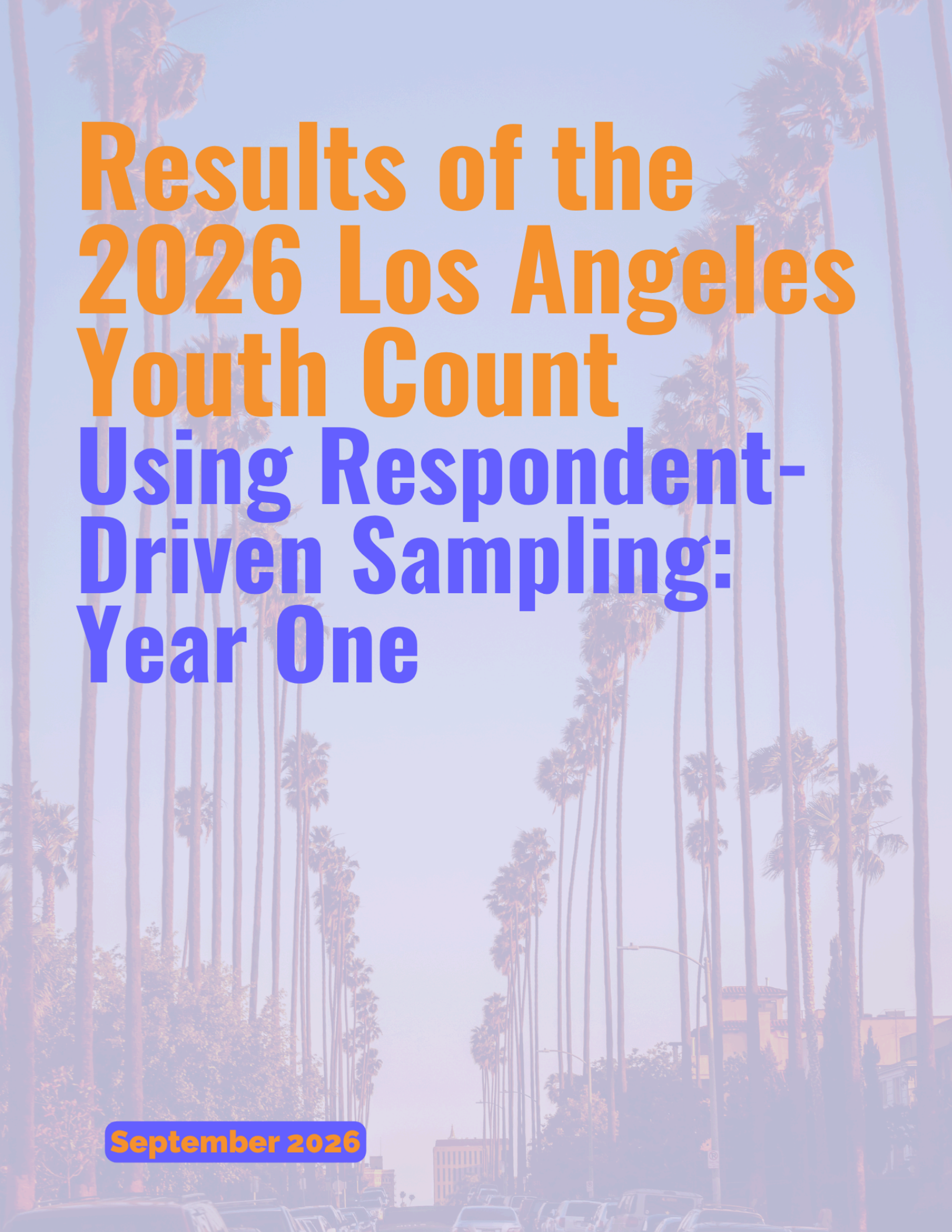


The background of the entire page is a photograph of a Los Angeles street, likely Santa Monica Boulevard, characterized by a dense line of tall palm trees on the right side and cars parked along the curb. The image has a soft, slightly hazy quality.

Results of the 2026 Los Angeles Youth Count Using Respondent- Driven Sampling: Year One

September 2026

RESULTS OF THE 2026 LOS ANGELES YOUTH COUNT

Using Respondent-Driven Sampling: Year One

A collaborative effort by Young People to the Front (YP2F) and the University of Southern California (USC), with methodological guidance from the University of Washington (UW) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and support from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

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OVERVIEW

For the first time, the 2026 Los Angeles Youth Count used Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) to estimate how many young people under 25 are experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (LA CoC). The result: an estimated 1,875 (+/- 194) young people are sleeping unsheltered on a given night in the LA CoC, with roughly 74% residing within the City of Los Angeles. These include young people living on their own and in youth-headed family households with minor children that are sleeping on the street, in a vehicle, tent or makeshift shelter, or anywhere else not meant for human habitation.

The Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count—the region's annual Point-in-Time (PIT) Count—shapes federal funding, local policy, and how resources move across the eight Service Planning Areas (SPAs) that make up the LA CoC. Young people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are more likely to be missed by traditional counting methods, rendering their needs invisible to the people who fund and design homeless services.

Since 2016, the Youth Count, a component of the Greater Los Angeles Homelessness Count, relied on geographic canvassing to estimate the unsheltered youth population, with providers and volunteers walking sampled census tracts to approach any young person who appeared to be unsheltered. In recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, that approach grew unsustainable. Providers spent entire shifts finding few to no youth, encampment sweeps made fixed routes unreliable, youth organizations were stretched thin, and cold-approach methods increasingly felt unsafe for the young people we were trying to reach amid heightened enforcement activities and eroding public trust.

In response, the 2026 Youth Count changed course, moving to an RDS approach. RDS is a network-based method built to reach hidden, hard-to-count populations. The method starts with a small set of "seed" participants who complete a survey and refer unsheltered peers in their networks who refer their own peers, and so on. Because these referrals come from peers rather than strangers, the chains reach young people geographic canvassing would miss entirely: those staying out of sight, who are highly mobile, or wary of unfamiliar faces. Instead of volunteers going out to search neighborhoods, all surveying took place at trusted hub sites located across the LA CoC. It's the same model King County, Washington has used for its Homeless Count since 2022, and we brought in the researcher who implemented it, University of Washington Professor Dr. Zack Almquist, to guide our design and lead the analysis.¹ The 2026 Youth Count ran at 17 hub sites across all eight SPAs over a roughly three-week period from January 13 to 31, 2026.

The estimate of unsheltered youth was higher in 2026 than in 2025, at 1,875 (± 194) compared with 1,342 (± 421), though the ranges around the two estimates overlap and the difference is not statistically significant. While any year-over-year comparison with previous Youth Counts should be made with caution given the substantial change in methodology, the team anticipated a higher number. The shift to RDS was made precisely because earlier counts were believed to be missing young people not visible to traditional street-based counting methods. Thus, the increase is most consistent with improved coverage of the population than with a sudden rise in the number of youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness with the CoC on any given night.

¹ Almquist, Zack W., et al. "Innovating a community-driven enumeration and needs assessment of people experiencing homelessness: A network sampling approach for the HUD-mandated point-in-time count." *American Journal of Epidemiology* 194.6 (2025): 1524-1533.

The hub site model also appears to have produced benefits beyond the final estimate itself. Because surveying took place inside service organizations rather than on the street, young people who came to a hub site could get a meal, talk with a case manager, or access clothing and mutual aid closets while they waited. Providers reported that some of those who arrived through a peer referral had never been to their organization before and completed new intakes, which suggests the count may have functioned as a point of outreach and service connection alongside a data collection mechanism. Provider leads' own assessment of the method shifted as well. Many had been calling for a change for years, yet communicated an initial skepticism about a shift this substantial; however, they came away from the experience praising the approach and endorsing it for future years. Even so, the transition yielded valuable lessons, and YP2F, USC, and UW have identified key areas to refine the approach for the 2027 Youth Count, confident in the foundation established in 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, communities across the country conduct a Point-in-Time (PIT) Count to measure the scope of homelessness. Required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the count shapes federal funding decisions, local policy, and how resources get distributed across the eight Service Planning Areas (SPAs) that make up the Greater Los Angeles Continuum of Care (LA CoC).

For young people experiencing homelessness, accurate data are especially important. Young people often stay hidden from traditional counting methods. When they are undercounted, their needs become invisible to policymakers and funders, which directly impacts services and the broader effort to end and prevent youth homelessness.

Since 2016,² the Greater Los Angeles Youth Count has been the coordinated effort within the overall LA CoC PIT Count that estimates the number of people under 25, including unaccompanied minors, who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness.³ For years, the methodology relied on a geographic canvassing approach that mirrored elements of the broader strategies used to conduct the PIT Count of unsheltered adults. This involved youth service providers and volunteers canvassing sampled census tracts (either by car or on foot) across LA County⁴ during the last 10 days of January, identifying, and approaching any young people who appeared to be unsheltered. Youth encountered in the field were invited to take a brief survey, and that data was used to produce an estimate.

In recent years, particularly post-pandemic, it became clear that a geographic approach was growing harder to sustain, and there were real questions about whether it was producing the best possible estimate. Providers reported spending entire shifts finding few to no youth in their assigned geographic area. Encampment sweeps and other displacement projects made fixed census-tract routes unreliable. Youth organizations, who the Youth Count relies on for data collection and are uncompensated for their efforts, were increasingly overburdened, with many reporting difficulty completing responsibilities while maintaining regular services at

² The University of Southern California assumed the methodological lead in 2016, so the timeline in this report for the Youth Count begins there.

³ Unsheltered homelessness is defined per HUD guidelines as individuals and families whose primary nighttime residence is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used for human habitation.

⁴ The Adult PIT count relies on over 8,000 volunteers to canvass every square mile of the LA CoC, covering approximately 4,000 square miles and 2,310 census tracts. Given the smaller scale of youth homelessness, previous unsheltered youth estimation methods included canvassing a sample of all census tracts, usually resulting in a sample of roughly 400-500 tracts. The sampling approach is critical to the estimation process and detailed thoroughly in the methodology reports from previous years, which can be found on LAHSA's website.

their organizations. Competing priorities within the youth homelessness system were taking a real toll. And notably, the change in federal administration, followed by ongoing United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) enforcement activity, created a social and political environment that eroded public trust and raised legitimate safety concerns, directly undermining the cold-approach methods that had been central to prior counts.

After the 2025 Youth Count, it was clear that the existing approach was not only straining provider capacity but also leaving data gaps that were at risk of widening. The shift that followed is grounded in years of provider and community advocacy calling for a more accurate and less burdensome way to estimate the size and characteristics of the unsheltered youth population in the LA CoC. For 2026, the Youth Count adopted an RDS methodology, a peer referral approach described in more detail in the following section.

2026 YOUTH COUNT: A FOUNDATIONAL YEAR FOR A METHODOLOGY SHIFT

The 2026 Los Angeles Youth Count represents an intentional shift in methodology, with development and adaptation efforts beginning in August 2025. While comprehensive technical details are documented within the 2026 LA CoC Homeless Count Methodology Report developed by USC,⁵ which includes the Youth Count Protocol and Youth Count Hub Site Operations Manual as appendices, an overview of the protocol and meaningful changes are highlighted below.

The Shift to Respondent Driven Sampling: A Social Network Approach

RDS is a network-based method specifically designed to reach hidden or hard-to-count populations. For the Youth Count specifically, this involved inviting young people to participate through existing peer networks. The process began with seed participants, young people experiencing homelessness who were identified and recruited primarily through direct outreach from youth service site providers and outreach workers rather than through a referral. After completing a survey at select hub sites, each seed participant received three referral coupons to share with peers in their social network who were also experiencing homelessness. Those peers then came to a hub site, completed a survey, and received three referral coupons to pass along. Each successive wave of referrals is intended to reach deeper into youth networks. Together, a seed participant and all of the participants recruited through that seed across every wave make up one recruitment chain. Under an RDS approach, longer recruitment chains indicate that referrals traveled well beyond the initial young people recruited as seed participants (and were already connected to services). In turn, longer recruitment chains may reflect larger underlying peer networks, which can produce a population size estimate that is larger relative to the number of people actually surveyed.

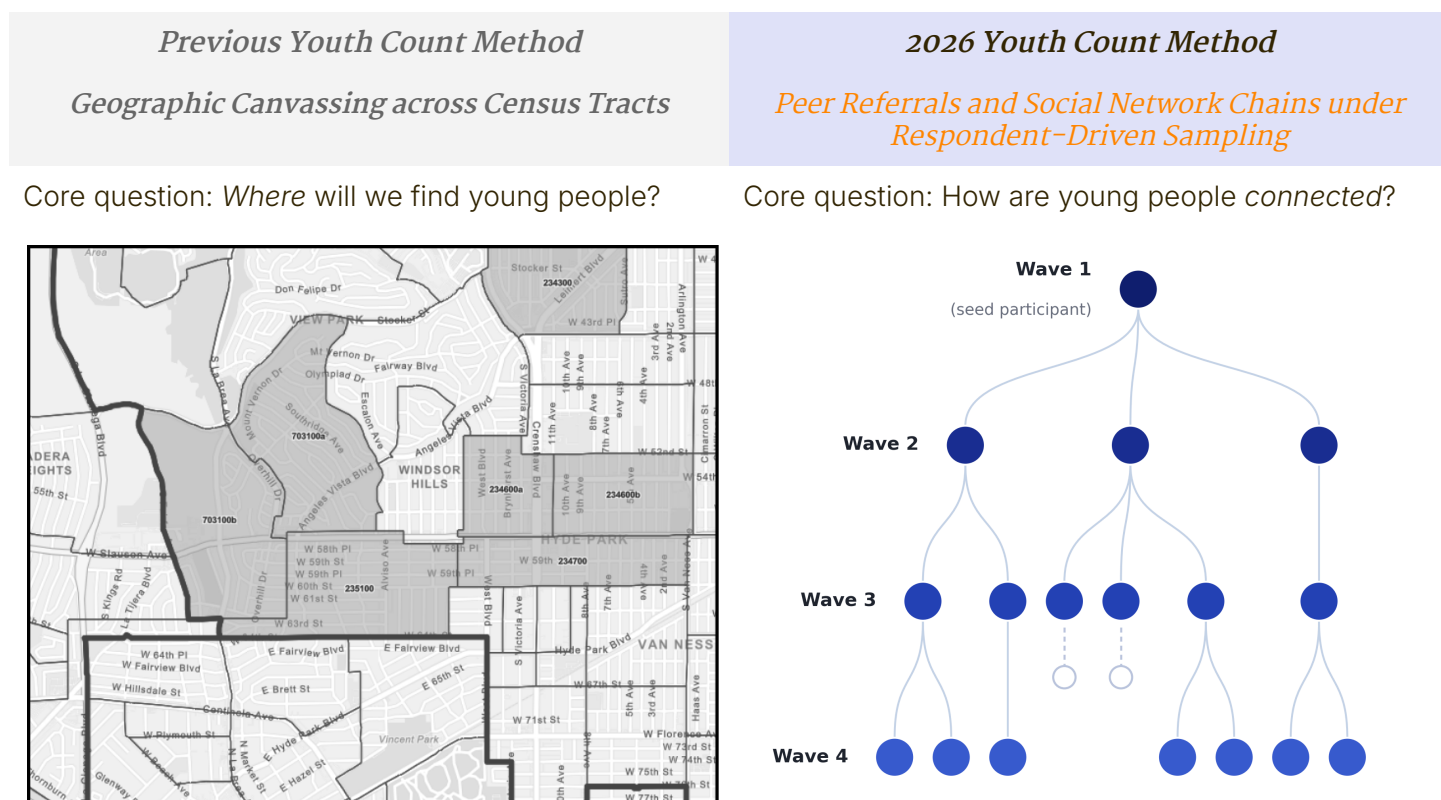
While RDS is not new as a population estimation technique, its application to point-in-time estimates of people experiencing homelessness is a relatively recent but increasingly tested approach. King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA), in King County, Washington, implemented RDS to estimate their unsheltered population beginning in 2022, under HUD guidance and in partnership with a data team from the University of Washington led by Dr. Zack Almquist (Professor, Department of Sociology). That methodology was used as the blueprint for our adaptation, with Dr. Almquist serving as a consulting partner throughout,

⁵ The 2026 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count Methodology Report can be found at: <https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=10152-2026-usc-homeless-count-methodology-report>

from methods development and implementation to statistical analysis. The KCRHA team also provided critical support and resources along the way.

This methodological shift had several key components that distinguish it from previous years. Most fundamentally, it moved the basis of estimation from geographic coverage to social connection. Where previous Youth Count efforts asked “Where can we find unsheltered young people?”, the 2026 Youth Count asked “How are unsheltered youth connected to each other?”

Figure 1. Visual comparison of previous geographic canvassing-based Youth Count method to 2026 RDS Youth Count method.



Building the Hub Site Model

Rather than sending volunteers out to canvass neighborhoods, all surveys were conducted at designated hub sites. These were primarily youth-serving organizations where youth experiencing homelessness could come to redeem their coupon, take a survey, and receive their referral coupons to share with peers. The 2026 Youth Count included 17 hub sites distributed across all eight SPAs with surveying happening almost every day of the week during the data collection period from January 13-31, 2026,⁶ including select weekday evening hours. Hub sites were selected to achieve broad distribution across the CoC, with the goal of ensuring that any young person experiencing homelessness had a site they could reasonably reach. Sites were prioritized to be youth service providers that young people experiencing homelessness were already familiar with and visiting, and most had participated in previous years’ Youth Counts.

⁶ The LA CoC received approval from HUD to conduct the 2026 Youth Count using RDS over an approximate three-week period from January 13-31, 2026 rather than occurring during the last 10 calendar days of January as typically required by HUD for point-in-time counts.

Several considerations shaped which organizations were ultimately designated as hub sites. Some sites were added in parts of the county where youth-specific services were not otherwise available, including Palmdale in SPA 1 and Pomona in SPA 3, but where we had reason to believe unsheltered youth were living, so that young people in those areas would still have a site within reach. We also considered where a site was located within its SPA. SPA-level estimates rest on the assumption that the young people who come to a hub site live in the same SPA as that site, and a location near a SPA boundary weakens that assumption. In some cases this led us to select a more centrally located organization within the SPA over one that had participated in previous years but sat closer to the boundary. Finally, we considered the distance between sites. Where two candidate sites were close to one another, we selected only one. This allowed staffing and materials to be concentrated in a single location rather than divided across both. Selecting sites that are farther apart may also reduce the chance that a young person completes the survey at more than one location, leading to double-counting. While analytic methods are applied to identify and remove duplicate responses, limiting the opportunity for duplication at the outset is preferable.

Transportation was pre-identified as a key barrier to this methodological shift. Transportation is a challenge for all residents of LA, but is especially challenging for young people experiencing homelessness. In previous years, survey teams met young people where they were in the field. With RDS, the burden is placed on young people to travel to a designated hub site during specific hours to complete a survey. Therefore, every seed coupon included a Metro card loaded with enough value for roundtrip fare, and every participant received an Uber discount voucher providing up to \$15 each way (or \$30 round-trip), with redemption instructions printed on all referral coupons. Additionally, each hub site was provided access to an Uber account so that staff could arrange rides directly for young people whose needs exceeded the standard discount.

Data were collected within the survey to understand the potential burden of traveling to hub sites. On average, Youth Count participants reported spending 60 minutes traveling to a hub site. Eight in 10 youth (80%) reported traveling 10 miles or less, with 10% traveling less than 1 mile, 37% traveling 1 to 5 miles, and 33% traveling 6 to 10 miles. Public transit was the most common way young people reached a hub site, with 48% arriving by bus or train; 28% reported traveling by transit on their own fare and 20% reported using the provided Metro card. A quarter of young people walked, and 23% arrived by vehicle.⁷ Despite providing access to an Uber discount voucher, only 1% of youth reported using Uber for their transportation to a hub site with the provided voucher.

Figure 2. Travel time, distance traveled, and mode of transportation to hub sites among 2026 Youth Count participants.

17 total hub sites across the LA CoC

60 mins

Average length of time to get to hub site

37%

Traveled between 1-5 miles to get there

20%

Took public transportation using a provided Metro card

⁷ This does not include the use of rideshare services (e.g., Uber, Lyft). Only 2% reported using a rideshare service to travel to a hub site to participate in the Youth Count (1% using the provided Uber discount voucher and 1% who did not use any discount voucher).

Figure 3. Location of 2026 Youth Count hub sites across the eight Service Planning Areas.

SPA 1 Antelope Valley

- 1 Penny Lane Centers TAY (Lancaster)
- 2 Valley Oasis Thrift Store (Palmdale)

SPA 2 San Fernando Valley

- 3 The Village Family Services (North Hollywood)
- 4 Volunteers of America TAY Access Center (Pacoima)

SPA 3 San Gabriel Valley

- 5 Pacific Clinics HOPE Drop-In Center (Irwindale)
- 6 Hillside's Youth Moving On (Pasadena)
- 7 God's Pantry (Pomona)

SPA 4 Metro

- 8 My Friend's Place (Hollywood)
- 9 LA LGBT Center (Hollywood)
- 10 Young People to the Front (East Hollywood)

SPA 5 West

- 11 Safe Place for Youth (Venice)

SPA 6 South

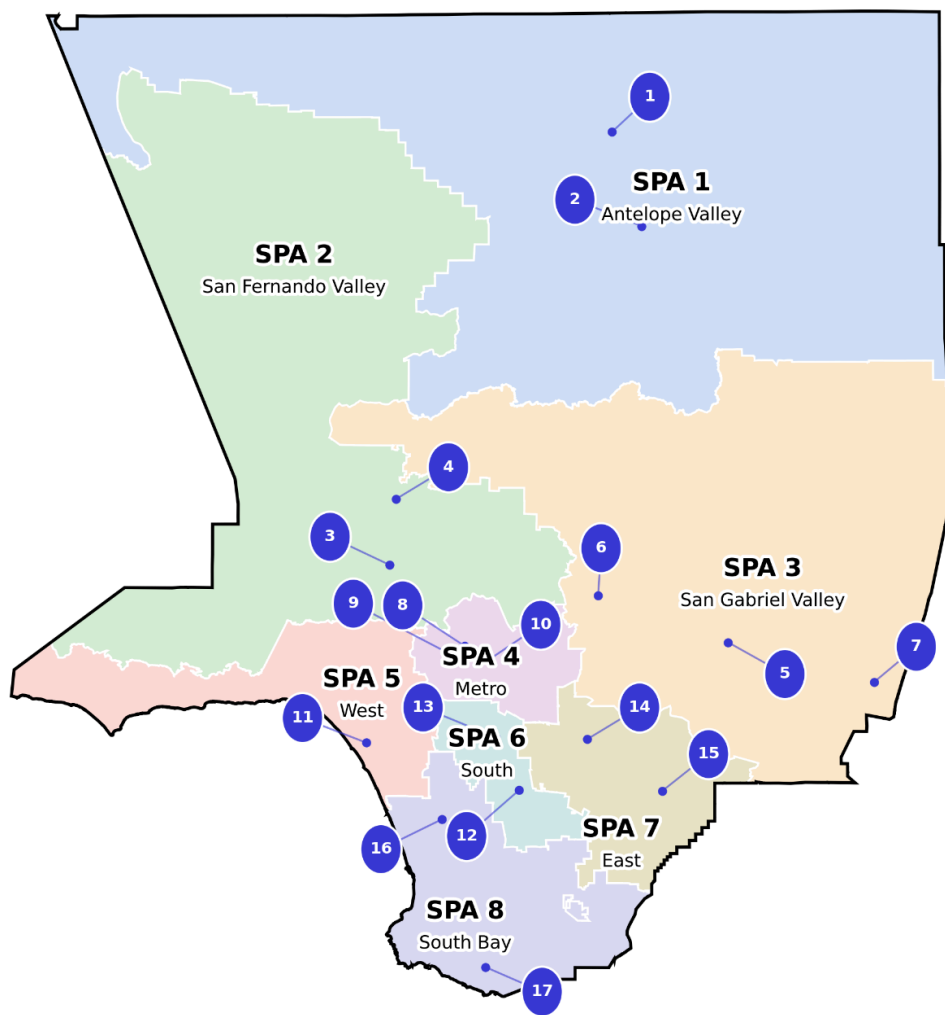
- 12 Watts Labor Community Action Committee (Watts)
- 13 Ruth's Place (South LA)

SPA 7 East

- 14 Penny Lane Centers TAY (Commerce)
- 15 Jovenes Access Center (Whittier)

SPA 8 South Bay

- 16 Sanctuary of Hope (Hawthorne)
- 17 Harbor Interfaith (San Pedro)



Moving from reliance on geographic hotspots to social network seeds

Under the previous methodology, data collection relied on a stratified random sample of all census tracts making up the LA CoC. This approach relied heavily on the identification of geographic hotspots, places where youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness were likely to be located. These hotspots were identified using a combination of historical data and yearly input from providers and outreach workers. However, hotspot data carried several limitations. It required data to be gathered in October, months before the Youth Count began. While a re-confirmation effort was conducted during the first week of January, youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness are highly mobile, and hotspot locations could change quickly following sanitation and law enforcement activity (e.g., encampment sweeps) or other forms of displacement. Providers and young people also reported anecdotally that unsheltered youth hotspots became harder to identify in the years following the COVID-19 lockdowns. As a result, the census tracts sampled for each Youth Count may have been drawn using data that no longer reflected where unsheltered youth were actually staying.

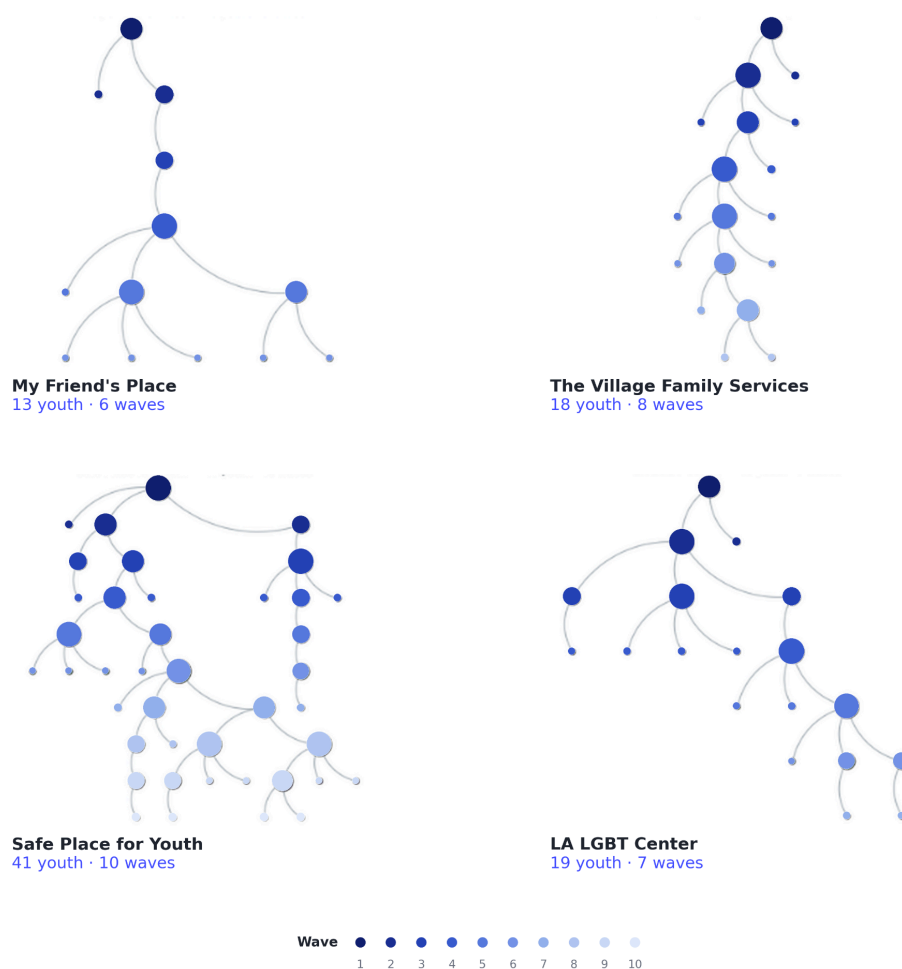
Rather than relying on providers to identify places where young people might be found and outreach workers to actually find those young people, RDS relies on the young people themselves to locate one another. Participants identify peers in their own networks who are also experiencing homelessness, which shifts them from being solely subjects of the research to active contributors to how the sample is built. Participants were compensated both for completing a survey themselves and for the successful referral of peers resulting in a completed survey. Each participant received \$20 for completing the survey, or \$40 if they were part of a family household with minor children, and could earn up to an additional \$15 for successful referrals (\$5 per referral coupon). This structure was designed to encourage young people to pass coupons along and to encourage their peers to redeem them, since the chain of redeemed coupons is what allows the social network to be constructed and is the basis of the estimation process.

Figure 4. Overview of 2026 Youth Count coupon distribution and redemption.



Seed participants were recruited through outreach workers, peer navigators, community college coordinators, and walk-up enrollment at hub sites during the first few days of data collection.⁸ Seed participant diversity was a communicated priority. Because participants in network-based samples tend to recruit peers who are similar to themselves, starting with a diverse set of seed participants produces more varied chains and a sample that better reflects the underlying population. In total, 193 seed coupons were redeemed throughout the data collection period. Further, over 1,100 (n=1,116) referral coupons were provided to participants and 236 unique referral coupons were redeemed. The average recruitment chain length was 1.5 and the longest chain including only eligible respondents reached 9 waves; the longest recruitment chain among all Youth Count participants (regardless of eligibility based on age or housing status) reached 10 waves. As a reminder, in RDS, longer chains may suggest larger networks of youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness and, thus, a larger population size estimate relative to the number of people actually surveyed.

Figure 5. Longest recruitment chains observed among all 2026 Youth Count participants at four hub sites.



⁸ A known limitation of RDS is that those who are socially disconnected from peers may be harder to reach. To help address this, seed participants were recruited from a wide range of backgrounds and locations, increasing the likelihood of reaching youth with smaller or no social connection with other unhoused peers.

Less strain and disruption on service provider organizations and staff

Because the hub site model removed the need to go out into the field, almost all of the effort asked of service providers took place at their own organizations alongside services already underway. Under the geographic-based approach, provider staff had to leave their organizations and travel during working hours, leaving agencies understaffed or dependent on volunteers. The hub site model asked more of service providers up front, with more intensive training and a heavier technology setup than in previous years, but once those were in place, Youth Count operations were able to be well integrated into daily operations. Surveying was ongoing, and when no youth were waiting to be surveyed, staff were able to easily return to their regular responsibilities. In total, 87 service provider staff and volunteers were trained to administer surveys, although only 55 went on to administer at least one survey during the data collection period. On average, 25 surveys were completed per hub site (range: 1 to 97) and 8 per surveyor (range: 1 to 55), with an average survey length of 18 minutes (range: 4 to 37).

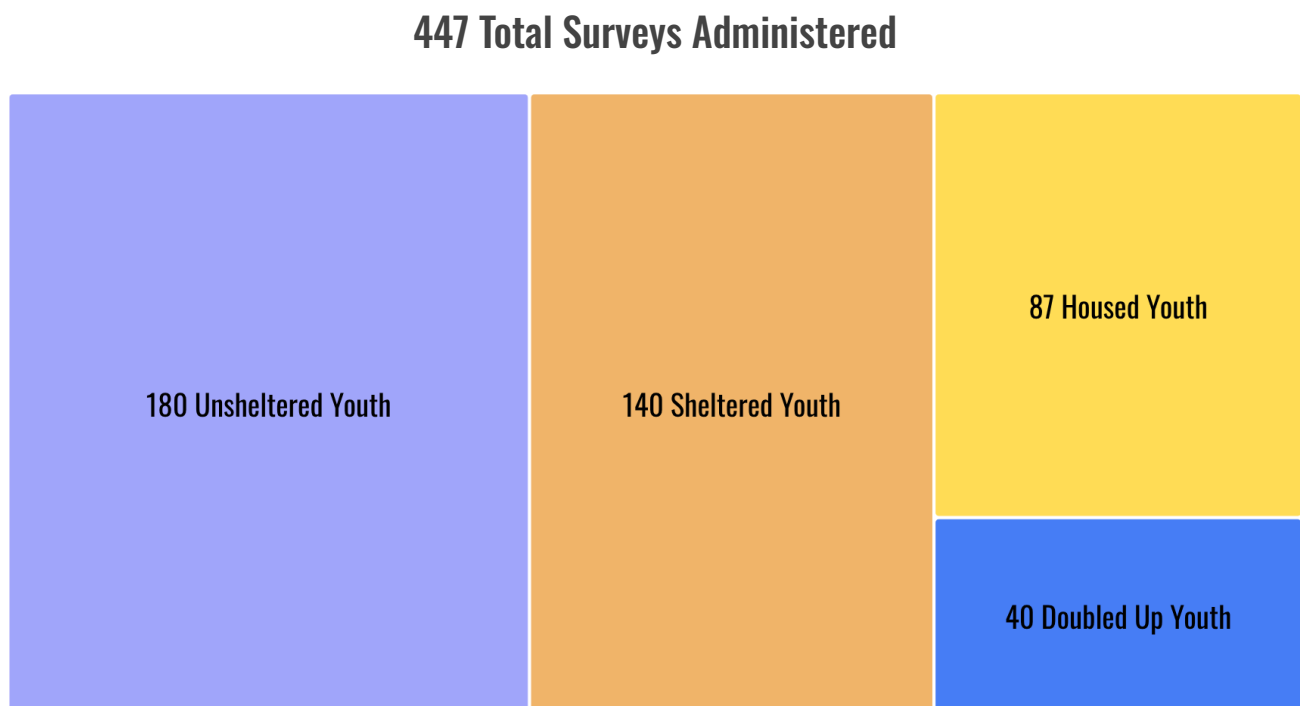
The model also changed how that effort was distributed across the CoC. Canvassing workload had been distributed relatively evenly across SPAs, with each provider site assigned a similar number of square miles to cover regardless of how many young people were expected to be found there. Under the hub site model, effort tracked expected survey volume more closely. SPAs that serve fewer young people, have lower staffing capacity, and/or historically complete fewer surveys experienced less disruption to daily services, while higher-volume sites benefitted from concentrating work within a single location. Surveyor feedback collected immediately after the surveying period reflected these experiences; 62% of surveyors considered RDS more effective than geographic canvassing, and 50% reported reaching youth who might not have been counted through prior methods. Several described the work as feeling more purposeful than driving census tracts.

Moreover, because surveying primarily took place within service organizations, the hub site model also allowed young people to be connected to services already in place. Those waiting to participate could get a meal, consult with a case manager, or access clothing and mutual aid closets. Providers reported that some young people who came in through the RDS process had never been to their organization before and completed new intakes, which suggests the model may have functioned as a point of outreach and service connection in addition to data collection.

Surveying beyond the unsheltered definition

Since the new methods relied on understanding the real networks of young people and how they are connected, youth count surveying was not limited to those who met the HUD definition of unsheltered homelessness, as was the case in previous years. Youth who were sheltered, doubled up, or in other housing situations were also surveyed whenever they arrived at a hub site with a valid coupon. Including them served two practical purposes. First, turning someone away after they had traveled to a hub site with a valid coupon risked creating conflict and frustration among both the individuals and provider staff, which could negatively influence participation in future counts and discourage service engagement more broadly. Second, it allowed the count to gather information on a population that providers and stakeholders have long wished to better understand. While published figures from the Youth Count will continue to reflect only those youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness, future analyses using survey data from sheltered, doubled-up, and other precariously housed youth are planned.

Figure 6. Breakdown of surveys administered during the 2026 Youth Count by housing status.



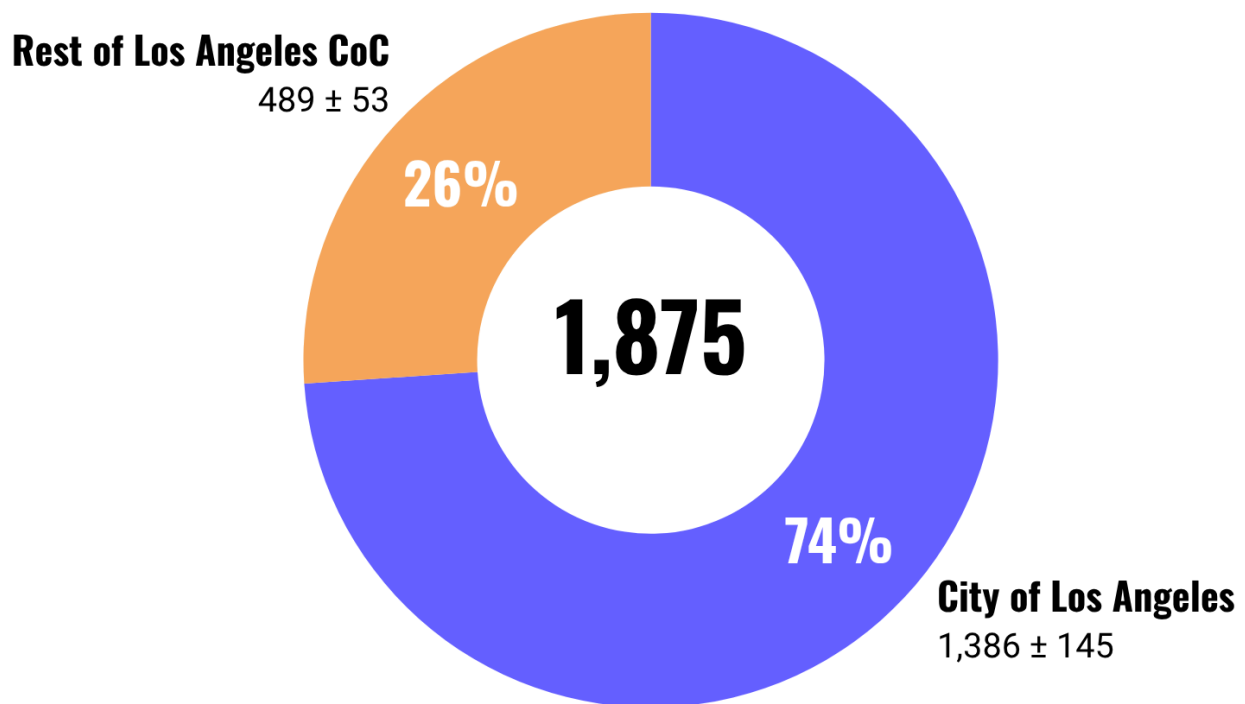
FINDINGS AND DATA INSIGHTS

This section presents findings from the 2026 Youth Count, including the estimated size and characteristics of the unsheltered youth population across the LA CoC on any given night in January. Proportions reported here are weighted, meaning they are adjusted through the study design to represent the full population of unsheltered youth rather than only the young people who were surveyed. The section begins with the estimated size of the population and how it is distributed across the City of Los Angeles, the rest of the CoC, and each SPA. It then turns to the sociodemographic characteristics of unsheltered youth, location where they slept the previous night, their systems involvement and experiences of violence and exploitation, the physical, mental, and behavioral health conditions they were living with, reported reasons for homelessness, where they were most recently living before becoming homeless, and benefits and service utilization.

An estimated 1,875 youth were living unsheltered across the LA CoC, most in the City of Los Angeles

We estimated a total of 1,875 (± 194) youth were living unsheltered across the LA CoC on any given night in January 2026. About 74% of these young people were estimated to be living in the City of Los Angeles, with the remaining 26% residing within the rest of the Los Angeles CoC.

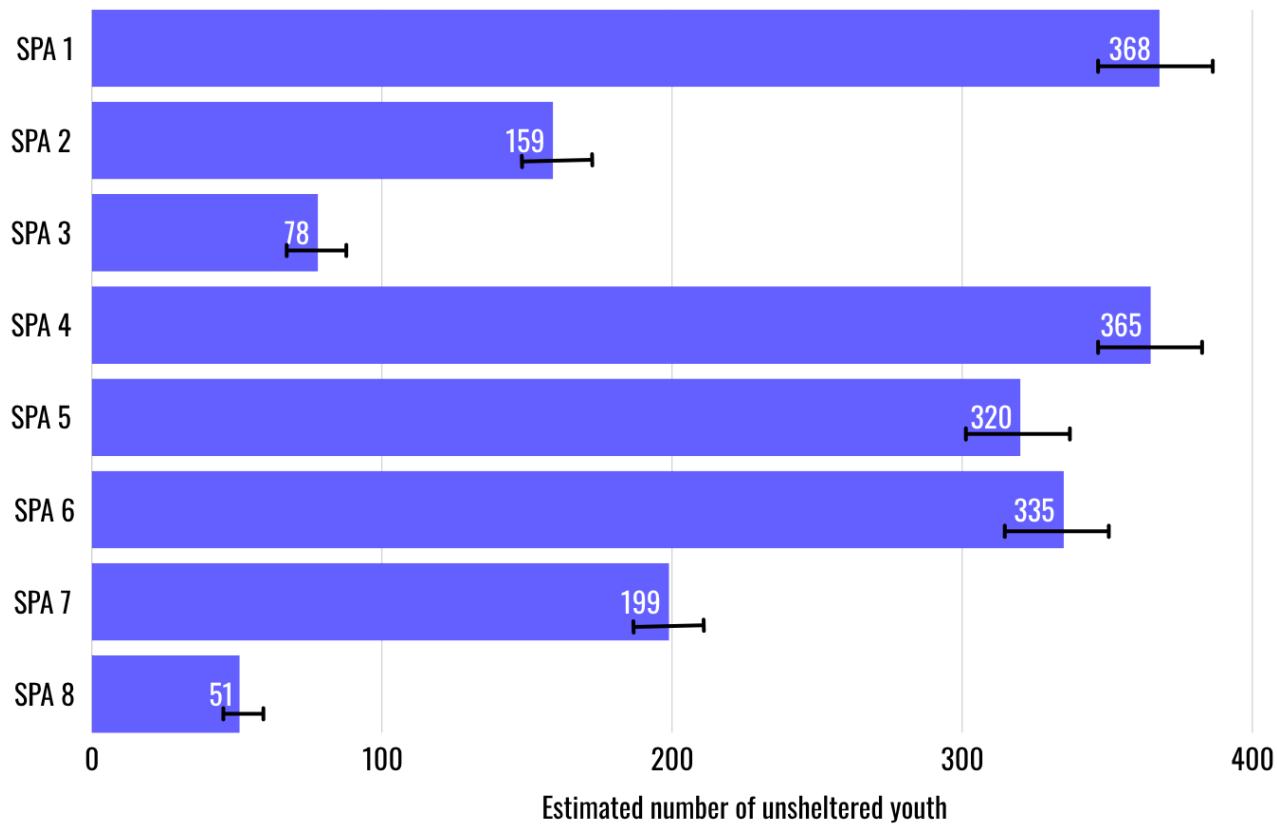
Figure 7. Distribution of the total unsheltered youth population across the City of Los Angeles versus the rest of the Los Angeles Continuum of Care.



This distribution of unsheltered youth also varied across SPA as shown in Figure 8 below.⁹ Estimates were highest in SPA 1 (Antelope Valley; 368 ± 41) and SPA 4 (Metro Los Angeles; 365 ± 39), followed by SPA 6 (South Los Angeles; 335 ± 37) and SPA 5 (West Los Angeles; 320 ± 35). SPA 3 (San Gabriel Valley; 78 ± 18) and SPA 8 (South Bay/Harbor; 51 ± 14) had the lowest estimates of unsheltered youth within the LA CoC.

⁹ Service Planning Areas (SPAs) are eight geographic subdivisions of LA County used for service planning, resource allocation, and reporting: SPA 1 (Antelope Valley: Lancaster, Palmdale); SPA 2 (San Fernando Valley: Burbank, San Fernando); SPA 3 (San Gabriel Valley: Pomona, Alhambra, Arcadia); SPA 4 (Metro LA: Downtown, Hollywood, Mid-City); SPA 5 (West LA: Santa Monica, Malibu, Beverly Hills); SPA 6 (South LA: Watts, Compton, southern City of LA); SPA 7 (East LA: Whittier, Downey, Norwalk, West Covina); and SPA 8 (South Bay/Harbor: El Segundo, Torrance, Carson, San Pedro). Note that these estimates do not include Glendale (SPA 2), Pasadena (SPA 3), and Long Beach (SPA 8) who operate their own CoCs and conduct their own point-in-time counts.

Figure 8. Estimates of youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness by Service Planning Area.



Sociodemographic characteristics of unsheltered youth in the LA CoC

The sociodemographic profile of youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the LA CoC is shown in Table 1. Most (86%) were individuals without children, while the remaining 14% were family members in youth-headed families with children. More specifically, 10% of the total unsheltered youth population were minor children in youth-headed families.

Table 1. Distribution of sociodemographic characteristics among unsheltered youth.

<i>Sociodemographic characteristic</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
<i>Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.</i>	
Household composition	
<i>Individuals without children</i>	86%
<i>Family members in families with minor children</i>	14%
Children in families	10%
Unaccompanied minors (under 18)	2%
Gender	
<i>Woman or girl alone</i>	37%

<i>Sociodemographic characteristic</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
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Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Man or boy alone	59%
Other gender identity alone	2%
More than one gender	2%

Race and ethnicity

American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous alone	1%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander alone	2%
Black, African American, or African alone	33%
White alone	11%
Hispanic, Latina, Latine, or Latino alone or in combination	44%
Middle Eastern or North African alone	0%
Multiple races	9%

Categories labeled "alone" include only those who did not also identify as Hispanic/Latina/e/o. The Hispanic/Latina/e/o category includes everyone who identified as Hispanic/Latina/e/o regardless of race.

Age (years)

Under 18	12%
18 to 24	88%

Sexual orientation

Straight	82%
Gay or lesbian	6%
Bisexual	10%
Questioning	1%

Sexual orientation is reported for youth aged 18-24; we do not collect information on sexual orientation for minors under 18

Highest level of education completed

Less than high school	28%
High school or GED	52%
Some college or associate's degree	15%
Bachelor's degree or higher	4%
Other	1%

Currently enrolled in school (yes)	21%
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Employed full or part time (yes)	15%
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Experiencing chronic homelessness (yes)	25%
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Chronic homelessness is defined as an adult with a disabling condition of long duration who has either been: a) continuously homeless for at least 1 year; or b) homeless on at least 4 separate occasions in the last 3 years where the combined length of time homeless is at least 1 year.

More than half (59%) of unsheltered youth identified as a man or boy, 37% as a woman or girl, and 4% as another gender or with more than one gender. Almost half (44%) of all unsheltered youth were Hispanic/Latina/e/o, while roughly one-third (33%) were Black, African American, or African, and 11% were White. Smaller shares identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander (2%) and American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous (1%). Further, among youth aged 18-24, most described their sexual orientation as straight (82%). About half (52%) of unsheltered youth had a high school diploma or GED, more than one-quarter (28%) had less than a high school education, and about 1 in 20 (4%) completed a bachelor's degree or higher.

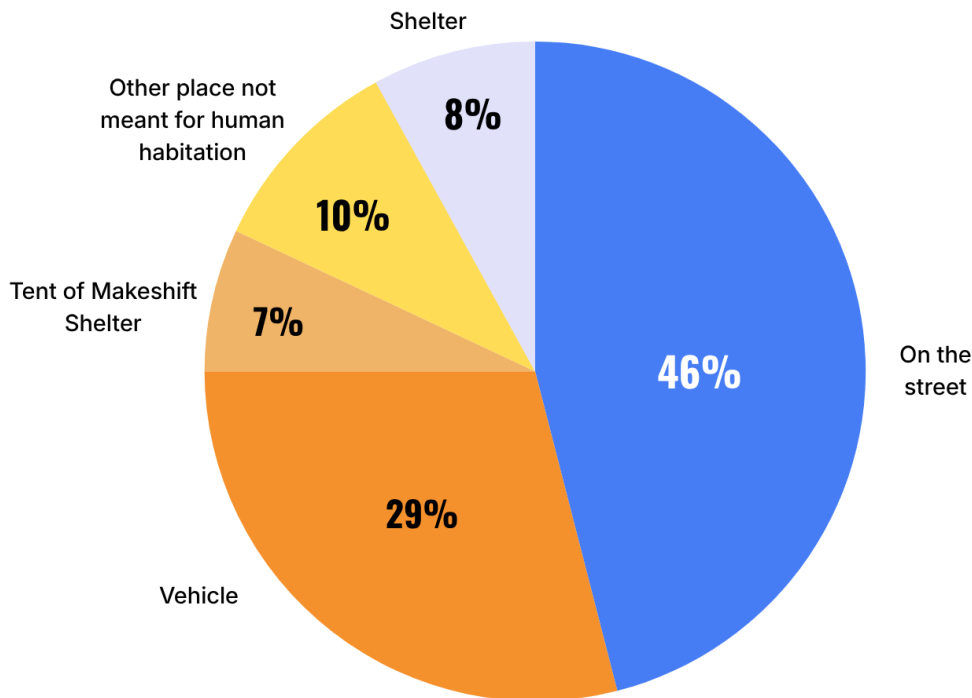
Importantly, the sociodemographic profile of unsheltered youth in 2026 closely resembles the estimated characteristics of this population in 2025,¹⁰ which offers some reassurance that the new method is reaching the same underlying population. The age distribution was nearly identical across the two years, with minors under 18 making up 12% of unsheltered youth in both years. Household composition was similar as well, with 86% of unsheltered youth being individuals without minor children in 2026 compared with 82% in 2025, and a comparable share met the definition of chronic homelessness in each year, at 25% in 2026 versus 23% in 2025. In both years, Hispanic/Latina/e/o youth made up the largest share of the unsheltered youth population, followed by Black, African American, or African youth. However, a few differences did emerge. A higher proportion of the youth surveyed in 2026 were women or girls, at 37% compared with 31% in 2025. A higher proportion also identified as bisexual in 2026, at 10% compared with 3%, while the shares identifying as gay or lesbian and as questioning were unchanged across the two years. Total agreement between the two years would be unexpected given that the shift to RDS was made because geographic canvassing was believed to be missing young people, and these differences are in the direction we might expect if the new approach is reaching youth who may have been the least visible on the street. Additional years of data under this approach will be needed before any such pattern can be established.

Most unsheltered youth reported to have slept on the street or in a vehicle last night

At the time of the survey, nearly half (46%) of unsheltered youth reported having spent the previous night sleeping on the street, while 29% slept in a vehicle. Nearly one-fifth (17%) of unsheltered youth spent the previous night in another place not meant for human habitation (10%) or in a tent or makeshift shelter (7%). The remaining 8% reported staying in a shelter last night but were still counted as “unsheltered” because they reported spending most of the past 30 days on the street, in a vehicle, in a tent or makeshift shelter, abandoned building, transit station, or another place not meant for human habitation.

¹⁰ All 2025 Youth Count figures referenced here are drawn from LAHSA's 2025 Youth Count Los Angeles Continuum of Care data summary, revised October 2025, available at: <https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=9541-yc25-coc-data-summary-revised-october-2025>.

Figure 9. Location where unsheltered youth reported sleeping last night.

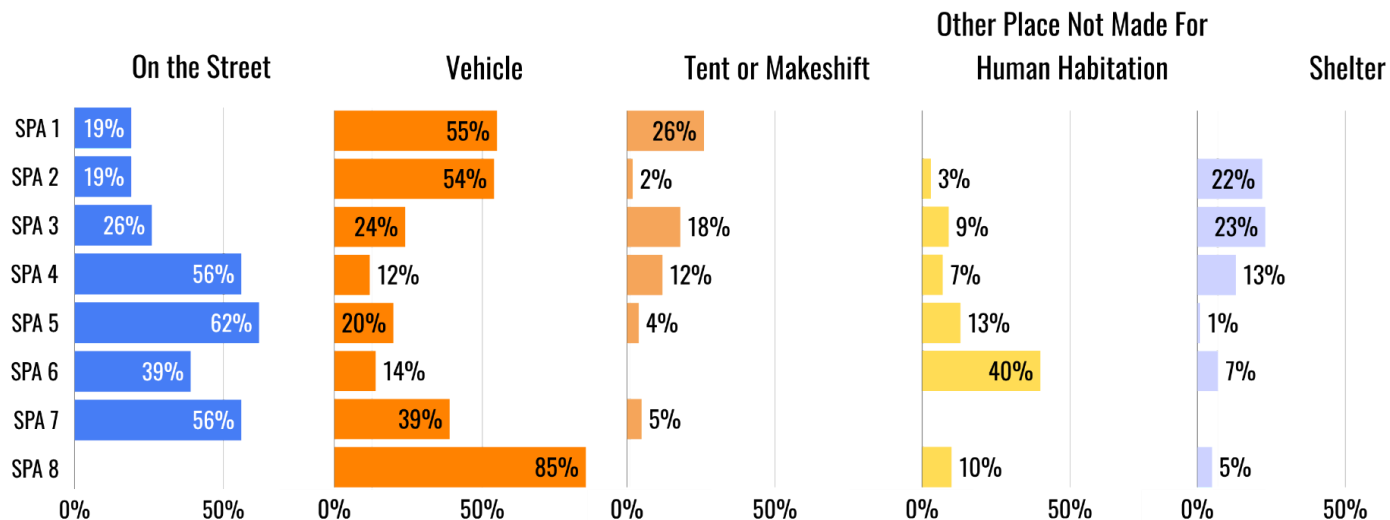


Note: Proportions may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Where youth reported sleeping the previous night varied considerably across SPAs. Sleeping on the street was most common in SPA 5 (62%), SPA 4 (56%), and SPA 7 (56%), while staying in a vehicle predominated in SPA 8 (85%), SPA 1 (55%), and SPA 2 (54%). Other places not meant for human habitation made up a large share only in SPA 6 (40%). The share of youth counted as unsheltered but who reported sleeping in a shelter the prior night was highest in SPA 3 (23%) and SPA 2 (22%). Although estimates for some SPAs are based on a small number of surveys and should be interpreted with caution, these data point to meaningful variation in the experience of unsheltered homelessness across the CoC that may require tailored approaches to homelessness outreach.¹¹

¹¹ SPA-level estimates leverage surveys from age-eligible youth in both unsheltered and sheltered settings in order to generate the weights used in the final estimation. In total, 180 surveys among unsheltered youth and 140 among sheltered youth were used in the estimation process, including: n=12 unsheltered and n=0 sheltered in SPA 1; n=20 unsheltered and n=27 sheltered in SPA 2; n=7 unsheltered and n=5 sheltered in SPA 3; n=45 unsheltered and n=72 sheltered in SPA 4; n=62 unsheltered and n=15 sheltered in SPA 5; n=10 unsheltered and n=14 sheltered in SPA 6; n=16 unsheltered and n=4 sheltered in SPA 7; and n=8 unsheltered and n=3 sheltered in SPA 8.

Figure 10. Location where unsheltered youth reported sleeping last night by Service Planning Area.



Many unsheltered youth had histories of systems involvement

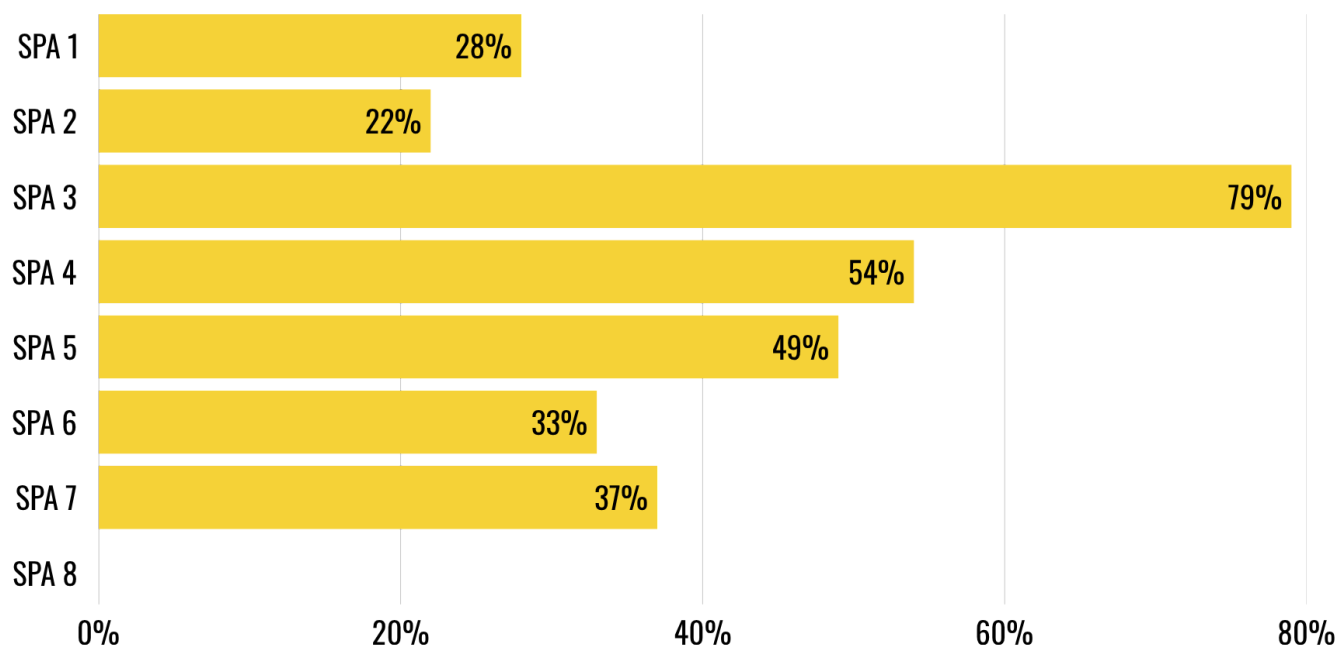
Results from the 2026 Youth Count point to substantial systems contact. As shown in Figure 11, nearly half (41%) had foster care system involvement and about one in six (17%) had justice system involvement.

Figure 11. Experiences of systems involvement among unsheltered youth.



We observed considerable variation in the estimated prevalence of foster care involvement across the CoC (Figure 12), ranging from 22% in SPA 2 to 79% in SPA 3, with roughly half of unsheltered youth in SPAs 4 (54%) and 5 (49%) reporting a history of foster care involvement. Given that such a substantial share of unsheltered youth across the CoC have prior involvement with the child welfare system, the transition out of foster care may be an important juncture for prevention efforts.

Figure 12. Any history of foster care involvement among unsheltered youth by Service Planning Area.



Note: Too few surveys in SPA 8 included a response to foster care involvement to produce an estimate.

Experiences of violence and exploitation were also common among unsheltered youth, with notable variation across gender identity

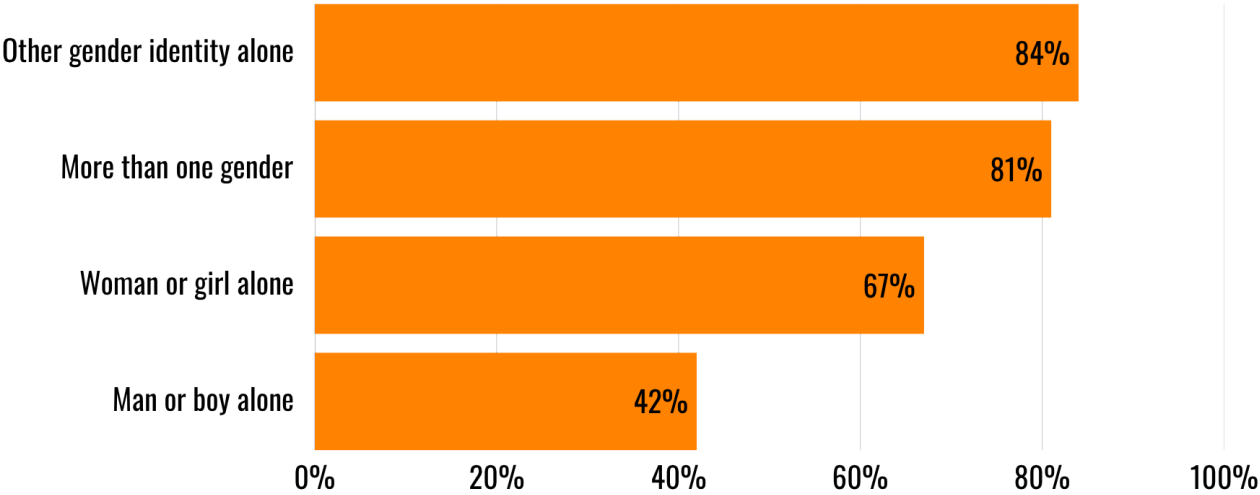
Experiences of domestic violence were also common among unsheltered youth. More than a third (37%) reported any experience of domestic violence, and roughly one in 10 (11%) said they were experiencing homelessness because they were fleeing domestic violence. Experiences consistent with human trafficking were likewise reported; 12% of unsheltered youth reported to have been forced to do any kind of work where they were not paid or paid less than expected, and 7% reported having been forced into sex work specifically (data not shown).

Figure 13. Experiences of domestic violence and human trafficking among unsheltered youth.



Experiences of domestic violence varied notably across gender identity among unsheltered youth. Youth who identified with another gender other than man/boy alone or woman/girl alone or those who identified as more than one gender identity reported the highest rates of domestic violence experience at 84% and 81%, respectively. About two-thirds (67%) of unsheltered youth who identified as woman/girl alone reported any history of domestic violence compared to 42% of those who identified as man/boy alone.

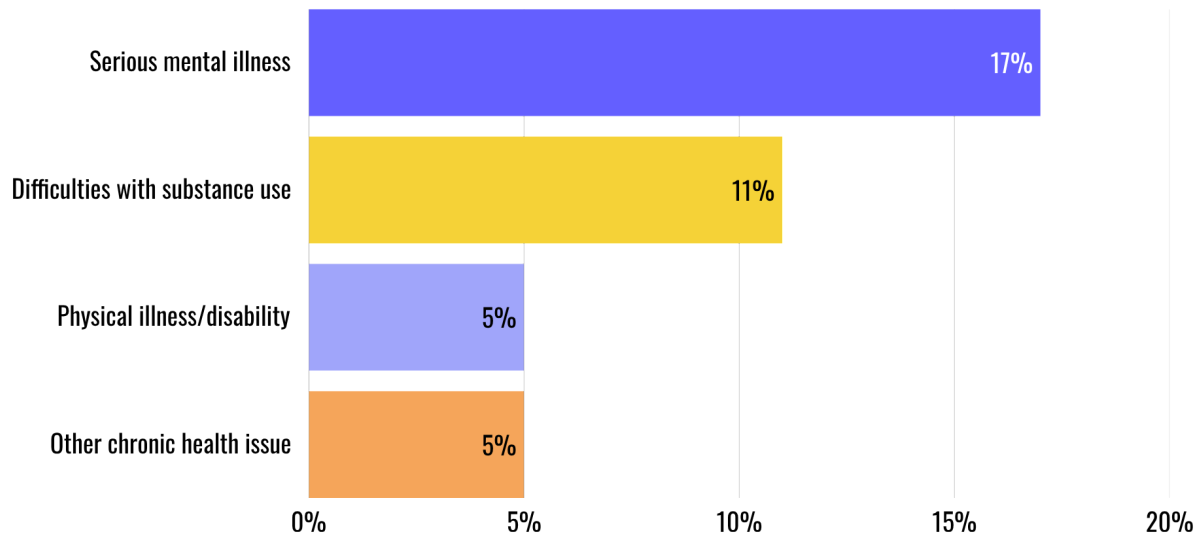
Figure 14. Any experience of domestic violence among unsheltered youth by gender identity.



Behavioral and physical health conditions affected a minority of unsheltered youth

Figure 15 below shows the prevalence of select health conditions, demonstrating that behavioral and physical health conditions are present but not exhibited among the majority of unsheltered youth. Serious mental illness was the most commonly reported health condition, affecting about 17% of the population, followed by difficulties with substance use (11%). Only 5% of unsheltered youth reported a physical illness or disability, with the same share reporting another chronic health issue (5%). Consistent with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development definitions, these are only counted when conditions are confirmed to be of long or permanent duration, reflecting ongoing health conditions expected to persist.

Figure 15. Prevalence of physical, mental, and behavioral health conditions among unsheltered youth.



Note: Health condition categories are not mutually exclusive and reflect definitions used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to mean conditions of long or permanent duration.

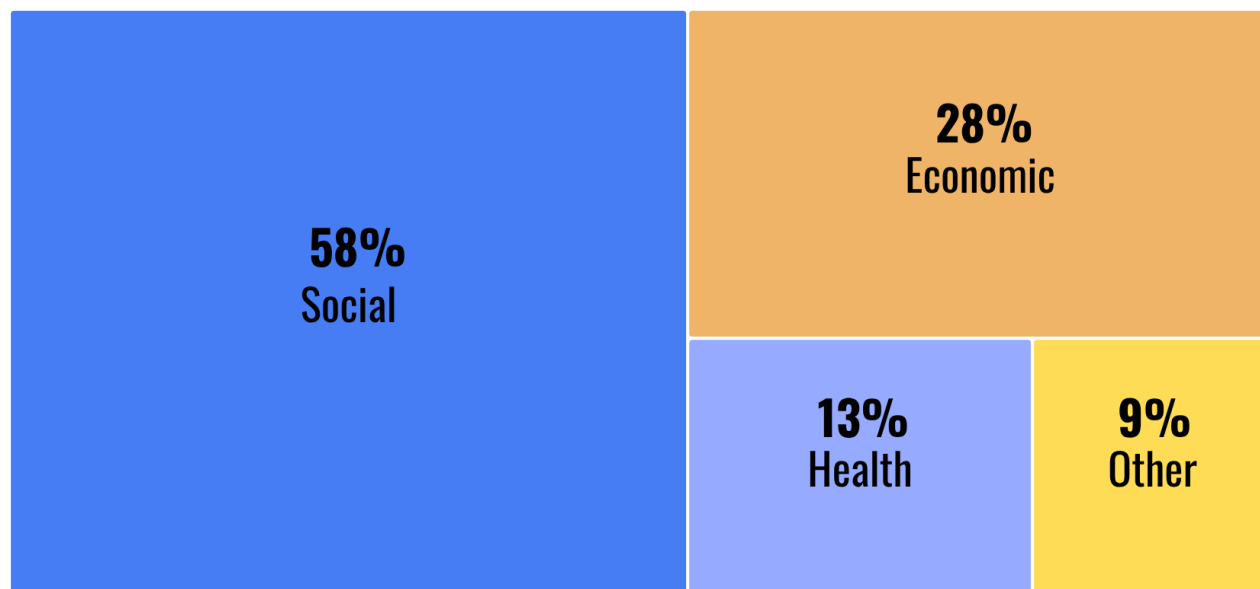
These rates are far lower than those observed in our companion analysis of unsheltered adults aged 25 and older the LA CoC,¹² suggesting that these conditions may be acquired on the streets as a result of long-duration unsheltered homelessness rather than causes of homelessness themselves. These rates also run counter to prevailing narratives about homelessness, which often assume widespread serious mental illness and substance use among people living unsheltered and use that assumption to argue for clinical and carceral responses to homelessness in place of evidence-based approaches like Housing First. These data suggest that behavioral and mental health conditions are not primary drivers of homelessness among unsheltered youth in the LA CoC.

Unsheltered youth commonly identified social factors as a major driver of homelessness

Youth were asked to indicate the factors that led to their homelessness, with responses grouped into four categories (Figure 16). Social factors, such as family conflict, domestic violence, and aging out of foster care or other institutional discharge, were the most commonly indicated, cited by a majority (58%) of unsheltered youth. Less than one-third (28%) of unsheltered youth cited economic factors, such as unemployment, job loss, or eviction, while roughly 1 in 10 unsheltered youth endorsed health-related (13%) or other contributors (9%; e.g., natural disasters).

¹² Henwood, B., Landrian Gonzalez, A., Kuhn, R., and Schachner, J. (2026). Houseless Angelenos. State of Los Angeles County Housing and Neighborhoods (SOLACHAN) 2026. USC Neighborhood Data for Social Change. <https://la.myneighborhooddata.org/solachan-2026-houseless/>

Figure 16. Reasons for homelessness as reported by unsheltered youth.



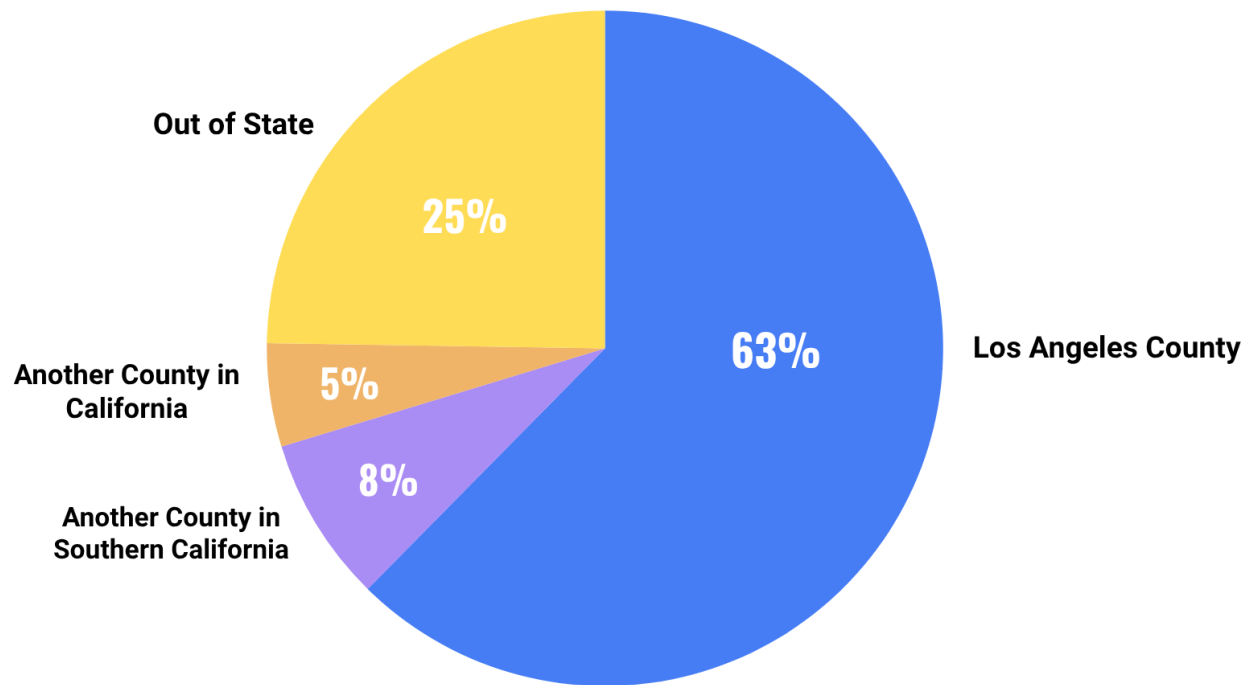
Youth were able to identify more than one reason for their homelessness, so these categories capture co-occurring contributors rather than a single cause. In fact, about 29% of youth indicated two or more factors that contributed to their homelessness spanning any category, while 20% indicated reasons that spanned two or more of the four categories (data not shown). These data suggest that youth homelessness rarely stems from a single cause and that prevention efforts may need to address several vulnerabilities at once. Approaches that pair strengthened social support with economic stabilization may be particularly critical for any effective homelessness prevention response for young people.

Most young people experiencing unsheltered homelessness were most recently housed in LA

The majority of youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness on any given night in January 2026 were residing within Los Angeles County when they last lost housing (63%), while 25% reported to have lost housing in another state outside of California. This suggests that unsheltered homelessness among youth in Los Angeles County is driven primarily by local housing loss rather than by young people arriving from elsewhere. That said, the share of youth last housed outside California appears higher than among unsheltered adults countywide. In our companion analysis of unsheltered adults aged 25 and older in the LA CoC, 15% reported last being housed in another state outside of California, compared with 25% of unsheltered youth.¹³ This difference may reflect the social factors most commonly cited as reasons for homelessness among unsheltered youth as described above, since the events young people identified most often can involve leaving a household rather than losing housing already in place.

¹³ Henwood, B., Landrian Gonzalez, A., Kuhn, R., and Schachner, J. (2026). Houseless Angelenos. State of Los Angeles County Housing and Neighborhoods (SOLACHAN) 2026. USC Neighborhood Data for Social Change. <https://la.myneighborhooddata.org/solachan-2026-houseless/>

Figure 17. Where unsheltered youth reported living when they last lost housing.

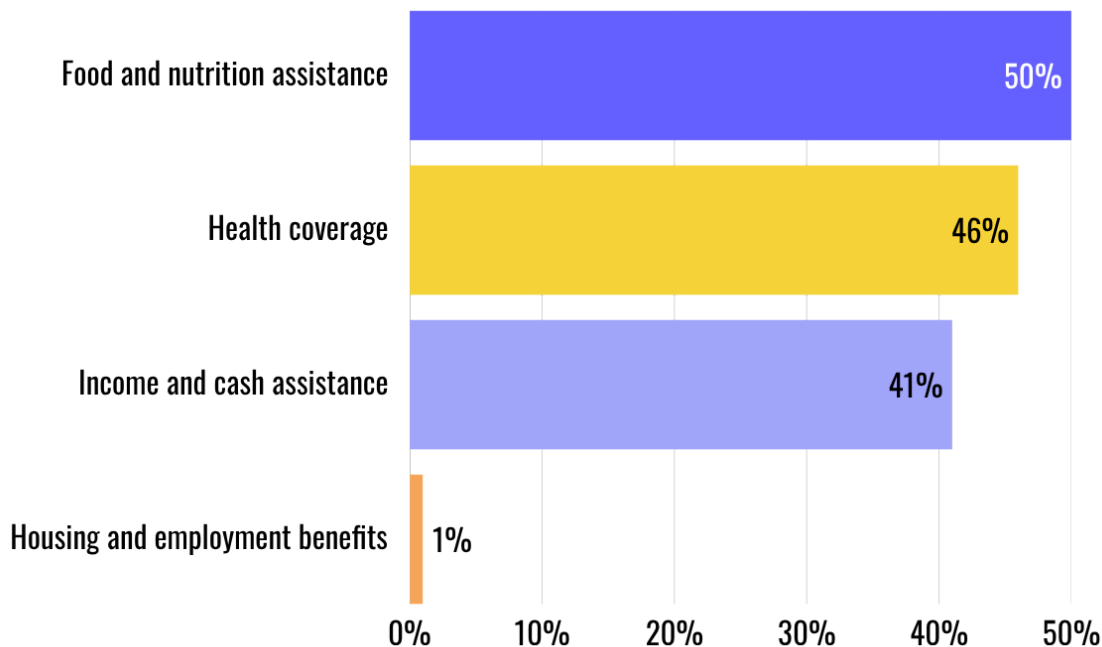


Note: Proportions may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Many unsheltered youth received food, health, or cash assistance, but few received household or employment benefits

About half (50%) of unsheltered youth reported currently receiving food and nutrition assistance, with similar shares receiving health coverage (46%) and income or cash assistance (41%). By contrast, only 1% were receiving housing or employment benefits, defined in the survey as enrollment in a housing voucher program, transitional housing or rapid rehousing, a cash transfer based housing program, or an employment program. These are specific, limited-capacity programs, and the housing placements among them would generally move a young person out of unsheltered status; the measure does not capture all housing or employment-related support a young person might receive (e.g., help with a housing application or job application). However, given that stable housing and income are central to exiting homelessness, this low rate may still reflect real difficulty in connecting unsheltered youth with these programs, whether because of limited availability, eligibility barriers, or gaps in outreach.

Figure 18. Social and government assistance benefits currently received by unsheltered youth.



Further, nearly one-third (30%) of unsheltered youth reported receiving no social services or benefits at the time of the Count (data not shown), even though most are likely eligible for at least some form of assistance, such as food or nutrition support. This may provide further evidence of gaps in access to social services and benefits among unsheltered youth.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM YOUTH COUNT 2026 AND PRIORITIES FOR 2027

Immediately after the count concluded, the Youth Count team circulated surveys and held debrief sessions with all site leads to capture staff experiences and identify areas for refinement. Many said they had been skeptical when the change in methodology was first presented; they were concerned about worsening the undercount, whether youth would be willing to travel to participate, and that the new approach would introduce more barriers than it removed. That skepticism gave way over the course of the count, and by its end, every site lead endorsed the RDS methodology moving forward.

Sites consistently reported that the peer referral reached youth that canvassing had not, including those who had not previously accessed services. Many surveyors reported that they completed intakes with new young people who came in specifically because of the count, and a few providers even reported that several young people were placed in emergency housing beds over the data collection period. Some youth even contacted sites afterward to ask whether the count would happen again, signaling that their participation had been a positive experience. Site leads also pointed to youth ownership as a specific strength of the methodology. One of the clearest wins came from SPA 1, where the Youth Action Board took primary ownership of count operations, creating social media posts, managing seeding, and running sessions with about one hour of staff time per session. As the staff lead in SPA 1 stated, "It was simple enough in terms of doing the seeds and

everything else that they [the youth] were able to take ownership of it. They were able to take it and make it their own."

As a foundational year, 2026 also provided insight into areas for improvement. One of the biggest areas for direct improvement is in regard to timeline. Providers need more lead time to prepare a hub site, train staff, review protocols, and develop SPA-specific seeding strategies. Many providers also noted that, although they felt the methods reached young people who were disconnected from services, there is room to reach deeper into social networks and find additional young people who might not have been included in 2026. They identified college campuses, parks, and transit hubs as missed opportunities for direct engagement and outreach. Much of the preparation for 2027 will therefore focus on identifying additional hub sites to fill geographic gaps and building partnerships that can support seeding and community awareness of the Youth Count. Accomplishing these goals is well within reach. The first year required building protocols and documentation from scratch, training staff on a completely new methodology, piloting technologies, and developing the survey and survey app. With that groundwork in place, both participating organizations and the Youth Count team can turn their attention to strengthening what already exists.

Table 2. Summary of key improvements and refinements for the 2027 Youth Count.

Reaching disconnected youth and geographic areas	RDS worked well for youth with existing service relationships, but multiple providers flagged college campuses, parks, and transit hubs as missed opportunities. Deliberately extending seeding and outreach into these settings will be a priority for reaching additional young people the 2026 Youth Count did not. Youth Count 2027 will also add one to two hub sites, with particular attention to establishing a site in or near Skid Row.
Engaging partners creatively	Because canvassing and short-form surveying were eliminated, the new methods offered fewer natural entry points for non-traditional partners like city employees, student groups, and youth boards to support Youth Count. For 2027, we will focus on finding creative ways to bring these partners back into the work.
Early prep time	The most common request from surveyors was earlier access to training materials and equipment. Technology issues, primarily Bluetooth printer connectivity and older tablets, created friction at several sites, so earlier equipment testing ahead of the Youth Count is essential. Everything from the survey app, seed coupons, printers, and training will be finalized by the end of November, leaving time to review before and after the holiday break.
Building community awareness	Youth, providers, and community members want to see the results. The Youth Count results deserve their own moment, separate from the broader Homeless Count. This dedicated report marks an important first step toward reporting back in a way that helps the community understand what this work is and why it matters, and puts the findings in front of the people who can act on them.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2026 Youth Count demonstrates that RDS is a feasible and effective approach for estimating the number and characteristics of young people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Los Angeles. The method produced a more precise estimate while reducing reliance on geographically intensive canvassing that had become increasingly burdensome for youth-serving organizations and less well suited to reaching a highly mobile and often hidden population. Peer referrals brought young people into trusted community settings, reached youth who had not previously accessed services, and created opportunities for connection to housing

and other assistance. Although refinements are needed, particularly to extend recruitment further into disconnected networks and underserved geographic areas, the experience of this foundational year strongly supports the continued use of RDS for future Youth Counts.

The findings also provide an important corrective to prevailing narratives about homelessness. Behavioral health conditions are consequential for the young people who experience them and require accessible, appropriate treatment. However, serious mental illness and substance use problems affected substantial but clearly minority shares of the unsheltered youth population at 17% and 11%, respectively. These findings do not support treating behavioral health conditions as the primary explanation for youth homelessness or shifting the broader response away from housing and toward treatment mandates or enforcement. Treatment should be available to those who need it, but it is not a substitute for stable housing.

Instead, the findings point to a combination of housing instability, fractured social supports, systems involvement, and exposure to violence. Most youth identified social factors such as family conflict, domestic violence, or transitions from foster care and other institutions as contributing to their homelessness. Forty-one percent had been involved with the foster care system, more than one-third had experienced domestic violence, and nearly one-third identified multiple contributing factors to their homelessness. At the same time, only 1% reported receiving housing or employment benefits, suggesting a significant gap between young people's needs and the assistance most likely to help them achieve stability.

The findings also challenge the perception that youth homelessness in Los Angeles is primarily driven by migration from elsewhere. Nearly two-thirds of unsheltered youth were living in Los Angeles County when they most recently lost housing. Young people may move frequently once they become homeless, making them difficult to locate through geographically fixed counting methods, but their homelessness is predominantly rooted in local housing loss and local systems. The appropriate response is therefore not to displace young people or redirect resources toward enforcement, but to strengthen the local capacity to prevent homelessness, support family mediation and reunification where it is safe and wanted, provide housing specifically tailored to the developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood (rather than modeled on adult programs), reconnect youth with education and employment, and deliver voluntary behavioral health care when needed.

Taken together, the 2026 Youth Count offers both a stronger method and a clearer picture of the population it is intended to measure. RDS can be further improved, but it has established a promising foundation for a Youth Count that is more accurate, less burdensome, and more closely connected to young people and the organizations that serve them. Most importantly, the findings reinforce that youth homelessness is not reducible to individual pathology. It reflects failures of housing affordability, social support, and public systems that require a response centered on housing, prevention, and sustained opportunities for stability.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 2026 Youth Count was made possible through the commitment and expertise of hub site staff, outreach workers, peer navigators, and the young people who participated and referred their peers. This work is a direct reflection of years of advocacy from providers and community members calling for a more accurate, more equitable way to count youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles. We thank them, and especially the young people, who trusted this process with their time and experiences.

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