

Wherever I Can Lay My Head: Homeless Youth on Homelessness

Homeless adults and families are the usual focus of research on homelessness in our communities. Homeless youth receive much less attention. Based on information gathered from interviews with 400 homeless youth in Chicago, CIR's study is one of the first in the county to provide the voice of homeless youth themselves on their own needs.

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The City of Chicago's Department of Children and Youth Services (CYS) partnered with the Night Ministry, an agency with a strong track record for addressing the needs of marginalized youth, to commission CIR to conduct a study of the needs of homeless youth in the City of Chicago. The study's purpose was to learn what the youth identify as their needs, and to understand the differences in these needs among subgroups—youth experiencing their first episode of homelessness, youth cycling in and out of homelessness, and youth experiencing chronic homelessness. Both the non-profit service providers and the City hope that identifying and meeting these needs will act as a gateway to other needed services, expedite resolution of problems that result in homelessness, and lead to the establishment of permanent, stable, and safe living situations.

Although the need for housing was reported by over 95% of the youth, their needs go far beyond finding a safe and stable place to live. Youth reported high levels of service needs, averaging over 12 needs per respondent, including food, clothing, health care, job training and placement, education, legal services, life skills, and a place to do laundry, take a shower, and store belongings. While many of the needs were reported consistently across the subgroups of respondents, other needs showed significant differences, depending on the age, living situation, and other characteristics of the respondents.

Some of the most significant findings include:

- One-quarter of the survey respondents are parents. In addition, over one-quarter of the female youth surveyed for this project reported being pregnant, which is 6% to 15% higher than pregnancy rates among homeless youth reported in other studies. Nearly one-half (49%) of the girls surveyed in this project are either parenting or pregnant.

Despite these high pregnancy and parenting rates, only one shelter in Chicago currently accepts pregnant and parenting youth under the age of 18, and that shelter has only five cribs.

- One-third of the youth interviewed are living “on the street”—in trains, cars, parks, and abandoned buildings or buildings under construction; just under one-half of the youth are living in unsafe and/or unstable housing with friends, acquaintances, or relatives.

- Youth reported many factors leading to their homelessness including bad family relationships, domestic violence, family finances, drug and alcohol use, parental neglect, sexual orientation, and pregnancy.
- More than 40% of the youth have stayed in shelters. Of these, 57% reported having had a bad experience, almost one-half of which concerned a severe lack of safety and security.
- Almost two-thirds of the youth have been abused in their lifetime.
- Over one-half of these homeless youth have no idea where to seek help.

To reach homeless youth, CIR trained and employed twelve youth, nine of whom were homeless, to administer surveys for the project. They conducted 400 interviews with homeless youth throughout Chicago—on the street and at bus stops, on buses and trains, at fairs, in parks and on basketball courts, at shelters, schools, homes, drop-in centers, churches, and restaurants. Further information about the Homeless Youth Project and the data can be found in the report at CIR's website.

The City of Chicago, the Night Ministry, and CIR will hold a joint press conference to release the report and discuss measures that are being taken to address the needs and issues raised through the research.