NEEDS AND VOICES OF YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN CALIFORNIA DURING COVID-19

COVID HAS SEVERELY IMPACTED MY LIFE

In September 2020, unaccompanied youth across the State of California were invited to take a survey on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their lives. The 20-question survey was developed using Google Forms and distributed by providers and through word of mouth. The first 300 respondents were reimbursed a $20 electronic visa gift card for participation through funding provided by California Children’s Trust. The responses of the 312* youth, ages 15 - 25, who took the survey are highlighted below. The results show how their path to stability has been further complicated by the pandemic and amplified the unique needs these under resourced young people face. It is imperative that we invest in youth-focused solutions to meet their needs in an efficient and effective manner.

DEMOGRAPHICS:

California had the largest population of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2019. The pandemic has intensified instability, and we project a significant increase in this population as more youth will experience homelessness than ever before.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE:

The inequities and disproportionality we see in COVID-19 are consistent with the inequity and disproportionality we see in youth homelessness. BIPOC and LGBTQ youth are over represented and most significantly impacted by housing instability and homelessness and COVID-19.

CALL TO ACTION: Ensure investments meet the complex needs of young people experiencing homelessness and instability. Housing alone will not divert youth from instability; mental health, education, employment, and COVID-19 testing and vaccines are critical in addressing these inequities.

ABOUT THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS:

75% of youth are 22 - 24 years old
74% Cisgender Man
72% Black/African American
50% of youth’s highest level of education is a high school diploma or equivalent
38% of youth have some college or a college degree
5% are pregnant or parenting

32% of youth had 3 or more different sleeping locations in the last week because they could not stay in their home or did not have a home.

TOP THREE LOCATIONS YOUTH SLEPT IN DURING THE LAST WEEK:

CAR (58%)
TENT (41%)
OUTDOORS (40%)

Youth represented 25 California counties. The most represented counties were Los Angeles (40%), Santa Clara (13%), and San Diego (9%).

*Three youth excluded for unknown age, four youth excluded because they were above the age limit, and two youth excluded because they did not indicate if they lived with a parent.
CONNECTION TO COVID:

COVID-19 adds a layer of complexity to the typical concerns homeless young people have. Changes in housing, education, and employment work together to amplify the instability these young people face everyday.

70% TESTED
(218 of the surveyed youth)

6% POSITIVE

This data represents a self-reported point in time.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE:

From UCB’s For the Good of Us All report: “Youth’s risk of infection is increased by their tendency to have to frequently change where they are sleeping, to be intermittently unsheltered, and to change with whom they are sheltering” (Auerswald, 2020, pp. 23-24). Youth experiencing homelessness often have poor health and untreated or undiagnosed medical conditions that put them at high risk for COVID co-morbidity.

CALL TO ACTION: Any investment in communities impacted by the pandemic should include specific, youth-focused support. At least 25% of funds directed toward homelessness should be earmarked for youth-specific services and supports. Youth cannot be lumped into adult services and supports.

IN THEIR WORDS:

Covid has affected my life by leaving me jobless and unable to provide for myself leaving no choice but to look for a homeless shelter. 23, Berkeley

It has made it hard to survive. I am currently couch surfing while trying to find stable housing. I only work part time so it makes it harder to save money for an apartment. 24, San Fernando Valley

Covid 19 has worsened the wait involving my immigration status, which has made me have to wait months more, including today, to get my work permit so I can pay for food, a place to stay, transportation, basic hygiene products such as toothpaste, and more. 24, Los Angeles

COVID-19 has exacerbated the fight for young people to access even their most basic needs. 66% of youth indicated they were in need of more than 5 resources during the pandemic. The most occurring number of resources needed was 8 which is nearly half of all the resources listed. Employment was the number one resource young people indicated they were in need of.

**NEEDS:**

- **FOOD/HEALTHY FOOD** 63%
- **VITAL PROGRAMS** 11%
- **MENTAL HEALTH** 38%
- **WATER** 44%
- **PHYSICAL HEALTH** 61%
- **PHONE** 46%
- **COMPUTER/LAPTOP ACCESS** 53%
- **WIFI** 53%
- **TUTORING** 18%
- **SUMMER ACTIVITIES** 44%
- **FOOD/HEALTHY FOOD** 63%
- **LEGAL ASSISTANCE** 6%
- **SANITATION (E.G. TOILET)** 13%
- **HAND SANITIZER** 13%
- **DISTANCE LEARNING SUPPORT** 42%

**ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE:**

"Access to food, water, a bathroom, housing, and technology are “basic” needs in today’s time in order to access mental health services, school, peers, mentors, community-based organizations, and more. When youth have these essentials and resources, they’re positioned to succeed and thrive. Compounded trauma without protective factors is a recipe for a lifetime of hardship and suffering. We have the knowledge, tools, and community to turn a lifetime of adversity into a lifetime of prosperity for us all.” - Jevon Wilkes, Executive Director CCY

**CALL TO ACTION:** Solutions to supporting youth include multiple layers: diverse housing options, mental health support, access to basic needs (including technology), education supports, relational supports, and especially employment services must be included and integrated into any solution.
MENTAL HEALTH:
The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the already fragile lives of homeless young people. Changes in employment and income further complicate their housing stability. Isolation, increased vulnerability, and loss of connections have negatively impacted the mental health of young people. Young people have a multitude of challenges and needs. It is our job to weave together and invest in the supports they need to stabilize and reach their full potential.

CALL TO ACTION: Any successful solution to ending homelessness among youth will include targeted mental and emotional health investments. Integrating funding sources to meet this critical need in an accessible way is essential.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE:
"COVID has brought on a lot of challenges, especially with social distancing. One of the ways I have been able to practice resilience is by knowing that this will only be for a short while and that if I do my part, I am helping stop the spread of this virus. While I am housed and ok, my heart hurts for the youth I talk to who are isolated, don’t have safe place to stay, and don’t have food in their bellies. My challenges are pale in comparison.” - Youth Crisis Counselor, California Youth Crisis Line

IN THEIR WORDS:
COVID-19 worsened almost everything to the point that I didn’t want to live another second. This year has been the most unbelievably emotionally painful and heartbreaking year of my life. 24, Los Angeles

I had to transfer from a four year college to a community college and move in with my uncle because there was a major decrease in hours. I also lost out on a month of work, so I’ve been struggling to buy textbooks. 19, Sacramento

This has all given me so much time to think about my goals and start making moves to achieve them. 19, Sacramento

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CCY is a thirty-nine-year-old grassroots non-profit organization located in Sacramento that, as a statewide coalition, takes positions on and advocates for public policies, programs and services that empower and improve the lives of all California’s youth ages 12-24, with a strong focus on youth and young adults experiencing homelessness and instability, and disconnected youth. To learn more, visit: www.calyouth.org