

San Diego County

Technical Report on Youth Homelessness: Findings from the In-Depth Interviews (IDI)

San Diego County Technical Report on Youth Homelessness: Findings from the In-depth Interviews

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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, parents and communities. Answers to “Where does your story begin?” clearly conveyed that families and specifically parental health and economic stability were critical to shaping risks for housing instability later in life.
- **It takes a village to end youth homelessness.** Conditions critical to youth’s trajectories of housing instability, and therefore, solutions to ending instability include 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. Shelters remain a critical component of this village; we need a continuum of care that meets youth needs developmentally.
- While most youth (75%) experienced adolescent onset homelessness, **many youth noted their stories beginning in the context of family instability starting as early as “birth.”** Youth named foster care, family homelessness, parent’s 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, our one rural site, faced a community context in which many of the critical supports and resources participants needed, were located outside the town of Walla Walla and in some cases, outside of the state. Consequently, these young people faced the highest rates of staying on the streets (85% versus 67%) and relatedly had the highest rates of juvenile justice involvement (68% versus 48%).
- The location of San Diego County on the border of Mexico distinguished San Diego from other sites in that the **stories of housing instability of some San Diego participants (15%) involved movement across the border.** In most cases youth crossed over into Tijuana to stay with friends and family but returned to San Diego once those living situations proved unstable.
- **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 their cities or towns. 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 financially contribute to the household. When youth did not, some parents kicked youth out or youth simply left home to avoid feeling like “a burden.”
- **Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Questioning/Asexual (LGBQA) youth, foster youth, and youth with juvenile justice histories had significantly higher than average cumulative adversity survey scores.** Not only did these youth report higher rates of experiencing the adversities inquired about on the survey, but they also reported other distinct challenges in navigating homelessness.
- **Make youth-centered services a priority.** Youth reliance on more informal precarious living arrangements is apparent in sites where the local service infrastructure is limited. In San Diego where one of its two youth-based shelters closed in 2016 due to funding constraints, exchange of sex for a place to stay was more frequently (24%) reported than in other sites (16%). Multiple youth discussed how their ability to access shelters provided a key alternative to sexually exploitive living arrangements. The provision of shelters signals the important need such services fill in reducing youth's exposure to high-risk and potentially harmful situations. It is imperative that their funding be made a priority at the local, state and federal levels.
- **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 to LGBQA and transgender identities), their accumulated experiences with services, and sense of their own personal agency and independence as important to weighing the risks and gains of engaging or avoiding resources. This suggests different types of outreach and organizational structures 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 before or in-between their experiences of unaccompanied homelessness. Our understanding of risk and adversity must adjust to acknowledge the risk, harm and 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 unaccompanied 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.

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 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 that were involved in the in-depth interview (IDI) component. 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 eight 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. 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%). The IDI sample in San Diego was the most racially and ethnically diverse site which had equal proportions of youth identifying as Latin@ (29.8%), Multiracial (24.3%), Black/African American (18.9%) and White (16.2%).

While 58% of the full IDI sample identified as 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. In San Diego, while most participants reported gender identities as either male (37.8%) or female (46%), nearly 11% (4 participants) identified as transgender or “other.” Just over half (56.8%) identified as 100% heterosexual; the remaining youth (37.8%) identified as something other than 100% heterosexual. Similar to the full sample, approximately one quarter (24.3%) reported that they were the parent of at least one child.

Systems involvement as well as sexual minority status (LGBQA) shaped youth experiences of housing stability in many domains. **Youth who identified as LGBQA as well as young people with histories of foster care and juvenile justice involvement reported significantly higher rates of surveyed adversity.** In San Diego, it was participants who identified as gender minorities (4.3), Black/African American (3.7), and LGBQA (3.9) who reported greater than the average total experiences with 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 find that in general, parents’ struggles with their children’s emerging sexuality, and parents’ own internalized stigma and prejudice, are sources of added parent-child discord that often are tipping points into youth homelessness.

Based on the youth who participated in the IDI, **emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) 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 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.”

Our analysis of the **beginnings of their homelessness points to the 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. In the San Diego sample, 32% of participants identified their housing instability as beginning between the ages of 9-15 and 53% between the ages of 16-18. In the overall sample, of the 82 youth with foster care histories, half of them noted foster care as the beginning of their own housing instability. **Almost one-quarter of participants (23.7%) experienced family homelessness.** Many of these youth named this early family instability as the cause of their unaccompanied homelessness. Relatedly, and perhaps most surprisingly, is the degree of parental death reported among young people in this study. In our survey, **35% of youth 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 their cities or towns. 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.

Exchange of sex for a place to stay was more frequently reported in San Diego (24%) than in the full IDI sample (16%). Multiple youth discussed how their ability to access shelters provided a critical alternative to sexually exploitive living arrangements. This signals the important need such services fill in reducing youth's exposure to high-risk and potentially harmful situations. It is imperative that the funding of these resources be made a priority at the local, state and federal levels.

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 them 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 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 highlight 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 serving as both a cause of gaining and losing resources, co-experiencing 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 harm and themes here included abuse, neglect and rejection, parental addiction and mental illness, and experiencing 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 mentioned specific conditions critical to the content in which they experienced homelessness including restrictive housing policies, policing or patrolling of public spaces and stigma toward homeless persons. In presenting trajectories of housing instability visually, we are able to illustrate how these factors unfold and what causes tipping points into 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. In San Diego, crossing the border to Mexico while unstably housed was a unique feature experienced by five youth. The majority went to Tijuana to temporarily stay with friends and family while one youth crossed as a part of the drug trade. 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 credited to the truancy policy and youth's 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 work; jobs that were the economic anchor of the town. Consequently, the stories youth told here mirror the national epidemic of methamphetamine 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. Taken together, 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 development 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, or experience their worlds, from a single space or identity. Youth's shared experience 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 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. For example, some LGBTQA youth may prefer agencies that provide safe spaces and culturally attuned services related to their sexual and/or gender minority identities. However, some LGBTQA 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 safe and inclusive services that affirm all of their identities and are open to a range of youth. Our service options to youth must reflect these layers of complexity in human diversity. Our findings support the emerging use of intersectional approaches that take a 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.

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, mentorship to 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.

Development and evaluation of youth-centric programing: In addition to building capacity within young people’s natural environments and informal networks, there is also a need for creative intervention models that serve as more relational, youth-centric, formal resources. 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 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 this or a similar critical interpersonal but formal resource. We would especially recommend use of adults who share a past experience of housing instability and/or share an identity or background (e.g., foster care 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 they compromise existing connections to schools, jobs and informal resources. While adding shelters and other institutional housing resources may 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 similarly creative arrangements and solutions across diverse community contexts (“Ending Youth Homelessness,” 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 from 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, 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. We also recommend targeting much younger children, and to 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 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 to youth in facilitating their 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 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 message to youth that they celebrate young people not just by affirming 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, re-thinking where unaccompanied homelessness begins, challenges us to reconsider where our 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 who 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.

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Background

Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) is a national, multicomponent research initiative seeking to end youth homelessness in America.¹ The purpose of the initiative is to inform the development of policies related to runaway, homeless and unstably housed youth, improve the provision of services to that population and build a foundation for future research. The VoYC research activities include:

- **In-Depth Interviews:** timeline narrative interviews with and survey of youth who have experienced homelessness or housing instability to explore their housing trajectories, the factors that shaped those experiences, their survival strategies, their use of services, and their perceptions of service effectiveness;
- **Youth Count:** a point-in-time visual count of homeless and unstably housed youth;
- **Brief Youth Survey:** a survey of homeless and unstably housed youth administered in conjunction with the youth count to collect information about the demographic characteristics and experiences of this population;
- **Provider Survey:** an online survey of runaway and homeless youth service providers, providers of services to homeless adults and families with children, and youth-serving organizations about the services they provide to runaway and homeless youth and how those services are funded;
- **Analyses of Existing Data:** leveraging of HMIS, child welfare and McKinney Vento data to improve site-specific estimates and supplement the primary survey and interview data;
- **National Survey:** a survey of over 13,000 adults about 13- to 25-year-old household members who had run away, couch surfed, or been homeless in the past year;

¹ Throughout this document, we use the term “homeless youth” to refer to youth who are homeless and not accompanied by a parent or guardian.

- **Policy and Fiscal Analysis:** an examination of the impact of federal, state and local policies on the ability of communities to address the needs of runaway and homeless youth; and
- **Evidence Review:** a systematic review of prevention and intervention research to summarize what is known about programs and services that improve the outcomes or well-being of runaway and homeless youth.

This draft report shares preliminary results from the surveys conducted with youth involved in the In-depth Interview (IDI) component. The IDI survey collects basic demographic information, government service use, and experiences of adversity both while homeless and while stably housed.

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/retail establishments). Unstably housed youth include youth sleeping in their own apartment, the home of a parent or other relative, the home of a friend/girlfriend/boyfriend, a foster or group home, a hospital/emergency room, a residential treatment facility, at the home of someone the youth was having sex with, or a juvenile detention center or jail who lack a stable place to stay.

Objectives and Research Questions

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 with 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’s 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 youth homelessness and provides answers to all six of the initiative’s research questions.

Figure 1: VoYC Research Questions and IDI Data Collection Elements

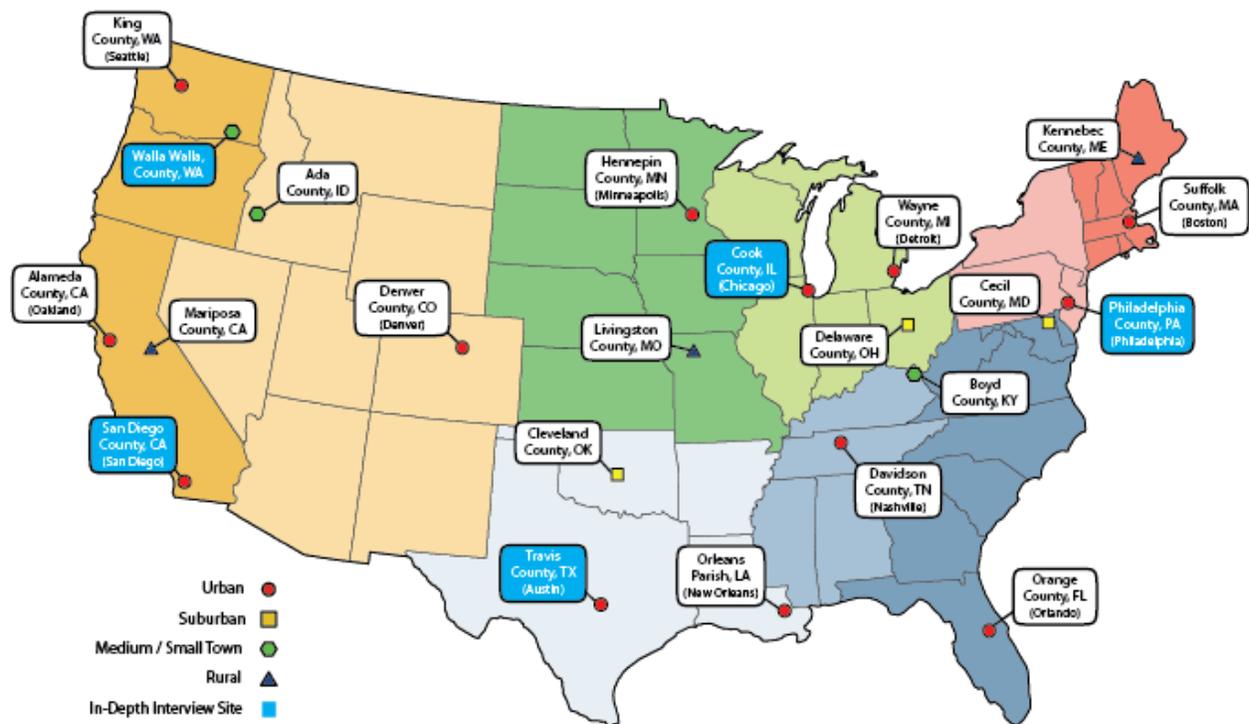


Partnerships

To address these research questions VoYC partnered with 22 counties across the U.S. In each county, VoYC identified a lead agency. Lead agencies included homeless service providers, continuums of care, local government organizations, and universities. In San Diego County, our lead agency was San Diego Youth Services. The VoYC lead agencies engaged a broad network of local stakeholders and provided extensive support to ensure the success of local data collection activities as well as providing critical feedback on emerging and preliminary findings.

Site Selection

During the first phase of VoYC, 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. Five of these 22 counties were selected as sites for in-depth youth interviews based on geography, population density, and the distinctiveness of the context for studying homeless and unstably housed youth.



San Diego County

Local Context

The experiences of homeless and unstably housed youth are influenced by their community context. This context includes the local climate, the service provider infrastructure, and the other systems with which youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are likely to interact.

San Diego County is located in southwestern California and the County's southern boundary borders Mexico. Its county seat and largest city is San Diego. San Diego is the fifth most populous county in the United States and includes densely populated San Diego, as well as smaller cities, suburban communities, and rural areas. The bulk of the population lives in western San Diego County, near the coast, with the eastern portion much more sparsely populated.

In 2015, San Diego County had a population of 3,299,521 and 18.7% of the population was 13 to 25 years old (United States Census Bureau, 2015). The racial composition of the County was 76.1% White, 5.6% Black, 1.3% American Indian, 12.1% Asian, and 0.6% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander with 32.9% of the population identifying as Latin@ (United States Census Bureau, 2015). In 2015, San Diego County's per capita personal income (\$53,298) was comparable to the state (\$53,741) and more than the nation (\$48,112) (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2015). Its poverty rate was less (13.9%) than that of California State (15.4%) and the nation (14.7%) (United States Census Bureau, 2015) and by the end of 2016, its unemployment rate was lower (4.1%) than that of California State (5.2%) and the nation (4.7%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Between 2011 and 2015, 86% of persons age 25 and older in San Diego were a high school graduate or higher, compared to 81% at the state level and 86.7% at the national level (United States Census Bureau, 2015).

San Diego County has a network of four Transition-Aged Youth (TAY) Academies that run drop-in centers for 16- to 24-year-olds. The four TAY Academies are geographically distributed across the County and serve as service hubs for homeless youth in their regions. The TAY Academies work collectively with each other and with other youth-serving organizations in their areas to meet the needs of San Diego County's homeless youth. While this youth-serving partnership is strong, it remains largely disconnected from the adult provider network.

To date, San Diego Youth Services operates the only emergency shelter for homeless youth under the age of 18 in San Diego. By the end of 2016, the only other program offering overnight shelter for youth under the age of 18, a transitional living program, was forced to close due to changes in federal funding priorities to focus more on permanent housing options for the homeless. As a result, the program could no longer access federal funding.

California is in the midst of an overhaul of its foster care system which includes new time limits for foster youth staying in Department of Social Services sponsored emergency shelters. San Diego is one of 10 California counties that operates emergency shelter facilities for youth entering the foster care system (Slattery, 2017). In 2016, the California Legislature passed Assembly Bill 1997 (AB 1997 § 48204 (2016)) which mandates a reduction of the number of days youth may stay in shelters from 30 to 10 citing that to be sufficient time to find a placement for a child. In anticipation of these changes, the Polinsky Children's Center in San Diego began a pilot 10-day shelter program in 2015 and found that while most children and youth were able to be placed in that time frame, some children needed more time particularly those with "significant mental or medical challenges." (Slattery, 2017, p. 2)

In-Depth Interviews Component

The purpose of the In-depth Interviews (IDI) is to capture different youth voices about experiencing housing instability and homelessness. This component collects three kinds of data directly with youth: narrative interviews, housing timelines (exploring all the places youth have stayed), and background surveys. Taken together, the IDI represents a

comprehensive exploration of the experience of housing instability among unaccompanied young people in the U.S.

Methods

The IDI used a novel methodology that explored the experiences of housing instability from youth perspectives. The key features of the VoYC IDI approach included:

- Bilingual field teams and interview tools
- Centering youth perspectives on the “why” behind their experiences of housing instability
- Engaging a broad set of community stakeholders and service providers to support recruitment and engagement with youth
- Integrated analysis of survey data and timeline interviews
- Analytic approaches that produce policy and practice relevant knowledge
- Building a research team that incorporates community participation to enhance informed data collection and analysis

VOYC IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Strengths

- Centers youth perspectives
- Community participation to enhance informed data collection, analyses
- Bilingual field teams
- Policy and practice relevant findings
- Novel and rigorous study design

Limitations

- Low numbers of Latin@ youth and youth under 18
- Point-in-time data rather than longitudinal

Building a Local Field Team

We hired a local field team of interviewers and transcribers in 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 breath of diversity they would bring to the field tem in terms of race-ethnicity, gender identity, sexual

identity, (bi)cultural skills (including native Spanish speakers), personal or family experience or other connection to homelessness and housing instability. Each site team included two interviewers and two transcribers who worked together as a team. All five sites identified at least one “lead agency” and a lead agency staff contact. The lead agency in San Diego County was San Diego Youth Services, a community organization dedicated to ending homelessness in San Diego County. Lead agencies and staff contacts were critical to the recruitment process. All site teams were overseen by a Site Lead at Chapin Hall.

All field team members completed an intensive 2-day training on qualitative interviewing, transcribing, research ethics, navigating difficult or sensitive situations in the field, and self-care and resilience in field research.

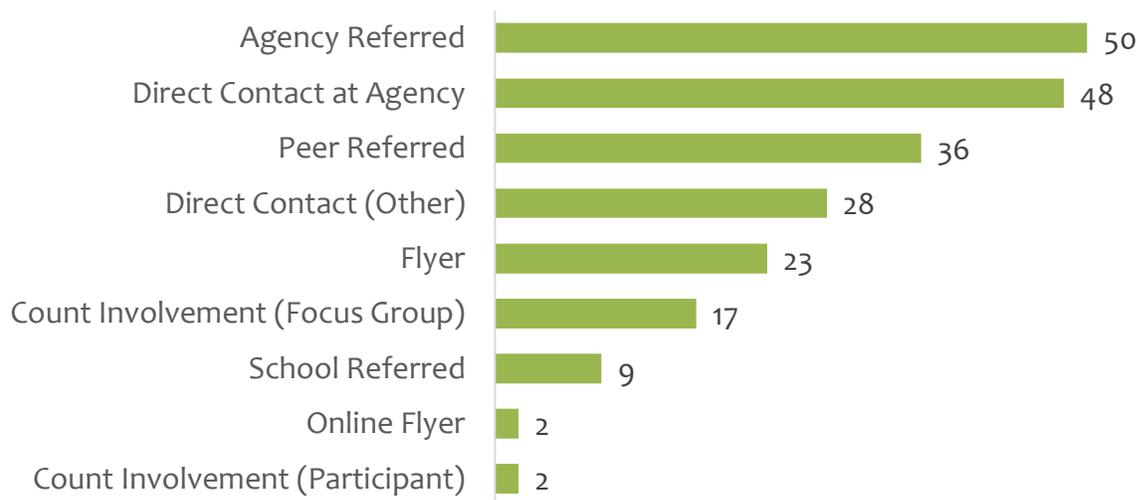
As interviews and transcripts were completed, each were reviewed and rated immediately by the assigned Chapin Hall research team. Each field member received this feedback in writing. We also held weekly phone meetings throughout the nine-month data collection period to discuss challenges in the field, recruitment, and tips for improving interviewing skills.

Recruitment

We used many recruitment strategies to reach diverse groups of youth in social identities and experiences. We specifically targeted diversity in age, sexual identity, race-ethnicity, service system involvement, gender identity, and in histories of homelessness and housing instability. 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 interviews, 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. Below is a table indicating 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 were used to provide supplemental information about the context or process of the interview. Each is described below.

Overall Interview Structure

All youth were informed 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. 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 uses the Housing Timeline Tool described below to document their housing instability stories starting with their chosen beginning through present time.

The IDI is also interested in understanding more than the “facts” of their moves, but also the “social ecology” behind these moves. This means the IDI seeks to understand the environments that youth are navigating (both protective and risky) that are often 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 is 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, 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 and 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 periodically throughout the data collection process.

Background Survey: The third data collection effort is a background survey that includes the same demographic questions appearing on the Brief Youth Survey as part of the Youth Count. However, the background survey included additional questions about types of adversities young people may have experienced both while 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 data and elements of the interview that were not captured on tape. They also included the interviewers' reflections on the interview itself.

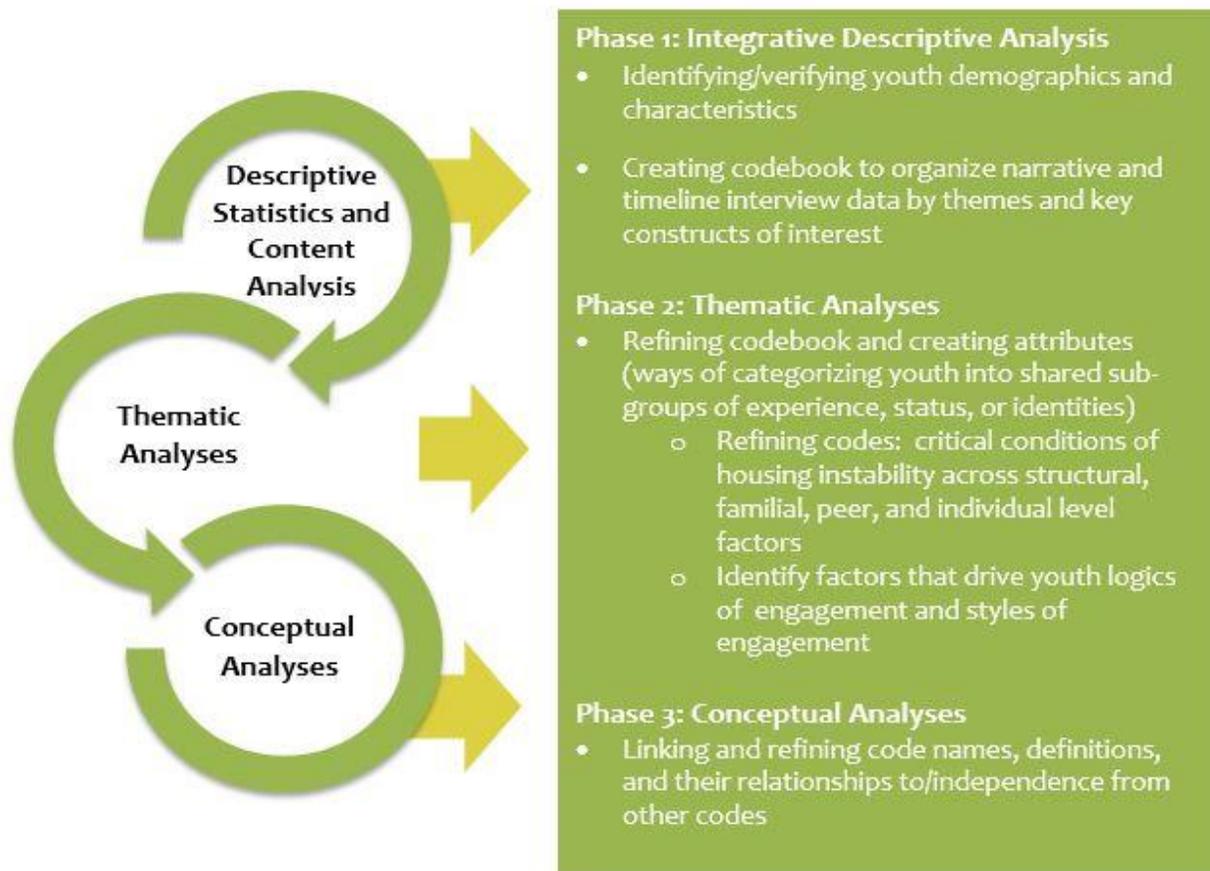
Data Analysis

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

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., to age, foster care history) based on our narrative interviews. When responses could not be reliably imputed, they are 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, 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 conceptual analyses (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: IDI's Multi-phase Approach to Analysis



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

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. This section concludes by sharing their reflections on what has been most helpful and their advice about ending youth homelessness.

We will conclude 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 and identify levels of intervention needed to promote the stability and wellbeing 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.

Results

The goal was to interview approximately 40 young people ages 13 to 25 years old in each of the five sites for a total sample of 200. We were able to interview 215 young people, of which 211 completed surveys. Only one young person declined to be audiotaped. In San Diego County, we interviewed 40 young people and 37 agreed to complete the survey.

Table 1: Homeless or Unstably Housed Youth 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

San Diego County IDI Survey Results

The remaining sections of this report share results from the San Diego youth who participated in the IDI. When relevant, we highlight comparisons between this site and the full IDI sample. Tables showing all of the results for the full IDI sample are provided at the end of this report in Appendix A.

It is important to note here that these findings are not intended to be representative of the full scope of unstably housed youth across all five sites or in San Diego alone. For example, the proportion of youth in San Diego who reported a history of juvenile detention, jail or prison does not necessarily represent the overall proportion of unstably housed youth in San Diego with this background.

Who Are the Youth?

San Diego and Full Sample Results

In this section, we present results on the characteristics of the homeless and unstably housed youth in San Diego County and compare these results to the full IDI sample (Table 2). Table 2 below shows that similar to the full IDI sample, most participants in San Diego County (75.6%) were 18 or older. However, San Diego County is the most diverse site of the five IDI sites where one-third (29.8%) of San Diego County participants identified as Latin@ followed by Multiracial (24.3%), Black/African American (18.9%) and White (16.2%). While most participants in San Diego reported gender identities as either male (37.8%) or female (46%),

nearly 11% (4 participants) identified as transgender or “other.” In both San Diego and the full sample, just over half (56-58%) identified as 100% heterosexual; the remaining youth identified as something other than 100% heterosexual. Similar to the full sample, approximately one-quarter (24.3%) of San Diego participants reported that they were the parent of at least one child.

Table 2: Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth

	San Diego County (n=37)		*Full IDI Sample (N=211)	
	#	%	#	%
Age (in years)				
13 to 17	8	21.7	31	14.7
18 to 21	15	40.5	108	51.2
22 to 25	13	35.1	69	32.7
Missing	1	2.7	3	1.4
Race/Ethnicity	#	%	#	%
White	6	16.2	50	23.7
Black/African American	7	18.9	65	30.8
Latin@	11	29.8	29	13.7
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0.0	6	2.8
Asian	0	0.0	1	0.5
Multiracial	9	24.3	43	20.4
Other	1	2.7	4	1.9
Don't Know	0	0.0	1	0.5
Refused	2	5.4	8	3.8
Missing	1	2.7	4	1.9
Gender Identity	#	%	#	%
Female	17	46.0	82	38.8
Male	14	37.8	107	50.7
Transgender M-F	1	2.7	7	3.3
Transgender F-M	2	5.4	4	1.9
Genderqueer/Nonconforming	0	0.0	3	1.4
Other	1	2.7	1	0.5
Refused	0	0.0	2	1.0
Missing	2	5.4	5	2.4

Sexual Orientation	#	%	#	%
100% Heterosexual	21	56.8	123	58.3
Mostly Heterosexual	5	13.5	16	7.5
Bisexual	3	8.1	22	10.4
Mostly Gay/Lesbian	1	2.7	8	3.8
100% Gay/Lesbian	3	8.1	20	9.5
Not Sexually Attracted to Either M or F	0	0.0	1	0.5
Other	2	5.4	7	3.3
Don't Know	1	2.7	5	2.4
Refused	1	2.7	7	3.3
Missing	0	0.0	2	1.0
Parent of At Least One Child	#	%	#	%
Yes	9	24.3	50	23.7
No	28	75.7	149	70.6
Don't Know	0	0.0	2	1.0
Refused	0	0.0	8	3.7
Missing	0	0.0	2	1.0

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 enter 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 category.

Foster Care: In response to the survey question “Have you ever been in foster care?” 35% of youth in San Diego indicated foster care history compared to 39% in the full sample.

Juvenile Justice: Over one-third of our participants in San Diego (38%) indicated that they had juvenile detention, jail or prison histories in our survey, compared with 49% in the full sample. Later sections of this report will discuss more general police contact and patrolling as a critical condition of housing instability among youth.

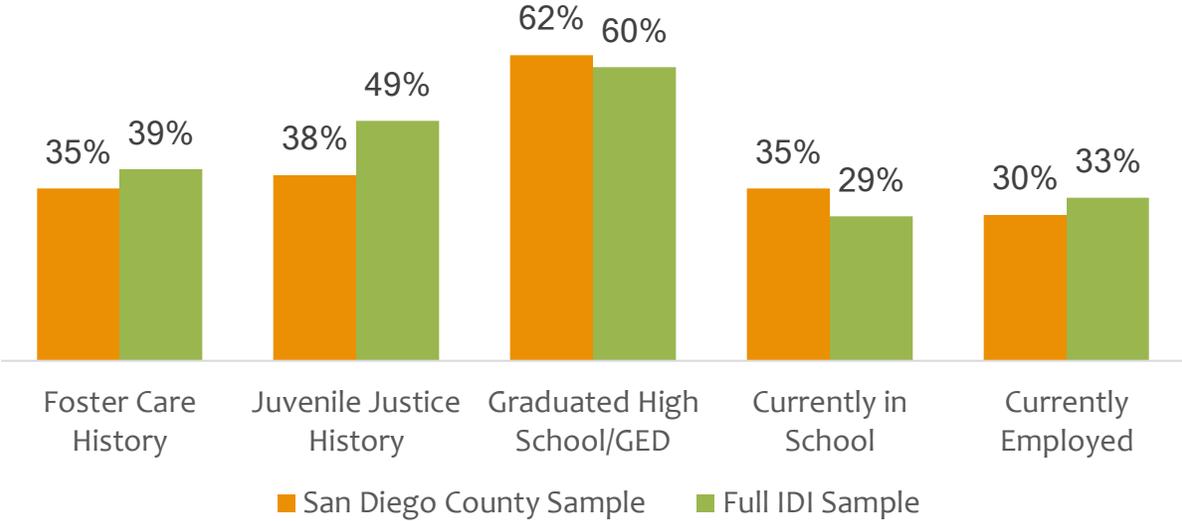
Dually involved youth: Dually involved youth are defined as those who have had both foster care and juvenile justice involvement. Similar to the full sample, 22% of San Diego participants reported involvement in both the juvenile justice and foster care systems.

School: A majority of our participants in San Diego and in the full sample obtained a high school diploma or a GED (62%). At the time of our interview, San Diego participants were slightly more connected to schools and currently enrolled in school (35.1%) than the full IDI sample (29.4%). San Diego County participants were enrolled in alternative high school (23.1%), community college (23.1%), trade school (23.1%) and four-year college, community college, or university (15.4%) at notably higher rates than the full IDI sample (11.3%, 22.6%, 11.3% and 9.7%, respectively). Additionally, participants had both a high school diploma/GED and were currently enrolled in school at greater rates (30%) than the full IDI sample (21%).

Employment: Our survey asked youth if they were currently employed in a place where they received a pay stub. This question was intentionally phrased to capture how many youth were connected to more formal institutions of employment. Thirty percent of youth in San Diego were formally employed at the time of our interviews, compared to 33% in the full sample.

Disconnected Youth: Disconnected youth are often defined as 16-24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school. Figure 6A in Appendix A of the 16-24-year-olds who participated in the IDI in San Diego, 35% would be defined as disconnected, compared to 46% in the full sample.

Figure 4: Youth Involvement and Connection to Systems and Institutions in Full Sample and in San Diego Sample (N=211) and (n=37)



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. Certainly, the narrative interviews capture a larger array of adversities on which we will report. 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. Figures 5-9 below present those results.

Adversities in the Full IDI Sample

Figure 5: Physical Harm and Discrimination/Stigma

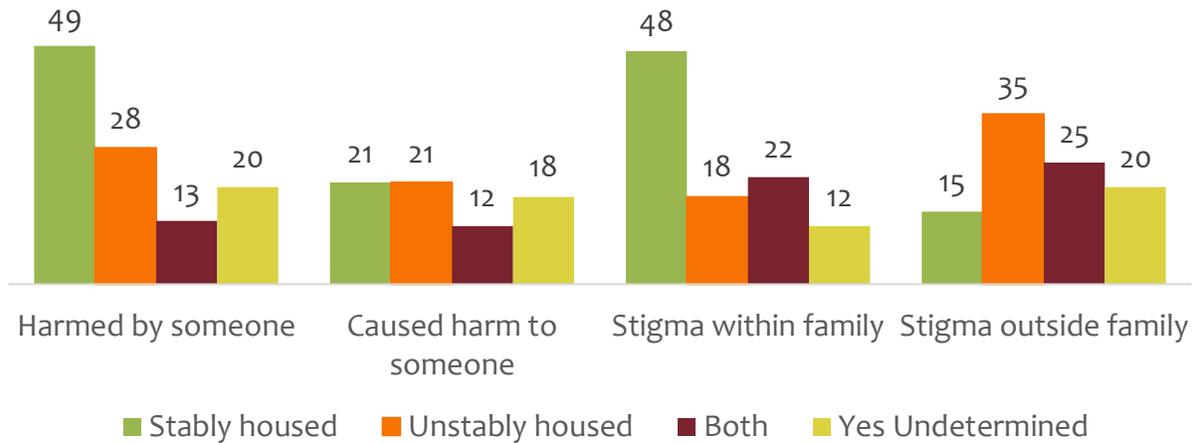


Figure 6: Perpetrator of Physical Harm to Youth

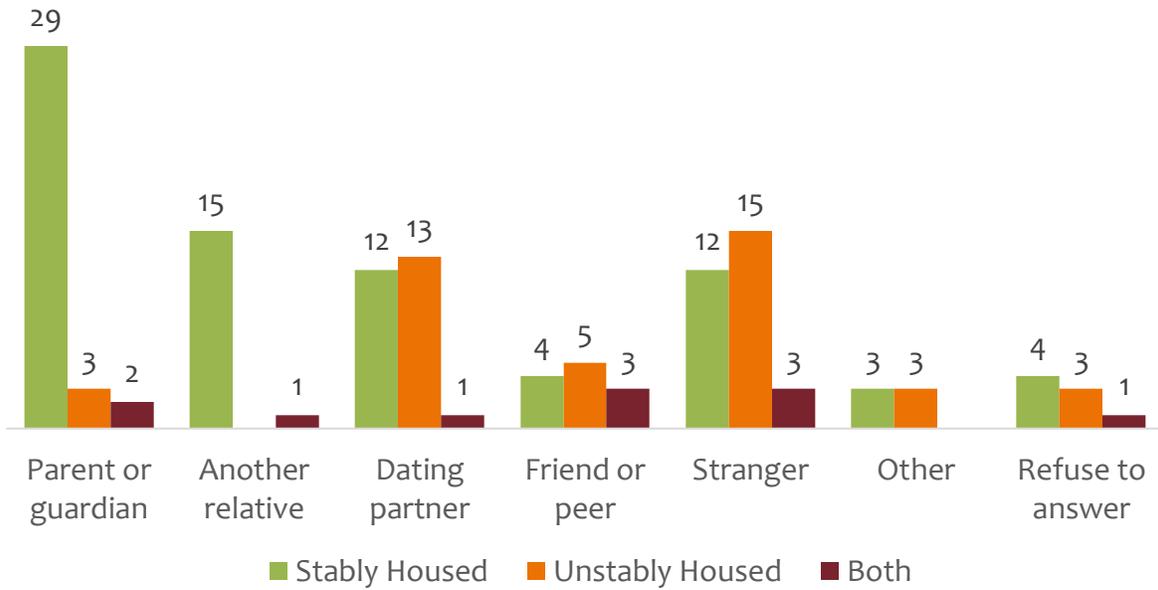


Figure 7: Victim of Physical Harm Caused by Youth

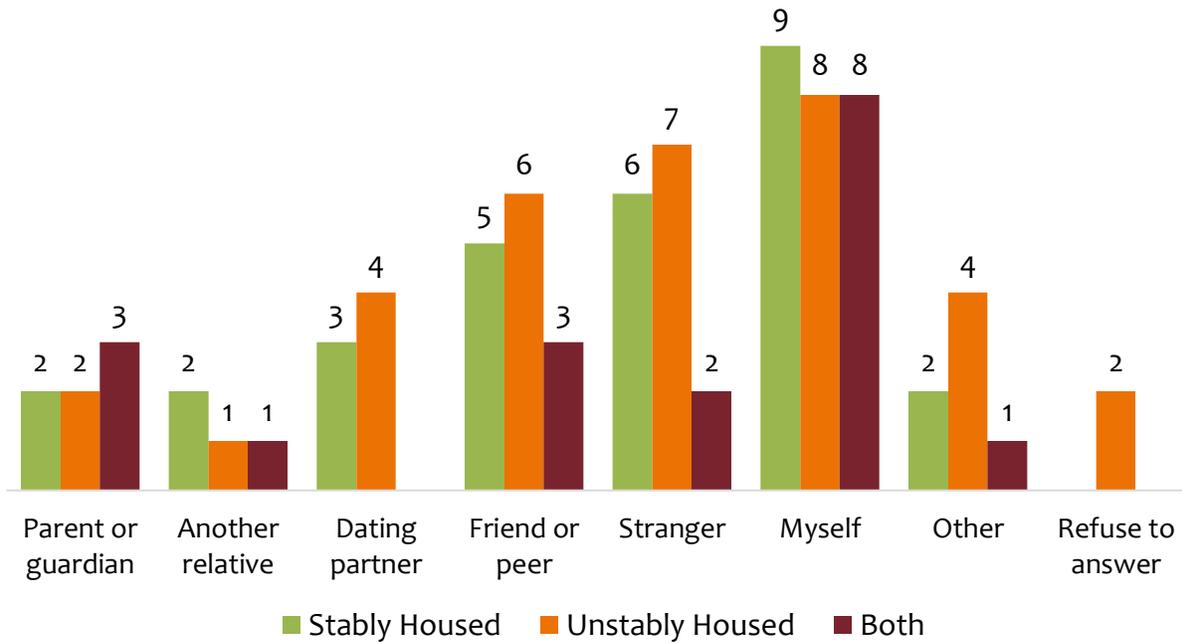


Figure 8: Adversities Tied to Sex

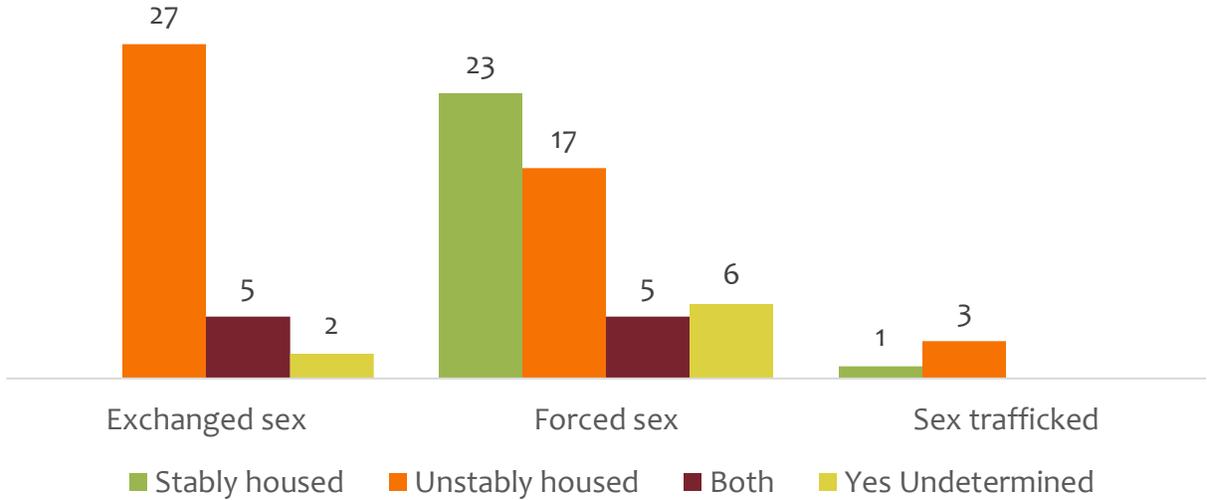
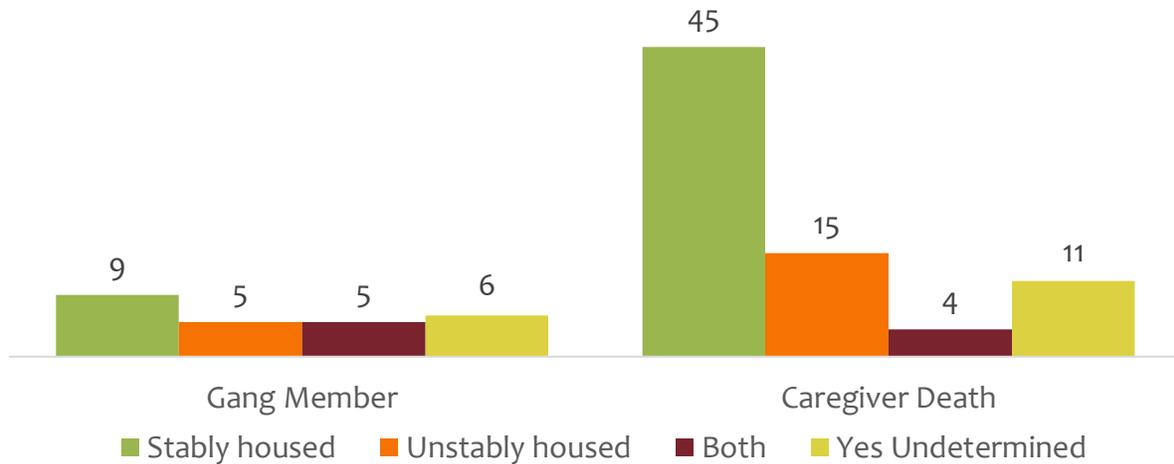


Figure 9: Gang Involvement and Parental Loss



In reviewing the figures above, several important findings immediately become apparent. First, many of the adversities actually decrease as youth leave stable housing (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 causing harm is to themselves. The largest groups of perpetrators of harm 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 stigma and discrimination from outside their families. It is likely that this increase in discrimination from non-family while unstably housed is capturing their new stigmatized status of “homeless.” This becomes an additional status that they must navigate while unstably housed.

We asked several questions about the role of sex for survival, sexual violence, and involvement in the sex trade. 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 (11.9%) 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. While youth in this study were rather open in disclosing a host of adverse experiences during their interviews, reaching youth who are deeply entrenched specifically in sex trafficking would have required a longer engagement in the field and a much more targeted recruitment effort to gain access to this highly regulated and controlled sub-population.

Perhaps surprising is the degree of parental death reported among young people in this study. In our survey, 35% of youth indicated experiencing the death of a parent or caregiver. Equally concerning, 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=19) and while unstably housed (n=16). This response was double the number for any of the other options.

In the San Diego sample, the most frequently reported experiences of adversity were being physically harmed by another (68%) and experiencing discrimination both within the family (51%) and outside the family (43%). San Diego participants also reported higher rates of exchange of sex for basic needs (24%) when compared to the full IDI sample (16%).

Adversities in the San Diego Sample

In San Diego County, Figure 1A in Appendix A shows that San Diego participants most commonly reported experience of adversity was experiencing physical harm from another (68%) making San Diego the highest reported site for this adversity out of all five IDI sites. The most common source of this harm was from parents and guardians (n = 10) or relatives (n = 5) while stably housed (n = 8 and n = 5 respectively). Seven young people also stated they were harmed by a dating partner (n = 7). However, similar to the full sample, the next most frequently reported adversities were experiences with discrimination or stigma within the family (51%), followed closely by discrimination or stigma outside the family (43%). Close to one-quarter (24%) reported the death of a parent or caregiver, a lower proportion than in the overall IDI sample (36%). However, a higher proportion (24%) reported exchanging sex for a place to stay than the overall sample (16%) making San Diego the highest reported site for this adversity as well out of all five IDI sites. A smaller proportion reported belonging to a gang (8%) than in the full IDI sample (12%) and one youth in San Diego reported being taken, transported or sold for sex.

We also compared experiences of adversity by youth demographic characteristics. These charts can be found in Appendix A, Tables 1A-6A.

Cumulative Adversity Scores

To understand how the surveyed adversities differed across demographic groupings of youth across all IDI sites listed in Table 2, we calculated mean scores². 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 scores. However, significance testing of these differences indicates the following three sub-groups of youth had significantly higher than average cumulative adversity scores: youth who identified as LGBTQA youth, foster youth, and youth with

² This analysis is based on 201 youth. Of the 211 10 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.

juvenile justice history. Additional supplemental tables related to the adversity findings are included in Appendix A.

Table 3: Cumulative Experiences of Adversities

	n	Mean
Total	201	2.8
Gender (n=196)		
Female	78	2.9
Male	105	2.6
Other	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
Latin@	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 $p < .001$

Cumulative Adversity in the San Diego Sample

Table 4 shows that similar to the IDI sample, the average number of accumulated adversities experienced by San Diego County participants is 2.9. Also, similar to the full IDI sample, participants with experiences with foster care (3.2) and the justice system (3.4) reported slightly higher numbers of cumulative experiences with adversities. However, San Diego County participants who reported notably greater than the average total experiences with adversity are youth who identified as gender minorities (4.3), Black/African American (3.7), and LGBQA (3.9).

Table 4: Cumulative Experience with Adversities in San Diego County

(n=35) ³		
	n	Mean
Total	35	2.9
Gender (n=33)		
Female	15	3.0
Male	14	1.9
Other	4	4.3
Age (n=34)		
13 to 17 years old	7	2.9
18 to 25 years old	27	3.0
Race/Ethnicity (n=32)		
Black	7	3.7
White	6	1.8
Latin@	11	2.9
Multiracial	7	3.1
Other	1	0
Sexual Orientation (n=33)		
100% Heterosexual	19	1.9
LGBQA	14	3.9

³ This analysis is based on 35 youth. Of the 37 who completed surveys, 2 of those youth did not answer 4 or more of the adversity questions and were omitted. When responses differ from 35, we note that total n in the corresponding cell within the table.

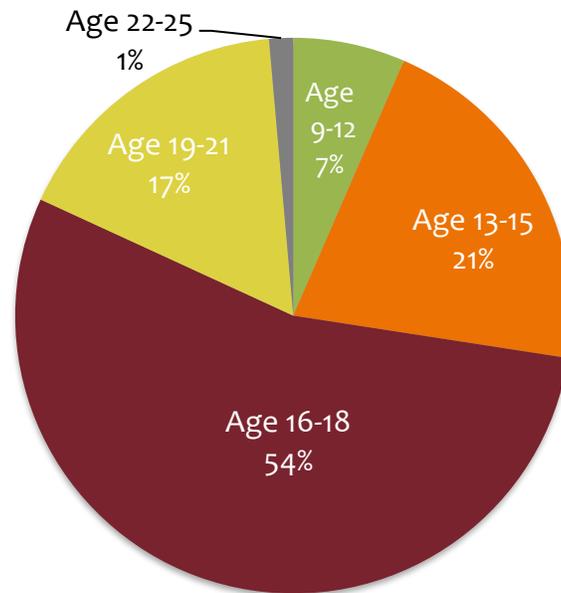
Foster Care History (n=34)		
Yes	13	3.2
No	21	2.7
Ever spent time in detention, jail or prison (n=35)		
Yes	13	3.4
No	22	2.5

As the narratives of two youth’s stories starting on page 53 will illustrate, the adversities youth have experienced exceed those measured in our survey. While the survey reveals some important patterns, the narrative interviews provide the context and detail necessary for unpacking these adversities and providing insight into potential points of intervention. The interviews also illuminate the critical strengths and resiliencies that shape these young people’s stories. This report now shares our analysis of those stories.

Beginnings of Housing Instability in the Full Sample

The age at which participants in the full IDI sample were first homeless on their own varied in the full sample (n = 215) (Figure 10). Over one-half of our participants experienced homelessness 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 in Full Sample
(N=215)**

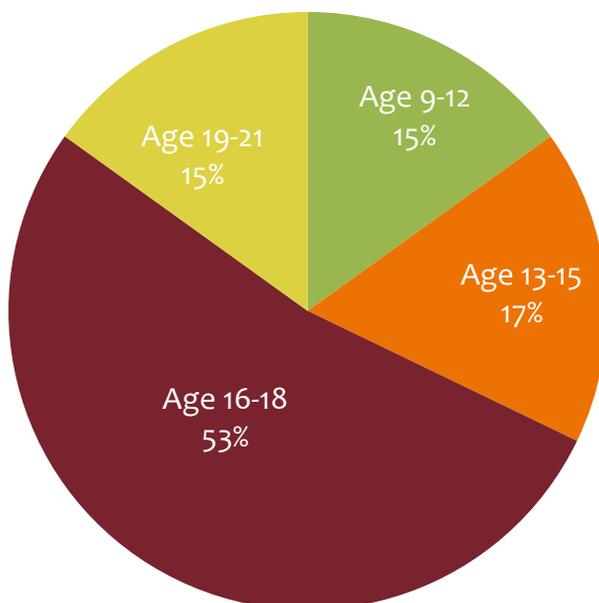


Knowing one’s age of first homelessness, however, tells us very little about the “why” behind these numbers. Youth described these beginnings within a web of early life challenges with their families of origin. They were clear that these realities were the early seeds of the instability they currently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

Beginnings of Housing Instability in the San Diego Sample

Relatedly, Figure 11 below shows that 70% of the San Diego sample described their homelessness beginning between the ages of 13-18, 15% stated it began between the ages of 9-12 and 15% identified their homelessness to begin between the ages of 19-21.

Figure 11: Age at First Spell of Homelessness
(N=40)



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 in the full sample named family-related issues as core to the beginning of their instability. No interview started without naming parents, extended family, siblings or foster families within the first few sentences. The five most common sub-themes to 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 the beginnings to more than one event 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 the quotes, youth name a cascade of other experiences that followed or preceded their chosen beginnings. For example, experiencing foster care is often embedded within prior experiences of a family dynamic of abuse and neglect, parental struggles with addiction or mental health, often poverty, and sometimes homelessness. Parental struggles with mental health and/or addictions can risk one’s 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, and others not explicitly named by young people at the start of their interviews.

Foster Care

Of the 82 youth with foster care histories, 38 (46%) reported that simply being removed from home and being 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 or even 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

“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 youth 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 (23.7%) 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 or 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 on-going conflict with a parent or a step-parent as the core issue behind their homelessness. Sometimes youth noted their own issues with “anger” or drug use. But just as often it 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 sub-theme: parents and family members deeply struggled with or outright rejected their emerging adult child’s sexuality. Sometimes youth left on their own accord, other times parents kicked youth out or issued frustrated ultimatums causing a young person’s departure.

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 a house together. If I do see y'all in the house together, you gotta get out’.” **Juan, Philadelphia County**

“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 4:30pm 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

“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 3rd 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 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 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 step-dad 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 house⁴." **Mackenzie, Walla Walla County**

"... my mother she um she had a nervous breakdown when I was about nine. It was very

⁴ 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. The definition or description of a trap house may differ slightly from youth to youth, and location to location. Typically, it refers often 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.

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**

“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 to where their stories begin represent 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, parental mental health and addiction, and youth’s own struggles and developmental processes. We now turn to understanding how these beginnings unfolded across 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 their housing instability over time. We begin by identifying the levels of instability they experienced (e.g., couch surfing, shelters, streets). We then present the analysis of the critical conditions that shaped their trajectories of housing instability. Two youth’s trajectories from San Diego are mapped out to illustrate how these conditions unfold over time.

Levels of Instability

As seen in Figure 12, below, most youth in all five sites experienced couch surfing at some point in their housing instability. In San Diego, 93% of the youth described some form of couch surfing while unaccompanied and unstably housed. With the exception of youth in Walla Walla, the majority of youth across all five sites also experienced at least one stay in a shelter or transitional living program (TLP).

Nearly all youth in our study experienced couch surfing at some point, or at multiple points, across their stories. Few individual stories involved only one level of homelessness (Figure 13). Instead, the majority of youth, across all five counties, experienced 2-3 different levels.

Figure 12: Percentage of Youth Experiencing Each Level of Instability (N=215)

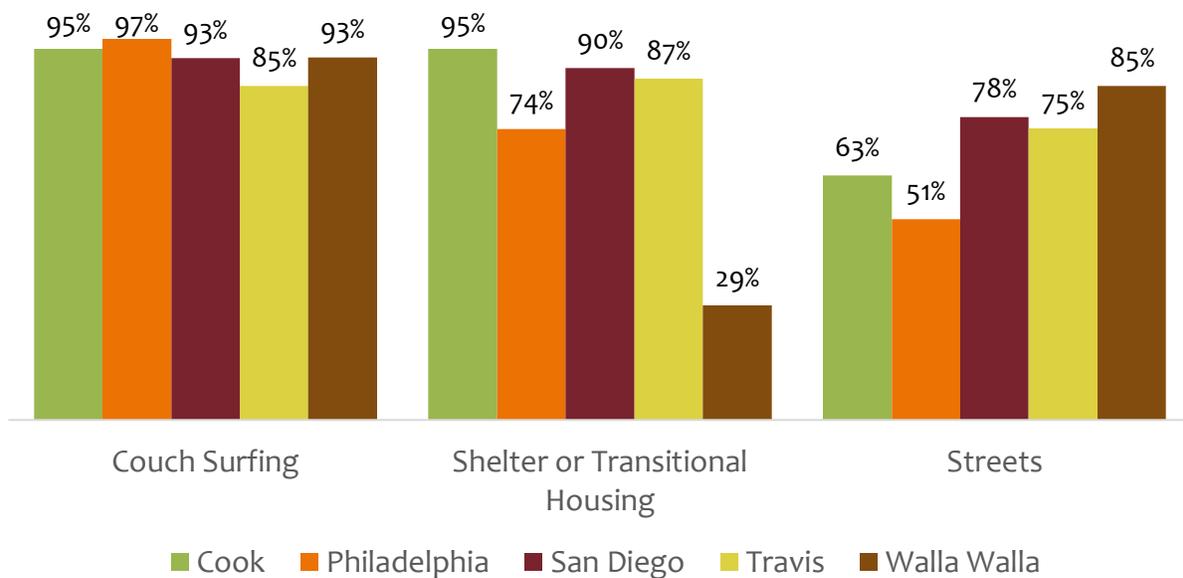
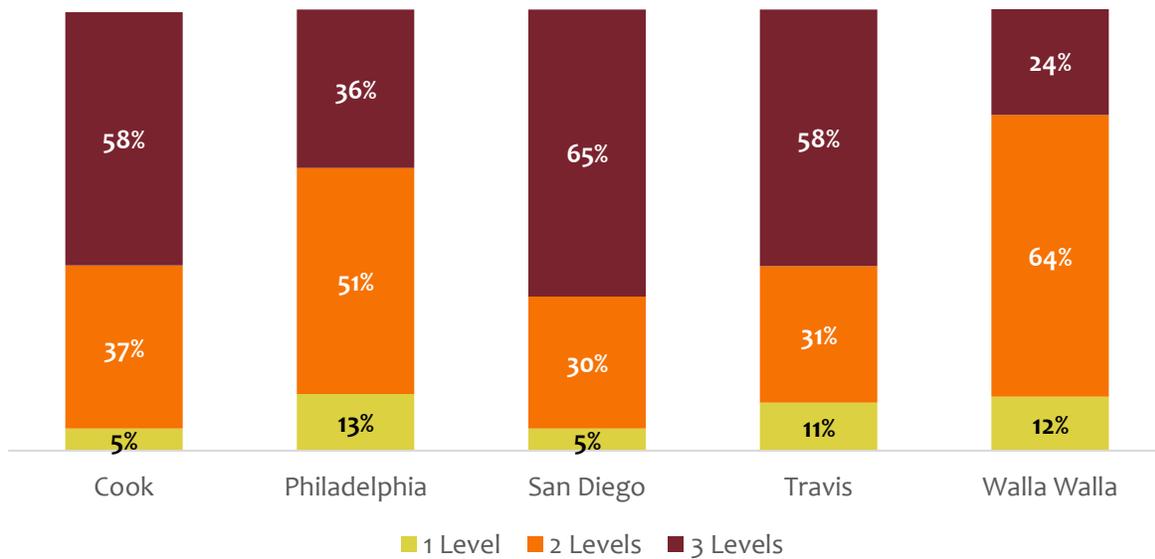
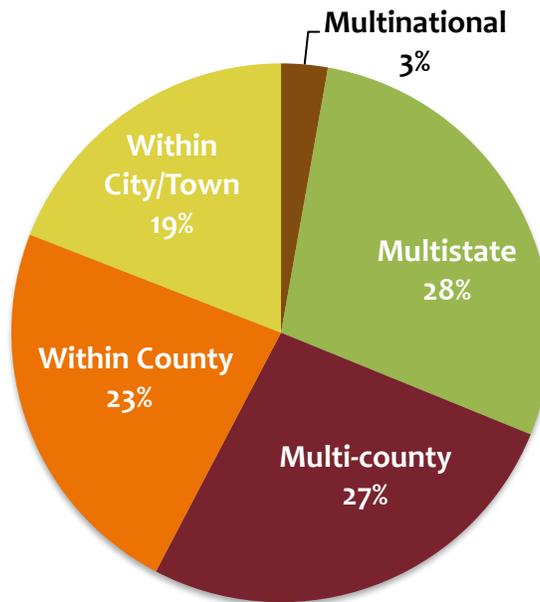


Figure 13: Number of Levels of Homelessness Experienced by Youth (N=215)



In the full sample, youth’s experiences with housing instability also included high degrees of geographic mobility. Within their housing timelines, youth described high levels of instability in their place of residence. In fact, only 19% of the full sample of youth stayed within their cities or towns (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Geography of Homelessness in the Full Sample (N=215)



In San Diego, the highest number of youth were unstably housed only within the county of San Diego (35%), followed by multi-state (28%), multi-county within California (18%), multinational (Mexico) (15%), and only 2 youth stayed within the city of San Diego.

Exploring Critical Conditions of Youth Homelessness

Young people’s experiences of instability were certainly unique. However, our analysis identified a set of shared themes that they all navigated. We refer to these as “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 categorize and color-code the themes of their responses within four levels: individual, peer, family, and structural factors. Altogether, these factors of influence are labeled “multilevel critical conditions.” All youth navigated some combination of these multilevel critical conditions (See Figure 15). Within this report, we provide two in-depth illustrative examples to help readers see the unique ways in which these shared critical conditions shape individual youth trajectories of housing instability. Ultimately, we will return to these multilevel conditions to identify

potential points of intervention, and gaps in services and supports that could potentially have shifted or interrupted their housing instability.

First, however, we define what comprises each level below. Figure 15 then presents the themes within each of the critical condition levels.

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 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 role that peers play in housing instability both positively and negatively. 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, 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 being a source of mutual support (n=39).

Family

These themes identify how youth perceived their family systems and their members to contribute to their 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 in 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) 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 stability (n=34). Some youth also named the level of surveillance or policing of public spaces (n=22) as causing added instability.

Figure 15: Multisystem Factors Shaping Trajectories of Housing Instability



Taken together, these are the multisystemic critical conditions of their housing instability. Figure 15 above illustrates those findings.

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. The section starts with a narrative of the young person's story followed by a graphic representation of that young person's narrative in the form of timeline trajectory. Next follows a discussion of the critical conditions present within that timeline trajectory. Following this, a second graphic presents the same story but highlights the different levels of homelessness that young person experienced across his or her trajectory of housing instability. In both cases, the trajectories are a way of synthesizing the detail of the storyline in order to identify the core critical conditions above, and visually mark key moments within the youth's story. These two illustrations serve to illuminate important features of a youth's story. They help to better understand the nature of youth homelessness and housing

instability, identify significant conditions and time periods in a youth's trajectory, and point to implications for policy and intervention. The two graphic trajectories combined with the youth's narrative intend to provide a comprehensive understanding of a youth's experiences of housing instability.

The Story of "Baylee"

Baylee self-identified as a 17-year-old Multiracial (White and Latina) female who was unstably housed in San Diego at the time of her interview. The majority of Baylee's young life was marked by housing instability and homelessness beginning at the age of two.

Baylee described these early years of childhood as "*mov[ing] around a lot*" between hotels, shelters and apartments of friends and family. These moves, with her mom and her two older sisters, included long-distances across four states (California, Arizona, Arkansas and Oklahoma). She attributed her family's housing instability to her mother's physical illness which caused her to have gastric bypass surgery when Baylee was two. After that, her mom was not able to hold a steady job because "*she'd get sick*" and was unable to pay rent for an apartment.

At the age of 11, Baylee's mom committed suicide. Baylee was placed temporarily into foster care in Arizona while Child Protective Services (CPS) identified a more permanent placement. Despite contacting Baylee's father in California immediately after her mother's death, it took over two years for him to receive approval from Arizona's child welfare system. During this time period, Baylee lived in two abusive foster care homes and one group home. It is this same time period that she also reports having suicidal thoughts.

Once her father received the court's approval, Baylee moved to San Diego to live with her dad, stepmother, and stepsiblings. But she and her stepmother began to chronically argue; their relationship was mostly combative. Baylee began a pattern of being kicked out and cycling between her grandmother's and her aunt's places, she even foster care again for a short time period. Baylee noted that she attended "*at least fifteen elementary schools*" and "*missed the fourth grade entirely.*" At the time of her interview, she responded that she "*doesn't know*" if she is even currently enrolled in school.

The final time Baylee returned to her dad's place she continued to struggle with her mental health and attempts suicide multiple times. She described her dad as unsupportive of her mental health needs and after a cycle of being kicked out and returning, Baylee decided to leave to stay in a hotel with a friend and her mom, who are also homeless. Her dad then tells her not to ever come back home. After short stays rotating between her friend's hotel room, her boyfriend, and her grandmother, Baylee tried to access a youth emergency shelter. But she was unable to access this resource because her father would not give the necessary permission for Baylee, a minor, to stay. She then returned to staying in hotels but this time began to exchange sex for money to get a hotel room. Once she ran out of money and hotels were no longer an option, Baylee was faced with staying on the streets. In one last attempt, she returned to the same emergency shelter at 2:30am. They let her in for the night. The following day, the shelter received permission from Baylee's father to stay there. At the time of her interview, Baylee was approaching her 21-day time limit and hoped to get a 2-week extension. She was six months from her 18th birthday. Baylee hoped to enter Job Corps to avoid being placed into foster care for the remainder of her time as a minor. She was unsure what she would do if she did not get into Job Corps. Still, Baylee had hope for a brighter future.

Baylee's Timeline of Housing Instability

Figure 16 below presents Baylee's Timeline Trajectory of Housing Instability. The large arrow represents the young person's story over time. Circles in the center of the arrow are used to indicate key moments of transition within the youth's story, known as tipping points. The timeline begins with the first big tipping point in the young person's story, and ends with the most recent tipping point as of the date of the interview. The bold text and bullet points paired with each circle provide information about the tipping point and the factors leading up to it. Each circle is colored to illustrate which critical condition(s) significantly contributed to the youth's housing instability at that time period. The multilevel critical conditions discussed above are assigned their own unique color: peer/familial as a relational domain (orange), structural (green) and individual (red). Peer and family have been combined to

indicate youth's relational and interpersonal systems (orange). The distinctions between these two sub-categories (peer versus family) will be made clear within the trajectory. The proportion of color within each circle represents the degree to which each of these multilevel critical conditions shaped the youth's trajectory of homelessness. Quotes from the narrative above are used to provide context about the events and circumstances surrounding these important moments in youth's stories. This trajectory shows the way that critical conditions in a young person's housing instability change over time, and with them, the appropriate forms of intervention.

Baylee's timeline below starts where she identified the beginning of her homelessness. From the ages of two to 11 Baylee described herself as unstably housed with her mother until her mother committed suicide and Baylee entered foster care. The first circle in her timeline is colored part orange to represent that it was her family context that first led her to become homeless and part green to represent Baylee's involvement with foster care system. The second circle in Baylee's critical conditions trajectory is green to indicate her stay in two foster homes and one group home between the ages of 11-13. The third circle in Baylee's timeline trajectory is colored mostly orange to indicate the conflict she had with her step-mother resulting in her kick-out return cycle from their home. It is also colored partly green to indicate that she did return to foster care for a short time period in the cycle of housing instability. The fourth circle in Baylee's trajectory is colored part red to indicate her individual struggles with mental health and part orange to represent her dad's lack of support for her mental health needs resulting in her final discharge from his home. The fifth circle in Baylee's timeline trajectory is colored orange to represent the acquaintances, peers and extended family members she temporarily stayed with when couch surfing as well as her father's unwillingness to grant her permission to stay in a youth shelter. The final circle in Baylee's trajectory is colored mostly green to indicate her access of the youth shelter and part red to represent how her individual status as a minor continued to affect her ability to access services.

Figure 16: Baylee’s Timeline Trajectory of Housing Instability



The critical conditions present in Baylee’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 her movement into homelessness. Across her timeline, supports and interventions targeting Baylee’s mother’s struggles with her physical and mental health may have prevented Baylee from becoming unstably housed with her mother at such a young age. Moreover, such targeted interventions may have prevented the suicide of Baylee’s mother or diverted Baylee from her own unaccompanied homelessness and subsequent struggles with mental health. Interventions focused on treating Baylee’s own struggle with mental health directly after the passing of her mother would have provided Baylee with the supports she needed to be more emotionally stable and potentially provide support to Baylee’s dad and step-mother to help reduce the conflict they experienced together. Addressing Baylee’s mental health and the family conflict may have reduced or even prevented the prolonged leave/kick-out and return cycle she experienced during the early formative years of her life. Additionally, relaxing policies that require guardian consent for minors to stay in a shelter would have increased Baylee’s access to a shelter and provided her with a safer alternative than exchanging sex to have a place to stay.

Baylee’s Trajectory across Four Levels of Housing Instability

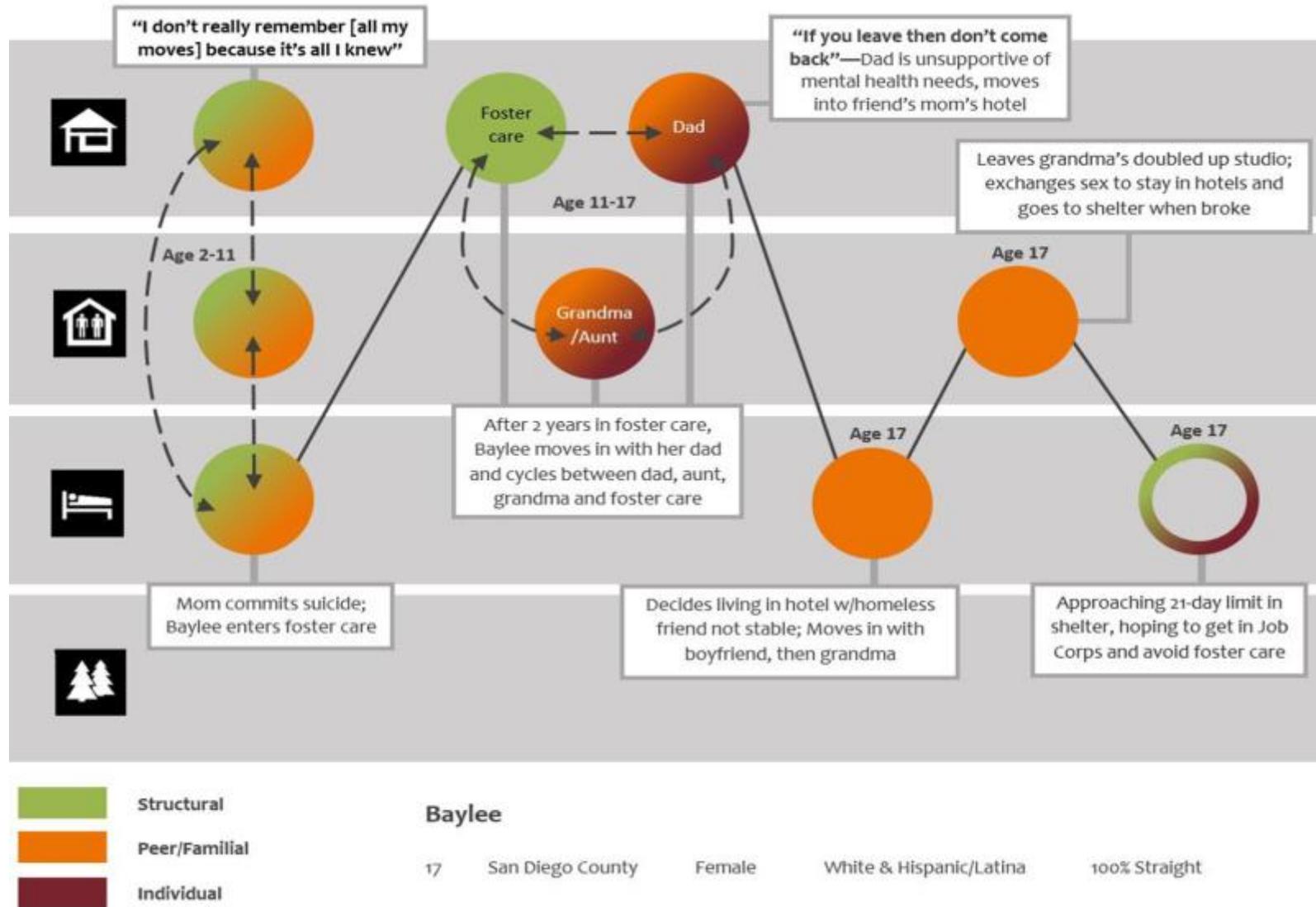
The above illustration, however, hides much of the instability in the levels of housing Baylee had during her lifetime. The housing trajectory below in Figure 17 takes the narrative and condenses it further. This timeline highlights how young people move through different forms of housing instability over the course of their stories. Each of the grey rows, labelled 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. We do not intend the ordering of this illustration’s rows to indicate more or less stability or degrees of assumed exposure to risk, however. Instead, we recognize that the potential for exposure to harm is possible within all types of housing. In Figure 17 below, stable housing, located in the top row, includes staying with parents or foster parents, in institutional placements like group Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

homes, juvenile justice centers, and residential treatment centers or hospitals. The second row includes instances of couch surfing including temporary housing with family members and peers (and trap houses), while the third level, sheltered, includes formal temporary housing such as shelters, TLPs, and hotels. Lastly, the bottom row contains instances of being unsheltered including 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 what we refer to as a “tipping point.” To read the timeline, follow the black line between circles from left to right. The color of each circle reflects the factors that led to the move from the current housing context, where the circle is located, to the following housing context. The text box connected to a circle provides a brief summary of the factors related to that tipping point. The 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 is not filled in because the next tipping point in the young person’s trajectory is unknown. However, the colored ring shows the associated critical conditions that we might recommend attending to, based on what we do know about their story.

When understanding her trajectory across four levels of instability, we see in Figure 17 below that Baylee stayed within the first three levels of housing instability and managed to stay off the streets. In her first period of accompanied unstable housing between the ages of two and 11, Baylee and her mother cycled between their own apartments (level 1), staying with friends, family and partners in their homes (level 2), and staying in shelters (level 3). After her mom passed away, Baylee cycled between living with her dad and foster care (level 1) and staying with her aunt and grandma (level 2) between the ages of 11 and 17. After being kicked out of her dad’s home for the final time, she stayed with a friend and her friend’s mother in a motel (level 3) before returning to her grandmother’s studio (level 2). Finally, after family members move into her grandmother’s cramped studio, Baylee decided to leave. When ultimately faced with staying on the streets, she turned to exchanging sex for lodging in motels before at last gaining her dad’s permission to stay in a shelter (level 3).

Figure 17: Baylee’s Levels Housing Instability Trajectory



Understanding Baylee's Story in the Context of San Diego County

Baylee's story represents a number of characteristics that are unique to San Diego County and distinguish it from other In-depth Interview sites. The San Diego IDI sample was more diverse and had larger proportions of Multiracial youth and youth under 18 of which Baylee is both. Her experiences with exchanging sex for money/a place to stay was a theme more frequently reported by homeless youth in San Diego (24%) than other IDI sites (16%) as were her experiences in accessing mental health services (43% vs. 38%, respectively).

Baylee's movement across multiple states was also characteristic of many (28%) youth who participated in an interview in San Diego County. Uncharacteristic of the sample was Baylee's disconnection from school. San Diego participants reported higher rates of school enrollment (29%) than other IDI sites (19%) and it appears Baylee's frequent movement across states for the vast majority of her life hindered her ability to attend school. In a similar vein, Mary's story below underscores the deeply unstable nature of youth homelessness and the potential for multilevel interventions.

The Story of Mary

Mary self-identified as a 17-year-old Latina whose assigned gender at birth was male. Mary begins her story of housing instability at the age of 12. This was the year her parents divorced and Mary remained with her mother who struggled to provide a secure home. Between the ages of 12 and 15 Mary, her mom and siblings cycled between multiple apartments and the homes of extended family in various parts of San Diego County. They also lived in Las Vegas for a short period of time with a cousin. Mary described her mom as an unstable, compulsive person with a gambling and drinking problem, “It’s always unstable living with my mom,” she noted. She attributed the majority of their moves to her mother’s gambling wins or losses.

During this same time period, Mary described herself as very depressed; she struggled with an eating disorder and in her own words says, “I had a lot of self-hatred.” Mary also began to self-harm and first attempted suicide in the seventh grade. After a short stay in a hospital, she approached her school counselor and started therapy. But just as quickly, Mary stopped attending school because she was so depressed and consequently, discontinued therapy. Over time, Mary’s mental and physical health worsened; she collapsed from dehydration and was sent to another hospital. Afterward, Mary was connected to a new therapist who sent her to a behavioral health program for youth with eating disorders. Here, she met her current boyfriend. After a three week stay, she was released from the program and returned to live with her mom. At age 15, while still presenting as male in her family, she told her parents she was gay. Her mother was supportive but her mother’s boyfriend, Mary’s father and his wife were not.

A week after her disclosure, Mary again attempted suicide and was sent to a mental health program at Rady Children’s Hospital where her eating and mental health were monitored. After a three day stay, she moved in with her dad and his wife who both stigmatized her sexuality and her mental health needs. Despite experiencing this intrafamilial discrimination, Mary lived with them for a year-and-a-half. During this time, she was not attending school.

She was forbidden to attend her group therapy sessions at an LGBT center located in San Marcos. After a fight with her dad and stepmom, she was kicked out and decided to move back in with her mom under the condition that her mom had broken up with her boyfriend. But a few weeks later, her mom reunited with her boyfriend and abandoned Mary in the room they rented; a pattern she noted of her mom, *“My mom always falls back on me or her kids when a relationship ends...we are a form of income to her.”* When Mary was made aware that her mom did not pay the rent for the remainder of the month she was evicted. She went to live with a family acquaintance in San Marcos, where she had a job working at a sushi restaurant. While living with this family, she planned to save money to be able to get her own place.

But then, Mary lost her job and began searching for another place to stay. She posted her picture on a Craigslist "housing wanted" ad and received sexually suggestive offers from *“creepy”* men offering her a place to stay. Her boyfriend convinced her not to take these offers and instead, let Mary stay in his car. Together they lived in his car and would park at various places across San Diego County. Sometimes, they even stayed in his own mother’s driveway. After a few months, the neighbors called the police reporting suspicious activity. But when confronted by the police, Mary noted they *“were really understanding and let me go.”* One of the officers called and made an appointment for Mary at an LGBT resource center that gave her information about Job Corps and homeless youth shelters in San Diego. Avoiding services out of fear of being placed in the foster care system, Mary continued to stay in the car but she became *“really paranoid”* that she would again get in trouble with the police. After an additional week in the car, she decided to call a homeless youth emergency shelter. This was where she was staying at the time of her interview.

The shelter connected Mary to multiple resources and she received mental and physical healthcare services including dental care. She also had an appointment to enroll in a San Diego charter school the following day noting this to be a better fit for her than *“traditional school”* because she is so far behind and her housing is still precarious. After her 21-day stay is up, Mary said she will likely move back into her boyfriend’s car for a few

months. They planned to save money during this time to have enough for a deposit on an apartment in Arizona where rents are cheaper and her boyfriend's sister lives.

Mary's Timeline of Housing Instability

Figure 18 below presents Mary's Timeline Trajectory of Housing Instability. Similar to Baylee's timeline trajectory, circles in the center of the arrow are used to display periods of time in Mary's story of housing instability. Each circle is colored to illustrate which critical factors or conditions contributed to her housing instability at that time period. As mentioned above, the proportion of color within each circle represents the three critical conditions (peer/familial, structural, and individual) that impacted Mary's trajectory into homelessness.

Mary's timeline below begins where she identified the beginning of her homelessness. The first circle in her timeline is colored orange (family) to represent that it was her family context that first led her to become homeless when she was unstably housed with her mother beginning at the age of 12. The second circle is colored mostly red (individual) to depict Mary's own struggles with her mental and physical health and partly green (structural) to represent her multiple stays in hospitals and treatment centers for her health. The third circle in Mary's Timeline Trajectory is colored part orange to represent the unsupportive and unstable family context in which she lived as she cycled between her mom and dad's places. This orange color includes the stigma she faced in her family around her sexuality and gender identity. This circle is also colored partly red to represent Mary's continued struggles with her mental health. The fourth circle is colored part orange to represent the support Mary's boyfriend offered when he diverted her from staying in potentially sexually exploitive living arrangements with strangers and offering her his car to stay in. This circle is also colored part green to represent Mary's interactions with police who also played a supportive role by not arresting her for staying in the car and instead, referring her to services in San Diego. The fifth and final circle is also colored part orange and part green to represent Mary's decision to stay in a youth shelter and her mom's ongoing requests to live with her when her mom is unable to live with her partner.

Figure 18: Mary's Timeline Trajectory of Housing Instability

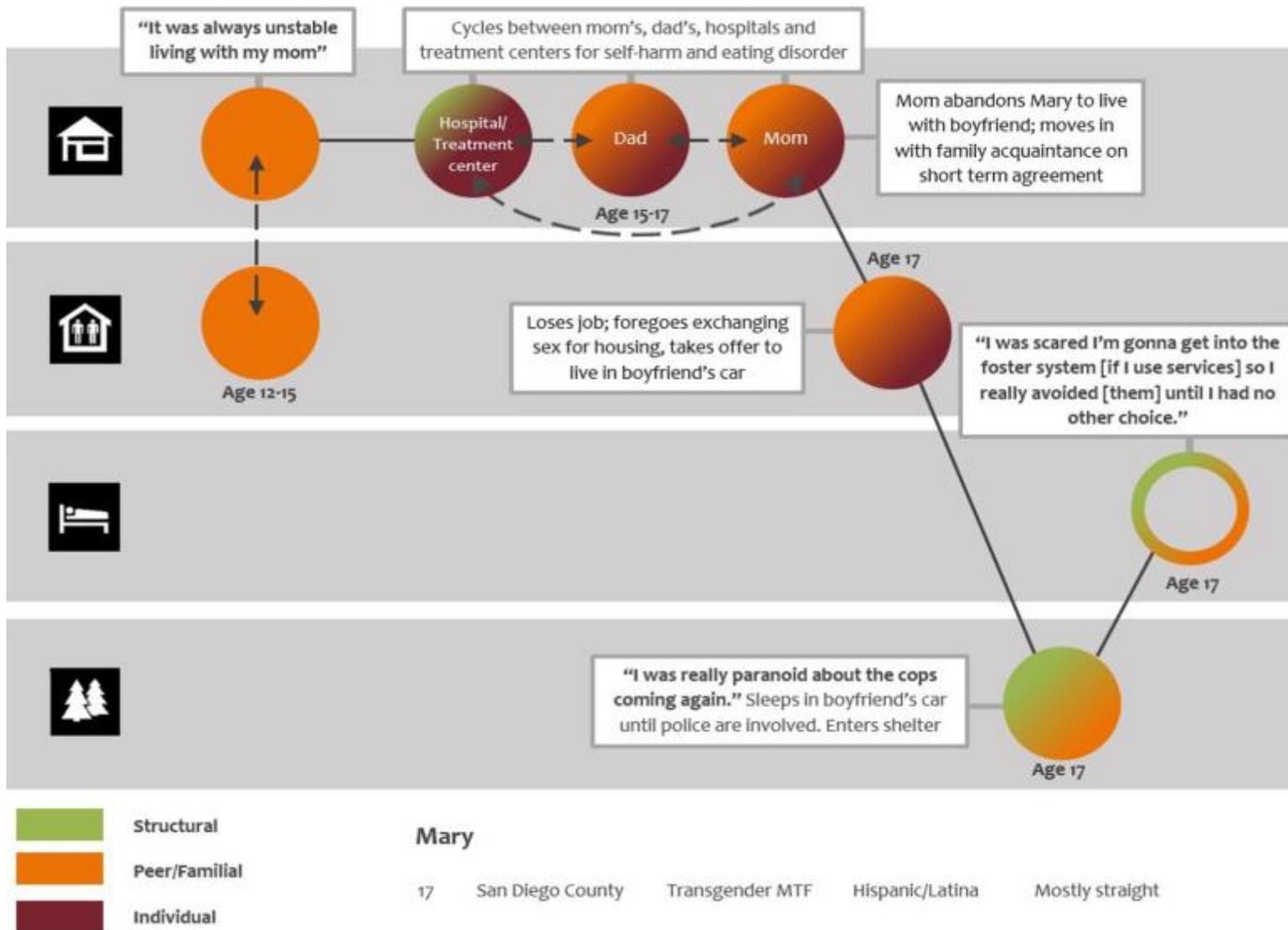


The critical conditions present in Mary's story provide insight into her needs at each critical point of her housing trajectory, what gaps existed and what types of interventions may have been implemented to prevent her movement into homelessness. Across her timeline, supports and interventions targeting her mother's struggles with mental health and addiction may have prevented Mary from becoming unstably housed with her mother and protected Mary from developing her own struggles with mental and physical health. Moreover, such targeted interventions may have diverted Mary from her own unaccompanied homelessness and precarious living conditions all together. Additionally, the provision of LGBTQA centered family therapy for Mary's dad and stepmother may have helped them to be more open and understanding of her sexuality and gender identity thereby reducing their conflict and Mary's inability to stay with them.

Mary's trajectory across four levels of housing instability

This above trajectory, however, hides much of the instability in the levels of housing experiences Mary had over her lifetime. When understanding her trajectory across the levels of instability, we see in Figure 19 below that Mary stayed on all four levels of housing instability over the course of her trajectory. In her first period of accompanied unstable housing between the ages of 12 and 15, Mary and her siblings cycled with their mother between their own apartments (level 1) and staying with friends, family and partners in their homes (level 2). Between the ages of 15 and 17 Mary cycled between 'stable' living situations with her mom, dad and multiple hospitals and treatment centers, all contained in the first level of the below figure. After Mary's mom reunited with her ex-boyfriend, she abandoned Mary to live with him and Mary lived on her own in room she rented (level 2). When Mary was no longer able to pay rent on the room, she lived in her boyfriend's car (level 4) for a number of months. Finally, when neighbors and police began to take notice of her living in his car, she then decided to move into a youth shelter (level 3) which is where she was currently staying at the time of her interview.

Figure 19: Mary's Levels of Housing Instability Trajectory



Understanding Mary's Story in the Context of San Diego County

Mary's story represents a number of characteristics that are unique to San Diego and distinguish it from other In-depth Interview sites. The San Diego IDI sample was more diverse and had larger proportions of youth who were Latin@ (30% vs. 14%) and under the age of 18 (22% vs. 18%) of which Mary is both. Her experiences with accessing mental health services was a theme more frequently reported by homeless youth in San Diego County (43%) than other IDI sites (38%). Additionally, her close encounter with exchanging sex for a place to stay via Craigslist was also more commonly reported by San Diego youth (24%) than other IDI sites (16%). Additionally, the vast majority of Mary's movement within San Diego County was the most common geographical movement pattern among San Diego County participants reported by 35% of the sample. Uncharacteristic of the San Diego County sample was Mary's disconnection from school. San Diego County participants reported higher rates of school enrollment (29%) than other IDI sites (19%) and it appears Mary's precarious housing that began at the age of 12 hindered her ability to attend and progress in school.

Summary

The visual depictions of Baylee's and Mary's history of housing instability in the above trajectories help to illustrate the complexity of youth homelessness. The timeline trajectories demonstrate how structural, peer/familial and individual level factors combine to propel youth into or out of housing instability. They also indicate how various possible interventions (along individual, peer/familial and structural dimensions) implemented early in one's life may prevent a youth from becoming unstably housed later on.

The level trajectories illustrate the many different forms homelessness and housing instability can take and demonstrate that having a roof over one's head does not necessarily make that form of housing any more stable, or less risky, than other forms of homelessness.

Both Baylee's and Mary's stories of housing instability illustrate the common characteristics and experiences described in interviews with San Diego County participants. Like Baylee and Mary, the San Diego County IDI sample was more diverse and had larger proportions of Latin@, Multiracial and youth under 18. The young ages at which they identified their unaccompanied homelessness to begin also reflects both the San Diego and full IDI samples. Baylee's and Mary's stories also point to how instances of unaccompanied youth homelessness often begin with housing instability and homelessness with a parent. Both Baylee and Mary were minors at the time of their interviews. However, they avoided disclosing their family situations to avoid the foster care system for the remaining months they had as minors. Both felt the risks outweighed the gains. Baylee's prior experiences with abusive foster homes may have exacerbated her mental health conditions and further contributed to her housing instability as this was a source of conflict she had with her father, his wife and extended family members.

Finally, both Baylee's and Mary's stories feature exchanging sex for a place to stay which was most frequently reported in San Diego (24%) of all the IDI sites (16%). Their abilities to access shelters provided a critical alternative to sexually exploitive living arrangements and signals the important need such services fill in reducing youth's exposure to high-risk and potentially harmful situations. It is unfortunate that one of San Diego's two youth shelters closed due to funding limitations and it is our hope that the stories of Baylee and Mary illustrate the important role these services play in diverting youth from additional risky situations by providing them with a safer place to sleep at night.

Engagement with Services, Resources and Supports

This section explores the services youth report using, who connects 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.

The sections below focusing on use of services, and how youth learn about services are based on analyses conducted with the full IDI sample. A comparison of service use between the full sample to the San Diego County sample can be found in Appendix A.

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. Participants in the IDI reported receiving mental health services (38%) more than any other category (Table 5). Among government benefits available (Table 6), food stamps (63%) were the most commonly used, followed by Medicaid (33.5%) and WIC (16%). 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 5: 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.

Table 6: 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.

Table 7: 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.

Receipt of Services in the San Diego Sample

In Appendix A, we present results of service utilization between San Diego and the full IDI sample. Similar to the full IDI sample, Figure 2A in Appendix A demonstrates that San Diego participants reported receiving services for mental health (43%) more than any other reason. Participants also reported greater service receipt for physical/developmental disability (14%) than the full IDI sample (9%). Figures 3A, 4A and 5A in Appendix A show that service receipt was similar to that of the full IDI sample with the exception of slightly greater involvement in certain government (SSI) and school (free/reduced price lunch) low-income assistance programs. Additionally, Figure 3A in the Appendix shows San Diego participants reported slightly higher rates of currently receiving Food Stamps or SNAP.

How Do Youth Learn About Local Services and Resources?

Throughout the 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 (Figure 20). Typically, youth learned about shelters, employment, and health care from professionals, and informal housing options from friends and peers.

Figure 20: Sources of Resource Referrals

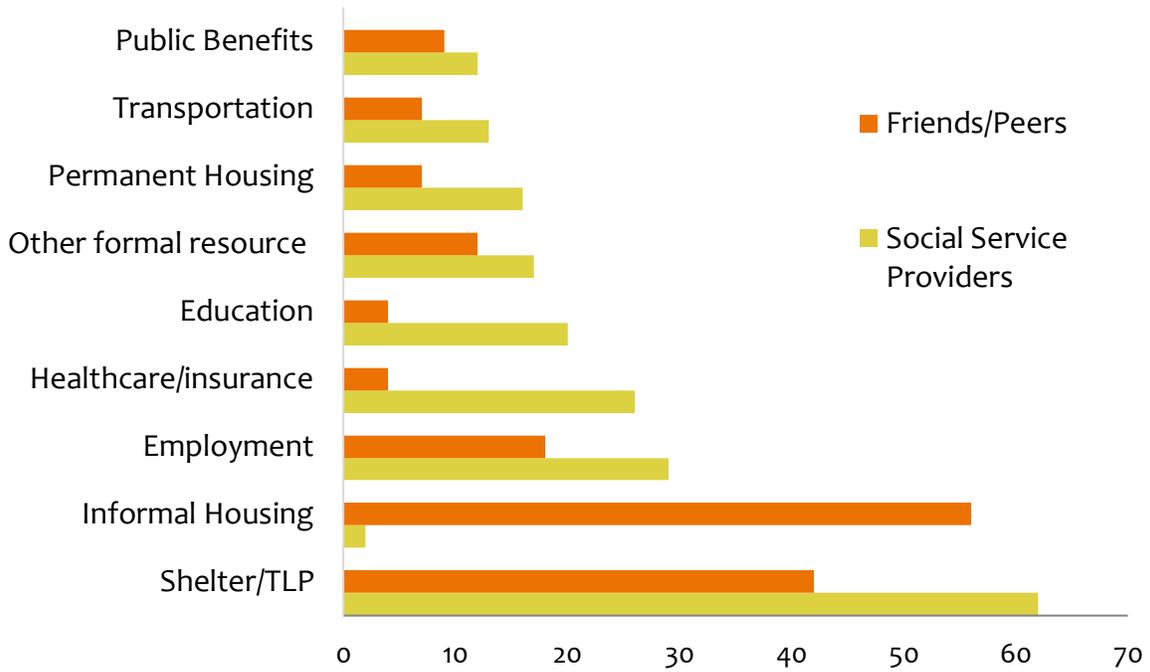
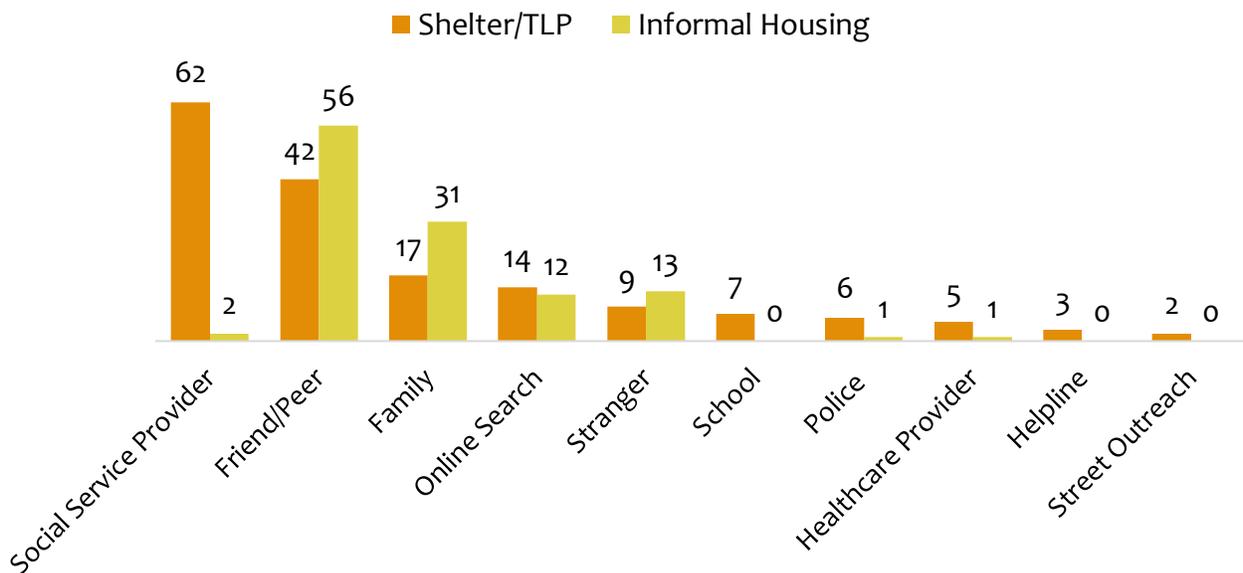


Figure 21 shows who facilitated youth’s awareness of different forms of housing resources. Overwhelmingly, professionals and peers, followed by family are the most often named as connectors to housing. Youth were least likely to name public advertising and street outreach, and helplines as their portal to housing services.

Figure 21: 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**

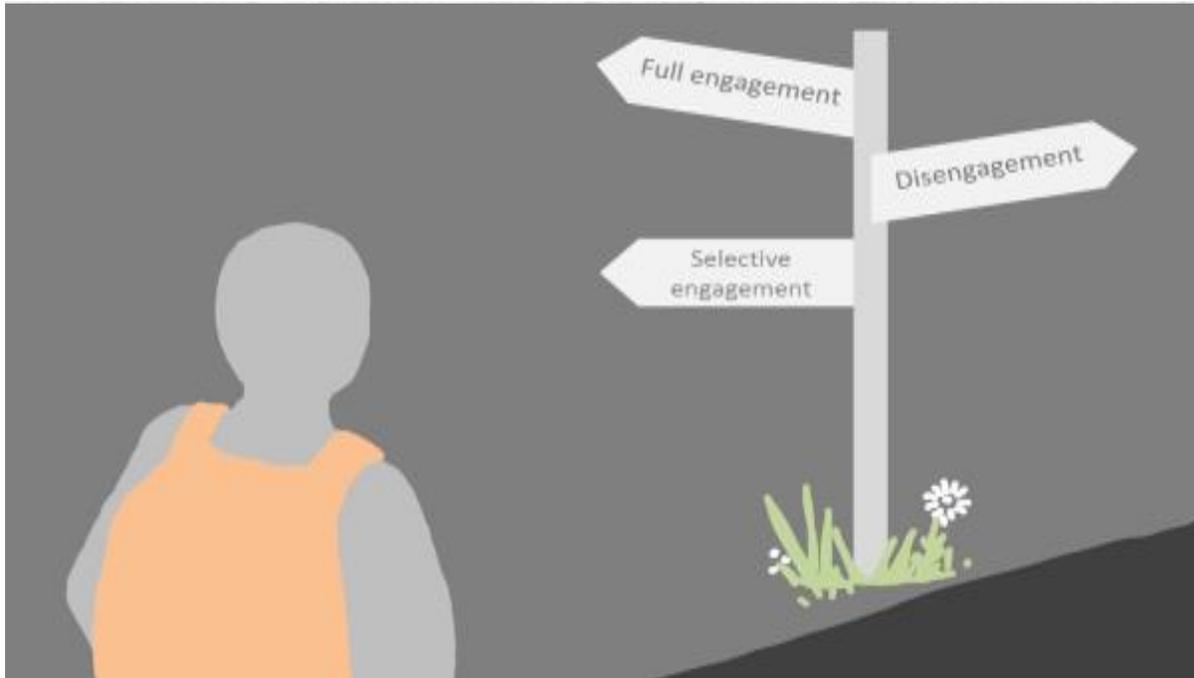
“I’ve never tried to find anyone as a support because people have their own agendas and I understand that and, I can do things alone.” **Kyle, San Diego County**

“... 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 (Figure 22) and explores often hidden factors within this process (Figure 23). 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 (Figure 22) or change styles over the course of their housing instability. We intentionally use the word resource to include both formal and informal sources and kinds 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).

Figure 22: Three Youth Engagement Styles



As youth contemplated the available resources in their local and social environments (Figure 22), 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 23).

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 this pattern 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, non-professionals), 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.

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 where some youth did use this style 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 to avoid 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 pages will now 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 their 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 (Figure 16). Like the quotes above indicate, you 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? Indeed, this was certainly a concern for Mary among other youth in San Diego. 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 help in general. Not all youth had to navigate the same kinds of risks. This analysis identified three factors that commonly featured across all interviews and 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 our 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 deposited were important reference points for young people. Specifically, it contributed to a youth's level of openness or trust. For some, like Selena above who self-described as distrustful of “people and everybody” this often shaped reticence to fully engage anyone. Yet there are also examples of youth, like Dilenger, who despite equally challenging lived experience, remained open to the potential gains from using resources. In the vignettes below, readers will hear youth reference their accumulated experiences as they weigh the risk 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 Dilenger above who remains open to resources, his personal agency contributes to, and is affirmed by, actively engaging resources. This generates a corresponding positive experience for doing so. For others like Selena who are less open, it causes her to steadfastly avoid shelters and acquire a resulting experience of avoiding the risk she fears. Youth also varied in the degree to which they believed their personal agency was threatened by receiving help; that their pride and independence (i.e., personal agency) would be at risk by engaging a particular resource.

Figure 23: Youth Logics of Engagement through Risk Management



In Figure 23 above, we intentionally locate these three factors—identity, experience and personal agency—within the backpack of the young person. It was indeed carried around as part of their essential toolkit for navigating their housing instability; it was ever-present as they anticipated 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 are their logics of engagement. Three examples are presented below to illustrate how these factors show up in the logics of individual participants.

Putting It All Together: Understanding Youth Logics of Engagement in Context

Jax

Disengages informal resources, selectively engages one formal service

Jax identified as 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 pridefully displayed, “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, *“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 that 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. Eventually, Jax’s father was deported when Jax was 12; this is the same year he notes getting his tattoo. Now parentless and undocumented in the U.S., Jax and his remaining brother spend most of their time fully disengaged from school to avoid being discovered. As the years go on, he and his brother begin selling drugs to survive. Eventually to avoid arrest, his brother runs away to México. By 14, Jax is living alone in his family trailer, *“It’s like my brother just kind of left out on me, and ... it kind of hurt, you know?”* For a while he rotates between staying at the trailer, couch surfing at friends, and living on the streets. Then one day a friend’s dad reaches out and tries to convince Jax to accept help in finding a job and getting back into school. Jax refuses. He expresses his own dismay as to why he rejected the resource, *“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.”* Then later a cousin also reaches out and invites Jax to come live with them and reenroll in high school. Jax explains that he again rejects 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 moves to a small nearby town to work, but instead uses what money he has 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 discover Jax and take him to the hospital. Once stable, he enters 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, and now 16 years old, his foster parents offer to adopt him. Jax also rejects this, *“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, at the end of the interview Jax has 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, *“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.

He also indicates 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 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, 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 houses⁵ 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-engaged with his father, re-entered high school, and himself became a father. For a short while, the young couple 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, *"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."*

⁵ A *tweaker house* is a kind of trap house that is specific to individuals who are using and selling methamphetamines (i.e., "meth").

When asked if he ever reached out for help, Brad explains 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 explains 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, *“... 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 replies 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 minimum 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;” 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 explains being stable includes risks to his own independence and feeling of autonomy, *“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 places the key to ending his, and other youth's homelessness, on one's self and personal will, *“I think to achieve the stability you would... need to want it.”*

Jamal

Full engagement with formal services, selective engagement with informal networks

Jamal identified as a 21-year-old African American male living in Philadelphia. Jamal began his story of instability when he first came out as gay at the age of 14. But this early family awareness of his identity brews in his extended family for three years until it results 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 cut offs 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 15-17, in attempts to protect his identity, Jamal cycles between couch surfing at a cousin's house and living with his grandma (where his mother and siblings also live). But when his cousin dies, Jamal, now 17, is forced to live full-time with his grandmother. Unaware of local resources, he leaves home to couch surf with a friend to avoid the *“hell”* he is enduring in his grandmother's home.

Eventually, he comes out to this friend and tells him he is gay. This friend then tells him about a local agency that serves LGBTQA unstably housed youth. Jamal is elated to discover

this resource, *“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 engages with and trusts this provider and makes use of all of their resources, *“They gave me resources and staff to talk to... [name of staff at agency] was real kind in really helping me out. And she still helps me out... to this day.”*

As Jamal spends less and less time at his grandmothers and more time couch surfing and at shelters, he continues to think of his mother as a support system. Though she can only provide limited emotional support as she remains in the grandmother’s house. She insists, and he accepts, that he is welcomed there, *“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, *“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 was seeking 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 finds meaning in one of his jobs where he provides 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 a roommate situation and is curious about the added benefits of living on his own. With a

past experience of living in tight quarters with his brothers and his grandmother, he worries that the friends of this potential roommate could be problematic. His friend may not pay the bills, and *“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... cuz... 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 ends his interview, he expresses his strong personal agency paired with openness to make change in his life. He offers 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 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 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 is 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 reinforces his doubt in any gains by seeking out housing services or other services. He is left to make use of the limited informal support through his dad and step-mom, and is 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 shadowed his own interpretation of the risks and gains presented by the potential adoptive family as a trusted resource and so, he rejected it. Jamal is the only one of the three who lacked a childhood experience of formal services. His first contact, through his friend, is exclusively positive and quite transformative. As he accumulates this new experience, it only fuels deeper levels of engagement with service providers.

All three of these young people clearly have a sense of personal agency. Jamal in leaving his family home at 17 convinced of a better more nurturing place, however, still affirms his openness and belief that others can be helpful and supportive. He unquestionably trusts the original provider who then acts as a portal to other services. Jax, with a “TRUST NOBODY” tattoo, and Brad also both exude a strong sense of personal agency. But unlike Jamal, Brad and Jax’s personal agency manifest 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 by homelessness; it is affirming to his sense of independence and self-reliance. His sole support, like Jamal, comes from a small sub-system 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 systems levels. They clustered around 5 major themes: a) housing (structural); b) jobs (structural and individual); c) education (structural and individual); d) informal support (individual, family, peer, and structural); and e) 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 interwoven. Time-limited housing interventions such as shelters and transitional living programs failed to provide youth with the feeling of stability. These programs also created other barriers to stable job opportunities given their centralized but often isolated location and the difficulty of accessing affordable and safe public transportation. 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 alone afford and where landlords will not take advantage of them.

Young people also expressed the need for jobs that pay a living wage with reliable, 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 safe and 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 the choice of 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 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. They also stated, however, that they wanted or needed professional counseling to make this a reality and to manage mental health conditions and enduring emotional struggles. 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 people who they could trust, who would help them stay motivated, provide advice and mentorship, challenge them to (continue to) improve themselves, and provide emotional support.

Figure 24 provides youth voice to these potential points of intervention. Just as homelessness itself was not an 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 to ending the instability these youth face.

Figure 24: 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 homelessness. We came to this conclusion by conducting rigorous descriptive, thematic, and conceptual analyses of 215 in-depth interviews. 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 figure above, may initially be taken as simple or uncomplicated responses—housing, jobs, support, and education. However, these remedies are multifaceted and depended 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 three pages outlines the three themes from their most common responses of advice to organizations: location, rethinking outreach, and embrace LGBTQ 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 so 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**

“Transportation. Yeah, if they had something like... “Oh hey if you guys need transportation or something” you know? I feel like that would be really helpful as far as like your commute back to school and everything.” **Sasha, San Diego County**

“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**

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.

“Because especially now there's a lot more than back in the day of, you know, kids struggling, trying to find a place or whatever or- 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 LGBTQ Youth

The presence of resources and organizations that are welcoming and affirming to LGBTQ youth makes an enormous difference to young people's emotional well-being. However, all organizations should strive to be more welcoming to this population. LGBTQ young people in the IDI are on disproportionately represented 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 like." **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 the critical importance of their lives, their struggles, and we present their advice to one another in their currency.

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.

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

Figure 25: Advice to Youth Facing Instability



VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT  Voices of Youth Count @VoYC

What advice do you have for other young people facing homelessness?

 Paris @parisCook 
Well I can say a closed mouth don't get FED.

 Alanna @alannaPhilly 
Uh just to let people know where they can go to get help like homeless youth. The School District of Philadelphia is a really, really, really big support system and they don't have enough homeless youth coming to them.

 Shirley Temple @shirleyTempleSD 
Like, if you want something like you have to go get it. Like, and once you start like **do not stop** like just **keep going** and **do not let anybody stop you** because people are harsh but you have to like remember that like there's good people. Like, it's hard to see especially now in these days but like there are good people and like, you know look for help like don't-don't try to hide your struggle like, like work your struggle.

 Cleveland @clevelandTravis 
Be polite as possible. And don't let nobody push you around. Stand up for yourself, don't be scared to speak your mind. Cause a story can go a long way.

 Sarah @sarahTravis 
Like they're not going to do everything for you and everything is going to happen just in two hours. Like nothing - like, no it's going to take time. You've got to be patient.

 Alex @alexWW 
Using makes it harder.

 MacKenzie @macKenzieWW 
If you can, go to college. If not, work on getting a job. Because as fun as it may look, it's not fun.

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 non-existent 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 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 for quite some time within their families. Their reporting 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 wellbeing, 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 within 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, death of a parent, high family mobility, and family homelessness among some of true beginnings of their sense of instability. Youth’s 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 18-25) 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 parent's rejection of a child's sexual identity, or sexuality in general. Parents sometimes waited until children were approaching 18 to then issue ultimatums that resulted in getting kicked out, or youth leaving. We return to this finding in the implications section as it suggests a distinct phenomenon that departs from some contemporary understandings of emerging adulthood in the context of middle-to-upper-middle class family norms of social support.

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 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, co-experiencing 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 and themes here included abuse, neglect and rejection, parental addiction and mental illness, and experiencing family instability and homelessness. It is quite telling that many adverse experiences surveyed 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 facilitate 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 space, and stigma toward homeless persons as critical to the context in which they experienced homelessness. In presenting trajectories of housing instability visually, we were able to illustrate how these factors unfold, what causes tipping points into deeper levels of instability, and identify 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. This report 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 implications for practice section below.

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 dollars 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 the condition of homelessness and housing instability. The reforms in policy, practice and society that could begin to address these issues, is 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 (Figure 26). Below we begin to outline some considerations to support positive change and movement toward ending youth homelessness.

Figure 26: 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, 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. Family dynamic that promotes 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 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. These other components, namely the Policy Review, Provider Survey, and the Evidence Review provide in-depth analyses of, and recommendations for, policies and programs. As with any study, the IDI's findings raise as many questions as it answers. We offer some of the IDI's strongest findings to support a few implications for practice, policy and research.

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 themselves and 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 (Abramovich & Shelton 2017, Baines, 2011; Hyde, 2005; Zufferey, 2017) and research (Fitzpatrick, 2013). In an effort to raise attention to social (in)justices 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-in-context 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. How one's racial-ethnic status matters is shaped by other factors like class, immigration status, sexuality, and gender identity. In this way we are recommending that 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.

Research: 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 would also recommend a more systematic evaluation of all of the adverse experiences youth navigated, especially parental death, suicide and a range of experiences of family instability and disruption (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). There is a need for improved measures and assessment tools (FYBSB, 2016) of the adverse childhood experiences that are relevant to these youth's normative contexts of development and of their many strengths.

Embracing LGBTQA youth: The presence of resources and organizations that are welcoming, protective and affirming to LGBTQA 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 LGBTQA youth may prefer agencies that provide safe spaces and culturally attuned services related to their sexual and/or gender minority identities. However, some LGBTQA 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 safe and inclusive services that affirm all of their identities and are open to a range of youth. Our service options to 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 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 & Shelton (2017) which outlines comprehensive approaches, using an intersectional model, for practice with LGBTQA 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, mentorship to 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 wellbeing 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, found also in this study (Rice & Rhoades, 2013; Rice et al., 2012). Our work suggests perhaps a third consideration of the use of peers. While the social networks of youth in our study certainly involved other homeless youth who were involved in drug use and other illegal activity, they also involved youth who were not homeless, connected to school and were noted as positive influences in their lives. These findings suggest that peer and social network 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 environments and informal networks, there is also a need for creative intervention models that serve as more relational, youth-centric, formal resources. 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 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 this or a similar critical interpersonal but formal resource. We would especially recommend use of adults who share a past experience of housing instability and/or share an identity or background (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 from 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, 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 general, 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 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 similarly creative arrangements and solutions across diverse community contexts (“Ending Youth Homelessness,” 2016)

Re-thinking 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 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 who 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 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 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, multigenerational, family dynamics that contribute to this need. Perhaps most importantly, this requires the development and deployment of federal funding streams to support a much more robust system of prevention and early intervention efforts that include supports directly to youth as well as their caregivers to ensure long term success.

Taking a developmental approach: Based on the youth who participated in the IDI, emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) 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 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.”

This finding is in stark contrast to the robust literature on “emerging adulthood,” a term coined by Jeffrey Arnett (2016a, 2006). 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 20-30 years 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—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 et al., 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, securing a job at which the young people in Yate’s study stayed for more than five years, took 15 years to obtain.

Consequently, economic instability, 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 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. Consequently, they were far more likely to report having to stay on the streets. They also reported the highest rates of juvenile justice involvement and 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 work; jobs that were the economic anchor of the town (Thiede, Lichter & Slack, 2016). Consequently, the stories youth told here also 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 their approaches to addressing youth homelessness (Bowen et al., 2016; Lambert, Gale & Hartley, 2008; Edwards, Torgerson & Sattlem, 2009; Rollingson & Pardeck, 2006). However, it remains a seriously understudied context to examine the unfolding of housing instability (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009) and ways of coping with poverty in general. We recommend, as part of a commitment to intersectional approaches, to include social economic 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.

Unanswered Questions and Need for Future Research

While we have learned much more about the ages and conditions that lead youth to unstable housing; the individual, peer/familial, and structural conditions that underlie these experiences; the factors that influence youth's (dis)engagement or selective engagement of resources; and what youth feel they need to find stability, there are many unanswered questions that remain. Below are three main questions in need of further exploration in future research:

- 1) San Diego participants were currently enrolled in alternative high school (23.1%), trade school (23.1%), community college (23.1%) and four-year college or university (15.4%) at notably higher rates than the full IDI sample (11.3%, 22.6%, 11.3% and 9.7%, respectively). One recent study involving over 70 community colleges across 24 states revealed that about half of community college students were housing insecure (e.g., difficulty paying rent, doubling up, and moving at least twice) during the past year and 13-14% were homeless (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson & Hernandez, 2017). More research is needed to understand how these youth fare in their educational endeavors while managing precarious housing situations and what sorts of supports help to eliminate the barriers they encounter.
- 2) More research is needed to better understand why San Diego participants reported exchanging sex for a place to stay more (24%) than other IDI sites (16%). The dwindling existence of youth based shelters in San Diego may have an effect on youth's likelihood

of engaging in risky housing situations. Indeed, Mary and Baylee's ability to access a youth based shelter provided them a safer alternative that allowed them to forego engaging in sexually exploitive situations.

- 3) More research is needed to uncover the reasons why San Diego participants reported harm from another at substantially higher rates (68%) than other IDI sites (52%). Such work would provide better insights into the unique critical conditions experienced by San Diego participants and would provide local providers with guidance on how to best meet the needs of homeless and unstably housed youth they serve.
- 4) Lastly, there is a critical need to change federal reporting mechanisms and measures of “success” for outcomes. Currently, these are overly-focused on systems-level measures (e.g., shortening length of stay) rather than directly measuring youth-level outcomes (e.g., stability in housing, health/mental health, recidivism). This also suggests the need for changes in policy that could facilitate data sharing between the systems in which youth often are engaged (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, schools, mental health).

Conclusion

This report is the result of a multifaceted collaboration between policy makers, 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. More specifically, it centered the intricate lives of San Diego County homeless youth. 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 eight 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:

Figure 1A: Experience with Adversities

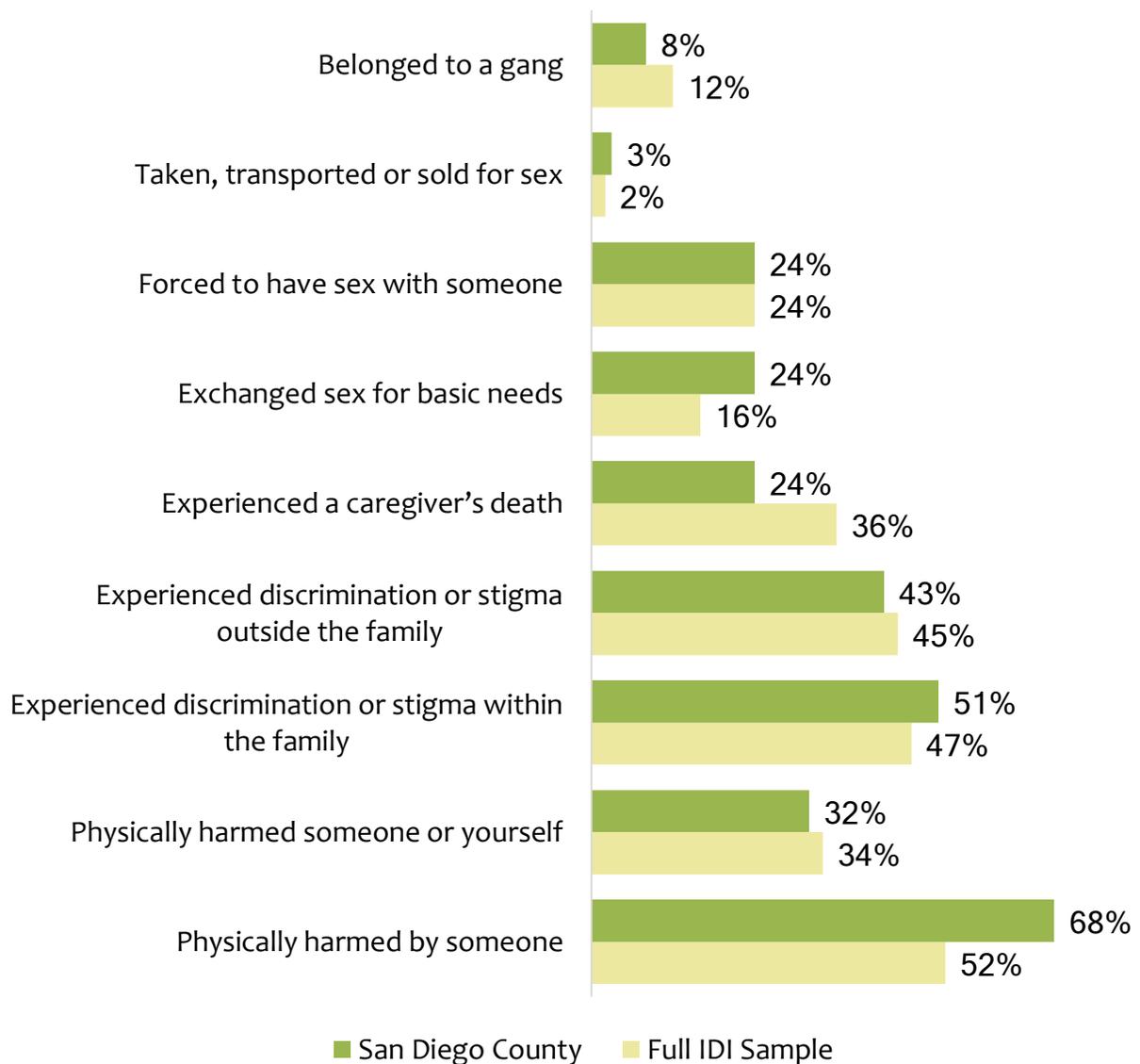


Table 1A: Experience with Adversities by Gender

(n=35)*						
	Female (n=17)		Male (n=14)		Other** (n=4)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	13	76.5	6	42.9	4	100.0
Physically harmed someone or yourself	7	41.2	2	14.3	2	50.0
Experienced discrimination or stigma						
Within the family	6	35.3	8	57.1	3	75.0
Outside the family	5	29.4	5	35.7	4	100.0
Experienced a caregiver's death	5	29.4	1	7.1	1	25.0
Exchanged sex for basic needs	5	29.4	1	7.1	2	50.0
Forced to have sex with someone	5	29.4	2	14.3	1	25.0
Taken, transported or sold for sex	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Belonged to a gang	2	11.8	1	7.1	0	0.0

*2 youth did not report their gender identity.

**Other includes youth who identified as gender minority including transgender and genderqueer/gender nonconforming.

Table 2A: Experience with Adversities by Age

(n=36)*				
	13 to 17 Years Old (n=8)		18 to 25 Years Old (n=28)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	5	62.5	20	71.4
Physically harmed someone or yourself	3	37.5	9	32.1
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	5	62.5	14	50.0
Outside the family	4	50.0	12	42.9
Experienced a caregiver's death	2	25.0	7	25.0
Exchanged sex for basic needs	1	12.5	8	28.6
Forced to have sex with someone	1	12.5	8	28.6
Taken, transported or sold for sex	0	0.0	1	3.6
Belonged to a gang	0	0.0	1	3.6

*1 youth did not report their age.

Table 3A: Experience with Adversities by Race/Ethnicity

(n=34)*										
	Black (n=7)		White (n=6)		Latin@ (n=11)		multiracial (n=9)		other** (n=1)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	6	85.7	4	66.7	7	63.6	5	55.6	0	0.0
Physically harmed someone or yourself	3	42.9	0	0.0	4	36.4	5	55.6	0	0.0
Experienced discrimination or stigma										
Within the family	4	57.1	2	33.3	7	63.6	3	33.3	0	0.0
Outside the family	4	57.1	2	33.3	5	45.5	3	33.3	0	0.0
Experienced a caregiver's death	2	28.6	2	33.3	2	18.2	3	33.3	0	0.0
Exchanged sex for basic needs	1	14.3	0	0.0	3	27.3	4	44.4	0	0.0
Forced to have sex with someone	4	57.1	1	16.7	2	18.2	2	22.2	0	0.0
Taken, transported or sold for sex	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	9.1	0	0.0	0	0.0
Belonged to a gang	2	28.6	0	0.0	1	9.1	0	0.0	0	0.0

*3 youth did not report their race/ethnicity.

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

Table 4A: Experience with Adversities by Sexual Orientation

(n=35)*				
	100% Heterosexual (n=21)		LGBQA** (n=14)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	11	52.4	13	92.9
Physically harmed someone or yourself	3	14.3	8	57.1
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	9	42.9	9	64.3
Outside the family	6	28.6	9	64.3
Experienced a caregiver's death	5	23.8	3	21.4
Exchanged sex for basic needs	3	14.3	5	35.7
Forced to have sex with someone	2	9.5	6	42.9
Taken, transported or sold for sex	0	0.0	0	0.0
Belonged to a gang	1	4.8	2	14.3

*2 youth did not report their sexual orientation.

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

Table 5A: Experience with Adversities by Foster Care History

(n=35)*				
	Ever in Foster Care (n=13)		Never in Foster Care (n=22)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	9	69.2	15	68.2
Physically harmed someone or yourself	6	46.2	6	46.2
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	6	46.2	13	59.1
Outside the family	3	23.1	12	54.6
Experienced a caregiver's death	4	30.8	4	18.2
Exchanged sex for basic needs	5	38.5	4	18.2
Forced to have sex with someone	6	46.2	3	13.6
Taken, transported or sold for sex	0	0.0	1	4.6
Belonged to a gang	3	23.1	0	0.0

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

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

(n=37)				
	Ever in Detention/Jail/Prison (n=14)		Never in Detention/Jail/Prison (n=23)	
	#	%	#	%
Physically harmed by someone	8	57.1	17	73.9
Physically harmed someone or yourself	5	35.7	7	30.4
Experienced discrimination or stigma				
Within the family	8	57.1	11	47.8
Outside the family	9	64.3	7	30.4
Experienced a caregiver's death	4	28.6	5	21.7
Exchanged sex for basic needs	3	21.4	6	26.1
Forced to have sex with someone	6	42.9	3	13.0
Taken, transported or sold for sex	0	0.0	1	4.4
Belonged to a gang	3	21.4	0	0.0

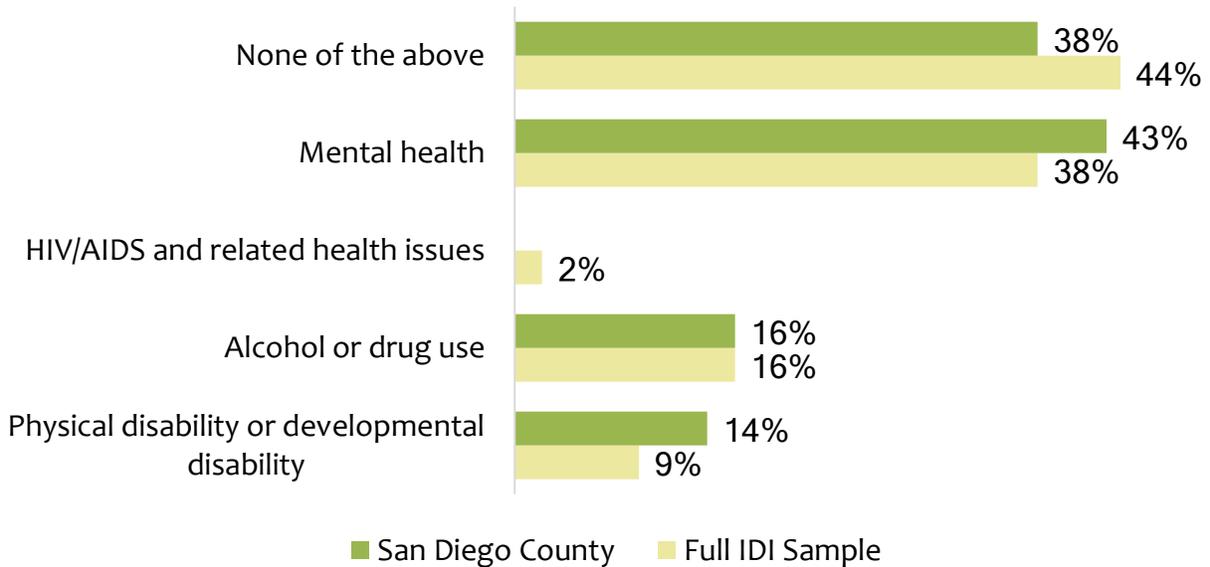
Table 7A: Education and Employment

	San Diego County		Full IDI Sample	
	#	%	#	%
Has a High School Diploma or GED	(n=37)		(N=211)	
Yes	23	62.2	126	59.7
No	12	32.4	79	37.4
Don't Know	1	2.7	2	1.0
Refused	1	2.7	3	1.4
Missing	0	0.0	1	0.5
Enrolled in School	(n=37)		(N=211)	
Yes	13	35.1	62	29.4
No	22	59.5	144	68.2
Don't Know	2	5.4	3	1.4
Refused	0	0.0	2	1.0
Type of School (If Enrolled)	(n=13)		(n=62)	
Junior High or Middle School	0	0.0	1	1.6
Regular High School	0	0.0	19	30.6
Alternative High School	3	23.1	7	11.3
GED or High School Equivalency Classes	1	7.7	7	11.3
Two-year or Community College	3	23.1	14	22.6
Four-year College or University	2	15.4	6	9.7
Trade School	3	23.1	7	11.3
Don't Know	1	7.7	1	1.6
Currently Employed	(n=37)		(N=211)	
Yes	11	29.7	70	33.2
No	26	70.3	139	65.9
Refused	0	0.0	2	0.9

Table 8A: Systems Involvement

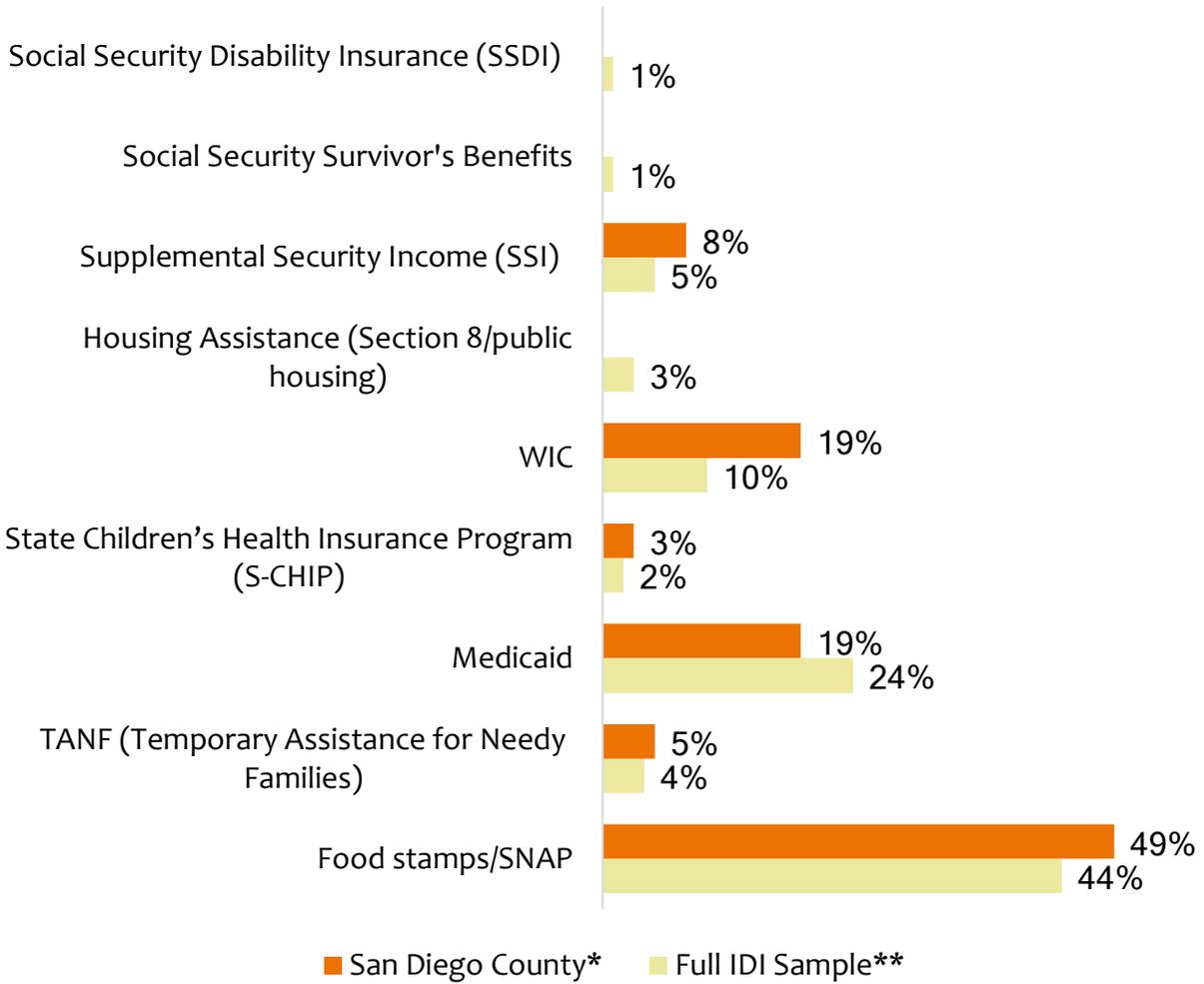
	San Diego County (n=37)		Full IDI Sample (N=211)	
	#	%	#	%
Ever in Foster Care				
Yes	13	35.1	82	38.9
No	22	59.5	124	58.8
Don't Know	0	0.0	0	0.0
Refused	1	2.7	3	1.4
Missing	1	2.7	2	0.9
Ever in Juvenile Detention, Jail or Prison				
Yes	14	37.8	103	48.8
No	23	62.2	102	48.3
Don't Know	0	0.0	2	1.0
Refused	0	0.0	3	1.4
Missing	0	0.0	1	0.5

Figure 2A: Reasons for Service Receipt*



*Participants could select multiple responses.

Figure 3A: Government Benefits: Currently Receiving**

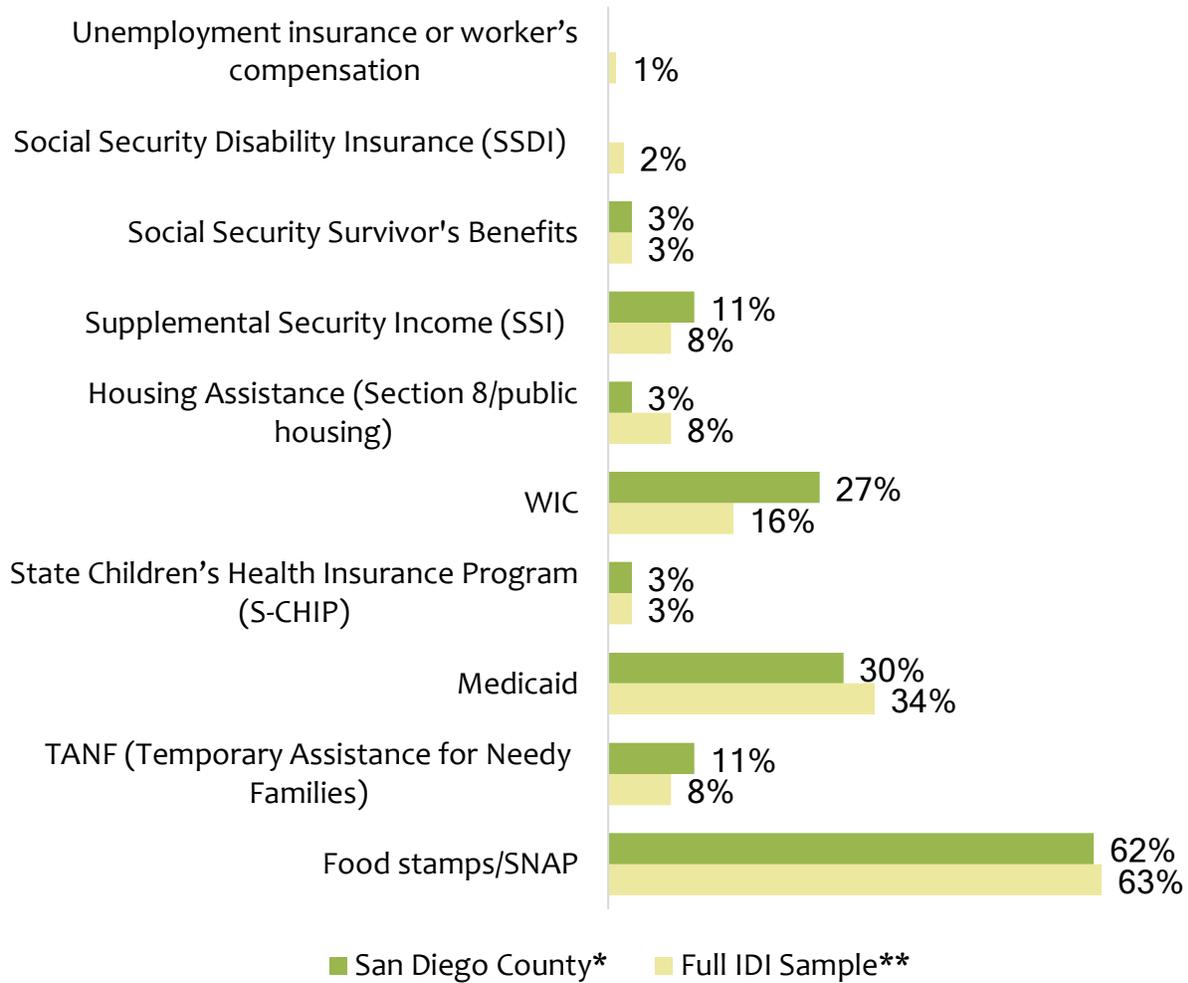


*In the San Diego County sample, data on receipt of government benefits was missing for 1 participant.

**In the Full IDI sample, data on receipt of government benefits were missing for 8 participants.

***Participants could select multiple responses.

Figure 4A: Receipt of Government Benefits: Ever Received***

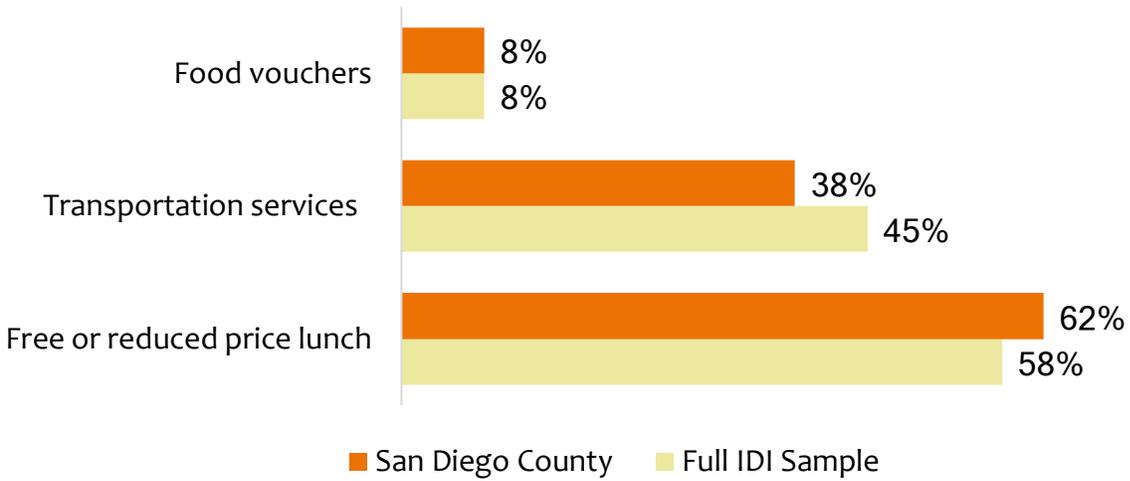


*In the San Diego County sample, data on receipt of government benefits was missing for 1 participant.

**In the Full IDI sample, data on receipt of government benefits were missing for 8 participants.

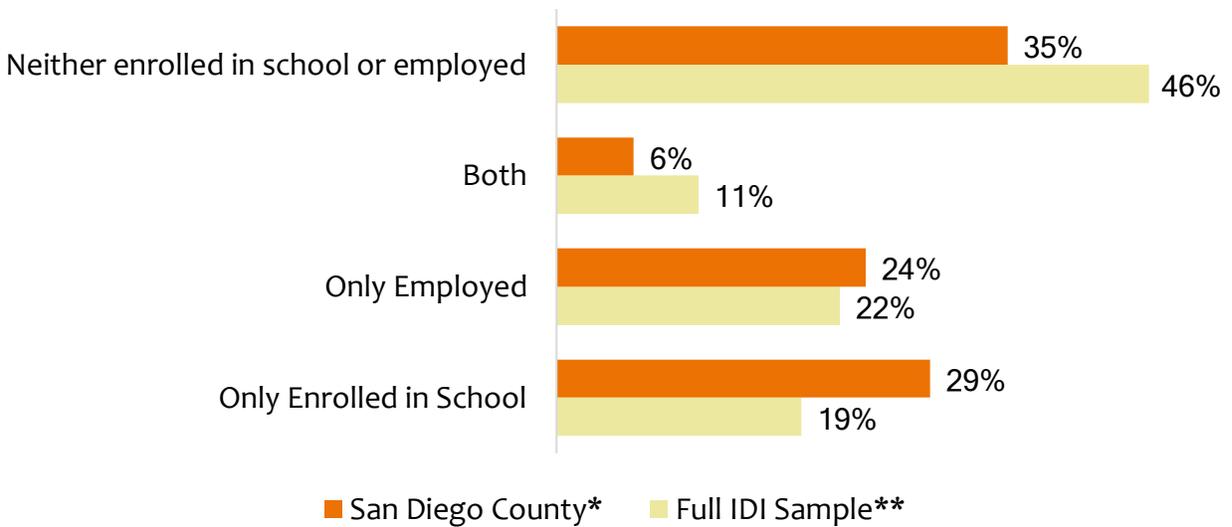
***Participants could select multiple responses.

Figure 5A: Receipt of School Benefits



*Participants could select multiple responses.

Figure 6A: School Enrollment and Employment: Ages 16 to 24



*In the San Diego County sample, data on school enrollment were missing for 2 participant ages 16-24.

**In the Full IDI sample, data on school enrollment were missing for 4 participants ages 16-24 and data on employment were missing for 2 participants ages 16-24.