



April 7, 2025

Secondary Data Overview

Western NC Youth Homelessness

OVERVIEW

As part of our regional needs assessment, we analyzed secondary data from a range of publicly available sources including Point-in-Time counts, Housing Inventory Count data, McKinney-Vento data, U.S. Census data, and other relevant datasets. We aimed to understand current data trends related to the number of youth experiencing homelessness, as well as the economic and environmental factors affecting their housing and financial stability. In reviewing this data, we also found it equally important to examine how communities collect and report this information since reporting methods can shape very different narratives about the extent and nature of youth homelessness. The following report summarizes key findings from this analysis.

COUNTING YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Defining youth homelessness varies across systems, which can make it challenging to determine how many youth are truly experiencing homelessness. For instance, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) counts only those who are unsheltered or in emergency shelter, while other definitions include youth who are doubled up or temporarily staying with others. Although communities are required to track age demographics in their homelessness data, youth-specific figures are not often publicly reported. The way a Continuum of Care (CoC) chooses to report this data significantly shapes both community perception and response efforts. Many youth do not self-identify as homeless, particularly when staying in non-traditional settings such as a car or with friends. Additionally, unaccompanied youth often avoid adult shelter settings and encampments, making them harder to locate and count, and shelter options for this age group remain limited.

Point in Time Count

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness as individuals and families who are unsheltered, meaning they are sleeping in a place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation.¹

According to 2024 Point in Time Count² across all 20 counties there were:

- 135³ youth between the ages of 18 and 24 experiencing homelessness. ([See appendix A for how this was calculated](#))
 - Other western counties and CoC's: 38 youth in Buncombe County⁴ and 15 youth in Northwest CoC⁵.
- 108 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 experiencing homelessness. ([Figure 1](#))
 - Note: Unaccompanied youth are those under the age of 25 not in physical custody of a parent or guardian.
 - Other western counties and CoC's: 31 in Buncombe County and 20 in Northwest CoC.
- 238 youth (17 and under) experiencing homelessness. ([See Appendix B for how this was calculated](#))
 - Other western counties and CoC's: 47 in Buncombe County and 68 in Northwest CoC

We also wanted to look at how many youth between the ages of 16 and 24 were parenting and experiencing homelessness. This was difficult to do with the data that was available. However we did find the following:

- There were **24 youth parents and children**, where everyone in the household is under the age of 25, experiencing homelessness within the BOS CoC regions 1,2, and 3 included in this project.
- There were **32 parenting youth** (18-24) across all NC BOS CoC regions.
- There was **1 parenting youth** (18-24) in the GLC CoC region.

¹HUD Homeless definitions and more information can be found here:

<https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/coc-esg-virtual-binders/coc-esg-homeless-eligibility/four-categories/category-1/>

² All point-in-time counts by CoC can be found here:

<https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>

³ Gaston-Lincoln-Cleveland CoC point-in-time data can be found here:

https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_CoC_NC-509-2024_NC_2024.pdf

BOS CoC point-in-time data can be seen here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1p3B5w46iCwdl8ginFZKN6ts33einqaej/edit?gid=2066891527#gid=2066891527>.

⁴ Asheville-Buncombe County point-in-time data can be found here:

https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_CoC_NC-501-2024_NC_2024.pdf

⁵ Northwest CoC point-in-time data can be found here:

https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_CoC_NC-516-2024_NC_2024.pdf

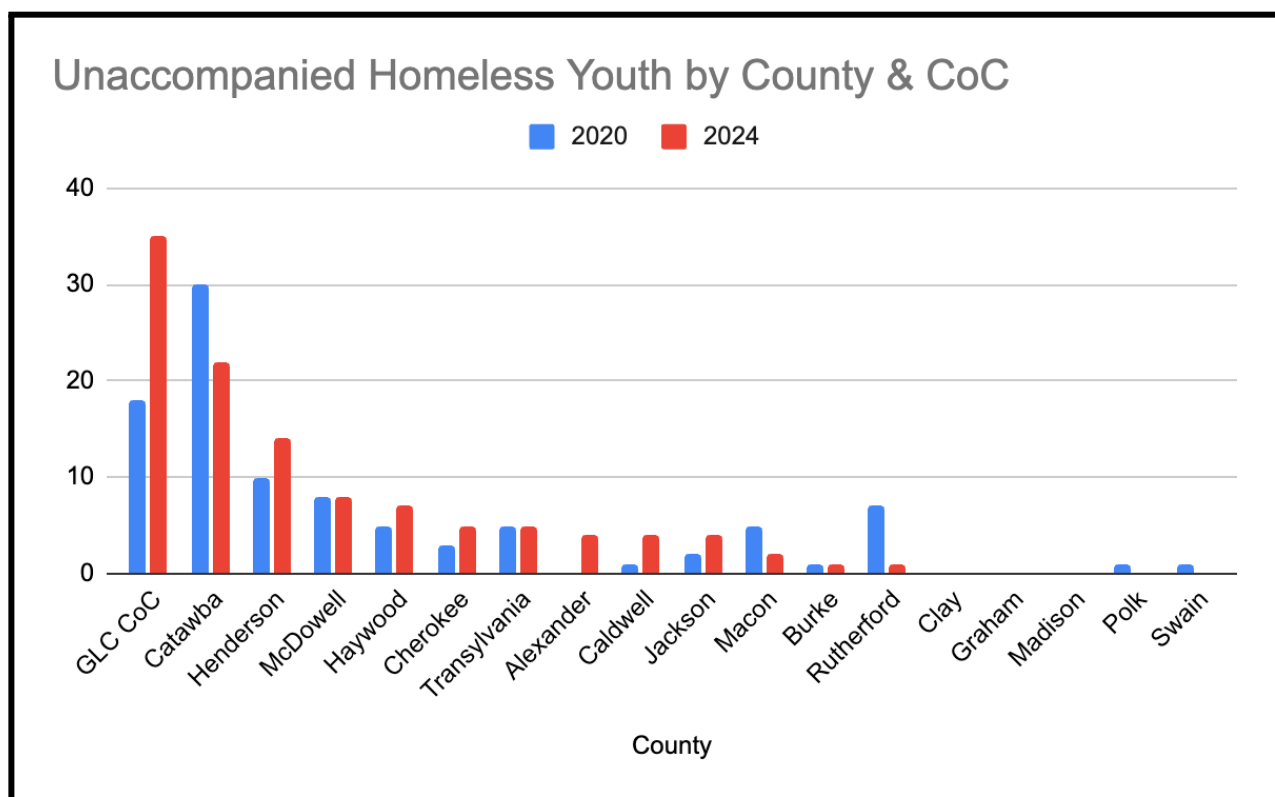


Figure 1

McKinney Vento

The McKinney Vento Act is a federal law that provides important educational rights and services to PreK-12 children and youth experiencing homelessness. Each school district must count the number of their students experiencing homelessness each year. McKinney Vento defines homelessness as: lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. Only 6 of the 20 counties had homeless data listed on their website: Alexander, Gaston, Jackson, Rutherford, Swain, and Transylvania. If McKinney Vento Homeless numbers were not available on county school district websites, we used data listed on

<https://eddataexpress.ed.gov/dashboard/homeless>.

During the 2023-2024 school year, North Carolina public schools reported 37,197 students enrolled in grades PK-12 as experiencing homelessness⁶. Across all 20 counties, the homeless student population ranged from 17 - 722 students per district. Rutherford (322), Henderson (348), Cleveland (388), McDowell (388), and Gaston (722) counties have the highest number of students experiencing homelessness. These numbers include all ages from PreK to 12th grade. We do not have a breakdown of ages, race, or gender. This can be requested by contacting individual school district McKinney Vento liaisons but this can be a time consuming process.

⁶ North Carolina McKinney Vento data is available here: <https://hepnc.uncg.edu/about/>

The North Carolina Homeless Education Program (NCHEP) lists the percentage of homeless identifications by North Carolina State Board of Education districts, or regions, on their website ([Figure 2](#)). 12 counties in this project are located in the Western region, 5 in the Northwest, and 3 in the Southwest. ([See Appendix C for full map of regions](#))

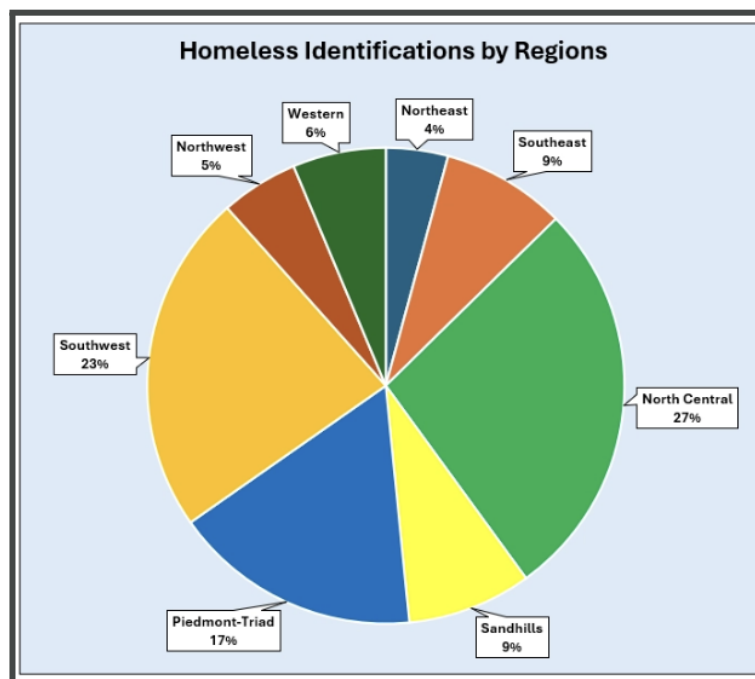


Figure 2

According to NCHEP approximately 71% of all students experiencing homelessness at the point of identification by the school's homeless liaison are "doubling up", meaning they are sharing housing with others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.⁷ ([Figure 3](#)) That means 71% of students counted in McKinney Vento as homeless in North Carolina would not be considered homeless by HUD's definition.

⁷ <https://hepnc.uncg.edu/about/>

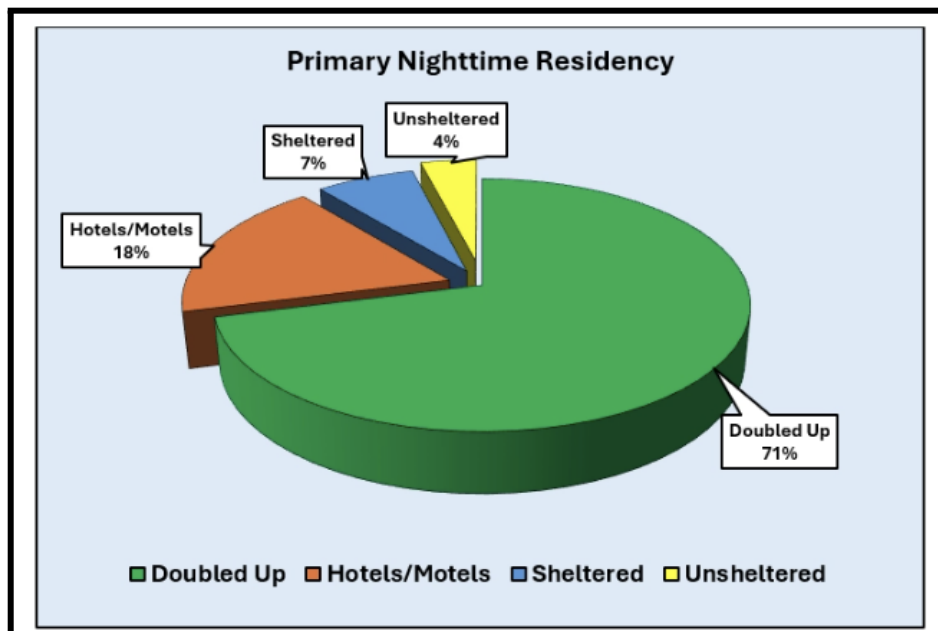


Figure 3

2024 HOUSING INVENTORY COUNT

The Housing Inventory Count (HIC) is a point-in-time inventory of housing programs dedicated to serving individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Conducted annually, the HIC provides critical data on the number and types of beds available within each Continuum of Care (CoC) and is used to assess housing capacity, identify gaps, and inform planning and funding decisions.⁸ The figures below reflect only those housing programs that participate in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

North Carolina Balance of State Continuum of Care (CoC)⁹

This data represents the full Balance of State CoC, which includes—but is not limited to—the 20 counties involved in this project:

- **34 youth beds** - Beds designated for unaccompanied young adults or youth-headed households between ages 18 and 24.
- **11 child-only beds** - Beds used by unaccompanied children under age 18, not part of a household with an adult or youth 18+
- **3,395 adult-only beds** - Beds designated for households without children, where all members are adults (age 18 or older).

⁸ All housing inventory count reports can be found here:

<https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-housing-inventory-count-reports/>

⁹ HUD 2024 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Housing Inventory Count Report NC-503:

https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_HIC_CoC_NC-503-2024_NC_2024.pdf

- **3,024 family beds** - Beds within units designed to serve families with children (at least one adult and one child under 18)

Gaston-Lincoln-Cleveland Continuum of Care (CoC)¹⁰

- 78 youth beds
- 56 child-only beds
- 164 adult-only beds
- 140 family beds

YOUTH ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL DATA

Opportunity Youth

Opportunity Youth are individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor force. This population is often at greater risk of long-term disconnection from economic and educational opportunities, making them a critical focus for intervention and support.¹¹

Statewide, 10.9% of youth fall into the category of Opportunity Youth. Across the 20 counties included in this project, rates range from 5.3% to 18.2%. Sixteen out of the 20 counties have rates that exceed the statewide average, indicating a significant regional challenge.

The counties with the highest proportions of Opportunity Youth include Burke, McDowell, Alexander, Caldwell, Polk, Rutherford, and Cleveland.¹²

Educational Performance

Graduation Rate Among Students:

The average graduation rate among the general student population across the 20 counties included in this project is 88.3%. In comparison, the average graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness is significantly lower, at 72.8%.

Graduation rates among homeless students vary widely across school districts, ranging from a low of 52.6% in Catawba County to a high of 90% in Burke County. This disparity highlights the additional challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness and underscores the need for targeted support and interventions.¹³ ([Figure 4](#))

¹⁰ HUD 2024 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Housing Inventory Count Report NC-509: https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_HIC_CoC_NC-509-2024_NC_2024.pdf

¹¹ More about Opportunity Youth in North Carolina here: <https://dashboard.myfuturenc.org/workforce-alignment/opportunity-youth/>

¹² County profiles with Opportunity Youth data can be found at <https://dashboard.myfuturenc.org/county-data-and-resources/>

¹³ Graduation rates and educational performance data by populations can be found here: <https://ncreports.ondemand.sas.com/src/district?district=020LEA&year=2024>

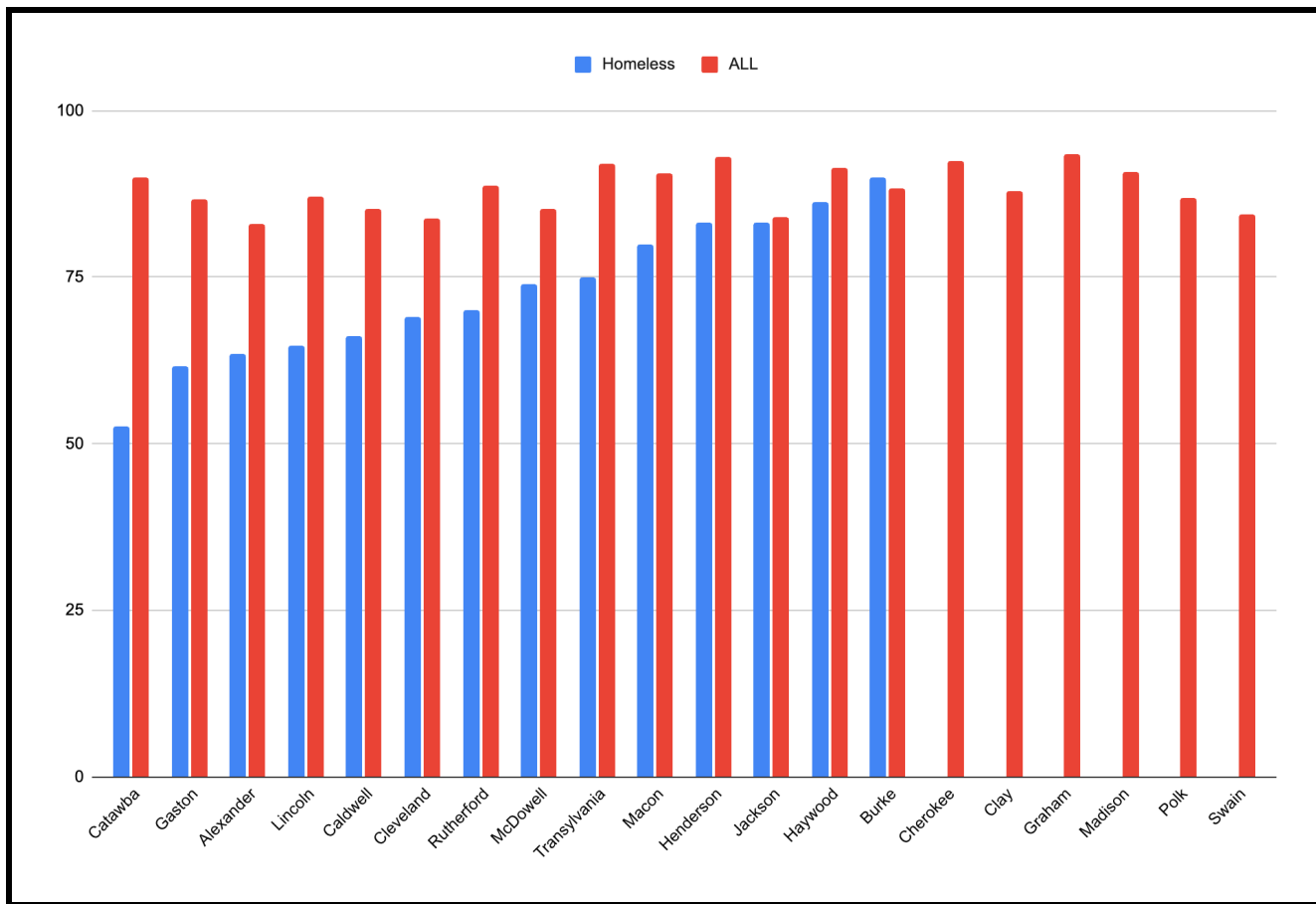


Figure 4

Reading Proficiency:

Students experiencing homelessness consistently perform below their housed peers on standardized reading assessments. On average, 69.1% of homeless students across the 20 counties are not proficient in reading, compared to 50.37% of the general student population—a gap of nearly 19 percentage points.¹⁴

The widest disparity is observed in Lincoln County, where 81.3% of students experiencing homelessness are not proficient in reading, compared to 46.1% of all students—a difference of 35.2 percentage points. [\(Figure 5\)](#)

In contrast, Gaston County presents an unusual trend. Here, students experiencing homelessness perform slightly better than the general student population, with 54.3% of homeless students not proficient compared to 56.5% of all students—resulting in a 2.2 percentage point advantage for the homeless student group.

¹⁴ End-of-Grade (EOG) English Language Arts/Reading assessments measure students' performance on the NC Standard Course of Study (NCSCS) for English Language Arts in grades 3–8.

% of Students Not Proficient in Reading:

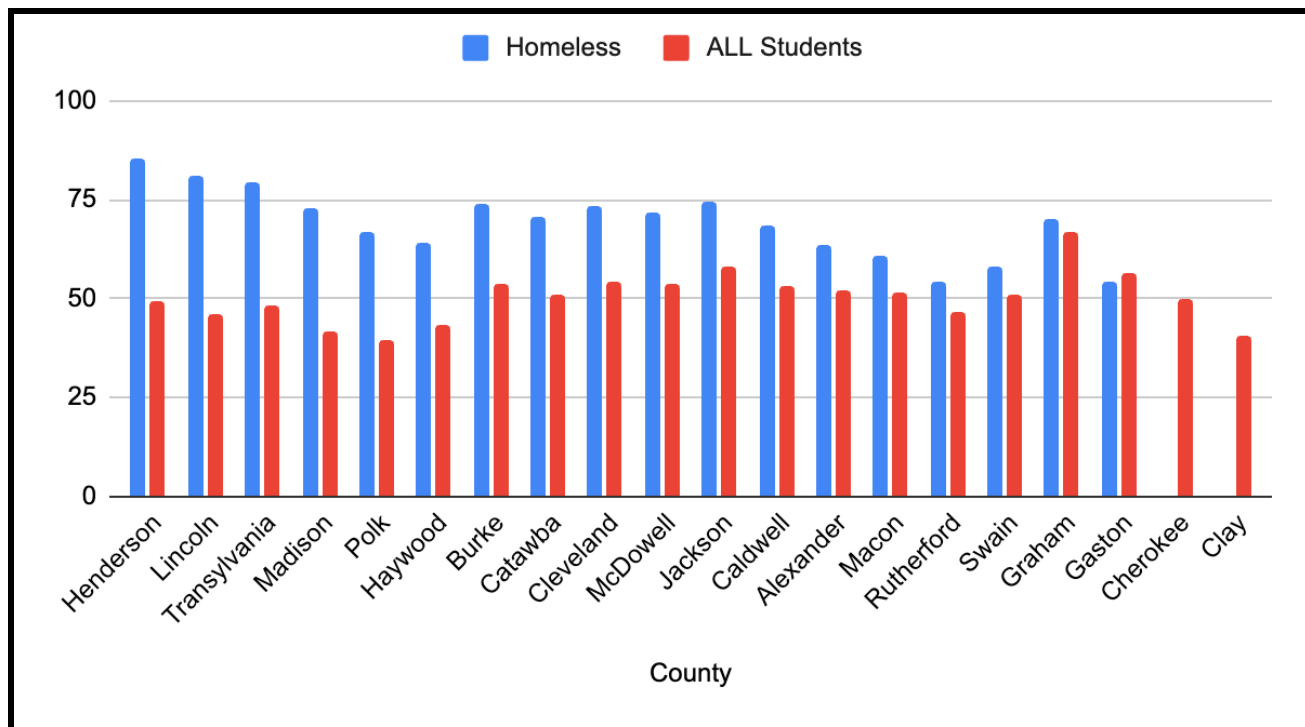


Figure 5

PREVALENCE OF YOUTH PROGRAMS AND SPACES

Initial research indicates a lack of consistent programs and community spaces for youth and young adults across Western North Carolina. A review of offerings from public libraries and parks and recreation departments shows an emphasis on programming for children under 12 and older adults, with fewer opportunities for teenagers. All 20 counties had programs for children under 12, but six counties had no listed programs for youth ages 13–18. Where youth programming was available through libraries, it typically consisted of card game clubs, Dungeons & Dragons, and book clubs. Parks and recreation departments showed a similar trend—four counties had no teen programs, while others offered opportunities for teens to join sports leagues such as basketball, football, cheerleading, and soccer.

Other Youth-Oriented Programs:

- **4-H Programs¹⁵:** All 20 counties offer 4-H, a nationwide youth development program for ages 5–18 that provides hands-on learning in areas such as agriculture, science, citizenship, and leadership.
- **LGBTQ+ Youth Support:** Only five LGBTQ+ organizations were located that explicitly serve youth or include youth in programming: Blue Ridge Pride, Sylva Pride, OUTright Youth, Cornbread and Roses, and LGBT Burke.
- **Youth Councils and Boards:** Six counties have youth councils or boards through local government or systemic partnerships (e.g., United Way) that give youth a platform to provide feedback and shape community decisions: Valdese Youth Council in Burke County, Youth Council United Way of Catawba County, Teen Action Council in Gaston County, Mayor’s Youth Leadership Council in Gastonia, Henderson County Youth Council, Student Advisory Council in Lincolnton, and Transylvania Youth Council.
- **Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils¹⁶:** All counties have a JCPC, though none publicly indicate youth participation in their operations.
- **Workforce Development¹⁷:** Every county falls under the umbrella of a regional Workforce Development Board and offers youth programming through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which supports career readiness and employment pathways for young people. However, workforce development programs by county or city are difficult to find. It appears that there are few programs covering a wide geographic range.

COMMUNITY HEALTH ASSESSMENTS AND YOUTH-SPECIFIC DATA

Community Health Assessments (CHAs) are systematic processes used by local health departments to collect and analyze data on the health status, needs, and priorities of a community. These assessments inform public health planning, guide resource allocation, and support the development of strategies to improve health outcomes. They are critical tools for identifying disparities and ensuring that health interventions are responsive to local needs. Each county identifies three key focus areas they aim to prioritize and address in their assessments.

Of the 20 counties reviewed, only three—Cleveland, Gaston, and Transylvania—explicitly mention youth-specific concerns in their CHAs. (*[See Appendix D for all Community Health Assessments by county](#)*)

- **Transylvania County** highlights the growing mental health crisis among youth. The county notes that nearly 5,000 school-aged children live in the area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) and emphasizes national trends showing worsening youth mental health, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Citing the U.S. Surgeon General’s 2021 Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health, the report acknowledges that vulnerable youth populations—such as LGBTQ+ youth, those from low-income or immigrant

¹⁵ More about 4H youth programs in North Carolina can be found here: <https://nc4h.ces.ncsu.edu/>

¹⁶ More about Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils here: <https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/juvenile-justice/community-programs/juvenile-crime-prevention-councils>

¹⁷ Full list of NC Works NextGen Programs can be found here: <https://nccareers.org/ncworks-nextgen-program>

households, and youth involved with juvenile justice or child welfare systems—are at greater risk of mental health challenges.

- **Gaston County** also emphasizes youth mental health. According to the county’s assessment, female and LGBTQ+ students report significantly higher rates of poor mental health. In 2019, 35.1% of Gaston County high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for at least two weeks, and 18% reported seriously considering suicide. The data show elevated rates among white students and especially among LGBTQ+ youth, who were more than twice as likely to report suicidal ideation compared to their heterosexual peers.
- **Cleveland County** focuses on teen pregnancy, noting a decrease in teen births over the past decade. However, the issue remains a priority due to its link to other health outcomes such as infant mortality, low birth weight, and pre-term births. The county emphasizes the need for continued investment in comprehensive reproductive health education.

Additionally, two counties—Macon and Henderson—identify safe and affordable housing as a top health priority in their assessments.

Five counties—Transylvania, Henderson, Haywood, Gaston, and Catawba—reference Point-In-Time (PIT) count data, indicating an awareness of homelessness as a public health concern, though most do not elaborate on youth-specific housing issues.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL TAKEAWAYS

In conducting this regional needs assessment, our goal was to better understand the extent of youth homelessness and housing insecurity by analyzing secondary data from a variety of public sources. While data on homelessness and related indicators does exist, we found that youth-specific reporting is often limited or inconsistently shared across systems. Definitions of homelessness vary—particularly between HUD and McKinney-Vento—and many communities do not disaggregate data by age in a way that clearly identifies the experiences of youth and young adults. As a result, young people experiencing housing instability are frequently undercounted or overlooked.

This lack of clear, youth-centered reporting makes it difficult to fully grasp the scale and nature of the issue. How communities choose to collect, report, and share data not only influences public understanding but also affects how priorities are set and resources are allocated. When youth are not visible in the data, their needs risk being deprioritized in planning, funding, and service delivery. Addressing youth homelessness effectively will require not only expanded services and housing options, but also greater transparency and consistency in how youth-specific data is captured and communicated.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

This was calculated by adding [GLC CoC](#) "persons in household without children: age 18-24" (32) PLUS GLC CoC "persons in households with at least one adult and one child: age 18-24" (12) PLUS remaining counties in [BOS](#) "Families with Children Experiencing Homelessness: adults 18-24" (23) PLUS "Adults without children experiencing homelessness: adults 18-24" (68)

$$32+12+23+68=135$$

Appendix B

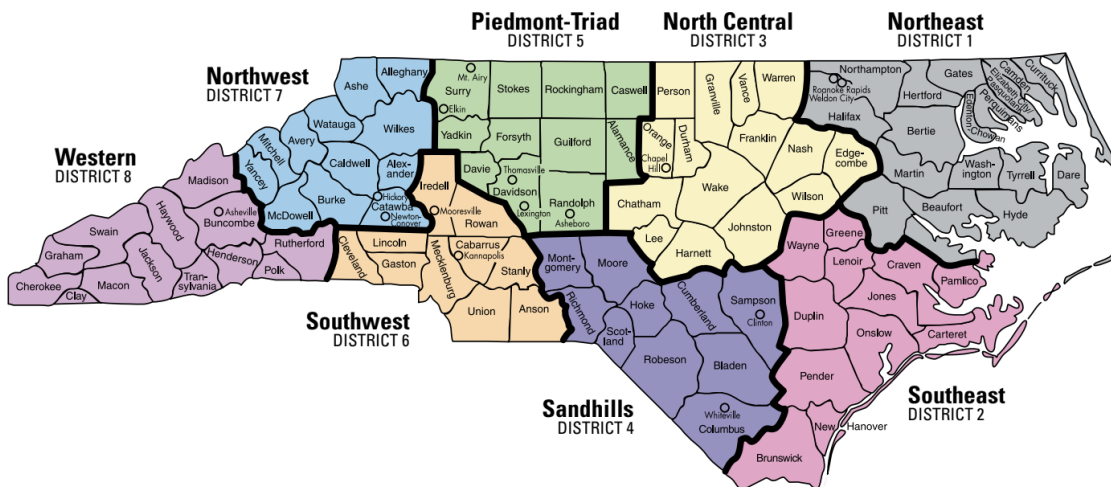
This was calculated by adding [GLC CoC](#) "persons in household with at least one adult and one child: Children under age 18" (73)

PLUS GLC CoC "unaccompanied youth under age 18" (10) PLUS remaining counties in [BOS](#) "Families with Children Experiencing Homelessness: children 17 & under" (148) PLUS "Children without Guardians Experiencing Homelessness" (7)

$$73+10+148+7=238$$

Appendix C

North Carolina State Board of Education Districts



Appendix D

List of community health assessments by county:

Alexander: <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/cha2022/2022-Alexander-CHA.pdf>

Burke: <https://www.uncbr.org/docs/2022-Community-Health-Assessment.pdf>

Caldwell:

<https://www.caldwellmemorial.org/app/files/public/82c33354-6959-4583-815e-a22cf84d0864/UNC%20Health%20Caldwell%20CHNA2023.pdf>

Catawba: https://catawbacountync.gov/site/assets/files/2488/catawba_2023_cha_final3.pdf

Cherokee: <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/cha2021/CherokeeCounty-2021-CHA-Final.pdf>

Clay: https://health.claync.us/files/ugd/fe4bcd_1c793247ff67452e995c6cfe539cd65a.pdf

Cleveland: <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/cha2023/Cleveland-2023-CHA.pdf>

Graham: <https://health.grahamcounty.org/DocumentCenter/View/898/-2021-Graham-County-CHA-?bidId=>

Gaston:

<https://www.gastongov.com/DocumentCenter/View/3394/2021-Gaston-County-Community-Health-Assessment-PDF?bidId=>

Haywood: <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/cha2021/Haywood2021-CHA.pdf>

Henderson:

https://www.hendersoncountync.gov/sites/default/files/fileattachments/health/page/37177/henderson_county_2021_cha_revised.26.22_0.pdf

Lincoln: <https://www.lincolncountync.gov/DocumentCenter/View/21722/Lincoln-County-2022-CHA?bidId=>

Macon:

<https://maconnc.org/images/healthy-carolinians/Macon%20County%202021%20CHA%20Final%20June%2017%202022.pdf>

Jackson: <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/cha2021/Jackson2021-CHA.PDF>

Madison:

https://www.madisoncountyhealth.org/uploads/5/9/7/0/59701963/madison_county_2021_community_health_assessment.pdf

McDowell: <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/cha2021/McDowell2021-CHA.pdf>

Polk:

https://cms4files1.revize.com/polkcounty/departments/consolidated_human_services/public_health/docs/20220317_PolkCounty2021CHAFinal3.pdf

Rutherford: <https://www.foothillshd.org/images/forms/1000/1120/cha/2021/FH1120.001.2021-R.pdf>

Swain: <https://www.swaincountync.gov/download/2021-swain-community-health-assessment/#>

Transylvania: <https://transylvaniahealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2021-Transylvania-County-CHA.pdf>

