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## **VOICES FROM THE STREET YOUTH SURVEY: SOME KEY FINDINGS**

In 2007, homeless and formerly homeless youth researchers interviewed 208 of their peers in 23 cities across the state. The youth interviewed ranged from ages 13 to 25, with the majority between ages 17 and 24, and almost evenly split between genders. Following are some key findings from the 2008 California Research Bureau report, *Voices From the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers* (which is available through the project website).

- **The great majority of young people did not seek or choose to be homeless;** they were pushed into it, either because their parents explicitly “kicked them out” of home, or because abuse or family conflict forced them to leave.
- **Thirty percent had spent the previous night outdoors, on the street, or in a car or vacant building.** Twenty-eight percent had been couch surfing at a friend’s house. Ten percent were living in transitional housing, and eight percent had spent the previous night at a shelter.
- **Interviewees identified their major challenges as finding affordable housing and a job that would provide enough income to obtain and maintain housing.** Close to 90 percent said they were trying to change their housing situation. Over 45 percent were looking for work; over 30 percent were seeking affordable housing.
- Nine percent said there was nothing good or positive in their lives right now. In contrast, **close to 30 percent cited children and peer relations as positive in their lives, and 14 percent of youth cited as positive some element of their own capacity, or internal strength, to take care of themselves and to survive.** Fourteen percent said being employed was good and positive.
- While over 25 percent of youth reported no interactions with police, **the majority of homeless youth report regular and negative interactions with police.** Frequently, these youth said “no more police harassment” when asked what law or policy they wanted to see changed.
- The **overwhelming majority report being perceived as, or called: “lazy, bad kid, bum, troublemaker, lowlife, piece of s---, scumbag, junkie, whore, gangbanger, the lowest of the low, and worthless.”**
- **Twenty-two percent of the youth interviewed had regular employment and 18 percent reported income from temporary or odd jobs.** Just over twenty percent of youth brought in money by panhandling, and the same number received income from public programs such as SSI, food stamps or general assistance. Ten percent received money from family or friends.
- **Over 75 percent of the 54 youth responding to this question were not attending school at the time of the interview** (six had graduated from high school or attained a GED). Only 20 percent said they had “dropped out” of their own accord. In general, the reasons for leaving school were entangled with the trajectories into homelessness and with homelessness itself, and **the great majority of youth said they would want to go back to school if they could.**

- Forty percent of interviewees believed that **in five years** they would **be employed**. Thirty-five percent believed they would **be in homes or apartments of their own**, and sixteen percent saw themselves attending or having graduated from college in that timeframe. Nine percent believed they would have their own families within five years, and five percent believed they would be wealthy. **Many believed they would have achieved some or all of these goals at the same time...though many also used the word “hopefully.”** Twelve percent did not know where they would be, and two percent believed they would be dead. Four individuals believed they would still be on the street.
- **Over 90 percent identified a specific career goal**, including being an entrepreneur, and careers in the medical field (as doctors, nurses or medical assistants), music industry, fashion industry, computer field, law enforcement or corrections, social work, and teaching. Many interviewees cited a strong desire to “give back” or help others in similar circumstances. Despite their circumstances, less than ten percent thought it was not realistic that they would achieve their career goals.
- **Over 40 percent of these youth looked to friends for support**; however, 28 percent cited a family member—generally a mother—as someone they turned to for support. (About half maintained some form of contact with their parents.) Fifteen percent named a boyfriend or girlfriend, and 12 percent looked to God or their church. Only 13 percent named a formal service provider as among their top three sources of support.
- **Over two-thirds of these youth considered themselves mentally healthy**. The vast majority attributed that fact not to any kind of formal mental health services but to their own positive attributes or attitudes, such as their basic capacity to function and survive, their ability to set and work towards goals, their self-awareness, and their resilience.
- **One-fifth did not consider themselves to be mentally healthy**. Twenty-one percent of these youth attributed their poor mental health to traumatic life experiences and 18 percent to drug use, while 15 percent said they had a specific mental illness.
- Forty-four percent of **youth receiving services** had received meals; 33 percent had stayed at a shelter; 32 percent had visited a drop-in program; 20 percent had received counseling; 17 percent had received medical care; 15 percent had received case management; and 13 percent had accessed transitional or other housing. Others had received free showers and/or personal hygiene supplies, clothing, food stamps, and services from independent living skills programs and needle exchange programs. Six youth received employment assistance.
- **Close to 50 percent of the youth reported an experience that made them not want to return to seek services**. Over 25 percent said they were treated badly or rudely, patronized or made to feel helpless by shelter staff or other service providers, and over ten percent said that excessive bureaucracy had deterred them. Others reported conflicts with other clients and unpleasant shelter conditions.
- Twelve percent of the **youth said they had not sought help** because they were self-sufficient or did not need any help; eight percent felt they would not qualify or be able to follow the rules that came along with aid. Other reasons included shame, past negative experiences, pride, and fear of being laughed at, arrested, or turned away because of immigration status.

Overall, these interviews underscore the need for a diverse continuum of supports and services that are offered in a positive, non-judgmental manner that allows for a range of responses depending on a young person’s readiness to accept assistance.