2026

STATE of YOUTH REPORT

Commissioned by The Youth Partners Coalition

ILLUMINOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Every young person deserves a safe and stable place to call home and the opportunity to build a future from that foundation. Yet, for too many young people in Franklin County, housing is uncertain. Some stay in shelters or places not meant for habitation. Others move between relatives and friends, live temporarily in hotels, or remain in situations that are unsafe because they have nowhere else to go. Still others are one disruption away from having no stable place to live. For vulnerable youth, a lost job, family conflict, changes in federal policy, or a small rent increase can tip the scales from making do to homelessness.

Housing instability rarely exists on its own. Young people who do not know where they will sleep are often trying at the same time to stay in school, keep a job, care for children or siblings, manage their physical and mental health, find transportation, and navigate multiple systems and service providers. A challenge in one part of life can quickly create problems in another. The result is that the path back to stability can become increasingly difficult, even for young people who are working hard to move forward.

Franklin County organizations, funders, and community leaders are committed to supporting young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability. But effective action requires a clear and current understanding of what young people are experiencing: how many are affected, how they become housing unstable, what makes instability hard to escape, where existing systems fall short, and what actually helps young people achieve lasting stability.

That understanding cannot come from any single source of information. Administrative data can tell us who comes into contact with particular systems, but not everyone experiencing housing instability appears in those systems. Counts can help establish the scope of the problem, but they cannot fully explain what it is like to navigate homelessness. And youth with lived experience know where systems help, where they create additional barriers, and what stability means in their own lives.

The State of Youth initiative was undertaken to bring these perspectives together. Through analysis of available data on a variety of quality-of-life indicators, input from youth-serving organizations and community stakeholders, and, most importantly, conversations with young people with lived experience, this research examines youth homelessness and housing instability across Franklin County from multiple angles. It builds on earlier work in Franklin County while asking what has changed, what remains unresolved, and what the region needs to do differently now.

The purpose of this report is not simply to document the problem. It is to help move Franklin County toward action. The findings that follow examine how housing instability begins, why it can be so difficult to escape, how young people experience it, and the supports and system changes that can help them secure and maintain safe, permanent housing.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The State of Youth initiative was made possible through the time, expertise, and commitment of many people and organizations across Central Ohio.

We are grateful to the youth-serving organizations, community partners, and system leaders who shared their knowledge and helped shape this research. Their perspectives provided important context for understanding both the challenges young people face and the strengths and gaps within the systems intended to support them.

Most importantly, we extend our deepest appreciation to the young people who shared their experiences with us. They spoke candidly about housing instability, family, work, school, parenting, mental health, service systems, and their hopes for the future. Their insight is central to this report and to the recommendations that follow.

We also recognize the members of The Youth Partners Coalition for their leadership of this work and their continued commitment to ensuring that young people in Central Ohio have the opportunity not simply to find housing, but to build lasting stability.



About The Youth Partners Coalition: The System Serving Vulnerable Youth in Central Ohio

The **Youth Partners Coalition** is a group of seven organizations dedicated to serving youth who struggle with housing instability. Among them, they offer the full continuum of support services, including temporary shelter, transitional living and permanent supportive housing, life skills training, access to mental health and medical care, and employment assistance.

The Buckeye Ranch

Dedicated to preventing homelessness among youth aging out of foster care, **The Buckeye Ranch** delivers critical support through its My Place and Bridges programs. The My Place initiative utilizes a secure, 24/7 staffed facility on the East Side of Columbus with 15 individual apartments to build life skills, academic success, and employment readiness to youth from public children services agencies across Ohio. For emancipated young adults, the state-backed Bridges program provides intensive housing search navigation and self-sufficiency coaching to former foster youth.

Home for Families

Home for Families is a non-shelter housing provider that delivers rapid re-housing navigation, emergency financial aid, and on-site behavioral health care. Additionally, the agency provides integrated academic support and early childhood enrichment programs to ensure long-term housing stability and educational success for children.

Huckleberry House

Huckleberry House delivers a comprehensive continuum of care through four core services: a 24-hour Teen Crisis Program and emergency shelter for ages 12–17, transitional living apartments (up to 18 months) for young adults ages 18–24, a dedicated community Counseling Center, and street-level Youth Outreach initiatives.

Kaleidoscope Youth Center

Kaleidoscope Youth Center is the largest and longest-standing organization in Ohio solely dedicated to supporting LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults. Operating from its drop-in community center on Bryden Road, the nonprofit serves youth ages 12–24 through free behavioral health services, youth-led programming, community education and training, and advocacy and civic engagement.

About The Youth Partners Coalition: The System Serving Vulnerable Youth in Central Ohio

Ours Brothers Keepers

Ours Brothers Keepers is a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting at-risk and underserved youth, primarily on the East Side of Columbus. The organization works to prevent youth violence and homelessness by providing mentorship, life skills coaching, behavioral health interventions, and job readiness training. Serving young people across a wide age spectrum, Ours Brothers Keepers operates emergency community resources, including a seasonal warming center and transitional housing assistance.

Star House

Star House operates Ohio's only overnight drop-in center for young people ages 14–24, offering a low-barrier, trauma-informed space in Columbus. Services include on-site health care, mental health counseling, case management, nutritious meals, hygiene supplies, laundry, clothing, and other wraparound support. Star House also operates Carol Stewart Village, a 62-unit affordable housing community with on-site services.

The YMCA

The YMCA of Central Ohio delivers critical housing and shelter services designed to stabilize individuals and families experiencing homelessness. The YMCA has a long history of housing services dating back over 100 years. Currently the YMCA operates Van Buren center, providing the largest shelter in central Ohio to homeless families and individuals. To address and end homelessness, the YMCA provides Rapid ReHousing programs to multiple populations, and Permanent Supportive Housing services to over 300 adults in multiple locations, assisting them in maintaining housing stability. Through shelter, Rapid ReHousing and Permanent Supportive Housing, the YMCA serves the continuum of services designed to end homelessness.

About Illuminology

Illuminology is based in Columbus, Ohio, and has a long history of work in the area of community insight. Its professionals have extensive expertise in measuring community impact — building on rigorous quantitative data analysis to tell the stories behind the data. Amanda L. Scott, Ph.D., is a co-owner of the firm and is passionate about helping vulnerable youth — she serves on the Huckleberry House Board of Directors and is a former foster parent with Franklin County Children Services and The Buckeye Ranch.

LETTER FROM THE COALITION

The Youth Partners Coalition was formed in 2025 as a way for organizations supporting youth experiencing or at risk of housing instability to collaboratively discuss, develop, and advocate for solutions to the issues most affecting youth in Franklin County. As our discussions evolved, it became clear that a gap existed in the system-wide research needed to advocate for collective change.

Each of our organizations could quote our annual programmatic statistics; we each had client stories to share and faces we would remember forever. But how much more could we discover about the state of our region's youth safety net by combining our collective data? We commissioned the State of Youth report to serve as one voice for our organizations and, most importantly, the young people we serve.

More than just a vehicle for sharing system-wide data, this report is a foundation for targeted problem-solving, with youth experience at its core. Our coalition will use this report as a framework for community advocacy.

We know young people are incredibly resilient. This report highlights their strength while also illustrating the barriers standing in the way of a future filled with possibility.

Creating a more streamlined path to stability requires **collective action and commitment**. We invite all community stakeholders, partner organizations, and government leaders to review these findings and join us in pursuing systemic solutions for unhoused and housing-insecure youth.

The Youth Partners Coalition would like to thank everyone who contributed time, insight, and expertise. Together, we can make the greatest impact for young people in central Ohio.

In partnership,

Vickie Thompson-Sandy, The Buckeye Ranch
Beth Fetzer-Rice, Home for Families
Jennifer Sharma, Huckleberry House
Amanda Erickson, Kaleidoscope Youth Center
Wesley Moore, Ours Brother's Keepers
Barbara Ebright, Star House
Tony Collins, YMCA of Central Ohio

01

Methodology

Quantitative Data + Lived Experience



Secondary Data Analysis

We made use of local data to understand the context in which vulnerable youth operate.

Secondary Data Collection

Data were collected by Illuminology from a variety of sources including:

- **ADAMH Board of Franklin County Data Dashboard[1]**: provides data on mental health and substance use disorder patterns across Ohio communities.
- **Community Shelter Board Homeless Management Information System[2]**: This system serves as the primary repository for tracking client-level data across the local homeless crisis response network. Publicly available Point-in-Time (PIT) counts and a custom data request made directly to CSB were utilized.
- **Franklin County Comprehensive Addiction & Recovery Evaluation System (CARES)[3]:** Franklin County Public Health produces this public-facing data repository designed to map and address the local overdose and addiction epidemic. Funded in part by the CDC, this platform provides timely data on overdoses and related outcomes (ED visits, deaths, 911 calls) to provide the data needed to drive prevention and recovery strategies.
- **Ohio Healthy Youth Environments Survey (OHYES!) 2024-2025[4]:** Ohio's departments of Education and Workforce, Health, and Mental Health and Addiction Services offer the OHYES! to Ohio school districts at no cost. The survey is administered online to middle and high school students. The survey is voluntary; in 2024-2025, the Bexley and Upper Arlington school districts were the participating districts in Franklin County.
- **Ohio's Interactive Children Services Dashboard[5]:** Ohio's Department of Children and Youth publishes this dashboard, which provides information on children services-related activities. The primary source for this data dashboard is the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS).
- **Ohio School Report Cards[6]:** The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce produces report cards for each district and summarizes data by county. This source was primarily used to understand rates of homelessness among youth in Franklin County.
- **Public Children Services Association of Ohio Factbook: State and County Profiles[7]:** PCSAO publishes annual factbooks designed to provide a resource for policymakers and the broader community. Data provided include both children in foster care and those who receive services while living with their family of origin. The primary sources for these data are the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 5-year estimates and the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS).

Additional sources are also cited throughout; references are indicated with endnote numbers in superscript. A list of sources for each page of the report appears in the "References" section.

Youth Voices

Listening to vulnerable young people is essential to understanding what they need.

The research prioritized youth with lived experience — those who were currently experiencing housing instability or had previously experienced homelessness. To collect these important perspectives, the researchers took several steps:

Step 1: In-depth interviews with all Coalition members

The research began with in-depth conversations with representatives from each Coalition agency. These conversations sought to understand what the partners saw as key issues faced by vulnerable youth as well as to get alignment on their goals for the remaining work.

Step 2: Review of prior efforts and conversations with program representatives

Illuminology conducted a best-practice review, including reviewing white papers, evaluations, and outcome measurement work done by youth homelessness service providers in other jurisdictions. Interviews were conducted with three organizations, most notably with Adam Ruege from Community Solutions, Inc., who shared his experience with Built for Zero, a national framework for eliminating homelessness.

Step 3: In-depth interviews and focus groups with youth

Armed with the background knowledge gained from Steps 1 and 2, researchers had conversations with youth who were recommended by partner agencies as those who would be willing to share their stories. This included youth who were “success” stories because they achieved stability after engaging in services, unsheltered youth living outdoors (e.g., in tents or encampments), youth who aged out of foster care, youth who had experienced mental health and substance use issues, and youth living with traumatic brain injury. The goal of these interviews was to dig deep into the unique experiences faced by some vulnerable youth.

Additionally, focus groups were conducted with youth advisory boards of partner organizations, youth who are parenting or working, youth who identify as LGBTQIA+, and youth who have experienced mental health or addiction issues.

In total, more than 30 people were interviewed over the course of the project, representing participants from Coalition member organizations and across different experiences on the housing stability continuum.

Computing Social Return on Investment for Services for Youth Experiencing Housing Instability

To compute the social return on investment in this study, the researchers took the following steps:

Step 1: Group discussion to identify potential outcomes

We facilitated a group session with the Coalition to identify those outcomes that mattered most to them. Specifically, we asked them to tell us what key goals their programs pursued — what changes they wanted to make in the lives of the youth that they serve.

Step 2: Identification of shared outcomes

The researchers reviewed this input to identify a potential set of outcomes — those that were pursued by multiple programs, highlighting the key objectives the Coalition as a whole sets out to accomplish.

Step 3: Online survey

Next, we designed and deployed an online survey of Coalition members. In this survey, we asked partners to specifically report if they tracked indicators related to each key outcome, and to provide specific outcome numbers where available. We also requested any logic models, theories of change, or other documents partners had to indicate the mechanism by which they attempted to make the changes identified.

Step 4: Review of survey results and review of submitted materials

The researchers analyzed the results of the survey and reviewed logic models and theory-of-change documents to determine which outcome indicators were 1) shared by partners throughout the system and 2) measured rigorously enough by at least one organization to allow them to be included in the model.

Step 5: Computation of SROI

Follow-up requests were made for key data from Coalition members, including the number of unique clients served and the rates at which different activities that supported key objectives occurred along with total cost to run the programs (separately for youth ages 12–17 and 18–24). These data were used to compute the SROI.

For more detail on SROI computations, see the Methodological Appendix.

02

State of Franklin County Youth

Indicators of vulnerability

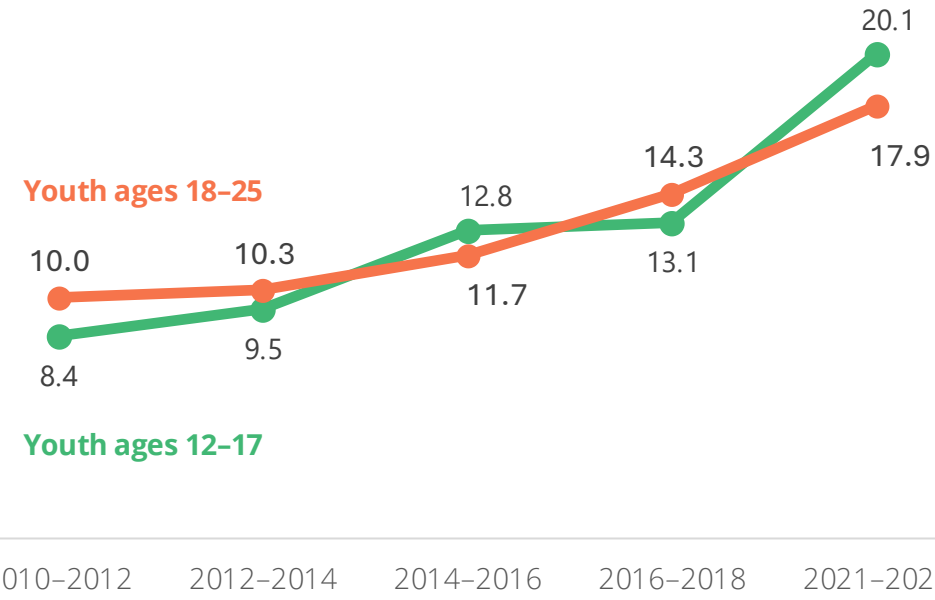
What do we know about the incidence of adverse events experienced by youth in Franklin County?



Mental Health

Mental health indicators for youth show increases in depression since 2010, especially among youth ages 12–17.

Percent of Youth Experiencing Major Depressive Episode in the Past Year[1]



Note: Methodology changed to include online administration in 2021. Later rates may not be directly comparable to earlier ones.

In Franklin County, the annual suicide death rate among youth ages 10–19 was approximately **6.9** per 100,000 during 2020–2024, up from 4.2 per 100,000 during 2010–2014.[2] Calls answered by Nationwide Children's Hospital's Youth Crisis Line also **increased**, from 10,807 in 2022 to 12,177 in 2024.[3]

AGES 10–19

Suicide death rate
(per 100,000 residents annually)

about **6.9** per 100,000
(2020–2024)

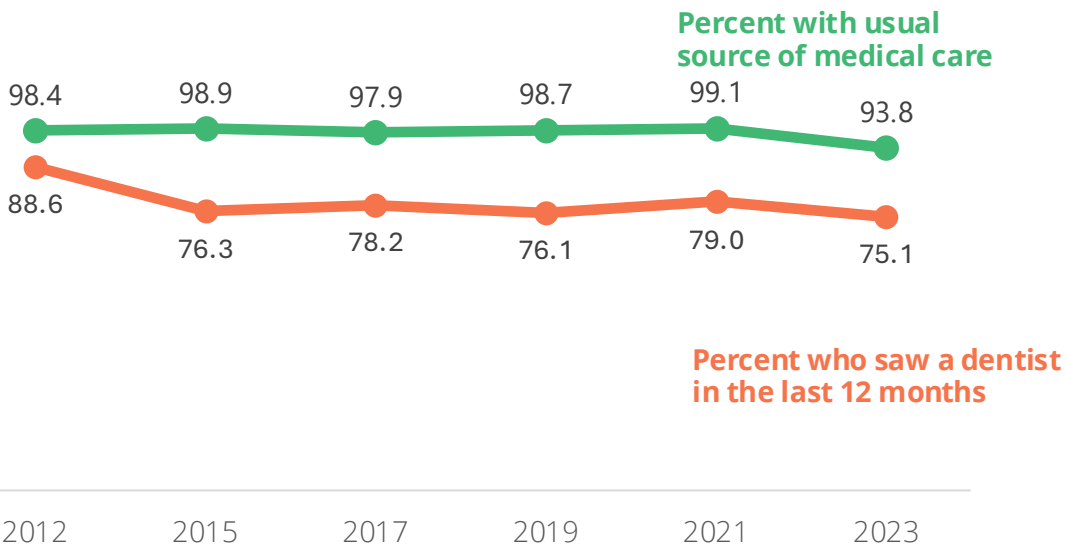
Youth Crisis Line Calls

2022		2023		2024
10,807 calls answered	↗ +11.8% from 2022 to 2023	**12,078** calls answered	↗ +0.8% from 2023 to 2024	**12,177** calls answered

Physical Health and Basic Needs

Medical needs may be a bright spot for Franklin County children ages 0-18. Data from 2023 suggest that **75.1%** had received dental care in the past year and **93.8%** had access to a usual source of medical care when sick or needing health advice. But warning signs exist: the share with a dental visit fell from 88.6% in 2012 to 76.3% in 2015 and has not recovered, and the share with a usual source of care, steady at about 98–99% through 2021, dropped to 93.8% in 2023.

Access to Medical and Dental Care[1]



Many youth in Franklin County may not be getting their basic needs met. Significant proportions live in households below the federal poverty level and about 6 in 10 are economically disadvantaged or enrolled in Medicaid.[2]

20.1% Children under 18 live below the poverty level (2023)[2]

61.7% Students are classified as economically disadvantaged (2023–2024)[2]

59.3% Children are enrolled in Medicaid (FY2023)[2]

6% Youth ages 16–19 are neither working nor in school (2019–2023)[3]

Causes of Death

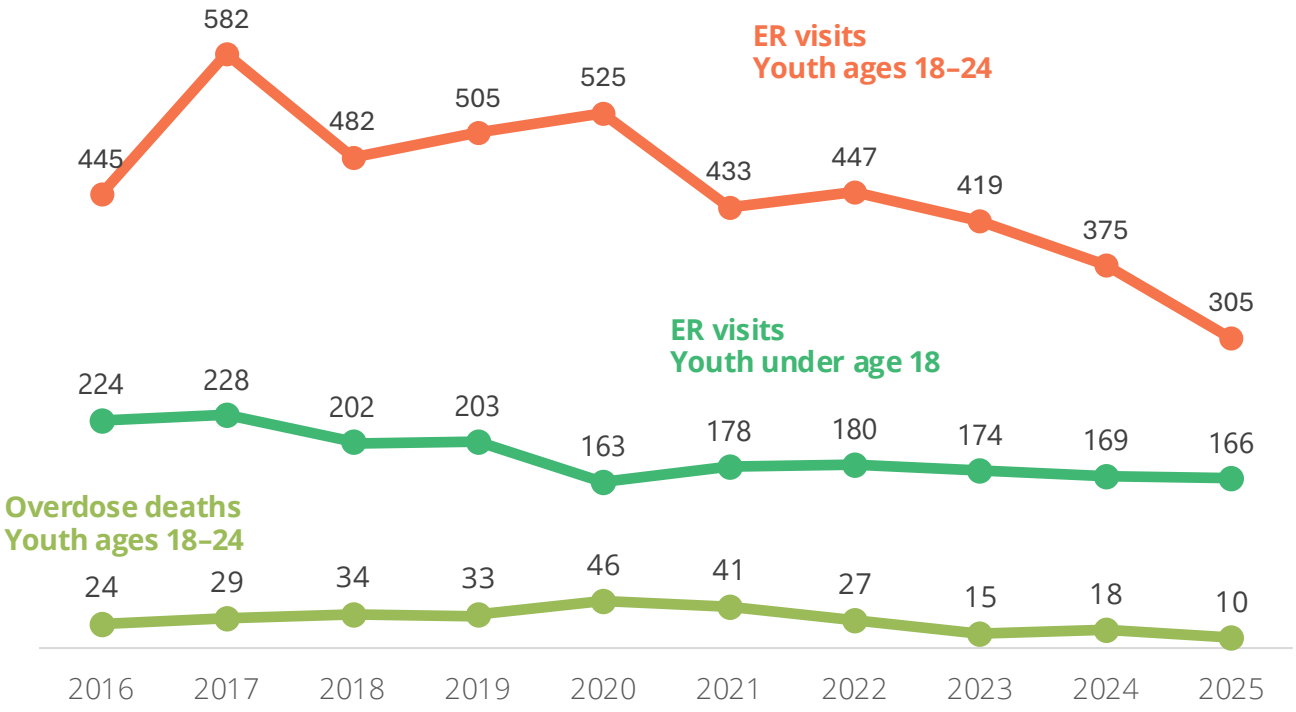
According to a custom report from Franklin County Public Health,[1] in 2025, **accidents** (including auto accidents and poisoning/overdose) were the leading cause of death for young adults ages 18–24 in Franklin County, followed by **intentional self-harm, homicide,** and **cancer**.

Although **overdose remains the second leading cause of accidental death** (nearly one quarter of accidental deaths are in that category) complications from substance use appear to have declined among young adults ages 18–24 in recent years.

In 2025, **305** youth ages 18–24 and **166** youth under age 18 visited an emergency room in Franklin County to receive treatment for a drug overdose. In 2025, **10** youth ages 18–24 died of a drug overdose in Franklin County.

ER visits due to overdose and overdose deaths have declined fairly steadily for youth ages 18–24 since 2020.

Emergency Room Visits for Overdose and Overdose Deaths in Franklin County[2]

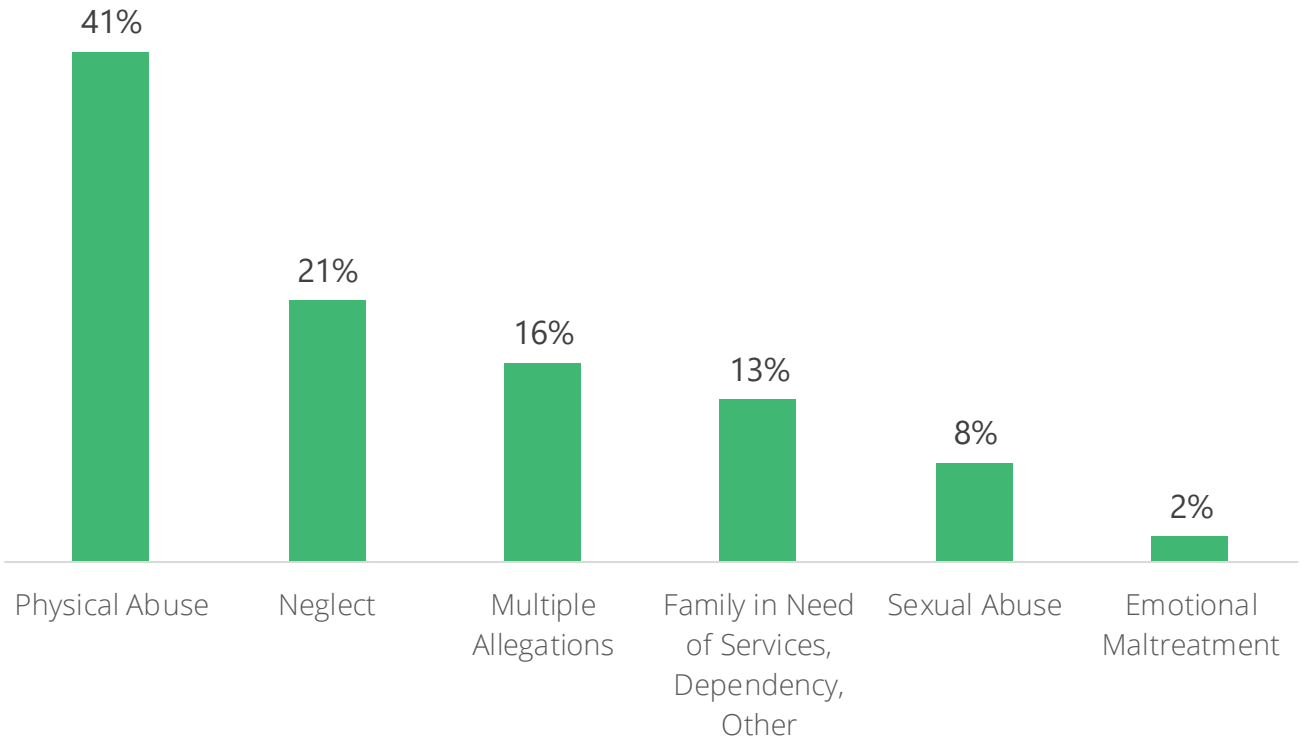


Experience with Children Services

In state fiscal year 2025 (July 2024– June 2025), Franklin County Children Services screened in **11,322** reports of child abuse, neglect, dependency, or family need. The most common reports were for physical abuse or neglect. A total of **1,585** cases were transferred to ongoing services.

A total of **157** youth aged out of foster care that year.

Reason for Report to Children Services[1]



In calendar year 2025, parental substance use or abuse was a reason for removal in **22%** of Franklin County removals.[2]

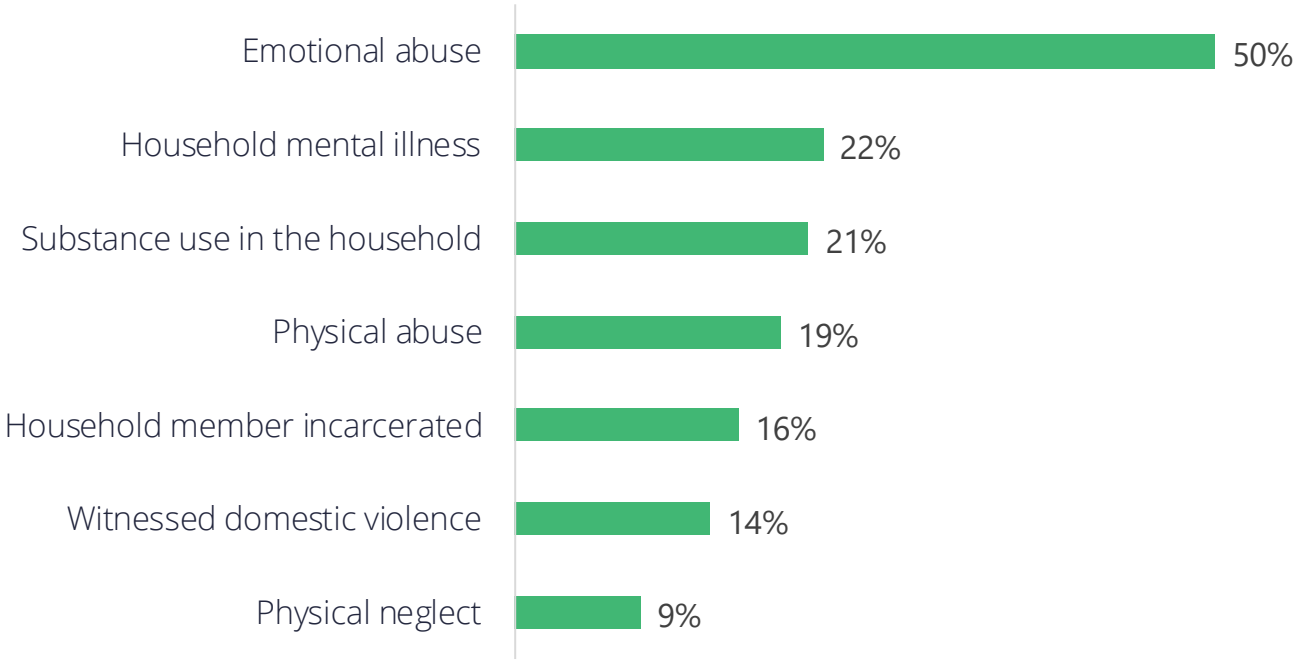
Family Dynamics

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic experiences that occur before age 18, such as abuse, neglect, household violence, substance use or mental illness in the home, or having a household member incarcerated. A higher ACEs score reflects exposure to a greater number of these experiences. Research has found a graded relationship between greater exposure to ACEs and increased risk for negative health and well-being outcomes later in life.[1]

According to the 2023 Ohio Medicaid Assessment Survey[2], **13.1%** of youth in Franklin County under age 18 experienced three or more ACEs and **5.8%** experienced four or more.

The OHYES! survey[3] suggests **50%** of youth surveyed in two participating districts in Franklin County have experienced emotional abuse while **19%** have experienced physical abuse. In addition, **21%** reported substance use in the household and **16%** said one or more of their household members were incarcerated.

Adverse Childhood Experiences[3]



Housing Instability Among Youth in Franklin County

The scope of the problem

How many youth in Franklin County face housing instability?



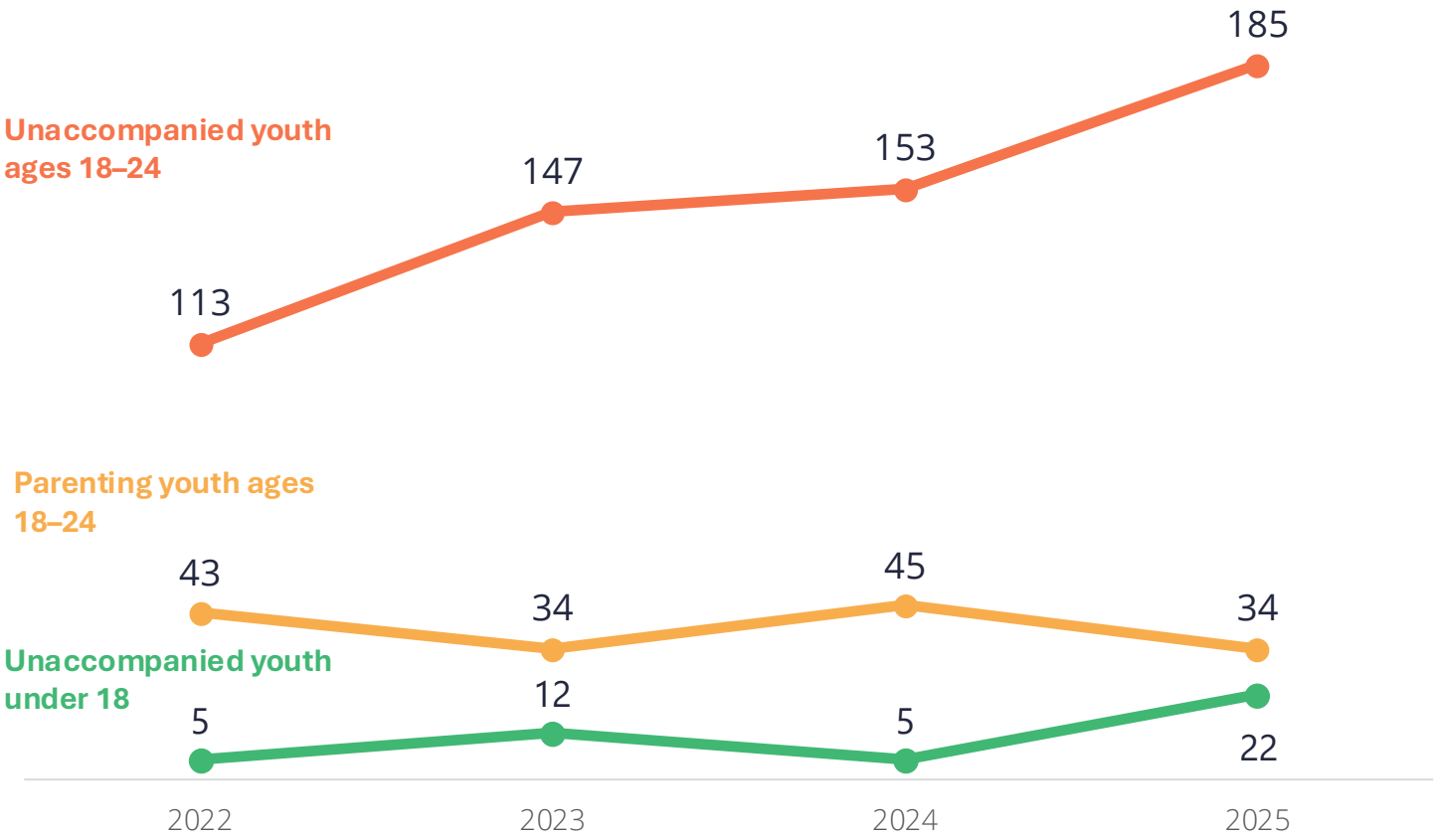
Point-in-Time (PIT) Counts

The Community Shelter Board coordinates annual Point-in-Time (PIT) counts across Columbus and Franklin County.[1] These federally mandated counts are single-day initiatives that capture a snapshot of individuals and families experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness.

Point-in-Time (PIT) counts are best understood as conservative baselines rather than exact totals of everyone experiencing homelessness. Point-in-Time (PIT) estimates frequently undercount people moving between temporary locations or those staying in hard-to-reach unsheltered areas. For instance, while the 2023 Point-in-Time (PIT) count found 12 unaccompanied youth under 18 on a single night,[2] Franklin County schools identified 374 students experiencing homelessness on their own during the 2022–2023 school year, according to federal McKinney-Vento data.[3]

Point-in-Time (PIT) estimates suggest that the number of unaccompanied youth ages 18–24 increased dramatically from 2022 to 2025. Counts of unaccompanied youth under age 18 and parenting youth have varied from year to year.

Columbus and Franklin County Point-in-Time Counts[2]

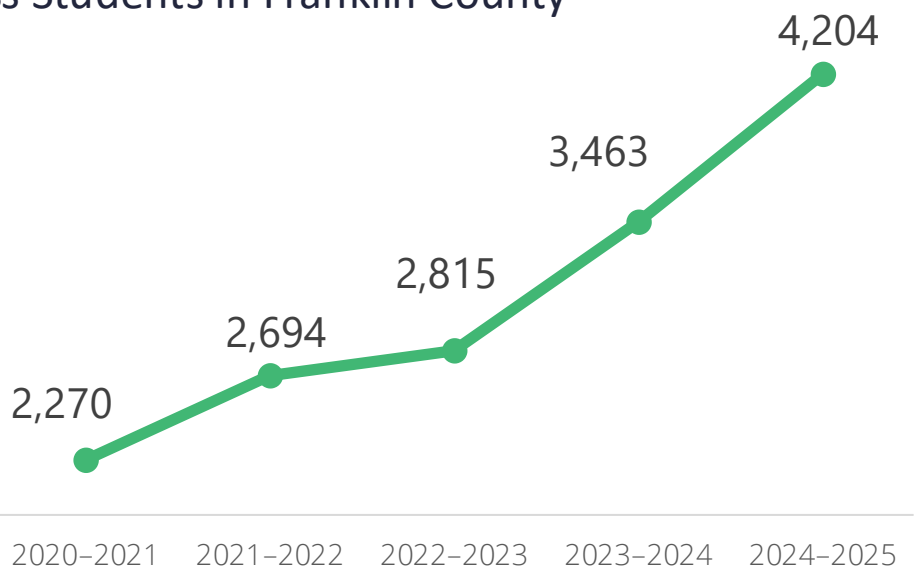


Homeless Students in Franklin County

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law that grants certain rights to students and their families. This act defines homeless children and youth as those who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This definition is broader than the one used for the Point-in-Time (PIT) count. It includes children and youth "sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason."[1] The Point-in-Time count reported to HUD does not include people temporarily staying with family or friends.[2]

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce tracks the number of homeless students identified in Franklin County. The data show **a dramatic increase** in the number of homeless students, nearly doubling between 2020–21 and 2024–25. During the 2024–2025 school year, **4,204** students were identified as homeless (about 2% of all students in the county).

Homeless Students in Franklin County[3]



Note: part of this increase may reflect federal pandemic relief funds that supported efforts to identify homeless students.[7]

85%[4]

increase in students identified as homeless in Franklin County schools since 2020–21.

2,270 → 4,204 students

2%[5]

of all students in Franklin County were identified as homeless in 2024–25.

That's about 1 in 50 students.

70.4%[6]

of homeless students in Franklin County were chronically absent during the 2022–2023 school year.

Compared to 36.0% of all students.

Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Unfortunately, no single data source can measure the incidence of youth who struggle with housing instability. PIT counts represent the number of youth living outside, in emergency shelter, or in transitional housing. And the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce data provide the total number of students identified as homeless, whether living with their families or on their own.

In 2019, the Columbus and Franklin County Continuum of Care estimated that a total of **3,033** youth were literally homeless in Franklin County for at least one night in 2017.[1] This estimate combined HMIS and other data sources with a survey conducted by Star House that indicated that **41%** of those who had been literally homeless did not receive services from the crisis response system. One way to update this estimate is to use more recently observed trends to model a new figure.

The table below shows that different local indicators of youth homelessness have increased at close to the same rate, with all but one (parenting youth) rate falling between 1.56 and 1.85.

Measure	Number of homeless youth	Ratio
Homeless students in Franklin County schools[2]	2020/21: 2,270 2024/25: 4,204	**1.85**
Unaccompanied youth ages 18–24 (PIT count)[3,4]	2022: 113 2026: 176	**1.56**
Parenting youth (PIT count)[3,5]	2022: 43 2025: 34	**0.79**
Unaccompanied youth under 18 (PIT count)[3,4]	2022: 5 2026: 8	**1.60**
Average rate of increase across all sources		**1.45**

When the average rate is applied to the original estimate (3,033), it yields 4,398 literally homeless youth in Franklin County

4,398 homeless youth in Franklin County per year

(estimate using 2017 numbers adjusted with recent trends)

Youth Experiencing Housing Instability

A second method was used to more completely estimate total rates of housing instability among youth. We did this by applying national survey rates to Franklin County's population.

The Voices of Youth Count is a nationally representative survey of more than 25,000 respondents, conducted in 2016–2017.[1, 2] It measured how many young people experienced at least one night of homelessness over a year, including sleeping in places not meant for habitation, in shelters or transitional housing, and staying with others without a safe, stable alternative (couch surfing). We multiplied those rates by the number of Franklin County youth in each age group, from 2024 Census estimates. These data are not as up-to-date as we would like: a 2024 Chapin Hall brief[3] calls for an updated national count, but none was available at the time of this report. This method has two advantages: it allows a breakdown by age group, and it captures more than literal homelessness.

Age group	Franklin County Youth (2024 Census ACS 1-year estimate)[4]	Estimated Youth Explicitly Homeless	Estimated Youth Couch Surfing Only	Estimated Youth Facing Housing Instability
18–24	129,706	5,935 (4.58%)*	5,310 (4.09%)*	**11,245 (8.67%)***
13–17	86,549*	2,073 (2.40%)*	622 (0.72%)*	**2,695 (3.11%)***
Total, 13–24		8,008	5,932	**13,940**

Percents may not sum due to rounding.
Explicitly homeless: reported homelessness or, for teens, running away or being asked to leave for at least one night. Couch surfing only: staying with others without a safe, stable place to live, with no explicitly reported homelessness. Percents in parentheses refer to 12-month prevalence rates applied to the Census estimates to generate numbers of youth.
* Indicates Illuminology estimated this number.
Please see Methodological Appendix for more detail on how these numbers were estimated.

Based on the most recent nationally representative survey evidence available, applied to local population counts:

13,940 youth experience housing instability in Franklin County per year

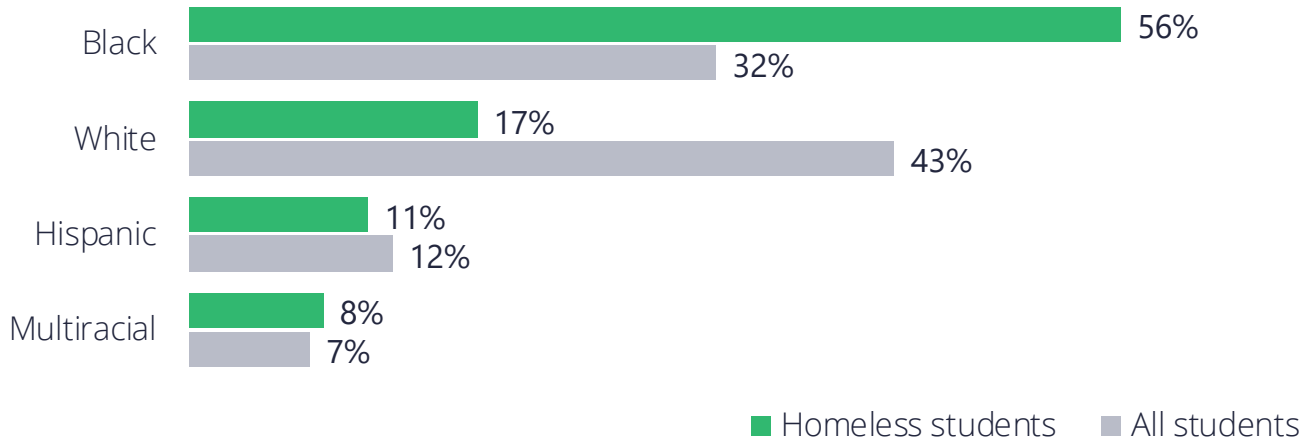
(ages 13–24, conservative estimate)

Who Experiences Homelessness

Black students are overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness, locally and nationally.

In the 2022–2023 school year, 56.4% of homeless students in Franklin County were Black, compared to 31.9% of all students in the county.

Share of Homeless Students vs. Share of All Students, Franklin County, 2022–2023[1,2]



Note: percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding and "Other" category is not shown.

National data show the same pattern. In a 2021 survey of U.S. high school students, 5.1% of Black students had experienced unstable housing in the past 30 days, compared with 2.0% of White students. Rates were highest among Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students (10.0%) and American Indian or Alaska Native students (7.9%).[3]

IN THE LOCAL HOMELESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

Community Shelter Board data[4] describe the 1,217 youth-headed households (head of household age 24 or younger) served in Franklin County between September 2025 and September 2026:

Race and ethnicity. Black or African American youth headed 69% of households (837). White youth headed 16% (196), multiracial youth 8% (94), and Hispanic youth 6% (70).

Gender. Women or girls headed 65% of households (795) and men or boys 32% (394). Twenty-six heads of household identified as transgender or non-binary.

Disability. A long-term disabling condition was recorded for 39% of records.

Having somewhere to sleep is not the same as having stable housing

Technical definitions of homelessness are only part of the picture. Young people in this research drew a clear distinction between having somewhere to stay and having housing they could rely on. They described staying with friends, relatives, partners, and other people; "couch surfing" or moving from place to place; and living in arrangements where they had little control over how long they could remain.

Local school data show how common this is. In the 2022–2023 school year, 60.7% of homeless students in Franklin County were staying with others, while 29.3% were in a shelter, a hotel or motel, or unsheltered.[1]

For the youth interviewed, what distinguished these arrangements from housing they could rely on was **permanence** and **control**. Youth talked about having their own key, privacy, knowing they could return, and knowing they would still be able to stay tomorrow. Many informal situations don't provide this type of stability; for instance, focus group participants described being told unexpectedly to leave places they thought would be available for months.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"...if you stay with a family member, that can change at any second because you have no legal rights over that place."**

Those same concerns extended to temporary shelters and shared living environments. Youth described crowding, limited privacy, concerns about whether their belongings were secure, and rules that were not always clearly or consistently enforced. In one focus group, participants described difficulty sleeping when quiet hours were not followed—even when they needed to be up early for work. Others shared experiences of bullying and feeling unsafe due to their gender identity.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Housing instability is broader than the situations most easily counted.

Young people may be sleeping indoors (in a friend's home, with relatives, in a temporary arrangement, or in shelter) without having housing they can rely on. Stakeholders specifically identified couch surfing and other unstable arrangements as experiences that can fall outside formal definitions used by programs and data systems. As a result, some young people may be experiencing serious housing insecurity before they appear in administrative counts or qualify for help.

04

Youth Voices: How Housing Instability Begins

Grounding the work in lived experience



Many Paths Into Instability

Housing instability rarely begins with a single event

Young people who participated in this research described very different paths to housing instability. Some experienced the death or loss of a caregiver. Others left homes that were unsafe or where they were not accepted. Some moved through foster care or residential settings and entered adulthood without the support or preparation they needed. Still others saw an already precarious situation unravel when a job, income, relationship, or place to stay disappeared.

The youth in this study do not share a single experience, but the loss or absence of a safety net is a common theme. For many young adults, the transition to independence is gradual. Family members provide crucial supports, but young people experiencing housing instability may have few or none of these resources.

PATHWAYS DESCRIBED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Family loss or disruption

- Death of a caregiver
- Conflict
- Abuse
- Rejection

Transitions from systems

- Foster care
- Residential settings

Economic disruption

- Job or income loss
- Unaffordable housing

Loss of a place to stay

- Relationship ending
- Temporary arrangement ending

RESEARCH CONTEXT

31–46%

of young people aging out of foster care in a three-state study were estimated to have experienced homelessness at least once by age 26.[1]

14%

of LGBTQ youth surveyed reported ever having slept away from parents or caregivers because they were kicked out or abandoned.[2]

When the safety net was never there

Most young people do not enter adulthood entirely on their own. Family members and other trusted adults often provide practical support. This may mean a place to stay, transportation, financial help, guidance, or assistance completing unfamiliar tasks. In fact, two-thirds of U.S. adults receive some form of financial or housing support from their parents at some point between their late teens and early 40s.[1]

Young people in this research described growing up without dependable adults who could consistently provide that support. Family environments were sometimes marked by abuse, conflict, rejection, or instability. This did not only affect housing stability; youth in focus groups indicated it was an important learning gap. There was no one to model basic life skills like laundry, cooking, budgeting and taxes, and housekeeping—things learned implicitly that many of us take for granted.

YOUTH VOICE

"If they didn't have family support, how are they supposed to learn these things ever?"

When the safety net falls away

Other young people described having important sources of support that were lost or disrupted. Two participants connected major changes in their housing circumstances to the deaths of their mothers. One lost their mother in early childhood, the other while in high school. Others described relationships becoming unsafe or ending. One focus group respondent was kicked out of their home because their parents did not accept their sexual orientation.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Family adversity and economic hardship are associated with homelessness.

Research identified several factors independently associated with having experienced homelessness, including:

- Running away
- Being ordered out of the family home
- Parental/caregiver neglect
- Incarceration of the biological father
- Recent socioeconomic difficulty

4x

Compared with those who had never been homeless, people who had experienced homelessness were four times as likely to report a family investigation by social services by sixth grade.[2]

Age cliffs: turning a certain age can mean losing support overnight

Many supports for young people end at a birthday: foster care, youth shelters and programs, and eligibility for some jobs. Young people in this research described reaching those cut-offs without a plan for what came next.

Aging out of foster care

One former foster youth described leaving a residential placement with no transition planning. Her case manager drove her to her grandmother's house, and that was the last contact she had. She had no list of resources and no help getting Medicaid, finding a job, or writing a résumé.

She described sleeping on the street in a tent. She did not learn that youth housing programs existed until her early twenties. Her experience is not unusual. In a federal survey of Ohio youth who were in foster care at age 17, 26% said at age 19 that they had experienced homelessness in the past two years.[1]

YOUTH VOICE

"My case manager picked me up, dropped me off at my grandma's… and I never heard from her again."

Aging out of youth services

Another participant was told at 25 that she would have to leave the youth program that had been helping her. She was too old for every other youth program she searched for. Her case manager's advocacy kept her case open until she got into permanent supportive housing, an informal solution to a structural problem.

Caught between systems

Young people described being too old for some youth spaces but not old enough for adult programs that serve people 21 and up. Some also found that jobs they were trained for required workers to be 21 or 25 when they applied.

YOUTH VOICE

"I was too old for a few spaces, but not old enough to be in … adult [programs]. [I was] kind of stuck there"

Some of the age cut-offs young people in Franklin County run into

Under 18

Huckleberry House's Teen Crisis Program shelters teens ages 12 to 17.

18

Juvenile court authority over a child found abused, neglected, or dependent, including a child in children services custody, ends at 18. It can continue to 21 for youth with a developmental disability or physical impairment, or for a set period so a youth can finish high school or vocational school.[1]

18 to 20

Ohio's Bridges program serves eligible young adults ages 18, 19, or 20 who aged out of foster care.

Through 24

HUD's Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program funds housing and services for youth ages 24 and younger.[2]

Through 24

Star House's drop-in center serves youth ages 14 to 24, and Huckleberry House's housing programs serve young people up to age 24.

Under 26

Youth who aged out of foster care at 18 or older while enrolled in Medicaid can qualify for Ohio Medicaid until age 26, regardless of income.[3]

WHY THIS MATTERS

Age cut-offs are set by policy, so they can be changed by policy. A transition plan, a warm handoff, or a short extension of eligibility can keep a young person from starting over from the street.

The Impacts of Trauma

Young people described experiences that happened before housing instability, experiences that happened because they were unstable, and experiences whose effects continued long afterward.

Across interviews and focus groups, youth talked about caregiver loss, abuse, family conflict and rejection, foster care, domestic violence, exploitation, and other experiences that affected their sense of safety and support. For some, those experiences shaped what came next: mental health struggles, difficulty trusting people, unsafe relationships, leaving home, and how they responded when help was offered.

YOUTH VOICE

"The abuse as a child it took a torment on me mentally..."

Housing instability can become part of that cycle. Losing housing, sleeping outside or in unsafe places, moving repeatedly, losing possessions, and not knowing what will happen next create new stress while making it harder to recover from what came before.

Mental health and coping

Youth were open about what they are carrying now: depression, anxiety, anger, grief, and PTSD. They also described how they cope. Some described using marijuana to calm their nerves or get through down days. Others named therapy as what actually helped, teaching them to breathe, walk away, and manage what comes up. One former foster youth left care with no way to get the medication she needed.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Young people without stable housing are also far more likely to experience violence.

In a 2021 national survey of high school students, students who were unstably housed reported much higher rates of sexual violence and physical dating violence than students who were stably housed.[1]

27.6% vs 10.6%

Forced to do sexual things they did not want to do in the past year

Unstably housed vs. stably housed students

31.9% vs 7.7%

Physical dating violence reported in the past year

Unstably housed vs. stably housed students

Focus on Prevention

An estimated 13,940 Franklin County youth ages 13–24 experience homelessness or couch surfing in a year, including 5,932 who couch surf without reporting homelessness. The CSB data for September 2025–September 2026 show 1,217 youth-headed households served by the system.[1] The two figures measure different things, but the gap suggests much of youth homelessness happens outside the system's view. Nationally, about half of youth who experienced homelessness in a year were experiencing it for the first time.[2] Young people in this research described instability that started earlier, often at moments when a school, a public system, or a provider already knew them.

SCHOOLS

Not finishing high school

Nationally, 35% of youth without a high school diploma or GED reported homelessness in the prior year, compared with 10% of those with at least a diploma or GED.[3]

CHILD WELFARE

Entering foster care

Among youth experiencing homelessness surveyed in 22 U.S. counties, 29% had been in foster care, versus about 6% of all U.S. children who enter foster care by age 18. Of interviewed youth with foster care histories, 44% said entering care was the beginning of their homelessness.[4]

YOUTH SERVICES

Reaching an age cut-off

Young people in this research described leaving foster care or youth programs at an age limit with no transition plan and being too old for youth spaces but too young for adult programs.

SHELTER

A shelter stay as a minor

Eight unaccompanied minors were counted on PIT night in January 2026, but 324 minor-headed households were served over the year.[1, 5]

WHY THIS MATTERS

These are moments when a young person is already in contact with a school, a public system, or a provider. These may be important targets for prevention efforts.

05

Youth Voices: Barriers Compound

Challenges in one part of life can make it more difficult to regain stability in another



What Makes Housing Instability Hard to Escape

Young people described transportation and phone access as practical requirements for work, school, housing searches, appointments, and services. When either was unreliable, the effect often extended across several parts of life at once.

Transportation

Youth described unreliable or unavailable transportation as a barrier to making it to work, interviews, school, medical and mental health appointments, and services. Focus group participants discussed needing bus passes to reach job interviews and described public transit delays that could leave them an hour or more behind schedule.

One respondent similarly identified transportation as one of her major barriers to regaining stability. She recalled that when she was in high school, having help with rides to school was one of the practical supports that helped her move forward.

Accessible transportation is equally important — one respondent who relies on COTA Mainstream said that regular COTA bus passes were often available, but it was harder to find passes for COTA Mainstream.

Communication

Without reliable phone service, young people miss calls from providers, employers, housing programs, or case managers. For someone already trying to coordinate transportation and multiple appointments, losing a working phone can make an already complicated process nearly impossible.

YOUTH VOICE

“My phone is off right now. They would call my phone and let me know, ‘Hey, this is what you gotta do,’ or ‘Hey, you have to meet me here for this meeting’ … and it’s all about transportation and getting to these places.”

Housing instability creates barriers to work, housing, and assistance

Young people described a frustrating cycle: many of the things they needed to move forward (a job, housing, benefits, or other assistance) required documents and resources that were harder to maintain while they were homeless.

Focus group participants described carrying important belongings with them and worrying that documents would be lost or thrown away. Some shared times this had happened to them. Replacing these documents requires additional time, transportation, money, and paperwork.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"I got my OSHA 30 and my OSHA 10 ... my certificate got thrown out when I was homeless ... It's kind of been hard for me to get my transcripts or to keep my files ... I don't want to get all my important stuff just to try to lose it again because I'm moving so much."**

The consequences extend beyond replacing what was lost. One youth noted that housing resources may be available, but young people arrive without the documents required to use them. She described youth who are homeless and "don't have their socials," IDs, or birth certificates and the discouragement that follows when those same documents are prerequisites for housing assistance.

Employment was an important goal for youth in this research, but housing instability could also make finding and keeping a job more difficult. Starting and maintaining work requires **identification, reliable transportation, and a working phone** — the same resources youth described struggling to maintain.

Stakeholders emphasized both employment opportunities **and support for keeping a job while housing is unstable**. They described promising approaches in which employers intentionally worked with unstably housed young people by allowing greater flexibility in work hours or locations.

One interviewee identified employment and housing as the two primary challenges she was trying to address. After losing her job, she struggled to find another while also dealing with transportation problems and a disconnected phone. At the same time, she was helping care for a family member, using some of her limited resources to make sure their basic needs were met.

Benefits That Don’t Reach Young People

Public benefits are hard to get, hard to keep, and easy to lose

Young people described public benefits as essential, and as a constant source of paperwork, denials, and gaps. One focus group participant described a year of Medicaid denials while needing surgery. The same participant had quit jobs because they couldn’t get treatment for past concussions without Medicaid.

YOUTH VOICE

“I've been trying for the past year to try to get on Medicaid, but I still, I keep getting denied for some reason.”

Food assistance was just as fragile. Parents described going without food stamps as food prices rose, paying out of pocket for formula, diapers, and wipes. One young mother lost her benefits and described repeated check-ins to get them back. She linked the difficulty to new federal rules. Another needed child care assistance (Title XX) before she could start working.

Youth also described rules that, in practice, kept them stuck. One interviewee explained that earning a little more meant losing food assistance, leaving just enough for bills.

A former foster youth described funds for her college education being cut and having to advocate with lawmakers to restore them. Young people with disabilities said it is especially hard to qualify for disability benefits at a young age.

Leaving a youth program often means handling all of this alone for the first time. But when someone helped, it worked. One interviewee's case manager helped her apply for TANF during a high-risk pregnancy.

YOUTH VOICE

“I have to make a certain amount to get food stamps. But if I make over this amount, I’ll literally only have enough to pay bills.”

WHY THIS MATTERS

Benefits are the floor under housing and work, and youth feel that floor shrinking. Help with applications, continuity when youth leave a program, and attention to benefits cliffs could keep a paperwork problem from becoming a housing problem.

Affordable Housing Is a System-Level Barrier

Every stakeholder interviewed identified affordable housing as a critical barrier to helping young people achieve long-term housing stability. They questioned whether the wages available to young adults — particularly those without family financial support — realistically align with the cost of housing in Franklin County. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition's 2026 *Out of Reach* report,[1] a full-time worker would need to make more than twice Ohio's minimum wage to afford a one-bedroom apartment in the Columbus area. This represents a nearly impossible bar for vulnerable youth seeking to stabilize their lives.



And stakeholders who participated in this research are not alone. Local public and philanthropic leaders have also noted the scale of need. In May 2026, Columbus City Council approved more than $13 million in city funding for the Community Shelter Board, reflecting the scale of ongoing local need.[2] And, in August 2026, The Columbus Foundation awarded the Community Shelter Board an emergency $2 million grant after CSB projected that, without additional public or private funding, shelter capacity could be reduced by 43%.[3]

Critically, the Community Shelter Board focuses primarily on adult shelter needs, leaving youth in an even more vulnerable position.

Young People See a System Doing a Lot with Too Little

When youth talked about funding and resources, they mostly didn't blame the people trying to help them. They described a system stretched too thin to meet the need. There are waitlists for transitional living. Shelters are crowded and time-limited, and a three-month stay may not be enough time to get back on track. Emergency and short-term housing options are too few. When one housing program for LGBTQIA+ youth closed, a participant said the community "lost a lot of voices."

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"They're very time limited. For a little bit. And like, it's just not enough time to like get things back on track."**

Waiting has real costs. One young woman said that by the time a spot opened in transitional living, she could "possibly be dead or in jail." Others described resources they had come to rely on shutting down or changing, which left them starting their search over.

Research backs up her worry about jail. Young people without a stable place to live may turn to survival behaviors such as trespassing or petty theft to meet basic needs like food and shelter. Those behaviors can lead to arrest instead of help, and a criminal record then makes it even harder to secure housing.[1]

Scarcity also shaped how youth saw their own need for help. One young woman said she felt guilty for getting housed before others she thought needed it more. She urged leaders to create a priority system, like triage in an emergency room: serve the most urgent needs first, then expand resources so others don't wait. Others noticed the pressure on staff, who absorb young people's frustration when supplies run short.

Most of all, youth wanted funders to understand that the need is real. They aren't asking for handouts. They are asking for a starting point.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"Just them knowing that hey, we are trying and we're waiting for some type of helping hand from where to start."**

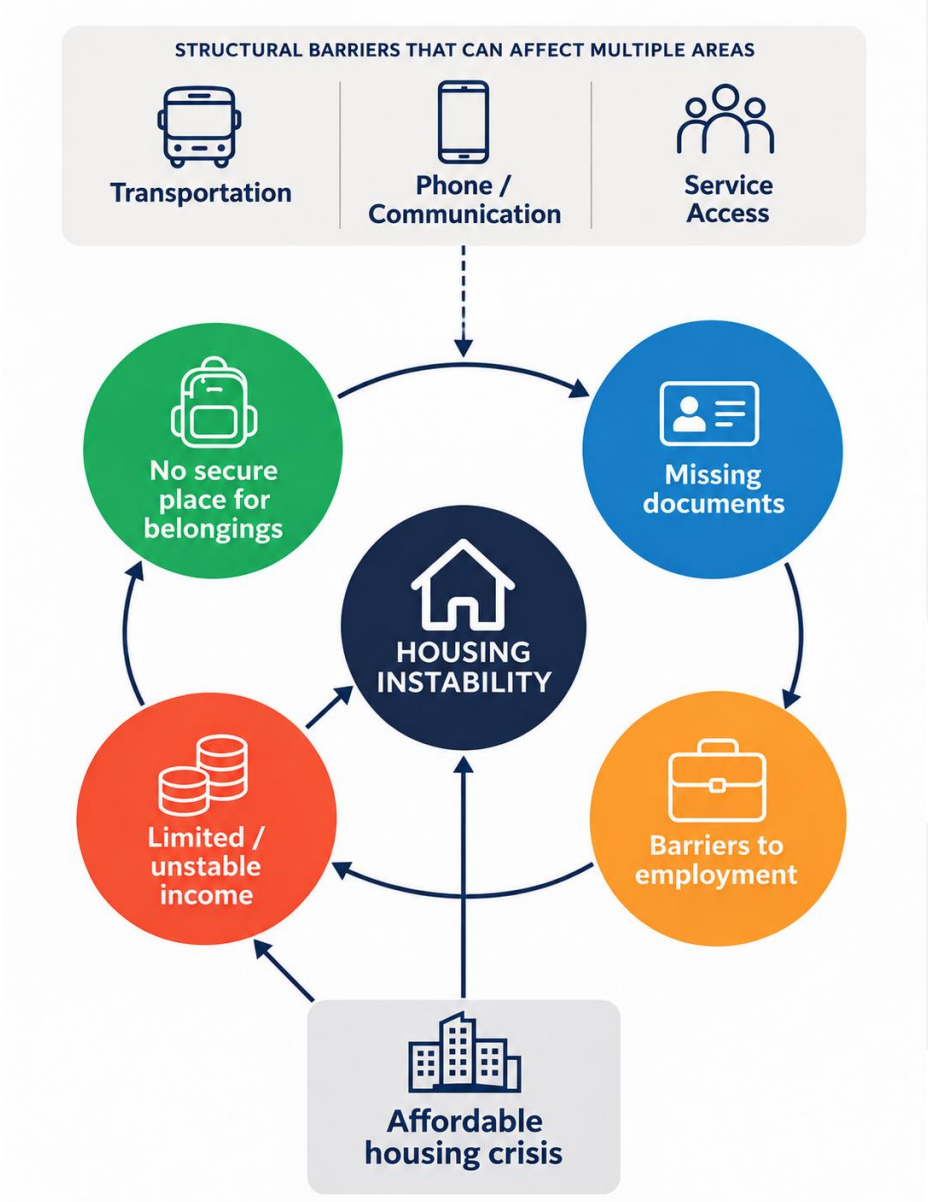
WHY THIS MATTERS

Providers and youth are describing the same gap from two sides. Youth understand that the people helping them are doing a lot with too little. Closing the gap will require investment and prioritization, not more effort from either staff or youth.

Compounding Sources of Difficulty

One barrier rarely stays one barrier

Young people described challenges that rarely occurred in isolation. Housing, employment, transportation, identification, communication, and access to services were deeply connected. A barrier in one area could make progress in another more difficult, creating a cycle that was hard to interrupt.



YOUTH LIVED EXPERIENCE

One young person suffered numerous traumatic brain injuries from abuse and a car accident. Finding a job was one of his first goals. He had previously worked through a staffing agency and wanted to do so again.

But he did not have an ID, and without an Ohio address, he struggled to obtain one. He also did not have a Social Security card. The money to obtain documents (and transportation to get them) became an obstacle to earning the income he needed to become stable.

"I was trying to get a job. I was really trying to get a job."

Distinct problems function as an interconnected system of barriers

Jamal's Story: Starting Over and Finding a Path Forward

A DECISION TO START OVER

Jamal left home at 16 after experiencing childhood abuse that affected both his mental health and his sense of safety. He described becoming involved in street and gang activity as a way to survive after leaving home. Eventually, he decided he wanted something different. Already homeless in Jacksonville, Jamal moved to Columbus hoping that getting away from the people and circumstances surrounding him would give him a chance to start fresh.

ASKING FOR HELP

Starting over did not immediately create stability. Jamal arrived in Columbus without identification, a Social Security card, or a local address. After roughly two months of sleeping outside, he searched online for help and found Star House. Its low-barrier approach mattered: he could come in without already having the documents he was struggling to obtain.

Asking for help itself was a significant step. Negative experiences with systems earlier in his life had left Jamal deeply mistrustful of programs, and he described pride and not wanting to burden others as additional reasons he often tried to manage on his own.

HOPE WHILE REBUILDING

Jamal is still early in his journey. At the time of his interview, he had been connected to Star House for about two weeks and was using the drop-in center and seeing a therapist. His most immediate goal was obtaining his ID and Social Security card so he could pursue employment. Ultimately, he said he wants a stable home—"somewhere I can grow from."

He does not pretend to know exactly what comes next. His faith remains an important source of resilience, and he described himself as trying to "catch back up" and understand where he is in his life. What he does have is a sense that his current circumstances are not where his story ends.

"I'm just hopeful. I know something good is coming."

— Jamal

06

Getting Help and Keeping It

Finding services is only the first step



Barriers to Accessing Services

Finding a place to get help

Youth who are experiencing housing instability face many barriers to connecting with programming. First, inexperience and the stress caused by the situation can make it **hard to reach out or look for help**. Some youth described being in "survival" mode without the mental or physical resources to look for help. Others suggested that when they did look for information, the hours or services offered were out of date.

Another major issue is **trust**. Focus group participants shared how difficult it was for them to trust anyone during and even after experiencing homelessness. They felt they were taken advantage of by others. This lack of trust can make it hard to ask for help or engage with programming.

Youth also struggled with **program requirements** at times. They described programs that were available only on certain days, services that required documents they did not have, resources that changed or disappeared, and rules or processes that did not always account for the circumstances of young people experiencing homelessness. In the focus groups, participants described the frustration of seeking advertised help only to encounter another requirement or restriction when they arrived.

Low-barrier service is about more than getting through the door.

Programs are more usable when their requirements, schedules, rules, physical environments, and staff interactions reflect the circumstances of the young people they are intended to serve, fostering trust and connection.

YOUTH VOICE

"A lot of people don't really know where to go… I didn't do a lot of research in my survival times."

"It's hard to ask for help, especially when like everything is going downhill and you don't know where to turn… especially when you've never been homeless before, it's hard to ask for help, and then you don't know where to start."

"I eventually ended up in [a program], and it was really hard to readjust to… being around a lot of people… the trust barrier where you just feel like people are out to hurt you… homelessness is really hard because… what you deal with on the streets… it is really hard to trust people."

"They always come up here on Wednesdays at like 11, but I always miss them because nobody ever says anything."

Rules Youth Can't See

Rules and policies can push young people out of programs

Young people described programs whose rules were never explained. They made mistakes they didn't know were mistakes and then got a warning that they could be removed. One participant described living with constant anxiety about being asked to leave. Posted rules, unspoken rules, and a packet at intake didn't add up to a clear picture.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"They don't explain any of the rules. So like whenever I make a mistake, well, I don't even know it's a mistake because I'm just existing."**

Some eligibility rules also work against stability. A participant described housing programs that required them to be in a shelter or on the street to qualify, so staying with a friend would have cost them their place. For another participant, a shelter's three-month limit ran out 'a week away from finding an apartment,' forcing a restart. Others described housing meetings that nobody announced, and requirements for documents they didn't have.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"When you want to go to a shelter, they say, you have to be on the streets in order to get help."**

Youth also noticed when rules were applied unevenly. One participant described a shelter whose no-violence policy was never enforced when the person causing harm was physically intimidating. When they were harassed for being trans, it was brushed off as another resident's opinion. By contrast, consequences that were consistent and proportionate, like a short timeout instead of losing services entirely, felt fair.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Rules only feel safe when young people can see them, trust they'll be applied to everyone, and know the consequence fits the mistake. Unclear, uneven, or all-or-nothing rules push youth out of the help they need. Clear, consistent, and proportionate ones keep them connected.

The First Interaction

Initial impressions can determine whether a young person stays

Youth also talked about what happens after they reach a program. Their experiences with staff were mixed. One young man put the odds at 50-50: some staff are there for a paycheck, and others genuinely care. Youth could tell the difference quickly, and it shaped whether they came back.

A single bad interaction can undo weeks of effort. Getting to a program often means waiting, filling out forms, and making calls. Being treated poorly at the door can send a young person back out. One focus group participant said that after experiences like that, they would rather be on the street. Another described staff who seemed to take things personally, which felt like being treated as an enemy instead of someone who needed help. For a young woman who grew up feeling dismissed, being brushed off by staff was a trigger.

Youth were specific about what good interactions look like. Staff can relate without making it about themselves. They talk to a 20-year-old differently than to a 14-year-old. And they are hired because they want the job, with real training and time to learn whether it's a good fit.

YOUTH VOICE

"I say it's a 50-50 chance. Concerned people, some programs, the people are there just to work. They're there like they're there to get a paycheck. Then you got the people that actually do care and they come and they want to help…"

YOUTH VOICE

"Someone that can sympathize with you is kind of like they can have a conversation with you, but not make it about themselves."

WHY THIS MATTERS

For youth who have learned not to trust adults, the first contact is a test. Hiring, training, and supporting staff for these moments is part of the service, not overhead.

Identity and Inclusion

"Everyone is welcome" is not the same as "Everyone is safe"

LGBTQIA+ participants described shelters divided into women's and men's programs. Youth who are "in between" may be turned away from those programs or harassed once they're admitted. One participant was followed and yelled at by other residents at a shelter. A case manager called learning their name and pronouns too much work.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"I was constantly harassed for being trans, but they're like, 'Well, that's their opinion'…"**

Participants said inclusion shows up in practice. Staff ask respectful questions instead of assuming, rules against harm are actually enforced, and youth see people like themselves there. After one LGBTQIA+-focused program closed, one young person said support for queer young adults is now missing.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"They… ask questions, like, respectful questions rather than assuming things."**

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Identity and Inclusion

Housing instability does not affect all young people equally. National data show especially elevated rates among transgender students and LGBQ students.

10.7% vs **2.1%** and **1.8%**

Transgender students experienced unstable housing in the past 30 days

Compared with cisgender boys and cisgender girls (2023)[1]

4.7% · **4.2%** · **4.0%** vs **2.0%**

Gay/lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students experienced unstable housing in the past 30 days

Compared with heterosexual students (2021)[2]

Needing Help Does Not Mean Trusting Help Is Easy

The importance of (re)building trust

Young people did not describe trust as something a program automatically receives because it exists to help them. For some, caution around adults and institutions had been learned through experiences of being ignored, disbelieved, judged, moved between systems, or promised support that did not materialize.

That history can shape how a young person responds when help is offered later. Participants described **pride**, **reluctance to burden others, fear of being judged**, and **uncertainty** about whether adults or programs would actually follow through.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"I was always raised to be the helper. So… asking for help just doesn't feel right, even though it's necessary."**

But youth also said trust can be built. Young people described very different experiences when they encountered adults who listened, treated them with respect, communicated consistently, followed through, and appeared genuinely invested in what happened to them.

One participant initially expected a youth advisory board to be another setting where adults did not really care what young people thought. As relationships developed, she became deeply involved and increasingly comfortable speaking up and advocating for herself.

Young people noticed how they were treated. One young person specifically valued being treated "like young adults" rather than simply as children. Across the conversations, feeling heard and respected was repeatedly connected to whether support felt credible.

Engagement is relational
Hesitation to accept or remain connected to help may reflect previous experience—not an unwillingness to change.

Effort Is Hard to See

What looks like lack of effort may be the weight of instability

Young people in this research knew how others see them. They described being seen as lazy, as "bad," as attention-seeking, and as undeserving of help. They said people assume they aren't trying to improve their situation, especially if they complain about it. They also said people assume they should already know how to do things no one ever taught them.

Their accounts told a different story. Young people described looking for work and trying to keep jobs, finishing school, caring for children and siblings, managing their mental health, and navigating benefits and services. Much of that happened while they didn't know where they would sleep or how they would get where they needed to go.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"People think that like you're just being lazy or that you're undeserving of that help."**
>
> **"My résumé doesn't look good… but I could show up and really show out."**

Housing instability also erodes the very things people use as evidence that someone is "responsible": steady employment, a strong résumé, reliable attendance, completed paperwork, returned phone calls, and kept appointments. A missed appointment may mean a bus that never came or a phone that was shut off, not a lack of commitment. A common refrain was a request to be seen as human, just like everyone else.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"And, I mean, we're normal, just like everybody else, right?"**

Effort can be difficult to see from the outside.
Visible outcomes (missed appointments, lost jobs, incomplete applications, or disengagement from a program) can hide what young people have done to get that far. Flexibility and understanding (in programming, in employment settings, and in housing) can go a long way toward helping youth stabilize.

07

What Creates Stability

What young people say actually helps



Treat Us Like Adults and Let Us Choose

Respect and choice build independence

The programs youth praised most treated them as young adults. Those programs met their basic needs but expected them to make their own decisions. Participants contrasted this with settings that felt controlling. They said being trusted to choose is how they learned to run their own lives.

Clear expectations feel like safety

A participant and a staff member described one program that clearly spelled out the community's shared commitments and the steps that follow when someone breaks them. Knowing what was expected, and that the same rules applied to everyone, made them feel secure. At another shelter, a participant said, staff laid out exactly who to talk to about each kind of problem. At the most recent shelter, they had no idea who was in charge.

YOUTH VOICE

"That helps with the safety… me knowing what's expected of me. So I don't have to feel as like, 'Oh a mystery consequence is gonna come back.'"

Choice also matters in small, everyday ways: how and when a required task gets done, decorating a space, having their own food. Low-barrier entry mattered, too. One young man chose a drop-in center because he didn't need an ID to get in — it was his only option to get off the streets at the time.

Relationships that follow through are the turning point

When youth described what changed their path, they usually named a person. A case manager advocated to keep one young woman's case open after she aged out. Mentors in a youth advisory board helped another participant find her voice, after she first expected them not to care. Therapists taught them coping skills. Youth also valued case managers who sit with them and explain things until they can do them on their own. Above all, youth said trust is earned by coming back and following through.

WHY THIS MATTERS
Clear, consistent expectations change how safe a program feels. Consistent, trusted adults are what youth described as the difference between help that sticks and help that doesn't. Caseloads, staff turnover, and program exits all affect whether that relationship survives.

Brianna's Story: Building Stability Through Continued Support

A FOUNDATION OF SAFETY

Brianna entered services after years of housing instability, domestic violence, foster care involvement, and trauma. Permanent supportive housing gave Brianna and her children an affordable, stable home. With rent she could manage and access to basic needs and mental health supports, she could focus on a high-risk pregnancy and begin planning for her family's future.

SOMEONE WHO STOOD BY HER

A trusted relationship with her case manager was crucial. As a child, Brianna often felt unheard and disregarded. Her experience with her case manager was different: she described someone who listened, related to her experiences, stayed involved, and gave her hope. Her case manager helped Brianna complete housing paperwork, apply for TANF, and navigate permanent supportive housing. When Brianna turned 25 and aged out of youth services, her case manager advocated for her case to remain open until permanent housing was in place.

WHAT STABILITY LOOKS LIKE

For Brianna, stability is concrete. It means being able to pay bills and meet basic needs without constant stress, while still having room to save, maintain transportation, and provide for her children. She described learning to make difficult decisions about spending and to prioritize household needs, even when she wants to provide more for her children.

Mental health is also an important part of stability for Brianna. She connected emotional and financial well-being and described therapy, communication, and supportive relationships as important parts of moving forward. Today, she has stable housing, mental health support, food and cash assistance during a high-risk pregnancy, and support from her fiancé.

> **"Life is more peaceful now. My family is safe."**
>
> — Brianna

Youth-Designed Solutions

Youth were asked about their vision for a system to serve them. They suggested making good use of the available resources, expanding services available (especially transportation), and increasing opportunities for social and peer support. The major areas where they suggested improvements are covered here.

Expanded housing opportunities
The youth in this study described long waits to find stable housing, citing the lack of affordable places, prior evictions, criminal histories, and other barriers. They pictured housing with quicker entrance (running more like a shelter model but with the privacy of an apartment, for example) and accommodation of disabilities and life circumstances, such as the need for housing for parents with children. They also suggested the need for both emergency and longer-term housing options. If expanded capacity is not possible, youth saw a need to prioritize some clients with higher needs based on urgency, including home conditions or potentially parenting youth.

Access and navigation
Youth stressed the need for clear, transparent, and accurate information about the rules of the program, the hours for contact, and the other community resources available to them. They also envisioned on-site help applying for benefits such as SNAP, TANF, and disability and help obtaining identity documents before they are referred to housing that requires them. Finally, youth noted that some of them work nights, so programs need to accommodate their schedules.

Transportation
Youth said they would ideally like the option to receive rides to school and work. They suggested exploring partnerships with employers to provide rides and, as previously mentioned, the need for accessible transportation options for those with disabilities. Importantly, these services must be reliable and consistent to fit youth needs for dependable transportation to get to work and other places.

Job assistance
Youth suggested job opportunities that fit into their lives (e.g., flexible hours, perhaps at the programs they are working with) with employers that understand their experience and aren't put off by résumé gaps. They stressed the need for placement for justice-involved youth. They also wanted help obtaining the insurance required for certain skilled trades and wondered about ways to fix gaps between their age and the age required for some positions that they had already trained for.

Economic mobility
Youth described a need for more consistent assistance, especially food stamps and Title XX child care assistance. Ideally that would be delivered more quickly. One interviewee stressed the need to protect Education and Training Voucher (ETV) college funds for former foster youth.

Youth Designed Solutions

Trusted staff
Youth described patient, trauma-informed staff who were there for the "right reasons." They appreciated when staff describe things step by step and walk with youth as they navigate complex systems. One former foster youth envisioned this happening while the child was in care, noting that they barely saw their caseworker while in foster care and would like to see more intense services while youth were still in care. They also want staff who set realistic expectations and who follow through on what they say. Ideally, they would like consistency in who they work with.

Mental health care
Youth mentioned they would include access to psychiatry and medication, family counseling (especially when leaving foster care), and open, honest communication for youth. One suggested a calming room in every program to help clients with anxiety. Another mentioned the need for calm in shelters and housing, supporting the removal of intoxicated guests. Separate quiet spaces could be helpful.

Fair rules and safe spaces
Youth want clearly posted rules that are applied fairly with proportionate consequences. One youth emphasized an equity approach that recognizes that equal is not always fair and that some people need more support. This young person felt enforced anti-harassment rules (especially for transgender and LGBTQIA+ youth) were important.

Programs built for young adults
Youth highlighted key tensions between autonomy and community. Some want to be treated as young adults with the ability to make choices, while others felt that age ranges might be restricted to keep younger youth separate from older youth. They saw the need for some structure (like quiet hours and curfew times) but appreciated programs that gave them choice and direction.

Guidance for transitions
Youth expressed a need for help with transition planning, especially out of foster care. They also see value in family mediation and safety planning and (if possible) an ability to soften age cut-offs so that services are not abruptly terminated.

Help building/rebuilding networks
Youth see a need for help building their own support network, including with family and with peers who "have been through it." They also saw a need for community support from people who will help with no questions asked.

Youth voice
Youth stressed the importance of efforts like this work (to ask youth what *they* need and want) and the need for follow-through after asking for input. They also suggested including former participants on boards and regular check-ins with clients.

08

Call to Action

Places where the system can do better



CALL TO ACTION

What It Would Take

What it would take for more young people to reach stability and stay there

Across every conversation, young people described the same thing: not a single crisis, but a chain of them. A lost phone leads to a missed appointment. A missed appointment leads to a lost spot in a program. Without family to fall back on, each setback lasts longer and costs more. Programs helped, sometimes decisively, but young people also ran into rules they couldn't see, doors they couldn't find, and support that ended on a birthday.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"I want the funders to understand… We really are trying."**

What Young People Need

1 Safe, affordable places to live
A home they can count on, and enough short-term options to get them there.

2 Work, income, and benefits
A real path to earning enough to live on, and public benefits that hold steady while they get there.

3 Practical assistance
Dependable ways to get where they're going, access to reliable communication, and assistance obtaining needed documents.

4 Programs built with youth at the table
Programs that respect them as young adults and give them a real voice in how services work.

5 Seeing young people as they are
The community, employers, and systems to see their effort and their potential, not a stereotype.

6 Life skills and people to lean on
Someone to teach them what families usually teach, and people to turn to when things go wrong.

7 Support through transitions
A plan and a warm handoff when they leave foster care or age out of youth services.

8 Mental health care
Mental health care they can access, and support for trauma and substance use that doesn't put their housing at risk.

9 Patient, trusted staff who follow through
Adults who listen, explain things patiently, and keep showing up.

10 Fair rules and safe, inclusive programs
Clear rules applied the same way to everyone, and programs where they're safe being who they are.

These needs overlap, and none of them can be met by one organization alone.

1 Safe, affordable places to live

Young people need a home they can count on, and enough short-term options to get them there

Young people drew a sharp line between having a roof and having a home. Couches, relatives' spare rooms, and temporary stays kept them indoors but never secure, since any of those could end without warning. Formal options often came with long waits or firm end dates. Affordable rentals were out of reach on the wages open to young adults. Every provider interviewed named housing cost as a critical barrier.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"Be in your own space, have your own keys, you know, pay your own bills. Just do your own thing."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Convert empty buildings into youth apartments with privacy | Housing sized for parents with children | Emergency and short-term stays long enough to get back on track | Do not require youth to wait for housing in shelters | Serve the most urgent situations first

2 Work, income, and benefits

Young people need a real path to earning enough to live on, and public benefits that hold steady while they get there

Young people wanted careers, not just jobs, but ran into age minimums, résumé gaps, criminal records, and the cost of simply getting to work. Benefits like food assistance, Medicaid, and child care help were described as lifelines, and as a maze of denials, re-applications, and cut-offs that could wipe out a small raise. When a case manager helped with the paperwork, it made the difference.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"I really feel like the main problem everybody has is … finding a job in their career path."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Employers who look past gaps and justice involvement | Revisit age requirements for trades jobs | Career guidance | Paid work inside programs | Hands-on help applying for and keeping benefits | Smooth out benefit cliffs | Faster child care assistance | Protect college funding for former foster youth

3 Practical assistance

Young people need dependable ways to get where they're going, access to reliable communication, and assistance obtaining needed documents

Getting to a job, an interview, a class, or an appointment depended on buses that ran late and passes that had to be requested again and again. For youth with disabilities, accessible transit was even harder to arrange. When a phone was cut off, calls from employers and case managers went unanswered, and opportunities slipped away. Finally, documents created barriers to employment and program enrollment.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"A couple buses or a couple vans that provide people [rides] to work, that will stop a lot of failed stable housing."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Partner with employers and transit on rides to work and school | Program-provided transportation | Make accessible bus passes as easy to get as standard bus passes | Keep resource lists current and provide them to young people | Help getting ID documents before they're required

4 Programs built with youth at the table

Young people need programs that respect them as young adults and give them a real voice in how services work

The programs young people praised most covered basic needs but trusted them to make their own choices. Settings that felt controlling, or that grouped older youth with much younger ones, pushed them away. Program hours didn't always fit night shifts or parenting. Young people valued being asked what they thought and wanted proof that someone was listening. They suggested convening more sessions like those done in the research, to allow them to connect to peers and offer feedback. They expected follow-up.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"So being put in a position where I could like think for myself and choose, it actually gave me more like a sense of independence."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Choices within program requirements | Separate spaces by age | Hours that work for youth | Healthy, sensory-friendly food | Help for youth with pets | Former participants on decision-making boards | Regular check-ins | Follow through after asking for input

5 Seeing young people as they are

Young people need the community, employers, and systems to see their effort and their potential, not a stereotype

Young people believed they were seen as lazy, as trouble, as attention-seekers, as statistics, or as objects of pity. They felt blamed for not knowing things no one had taught them and judged as not trying. Former foster youth described being treated as if something might set them off. Yet the young people in this research were working, parenting, and going to school. They asked to be understood as individuals, with stories that are different from one another and lives that are complex, just like everyone else.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"We are human … We are the same as everybody else."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Get to know them before deciding how to help | Listen to and observe young people | Recognize no two young people's experiences are the same | Employers who look at what a young person can do, not just their résumé | Help without demanding justification

6 Life skills and people to lean on

Young people need someone to teach them what families usually teach, and people to turn to when things go wrong

Many young people grew up without adults who modeled everyday skills like laundry, budgeting, credit, and taxes, and felt judged for not knowing them. They didn't want things done for them; they wanted things explained. They also described weak support networks: family relationships strained or lost, and few people to call in a pinch. Mentors, peers who had been through it, and neighbors willing to help without question all made a difference.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"I always needed some type of life coach or … mentor or just somebody in general."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Mentors and life coaches | Hands-on life-skills and financial-skills teaching | Help rebuilding family relationships where safe | Peer support from people with lived experience | A community that helps without judgment

7 Support through transitions

Young people need a plan and a warm handoff when they leave foster care or age out of youth services

Support often ended on a birthday, not when a young person was ready. Young people described leaving foster care with no plan, no resources, and no one checking in afterward. Others found themselves too old for youth programs and too young for adult ones. When a case manager bent the rules to stay involved, it changed the outcome. Earlier help at home, like family mediation or an adult who noticed something was wrong, might have prevented some of these exits.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"They didn't help me figure out how to get my Medicaid. They didn't explain to me about jobs. I had no idea."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Transition plans, safety plans, and extra meetings before leaving care | A case manager after exit | Flexible age limits and extended eligibility | Family mediation | Adults at school and elsewhere who notice warning signs

8 Mental health care

Young people need mental health care they can access, and support for trauma and substance use that doesn't put their housing at risk

Loss, abuse, rejection, and time in unsafe places followed young people into adulthood as anxiety, depression, anger, and grief. Some turned to substances to get through hard days. Therapy was the support they named most often as actually working, but access broke down at key moments, such as leaving foster care without a way to get medication. Young people also linked emotional and financial stability: it's hard to have one without the other.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"You can't be financially stable if your mental is tore up, and vice versa."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Keep therapy within easy reach | Continuous psychiatric care and medication after leaving care or a program | Family counseling | Quiet, calming spaces in programs | Peer support

9 Patient, trusted staff who follow through

Young people need adults who listen, explain things patiently, and keep showing up

Many young people had learned to be wary of adults and programs, so a first interaction could decide whether they stayed. They could quickly tell staff who cared from staff who were just working a shift. The relationships that changed things were steady ones: a case manager who stayed involved, a mentor who kept coming back, someone who walked them through each step rather than handing them a form.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"If somebody really wants to … help, they're going to come back as many times … like, hey, I'm making sure this is happening."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Trauma-informed case managers who explain step by step and sit alongside youth | Hire people who want the work, and train them well | Regular check-ins with clients | Steady staffing | Let trusted case managers stay involved past age limits

10 Fair rules and safe, inclusive programs

Young people need clear rules applied the same way to everyone, and programs where they're safe being who they are

Young people often learned the rules by breaking them, then lived with the fear of being asked to leave. Enforcement felt uneven, depending on who was involved. Some eligibility rules pushed them onto the street or into shelter to qualify. LGBTQIA+ youth described harassment that went unaddressed, and youth with disabilities described needs that were overlooked. Where expectations were written down and applied to everyone, young people said they felt safer.

> **YOUTH VOICE**
>
> **"Not being able to voice issues you're having because of fear of retaliation or having to leave …."**

IDEAS YOUTH OFFERED

Clearly posted rules | Consequences that fit the mistake | Use correct names and pronouns and enforce anti-harassment rules | Give more support to those who need more support | Safety screening

09

Collaborative Priorities

Where should our community go next?



From Findings to Action

The research tells us what young people are facing. The State of Youth Summit identified where collective action is most needed.

The findings in this report come from three places: secondary data, community stakeholders, and the young people themselves. Read together, they point to ten needs.

No single organization can meet these needs alone. Some can be addressed by changing how programs work. Others require new investment, policy change, or partners outside the youth-serving system: employers, transit, schools, child welfare, and funders.

To facilitate community collaboration, The Youth Partners Coalition organized the **State of Youth Summit**, held on October 6, 2026 at The Columbus Foundation. Forty-eight Community members attended, including representatives of city, county, and state offices; service providers; Huckleberry House and Kaleidoscope Youth Center Youth Advisory Board members; corporate partners; and community funders.

The needs identified were reorganized into ten areas for collective action — issues that organizations in Franklin County could work together to address. See the Methodological Appendix for detail on how **three priority areas** (discussed next) were selected for planning at the Summit.

Ten Areas for Collective Action

1. **Prevent housing instability before it starts**
2. **Increase access to stable, affordable housing**
3. **Remove practical barriers to stability**
4. **Strengthen pathways to employment and economic stability**
5. **Make services easier to find, access, and navigate**
6. **Make programs safe, fair, and responsive to young people**
7. **Strengthen trusted relationships and support networks**
8. **Expand trauma-informed mental health supports**
9. **Plan for transitions and soften age cliffs**
10. **Improve accessibility for youth with disabilities**

Priority 1: Prevent Housing Instability Before It Starts

WHAT WOULD SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Fewer youth enter the system

More young people stay housed and never need the homelessness system.

Families can keep kids housed

Caregivers have resources, and families and the broader community understand risk.

Help arrives before a crisis

Schools and providers have resources to intervene immediately.

Fewer inequities and gaps

Reduce racial inequity and the need for children-services involvement. Close benefits gaps so families qualify for help before a crisis.

HOW DO WE ACHIEVE THIS?

Connect existing prevention supports

Build a coordinated upstream prevention and housing-counseling network from rental assistance, school counselors, and the homeless hotline. Connect pieces now fragmented and separate from crisis response.

Use a shared approach to risk

Standardize how sectors identify youth at risk, assess risk, and determine what happens next.

Pair resources with tenant protections

Reinforce COVID-era tenant rights, education, and resources. Combine rental assistance, tenant protections, and flexible dollars to help families through a crisis.

WHO NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED

Youth and social-service providers; the homeless network/HPN; and DV providers, whose universal screening could inform a broader model.

Schools, health/medical providers, FCCS/JFS, juvenile and criminal justice, child welfare, and child care. Businesses and traditional funders.

Participants also raised possible citywide or Franklin County living-wage policy.

NEXT 3–6 MONTHS

01

Map what exists

Inventory prevention infrastructure before building something new.

02

Convene a think tank

Develop a shared vision and framework with youth who have lived experience.

03

Learn from other communities

Adapt approaches that have worked elsewhere.

04

Pilot if support emerges

With momentum and a dedicated champion or funder, attach a housing counselor to one school system or medical provider.

Priority 2: Increase Access to Stable, Affordable Housing

WHAT WOULD SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Fewer youth experience homelessness
More young people have housing and basic needs already met.

Fewer evictions
Young people can remain housed and avoid the disruption of eviction.

Youth participate in community life
With basic needs met, young people can engage in their communities.

A foundation for long-term stability
Build stability early and proactively, with youth voice and leadership from the start.

HOW DO WE ACHIEVE THIS?

Engage government at every level

Connect city councils and county commissioners with state and federal decision-makers. Focus collective action on policy and systems change.

Build a private landlord network

Bring private landlords into the work, because existing policy constrains what public systems can do.

Measure the housing-cost gap

Fund a cost analysis to determine the actual gap in housing costs and the funding needed to close it.

WHO NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED

Government at every level, including city councils, county commissioners, state legislature, and Congress. Local leaders should inform state and federal decision-makers.

Youth with lived experience, community members, private landlords, and developers. Private partners are increasingly needed given state policy constraints.

Youth contributions must be paid, not volunteered.

NEXT 3–6 MONTHS

01

Track election results

Review outcomes of the Nov 3 election for implications for housing policy

02

Build trust and plan together

Build trust with youth and bring all parties together for group action planning.

03

Commission a cost analysis

Determine the actual funding gap in housing costs.

04

Pay youth to participate

Compensate youth for their participation in all of this work.

Priority 3: Strengthen Trusted Relationships and Support Networks

WHAT WOULD SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Support when youth need it

Any young person can access a mentor or natural support and control the boundaries of that relationship.

A trusted adult and organization

Every youth can identify at least one unpaid trusted adult and a reliable organization.

Organizations can connect youth

Organizations have adequate financial backing to connect young people with trusted adults.

Less isolation, more preparation

Youth feel less isolated and more prepared for the transition into adulthood.

HOW DO WE ACHIEVE THIS?

Create and train community mentors

Create a team with a case manager plus four to five adults, each supporting a specific part of a young person's life.

Map existing youth efforts

Create an inventory of youth advisories, youth-serving coalitions, and action plans across Franklin County.

Consolidate and share what exists

Use the inventory to consolidate overlapping efforts, vet their quality, and eventually create a single public-facing directory.

WHO NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED

Youth with lived experience, direct service providers, youth-serving agencies, and community volunteers.

Youth-serving agencies, school districts, and faith-based organizations.

Young people must have real control over relationship boundaries.

NEXT 3–6 MONTHS

01

Learn from existing models

Talk to organizations running models like Open Table and explore private funder interest.

02

Gauge interest first

Ask youth and the broader community about their interest before building anything new.

03

Identify clear conveners

Choose who will lead the landscape inventory, with clear responsibility.

04

Coordinate the inventory

Once conveners are in place, establish a coordinated system for the inventory.

Social Return on Investment for Homelessness Services

For each dollar spent per year, how much social value accrues to the young people and the community?



What Is Social Return on Investment?

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework for estimating the broader value created by a program or intervention. Unlike a traditional financial return, SROI includes social, economic, and, where relevant, environmental outcomes that may not normally appear in financial measures. It translates those outcomes into monetary terms using financial proxies or estimates of the dollar value of benefits created or costs avoided.

The approach is stakeholder-centered. **Outcomes** are first identified based on the changes that matter to people and organizations affected by the intervention. Researchers then estimate how many people experience each outcome and assign an appropriate monetary proxy to represent its value. Those values are adjusted to avoid overstating impact. This includes accounting for outcomes that might have happened anyway, contributions from other programs or circumstances, how long an effect lasts, and whether its value declines over time.

The result is both an **estimate of total social value created** and an **SROI ratio.**

The ratio compares that estimated social value with the amount invested. For example, an SROI of 5:1 means that the analysis estimates approximately $5 in social value for every $1 invested.

Social value is not the same as revenue or direct financial savings. SROI places a monetary value on changes that matter to people and communities, including outcomes that do not have a conventional market price.

For more information on how the SROI was computed, please see the Methodological Appendix.

SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Social return on investment asks:

What broader value does an investment create?

SROI:

- Identifies outcomes that matter to stakeholders;
- Measures how many people experience those outcomes;
- Assigns credible monetary values to those changes;
- Adjusts for what would have happened without the intervention or because of other factors; and
- Compares the resulting social value with the dollars invested.

$$\text{SROI ratio} = \frac{\text{Total estimated social value}}{\text{Dollars invested}}$$

Estimated Annual Social Return on Investment for Coalition Activities

Based on stakeholder program data, a lower-bound estimate of the SROI for services provided by The Youth Partners Coalition is **$2.46** per $1.00 invested. Using higher-end proxy values, the estimate is **$3.57** per $1.00 invested.

For every $1.00 invested, The Youth Partners Coalition generates:

$2.46 – $3.57

in social value

$30,447,622

in social value created annually by The Youth Partners Coalition.

The Public Cost of Youth Homelessness

No local estimate of what youth homelessness costs taxpayers is available, so we relied on Foldes & Lubov (2015),[1] a study of 1,451 young people ages 16–24 who used a Minneapolis drop-in center while experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It estimated what each person in the study cost taxpayers in 2011. Adjusted to September 2026 dollars using the Consumer Price Index,[2] that cost is:

$25,700

per youth, per year, in public costs associated with homelessness

Public costs include criminal justice spending (policing, corrections, and judicial and legal costs); benefit payments (cash, food, and family assistance); housing support (emergency assistance, shelters, supportive housing, and foster care); public health care, including estimated uncompensated care; social support programs; and lost tax payments, less savings from lower public education spending. Most costs are the amount above what other young people of the same age cost; benefit payments and public housing spending are the total spent on these youth.

Methodological Appendix

Detail on how the work was done



HOMELESS YOUTH COUNTS

Estimating the Number of Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Franklin County

To estimate how many Franklin County youth experience homelessness in a year, the researchers took the following steps:

Step 1: Starting estimate

In 2019, the Columbus and Franklin County Continuum of Care estimated that 3,033 youth were literally homeless in Franklin County over a year.[1]

Step 2: Recent trends

For four local indicators of youth homelessness, we divided the most recent value by the earliest available value:

- Homeless students in Franklin County schools[2]: 4,204 ÷ 2,270 = 1.85
- Unaccompanied youth from PIT counts[3,4]: 176 ÷ 113 = 1.56
- Parenting youth from PIT counts[3,5]: 34 ÷ 43 = .79
- Unaccompanied youth under 18 from PIT counts[3,4]: 8 ÷ 5 = 1.60

Step 3: Compute average rate of change

The simple average of the four ratios is 1.45: (1.85 + 1.56 + 0.79 + 1.60) ÷ 4.

Step 4: Updated estimate

We multiplied the average rate of change by the prior estimate: 3,033 × 1.45 = 4,397.85, rounded to 4,398.

This approach assumes the prior estimate was valid and that average rates of change from other measures can be applied.

Estimating the Number of Youth Experiencing Housing Instability in Franklin County

To generate the number of Franklin County youth who experience housing instability in a year, the researchers took the following steps:

Step 1: Selection of national rates

Rates come from Voices of Youth Count,[1] a nationally representative survey conducted in 2016–2017. It reports 12-month rates of explicit homelessness and of couch surfing only, with 95% confidence intervals.

Step 2: Young adult rates

To be conservative, we started from the lower bound of each confidence interval for ages 18–25 (5.2% explicit homelessness; 8.9% couch surfing only). We then applied the survey authors' deductions for reports that their follow-up interviews showed were not homelessness (× 0.88 and × 0.46), giving 4.576% and 4.094%.[2]

Step 3: Teen rates

The survey measured ages 13–17 by household. Following the authors, we divided their adjusted national estimates (500,000 households reporting explicit homelessness; 150,000 couch surfing only) by the 20,870,640 U.S. youth ages 13–17, giving 2.396% and 0.719%. The authors describe this as a lower bound. [2]

Step 4: Local population

Counts are from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey 1-year estimates for Franklin County (Table B01001):[3] 129,706 youth ages 18–24 and 51,855 youth ages 15–17. Because the Census reports ages 10–14 as a single group, ages 13–14 were estimated as two-fifths of that group (34,694), giving 86,549 youth ages 13–17.

Step 5: Computation

Each rate was multiplied by the matching population and rounded to whole persons: 11,245 young adults (5,935 + 5,310) and 2,695 teens (2,073 + 622), or 13,940 youth in total.

This approach assumes Franklin County's rates match national rates from 2016–2017 and applies a rate measured for ages 18–25 to the population ages 18–24. The adjusted rates have no published confidence intervals.

YOUTH VOICE

Youth Voice Methodology

To collect and analyze the data from focus group sessions and in-depth interviews, the researchers took the following steps:

Step 1: Collection

Coalition partners identified youth in their programs who were willing to speak with Illuminology as part of this work. All sessions were audio- and/or video-recorded using either a handheld recorder or Zoom. Permission to record was obtained at the start of each interview or discussion session, and each respondent was paid $25 for their time.

Step 2: Transcription

Transcripts from each interview or session were created using an automated tool. Each transcript was then reviewed by a researcher to verify its accuracy. During this step, transcripts were de-identified by removing the names of anyone other than the moderator.

Step 3: Identification of themes

A researcher reviewed each transcript, highlighting portions of interest to the key questions in the study — those related to how young people become homeless, what barriers they face to becoming stably housed, what gaps they see in services available to youth facing housing instability, and what suggestions they had for improvements (both in terms of what services are delivered and how they are delivered).

A second researcher reviewed each transcript to ensure no themes were overlooked.

Step 4: Extraction of themes

An automated tool was used to extract all highlighted portions of the transcripts into an Excel spreadsheet and to provide a preliminary assignment of themes into categories. A researcher reviewed this spreadsheet, revised the preliminary assignments to ensure accuracy and utility, and made other adjustments as needed to finalize the extraction of themes.

Step 5: Translation of themes

Themes were organized into the sections presented in the report. Researchers wrote descriptions of the themes and presented verbatim quotes to illustrate key findings.

SUMMIT

Analysis of Outputs from State of Youth Summit October 6, 2026 — The Columbus Foundation

The Summit was organized as a series of individual exercises and facilitated discussions designed to help the group reach consensus on the right next steps for the community.

Step 1: Review

Multidisciplinary groups were assigned to each of eight tables. The research results were briefly reviewed by Illuminology, then each multidisciplinary group discussed what stood out to them from the report's findings and what felt like the biggest opportunity for collective action. Each table reported out to the room.

Step 2: Individual ratings

Next, each person **individually** completed a worksheet that helped them score all ten candidate priority areas on three characteristics:

> **Impact**
> *How much does this issue affect young people's safety, well-being, or future opportunities?*
>
> **Gap**
> *How much are current systems, services, or resources falling short of adequately addressing this area?*
>
> **Urgency**
> *How much do you want Franklin County to take greater action on this issue right now?*

After completing the ratings, each person also ranked their top three priorities.

Step 3: Table discussion and brief share-out

Each table discussed members' individual ratings, looking for areas of convergence and divergence. Following this discussion, tables were permitted to briefly share any considerations before they proceeded to the next step.

Step 4: Dot vote

Each participant received three dots, which they assigned to one of the ten areas to indicate which they felt should receive the most collective action. A final round of voting (with one additional dot) was used to clarify two closely ranked options.

Analysis of Outputs from State of Youth Summit October 6, 2026 — The Columbus Foundation

Following the dot vote, three priorities were selected for further development. The results of the dot vote aligned nicely with individual priorities as shown in the table below.

Priority area	Dot votes	Number who ranked #1	Average Impact Score	Average Gap Score	Average Urgency Score
Prevent housing instability before it starts	22	10	3.75	3.44	3.84
Increase access to stable, affordable housing	19	11	3.69	3.81	3.77
Strengthen trusted relationships and support networks	11	1	3.58	3.03	3.47
Remove practical barriers to stability	10	3	3.47	2.91	3.35
Strengthen pathways to employment and economic stability	10	0	3.50	3.09	3.23
Expand trauma-informed mental health supports	6	0	3.13	2.84	3.00
Make programs safe, fair, and responsive to young people	5	2	3.32	2.61	3.13
Improve accessibility for youth with disabilities	5	0	3.19	3.06	3.27
Make services easier to find, access, and navigate	4	0	3.16	2.65	3.07
Plan for transitions and soften age cliffs	4	0	2.84	2.90	2.93

Step 5: Future planning

Following the dot vote, Summit attendees self-selected into tables based on the priority areas identified. Two tables worked on Priorities 2 and 3 and one table worked on Priority 1. The results of these efforts were used to populate the pages indicating what success would look like, how that success might be achieved, who would need to work together to achieve it, and what concrete steps could be taken in the next three to six months.

SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Computing Social Return on Investment for Services for Youth Experiencing Housing Instability

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework for accounting for and measuring the social value created by an organization's activities for multiple stakeholders in the ecosystem.[1,2,3] The SROI framework includes social, economic, and environmental impacts in a total measure of social value[1] and is used as a form of evaluation to quantify the social value created by an organization's programs or a business's activities.[2,3] According to *A Guide to Social Return on Investment*, SROI is "a framework for measuring and accounting for this much broader concept of value; it seeks to reduce inequality and environmental degradation and improve wellbeing by incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits."[1]

SROI emerged in the early 2000s as an applied research framework for enabling mission-driven organizations such as nonprofits and socially or environmentally minded corporations that faced the need for timely, cost-effective decision-making processes to understand and maximize program impact.[4] SROI was pioneered by the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund (REDF), a San Francisco-based venture philanthropy fund, and was later developed into a widely used framework through guides such as *Measuring Value: A Guide to Social Return on Investment (SROI),* published by the new economics foundation.[5]

In 2005, a consortium of organizations in the UK created the first formal guidelines for SROI. The UK's Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, in force since 31 January 2013, requires people who commission public services to consider how they can also secure wider social, economic, and environmental benefits. UK government departments are also expected to report on the social impact of their major contracts, and since January 2021 a Social Value Model has guided central government procurement.[6] SROI is one method organizations have used to demonstrate this value.

The UK government publishes valuation guidelines and standards for valuations for use in SROI analyses. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Development Programme, include SROI in policy guides, policy briefs, and discussion papers[7,8,9]

For full detail on the social science justification for SROI and the sensitivity analysis completed, please see this document: SROI Methodology Supplement.

Computing Social Return on Investment for Services for Youth Experiencing Housing Instability

To compute the social return on investment in this study, the researchers took the following steps:

Step 1: Group discussion to identify potential outcomes

We facilitated a group session with the Coalition to identify those outcomes that mattered most to them. Specifically, we asked them to tell us what key goals their programs pursued — what changes they wanted to make in the lives of the youth that they serve.

Step 2: Identification of shared outcomes

The researchers reviewed this input to identify a potential set of outcomes — those that were pursued by multiple programs, highlighting the key objectives the Coalition as a whole sets out to accomplish.

Step 3: Online survey

Next, we designed and deployed an online survey of Coalition members. In this survey, we asked partners to specifically report if they tracked indicators related to each key outcome, and to provide specific program outcome numbers where available. We also requested any logic models, theories of change, or other documents partners had to indicate the mechanism by which they attempted to make the changes identified.

Step 4: Review of survey results and review of submitted materials

The researchers analyzed the results of the survey and reviewed logic models and theory-of-change documents to determine which set of outcome indicators were 1) shared by partners throughout the system and 2) measured rigorously enough by at least one organization to allow them to be included in the model.

Step 5: Computation of SROI

Follow-up requests were made for key data from Coalition members, including the number of unique clients served and the rates at which different activities that supported key objectives occurred along with total cost to run the programs, separately for youth ages 12–17 and youth ages 18–24. These data were used to compute the SROI as detailed on the next two pages.

Computing Social Return on Investment for Services for Youth Experiencing Housing Instability

Description of the SROI model

To estimate SROI for the Coalition partners serving youth with housing instability in Franklin County, the following outcomes and their corresponding indicators were used:

Outcome	Indicator	Percentage
Increased access to basic needs	Percent of youth with increased access to food	88%
Increased access to transportation	Percent of youth receiving bus passes	65%
Increased access to health care	Percent of youth who received medical care while participating in the program (low estimate)	5%
Improved access to employment	Percent of youth who report securing employment as part of services	63%
Decreased chronic / adult homelessness through early intervention	Percent of youth attaining stable housing	56%
Removal of barriers to accessing social systems and increased independent living skills	Percent of youth who were assisted in attaining documents (SS cards, IDs, birth certificates)	3%
Improved mental health / access to counseling	Percent of youth who met with a therapist two or more times	9%
Improved sense of belonging, community, and trust	Percent of youth willing to meet with a counselor	26%

The percentages of youth attaining each outcome are based on data provided by Star House and Huckleberry House.

The outcomes included in the SROI model closely align with the challenges described by young people and stakeholders, including meeting basic needs, accessing transportation and securing employment, obtaining identification, building trusted connections, and achieving stable housing.

Computing Social Return on Investment for Services for Youth Experiencing Housing Instability

SROI COMPUTATIONS

Once outcome data and the number of youth served was obtained, financial proxy values for the outcomes were assigned using values obtained from previous research or other credible sources. These values were discounted based on counterfactuals as outlined below.

Outcome	Financial proxy	Source
Increased access to basic needs	**$917 per** person: Estimated total excess health care costs associated with food insecurity per food-insecure adult ($1,834). Discounted by 50% to account for food received elsewhere.	Berkowitz et al (2019)[1]
Increased access to transportation	**$18.00** per person receiving bus passes: Average number of bus passes obtained by youth (low estimate=4) x cost of a one-day COTA bus pass ($4.50)	COTA website[2]
Increased access to health care	**$3,976** per person: Cost savings of non-delayed primary care visit	Gao et al., 2022[3]
Improved access to employment	**$9,377.50** per person who obtained employment: Average hours worked per week in Columbus (34.1) x Ohio minimum wage ($11.00 per hour) x 50 weeks per year ($18,755). Discounted by 50% to account for youth who would have been employed without access to the program.	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics[4], Ohio Department of Commerce [5]
Decreased chronic / adult homelessness through early intervention	**$1,634** per person: Low estimate of average homeless system costs for society associated with first time homelessness drawn from three sites in the U.S.	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development[6]
Removal of barriers to accessing social systems and increased independent living skills	**$8,182** per person receiving documents: Low estimate of well-being value of increased ability to meet daily responsibilities independently	Ricket et al., 2026[7]
Improved mental health / access to counseling	**$9,292** per person: Low estimate of well-being value of improved mental health	Ricket & Goodspeed, 2025[8]
Improved sense of belonging	**$6,489** per person: Low estimate of well-being value of increased sense of trust	Ricket et al., 2026[7]

COST OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Estimating the Costs Associated with Youth Homelessness

Estimates for the costs of youth homelessness were based on Foldes & Lubov (2015),[1] a study prepared for YouthLink, a Minneapolis drop-in center. We did not recompute them. The study covered 1,451 young people ages 16–24 who visited or received services from YouthLink in 2011 and were experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Youth with disabilities who received Supplemental Security Income, and youth with no data, were excluded.

Estimated Annual Cost. The authors used 2011 data from YouthLink, government agencies, and schools to estimate annual costs in seven areas: earnings and taxes, crime, health, welfare and social supports, education, housing, and the added economic cost of raising tax revenue. They compared the group with all young people ages 16–24 for earnings, taxes, and education, and with privately insured Midwest young people for health care. For criminal justice spending, they applied Minnesota's added cost of a young person who is neither in school nor working, relative to other young people, to every member of the group. For benefit payments and public housing spending, the authors counted the total spent on these youth rather than the amount above other young people's spending.

Adjustment to 2026 dollars. We adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U).[2] The study's costs cover all of 2011, so we used the 2011 annual average CPI-U (224.939) as the starting point instead of a single month, since prices rose through the year and the choice of month would change the result by up to about 3%. We multiplied the 2011 figures by 1.4979, the ratio of the September 2026 CPI-U (336.940) to that average.

These costs were measured for 2011 only. Criminal justice spending, nearly half of taxpayer costs, was estimated from government spending data, and social support programs from a national estimate,[3] rather than measured for each youth. The costs are associated with youth homelessness, not shown to be caused by it. They were measured for youth who were already using a drop-in center, so they do not show what services save or what no services would cost. We report only annual estimates; the study also projected multi-year and lifetime totals, which rest on further assumptions. Costs may change over time: in a later study of 1,229 YouthLink youth, the share using public financial support programs (cash, food, family, and emergency assistance) fell from 57% in 2011 to 36% in 2016.[4]

LIMITATIONS

Limitations

No single data source captures every young person who struggles with housing, and each source used in this report has limits.

- **Different definitions and counts**. Point-in-Time counts capture a single night and likely undercount youth who move between temporary places. School counts use the broader McKinney-Vento definition, which includes staying with others. State and federal sources count homeless students differently, so their totals for the same year do not match. Community Shelter Board data include only youth served by the homeless response system.
- **Estimates rest on assumptions**. The updated estimate of literally homeless youth (4,398) assumes the 2017 count changed at the average rate of four local indicators. The housing-instability estimate (13,940) applies national survey rates from 2016–2017 to Franklin County's population. Both are approximate.
- **Survey data.** Survey estimates are subject to sampling error, and some changed methods over time. For example, the national depression survey added online administration in 2021. Only two Franklin County school districts took part in the 2024–2025 OHYES! survey, so those results may not reflect the county as a whole.
- **Youth voice.** Coalition partners identified the young people who took part, so participants were youth already connected to programs. Their accounts describe their own experiences and are not a representative sample.
- **Social return on investment.** Outcome rates come from two Coalition members, Star House and Huckleberry House. Financial values come from published research in other places and years. The cost of youth homelessness is based on a 2011 Minneapolis study, and those costs are associated with youth homelessness, not shown to be caused by it.

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