

JULY 2019

# “I’m Still a Human”

AN ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT HOMELESSNESS  
IN THE THREE COUNTY CONTINUUM OF CARE (FRANKLIN,  
HAMPSHIRE, AND BERKSHIRE COUNTIES, MASSACHUSETTS)

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**COMMUNITY ACTION  
PIONEER VALLEY**

Access • Opportunity • Community



Prepared by jo consulting for Community Action Pioneer Valley

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# Executive Summary



*From April through June 2019, Community Action Pioneer Valley partnered with jo consulting to conduct a needs assessment on youth and young adult (YYA) homelessness in Berkshire, Franklin, and Hampshire Counties in western Massachusetts. Services for families and individuals experiencing homelessness in this region collaborate within the Three County Continuum of Care (CoC) funded in part by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.*

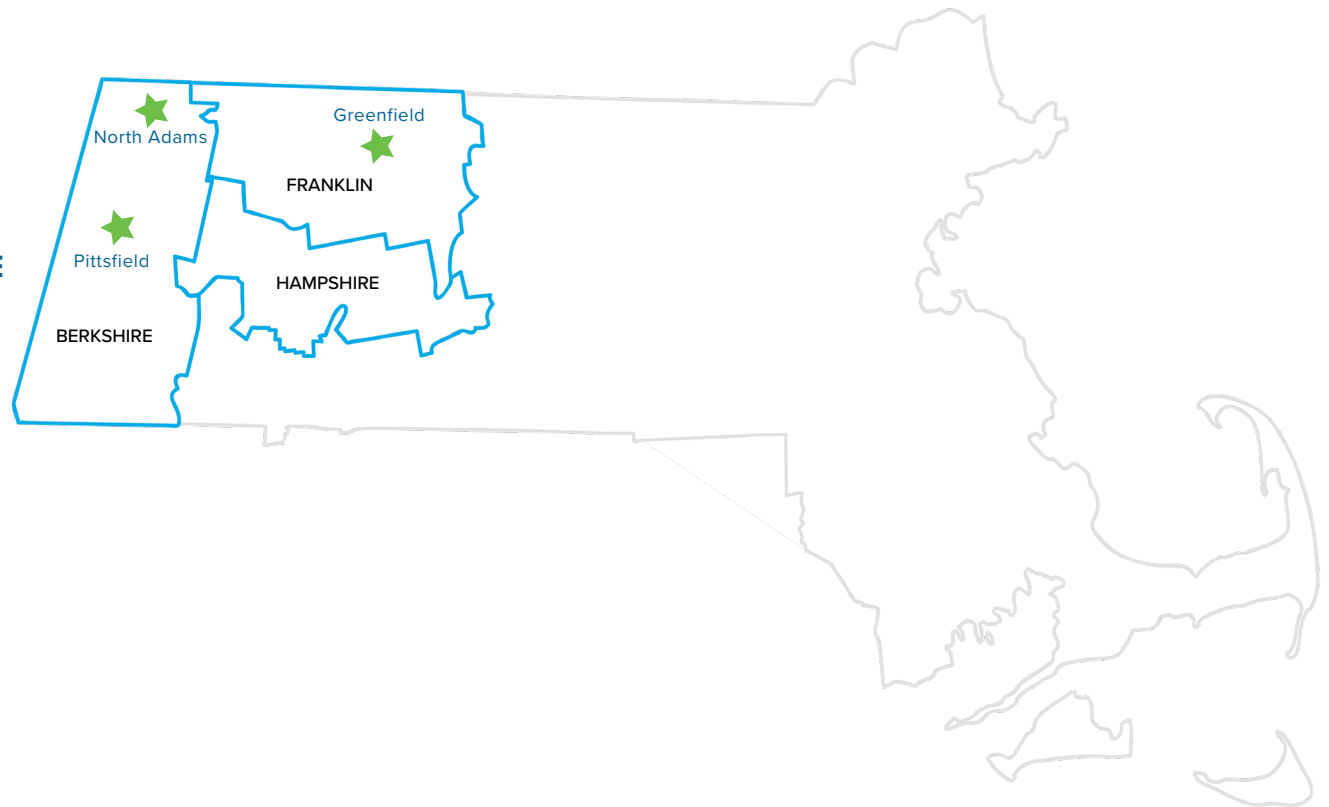
**THIS NEEDS ASSESSMENT IS PART OF A LARGER EFFORT FUNDED BY THE MASSACHUSETTS EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES TO UNDERSTAND THE SCOPE AND NATURE OF YYA HOMELESSNESS ACROSS MASSACHUSETTS AND TO CRAFT STATEWIDE SOLUTIONS.**

**IT IS IN THIS LARGER CONTEXT THAT WE CONDUCTED THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT, WITH THE FOUR SPECIFIC AIMS:**

- 1. Understand the scope and nature of YYA homelessness in the region**
- 2. Engage YYAs in designing services and systems**
- 3. Develop recommendations for improving the response to YYA homelessness**
- 4. Lay the groundwork for cross-system collaboration**

YYAs with lived experience of homelessness were engaged throughout the process through focus groups and the development of a Youth Action Board (YAB).

### THREE COUNTY CONTINUUM OF CARE (COC) SERVICE AREA OVERVIEW



The Three County CoC service area is largely rural, with approximately **360,000 people in 2,133 square miles** of land area -- 5.3% of the state's population residing in 27.3% of its total land area.

Population centers are in the **Connecticut River Valley** in central Franklin and Hampshire Counties and in **Pittsfield and North Adams** in Berkshire County on the extreme western side of the state.

Regular access to public infrastructure like public sewer and water services and transportation in the Three County region **lags behind** urban areas of the state (McFarland, 2018).

This further complicates **housing stability** in an area with an already **limited supply of affordable housing and housing subsidies** (Snow et al., 2014).

Additionally, **wages are low** relative to the cost of living.

**WHILE OFFICIAL POVERTY RATES ARE RELATIVELY LOW, ONLY ABOUT HALF THE POPULATION HAS ACCESS TO LIVING WAGE-LEVEL INCOME.**

**WE COLLECTED QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA FROM NUMEROUS SOURCES:**

- » Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)
- » 2018 Point-in-Time (PIT) count
- » 2018 Housing Inventory Chart
- » 2018 MA statewide youth count
- » Other statewide data sets on children, youth, and families
- » Two focus groups with YYAs experiencing homelessness, including one specifically focused on pregnant and parenting YYAs
- » Three focus groups with providers and community partners
- » Twelve stakeholder interviews with leaders and direct service staff from across the region
- » An online survey of people working in homelessness and related fields (49 respondents from across the three counties)

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**BASED ON THESE DATA SETS, THE ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTED THE FOLLOWING:**

- At least **24 YYAs experience homelessness** on the streets or in shelters in the Three County region on a given night.
- Over the course of a year, at least **101 YYAs are served by homelessness programs** (as documented in HMIS). The vast majority of YYAs accessing services each year are between 18 and 24 years old.
- Based on national prevalence data from the Voices of Youth Count (YoYC, 2016), there could be as many as **3,750 YYAs experiencing homelessness or housing instability** in the region in the course of a year.
- **Young people of color** are significantly overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness compared to their general population numbers. According to HMIS, 16% identify as African American (compared to 4.5% of the general population), and 35% identify as Latinx (compared to 7% of the general population).
- 27% of the total population of YYAs experiencing homelessness identifies as **LGBTQ+**, which is approximately 2 times the prevalence among all young people in Massachusetts.
- Approximately 33% of YYAs are **pregnant or parenting**.

The current inventory of housing designed for YYAs transitioning from homelessness in the region includes: 24 units of rapid rehousing; 8 units of transitional housing; and 24 permanent supportive housing units. Funding sources for these subsidies include the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Section 8 vouchers, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services); the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (Department of Housing and Community Development), and Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance Home and Healthy for Good (Commonwealth of Massachusetts).

**IN ADDITION TO THESE QUANTITATIVE DATA, VARIOUS THEMES EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS, AND SURVEY:**

- Many YYAs experiencing homelessness are “**couch-surfing**” and not currently being served.
- A severe **lack of affordable housing** in the region puts many YYAs at risk of homelessness and complicates efforts to exit homelessness, a finding that was also supported by the quantitative analysis.
- **Few employment opportunities** exist for YYAs experiencing homelessness.
- **Mental health, substance use, and trauma** are intimately connected to experiences of homelessness, and there are insufficient resources across the region to address these issues.
- While the region has some strong programs serving YYAs experiencing homelessness, increased **cross-sector partnership** is needed to prevent and end YYA homelessness.

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**BASED ON THESE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS, A BROAD-BASED RESPONSE TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SHOULD FOCUS ON ACTIVITIES THAT:**

1. Prevent homelessness among YYAs, with a particular focus on YYAs of color, LGBTQ young people, and young families.
2. Create an effective and coordinated crisis response system in each of the three counties and improve coordination among the counties.
3. Develop long-term, sustainable solutions that focus on housing, education and employment, wrap-around services, and social connections.

**THIS REPORT PRESENTS THE FINDINGS FROM THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND OUTLINES POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS FOR PREVENTING AND ENDING YYA HOMELESSNESS IN THE BERKSHIRE, FRANKLIN, AND HAMPSHIRE COUNTIES.**



# Approach

## DEFINITIONS

This report uses the following definition of YYA homelessness established by the Massachusetts Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth:

A person 24 years of age or younger who is not in the physical custody of a parent or legal guardian, and who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. “Fixed” refers to a residence that is stationary, permanent and not subject to change. “Regular” means a dwelling at which a person resides on a regular basis (i.e. nightly). “Adequate” means that the dwelling provides safe shelter, meeting both physical and psychological needs of the youth. All three components of this definition- age, connection to a parent or guardian, and housing status- must be met in order for a person to be considered **AN UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH.** (Mass.gov, 2013)

## WE OBTAINED QUANTITATIVE DATA FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES:

- 2018 Three County CoC HMIS<sup>1</sup> for persons under 24-years-old
- HUD 2018 Point In Time (PIT)<sup>2</sup> count
- 2018 Housing Inventory Chart
- 2018 MA statewide youth count (Three County region data set)
- SY17-18 Consolidated dataset for elementary and secondary schools in the three counties
- MA Department of Public Health FY18 (Bureau of Substance Addiction Services dataset)
- MA Department of Children and Families FY18 data for children and youth served through the regional offices in the three counties
- Census Bureau estimates from the ACS 2017 dataset
- CY 2018 Department of Youth Services report
- and other existing reports.

## METHODOLOGY

This report summarizes the best available data concerning the prevalence and characteristics of YYAs experiencing homelessness in Franklin, Hampshire, and Berkshire Counties, the official coverage area for the HUD-designated “Pittsfield/Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire Counties Continuum of Care MA-507,” locally known as the “Three County CoC.”

<sup>1</sup> HMIS: Homeless Management Information System, a computerized data collection tool designed to capture client-level information over time on the characteristics and service needs of men, women, and children experiencing homelessness.

<sup>2</sup> Point in Time counts are conducted annually on a single night during the last week of January and serve as a longitudinally-tracked baseline estimate for the number of people sleeping on the streets, in places not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelters, and in transitional housing programs. Chapin Hall has produced a useful toolkit that provides more information on the count and why it is generally considered by the field to be a minimum count, specifically for youth and young adults: <http://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Voices-of-Youth-Count-Toolkit-2018-FINAL.pdf>

Additionally, the assessment team administered an online survey with service providers working in homelessness and housing programs, health care, behavioral health, education, and other related fields. Finally, the team conducted two focus groups with service providers in the homelessness field, two focus groups with YYAs experiencing homelessness, and 12 stakeholder interviews to understand the nature of YYA homelessness in the region and to identify needs and gaps in the current housing and services system.

**INTERVIEWEES ARE LISTED IN THE TABLE TO THE RIGHT.**

NAME	TITLE/ORGANIZATION
<b>KAT ALLEN</b>	Franklin Regional Council of Governments, Coalition Coordinator, Communities That Care Coalition
<b>SEAN BARRY</b>	Department of Mental Health, Child and Adolescent Services for the Western Massachusetts Region
<b>LEV BEN-EZRA</b>	Executive Director, Amherst Survival Center, former Director of Community Action Youth Programs (Franklin and Hampshire Counties)
<b>BRAD GORDON</b>	Executive Director/Staff Attorney, Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority
<b>GAIL GRAMAROSA</b>	Quaboag Hills Substance Use Alliance/Quaboag Hills Community Coalition (Hampshire County)
<b>MICHAEL HAGMAIER</b>	Soldier On
<b>BETTE JENKS</b>	North Quabbin Patch Program of Valuing Our Children
<b>DEB MCLAUGHLIN</b>	Coordinator, Opioid Task Force of Franklin County and the North Quabbin Region
<b>THADDEUS POULTER</b>	Outreach Worker, DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services (Franklin and Hampshire Counties)
<b>NANCY PARLAND</b>	Clinical Supervisor, CHD Outpatient Behavioral Health Services, Greenfield clinic (Franklin County)
<b>SAM PEPE</b>	Case Management Supervisor, DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services
<b>ANDREA TOMSHO-DEXTER</b>	Program Coordinator for Healthy Families, Community Action Pioneer Valley (Franklin and Hampshire Counties)

**WE AUGMENTED THESE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES WITH COMMUNITY MEETINGS AROUND THE THREE COUNTY REGION.**



# Youth Partnership

*Throughout the Needs Assessment process, our team partnered with YYAs experiencing homelessness. We began by assessing the region's experience with YYA-led decision-making and the capacity to recruit, coordinate, and facilitate engagement of young people with lived experience, then formally launched a Youth Action Board (YAB) in Franklin County. Community Action identified Myck LeMay, Leadership Development & Education Coordinator at Community Action Youth Programs, as a key process lead to engage young people with lived experience, support their participation, and ensure safe and affirming meetings. YAB members developed meeting norms and areas of focus, including housing affordability, employment, transportation, and the need for earlier, more supportive interventions. YAB members and YYA focus group participants were compensated with cash stipends for their time and expertise. Future work will include YABs in Berkshire and Hampshire Counties.*

## **SPECIFIC YYA PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES INCLUDED:**

- 1.** Identifying a primary facilitator and YYAs with leadership and advocacy experience
- 2.** Convening YAB meetings and developing internal norms and a governance structure
- 3.** Two focus groups, including one that included systems mapping and gaps analysis
- 4.** YAB members co-developing and leading a training segment at a Youth Homelessness Summit held at Greenfield Community College on June 20th, 2019
- 5.** YAB adapting and implementing materials to incorporate into their internal structure

## **CHALLENGES**

The current YAB is focused on Franklin County, and similar structures should be replicated in Hampshire and Berkshire Counties. This will require funding, facilitation, and ongoing organizational support. Cash stipends – an ethically responsible component of the work that matches national best practices – are needed to support multiple YABs. Cash payments provide flexible compensation that values time and unique expertise, increases credibility with and accountability to community partners, and allows YYAs to pay for their life's expenses just as every other adult expects to be compensated. Community Action Youth Programs has already dedicated resources for cash stipends and staff time to support the Franklin County YAB.

Another challenge is that while several members display high level leadership qualities, they may not yet be in a position to balance immediate needs (e.g., housing, food) with a paid position and increased responsibility. Support for these peer leaders should take this into account.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The YAB will continue to meet regularly in Franklin County, develop a recruitment strategy, and build a social media presence. The YAB has been recognized by the CoC Board as an official committee and is poised to become more integrated into CoC planning and decision making. Another next step in expanding to other counties is to explore the use of video-conferencing and other technologies to link youth and young adult leaders from across the three counties.

# Prevalence & Characteristics

*Around 24 YYAs experience homelessness in the Three County CoC each night according to our most conservative estimates (PIT, 2018). Through the course of a year, many more become literally homeless, while untold numbers of others are at risk of homelessness. They find themselves without a stable place to live because home wasn't safe, home wasn't supportive, or home didn't exist.*

## PREVALENCE OF YYA HOMELESSNESS IN THE THREE COUNTY REGION

Prevalence estimates describe the size and scope of homelessness. They are often based on point-in-time methods, which count the number of individuals experiencing homelessness at a given point in time, or on a typical day.

In the January 2018 HUD PIT count, the Three County CoC identified 24 YYAs on the streets, in emergency shelters, or in Transitional Housing (TH).

If we include the young children of YYA parents, the number is 35 individuals (HUD, 2018). This number provides the clearest minimum baseline for YYA homelessness in the county. However, current PIT counting methods capture only a portion of the total number of YYAs experiencing homelessness.

### PIT DATA DO NOT INCLUDE:

- YYAs fleeing **dangerous living arrangements**
- Those who are **sleeping night to night** between different homes and apartments (e.g., couch-surfing)
- Those sleeping consistently in **spaces too small** or inappropriately configured to meet basic needs (e.g., doubled up)
- Those who **do not want to be, or cannot be, identified** by volunteers during the annual count

Three County CoC HMIS for 2018

**includes only one**

unaccompanied YYAs under 18, yet  
school districts in the three counties

**identified 73 students**

experiencing homelessness without a  
parent or guardian,

**out of 629 total**

students experiencing homelessness.

*Annual estimates are more likely than PIT estimates to include individuals experiencing episodic homelessness, which research shows is much more common for YYAs than being chronically homeless (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012). In 2018, the Three County CoC's HMIS included 101 YYAs in emergency shelter and transitional housing programs and 50 children in YYA-headed households (HMIS, 2018).*

Annual estimates only capture YYAs who interact with our homelessness resources and are therefore constrained by the current system's limitations. For example, homelessness systems are generally designed to target and provide services to older individuals, and so our PIT and HMIS numbers may be biased towards older YYAs. Three County CoC HMIS for 2018 includes only one unaccompanied YYAs under 18, and yet school districts in the three counties identified 73 students experiencing homelessness without a parent or guardian out of 629 total students experiencing homelessness. The school's method for identification is itself imperfect, generally requiring that YYAs self-report to a homelessness liaison or counselor, which may significantly suppress the number of YYAs actually experiencing homelessness.

Using the national average of 1 in 10 YYAs who are 18-24 and 1 in 30 YYAs who are under 18 (Morton, 2017), we would expect an upward limit of YYAs experiencing some kind of homelessness (10-24 years old) in the Three County region over the course of a year to be roughly 3,750 YYAs (Census, 2017).

### **DOES THAT MEAN WE ARE MISSING 3,726 YYAs?**

Indeed, this higher estimate is based on national data and ignores the nuances of our local communities, but it does invite us to question whether we are identifying all of the YYAs experiencing some type of homelessness in our region. The wide range of estimates of YYA homelessness indicates that it is larger than currently acknowledge, and that it is an urgent challenge.

**AT THE SAME TIME, THE CRISIS OF YYA HOMELESSNESS IN THE REGION IS SMALL ENOUGH THAT WE SHOULD FEEL EMPOWERED THAT WE CAN ACTUALLY DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.**

## CHARACTERISTICS OF YYAs EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Understanding the characteristics of YYAs experiencing homelessness can help policymakers and programs understand:

- **WHY** YYAs experience a housing crisis in the first place
- **HOW** certain populations experience homelessness differently from others
- **WHERE** to target specific resources
- **HOW TO** better communicate and raise awareness with a variety of community stakeholders.

### AGE:

According to our HMIS and PIT data, between 2% and 4% of YYAs experiencing homelessness are under the age of 18 (HUD, 2018; HMIS, 2018), and the average age of all YYAs who are homeless is between 20.4 and 21.5 (Mass.gov, 2018; HMIS, 2018). In contrast, YYAs report their average age of a first experience with homelessness as 16.6 years old (Mass.gov, 2018). This suggests that homelessness begins, on average, when YYAs are still minors, although our systems do not engage them until after they turn 18. The disparity may result from several factors. For example, our homelessness systems are designed to identify and serve older adults and not YYAs. Community and YYA awareness of what homelessness means, when and where a YYA might seek help, and stigma about those who identify themselves likely suppress counts of under 18-year-olds. In addition, mandatory child welfare reporting requirements may limit both an agency's willingness to identify a minor and a minor's willingness to present for homelessness resources.

### RACE AND ETHNICITY:

21% (PIT) to 35% (HMIS) of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County area identify as Hispanic or Latinx (Mass. gov, 2018; HMIS, 2018), compared only 7% of the general population and 26% of those with income below poverty level (Census 2017). Between 11% (PIT) and 16% (HMIS) of the total YYA population experiencing homelessness in the region identify as Black (Mass.gov, 2018; HMIS, 2018), compared to only 4.5% of the general population but 43% of those with income below poverty level in the region (Census, 2017). An additional 4% (PIT) to 25% (HMIS) of YYAs experiencing homelessness in our region identify as multiracial (Mass.gov, 2018; HMIS, 2018), reinforcing that preventing and ending YYA homelessness must intentionally target solutions to minority young people. Disparities may be even more pronounced among parenting YYAs, where 47% pregnant or parenting YYAs between 18-24 identify as Latinx (HMIS, 2018).

### GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

Data sources report some variability in gender among YYAs experiencing homelessness, although in all cases the majority of YYAs identified as female: according to PIT and HMIS data respectively, between 50% and 59.3% identified as female and 36.6% to 44.4% identified as male (Mass.gov 2018; HMIS, 2018). Although 2.1% of YYAs in the state youth count identified as transgender (Mass.gov, 2018), no YYAs identified as transgender among YYAs in the Three County CoC HMIS data (HMIS, 2018). Additionally, 18.7% of YYAs in the state youth count identified as LGBTQ (Mass.gov, 2018). By comparison, 12.5% of Massachusetts high school students and 15.5% 18 to 24-year-olds in Massachusetts identify as LGBTQ (Cahill, 2018), and communities across the country consistently find that between 20% and 40% of YYAs experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ. Percentages of YYAs who identify as non-cisgender (anything other than male or female as assigned at birth) have been estimated by studies at between .5% and 3%. Research consistently finds that LGBTQ YYAs are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness, that their reasons for leaving home are significantly different from their cisgender straight peers, and that they experience more severe consequences from homelessness, with higher rates of sexual exploitation, violence, and suicidality (MA Coalition, 2019).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF YYAs EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

**72%**

of unaccompanied YYAs sheltered through the homelessness system in 2018 did so for the first time.

**ONLY 12.3%**

were recorded as having a positive system exit.

**A LOW 11%**

of YYAs leaving shelter or transitional housing exit to permanent housing.

### PREGNANT AND PARENTING YYAs:

Eight YYAs (33%) experiencing homelessness in the Three County CoC were pregnant or parenting on the night of the 2018 PIT (HUD, 2018). As stated earlier, 47% of pregnant and parenting youth ages 18-24 identify as Latinx. Additionally, 36% of YYAs throughout the year who were identified sleeping on the street or who accessed shelter and Transitional Housing during the year were pregnant or parenting (HMIS, 2018). 19% of YYAs identified in the MA Statewide Youth Count Survey were pregnant or parenting (Mass.gov, 2018). These rates are lower than both the estimated national average of 40% (Morton, 2017) and estimates from many other Massachusetts communities whose HMIS and PIT count data indicate that the percentage of pregnant and parenting YYAs may be as high as 80% of all YYAs experiencing homelessness. We would expect over-representation in HMIS and PIT data sets, as Massachusetts is a right to shelter state for families.<sup>3</sup> The relatively low rates of pregnant and parenting YYAs may be a function of limited family resources in the region, or perhaps limited awareness, identification, and outreach in a region that is largely rural. As previously mentioned, Latinx YYAs are even more overrepresented among parenting YYAs in our data set than they are among unaccompanied YYAs (HMIS, 2018).

### HOMELESSNESS SYSTEM EXPERIENCE:

Nearly 64% of YYA parents sheltered through the homelessness system in 2018 did so for the first time. Only 26% were recorded as having a positive system exit,<sup>4</sup> although HMIS does not include any YYA parents who returned to the system during the same calendar year. Only 56% of parenting YYAs for whom we have data leave shelter or TH exit to PH (HMIS, 2018). 11% of all parenting YYAs in HMIS in 2018 are identified as long-term stayers and 3% (1 YYA) qualify as chronically homeless.

Nearly 72% of unaccompanied YYAs sheltered through the Three County CoC homelessness system in 2018 did so for the first time. Only 12.3% were recorded as having a positive system exit, and 10 unaccompanied YYAs returned to the system in the same calendar year. A startlingly low 11% of YYAs leaving shelter or TH exit to PH (HMIS, 2018). 17% of all unaccompanied YYAs in HMIS in 2018 are identified as long-term stayers, and 11% (7 YYAs) qualify as chronically homeless.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 450 of the Acts of 1983 mandates that Massachusetts provides emergency housing assistance to all “needy families with children and pregnant women with no other children.” The Emergency Assistance Program operated by the MA Department of Housing and Community Development provides emergency shelter and rehousing services to families experiencing homelessness who meet the following criteria - income below 115% of the poverty line; proof of homelessness status; and homelessness is due to one of four conditions 1) domestic violence 2) disaster 3) eviction 4) health and safety (e.g., irregular housing situation; not meant for human habitation; health/behavioral health; unit condition). For more information, visit the EA Program website: <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/find-emergency-family-shelter>

<sup>4</sup> HUD generally considers “positive exits” as those where a person exits to a “permanent destinations.” They may include: rental without a subsidy, rental with a temporary subsidy, rental with a permanent subsidy, permanent supportive housing, staying with family permanent tenure, or staying with friends permanent tenure. It generally does not include temporary programs where a person must vacate their living space after a predetermined date (e.g., transitional housing).

<sup>5</sup> Chronic homelessness is a threshold designed to identify the highest need and hardest to reach persons experiencing homelessness. Generally speaking, a person qualifies as chronically homeless when they have a 1) disability; 2) lives in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or an emergency shelter; and 3) has experienced homelessness continuously for at least 12 months or on at least 4 separate occasions in the last 3 years that equal at least 12 months. For the complete definition, see <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Defining-Chronically-Homeless-Final-Rule.pdf>

## CHARACTERISTICS OF YYAs EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

**21%**

of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County region reported a mental health service need.

**OVER 60%**

of unaccompanied YYAs in the HMIS data have at least one disabling condition.

### MENTAL HEALTH:

21% of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County region the a need for mental health services (Mass.gov, 2018), and similarly, 20% of YYAs in HMIS, all but one of whom were unaccompanied, report mental health to be disabling (HMIS, 2018). These may be regarded as a significant undercount; 69% of YYAs participating in the national Voices of Youth Count study indicated having mental health difficulties. Over 60% of unaccompanied YYAs in the HMIS data have at least one disabling condition.<sup>6</sup>

### SUBSTANCE USE:

8% of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County region reported a substance use service need (Mass.gov, 2018), a number that may be regarded as a significant undercount based on the following data from other sources: 13% of YYAs in HMIS, all of whom are unaccompanied, report substance use as a disabling condition (HMIS, 2018). In FY18, the MA DPH Bureau of Substance Addiction Services (BSAS) identified 81 YYAs ages 14-24 in the Three County region who were in their treatment system and self-identified as homeless (12% of identifiable enrollments). BSAS lists 311 additional YYA entries as either “missing” or “unable to determine” (BSAS, 2018).

### EDUCATION:

69% of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County region reported being in school or having a high school diploma or equivalent (Mass.gov, 2018). Nationally, the lack of a high school diploma or GED equivalent is associated with a 346% higher risk of homelessness (Morton, 2017).

Two local community colleges, Berkshire and Greenfield, and one four-year college, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), participated in the 2018 Hope Labs survey that assessed for homelessness, housing insecurity, and food insecurity. For Berkshire and Greenfield respectively, the survey identified 10% and 12% of students experiencing homelessness, 49% and 48% experiencing housing insecurity, and 37% and 35% experiencing food insecurity (Hope Labs Berkshire, 2018; Hope Labs Greenfield, 2018). For MCLA, the only 4-year institution included in Hope Labs’ surveys in Western MA, the survey identified 8% of students experiencing homelessness, 34% experiencing housing insecurity, and 37% experiencing food insecurity (Hope Labs, 2018).

### EMPLOYMENT:

40% of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County CoC surveyed during the Massachusetts Youth Count reported active employment, which is significantly below the 56% of all 16 to 24-year-olds in the Three County CoC estimated to be actively employed (Census, 2017). In the formal economy, 35% of YYAs report part-time work, and 19% report full time work, while only 15% receive cash assistance, 6% receive SSDI, 10% receive income from family, and 15% work “under the table” (Mass.gov, 2018). Over 20% report income from the informal sector, including hustling, drugs, and panhandling (Mass.gov, 2018). In HMIS, 20% of YYAs reported income when entering the formal homelessness system; 10% reported earned income (HMIS, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Includes the following: Mental Health; Substance Use; Chronic Health; Physical Disability; and Developmental Disability. 13

## CHARACTERISTICS OF YYAs EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

**27%**

of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County region reported foster care experience.

**19%**

of YYAs entered the homelessness services system from the street in FY 2018.

### SYSTEMS INVOLVEMENT:

27% of YYAs experiencing homelessness in the Three County region reported having been in foster care, which is consistent with both national and state estimates (Morton, 2017; Mass.gov, 2018). YYAs in the Three County CoC report lower than national rates of involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system—27%, compared to the approximately 50% of YYAs identified in national research. Criminal justice rates are only slightly lower than the state average of 34% (Mass.gov, 2018).

### VICTIMS OF SEXUAL TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION:

We know little to nothing about the impact of sex trafficking on YYA homelessness and vice versa in the Three County region. No one interviewed during the 2018 Massachusetts Youth Count self-reported “sex work” as a source of income, and only 6.3% indicated having ever exchanged sex for money or housing (Mass.gov, 2018).<sup>7</sup> 22% of YYAs in HMIS report being survivors of domestic violence, a larger category of violence that may include sexual trafficking and exploitation, but more often refers to intimate partner or family violence (HMIS, 2018). According to one national estimate, 15% of YYAs experiencing homelessness had been trafficked for sex, and 32% had been involved in the sex trade in some way (Wolfe, 2017). According to the Massachusetts Youth Count, 14.4% of YYAs who had been homeless also reported having exchanged sex for money -- 5.5 times the rate for YYAs without homelessness experience (Mass.gov, 2018).

### WHERE THEY SLEEP AT NIGHT:

19 out of the 24 YYAs engaged during the January 2018 PIT count were either in emergency shelter or transitional housing (HUD, 2018). Five YYAs were in unsheltered situations during the same count. In the state youth count, 5 were sleeping outside, 4 in cars, 3 in places not meant for sleeping, and 20 in some form of doubled up or couch surfing situation with friends or relatives (Mass.gov, 2018). 19% of YYAs entered the homelessness services system from the street in FY 2018 (HMIS, 2018).

### AT-RISK FOR HOMELESSNESS:

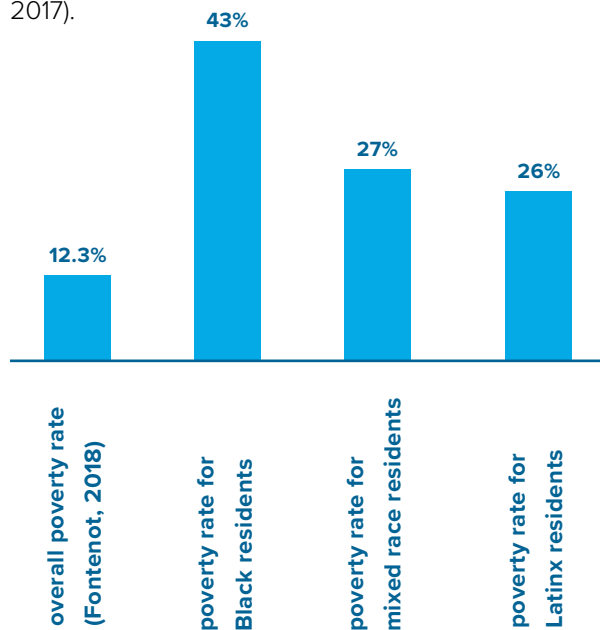
The Three County region has a similar rate of poverty (12%; Census, 2017) to the national average (12.3%; Fontenot, 2018). Hampshire County has a slightly higher rate (14%; Census 2017), and both Franklin and Berkshire Counties have slightly lower rates (11%; Census, 2017). However, the poverty rate is 53% for unrelated individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, and roughly 2,749 young adults 18-24 live in poverty (Census, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> “Sex work” is the term used in the survey—the authors are clear that any transactional sex for YYAs is a form of commercial sexual exploitation.

## RACE AND ETHNICITY ARE IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN CONSIDERING POVERTY AND HOUSING COSTS.

For example, while the overall poverty rate is 12.3% (Fontenot, 2018), the poverty rate for Black residents in the Three County region is 43%. The poverty rates for people who identify as mixed race or Latinx are 27% and 26% respectively.

Black individuals in the region have more than twice the unemployment rate of Whites -- 13% compared to 6% overall. In Berkshire County the comparison is 20% to 6% (Census, 2017).



According to an analysis by Glynn, Byrne, and Culhane in 2018, communities experience a dramatic spike in homelessness when residents are spending, on average, over 32% of their income on housing. But the region is an anomaly. While their research estimates that local housing costs are roughly 36% of median income, homelessness rates are relatively low (0.18%) (Glynn, 2018+). This may be due to several hidden protective factors, but also indicates a significant pressure on those protective factors from the lack of affordable housing that may not be sustained indefinitely. The pressure appears even more significant when combined with average transportation costs, which one index estimates at 25% of median income (HTA, 2017).

## EXITS FROM INSTITUTIONS & SYSTEMS OF CARE

While young people experiencing homelessness often have past experiences with institutions and systems of care, it is a two way street: young people also frequently leave institutions and systems of care only to experience homelessness. At the end of 2018, roughly 976 young people between the ages of 12 and 24 actively engaged with the child welfare system in the Three County region. 835 were between the ages of 12 and 17, and 141 were over 18. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) identifies 33% as “in placement” (i.e., in foster care or group quarters) and 67% as “out of placement.” DCF indicated the permanency plan associated with many YYAs “in placement” as “Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement” (APPL),<sup>8</sup> including 83% for those over 18 and 3% as “Unspecified.” For those YYAs “out of placement,” 33% of over 18-year-olds had an APPL permanency plan, and 18% of all YYAs had an “unspecified” permanency plan.

**Among minority populations, Latinx and multi-racial YYAs are the most overrepresented among all YYAs in foster care (15% and 10%) relative to their percentage of the general population (5% and 3%; Census, 2017).<sup>9</sup>**

*We currently do not have data for involvement with the justice system. Data on the number of 13-17 year-olds engaged with the Department of Youth Services (DYS), including those discharged into unstable housing, may help us plan for young people entering the community with these risk factors and prevent their homelessness. Similarly, understanding the number of 18-24-year-olds who are incarcerated, entering from a homelessness experience, exiting without stable housing, and living with parole restrictions will help us to ensure that these vulnerable young people do not add housing crises to their barriers to success.*

<sup>8</sup> The Children’s League has identified simply that, “When a child receives APPLA as a service plan goal, the goal of finding a permanent placement is abandoned.” <http://www.childrensleague.org/2017-2018-priority-legislation/>. DCF maintains responsibility for the young person, and an assigned social worker must continue “to seek a permanent connection with a competent adult,” and help the young person maintain, “a stable living environment” and work on “life skills training.” <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/07/qk/permanency-planning-policy.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> All DCF data from the relevant regional office pages from the 2019 Q2 DCF report: <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/03/22/Quarterly%20Profile%20FY2019-Q2.pdf#12>



**FAIR MARKET RENT (FMR)** for a two-bedroom apartment in Franklin County is \$1,113/month (HUD.gov, 2019), and yet renters earning an estimated average wage of \$11.02 per hour can only afford a unit up to \$573 per month (NLIHC, 2019). It would take a two-income household at the estimated average wage to afford the fair market rent. Hampshire County has an FMR of \$1,061/month, Northern Berkshire County an FMR of \$1,048/month, and Southern Berkshire County an FMR of \$1,067/month (HUD.gov, 2019).

## EFFECTS OF A LARGE RURAL GEOGRAPHY

The CoC service area is largely rural, with approximately 360,000 people in 2,133 square miles of land area and 5.3% of the state's population residing in 27.3% of its total land area. The population centers that do exist are relatively small and can be difficult for YYAs to access. State-led investigations in 2013 and 2014 revealed that this "isolation has significant impacts on the quality of life of rural residents" (Mass.gov, 2013), and that the lack of public infrastructure and transportation, among other factors, make it "difficult to develop and preserve affordable housing" (MHP, 2014). The state has made investments in rural communities through its Rural Policy Advisory Commission since 2015, helping to reduce the digital divide between urban and rural areas to the lowest rate in the county (McFarland, 2018). However, surveys from as recently as 2017 still identify significant disparities in access to resources like public sewer and water services and transportation that continue to challenge residents in our rural communities and limit economic development (Mass.gov, 2017).

## HOUSING INVENTORY

In contrast to the potential scope and diversity of YYAs homelessness in the region, the current inventory of housing options specifically dedicated to YYAs experiencing homelessness is limited:

- » **24 units of rapid rehousing<sup>10</sup>**
- » **8 units of transitional housing<sup>11</sup>**
- » **24 units of permanent supportive housing<sup>12</sup>**

## MORE DEDICATED HOUSING AND SERVICES MUST BE DEVELOPED TO ADDRESS THE GROWING NEED FOR HOUSING AND SUPPORT AMONG YYAs EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS.

<sup>10</sup>A time limited response where a young person is supported in finding an apartment and is provided with up to 24 months rental assistance and a variety of supportive services according to their needs.

<sup>11</sup>A time limited response where a young person lives in either a congregate facility or an independent unit owned or leased by the organization for up to 24 months and is provided with a variety of supportive services often in a structured environment.

<sup>12</sup>A non-time limited response where a young person lives in either a congregate facility or an independent unit and is surrounded by supportive services, often intensive, designed to meet their needs.

# Qualitative Themes

*Key insights emerged from the focus groups, provider surveys, and stakeholder interviews.*

## **THIS SECTION PRESENTS QUALITATIVE FINDINGS ORGANIZED AROUND:**

1. perceptions about YYA homelessness and the current system
2. strengths and barriers of the current response
3. needs and gaps
4. making the invisible visible

### **In describing the current state of the homelessness system, respondents used the following words and phrases:**

- » Slow, cumbersome, repetitive
- » Well-intentioned
- » Invisible
- » Limited and non-responsive
- » Lacking comprehensiveness and coordination
- » Under-resourced and scrappy
- » Under-funded and understaffed
- » Inadequate
- » Getting more organized

## **PERCEPTIONS ABOUT YYA HOMELESSNESS AND THE CURRENT SYSTEM**

An analysis of the qualitative data revealed many drivers of YYA homelessness, including:

- **Generational poverty**
- **Lack of emergency housing in the region**
- **High cost of housing**
- **Trauma from systemic poverty/racism**
- **Unstable home lives, family rejection, and abuse/neglect**
- **Immigration status**
- **Lack of employment opportunities**

Participants identified several groups especially at-risk for YYA homelessness: LGBTQ YYAs; young people of color; parenting YYAs; YYAs with mental health and substance use disorders; YYAs without supportive families; and YYAs leaving the DCF system. Many YYAs also couch-surf, making it less likely that they will appear in our homelessness response systems, a theme that continually emerged in the interviews, focus groups, and survey.

**DESPITE THE MANY STRENGTHS IN LOCAL SERVICES ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS, IT WAS CLEAR THAT NUMEROUS BARRIERS COMPLICATE EFFORTS TO PREVENT AND END YYA HOMELESSNESS.**

**STRENGTHS AND BARRIERS**

Stakeholders and focus group participants described a number of strengths in the current system, including the YYA homelessness focus of programs like DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services, Community Action Pioneer Valley, and the Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority, as well as the passion and dedication of individual staff working in the system. Additionally, they described the deep commitment to collaboration among those working to end YYA homelessness and a positive sense that schools and colleges are becoming more aware and more involved.

Despite these strengths, it was clear that numerous barriers complicate efforts to prevent and end YYA homelessness. These include:

- » **Limited emergency shelter** options for YYAs, and a strong sense that young people avoid adult shelters to avoid unsafe and exploitive situations. According to one interviewee: “Our LGBTQ youth will do anything to avoid adult shelter. They will stay anywhere else.”
- » **Long wait lists** for housing and services
- » **Shortage of affordable housing** options. Many that do exist are substandard and run by “slumlords.”
- » **Not enough subsidized housing** for young people—including the recent loss of Redfield House in Pittsfield
- » **Limited time to engage** young people over an adequate period to support stability
- » **The need for increased focus** on YYA homelessness by public housing authorities, state agencies (e.g., DCF and DYS), faith community and local government, schools and colleges, and the health care system

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According to one person we interviewed: “I feel like it’s getting worse. The opioid crisis is a devastating accelerator of this problem.” In addition to this observation, the online survey asked respondents to prioritize the most significant challenges facing YYAs experiencing homelessness and those who serve them. Three rose to the top:

- 1. Housing**
- 2. Income/Employment**
- 3. Mental Health**

Around youth engagement, the majority of survey respondents felt that much more could be done in the region to engage YYAs in paid roles as peer leaders who shape homelessness policy and programming.

## NEEDS AND GAPS

Participants in the qualitative data collection activities identified many needs and gaps that need to be addressed in order to prevent and end YYA homelessness:

- Transportation
- Housing
- Employment
- Early intervention with families and adolescents
- Support for LGBTQ people
- Interventions to address sexual exploitation
- Landlords willing to rent to youth
- Youth-friendly emergency shelter and crisis housing options
- Mental health prescribers, especially in Berkshire County

When asked about their experiences of homelessness, YYAs described how unsafe it is:

**“Being homeless, you’re exposed to the more bad people. Be very cautious with them because you can’t avoid them when you’re homeless and they can rope you into some really bad things.”**

**“It is very difficult to go through. You’re exposed to the elements. You’re exposed to a lot of bad things.”**

Others described eloquently how many of the myths about YYA homelessness miss the real experiences of young people themselves:

**“Not everyone chose to be in the scenario they are now. I has half a year from turning 16 when I became homeless. There was nothing I could do to prevent it. I had no family. I had no friends I could stay with. I did not choose that. I did not choose to be living in a hotel. I did not choose to be living in a car. I did not choose my lots in life. Please understand that I am scared. I am frightened. I am confused. I just want help. There is a reason we turn to drugs. There is a reason we are impulsive beings. It sucks where we are now, and we want help. We don’t want to become druggies or join gangs or live on the streets. We want to live life and have a family. We are the most vulnerable demographics. We don’t get to choose where we start.”**

Another focus group participant sought to remind those in the broader community of the basic humanity of YYAs experiencing homelessness:

**“I’M STILL A HUMAN. IT’S AS SIMPLE AS THAT.”**

**“BEING HOMELESS, YOU’RE EXPOSED TO THE MORE BAD PEOPLE. BE VERY CAUTIOUS WITH THEM BECAUSE YOU CAN’T AVOID THEM WHEN YOU’RE HOMELESS AND THEY CAN ROPE YOU INTO SOME REALLY BAD THINGS.”**

## MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

In thinking about potential solutions to YYA homelessness in the region, multiple stakeholders identified the importance of early intervention in detecting risk and preventing homelessness:

**"If a person becomes homeless, we have failed. From a well-being standpoint, and from a fiscal standpoint, the earlier we can be involved, the more effective it will be."**

One respondent stated that YYA homelessness remains "invisible, not well understood." Another described the loss to the community as a whole when we fail young people:

**"We have all these people in our community who have to spend all their energy on survival and what's next. So it's a loss not to get to see what they would do to build beautiful connections...With youth homelessness there is an added level of crisis, but it is important to recognize that the band-aid that is happening right now...Unless we are able to support that person long-term, it will continue."**

**THESE QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS PROVIDE CONTEXT TO THE PREVALENCE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF YYAS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN THE THREE COUNTY REGION AND OFFER MANY INSIGHTS FOR POTENTIAL WAYS TO IMPROVE OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSE.**



# Next Steps

*The overarching recommendation from these findings is to engage in a community-wide process that results in a concrete action plan to prevent and end YYA homelessness. This will first require the community to examine how it will make decisions across the Three County region, which partners will participate, and how it will focus the scope of its efforts.*

Given the geographical size of the Three County region and the variation in services available, it will be useful for each county—and potentially even sub-regions in each county—to develop strategies that are tailored to their needs. It is possible, for example, to imagine a housing and services continuum in each area that offers a range of age-appropriate housing options, supportive services, and opportunities for success in school and work. Even with local housing and services, coordination across the three counties is critical to developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy to end YYA homelessness. An organization such as **COMMUNITY ACTION PIONEER VALLEY**, now the CoC lead agency, known as the "Collaborative Applicant," can serve a vital role as a convener and coordinator across the region to promote best practices and track system performance.

## IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT THAT MORE PARTNERS COME TO THE TABLE:

- **DCF and DYS** should play a stronger role in responding to YYA homelessness
- **Schools and colleges** should continue to increase their focus on homelessness
- **The faith community and business community** need to play a part
- **Health systems** can and should partner closely with YYA homelessness providers to identify those at risk and fund programs to address their health, housing, and service needs

Next steps should focus action in the areas of inflow, crisis response, and outflow. In other words, it is not possible to end YYA homelessness simply by designing effective homelessness programs. Instead, a broad-based effort that focuses on prevention and long-term housing and support will be essential to prevent and end future homelessness.

## MANY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGED FROM THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS.

We present them below as a starting point for community planning grouped in three major areas:

1. **Prevention**
2. **Crisis response**
3. **Sustainable solutions**

PREVENTION	CRISIS RESPONSE	SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS
Develop interventions for 14-15-year-olds to prevent homelessness	Create more YYA-specific emergency shelter options	Develop a robust advocacy agenda to advance policy and funding
Increase family mediation and conflict resolution services	Increase adult shelter capacity to serve YYAs	Train landlords on YYA homelessness and the need to house YYAs
Improve transportation and develop more flexible transportation options	Train adult shelter providers on YYA homelessness and work with them to make shelters safer for YYAs	Create flexible funding pool for landlord incentives, transportation, rent, utilities, etc.
Partner with DCF and DYS to prevent homelessness, shore up supports, and prepare YYAs to live on their own	Train providers on signs of abuse and human trafficking	Support development of YABs in each county/region to shape policy and programming
Expand employment opportunities for YYAs	Create opportunities for integrated services (housing, case management, behavioral health) in central locations	Develop a continuum of housing options with supportive services in each county
Increase access to responsive, trauma-informed, youth-centered mental health care	Develop emergency shelter options for pregnant and parenting YYAs	Create housing options for pregnant and parenting YYAs
Explore cross-system data sharing strategies to identify risk of homelessness for YYAs and track housing and service outcomes	Increase outreach services and create programs for YYAs who are not currently accessing services	Expand flexibility in how we think about housing (e.g., shared housing models)
Improve collaboration with schools and colleges around identifying and providing support for YYAs at risk or experiencing homelessness	Create a YYA-run recovery program to support YYAs with substance use issues	Develop case management and supportive service models that allow more time to work with young people
Increase outreach to at-risk YYAs	Ease program requirements for existing shelter and housing programs so that more YYAs use them	Initiate an anti-stigma campaign around youth homelessness
Offer increased parenting education and support/crisis intervention for families	Partner with libraries to offer outreach and information on available services	Develop more community spaces for meals and social connection
Increase housing options for YYAs with disabilities	Develop more transitional housing on a small, individualized scale	
Increase accountability for unsafe foster care placements	Create detox and other treatment options for YYAs with substance use issues	
	Use college dorms as temporary housing during summer/school breaks	

**WHILE THE STRATEGIES PRESENTED HERE ARE NOT COMPREHENSIVE OR PRIORITIZED BASED ON POTENTIAL IMPACT, THEY SERVE AS A STARTING POINT FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING, PRIORITIZATION, FUNDING, AND IMPLEMENTATION.**

# Conclusion

The Three County region of Berkshire, Franklin, and Hampshire Counties stands at a critical juncture in its recognition of and response to youth and young adult homelessness. Building on current strengths and working together to address housing and supports for YYAs experiencing homelessness, the end of YYA homelessness can be within sight. Each county must develop a more comprehensive, coordinated effort to prevent and end YYA homelessness, and the counties must work closely together to ensure that no youth or young adult ever has to experience homelessness or housing instability.

**YYAs WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE MUST BE PART OF THE SOLUTION, WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PROVIDERS, ADVOCATES, AND THOSE IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS TO DESIGN LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS TO END YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT HOMELESSNESS.**





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## **ABOUT COMMUNITY ACTION**

Community Action Pioneer Valley assists people who have low incomes to achieve economic stability and security, and works to build communities in which all people have the opportunity to thrive. Founded in 1965 during the War on Poverty, it is the federally designated anti-poverty agency for Franklin and Hampshire Counties and also provides services in northwestern Worcester County and western Hampden County and serves over 27,000 people a year. Services include homelessness prevention, mediation, financial counseling, information and referral, free food and nutrition education, fuel assistance and energy conservation, family support, early education, youth leadership and workforce development, alternative staffing/adult workforce development, senior volunteer placement, and free tax assistance. Community Action is the lead (Collaborative Applicant) for the HUD-funded Three County Continuum of Care, whose members provide assistance for people experiencing homelessness in Franklin, Hampshire, and Berkshire Counties.

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