

Evaluation of the HUD Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program: Youth Perspectives on Homeless Housing and Services



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DISCLAIMER

The contents of this report are the views of the contractor and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development or the U.S. Government.

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We thank the many stakeholders we have interviewed over the years in the demonstration communities. We also thank our three peer comparison communities—Colorado Balance of State (BOS), Memphis, and Sonoma County—for graciously providing us their time and knowledge in assisting us in recruiting youth focus group participants. Most importantly, we are grateful to the youth and young adults who have participated in this study and have shared with us their experiences, struggles, and successes along the way.

Foreword

Over 42,000 unaccompanied youth and young adults aged 14–24 in the United States experience homelessness on any given night. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded funds through the new Youth Homeless Demonstration Program (YHDP) to 10 diverse Continuums of Care (CoCs) to plan, develop, and implement coordinated community responses aimed at preventing and ending youth homelessness. The demonstration requires CoCs to collaborate with Youth Action Boards (YABs), child welfare agencies, and other community partners to develop and implement comprehensive community plans to end youth homelessness. This qualitative, interim report summarizes perspectives of youth with lived experience of homelessness from communities funded in the first round of demonstration sites gathered at baseline and more than a year after projects were put into place. Comparisons to matched sites that did not receive demonstration funding are also included. It is HUD’s evaluation policy to have a “deliberate and intentional inclusion of the thoughts and perspectives of studied groups.” In total, the report reports on interviews with 25 homeless youth members of the YABs and more than 60 focus groups with homeless youth.

At mid-implementation, generally about a year and a half into the 3 years of demonstration funding, demonstration sites had evolved and were providing more services and supports to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness in their communities—all 10 CoCs provided youth specific outreach, coordinated entry, case management, crisis, and permanent housing assistance, and most provided a range of other services for youth as well.

Youth age 18 to 24 were interviewed in this round, and were vocal in their desire for improvements to the service systems in their communities. Their recommendations include a need for:

- Better information about available resources, including centralized, updated sources of information about what services were available, and how to access them.
- Additional places, such as 24-hour shelters or drop-in centers, for youth to go during the day and on weekends.
- Help finding affordable housing, including safe apartments that will accept their financial assistance and/or more assistance with paying for housing.
- Better training for case managers so that they were more informed about services in their communities and more respectful of the youth they worked with.
- Additional assistance with life skills such as banking, filing their taxes, improving their credit, cooking, and cleaning/maintaining their apartments, as well as support programs and help accessing clothing.
- Help with transportation to work or school, doctor’s appointments, and for other basic needs, such as laundry and grocery shopping.
- Opportunities for youth to provide input on their own paths as well as the system as a whole.

The report richly describes the lived experiences of homeless youth. It also contains a rare glimpse of the impacts of COVID on the lives of homeless youth. The comments within are not generalizable because the selection of interviewees and focus group participant was not random, instead depending upon outreach to those with existing interactions to YHDP participating agencies, but it does give some voice to the program participants. This report is a complement to a final evaluation report of the first 10 YHDP demonstration CoCs to be published soon.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Todd M. Richardson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent horizontal stroke at the beginning.

Todd Richardson
General Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

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Executive Summary

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded funds through the first round of the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) to 10 diverse Continuums of Care (CoCs) to plan, develop, and implement coordinated community responses aimed at preventing and ending youth homelessness. The demonstration requires CoCs to collaborate with Youth Action Boards (YABs), child welfare agencies, and other community partners to develop and implement comprehensive community plans to end youth homelessness. The plans build upon existing crisis and permanent housing services, and supports to prevent homelessness, identify and engage youth ages 14–24, and provide needed resources. Housing can include shelter or crisis-transitional housing, access to other time-limited options (such as host homes), and more permanent housing solutions such as rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing. Services can include assistance to prevent youth homelessness, helping youth to navigate the service system, or providing services to connect youth with family and other natural supports.

HUD has contracted with Westat, an independent research firm, to conduct a cross-site evaluation to understand the role of the YHDP in shaping communities' efforts and the effects on the population of youth experiencing homelessness. The evaluation employs a longitudinal, multiple comparative case study design involving the 10 demonstration CoCs and three "matched" peer CoCs that did not receive YHDP awards, selected based on the level of development of their systems at baseline. The design also includes a second basis of comparison for the YHDP efforts through a survey of all CoCs across the country conducted at two points in time to track national progress in developing youth homeless housing and service systems.

Data for the evaluation are collected through multiple methods and data sources, including stakeholder interviews, document reviews, and analysis of the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Incorporating the perspectives of a diverse group of youth through interviews and focus groups is an essential component of both the YHDP program and the evaluation. Youth experiencing homelessness offer expertise gained through their experiences seeking and receiving assistance in their communities, including identifying what works well and what challenges remain. They offer a unique perspective that providers and other stakeholders do not always understand or can represent. Moreover, as youth experiencing homelessness are diverse, over-represented by people of color and LGBTQ+, their voice is critical to understanding the inequities within system and how they can be addressed. The perceptions from YAB members shared in this report also provide insight into how well youth have been integrated into the decisionmaking processes in their communities and how well the systems have changed to meet their needs.

This report presents findings from youth data collection at YHDP baseline and mid-implementation, including 25 interviews with members of the YABs and more than 60 focus groups with youth experiencing homelessness across the sites, including LGBTQ youth, youth

of color, pregnant and parenting youth, and child welfare and juvenile justice-involved youth. This report summarizes youth perspectives regarding their role in the governance and activities of their CoCs, their perceptions of the youth service systems in their communities, and their recommendations for changes or improvements.

Youth Perspectives on Their Governance and Decisionmaking Role

YAB members across all sites reported playing an active role in YHDP planning and early implementation, but fewer felt that their contributions were valued.

At baseline, the youth serving on YABs in all sites reported playing a role in determining what YHDP projects to include in their communities' plan and how to implement those projects. In some sites, YAB members also reported participating in Youth Point-in-Time (PIT) Counts, organizing and hosting community events for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and participating in outreach activities. In half of the 10 Round One sites, the youth felt that CoC members were interested in and responsive to what they had to say, and YAB members got a lot out of the experience. In the remaining sites, youth reported feeling that they were not listened to or valued, they did not see a clear role in the CoC, or that their participation was not sufficiently supported.

By mid-implementation, YABs varied in their involvement across the 10 sites, with fewer sites maintaining an active YAB role, despite continued interest in including youth input into the CoC.

Only three sites continued to have a robust, active role for their YABs, each with more than eight members and youth regularly attending CoC meetings, providing feedback on policies and programs, and making suggestions for ways those could be improved as well as participating in other CoC activities. In three other sites, the YABs had only one or two regular members, but those members continued to be involved in the work of the CoC. In the four remaining sites, the YABs struggled to maintain membership as YAB members aged out and the agencies supporting the YAB experienced staff turnover. Those CoCs were working to re-convene their YABs or find other ways to include youth input in the CoC through other, less formal mechanisms.

YAB members appreciated the opportunity to improve services and supports for other youth as well as the experience they gained from YAB participation. Several YAB members also felt they needed more training to contribute fully.

In sites that continued to actively include youth input into the CoC, YAB members remarked on enjoying the sense of community they received from working with other members of the CoC to improve services for young people. Additionally, they noted enjoying learning about how government and service systems work. In some sites, YAB members indicated that they were not provided with adequate training about system functioning to allow them to fully participate in decisionmaking. Interviewed YAB members indicated wanting more training or mentorship so that they could make better-informed contributions to the conversation.

Youth Assessment of Housing, Services, and Supports

Coordinated Entry: Over time, youth in all sites became generally aware of the Coordinated Entry process but did not always view it favorably.

At baseline, awareness of coordinated entry varied across the sites where it was in place. Coordinated entry was often viewed as slow, burdensome, or as something that did not serve youth efficiently. By mid-implementation, coordinated entry for youth was implemented in all YHDP sites, and focus group participants reported greater awareness of the process. In some sites, youth voiced discomfort with the coordinated entry process, feeling like their answers to the assessment questions were not believed or reporting they felt retraumatized by assessment questions about topics like past abuse. While many youth reported that they received assistance quickly after receiving an assessment, other youth in the same sites indicated it was hard to get assistance, either because they were not eligible for the help they needed, or it took a long time to receive it.

Awareness of Assistance: Youth reported often being unaware of assistance available to them, even in sites with a wide range of supports available and despite having coordinated entry.

At both baseline and mid-implementation, youth across sites indicated they often did not know what assistance was available or where to go to receive it, even in sites with a wide range of services available. Despite availability of outreach services, youth-specific drop-in centers, and coordinated entry in nearly all sites by mid-implementation, youth continued to report that services were not well-advertised, and they often relied on friends and family or non-homeless service providers, such as health clinics, employment programs, and their schools, to learn about where to get homelessness assistance.

Housing Options: Youth were aware of and appreciated the increase in access to crisis and permanent housing options.

At baseline, youth across sites reported difficulty accessing crisis and permanent housing. They felt that there were not enough youth-specific shelters and that adult shelters were unsafe or otherwise not suitable for them. The lack of affordable housing was also noted as a problem, especially in the larger urban areas where youth could not find the kinds of jobs that would support them when assistance ended. By mid-implementation, all YHDP sites had implemented projects to increase youth's access to shelter and housing. These interventions were considered welcome resources by focus group participants who appreciated having youth-specific crisis housing, including crisis transitional housing and host homes, as well as programs that helped them access and afford permanent housing.

Despite more housing assistance, youth reported continued struggles in finding housing.

Youth in all sites reported difficulties in finding landlords who would rent to them and apartments they could afford, regardless of the amount of assistance they received across sites. Some youth were living in run-down apartments or units in locations they considered unsafe, and they frequently indicated wanting more assistance finding apartments, securing furniture and other household items, and dealing with landlords. Many youth reported the search to gain access to shelter and housing was disrupted or delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic as shelters tried to deconcentrate their populations, eviction moratoriums limited the availability of affordable apartments, and the apartment search and application process became more difficult.

Case Management: Youth were much more likely to report access to case management at mid-implementation than at baseline though appraisals of its usefulness varied.

At baseline many youth identified a need for case managers to help guide them through the services and supports that were available. By mid-implementation, all youth focus group participants indicated being connected to navigators or case managers who assisted them with making plans to reach their goals, access needed services, and find housing and jobs. Youth's assessment of the quality of the assistance received varied however. Many youth spoke of their case managers as trusted advisors, who go "above and beyond," while others, even within the same sites, reported their case managers were not well-informed about what services and supports were available and that they were difficult to contact. Some youth felt they were not treated respectfully.

Other Services: Youth were familiar with and used several services outside the homeless services system, such as education and employment assistance and behavioral health services, and expressed interest in receiving more life skills. They were less familiar with family intervention services.

Youth in all sites were aware of education and employment assistance and behavioral health services in their communities and frequently noted using them. Many also expressed interest in getting access to additional life skills training and connection to services such as banking, filing taxes, improving their credit, cooking, and cleaning/maintaining their apartments as well as greater help with transportation to jobs and appointments.

Few youth reported familiarity with or receipt of family intervention services, despite discussing having difficult relationships with family members with whom they spent time in between periods of homelessness.

Compared to youth in the YHDP CoCs, youth in the peer sites reported little change in their systems across the two time periods.

The perspectives of youth on the services and supports available in the three peer CoCs largely reflected that of youth in the YHDP CoCs. However, youth in YHDP CoCs reported increasing awareness of and access to various services, such as coordinated entry, case management, and youth-specific crisis and permanent housing assistance by mid-implementation, whereas youth in the peer sites reported little change in their systems over time. With the exception of the creation of a new drop-in center and four-person LGBTQ shelter in Memphis, the services available in the three peer CoCs remained the same across the two time periods studied. In Sonoma County, where coordinated entry was in place, youth were aware of the service but expressed concerns about the assessment questions, similar to youth in YHDP sites. In Sonoma County and Memphis, where drop-in centers and youth-specific crisis housing were available, youth appreciated having access to these services, but similarly noted challenges with limited capacity and restrictive rules. Unlike the YHDP sites that were in early stages of development prior to the demonstration, Colorado BOS did not have additional youth-specific services in place by mid-implementation. Consequently, focus group participants in Colorado BOS often reported being unfamiliar with whether services such as outreach, drop-in centers, or coordinated entry were available or how they would access them. Additionally, in all three peer

sites, by mid-implementation youth generally had less awareness of and experience receiving assistance accessing permanent housing than youth in the demonstration sites.

Recommendations from Youth for Change

During both waves of data collection youth offered recommendations for changes or improvements to the service systems in their communities. These included a desire for:

- Better information about available resources, including centralized, updated sources of information about what services were available and how to access them.
- Additional places, such as 24-hour shelters or drop-in centers, for youth to go during the day and on weekends.
- Help finding affordable housing, including safe apartments that will accept their financial assistance and/or more assistance with paying for housing.
- Better training for case managers so that they were more informed about services in their communities and more respectful of the youth they worked with.
- Additional assistance with life skills such as banking, filing their taxes, improving their credit, cooking, and cleaning/maintaining their apartments, as well as support programs, and help accessing clothing.
- Help with transportation to work or school, doctor's appointments, and for other basic needs, such as laundry and grocery shopping.
- Opportunities for youth to provide input on their own paths as well as the system as a whole.

Section I. Introduction and Background

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) established the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) to reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness. In the first round of the demonstration (the focus of this evaluation), HUD awarded \$33 million in YHDP funds in January 2017 to 10 diverse CoCs, including four rural sites, to develop and implement coordinated community approaches to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Through the demonstration, communities develop and expand youth homeless service systems through the development of and partnership with Youth Action Boards (YABs) as well as partnerships with other stakeholders such as child welfare agencies. These approaches include developing or improving ways to identify and reach out to youth in need of assistance, provide resources to youth at risk of homelessness, and offer a variety of housing options for those who need them, including rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing, transitional housing, and host homes.

Under contract to HUD, Westat is conducting a longitudinal, cross-site implementation evaluation of the 10 Round One demonstration sites. This evaluation seeks to examine if and how a comprehensive system-level approach to serving youth can reduce youth homelessness across diverse (rural/non-rural)¹ settings. The evaluation is examining how communities approach the goal of preventing and ending youth homelessness and how they build comprehensive systems of care for young people. The evaluation research questions focus on understanding:

- The baseline status of the communities' systems serving youth who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- The development and implementation of efforts to build a coordinated community response to youth homelessness through the YHDP demonstration.
- The role of technical assistance in facilitating implementation.
- Youth involvement in the demonstration and perspectives on the changes taking place.
- Changes over time in the systems and the size and composition of the youth homeless population.

The evaluation employs a longitudinal, multiple comparative case study design involving the 10 demonstration CoCs and three "matched" peer CoCs that did not receive Round One YHDP awards, selected based on comparable levels of development of their systems at baseline. The design also includes a second basis of comparison for the YHDP efforts through a two-wave survey of all CoCs across the country tracking national progress in developing youth homeless housing and service systems.

¹Sites were considered "rural" by HUD if the area did not belong to a metropolitan statistical area (MSA), the area was part of an MSA but 75 percent of the population was located in non-urban census blocks, or if the population was less than 30 persons per square mile.

Through their experiences being homeless, youth offer a unique and key perspective in the evaluation, providing an understanding of the services and housing the system offers and the extent to which they meet their needs. Providers and other stakeholders cannot represent the views or feelings that youth have. Moreover, as youth experiencing homelessness are diverse, over-represented by people of color and LGBTQ+, their voice is critical to understanding the inequities within system and how they can be addressed.

For this report, perspectives from a diverse group of youth were gathered multiple focus groups with youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness identified by providers in each of the YHDP and peer communities. Individual interviews also were conducted with selected members of the YABs to provide insight into how well youth have been integrated into the decisionmaking processes in their communities and how well the systems have changed to meet their needs. This report provides a summary of the youth perspectives from all YHDP and peer sites gathered at baseline and at mid-implementation, more than a year after YHDP projects were put into place. We examine youth's experiences of homelessness, their roles in the governance and activities of their CoCs, and their perceptions of the service systems in their communities and how they have changed between baseline and more than a year later. We also gathered information on their views on the challenges that remain and recommendations for improvement. Throughout the report, we identify cross-site themes and distinct patterns based on site characteristics (e.g., urbanicity) and interventions that have been implemented.

This section continues with a description of the interview and focus group methodology, including how youth were selected for interviews or focus groups, how the interviews and focus groups were conducted, the topics covered in each, and how the analysis was performed. Because the data collection relates to the system in each site, we then provide for context and interpretation an overview of baseline and mid-implementation status of the sites' service delivery systems. Section II offers perspectives from YAB members across the sites, including their assessment of the status and role of the YABs at both time periods. Section III presents the views from youth in focus groups on the factors that contributed to their becoming homeless and what could have prevented it, their awareness and assessment of services and supports in their communities, and their recommendations for what additional services and supports might meet their needs. Given the timing of the data collection at mid-implementation, we also asked youth to describe how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives, their housing, and service access. The final section, Section IV, summarizes the findings and offers implications for further systems development.

Methodology

Data Collection

Two waves of data were collected in each community. Each wave included:

- In-person interviews with one to four YAB members.²

² In Cincinnati/Hamilton County and Santa Cruz, in place of individual interviews we conducted focus groups with 6–12 YAB members at baseline.

- More than 30 focus groups with a broader population of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness across the 13 sites.³

The baseline wave of data collection for both YAB interviews and focus groups with youth occurred in-person between December 2018 and May 2019. The mid-implementation wave of interviews with YAB members was conducted between May and June 2020, and the mid-implementation youth focus groups were conducted between August and October 2020. Mid-implementation data were collected through Zoom video calls due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews with YAB Members: At both waves, interviews were conducted with YAB members in nine of the 10 YHDP sites. We were unable to identify and recruit a YAB member for participation in an interview in Kentucky BOS at either wave. Additionally, at both waves, we conducted interviews with a YAB member in Memphis; at baseline, we interviewed a member of a youth advisory board for the child welfare system in Colorado BOS, which was asked to provide input into the CoC's YHDP application. Sonoma County did not have an active YAB or other youth involved in decisionmaking in the CoC at either wave.

YAB members were identified for interviews in collaboration with the lead agency staff in each of the CoCs. To compensate youth for their participation, at the end of interviews, YAB members were provided a \$20 gift card to a local store.

Topics covered with YAB members included:

- The role of the board in CoC governance and activities.
- Members' assessment of their role.
- Members' assessment of the current service system for youth experiencing homelessness.

Focus Groups with Youth at Risk of or Experiencing Homelessness: For both waves of data collection, the evaluation team worked with service providers and site leads in each community to identify organizations from which to recruit youth for the focus groups. We specifically sought out organizations that received YHDP funding as well as those that did not in order to understand the range of perspectives of youth across the communities. We made additional efforts to represent subpopulations of interest including LGBTQ youth, pregnant and parenting youth, child welfare and juvenile justice-involved youth and minors (at baseline) who were currently experiencing or had previously experienced homelessness or unstable housing. The evaluation team provided eligibility criteria for each group and a set of recruitment materials for providers to use in inviting youth to participate in the focus groups and to encourage youth to contact members of the evaluation team (via email, telephone, or text) for additional information. We sought to recruit 8–10 youth for each group, expecting that 6–8 youth would

³ We were unable to recruit youth participants for focus groups in Memphis for baseline data collection or in NW Michigan for the second wave of data collection.

participate. Exhibit 1 presents the number of focus groups and participants in each site at baseline and mid-implementation.

Exhibit 1: Number of Focus Groups and Participants by Site

	Baseline		Mid-Implementation	
	# of focus groups	# of participants	# of focus groups	# of participants
Anchorage	4	16	3	12
Austin/Travis County	3	20	3	13
Cincinnati/Hamilton County	3	23	3	16
Colorado BOS (peer site)	1	5	2	7
Connecticut BOS	3	16	4	16
Kentucky BOS	2	18	2	9
Memphis (peer site)	---	---	2	8
NW Michigan	3	12	---	---
Ohio BOS	2	5	3	13
San Francisco	1	7	3	9
Santa Cruz	3	17	2	10
Seattle/King County	5	30	3	12
Sonoma County (peer site)	1	10	2	9
Total	31	179	32	134

Exhibit 2 summarizes categories of youth in the focus groups for each wave, showing subpopulations that were of particular interest in the evaluation.⁴ Some groups were composed entirely of a single subpopulation type, though most of the groups were composed of mixed populations of youth with a variety of characteristics and backgrounds. The youth were recruited from emergency shelters, drop-in centers, rapid re-housing, or permanent supportive housing programs that typically served diverse populations of youth. Groups with mixed populations of youth were more common in the virtual focus groups in which the evaluation team often recruited from across different providers within a site to reach the target number of participants.

As with YAB members, youth who participated in focus groups were provided a \$20 gift card to a local store⁵ as compensation for their participation at the end of all focus groups. Youth participating in in-person focus groups were also provided food during the focus group and assistance with transportation if needed.

⁴ We conducted more focus groups with youth who were pregnant and parenting during the baseline wave than in the mid-implementation wave. However, similar percentages of youth in focus groups were parenting in each wave (25 percent at baseline and 29 percent at mid-implementation).

⁵ Youth in virtual focus groups were able to choose between an electronic gift card sent to their email address or a physical gift card mailed to their residence.

Exhibit 2: Composition of Focus Groups by Site

	Baseline		Mid-Implementation	
	# of focus groups	# of participants	# of focus groups	# of participants
LGBTQ youth	3	15	3	11
Pregnant and parenting youth	7	35	2	8
Youth under age 18	4	26	0	0
Youth aging out of child welfare or juvenile justice	2	9	2	8
Mixed populations	16	94	24	107
Total	32	179	31	134

Youth focus group topics included:

- Youth’s background information, including their demographic characteristics and current homeless and housing situations.
- Contributors to their homelessness and thoughts about what might have prevented it (at baseline).
- Knowledge of the systems of services and housing available in their communities.
- Perceptions of the services and housing in place and the challenges they experienced using them.
- Recommendations for changes or improvements to the systems and services; and
- Perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives (at mid-implementation).

Analysis

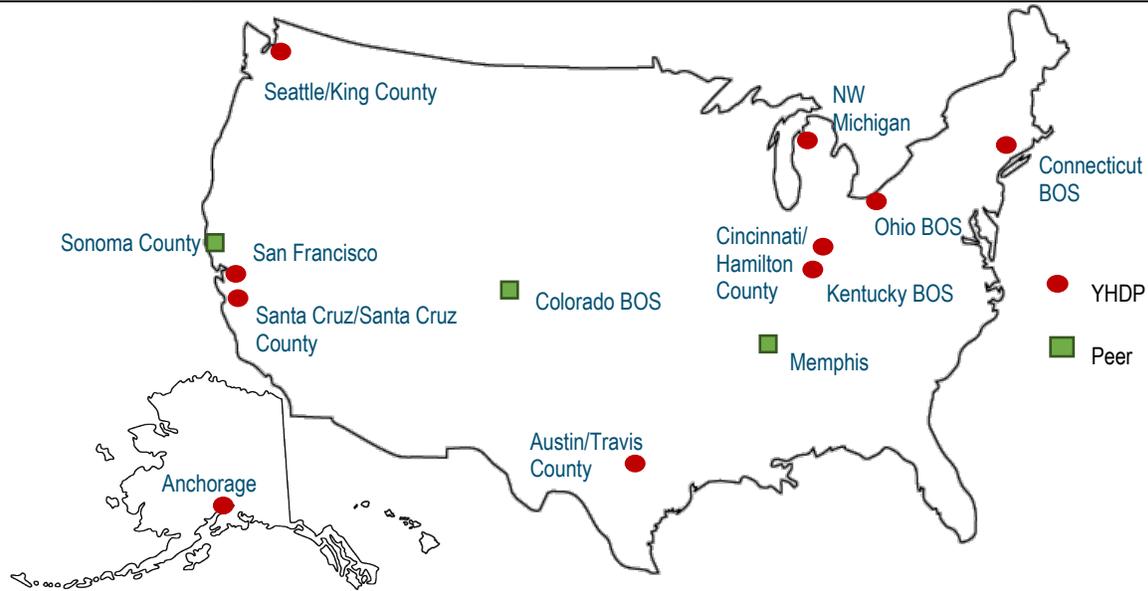
Across all demonstration sites, we conducted a thematic analysis of the findings within each site according to the key domains of the interviews/focus groups. We then looked across sites at each time point to identify patterns in youth’s experiences and determine how their experiences related to key site-level factors. Finally, we looked for patterns in the demonstration sites and compared those to the results from the three peer sites to determine whether differences over time related to changes in the sites.

The Appendix provides additional information about how the data were collected for both interviews and focus groups, with special attention to differences that resulted from collecting data virtually for the mid-implementation wave due to COVID-19. Additionally, we present information about the characteristics of youth included in the data collection and study caveats.

Overview of the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program Sites

In Round One of the demonstration, HUD awarded grants to 10 diverse CoCs, including four rural sites, to develop and implement coordinated community approaches to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Exhibit 3 provides a map of the 10 funded CoCs as well as the three matched peer CoCs.

Exhibit 3. Map of the YHDP and Peer Sites



Prior to implementing YHDP, the 13 CoCs varied considerably in the extent to which they had services and housing in place to serve youth at risk of and experiencing homelessness. The sites with highly developed systems all had in place some level of outreach services, coordinated entry systems aimed at or inclusive of youth populations, housing interventions specifically for youth, and other assistance available, including prevention, family interventions, employment, and/or other services. Sites with “medium” starting points also had youth-specific outreach, coordinated entry systems, and housing interventions, but generally had fewer other youth-specific services than highly developed sites. Sites categorized as “early development” had limited outreach services available, nascent or under-development coordinated entry systems, and few youth-specific shelter and housing interventions.

Between the baseline and mid-implementation time periods, the sites implemented a number of new programs to serve youth experiencing homelessness in their communities. These included both YHDP-funded initiatives as well as some that have occurred outside of the demonstration in both YHDP and peer sites. Exhibit 4 presents the services and supports available in the 13 CoCs at baseline and mid-implementation to provide an understanding of the system’s youth assessed during the focus groups and how they changed over time.

Exhibit 4. Status of Youth-Specific Housing and Services Systems at Baseline and Mid-Implementation, by Site

		Outreach	Drop-in Centers	Coordinated Entry	Crisis Housing	Host Homes	Permanent Housing	Family Intervention Services	Navigation/ Case Management	Diversion	Education & Employment Services	Behavioral Health Services
High Development												
Austin/Travis County	B	●	●	●	●		●	●		●	●	●
	M	●	●	●	●		●	●		●	●	●
Cincinnati/Hamilton County	B	●	●	●	●	○	●	●		●	●	●
	M	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●
Seattle/King County	B	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	M	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sonoma County (peer)	B	●	●	●	●	○	●	●		●	●	●
	M	●	●	●	●	○	●	●		●	●	●
Medium Development												
Connecticut BOS	B	●	●	●	●		●	●		●	●	●
	M	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
Ohio BOS ^R	B						●				●	●
	M	●		●	●		●			●	●	●
San Francisco	B	●	●		●		●	●			●	●
	M	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
Memphis (peer)	B				○		○	○				●
	M		○		○		○	○				●
Early Development												
Anchorage ^R	B	●	●		●			●			●	●
	M	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
Kentucky BOS ^R	B		○					○				●
	M	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	●			●
NW Michigan ^R	B				○			●			●	●
	M	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●
Santa Cruz	B		○		●			○				●
	M	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●			●
Colorado BOS ^R (peer)	B				●		●	○				●
	M				●		●	○				●

B = Baseline Status. M = Mid-implementation Status. ^R Rural Site.

● = Youth-specific services in place. ○ = Services in place for subpopulations of youth.

Note: Blank cells indicate service was not available.

Section II. Findings: Perspectives on Youth Action Board Involvement in the Continuums of Care

Overview of Youth Action Boards

During the YHDP planning stage, all 10 YHDP sites developed YABs composed of youth with lived experience, with membership ranging from three to more than 20 members. Most of the YABs were developed in response to the YHDP, although many sites have histories of engaging youth in advisory boards, advocacy efforts, and decisionmaking. Pre-YHDP youth involvement typically was organized to provide input to specific providers rather than the CoC as a whole. For three multi-county rural sites, there was no organized youth involvement before YHDP.

The role of the YABs in their CoCs was clearly specified at the beginning of the demonstration program when the coordinated community plans were being developed and YHDP-funded projects were being designed and implemented. During this time, most YABs served as advisory councils, providing input into and feedback on the coordinated community plans and proposed projects, with a subset of members, generally one-to-two, participating in the YHDP planning and implementation workgroups that developed the plans, reviewed project proposals, and made recommendations to the CoC.

As sites moved into an ongoing implementation and monitoring stage of the demonstration, the role of the YAB was less well-defined. Many YABs had transformed their composition and their roles in the CoC. Maintaining an active YAB required continual efforts to recruit and train new members, because existing members aged out and/or transitioned to other activities in their lives, such as school and jobs that prevented their continued involvement. Consequently, by mid-implementation, not all YABs were active, and those that were active varied in their size and roles. Exhibit 5 presents the status of the YAB at each wave of data collection by site.

Three sites continued to have active YABs, with more than eight members, and regular monthly meetings (although at the time of our interviews, meetings had been temporarily on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic). In Anchorage and San Francisco, the YABs do not have defined memberships; being open to anyone who wants to attend has facilitated bringing new youth on board as members age out and transition off the board.

In three other sites, the size of the YAB decreased to only a few regular members. In these sites, stakeholders indicated they felt it was beneficial to have a stronger commitment from a few members who were more involved in the CoC than to have limited engagement from a larger group of youth.

Exhibit 5. Status of Youth Action Boards at Baseline and Mid-Implementation, by Site

	Baseline	Mid-Implementation
High Development		
Austin/Travis County	8 members Met monthly	2 members Met monthly
Cincinnati/Hamilton County	10-20 members Met monthly	YAB dissolved
Seattle/King County	6 members Met monthly	8 members Met monthly
Sonoma County (peer)	No YAB*	No YAB
Medium Development		
Connecticut BOS	8 members Met monthly	1 full-time member, 2 part-time members Met weekly
Ohio BOS^R	6-8 members Met monthly	YAB dissolved
San Francisco	Open membership (6-8 member executive committee) Met monthly	Open membership (6-8 member executive committee) Met monthly
Memphis (peer)	No YAB	4-7 members Met monthly
Early Development		
Anchorage^R	Open membership (5 member steering committee) Met quarterly	Open membership (5 member steering committee) Met monthly
Kentucky BOS^R	3-5 members Met monthly	YAB dissolved
NW Michigan^R	5 members Met bi-weekly	1 member
Santa Cruz	6 members Met weekly	5 members Temporarily not meeting
Colorado BOS^R (peer)	No YAB	No YAB

^R Rural Site.

* All three peer sites formed YABs for the YHDP application but did not have one in place during our baseline data collection.

Three YABs dissolved due to difficulties sustaining members, and a fourth was temporarily on hold. Two large, multi-county rural sites struggled with establishing and maintaining YABs, in part due to relatively small numbers of youth experiencing homelessness over large geographic areas as well as challenges with limited public transportation and the lack of reliable internet.

By mid-implementation, both were hoping to obtain youth input either through pre-existing youth boards for local behavioral health drop-in centers, or through ad hoc meetings with youth participating in YHDP-funded projects. The third site experienced turnover in the YAB membership every few months and dissolved when the staff person responsible for recruiting new members left. By mid-implementation, a new staff person was on board and collaborating with other youth boards in the community to restart its YAB. In the fourth site, the YAB still existed but had lost momentum following the development of the community plan and implementation of the YHDP projects. The combination of the turnover of members and the pandemic resulted in the YAB not meeting regularly for many months.

The peer sites had more limited youth involvement. In Sonoma County and Memphis, YABs were formed to participate in the development of the YHDP application. Colorado BOS sought youth input for the YHDP application from existing youth boards from other systems, including child welfare and juvenile justice. Although there was some intermittent youth involvement in Colorado BOS and plans for a youth position on the CoC board in Sonoma County, only Memphis of the peer sites had an active YAB at either wave of data collection. Its YAB, composed of between four and seven members, received financial and logistical support from staff from OUTMemphis, an LGBTQ provider.

Perspectives of Youth Action Board Members

Across all sites, YAB members reported playing an active role in providing input into the design of YHDP as it was developing.

During baseline interviews, in all sites, YAB members reported playing a role in determining what projects to include in their communities' plans and how to implement those projects. For example, YAB members in Connecticut BOS advocated for including additional crisis housing for youth in the plan so that youth had a safe alternative to adult shelters and unsafe doubled-up situations. In Cincinnati/Hamilton County, YAB members advocated for additional case management assistance for new clients and a matching tool that would help pair youth with a case manager who would be a good fit. In Seattle/King County, the YAB negotiated the salary for a clinical therapist position that anchors the Youth Engagement Team to reduce staff turnover in that position.

YAB members also engaged in a range of other activities within their CoCs during baseline interviews.

In seven of 10 sites, YAB members participated in Youth Counts.. Additionally, in one or two sites each, they noted making presentations at community events and panels; organizing and hosting community events for youth; collecting input from non-YAB involved youth through focus groups, surveys, and informal information gathering; and developing social media, such as Facebook groups, to share information. In four sites, YAB members also participated in outreach activities. For example, YAB members in Santa Cruz made Homeless Crisis Response Kits that included information about where to access assistance and some essential supplies that could be distributed to youth in need. YAB members in NW Michigan, Santa Cruz, and San Francisco participated in peer-to-peer outreach activities.

In those sites that maintained active YABs over time, members continued to be involved in a range of activities; in other sites, YAB members were not involved despite continued interest.

In both sites with full boards and more limited membership, YAB members reported regularly attending CoC meetings, providing feedback on policies and programs and making suggestions for ways they could be improved, conducting youth-perspective training to providers throughout the CoC, and soliciting feedback from youth participating in YHDP-funded programs through surveys and focus groups and sharing that feedback with other CoC members. In Connecticut BOS and Seattle/King County, YAB members also provided technical assistance to other communities on how to develop their own YABs.

“I would say main role that the [YAB] has been playing within the CoC is helping with fostering youth partnership within the state. I have been doing this over the last few years of just meeting with different...groups with acquiring best practices and resources for fostering youth partnership with young people across the state.”

In other sites, YAB members reported they have “no deep involvement in anything” and that they would like to be more involved, but that there were no opportunities for them to be engaged or there were limited financial means to support their participation.

At both time periods, YAB members from different sites had varying views on whether their contributions were valued.

At baseline, YAB members from five sites felt their input was specifically solicited during the planning process and was being listened to by YHDP leadership.

“[Prior to YHDP] it was very adult ran and there wasn't a lot of youth input. And now they're definitely realizing...‘Okay, this is what they need or what they want, so we should go with it.’”

In one site, YAB members spoke optimistically about the role of the YAB moving forward, believing it would not be limited in scope to the demonstration, but rather become a contributing member to the overall CoC.

In the other four YHDP sites, YAB members reported feeling less effectual because their input was not listened to. They mentioned feeling like decisions had already been made before soliciting their input, that their feedback was not heard, and that their contributions were dismissed. YAB members in these sites described youth as tokenized.

“I was little bit disappointed that they weren't taking the youth voice into account, they were just saying they were. Like ‘yeah we value your words,’ yeah but you're not, just cause you call it, just cause you call it something else doesn't mean you're not dismissing us.”

Few patterns are evident between the sites in which YAB members felt valued and those that they did not, except that the sites with youth who reported participating in more activities such as Youth Counts, outreach, research activities, and community events also tended to make youth feel like they were making important contributions. Differences in perceived value did

not appear to relate to differences in sites' size, the baseline level of development, history of engaging with youth, or the size and recruitment of the YAB.

YAB members across the sites, however, felt they were improving services and supports for youth, even in sites where youth did not feel always listened to.

In numerous sites, members indicated they felt like they were improving services and supports for other youth who were struggling. Some noted that they appreciated sharing their experiences and perspectives with people in decision-making positions. Others said they appreciated getting to advocate for policies or reforms they believed in, such as encouraging systems to allow youth to have a choice in their case managers.

Being on a YAB provided an opportunity to learn and gain experience for future employment, but several YAB members felt they needed more training to contribute fully.

In some of the larger urban sites with multiple youth providers, YAB members reported enjoying learning about how government and service systems work. Sites that included youth in a wide range of CoC activities, including the Youth Count, community events, and research projects reported appreciating gaining valuable experience that would benefit them in future jobs.

“What I really like is seeing how it just provides people opportunities to really grow. I think that’s most important.”

In three sites, however, YAB members indicated that they were not provided with adequate training about system functioning to allow them to fully participate in decision-making. They indicated wanting more training or mentorship so that they could make better-informed contributions to the conversation.

“I feel like I don’t have enough information about everything to be able to make a good argument or say I approve of this or I don’t approve of this, because there’s a lot of things [about how] systems work and the CoC...that I don’t really know that much about. It’s just kind of a limit on how much we can have input in.”

For YABs that continued through mid-implementation, members noted the added benefit of developing comradery on the YAB and close ties with others in the CoC.

During mid-implementation interviews, some of the more engaged YAB members remarked on enjoying the sense of community they received from working with other members of the CoC to improve services for young people. They also remarked on the supportive bond that forms among members of a YAB.

“I think I just like working with my family. They’re literally like my family. As well as just being able to help create change to help other young people going through it now.”

YAB members reported a myriad of challenges that they felt limited their ability to attend regularly as well as contribute as much as they would like.

YAB members noted several things that made their participation more difficult, including meeting times, logistics, payment, and confidentiality. In some sites, YAB members noted that the meetings, scheduled during the day, made it difficult for them to attend if they were working or going to school. YAB members from several sites also noted that the site's inability to provide transportation assistance limited who could participate. Similarly, YAB members noted that if a site did not assist with childcare, parenting youth were under-represented on the YAB.

A key concern voiced by YAB members in six of the nine YHDP sites in which we conducted interviews was the effect of limited financial support on their participation. Although all sites compensated YAB members, amounts and types of compensation varied considerably, ranging from \$10 to \$25 an hour.⁶ YAB members from the two sites that provided gift cards instead of cash voiced their dissatisfaction with this choice of compensation.

"I can't pay my phone bill with a Visa gift card or a gift card for Target. I can't go pay rent with that."

YAB members also voiced their concerns on the limitations in the hours they could devote and the roles they could play in the CoC. The amount of funding CoCs had to support their YABs restricted the number of youth who could participate and/or the number of hours involved that youth could commit to, which in some sites could be as few as one hour a week. One YAB member reported it was hard to sustain YAB member commitment in his CoC because limited hours meant that youth could not count on it as a reliable source of income and thus left the YAB after finding employment. In other sites, YAB members reported wishing they could devote more time to these issues as full-time employees, like other members of the CoC. Even in YABs that were active at mid-implementation, YAB members continued to voice the need for additional financial support to expand membership or increase their hours.

In addition, YAB members in a few sites noted that other restrictions in the site limited the role they could have. For example, one YAB member shared that because YAB members were not provided access to confidential HMIS data, they were asked to leave the room when the YHDP team wanted to use the data to guide their discussions. This impeded their ability to fully participate in decision-making and also made them feel like their input was not as valued as other members of the team.

⁶ Reasons for variation across sites in the type and amount of compensation of youth include the size of the population and number of YAB members, as well as the CoC's ability to access funding. While all CoCs were encouraged to provide funding to youth, and CoCs were able to use planning grant dollars after their release in October 2017 to fund the YABs, prior to October 2017, CoCs had to support youth participation through additional funding (such as through local foundations).

Section III. Findings: Perspectives of Youth at Risk of or Experiencing Homelessness

This section presents the perspectives of a general population of youth who were at risk of or experiencing homelessness in the YHDP and peer sites. In more than 60 focus groups at two points in time, we asked the youth

- How they became homeless and what would have prevented it (baseline only).
- Their perspectives on the services and supports that were available.
- How the COVID-19 pandemic affected their lives and the services they received (mid-implementation only).
- Their recommendations for changes or improvements to the service systems for youth in their communities.

In addition, when provided through our individual interviews with YAB members, we include their perspectives on the services and supports that were available in their communities.

How Youth Became Homeless and What Might Have Prevented It (among Youth in Baseline Focus Groups)

Youth in baseline focus groups most commonly cited family conflict and tumultuous home environments as contributing to their homelessness.

Youth often attributed their becoming homeless, at least in part, to abusive and neglectful parenting practices, family rejection, and troubled relationships with family members, particularly for LGBTQ youth who indicated their parents rejected them because of their sexual/gender orientation.

“The reason why I’m homeless is because my mother found out I was gay when I was 14 and she kicked me out.” —Anchorage

Pregnant and parenting youth described being kicked out or choosing to leave unstable or conflictual home environments.

“My parents have a different way of parenting my son and they think of timeouts and punishment and getting in trouble. I wasn’t gonna have my son in a toxic environment that he wasn’t supposed to be in. I wanted a better life for him that I didn’t have.” —Santa Cruz

Youth with involvement in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems who experienced homelessness cited the lack of safe or welcoming family environments to return home to. Additionally, youth said family financial issues, drug use, and overall poverty were factors that led to histories of housing instability while living with their parents and contributed to their homelessness as young adults.

“I kinda, like, grew up in this situation, so I went from being in foster care to being in my mother’s custody where she couldn’t take care of me. Sleeping in a van with her, so I pretty much grew up knowin’ what it was to be homeless. By

the time I was 18, I was on my own. I ended up on the streets.” —Connecticut BOS

Youth also described their own challenges with mental health and substance abuse disorders or spending time in jail as contributing to their homelessness. Youth noted that these conditions interfered with their schooling and employment and resulted in homelessness.

“For me, I was getting kicked out of my house. Since I was 14, I was in and out of my house and one of the main reasons was drugs, smoking weed and all that stuff and just gangs and stuff like that.” —Santa Cruz

Youth suggested having more support for themselves, and early intervention with their families may have helped prevent their homelessness.

Youth offered a number of suggestions of things they think might have helped prevent their homelessness. Across the sites, youth indicated that they felt having a caring adult or support network to provide them with advice could have prevented their homelessness.

“One of the things I didn’t get that I needed was support. I think had I gotten the support and the satisfaction of knowing that somebody is trying to help me understand what I was going through would have helped a lot.” —Anchorage

They also suggested that early intervention to assist their families, by addressing poverty and family conflict, could also have helped to prevent homelessness. In multiple sites, youth believed that their families could have benefited from counseling or mediation services that would help them communicate better and amicably resolve problems. For youth who believed that their homelessness was due to their families’ poor money management, access to financial literacy might have helped their parents avoid housing instability. Moreover, they believed if their parents had more education, they would have been able to obtain jobs with higher income, thus resulting in more money for housing.

“Maybe trying to help moms a lot more ‘cause a lot of, I don’t know. It could be grandmas, it could be moms, it could be dads, but our situations always stem from our parents.” —Connecticut BOS

Help in Accessing Services and Supports

Outreach Services

Youth were largely unaware of the outreach services and other assistance available.

During baseline focus groups, knowledge about what type of assistance was available and where to go for assistance was a gap identified by youth in all sites’ service systems, including those at sites that had youth-specific outreach in place. Among mid-implementation focus groups, some participants indicated awareness of outreach in sites where youth-specific outreach was available; however, in both YHDP and peer sites, youth continued to report that services were not well-advertised, and

Outreach services identify and engage youth/young adults at risk of or experiencing homelessness and connect them with assistance. They can include street outreach teams, mobile vans, school-based outreach, and websites or other technology.

it was hard to know where to go to get assistance. In response to a question about whether there were outreach services available, one youth replied:

“No, I don’t think so. If there is, they’re not very good at their job.” —Santa Cruz

Few focus participants indicated they had received outreach assistance. Youth who did encounter outreach workers reported connecting at encampment sites, in parks, and public buildings, such as libraries. They noted receiving clothes, meals, and first aid services as well as assessments of their service needs. One youth indicated:

“Basically, they come out to wherever you are and they do a small evaluation with you about what your plans are and what your situation is.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Youth often learned about homelessness assistance through non-homeless providers, families, friends, and their schools.

At both time periods, most youth reported that they learned about where to get homelessness assistance from other service providers such as health clinics, behavioral health providers, LGBTQ agencies, and employment programs; through word-of-mouth from friends or family; or through their schools. One youth stated:

“My mother did a lot of advocacy work with the State of Ohio for people with disabilities, so I’m a little bit more inclined to know about state programs, I would say, than most people.” —Ohio BOS

Youth wanted easier, more comprehensive ways of learning about assistance.

In multiple sites, youth suggested having all available resources compiled into a single source, such as a centralized directory, would be helpful, and that the information needed to be regularly updated. In Connecticut BOS, for example, youth can call 211 for a list of providers in their area; however, the information was not always current. One youth indicated:

“When I tried to call them, the number didn’t work. And then a lot of them, the other ones their programs didn’t exist, or the program was canceled, because they didn’t have enough funding.” —Connecticut BOS

Youth suggested services could be advertised through commercials, pop-up ads on Facebook, and on buses to reach a wider audience and be helpful to those in need.

“They advertise everything on the buses, but yet do not advertise anything that’s actually useful for everyday life.” —Austin/Travis County

YAB members additionally suggested that more outreach about the kinds of assistance youth can receive and where they can go to get it needed to occur in schools, particularly in middle schools before most youths become homeless. One YAB member noted it was particularly difficult to get help as a minor.

Drop-in Centers

Drop-in centers were considered a valuable resource by youth in the locations in which they were available. Youth reported using them to access food, showers, laundry, and hygiene

products; have social interactions with others; and gain access to case managers and other services.

During baseline focus groups, youth from only two sites—Anchorage and Seattle/King County—mentioned using drop-in centers, but by mid-implementation, when drop-in centers were available in a broader number of sites, many focus group participants were aware of drop-in facilities and discussed using them. Youth reported using drop-in centers to meet their basic needs when they were couch surfing or staying in unsheltered locations. Youth residing in shelters also used the drop-in centers during the day when they were required to exit the shelters and needed a place to spend time between overnight stays. They discussed using drop-in facilities to access food, showers, laundry, and hygiene products as well as to have social interactions with peers. For example, one youth indicated:

“I can go there and hang out and play some video games with my friends and catch up, and really a lot of the staff were my friends too.” —Anchorage

Youth also said they could get coordinated entry assessments, receive referrals to needed services and supports, and connect with case managers at drop-in centers.

“I think that for me I was in a really bad place and there was a few times when I went in and I was actually able to just talk to someone and be like this is where I’m at and that was super helpful.” —Sonoma County (peer site)

Drop-in centers may be harder to put into place in rural locations, yet youth in those locations wanted them.

The two sites without youth drop-in centers available by mid-implementation— Ohio BOS and Colorado BOS (peer site)—are large, multi-county, rural CoCs. The vast area, limited public transportation, and proportionally smaller populations of youth experiencing homelessness may contribute to reduced demand for centralized drop-in facilities. However, youth still discussed the need for them.

“We don’t have anything like that here. It would be nice if we did.” —Colorado BOS (peer site)

Experience with Coordinated Entry

Coordinated Entry

Over the course of the demonstration, youth in YHDP sites were increasingly aware of and reported using coordinated entry.

During baseline data collection, youth in focus groups varied in the degree to which they were familiar with or had used coordinated entry. Even focus group participants in sites with youth-specific coordinated entry systems were mixed in their familiarity with the coordinated entry process. Youth in two of

Drop-in centers are locations where youth/young adults can go to access food, clothing, and other basic needs; to get connected to services and supports and to spend time with other youth/young adults.

Coordinated entry is defined as a process that ensures all youth/young adults experiencing homelessness or other housing crises are quickly identified, assessed, referred, and connected with housing and homeless assistance in a coordinated manner.

the four sites with youth-specific processes in place—Seattle/King County and Connecticut BOS—reported familiarity with the coordinated entry systems, including where to go for assistance, what the process entailed, and what kind of assistance they could receive through coordinated entry. However, except for a few participants, youth in focus groups in the remaining sites were unaware of the process. Additionally, in sites where coordinated entry was in place, YAB members interviewed noted that it was difficult for youth to access assistance. They believed there needed to be more locations for youth to ask for help and those access points needed to be youth-friendly *“because calling on a phone isn’t something a lot of youth are gonna do.”*

During mid-implementation focus groups, however, youth in most demonstration sites were familiar with the coordinated entry process and were able to articulate where they went for assistance, what the assessment process was like, and the assistance they were offered. For example, one youth noted:

“They come out to you wherever you are and do an assessment of what’s going on with you and what you need. You can get help with accessing the shelter or finding some other housing. They’ll help you with other things, like transit [bus cards].” — Cincinnati/Hamilton County

This was also true in one of the three peer sites. A youth in Sonoma County shared:

“I don’t remember having too many issues with getting the initial intake for coordinated entry.” —Sonoma County (peer site)

As with outreach services, youth in rural sites were less familiar with coordinated entry.

In contrast, youth in Ohio BOS and Kentucky BOS, large, multi-county rural sites, often were unfamiliar with coordinated entry, although many described being asked some questions about their situation before receiving services. Participants in Ohio BOS reported being asked questions by shelter staff for about 5–10 minutes before moving into a shelter, including questions about needing help with drug and alcohol treatment or help to get a GED. Similarly, youth in Kentucky BOS discussed being asked questions before receiving assistance, a process staff referred to as a “front porch assessment,” a youth said:

“They technically ask us questions about where we came from, if we’re fleeing abuse, and stuff like that.” —Kentucky BOS

Youth in Colorado BOS, a rural peer site where coordinated entry for youth was still in the early implementation stages, also reported no familiarity with coordinated entry. This difference in familiarity may be because in these rural sites, with few youth-specific services or providers, youth often received coordinated entry from the same organizations that provided them other types of assistance such as shelter, rather than from a separate entity responsible for assessing youth and referring them to additional assistance. Coordinated entry, therefore, is likely not viewed as a separate process but just part of the admission process to shelter.

Some youth reported concerns with intrusive assessments as part of coordinated entry.

In half of the YHDP sites and one peer site, youth indicated a number of challenges in using coordinated entry, such as feeling like their answers to the assessment were not believed. Others reported being uncomfortable with what they viewed as the invasive nature of the assessment questions, including questions about topics, like past abuse, that they did not feel were relevant to their current situations. One youth reported:

“There was a lot of triggering. They get really deep into the questions to see where you ‘better fit’ in a housing program. It can get very invasive. It leaves you in a very, very yucky, nasty, for me at least, a very weird spot, and then not to have a secure spot that night after taking that assessment...” —Seattle/King County

Youth also reported that they were not sure that young people answered all of the questions accurately because they may have been reluctant to share information that could help prioritize them for assistance.

“I feel like sometimes the right questions don’t get answered in the right way and people don’t know what they’re supposed to say or not, and so they might leave something out or whatever.” —Sonoma County (peer site)

In one site, YAB members interviewed echoed this sentiment, expressing dislike for the Transition Age Youth Vulnerability Index Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (TAY-VISPDAT). They found it inflexible and not accurately capturing youth’s needs and vulnerabilities.

Youth reported variable wait times for assistance following intake.

While some participants in almost all sites reported that they received assistance quickly after receiving an assessment, other youth in the same sites indicated it was hard to get assistance, either because they were not eligible for the help they needed, or it took a long time to receive it. One youth shared:

“I was actually living on a bus on the street, so I wasn’t in a park or anything, but it still took a couple of months until someone contacted me. And that was in a bus that’s not really meant to be a living situation, it’s not like there was a sink or anything, it was a bus that we took the seats out of.” —Santa Cruz

Youth in a few sites—Austin/Travis County, Connecticut BOS, Sonoma County (peer site)—reported contacting coordinated entry multiple times or completing multiple assessments to get scores high enough to get assistance. YAB members in those sites reported that the youth system was inadequate to address all of the needs in their communities, so youth often had to wait a long time for help.

Perspectives on Crisis and Permanent Housing

Crisis Housing: Emergency Shelter/Crisis Transitional Housing

Many youths noted, especially at baseline, how limited access to youth shelters required them to stay in adult shelters, which typically felt dangerous and unsafe.

Particularly at baseline, youth reported relying on adult shelters when they were in crisis but expressed concerns around their safety. They reported feeling unsafe or particularly vulnerable in the adult shelters and in the surrounding area where the shelters were located. In

multiple sites, youth said that they would forego accessing services rather than stay at adult shelters. These concerns and issues were particularly salient for female youth, who noted fear of sexual assault or rape. Youth reported being bullied and robbed while they were in shelters and feared being arrested if they were to defend themselves or get into altercations with other shelter occupants. Finally, focus group participants reported that many adults in shelters had substance abuse problems, and youth staying in shelters were at risk of using drugs themselves.

Across sites, youth overwhelmingly reported valuing youth-specific crisis housing where they felt safe and could get case management assistance to meet their needs.

At mid-implementation, youth in many sites indicated youth-specific shelters (as opposed to adult shelters) were a welcome resource. They spoke of feeling safer and receiving more assistance than when in adult shelters.

“I like this program better because it’s youth and the other shelter is all ages, so you just feel more uncomfortable. The staff here, they do more as far as offering resources than the women’s shelter. There’s more that you can get out of the program to assist you with obtaining employment, housing, et cetera. Whereas at the women’s shelter it was more so independent.” —Connecticut BOS

In Ohio BOS and Kentucky BOS, where crisis housing specifically for youth was newly available as a result of the YHDP, youth indicated they were grateful to have a place to go.

“I couldn’t ask for anything better. They gave you a place to stay. They feed you. They pay your bills. They help you get on your feet.” —Ohio BOS

Youth spoke appreciatively of the assistance they received from case managers who work at shelters. Shelter staff were also credited with helping youth with things they did not know how to do such as laundry and cooking.

“The caseworker’s job, the one that we have, he has very many jobs within the system. So, whenever he is available, he does as much as possible to help you with whatever you need.” —Kentucky BOS

In other sites, youth’s assessment of the assistance they received in shelter varied, even within site. In Connecticut BOS, one youth staying in a shelter reported that the staff and case managers were “amazing,” while another said of the staff:

Emergency shelter is a type of crisis housing that provides a temporary place for youth/young adults experiencing homelessness to live while looking for permanent housing.

“They do not do much and you have to fight to get the services they do offer.” — Connecticut BOS

However, youth indicated that they continued to have unmet needs related to crisis housing, including not enough capacity, restrictive rules, and limited services.

Despite the increased access to youth-specific shelter and accompanying case management, youth indicated that they continued to have unmet needs related to crisis housing. In about half the YHDP sites and all of the peer sites, youth indicated that there was still not enough crisis housing in their communities.

“I think we do need more facilities that target young parents or just young people in general because I had a hard time [finding a place to stay].” —Austin/Travis County

Additionally, youth indicated that restrictive shelter rules were difficult. For example, rules that require youth to leave during the day can be challenging, especially for those that work late hours. One young woman who worked an evening shift noted that she:

“[Doesn’t] get much sleep and then [has] to get up early to leave the shelter and find a place to hang out all day, even when it’s cold and raining. It kind of takes a toll on you.” —Connecticut BOS

Some youth felt unsafe not having any place to be during the day.

“You have to be gone all day. So just being kicked out all day is like people get into trouble and I was assaulted. It’s... you don’t have anywhere to go.” —Sonoma County (peer site)

Across sites, youth frequently indicated that they wanted to receive more services through crisis housing, such as therapy and transportation for going to work, school, and seeing apartments.

Crisis Housing: Host Homes

Host homes, while not frequently used by youth in focus groups, were well-received by youth who appreciated forming relationships with the hosts with whom they lived.

By mid-implementation, host home programs were available in seven YHDP sites and one peer site. However, they typically operated on a smaller scale than other crisis housing options due to the reliance on community members to volunteer as prospective hosts and the processes involved in matching youth with compatible hosts. Accordingly, none of the youth participating in baseline focus groups had experience with the intervention, and only a few youth focus group participants reported firsthand experience in host homes during mid-implementation data collection. However, most of the youth who did participate in host home programs reported valuing the individualized and familial nature of the arrangement.

Host homes are a type of housing assistance in which youth/young adults reside with an unrelated adult in the adult’s home for a temporary period of time.

In San Francisco, one youth reported having lived in a host home for about 6 months. He said he wanted to be in a host home arrangement to have more stability in his life. He described his relationship with the hosts as *“like a helpful aunt/uncle role.”* He reported:

“I’d say overall that it’s pretty just relaxed and we have weekly check-ins after dinner, but also I do usually have dinner with them pretty much nightly and spend a lot of time with the kids. And it’s been pretty comfortable.”

In Kentucky BOS, one youth noted that her case manager had discussed host homes with her, but she did not want to try it because she preferred to stay in the shelter.

Among the peer sites, only Sonoma County had a host home program in place. One focus group participant had been in a variety of host homes there for many years. She said the host homes provided her an opportunity to move out of a transitional living program when she was still a minor and too young to rent an apartment. Over the years, she had been placed in a variety of homes and reportedly had good experiences with all of them.

Youth underscored the importance of the matching process with host homes.

In Seattle/King County, one focus group participant was actively living in a host home during the mid-implementation period. She reported that the enrollment and matching processes, in which interested youth are paired with willing hosts, were simple and worked well, and her case manager checked with her weekly to see how she was doing and connect her with needed services. Similarly, in Anchorage, a participant indicated he was well-matched with his host family. He noted, *“The relationship in a host home is a little like [having] roommates but a bit more intimate.”*

A youth in Santa Cruz, however, was not happy with his experience because he said his case manager was not very organized and did not provide him with any assistance he needed. He said that there were not many young adults participating in the program, in part because it was difficult to find people willing to serve as hosts.

Permanent Housing

Despite increases over time in housing assistance, at both times frames youth voiced challenges in finding available housing.

During baseline data collection, difficulty accessing permanent housing was noted as a problem by youth across YHDP and peer sites. During mid-implementation data collection, 25 percent of focus group participants reported receiving rental assistance at the time of the focus groups. However, despite the increased access to permanent housing programs, youth in all sites continued to report experiencing challenges in locating housing.

Youth in sites with a high cost of living, such as San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Seattle/King County, and Austin/Travis County discussed the lack of affordable housing and expressed concerns about their ability to “make it” in housing even with assistance and the steep requirements for moving in (for example, having an income that is three times the cost of one month’s rent) that were out of reach for a young person with an entry-level job. Concerns about securing and maintaining housing were not limited to urban areas. In other sites, where rents were more attainable for those with limited incomes, such as Cincinnati/Hamilton County and Connecticut

BOS, youth noted a reluctance of landlords to rent to young people without rental or credit histories and, in Ohio BOS and Kentucky BOS, a lack of housing stock.

In many sites, youth reported experiencing difficulty finding affordable housing. As a result, some youth had to accept run-down or unsafe housing that was affordable for them.

“I’m grateful that I got the help with the program that helped me find a place to live. But right now I’m dealing with a lot of cockroaches in the apartment, so it’s hard. Yeah I have a baby, and it’s scary that she wants to touch everything.” —Santa Cruz

Youth felt that uncertainty in how much financial assistance they would receive or concerns with using subsidies made it difficult to find landlords willing to rent to them.

Youth expressed difficulty finding landlords who would rent to them, which could be exacerbated by not knowing how much financial assistance they would receive. In most YHDP sites, youth indicated they were told rapid re-housing was a 12-month program. Yet, in at least three sites, youth reported not knowing the amount or duration of assistance they would be provided, and that made finding an apartment difficult.

“My case worker had me stressing out looking for an apartment...and she knew my apartment was paid for a whole year so she had me freaking out and going crazy and then the whole time I was covered...you can just tell me that the rent was going to be paid so I could just do other things like worry about school...I lost a lot of apartments because she was telling me they couldn’t guarantee to pay my rent for a year and then she’s like...we can pay your rent for a whole year and I’m like so why didn’t you say that before? So it made my homelessness longer.” —Connecticut BOS

Others indicated that it was difficult to find landlords who would accept their subsidies.

“A lot of landlords are not working with the program. That made it harder for me to find somewhere to go, and some of the places weren’t really great places.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Youth emphasized the importance of navigation assistance and housing location.

Most youth across the YHDP and peer sites reported receiving assistance finding housing from navigators/case managers. However, the amount of assistance youth received varied across sites. In some sites, youth reported their case managers provided them with a list of landlords to contact, went with them to look at apartments, talked to landlords, or found apartments for them.

“[Program staff]...call the landlord just to make sure, to explain to them what the program is and how it works just so the landlord has an idea, so he’s not coming in blindsided.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

In San Francisco, where finding affordable housing can be very challenging, the YHDP rapid re-housing program benefited from another youth rapid re-housing program in which housing locators were contracted to identify three potential apartments from which youth could choose.

In other sites, youth were largely on their own. In Ohio BOS, for example, youth reported that no one helped them find apartments, *“they just help with the costs.”* Others indicated their apartment was picked out for them and they were not offered any choice about where to live.

“It was like either me being homeless or getting this place.” —Ohio BOS

Youth largely spoke of appreciating assistance finding apartments. One youth spoke of never having rented an apartment before and needing guidance on what to look for, such as being close to public transportation or rent that included utilities.

“My first time looking for apartments it’s like I don’t know exactly what to look for. I never had an apartment before. If my caseworker takes the time to actually teach me that, maybe I’ll have more sense of, ‘Okay, I know what I want, and if I have everything included it’ll be cheaper and stuff like that.’” —Austin/Travis County

Youth also spoke about needing assistance in a variety of areas once they were in housing.

Once in housing, youth received varying levels of assistance accessing furniture and household items. Some youth reported receiving what they needed.

“I don’t know where I’d be without [agency]; they gave me furniture when I moved in and they gave me a blowup bed for the one night before I had furniture.”—Austin/Travis County

Others reported having to go to different places to get resources because the housing did not include items like dishes that they *“shouldn’t have to worry about.”*

Youth often spoke of difficulty getting their landlords to respond to repair requests. One landlord in Cincinnati/Hamilton County took three months to get the electricity working, and another took months to fix the air conditioner. Some youth reached out to case managers for assistance dealing with their landlords, but case managers often encouraged them to advocate for themselves. One youth, receiving rapid re-housing assistance, indicated that the landlord did not listen to her requests because she was not paying the rent; she felt that the provider would have more influence over the landlord because they paid the rent.

Focus group participants from the peer sites generally had less experience receiving assistance accessing permanent housing.

Youths in Sonoma County were not aware of any resources to help them access permanent housing, though one mentioned his parole officer was helping him look into options. In Memphis, a few youths had received rapid re-housing assistance.

“I was in the rapid re-housing program. They had got me a house, and they paid the first 3 months, they paid it all. After that, they started paying percentage by percentage until after a year, and I moved out and got [another] apartment.” —Memphis (peer site)

However, others reported that there were long waitlists for assistance and limited capacity in the youth-specific housing programs. One youth reported that he was on a waitlist for housing, and in the meantime he was moving around between friends, family, and people he did not know. Colorado BOS had few permanent housing programs for youth across a wide geographic area, and youth in the focus groups reported no experience using them.

Knowledge of and Perspectives on Other Services and Supports

Diversion

Few focus group participants reported receiving diversion assistance at either time period; those who did were pleased with the assistance.

At both time periods, few focus group participants had experience with diversion assistance. This may be reflective of how youth were recruited for focus group participation, or through providers with whom they were typically still connected, rather than its prevalence in these sites. At mid-implementation, two participants—both from Cincinnati/Hamilton County—had received diversion assistance from a YHDP-funded program to help them find stable housing.

“If you can’t find somebody [to live with], then they’ll hook you up to the diversion. They’ll just go ahead and pay your first month rent and deposit, and then that’s a quick way for you to go ahead and get housing without even waiting in a shelter.” — Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Both participants indicated they were pleased with the assistance they received, although they would have appreciated more assistance finding housing.

“I really had to do a lot of research to find an apartment and a landlord that was willing to work with the diversion program. And I did that on my own, and it was a little difficult. My worker didn’t really help out with that.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Navigation/Case Management

Youth consistently cited case managers as critical and essential support for making plans to reach their goals, accessing needed services, and finding housing and jobs.

During baseline data collection, youth in focus groups indicated that guidance from a case manager or other knowledgeable person was critical to helping them access the services they needed. They also noted the importance of having a caring adult provide emotional support and advice. YAB members across sites shared that many youth experiencing homelessness have problems trusting adults, particularly if they have reached out for help in the past and have not received it. They suggested that case managers could play an important role in helping them ask for the help they need. One

Diversion involves a focus on problem-solving and often short- to medium-term financial assistance and/or supportive services to divert youth/young adults from entering shelter.

Navigation/case management is a process in which an individual is assigned through a provider to meet with youth/young adults and help guide them through the system of housing and services.

youth articulated how important case managers are to youth who are experiencing homelessness.

“A lot of youth that are struggling don’t have their parents, so a case manager or mentor would be really cool. Just having someone that knows about resources is huge. It’s hard to even begin to understand all of the programs that are out there and how to get approved for them.” —Colorado BOS (peer site)

At mid-implementation, all focus groups participants reported being connected with navigation/case management assistance. It is important to reiterate, however, that because we recruited youth through service providers, the youth included in focus groups may be more connected to services and supports than other youth in their CoCs. We do not know the extent to which other youths in the CoCs receive navigation/case management assistance.

Many focus group participants spoke of their navigators/case managers as trusted individuals who helped them make plans to reach their goals, access needed services as well as food and other basic supplies, and find housing and jobs. In sites where youth did not have access to public transportation, such as Kentucky BOS and Ohio BOS, youth reported their case managers drove them to grocery stores and doctor’s appointments. In one site, a youth reported receiving a laptop for remote schooling from his case manager.

“She would just ask me what kind of needs I needed or what steps I wanted to take and we wrote down goals and she was coming to visit me at the shelter as well and telling me the steps I needed to take to reach the goals. She actually helped me with bus passes to get to places or printing paperwork and helping me fill them out, things like that.” —Connecticut BOS

This was true in the peer sites as well. Participants in all three peer sites spoke of having case managers they could count on.

“It really matters to me, and really makes me feel good to know that somebody’s actually there and listening to us, hearing us out, seeing us as people.” —Memphis (peer site)

Youth perceptions of the quality of the assistance received varied, even within the site.

However, the assistance youth reported receiving varied. Within the same sites, some navigators/case managers were described as really caring and “going above and beyond,” while others were described as there “just for the paycheck.”

In multiple sites, youth mentioned that their case managers did not know what assistance was available. This was often attributed to staff being new.

“She is new to the job and doesn’t know what she is doing.” —Seattle/King County

Across multiple sites, youth reported feeling like their case managers did not treat them well. Youth suggested that case managers should get vulnerability training to learn to treat youth with respect.

“They need to get nicer staff that care about people and want to help people. Being homeless is traumatic and they don’t take this into consideration.” —Connecticut BOS

Others believed their case managers did not take their preferences into account.

“A lot of case managers like to tell you what you need to do instead of giving you options or letting you decide for yourself what’s best for you, you know what I mean? You have to have a passion for this because this is people’s lives, you’re playing with our kids, where we live at, this is serious to us and it needs to be serious to you all.” —Seattle/King County

Youth expressed the desire for more frequent and improved communication with case managers.

Many youths wished for better communication with their case managers. Youth reported that their case managers did not return their telephone calls or were slow to do so. The youth noted that many case managers are too busy with too many clients to return telephone calls promptly.

“She never texted me back. I could show you where I texted her multiple times and she never texted me back. I left her voice messages, she never called me back. She told me that we would have meetings scheduled, and she wouldn’t show up, or she wouldn’t call me.” —Ohio BOS

Others expressed that they wanted more meetings with their navigators/case managers so they could work together to achieve the youth’s specific goals.

“I mean, I feel like with the youth navigators, there wasn’t really any contact with them. They would text you...and send you resources for here or there, but it wasn’t meeting up and really getting to the root of what you’re trying to do. And so you have suggestions on these things that they’re sending you. And if you’re in a bad situation, you’ll take anything. Forget your goal, or what you’re actually trying to do.” —Austin/Travis County

Family Intervention Services

Both at baseline and mid-implementation, youth frequently discussed having difficult relationships with family members with whom they may spend time on and off between periods of homelessness; however, few, if any, youth noted receiving family intervention services.

During baseline focus groups, youth identified family conflict, abuse, and rejection, as well as family poverty, residential instability, and drug use as primary contributors to their experiences of homelessness, particularly among pregnant/parenting youth and those identifying as LGBTQ. Youth perceived early interventions to assist families as potentially helpful in preventing youth homelessness but did not recount having received such interventions.

Family intervention services include services such as counseling, mediation, and reunification assistance to help youth/young adults strengthen family ties and return to their families, or to identify new kinship supports and housing opportunities.

Similarly, during mid-implementation focus groups, no youth indicated receiving such assistance. In some sites, such as Anchorage where one focus group was composed of youth aging out of child welfare, participants discussed temporarily living with family members after leaving foster care or shelter, but these situations were frequently described as challenging because they were not welcome or did not get along with their family members. None mentioned receiving counseling or mediation services to help improve those relationships. One young woman indicated she received financial assistance to move in with her grandmother in another state upon leaving foster care; however, shelter-in-place orders resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic prevented her from moving. Additionally, a young man described shelter staff reaching out to his mother for permission to stay in the shelter for a “cooling off period” as a minor.

“The times that I did stay there under 18, they were very polite and they made it seem very approachable for my mom so that everybody agreed that it was okay that I stayed there for a couple days.” —Anchorage

It may be that family intervention services were not frequently made available to youth experiencing homelessness, but it is also possible that youth did not realize they were receiving such assistance if it was embedded in navigation or case management conversations about how they might access and maintain stable housing.

Education and Employment Assistance

Education and employment assistance for youth experiencing homelessness was widely available.

Youth in most sites were aware of services to help them continue their education. Education supports included programs to help them finish high school, get a GED, or provide assistance applying for or funding post-secondary education. Some sites, such as Anchorage, had classrooms co-located with homeless service agencies so youth could complete high school on-site or, alternative high schools that targeted services to youth experiencing homelessness, as in NW Michigan. Youth indicated that having access to such school-based supports, such as providing showers, laundry, food, and counseling was an especially useful way to reach youth experiencing homelessness and help them stay in school.

In focus groups, across all sites, youth were able to identify where they would go for help with school. Youth in four sites indicated they had received help to get their GEDs, and youth in three additional sites said they were looking into it. In many sites, youth indicated it was easy to get the assistance they needed enrolling in or applying for financial assistance for school past high school.

“[My case manager] helped me sign up for classes and helped me sign up for financial aid and introduced me to some support structures on campus.” —Santa Cruz

Education assistance offers help completing high school or a GED, applying for or attending post-secondary education, or participating in training programs.

Employment assistance includes job search and job preparation services, support or coaching while employed, paid or unpaid work experiences, and other services to find or keep employment.

Additionally, in all the sites, youth indicated that employment services were available in their communities and that youth homeless providers often provided them with assistance getting jobs. For example, a youth in Seattle/King County said that the shelters have bulletin boards with employment opportunities. He reported that he got a landscaping apprenticeship through the shelter. In Cincinnati/Hamilton County, youth reported that the main youth provider helps with finding jobs by giving them access to computers to find jobs and apply for them, helping them navigate job search websites, connecting them with temp agencies, helping them prepare for job interviews, and providing transportation to interviews.

“My case manager helped me write a really nice resume. I told her what my goals are and what career I’m trying to go toward and she’s been helping me direct that. She’s been helping me with opportunities with that too.” —Santa Cruz

Youth also discussed receiving clothing or other items they needed for their jobs.

“I told him I had an interview at a car dealership and I didn’t have any clothes. I told him I had a pair of dress pants. He brought me over a really nice dress shirt and a \$45 Perry Ellis belt, a reversible belt that I could use.” —Austin/Travis County

Yet, youth continued to struggle with the challenges of finding time for school and finding or keeping jobs.

Many focus group participants expressed interest in going back to school; however, they frequently noted difficulty finding the time and/or money to get more education.

“We both want to...go back to school. But we can’t do that if we’re still struggling to make ends meet every single month.” —Ohio BOS

Focus groups participants also mentioned challenges they had with finding or keeping jobs, including dealing with health or behavioral health issues, struggling to balance jobs and schooling, responsibility for taking care of children, and difficulty finding jobs that were hiring during COVID-19. A young woman in Connecticut BOS mentioned she struggled to provide references for job applications and she was frustrated that her case manager said she could not serve as one. One youth with a job in a grocery store quit his job when COVID-19 happened. He said:

“I figured that it wasn’t worth risking my health in order to deal with all the amount of disrespect I deal with on a daily basis.” —Anchorage

Across sites, transportation posed a significant challenge to employment for youth, but especially in the rural communities where there are no public transit options. One participant in Kentucky BOS mentioned there were only two stores (a grocery store and a dollar store) within walking distance of the shelter where they could get jobs. All other employment opportunities were many miles away. In other sites, public transit does not run where they need it to or when they need it to. Many youths indicated they took Ubers to get back and forth to work—which took up a good share of their income.

Behavioral Health Services

Behavioral health services for youth experiencing homelessness were available in all YHDP and peer sites.

At both time periods, participants in all sites were generally aware of where they could go or who they could ask for behavioral health assistance if they needed it, often indicating their case managers would be their first point of contact.

Behavioral health services provide assistance with mental health and chemical dependency disorders and can include inpatient and outpatient treatment, counseling, and medication.

“I just asked my case manager about what options do we have, and she had mentioned a few options which is better than none, in my opinion because I feel like it takes time to find the right mental healthcare professional or services.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Youth reported wanting more choice in services or better quality services than they received.

In some sites, youth complained of the quality of services they could receive. For example, one young woman said she had access to therapy but that it was *“just not the help that I wanted”* and she wished there were more options from which to choose. Others expressed wanting more ongoing therapy and less medication to address their mental health challenges.

“They just drug you up on pills and then throw you back out on the street. And it doesn’t really fix anything. It just keeps you sedated, keeps you basically like a zombie. And I’ve been on and off all types of medication since I was 18. And it has literally made me feel like a zombie.” —San Francisco

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the mid-implementation focus groups, youth were asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their lives and the services they received.

Housing and Homelessness

Some youth noted that the pandemic increased their stays in crisis housing and made it more difficult to move to permanent housing.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected youth’s ability to move into permanent housing. A young woman exiting foster care in Anchorage noted she was going to move in with her grandmother in Seattle, but shelter-in-place orders prevented her from moving. Other youth mentioned it was difficult to find apartments during quarantine.

“But for COVID, it just slowed down with me being able to find places. A lot of places I called, they weren’t showing, they weren’t having any viewings.” —Connecticut BOS

In Kentucky BOS, where there is limited housing available, a young woman mentioned she was staying in crisis housing longer than expected because the eviction moratorium limited the availability of housing. Others mentioned that delays in getting IDs and other documentation prevented them from moving into permanent housing quickly.

“So many delays because of COVID, it was so many delays just for me to get my license and ID and all the stuff that I needed.” —Anchorage

Other youth, however, reported the COVID-19 pandemic made it more difficult to stay in a shelter because many shelters were trying to deconcentrate their facilities.

One youth in Connecticut BOS said that when the shelter she was staying in encouraged people to move out if they had another place to go, she ended up sleeping in her car for months. In Anchorage, youth reported leaving the shelter to stay with family members with whom they did not get along.

New shelter rules (such as social distancing) limited the amount of interaction youth had with other people both inside and outside the shelter.

In Ohio BOS, for example, a youth stated that the social distancing rules that limited physical contact with other residents “*seem ridiculous.*” He said he was frustrated that he could not hug someone if they were upset. Youth in the shelter in Kentucky BOS reported that if they wanted to stay in the shelter they had to quarantine and were not allowed to see their partners or others outside the shelter. In Cincinnati/Hamilton County, youth were only allowed to leave the shelter for 1 hour a day.

“If you break that rule, you’re most likely going to get asked to leave just because they don’t want to risk any infections coming into the shelter.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Anchorage’s youth shelter implemented a COVID-19 screening process for youth entering the shelter and required a period of quarantining that limited their interaction with other residents.

Social distancing policies in shelters and drop-in centers often meant youth had fewer places to go to hang out or socialize, which was particularly difficult for the youth who lived alone.

“Losing those visitor rights to [the drop-in center], where I can go and hang out and play some video games with my friends and catch up. Just hanging out, in general, has been really, really rough. I’m so lonely.” —Anchorage

Youth in some sites, however, reported that shelters were not taking enough COVID-19 precautions.

“It was crowded, like a setting where you had bunk beds, and they didn’t really like take the precautions, I feel like, to make sure other people there wouldn’t get [COVID-19].” —San Francisco

Services and Supports

Some youth noted challenges in receiving some assistance, including unemployment and other benefits, during the pandemic.

Youth mentioned the pandemic made it harder for them to get the assistance they needed because telephone lines were busy, there were long waitlists for appointments, and case managers stopped providing them rides to stores and appointments. In some sites, youth indicated they no longer received food from their providers.

“I used to get food boxes every week, then because of the COVID they stopped doing that.” —Austin/Travis County

A few youths mentioned the additional financial assistance of stimulus checks and expanded unemployment, provided through the CARES Act, helped them temporarily. However, others struggled to get benefits due to their housing instability. A youth in Santa Cruz lost her job and applied for unemployment, but did not receive it because she was homeless without a fixed address and had difficulty staying on top of her application. One youth in Colorado BOS (peer site) had been trying to get access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). She had applied three times; she needed to go in person but the office was not open due to COVID-19.

Yet, in multiple sites, youth mentioned that due to the pandemic, they received additional housing assistance.

The amount of rental assistance youth received through rapid re-housing was increased when they were unable to contribute to the rent or extended if they were unable to exit the program and support themselves.

“Due to COVID, they extended [the rental assistance]. I was supposed to not get it anymore but COVID they extended it, so I’m not even sure.” —Connecticut BOS

A youth in a host home also shared that his time in the program was extended when he was furloughed from his job.

“It originally was supposed to be a 6-month program but because of COVID, I couldn't work so they extended it another 6 months.” —Santa Cruz

Employment and Education

Youth struggled to find or keep jobs during the pandemic.

Several youths across the sites who previously worked in food service, clothing stores, daycare centers, and other fields, spoke of losing their jobs or having their hours reduced when their communities were locked down.

“I work at a daycare, so as soon as COVID hit, they laid us off. Everything is opening up again, but it was a while before they opened. It was months. I was out of a job for a while.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Parenting youth mentioned they had to quit their jobs to take care of their children when schools and daycare centers closed. One young woman in Memphis (peer site) left her job to take care of her mother when her mother got COVID-19. Other youth mentioned they left their jobs because of concerns for their health. For example, one youth in San Francisco said he quit a grocery store job because the stress of exposure to the virus was too much to handle. They also experienced difficulty finding new jobs during the pandemic because so few places were hiring.

Youth spoke of the challenges with schooling, especially online schooling.

The pandemic affected some youth’s schooling. Focus group participants reported it was hard to do online schooling without computers or reliable internet. One youth shared:

“School is difficult for me because I don’t have all these cool technologies. I just got a tablet which is helpful, but going to school in person is definitely, was easier to me.” — Anchorage

A youth in Ohio BOS noted that she had had a full school schedule but had to drop down to two classes because *“Online school is very hard and requires a lot of motivation, it requires a lot of self-teaching.”* Another youth mentioned she was studying music, which was particularly difficult to do online.

Health and Mental Health

Youth spoke of the physical and mental health effects of COVID-19.

A few focus group participants mentioned getting COVID-19. One youth in Seattle/King County caught COVID-19 while staying in a tent city and received a hotel voucher and medical care for 2 months while she recovered. Others discussed the emotional toll of the pandemic, feeling scared of getting sick and being isolated without the supports they needed.

“It was kind of scary knowing people was getting sick and I didn’t even have nowhere to go.” —Connecticut BOS

Recommendations for Change

During focus groups, youth from YHDP and peer CoCs provided recommendations about the services and supports in their communities.

Improve outreach and communication about the resources available in their communities.

In both the baseline and mid-implementation focus groups, youth indicated they often did not know what services were available in their communities or how to get them. Across both YHDP and peer sites, youth spoke of wanting better information about the available resources. They recommended centralized, frequently updated sources of information about what services were available and how to access them.

“There’s all these resources to try and help you in those situations, to get them, but there’s no central resource that’s published or easy to find to get that stuff. And even some of the stuff has names and acronyms that you have to know this lingo or code to even get through it and that you qualify for whatever reason.” —Santa Cruz

Youth also reported wanting to know what all of the options of assistance were when they first sought help so they could make informed choices about what housing and service goals to pursue.

“So they need to tell you from the beginning all of what they can offer because I’m not going to ask for something that I had no idea that you could offer in the first place.” — Connecticut BOS

Provide additional places for youth to go during the day.

Youth expressed a need for additional places to spend time during the day and on weekends. This sentiment was echoed by both youths in shelter who were left roaming the streets during daytime hours as well as youth living in their own apartments, often for the first time, who wanted more opportunities for social engagement.

“There needs to be a place for people to be and I don’t understand why shelters can’t be open during the day and I do understand it’s funding and they need to be staffed et cetera. But kicking people out on the street from 9:00 to 6:00 especially when they’re already having a hard time or out of prison or out of the hospital is crappy. So I’d just say more staff and a place to do art or watch TV would be great.” —Sonoma County (peer site)

Help youth find affordable housing.

During baseline focus groups, youth recommended more programs that could help them access permanent housing. At mid-implementation, these resources have been made available in all sites through programs like rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing, yet youth expressed wanting more help using the assistance that was available through these programs. For example, in multiple sites, youth recommended they receive more assistance finding safe apartments that will accept their financial assistance and/or more assistance with paying for housing. Youth expressed concerns about the quality of the apartments they could afford as well as the safety of the neighborhoods in which they were located.

“Probably better quality apartments that would accept the voucher. A lot of the apartments are in inconvenient places where a lot of the public transportation doesn’t really go to. They have some in about a good 30-minute walk from a lot of the bus stops, or they’re in such a poor quality area that the crime rate is pretty high where you hear sirens every night, or just really small apartments and it’s really hard just to feel comfortable in your own home when you feel suffocated.” —Anchorage

Similarly, in a few sites youth suggested they receive longer-term rental assistance while they work toward self-sufficiency.

“I’d like to see more long-term stable housing, or youth that are transitioning into receiving their own place so that the young adults and the youth could heal before we start merging into 40 plus hours a week.” —Seattle/King County

Provide additional training for case managers.

In both the baseline and mid-implementation focus groups, youth recommended better training for case managers to improve their sensitivity to youth’s situations. While many youths in focus groups spoke positively of their case managers, in a few sites, youth recommended providers more carefully screen the individuals they hire to be case managers to choose staff who will be empathetic to the youth they serve, believing *“some staff just comes for the money.”* Others suggested providing case management staff with better training so that they treated youth more respectfully.

“The [agency] staff should have more training in regards to how to work with the youth, how to accommodate them, how, to sympathize with them and stuff like that.” —Cincinnati/Hamilton County

Make available additional services and supports, especially life skills, mental health services, and supports to meet youth’s basic needs.

Similarly, in both waves, youth identified services and supports they would like to receive but were not available or they did not know how to access them. Services they suggested included life skills such as banking, filing their taxes, improving their credit, cooking, and cleaning/maintaining their apartments.

“I just haven’t figured out how to file my taxes yet. And since I’m going to start working soon, that’s something I need to learn how to do.” —Anchorage

Supports included domestic violence programs, group therapy with other youth experiencing homelessness, and support groups for LGBTQ youth or immigrant youth. In multiple sites, particularly the rural sites where youth have limited access to local stores, laundromats, and public transit, youth mentioned getting clothing and doing laundry were challenges with which they would like to receive more help.

“I think that they should offer more help when it comes to clothes. If you need clothes, if you need food, if you need anything that you may need, I feel like they should help us more with because we can’t do it all alone.” —Kentucky BOS

Help youth access transportation.

Limited transportation to work or school, doctor’s appointments, and other basic needs, such as laundry and grocery shopping, was a challenge for many youths, especially those in rural sites. In most sites, youth indicated they could get bus passes and occasional rides if their case manager was free at the time they needed to go or they arranged it in advance. In many urban sites with established bus systems, such as Austin/Travis County, Cincinnati/Hamilton County, and Memphis, youth mentioned public transit was temporarily free during the pandemic. However, youth noted that bus systems often do not operate at the times or on the routes that they need them.

“Sometimes you have to wait four or five hours for the next bus to come.” —Kentucky BOS

Youth with their own cars indicated there was very little help available to pay for gas or car repairs.

Establish opportunities for youth to provide input.

In both waves, youth appreciated the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns both on their own paths as well as the system as a whole. They reported wanting to be consulted on decisions made about the services and supports they received.

“Just having youth voice, and at least if they’re, if people are doing case reviews and things like that, if the case managers are doing case reviews, is to have the youth that owns their life and in that caseload or case review be a part of it.” —Anchorage

Additionally, in some sites, youth reported wanting opportunities to provide input on the services available as well as established pathways to ensure that changes will be made based on the information that they provide and that improvements within the homeless service system will result.

Section IV. Summary and Implications

The 10 YHDP CoCs have all evolved over the course of the demonstration to provide more services and support to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness in their communities. Before implementing YHDP, the 10 CoCs varied considerably in the extent to which they had services and housing in place to serve youth at risk of and experiencing homelessness. By mid-implementation, however, all 10 CoCs provided youth-specific outreach, coordinated entry, case management, and crisis and permanent housing assistance, and most provided a range of other services for youth. Findings from YAB interviews and more than 60 focus groups of youth at the two time periods provide insight into how enhanced systems are meeting youth's needs, indicate persistent challenges youth face, and spark suggestions for improvement.

Supporting Meaningful Youth Involvement in the Continuums of Care

The demonstration required all YHDP sites include youth with lived experience in the planning process for their CoCs through YABs. In all sites, YAB members reported playing a significant role in YHDP planning and implementation as well as other activities within the CoC. However, YAB members in the YHDP sites had mixed feelings about whether their contributions to the CoC were valued. In some sites, youth felt that CoC members were interested in and responsive to what they had to say and YAB members got a lot out of the experience. In other sites where the role of the YAB was less clearly specified, youth reported feeling that they were not listened to or valued. Across most sites, YAB members reported that limited financial support for the YAB restricted their participation. As a result, many CoCs struggled to maintain active YAB engagement over time. By mid-implementation, some sites were able to maintain active YABs with more than eight members and regular monthly meetings, while other sites reconfigured the YAB to be composed of smaller groups of youth who were more involved in the CoC. In four sites, YABs struggled to maintain membership and were instead relying on other, less formal methods to include youth input into CoC activities. These data suggest that to maintain active YABs over time, CoCs need to establish processes for continually recruiting and training new members and prioritize resources (e.g., compensation, logistical support, childcare, transportation assistance) to support their involvement.

Moreover, the role of the YABs in their CoCs was clearly specified at the beginning of the demonstration project when the coordinated community plans were being developed and YHDP-funded projects were being designed and implemented. As sites moved into an ongoing implementation and monitoring stage of the demonstration, the role of the YAB was less prescribed and some sites struggled to define a new role for the YAB. This suggests that sites may need to establish processes to continually reassess how youth input can enrich their work and establish clearly articulated roles for the YAB as well as provide the support necessary for that involvement..

Help in Accessing Services and Supports

At both baseline and mid-implementation, youth voiced concerns about not knowing what services were available or where to go for assistance, even in sites with a wide range of services available. At both time periods, youth recommended providing better information about the

assistance that is available, such as through a centralized directory that is regularly updated. The findings further suggest that multiple strategies for reaching youth are likely needed, including advertising in a range of public areas, providing information through a range of service providers, and regularly verifying that the contacts are still current.

Youth considered drop-in centers, in the locations in which they were available, to be a valuable resource. They reported using them to access food, clothing, hygiene items, and other resources to meet their basic needs as well as become connected to other resources in the community and participate in social activities. Having a safe, warm place to spend time during the day or to socialize with other young people was important not only to youth not yet connected to assistance but also to those in a shelter and their own apartments, often living alone for the first time. The lack of access to drop-in centers to socialize, in fact, was noted as a negative consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic for youth in multiple sites.

Experience with Coordinated Entry

Over the course of the demonstration, youth increasingly reported familiarity with and experience using coordinated entry in all but a few, large, multi-county, rural sites, where coordinated entry was likely not experienced as a separate process but part of the admission process to shelter. However, some youth reported discomfort with the process, including feeling like their answers to the assessment were not believed and being triggered by assessment questions about topics like past abuse, which they did not feel were relevant to their current situations. Other youth complained of the long wait times to receive assistance.

These data suggest sites should examine their coordinated entry assessments and processes, in conjunction with their YABs or other youth in the community, to determine how these challenges may be mitigated. Assessments could be edited to exclude invasive questions about youth's history that are not relevant to their current housing crisis. If the data are critical to making the most appropriate referrals, youth could be asked more detailed questions at a later point in time once they have entered shelter or established a trusting relationship with a navigator or case manager. Alternatively, youth could be provided more context around the questions so they know why they are being asked.

Perspectives on Shelter and Housing

Across sites, youth reported that access to shelter and housing were a welcome resource.

In particular, they appreciated youth-specific crisis housing that provided safe places to stay where case management assistance was offered to address their needs. However, youth also indicated that they continue to have unmet needs related to crisis housing, due to limited capacity, restrictive rules (such as those that required them to leave during the day), and limited assistance with things like transportation assistance.

Youth in the mid-implementation focus groups did not express the same concerns about difficulty accessing permanent housing that was noted as a problem during baseline focus groups, likely due, in part, to the increased resources available to them. However, they did continue to struggle to find landlords who would rent to them and apartments they could afford. As a result, some youth were living in run-down apartments or units that were in

locations they considered unsafe. The amount of assistance youth received finding housing varied across sites; they frequently indicated wanting more assistance finding apartments, securing furniture and other household items, and dealing with landlords.

Few focus group participants reported using host homes, but those were also well-received by the youth who used them.

For many youths, access to shelter and housing was disrupted or delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic as shelters tried to deconcentrate their populations, eviction moratoriums limited the availability of affordable apartments, and searching and applying for apartments became harder.

Sites may explore how their navigators and case managers are working with landlords to access housing for youth, whether more can be learned from landlord liaison efforts for adults, and whether CARES resources can be used to support landlord recruitment. Engaging YAB members in helping to further understand the issues youth experience and suggestions for addressing them also could be beneficial across the sites.

Accessing Case Management and Other Services

At baseline, youth identified a need for case managers to help guide them through the services and supports that were available. During mid-implementation focus groups, all participants were connected to navigators or case managers who assisted them with making plans to reach their goals, accessing needed services, and finding housing and jobs. While focus group participant recruitment procedures likely identified a group of youth who were more connected to providers than all youth experiencing homelessness in their CoCs, this difference over time suggests increased access to services and supports among youth.

Yet, youth's assessment of the quality of the assistance received continued to vary. While many youths spoke of their case managers as trusted advisors, who go "above and beyond," others reported being dissatisfied with their case managers because they were not well-informed about the services and supports that were available; they were hard to get in touch with, only sending occasional text messages and not returning phone calls; and they did not treat youth respectfully. Echoing sentiments from the baseline focus groups, youth recommended careful screening of applicants for case management positions and better training on both what services are available and how to interact with youth respectfully.

Of other services, few youths reported familiarity with or receipt of diversion or family intervention services. Youth in all sites were aware of education and employment assistance and behavioral health services in their communities and frequently noted using them. However, they also noted that attending school, keeping or finding jobs, and scheduling appointments were challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, youth expressed interest in access to additional life skills services, such as banking, filing their taxes, improving their credit, cooking, and cleaning/maintaining their apartments as well as greater help with transportation to jobs and appointments.

In those sites where case management is decentralized across providers, booster training for case managers on the needs and interests revealed by youth and brainstorming of strategies for meeting these needs and requests may strengthen the system responses to youth. Additionally, where possible, providing youth with the ability to switch case managers if they were working with one with whom they do not click may help mitigate these challenges.

Comparison with Peer Continuums of Care

The perspectives of youth on the services and supports available in the three peer CoCs largely reflected that of youth in the YHDP CoCs. For example, consistent with what we learned in the YHDP sites, only a few youths in Sonoma County were aware of outreach services and none had used the assistance, but all were familiar with coordinated entry. Like youth in other sites, they also expressed concern about the nature of the assessment questions, wondering if youth were able to answer them accurately. In Sonoma County and Memphis, where youth drop-in centers were available, youth appreciated having some place to go where they could hang out, connect with case managers, and receive referrals to needed services and supports. Similar to youth in YHDP sites, youth in the peer sites also appreciated having access to youth-specific emergency shelters and housing assistance, despite their CoCs having limited capacity and long waitlists for assistance. Youth in all three peer sites were connected to case managers through shelters or mainstream providers that helped them enroll in school, find jobs, and/or access behavioral health services.

The 10 YHDP CoCs increased the services and supports, such as outreach, coordinated entry, and crisis and permanent housing, available to youth over the course of the demonstration. Accordingly, focus group participants in those CoCs were increasingly aware of and reported using these services. In contrast, without the same resources to improve services and enhance their systems, the peer CoCs have been unable to make similar changes over time. For example, Sonoma County, with a highly developed system at baseline, did not introduce any new services for youth over time. Memphis opened a new drop-in center and four-person shelter for LGBTQ youth but otherwise remained unchanged. Compared to youth in the YHDP sites, fewer youths in both these peer sites groups' had assistance accessing permanent housing and did not indicate increased awareness or use of other types of assistance by mid-implementation. At both baseline and mid-implementation, Colorado BOS had the fewest youth-specific services in place. Youth in focus groups often reported being unfamiliar with whether services were available or how they would access them. For example, none were aware of outreach, drop-in centers, or coordinated entry at either time point. Further, Colorado BOS had few permanent housing units for youth across a wide geographic area, and youth in the focus groups reported no experience using them.

Appendix

Methodology

This appendix provides additional detail about the methodology used for this report. For both the YAB members and the general population of youth experiencing homelessness, we describe how youth were recruited for participation in each site for both interviews and focus groups, with special attention to differences that resulted from collecting data virtually for the mid-implementation wave due to COVID-19. We include information about the number and composition of focus groups. We describe the characteristics of participants for each data collection effort. Finally, we provide a few study caveats that are important to consider in reviewing the data.

Data Collection

Youth Action Board Members

For each wave of data collection, we conducted interviews or focus groups with members of the YHDP CoC YABs.

Baseline data were collected in-person during evaluation site visits, which occurred between December 2018 and May 2019, with nine of the 10 YHDP sites and two of the three peer sites. Individual interviews were conducted with one to four YAB members in seven of 10 of the YHDP sites,⁷ and focus groups were conducted with six YAB members in Cincinnati/Hamilton County and 12 YAB members in Santa Cruz. We were unable to identify and recruit a YAB member for participation in an interview in Kentucky BOS. Additionally, we conducted individual interviews with a YAB member in Memphis and a member of a youth advisory board for the child welfare system, which was asked to provide input into the CoC's YHDP application in Colorado BOS. Sonoma County did not have an active YAB or other youth involved in decision-making in the CoC.

The second wave of YAB interviews was conducted with youth in the same nine YHDP sites and the Memphis peer site via telephone interviews occurring between March and June 2020. Kentucky BOS no longer had an active YAB and was unable to identify any youth for us to interview. Similarly, Colorado BOS and Sonoma County did not have youth involved in decision-making in the CoC.

YAB members were identified for interviews in collaboration with the lead agency staff in each of the CoCs. Evaluation staff reached out to YAB members via email and telephone calls to explain the purpose of the evaluation and request an interview. At the beginning of each interview, the evaluation team obtained informed consent from participants. Individual interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and focus groups lasted for 90 minutes. To compensate youth for their participation, at the end of the individual interviews and focus groups youth were provided a \$20 gift card to a local store. Youth participating in in-person

⁷ Anchorage, Austin/Travis County, Connecticut BOS, NW Michigan, Ohio BOS, San Francisco, and Seattle/King County.

focus groups were also provided food during the focus group and assistance with transportation if needed.

Population of Youth at Risk of or Experiencing Homelessness

The evaluation team also conducted more than 30 focus groups with youth across the YHDP and peer CoCs⁸ for each wave of data collection. Baseline focus groups were conducted in-person at local provider sites during evaluation site visits that occurred before most YHDP-funded programs began serving youth. The second wave of focus groups was conducted virtually via Zoom more than a year later when all YHDP-funded programs, as well as other non-YHDP-funded changes, had been implemented.

For both waves of data collection, the evaluation team worked with service providers and site leads in each community to identify organizations from which to recruit youth for the focus groups. We specifically sought out organizations that received YHDP funding as well as those that did not, to understand the range of perspectives of youth across the communities. We made additional efforts to represent subpopulations of interest including LGBTQ youth, pregnant and parenting youth, and child welfare and juvenile justice-involved youth and minors (at baseline) who were currently experiencing or had previously experienced homelessness or unstable housing. The evaluation team provided eligibility criteria for each group and a set of recruitment materials for providers to use in inviting youth to participate in the focus groups and to encourage youth to contact members of the evaluation team (via email, telephone, or text) for additional information. We sought to recruit 8–10 youth for each group, expecting that 6–8 youth would participate.

At the beginning of each in-person focus group, the evaluation team obtained informed consent from participants and distributed a brief self-administered survey of their demographic characteristics, living situations, and previous involvement with child welfare or juvenile justice systems. For the virtual focus groups, these activities were conducted in separate one-on-one telephone conversations with participants before each focus group. Evaluation staff also walked through how to use the Zoom technology, if needed.

As with YAB members, youth were provided a \$20 gift card to a local store⁹ as compensation for their participation at the end of all focus groups. Youth participating in in-person focus groups were also provided food during the focus group and assistance with transportation if needed.

Conducting mid-implementation focus groups remotely allowed us to connect with youth across the country amid the COVID-19 pandemic. For all of the remote focus groups, evaluation staff participated in the group via separate screens. For some focus groups, youth also joined separately from their own devices, and in others, all of the youth were together in a single location (i.e., if they lived together in a shelter) with a shared screen. In both situations, we were able to learn about youth's experiences and perspectives, foster natural conversation

⁸ We were unable to recruit youth participants for focus groups in Memphis for baseline data collection or in NW Michigan for the second wave of data collection.

⁹ Youth in virtual focus groups were able to choose between an electronic gift card sent to their email address or a physical gift card mailed to their residence.

between the participants and the moderators, and encourage group interaction. Additionally, the chatbox feature of Zoom provided an outlet for youth to provide answers to questions, indicate they had something to contribute to the conversation, share additional details about their experiences for example, provider names and locations), and offer words of support and recommendations of resources to each other.

Conducting focus groups virtually also presented several challenges. First, recruiting youth participants was more challenging than it typically is for in-person focus groups. Although the flexibility of being able to participate from any location may have made participation easier for some youth, in some cases, limited access to technology or technical problems such as lack of reliable internet may have prevented youth from accessing the platform. Remote focus groups also possibly appealed to youth less than in-person focus groups in which they could share a meal and spend time with other people. While we aimed to recruit 8–10 youth per group, some providers indicated that they struggled to find youth interested in participating. Second, no-shows in the groups after conducting the individual consent calls were a challenge in some sites. After we conducted a few initial focus groups that had numerous no-shows, we changed our process. If we had fewer than six participants in the individuals' consent calls, we rescheduled the focus group. Even following these procedures, at times fewer than five youth participated.¹⁰ Overall, the size of the focus groups ranged from two to eight participants.

Third, in some groups, problems with technology prevented full participation by the youth. Participants occasionally had difficulty logging onto the platform, experienced dropped calls, or their devices ran out of power. When this occurred, most youth were able to rejoin the conversation, though they often missed out on a portion of the discussion during the interruption. Finally, due to the novelty of conducting focus groups virtually, we elected, in consultation with our Institutional Review Board, to exclude youth under 18 from this wave of data collection.

Characteristics and Homeless and Housing Situation of Participants Youth Action Board Members

Across sites, 33 YAB members participated in baseline interviews or focus groups, and 10 YAB members participated in mid-implementation interviews. We did not collect detailed survey information about the YAB members' characteristics; however, during interviews, we asked youth how long they had participated in the YABs as well as where they were living at the time of the interview. In both waves, the majority of YAB members had been involved in the YAB for more than a year, with 19 of the 33 members at baseline and eight of the 10 members at mid-implementation having participated in the YAB for more than a year. At the time of the baseline interviews, 14 of 33 members were living on their own (some with rental subsidies), four were staying with family members, three were in student housing, two were in transitional housing, two were in foster care, two identified as homeless, and six were staying in unknown situations. At mid-implementation, six members were in their own place (two with subsidies), two were in transitional housing, one was in a shelter, and one was staying with a friend.

¹⁰ In two focus groups, only one participant showed up. These focus groups were treated as individual interviews.

Youth at Risk of or Experiencing Homelessness

Among focus groups with the general population of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, 173 youth participated in baseline focus groups and 134 youth participated in the mid-implementation focus groups.

Exhibit A-1: Characteristics of Youth Participating in Focus Groups

	Baseline (%) (N=173)	Mid-Implementation (%) (N=134)
Age		
18+ years of age	85	100
Less than 18	15	0
Gender		
Female	43	59
Male	36	37
Gender fluid/Non-binary	4	4
Unreported	17	0
Race/Ethnicity		
White	36	37
Black/African American	25	31
Hispanic	10	9
Multiracial	22	5
Native American/Alaskan Native	3	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	3
Unreported	0	13
Pregnant or parenting	25	29
Systems Involvement		
Foster care involvement	47	31
Juvenile justice involvement	32	24
Employed	39	39
Enrolled in school	38	25
Served on a youth board	20	16

Source: 2019 and 2020 Surveys of Youth Focus Group Participants.

Exhibit A-1 shows the demographic and background characteristics of the youth who participated in these focus groups for each wave. Youth in mid-implementation focus groups ranged in age from 18–26 years, with an average age of 22. Nearly 60 percent of participants were female, with 37 percent male, and a small percentage identifying as gender-fluid/non-binary. More than a third identified as White, 31 percent as Black/African American, 9 percent as Hispanic, and small percentages of youth identified as multiracial, Native American/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander. The remaining 13 percent of youth did not report their race or ethnicity. Almost one-third of youth (31 percent) reported previous foster care involvement and one-fourth reported previous juvenile justice involvement. At the time of the focus groups,

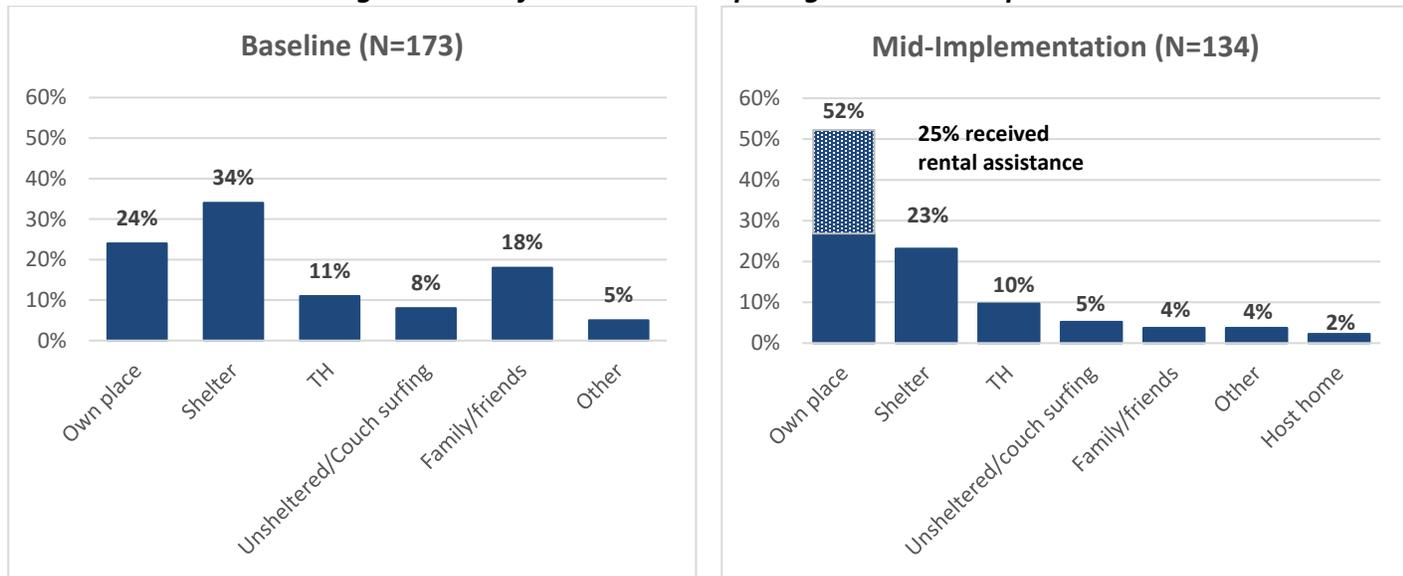
nearly 40 percent were employed, and 25 percent were enrolled in school. Sixteen percent had served on a youth board for a housing or service organization (not necessarily the YAB for the CoC).

Youth participants in baseline focus groups differed on a few key variables. While mid-implementation focus groups were limited to youth over 18, 15 percent of those in the baseline groups were minors. A smaller percentage identified as female, however, and a larger group left gender unreported. Additionally, while comparable percentages were identified as most race categories, a larger share of youth in the baseline focus groups identified as multiracial, and a larger percentage of youth in mid-implementation focus groups left their race unreported. A larger percentage of youth at baseline had systems involvement and were enrolled in school than among mid-implementation youth. These differences between the groups could result from the exclusion of minors in the latter focus groups and/or the different methods of data collection for the two waves. (Youth in the baseline focus groups completed a self-administered survey, whereas youth in mid-implementation focus groups answered the same questions over the telephone.)

Analysis of HMIS data for 2017 indicate that youth in these focus groups are similar to all youth served by the homeless service systems in the 10 YHDP sites (Henderson, 2020). According to HMIS data, across all YHDP sites, in 2017 the average age of youth served was 21 years, with 91 percent being over the age of 18, compared with 85 percent of youth in the baseline focus groups and 100 percent of youth in the mid-implementation focus groups. Slightly more than one-half of the youth served (56 percent) were female, with 42 percent male, and small percentages identifying as transgender or gender non-conforming or unreported, similar to the rates in mid-implementation focus groups. Across all YHDP sites in 2017, a similar percentage of youth identified as White (38 percent) as in both baseline and mid-implementation focus groups, while higher percentages identified as Black/African American (33 percent) and Hispanic (15 percent), and a smaller percentage of youth identified as multiracial (7 percent) than among the focus groups participants. These differences likely result in differences in data collection tools, rather than differences in the youth who participated in focus groups.

Exhibit A-2 presents the current homeless and housing situations for youth in both waves of focus groups. At baseline, one-fourth of youth were living in their own place, one-third were in a shelter, and an additional 11 percent were in transitional housing. Nearly 20 percent were living with family or friends at the time of the focus group. In contrast, among youth participating in the mid-implementation focus groups, more than one-half were living in their own place, with one-fourth receiving rental assistance, primarily through rapid re-housing. One-third of the youth were living in emergency shelters (22 percent) and transitional housing (10 percent). Five percent of the youth indicated they were unsheltered or couch surfing at the time of the focus group, and smaller percentages reported living with friends or family, in a host home situation, or another location (such as a college dormitory).

Exhibit A-2: Current Housing Situations for Youth Participating in Focus Groups



Source: 2019 and 2020 Surveys of Youth Focus Group Participants.

Caution should be used before drawing conclusions from these data. Differences between the groups could reflect differences in the availability of services and supports for youth in the CoCs; however, they could also reflect differences in youth recruited for participation at the two waves. While we recruited participants from many of the same providers for the two waves, during the mid-implementation focus groups we also recruited youth from providers who were implementing YHDP-funded programs that may not have been included in baseline recruitment. These survey data are presented to provide context for the perspectives shared by youth in the two waves of data collection, rather than to provide evidence of change in the systems over time. Forthcoming analysis of HMIS data will provide a better understanding of changes over time in how all youth are served in the CoCs.

Study Caveats

A few caveats are important to consider in reviewing the findings from both YAB and general population data collection.

Except for baseline focus groups with YAB members in Cincinnati/Hamilton County and Santa Cruz, we interviewed only select members of the YABs in each site where YABs were active and youth could be identified. Thus, their responses may not represent the diversity of opinions among YAB members within their sites. Moreover, YAB members were identified for potential interviews in collaboration with the lead agency staff in each of the CoCs. At both waves of data collection, some YAB members who were contacted for interviews by evaluation staff declined to be interviewed. It is possible that YAB members with more positive experiences were both more likely to be identified and more likely to accept the request for an interview than were YAB members with less positive experiences. It is also difficult to compare the experiences of YAB members in the demonstration sites to YAB members in the peer sites. While Memphis had an active YAB at both time periods, neither Sonoma County nor Colorado BOS had a YAB. We

interviewed a youth in Colorado BOS who provided feedback on the YHDP application; however, she was less engaged in the CoC's activities than YAB members in YHDP sites.

Youth experiencing homelessness that participated in the focus groups on the services and supports that are available in their communities may not be representative of the full population of youth in their CoCs. In fact, we targeted specific subpopulations of the youth of particular interest to the demonstration, such as LGBTQ youth, pregnant and parenting youth, and minors, to offer insights into their specific experiences. As a result, the participants may represent characteristics that are likely distinct from the broader set of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness in their communities. For example, in baseline focus groups, all youth in San Francisco were pregnant or parenting. However, according to HMIS data, only nine percent of youth served in San Francisco in 2017 were accompanied by a child. Additionally, all youth who participated in mid-implementation focus groups in Memphis were LGBTQ. While we do not have HMIS data on the overall percent of youth in Memphis who are LGBTQ, it is safe to conclude these focus group participants represent only a portion of those experiencing homelessness in the CoC. Therefore, we must use caution in drawing conclusions about the experiences of youth within a CoC based on data presented here, especially if those experiences appear to be distinct from those of youth in other CoCs. At both baseline and mid-implementation, all other sites included mixed populations of youth.

Lastly, because we recruited youth through providers, the youth included in focus groups are likely connected to services and supports in their communities. Therefore, they are likely more connected to services than youth in general in a CoC. We are likely missing the perspectives of youth who are on their own, including both youth who have not sought help and those who have reached out for assistance and been unable to receive it. Forthcoming analysis of the HMIS will provide a better understanding of how the various sites serve youth in their CoCs.

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