Northeast Minnesota Continuum of Care 2026 Youth Homelessness Needs Assessment Youth & Community Partner Survey Findings

Background, Context, and Key Results

About The Surveys

In 2026, the Northeast Minnesota Continuum of Care (NE CoC) Youth Empowerment Team (YET) conducted surveys with youth and young adults who had experienced homelessness or a housing crisis, as well as community members, service providers, and other partners across the region. The surveys were part of the NE CoC's Youth Homelessness Systems Improvement (YHSI) initiative.

The NE CoC region includes Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, and Lake Counties, as well as portions of Tribal Nations that share geography with the region.

This document summarizes findings from both surveys using data collected by the NE CoC through the YHSI initiative.

Important Considerations

The youth survey was completed by 22 youth and young adults age 24 and younger who had experienced homelessness or a housing crisis. The results reflect the experiences of the youth who participated and should not be viewed as representative of all youth experiencing homelessness across the region.

Results do not include responses from youth living on Tribal reservations. The Minnesota Tribal Collaborative, a YHSI partner, conducted separate youth surveys in partnership with Tribal Nations and in accordance with Tribal data sovereignty principles. Those findings are owned and shared separately by Tribal partners.

Youth & Young Adult Survey Findings

The 2026 NE MN CoC Youth and Young Adult Survey gathered firsthand perspectives from twenty-two people age 24 and younger who had experienced homelessness or a housing crisis. The survey explored their housing experiences, basic needs, health and well-being, education, employment, support networks, and experiences accessing services. Although the sample was small and geographically concentrated, the responses provide valuable insight into the challenges young people face and the supports they need to achieve housing stability. Key findings included:

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- Housing instability among youth and young adults(YYA) is often hidden, temporary, and difficult to identify.

  The survey suggests that YYA homelessness is not limited to young people living in shelters or outside. Couch-hopping and unstable arrangements with family or relatives are prominent experiences.

- Housing instability is closely connected to economic insecurity and the challenges of transitioning to adulthood.

  The economic findings are among the most concerning results of the survey.

  - 53% reported having no monthly income.
  - Only 32% reported having a job.
  - Of those who were employed, 67% said their jobs did not pay enough to live independently.
  - The most frequently identified financial barriers included lack of steady income, rental costs and deposits, vehicle expenses, and difficulties budgeting or saving.
  - The three most frequently identified independent living skills needs were obtaining a driver's license, budgeting and paying bills, and finding a job.

- Basic needs remain unmet even when YYA have a place to stay.

  The survey reveals significant concerns about food security and access to everyday necessities.

  - Only 26% reported eating and feeling full every day.
  - 47% reported getting food from friends, and 37% relied on food shelves, pantries, or community food programs.
  - 29% identified food and hunger among their day-to-day challenges.
  - 21% identified showering as a challenge.
  - Although 89% reported having a safe place to shower and 89% reported having a safe place to wash clothes, 11% lacked each of these resources.

- Mental health is a significant concern, and some YYA may lack effective support.

  Mental health emerges as a recurring theme throughout the survey.

  - 50% said they were concerned about their mental health.
  - 36% of open-ended responses about day-to-day challenges mentioned stress or mental health.
  - 25% of responses about coping with stress, anger, or sadness indicated that youth were not able to take care of their mental health.
  - Only 8% of the responses about coping mentioned therapy, and another 8% mentioned medication.

- YYA may have informal support networks but limited connections to formal services.

One of the most revealing contrasts in the survey is the difference between support from people youth know and support from organizations.

  - 94% reported receiving help from family, relatives, or friends.
  - 33% reported receiving help from a service provider, program, or nonprofit.
  - 68% said they knew what housing resources were available in their communities, while 32% did not.
  - 26% reported being turned away from homeless or housing services they tried to access.
  - 72% did not know about service providers that help with debt issues.

- Education and employment connections may be important opportunities for prevention and long-term stability.
  - The survey identifies a population with varied educational experiences and potentially limited economic opportunities.
  - 36% reported that they had not graduated from high school.
  - 21% had attended a college, technical, or trade school.
  - Among those who had attended post-secondary education, 69% had not graduated.
  - Only 32% reported currently having a job.

- Some YYA face additional barriers related to caregiving, cultural connection, and justice-system involvement
  - 30% reported having children or other dependents, and all reported that those dependents lived with them.
  - 25% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.
  - 58% said they could stay connected to their culture, traditions, or language where they lived; 32% said somewhat, and 10% said no.
  - 32% reported involvement with the criminal justice system.
  - 14% of open-ended responses about support networks indicated that youth had no support network.

Community Partner Survey Results

The 2026 Community Partner Survey gathered perspectives from 23 service providers, community partners, and community members regarding the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in Northeast Minnesota. Key findings include:

- ***Limited youth-specific services:*** Respondents identified significant gaps in services for homeless youth, particularly emergency shelter, housing for minors, drop-in centers, transportation, and mental health support. Existing services most commonly mentioned were case management, education support, and life skills assistance.

- ***Underserved populations:*** Service providers identified youth with mental health needs, youth under age 18, and youth involved in the justice system as among the most underserved populations.

- ***Barriers to accessing services:*** Across all respondent groups, the most frequently identified barriers were lack of awareness of available services, limited basic life skills, and long waitlists. Transportation, eligibility restrictions, and the overall lack of available services were also identified.

- ***Housing and system barriers:*** Respondents described a shortage of affordable housing, limited emergency shelter options, age restrictions, landlord requirements for credit history, and rental assistance income limits that do not reflect current housing costs.

- ***Need for additional resources:*** Respondents expressed interest in drop-in centers offering meals, showers, laundry, internet, and educational support; additional shelter and housing options; direct financial assistance; transportation and employment services; and youth-focused housing models with on-site supports.

- ***Challenges to expanding services:*** Providers identified insufficient funding, staffing, physical space, and available housing as primary constraints preventing them from offering additional services.

- ***Existing collaboration and promising practices:*** Most service provider respondents (71%) described collaboration with other organizations as very good. Examples of effective practices included coordinating financial assistance, providing direct cash assistance, conducting outreach, meeting youth where they are, and supporting youth choice in housing.

- ***Community awareness and engagement:*** Respondents emphasized the importance of increasing awareness, reducing stigma, building trust with young people, and creating welcoming, nonjudgmental environments. Only 4 of the 14 community partner respondents who answered the question reported familiarity with Coordinated Entry for youth and young adults.

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