2019
INDEPENDENT LIVING SURVEY PROJECT
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



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



homelessness is an indicator of the health of our larger society

—Learning Web Staff

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This project was undertaken for the Tompkins County Continuum of Care Committee led by the Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County

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The Independent Living Survey (ILS) projects have generated solid data which have been used to develop state and federal funding sources bringing in **over $410,000** in expanded services for homeless youth. The Learning Web secured these funds to create a Transitional Housing Program which has **provided 154 homeless youth with housing** since the program's inception in 2008. Results of this effort have been promising: 140 residents exited from this program in 12-18 months and 95% secured stable housing.







introduction



In response to a community need to document the scope and nature of youth homelessness, the 2019 Independent Living Survey 5 (ILS5) was conducted by Cornell's Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research (BCTR) in conjunction with the Tompkins County Continuum of Care Committee (CoC), the county's planning entity for homeless services. Since 2003, this community-based participatory research project has been conducted every four years: 2004 (ILS1); 2007 (ILS2); 2011 (ILS 3); 2015 (ILS4) following a similar approach. The results of these previous surveys have had a significant impact on the community, generating both increased awareness of youth homelessness as well as increased services for youth living independently. The ILS projects have generated solid data which have been used to develop state and federal funding sources bringing in over $410,000 in expanded services for homeless youth. The Learning Web secured these funds to create the Transitional Housing Program which has provided 154 homeless youth with housing since the program's inception in 2008. Results of this effort have been promising: 140 residents exited from this program in 12-18 months and 95% secured stable housing. The CoC has requested additional ILS data in order to update the findings and assess change over time.

Young people approach shelter differently than adults, often preferring uncertain, transient housing to emergency shelters and residential programs which they associate with a loss of control and independence. Given that choice, they are rarely captured in traditional measures used to assess the prevalence of homelessness, such as point-in-time counts and shelter utilization statistics. Efforts to count or describe homeless youth that rely primarily upon these sources vastly underestimate the true extent of the problem.

Consequently, the study team adopted a unique approach, engaging 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 survey, to recruiting subjects, collecting the data, interpreting the findings and presenting results to community stakeholders. This effort enabled us to reach deeply into the homeless youth population not connected to service systems. The benefits of engaging young people in the research process have been significant: youth involvement in generating and interpreting knowledge are powerful strategies to promote positive youth development, advance research practice, impact policy and improve services for homeless youth.

...the study team adopted a unique approach, engaging 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.

Through this project, our research assistants were able to reach 144 young people between February and April 2019. Their voices, captured in this report, provide a catalyst for rich public discussion about this sizeable population of vulnerable youth in our community. We hope this will generate the public will to prioritize articulating a "continuum of care" that is focused exclusively on the needs of homeless youth.

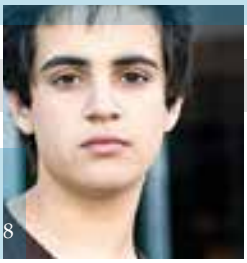
PROJECT PARTNERSHIP

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 (conducted in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019), each time making improvements, strengthening the approach and survey, to better capture and collect useful data. For this project, a study team was formed in the fall of 2018 to plan for the 2019 follow-up study. The team engaged 17 youth researchers, all of whom were current or past participants in The Learning Web's Youth Outreach Program. These young people updated the survey, completed a human subjects training, and learned how to identify the sample, administer the survey, and follow study procedures. They administered surveys to the target group of community youth during the period between February and April 2019. Youth who agreed to be interviewed were given a coupon for a free sandwich meal from a local deli. Youth researchers earned an hourly stipend for participating in all planning meetings, a flat rate per survey completed, and a sandwich coupon per each survey completed.

Cornell researchers from the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research (BCTR) assisted in the planning meetings, training of research assistants, analyzing the data and generating project reports. The youth researchers, along with the study team, and other homeless youth met to discuss and interpret the findings at a data dialogue session held prior to finalizing this report. This provided an important opportunity to assess the validity of our findings and to deepen our understanding. The study team will present the 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 youth who are in unstable housing face on a daily basis. We value the time and effort which the youth researchers have devoted to this project, and to those who they interviewed. We 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. They "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 USC 11302) definition of homeless children and youth)
2. They are age 24 or younger
3. They are not a Cornell University or Ithaca College student
4. They did not already complete a 2019 survey

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



RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The total number of youth who completed surveys was 144.

The chart below reveals that our sample includes more male respondents (51%); 6% identified as transgender, intersex, or gender queer/gender nonconforming. This is the first time since we began collecting data in 2004 that youth identified their gender as something other than male/female. This is also the first time we asked about sexual orientation as displayed in Figure 2.

Fig 1. **Gender Identity**

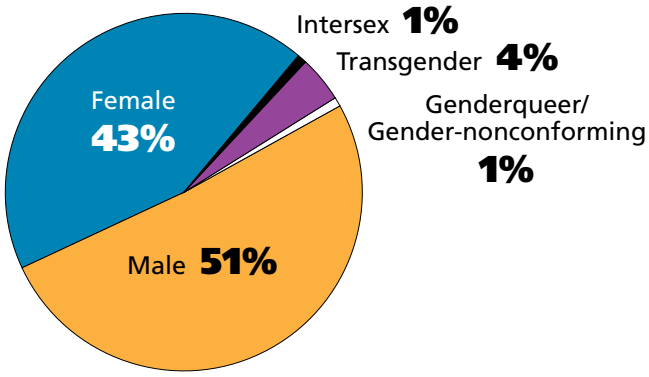
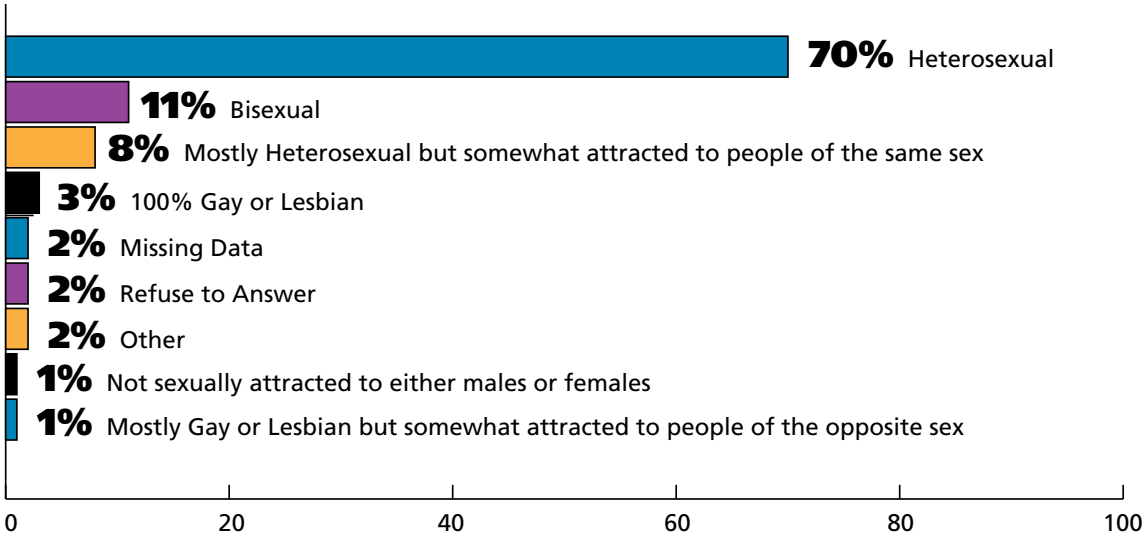


Fig 2. **Sexual Orientation**



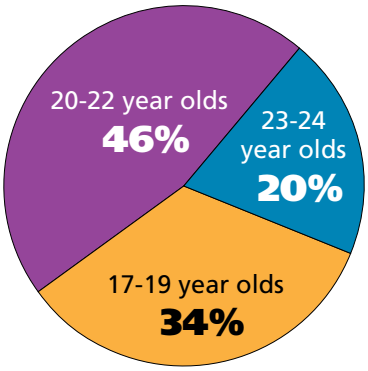
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS continued

AGE

The average age of study participants was 21 years old and ranged from 17 to 24 years old.

About 1/3 were between 17-19 years of age. In several of our analyses we present data separately for youth under age 21 (43%) and those between 21-24 (57%) to examine whether there are age related differences in responses.

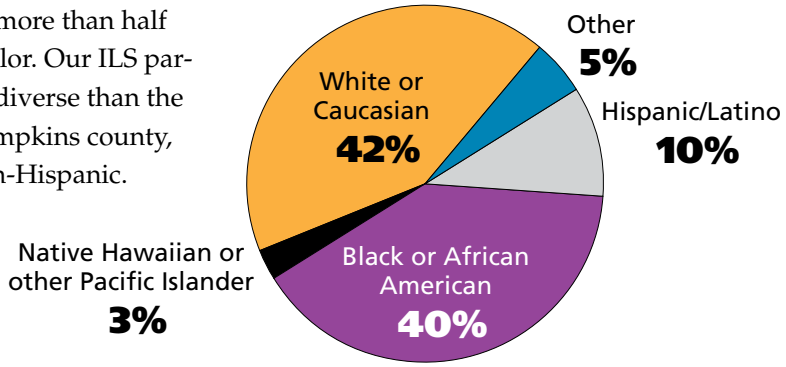
Fig 3. **Age Group**



RACE/ETHNICITY

Youth respondents were from diverse racial backgrounds with more than half being young people of color. Our ILS participants are much more diverse than the general population in Tompkins county, where 77% are white, non-Hispanic.

Fig 4. **Race/Ethnicity**



PARENTING STATUS

Over one fourth of the total sample have children or are pregnant.

- 22% of the younger youth (under age 21) have children or are pregnant
- 25% of the older youth (21-24) have children or are pregnant

Of all those respondents who have children, the majority have 1 child (17%) and 2% have 2 children. The average age of children is 2 years old, (ranging from less than 1 to 5 years old).

Fig 5. **Parenting Status**

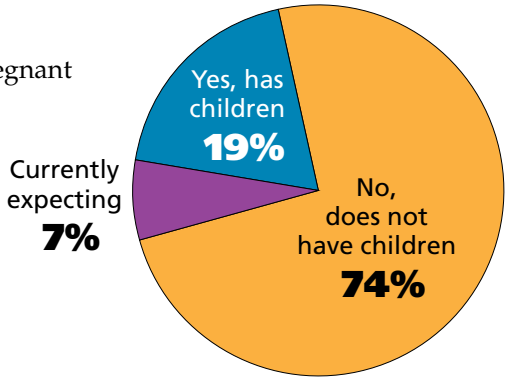


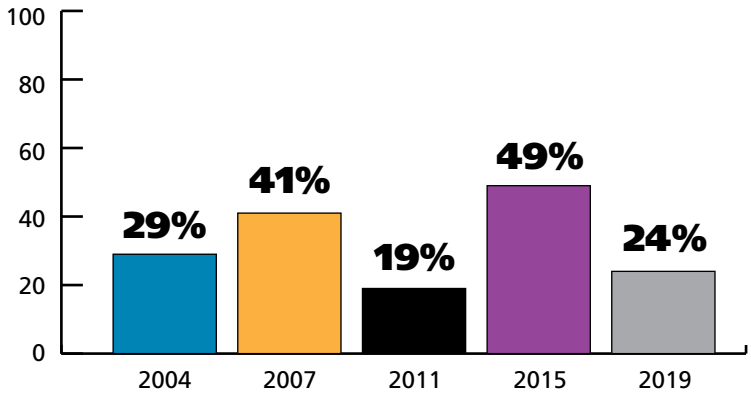
Table 1. **Parenting By Age Group**

Do you have any children?	Age: Under 21	Age 21-24
YES	22%	25%
If yes, how many?		
1 child	15%	20%
2 children	0%	0%
3 children	0%	0%
4 children	0%	0%
Currently Pregnant	7%	5%
NO	78%	75%

The pregnancy rate observed among our study participants is lower than that in the general Tompkins county population for a similar age group. According to the Tompkins County Youth Services Department 2019 Profile of Tompkins County, the pregnancy rate per 1000 females ages 15 – 17 years old is 7.8 (about 1%) which is lower than the NYS rate (excluding NYC) of 9.9 per 1000 (or about 1%). However, the birth rate for Tompkins county females ages 15 – 17 years old is 7.2 per 1000 (about 1%), which is higher than the state rate of 6.3 per 1000 (or about 1%). See: (http://tompkinscountyny.gov/files2/youth/TownProfiles/2019/2019%20Tompkins%20County_1.pdf

Data on pregnant and parenting homeless youth respondents have varied widely each year the survey has been administered. As illustrated below (see Figure 6), the number of pregnant and parenting study respondents is lower than in previous years. This decrease may reflect statewide and national trends on teen pregnancy/parenting rates which have significantly decreased over the past decades. It is unclear whether the decrease observed in our 2019 sample reflects an actual decrease in pregnancy or is due to our research approach which draws on the natural networks and social connections of the youth researchers. It is possible that previous ILS research assistants had more connections with parenting/pregnant peers than our current study.

Fig 6. **% who are pregnant/parenting from each wave of ILS data collection**



Parenting is a difficult task even under the best of circumstances. The ILS young parents 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 need additional support.

EDUCATION

As illustrated in Table 2, there are differences in educational status by age group. In comparison to the older respondents, fewer of our younger respondents have graduated from high school or received their GED/TASC (53% vs 61%); and more of our younger respondents are currently in school (23% vs 5%). Almost a third of the older respondents have not graduated from high school.

38% of respondents also indicated that they are interested in getting more education or training. 50% did not want any more education or training, and 12% were unsure. A common barrier cited by those who wanted to further their education was the **lack of a stable living environment**. Other barriers mentioned included finances, time, child care, and help filling out forms for financial support, like the FAFSA.

Table 2. **Education broken down by age group**

Did you graduate or get your GED/TASC?	Under 21	21-24 years
Yes, graduated from high school or got my GED/TASC	53%	61%
No, still in high school	23%	5%
No	21%	30%
Prefer not to answer	2%	3%
Missing data	1%	1%

HOUSING

As in previous years, the local housing market continues to be a significant challenge for homeless youth to find and secure affordable housing. Although Tompkins County has a high percentage of rental stock there continues to be 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 all areas of a young person's life including their education, employment, finances, and interpersonal relationships – 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 use 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 stereotypical views of "homelessness" – as if this refers to someone living on a heating grate on the streets --- and don't identify with this image. We use the term "independent youth" to avoid the negative stereotypes and to convey the positive characteristics of the population: their courage and resilience in the face of significant challenges. Although flexibility and resilience have been key to their survival, the lack of basic support that has defined so much of their lives has given these young people a mean standard to assess their own personal situations.

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

CURRENT LIVING SITUATION

Though a significant number of respondents 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 stayed 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 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 sometimes, no housing at all.

Only 18 respondents in the entire sample did not change housing in the past month. As shown in Table 3, the younger youth appear to experience less stable living situations, and are staying in more places, than the older youth. None of the older respondents reported moving more than 10 times whereas 10% of the younger respondents reported moving more than 10 times.

Most commonly, respondents are currently staying in someone else's house, apartment, or room (38%) or with several friends indicating multiple moves. See proportion of respondents staying in each location listed on the survey in Table 4.

Table 3. **Number of times respondents have changed housing in the past month by age group.**

Number of times youth have changed housing years in the last month	Under 21	21-24 years
0 times	13%	13%
5 or less	53%	65%
6-10 times	23%	18%
11-15 times	5%	0%
16-20 times	2%	0%
More than 21 times	3%	0%
Missing data	1%	4%

Table 4. **Current Living Situation**			
In the past week, where have you stayed? (respondents checked all that apply)	**Aggregate**	**Under 21**	**21-24 years**
Someone else's house, apartment, or room	38%	39%	38%
In several friends' houses, apartments, or rooms (couch surf, bounce around)***	35%	41%	30%
An emergency shelter	27%	28%	27%
With other relatives	21%	31%	14%
With parent	20%	26%	17%
A room paid for by a voucher	15%	12%	16%
With guardian	12%	13%	9%
Jail	8%	8%	8%
In a van or other vehicle	7%	8%	7%
In your own house, apartments, or room (you pay for this)	7%	7%	8%
An abandoned building	6%	2%	8%
A hotel or motel that you paid for	6%	7%	4%
A hotel or motel that someone paid for you	4%	5%	3%
The Jungle	4%	3%	5%
Some other kind of transitional living or housing program	4%	2%	7%
Anywhere outside (i.e. in a park, barn, tent, bridge)	3%	3%	3%
College dormitory	2%	2%	3%
A place of business (i.e. all-night Laundromat, Center Ithaca, Dewitt Mall)	2%	3%	1%
A transportation site (i.e. bus station)	1%	2%	0%
Juvenile Detention	1%	2%	0%
Some other place we haven't listed	1%	0%	1%

*****On average, respondents reported staying in 2 different places (friends' houses, apartments, or rooms) in the past week with a range from 1 to 8 places.*

Table 5. **Feeling of safety in current living situation by age**		
How safe do you feel in your current living situation?	**Under 21**	**21-24 years**
I feel safe all of the time	34%	43%
I feel safe some of the time	56%	48%
I feel safe none of the time	7%	7%
Refuse to answer	2%	0%
Missing	1%	2%

It is well documented that youth homelessness brings with it a high level of vulnerability to adverse events and Tompkins homeless youth are no different. The majority (52%) of respondents (in both the younger and older age groups) felt safe some of the time in their current living situation, 38% felt safe all of the time, and 7% felt safe none of the time. In the general population, the majority of people, including young people, feel safe most of the time. See the breakdown of respondent's feelings of safety in their living situations in Table 5.

Comments about current living situations were varied with most respondents expressing that they were not satisfied and were "dealing with it" for the time being. Young people discussed the lack of stability, not getting along with others in the home, safety concerns, and the need to move constantly. They spoke of a desire and need for their own space.

No, I'm not satisfied. I live behind Walmart [outside].

I'm always moving, trying to find out where I'm going next.

I have certain problems such as a lack of stability...



It's a toxic living situation.

I am not satisfied with my current living situation because I would like to feel more stable and comfortable. I'd like to get settled in one place.

I don't really have a living situation: I move around with family and friends. An apartment would really help me.

I have nowhere to go.

I am couch surfing and sleeping on a small couch. I have no stable housing.

Not really satisfied, back to house hopping in 28 days.

Nobody gonna hand it to you, you gotta do what you gotta do.

OVER THE PAST YEAR…

The level of housing instability increases dramatically when looking at youths' housing over the past year.

The aggregated data reveal that 9% of the respondents have not moved at all over the past year; a majority (51%) have moved between 1-5 times. 19% have moved 6 to 10 times; 8 % moved 11-15 times; and 6% have moved 16 – 20 times; 4% moved more than 21 times (3% refused to answer). Table 6 illustrates age differences in these data.

Table 6. **Numbers of places respondents have stayed in the past year by age group**

Number of times you have moved in the past year	Under 21	21-24 years
0 times	12%	8%
5 or less	41%	58%
6-10 times	23%	16%
11-15 times	8%	7%
16-20 times	8%	4%
More than 21 times	7%	1%
Missing data	1%	6%

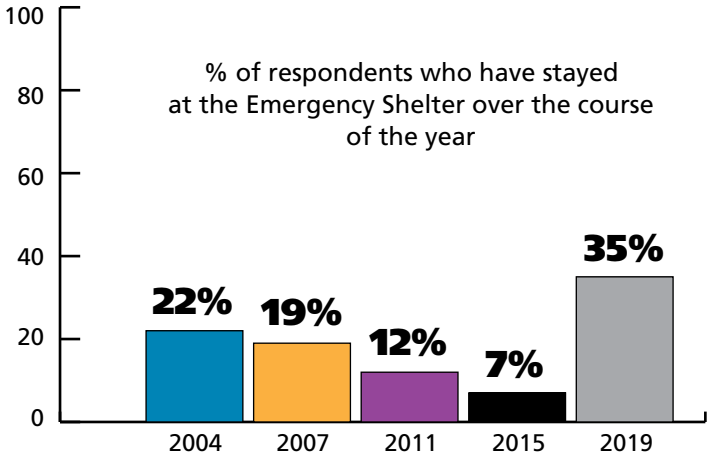
Table 7 illustrates the places young people have lived in the past year. Most commonly, respondents have stayed in several friends' houses, apartments, or rooms (48%) or in an emergency shelter (35%).

Table 7. **Places respondents have stayed in the past year**

In the past year, where have you stayed? (check all that apply)	Aggregate	Under 21	21-24 years
With parents	29%	34%	26%
With guardian	14%	18%	12%
With other relatives	33%	48%	21%
In a van or other vehicles	22%	25%	20%
A room paid for by a voucher	20%	16%	23%
An emergency shelter	35%	20%	48%
An abandoned building	10%	7%	9%
College dormitory	6%	10%	3%
In your own house, apartment, or room (you pay for this)	13%	13%	12%
In someone else's house, apartment, or room	30%	31%	30%
In several friend's houses, apartments, or rooms. How many friends' houses?	48%	53%	44%
A hotel or motel that you paid for	17%	18%	16%
A hotel or motel that someone paid for you	18%	18%	17%
A place of business (i.e. all-night Laundromat, Center Ithaca, Dewitt Mall)	7%	5%	8%
A transportation site	5%	7%	4%
Anywhere outside (i.e. in a park, barn, tent, bridge)	12%	16%	9%
The Jungle (homeless encampment)	9%	10%	8%
An institution (i.e. C.A.R.S. or hospitals)	2%	3%	1%
Jail	19%	20%	18%
Juvenile Detention	4%	5%	3%
Some other kind of transitional living or housing program	3%	2%	4%
Some other place we haven't listed	2%	3%	1%

From 2004 to 2015, use of emergency shelters declined. The 2019 data show that **shelter use has increased** (Figure 7). Over the course of the ILS, shelter usage has fluctuated. We believe that these fluctuations are due to protocols used to determine eligibility for shelter usage at the time of the survey administrations. For all youth under 21 who apply for admittance to the shelter, the Department of Social Services (DSS) contacts the parent to verify whether or not the youth can return home. If the parent says that a child cannot return home, DSS will require a parent to pay DSS for the cost of the shelter. This protocol usually results in a parent claiming that the child can return even when that is not the case, or the youth refusing to give DSS contact information because they don't want DSS to call their parents. In both cases, the youth is denied access to the shelter. In January of 2016 New York State established a regulation known as Code Blue. Code Blue requires shelters to extend their hours to keep the homeless indoors when temperatures are below freezing, including daytime hours as well as overnight. Young people who previously had been ineligible for shelter entrance (due to reasons cited above) are granted shelter on Code Blue nights. These youth are included in shelter bed-nights even though they are not consistently sheltered—only on nights deemed Code Blue. The local shelter has also experienced a change in management. St John's Community Services took over management of the shelter in 2018 and it is possible that more young people are given access to the shelter than previously, loosening eligibility criteria at times.

Fig 7. **The percent of respondents that have stayed at the emergency shelter in the past year, per each wave of ILS data collection.**



REASONS FOR LEAVING HOME

Approximately one third of all respondents 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 a clear cut "event" or the unilateral decision of a youngster to leave his or her parental home. Rather, it is a series of events where the youth leaves home or the parent ejects the child from the home. These departures are unplanned and can last a day or several weeks. Given this erratic pattern, by the time the youth leaves home for good, the reason for leaving is often unclear to the youth.

Table 8. **Reasons for leaving home**

Reasons for leaving home (respondents checked all that apply)	
Conflict at home	35%
Left home after the age of 18	24%
Ran away	22%
Thrown out	20%
Never lived with parents	13%
Other	11%
Abuse by parents/guardians	9%
Parents in jail	8%
Substance abuse	6%
Parents homeless	5%
Parents moved	5%
Sexual orientation/Gender Identity	4%
Prefer not to answer	4%
Parents deceased	1%

Youth gave multiple reasons for why they left home – many of which involved conflict. 35% of respondents reported "conflict at home" as their reason for leaving home, followed by 'left home after the age of 18' (24%), 'ran away' (22%), 'thrown out' (20%), 'never lived with parents' (13%), and other (11%). Some responses for

those who chose 'other' included foster care, sexual harassment from parent/guardian, eviction, moving in with grandparent to help out, and some wanting to experience life on their own.

The research team was interested in identifying possible antecedents to a youth's break with their family in order to determine if interventions could prevent a child's departure from the home.

On average, respondents reported that they were 14 years old (range 1-20) when things at home began to get rough and that they were 9 years old (range 1 – 20) when they first needed to find other places to stay because they couldn't or, didn't want to go, home.

Stressors such as parental abuse, parental substance abuse, clashes with step parents or partners of a parent, and non-compliance with parental rules contributed to a disintegration of the parent-child relationship. When asked what would have helped them to continue to live with their parent/guardian respondents listed better communication, decreases in family violence, and an increased ability of parents to show caring and concern for their child's well-being.

"I feel like they aren't listening to me.

I wish they understood my beliefs and lifestyles choices."

Less yelling, being able to have conversations.

Talking and Understanding.



EMPLOYMENT

Homeless youth are at a great disadvantage when competing for jobs in Tompkins County. A lack of education, few opportunities to acquire basic employability skills, and the constant crisis and instability that results from homelessness all lead to unemployment and underemployment.

Slightly less than 1/3 of the respondents (31% which represents 45 individuals) reported currently working. The majority of young people (66%) are not currently working, up 8% from 2015 data when 57% of respondents were unemployed.

Table 9. **Current employment status by age.**

Currently working?	Under 21	21-24 years
Yes	30%	31%
No	66%	66%
Missing	4%	3%

Only 9 of the 45 working respondents reported having a full-time job. Most of the young people who were working reported holding one job; 5 individuals reported having more than 1 job. Only 14 of the respondents who held jobs reported working more than 30 hours a week – 41% worked between 20-30 hours; about a third worked less than 20 hours a week.

We found that 56% of all respondents are currently looking for a job with roughly the same proportion of job seekers in the younger and older groups. Of those looking for a job, 40% have been looking for 1 month and 19% have been looking for 6 months or more. Older respondents reported that they have been looking for a job for a longer period of time than younger respondents.

When asked to describe barriers to getting a job in Ithaca, respondents identified the lack of transportation as a major issue. Other barriers included lack of experience, and needing an ID and/or social security card. Several respondents spoke of the need to stay motivated, committed and focused. It is especially difficult when you are *"doing something you hate and you have nothing to look forward to."*

Youth attending the data dialog session spoke at length about the difficulties getting and keeping a job in Ithaca.



"People here are super clicky. You need to know someone to get in. I feel like an outsider when I'm at work.

They [employers] don't think people like me [youth of color] can do a retail job or be a manager."

Respondents were also asked how they got the cash they needed if they were unemployed and common responses were through government assistance, illegal ways, others (family, friends, significant others etc.), and can, bottle, and scrap metal recycling.

SUPPORTING YOURSELF

The majority of respondents are receiving SNAP (39%) and/or Medicaid (28%). Despite receiving assistance, respondents reported having a very difficult time covering their basic needs. Discussion at the "data dialog" session regarding what prevents young people from taking advantage of SNAP and other public benefits centered on barriers within the social services system.

"DSS is a certain kinda system, it's kinda sad.

Young people described the long wait at DSS *"often 5 hours or more", ageism, "how we look—discrimination" and family status—"if you are single, you can't get benefits."*

When you see the few that's getting benefits, it drives youth to get what they need.

It's why people resort to stripping, hustling, prostitution."

See more detail regarding assistance in table 10.

Table 10. **Proportion of respondents receiving public assistance.**

Do you get any of the following assistance? (check all that apply)	Aggregate	Under 21	21-24 years
SNAP	39%	36%	40%
Medicaid/Fidelis	28%	28%	30%
Cash Assistance	18%	18%	18%
Learning Web	17%	16%	20%
WIC	9%	8%	10%
SSI	7%	12%	4%
Child Support	6%	0%	5%
Safelink	5%	3%	7%
Section 8 Rental assistance, public housing, or other housing program	4%	2%	5%
HEAP (Heating & Electric)	3%	2%	4%
Child Health Plus	2%	3%	1%
Day Care Subsidies	1%	2%	1%
SSD	1%	2%	0%
NY Health Care Exchange	1%	2%	1%
Other	1%	0%	1%

HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

Hunger is an ongoing reality for many of the survey respondents. When asked to reflect on the past year, 50% of the respondents said they had to cut the size of a meal or skip a meal because they didn't have enough money to buy food. Almost 2/3 of those who reported skipping meals, did this on a weekly basis. Even more respondents -- 59% of the sample -- reported not eating for a whole day because they lacked money to buy food and 54% did so on a weekly basis. As one data dialog participant said, "Food that's actually good is expensive."

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.

The data dialog revealed why more young people don't use the food pantries:

> *"We live in a world that's so judgmental, we're ashamed.*
>
> *People need to know where the pantries are— some are out of town and there's no transportation."*

Despite the fact that one third of the respondents received SNAP benefits, hunger is still prevalent.

Of those that have SNAP benefits, 55% have had to cut the size of a meal or skip meals, and 61% have not eaten for a whole day, because there wasn't enough money to buy food.

During our data dialog discussions, youth researchers commented on this inconsistency by pointing out how difficult it is to shop and cook economically while you are homeless, moving from place to place. It is impossible to store food safely and very difficult to depend on using cooking facilities. This situation leads to most young people buying cold prepared foods (hot foods are not allowed to be purchased with food stamps). It is impossible to shop the sales since there is no place to store the food. Unstable housing leads to high food expenses. Many young people run out of their food stamps towards the latter half of the months—resulting in skipping meals.

Additionally, the percent of respondents receiving SNAP/food stamp benefits who did not have enough money to buy food has increased since 2015.

When respondents were asked where they get their food, the majority (69%) went to food pantries, 56% went to Loaves & Fishes, and 49% got food from grocery stores.

Fig 8. **The percent of respondents receiving SNAP and still cutting a meal and/or not eating, in 2015 and 2019.**

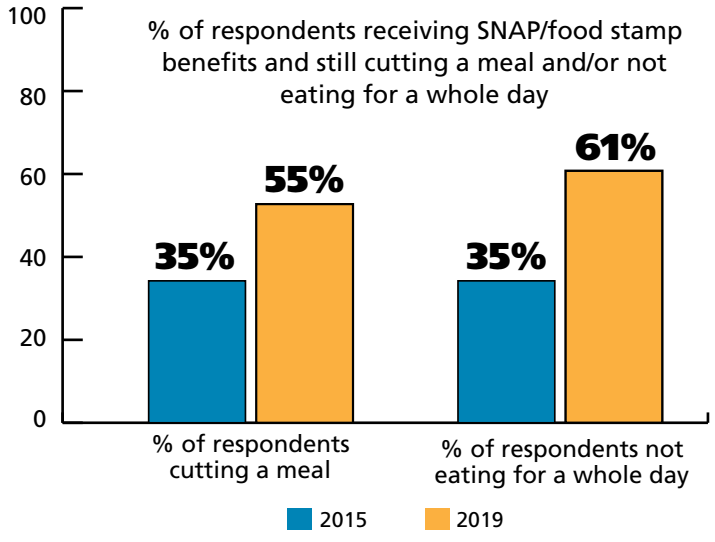




Table 11. **Where respondents get their food.**			
Where do you get the food you eat? (check all that apply)	**Aggregate**	**Under 21**	**21-24 years**
Food pantries	69%	66%	69%
Loaves & Fishes	56%	51%	60%
Grocery Stores	49%	46%	53%
Friends' houses	45%	48%	42%
Convenience stores	35%	36%	35%
Parents or Relative's house	22%	21%	23%
Restaurants/Fast Food	19%	20%	21%
Pay it Forward	14%	13%	16%
At work	9%	12%	6%
Other	6%	7%	5%

"Other" responses included: asking for lower prices at stores, dumpster diving, or eating at The Learning Web, shelter, school, SNAP, and at their under-the-table jobs.

We acknowledged that not everyone has enough money to buy food and asked respondents if they ever felt like they had to do something out of their comfort zone for a place to stay, food, or money. 23% of respondents said they had. Common responses included "had sex for food", "had sex for a place to sleep", dumpster diving, stealing food, and drugs. During the data dialog discussion youth felt that this question was not truthfully answered and that in fact many more youth have engaged in compromising behaviors for survival. Youth were reluctant to disclose this personal information to the interviewer.

Table 12. **Activities done outside of comfort zone by age.**		
Have you ever felt like you had to do something out of your comfort zone for a place to stay, food, or money?	**Under 21**	**21-24 years**
Yes	25%	21%
No	74%	77%
Missing	1%	2%

INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC SYSTEMS

As in previous years, a significant percentage of youth whom we interviewed have 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.

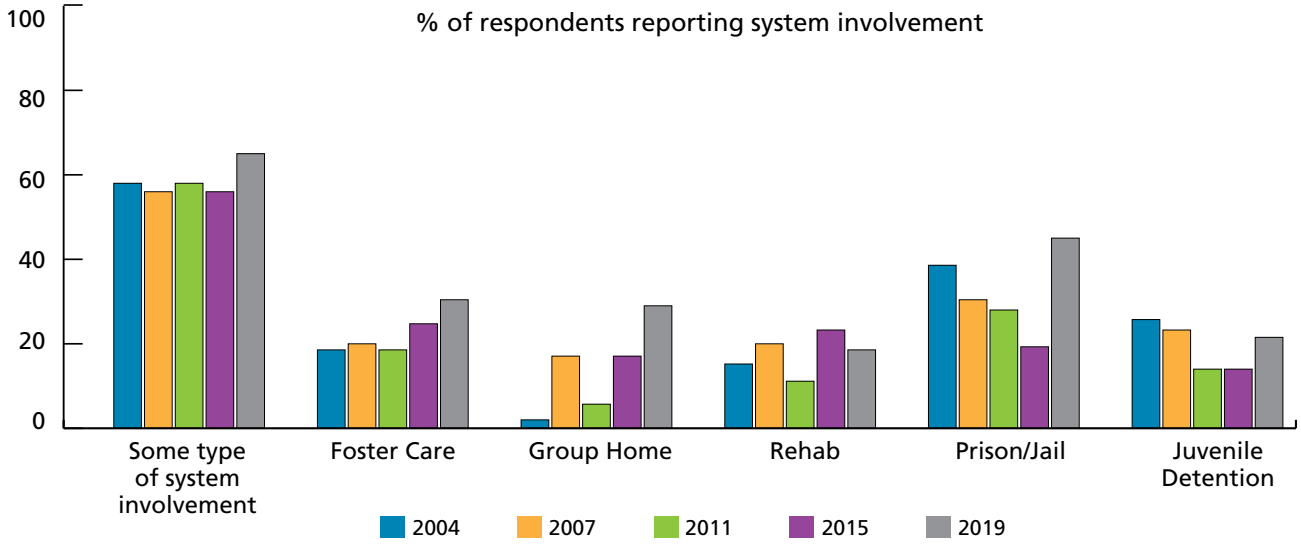
Our findings show that a majority of youth (67%) in the study have a history of involvement with institutional systems --- including foster care, jail, group home, or day treatment. Thirty percent of younger respondents and 26% of older respondents reported not having some type of system involvement. Over half of the older respondents (56%) reported having been in prison or jail. Respondents who checked 'other' described being in a mental health facility.

Table 13. **Involvement in public systems by age group.**

System (respondents checked all that apply)	Under 21 years	21-24 years
Group Home	34%	29%
Day Treatment	33%	31%
Foster care	31%	34%
None30%	26%	
Prison/jail	26%	56%
Juvenile detention	25%	20%
Residential Rehab (drug and alcohol)	16%	20%
Treatment court	12%	18%
Other institution	8%	14%
Prefer not to answer	2%	1%

The 2019 ILS respondents reported more system involvement than the other prior waves of data we have collected. Specifically, as illustrated in Figure 9 -- foster care, group home, and prison/jail involvement is also the highest out of all waves of ILS data.

Fig 9. **The percent of respondents reporting involvement in public systems, from each wave of ILS data collection.**



COMMUNITY SAFETY

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 as well as a high degree of vulnerability and victimization in these youths' lives. For the majority of people in our county, indeed, in our nation, where we lay our heads at night is a safe place. For 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.

On average, **44% of the sample report carrying a weapon.**

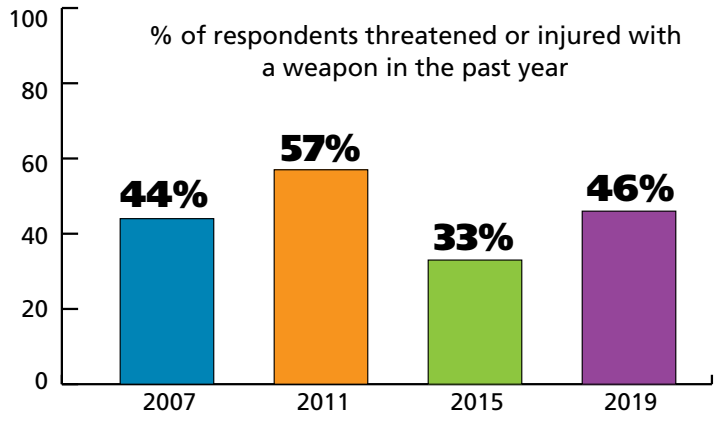
About half (51%) of respondents have not been threatened or injured with a weapon during the past year. However, for 17% this has happened 1 time, for 22% 2 or 3 times, and for 6% this has happened 4 or more times.

The rates are relatively consistent between the younger and older groups of respondents; however, a greater proportion of younger respondents carry a weapon and have been threatened or injured with a weapon 2 or 3 times. See more detail in table 14.

Table 14. **Proportion of respondents who carry a weapon and have been threatened or injured with a weapon, by age group.**

Do you ever carry a weapon?	Under 21 years	21-24 years
Yes	46%	42%
No	51%	55%
Missing	3%	3%
During the past year, how many times has someone threatened or injured you with a weapon?		
0 times	46%	56%
1 time	16%	17%
2 or 3 times	31%	16%
4 or 5 times	2%	1%
6 or 7 times	0%	3%
8 or 9 times	0%	0%
10 or 11 times	0%	0%
12 or more times	2%	5%
Missing	3%	2%

Fig 10. **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.**



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. Only 35% report seeing a private physician; the majority (54%) go to the emergency room when they are sick. 22% go to convenient care, 17% go to the free clinic, and 17% do not seek any medical care when they are sick.

Table 15. **Proportion of respondents seeking medical support.**

When you are sick — where do you go? (respondents check all that apply)	Aggregate	Under 21	21-24 years
Emergency room	54%	57%	51%
Private physician	35%	34%	33%
Convenient care	22%	20%	26%
Free Clinic	17%	25%	12%
Go nowhere (home/self-treatment)	17%	15%	20%
Planned Parenthood	11%	5%	16%
REACH Medical	4%	0%	7%
Unofficial doctor (i.e. friend who is a doctor/nurse)	4%	2%	5%
Dentist	4%	5%	3%
Herbalist/Alternative healer	1%	0%	1%

During the data dialog session we explored why youth use the ER rather than convenient care or Free Clinic. Participants said that the transportation to convenient care was inadequate, the Free Clinic's hours are very limited, and there was a perception that if one went to Emergency without insurance, you would not be charged.

A flaw in the wording of the question was revealed at the data dialog session. When asked why young people do not use Planned Parenthood (PP), the participants said that maybe some respondents didn't want to say they go there, due to the stigma. The question asked, "where do you go when you're SICK", implying that you may have an STD. In the future, the question will be worded, "where do you get MEDICAL CARE." Participants also noted that some young people have personal beliefs that prevent them from using PP's services, some young men don't think PP serves men, and many young people do not seek out preventative care.



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Just like most young adults, a source of sage counsel would be critical for homeless youth in learning how to grow into a healthy adult. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The majority of respondents (72%) turn to their friends for emotional support. Of concern is the large percentage of respondent who rely on themselves/ turn to no one else for this support. This varied by age: 33% of the younger respondents and 43% of the older youth reported not having any outside emotional support.

With the majority of respondents turning to peers for support (other young people with similar backgrounds living on their own with little positive and healthy experience or skills to share with a friend in need), it is important that youth find healthy connections and relationships.

Table 16. **Proportion of respondents seeking emotional support.**

Who do you turn to when you need emotional support or need someone to talk? (respondents check all that apply)	Aggregate	Under 21	21-24 years
Friends	72%	71%	74%
Nobody	38%	33%	43%
Family members	23%	20%	27%
Partners/significant others	21%	18%	23%
Spiritual figure	8%	5%	7%
My pet	6%	8%	4%
Other	6%	3%	8%
Therapist	4%	2%	5%
Boss	1%	0%	3%

Discussion at the data dialog regarding emotional support revealed the difficulties in engaging homeless youth with traditional mental health services. Participants spoke of discrimination in treatment according to type of payment, "If you don't pay for mental health [services], you are treated differently." [ie. clients who pay co-pays or pay themselves are treated with more respect than Medicaid clients.] They also spoke of cultural messages around mental health that cause one to feel a stigma if using mental health services. "For people of color growing up in the hood we had no counseling—your mom was your counselor!" "In Black communities going to counseling is not talked about, makes you look weak." And finally, many participants spoke about the lack of therapists of color available in our community.



"We need a counselor who looks like us [non-white] who accepts Medicaid."

SUBSTANCE USE

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

The most popular substances which respondents reported using included: Tobacco, Marijuana, Alcohol, Cocaine, and a prescription drug that was not prescribed to them.

We observed age differences showing that substance use is significantly higher in the older group. Data dialog participants said that "the older you get the more stressed out you are and you are so used to doing this certain drug, you're going to continue to chase the high."

36% of respondents indicated that they used these substances (other than cigarettes) practically every day in the last month.

24% use them two or three times per week. 10% did not use them at all in the last month.

Table 17. **Proportion of all respondents using substances, and substance use by age group.**

Substance (respondents check all that apply)	Under 21	21-24
Tobacco	69%	83%
Marijuana	64%	69%
Synthetic Marijuana	8%	23%
Alcohol	44%	64%
Magical Mushrooms	8%	20%
Acid/LSD	12%	27%
PCP (Angel Dust)	3%	7%
Speed/Meth	3%	18%
Cocaine	18%	38%
Crack	5%	18%
Morphine	2%	7%
Heroin	3%	14%
Fentanyl	0%	9%
Krokodil	0%	3%
Inhalants (i.e. whippets)	3%	5%
Hash	8%	10%
Bath Salts	0%	9%
Ketamine (Special K)	2%	9%
Valium (non-prescription)	2%	5%
Ritalin (non-prescription, Adderall)	5%	8%
Prescription drug that was not prescribed to you	15%	30%
Salvia	3%	7%
Ecstasy	7%	12%
Molly	8%	16%
Other	2%	3%

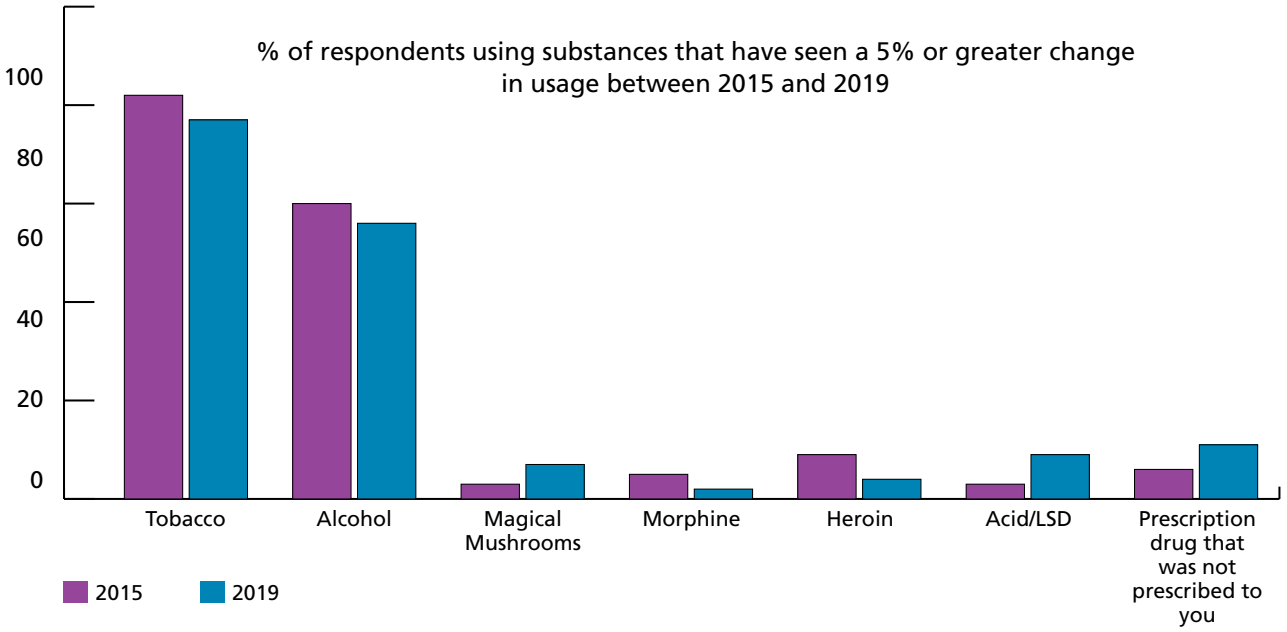
Several substances have seen a 5% or greater change in usage between the 2011 and 2015 waves of ILS data collection. When comparing substance use among the younger and older groups, the proportion reporting magical mushrooms, acid/LSD, and prescription drugs not prescribed to them are up from 2015; however, tobacco, alcohol, morphine, and heroin are down (Figure 11).

Table 18. **Number of substances each respondent used by age group.**

The number of substances respondents used	Under 21	21-24
0 substances	26%	21%
1 substance	21%	12%
2 substances	28%	13%
3 substances	7%	17%
More than 3 substances	18%	37%



Fig 11. **The percent of respondents reporting substance use in 2015 and 2019.**



With increasing awareness surrounding opioid use, respondents were asked if they or anyone they knew had been affected by the opioid crisis. Most chose not to answer the question but 13 respondents did report being affected, one specifically describing their family members. Young people attending the data dialog discussion session felt that this data was significantly underreported. Participants felt that the question was worded incorrectly— saying, *"most people do not know what "the opioid crisis"* is (i.e., what drugs does this include?) Participants also noted that, *"I think a lot of [young] people in Ithaca do more drugs to suppress what they're going through—stress and anxiety—and a lot of people do it to suppress that."*

The connection between boredom and drug use was frequently observed by our survey respondents. They repeatedly told us that young people need more things to do to keep them off the streets.

Better guidance of life and keeping busy.... finding options beyond just going to school and work.

...there [is] nothing for the youth to do.

Nothing out here for us. The youth is enslaved by social media.

CURRENT NEEDS

Youth were also asked to identify their top current needs. The needs most frequently identified by all respondents included: help affording housing, help finding housing, and help with transportation. This has been a consistent finding since the beginning of the ILS project.







Table 19. **Current needs by age group.**

What do you think are your current needs? (respondents check all that apply)	Aggregate	Under 21	21-24 years
Help affording housing	70%	74%	68%
Help finding housing	54%	51%	57%
Transportation	49%	49%	48%
Help finding a job	38%	38%	39%
Buying clothes	36%	39%	39%
Help affording food	36%	38%	36%
Budgeting	35%	49%	25%
Someone to talk to	31%	28%	31%
Help with my education	26%	30%	22%
Mental Health	24%	21%	21%
Affording personal care needs	21%	28%	14%
Maintaining healthy relationships	21%	20%	21%
Help affording a phone	20%	16%	23%
Child care services	19%	16%	21%
Help learning life skills (cooking, cleaning, etc.)	19%	21%	14%
Legal issues	17%	16%	17%
Better access to healthcare	17%	20%	13%
Help being a parent	15%	15%	14%
Safety	15%	21%	8%
Help in being prepared for employment/job search	15%	22%	10%
Help affording work clothes	11%	16%	8%
Help with addiction/substance abuse problem	10%	12%	9%
Other	1%	0%	3%





The needs of respondents who are pregnant and parenting were not extremely different when compared to all respondents. Their top three needs were: affording housing, finding housing, and transportation; not surprisingly, their fourth top need was child care services.

Table 20. **Top needs of pregnant/parenting respondents**

What do you think are your current needs? (respondents checked all that apply)	
Help affording housing	71%
Help finding housing	56%
Transportation	53%
Child care services	50%
Budgeting	41%
Buying clothes	41%
Finding a job	41%
Help being a parent	38%
Mental health	35%
Someone to talk to	32%
Help with my education	30%
Maintaining healthy relationships	27%
Affording a phone	24%
Safety	21%
Legal issues	18%
Better access to healthcare (including medical, dental, birth control, STD/HIV)	18%
Help learning life skills (cooking, cleaning, etc.)	18%
Help affording food	18%
Help in being prepared for employment/job searching	18%
Affording personal care needs (shampoo, razors, pads, tampons)	18%
Help affording work clothes	15%
Help with addiction or substance abuse problem	12%
Other	0%

TOP 3 NEEDS

Affording housing

Finding housing

Transportation

STRENGTHS

Despite the challenges and barriers these young people face, many possess remarkable resilience that support 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 have found throughout the ILS project: respondents identify personal strengths and goals that are very reasonable, not outlandish in any way shape or form; not unlike the goals of other youth in our community. These young people want to use their strengths and want to lead normal lives – to go to school, start a career, and have a family.

When asked about their personal strengths, respondents most frequently mentioned things related to being a good friend a good listener, caring, empathetic, and hardworking (24%). Many different talents were mentioned from artistry to dance (22%) as well as being great at different sports like basketball and soccer (15%).

"I'm good at most things I do (work-related); customer service and food service activities. I'm good at listening to people/communicating. I'm good at creating art. Good at being there for people/nurturing."

"I'm a hard worker."

"listening, understanding, making people laugh."

"Good at dealing with other people's problems."

"Dancing, empathy and people skills, expression through various mediums, emotional maturity/sensitivity, set of values, intelligence, wisdom seeking and my spirituality."

"Socialization is probably my biggest strength, my personality has literally saved my life numerous times."



GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

Many respondents expressed plans and goals for future jobs, careers, and having a family (43%) and for furthering their education (11%).

"Become a fashion designer"

"A good career, job and a house with my family."

"Go to college, become RN."

"Have my own place
maybe have my art displayed somewhere in the town."

"Hopefully, happily married with a house of my own and a good job."

"My goal is to finish school and become more stable.
I see myself in school in the next 3-5 years."

"Get off parole, good job, and my own place."

"Good paying job, managing money, healthy and happy home"

"To write novels. Be a psychology teacher."

"Living on my own, taking care of my son"

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST ISSUE FACING SOMEONE YOUR AGE TODAY?

Respondents indicated that there were several big issues facing youth their age. Several respondents wrote about the need for financial stability in their lives in regard to affording housing and furthering their education. Drugs and addiction continue to be an issue mentioned in prior ILS waves of data collection. This group of respondents talked about the need for guidance and finding direction in life.

"Finding out what the next step is and getting there."

"Financial aid, scholarships."

"How easy it is to fall into hard times, but how hard it is to get back
up. Lack of motivation to do better. Poverty at a young age."

"I see a lot of addiction in the youth and lack of
jobs, proper housing and opportunities to do fun productive things."

"Staying safe, finding good work and having access
to affordable housing."

"Where to live, how to pay bills."

"Mental health, finances, family issues, drug use."

MOVING FORWARD

We have learned from this study that homeless youth and young adults want to be successful, have safe and secure housing, find meaningful work, have a family and supportive friends – the same things all of us want for ourselves and our children. Sadly, homeless youth do not know how to achieve these goals, lack the requisite skills and support in their lives, and must confront a myriad of daily challenges just to survive.

Since the ILS project was first conducted in 2003, our community has been listening to what homeless youth and young adults have to say. Although there has been progress in several critical areas of need, more needs to be done. We describe the challenges faced and actions needed to move forward in meeting the needs of youth who live independently in order to help them achieve their goals.

HOUSING

The data on housing instability have been consistent throughout all five of the ILS projects. The creation of The Learning Web's Housing Scholarship Program (15 beds) and Tompkins Community Action Permanent Supported Housing, Amici House (26 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.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Section 8/ FUP vouchers:** Although there has been an increase in the availability of vouchers, the lack of landlords who accept vouchers is a significant issue for homeless youth. They often cannot find eligible housing within the timeframe required by HUD. The process required to complete the application and rental requirements for vouchers are also barriers for young homeless youth. There are many steps that pose barriers to young people who need intensive assistance to successfully negotiate the process and maintain their vouchers. Learning Web has added new prevention services in 2019 through a collaboration with Ithaca Housing Authority and the Tompkins County Department of Social Services that assist youth who are eligible for FUP vouchers to negotiate all of the hurdles and secure housing. These prevention services also assist youth who face the same barriers as homeless youth but whose housing is stable. These youth are supported to maintain their housing by staff who provide intensive case management, assistance with education and employment and life skills training. The program is a pilot and though initial outcomes are positive, continued funding is necessary to support these services.
- **A youth shelter for young people** 16 through the age of 21 is a continued need. 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 St John's Community services Emergency Shelter, an adult shelter. Tompkins Community Action is investigating the possibility of creating additional emergency housing to serve homeless youth. During this past year, a team of Cornell faculty and researchers along with several community partners have been gathering data to learn how best to design this facility so that it meets the needs of homeless youth. This collaboration has led to design guidelines and initial working drawings which will be incorporated into this new facility. Funding is currently being sought to build the emergency youth shelter.
- **Supervised Independent Living Program (SILP)** for younger homeless youth (age 16-20) is a continued need. The homeless youth age 16-20 who are not ready to live alone in a scattered site transitional housing apartments and permanent Supported Housing could be successful in a SILP model of supportive housing.

TRANSPORTATION

Echoing comments from previous surveys, transportation was ranked as a top need by survey respondents. Several youth cited the difficulty of using TCAT to get them around the county during the course of a single day when trying to combine work, taking classes at the community college, and, in some cases, getting a child to day care. They also pointed out how frequently the Cornell buses run in comparison to the TCAT buses to TC3. Housing rents within the city are so high that youth are pushed into housing in the rural areas, not accessible to transportation but more affordable. They soon find that they are in a catch-22 because though they can better afford rent, they are not able to get to jobs or school. There have been improvements made to the transportation system as a result of the previous ILS surveys but the county geography makes it difficult to adequately cover all areas.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Expansion of frequency and pick up locations** across the county, especially to help evening shift workers get to and from work.
- **Bus passes** for youth to get to work, school (and TC3), and to services.

EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

These areas continue to present major challenges to youth experiencing homelessness. There are many minimum wage retail job openings in our community that theoretically are available for youth surveyed for the ILS. However, ILS5 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, low wage, and high rents). The result is that many youth 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. A significant segment of youth carry debt from attempts at postsecondary education. Young people are ill-prepared for college and once registered, they cannot maintain the grades needed to stay in school. They drop out of college with debt they are unable to repay. Later, once they have developed the life and study skills, this debt often prevents them from returning for further education.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Education debt forgiveness** to allow young people to return to post-secondary education/training.
- **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 succeed on the job. The Learning Web's new prevention services are addressing this issue as mentioned previously, but expanded prevention services are needed.
- **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 can 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. This federal law that went into effect July 2015, pays specific attention to serving "disconnected" youth, i.e., 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.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

The majority of respondents (54%) still utilize the emergency room when they need medical care, almost identical to the percentage in the 2015 survey. Barriers to using convenient care and the Ithaca Free Clinic include transportation, schedule of hours, and a lack of awareness of when to use the emergency room.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Increase awareness** around preventative care and urgent care—where and when to go to various local facilities.
- **Increase hours and services** at the Ithaca Free Clinic
- **Improve transportation** options to get to Convenient care.

MENTAL HEALTH

The majority of respondents (72%) turn to their friends for emotional support. Almost 40% rely on themselves/turning to no one else for this support. This is very similar to our 2015 ILS4 results. Mainstream counseling and therapy are not trusted or utilized by this group of young people. The research team also stated that cultural norms valuing "toughing it out" add to shame around admitting a mental health problem and asking for help. In the 2015 survey recommendations, Tompkins County Mental Health, (TCMHC) suggested that an area for action was 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. In response, there have been expanded efforts to train individuals in the Mental Health First Aid model which is a concrete action step toward early identification of mental or emotional problems. The Tompkins County Mental Health Association offers the MH First Aid for Youth several times annually. This is a step in the right direction.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Increase the number of local therapists** who reflect the race/ethnicity of the population of youth experiencing homelessness. A significant proportion of youth are youth of color. There are few therapists of color available in the county.
- **Address the culture and style of young consumers** of mental health treatment. When a youth has the courage to make a call for mental health care, they are often faced with a significant delay in receiving services. Once a crisis has passed and the appointment arrives, most youth have lost the motivation to deal with the issue. Capitalizing on this generation of youths' facility with digital platforms, we should explore how to address the mental health needs of youth in virtual ways. There are online and phone models of mental health assistance that are immediate and effective and should be explored by our community.



SUBSTANCE ABUSE

When comparing substance use among respondents, the proportion reporting magical mushrooms, acid/LSD, and prescription drugs not prescribed to them are up from 2015; however, tobacco, alcohol, morphine, and heroin are down. Youth researchers report that heroin/opiate use is underreported in the 2019 ILS5. The researchers believe that youth were ashamed of admitting use. As the ILS team looks to future data collection efforts, we will be exploring the use of electronic devices for capturing respondents' answers so that anonymity is increased.

Even with the underreporting on opiates, the data on substance use and emotional well-being reflect a need for earlier intervention for young people—over 30% of respondents listed the need for "someone to talk to" and "more non-drug related activities to do in town."

Positive movement regarding substance abuse has been the creation of the Open Access Center, part of the Alcohol and Drug Council. Reach medical, a harm-reduction focused medical practice, provides acute and primary care to people with addictions.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Prevention services** are needed to help young people process previous trauma, and build social emotional skills.
- **Youth-relevant attractive recreational** and out of school time youth development activities should be increased and available at no cost to this population of young people.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

This is an area of continued need that affects every other area of life for a youth experiencing homelessness. 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 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; youth under age 20 are almost entirely shut out of the system due to regulations that involve their parents. Ongoing financial support would allow youth to focus their energies on setting goals, working on their education and employment, and moving towards self-sufficiency.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Food assistance:** ILS5 respondents continue to report that they do not have access to healthy, nutritious, and affordable food on a regular basis. Though stigma and embarrassment keep many from using food pantries and feeding kitchens, other youth do use these services but note that hours are limited and transportation impedes use of local sources of food supports. SNAP benefits are difficult to access as the process is complex for inexperienced youth.
- **Housing vouchers:** As reported above in the housing section, young people cannot find landlords willing to take third party payments. The application process also presents barriers to young people.
- **Independent Living resources:** Cell phones, cell phones minutes, transportation supports are all examples of resources youth need to work, go to school, and maintain housing and public benefits.

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. 26% of respondent were pregnant or parenting, significantly higher than the county and NY state rate of 1%. 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.

A new collaboration between Tompkins County Department of Social Services, the Advocacy Center, and The Learning Web will increase services to pregnant and parenting youth who are at risk of child abuse and/or family violence. Child Abuse/domestic violence prevention skill building, parenting training, life skills training, and intensive case management will be offered to pregnant/parenting youth ages 16-24. This represents a significant increase in support for this group of vulnerable youth.

ACTION NEEDED:

- **Childcare resources** are an area of need cited by ILS5 respondents. Lack of affordable options for childcare limits a young parent's ability to work and/or pursue education.

CONCLUSION







The importance of undertaking a project like the ILS in our community cannot be overstated. It has served as a catalyst for systemic change bringing:

- **Increased Awareness and Visibility.** The issue of youth homelessness is now on the radar screen of funders, legislators, and community, generating the public will to prioritize homeless youth issues by including it in City and County Plans, and the Continuum of Care 10 Year Plan.
- **Improved bus transportation** as a result of feedback from youth respondents.
- Solid data to be used in applications for Federal, State, and foundation funds to create a continuum of supported housing support to homeless youth including The Learning Web's Transitional Living Program, TCAction's Amici House Permanent Supported Housing, and the upcoming addition of TCAction's new Arthaus Permanent Supported Housing. These data are also used for applications for State funds for services for "non-residential" homeless youth who are not able to secure the supported housing. Services offer intensive case management and life skills support to these youth in addition to help finding safe housing in the private sector.
- **Recognition of the issue of youth homelessness** to community members, making real the struggles of this resilient group of community young people.

We have a unique opportunity to hear from a group who is marginalized, often alienated, eager to be heard and helped. We asked respondents if there was anything that they would like people in power to know about young people like themselves. This is a question that has been asked in the previous survey waves and the responses in all five surveys have been remarkably consistent, provoking some powerful commentary. The responses to this question have been taken seriously over the years and have been listened to as we have presented the findings to community stakeholders who make funding and policy decisions.

Many youth respondents indicated that they would like people in power in this community to know that young people need more support and services regarding places to hang out and programs; they also need support finding affordable housing. Others indicated that it is hard being young, it is hard being homeless, and they would like the opportunity to be heard.

Need a program for people who are trying to turn their life around.

I want them to know there's not enough affordable housing for people my age."

Help these people the best you can, don't abandon them.



There are many very hardworking young people like myself who struggle every day with their mental health and family situations but still get up every day and try their best to be their best.

There needs to be a place for young kids to go to have something to do instead of running the streets.

Do not be racist, judgmental and do not discriminate.

Young people like myself coming home from prison need help with things.

Yes, we need more interesting things around the community to do and we also need a place where people won't bother and kick out the youth. We also need more affordable housing."

Listen and try to help people who are in a struggle.

These young people have been vocal about the lack of support and guidance they have experienced. They welcome the help and support of caring adults.

