



COUNT ON YOUTH

2014

Mercer County, NJ

Count on Youth Summary Report

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## **A. Overview: Why it's important to do a youth count:**

The impact of homelessness on youth is alarming. Homeless youth experience higher rates of violence and sexual assault than their adult counterparts and often use drugs and alcohol to help cope with the traumatic experiences and abuse they face. While we do not know the full extent of homelessness in our community, we believe that the numbers are significant. Obtaining a more accurate picture of the number of youth that are homeless is an important step in helping address the issues causing youth homelessness in our community.

According to the 2014 US Department of Housing and Urban Development report *Housing for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*, nationally over 25,000 youth exit the foster care system homeless or precariously housed. In 2013, the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (NJDCF), working in conjunction with Mercer County, began identifying youth who exit the child welfare system into homelessness through a Federal grant initiative. Further examination was needed in order to develop an effective strategy to address this issue and to measure our progress towards meeting our goals towards preventing and ending homelessness for this very vulnerable population.

## **B. Challenges of doing a youth count:**

Homeless youth do not often identify themselves as being homeless. They are less willing to disclose that they are experiencing homelessness and often work hard to blend in with their peers who are not homeless. Since many homeless youth “couch surf” and aren’t easily found on the streets where many older homeless adults can be found, this makes it especially difficult to identify youth through our annual “Point in Time” count of people experiencing homelessness.

## **C. Our planning process:**

The Trenton/Mercer Continuum of Care established a Youth Homelessness Planning Committee in September of 2013. This was comprised of community stakeholders, school liaisons, youth serving providers, funders of youth services and young adults; it is noteworthy that a number of young adults on the Committee had experienced homelessness themselves. This group met for a year, looking at national and local data, and best practices and trends in the area of youth homelessness. NJDCF applied for, and was granted, a statewide planning grant from the federal government to gather critical data and to plan for appropriate interventions for the population. Mercer County’s effort was fully supported by the Department both in personnel resources and financial assistance to the youth participants.

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The committee reviewed existing data, both locally and nationally, on homeless youth and researched best practices on conducting youth counts. A decision was made to conduct Mercer County's first ever youth count, a project we call: *COUNT ON YOUTH (COY)*. Knowing that homeless youth are often reluctant to identify themselves as homeless, the **goal of this pilot project was to assess housing stability** as a predictor of future homelessness for the youth in the Trenton/Mercer Community. This focus enabled us to look more broadly at the housing needs of the community and not those of persons in shelter alone.

## **D. COUNT ON YOUTH Methodology:**

The Committee reviewed the successful methodology of Seattle's King County Youth Count project and, with their permission, modified their survey instrument to be used in the *Count on Youth* pilot.

The key questions used in the survey to indicate housing stability were:

1. Where did you stay last night?
2. Can you live where you stayed last night for the next month?
3. Where did you live in the last 3 months?
4. Do you have a place where you can sleep at night on a regular basis?
5. Has there ever been a time in the past when you didn't know where you would be sleeping at night?

Two primary methods of data collection were used 1) distribution of the survey through the middle and high schools in Trenton and 2) administering the survey in-person using street outreach teams.

### *School Surveys*

It was our original intention to distribute the survey to all middle and high schools students in the Trenton Public Schools. We worked with the Trenton Board of Education and McKinney Vento Liaison, for assistance in distributing the survey. On November 5, 2014, a total of 2,821 surveys were completed by Middle and High School students from 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grades. Surveys were filled out by students in homeroom and collected by the teachers and returned to the Liaison.

### *Street Outreach Count*

A team of surveyors, including the youth and adult sheltering organizations, that participate in the annual Point in Time Count, and two dozen youth and young adults from those organizations agreed to assist us in surveying youth in our Street Outreach count.

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A *Count on Youth* volunteer training was held a week prior to the count. During this training, both adult and young adults reviewed the survey and participated in role plays to practice administering the survey. Outreach teams, led by experienced outreach workers, were established during the training. Maps were generated to identify specific locations for the outreach teams to go to conduct the surveys, based upon a variety of feedback provided by the Planning Committee and outreach workers of homeless youth.

The Count on Youth outreach street surveys were also administered on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014. There were 4 Outreach teams, led by trained outreach workers of homeless youth (staff from ***Anchor House, HomeFront and Lifeties.***) Each team was comprised of staff and young adults to designated survey spots including Trenton Transportation/Train center, Trenton public library, and Lawrenceville shopping mall. Outreach teams also surveyed youth at the two Mercer County Community College campuses: tables were set up at the entry to the MCCC campus and in the community room so students entering the building for classes were surveyed. The community room at the Mercer County Community College served as a central HUB for volunteers to meet throughout the day. Surveyors were instructed to only have youth ages 14 – 24 complete the survey.

## E. COUNT ON YOUTH FINDINGS

- ✓ Over 3000 surveys were completed; 10% of these were youth with housing instability. Results are highlighted below:

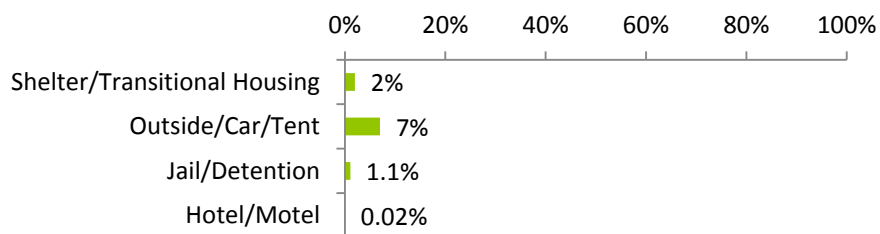
TYPE	Number Surveyed	# with Housing Instability	% with Housing Instability
Street Outreach	632	107	17%
Public Schools	2821	253	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3453</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>10%</b>

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The following data focus on the survey results of those youth identified with unstable housing.

## 1. Where did you stay last night?

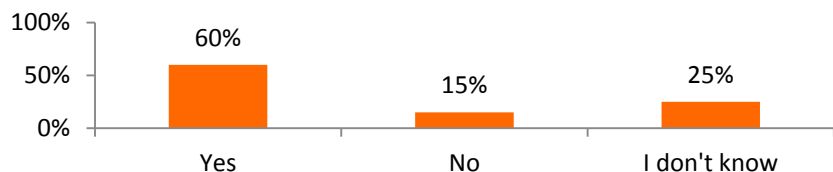
Thirty seven (37) students, or 10%, reported staying in an unstable (homeless) housing situation. Eight (8) youth reported sleeping in an emergency shelter, whereas twenty four (24) youth reported sleeping outside in a car or a tent.



N=341 (N = # of responses to question)

## 2. Can you live where you stayed last night for the next month?

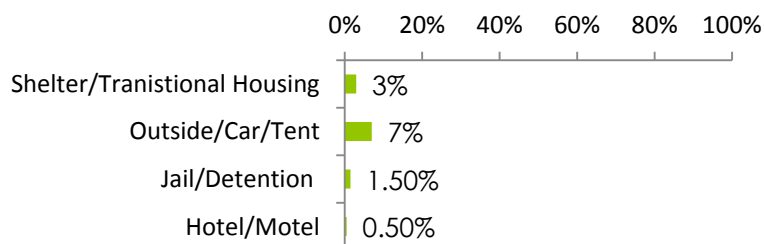
Of the 329 youth who responded to this question, 130 youth, or 40%, reported housing instability when asked if they could continue living in the place they stayed the night of the count for the next month.



N=329

## 3. Where did you live in the last 3 months?

When asked about previous living situations, forty two (42) youth, or 12%, reported that at one time during the last 3 months, they lived in unstable (homeless) housing conditions.

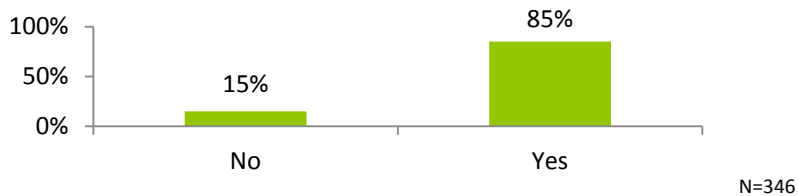


N=339

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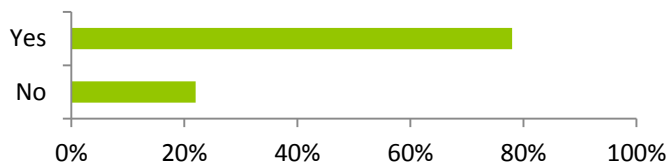
## 4. Do You Have a Place Where You Can Sleep at Night on a Regular Basis?

Fifty three (53) youth reported not having a place at night to sleep on a regular basis.



## 5. Has there ever been a time in the past when you didn't know where you would be sleeping at night?

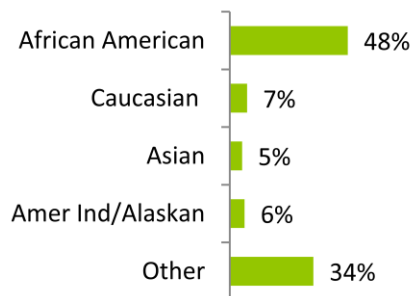
Two hundred and fifty four (254) youth with housing instability reported, at one point in time, being concerned about having a place to sleep at night.



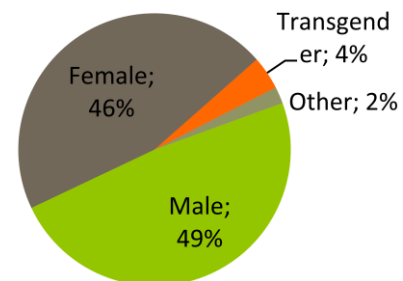
N=324

## 6. DEMOGRAPHICS

### RACE

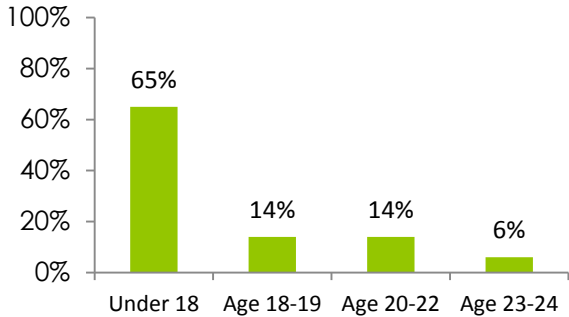


### GENDER



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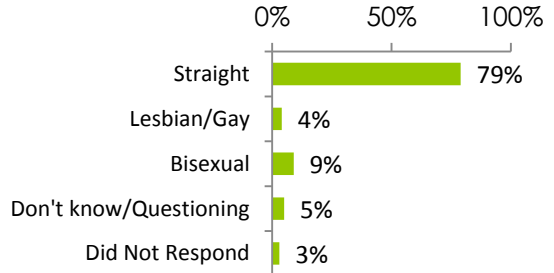
## AGE



A majority of the youth surveyed with housing instability were under 18. *\*Eighty two (82%) percent of the surveys were conducted with youth in grades 8-10 graders in school.*

The average age of youth with housing instability surveyed during street outreach was 20 years.

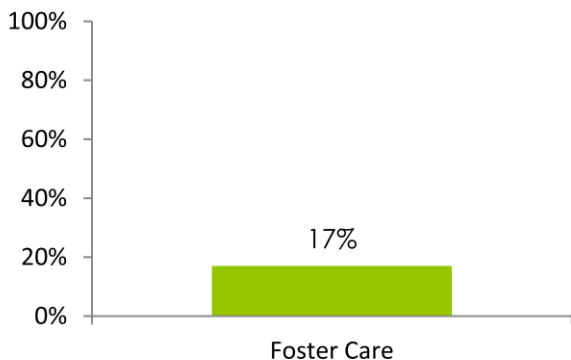
## SEXUAL ORIENTATION



LGBTQ youth who experience homelessness and/or housing instability are particularly vulnerable. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, "LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of physical and sexual assault and higher incidences of mental health problems than heterosexual homeless youth". In the Trenton/Mercer community, 46 or thirteen percent of the students surveyed with housing stability issues were LGBTQ. This follows the same trend observed in the other \*Youth Counts notably Seattle, WA and Minnesota.

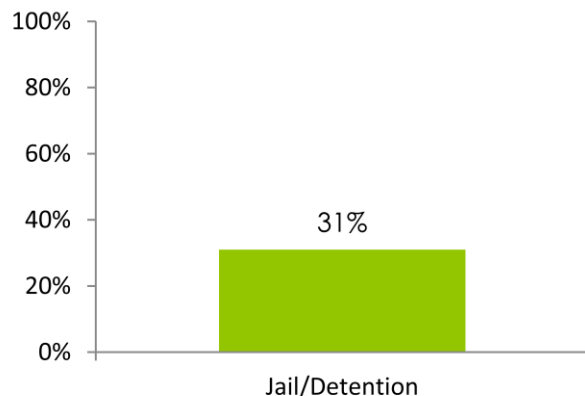
\* <http://www.endhomelessness.org/>

## % of Youth with Housing Instability with a History of Foster Care Placement



Sixty (60) youth with housing instability reported having been in Foster Care.

## % of Youth with Housing Instability with a History of Detention or Jail



One hundred and thirty (130) youth with housing instability reported having been in detention or jail.

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- ✓ Things we would do differently next time:

This pilot project provided a first look at homelessness and housing stability for youth in the Trenton/Mercer community. Because this was a pilot project, limitations in the data collection were anticipated. Following the COY pilot, the Committee members and youth volunteers identified specific areas where we could improve our process for the next count:

1. Expand coverage to a larger area outside of the city of Trenton:  
*Street outreach teams covered the Trenton area, but more planning and volunteers are needed to expand coverage to survey the entire Mercer County area.*
2. Expand school survey to cover all 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades in the Mercer County area:  
*The 2014 count covered some 8-10<sup>th</sup> grade classes in the Trenton School District. Future plans will include surveying students in 7-12<sup>th</sup> grade and those also in the Ewing and Hamilton school districts which have been identified as having increased homelessness issues in recent years.*
3. Insert identifiers into Survey tool to prevent duplications:  
*Due to privacy issues, surveys conducted in schools were not able to include any identifying information. However, since the surveys were ONLY distributed during the morning home room process, duplication should have been minimized. Identifiers such as first and last name initials and DOB would help eliminate youth counted in both the school and outreach counts.*
4. Integrate HMIS data for sheltered population:  
*The focus of the 2014 COY was on gaining a better understanding of youth experiencing "housing instability", particularly those who do not identify themselves as being homeless. Future study should include a segment on unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness who are currently in emergency shelter or transitional housing programs.*
5. Clarify survey questions related to Foster Care and Detention:  
*Post-survey feedback from volunteers and youth suggested clarification on questions related to Foster Care and Detention. Future survey will expand the Foster Care question to "Out-of-Home" placement to include Kinship Care placements. Detention will be changed to Youth Detention to avoid confusion about school based detention.*



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The Trenton/Mercer Count on Youth project was a collaborative effort on the part of many community agencies (see list below). It was helpful to have a large sample size, which allowed for a comparative experience to other communities, yet the experience was unique to Mercer County. The next endeavor will incorporate the identified changes to the tool and will expand to include a broader range of school districts and survey areas in Mercer County.

Thank you to the following organizations who participated in the 2014  
Count on Youth event:

- Anchor House
- CASA of Mercer County, Inc.
- City of Trenton
- Catholic Charities of Trenton
- HomeFront
- Isles Youth Institute
- Lifeties, Inc.
- Juvenile Justice Commission
- Mercer County Community College
- Mercer County Department of Human Services
- Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness
- Mercer County Board of Social Services
- New Jersey Department of Children & Families
- International Masons
- Urban League Guild
- Trenton Public Schools
- Trenton Board of Education