

Illinois Youth — Ready for Life?

ILLINOIS YOUTH SHARE THEIR PERSPECTIVE ON CHALLENGES
AND OPPORTUNITIES AS THEY MAKE THE TRANSITION FROM
CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD



Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the **Grand Victoria Foundation** for their generous support of the Teen Poverty and Youth Development Project.

GRAND VICTORIA FOUNDATION

We also thank the following partners for their assistance in recruiting youth for participation in this project and for hosting survey distribution and/or focus groups:

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Peoria	The Night Ministry
Chicago Area Project	Southern Illinois Regional Social Services
Jobs for Youth	Tomorrow's Builders YouthBuild Charter School
La Casa Norte	UCAN
Las Caras Lindas	YouthBuild Rockford

July 2007

Research: Andrea Ray, Elizabeth Clary, and Helen Edwards — Mid-America Institute on Poverty of Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights

Writing: Andrea Ray and Gina Guillemette

Editing: Amy Rynell and Amy Terpstra

Design and print: Graphix Products, Inc.

Suggested citation: The Mid-America Institute on Poverty of Heartland Alliance. (2007, July). *Illinois Youth — Ready for life?* Chicago: Author.

This report can be downloaded from <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/maip>

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction.....	4
Youth Engagement.....	6
Key Findings.....	9
Relationships/Support	10
School.....	12
Work	14
Health.....	16
Future Planning	18
Youth Services — Current Barriers and Opportunities for Change.....	20
Recommendations.....	21
Illinois Youth — Ready for Life: Teen Poverty and Youth Development Project.....	23
Endnotes	24



Executive Summary

Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders and decision makers. They are the future teachers, business owners, parents, and community members of our state. As youth make the important and often difficult transition from childhood to adulthood, families, communities, and the state provide critical opportunities and supports. Investments made in youth today through programs, services, and other opportunities are a wise contribution to Illinois' collective future. In order to ensure that all young people in Illinois are ready for life, Illinois policymakers, parents, and other adult leaders must work intentionally and collaboratively to devise a comprehensive youth development strategy.

Youth themselves are a valuable resource in the quest to identify effective solutions for positive youth development. Young people are experts on their own experiences and needs and have insights on issues facing youth overall. Their perceptions on factors impacting their relationships with adults is valuable information for youth service providers, and they can bring creative, fresh ideas to longstanding problems such as engaging youth in current programs. Youth involvement in developing solutions and strategies is essential to the creation of programs, services, and opportunities that are innovative, effective, flexible, and relevant to their experiences and needs.

This report highlights key findings from a recent survey and series of focus groups with 196 youth ages 12 to 24 in communities across Illinois. One hundred sixty-two surveys were collected from youth who were connected to 10 community-based agencies, and 5 focus groups were conducted at 5 of those community-based agencies. Researchers partnered with youth service providers to engage youth in identifying the barriers and ongoing challenges they have experienced, as well as solutions to help them and their peers succeed. The youth voices outlined in this report emphasize that more deliberate efforts to build their relational and job-readiness skills, improve public transportation, provide greater access to health services, and create more workforce development experiences are critical to their future. Illinois' young people have dreams and ambitions and an inner drive to accomplish their goals. External supports from families, other adults, and communities, as well as adequate investment of state resources are needed to help prepare them for life.

Illinois youth face a variety of obstacles and complex problems related to education, employment, mental health, and access to health care that often intersect and may thwart successful transitions to adulthood. On the systemic level, the manner in which many states plan for, structure, and deliver youth programs and services creates added barriers to access. As a result, youth and youth service providers alike face a confusing maze of system barriers. The combined impact of these barriers, without adequate services and supports, will continue to undermine successful transitions between childhood and adulthood for Illinois youth.

Youth involvement in developing solutions and strategies is essential...

The following recommendations are offered as a means for Illinois to better serve and support older youth across the state. These findings serve as a call to action to Illinois policymakers, parents, and other leaders to ensure that Illinois does all it can to ensure that all Illinois youth are ready for life.

1. INVEST IN PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT SUPPORT YOUTH IN THEIR TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Programs and services must help older youth develop life skills so that they are equipped to become independent and self-sufficient in adulthood. Increased and sustained investments in the following types of programs and services are needed: workforce development that includes job readiness, skill building, work experience, and wages; linkages and integration among educational, housing, mental health, and other basic services for youth at key points in their adolescent development; expanded eligibility of public health insurance to include youth between the ages of 18 and 24; and financial education and savings opportunities.

2. UTILIZE EVIDENCE-BASED FINDINGS TO GUIDE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

Research on best practices in youth development and the corresponding outcomes should serve as a foundation for program development and evaluation as well as policy and systems change. Research that incorporates youth interests, experiences, and opinions should serve to inform and guide related policy and program development.

3. CREATE A COORDINATED SYSTEM OF YOUTH SERVICES

Services to Illinois youth should be coordinated across state agencies and funding streams to facilitate joint planning and reduce barriers to access. Such collaboration would ensure a continuity of services to address the specific academic, civic, mental, occupational, and physical needs facing youth at various points in their adolescence and early adulthood. State agencies serving youth should collaborate wherever possible to align program standards, streamline reporting requirements, and increase the flexibility of funding streams and program models.

As Illinois struggles to balance strategic, longer-term investments in our economy and infrastructure with current critical human needs, our willingness to invest in the youth of our state will lay the direction for Illinois' future in terms of the strength of the workforce and economy as well as individual and family well-being. Systemic issues that serve as barriers to success for all youth, as well as those issues that predominantly impact vulnerable youth, must be addressed. The state has a responsibility to provide supports and services to help youth transition successfully into adulthood with the skills and resources to be ready for life.

Introduction

Investments made in youth today through programs, services, and other opportunities are a wise investment in Illinois' collective future. Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders and decision makers. They are the future teachers, business owners, parents, and community members of our state. Over the past decade Illinois has invested over \$100 billion in programs and services for youth in areas such as education, health care, and child welfare. These investments have supported important youth development opportunities, yet there continue to be unmet needs, service gaps, and other challenges facing youth across the state. As youth make the important and often difficult transition from childhood to adulthood, families, communities, and the state provide critical supports. Illinois policymakers, parents, and other adult leaders must work intentionally and collaboratively to devise a comprehensive strategy to ensure all Illinois youth are ready for life.

Recent data show that Illinois youth face a variety of obstacles related to education, employment, mental health, and access to health care that may thwart successful transitions to adulthood. Of youth ages 18 to 24, 22 percent do not have a high school diploma.¹

Illinois youth face a variety of obstacles related to education, employment, mental health, and access to health care...

College-bound youth are not exempt from education-related hurdles. The net costs for low- and middle-income Illinois students to attend community colleges represent about 36 percent of their annual family income.² In addition, engagement in the workforce is precarious. From 2000 to 2004, Illinois was one of five states with the largest decrease in teen employment.³ Youth also face mental health issues and reduced access to medical care. Nearly 25 percent of Illinois adolescents reported signs of depression lasting for 2 or more weeks in a row that kept them from engaging in usual activity.⁴ The uninsured rate of young Illinoisans, ages 18 to 24 was 26 percent in 2005.⁵ Taken together, these issues add up to significant individual and societal costs, both now and in future years.

Existing data also demonstrate that Illinois youth tackle complex problems in which issues such as court-involvement, mental health conditions, homelessness, and young parenthood intersect. Nearly 70 percent of Illinois children in the juvenile justice system have mental health problems.⁶ Approximately 40 percent of the near 25,000 homeless youth were parents with one or more children of their own.⁷ The combined impact of these barriers, without adequate services and supports, will continue to undermine youth's efforts to become self-sufficient.

On the systemic level, the manner in which many states plan for, structure, and deliver youth programs and services creates added barriers to access. The “silo” phenomenon is created when publicly-funded programs segregate services based on funding streams or programmatic restrictions so that one area of service, such as education, is quite separate from others, such as housing or mental health treatment. Local access points for these different service areas as well as planning, program standards, benchmarks, outcomes, and funding mechanisms operate largely independent from one another. Similarly, the youth service system in Illinois has focused and invested more heavily on intervention and treatment services than prevention services. While intervention and treatment are critical services for the state to fund, failure to invest in prevention and general youth development ensures that barriers and challenges will continue in future generations.

The result of ongoing system barriers is a confusing maze for youth and youth service providers alike. Local providers have the daunting task of providing high quality services to youth within a context of contradictory program standards and repetitive reporting requirements. Furthermore, inflexible funding streams and program models inhibit providers from addressing the overlapping needs of many youth. Many providers are committed to youth development grounded in best practices, but find their options quite limited by the scattered requirements of different systems.

Likewise, youth are often deterred from capitalizing on existing youth development opportunities due to the complexity and inaccessibility of these services. For those living in poverty, limited access to education and career supports impedes their chances for health and stability as adults. The arbitrary ages of adulthood set by many state programs, usually 18 or 21, result in youth losing critical supports before they are prepared to live on their own. The end result is expanding numbers of youth disconnected from support systems and the economy.

Failure to support all youth during the important time of transition between childhood and adulthood puts many youth at risk and costs significant state resources both now and into the future. The impact of school dropout is staggering, affecting future income, employment prospects, and the quality of Illinois’ labor market. Unaddressed health issues intersect with other major poverty risk factors to impact youth in both the short- and long-term. A lack of career development and job experiences leave youth with a weak foundation for future workforce participation. Supports and opportunities, combined with positive relationships with adults, are necessary to assist youth in making healthy life choices. Likewise, youth involvement in developing solutions and strategies is essential to foster leadership and civic participation as well as to ensure that programs and services are relevant to their experiences and needs.

Failure to support all youth during the important time of transition between childhood and adulthood puts many youth at risk...

Youth Engagement

Youth participation in identifying the challenges and barriers they face as well as in developing solutions is essential to the creation of effective public policies and service strategies. Youth themselves are experts on the unique challenges they face, their hopes and dreams, and what types of services and supports would help them succeed. As program participants and recipients of services, young people are uniquely equipped to share their experiences and offer ideas for positive change. They also offer rare insight on various factors that impact whether they or their peers will take advantage of a particular service or opportunity and what will prove most useful.

Identifying and advocating for policy change can be an empowering experience and opportunity to build valuable lifelong

communication, advocacy, and civic engagement skills. For youth, it also plants seeds for future participation in system change or community building. Youth involvement in the policymaking process also serves as an accountability mechanism to ensure that lawmakers, providers, and other related stakeholders initiate system improvements and services that address the issues youth identify.

The youth involved in this effort were well aware of the challenges that surround them and had many ideas on how to address them in a beneficial way. Many youth feel they have no outlet to influence change and were eager to get involved with this project. The development of policies and programs targeted at youth should, at a minimum, incorporate youth feedback and guidance to maximize effectiveness.

SURVEY & FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

To capture the needs and challenges facing Illinois youth as well as the opportunities they envision for systemic change, a survey was developed and a series of focus groups were conducted that encouraged youth to share their experiences in five major areas: their network of relationships, school, work, health, and future planning. Youth were also asked to describe how they perceive specific issues within these broad categories and how they affect their larger peer group. The key findings outlined in this report were compiled based on youth survey and focus group input.

As program participants and recipients of services, young people are uniquely equipped to share their experiences and offer ideas for positive change.

• **SAMPLE**

A total of 162 youth completed the survey. Researchers partnered with 10 community-based agencies to survey youth from Carbondale, Centerville, Champaign, Chicago, Cicero, East St. Louis, Harvey, Illiana, Machesney Park, Maywood, Murphysboro, Oak Lawn, Peoria, Rockford, St. Clair County, Steger, and Washington Park. The goal was to connect with young people involved in formal, ongoing services, such as job training or after school programs, as well as youth nominally connected with human services programs. Following the survey, researchers facilitated five focus groups in Carbondale, Chicago,* East St. Louis, and Rockford. A total of 34 youth participated, as a voluntary, non-random subset of the survey respondents. The survey and focus group samples used for this report are not representative and therefore findings should not be generalized.

• **SURVEY DEVELOPMENT**

Numerous existing instruments used to gauge behavior, attitudes, perceptions, and goal setting of youth were leveraged in developing this survey. Several external partners in the youth services field served as reviewers on the initial survey draft and provided feedback on the survey tool to ensure that all salient issues were covered and questions were constructed in a thoughtful and coherent manner. The tool was designed at a fourth-grade reading level.

• **SURVEY ADMINISTRATION**

Staff from the 10 community-based agencies recruited youth, ages 12 to 24, currently enrolled in at least one of their programs to complete the survey. Researchers visited most program sites to administer the survey. They also explained the project's goals, so

that youth understood how their participation could influence systemic changes for the state. All youth and the parents/guardians of youth under the age of 18 signed a consent form to participate. Answers from youth for whom consents were not obtained were excluded from this analysis. Youth received snacks in return for their involvement. Surveys were self-administered pencil and paper instruments, and data were compiled and analyzed using the SPSS statistical software package.

• **FOCUS GROUP FACILITATION**

The focus groups were conducted with youth to acquire deeper levels of understanding of needs, challenges, and possible solutions. Questions were developed in response to trends and themes that emerged from the survey data. Researchers collaborated with five youth providers in Chicago,* Rockford, East St. Louis, and Carbondale to recruit youth to participate in each focus group. Focus groups were held at program sites, and 5 to 10 youth participated in each discussion. All youth and the parents/guardians of youth under the age of 18 signed a consent form to participate. Youth responses were tape-recorded and an observer also took notes. Youth received snacks and a \$10 gift card in return for their involvement.

The survey and focus group tools and procedures were approved by Heartland Alliance's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB consists of community-based providers and researchers whose expertise establishes ethical safeguards and ensures that research adds value to practice and policy development.

** Two focus groups took place in Chicago.*

"UP UNTIL 2 MONTHS AGO, I HAD A MEDICAL CARD BUT SHE TOLD ME I COULDN'T KEEP IT BECAUSE OF THE FACT THAT I DIDN'T HAVE ANY KIDS. I WAS PRETTY MAD ABOUT THAT, LIKE I GOTTA HAVE A BABY JUST TO HAVE MEDICAL INSURANCE."

"...THE PROGRAM IS ONLY FOR A CERTAIN AGE SO AFTER I GOT LIKE 14 OR 15, I COULDN'T REALLY ATTEND THE PROGRAM NO MORE...SO IT WAS LIKE I STILL HAVE THIS ANGER PROBLEM, I STILL HAVE THESE ISSUES...I COULDN'T FIND REALLY NO OTHER PROGRAM THAT, THAT COULD JUST HELP ME OUT..."

"IF THERE WAS JUST A LOT MORE AWARENESS OF WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE HOUSEHOLD, WHAT WAS GOING ON WITH YOUR FAMILY...IF PEOPLE WERE MORE AWARE OF WHAT WAS GOING ON, IF PARENTS WERE A LOT MORE ACTIVE IN THE CHILD'S SCHOOL WORK...AND TEACHERS TOO..."

"I WANT TO BE SOMEBODY. I'M NOT TRYING TO STAY HERE MY WHOLE LIFE."

"WHEN WE GROW UP, WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO HAVE IT BETTER THAN WE HAVE."

"THE WORLD HAS TAUGHT ME SO MANY THINGS. PEOPLE SAID THAT IF I TRIED HARD ENOUGH, I COULD BE IT."

"STOP PUTTING LIQUOR STORES ON EVERY CORNER. THERE'S LIQUOR STORE, CHURCH, LIQUOR STORE, CHURCH...AND THE YOUNG KIDS DON'T GO TO CHURCH NO MORE SO THE ONLY SPOT THEY GOT IS THE LIQUOR STORE OR THEY GOT A VACANT LOT."

"EVERYONE WANTS EXPERIENCE, IF YOU DON'T HAVE IT, YOU START AT A MEASLY JOB AND HAVE TO WORK UP."

"I MADE A PERSONAL PROMISE TO MYSELF. I WOULD NEVER PUT MYSELF IN THAT POSITION EVER AGAIN IN MY LIFE."

"I DIDN'T HAVE A GRIP ON REALITY AND DIDN'T REALIZE...THE POSITION I WAS PUTTING MYSELF IN WHEN I STOPPED GOING TO SCHOOL, WHEN I WAS SKIPPING CLASS AND NOT DOING MY WORK WHEN I WAS THERE...I DIDN'T REALIZE HOW IT WAS GOING TO AFFECT MY FUTURE AS FAR AS THE REST OF MY LIFE."

Key Findings

In recent years, the youth development field has gravitated away from a focus on prevention of risky behaviors to a focus on readiness. Readiness relates to developing programs and supports that build a comprehensive set of academic, job-related psychosocial and civic skills in youth to prepare them for adulthood. In keeping with this trend, the survey and focus groups aimed to assess how prepared Illinois youth feel for adulthood — *Are Illinois youth ready for life?* They were asked numerous questions about their relationships, school, work, and health experiences as well as their future plans. The findings are both enlightening and inspiring. Illinois youth demonstrate a profound sense of resilience in confronting daily challenges. Furthermore, their insight and candid feedback advances the youth policy discussion toward systemic solutions that are responsive to the needs of today's youth.

DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 162 youth completed the survey. Their ages ranged from 12 to 24 years, with the average age being 18 years old. Fifty-one percent of survey respondents were female, 48 percent were male, and 1 percent was transgender. In terms of race/ethnicity youth indicated the following: Black/African American (76%), White (10%), Latino/a (7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (4%), Native American (4%), Middle Eastern (1%).*

Over half of youth respondents (57%) lived in the Chicago area. Youth also lived in Southern Illinois (21%), Northern Illinois (16%), and Central Illinois (5%). In terms of their living situation at the time of the survey, youth reported that they lived with biological or step parents (38%), with siblings (14%), with grandparents (12%), with a romantic partner (11%), by themselves (8%), with roommates (7%), with their own family (5%), homeless or in a shelter (5%), with foster parents (4%), and with adoptive parents (2%).*

** Percentages may not total 100 percent because respondents had the option of choosing more than one response.*

Relationships/ Support

The presence of caring adults in a young person's life is essential to their healthy development. These adults can provide emotional stability, support, advice, and other necessities that help youth develop important life skills. Furthermore, positive relationships with adults can also link youth to community-based resources. Adults not only serve as service providers and educators, but also as mentors, role models, or other types of advocates for youth. Strong linkages can help youth feel more secure about their future and more confident that they can reach their goals.

GENERAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT

To ascertain the level of support Illinois youth feel they receive, youth were asked to identify the most important people in their lives — with whom they discuss personal problems, get money and other material items, and depend on for advice and other types of support. Ninety percent of youth reported that there is at least one adult person in their lives who cares about them and who they could turn to for guidance, help, or support. Yet, notable distinctions emerged when youth were asked

to rate how helpful parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, other peers, teachers, and

social workers were for emotional support and material necessities. Mothers/stepmothers followed by grandparents and siblings were most frequently reported by youth as being "very helpful" to discuss personal problems with or to obtain money and other things from.

Only 25 percent of youth reported that their fathers were "very helpful" to discuss personal problems with. In terms of asking fathers for money or other things, 34 percent rated them as "very helpful." A Southern Illinois youth talked passionately about the complications she experienced with her father after he remarried, **"...You don't write me, call me, you ain't my daddy."**

Youth were also asked more focused questions to understand the nature of parental relationships. Youth overwhelmingly reported that they "strongly agree" or "agree" that their parents/guardians cared about them (87%), made them feel wanted (76%), and showed youth that they can trust them (73%).

Adults not only serve as service providers and educators, but also as mentors, role models, or other types of advocates for youth.

YOUTH AND ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

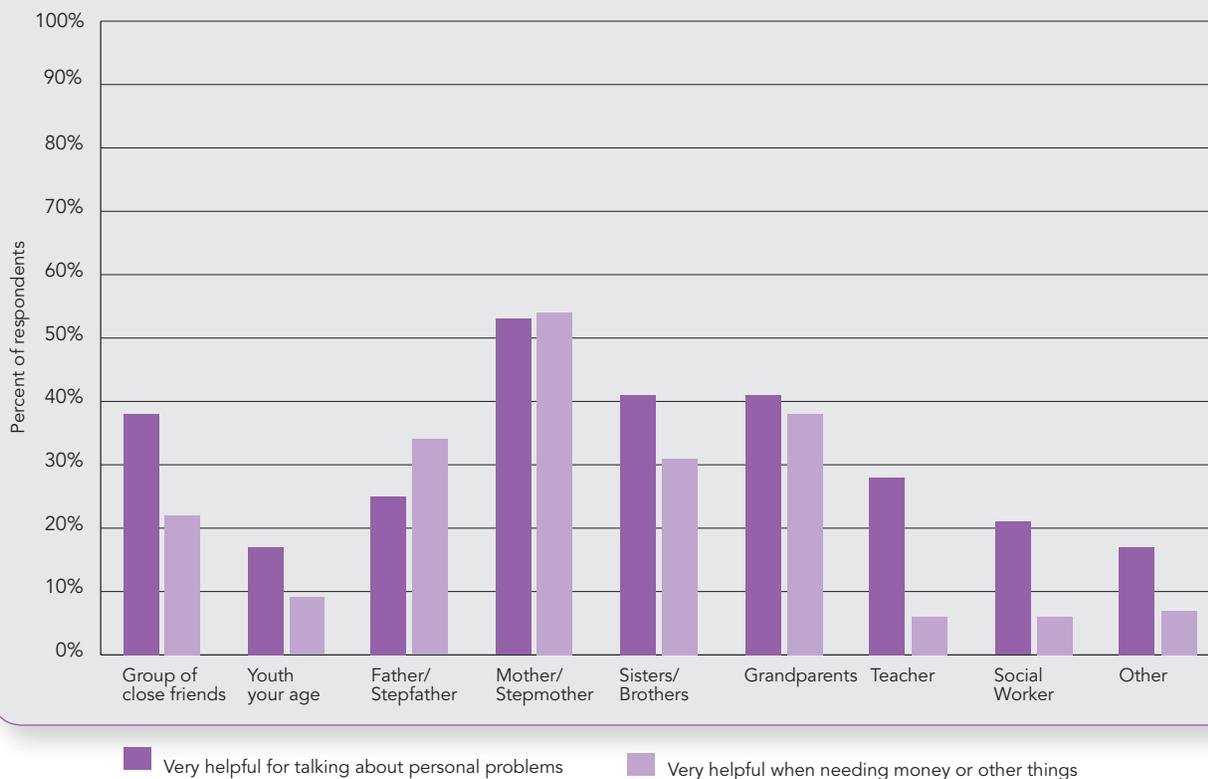
Adolescents who are more mobile, have jobs, or other responsibilities that take them outside the home face unique situations that impact the quality of their relationships with other adults. Youth were asked to identify factors that make relationships between themselves and adults difficult. Youth most commonly reported that relationships between youth and adults are sometimes difficult because of adults making judgments (54%). This was followed quite closely by adults being too busy (46%) and adults not trusting them (44%). A Rockford youth noted, **“Older people, they think just ‘cause we’re young, we’re so irresponsible, so reckless...it’s irritating.”**

When asked what would improve relationships between youth and adults, youth overwhelming reported that adults should be more open-minded (70%). This was followed by building

trust (66%) and spending more time together (59%). The solutions outlined by youth closely matched the problems they identified in dealing with adults, suggesting that they have an understanding of the pitfalls of the relationships and ways to remedy them.

These findings are encouraging, as the majority of youth who participated in this project were able to identify adults or peers in their lives as sources of support. Their perceptions of factors that make their relationships with other adults sometimes difficult and ways that these relationships could be better may also serve as valuable information for agencies that provide services to youth. Programming that creates open, safe places for youth to vent frustrations or express feelings while sharing tools to empower youth in making their own decisions may be more readily embraced and utilized by youth.

When you want to talk about a personal problem or when you need money and other things, how helpful is each of the following people?



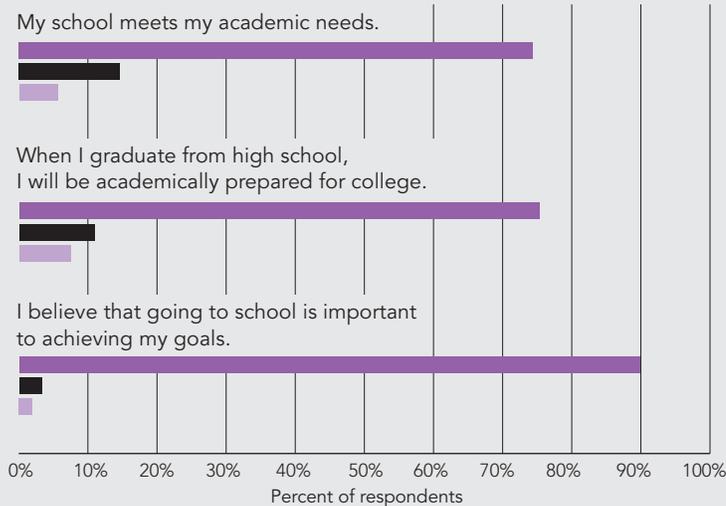
School

Youth make important choices about their educational future during the teenage years. School is another fundamental mechanism to promote positive youth development, as it affords youth opportunities to harness academic knowledge, develop interpersonal skills, and explore possible careers. An individual's ability to increase income over their lifetime is closely associated with educational attainment.⁸

ATTITUDES ABOUT SCHOOL

Youth demonstrated a core belief in education as a tool to achieve future goals, but family problems and school inadequacies pose significant challenges. In fact, most youth reported that they were enrolled in school (75%) and attended school (77%) at the time of the survey. Of youth who attended school at the time of the survey, 74 percent reported that they "strongly agree" or "agree" that school meets their academic needs, 76 percent reported that they "strongly agree" or "agree" that school will academically prepare them for college, and 90 percent "strongly agree or "agree" that school is important to achieve their goals.

How do you feel about the following statements?



Strongly agree/Agree Strongly disagree/Disagree Don't know

BARRIERS TO STAYING IN SCHOOL

The most commonly reported barriers by youth that keep their peers from staying in school included boring classes (68%), becoming a parent (57%), wanting to work and earn money (56%), and not seeing how school is important to their future (56%). This echoes sentiments uncovered in national research on factors leading to high school dropout.⁹ Classes deemed boring because of the subject matter or teaching style can fuel an attraction toward working and a mounting feeling that school may not matter. A Rockford youth noted, **"I didn't have a grip on reality and didn't realize...the position I was putting myself in when I stopped going to school, when I was skipping class and not doing my work when I was there...I didn't realize how it was going to affect my future as far as the rest of my life."** Also important is the portion of youth who perceive early parenthood as a barrier. Approximately 16 percent of youth who took the survey indicated that they were living with a romantic partner or with their own children. Of these youth, 67 percent reported that becoming a parent is a barrier to staying in school. This raises concerns about the school supports in place to help young parents continue and finish school.

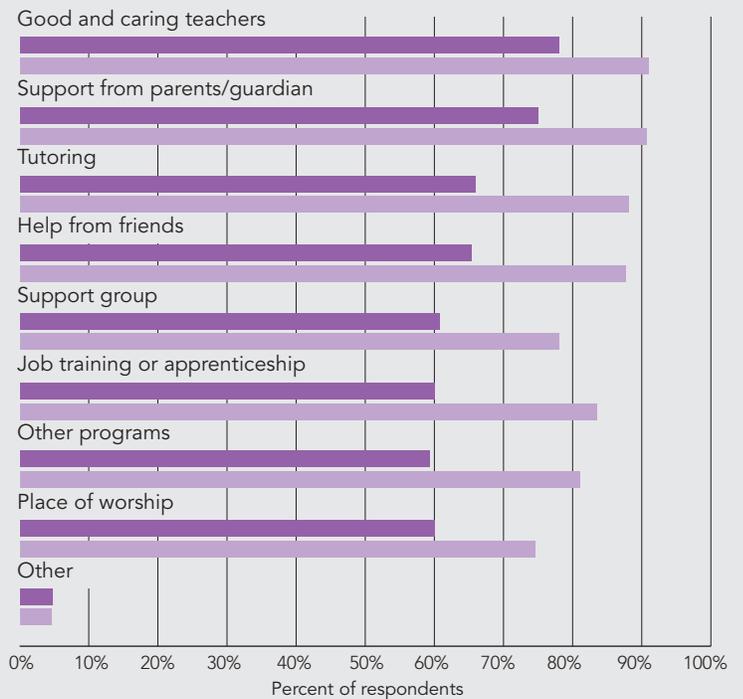
Many youth who participated in the focus groups did not finish school or knew of someone who dropped out. Youth pointed toward family problems, dismissive teachers, and the lure of steady money through work as important factors that kept themselves, siblings, or peers from staying in school. They shared stories of youth being pushed out of school due to pregnancies, truancy, or behavioral issues. They also questioned the merit of such practices, when they feel there are not enough programs in place to address these challenges in their schools or surrounding communities.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOUTH STAY IN SCHOOL

Youth reported that good and caring teachers (78%) and support from their family (75%) are “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” for them to stay in school. Youth also see tutoring (66%), help from their friends (65%), support groups (61%), and job training/apprenticeship programs (61%) as “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” to assist them to stay in school. This feedback suggests that a strong support system of family, friends, and peers, combined with targeted academic assistance and lessons grounded in real world experiences may bolster school attendance. This was consistent with youth responses about the resources they perceived their peers needing to stay in school. Again, good and caring teachers (91%), and support from family members (91%) were most commonly cited as being “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” to help their peers stay in school.

Youth asserted that a stronger support system for youth that encompasses their immediate family and surrounding community would go a long

How have the following been helpful to your staying in school, and how helpful could the following be to help youth stay in school?



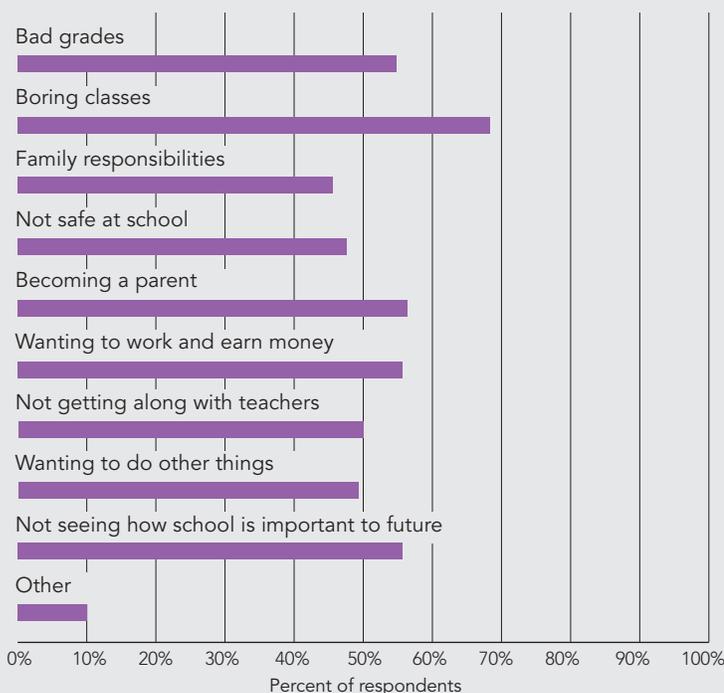
■ Very helpful or somewhat helpful to YOUR staying in school
 ■ Very helpful or somewhat helpful to YOUTH staying in school

way toward helping youth stay in school. As one youth from Chicago noted, **“If there was just a lot more awareness of what was going on in the household,**

what was going on with your family...if people were more aware of what was going on, if parents were a lot more active in the child’s school work...and teachers too. A lot times teachers really don’t care and that means we need to actually hire teachers who do care, who actually should and are qualified to teach.”

Generally, youth believe that school attendance is an essential ingredient for a successful future. Their opinions and experiences also raise important concerns about the efforts in school districts and local communities to help their peers stay in school. For youth, a web of supportive family, friends, and committed educators, in conjunction with lessons relevant to their interests and future career paths is vital for continuing school.

Which of the following are barriers that youth face to staying in school?



Work

A young person's ability to meet his or her basic needs is a key component in the transition to adulthood. Stable and adequate wage-paying employment is an indisputable method to manage life's demands. Early employment opportunities help youth develop the skills and experiences they need for future career development. Yet, approximately half of the youth ages 16 and over who were surveyed indicated that they were not working at the time of the survey, raising questions about their future marketability and success in the job market. Of the youth 16 years or older who took the survey and had held a job at some point, 20 percent indicated that their friends/peers and 18 percent indicated that family members helped them get their jobs.

REASONS TO WORK

In general, youth see work as an imperative vehicle to entering adulthood. The most commonly reported reasons to work include wanting to buy things like clothes and CDs (73%), saving for their own places to live (69%), purchasing their own cars (65%), and helping

their families (61%). Nearly all youth from the focus groups had looked for work at some point. The most common industries worked in by these youth included retail, food service, construction/maintenance, and recreation. Most believed their existing skill set suited them for these jobs, but few expressed any desire to stay in these fields over the long-term. One Chicago youth asserted, **"Everyone wants experience, if you don't have it, you start at a measly job and have to work up."**

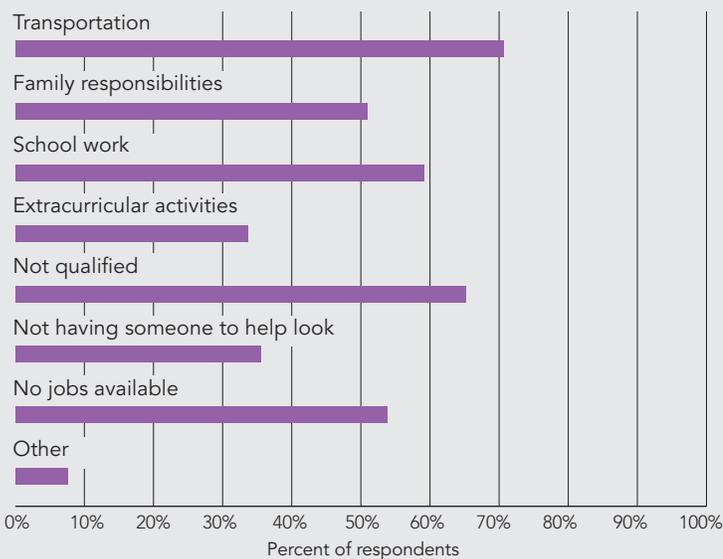
BARRIERS TO WORK

Youth understand the value of work, not only for meeting their short-term needs, but also for achieving their long-range goals. Yet, they encounter significant hurdles in securing employment. These obstacles leave many youth wondering how steep the climb will be toward realizing their ambitions. A youth from Southern Illinois declared, **"I live like on the west side or something like that and they're [the jobs] like on the east. And it's like really hard to get to because they're like so far away...It takes you maybe 2 hours just to walk, and by the time I've walked to work... I don't even want to go in."**

In fact, transportation issues emerged as the most formidable barrier to securing and maintaining employment. For most youth, arranging transportation requires constant planning, juggling, and/or dependence on family and friends with cars. They must be resourceful in finding ways to make lengthy commutes.

Public transportation, even in larger urban areas, is not always dependable or flexible. One Chicago youth said, **"If a job is far south, and they pay good money, but if you have to be there at a certain time and if you don't have a car and you got to depend on CTA* or Metra**...the odds of being on time are slim to none. Your boss is gonna have a problem with you coming in late."**

What are the biggest barriers that youth face to getting jobs?



A Rockford youth concurred, **“What agitated me is I’d get up, take the bus. You have to be here [work site] by 8 but the bus comes here every hour so if I catch the bus at 8, I’m gonna be late so I have to catch it at 7.”**

Considering the transportation issues, it is not surprising that one motivation for working is to purchase cars. Their experiences demonstrate how the difficulties in relying on other resources forced these youth to depend on themselves.

Along with transportation, youth reported that not feeling qualified (65%) and schoolwork (59%) were other significant barriers to getting a job. They report not getting along with supervisors or co-workers (65%) and family responsibilities (57%) as additional impediments to keeping jobs.

RESOURCES TO PREPARE FOR WORK

Youth most commonly reported that job training workshops (80%), job fairs (65%), and apprentice or internship programs (59%) would prepare them for jobs. Youth in the focus groups elaborated that they need workshops to strengthen their resume writing, computer literacy, and interviewing skills. They also see the value of developing other interpersonal skills such as teamwork, communication, and goal setting. This suggests that youth realize that they may not possess adequate skills to manage job responsibilities and interpersonal dynamics, raising questions about future job prospects and the likelihood of being self-sufficient adults.

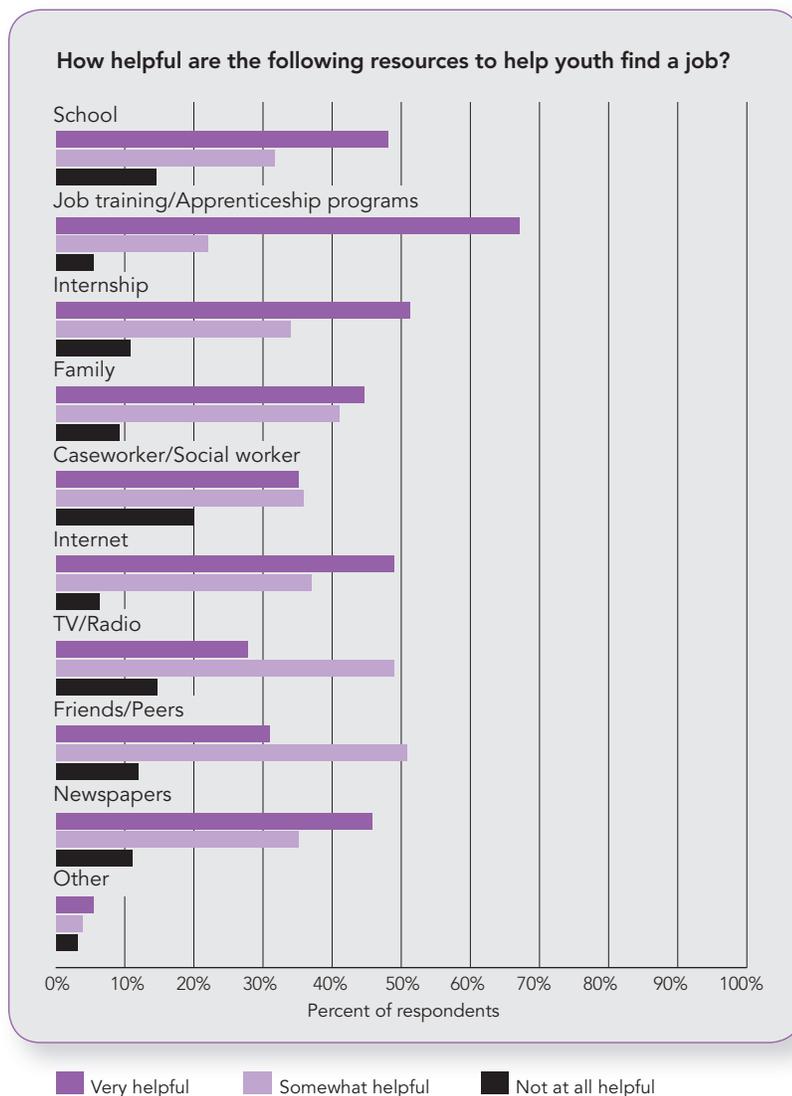
When youth were asked what resources would be “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” for youth to find jobs, job training or apprenticeship programs (89%), the Internet (86%), and family members (85%) were most commonly selected.

Developing job-related skills and having work experience in adolescence is crucial to achieving success in the workforce during

adulthood. Youth comments reinforce this and point to major hurdles such as transportation constraints and feeling unqualified that may hinder their efforts to secure employment. Their input also suggests that school and community-based resources that teach skills, build confidence, and easily connect youth to job opportunities can help youth overcome these hurdles.

* CTA stands for the Chicago Transit Authority.

** Metra refers to the Chicago metropolitan commuter rail system.



Health

Health and well-being are also key indicators of positive youth development. Youth face a variety of lifestyle choices in adolescence that can have significant impacts on their health and well-being, both now and into adulthood. Having access to health care and feeling equipped to make healthy decisions is vital to realizing success in adulthood.

Most youth surveyed believe that they get enough support and information to make healthy decisions. They also feel prepared to make healthy decisions as adults. Yet, they raised important issues concerning access, utilization, and the quantity of health-related resources, which may infringe on their ability to actually prepare for making decisions related to their well-being in adulthood.

BARRIERS TO HEALTH-RELATED SERVICES

Thirty-two percent of youth surveyed between the ages of 18 to 24 said they do not have health insurance. In fact, not having enough money or lacking health insurance were most commonly cited by youth as being barriers to seeing a doctor or dentist when they have ailments. These youth also have few options for acquiring affordable coverage since many are too old to be covered on their parents' policies or public insurance, or they work at jobs that do not provide benefits. In the focus groups, young women without children expressed strong opinions about this issue. Their understanding of current eligibility rules for public insurance — that older youth are only eligible for coverage if they are pregnant or parenting — left many feeling that current Medicaid regulations indirectly encouraged

them and their peers to bear children in order to receive insurance. One young woman said, **"Up until 2 months ago, I had a medical card but [she] told me I couldn't keep it because of the fact that I didn't have any kids. I was pretty mad about that, like I gotta have a baby just to have medical insurance."**

A lack of health care coverage among youth mirrors health insurance problems in the adult population: mounting bills, long waits in emergency rooms, and the burden of managing pain.

HEALTH CONCERNS

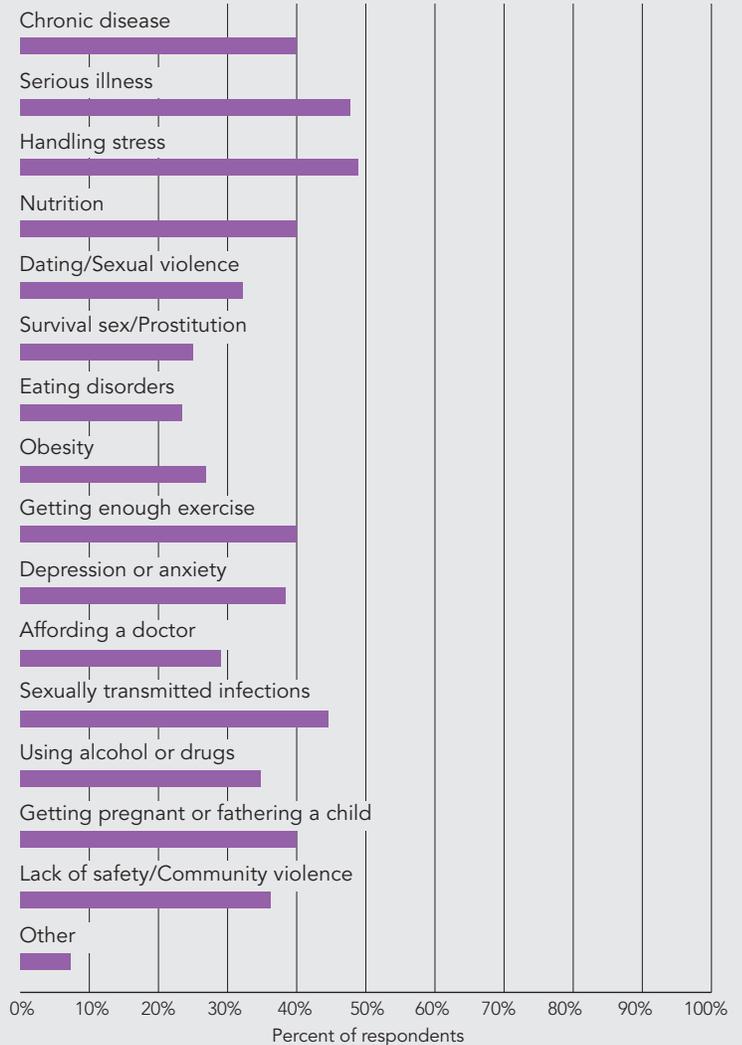
Lack of health insurance may also contribute to top health issues that youth report as concerns. Handling stress (49%), serious illnesses (48%), and sexually transmitted infections (44%) were the most commonly cited health worries. Youth concerned about their ability to handle stress may raise a larger concern in regards to mental health access. Fifty-six percent of youth surveyed have never talked to a social worker, school counselor, or therapist when they felt anxious and depressed. Focus group participants raised strong concerns about the lack of programs that teach coping skills for their age group. A Rockford youth shared, **"...The program is only for a certain age so after I got like 14 or 15 I couldn't really attend the program no more...so it was like I still have this anger problem, I still have these issues...I couldn't find really no other program that, that could just help me out..."** Left unchecked, mental health issues can present significant lifelong challenges and contribute to other costly problems such as homelessness, interpersonal violence, and substance abuse.

VIEWS ON COMMUNITY SAFETY AND RECREATION PROGRAMS

Nearly 90 percent of youth reported that there are not enough safe places to hang out in their communities. Youth in the focus groups lamented extensively on the lack of positive outlets combined with feeling unsafe, citing ineffective law enforcement and bad parenting as contributing factors. Even more disturbing, most youth did not feel like anything could be done to change the situation. Also, most youth surveyed did not feel that they receive enough information about recreation services available in their communities. This may contribute to the general perception that their neighborhoods lack safe places. Focus group participants said the best they could do is to avoid the “wrong crowds” and stay indoors after dark.

Most youth reported feeling prepared to make healthy decisions as adults, but they also raised compelling issues related to access to medical care, their general health concerns, and community safety. Without taking concerted efforts to improve access to health care and to stabilize their communities, their wellness as adults may be compromised.

What are the most important health issues that you are worried about?



Future Planning

Positive youth development also helps youth envision their futures, encourages goal setting, and instills confidence necessary to realize their ambitions. Generally, youth possess an optimistic outlook with regards to their future. Survey results indicated that youth believe that it is “very likely” that they will graduate from high school, attend college, and be a good friend and parent.

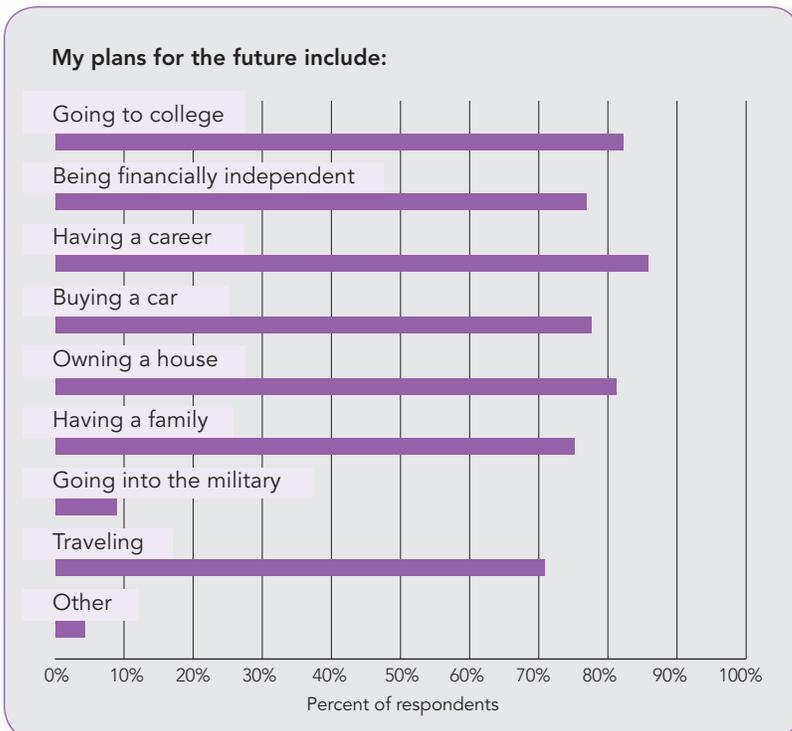
CONCERNS ABOUT FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

Responses were somewhat mixed when youth were asked about their future job prospects. While employment goals are probably embedded in their future plans, 58 percent of youth reported that it would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that they would have difficulty finding a good job as adults. Another 51 percent of youth reported that it would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that they would have difficulty finding a husband/wife or partner who has a good job.

BARRIERS TO FUTURE GOALS

When asked what might prevent youth from reaching their goals, not having enough money (62%), going to jail (46%), and experiencing difficulty finding a job (44%) were most frequently reported as potential barriers. Most focus group participants voiced serious concerns not only about having enough money, but also about getting money when they really needed it. One youth doubted that she would be able to ask for money even if she faced a dire situation, “...sometimes [I have] too much pride to ask.”

Going to jail also proved to be a huge worry for focus group participants. A few focus group participants had previously been court-involved, and would go to any lengths to prevent future involvement. A Rockford youth contended, “I made a personal promise to myself. I would never put myself in that position ever again in my life.” As was the case for community safety, many youth doubted that their local communities could prevent other youth from a similar fate. A Chicago youth declared, “Stop putting liquor stores on every corner. There’s liquor store, church, liquor store, church...and the young kids don’t go to church no more so the only spot they got is the liquor store or they got a vacant lot.”



RESOURCES NEEDED TO ACHIEVE GOALS

Youth had many concrete ideas on what will help them achieve their goals. Youth reported that money management (72%), decision-making (58%), math (56%), job-readiness (53%), problem-solving (52%), and techniques for dealing with people (52%) are essential skills needed to achieve their goals.

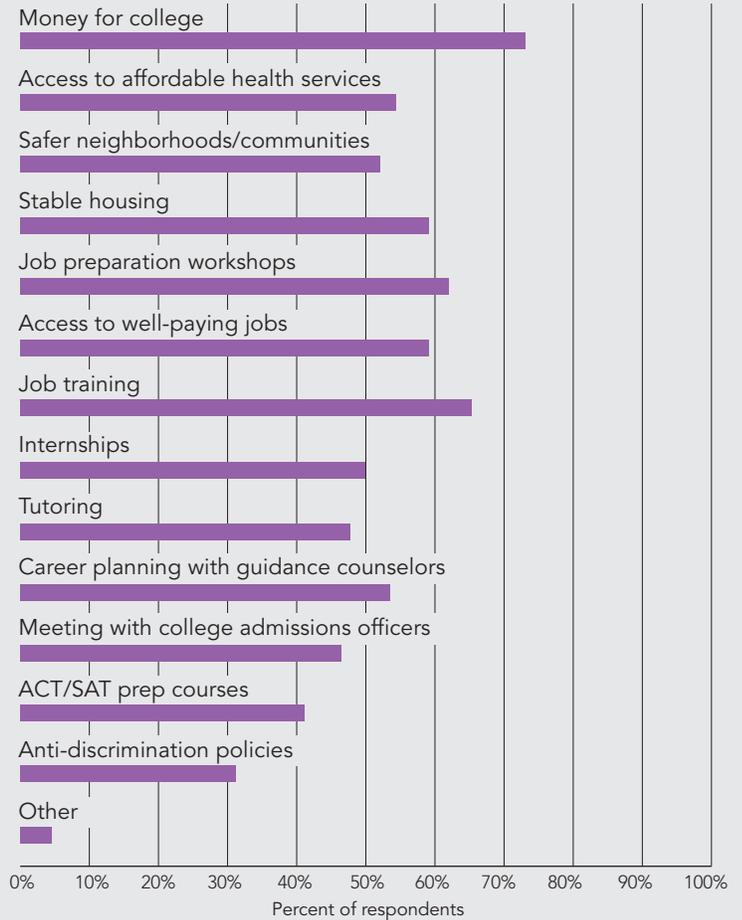
Youth also stated that college tuition assistance (73%), as well as job training (65%) and job preparation workshops (62%) would be the best programs or services to fulfill their ambitions.

PERSONAL INFLUENCES

When asked to identify the individuals that most influence their plans for the future, youth most commonly reported that their mothers (59%) were most influential. Youth also frequently cited themselves as influencing their future goals (54%), illustrating a sense of independence and self-direction.

Overall, youth envision a positive future. Yet, their fears — not having enough money, being unemployed, or facing incarceration — weigh heavily on their impending adulthood. Youth voices amplify the need for more deliberate efforts to create more work experiences, develop financial education and saving opportunities, build interpersonal and job-readiness skills, improve public transit, and provide greater access to health services. These findings should serve as a call to action to help more youth feel ready for life.

What would be the best programs or services to help you identify and achieve your goals?



Youth Services — Current Barriers and Opportunities for Change

There is a growing body of knowledge about the unique needs and challenges facing older youth and growing interest among leaders across the country in crafting effective public policies and programs to address these needs. However, existing research documents that shortcomings within public programs and services result in youth becoming disconnected from the very systems meant to facilitate their successful transition to adulthood. The following are well-documented barriers to effectively providing youth services:

- [Weak transition points among youth services](#) — Aging out of foster care, becoming a young parent, exiting the juvenile justice system, dropping out of school, or becoming homeless are the most common ways that youth become disconnected from supports and opportunities that can help equip them for a successful future. Youth who leave school are often disconnected from mentors, links to employment, and non-relative adults who are invested in their future. Early problems youth may experience with substance abuse or involvement with the corrections system persist into adulthood without access to related services.¹⁰ Many youth enter adulthood without reconnecting to needed services and systems.
- [Narrowly defined program issues](#) — As they become adults, youth face many complex, overlapping issues. For example, securing stable, affordable housing may be a primary concern, but other dilemmas such as unemployment and mental health ailments may also loom as significant impediments.¹¹ Unfortunately, most program models and funding streams are narrowly focused on one or a small set of issues that do not adequately address complex problems. This forces youth to seek out multiple entry points. It also reduces program effectiveness when issues are not addressed in a coordinated way.

- [Lack of coordination among programs](#)

— Coordination among government agencies serving youth through various programs or funding streams is usually infrequent or limited in scope.¹² Instead of partnering for ongoing planning or allocation of resources based on a joint assessment of need, efforts are often project-based or intermittent, creating difficulty for providers and youth themselves.

- [Lack of positive youth development opportunities](#)

— Most states, including Illinois, struggle to provide supports that not only remediate problems but also build employment, relationships, and general life skills in a proactive, holistic manner. Remediating problems is more costly than proactive investments in skill building in terms of budget impact as well as the impact on youth, their families, and communities.

The release of the 2003 Final Report from the White House Taskforce for Disadvantaged Youth, followed by the passage of the Federal Youth Coordination Act in 2006 has set a national context and ignited state-level activity to take more concerted steps in crafting youth policy with a focus on positive youth development, reducing fragmentation of youth services, and better aligning youth programs across departments. Several states, including Oregon and New Mexico, have answered the call for stronger coordination and a more deliberate effort to develop services within a context of youth development by creating youth development councils and children's cabinets — consisting of committed state officials across agencies, with gubernatorial support, to engage in joint planning. Lessons learned from these efforts demonstrate that a shared responsibility between state agencies and local providers, a commitment to understand the needs of youth, and a clear vision for youth development is paramount. Their efforts offer important insight on how effective strategies can serve to guide similar efforts pursued by other states, including Illinois.

Recommendations

Illinois youth have dreams and ambitions and express the inner drive needed to accomplish their goals. However, many face complex life situations and barriers without understanding or having access to the resources needed to be successful. The state plays a central role in providing supports and services to help youth transition successfully into adulthood with the skills and resources to be ready for life.

Illinois youth feel that more deliberate efforts to build their interpersonal and job-readiness skills, improve public transportation, provide greater access to health services, and create more workforce development experiences are critical to their future. These findings should serve as a call to action to ensure all youth are ready for life. The following recommendations are offered as a means for Illinois to better serve and support young people across the state:

1. INVEST IN PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT SUPPORT YOUTH IN THEIR TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Programs and services for youth must help youth develop life skills so they are equipped to become independent and self-sufficient in adulthood. Increased and sustained investments in the following types of programs and services are needed:

- Create alternative education opportunities for students who have dropped out but who are interested in continuing their education.
- Increase workforce development opportunities that include job readiness, skill building, work experience, and wages. Transitional jobs, workplace mentoring, internships, summer jobs, school-to-career, and related programs should be expanded.
- Support linkages and integration among education, housing, mental health, and other basic services for youth at key points in their adolescent development.
- Expand eligibility for All Kids or other public health insurance programs to include youth between the ages of 18 and 24 regardless of whether or not they are parents.
- Create financial education and savings opportunities to equip youth with financial skills and assist youth in paying for college, housing, and other expenses related to independent living.
- Expand means to support parents and families in their important role as facilitators of positive youth development. Invest in programs and services that support parental employment, financial stability, and success.

Recommendations — continued >

Recommendations (continued)

2. UTILIZE EVIDENCE-BASED FINDINGS TO GUIDE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

Research on best practices in youth development should serve as a foundation for program development and evaluation as well as policy and systems change. Such practices and desired outcomes should serve as a template for policymakers in their strides to craft legislation and develop new programs; for state personnel in their efforts to design services, disburse funding, and evaluate effectiveness; and for service providers as they build and deliver programs to promote healthy youth development. Research that incorporates youth interests, experiences, and opinions should serve to inform and guide related policy and program development.

3. CREATE A COORDINATED SYSTEM OF YOUTH SERVICES

Services to Illinois youth should be coordinated across state agencies and funding streams to facilitate joint planning and easy access. Such collaboration would ensure a continuity of services to address the specific academic, civic, mental, occupational, and physical needs facing youth at various points in their adolescence and early adulthood. Illinois state agencies providing services to youth — including the Illinois Departments of Children and Family Services, Human Services, Healthcare and Family Services, Commerce and Economic Opportunity, and Juvenile Justice, as well as the State Board of Education, Community College Board, Board of Higher Education, and the Student Assistance Commission — should partner on the following whenever possible:

- Develop program standards that reflect best practices in youth development so that youth programs build skills, encourage healthy behaviors, and reinforce positive attitudes in matters related to personal relationships, schooling, work experiences, health and mental well-being, and civic engagement.
- Streamline reporting requirements to minimize duplication, incorporate desired outcomes, and ease administrative burdens across programs and agencies.
- Increase the flexibility of funding streams and program models to enable providers to address youth development issues in a more comprehensive manner.

Comprehensive, informed investments can enhance young people's successful transition into adulthood. Youth success in completing education and training translates into a skilled workforce that will benefit Illinois' business and provides a means for youth to have an adequate livelihood in the future. Strong, healthy interpersonal relationships serve as the bedrock for Illinois families and communities. Economic stability and opportunity are critical to reducing intergenerational poverty. It is incumbent upon Illinois policymakers, parents, and other adult leaders to work intentionally and collaboratively, in partnership with youth, to devise a comprehensive youth development strategy that ensures that **all young people in Illinois are ready for life.**

Illinois Youth — Ready for Life: Teen Poverty and Youth Development Project

Since 2003, Heartland Alliance has provided leadership to the Illinois Youth — Ready for Life Project. Working with a multidisciplinary group of project advisors, including Illinois youth, the project focuses on the following goals:

- Educate state policymakers on the unique factors surrounding teen poverty and youth development;
- Expand the scope of state-funded programs to include a comprehensive approach to youth development;
- Initiate joint planning and decision-making among state agencies serving youth in Illinois; and
- Increase state appropriations for positive youth development programs.

For more information, including a copy of the survey, visit <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/maip/CampaignsCoalitionsNetworks.html> and click on *Illinois Youth — Ready for Life: Teen Poverty and Youth Development Project*.

ABOUT US

Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights is a service-based human rights organization focused on investments in and solutions for the most poor and vulnerable men, women, and children in our society. We provide housing, health care, human services, and human rights protections to over 100,000 people each year and use our more than a century of direct service experience to advocate for social justice. The Mid-America Institute on Poverty (MAIP) is the advocacy and research arm of Heartland Alliance.

Mid-America Institute on Poverty of
Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights
4411 North Ravenswood Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60640

ph 773.336.6075
fx 773.506.6649

maip@heartlandalliance.org

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2004-2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Microdata, calculation conducted by the Mid-America Institute on Poverty of Heartland Alliance.
- ² The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2006). *Measuring up: The national report card on higher education*. San Jose, CA: Author. (Net college costs include tuition, room, and board after financial aid.)
- ³ Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., Palma, S., & Tobar, P. (2004, December). *Lost in the wilderness: The deteriorating labor market for teens and young adults in Illinois, 2000-2004*. Chicago: Alternative School Network.
- ⁴ VanLandeghem, K. (2003, April). *Children's mental health: An urgent priority for Illinois*. Final Report. Chicago: Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force.
- ⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2005-2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Microdata, calculation conducted by the Mid-America Institute on Poverty of Heartland Alliance.
- ⁶ VanLandeghem, K. (2003, April). *Children's mental health: An urgent priority for Illinois*. Final Report. Chicago: Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force.
- ⁷ Johnson, T.P., & Graf, I. (2005, December). *Unaccompanied homeless youth in Illinois: 2005*. Survey Research Laboratory, College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs. Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago.
- ⁸ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2003). *Fact sheet: Impact of education on personal income & employment*. Retrieved June 20, 2007, from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/PIE%20Factoids%20for%20Website.doc>
- ⁹ Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio Jr., J. J., Morison, K.B. (March 2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington DC: Civic Enterprises, LLC and Peter D. Hart Research Associates.
- ¹⁰ Zweig, J.M. (2003, June). *Vulnerable youth: Identifying their need for alternative educational settings*. Washington DC: The Urban Institute.
- ¹¹ Wald, M. & Martinez T. (2003, November). *Connected by 25: Improving the life chances of the country's most vulnerable 14-24 year olds*. California: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.
- ¹² Dunkle, M. (2002). *Understanding LA systems that affect families: A look at how 40+ programs might touch one Los Angeles family*. Washington DC and Los Angeles: The George Washington University and The LA County Children's Planning Council.

WE WOULD LIKE SEND A SPECIAL **THANK YOU** TO
THE YOUTH WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEYS AND
FOCUS GROUPS FOR THIS PROJECT. YOUR INSIGHTS
WERE BOTH POWERFUL AND INSPIRING, AND WITH YOUR
HELP WILL MOVE THIS PROJECT FORWARD. MAY YOUR
RESILIENCE AND DETERMINATION SERVE YOU WELL!

"...THE PROGRAM IS ONLY FOR A CERTAIN AGE SO AFTER I GOT LIKE 14 OR 15, I COULDN'T REALLY ATTEND THE PROGRAM NO MORE...SO IT WAS LIKE I STILL HAVE THIS ANGER PROBLEM, I STILL HAVE THESE ISSUES...I COULDN'T FIND REALLY NO OTHER PROGRAM THAT, THAT COULD JUST HELP ME OUT..."

"IF THERE WAS JUST A LOT MORE AWARENESS OF WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE HOUSEHOLD, WHAT WAS GOING ON WITH YOUR FAMILY... IF PEOPLE WERE MORE AWARE OF WHAT WAS GOING ON, IF PARENTS WERE A LOT MORE ACTIVE IN THE CHILD'S SCHOOL WORK... AND TEACHERS TOO..."

"I WANT TO BE SOMEBODY. I'M NOT TRYING TO STAY HERE MY WHOLE LIFE."

"WHEN WE GROW UP, WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO HAVE IT BETTER THAN WE HAVE."

"THE WORLD HAS TAUGHT ME SO MANY THINGS. PEOPLE SAID THAT IF I TRIED HARD ENOUGH, I COULD BE IT."

"STOP PUTTING LIQUOR STORES ON EVERY CORNER. THERE'S LIQUOR STORE, CHURCH, LIQUOR STORE, CHURCH...AND THE YOUNG KIDS DON'T GO TO CHURCH NO MORE SO THE ONLY SPOT THEY GOT IS THE LIQUOR STORE OR THEY GOT A VACANT LOT."

"EVERYONE WANTS EXPERIENCE, IF YOU DON'T HAVE IT, YOU START AT A MEASLY JOB AND HAVE TO WORK UP."

"I MADE A PERSONAL PROMISE TO MYSELF. I WOULD NEVER PUT MYSELF IN THAT POSITION EVER AGAIN IN MY LIFE."

"I DIDN'T HAVE A GRIP ON REALITY AND DIDN'T REALIZE...THE POSITION I WAS PUTTING MYSELF IN WHEN I STOPPED GOING TO SCHOOL, WHEN I WAS SKIPPING CLASS AND NOT DOING MY WORK WHEN I WAS THERE...I DIDN'T REALIZE HOW IT WAS GOING TO AFFECT MY FUTURE AS FAR AS THE REST OF MY LIFE."

Mid-America Institute on Poverty of
Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights
4411 North Ravenswood Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60640

Ph 773.336.6075
Fx 773.506.6649
maip@heartlandalliance.org