Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in Utah

Needs and Resources in the Mountainland and Balance of State Continuums of Care (CoCs)

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Executive Summary

Project Scope

In fall 2024, the Utah Department of Health and Human Services Office of Substance Use and Mental Health contracted with the University of Utah College of Social Work to conduct a needs assessment of youth and young adult homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State Continuums of Care (CoCs) across Utah. The Balance of State CoC covers 11 local homeless councils (Bear River, Carbon-Emery, Davis, Grand, Iron, San Juan, Six County, Tooele, Uintah Basin, Washington, Weber-Morgan), across 25 counties. The Mountainland CoC encompasses one local homeless council (Mountainland) across Summit, Utah, and Wasatch counties.

The primary purpose of this assessment was to evaluate the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in these CoCs and identify existing resources available to meet these needs. Findings from this assessment will inform future directions for resource and program development in these CoCs.

Our team conducted this needs assessment with the goal of answering the following research questions:

1. What are the primary needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs (related to housing, case management, mental health, substance use, social connection, etc.)?
2. What are the existing resources to meet the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs, and what are the gaps?

We conducted a sequential mixed methods needs assessment (beginning with analyzing available secondary data collected by the state, then conducting key informant interviews and focus groups/mapping workshops with youth and service providers) to achieve our objectives (Figure 1).

We used existing secondary data to:

1. Establish how many (counted) youth and young adults experience homelessness across each CoC; and
2. Identify rates and patterns of existing formal resource use (e.g., drop-in centers, shelters, resource centers).

We collected original data (with service providers, youth, and community partners) to:

1. Connect homelessness statistics and resource use rates to perceptions and realities of youth and young adult homelessness;
2. Identify formal and informal resources across each CoC;
3. Characterize experiences of youth and young adult homelessness in and beyond metro areas in Utah;
4. Identify key needs to address youth and young adult homelessness across each geographic area; and,
5. Understand youth and young adult experiences and desires related to participation and leadership in each CoC.

Table 1. Data Sources

Data Type	Data Sources
Secondary Data	Utah Homelessness Management Information System (UHMIS)
	Point in Time (PIT) Count
Key Informant Interviews (Virtual; 30-60 minutes each)	Interviews with key informants (e.g., service providers, CoC members, youth with lived experience) (N = 43; 34 Balance of State and 9 Mountainland). Topics included: 1) Important contextual factors shaping youth experiences in each geographic area; 2) Service landscape in each geographic area; and 3) Perspectives needed and individuals/groups to recruit for focus groups.
Focus Groups & Mapping Workshops (In Person; 2-hours each)	2-hour focus groups with N = 48 service providers and youth across Mountainland and Balance of State (1 Mountainland focus group and 5 Balance of State focus groups with n = 3-14 participants in each group). Topics included: 1) Perceptions of youth homelessness (shared statistics from secondary data & discussed); 2) Formal/Informal resources available to support youth; 3) Key needs to address youth homelessness; 4) Gaps in resources to support youth homelessness; 5) Resource access (e.g., travel time); 6) Youth participation and leadership in informing CoC activities; and 7) Spatially identified community assets and needs related to youth homelessness on local maps.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Summary of prevalence and patterns among youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- From 2015-2024, 15,995 total youth and young adults were found to have engaged with Utah Homelessness Management Information System (UHMIS) during the study period; 2,559 from the Mountainland CoC and 5,320 from the Balance of State CoC (the remainder are from Salt Lake CoC)
- Across the CoCs, most youth and young adults first entered the homeless services system through emergency shelter: 72.6% in the Mountainland CoC and 68% in the Balance of State CoC
- Overall, the data suggest that there are short stays for crisis services, moderate stays for prevention and service-based programs, and extended stays in long-term housing, though there are regional differences in program utilization and service durations.

Summary of key realities, resources, and needs facing youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- Rates of youth and young adult homelessness are likely underestimated and underreported due to (a) pervasive cultural stigma associated with identifying as homeless or lacking material resources, and (b) the hidden nature of homelessness (most homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs presents as couch surfing/doubling up and staying in vehicles and/or on public lands out of plain sight).
- Homelessness often co-occurs with, or follows, engagement in child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and is overrepresented among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+ (LGBTQ+) youth and young adults and those experiencing mental health and substance use related challenges. There is also a high rate of homelessness that follows exits from residential treatment programs.
- Rising housing costs are a key barrier to accessing affordable housing across the state, but especially in communities where

tourism is associated with large wealth gaps and extremely high housing costs.
- Existing formal programs such as teen centers, crisis supports, youth shelters—and informal supports like libraries, religious communities, and peers/friends/neighbors—are crucial in supporting youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.

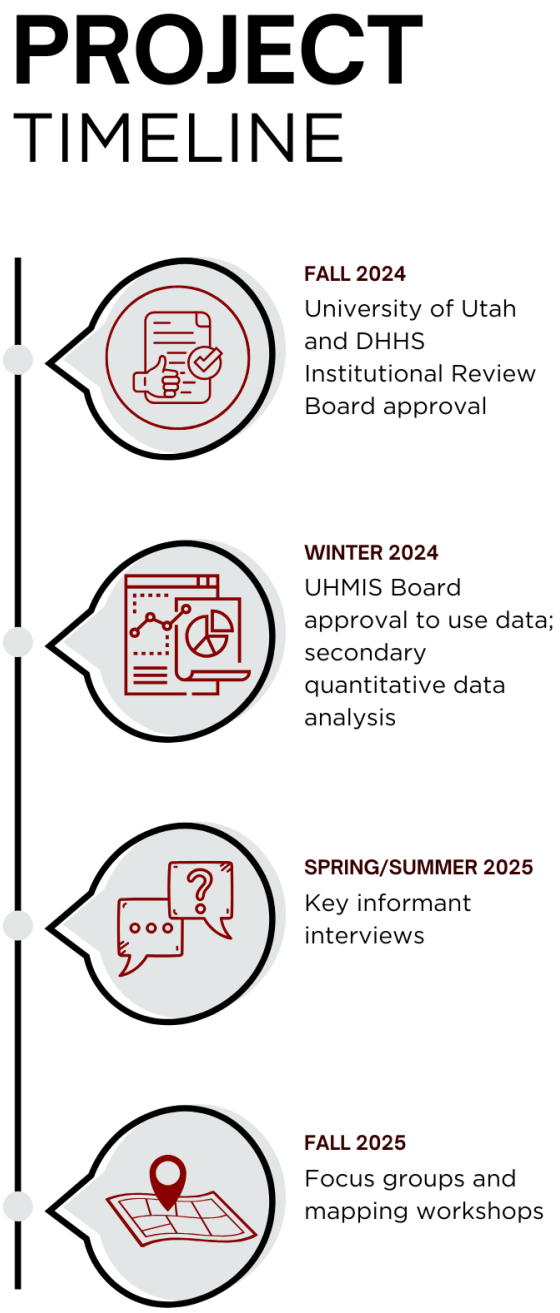
Summary of key recommendations for supporting youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

For all community members
- Recognize that rural and suburban homelessness among youth and young adults across Utah does exist
- Reduce stigma around homelessness

For youth and young adult serving programs
- Support youth in transition from child welfare, juvenile justice, and residential treatment programs as homelessness prevention
- Continue to increase local program coordination
- Expand transitional living programs for young adults
- Include youth and young adults in decision-making

For policymakers
- Sustainably fund teen centers
- Fund transitional living programs for young adults
- Collect state-level data metrics that represent on-the-ground experiences

Figure 1. Project Timeline



Introduction to Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in Utah

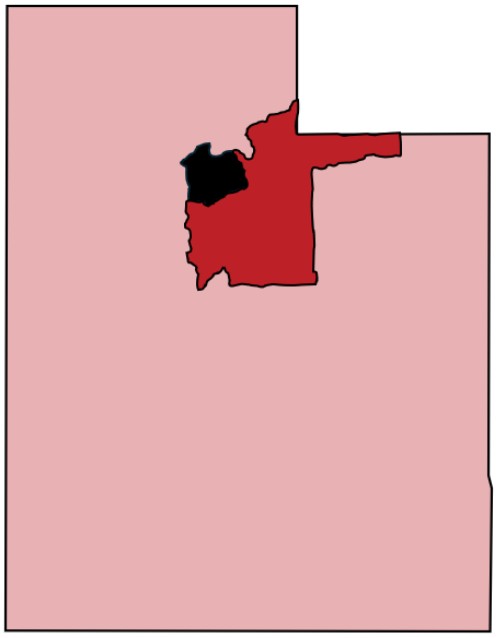
Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to evaluate the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in Utah's Mountainland and Balance of State Continuums of Care (CoCs), as well as to identify existing resources available to meet these needs. In early 2024, the Corporation for Supportive Housing was contracted to conduct a Youth Housing Needs Report for the Salt Lake County CoC,[1] finding that the Salt Lake Valley has an urgent need to add housing units and multi-sector supports for local youth. However, this report did not include data from the two other CoCs in Utah—Mountainland and Balance of State—which comprise the remainder of the state.

Utah has three CoCs: Salt Lake County, Mountainland, and the Balance of State (Figure 2). The Salt Lake County CoC consists solely of Salt Lake County. The Mountainland CoC consists of three counties: Summit, Utah, Wasatch. The Balance of State CoC consists of the remaining 25 counties in Utah, divided into 11 homeless councils: Bear River, Carbon-Emery, Davis County, Grand County, Iron County, San Juan County, Six County, Tooele County, Uintah Basin, Washington County, and Weber-Morgan.

Youth and young adults across Utah are actively experiencing homelessness and housing instability—and young people who live in rural and suburban areas outside the Salt Lake Valley metropolitan area are likely to have different needs and realities. Thus, this project addresses a critical need to understand the opportunities and challenges related to youth and young adult housing, mental health, and substance use across the state of Utah, particularly outside of the Salt Lake County CoC.

Figure 2. Utah's Continuums of Care



Note: Salt Lake County CoC (black), Mountainland CoC (dark red), and Balance of State CoC (light red)

Intended Purposes and Audiences for this Report

The key purposes of this report are to (a) highlight the key resources and needs related to youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs, and to (b) offer key recommendations for programs and funding based on key findings.

This report is presented in three phases. In Phase 1, we describe our quantitative secondary data analysis and findings from the Utah Homelessness Management Information System and Point-in-Time Count data. Recognizing the need for mixed-methods data collection and interpretation, Phases 2 and

3 describe the data collection, analysis, and findings from our key informant interviews and focus groups, respectively. Finally, we provide a summary of high-priority recommendations for policy and practice.

The intended audiences of this report are youth and young adult homelessness service providers, community organizations and local governments, local and state elected officials, and youth and young adults themselves—who may find these recommendations helpful for program delivery and advocacy. While these findings are most applicable to the Utah context, there is limited research on rural and suburban youth experiences of homelessness across the nation.

We hope this report paves the way for future nationwide research on the realities of non-urban youth and young adults navigating complex systems, often with little support.

Defining Youth and Young Adult Homelessness

At the federal level, there is currently no single definition of homelessness (Table 2). Key federal entities, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), McKinney-Vento, and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, define youth and young adult homelessness as follows:

Table 2. Federal Definitions of Youth and Young Adult Homelessness

Federal Source	Definition
HUD Categories of Homelessness *Source: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2025 https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/coc-esg-virtual-binders/coc-esg-homeless-eligibility/four-categories/*	**Category 1 Literally Homeless:** Individuals and families who live in a place not meant for human habitation (including the streets or in their car), emergency shelter, transitional housing, and hotels paid for by a government or charitable organization **Category 2 Imminent Risk of Homelessness:** Individuals or families who will lose their primary nighttime residence within 14 days and have no other resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing. **Category 3 Homeless Under Other Statutes:** Unaccompanied youth under 25 years of age, or families with children and youth, who do not meet any of the other categories but are homeless under other federal statues, have not had a lease and have moved 2 or more times in the past 60 days and are likely to remain unstable because of special needs or barriers. **Category 4 Fleeing Domestic Violence:** Individuals or families who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking and who lack resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing.
McKinney-Vento *Source: Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/*	The term "homeless children and youths" a) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and b) includes i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals, ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings, and iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in the clauses.
Runaway and Homeless Youth Act *Source: https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/homelessness_definition.pdf*	Youth for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative, and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement. Youth living in unsheltered locations, emergency shelters and transitional housing, motels and hotels, staying with others "doubled up." Youth at risk of separation from the family – who is less than 18 years of age and who has a history of running away from the family, whose parent, guardian, or custodian is not willing to provide for the basic needs, who is at risk of entering the child welfare system or juvenile justice system as a result of the lack of services available to the family to meet such needs.

For the purposes of this report, we are using the following definition of youth/young adults experiencing homelessness:

Youth experiencing homelessness include individuals aged 17 and younger who are not accompanied by a family member aged 25+, and who reside in an unsheltered location (on the streets, in a vehicle, an abandoned building, a temporary shelter, or transitional housing program serving people experiencing homelessness) OR stay in a doubled up situation (also referred to as "couch surfing") where they must leave within 14 days and have no subsequent place to live or resources to obtain another place.

Young adults experiencing homelessness include individuals aged 18-24 who are not accompanied by a family member aged 25+, and who reside in an unsheltered location (on the streets, in a vehicle, an abandoned building, a temporary shelter, or transitional housing program serving people experiencing homelessness) OR stay in a doubled up situation (also referred to as "couch surfing") where they must leave within 14 days and have no subsequent place to live or resources to obtain another place.

Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness

In the United States

Across the United States, youth and young adults experiencing homelessness navigate multiple and complex stressors to their physical, behavioral, and psychosocial health. Prior to becoming homeless, many young people have encountered family abuse and neglect and are likely to have lived with an adult caregiver who faces mental illness and/or substance misuse; these factors have often made leaving home the best or only perceived option for young people.[2,3] In comparison to their stably housed peers, youth and young adults who experience homelessness have higher rates of mental health challenges, including depression and mood disorders,[4] are more likely to contemplate and attempt suicide than general youth population,[5] and are more likely to use substances to cope with the stressors associated with homelessness.[6] Youth and young adults experiencing homelessness often lack familial or financial resources to attain independence; therefore, they struggle to navigate the transition from dependent to independent living and may continue to experience homelessness as adults if they do not receive supportive intervention.[7]

In Utah

There has been a 34% increase in students (kindergarten through 12th grade) experiencing homelessness since 2020 in Utah. More than 15,000 students statewide are reported to lack a regular, fixed nighttime residence.[8] These statistics are likely an undercount including those who are disengaged from educational systems or feel uncomfortable reporting their housing status to formal systems. As Utah continues to grow, cost of living is a stressor for all—but those aged 18-24 experience the highest poverty rate in the state.[9] In one effort to combat these concerning statistics, during the Legislature's 2023 General Session, The Policy Project was successful in securing $15 million in state funding and $2.7 million in private funding to create and expand teen centers in schools across Utah. According to The Policy Project, by the end of 2025 a total of 72 local education agencies in Utah received grant funding to build a teen center, and 86 schools had one open serving an estimated 87,200 students each year.[8] This funding marks a significant investment in resources for youth and young adults across Utah—and serves as an important backdrop for the present study.

Geographic and Demographic Overview of Utah

Despite its large geographic size (~85,000 square miles) and vast rural spaces, Utah is a highly urbanized state, with nearly 90% of its population living in urban areas, primarily concentrated along the Wasatch Front. With a population of nearly 3.5 million people, Utah's Wasatch Front, roughly from Ogden to Provo, is home to more than two-thirds of the state's population (2.6 million people), with more than one-third (1.2 million) of the state's population living in Salt Lake County.[10] For these reasons, the state's capital city and surrounding urban areas are a reasonable location for the concentration of a variety of services. This urbanization leads to approximately 900,000 Utahns living outside of the Wasatch Front, across a massive geographic space (~81,000 square miles). Other notable population centers outside of the Wasatch Front include St. George (approximately 99,000 people), Logan (54,000), Cedar City (37,000), Tooele (37,000), Washington (31,000), Hurricane (22,000), Brigham City (20,000), Heber City (17,000), Smithfield (14,000), Grantsville (14,000), Tremonton (11,000), Vernal (10,000), Park City (8,000), Richfield (8,000), Price (8,000), Enoch (8,000), Nephi (7,000), Ephraim (6,000), Kanab (5,000), and Moab (5,000).[11] Many of these cities and towns are remote but also serve as hubs for the services that are available across wide geographic expanses; many Utah residents are many miles and hours away from services. Understanding the needs of people living outside of the Wasatch Front remains a core research and service provision necessity.

Services for youth and young adults experiencing or at risk for homelessness are concentrated in Salt Lake County, including the Youth Resource Center operated by Volunteers of America, Utah. Low population density outside of the Wasatch Front means that service provision in rural communities is often limited, inconsistent, or nonexistent. Services for youth in rural areas may include assistance with housing, nutrition, education, mental and physical health care, social support, and others. Service provision may be less formalized and delivered by community members serving in multiple roles; for instance, neighbors, educators, religious members, healthcare providers, and others may be primary providers of services in rural communities. In such cases, individual and community relationships are paramount and often serve as a primary form of service connection. These communities may also have transportation challenges, with limited or nonexistent public transit available to support individuals who do not have personal transportation options.

Utah's demographics reflect a population that is predominantly White, relatively young, and strongly influenced by religious affiliation. In 2024, it was estimated that Utah's racial/ethnic composition was approximately 70% White, 20% Hispanic, 2.6% Asian, 1.4% Black or African American, 1.3% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian.[12] Utah has the highest percentage of its population younger than age 18 in the US, at 27.5%.[13] Religiously, approximately 63% of the Utah population identifies as Christian, with 50% of Utahns identifying as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. There are a variety of additional religions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) represented in smaller percentages, while 34% of Utah adults identify as religiously unaffiliated.[14]

Key Terms

Continuum of Care (CoC):
The CoC Program, currently funded and operated by HUD, is designed to promote community-wide planning and coordination of homeless services at a local level. Grantees range from nonprofit organizations to local and state governments. CoC eligible projects include permanent housing, transitional housing, supportive services, Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS), and homelessness prevention.[15]

Emergency Shelters:
Temporary shelters for youth and young adults (age ranges shelter dependent) which provide safe space to sleep, shower, eat, receive case management, and access essential supplies (clothing, hygiene) for a limited period (exact length of stay shelter-dependent).

McKinney-Vento:
The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law which designates educational rights and services to students PreK-12 experiencing homelessness. Every U.S. state educational agency designates an Office of State Coordinator to carry out the duties in the Act, and every local education agency designates a liaison for students experiencing homelessness. Key rights of students under McKinney-Vento include the right to remain in their school of origin and the right to enroll in school, even if documentation is missing or enrollment has passed.[16] While all public schools are required to comply with the Act, not all districts receive funding—meaning that many school administrators and staff must work to support students in non-funded capacities and in addition to their full-time roles.

Teen Centers:
Dedicated spaces within schools to help students meet basic needs. Each teen center is tailored to the local community, but often includes food pantries, clothing, laundry and shower facilities, and referrals to community resources.

Rapid Rehousing:
Helping people move quickly from homelessness into housing stability, often including financial assistance and case management resources.

Residential Treatment Programs:
Inpatient programs or facilities that provides a 24-hour group living environment to support mental and behavioral health needs.

Transitional Living Programs:
Programs which provide housing for young adults exiting youth shelter settings to work towards independent living by paying partial rent and receiving supportive case management.

Phase 1: Secondary Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

While identifying how many youth and young adults experience homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs in Utah is difficult to answer, there are two quantitative data sources that help estimate experiences of homelessness: (1) the Utah Homeless Management Information System (UHMIS), which records all engagements with homelessness service providers in Utah in a coordinated electronic records system; and (2) the Point-in-Time (PIT) Count, which physically counts individuals experiencing homelessness across Utah one night per year as a part of a national effort coordinated by HUD and deployed in local communities. We utilized both datasets to understand current rates and trends related to youth and young adult homelessness.

Secondary Quantitative Data Collection Methods

Secondary data were collected from UHMIS covering the period from January 2015 through July 2024. This dataset includes all unique first-time engagements for youth and young adults aged 13–25 (who identified as 'head of household') recorded during this period, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of demographic characteristics, historical-system engagement and involvement, service-entry patterns, and subsequent outcomes.

Quantitative Findings

Across the three CoCs, 15,995 youth were found to have engaged with UHMIS from 2015-2024: 8,116 from the Salt Lake County CoC, 2,559 from the Mountainland CoC, and 5,320 from the Utah Balance of State CoC (Table 3). Demographic characteristics and differences between the three CoCs that were identified include:

- Youth in the Mountainland CoC were the youngest (average age 17.6 years), compared to youth and young adults in the Salt Lake County CoC (average age 20.8) and Balance of State CoC (average age 20.0).
- Similar proportions of male, female, and gender diverse youth and young adults were found across the three CoCs; in all three, most identified as a man (range 53.9% to 49.4%), followed by identification as a woman (range 47.6% to 42.9%); few identified as gender-diverse (range 3.2% to 2.7%).
- Transgender representation among youth and young adults was found to be consistently low, with 1.2%, 1.1%, and 1.4% of youth and young adults identifying as transgender in the Salt Lake County, Mountainland, and Balance of State CoCs, respectively.
- Youth and young adults in the Salt Lake County CoC were more racially diverse (48.1% White), compared to youth in the Mountainland (66.0% identified as White) and the Balance of State (60.0% identified as White) CoCs. The Salt Lake County CoC had the highest proportion of youth and young adults who identified as Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color (BIPOC) (19.7%) and combined BIPOC + Hispanic/Latino (4.1%) compared to the other CoCs.
- Youth in the Mountainland CoC were most likely to report a disabling condition (41.0%), compared to youth in the Salt Lake County (36.4%) or Balance of State (27.7%) CoCs.

Table 3. Demographics at First Engagement with UHMIS

	Balance of State CoC	Mountainland CoC	Salt Lake County CoC	Total
	(N = 5320)	(N = 2559)	(N = 8116)	(N = 15995)
Age				
Mean (SD)	20.0 (3.36)	17.6 (3.48)	20.8 (2.97)	20.0 (3.38)
Median [Min, Max]	20.0 [13.0, 25.0]	16.0 [13.0, 25.0]	21.0 [13.0, 25.0]	20.0 [13.0, 25.0]
Gender				
Gender Diverse	145 (2.7%)	73 (2.9%)	259 (3.2%)	477 (3.0%)
Man	2715 (51.0%)	1265 (49.4%)	4378 (53.9%)	8358 (52.3%)
Woman	2460 (46.2%)	1219 (47.6%)	3478 (42.9%)	7157 (44.7%)
Unknown	0 (0%)	2 (0.1%)	1 (0.0%)	3 (0.0%)
Transgender				
No	5244 (98.6%)	2531 (98.9%)	8016 (98.8%)	15791 (98.7%)
Yes	76 (1.4%)	28 (1.1%)	100 (1.2%)	204 (1.3%)
Race/Ethnicity				
BIPOC	773 (14.5%)	295 (11.5%)	1600 (19.7%)	2668 (16.7%)
BIPOC and Hispanic/Latino(a/e/o)	146 (2.7%)	65 (2.5%)	331 (4.1%)	542 (3.4%)
White	3196 (60.1%)	1690 (66.0%)	3906 (48.1%)	8792 (55.0%)
White and Hispanic/Latino(a/e/o)	991 (18.6%)	410 (16.0%)	1763 (21.7%)	3164 (19.8%)
Unknown	214 (4.0%)	99 (3.9%)	516 (6.4%)	829 (5.2%)
Disabling Condition				
No	3363 (63.2%)	1218 (47.6%)	4574 (56.4%)	9155 (57.2%)
Yes	1475 (27.7%)	1048 (41.0%)	2951 (36.4%)	5474 (34.2%)
Missing	482 (9.1%)	293 (11.4%)	591 (7.3%)	1366 (8.5%)
SexualOrientation				
Bisexual	173 (6.8%)	123 (1.5%)	223 (4.2%)	519 (3.2%)
Gay	16 (0.6%)	26 (0.3%)	16 (0.3%)	58 (0.4%)
Heterosexual	1313 (51.3%)	730 (9.0%)	1043 (19.6%)	3086 (19.3%)
Lesbian	27 (1.1%)	17 (0.2%)	34 (0.6%)	78 (0.5%)
Other	23 (0.9%)	24 (0.3%)	26 (0.5%)	73 (0.5%)
Questioning / unsure	65 (2.5%)	40 (0.5%)	39 (0.7%)	144 (0.9%)
Client doesn't know	1 (0.0%)	91 (1.1%)	12 (0.2%)	104 (0.7%)
Client prefers not to answer	14 (0.5%)	33 (0.4%)	26 (0.5%)	73 (0.5%)
Data not collected	5 (0.2%)	70 (0.9%)	151 (2.8%)	226 (1.4%)
Missing	922 (36.0%)	6962 (85.8%)	3750 (70.5%)	11634 (72.7%)

Among the 15,995 youth and young adults in the UHMIS dataset from 2015-2024, a substantial portion of historical-system involvement and risk-factor data are missing (Table 4); 85.3-91.9% of data are missing for youth in Salt Lake County, 37.8-40.3% are missing in Mountainland, and 69.6-77.1% of these data are missing from the Balance of State CoC. Missing data for several variables is expected as many programs are not systematically required to collect these data based on their funding requirements. Based on the available data, we estimated demographic trends among youth and young adults in the UHMIS system, and identified that:

- Youth and young adults in the Mountainland CoC were more likely to be former wards of child welfare (8.8%) compared to youth in the Salt Lake County (2.4%) and Balance of State (5.2%) CoCs.
- Youth and young adults in the Balance of State CoC were more likely to be former wards of juvenile justice (5.8%), which was higher than the Salt Lake County (1.1%) and Mountainland (0.8%) CoC.
- Youth and young adults from the Mountainland CoC reported higher rates of family mental health disorders (14.3%) and family alcohol/drug use disorders (9.6%) than either the Salt Lake County (2.6% and 2.5%, respectively) or Balance of State (6.1% and 4.6%, respectively) CoCs.
- Youth and young adults from the Mountainland CoC were more likely to report having an incarcerated parent (2.2%) than the Salt Lake County (0.7%) or Balance of State CoCs (1.75%).
- Youth and young adults from the Mountainland CoC were more likely to exchange money for sex as a survival strategy (1.8%), compared to youth in the Salt Lake County (0.2%) or Balance of State (0.7%) CoCs.

The UHMIS data were analyzed to examine how youth and young adults engage with homeless services (Table 5). Individuals may engage with homeless services through permanent housing (e.g., permanent supportive housing [PSH], rapid rehousing [RRH]), emergency shelter, day shelters, homeless prevention activities (which include providing short- and medium-term rental assistance and supportive services, and service-only (which includes outreach and other supportive services, including referrals to housing and essential resources, without providing direct housing assistance.[17,18] Data suggest that:

- Across the three CoCs, most youth and young adults were found to first enter the homeless services system through emergency shelter (55.5% overall); 44.6% in the Salt Lake County CoC, 72.6% in the Mountainland CoC, and 68% in the Balance of State CoC.
- Almost a quarter of youth and young adults in the Salt Lake County CoC (33.1%) were found to enter the homeless service system through day shelter programs. Day shelter programs are unavailable in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs.
- Homelessness prevention is another common entry point for youth and young adults into the homeless services system (11.4% overall), with the Balance of State CoC showing a higher rate (18.3%) compared to the Mountainland (9.7%) and Salt Lake County (7.5 %) CoCs. Service-only enrollments served as a more frequent entry point into homeless services for youth and young adults in the Mountainland CoC (15.6%), compared to youth in the Salt Lake County (2.8%) and Balance of State (10.6%) CoCs.
- All forms of permanent housing were found to represent only a small proportion of first engagement for youth and young adults, accounting for less than 4%.

Table 4. Family History at First Engagement with UHMIS

	Balance of State CoC	Mountainland CoC	Salt Lake County CoC	Total
	(N = 5,320)	(N = 2,559)	(N = 8,116)	(N = 15,995)
Former Ward Child Welfare				
No	1333 (25.1%)	1327 (51.9%)	834 (10.3%)	3494 (21.8%)
Yes	279 (5.2%)	224 (8.8%)	191 (2.4%)	694 (4.3%)
Missing	3708 (69.7%)	1008 (39.4%)	7091 (87.4%)	11807 (73.8%)
Former Ward Juvenile Justice				
No	1309 (24.6%)	1506 (58.9%)	938 (11.6%)	3753 (23.5%)
Yes	308 (5.8%)	21 (0.8%)	91 (1.1%)	420 (2.6%)
Missing	3703 (69.6%)	1032 (40.3%)	7087 (87.3%)	11822 (73.9%)
Mental Health Disorder Family				
No	1256 (23.6%)	1174 (45.9%)	976 (12.0%)	3406 (21.3%)
Yes	327 (6.1%)	367 (14.3%)	214 (2.6%)	908 (5.7%)
Missing	3737 (70.2%)	1018 (39.8%)	6926 (85.3%)	11681 (73.0%)
Alcohol Drug Use Disorder Family				
No	1340 (25.2%)	1301 (50.8%)	990 (12.2%)	3631 (22.7%)
Yes	243 (4.6%)	246 (9.6%)	200 (2.5%)	689 (4.3%)
Missing	3737 (70.2%)	1012 (39.5%)	6926 (85.3%)	11675 (73.0%)
Incarcerated Parent				
No	1491 (28.0%)	1477 (57.7%)	1132 (13.9%)	4100 (25.6%)
Yes	92 (1.7%)	57 (2.2%)	58 (0.7%)	207 (1.3%)
Missing	3737 (70.2%)	1025 (40.1%)	6926 (85.3%)	11688 (73.1%)
Exchange For Sex				
No	1183 (22.2%)	1545 (60.4%)	642 (7.9%)	3370 (21.1%)
Yes	36 (0.7%)	46 (1.8%)	18 (0.2%)	100 (0.6%)
Missing	4101 (77.1%)	968 (37.8%)	7456 (91.9%)	12525 (78.3%)

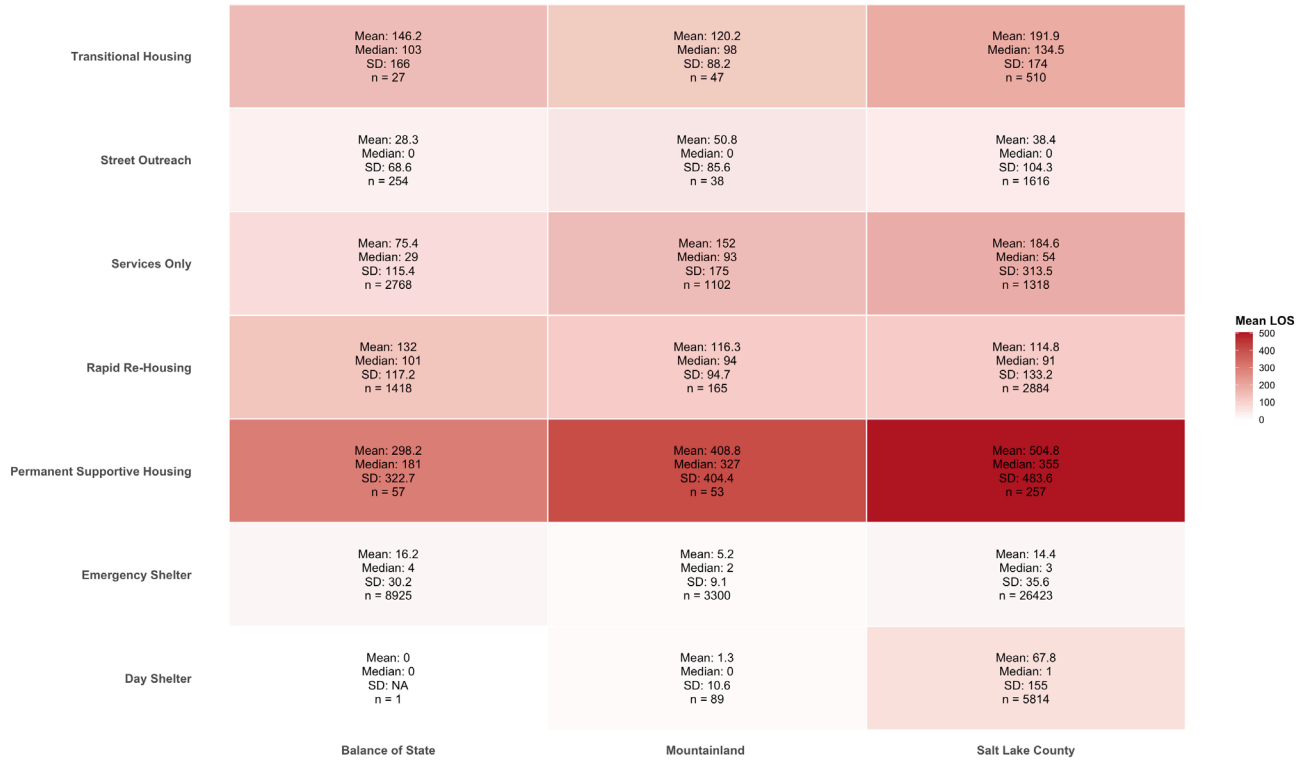
Table 5. First Service Engagement with UHMIS

	Balance of State CoC	Mountainland CoC	Salt Lake County CoC	Total
	(N=4986)	(N=2419)	(N=7608)	(N=15013)
Emergency Shelter	3189 (64.0%)	1755 (72.6%)	3390 (44.6%)	8334 (55.5%)
Homelessness Prevention	913 (18.3%)	234 (9.7%)	570 (7.5%)	1717 (11.4%)
Permanent Supportive Housing	23 (0.5%)	12 (0.5%)	8 (0.1%)	43 (0.3%)
Rapid Re-Housing	249 (5.0%)	24 (1.0%)	185 (2.4%)	458 (3.1%)
Services Only	528 (10.6%)	377 (15.6%)	216 (2.8%)	1121 (7.5%)
Street Outreach	74 (1.5%)	17 (0.7%)	401 (5.3%)	492 (3.3%)
Day Shelter	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2522 (33.1%)	2522 (16.8%)
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	103 (1.4%)	103 (0.7%)
Transitional Housing	10 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	213 (2.8%)	223 (1.5%)

Using UHMIS data, we examined differences in youth and young adult engagement across intervention and project types (e.g., emergency shelter, street outreach, services only, RRH, PSH) across Utah's three Continuums of Care (CoCs; Figure 3). Across all CoCs, we observed substantial variation in both the duration and distribution of engagement, as well as large differences in the volume of youth served, reflecting variation in program availability, program goals, and housing intensity.

- Short-term crisis services were associated with the briefest engagement and the largest service volumes.
- Emergency shelter stays averaged 5.2 days in Mountainland CoC (n = 3,300), 14.4 days in Salt Lake County CoC (n = 26,423), and 16.2 days in the Utah Balance of State CoC (n = 8,925), with medians ranging from 2 to 4 days.Street outreach engagement was similarly brief, averaging 50.8 days in Mountainland CoC (n = 38), 38.4 days in Salt Lake County CoC (n = 1,616), and 28.3 days in the Balance of State CoC (n = 254), with medians of 0 days across all CoCs, indicating that many outreach contacts did not translate into sustained engagement.
- Day shelter engagement was uneven across regions and largely concentrated in Salt Lake County. Average stays were 1.3 days in Mountainland (n = 89) and 67.8 days in Salt Lake County CoC (n = 5,814), while day shelter services were not available in the Utah Balance of State CoC, as reflected by the absence of estimates in that region.
- Services-only projects averaged 152 days in Mountainland CoC (n = 1,102), 184.6 days in Salt Lake County CoC (n = 1,318), and 75.4 days in the Balance of

Figure 3. Average Length of Youth and Youth Adult Stays in Each Project

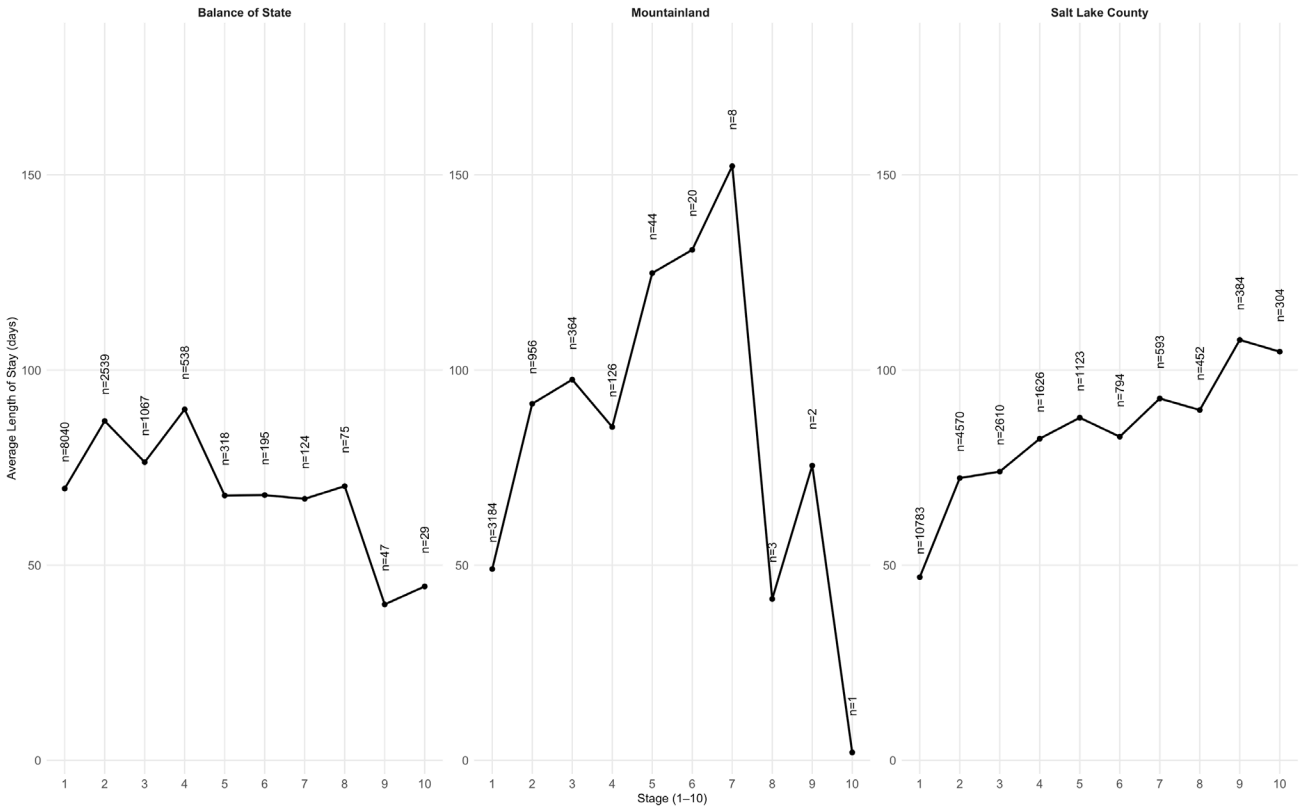


State CoC (n = 2,768), with wide standard deviations, indicating heterogeneous service trajectories.

- Transitional housing engagement fell between short-term crisis services and permanent housing interventions, with average stays of 120.2 days in the Mountainland CoC (n = 47), 191.9 days in the Salt Lake County CoC (n = 510), and 146.2 days in the Utah Balance of State CoC (n = 27). These patterns suggest that transitional housing serves as a medium-term intervention, with longer engagement in regions where capacity and program availability are greater.
- Housing-focused interventions were associated with longer and more sustained engagement. RRH stays averaged 116.3 days in Mountainland CoC (n = 165), 114.8 days in Salt Lake County CoC (n = 2,884), and 132.0 days in the Balance of State CoC (n = 1,418), with medians near 90–100 days. The longest lengths of stay were observed among youth and young adults enrolled in PSH. Average PSH engagement was 408.8 days in Mountainland CoC (n = 53), 504.8 days in Salt Lake County CoC (n = 257), and 298.2 days in the Balance of State CoC (n = 57), with large standard deviations indicating substantial variability in housing tenure even within PSH.

Using UHMIS data, we also examined shelter system exit and re-entry outcomes (Figure 4). Across all three CoCs, youth and young adults were found to experience an increased average length of stay with each subsequent emergency shelter episode, beginning with relatively short first stays (often 40-60 days) and increasing to 100-150 days by the 7th-9th episode.

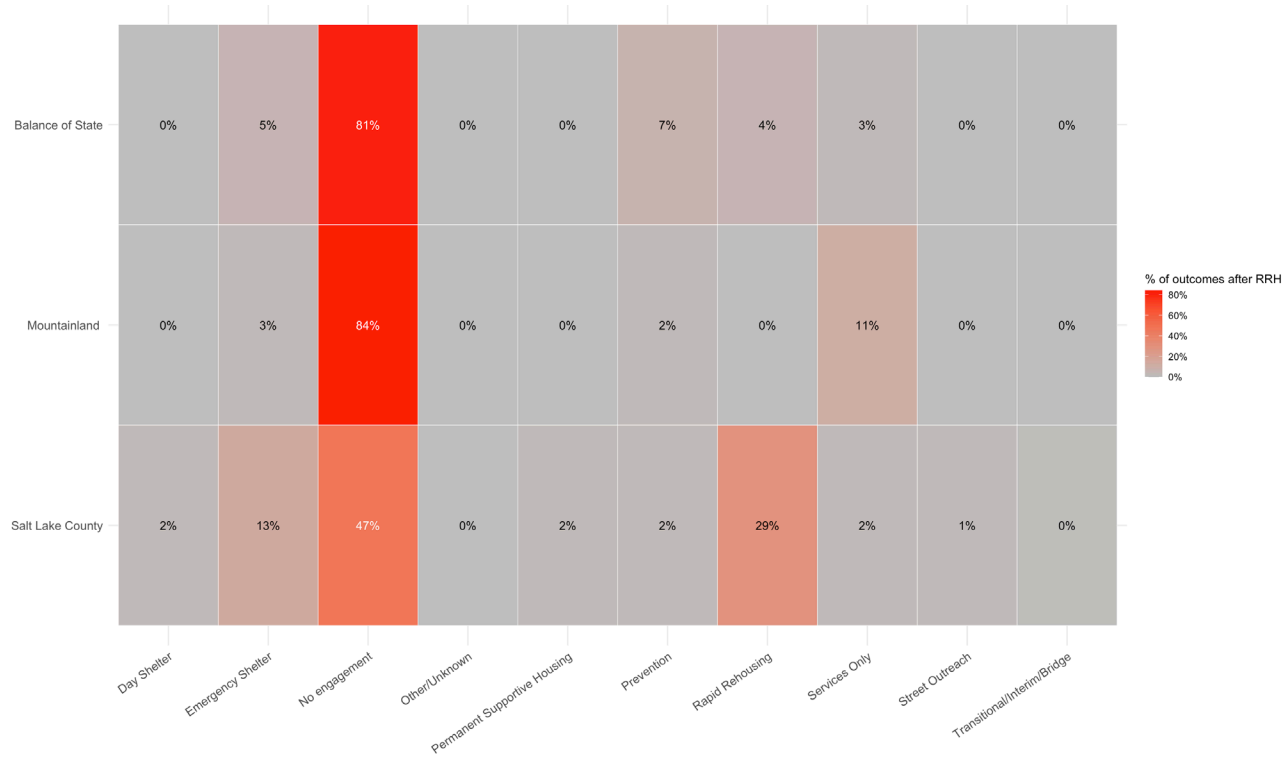
Figure 4. Reengaging Youth and Young Adults in the Shelter System



To assess first system contact outcomes, we analyzed how youth and young adults move through or disengage from homelessness services after initial engagement across different service types. To examine the first outcome (i.e., first system contact) after engaging in UHMIS systems (available in the UHMIS data) for youth and young adults following initial engagement with distinct homeless service types (RRH, for which enrollment is limited to individuals aged 18 and older**,** street outreach, and emergency shelter) we examined how youth move through (or disengage from) the homelessness service system after first contact and initial engagements, and how these trajectories vary across the three CoCs. Following an exit from RRH (Figure 5), we found:

- Across all three CoCs, most young adults exiting RRH do not re-engage with the homeless service system afterward at all. This finding is most pronounced in the Mountainland CoC (84%), but is also significant in the Balance of State CoC (81%) and less so in the Salt Lake County CoC (47%).
- Among young adults who do return to service engagement after exiting RRH, those in the Salt Lake County CoC are most likely to re-engage with RRH (29%), while 13% return to emergency shelter.
- In the Balance of State CoC, only small proportions of young adults return to emergency shelter (5%) or homelessness prevention (7%).
- In the Mountainland CoC, only small

Figure 5. First Outcome After Exiting from Rapid Rehousing Systems

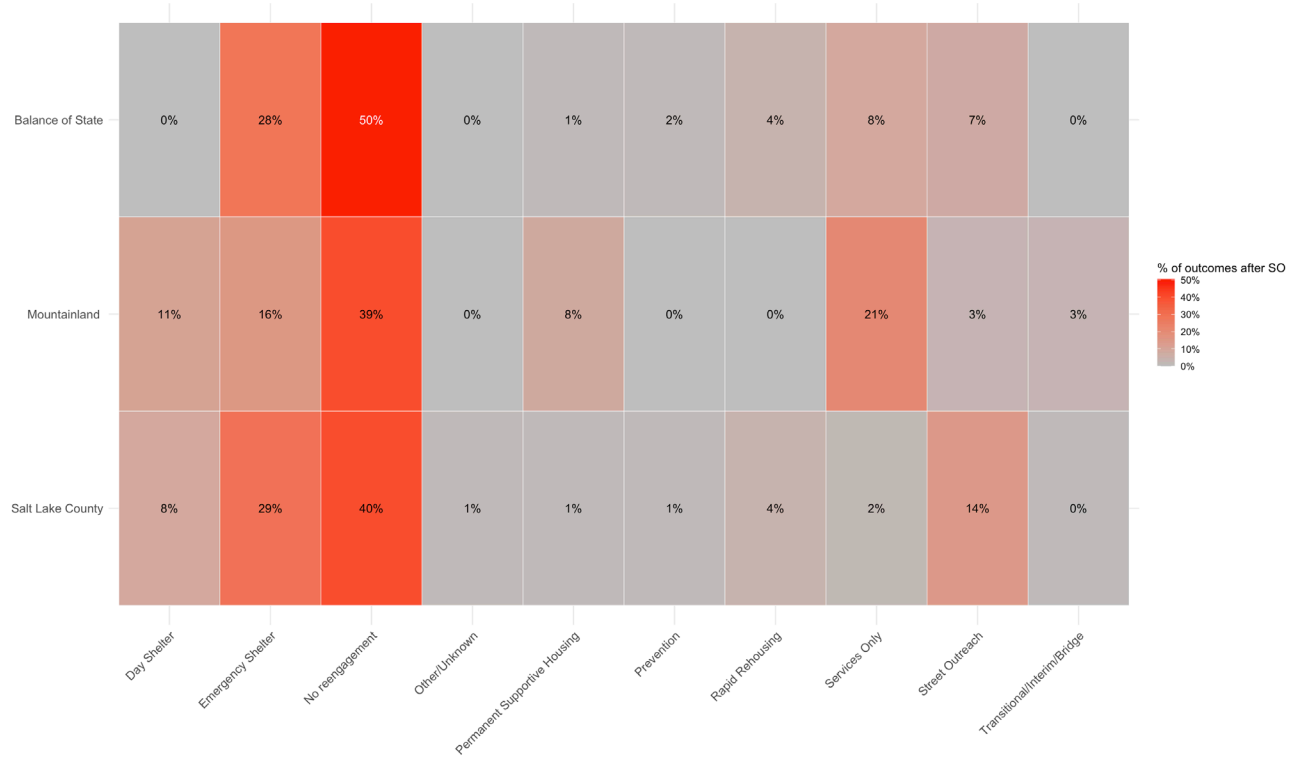


proportions of young adults return to services-only (11%), emergency shelter (3%), or homelessness prevention (2%).
- Transitions into PSH or other long-term housing programs are extremely rare across all CoCs (0-2%).
- Overall, the data suggest that most RRH exits do not immediately lead to further system involvement, though youth and young adults in the Salt Lake County CoC have a higher rate of cycling back into RRH or emergency shelter compared to youth and young adults in the other CoCs.

Based on analysis of the UHMIS data, results of the first system contact for youth and young adults following engagement with street outreach (Figure 6) indicate substantial regional variation in post-outreach trajectories:

- No further engagement with the homeless service system was the most common outcome across all three CoCs, though rates varied considerably by region. The Balance of State CoC exhibited the highest rate of non-engagement following street outreach (50% of episodes), followed by Salt Lake County (40%), while Mountainland showed the lowest rate of non-engagement (39%).
- Among youth and young adults who did re-engage with services, emergency shelter was the most frequent first follow-up service in both the Balance of State (28%) and Salt Lake County (29%) CoCs, suggesting that street outreach frequently connects youth directly to immediate crisis services in these regions.
- In contrast, the Mountainland CoC demonstrated a distinct post-outreach

Figure 6. First Outcome After Engaging in Street Outreach



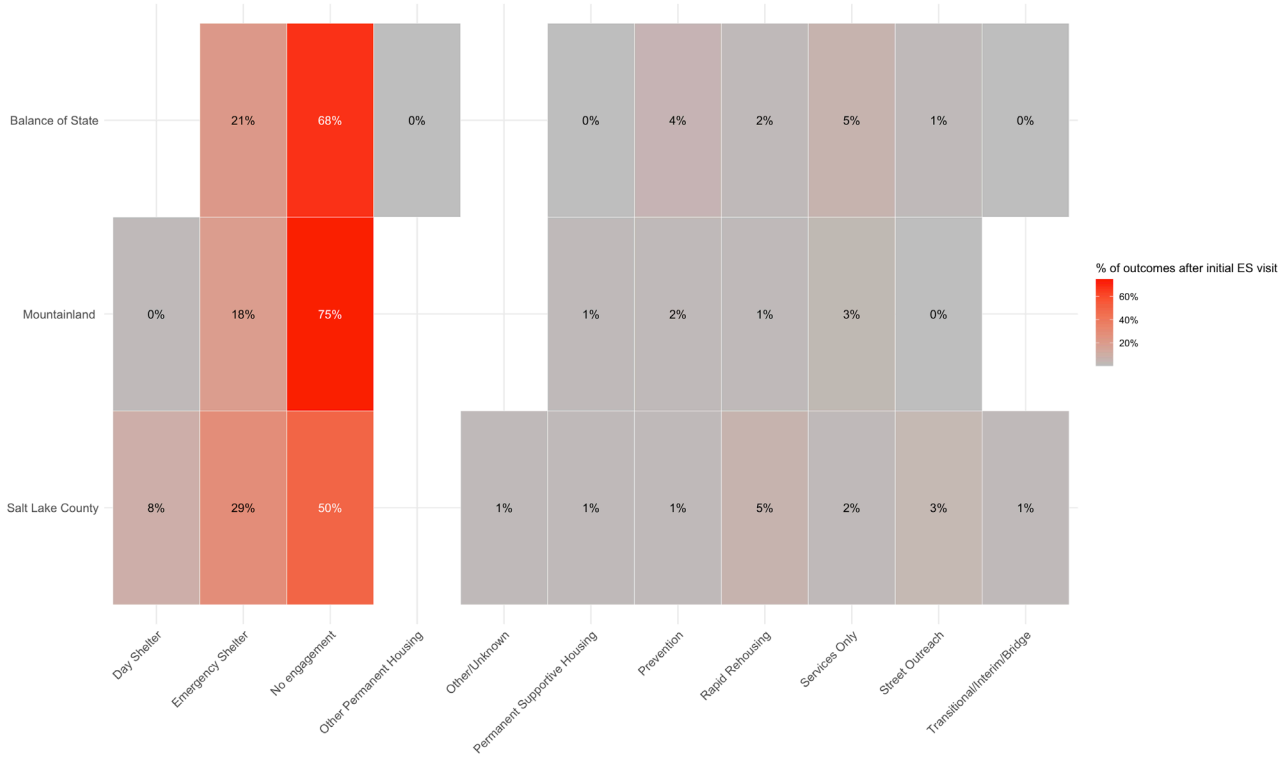
pattern, with services-only projects representing the most common first engagement after street outreach (21%), indicating a stronger linkage to supportive services rather than emergency shelter.

- Transitions into other service types were relatively uncommon across all regions. Small proportions of youth and young adults transitioned into day shelter (0–11%), homelessness prevention (0–2%), permanent supportive housing (1–8%), rapid rehousing (0–4%), or transitional/interim/bridge housing (0–3%), reflecting limited movement into longer-term housing interventions immediately following outreach.
- Overall, the heatmap illustrates that after engaging in street outreach, youth and young adults most often either do not re-engage with the homeless service system or enter emergency shelter, with the Mountainland CoC standing out for its comparatively stronger connection to services-only interventions following outreach.

Following an emergency shelter stay, the UHMIS data suggest that youth and young adult outcomes (Figure 7) include:

- No further engagement with the homeless service system. This pattern is particularly pronounced for youth and young adults in the Mountainland CoC, where 75% of emergency shelter exits do not lead to any subsequent service contact. Similarly, the Balance of State CoC sees a 68% non-engagement rate, while Salt Lake County CoC has the lowest rate of disengagement at 50%, indicating

Figure 7. First Outcome After Engaging in Emergency Shelter



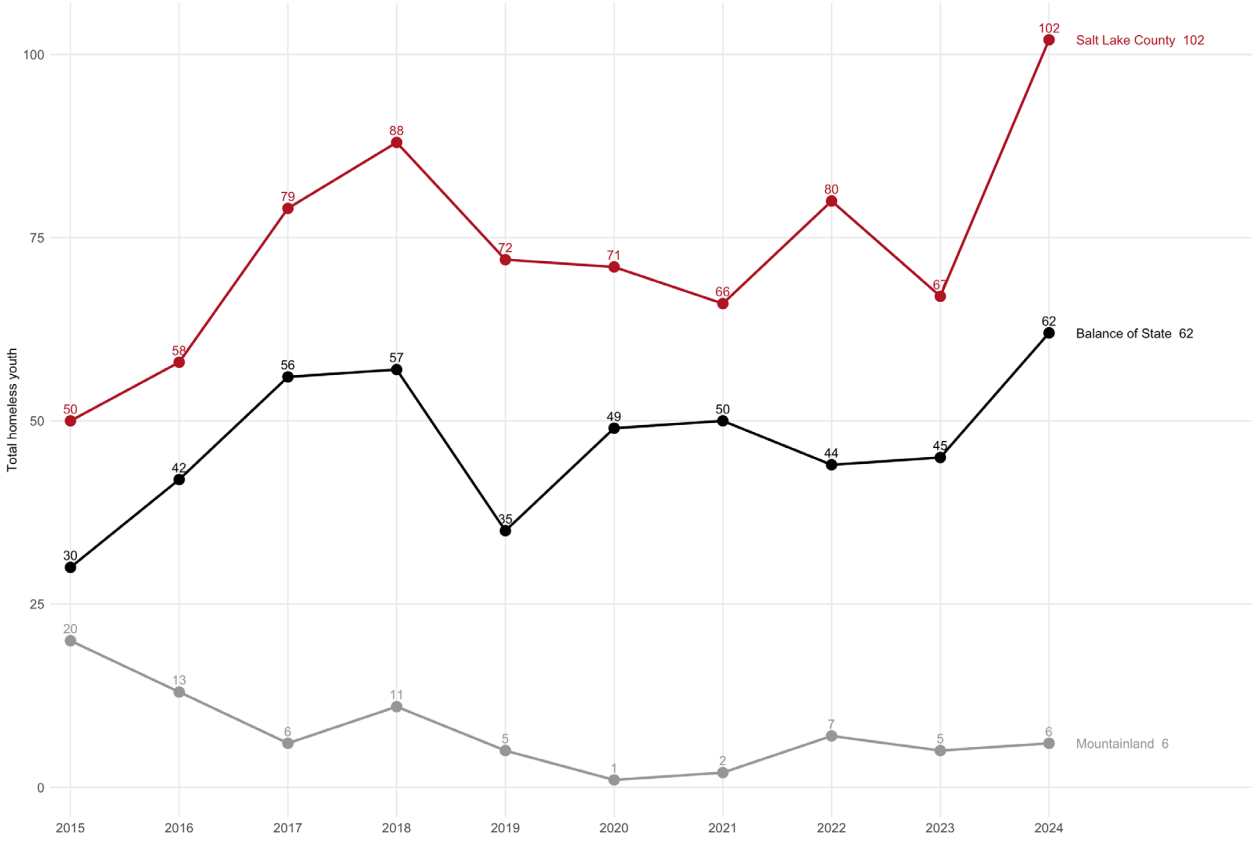
comparatively more frequent system re-entry among youth and young adults.
- Among youth and young adults who do re-engage, emergency shelter itself is the most common first outcome, particularly in the Salt Lake County (29%) and Balance of State (21%) CoCs, followed by the Mountainland CoC (18%), consistent with that region's higher overall rate of non-engagement.

We analyzed temporal and seasonal patterns in youth and young adult service engagement, comparing trends across UHMIS and PIT Count data. Using PIT Count data from 2015–2024, we examined changes in youth and young adult homelessness over time and throughout the year, and how these trends align with reported UHMIS rates. Of note, data collected from PIT counts of people experiencing homelessness, including unsheltered homelessness, are widely considered to be a statistically significant underrepresentation of actual conditions.[19,20]

Across all three CoCs, PIT counts of youth and young adults show an overall increase from 2015 to 2024, though trends vary substantially by region (Figure 8). Specifically:

- Salt Lake County CoC experienced the largest absolute increase in the number of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness over this period, rising from 50 in 2015 to 102 in 2024. Although counts fluctuated across the decade, the overall trajectory reflects a substantial upward trend, with particularly high counts observed in 2017–2018 and again in 2022–2024.
- The Balance of State CoC also saw a

Figure 8. PIT Count of Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness, by CoC (2015-2024)



notable increase in youth and young adult homelessness, more than doubling from 30 in 2015 to 62 in 2024. After a decline around 2019, counts increased steadily beginning in 2020, with especially pronounced growth after 2021.

- Mountainland CoC consistently had the lowest PIT counts of youth and young adults across the decade. Counts declined from 20 in 2015 to a low of 1–2 between 2020 and 2021, followed by a modest rebound, reaching 6 in 2024. While the overall magnitude remained small relative to the other CoCs, this pattern indicates renewed increases in recent years.

UHMIS and PIT Count data suggest a disconnect between when youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are most visible to service systems and how they subsequently engage with those systems over time. PIT Count data suggest a steady and statewide increase in youth and young adult homelessness from 2015 to 2024, across all three CoCs. Yet, UHMIS enrollment data suggest that identification and outreach activities are not evenly distributed throughout the year:

- Enrollments—particularly those associated with street outreach to youth and young adults experiencing homelessness—are higher in January than surrounding months, coinciding with the annual PIT Count, as well as winter holidays.
- This seasonal concentration is most pronounced in the Salt Lake County and Balance of State CoCs, suggesting that outreach intensity and administrative reporting cycles influence when youth and young adults are recorded as homeless.
- Seasonal spikes in enrollment rates are also seen in March and August, potentially coinciding with times when school is out of session.
- A large share of youth and young adults—especially in non-metro regions—do not reengage with the homelessness service system following initial outreach contact, which suggests that many become briefly visible during PIT Count-driven efforts and then disappear from administrative records.
- Together, these trends suggest that current measurement and outreach practices may capture youth and young adult homelessness episodically rather than continuously, limiting understanding of youth and young adults' lived experiences, service trajectories, and unmet needs outside the PIT Count period.

Using UHMIS data, we examined how youth and young adult service engagement varied at different times of the year. Between 2015 and 2024, total UHMIS enrollments suggest seasonal patterns by month (Figure 9). We found:

- Enrollment volumes remain relatively stable throughout the year, but spike at the beginning of the calendar year. January records higher enrollments of youth and young adults (83,655), standing out sharply compared to February and most subsequent months, a pattern that is consistent with increased system activity tied to the annual PIT Count.
- After this January increase, enrollments decline modestly in February and remain comparatively steady through the spring and summer months, gradually rising again toward late summer and early fall before tapering slightly in November and December.

During the 2015–2024 period, UHMIS engagement, especially street outreach showed similar trends in both the Salt Lake County and Balance of State CoCs (Figure 10), with January enrollments notably higher than adjacent months such as October, November, December, and February.

Figure 9. UHMIS Enrollments of Youth and Young Adults, by Month (2015-2024)

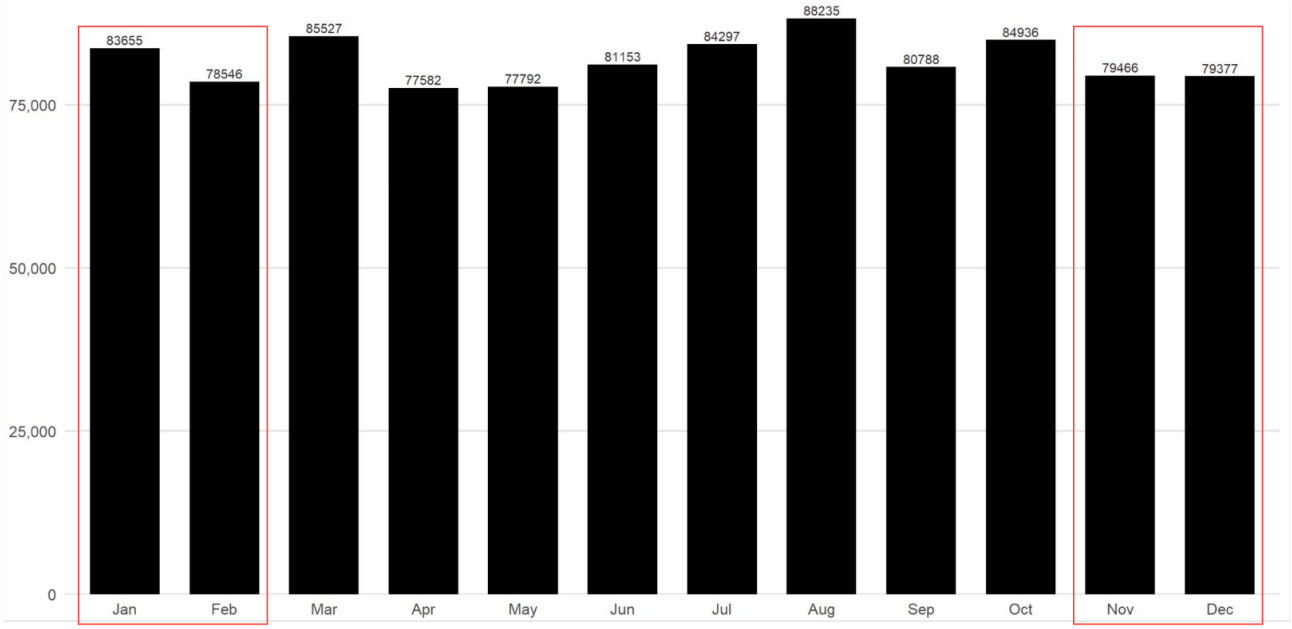
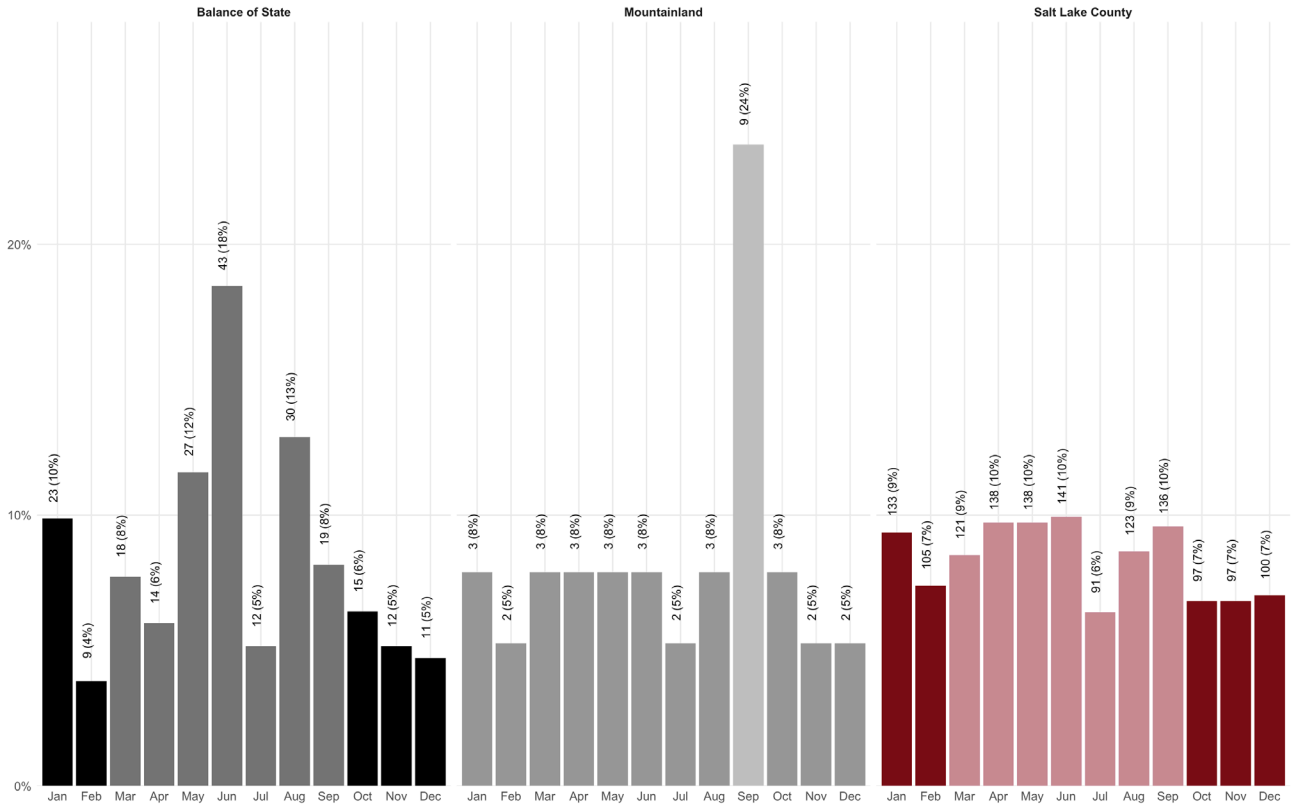


Figure 10. UHMIS Street Outreach Engagements, by Month (2015-2024)



- This seasonal spike suggests that outreach activity—and corresponding identification of unsheltered individuals—may be disproportionately captured during the January PIT Count rather than evenly throughout the year.
- Spring and summer peaks may be related to times when students are out of school and families seek additional support.
- While the Mountainland CoC has a flatter monthly distribution with less pronounced seasonality, the Salt Lake County and Balance of State CoCs have similar temporal patterns despite substantial differences in overall outreach volume.

Quantitative Summary and Need for Mixed Methods Approach

A substantial number of youth and young adults, particularly in the Balance of State CoC, do not reengage with the homelessness services system after initial contact with street outreach. These patterns are especially concerning given the pronounced spike in outreach activity during PIT Count. Youth and young adults may be most visible to the homelessness services system at a single point in time, yet many subsequently exit or lose contact with services after initial engagement. These patterns raise concerns that experiences of unsheltered homelessness may be systematically undercounted outside of the PIT Count, particularly in regions with lower baseline outreach capacity.

Quantitative data alone cannot explain whether youth and young adults who are no longer in system records have secured informal housing, avoided services, faced access barriers, or moved beyond the reach of local outreach. Reliance on PIT Count-based visibility and high post-outreach disengagement suggests that key insights into youth and young adults' needs and decision-making are lost shortly after the PIT Count, particularly in rural and non-metro areas. HMIS data, while valuable in showing enrollment trends, is not systematically collected in all programs – often due to funding requirements, but at times likely due to contextual realities impacting service providers who would collect data (e.g., urgent crises, need for trauma informed training, etc.). Expanding qualitative inquiry beyond the PIT Count and HMIS data is therefore essential to inform engagement strategies grounded in how and when youth and young adults actually interact with service systems.

The strong seasonal concentration of service engagements further underscores the need for qualitative and mixed-method data in rural contexts. Although the UHMIS and PIT data suggest periods of increased visibility, these data offer limited insight into youth and young adult's lived experiences, service navigation, or avoidance of formal systems across the year. Integrating qualitative data with these administrative records can bridge gaps in what we know about youth and young adult's lived experience, clarify how reporting structures shape observed patterns, and reveal access barriers not captured in UHMIS or PIT Count data.

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Phase 2: Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interview Methods

We conducted virtual interviews with key informants (providers, community leaders, youth leaders) to understand resources and needs in each CoC. Recruitment was conducted using non-probability, purposive sampling that was supplemented by snowball sampling. A database of personal contact details was compiled of publicly available contact information of key informants from throughout the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs and included potential participants from various sectors such as shelters, school districts, teen centers, libraries, child welfare, mental health agencies, medical facilities, community resource centers, tribal councils, non-profits, and religious institutions. When contacting service providers, we explicitly asked them to share recruitment information with youth and young adults with lived experience, in the hopes of including as many lived experience perspectives as possible in our data. Nine key informant participants were recruited from the Mountainland CoC and 34 were from the Balance of State CoC.

Key Informant Interview Data Collection

Between April and July 2025, more than 315 recruitment emails were sent to potential interview participants, with subsequent follow-up emails as necessary. Emails described the needs assessment being performed and requested participation in a voluntary one-time virtual interview. This solicitation resulted in 43 successfully completed interviews between April and August 2025. Prior to each interview, individuals were given the opportunity to ask questions and provide their consent to participate. Those participating on their own time, and not as part of their employment, were compensated with a $25 virtual gift card following the interview. In each interview, participants were asked questions focused on the contextual factors shaping youth and young adult homelessness in their geographic area, the service landscape, and the necessary perspectives to complete our picture of local youth and young adult homelessness (Appendix A). Each interview was audio recorded and lasted an average of 40 minutes.

Key Informant Interview Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were generated from interview audio using Otter.ai (an Artificial Intelligence transcription software). Each transcript was cleaned for accuracy and to remove personally identifying information before being imported into Dedoose (a qualitative coding software) for analysis. Coding was conducted by three trained analysts who utilized a structured codebook, and an inductive, iterative collaborative thematic analytic process[21] to refine code definitions and support transparency and rigor in the analytic process.

Interview Participant Characteristics

Following the interview, participants had the option to complete a demographics survey (Appendix B). Most (n = 38) participants completed the demographic survey (Table 6). Most participants (n = 32; 84%) did not identify as having a lived experience of homelessness, while six (16%) did. Likewise, the majority (n = 32) of participants identified as individuals who provided support to people experiencing homelessness, either through direct services or advocacy work. Most participants self-identified as White (n = 30), female (n = 31), and aged 35-54 (n = 27).

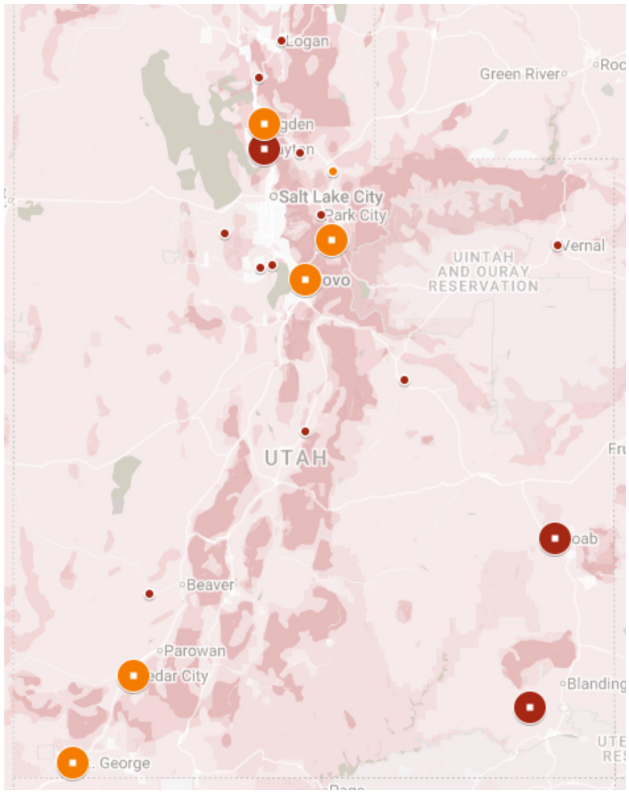
Some participants shared additional identities or experiences that shape their perspectives. Responses ranged from emphasizing their role in the community based on their religious identification as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or Judaism, while others described their experience working in K-12 education, non-profit organizations, or local government. Some participants noted lived experiences of transiency, personally providing housing for a young person experiencing homelessness, and contributing factors to their lived experiences of homelessness.

Table 6. Interview Participant Demographics

	n
Age Range	
18-24	2
25-34	4
35-44	11
45-54	16
55+	5
Race/Ethnicity	
Asian	2
Black/African American	1
Hispanic, Latino, Mexican	2
Native American	1
Bi-racial	2
White, Non-Hispanic	30
Gender Identity	
Female	31
Male	7

The geographic location where interviewees were situated (Figure 11) shows the saturation of participants in each location, with large markers indicating more participants and small markers indicating fewer participants. Red markers indicate participants who spoke exclusively about the region they were located; each orange marker denotes participants who work in multiple regions.

Figure 11. Geographic Location of Interview Participants



Qualitative Interview Findings

Throughout the 43 interviews, participants described contributing factors of youth and young adult homelessness to be often linked to family conflict, communication breakdown, trauma, and substance use, with some regionally specific factors such as dislocation from family due to religious differences, juvenile justice system involvement, or failed adoptions post-child welfare system involvement. In nearly every interview, the rate of homelessness among youth and young adults was noted to be on the rise, despite general community perception of low rates. Throughout the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs, interview participants noted that community members were often unaware or unaccepting of the fact that youth and young adult homelessness exists in their community—oftentimes because youth and young adult homelessness was "hidden" and inaccurately counted in the PIT Count and UHMIS. Many participants noted that youth and young adults were less visible on the street or in unsheltered spaces, as they tend to find shelter in vehicles, wilderness spaces, or through couch-surfing and doubling up.

In the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs, youth- and young adult-specific resources were considered limited, as only a few youth-centered shelters were identified, and most resources were notably designed for adults rather than youth. Interview participants characterized formal services as having strict eligibility requirements, such as age limits or access to active Medicaid, that served as access barriers. Some participants expressed that young people are unsure where to turn for help or how to access available resources, and that formal resources are often time-limited, have long waitlists, or geographically inaccessible due to limited local services coupled with a lack of public transportation options.

Interview participants in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs identified affordable housing and emergency shelter as a priority need, as well as improved transportation access. Preventive services such as access to case management, education completion, and increased mental health and substance use treatment were also identified as necessary and important.

Interview Findings from Participants in the Mountainland CoC

Table 7. Mountainland Interview Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Locations of youth homelessness	Couch surfing/doubling up
	Staying in cars or on public land
Perceived rates of youth homelessness	Some perceive youth and young adult homelessness as non-issue
	Some perceive youth and young adult homelessness to be growing
Community stigma against homelessness	Stigma discourages service engagement
	Public concerns about 'enabling' homelesssness
Contributing factors	Child welfare and adoption systems
	Cost of living
	Family rejection
Current resources	Teen centers offer tangible resources and relational support
	Warming centers & crisis shelters
	Informal volunteers and faith-based communities
Key needs	Reduce stigma
	Increase accessible housing
	Sustain Teen Center Funding

Locations of Youth Homelessness in the Mountainland CoC

Couch surfing/doubling up. Participants consistently mentioned the common practice of youth and young adults who are connected to their family or guardian(s) doubling up and staying with other families in single-family homes, staying in a vehicle, or camping outside of city or town limits. Many participants mentioned that it is typical for youth and young adults to stay at the home of a friend's family or to move among the homes of various friends' families "couch surfing," or to live on their own out of a vehicle. While not common, some participants referenced encountering youth and young adults staying in spaces not suitable for habitation, with or without a guardian, such as in a trailer or outbuilding that lacked heating, air conditioning, or running water.

Staying in cars or public land. One Utah County participant who works with youth noted their knowledge of homelessness among youth in their region: "Most people are just shocked that this is even a thing . . . [They think of homeless as] men in [a public] park or something that you can see . . . It's kids . . . living out of their car, or sleeping on a friend's couch . . ." This participant stated that in their community they had "kids living in their cars, like at the high school. A couple kids that were sleeping in their car . . . just to stay engaged in school . . . I can't imagine how you would even function at school like that." Another participant who has worked directly with youth experiencing homelessness in Utah, Wasatch, and other counties, provided a similar perspective:

> "The kids that are usually in our area are either couch surfing homeless, meaning they're not attached to their legal guardian. And another thing that affects us directly is they end up in our shelter . . . But again, they are unattached from their guardian, but they're always in a sheltered place."

A participant working in a sector that interfaces with people experiencing homelessness detailed locations where segments of youth and young adults in Summit County are located:

> "I think there's a chunk of our homeless population like especially . . . 25 and younger, like, they'll go up in the mountains because there's tons of trails and stuff. And, like, they try to find a place and camp and just make a place. Make a home, you know. Then, everyone's like, 'Oh, well, this red truck's been parked [at a location] . . . overnight for like, weeks' . . . And then it's like, we've had people who are like, "Are there shelters?" And it's like, 'If you can make your way down [Parley's] Canyon [to Salt Lake].'"

Perceived Rates of Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in the Mountainland CoC

Participants emphasized their first-hand perspectives that the rate of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in the Mountainland CoC is not as high as other places in the state. Some noted that the lack of youth- and young adult-specific resources may contribute to lower official rates than areas that have such services and facilities.

Some perceive youth and young adult homelessness as a non-issue. Participants working in youth-serving sectors shared that even as they see rates of homelessness increasing, the public perception is that homelessness is not a concern in their communities. Participants consistently mentioned misconceptions that presume homelessness is a publicly visible experience of unsheltered homelessness, which they concluded is why there is less public awareness of increasing rates of homelessness as youth and young adults tend to have less visible and intentionally more private experiences of homelessness, such as couch surfing.

Some perceive youth and young adult homelessness to be growing. Two participants, each with decades of work experience in Utah County, shared their views pertaining to rates of youth and young adult homelessness in Utah County. One stated, "We have a lot more homelessness in Utah County than we've probably ever had. I think we have seen some youth homelessness this past year with the warming centers." The second also noted that rates in Utah County are increasing. "People have to realize that we have elementary school kids that are homeless. We have college kids that are living in their cars and going to school because they don't have enough . . . money to, you know, rent." This participant continued, mentioning that Utah County has "problems [too], you know. Kids are struggling, and youth are struggling, and that we need to help them." A third Utah County participant working directly in allied services stated, "I believe that [rates of youth and young adult homelessness are] growing. I believe [it is] because of a lot of the addiction issues that we're running into . . . It seems to be a growing demographic in our community."

Community Stigma Against Homelessness

Stigma discourages service engagement. Participants shared the sentiment that the stigma associated with homelessness can discourage youth and young adults from seeking services, which reinforces the sense that homelessness does not occur in their communities. Participants highlighted how negative perceptions pertaining to entries into, and experiences of, homelessness reinforce and potentially compound internalized shame among families and youth. A Utah County service provider stated:

> "There's a huge stigma around homelessness in our community . . . [And it is] stigma around homelessness and addiction and mental illness. That kind of thing. Oftentimes, people in our community think that you should be able to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, do it on your own, and that's not always possible. You know, foster care, those kind of things aren't talked about a lot [as contributing factors]. And so [stigmas come from a] lack of education or a lack of the awareness that we do have a problem."

A school employee in Utah County noted similar resistance among youth and young adults seeking services at school due to the stigma from other young people, "I found that a lot of kids that needed [food from the pantry] didn't want to come and get the food, because kids see them . . . One of the kids actually asked [another], 'Doesn't your mom and dad work?'" This participant continued, further highlighting the sense that young people understand the stigma and sense the need to personify self-sufficiency over seeking assistance, "99% of my kiddos [are not] gonna say, 'I'm struggling.' They're more like, 'I'm surviving. I'm doing this. I'm doing this on my own. I'm getting through the day.'"

"99% of my kiddos [are not] gonna say, 'I'm struggling.' They're more like, 'I'm surviving. I'm doing this. I'm doing this on my own. I'm getting through the day.'"

A participant working in behavioral health noted that the confluence of stigmas, imperceptibility of rates of homelessness, and internalized shame among youth and young adults may function to support conditions that further endanger vulnerable youth:

> "Just because we're [in] Utah County doesn't mean that some of these kids [experiencing homelessness] aren't getting

> sex trafficked. Doesn't mean that these kids aren't coming in with pretty scary substance use disorders. [We have had] kids who were detoxing off of heroin in [the] shelter. [And] kids who have been poisoned with fentanyl. [And] kids who are rescued from sex trafficking. Now we're not talking about hundreds of kids, thank goodness. But [it is happening] here."

Public concerns about 'enabling' homelessness. The sentiment on stigmas and the intersection with presumptions about entries into homelessness and the preclusion of young people seeking services was reinforced by a participant working throughout the Mountainland CoC, but speaking specifically about their perceptions of Utah County:

> "[When there is] divergence from sort of a religious, a rigid lifestyle and expectation, [young people] can be ostracized and then [enter homelessness], or resulting trauma can be considered to be a 'learning experience,' for diversion. And that's a challenge. And then, you know, we, we have a very high percentage of [the] community giving [to others]. That's a huge positive here. A lot of people want to engage in volunteerism. They want to engage in activism. But then also, in a more conservative region, you run into some challenges like, 'If we're feeding the poor, are we enabling them? If we're providing housing for the poor, are they deserving?' And so that 'deserving poor,' mentality tends to stick a little bit more with high, high conservative populations."

Factors Contributing to Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in the Mountainland CoC

Child welfare and adoption systems. Participants identified multiple factors that contribute to youth and young adult homelessness in the Mountainland CoC, including the co-involvement with child welfare and adoption systems. A Utah County behavioral health provider stated, "I can say pretty confidently, that at any given day, about 50 to 60% of the kids in [the] shelter are post-adopt kids." A provider in Wasatch County shared a similar view, "We've had a couple of kids whose parents just flat out refuse to [get] them. And they wind up in state custody or back in state custody . . . It sometimes creates more problems than it solves." Another Utah County provider noted that it is common for them to work with youth "in a post-adoption situation [where] parents will bring them [in] and say, 'We don't want them back in our home.' And so they will drop them off . . . and leave them there."

"We've had a couple of kids whose parents just flat out refuse to [get] them. And they wind up in state custody or back in state custody . . ."

Cost of living. The imbalance of high housing costs and a low supply of affordable housing was identified as a barrier to stability and a contributor to experiences of homelessness for youth and young adults. A participant emphasized this situation in the Mountainland CoC:

> "[Summit County] is one of the most expensive places to live in the entire country. So, [it] has its own challenge of workers not being able to afford to live there. And so as you're looking at that age demographic, that becomes even more of a challenge. Because if you have executives that have been in a career for 20 years that cannot afford to live in Summit County where they work, you're not going to have

> a 22-year-old that's going to be working at McDonald's . . . [starting] entry level to work up [the] career [ladder], that's going to be able to afford to live there."

According to another participant, the supply and demand issue is also a concern for similarly aged youth and young adults in Utah County:

> "[There is] a significant lack of housing [such as single-units, one bedroom, or studio apartments]. And part of that is because we have such a high university student population . . . in Utah County. If a landlord is going to rent, they're going to usually take a chance on university students if they have the ability to do so, rather than . . . a homeless individual . . ."

Family rejection. Participants described how for many LGBTQ+ youth and young adults, the incongruence between their identity and the beliefs or values of their family of origin may precipitate their entry into homelessness. A Mountainland participant stated:

> "We see a significant portion of LGBT individuals that have no family structure, or have been disowned, or don't have some type of supports to fall back on because of their orientation. I think, as a particularly religious part of the state, that's a challenge that we see where you have very devout parents that for whatever reason . . . have decided that a teenager or a young adult [who is] LGBTQ+ can't live under their roof anymore, regardless of [the] level of support they might have leaving."

Current Resources in the Mountainland CoC

Teen centers offer tangible resources and relational support. Teen centers were highlighted by participants as one of the most significant formal resources within the Mountainland CoC for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. While exact provisions vary from center to center, most teen centers have a range of essentials available to any student that may include washers and dryers, showers, food pantries, clothing, hygiene items, and school supplies. Participants emphasized the integral role community collaborations play in maintaining teen centers, as well as ongoing support from The Policy Project staff. One participant stated:

> "The community is also very willing [to provide resources for the centers]. And if I have an issue [I say,] 'Listen, I have a kid that needs to go to an interview. He needs a suit. He doesn't have a suit.' I have such willing people just to contribute, saying, 'Yeah, let's make this work' . . . [And with students I say], 'Come. Come to me with anything. A problem or whatever, and I'll find a way to solve it' . . . [And] as I said, The Policy Project has been tremendous [in continuing to support teen centers]."

One participant added their perspective that pairing tangible needs with personal support is fundamental to student success and educational outcomes:

> "I found with the young students, they'd rather live in their car than go speak to a stranger about the situation they're in . . . So I think . . . teen centers [are] so important [because] you have that person that's there, that's building [relationships with students saying,] 'Why were you not at school today,' type of thing [and], 'How can I get you to school?' It's knowing these kids and getting to know them. So that's one of the biggest things that I think [teen centers have done]."

Warming centers and crisis shelters. A Utah County participant reported that warming centers have been used by youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, and that the need for this resource seems to be high: "We had a lot more participation this past winter than we had even the year before." Other key

resources identified in the Mountainland CoC were Vantage Point and Vantage Point North, both Wasatch Behavioral Health facilities, which offer short-term, free shelter for youth (aged 10-17) who do not feel safe at home, are in a mental health crisis, and are at-risk of homelessness.

Informal volunteers and faith-based communities. Several informal community resources were mentioned by participants, but particularly active community support and engagement. One participant stressed the importance of community contributions:

> "The most important informal system [we have is] . . . volunteering. I don't think people realize how much their volunteering helps [students, from] teaching them how to iron . . . or make food that isn't [just microwaved] . . . So [people] volunteering to teach simple things, I don't think they sometimes realize the impact that they make . . . [There are] so many ways [people] can help or contribute."

Another participant indicated the role faith-based volunteers play in supplementing the formal resources available to youth and young adults:

> "[The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides a lot of] support. I think we would see a lot more of some of the issues that we are dealing with if we didn't have good [Church] support. A lot of the churches, both [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] and interfaith churches, are helping people within their congregations . . . and . . . one of the things about Utah County is we have an amazing volunteer base. And so, you know, people want to volunteer. They want to give back."

Key Needs for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness in the Mountainland CoC

Reduce stigma. Given the high stigmatization of homelessness across the Mountainland CoC, one of the most important needs is to reduce the stigma associated with accessing food and housing supports. While nutritious food options may not always be readily available in food pantries, low-income youth and families should qualify for free or reduced lunch if engaged in school. However, according to a participant, some families are reluctant to engage in these supports and say, "please do not feed my kid at school." While there *is* food at school, "parents are hiding sometimes that their kid is hungry because they don't want to fill in the free and reduced [lunch application because of the stigma]."

Increase accessible housing. Affordable housing is a struggle across Mountainland CoC communities. While affordable housing is needed across Utah, one participant noted the particular wealth disparities in their region: "[There is] extreme wealth [here], there's also, like, the working class and . . . finding affordable housing is near impossible."

One participant discussed the specific need for transitional housing for young adults aged 18-24, who cannot be served by services like Vantage Point and Vantage Point North (which only accept youth ages 10-17), but who may not be financially prepared for independent renting in the housing market:

> "At this point, I would say that [the highest priority] would be [housing for] transition [aged youth], from 17 to 18. Because this transitional age, they need a lot of support . . . they're not ready to take care of themselves. They're not ready to have independence. And a lot of these kids are not where they are supposed to be with their education, with a trade. A lot of them are unprepared to take care of

themselves . . . The other thing, too, is at 18, a lot of renters, or landlords who want to rent, they require a credit check, which I get. It protects them, right? It protects the landlords. But what 18-year-old is going to pass a credit check?"

Sustain teen center funding. Though several participants expressed the value teen centers in schools add to their communities, there was a highlighted need for sustained teen center funding for operations and staffing over the long-term:

> "I'm sad that . . . teen centers are closing because there's no funding . . . they do not fund the person that needs to run it. So the staff, when the teen centers open, they get this [grant] that you're supposed to use only for building, which we did. But after that, there's no funding to staff [them] . . . There isn't really funding where they focus on salary . . . But that makes it difficult, because now most schools are like, 'We cannot afford a person,' so it reverts to a teacher that does it, maybe after school. So it gets shoved on whoever is already hired, already tired . . . So that's lacking, definitely lacking in how [the teen center] structure is working."

Interview Findings from Participants in the Balance of State CoC

Table 8. Balance of State Interview Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Locations of youth homelessness	Mostly couch surfing / doubling up; vehicles/shelters as second resort
Perceived rates of youth homelessness	Hidden homelessness is growing; not all are able to see it
	Hidden homelessness creates challenges for accurate counts
Contributing factors	Intergenerational poverty and homelessness
	Cost of living
	Prevalence of residential treatment (congregate care) programs
	Famiy breakdown post adoption, often due to trauma or identity rejection
	Religious communities as both help and hindrance
Consequences	Youth and young adults at risk of trafficking
	Negative educational outcomes
Current resources	Teen centers offer essential resources and reduce stigma
	Libraries as a multipurpose resource
	Informal volunteers and faith-based communities
Key Needs	Increase accessible housing
	Sustain Teen Center Funding

Locations of Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in the Balance of State CoC

Mostly couch surfing/doubling up; vehicles/shelters as last resort. Participants in the Balance of State CoC predominately noted that youth and young adults may experience homelessness as purposely private and hidden homelessness. Participants reported that youth and young adults are often doubling up with friends or other families, couch surfing, staying in vehicles or hotel rooms, camping outside of city or town limits, or staying in one of the few available shelters.

A Davis County participant noted the deliberate

and skilled ways in which youth conceal their circumstances as "kids are pretty good about figuring out how to couch surf, find and go between friends [houses] and/or other family members, things like that. And then once those [resources are exhausted], they may end up in a car or a shelter or somewhere, [and] that isn't ideal at all."

Perceived Rates of Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in the Balance of State CoC

Hidden homelessness is growing; not all are able to see it. A common misconception noted by participants is that homelessness does not exist among youth and young adults within their communities. They referenced common misperceptions that experiences among these populations parallel visible public experiences of unsheltered homelessness among adults.

Participants emphasized that the hidden nature of homelessness among youth and young adults may obscure the increasing rates of homelessness among these populations they are seeing firsthand. A participant from Cache County stated that the area has seen an increase in McKinney-Vento eligible students: "It tended to be 70 or 80 individuals [annually] historically. And just this past school year, we had somewhere around 131 individuals who were qualifying individuals that we kept track of."

Further, participants described how the hidden or sheltered nature of youth and young adult homelessness throughout the Balance of State CoC made it difficult for community members to recognize that homelessness existed in their communities. A participant from Davis County stated, "The perception is, 'We don't have homelessness with youth.' And then if we do, their perception is [that] it looks like adult homelessness. And that's not always the case."

A participant from Morgan County acknowledged the difficulty community members may have in understanding experiences of youth and young adult homelessness, which is not visible to everyone, particularly in areas where there is relative economic stability:

> "We live in [an affluent town] and sometimes when we present these needs . . . or we present, 'We're having kids that struggle,' we're met with, 'no, I don't believe that.' And sometimes in a small, tight knit community, it's really easy to be blinded, because you think everybody's okay; you think everybody's doing well. But [there is] always more than you realize going on underneath the surface."

"Sometimes in a small, tight knit community, it's really easy to be blinded, because you think everybody's okay; you think everybody's doing well. But [there is] always more than you realize going on underneath the surface."

Hidden homelessness creates challenges for accurate counts. A participant in Carbon County mentioned some of the challenges of identifying youth and young adults experiencing homelessness due to their geographic location and the lack of services in their region:

> "[We are] in a very rural area, and so our county has about a population of 30,000 . . . I would say the majority of youth that are homeless are not accessing or seeking resources or services. They're living with their friends' parents or couch surfing . . . I think it's really difficult to get accurate data

on how many youth are homeless in our area [for these reasons]."

An Iron County participant expressed similar sentiments about the rates and experiences of youth and young adult homelessness in their region:

> "In rural areas, homelessness, in general, tends to be kind of dispersed and hidden. You don't have a lot of people congregating at a park or other public place right here in Iron County. They tend to be outside of the city limits or sort of camping in remote places. I think [because of that] oftentimes the problem of homelessness in general, and especially with youth, is kind of hidden. I know at last [McKinney-Vento] count, I think there was something like 400 students in the Iron County School District that were either homeless or couch surfing . . . But I think the issue here is a lot larger than people would expect."

A San Juan County participant reflected on what they considered a distinct cultural aspect of youth and young adult housing in their region:

> "[Our circumstances are] a little bit more unique in San Juan, where we have essentially three tribal nations here within San Juan [County]. We've got the Navajo Nation tribe, the Ute Mountain Ute tribe, and then [the San Juan Southern Paiute tribe]. And really what we see is that transition at an early age, we'll see some of those Native American youth that'll be couch surfing. They'll be partnered up in multi-generational housing [and] that's kind of a typical [housing situation] here."

Factors Contributing to Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in the Balance of State CoC

Intergenerational poverty and homelessness. For some youth and young adults, intergenerational poverty or homelessness has impacted their families. A participant in Weber County noted, "Parents often will have homelessness issues themselves, or drug use, or a history of violence, or neglect, or all of those kinds of things. The [Adverse Childhood Experience] scores are pretty high for a lot of our homeless youth." A Davis County participant similarly identified this as an issue as they have seen "some [entries into homelessness because of] true, like poverty. The cycle of poverty, where . . . you see [inter]generational poverty, you know, [their] grandparents were [unhoused], mom is [unhoused], sister is [unhoused, and] now [the youth is]." An Iron County participant identified intergenerational poverty as an issue for communities across the Balance of State CoC:

> "We had an initiative in Utah that was focusing on intergenerational poverty, [that has] kind of gone by the wayside. But we have a lot of poverty-burdened communities in the Balance of State [CoC], where those kids are absolutely at-risk [for experiencing homelessness]. And I think we can do better homeless prevention [which] is what I would love to see us [do]. You know, focus on [prevention] with our youth, so whether we're talking about youth that don't connect with their families, and that's how they become homeless, or supporting households with youth to lower the stress and try to build more stable households."

Cost of living. Increasing housing costs and a low supply of affordable housing was identified as contributing to experiences of homelessness for youth and young adults in communities throughout the Balance of State CoC. A participant in Uintah County highlighted

the unique circumstances in their region that challenge young adults' ability to rent in the rental market:

> "I wouldn't say [youth and young adult homelessness is] a pervasive problem [here], but there are several factors that I think that contribute to, you know, the potential homelessness in our community. And that's the high cost of rent, which is probably a universal problem . . . We kind of have an interesting economy in our little area of the state, because we have a lot of oil and gas, and so we have some incredibly high-paying jobs . . . [And oil and gas companies will] rent houses . . . a year at a time, at premier prices. And so it really drives the rental market up and . . . as a landlord, are you going to rent to an 18-year-old kid who doesn't have any job history, or this company?"

Prevalence of residential treatment (congregate care) programs. Residential treatment (congregate care) programs were characterized by participants as being widely accessible to youth younger than age 18 as many of these programs accept Medicaid. Congregate care programs were also identified as playing a part in the rate of young adult homelessness as youth entering these programs lack housing or transitional services upon aging out at 18. One participant who held multiple roles in Weber, Iron, and Grand Counties declared that, "Population-wise, we get a lot of kids who come from [congregate care] facilities." This participant further explained:

> "The [congregate care] industry out here in Utah is the wild west. And some of the stories that we hear happening in some of these places are mind-boggling . . . There are some organizations out there that are doing active harm to our youth, and we need better policies to reel those organizations in. I've seen some of the [state] audits of these places and am like, 'How is it that they're missing these kinds of practices?'"

A participant with lived experience corroborated the hardships encountered by young people who are exiting congregate care:

> "Their parents just don't want them after treatment . . . It's kind of like a capitalistic system, and [parents] use it to . . . send their kids away. Because, if insurance pays for it, it's not on their hands and they leave their kids in a different state. And that's how Utah probably has a lot of homeless kids, because their parents abandon them in these treatment centers. And the treatment centers, a lot of them, cut off at the age of 18, so then you have homeless 18-year-olds like me."

Family breakdown post-adoption, often due to trauma or identity rejection. Family breakdown, or family relational rupture, was identified as a multi-dimensional contributing factor to youth homelessness, often leading to expulsion from the family system. Service providers described youth entering homelessness following failed transitions out of the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) systems, such as aging out of the system. In other cases, service providers described homelessness among former foster youth following post-adoptive family breakdowns. Participants throughout the Balance of State CoC described that many homeless youth are "kids who have been [previously] adopted" from foster care. The pathways to homelessness for youth experiencing post-adoption family breakdown were seldom isolated. Participants described these scenarios as an accumulation of factors that include childhood trauma that adoptive families are unprepared to navigate over the long term.

In addition to post-adoption disruptions, participants identified identity-related rejection as another form of family breakdown

contributing to youth homelessness. For some youth, particularly those identifying as LGBTQ+, rejection within the household resulted in loss of housing and family support. A participant stated, "The third most prevalent [cause of homelessness] is probably LGBTQ+ community kiddos."

Religious communities as both help and hindrance. Participants generally ascribed elements of religious beliefs and cultural practices as supporting services for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, while potentially contributing to homelessness in other circumstances. A participant with lived experience of homelessness acknowledged the compassion they received from members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

> "I'm originally from [another state] . . . [and] when I aged out of treatment [I] had nowhere else to go. [And here] there's a large [population of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] and a part of their . . . like, commandments or something like that, is you know, love your neighbor . . . so, it's like a big value to care for people here and you can feel that."

Another participant described the contrasting experiences they have had with support from religious groups:

> "The [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] is really helpful, and also not . . . We've got religious trauma that happens with the youth and that causes them to seek services. At times, that can be a contributing factor to the reason that they're presenting as homeless. However, the Church historically has been really helpful in funding [services]. We're working on funding right now. We had a couple years [of] no funding. But, generally speaking, they have been helpful to us to provide the services. So it's a cycle."

Consequences of Homelessness for Youth and Young Adults in the Balance of State CoC

Youth and young adults at-risk for human trafficking. Multiple participants emphasized that youth and young adults are at high risk for being trafficked. A Weber County participant stated they had "seen the most sex trafficking cases out of the Ogden shelter." A Carbon County participant similarly emphasized the potential risk of trafficking:

> "[You would] have to really, really, really think hard to think of an age group that is more high risk than [those aged 14-24] . . . They are so high risk for so much, yes. [. . .] [Trafficking] is the reason why I wanted to [participate in the study] . . . [To help] decision makers to see like this is a group of the population that . . . are so high risk that they could easily disappear."

A service provider in Washington County echoed these concerns:

> "In southern Utah, we see a lot more trafficking. Not to say that trafficking doesn't happen in [northern Utah] because it does. And, certainly there's no shortage of people who want to traffic [youth]. But I think in southern Utah, there's . . . the proximity to Las Vegas, [which] I think means that there's more organized [groups of human traffickers]."

Negative educational outcomes. Participants stressed the negative impact that homelessness has on educational outcomes for youth and young adults. A participant in Grand County stated they often have "students who are homeless [who need to work] to contribute to [the] household or take care of themselves, now [that] they or [their] whole family . . . are homeless." A participant from Tooele expressed similar concerns that students are "not coming to school, therefore they're not going to graduate . . . [because they have to be] out in

the workforce."

Another Balance of State participant discussed the challenge of youth frequently moving due to homelessness:

> "From . . . an educational standpoint [it] is worse for them because the students can't really get that stability, and I feel like it interferes with their academics. Because with every school you go to, it takes time to get registered, to go through the process, to get all those documents in. And students are protected under McKinney-Vento, but it still is like starting from scratch time and time again."

Current Resources for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness in the Balance of State CoC

Teen Centers offer essential resources and reduce stigma. As the Balance of State CoC consists of 25 counties and a range of populations, there are wide variations in formal resources and infrastructure to support services across the CoC. Participants reported on the significance of teen centers for the communities that have them, as well as the desire for opening centers in areas that do not. A Davis County participant specified the need for teen centers, as they have "seen students experiencing [homelessness], but not speak about it, because there [were] no resources . . . schools have seen the McKinney-Vento numbers, double, triple, almost quadruple once a center is placed in their school, because now there's a resource." Another Davis County participant affirmed the role teen centers play in providing needed resources, and further described the importance of a new teen residential program, a Teen Living Center, in their community:

> "The teen centers . . . are one of the best things that we could have ever done for our teenagers who are at risk or who are actively homeless. They help the kids figure out a place to shower, a place to do laundry, and a place for food. And the reason [the Teen Living Center] was made was because [teen centers] can't house [students] overnight. And so that's where the Davis School District and Switchpoint combined and said, 'We're going to put it together so [students] have a house to sleep in at night.'"

A Carbon County school employee noted the singular role a teen center plays in their region, "[The teen center is] doing really great work. Awesome [work at the] teen center. [They] have clothing donations . . . laundry facilities, shower facilities, food. [But otherwise] here in this community, we have absolutely zero [other] homeless services. Zero." A participant from Sanpete County shared the basic needs their teen center has provided, "Last year, [they] had money . . . and families would [go with a grocery list] and [staff] would say, 'Okay, what items do you need monthly?' And would just give them their basics . . . eggs, flour, milk, stuff like that, and people needed it."

Participants suggested that it is essential for all students to be invited to use teen centers to reduce the stigma associated with accessing school-based services. A Washington County participant stated:

> "[The teen center] worked really hard to [try to ensure it is not] associated with homelessness [because they] were afraid no students would go in because kids would say, 'Well, that's for the homeless kids' . . . So, it's open to everybody and [they hosted] tours [and had snacks and said], 'If you're on your way to class and you realize [you don't have a pencil or paper] stop in [and grab] whatever you need.' [And] made it . . . a priority [that students] . . . know every one of them can benefit . . . So, [they] tried to make it [so there is] no stigma attached to it at all. And I think it worked. The school has had a food

> pantry for years and was doing about 25 meals per month out of the food pantry . . . [and] has been doing at least 25 meals per day since the teen center [opened]."

Libraries as a multipurpose resource. Participants reflected on community members' dynamic responses to meeting the multiple needs youth and young adults experiencing homelessness have year-round. A Grand County participant explained basic needs provided at the public library for youth, "The . . . Grand County Public Library, has lunches available for youth, I think up to 18 years old. And there's not . . . any kind of stipulation. [They] don't have to qualify for it. [Youth] just go to the library and [ask]." Participants also noted that the library is a safe and welcoming environment where youth and young adults can access computers, free internet, and air conditioning in warm months and heat in cold months. Another Grand County participant detailed how the high utilization of the public library by youth and young adults illustrated the need for a more youth-specific resource. They noted that this led to the creation of The Grand County Public Library Teen Center, which:

> "Just moved into . . . [a] converted house right next to the [public] library. [They] give out free snacks . . . [and] free hygiene supplies that the health department provides; [they] have condoms upon request [they] can give out, which they can't do in the school system. [They] give out free school supplies and . . . vouchers for [a] nonprofit thrift store in town if they need any house supplies or clothing or, you know, home needs, then we can give out vouchers for that too. [They have been able to partner] with different organizations in town to have kind of a resource center for the teens."

Informal volunteers and faith-based communities. Participants detailed informal resources and collaborations with community members and faith-based organizations that worked to address youth and young adult needs. A participant from Tooele reported that the "New Life [Christian Fellowship] church here, [which is the] frontline [for] education [and] food, and . . clothing. They do service a lot of our homeless families [and have] access to showers and laundry there as well." An Iron County participant noted the significant faith- and community-based support and collaborations in Cedar City:

> "We've got [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints'] transitional services office here, they have missionaries that work with people to provide some forms of support . . . [The] Presbyterian Church does a lot of that as well. Christ the King Catholic Church does a lot of community support. There's [the] Church in the Park . . . that serves meals to people. The lady who runs that program is . . . amazing at reaching out to the community to see . . . [what people need and] networks with community members to try to obtain those. We've got a thrift store in town . . . who have been very supportive . . . [And a] nonprofit [that] will get bikes donated to them, repair them, fix them up, and then they donate them to clients at [the youth] shelter . . . [And our local homeless council] has grown hugely over the past few years, where we have like 50 people attending each meeting."

Key Needs for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness in the Balance of State CoC

Increase accessible housing. Across the Balance of State CoC, communities lack access to affordable housing, with participants from small towns to large cities highlighting high costs and the lack of available housing. A St. George participant noted, "We have lots and lots of families that have to double or triple or quadruple up in homes or even apartments." A San Juan County participant stated there is an overall "lack of available housing . . . it

has become so unattainable and unaffordable in San Juan County and Moab, there's not available workforce housing." A Sanpete County participant emphasized that "housing [availability] is awful in small town Utah." Participants noted the need for accessible and affordable housing for youth and young adults, with one participant stating the greatest need they see is "transitional [age] housing; transitional living, hands down." A Cedar City participant cited the need for "housing for youth. It's so difficult when [you are too young to] sign a lease. That's where the transitional living program is so critical. You'd hate to think of keeping a youth in a shelter because there are no other choices."

Sustain teen center funding. Multiple participants highlighted the positive impacts that teen centers have on students and their educational outcomes. However, participants also noted the challenge of sustained funding for the teen centers, particularly for smaller districts and schools. Several participants described meeting with staff from the Davis School District to learn how their coordinated model is structured and functions. Davis School District's model of district-level integration was described by one participant as one that should be replicated statewide, but with additional funding supports:

"There needs to be a legislatively-funded, district-level [teen center coordinator in the Family Resources Department]. [Teen centers] are addressing [students'] issues, while also lifting the [burden off] teachers, counselors and [other students]."

"If [teen centers are going to be] a sustainable program in education, there needs to be [funding] for designated [full-time district-level employees] as a model for how it works in a school district, where you have a student Family Resources Department, [which has] a McKinney-Vento office. There needs to be a legislatively-funded, district-level [teen center coordinator in the Family Resources Department]. [Teen centers] are addressing [students'] issues, while also lifting the [burden off] teachers, counselors and [other students]. [And] teen centers [can coordinate an entire family's needs] because they're able to have [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act] compliant conversations because they're part of the educational team [and are] highly educated in McKinney-Vento law."

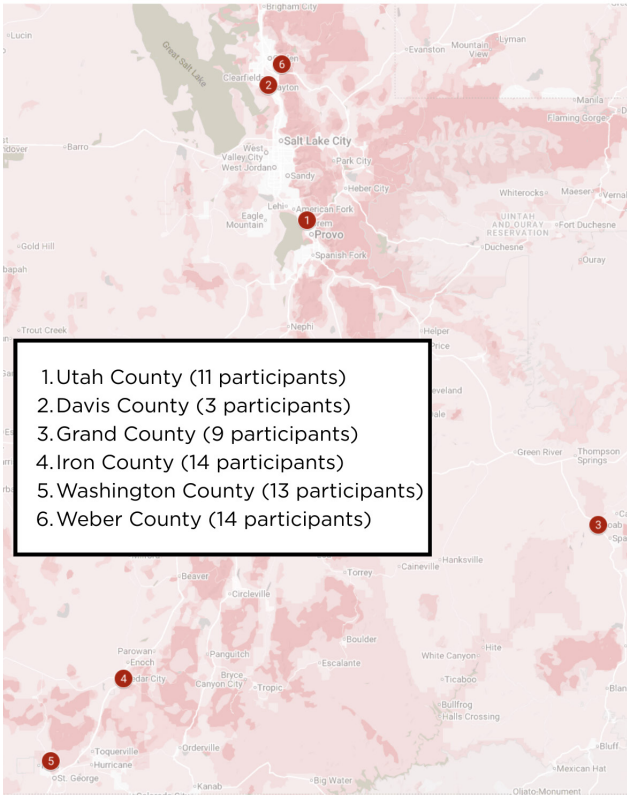
Phase 3: Focus Groups

Focus Group Methods

At the end of the key informant interviews, participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in an in-person focus group within their region or if they knew of others in their networks who would be. The responses to this question helped build a foundation for determining focus group locations. After identifying "hot spot" regions of youth and young adult homelessness, key organizational partners were identified in the Mountainland CoC (Utah County) and the Balance of State CoC (Iron, Weber, Davis, Washington, and Grand counties). These partnerships involved collaborative scheduling, securing locations, and coordinating the logistics of the focus group hosted in each of these counties.

Using non-probability, purposive sampling, recruitment flyers and emails were sent to interview participants who stated they would be willing to participate in a focus group, as well as potential participants who worked in shelters, school districts, teen centers, libraries, child welfare, mental health, medical, community resources, tribal council, non-profits, and religious institutions. The emails described the needs assessment being performed and requested participation in a voluntary in-person focus group, with a link to register. Registration enabled us to track the number of potential participants and inquire about any requested snacks to create a warm and welcoming focus group space. Potential participants were also invited to share or post the flyer in youth and young adult spaces to increase visibility among this group. Between August and November 2025, recruitment efforts resulted in 64 participants in six focus groups in Utah, Davis, Washington, Grand, Iron, and Weber counties (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Map of Focus Group Locations



Note: Focus group locations were weighted by the number of participants at each location, with large markers indicating more participants and small markers indicating fewer participants.

Prior to the beginning of each focus group, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and provide their consent to participate. Those participating on their own time, and not as part of their employment, were compensated with a $50 gift card.

The focus groups consisted of three parts (Appendix C). First, a small group discussion was facilitated to understand (a) perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness; (b) formal/informal resources available for youth; (c) key needs to address youth and young adult homelessness; (d) gaps and resources; and

(e) youth leadership participation in CoCs. The researchers then shared preliminary findings from our secondary data analysis (Phase 1) to understand what participants found to be surprising or missing from the data. Finally, a mapping activity was undertaken to identify where known services are located. Focus groups concluded with a question asking participants to write down a few key resources they would add to their community. Focus groups were audio-recorded for transcription. Each focus group lasted an average of 90 minutes.

Focus group transcripts were generated from the recorded audio using Otter.ai (an AI transcription software), cleaned for accuracy, and analyzed. All transcripts, notes, and maps were digitized and anonymized for the purposes of this report.

Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Eleven focus group participants were from the Mountainland CoC, and 53 were from the Balance of State CoC. Of the 64 participants, most identified as youth or young adults with a current or prior experience of homelessness (*n* = 40); the remaining participants identified as service providers (*n* = 24).

Focus Group Findings

Below, we offer community profiles from each of the six focus groups. For each, we share:

- Community characteristics
- Perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness
- Existing resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness
- Needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

We also offer digitized maps of valuable community resources identified by participants in each focus group. Our hope is that these community profiles will serve as a present mirror, and future guide, for the profiled communities in combating youth and young adult homelessness locally.

Orem Community Profile

Community characteristics

- **Community members experience pressure to appear outwardly successful.** Participants identified that it can be difficult to share when a youth or young adult is struggling as families sometimes feel the need to hide homelessness or housing instability due to cultural expectations of success and harmonious family relationships.
- **Community members value self-sufficiency.** Participants shared that communities in the area value independence as an important component of the "pioneer spirit," which further discourages individuals from seeking out support from social service agencies when in need. One participant stated, "People just aren't willing to help, and then when they do help, they hold it against you."

Perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness

- **Judgment stems from the misconception that youth and young adults are responsible for their own homelessness.** Participants noted that homeless youth and young adults are unfairly perceived by others in the community as responsible for their homelessness, which contributes to a diminished willingness to provide services or assistance. A youth participant who had previously experienced homelessness stated, "A lot of people didn't want to help at all . . . because they didn't trust us." Another participant shared, "They blame you for your homelessness." Youth and young adults may also face bullying at school for being homeless, further exacerbating the desire to hide the struggle.
- **Many community members are unaware of the realities of homelessness in the area.** Participants expressed that there is limited awareness of the true prevalence of youth and young adult homelessness due, in part, to a misconception that homelessness only looks like sleeping outside on the street. In reality, most local homeless experiences look like staying with friends (couch surfing) or living out of a vehicle. As one participant noted, "Not all homelessness looks the same." This misconception contributes to a narrative among decision-makers that homelessness services and funding for these services is not needed.
- **State-collected data does not fully represent youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants shared that data collected by annual PIT Counts does not identify the large number of youth and young adults who are couch surfing.

Existing resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Residential treatment centers provide housing and mental health services.** Participants identified residential treatment centers as important resources, noting the benefits of understanding and respectful staff, engagement in enriching activities, and opportunities for choice and agency. However, some aspects of residential treatment, such as restriction of rights and mandated medication, were identified as harmful.
- **Youth and young adults aging out of youth services face barriers to independence.** Participants noted that few resources exist in the area for young adults (aged 18-25). Additionally, finding a stable job can prove challenging for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness due to inconsistent access to the internet or age restrictions for

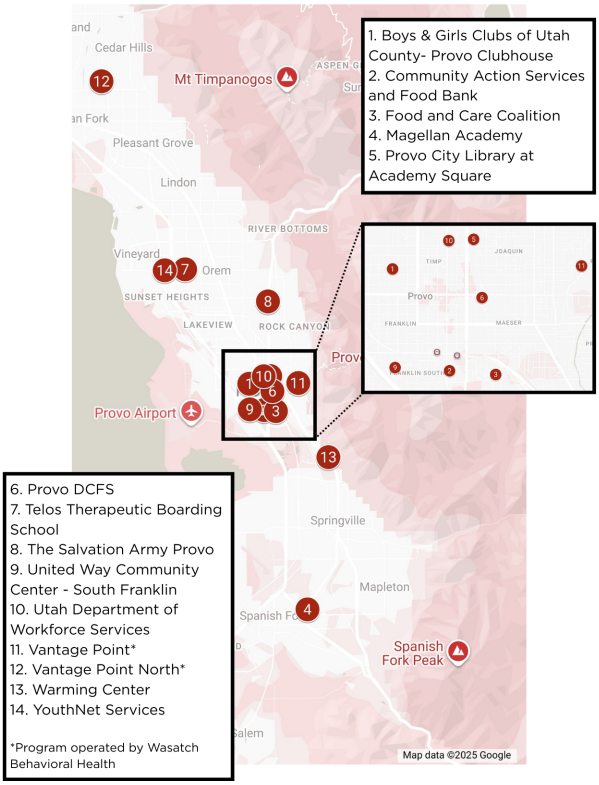
employment. Additionally, those who do find jobs are sometimes not permitted to work enough hours to independently support themselves.

- **Youth and young adults do not always feel safe or ready to accept support.** Participants shared that various factors may contribute to a youth or young adult's choice to not seek help when experiencing homelessness. Youth may feel undeserving of help, afraid of getting in trouble or being judged, or misunderstood by their case management team. Multiple participants mentioned parental concerns that children may be taken from them by the Division of Child and Family Services due to being homeless. A lack of confidentiality from parents may also harm a child's relationship with their service providers. One participant shared her experience with a youth shelter: "Every time I would go there, they would always call my mom and tell her I was there. So . . . I just stopped reaching out for help, because I was like, 'Well, if I do, they're gonna reach out to my mom.'" Additionally, some participants shared that shelters frequently feel unsafe or intimidating to youth and young adults. One participant noted, "We're scared to go to places that do 'keep you safe,' because you are more likely to get hurt or harmed in a 'place of safety.'"

Needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Elevate the perspectives of youth and young adults with lived experience of homelessness.** Participants shared the importance of raising awareness of youth and young adult homelessness to establish a "more caring and educated community" who are receptive to the perspectives of youth and young adults. Youth and young adult participants also shared that hearing more people with lived experiences sharing their stories would make them feel more comfortable in sharing their own. Additionally, involvement of youth and young adults with lived experience in policy and practice decision-making could help to increase the relevance of services for youth and young adults.
- **Enhance support for young adults aging out of youth services.** Participants expressed a need for a shelter in the area that provides housing to young adults aged 18-25. Additionally, interest was expressed in expanded life skills classes to help prepare youth and young adults for adult living, including securing jobs and paying rent. Youth participants noted that opportunities for independence and agency would help them to thrive; one stated, "It's nice to be the driver in your life and not the passenger."

Figure 13. Orem Resource Map



Ogden Community Profile

Community characteristics

- **Youth and young adults can navigate the area by walking and utilizing public transportation.** Participants expressed positive perceptions of Ogden's walkability and noted that public transit is easy to access and effective. Many social service agencies were identified as located near each other, and those that are not can be accessed using public transit.
- **Youth and young adults experience racism and discrimination.** Multiple participants shared that they have experienced racist comments and discriminatory treatment as youth and young adults of color when navigating services and community spaces. One stated, "It's still very like 1950s mindset of like what Black people are . . . We are less likely to get jobs. We are less likely to find love in Utah specifically . . . that's something that . . . needs to be more talked about."
- **Many in the state hold negative perceptions of the area.** Participants stated that many people in Utah consider Ogden to be a dangerous or undesirable area, but that the city has taken steps to combat this perception. Some participants disagreed with this perception, sharing positive experiences that they have had in the area.

Perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness

- **Community stigma perpetuates negative stereotypes.** Participants shared that some community members incorrectly assume that youth and young adults become homeless due to deviant behavior or criminal activity, which leads them to perceive homeless youth and young adults as untrustworthy. Participants indicated that the public is unaware of the complex factors that contribute to youth and young adult homelessness. Due to this stigma, youth and young adults feel the need to hide the fact that they are homeless from adults who may judge rather than support them. A service provider noted, "People often think it's just teenagers being bad . . . No, they're being kicked out or running away fleeing abuse, and there aren't a lot of resources in the community for youth. Youth are often forgotten."
- **"Homelessness goes beyond graphs;" state-collected data does not fully represent youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants noted that data collected in annual PIT Counts does not capture youth and young adults who are couch surfing or staying with friends. Additionally, participants shared that youth and young adults who do sleep outside take extreme steps to hide themselves from others to stay safe, which could prevent PIT teams from finding and counting them. Participants also noted that UHMIS data underrepresents youth and young adults who do not interact with formal homeless services or who lie about their age to service providers to access basic needs.

Existing resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Various service agencies assist youth and young adults in meeting their needs.** Participants expressed a robust understanding of services available to youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness in the area, including the Youth Futures shelter, Department of Workforce Services, Ogden Adult Education, Weber Basin Job Corps, and the Your Community Connection

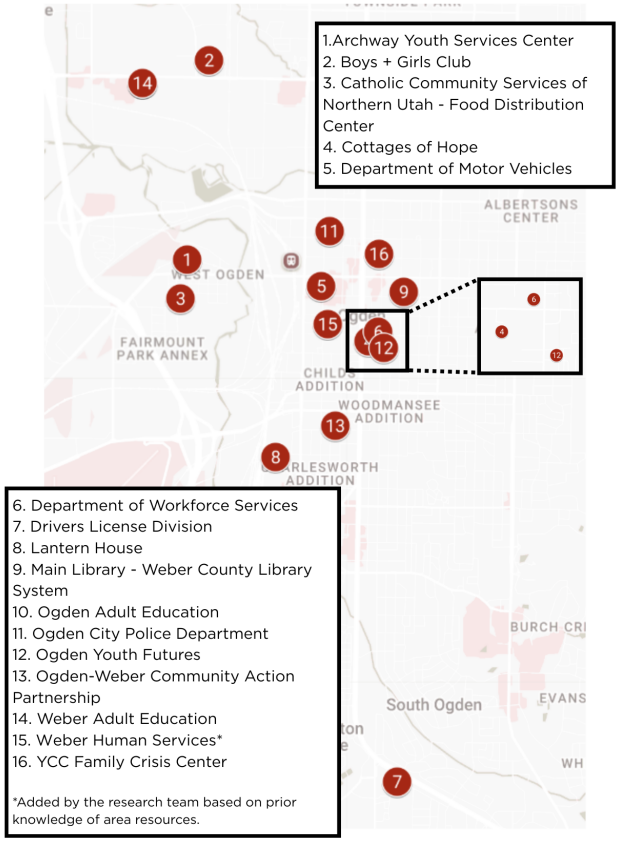
Crisis Shelter. Available services include education, transportation, case management, connection to housing, and mental health services.

- **Age-based policies are a barrier to critical resources and independence.** Participants shared that age requirements for employment and renting prevent youth and young adults from living independently. Additionally, many services require parental consent, which can be a barrier because parents are sometimes unreachable, unwilling, or unable to provide consent. Emancipation can sometimes help youth and young adults navigate these barriers, but the process is extremely time-consuming and difficult, so few formally acquire emancipated status.

Needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Improve access to financial stability.** Participants frequently identified a need for youth and young adults to have greater financial stability through access to steady employment for youth and young adults, increased funding for social service programs, or direct access to cash assistance.
- **Expand youth and young adult access to safe housing and shelter.** Multiple participants expressed a need for additional shelters specifically geared toward substance use recovery. Additionally, others identified the need for transitional living or additional access to housing for young adults leaving youth shelters and seeking to live independently: "Housing is a big barrier for kids coming out of homelessness."
- **Resolve barriers to independence.** Participants indicated a need for more opportunities for youth younger than age 18 to have greater independence and suggested changing age requirements for housing and job opportunities or providing priority access to housing for young adults.

Figure 14. Ogden Resource Map



Davis County Profile

Community characteristics

- **Area schools recognize the prevalence of youth homelessness.** Participants noted that through their formal programs and employee attitudes, the Davis County School District communicates a sense of awareness and care toward youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.
- **Community values of altruism and piety both help and hinder youth and young adults.** Participants noted that religious institutions within the community encourage charitable acts from their congregations, which provide resources and support for homeless services in the area. However, participants also identified that assistance is sometimes limited to offering spiritual support instead of tangible resources. As one focus group participant shared, "I don't need your hope. I need your help."

Perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness

- **Misconceptions about youth and young adult behavior contribute to the stigmatization of youth homelessness.** Participants shared that some community members incorrectly assume that youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are engaged in substance abuse or 'risky' sexual activity. Additionally, others wrongly infer that youth and young adults become homeless after choosing to leave home; in reality, youth are often fleeing unsafe situations at home and have no other options for safe shelter. A participant noted, "A lot of the community thinks that a lot of the youth are homeless on their own terms . . . it's that they've been forced out, or their situations are so unsafe that they can't stay there."
- **State-collected data does not fully represent youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants noted that data collected by annual PIT Counts and UHMIS are underrepresenting youth and young adults, especially those who are staying with friends (couch surfing), unaware of services available to them and thus not accessing or seeking out resources. Additionally, participants noted that youth and young adults are less likely to share with adults that they are experiencing homelessness due to shame or stigma.

Existing resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Schools help connect youth and young adults to resources and support.** Participants noted that in addition to an awareness of youth and young adult homelessness by teachers and administration, programs within schools such as teen centers provide resources to students such as washing machines, showers, and private bathrooms.
- **The Teen Living Center provides housing and support to youth and young adults in need.** The Teen Living Center provides shelter to students experiencing homelessness, as well as transportation services, case management, social connection, and structure from supportive adults. Participants also identified barriers to accessing the Teen Living Center, including students having to undergo a mental health evaluation and obtaining parental consent.

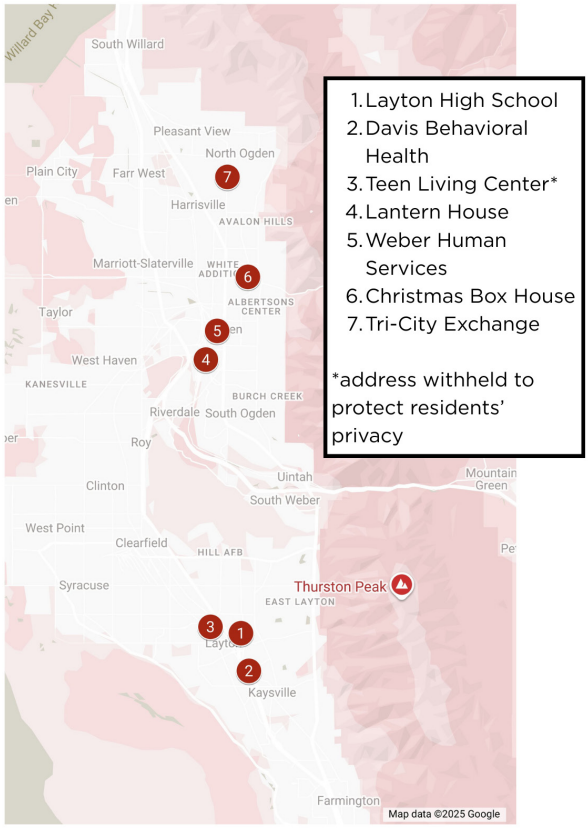
Needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Enhanced public transportation**

would increase service accessibility. Participants expressed a need for increased access to public transportation by reducing cost barriers for youth and young adults, which could be achieved through free public transit or additional distribution of bus passes.

- **Expand Teen Living Center programs.** Participants acknowledged the many benefits of the Teen Living Center program and stated that more centers throughout the area and state could be a valuable resource.
- **Challenge stigmatizing community attitudes of youth and young adult homelessness.** Focus group participants expressed a need for enhanced community connection and a reduction in negative stereotypes of homeless youth. Involving youth and young adults with lived experience in decision-making processes regarding homeless services was thought to be one way to elevate a more realistic representation of homelessness in the area.

Figure 15. Davis County Resource Map



Moab Community Profile

Community characteristics

- **Tourism creates unique challenges for homeless youth and young adults.** Participants noted that the seasonal nature of tourism in Moab results in fewer available jobs in the winter, and that available jobs during peak season may place employees in unsafe situations, including sexual harassment and unsuitable living conditions. A participant explained, "A lot of places have employee housing as a benefit for workers . . . Your housing is tied to your job, so if you are being exploited at work, you cannot easily leave." Moab's status as a tourist destination contributes to a high cost of living that disproportionately burdens youth and young adults at risk of homelessness. Participants stated that car camping is heavily policed within the city limits, potentially due to concerns of tourists illegally camping or pressure to maintain an image of an idyllic tourist town.
- **Rural surroundings uniquely shape experiences of youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants shared that rural homelessness typically involves youth or young adults "doubling up" or couch surfing instead of sleeping outside in the city. While some youth may camp in the surrounding areas, the town is quiet at night with limited safe third places (i.e., accessible community spaces to freely spend time).
- **Larger social issues complicate youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants perceived there to be a high prevalence of domestic violence and substance abuse that contributes to youth and young adult homelessness and intergenerational poverty. Additionally, participants reported that both drug and human trafficking in the area presents additional dangers to youth. One participant stated, "Without having adult supervision and support, even . . . a student who's considered an adult is still very vulnerable . . . to being exploited."

Perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness

- **Lack of understanding of youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants stated that many community members do not recognize the prevalence of youth and young adult homelessness in the area, perhaps due to a misconception of Moab that one participant described as the "glow of 'Moab is small. Moab is safe. Stuff doesn't happen here.'" Additionally, adults who interact with homeless students are not aware of available resources or how to help access these, if this is not part of their formal role.
- **Formal systems are not in place to collect youth and young adult homelessness data.** Participants shared that no formal system is in place at the school-district level to collect data regarding the prevalence of homelessness among students. A lack of teacher and administrator understanding of the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness leads to homeless youth and young adults being overlooked.
- **State-collected data does not fully represent youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants shared that data gathered in annual PIT Counts does not accurately represent the prevalence of homelessness in the area, pointing out that few people live outdoors during the winter months, instead opting to seek warmth and shelter at the emergency room or jail.

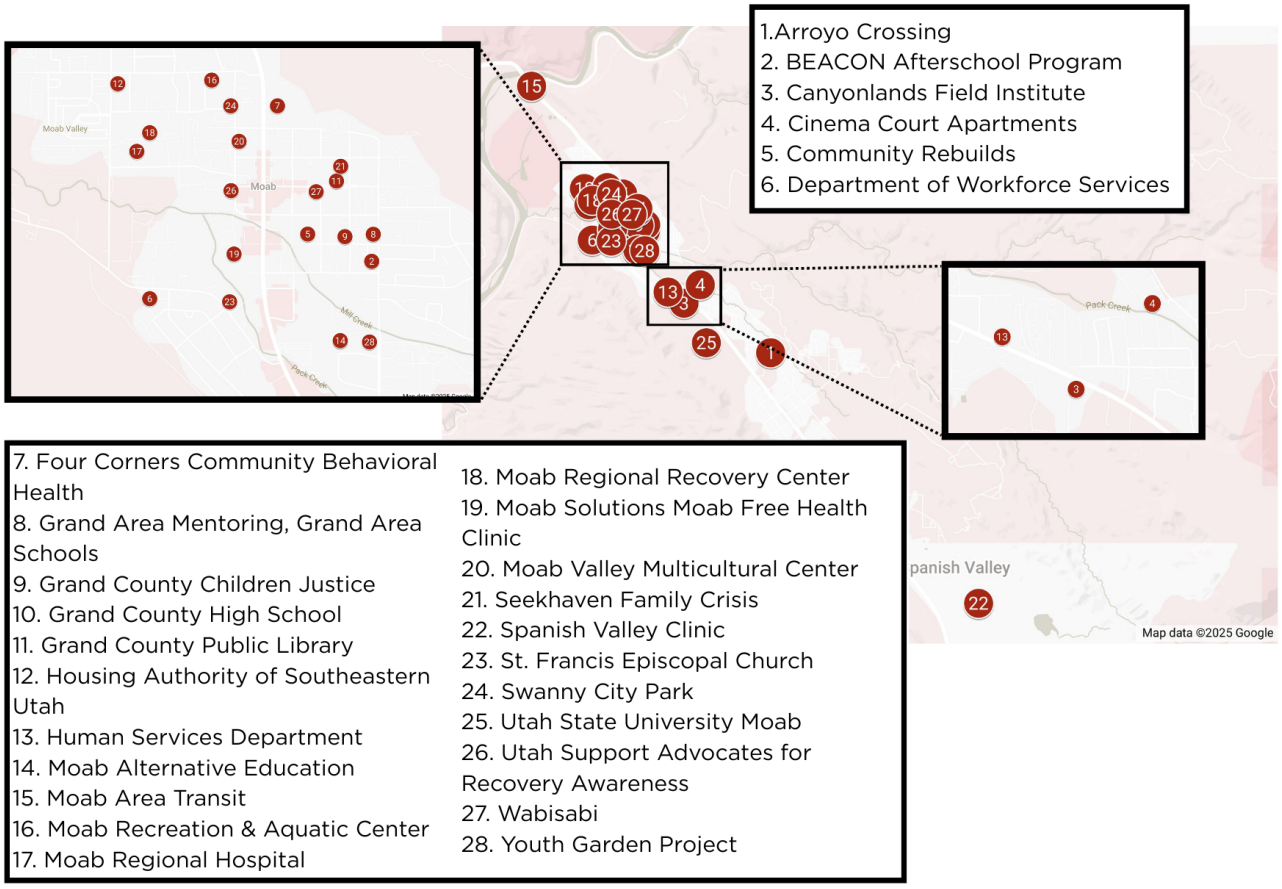
Existing resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Few resources exist specifically for youth or young adults experiencing homelessness.** Participants shared that resources for homeless youth are "very much piecemeal," with area social service organizations working together to help youth and young adults but often run into complications. Youth younger than age 18 face additional barriers in accessing resources due to the need for parental consent for many services, which requires extensive advocacy and knowledge of McKinney-Vento policy to resolve. Participants also noted that the lack of a youth homeless shelter in the area complicates providing youth with safe housing.
- **Homeless youth and young adults do not feel safe accessing services.** Participants shared that families interacting with the school district often do not feel comfortable disclosing that they are experiencing housing instability, especially families who recently immigrated to the United States. Additionally, youth and young adults are hesitant to share their situation with teachers, administrators, and service providers due to previous negative experiences with authority figures, fear of entrapment, or a sense of hopelessness. Participants noted that a Spanish-speaking provider could be useful in better connecting with Spanish-speaking families.
- **Tailor services and policy to specifically address youth and young adult needs.** Participants shared a need for additional resources for youth and young adults, including a transitional living program, a shelter for minors or families, and more accessible pathways to services that do not require parental consent. Importantly, increasing shelter services was not unanimously supported. One participant shared in a written response a concern that a shelter would attract additional people in need of services to the area, straining already-strapped resources.

Needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Utilize trained social service professionals to establish greater trust with youth and young adults.** Participants expressed a need for more community health workers, social workers, or school nurses who could build trust and communicate with youth and young adults, clearly explain the benefits of accessing social services, and refer to appropriate agencies for further support.

Figure 16. Moab Resource Map



7. Four Corners Community Behavioral Health
8. Grand Area Mentoring, Grand Area Schools
9. Grand County Children Justice
10. Grand County High School
11. Grand County Public Library
12. Housing Authority of Southeastern Utah
13. Human Services Department
14. Moab Alternative Education
15. Moab Area Transit
16. Moab Recreation & Aquatic Center
17. Moab Regional Hospital
18. Moab Regional Recovery Center
19. Moab Solutions Moab Free Health Clinic
20. Moab Valley Multicultural Center
21. Seekhaven Family Crisis
22. Spanish Valley Clinic
23. St. Francis Episcopal Church
24. Swanny City Park
25. Utah State University Moab
26. Utah Support Advocates for Recovery Awareness
27. Wabisabi
28. Youth Garden Project

Cedar City Profile

Community characteristics

- **Rural setting shapes homeless youth and young adults.** Participants noted that residents from surrounding small communities come to Cedar City to access homelessness services. However, there is limited public transportation in the Cedar City area, so most youth and young adults walk or bike as primary forms of transportation.
- **Youth and young adults aging out of congregate care centers are at risk of homelessness.** Participants stated that youth and young adults being discharged from congregate care centers sometimes become homeless. Participants also suggested that congregate care centers may exacerbate risk factors for homelessness due to coercive programming or abusive and traumatic experiences.
- **Youth and young adults travel throughout the state to access services.** Participants identified that many homeless youth and young adults will travel between cities and counties to access services given the limited supports available locally.

Perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness

- **Community members misunderstand the cause of youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants shared that many community members assume that youth and young adults become homeless due to their own choices or behavior rather than recognize the complicated factors that contribute to youth homelessness. One participant stated, "I feel like sometimes they think it's your fault that you're homeless and that you should be able to just automatically get out of it by yourself, without any help at all."
- **Community members associate homelessness with criminality.** Participants shared that law enforcement and other community members assume that because youth and young adults have a history of homelessness, they are untrustworthy or involved in illegal activity. One participant stated, "Cops immediately assume all homeless youth and people in general are on drugs, high, and only committing crimes."
- **State-collected data does not fully represent youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants noted that data gathered from the annual PIT Count may be missing homeless youth and young adults who are living with friends, sleeping in cars, or hiding the fact that they are homeless. Additionally, the PIT Count, which is conducted in the winter, does not count youth and young adults who travel to Cedar City seasonally in the summer to escape hot St. George summers. Additionally, the state's UHMIS data does not identify youth and young adults who do not interact with formal homelessness services.

Existing resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Youth and young adults use both formal and informal resources for shelter.** Participants identified that youth and young adults experiencing homelessness stay with friends, sleep in cars, and camp outside of town, but also utilize formal services including the Youth Futures shelter, Iron County Care & Share services, teen centers in local schools, and programs through the Department of Workforce Services.
- **Lack of funding and overcrowding**

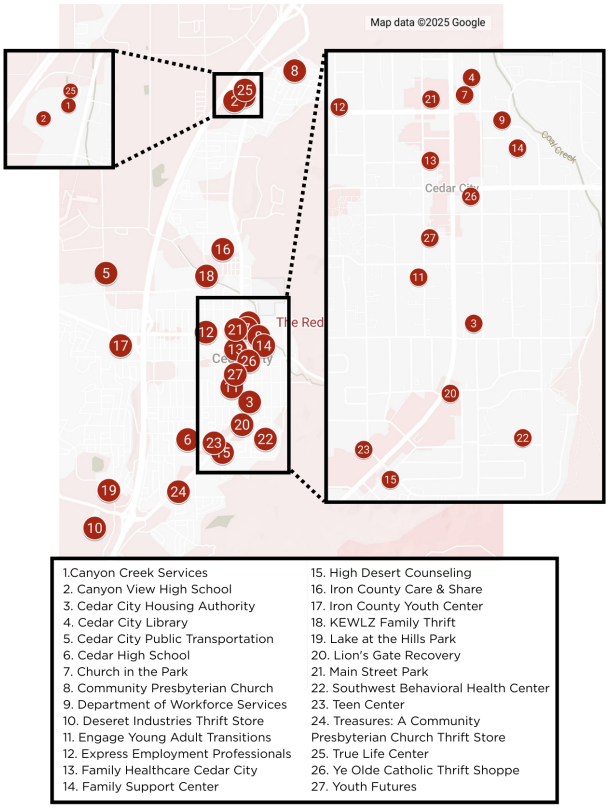
strains existing resources. In Cedar City, only two long-term shelters exist: one for homeless youth (younger than age 19) and another for adults. Participants shared that limited space at both shelters prevents youth in need from accessing services. Additionally, formal services are limited by funding.

- **Resources are difficult for youth and young adults to identify and access.** Participants noted that youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness may not be aware of the resources available to them and either must do their own research or be connected to services by a case manager or service provider.

Needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Expand public transportation to enhance youth and young adults' access to jobs and resources.** Participants shared a need for additional public transportation and transportation resources, especially between surrounding towns.
- **Provide additional support to youth and young adults leaving youth homelessness services.** Participants shared the need for additional mentoring and support for youth and young adults who are transitioning to adult living, including transitional living programs, mentorship, and long-term follow-up care.
- **Develop additional transitional housing for youth and young adults.** Participants identified a need for additional funding for transitional housing and shelters in the area, pointing out specific populations that would benefit from a specialized shelter, including single mothers or young adults who have aged out of the youth shelter.

Figure 17. Cedar City Resource Map



St. George Community Profile

Community characteristics

- **Limited public transportation makes traveling the area physically dangerous for youth and young adults.** Participants indicated that limited public transportation in St. George requires youth and young adults to bike or walk most of the time. However, the area is difficult for pedestrians to navigate, sometimes resulting in youth and young adults being hit by cars, and hot summer temperatures create hazardous conditions for extended periods of biking or walking. Additionally, hitchhiking or relying on others for rides can place youth and young adults in dangerous situations.
- **Youth and young adults aging out of residential treatment centers are at risk of homelessness.** Participants noted that some homeless youth and young adults become homeless after being discharged from surrounding residential treatment centers, which is unique to this area because of the high prevalence of these centers in Southwestern Utah.

Perceptions of youth and young adult homelessness

- **Misconceptions about the cause of youth and young adult homelessness leads to unfair treatment.** Youth participants shared that some adults, including police officers they have interacted with, suspect them of wrongdoing because of their homelessness. One participant stated, "There's a really big stigma against homeless teenagers." These misconceptions were identified as leading to heightened police scrutiny and difficulty finding employment.
- **Many community members are unaware of or uncomfortable with the issue of youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants shared that many adults are unaware that youth and young adults experience homelessness in the area. Participants suggested that those who are aware of the issue do not take action to solve the problem, possibly because they are uncomfortable with the issue of youth and young adult homelessness. One participant stated, "People don't like saying the word homeless."
- **State-collected data does not fully represent youth and young adult homelessness.** Participants identified that information gathered during annual PIT Counts misses youth and young adults who couch surf or sleep in their cars. Additionally, youth and young adults living on the street may not appear homeless to those conducting the count and may not be approached to complete the survey. Adaptive mistrust in adults may also make homeless youth and young adults less likely to participate in the count when given the opportunity. A youth participant shared, "When I was homeless and sleeping in my car, I was trying to avoid everybody. So . . . you're not going to find them."

Existing resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Employment training supports help youth and young adults navigate a complex job market.** While participants acknowledged the few job opportunities for homeless youth and young adults in the area, participants shared the benefits of training and services through the Department of Workforce Services that assist with finding stable employment. Some youth participants shared that they leveraged self-advocacy skills developed

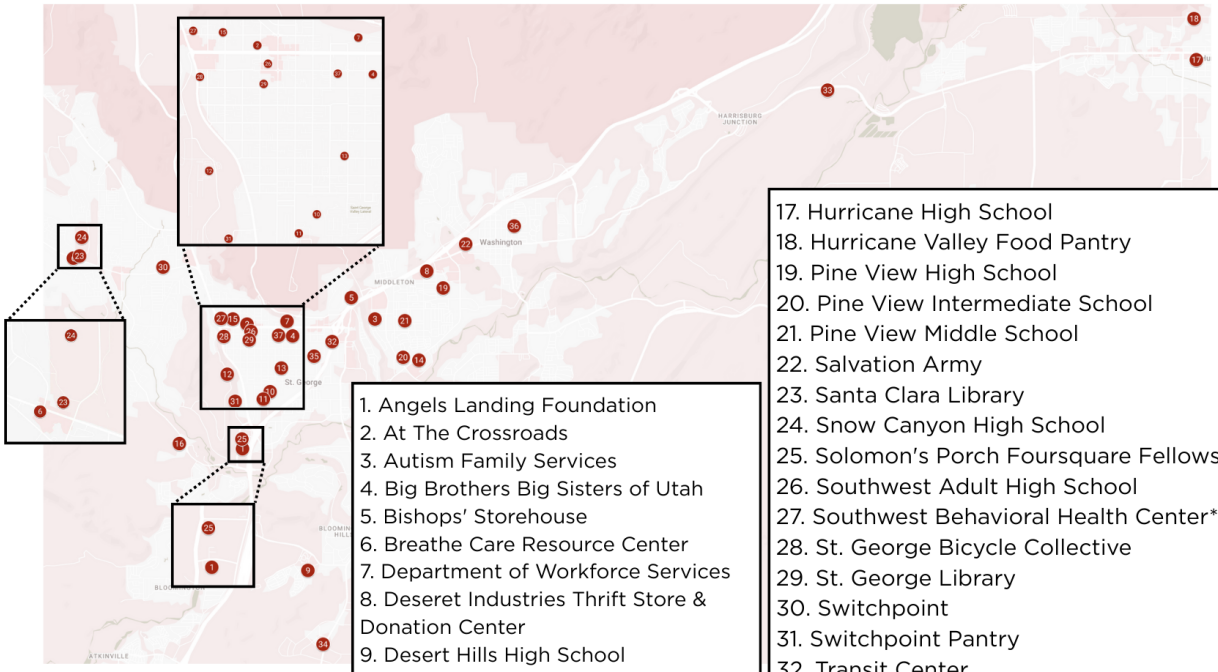
with case managers to avoid being taken advantage of by employers.

- **Youth and young adults utilize formal and informal resources when experiencing homelessness.** Participants noted that youth and young adults experiencing homelessness often cycle between staying with friends, living out of cars, camping in public lands or a local park, and staying in hotels when possible. Youth and young adults can utilize teen centers in local schools for resources like laundry machines and showers, while a youth shelter offers housing, case management, and additional services.
- **Lack of affordable housing complicates youth and young adults' transition to independent living.** Participants noted policies for renting in the area often prevent youth and young adults from living independently: strict income and employment history requirements, as well as burdensome costs of security deposits, application fees, and down payments. Some who are transitioning out of homelessness can access student housing through higher education, but others have to travel to other areas (e.g., Cedar City) to access transitional living resources.

Needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- **Strengthen local public transportation to benefit pedestrians.** Many participants indicated a strong community need for more affordable and wide-reaching public transportation. Additionally, participants shared the need for government efforts to make navigating the area on foot or bike safer, potentially through greater enforcement of traffic laws.
- **Expand access to resources by increasing awareness of social services in the area.** Participants shared the need for increased awareness among youth and young adults of the resources available to help them navigate homelessness. For example, several participants learned about resources available locally through engagement with a service provider during the focus group.
- **Involve youth and young adults with lived experience of homelessness in government decision-making.** Participants expressed interest in increased efforts to involve youth and young adults in local and state decision-making processes through initiatives like the existing Youth Action Board.

Figure 18. St. George Resource Map



1. Angels Landing Foundation
2. At The Crossroads
3. Autism Family Services
4. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Utah
5. Bishops' Storehouse
6. Breathe Care Resource Center
7. Department of Workforce Services
8. Deseret Industries Thrift Store & Donation Center
9. Desert Hills High School
10. Dixie High School
11. Dixie Middle School
12. Dixie Technical College
13. DOVE Center
14. Family Healthcare Riverside Clinic
15. Family Support Center
16. Five County Association of Governments' Community Action Partnership

17. Hurricane High School
18. Hurricane Valley Food Pantry
19. Pine View High School
20. Pine View Intermediate School
21. Pine View Middle School
22. Salvation Army
23. Santa Clara Library
24. Snow Canyon High School
25. Solomon's Porch Foursquare Fellowship
26. Southwest Adult High School
27. Southwest Behavioral Health Center*
28. St. George Bicycle Collective
29. St. George Library
30. Switchpoint
31. Switchpoint Pantry
32. Transit Center
33. Utah DMV Hurricane Office
34. Utah Food Bank
35. Utah Tech Blazer Food Pantry
36. Washington City Library
37. Youth Futures

*Added by the research team based on prior knowledge of area resources.

Discussion and Recommendations

Report Summary

When the three project phases are examined collectively, several key insights emerge:

- While services and supports are concentrated in the Salt Lake County CoC, youth and young adults are actively experiencing homelessness at considerable rates in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs and **must be included in statewide conversations about homelessness**.
- Youth and young adults in rural areas often **travel long distances to access needed services and support**.
- **Rates and experiences of homelessness based on the UHMIS data and PIT Counts are vastly underrepresenting the prevalence** of youth and young adult homelessness across Utah, partially due to conflicting federal definitions of homelessness.
- While some communities report low rates of youth and young adult homelessness, this is likely underestimated and underreported due to (a) **pervasive cultural stigma** associated with identifying as homeless or lacking material resources, and (b) the **hidden nature of youth and young adult homelessness** due to most homelessness presenting as couch surfing/doubling up and staying in vehicles and/or on public lands out of plain sight.
- As seen nationwide, **homelessness often co-occurs with, or follows, engagement in child welfare and juvenile justice systems**, and is **overrepresented among LGBTQ+ youth and young adults** and those **experiencing mental health and substance use related challenges**. More unique to Utah (especially Southern Utah) is the high rate of homelessness that follows exits from residential treatment programs.
- **Rising housing costs** are a key barrier to accessing affordable housing across the state, but especially in communities (e.g., Park City, Moab) where tourism is associated with large wealth gaps and extremely high housing costs.
- Existing formal programs, such as **teen centers, crisis supports, youth shelters, and informal supports, like libraries, religious communities, and peers/friends/neighbors, are crucial** in supporting youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. These must be sustained and expanded to prioritize the well-being of youth and young adults across Utah.

Program Model Spotlights

It is helpful to spotlight a few programs which participants noted as exemplary models for potential consideration for replication or expansion. In each case, participants in interviews or focus groups suggest we consider how these programs may scale in other communities in the state.

School District-Wide Coordination in Davis County

Various participants highlighted the coordinated and well-resourced services available to students in the Davis County School District as a model they hoped could be replicated in their communities. For example, one Davis County District participant mentioned the coordination between schools and the Teen Living Center as students “may self-refer to the Teen Living Center through a teen center coordinator, school counselor, or administrator

if they are experiencing homelessness or housing instability. With parent/guardian authorization, student information is shared with the Teen Living Center (TLC), who determines residency eligibility, and Davis School District collaborates with the TLC to coordinate wrap-around services that support stabilization, graduation, post-secondary planning, and long-term self-sufficiency." Another participant mentioned educational outcomes associated with their coordinated services: "We went from a 72% graduation rate with our McKinney-Vento seniors to an average of a 98% graduation rate for homeless seniors who agreed to participate in the program that offered additional academic coaching support. [And] this last year all of our kids participating seniors graduated."

Teen Living Center (Layton)

The Teen Living Center (TLC) in Layton opened in 2024 and is operated by Switchpoint, a nonprofit organization which supports people experiencing homelessness across Utah. Located near several schools in Davis County, the TLC offers stable housing for students aged 14-18 actively enrolled in high school while experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity locally. The program has 16 dormitory-style rooms, a full communal kitchen, individual case management, and is staffed 24/7. Youth living at the TLC are often disconnected from their guardian(s) prior to entry in the program, and TLC staff serve as temporary guardians (or students sign themselves in upon turning 18). Youth can stay until they graduate from high school and are supported in transition to post-secondary education and/or independent living. While a highly specialized and intensive program model, youth living at the TLC urged us to consider how this program may be scaled to other communities across the state.

Transitional Living Program (Cedar City)

The Transitional Living Program (TLP) for young adults aged 19-25 is one of three programs operated by Youth Futures, a non-profit organization with locations in Ogden, St. George, and Cedar City. While all three programs offer shelter and drop-in services, only Cedar City houses a TLP. This program is administered in a house on a residential street near the youth shelter and has space for six young adults to live independently and pay partial rent (a proportion of their income) while receiving supportive case management. Select residents from both the St. George and Cedar City Youth Futures shelters transition to the Cedar City TLP when they turn 19. Participants in both the St. George and Cedar City focus groups remarked on the value of this program, and their desire for similar programs to be established and expanded. One Cedar City focus group participant suggested that specialized TLP programs, like "shelters for single mothers, or transitional living for single mothers or teen parents. That would have been helpful for me."

Key Recommendations

Recommendations for all community members

- **Recognize that rural and suburban homelessness among youth and young adults across Utah *does* exist.** Often, youth and young adult homelessness is more hidden in rural and suburban areas than in urban centers, as youth and young adults are likely to be couch

"Don't forget about the rural communities. I feel like the rural communities get forgotten about and that we are not accounted for as much." - Cedar City focus group participant

surfing/doubling up, staying in vehicles, and/or camping out on public land out of sight. Further, a lack of rural resources puts additional strain on metropolitan area resources.

- **Reduce stigma around homelessness.** Many youth, young adults, and service providers we engaged in this study acknowledged stigma as one of the key barriers to seeking supports which could help youth and young adults move out of homelessness and toward stability. Even when resources or services do exist, youth and young adults may be reluctant to engage them due to the stigma associated with naming a need for support. *How might we reduce the stigma associated with asking for help?*

Recommendations for youth- and young adult-serving programs

- **Support youth in transition from child welfare, juvenile justice, and congregate care programs to prevent homelessness.** Youth and young adults who have been involved in these systems are overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness. The transition out of these systems is often associated with housing instability. Service providers should work with youth and young adults to create transition plans from these systems to prevent homelessness.
- **Continue to increase local program coordination.** Some communities have extremely coordinated structures for supporting youth and young adults experiencing homelessness (see: Davis County), and other communities do not. Communities should ensure that representatives from social services, schools, healthcare, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems are represented in CoC and other community-level planning.
- **Expand transitional living programs for emerging adult age group (18-24).** While space in shelters is a pressing need throughout the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs, participants noted the dire need for expansion of transitional living programs. Young adults aged 18-24 are often disconnected from school-based resources and unable to receive support designated for minors. Participants across the state noted a desire for more transitional living programs and related supports navigating the transition to adulthood (e.g., job training, mentorship, independent living skills programs).
- **Include youth and young adults in decision-making.** Youth and young adult participants in focus groups across the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs remarked on their interest in being involved in leadership and decision-making, such as serving on Youth Action Boards for the CoCs.

"Why would I want someone advocating for me who's never lived it? . . . They're not gonna understand what it feels like. They've never slept on the floor, on the concrete outside. They haven't experienced those things, so they don't know how bad it is. So if they can't empathize in that way, why would I want them speaking for me?" - St. George focus group youth participant

Recommendations for policymakers

- **Sustainably fund teen centers.** Teen centers are filling a vital void in communities across the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs for high school students at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. However, the current funding model for teen centers, which does not include staffing support, is unsustainable. Because of this, participants noted that teen centers without supplemental funding are closing, only two years after legislative funding to build them. Recognizing their positive impact on graduation rates of students and on students' material and mental health needs, teen centers should be sustainably funded by the Utah State Legislature and include funding for both resources *and* staffing.
- **Collect state-level data that represent on-the-ground experiences.** Participants across interviews and focus groups noted the limitations of the current metrics (UHMIS and PIT) in capturing accurate rates of homelessness in their communities. Thus, the state of Utah should explore adjunctive quantitative metrics to better represent homelessness rates. Further, the state should fund periodic (e.g., every five years) mixed-methods studies to ensure on-the-ground experiences are represented in state-level data. These studies should center and uplift those with lived experience of homelessness.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this 30-60-minute interview. Today, I'd like to learn about youth homelessness in your region by asking you a series of questions. As a reminder, if there are any questions you do not want to answer, you do not have to.

Opening questions:

1. From a big-picture perspective, describe the state of youth and young adult homelessness in your region. [Youth alternative: what does youth and young adult homelessness look like in your area?]
2. Can you share more about what makes your region unique in relation to addressing youth homelessness (e.g., culture, geography, population, transportation, etc.)? [Youth alternative: what makes your area special or different when it comes to youth homelessness?]

Question about service landscape

3. What do you see as some of the most important services for young people experiencing/at risk of homelessness locally? (Probe: What supports do people access in the absence of formal services? Probe: Can you share a story about a person/situation that exemplifies some of these issues?)
4. What do you see as some of the things that are missing in your service landscape? (Probe: What feels most urgent as an unaddressed need? Probe: Can you share a story about a person/situation that exemplifies some of these issues?) [Youth probe: What is missing in this area that you think should be here?]

Closing questions:

5. What other information do we need to know about this topic that hasn't been discussed yet?
6. Who else should we talk to in this interview phase (service providers, youth leaders, faith leaders, school personnel, etc.)?
7. Would you be willing to join us for a focus group to dig deeper into this conversation in person?
8. Who else should we be sure to connect with to invite to our in-person focus groups?

Appendix B. Demographic Survey

Demographics questions — (clarify verbally that these are OPTIONAL, will not be tied to their individual interview data, and are only used to capture a sense of who we spoke to in our research)

Do you identify as a person with lived experience of homelessness?	Yes	No
Are you employed to support persons experiencing homelessness (i.e., provide services, advocate)?	Yes	No
What is your current age?		
What is your race/ethnicity		
What is your gender identity?		

Appendix C. Focus Group Guide

- To start out: What are some of the most important **things to know about being a young person who has experienced homelessness**/someone who has worked with youth experiencing homelessness in this area?
- What are some of the community characteristics that shape this area's **perceptions** of youth homelessness? (Probe: What is unique about this area's culture, attitudes, etc.?) How does this approach how the community works to **solve** youth homelessness? (Probe: What is unique about this area's geography, transportation access, etc.?) [Youth alternative: What is different about your community's approach to helping youth experiencing homelessness?]
- What are some of the most important **formal and informal resources available** here for youth experiencing homelessness? [Youth alternative: What are the most important resources for youth experiencing homelessness? (This could be official programs or informal supports like help from friends, family, or neighbors.)]
- *Share preliminary data from secondary data analysis*. How does this **data compare to your perceptions of youth homelessness in this community**? (Probe: What might not be represented in these numbers? What has changed over time?) [Youth alternative: What surprises you about this data—or is different than what you might expect? What isn't surprising?]
- How would you like to see youth and young adults **participating in Continuum of Care (COC) leadership**? (Probe: Possibilities and challenges you see for this? What is needed to make this happen?) [Youth alternative: How do you think youth should be involved in leadership roles to help solve youth homelessness?]

Mapping Session

We'll use these maps to identify (to the best of our ability) where resources that serve and support youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are located.

- We talked about some of the **formal and informal resources available**. Now we are going to put those on this map. Are there other services or supports when looking at this map that feel important to add on here?
- Place sticky notes on pre-printed maps, generating visual representations of where support services and resources are located. You are encouraged to map services and supports beyond these boundaries, when appropriate [online and print resources]

Once the resources are mapped, discuss what it's been like to use or try to use these resources.

- How do these **resources function/ operate** (e.g., accessibility, waitlists, hours of operation)? [Youth alternative: How easy or hard is it to use these services?]
  - What **difficulties** are there in using these services and supports? (gaps/ weaknesses)
  - What is **helpful** in accessing these services and supports?
  - What **successes or barriers** have you had or seen with these resources? In cases of success, what facilitated the success?

Facilitate large group discussion about:

- Where is there a **concentration** of services? Or, how are they spread out?
- How do community members get their needs met **outside of these services** (e.g. collective care/mutual aid among community members)?
- What support **services people feel are lacking** but would like to have in their communities and are most needed (e.g., current gaps in the provision of services). What would need to happen to close some of the gaps?

If you could wave a magic wand, and **add *3* resources to your community**, what would they be? Write down your three on individual note cards (solo activity).