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# Understanding Unstably Housed Youth in Spokane

Volunteers of America of Eastern WA and Northern ID  
AmeriCorps VISTA

Volunteers of American, Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho conducted a survey to learn more from young people in Spokane County who are unstably housed, systems involved, or literally homeless. We focused on hearing from young people ages 12-25 who might be moving from couch to couch, in and out of systems, living in shelters, parks, cars, or on the streets. The intent of the project was to learn about the interaction youth and young adults have with the local homelessness system and other systems of care. 28 youth and young adults filled out a self-directed survey to answer questions about their living situation, education, demographics, their system's involvement, their Adverse Childhood Experiences score, their fears, worries, and hopes for the future.

This report will inform us as a community of the importance of being trauma-invested, how minorities are over-represented in this at-risk population, and will help inform program and system improvement. We learned that many youth who come into contact with our system have experienced instability in all places of their lives - their living situation, their educational history, their trusted relationships - and this broad instability is made more tenuous by a loss of housing. Youth advocate for the need for a home, and in this report we will see the importance of cultivating trust and creating institutional change for lasting resiliency.

Meg Pannkuk



**VISTA**  
Volunteers in Service to America

# Who We Heard From



from



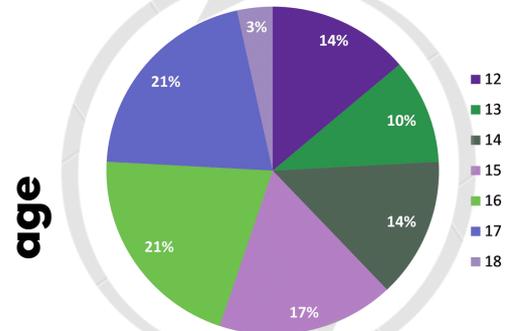
Crisis Residential Center



Juvenile Detention



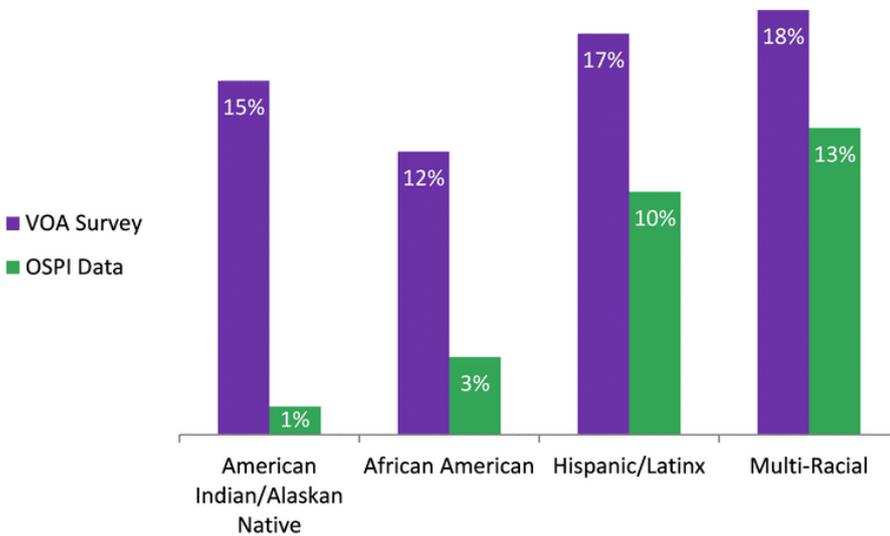
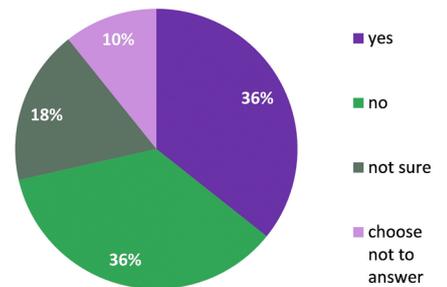
Crosswalk



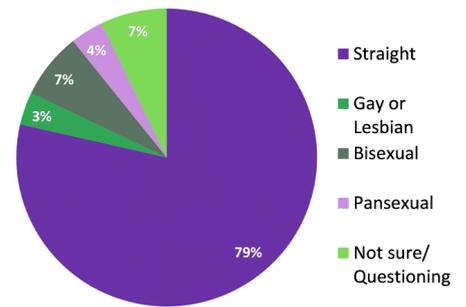
97% are under the age of 18

We asked youth about their demographics to determine whether there are groups that experience housing instability at a higher rate locally. People doing homeless-focused work in Spokane County know anecdotally and from their own program data that people of color and those from the LGBTQIA+ community are over-represented in the population of people experiencing homelessness. Here we are able to see specifically what that looks like for the youth we heard from, and how broader data sets reflect disproportionality. Comparing our demographic data to that collected by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) by Spokane County School Districts of all enrolled school-aged youth in the county, brings context and life to the numbers we report.

## do you identify as a person of color?



## Racial Disproportionality



sexual orientation

21% identify as LGBTQIA+

As a whole, Spokane County and the Public School Districts within it do not track sexual orientation data. To be able to determine local disproportionality more research is needed on this subject in our area.

# Instability

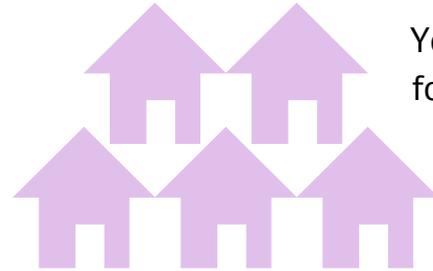
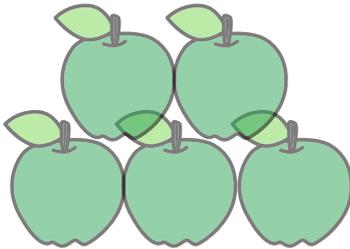
Young people showed us how instability permeates more than just their housing.

**43%**  
OF YOUTH

reported multiple living situations  
in their first 18 years of life

For example, living with two parents or one, with extended family, in foster care or adoptive parents.

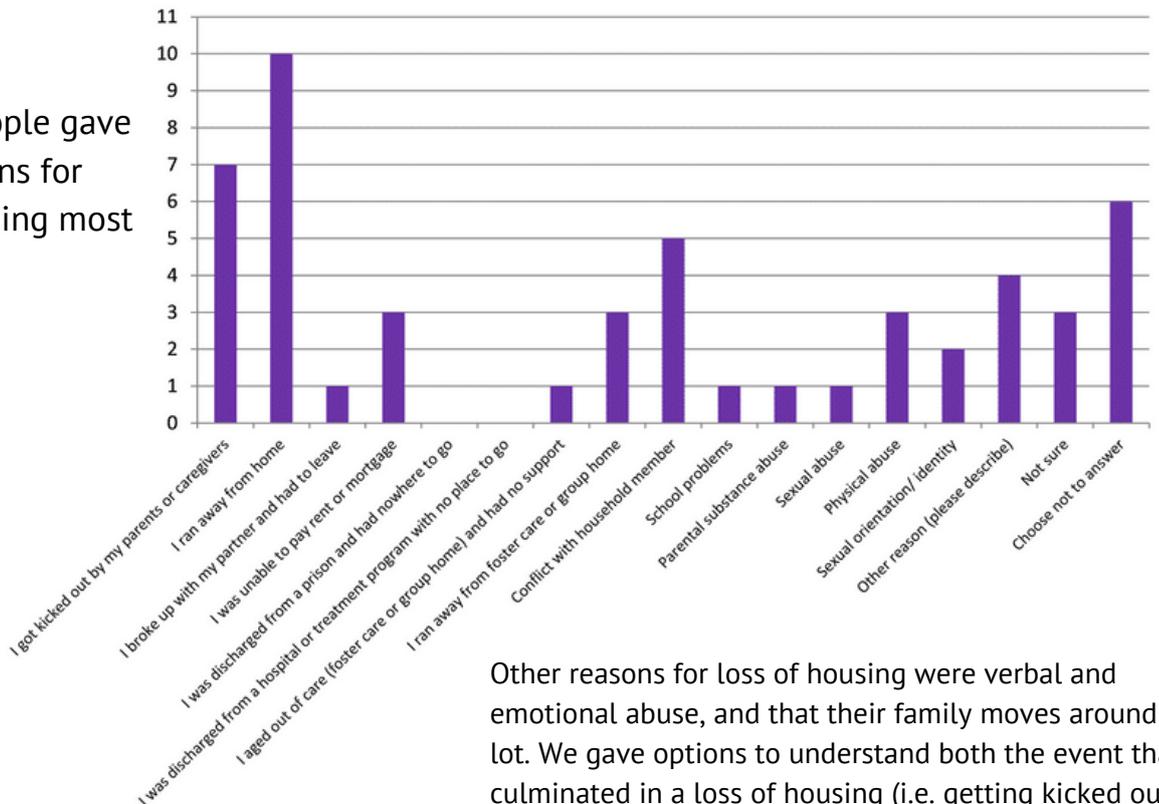
On average, young people attend 5 different schools before graduating high school



Young people in foster care lived in 5 different homes on average

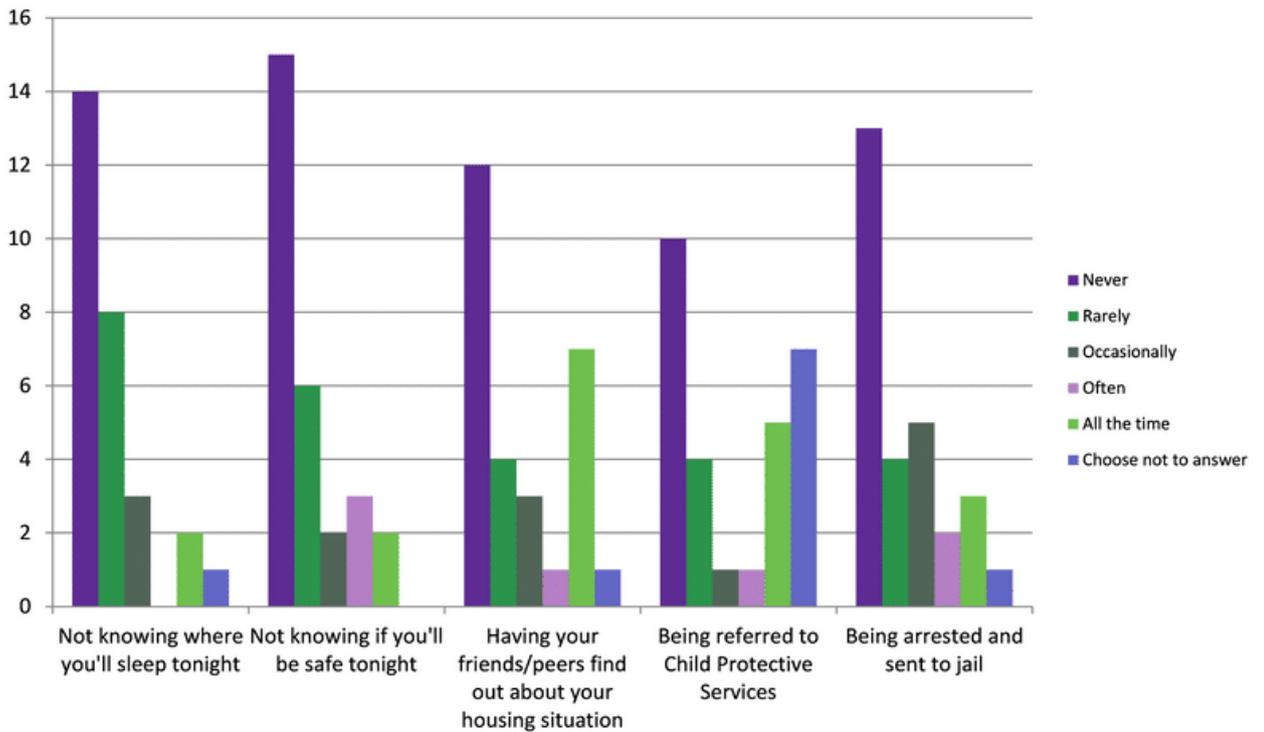
## What happened that resulted in a loss of housing most recently?

32% of young people gave multiple reasons for losing their housing most recently



Other reasons for loss of housing were verbal and emotional abuse, and that their family moves around a lot. We gave options to understand both the event that culminated in a loss of housing (i.e. getting kicked out or running away), along with the reasons why that event happened (i.e. school problems, abuse, sexual orientation).

# What do young people fear and worry about?



While co-designing the survey tool with youth experiencing homelessness in Spokane it became clear that learning about young people's fears and worries while being unstably housed was an important aspect of the youth experience in Spokane. We learned that sometimes the above 5 categories might permeate a young person's day and therefore posed the question "how often do you find yourself worrying about the following" in the survey.

The youth who filled out the survey all knew where they were going to be sleeping that night, therefore those questions were skewed by who our sample population turned out to be and so the last three categories become most interesting to us. We see that 11 of the young people we heard from are at least occasionally worried about having their peers find out about their housing situation, with 7 of them being worried about it all the time. Experiencing housing instability can be an isolating experience. 10 young people were at least occasionally worried about being arrested and sent to jail, 5 of whom were occasionally worried about it. Fears about Child Protective Services shows mistrust - 7 youth, a full 25% of the young people we heard from, chose not to tell us how often they worry or fear being referred to CPS, and a further 7 shared that they were at least occasionally worried about being referred to the system. This indicates that CPS has a trust issue with the youth it aims to serve here in Spokane.

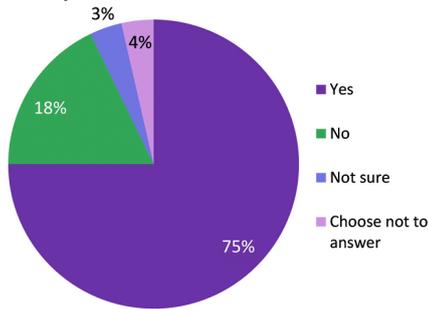
# Systems Involvement

We chose to focus a large portion of our survey on young people's experiences with Child Protective Services, Behavioral Health Treatment, and Juvenile Detention because there is growing evidence that homelessness is a result of poor and unsupported transitions from these care institutions. We wanted to learn how many youth had been systems involved, and whether they were supported to exit successfully.

**We found 14% of the 28 youth we surveyed had no systems involvement, 36% had been involved in 1 system, 25% had been involved in 2, and another 25% had been involved in 3.**

## Child Protective Services

Have you ever been involved with CPS?



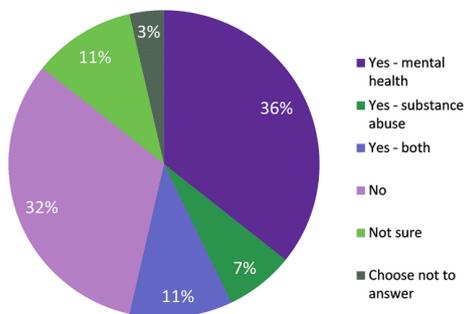
A total of 21 young people said they had at one time been involved with CPS, and 76% of them, 16 youth total, had lived in a foster or group home.

6 of the young people who reported living in a foster or group home said that their caseworkers did not help them create a plan for when they were to leave care. 5 weren't sure, which means a total of 69% of youth who lived in a foster home didn't have a plan or weren't aware of one upon exiting care.

1 young person said they became homeless within 6 months of exiting foster care.

## Behavioral Health Treatment

Have you ever received mental health or substance abuse treatment?

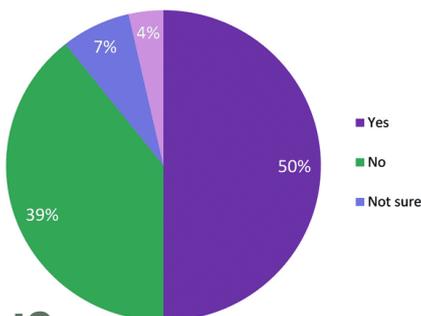


A total of 15 young people we heard from, 54%, received some kind of behavioral health treatment, and 40% of them, 6 youth total, spent time in an in-patient treatment center.

2 of the young people who reported spending time in an in-patient treatment center said their caseworkers did not help them create a plan for when they were scheduled to leave.

## Juvenile Detention

Have you ever spent time in Juvenile Detention?



A total of 14 of the young people we heard from had spent time in Juvenile Detention.

7, or 50% of them, said that their case workers did not help them create a plan for when they were to leave. Another 2 young people weren't sure if they had a plan when they left. This means a total of 64% of youth who were in Juvenile Detention did not have a plan or weren't aware of one when they left.

3 young people who reported spending time in Juvenile Detention said that they became homeless within 6 months of leaving.

# Accessing Housing Help

“ I use local housing systems such as UGM or Cup of Cool Water.  
And find steady employment to pay for housing ”  
- surveyed youth

We asked if young people knew how to access housing help if they needed it. 50% answered either “no” or “not sure.” We asked a follow up question: “what is the best way to help you access services to stabilize your housing” and 33% answered “I don’t know.” The remaining 76% said they thought they could talk to their parents, teachers, probation officers, or social workers if they had trouble with housing, or that they should call CPS or law enforcement and they could help them figure out where they would be able to stay. Youth also told us that they felt they needed more options, that they needed to know about the resources that were available to them, and that even when they knew what resources were available those resources were not adaptable to their specific needs.

## Prevention

“ All homeless kids should be taken in and taken care of. ”  
- surveyed youth

We asked “what do you want to tell local government about preventing youth homelessness?” Prevention for many young people has to do with safe homes where they don’t feel threatened physically or psychologically. If they don’t have a home like that with their biological parents they want other safe homes just for them that they can go to if they need. Some said they need more services, need CPS to actually do something when parents are abusing and neglecting their children, and need more agencies to be looking out for at-risk youth. It was also pointed out that youth should not be locked up for drug or alcohol problems, and that judges should not be the ones to decide what they need because jail doesn’t help. This becomes even more important when we take into account what we learned from young people exiting juvenile justice in this survey: that 7 of them did not have a plan that they were aware of upon exiting Juvenile Detention which lead 3 of them to homelessness within 6 months.

“ Notice the problems and take care of them as fast as you can. ”  
- surveyed youth

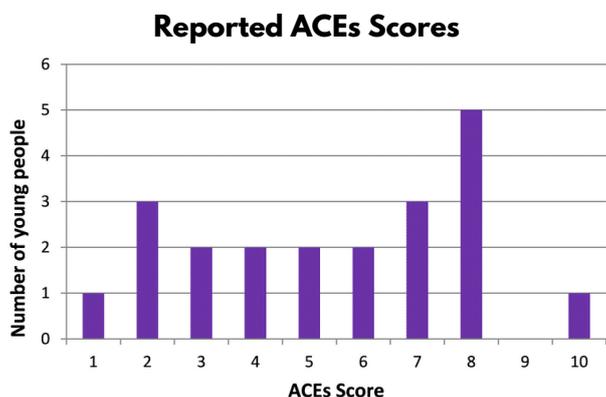
# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

According to the Children's Bureau within the US Department of Health and Human Services, ACEs are traumatic events occurring before age 18. An ACE score, which is what we are reporting on here, is a tally of the 10 different types of abuse, neglect, and other hallmarks of a rough childhood.

## THE 10 ACES

- Emotional Abuse
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Mother figure treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Mental illness in household
- Parental separation or divorce
- Criminal household member
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect

21 of our 28 survey respondents revealed their ACEs score to us. **The average score was 5.5**



According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, as an individual's ACEs score increases, their risk for negative outcomes increases. A study conducted of 17,000 participants shows that only 12% had 4 or more ACEs, and those individuals were found to have the highest likelihood of risk of a wide variety of possible outcomes including drug use and suicide attempts. When left unaddressed, ACEs have impacts on a lifetime of health, earning, and learning abilities.

We must be trauma invested while we work with youth to build towards their future. Research is being done locally on how to create trauma invested and informed spaces for young people by Chris Blodgett, Director of the Child and Family Research Unit (CAFRU) at Washington State University Extension in Spokane. His work shows how being trauma invested means "supporting regulation to support success." This includes promoting physical safety, emotional safety, predictability and consistency. Resiliency is key to recovery from the negative impacts of ACEs in a child's life, and building individual and familial resilience is central in this work.

Blodgett lays out the targets for building resilience: coping skills, building relationship resources and skills, having a sense of efficacy, a realistic but positive sense of self, and an ability to experience happiness. These targets can be achieved by assuming trauma, keeping resilience at the center of the work, moving focus from the individual to the relationship, making safety and predictability the foundation for our action with others, and acknowledging that as important as you are in this work, institutional change sustains trauma investment. This goal must be accomplished through thoughtful community-level collaboration to provide services and build social inclusion.

# Hopes for the Future

We asked "what are you hopeful about for the future?" and heard from the young people we surveyed that they were hopeful about many things, however there was also a lot of hopelessness in the responses. Three of the young people we surveyed were not sure what to be hopeful for, two shared that they had already given up because of the things in their past - *"I'm a felon, I already gave up on it."*

Six young people were hopeful for stability: *"making it", "having a house having food," "getting a job, having a place to live, have the necessities to live," "getting a car and driver's license."*

Nine young people were hopeful for their future careers: the military, being a doctor, the music industry, carpentry, getting a PhD or JD. One person's hopes for the future show us what their life is like currently: they hope *"to feel safe to have someone to talk to. I would also love to feel like I'm not just a burden that everything is not my fault."* Another young person was hopeful for a future where they could take care of their mother.

The answers to this question show a tough duality faced by unstably housed youth. In many of the answers we see how we're teaching our children that they cannot dream for a future more than meeting their basic needs, or that just because they have gone to jail the rest of their lives are over. But in other ways we see the resilience of youth. We see the way they are able to dream. In those dreams and that innate resiliency that young people have is where we are able to find a path forward.

We heard straight from youth that stability is key. They lack it in their school and home life, and they hope for it for the future. We know that stability - predictability, consistency, safety - is central to being trauma invested, and that to create it within our programming is more than just making the effort as an individual. Community-level collaboration to create stability within relationships, education systems and social services necessitates institutional focus on practices that are collaborative in nature and place primacy on creating the trappings of home for young people. For instance, creating positions like a Permanency Navigator Team being deployed in the Anchorage CoC that can act as a trusted relationship for a young person regardless of which social services or formal institutions they may be involved in would create some of the consistency that young people need from the adults in their lives as they move from school to school, house to house, in and out of detention.

Above all, this report shows the need to focus programming and interventions that provide stability and belonging in all it's forms. One youth said it well: *"create homes where children can go if they feel like they don't want to be home for hurtful reasons."*