



Improving High School Outcomes for Runaway and Homeless Michigan Youth

A [top priority for Michigan voters](#) is addressing student learning loss related to the COVID crisis. One group of students who has faced additional barriers to high school success both prior to 2020 and since are youth experiencing homelessness. In 2021 Michigan's four-year high school graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness fell from 60% to 54%, a larger decrease than for any other student group. [Suspension or expulsion rates for these students are double the statewide average](#). Michigan's students at-risk of or experiencing homelessness deserve the critical attention and tools needed to succeed in school and graduate.

What Does Michigan Youth Homelessness Look Like?

In 2019, Michigan schools identified 36,000 students, or 3% of the K-12 population, as homeless. Despite great efforts from schools to identify student homelessness, barriers exist to identifying everyone who experiences homelessness throughout a year, including timing, reluctance to share information, and staff capacity.

The Youth Behavioral Risk Factor Survey (YBRF) polls Michigan high school students to learn what youth are going through. The findings collected are essential to understanding what our state's youth are experiencing, especially regarding their physical and mental health. It is anonymous, protecting identities and creating conditions where young people report things which they don't always feel comfortable sharing in-person with an adult. A University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Lab analysis of the latest available survey (2019) estimates that around 22,444 high school students alone experienced homelessness during that school year.

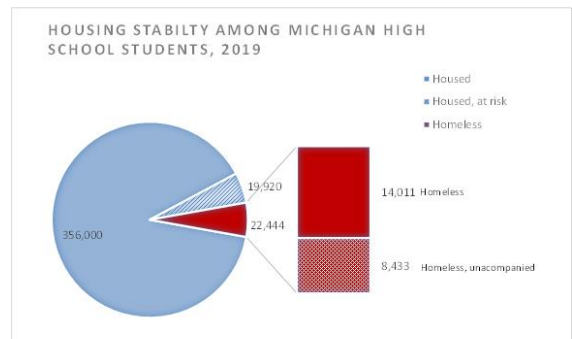


Figure 1, University of Michigan Poverty Solutions, 2022

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Youth homelessness affects Michigan's [rural, urban, and suburban areas](#). Just over half of YBRF homeless responses were "couch-surfing" at the home of friends or family. These arrangements show the power of social networks, but are often unstable, putting primary residents in violation of lease agreements or occupancy rules and creating difficult dynamics where youth risk losing their shelter if conflicts arise. One-fifth of youth surveyed stayed in a shelter or emergency housing program, and one-fifth lived in a car, park, camp, or other unanchored location. Some stayed in motels or hotels. Youth also "couch-surf" with strangers, which exposes them to the risk of human trafficking. Youth who identify as Black, Native American, Hispanic, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer report the highest unaccompanied homeless rates.

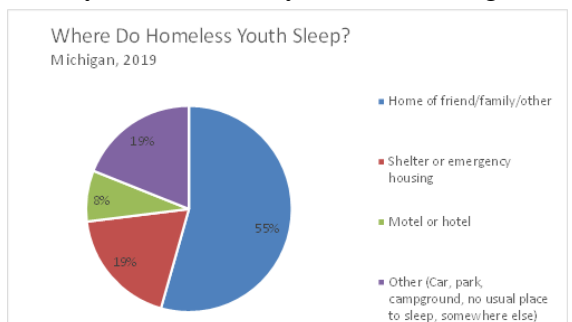


Figure 2, University of Michigan Poverty Solutions, 2022

Many youth experience homelessness along with their families, but youth risk unaccompanied homelessness especially during key periods of transition. Nearly [half](#) of youth involved with foster care or juvenile justice also experience homelessness soon after they transition out of those systems. Some youth, when they age out of foster care, do not opt in to transition services which help them find stable housing, either because they do not learn about it or because prior negative experiences leave no desire to extend involvement with the child welfare system. Some youth also run away from foster care or adoptive placements.

Older youth exiting juvenile justice have their own struggles. Sometimes they face landlord restrictions that make finding affordable, safe housing difficult. Others struggle with unaddressed household conflict which can contribute to periods of homelessness. Also, if a young person exits the juvenile justice system after age 18, and if their social support network has shrunk for any number of reasons, their legal adult status can create additional barriers to receiving dedicated federal housing aid.

Housing Instability Creates Barriers to Attendance and Graduation

Research and the testimony from youth with lived experience tell us that being homeless exposes young people to experiences that can be incredibly physically and emotionally damaging. The University of Michigan’s YRBF analysis shows that K-12 students who experience homelessness in Michigan consistently report higher rates of suicide, substance use, sexual violence, and early pregnancy.

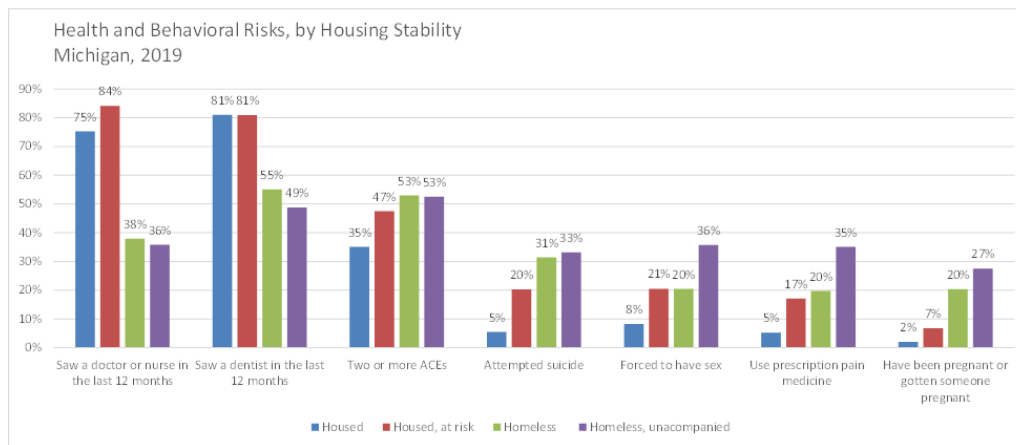


Figure 3, University of Michigan Poverty Solutions, 2022

Homelessness and related experiences create barriers to school attendance and graduation that can have long-ranging, negative consequences. Research tells us that repeated exposure to traumatic events (*see Figure 3*) causes a “fight or flight” reflex that builds up in youth. If this reflex tends towards “flight”, youth succumb to feelings of hopelessness and may simply stop attending school and instead pursue work and other activities that may appear to offer a quicker path to stability. In another form of “flight”, homeless students may still attend school despite these barriers but not engage in school to avoid feeling let-down. If homeless students attend school but have heightened responses to stressors that align more with “fight”, such outbursts might lead to school discipline and eventual recommendation for suspension or expulsion. Instability also literally disrupts education. Students who experience homelessness can bounce around schools or miss out on school for a period of time because they lose a means of

transportation. Moving from school to school could leave a learning disability undiagnosed, and could disrupt record transfers that contain information about a student's learning needs. Without the protection of a strong safety net, youth experiencing homelessness are also more likely to experience substance use disorder or early pregnancy, causing them to stop attending school. For young parents on their own, the demands of parenting a young child without child care or without help for post-partum disorders can be overwhelming.

Youth who experience homelessness deserve attention and time to overcome the obstacles they frequently endure. Chronic absence, school discipline, and dropout are preventable. We know that additional time helps; high school graduation rates rose from 57% after four years to 67% after six years for the 2018 cohort of students experiencing homelessness. We also know that taking steps to stabilize their housing, reuniting with family if possible, and prioritizing strong relationships and access to services both in-school and out-of-school are all essential to strengthening school engagement for homeless students. Above all, we must prevent youth homelessness from occurring in the first place. The impact of youth homelessness on our community's future gives our state an interest in prioritizing all of these strategies.

Recommendations

- **Expand and strengthen shelter and transitional living services for youth experiencing homelessness or who have run away from home.** Michigan's youth homelessness service providers connect youth with schools and key services, helping prevent one-third of those served from experiencing homelessness. Ninety-three percent of youth served leave to a safe housing situation. Despite this success, Michigan has lost six programs since 2010 due to nearly flat funding amidst increasing demands. As a result, greater numbers of Michigan programs have lost staff, forcing families and youth in crisis to travel several hours to reach a service provider. All this has reduced the ability of programs to serve more youth.
- **Expand K-12 supports and pathways for students experiencing homelessness** including school-based physical and mental health services, funding for transportation for homeless students, and McKinney-Vento liaisons. Pathways to partial credit recognition for homeless students, who experience high mobility, is also essential to improving graduation outcomes.
- **Prevent youth homelessness by creating housing stability for their families** including through shelter diversion, family unification vouchers, and eviction diversion. This will also reduce the number of child welfare cases which are often caused by or aggravated by inadequate housing and homelessness.
- **Invest in stronger youth transitions out of foster care and juvenile justice systems.** Michigan's leaders of task forces dedicated to improving juvenile justice and foster care outcomes must prioritize strong transitions out of each system.
- **Reduce out-of-home placements for youth involved with the juvenile justice system.** Strategies including diversion, in-home care programs, and further upstream interventions will shield young people from the destabilizing influence of out-of-home placement on their educational success while still ensuring that youth and their families get the help they need.