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Voices from the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers

*By Nell Bernstein
and Lisa K. Foster*

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C A L I F O R N I A R E S E A R C H B U R E A U

Voices from the Street:
**A Survey of Homeless
Youth by Their Peers**

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	9
THE CALIFORNIA HOMELESS YOUTH PROJECT	9
THE SURVEY OF HOMELESS YOUTH: INTERVIEWERS AND PROCESS	10
STATEWIDE YOUTH/PROVIDER CONVENING.....	12
YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS	12
YOUTHS’ IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES	13
TRAJECTORIES INTO HOMELESSNESS.....	15
HOW LONG AGO DID YOUR HOUSING SITUATION BECOME UNSTABLE?	15
HOW OR WHY DID THAT HAPPEN?	15
DO YOU FEEL MORE SAFE OR LESS SAFE SINCE LEAVING HOME? WHY?	23
YOUTHS’ IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES	27
LIFE ON THE STREET	29
WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT?	29
WHERE DO YOU USUALLY SLEEP?	31
ARE YOU TRYING TO CHANGE YOUR HOUSING SITUATION?	33
IF SO, HOW ARE YOU TRYING TO DO THAT?	33
WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE IN TRYING TO FIND A MORE STABLE SITUATION?	34
WHAT IS GOOD, OR POSITIVE, IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?.....	39
BEING ON THE STREETS, HOW DO YOU THINK PEOPLE PERCEIVE YOU?	43
HOW DO YOU GET MONEY?	47
YOUTHS’ IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES	50
INTERACTIONS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT	53
HOW MANY TIMES EACH MONTH DO YOU HAVE AN INTERACTION WITH THE POLICE? WHAT USUALLY HAPPENS?	53
HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TICKETED FOR A “QUALITY OF LIFE” OFFENSE?	57
YOUTH’S IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES	59
EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS	61
DO YOU GO TO SCHOOL? IF SO, WHAT YEAR/KIND OF SCHOOL ARE YOU IN? IF NOT, WHAT WAS THE LAST GRADE/KIND OF SCHOOL YOU ATTENDED?.....	61
WHY DID YOU LEAVE?	61
WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL?	62

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT OR HELP WOULD YOU NEED IN ORDER TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL?	64
WHAT LIVELIHOOD WOULD YOU LIKE TO PURSUE? DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE A REALISTIC CHANCE OF ACHIEVING THAT SOMEDAY, AND IF NOT, WHY NOT?.....	65
WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN FIVE YEARS?.....	69
MENTAL HEALTH.....	73
WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH?	73
DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF MENTALLY HEALTHY, BY YOUR OWN DEFINITION? WHY OR WHY NOT?.....	74
HAVE YOU EVER RECEIVED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES? WHAT KIND (COUNSELING, THERAPY, MEDICATION, HOSPITALIZATION, OTHER)? WERE THOSE SERVICES HELPFUL? WHY OR WHY NOT?	78
WHAT DO YOU FEEL YOU MOST NEED TO STAY MENTALLY HEALTHY?.....	82
NETWORKS OF SUPPORT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS	87
WHO DO YOU RELY ON (TOP THREE) WHEN YOU NEED HELP?.....	87
WHO RELIES ON YOU FOR SUPPORT?	89
HOW MUCH CONTACT DO YOU HAVE WITH YOUR PARENTS? (VISIT THEM, SOMETIMES STAY WITH THEM, TALK TO THEM ON THE PHONE, LETTERS, MONEY?).....	90
IS THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN THINK OF THAT MIGHT HAVE HELPED YOUR FAMILY STAY TOGETHER OR PREVENTED YOU FROM WINDING UP ON YOUR OWN IN THE FIRST PLACE?	91
HELPING HANDS	93
WHAT KINDS OF SERVICES HAVE YOU RECEIVED?.....	93
WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST USEFUL HELP YOU HAVE RECEIVED?.....	94
HAVE YOU HAD ANY EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICES THAT HAVE MADE YOU NOT WANT TO GO BACK? IF SO, WHAT HAPPENED?	97
IF YOU HAVE NOT SOUGHT HELP FROM PUBLIC OR NON-PROFIT AGENCIES, WHY NOT?	104
WHAT KIND OF HELP OR SERVICES DO YOU WISH WERE THERE FOR YOU THAT ARE NOT AVAILABLE NOW?	106
YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY CHANGES	109
YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES	113
FUTURE INQUIRY	117
WHAT QUESTION WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE ON THIS SURVEY THAT IS NOT THERE, AND HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER THAT QUESTION?.....	117
APPENDIX	121
REFERENCES.....	125
ENDNOTES.....	127

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- Ambassadors for Hope and Opportunity
- At the Crossroads
- California Coalition for Youth
- Children's Hospital Los Angeles
- Common Ground
- Dreamcatchers
- Larkin Street Youth Services
- Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center
- My Friend's Place
- Roaddawgz
- San Diego Youth and Community Services Storefront
- Silicon Valley De-Bug

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Photographs

The photographs included in this report are of homeless youth in the Sacramento area by Kent Lacin, © Lacin 2008. We thank him, and the youth pictured, for generously allowing us to use these images.

Internet Access

This report is available through the Internet at the California State Library's home page (www.library.ca.gov) under CA Research Bureau Reports. The report is formatted for printing pages on both sides.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

Homeless youth who are on their own are a hidden population. Nationally, from 1.8 to 2.1 million young people are estimated to be homeless, and these numbers are believed to be increasing.¹ California does not have statewide numbers. The fact that homeless youth are highly mobile, often use services sporadically, and tend to distrust and avoid public agencies, makes it difficult even to determine their numbers, much less assess these young people's multiple needs.

In 2007, the California Research Bureau conducted a survey in which homeless and formerly homeless youth completed 208 interviews with their currently and formerly homeless peers across the state in order to find out about their experiences, the services they need, and the changes they would like to see happen in policy or law. Partnering with youth interviewers allowed access beyond shelters and drop-in centers to reach those young people who were not necessarily connecting to any formal services. Only 18 percent of those interviewed had spent the previous night in a shelter or transitional housing. The majority of interview respondents came from the hardest to reach and least-studied populations – those who sleep on the streets or in cars, squat in abandoned buildings, or “couch-surf” – moving from house to house, often with periods on the street, without a stable address.

The youth interviewed ranged from ages 13 to 25, with the majority between ages 17 and 24, and almost evenly split between genders. Interviews were conducted in 23 California cities; in addition, focus groups were held in several locations. All of the interview questions were open-ended, giving respondents maximum latitude to define their own needs, tell their own stories, and make their own recommendations for change. Following are key findings.*

When asked what ideas she had for services and policy changes, one young woman from Los Angeles responded: “I would definitely do what you’re doing now. I’d be conducting interviews to find out the general consensus of what people’s needs are, because of course we need to know what other people need before we can actually give it.... So this is definitely probably gonna work. Hopefully it does, if it gets to the right people.”

Trajectories into Homelessness

The great majority of young people did not seek or choose to be homeless; they were pushed into it, either because their parents explicitly “kicked them out” of home, or because abuse or family conflict forced them to leave. In the vast majority of cases, it was the deterioration or implosion of a personal relationship, rather than simply economic circumstances that propelled young people onto the streets.

- About 40 percent of the youth responding said their housing had been unstable for a period lasting between one to four years and close to 30 percent reported that their housing had been unstable for one year or less. One quarter had experienced unstable housing for five years or more.

* In some cases interview respondents did not answer every question and in other cases respondents provided more than one response. Where it was possible, we broke down responses into percentages; however, in many cases responses were not consistent enough to do so.

- Close to 40 percent of the survey respondents said they felt safer since leaving home, primarily because they were out of unsafe homes, no longer being abused, or were away from family members.
- Almost half of the respondents said that they felt less safe since becoming homeless – over 50 percent referenced the dangers and vulnerability associated with life on the street (including drugs), and 14 percent cited housing instability and moving from place to place as detriments.

Life on the Street

On the streets, young people have to deal both with their own sense of vulnerability and victimization, potential and actual, and the fact that they are generally perceived by the public and by law enforcement as a potential threat or menace rather than as children in need of protection themselves.

- Thirty percent of youth had spent the previous night outdoors, on the street, or in a car or vacant building. Twenty-eight percent had been couch surfing at a friend's house, ten percent were living in transitional housing, and eight percent had spent the previous night at a shelter.
- Close to 90 percent said they were trying to change their housing situation; their major challenges were finding affordable housing (over 30 percent) and a job that would provide enough income to maintain that housing (over 45 percent).
- Close to ten percent of the youth said there was nothing good or positive in their lives right now. In contrast, close to 30 percent cited peer relations and children, and one-quarter cited some element of their own internal strength to care for themselves and to survive as positive; another quarter said being employed or being in school was good and positive.
- Youth respondents reported that people's perception of them was overwhelmingly negative: they used terms such as lazy, bad kid, troublemaker, bum, piece of s—, lowlife, scumbag, junkie, gangbanger, filthy scum, lowest of the low, worthless, and whore. Only six percent said others had a positive perception of them.
- Over 20 percent of the youth had regular employment and 18 percent reported income from temporary or odd jobs. Just over 20 percent brought in money by panhandling; the same percentage received income from public programs such as SSI, food stamps, or general assistance. Fifteen percent received funds from family or friends. Eight percent got money by stealing or robbing, seven percent sold drugs, and five percent by prostitution. Other means of generating income included selling plasma, pimping, and making and selling things.
- Ten percent brought in \$20 or less in a week, around 25 percent received between \$20 and \$100 a week, and close to 20 percent got between \$100 and \$500 a week. Three percent reported no income; and income was sporadic for the rest, often cobbled together from a variety of sources.

Interactions with Law Enforcement

This area of inquiry was suggested by the youth researchers who described the constant fear and the common experience of encounters with the police as contributing to the sense of danger and hyper-vigilance that often accompanies homelessness. They also described the vicious cycle that the criminalization of homelessness creates and perpetuates – being ticketed for offenses such as sleeping on the street and unable to pay the fines, resulting in criminal records which impede their efforts to find employment and housing, stabilize their lives, and get off the streets by legitimate means.

- The majority of homeless youth (75 percent) report regular and negative interactions with police. Five percent said these interactions were daily, over ten percent reported weekly occurrences, and around 20 percent reported interactions once or twice a month.
- At the Los Angeles focus group each of the 12 young people present had been ticketed for a quality of life offense, often repeatedly. In addition, close to 60 percent of the 59 individuals statewide who answered interview questions on this subject had been ticketed.
- Despite the reality that homeless youth are frequently the *victims* of crime while on the streets, not a single respondent described turning to police for help or reporting being victimized.

Education and Aspirations

- Over three-quarters of the 54 youth responding to this question were not attending school at the time of the interview (six had graduated from high school or attained a GED). One-fifth said they had “dropped out” of their own accord. In general, the reasons for leaving school were associated with homelessness, and the great majority of youth said they would want to go back to school if they could.
- Over 90 percent of the youth identified a specific career goal. These included careers in the medical field (as doctors, nurses, or medical assistants), music industry, or being an entrepreneur. Others wanted to work in the fashion industry, computer field, law enforcement or corrections, social work, and teaching. Many cited a strong desire to “give back” or help others in similar circumstances.
- Among youth respondents, 40 percent believed that in five years they would be employed, 35 percent believed they would be in homes or apartments of their own, 16 percent saw themselves attending or having graduated from college, nine percent believed they would have their own families, and five percent believed they would be wealthy. Many believed they would have achieved some or all of these goals at the same time – though “hopefully” was often added. In contrast, 12 percent did not know where they would be, and two percent believed they would be dead.

Mental Health

Many youth felt that the fact that they were surviving, or had overcome, being on the streets was an indication of mental health. Some noted however, that although they believed themselves to be fundamentally mentally healthy, street life had taken a psychological or emotional toll.

- Over two-thirds of youth respondents considered themselves mentally healthy. The vast majority attributed that fact not to any kind of formal mental health services but to their own positive attributes or attitudes such as their basic capacity to function and survive, their ability to set and work towards goals, their self-awareness, and their resilience.
- One-fifth did not consider themselves to be mentally healthy: over 20 percent of these youth attributed their poor mental health to traumatic life experiences, 18 percent to drug use, and 15 percent said they had a specific mental illness.
- Close to 60 percent of youth had received some kind of mental health service(s): half had received counseling, 36 percent had received medication, close to 30 percent had received therapy, and 13 percent had been hospitalized for mental illness. Less than half of those who had received mental health services found those services to be helpful.
- Respondents report that both positive relationships and the ability to meet basic needs (such as food and shelter) are crucial to sustaining mental health.

Networks of Support and Social Connectedness

While most of the respondents were able to identify people they relied on for help, among those who elaborated on the nature of these relationships, many described them as tenuous or provisional.

- Close to 45 percent of respondents looked to friends for support, 28 percent cited a family member – generally a mother (about half of those that responded maintained some form of contact with their parents), 15 percent named a boyfriend or girlfriend, and 12 percent looked to God or their church. Only 13 percent named a formal service provider among their top three sources of support. One-third included themselves and five percent said they had no one.
- In terms of providing support to others, 28 percent said that they supported family members (ten percent of these youth identified their children), 30 percent said that they supported friends, and 15 percent had a boyfriend or girlfriend who relied upon them for support. Close to 20 percent said no one relied on them for support and 16 percent reported that they provided support to themselves.

Helping Hands

- Youth reported receiving or using the following services: meals (44 percent), shelters (33 percent), drop-in programs (32 percent), counseling (20 percent), medical care (17 percent), case management (15 percent), and transitional or other housing (13 percent). Others had received free showers and/or personal hygiene supplies,

clothing, food stamps, and services from independent living skills programs, and needle exchange programs.

- Despite the high value the young people placed on employment as a bridge to self-sufficiency, only four individuals had received job training and only two individuals had received help in finding work.
- Close to one-fifth of the respondents said the most useful help they had received had come from a drop-in program, close to 15 percent cited transitional or other housing, and over ten percent cited shelters and free meals. Others said medical care and needle exchange programs. Youth also mentioned the kindness of strangers.
- Close to half of the youth reported an experience that made them not want to return to seek services. Over 25 percent said they were treated badly or rudely, patronized or made to feel helpless by shelter staff or other service providers, and over ten percent said that excessive bureaucracy had deterred them. Others reported conflicts with other clients and unpleasant shelter conditions.
- Over ten percent of the youth said they had not sought help because they were self-sufficient or did not need any help; eight percent felt they would not qualify or be able to follow the rules that came along with aid. Other reasons included shame, past negative experiences, pride, and fear of being laughed at, arrested, or turned away because of immigration status.
- Among the youth who described the kinds of help or services they wished were available to them now, over ten percent identified help with housing, seven percent said direct financial assistance, five percent said more access to food, and five percent said more shelters. Other desired services included: bathrooms and showers, clothing, individual and family counseling, peer support, health and dental care, education, career counseling, help getting documents such as a driver's license, childcare, services for youth with disabilities, services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, recreation, and transportation assistance.
- In terms of changes at the service delivery level, close to half of the youth said that, if they found themselves in the role of outreach worker, they would offer advice and/or emotional support. Nearly 20 percent would let the youth define the interaction and the nature of "help." A large number also said they would offer direct assistance in meeting survival needs, with many specifying that these essentials would be provided with a warmth and sense of welcome that they had sometimes found lacking in services they had received themselves.

Youths' Ideas for Policy Change

The survey and focus groups included questions aimed to elicit young people's ideas for change at the policy level. These youth would like to see the government help them meet their survival needs and also stop criminalizing their own efforts to do so. They would also like to see programs and initiatives that would do more than simply meet those basic needs and instead help them move towards independence and stability.

- The largest number – close to one-quarter – of the youth responding made recommendations that focused on undoing the criminalization of homelessness. These included decriminalizing outdoor sleeping and squatting, changes to panhandling and loitering laws, and increased police sensitivity.
- One-fifth asked for laws mandating that homeless youth have a place to stay, including creating more affordable or supported housing; over ten percent wanted more youth shelters, including those specifically for gay and lesbian youth and for young parents and children; and a small number identified transitional housing. There was also the desire to instill a sense of warmth and welcome and to remove limits, requirements, and stigma that kept young people from feeling genuinely “at home” in existing shelters or housing programs.
- Youth also suggested the following:
 - requiring better responses to the abuse and neglect they and their peers experienced
 - revising age restrictions on services targeted to youth, and making it legal for those under age 18 to live independently and seek public services
 - eliminating “hoops” that young people perceived as standing between them and the support they needed (one example would be facilitating faster processing of IDs that are needed to obtain many services)
 - creating public bathrooms accessible to the homeless



INTRODUCTION

It's not safe on the streets, and sometimes you feel sad because you have nothing to come home to. You walk around all day living life for nothing. You dream and dream all the time about going home, but you have no home to go to.

--Female, 18, Hayward

Unaccompanied homeless youth are a hidden population to most of us. Many of these youth try hard to avoid detection and contact with mainstream systems. While their numbers appear to be growing, their mobility, sporadic use of services, and distrust of public agencies makes it difficult even to determine their numbers, much less assess these young people's multiple needs.²

Estimates of the numbers of homeless youth vary widely across agencies and studies, in large part due to the difficulties already mentioned and also due to the lack of a single, consistent definition of "homeless youth." Federal programs use different criteria for determining homelessness, and agencies and researchers use different age parameters.

While national estimates vary among studies over the years, Dr. Martha Burt, homelessness expert from the Urban Institute, provided the most recent data to Congress in June 2007.³ She stated that 1.6 – 1.7 million youth ages 12 to 17, 80,000 – 170,000 youth ages 18 to 19, and 124,000 – 236,000 youth ages 20 to 24 are estimated to be homeless over a year. (See the Appendix for additional information on homeless youth estimates and characteristics.)

Numbers on homeless youth on their own are not available for the State of California. While most cities and counties that conduct homeless counts only collect information on homeless adults and families, some have started to focus on youth as a separate group. Based on the 2005 homeless count, for example, an annual estimate of homeless youth is close to 22,000 in Los Angeles County.⁴

The lack of numbers for homeless youth in the state indicates the invisibility of this group, and the difficulty of accessing and understanding them. However, there is little question that a great number of California youth experience homelessness at some point in their lives, and a significant number remain homeless for long periods of time.

THE CALIFORNIA HOMELESS YOUTH PROJECT

This report, *Voices from the Street – A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers*, presents the homeless youths' experiences and ideas for change at the policy and service delivery levels. It is a primary component of the California Homeless Youth Project, a major research and policy initiative undertaken by the California Research Bureau (CRB) and the California Council on Youth Relations (CCYR), with support from The California Wellness Foundation, to bring attention to the serious issues facing homeless youth in California. This research has already been informing a series of CRB public policy forums held for state and local policymakers in which homeless and formerly

homeless youth participate in discussions along with researchers and program providers. The project goal is to develop policy options for more effective state and local interventions for this population.

The California Homeless Youth Project includes several additional components: a youth-produced DVD highlighting the recommendations of homeless youth for policy change as presented at public policy forums, a CRB report – *The Educational Success of Homeless Youth in California: Challenges and Solutions* – that summarizes the education requirements and issues and identifies successful educational program models, a CRB report – *Preparing Youth to Participate in State Policymaking*, and an annotated bibliography of resources published as a CRB report. An advisory group made up of homeless youth, organized through CCYR, meets weekly over pizza to discuss individual housing and life issues and provide ongoing feedback to the policy ideas raised by this project.[†]

THE SURVEY OF HOMELESS YOUTH: INTERVIEWERS AND PROCESS

Our study of homeless youth in California tackled the challenge of connecting with the survey participants in a novel way: interviews were conducted entirely by currently or formerly homeless young people themselves. Our process was innovative and somewhat fluid: youth researchers, recruited from across the state via youth-serving organizations, worked with the adult research team to develop the research agenda and initial interview template. In addition, they revisited the interview questions as they administered the survey, deleting questions that “fell flat” and adding new questions inspired by answers to the original set.

For purposes of the survey, we defined homeless youth as those lacking a stable or permanent address. This includes young people sleeping in shelters, on the street, in parks, in cars and buildings, and “couch-surfers” who find provisional or intermittent shelter with friends or, less often, family members, but lack a permanent or stable home.

Much existing research on homeless youth has relied on “convenience samples” of youth found in shelters and drop-in centers, thus leaving out the 40-50 percent of the population who do not access these services.⁵ Partnering with youth interviewers allowed our research team to reach beyond shelters and drop-in centers and access young people who were not necessarily connecting to any formal services. As a result, only 18 percent of those interviewed for this report had spent the previous night in a shelter or transitional housing, and the same number reported they usually slept in one of these settings. The majority of interview respondents came from the hardest to reach and least-studied populations – those who sleep on the streets or in cars, squat in abandoned buildings, or “couch-surf.”

In most cases, the youth researchers administered the survey as a taped interview which was then transcribed, usually by the interviewer. In those few cases where respondents did not want to be tape recorded,

[†] CRB reports can be downloaded from <http://www.library.ca.gov> under CA Research Bureau Reports. For more information about this project, please contact Ginny Puddefoot (916-653-7653 or gpuddefoot@library.ca.gov) or Lisa Foster (916-653-6372 or lfoster@library.ca.gov).

they were asked to fill out the interview form in writing.

We paid the youth researchers to conduct and transcribe the interviews. We also gave gift cards to those they interviewed in appreciation of their time and to acknowledge the value of the information they were sharing with us.

The youth researchers were instructed to give interviewees the following introduction and explanation of the purpose of the interview:

“Thank you very much for taking the time to answer these questions. **The goal is to get a sense of what your experience has been, and to get your ideas about what kind of care or support you feel would help you the most, and what kind of changes you would like to see happen in policy or law.** Once we have gathered answers from a number of young people, we will do our best to make your voices heard by lawmakers, service providers, and others who are in a position to make the changes you recommend.

Your answers may be included in a published report, but your name will not be used. All of these questions are optional – if you do not want to answer a particular question, just say so.

If you are answering these questions in writing, please feel free to use the attached blank pages if you want to write longer answers to any of the questions (just include the number of the question you are answering).

Thanks again for your time and your thoughts.”

In light of the understanding that the transition to adulthood for all American youth now extends well past their eighteenth birthday, and that many homeless people in their late teens and early twenties identify with youth culture, we interviewed young people between the ages of 13 and 25, with the majority between age 17 and 24. Interviews were almost evenly split between males and females, with three interview subjects identifying as transgender.

Youth researchers completed 208 valid interviews with other homeless and formerly homeless youth in 28 cities across the state, based on the social networks of the interviewers: Albany (1), Fairfax (2), Fairfield (1), Fremont (4), Fresno (46), Hayward (1), Los Angeles (28), Modesto (1), Novato (5), Oakdale (1), Oakland (21), Richmond (1), Sacramento (1), Salinas (1), San Anselmo (2), San Diego (8), San Francisco (48), San Jose (12), San Leandro (1), San Lorenzo (1), San Rafael (2), Santa Cruz (9), Sausalito (1), Sonoma (1), Stockton (2), Tracy (1), Vallejo (1), and Yuba City (5). The two largest groups of interviews came from two very different regions: San Francisco, a service-rich urban area that draws homeless youth from all over the country, and Fresno, an agricultural center with relatively fewer services where the great majority of homeless youth are from the immediate area.

The research process was journalistic, rather than following a traditional social science format. (We did not ask for demographic information such as ethnicity or sexual orientation for example.) All of the interview questions were open-ended, giving

respondents maximum latitude to define their own needs, tell their own stories, and make their own recommendations for change. While this created challenges in classifying and categorizing answers to some of the questions, it yielded a rich, varied, and original body of material, including insightful and innovative ideas for improving the prospects of young people experiencing housing instability and the relational instability that precipitates and accompanies it.

The responses to the survey are organized and presented by each question asked. Interview respondents did not answer every question, and in some cases respondents provided more than one response to a question. Where it was possible, we broke down the survey responses into percentages; however, in many cases the responses were not consistent enough to do so and we provide instead quoted examples of the range of answers provided to the youth researchers. To protect their confidentiality, survey respondents are identified throughout the report by gender, age, and location. Focus group participants are generally identified by pseudonym, age, and location.

STATEWIDE YOUTH/PROVIDER CONVENING

To launch the research project, CRB and CCYR co-hosted a statewide youth/provider roundtable with community-based organizations that worked with homeless youth: At the Crossroads, Dreamcatchers, Larkin Street Youth Services, Roaddawgz, and Silicon Valley De-Bug from the Bay Area; My Friends Place, Common Ground and the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center from Los Angeles; and the Youth and Community Services Storefront from San Diego. Each of these organizations was represented by both adult staff and youth participants. The California Coalition for Youth and Children's Hospital Los Angeles also participated.

The convening provided an opportunity to introduce the Homeless Youth Project to the service provider community and ask for their help. Participants at this all-day session provided feedback on the project, shared their practice and policy perspectives across California regions, and helped set the project's research agenda. The project team also used the convening as an opportunity to recruit youth researchers.

YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS

To complement the survey research process, we convened five focus groups with homeless or formerly homeless youth throughout the state to hear their experiences and ideas. The feedback we received from the estimated 50 youth at these sessions added depth to the survey responses. The forums also served as an opportunity to recruit youth researchers in specific locations. Each focus group was hosted on-site with a community based organization: the Bill Wilson Center in San Jose, the EOC Sanctuary in Fresno, Pacific News Service/New America Media in San Francisco, My Friends Place in Los Angeles, and the WIND Center in Sacramento. Youth who attended the focus groups received either cash or a gift card in addition to lunch or dinner.

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

If you could write one law, or change an existing law, to help homeless youth, what would it be and why? [Survey Question]

The survey and focus groups included questions intended to elicit young people's ideas for changes that need to be made at the policy and service delivery level to help homeless youth. Policy recommendations were diverse and imaginative, but taken together, a clear message emerged: homeless youth would like to see the government help them meet their survival needs and also stop criminalizing their own efforts to do so. They would also like to see programs and initiatives that would do more than simply meet those basic needs, and help them move towards independence and stability.

I would go to Colorado, where they got a whole bunch of land that no one is using, and I would pay to build up a big facility that would offer single mothers' shelter, things for teenagers and young adults. I would offer work clothes and street clothes and dress shoes.... I would create a bus line across the country and pick up as many people as possible, and have educational tools.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Because this report represents the voices from the street, ideas for policy changes are limited to those identified by the youth responding to the survey questions or participating in the focus groups. A full range of options for policymakers – including recommendations resulting from the public policy forums – will be provided as part of other components of the CRB Homeless Youth Project.



TRAJECTORIES INTO HOMELESSNESS

HOW LONG AGO DID YOUR HOUSING SITUATION BECOME UNSTABLE?[‡]

Answers to this question ranged from “a few days ago” to “my whole life.” Overall, the interviews were fairly evenly split between those who had spent two years or less and those who had spent more than two years without stable housing. Close to 40 percent of those responding said their housing had been unstable for a period lasting between one to four years. About one-fifth said their housing had been unstable between one month and one year, and another one-fifth for five to ten years.

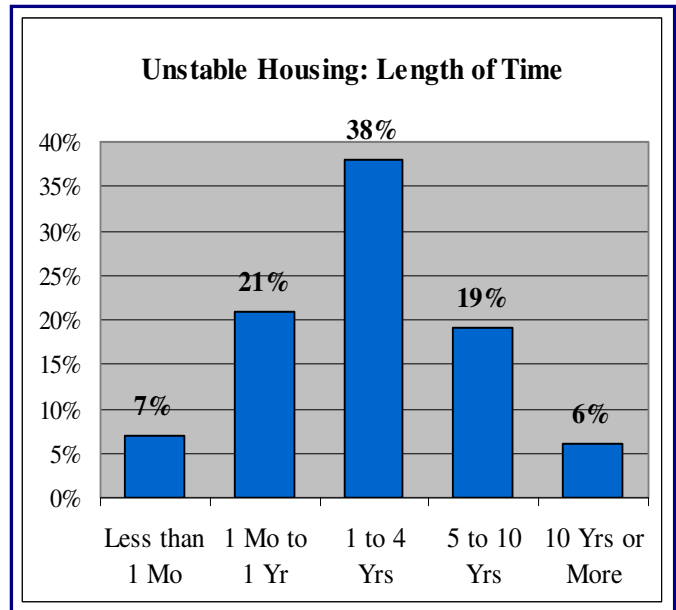
HOW OR WHY DID THAT HAPPEN?

This question was intentionally broadly framed – we wanted to get a sense of what caused young people to become homeless but did not want to ask them to give detailed accounts of potentially traumatic experiences in a context where they might not have adequate support or follow-up. As a result, our findings in this area are necessarily somewhat general.

Nevertheless, the overall finding is clear: the great majority of young people do not seek or choose homelessness; they are pushed into it, either because their parents explicitly “kick them out” of home, or because abuse or family conflict forces them out. In the vast majority of cases, it was the deterioration or implosion of a personal relationship, rather than simply economic circumstances that propelled young people onto the streets. This finding is confirmed by a body of research indicating that family conflict, physical and sexual abuse, and parental drug and alcohol abuse are the key causes of youth homelessness.⁶

Most young people do not choose to leave home. They are pushed into it – either because their parents “kick them out,” or because abuse or family conflict forces them out.

While only three percent of the youth responding to the CRB survey said physical or sexual abuse precipitated their homelessness, researchers have found that between 40 to 60 percent of all homeless youth say physical or sexual abuse contributed to their no longer living at home.⁷



[‡] Once we understood that many young people who lack stable housing do not identify themselves as “homeless,” we rewrote the interview questions to eliminate that term to the degree possible. Rather than asking, “When did you become homeless?” we asked: “How long ago did your housing situation become unstable?”

I was raped by four different family members and they didn't believe me so I got kicked out of the house.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

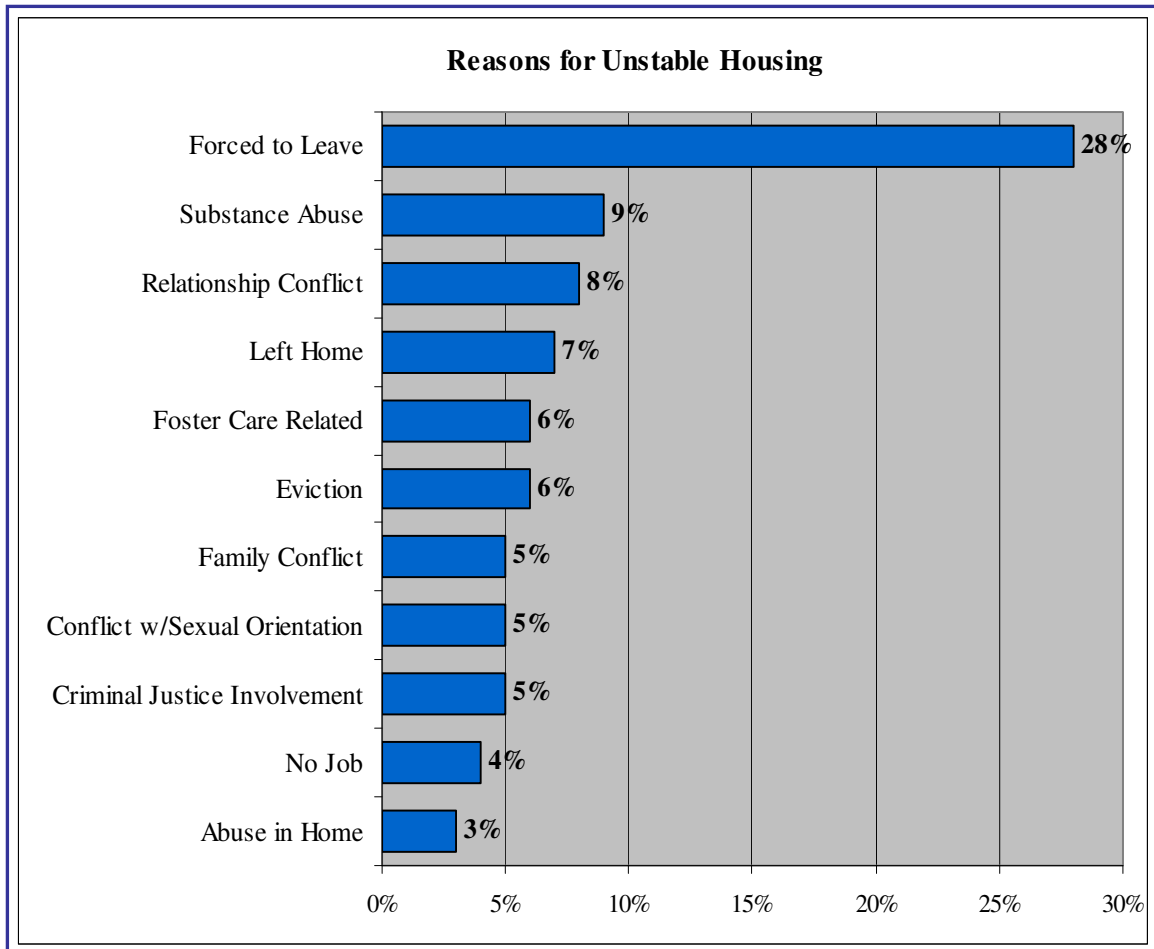
Home life started to become violent and I could find no outside agency to help so I left home.

--Male, 19, San Diego

My parents are abusive and drug addicts.

--Male, 25, location unknown

Many respondents gave more than one answer to the question “How or why did your housing become unstable?” The most common answer by far, however, was some variant of being kicked out, thrown out, or pushed out by their parents. Close to 30 percent of those interviewed said they had become homeless after being forced to leave their homes.



My mom and dad kicked me out because I was using too much drugs, I was never going to school.

--Male, 23, San Jose

I was being bad at home so I wasn't wanted there no more.

--Female, 18, Salinas

My parents kicked me out. My parents found out that I was drinking with my friends and they didn't like it.

--Female, 16, Richmond

My mom got mad at me for some reason, moved all my stuff onto the back porch and boxed it up and locked all the doors so I couldn't get in the house. So I had to find somewhere else to go.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Because my mom kicked me out and chose a guy over my family.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

Because we have a three bedroom home and my mom takes care of foster kids so there was no room for me and she gave me a week to find somewhere to live.

--Female, 19, Location Unknown

I was just getting into a lot of arguments and everything with my mom and she was getting tired of going through everything with me so she kicked me out because I was too much of a problem for her.

--Male, 16, Fresno

Family Conflicts

Eight percent cited drug or alcohol abuse as causing their homelessness, although their answers sometimes left it unclear whether it was their own drug use or their parents' use that precipitated their homelessness. Other studies have indicated that substance abuse in the home is a precipitant for youth homelessness in 24 to 30 percent of cases.⁸

Because my mom never had a house and she did drugs.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

Another five percent cited a negative relationship with a parent or parents as the impetus for becoming homeless.

I was getting in so many fights with my mom and I didn't want to be that kind of person. I didn't want to be a burden on my family.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Parents weren't good.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

I felt a lot of pressure at home with trying to keep up with school and trying to make my parents happy.

--Female, 17, Stockton

Mark, in Los Angeles, offered a succinct and piercing analysis: *"If they would have loved us, then we would have never went through this."*

According to the National Gay And Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, "Family conflict is the primary cause of homelessness for all youth, LGBT or straight. Specifically, familial conflict over a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity is a significant factor that leads to homelessness or the need for out-of-home care." According to the Task Force, between 20 and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.⁹ One study found that 26 percent of teens who came out to their parents were kicked out of their homes as a result.¹⁰

In our research, five percent of the surveyed youth said that conflict over their sexual orientation precipitated their homelessness. Because our question was open-ended and we did not specifically ask about sexual orientation, it is quite possible that the actual number is higher and includes a proportion of those who answered more generally that family conflict precipitated their homelessness without specifying the reason for that conflict.

I guess I came out to the wrong people and made my life miserable.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

I had a fight with my mother over my gender identity and sexual orientation, and she put me out, and she instructed all family and friends not to help me out financially, so I hitch-hiked to San Francisco.

--Transgender (male-to-female), 24, San Francisco

In focus groups, young people described growing up in homes where family relationships and their sense of stability were eroded long before they hit the streets. *"Growing up, (my mom) degraded and sabotaged everything I did."* said a young man in the Los Angeles focus group. *"No, you can't do it. You're an idiot. You're stupid. You can't do it. He can do it, but you can't do it.... You're retarded. Your friend is smarter than you. All that. As I got older...it built up into anger and I just left. I chose to be in the streets because I couldn't take all that s--- my mom was telling me. It was driving me up the wall. All that frustration and all that...anger. Hatred."*

"My mom used to do crystal meth and come home and she used to want to fight with me," another young woman responded. *"No one wants to fight with their mother like that. I'm like, 'I'll hurt you if I fight with you.' So then I moved out...and I ended up in prison. And when I got out prison I was still homeless."*

At the project youth/provider convening held before the survey had widely hit the streets, Lauren offered this account: *I was labeled a delinquent and no one listened to me when I was telling them I was being abused by my father and my mother. No one believed me, and they kept taking me back there. Then I'd get my a-- beat and I'd run away again, and then they'd take me back there and get my a-- beat. It was like this vicious cycle.... It finally took a cop that got interested in me to take me to (a shelter). It took someone actually (caring) about me to put me somewhere where I belonged.... (People) just think, 'Oh, drug addict kid, they don't like rules,' or whatever. It's not true. Usually there's a reason why they're not there (at home).*

In a focus group in Fresno, Amanda, 19, described her trajectory from home to home, and then into homelessness: *I got here because my mom did drugs or whatever and my dad wasn't around to claim me. So I hopped around from my brothers' and sisters' parents. We all had different dads. There are six of us. And I kind of stayed with them and their family. But it just wasn't working because we're all different nationalities. I'm the only black one. My sister is white. My other sister and brothers are Mexican.... So then they put me in foster care. When I got my high school diploma, they told me that I had to leave. So I had to leave.*

Other reasons given by small numbers of young people included the death or arrest of a parent, and parental divorce.

Foster Care

Four percent of the surveyed youth said they became homeless upon aging out of foster care, and another two percent attributed their homelessness to having been placed in or growing up in the foster care system. These numbers are lower than those found in other studies, indicating either that youth coming from foster care may have been underrepresented in our survey, or that respondents who may in fact have been in the foster care system did not choose to attribute their homelessness to that fact.

Nationwide, one study reported that more than one in five youth who arrived at shelters came directly from foster care, and more than one in four had been in foster care in the previous years.¹¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation has estimated that nearly a quarter of emancipated foster youth become homeless within two to four years of leaving care.¹²

In California, the problem of homelessness among emancipated foster youth is particularly severe. A Los Angeles county study found that approximately half of the youth who age out of foster care in that county will either be emancipated directly to the streets, or into such unstable situations that they are likely to become homeless shortly after emancipation.¹³

Those young people in our study for whom foster care was a trajectory into homelessness often described an instability and “emotional homelessness” that began long before they literally had no roof over their heads.

It's been all my life. I grew up in foster care and I was abused in group homes. I've moved around so much. I've been in over ten mental institutions, over 32 group homes and foster houses. I became homeless five years ago.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

Messed up foster system, I feel like they just give kids away to anyone.

--Female, 19, San Diego

"I've been (to the children's shelter) over 15 times," recounted a participant in the Los Angeles focus group. *"It's like an animal shelter. Like, this dog doesn't have anywhere to go and we don't want him on the streets, so let's put him over here until somebody comes and gets him."* *"I'm just this innocent kid,"* continued this young man – who said he was assaulted by staff and other residents, and kept in an isolation room at the shelter – *"my mom was using drugs. And I go there, and I'm just a victim."*

Some young people become homeless because they flee abusive or neglectful foster care placements, just as others flee abusive or neglectful families of origin. Others described an abrupt transition from relative stability in foster care to being abruptly discharged when they turn 18.

At a focus group at a transitional housing program in Fresno, Veronica described this experience: *They came to take me away from my aunt because my aunt didn't have legal custody of us...and then I was in foster care for 4 1/2 years. I graduated with honors. I was into a lot of clubs and a lot of activities in school, and volunteering. And then when I turned 18 – even though I was doing good – they told me that I had to leave, regardless. And my foster mom didn't want to keep me because it was going to keep her from having an extra room in the home for other foster kids.... They actually tell the foster parents to put your things on the street. If you don't want to go, then call the cops.... That's what the agency that my foster mom was with (told her) – if they don't want to leave, you put all their things outside and then you call the police, because you're 18 now.... Before that, they were all excited that I was getting good grades and that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. But when I came to 18, it was like they didn't know me anymore, and I have to leave.... 'Now we're going to get rid of you.' That hurt the most.*

Thomas, 22, who was in kinship foster care with his elderly, ill grandmother because his mother was incarcerated, described leaving his grandmother's home at age 16 rather than waiting until funds were cut off on his 18th birthday. While he was doing well at 22 – living in the transitional housing program in Fresno, working, attending college, and preparing for independence—the years immediately after he left his grandmother's were extremely challenging: *She was telling me it was really stressing on her, so I had to make that transition and move myself.... (But) I can't really work from barely turning 16. So I had to go to a life of crime. I started really looking to the streets and stuff like that.... Even though in my heart I didn't want to, I had no other choice, because of the age that I was, I couldn't just go work hard, like I'm doing now.... I started taking cars, selling drugs. It forced me into that lifestyle. I was already going to school, so I knew school one day would be my way out, but at that time period I had to do something, because I saw the systems failing me.*

Personal Crises

Six percent of the survey respondents said they became homeless because of domestic violence in a romantic relationship and another three percent cited divorce or the break-up of a relationship. Six percent became homeless as the result of an eviction and five percent said their housing had become unstable following their involvement with the criminal justice system. Other reasons given by small numbers of young people included a house fire, conflict with friends, and being the victim of a robbery.

Arizona State put me in jail for a minute and I lost my trailer and my truck 'cause I couldn't make the payments on it. They took everything and when I got out I had nothing.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Only seven percent of the youth were “runaways” in the sense of having left home by choice.

I got tired of my parents so I moved out and told them to f--- off.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

I was trying to be on my own and trying to be grown, you know.... That's why I'm unstable.

--Female, 15, Tracy

I didn't like being in situations where I was controlled, so I would run away.

--Female, 18, Santa Cruz

Relatively small numbers attributed their lack of stable housing to economic causes. Four percent said they had lost or could not find a job.

Family Shelter Restrictions

In focus groups, young men described becoming “unaccompanied youth” after they were not allowed to enter shelters with their mothers if the whole family became homeless, because of concerns about mixing teenage boys with children and/or women. In the Los Angeles focus group, one young man described a scenario in which domestic violence led to homelessness and the dissolution of his family: “*The reason why I became homeless is because (my mother's boyfriend) beat her and I was going to kill him. Literally...I had a screwdriver to his neck. My mom was pulling me off. She went to an abuse shelter. I was too old to go in.*”

“*If it's a young male child it's OK,*” echoed a 15-year-old in the Sacramento focus group, who had been separated from his mother when he was not allowed to enter a shelter along with her. “*But if it's a teenage male child, there is always something wrong with that – or they could do something, or they will do something.*”

Need for Intervention and Services

Family crisis often propels young people onto the streets, where they may spend months or even years before connecting with services that can help them get off the street and begin to create stable lives for themselves. During that period, young people who have already experienced trauma at home are likely to have that trauma compounded by the dangers and vulnerability that homelessness imposes.

“The best homeless prevention strategy is a family. When you look at who is long-term homeless, these are people who have been completely disconnected, alienated; who aren’t part of a social system. We have to address the issues that families are experiencing.... If those (family) relationships can be sustained, and young people can grow up safely in that family, that’s a network of people to surround them for their entire life, to help them address a variety of issues that they’re going to face as they age.”

--Amy Lemley, Policy Director
John Burton Foundation for
Children without Homes

Interventions are needed at or before the moment of crisis that triggers homelessness, so that young people can access services and find support either within or outside of their families, rather than needing to “become homeless” – with all the trauma that entails – in order to become eligible for services and supports.

Foster youth are a vulnerable population given their history of neglect and abuse, removal from their homes, and experiences in the foster care system. They are often lacking family support and are greatly in need of both services and support to prevent homelessness once they “age out” of the foster care system and are on their own.

Service providers who work with homeless youth also point out that there are many youth on the streets that have had the same experiences as these foster youth but have never been identified by the child welfare system. As a result, they are not eligible for services provided by the child welfare system (limited though these services might be due to lack of adequate resources). This has created a “haves” and “have-nots” situation among the homeless youth population.

We’ve seen this growing population of young people who maybe have not ever been in the system, but they have been disowned by their families, so they do not have a caring adult, or any support system to be there for them with resources.... Youth from families that have drug/alcohol issues, so neither parent—if there are two parents—really has the capacity to be there in any way for their young people. Young people from families that are extremely low-income, and they’re not able to be there either. Families that have extreme mental illness of one or both parents. Families that have severe medical crises within the family and cannot be there for their youth. Parents who have disowned their youth for a variety of reasons. There is this growing snowball of young people who do not fit into the categories that have been neatly defined, and therefore there is no local, state, or federal funding for these young people.

--Zara Babitzke, Founding Director
Ambassadors for Hope and Opportunity, Marin County

I've had kids that have been homeless for six years, and the [child welfare] system has never had any contact with them. They've missed the system. The system has missed them.... They have not been able to enter into the system so they are not eligible for the services that are available to the foster youth...I would like to broaden the definition of foster youth, because I feel that a youth that has spent one night out on the street should get something for that.

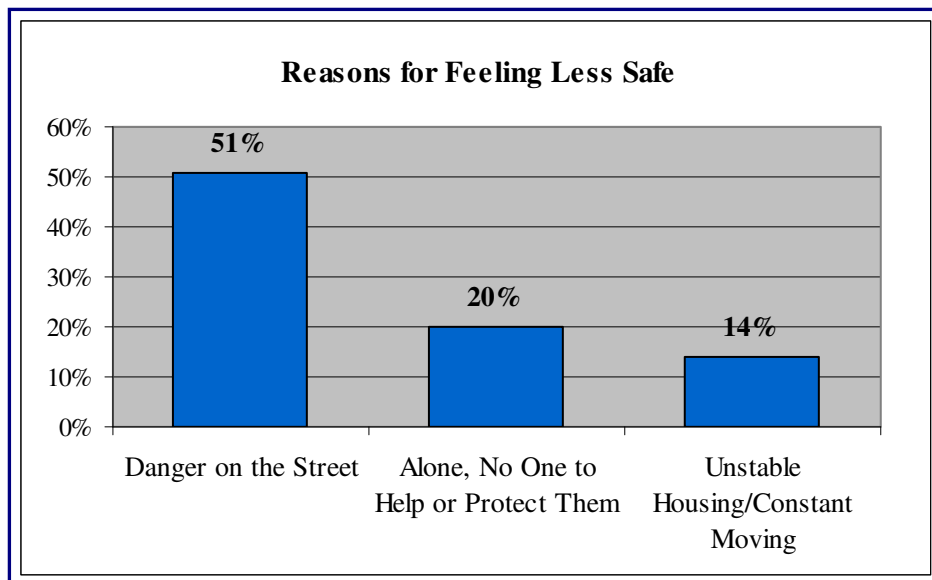
--Tasha Norris, Associate Executive Director
WIND Center, Sacramento

DO YOU FEEL MORE SAFE OR LESS SAFE SINCE LEAVING HOME? WHY?

Young people on the streets face high levels of victimization and trauma. A study of homeless youth in Seattle, for example, found that 35 percent had been beaten up, 39 percent robbed, and 44 percent threatened with a weapon. In addition, 31 percent of females and 13 percent of males had been sexually assaulted.¹⁴ According to researchers at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, as many as 43 percent of homeless adolescent males and 39 percent of homeless adolescent females report having been assaulted with a weapon while on the streets.¹⁵ At the same time, these researchers point out, "The majority of youth on the street...have decided that the challenges and dangers of living in a street environment are preferable to continuing the life they experienced at home, in foster care, or in a group home."¹⁶

Our research team asked a general question as an effort to explore the ramifications of the youths' decision to leave home, to find out whether leaving home situations in which they felt or were unsafe had improved their sense of security or whether they were simply trading one danger for another.

Forty-nine percent of those who answered this question said that they had been less safe since becoming homeless. A significant minority, however, (38 percent) felt safer since leaving home; the remaining 13 percent said their safety level had remained the same.



Of those who felt less safe than before, over half referenced the dangers and vulnerability associated with life on the street, including those associated with drug use and the drug trade. Another 14 percent cited housing instability and moving from place to place as detriments to their sense of safety.

Young people on the streets are generally seen and treated as a threat by the public and police – not as children in need of protection.

These answers were particularly poignant when taken in the context of answers to subsequent questions about how they felt they were perceived by the general public, and about their interactions with law enforcement. Taken together, these responses indicate that many homeless young people must deal both with their own sense of vulnerability and victimization, potential and actual, and the fact that they are generally perceived by the public and by law enforcement as a potential threat or menace rather than as children in need of protection themselves.

Way less safe, because I'm living in a crazy town and I'm really scared. I wish I could go back home but I can't.

--Female, 18, Salinas

Less safe, there is no resources out there. I had to sleep in the car with my kids and it's really not safe on these streets.

--Female, 23, Fresno

I don't know what kind of people are out here, and plus I'm young.

--Female, 18, Fresno

Hella less safe, because now it's even harder. I meet new people, but it's not cool, and I'm a female, too, so I gotta watch my back, because guys try to rape me, and they try to put me on the track (force into prostitution). Females try to take advantage of me. It's just hard life out here.... I hate it. I wasn't brought up like this.

--Female, 18, Albany

Twenty percent said they felt less safe because they were alone with no one to help or protect them.

Less, because I have no one to take care of me.

--Female, 19, San Francisco

I feel like I got to take care of myself.... I ain't got my mom and stuff no more.

--Male, 19, Fresno

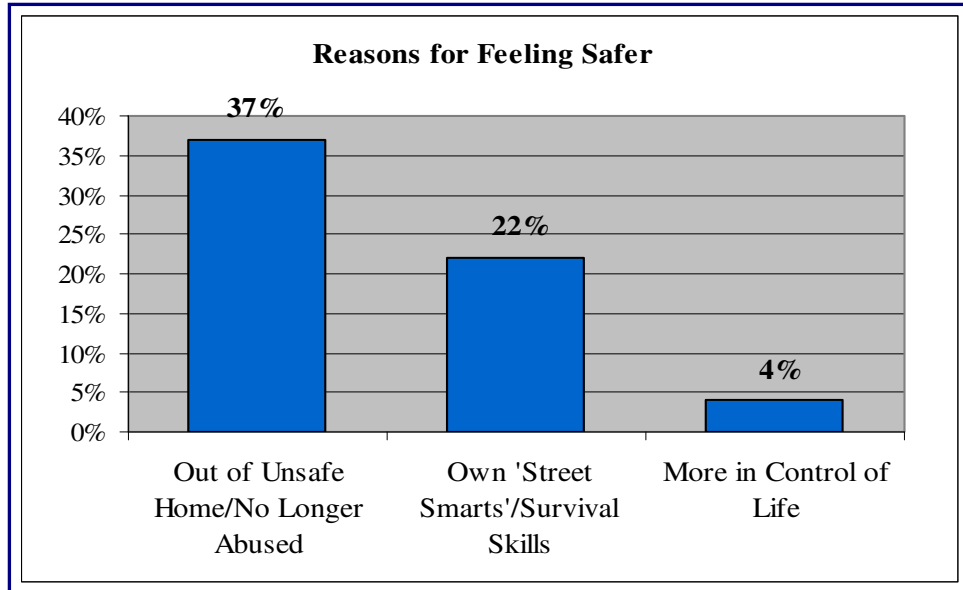
Less safe, 'cause I don't have anybody to count on.

--Female, 19, San Francisco

Despite overwhelming concerns about being the victims of crime, the two individuals that mentioned the police in the context of questions about safety perceived them as a threat, not a source of recourse or protection, heightening the need for hyper-vigilance.

I been unsafe because you gotta watch out for the police when you're outside and they harass you, they ask you questions. So yeah, I'm unsafe.

--Female, 15, Tracy



Of those who told our researchers they felt safer since becoming homeless, over 35 percent said it was because they were out of unsafe homes, no longer being abused, and/or were away from family members.

Close to 40% felt safer since leaving home.

Yes (more safe), because I am not getting into fights with my step dad.

--Male, 19, San Francisco

More safe, 'cause my step dad used to beat my a--.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

Right now that I'm on my own I feel safe. Nothing today compares to what I've been through in the past, so I guess I built up a tolerance and I don't fear that much anymore.

--Male, 22, Fresno

Over one-fifth of the youth attributed their sense of greater safety to their own “street smarts” or survival skills, and a small percent said they felt safer because they were more in control of their lives.

More because I have acquired quite a bit of street smarts.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

More safe because I'm learning how to cope with the tough environment on the streets.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Because I have more control over the situations I get into and can leave at any time.

--Male, 19, San Diego

I feel safer because I have more direct control over what happens to me.

--Male, 17, Los Angeles

Others cited access to services, school, employment, and supportive friends as sources of safety.

Safer, because I'm in the KT House and there is more security, more role models, and there are people that are trying to help you.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

I got a lot better friends out here on the streets than I did living in a house.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

I have a lot of street family, pretty much, out here that will help me, you know. I didn't have that back in my hometown. It feels better knowing a lot of people, being able to hang out with lots of people.

--Male, 18, Santa Cruz

Four percent of the youth respondents described their safety level as mixed, reflecting the tradeoffs that young people who become homeless after fleeing abuse are forced to make.

Less and more. I feel less because I don't have stable housing, but more because I'm not getting hurt every day.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

More safe as in my dad isn't calling the police on me, but less safe as in, you know, less safe.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

More safe as in being away from my family, less safe as in just being scared of being on the streets.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

I've felt more safe because I've learned more things throughout my homeless time, but at the same time less safe, because it just ain't safe out there in the world, man.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

In the middle. Maybe more safe because I don't get abused no more, less safe because I been sleeping on the streets and stuff.

--Transgender, 19, San Jose

Less safe 'cause of dangers of street life and unpredictability, but more safe because no more abuse from parents.

--Female, 19, San Francisco

I feel like I've been safer in a way 'cause I haven't had to deal with the sexual abuse, and in a way not, 'cause as soon as I got out I was forced on heroin.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

Youth asked for better responses to the abuse and neglect they and their peers experienced.

- ✓ *I would change the law that says when cops find a runaway they bring them back to their parents. Usually the parents are abusing the kid and that's why they're a runaway. Cops should send a kid to a teen shelter.*

--Female, 17, San Diego

- ✓ *That the people who get away with treating kids wrong get punished!*

--Male, 16, San Francisco

- ✓ *I wish CPS or the police would take some kind of action on non-life threatening child abuse other than: "Tough luck, wait till you're 18 and leave!"*

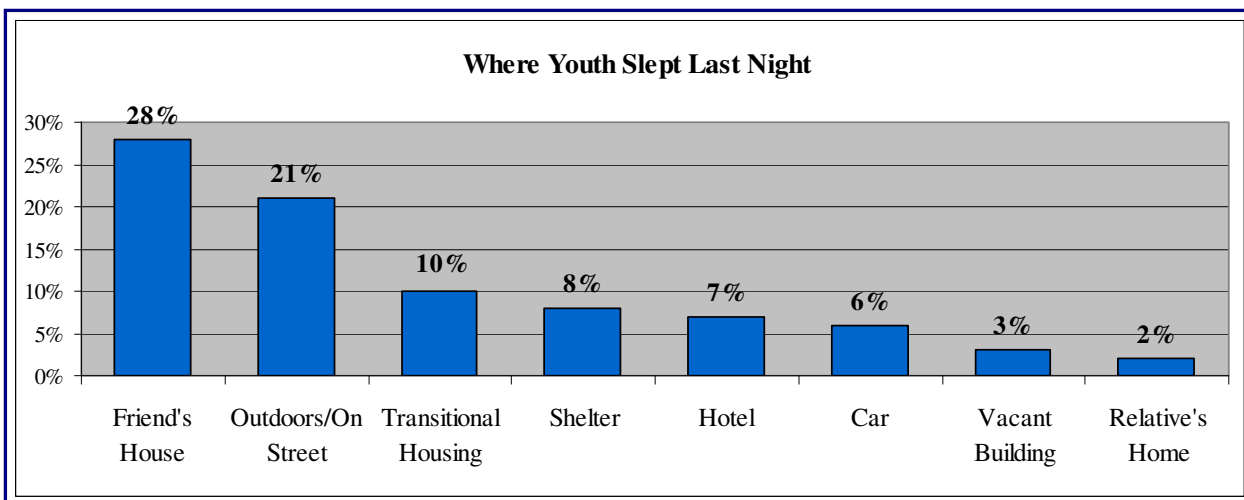
--Male, 19, San Diego



LIFE ON THE STREET

WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT?

In an indication of the importance of social networks in surviving homelessness, close to 30 percent of those interviewed said they spent the previous night couch surfing at a friend's house. At the same time, many made it clear that their welcome was limited and this was a short-term solution.



I went to a friend's house 'cause I've been sick.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

I slept at my friend's house last night but their parents didn't know so it's kind of a secret.

--Male, 16, Fresno

On the floor of my friend's room in the SRO (single room occupancy hotel). Right there.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

Well, I did meet this person, this friend, but he can only let me stay there for one night. So it's like I got blessed and I stayed at his place for one night.

--Male, 18, Fresno

Thirty percent had spent the previous night on the street, in a car, or squatting in a vacant apartment.

In the gutter. Usually it's on the sidewalk, but I woke up in the gutter.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

Last night I slept on the streets. I sleep wherever I lay.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

Under the bridge, in a bush.

--Female, 24, San Francisco

Laid out on a park bench.

--Female, 17, San Francisco

Six miles into the mountains. I had to walk it.

--Male, 18, Santa Cruz

Behind the church on Hollywood and Gower in my tent.

--Female, 19, Los Angeles

Last night I spent a good portion of the night walking around and I ended up in front of a hotel in the parking lot, passed out right there.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

In a park restroom.

--Male, 22, Fresno

I slept in one of my best friends' car after work.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

Eight percent had spent the previous night at a shelter, and ten percent were living in transitional housing.

Wow, now I'm thankful for the shelter. I slept in my bed. I usually sleep on the ground and about this time I would've been freezing.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

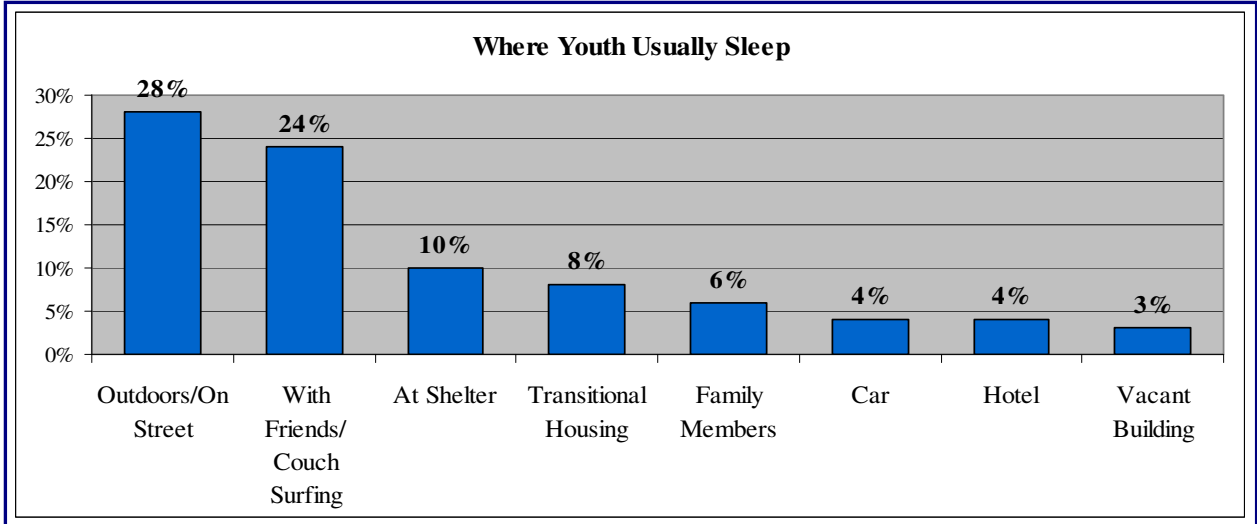
Seven percent said they slept at a hotel, a short-term solution that can be so costly, even in cheap single-room occupancy hotels, that it prevents young people from saving enough money for a deposit on an apartment, where they might pay significantly less in monthly rent. Only two percent had slept at a relative's house.

Last night from working with Arrow Ads we were able to get our own hotel for a week. Before that, we were sleeping in an abandoned garage.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

WHERE DO YOU USUALLY SLEEP?

Overall, answers to this question revealed that for many homeless youth, finding a place to sleep each night is a constant struggle.



Close to thirty percent reported that they usually slept outdoors or on the street; another seven percent usually slept in a car or squatted in vacant apartments or buildings; four percent usually slept in a hotel.

On the street...where else?

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Anywhere I can find a good spot that I know that probably the police can't find me.

--Male, 21, Santa Cruz

Under the bridge...wherever I fall over.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

I stay up until the BART opens. I don't go to sleep at night.

--Male, 23, San Francisco

I sleep usually behind the back of the Staples in Hollywood. Sometimes I go to another spot. Just on the streets.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

In abandoned cars or on a park bench. Anywhere I can find.

--Male, 22, Fresno

Under a pile of wood, looks like an old native tent. Under the free heaven...under the skies. Different places.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

A quarter of the youth reported that they usually slept at a friend's house or "couch-surfed." Examined more closely, these responses revealed a deep degree of instability and tenuousness associated with these arrangements.

I was going from home to home.

--Female, 20, Fresno

Now I have a house but when I didn't we sleep at friends' house and we stand at a bus stop one night, in a van for a month.

--Female, 15, San Francisco

I normally try to stay with my friends in their houses, but sometimes I've had to stay out there in parks and at schools, at nights and weekends.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

At a friend's house for a while, then he had to work so I walked around. I usually sleep at a friend's house, or a boyfriend, or during the daytime. Or I don't sleep for a night sometimes.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Last night I slept on my friend's couch. I go from friend to friend and if I can't find that I will wrap up with my sleeping bag and find somewhere to crash out. Somewhere that's dry.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Hell yeah, I hate couch surfing. I be couch surfing at different people's houses and I go to a shelter every now and then. Man, there's been times I slept at abandoned restaurants and slept on buses catching AC Transit all night all throughout the city.

--Female, 18, Albany

Well, I went to my friend's house until they couldn't stand me. After that I slept in cars and pretty much did whatever.

--Male, 21, Fresno

My friend's house. I just spend the night and then I have to leave. He got a family and I just stay the night.

--Male, 23, Fresno

Ten percent usually slept at a shelter and eight percent stayed at a transitional living center. Six percent usually slept at a family member's house, including parents, but again, these arrangements were tenuous and unstable.

In the backyard of the house. I usually sleep in the backyard, they don't know.

--Female, 16, Richmond

A number of respondents gave multiple answers, indicating a constant search for a roof over their heads.

I stay at other people's houses, stay out all night and walk around. Sometime I'll stay in the park or if I have money, hotels.

--Female, 19, San Francisco

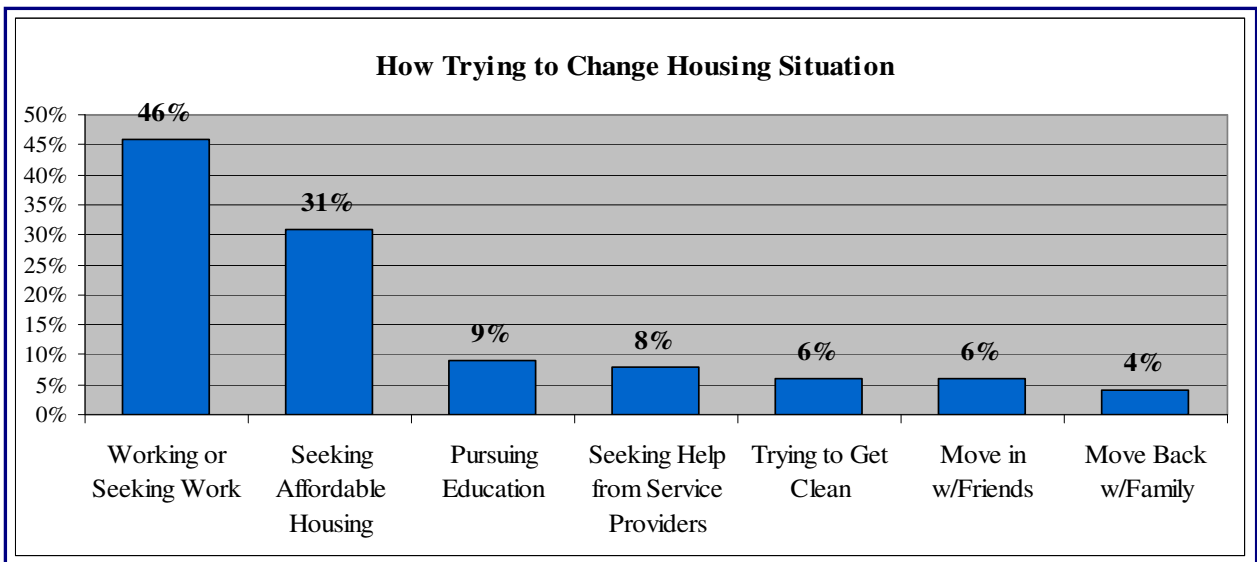
Jail. When I'm not in jail I don't sleep enough to have a regular spot.

--Male, 21, San Francisco

ARE YOU TRYING TO CHANGE YOUR HOUSING SITUATION?

The response to this question made it overwhelmingly clear that for the great majority of young people, homelessness was not a “lifestyle choice” but rather an unwanted situation they were struggling to get out of. Close to 90 percent – the largest group to be in agreement on any question on the interview template – said they were trying to change their housing situation.

IF SO, HOW ARE YOU TRYING TO DO THAT?



Over 45 percent of those trying to change their housing situation said they were trying to do so by working or looking for work and nearly one-third were seeking affordable housing. Close to ten percent said they were pursuing an education in the hope that it would lead to stable housing.

Trying to save up money by a really crappy job.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

Less than 10%
sought help with
housing from
service providers.

Eight percent of the youth responding reported that they looked to community-based organizations or service providers for help in changing their housing situation. Six percent said they were trying to get clean and another six percent were hoping or planning to move in with friends and/or roommates.

I am trying to find people that I can live with that are reliable.

--Male, 23, San Francisco

Trying to find places where I can stay at friends' houses, but it's like I used it up, and I don't know what to do.

--Male, 18, Fresno

Several described efforts to build social networks in an attempt to find stability.

I am (trying to change my situation) by getting good contacts and networking with people, so I can have people to contact, and get a job so I can pay rent and have a stable place to stay at.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Four percent hoped to work out their problems with their families and move back in with them.

I'm trying to get back in with my parents by talking to them.

--Female, 18, Fresno

I am thinking about coming back home, but I don't want things to be like they used to.

--Female, 16, San Francisco

I'm trying to move to Arizona with my family. The problem is I don't have any money to get the bus ticket.

--Female, 19, San Francisco

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE IN TRYING TO FIND A MORE STABLE SITUATION?

Thirteen percent said that finding affordable housing was a challenge, and fourteen percent said it was difficult to find a job that would provide enough income to obtain and maintain housing. “*Rent is very high,*” said one respondent. “*Income is low,*” added another – together, offering a succinct summary of a central challenge.

Recent research indicates that finding and holding onto affordable housing is becoming more difficult nationwide and particularly in California. According to the Center for Housing Policy, the number of working families with critical housing needs – those who paid more than half their income for housing and/or lived in severely dilapidated housing

– increased by 73 percent between 1997 and 2005. The highest rates of critical housing needs – one in six families – were found in the West, with particularly severe needs in Los Angeles, Anaheim, and San Diego.¹⁷ According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, California is second only to Hawaii as the least affordable state in the nation. To rent a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent in the Los Angeles area, for example, a minimum wage worker would have to work 108 hours a week.¹⁸ Homeless young people, who are generally able to secure only low-wage employment, if any, face a particularly steep battle in a housing market such as this.

I don't have a job, so how am I gonna get a place? That's all.

--Female, 17, Stockton

A lack of jobs, really.... All the jobs around here are pretty much high tech, (and) even the ones that are not all that high-tech aren't really paying enough for you to get into a place. It's so high cost of living in San Jose, kind of keeps you down.

--Male, 25, San Jose

I'm trying to get a job. Me being a high school drop-out, many places won't let me work.

--Female, 18, Hayward

In focus groups, young people discussed the challenges of holding down work and being a reliable employee without access to stable housing. As one young woman in Los Angeles explained: *If you're on the streets and you get a job, you know what? They don't care about you being homeless. They don't care about your situation. If you're late, then you're fired. If you are on the streets and you're getting a paycheck, guess what your paycheck goes to? Going inside for the evening because it's raining outside.*

Shelter regulations, focus group participants also observed, sometimes make it hard to find and maintain employment. Many shelters ban cell phone use, so that keeping in contact with current or potential employers becomes difficult. Shelter curfews often interfere with work schedules, as homeless youth, who often have weak or non-existent resumes, might be offered only swing or graveyard shifts. One 20-year-old in the Sacramento focus group described sleeping in a shelter two nights each week—his days off from his fast food job, where he worked a 6 p.m.-2 a.m. shift. The other five nights, because he could not access the shelter in the middle of the night, *"I'd roll out my sleeping bag and pass out at the light rail station."*

Other challenges to stabilizing their lives that young people cited included finding information, lack of credit history, lack of ID and other documents, a criminal record, discrimination, lack of transportation, pet ownership, lack of self-confidence, finding childcare, difficulty in leaving other homeless friends behind, drug addiction, poor decision-making, harassment by law enforcement, mental illness, immigration status, and lack of money generally.

The fact that I'm young, and a lot of people don't like to rent to young people because they are not (well)-established, and the fact that I'm gay, too.... As much as people say that they don't really look at that or care about that, I know that they do, so I know that is going to be harder.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

I don't want to use drugs. I'm trying to go to a program.

--Male, 18, San Francisco

Repeating a theme that emerged throughout the interviews, some youth cited the criminalization of homelessness as exacerbating their instability by keeping them on the move.

A lot of traveling, trying to find spots where you can just kind of hang out and chill – to not be hassled by law enforcement or anybody.

--Male, 21, Santa Cruz

Not knowing if it's going to rain or not, not having a roof over my head. If it gets soaked, I'm screwed! All I got is cover. It's illegal to camp outside anywhere, so I can get in trouble for that.

--Male, 18, Santa Cruz

In the San Francisco focus group, young people – several of whom were involved in the street economy – described the trap of scrambling to earn money for a hotel room each night and spending so much money trying to keep from sleeping on the street (a \$65 room in a cheap “single room occupancy” hotel adds up to close to \$2000 per month) that they were never able to save up enough for the deposit on an apartment, which would be more affordable in the long run.

“I'm accumulating a lot of money, but I'm not being able to utilize it right,” said Alana. *“It's a constant making and spending thing,”* agreed Curtis. *“You never get the opportunity to save.”*

This led to a spirited discussion of the difficulty of getting out of “survival mode” and thinking about the future when you are 16 or 17 and trying to make it on your own...

Jonah offered this description of the cycle he found himself in as a teenager: Our mother had lost her mind. We got evicted from our house. Me and my brother went to stay with our pops. When I was 17, he kicked me out for forgetting to wash the dishes one night. After that I was immediately on the streets. I got nine brothers and sisters. All my brothers and sisters were spread out over all my other relatives' houses. Nobody had room or want for me there. So instantly I became an adult, but I wasn't making adult decisions. I'm posting here and I'm doing this.... I need to do this to survive. But I'm not thinking that, OK, I could easily walk into this place and fill out this application. And if I could just do what I need to do for two weeks, I'll get a check, and that check will be large enough for me to get someplace to stay for at least another two weeks. It becomes a shortsighted thing, where you are just so caught up in survival mode that you have no foresight whatsoever. You can't think about tomorrow for being so stuck in survival.

According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, “Homelessness itself poses an almost insurmountable barrier to participation in education and employment. For many youth, the immediate challenges of survival, lack of physical safety, haunting memories of past trauma, and even lack of access to showers and clean clothes can all contribute to an environment not conducive to learning or work.”¹⁹

At the same time, youth identified both school and work as crucial stepping stones to stable housing. The result is a vicious cycle in which the circumstances of homelessness itself impeded young people’s efforts to get out of it. Overall, the discussion of the challenges to finding stability made it clear that young people felt enmeshed in a tangle of issues and barriers that fed on each other and often overwhelmed their efforts to find stability.

While youth identified school and work as important steps to stable housing, homelessness itself is a barrier to participation in both.

The challenges I face are being in an unstable situation, and trying to work and save money at the same time.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

I’m interested in getting a place, but getting a job around here is kind of hard – especially one that will let you pay to get your own house or apartment, or move in with somebody, or something like that. So it’s just easier to live on the streets. It’s a lot cheaper. Cost of living is way down.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Trying to get a job and a place. It’s hard to get a job if you can’t find a place to sleep.

--Female, 19, San Diego

The challenges I face: not enough money, nobody wanting to rent to you because you don’t make three times the rent, waiting for Section 8. Just being homeless in itself. There is no in between. There is no transitional housing. There are maybe one or two shelters, and that’s it.

--Female, 22, Fresno

The fact that I have nowhere to shower, clean my clothes or get adequate sleep prevents me from being able to walk into appointments and things that I need to be able to walk into.

--Female, 19, Los Angeles

I’m trying actually to get job, and I have a daughter who I’ve been trying to (regain custody of). I have been doing classes and fighting through the court system, so it’s all very complicated ‘cause it takes up a lot of my time. At the same time I’m expected to find housing and to get a job and maintain a normal or average life, which is technically really hard when you start up at the dumps.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

Several added that the stigma associated with homelessness impeded their efforts to find stability.

There is a lot of poverty, and people look down on you. They shut you away like a fly.

--Male, 22, Fresno

Well, it's hard when you really look like a street kid, you don't look like you have money, to get into the system and find somewhere to work or stay.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Those Not Trying to Change Their Housing Situation

The small number – 11 percent – who said they were not trying to change their housing situation fell into two categories: those who said they preferred being homeless or found advantages to it, and those who had simply despaired.

I'm not trying to change my housing situation. I like living in squats and stuff, and I'm not into that stable housing stuff.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

Not at the moment, because I'm choosing to be on the road. It's what I want to do right now. It's a good way to learn about yourself, out here taking care of yourself. Just working, doing the same thing everybody does, nine to five – that's not my way.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

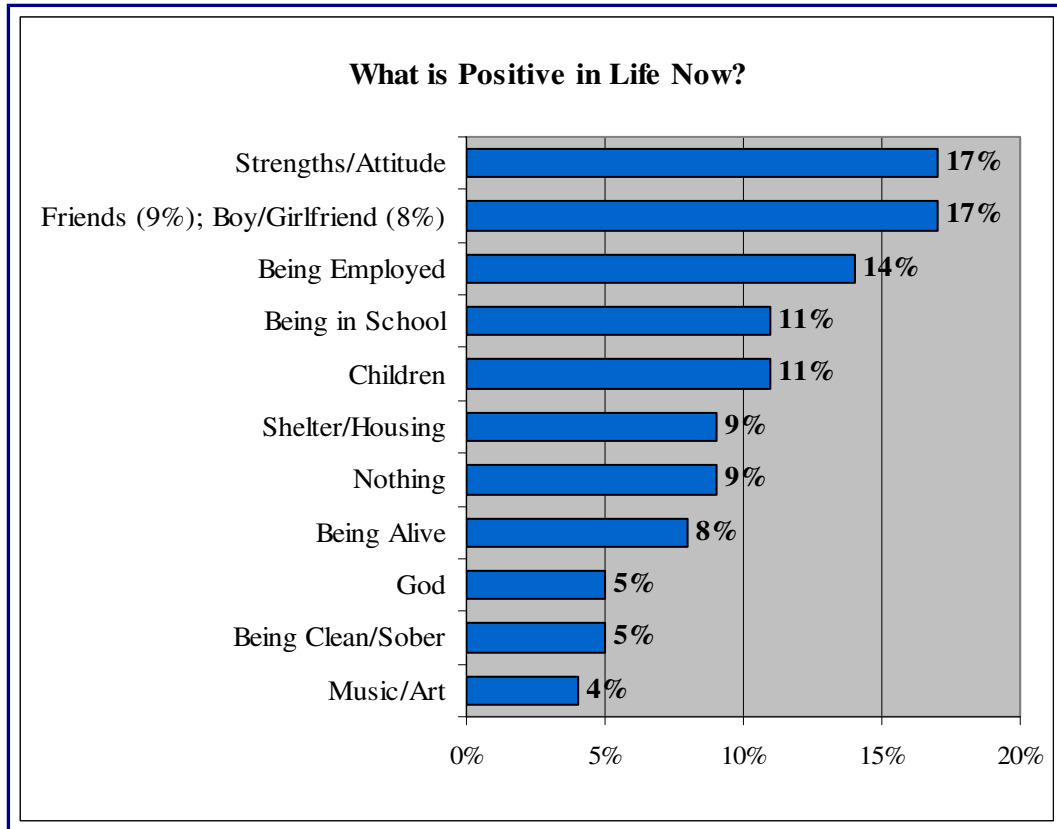
Never will have housing in San Francisco.

--Female, 17, San Francisco

At the Los Angeles focus group, one young man explained why the autonomy of street life was preferable to him to the comforts of home: *I could get off the streets so fast. I know I can. I could go sign up for a school. Go get a job. Go get some program. Get a house. It ain't that...hard. But no...I don't even like living in a house. I don't like walls. I don't like ceilings. I'd rather sleep under stars and trees...or in a tree, actually. That would be even better...a tree. I don't need a house. I ain't working...I run the show at all times. I work for myself and do whatever I want and it pays great – just not money.... I ain't paying taxes to fix the streetlight for a ...car that I'm never going to have.... Hell no...I'm done.*

WHAT IS GOOD, OR POSITIVE, IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

The answers to this question laid to rest any romanticized notion of street life and indicate the need for increased avenues to stability such as employment and education. Aside from two young people who cited the ability to travel as a positive factor in their lives, virtually no one gave answers that indicated they had chosen street life or perceived it as a desirable way of life.



A larger number, however, did cite some element of their own capacity to survive as positive. Eleven percent cited internal strengths – their own positive attitude, motivation, characteristics, or efforts – and three percent pointed to their ability to care for themselves. Eight percent said simply being alive.

I'm alive, I'm breathing, and I get to eat every day.

--Male, 21, Santa Cruz

My health, my well-being, how I'm able to take care of myself and keep a smile on my face right about now.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Probably just becoming more independent and...learning how to rely on myself, because I'm truly the only one that's going to make it out.

--Female, 21, Fresno

The fact that I have a job to begin with is good because I have a little bit of money to live on. And the fact that I'm a strong person and I'm happy with the choices I make. So I'm just happy with the way things are. They could be a lot worse.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

My attitude and my drive to get a regular, decent job so I can get the hell out of the situation I'm in.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

The fact that my girl and me are working pretty hard to get off the streets.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

My motivation is pretty good right now.... I've been waking up every day saying, "You know what, you can do it, you can make it, get through this day, get one step closer to where you wanna be, just accomplish something."

--Female, 18, Albany

The thing that's positive is my attitude about things. The situation of where I'm at, it changes constantly. The only thing I could really rely on is my attitude. Being able to think positive is what's good.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Relatively large numbers gave answers that might be classified, together, under "opportunity." Fourteen percent – the largest group to give a single answer – said that being employed was good or positive, indicating that homeless youth want to work and, when they are able to work, perceive it as an important avenue to stability and a source of optimism. Over ten percent cited going to school as positive.

The fact that I'm working three jobs and steady income coming in.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

Mostly my job. It feels really good to be employed. I don't even have to flip burgers! Also I start school in the winter so I'm pretty happy about that.

-- Male, 19, San Diego

That I have a job and that I'm going to school and that I'm keeping well and I'm not kicked out (of the transitional living center) yet. I'm following all the rules.

--Male, 19, Fresno

I'm homeless but I still have a job. I make it to clean, I make it to rested, I prove myself responsible, and that's enough for me.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

At the statewide youth/provider convening, Joseph, who became homeless after his parents put him out when he turned 18 (a phenomenon that youth workers say is becoming more common among parents who fear legal repercussions if they expel their children earlier), described the importance of finding a caring employer who understood his circumstances: *What really helped me was I just happened to run into somebody who gave a damn about me. They knew I wasn't going to find a job...being on the street. It just wasn't going to happen.... I could be late because the cops came and swarmed my quit last night and I had to spend all night looking for a place to sleep. So I wasn't going to be working at McDonald's or anything like that. I wasn't going to go to school because of the same reason. So what ended up happening is that somebody gave a damn. They gave me an internship, knowing that I was a homeless youth, and knowing that I'm going to have these challenges. So they just worked with me.... Once I had that, that's when I had that strength to say, 'OK, if I can stick with this, maybe I can get myself out of this rut.'* And I'm still in the middle of getting myself out that rut.

Nine percent cited having shelter or housing as positive and five percent answered "God."

That I love God. I mean, I pray that maybe one day he will forgive me for all that I've done and put me in a safe home so I can know that I'm loved.

--Female, 18, Hayward

Five percent said being clean and sober was positive.

I've been clean and sober for eleven days. I am trying to do something different with my life versus what I used to do.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

I'm 21 and I made it. I'm sober.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

Peer relations were another area respondents cited frequently. Eight percent said a relationship with a boy or girlfriend was positive, and nine percent cited friends. Interestingly, many young people indicated that stable housing and/or stable employment had developed simultaneously with positive relationships, indicating that each is necessary for the other to flourish.

I've been able to obtain a stable job, a friend that is very dependable, and a stable relationship.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

My friends that I consider my family. I have a good job even though my boss is crazy, ha-ha, I have a roof over my head, and I got meals in my stomach and people who care. I think that's the biggest thing I have right now.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

I'm in school, I'm working, I'm saving money, I'm meeting new people, and I stay in a really great place.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

My job, the fact that I have somewhere to live and I'm getting closer to getting my own place, and that I have a good relationship.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

None of the youth identified a relationship with a services provider or adult in a helping role when describing what was good and positive.

My connection with friends and my will to make it.

--Female, 19, San Francisco

That I'm not on the streets and I have a good friend, and as long as I don't mess up right here everything will be good.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

Eleven percent of the respondents said their children were a good or positive thing in their lives. Only two individuals cited their parents, four mentioned siblings, and four said "family" in general. None reported a relationship with a service provider or other adult in a helping role when asked what was good in their lives.

Four percent cited music or art as a positive element in their lives. "Whether it's painting, music, or writing," one Los Angeles focus group participant said of another who was involved with the local arts scene, "all I know is that is really helping him. Otherwise he'd be out there fighting every day like he used to be. That's what kept me going (too)."

Nine percent said there was nothing good or positive in their lives, and three individuals said they did not know.

Right now I am actually sick and worn out so I can't say anything about that right now.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

Nothing much. I don't know, my life is just really bad right now. I'm just stressed out, I'm homeless and I'm young. I just can't do it by myself, you know.

--Female, 13, Oakland

Nothing because I'm freakin' homeless.

--Female, 16, Fairfield

Absolutely nothing.

--Female, 24, San Jose

BEING ON THE STREETS, HOW DO YOU THINK PEOPLE PERCEIVE YOU?

This question was added by the youth researchers, who thought it was important to communicate the stigma associated with being young and homeless. The answers, not surprising, were overwhelmingly negative.

Young people reported being perceived as, or called, “lazy, bad kid, bum, troublemaker, lowlife, piece of s—, scumbag, junkie, whore, gangbanger, the lowest of the low, and worthless.”

Either another bad kid, or most of them see me as a runaway, or someone whose parents didn't raise them right.

--Female, 16, Richmond

Well, they get the impression that I'm a lowlife that doesn't know anything, just hanging on the streets. I guess they think I'm a bad person.

--Female, 17, Stockton

As the scum of the earth, the lowest of the low.

--Female, 24, San Jose

Probably a nobody. I was on the street for a while and people looked at me and said 'Why can't you get your own job? Why can't you pay for your own food?' They looked at me like I was a piece of junk, just a piece of scum off the road.

--Male, 18, Fresno

They look at me as another person on the streets. Like nobody ever says 'hi' to me. All my friends that I used to have, they keep walking, they don't never say 'hi' they don't offer me a place to stay or nothing. It really hurts my feelings.

--Female, 18, Hayward

A lot of people ignore me, or yell at me.

--Male, 18, Santa Cruz

Lower than dirt. People look at you with contempt and disgust.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

People are just mean. It's life.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

People look at us like we are the strangest people in the earth.... They make you feel so ashamed, just right there asking for money, but that's all you can do because you're hungry or you're starving or you're sick and you need to get some medicine.... They just treat you like you're nothing.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

When I was a minor it was all pity. When you're an adult, it's all contempt.

--Male, 19, San Diego

Given that most young people reported being on the street because they had been thrown or pushed out of their families, this widespread sense that they were perceived as being to blame for their situation was particularly painful.

Like I'm a prostitute. Some of them think that we have a place to go and we don't want to go, but the reality is that our own parents are the ones that kicked us out.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

People think that it is my fault to be in the streets, but they don't even know me, and they don't know what happened to me.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

As lazy or like I want to be here.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

They probably thought that if I was on the streets, it's because I maybe done something really bad, or since I'm in the streets I'm going to do something really bad like steal or something like that.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

Well, since I'm already black, it's just statistical, you know what I'm saying? It's like, 'Oh, another black guy on the streets, oh well, who gives a damn.' Me honestly, I feel like I'm homeless not because it's something I chose but it's because...events led up to it.

--Male, 21, Los Angeles

Over ten percent said they were perceived as “dirty” – a response which may explain why the need for clean clothes and a place to shower came up frequently in response to other questions on the survey.

They probably think I'm a dirty worthless nothing.

--Female, 18, San Jose

Dirty, indolent, worthless.

--Male, 17, Los Angeles

Dirty, nasty, smelly, worthless. I mean that's pretty much it – they'll tell us straight to our face.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

They judge you on the street because you're not stable, you're not as clean as you should be, and they judge you on that and stuff.

--Female, 15, Tracy

What came through most powerfully was how very aware young people were of how negatively they were perceived by others, and how many believed the general public thought their homelessness was their own fault.

Given the high aspirations most held for themselves – to pursue their education, attain career goals, and find stable housing – the perception that they were “going nowhere” was particularly painful for many.

They think that I have nothing going on, that I'm just another kid on the street that has no future.

--Female, 17, Stockton

As stupid, no education, she never gonna get anywhere and she ain't gonna amount to anything. They just look at me different.

--Female, 21, Fresno

Probably, I feel, like I don't have an education...and don't have any chance of being anybody, because we are labeled to society as useless and helpless.

--Female, 23, Fresno

As a lost cause.

--Male, 17, San Francisco

Some offered explicit challenges to the negative perceptions they felt were directed at them, and specifically to the notion that they were “not trying” or were to blame for their situation.

As a bad abandoned bum all the time.... I'm not a bum, a bad guy, or nothing. At least look at me in the eyes when I talk to you.... Just 'cause you wear nice clothes or whatever, you drive a car, you aren't better than me. I mean, I can see why you think that, but at least look me in the eyes when you walk by me.

--Male, 19, Fresno

They see me on the streets and they think I'm a ho. They look at me as if I don't have somewhere to go and I'm constantly on the streets and that I don't care about myself. Just negative images. They don't know me.

--Female, 21, Fresno

Close to ten percent felt they were perceived as a drug addict or alcoholic – an assumption which a number also challenged.

I think people assume if you're on the streets that you're lazy, or you do drugs, or you drink excessively to the point that you can't work, or that you're irresponsible, or that you did something bad that you got kicked out wherever you were.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

A lot of people see homeless kids as drug addicts or alcoholics, but that's not always the case. A lot of us are trying hard to get on our feet.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

Punk, drunk, a rebel – and I'm not.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

Others expressed a desire for those who prejudged them to make an effort to get to know them and see beyond stereotypes and assumptions.

I think we're so stereotyped. People automatically assume you are on drugs, a drug addict, or something like that. They don't take the time to look beneath the surface and see what's really going on. So I think they look at us like we're puke, the scum of society. That's before they take a deeper look, but not many people do that.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Generally they perceive me as a piece of s---. There are the few that actually take the chance to talk to you and see that you're not. Generally, they just think you're trash.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

Ten percent of the respondents did not report negative perceptions, including four percent who said others did not know they were homeless – generally because of their own efforts to conceal their situation. Only six percent said others had a positive perception of them such as “cool” or “intelligent.”

They probably think I'm a student. I work pretty hard to look like I'm not homeless, and I have a place to go, because I don't want the police to bother me.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

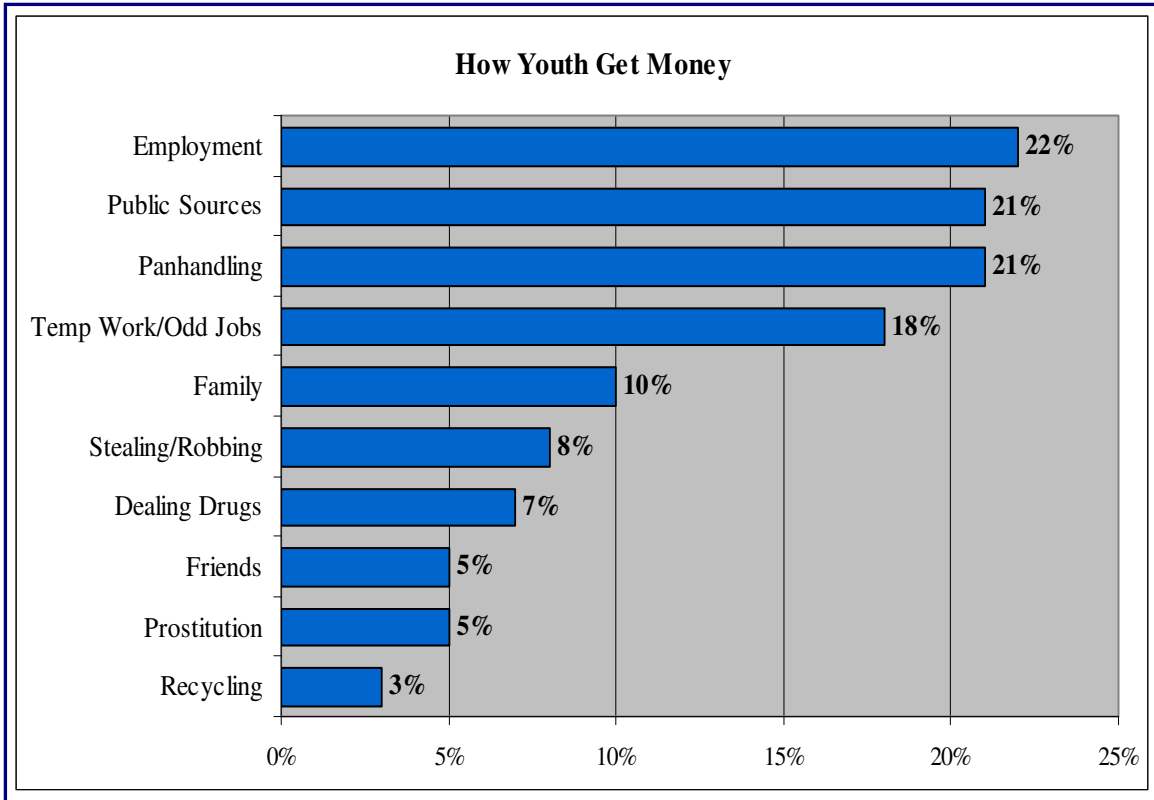
It seems like if you keep yourself clean with a nice shaved face and clean clothes, they treat you like a normal person, with respect.

--Male, 23, San Francisco

When I was on the streets, I was always moving, not staying only in one area too long. People saw me just like any other guy trying to get somewhere. The only thing is that they didn't know that I didn't have a destination.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

HOW DO YOU GET MONEY? ABOUT HOW MUCH MONEY DO YOU GET EACH WEEK?



Over 40 percent of the youth responding to the survey reported that their income came from working: 22 percent had income from regular employment and another 18 percent had income from temporary or odd jobs.

I'm working part time right now at McDonald's and another clothing store. It's hard 'cause they're only temporary and they only pay minimum wage.
 --Female, 23, Fresno

Well, I do know how to do hair. I've actually done some yard work. Find someone doing some work in houses and I ask, can I help?
 --Female, 22, Fresno

I play music on the street. I've had jobs on and off. I was doing concrete work for a while.
 --Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Prostitution, and I hang flyers on doors for random companies. (Prostitution pays) \$100 an hour. (Hanging flyers pays) \$7.50 an hour.
 --Male, 22, Yuba City

My job brings in a little bit of money. I get like \$200 every two weeks. Besides that, when I run out, I'll sponge or try to do side jobs for people that I know for extra cash.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

I braid hair and sometimes I'll go to my cousin's house and baby-sit her kids and she'll give me a little change.

--Female, 13, Oakland

Over one-fifth brought in money by panhandling and three percent recycled cans and bottles.

Generally I panhandle for it. Also, if someone tells me to get a job, I'll say 'Why don't you give me a job, dude?' I'm willing to work for scraps, pretty much, man. I'll do the work. It's just no one wants to give me the chance.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

I ask for change. It depends on if a security guard runs me away from there, but I try to make like six or seven (dollars) before they kick me out, and I come back about 30 minutes later.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Ask people or once in a while I'll rob them. I get an average every day about five dollars. From then I'll buy something to eat.

--Female, 18, Hayward

I collect cans or I ask people for change in the parking lot. Usually I average about \$60.

--Female, 19, Sacramento

Another fifth received income from some public source (SSI, TANF, disability, food stamps, or general assistance). Ten percent of the youth received money from family members and five percent got money from friends.

My family sends me money every so often, so that's enough for a hotel to go shower up, and then you're broke again.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Either ask people for money or I can beg my grandma to give it to me, like ten dollars, and she'll do that sometimes.

--Male, 16, Fresno

Sometimes I have friends...that would help me out when I need help the most. Within a week I can probably come up on 20 or 40 bucks if I need something to eat or if I need essential clothing or something like that.

--Male, 20, Fresno

My homegirl's mom. She sees me as her daughter, so it's cool.

--Female, 17, Stockton

Seven percent said they sold drugs, eight percent brought in money by stealing or robbing people and another five percent by prostitution. Other means of generating income included selling plasma, pimping, and making and selling things.

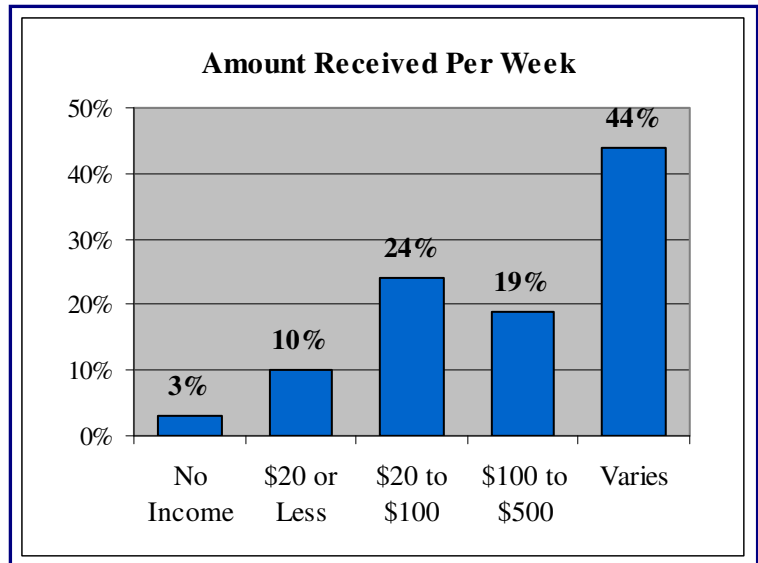
I will do anything for money. I will clean toilets. I will run into your house if the door was unlocked. I'd rob and steal, because I became rock bottom.... I have a schedule. Maybe one week I'll rob and steal, I'll rob somebody for their drugs, I'll sell soap if I have to. I make about \$30 to \$40 a week.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

Amount Received Per Week

In terms of the amount of money they lived on each week, many youth cobbled income together from a variety of sources, and many described their ability to get money as sporadic or variable.

Ten percent of the youth respondents brought in \$20 or less a week and a quarter reported between \$20 and \$100 a week. About one-fifth said they brought in between \$100 and \$500 a week and three percent reported no income at all. The remainder said their income varied.

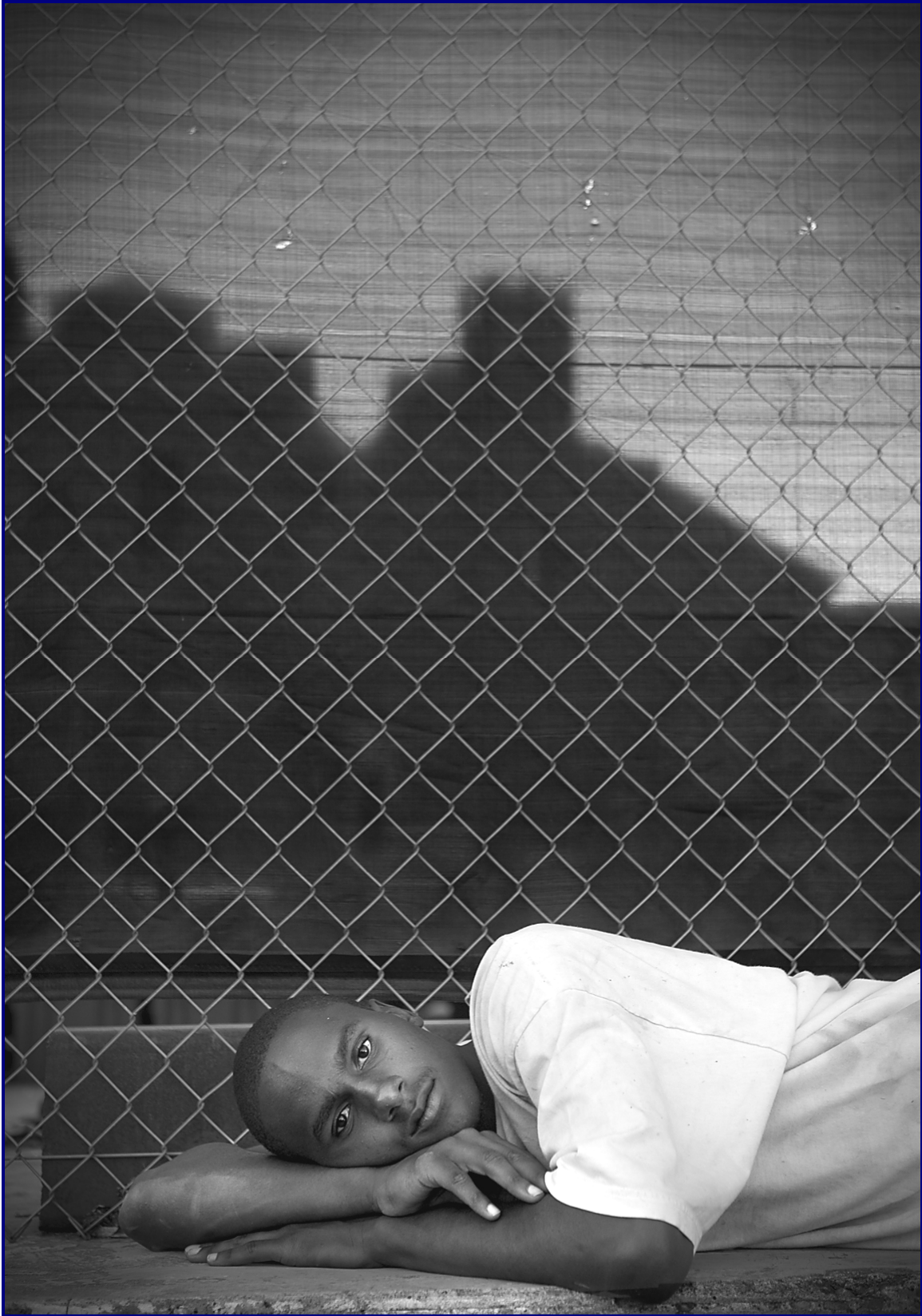


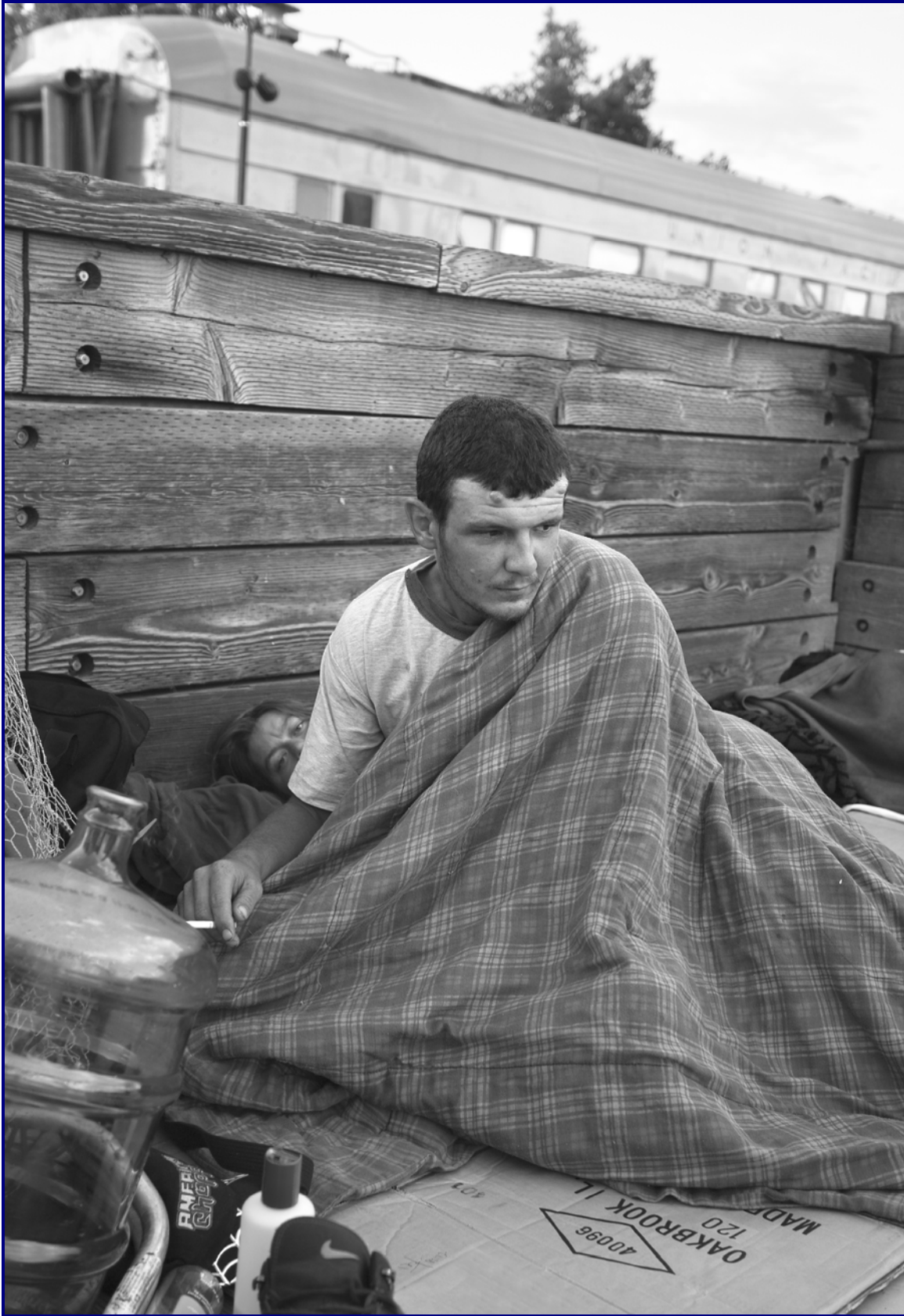
YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

Many of the youths' responses reflected a desire to see a fundamental right to shelter written into law. One-fifth asked for laws mandating that homeless youth have a place to stay, including creating more affordable or supported housing. Ten percent wanted more youth shelters, including those specifically for gay and lesbian youth and for young parents and children, and two percent wanted transitional housing mandated by law. Many of the answers reflected a desire to instill a sense of warmth and welcome into the shelter offered, and to remove limits, requirements, and stigma that kept young people from feeling genuinely "at home" in existing shelters or housing programs.

- ✓ *If I had the money to help kids, I would try to build some sort of real good shelter where they would feel real safe. Get comforting advice, let them feel good about the spot where they're at, not have to be ashamed about being in a homeless shelter and whatnot. Make sure that everybody has food to eat. As much as possible.*
--Male, 19, Santa Cruz
- ✓ *I would write legislation that would make it the legal responsibility of the government (of the state) in which the child resided that they provide a stable, safe housing situation.*
--Male, 25, San Francisco
- ✓ *I would make a law where if you're a homeless adult or youth, that there will always be somewhere you can go. 'Cause a lot of the time it's not your fault you get kicked out. That you have somewhere to go, mandatory, and you don't have to wait months or weeks to get in there.*
--Female, 21, Fresno
- ✓ *I would focus on a lot of these empty houses that are just sitting there rotting away. I would open them up for the homeless, try to make more shelter for women with children so they wouldn't have to be separated. Someone to just sit down and listen to their problems, because if you release the things on your mind that you're going through, that's when the healing starts.*
--Female, 22, Fresno
- ✓ *To get free housing where we wouldn't have to hustle.*
--Male, 19, San Francisco
- ✓ *I would build a big place for homeless youth but let them have freedom.*
--Male, 17, San Diego
- ✓ *I will build more housing for them to stay not only for 18 months but for five years.*
--Male, 20, Los Angeles
- ✓ *It would be if not make more buildings like this (transitional living center) at least make a building for homeless people 'cause they don't have nowhere to go, they're out in the street....They need a warm place to have a roof over their head and at least show that somebody cares.*
--Male, 20, Fresno
- ✓ *If I was to change a law there would be mandatory housing for homeless youth. Because sometimes it's not their fault they have to be out there. Sometimes it's the fault of other people.*
--Male, 25, San Jose





INTERACTIONS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

If you want to access homeless young adults, go to county jail. If there were services in county jail that helped people while they were in jail and also helped them transition once they were out, you would create a dramatic shift in homelessness among young adults. That would be the easiest place to start. Because if you are young and you are on the streets, you are getting arrested. There is no question about it.

Rob Gitin, Director
At the Crossroads, San Francisco

They tell me to stop loitering and to go back to my house. It hurts my feelings, because I have none.

--Female, 18, Hayward

This area of inquiry was suggested by the youth researchers, who described the constant fear – and experience – of encounters with the police as contributing to the sense of danger and hyper-vigilance that often accompanies homelessness. They also described the vicious cycle that the criminalization of homelessness creates, as unpaid tickets and/or a criminal record impedes their efforts to find employment and housing, stabilize their lives, and get off the streets.

According to the 2006 National Coalition for the Homeless report, over the past 25 years the trend has been towards increasing use of the criminal justice system – as opposed to social service agencies, mental health, etc. – to respond to homelessness. This includes the passage of measures that “target homeless persons by making it illegal to perform life-sustaining activities in public.” These measures prohibit activities such as sleeping/camping, eating, sitting, and begging in public spaces, usually including criminal penalties for violation of these laws.²⁰

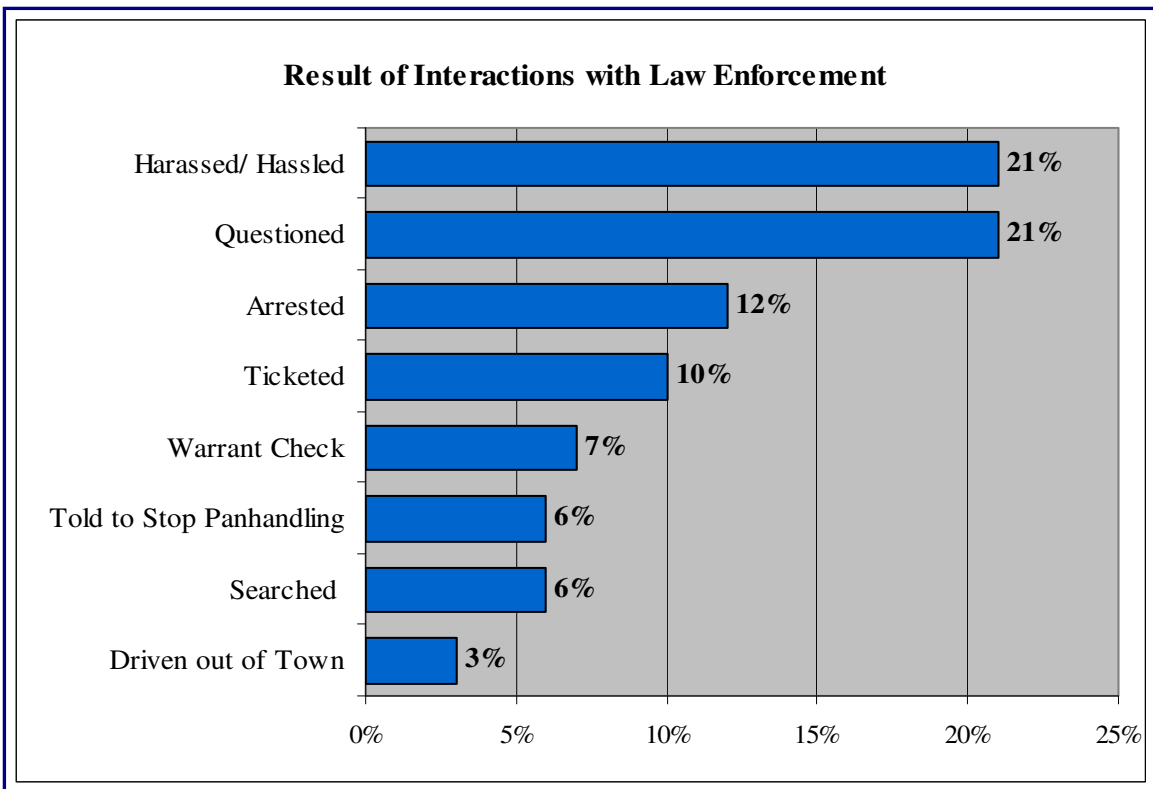
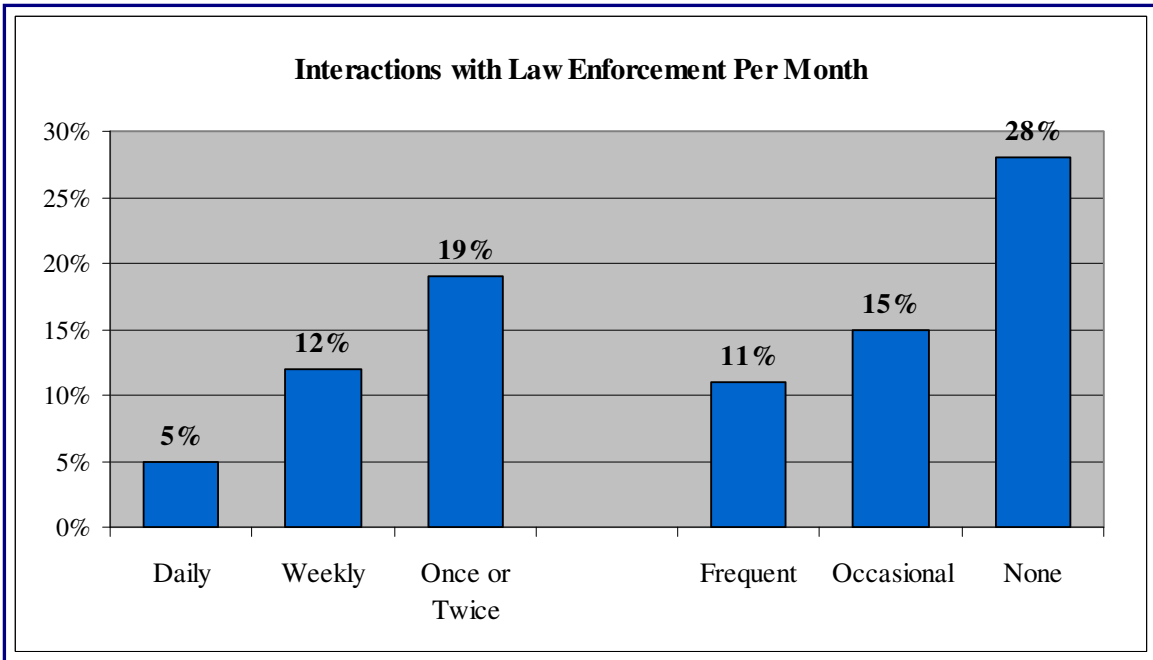
Santa Monica, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are among the 20 U.S. cities cited as the nation’s “meanest cities” – those with the most punitive approach towards homelessness – according to the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

In the four years between 2002 and 2006, in the 67 cities surveyed, the report found there was a 12 percent increase in laws prohibiting begging in particular places, an 18 percent increase in laws prohibiting “aggressive panhandling,” and a 14 percent increase in laws prohibiting sitting or lying in particular public spaces.²¹ Jailing a homeless person for violating one of these laws, the report points out, costs two to three times as much as providing supportive housing would.²²

HOW MANY TIMES EACH MONTH DO YOU HAVE AN INTERACTION WITH THE POLICE? WHAT USUALLY HAPPENS?

While a substantial minority – 28 percent of the youth – reported no interactions with police, the majority reported regular and negative interactions. Five percent said these interactions were daily. Close to 20 percent reported police interactions once or twice a

month, and 12 percent reported weekly interactions. Over ten percent described interactions with police as frequent and 15 percent described it as occasional.



Of those who reported interactions with the police, over ten percent said they were usually arrested. Over 20 percent said they were hassled or harassed, and six percent were told to stop panhandling. In seven percent of the cases, police ran a warrant check, and in six percent they searched the youth. Three percent said they were driven out of town.

For young people who described, elsewhere in the interviews, the grueling and constant search for a safe place to sit or to sleep, the fear (and reality) of an encounter with police added to the stress of that exhausting gauntlet.

Some months it's a lot, some months it's almost every day. When they do mess with me, I've had them shine lights in my face, threaten to arrest me, or harass me.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

They tell me to wake up, I can't sleep there.... They run my name and they say no loitering and there is no sign but they say I can't sleep there. They run my name, tell me I got to go somewhere else.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Four or five times a month they tell me to sleep somewhere else.

--Male, 17, Los Angeles

Over twenty percent said the police interrogated them or spoke to them.

I've been pulled over quite a few times when I've been packing my backpack down the road. Cops ask me what I'm doing and where I'm going. I usually just tell them that I'm walking around with my mobile home. They usually just leave me alone. Sometimes they want to search me.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

(They ask about) the way I look, what am I doing out in the hood, why am I out so late, why I ain't at home, where do I live?

--Female, 21, Fresno

Ten percent of the time, police ticketed the young person for a quality of life offense.

They ask me my name, they search me. Sometimes they write me a ticket. Sometimes they just let me go. Basically, I don't even do nothing. They just pull up on me 'cause they always see me on the street, so they think I'm up to something. I ain't up to nothing. They just want to harass me.

--Male, 20, San Jose

It's really an everyday basis. Honestly, I'm not even gonna lie to you, 'cause it's sad, really.... I just mind my business. They continually mess with me so it's nothing I'm not used to. They usually write me a ticket for loitering.

--Male, 21, Los Angeles

They'll ask me what am I doing, and I'll tell them I'm homeless. Then they'll tell me to go somewhere.

--Female, 16,
Fairfield

A number indicated that simply being on the street, with nowhere to go, made them vulnerable to police attention, and described the helplessness and frustration that came with being told to “move on” when they had nowhere safe to go.

They just tell us to move on if we are panhandling, or even if you are just standing in a street corner. They don't want you to stand there, but if you are homeless, you have no place to go.

--Female, 23, Fresno

I lay where I guess they say I shouldn't be laying, but I have nowhere else to go. It's like being violated for being homeless.

--Male, 22, Fresno

In addition to being frightening and exhausting, these frequent interactions for police serve to underscore for these young people that they carry a stigma, are not wanted, and that their very existence is an affront.

They usually throw me against the wall, put all my s --- all over the place out of my bags, search me in and out, ask me a bunch of questions – what I'm doing here, what is this for and all that – and then tell me to basically kick rocks and I'm not wanted, you know?

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Probably about once or twice (a month). Because they'll look at me and stop me and think bad about me. They'll ask me why I'm not home.

--Female, 18, Salinas

I've been kicked out of plenty of places, told to move on, my kind's not welcome, worthless – heard the whole rundown.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

At the Los Angeles focus group, participants delved into the ideology behind the criminalization of homelessness, observing that they were being penalized for living outside of mainstream society: *The problem with America is that they only offer one lifestyle, and they try to restrict any others. It just doesn't work.... You should be able to go and get by however (you choose) to get by. There are plenty of resources and whatnot; the problem is that they're being basically restricted unless you go through their particular method of living to get it.... If somebody wants to live simply and grow their own food...that shouldn't be a problem. You shouldn't look down at them because they don't want to live in a...flashy mansion...or you don't want to be part of a community, or whatever. You want to go live out in the boondocks on your own, and come in and sell do-dads.... All this land on the side of the highway that's not used – it's off limits. What's that? You should be able to go out there if you can.... Build yourself a shack or whatever. Come up the way you choose to do so. And it would be a lot more kosher. There wouldn't be a lot of problems.*

Despite the documented reality that homeless youth are frequently the *victims* of crime while on the streets,²³ not a single respondent described turning to police for help or reporting being victimized.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TICKETED FOR A “QUALITY OF LIFE” OFFENSE?

Many subsistence and survival aspects of homeless life are restricted or are illegal – such as sleeping outside, trespassing, camping, and loitering. This question was added midway through the survey process, after a number of focus group participants raised the issue of being ticketed for “quality of life” or lifestyle offenses, their inability to pay for these tickets, and how the subsequent fines often lead to garnishment of wages and other impediments to stability and financial independence. Almost 60 percent of the 59 individuals who answered interview questions on this subject had been ticketed.

Each of the 12 youth participating in the Los Angeles focus group had been ticketed for a lifestyle offense, often repeatedly.

At least twice a week I get bugged by the police for sleeping or camping. I get a ticket and they expect me to pay.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

I got ticketed for being on the street, walking to a friend’s house where I was going to sleep.

--Female, 21, Fresno

I have an interaction almost daily. Usually I get searched and just the other day I got tackled. I ended up having four cops around me. They ticketed me and I took it to the Homeless Coalition.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

I got a ticket for sleeping on the ground and blocking pedestrian traffic at five in the morning when there was no pedestrian traffic.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

The great majority said they did not pay these tickets because were not able to. According to the Campaign to End Homelessness, warrants issued due to inability to pay fines can impede homeless people from obtaining a driver’s license, getting a job, and securing housing. “These cycles of arrests create escalating legal barriers for homeless people that all too often impede their ability to overcome homelessness.”²⁴ This was true for the young people in our study, who reported that failure to pay led to problems including having their wages garnished and having warrants issued for their arrest, complicating subsequent cases involving the custody of their children and going to jail.

I pretty much get tickets, and I can’t pay them, then they garnish all my wages.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

I just go to jail for it eventually. I mean, I can't afford to pay for a shower. How can I pay for a ticket?

--Male, 25, Los Angeles

Definitely it goes on your record, and for me, with my child and the county investigating everything in my past, it's kind of hard.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

At the youth/provider convening and at the Los Angeles focus group, one young man described getting a job at a bank and saving up nearly \$1,000 towards the deposit on an apartment. But he had unpaid tickets for sleeping on the street; as a result, his wages were garnished and his path to stable housing sabotaged. Years later, this young man is still without a bank account for fear any deposits would be seized to cover unpaid tickets. “All it’s going to do is prolong homelessness,” he observes. “They garnish all your wages because you were sleeping on the streets, (when) you have no choice but to be on the streets.”

Throughout the interviews, young people brought up the criminalization of homelessness as a cause of homelessness – perpetuating the cycle by saddling them with a criminal record, which then impeded their efforts to get off the streets by legitimate means.

I'm trying to get another job. No one will hire me 'cause I went to jail. It sucks.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

One young man in the Los Angeles focus group offered this fatalistic assessment of the cycle of tickets, warrants and jail: “You give me a warrant and you tell me I got to go to jail. You kind of helping me out. This is when it’s rainy – take my a-- in.”

Others in the group pointed out that getting arrested, and jailed even briefly, could cause them to lose their jobs and/or impede them from finding employment in the

future. “Sabotage,” one put it succinctly. A bitter exchange followed: “They’re telling you, ‘You can’t sleep here.’ But yet we ain’t got nowhere else to sleep. We don’t really have places we can go like everybody else. They can’t recommend any places. I’m on parole. I’m violating it by sleeping outside. I’ve been violating for two years, by sleeping outside.... I was in the hospital. I missed my court date. So now there is a bench warrant against my arrest. Pretty much all we could really do is just keep at it,” one young man offered, countering the fatalism of his peers. “Just keep on trying to get off the streets.”

Beyond the constant anxiety and dread associated with the criminalization of homelessness – and beyond the impediment of tickets, fines, warrants, garnishment of wages, jail time, and the stigma of a criminal record – several youth communicated the powerful message this practice conveyed: that they were not wanted, untouchable, “illegal” – a powerful message of rejection directed at young people who had already received this message in their homes of origin.

Pretty much what they’re doing is they’re taking away our right. We can’t stand anywhere. There’s nowhere to sit, nowhere to stand, nowhere to sleep.... We should all just f---ing kill ourselves, right?

--Male, Los Angeles

YOUTH'S IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

About one-fourth of the youth responding to the survey made recommendations that focused on undoing the criminalization of homelessness: ten percent recommended legalizing outdoor sleeping, six percent asked for enforced police sensitivity, four percent asked for changes to panhandling and loitering laws, and two percent wanted to see squatting decriminalized.

- ✓ *Less profiling on the streets, no more illegal search and seizures.*
--Male, 18, San Jose
- ✓ *Maybe the way police or authorities are allowed to hassle people...that are hanging out pretty late.... They're trying to get situated, even late at night. Getting hassled really does not help. Just a little bit more understanding – some kind of legislation that is a little more understanding on the young.*
--Male, 19, Santa Cruz
- ✓ *Tell the police to leave us alone for a while. Too many people have been getting arrested for just no reason.*
--Female, 21, Los Angeles
- ✓ *Allowing people to sleep on the streets.*
--Male, 21, San Francisco
- ✓ *Let homeless youth occupy any available building that's abandoned so we can go in there and have a place to sleep, shower, and be able to go and look for a job and whatnot.*
--Male, 20, Los Angeles
- ✓ *That the minute someone is arrested for sleeping on the sidewalk, it should be a strike on the cop's record, because all it is harassment by the cops. Anyone could lose their housing at any point so we should be able to sleep wherever we want.*
--Male, 24, Los Angeles
- ✓ *Maybe just letting kids who don't have a home maybe pitch a tent somewhere, in a park or whatnot ... so they don't have to sleep on the street. A tent is better than the curb.*
--Male, 19, Santa Cruz
- ✓ *When I change the law, I know that people like to live outside, I let them sleep outside and don't force them into some housing project where they get depressed and don't know what to do, especially when they come from different backgrounds....(I'd) let people sleep outside, because life started outside, human is nomad, and I think you can try to kill nomads off but there will always be the nomad energy.*
--Male, 25, San Francisco
- ✓ *Make panhandling legal, 'cause they're not trying to hurt anybody, they're just looking for help.... Everybody needs a helping hand. It would make things easier on the unfortunate people and make things easier on myself also.*
--Male, 22, San Francisco



EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Questions about school attendance and personal goals were added later in the survey process, after a large number of respondents stressed the importance of education in response to other questions. Fifty-four young people answered questions about formal schooling; this number is smaller than the number of youth who responded to the survey as a whole.

DO YOU GO TO SCHOOL? IF SO, WHAT YEAR/KIND OF SCHOOL ARE YOU IN? IF NOT, WHAT WAS THE LAST GRADE/KIND OF SCHOOL YOU ATTENDED?

Three-quarters of the youth (76 percent) were not in school at the time of the interview; while one-quarter (24 percent) were currently attending either high school or college. Four of the respondents were high school graduates and two had attained GEDs. Those who were not in school had left between the seventh and twelfth grades, with the majority leaving during their high school years.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, “Homelessness has a devastating impact on homeless children and youth’s educational opportunities. Residency requirements, guardianship requirements, delays in transfer of school records, lack of transportation, and lack of immunizations records often prevent homeless children from enrolling in school.”²⁵

A recent CRB report supports the position that homeless youth are not in school for a variety of reasons. This report points out that it is extremely difficult for young people to attend school if their basic needs (shelter, food, clothing, and health care) are not being met. In addition, they are unlikely to seek services from schools, particularly if they perceive them as unwelcoming or unsupportive. Typical school policies such as waiting lists and activity fees, and requiring parental signatures, pose barriers for homeless youth; and efforts to re-engage youth who have left school are generally inadequate.[§]

WHY DID YOU LEAVE?

Only 20 percent of the surveyed youth said they had “dropped out” of school of their own accord. In general, the reasons the young people gave for leaving school were entangled with their trajectories into homelessness, and with homelessness itself.

I work weird hours and I don’t really have a place to do anything. It makes it kind of hard to do work and turn it in.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

[§] A component of the Homeless Project, the CRB report, *The Educational Success of Homeless Youth in California: Challenges and Solutions*, 2007, by Patricia F. Julianelle, discusses key issues related to the challenges homeless youth face in achieving their educational goals. It describes federal and state programs and funding, identifies successful practices and model programs, and presents policy options. The report is available at www.library.ca.gov under CA Research Bureau Reports.

(School) was good but then it started falling off in 11th grade. I was in a foster home, I don't know what I was going through with my foster parents, I didn't even get to finish my last year 'cause I was only 17 and then I got kicked out because we started to get into arguments. I guess because I called myself to become grown and so I started talking back.... We started to arguing and I just couldn't go to school.
--Male, 19, Fresno

I left in eighth grade because I ran away.
--Male, 16, San Francisco

WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL?

Most of the youth would like to go back to school.

The great majority of those who answered questions about education said they would go back to school if they could.

I was almost gonna graduate but I got pregnant and started working. I would like to go back to school and need more support from my family.
--Female, 18, Fresno

I want to get back into school. I was in school last semester. I want to do embalming and reconstruction. I stopped because my situation wasn't going very well and I had to get away from it. As far as support goes, I have a mental disorder, so it's hard for me to go in and talk to people.
--Female, 20, San Francisco

I'm trying to enroll in a culinary academy as soon as I get my house.
--Male, 22, San Francisco

Getting My GED When I'm Sleeping Outside
New America Media, Youth Commentary, Alex Gutierrez, Posted: Feb 06, 2007

Editor's Note: Countless hours of studying is perhaps the simplest part of preparing for the GED for homeless youth Alex Gutierrez. Gutierrez is a writer for Silicon Valley De-bug.

It is the first day of class, and I arrived at 5:45 PM—a full 45 minutes early. I thought I wouldn't make it to school on the east side of San Jose, coming from downtown on the city bus. It's actually good I have some extra time before class starts, since the trip over was tiring.

While trying to get my GED, I have to handle things that a lot of students here at the adult education school don't. After rushing around filling out job applications, making sure my mom and sister are fed and trying to find out where we're going to sleep tonight, I can use a break before cracking the books.

I've been on and off of the streets for years. I'm trying to get my GED, so we don't have to sleep outside again.

I stopped going to school when I was 18 because at the time I didn't know how to balance school with my work hours. Plus, I had to get second jobs because my first job wasn't paying me enough or wasn't giving me enough hours.

I mean, I got family to feed. I can't be dealing with chicken feed for pay anymore at entry-level jobs.

But now a year later, after going to different continuation schools and trying to pay the bills at the same time, I am back on the education track so I can get a job that pays. I've decided to get a GED instead of a high school diploma because it was taking me too long to get a hold of my old high school transcripts.

I owed San Jose High Academy some school books from my freshman year, so they decided to hold my transcripts hostage until I paid the ransom. I never paid the books off, but in the end they had to give me my transcripts—as a homeless youth, I had no way of paying the money.

I was also shy about 70 credits of graduation, so it would have taken me about a full school year to get my high school diploma. Pursuing the GED instead, I should be able to complete the process in a couple months.

For the most part, what makes going to school difficult in my situation is the preparation it takes to get to class. Things that other students might take for granted, I have to make happen with my own effort. I have to line up the necessities such as a shower, a meal, and clean clothes needed just to step into a classroom.

For the things that I don't have, I substitute. For showering, I wash up in a public library bathroom; where I brush, shave and give myself a bath. That's how I try and maintain good hygiene. I wash my clothes at the youth drop in center, and I pack lunches from the center as well. When I don't have bus money, I walk to school, which takes at least a good hour.

In class, I sit quietly and listen to the teacher for two of the three hours of class. During that last hour, we have free time, so I take sample GED tests. I have been passing all of them. Usually, I am one of the last ones out, turning in my work, picking up my backpack and jacket and heading straight for the door.

On the walk back downtown, I just think about how I am going to get it together, make some money and fix my situation. I go to my night spot next to a closed office supply store in the cold 20 degree weather. I make it there around 10:30 PM, and my mom and sister wait for me as usual.

It's hard to sleep or get any homework done with the sounds of cars driving by, blazing their horns, or drunk luses coming out of the bar down the street talking smack and starting fights.

Even the smallest things start to bother you, like police harassing, saying that they got a call from a tenant from the neighborhood even though downtown San Jose is all city hall, restaurants, bars, and nightclubs. I don't see how someone could complain at the hour of 3:30 am, when the area is completely desolate, and we're just sleeping.

The only reason I put up with all of this is because I know it has to get better—it can't get any worse. I figure with my GED I have a better shot at receiving more stable jobs, and for sure it's my ticket to college.

This past week, I took the GED pre-test for my reading comprehension, and passed it with 73 percent correct. I am now eligible to go to the Santa Clara County Office of Education and take the General Equivalency test.

If all goes well, I will further my education at San Jose State University and obtain a degree in their Radio Television Film and Theater (RTVF) program. I at least got to try, I mean, since I've gotten this far, I don't see why I can't go any further.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT OR HELP WOULD YOU NEED IN ORDER TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL?

MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT

In 1987, Congress established the *McKinney Act's* Education of Homeless Children and Youth program, in response to reports that only 57 percent of homeless children were enrolled in school. The program was reauthorized in 2002 as the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act*, and expanded to require that each district have a designated homeless education liaison. This *Act* provides grants to the states to ensure that homeless children and youth have equal access to education and to “review and revise laws, regulations, practices, or policies that may act as a barrier to the enrollment, attendance, and success in school of homeless Children and Youth.”

National Coalition for the Homeless,
*Education of Homeless
Children and Youth*

As with other programs intended to assist homeless youth, the *McKinney-Vento Act* (see box) is not funded at a level that allows it to reach most of those in need. In fiscal year 2000, for example, the states had resources to help only 28 percent of identified qualifying children and youth.²⁶ Unaccompanied youth – the focus of this report – may be particularly hard to reach via the programs funded under the *McKinney-Vento Act*.

Virtually no one in our survey answered the question “What kind of support or help would you need in order to go back to school” with references to direct support in applying to or enrolling in school. Instead, the answers reflect a broad range of needs related to stabilizing their lives that they felt had to be met in order for them to be able to begin working towards their educational goals.

Most attributed dropping out of or being unable to enroll in school to their housing instability and related issues. Support needed to return to school included a place to shower, employment, family support, financial stability, help with mental illness, new clothing, a place to live, and help in gaining confidence.

Answers to the question, “What kind of support do you feel you need in order to return to school?” reflect the range of young people’s needs for stability and support:

I need my case manager up in here to talk to my mom to get my records. My school records. I need the help to get me an ID.

--Male, 16, Fresno

In order to go back to school I need a job, financial stability, my own home.

--Female, 22, Fresno

I need somewhere I can shower, somewhere I can get better clothes, and better myself – free my mind.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

Well, somebody stole all my clothes just the other day and this is the only clothes I have. Appearance – I feel appearance (is an obstacle).

--Male, 22, Fresno

I need a place to live, maybe some support other than myself in order to help me have confidence.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Stable housing, you know? That's pretty much it.... To try to go to school and live on the street or hold a job down living on the street – I don't know anybody that's done it.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Basically I could use rides to the school or places I need to go to fill out my paperwork and drop them off. That's basically the only support I need.

--Male, 19, Fresno

My family there with me by my side.

--Male, 16, Fresno

Just somebody to help me in my work and somebody to help me with my anger.

--Female, 17, location unknown

I'm not in school right now. I left in ninth grade. I would be able to be in school if I had a more stable environment. I don't want to be enrolled and pay and then not be able to study or get to classes on time.

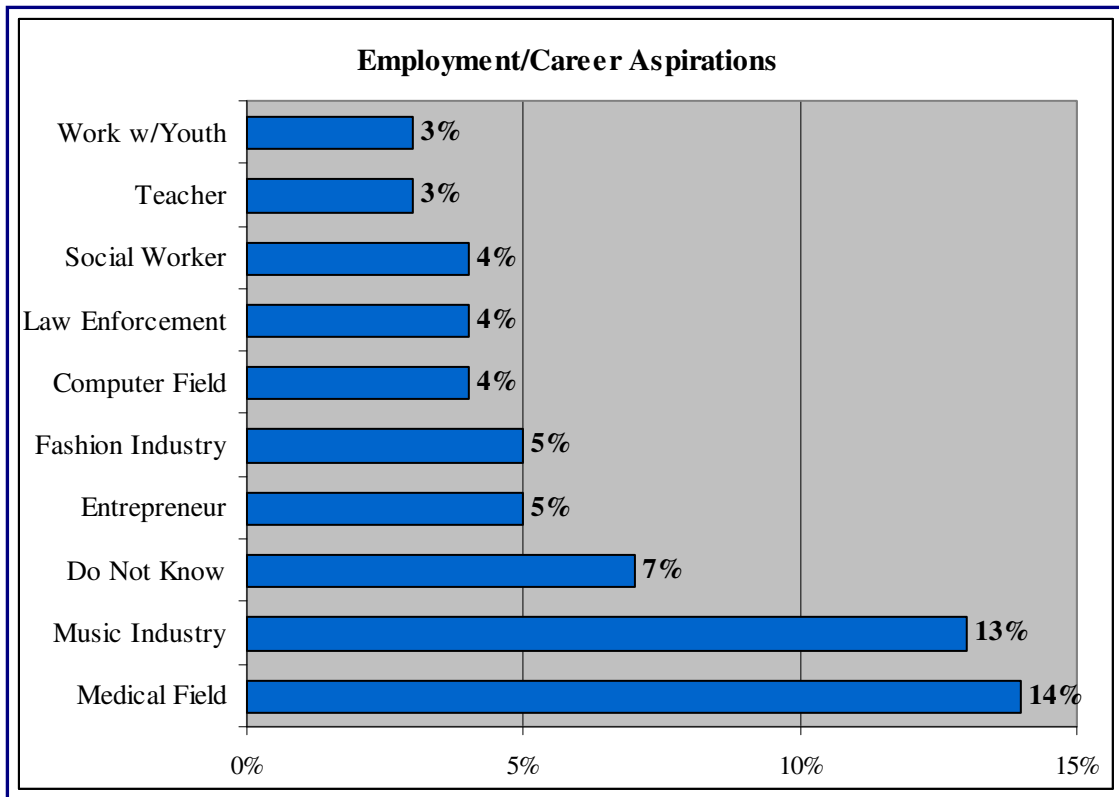
--Male, 20, San Francisco

In the Los Angeles focus group, participants suggested that – given the number of young people who are or may become homeless – basic survival skills should be taught along with academic skills in high school or earlier. “*The just-in-case factor,*” one young man said, “*is that they should (teach) kids about how to balance a budget.... How to fill out applications and stuff like that. Instead of just, ‘Here’s a calculus test.’ They give a lot of stuff that we don’t really use in real life.... People need to be educated in school about reality. Life. Like how hard it is out there.*”

Focus group youth suggested that high schools teach basic survival skills along with academic skills.

WHAT LIVELIHOOD WOULD YOU LIKE TO PURSUE? DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE A REALISTIC CHANCE OF ACHIEVING THAT SOMEDAY, AND IF NOT, WHY NOT?

Answers to this question were as varied as they might be among any group of young people: actor, architect, artist, attorney, auto racer, auto repair person, beautician, bike messenger, blacksmith, businessperson, childcare provider, chef, construction worker, coroner, dental assistant, electrician, engineer, fast food worker, firefighter, homesteader, landscaper, lawyer, longshoreman, machinist, mechanic, movie star, photographer, professional athlete, therapist, tour guide, welder.



Fourteen percent of the youth responding to the survey hoped to work in the medical field as doctors, nurses, or medical assistants. Thirteen percent aspired to careers in the music industry. Five percent hoped to become entrepreneurs, another five percent to work in the fashion industry, and four percent to work in the computer industry.

I want to be a doctor, in a perfect world. Or maybe an accountant, they make good money. I think the most realistic career for me right now would be an escort – a safe escort, not on the street.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Naturopathic medicine. I think I do have a chance with it, I can't get discouraged.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

I like music a lot. I write a lot of lyrics and such. I also like working with machines like lathes and drill presses doing machine shop work. It has always come like second nature to me.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

I might want to open my own business, something slightly entrepreneurial. I don't really know what that is yet, but I'm just working for the meantime and hoping something will come to me. I think that everything's possible and if I try really hard and I put myself in the right places that I can pull it off.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

I'm planning to become a private math tutor, and owning and managing my own apartment building, and I have a realistic chance to achieve this some day.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

I want to make my own label with songs, my own fashions. I think I can do it. I'm working on it.

--Male, 17, San Francisco

Three individuals planned to join the military. Four percent wanted to work in law enforcement or corrections (including two prospective bounty hunters), three percent hoped to become social workers, and another three percent wanted to be teachers. Five percent wanted jobs in which they could work with or help other youth.

Ultimately I would like to be a case manager for at-risk youth and I think I have a good chance at obtaining it because I already have my BA in social work.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

With God's will if I am still alive, doing something that's working with kids.

--Male, 20, Fresno

I'd like to be a child advocacy attorney and keep kids in the foster care program safe from being abused again by new people. I think that I'm much more likely to accomplish that than some because I'm smart enough and have already been to college.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

Several young people mentioned a criminal record as standing between them and their aspirations.

When/if I get my felonies cleared, I would like to teach high school.

--Male, 21, San Francisco

I'd like to work on a port, and I definitely don't have a chance because I'm a convicted felon.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

The majority of respondents thought it was realistic that they would reach their career goals someday. Despite the fact that the great majority were not enrolled in school at the time of the survey, a number spontaneously mentioned education as an important stepping stone towards their career goals – and, as in the responses to questions about education, cited housing instability as an impediment to pursuing that education.

The emphasis respondents placed on education as a way out of homelessness is borne out by research: According to the National Coalition on the Homeless, “Without an opportunity to receive an

Most of the youth thought they would reach their career goals. While several identified the importance of education in meeting career goals, most youth were not in school.

education, homeless children are much less likely to acquire the skills they need to escape poverty as adults.”²⁷

I do know that I can be a lawyer if I really want to. The only thing is that my living situation would most definitely have to change for me to be able to be stable enough to actually maintain the school work that is required for somebody that's going after a law degree.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

Despite their circumstances, less than ten percent (9 percent) thought it was not realistic that they would achieve their career goals, and only seven percent were unable to identify a specific career to which they aspired.

No (career goals aren't realistic), because I don't have the support or money to go to school.

--Female, 19, Sacramento

I probably end up the same way I am now, forever.

--Female, 24, San Jose

For right now, none. I'm so down right now that I don't even believe in myself anymore.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

Well, I wanted to be a doctor, but then people told me that I can never become that, so I'm kind of crushed. So I don't know.

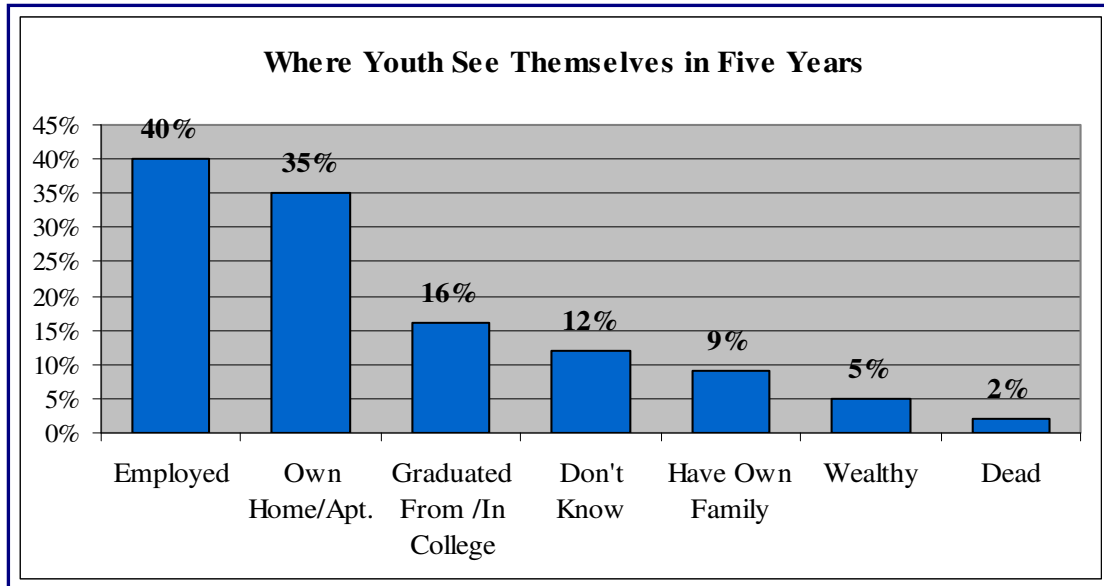
--Male, 16, Fresno

I don't think so because I don't know if I can be able to get a house.

--Female, 18, Salinas

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN FIVE YEARS?

Again, the answers to this question reflect an overwhelming optimism under the most difficult circumstances, and a wealth of aspiration among homeless youth.



Forty percent of the respondents believed they would be employed in five years, reflecting the emphasis placed on the value of employment throughout answers to various survey questions. Similarly, reflecting the value placed on education throughout the interviews, 16 percent saw themselves attending or having graduated from college within five years. Thirty-five percent believed they would be in homes or apartments of their own by that time. Nine percent believed they would have their own families, with a spouse and/or children. Many believed they would have achieved some or all of these goals at the same time – although many used the word “hopefully” to qualify this expectation.

In five years, I see myself halfway done with school, very stable in my housing situation, very stable in my financial system, and just thankful for everything I have at that point.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

Hopefully in school, a nice job, maybe a nice girlfriend – that’ll be nice – but first of all I would need to get off the streets, pick my head up, make a change.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Hopefully in a house. I see myself in a house, taking care of myself and going to work.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

Truth is, I just wanna be a family man, work eight hours, and take care of my kids, and come home to my family. No matter what you do, your children love you.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Hopefully with my own place with a job of some kind. Just off the streets with a happy little life.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

With my son, either at an apartment or a house that I can afford on my own, with a car, and not having to bother no one for my necessities.

--Female, 18, Fresno

In five years I see myself in my own home, back with my children in a nice stable job, and that's what I'm fighting for.

--Female, 22, Fresno

Married, happy, raising my son in a home that I save up on my own. Being able to take my son to school in a car and not having to walk anywhere. Working in a field I love. Just being happy and not struggling.

--Female, 21, Fresno

With a house, and no picket fence. Just a little house will do.

--Male, 21, Santa Cruz

I like to imagine having a little apartment with blue and green walls and a cat and being able to cook my own food. I don't know, be OK.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Have a house somewhere with a dog, and a turtle. By Jim, I will get that turtle.

--Male, 19, San Diego

Not outside.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

As in the responses to questions about their career aspirations, a number said in five years they hoped to be working in a field where they could help others.

Married with another baby and finished with my bachelor's degree and hopefully working in a field that improves the life of other people, once I have mine together.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

I could probably see myself doing nursing and helping other people.

--Female, 18, Fresno

I want to see myself in five years helping people out, like in a group home, having my own spot, you know, just being off the streets.

--Female, 15, Tracy

Twelve percent said they did not know where they would be in five years, and two percent believed they would be dead. Only four individuals believed they would still be on the street in five years.

That is far away, I don't know if I'll make it that far.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

It's one way or the other. I'll either be doing real good or in prison – have a life, or I'll be in prison and that will be my life. I haven't caught a prison number yet but once I do there's no turning back after that.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Five percent asserted that they would be wealthy in five years, although at least one found humor in that expectation.

A millionaire, if I collect enough cans in time.

--Male, age and location unknown



MENTAL HEALTH

WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH?

For five percent of the youth surveyed, the term “mental health” evoked such negative connotations that they associated it with mental illness, defining it as being emotionally unstable or out-of-control.

The rest offered positive definitions of mental health. These definitions varied and/or overlapped so that they were not easily classifiable, but certain themes emerged.

A number associated mental health with stability – a state to which many made clear, throughout the interviews, that they very much aspired.

Someone who is mentally stable enough to take care of themselves or to know what’s right for them or what they want.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

Being stable and being happy.

--Female, 18, Salinas

Some associated mental health with being drug free.

To me it’s like you’re healthy in your mind, you’re healthy in your body. You’re ultimately happy. You’re not depressed. You don’t need drugs to get through the day. You don’t have to be drunk. You just face problems as they come at you and be able to handle them. So you have a calm sense, and reasonable judgment.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Comfort with myself. Not needing to hide behind drugs.

--Male, 21, San Francisco

Several defined mental health, in the context of homelessness, as the capacity to survive on the street.

Somebody that can take care of themselves each day when the harshness of the world is out there – homeless – and still maintain a form of sanity.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

Others described mental health in terms of resilience.

Your wellness in our mind. How f---d you are from the abuse you’ve had in your life and how well you’re able to take it. Some people are more resilient and strong and some people...get knocked around and never get back up.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

Mental health is the ability to cope with troubled times without being internally or externally destructive for an excessive amount of time.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

The importance of goals and a sense of purpose came up in answers to this question, as it did throughout the interviews.

Knowing where you are and where you wanna go and not being confined by the past.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF MENTALLY HEALTHY, BY YOUR OWN DEFINITION? WHY OR WHY NOT?

Studies of the prevalence of mental health problems among homeless youth vary widely, with various studies finding a prevalence of serious mental health disorders between 19 and 50 percent.²⁸ Among those we interviewed, over two-thirds (68 percent) considered themselves mentally healthy. The vast majority of those who considered themselves mentally healthy attributed that fact not to any kind of formal mental health services but to their own positive attributes or attitudes: their basic capacity to function and to survive, their ability to set and work towards goals, their self-awareness, their resilience, etc. Many felt that the fact that they were surviving, or had overcome, being on the streets was an indication of mental health.

Yes I do. I feel that I am very independent and I have come too far to say that I am not.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

Yes I do 'cause I am aware of my situation and trying to seek help, looking for different opportunities.

--Female, 22, Fresno

Yes, I've always taken care of myself.

--Female, 19, San Diego

Yeah, because I'm still in school, I'm still strong, I'm on my own, so I think I'm alright.

--Female, 17, Stockton

Yes, I have dreams and goals and I feel like I am close to accomplishing (them) this year.

--Male, 18, San Francisco

Yeah, I understand what to do to survive.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

I'm a strong person and I try to set goals in my life and work hard. If people just give me a chance I could get ahead and not expect to get things for free but to work for what I want and need.

--Female, 23, Fresno

Others attributed their mental health to social connectedness.

Yeah.... I have people to talk to. I have people there when I need them.

--Female, 19, San Francisco

Because I feel good about myself, I can talk to other people, converse with people.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Some noted that, although they believed themselves to be fundamentally mentally healthy, street life had taken a psychological or emotional toll.

Being homeless, it really does get to you emotionally, and being me, there's no one there to help me.

--Female, 19, Sacramento

Yes, I seem to be stable, but I have...trust issues of what I have been through (in) life. Some people consider that I need mental health, but I'm just protecting myself from being hurt again, because it's really hard to be out here by yourself especially if you're a single female.

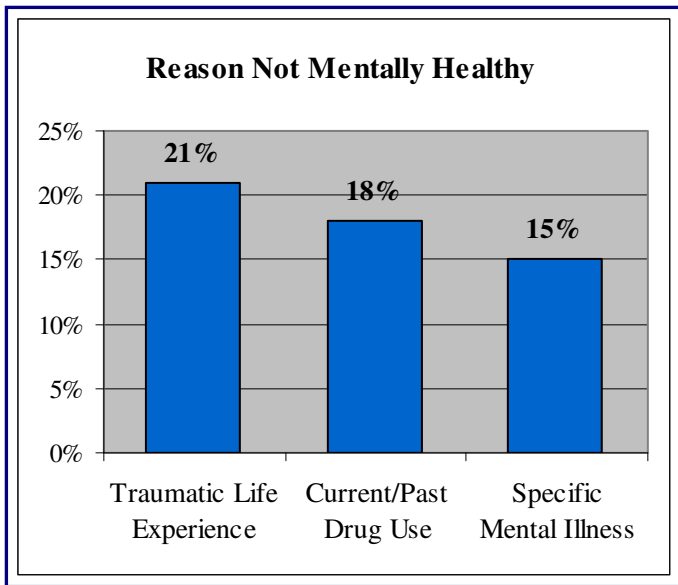
--Female, 21, Fresno

Only three individuals said that they were mentally healthy because they were receiving counseling or therapy, and two individuals cited medication they were taking.

In the Sacramento focus group, a 20-year-old who had spent three years on the street reflected on the mental health impacts of homelessness itself in this haunting description of the erosion of identity that can come with protracted homelessness: *I'd say the worst thing about being homeless is pretty much losing yourself. Like a lot of your identity. You're pretty much walking around the street. I find myself walking to the point where I fall asleep right where I was. Or trying to fall asleep. You always have to worry about the cops. You have to worry about people who are out late at night who have been drinking and looking to roll a bum or something. What makes it even worse is if you have to work, you want to go to work, and you do not always function well because you're tired – you didn't get very much sleep last night.... You find yourself being on more of an automatic mode.... At a certain time you can't go to sleep because the amount of police patrol you know will drop down. You become a robot.... You get used to it. You don't see yourself anymore. I see myself like a grey figure along with all the other grey figures. Nothing standing out about me. I'm just going about my life, not really trying to function. Every time you did try to accomplish (something), things start falling through, or you find out you didn't qualify for this program, or this program wouldn't take you, or there's a year and half waiting list, or a three year waiting list.*

A 15-year-old in the same focus group responded to this account with a description of his own sense of invisibility: *Nobody really pays attention to us. They see us as a ghost.... We scare them.... They won't try to help us out. They don't see straight through us – they see us enough to notice that we're beneath them.*

Twenty percent of the youth responding said they did not consider themselves mentally healthy (the rest did not answer or did not know).



Fifteen percent of the youth who did not consider themselves mentally healthy said that they had a specific mental illness. Researchers at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network point out that early and chronic abuse put homeless youth at a higher risk for anxiety disorders, depression, post traumatic stress disorder, suicide, and character disorders.

Similar problems can be found in youth who were separated from their parents for reasons other than abuse or who may not have had an adult in their life who loves them unconditionally. The early experiences of these youth may interfere

with attachment and may lead to difficulty in developing positive relationships with peers and in trusting relationships with other adults. The consequences of these negative experiences can be long-lasting.²⁹

Over one-fifth of those who did not consider themselves mentally healthy attributed their poor mental health to traumatic life experiences, a self-assessment that is backed up by research findings. One study’s sample of street youth in San Francisco found that two-thirds met the diagnostic criteria for post traumatic stress disorder.³⁰

No, because I've seen some horrible things in my life.

--Female, 18, San Jose

No. Rape, incest, etc.

--Female, 20, Fremont

Various surveys have found that as many as 75 percent of homeless youth use marijuana or other drugs.³¹ According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “Youth sometimes use substances to self-medicate for the trauma and pain they have experienced.”³² As Nicholas Ray of the National Gay And Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute of the National Coalition for the Homeless observes: “Substance abuse pathways both lead to and result from homelessness... The prevalence of alcohol and tobacco use among runaway youth can be seen as initially rooted in family conflict or breakdown, including situations where youths were exposed to family members who abused alcohol and/or drugs. Subsequent to becoming homeless, with all the attendant risks and stresses it brings, substance use has been identified as a coping strategy for all youth.”

Substance use is not an isolated behavioral outcome automatically causing or resulting from homelessness. Rather, it is inextricably linked to other behavioral and mental health concerns. The combination of stressors inherent in the daily life of homeless youth leads to substance use at alarmingly high rates when compared with the general population.

Most shelters do not meet the need for effective intervention beyond basic crisis counseling. One study of 226 runaway youth living in two shelters in the southwest United States found that only ten to 15 percent were ever treated for drug- and alcohol-related problems.

Substance use and abuse is both a cause and a result of homelessness in the general population of homeless youth. In a study of 302 homeless youth, Shelley Mallet and colleagues described the relationship between young people's substance use and their pathways into homelessness. They found that 38 percent of young people who reported personal or familial alcohol and drug use indicated that the substance abuse led directly to their homelessness. Additionally, 17 percent of the drug-using youth reported problematic drug use beginning after they became homeless as a result of family conflicts.³³

At the same time, some young people appear to recognize the potential for this self-medication to create a destructive cycle. Eighteen percent of the youth in our survey who believed they were in poor mental health attributed that fact to current or past drug use.**

I would say I have mental health issues because of the drug use. That definitely throws off your mental being.
--Male, 21, San Francisco

At the moment, no, because of the stuff I put into my body, like drugs. And I choose to do other things that I know I shouldn't be doing, and it makes my mind see things that are not there.

--Female, 18, Fresno

No 'cause I'm mentally weak. I do a lot of drugs. That's why I consider myself mentally unhealthy.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

I'm not healthy, I guess definitely not, because everything I deal with, I drink all my problems away now.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Substance use and abuse is both a cause and a result of homelessness among youth.

At the statewide youth/provider convening, one young man elaborated on the connection between drug addiction, homelessness, and social isolation: *Drug addiction is just a symptom of the bigger problem. When nobody takes time to talk to you and figure out what's going on with you, and you don't feel like you can talk to anybody, you feel hopeless. And when you're in that mode of feeling hopeless and surviving on the street, anything can happen, really.... Looking for an escape, and that's where drugs come in, and alcohol. It's like bim-bam, you're in a deeper pit and you can't get out of that. Then that's where you're labeled. They think you're a homeless bum.*

** Several respondents suggested adding questions about experiences with drug use when asked what they would like to see on this survey. See the "Future Inquiry" section of this report.

Look at me, I'm 23 years old with gray hairs. I should not have gray hairs. It's stress, it's the use of drugs, the fighting all the time. I just don't feel the same.

--Male, 23, San Francisco

Some indicated that homelessness in and of itself was detrimental to, or incompatible with, mental health.

I don't think so because I'm homeless, I have no place to live, and I'm unstable.

--Female, 17, Stockton

Probably not. To live like this, you can't be too smart.

--Female, 24, San Jose

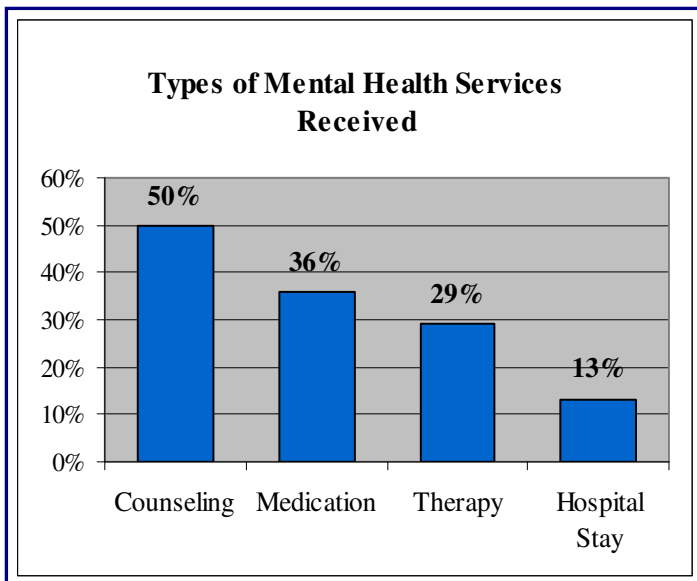
Others described social isolation as the root of their mental health problems.

No because I don't really have anyone to talk to.

--Female, 18, Hayward

HAVE YOU EVER RECEIVED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES? WHAT KIND (COUNSELING, THERAPY, MEDICATION, HOSPITALIZATION, OTHER)? WERE THOSE SERVICES HELPFUL? WHY OR WHY NOT?

Of those who answered this question, the majority of youth – 58 percent – had received some kind of mental health service or services.



Of these youth, one-half had received what they described as counseling, over one-third had received medication, and close to 30 percent had received therapy. Over ten percent had been hospitalized for mental illness.

Less than half of the youth who had received mental health services – 47 percent – found those services helpful.

Counseling, therapy, hospitalization, even medication. They help a lot, because they helped me to get some stuff off my chest.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

I have received individual and group counseling and medication. All of these services have been helpful. The medication helps bring stability through the week, and the group and individual counseling helped work out personal issues.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

Of those who found mental health services helpful, the majority said they appreciated the opportunity to talk about things going on in their lives.

When I was young, I went through counseling because of parental issues and abuse. They were helpful. They helped me talk to somebody and get things off my chest.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

Yes, because I got to express how I felt and talk about what I was going through.

--Female, 17, Stockton

At the Fresno focus group, one young woman described the difference that counseling she received in her transitional living program had made in her ability to parent her young son. Counseling, she explained, represented: *Someone to care what you do.... Somebody hearing you. For me, if someone was there to hear me, I felt OK.... When I get stressed out I take it out on (my son). I push him away from me. I don't want him next to me. So now that I've got counseling, I want him with me all the time now. I enjoy him being around me. I'm not constantly taking my anger out on him.*

Young parents who are homeless are at high risk of losing their children to foster care or, ultimately, to homelessness perpetuated into the next generation. This young woman's insight into the value of early mental health intervention offers an important clue for those looking to stem intergenerational homelessness and child welfare involvement.

Several said they found medication helpful.

Yep, they are definitely helpful. I'm pretty sure I would be dead if it wasn't for the medication I'm taking.

--Male, 18, Fresno

A slight majority of those youth responding to the survey who had received mental health services – 53 percent – did not find those services helpful. They cited therapists' inability to understand them or their situation, medication that did not help or was used to control their behavior, and their own unwillingness to communicate with a therapist.

Several observed that, while they had received helpful mental health services, those services were cut off abruptly or in ways they perceived as arbitrary, representing yet another broken relationship in lives marked by multiple ruptures. At the Fresno focus group, Veronica described this experience: *I went through therapy for a year and a half and then (the foster care system) had to cut me off because they felt like I was going to be co-dependent to my therapist. I think it was more that they didn't want to continue*

spending the money on me seeing someone.... I felt like by cutting me off I still have a lot of problems and issues I didn't deal with. And they still come out now, in my attitude and the way I treat people.... I feel like if I would have had more time with the therapist, and more time to talk about things, I would have healed better.

Amanda seconded the concern about ruptured therapeutic relationships: *We did have a counselor here (at the transitional living center), but she left. And after she left, that was it...I'm back where I started. Because you can't confide in everybody. You can't just tell everybody.... I knew her, and I felt comfortable with her, and she was helping me out. She left, and I'm back in the same situation. My anger is getting worse.*

After hearing Amanda speak, Veronica – who was in her sophomore year of high school when her therapy was terminated – began to cry. She shared: *The foster system cutting therapy off for me was hard, because I had to do it on my own. I didn't have anyone to talk to or anyone to open up to.... I want to get back into therapy but...they're not going to understand unless they know everything, and it's just reliving it and going through it again and again, and just having to deal with it all over. I wish I would have told them that I wanted to stay with the therapist, and I wanted to keep her.*

Some youth responding to the survey expressed concern that their problems were too complex or numerous for a therapist to address.

I have received therapy and have voluntarily stayed in a mental facility but nothing was helpful. Not enough time on the individual, and most therapists didn't really hear what I was trying to say. There are way too many issues to go into.

-- Male, 19, San Diego

When I was a kid, but I didn't open up to them, and they thought their help wouldn't help me. But truly, it probably would've if they would have kept at it. But they gave up on me because I wouldn't open up to 'em. And if I had, it'd probably scare them with all the things I could tell them that I have mental problems with.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

Those who had received services while in the foster care system often described those services as required or coerced. This group was particularly likely not to have found such services useful – a finding which echoes earlier CRB research on the mental health needs of young people in the foster care and juvenile justice systems.³⁴

Throughout growing up I used to be in group homes, and part of the program was to go to therapy, so I've seen seven different therapists, been on numerous medications. None of that...really helped.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

I've had a lot of therapy. I lived in CPS group homes and group home managers...pumped me full of pills that I didn't need in order to make larger checks, so I'll be standing in a corner like a zombie and it makes it easier for them. I was young, couldn't do anything about it. It is not right.

--Male, 19, Fresno

A number of others felt stigmatized or belittled by mental health providers.

I been to three different mental hospitals. They all put me on medications. They were not helpful at all. They basically told me I was a bag of s---

--Female, 20, San Francisco

Several observed that what they needed most was not just help dealing with their feelings about their circumstances but also concrete assistance in changing those circumstances. These observations also echoed the findings of an earlier CRB survey of young people in and exiting the foster care and juvenile justice systems, many of whom also felt that mental health services were most effective when combined with concrete assistance in meeting survival needs.³⁵

Counseling. Yes and no (helpful). Yes, because I got a lot of pain off my heart, but no, because I went on living on the streets, and now I'm still on the streets.

Female, 18, Hayward

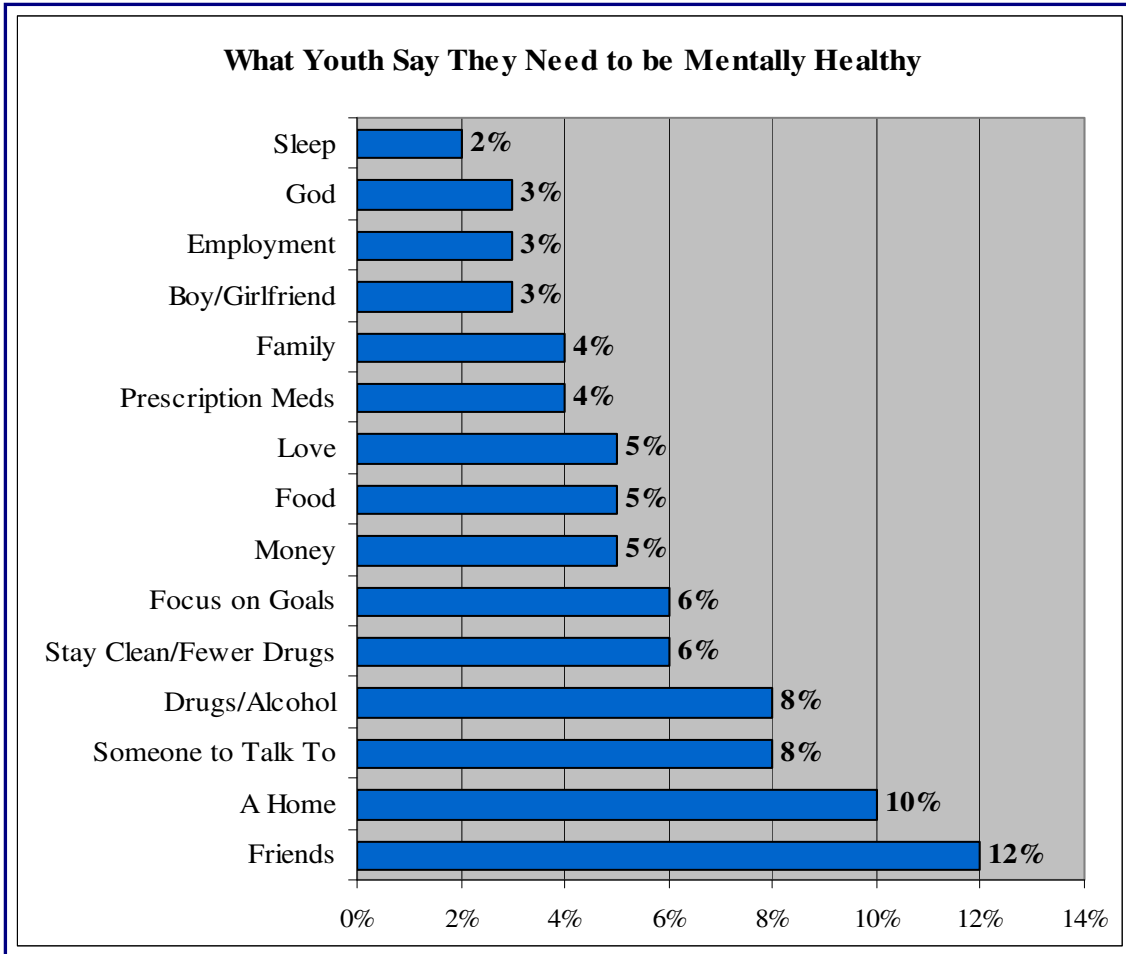
Researchers from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network point out that homeless youth are asking for caring relationships far different from the abusive relationships that they have probably experienced with parents and other adults.³⁶ Service providers of all kinds can have a positive impact on runaway and homeless youth and can mitigate the impact of trauma by working to develop supportive relationships with them. Even if a homeless youth never seeks out formal mental health treatment, a strong relationship with an outreach worker, shelter worker, or case manager can make a significant positive difference.³⁷

In focus groups conducted by Children's Hospital Los Angeles in 1992 and 1999, homeless youth said they wanted mental health providers to be:

- ✓ nonjudgmental
- ✓ have a good sense of humor
- ✓ empower rather than enable
- ✓ offer choices instead of advice
- ✓ build trust by being honest regarding confidentiality and the limits of confidentiality
- ✓ be patient and not give up on them
- ✓ match the treatment with the youth instead of matching the youth with the treatment
- ✓ be aware of their own personal issues

The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network
Trauma Among Homeless Youth
Culture and Trauma Brief, 2007

WHAT DO YOU FEEL YOU MOST NEED TO STAY MENTALLY HEALTHY?



Answers to this question reflected the high value the young people interviewed placed on personal relationships and social connectedness. Twelve percent said they needed friends in order to maintain their mental health: eight percent said they needed someone to talk to. Three percent said they needed a boyfriend or girlfriend, four percent cited family, and five percent said love was essential to their mental health. Many described a network of relationships as necessary to sustain their mental health.

I just need a lot of positive people around me and someone there. I need my mom back.

--Female, 13, Oakland

In order to stay mentally healthy, everyone needs a support system. A lot of people try to act like they don't need anybody, but that's really not the case. You need a support system of people that can give you the extra push when you're not in the best moods, or share happy times with.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

Just being able to focus on the fact that there are people who care about me. It's sometimes hard to relate and stay connected and engaged with people that matter, because I'm very much grounded in the idea (that) I'm just me and stuck within yourself and no one else is gonna be there for me.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

A best friend and someone to love me.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

Someone to talk to, a friend, a companion, maybe human or animal. Someone that you feel close to, even if you talk to yourself.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

Someone to be there on my side to help me and let me know that everything is OK.

--Male, 20, Fresno

Many made a clear association between sustaining their mental health and meeting their basic survival needs. Ten percent said they needed a home in order to be mentally healthy, five percent said they needed food, another five percent said they needed money, three percent cited employment, and two percent said they needed sleep in order to maintain their mental health.

Youth linked meeting their basic physical and emotional needs – a place to live and someone to talk to – with maintaining their mental health.

A bed and four walls – yep, and home – your mind stay tame.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Just stability, that's the most reasonable thing. I don't ask for more than I can handle. I just need a good job, a place to live, a place to have my girl and my kids and just grow.

--Male, 25, Los Angeles

Stable housing, someone who cares, psychiatrist.

--Female, 20, Fremont

A number of youth made it clear that both positive relationships and the ability to meet basic needs were crucial to sustaining mental health. Just as young people described a complex and interconnected tangle of challenges they faced in their efforts to find stable housing, so did many describe an interconnected set of material and emotional needs they felt needed to be met in order for them to attain stable mental health.

A good environment to live in, safe place to sleep, some food in your stomach, good people to talk to if you need it.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Food, and someone to talk your problems out with.

--Female, 18, San Jose

I need a home. I need a family. I need someone to love me and be there for me.

--Female, 18, Salinas

Family, friends, a home, money.

--Female, 17, Stockton

Friends. My job. I have to be situated. Everything in my life needs to be situated. I don't think I need drugs, either.

--Female, 18, Fresno

Probably a steady relationship, whether it would be with your wife, your girlfriend, your family, your friends...anybody you could have a steady relationship (with). Provide ourselves with what you need. If you need, find a way to go get yourself some food.... A house. Anything that won't drive you mentally insane.

--Male, 18, Fresno

Love, money, music, a good sleep, my brother.

--Male, 17, San Francisco

Several youth cited internal attributes or strengths such as determination, confidence or a positive outlook. Six percent said having or focusing on goals enhanced their mental health.

Balancing, not letting my mind drift off. Staying straight with what I want to do will keep me mentally healthy

--Male, 21, Santa Cruz

(Staying) focused on the things I need to do for my girls and myself.

--Female, 23, Fresno

Because I'm able to set goals for myself and accomplish them.

--Female, 25, Fresno

Three percent said God sustained their mental health.

God is the most important one. Good friends and homo people.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

God, a sponsor, and music.

--Male, 21, San Francisco

Eight percent said they needed drugs and/or alcohol to stay mentally healthy, whereas six individuals said they needed to stay clean or use fewer drugs. Four percent said they needed prescription medication.

I guess to stay on drugs.

--Female, 16, Vallejo

Stay away from crack.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

I need to be seeing my therapist at least once a week, I need medication, and I need a boyfriend to rely on.

--Transgender (male to female), 24, San Francisco

Having my medication and keeping my MediCal so I don't have to pay \$150 for a bottle of medication.

--Male, 18, Fresno

Other answers included the ability to maintain personal hygiene, a sense of purpose, music, a safe place to express oneself and/or vent anger, pets, therapy, and an end to trauma.

I like to be clean and have my clothes and my hair to be nice. Also my tattoos. I'm saving up for a tattoo that I think is more important psychologically than getting an apartment.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Enough food and a home and friends for support. A way to work on projects or have some endeavors so I can feel satisfied or fulfilled in some way.

--Male, 21, San Francisco

I need a place to physically vent anger in a way that stays true to that anger without hurting anyone, a place to rant without argument and a place to talk out issues. I also like helping people. It makes me feel better than anything when I'm down.

--Male, 19, San Diego

You know what I really want? I want a pet. A dog, cause it's so lonely here, and a dog will give you that emotional company.

--Female, 21, Fresno

To not be raped anymore. To be left alone.

--Female, 24, San Jose

In the San Francisco focus group, young people brought up the need for interventions that addressed family problems *before* those conflicts led to homelessness: “*You go to school,*” Jonah observed, “*and you have counselors at school, they don't actually counsel. They pull you into their office and tell you when you're f---ing up.... But it's not*

a situation where, if you got something going on at home, and mom is being beat, or....” “They’re not even asking about that,” Maria interjected. “Exactly,” Jonah continued. “And so all this that is going on around you is affecting your behavior and affecting the person that you’re becoming – learned behaviors, and coping mechanisms.... It’s not in the school district’s mission statement to do no more than educate you. But what’s the point of education if it means nothing? If, at the end of the day, you’re not going to be able to sustain a job or sustain a place to live because you’re not mentally fit to do so. It’s something in you that is self-destructive.” “The stability of somebody’s mental health,” he added, “can lead you to make a bad decision, even when you’ve got perfectly good opportunities in your face.”

Other focus group participants seconded this analysis, and stressed the need for counselors and mentors who had “been there” and could help guide young people at risk of homelessness out of self-destructive pathways and towards stability and self-sufficiency.

Several cited youth development programs such as the Center for Young Women’s Development, The Mentoring Center, and Youth Uprising, and suggested that money invested in positive youth development would ultimately reduce homelessness by helping young people overcome the psychological barriers that inhibited them from building stable futures for themselves. “*Having a place where they could spend their time creatively and positively,*” suggested one young man, “*goes a long way, in my opinion, toward creating mental stability, (and) that goes toward building better decision-making skills.*”

NETWORKS OF SUPPORT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

The most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life (is)... a brotherhood of the streets. There's a brotherhood of all kinds of people, all mixtures. Like young men poets, to vandals, to people into hip-hop, to people that are just quiet and kind of strange and don't talk. But everybody looks out for each other, you know what I mean?

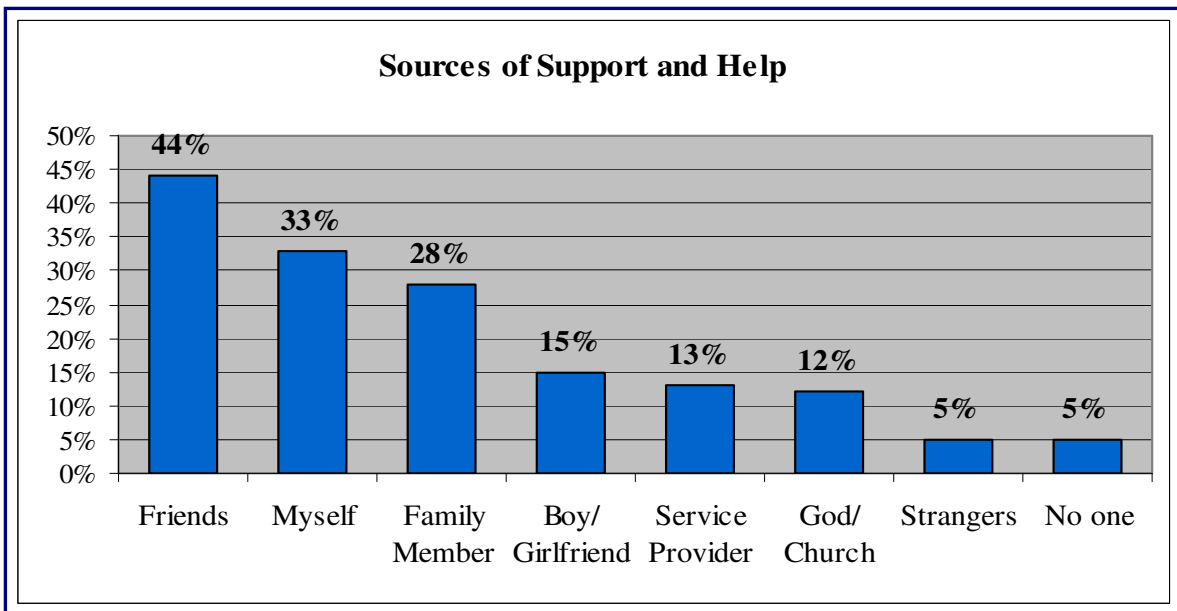
Justin, Youth/Provider Convening

WHO DO YOU RELY ON (TOP THREE) WHEN YOU NEED HELP?

We asked questions about networks of support in an effort both to gauge where young people spontaneously looked for support, and to gain insight into how those pre-existing networks, however limited, might be bolstered or supported.

Researchers studying attachment patterns in homeless youth have found that the longer youth were homeless, the more socially connected they were. "This supports the notion that the street family or peer subgroup may provide important attachment experiences for homeless youth."³⁸

While most of the respondents were able to identify people they relied on for help, among those who elaborated on the nature of these relationships, many described them as tenuous or provisional.



The largest group of youth – close to 45 percent – looked to friends for support. Fifteen percent named a boyfriend or girlfriend.

I don't really know anybody. I mean, I have an older friend, he's like 48, and he's in the same situation I'm in. He's always there to listen to my problems. I mean, all my friends kind of left me since I ran away.

--Female, 16, Vallejo

I can't really sleep there but I know people I can call.

--Male, 18, Fresno

I rely on the general person to give me large amounts of spare change, and me to figure something out, and usually my friends. My best friend Susan I can usually count on to hook me up if it's an emergency.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Despite the obvious breaches in their families of origin, over one-quarter nevertheless cited a member of their immediate or, less often, extended family as someone they looked to for support. As with those who relied on friends, however, many delineated the limits of these relationships.

My mom, every now and then. I barely ask her for nothing but if I need a couple of hundred I ask her. And I rely on myself because I wake up by myself and I go to sleep by myself.

--Female, 18, Albany

My mother, even though she lives so far away she will be there. Right now she is not here because I don't want her to be here. I mean, if I'm going to do it I have to do it myself. I can't call mom every single minute if I'm in trouble.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

Probably since me and my mom are a little bit better, I guess if something is really wrong or bad I could call her for help.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

I can call my father. He gives me money, that's number one. Then, pretty much after that, it's myself and that's it!

--Male, 18, Santa Cruz

Over ten percent looked to God or their church. Thirteen percent named a service provider – case manager, drop-in counselor, etc. – as among their top three sources of support.

One person I think I can really count on is IOP3 downtown – a building. They got some good people there that will help you out and I feel that what they do is amazing. They drive you down to the bank, they give you money for bikes, they do a lot.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Five percent of the youth respondents relied on strangers for help. Four respondents said they looked to drugs or their drug dealer for support, two found support from police, and two relied on foster parents.

Drugs, drugs, men.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

Myself, dope man, and friends.

--Male, 18, San Francisco

One-third of the youth said they relied on themselves, and five percent said they had no one they could rely on.

I rely on myself, really. That's the only one who's going to get you through it. You're by yourself, really.

--Male, 21, Santa Cruz

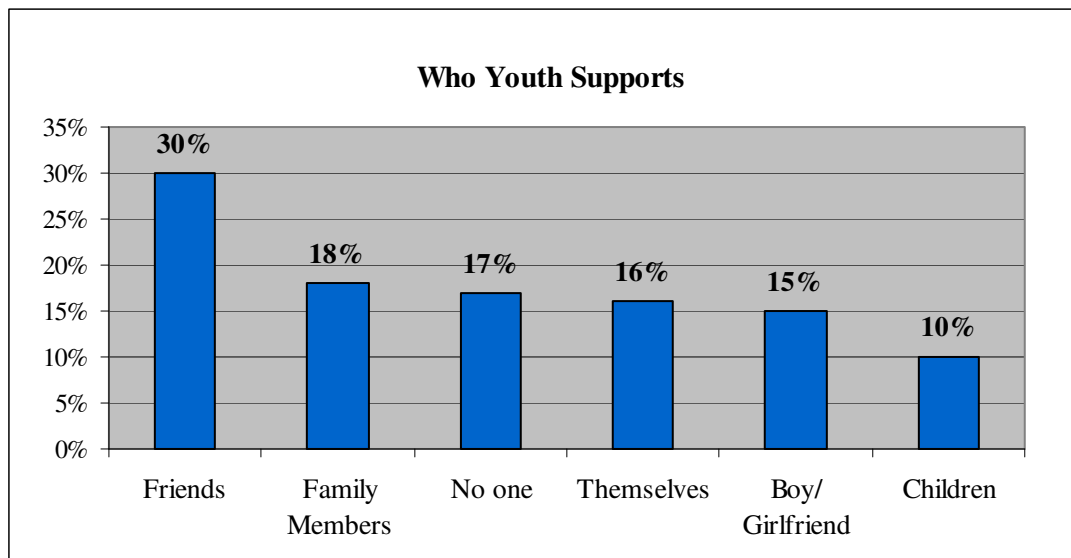
I usually rely on myself. I've realized that's who I have to rely on. No one else is going to change my situation, no one going to change my life but myself.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Man, wouldn't that be nice?

--Male, 21, San Francisco

WHO RELIES ON YOU FOR SUPPORT?



Fifteen percent reported that a boyfriend or girlfriend looked to them for support, and thirty percent provided support to friends, again underscoring the importance of connectedness to street peers.

I got friends in the same situation, you know, we try to help one another best way we can.

--Male, 22, Fresno

My friends. They rely on me just as much as I depend on them to be there. You know, days get hard and you need somebody.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Almost one-fifth of the respondents reported that family members such as a mother, sister, grandmother, and cousin, relied on them for support. In addition, ten percent said they have children who relied on them.

Seventeen percent said no one relied on them for support.

I'm homeless! Nobody relies on a homeless person. What kind of insane question is that? If they're relying on me and I ain't got nothing, then they're a fool.

--Male, 22, Yuba City

I don't think anybody relies on me for support, because I don't really have friends.

--Female, 16, Vallejo

Nobody, because if I can't help myself, why would people think I could help them?

--Female, 16, Fairfield

Sixteen percent reported that they provided support to themselves.

Me, I'm the only one thing I got now.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Me, myself, and I.

--Male, 21, San Francisco

HOW MUCH CONTACT DO YOU HAVE WITH YOUR PARENTS? (VISIT THEM, SOMETIMES STAY WITH THEM, TALK TO THEM ON THE PHONE, LETTERS, MONEY?)

Questions about contact with parents were added partway through the interview process when it began to be clear that, despite the fact that they were not able to live with their parents or receive consistent care from them, a significant number of respondents were naming a parent – generally a mother – as someone they turned to for support. Fifty-three young people answered this set of questions which was aimed at gleaning insight into how families might better be supported so that young people might not become homeless in the first place.

Of those who answered questions about parental contact, about half maintained some form of contact with their parents, mainly by phone.

I visit my dad maybe once a year and call my mom every time I get my hands on a free long-distance phone.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

I call them over the phone about three times a month and they send me money once a month and that's it. That's all the contact I have with them.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Usually talk to my mom about once a month, once every three weeks...but other than that I really don't have enough money for the pay phone.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

Half reported no contact at all with their parents.

I don't have contact. They told me never to contact them again. That was when I was 12.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

I have no contact with them. It is not that I don't want it, it's just that I don't know where they are at. I've been in foster care for so long and even when I tried to talk to them at first, and I did have their phone number, they didn't want me to talk to them. They didn't want me to have their phone number.

--Male, 19, Fresno

None at all, they're in prison.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

My parents are dead, and no, because they were both crack heads and by the time I was born all of my sisters had been runaways and had children.

--Female, 19, Los Angeles

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN THINK OF THAT MIGHT HAVE HELPED YOUR FAMILY STAY TOGETHER OR PREVENTED YOU FROM WINDING UP ON YOUR OWN IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Almost no one who answered this question described a service or therapeutic intervention they thought might have made a difference, but many took this question as an occasion to describe the family dynamics they believed had precipitated their homelessness.

A lot less drugs. Not for me. For my mom.

--Male, 22, Yuba City

If they were not doing bad stuff in the first place. If they had their life together.

--Male, 20, San Jose

If my mom would have laid off drugs, she would have never left for Mexico and pissed my dad off and he would have never taken off to Minnesota and left me at the neighbor's house.... If my dad would have cared just a little bit more to take care of his son, put a little bit of time into him, maybe I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now. But I learned the street when I was real young. I know how to push drugs and do that financial situation but that's not what I'm looking to do. I'm trying to do things right.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Probably if my mom was there more, or if my mom and dad hadn't gotten divorced. Maybe if I wasn't so independent when I was younger.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

My stepdad. If he wouldn't have never came into my mom's life, then everybody would be together.

--Female, 18, Fresno

(If) I would have just did what my mom wanted me to – you know, do exactly what every other kid does, just listen to (them), they're parents, blah blah blah – I probably wouldn't be here now.

--Male, 21, Los Angeles

Honest communication, less stubbornness (both ends).

--Male, 21, San Francisco

One-fifth (19 percent) of the youth responding to this question said nothing would have helped their family stay together or prevented them from winding up on the street.

There's nothing that could have been done because I hated everyone.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

HELPING HANDS

Ninety-five percent of my day's work is involved in giving direct services. It would be really nice if 50 percent of my work was involved in trying to stop the next young people coming down the line who are going to end up homeless. How can we put together a coordinated plan and policy that looks at all the different aspects – prevention, system support, outreach. I would liken it to a medical model. There is a statewide plan about cancer. Everything is coordinated. Everything is linked. We're not treating youth homelessness the same way.

--Simon Costello, Program Manager, Youth Services
Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center

Since the passage of the *Runaway Youth Act* in 1974, there have been a number of pieces of federal legislation aimed at addressing youth homelessness. The most recent is the *Runaway, Homeless and Missing Children Protection Act*, signed into law in 2003 and up for reauthorization in 2008. This legislation authorizes funding streams for homeless youth services including drop-in centers, street outreach efforts, transitional living programs, and the National Runaway Switchboard. However, funding levels do not meet the existing need. In 2003, for example, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 40 percent of youth who sought help from Transitional Living Programs were turned away due to lack of resources.³⁹ In 2004, 4,200 young people were turned away from emergency shelters for the same reason.⁴⁰

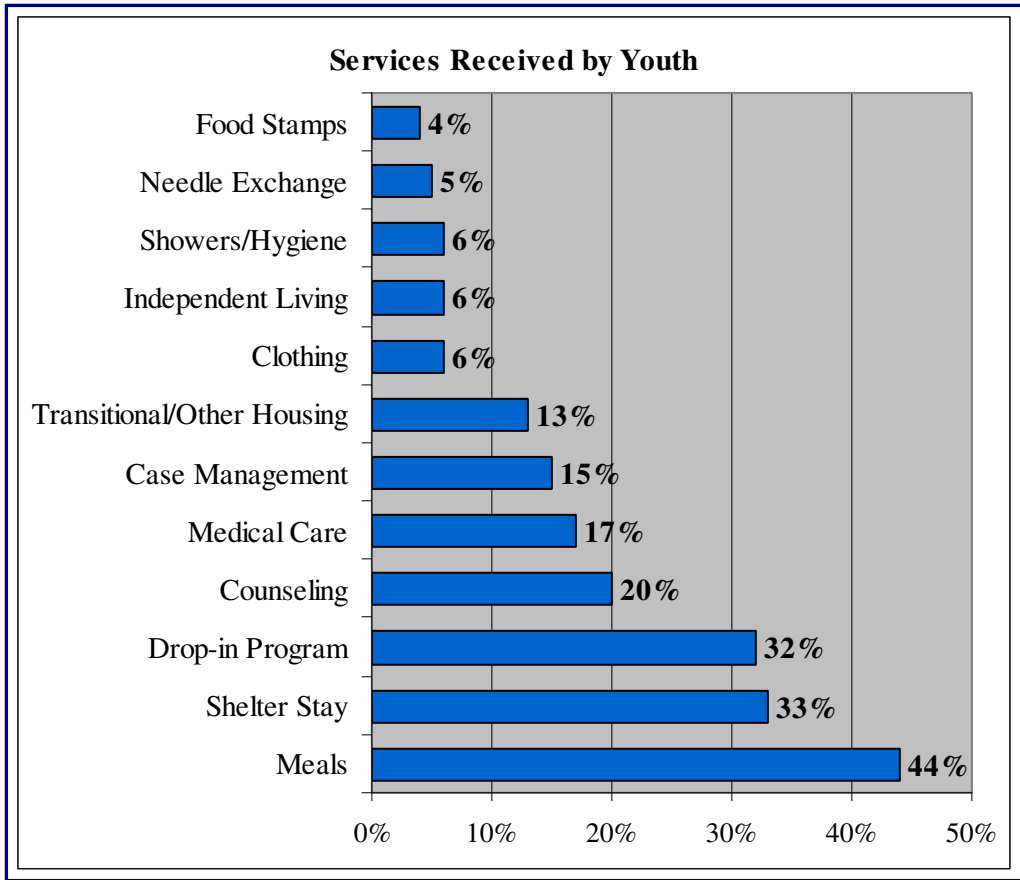
Our own research made clear that, in addition to youth who may have been turned away from services because of lack of funding, large numbers of youth receive no services, or only sporadic and inadequate services, because of a perceived mismatch between their needs and what is offered, prior bad experiences, and a complex interplay of internal and systemic barriers.

WHAT KINDS OF SERVICES HAVE YOU RECEIVED?

Thirteen percent of the youth reported that they had received no services of any kind.

Of those who had received services, 44 percent had received meals, 33 percent had stayed at a shelter, 32 percent had visited a drop-in program, 20 percent had received counseling, 17 percent had received medical care, 15 percent had received case management, and 13 percent had accessed transitional or other housing. In addition, six percent had received clothing, six percent had received services from an independent living skills program, six percent had received free showers and/or personal hygiene supplies, five percent had received services from a needle exchange program, and four percent had received food stamps.

Despite the high value youth placed on employment as a bridge to self-sufficiency, only four had received job training and only two had received help in finding work.

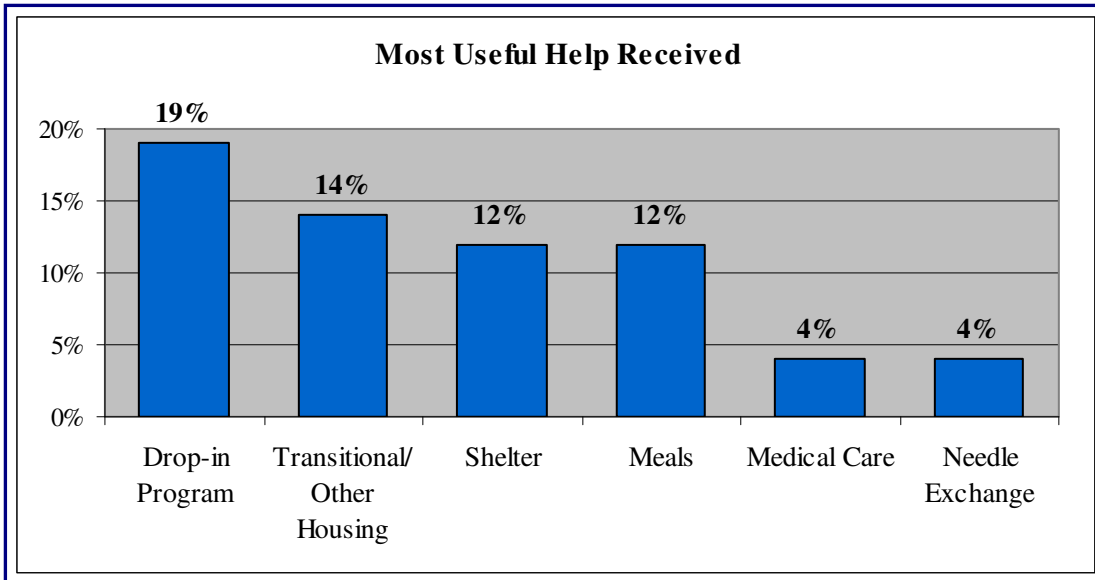


WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST USEFUL HELP YOU HAVE RECEIVED?

Those who elaborated on why particular services were helpful underscored the importance of personal relationships formed with service providers.

Another theme that emerged was the importance of tailoring services to the needs and capabilities of the individual, rather than requiring youth to meet strict predetermined criteria in order to be eligible for help.

At the statewide youth/provider convening, Lauren stressed: *Working on a case-by-case basis, with every kid – that’s the best thing any system can do.... That helped me out a lot. Like, one night I could not be back at the curfew, but I called from a pay phone and they said OK, come back. So I had somewhere to stay for that night.... Whatever your needs are, even if the rules need to be changed a little, or bent a little, so they can be met – you got to do what you got to do to help kids.*



Close to one-fifth of the youth responding said the most useful help they had received had come from a drop-in program.

My Friend's Place. Erin has been great. She helps me out when I need her to help me. We'll talk – even if I don't ask, she knows what I need.

--Male, 25, Los Angeles

The fact that My Friend's Place takes me to court and stays there with me until court is over and advocates for me. They're probably the only reason I haven't lost my son.... If I didn't have My Friend's Place, I wouldn't have anybody, cause my family disowned me.

--Female, 19, Los Angeles

Roaddawgz is a really great service for people to release some junk in their head and get something to eat.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

Shelter and the drop-in. When I was young enough to go there, they used to really take care of you with food and stuff, make sure you have coats and stuff.

--Male, 25, San Jose

Close to 15 percent of the youth responding cited transitional or other housing, and 12 percent cited shelters as the most useful to them.

Just getting me out of the streets instead of doing some stupid things.... I mean to be able to pretend a little bit that I actually live with people who really care about me, like they're my family, you know.

--Female, 21, Los Angeles

The shelter I've been going to in Oakland. It's really really good. They help you get in school, and they got a nice resource center and a nice place for me to stay. It's really really good. I like it.

--Female, 18, Albany

I'm going to have to say TLC3 (a transitional living program). All the staff, I appreciate what you are doing. I know that I'm 18, I'm grown, but I'm just not on my feet yet, and I just appreciate that they let me come in the building and change my life around.

--Male, 19, Fresno

Over ten percent cited free meals, four percent cited medical care and four percent needle exchange. Other services mentioned included counseling, drug treatment, GED support, food stamps and food programs, free telephone calls, showers and personal hygiene items, church, job training, legal advocacy, parenting classes, writing and arts programs, transportation, independent living skills programs, and the kindness of strangers.

I think just meeting people along the way who are really generous. Maybe give us a place to stay for the night, or give us some food if we really need it.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Not necessarily have I gotten help at any organizations.... Good people help me out a lot. People I don't know. Good Samaritans, I count on all the time.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Probably the food and the showers. That way I could save money for the hotels and my apartment...showers to keep myself clean for work.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

Bus tokens to make it to probation so I don't violate.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

Youth described the importance of service providers who provide support and prepare them – like a parent might – to be independent adults.

In focus groups, young people talked about the value of relationships with service providers who offered support but also had high expectations for them – as a parent might – in order to prepare them for adulthood and independence.

At the Sacramento focus group, a 15-year-old talked about why the WIND Center – where the group was held – was different from other providers he had encountered: *That's why WIND is so good, because Tasha [the associate executive director] and all the staff there, they're like family.*

They're another part of our lives. Tasha – she's more like my aunt. If I needed her for something, she would be there.... They are always behind you on everything, but they also stop doing stuff at a certain point, so you can help yourself out. If you don't help yourself out, then they'll tell you something to help yourself out. And if that doesn't work – well, you need to work it out a little bit more.... You need to learn to stand up for yourself. So WIND – they're a big leaning post, but (they) push back.

HAVE YOU HAD ANY EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICES THAT HAVE MADE YOU NOT WANT TO GO BACK? IF SO, WHAT HAPPENED?

The youth who answered this question were fairly evenly divided between those who had had an experience that made them not want to return to seek services (49 percent) and those who had not (51 percent).

Previous research has attributed the large number of homeless youth who are disengaged from services to qualities of the young people themselves, including distrust of adults and institutions, their transient nature, concern for daily survival, and low self-esteem.⁴¹ While some of these issues did emerge in the young people's own accounts of why they did not access services, these accounts also challenge service providers and policy-makers to re-examine how services are organized and provided, rather than putting the onus for the disconnect entirely on the youth themselves.

Half the youth reported an experience that made them not want to return to seek services... being treated badly, excessive bureaucracy, conflicts with staff/clients, and unpleasant conditions in shelters.

Over one-quarter (26 percent) of the youth responding said they were treated badly or rudely, patronized, judged or made to feel helpless by shelter staff or other service providers. Eleven percent said they had been deterred by excessive bureaucracy.

I was mistreated, like I chose to be homeless.

Male, 17, San Diego

People know I been to jail so they use that against me.

Male, 20, San Francisco

I went to a shelter in Sacramento once and they wouldn't let me in or feed me. It was horrible.

Female, 20, San Francisco

Yes, at _____ House, they are very homophobic.

Male, 20, Los Angeles

At the statewide youth/provider convening, Lauren underscored the importance of service without stigma or judgment: *I dealt with a lot of great people in the Storefront program (in San Diego) that got me on my feet and up the stairs, too. I mean, I was nowhere. And what helps is people that care. If someone gives a damn about you and wants to listen to you, and not try to tell you what you need or what you are, it's easier to connect with that person. Because what I've dealt with - and a lot of my friends that are also at programs have dealt with - is, not all, but some of the staff are very judgmental of the kids. And they just tell you, 'You're a drug addict,' 'You're crazy,' 'You're a street kid.' And if they don't look past that - you know, there's a person inside.... You have to connect with the kids, and you have to believe them when they say something. You can't just judge them.*

In a number of cases, conflict with staff revolved around pressure to follow rules, meet requirements or otherwise "get with the program" in order to receive help. Programs,

said a 20-year-old participant in the Sacramento focus group, need to be “*more accessible. Because some of those programs have ridiculous criteria to get through. You have to hop through so many hoops.*”

“*They want you to have a job,*” added a 15-year-old participant. “*But what if you can’t ‘cause you just got out of jail or something like that? It’s harder to do that.... They want somebody that’s perfectly poor.*”

As with so many of the obstacles and barriers they faced, many of the young people perceived program requirements they could not meet as judgments on themselves and their efforts. “*I feel that it’s just manipulation,*” a 21-year-old participant in the Sacramento focus group chimed in. “*They’re trying to say that all homeless people, the reason why they’re homeless is because they’re stupid. But we’re not stupid and we don’t have any mental problems. It’s just sometimes we can’t meet up to their standards.*”

Young people took a similar message – *you are not wanted* – from the fact that many shelters put them out in the morning, sometimes waking them as early as 5:30 so that they could eat breakfast and be back on the street by 8 a.m.

“*We’re homeless,*” observed a 15-year-old participant in the Sacramento focus group. “*It doesn’t make any sense. What, you’re going to kick us out? We’re going to be right there in the front yard, basically. It doesn’t make any sense.*”

Given the fact that many homeless youth had been “put out” of their homes of origin and/or foster homes, this daily experience of literally being returned to the street was often perceived as personal rejection and was traumatic enough for some that it deterred them from seeking help or shelter in the future. The requirement that they be on the street during the day also increased their vulnerability to the dangers they described, and to police interaction, with the destructive cycle of tickets, warrants, and arrests that often followed.

When you’re on the streets, you have to have a certain attitude about you. You have a certain speech to make sure you fit in, to make sure you’re not an outcast, because that can be dangerous.... The worst experience I’ve had was when the staff expects you to totally change everything that you were five minutes ago and act like your life is perfect, and punish you; they take away your food, they take away your shelter if you don’t do what you’re told.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

I went to ____ House to try to get into their program, but as I was waiting, the case manager was yelling at this guy who wasn’t complying with the program or whatever, so it made me worried that maybe they’re really strict and don’t treat you with respect. But I hope not – I’m trying everything I can to get shelter.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

When they drill you a thousand questions about your personal life just to see if you’re qualifying for insurance or a place to stay, what... is the point? I’d rather sleep outside than tell you what I did five years ago with my ex-girlfriend.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

*Any shelter is like prison...but I guess it's better than being on the streets.
You got food and a place to sleep.*

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

Given the issues with trust and authority that homeless youth may carry as a result of past trauma, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) advises would-be providers to “offer assistance with no strings attached. Homeless youth may require access to low-barrier services, such as a meal or a hot shower, while they are developing trust with service providers.” In the same vein, the NCTSN recommends that providers “consider (young people’s) behavior in the context of their life experiences including their traumatic life experiences.”⁴²

At the focus group at the transitional housing program in Fresno, many of the young people – while expressing tremendous appreciation for the support and stability the program provided – talked about having to trade the traditional graduated freedoms of young adulthood for a “second childhood.” As Thomas, who lived independently from age 16 to 20 before entering the program, put it: *I feel that I had to trade in a lot of my adulthood. Pretty much I had to go back to childhood. I had to have a supervisor, like a parent. And I had to report all of my doings. Even if I had a guest – what time the guest came, what time the person left, their name, their background.... I had to write down pretty much everything I did. If I would look for a job, I had to write that down.*

Amanda expressed concern that this level of restrictiveness might hobble her once she had to leave the program and live on her own: *They want you to be grown, but then they're treating us like kids. Everything we do, like signing in and out. Chores. It is a program that helps us out. But then you also want to learn how to live and how to be on your own. When we're on our own, there is not going to be nobody telling us, "This person can't stay here, and you have to sign out, you have to do this, you have to do that.".... It's kind of like foster care makes you crippled and transitional housing – it's not as crippling, but it's like that.*

These statements ignited a spirited debate among the group, several of whom believed that the restrictions and requirements were for their own good and that the benefits of the program far outweighed the costs. As Alfonso put it: *I can see past the curfew and all that, because to me, that's nothing. That doesn't compare to how much I'm benefiting from this program. I'm taking advantage of it as much as I can right now. I have a place to stay. I have a foundation. From here I do all my job searching, and school.*

Felicia – who had become homeless after coming to the United States on her own, leaving her family behind in Mexico – added that the rules and restrictions, like those a parent might impose, made her feel cared for and protected: *You have someone to remind you to go and look for a job, go do this, go do that. Someone to go talk to and say, "You know what? This is going on." What if you had nobody, and you were in the street? Would you rather have this, or nothing?*

At the Sacramento focus group, Winston, 20, offered a nuanced analysis of the ambivalence some young people who have experienced the extreme autonomy of street life feel about trading that autonomy for shelter and support: *You have to take into account people that be taking care of themselves so long that when you do give them that leaning post, they're very wary of it, because they're afraid that everything they worked for...everything they earned...their identities, period, is going to be swept away because of the...regulations and rules. Their procedures. Classes that they want you to take. You have to turn over your paychecks. Your independence is your biggest criteria, and a lot of these programs don't recognize that...I've always been in control. Always. And now they're asking me to give up my money. I want to do this, but at the same time, I've been taking care of this by myself and I've been doing just fine.*

At the same focus group, Carmela elaborated on the psychic trade-offs that accepting shelter sometimes demands: *At times you stay even when you know it's probably better for your psyche to leave. Not better for you physically, but better for your psyche to leave. You are basically harming yourself. You're putting up and making a shell, coating yourself. Shelling yourself. And you are (becoming) more defensive.... They have certain criteria that you have to follow.... You have to give up some of your personality in order to be housed.... You can't be as...independent as you normally would be. That's why, at times, the streets seem better.*

Other problems cited in interview responses included conflicts with fellow clients and unpleasant shelter conditions.

Shelters, 'cause of how dirty they are, and the amount of drugs.

--Female, 17, San Francisco

Yeah, some of the other homeless people will look at me weird. And sometimes I'll be sleeping at night and they want to go up to me and see if I have any cash.

--Female, 18, Salinas

I went to the shelter one time at _____. There was a lot of people trying to fight everybody, a lot of violence, a lot of frustration going on around there. I didn't want to go back because I figured I'd either get in a fight or get kicked out, that would be the end of that.

--Male, 25, San Jose

Just going down to the _____ House sometimes and eating, if you have small children, people hitting their crack pipe in front of your kids, and you have no choice but to go there because you are hungry. Or having the cops stop and search your car because that's what they expect to find down there, and your kids are just standing there, and all you want is something to eat.

--Female, 23, Fresno

As attachment theory pioneer John Bowlby has observed, “*When youth suffer extreme trauma such as physical or sexual abuse, they are likely to experience relationships as unsupportive and uncaring.*”⁴³ Research indicates that homeless youth have experienced, and often continue to experience, high levels of trauma, so it should not be surprising that many expressed this perception in their accounts of relationships with adults, including service providers.

In many cases, experiences of being judged, rejected or expelled by providers or programs mirrored the experiences young people had had in troubled families. At the project youth/provider convening, Arturo, from Los Angeles, described being “*kicked out of my house because I told (my father) I was gay and he said that I was a disgrace for the family and they didn’t want to know nothing about me.*” When Arturo subsequently encountered homophobic remarks from staff and other residents at shelters, he concluded that “*staff don’t really care about you.... Bad experiences make you think that everything else is going to be the same way, and you don’t want anything from them any more.*” Only when he found his way to a shelter specifically targeted to gay and lesbian youth was Arturo able to get the help he needed to stabilize his life.

Similarly, Erin Casey of My Friend’s Place, which offers drop-in services in Los Angeles, says that often “*young people access drop-in for the first time because they were exited from their shelter program due to behavioral issues. Unfortunately, there is usually little advocacy or negotiation that we can do with the shelter so that the young person can maintain safe housing.*” This same young person, Casey points out, may well have entered shelter because her parents kicked her out of the house. “*We recognize the dilemma shelter programs face in how to hold young people accountable for their decisions and behaviors within a housing structure,*” she explains, “*and we share the dilemma in our milieu as well. Drop-in centers and shelters need to ask: Is cutting a young person off from safe shelter and basic necessities the most appropriate, compassionate, and trauma-informed consequence for disruptive or otherwise negative behavior? Does it build trust? Does it create space for real change?*” As an example, she states: “*Certainly I was given consequences for behavior when I lived at home, but it never meant that I didn’t get to eat or shower.*”

In focus groups, young people who had received services talked about how easy they felt it was to get kicked out for breaking rules or failing to meet requirements – an experience which often mirrored the trauma of being expelled from their homes of origin, (and, for some, expelled again from foster homes once they turned 18). Even those who had not been expelled from programs described the insecurity that came with feeling that, should they slip up, the bed they slept in might not be there for them tomorrow.

At the transitional living center in Fresno, Amanda put it this way: “*They will put you out. Because me, I started out going to school, but my financial aid got screwed up. Somewhere down the line, they said there would be no financial aid...so then I couldn’t go to school that semester. It’s hard for me to get a job. So I don’t have a job, I’m not in school, and they were saying I have to (be in school or have a job) or they’re going to put me out. So there’s that little fear of – dang, if I just mess up one time, I’m going to be*

out.... I don't have nowhere to go. I don't have family.... I don't have reliable friends, where I can just move in.

A survey respondent echoed this anxiety. Programs and shelters, he said, should

...make it where you can't get kicked out so easy, because I seen case plans that you can't follow, and if you don't do it you get kicked out. Try to have better staff, so they can work with you and not kick you out and put you on the streets, because sometimes staff have their own little issues and they try to take it out on clients.... I had some staff say to me, "If you want, we can take this outside."

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

As Rob Gitin, director of the San Francisco street outreach counseling collaborative At the Crossroads, put it at the statewide youth/provider convening: *A lot of the time there is an assumption made that if young people are unwilling to go into services, it means that they are saying, 'I don't want to make any change, or I don't have any goals, or I don't want to make any progress.' We just don't think that's true, so we wanted to create a program that reaches people regardless of the decisions that they're making, regardless of what kind of structure they want or don't want in their lives – that just tries to support them and help them identify and achieve their goals. We don't have a pre-existing agenda with our clients, where we say, 'you need to do this,' or 'you need to do that.' We just try to get to know them and say 'How can we be of support?'*

Some young people come to the street having fled child welfare or juvenile justice institutions (such as group homes) they found coercive or stigmatizing, and so are particularly unlikely to trust providers they feel are imposing rigid demands or “telling them what their problem is.”

Kristen, 28, was 14 when her parents sent her to a locked “behavior modification” facility. *“They basically stuck me in an isolation room in a pair of boxers and a T-shirt with no pens, no papers, no pencils, no books,”* she said at the youth/provider convening. *“And I had to sit with my legs crossed and my hands in my lap for six months straight talking to nobody. I ate in that room and I slept in that room. And they had me on all sorts of meds.”* After that, says Kristen, *“any kind of program, I was like, ‘No.’ I was terrified. I was afraid I was going to get forced to do something I didn't want to do. So I completely rebelled against the system. And I've been on the streets on my own, living out of hotels and stuff, and scared of any place to help.”*

Today, after seven years of work with At the Crossroads, Kristen is living in her own apartment with her longtime boyfriend and attending college. *“I wish I hadn't been so scared of all the help that had been out there when I was a kid,”* said Kristen, *“because I really think it could have helped.”*

Damien, 22, who described himself as an artist who sleeps in an undisclosed park, said he will only access open-ended services – including At the Crossroads, Roaddawgz (a multi-media art and writing program), and the art studio at Hospitality House. *“I think the*

reason why a lot of people are crazy is because they are constantly being funneled through a system that (requires a lot) of paperwork, and 'OK, what's the agenda now?' and 'OK, we're going to get you on track,'" he said at the statewide youth/provider convening. *"So that's why I only participate in those specific programs."*

At the same time, other youth pointed out the value of programs that encourage young people to work towards stability rather than simply allowing them to "hang out" at drop-in centers: *"Where is the motivation if somebody's whole life revolves around traveling to punk shows or hopping on trains to do graffiti or some huge drug deal in Reno so they can brag about it back at the park?"* asked Christopher, from San Jose, at the youth/provider convening. *"I've seen success stories, where people go on to college...(but) then you see these people in their early 30s that were part of the scene in the early '90s and they never just connected with something to overcome this and get in school and hit the books.... We just have to get people connected with the reason why you can't just hang out and watch TV and try to mack on the girl next to you, because this is what they do at our (drop-in) centers."*

Young people emphasized the importance of programs that offer emotional and spiritual support as well as meeting basic survival needs, so that they could move beyond feeling that they were "just surviving."

What he would have valued most as a teenager and young adult on his own, one formerly homeless young man said at the statewide youth/provider convening, is a program that combined art with peer mentorship: *That stuff is so important, because it makes you feel like you have an outlet, and that you can do something to express what's going on in your life. That's the biggest thing, I think – for kids to feel connected to their change, and know that they can do something positive. Because it's so hard. Once you've been on the street for so long, how do you crawl out of that? It's like you start cutting off every positive thing that you have in your life. You don't have family.... You know people in passing, but to really have a foundation of someone that's going to help you – I think that young adults who have been through it can best help kids, and help pull (them) up around art, and all the things that they're interested in and they want to do. That's so important at that age.*

At the statewide youth/provider convening, several participants talked about the difficulty of age restrictions on services for homeless youth and the barrier it creates when working with individuals.

"I don't think it's ethical to start working with someone and then, two months later, say 'OK, you've aged out,'" says Rob Gitin, whose organization, At the Crossroads, will work with clients into their thirties if needed. *"Young people coming from the streets have been through so many transitions in their lives, and the last thing service providers should be doing is mimicking that, and continuing that.... If you hit the streets when you're 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, it's not like when you hit your 24th birthday, you say, 'OK, I'm going to leave behind all my friends who are younger and start hanging out with 45-year-olds.' And yet that's the exact experience you have to go through in services. You have to leave your peer community, and then exclusively start using services which usually are*

focused on middle-aged men.”

Tasha Norris, Associate Executive Director of the WIND Center in Sacramento, said that WIND tries to be flexible, for just this reason. We rely on “*emotional ages, because some of our kids are 22 years old and they function like a 12-year-old. And they would be eaten alive down at the Salvation Army.... Most of the kids that I talk to would rather be on the streets than be in an adult shelter.*”

“I remember outreach talking to me and telling me about all these services they could give me, and I didn’t want it,” said one young man who spent most of his adolescence and early adulthood on the streets of San Francisco. *“I figured, ‘Well, I’ve been taking care of myself for this long, why do I need help now? But when you’re ready to get help, it’s got to be there. And as you get older – when you’re really ready to get up out of that situation and do something about it – sometimes the help is not there.”*

IF YOU HAVE NOT SOUGHT HELP FROM PUBLIC OR NON-PROFIT AGENCIES, WHY NOT?

According to the Campaign to End Homelessness, rules imposed by shelter providers – such as requiring sobriety or denying entrance to those with signs of mental illness – are a central reason why chronically homeless people remain on the street.⁴⁴ Among the youth respondents to our survey, eight percent had not sought aid because they felt they would not qualify or be able to follow the rules that came along with it (or had experienced this in the past), or that there was too much bureaucracy associated with receiving aid.

They don’t do much. They usually tell you there’s nothing that we can do for you. “You don’t qualify for our help.”

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

The waiting lists are hundreds of people, or pages, long. I signed up for Section 8 five years ago and I’m still waiting.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

They didn’t do nothing. They expected too much, and they didn’t see that I went into that program with nothing.

--Female, 21, Fresno

I don’t like being told what to do.

--Female, 24, San Jose

Other reasons for not seeking help included shame, past negative experiences, pride, and fear of being laughed at, arrested, or turned away because of immigration status.

Because I’m afraid of getting laughed at.

--Female, 18, Hayward

Because I’m afraid they’ll say no, because I’m here illegally.

--Female, 25, Fresno

Because I was unaware of these organizations.

--Male, 16, San Diego

Because of the law, my warrants.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

'Cause I had a terrible experience. Because I needed them and it was embarrassing that no one wanted to help and they made it such an ugly experience.

--Female, 23, Fresno

Because they don't want to help.

--Female, 18, San Jose

Several expressed a complex mix of feelings and values associated with being an object of aid.

I have sought help from non-profit agencies but I try not to because that's worse than a lot of things that I believe are bad. So I just won't do stand-in-line kind of crap to get free stuff that I could probably go and work for and not be lazy and just do the regular American thing and work.

--Male, 22, Yuba City

'Cause I haven't needed it yet. Maybe when the time comes. I know other people are more needy than me. I see people, they need help more than I. Let them go first.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

I don't like to rely on them. I don't like the whole fact of them trying to give us such a little amount, then trying to control us. "Oh, we did all we can for you guys and now you're still out there on the streets."

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

Twelve percent of all survey respondents said they had not sought help because they were self-sufficient or did not need any assistance.

Because usually I can take care of myself and with all the people I know I can usually stay afloat and I don't have to rely on that.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Because I think I can handle it myself.

--Female, 17, Stockton

I do for me. I don't need help.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

WHAT KIND OF HELP OR SERVICES DO YOU WISH WERE THERE FOR YOU THAT ARE NOT AVAILABLE NOW?

Eleven percent of the youth respondents asked for help with housing, and another seven percent said they needed direct financial assistance. Five percent wished for more access to food and five percent for more shelters – with some specifying the desire for housing and/or shelter specifically for undocumented youth, gay and lesbian youth, people with pets, or young adults.

In a focus group in Los Angeles, one young man sketched out a vividly-imagined picture of the center he would build if he had the resources – one which offered shelter without asking those who sought it to trade in their autonomy: *If I ever make it major on my music, I think a good 70 percent of my earnings is going to go towards drop-in centers and stuff like that. Because I want to build my own drop-in centers and shelters and stuff. I kind of have a different idea. Pretty much have a humongous building ...with a lot of empty rooms, right? And on the bottom floor is a drop-in center, a TV and all that. But everything else is just empty. Because they have all these lots out there that you could just build stuff on. And people who are squatting on the streets, instead of squatting on the streets – because it's like, 'Damn, where am I gonna go tonight?' – you just squat upstairs. Just bring your sleeping bag, and just pick a corner or pick a room, and it's yours. It's like a safe haven for people who have nowhere to go.... So that's what I plan on doing with it, is opening up a bunch of those. Have like a humongous drop-in center at the bottom floor, and they have a 24-hour staff. That way it's a drop-in center that's open for 24 hours.*

“Because stuff happens in the middle of the night,” a young woman in the group said, endorsing this vision. “The only place to go is the ER to feel safe.” “Exactly,” added a young man, “or riding the buses.”

Just housing, places where I can live and have the proper day care so I can go to work and get back on my feet.

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

Maybe just somewhere safe, comfortable to sleep. Maybe a friendly environment to eat. Not having to worry about getting jumped or stabbed or anything.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

More shelters for adults, 'cause where I'm at it's only under 25, and what if I became homeless at 27? They're basically telling me there is no hope for you.

--Female, 21, Fresno

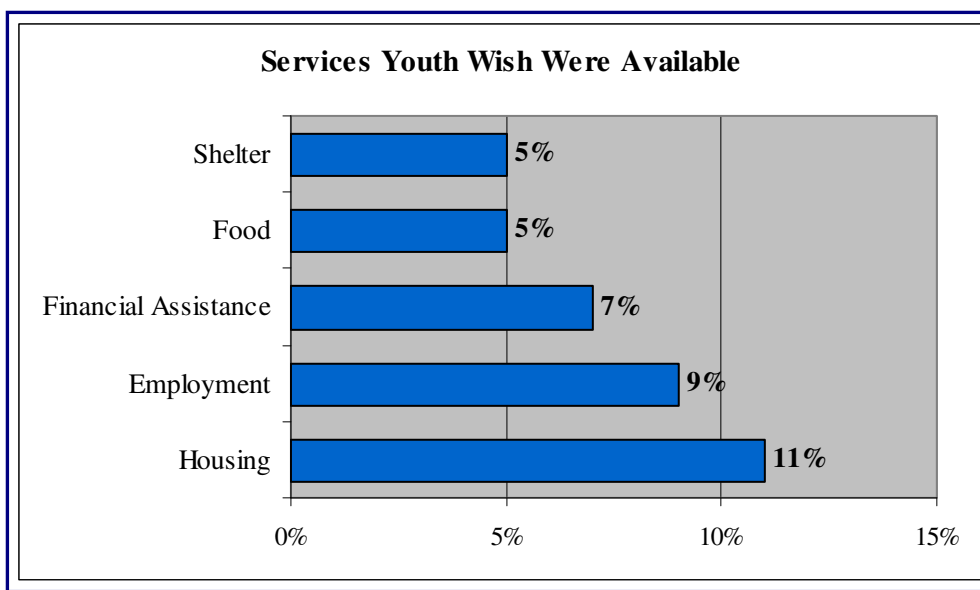
A smaller number had a more modest, and poignant, wish – to be offered a roof for the night, even if not a bed.

Bathrooms. Somewhere safe you could stay when everything is closed, maybe from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Not necessarily somewhere to sleep, just somewhere warm and safe, like the library.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Somewhere to stay at all night. Not just somewhere to sleep, if you want to stay up and write without being harassed.

--Male, 22, San Francisco



Nine percent wanted more help in finding employment, including an innovative suggestion for combining housing with immediate employment.

A decent housing where they got like a day labor program to give you a little bit of time...to set up if you can't find a job on your own in a certain (period)... They'll put you to work every morning, so you're not just sitting there irritated and aggravated and feeling left behind.

--Male, 19, Los Angeles

The obstacles faced by those seeking work with a criminal record, raised in response to several other questions on the survey, came up once again in this context.

Just jobs ready for people who are willing to work, regardless to what's on their record.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Several young people mentioned the need for health and mental health care.

Probably better counseling services and services that will help me get the medication I need.

--Female, 20, San Francisco

Dental services, check-ups for vision, stuff like that.... I got a wisdom tooth that's cracked off at the gum line; it's all abscessed and stuff. They can't do anything for me.

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

Education emerged as a priority for several, as it did throughout the survey – including one request for a performing arts academy that would capitalize on young people’s creative strengths.

I wish there were more educational programs for the kids out here, ‘cause a lot of the kids don’t like going to “school” school. If there were places where we could learn to express our creativity, ‘cause a lot of the kids out here are really, really, really creative. That’s usually how we make our money. A lot of them are singers, dancers, instrumental, you know. If there were a place where we can channel that in, I don’t know, somehow make profit out of it on a continuous basis rather than rely on the people that walk down the street.

--Female, 18, Santa Cruz

Maybe education, so I can at least try to get some education to get a good job. Get money for buying a place and stuff like that.

--Female, 19, Sacramento

Getting into college for free.

Male, 17, San Francisco

Other desired services included bathrooms, showers, clothing, individual and family counseling, health and dental care, education (including help with college tuition), help getting documents such as a driver’s license, career counseling and childcare, help for undocumented individuals, more rehab centers with less waiting time to get in, more family-oriented services, more services for youth with disabilities, more services for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender youth, peer support, recreation, and transportation assistance.

People my age that can counsel me – just sit down and talk to them.

--Female, 17, location unknown

Honestly, if they would start giving out bus passes. If you have a job, you shouldn’t have to worry about getting tokens the next day if you have to get to your job.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

Reflecting a theme that emerged throughout the survey, one young woman responded that she wished for help despite being technically an adult and thus, even in her own eyes, “undeserving.”

I wish I can have anything and everything needed, and if I’ll ask they’ll just help me find a home. Even though I’m 18, I should do everything on my own, but I need some help.

--Female, 18, Salinas

Eleven percent said they had no unmet services wishes, either because adequate services were already available where they lived, or because they were independent and did not need services.

You can get anything if you look for it hard enough so I can't really cry about nothin'.

--Male, 22, San Francisco

It's all out there for us, you just got to look for it. You just got to know. There's shelters, hospitals, there's even Food Not Bombs, there's independent organizations trying to help homeless people. It's out there as long as you want it. I'm pretty happy with what's going on.

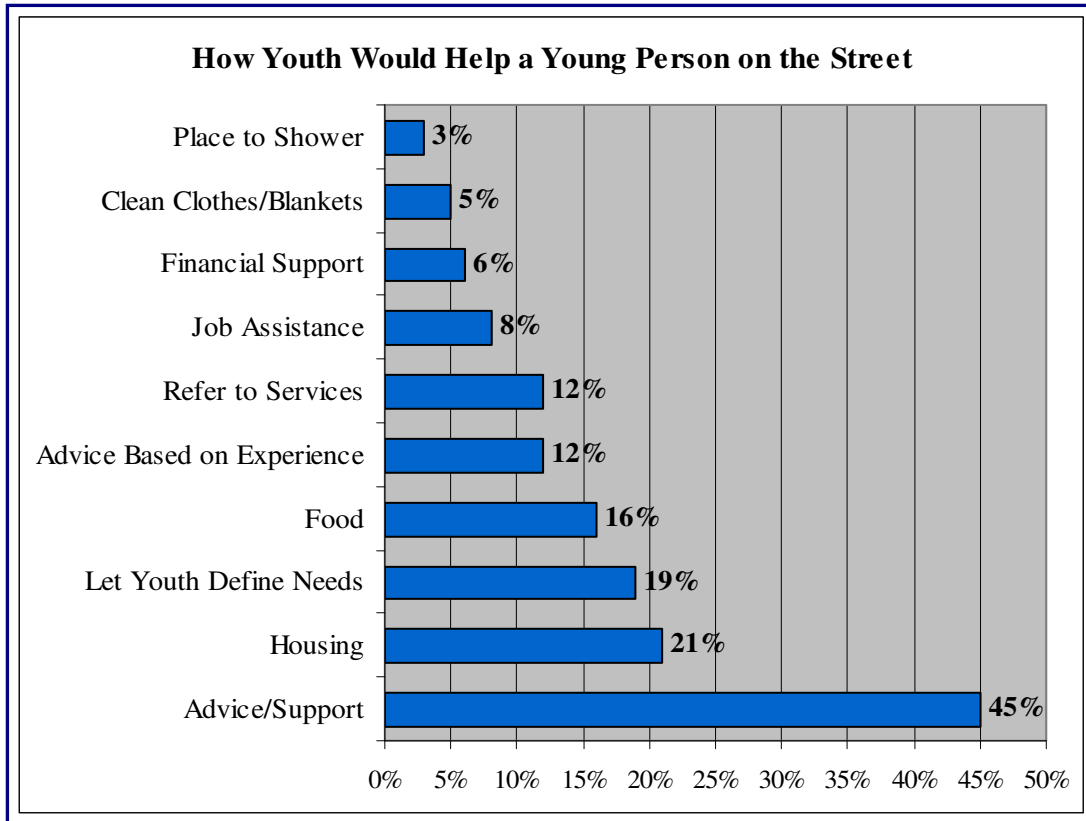
--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

I always try to do things on my own.

--Female, 23, Fresno

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY CHANGES

Imagine you were an outreach worker trying to help a young person on the street. What would you say, do or offer? [Survey Question]



A large number – 45 percent – said they would offer advice and/or emotional support if they found themselves in the role of outreach worker. Twelve percent said they would offer advice or support based on their own personal experience.

I would come from a position of understanding – non-judgmental. I would present myself not better than them but equal ... so they might be a little more willing to work with me and a little more willing to believe what I have to offer and what I have to say. I would let them know all the possibilities I know. I wouldn't push them to quit what they were doing. I would help them in the ways I could help them.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

I will first approach them in a friendly manner, not as an authority figure. I will sit down and talk to them, get to know their story and let them know that there are places where they can go and ask for help. I'll give them my card if they need someone to talk to, and addresses and hours of some shelters that I know. I'll also give them a gift certificate to a fast food place, and some bus tokens.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

Say to them, "Get your education, stay in school." I would try to find something that would interest them 'cause that's mainly their problem, the reason they're out here. They have nothing to draw their attention. They have no one really basically acknowledging anything that they would want to do.

--Female, 22, Fresno

Several used phrases such as "keep your head up" or "don't give up" to describe the message they would convey to other young people.

I would tell them they still have a chance.

--Male, 17, San Diego

Let them know there is hope.

--Female, 24, San Jose

Others said they would offer their own experiences as a cautionary tale.

I would say all you should do is stay in school and have a healthy home. Try to stay out of trouble because you don't want to end up like how I was, or like I am.

--Female, 18, Hayward

Nineteen percent said the first thing they would do is ask the young person questions about his or her needs, letting him or her define the interaction and the nature of "help."

I would be more realistic about helping them. What can they do, or what are they willing to do, to get themselves out of that situation?

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

Sit down and talk to them and see what's going on. Because I don't want people to come up to me and be like, "You need my help." I want them to come up and be like, "Hey, how's it going?" and have a dialogue with me.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

First of all, I would ask the kid what was going on in his life, what kind of problems he was facing. Try to give some advice at first. Maybe to direct him in some sort of direction he can sustain for himself, be able to provide for him. Not have to rely on someone else to keep him alive.

--Male, 19, Santa Cruz

I would offer them my ear 'cause a lot of times kids don't like being told "You should go get a job, you should do this or that." They'd rather have somebody to talk to that will actually listen to them. It's not just going in one ear and out the other. I would take them out to lunch.

--Female, 18, Santa Cruz

What do you need the most, what's more important than anything right now? Yeah, you're a drug user but besides the drugs and everything, what do you need now? And I'd do it if I could.

--Male, 25, Los Angeles

Similarly, several underscored that they would tailor their approach to the individual.

It all depends on who approached me. If it is someone who is on the streets but is gang banging, I would point them towards programs that prevent gang violence, and I would also tell them where to find shelter.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

Employment emerged again as an important theme, with eight percent saying they would offer a young person assistance in looking for a job.

I would first offer them a job 'cause that's like a really important thing. And next is if they have a place to stay and if they're in school. Those are the three basics that most homeless people and homeless kids need to work on.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

While the primary focus was on providing emotional support and guidance, a large number also said they would offer direct assistance in meeting survival needs. Twenty-one percent said they would offer housing and 16 percent said they would offer food. Six percent said they would offer direct financial support, five percent said they would offer clean clothing and/or blankets, and three percent said they would offer a free place to take a shower. Twelve percent said they would refer a young person to existing service providers. Several said they would provide clean socks.

Several youth said that, if they were an outreach worker, they would take homeless youth into their own homes if they could...

Many specified that these essentials would be provided with a warmth and sense of welcome that they had sometimes found lacking in services they had received.

If I could I will try to get them somewhere where they can live, offer them as much as I could with work or whatever, and try to find a place where they feel nice and warm – where they don't feel like they have to leave in a second, and not constantly look over their shoulder.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

First I'd start offering them food and stuff like that – actually get their attention with stuff like that – and then I'd start offering them better services and try to help them get on their feet.

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

I would give them a place to live. I would treat them good. I'll nourish them good. I'll basically take them under my wings and treat them like a king, like I want to be treated.

--Male, 23, San Jose

Several said that they would take other young people into their homes, if they had the resources to do so.

I would say, "I want to help you out," and first of all, I would ask them if they want to live with me, if I had room. I wouldn't mind having someone I care about live with me if I had my place – if I had my job and stuff – and then I'll try to help them get a job.

--Male, 18, Fresno

If I had somewhere to stay, offer them something. Because people been coming to me like that. What goes around comes around. If you're kind to other people, people will be kind to you.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

If I had a place to stay, I would offer them my place, because I know how it is. I would offer them clothes, food, numbers of other places they could go to and get help. I would listen to them, because I know how it is when you need someone to talk to.

--Female, 18, Fresno

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES

Another theme that emerged was that housing should come with enough support to foster internal change and avenues to opportunity, rather than merely meeting survival needs, in order to help young people achieve long-term stability.

As one young man at the statewide youth/provider convening expressed: *Even in the situation I'm in now, it's like I'm supposed to be so grateful for this bed, you know what I mean? I try to approach staff and talk to them about what's going on and how they can help me, and it's like they don't want to talk to me. It's like, "You should just be grateful you have someplace to go." And I am, you know? But I still need to work on things to make my transition into the outside of that work for me. And it just seems like I get these road blocks every time I try to go to them and ask. And who knows why? I mean, obviously...the system is overcrowded or whatever. But it just seems like if they don't take time to meet people on a case-by-case basis – individual help for each person – then nothing is going to change.*

- ✓ *I think they should have a place for all the homeless people, try to help them, try to let them get a job or something – teach them how their life can change. Especially the people that have kids... 'cause a lot of people would be walking with kids and right now is cold, so if they could have a place for all of them and change their lives, I know that there wouldn't be a lot of people homeless like how there is right now.*

--Female, 18, Fresno

- ✓ *I would create a drop-in center and specifically interview (staff) to make sure they were treating people the way they should be, which is respectful as a human being as a whole, regardless of their status in life. I would also set aside some kind of money to help some people get on their feet, so that way they won't end up back in this situation and from then on take care of themselves and not need any more help.*

--Female, 24, Los Angeles

- ✓ *I would make sure there was a lot more transitional housing, because some of the shelters are short-term. Even if you apply for low-income housing or you are going to school, there is nothing in between. There is no cushions, so you are set up for failure.*

--Female, 23, Fresno

The theme of providing opportunity for advancement was reflected also in an emphasis on offering or supporting education – in particular, embedding educational opportunities within housing programs – as well as job training and placement.

- ✓ *I would build transitional housing and...there will be an outreach worker for health care, they would take care of clothing so that you can go to school, support you while you're going to school, and there will be an advocate that will come by and visit every week.... After you're done with school, there will be an extra year added on while you are getting stable.*

--Female, 23, Fresno

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGE, Cont.

- ✓ *I'm going to make a big private school, but it's going to be for the troubled kids, the kids that don't have it.... I'm gonna pick 5,000. It's gonna be a four-year school...and all those people that graduate from the school will go to a four-year college. I'm going to invest in the children.*
--Female, 18, Albany
- ✓ *There would be more government-based organizations aimed at the education and rehabilitation of youth to enter society. There would also be more investigators as to why known homeless youth are homeless.*
--Male, 19, San Diego
- ✓ *I wish there were services for people over a certain age, and there should be some kind of system set up that if you're trying to do something productively with your life, then there should be more things available to you.*
--Female, 24, Los Angeles
- ✓ *A shelter that doesn't have a curfew, that really helps you get a job and a place of your own. There is none.*
--Female, 19, San Diego

Youth also asked for more programs to help homeless youth in general, with some specifying free food programs.

- ✓ *That we have more funding for homeless youth up to the age of 27, and the provision of more housing, drop-in centers, and accessible programs.*
--Female, 24, Los Angeles
- ✓ *I say that there should be more free food centers, like when...large stores don't use all their food, instead of throwing it away, they give it to homeless people. That would work really really good.*
--Male, 19, Yuba City

Other ideas included raising or eliminating age restrictions on services targeted to youth, and making it legal for those under 18 to live independently and seek public services.

- ✓ *I'd say the age limit on the youth (services). I mean 22 or 21 or 23, it's pretty early to cut it off at those ages. I'm 23 now and I need more help I think than anybody I know, because of the fact that I'm right there at that age limit where considering me an adult, and I might as well be on skid row, you know? I would definitely change the age limit 'cause 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 even is too young to classify somebody as a loser for life, their heart's been handed them, they're dealt their hand, you know?... When you become like 20, 21 out here on the streets you start to realize that maybe I should try and change my childish ways or whatnot. It takes some people longer to realize that than others. I believe everybody deserves a little bit of a fair chance. I believe everybody's a kid and they should all get a fair chance. What I would change is the age limit on these programs for youth.*
--Male, 23, Los Angeles

YOUTHS' IDEAS FOR POLICY CHANGES, Cont.

- ✓ *That even if we are a minor we could rent a place or a hotel room, instead of being 21 or 18. Kids can live by themselves and get welfare for themselves.*

--Male, 17, San Diego

Youth also suggested creating public bathrooms accessible to the homeless, faster processing of IDs that are needed to obtain many services, and – a theme that emerged frequently in focus group discussions as well – eliminating “hoops” that they perceived as standing between them and the support they needed.

- ✓ *The waiting lists and having to meet certain requirements. I would look past that and help first, then work on the requirements.*

--Male, 19, San Francisco

“Give us a place to live,” one participant in the Los Angeles focus group suggested, summing up the sentiments of many who had rejected services they found overly restrictive or directive. “Don’t tell us how to live there.”





FUTURE INQUIRY

WHAT QUESTION WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE ON THIS SURVEY THAT IS NOT THERE, AND HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER THAT QUESTION?

I would just want to know why there is so many homeless youth, why they don't have a place to live, and why are things so bad for them?

--Male, 19, Fresno

Most youth who responded to the survey chose not to add a question to the interview template; however, those who did offered intriguing suggestions for further research and inquiry. Several questions and answers involved experiences with drug use:

Do you use drugs or have you ever (had) experience with it?

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

More questions about helping kids with drug problems.

--Male, 21, San Francisco

Why do you use drugs, if you use them? Because people use them for a lot of different reasons, they don't necessarily "abuse" them. I use drugs sometimes but I don't abuse them.

--Male, 20, San Francisco

Have you ever used drugs or got drunk to help you deal with being homeless? After three days of being homeless, I spent 20 dollars that I had on a bar and got drunk. I was depressed dealing with the fact that I had no place to stay so I got wasted. Since I been on the shelter I have to drink once a week to keep out the stress of my situation.

--Male, 23, Los Angeles

Questions about drug treatment and such.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

If drugs affected your life, because when you're homeless there's always something with drugs. In my case, drugs have been a big part of my life and now I'm getting my s--- together.

--Male, 24, San Francisco

Some youth suggested asking more personal questions such as:

Ask about sexual orientation, and an appendix question attached to it asking if they've ever experienced any hate/discrimination as a result of their sexual orientation, 'cause that goes on a lot, even in San Francisco.

--Transgender (male to female), 24, San Francisco

Are you HIV positive?

--Female, 19, San Francisco

Do you feel loved? My answer is, "Sometimes."

--Male, 17, Los Angeles

Question about how I feel emotionally.

--Female, 18, San Francisco

Can I help you? And I would answer that by saying, "Yeah."

Female, 18, Salinas

Others offered questions that explored the condition and impact of homelessness more fully.

How could have this been prevented? Just by talking to my parents.

--Female, 18, Fresno

If you had another chance, what would you like to do different? And my answer to that is, "I would have listened to my mom, never disrespected her, graduated from high school, and never started doing drugs."

--Female, 18, Albany

How involved is your family? Somewhat involved.

--Respondent unknown

Do you feel being homeless has made you stronger or weaker? Stronger.

--Male, 18, San Jose

I would like to hear someone ask not "Why or how are you homeless?" but "What has it given you? What has being homeless offered in life experience and a skill-set that you would otherwise not have?" And I would say for me that would be resilience and resourcefulness, whether or not always legitimate resourcefulness. I've learned to hustle and scrape if I need to and not turn down a good hand when it's dealt to me.

--Male, 25, San Francisco

I think the question would have to be, "Are you happy being homeless?" 'Cause a lot of people I know actually don't so much think of it as a bad thing. And I think right now I'm content with the way things are, but I don't want them to stay that way forever, so I'm making plans to change them.

--Male, 19, Yuba City

Are you happy? Most definitely!

--Female, 18, Santa Cruz

Some questions regarding how to/cost of/hindrances to the re-entry of mainstream society. Ever try getting a job with no address/phone number? Difficult.

--Male, 19, San Diego

Do you take time out and look at your actions? I would say, "Yes."

--Male, 19, Fresno

The question I would like to see on that survey is what place would I like to move in? The answer would be, "Any place you can spare."

--Male, 22, San Francisco

I will have the survey ask them how they feel being on the streets? My answer will be that it is scary being on the streets and is depressing, it is lonely.

--Female, 20, Los Angeles

The question I would like to see on this survey would be, "How would you define family?" My answer to that is, "People who love you and look out for you and do not (let you) out of their sight; make sure that you survive and don't let little stuff irritate them to irritate you."

--Male, 18, San Leandro

How do people plan to change their situation? I'd answer it myself by pretty much saying, "Put the effort forth to actually do something out of the ordinary of your lifestyle that would change it for the better."

--Male, 23, Santa Cruz

What can you do different?

--Female, 17, San Francisco

Are you happy with your own personal effort to overcome your situation? And my answer would be, "NO."

--Male, 20, Los Angeles

Who do you look up to in life? Who keeps you inspired to keep going every day? I look up to my best friends, and all my favorite bands. When I hear that new song, it makes me want to keep going.

--Male, 24, Los Angeles

A couple of youth surveyed suggested questions about pets.

Do you have a dog and do you need services for that animal? And yes, I need services for my dog.

Female, 24, San Francisco

Do you have an animal? I would say, "Yes."

--Male, 24, San Francisco

APPENDIX

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: NUMBERS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The document on the following pages was developed by the California Research Bureau for the public policy seminar *Becoming Homeless: An Overview of Homeless Youth in California*, held October 3, 2007.



YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: NUMBERS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Definition of Homeless Youth

There is not a single, consistent definition of “homeless youth.” Federal programs in the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development use different criteria for determining homelessness, and agencies and researchers use different age parameters.

In general, homeless youth include both minors under the age of 18 as well as young adults ages 18 to 24 who lack parental, familial, foster, or institutional care (some agencies exclude anyone over 21 as a homeless youth and others include individuals through age 25). Homeless youth include the following populations:¹

- Unaccompanied Youth: “young people who are living apart from their parents or legal guardians in unstable or inadequate living situations.”²
- Throwaway Youth: young persons who are asked to leave home by a parent or other adult in the household or leave home and are prevented from returning home.
- Street Youth: youth who reside in high-risk, nontraditional locations, such as under bridges or in abandoned buildings, and are generally disconnected from traditional service providers.
- Systems Youth: youth who have been involved in government systems – foster care, mental health and juvenile justice – due to abuse, neglect, illness, incarceration, or family homelessness.

How Many Homeless Youth Are There?

There are no reliable statistics on the number of homeless youth for a variety of reasons – it’s difficult to count homeless populations; many homeless youth are highly mobile; many youth try hard to avoid detection and contact with adults and mainstream systems; and the inconsistent definitions of homeless youth make it difficult to collect data on this population. Characteristics of youth will also vary significantly based on whether data is collected from sheltered youth or street youth; it’s easier to obtain information on youth accessing services compared to those who are not.

National Level Estimates

- There are an estimated 1,682,900 homeless and runaway youth (under age 18) according to a 2002 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice study.³
- Unaccompanied youth account for three percent of the urban homeless population according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors 2005 report.⁴
- The following estimates of homeless youth were provided to Congress by Martha Burt, Urban Institute, June 2007:⁵
 - *Ages 12 to 17*: estimates range from 1.6 to 1.7 million over a year. About 300,000 to 400,000 youth might be expected to be homeless on a single day.
 - *Ages 18 to 19*: about 80,000 to 170,000 over a year; about 22,000 to 44,000 (or five percent of the homeless population) on a single day.
 - *Ages 20 to 24*: about 124,000 to 236,000 over a year; about 31,000 to 59,000 (or seven percent of the homeless population) on a single day.

State Level Estimates

Statewide estimates of homeless youth are not collected or available. Most cities and counties that conduct homeless counts only collect information on homeless adults and families.

- ✓ The 2005 homeless count conducted in Los Angeles County estimated that there were close to 22,000 homeless youth annually, including both minors and older youth through age 24.⁶

Who Are Homeless Youth?

- Youth most often cite family conflict – such as physical and sexual abuse, strained relationships, addiction of a family member, and parental neglect – as the major reason for their homelessness or episodes of running away.⁷
- A number of other factors contribute to a youth becoming homeless. For example, youth exiting the foster care and juvenile justice systems are at high risk because they often lack support systems and opportunities for housing.
 - Twenty-five percent of former foster youth nationwide reported that they had been homeless at least one night within 2.5 to four years after leaving foster care.⁸
- The proportion of males and females tend to be about equal in shelters (a younger population); there tend to be more males on the streets (an older population).⁹
- Homeless youth generally reflect the ethnic makeup of their local community (though some studies show overrepresentation of racial or ethnic minorities).¹⁰
- Estimates on the proportion of homeless youth who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual range from six percent in youth centers to 35 percent on the street.¹¹ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force reports that between 20 and 40 percent of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.¹²
- Homeless youth are three times as likely as national samples of youth to be pregnant, or to already be a parent. This trend continues for homeless young adults age 18 to 24.¹³
- Youth who use shelters are usually homeless only once and for a short time. Street youth are generally homeless on an episodic or chronic basis for longer periods of time.¹⁴ Data on young adults on the street show that more than half have been homeless for two to nine years.¹⁵

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