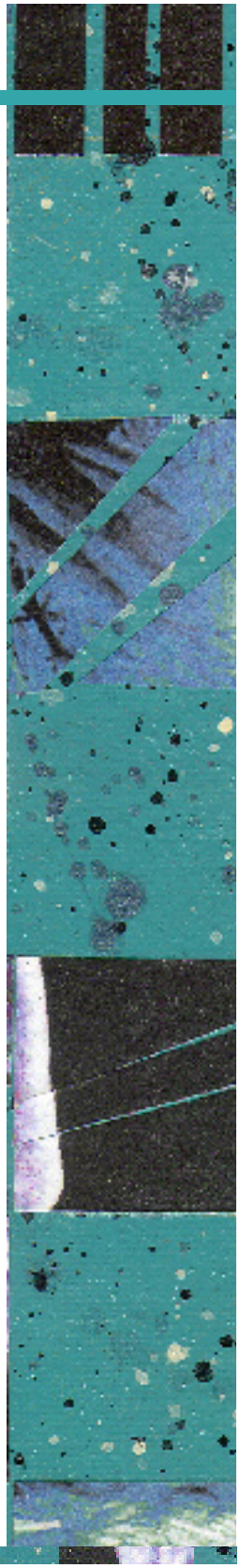
# Surviving On Our Own:

## The Independent Living Survey Project Final Report



### A Collaboration Among:

Family Life Development Center, Cornell University

Tompkins County Youth Services Department

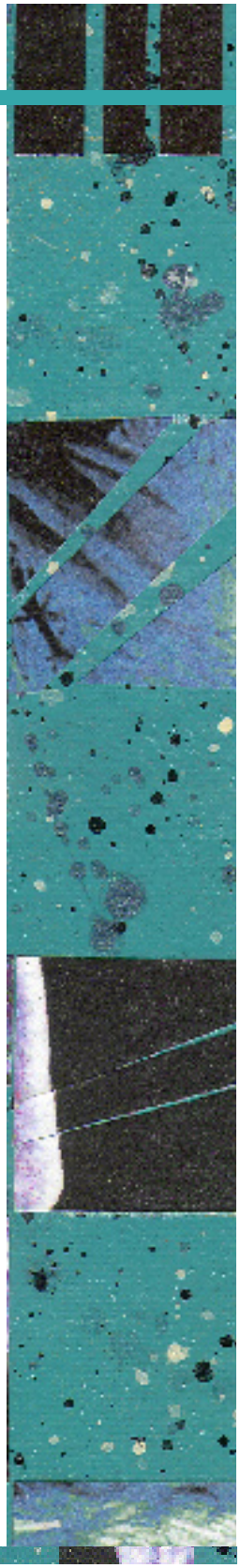
The Learning Web

Young Adult Participants in the Web's Youth Outreach Program

**March, 2004**

This project was undertaken for the Tompkins Continuum of Care Committee and the Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County. It was made possible by support from Cornell University's Faculty-In-Service Program, the United Way of Tompkins County, and the Tompkins County Foundation.

# Project Members



**Steering Committee**
Jane Levine Powers, Ph.D., Family Life Development Center
Nancy Zook, Tompkins County Youth Services Department
Mary Ann Lapinski, The Learning Web
Sally Schwartzbach, The Learning Web

**Young Adult Members**
David Bailor
Micah Baker
Kati Batty
Capri Genung
Dennis Henderson
Shawnae Milton
Shanovah Moodie

**Data Analyst**
Amanda Purington

**CU Student Members**
Amanda Purington
Scott Litwack

**Young Adult Interviewers**
Lee Avery
David Bailor
Micah Baker
Mike Billington
Tesha Collins
Heather Dengler
Capri Genung
Oliver Hedian
Crystal Keefe
Jessie Kelso
Galvin Lawton
Angie Montanez
Shanovah Moodie
Kysha Radcliff
Victor Santos
Tish Williams

**Consulting Members**
Rick Alvord, The Learning Web
Larry Farbman, The Learning Web
Mona Smiley, The Learning Web

**Other CU Assistants**
Jonathan Akouku
Lydia Briggs
Nathanial Oaks-Lee
David Schoonover
Joe Serrano
Suen Soth

**with assistance from:**
Abby Thomas, The Learning Web
Diane Hardy, American Red Cross
Rose McGrady, Friendship Center
Amelia Sauter, Teen Pregnancy Program

**and gratitude to our youngest ILS meeting attendees:**
Faith Genungbailor, age 2 years
Dyshawn Lawton, age 18 months
Naysa Milton, age 2 years

**Report Proofreaders**
Kris Bennett
Louise Werner

**Artwork & Design**
Mary Ann Lapinski

# Table of Contents


Summary ..... 1

Background ..... 5

Methodology ..... 8

Demographic Profile of Respondents ..... 10

Sheltered, Perhaps, But Still Homeless ..... 11

Runaway, Throwaway, or Failed Youth? ..... 15

Vulnerable and Victimized ..... 17

It's Not Easy "To Go From Nothing" ..... 22

Youth Voice: What We Need ..... 27

A Desire for Respect ..... 29

References ..... 30

Poetry

"Untitled," S. Moodie ..... iv

"Face the world," K. Batty ..... 21

"Afraid," D. Bailor ..... 26

## Untitled

**PLEASE** hear our voice
**WE** speak loud and clear
**WE ARE** the youth of today and we are filled with fear
**NOT** because we're scared or afraid of the dark
**BUT** because society has left us in the dark
**WE ARE** trying to save other countries and build them back up
**WHEN** our own country is more than corrupt
**WE** spend millions of dollars
**BUT** not for the youth
**IT** is a wonder why our school systems fail
**WHY** the youngest of our youth are in jail
**WE** can be lawyers and doctors of tomorrow
**BUT** if we are ignored this country will reap the seed that has been planted tomorrow

**THIS** is only one opinion you see
**NEVERTHELESS**, you would be surprised by how many agree
**WE** do not want to be drug dealers, inmates, or hookers without any degree

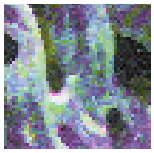
**HOWEVER**, for some that is the only way life can be made easy financially

**LISTEN** to one of the many voices of tomorrow
**BECAUSE** if you turn away, there will be many more voices filled with rage and sorrow.

Shanovah Moodie

"Our lives haven't been peachy-keen. They've been hard. Lots of folks in Ithaca have money and family; they don't know what it's like. Some people grow up in Brady Bunch families. Me, I got whooped every day growing up."

ILS Respondent, age 19, living on her own since age 13



# Summary

Most youth do want help. They want a normal life, go to school, start a career, develop relationships. They just don't know how with the limited resources available to them . . . As much as they want a better life, they may be afraid to engage in services or cynical about the likelihood of getting real help. They have been let down a lot. But if trust can be slowly built, most do engage in services when they are available, and often do very well.

"Background on Homeless Youth in Seattle and King County," City of Seattle website

The Independent Living Survey Project (ILS) evolved out of the need to learn more about youth homelessness in Tompkins County. Various labels are used to describe this population including unattended homeless youth, doubled-up youth, throw-away youth, and couch-surfing youth. We chose the term *independent youth* to describe these young people in recognition of the fact that they are living on their own apart from an adult caregiver and to avoid the negative stereotypes associated with other terminology.

The term *independent youth* has many positive associations rightly reflecting the courage and resiliency of these youth; however, we can not forget the fact that these young people lack safe, adequate, and stable shelter. They are youth with challenging pasts who prematurely have had to assume the demands and responsibilities of adulthood without the benefit of a nurturing childhood and adolescence. They may be surviving on their own but they are poised to become a new underclass.

## ILS Survey

To investigate the phenomenon of independent youth, a partnership among Cornell's Family Life Development Center (FLDC), Tompkins County Youth Services Department, The Learning Web, and a group of independent youth—the real experts on youth homelessness—was formed in late 2002.

By January of 2003, an 11-page semi-structured interview tool was developed and 16 participants in the Web's Youth Outreach Program were trained to be project interviewers. Between January 28, 2003 and March 18, 2003, 165 interviews of independent youth, ages 15 to 24, were conducted that form the basis of this report.

## Sheltered, Perhaps, But Still Homeless

Youth homelessness is best understood as a "cyclic process" (Van der Ploeg, 1997). After leaving home, youth tend to move from place to place sometimes staying with extended family or friends, other times with strangers, with occasional stays in an emergency shelter or on the streets. Even after youth obtain housing, they are rarely able to maintain it for any length of time. This reality was demonstrated by the pattern of extreme mobility discovered within the local independent youth network. When we asked young people where they were living currently:

- almost one in three young people (**30 PERCENT**) said that they were staying at more than one place. The number of places that youth said that they were staying ranged from 2 to 7+ places.

Places that youth identified staying included: their own place; someone else's place; several friends' places; a hotel; with a parent or family member; in abandoned buildings; anywhere outside; vehicles; the emergency shelter; and places of business.

When we asked youth to recall the places that they had stayed during the previous year, an even more startling picture of mobility and impermanence began to take shape:

- **85 PERCENT** of youth said that they were staying at multiple places.

Of these young people:

- **61 PERCENT** identified having stayed at 2 to 6+ places;
- **23 PERCENT** of youth said that they had stayed at 7 to 18+ places.

"I just stay wherever I'm chillin' that night."

ILS Respondent

Local independent youth piece together their housing utilizing many resources so that short periods of adequate housing are intertwined with periods of inadequate, unsafe housing and periods of no housing at all:

- about one-third of all youth (**32 PERCENT**) reported having stayed outside;
- an extremely high percentage of youth (**80 PERCENT**) said they had stayed somewhere not intended for human habitation such as outside, in a vehicle, an abandoned building, a place of business, or a transportation site;
- only **22 PERCENT** said that they had stayed in the emergency shelter and **22 PERCENT** had stayed at a motel using a voucher.

Independent youth are refugees in their own community. They are wanderers moving from place to place, sometimes on a daily basis, sometimes keeping all of their belongings with them in a knapsack. This lack of stability constantly threatens to erode any progress that youth may achieve regarding educational or work-related goals and is disruptive to the general community's wellbeing.

## Runaway, Throwaway, or Failed Youth?

Our findings support the growing awareness that most independent youth are not runaway youth who have left home in a fit of adolescent rebellion. Relatively few youth (**7 PERCENT**) identified themselves as runaways. Far more frequently, youth said that they had been thrown out by a parent (**18 PERCENT**), left home because of parental or guardian abuse (**8 PERCENT**), or because of the substance abuse of a parent (**6 PERCENT**).

A significant percentage of the youth whom we interviewed have a history of involvement with institutional systems. Over half of the population surveyed (**57 PERCENT**) told us that they had backgrounds that included: jail (**38 PERCENT**); juvenile detention (**27 PERCENT**); and foster care (**19 PERCENT**.) Almost one-third of youth interviewed (**32 PERCENT**) said that they had been involved with two or more of these systems.

## Vulnerable & Victimized

Through ILS 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.

A high percentage of youth (**28 PERCENT**) said that they had been a victim or offender of a violent crime in the previous 12 months and an even higher percentage (**44 PERCENT**) said that they had been a victim or offender of a non-violent crime. Approximately one-third of youth (**31 PERCENT**) said that they carried some form of weapon.

Survey respondents identified a wide range of drugs available in the local community and talked openly about their drug use. A primary reason that youth gave for why they became involved with drugs was boredom. They told us that young people need "more places for kids to hang out in a safe, drug-free environment" and "more activities for teenagers and young adults that don't cost a lot of money" or they are "likely to get into trouble."

Several survey questions attempted to gauge young people's level of knowledge and attitudes towards birth control and sexually transmitted disease (STD). We were surprised to learn that the majority of youth thought that most young people knew how to avoid contracting an STD and where to get help locally. Nonetheless, only:

- **21 PERCENT** of youth thought that most young people are comfortable getting care for an STD;
- **35 PERCENT** of youth thought that most young people feel it is important to let a potential partner know whether they have an STD;
- **38 PERCENT** of youth thought that most young people think it is important to use birth control.

## It's Not Easy

The challenges that independent youth face trying to secure and maintain employment are great. Even once they secure work, it is often difficult for them to maintain a job given their transient, subsistence lifestyle. Independent youth who have a criminal record face even greater obstacles when trying to secure work.

> "I started taking drugs when I was in the sixth grade. I was bored. There was nothing to do but there were lots of drugs around. Like most kids, I was curious. What else can you do for free in this town? Cause that's how they get you hooked. When you first start, drugs are free."
>
> ILS Respondent

Most of the young people we surveyed want to work. They told us that they need: "more jobs;" "help finding a job;" "help getting a better job;" and "helping earning a livable wage." Young people recognize the need to complete their education, pursue additional schooling, or earn a professional credential but they spoke about the painful reality of trying to achieve these goals while attending to adult responsibilities such as maintaining housing, caring for a child, and meeting the requirements of service providers such as DSS or Probation.

The young people surveyed have hopes and goals for the future including career goals but, at the moment, their struggle is to survive. Youth identified their top needs as: transportation; housing; help finding a job; help with their education; and help affording food.

## A Desire For Respect

The last question of the survey asked youth if there was anything that they wanted people in power to know about young people such as themselves. This question provoked some very powerful commentary. Youth spoke about the need for community members to look beyond appearances and stereotypes and to understand and respect youth. They told us:

- *"We are misjudged strongly. We are not all trouble-makers. We do want to succeed at something, we just don't know how."*
- *"Kids are young and make stupid choices sometimes but they don't mean any harm."*

## We're All At Risk

Safe, nurturing environments that include caring adults and stable housing are a necessity for adolescents to develop into healthy adults. When young people are deprived of these basics, their development—emotional, social, cognitive, academic, and moral—is imperiled. So, too, is the community at risk of severe long-term consequences to its overall quality of life and economic vitality:

> The greatest economic and social costs in not addressing the homeless youth population are long-term. Once youth begin to see homelessness as a way of life, they virtually "drop out" of society. The hope of getting an education is lost. The potential increases for incarceration, emergency hospital and long-term care, and welfare assistance. Early intervention approaches are clearly an investment worth the cost (City of Seattle, website).

We are grateful to all of the youth who participated in the ILS Project. We hope that we were good listeners. We also hope that many people in the community, policymakers as well as others, will take the time to review the full report.

We should listen carefully to independent youth because unlike Athena they did not sprout full-grown. They are the young people that we (their families, schools, service systems, and communities) fostered either through action (dysfunction, abuse, inadequate policies and programs) or inaction (lack of opportunities, benign neglect, and indifference).

The healthy development of many adolescents in Tompkins County is in jeopardy. Adolescents make up a sizable portion (**12.4 PERCENT**) of the county's population. They are more likely to be poor than any other segment of the population. Locally, **16.9 PERCENT** of youth ages 17 and younger live in poverty and more than one in four youth (**27 PERCENT**) are eligible for free or reduced school lunch programs (Tompkins County Youth Services Department, 2002).

*"We're hurting out here."*

ILS Respondent

There is a solid correlation between youth living in low income families and youth being at risk for a range of negative outcomes including academic failure, teen parenting, and youth homelessness. Poverty, however, is not the only indicator demonstrating that local youth are in trouble (Kids Well-Being Indicators Clearinghouse, 2000):

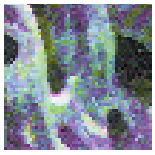
- **26 PERCENT** of all families in Tompkins County are one-parent families;
- **276 FAMILIES** are headed by a grandparent who is responsible for grandchildren;
- there has been a decrease in the number of youth receiving food stamps and public assistance since stricter eligibility guidelines were enacted as part of welfare reform;
- there is a higher rate of Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) cases opened for services than the state-wide rate and, most disturbingly, there has been an **80 PERCENT** increase in PINS referrals between 1997 and 2003 for behaviors such as truancy, incorrigibility, drug use, and running away (TCYS, 2004);
- Tompkins County has a higher rate of proven child abuse and maltreatment cases than the average of other state counties, excluding NYC.

The health and vitality of our entire community is at risk if we fail to listen to the voices of the next generation. As one young poet writes:

> **LISTEN to one of the many voices of tomorrow**
>
> **BECAUSE if you turn away, there will be many more voices filled with rage and sorrow.**

"We want to get information to the people who have the power to make decisions about youth who are living on their own."

ILS Respondent



# Background

Young people who lack a permanent and stable home face enormous odds. An estimated 1.3 million adolescents run away from home or become homeless each year. At any given time, an estimated 300,000 adolescents are living on the streets with no supervision, nurturing, or regular assistance from a parent or responsible adult.

National Collaboration for Youth
Public Policy Statement

The Independent Living Survey Project (ILS) evolved out of the need to learn more about youth homelessness in Tompkins County. Like many communities, ours is seeking to learn more about a population of adolescents and young adults who live on their own apart from their families. In the last several years there has been a growing awareness that this population of youth, a sub-set of the general homeless population, has been underestimated, ill-understood, and growing.

These young people have been described variously as unattended homeless youth to distinguish them from homeless youth living as part of a homeless family (Monterey County, 2002), as absolute or relative homeless youth (Chignecto-Central Regional School Board, 2002), doubled-up youth, unaccompanied youth, push-outs, throw-away youth, and couch-surfing youth (Powers & Jalkitsch, 1993). Communities, mirroring government and social service programs, also use various ages to define chronologically the magical moment at which adolescents are said to become adults. Thus, different communities and reports have used different ages—age 17, 18, 21, or 25—to distinguish between homeless youth and adults.

These inconsistencies reflect one of the most fundamental problems confronting these youth: their needs straddle both the youth development and adult social service systems and they are never fully served by either. Youth, who prematurely have had to assume the demands and responsibilities of adulthood without the benefit of the basic developmental assets required for becoming successful adults, may be able to survive on their own, but they are poised to become a new underclass.

Over the past several years, there have been efforts to raise awareness of the needs of homeless youth who are living with their families including guaranteeing them access to public schooling. Little attention, however, has been paid to the

unique needs of independent adolescents and young adults who are living on their own in communities across the country.

Ill prepared to assume the responsibilities of adulthood, these youths' struggle for survival is largely invisible to the greater community until they begin appearing as problems in the justice, social service, or shelter systems. Who these young people are, why they are living on their own, how they approach the problem of shelter, what challenges they confront daily, and how they define their needs and future goals are some of the questions we sought answers to through the ILS Project.

As part of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Continuum of Care planning process, local communities have been assessing programs and strategies to address homelessness. In so doing, many have noted the inadequacies of traditional reporting data to identify homeless youth and the underutilization of HUD resources to address the needs of this unique population.

Young people approach the issue of shelter differently than adults. Youth often prefer the uncertainties of their housing situations over the perceived loss of independence associated with residential programs. Youth homelessness is best understood as a "cyclic process" (Van der Ploeg, 1997). After leaving home, youth tend to move from place to place sometimes staying with extended family or friends, other times with strangers, with occasional stays in an emergency shelter or on the streets.

**ACROSS THE COUNTRY,** homeless youth have been undercounted and homeless youth serving agencies have underutilized HUD programming.

Derryck & Eisenbud, 2001, p.2.

While homeless data is generally reported, current methodology does not capture the numbers or needs of homeless youth. Youth unaccompanied by adults generally do not frequent adult shelter and soup kitchens where most data is collected. Within existing reporting methods there is little that speaks to the needs of homeless youth. As a result, homeless youth are seldom if ever in the continuum of care plans across counties and states throughout the country.

Derryck & Eisenbun, 2001, p.3.

Homelessness is not an absolute lack of shelter that ends as soon as any kind of housing is obtained (Van der Ploeg, 1997). Even after youth obtain housing, they are rarely able to maintain it for any length of time. Thus periods of housing (both adequate and inadequate) are typical of homeless youth and the securing of housing alone cannot be the defining moment at which a youth's homelessness ends.

Thus efforts to count or otherwise describe this population of youth that rely primarily upon traditional data sources such as point-in-time counts and emergency shelter statistics are inadequate at capturing the more mobile lifestyle of homeless youth and underestimate the true extent of the problem. Moreover, they offer no insight into the unique needs and challenges that youth living on their own must confront in their search for more stable lives.

To investigate the local phenomenon of independent youth further, the Tompkins Continuum of Care Committee formed a sub-committee in the fall of 2002 that was co-chaired by the Tompkins County Youth Services Department and The Learning Web.

It quickly became clear to members of the subcommittee that more information about these young people was needed. It also became clear that in order to learn more about this population two types of expertise were required: the research

expertise brought to the project by Cornell University's Family Life Development Center (FLDC) and the insight and guidance of independent youth themselves—the real "experts" on youth homelessness. Thus a partnership was formed and work begun on a survey instrument and process to address this critical gap in knowledge about local youth.

Youth development is the natural process of young people's growing capacities to understand and act in the world (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Safe, nurturing environments that include caring adults and stable housing are a necessity for adolescents to develop into healthy adults. When young people are deprived of these basics, their development—emotional, social, cognitive, academic, and moral—is imperiled. So, too, is the community at risk of severe long-term consequences to its overall quality of life and economic vitality:

> The greatest economic and social costs in not addressing the homeless youth population are long-term. Once youth begin to see homelessness as a way of life, they virtually "drop out" of society. The hope of getting an education is lost. The potential increases for incarceration, emergency hospital and long-term care, and welfare assistance. Early intervention approaches are clearly an investment worth the cost (City of Seattle, website).

Although youth may be living independently for a variety of reasons, all share a pattern of abrupt, often violent interruptions in their development. The need to assume premature responsibility for meeting their basic, subsistence needs combined with a lack of preparation and resources with which to do this, leaves youth adrift in a sea of adult responsibilities.

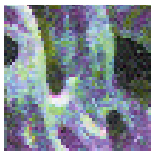
Adolescence is a time of great challenge and great resiliency. The young people who were part of this study are survivors. The question for our Tompkins County community is whether or not survival is the standard of life we can tolerate for these youth.

**THE TWENTY-FIRST** century requires bold initiatives on how best to reach and engage youths in the coming generations' transitions to adulthood. Particularly we need to reach youths who are undervalued. The transition to adulthood can either be facilitated or thwarted by society. A smooth transition will result in citizens who are capable and willing to make contributions to the general welfare; it will serve as a foundation for social, economic, political, and technological advance. An unsuccessful transition will create a group of marginalized citizens unable and unwilling to be productive. It will no doubt cause a great deal of anxiety in society and increase the economic costs associated with "failures" such as incarceration, substance abuse, and so on. The costs, by today's standards, will appear to be staggering.

Delgado, 2002, Epilogue

"Research before jumping to conclusions."

ILS Respondent



# Methodology

A New Jersey report, compiled by the Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, succinctly identifies why many communities have found it difficult to assess youth homelessness as part of a general methodology focused on the overall homeless population:

- Youth unaccompanied by adults generally do not frequent adult shelter and soup kitchens where most data on the homeless is usually collected.
- Youth are homeless for a different set of reasons than adults.
- Because the reasons for their homelessness are different, youth needs are different from those of the adult homeless population.
- Homeless youth and adults congregate in different places and approach the issue of shelter differently requiring a different form of mapping as to where and how these youth survive.

Derryck & Eisenbud, 2001, p. 3.

Members of the ILS Steering Committee researched other community efforts to study youth homelessness. They also consulted with the Tompkins Continuum of Care's Point-In-Time Sub-Committee but chose to work independently of the local point-in-time count. The hope is that the two efforts will be complementary and result in a more complete understanding of the dimensions of the homeless youth population within the county.

Two important decisions affected the project. First, the decision was made to include young adults up to the age of 25 in the survey. For the purposes of analysis, however, responses were broken out into two categories: younger youth, ages 15 to 21; and older youth, ages 22 to 25. Except where noted, there was very little difference in how the older and younger populations responded to specific questions. Therefore, most of the findings are reported for the total population.

Secondly, a participatory research approach was adopted. During the late fall of 2002, young adults involved in The Learning Web's Youth Outreach Program were recruited to be members of the ILS Project Team. These young adults played an integral role in the ILS Project by helping to identify which questions to ask, how best to recruit subjects, and which strategies would be best to collect the data. By January of 2003, an 11-page, semi-structured interview tool was developed and a goal was set of completing 100 interviews by April.

Originally, the plan was to pair each young adult with a Cornell student to do the interviews.

However, the young adults persuaded members of the Steering Committee that the presence of a perceived "outsider" might turn away potential study participants. Although a certain degree of objectivity or technical expertise might have been lost by using youth as the primary interviewers, our hope is that the unprecedented access that we had to young people's natural networks enabled us to get more complete and honest responses than possible otherwise.

The Web's Youth Outreach office in Dewitt Mall was set up as the project's field office. Sixteen Youth Outreach participants were trained as interviewers by FLDC staff to:

- determine if potential youth met the target population criteria;
- obtain consent and inform youth about the confidentiality of the study;
- to use the interview tool to ask questions and record responses.

Staff from the Red Cross, the Teen Pregnancy and Parenting Program (TP3), and the Friendship Center also identified potential youth to interview and made their sites available to interviewers. Interviews occured between January 28, 2003 and March 18, 2003. The average length of the interview was approximately an hour. Youth who agreed to be interviewed were given a coupon for a free sandwich at ShortStop Deli.

**TARGET POPULATION CRITERIA**

- **Youth "who have no parental, substitute, foster or institutional home to which they can safely go" (McKinney Act, 1987).**
- **Youth who were born after 1977.**
- **Youth who were not Cornell or Ithaca College students.**
- **Youth who had not completed the survey before.**

Cornell students worked closely with the young adult interviewers. They monitored and reviewed the completed surveys, developed and entered the data into an electronic database, cleaned the data files, and conducted preliminary data analyses. When 165 surveys had been completed, it was decided to close the data collection phase.

Project members were very pleased with the overall quality and quantity of the interview data. The survey instrument contained highly personal questions about illegal activity, drug use, and familial dysfunction. Nonetheless, survey questions had a high response rate; only one young person who began the survey decided not to participate after the first few questions. The open-ended questions at the end of the interview elicited very honest and poignant responses.

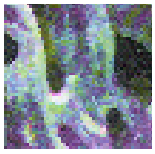
Analysis of the data occurred during the summer and fall of 2003. Focus group meetings were held with the young adults to involve them in discussing and interpreting the findings. They also assisted in designing a presentation to share the project's findings with community stakeholders.

Unfortunately, the survey tool was not piloted. Thus it was only after collecting and analyzing the data that we realized the weakness of certain questions. We should note that when the interview tool was being developed, the young adults cautioned against specific questions saying that we were unlikely to get honest responses.

Despite these warnings, some of the questions were kept in the survey. When reviewing the preliminary findings several questions—the very ones that the young adults had warned us about—had resulted in incomplete and confusing responses due to respondents' apparent reticience in answering the questions. These questions had to be eliminated from the study.

"Homeless youth are a complex population with multiple problems."

Kryder Coe,(1992), p. 37.



# Demographic Profile of Respondents

There was a fairly even distribution regarding the gender of the 165 survey respondents (**55 PERCENT** were male and **45 PERCENT** were female.) Two-thirds of all respondents were age 21 or younger:

- **67 PERCENT** were **15 to 21** years old;
- **33 PERCENT** were **22 to 24** years old.

| | Percentage of Total |
|---|---|
| Age 15 years | 1% |
| Age 16 years | 6% |
| Age 17 years | 9% |
| Age 18 years | 11% |
| Age 19 years | 11% |
| Age 20 years | 10% |
| Age 21 years | 19% |
| Age 22 years | 12% |
| Age 23 years | 11% |
| Age 24 years | 10% |

Youth respondents were from diverse racial backgrounds mirroring the local community:

| | ILS | Total Population[1] |
|---|---|---|
| White, Non-Hispanic | 63.6% | 85.5% |
| Black, Non-Hispanic | 10.3% | 3.6% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 8.50% | 3.1% |
| Both Black & White | 5.50% | — |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 1.20% | 7.2% |
| Native American | 4.80% | 3.0% |
| Other | 5.60% | 1.1% |
| 2 or More Races | — | 2.3% |

Almost one third (**29 PERCENT**) of the total respondents said that they had children. The age of children ranged from under one year to 8 years old.

| | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|
| One Child | 18% |
| Two Children | 6% |
| Three Children | 2% |
| Four Children | 1% |
| Five Children | <1% |
| Six Children | <1% |

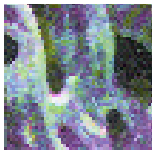
Younger youth were slightly less likely to have children, but still a significantly high percentage—**23 PERCENT** of younger youth—had children. The oldest child among this younger age group was 5 years old.

A total of **55 PERCENT** of parenting youth said that at least one of their children lived with them. The percentage was **60 PERCENT** for parenting youth age 21 and younger.

[1] Source: U.S. Census Data, 2000. Note that Census data uses slightly different categories for race than we did in ILS. Since the Census defines youth as ages 0 to 17, we compared ILS demographics to Census data for the total population of Tompkins County.

"I just stay wherever I'm chillin' that night."

ILS Respondent



# Sheltered, Perhaps, But Still Homeless

In many studies it is supposed that homelessness involves the complete lack of living accommodations and ends as soon as any type of housing is obtained. In reality, however, young homeless people often drift from one place to another, regularly having more permanent housing accommodations. The problem is that they are unable to consolidate this housing position because of conflicts with landlords, getting into debt, vandalism and other behavior that brings them back on the street.

Van der Ploeg, (1997), p. 11

I know lots of folks who don't have any place to stay. Sometimes they knock on the door late at night saying that they've been kicked out of somewhere and want to stay the night.

ILS Respondent

Stable, safe, adequate housing is a necessity for all individuals. 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.

Although youths' flexiblity 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. Instability and inadequacy have become the norm regarding many facets of their lives, especially housing.

When designing the ILS interview we never used the word *homeless* or asked youth to identify themselves as such. Information on housing was collected by giving youth a list of places and asking youth to identify where they were currently living and, then, to identify all of the places that they had stayed during the previous 12 months.

When we asked young people where they were living currently:

- **70 PERCENT** of youth identified staying in one place;
- **30 PERCENT** of youth said that they were staying at more than one place. The number of places that youth said that they were staying ranged from 2 to 7+ places.

A point-in-time snapshot of places that youth said that they were living currently included:

| | Younger Youth | Older Youth[1] |
|---|---|---|
| With parents | 11% | 4% |
| With guardian | 3% | 0% |
| Other relatives | 10% | 4% |
| Own house, apartment, or room | 39% | 67% |
| Someone else's house, apartment, or room | 29% | 9% |
| Several friends' houses, apartments, or rooms | 25% | 9% |
| Hotel/motel paid for by self | 2% | 4% |
| Hotel/motel paid for by a voucher | 4% | 6% |
| Place of business | 0% | 0% |
| A transportation site, e.g. bus station | 0% | 0% |
| An abandoned building | 1% | 0% |
| Anywhere outside | 3% | 2% |
| Van or other vehicle | 3% | 9% |
| Detention center, jail | 3% | 0% |
| Institution, e.g. Alpha House or hospital | 1% | 0% |
| Emergency shelter | 5% | 4% |
| Other transitional or housing program | 0% | 0% |
| College dormitory | 0% | 2% |
| Other | 3% | 2% |

When we asked youth to think back to all of the places that they had stayed in the previous year, an even more startling picture of mobility and impermanence began to take shape:

- only **15 PERCENT** of youth identified staying in one place;
- **85 PERCENT** of youth said that they were staying at multiple places.

Of these young people:

- **61 PERCENT** identified having stayed at 2 to 6+ places;
- **23 PERCENT** of youth said that they had stayed at 7 to 18+ places.

The range of places that youth identified having stayed over the previous 12 months included:

| | Younger Youth | Older Youth[1] |
|---|---|---|
| With parents | 49% | 31% |
| With guardian | 14% | 2% |
| Other relatives | 37% | 24% |
| Own house, apartment, or room | 52% | 86% |
| Someone else's house, apartment, or room | 66% | 55% |
| Several friends' houses, apartments, or rooms | 67% | 55% |
| Hotel/motel paid for by self | 25% | 27% |
| Hotel/motel paid for by a voucher | 23% | 20% |
| Place of business | 11% | 9% |
| A transportation site, e.g. bus station | 6% | 9% |
| An abandoned building | 10% | 11% |
| Anywhere outside | 32% | 31% |
| Van or other vehicle | 20% | 22% |
| Detention center, jail | 17% | 18% |
| Institution, e.g. Alpha House or hospital | 7% | 11% |
| Emergency shelter | 17% | 26% |
| Other transitional or housing program | 5% | 4% |
| College dormitory | 6% | 9% |
| Other | 2% | 2% |

*"I've moved around so much that I guess I get nervous when I'm in one place for too long."*

ILS Respondent

[1] Note that percentages equal more than 100 PERCENT because many youth cited multiple places.

What may appear as stability at any single moment in the lives of these young people is illusory. Their housing situations are unstable because of the deep fault lines in the foundation upon which they attempt to secure and maintain housing. Of course, this is the most brutal of ironies because as their housing falls apart, so, too, does everything else in their lives.

Like their counterparts in communities across the country, homeless youth in the 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:

- Surprisingly, about one-third of all youth (**32 PERCENT**) reported having stayed outside during the previous year.
- An extremely high percentage of youth (**80 PERCENT**) said they had stayed somewhere not intended for human habitation such as outside, in a vehicle, an abandoned building, a place of business, or a transportation site.
- Only **22 PERCENT** said that they had stayed in an emergency shelter and **22 PERCENT** said that they had stayed at a motel paid for with a voucher.

The number of places that youth had stayed during the previous year is alarming as is the inadequate and unsafe locations that many youth reported having stayed, but just as disturbing is the pattern of constant mobility in the lives of these young people. Independent youth are refugees in their own communities. They are wanderers moving from place to place, sometimes on a daily basis, sometimes keeping all of their belongings with them in a knapsack.

Although difficult, it is not impossible for young people to stabilize their housing situations. In our sample, there were 12 young people who identified themselves as having lived in the same place for the previous 12 months. When we took a look at the profile of who these young adults were, we discovered that they were:

- older youth (20 to 24 years old);
- mostly female (**75 PERCENT**);
- mostly parenting youth (**67 PERCENT**).

In their responses to the open-ended questions on the ILS survey, these young people identified working with programs that have housing components. Whether or not they would have been able to maintain their housing for a year without the assistance of service providers is unknown. However, it would seem that when provided with housing and support services these youth can begin to achieve stability.

### Daesheke's story . . .

**My mom kicked me out** the first time when I was 13 years old. I called this older guy that I knew and ended up staying with his sister for about a year. I've done a lot of moving around. Lived with my dad and his girlfriend for awhile when I was 15 and got kicked out of school. Then my dad's girlfriend kicked me out. For a little while, I lived with my mom again until she threw me out.

I've stayed with lots of people in all kinds of places but never outside and only once at the shelter. I was out West for a couple of months. Sometimes I still stay with my mom but it's always temporary. My staying there never lasts more than two weeks.

I feel that I'm doing pretty well. With all of the stuff that's happened to me I should be dead. Lots of young people I know have two and three kids and I don't. I've also had the chance to travel around.

Finally after six years of staying with other people, I've got my own efficiency apartment in Dryden that I share with my boyfriend and another person. I've also started getting food stamps and I'm going to begin a new apprenticeship soon.

Young people could be more successful if there was more support for us in the community. What we need is help finding jobs that we like.

**Jesus' story . . .**

*Once I got to the Red Cross, I told the woman at the desk that I didn't have any place to spend the night. She said that since it was after 4 PM, I'd have to call the shelter. I didn't really know downtown so I walked around looking for a pay phone. When I made the call, a person asked me some questions and then said that they couldn't help me with housing that night and that I should go to DSS first thing the next morning. I walked around a bit and got something to eat. There was a guy that I kept seeing on the Commons who looked like he was just hanging out. I started talking to him and asked if I could sleep at his crib that night cause I didn't have anywhere else to go. He was cool and said "yes."*

**The next morning,** Jesus, age 19, went to the Human Services Building at 8 AM. Around mid-afternoon, he was called to the phone and asked the same set of questions that he had been asked the previous day. Once again he was told that there was no housing for him that evening, but he should try again tomorrow. Jesus spent the day walking around and saw his "friend" from the day before. Jesus ended up staying with the young man and his girlfriend for three nights.

Over the next two months, Jesus stayed at the shelter and at the Meadowcourt Hotel. He was suspended twice for breaking the rules. Then he found a room in a house where several individuals were staying. Realizing that it was not a very good place for him to be, Jesus did not stay there long and returned to the shelter.

Shortly before Christmas when Ithaca was in the grip of a particularly intense cold spell with night-time temperatures dropping to 10 below or less, an apartment in Enfield was found for Jesus and four other people from the shelter. On moving day, the landlord picked them up to take them to the apartment. He said that all of the work wasn't complete yet, but that he was "going to make it comfortable."

The only heat in Jesus' new apartment was a space heater. In his bedroom, the former attic, there was a chair and bed but no blankets, sheets, pillows, or towels. The phone hadn't been hooked up yet either. That first night Jesus slept in his clothes and coat. On the second day he got to know a tenant in one of the building's other apartments and she gave him some sheets and a blanket.

The lack of heat wasn't the only problem in the new apartment. The water smelled funny and the electricity was unpredictable. For the first week, no one left the apartment because no one had bus fare. The electricity was fixed within a week, but Jesus decided that he didn't want to say there. He moved back to the other house in Ithaca.

Although Jesus has considered himself living in his own place three times in the past six months, he has stayed in five different locations during this time and moved more than eight times.

"Most of us young people have a good reason for getting out—not just for the sake of rebellion."

ILS Respondent



# Runaway, Throwaway, or Failed Youth?

The runaway behavior of juveniles has for a long time been taken to be the unilateral decision of a youngster to leave his or her parental home. It was considered to be the impulsive, spontaneous, acting-out or explosive answer to a specific family problem limiting the opportunities of the youngster. Recently, however, it has become clear that not all homeless youngsters are former runaways, but that some of them have been expelled from home by their parents: these are the throw-outs or 'throwaway youth.'

Van der Ploeg, 1997, p. 8

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" (Van der Ploeg, 1997).

When asked why they were not currently living with a parent or guardian, reasons of conflict and abuse were cited most often. Relatively few youth **(7 PERCENT)** actually identified themselves as runaways. The category of "other" included a variety of responses including: "couldn't live with mother's husband;" "had a child;" "taken away from parents by state;" "very personal issues;" "parents deceased;" "not allowed to live at home for legal reasons;" and youth's substance abuse.

| Why aren't you living with a parent? | Percentage of Respondents[1] |
|---|---|
| Conflict with parents | 32% |
| Just left | 32% |
| Thrown out | 18% |
| Left home after age 18 | 15% |
| Abuse by parent/guardian | 8% |
| Ran away | 7% |
| Substance abuse of parent/ guardian | 6% |
| Never lived with parents | 5% |
| Parents moved | 4% |
| Recently released from jail/ detention center, other | 4% |
| Parents in jail | 1% |
| Parents homeless | 1% |
| Other | 9% |

[1] Note that percentages equal more than 100 PERCENT because some youth cited more than one reason.

"Let's face it, you don't leave food and shelter if everything's okay."

ILS Respondent

Our findings suggest that 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.

Over half of the population surveyed (**57 PERCENT**) told us that their backgrounds included:

| | Percentage of Respondents[1] |
|---|---|
| Prison/jail | 38% |
| Juvenile detention | 27% |
| Foster care | 19% |
| Psychiatric hospital/rehab | 15% |
| Group home | 3% |
| Other | 2% |

Almost one-third of the youth interviewed (**32 PERCENT**) said that they had been involved with two or more of these systems:

| | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|
| One system | 26% |
| Two systems | 18% |
| Three systems | 12% |
| Four systems | 2% |

"I was in over 36 placements—foster homes, jail, detention, psych centers, and rehabs. All it did was make me angry."

ILS Respondent

**Melanie's story . . .**

*I got into a fight with my mom's boyfriend when I was 15. I couldn't take him terrorizing my brother and sister anymore. I grabbed a knife and tried to stab him, but all I did was cut him and myself. When the police arrived they told my mother that I seemed like a nice kid. They told her that they could make her boyfriend leave and stay away if that was what she wanted. They asked her to think about it and make a decision. When they asked her which of us she wanted taken away, she said me.*

**The police removed Melanie** from her mother's home in New Jersey and took her to the police station. On the way, they stopped at the hospital where she was chained to a bed while the gashes in her hands were stitched. Around dawn, she was moved to a juvenile detention center.

When she was released from the facility at the age of 16, Melanie and her two younger siblings, ages 6 and 10, were put on a Greyhound bus by Social Services to make the two-day trip to Florida. They believed that they were all going to live with their aunt. However, once they arrived at the bus station, the children were split up and taken to live with different relatives across the state.

Melanie was taken to live with her grandmother where she felt "like a burden." When she overheard her grandmother complaining to her aunt that Melanie wasn't paying any rent, Melanie decided to return to New Jersey. She had not seen her brother and sister since their bus trip together but she had heard that they were living again with their mother.

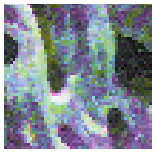
Shortly before her 18th birthday, Melanie boarded another Greyhound bus to return to New Jersey to stay with her father and his wife. This arrangement lasted only a couple of months. Knowing that she could not return to her mother's house, and not feeling welcome in Florida, Melanie decided to move to Ithaca to pursue schooling.

Her mother had moved the family to Ithaca when Melanie was about 9 years old. Although they only lived here for a couple of years, Melanie remembered it as a happy time and she contacted a childhood friend's family. Just barely 18 years of age, Melanie took another bus, this one headed to Ithaca, to try and begin a new life on her own.

[1] Note that percentages equal more than 100 PERCENT because some youth cited more than one system.

"Young youth as myself who are on their own are likely to get into trouble. That's why we need more activities in this town."

ILS Respondent



# Vulnerable and Victimized:
## Dangerous and Risky Behaviors

No excuse for what I did to get sent to jail, but a lot of the stuff that we do reflects on what's happened to us.

There's a reason for everything. That's always good to know.

ILS Respondents

Through ILS we attempted to learn more about the particular lifestyles of independent youth in our study. 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.

## Crime

A high percentage of youth interviewed said that they had been a victim or offender of a crime in the previous 12 months. (Survey questions were phrased to ask youth if they were either a victim or offender of crime so that the survey would not be perceived as a means of obtaining information about illegal activity.)

Youth who said that they had been a victim or offender of a violent crime included:

- **32 PERCENT** of younger youth;
- **24 PERCENT** of older youth.

Even higher percentages of youth said that they had been a victim or offender of a non-violent crime during the previous year:

- **46 PERCENT** of younger youth;
- **42 PERCENT** of older youth.

Given the high level of crime that is part of their lives, it was surprising that so few youth said that they felt unsafe. Perhaps, even more surprising, younger youth indicated feeling safe more often than older youth:

| How much of the time do you feel safe? | Younger Youth | Older Youth |
|---|---|---|
| **Always** | 34% | 16% |
| **Most of the time** | 37% | 44% |
| **Some of the time** | 16% | 26% |
| **Hardly ever** | 9% | 6% |
| **Never** | 3% | 7% |

The young adult team members thought that young people might not have been comfortable admitting to feeling unsafe for fear that they would not appear tough enough to be living on their own. They also pointed out that many young people said that they carried a weapon and that this could give them a sense of security:

- **38 PERCENT** of younger youth said that they carried a weapon;
- **24 PERCENT** of older youth said that they carried a weapon.

Knives were the most common weapon carried by **20 PERCENT** of the respondents. Only three respondents (**2 PERCENT**) said that they had guns.

The question with one of the lowest response rates in the survey involved the frequency with which youth carried weapons. However, of those who did respond, younger youth said that they were more likely to carry a weapon:

| How often do you carry a weapon? | Younger Youth | Older Youth |
|---|---|---|
| Always | 23% | 13% |
| Most of the time | 11% | 4% |
| Some of the time | 3% | 5% |
| Hardly ever | 1% | 0% |
| Never | 0% | 0% |
| No Response | 62% | 78% |

Being either a victim or a perpetrator of crime is not the only way that youth lead unsafe lives. They also spoke freely about the range and frequency of drug use in their lives and their views on safe sex and birth control.

*"We need more activities that youth will find more enjoyable than drugs."*

ILS Respondent

*"I started taking drugs when I was in the sixth grade. I was bored. There was nothing to do but there were lots of drugs around. Like most kids, I was curious. What else can you do for free in this town? Cause that's how they get you hooked. When you first start experimenting, drugs are free."*

ILS Respondent

## Drugs

Survey respondents identified a wide range of drugs available in the local community. Drugs that youth said that they had used over the past six months included:

| | Percentage of Younger Youth | Percentage of Older Youth |
|---|---|---|
| Alcohol | 78% | 86% |
| Cigarettes | 81% | 82% |
| Acid/LSD | 21% | 15% |
| Angel Dust | 11% | 6% |
| Cocaine | 26% | 16% |
| Crack | 8% | 2% |
| Ecstasy | 32% | 20% |
| Hash | 32% | 15% |
| Heroin | 8% | 6% |
| Inhalants | 14% | 6% |
| Ketamine | 12% | 4% |
| Marijuana | 76% | 67% |
| Morphine | 7% | 7% |
| Mushrooms | 30% | 26% |
| Ritalin | 9% | 6% |
| Ruffies | 2% | 2% |
| Speed | 16% | 13% |
| Valium | 14% | 7% |
| Other | 10% | 11% |

Disturbingly, higher percentages of younger youth appear to be using certain drugs including cocaine, ecstasy, hash, marijuana, ketamine,

angel dust, and valium. Younger youth also reported a slightly higher frequency of drug use than older youth:

| Other than cigarettes, in the last month, how often did you use any of the above substances? | Younger Youth | Older Youth |
|---|---|---|
| Practically every day | 35% | 22% |
| Two to three times per week | 20% | 31% |
| Once a week | 14% | 15% |
| Once a month or less | 13% | 18% |
| Never | 11% | 4% |
| Not answered | 7% | 10% |

Youth also reported using multiple drugs over the previous six months:

- **25 PERCENT** cited using 1 to 2 drugs;
- **41 PERCENT** cited using 3 to 5 drugs;
- **34 PERCENT** cited using 6 or more drugs.

The young adult members of the survey team felt that respondents had been honest about their drug use and, if anything, under-reported use rather than exaggerating it. They talked about the availability of drugs within their family or peer networks long before they left their homes or high school. The primary reason that they gave for why they and other youth become involved with drugs is boredom. Familial dysfunction, the substance abuse of parents, difficulties in school—none of these were identified as the primary reasons for becoming involved with drugs.

The connection between boredom and drug use was also made spontaneously by survey respondents in the open-ended portion of the survey. Over and over, youth told us that young people need:

- "more places for kids to hang out in a safe, drug-free environment;"
- "more activities for teenagers and young adults;"
- "more places to go and things to do when it's cold;"
- "more activities that youth find more enjoyable than drugs;"
- "more things for young people to do that don't cost a lot of money;"
- "more youth programs."

"This town is very hard to live in . . . There are no activities for young people. The job market is also very bad."

ILS Respondent

"We need more things to do that teach us how to live on our own and how to get a job that we like. We don't need another hang-out place, we need programs that will help us."

ILS Respondent

## Risky Sex

Several survey questions attempted to gauge young people's level of knowledge and attitudes towards birth control and sexually transmitted disease (STD). We found that:

- only **38 PERCENT** of youth agreed that most young people think it is important to use birth control;
- only **30 PERCENT** of youth agreed that most young people think it is important to practice safe sex;
- only **49 PERCENT** of youth agreed that most young people are concerned about contracting an STD.

We also found that:

- **61 PERCENT** of youth felt that most young people knew how to avoid contracting an STD;
- **61 PERCENT** of youth felt that most young people knew where to get care for an STD.

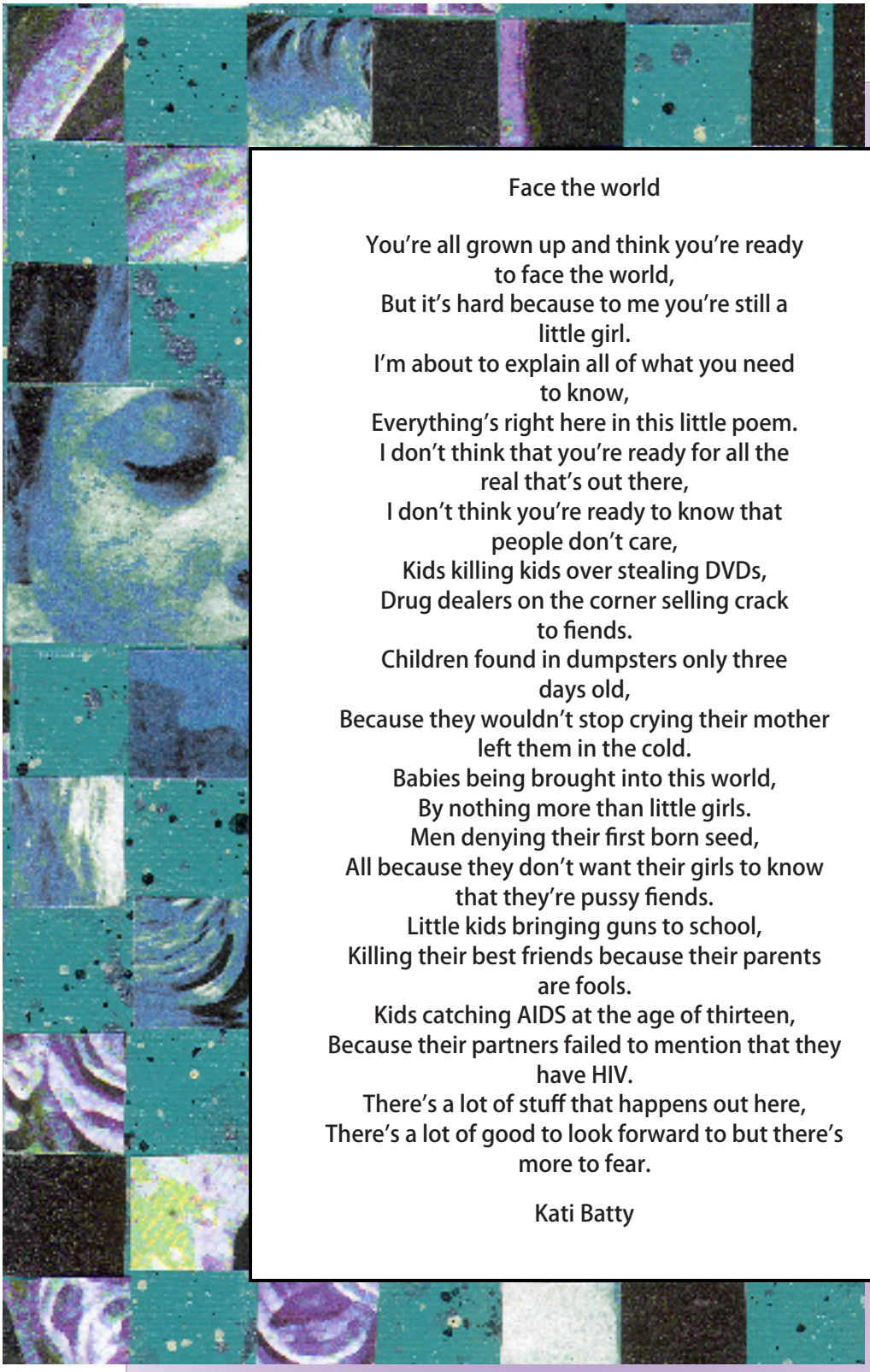
However, despite this knowledge:

- only **21 PERCENT** of youth felt that most young people were comfortable getting care for an STD;
- only **35 PERCENT** of youth felt that most young people felt it is important to let a potential partner know whether they have an STD.

In discussing these findings with young adults, several issues emerged including the lack of fear that many youth have of unwanted pregnancy, dissatisfaction with local treatment options, and a sense that birth control is *unnatural* and unhealthy since it relies on artificial or chemical means to thwart what is viewed as a natural, biological act. Condoms were viewed as a method of STD prevention but not seen as an acceptable means of birth control.

"Risky sex is a big problem. Lots of young women don't want to believe that their boyfriends would do anything to hurt them because they're in love."

ILS Respondent



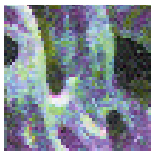
## Face the world

You're all grown up and think you're ready
to face the world,
But it's hard because to me you're still a
little girl.
I'm about to explain all of what you need
to know,
Everything's right here in this little poem.
I don't think that you're ready for all the
real that's out there,
I don't think you're ready to know that
people don't care,
Kids killing kids over stealing DVDs,
Drug dealers on the corner selling crack
to fiends.
Children found in dumpsters only three
days old,
Because they wouldn't stop crying their mother
left them in the cold.
Babies being brought into this world,
By nothing more than little girls.
Men denying their first born seed,
All because they don't want their girls to know
that they're pussy fiends.
Little kids bringing guns to school,
Killing their best friends because their parents
are fools.
Kids catching AIDS at the age of thirteen,
Because their partners failed to mention that they
have HIV.
There's a lot of stuff that happens out here,
There's a lot of good to look forward to but there's
more to fear.

Kati Batty

"I would like [community leaders] to understand that it is really impossible to finance living on your own and accomplishing any sort of goal such as going to school."

ILS Respondent



# It's Not Easy

## "To Go From Nothing"

I think it sucks when I work hard and can't get any sort of assistance such as financial aid, food stamps, Medicaid, or Section 8. It's really hard when you complete all the steps and still get shut down. I hate having to work 60-80 hours a week to afford basic needs.

The only cash I have each month is what I earn at my apprenticeship and that varies. I'm working with Section 8 to start paying $10 a month towards my rent. My son has a lot of health problems. I've heard that Child Health Plus is a better health plan for children than Medicaid but I was told that I couldn't get it for my son because we have Medicaid. Why wouldn't they want people to have better health care if it's available?

ILS Respondents

Most of the young people whom we surveyed want to work. They told us again and again in response to the open-ended survey questions that they need:

- "more jobs;"
- "help finding a job;"
- "help getting a better job;"
- "a livable wage."

The challenges that these young people face trying to secure and maintain employment are great. They are attempting to be self-sufficient adults without having had the benefit of a supported adolescence in which they could complete their education, develop their capacities and talents, acquire basic employability skills, and develop the critical reasoning and moral judgement required to live satisfying, self-sufficient adult lives.

Even once they secure work, it is often difficult for them to maintain a job given their transient, subsistence lifestyle. Those youth who are able to maintain a job for any length of time quickly

"It seems that people are only interested in helping you once you hit the very bottom."

ILS Respondent

"It's not easy to go from nothing and try to build yourself up."

ILS Respondent

discover themselves in a low-wage limbo with its own Catch-22: as soon as they begin earning a wage, even a minimum wage, any public subsidies that they may be receiving are reduced often leaving them further behind, unable to pursue longer-term goals.

## Work

Just as the young people surveyed piece together their living situations, most use a variety of means to piece together an income.

| How do you support yourself? | Younger Youth | Older Youth[1] |
|---|---|---|
| Paid job | 46% | 53% |
| Public assistance | 24% | 29% |
| Paid apprenticeship[2] | 6% | 2% |
| Work off the books | 26% | 18% |
| Other | 25% | 20% |

Some of the career areas that youth said that they wanted to pursue included:

- education, youth services, and childcare;
- music;
- truck driving;
- pharmaceuticals;
- hair styling;
- nursing;
- food service;
- corrections;
- theater work and set design;
- biological sciences and psychology;
- architecture and landscaping.

Fourteen respondents said that they would like to own their own business and several specified the kinds of businesses that they wanted to operate including:

- a day care;
- a detention center;
- a hair stylist salon;
- a fishery;
- a restaurant.

Many of the young people whom we surveyed recognize the need to complete their education, pursue additional schooling, or earn a professional credential but they spoke about how difficult it is to support themselves and attend school. Not only is a lack of financial resources a problem, so, too, is a lack of transportation.

Several youth spoke at length about 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 Tompkins-Cortland Community College (TC3), and, in some cases, getting a child to day care. They also pointed out how frequently the Cornell buses run in comparison to the buses to TC3.

"We are capable but public school is destructive."

ILS Respondent

[1] Note that percentages equal more than 100 PERCENT because many youth cited more than one source.

[2] The young people in the survey did not necessarily distinguish between paid employment and subsidized employment such as apprenticeship. Evidence for this is that all 16 youth interviewers were paid apprentices on the project and each completed a survey. Therefore, at a minimum, there should have been a 10 PERCENT response rate to this category.

"Stay IN school. Make life what you want it to be."

ILS Respondent

## Education

We attempted to get an educational profile of survey respondents, but there is some skepticism regarding the data collected. The young adults on the survey team were very 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.

Once the interviews were completed and the data input, responses to the educational questions proved difficult to analyze. More often than not, questions were answered incompletely or multiple, contradictory responses were given. We should have paid more attention to the young adult members' concerns. Nonetheless, in the survey:

- less than half of the youth (**42 PERCENT**) said that they had completed high school;
- slightly more than one-fourth of youth (**26 PERCENT**) said that they had dropped out of school.

Most youth do want help. They want a normal life, go to school, start a career, develop relationships. They just don't know how with the limited resources available to them . . . As much as they want a better life, they may be afraid to engage in services or cynical about the likelihood of getting real help. They have been let down a lot. But if trust can be slowly built, most do engage in services when they are available, and often do very well.

City of Seattle, website

**David's story . . .**

*I decided that I had to make changes in my life when I realized that I wasn't going to be a good father if I was in a jail cell.*

**Turning his back** on friends, his livelihood, and his identity hasn't been easy for David, but he has remained steadfast in his commitment to try and make a new life for himself despite numerous obstacles. David has been on his own since the age of 13 when he was sent to his first foster care home. He thinks that the number of placements that he's had in foster care, detention, a psychiatric unit, and jail total about 36 or so.

David freely acknowledges that before his decision to turn his life around for the sake of his children and the relationship that he wants to have with them, he was deeply involved in drugs. He recalls that in one four-day drug selling marathon that he was able to make $10,000. Now he no longer wears his gang colors and he tries to keep hidden the brand markings that have been etched into his upper left arm. He works at a full-time job that barely pays more than minimum wage. After paying taxes and child support, David struggles to cover the necessities of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that stable housing has remained a goal and not a reality for him. During the past year, he has lived with several different friends and on roof tops.

The biggest challenge facing David is the lack of jobs that pay a livable wage and, even if such jobs were available, his ability to secure one given his record. "I did my time but I'm still paying for what I did," he says. "I was young and I made a lot of mistakes. I've changed but I'm still treated like a criminal." Because he is a convicted felon, David can't vote and many employers don't want to hire him. He says that the systems that are supposed to help you change only make it hard for you to "do the right stuff" because there's no support and no opportunity. Too many people assume that "once you're a criminal, you'll always be one."

David agrees that it is impossible to stop drugs but he says that a lot could be done to make drugs easier to avoid. To help reduce the demand for drugs, give young people something positive to do. As a dealer, he saw lots of young people turn to drugs out of boredom. "Give young people real opportunities," David says. "That's what will make a difference."

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:

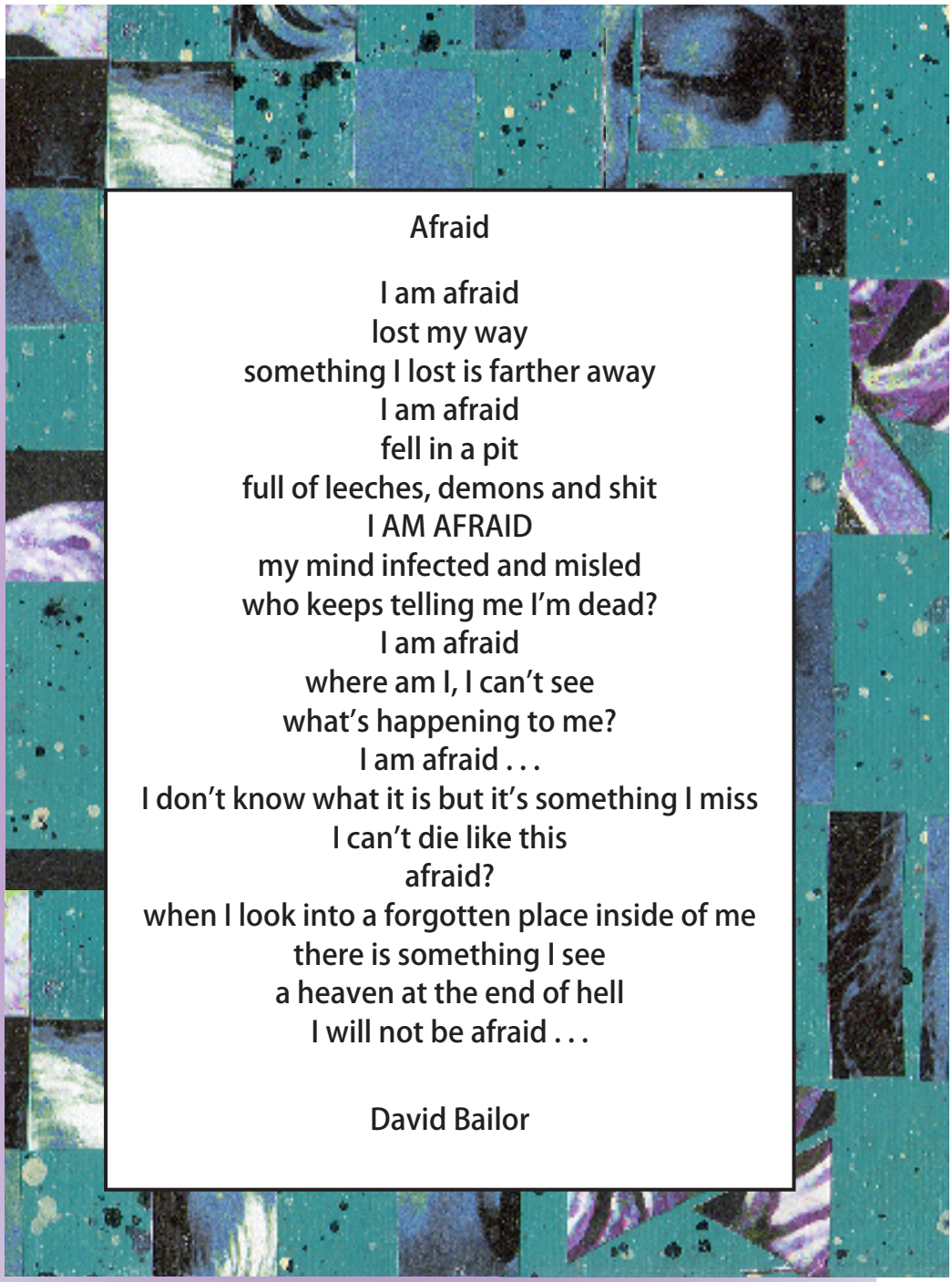
- 46 respondents said that they wanted to return to school, complete a GED, or get more education;
- 17 respondents said that they wanted to attend or complete college;
- 5 respondents expressed the desire to earn a professional certificate to become a hair stylist, truck driver, machinist, and chef.

Several other respondents cited future goals of attending graduate school, law school, art school, and massage school.

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 of service providers such as DSS and Probation.

Young people do not need to be Holden Caulfield to feel that hypocrisy is all around them. They are quick to point out how difficult it is to get ahead when the very systems supposedly designed to help them only 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.



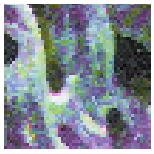
## Afraid

I am afraid
lost my way
something I lost is farther away
I am afraid
fell in a pit
full of leeches, demons and shit
I AM AFRAID
my mind infected and misled
who keeps telling me I'm dead?
I am afraid
where am I, I can't see
what's happening to me?
I am afraid . . .
I don't know what it is but it's something I miss
I can't die like this
afraid?
when I look into a forgotten place inside of me
there is something I see
a heaven at the end of hell
I will not be afraid . . .

David Bailor

"Just because we are young does not mean we are stupid. We have opinions on things and should be able to express them and actually be heard, not just listened to and ignored."

ILS Respondent



# Youth Voice:
## What We Need

Ithaca isn't a bad town but it should just try to treat everyone the same. Old people get all the benefits—not that old people don't deserve help, because some day I'm going to be old, too. It's just that young people can't get any help. Just try to make it for all people and not just some.

ILS Respondent

The young people whom we surveyed want help. Through ILS we attempted to learn more about the programs and services that they found useful as well as the kinds of assistance that they need.

We asked youth if they have anyone in their lives that they can turn to when they need support. The 58 individuals who responded to this question identified the following support people and networks:[1]

- friends, including boy/girlfriends (**36 RESPONSES**);
- family members (**33 RESPONSES**);
- self or no one (**9 RESPONSES**).

"If we had more support in the community, we could be more successful."

ILS Respondent

Each of the following were identified once by youth as part of their support system: case worker (unspecified); Jesus; professor; Learning Web; job; and DSS "for financial help." It is significant that more than 100 young people chose not to respond leaving open the question of whether or not they have any sources of social support.

When we asked young people if there were any programs that had been particularly helpful or useful to them, they told us:

| | |
|---|---|
| None | 25 responses |
| Learning Web | 10 responses |
| Planned Parenthood | 6 responses |
| DSS | 3 responses |
| WIC | 3 responses |
| Section 8 | 2 responses |
| TP3 | 2 responses |
| Mentor/apprenticeship site | 2 responses |
| Red Cross | 2 responses |

[1] Several respondents gave more than one answer.

The following programs were each mentioned once: jail GED program, the arts, Loaves and Fishes, Workforce Development, Tompkins County Mental Health, Drug Court, Cornerstone, law office, Medicaid, PCAP, and detention/group home.

Youth were also asked to identify their top five needs. There was not much difference between how younger and older youth answered this question. Younger youth identified their top needs as:

- transportation;
- housing;
- help finding a job;
- help with their education;
- help affording food.

Older youth cited as their top needs:

- transportation;
- housing;
- someone to talk to;
- help with their education;
- help finding a job.

All of the young people surveyed indicated needing help with the basics of life:

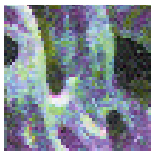
| | Younger Youth | Older Youth |
|---|---|---|
| Housing | 57% | 49% |
| Someone to talk to | 31% | 40% |
| Help being a parent | 8% | 13% |
| Help with my education | 44% | 40% |
| Help finding a job | 48% | 36% |
| Child care services | 10% | 9% |
| Transportation | 59% | 60% |
| Better access to health care | 30% | 27% |
| Help with addiction or substance abuse | 9% | 4% |
| Help with legal issues | 11% | 7% |
| Help affording food | 36% | 40% |
| Help affording personal living supplies | 17% | 15% |
| Help affording housing | 27% | 24% |
| Safety | 12% | 16% |
| Relationships | 22% | 26% |
| Other | 9% | 15% |

"There are a lot of people who need help and most don't know that there are programs available."

ILS Respondent

"Young people work really hard and, more than anything else, we need appreciation and respect."

ILS Respondent



# A Desire

## For Understanding and Respect

It's important to know that the teenage world is completely different from the adult world—not that adults don't need help, too, but adults have more people willing to help them. If you're young, they don't have to listen to you. People think that the schools or parents are there for you. What they don't know is that many teenagers don't have anyone.

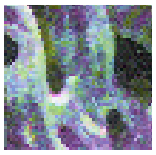
ILS Respondent

The last question of the survey asked youth if there was anything that they wanted people in power to know about young people such as themselves. This question provoked some very powerful commentary. Some respondents reiterated the kinds of programs or assistance that youth need and many spoke again about the need for more activities and programs.

Youth, however, also 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 it is worth sharing many of them verbatim:

- "Those with advantages should realize that a lot of young people whom they see as 'screwed up' are doing the best they can in their current circumstances."
- "We are misjudged strongly. We are not all trouble-makers. We do want to succeed at something, we just don't know how."
- "We're hurting out here."
- "Don't harrass us cause we dress different."
- "I am an ok guy even though I seem like a dick."
- "That young people are not lazy and apathetic but, rather, exuberant and hopeful. However, we are often left with nowhere to turn because society does not accomoodate our needs. Adults don't deal with their problems so they use the younger as scapegoats."
- "Some of us really do try our best, y'all, for real!"
- "Kids are young and make stupid choices sometimes but they don't mean any harm."
- "Treat us good!"

And one respondent simply said: "***Thank you.***"



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