

# Partnering with Homeless Youth to Study the Scope and Nature of Youth Homelessness

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## BACKGROUND

In the last several years, there has been growing awareness that the population of homeless youth has been underestimated, ill understood, and growing. There is little understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by these young people who are often disconnected from the service systems designed to support them, and hidden from society. Young people approach the issue of shelter differently than adults, often preferring the uncertainties of their housing situations to the perceived loss of independence associated with residential programs. **Traditional measures used to estimate their numbers – such as point in time counts and emergency shelter statistics – are inadequate at capturing the more mobile lifestyle of homeless youth and underestimate the true extent of the problem.** This innovative project emerged out of a community's desire to better reach and serve homeless youth in order to help them establish more stable lives.

## APPROACH

### Youth Participatory Evaluation

Young people are involved in the process of evaluating the programs, organizations, agencies, and systems that have been designed to serve them.

Acknowledging the disconnect between traditional measures and the needs of the younger homeless, the *Independent Living Survey Project* used a **youth participatory approach** to conduct a **needs assessment on the scope and nature of youth homelessness** in Tompkins County, NY. This allowed for a group of **formerly homeless youth to be engaged as research partners** in order to reach this invisible sector of the population.

#### University/Community Partnership – Study Team:

The Learning Web Youth Outreach Program (6 staff, 17 youth researchers),  
Tompkins County Youth Services Department (1 staff),  
Cornell University (5 researchers)

**3 waves** of data collection: 2004, 2007, 2011

Survey data were collected by youth researchers from a group of homeless youth in their natural networks during an 8 week period of the winter.

**17 Youth Outreach Researchers** were involved in all aspects of the project:

- Designing tools, methodology
- Recruiting subjects
- Collecting data (instructed on: IRB Human Subjects Training, obtaining consent, data collection procedures)
- Interpreting findings
- Presenting results to community stakeholders

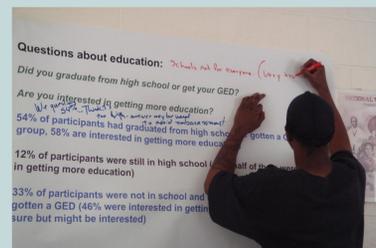
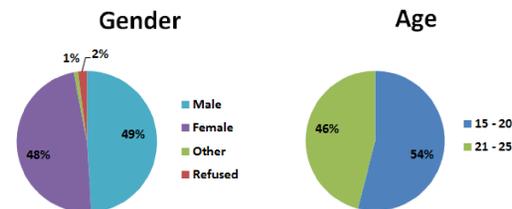


Image: Youth Researcher interpreting findings during a "Data Dialogue" session

## POPULATION SURVEYED

**225 surveys completed in 2011** (165 in 2004 and 204 in 2007)

All participants (1) had no parental, substitute, foster, or institutional home to which they could go and (2) were 25 years old or younger



The majority of participants identified as young people of color, 47% were 'white, non-Hispanic'

## FINDINGS

**Greatest Needs (constant since 2004) include help finding: Housing, Transportation, Job, Education, Someone to talk to**

*"No one listens to [our] needs, they just assume they know what [we] need. Sometimes it's better to listen than to assume you know the answer to everything."*  
- ILS respondent

**Parenting Status: 19%** have **children** or are **pregnant**

**Education: 76%** in **school** or have high school **diploma/GED**

**Employment: 60%** **unemployed** (80% looking for work)

**Food Insecurity: 40%** reported **skipping a meal** (50% of them do so on a weekly basis)

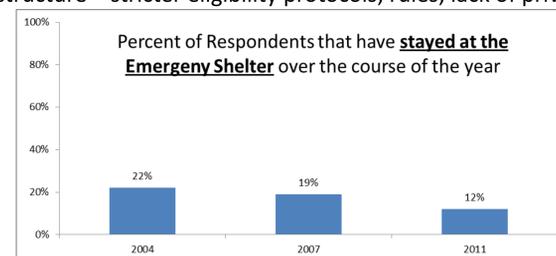
**Health Care: 24%** seek **no medical help** when sick; the majority (62%) go to the ER

**Social Support: 19%** have **no one** to talk/turn to for emotional support

### Unstable Housing: Lack of stable housing is a major concern for these youth

Current # of Living Situations (at time of survey)	1 place: 72%	Multiple Places: 28%
Total # of Living Situations Over the Past Year	1 place: 17%	Multiple Places: 83%

**Shelter Use – declining over time**  
(structure – stricter eligibility protocols; rules; lack of privacy)



### Lack of safety and the threat of violence are a constant reality

**41%** feel **safe** in their current living situation only **some, or none**, of the time

**57%** have been **threatened or injured** with a weapon (compared to 44% in 2007)

**Reasons for Leaving Home: Long-standing Conflict and Dysfunction**

*"Most of us young people have a good reason for getting out – not just for the sake of rebellion."*  
- ILS respondent

## IMPACTS OF APPROACH AND FINDINGS

### Impact on Community

- **Visibility/Awareness** – generated public will to prioritize homeless youth needs
- **Solid Advocacy Data** – use to develop funding sources
- **Improved Services** – supportive transitional housing & improved bus system

### Impact on Youth

- **Skill Development** - research, public speaking
- **Build Relationships** – youth/adult partnerships
- **Job Readiness**
- **Personal Efficacy**
- **Civic Competencies**

#### Lessons Learned: Engaging Youth as Research Partners

- **Make it fun**
- **Involve youth from the start**
- **Help youth see the benefits**

*"Since we helped design the survey, we felt that it was our project: these were our questions, not just the ones we were told to ask."* - youth researcher

*"Going through the IRB training was a self esteem booster; it gave me confidence that I could do this. I learned how to make people more aware of their problems and who to talk to for help. Now I can see that if people work together they can make changes; I used to think no one cares – not now!"* - youth researcher

### Impact on Research

- **Accessed hard-to-reach samples**
- Improved **data collection** tools to be **"youth friendly"**
- Potentially more accurate data/**honest responses**
- Increased understanding/**interpretation of results**
- Increased **utilization of findings**

#### Lessons Learned: Connecting with Hard-to-Reach Youth

- **Go to where the youth are**
- **Offer incentives**
- **Stress the "why" of the project**
- **Emphasize confidentiality**
- **Be open**

*"Since we have been there ourselves, we know where to find the homeless youth. We are connected to these networks."* - youth researcher

*"It helps to say that you have been homeless yourself. This makes them more comfortable and willing to be honest; they know they won't be judges for their responses. Be kind, be respectful, listen well, don't be judgmental, show that you care."* - youth researcher

For Complete Study Findings: <http://www.learning-web.org/publications.cfm>

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