

2015

# Independent Living Survey Project Summary of Findings

Identifying & Understanding the Needs of Homeless  
Youth in Tompkins County, New York



*“Give them a chance. Hear them out. Help with education. Help them try to be somebody. Show them the right thing to do.”*

*- Survey  
Respondent*

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**This project was a collaboration among:**

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Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research**

**Tompkins County Youth Services Department**

**The Learning Web**

**Young Adult Participants in the Learning Web's Youth Outreach Program**

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## INTRODUCTION

In conjunction with the Tompkins County Continuum of Care Committee (CoC), the county's planning entity for homeless services, and in response to a community need to document the number of homeless youth, the 2015 Independent Living Survey 4 (ILS4) Project was conducted. ILS4, a community-based participatory research project, was a follow up to three similar surveys completed in 2004 (ILS1) and 2007 (ILS2), and 2011 (ILS3). The results of these previous surveys have had a significant impact on the community and services for independent youth. The ILS projects have generated solid data used to develop state and federal funding sources bringing in over \$260,000 in expanded services for homeless youth. The Learning Web secured these funds to create a Supportive Transitional Housing Program. 93 homeless youth secured transitional supported housing since the program's inception in 2008. 81 residents exited from this program in 12-18 months and 97% of them secured stable housing. The CoC asked us to repeat this effort in order to update the findings and assess change over time.

Young people approach the issue of shelter differently than adults, often preferring the uncertainties of their housing situations over the perceived loss of control associated with shelters and residential programs. As such, they are rarely captured by traditional measures used to assess the prevalence of homelessness, such as point-in-time counts and shelter utilization statistics. Thus, efforts to count or otherwise describe homeless youth that rely primarily upon these data sources vastly underestimate the true extent of the problem.

Using a unique approach, the study team engaged a group of formerly homeless youth as research partners who were able to reach those individuals not connected to programs or services, the invisible and underserved sector of the homeless youth population. The youth researchers were involved in all aspects of the project, from designing the tools, to recruiting subjects, collecting the data, interpreting the findings, and presenting results to community stakeholders. We were able to reach the invisible and underserved sector of the homeless youth population. The benefits of engaging young people in the research process are significant—youth involvement in generating and interpreting knowledge is a powerful strategy to promote positive youth development, advance research, impact policy, and improve services for homeless youth.

Once again, the project was enormously successful: we reached 208 young people between February and April 2015 (we estimate that this represents almost 21% of the homeless youth population in the county<sup>1</sup>).

The Independent Living Survey Project has been the catalyst for a rich public discussion about this sizeable population of vulnerable youth in the community and has generated the public will to prioritize articulating a “continuum of care” that is focused exclusively on the needs of homeless youth.

## PROJECT PARTNERSHIP

This Community-University partnership began in 2003 when the first survey (ILS1) and project methodology were developed. The overall research approach has been followed for subsequent studies: ILS2, ILS3, and the current ILS4. For this project wave, a study team was formed in the fall of 2014

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<sup>1</sup> This estimate is derived from comparing the number of unaccompanied youth and young adults to age 24 who used the Rescue Mission Shelter in 2014 [ 71 young people as per the Homeless Management Information System], to the number of ILS respondents who said they used the shelter in the past year [15 respondents out of 208 total respondents]. Therefore,  $71 \times 208 \div 15 = 985$  estimated homeless youth population in Tompkins County.

and planning began for the 2015 follow up project. The team engaged 19 youth researchers, all of whom were current or past participants in the Learning Web's Youth Outreach Program. These young people revised the survey questions, completed the National Institutes of Health Human Subjects Training, learned to administer the survey and identify the sample. They administered surveys to the target group of community youth during the period between February and April 2015. Youth who agreed to be interviewed were given a coupon for a free sandwich from a local deli. Youth Researchers earned an hourly stipend for all planning meetings, a flat rate per survey completed, and a sandwich coupon per survey completed.

A Cornell Research Support Specialist and an undergraduate research assistant assisted in the planning meetings, training of researchers, compiled the data, and generated reports. The youth researchers along with the study team met on several occasions to discuss and interpret the findings at "Data Dialog" sessions. In addition, the Research team will present survey findings to key community stakeholders and decision makers. The results will be used to guide community and school efforts to prevent youth homelessness and to fill the gaps in services which unattended youth face daily. We value the time and effort spent by the youth researchers and those they interviewed and thank them for their willingness to share their insights and life experiences.

#### **POPULATION SURVEYED**

In order to be included in the study, young people had to meet the following criteria:

1. if they "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 USC 11302) definition of children and youth as homeless.)
2. They are age 24 or younger;
3. They are not a Cornell or Ithaca College student;
4. They did not already complete a 2015 survey.

Interviews were conducted with youth primarily in their natural network settings in the community as well as in the Youth Outreach office.

## **RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Total number of survey respondents was **208**.

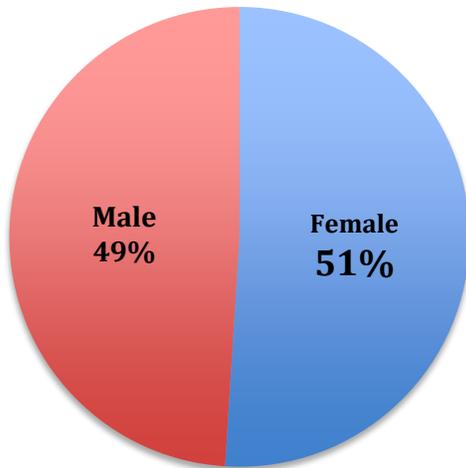
The demographic charts reveal a fairly even distribution regarding the gender and age of the 208 survey respondents.

- No respondents listed their gender as other and no one refused to answer the question.
- Slightly over half of the sample is over 20 years of age with 33% between 18-20 years and 11% between 13-17 years of age.

- The independently living youth population is much more diverse than the general population in Tompkins County, where 79% are white, non-Hispanic. 48% of respondents identified themselves as youth of color.

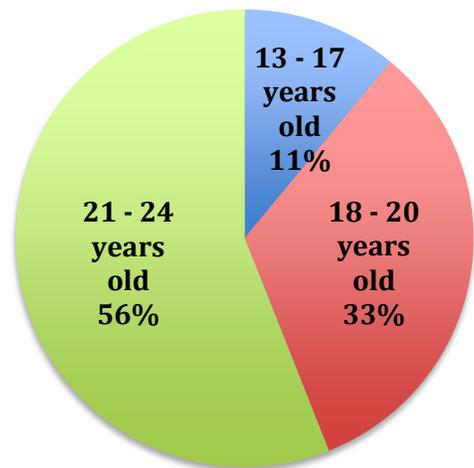
### Gender

**Figure 1.** Percent of all respondents by gender



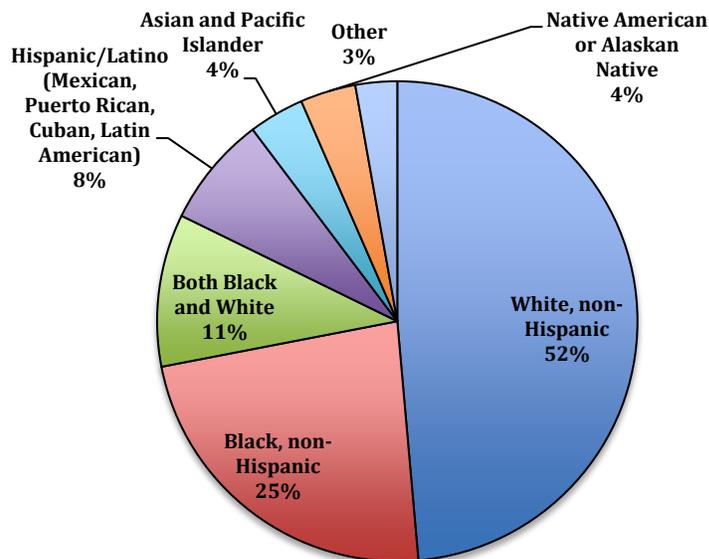
### Age

**Figure 2.** Percent of all respondents by age group



### Race/Ethnicity

**Figure 3.** Percent of all respondents by race/ethnicity



## HOUSING

The local housing market makes finding and securing housing very difficult and exponentially so for homeless youth. Although Tompkins County has a high percentage of rental stock there is a very low vacancy rate resulting in high rents and stiff competition for available units. Local youth and young adults who are living independently cannot compete with college students and families who have far greater resources both in terms of finances and independent living skills.

The lack of housing stability affects every other area of a young person's life including education, jobs, finances, and interpersonal relations—making it nearly impossible to reach the milestones that typical adolescents and young adults achieve as they prepare for independence.

When designing the ILS survey, we never used the word “homeless” or asked youth to identify themselves as such. When young people do not have a safe place to go that they consider home, they may be able to piece together a patchwork of more or less temporary housing situations, but they are homeless. Often homeless youth themselves have a stereotypical view of “homelessness” –someone living on a heating grate on the streets— and do not identify themselves as being homeless. We use the term “independent youth” to avoid the negative stereotypes and to convey the positive characteristics of this population; foremost, their courage and resilience in the face of significant challenges. Although youths' flexibility and resiliency are key to their survival, the lack of basics that has defined so much of their lives has given them a mean standard to assess their own situations.

***“If your household is broken and you have no one to guide you, you make decisions at a very early age but if your parents are more interested in your education, the odds work out better for you.”***

Information on housing was collected by providing youth with a list of places and asking them to identify: 1) where they were currently living, and 2) all of the places in which they had stayed during the previous year.

### *Current Living Situation*

Though a significant number of youth indicate they are currently living in one place, a closer look uncovers both the instability of their housing and the poor conditions in which they live. Even those who checked “living at parent's house” also checked that they were staying at other places. These youth are staying with a parent one night and getting kicked out the next. Just because they are living with a parent, it does not mean that their housing is stable. Like their counterparts in communities across the country, homeless youth in our county piece together their housing using every possible resource and network. Short periods of adequate housing are intertwined with periods of inadequate, unsafe housing, and no housing at all.

- **On average, respondents reported staying in 2 different places in the past week** with a range from 1 to 11 places.

However, this is a low estimate of the total number of places: **For those indicating they are currently staying in \*several friends' houses, apartments, or rooms, this actually means 3 different places on average** (range 1 - 12 different friends' places). The younger youth seem to have a less stable living situation, and are currently staying in more places, than the older youth (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Numbers of places respondents are currently staying by age group.

Number of places you are currently staying		
Number of places	13-20 years	21-24 years
1	47%	75%
2	28%	10%
3	19%	7%
4	2%	2%
5+	4%	5%

- **Most commonly, respondents are currently staying in someone else's house, apartment, or room (33%) or in their own house, apartment, or room (32%).** See proportion of all respondents staying in each place asked about on the survey in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Places respondents are currently staying.

In the past week, where have you stayed? (Respondents could check all that apply)	
Someone else's house, apartment, or room	<b>33%</b>
Own house, apartment, or room	<b>32%</b>
Other relatives	<b>22%</b>
Parents	<b>19%</b>
*Several friends' houses, apartments, or rooms	<b>17%</b>
Room paid for by a voucher	<b>11%</b>
Emergency shelter	<b>11%</b>
Guardian	<b>4%</b>
Jail	<b>3%</b>
Transportation site	<b>3%</b>
Place of business	<b>3%</b>
Anywhere outside	<b>3%</b>
Transitional living or housing program	<b>2%</b>
Hotel or motel	<b>2%</b>
Abandoned building	<b>2%</b>
Other	<b>1%</b>
Juvenile Detention	<b>1%</b>
Institution	<b>1%</b>
College Dorm	<b>1%</b>

- **The majority of respondents (88%) have moved 5 times or less in the past month.** However, 12% of respondents have moved 6 or more times in a month.

*"I couch-surfed in high school. It was real. I had to go to one side of town for my clothes, the other side of town to get my textbooks, and another place to pick up my work uniform. It was real."*

*ILS4 Youth Researcher*

### **Adequacy of Current Housing**

There were mixed responses to an open-ended question regarding how respondents feel about their current living situation. The range of responses reflects the respondents' housing stability at the time of the interview. Some expressed that they are currently satisfied, while others stated that it is ok now, but only after many struggles, or only for a short while. Others are not satisfied for reasons including, but not limited to, size, cleanliness, conflict with others, and safety. In general, respondents have a definite desire for their own place.

*"Yes - finally my own apartment after a lot of struggle and need for assistance."*

*"I am really unsafe. The guy I am staying with tries to do bad things to me"*

*"Good home. Kind of small, lots of people, would like to get my own home sometime"*

*"Not satisfied, I have no personal space; I sleep in the living room on a mattress. The people I live with feel very strongly about political situations that I cannot agree with. Threats against relatives are persistent."*

*"Landlord is a slumlord who doesn't care about the client's safety. Unsafe because my front door was kicked in and hasn't been replaced."*

- **The majority (65%) feel safe all of the time.** However, **35% of respondents indicated that they feel safe only some or none of the time** in their current living situation.

### **Living Situation Over the Past Year**

Homeless youth in Tompkins County are often invisible— staying at multiple places with friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, never knowing where they will be sleeping that night. This is evident when looking at youths' housing over the past year; the level of housing instability increases dramatically as compared to current living situation.

- From the information contained in Table 3 below, **respondents reported staying in 1 – 3 different places over the past year, with a range of 1 – 19 actual places.** Regardless of the number of places indicated in Table 3, Table 4 shows that 38% of respondents reported staying in “several friends’ houses, apartments or rooms.” Of that 38%, about half claimed staying in 1 – 5 different friends and about half indicated staying with 6 or more friends.
- **The majority of respondents (70%) have moved 5 times or less in the past year. 31% of those, have not moved at all.** This last group may appear stable but they have no guarantee that they can stay where they are for the long run as indicated by respondents’ comments:

*“I sleep on the couch and I'm just waiting to get my own place.”*

*“I live with my girlfriend and it's a bad situation for me because if things don't go her way then she tells me to get out.”*

*“It is only a room and it is in a bad building with a lot of activity.”*

- However, **26% of respondents have moved 6 or more** times in the past year.
- Again, the **younger youth seem to have a less stable living situation, and are staying in more places,** than the older youth (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Numbers of places respondents have stayed in the past year by age group.

Number of places you have stayed in the past 12 months		
Number of places	13-20 years	21-24 years
1	24%	36%
2-3	50%	40%
4-5	15%	14%
6-7	5%	4%
8-9	2%	3%
10+	1%	2%

- **Most commonly, respondents have stayed in someone else's house, apartment, or room (47%) or with other relatives (42%).** Table 4 illustrates all of the places respondents had lived during the previous year.

**Table 4.** Places respondents have stayed in the past year.

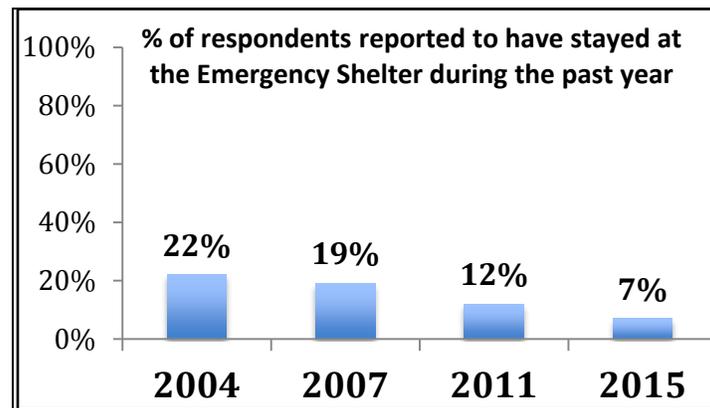
<b>In the past YEAR, think back to all the places you stayed or spent your nights. Did you stay at any of the places listed?</b> (respondents could check all that apply)	
Someone else's house apartment, or room	<b>47%</b>
Other relatives	<b>42%</b>
*Several friends' houses, apartments, or rooms	<b>38%</b>
Parents	<b>37%</b>
Own house, apartment, or room	<b>37%</b>
Guardian	<b>12%</b>
Room paid for by voucher	<b>9%</b>
Emergency shelter	<b>7%</b>
Jail	<b>7%</b>
Anywhere outside	<b>5%</b>
Hotel or motel	<b>5%</b>
Van or other vehicle	<b>4%</b>
Place of business	<b>3%</b>
Abandoned building	<b>3%</b>
Institution	<b>3%</b>
Transitional living or housing program	<b>3%</b>
Other	<b>3%</b>
Transportation site	<b>2%</b>
Juvenile detention	<b>2%</b>
College dorm	<b>1%</b>

- Shelter use has declined over time** (Figure 6). Anecdotally, youth state that this is not because the demand is down, but rather because the restrictions are greater; there are strict eligibility rules for the shelter. And, for youth under age 18, Department of Social Services regulations prohibit youth age 17 and under from admittance.

*“When I got kicked out of my mom’s house when I was 18 I had absolutely no where to go. The shelter was like, no, you can go back to your mom’s house.”*

*“You have to be like you’re on your hands and knees begging God in order for them to let you into the shelter at this point.”*

**Figure 6.** The percent of respondents that have stayed at the emergency shelter in the past year, from each wave of ILS data collection



### *Reasons for Leaving Home*

Approximately one third of all youth surveyed have stayed “with parents” for some period within the last 12 months, but were not able to make this a permanent home. There has been a tendency to see homeless youth as synonymous with runaway youth. However, our findings support the more recent acknowledgement that runaway behavior is not the unilateral decision of a youngster to leave his or her parental home.

- The **most common reason for leaving home was 'conflict at home' (39% of respondents)**, followed by 'left home after the age of 18' (26%), 'thrown out' (22%), 'substance abuse by parent/guardian' (18%), and 'abuse by parent/guardian' (15%). Respondents could choose more than one reason, therefore percentages exceed 100%.
- The research team included the option of “left home after age 18” for respondents that were not comfortable sharing their reason for leaving. Given the difficulties these youth face living on their own, it is fair to deduce that for some, home was not a harmonious or safe place to stay. See additional reasons for leaving home in Table 5.

*“Sometimes there are abusive situations where the child is being abused and they can’t leave and as soon as they turn 18 that’s their chance to leave.”*

**On average**, respondents reported that they were:

- **15 years old when things at home began to get rough**
- **16 years old when they first needed to find other places to stay because they couldn't or didn't want to go home.**

**Table 5.** Reasons for leaving home.

Reason for Leaving Home	(respondents could check more than one)
Conflict at home	39%
Left home after the age of 18	26%
Thrown out	22%
Substance abuse of parent/guardian	18%
Abuse by parent/guardian	15%
Ran away	14%
Never lived with parents	12%
Parents in jail	12%
Other	10%
Parents deceased	6%
Parents moved	6%
Parents homeless	2%

When asked what would have helped them to continue to live with their parent/guardian, respondents most commonly mentioned things including a more supportive family with better communication, and less drug abuse and/or violence from both parents and youth. However, respondents also mentioned that there was nothing that would have helped them to stay home.

*“A better household, family support.”*

*“Stability and if any of them would actually talk to me, I was never able to open up at home because no one listened*

*“If my father didn't drink all the time or do drugs or beat my ma.”*

*“If I stopped using drugs.”*

*“Family counseling and parents willing to go.”*

*“Nothing, I couldn't stay there any longer.”*

The problems these youth and their parents face are complex and deep-seated. It is hard to discern from the survey results whether there is a significant time period where intervention could occur. Offering opportunities for parents and youth to get help in addressing parent-child communication, addiction issues, etc. could repair the parent-child relationship and avoid a youth's premature departure from home.

## EDUCATION

In previous survey waves and in this current wave, we attempted to get an educational profile of survey respondents, but there continues to be some skepticism regarding the data collected. The youth researchers on the survey team were skeptical that their peers would answer questions about schooling honestly because of the stigma associated with being a drop-out. However, Steering Committee members chose to keep the questions as part of the survey because it is such a crucial piece of the picture. We share this data with a caution that the numbers of high schools grads is most likely inflated.

- The **majority of respondents graduated from high school or got their GED (55%)**. 13% are still in high school. 24% did not graduate or get a GED and 8% preferred not to answer this question.
- The **majority also indicated that they are interested in getting more education or training. (54%)**. 24% were unsure, and 19% do not want more education or training. Barriers to furthering education noted by respondents included finances, transportation, childcare, time, and addictions. Likewise, help in those same areas would assist the respondents in furthering their education.

Many of the young people we surveyed recognize the need to complete their education, pursue additional schooling, or earn a professional credential. Tompkins County has the lowest percentage of residents who have not completed high school and the one of the highest percentages of residents who have a college degree in New York State (US Census). This combination spells disaster for homeless youth, many of whom have dropped out of high school or who at most have completed their high school studies. Employment opportunities for these youth occur mostly in low wage, low skilled service sector jobs. Youth must compete with Cornell and Ithaca College students and graduates for these positions.

*"If you don't have a stable place to rest your head, why would education be on your mind."*

Many young people spoke about their short and long range educational goals. These goals are very reasonable and not unlike the goals of other community youth. Youth also told us—once again—about the painful reality of trying to achieve goals when combined with adult responsibilities such as maintaining housing, working, possibly caring for children, and meeting the commitments to service providers such as DSS and Probation. They are quick to point out how difficult it is to get ahead when the very systems designed to help them seem to penalize them whenever they achieve a milestone. Youth may secure a job and work hard, but low wages barely enable them to cover the basics, especially once their food stamp or housing allowances are reduced as a result of their earnings. They know that the path to a more fulfilling and better paying job is to finish school, earn a professional certificate, or get a college degree but it is hard, if not impossible, to do this while working full-time and attending to other responsibilities.

Respondents noted barriers including:

*“Better child care and transportation.”*

*“Complete substance abuse classes that I’m currently in.”*

*“Knowing what I wanna do.”*

*“Money to pay bills while in school full time.”*

*“Motivation, support, confidence.”*

*“No drugs, more ambition, more money and reliable transportation.”*

*“A time machine.”*

## EMPLOYMENT

Employment opportunities for homeless young adults occur mostly in low wage, low skilled service sector jobs. Tompkins County’s major employment sectors are education, health and human services. Manufacturing is the other major sector with the hi-tech industry also providing a significant employment source. While good news for the overall economy, few of the homeless young people will find employment in these high-wage sectors. These sectors tend to require high levels of education and technical skills. Other than in these sectors, young job seekers find the majority of job openings are in relatively low-paying retail, trade, health care and child care. Youth must compete with Cornell and Ithaca College students and grads for these positions. Keen competition for these less attractive jobs from our over educated populace leave homeless youth literally “out in the cold.”

Survey data revealed a picture of poorly educated, low-skilled youth who find themselves in a revolving door of fast-food and other low-paying jobs. Youth are hired, trained, and shortly after beginning a position, they are either fired or they quit without notice. Rather than having no work history, these young people have poor work histories— a much greater obstacle to overcome.

- **The majority of respondents (76%) indicate that they have had between 1 and 3 different jobs in the past year.** 18% have had 4 or more jobs.
- **The majority (57%) are not currently working; 41% are working** (this is down slightly from 2011 when 60% of respondents were unemployed). Of those working, **46% are working more than 30 hours per week.** 34% are working between 20 and 30 hours per week, 11% are working between 10 and 20 hours per week, and 8% are working less than 10 hours per week. **50% of all those working, indicate that this is not enough hours.**
- **57% of all respondents are currently looking for a job.** Of those looking for a job, **54% have been looking for 6 months or more.** A greater proportion of the younger respondents are looking for jobs; however, the older respondents looking for a job have been looking for longer than the younger respondents. (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Proportion of respondents looking for a job, and length of time spent looking, by age group.

	Age 13 – 20	Age 21 – 24
If you are not working, are you looking for a job?		
Yes	76%	67%
No	16%	32%
How long have you been looking for a job?		
1 month	57%	41%
6 months	39%	47%
12 months or more	5%	12%

**On average, those looking for a job are doing so via 4 different methods** (range 1 - 9 different ways of looking). The majority are looking via Internet job postings (75%), putting in applications directly at businesses in town (69%), and/or stopping in to businesses to ask if they are hiring (69%).

When asked an open-ended question about barriers to getting a job in Ithaca, respondents commonly mentioned: lack of transportation and education and/or job experience; discrimination towards age, race, appearance, and social situation when hiring; lack of available jobs; and lack of childcare.

**A common story:  
Transportation Challenges**

“My manager wanted me to work closing till 1AM and opening at 7AM. I have to walk 40 minutes home after closing and get to sleep around 2:30AM and have to get up at 6AM to get back there by 7AM. I told him he wasn’t going to see me at 7AM if I had to close. He fired me.”

“I live in Groton and the first bus is at 6:45AM. My manager scheduled me for 5:30AM. The first bus is at 6:45AM and it takes over an hour. I can’t get there.”

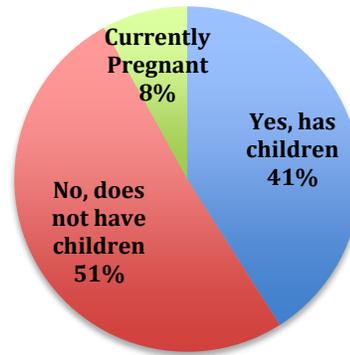
**Barriers to Employment:**

- My age, my schooling, my transportation*
- Not having high school diploma/GED, reliable transportation, childcare*
- Sell drugs better money*
- Transportation, housing, low wages*
- Having a spotty job history*
- Professionalism- race is an issue*

## PARENTING STATUS

The pregnancy rate seen in this population is much higher than that in the general Tompkins County population for a similar age group with 49% of respondents either parenting or pregnant. According to the Tompkins County Youth Services Dept. 2013 Profile of Tompkins County ([www.tompkinscountyny.gov/files/youth/Tompkins%20County.pdf](http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/files/youth/Tompkins%20County.pdf)), the pregnancy rate per 1000 females ages 15 – 17 years old is 10.3 (about 1%) and this is lower than the NY state rate of 18.4 per 1000 (or about 2%). Similarly, the birth rate for Tompkins county females ages 15 – 17 years old is 1.3 per 1000 (about 0.1%), and again this is lower than the state rate of 9.2 per 1000 (or about 1%).

**Figure 4.** Percent of all respondents by parenting status



Of all those respondents who have children, the majority have 1 child (65%). 28% have 2 children, 5% have 3 children, and 2% have 4 children (Table 7).

- The average age of children is 3 years old and ranges from less than 1 to 8 years old.
- When you look at these rates broken out by age group (Table 7), it is evident that a greater proportion of the older youth has children or is pregnant.

**Table 7.** Parenting status by age group

Do you have any children or are you currently pregnant?	Age 13 – 20	Age 21 - 24	All respondents
<b>Yes, I have children</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>41%</b>
If yes, how many?			
1 child	<b>76%</b>	<b>60%</b>	
2 children	<b>21%</b>	<b>32%</b>	
3 children	<b>3%</b>	<b>5%</b>	
4 children	<b>0%</b>	<b>4%</b>	
Are any of your children living with you either some or all of the time?			
Yes	<b>41%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>53%</b>
Do they live with you? Yes			
Child 1	<b>27%</b>	<b>49%</b>	
Child 2	<b>43%</b>	<b>32%</b>	
Child 3	<b>0%</b>	<b>20%</b>	
Child 4	<b>N/A</b>	<b>0%</b>	

Do you have any children or are you currently pregnant?	Age 13 – 20	Age 21 - 24	All respondents
Yes, I am currently pregnant	6%	10%	8%
Total parenting/pregnant	37%	59%	49%
No, I do not have children and am not currently pregnant	63%	41%	51%

Of those respondents with children, data in Table 7 indicate that a little more than half of the parents are living with their children, (53% of parenting respondents). Of that 53%, 34% are full-time parents and 19% have joint custody. 47% of parents do not live with their children. To gain insight into this phenomenon, the research team asked Youth Outreach staff if this trend is also true within the Youth Outreach’s parenting participants. Youth Outreach staff confirmed that many parenting participants did not have custody of their children or they share custody with kinship relatives. When staff was asked why so many parents did not have custody/care of their children, staff noted several reasons:

- When the parent is homeless, their child is in jeopardy of entering foster care. To avoid that, the parent is willing to let a grandmother or other relative care for the child until the parent stabilizes their housing.
- In some cases if parents are experiencing mental health and/or substance abuse problems that affect their ability to parent, this can lead to placement of their child in foster care.

Most respondents report not having other dependents; however, 12 indicated that they do have others who are dependent on them, mainly another family member (brother, sister, nephew, mother, grandmother, etc.).

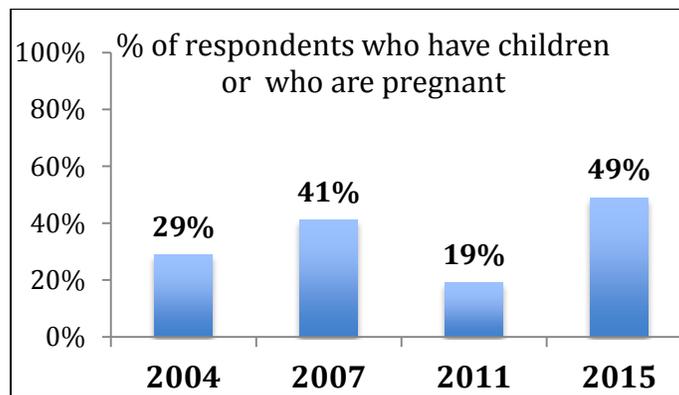
The percent of respondents who have children or are pregnant is the highest in the history of ILS and have more than doubled since 2011 (Figure 5). Data on pregnant and parenting homeless youth respondents have varied widely each year the survey has been administered. The research team believes that the spike is a result of the research assistants’ networks surveyed in this wave of the ILS. Several of the research assistants had children themselves and surveyed friends and acquaintances who were parents.

*“I need a permanent place to have for me and my baby.”*

*“I’m grateful that I have my own [place], however it’s not a great living situation especially when my baby is born; I have made it comfortable for myself right now.”*

**Figure 5.**

The percent of respondents who have children or are pregnant, from each wave of ILS data collection



In a data dialogue session, some of the youth research assistants and survey respondents indicated that the reason for the higher rate of pregnancy and parenting in this group might be because of a combination of a lack of information, a lack of advertising of female options for contraception, discomfort and distrust of local family planning services, resistance to use of contraception from male partners, and some laziness.

Parenting is a difficult task even with a stable home and financial and emotional support. These young people are struggling to provide adequate shelter, food, and education for themselves, let alone for a child. If the cycle of poverty is to be interrupted, these young parents require additional support.

## MAKING ENDS MEET

The majority of respondents reported using food stamps (SNAP) (67%) and Medicaid assistance (66%). Almost one-third had received cash assistance. Despite this assistance, respondents reported having a very difficult time covering their basic needs.

The Affordable Care Act appears to have increased the number of young people who have health insurance. The percentage of youth who had Medicaid in ILS 2007 was 52% and in ILS2011 was 48%. The 2015 ILS figure of 66% is a significant increase in participation. During our Data Dialog sessions, youth researchers spoke about the improvements in the process of getting health insurance, “It’s easier to get health insurance. You don’t have to go in for an interview, you can do it online. They send you a packet and a card and there are people you can call who can explain it to you.”

See more detail regarding assistance in Table 8.

**Table 8.** Proportion of respondents reporting that they receive public assistance.

Do you get any of the following assistance? (respondents checked all that apply)	
SNAP	67%
Medicaid	66%
Cash Assistance	29%
WIC	19%
Section 8	14%

Do you get any of the following assistance? (respondents checked all that apply)	
Child Support	8%
HEAP (heating and electric)	8%
Other	6%
SSI	4%
Obamacare	3%
SSD	2%
Lifeline	2%
Child Health Plus	1%
Day Care subsidies	0%

## HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

Hunger is an ongoing reality for many of the survey respondents. Trying to scrape together the resources to fill basic needs is not easy on no salary or a minimum wage part time job.

On average,

- **35% of respondents have had to cut the size of a meal or skip meals because there wasn't enough money to buy food.** Over one third of these youth (36%) skip a meal on a weekly basis.
- **32% of respondents have not eaten for a whole day because there wasn't enough money to buy food.** Over one-third of these youth (31%) have not eaten for a whole day on a weekly basis due to lack of money.

Additional detail regarding food security by age group can be found in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Hunger and food security by age group.

In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of your meal or skip meals because there wasn't enough money to buy food?	Age 13-20	Age 21-24
Yes	42%	48%
If yes, how often:		
weekly	39%	33%
Some months but not every month	42%	48%
monthly	18%	20%
In the last 12 months, did you ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't money to buy food?	Age 13-20	Age 21-24
Yes	35%	30%
If yes, how often:		
weekly	34%	29%
Some months but not every month	50%	66%
monthly	9%	6%

These figures are likely conservative because many youth are ashamed to admit that they do not have to money to feed themselves. Many youth use the food pantries and Loaves & Fishes meals to supplement the food they can afford but even with these supports, high percentages of young people go hungry.

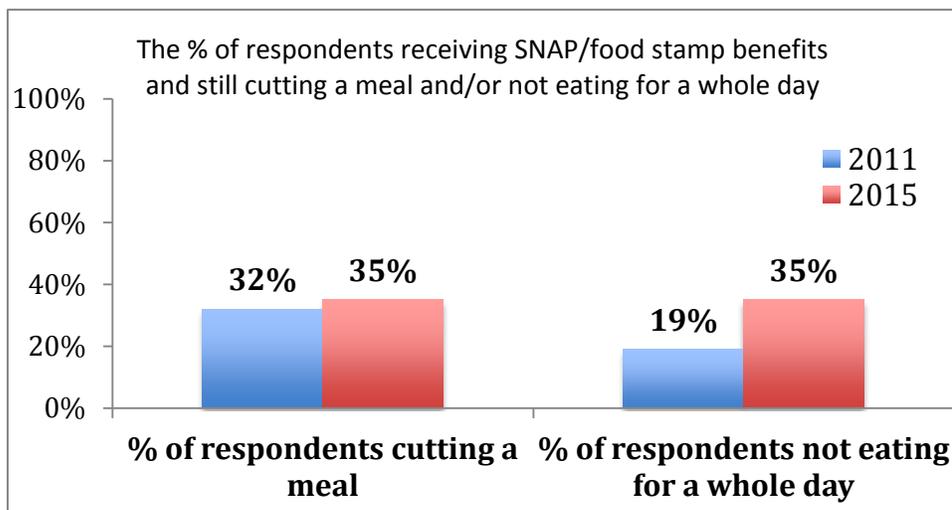
*“Every dollar counts. Spending the \$5 on this meal is going to take away what I need to make it through the month.”*

Of those that have **SNAP (food stamp) benefits**,

- **35% had to cut the size of a meal or skip meals**, because there wasn't enough money to buy food
- **35% had not eaten for a whole day**, because there wasn't enough money to buy food.

The percent of respondents receiving SNAP/food stamp benefits and still not having enough money to buy food has increased since 2011 (Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** The percent of respondents receiving SNAP and still cutting a meal and/or not eating, in 2011 and 2015



## INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC SYSTEMS

The majority of respondents' childhood and adolescence include a history of involvement with institutional systems. Just as the families of these young people either failed them or were too dysfunctional to support youth in their development, so, too, did social systems fail these youth. The data are probably conservative as 23% of the younger group and 10% of the older group preferred not to answer the question—most likely because of embarrassment of having to divulge their involvement in these systems.

- **Over half (52%) of all respondents report some type of system involvement.**
- **Almost 1/3 (31%) report involvement in 2 – 5 of these systems.**
- **A greater proportion of the younger respondents report having been in foster care, a group home, juvenile detention, some other institution, and prefer not to answer.**
- **A greater proportion of older youth report having been in prison/jail, and rehab**

**Table 10.** Involvement in public systems by age group.

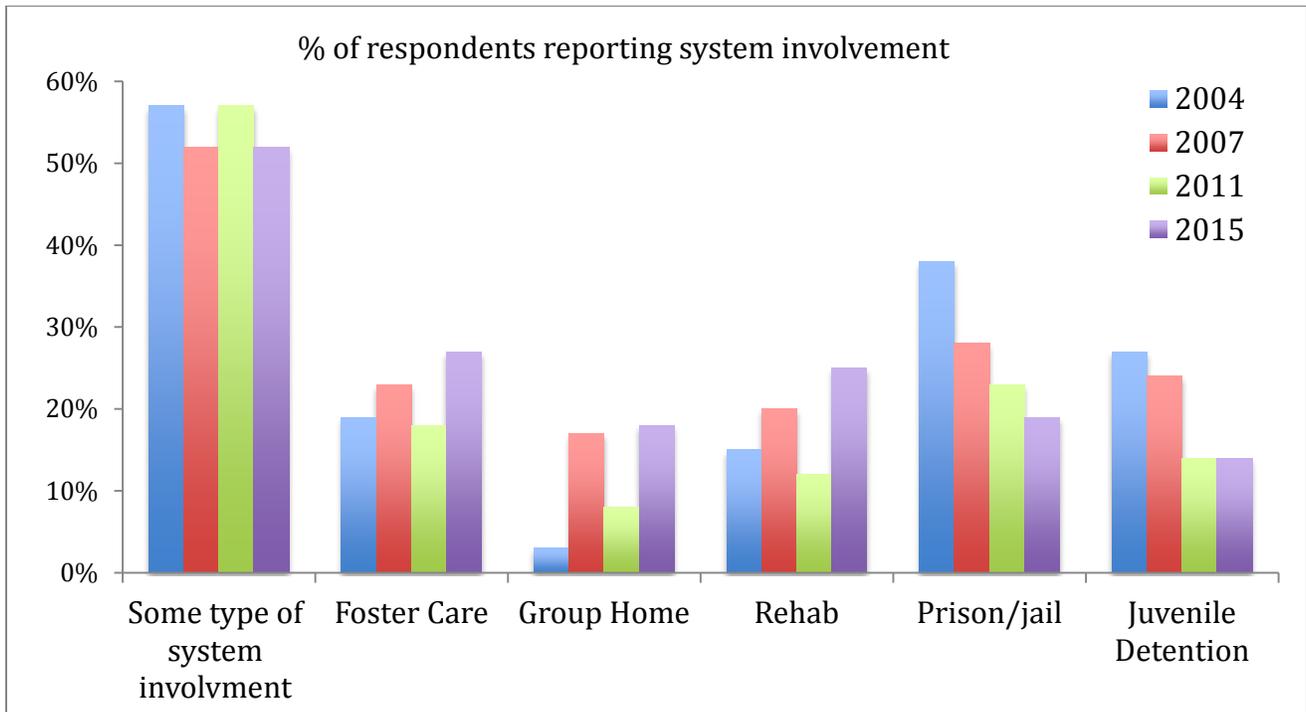
<b>System</b>	<b>Age 13-20</b>	<b>Age 21-24</b>
NONE	<b>32%</b>	<b>31%</b>
Foster care	<b>31%</b>	<b>24%</b>
Group Home	<b>20%</b>	<b>16%</b>
Juvenile detention	<b>18%</b>	<b>11%</b>
Prison/Jail	<b>17%</b>	<b>22%</b>
Rehab (drug and alcohol)	<b>14%</b>	<b>34%</b>
Other institution	<b>6%</b>	<b>3%</b>
Prefer not to answer	<b>23%</b>	<b>10%</b>

Though the numbers of youth involved in public systems has not changed significantly over the course of the ILS surveys, there appears to have been a significant shift in what type of institutions youth are being sent.

- **Foster care, group home, and rehab involvement is at its highest out of all waves of ILS data.**
- **Respondent involvement in jail and/or juvenile detention is the lowest it has ever been.**

When discussed with the research team at the Data Dialog, members felt that many more youth are being sent away for help rather than to detention or jail. Some noted that the judges have changed and with the change are different philosophies of sentencing. In the next wave of the ILS there may well see a shift back to sending youth to detention or jail when New York State moves to “raise the Age” (where the age of criminal responsibility in New York will be raised from the current age of 16 to the age of 18).

**Figure 8.** The percent of respondents reporting involvement in public systems, from each wave of ILS data collection



## COMMUNITY SAFETY

For the majority of people in our county, indeed, in our nation, where we lay our heads at night is a safe place. For many of these young people, neither the streets nor their homes provide a safe haven. Programs designed to work with these young people need to keep this in mind.

- **Almost 33% of respondents have been threatened or injured with a weapon during the past year.** For 24% of these youth, this has happened three or less times and for 9% this has happened four or more times in the past year.
- On average, **34% of respondents report carrying a weapon. Of those who do not, 13% feel like they need to, 27% do not feel they need to carry a weapon, and 61% did not respond.**
- **43% of respondents know people who carry guns.** This was a new question added to the ILS4.

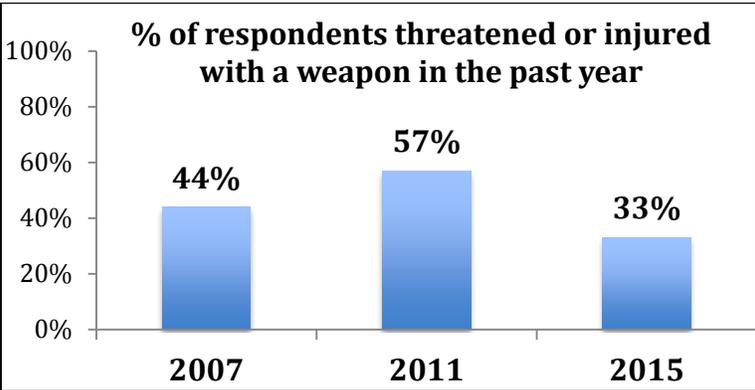
It is difficult to gauge the number or type of weapons that youth actually carry on the street. Perhaps more important than the actual number, is the apparent sense of vulnerability these young people experience. The rates are relatively consistent between the younger and older groups of respondents; however, a greater proportion of the younger respondents carry a weapon, feel they need to carry a weapon, know people who carry guns, and have been threatened or injured with a weapon 1 or more times. See more detail in Table 11.

**Table 11.** Proportion of respondents who carry a weapon, know people who carry guns, and have been threatened or injured with a weapon, by age group.

	Age 13-20	Age 21-24
Do you ever carry a weapon?		
Yes	39%	31%
If no, do you feel like you need to? Yes	15%	12%
Do you know people who carry guns?		
Yes	45%	41%
During the past year, how many times has someone threatened or injured you with a weapon?		
0 times	64%	69%
1 time	17%	8%
2 or 3 times	12%	11%
4 or 5 times	6%	3%
6 or 7 times	0%	3%
8 or 9 times	0%	1%
10 or 11 times	1%	1%
12 or more times	1%	3%

The percent of respondents who have been threatened or injured with a weapon in the past year is the lowest that it has been since 2007 (Figure 9). The research team feels that this is more a function of the differences in the youth sampled in the various research waves than a reflection that our community is safer.

**Figure 9.** The percent of respondents reporting having been threatened or injured with a weapon in the past year, from each wave of ILS data collection since 2007.



While many report never having been in any situations where they felt unsafe in the past year, some have been in unsafe and dangerous situations, sometimes even daily. Respondents reported these situations happening both in the home and on the street. Others stated that they preferred not to talk about it.

*“1. I had a gun put to my head. 2. I was almost raped 3. I got jumped. 4. Every night in jail”*

*“Every day when I leave my house”*

*“In relationships that were abusive”*

*“Yes, threatened multiple times with knives, once with gun, and I was jumped.”*

*“Walking home after dark a man came up to me and threatened to stab me with a knife. I was also chased and followed by a red truck while I was walking.”*

## HEALTH BEHAVIORS

### Medical Support

Alienated from family, most respondents do not access the family doctor and their family’s health insurance, even if the family had health insurance. As outlined previously in the “Making Ends meet” section, the Affordable Care Act appears to have increased the number of young people who have health insurance. The percentage of youth who had Medicaid in ILS 2007 was 52% and in ILS2011 was 48%. The 2015 ILS figure of 66% is a significant increase in participation.

**The majority of respondents (58%) go to the emergency room when they are sick.** 45% go to convenient care. Despite the increase in health insurance coverage, **36% treat themselves at home, and 20% do not seek any medical care** when they are sick. See additional detail in Table 12.

**Table 12.** Proportion of respondents seeking medical support.

When you are sick – where do you go? (respondents checked all that apply)	
Emergency Room	<b>58%</b>
Convenient Care	<b>45%</b>
Home, self-treatment	<b>36%</b>
Private Doctor/Physician	<b>23%</b>

When you are sick – where do you go? (respondents checked all that apply)	
The Free Clinic	21%
Go nowhere	20%
Dentist	20%
Herbalist/alternative healer	2%
Other	2%

During the Data Dialog, the research team spoke about the difficulties youth face when trying to find providers who will accept Medicaid. The few providers accepting new patients do so for a very limited number of new patients per month. Transportation to providers is also a barrier. Guthrie, which accepts Medicaid, must be accessed by bus due to its location outside of the city. As one research team member said, “The bus does not run every hour so if I have an appointment for 11:00 AM I may not be able to get back downtown until 5PM. If people have jobs or childcare that they need to be at, they can’t go to the doctor.”

## Emotional Support

Who these young people turn to for support is a critical question given how important “being connected” is to the health and well-being of adolescents. In our previous studies, as in this one, we have a substantial number of individuals who do not have anyone to whom they can turn for support --- and few can go to their families. Amidst the typical issues faced during the transition to adulthood, homeless youth must also deal with crisis connected to their family of origin, the uncertainties and dangers of living without a home, and the responsibilities of supporting oneself. More so than most young adults, a source of sage counsel would be critical in learning how to grow into a healthy adult. Unfortunately, this is not the case. When asked “who do you turn to when you need emotional support or need someone to talk to:

- **The majority of respondents (62%) turn to friends for emotional support.** These youth have similar backgrounds to the respondent, living on their own with little positive and healthy experience or skills to share with a friend in need.
- **Over 40% rely on themselves/turn to no one else for this support.**

The importance of having someone to talk to appears to be a major issue especially for the younger respondents, 48% of whom identified this as one of their top five needs (see section “Current needs” below). These data are important for service providers since they indicate a strong desire to be heard. Including authentic youth voice in service delivery models will likely attract this population of youth and keep them engaged in programs.

See additional detail in Table 13.

**Table 13.** Proportion of seeking emotional support.

Who do you turn to when you need emotional support or need someone to talk to? (respondents checked all that apply)	
Friends	62%
Family Member	48%
Myself	40%
Girl Friend or Boy Friend	39%
Therapist	19%
No One	16%
Spiritual Figure	14%
Other	5%

When asked what types of activities they do for emotional support, responses most often fell in to the following categories:

- 50%: listening to and/or making music or art.
- 27%: sports or exercise
- 27%: using drugs and/or alcohol.
- 16%: socializing or hanging out with friends.
- 16%: reading and/or writing.

A sampling of responses is in the box at right.

**What types of activities do you do for emotional support?**

*Art, drugs, socializing, music, exercise, daughter.*

*Sports, bars, drugs/alcohol, listen to music.*

*I clean.*

*Play video games, fix cars.*

*Music, drugs, art.*

*Listen to music and exercise.*

*Sports, socializing, listen to music, writing.*

*Get angry, no real activities, writing.*

*Chill with my friends.*

## Substance Use

Through this study, we attempted to learn more about the particular lifestyles of independent youth. Our findings suggest a high level of unhealthy, high-risk behaviors. Survey respondents identified a wide range of drugs available in the local community. The results indicate that the majority of respondents use drugs and alcohol regularly which is consistent with the previous surveys as well as national data sources.

- **Only 6% of respondents reported using no substances at all.**
- **On average, respondents reported using 4 different substances** (range 0 to 24 different substances) in the past 6 months.

- **35% of respondents indicated that they used substances (other than cigarettes) practically everyday in the last month.** 18% use them two or three times per week. 16% did not use them at all in the last month.
- **The most popular substances included: Tobacco, Marijuana, Alcohol, Cocaine, and Heroin.** See additional details on substance use in Table 14.

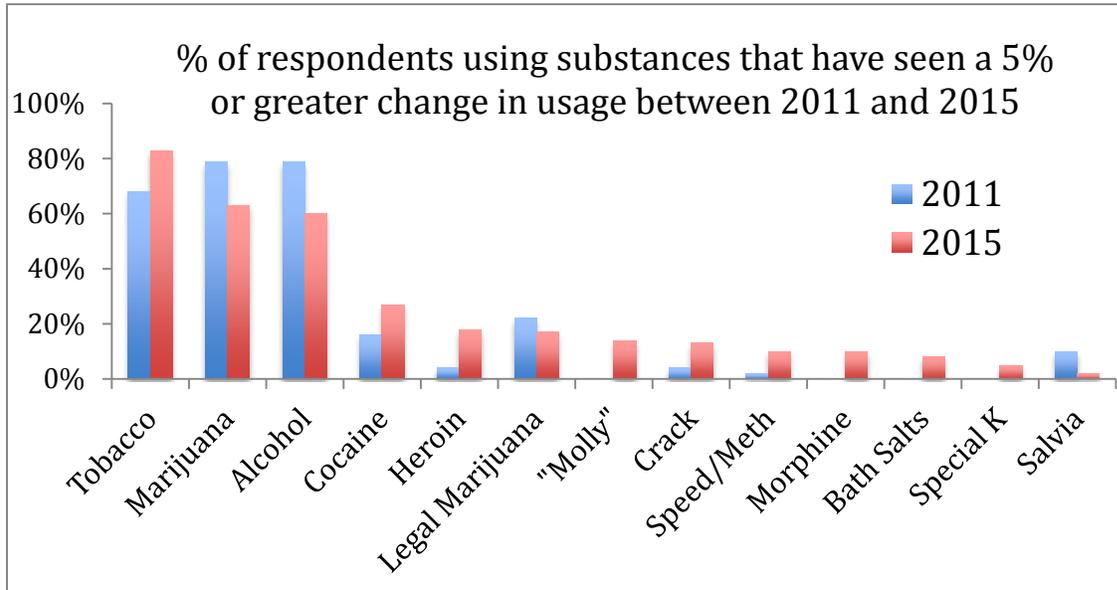
**Table 14.** Proportion of all respondents using substances, and substance use by age group

Substance	% of respondents indicating that they use this substance in the past 6 months	13 - 20 year olds	21 - 24 year olds
Tobacco	83%	78%	87%
Marijuana	63%	65%	62%
Alcohol	60%	56%	64%
Cocaine	27%	25%	28%
Heroin	18%	15%	20%
Legal Marijuana	17%	22%	14%
"Molly"	14%	15%	12%
Crack	13%	9%	16%
Prescription drug that was not prescribed to you	13%	10%	16%
Ecstasy	11%	13%	9%
Hash	11%	14%	8%
Speed/Meth	10%	8%	11%
Morphine	10%	7%	12%
Bath Salts	8%	3%	11%
Acid/LSD	8%	9%	7%
Magical Mushrooms	7%	7%	8%
Valium (non-prescription)	7%	7%	7%
Other	5%	9%	3%
Special K	5%	6%	4%
Inhalants	3%	3%	3%
Ritalin (non-prescription)	3%	4%	2%
Angel Dust	2%	3%	2%
Salvia	2%	4%	1%
"Chocolate"/Beta	1%	2%	0%

**Many substances have seen a 5% or greater change in usage between the 2011 and 2015 waves of ILS data collection.** When comparing substance use among respondents, the proportion reporting

marijuana, alcohol, and/or salvia use is down from 2011; however, tobacco, cocaine, heroin, molly, crack, speed/meth, morphine, bath salts, and special K use are all up (Figure 10).

**Figure 10.** The percent of respondents reporting substance use in 2011 and 2015.



- **There has been a shift from the less dangerous drug of choice, alcohol and marijuana, to hardcore drugs** like cocaine, heroin, crack, “molly” (ecstasy), bath salts, and meth.

**Table 15.** Change in substance use of hard-core drugs between 2011 and 2015 by age group.

Substance	13 - 20 year olds 2011	13 - 20 year olds 2015	21 - 24 year olds 2011	21 - 24 year olds 2015
Cocaine	18%	25%	14%	28%
Heroin	3%	15%	4%	20%
Crack	4%	9%	4%	16%
Speed/Meth	2%	8%	2%	20%

## CURRENT NEEDS

The needs most frequently identified by all respondents included: help finding and affording housing, help with transportation, help with education, and help finding a job.

When asked to identify their top 3 needs, respondents most commonly mentioned transportation (62 respondents indicated this as a top need), help finding housing (54 respondents), and help affording housing (35 respondents).

Age appears to affect respondents’ top needs.

**Younger youth have a significantly higher need for:** help finding a job (19% higher than older group); someone to talk to (18% higher); help affording and finding housing (11% higher), and help

**affording food** (10%). The research team felt this was indicative of the difficulties facing youth under age 21— age discrimination in the job market and in renting housing and its effect on filling basic needs such as food. In addition, this younger group has recently separated from their families and has a greater need to have emotional support as they accustom themselves to living on their own.

The older group’s needs are indicative of the negative outcomes that accumulate as homeless youth grow into homeless young adults and in these young adults coming to terms with their situation: help with my education ( 12% higher than the younger group); help with mental health (9% higher); and help with addiction or substance use problems (9% higher).

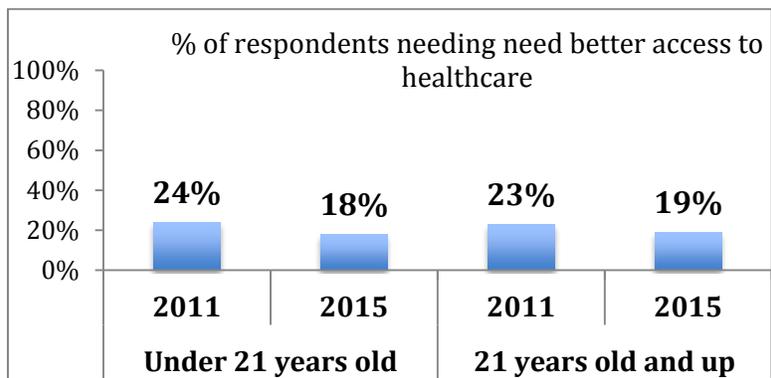
It is important for service providers and programs designed to work with these young people need to keep this in mind in as they engage these populations. See detail on how the most common needs changed by respondent age group in Table 16.

**Table 16.** Current needs by age group.

<b>What do you think are your current needs? (respondents checked all that apply)</b>	<b>Age 13 - 20</b>	<b>Age 21 - 24</b>
Transportation	65%	53%
Help finding housing	56%	45%
Help affording housing	53%	42%
Help finding a job	53%	34%
Someone to talk to	48%	30%
Help with my education	43%	55%
Maintaining healthy relationships	36%	34%
Help affording personal living supplies	35%	29%
Help affording food	29%	19%
Help in being prepared for employment/job searching	26%	25%
Help affording work clothes	23%	22%
Help with legal issues	22%	26%
Help being a parent	20%	20%
Help with an addiction or substance abuse problem	19%	28%
Child Care Services	19%	25%
Better access to healthcare	18%	19%
Safety	15%	8%
Mental Health	15%	24%
Other	2%	4%

Since the implementation of the affordable care act, the percentage of respondents needing better access to healthcare has decreased. This is true both for those respondents under 21 years of age and those 21 years old and up (Figure 11).

**Figure 11.** The percent of respondents needing better access to healthcare in 2011 and 2015.



## STRENGTHS AND GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

Despite the challenges and barriers these young people face, many possess remarkable resilience that supports them in growing into positive, self-sufficient community members. The research team was interested in finding out how these young people envision their future and what they see as their strengths. These data confirmed what we found in both ILS1, ILS2, and ILS3: respondents identify personal strengths and goals that are very reasonable, not outlandish in any way shape or form; not unlike the goals of other community youth. These young people want to utilize their strengths and want to lead a normal life – to go to school, start a career, and develop relationships.

When asked about personal strengths, respondents most frequently mentioned things related to being a good friend, listener, communicator, and overall caring and helpful person (36% of respondents). Also mentioned frequently were artistic and musical talents (32%), and school or work related skills (26%).

### STRENGTHS—

*“I am great at multitasking, I am good at cooking, I am a good musician, I have good people skills, I communicate well, I have good memory and am good at following directions”*

*“Customer service, helping others, being a leader, reading, public speaking”*

*“Good with people, lots of patience, think of others before myself, smart and talented”*

*“I am a hard worker and honest”*

*“I’m trustworthy, I’m positive, I’m creative, I am good at writing music, I am a good cook, I am a quick learner”*

*“Loyal, making music, good friend, good listener”*

*“Running, anything arts/ children related, good at communication, good at taking responsibility and showing initiative”*

*“Mechanics, building”*

Respondents' goals for the future most commonly included plans for jobs and careers (40% of respondents), furthering their education (28%), and building a family (26%).

Respondents repeatedly spoke about how difficult it is to pursue their goals with the limited resources

### **GOALS FOR THE FUTURE—**

*“Have house, car, job, money, and a life”*

*“Hopefully furthering my education, get married, and starting a family”*

*“I want to be a chef, take care of my son, and live my life”*

*“I want to own my own restaurant. I want to be relaxed so I never have to be struggling”*

*“My goals are to finish college and my plans for my future is to have a good career, get married and start a family.”*

*“School, own my own house, ultrasound technician”*

*“To be a nurse/ RN”*

*“To be an architect”*

*“To be an engineer”*

*“To go back to school for human services to help out people in our community.”*

available to them. The difficulties of trying to pursue an education while holding down a job or trying to pursue any goal when you don't know where you will sleep at night were commonly heard themes.

## **BIGGEST ISSUE FACING YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY**

Most commonly, respondents mentioned drugs and addiction (29% of respondents), violence and abuse (29%), homelessness/no safe places to go (14%), and feelings of abandonment and no support (11%) as the biggest issues facing young people today. From their responses, it is also clear that none of these issues occur in isolation; they are all linked.

*“Easy access to drugs and alcohol”*

*“Abuse in home, and drug abuse in and out of home, and violence”*

*“Homelessness, violence, sexual abuse, drugs”*

*“Not having support systems or safe places to go. It's not what you know it's who you know.”*

*“Violence, no safe places to go, no support from community.”*

*“Having no one to talk to, no support systems”*

## LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE:

### What would you like people who have power in this community to know?

And finally--- we asked if there was anything that the respondents wanted people in power to know about young people such as themselves. This question provoked some very powerful commentary. Some respondents spoke about the need for community members to look beyond appearances and stereotypes to understand and respect youth. For a group of young adults often described as alienated from adults and the greater community, their responses reflect a deep desire to be accepted and heard.

Youth respondents indicated that they would like people in power in this community to know that young people need more support and services (24% of respondents), would like to be given a chance and have others realize their potential (13%), want to be listened to so that their struggles are made known and understood (6%), and desire others to realize the extent of drug use and addiction (5%).

*“Better child care, better community centers, free activities.”*

*“Create more, or make it more public, on the types of and so on, programs for help and support.”*

*“Need better programs to help young people that have nowhere to go.”*

*“Some people really need help but don't have anyone to talk to or know how to go about getting it”*

*“If we had more support instead of judgments we would be in a much better position.”*

*“Not all teens are lazy and want to do nothing; some of us actually want to do something in life”*

*“People need to be more here for us, instead of feeling like a burden, stop making us burdens”*

*“Some of us actually are striving to be somewhere in life”*

*“We are good kids, we just want support and to know people love us.”*

*“We do struggle and it's really hard for young people to do what they have to do to get by day by day.”*

*“Young people need a special kind of assistance to keep them from turning to drugs and violence to get the things they need. We need more attention in specific areas like education on how to take care of yourself and about the consequences of not learning to do that.”*

## MOVING FORWARD

No one is born with a desire to fail. Homeless youth and young adults want to be successful, have safe and secure shelter, find engaging work, have friends and family—the same things that all of us want for ourselves and our children. The difference is that homeless youth do not know how to achieve these goals and they must confront a myriad of daily challenges just to survive in some cases.

Since the first ILS project in 2004, our community has listened to what these young people have to say and there has been some progress in critical areas of need but more needs to be done:

**Housing:** The data on housing instability have been consistent throughout all of the ILS projects. The creation of The Learning Web’s Housing Scholarship Program (15 beds) and Tompkins Community Action Transitional Living Program (16 beds) are a solid start to providing supportive housing for homeless youth in our county. However, affordable housing is still a major barrier to stability. Independent youths’ lack of financial resources leaves the Tompkins County housing market out of reach for them. Section 8 vouchers are in scant supply and usually available only to young people with children. Action needed:

- ✓ A youth shelter for young people through the age of 21 and a Supervised Independent Living Program (SILP) for younger homeless youth (age 16-20) are needed. There are homeless youth who need safe housing for a short time until they can stabilize their housing situation whose needs cannot be met in the Rescue Mission, an adult shelter. The homeless youth age 16-20 who are not ready to live alone in a scattered site transitional housing apartment could be successful in a SILP model of supportive housing.
- ✓ Additional Section 8 vouchers for independent youth are needed. Though there has been an increase in rental housing for those with low to moderate incomes such as Overlook and the housing complexes related to Linderman Creek, not enough units are set aside for Section 8.

**Education & Employment:** There are many minimum wage retail job openings in our community that theoretically are available for youth surveyed for the ILS. However, ILS data revealed that youth are not prepared to succeed at these jobs and the salary earned will not afford them a place to live (both due to the part time fluctuating hours offered and the low wage). The result is many youth who bounce from job to job and develop poor work histories. This is compounded by a lack of education that puts these youth at a disadvantage when competing with college students for low-level jobs. Action needed:

- ✓ Intensive and long-term job preparation for these disconnected youth that will help them repair their work histories and develop the persistence and workplace skills to excel on the job.
- ✓ Living wage jobs for those who are not going on to college. There is a gap in the types of employment in the county—either the jobs are low-paying without a career ladder or they are high pay, highly skilled jobs with a clear career progression. Many ILS youth have the ability to succeed at a job that pays a living wage and has a pathway to a good career. Our county needs to develop businesses that utilize this category of worker.

Service professionals working with homeless youth must be proactive in referring youth for the services created through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, a federal law that went into effect July 2015, pays specific attention to serving “disconnected” youth, meaning young people ages 16 to 24 who are not working and not in school (the population

surveyed in the ILS). Service providers should coordinate with employment providers to make use of these resources.

**Mental Health & Substance Abuse:** A rise in the use of hard-core drugs like heroin, crack, and meth requires a multi-system approach. The ILS data on drug use supports reports in the community of more hard-core drug activity among community drug users. The data on substance use and emotional well-being reflect a need for earlier intervention for young people—younger respondents especially listed the need for “someone to talk to” and “more non-drug related activities to do in town.”

Tompkins County Mental Health Clinic (TCMHC) staff contributed the following information regarding behavioral health access to independent and transient young people:

Tompkins County has both outpatient mental health programs and chemical dependence treatment programs that serve people across the lifespan. In theory, youth in our community who are living on their own can access treatment at these local agencies. However, youth attempting to access services can encounter barriers: youth in rural areas may have problems accessing services; youth can be inexperienced or poorly educated about accessing resources; sometimes youth do not have insurance, and are unaware that local agencies can provide assistance in securing public benefits or offer sliding scale fee schedules. In addition, some youth distrust systems, having had adverse experiences with treatment providers, particularly those youth who were placed outside of their family of origin. Lastly, as a society we are still struggling to overcome long held prejudices and stigmas associated with people accessing behavioral health care, leading some youth to avoid care.

*“I am intelligent, resourceful, and just need to be given a chance.”*

*ILS Respondent*

As a result, TCMHC recommends that an area for action is to develop the capacity of adults outside of the behavioral health systems (other youth-serving professionals), as well as our informal community networks and leaders, to identify youth at-risk. Expanding efforts to train individuals in the Mental Health First Aid model would be a concrete action step toward early identification of mental or emotional problems. A trained First Aider could engage, assess, and connect youth in need to appropriate community resources.

**Financial support:** Young people who grow up in functional, supportive families need and receive financial support into their twenties in order to finish their education and embark on the road to independence. Respondents spoke about the difficulties balancing the need to have food and shelter with the need to spend the time to finish their education and get a decent job. Though financial supports are available through DSS and education programs, the regulations can be overwhelming to youth and youth under age 20 are almost entirely shut out of the system. Ongoing financial support would allow youth to focus their energies on setting goals, working on education and employment, and moving towards self-sufficiency.

**Parenting support:** Parenting is a difficult task even with a stable home and financial and emotional support. Research is clear that children do better when both their mother and father are intimately involved in their lives. For the 47% of respondents’ children who are not living with their parent(s), the future is fraught with challenges. For the 53% of parenting respondents who are struggling to provide adequate shelter, food, and education for themselves and for a child, it is not much easier. In many cases, it is a child raising a child.

If the cycle of poverty is to be interrupted, these young parents require additional support so that they can retain custody of their child and, in the case of those parents who are not living with their child, to regain custody of their child. And, not only to have custody of their child but possess the skills to grow into stable, loving, and nurturing parents.