



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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Section I: Executive Summary

Introduction

Every city has a slightly different picture of homelessness that varies by gender, race, ethnicity, age, population and service array. Billings is the largest city in Montana with 104,170 residents according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Despite being a small city, the Billings School District identified 560 students who had experienced homelessness in the 2012-2013 school year, 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; 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 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, pursue a career, (have a place of their own) 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, some youth admitted trading sexual favors for basic necessities.
- **Food:** Food resources are not especially accessible to 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 to create a replicable model for other communities to 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 of the 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 as AmeriCorps VISTA members.

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 financial instability, 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*.

In addition to using the preceding factors to determine which youth are *at risk of homelessness*, questions regarding respondent caregiver perceptions and experiences: caregiver told the youth to leave home; has been emotionally unsupportive; called them names or cursed at them; made the youth feel unsafe living with them; and have used drugs around the youth 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 juvenile 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 were voluntarily willing to share. Given these limitations, the data collected on homeless youth in Billings provides statistical parameters and patterns helpful in setting strategic priorities and benchmarks.

Section II: Research & Development

National Best Practices

In 2012, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) amended *Opening Doors*, the federal strategic plan to prevent and impact homelessness. The amendment introduced the *Framework to End Youth Homelessness*, which included strategies to build capacity through community assessment followed by the creation and implementation of plans to end youth homelessness. Core outcomes included stable housing, education, employment, positive connections and well-being. In order to establish 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 centers 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; the State of Washington; 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 D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; and Clark County, Nevada. Additional communities have completed surveys targeting youth homelessness since the initiation of this project.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness [website](#) has many useful features for organizations 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 beginning with calendar year 2001.

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

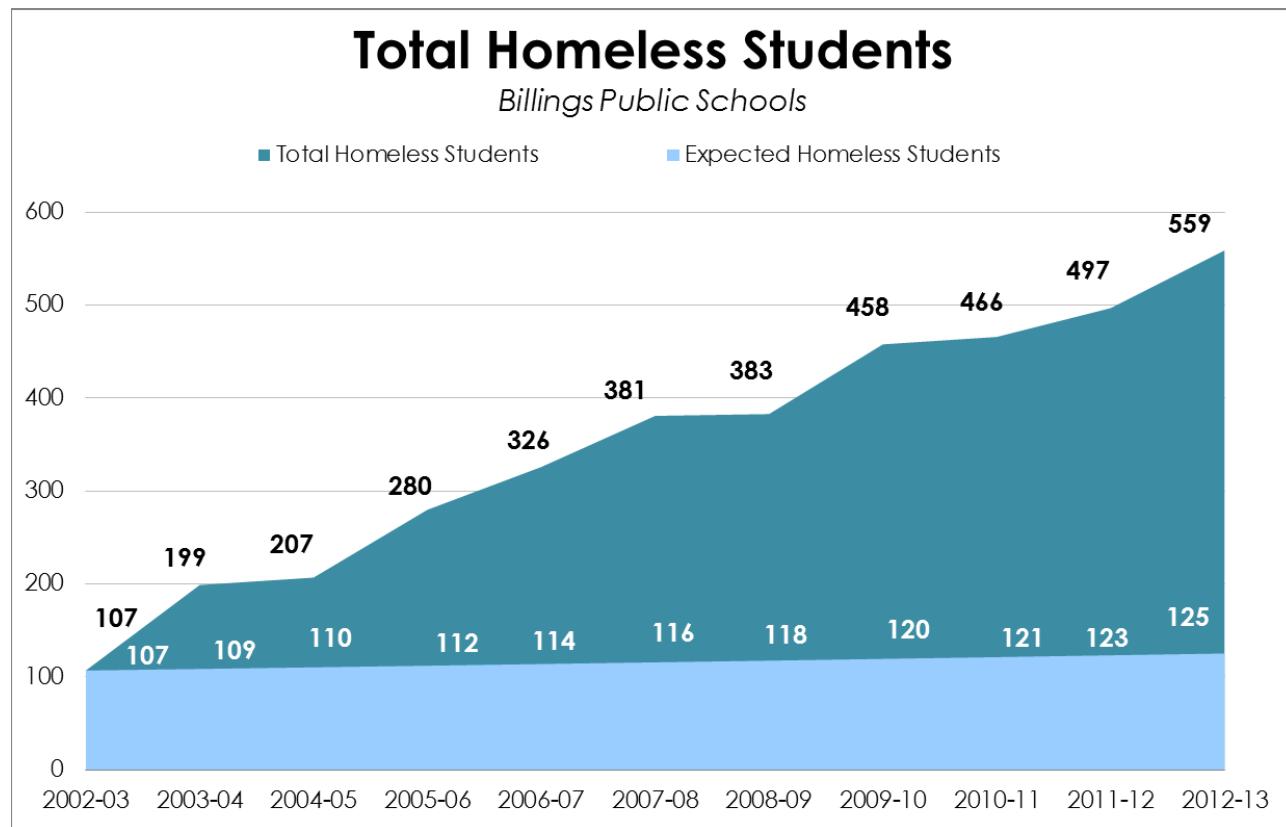
- Ensure adequate preparation, research and coordination takes place prior to starting a count.
- Map out locations where youth receive services and congregate.
- Engage the involvement of the school district via the homeless education liaison.
- Engage the support and involvement of local organizations 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 an objective manner.
- Use findings to educate policy makers, the public and others about youth homelessness.

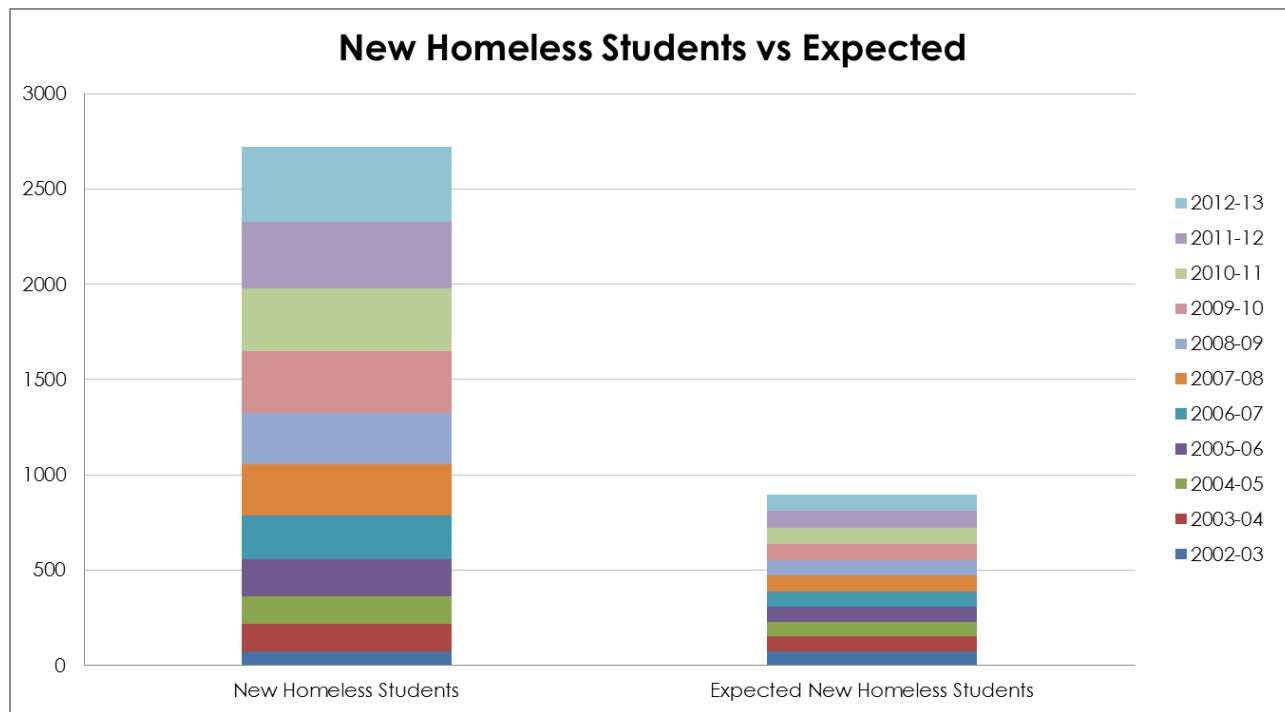
Connecting to Community

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 the existing service structure available to support youth in Billings.

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 1.6% annual increase in population. According to the Census, the population in Billings has grown 15.94% from 2000 to 2010. The identified number of students in Billings Public Schools is nearly triple 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 approximately 1,300 children.

Local Youth Services

The 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”¹. The VISTA members toured both the detention and shelter care facilities to gain insight into the juvenile justice system, 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* that provides 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, the 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. The staff at various community organizations offered invaluable guidance during survey preparation and assisted with the recruitment of community volunteers for the project.

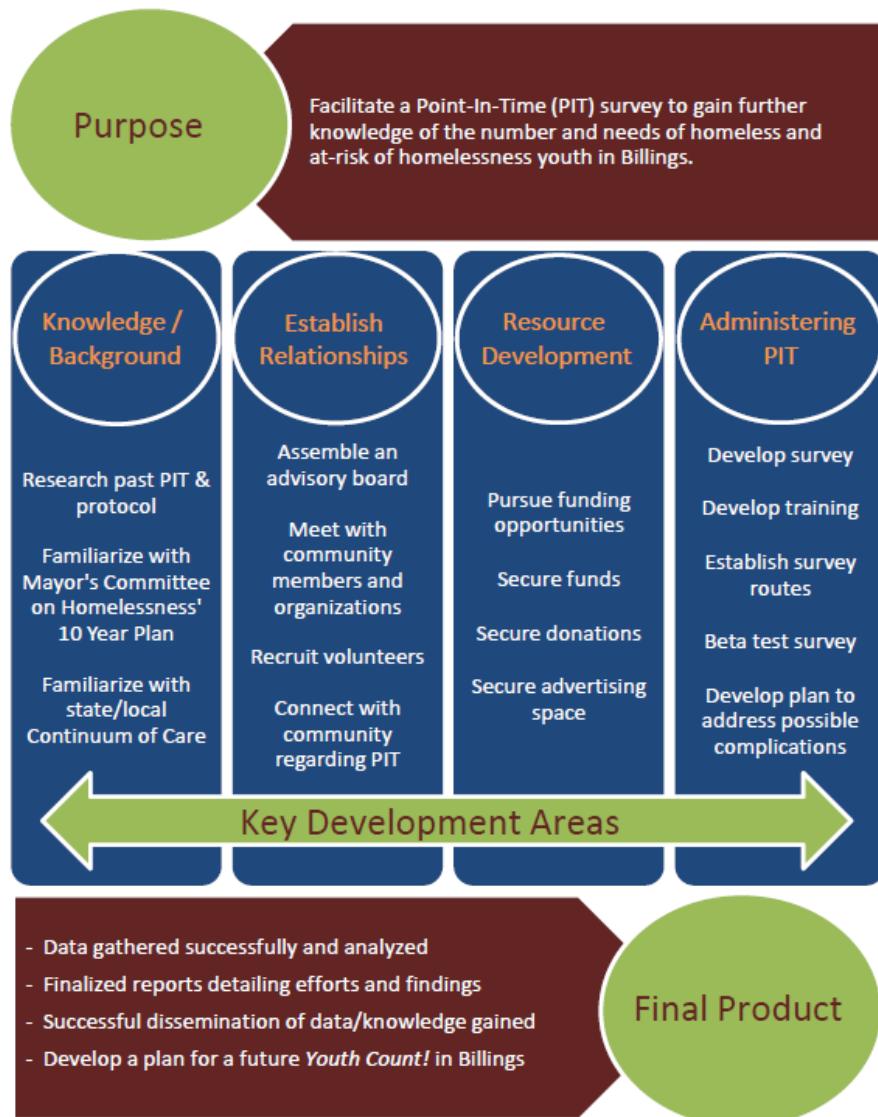
¹ http://www.facjj.org/docs/MT_Best%20Practices.pdf

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!*, a *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 consists of seven sections and is nine pages in length. Sections include: purpose and goals; graphic timelines; fund development and marketing strategies; establishing community relationships; and the *Youth Count!* budget. The sections of the plan were structured to guide the VISTA members through each step of the survey process, coinciding with their 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 their interests, abilities, and skills into adulthood. Therefore, survey questions were structured to communicate compassion over 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.

If volunteers noticed respondent interest waning or a loss of focus, they were instructed to skip forward to the following eleven questions emphasized in bright red font:

- 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 was comprised of six sections, each identifying logistical guidelines for survey administration; definitions specific to youth experiencing homelessness; the survey instrument itself; questions and probable scenarios during survey administration; and safety procedures for survey volunteers.

Volunteers were instructed to:

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



*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.

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 from July 6th - 14th. A flyer and post card were also created to distribute to businesses and during resource fairs (see below and following page).



YOUTH COUNT! SURVEY

JULY 12-14

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!



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 the local franchise of 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 volunteer administrators and included an extensive review of the associated training manual and the survey instrument. Safety guidelines and survey protocols were discussed. Volunteers provided feedback and reviewed pre-planned zones (*see map, following page*) for survey administration. Every volunteer received a certificate of completion acknowledging participation and a t-shirt identifying each as an authorized survey administrator.



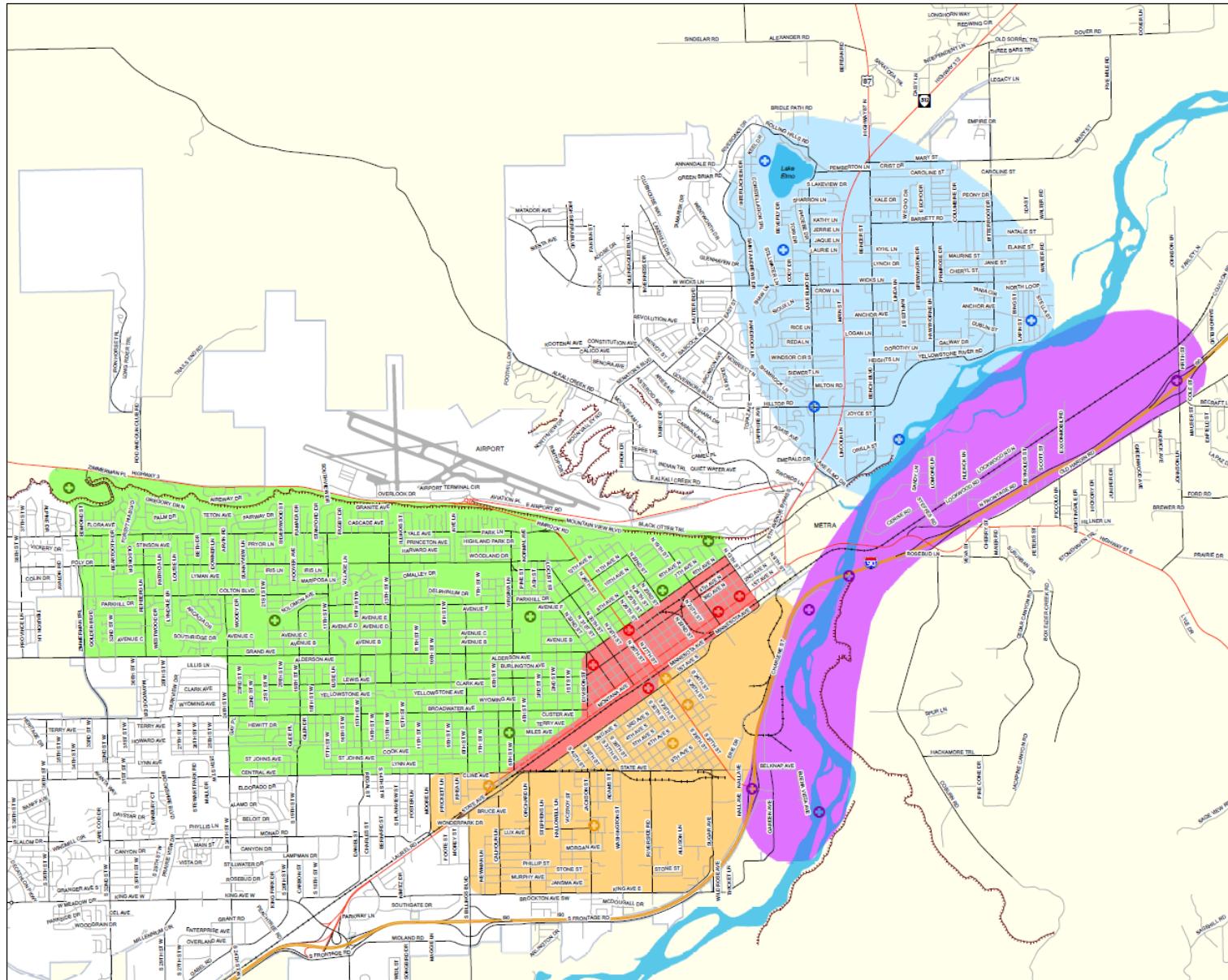
Joshua Downes and Kelsey Dwyer, VISTA Members
Photo by Aundi Hunter

Survey Administration

The *Youth Count!* survey was administered July 12-14, 2013 and volunteers collected 176 surveys during this three-day period. Respondents' participation in the survey was voluntary, completely anonymous, and confidential. 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



0 0.5 1 Miles

Map Document: Yellowstone County Planning Commission Development Map YouthCount_2013.mxd
Date: 10/15/2013

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

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

Volunteer Debriefing

The Volunteer Debriefing session was held to invite feedback about the volunteers' experiences, the survey instrument itself, and any anecdotal information resulting from 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, from whom to hide, and when to seek shelter. Therefore, counting this population can be challenging. Limitations noted during the process of administering the *Youth Count!* survey were:

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

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

Visibility & Weather

Throughout the three-day count, youth were not frequently 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 two evening shifts for volunteers.

Survey

The length of the survey instrument 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 resulted in reduced 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 completion 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 to read the questions for them.

Nevertheless, the youth answered as many questions as they could, which is exactly what the team anticipated before the count. Even one response of forty-two was deemed productive in lieu of no response.

Canvassing Zones

Some volunteers had a difficult time locating youth in certain zones. One volunteer, for example, suggested 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 as anticipated; or did not have enough time to gather the necessary assistance for survey administration; and on occasion misplaced or lost surveys 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 during the 9:00am to 12:00pm shift, and local youth may be more readily found between 4:00pm to 2:00am.
- Ensure adequate volunteer coverage in order to engage respondents with a longer survey format.
- Eliminate questions and sub-questions in order to shorten the length of the survey, create a smoother flow, and 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 as 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 ineffective 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.

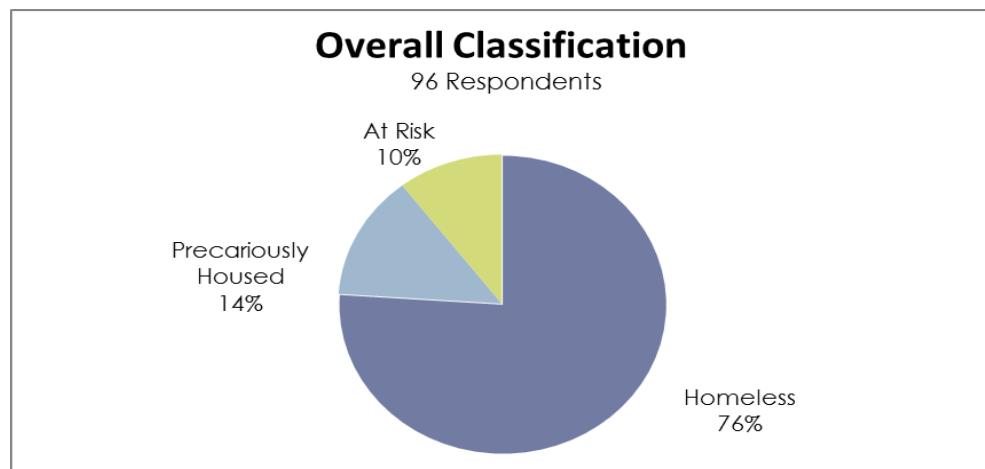
Overall Cohort

Youth Count! was conducted over a three-day period and resulted in 176 submitted surveys. Forty-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.

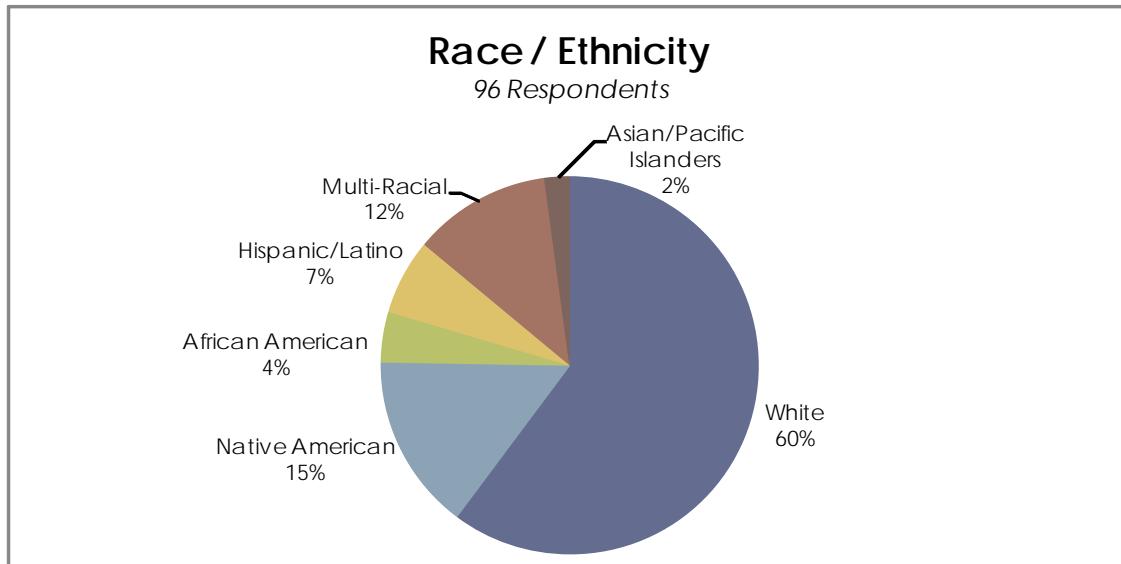
The remaining surveys, 96 total, were classified as either homeless (73), precariously housed (13), or at-risk of homelessness (10):

- **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.

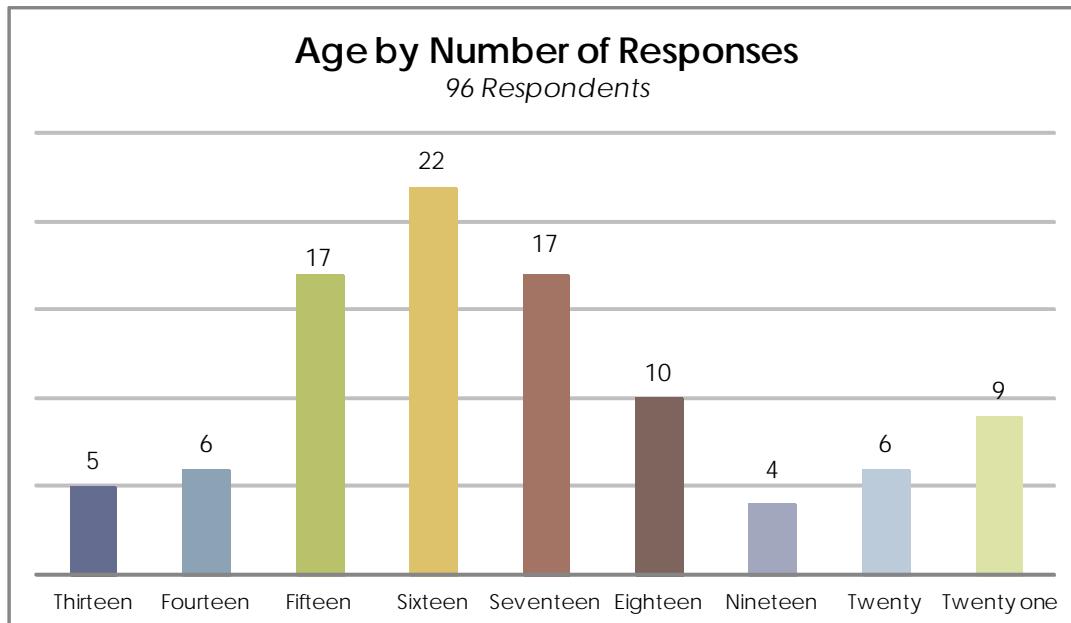


Demographics

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).

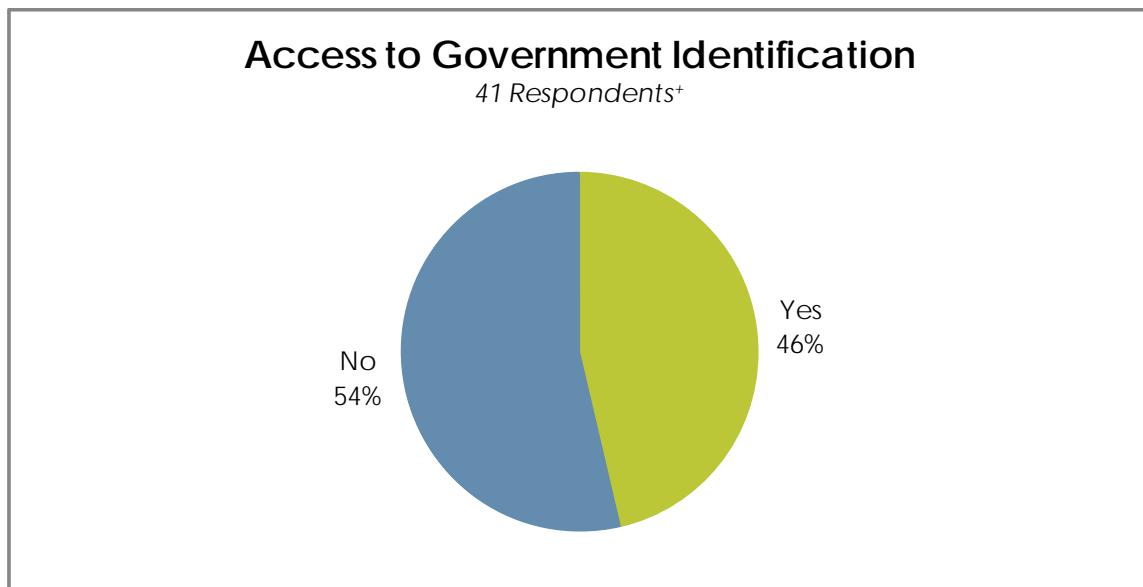


The age of respondents was diverse and distributed from age 13 to 21, the greatest number of responses ranged from 15 to 18 years old; 66% of the overall cohort. The average age for the overall cohort is 16.77 years.

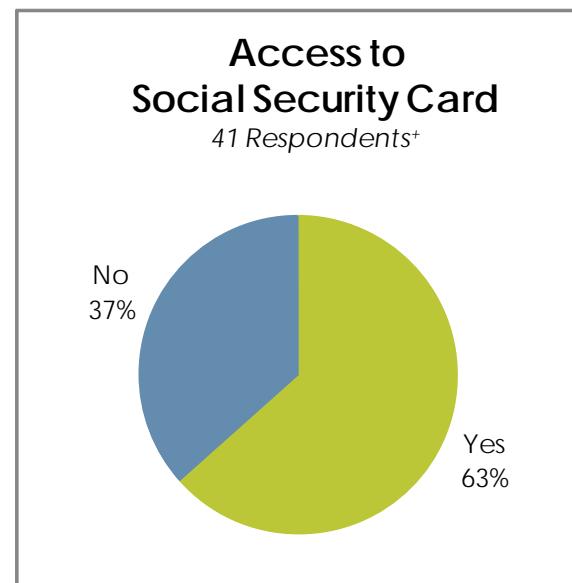
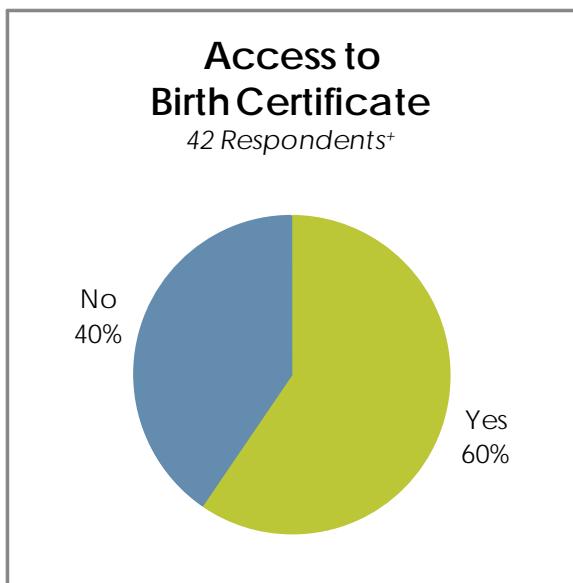


Access to Identification

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.

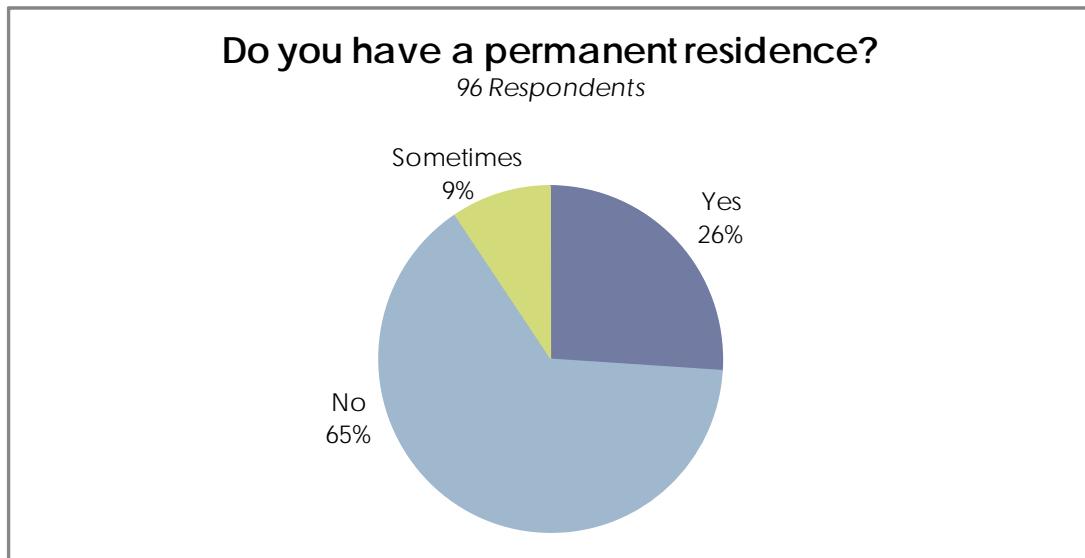


More than half of the responses indicate lack of access to government identification. Responses relative to birth certificate and social security card access were similar; approximately 60% indicated access and 40% indicated lack of access.

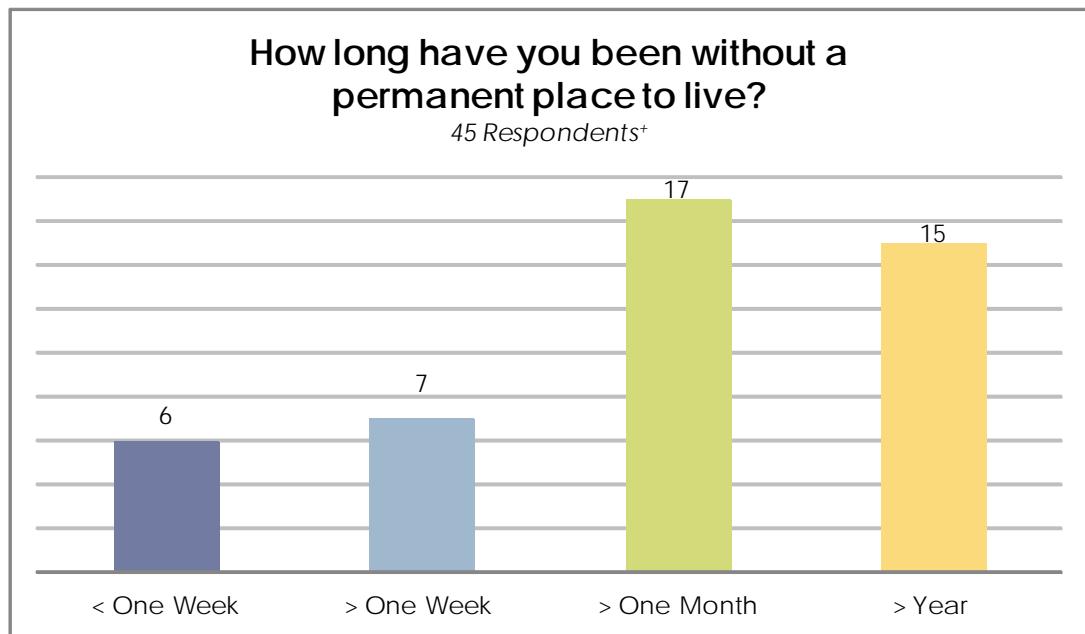


Housing Status

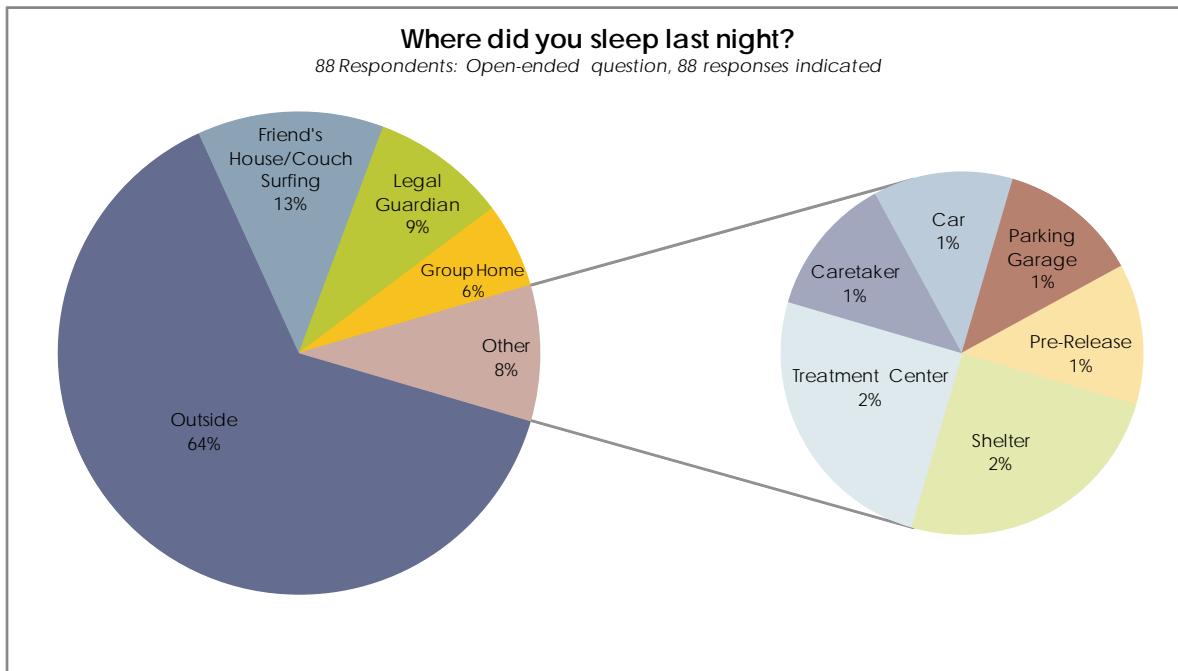
Respondents may define a permanent residence as a place where they have stayed some of the time or a parent or relative's house where they have lived continuously. A majority of respondents (65%) indicated lack of access to a permanent residence and nine percent indicated they had sporadic access. In 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%).



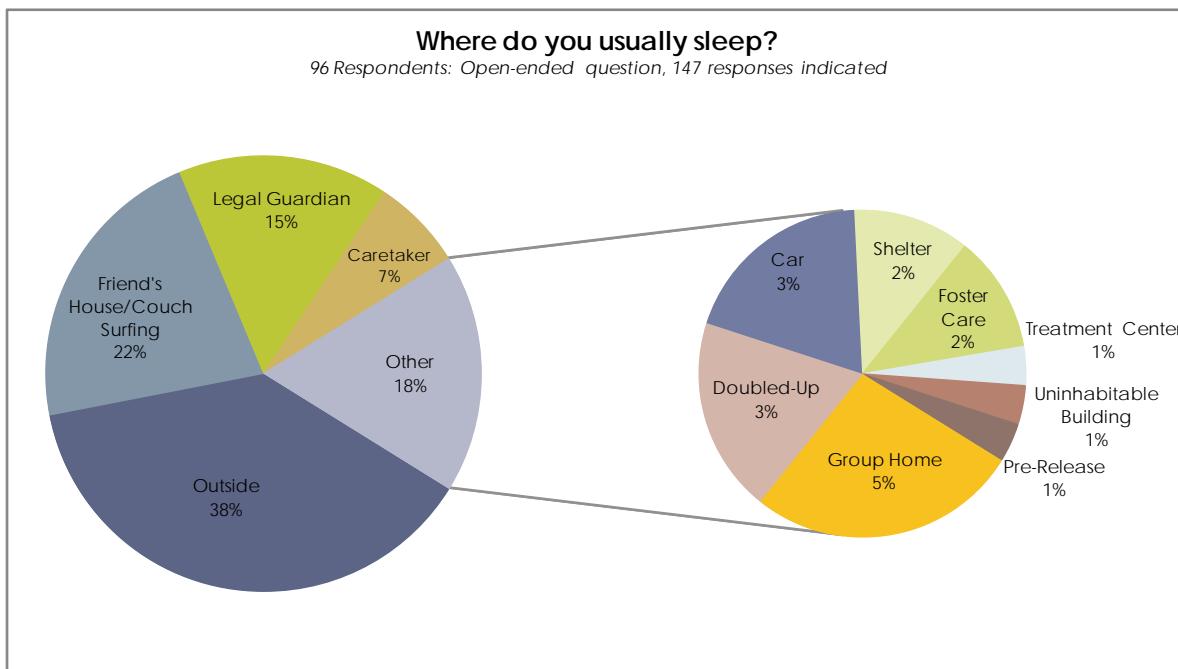
71% of respondents indicated a lack of stable living environment for a month or more, indicating a possible majority. As only 45 respondents answered this question, it is difficult to conclude a majority have been without a permanent residence.



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

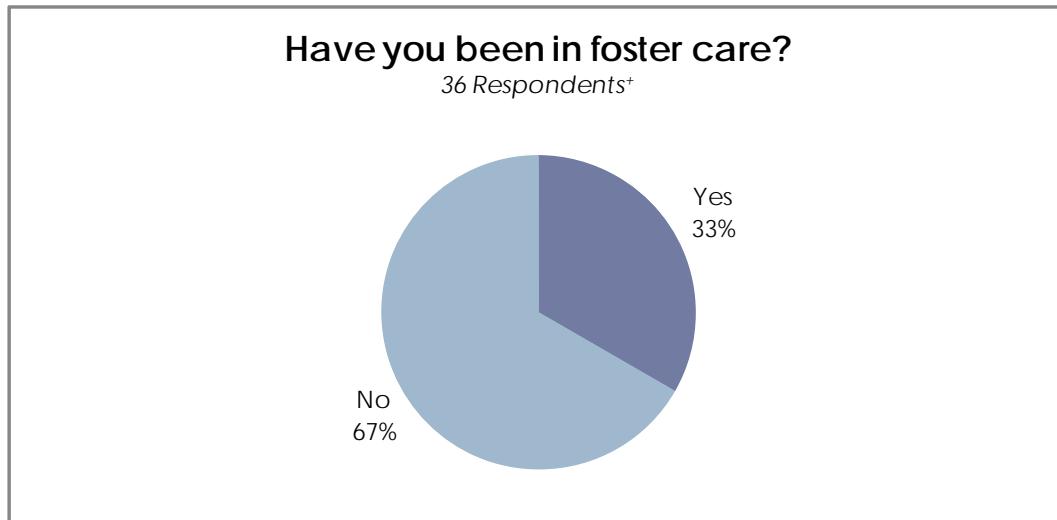


Respondents noted usually sleeping slightly more frequently at a friend's house or couch surfing (22% compared to 13%). Likewise, they noted sleeping at a legal guardian's residence slightly more frequently (15% compared to 9%).

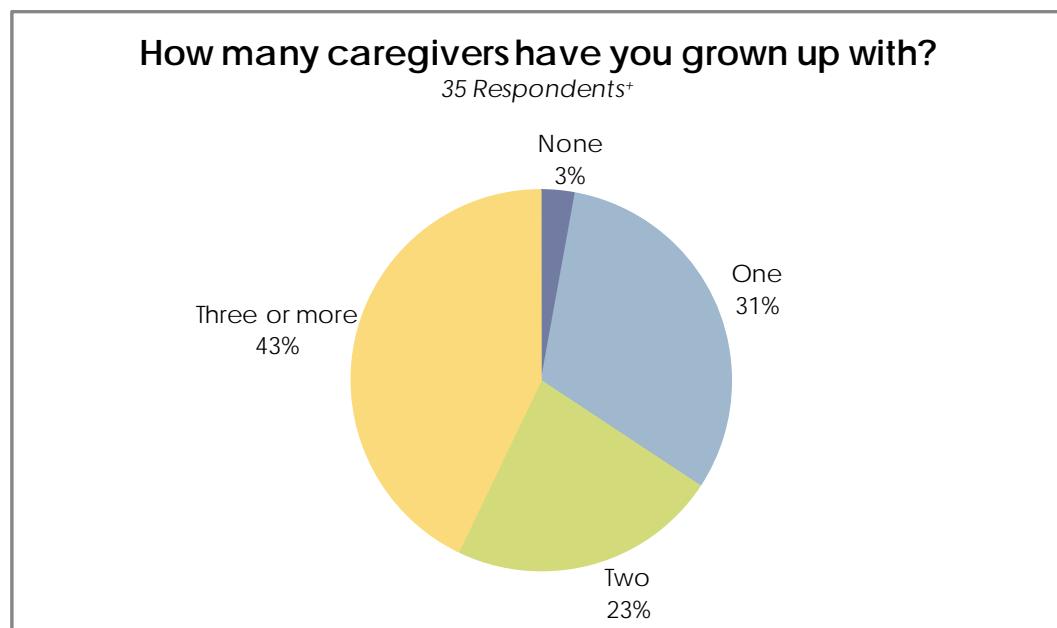


Notably, 30 respondents indicated regularly sleeping outside and very few (four) considered this option “safe”.

36 respondents 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.

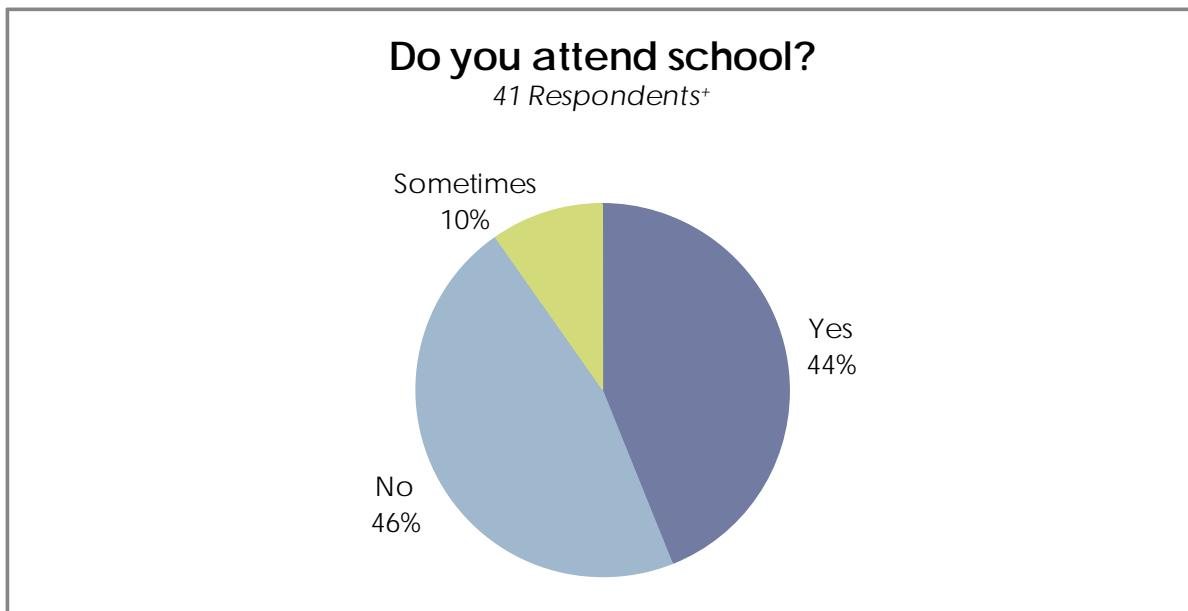


Respondents were asked to identify the number of primary caregivers they had grown up with. Respondents offered both numerical and anecdotal responses to this query; over 40% of the responses indicated living with familial caregivers including grandparents and extended family.

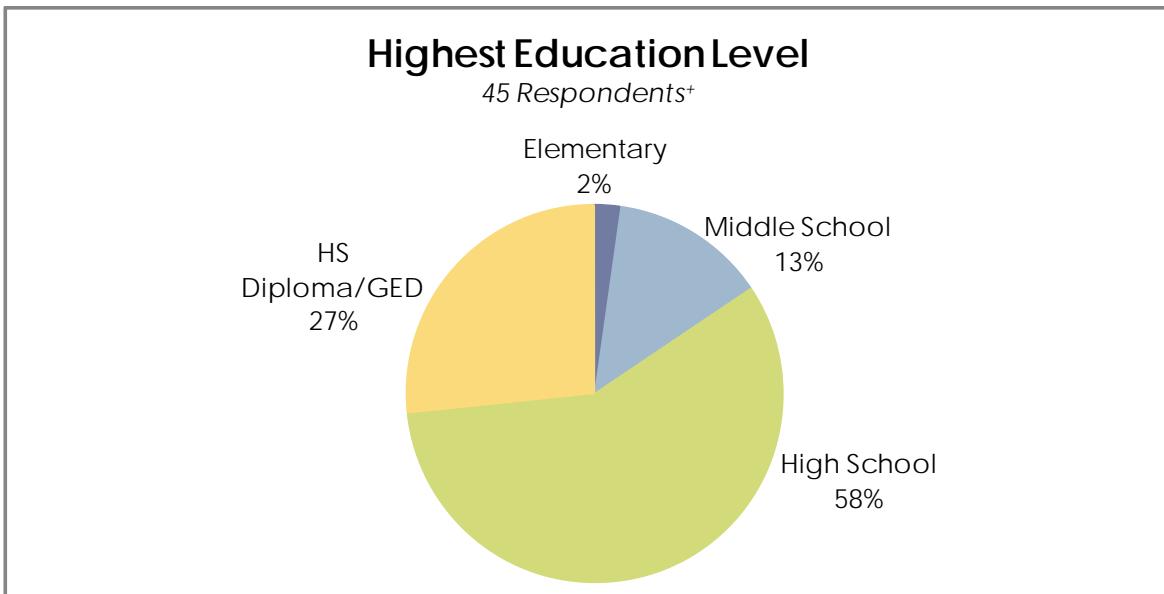


Education

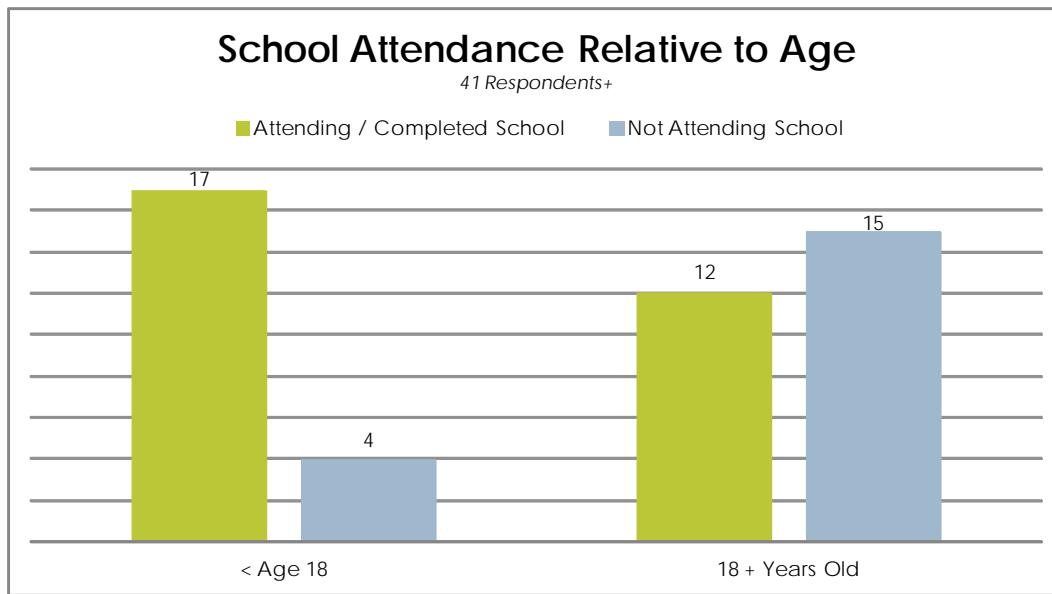
A total of 41 respondents answered a query regarding school attendance; less than 50% of the overall cohort. The majority of respondents indicated sporadic or non-attendance (56%).



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).



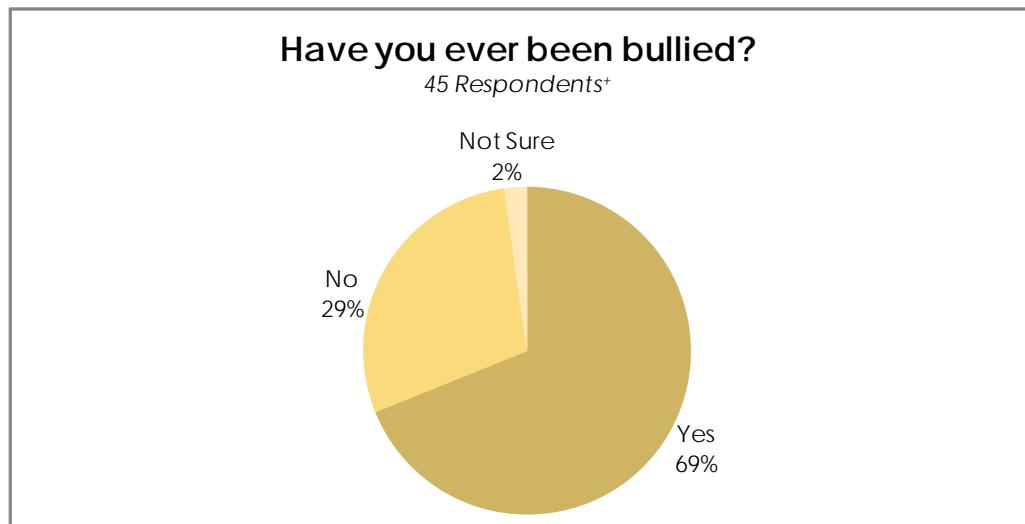
Respondents under age 18 were more likely to attend school than not, differing significantly from those over the age of 18. Nearly half of the respondents over the age of 18 indicated they had completed school.



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).

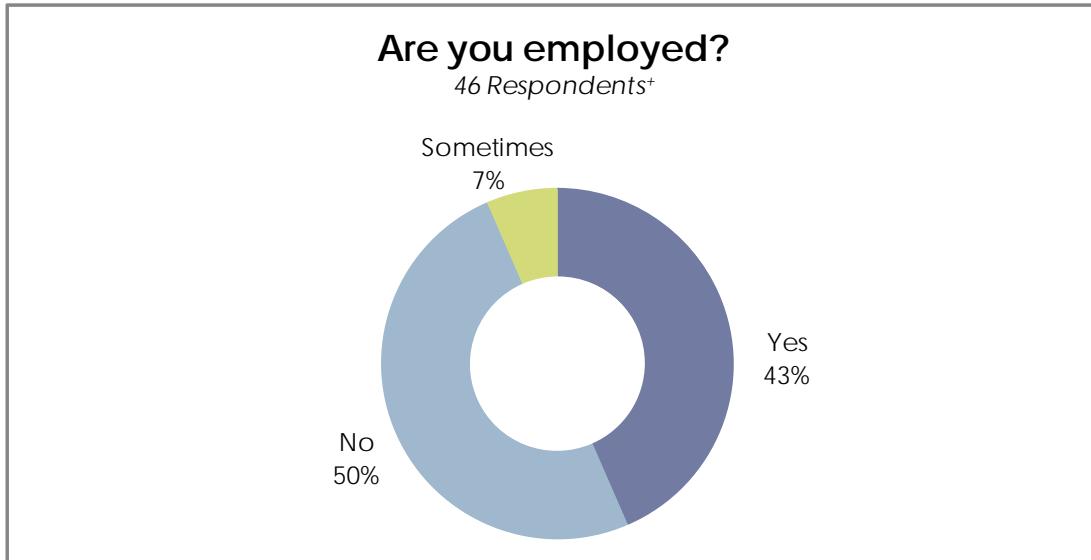
Bullying

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."

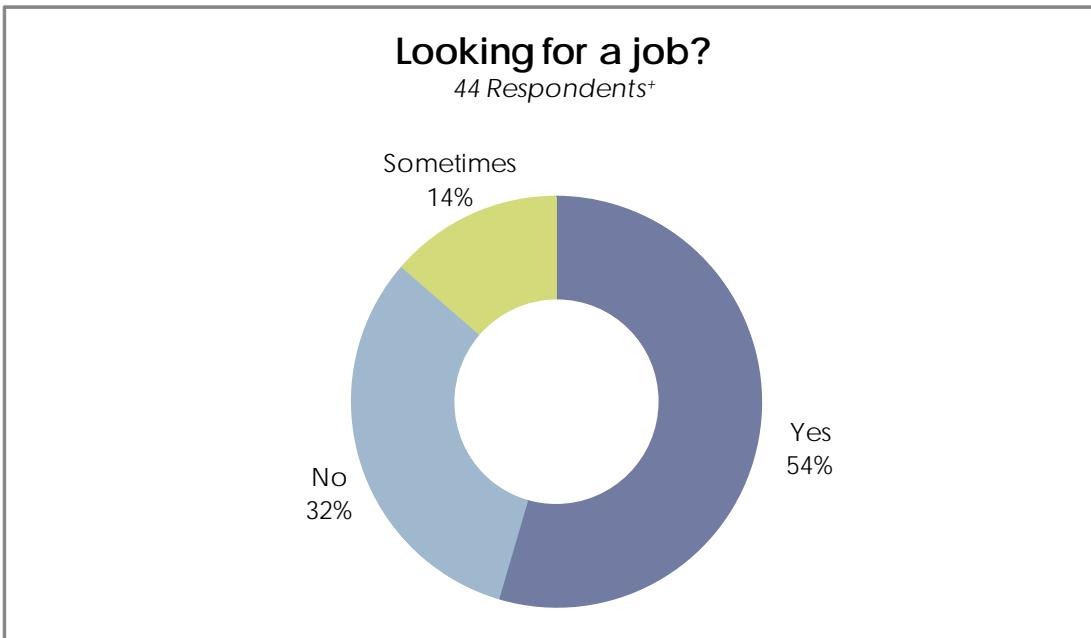


Employment

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.



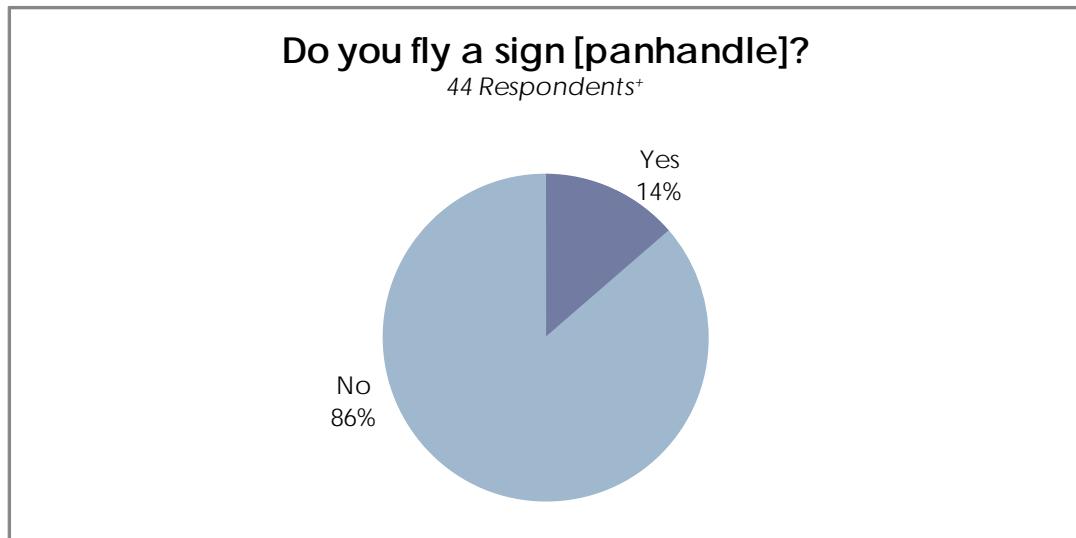
A dozen individuals indicated the number of hours per week they typically work. For this very small cohort, 42% (five people) indicated they were working full time and seven indicated they were working less than 39 hours.



Slightly over half of respondents 54% (24 individuals) answering a query regarding the search for employment responded affirmatively and an additional 14% (six individuals) indicated they were *sometimes* looking for work. Fourteen respondents (32%) stated they were not looking for a job.

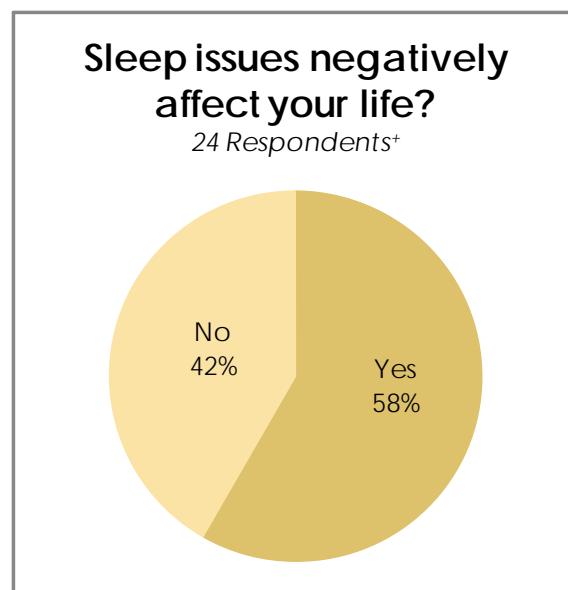
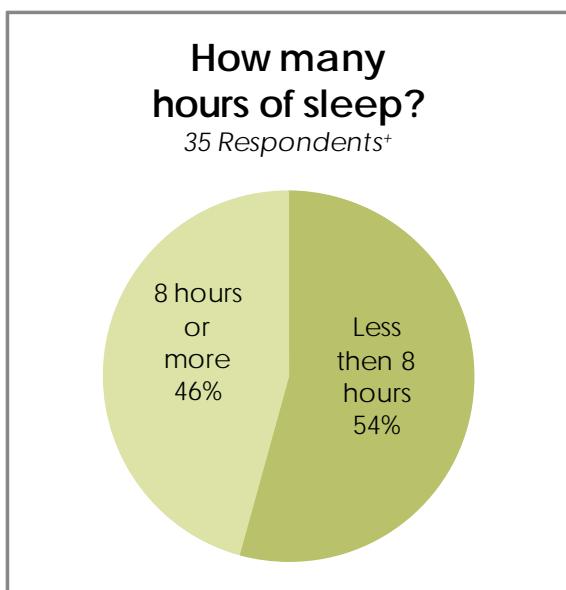
A few respondents (three individuals) specified they were not seeking employment, noting: no place or phone; not accepted [because of appearance]; or they did not want a job.

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.

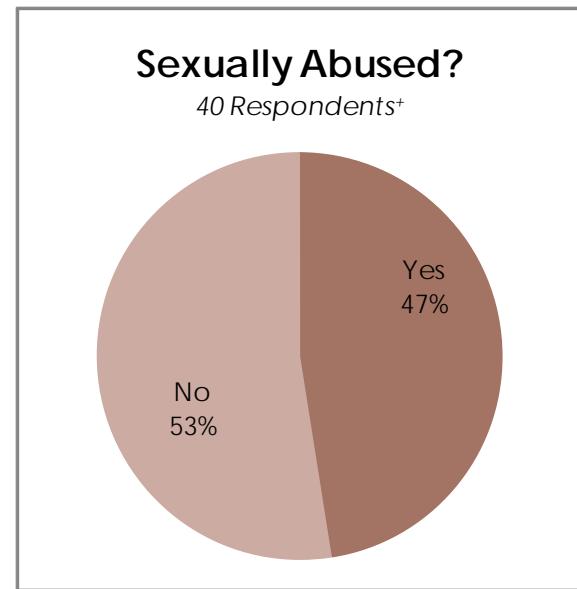
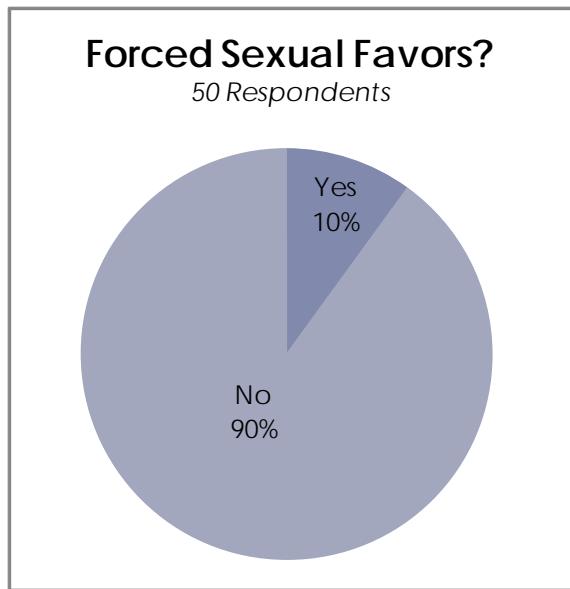


Health

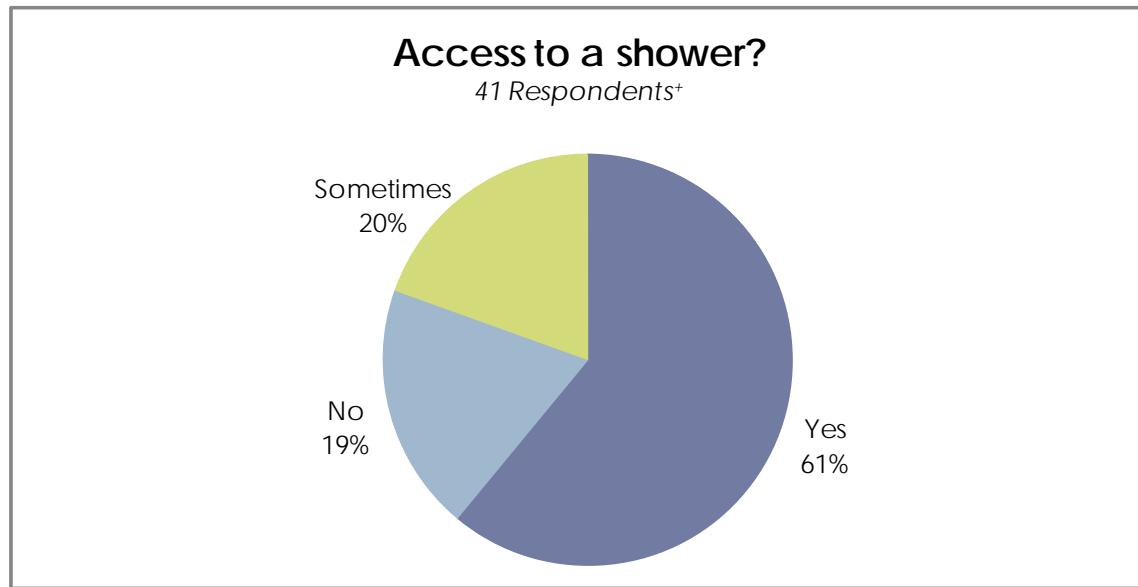
A relatively small number of respondents answered queries relative to sleeping patterns (35 or less) and the cohort is near equal when reporting usual hours of sleep per night; over or under eight hours. However, nearly 60% reported sleep issues negatively affecting their lives.

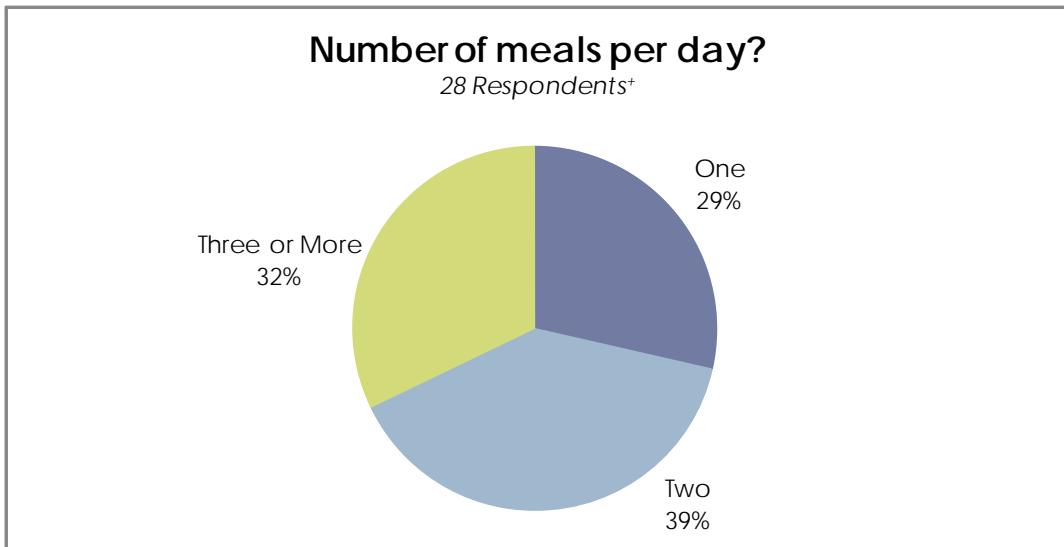


Fifty individuals (52%) chose to answer a question regarding being forced to trade sexual favors for necessities such as shelter, food, protection or money, and 40 respondents answered a question regarding sexual abuse.

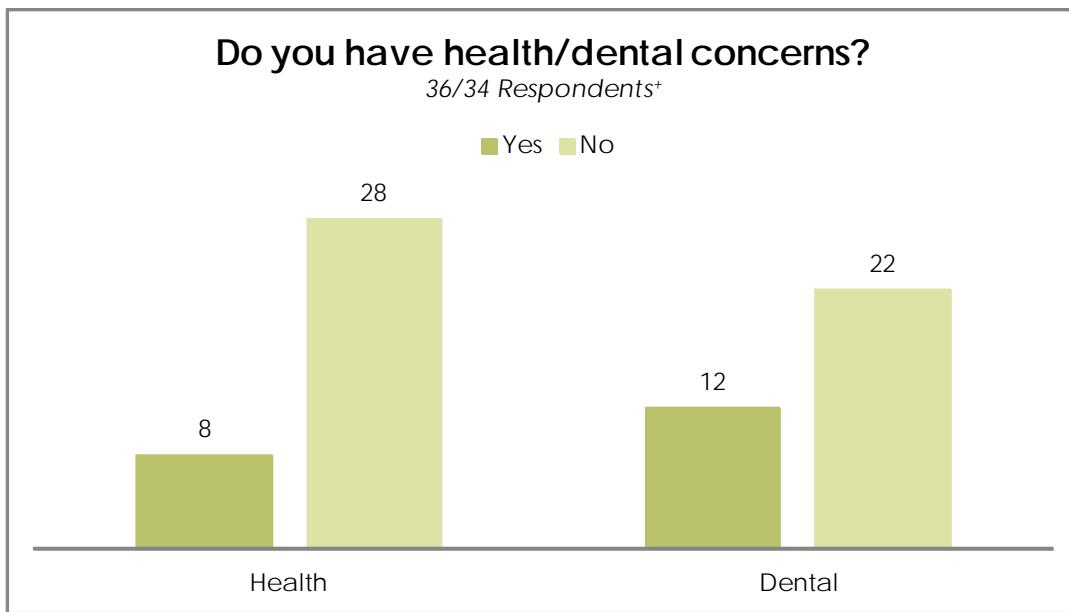


Only ten percent (five individuals) reported trading sexual favors and 19 respondents (47%) indicated sexual abuse. Thirty-nine percent of respondents (18 individuals) noted limited or no access to a shower facility while the majority of respondents (25 people, 61%) reported regular access.

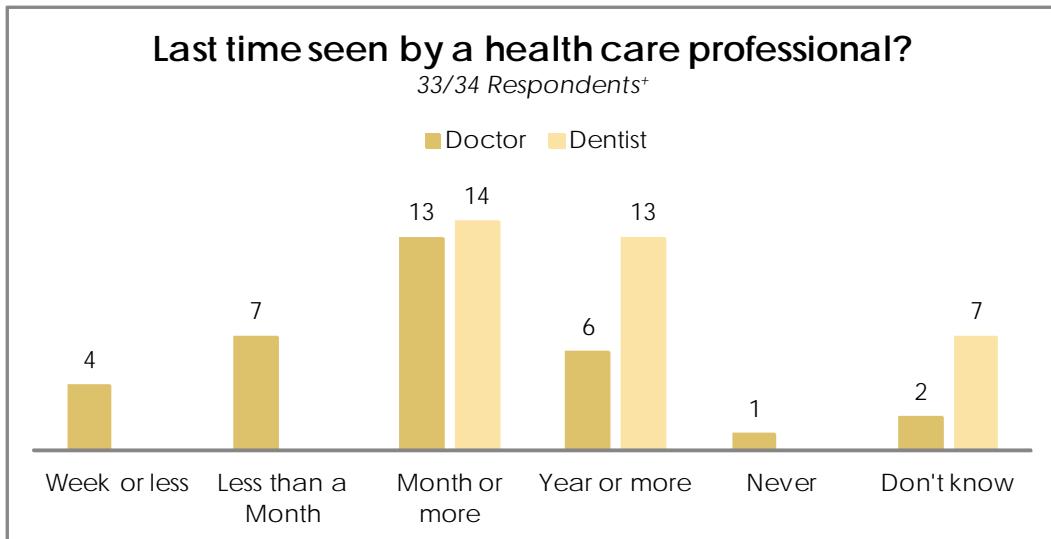




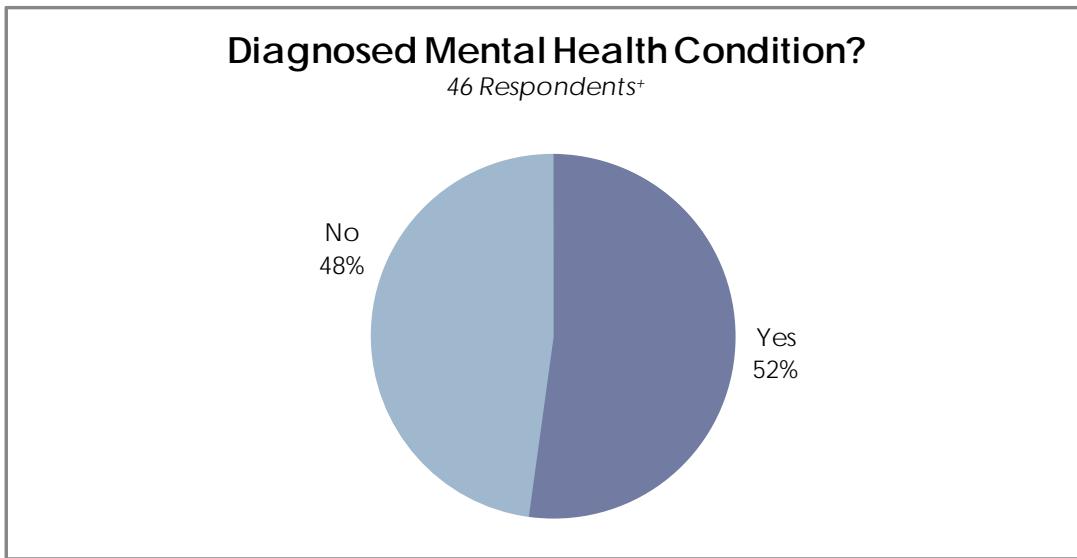
Only 28 respondents chose to answer a question regarding the number of meals they usually had per day. Eight respondents (29%) reported access to one meal a day, 39% indicated having two meals and ten (32%) reported having three.



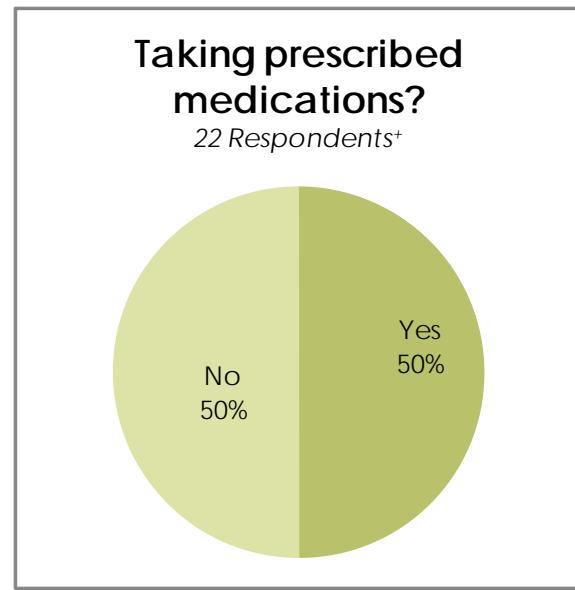
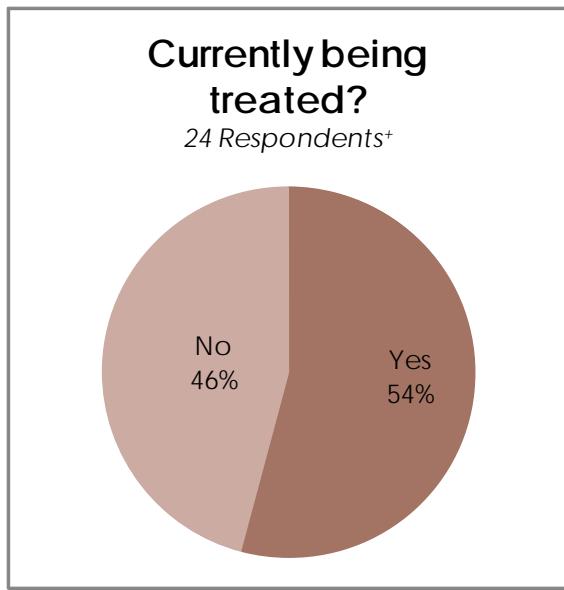
Over 30 respondents answered questions relative to having health or dental concerns. The majority indicated they did not have concerns and had seen a doctor within the last year. Fewer respondents reported having recently seen a dentist.



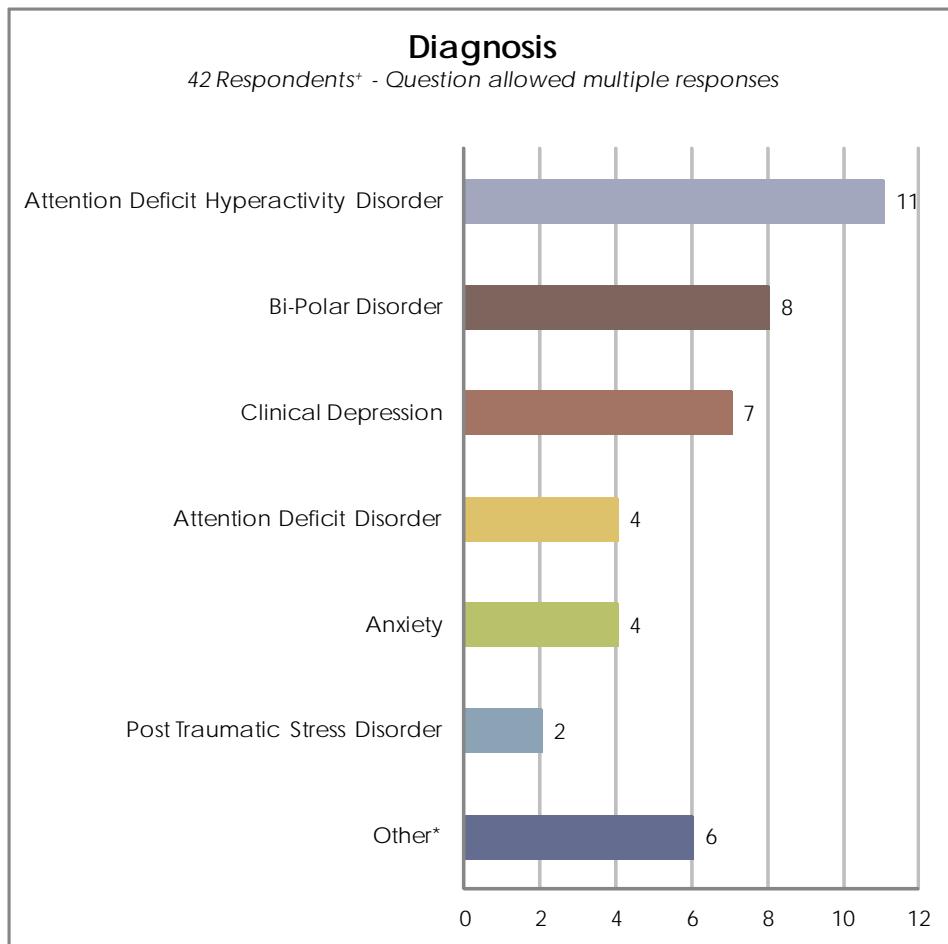
While only 46 respondents chose to answer a question regarding having been diagnosed with a mental health condition, around half responded to the affirmative. When one 17 year-old female was asked if she had any diagnosed mental health conditions, she replied “not yet”.



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.



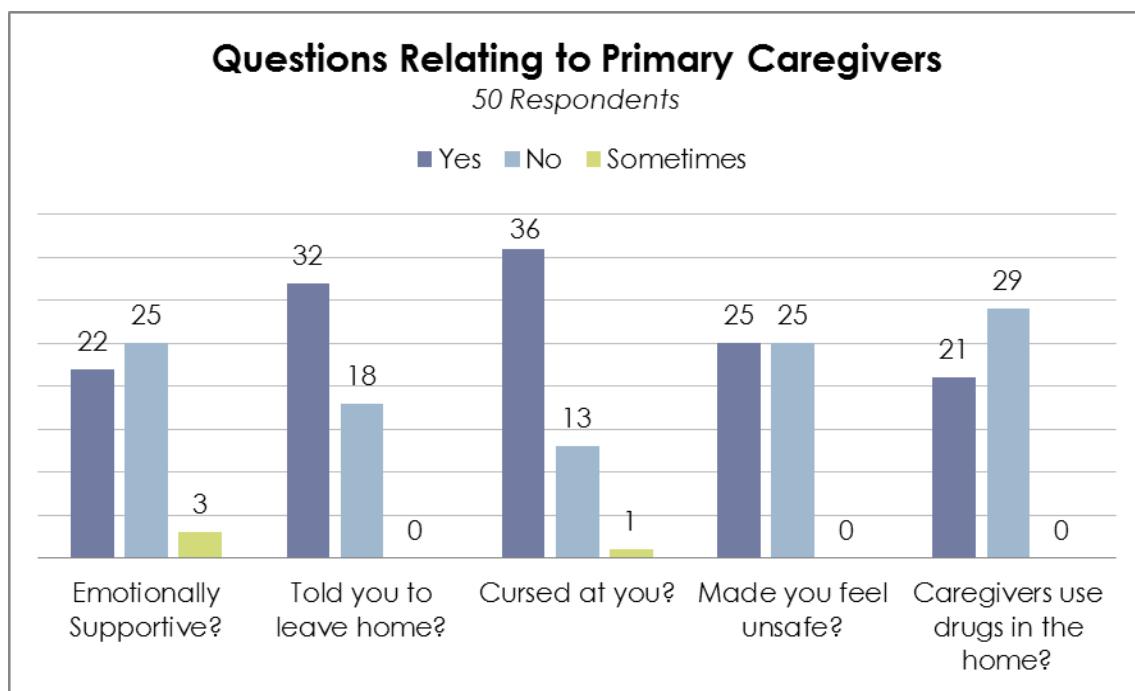
^{*}Other includes one response for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and one response for each of the following disorders: Autism Spectrum; Obsessive Compulsive; Oppositional Defiant; Reactive Attachment; and Intellectual Disability.

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 or 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

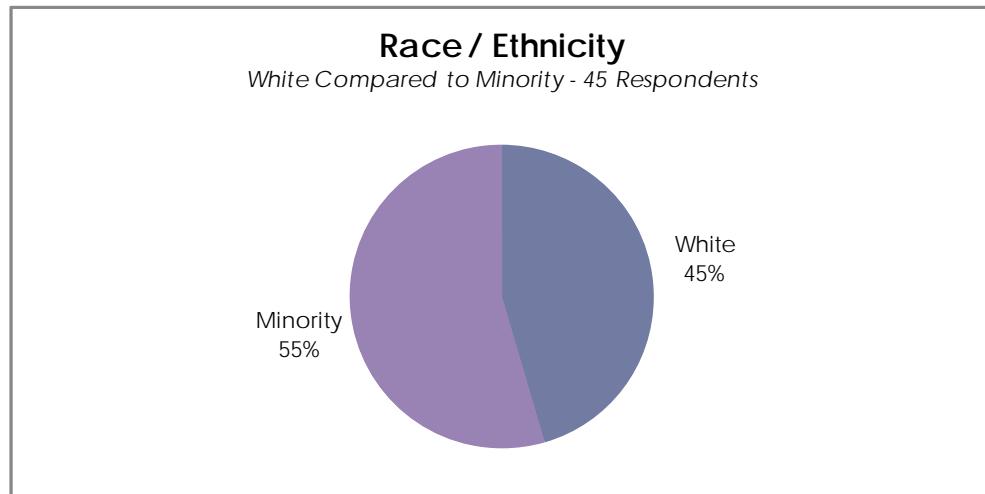
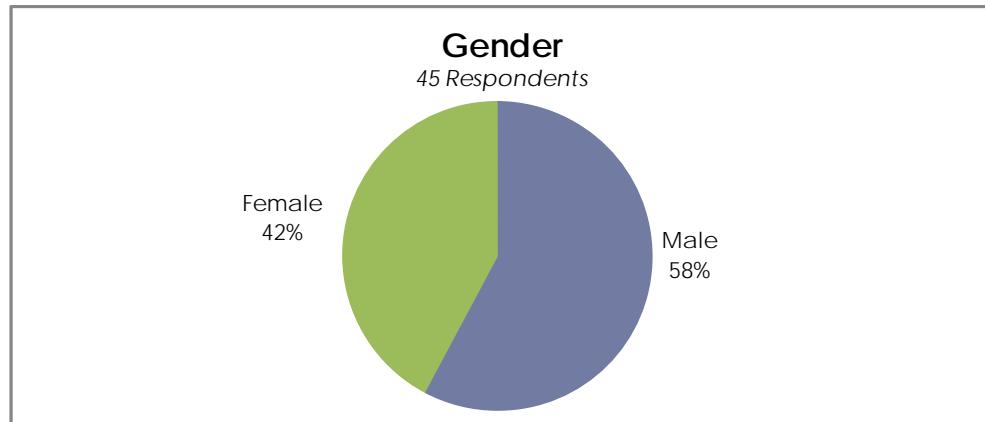
Data analysis resulted in the identification of two distinct cohorts worthy of segregated review. The *urban cohort* represents 45 viable surveys collected from multiple sites spanning all canvassing zones in the Billings area. The *rural cohort* represents a group of 51 individuals living collectively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

Urban Cohort

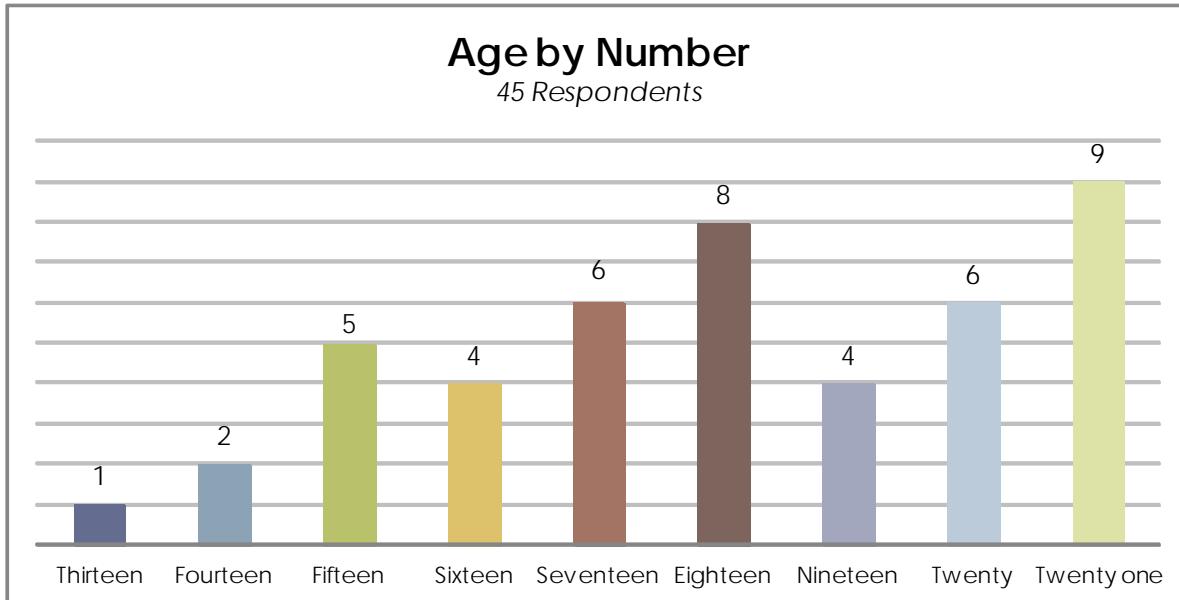
The urban cohort consists of those respondents classified as homeless, precariously housed and at-risk of homelessness. This group represents a more typical overview of youth and young adult homelessness in Billings.

Demographics

The majority of respondents in the urban cohort self-identified as male and a 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 U.S. 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. The average age for the urban 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 almost evenly with 18 and 19 individuals for ages 16 to 18 and 19 to 21 respectively.

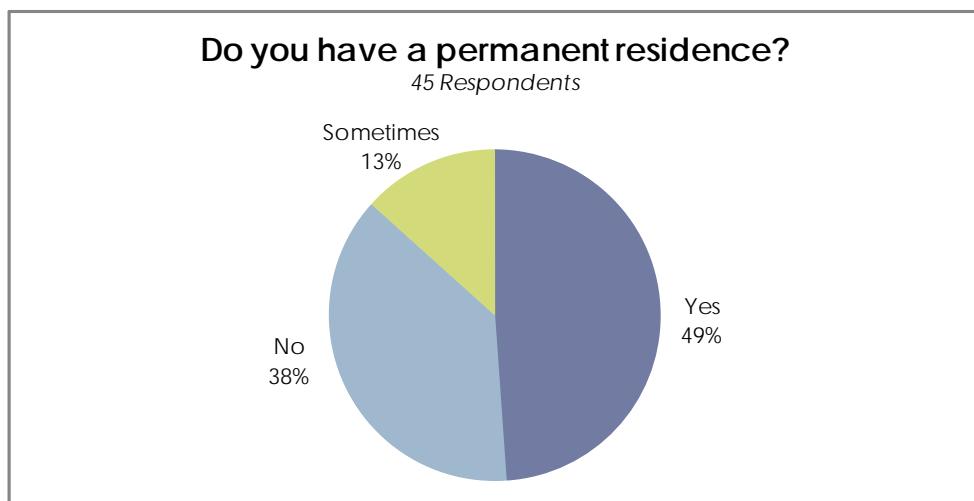


Access to Identification

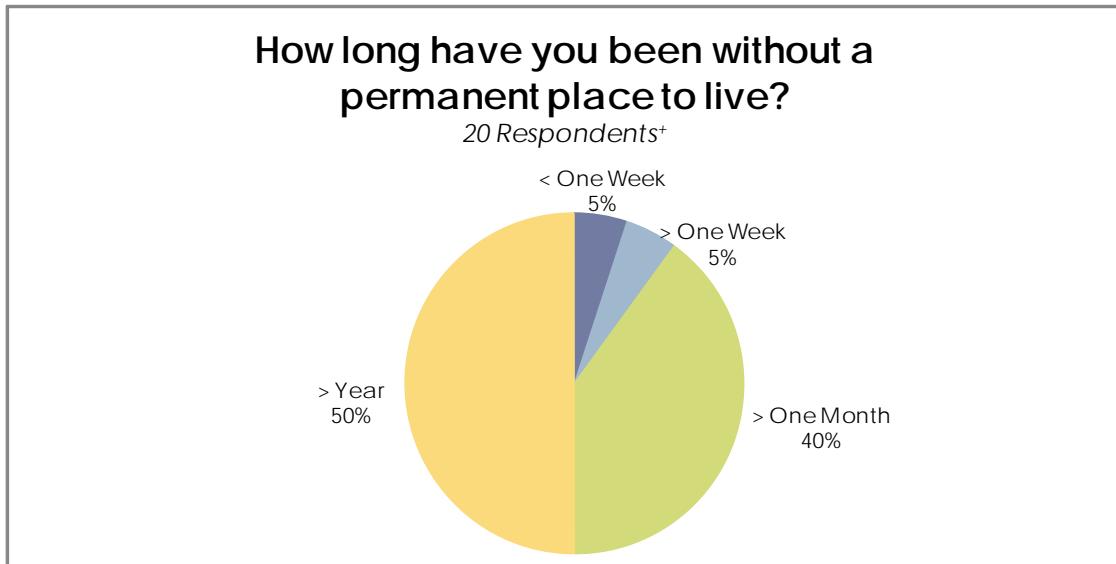
Data represented previously in the overall review is still applicable to the urban cohort relative to access to government identification including birth certificate and social security card.

Housing Status

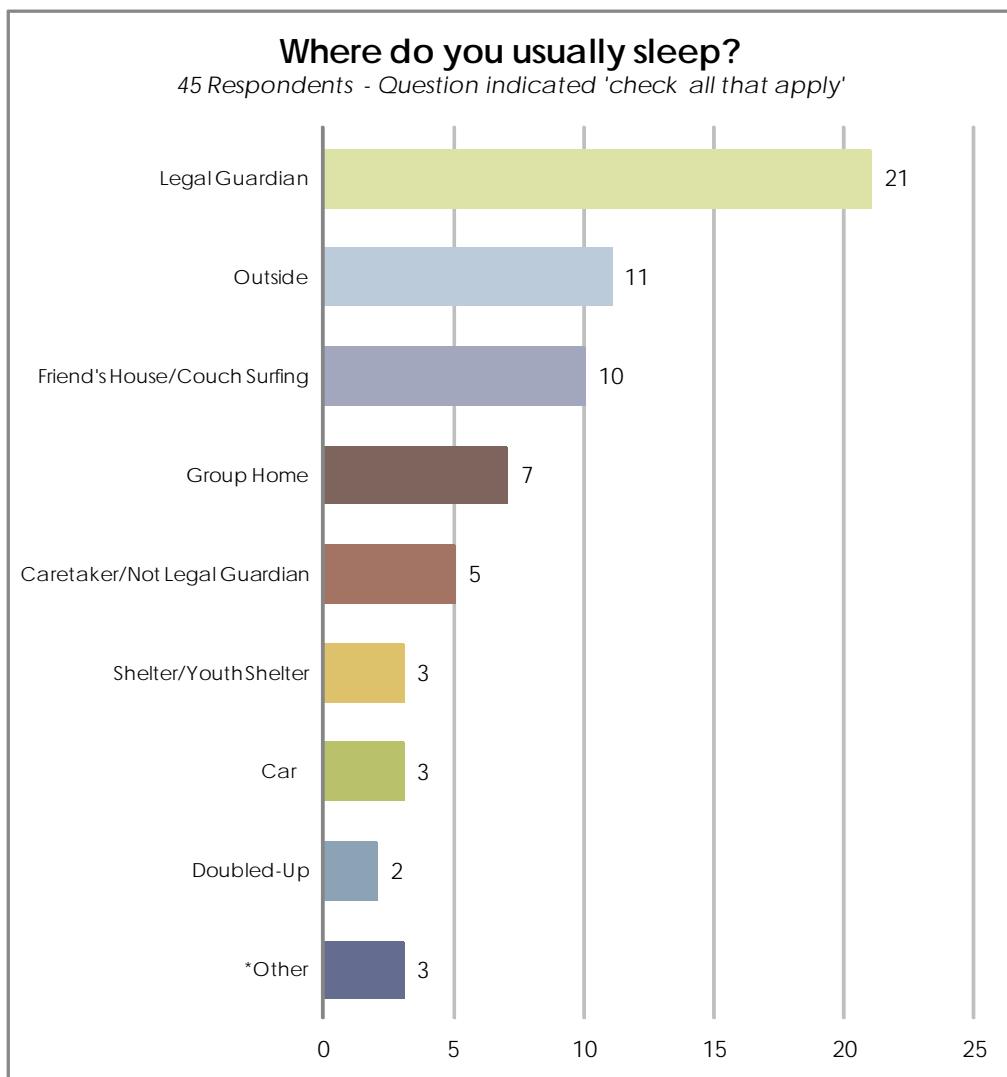
When queried regarding access to a permanent residence, nearly half of respondents (49%) in the urban cohort responded affirmatively while nearly 40% indicated they did not have a permanent residence. Thirteen percent indicated they had sporadic access.



90% 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 previous night, and where they usually sleep from a list of possible places. They had the option to write a response. The urban cohort reported usually sleeping at a legal guardian's residence, followed by outside and at a friend's house.



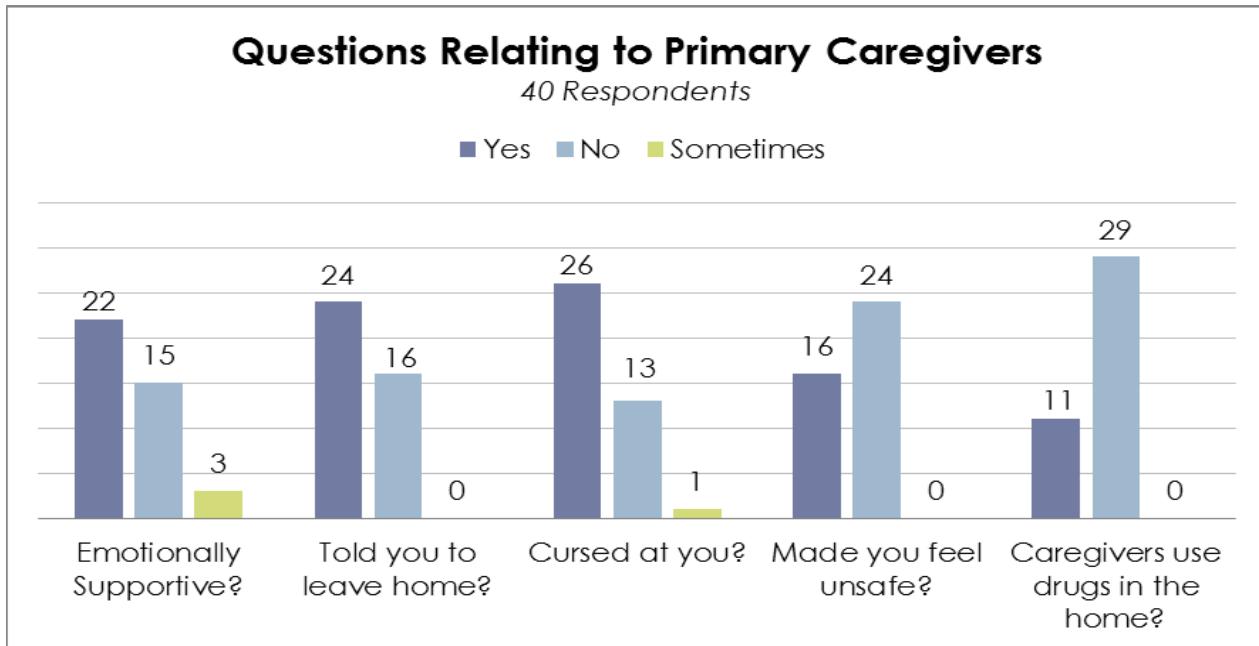
*Other includes one response for each of the following: uninhabitable building; pre-release and treatment center.

Data represented previously in the overall review is still applicable to the urban 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

40 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:

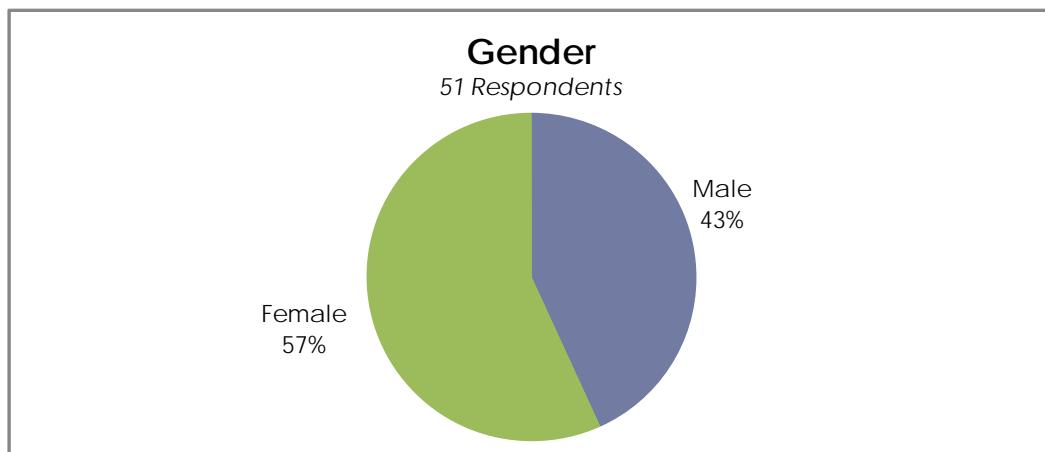
- 60% reported being asked or told to leave home, compared to 64% in the overall cohort.
- 65% noted they were called names or cursed at, compared to 72%.
- 40% indicated they were made to feel unsafe, compared to 50%.
- 28% reported one or more primary caregivers used drugs around them in the home,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

Rural Cohort

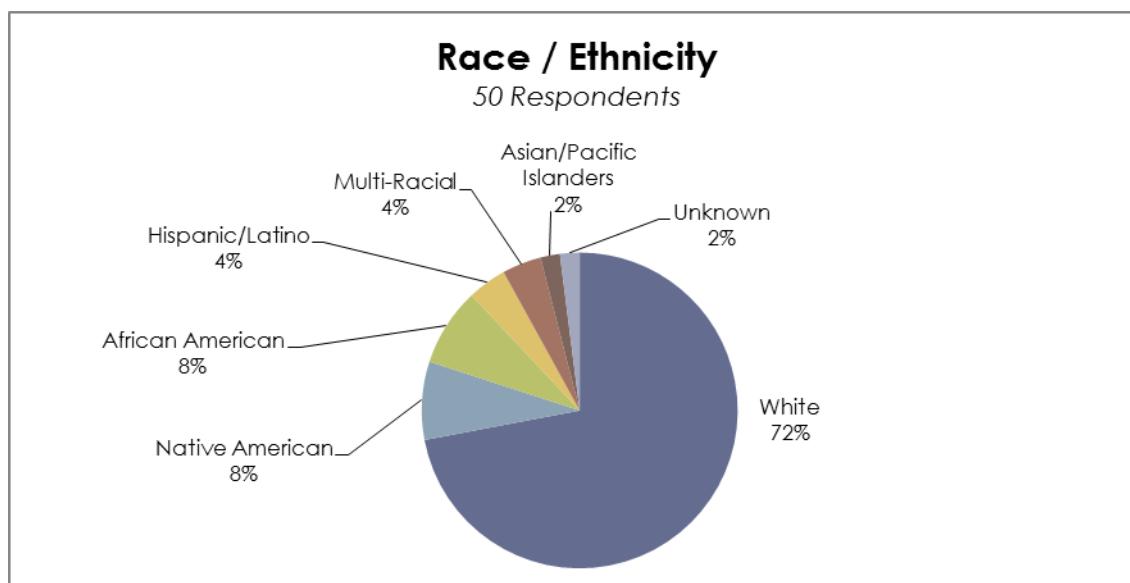
The rural cohort consists of 51 respondents classified as homeless. All were residing in a communal environment outside of the Billings city limits. Very few survey questions were garnered with this cohort; resulting in an atypical and limited view of youth and young adult homelessness in the area.

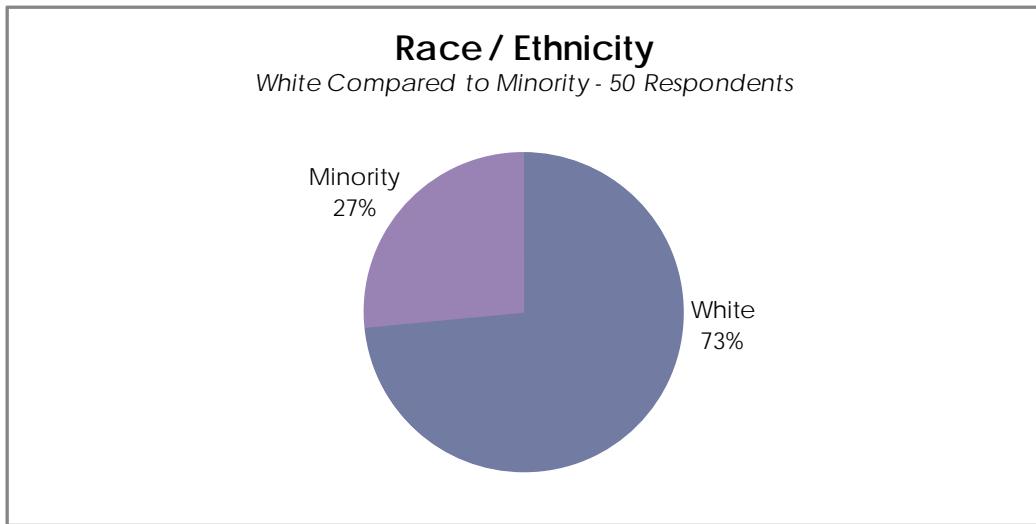
Demographics

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

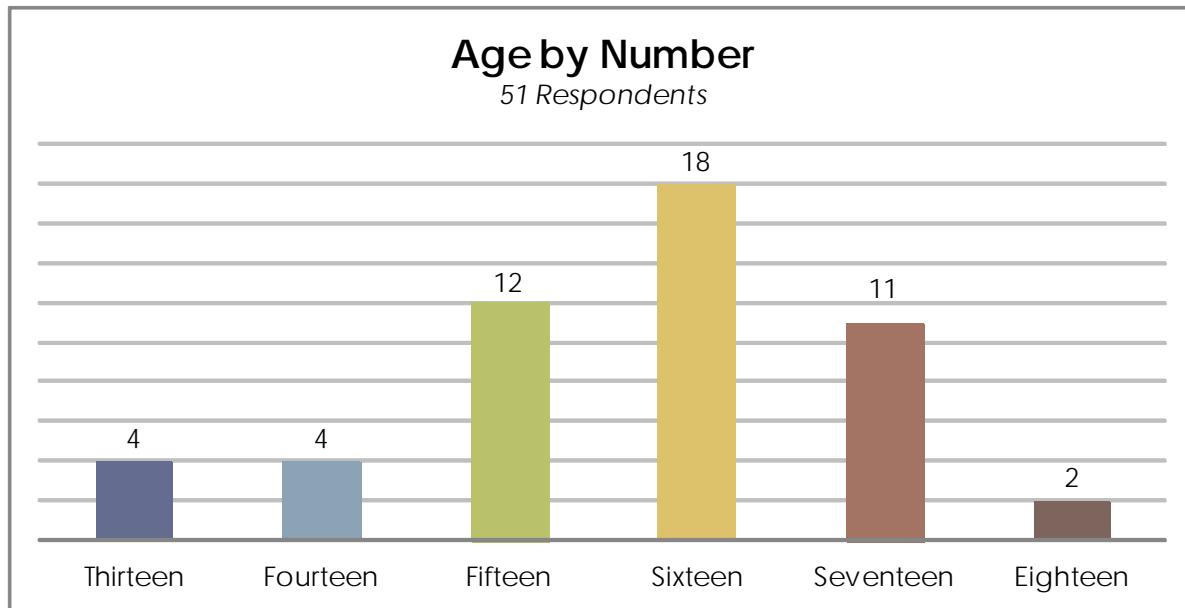


The majority of respondents (72%) self-identified as White when asked about race / ethnicity. 27% percent of respondents self-identified as a minority, which is still statistically significant as Billings has a 19% minority rate according to the 2010 U.S. Census. The largest minority groups identified were Native American and African American (8% respectively) followed by Hispanic / Latino tied with multi-racial (4% for both).





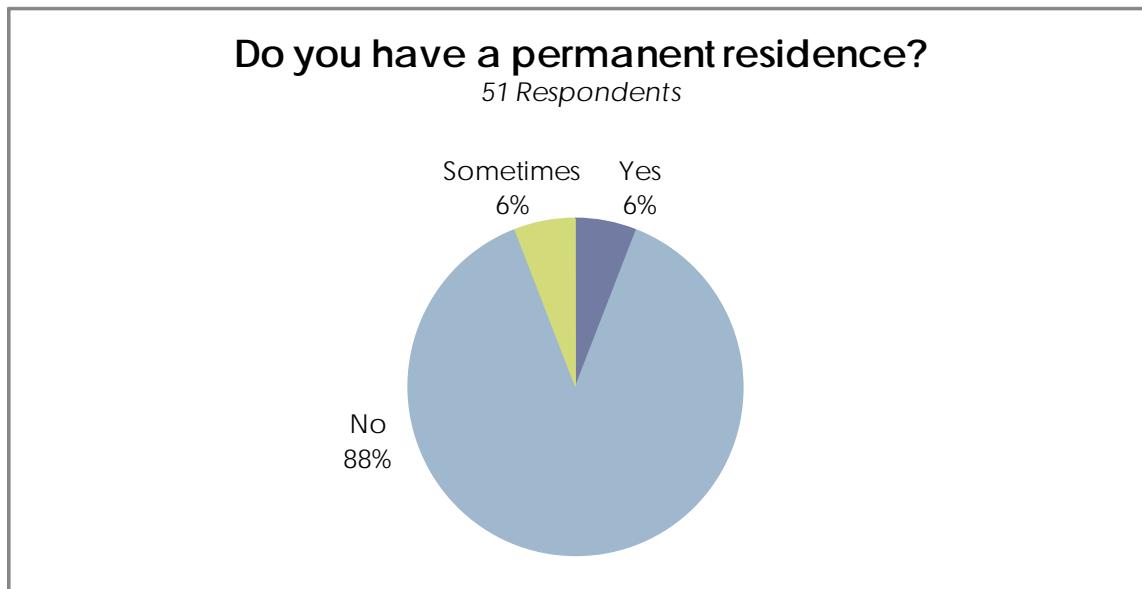
The age of respondents was less diverse than both overall and urban cohorts, with primary distribution between 15 years to 17 years of age. The average age for the rural cohort is 15.67 years.



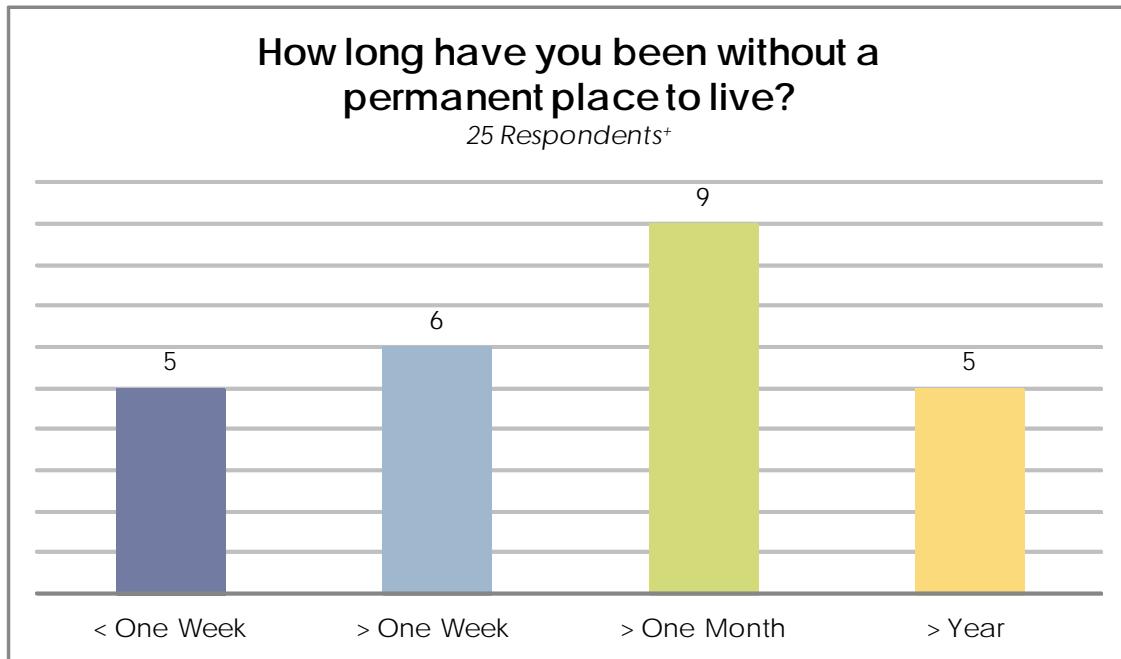
Youth aged 13 to 15 was the largest collective group (20 individuals) and the remainder of the cohort reported ages between 16 and 18. There were no (adolescents or young adult?), ages 19 – 21, identified in this rural group.

Housing Status

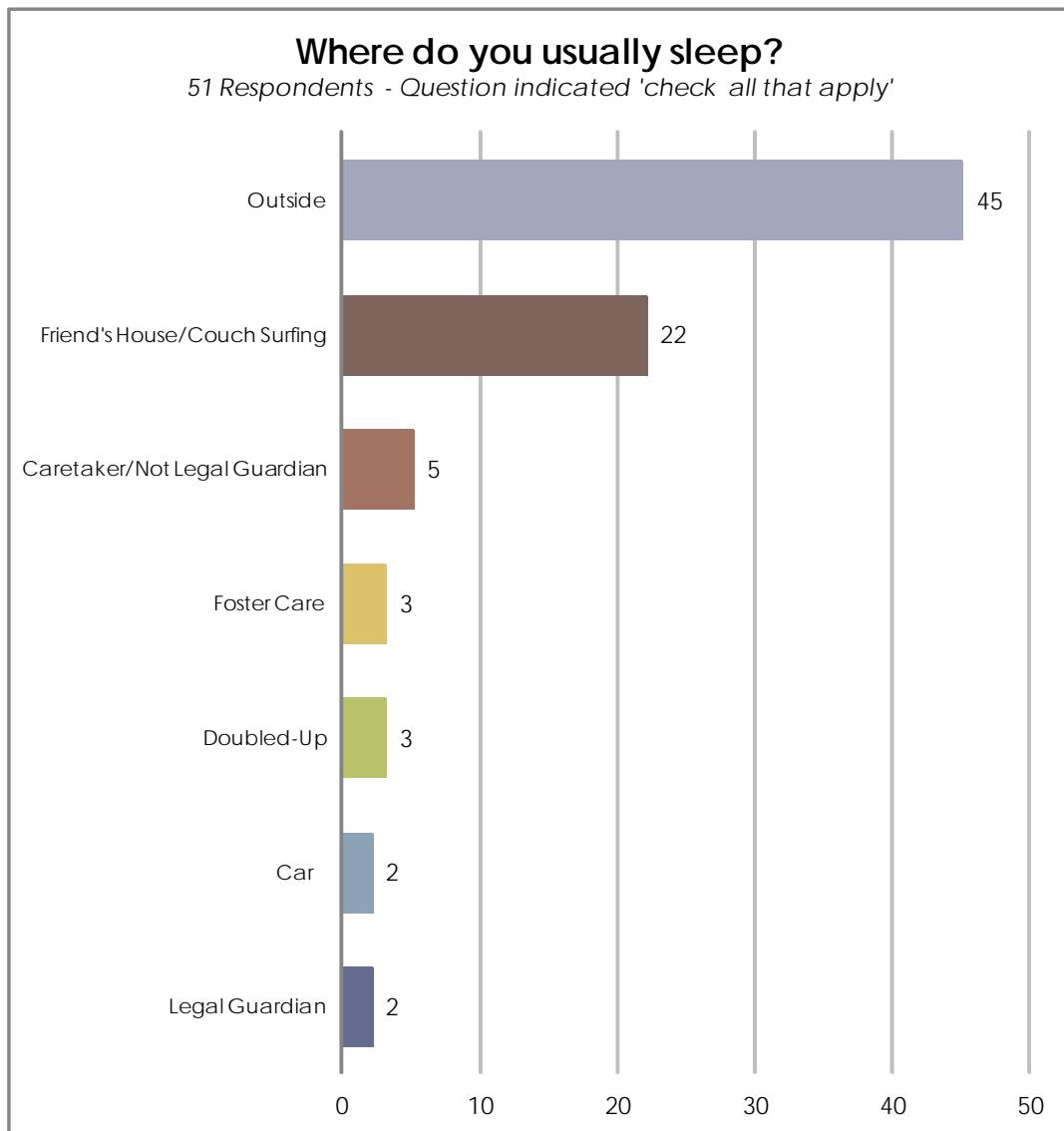
When queried regarding access to a permanent residence, the majority (88%) in the rural cohort responded negatively (45 individuals).



56% 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 had the option to write a response. The rural 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:

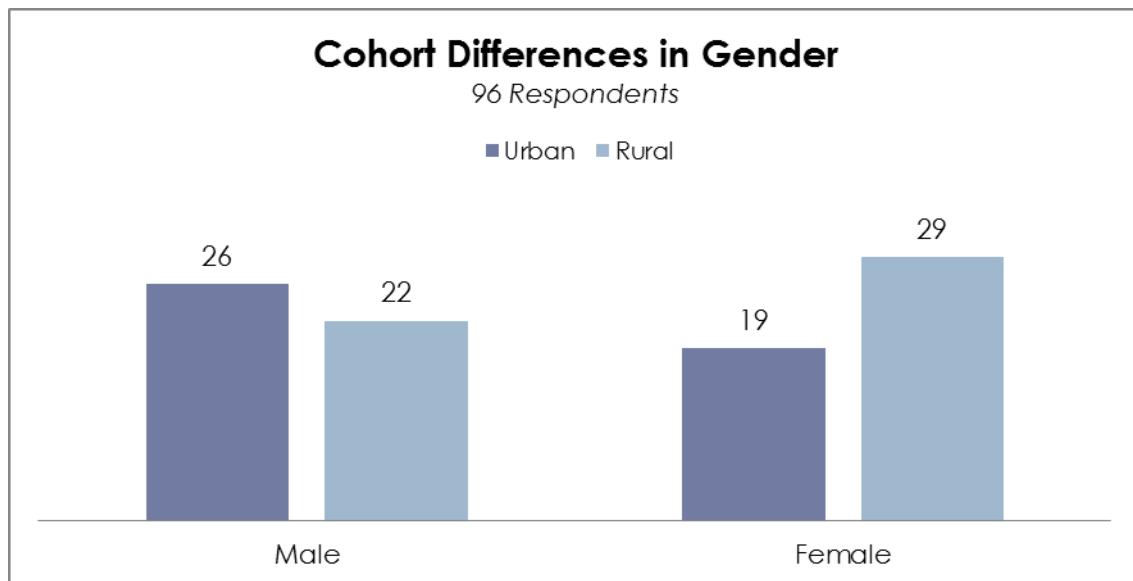
- Access to government identification
- Education
- Foster care
- Number of primary caregivers
- Issues relating to caregivers
- Bullying
- Employment
- Panhandling
- Sleep
- Sexual favors / abuse
- Showers
- Meals
- Health and dental care
- Mental health
- Aspirations
- Barriers
- Service needs and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

Cohort Differences

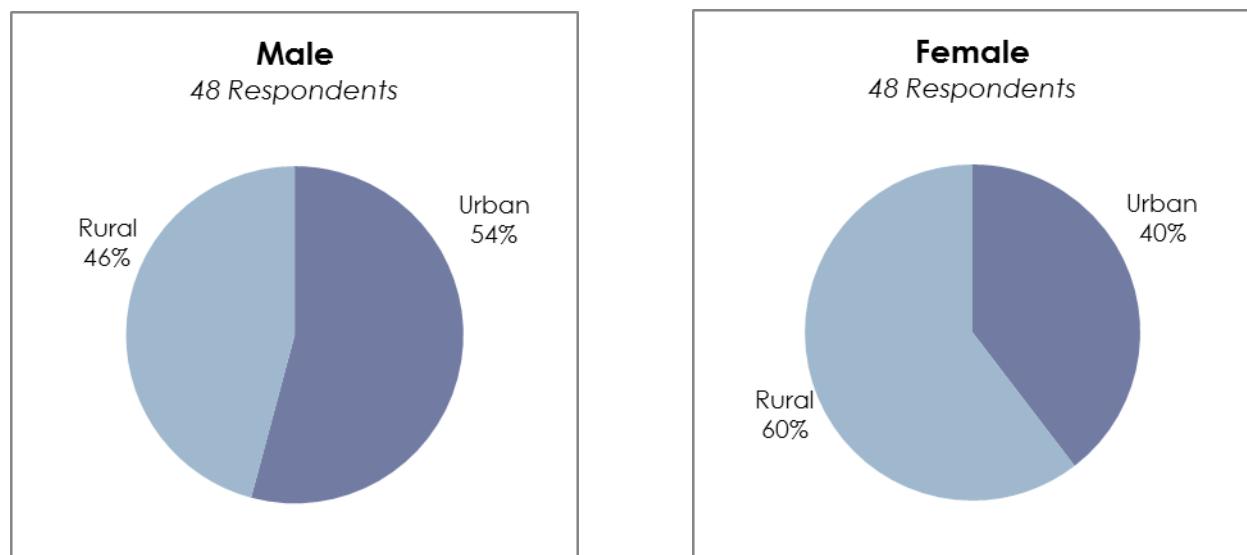
Significant differences between the urban and rural cohorts have been identified, which supports separation of cohort data and utilization of the urban cohort as a standard for the development of services and resources.

Gender

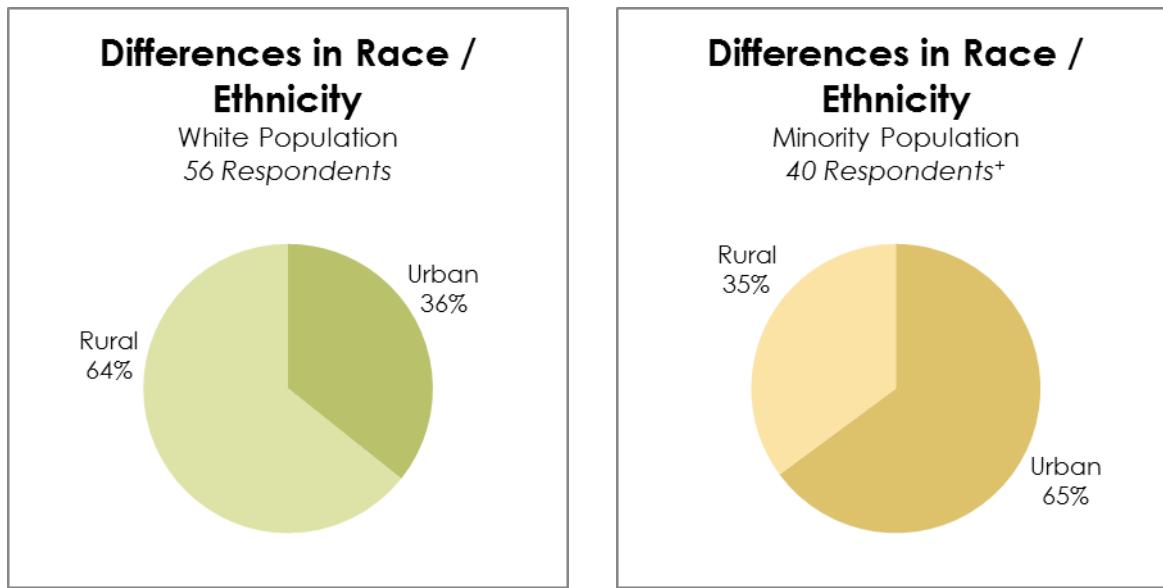
Both cohorts represent approximately half of the total population surveyed resulting in viable data and gender was perfectly split (48 males and 48 females overall).



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

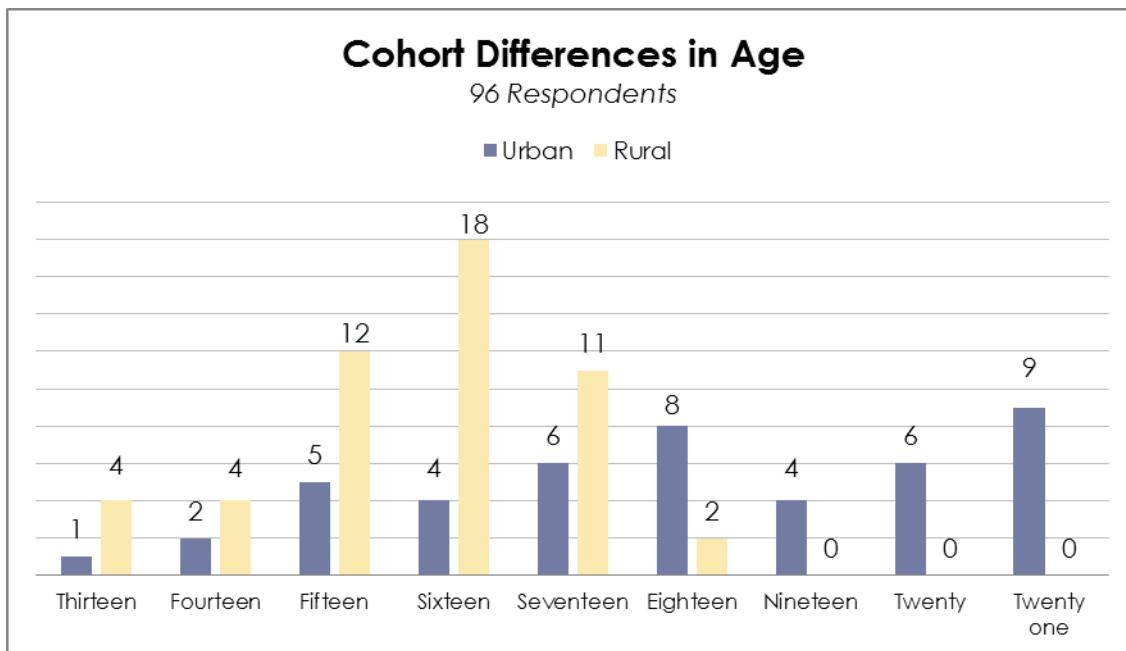


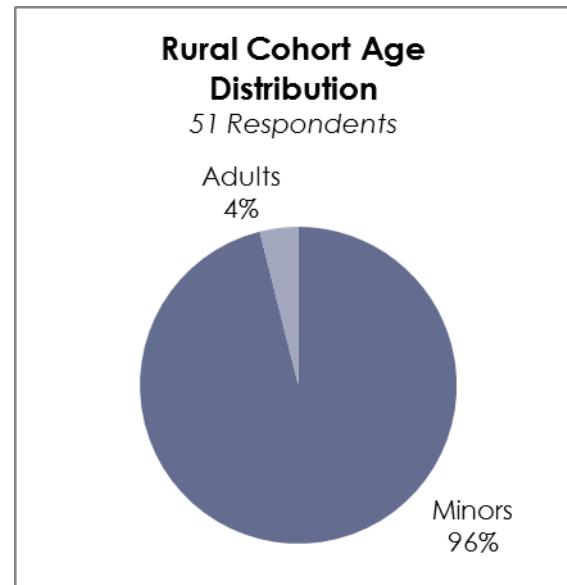
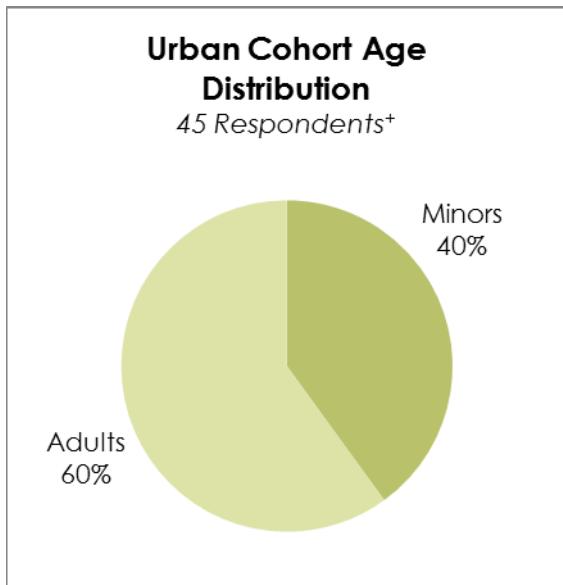
Differences in race and ethnicity were also apparent. An overall comparison reveals the rural cohort contained 64% of the total White population of all surveyed, and the urban cohort contained 65% of the overall minority population.



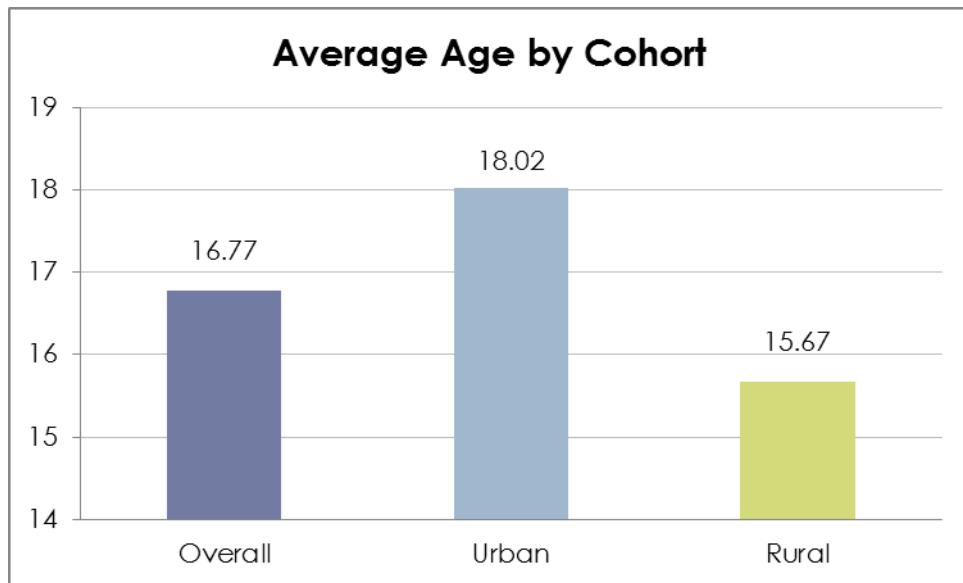
Age Distribution

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





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



Rainbow Gathering: A Theory

One possible explanation for the rural 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.

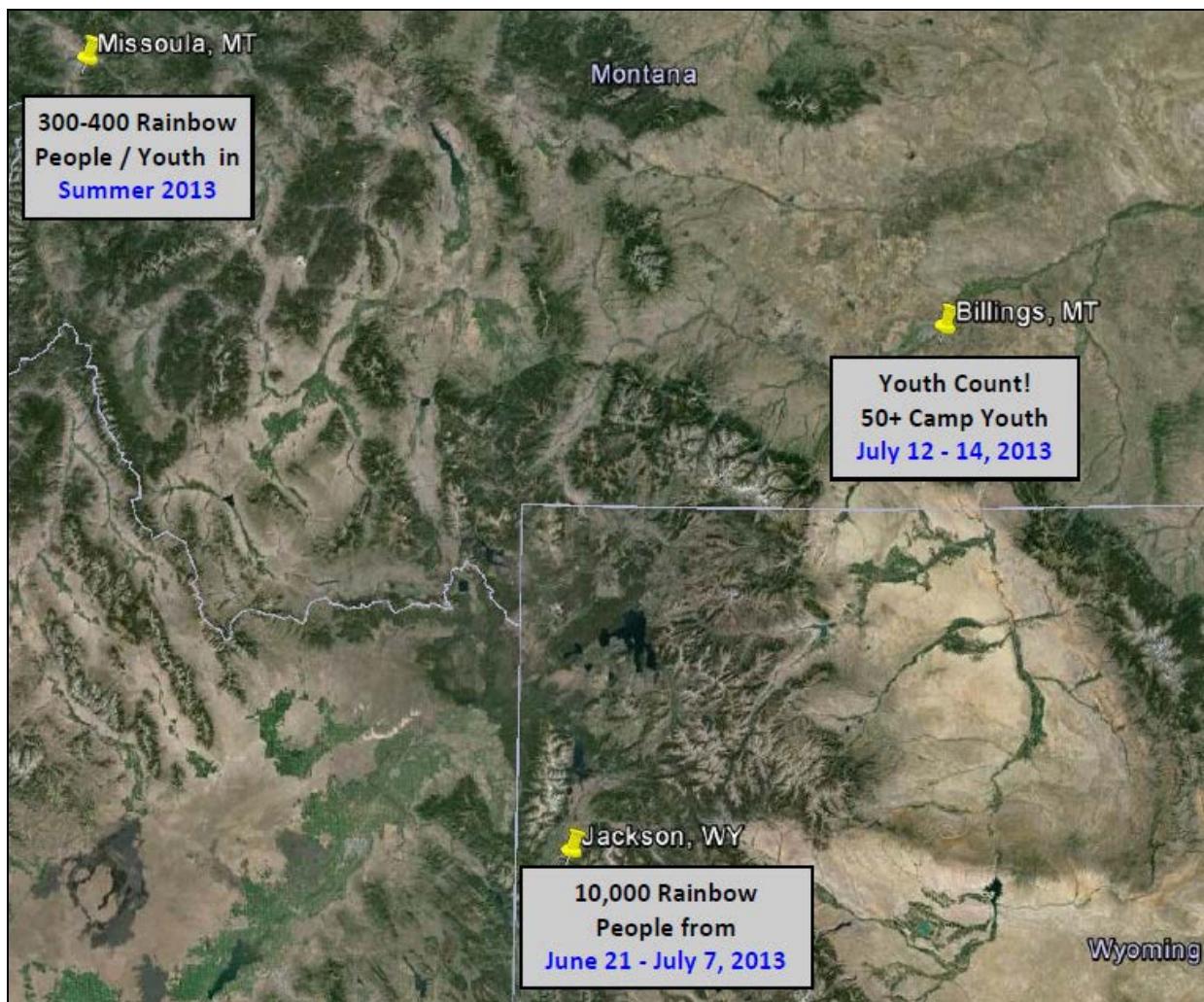
But Nibs and his group of homeless travelers are not from Neverland – they’re from the recent Rainbow Gathering in southwestern Montana.

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 and Jackson would also support this theory.

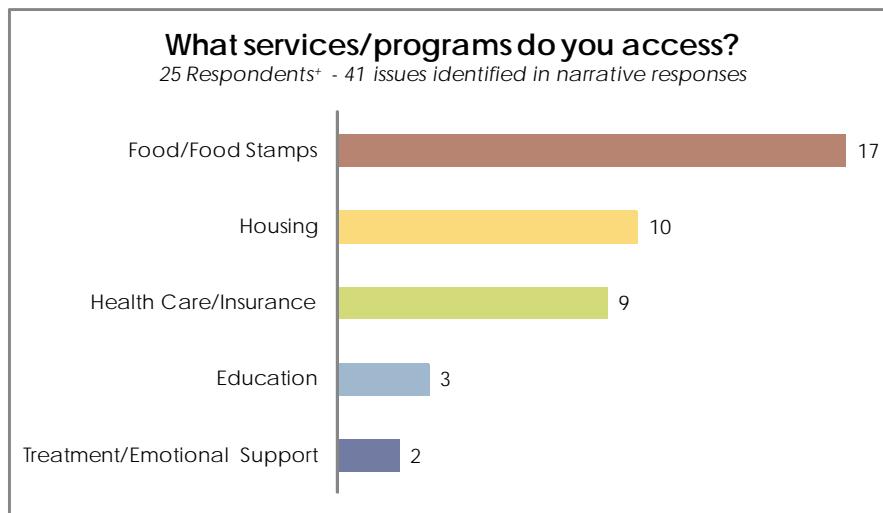


Section VIII: Services & Gap Analysis

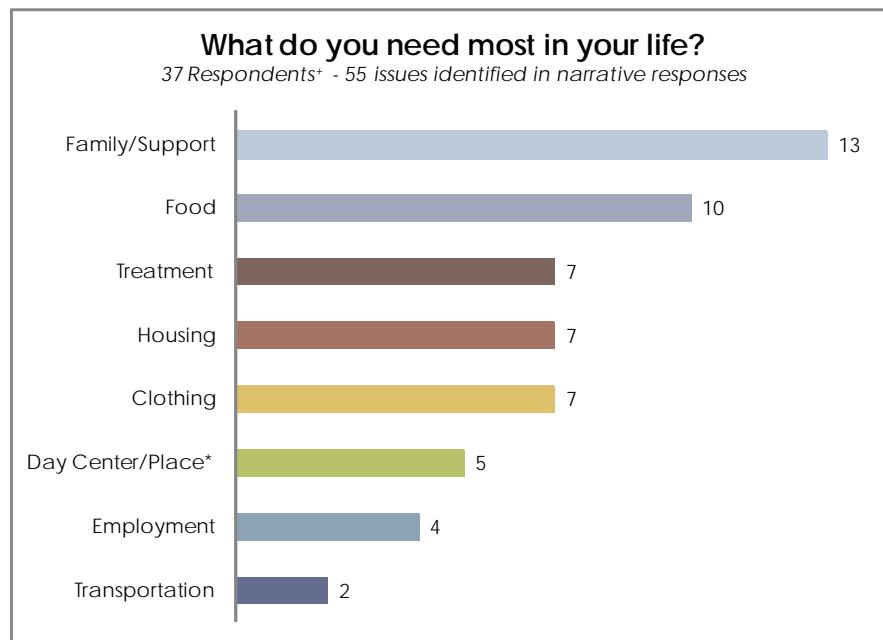
Data analyzed in this section represents responses for the overall cohort which is predominantly comprised of the baseline group, as only few respondents in the rural cohort answered the following questions.

Service Utilization & Needs

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



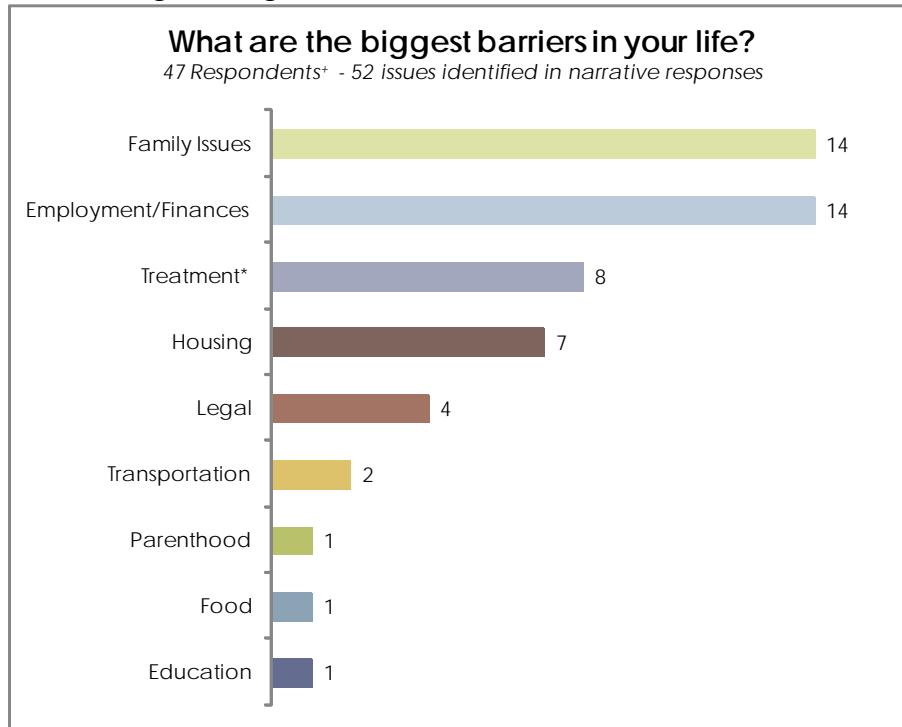
Respondents were asked to identify what they needed most in life, and the majority indicated family and support followed by food, treatment, housing, and clothing.



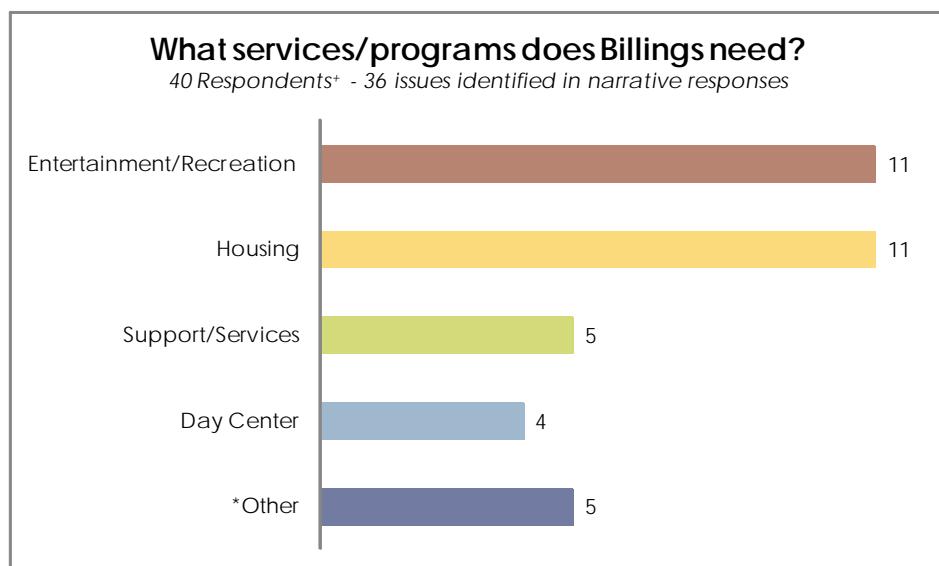
**Day Center includes youth-centered places to go, recreation, entertainment, etc.*

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.



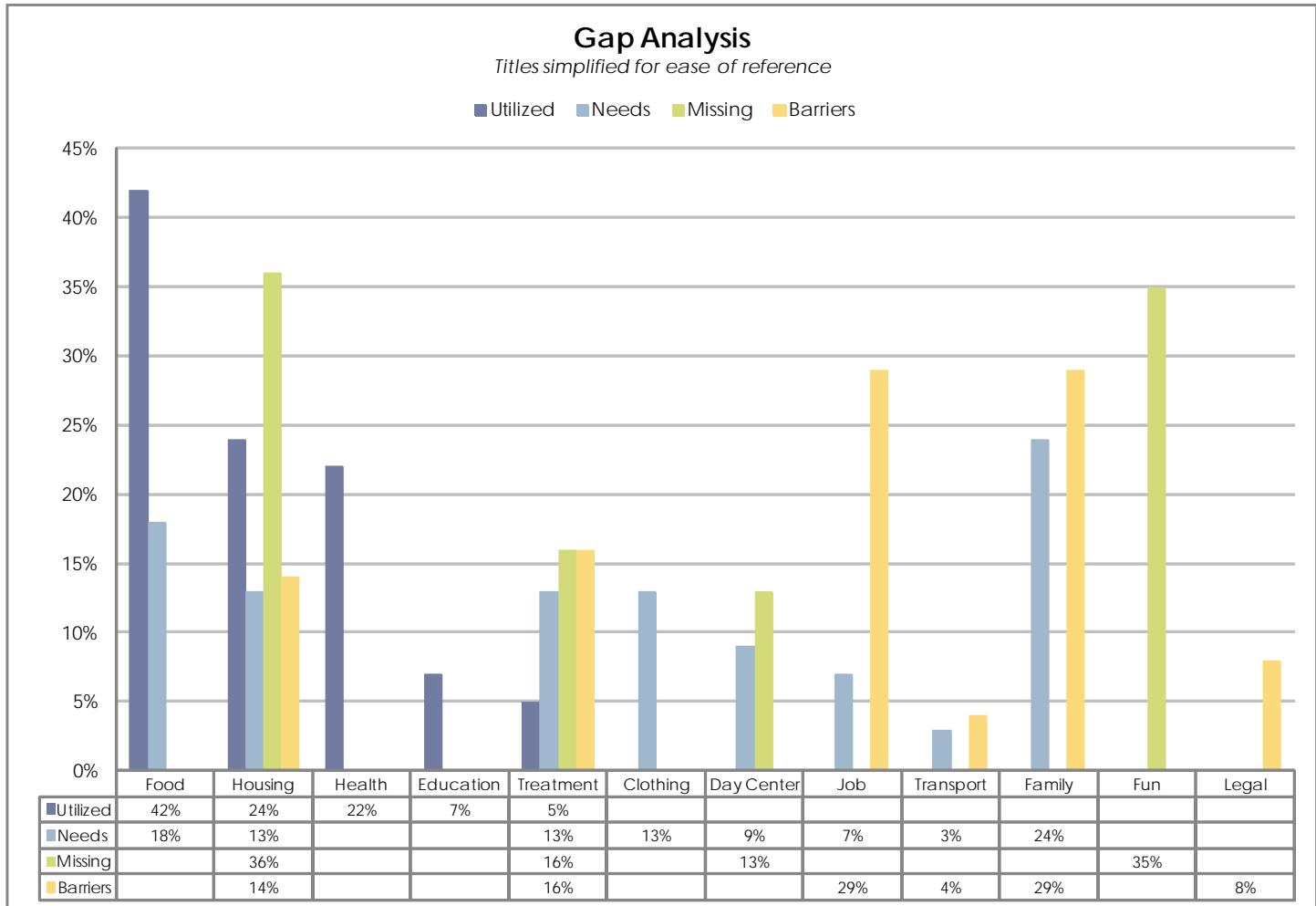
Respondents were also asked to identify programs and services needed in Billings. The majority of responses indicated the need for indoor entertainment and recreation, parks, places for sports, and other places to "hang out", such as a day center.



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

Comparing Service Utilization, Needs & Life Barriers

In order to analyze prioritized service and resource needs in Billings, respondents were asked a series of questions relative to services in the community. Comparing services utilization, life barriers, and identified personal / 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 education was a predominant theme respondents indicated for life goals and aspirations; requiring a 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 obtaining employment and benefits to sustain financial stability difficult. Without primary identification issued by the state or federal government, it is increasingly difficult to garner replacement birth certificates and social security cards.

Service Limitations & Knowledge: Some service providers lack the 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 urban 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. It also 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 a variety of 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, similar to Tumbleweed's 24-hour crisis hotline, have also been useful in deescalating conflict situations for families. 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, easily accessible 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: Resource maps / pamphlets designed to fit in a pocket and widely distributed across the city; youth may utilize them more, rather 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' opinions must be taken into consideration regarding innovative ways to aid in service connection. Youth may subscribe to a supportive online resource rather than 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: Addiction / Mental Health Services specific to youth and young adults must be continually funded and community outreach / awareness efforts strengthened.

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

Recommendation D3: The concept of organizing an annual resource fair to connect youth and young adults to services, including educational and 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 homelessness. While efforts have been made to enhance services for adults experiencing homelessness, youth and young adults would benefit from additional services at day centers.

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 for 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 their transition to a fulfilling life free from poverty, violence, and oppression. This project was designed to provide the research necessary to assist in further strengthening existing and successfully developing new programs and services aimed at alleviating youth homelessness in the Billings community.

Primary caregivers should be the most important pillars 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, 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 must recognize this as a priority and respond 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. 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 must 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 services in order to survive.

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

- Interagency cooperation to fully understand and restructure the services provided in order to better fit the identified needs of homeless and at-risk youth.
- Increased community awareness regarding the programs available to youth and young adults.

- Strengthening their message, mission, and outreach designed to educate youth on the services available to them.
- Ensuring complete and easy access to specific services previously denied to many of these youth.

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

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
The HUB
KTVQ
KULR8
Lynda Woods, Community Development Coordinator
Mayor's Committee on Homelessness
Montana Correctional Enterprises
Montana State University-Billings
Rigmor Hydenryk
Rimrock Foundation
RiverStone Health; Healthcare for the Homeless
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South Central Montana Continuum of Care
Starbucks, 24th Street West
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Tumbleweed Board of Directors