



2013

Youth Count! Report



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AmeriCorps VISTA Members
Billings Metro VISTA Project



Youth Count!

Sponsored by the City of Billings and Tumbleweed Program



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*Emily Aerts, Chelsia Davis and Joshua Downes
Photo by Aundi Hunter*

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Section I: Executive Summary

Introduction

Every city has a slightly different picture of homelessness that varies by gender, race, ethnicity, age, population size, and service array. Billings is the largest city in Montana with 104,170 citizens, according to the 2010 United States Census. Despite being a small city, the Billings School District identified 560 students who had experienced homelessness in 2012-2013, not including young children, drop-outs, or homeschooled youth.

In 2011, the National Center on Family Homelessness determined that one out of every 45 children is homeless, with a national average of 2.2%. These numbers show the desperate situation of youth homelessness in Billings when compared to the national average. Further, the 2013 Billings Housing Status Point-In-Time Survey indicated 225 children experiencing homelessness. The survey also determined youth account for 28% of the overall homeless population in Billings. Many of these children have families, but some do not. Some live with neighbors and friends, but without a support network, many are forced to live on the streets.

Key Findings

- **Number:** The number of youth experiencing homelessness in Billings is escalating well past the expected increase in overall population.
- **Family Conflict:** Resolution of family conflict is the most significant need and life barrier identified by youth and young adults in Billings. The survey identified an overwhelming need for solid familial and emotional support structure, and resolution of family conflict.
- **Education:** A vast majority of respondents have high aspirations for their future: attend college, have a career, maintain affordable housing, etc. Disadvantaged youth in Billings have the desire to finish high school and attend college, but do not have the support and financial means to do so.
- **Housing:** The city's supply of affordable housing specific to and accessible by youth and young adults is not sufficient to meet identified personal and community need.
- **Service Knowledge:** Youth and young adults do not have sufficient knowledge, resources or identification to navigate and access services such as housing, food, treatment, clothing, and transportation. Further, youth admitted using sexual encounters to trade for necessities.
- **Food:** Food resources are not easily accessed to end hunger for school-aged youth and young adults in Billings.
- **Treatment:** Access to treatment specific to addiction, mental health and the provision of emotional support should be enhanced and diversified for youth and young adults.
- **Employment:** Youth and young adults are underemployed in Billings and financial support / employment has been identified as a primary life barrier.

Background

History

In 2004, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness challenged communities to develop strategic ten-year plans to impact chronic homelessness and poverty. Subsequently, the *Montana Council on Homelessness* chose the City of Billings as a pilot project to develop the first ten-year plan and the intent was to create a replicable model for other communities end chronic homelessness. In 2006, the Billings City Council selected twenty members for a *Mayor's Committee on Homelessness* devoted to proposing, debating and implementing city-wide homelessness initiatives.

In the fall of 2009, the Mayor's Committee and Billings City Council adopted *Welcome Home Billings*; a ten-year plan designed to increase overall collaborative efforts and resources to assist the homeless in our community. In order to creatively address local homelessness initiatives, the City's Community Development Division staff created an AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program in 2009 known as the *Billings Metro VISTA Project*, sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Generating Youth Count!

While local data efforts have traditionally focused on annual Point-In-Time surveys conducted each January, there were no concerted efforts to specifically garner data relevant to the status of youth experiencing homelessness, the services they were utilizing and the services they need to access.

In 2012, Brenda Beckett, Community Development Manager, identified the need to gather targeted data on the number and demographic characteristics of local youth experiencing homelessness. She authored the *Youth Count!* VISTA Assignment Description and committed financial resources to sponsor the project. Beckett then proposed the initiative to Sheri Boelter, Executive Director for Tumbleweed Program, Inc., who graciously accepted the challenge to direct and supervise VISTA members assigned to the project. In January 2013, Joshua Downes and Chelsia Davis dedicated one year of their lives to spearhead the project.

Definitions

Homeless Youth: *The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* definition of a homeless youth is any child or youth under the age of eighteen who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. For example, youth who reside in: runaway / homeless youth shelters; transitional housing; doubled-up in housing with other families or friends; couch-surfing; hotels or motels; shelters with family members; and campgrounds. The definition also includes those living in places unfit for human habitation, including cars, abandoned buildings, lots, parks, alleyways, uninhabitable trailers, or the streets.

Precariously Housed: Youth who are unaccompanied and on their own including those: in foster care and juvenile justice custody; who have left the system without a place to live; or placed into transitional housing including group homes, treatment centers and shelters.

At Risk: Youth who are in danger of becoming precariously housed or homeless due to inadequate financial stability, lack of a sustainable family or support structure, etc.

Methodology

For the purposes of the *Youth Count!* project, VISTA members used the following as a baseline for survey development: youth ages 13 to 21 who were precariously housed, who were sheltered and unsheltered or living in places unfit for human habitation. Those who self-identified as “couch-surfers” were also enumerated as their living condition is neither adequate nor fixed.

Respondents who indicated they usually slept in either a car, outside, or a building unfit for human habitation and the living conditions of their environment (is it safe and fit for people to live in) were classified as *homeless*.

For determining youth who are *at risk of homelessness*, the above factors that lead to homelessness are considered in addition to questions relating to primary caregiver(s). For example, the caregiver(s): told the youth to leave home; have been emotionally supportive; called them names or cursed at them; made it feel unsafe living with them; and have used drugs around them or in the home.

Respondents classified as *precariously housed* indicated residency in transitional housing, including: group home; treatment center; or in the custody of the justice system.

The data contained herein will provide community organizations and service providers with a better understanding of the number of the various types of homeless youth, and further, their needs to be met in order to bring them out of homelessness. Services and programs can then be restructured accurately and proficiently to meet the specific needs that the youth have identified within the survey.

While efforts are made to avoid duplication and omissions in data, survey results are based on information youth are voluntarily willing to share. Given these limitations, the data collected on homeless youth in Billings provides statistical parameters and patterns which are helpful in setting strategic priorities and benchmarks.

Section II: Research & Development

National Best Practices

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) amended the federal strategic plan to prevent and impact homelessness, *Opening Doors*, in 2012. The amendment introduced the *Framework to End Youth Homelessness*, which included strategies to build capacity through assessment followed by the creation and implementation of plans to end youth homelessness. Core outcomes including stable housing, education, employment, positive connections and well-being, were also identified. Without identified national standards for calculating the number of youth experiencing homelessness, communities have been called upon to conduct collaborative point-in-time counts specific to this population.

Nine urban center locations were chosen by USICH to pilot *Youth Count!* initiatives around the country, including: Boston, Massachusetts; New York City, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; King County, Washington; Hennepin County, Minnesota; Washington State; Houston, Texas; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Los Angeles, California. By January 2013, the following communities also conducted surveys to capture data on youth experiencing homelessness: Washington DC; Baltimore, Maryland; and Clark County, Nevada. Additional communities have completed surveys targeting youth homelessness since initial research was conducted for this project.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness [website](#) has many useful features for locations planning a targeted youth survey. An interactive map of over 15 completed youth survey locations contains links to specific websites relative to data findings and recommendations. For example, the *Amherst H. Wilder Foundation* hosts several studies focusing on youth homelessness in Minnesota from the year 2001 on.

Priority research areas included: surveys; outreach to organizations with experience in conducting a youth survey; and results reports. Survey examples illuminated survey concepts, questions asked, and responses received. Reports illustrated challenges, provided insight regarding project development and identified recommendations for future initiatives.

Key Advice Points

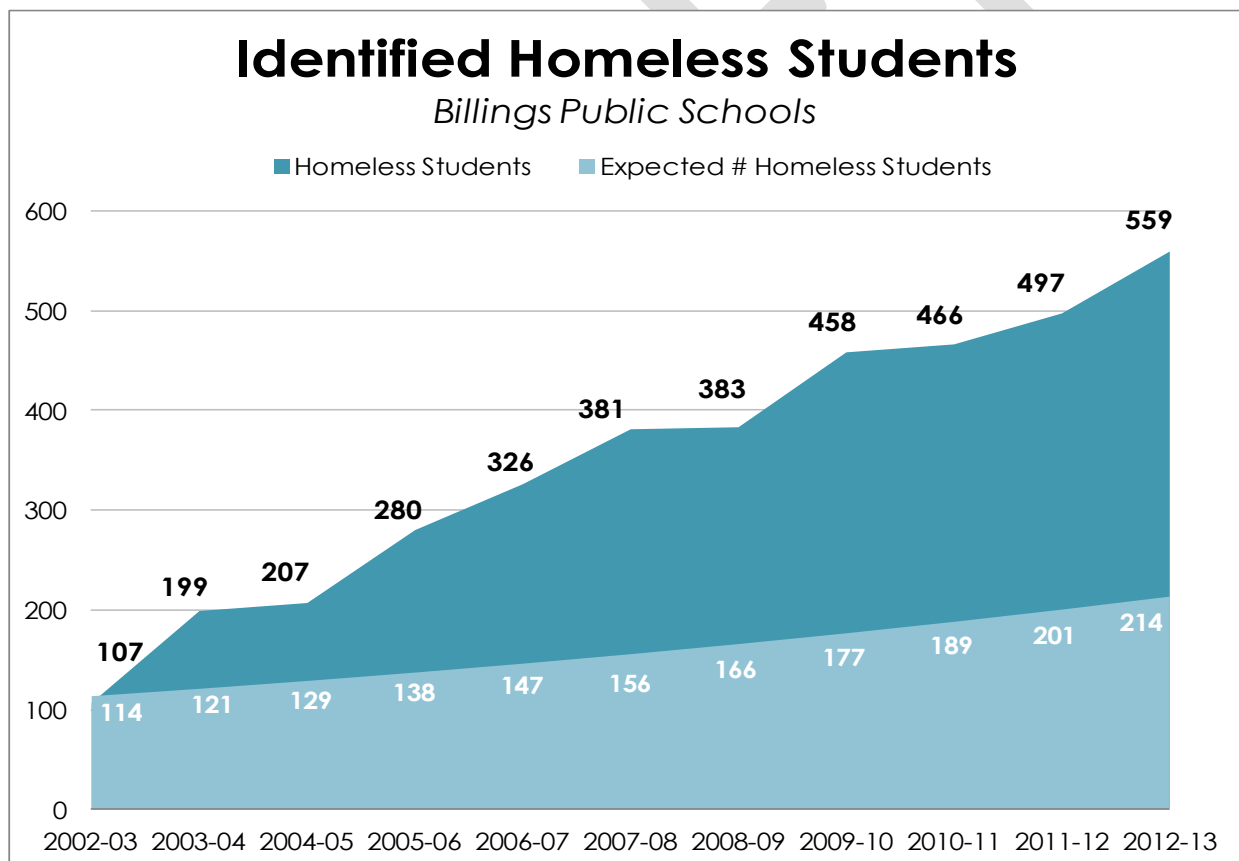
- Ensure adequate preparation, research and coordination takes place prior to starting a count.
- Mapping out locations where youth receive services and congregate.
- Engaging the involvement of the school district via the homeless education liaison.
- Engage the support and involvement of local organizations for feedback on implementation strategies and assistance in carrying out the count.
- Notify law enforcement of efforts to conduct the survey.
- Train volunteers and garner feedback.
- Analyze data in objective manner.
- Use findings to educate policy makers, the public and others about youth homelessness.

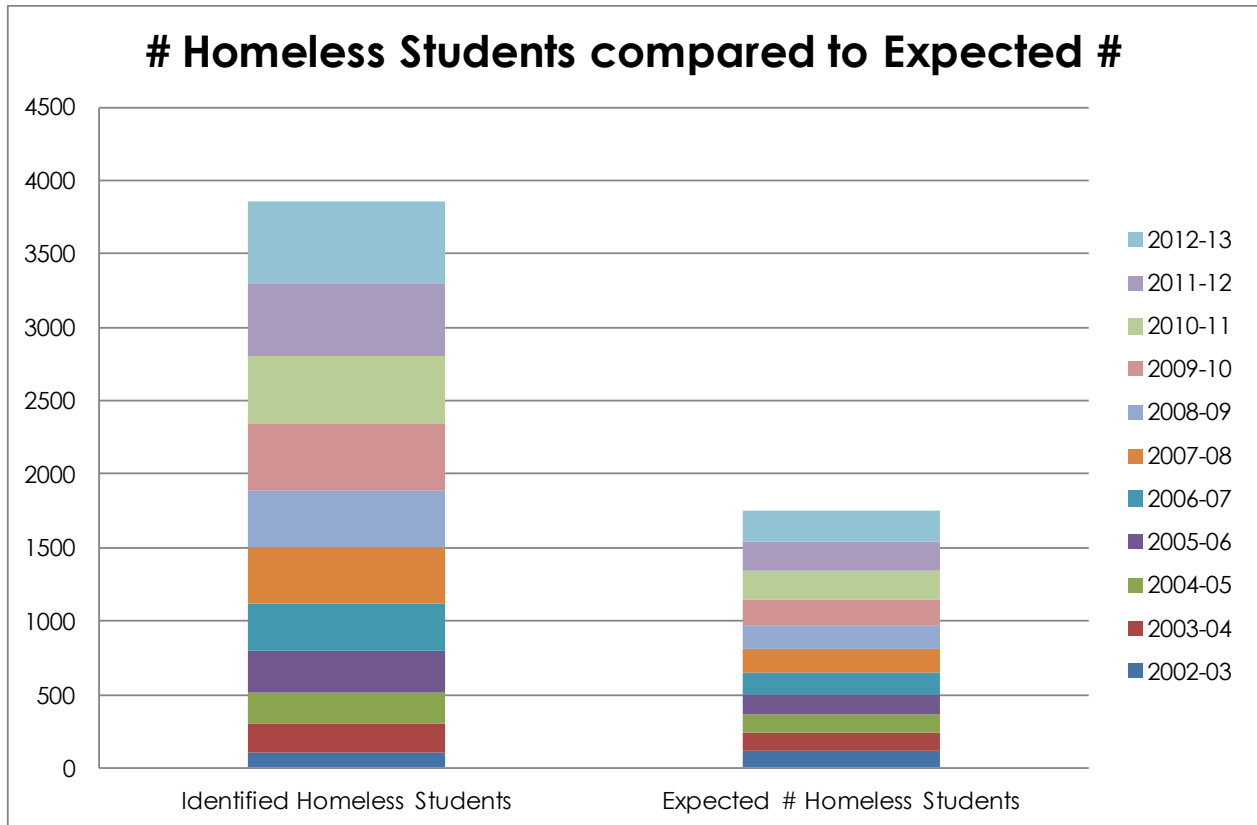
Connecting to Community

During preparation for *Youth Count!*, the VISTA members visited a number of social service organizations to build partnerships, spread awareness about survey administration, recruit volunteers and assess existing service structure available to support youth in the Billings community.

Billings Public Schools

Sue Runkle, Homeless Education Liaison for Billings Public Schools, offered valuable insight and support throughout the project, including the provision of baseline data regarding the number of identified students experiencing homelessness. Billings historically experiences an approximate 6.5% annual increase in population. The identified number of students in Billings Public Schools is more than doubled the expected number of students when considering normal population increases. The number of students experiencing homelessness identified by Billings Public Schools has increased an average of 20% each year.





Nearly 4,000 children have been identified as homeless through the school system over the past decade, when population increases alone should have resulted in only 1,750 children.

Local Youth Services

Youth Services Center provides juvenile detention and shelter-care facilities for youth, focusing on “caring for detained youth in a manner that prevents violence and provides safety for youth in Montana”ⁱ. The VISTA members toured both the detention and shelter care facilities to gain an insight into juvenile justice, and the primary shelter services provided for youth in Billings.

The Tumbleweed Program provides services to youth ages 10 to 21 including: crisis and long term counseling for youth and their families; facilitating a Street Outreach Program; maintaining the *Hope Drop-In Center* to provide food, clothing, supplies, and showers; offering life skills classes, support groups and parenting classes; and positioning crisis counselors at each of the three local high schools.

Addiction, mental health and crisis counselors employed through various social service agencies serve at local high schools, including Rimrock Foundation and the Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch.

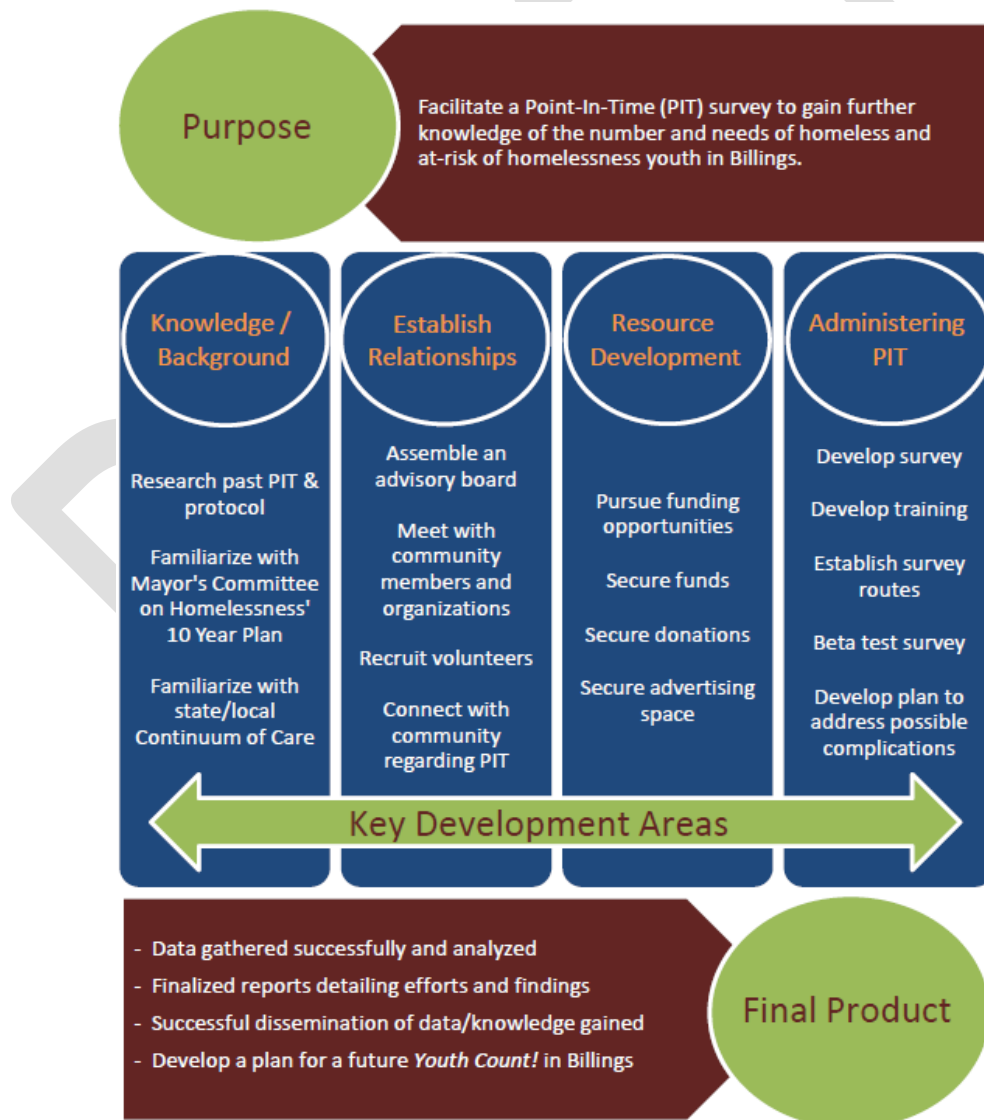
Other organizations visited include the Center for Children and Families, Child and Family Services Division of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, RiverStone Health and the Billings Police Department. These various community organizations offered invaluable guidance during survey preparation and assisted the team with the recruitment of community volunteers.

Section III: Written Documents

Several written documents were developed by the VISTA members for the project. All are located on the City of Billings website at www.ci.billings.mt.us/youthcount and contained in the appendices.

Strategic Implementation Plan

During preparation for *Youth Count!*, the *Strategic Implementation Plan* was developed to assist the VISTA members with a comprehensive guide outlining successful planning, organizing, and administration strategies for survey implementation. The plan consisted of seven sections and is nine pages in length. Sections included: purpose and goals; graphic timelines; fund development and marketing strategies; establishing community relationships; and the *Youth Count!* budget. Each section of the plan was structured to guide the VISTA members in each specific step of the survey process, coinciding with the VISTA Assignment Description.



Survey Instrument

The *Youth Count!* survey instrument is comprised of 42 questions and is seven pages in length. Questions included standard demographics and housing status along with queries regarding education, employment, health, and lifestyle. Social service utilization and needs questions were also included to provide information relevant to conducting a gap analysis.

Positive Youth Development models refer to intentional efforts to enhance youth opportunities to pursue interest, abilities and skills into adulthood. Therefore, survey questions were structured with a primary focus on compassionate understanding without judgment. Questions focused on the type of activities youth enjoy and what makes them happy. Weaving personal interest questions throughout the survey ensured respondents were not emotionally overwhelmed.

Eleven key questions were identified on the survey in red font to alert volunteers and respondents of prioritized data points. If volunteers noticed respondent interest waning or loss of focus, they were instructed to skip forward to the following:

- Racial and / or ethnic identity
- Gender
- Do you have a permanent residence?
- Where do you usually sleep?
- What services and / or programs do you think Billings is missing for people your age?
- What is your highest level of education?
- Have you ever been forced to trade sexual favors for: shelter, protection, clothing, food, money, or other necessities?
- Have your primary caregiver(s):
 - Been consistently emotionally supportive?
 - Ever asked or told you to leave home?
 - Ever called you names, cursed to you, or said other mean things to you?
 - Ever made you feel unsafe living with them?
 - Used drugs around you or in your home?
- Are there services you need but cannot currently access (specify)?
- Do you have any diagnosed mental health conditions?
 - Are you currently being treated?
 - Are you currently taking any medication as part of a prescribed treatment?
- Do your primary caregiver(s) have any diagnosed mental health conditions (specify)?

As a primary resource, Tumbleweed's Street Outreach Program, Individual and Family Counselor, and Runaway and Homeless Youth counselors reviewed the survey instrument and provided valuable feedback regarding the questions and survey process. Community Development Division staff also reviewed the survey instrument and provided feedback.

Volunteer Training & Recruitment Plan

In order to prepare volunteers before survey administration, the *Volunteer Training and Management Plan* was constructed to educate survey volunteers in proper and safe administration. The manual had six sections outlining procedures, defining logistical guidelines for survey administration, provided definitions specific to youth experiencing homelessness, the survey instrument, questions and probable scenarios during survey administration, and safety procedures.

Volunteers were instructed to:

- Sign up for designated shifts and zones via online sign-up sheets.
- Follow safety procedures during the count.
- Interview prospective survey participants, what to do in case of emergencies, and what to do with completed surveys after their shift.
- Sign Confidentiality Agreement prior to survey administration.



***Volunteer Training Session
Photo by Carmen Price***

Recommendations

- Guidance documents, such as the Strategic Implementation Plan and Volunteer Training & Recruitment Plan, should be fully developed and shared with stakeholders well in advance of survey launch.
- Garner feedback on plans and the survey instrument prior to actuating the survey. Make changes to the plans based on feedback received.
- Staff and / or full-time volunteer commitment are required to undertake a point-in-time survey.
- Engaging individuals and organizations affiliated with Street Outreach Program(s) or other youth services available in the community is essential.
- The survey instrument should be developed early in the process and the identification of primary data points of interest should be gathered from stakeholders.

DRAFT

Section IV: Outreach & Fund Development

Resources

Several print resources were designed to increase community awareness and involvement. A banner measuring 3' x 20' was hung across the Skybridge North pedestrian crossing bridge in downtown Billings. A flyer and post card were also created to distribute to businesses and during resource fairs (see below and following page).


INAUGURAL YOUTH COUNT!

July 12-14 A SURVEY OF HOMELESS YOUTH IN BILLINGS

To Volunteer: 406.259.2558 WWW.TUMBLEWEEDPROGRAM.ORG



YOUTH COUNT! SURVEY



JULY 12 - 14

Contact Joshua or Chelsia at:
(406) 259-2558



VOLUNTEER FOR OUR YOUTH COUNT! SURVEY!

WE ARE LOOKING FOR VOLUNTEERS TO HELP ADMINISTER OUR *YOUTH COUNT! SURVEY* DURING **JULY 12-14**. MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR OUR HOMELESS YOUTH POPULATION AND HELP US ***COUNT!***

Volunteers will receive a thank you gift for their participation!

CALL 406-259-2558 OR VISIT WWW.TUMBLEWEEDPROGRAM.ORG

FOR MORE INFORMATION!



YOUTH COUNT! SURVEY

JULY 12-14

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Currently, comprehensive data for homeless and at-risk youth in this region is lacking. Youth are incredibly resilient and smart, and because of this they are often invisible and go unreported. While many youth couch surf, relying on a rotation of friends, others must find shelter on the streets—a more dangerous alternative. They know when and where to hide, who to hide from, and when to seek shelter, thus making it difficult to ascertain a precise number of youth.

Data remains inconclusive regarding this invisible population. The results of the Youth Count! project will provide Tumbleweed, the City of Billings, and other service providers in Yellowstone County with essential information that will enable us to develop, fund, and further expand services that fulfill the needs of youth who are homeless and at risk of homelessness—and in our hopes, eliminate homelessness for future youth! By making these services available to our youth, we are investing not only in our youth and their future, but in our community's future as well.

**PLEASE CONTACT JOSHUA DOWNES OR CHELSIA DAVIS
AT 406.259.2558 OR E-MAIL US FOR MORE INFORMATION!**

joshua.downes@tumbleweedprogram.org

chelsia.davis@tumbleweedprogram.org

Grant Writing & Project Budget

The VISTA members applied for and were awarded a Billings Community Foundation grant for \$1,000 to support the project. A project budget was also created as part of the grant application. The VISTA members also received \$625 in donations and \$212 in in-kind support from Starbucks. Starbucks generously donated coffee, creamer, sugar, cups, and six travel tumblers for the volunteer training sessions. The VISTA members also developed a fundraising plan selling Giving Bean coffee, complete with a custom designed label promoting *Youth Count!*. The whole bean and ground pound bags of coffee were sold at various local events to raise funds for the project.

Presentations

VISTA members presented information regarding *Youth Count!* to various organizations and attended community events to promote the project, recruit volunteers and raise funds:

- Harvest Church
- Montana State University-Billings, Dr. Joy Honea, Sociology
- Mayor's Committee on Homelessness
- South Central Montana Continuum of Care Committee
- Tumbleweed Program, Inc. Board of Directors
- Wellafalooza Resource Fair
- Montana Active Lifestyle Fest
- Rock & Rolling for Tumbleweed at the Yellowstone Valley Brewery



Outreach and volunteer sign-up at Wellafalooza Resource Fair

Photo by Carmen Price

Media

VISTA members drafted and sent out a media release regarding their project initiative. They were then contacted by local television stations and newspapers about *Youth Count!* The Billings Gazette, KULR8, and KTVQ-Q2 interviewed the VISTA members during survey administration and wrote pieces before and after survey implementation. The VISTA members also utilized social media outlets such as Tumbleweed and the Billings Metro VISTA Project's Twitter and Facebook pages to update the community on the project and survey administration. See the City of Billings website ci.billings.mt.us/youthcount for additional *Youth Count!* media pieces.



Photo courtesy of Billings Gazette, Casey Page

Section V: Actuating Youth Count!

Volunteer Training

VISTA members designed a one-hour training to prepare the volunteers with the knowledge to administer the survey with the utmost efficiency. Two sessions were made available on consecutive days and 39 volunteers attended. The training was mandatory for survey administration and included review of extensive training manuals, the survey instrument, discussed safety guidelines, and survey protocol. Volunteers also provided feedback and reviewed pre-planned zones (*see map, following page*) for survey administration. Volunteers received a certificate of completion acknowledging participation and a t-shirt for identification as authorized survey administrators.



*Joshua Downes and Kelsey Dwyer, VISTA Members
Photo by Aundi Hunter*

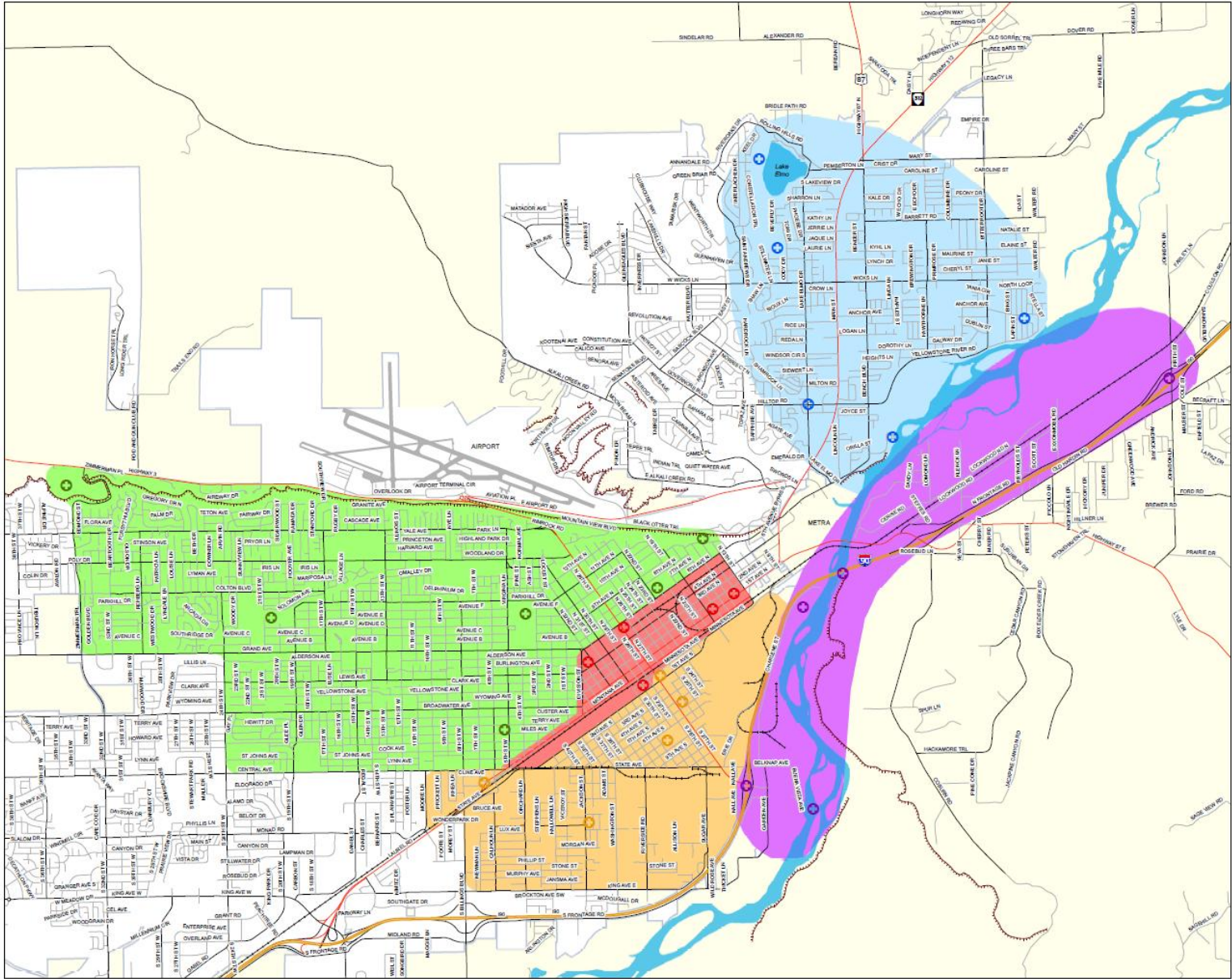
Survey Administration

The *Youth Count!* survey was administered July 12-14, 2013 and volunteers collected 176 surveys during this three-day period. Participation in the survey was voluntary, completely anonymous, and confidential, therefore participants did not have to answer any questions they deemed invasive.

Canvassing Zones

Five canvassing zones were created to ensure adequate geographic coverage of known areas where youth congregate or live. Volunteers were divided into teams consisting of two to three people assigned to a specific zone during any of the following shifts: 9:00am to 12:00pm; 4:00pm to 7:00pm; and 7:00pm to 10:00pm.

Youth Count! Survey Zones Summer 2013



**Locations
Survey Zone**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Survey Zones

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

- Yellowstone County
- Railroads
- Rims



Map Document: \\gis\workspaces\giscms\workspace\youth_count_13.mxd
Date: 10/10/2013

A unique identifier was created for each respondent to avoid counting a respondent more than once. Structure of the unique identifier included the following:

Initials: First and Last Name	Age	Day of Birth	Gender	Unique Identifier
BR	21	23	M	BR2123M

Volunteer Debriefing

The Volunteer Debriefing session was held to ensure feedback about the volunteers' experience, the survey instrument, and any stories they may have had regarding their volunteer service. The session was held a week after the count and lasted two hours. Volunteers discussed their experiences in an open forum and filled out a survey at the end of the session. The survey asked questions specific to their experience, the survey instrument, and any recommendations that would benefit future counts. The survey contained a statement offering assistance from Tumbleweed counselors if volunteers needed support or counseling services as a result of their experience.

Limitations

Youth experiencing homelessness know when and where to hide, who to hide from, and when to seek shelter. Therefore, counting this population can be challenging. Limitations occurred during the process of administering the *Youth Count!* survey were:

- Visibility of youth during the early morning shift.
- Inclement weather.
- Length of the survey instrument and sub-questions.
- Massive area of the five designated canvassing zones.
- Cooperation from local youth organizations and homeless service providers.

These limitations were small in comparison to other national survey counts and they reveal important insight on how to strengthen these areas for future counts.

Visibility & Weather

Throughout the three-day count, youth were not visible during the early morning shifts. However, volunteers did interview a couple of youth in the morning. When some of the volunteers came back from their morning shift, they stated that it was difficult finding youth to take the survey since many youth were not around in the early morning hours. Thunderstorms and torrential rain affected the evening shift on Saturday July 13th. As a result of the inclement weather, the VISTAs cancelled the evening shift for volunteers.

Survey

The survey instrument's length created some minor complications regarding responses. Some youth did not answer all of the questions, leaving at least half of the survey blank, or had answered questions sporadically throughout the survey. Therefore, the length of the survey was a reason for the lack of responses and incomplete surveys.

Some of the questions within the survey posed some problems for participants. For example, the structure of the questions and the sub-questions confused some respondents, which may have been a contributing factor to questions not answered. Volunteers were present during execution to assist respondents with any questions they had. In most cases, the participants were willing to take the survey independently, but many asked the survey administrators read the questions to them.

Nevertheless, the youth answered as many questions as they could, which is exactly what the team anticipated before the count. One response out of 42 questions is better than no response at all.

Canvassing Zones

Some volunteers had a difficult time locating youth in certain zones. One volunteer, for example, stated that some of the canvassing locations should be changed since they couldn't find any youth to survey during their shift. Since many youth rarely stay in one place, locating them was quite difficult in certain areas such as the Billings Heights, West End, and along the Rimrocks (a geological sandstone formation on the north side of Billings).



Billings Rimrocks, photo by Dee Ann Redman

Cooperation

Local organizations and programs that serve youth were more than willing to help administer the survey on-site. However, some organizations were not able to help administer the survey at their locations, did not have enough time to gather the necessary assistance for survey administration, and some of the surveys were misplaced or lost within the organizations.

Recommendations

- Surveys conducted in the summer months should concentrate volunteers in the late evening, night and early morning shifts as much as possible. Few surveys were gathered in the morning shifts and local youth may be more readily found between 4:00pm to 2:00am.
- Ensure adequate volunteer coverage to engage respondents with a longer survey format.
- With limited human capital, eliminate questions and sub-questions in order to shorten the length of the survey, create a smoother flow, and to decrease the likelihood of youth losing focus or interest.
- Re-word questions to avoid confusion or ambiguity. For example, the interpretation of questions relating to permanent residence and life barriers are varied.
- The intent of each survey question should also be identified and vetted with focus groups to ensure wording is adequate. For example, a question relating to local services or programs needed for young people resulted in a high number of responses relating to entertainment and recreation, rather than social services.
- Utilize Likert scales to identify intensity of need relative to services, the degree of support relative to caregivers, etc. Questions only asking either for an affirmative or negative response are often limiting in nature.
- Include a series of questions relative to sexual orientation and gender. No question was asked relative to the self-identification of sexual orientation. The open-ended gender question resulted in self-identification of either male or female, not transgendered.
- Include the following questions: “Are you from Billings?”; “If yes, how long have you lived in Billings?”; “If no, where was the last place you lived?”
- Locate new areas in canvassing zones and review the ineffectual locations, replacing them with promising locations and youth hang-outs.
- Ensure interagency cooperation with survey administration, especially among the schools, Youth Services Center, and the Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch.
- Provide adequate support for staff, facilitators and volunteers following survey implementation. The emotional impact of gathering stories and data can be stressful and difficult.

Section VI: Billings Youth Homelessness

Significant efforts were made to avoid duplication and omissions in data. However, survey results are based on information youth are voluntarily willing to share. Claims regarding situation and status have not been verified and reflect the perception of those surveyed. Given these limitations, the data collected on homeless youth in Billings provides statistical parameters and patterns which are helpful in setting strategic priorities and benchmarks.

Data sets for the overall population and respective cohorts are located in the Appendices. The number of respondents to individual questions is illustrated on each chart. A respondent rate less than 50% for the cohort in each section is illustrated by a “+” in the title of each chart.

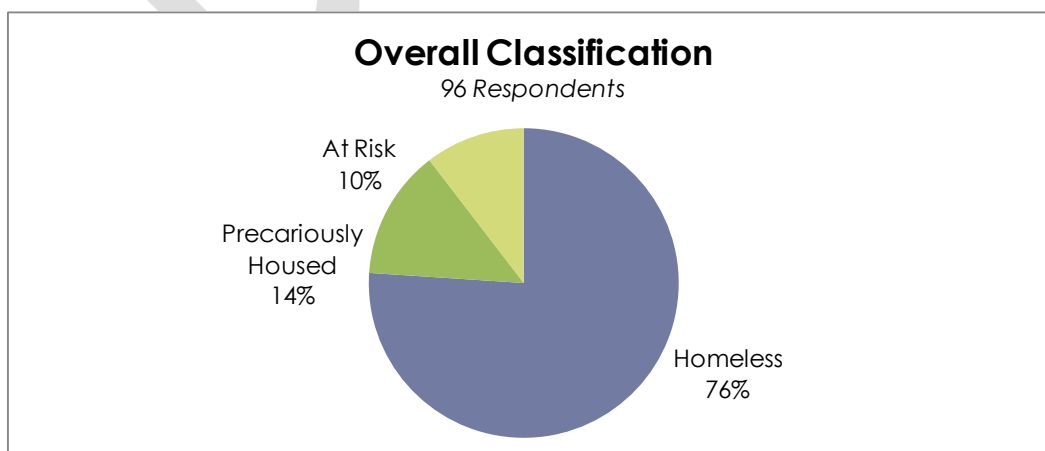
Overall Cohort

Youth Count! was conducted over a three-day period and 176 total surveys were completed. Fifty-five percent of the surveys were excluded from data tabulation efforts due to the following reasons:

- Forty respondents did not meet the age requirement; 15 were under the age of 13 and 25 were over 21 years old.
- Thirty-six respondents did not meet classifications for homeless, precariously housed or at-risk of homelessness.
- Four surveys were duplicates.

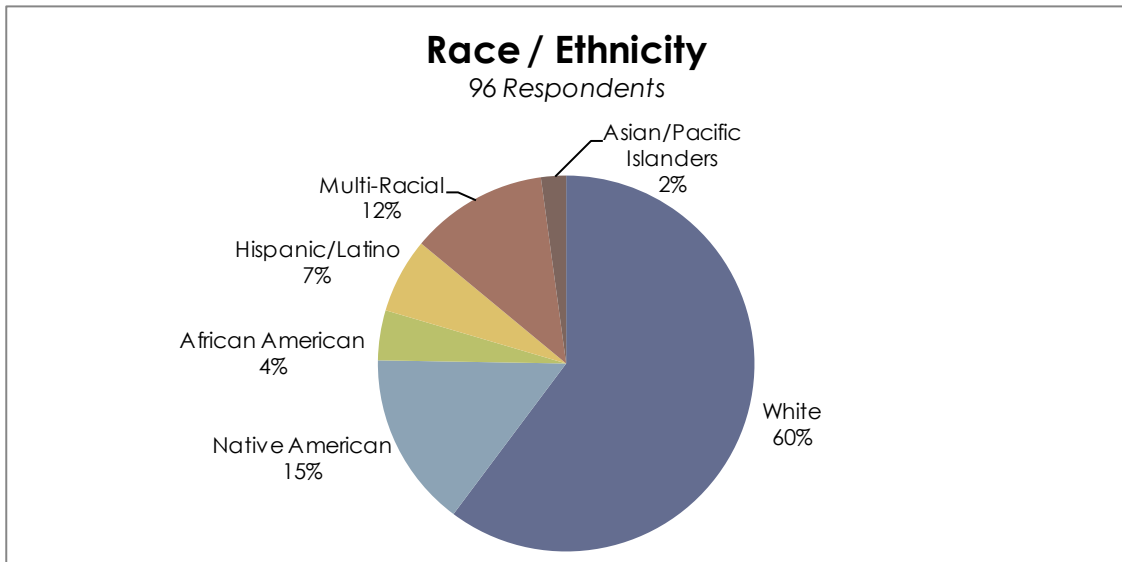
The remaining surveys, 96 total, were classified as either homeless (73), precariously housed (13), or at-risk of homelessness (10):

- **Homeless:** Any child or youth under the age of eighteen who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those living in places unfit for human habitation.
- **Precariously Housed:** Youth who are unaccompanied and on their own.
- **At Risk:** Youth who are in danger of becoming precariously housed or homeless.

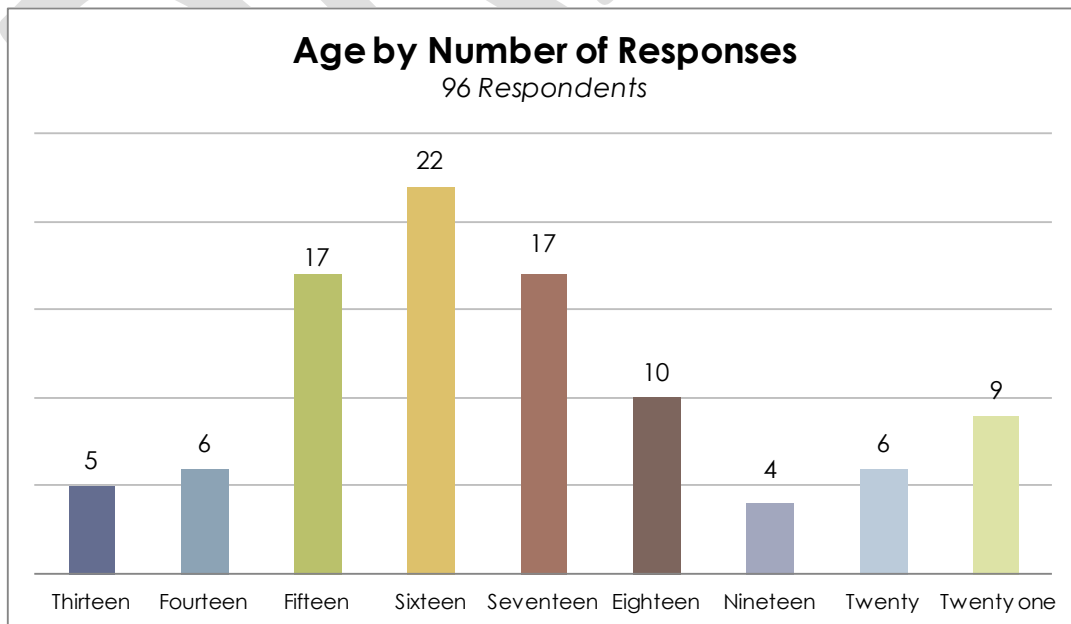


Demographics

Of the 96 viable surveys retrieved, the percentage of males to females is equivalent (48 respondents each). Only 60% of respondents self-identified as White when asked about race / ethnicity. Forty percent of respondents self-identified as a minority, which is statistically significant as Billings has a 19% minority rate according to the 2010 Census. The largest minority group identified was Native American (15%) followed by multi-racial (12%) and Hispanic / Latino (seven percent).

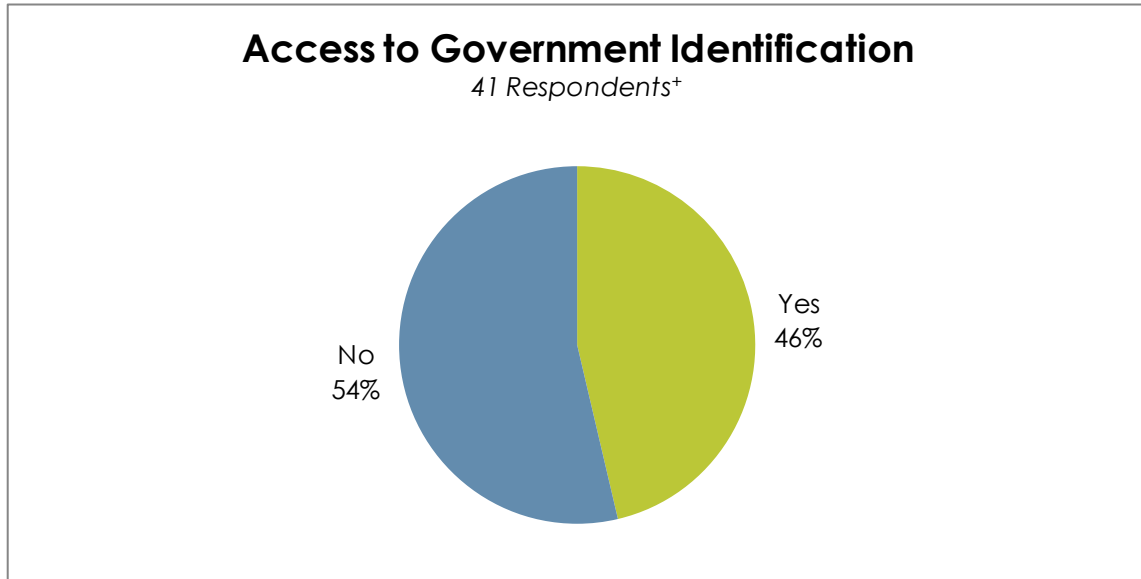


The age of respondents was diverse and distributed from age 13 to 21, the greatest number of responses ranged from 15 to 18 years old; 66% of the overall cohort. The average age for the overall cohort is 16.77 years.

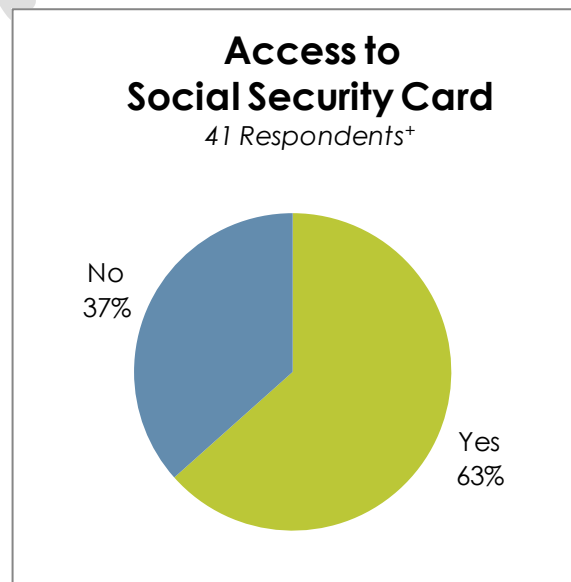
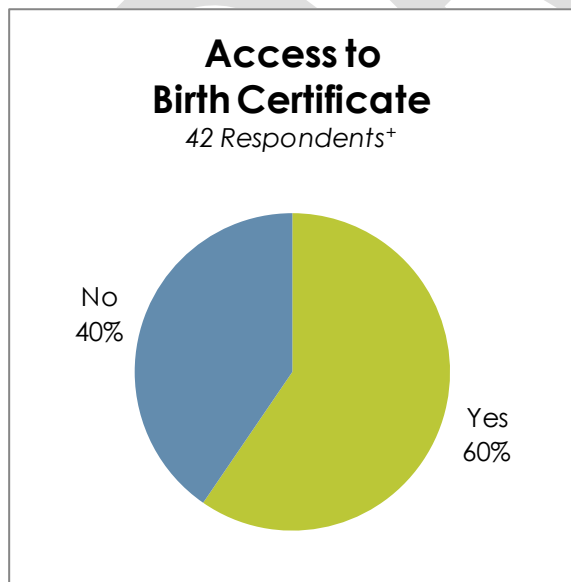


Access to Identification

Approximately 40 of the total 96 surveys contained responses to questions relating to access to government identification, including a birth certificate and social security card. A 42% response rate for this particular inquiry does not indicate statistical significance. However, data retrieved indicates the possibility that lack of proper identification may indicate a barrier to accessing services and may interfere with activities of daily living.

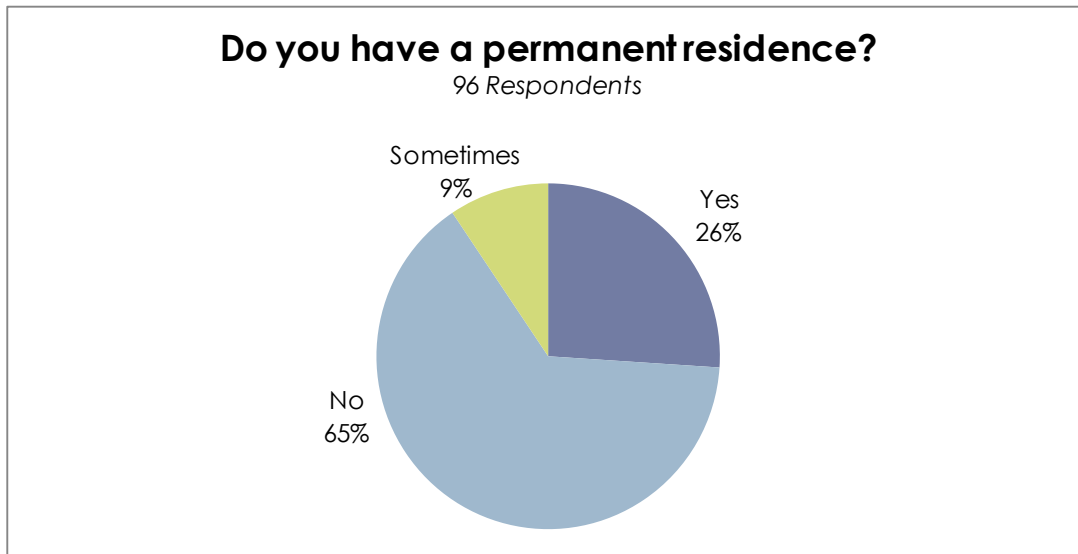


More than half of the responses indicate lack of access to government identification. Responses relative to birth certificate and social security card access were similar; approximately 60% indicated access and 40% indicated lack of access.

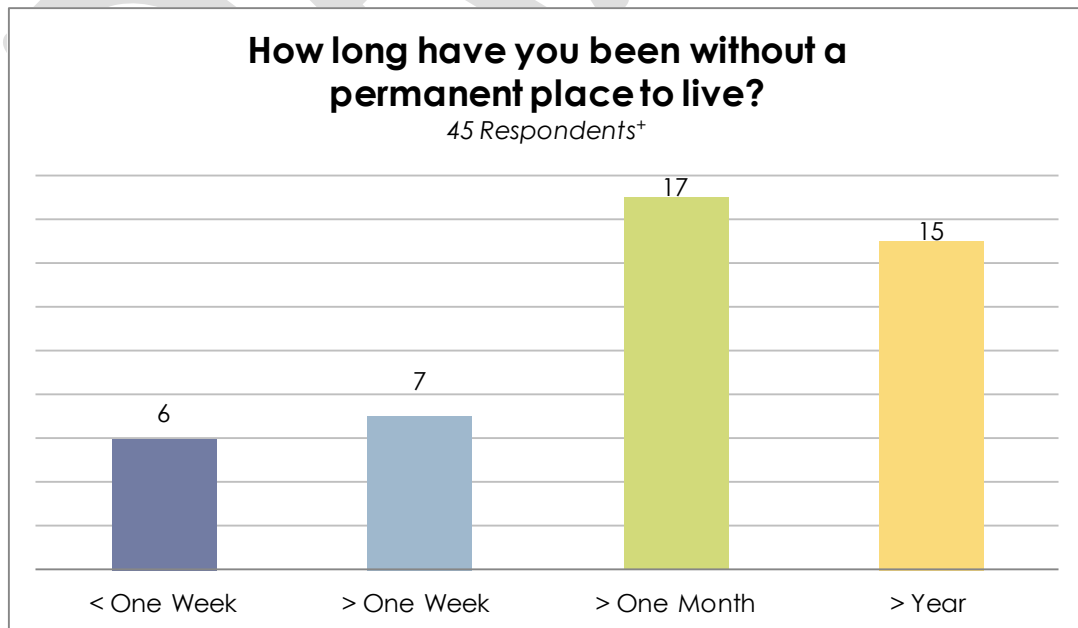


Housing Status

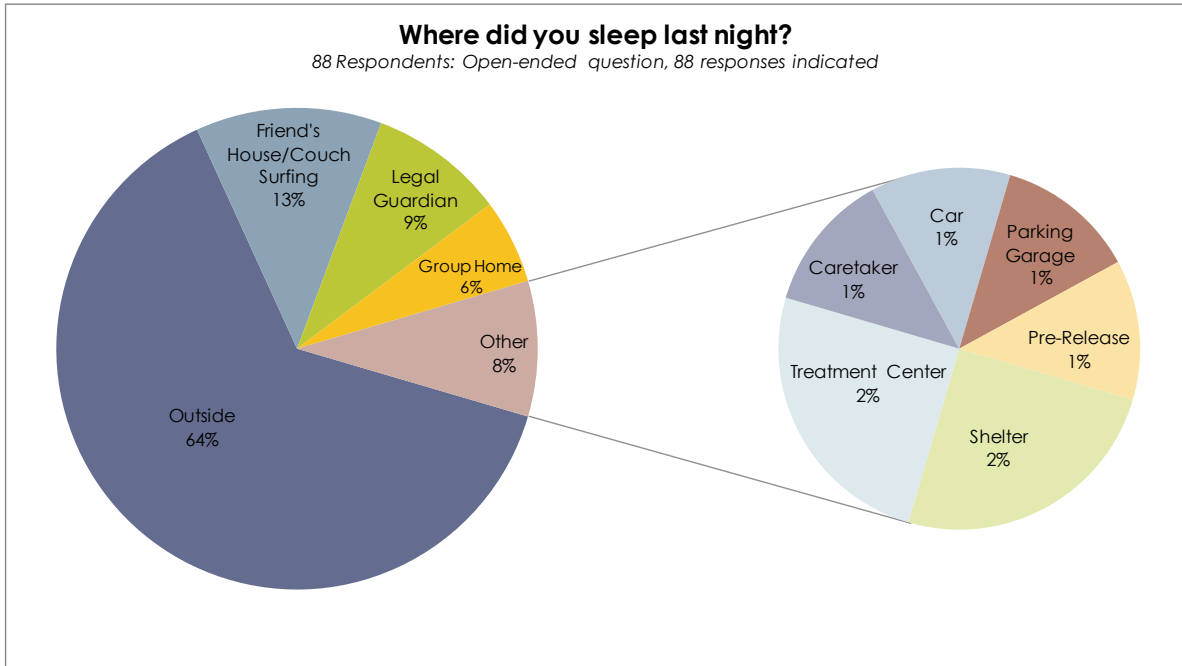
Respondents may define a permanent residence as a place where they have stayed some of the time or a parent or relative's house where they have lived continuously. A majority of respondents (65%) indicated lack of access to a permanent residence and nine percent indicated they had sporadic access. In total, nearly 75% of respondents indicated lack of a stable living environment (71 individuals). Of those who indicated affirmatively regarding a permanent residence (25 individuals), most considered it "safe" (20 individuals, or 80%).



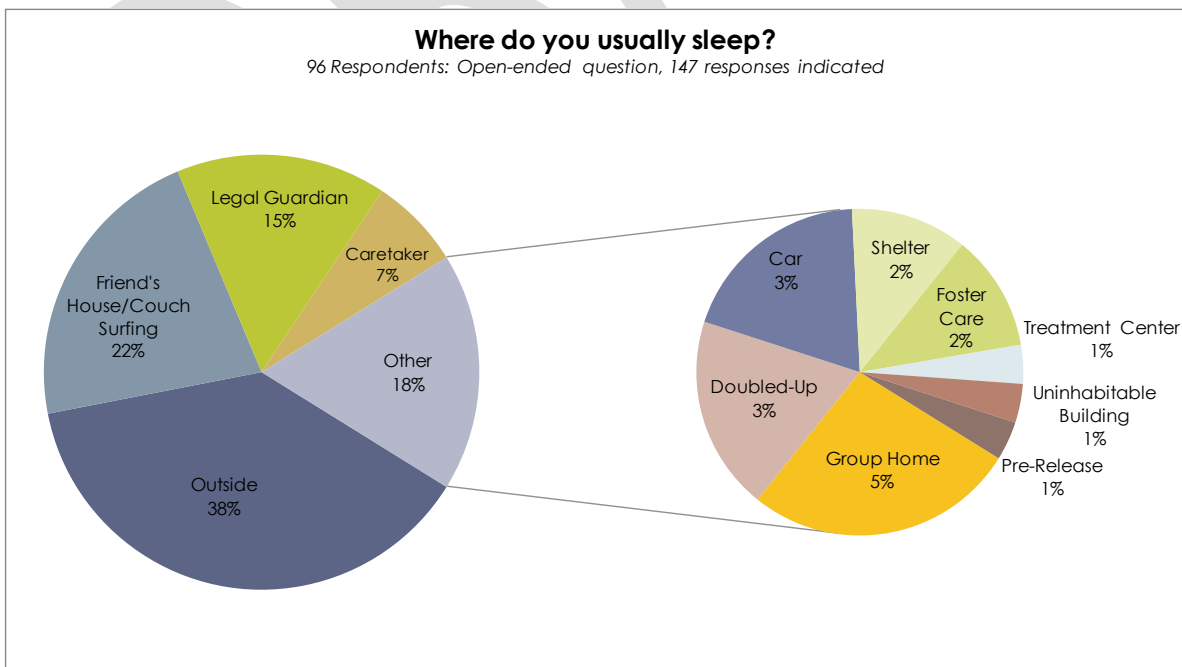
Seventy-one percent of respondents indicated a lack of stable living environment for a month or more, indicating a possible majority. As only 45 respondents answered this question, it is difficult to conclude a majority have been without a permanent residence.



Respondents were asked where they slept the night previous and where they usually sleep from a list of possible places and they had the option to write a response. Please note the survey was taken in July 2013 which may influence responses. The majority of respondents indicated they slept outside the previous night (64%) and only 38% indicated usually sleeping outside.

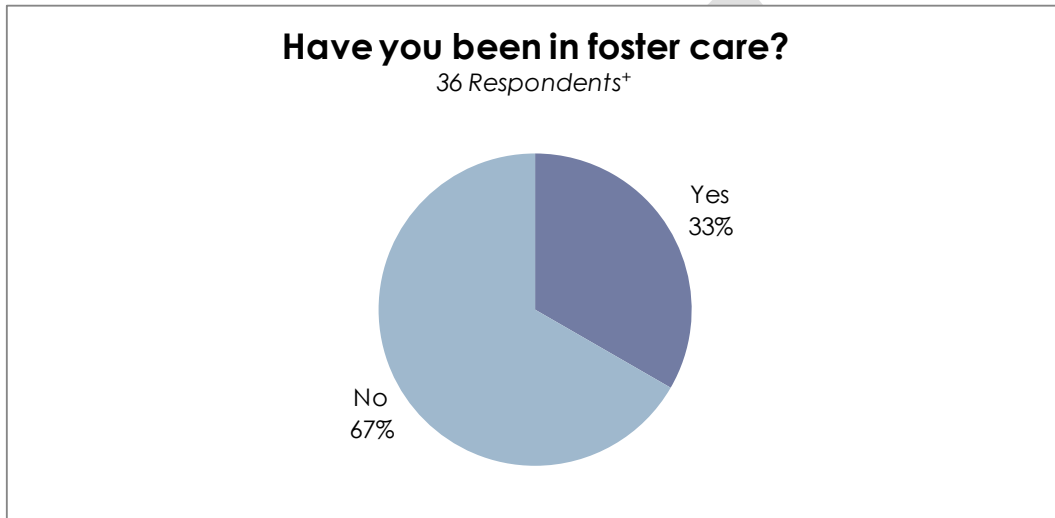


Respondents noted usually sleeping slightly more frequently at a friend's house or couch surfing (22% compared to 13%). Likewise, they noted sleeping at a legal guardian's residence slightly more frequently (15% compared to 9%).

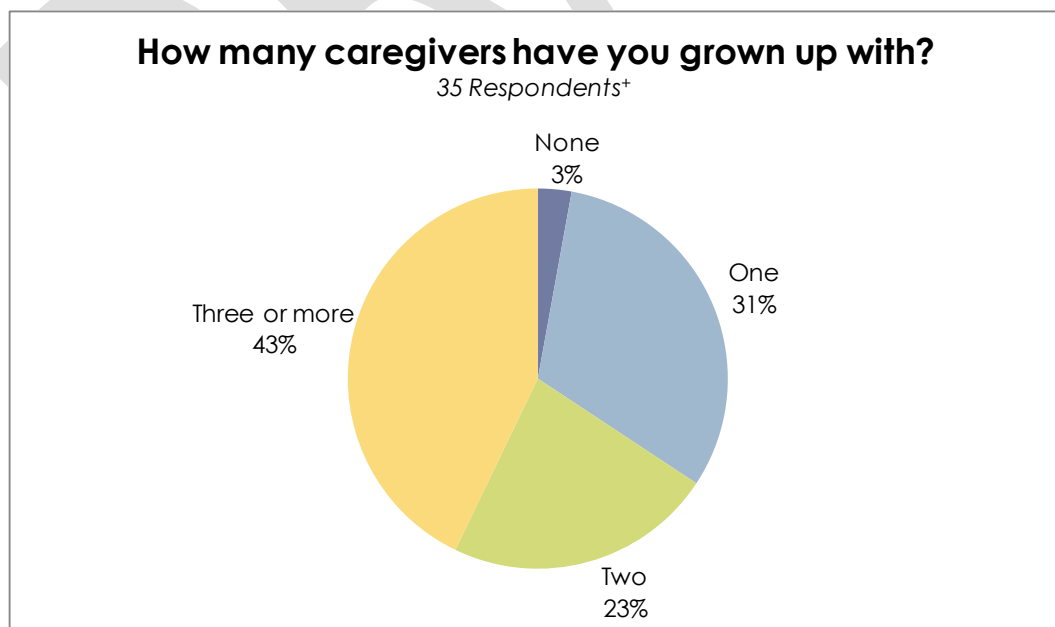


Notably, 30 respondents indicated regularly sleeping outside and very few (four) considered this option “safe”.

Thirty-six responses chose to answer a question regarding living in foster care; less than 50% of the overall cohort. Of the 36 total responses, only 12 indicated they had lived in foster care (33%). Only 11 respondents indicated the age when they entered the foster care system and how long they have been in care. Of this small group, most had entered the system under age five and the majority had been in care for more than two years. One respondent stated that she had been with 10 foster parents and another respondent had lived in 13 different foster homes.

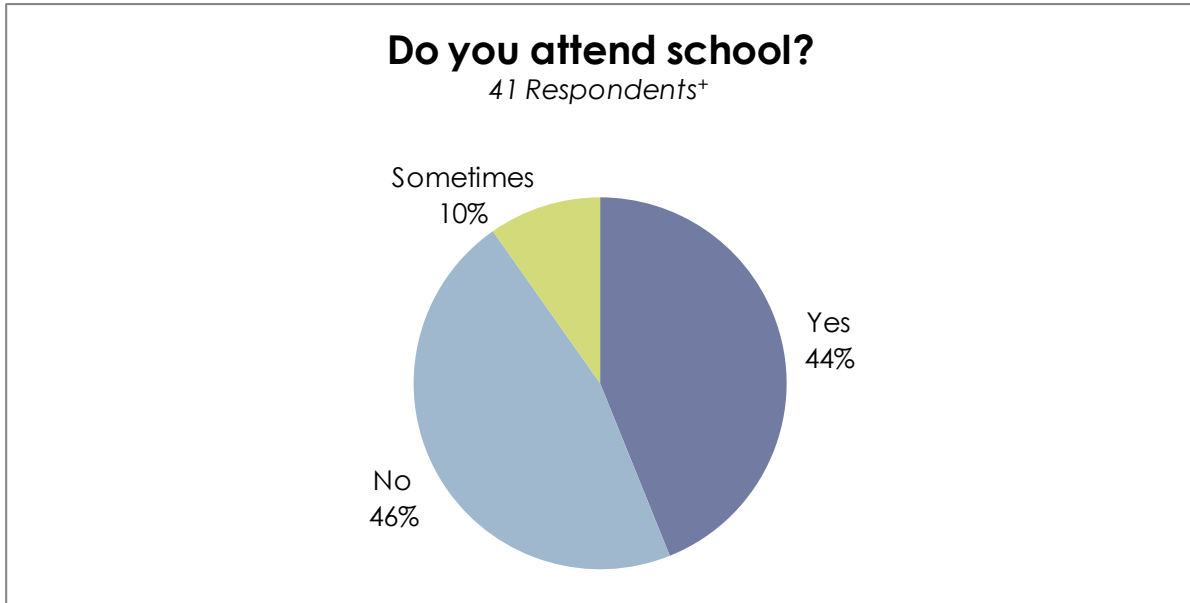


Respondents were asked to identify the number of primary caregivers they had grown up with. Respondents noted both numerical and anecdotal responses to this query; over 40% of the responses indicated living with familial caregivers including grandparents and extended family.

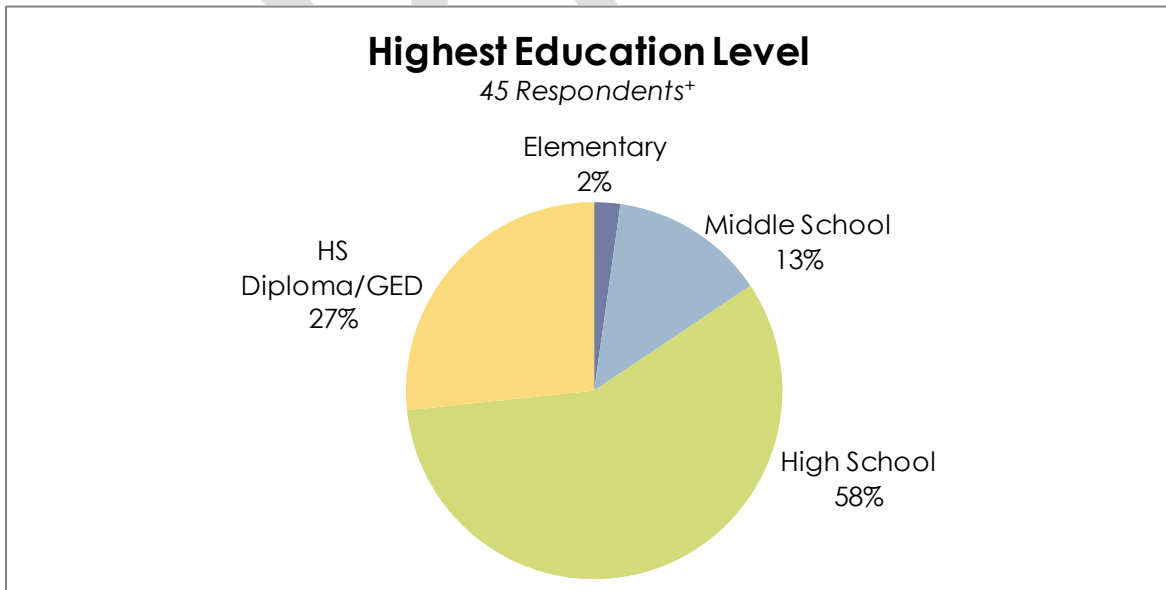


Education

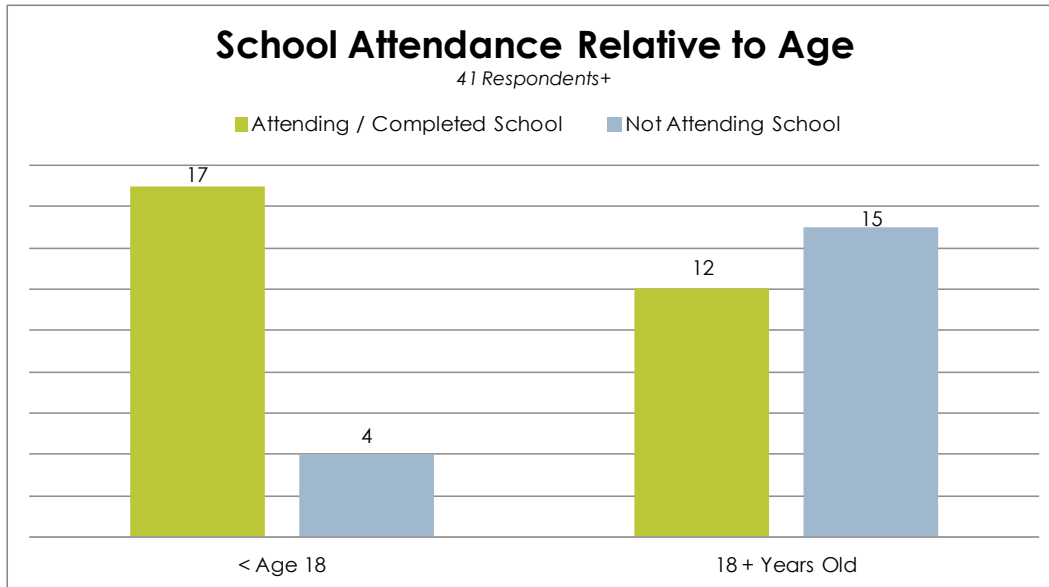
A total of 41 respondents answered a query regarding school attendance; less than 50% of the overall cohort. The majority of respondents indicated sporadic or non-attendance (56%).



Of the 45 respondents answering the question relative to education level, over 80% indicated at least a high school education or General Education Diploma (GED).



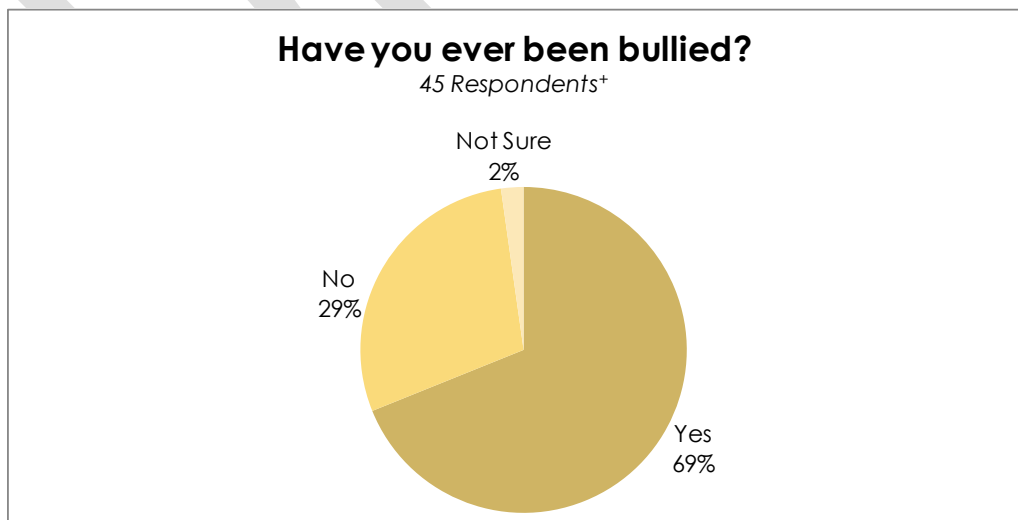
Respondents under age 18 were more likely to attend school than not, differing significantly from those over the age of 18. Nearly half of the respondents over the age of 18 indicated they had completed school.



Reasons noted for school non-attendance included: academic problems and unstable housing (five responses each); issues related to Zero Tolerance policies such as drug use or truancy (three); family conflict (four); and employment or transportation (two responses each).

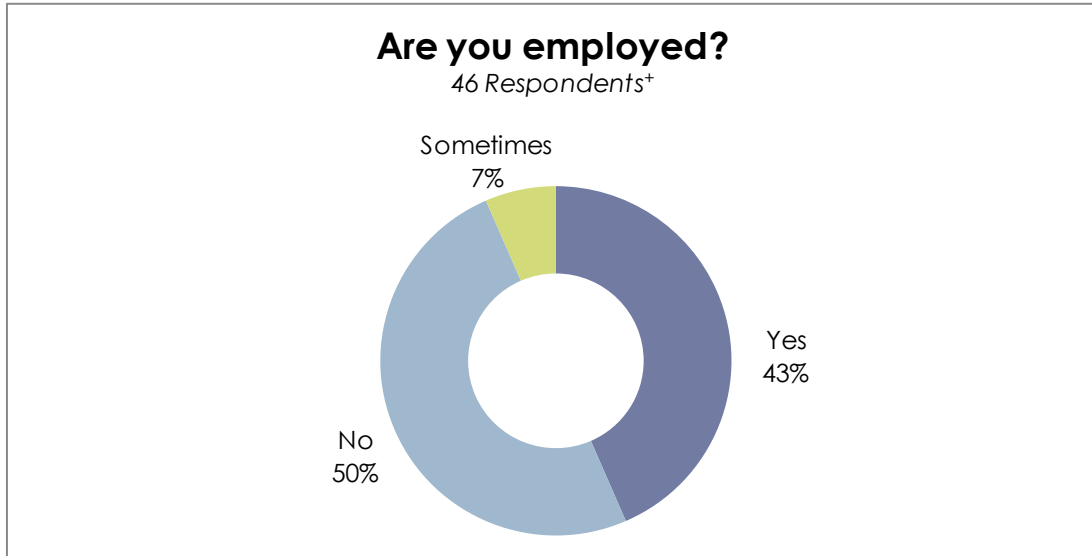
Bullying

A total of 45 respondents answered a question relative to experiencing bullying and the majority (nearly 70%, 31 individuals) responded in the affirmative. Twenty three respondents further identified the type of bullying experienced; 85% noted verbal and 13% physical (20 and three individuals respectively). During this survey, an 18 year old girl was asked if she has ever been bullied. She replied, "They cyber bullied me so bad I [was] suicidal."

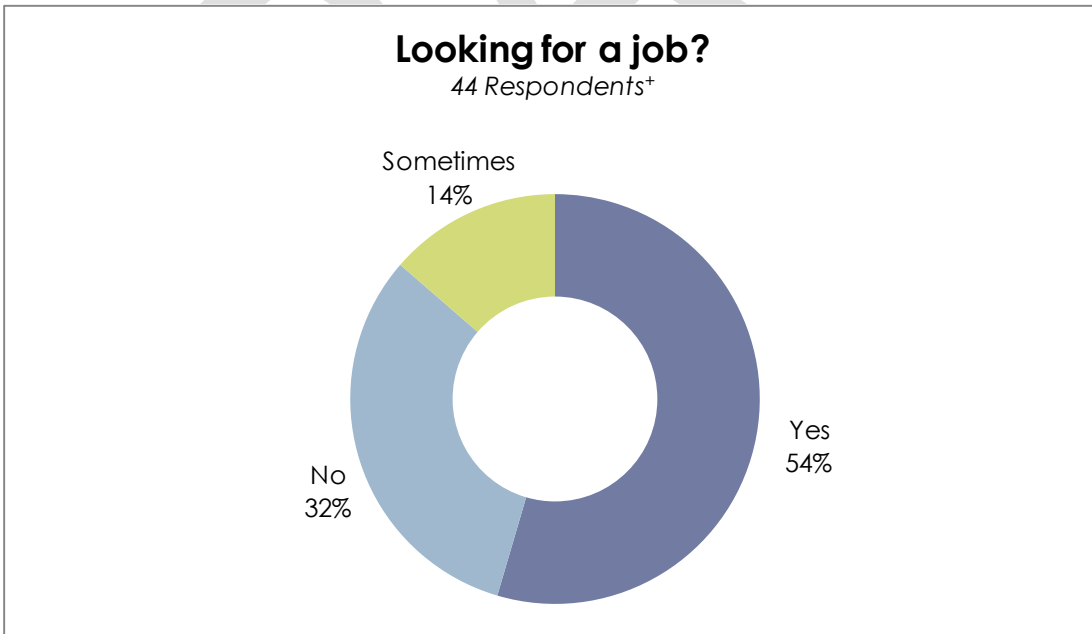


Employment

Just under half of the survey respondents (46 out of 96 total) answered a question relative to employment; 23 indicated lack of employment and 23 indicated either partial or affirmative employment.



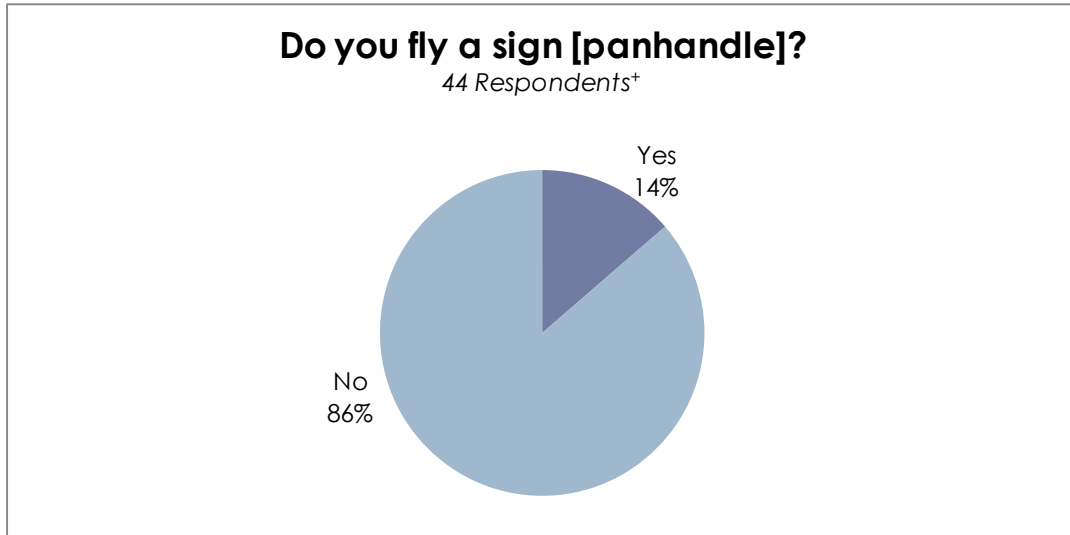
A dozen individuals indicated the number of hours per week they typically work. For this very small cohort, 42% (five people) indicated they were working full time and seven indicated they were working less than 39 hours.



Slightly over half of respondents (24 individuals) answering a query regarding the search for employment responded affirmatively and an additional 14% (six people) indicated they were *sometimes* looking for work. Fourteen respondents (32%) stated they were not looking for a job.

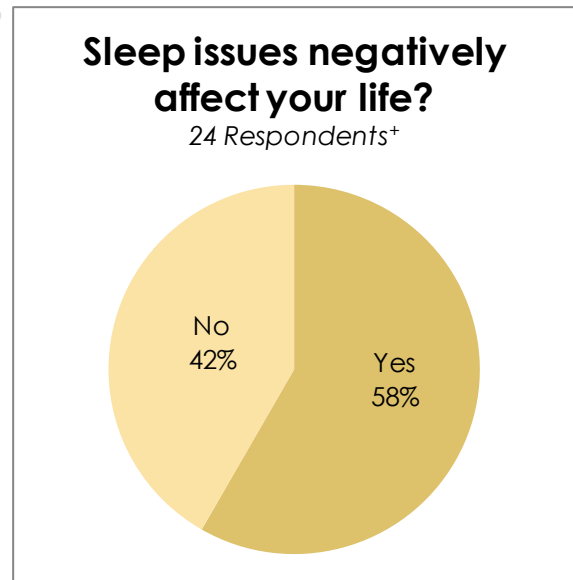
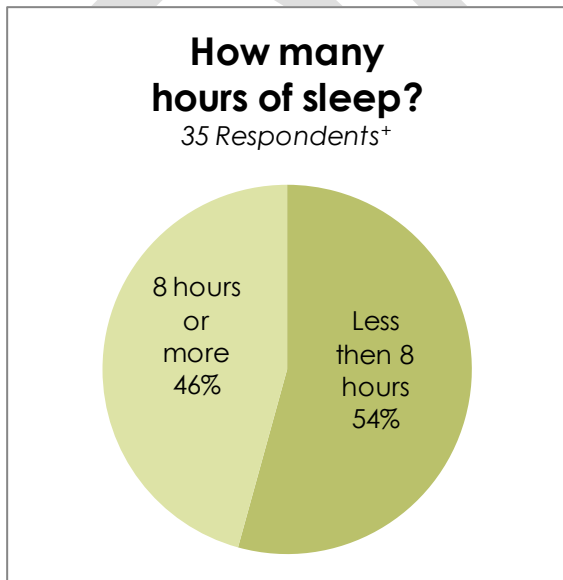
A few respondents (three individuals) specified they were not seeking employment, noting: no place or phone; not accepted [because of appearance]; or they did not want a job.

When respondents were asked if they fly a sign (panhandle), the majority stated they do not (38 individuals, 86%). One individual indicated he panhandles and thus, declared himself employed.

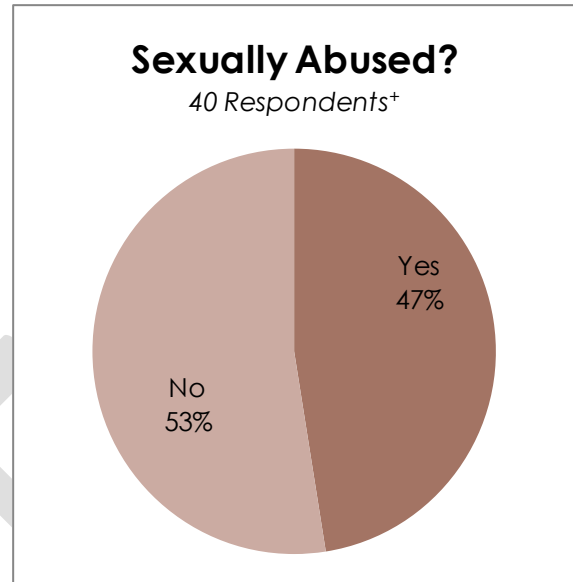
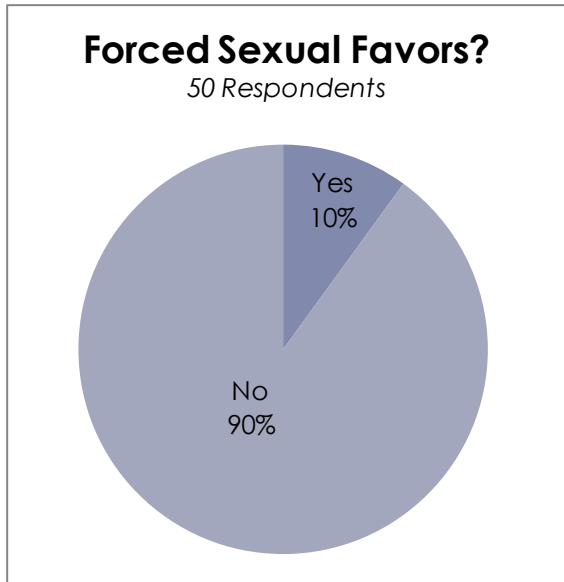


Health

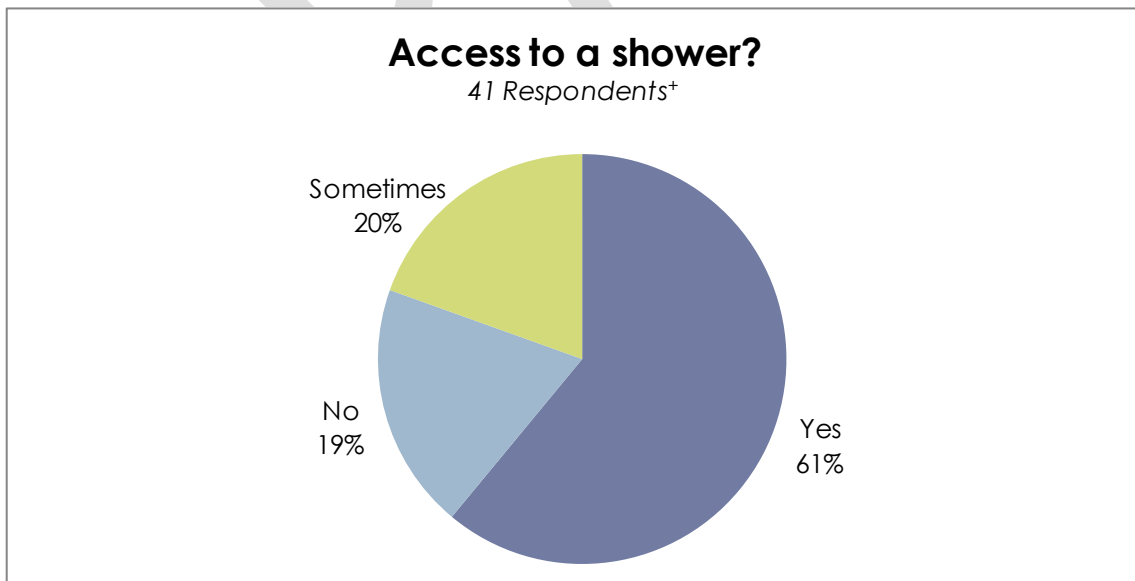
A relatively small number of respondents answered queries relative to sleeping patterns (35 or less) and the cohort is near equal when reporting usual hours of sleep per night; over or under eight hours. However, nearly 60% reported sleep issues negatively affecting their lives.

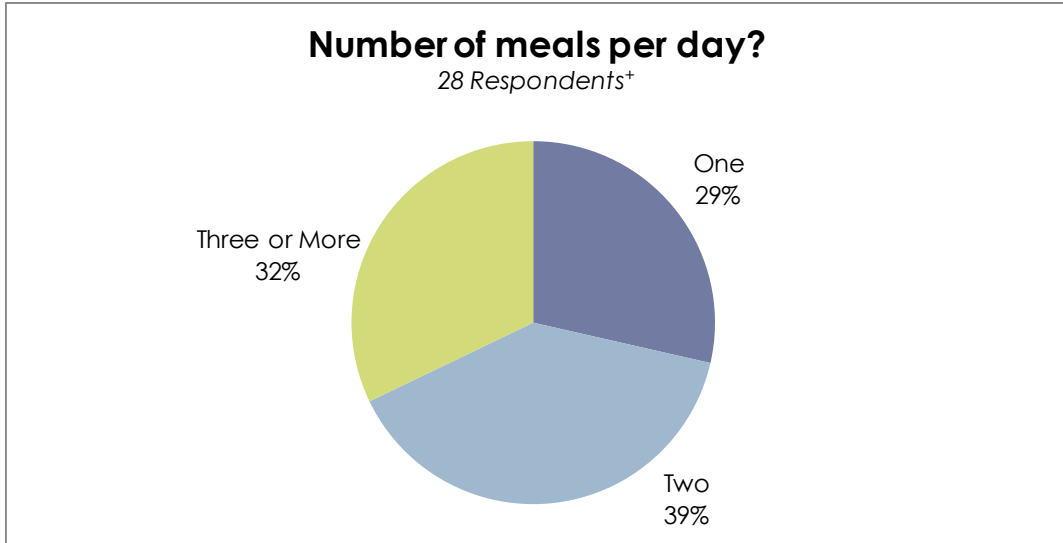


Fifty individuals (52%) chose to answer a question regarding being forced to trade sexual favors for necessities such as shelter, food, protection or money and 40 respondents answered a question regarding sexual abuse.

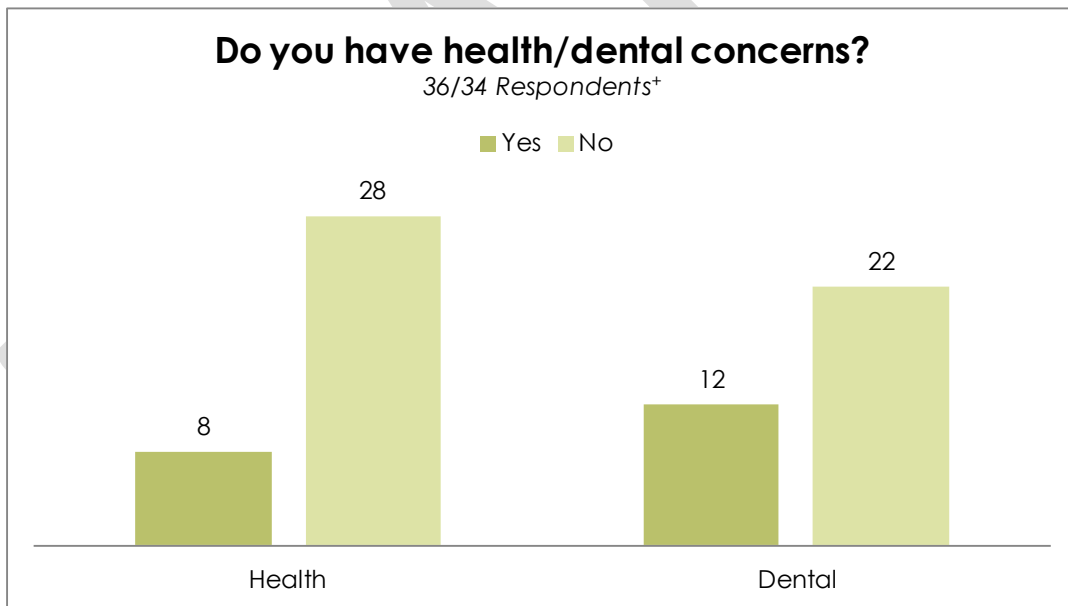


Only ten percent (five individuals) reported trading sexual favors and 19 respondents (47%) indicated sexual abuse. Thirty-nine percent of respondents (18 individuals) noted limited or no access to a shower facility while the majority of respondents (25 people, 61%) reported regular access.

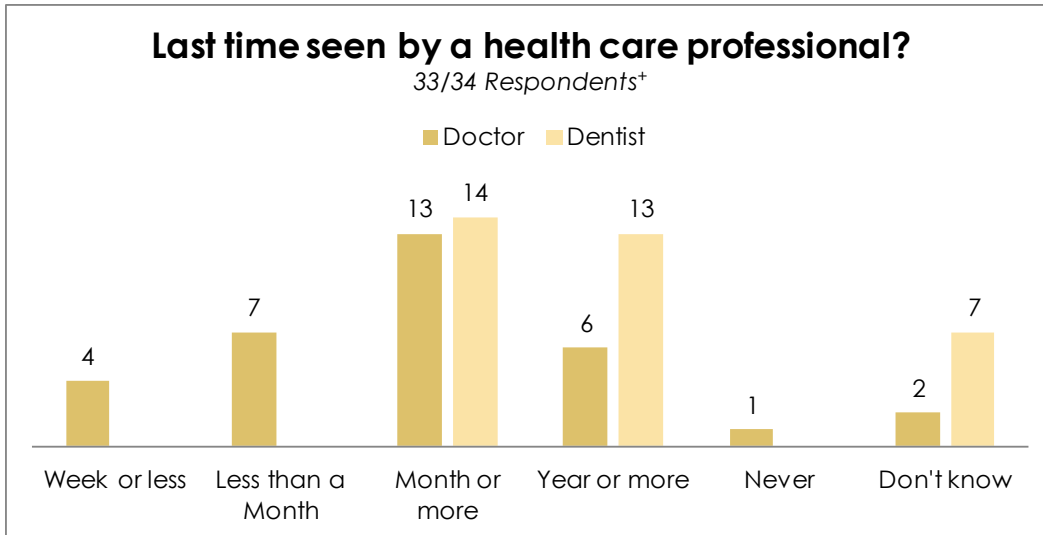




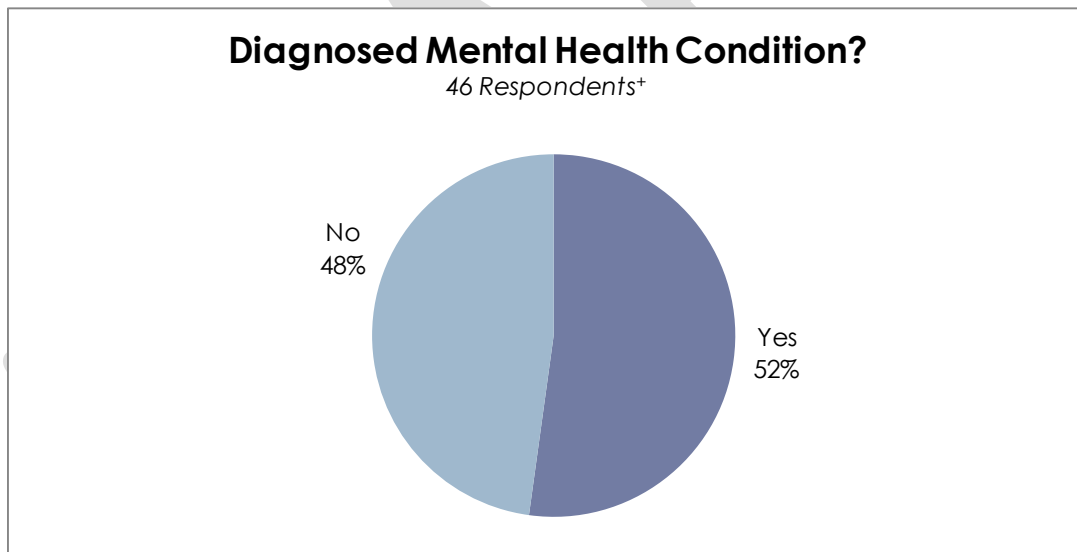
Only 28 respondents chose to answer a question regarding the number of meals they usually had per day. Eight respondents (29%) reported access to one meal a day, 39% indicated having two meals and ten (32%) reported having three.



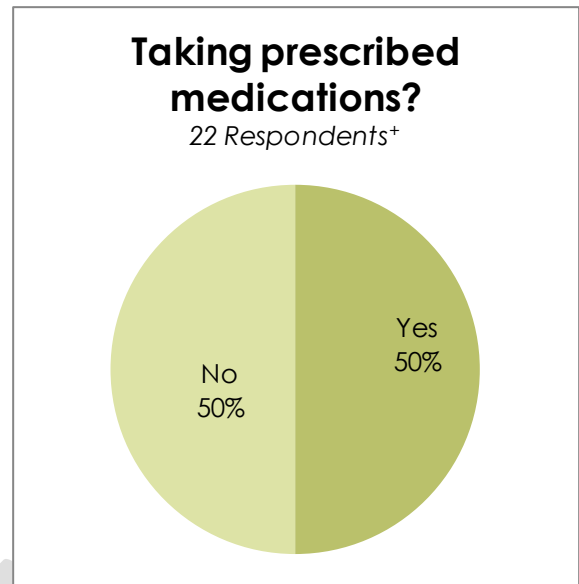
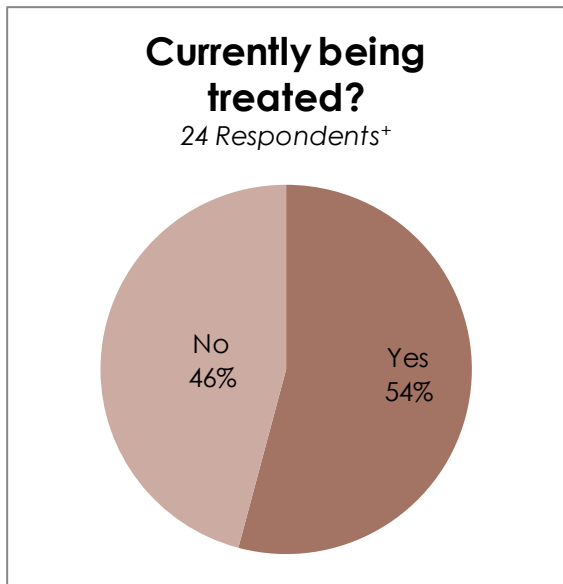
Over 30 respondents answered questions relative to having health or dental concerns. The majority indicated they did not have concerns and had seen a doctor within the last year. Fewer respondents reported having recently seen a dentist.



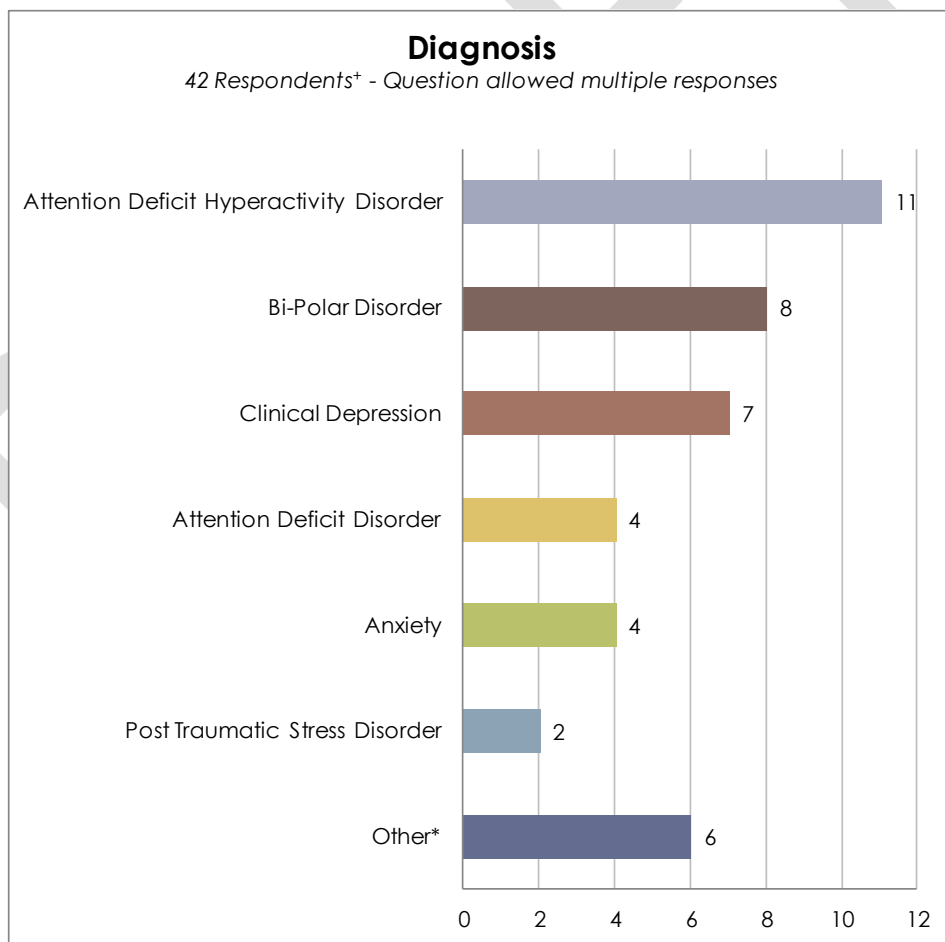
While only 46 respondents chose to answer a question regarding having been diagnosed with a mental health condition, around half responded to the affirmative. When one 17 year-old female was asked if she had any diagnosed mental health conditions, she replied “not yet”.



Just over 20 of these respondents chose to answer subsequent questions regarding current treatment and prescribed medications; approximately half of these reported treatment and medication adherence. Only 18 individuals answered a question regarding hospitalization for a mental health condition and the response was equally split; 50% (nine individuals) reported being hospitalized and the same number reported not having been hospitalized.



The most frequent diagnoses reported were: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Bi-Polar Disorder, and Clinical Depression.



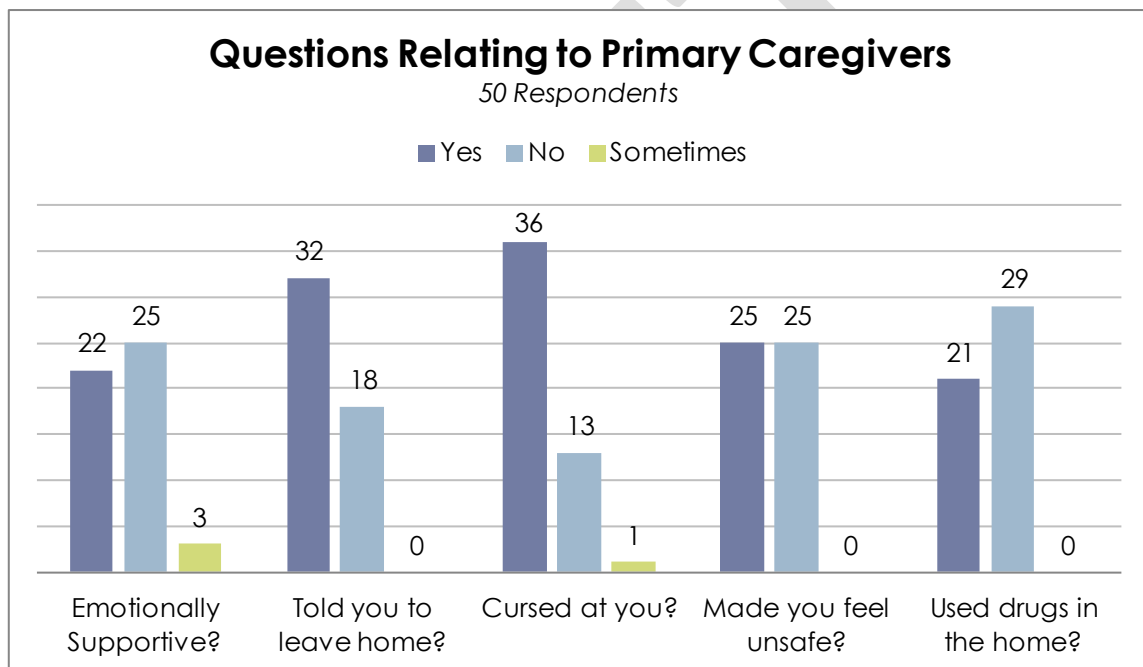
*Other includes one response for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and one response for each of the following disorders: Autism Spectrum; Obsessive Compulsive; Oppositional Defiant; Reactive Attachment; and Intellectual Disability.

Aspirations

When asked about future goals, 35 respondents indicated hopes to attend college, have a career and a family. Most careers noted require higher education (surgeon, mechanic, veterinarian, nurse, lawyer, computer programmer and teacher). Some indicated the desire to have a family, including marriage, a stable home and children. A few indicated the desire to join the military while others expressed an interest in the arts.

Family Support & Conflict

Fifty total respondents answered a series of questions regarding their primary caregiver(s), indicating the majority of overall viable respondents. While emotional support was indicated by roughly the same number of respondents, the majority (57% overall average) reported significant familial issues present in the home.



Specifically, respondents indicated affirmatively to the following family conflict issues:

- 64% reported being asked or told to leave home.
- 72% noted they were called names or cursed at.
- 50% indicated they were made to feel unsafe.
- 42% reported one or more primary caregivers used drugs around them in the home.

A fifteen year-old girl experiencing homelessness explained that her “dad denied food as punishment”, and her bed was “taken away when caught smoking”.

Section VII: Cohorts

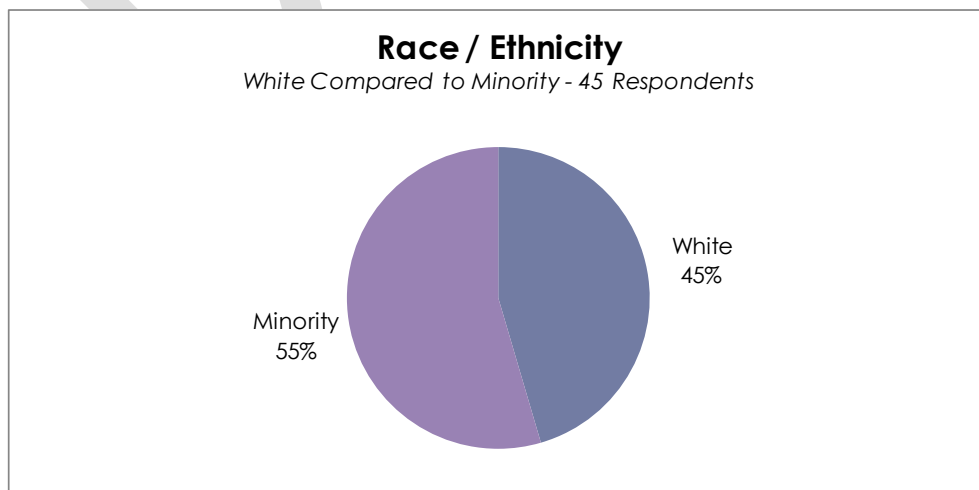
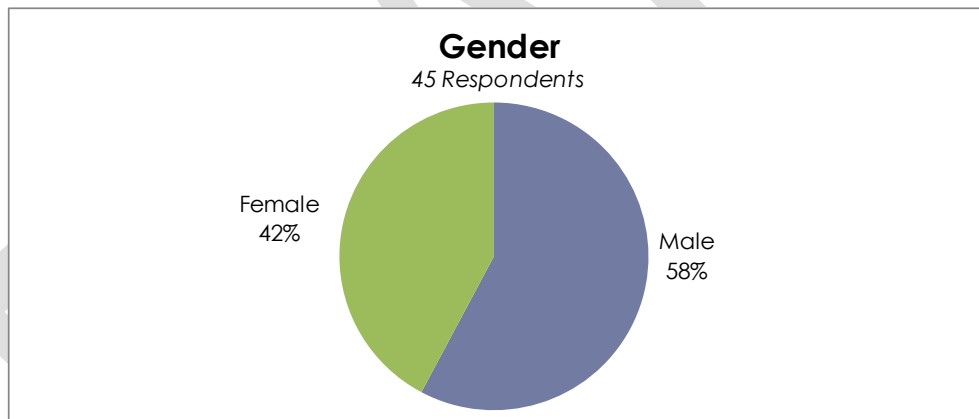
Data analysis resulted in the identification of two distinct cohorts worthy of segregated review. The *baseline cohort* represents 45 viable surveys collected from multiple sites spanning all canvassing zones in the Billings area. The *outlier cohort* represents a group of 51 individuals living collectively outside of the Billings city limits.

Baseline Cohort

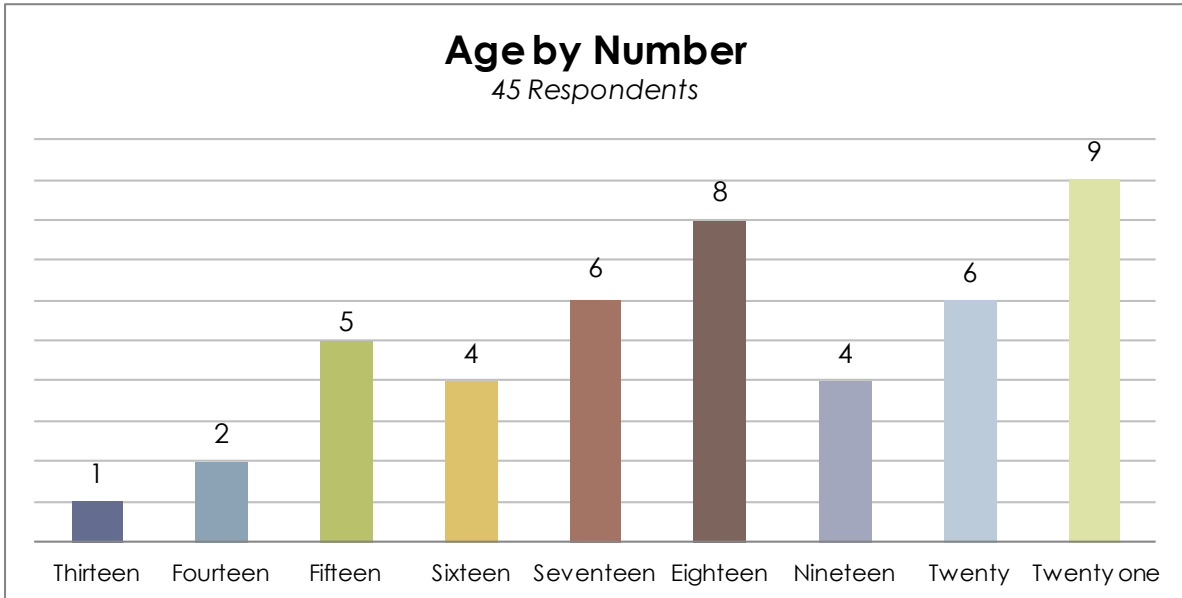
The baseline cohort consists of those respondents classified as homeless, precariously housed and at-risk of homelessness. This group represents a more typical overview of youth and young adult homelessness in Billings.

Demographics

The majority of respondents in the baseline cohort self-identified as male and minority. Of the 45 viable surveys retrieved, 26 respondents (58%) self-identified as male and 19 as female (42%). Only 45% of respondents self-identified as White when asked about race / ethnicity. Fifty-five percent of respondents self-identified as a minority, which is statistically significant as Billings has a 19% minority rate according to the 2010 Census. The largest minority group identified was Native American (22%) followed by multi-racial (20%) and Hispanic / Latino (nine percent).



The age of respondents was diverse and distributed from age 13 to 21 and the average age for the baseline cohort is 18.02 years. Youth aged 13 to 15 was the smallest collective group (eight individuals) and the remainder of the cohort was distributed nearly evenly with 18 and 19 individuals for ages 16 to 18 and 19 to 21 respectively.

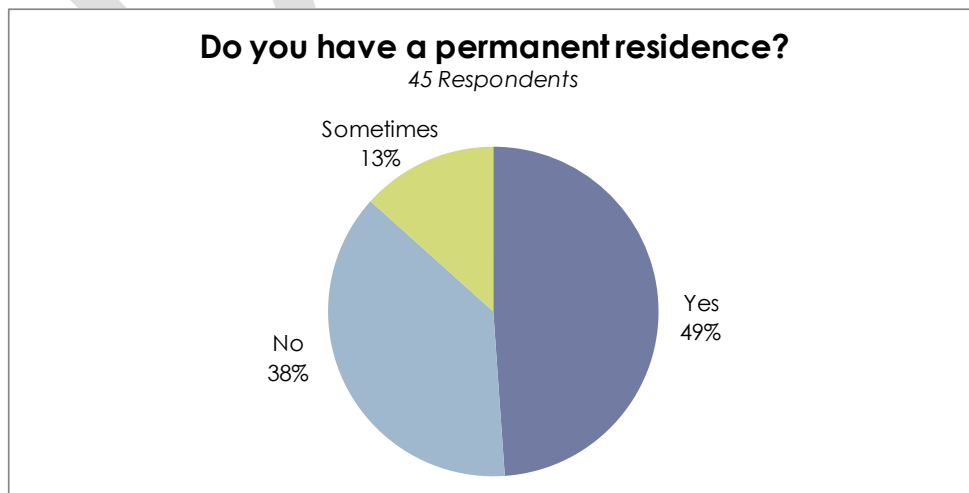


Access to Identification

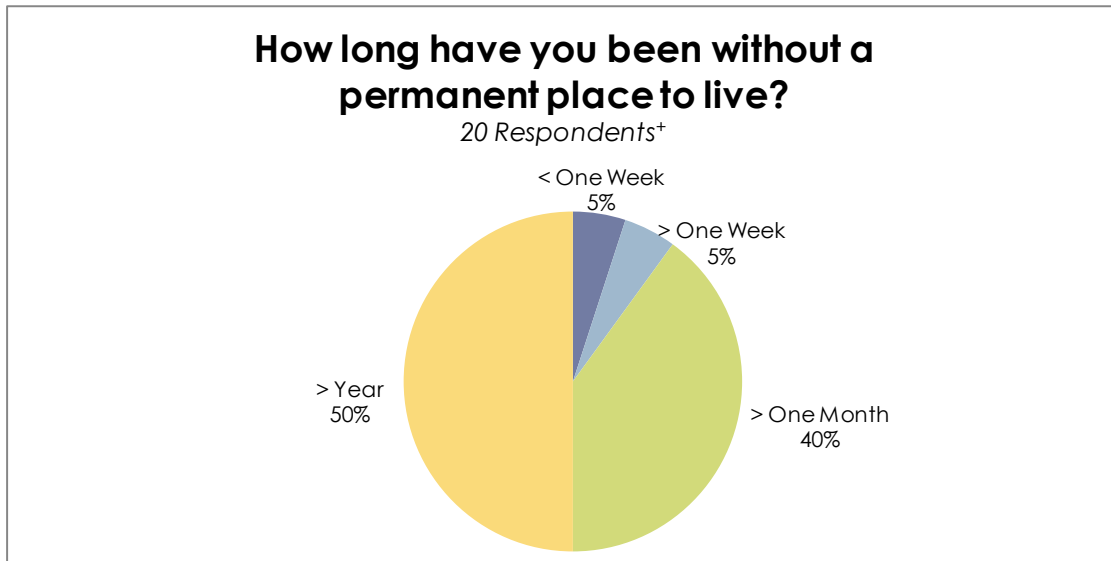
Data represented previously in the overall review is still applicable to the baseline cohort relative to access to government identification including birth certificate and social security card.

Housing Status

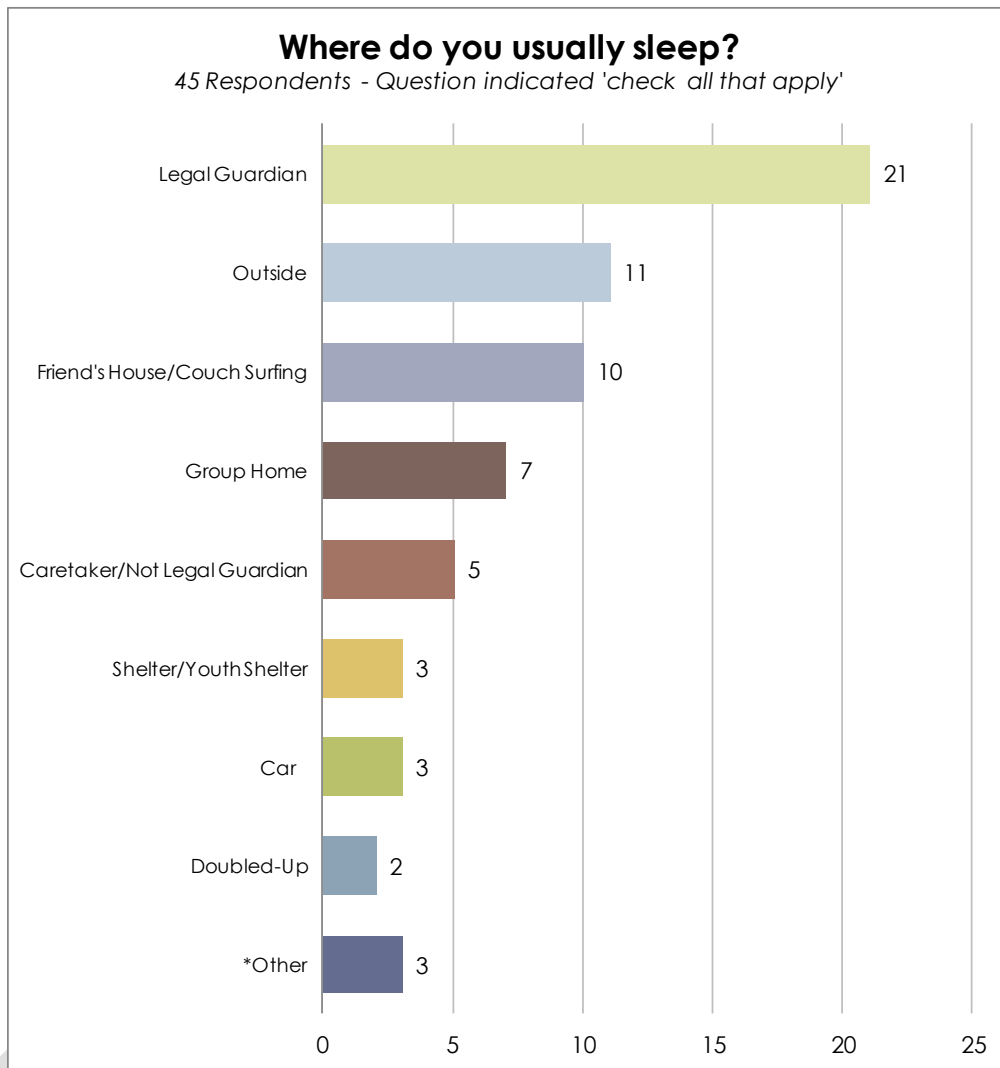
When queried regarding access to a permanent residence, nearly half of respondents (49%) in the baseline cohort responded affirmatively while nearly 40% indicated they did not have a permanent residence. Thirteen percent indicated they had sporadic access.



Ninety percent of respondents indicated a lack of stable living environment for a month or more, indicating a possible majority. As only 20 respondents answered this question, it is difficult to conclude a majority have been without a permanent residence.



Respondents were asked where they slept the night previous and where they usually sleep from a list of possible places and they had the option to write a response. The baseline cohort reported usually sleeping at a legal guardian's residence followed by outside and at a friend's house.



**Other includes one response for each of the following: uninhabitable building; pre-release and treatment center.*

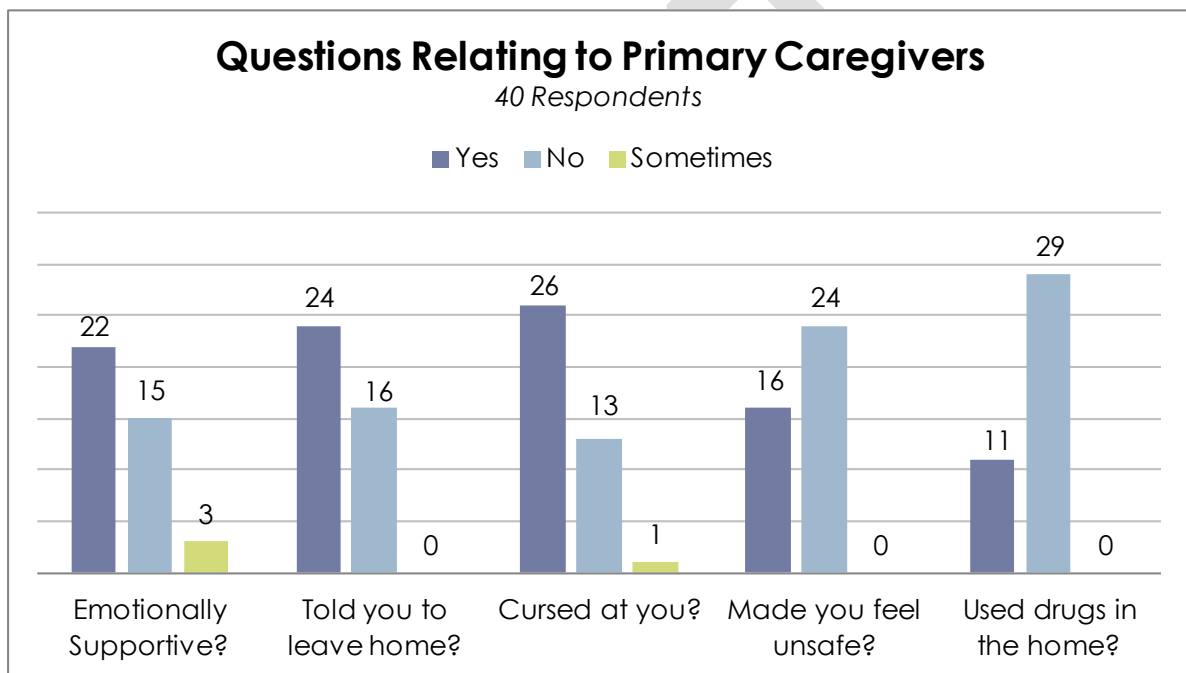
Data represented previously in the overall review is still applicable to the baseline cohort relative to:

- Residency in foster care
- Age entered into foster care and length of placement
- Total number of caregivers
- School attendance and highest education level
- School attendance relative to age
- Bullying
- Employment
- Panhandling
- Sleep
- Sexual favors / abuse
- Showers
- Meals

- Health and dental care
- Mental health diagnosis, treatment and prescriptions
- Aspirations
- Barriers
- Service needs and utilization

Family Support & Conflict

Forty total respondents answered a series of questions regarding their primary caregiver(s) compared to 50 respondents in the overall cohort. While emotional support was indicated by roughly the same number of respondents, under half (48%) reported significant familial issues present in the home (compared to 57% in the overall cohort).



Specifically, respondents indicated affirmatively to the following family conflict issues:

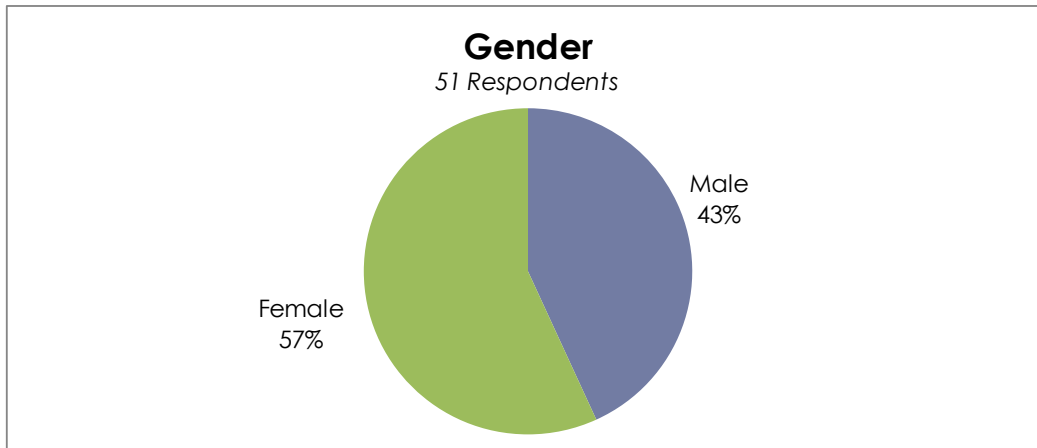
- 60% reported being asked or told to leave home, compared to 64% in the overall cohort.
- 65% noted they were called names or cursed at, compared to 72%.
- 40% indicated they were made to feel unsafe, compared to 50%.
- 28% reported one or more primary caregivers used drugs around them in the home, compared to 42%.

Outlier Cohort

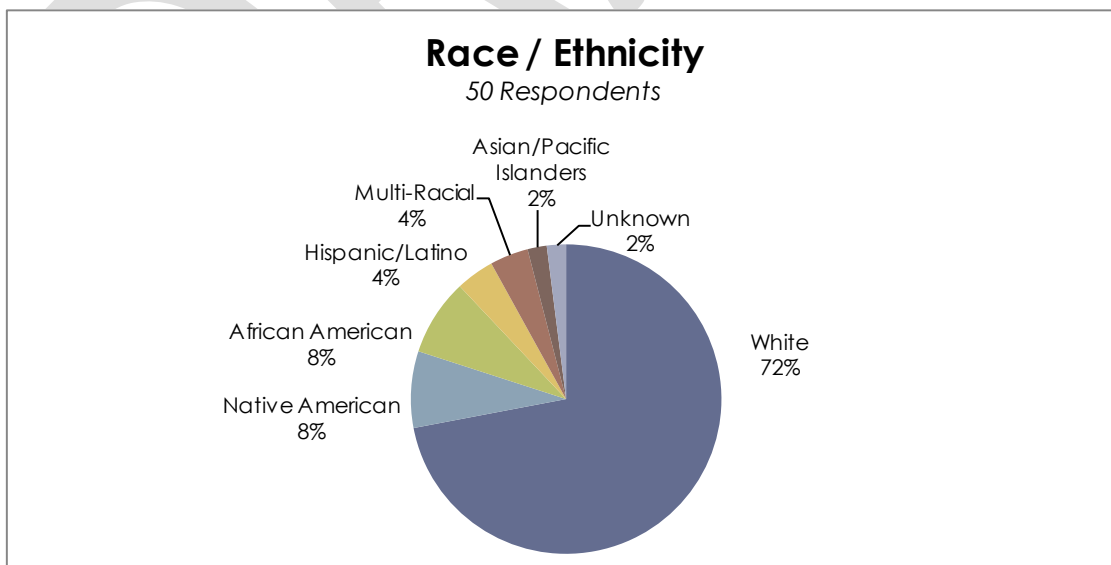
The outlier cohort is comprised of 51 respondents classified as homeless. All were residing in a communal environment outside of the City of Billings limits.

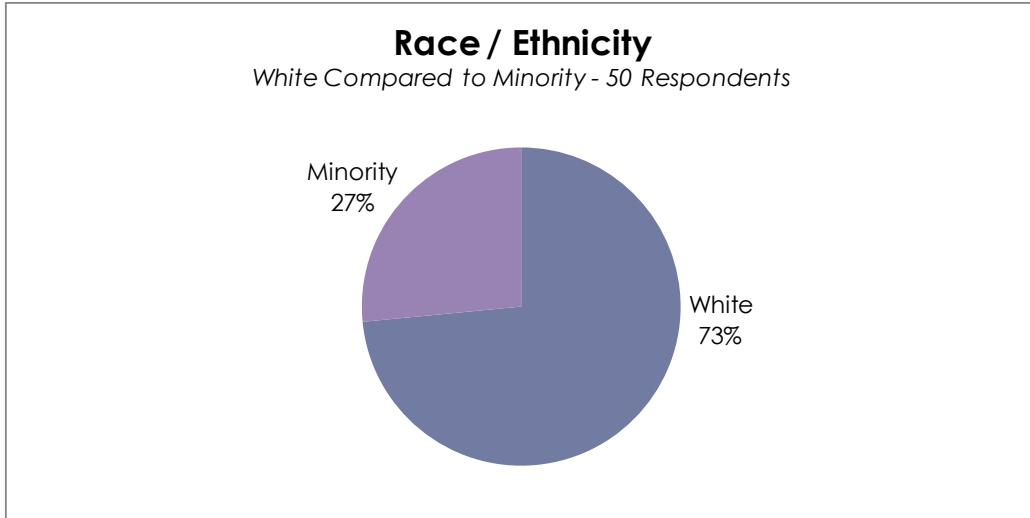
Demographics

The majority of respondents in the outlier cohort self-identified as female and White. Of the 51 surveys retrieved, 29 respondents (57%) self-identified as female and 22 as male (43%).

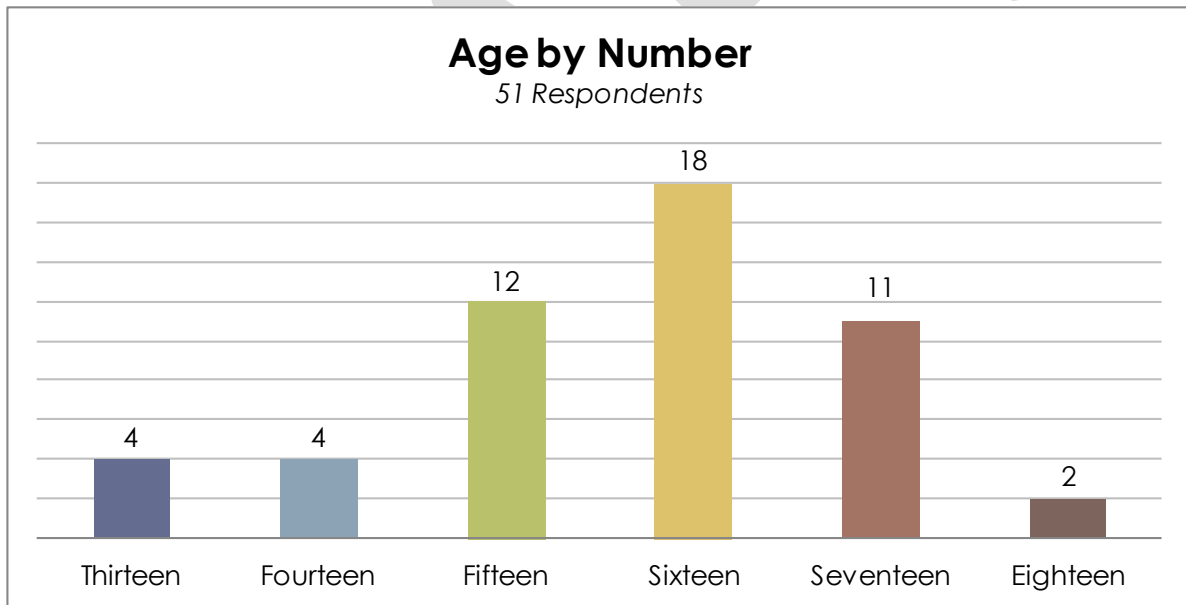


The majority of respondents (72%) self-identified as White when asked about race / ethnicity. Twenty-seven percent of respondents self-identified as a minority, which is still statistically significant as Billings has a 19% minority rate according to the 2010 Census. The largest minority groups identified were Native American and African American (eight percent respectively) followed by Hispanic / Latino tied with multi-racial (four percent for both).





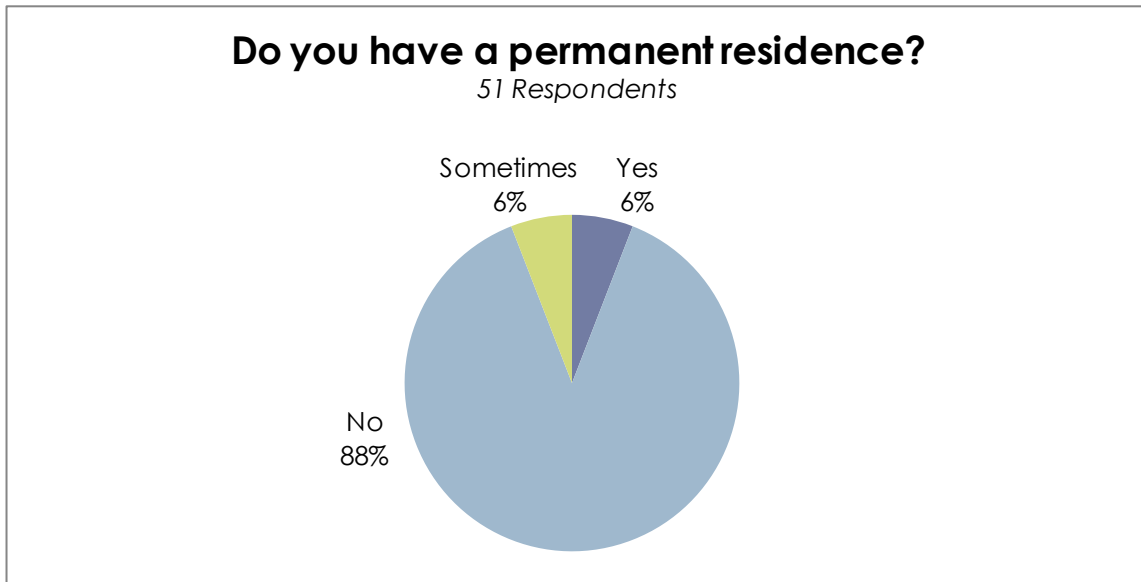
The age of respondents was less diverse than both overall and baseline cohorts with primary distribution between fifteen years up to 17 years of age and the average age for the outlier cohort is 15.67 years.



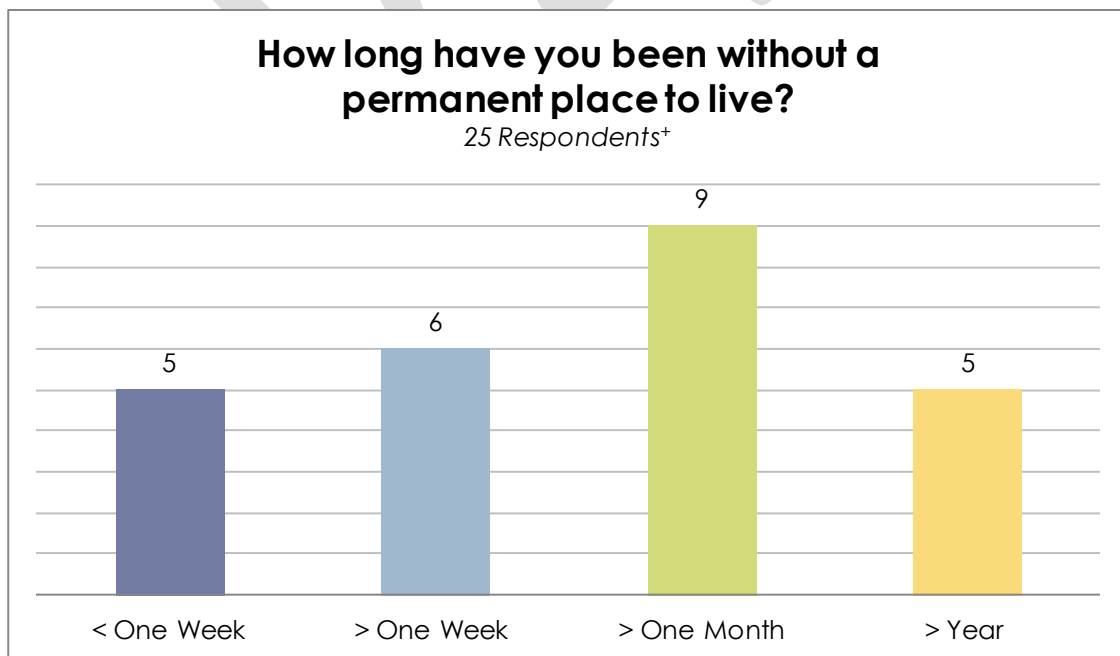
Youth aged 13 to 15 was the largest collective group (20 individuals) and the remainder of the cohort reported ages between 16 and 18. There were no young adults identified in this outlier group.

Housing Status

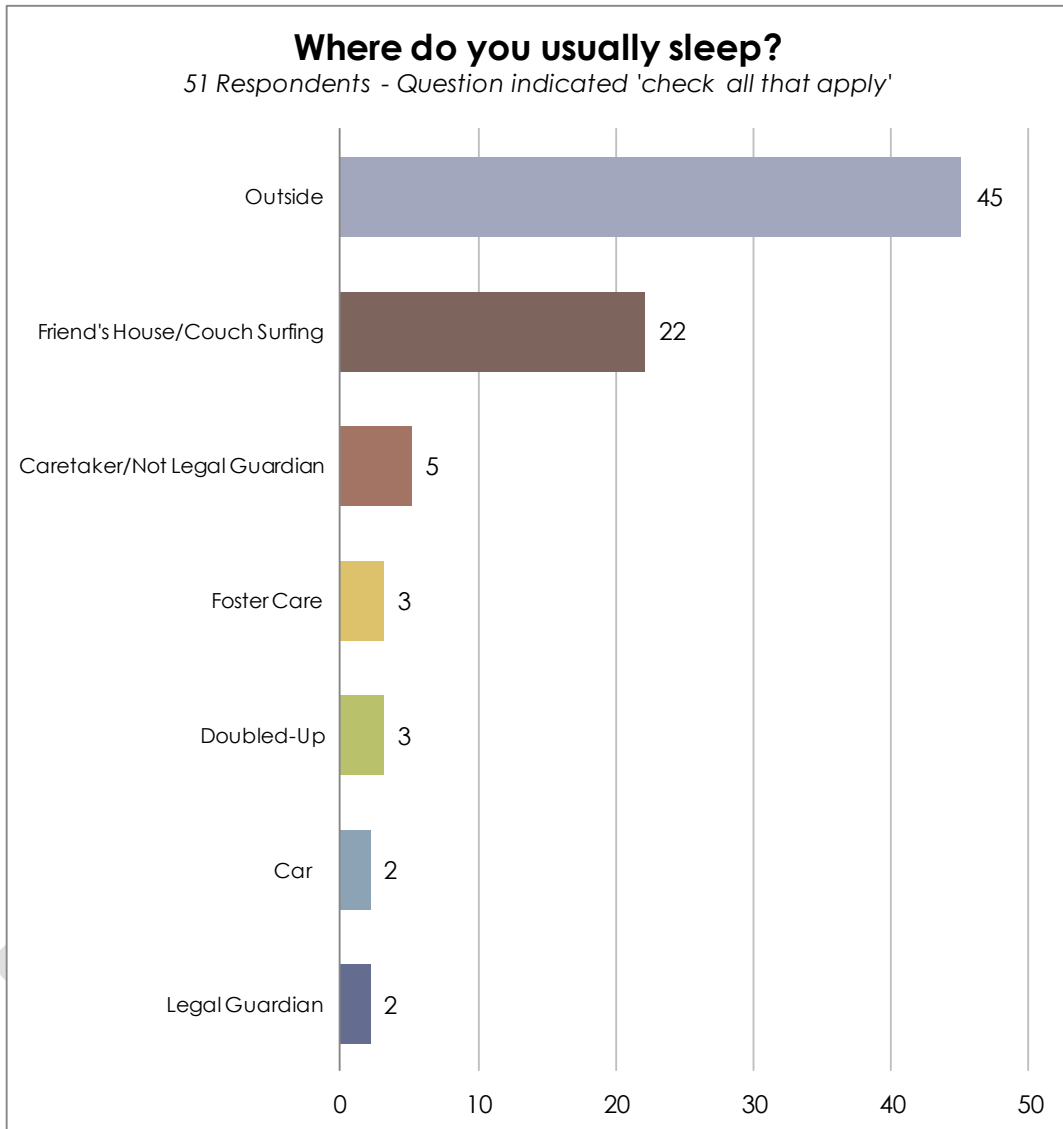
When queried regarding access to a permanent residence, the majority (88%) in the outlier cohort responded negatively (45 individuals).



Fifty-six percent of respondents indicated a lack of stable living environment for a month or more. As only 25 respondents answered this question, it is difficult to conclude a majority have been without a permanent residence.



Respondents were asked where they usually sleep from a list of possible places and they had the option to write a response. The outlier cohort reported usually sleeping outside followed by a friend's house.



Cohort Limitations

One of the most significant aspects of this group was the lack of data obtained overall to analyze the cohort. Very few individuals completed the majority of survey questions. Therefore, data cannot be analyzed or compared in the following categories:

- Access to government identification
- Education
- Foster care
- Number of primary caregivers
- Issues relating to caregivers
- Bullying
- Employment
- Panhandling
- Sleep
- Sexual favors / abuse
- Showers
- Meals
- Health and dental care
- Mental health
- Aspirations
- Barriers
- Service needs and utilization

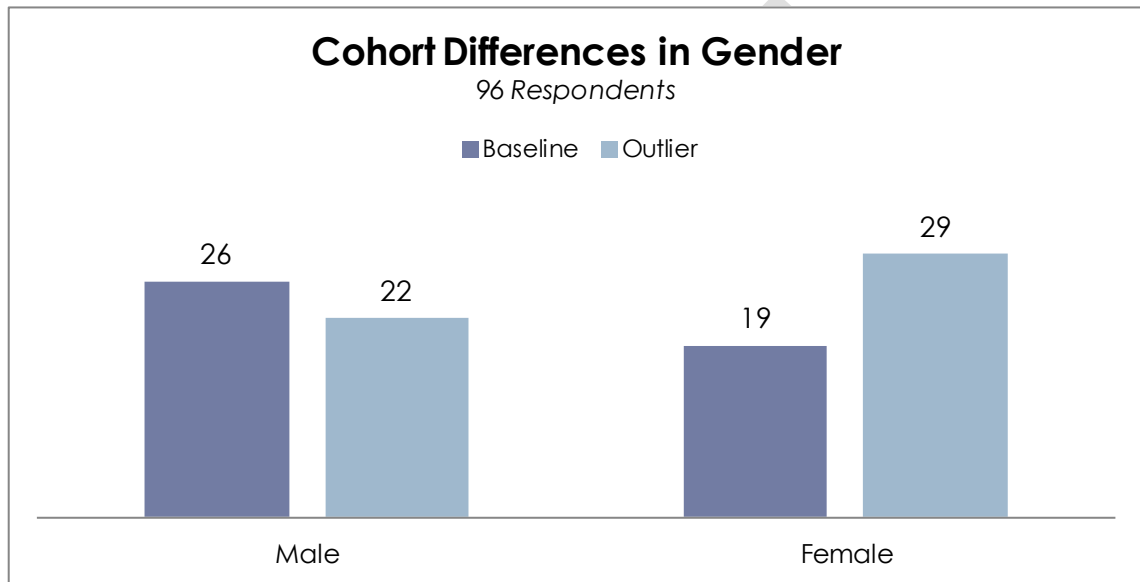
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Cohort Differences

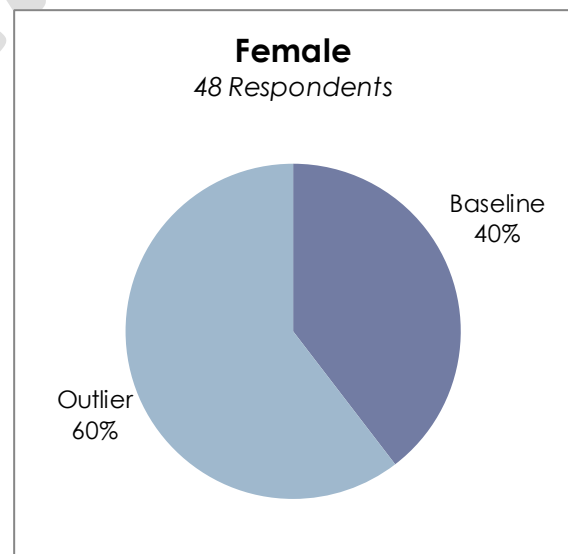
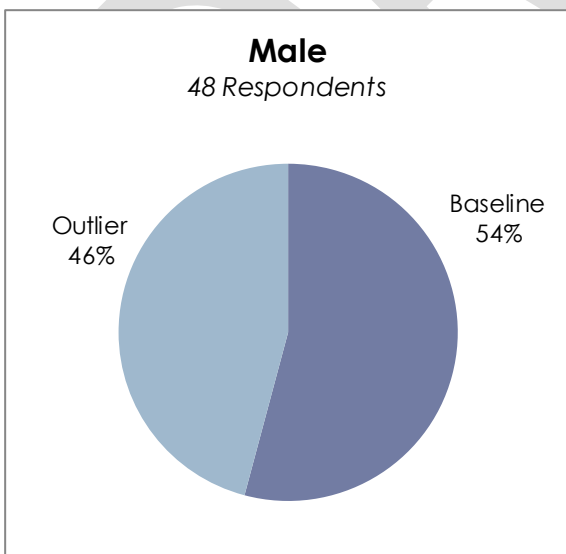
Significant differences between the baseline and outlier cohorts have been identified, which supports separation of cohort data and utilization of the baseline cohort as a standard for the development of services and resources.

Gender

Both cohorts represent approximately half of the total population surveyed resulting in viable data and gender was perfectly split (48 males and 48 females overall).

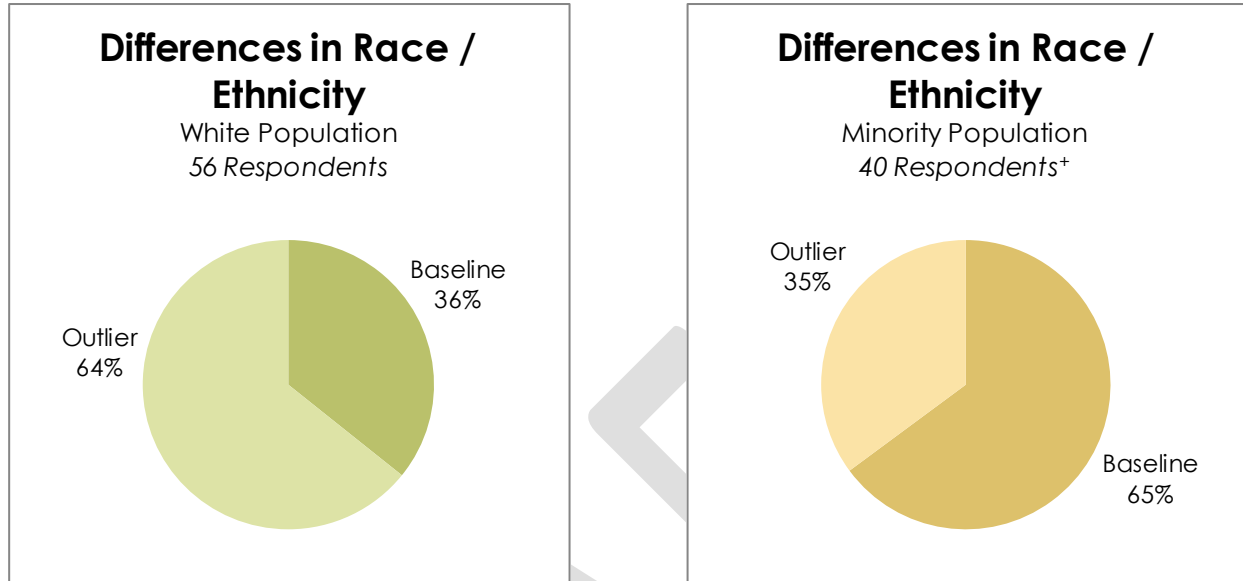


The baseline cohort was comprised of more males (54%) than females and the outlier group was 60% female.



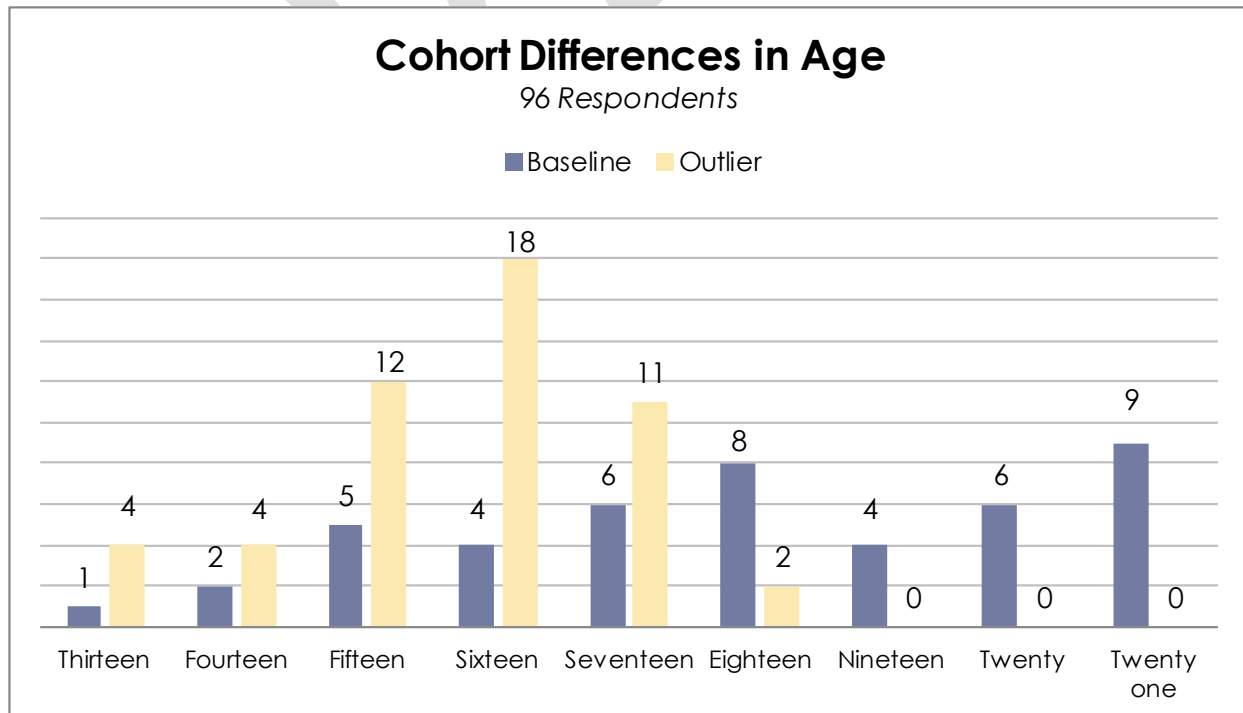
Race & Ethnicity

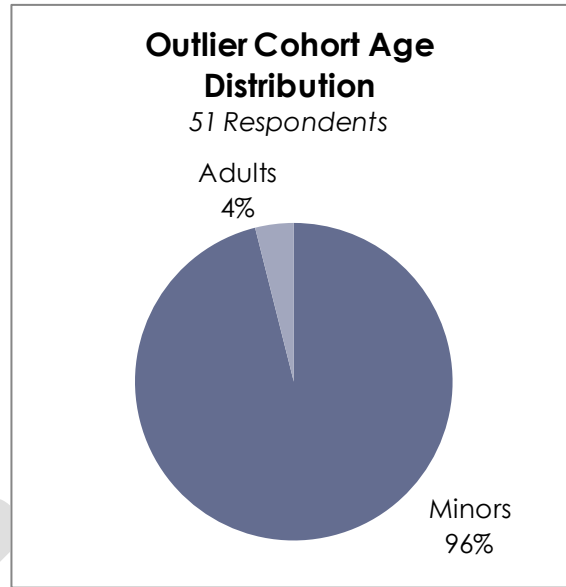
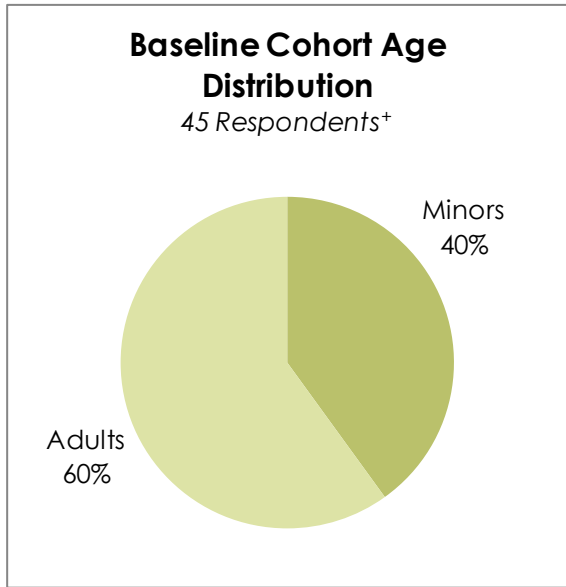
Differences in race and ethnicity were also apparent. An overall comparison reveals the outlier cohort contained 64% of the total White population of all surveyed and the baseline cohort contained 65% of the overall minority population.



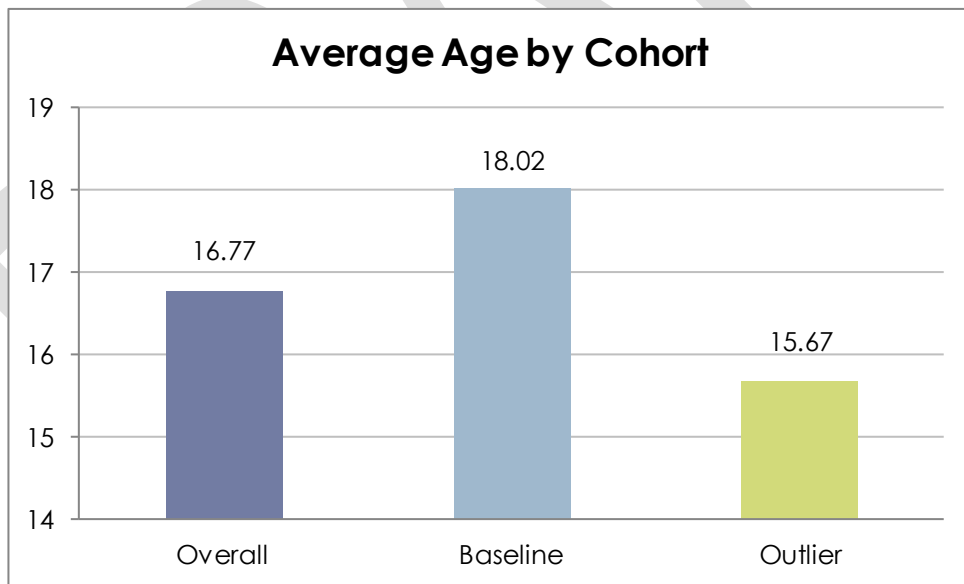
Age Distribution

There were also striking differences in age distribution between the cohorts. The outlier cohort ranged from youth aged 13 to 18 and the baseline group was more evenly distributed up to age 21.





Very few adults were identified in the outlier cohort whereas the majority of respondents in the baseline group were over the age of 18. Further, average age between the outlier cohort and baseline is over two full years.



Rainbow Gathering: A Theory

One possible explanation for the outlier cohort is a large-scale coincidental event held the week prior to *Youth Count!* survey administration from July 12 to 14, 2013. The *Rainbow Family of Living Light* sponsors annual outdoor camping events to further concepts of peace; Rainbow Gatherings. Many attendees travel across the nation together to and from the event.

The 2013 Rainbow Gathering was held from June 21 to July 7 and attracted approximately 10,000 people to Jackson, Wyoming for two weeks. City staff also noted a number of youth affiliated with the Rainbow Gathering congregating outside of the Billings Public Library during the *Youth Count!* event and along the Yellowstone River residing in encampments.

The following is an excerpt from an article published on July 29, 2013 from the *Missoulian*, written by Kathryn Haake:

Rainbow youth in Missoula after gathering brings concerns

Nibs is a 16-year-old anarchist who lives on the road. With baggy clothing hanging off his slight frame, a short “rat tail” hairstyle and an “X” intentionally scratched into his cheek, he looks like the Lost Boy in “Peter Pan” he was named after.

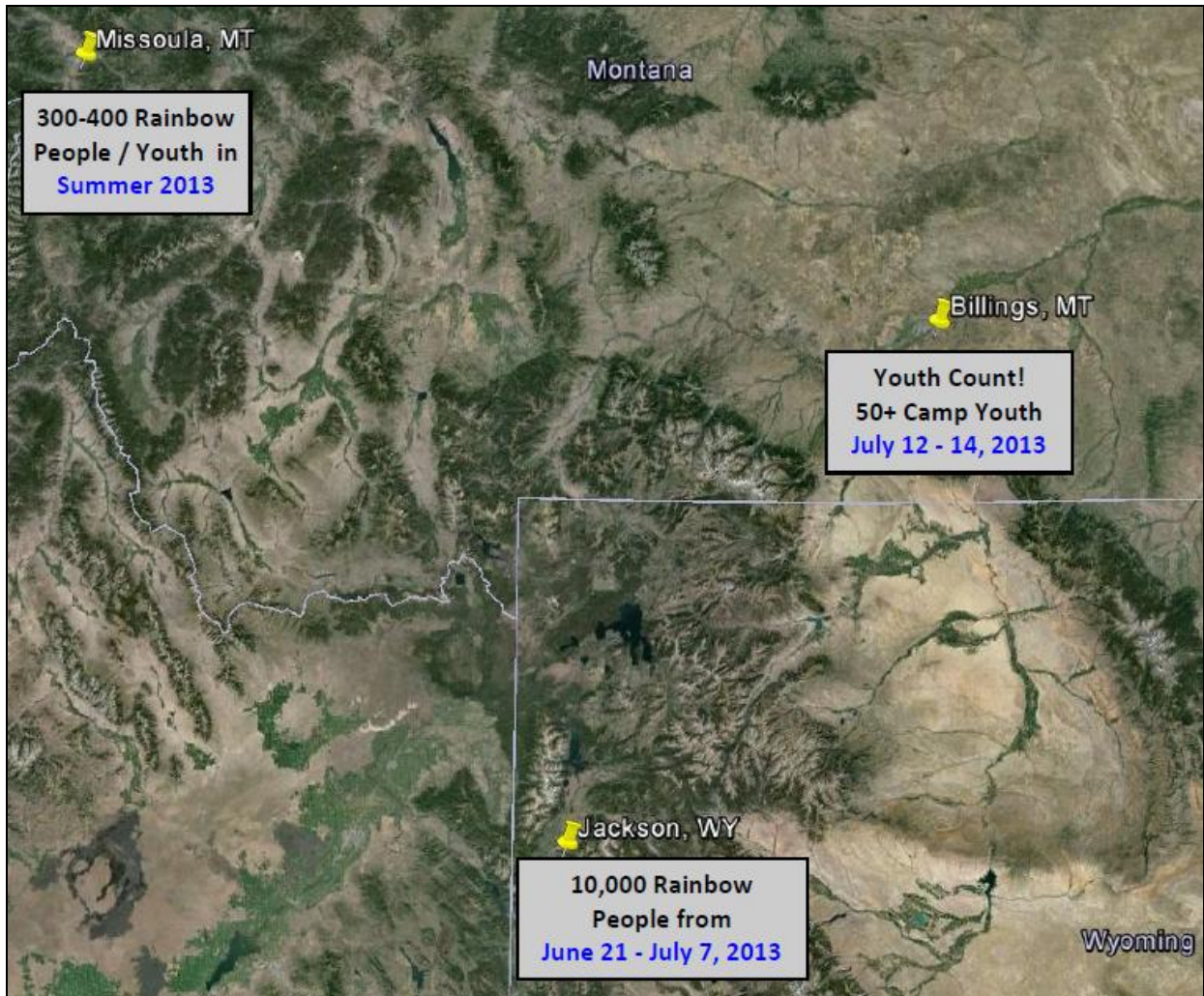
But Nibs and his group of homeless travelers are not from Neverland – they’re from the recent Rainbow Gathering in southwestern Montana.

The Rainbow Family of Living Light, a loosely affiliated group of diverse individuals who generally advocate for peace and alternative lifestyles, holds a gathering at a different location each summer. This year’s event was held in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest about 10 miles from Jackson. It attracted nearly 9,700 participants at its peak in early July, and Rainbow Family members began dispersing shortly thereafter.

Unlike most homeless people, Nibs and many fellow Rainbow Gathering folk have made a conscious choice to live on the road – and have stopped in Missoula before they take off westward. They may well stay in town for several months.

Missoula Police Officer Andy Roy estimates that anywhere from 300 to 400 Rainbow folk have stopped in Missoula.

If Missoula, Montana experienced hundreds of travelers, it is likely Billings, Montana would encounter a likewise surge in traveler and transient populations. The proximity of the Rainbow Gathering to Billings relative to Missoula would also support this theory.



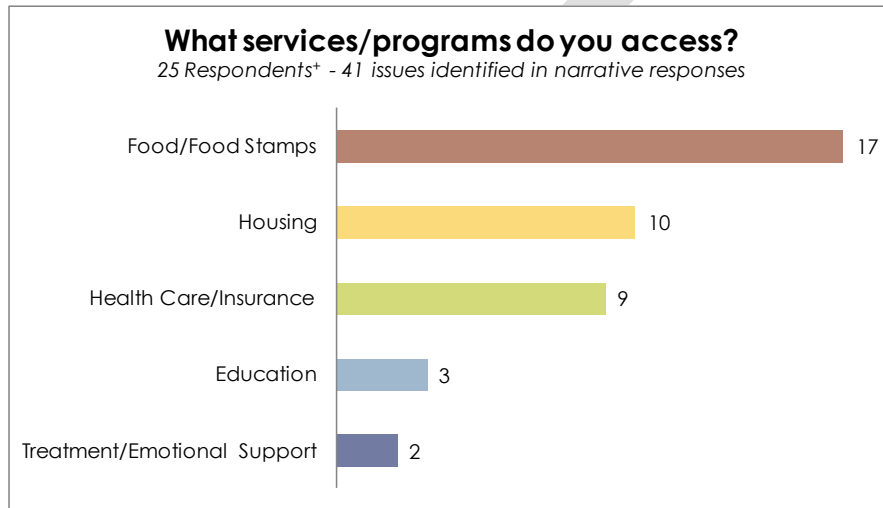
Google Earth

Section VIII: Services & Gap Analysis

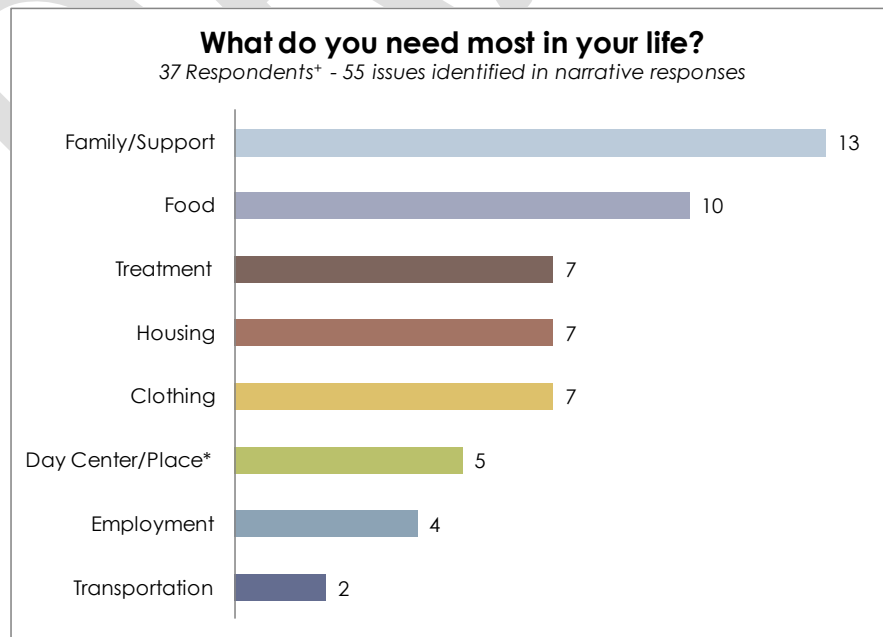
Data analyzed in this section represents responses for the overall cohort which is predominantly comprised of baseline group, as only few responders in the outlier cohort answered relative questions.

Service Utilization & Needs

When asked to identify services utilized in Billings, food and food stamps were identified as the predominant response followed by housing, health care or insurance, education and emotional support / treatment.



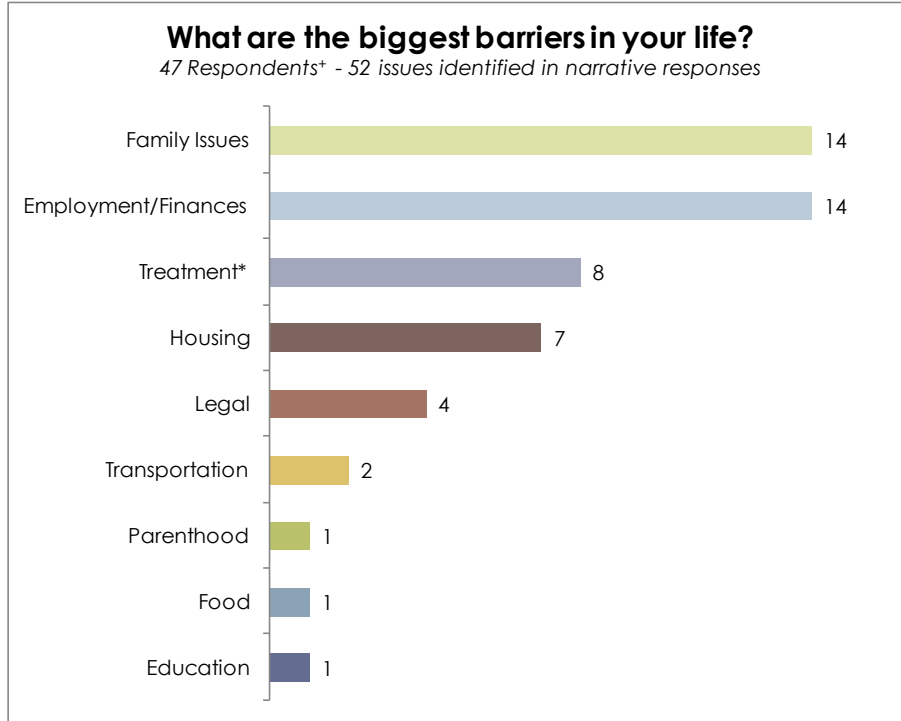
Respondents were asked to identify what they needed most in life and the majority indicated family and support followed by food, treatment, housing, and clothing.



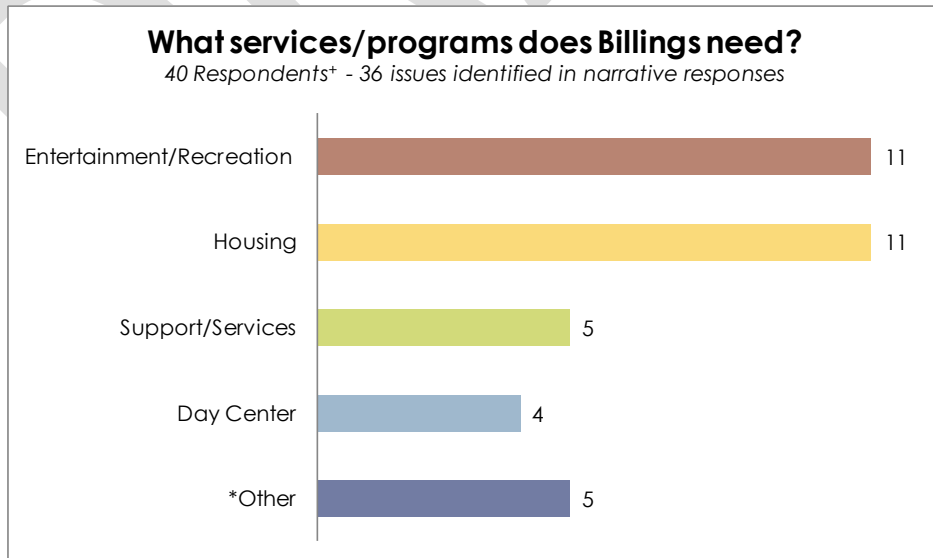
*Day Center includes youth-centered places to go, recreation, entertainment, etc.

Life Barriers & Community Needs

When asked to identify the biggest barriers in their lives, respondents indicated family issues were primary followed by: employment and finances; addiction, disability, mental health or other treatment; housing; and legal issues.



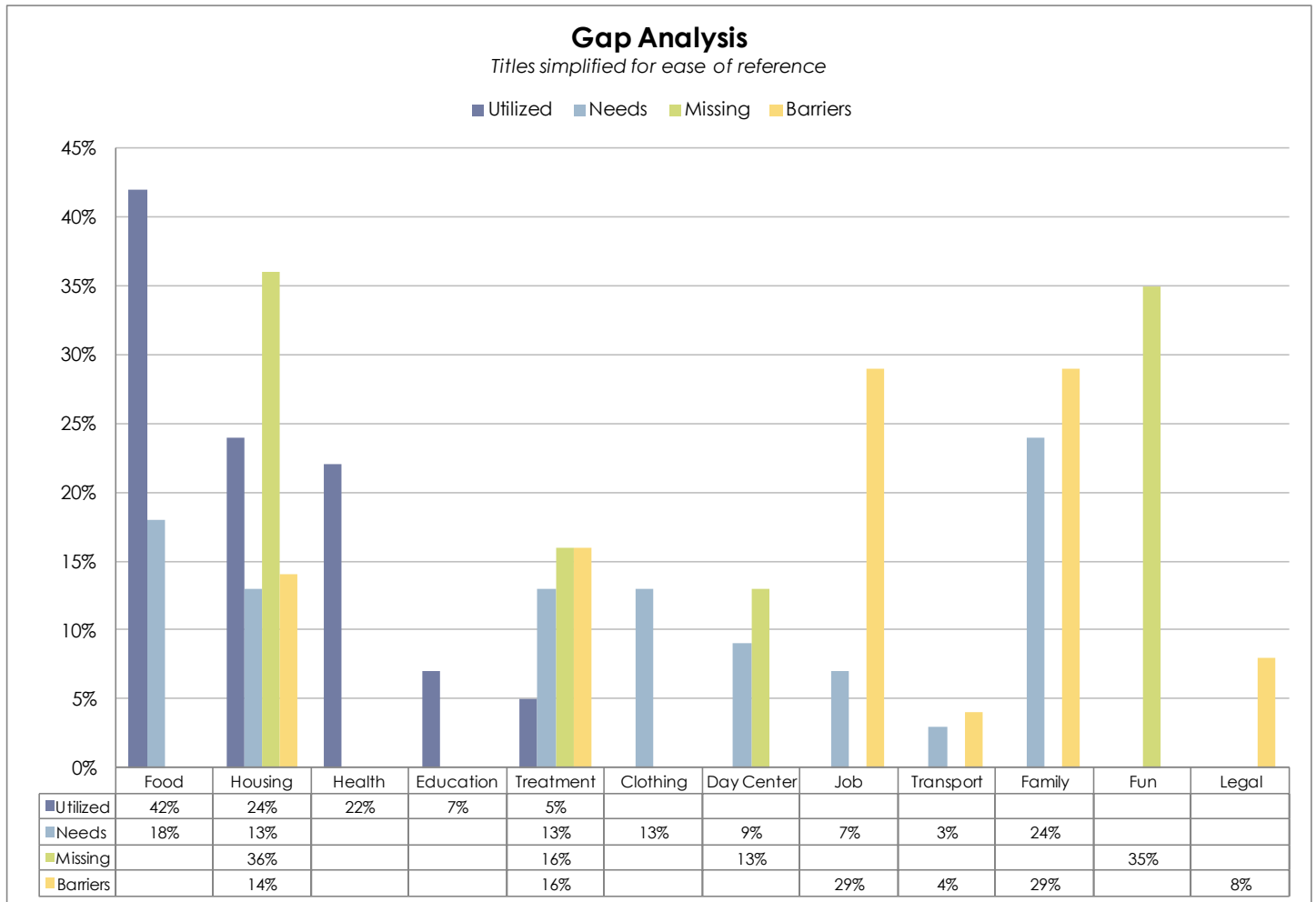
Respondents were also asked to identify needed programs and services needed in Billings. The majority of responses indicated the need for indoor entertainment and recreation, parks, places for sports and other places to “hang out”, such as a day center.



**Other includes one response for each of the following: transportation, spiritual establishment, employment, elder services and alternative school.*

Comparing Service Utilization, Needs & Life Barriers

Respondents were asked a series of questions relative to services to gain insight relative to analysis for prioritizing service and resource needs in Billings. Comparing services utilization, life barriers and identified personal and community needs is helpful in evaluating next steps and funding priorities.



Food: The most highly utilized resource in Billings, yet the second highest need indicated by respondents.

Housing: The single most identified resource in utilization, personal need, identification of need as a community resource and life barrier.

Health: Only identified as a resource utilized in this data series.

Education: Only identified as a resource utilized in this data series. Yet predominant themes respondents indicated for life goals and aspirations require college education, including graduate degrees.

Treatment: The second most identified resource in utilization, personal need, identification of need as a community resource and life barrier.

Clothing: Only identified as a needed resource in this data series.

Day Center: References to needing a place to take care of important business and a place to exist, receive support and services was a theme identified in responses related to both personal and community resource needs.

Job: Employment and lack of financial resources was identified as a primary life barrier and also a personal need.

Transport: Lack of a vehicle and transportation services was identified by a few participants as a personal need or a life barrier.

Family: Family issues, conflict and support were identified both as a primary need and life barrier.

Fun: Recreation and entertainment were identified as a primary resource needed in the community.

Legal: Only identified as a life barrier in this data series.

Impediments to Accessing Services

Youth who are experiencing homelessness, or are at-risk of becoming homeless, have difficulty accessing the resources and services offered through various providers in the Billings community. Respondents have overwhelmingly stated that there are, in fact, a number of barriers to services that they cannot overcome.

Age: Many service providers and benefit plans require an applicant be at least 18 years of age, therefore minors cannot access services such as shelters and benefits on their own without becoming emancipated.

Identification Documents: Access to specific identification and legal documents is a life necessity. Lack thereof makes it difficult to obtain employment and benefits to sustain financial stability. Without primary identification issued by state or federal government, it is also difficult to garner replacement birth certificates and social security cards.

Service Limitations & Knowledge: Some service providers lack funding and resources for full time distribution to meet demand. Many respondents note a generalized lack of knowledge relative to accessing services. Although great strides have been made in recent years to create a network of providers through events such as Billings Community Connect (formerly known as Project Homeless Connect), services supporting teenagers and young adults are not widely known.

Gap Analysis Findings & Recommendations

As the baseline cohort identified a large percentage of young adults aged 18 - 21 through the survey, care should be taken to include services relative to this population in addition to school-aged youth. Overall, an influx in services tailored for youth and young adults would undeniably benefit the growing number of disadvantaged individuals in the community and would help to bring them out of homelessness.

Finding A: The city's supply of affordable housing specific to and accessible by youth and young adults is not sufficient to meet identified personal and community need.

Recommendation A1: The city's supply of affordable housing specifically serving youth and young adults needs to be expanded and barriers to accessing housing must be reduced and / or eliminated.

Recommendation A2: The feasibility of establishing both rental housing units and youth shelter options should be reviewed, including *housing first* concepts. The provision of housing quickly eliminates immediate threats to health and safety and provides stabilization on many of the identified needs and life barriers including food, treatment, clothing, day center, transport, and emotional support. The provision of housing as a first priority provides the opportunity for youth to work on other goals, including resolution of family conflict, attending school, seeking employment and resolving legal issues.

Recommendation A3: Property management companies maintain control of available affordable rental units and require application fees, positive credit, and rental history. They also require applicants be at least 18 years old. Efforts should be made to continue establishing positive relationships between service providers and landlords willing to rent to youth and young adults.

Recommendation A4: Expand the city's available housing service array to include housing to accommodate varying developmental and support functions would benefit growing independence. Examples include: casual shelter; structured treatment shelter; communal group living; supported transitional independent living; and fully independent living.

Finding B: Resolution of family conflict is the most significant need and life barrier identified by youth and young adults in Billings.

Recommendation B1: Efforts to strengthen families and remediate conflict should be prioritized for service expansion and enhancement, including family therapy, parenting support classes, teen support groups, etc. Expanding funding for these services to alleviate extensive costs for the economically challenged and establishing varying access points is paramount to success.

Recommendation B2: Families should be made aware of available community and online resources to educate and assist with conflict. For example, *Parents Let's Unite for Kids* maintains a large library containing materials specific to diverse therapy approaches to treat diagnoses identified through the survey process including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Depression, etc.

Recommendation B3: Enhanced crisis intervention services have been established in other communities and the feasibility of developing and enhancing these types of services should be investigated. Crisis hotlines have also been useful in deescalating conflict situations for families and short-term residential Crisis Centers have been established to give youth a break from family tensions. Therapy is typically required for re-entry in the home.

Finding C: Youth and young adults do not have sufficient knowledge, resources or identification to navigate and access services such as housing, food, treatment, clothing, and transportation.

Recommendation C1: Create a comprehensive, easy access resource identifying all services available to youth and young adults in the community. Although the Mayor's Committee on Homelessness sponsored the creation of the Downtown Resource Notepad and Map, services relative to access age have not been specifically identified.

Recommendation C2: Resources designed to fit in a pocket and widely distributed across the city, youth may utilize it more than a larger brochure. Traveling youth do not have easy access to storage and would benefit from compact formats.

Recommendation C3: Generate a free downloadable app for various cell phone platforms in order for youth to navigate services. The app could have notification reminders for service dates, times and locations. For example, food boxes are available on certain days and available for pick up between established hours of operation. Text messages or lock-screen notifications could assist in reminding youth and young adults to access food resources.

Recommendation C4: Youth and young adults should be queried on innovative ways to aid in service connection. Youth may subscribe to a supportive online resource over carrying paper resources or they may be able to access resources outside office hours more frequently.

Recommendation C5: Efforts to assist youth and young adults in obtaining and maintaining federal and state identification documents would benefit youth in their ability to access services.

Finding D: Access to treatment specific to addiction, mental health and the provision of emotional support should be enhanced and diversified for youth and young adults.

Recommendation D1: Services specific to youth and young adults needs to be continually funded and outreach efforts strengthened.

Recommendation D2: Engaging this target population to identify methods to increasing access to treatment is essential. For example, youth may attend a support group in the park if lunch was provided or therapy group in a private room in a downtown coffee shop more readily than in an office setting.

Recommendation D3: The concept of organizing an annual resource fair to connect youth and young adults to services, including employment opportunities, is worthy of investigation. Billings Community Connect can be perceived as an intimidating environment for young people. The concept of holding a resource fair to create access to services would also generate community donations to serve youth year-round.

Recommendation D4: Day center services are a primary support for youth and young adults and should be enhanced at every opportunity. The lack of day center services was a primary finding in Welcome Home Billings, the city's ten-year plan to impact services. While efforts have been made to enhance services for adults experiencing homelessness, youth and young adults would benefit from additional supports in day center services.

Finding E: Food resources are not easily accessed to end hunger for school-aged youth and young adults in Billings.

Recommendation E1: The expansion of food access resources should be a primary effort, including support of food pantries, back-pack meals, food services at organizations serving youth and young adults. Also see Recommendation C1.

Finding F: Disadvantaged youth in Billings have the desire to finish high school and attend college, but do not have the support and financial means to do so.

Education is one of the most important preventative measures to youth homelessness. However, youth experiencing homelessness have a harder time focusing in class, resulting in a decline in academic performance and graduation rates. Focus and overall performance in school can be negatively impacted by the lack of a nutritional diet, access to food, and housing situation.

Recommendation F1: Efforts to support youth and young adults in completing a high school education, vocational education and / or college degree should be enhanced, including education and career events, facilitating college and financial aid applications, etc.

Recommendation F2: The feasibility of expanding educational venues, including alternative schools and vocational schools, should be investigated and funded.

Recommendation F3: Establish agency scholarship programs to directly benefit youth and young adults who have experienced homelessness.

Finding G: Youth and young adults are underemployed in Billings and financial support / employment has been identified as a primary life barrier.

Recommendation G1: Efforts should be made to connect youth and young adults to employment opportunities through venues such as a youth-oriented annual resource fair event, job training initiatives and employment preparedness. Employment would assist in creating heightened self-esteem, security, and stability for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation G2: Organizations providing services to youth should be supported in efforts to create social enterprise businesses to further employment opportunities, engage clients in meaningful work and to provide financial stability for both the organization and clientele.

Recommendation G3: Organizations providing services to youth may wish to consider applying for federal programs, such as *YouthBuild* through the United States Department of Labor, to provide additional opportunities for vocational training and education to disadvantaged youth. An initiative of this type would entail effective cross-boundary work with several service organizations but would greatly benefit the Billings community and participants.

Section IX: Conclusion

One of the major goals of the *Youth Count!* project was to further understand how the community can better serve youth and assist with the transition to a fulfilling life free from poverty, violence, and oppression. This project was designed to provide research necessary to assist in further strengthening and successfully developing new programs and services aimed at alleviating youth homelessness in the Billings community.

Primary caregivers should be the most important pillar in the lives of children, supporting them with emotional help when they need it most. However, if youth do not feel emotionally supported at home, then how do they feel about being a part of the Billings community? An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated they want a loving and nurturing home life and a close knit, healthy support structure. Since many of respondents report not having experienced support at home, the community needs to recognize this first and foremost with compassionate understanding.

The homeless and at-risk youth population in Billings has difficulty accessing basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. Health-related services can also be an issue for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. Survey data indicated some youth do not have regular access to a shower, have suffered sexual abuse, have traded sexual favors for basic needs, and have health and dental related concerns without the means to seek proper care. The fact that these youth have suffered sexual abuse and have traded their bodies in order to survive needs reflection in the community. Moreover, these dignity crushing and devastating situations should not have to be faced by anyone, especially youth who are experiencing homelessness in the Billings community. These experiences drastically impact mental and physical well-being, especially when the means to seek proper care in the community is lacking.

The community needs to fund alternative programs for youth, focusing on new and improved services specific to identified, data-driven needs. Local agencies and service providers should develop additional programs structured for youth to learn and practice a path for self-reliance. Organizations serving youth need to continue working together, continuously offering feedback and guidance regarding new programs and social justice initiatives specific to the services, housing, health, and educational needs of local youth. Outreach strategies should be tailored to reach youth who are unaware of available services so they can meet immediate needs. Most importantly, barriers to services need to be rectified in order to support youth who need immediate access to survive.

The Billings community and local service providers need to continue working together to help end the epidemic of youth homelessness, focusing on:

- Interagency cooperation to fully understand and restructure the services they provide to better fit the needs of the clients they serve.
- Community awareness regarding the programs they offer to youth and young adults.

- Strengthening message, mission, and outreach in order to educate the youth on the services they provide.
- Ensuring complete and easy access to the specific services that have been denied to many of these youth.

Cooperation among youth-centered agencies and homeless service providers in the Billings community will benefit youth who are experiencing homelessness with the opportunity to not only succeed in the community, but live a life they so rightly deserve.

DRAFT

Section X: Special Acknowledgements

Many THANKS to our dedicated community volunteers, partners, and Tumbleweed staff in helping make the first *Youth Count!* a major success:

Billings Community Foundation
Billings Gazette
Billings Metro VISTA Project
Billings Police Department
Billings Sign Service
Brenda Beckett, Community Development Manager
Harvest Church
KTVQ
KULR8
Lynda Woods, Community Development Coordinator
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The HUB
Tom Tully, City of Billings, Planning Division
Tumbleweed Board of Directors

http://www.facjj.org/docs/MT_Best%20Practices.pdf

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