

# 2013 Survey of Unstably Housed Youth in Chicago: Summary of Findings

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Chicago Task Force on Homeless Youth  
and  
Chicago Department of Family and Support Services

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# Introduction

## Overview

The City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) works in collaboration with the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness and numerous other stakeholders to implement Chicago's Plan 2.0 to prevent and end homelessness. Chicago's Plan 2.0 is a broad-ranging, seven-year action plan that reaffirms and builds on the core tenets outlined in Chicago's original Plan to End Homelessness – homeless prevention, housing first, and wraparound services – and identifies new strategies to improve access and opportunity for those most in need.

A critical component of this effort is a biennial tally and survey of homeless persons known as the point-in-time (PIT) count. Conducted on a single night in January, the PIT count is required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development of all communities receiving Continuum of Care funding to end homelessness to provide benchmark data on this population.

A growing consensus in the field has pointed toward the limitations of the PIT count in identifying homeless youth. Homeless youth are often unfamiliar with or mistrustful of the generally adult-centered services that are canvassed on the night of the count. In addition, homeless youth can be difficult to distinguish from their stably housed peers in terms of appearance and avoid the spaces typically inhabited by homeless adults.<sup>1</sup>

In response, the federal Youth Count! initiative was launched in 2012 by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, and Education “to develop promising strategies for counting unaccompanied homeless youth.” Nine cities across the country implemented pilot youth-specific surveys as part of this effort and the Urban Institute documented best practices and lessons learned in a 2013 process study.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to its strong network of advocates and service providers, Chicago was well-positioned to learn from the experiences of the nine pilot cities. The Chicago Task Force on Homeless Youth was formed in 2010 as a result of a meeting between former Mayor Daley and youth activist group HELLO (Homeless Experts Living Life's Obstacles) to address the issue of youth homelessness in Chicago.

Facilitated by DFSS, the Task Force brings together city and state agency officials, service providers, advocates, and homeless youth on a quarterly basis and focuses on issues such as housing, prevention, education, training, and transportation. The Task Force has played a critical role in advocating for increased resources and elevating youth issues in Chicago's Plan 2.0.

## Survey of Unstably Housed Youth

In 2013, a committee of the Task Force was formed to launch YOUth Count Chicago – a multi-year initiative to develop new strategies for measuring youth homelessness and its effects. Among its primary objectives, the initiative seeks to explore methodologies to better identify and engage homeless youth, assess housing instability, and enumerate the population, with the ultimate goal of informing resource allocation and improving services.

In phase one of the initiative, the committee set forth the goal of developing and implementing Chicago's first survey effort focused specifically on unstably housed youth. The committee sought to not only assess housing status, but to also capture the life experiences, assets and risk factors, and access to services of a broad cross-section of this population. The results of the survey would provide unique and valuable information to guide future YOUth Count Chicago efforts, including implementing a census to better enumerate the homeless youth population.

Strategies used in the biennial PIT count were expanded and adapted to better engage homeless youth. The committee also drew on lessons learned from other cities that have conducted similar youth-specific efforts across the United States. In particular, the committee focused on the recommendations detailed in the Urban Institute process study of the nine sites that participated in the federal initiative. A best practice framework adapted from the Urban Institute's process study is used below to outline the strategies implemented in Chicago's survey effort:

### ***Measure housing instability, not homelessness***

Outreach and survey language focused on access to services and housing status in general to remove any stigmas associated with homelessness. In addition to housing status, areas covered by the survey included

# Five-Year Timeline: Growing Spotlight on Youth Homelessness



place of origin, involvement in the foster care system, educational attainment, involvement in the juvenile justice system, parenthood, food access, use of and access to medical and human services, sex trade, drug use, and exposure to violence.

## ***Survey broadly***

The survey was intentionally designed and implemented to allow for a broad array of respondents. The survey language focused on housing status and access to services in general, and did not utilize the term "homeless." No youth were prevented from completing the survey.

## ***Engage youth service providers***

The committee brought together a diverse cross-section of the Chicago Task Force on Homeless Youth, including five service providers and three advocacy organizations with expertise in outreach, LGBTQ youth, sex trafficking, and other areas. This committee participated in all aspects of the initiative, including designing the survey tool, conducting outreach, holding magnet events, and surveying youth.

## ***Involve youth***

Youth focus groups provided feedback on the survey tool questions to make them more applicable and accessible to young people. Youth also participated in the coordination of outreach events.

## ***Expand coverage***

The survey was held over two weeks, from September 25 to October 8, 2013, to allow for word-of-mouth outreach

to build momentum and engage additional youth. Surveys were distributed in paper format and made available online. Outreach partners were expanded beyond homeless youth service providers to include Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and afterschool programs. The survey was made available online through any computer, tablet, or smartphone in both English and Spanish, allowing for more questions, greater anonymity, and a format more engaging to youth.

## ***Hold magnet events***

Homeless youth service providers held events to encourage participation and conducted special outreach efforts to target youth not typically engaged in services at the agencies. DFSS developed materials and giveaways branded with the YOUth Count logo to engage young people and establish recognition for future counts. Additional incentives included food and hygiene kits provided at magnet events.

## ***Avoid duplicate counts***

Survey respondents were asked to provide the first, middle, and last initials of their name and birthdate to avoid duplication. Data was de-duplicated prior to analysis.

## ***Use social media to raise awareness and outreach***

Survey announcements were posted across the City and partner websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts. An electronic survey tool allowed for the link to be distributed to and displayed by DFSS homeless and youth service providers, CPS Homeless Liaisons, and other key stakeholders. The survey was also advertised in partner newsletters.

# Survey Findings: Unstably Housed Youth

## Defining the Population

A total of 541 young people completed a paper or online survey over a two-week period in the fall of 2013. The survey was intentionally designed and implemented to allow for a broad array of participants. Young people were engaged through homeless youth service providers as well as organizations such as Chicago Public Schools and afterschool providers. The survey language focused on housing status, life experiences, and access to services in general, and did not utilize the term “homeless.” No youth were prevented from participating or screened out prior to completing the survey.

Survey participants were categorized as unstably housed if they selected a specific response or responses from any one of six particular questions in the survey designed to measure housing status (see fig. 1). As it was not the intent of the committee to capture a representative sample of Chicago youth overall or to make comparisons between unstably and stably housed youth, this cohort of respondents was selected and isolated for further analysis.

## Demographics

Of the 541 young people that completed the survey, 400 were unstably housed. This cohort will be referred to as “respondents” or “unstably housed youth” throughout the rest of the document.

The population of unstably housed youth was 51% female, 45% male, and 3% transgender, while 1% selected other or did not answer. The majority of youth (65%) were between the ages of 16 and 21, with 17% between 22 and 25, and 14% under 16 years of age. The average age of all respondents was 18.7 years old and 18 years of age represented the largest age group (16%). The youngest respondents were 12 years old.

Sixty-one percent of unstably housed youth identified themselves as straight or heterosexual, 13% bisexual, 10% gay or lesbian, 1% queer, 1% questioning, and 2% other. The LGBTQ population was defined as those respondents that selected Gay/Lesbian, Bisexual, Questioning, or Queer under the sexual identification category, and/or

**Fig. 1: Unstably Housed Definition\***

Question	Unstably Housed	Stably Housed
Where did you sleep last night?	With relatives or friends; In a car; Riding the train or bus; In an apartment that I got evicted from; In an emergency shelter; In jail or prison; On the street, in a park, or camping out; In an abandoned building; In a transitional housing program; In a home or place that burned down or got flooded; On a roof top or fire escape; Dating for shelter, popping dates, or trading sex for shelter; In a place where people I lived with are/were hurting me; In a care facility (hospital, substance use treatment, psychiatric hospital, etc.); Don't know; Prefer not to answer; Other	My own apartment/house; With parents or guardians; In public housing
Can you stay at this place every night for as long as you want?	No; Don't know; Prefer not to answer	Yes
How many different places have you slept in the past week?	I slept on the street or outside somewhere; 2 to 3 places; 4 or more places; Don't know; Prefer not to answer	1 place
When was the last time you had a safe place to stay?	Within the past week; Within the past month; 1 to 2 months ago; 3 to 6 months ago	Last night
Did you run away from housing where you were living with a parent, guardian, or caregiver?	Yes	No; Prefer not to answer
Were you thrown out of your housing by a parent, guardian, or caregiver?	Yes	No; Prefer not to answer

\* Any one or more responses from the “Unstably Housed” column

# Defining Youth Homelessness

*While the term “homeless youth” is widely used among the media, policymakers, and the public in general, there is no uniform, nationally accepted definition. Because of this, efforts to quantify homelessness among young people produce varying results.*

The two most commonly used definitions of homelessness to quantify the population and guide service provision come from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Generally speaking, the former is concerned with youth enrolled in school while the latter guides entities that provide homeless services. Both definitions include the criteria most commonly associated with homelessness -- individuals residing in: 1) unsheltered locations, such as cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, etc.; and 2) emergency shelters and transitional housing. ED also includes youth that are “doubled up,” “sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason,” or living in other temporary accommodations.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) annually collects school-by-school, self-reported data on student homelessness using the ED definition described above. In 2013-2014, CPS reported 22,099 homeless youth in the school district.

The Chicago Department of Family and Support Services conducts the biennial point-in-time count using the HUD definition described above. During the night of the survey, shelter staff conduct a tally and survey of every homeless person in shelter and trained volunteers canvass the streets and public spaces for those unsheltered. The 2014 point-in-time count estimated 2,281 sheltered and unsheltered homeless youth below the age of 25.

Transgender/Gender Queer/Gender Non-Conforming under the gender category. Overall, 26% of unstably housed youth identified as LGBTQ. A selection of findings are provided for this population throughout the report.

Unstably housed youth were 82% African-American, 9% white, 5% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1% Asian, and 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Fifteen percent of the group identified as Latino (see fig. 2).

## Housing Stability

As described above, a survey participant was categorized as unstably housed if they provided specific responses to any one of six questions designed to measure housing status (see fig. 1 for more details).

Among these six categories, the unstably housed youth responded as follows:

- 58% of respondents had not spent the night in their own apartment or house, with parents or guardians, or in public housing;
- 46% could not stay where they were for as long as they want;
- 44% had slept in two or more places over the past week;
- 42% had not had a safe place to stay in over a week;
- 33% had been thrown out of their home by a parent or guardian; and
- 13% had run away from home.

**Fig. 2: Demographic Characteristics**

Gender	Female	51%
	Male	45%
	Transgender / Gender Queer / Gender Non-Conforming	3%
	Other (please specify)	1%
Age	12-15	14%
	16-18	32%
	19-21	33%
	22-25	17%
Sexual Identification	Heterosexual or straight	61%
	Bisexual	13%
	Gay/Lesbian	10%
	Prefer not to answer	8%
	Other (please specify)	2%
	Queer	1%
	Questioning	1%
Race/Ethnicity	Black/African American	82%
	White	9%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	5%
	Asian	1%
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1%
	Hispanic/Latino Descent	15%

The survey was purposefully designed to capture the nuanced living conditions of unstably housed youth, and the responses reflect this broad spectrum. For example, while 40% reported that they had spent the previous night in “my own apartment or house” and/or “with parents and guardians” – selections that on their own would qualify a respondent as being stably housed – 40% of this group indicated that they had not had a safe place to stay in over a week and 25% could not stay at this place every night for as long as they want.

Female and male respondents reported significant differences in housing status. A quarter of females reported having stayed in their own apartment the previous night compared to 13% of males, while 28% of males had stayed in an emergency shelter compared to 16% of females. Significant variations were also present by age, with 28% of youth 18 years old and above residing in emergency shelters and 16% in transitional shelters, compared to 3% and 1% of youth under 18, respectively. Respondents 18 years of age and older were also significantly more likely than those under the age of 18 to have slept in two or more places during the past week (42% vs. 26%) or been thrown out of housing by a parent or caregiver (46% vs. 10%).

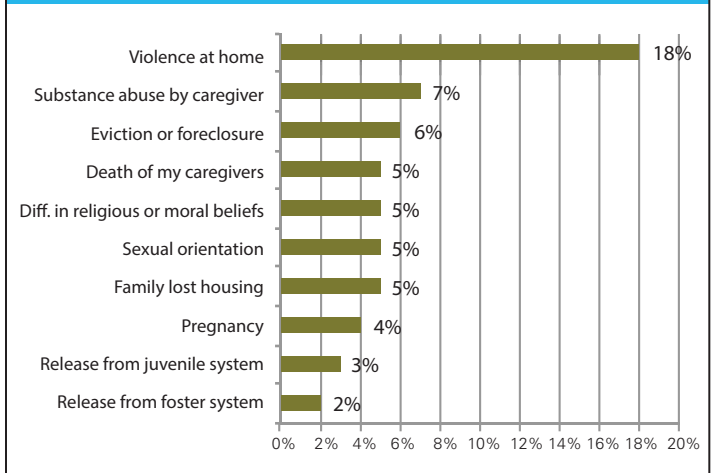
Twenty percent of all unstably housed respondents had spent the previous night in an emergency shelter and 11% had stayed at a transitional housing program. Six percent of youth indicated that they had spent the previous night in a highly precarious situation (in a car, riding a train or bus, in an abandoned building, or outdoors). Among LGBTQ youth, more than twice the percentage (14%) had spent the previous night in a highly precarious situation as compared to all unstably housed youth.

Issues related to a volatile domestic situation were the most common responses for why young people left their home, with violence in the home (18%) and alcohol and substance abuse by a caregiver (7%) as the primary reasons reported (see fig. 3). Additional related reasons included leaving home due to a difference in religious or moral beliefs with caregivers (5%), sexual orientation (5%), or pregnancy (4%). Loss of housing due to eviction and foreclosure (6%) or other reasons (5%), and death of a caregiver (5%) also made up a significant percentage of responses. A smaller, but notable number of young people experienced housing instability upon exiting the juvenile justice (3%) or foster care (2%) systems.

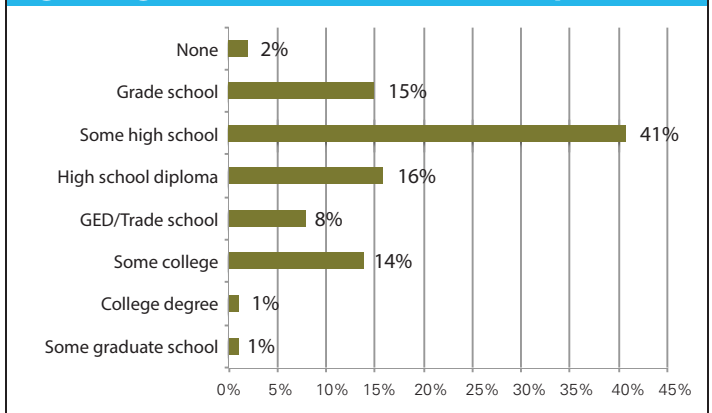
## Life Experiences: Assets and Risk Factors

As described above, a key motivation in implementing the survey was the opportunity to explore the wellbeing of unstably housed youth in Chicago. As such, the committee developed a series of questions to better ascertain the life experiences and ability to access services among the target population.

**Fig. 3: Reason for Housing Instability**



**Fig. 4: Highest Level of Education Completed**



### Place of Origin

Nearly three out of four (74%) respondents indicated that they were originally from Chicago. Of those not from Chicago, over half (61%) were from the Midwest, 17% from southern states, 10% from northeastern states, and 9% from abroad. This group reported that joining family (40%), going to school (33%), and a job (28%) were the primary reasons for coming to Chicago.

### Education

Among all respondents, the largest group had completed some high school (41%), with 15% having never progressed beyond grade school (see fig. 4). Over two-thirds (68%) of respondents over the age of 19 had received a high school diploma, GED, or trade school certificate, 14% had attended college for some period of time, and 2% had received their college degree. Of those students 19 years of age or younger, 64% reported being currently enrolled in school, while 14% had not been enrolled over the past 12 months and 7% had not been enrolled for over a year.

### Household Status

Regardless of housing type or location, nearly one quarter (24%) of respondents reported spending the previous

## What are youth saying?

*Please provide any other information that you feel would help us to better understand the experience you face on a daily basis...*

It's a struggle sometimes going to the shelter nights. I work late, I get shifts that's 3pm to midnight and I fear traveling late and being safe.

*-female, 23*

"It's hard to find housing when you're under a certain age and you don't have good credit."

*-female, 20*

"I need medical care. I need glasses. I want a check up. My own doctor."

*-male, 16*

"Because I turn 25 at the start of the year, housing or transitional housing is slim to none."

*-male, 24*

"Services from drop-in centers is absolutely vital to homeless youth... Everyday is a struggle in all aspects. We worry about where we will sleep, how we will eat, and how people can tell us 'do something with yourself' yet they don't get involved."

*-male, 23*

"Sometimes I miss school because I don't be having a babysitter to watch my child. And that kinda ruins some things that I would try to do."

*-female, 17*

night with their parents or guardians. Eleven percent of respondents reported having an assigned Illinois Department of Children and Family Services caseworker, while 17% had been in foster care at some point.

Just over a quarter (28%) of all respondents reported having been pregnant or having gotten someone pregnant. Among this group, 63% were female, 34% male, and .04% Transgender / Gender Queer / Gender Non-Conforming. Eighteen percent of respondents indicated that they had children, with an average of 1.5 children each.

Of those that reported the ages of their children, respondents were on average 18 years old at the birth of their first child, while the average age of their child was

approximately 18 months. Half of respondents reported that their child lived with them, 26% of children lived with the other parent, 22% lived with family, and 3% were in foster care.

### **Resources**

Over a quarter (27%) of respondents reported having no source of income. While 6% and 14% of respondents reported receiving income from either full-time or part-time employment, respectively, the most common source of income was SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), with 27% of young people receiving the food assistance benefit. The Women, Infant, Children (WIC) Program (6%), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (5%), and Supplemental Security Income (3%) rounded out the other



most common resources. Unemployment Insurance, Supplemental Security Disability Income, cash, student or short-term loans, worker’s compensation, and panhandling were indicated by less than 2% each as a source of income. Roughly half of respondents with a child five years of age or younger were not receiving WIC.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported currently having health insurance coverage, with 8% specifically citing Medicaid and 1% citing the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (Illinois All Kids). At the same time, over one-fifth (21%) of respondents were not aware whether they had health insurance coverage.

**Food Access and Hunger**

Family and friends (34%) and other mainstream access points were the most common sources of food utilized by respondents, including grocery stores (45%), fast food outlets (14%), and convenience stores (7%). At the same time, 43% reported accessing food during the past month through one or more service providers and/or food assistance programs including shelter and drop-in centers (22%), food pantries (22%), faith-based institutions (14%), hot meals programs (9%), and meals on wheels (2%). Fifteen percent of respondents were reliant on one or more precarious strategies such as handouts (11%), shoplifting or stealing (6%), panhandling (4%), and searching in dumpsters (1%) for obtaining food. As mentioned above, 27% of respondents reported utilizing the SNAP benefit for accessing food.

Overall, food insecurity was a significant issue among unstably housed youth. Over one-third (37%) of all respondents reported having not eaten for a whole day because of lack of food during the past year. Over half (53%) of LGBTQ youth indicated that they had experienced food insecurity over the past year.

**Exposure to Violence and Sexual Exploitation**

Exposure to violence is a common experience reported by homeless youth, and the results of the survey reflect this reporting.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 40% of respondents indicated that they had been hurt or harassed by someone they had dated (18%), a parent or caregiver (15%), other family member (14%), friend (13%), police officer (13%), or social service worker (1%). Among this group, nearly one-third (29%) reported being hurt or harassed by three or more of these people in their lives. Thirty percent of respondents were victims of domestic violence. A similar percentage of females and males reported having been hurt or harassed by someone they had dated (17% and 16%) or being the victim of domestic violence (32% and 27%).

Recent research and advocacy efforts have brought increased attention to the disproportionate risk of violence faced by LGBTQ young people experiencing homelessness.<sup>4</sup> As stated by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, “LGBTQ youth are particularly vulnerable during episodes of homelessness. Once homeless, LGBTQ

youth experience higher rates of physical and sexual assault and higher incidence of mental health problems and unsafe sexual behaviors than heterosexual homeless youth.”<sup>5</sup> The survey results reflect these findings – among LGBTQ unstably housed youth, 57% had been hurt or harassed by someone in their lives as compared to 40% among all unstably housed youth, and 45% percent were victims of domestic violence as compared to 30% of respondents overall.

In addition, 12% of respondents reported having traded sex for food, money, or a place to stay. This percentage was twice as high (24%) among LGBTQ youth.

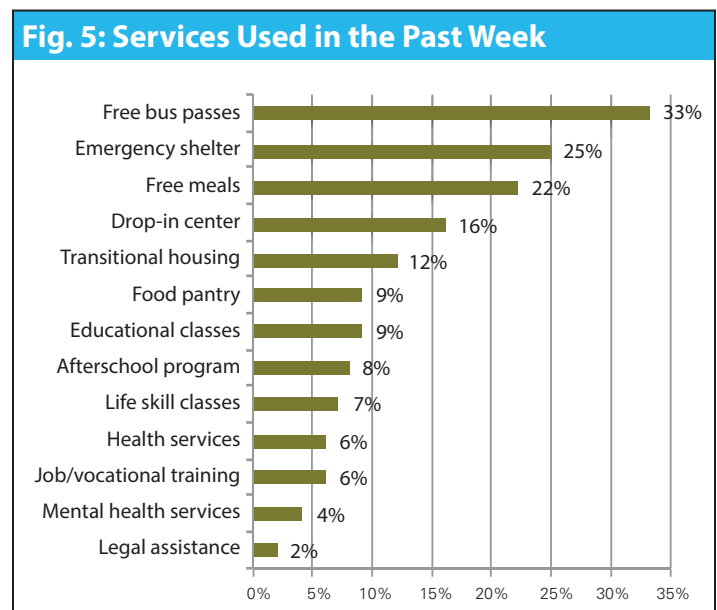
**Additional Risk Factors**

Seventeen percent of respondents reported spending time in jail or detention before the age of 18. More than twice the percentage of males (24%) had been in jail or detention than females (11%). Over two-thirds of young people (68%) reported trying marijuana, with 20% having tried before the age of 14.

**Life Experiences: Access to Services**

As stated in the introduction of the survey tool, questions were formulated in an effort to learn about “the experiences [young people] face on a daily basis when trying to access services like meals, health care, and safe housing.” Included in the survey were a series of questions asking youth to identify the types of services recently accessed.

Overall, 68% of unstably housed youth reported utilizing some form of human service program or support over the past week, with the most common responses being free bus passes (33%), emergency shelters (25%), free meals (22%), drop-in centers (16%), and transitional housing (12%) (see fig. 5). Of this group, 70% reported



only accessing one or two of these services. Among LGBTQ youth, 83% accessed some form of human service program or support.

Respondents were also asked whether any one of a number of factors, such as drug or alcohol use, HIV/AIDS, a mental health condition, or physical disability inhibited access to these support programs. The majority of young people (61%) responded that none of these factors presented a barrier to receiving services, while 10% indicated that one or more of the above factors had inhibited accessing services and 13% selected “don’t know.” Drug use was the only factor indicated as a reason by more than 5% of respondents.

Access to services among LGBTQ youth is another area of growing concern among homeless youth service providers and advocates.<sup>6</sup> Nineteen percent of LGBTQ youth indicated that one or more factors had gotten in the way of accessing services, nearly twice the rate among all respondents, while 23% selected “don’t know.” Sexual orientation was not provided as an option in the survey as a barrier to accessing services and was not entered by any respondents under “other.”

Sixty-four percent of all respondents reported receiving some form of medical service, with the emergency room (32%) being the most common facility visited. Female respondents were more likely than males to have made at least one visit to an emergency room (36% vs. 26%) or doctor’s office (39% vs. 16%) during the past year.

## Youth Vulnerability Index

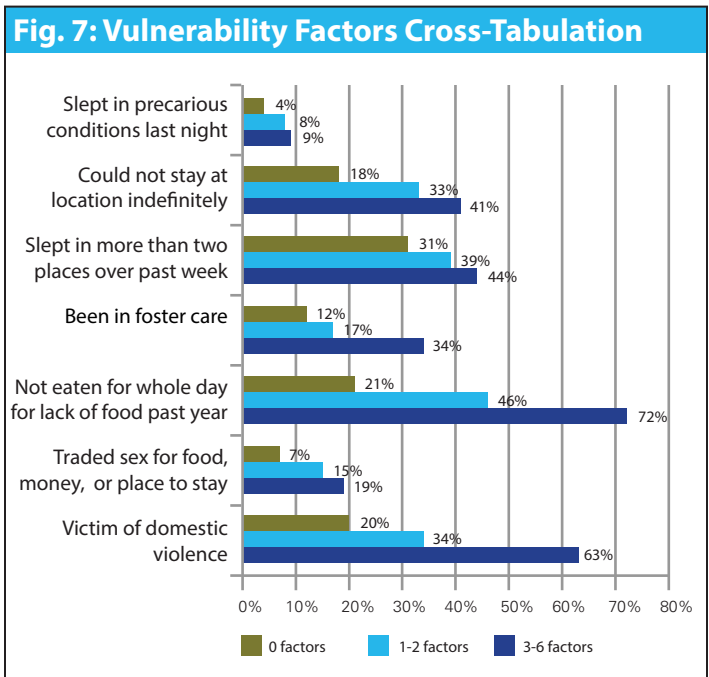
The Vulnerability Index is an evidence-based tool used by homeless provider systems to help prioritize the delivery of services.<sup>7</sup> The tool assesses whether a homeless individual is medically vulnerable and faces “an increased risk of mortality if homelessness persists.” Chicago’s Central Referral System (CRS) for permanent supportive housing utilizes this tool to assess individuals and prioritize those that are most vulnerable.

Homeless youth, however, are unlikely to experience multiple chronic illnesses or display other factors incorporated in the vulnerability index. Because of this, homeless youth service providers have found that young people are possibly placed at a disadvantage in accessing permanent supportive housing through CRS.

Recognizing these limitations, Chicago is in the process of adopting a tool more appropriate for assessing vulnerability among young people experiencing homelessness. Chicago’s youth vulnerability index accounts for factors associated with a young person experiencing long-term homelessness as an adult and is based on a triage tool for assessing vulnerable transition-age youth developed at the University of Southern California School of Social Work in conjunction with the Corporation for Supportive Housing.<sup>8</sup>

**Fig. 6: Incidence of Vulnerability Factors**

Number of vulnerability factors	# Youth	% Youth
Six vulnerability factors	0	0%
Five vulnerability factors	1	<1%
Four vulnerability factors	6	2%
Three vulnerability factors	25	6%
Two vulnerability factors	60	15%
One vulnerability factor	129	32%
Zero vulnerability factors	179	45%



The survey provided an opportunity to implement portions of the youth vulnerability index in the field and six indicators were incorporated in the survey:

- Did you run away from housing where you were living with a parent, guardian, or caregiver? (Yes);
- What causes led to you leaving home? (There was violence at home);
- What causes led to you leaving home? (Differences in religious or moral beliefs with caregivers);
- Before your 18th birthday, did you spend time in jail or detention? (Yes);
- Have you ever been pregnant or gotten someone else pregnant? (Yes); and
- How old were you when you tried marijuana for the first time? (Before the age of 12).

Overall, 55% of unstably housed youth displayed one or more vulnerability factors, with the largest group among these (32%) presenting one factor. One youth responded

with five vulnerability factors and none presented with all six factors (see fig. 6).

In an effort to better understand the implications of the vulnerability index, respondents were divided into three sub-sets based on the number of vulnerability factors displayed: zero (low-risk), one or two (moderate-risk), and three to six vulnerability factors (high-risk). These subsets were then cross-tabulated against a set of additional variables from the survey that measured housing instability, involvement in the foster care system, food insecurity, sexual exploitation, and exposure to violence (see fig. 7). As expected, youth in the high-risk category responded in higher percentages to each variable as compared to moderate-risk youth. In turn, youth in the moderate-risk category responded in higher percentages as compared to low-risk youth. These differences were most pronounced in the areas of food insecurity and domestic violence.

## Conclusion

In 2013, the Chicago Task Force on Homeless Youth formed a committee composed of DFSS and key partner organizations to implement YOUth Count Chicago – a multi-year initiative to develop new strategies for measuring youth homelessness and its effects. In phase one of this initiative, the committee conducted best practice research and developed and implemented a survey to capture the housing status, life experiences, assets and risk factors, and access to services of a broad cross-section of unstably housed youth in Chicago.

The survey, both in its implementation and findings, presents a strong foundation for future work. Committee members represented diverse areas of expertise, and the survey development and implementation processes were conducted in a highly collaborative manner.

The findings shed light on numerous aspects of the life experiences of unstably housed youth in Chicago. Responses revealed a broad spectrum of living conditions and highlighted the importance of incorporating multiple variables to measure housing status. For example, having spent the previous night in “my own apartment or house” was not necessarily an indicator of stable housing in other categories such as safety or ability to stay in one place long-term. In addition, respondents reported a volatile domestic situation as the primary reason for leaving home, as well as alarming levels of food insecurity and exposure to violence. The findings also reaffirm previous research findings on LGBTQ homeless youth, such as a higher incidence of exposure to violence among the population.

At the same time, the survey revealed assets and areas of opportunity among unstably housed youth. Nearly 70% of respondents over the age of 19 reported having received a high school diploma, GED, or trade school certificate, with 16% having spent at least some time in college. Nearly three in four young people reported being from Chicago,

presenting potential opportunities for family reunification efforts. Findings also reveal significant opportunities in connecting young people to public benefits programs.

### *Survey limitations*

While the survey was intentionally designed to be as inclusive as possible in terms of respondents’ housing status, several aspects of this strategy merit further discussion in future efforts. The “or” logic used across six variables to determine housing instability presented challenges in the analysis of data. For example, the question “How many different places have you slept in the past week,” while a potential marker for housing instability, did not serve as a reliable indicator on its own. In addition, questions related to running away or being kicked out of home were not tied to a timeframe, and therefore were not readily comparable to other variables that were used to assess current housing status. Also, some response options related to housing status conflated housing conditions (e.g. safety) with housing type.

The survey implementation strategy did not include the volunteer-driven street canvassing strategy implemented during the traditional point-in-time count. Rather, the large majority of respondents were engaged by and surveyed at the facilities of homeless youth service providers, and the location of participants at the time of survey completion was not recorded. Because of this, findings could not be geo-coded in a manner that would allow for an extrapolation of survey participant numbers. This also highlights a need for developing additional strategies to identify and engage youth who do not seek services and are extremely vulnerable.

Because of these limiting factors, the survey findings do not provide a conclusive number of homeless or unstably housed youth in Chicago. At the same time, the survey presents a uniquely descriptive snapshot of the challenges and assets of unstably housed youth that will inform strategic planning moving forward and provides a strong framework for future YOUth Count Chicago efforts.

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# Survey Partners



