the findings illustrates that youth are seeking services or training opportunities and that low service utilization rates are the result of difficulty finding appropriate and available service providers or programs, or delays due to extensive waiting lists or other types of systemic barriers. Barriers related to education and employment are discussed in further detail below. The data also suggests that once connected to an appropriate service or support, youth remain consistently engaged.

Youth utilized a variety of strategies and individuals to access the services they engaged in. The strategies most commonly reported in finding services included self-referral or suggestions from family, friends and school. Once connected to an initial provider or entry point, youth reported support via case managers, program staff and social workers as being critical supports to identifying and obtaining additional resources, or identifying additional opportunities. The degree to which youth

Do you know what it's like to look to someone to for support and care only for them to betray that trust? Unfortunately, I do, and I learned this at a very early age. When I was 14 years old, I was raped by my stepfather. It was a traumatizing experience, one that led to my grades dropping, my relationships with my family turning sour, and a loss of hope. His abuse didn't stop, but worsened. He continued to molest me, beat me, verbally and mentally abuse me until I had become a completely different person. I was now cold and angry, a high school dropout, violent and pugnacious. I had given up on any dream I'd had of becoming something beautiful, something great.

When I turned 17, my stepfather decided that once my eighteenth birthday arrived, I was no longer welcome in his house. I had no family or friends to stay with, so I was in danger of being homeless. One day in June of 2009, I found Sasha Bruce and started going through the interview process needed to get in.

The very next day my life began to change, and in one year, I graduated from high school an honor roll student, got my first job, started saving money, and applying for college. Now I'm a Sasha Bruce employee, giving back to the organization that saved my life, and looking forward to started school in the fall. More importantly, I am well on my way to becoming the person I had once dreamed I would be.

Since becoming a part of the Sasha Bruce family, one of the most rewarding things I've done is give back; I volunteer for the agency as often as I can, whether I'm sharing my experiences with others, painting one of the organization's facilities, or helping out at the emergency shelter they run. I feel so good about myself when I know I'm helping others, but I feel even better when I meet people my age who want to help kids like me.

—JW, 19, FEMALE

<sup>4</sup>The survey asked youth to directly indicate if they had actively refused a service.

reported utilizing existing relationships to identify services is an important asset to build on. Research on youth exiting state systems of care has consistently articulated that to succeed, youth need to have lasting relationships with a caring and supportive adult (Propp, Ortega, NewHeart 2003). In light of the DCAYA study findings articulated above, helping homeless youth identify and nurture relationships with caring adults is a promising intervention that can lead to lasting stability.

### Educational Engagement, Participation and Barriers

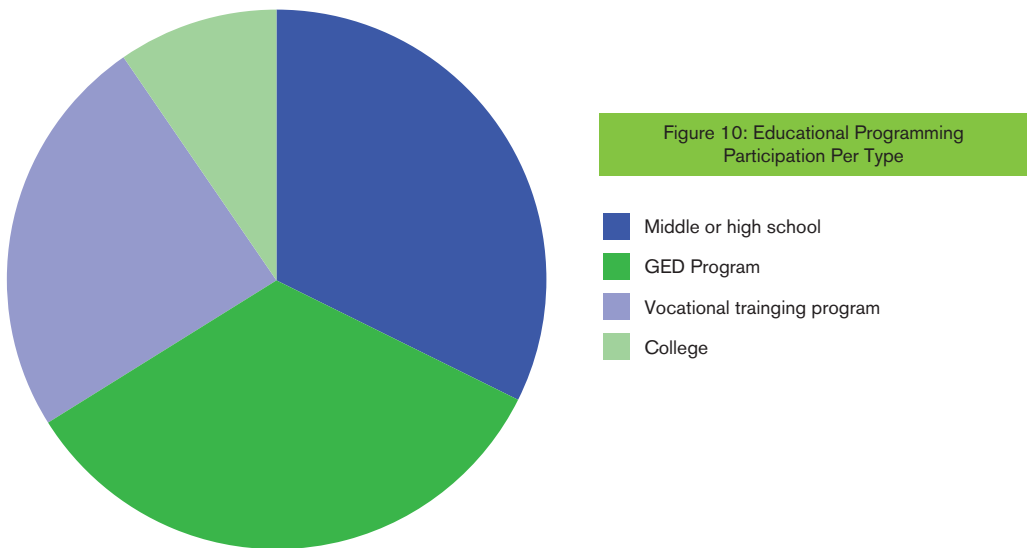


Figure 11: Education Participation Rates

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 12: High School or GED Completion Rates

Age Group	General Youth Population of DC(American Fact Finder Database, 2005-2009) <sup>5</sup>	Homeless Youth
18-24	85.3%	73%

<sup>5</sup>This percentage is likely high due to the way in which DCPS graduation rates are calculated

Figure 13: Findings on Youth not participating in an educational program

Percent who do not have a high school diploma or GED	38.9%
Percent of drop outs who disengaged before the start of 11th grade	38.9%

Figure 14: 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>

Figure 15: Reasons for educational disengagement for youth who have completed high school or GED

Reason Cited	Youth is over 19 years of age, has obtained a GED or High School Diploma
Not Interested	25%
Not sure where to enroll/No documentation	6.2%
Lack of Money	26.6%
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/maintain employment</li> </ul>

Figure 16: Experiences when last in School

Issue Identified	Percent
Truancy	46%
Poor or Failing Grades	40.7%
Suspension	38.6%

Nearly half of respondents (49%) reported attending an educational or vocational training program. Of those respondents, the types of educational programming youth reported participating in included middle and high school, GED programming, vocational training programs, or college. There was no significant statistical difference in education participation across genders. Notable differences in participation and completion rates are apparent when comparing homeless and unstably housed youth to the general DC youth population as data from the US Census Bureau American Fact Finder Data base in Figures 11 and 12 illustrates.

Youth not participating in an educational or vocational training program were asked to indicate why and as Figures 14 and 15 illustrate, the reasons for disengagement differed significantly depending on the age of the respondent and whether they had completed high school or obtained a GED. For those who had not completed a secondary education program the difference could be the result of a number of factors including: the maturity of the respondents, a more nuanced appreciation for the importance of a diploma or GED and/or the lack of access to alternative venues able to engage and maintain non-traditional or disengaged learners, or young parents. The qualitative responses youth gave proved that youth over 18 had a desire to engage in this type of programming but faced a myriad of barriers to re-engagement. The most frequently cited barriers included: the need to earn money, an inability to find and access services, lack of knowledge on how to re-engage and the complexities associated with young parenthood, most notably, the need for affordable childcare.

Figure 15 reflects why those youth who have obtained a GED or High School Diploma chose not to continue into a post secondary education opportunity. The most frequently cited reasons were a lack of money and a lack of interest. The apparent lack of interest is troubling given the importance of education in long term stability and understanding why youth are disinterested is clearly an area that needs further investigation. Furthermore, it is evident that helping youth understand the value of continued education or training opportunities, and then matching this messaging with access to appropriate programming and available funding opportunities, is critical to achieving lasting self sufficiency.

In an effort to better understand factors leading to educational disengagement, youth were queried about their experiences when last in school. Truancy, poor or failing grades and discipline problems the most frequently cited. However, youth still in school did report transportation difficulties at a significantly higher rate than those youth who had dropped out of school. These findings suggest a variety of root causes related to educational disengagement and opportunities for more comprehensive intervention. Continuing to expand our understanding of what is leading to or exacerbating these experiences is critical as the District continues to look at educational reforms and systems to better support secondary and post secondary education completion.

## Employment Status

Figure 17: 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 18: 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%

Figure 19: Length of Employment	
Length of time at current job	Percent
< 3 months	50%
3-6 months	25%
6-12 months	17.5%
Over 1 year	7.5%

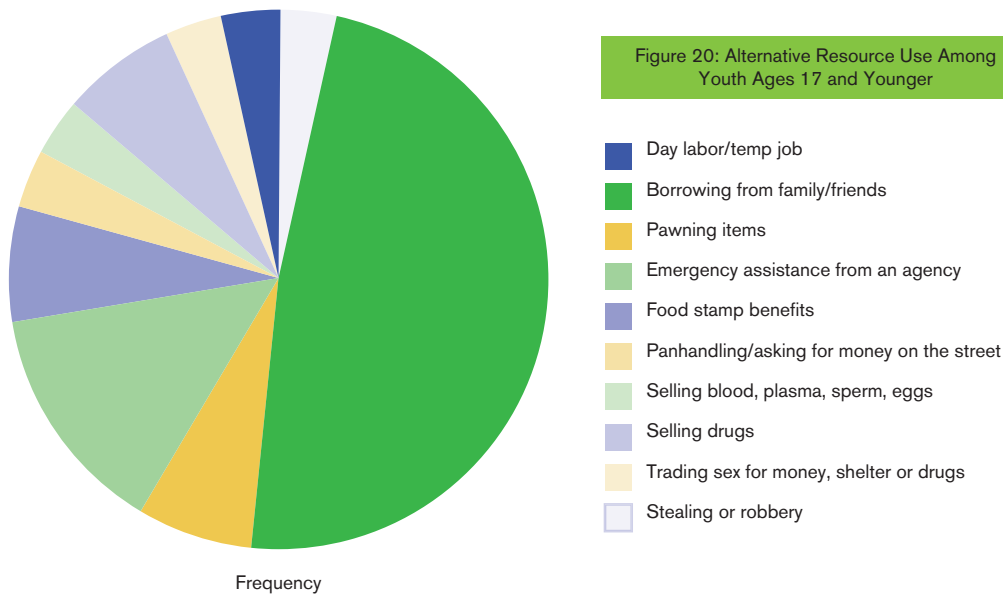
On the whole, more than 81% of respondents reported being unemployed, with a slightly lower rate of unemployment among youth between 20-24 years of age. The rate of unemployment, the barriers to obtaining employment cited by youth, and the finding that 75% of youth had been employed for six months or less are all likely the result of a number of interconnected variables. The recent economic downturn is one obvious contributing factor; youth, with the “least labor force experience are disproportionately hurt by recessions, (last hired, first fired)” (Danziger and Ratner, 2011, p. 135). A second possible cause is that, unlike previous generations, young adults entering the work force are simply more likely to experience what economists refer to as job churning, the voluntary or involuntary movement between employers over relatively short periods of time (Farber, 2007). While voluntary movement between employers can be associated with positive outcomes in earning power over the long term, involuntary movement is associated with reduced wages and a lack of labor market skills in the long term (Danziger and Ratner, 2011). Given the high degree of overall unemployment in this sample and the low educational attainment and completion rates reported, a third likely cause is that youth are struggling to enter the labor market because they lack both hard and soft employment skills necessary to sustain employment. While large social change or the health of the economy are not immediately or easily resolved, providing youth and young adults with structured opportunities to gain these skills, apply them in the work place with support is an intervention that has been successful in other communities. Building on promising practices in this arena and continued investment in local programs that provide this type of support has the capacity to increase youth success in the job market.

Of the 18.9% who reported being regularly employed in a full or part-time job, the findings are still not encouraging. While 66.7%, reported working between 20-40 hours a week the median hourly wage was only \$8.30 an hour, or approximately \$1,300 a month before taxes (assuming a 40 hour work week). To put this wage in context, the National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that at the DC minimum wage rate of \$8.25 per hour an individual would have to work 139 hours a week to afford the fair market estimate (\$1,461 a month) for a two bedroom apartment. Recognizing that most young adults live in shared housing, if both renters make minimum wage, they would each need

to work 70 hours a week to afford the rental costs. Even those youth with jobs are not earning the amount necessary, at least \$14 per hour, to afford District rental costs in shared housing scenarios. Finally, a particularly telling finding was the rate of both educational disconnection and unemployment for homeless youth vs. their housed counter parts. According to American Fact Finder data from 2005-2009, 6.6% of District youth between the age of 16-19 are not in any type of educational program, and are not actively working. The rate of disconnection from vocational or educational programming for the homeless respondents between 16-19 years of age was vastly higher at 73%.

Recognizing that self sufficiency relies on educational completion, employment experience, and access to continued education or training opportunities, understanding the root cause of educational disengagement and unemployment, addressing the barriers they are experiencing in either of these sectors and finding ways to effectively message this relationship to young people are all important facets of diminishing the rate of disengagement evident in this population.

In an effort to identify what types of resources or strategies youth accessed when unemployed, the survey did ask questions related to alternative resource use.. The findings related to alternative resource usage varied according to age and parenting status. Young heads of household (which are discussed in more detail further in this report) and youth over the age of 18 utilize social service or welfare based programs more than those under 18. This is logical given that access to these types of supports are typically based on age or parenting status. The lack of access to these programs for youth under 18 likely explains the reliance on borrowing from friends and family as well as the higher rate of high risk survival behaviors noted for this age group.



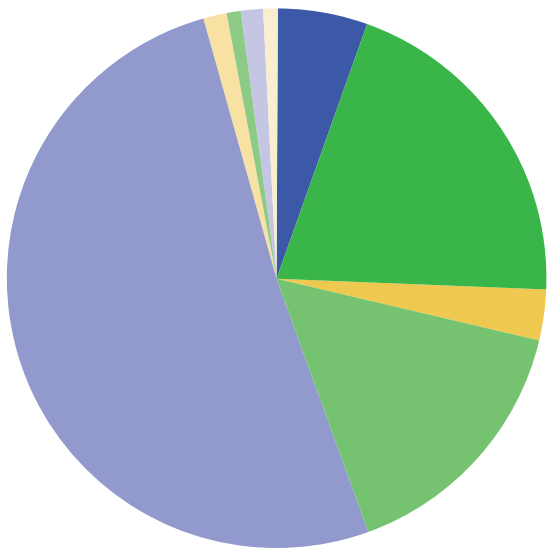


Figure 21: Alternative Resource Use Among Youth Ages 18 and Older

- Day labor/temp job
- Borrowing from family/friends
- Pawning items
- Emergency assistance from an agency
- Food stamp benefits
- Panhandling/asking for money on the street
- Selling drugs
- Trading sex for money, shelter or drugs
- Stealing or robbery

Frequency

Figure 22: Health Status	
Percent with a diagnosed disability	7.6%
Percent with a chronic health problem	10%
Percent that used an emergency room in the 30 days preceding the study	11%
Percent who access mental health services	35%
Percent who refuse mental health services	2%

Figure: 23 Substance Use	
Percent reporting use of drugs or alcohol 30 days preceding the survey	28%
Of those using—	45% reported using Alcohol 35% reported using marijuana
Percent reporting a history of substance abuse	18%

### Health and Substance Use

It is important to note that there are a few findings in this arena that are likely under-reported, particularly mental health diagnoses/needs and substance use. Youth did not frequently identify mental health diagnosis or disability yet 35% of respondents indicated utilizing counseling or other mental health services. This finding could indicate that while youth may be unwilling or reluctant to disclose personal history information related to mental health diagnoses, or may be unaware of a formal diagnosis. In either scenario, it is clear that youth are seeking out these supports and only a small percentage are

refusing them if offered access.

With regard to substance use, comparing this study's response rates to those from national research on adolescent substance use suggests that the rates reflected in this study are low, and that use was likely under-reported. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Association, approximately 33.6% of young people ages 12-25 reported using alcohol during the 30 days prior to the 2009 survey (p. 30) and 13.98% reported using illicit drugs during this time period (p. 17). Given the national statistics, it is possible that youth were not fully reporting substance use in their responses. One compelling and positive finding related to health, wellness and risk factors was the rate at which youth were being tested for HIV. Nearly 77% of respondents reported having been tested for HIV, with 81.5% having been tested in the last 6 months.

## Sub-Populations

Figure 24: 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 25: 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%

Figure 26: Where Young Parents Stay	
Time/Age Limited Transitional Housing Program	39%
With friends or extended family	19%
Permanent Supportive Housing Program	17%
Adult Emergency Shelter	10%

Figure 27: Most Commonly Utilized Services Among Young Parents	
Shelter or Transitional Living Program	67%
Education Supports	58%
Job Training Program	52%
Childcare	48%

Figure 28: Education Data for Young Parents	
Completion of High School or GED Program	41%
High School drop out rate	40%
Percent who drop out by 10 <sup>th</sup>	22%
Most commonly cited reasons for educational disengagement	Lack of child care / Not interested / Lack of money

Figure 29: Employment Data for Young Parents	
Unemployment rate	80%
Barriers to employment (quantitative)	60% Cannot find employment 28% Lack the necessary job skills 12% Lack the necessary ID or documentation 8% Do not know how to obtain employment
Barriers to employment (qualitative)	Lack of affordable child care

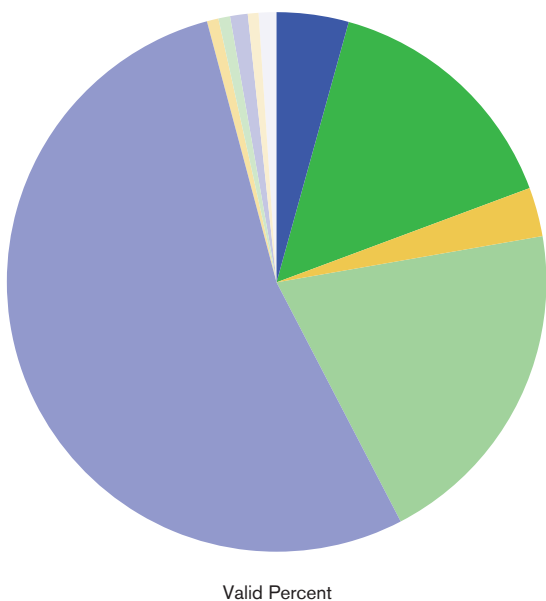


Figure 30: Alternative Resource Use Among Young Parents

- Day labor/temp job
- Borrowing from family/friends
- Pawning items
- Emergency assistance from an agency
- Food stamp benefits
- Panhandling/asking for money on the street
- Selling blood, plasma, sperm, eggs
- Selling drugs
- Trading sex for money, shelter or drugs
- Stealing or robbery

It may seem that parenting youth respondents are somewhat over represented within this data set. While the range of participating sites was weighted toward programs that provide housing and supports to families, it is important to note that data from the Homeless Management Information System and anecdotal reports from providers both indicate that the prevalence of young families within the homeless population has been increasing.

The prevalence of young parents in the sample is particularly significant when compared to the larger District population. According to data from a DC Department of Health report published in 2010, there were 9,135 live births in 2008 of which 3,027, or approximately one third, were to mothers under the age of 24. This report estimates that there were 64,065 women between the ages of 10-24 in DC, meaning that just under 5% of this age group carried a child to term and gave birth. The overrepresentation of parenting youth respondents could be the result of the sampling process, which

did include a number of programs that specifically work with young families.

Unlike the sample solely including unstably-housed youth, the broader sample demonstrates that young parents were more likely to report economic issues rather than interpersonal conflict as main reasons leading to homelessness. Interestingly, becoming or getting someone pregnant was not cited as a leading cause of homelessness for young parents; only 37.34% of respondents from this group indicated that this was a main reason leading to homelessness. While young parents did not directly identify pregnancy or parenting as a direct cause, it could still be a contributing factor that leads to other family or household stressors that culminate in a youth exiting or being asked to leave their home of origin. Of those who did respond that it was a main cause, the vast majority, 86.44%, was female. This suggests that pregnancy or parenting is a greater determinant for homelessness among young women.

The higher rate of placement at transitional living programs and permanent supportive housing programs vs. couch-surfing reflected in this sample is likely the result of the range of participating host sites, and the slightly greater availability of supported housing programs for families vs. those specifically tailored to individual youth or young adults. Nonetheless, it is still troubling that close to 20% of the respondents are without a stable housing situation.

In terms of service utilization, it may seem inconsistent that only 48% of participants reported using child care. The researchers do not attribute this low response rate to young parents not wanting or seeking childcare options. This conclusion is supported by two key factors. First, young parents consistently cited a lack of access to subsidized or affordable childcare as a significant barrier to re-engaging in educational or vocational activities.

Second, the lack of affordable and accessible childcare is an issue throughout DC, and particularly in low income areas. According to an Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) report from 2010, there were 10,377 children on provider waiting lists, the majority of whom were under school-aged (under five years of age). (Akukwe, Lyons, Claiborne, Harris, Timbo, Barry, Garba, 2010) Furthermore, although the District has prioritized early education opportunities, the system is currently being redesigned and has not been fully implemented. As this process has unfolded, District agencies providing low cost or subsidized programming were decreased. From 2008-2010, the percentage of childcare slots in government agencies declined from 10.1 percent to 1.4 percent. Community based providers operating the majority of the remaining low cost, accessible centers simply have not been able to keep pace and fill this gap. To provide further context, as of May 2011, 15,400 children were served with subsidy dollars, however the National Center for Children and Poverty, using data from the 2009 American Community Survey estimates that 33,677 children in the District live in a household with an income below the Federal poverty level. Further complicating access is the distribution of child care centers across the city. The communities and regions of the city with the highest poverty rates and the most children, wards 7 and 8, have the fewest options (DC Action for Children, 2011). A second complicating factor that may be contributing to under utilization of subsidized child care is the process of accessing these services. Parents must first identify a program with an open slot, then begin the subsidy application process which can be time consuming, frustrating and difficult to navigate.

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

<sup>6</sup>This number is likely inflated given the cost of living differences inherent to the DC Metropolitan area as a whole.

Education participation rates and secondary education completion rates within the young parent group are both lower than their non-parenting peers. Over half of the young parent group was not participating in any type of educational or vocational program and as Figure 28 illustrates, high school diploma or GED completion rates for this group are low. This finding is consistent with other research into the struggles teen parents and young heads of household face. Employment rates among parenting teens vs. their non-parenting peers were not significantly different, with a staggering 80% reporting unemployment.

Similar to their non-parenting peers, 75% of parenting youth who were employed had been in their job for less than six months. The median hourly wage for employed parents was slightly higher at \$10.00 an hour or, assuming a forty hour work week, \$19,200 a year. To put this in context, the Economic Policy Institute estimates that in the DC Metropolitan area, a single parent of one child must earn over \$56,000 a year to cover housing, food, child care, transportation, health care, basic necessities and taxes<sup>6</sup>. Childcare alone costs an average of \$58 a day (average of daily costs for a child age 4 or younger attending full time child care at a child care center) or close to \$14,000 a year. Thus, even if employed, young parents are still not earning enough in their current positions to achieve self-sufficiency. While some of the barriers to educational re-engagement are similar regardless of parenting status, the lack of access to affordable child care as a significant barrier was frequently mentioned throughout the surveys completed by young parents. These data points all suggest that investment in affordable and accessible child care will enhance young parents' employment and educational participation rates and facilitate their successful transition out of shelter or transitional living programs and into self sufficiency.

The types of alternative resources young parents utilize differed from their non-parenting peers under the age of 18 significantly, but were not drastically different from youth between the ages of 18-24. Food stamps, emergency support from an agency and TANF were among the most frequently cited services utilized. Given the median age of young parent respondents, plus additional access to programs (like TANF) due to parenting status, the rates of alternative service use are consistent.

### System-Involved Youth

Figure 31: System Involved Youth Demographics	
Percent of Respondents	39%
Median Age	20
Gender	75% Female / 25% Male
Percent over 18 years of age	68%

Figure 32: Experiences When Last in School		
Experience when last in school	Percent response for SI Youth	Percent Response for non-SI Youth
Truancy	59%	46%
Poor or Failing Grades	45%	40.7%
Suspension	46%	38.6%

Figure 33: Reasons for Educational Disengagement post secondary education completion		
–	Percent response for System Involved Youth	Percent Response for Non-System Involved Youth
Lack of Funds	40%	26%
Lack of Interest	14%	25%

Figure 34: Substance Use	
Percent reporting use of drugs or alcohol 30 days preceding the survey	34%
Percent reporting a history of substance abuse	26%
Percent who received substance abuse treatment	19%

System-involved youth were those who responded “yes” to “having been placed in foster care, a group home, treatment center, juvenile detention facility or other related placement. The prevalence of homeless youth with a history of system involvement reflected in our sample is higher than most national estimates, but comparable to findings in homeless youth studies. Given that 68% of those with a history of involvement with the welfare of juvenile justice system were over 18 years of age, this data suggests that youth are either transitioning from, or aging out of, systems of care and not successfully reuniting with their communities or families of origin for the long term. The prevalence of homeless youth with a history of system involvement reflected in our sample is significantly higher than national estimates, but comparable to findings in homeless youth studies. A 2005 study of 19 year olds who had emancipated from the foster care system in three states found that 14% had experienced a period of homelessness since exiting care (Courtney, 2005). A national evaluation of foster care independent living programs reported a higher percentage, 25%, of homelessness among former foster care youth (Cook et al., 1991). A 2004 study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported a similar rate of homelessness for youth exiting the state welfare system (Casey, 2004).

Surveys of homeless youth completed in specific communities have consistently reported higher rates of system-involved youth in their samples. Minnesota's point in time survey completed by the Amherst E. Wilder Foundation found that roughly one third of respondents had a history of placement in a state system of care. The Baltimore youth count found that nearly half of their unstably housed youth had a history of system involvement.

Youth responses for where they spent the night prior to taking the survey, as well as their reasons for leaving home were similar to their non-system involved peers. However, youth in this group did report running away from home or placement at a higher rate than their peers, at an average of five times, with 13% reporting they had run away 10 or more times. The frequency of running from placement, and the reasons identified are similar to findings revealed in an Urban Institute and Chapin Hall (University of Chicago) study of foster care youth in Chicago and Los Angeles. The study of 50 foster care youth between the ages of 14-17 found that one in four youth had run away from placements more than 10 times, typically running because of frustration with their placement, or a desire to be with friends or family. That youth are running from placement to be closer to friends or family, but then also struggling to remain in their home of origin upon exiting systems of care suggests that there is a clear opportunity

to enhance and strengthen family reunification work conducted while youth are still in care or custody.

Education participation rates among system-involved youth were very similar to their non-system involved peers, but as Figure 32 illustrates, the rate at which system involved youth reported negative school behaviors was higher than their peer groups. One of the most interesting findings in this data set was the different reasons given for educational disengagement after completion of a high school diploma or GED (See Figure 33) These data points suggest that youth in systems of care have received different messages on the importance of education and have a desire to participate in a post secondary education program or opportunity. What this could be, or how it is occurring is unknown, but examining this difference further is recommended, as is thinking about creative ways to ensure that youth exiting the child welfare of juvenile justice system have the opportunity to obtain funds or participate via a subsidy or reduced cost.

Employment among system involved youth was slightly higher than non-system involved youth, with 24% reporting employment. The wage earned, number of hours worked and length of employment were comparable to non-system involved youth, as were the barriers to employment identified by system involved youth.. The higher rate of employment among this subpopulation suggests conclusions similar to those related to education, that youth in systems of care may be receiving positive employment training opportunities that if identified, could be replicated for the larger at risk and homeless youth population. For those youth who were unemployed, alternative resource use did differ slightly. System involved youth utilized food stamps (33%) or emergency assistance (17%) at a higher rate than non-system involved peers, while borrowing from friends or family was a far less utilized strategy at only 18%.

Response rates related to disabilities or chronic health issues were not significantly different among the system involved sub-population. However, rates of substance use, frequency of substance use and history of substance use did differ slightly. Rates of HIV testing were higher among system involved youth than their peers. 84% of respondents had been tested for HIV and 88% of those had been tested in the preceding six months.

One final data point related to system involved youth was related to independent living preparedness. This group of respondents was analyzed according to age, to identify those respondents who were no longer involved in either CFSA or DYRS. Youth were asked if they had checking or savings accounts, and if not, why. This question was asked to try and parse out financial literacy awareness. Nearly 60% of respondents reported not having either a checking or savings account. Of those without checking accounts, 40% reported not having proper identification and 15% reported not knowing how to open a checking account. Of those without a savings account, 31% did not have the proper identification and 15.8% did not know how to open one. Based on these response rates, youth are still exiting state systems of care without proper identification or basic training on financial literacy. This lack of exposure to basic independent living skills (for the entire group of system involved respondents) was further evidenced by responses to service utilization among system involved youth with only 36% reporting having received structured independent living skill development opportunities.

## LGBTQ Youth

Figure 35: Demographics of LGBTQ Youth	
Percent of Respondents	6%
Median Age	19
Gender	14.8% Male 77.8% Female 7.4% Transgendered

Figure 36: Causal Factors Leading LGBTQ Youth to Exit their Home of Origin	
Family Conflict	53%
Lack of tolerance for sexual orientation or gender identity	22%

Figure 37: LGBTQ Youth Experiences When Last in School		
	Youth who identify as LGBTQ	Youth who do not identify as LGBTQ
–		
Did not feel safe at school	8.7%	13.5%
Did not feel supported at school	17.39%	28%

To more effectively ascertain the characteristics of the LGBTQ population, the entire data set of 479 respondents was used. It is important to note that the response rate for LGBTQ youth is likely low due to the low number of participating sites that provide services specifically tailored to LGBTQ youth. The information provided by LGBTQ youth related to demographics, services utilized, education and employment were similar to those provided by the larger sample.

A few interesting findings did emerge. First, despite common assumptions youth in this data set did not report being thrown from, or exiting the home due to a lack of tolerance for their sexual identity at rates suggested in other studies. A second interesting finding was identified in responses related to education. LGBTQ youth reported not feeling safe, and not feeling supported when last at school at far lower rates than peers who did not identify as LGBTQ. This finding suggests that efforts to ensure schools are safe zones for LGBTQ youth have had a positive effect. Substance use among LGBTQ youth was comparable to peers who do not identify as LGBTQ; however the rate at which this sub-population reported being tested for HIV was even higher than their peers with 92% having been tested and 76% having been tested in the previous six months.

## Prevalence of Youth Homelessness in Washington DC

Deriving a more accurate estimate on the size of the homeless youth population is inherently difficult. The previous discussion on this study's limitations demonstrates that there simply is no perfect method for effectively counting homeless youth in a set period of time, and therefore, the ability of any research study to determine either an incidence or annual prevalence rate is limited. Rather than give a concrete estimate, DCAYA has applied a variety of methods to this data set to provide a range of estimates on the actual size of the homeless youth population.

### *Application of a weighted turn over rate*

To determine prevalence rates, DCAYA determined and applied a weighted turnover rate. Turnover rates, or multipliers recognize that more people experience homelessness than can be identified and counted at any given point in time and that in a given year individuals will cycle in and out of homelessness over varied periods of time. Turnover rates, when applied to point in time counts, are intended to produce an annual estimate on the number of individuals who are homeless during a given year. Rather than rely on turnover rates in other communities, DCAYA calculated the turn over rate

<sup>7</sup>Specifically, DCAYA is aware that this study did not capture the entire homeless youth population. Furthermore, the turnover rate is based on only the 230 respondents who indicated a clear length of homelessness.

<sup>8</sup>The specific assumption of relevance is that the number of youth counted is representative of responses and rates of homelessness given at any other time of the year. It is likely that there are seasonal shifts in the number of homeless youth and young adults.

based on respondent data.

Figure 38: Weighted Turn Over Rate			
Mean Time for Homelessness	Percent of Respondents	Minimum Turn Over Rate	Average Turn Over Rate
< 1 month	31%	12	3.7
1-4 months	20.6%	3	.6
5-11 months	14.6%	1.5	.21
> 12 months	33.6%	1	.33
Weighted Average	–	–	4.84

To isolate the prevalence rate, the weighted average is then multiplied by the number of unique respondents. Using this methodology, at least 1,600 youth experience a period of homelessness over the course of the year in DC. It is important to note that due to the limitations<sup>7</sup> inherent in this type of survey, and the assumptions required to ascertain this number<sup>8</sup>, we believe this to be a very conservative estimate.

A Congressional Research Service Report from 2007 suggests that between 2.8% and 5% of the youth population (10-24) experience a period of homelessness each year. Applying these estimates to the District's population of 10-24 year olds provides a second set of estimates. At 2.8%, just over 3,000 youth run from or are thrown from their home each year. At 5%, the number increases to just under 6,000 youth.

### Policy Recommendations

Although this data set is not entirely generalizable, the findings have the capacity to inform the development of, and investment in, interventions and supports able to enhance prevention, streamline youth service access and more effectively transition youth into stable adulthood. The following section provides an overview of the areas where this study can enhance future discussions and policy development. The discussion of recommendations is intentionally broad. The nuances of this data set, combined with the array of stakeholders that need to be involved in translating these findings into policy and practice for the District, precludes more definitive recommendations at this time.

The findings of this study reveal three major themes relevant to policy recommendations. First, that the services, supports and systems youth need to achieve self-sufficient adulthood are unique. Second, youth homelessness is not the result of a single systems failure but rather a confluence of conditions spanning individual and family functioning, community conditions and institutional failures. Thus, the array of individual, community based, and government stakeholders who must participate in future discussions related to policy development or systems change is vast. Third, the District has many of the components needed to better support

homeless youth but access and coordination could be more effectively managed. In doing so, we believe that outcomes for both homeless youth, and all youth will improve.

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

The array of services and supports necessary to transition homeless and unstably housed youth into self sufficiency are broad and dynamic. Increased availability of, and access to, stable long-term housing is the primary component to moving youth forward. The study clearly demonstrates that demand for supported transitional housing programs for those youth for whom it is not appropriate or possible to live in 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 necessarily mean permanent supportive housing. In fact, the type of housing could, and should be varied to meet the distinct needs of youth as they grow and mature. Regardless of the housing type, it is critical that the program facilitating housing is able to connect youth to an array of complementary services (health, mental health, education, job training, independent living skill training). In addition, due to the distinct developmental features of adolescence and early adulthood, and range of skills and experiences youth must gain as they approach a healthy adult interdependence, it is important that progress through the housing/support system continuum is not defined by age. Instead, gradually decreasing the level of support (financial, as well as practical day to day support) and increasing the degree of self-reliance and healthy connections as outcome goals or specific benchmarks are achieved has the capacity to translate to stronger outcomes for homeless youth.

As mentioned above, access to academic re-engagement opportunities, accessible post-secondary education opportunities, job training and supported placement programs as well as community based services that provide health care and psycho-social development programs are equally important. Youth consistently reported seeking out but being unable to access many of the above services. Youth frequently cited extensive wait lists, a lack of knowledge on available programs or a lack of clarity on how to enroll or participate as primary barriers. This suggests both a need to increase the capacity and availability of these services, as well as simplify the process by which youth are directed to these resources. Investing in a structured and coordinated system able to match youth with available housing and/or other service providers who are able to begin working with the youth immediately is critical. Acknowledging that the issue of youth homelessness does not stem from one single system or individual failure, but instead a confluence of dynamic circumstances, means that the systems and policy changes necessary to mitigate this issue cannot come from a single stakeholder, organization or agency. Policy recommendations in this arena must evolve from the needs of the consumers, in part reflected by this study, as well as building on the institutional knowledge and expertise of community providers and representatives from a broad spectrum of government agencies including but not limited to: the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, the Department of Human Services, DC Public Schools, the Department of Employment Services, the Child and Family Services Agency, the Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services, the DC Housing Authority, the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Health. The Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) and the ICH Youth Sub-Committee have already begun convening these stakeholders on a regular basis and the work that has started in these meetings should continue to be built upon in future.

The final emerging theme of this study is that the District must continue to leverage and strengthen existing systems and reforms for youth writ large. Continued investment in changes to policy and practice that: enhance family and community functioning, connect families and youth to necessary community based services from both a prevention and positive youth development perspective, improve educational outcomes and position youth to enter the workforce from a place of strength are all critical to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Many existing and current initiatives across the District embody these efforts. As these developments continue, it will be important to recognize that while these shifts have the capacity to aid in homelessness prevention, it is equally important to develop avenues and opportunities to re-engage those young people who have already found

themselves homeless. This does not mean recreating the system or developing one exclusively for homeless youth. Rather, it means providing basic needs to homeless youth so that they are ready and able to take advantage of these opportunities, and fostering a system with multiple points of entry that can provide a coordinated response to each youth's level of skill, inherent assets and unique needs. The provision of basic needs and simplified access to appropriate services and supports are necessary elements for youth to achieve lasting self reliance and cultivate substantial healthy adult connections to individuals and institutions alike. It is equally important that the District develop a means to track where resources have been successfully leveraged, interventions leading youth to positive outcomes and the impact of systems change on the issue writ large. Thus, it is strongly recommended that the City execute an annual study of homeless youth to acquire a longitudinal data set that can illustrate the impact of policy and systems change to guide future efforts and modify the existing system as appropriate or necessary. That DCAYA was able to execute this study within a modest budget using critical partnerships with local providers and academic institutions demonstrates that this type of project can be successfully undertaken and likely improved upon in future years if it is institutionalized by the District government or ICH.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the Survey of Unstably Housed Youth garnered new and useful information about DC's homeless and unstably housed youth 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 in the District. 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 slightly modified (based on stated limitations and lessons learned) and 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 success, facilitating the District's ability to expand promising practices and effectively leverage resources.

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## Appendix A: Survey Instrument

The following pages contain the survey draft.