



Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) In-Depth Interviews: Technical Report

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Highlights

- **Homelessness is not an event.** The stories of young people in this study suggest that their first episodes of “actual” homelessness were preceded by and contextualized within chronic and deeply complex challenges in their family systems and communities. Answers to the question, *where does your story begin?* clearly conveyed that families—and specifically parental health and family economic stability—were critical to shaping risks for housing instability later in life.
- **It takes a village to end youth homelessness.** Youth’s trajectories of housing instability—and, therefore, solutions to ending instability—depend on conditions of individual, family, peer and structural systems. Youth are not the sole actors in their stories. There are many other key players that can and do offer both critical supports and risks as they navigate their housing instability.
- **While most youth (75%) experienced adolescent onset homelessness,** many youth felt the groundwork for their homelessness as an adolescent was laid by earlier family instability, in some cases starting as early as birth. Youth named foster care, family homelessness, parents’ own struggles, and chronic family conflict as some of the most common causes of their later homelessness in adolescence.
- **Urbanicity matters.** Youth in Walla Walla, WA, our one rural site, faced a community context in which many critical supports and resources participants needed were located outside of the town of Walla Walla. In some cases, they were located outside of the state. Consequently, compared to the other four counties, these youth had the highest rates of staying on the streets (85% versus 67%) and, relatedly, the highest rates of juvenile justice involvement (68% versus 48%).
- **Many youth reported that they had never experienced stability,** referencing a range of early disruptions and losses in their sense of home as young children. Over half of the youth with foster care histories named entrance into foster care as the beginning of their own homelessness. Almost one-quarter of participants (23.7%) experienced family homelessness and 35% of youth experienced the death of a parent or caregiver. Youth’s stories of housing instability also reflected significant mobility. Only 19% of youth stayed within the cities or towns of their birth. Altogether, youth’s beginnings of homelessness point to persistent instability and loss beginning in early childhood.
- **Emerging adulthood (age 18–25) in the context of family poverty and parental struggles is a high-risk period for youth homelessness.** Turning 18, particularly for male youth, marked a critical life stage in which many parents expected participants

to contribute financially to the household. When youth did not, some parents kicked youth out or youth left home to avoid feeling like a burden.

- **Lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning/asexual (LGBTQA) youth, foster youth, and youth with juvenile justice histories had higher-than-average cumulative adversity survey scores.** Not only did these youth report higher rates of experiencing the adversities the survey asked about, they also reported other distinct challenges in navigating homelessness.
- **Risk management is an important factor as youth decide whether or not to use a service.** Young people in our study expressed factors like identity development (specifically LGBTQA identities), their accumulated experiences with services, and sense of their own personal agency and independence as important when weighing the risks and gains of engaging or avoiding resources. This suggests different types of outreach and organizational structures are necessary for independent and transitional living supports. It also suggests the need for increased attunement to the developmental and identity needs of individual young people as relevant to their use of available resources.
- **Some surveyed adversities actually decrease while young people are unstably housed.** Harm from others, stigma within family, forced sex, gang membership, and parental/caregiver death were reported at higher rates while youth were stably housed. Our understanding of risk and adversity must adjust to acknowledge the risk, harm, and threats to safety that exist both while stably housed and while unstably housed. This reinforces the importance of a focus on safe and stable housing rather than solely on stable housing.

Executive Summary

Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) is a national, multicomponent research and policy initiative focused on youth who are homeless and unstably housed. Its purpose is to accelerate progress toward preventing and ending youth homelessness by filling critical knowledge gaps; informing the development of federal, state, and local policy; improving service provision; and building a foundation for future research.

VoYC partnered with 22 U.S. counties. Counties were sampled using a stratified random approach designed to ensure geographic diversity as well as variation in population density and in homeless youth services infrastructure. In each county, VoYC identified a lead agency to engage a broad network of local stakeholders and provide extensive support for local data collection activities. Those activities included point-in-time counts of homeless and unstably housed youth, three surveys (a youth survey, a survey of service providers, and a Continuum of Care Survey), and in-depth youth interviews within five of the 22 counties. Other VoYC research components included a national survey of adults, an analysis of existing data, a policy and fiscal analysis, and a systematic evidence review.

This report shares findings from the five counties involved in the in-depth interview (IDI) component. The IDI component collected two kinds of data from 215 young people: a narrative timeline interview of housing instability and survey data, including information about eight adverse experiences, their service use, and demographic characteristics. We analyzed the data to identify critical conditions within youth's stories, their logics about engaging or rejecting resources, their perspectives about where their stories of instability began, and their insights into what it will take to end youth homelessness. This Executive Summary provides an overview of some of those findings. It also highlights some of the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and future research.

Results

Most IDI participants (86%) were age 18 or older. Just over one-half identified as either Black/African American (31%) or white (23%). The majority of young people reported gender identities as either male (52%) or female (41%). Twelve youth (5.5%) identified as transgender and two (.9%) as genderqueer/nonconforming.

While 58% identified as heterosexual/straight, 38% did not. Among those, 11% identified as bisexual and 10% identified as gay or lesbian. Nearly one-quarter reported that they were the parent of at least one child. An additional 8% of youth ($n = 18$) reported that they or their partner were currently pregnant.

Systems involvement as well as sexual minority status (lesbian/gay/bisexual/questioning/

asexual, or LGBTQA) and gender minority status (transgender, or T) shaped youth experiences of housing stability in many domains. **Youth who identified as LGBTQA, as well as young people with histories of foster care and juvenile justice involvement reported higher rates of surveyed adversity.** While “coming out” to parents and identifying as gay, lesbian, or transgender mattered, these youth typically described a gradual escalation of parent-child conflict over time, or a growing sense of rejection in the home, rather than an immediate reaction to the disclosure that instantly caused an eviction. The conflict sometimes came from a parent’s partner or other extended family member in the home. This was also true for heterosexual girls who, in the context of ongoing family conflict, disclosed their pregnancies and were eventually kicked out of their homes. We found that, in general, parents’ struggles with their children’s emerging sexuality, and parents’ own internalized stigma and prejudice, were sources of added parent-child discord that often serve as tipping points into youth homelessness.

Based on the youth who participated in the IDI, **emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25) in the context of family poverty and parental struggles was a high-risk period for many youth’s homelessness.** Turning 18, particularly for male youth, marked a critical life stage in which many economically stressed parents expected participants to start contributing financially to the household. When youth did not or could not, many parents kicked youth out or youth simply left home to avoid feeling like a burden.

Our analysis of the **beginnings of their homelessness points to persistent instability and loss throughout young people’s early childhoods.** In fact, many youth indicated that they had never experienced stability, referencing a range of early disruptions and losses in a sense of home as young children. Of the 94 youth with foster care histories, 44% of them noted foster care as the beginning of their own housing instability. **Almost one-quarter of participants (24%) experienced family homelessness.** Many of these youth named this early family instability as the cause of their unaccompanied homelessness. Relatedly, and perhaps most surprisingly, 35% of young people in this study reported they had experienced the death of a parent or caregiver. Youth’s experiences with housing instability also included **high degrees of geographic mobility.** Few youth remained in a single geographic area. In fact, only 19% of youth stayed within the cities or towns of their birth. Taken together, most of these young people have not experienced much stability in their lives. Instead, their childhoods are marked by significant and pronounced loss of a stable sense of home.

This report also explores why youth make use of resources and services and the conditions under which they avoid or reject them. We refer to this often hidden process of decision making as “youth logics of engagement” and identify **risk management as central to their use of local services and informal resources.** Even after young people were aware of a service in their local or social environments, there were concerns about whether using it would bring more harm than good. Sometimes accepting a resource placed an important relationship at risk or threatened youth’s sense of autonomy, independence, and personal agency. Other times, youth felt it would introduce risk to a family member (e.g., becoming involved in the child welfare system) or bring undue burden to their already stressed

households. We highlight **three factors that shape youth’s discernment of the risks versus gains of engaging resources: identity protection, accumulated experience with services, and personal agency**. As we consider why young people may not make full use of the available services and resources in their environments, our work must remain sensitive to the real and perceived risks youth face as they are asked to engage “help” and “supports” that may also bring some degree of risk or loss.

Our **analysis of critical conditions and illustrations of the trajectories of their housing instability highlights factors that span multiple levels of influence: individual, peer, family, and structural**. While each person’s experience of instability was certainly unique, all youth navigated some combination of these multilevel conditions. Individual-level themes included youth’s own struggles with mental health and addiction, navigating developmental stages, identity, and youth’s own coping strategies.

Peers and intimate partners were critical as both a cause of gaining and losing resources, and a source of both harm and support. Family, particularly aunts and grandmothers, was identified as a critical support. However, families were also sources of trauma and harm. Themes here included abuse, neglect and rejection, parental addiction and mental illness, and family instability and homelessness. Structural-level themes included programs and practices that shaped instability (e.g., long wait lists, narrow eligibility criteria, siloed systems) and those that facilitated or inhibited use of resources (e.g., overly strict rules, agency reputation as a safe space, poor transitions in and out of services and systems).

Youth also named critical conditions in their communities—including restrictive housing policies, policing or patrolling of public space, and stigma toward homeless persons—as critical to the context in which they experienced homelessness. In presenting trajectories of housing instability visually, we illustrate how these factors unfold and the tipping points that caused deeper levels of instability. We also identify missed opportunities to intervene and support youth across different levels of influence to interrupt the instability they navigate.

Finally, our analysis suggests that the **structural and regional conditions** of the communities in which youth experience their instability deeply shape how and why it unfolds. We particularly raise concern about the trajectories of youth navigating homelessness in more rural and small town regions of the country. Young people in Walla Walla, our more rural site, experienced some of the same challenges as youth in our more urban sites (e.g., family discord, parental struggles, family homelessness, poverty). However, the experiences and details of their trajectories of housing instability were uniquely shaped by the lack of a robust formal service system, strictly enforced truancy policies, and location of services outside of the town or even outside of the state. As such, **Walla Walla youth reported the highest rates of staying on the streets, 85% versus 67% in the urban sites**. They also reported the highest rates of juvenile justice involvement (68%) as compared to the other sites (48%). This was largely due to the truancy policy and youth’s higher rates of involvement with drugs (e.g., methamphetamines). Due to limited local resources, they reported the lowest rates of using shelters or transitional housing (29% versus 87% for urban sites). Walla Walla,

like many other small towns in America, has struggled to survive an economic downturn and the disappearance of factory jobs that once economically anchored the town. Consequently, the stories youth told here mirror the national epidemic of methamphetamine (meth) use in similar small towns in America. **Specifically, meth use was reported among 27% of youth at this site, and an additional 20% of youth indicated that both they and their parents were addicted to methamphetamines. In fact, 47% of this site’s youth told stories of personal or parent-child meth use, and 78% of Walla Walla County youth discussed meth use that pervaded daily life within their community and social networks.**

Taken together, our findings represent a larger observation—that **youth homelessness is not an event**. It is preceded by and contextualized within often chronic and deeply complex structural, familial and personal challenges including poverty, cycles of violence, abuse, neglect, societal and familial stigma and discrimination, mental health and addiction, and youth’s own struggles and developmental processes.

Implications

There are myriad implications for this study’s findings. We share some of them below.

Using holistic and intersectional approaches. There is a need for our systems and services to not assume youth operate from, or experience their worlds within, a single space or identity. Youth’s shared experiences of their housing instability were further shaped by other, intersecting, realities, such as the resources in their communities, the health and wellness of their parents and families, social class, their peer networks, youth’s involvement in various systems, and the presence of stigma and discrimination in their environments. Youth themselves also have a range of identities and social locations that affect how they make meaning of the risks in their environment and of their needs. These identities include, but are not limited to, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, developmental stage/age, social class, and (dis)ability. For example, some LGBTQA youth may prefer agencies that provide healing spaces and culturally attuned services related to their sexual and/or gender minority identities. However, some youth of color—regardless of sexual or gender identity—may prioritize racial and cultural safety and attunement. Still others may seek services that are not identity-specific but still offer services that affirm all of their identities and are open to a range of youth. Our service options for youth must reflect these layers of complexity in human diversity. To that end, in this report we sometimes distinguish between using abbreviations that only mark *sexual* minority identities (LGB—lesbian, gay, bisexual), versus those for *gender* minority identities (T—transgender), and abbreviations that are intersectional and can be used across these two statuses (QA- queer/genderqueer, asexual/agender). Our findings support the emerging use of intersectional approaches that take a more holistic view of youth and the host of vulnerabilities and strengths within the context of their environments. We recommend the development of models of practice, and a robust complementary research agenda, that can move this work forward in ways that truly reflect the existing diversity among youth navigating homelessness.

Building healthy informal networks: Young people need people. While some youth struggled with trusting people as sources of support, they also spoke at length of their need for more and better informal support systems—especially trustworthy adults. They wanted people who would help them stay motivated, provide mentorship, sage advice and challenge them to continually improve themselves, and provide much-needed emotional support. The level and depth of relationships they desired far exceeds a traditional mentoring intervention. These young people were searching for authentic, long-lasting, trustworthy relationships embedded within their daily lives. We recommend community-building efforts and initiatives that help to foster relational health and well-being among youth and within the social and family systems that comprise their natural environments. This prevention work is critical to addressing many of the issues youth identified as causing their homelessness.

Development and evaluation of youth-centric programming. In addition to building capacity within young people’s natural environments and informal networks, there is also a need for creative intervention models that engage more relational, youth-centric approaches. Such resources might link unstably housed youth to trained adults who can develop individualized and deeply engaged relationships with young people. In that role, they would serve as advocates and navigators. As such, they would champion a youth’s individual needs and preferences and help young people develop skills to navigate complex systems and effectively manage risk as they engage resources in their local environments. Youth in our study often fell through the cracks when systems were siloed or during transitions in, out, or between systems or services. We recommend the design and evaluation of intervention models that provide youth with these critical interpersonal but formal resources. We would especially recommend use of adults who share a past experience of housing instability or share a core identity or background (e.g., foster care or adoption history, juvenile justice history, LGBTQA identity, racial/ethnic identity).

Strategic placement of services. Youth wanted more resources in the neighborhoods and towns where they lived. This was a challenge in both urban and rural settings. When youth are required to travel long distances, or literally move to a new town, in order to engage with service providers, existing connections to schools, jobs, and informal resources are compromised. While adding shelters and other institutional housing resources may be impractical or undesirable, communities across the country and internationally are increasingly experimenting with youth-centered models of rapid rehousing and host homes that provide temporary or permanent housing arrangements. These resources can be located within and around the communities where youth currently reside. Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program grantees are also being encouraged by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to experiment with these and similarly creative arrangements and solutions across diverse community contexts (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016).

Re-thinking outreach. Youth are often connected to housing resources through friends, family, and existing relationships with service providers. However, they also reported using online searches for housing resources much more than using street outreach or helplines. Our findings also suggest that youth put a lot of time and effort into hiding their homelessness from adults who may be in a position to help (e.g., teachers or school social workers). Our youth logic analysis suggests this is a critical part of their management of risk. But it is also a serious barrier to building awareness about resources youth need. We recommend expanding youth outreach methods to extend into online and social media venues. We also recommend targeting much younger children and including youth who are not currently homeless. Streamlining access to these resources and basic service information may reach a larger population of youth so that they and their peers have this information when they need it. It may also decrease their need to manage risk of stigma by avoiding using services that require they first admit to being “homeless.” We take up the issues of social network interventions and peer-centric approaches to service delivery in the final discussion section.

Embracing LGBTQA youth. The presence of resources and organizations that are welcoming, protective, and affirming to LGBTQA youth made an enormous difference in youth’s engagement with formal services. Identity protection, though not exclusive to this population, was an important lens through which youth assessed the risks of engaging a resource, including resources within their own families. All organizations can become skilled and culturally attuned to this very diverse group of youth. This study suggests a serious need for agencies and their staff to explicitly and implicitly convey to youth that they celebrate young people not just by “accepting” their identities. Such support must also be practiced through partnering with youth as they navigate the homophobia and transphobia that permeate their daily lives and key developmental contexts, including family, school, work and community.

Finally, rethinking where unaccompanied homelessness begins challenges us to reconsider where interventions should start. **While youth’s literal homelessness often began in adolescence, youth started their “stories of instability” at much younger ages—some as young as birth.** Their stories suggest that homelessness is a symptom of much larger and enduring struggles in our society, our systems and institutions, and consequently, in family systems which often navigate these challenges on their own. For example, there is a serious need to address the loss, grief and trauma that many of these young people described as normative in their early childhoods. This calls for developing and evaluating models of practice and service delivery that are trauma-informed and those that address grief and healing from chronic loss. Practice models and approaches to engagement must also take seriously the many ways in which youth experience interventions themselves as risky or even the cause of their instability and loss (e.g., removal from home into foster care). Our findings strongly reinforce the increased use of trauma-informed services, paired with the intersectional and holistic approaches discussed above.

Overview and Research Questions

Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) is a national, multicomponent research and policy initiative focused on runaway, homeless, and unstably housed youth. Its purpose is to accelerate progress toward preventing and ending youth homelessness by filling critical knowledge gaps; informing the development of federal, state, and local policy; improving service provision; and building a foundation for future research.

Each of the initiative's components was designed to address one or more of the following research questions:

- How many youth are homeless and unstably housed, where are they, and what are their characteristics?
- Why do youth become homeless or run away from home?
- How do youth get by and how are they doing?
- What factors are associated with how long and how often youth are homeless or away from home?
- What services are available to youth who run away or are homeless, what are the gaps in service provision, and what services are likely to lead to better life outcomes?
- In what ways are the experiences of these youth influenced by local, state, or federal policies?

To address these research questions, VoYC partnered with 22 counties across the U.S. The counties were selected using a stratified random sampling approach that was designed to ensure geographic diversity as well as variation in population density and homeless youth services infrastructure. In each county, VoYC identified a lead agency to engage a broad network of local stakeholders and provide extensive support for local data collection activities. Those activities included point-in-time counts of homeless and unstably housed youth, three surveys (i.e., a brief youth survey, a survey of service providers, and a Continuum of Care¹ Survey) and in-depth youth interviews. Other VoYC research components include a national survey of adults, an analysis of existing data, a policy and fiscal analysis, and a systematic evidence review. This report focuses on the results of the In-depth Interview (IDI) component.

¹ A Continuum of Care is a regional or local body designed to promote community-wide planning and strategic use of resources to address homelessness; increase service coordination and integration; improve data collection and performance measurement; and allow programs to be tailored to the particular needs of homeless individuals (including unaccompanied youth) and families in each community.

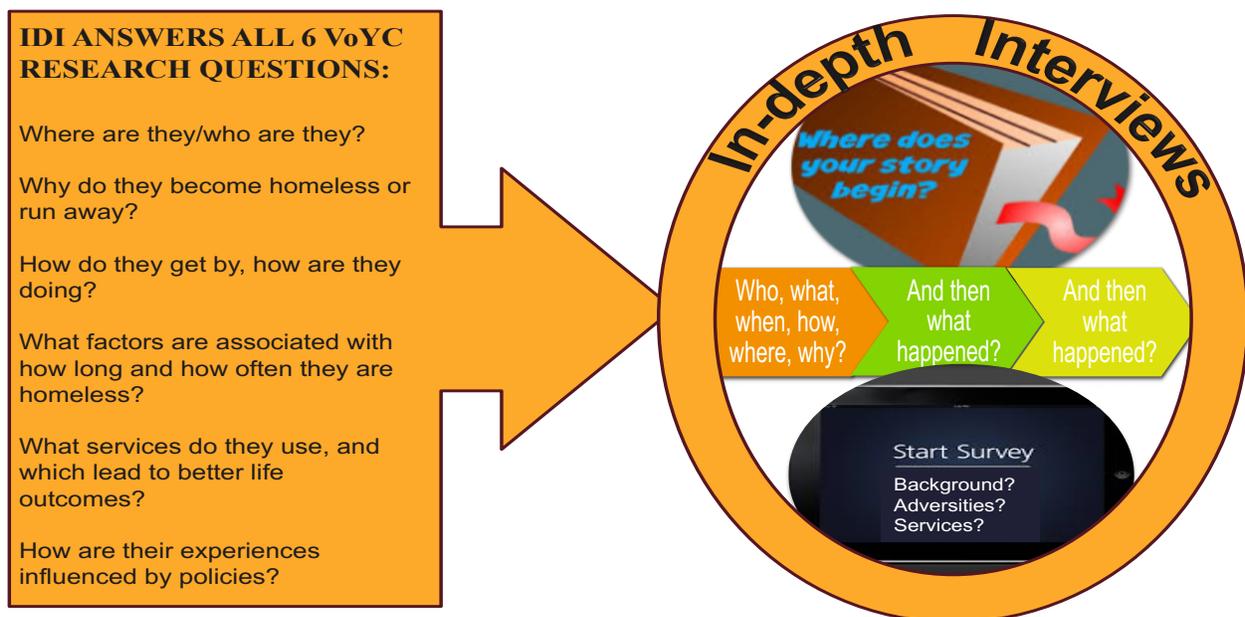
Objectives of In-Depth Interview Component

Within the larger VoYC initiative, the purpose of the IDI component is to capture a diverse range of youth voices about experiencing housing instability and homelessness. This component collects three kinds of data directly from youth: narrative interviews, housing timelines (exploring all the places and people with whom youth have stayed/slept), and background surveys. The IDI objectives include:

- using novel methods to highlight youth perspectives on housing instability and the “why” behind their diverse experiences of homelessness;
- building a research team that incorporates community participation to provide informed data collection and analysis;
- conducting analyses that integrate all three types of IDI data to inform policy and practice with this population;
- highlighting challenges or supports that youth identify as critical to their experiences;
- using approaches to recruitment and data collection that integrate VoYC relationships and knowledge-building efforts initiated during the Youth Count; and
- creating a rigorous mixed method and mixed model study design that elevates the perspectives and insights of the young people themselves.

Taken together, the IDI represents a “deep dive” into the experience of homeless youth and provides answers to all six of the initiative’s research questions.

Figure 1. VoYC Research Questions and IDI Data Collection Elements



Methodology

Definition of Homeless or Unstably Housed Youth

VoYC defines its target population broadly to include 13- to 25-year-olds who are either homeless or unstably housed. Homeless youth can be sheltered (i.e., sleeping in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and hotels or motels) or unsheltered (i.e., sleeping on the street, in parks, or otherwise outside; in vehicles or in abandoned buildings/vacant units; on trains/buses or in train/bus stations; or at 24-hour restaurants, laundromats, or retail establishments). Unstably housed youth include youth who lack a stable place to stay and are sleeping in the home of a parent or other relative, the home of a friend/girlfriend/boyfriend/sexual partner, a hospital/emergency room, a residential treatment facility, or a juvenile detention center or jail.

Site Selection

The IDI's selection of sites builds on the first phase of the VoYC initiative launched in the early summer of 2016. As part of that first phase of work, VoYC partnered with 22 U.S. counties. Each county was selected using a stratified random sampling approach. Using this method ensured diversity in geography, urbanicity, and homeless youth service infrastructure.

The IDI used “purposive methods” to select five of these 22 counties. A purposive sampling method means that counties were selected intentionally rather than randomly. In addition to the factors that informed the overall selection VoYC sites, we considered the following:

- Each county's interest and ability to support extended (nine-month) data collection activities;
- Unique local factors that could shape distinctive experiences of housing instability among youth (e.g., proximity to national border, climate, regional demographics, potential “magnet” city); and
- The breadth and depth of the lead agency provider's network in serving as a connector and resource during recruitment.

Ultimately, the following five counties were selected and agreed to participate in the IDI component: (1) Cook County, Illinois; (2) Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania; (3) San Diego County, California; (4) Travis County, Texas; and (5) Walla Walla County, Washington.

The IDI also built upon the relationships and knowledge gained during the Point-in-Time Youth Count. For example, the VoYC team conducted focus groups with providers and youth to identify “hot spots” (i.e., places where youth hang out). This information was used to locate youth during the Youth Count. The IDI also used this “hot spot” information to inform our field teams' recruitment strategies.

Building a Local Field Team

We hired a local field team of interviewers and transcribers at each of the five sites. Field team members were hired based on their previous experience with qualitative interviewing, familiarity with the county, and knowledge of the local services and supports for unstably housed youth. We also selected field team members based on the depth or breadth of diversity they would bring to the field team in terms of race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity, (bi)cultural skills (including native Spanish speakers), and personal, family, or work experience and connection to homelessness and housing instability. Each site team included two interviewers and two transcribers who worked together as a unit. Through a collaborative discussion with local providers, all five sites identified at least one “Lead Agency” and a lead agency staff contact. Lead Agencies and staff contacts were critical to the recruitment process (described below). Each site field team was overseen and supported by a “Site Lead” who was a member of the research team at Chapin Hall.

Training and Ongoing Quality Assurance of Data. All field team members completed an intensive two-day training at Chapin Hall. Topics included skills of qualitative interviewing, transcribing, research ethics, navigating sensitive situations in the field, and maintaining self-care and resilience in field research.

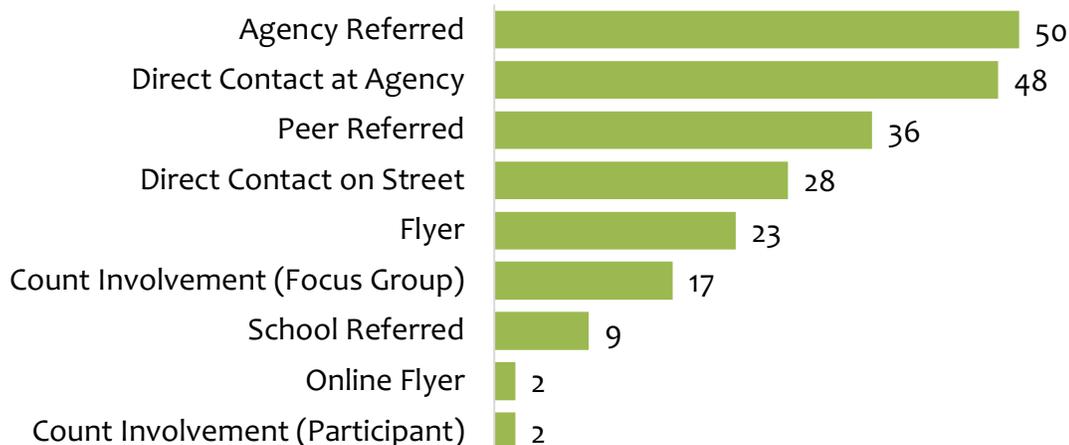
As interviews and transcripts were completed, the assigned Chapin Hall research team immediately reviewed and rated them. Each field member received written feedback on every interview. Chapin Hall Site Leads held weekly phone meetings throughout the nine-month data collection period to discuss challenges in the field, recruitment, and tips for improving interviewing skills. We also incentivized high-quality field work by using a bonus payment structure for outstanding interviews and transcriptions.

Recruitment

We used many recruitment strategies to reach groups of youth with diverse social identities and experiences. We specifically targeted diversity in age, sexual identity, race/ethnicity, service system involvement, gender identity, and histories of homelessness and housing instability. Both initially and throughout, Lead Agencies were critical in connecting interviewers with youth they served and with other providers and school personnel who work with homeless or unstably housed youth. Other recruitment strategies included posting recruitment flyers in public spaces where youth are likely to congregate and posting electronic announcements on social media. Interviewers also made direct contact with youth on the streets. This included searching for young people at locations identified as “hot spots” by the focus groups for the Youth Counts. We also used peer-driven methods to reach disconnected youth by handing out cards with interviewer contact information after youth completed an interview, and asking youth to verbally spread the word about the study to their friends and peers. We made direct contact with local schools in order to reach

school-enrolled youth 18 and under. We were able to interview a total of 215 young people. Figure 2 indicates how many youth were recruited by specific recruitment methods.

Figure 2. Sample Based on Type of Recruitment Strategy



Data Collection

The IDI component includes three interwoven data collection methods: narrative interviews, housing timelines, and background surveys. Interviewers also completed reflection logs that provided supplemental information about the interview. Each is described below.

Overall Interview Structure

The research team informed all youth of their rights and the voluntary nature of their participation. Upon consenting, interviewers explained the Housing Timeline Tool and general process of the interview. Youth were then asked to select a “fake name” to use during the interview and in all reports. All youth in each site had the option of completing interviews in either Spanish or English. To address differences in reading abilities for the survey, we used iPads with *RedCap* Survey software technology. This allowed two ways to complete the survey on the iPad touch screen. Participants could privately listen to the survey questions spoken in English or Spanish through ear buds or read the survey questions themselves. After completing the survey, interviewers asked several questions designed to bring closure to the interview, giving participants an opportunity to share final thoughts or reflections. Only one youth declined to be audiotaped. Interviews lasted anywhere from 1

hour to 4 hours, with the average interview lasting approximately 1.5 hours. Participants received a \$25.00 Visa gift card as well as a local service/resource guide. Below, each component is described in greater detail.

Narrative Interviews. All interviews began in the same way, by asking youth: "If you were to think about your experiences with housing instability as a story, where does your story begin?" After posing this question, the interviewer used the Housing Timeline Tool described below to document their housing instability stories, starting with their chosen beginning through present time.

The IDI is interested in understanding more than the “facts” of their moves. The IDI also examines the environments and contexts that youth are navigating (both protective and risky) that are critical to their housing instability experiences. Using the acronym JoFFiSSH (pronounced Joe Fish), the interviewers also probed these seven key areas as youth told their stories. They were asked about:

- Jo: Jobs, employment, finances, and access to money
- F: Family ties and relationships
- Fi: Friends/peers, intimate partners
- S: Connections to school and education
- S: Formal or informal services, supports, resources
- H: Health and well-being

JoFFiSSH provided an easy way to remember these factors and facilitated a more conversational style during the interview.

Housing Timeline Tool. The narrative interview was paired with the Housing Timeline Tool. Appearing as a wide and blank arrow on 11 x 14 inch paper, the timeline tool was used collaboratively with young people to plot the who, what, where, when, why and how of their moves in and out of places they stayed (see Figure 1). For each new living experience, young people were asked where or with whom they were staying, how long they stayed there, and the reasons they left, ran away, or got kicked out.

The Housing Timeline Tool serves as an interactive visual reference for both interviewer and participant to track, correct, and fill gaps in the narrative interview as they go along. It also provides important structure for the more youth-driven narrative interview. Photographs of the timelines and audio recordings of the interviews were uploaded to Chapin Hall’s database immediately following the interview. Hard copies of the actual timelines were mailed in to Chapin Hall periodically throughout the data collection process.

Background Survey. The third data collection effort was a background survey that includes the same demographic questions that appear on the Brief Youth Survey as part of the Youth Count. However, the background survey included additional questions about eight types of adversities young people may have experienced while both stably and unstably housed, their receipt of services and specific government benefits, what other services and supports they have used, and what factors make it hard to achieve housing stability. The surveys were given to youth two-thirds of the way through the interview and were followed by a series of questions to bring closure to the interview.

Reflection Logs. Interviewers completed reflection logs that recorded observational and contextual data, and elements of the interview that were not captured on tape. They also included the interviewers' reflections on the interview itself.

Data Analysis

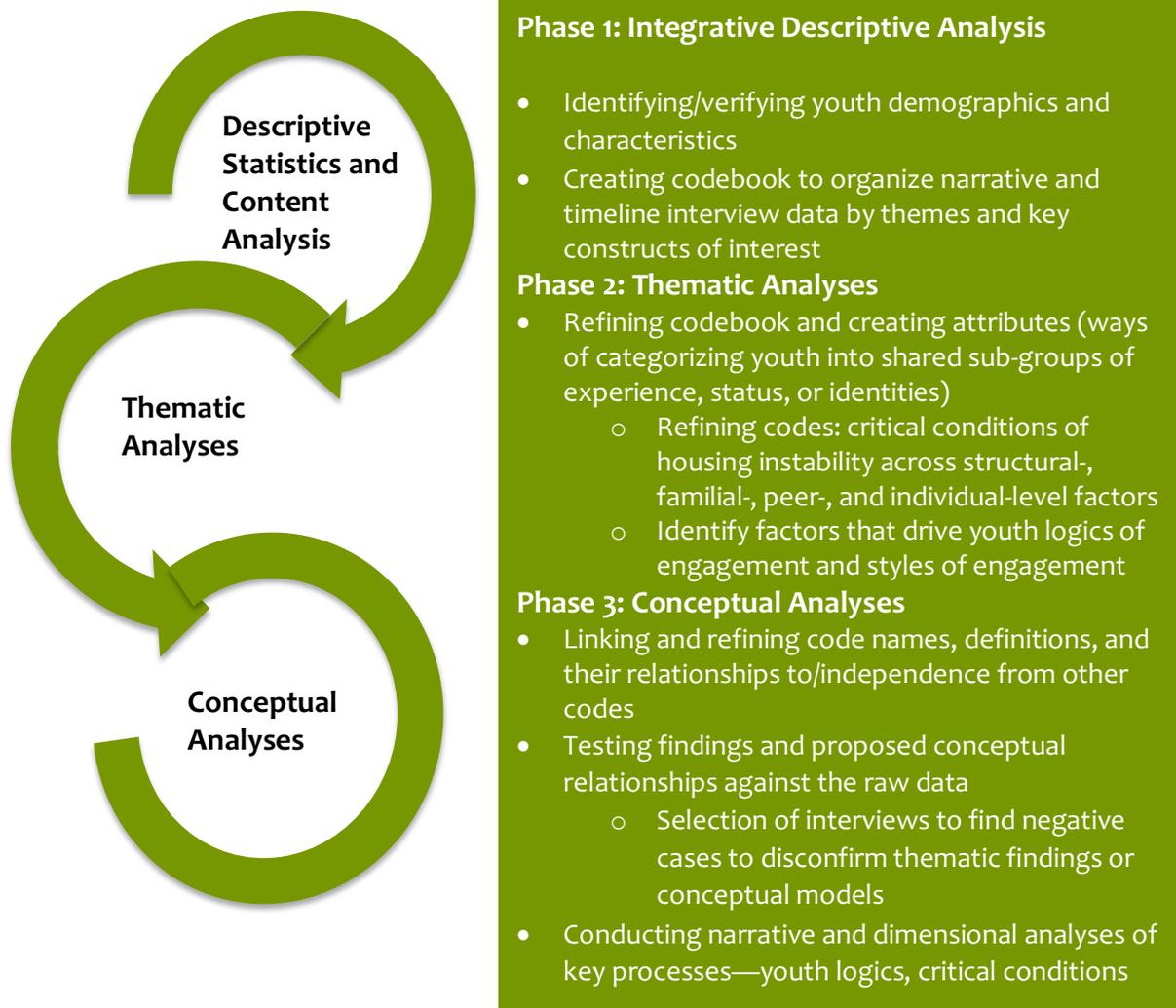
To store, manage, and analyze our data we used NVivo 11Pro software. We analyzed all data using the process below.

Analysis of Survey Data. All survey responses were reviewed and any inaccurate or incomplete responses were modified or deleted from the dataset. We then used the interview data to fill in missing values and responses (e.g., age, foster care history) based on our narrative interviews. When responses could not be reliably imputed, they were coded as missing or unassigned. We created cumulative adversity scores (based on survey data) across key demographic characteristics and tested for significance of differences.

Integrative Analysis of IDI data. Our approach to analysis ultimately integrates all of the IDI data to produce the following: “youth logics” of engaging resources, trajectories of housing instability, and critical conditions that illuminate opportunities for intervention within youth’s trajectories. We followed a three-phase process using content and descriptive analyses, thematic analyses and ultimately, more conceptually-driven analyses (see Figure 3). These conceptual analyses were informed by both Narrative and Grounded Theory Methods.

Midway through data collection, members of the IDI research team completed 3-day debrief meetings at all five sites. We also shared preliminary reports of the survey data with all five sites. The analytic plan and final analyses within this report are significantly informed by the feedback we received from these many debriefs.

Figure 3. IDI's Multiphase Approach to Analysis



Results

The goal was to interview approximately 40 young people ages 13 to 25 in each of the five sites, for a total sample of 200. We were able to interview 215 young people. Table 1 depicts the number of participants in each site.

Table 1. Homeless or Unstably Housed Youth Interviewed, by County

(N = 215)	#	%
Cook County	40	18.6
Philadelphia County	39	18.1
San Diego County	40	18.6
Travis County	55	25.6
Walla Walla County	41	19.1
Total	215	100.0

Who Are the Youth?

Most participants (86%) were age 18 or older (see Table 2). Just over one-half identified as either Black/African American (31%) or White (23%). The majority of young people reported gender identities as either male (52%) or female (41%). Twelve youth (5.5%) identified as transgender and two (.9%) as genderqueer/nonconforming.

While 58% selected the option “one hundred percent heterosexual/straight,” 38% did not. Among those, 11% identified as bisexual and 10% identified as one hundred percent gay or lesbian. Nearly one-quarter reported that they were the parent of at least one child. An additional 8% of youth (n = 18) reported that they or their partner were currently pregnant (see Table 2).

Organization of Results

The results section will briefly introduce the demographics of our participants: Who are the youth? We will also share their answers to, where does your story begin? Next, we highlight conditions that were critical to their stories and use visual trajectories to illustrate how those conditions shaped their stories over time. The third section answers questions regarding service use, access, and the logics that inform when and how they engage resources and supports. That section concludes by sharing their reflections on what has been most helpful and their advice about ending youth homelessness.

We close the report by sharing our insights into ways in which the IDI’s findings contribute to and expand the field’s understanding of youth homelessness. We identify levels of intervention needed to promote the stability and well-being of this population across the life course. Supplemental tables from the survey data can be found at the end of the report, in Appendix A.

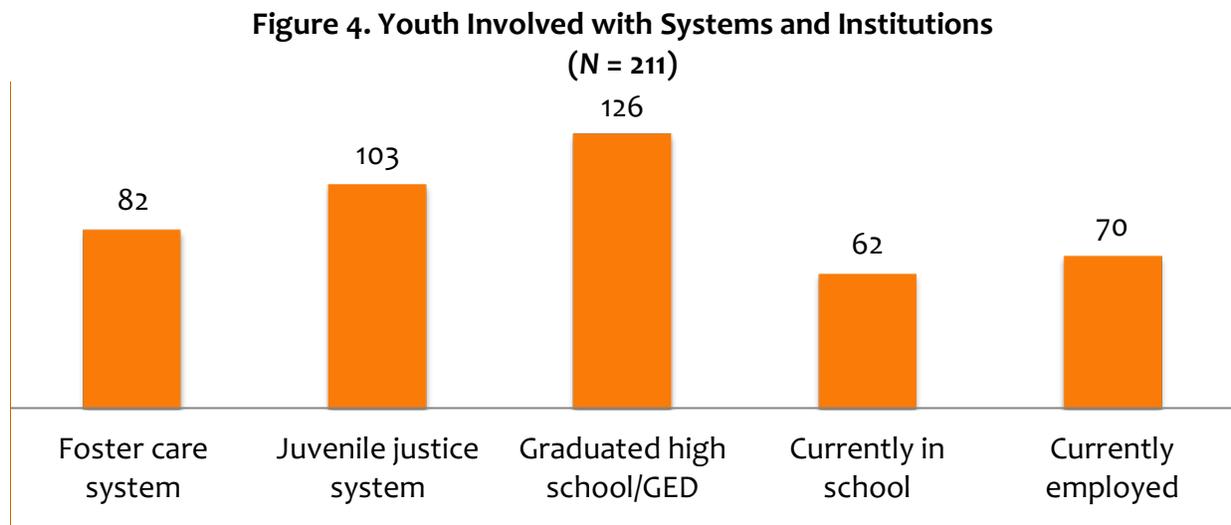
Table 2. Characteristics of Participants

(N = 215)	#	%
Age (in years)		
13 to 17	31	14.4
18 to 21	112	52.1
22 to 25	72	33.5
Race/Ethnicity		
White	50	23.2
Black/African American	67	31.2
Latin@	30	14.0
American Indian or Alaskan Native	6	2.8
Asian	1	0.5
Multiracial	44	20.5
Other	4	1.8
Don't know	1	0.5
Refused	7	3.2
Missing data	5	2.3
Gender Identity		
Female	87	40.5
Male	112	52.1
Transgender M-F	8	3.7
Transgender F-M	4	1.8
Genderqueer/Nonconforming	2	0.9
Other	1	0.5
Refused	0	0.0
Missing data	1	0.5
Sexual orientation		
100% heterosexual	125	58.1
Mostly heterosexual	16	7.4
Bisexual	24	11.2
Mostly gay/lesbian	8	3.7
100% gay/lesbian	21	9.8
Not sexually attracted to either males or females	1	0.5
Other	6	2.8
Don't know	5	2.3
Refused	5	2.3
Missing data	4	1.9
Parent of at least one child		
Yes	49	22.8
No	157	73.0
Don't know	1	0.4

(N = 215)	#	%
Refused	4	1.9
Missing data	4	1.9
Are you or your partner currently pregnant?		
Yes	18	8.4
No	180	83.7
Don't know	6	2.8
Refused	6	2.8
Missing data	5	2.3

Youth Involvement in Key Systems and Institutions

It is important to understand the degree to which young people are engaged in institutions that critically shape their development and stability, or have entered into systems serving as interventions targeting children and youth. In our survey, we asked young people about their educational experiences, completion of high school, involvement in the formal work force, and if they had histories in foster care or juvenile justice. Figure 4 reports how many youth answered “yes” within each surveyed category.



Involvement in Foster Care. In response to the survey question, *Have you ever been in foster care?* 39% of youth indicated foster care history. Over one-half of those youth ($n = 49$) reported aging out of foster care.

Involvement in Juvenile Justice. Almost half of our participants (49%) indicated that they had juvenile detention, jail, or prison histories. Later sections of this report will discuss

more general police contact and patrolling as a critical structural-level condition of housing instability among youth.

Dually Involved Youth. Dually involved youth are defined as those who have both foster care and juvenile justice involvement. Only 23% of IDI participants reported involvement in both the juvenile justice and foster care systems.

School. A majority of our participants obtained a high school diploma or a GED (60%). At the time of our interview, 30% were enrolled in school. Most of these youth (53%) were in a regular high school (31%), alternative school (11%), or completing a GED/high school equivalency program. Only 14 youth were currently attending 2-year community colleges and six were attending a 4-year college.

Employment. Our survey asked youth if they were currently employed in a place where they received a pay stub. We intentionally used this phrasing because we wanted to know how many youth were connected to more formal institutions of employment. One-third of youth were formally employed.

Disconnected Youth. Disconnected youth are often defined as 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school. Of the 16- to 24-year-olds who participated in the IDI, 46% would be defined as disconnected.

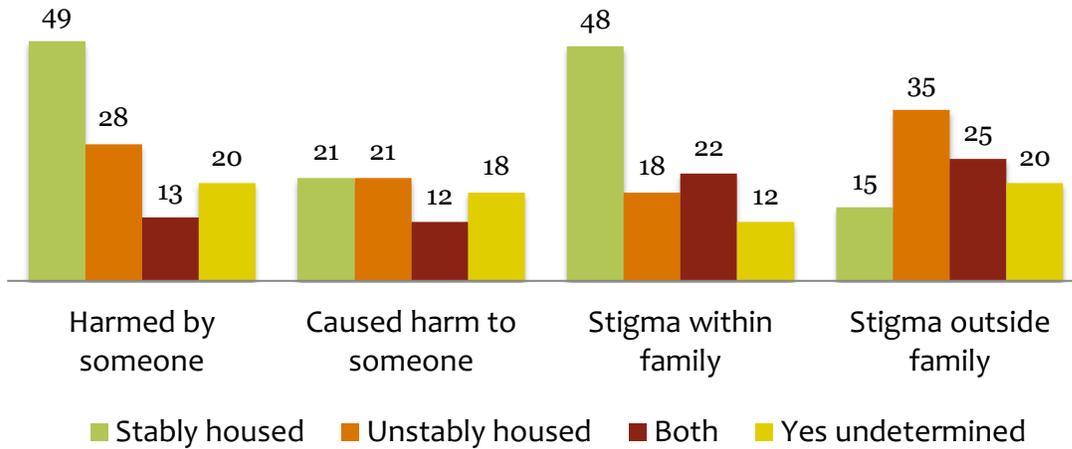
Survey Responses to Selected Adverse Experiences

One purpose of the survey was to systematically measure a small number of adversities unstably housed youth may experience. The narrative interviews certainly captured a larger array of adversities, and we will report on those. These eight were asked within the survey:

1. Have you been physically harmed by someone?
 - Who: parent or guardian, another relative, dating partner, friend or peer, stranger, other, refuse to answer
2. Have you physically harmed someone or yourself?
 - Who: parent or guardian, another relative, dating partner, friend or peer, stranger, myself, other, refuse to answer
3. Have you experienced discrimination or stigma?
 - Within your family?
 - Outside your family?
4. Have you experienced the death of a parent or caregiver?
5. Have you exchanged sex for basic needs?
6. Have you been forced to have sex with someone?
7. Have you been taken, transported, or sold for sex?
8. Have you belonged to a gang?

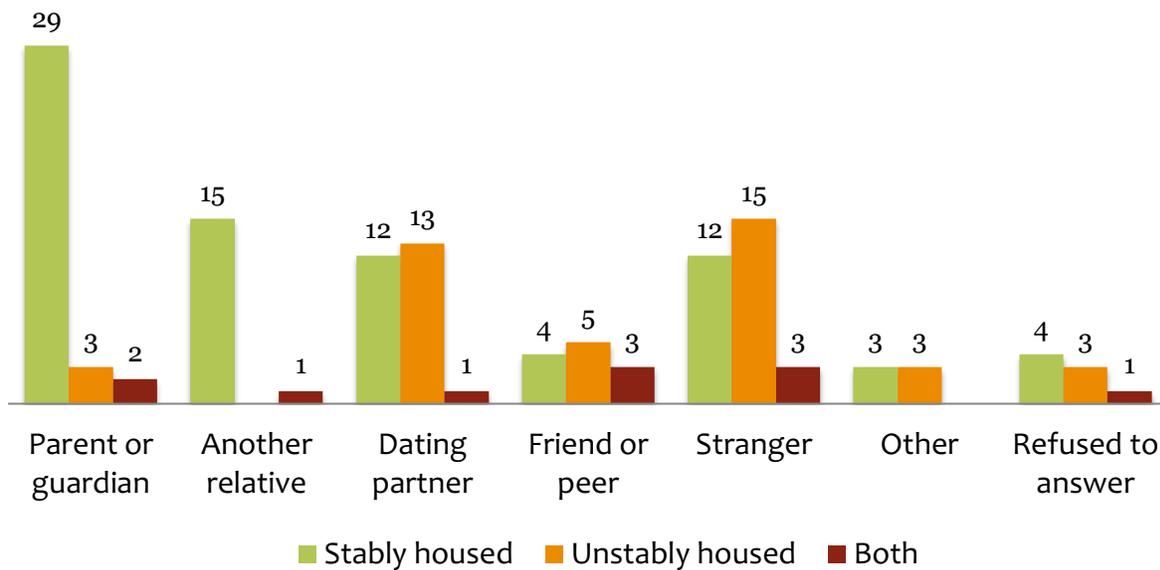
Youth were asked if these occurred while stably housed, unstably housed, or both. As figure 5 indicates, some forms of harm actually decreased when they became unstably housed.

Figure 5. Physical Harm and Discrimination/Stigma



It was important to understand who harmed youth. As Figure 6 below indicates, while stably housed, persons youth considered “family” often posed the greatest risks.

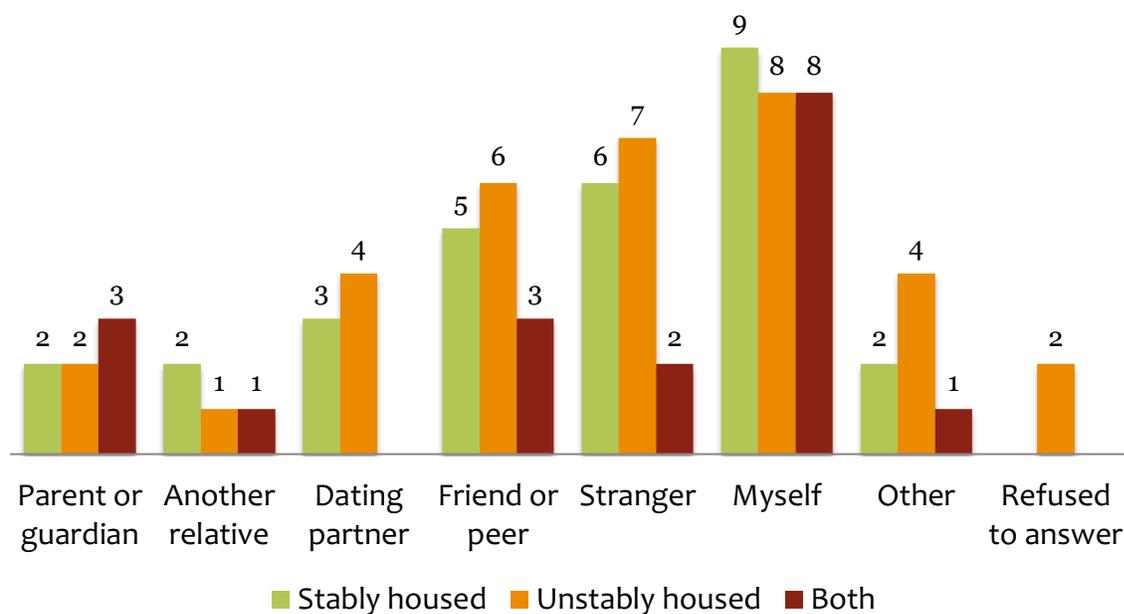
Figure 6. Perpetrator of Physical Harm to Youth



When youth reported harming someone else, who were the common victims of this violence? A concerning response: of the 33 youth who reported harming someone else or

themselves, the most frequent victims of this violence were themselves (i.e., self-harm). This was true both while stably housed ($n = 17$) and while unstably housed ($n = 16$). This response outnumbered any of the other options.

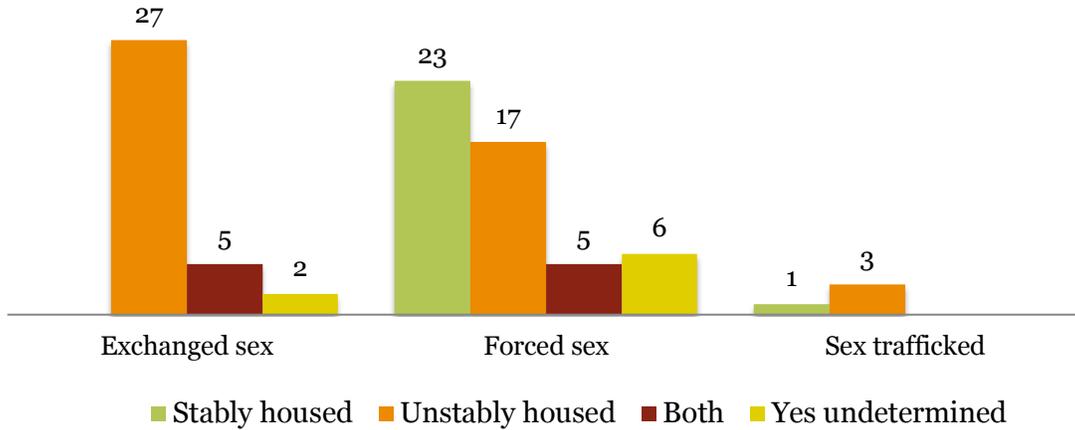
Figure 7. Victim of Physical Harm Caused by Youth



We asked several questions about the role of sex for survival, sexual violence, and involvement in the sex trade (see Figure 8). The largest category of “yes” responses was from youth who had been forced to have sex (24%). A very small number of young people, four, reported being taken, transported, or sold for sex. Gang involvement was also reported among a small minority (12%) of participants.

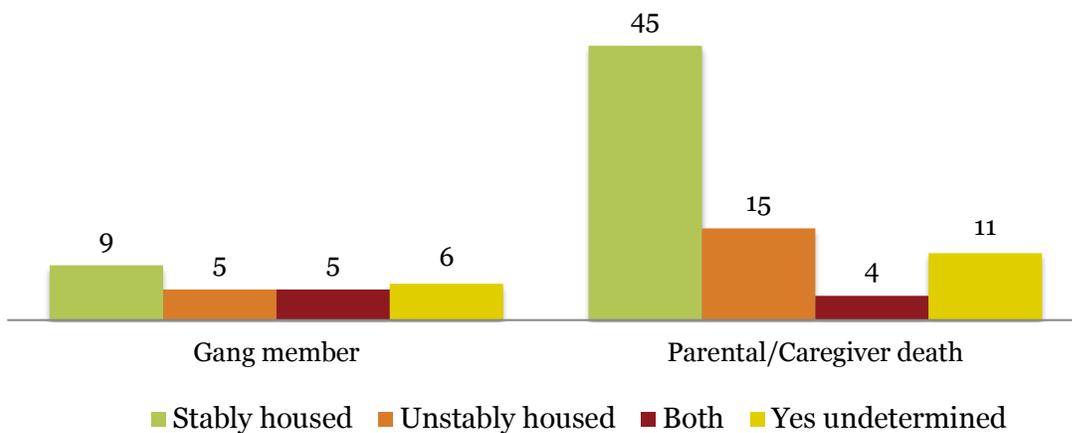
It is likely that the low number of youth reporting involvement in what would be labeled “sex trafficking” within this survey is an undercount among youth experiencing homelessness. Reaching and recruiting youth who are deeply entrenched in sex trafficking specifically would have required a longer engagement in the field and much more targeted recruitment efforts to gain access to this highly regulated and controlled subpopulation.

Figure 8. Adversities Tied to Sex



The degree of parental death reported among young people in this study is somewhat unexpected. In our survey, 35% of youth indicated experiencing the death of a parent or caregiver. A very small number of youth reported gang affiliations.

Figure 9. Gang Involvement and Parental Loss



In reviewing the figures above, several important findings immediately become apparent. First, as youth leave stable housing, many adversities actually decrease (e.g., harm from others, stigma within family, forced sex, gang membership, and parental/caregiver death). It is also notable that the most frequent victim of youth's violence is themselves. The largest groups of perpetrators of harm to youth are parents and other relatives.

Second, experiencing discrimination and stigma was a common experience. One hundred youth (47%) experienced some form of stigma or discrimination within their families while stably housed, and 95 youth reported experiencing stigma and discrimination from outside their families. It is likely that this increase in discrimination while unstably housed is related to their new stigmatized status of being "homeless."

Finally, survival sex as well as sexual abuse are far more common experiences than sex trafficking among our sample participants. While there are likely reasons for low reporting of what increasingly is labeled "sex trafficking," youth in our study more frequently reported family-based abuse, rape, or their own sporadic use of sex to access places to stay that allowed them respite from the streets.

Cumulative Adversity Scores

To understand how the surveyed adversities differed across demographic groupings of youth listed in Table 2, we calculated mean scores.² This allows us to know if some of the differences between their scores are statistically significant. The average cumulative adversity score for the entire sample was 2.8. As Table 3 indicates, several groups of youth have higher than average scores. However, significance testing of these differences indicates the following three subgroups of youth had significantly higher than average cumulative adversity scores: youth who identified as sexual minorities (LGBQA), foster youth, and youth with a juvenile justice history. Additional supplemental tables related to the adversity findings can be found in Appendix A.

As the trajectories will illustrate, the adversities youth have experienced exceed those measured in our survey. While the survey provides important insights, the narrative interviews add necessary context and detail to unpacking these adversities and others, as well as understanding critical strengths and resiliencies within these young people and their stories. This report now shares our analyses of those stories.

² This analysis is based on 201 youth. Of the 211 completed surveys, 10 of those youth did not answer 4 or more of the adversity questions and were omitted. When responses differ from 201, we note that total *n* in the corresponding cell within the table.

Table 3. Cumulative Experiences of Adversities

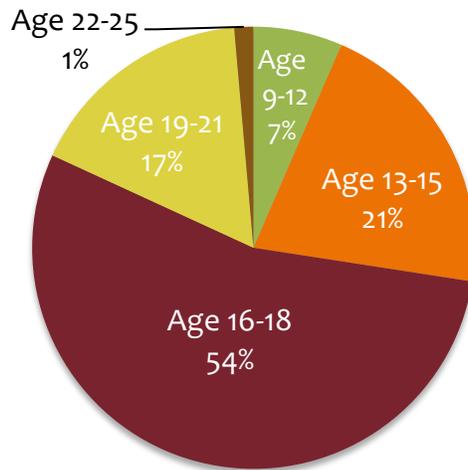
	<i>n</i>	Mean
Total	201	2.8
Gender (n = 196)		
Female	78	2.9
Male	105	2.6
Transgender/Genderqueer	13	3.2
Age (n = 198)		
13 to 17 years old	29	2.3
18 to 25 years old	169	2.9
Race/Ethnicity (n = 192)		
Black	63	2.7
White	50	3.0
Latinx	28	2.1
Multiracial	40	3.2
Other	11	2.6
Sexual Orientation (n = 191)		
100% heterosexual	118	2.3
LGBQA	73	3.6***
Foster Care History (n = 200)		
Yes	81	3.2**
No	119	2.5
Ever spent time in detention, jail or prison (n=197)		
Yes	97	3.1*
No	100	2.5

*Significant at $p < .05$; **Significant at $p < .01$; ***Significant at $p < .001$

Beginnings of Housing Instability

The age at which participants first experienced unaccompanied homelessness varied (see Figure 10). Over one-half of our participants experienced homelessness on their own during their late adolescence between the ages of 16-18 (54%). Another 21% experienced their first homeless episode during early adolescence, ages 13-15. Taken together, 75% of young people in our study experienced adolescent onset of homelessness (ages 13-18). A small proportion of youth experienced their first spell of homelessness prior to the age of 12 (7%).

Figure 10. Age at First Spell of Unaccompanied Homelessness (N = 215)



Knowing one’s age of first homelessness, however, tells us very little about the “why” behind these numbers. Youth described these beginnings within a web of early life challenges with their families of origin. They were clear that these realities were the early seeds of the instability they currently were navigating. The findings below share their answers to the question, where does your story begin?

Where Does Your Story Begin?

In many ways, it is fair to say that 100% of young people named family-related issues as core to the beginning of their housing instability. No interview started without naming parents, extended family, siblings, or foster families within the first few sentences. The five most common subthemes of youth’s own understanding of where their stories began included: foster care, family homelessness, chronic parent-child conflict, youth running away/leaving, and parental struggles. Some responses were double coded across these categories when youth themselves attributed beginnings to more than one event or condition happening simultaneously.

Below, these themes are explained alongside youth’s own words illustrating how young people understood the beginnings of their instability. It is important to note, however, that the themes are not mutually exclusive and the beginnings often not singular. Even in quotes, youth name a cascade of other experiences that preceded or followed their chosen beginnings. For example, experiencing foster care was embedded within prior experiences of a family dynamic of abuse and neglect, parental struggles with addiction or mental health, poverty (often), and family homelessness (sometimes). Parental struggles with mental health and addictions can increase the likelihood of entering foster care and can certainly stress and burden family dynamics and relationships. In their quotes, readers will see the

related issues that contextualize these beginnings and will likely sense other hidden and unspoken challenges and dynamics. In the discussion section that concludes this report, we will examine the deep interconnections between many of these beginnings.

Foster Care

In the narrative interviews, 94 youth had foster care histories and 44% of them indicated that simply being removed from home and placed in foster care was the beginning of their homelessness. The experience of family disruption and “bouncing” around from one foster home to another, especially for those removed at very young ages, caused many of these youth to feel they had been experiencing a form of instability and loss in their sense of home nearly all of their lives.

It would begin when I was three years old. . . I was taken away from my mom. My dad was already in prison. . . I entered CPS and everything, um, life changed, life changed for me as a kid. . . whose life wouldn't change, you know? . . . I had to learn and teach myself. . . how to do things on my own. . . Being in CPS it affects you because of the fact that you. . . don't have a childhood, you know what I mean? . . . You don't get to enjoy that childhood. So, when you turn 18 or 19 or 20 years old when you're an adult and you have to take care of adult things, it's harder to take care of those adult things and do adult things because of the fact that you still want your childhood. Like, you still want to, you know, bring that out and everything. But you have to accept the fact that your childhood is gone.

-- Angel, Travis County, TX

It pretty much started at three because I was actually in FOSTER care. And you know, sometimes foster parents want you, sometimes they don't. Sometimes youth might do a little something off the wall, they send you to another house. . . I have been in at least seven or more houses, so you know it can be pretty emotionally and mentally traumatizing and it can build up a, how do I want to put it (pauses) a certain kind of a wall where people really can't, you know, get in or earn your trust as easily as others you know?

-- El Chapo, Cook County

The story would probably begin back to when I was three, because, uh, from three to the age of 10 I was in and out of the DHS system. So, I was moving from foster home to foster home. Then I came to live with my parents around age 10. And I lived with them until I was sixteen. Um, at the age of sixteen I became homeless again because my mother had multiple mental disabilities. . . so I ended up leaving home and this is when my journey started.

-- Alanna, Philadelphia County

Well I guess I'd say. . . when I was two. . . my mom lost custody of us and we were put in the system. So we were like bouncing from houses to houses until. . . we found, like, a foster family that would. . . keep all of us together.

-- April, San Diego County

Family Homelessness

Nearly one in every four youth (24%) experienced homelessness in their families before becoming homeless on their own. Over half of these youth named this experience as where their homelessness began. Young people often recalled stories of being homeless due to poverty; a parent fleeing domestic violence; a parent's struggles with mental health, addiction, infidelity; or an emotional need to follow an unstable partner. Like foster youth, they too moved "all over" and endured a highly unstable childhood context for development.

Ever since my mom started cheatin' on my dad like way back when I was a little kid, like, we've been like movin' like all over the place. I've lived all over the place. ... growin' up like in all sorts of like fuckin shitty places, livin' with my mom's (male) friends and shit, like, out of the car and whatnot. Like it's always been like that kinda thing, you know?

-- Alex, Walla Walla County

Story begins. . . when I was, um, living in San Francisco with my mom. And I was about (pauses) I would say 11, 11 years old. And she had a place for a while but it was with a friend and we ended up moving out and living on the streets. . . . We didn't have, uh, services provided or anything like that. We tried to sleep in parks or storefronts. . . . We found a place in the winter. . . . It was uh, with one of her friends. . . so on from there we. . . basically

couch surfed, um, for the next 2 years, going from friend to friend. -- Kyle, San Diego County

I was around like 12. . . my mom was going through some domestic violence and we had to relocate our self in a better position. . . . No matter wherever we went, my dad would have like found us. And so we moved THERE cause he didn't know anything about Wisconsin. And from there it was just like (pause) that's when I really experienced being homeless.

-- Naomi, Cook County

I was like I think 6? . . . And then we- like had unstable housing, we didn't have nowhere to stay so, we went through like, the shelters, [names shelters in area], and then we moved back- we moved back to like, West LA. . . my sister's grandparents were like paying the rent. So, like that helped a lot. We lived there for about like a year, and it was like a pretty good time. And then, (pauses). . . we lost the house. Like, my mom's a single parent, so- so she's always like struggled just to like, keep the places. So, we lost that place through like some- some like drug problems. Like my mom has problems with eh- she always had problems with drugs, and then uh, like opiates. And then, ah what else. And then we- we came back to San Diego for a little bit, like, after just like a mix up of like a bunch of different things, and we were like staying in shelters. And then, like, I think like last time I was in shelters. . . a little bit over a year ago. . . . We just got evicted from this place like a month ago and so we don't have a place right now. And, so I'm just like chillin' on my sister's couch for a little bit, and yeah, so that's just like, that's it, like a general overview.

-- Bobby, San Diego County

Chronic Conflict

As the largest category, 65 youth reported experiences of ongoing conflict with a parent or a stepparent as the core issue behind their homelessness. Sometimes youth noted their own issues with “anger” or drug use. But just as often, conflict marked a coming of age story where economically struggling parents conveyed expectations that the young person (particularly boys) contribute to the household after turning 18. A second core subtheme: parents and family members deeply struggled with or outright rejected their emerging adult child’s sexuality. Sometimes youth left of their own accord; other times parents kicked youth out or issued frustrated ultimatums, causing a young person’s departure.

About a year ago (age 19) I got kicked out of my house because. . . me and my mom don’t get along. I mean we do, but she has a stressful job, she comes home from work all stressed out. . . And so when I get home, you know, I have done nothing all day so, when I talk to her sometimes she just yells at me. When I was 18 and I came home. . . didn’t do nothing all day because I’m tired of school. . . I graduated at 17 but never really looked for a job. . . I started looking for a job. . . and that made my mom more proud of me and, one time (at work). . . I fell asleep at like 2:30, it was my break and I woke up at 4:30 p.m. and they fired me and my mom got mad. That’s when I got kicked out.

-- John Walker, San Diego County

It was the conflict of me being the oldest child and then the fact that I was gay. So it was one of them things where my father didn't approve of it, so he was like, “Oh, I'm not approving of it, so I don't wanna talk to you. I don't wanna see

you.” And then my mother at the time was going through a relationship where her partner didn't accept the fact that I was gay. I was able to stay with my mom, but it was more so the fact that her partner didn't accept me being gay or, like, bringing my boyfriend over. . . . And my mom just, like, agreed with him, so of course it was, like, at times, “Oh, I don't wanna see y'all two in the house together. If I do see y'all in the house together, you gotta get out.”

-- Juan, Philadelphia County

And I guess they started to see a change. . . . I obviously started having like, you know, interest in boys but it was not [baby is making noises in background] in the sense my Mom wanted it to be. So she had a huge problem with them and then I guess some of the clothes. . . I was buying like clothes and stuff that she wasn't really approved of. . . we kinda got into little stuff like that and it grew into a HUGE– a huge issue. . . it was just something that kind of always been our difference, because she's a Jehovah's Witness and then I'm not really into religion. . . . So that was also kind of having to do with the conflict. . . . At 19, from there I left home.

-- Alicia, Cook County

I just– I started getting older. I started, uh, kind of seeing how my mom’s husband really was and how my mom’s own emotional issues and shit so just kind of a things started kinda going downhill, and it got to the point to where, uh, I got into a little trouble, and her husband saw a

good— a good, uh, opportunity to be like [in mocking tone], “Oh, well this crazy troubled kid. Get him out of here!”

-- Josh, Travis County

Running Away or Leaving

When youth chose the beginning of their stories as “I ran away” (n = 21) or “I left” (n = 26), it was always linked to their own sense of having to take initiative to escape or just disappear from a harmful or neglectful family dynamic, or to search out a better or safer place to live. Sometimes what distinguished leaving from running away was age (older youth describing departure as leaving). Other times youth sought a general disconnection from their homes or parents. This also captured experiences of youth who felt unsafe or unwanted at home because of a stigmatized sexual or gender identity. These youth left to find a more nurturing and safe place for their development but were typically not kicked out as youth above described.

I ran away when I was seven, for like eight hours. But it wasn't a huge deal, my parents didn't even notice I was gone. I used to— when I was like fourteen, no I was like thirteen to like sixteen, I'd be gone for weeks. I was gone for two and a half months, and I came home, and my mom goes, “I asked you to do the dishes yesterday.” I was like, “I've been gone.” Like, my parents, just— my dad was on medication for his back, so he wasn't mentally there. He was physically there, but not mentally there you know?

-- Anastasia, Walla Walla County

I still didn't wanna be around like my family, and um, I'm also like a third gender person and I wanted to be able to medically transition which was, um, financially impossible in Florida. And the laws regarding like psychiatric care and psychological care are much more stringent, there was only like one

doctor around like all these different cities, and, who treated like trans, third gender or like people like that were not comfortable with, um, their gender identity and wanted to pursue some sort of hormone replacement therapy. And he knew that, and charged a ridiculous amount of money. So it was practically impossible to transition medically and get the help that I needed and the respect that I needed. Because it's like a very Republican, conservative, like backwoods, like very dangerous place. I—I lived in a very, very tiny town and it was not good to be gay or trans. Basically if you weren't white and straight and Christian then you weren't safe. It wasn't good for you. So moving to San Diego, the weather was great. I had this idea that all of California was like this liberal utopia and everything was gonna be perfect. And there were like gay people everywhere. . . I took a trip here and I researched about medical care and realized there were a lot of resources for LGBT people and um, the Family Health Center Clinic which offers free hormone um, replacement therapy for trans people that are like low income. [Later in the interview once Jess describes becoming homeless after arriving to San Diego.] Like at the time I thought, “Oh God I'm—I'm 19 like I'm already a year behind,” like my plan. Ever since I was like four I knew. I just had a deep sense of knowing like, “When I'm 18 I'm leaving and I will never see these people again.” What—what sort of like four- or five-year-old thinks like

that? You know, it's very sad. Um, but yeah so 19 was old for me. I look now and I'm like, "Oh my gosh! Like, that is pretty young to like move all the way across the country like by yourself with no support and no help, no encouragement, no support base. Just like, all on my own." You know?

-- Jess, San Diego County

Parent's Struggles

This last group of youth chose their beginnings by naming parental struggles with health, mental health, and various addictions as the primary cause of their instability. Sometimes parents also struggled around competing commitments and obligations to their children versus their partners. These struggles created ongoing instability in the parenting that youth were able to receive and depend on early in their lives.

I've never really had housing stability my whole life, honestly. . . . My mom married my stepdad and she got cancer. . . . I lived in [small town in Texas] and I raised my brothers basically. So I was kind of like the parents of them, you know. I didn't really have any guardianship. . . my mom came back, um she was in remission and um she tried to come back and play like parent role. . . I wasn't in that kind of mood to be told what to do after I've been dealing with taking care of the brothers and making sure they're fed, homework and all that. . . probably wasn't the best way to handle things at the time, but that was how I was.

-- Aubrie, Travis County

Um, I didn't really run away or be kicked out I just choose to leave when I was 15. My mom turned our family home into a trap house.³

-- Mackenzie, Walla Walla County

. . . my mother she um she had a nervous breakdown when I was about nine. It was very unstable at that point, like we lost everything.

-- Rocky, Cook County

I think it'd have to start with like just being born. I was born into a drug infested and alcohol infested lifestyle. . . Dad addicted to alcohol, mom addicted to drugs, not really caring about us, more caring about gettin' their fix. . .

-- Raw Beatz, Walla Walla County

³ The phrase "trap house" was referenced frequently to describe shelter used intermittently by study participants. Contemporary rap and hip-hop artists have made colloquial use of the phrase, expanding its consumption and meaning. Among participants in this study, definitions or descriptions of a trap house may differ slightly from youth to youth, and location to location. Typically, it refers to a sheltered, sometimes abandoned, space that a) is out of the public eye b) facilitates the using and selling of drugs and c) enables delinquency and crime. Occasionally trap houses are actual homes and apartments of family or acquaintances that become over-taken by its unstably housed residents and a host of illegal activities. For more information see Rothman, Bazzi, & Bair-Merritt, 2015 and Teixeira, 2015.

I feel like. . . unstable housing has kind of always been a thing. . . because my mom was um, she was like—she lived off the people that she was dating. . . . She was never able to like hold down a job for very long, because she would be like, “Oh, they’re making me work, like, these hours and it’s horrible. And I just need to like quit.”. . . But um, she also had a gambling problem. Sooo, if she like got money for rent. . . she would go gamble at a casino and sometimes she would spend all of it.

-- Mary, San Diego County

Um, my mom was a drug addict. She– she used ice, coke. She smoked weed. . . well we just started butting heads, and- and uh, like I wanted to do my own thing. I was catching on to what she was doing. Um, and then it– you know, just as a kid, you get those bad vibes, and you know- you kind of like- you go off of them. . . . You lash out and– not knowing what's happening. So, um that's how I dealt– dealt with it, you know. The problem. . .

-- Nick, Travis County

Summary

Taken together, these answers about where their stories began form the start of a larger finding that is emphasized throughout this report—that youth homelessness cannot be reduced to a single event. It is preceded by and contextualized within often chronic and deeply complex social and familial challenges related to poverty, cycles of family violence/abuse/neglect, intrafamilial discrimination, parental mental health and addiction, and youth’s own processes or struggles developmentally and personally. We now turn to understanding how these beginnings unfolded over time, and the conditions that youth believed were critical to their trajectories of housing instability.

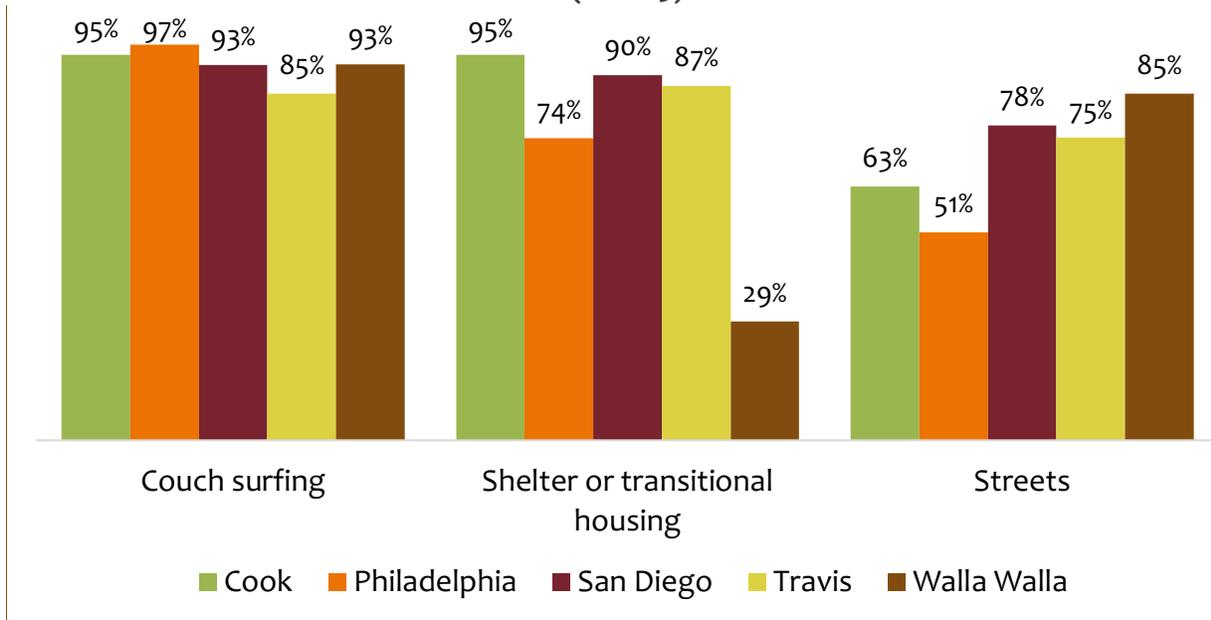
Trajectories of Housing Instability

Drawing primarily from the narrative interviews and timelines, this section reports findings about youth’s housing instability. We begin by identifying the levels of instability they experienced (e.g., couch surfing, shelters, or streets). We then present the analysis of the critical conditions that shaped their trajectories of housing instability. Two youth’s trajectories are mapped out to illustrate how these critical conditions unfolded over time.

Levels of Instability

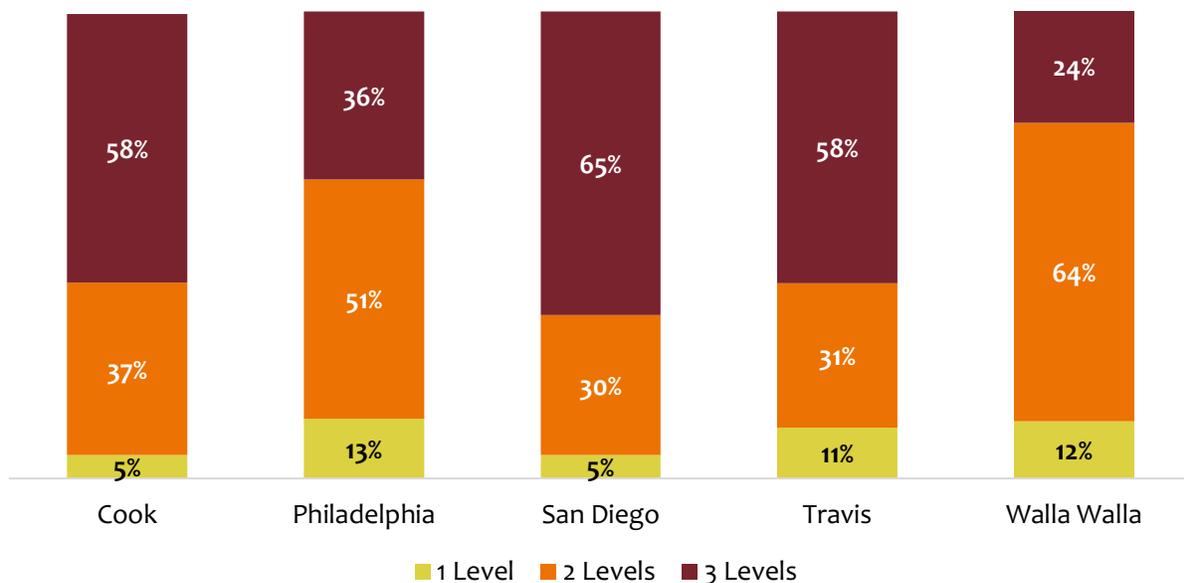
Nearly all youth in our study (93%) experienced couch surfing at some point, or at multiple points, across their stories (see Figure 11). This was also consistently true across the five counties. Few individual stories involved only one level of homelessness (see Figure 12). Instead, the majority of youth, across all five counties, experienced two to three different levels.

Figure 11. Percentage of Youth Experiencing Each Level of Instability
(N = 215)



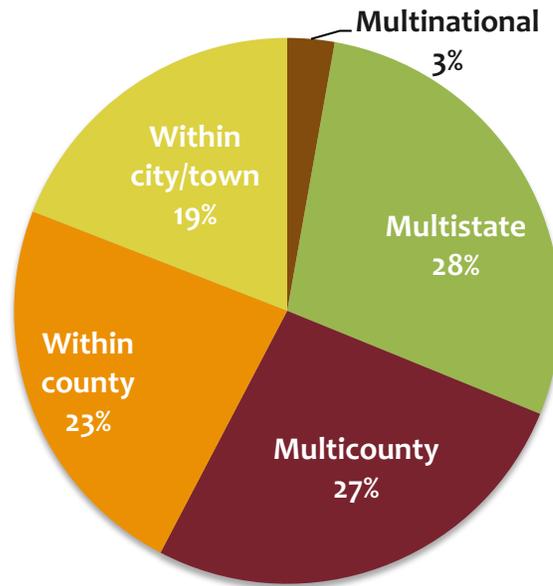
It is important to note that in Walla Walla County, the low rates of youth using shelters or transitional housing and higher rates of living on the streets is related to the absence of sufficient numbers of available youth shelters. This causes youth to utilize unsheltered (i.e., streets) and informal housing options available to them.

Figure 12. Number of Levels of Homelessness Experienced by Youth
(N = 215)



Youth’s experiences with housing instability also included high degrees of geographic mobility. Few youth remained in a single geographic area. In fact, only 19% of youth stayed within their cities or towns (see Figure 13). Still, most youth stayed within their home states (69%).

Figure 13. Geography of Youth’s Homelessness



Exploring Critical Conditions of Youth Homelessness

While each person’s experience of instability was certainly unique, our analysis identified four categories of what we call “critical conditions” of housing instability. All of these critical conditions derive directly from factors that youth identified as central to their experiences over time. We sort and color-code their responses into four groups: individual, family, peer, and structural factors. Altogether, these factors are labeled “multilevel critical conditions.” All youth navigated some combination of these multilevel critical conditions (see Figure 14). Within this report, we provide two in-depth illustrative examples to help readers see the unique ways in which these critical conditions shape individual youth trajectories of housing instability. Ultimately, we will return to these multilevel critical conditions to identify potential points of intervention as well as gaps in services and supports that could potentially have shifted or interrupted their housing instability.

First, however, we define and color-code each of the critical condition categories and include the corresponding findings. We synthesize and summarize the themes across the levels of critical conditions in Figure 14.

Defining Multilevel Critical Conditions

Individual

Individual-level themes identify conditions tied to a young person's own attributes, both positive and negative, that shape their housing instability. Youth identified personal characteristics of health (addictions and mental health), attitudes/beliefs and worldviews, core identities, and their own behaviors and feelings. Specifically, the most commonly mentioned individual contributions youth referenced were mental health challenges ($n = 66$) and drug use or addiction ($n = 46$). Youth also talked about persistently feeling like a burden or being unwanted ($n = 40$), or that they felt strong desires to escape to pursue a better life ($n = 45$). Youth also named personal characteristics either as getting in their way or as helpful mechanisms for identity protection or general risk management. These often included choosing to avoid or self-isolate ($n = 30$), being “too prideful” and independent ($n = 40$) or getting “angry” too easily ($n = 34$).

Peers

These themes articulate the roles—both positive and negative—that peers play in housing instability. These themes included peers as linkers and brokers to accessing services and resources, a reason for losing a resource, being a source of both harm and support, and serving as a key attachment figure or as family. Specifically, youth reported becoming or staying homeless in order to stay with or follow a peer or intimate partner who was also homeless ($n = 45$). However, the most commonly mentioned role peers played was as a link to services and skills or as a source of knowledge while homeless ($n = 149$). Peers also were named as the primary reason youth lost many of those same resources ($n = 78$). Just as peers were portals to supports, a few were sometimes portals to illegal activity, including sex work ($n = 4$) or drug use and sales ($n = 17$). While youth reported peers as sometimes abusive, controlling, or violent ($n = 34$), they also just as often named peers as their rescuers, protectors, and sources of mutual support ($n = 39$).

Family

These themes identify how youth perceived their family systems and their members as contributing to youth's housing instability. This included youth reports of parental mental illnesses ($n = 19$), addictions ($n = 55$), death of a parent ($n = 75$), loss of important family supports ($n = 35$), cycles of abuse/neglect or violence ($n = 61$), and family economic conditions that created instability ($n = 35$). Many of these conditions were named as contributing to a general family experience of intense conflict and discord. Youth also referenced their families' bias, discrimination, and bigotry, particularly toward sexual minority (LGBQA) and gender minority (transgender or gender nonconforming) youth. One hundred youth indicated family as the source of experiences with stigma and discrimination. Some youth also reported feeling rejected by a parent who chose a new intimate partner over them, resulting in the youth's getting kicked out or running away ($n = 36$). At the same time, extended family (typically an aunt or grandmother) was often a critical source of housing and social support ($n = 48$) as youth navigated these dynamics.

Structural

These themes identify societal and structural conditions that contribute to youth's instability. Professionals, as part of a community's structure of formal supports, were critical sources of connecting youth to other formal services ($n = 46$). However, youth also mentioned policies and practices that impeded their stability or their use of/access to a formal service. Youth named barriers such as practices and policies in foster care that disconnect youth from building and retaining family resources ($n = 31$), rules and conditions of group living in shelters and congregate care that are controlling, unsafe, or unsanitary ($n = 82$). Many young people's trajectories illuminated serious gaps in transition services in or out of a system, or service system siloes that complicate accessing services ($n = 48$). Youth also named societal or community bias, discrimination, and bigotry as critical to feeling a community or its institutions are (un)safe or (un)welcoming places that facilitate instability ($n = 34$). Some youth also named the level of surveillance or policing of public spaces ($n = 22$) as causing added instability.

Taken together, these are the multisystemic critical conditions of their housing instability. Figure 14, below, visually depicts these findings.

Figure 14. Multisystem Factors Shaping Trajectories of Housing Instability



Understanding Critical Conditions and Trajectories of Housing Instability

This section of the report offers two examples of how these multilevel critical conditions can shape a youth's trajectory of housing instability. Each example is organized in the following way. We first present a narrative of the young person's story. A trajectory of housing instability follows that. We will discuss the critical conditions within that trajectory. We then

present the same story within a second trajectory that illustrates the different levels of homelessness that young person experienced. A trajectory of that youth's experience across four levels of housing instability follows. In both cases, the trajectories are a way of synthesizing the detail of the storyline in order to isolate the core critical conditions above and visually mark key moments within the story. We then summarize what each example illustrates about opportunities for intervention and prevention that occurred and those that were missing.

The Story of “Natalie”

Natalie was a 17-year-old white, female participant with a history of housing instability in Walla Walla, Washington and neighboring small towns. At the time of her interview, Natalie was finishing up a 28-day sentence in the juvenile detention center for school truancy and drug charges. The day of her release also marked the end of her probation. Natalie was born in Kentucky and moved to Walla Walla county at 13 with her parents, who had grown up there. In Kentucky, she described herself as a straight-A student who was not involved with drugs, but after she moved away, she started drinking and smoking. She attributes this change to her new friends and to life in Walla Walla: *"There's nothing to do in a small town."*

At 14, Natalie's dad left their family to live with his new girlfriend. After his departure, Natalie's mom went into a depression and started using meth. *"[I]f she wasn't drunk or high, she was gone,"* Natalie noted of her mom. For the next six months, Natalie took responsibility for the care of her four younger siblings. She started to miss school and, ultimately, dropped out. Seeking an escape from the burdens of raising her siblings, she called her dad to come get the children and parent them. He did. To help her cope with her stress, Natalie's friends introduced her to meth. This only added to her conflicts with her mom. After a fight with her mom's new boyfriend, Natalie was kicked out. She then cycled between couch surfing and trap houses for the next two years. During that time, she also stayed with an older man. She exchanged sex for this living arrangement so she could *"have a roof over [her] head."* Neither of Natalie's parents allowed her to live with them while she was using drugs.

At 16, Natalie, on her own accord, stopped using meth and returned to live with her mom, who had also been clean for the past eight months. Natalie resumed her schooling and enrolled in an Alternative Education Program at the local community college. For a short time, she cut off connection with her friends involved with drugs. But after resuming contact with an old friend, Natalie relapsed and her mom kicked her out again.

Between the ages of 16 and 17, Natalie cycled through many informal housing arrangements. She couch surfed at her aunt's house and friends' homes, both of which she described as trap houses. She also occasionally exchanged sex for a place to stay, as she had before. One of Natalie's friends—who had only recently become clean himself—expressed concern

about her living with the older man. As an alternative, he offered to house Natalie in his shed while they tried to find something more stable. She moved into the shed, which soon became overrun with people using drugs. The police started watching the property, and Natalie was ultimately arrested for her truancy warrant and possession of drugs.

Over the past year, Natalie was sent to the juvenile detention center on a monthly basis. “I practically live here,” she described. “I’m grateful to be here. . . I have a bed to sleep, I’m safe here. . . I have nowhere safe to go when I leave. . . This [detention facility] is like a second home to me.” After release, Natalie’s case plan is to transition to a residential drug treatment facility in Spokane, Washington.

In thinking about the future, she expressed hope that after treatment, she would reunite with her mom and sisters and return home. “I want to be home with my mom, and I want to stop using, and I want to be clean with my mom. I want to be able to see my siblings. I want them to be able to look up at me and not call me a drug dealer.”

Natalie’s Timeline Trajectory of Housing Instability

Figure 15 presents Natalie’s timeline trajectory of housing instability. Circles in the center of the arrow are used to display significant periods of time in Natalie’s story of housing instability. Each circle is colored to illustrate which critical conditions contributed to her housing instability at that time period. The critical condition colors sometimes appear combined as a gradient within a single circle to represent the blended presence of more than one multilevel critical condition.

Natalie’s timeline below begins with the point she identified as the beginning of her homelessness. At age 14, Natalie’s father left her mother and her mother went into a depression, began to use drugs, and neglected Natalie and her siblings. The first circle in her timeline is colored orange to represent that it was her family context that first led her to become homeless. The second circle in Natalie’s critical conditions trajectory is red to indicate Natalie’s individual decision to become sober so she could move back in with her mom. The third circle is colored part orange (peers) and red (individual) to indicate the combined influence of her peers and her own individual behavior as she began using meth again which, in turn, led her mom to kick her out. The fourth circle is also colored part orange (peers) and part red (individual) to indicate the dual influence of her friend and her own decision to stop exchanging sex for a place to stay and move into her friend’s shed. The final circle in Natalie’s trajectory is colored green (structural) to indicate the heavy presence of the juvenile justice system in Natalie’s housing trajectory for the last year of her life and how she began to view it as a “second home.”

Figure 15. Natalie's Timeline Trajectory and Critical Conditions of Housing Instability

“My mom was so depressed . . . she was gone . . . then I started using ‘cuz I felt like I had nothing.”

- Mom starts using meth after Natalie's dad leaves
- Natalie forced to care for siblings and starts missing school; has a warrant out because of truancy
- Dad picks up siblings, Natalie starts using meth and leaves home to couch surf and stay in trap houses

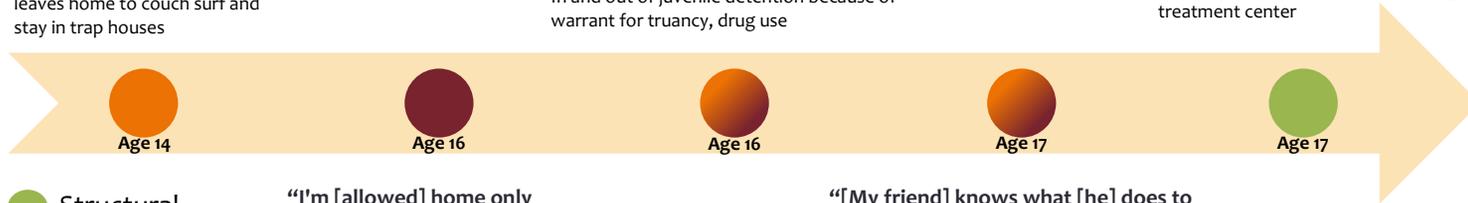
“Natalie” from Walla Walla

“I let one of my old friends come over . . . and that was the end of it.”

- Relapses after inviting over a friend, who invites over others to use meth
- Mom kicks her and friends out; Natalie starts cycling again through trap houses, couch surfing, sometimes exchanging sex for place to stay at 31-year-old "boyfriend's" house
- In and out of juvenile detention because of warrant for truancy, drug use

“I have nowhere safe to go when I have to leave . . . I call [juvenile detention] my second home.”

- Friend tries to get her a hotel room, but police pick her up first
- Prefers being in juvenile detention to being out on the streets or in trap houses, because it's safer
- Close to finishing both sentence and probation; plans to transfer to a drug treatment center



- Structural
- Peer/Familial
- Individual

“I'm [allowed] home only when I'm clean . . . and I was clean for six months.”

- Natalie gets clean; Mom gets clean and lets Natalie stay at home
- Enrolls in the Alternative Education Program at the community college

“[My friend] knows what [he] does to me... and [said], ‘I'm not lettin' you go back’.”

- Friend takes her away from sexually exploitive living arrangement, takes her to live with him in a shed on his property
- Shed is essentially abandoned, with a partial roof and no heat or water
- Quickly gets overrun with other youth with warrants, drug use escalates, becomes trap house, police begin to take notice

Natalie's Trajectory Across Four Levels of Housing Instability

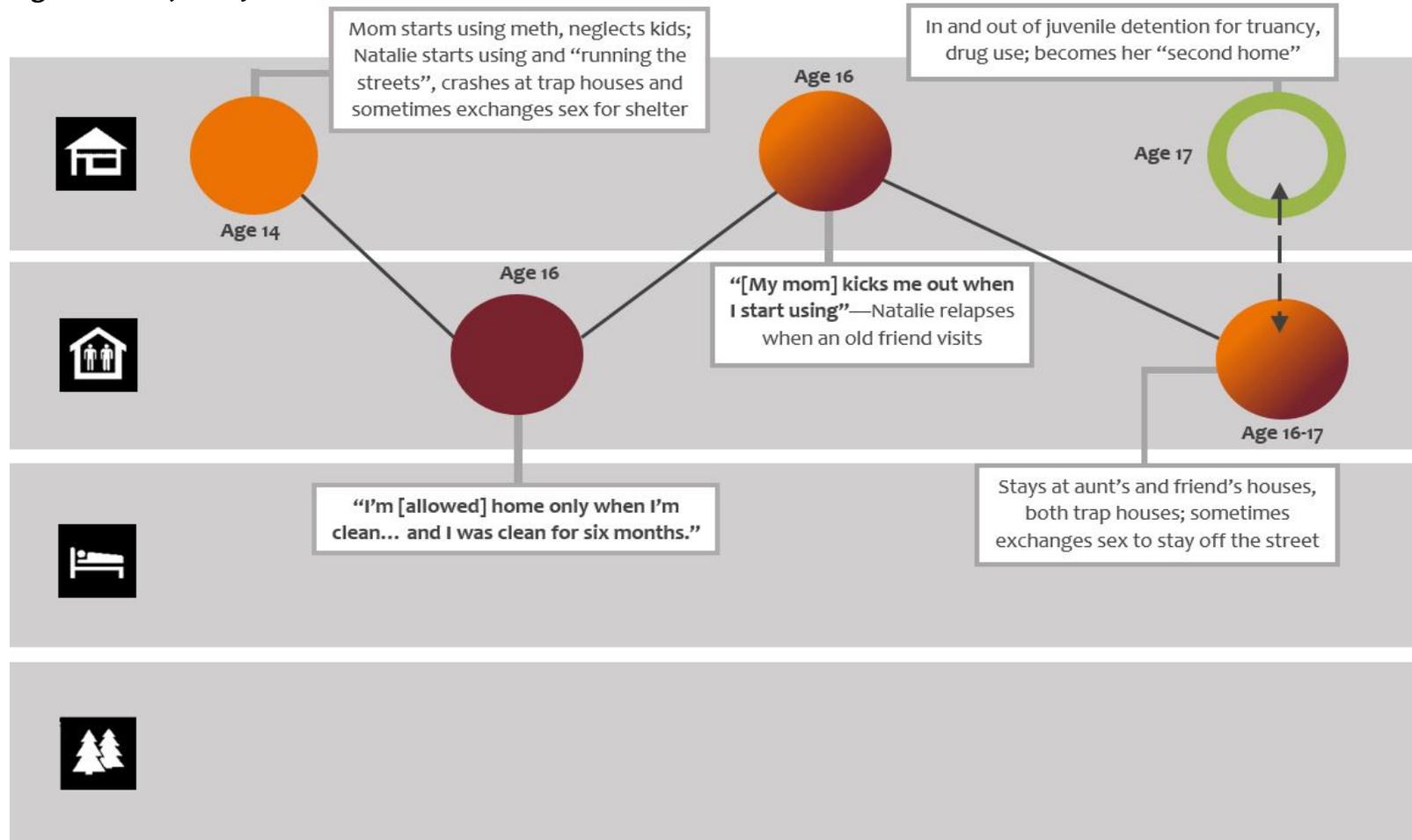
Figure 15, however, hides the many changes in the levels of housing instability Natalie navigated during her lifetime. The housing trajectory shown in Figure 16 takes the narrative and condenses it further.

This timeline highlights how young people move through different forms of housing instability over the course of their story. Each of the grey rows, labeled by an icon on the left, represents a different type of housing: stably housed, doubled up or couch surfing, sheltered, and unsheltered, from top to bottom. The ordering of these rows is not a judgment on the actual safety or (im)permanence of any particular period of a participant's story. Instead, we recognize that the potential for exposure to harm is different within different kinds of housing. "Stable housing" includes staying with parents or foster parents; in institutional placements like group homes, juvenile justice centers, and residential treatment centers or hospitals. "Couch surfing" includes temporary housing with family members and peers, while "sheltered" includes formal temporary housing such as shelters, transitional living programs (TLPs), and hotels. Lastly, unsheltered includes living on the street as well as transient shelter like cars and abandoned buildings.

Like in the timeline above, each circle represents a key transition, or tipping point. To read the timeline, follow the black line between circles from left to right. The color of each circle reflects the blended factors that led to the move from the current housing context, where the circle is located, to the next housing context. The text box connected to a circle provides a brief summary of the factors related to that tipping point. Dotted arrows connecting two or more circles indicate a period of cycling between different forms of housing. Where there is cycling, a separate text box explains the factors related to that instability. The final circle shows where the participant was at the time of the interview. That circle isn't filled in because the next tipping point in the young person's trajectory is unknown. However, the colored ring shows the levels of intervention we might recommend, based on what we know from their story.

Natalie's trajectory across levels of instability shows that she never stayed on the streets. However, she spent the majority of her three years of housing instability cycling between more stable living arrangements with her mom and juvenile detention (the first row) and more informal living arrangements such as couch surfing with friends and family at their places (including trap houses) and exchanging sex for shelter (all contained in the second row). We also see that Natalie never stayed in shelters (the third row) or on the streets (the fourth row). Not staying in shelters was a characteristic Natalie shared with Walla Walla County participants; most youth did not stay in shelters as they were scarce. But Natalie differed from Walla Walla County participants in that she had no experiences of staying on the streets. The vast majority of Walla Walla County participants reported staying on the streets (85%) at a rate much higher than all other IDI sites (67%).

Figure 16. Trajectory of Natalie across Levels of Homelessness



- Structural
- Peer/Familial
- Individual

Natalie

17 Walla Walla County Female White 100% Straight

Understanding Natalie's Trajectory

The critical conditions present in Natalie's story provide insight into her needs at each critical point of her housing trajectory, what gaps existed, and what types of interventions may have been implemented to prevent Natalie's movement into homelessness. For example, supports and interventions targeting family and individual struggles with mental health earlier in Natalie's life may have prevented Natalie and her mother from turning to the use of methamphetamines to cope with Natalie's father's decision to leave the family. Addressing these struggles may also have provided Natalie with better support to stay in school, forgo her warrant for her arrest for truancy in school, and avoid juvenile detention all together.

Natalie's story represents a number of characteristics that are unique to Walla Walla County and distinguish it from other IDI sites. The presence of drugs in Natalie's story, particularly methamphetamines, is a characteristic she shared with the majority of Walla Walla interview participants. Of the 41 interview participants in Walla Walla County, 11 youth (27%) discussed using meth, seven (17%) discussed their parent or family member using it, and eight (20%) discussed both personal and family use. Additionally, nearly twice as many Walla Walla County participants (29%) reported currently receiving services for drug/alcohol treatment as the full IDI sample (16%).

Natalie's use of trap houses as a place to couch surf was also a common experience among multiple interview participants in Walla Walla. The pervasive use of trap houses in general was unique to Walla Walla County; youth at other IDI sites rarely, if ever, mentioned trap houses. Of the 41 Walla Walla youth who participated in an interview, 38 (93%) reported couch surfing and of those who couch surfed, 16 (42%) stayed in trap houses run by family, friends, or acquaintances. This may, in part, be a feature of rural homelessness, when there are limited formal services for homeless youth. This was certainly the case in Walla Walla County.

Walla Walla County participants reported greater involvement in the juvenile justice system than other IDI sites. Natalie's frequent stays in juvenile hall reflect this trend. Approximately 68% of Walla Walla youth reported involvement in the justice system whereas only 48% of the full IDI sample reported such involvement. One reason for Natalie's arrest was for her truancy in school—a factor stemming from Washington State's truancy law known as the Becca Bill. Legislation has since been passed to diminish the harsh consequences for missing school, but the prior strict truancy laws may be a contributing factor to some of the Walla Walla County participants' greater involvement in juvenile justice.

The Story of “Dilinger”

Dilinger self-identified as a 19-year-old heterosexual African American male, born and raised entirely in Cook County, Illinois. His early years were idyllic- he played soccer, had good friends, and enjoyed school. Yet a prevalent theme of loss characterized Dilinger’s teen years, leading to his housing instability. His parents had a strained relationship with each other, plagued by drugs and mental illness; his paternal grandparents raised him. His grandmother passed away when he was 15 and his grandfather shortly thereafter. Dilinger moved from south Chicago to the Cook County suburbs to live with his father. Two years later, his father was arrested on drug charges and died soon thereafter. At 17, Dilinger moved back to Chicago to live with his mother for the first time since he was a toddler.

The next year of his life was chaotic. He described a cycle of being kicked out by his mother and the police bringing him home, just to be kicked out again days later. Dilinger said it was because he was too much like his father—he was loud like his father, he looked just like him, and his mother resented him for it. He also began dating a transgender woman who was transitioning, a relationship his mother said was “disgusting.” She kicked Dilinger out for good once he turned 18. Although their time together was characterized by conflict and verbal abuse, he was hopeful that he and his mother could one day repair their relationship.

He says of this hope, *“Maybe a few years down, when I’m older, more grown manly-ish, we can sit down, have a cup of tea, talk about it. But, as of now, she’s not helping me, she’s not supportive, she completely cut me OFF and she dipped out on me. So, it’s nothing really I can do.”*

With few places to turn, and most biological family members having passed on, Dilinger couch surfed. He lived briefly with his stepsister’s father. He stayed with friends from high school for as long as he was welcomed. He befriended a deacon of a local church and lived with him for about two months. Dilinger was forced to find other living arrangements once the deacon married. He learned where to find free meals, provided by churches or local nonprofits. He finally made his way to a shelter for homeless young adults. Organization staff helped him obtain food stamps, a Medicaid card for health care, and a public transit pass. Through all of this, he remained employed part time and hopeful that his housing instability was a temporary setback. He readily accepted all assistance from service providers and attributes his optimistic disposition to his strong religious foundation.

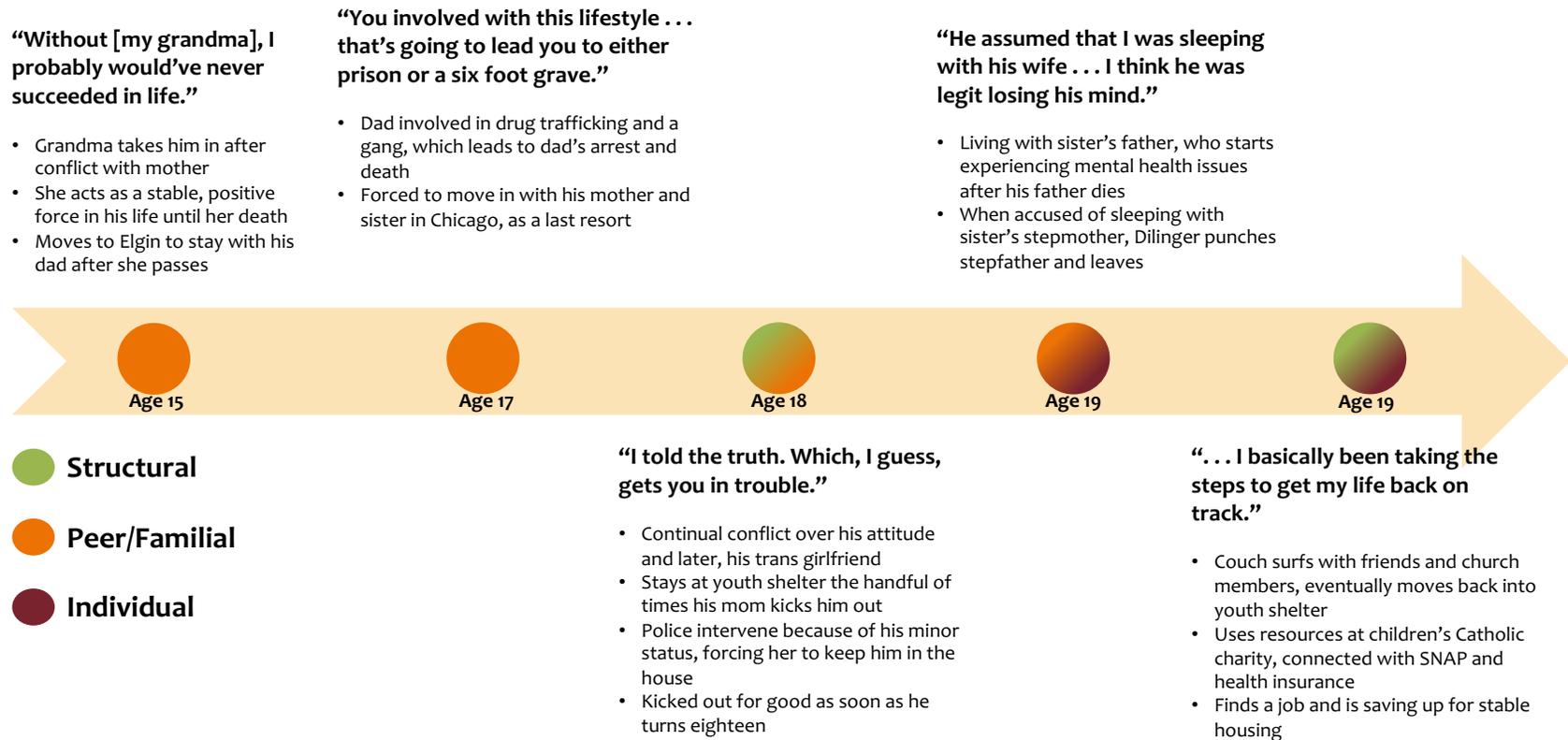
At the time of his interview, he was working on securing more living-wage work and a permanent housing location. As he reflected on his life, he exclaimed, *“Remember the fact that, I’ve kept up with the promises I’ve made. I made sure to fulfill everything that my grandmother wanted me to do, my father wanted me to do, and my grandfather wanted me to do. And that. . . this experience is gonna make me a better person than a lot of people in the world.”*

Dilinger's Timeline of Housing Instability

Like Natalie, whose story we described earlier, Dilinger's timeline also begins with the age and moment he identified as the beginning of his housing instability (see Figure 17). At age 15, Dilinger's grandmother passed away and he moved in with his father. The first circle in his timeline is colored orange to represent that it was his family context that first led him to become homeless. The second circle in Dilinger's critical conditions trajectory is orange as well, indicating that family instability continued with the passing of his father and Dilinger moving in with his mother and sister. The third circle is a blend of orange (family) and green (structural) to indicate the continued conflict between Dilinger and his mother and police intervention in his life. This circle also depicts being kicked out of his mother's house for good at age 18. The fourth circle is a blend of orange (family) and red (individual) to depict the turbulent time he spent couch surfing with distant family members. The final circle in Dilinger's trajectory is both green (structural) and red (individual) to indicate the heavy presence of service providers and receipt of government benefits in his life, as well as his personal ability to work and save for stable housing.

Figure 17. Dilinger’s Trajectory and Critical Conditions of Housing Instability

“Dilinger” from Cook

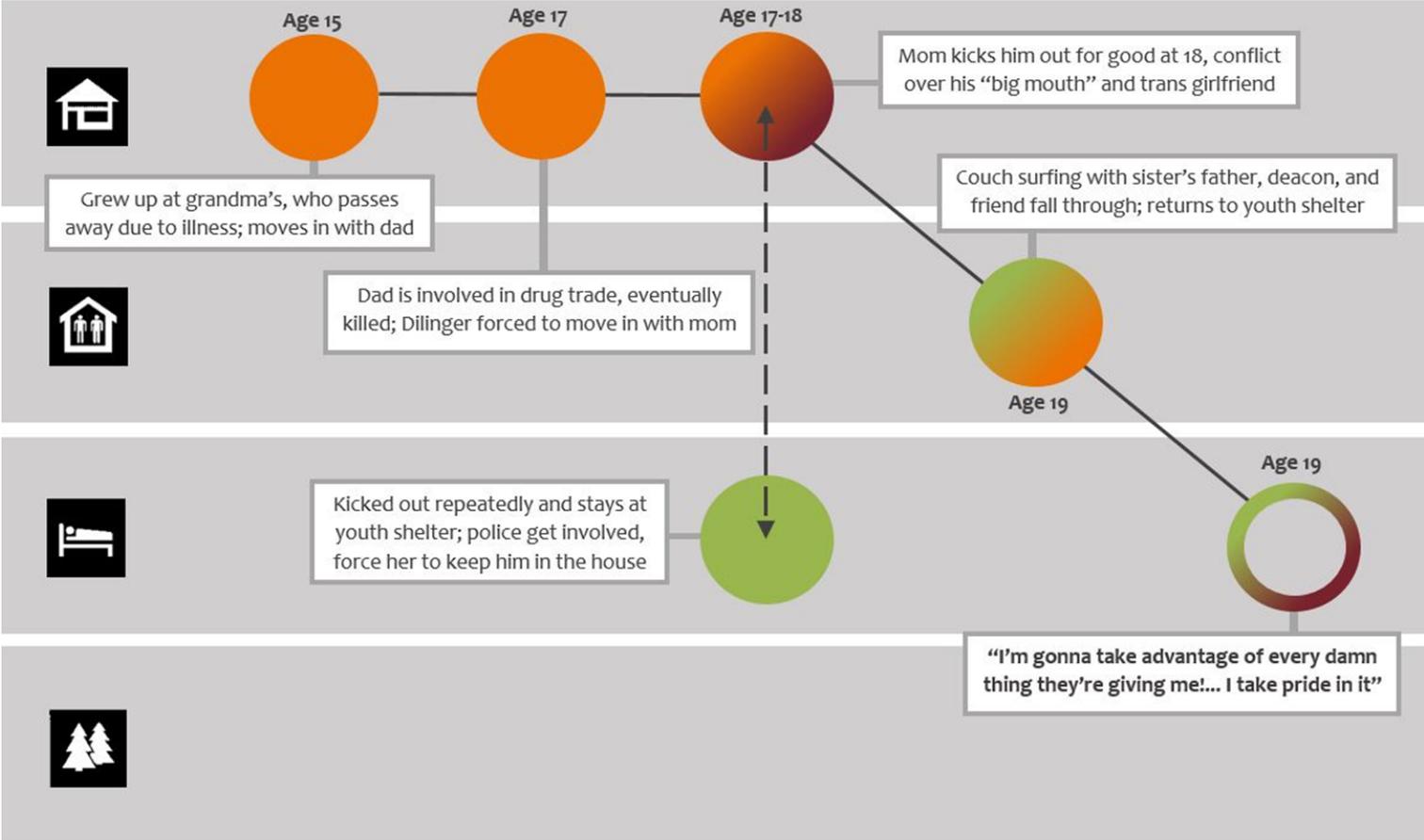


Dilinger: Trajectory Across Four Levels of Instability

When studying Dilinger's trajectory across levels of instability (see Figure 18), we see that he never stayed on the streets. However, the first row of the figure shows he spent the majority of his four years of housing instability rotating between insecure living situations with his father and with his mother (after his father dies). The solid line depicts a lasting, one-way move. Once he turned 17, he endured a cycle of being kicked out of his mother's house, living at a youth shelter, and moving back in with his mother (the third row). The dotted line depicts the back-and-forth nature of this housing situation. Once he is kicked out for good, he couch surfs with people (the second row), until finally landing once again at a youth shelter at 19 years old (the third row).

The death of a caregiver was a characteristic Dilinger shared with other Cook County participants. Forty-five percent of those interviewed reported that the death of a caregiver was the beginning of their housing instability. His homelessness also matches with 50% of his fellow Cook County participants in that it began in late adolescence (age 18). Finally, Dilinger was representative of the larger Cook County sample in that he reported no involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice/criminal justice systems (as did 62.5% of Cook County youth, for each system).

Figure 18. Trajectory of Dilinger across Levels of Homelessness



- Structural
- Peer/Familial
- Individual

Dilinger

19 Cook County Male Black/African American 100% Straight

Understanding Dilinger's Story

Dilinger's trajectory of housing instability was indicative of both the larger IDI sample and Cook County participants in several ways. First, Cook County represented the highest rate of youth experiencing parental death (45%). Like Dilinger, many of these youth, both in Cook County and in the larger sample, identified this as critical to their housing instability. We are missing opportunities in identifying and assisting these families and young people as they grieve their loved ones and seek secure and safe housing in the wake of these critical losses. Unfortunately, many youth also experience pronounced instabilities following the death of a parent or of a key matriarch whose house provided refuge and stability for many generations in their families. Had Dilinger's family received such supports, they may have been able to retain stable housing.

Dilinger is also representative of other youth in our study in that he experienced adolescent onset of his first spell of unaccompanied homelessness. Fifty-four percent of IDI participants indicated that they were between the ages of 16 and 18 when they were first without a place to stay. Roughly one-third of both Cook County youth and the IDI participants overall reported being currently employed in work that provided formal pay. Although they are a minority, Dilinger represents youth who were able to access formal employment.

Dilinger, like 56% of other youth in our larger sample, reported no experience with the foster care system. His lack of juvenile/criminal justice system involvement sets him apart from the 49% of IDI youth who indicated this history.

Finally, similar to youth in Cook County and in the larger sample, Dilinger experienced stigma and discrimination within his family. In his case, it was tied to his assumed sexual orientation. Though he identified in our study as "100% heterosexual," dating a transgendered person who is transitioning from male to female causes his mother to stigmatize the relationship. And while this did not immediately cause him to be kicked out, given a relationship already rife with conflict, it did lead his mother to evict him from home on his 18th birthday.

Couch surfing (95%) and staying in shelter or transitional housing (95%) were the most common outcomes for Cook County youth. Cook County youth reported lower levels of staying on the streets (63%) than other youth. This is in stark contrast to Natalie's trajectories and speaks to the availability of shelters and transitional living spaces in the city of Chicago and greater Cook County. However, given that the VoYC team identified 862 homeless or unstably housed young people during Cook County's Point-in-Time Count, more will need to be done (with regards to homeless youth services) to provide these youth with safe shelter if they are to be less reliant on precarious housing situations.

Engagement with Services, Resources, and Supports

This section explores the services youth report using, the people that connect them to specific resources, and their logics for engaging or rejecting available resources, both formal and informal. This section draws from both the survey and narrative interview data. We conclude this section by exploring youth logics of engaging resources and some of the hidden factors that often inform why youth may not use some resources that are available to them.

Survey Responses Reporting Use of Services

Young people were asked about their lifetime use of services as well as government benefits. This section reports those findings. Based on our survey data, participants in the IDI reported receiving mental health services (38%) more than any other category (see Table 4). A substantial number of young people (44%) indicated that they had not used any of the surveyed services.

Table 4. Reasons for Service Receipt

(N = 211)*	#	%
Physical disability or developmental disability	19	9.0
Alcohol or drug use	33	15.6
HIV/AIDS and related health issues	5	2.4
Mental health	81	38.4
None of the above	92	43.6

*Participants could select multiple responses.

We also asked youth about a select number of government benefits. Among government benefits available, food stamps (63%) were the most commonly used, followed by Medicaid (33.5%) and WIC (16%; see Table 5). There were no youth in our study who had a history of military service. Therefore, young people were not eligible for veteran benefits. Only four young people indicated ever receiving disability insurance (SSDI).

Table 5. Receipt of Government Benefits

(N = 203)*	Currently receiving		Ever received	
	#	%	#	%
Food stamps/SNAP	90	44.3	128	63.1
TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)	8	3.9	17	8.4
Medicaid	48	23.6	68	33.5
State Children's Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP)	3	1.5	7	3.4
WIC	21	10.3	32	15.8
Housing assistance (Section 8 voucher, public housing)	6	3.0	16	7.9
Supplemental Security Income (SSI)	11	5.4	16	7.9
Social security survivor's benefits	2	1.0	7	3.4
Social security disability insurance (SSDI)	2	1.0	4	1.9
Unemployment insurance or worker's compensation	0	0.0	2	1.0
Veteran's benefits	0	0.0	0	0.0

*Participants could select multiple responses.

We also asked if young people had received services through school. Over half (58%) indicated receiving subsidized lunch. The next most frequent support received was transportation (44.5%).

Table 6. Receipt of School Benefits

(N = 211)*	#	%
Free or reduced-price lunch	123	58.3
Transportation services	94	44.5
Food vouchers	17	8.1

*Participants could select multiple responses.

How do Youth Learn about Local Services and Resources?

Throughout the narrative interviews, youth shared who connected them to services. We conducted an analysis of their answers. Friends, peers, and social service providers were overwhelmingly the most frequently named sources of information about local resources (see Figure 19). Typically, youth learned about shelters, employment, and health care from professionals, and about informal housing options from friends and peers.

Figure 19. Sources of Resource Referrals

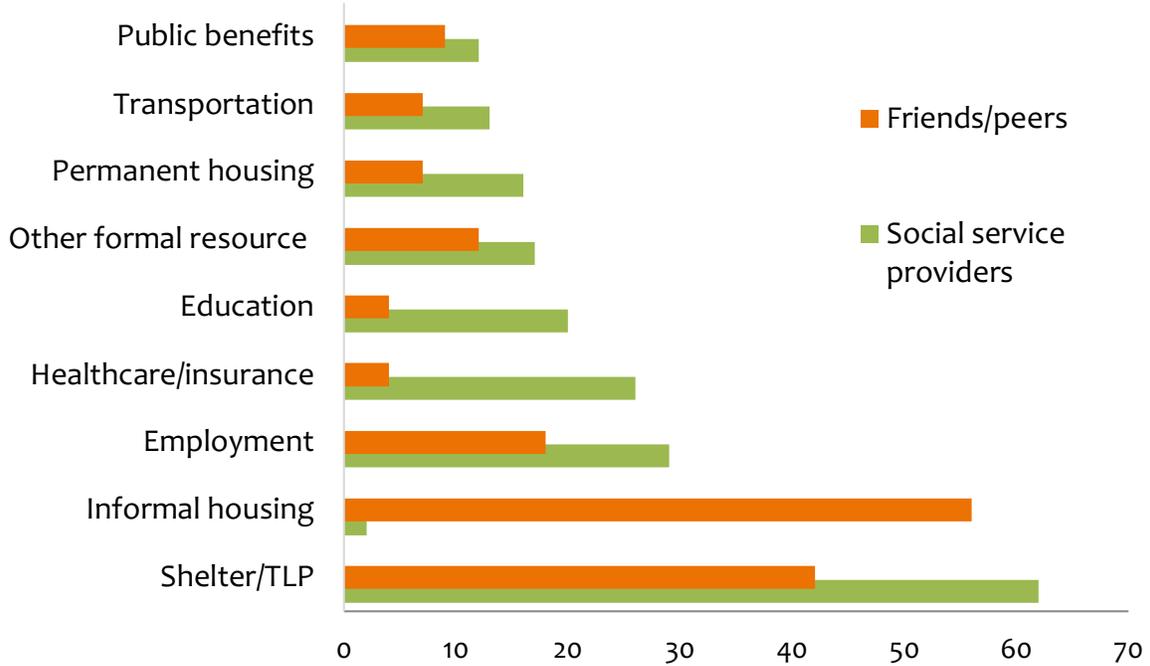
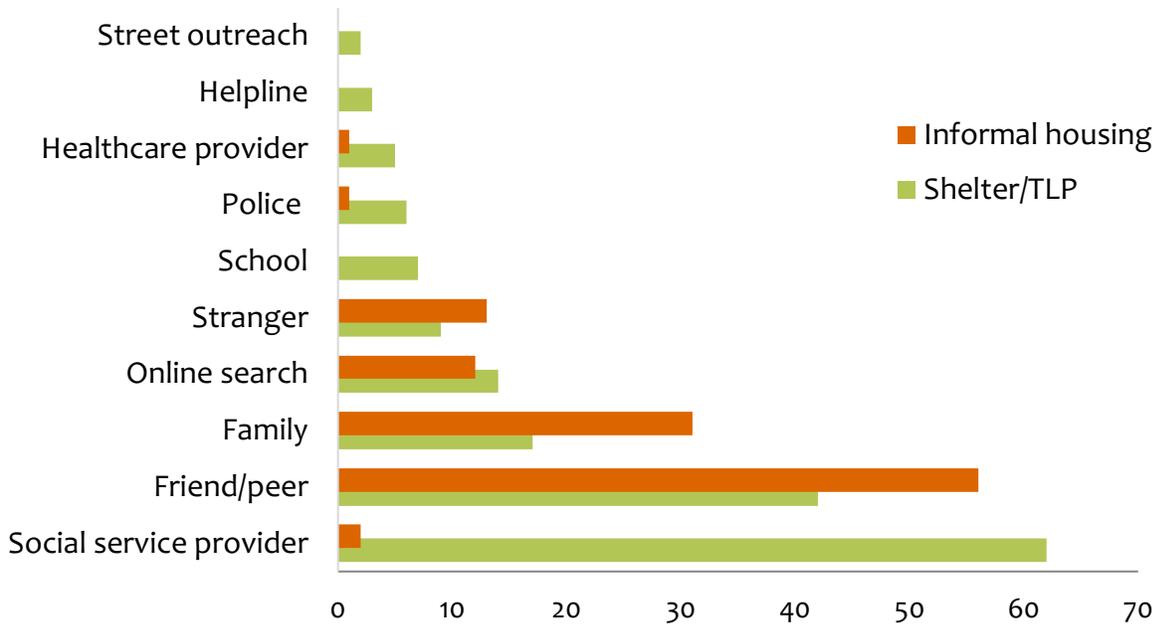


Figure 20 shows who facilitated youth’s awareness of different forms of housing resources. Overwhelmingly, professionals and peers, followed by family and online searches, are the most often named as connectors to housing. Youth were least likely to name public advertising and street outreach, and helplines as their portal to housing services.

Figure 20. Facilitators of Awareness and Access to Housing



Youth Logics of Engagement with Resources

I didn't enroll in a shelter. I had too much pride. I just slept on the streets. . . **Angel, Travis County**

I've never tried to find anyone as a support because people have their own agendas and I understand that and I can do things alone. **Kyle, San Diego County**

Never depend on nobody. . . . Basically. . . I'm on my OWN. Just stay—just get on your own! **Paris, Cook County**

Like Kyle, Angel, and Paris above, youth sometimes rejected resources even when they were available. An important part of our analysis was to understand why. We refer to this decision-making process as “youth logics of engagement.” This analysis identifies three different styles of engagement (see Figure 21) and explores often hidden factors within this process (see Figure 22). We find youth logics are, understandably, shadowed by a heightened attunement to managing risk. For participants, risk was evaluated through the lens of their identities, accumulated lived experience, and sense of personal agency and independence.

As we present these findings, we emphasize throughout that these are not “types of youth” but rather patterns in the way they engaged a resource. Any individual youth may actually use all three of these styles (see Figure 21) or change styles over the course of their housing instability. We intentionally use the word resource to include both formal and informal sources and types of assistance. It is a term that does not assume its receipt is experienced by youth as supportive or as helpful. In this section, the term resource includes services from professionals (e.g., counseling, shelters/housing, schools, health care) as well as resources from informal social network members like friends and family (e.g., housing, emotional support, money).

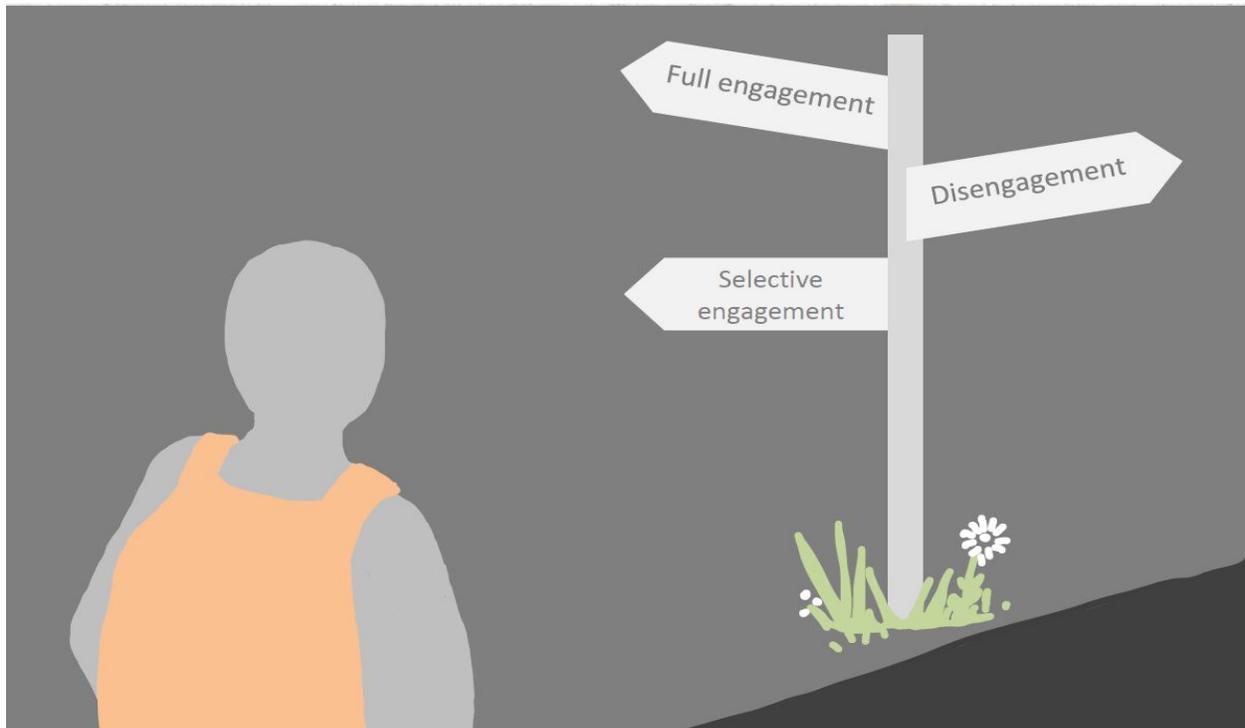
As youth contemplated the available resources in their local and social environments (see Figure 21), they faced difficult choices about using them. This section defines the three patterns in how participants engaged resources. We then unpack these styles, using case examples, to understand the factors informing their choices and behaviors (Figure 22).

Patterns of Engagement

Full Engagement. Sometimes youth described deeply immersing themselves within an array of resources, rotating across different agencies. Other youth attached themselves (when available) to a single agency that provided many services. Youth who exercised both patterns with formal services often described themselves as open to help seeking and people in general. Sometimes full engagement was tied to exclusively relying on one's

informal network (i.e., family, friends, nonprofessionals), decreasing the need to rely on formal sources of support (i.e., agencies, shelters). Other times youth would proclaim loyal attachments to a particular agency or organization and make use of all of their resources.

Figure 21. Three Youth Engagement Styles



Disengagement. Sometimes youth rejected certain services or resources. When youth reported this style, they often referenced past experiences of service systems (or their family systems) that left them less open to, or trusting of, help seeking/receiving in general. This was the only pattern of engagement that some youth used exclusively and fully disengaged from all resources (formal and informal). The quotes from Kyle, Paris, and Angel above are examples of this. In these cases, young people only used resources when externally forced to, due to harsh weather, an arrest, a pregnancy, or because their literal survival depended upon it. Often these patterns were explained by youth reporting high degrees of self-reliance, blaming their own pride or insistence on doing things independently or “on my own.” This perception of risk to one’s personal agency seemed to be a powerful driver behind their insistence on avoiding using resources.

Selective engagement. Selective engagement was by far the most common style of engaging. Selective engagement refers to a pattern of using specific criteria or conditions to engage or disengage on a case-by-case basis. This resulted in either selectively engaging an array of formal or informal services or being selective within a category (e.g., shelters) in choosing one resource over another. For example, sometimes youth might only go to a

particular shelter if it specifically served LGBTQA youth, or only if important relationships could be retained or preserved (e.g., shelter allows baby to stay with them, or will also accept a partner or friend). When these conditions were not met, youth rejected the resource, often choosing to stay on the streets instead.

The following section will explore how these engagement patterns were deeply informed by three underlying factors: identity protection, accumulated lived experience, and personal agency (i.e., sense of independence and autonomy). These factors shaped youths' perceptions of the gains and risks of engaging the actual resources in their environments.

Risk Management: The Role of Identity, Experience, and Personal Agency

I mean anything is better than being out on the street. But if it's not geared for LGBT people, I can't do it. Cause I'm just—uh—I just can't not be myself.

- **London, Philadelphia County, selectively engages shelters**

I just wanted to stay out on the street 'cuz I don't trust people and everybody.

- **Selena, Walla Walla County, generally disengages from all formal resources**

I'm gonna take advantage of every damn thing they're giving me! I'm gonna use it.

- **Dilinger, Cook County, fully engaged with local provider agency**

... My mom raised me to take nothing and that nothing is for free.

- **D, San Diego County, disengages all formal and informal resources**

As youth considered their available options and access to resources, their decision-making processes were overshadowed by a need to manage risk against the gains (see Figure 22). As the quotes above indicate, youth varied in how they made meaning of and weighed the possible risks. Due to prior systems involvement—or simply an accumulated lived experience with housing instability—all young people in our study had, to varying degrees, prior experiences of receiving or being offered assistance from peers, adults, and/or professionals. Participants also shared a history of navigating complex and chronically stressed or even toxic relationships with parents or adult family members. Understandably, most remained leery of the hidden or explicit costs of receiving “help.” If someone offers a place to stay, what will they want in exchange? Was returning home to a parent addicted to drugs, or whose boyfriend is homophobic, riskier than sleeping on the streets? Was disclosing one's homelessness to a teacher worth risking a call to child protective services? These were among the commonly articulated risks that young people mentioned as they considered making use of a resource.

Just as youth differed in weighing the possible risks against the gains, so too did they vary in their individual degrees of openness to a resource, and to help in general. Not all youth had

to navigate the same kinds of risks. This analysis identified three factors that youth commonly articulated across all interviews and that shaped their assessments of risks and gains of engaging resources: identity protection, past experience, and personal agency.

Identity Protection. While all youth had identities that mattered to them, some youth held identities that they felt needed extra protection. This was overwhelmingly true for the youth in our study who identified as gender minorities (transgender youth), and as sexual minorities—in particular youth who identified as gay or lesbian. As London’s quote earlier illustrates, an agency’s reputation for being a safe space for “LGBT people” was often a filter through which they assessed risk versus gains. Some of the vignettes below will highlight the ways in which youth weighed the risks and gains through the lens of a stigmatized, marginalized, or discredited identity.

Accumulated Experience. Despite their young ages, youth also had acquired lived experiences that factored significantly into how they perceived the risk or gains attached to the people and resources in their environments. The emotional and relational residue, both positive and negative, that these lived experiences left behind were important reference points for young people. Specifically, they contributed to a youth’s level of openness or trust. For some—like Selena, above, who self-describes as distrustful of “people and everybody”—this often shaped reticence to fully engage anyone. Yet there are also examples of youth, like Dilinger, who, despite equally challenging lived experience, remained open to the potential gains from using resources. In the vignettes below, youth reference their accumulated experiences as they weigh the risks and benefits and explain why they rejected or used a resource.

Personal Agency. Finally, youth varied in their sense of personal agency—how one makes use of and understands their own power to act, resist, and create change in their external world. Again, for Dilinger, who remains open to resources, his personal agency contributes to, and is affirmed by, actively engaging those resources. This generates a corresponding positive experience. For others, like Selena, who are less open, it causes her to steadfastly avoid shelters and also avoid the risk she fears. Youth varied in the degree to which they believed their personal agency was threatened by receiving help and the degree to which their pride and independence would be at risk by engaging a particular resource.

In Figure 22, we intentionally locate these three factors—identity, experience, and personal agency—in the backpack of the young person. These factors were indeed carried around as part of their essential toolkit for navigating their housing instability; they were ever-present as youth weighed the gains against the looming risks of using resources. We recognize there are likely many other things youth carry with them as they move through their environments and assess risk and gain. These three, however, were the most frequently mentioned as our participants made meaning of their choices. Taken together, these factors fuel their logics of engagement. Three examples are presented below to illustrate how these factors show up in the logic of individual participants.

Figure 22. Youth Logics of Engagement through Risk Management



Putting it all together: Understanding Youth Logics of Engagement in Context

Jax: Disengages informal resources, selectively engages one formal service

Jax is an 18-year-old heterosexual male. Born in México, he and his family arrived to the U.S. undocumented. In addition to the strong confidence Jax exuded throughout his interview, his sense of autonomy and independence was further affirmed by the tattoo he proudly displayed, which read “TRUST NOBODY.” This extreme sense of personal agency paired with his general distrust of others has caused him to reject adoption and to turn down an educational opportunity. He said, “I just didn’t wanna depend on anybody no more and kind of just be independent.”

Yet, Jax has actually been independent most of his life; an accumulated lived experience of loss and sense of rejection shows up throughout his story. His mother abandoned the family when Jax was six. His father would often leave Jax and his older siblings alone for weeks at a time while he was away working. Then, when Jax was 12, his father was deported. Jax notes this is the same year he got his tattoo. Now parentless and undocumented in the U.S., Jax and his remaining brother spent most of their time fully disengaged from school to avoid being discovered. As the years went on, he and his brother began selling drugs to survive. Eventually, to avoid arrest, his brother ran away to México. By age 14, Jax was living alone in his family trailer. He said, *“It’s like my brother just kind of left out on me, and. . . it kind of hurt, you know?”* For a while he rotated between staying at the trailer, couch surfing at friends’, and living on the streets. Then one day a friend’s dad reached out and tried to convince Jax to help him find a job and get back into school. Jax refused. He expressed his own dismay as to why he rejected the resource, saying, *“To be honest, I didn’t—I didn’t—I don’t know! I don’t know why I never decided to go back, to be honest.”*

Later, a cousin reached out and invited Jax to come live with them and reenroll in high school. Jax explained that he again rejected this resource and big opportunity, *“It was weird, to be honest. . . . I was again. . . here I am I’m by myself. You know it was a big window. . . . I mean it was—it was big. It was something big, but I didn’t take it.”* Months later, exhausted by surviving on his own, he moved to a small nearby town to work. Instead, he used what money he had to buy drugs and alcohol in order to commit suicide by overdosing, *“I tried killing myself, I’m not gonna lie to you, yeah I did. . . . I was done. . . I just didn’t see no point in life no more. . . I didn’t feel happy. . . I didn’t see why God took everything from me like that.”* Police eventually discovered Jax and took him to the hospital. Once stable, he entered foster care. While the case plan was to obtain his paperwork for citizenship, Jax believes the paperwork fell through the cracks after his caseworker left. While in foster care, when Jax was 16 years old, his foster parents offered to adopt him. Jax also rejected this. He said, *“They were good foster parents, there was nothing wrong with them. They wanted to adopt me hard. I’d be like, ‘no, no.’ . . . They tried a lot. I can’t really see why they want anybody else except me.”*

Despite this history of disengagement, strongly rooted in his own accumulated experiences of rejection, Jax is currently selectively engaged in a transitional living placement (TLP). He does this only because it preserves his relationship with his fiancé. It also protects his newly emerging identity as a father, as he explained, *“I don’t have family, you know, and I have my own family you know with my girl and our baby. . . no drug use, no alcohol use. Everything is good. She’s my happiness, you know?”* This selective engagement is made possible only because the TLP allows him to be in close contact with his fiancé, who lives in the same town in her own foster placement.

Jax also indicated that most of the staff affirm his emerging parent identity, *“They think I’m gonna be a really good father, so I mean I have like tons of books, I’m ready for this now. . . . I have people that talk down on me. . . but I tell them, ‘You never know you’re ready until it*

actually happens.” To prepare for fatherhood, Jax said he has read “eight books for babies and stuff, and I’m trying to prepare myself. . . and I had sympathy symptoms. I don’t know if you even know what that is. The sympathy symptoms—I’m the one that has the nausea and stuff like that!” Just as the tape recorder is turned off, he discloses happily that the name he has chosen to use as his own during this interview, “Jax,” is the name they plan to give the baby.

Brad: Disengages from most formal services, selectively engages informal networks

Brad identified as a white heterosexual male who currently lives in Walla Walla County, Washington. He began his story by naming parental struggles (mom’s addiction to methamphetamines) and family homelessness as the beginning of his own instability. “I lost my place when I was seventeen with my mom. . . my mom got really bad into drugs and so we were just kinda just bouncing from uh, you know, tweaker houses to park benches. . .” Before he and his mom experienced homelessness, Brad and his younger brother were removed from their mother’s care when she “called the system on herself. She called CPS and told them that she couldn’t take care of me or my brother anymore. . . she was on a bunch of medications. . . She wasn’t mentally stable. . .” Brad cycled through five placements during his time in foster care and ultimately, he was returned home. His brother is currently still in foster care out of state. As he looks back over his childhood, despite experiencing abuse in one of his placements, Brad notes foster care as mostly a positive experience that gave him a respite from his mom’s struggles with addiction and allowed him to re-engage with school. But when he returned home to his mom, she relapsed into drug use, and their ultimate homelessness also resulted in his dropping out of school.

At 16, Brad experienced a whirlwind of life transitions. He re-entered high school, re-engaged with his father, and himself became a father. For a short while, Brad and the baby’s mother lived together at his mom’s house with their baby. But then his maternal grandmother died and this caused his own mother to spiral downward. Brad said, “Her whole demeanor changed, you could just tell she wasn’t. . . even there mentally. She started getting really depressed, started cutting herself really bad. . . I’d come home and she’d be in the bathroom in like the bathtub. . . passed out and there’d just be the whole—the whole—the whole bathtub would just be red. . . I didn’t know what to do.”

When asked if he ever reached out for help, Brad explained he was afraid that the risk would outweigh the gain, “I was always afraid to tell anybody because I didn’t wanna—I didn’t want my mom to you know, get in trouble or have—have somebody come in and take her to like some facility or something.” Brad also explained that his negative past experiences with counseling services in foster care made him doubt the gains of seeking help for himself would be worth it. He said, “But on top of that my—my counselors never really lasted. It was more, it was more their budgets. You know, they’d be like, ‘Oh well, this is our last appointment cause we’re no longer being paid for it.’ And then at that point I’d just realize, ‘Oh yeah, it’s all about money so I don’t really want to sit and talk to you anyways.’”

When asked how or where he now gets support or what helps him to survive, Brad replied he mainly copes on his own by using distractions, *“I think about all the shit that I’ve been through. . . I’ve never wanted to end my life. But. . . I would you know I’d sit and pity myself sometimes. . . . I don’t know what the hell I’m doing here. . . what my purpose is or why I’m even still here right now. . . . It’s when I’m alone that it starts getting bad like that so I always try to keep myself occupied. I’m always trying to like hang out with somebody or do something...”*

At the time of our interview, Brad was still connected to his dad, and his dad’s girlfriend had hired him to work in her seasonal landscaping business. He refers to her as not only his boss but also a mentor. She has helped him to get his ID and re-engage in school to complete his GED. He is expecting another baby with his current girlfriend, but is estranged from his first daughter who was removed and placed into foster care with the maternal grandmother.

Brad is still unstably housed and still has some nights on the streets. He makes selective use of a local church’s meals and their health services and sometimes goes to the hospital for “panic attacks.” He is ambivalent about ending his homelessness and talks at length about its benefits—including allowing him to develop a lifestyle of not feeling “confined” and a sense of unbridled freedom and autonomy that he “liked too much.” He now thinks this is problematic, in part because *“there’s a lot of stigma with homeless people. . . . It kinda sucks because. . . they don’t see each person as themselves.”* While he appreciates the stability of times when he has been housed, he explained being stable includes risks to his own independence and feeling of autonomy. Brad said, *“It took me a little while to transition into not being homeless again. . . I felt confined when I lived in a place. . . I don’t wanna be in a house, you know? Like what the hell is this?! But then I got used to it again and like now I can kinda see it from both—both angles.”* Brad’s personal agency also causes him to reject formal housing services as a critical resource to support his stability. Instead, he asserts the key to ending his, and other youth’s, homelessness is individual effort and will, saying, *“I think to achieve the stability you would. . . need to want it.”*

Jamal: Full engagement with formal services, selective engagement with informal networks

Jamal is a 21-year-old African American male living in Philadelphia County. Jamal begins his story of instability when he first came out as gay at the age of 14. But this early family awareness of his identity brewed in his extended family for three years until it resulted in Jamal’s first episode of unaccompanied homelessness at age 17. Jamal was never kicked out for being gay, but he left a home that was certainly a source of stigma and discrimination because of this identity. As Jamal recalls,

My mom, when she found out that I was gay, she didn’t really have a big problem with it. She did accept me, took me in, like with open arms. My dad, he was a little on edge about it, but he finally came around. But um my older brothers and like my grandmother were. . .

against it. . . My grandma she would claim it was a phase or. . . it was like a disgrace or disgust to her. My brother. . . one of my older brothers when he found out, [pauses] he stopped speaking to me.

As Jamal speaks of this three-year period, the emotional and literal cutoffs from his grandmother and brothers made Jamal feel like he no longer had a home. He says these years were like “hell.” From the ages of 15 through 17, in attempts to protect his identity, Jamal cycled between couch surfing at a cousin’s house and living with his grandma (where his mother and siblings also live). But when his cousin died, Jamal, now 17, was forced to live full time with his grandmother. Unaware of local resources, he left home to couch surf with a friend to avoid the “hell” he was enduring in his grandmother’s home.

Eventually, he came out to this friend and told him he is gay. This friend then told him about a local agency that serves LGBTQA unstably housed youth. Jamal was elated to discover this resource, saying, *“I went and I had fun. Then I kept going back and I kept going back and it was like before you knew—[snaps fingers]—years and years came.”* In finding a safe space that affirmed an identity that was unprotected in his own home, he says, *“I gained family and friends there. . . I’d rather see them more than my friends, my brother’s friends, and him any day!”* After this awareness, he fully engaged with and trusted this provider and made use of all of their resources, *“They gave me resources and staff to talk to. . . [names staff at agency] was real kind in really helping me out. And she still helps me out. . . to this day.”*

As Jamal spent less and less time at his grandmothers and more time couch surfing and at shelters, he continued to think of his mother as a support system. However, his mother can only provide limited emotional support as she remains in the grandmother’s house. She insists, and he accepts, that he is welcomed there. Jamal said, *“One thing about my mom was like, whenever we was there, my mom wasn’t like. . . ‘I don’t want gays in my house’ and stuff like that. She was very inviting. My mom used to always tell me if I ever had a boyfriend or a friend. . . and I wanted them to come over, she’d rather us be there in the house safe than to be out any other place that is unsafe.”* When asked how she reacted to Jamal’s choices to stay elsewhere, in places he indeed felt safer than at his grandmother’s, Jamal said, *“I think that she felt that as though I was older now. And maybe I needed to find my way.”* With Jamal’s continued accumulated positive experience with the provider, he is now fully engaged with other services that are not specifically targeting LGBTQA youth.

After graduating from high school, he engaged with job training and placement services at another agency and sought transitional housing resources as well. At the time of his interview, Jamal had just learned he was accepted to a transitional living program and was already working three part-time jobs. He particularly found meaning in one of his jobs where he provided assistance to persons with disabilities and special needs, *“That’s one of my greatest joys, like to help people. . . if I was helping other peoples’ family members, um and making them happy, I was happy.”* Jamal is also engaged in therapy sessions and is completing a life skills course.

With an offer to live with a friend who is also transitioning out of homelessness, he is leery of living with a roommate and is curious about the added benefits of living on his own. With past experience living in tight quarters with his brothers and his grandmother, he worried that the friends of this potential roommate could be problematic. His friend may not pay the bills. Plus, *“then there’s turmoil in the house. Or either something goes missing, something gets broke. . . So I say, and I used to tell myself all the time, if I was to live by myself, I’d rather. . . I know that if I left my house and I washed all the dishes when I come back, there will be no dishes in the sink.”* As Jamal ended his interview, he expressed his strong personal agency paired with openness to make change in his life. He offered the following wisdom to other youth who might be going through similar struggles: *“And regardless of anything that may come your way, you still have the ability to fight it. Like whether it’s with help by yourself, with friends, family, coworkers, like anything. . . know that there’s someone out here. . . that can relate to you. So you’re never in this world alone by yourself going through just one thing by yourself. . . never give up trying to make a better you.”*

Summary

This section examined the ways in which young people make decisions about engaging the resources available to them. When young people had an identity that needed nurturing and protecting, that reality helped to illuminate a unique set of risks and gains. For Jamal as a young gay man and Jax as a young father, they each found a resource where those identities could grow and develop. This also gave them access to important relationships with others who validated those identities. These factors were critical gains in their choices to engage, and then stay engaged, with a service provider.

While all three young people had accumulated experiences with formal resources, Brad was the most disengaged from, and least open to, formal services. He only goes to churches and the hospital to survive. His negative experiences of service providers in counseling as “about the money” and not about helping only reinforced his doubt about any gains from seeking out formal services. He was left to make use of the limited informal support through his dad and stepmom, and was consequently cut off from having any counter/positive experiences with service providers. Jax’s undocumented status resulted in limited access to formal resources until he entered foster care. While this was a mixed experience, his history of rejection in his family of origin colored his own interpretation of the risks and gains presented by the potential adoptive family as a trusted resource. Thus, he rejected it. Jamal is the only one of the three who lacked a childhood experience with formal services. His first contact, through his friend, was exclusively positive and quite transformative. As he accumulated this new experience, it only fueled deeper levels of engagement with service providers.

All three of these young people clearly have a sense of personal agency. Jamal left his family home at 17 convinced of a better, more nurturing place. However, he still affirms his openness and belief that others can be helpful and supportive. He unquestionably trusted

the original provider who then acts as a portal to other services. Jax, with a “TRUST NOBODY” tattoo, and Brad also exuded a strong sense of personal agency. But unlike Jamal, Brad and Jax’s personal agency manifests as extreme self-reliance. Time and again Jax disengages the informal resources in his social network. His experience of being abandoned and let down potentially contributes to his rejection of the occasional informal resources that have come from the few positive adults in his life. They are too risky. This heightens the critical importance of his only informal resource, his fiancé and future child. Similarly, Brad rejects formal services and still wrestles with the attraction of the freedom and unconfined lifestyle gained from homelessness; it is affirming to his sense of independence and self-reliance. His sole support, like Jamal’s, comes from a small subsystem of his family: his dad and stepmom.

Ending Homelessness: Youth Perspectives and Advice

*It’s taken me and my mom like a lot of like processing and a lot of like honestly, just staying away from each other and just thinking about everything that happened and like everything that I went through growing up and for her to realize like, I was valid, like I was validated you know. I meant something. **Antonio, Cook County***

*I’m changing. . . I’m getting my education back. I’m getting back on track. I’m about to get my housing soon like I’m working on myself. I focus on me! **Crystal, Philadelphia County***

*I plan on making a change. I’m gon’ be happy more, I’mma look good. I’mma have my own place and ain’t gon be depending on nobody. I’m just depend on myself. I’mma go to church and I’mma forgive and forget as in my family. And be a grown woman making grown moves. **Bianca, Cook County***

Just as the in-depth interviews began across all five sites with the same question (“Where does your story begin?”), every interview concluded with the counter question: “What would it take to achieve stability?” The multisystem factors shaping the critical condition trajectories—individual, family, peer, and structural—once again show up as important considerations. All of the responses provided by participants highlight potential points of intervention (see Figure 23) and can be assigned to one or more system levels. They clustered around 5 major themes: (1) housing (structural); (2) jobs (structural and individual); (3) education (structural and individual); (4) informal support (individual, family, peer, and structural); and (5) personal changes (individual).

While “housing” appeared in nearly every response, the details provided by young people were more nuanced. The potential points of intervention were linked to other issues and were interconnected. Time-limited housing interventions such as shelters and transitional living programs often failed to provide youth with the feeling of stability. Given their often distal location from where youth lived and the difficulty of accessing affordable public transportation, these programs also created other barriers to stable job opportunities.

Other participants expressed concerns with finding housing that was within their price range, especially given the upfront costs of security deposits and first/last month's rent. Young people expressed the need for assistance in locating reliable housing options that they could afford alone and where landlords would not take advantage of them.

Young people also expressed the need for jobs that pay a living wage with stable, consistent hours. Many participants who were currently working noted that they failed to be assigned enough hours or a rate of pay that would enable them to afford stable, secure housing.

While the young people in this study were concerned with issues of safety, security, and basic needs, they also articulated a desire for higher education. They were aware that more education would help them achieve higher paying and more fulfilling employment. They wanted to pursue this. But they often faced a choice between work or education. Many were in some type of schooling (e.g., GED program, community college) and unable to work enough to support housing costs. These youth needed financial assistance to be able to complete their educational goals.

In addition to affordable housing, living wage jobs, and higher education, participants noted that they also needed to make personal changes to achieve stability. Some of these changes included learning better financial management and budgeting skills. Many of them acknowledged that they need to “mature” or “grow up” if they wanted to achieve their goals. However, they also stated that they wanted or needed professional counseling to make this a reality and to manage mental health conditions. Others added that they needed to “avoid drama” and peers who created a negative and counterproductive environment.

Finally, young people spoke at length of their need for more and better informal support systems. They wanted this support from people who they could trust, who would help them stay motivated, provide advice and mentorship, challenge them to continually improve themselves, and provide emotional support.

Figure 23 provides youths' voices on these potential points of intervention. Just as homelessness itself was not a single event for these young people, ending their homelessness must also include multiple key players and be contextualized within chronic conditions in their families, communities, and larger structural systems. Answers to, What would it take to achieve stability? clearly conveyed that structural supports—housing, jobs, and education—are critical foundations to ending the instability these youth face.

Figure 23. Youth Perspectives on Achieving Stability

POTENTIAL POINTS OF INTERVENTION

We asked youth "What would it take to achieve stability?"



AFFORDABLE and SAFE HOUSING

Housing, housing, housing

"... housing security would honestly be the biggest thing because I need to make sure that if I'm getting a house I can at least be in this house for up to a year."

-Libra, Philadelphia County

MORE SUPPORT

Young people need people

"Um, I would say really some guidance. I mean I'm pretty much a person who does everything on my own so, I mean, just guidance in the right direction and where to start it to find a place to live."

-Frank Castle, San Diego



STABLE EMPLOYMENT

A living wage is critical

"Um, getting a steady income, because Craigslist is nice and all, but it's not steady. Um, having a steady income, making sure my health is in good- in good condition so I don't wind up losing my place."

-Kitten, Travis County



NEED MORE EDUCATION

Knowledge is power

"I don't want anything getting in the way of my career. I do not want to close a door just to open another door, I want to keep this door open cause I know I can't go through 2 doors at once I would have to literally cut myself in half if I were to do that and that's gonna just make me more stress."

-Gemini, Cook County



Advice to Organizations to Help End Youth Homelessness

One of the key findings of this study is that it will take a village to end youth homelessness. Youth are not the sole actors in their stories, even when they feel completely alone or desire to be completely independent. There are many other key players that offer both critical supports and risks as they navigate their housing instability.

At the end of every interview, we asked participants, What would it take to achieve stability? Their answers, as outlined in the narrative and in Figure 23 above, may initially be taken as simple or uncomplicated responses—housing, jobs, support, and education. However, these remedies are multifaceted and dependent upon individual, family, peer, community, and structural change and contributions: the village.

The other concluding question to their interview was, What advice would you give to other youth experiencing instability? Many participants went beyond this question and shared additional advice to organizations that serve young people. The following quotes outline the three themes from their most common responses of advice to organizations: location, rethink outreach, and embrace LGBTQA youth.

Location, Location, Location

Youth want more resources in the neighborhoods where they live. When youth are required to travel long distances in order to engage with service providers, they compromise existing connections to school, jobs, and informal resources. Young people also advise organizations to provide more transportation support to maintain these connections and to compensate for lack of local resources.

If you noticed, majority of this stuff is in nice neighborhoods. I feel like they shouldn't be—it shouldn't matter what it is, you know, no matter what community it is. I just feel like, there should be, at least a resource center that people can go to, in their community.

- Leo, Cook County

But like sometimes I actually need a fuckin house to like, recuperate. I don't want to fucking go all the way up to Yakima to detox.

- Jesse, Walla Walla County

It should be programs out here that can give, like— if you see kids are like are trying to go to school or work or something, it should be programs that can be funded like to give them bus cards to help them

for the first month or something. Yeah, TRANSPORTATION, that's another, trans— for homeless people, transportation is a big issue.

- Jenna, Cook County

Rethinking Outreach

Youth are often connected to housing resources through friends and family, or through existing relationships with service providers. They also make use of social media and online resources. According to young people, service providers should rethink their outreach to include youth's social networks. Young people we interviewed first experienced homelessness at an average age of 16, so outreach should begin early and not be restricted to targeting currently homeless youth.

But homeless youth wasn't an issue um in my neighborhood, in my family, in my school. So there weren't any resources for me. I had to look for them.

- Leaf, Philadelphia County

Because . . . a lot of kids too just, you know, are too scared to speak out because they know that there's not gonna be, you know, a place to go. Um, so I think also like educating kids like you know going to schools and being like, "Hey," you know, "do you know anybody or yourself?" Like there is these programs, cause when I was, you know, I didn't know any of this.

- Denise, San Diego County

They have a lot of resources they have a lot of things um and they can really, really help but it's- people don't really know about them so I want um to spread the word and you have the name of the uh

program on there and that's the name of the program so just tell them come down to the school district they can ask anybody and they'll direct them right to that office.

- Alanna, Philadelphia County

I'm saying like it should be people that, you know, reach out to, you know, there should be somebody to go up to a homeless person, like talk to them, don't judge them. You know what I'm saying? Like get to know that person and try to, try to give them like, there should be like a set card already like, "Look, go to this place. They wanna help." It should be like that 'cause I had to look online.

- Lamar, Philadelphia County

As a matter of fact, food stamps most of my time I didn't even have until we got to California. Didn't know how to obtain them until then. They don't teach kids that. Which is something I think growing up as an adult I've learned that is really important to teach kids the resources they have in their states.

- Drakeo Raine, San Diego County

If I need something, I just Google it and go!

- Ciara, Cook County

Embrace LGBTQA Youth

The presence of resources and organizations that are welcoming and affirming to LGBTQA youth makes an enormous difference to young people's emotional well-being. However, all organizations should strive to be more welcoming to this population. LGBTQA young people in the IDI are a disproportionately overrepresented group and reported significantly higher rates of adversities. Identity protection within the logics of these young people was an important lens through which they assessed the risks and gains of engaging resources.

Uh, the fact that—it's hard being LGBT and being in foster care, cause a lot of times they don't want to have that possibility of having kids having sex with each other. You've gotta at least have some kind of understanding or some kind of tolerance for something like that.

- Ellie, Travis County

If the community was a lot more accepting—not just with like accepting as in like with my kind of people like, LGBT, but accepting as in just, you know, with people who are struggling with like—for instance like drug issues or just abusive parents or homeless.

- Dan, Walla Walla County

Why don't we—why—and that's another thing that kills me, why we don—why we only have one area, that LGBT people can hang out, that-that's supposed to be considered safe. WHY is it always gotta be up north? Why we can't take over no more areas? You feel what I'm saying?

- Laymore, Cook County

Having appropriate mental health care is so important. And there are so many therapists out there that are not educated at all on LGBT issues, and even if they are a little bit when it comes to trans or like gender identity related issues they're very, very, very uneducated. Um, and that's not just—that's coming from me and basically every single other trans person that I know and I've talked to have had, um negative, um, encounters with therapists or psychologists or psychiatrists.

- Jess, San Diego County

And so—but with [service provider] they prioritize LGBTQ you know, well-being, you know, and they welcome—they welcome allies into the space, but it's known that, you know, this is a place where if you're gonna be an ally you're gonna be an ally, if you try to get fierce here you will receive that fierceness ten-fold.

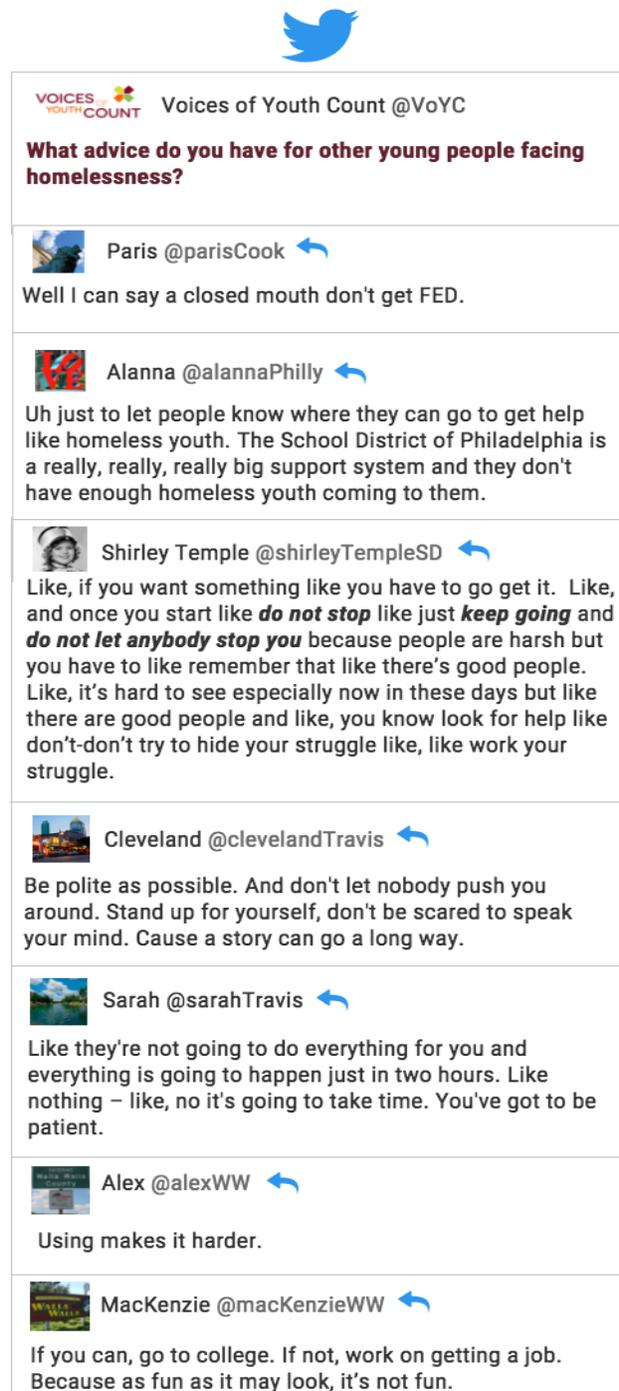
- Antonio, Cook County

Advice to Other Youth Experiencing Housing Instability

The participants of this study were the experts on their lives, and they were eager to share what they had learned from their life's circumstances. We present their advice to other young people experiencing homelessness in the form of a Twitter feed. While the study's participants were facing unstable housing, they were also keenly connected to social media, using it to find available housing, food pantry hours, and drop-in locations. Each one was a member of the millennial generation, and, as such, used social media whenever possible to stay connected to the larger community and to find resources. We acknowledge this method of engagement, and we present their advice to one another in their currency as tweets. Here we use their own chosen pseudonyms, and insert their actual quoted advice as they stated it during the interview (rather than converting it to twitter slang/lingo).

Contrary to the youth's own actions, many gave advice to reach out as much as possible and accept help from individuals and organizations that will provide it. They also advised youth to be prepared for the amount of work and time that goes into gaining housing stability—that they have to put in the hard work while maintaining a sense of themselves. Above all, youth advised their peers to never give up hope and that if they keep working, things will get better.

Figure 24. Advice to Youth Experiencing Instability



Discussion

In this report, we shared findings from in-depth interviews with 215 young people who are homeless and unstably housed within five of the 22 Voices of Youth Count partner sites. Those interviews included both a qualitative narrative timeline interview as well as a brief background survey. The purpose of the IDI was to provide a deep dive into youth perspectives on homelessness, the “why” behind their housing instability, and their own insights into the beginnings of homelessness. Our analysis also explored youth logics of engaging resources and the multilevel conditions critical to their trajectories of housing instability. We have also shared their advice and opinions about what it would take to end their housing instability. This section discusses some of the highlights of these findings and their significance for understanding unaccompanied youth homelessness.

Homelessness is not an event. The stories of young people in this study suggest that their first episodes of unaccompanied homelessness (typically in adolescence) were preceded by and contextualized within chronic conditions in their family systems, parents and communities. Even in cases where youth named an event (e.g., getting kicked out, running away), that event was linked to other, more chronic conditions of family stress, poverty, trauma, parental mental health, or a toxic family dynamic. Their instability was also shaped by the neighborhoods and communities in which it unfolded. For example, the stories of youth in Walla Walla County were deeply embedded in the larger economic struggles in their communities and resulting vulnerability to pervasive drug use and selling. Their increased use of the streets as a place to stay was a “choice” embedded in a larger reality of limited access to sparse or nonexistent formal resources in their immediate environments. For all youth in this study, our understanding of individual and family struggle must be contextualized within an equally robust understanding of the structural and institutional conditions that create serious barriers to stability and well-being for all youth and families.

Their many accumulated life experiences within service systems and within their family systems also challenge the idea of homelessness as created by a single event. Youth named involvement in foster care and the removal of home as itself a risk factor to later unaccompanied homelessness. They named it exclusively as the beginning of their sense of being homeless. For LGBTQA youth, while disclosures of stigmatized sexual or gender identities typically did not instantly result in getting kicked out, it often arrived in the context of already stressed parent-child relationships and other parental and family struggles that were years in the making. Many of these youth eventually left in order to escape the stigma and discrimination they had endured within their families for quite some time. Their reporting some of the highest rates of adversity scores in our survey, often while stably

housed, further points to a need for earlier intervention and prevention prior to adolescence, when their first episodes of literal homelessness occurred.

A developmental context of instability, trauma and loss. Answers to, “Where does your story begin?” clearly conveyed that family well-being, and specifically parental health and stability, are critical to shaping early risks for housing instability of youth. Our analysis of these early beginnings points to the persistent instability and loss throughout their early childhoods. In fact, many youth indicated in their interviews that they had never experienced stability, referencing a range of early disruptions and losses in their sense of home as very young children. Youth named foster care involvement, the death of a parent, high family mobility, and family homelessness among some of the true beginnings of their sense of instability. Youth experiences with homelessness on their own also included high degrees of geographic mobility. Few youth remained in a single geographic area. Taken together, most of these young people have not experienced much stability in their lives. Instead, their childhoods, and emerging adulthoods, are marked by significant and pronounced loss, ambiguity, and instability.

Emerging adulthood in the context of poverty. Based on the youth who participated in the IDI, emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25) in the context of family poverty and parental struggles was a high-risk period for many youth’s homelessness. Turning 18, particularly for male youth, marked a critical life stage where many economically stressed parents expected participants to start financially contributing to the household. When youth did not or could not, many parents kicked youth out or youth simply left home to avoid feeling like a burden. Sometimes this life stage intersected a parent’s rejection of a child’s sexual identity, or sexuality in general. Parents sometimes waited until children were approaching 18 to issue ultimatums that resulted in youth getting kicked out or leaving. We return to this finding in the implications section as it suggests a distinct phenomenon that departs from some contemporary understandings of family and social support that may be specific to middle-to-upper-middle class parents and their young adult children.

Conditions critical to housing instability are intersectional and multisystemic. Our analysis of critical conditions and illustrations of the trajectories of their housing instability highlight factors that span multiple levels of intersecting influence: individual, peer, family, and structural. While each person’s experience of instability was certainly unique, all youth navigated some combination of these conditions. Individual-level themes included youth’s own struggles with mental health and addiction, navigating developmental milestones, social and personal identities, and youth’s own coping strategies. Peers and intimate partners were critical as a cause of both gaining and losing resources, coexperiencing risk, and a source of harm and support. Family was identified as a critical support, particularly aunts and grandmothers. However, families were also sources of significant harm with themes here including abuse, neglect and rejection, parental addiction and mental illness, and experiencing family instability and homelessness. It is quite telling

that in surveys many adverse experiences actually decreased as youth departed from their homes.

Structural-level themes included programs and practices that shaped instability (e.g., long wait lists, narrow eligibility criteria, siloed systems) and those that facilitated or inhibited use of resources (e.g., overly strict rules, agency reputation as a safe space, poor transitions in and out of services and systems). Youth also mentioned critical conditions in their communities, including truancy policies, safety, prevalence of drugs and illegal activities, restrictive housing policies, policing and patrolling of public spaces, and stigma toward homeless persons as critical to the context in which they experienced homelessness. In presenting trajectories of housing instability visually, we illustrated how these factors unfold, what causes tipping points into deeper levels of instability, and identified missed opportunities to intervene and support youth across different levels of influence to interrupt the instability they navigated. The critical conditions and trajectories of young people only further emphasize that understanding youth homelessness requires understanding the intersections of structural, familial, peer, and individual risks and strengths.

Risk management shapes how and why youth engage or reject resources. In this report we also explored why youth make use of resources and services and the conditions under which they avoided or rejected them. We referred to this often hidden process of decision making as “youth logics of engagement” and identified risk management as central to their use of local services and informal resources. Even after young people were aware of a service in their local or social environments, there were concerns about whether using them would bring more harm than good. Sometimes accepting a resource placed an important relationship at risk or threatened one’s sense of autonomy, independence, and personal agency. Other times youth felt it would introduce risk to a family member (e.g., becoming involved in child welfare system) or bring undue burden to their already stressed households. We highlighted three factors that shaped youth’s discernment of the risks versus gains of engaging resources: identity protection, accumulated experience with services, and personal agency. As we consider why young people may not make full use of the available services and resources in their environments, our work must remain sensitive to the real and perceived risks youth face as they are asked to engage “help” and “supports” that may also bring some degree of risk or loss. This will be taken up further in the next section, implications for practice.

Implications

I don't think I can do it completely on my own. Derek, Walla Walla County

In a “world-first” economic analysis, a group of Australian researchers estimated that youth homelessness costs their child and youth serving systems alone approximately \$626 million a year (MacKenzie, Flatau, Steen, & Thielking, 2016). This does not include the other ripple effects of economic, social, and personal costs to larger society, families, and the youth who directly experience homelessness and housing instability. The reforms in policy, practice, and society that could begin to address these issues, are indeed significant. Derek is certainly making an astute observation when he says his homelessness can't be solved on his own.

Instead, our findings suggest it takes a village to end youth homelessness (see Figure 16). Below, we begin to outline some considerations to support positive change and movement toward ending youth homelessness (see Figure 25).

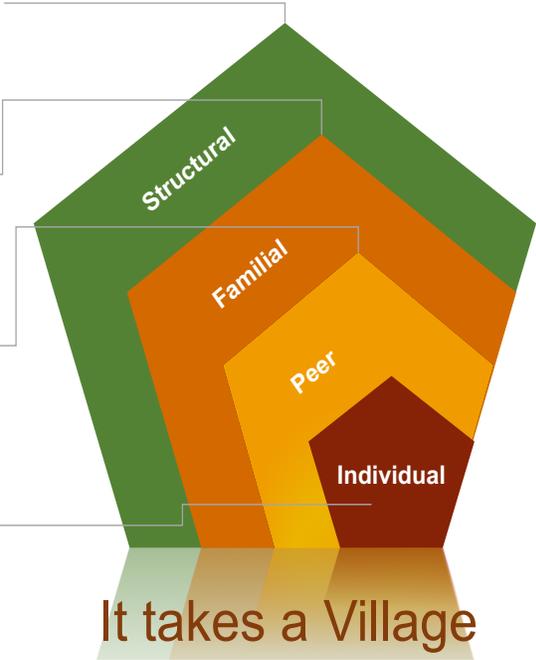
Figure 25. A Multisystemic Holistic Approach to Ending Youth Homelessness

Systems & Communities Play Critical Role in: offering developmentally and culturally attuned supports and services, ensuring safety and stability even across transitions, serving as portals to other services that promote healing, growth, recovery, and wellness in communities, families, and children

Families Play Critical Role in: providing stability, safety, and nurturance, and fostering dynamics that promote growth, wellness, belonging, and healthy development of its members

Peers Play Critical Role in: supporting sense of belonging and family/kinship, providing social support, and serving as portals to accessing resources, information, and skill development

Young People Play Critical Role: as resilient actors making meaning of their lives and identities, fully engaging their communities, building or strengthening capacities for decision making that facilitate and protect their own wellness and health



It Takes a Village: Building an Agenda for Ending Youth Homelessness

The IDI is one component within a larger effort of the Voices of Youth Count Initiative. We offer some of the IDI's strongest findings to support a few implications for practice and policy. As with any study, the IDI's findings raise as many questions as answers. Suggestions for future research will be identified alongside the implications.

Using holistic and intersectional approaches. There is a need for our systems and services to not assume youth operate, or experience their worlds, from a single space or identity. Youth's shared experience of their housing instability was further shaped by other intersecting realities, such as the resources in their communities, the health and wellness of their parents and families, social class, their peer networks, youth's involvement in various systems, and the presence of stigma and discrimination in their environments. Youth themselves also have a range of identities and social locations that matter in how they make meaning of the risks in their environment and of their needs. These identities include, but are not limited to, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, developmental stage/age, social class, and (dis)ability.

Our findings support the emerging use of intersectional approaches that take this more holistic view of youth and the host of vulnerabilities and strengths in their environments. We recommend the development of models of practice and service delivery, and a robust complementary research agenda, that can move this work forward and that is a true reflection of the diversity that exists among this population.

Specifically, the IDI's findings fully support the small but growing trend in work with marginalized populations that call for use of "anti-oppressive" and "intersectional" models for practice and research (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017; Baines, 2011; Hyde, 2005; Zufferey, 2017). In an effort to raise attention to social injustices faced by many marginalized populations, these models offer a shift in understanding the role of power and cycles of oppression tied to structural and interpersonal factors. They offer a person-centered frame from which to assess needs collaboratively between those giving and those receiving resources and services. Our findings that youth often experience "help" as disempowering and as a risk to their personal agency or a threat to invalidate or stigmatize a marginalized identity or status most strongly support this recommendation.

Taking an intersectional approach within our systems and services, however, can also facilitate remaining attuned to the complexity inherent in any youth's circumstance. For instance, the effect of one's racial/ethnic status is shaped by other factors like class, immigration status, sexuality, and gender identity. Intersectional approaches can be critically useful not only for minoritized populations (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, people who identify as LGBTQA), but for understanding the intersecting oppressions and privileges that any young homeless person navigates.

Transdisciplinary and Holistic Research Agenda. Complementary research agendas would include using models of science that deeply engage young people and other key stakeholders in the design and interpretation of findings. This also includes ecological and life stage approaches to research that contextualize youth experiences over time (Anderson, 2003; Auserwald & Eyre, 2002; Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010). We also recommend a more systematic evaluation of all of the adverse experiences youth navigated, especially parental death, suicide, stigma/discrimination, and a range of experiences of family instability and disruption (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). There is a need for improved measures and assessment tools of the adverse childhood experiences that are relevant to these youth's normative contexts of development and of their many strengths. We strongly recommend considering family based stigma and discrimination as not only an adverse childhood experience, but a family-based trauma with lifelong consequences, including its role in contributing to unaccompanied youth homelessness.

Embracing LGBTQ Youth. The presence of resources and organizations that are welcoming, protective, and affirming to LGBTQ youth made an enormous difference to participants in the study. It facilitated their engagement with formal services in particular and opened up new informal networks of support in general. Identity protection, though not exclusive to this population, was an important lens through which youth assessed the risks of engaging a resource, including within their own families. Some LGBTQ youth may prefer agencies that provide safe spaces and culturally attuned services related to their sexual and gender minority identities. However, some LGBTQ youth of color, and straight/heterosexual youth of color may prioritize racial and cultural safety and attunement. Still others may seek services that are not identity specific but still offer healing and restorative supports that affirm all of their identities and are open to a range of youth. Our service options for youth must reflect these layers of complexity in human diversity.

All organizations can become skilled and culturally attuned to this very diverse group of youth. This study suggests a serious need to explicitly and implicitly communicate the message that agencies and their staff celebrate young people, not only by affirming their identities but also through partnering with youth as they navigate the homophobia and transphobia that permeate their daily lives and key developmental contexts including family, school, work, and community. We strongly recommend the edited volume by Abramovich and Shelton (2017) that outlines comprehensive approaches, using an intersectional model, for practice with LGBTQ youth in Canada and the U.S.

Building healthy informal networks—young people need people. While some youth struggled with trusting people as sources of support, they also spoke at length of their need for more and better informal support systems—especially trustworthy adults. They wanted people who would help them stay motivated, provide sage advice, mentor and challenge them to (continue to) improve themselves, and provide much-needed emotional support. The level and depth of relationships they desired far exceeds a traditional mentoring intervention. These young people were searching for authentic, long-lasting,

trustworthy relationships embedded within their daily lives. We recommend community-building efforts and initiatives that help to foster the relational health and well-being among youth and within the social and family systems that comprise their natural environments. This prevention work is critical to addressing many of the issues youth identified as causing the beginning of their homelessness.

In addition to adults, youth made heavy use of their peer networks, for better and for worse. Peer-centric interventions have been debated recently in the field due to the strong influence (both positive and negative) of youth's social networks, something we also found (Rice & Rhoades, 2013; Rice, Tulbert, Cederbaum, Adhikari, & Milburn, 2012). Our work suggests perhaps a third consideration of the use of peers. While the social networks of youth in our study certainly included other homeless youth who were involved in drug use and other illegal activity, they also involved youth who were not homeless, were connected to school, and were noted as positive influences in their lives. These findings suggest that peer and social networks may be more diverse in their behavioral health, and interventions should make use of youth's existing positive relationships and strengthen those ties.

Development and evaluation of youth-centric programing. In addition to building capacity within young people's natural or immediate environments and informal networks, there is also a need for creative intervention models that engage relational and youth-centric approaches. Such a resource might link unstably housed youth to trained adults who can develop individualized and deeply engaged relationships with young people. In that role, they would serve as advocates and navigators. As such, they would champion a youth's individual needs and preferences and help young people develop skills to navigate complex systems and effectively manage risk as they engaged resources in their local environments. Youth in our study often fell through the cracks when systems were siloed or during transitions into, out of, or between systems or services. We recommend the design and evaluation of intervention models that provide youth with this or a similar critical interpersonal but formal resource. We would especially recommend use of adults who share a past experience of housing instability or share core identities or backgrounds (e.g., foster care history, juvenile justice history, LGBTQA identity, racial/ethnic identity).

Strategic placement of services. Youth are often connected to housing resources through friends, family, and existing relationships with service providers. However, they also reported using online searches for housing resources much more than street outreach or helplines. Our findings also suggest that youth invested time and effort into hiding their homelessness from adults who may be in a position to help (e.g., teachers, school social workers). Our youth logics analysis suggests this is a critical part of their management of risk. But it is also a serious barrier to building awareness about resources youth need. We recommend expanding youth outreach methods to extend into online and social media venues. Our findings support public health campaigns that target much younger children, families in the general public, and include youth who are not currently homeless. Normalizing access to these resources and basic service information may reach a larger

population of youth so that they and their peers have this information before they need it. It may also decrease their need to manage risk of stigma by avoiding using services that require they first admit to being “homeless.” While adding shelters and other institutional housing resources may sometimes be impractical or undesirable, communities across the country and internationally are increasingly experimenting with youth-specific models of rapid rehousing and host homes that provide temporary or permanent housing arrangements. These resources can be located within and around where youth currently reside. Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program grantees are also being encouraged through HUD to experiment with these and other similarly creative arrangements and solutions across diverse community contexts (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016).

Rethinking timing of intervention and prevention. Taking youth seriously about where their unaccompanied homelessness really begins challenges us to reconsider where our interventions should start. While youth’s literal homelessness often began in adolescence, youth began their “stories of instability” at much younger ages. Some began as young as birth. Their stories suggest that homelessness is a symptom of much larger and enduring struggles in our society and our systems and institutions and, consequently, in family systems that often navigate these challenges on their own. For example, there is a serious need to address the loss, grief, and trauma that many of these young people described as normal in their early childhoods. This calls for deploying and evaluating models of practice and service delivery that are trauma informed and those that address grief and healing from chronic loss. Practice models and approaches to engagement must also take seriously the many ways in which youth experience interventions themselves as risky or even the cause of their instability and loss (e.g., removal from home into foster care). Our findings strongly reinforce the need for increased use of trauma-informed services, paired with the intersectional and holistic approaches discussed above. The enduring findings in homelessness research around family conflict (Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999) and need for effective interventions (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007) must take seriously the enduring and multigenerational family dynamics that contribute to this need.

Taking a developmental approach. Based on our findings, emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25) in the context of family poverty and parental struggles was a high risk period for many youth’s homelessness. Turning 18, particularly for male youth, marked a critical life stage in which many economically stressed parents expected youth to start financially contributing to the household. When youth did not or could not, many parents kicked them out or youth simply left home to escape, or to avoid feeling like a burden.

This finding is in stark contrast to the robust literature on “emerging adulthood,” a term coined by Jeffrey Arnett (2016a). Emerging adulthood is described as a period of extended adolescence and ambiguous adulthood where parents provide young adults with added supports, including extended opportunities to stay at home into the early to mid-20s.

Pejorative and classed understandings within mainstream stereotypes of “Millennials” as 20 to 30 year olds who are slow to mature and launch into adult roles only reinforces this conception. However, some scholars have criticized Arnett’s characterization of this period of time as universal, arguing that these conceptions of early adulthood ignore the realities that face working class and poor families (du Bois-Reymond, 2016). The debates continue about emerging adulthood itself as a separate stage (Arnett et al., 2011) and its universality across social class (Arnett, 2016b) including for homeless youth (Bowen, Miller, Barman-Adhikari, Fallin, & Zuchlewski, 2016; Hyde, 2005). Our findings reinforce the idea that not all parents have the luxury to sustain family members financially beyond high school. And yet, given youth’s difficulties in finding jobs and housing on their own, many youth really were not ready to be financially self-supporting.

Findings from Yates (2005) in an analysis of U.S. Department of Labor data adds further concern. Achieving stability in the work force is far more challenging for today’s young people who only have a high school diploma. In fact, it took 15 years to secure a job at which the young people in Yates’s study stayed for more than five years. Consequently, economic stability, and other instabilities that accompany it, are likely to be a normative feature for youth in this study into their 30s (Yates, 2005). Additional research is needed to understand how and if class, and potentially culturally anchored and gendered understandings of emerging adulthood, cause some parents to relinquish or seriously reduce their sense of financial responsibility to their young adult children.

Relatedly, our analysis suggests that the structural and regional conditions of the communities in which youth experience their instability deeply shape how and why it unfolds. We particularly raise concern about the trajectories of youth navigating homelessness in more rural regions of the country and in small towns. Young people in Walla Walla, our more rural site, experienced some of the same challenges as youth in our more urban sites (e.g., family discord, parental struggles, family homelessness, poverty). However, the experiences and details of their trajectories of housing instability were uniquely shaped by the lack of a robust formal service system, strictly enforced truancy policies, and location of services outside of the town or even outside of the state. Consequently, they were far more likely to report having to stay on the streets. They also reported the highest rates of juvenile justice involvement. This was largely credited to the county’s truancy policy and youth’s own involvement with drugs (e.g., methamphetamines). Due to limited local resources, they reported the lowest rates of using shelters or transitional housing (29% versus 87% for urban sites).

Walla Walla is also a small town that has, like many other small towns in America, struggled to survive economic downturn and the disappearance of factory jobs that were the economic anchor of the town (Thiede, Lichter & Slack, 2016). Consequently, the stories youth told here mirror the national epidemic of methamphetamine use in similar small towns in America (Draus & Carlson, 2009). In fact, within the majority of Walla Walla youth’s stories, meth use featured within their individual and family struggles (47%) and pervaded daily life within their community and social networks (78%).

Others have explored these unique issues facing rural and small towns and approaches to addressing youth homelessness (Bowen et al., 2016; Edwards, Torgerson & Sattem, 2009; Lambert, Gale & Hartley, 2008; Rollingson & Pardeck, 2006). However, it remains a seriously understudied context in examining the unfolding of housing instability, and ways of coping with poverty in general. We recommend, as part of a commitment to intersectional approaches, to include socioeconomic status, class, and regional diversity as critical to the development of a rigorous and empirically informed set of strategies in policy and practice to end youth homelessness in the U.S.

Taken together, our findings represent a larger observation—that **youth homelessness is not an event**. It is preceded by and contextualized within often chronic and deeply complex structural, familial, and personal challenges, including poverty; cycles of violence, abuse, oppression, and neglect; societal and familial stigma and discrimination; mental health and addiction; and youth’s own struggles and development processes.

Conclusion

This report is the result of a multifaceted collaboration between policymakers, researchers, and countless community service providers and partners. But this work would not have been possible without the promotion, cooperation, and assistance of hundreds of young people across the country who believed in the mission of this initiative: to learn about the life experiences of runaway, unaccompanied, and unstably housed youth with a goal to prevent and end youth homelessness. Their trust in our mission, methods, and scholarly intent drives this research to remain worthy of their confidence.

This report shared findings from five counties that were involved in the in-depth interview (IDI) component of Voices of Youth Count. The IDI component collected two primary kinds of data with 215 young people: a narrative timeline interview of their housing instability and survey data, including information about nine adverse experiences, their service use, and demographic characteristics. We analyzed the data to identify critical conditions within their stories, their logics about engaging or rejecting resources, their perspectives about where their stories of instability began, and their insights into what it will take to end homelessness.

The implications of this research are many, yet they are made straightforward with an enduring proverb: it takes a village.

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Appendix A. Understanding Adversity across Demographic Characteristics

Gender

In analyzing experiences of adversities across gender identity, gender minority youth (those who do not identify within dominant single-gender identifications male/female noted as “other” in this table) report notably high levels of adversity. Young people who did not identify as male or female were most often those who answered “yes” to physically harming self or others (53%), experiencing discrimination both inside family (66.7%) and outside of family (80%), and were about as likely as those identifying as female to be forced to have sex with someone (34% versus 33% respectively).

Table 1A. Experience with Adversities, by Gender

(N = 204)*	Female (n = 82)		Male (n = 107)		Other** (n = 15)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	48	58.5	52	48.6	7	46.7
Physically harmed someone or yourself	29	35.4	33	30.8	8	53.3
Experienced discrimination or stigma						
Within the family	35	42.7	51	47.7	10	66.7
Outside the family	35	42.7	45	42.1	12	80.0
Experienced a caregiver’s death	29	35.4	42	39.3	2	13.3
Exchanged sex for basic needs	16	19.5	13	12.2	4	26.7
Forced to have sex with someone	28	34.2	16	15.0	5	33.3
Taken, transported, or sold for sex	3	3.7	0	0.0	0	0.0
Belonged to a gang	7	8.5	18	16.8	0	0.0

*7 youth did not report their gender identity in the survey.

**Other includes youth who identified as nonbinary.

Age

Our sample is comprised of primarily older youth (ages 18 to 25). This limits our ability to make reliable age comparisons. This may also explain the lack of robust differences based on age across the adversity categories. With the exception of “being forced to have sex,” older youth reported experiencing more adversities across all categories.

Table 2A. Experience with Adversities, by Age

(N = 208)*	13 to 17 Years Old (n = 31)		18 to 25 Years Old (n = 177)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	13	41.9	96	54.2
Physically harmed someone or yourself	10	32.3	60	33.9
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	14	45.2	86	48.6
Outside the family	13	41.9	80	45.2
Experienced a caregiver’s death	7	22.6	68	38.4
Exchanged sex for basic needs	3	9.7	31	17.5
Forced to have sex with someone	8	25.8	42	23.7
Taken, transported, or sold for sex	0	0.0	4	2.3
Belonged to a gang	2	6.5	23	13.0

*3 youth did not report their age in the survey.

Race/Ethnicity

Young people who identify as “other” (72%), white (68%), and multiracial (56%) reported higher rates of being physically harmed than Latin@ or Black youth. In the IDI sample, “other” included primarily American Indian youth. Youth identifying as multiracial, however, were the group with the most reports of discrimination and stigma, both within the family and outside the family, of exchanging sex for basic needs, and of being forced to have sex. They were the second highest group to report being physically harmed by someone, harming someone or self, and experiencing caregiver death. Overall, identifying as multiracial was associated with the highest cumulative adversity score (see Table 3A) compared to any other self-selected racial-ethnic identity.

Table 3A. Experience with Adversities, by Race

(N = 198)*	Black (n = 65)		White (n = 50)		Latin@ (n = 29)		Multiracial (n = 43)		Other** (n = 11)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	27	41.5	34	68.0	12	41.4	24	55.8	8	72.7
Physically harmed someone or yourself	19	29.2	23	46.0	7	24.1	17	39.5	3	27.3
Experienced discrimination or stigma										
Within the family	31	47.7	22	44.0	12	41.4	22	51.2	5	45.5
Outside the family	30	46.2	24	48.0	11	37.9	22	51.2	4	36.4
Experienced a caregiver’s death	26	40.0	19	38.0	8	27.6	17	39.5	4	36.4
Exchanged sex for basic needs	14	21.5	3	6.0	3	10.3	11	25.6	2	18.2
Forced to have sex with someone	15	23.1	14	28.0	5	17.2	14	32.6	1	9.1
Taken, transported or sold for sex	2	3.1	0	0.0	1	3.5	1	2.3	0	0.0
Belonged to a gang	9	13.9	9	18.0	1	3.5	4	9.3	2	18.2

*13 youth did not report their race/ethnicity within the survey.

**Other includes American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, or Other.

Sexual Orientation

We asked about sexual orientation on a spectrum. Table 4A compares youth who identify as 100% heterosexual with all other sexual identities. Youth who do not identify as 100% heterosexual reported both more physical harm from others (64%) and to others or self (41%). Reporting a sexual minority identity (LGBQA) also was associated with much higher percentages of discrimination or stigma both within the family (65%) and outside of the family (62%). These young people indicated higher percentages of loss of a parent or caregiver to death. They also reported more experiences with sexual adversity across all domains. They represented three of the four youth who responded “yes” to sex trade involvement.

Table 4A. Experience with Adversities, by Sexual Orientation

(N = 197)*	100% heterosexual (n = 123)		LGBQA** (n = 74)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	58	47.2	48	64.9
Physically harmed someone or yourself	38	30.9	31	41.9
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	47	38.2	48	64.9
Outside the family	46	37.4	46	62.2
Experienced a caregiver's death	43	35.0	31	41.9
Exchanged sex for basic needs	11	8.9	21	28.4
Forced to have sex with someone	19	15.5	29	39.2
Taken, transported, or sold for sex	0	0.0	3	4.1
Belonged to a gang	17	13.8	8	10.8

*14 youth did not report their sexual orientation within the surveys.

**LGBQA includes youth who identified as 100% gay/lesbian, bisexual, mostly gay/lesbian, mostly heterosexual, asexual, or other.

Adversity and Foster Care History

Nearly 40% of the young people in this study had histories of ever being in foster care. These youth reported higher percentages of adversities across all categories except for being taken, transported, or sold for sex (see Table 5A).

Table 5A. Experience with Adversities by Foster Care History

(N = 206)*	Ever in foster care (n = 82)		Never in foster care (n = 124)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	51	62.2	57	46.0
Physically harmed someone or yourself	36	43.9	36	29.0
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	40	48.8	58	46.8
Outside the family	39	47.6	55	44.4
Experienced a caregiver's death	36	43.9	38	30.7
Exchanged sex for basic needs	14	17.1	20	16.1
Forced to have sex with someone	26	31.7	25	20.2
Taken, transported, or sold for sex	1	1.2	3	2.4
Belonged to a gang	16	19.5	9	7.3

*5 youth did not respond to the question about foster care.

Adversity and History of Detention or Incarceration

Among the 205 youth who responded to this question, half reported an experience of detention, jail, or prison. This group reported higher percentages of all adversities except experiencing discrimination inside of family, exchanging sex for basic needs and involvement in the sex trade. Their responses of “yes” for gang involvement is 10 times higher than for youth who reported no such history.

Table 6A. Experience with Adversities, by History of Detention/Incarceration

(N = 205)*	Ever in Detention/Jail/Prison (n = 103)		Never in Detention/Jail/Prison (n = 102)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	60	58.3	49	48.0
Physically harmed someone or yourself	41	39.8	29	28.4
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	47	45.6	51	50.0
Outside the family	51	49.5	42	41.2
Experienced a caregiver’s death	40	38.8	31	30.4
Exchanged sex for basic needs	15	14.6	19	18.6
Forced to have sex with someone	29	28.2	21	20.6
Taken, transported, or sold for sex	1	1.0	3	2.9
Belonged to a gang	22	21.4	2	2.0

*6 youth did not respond to the question about spending time in detention, jail, or prison