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## Uncertain Times for Chicago Youth



Summary of Key Findings from Status Survey  
conducted by NUF SAID, 2010  
Written by Florian Sichling

A Project of the Chicago Youth Voices Network

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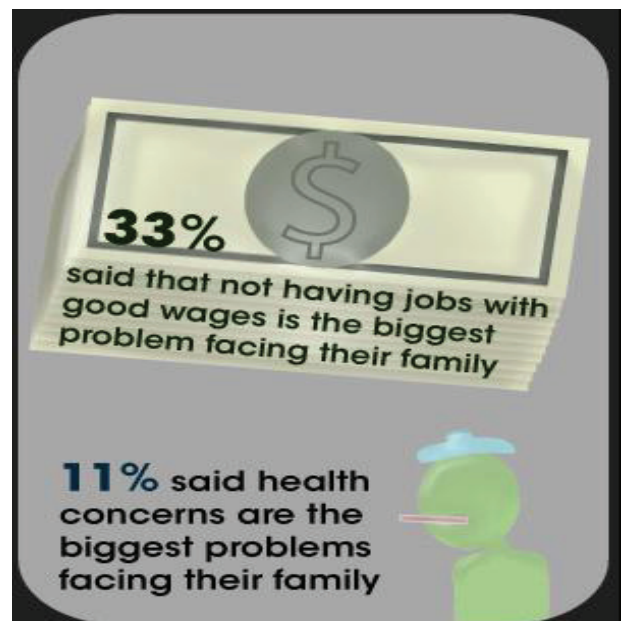
## Background

Youth is an important time in the life of an individual. As a distinct stage in the life cycle, this period is not only defined by age, but also by a set of developmental tasks, such as finishing school, starting work, moving out of the parental home and starting a family, that reflect societal norms and expectations. But large economic and social transformations and the recent recession in the U.S. fundamentally altered the conditions under which young people are growing up because they affected their ability to achieve a level of economic security sufficient to start a life of their own. Despite this emerging consensus in the contemporary youth literature however, we currently have very limited knowledge about how certain groups of young people and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds are faring under conditions of growing uncertainty. The Chicago Youth Voices Network (CYVN) set out to ask young people in Chicago directly about their concerns, worries and hopes.

CYVN consists of eleven city-wide youth media organizations that collaborated over the course of one year to engage youth in online polling and social media tools to create their own stories and provide a means for sharing them with the larger community. The project combines elements of pedagogy (social media training), research (develop and conduct a poll) and action (media production) in a unique way that allows young people to be meaningfully involved in every step along the way and thus, distinguishes it from conventional, primarily adults-driven research agendas. While such an approach certainly violates some basic academic rules of conduct, it provides a unique and fascinating window into the lived experience of disadvantaged youth in Chicago.



*Young people ... kept emphasizing the difference between “knowing what the right thing to do is” and “what one actually has to do”.*



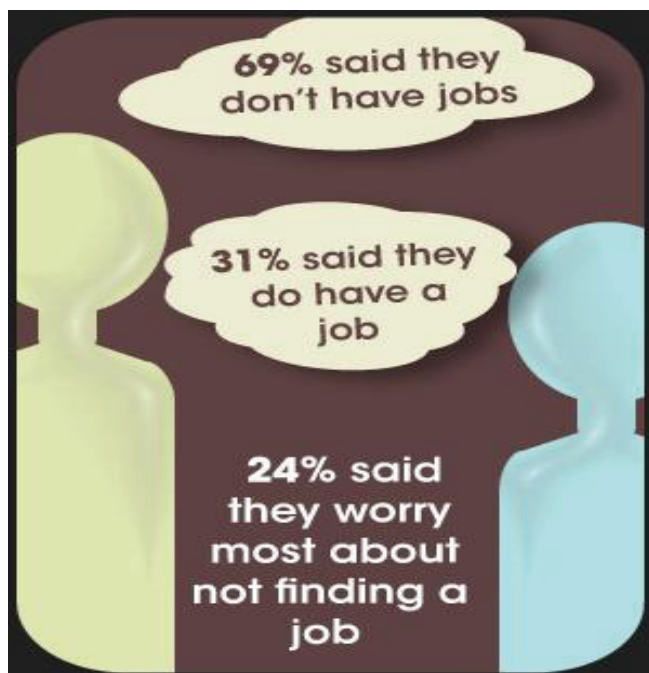
<sup>1</sup>see Furstenberg Jr., 2008; Furstenberg Jr. et al, 2005; Settersten Jr. & Barbara, 2010

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## Methodology

During the kick-off event, focus groups of young people under the guidance of issue experts began brainstorming issues and questions related to housing/neighborhood, health, crime/violence, education and work. A research team developed these ideas into a survey which was administered as a paper & pencil pre-test to a separate focus group of 11 youth. Their feedback was then used to revise the final version of the survey, which was first administered as a paper & pencil survey to 147 youth connected with CYVN organizations. These findings were used to establish a baseline of data. Finally, the digital version of the survey was administered by a team of about 40 youth pollsters online. As a result the sample of respondents is not representative of young people in Chicago, but rather approximates a convenience-snowball sample. Such a non-probability technique is well-suited for the exploration of little-known phenomena among less visible populations such as the experience of disadvantaged youth .



## Demographics

698 young people between 12 and 24 years old responded to the digital poll. Slightly over one third was male (34.3%) and somewhat less than two thirds (65.7%) were female. While we did not directly ask for parental income, the fact that the overwhelming majority of respondents is of minority status (65.4% African American, 16.3% Hispanic, 6.9% non-Hispanic White), resides on the South and West Side of the city and has limited access to family health care benefits suggests that they did not come from privileged backgrounds.

<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed description of the process please refer to the CYVN website

<sup>4</sup>When asked for the source of the family's health insurance, 34.2% did not know, 26.4% Medicaid and only 28.1% job



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## Navigating Conflict: What is the Right Thing to Do?

As young people maneuver these uncertain transitions from school into the labor market, society also expects them to develop norms and values to guide socially acceptable modes of interaction and behavior along the way. But the social contexts such as neighborhoods and schools in which young people learn to interact with others vary significantly in their composition for different groups of young people and can foster or inhibit positive development. This aspect became very apparent right from the start. Young people in our focus groups kept emphasizing the difference between “knowing what the right thing to do is” and “what one actually has to do”. This distinction is profound because it suggests that there might be instances in which the two are not the same. While we were unable to explore this theme with open-ended and descriptive questions, we were able to ask a set of close-ended questions about conflict resolution strategies. When confronted with a hypothetical conflict situation the majority of respondents (42.3%) said that they would walk away or try to solve the situation peacefully. The more interesting insight however, was that only a mere 6.4% would call an adult authority figure such as a police officer or teacher. Almost two thirds (64.6%) of young people explained that involving such an external figure would likely make one a target of ridicule or future attacks. These responses are by no means exhaustive, but they speak to the general theme of a potential divergence between general norms and situational options. This is a fascinating insight that deserves a more in-depth exploration, because it raises the question how young people resolve such a tension and to what extent existing supports and resources (e.g. adult role models or authority figures) are actually perceived as such.



## The biggest problem facing me and my family today is:

- 33.1% Not having jobs with good wages
- 21.8% Crime and Violence
- 15.7% Other
- 11.4% Health
- 5.6% Poor Education in School
- 4.6% Lack of Decent Housing
- 3.5% Family Abuse or Neglect

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## Violence and Crime

These difficulties are deeply engrained in an environment that fosters a latent fear of crime and violence. The fear of crime is the second biggest concern among young Chicagoans (21.8%) who participated in our poll. In contrast to the issue of finding a job, this fear is somewhat more prevalent (26.2%) among younger youth age 12-17. But regardless of age, about one fourth (26%) of these young people witness violence at least once every week and 63% worry about violence in their neighborhood at least sometimes.

While they see territorial conflicts, relationship issues and money as the most prevalent causes for violence in their communities, jobs and opportunities for young people are seen as the most effective violence prevention by 38.5% of our respondents, a percentage that reaches 41.8% among the 18-24 year-olds. The second most effective prevention of violence in the neighborhoods in which these young people are growing up is seen in the reduction of exposure to violence at home (25.3%). Among our 12-17 year old respondents, support for this statement reached almost thirty (29.5%) percent.

Whereas much of the neighborhood literature emphasizes residential turnover and disorder such as people hanging out on the streets as an important ecological predictor of neighborhood crime, the young people in our sample were somewhat indifferent in their assessment of newcomers and people hanging out on the street in relation to crime. While the latter are generally not seen as likable (84.9%) they are also not regarded as a particular threat (86.4%), a cause of crime (70.9%) or as bringing the neighborhood down (66.5%). But for respondents themselves, hanging out on the street is not really seen as a way to make friends (75.2%) and they are evenly split over the question whether it is risky or even dangerous to do so.

## References

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## Optimism Despite an Uncertain Future

In sum, with their responses these young people have provided us with some important insights into their social worlds. While these young people are concerned about their ability to make the transition into an insecure labor market, they also recognized the critical importance of building their human capital in the form of education and relevant experience. The neighborhoods they live in, the schools that they go to and the families they come from harbor serious risks and hazards to their well-being and provide these kids with vastly different resources and opportunities compared to their more privileged contemporaries. These environments often confront them with societal expectations that at times do not match the options perceived to be available and sometimes lack appropriate guidance for how to resolve these contradictions. But despite these obstacles, their fears and worries about an uncertain future, there is also a strong sense of optimism and faith in their abilities. Now it is up to adults to hear their voices, because everybody deserves not only a second chance but a first one.

Florian Sichling is a doctoral student in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. Originally from Nuremberg Germany he received his undergraduate degree in Social Work from the University of Dresden. After working with Turkish immigrant youth for several years he came to Chicago to pursue graduate school. Florian is interested in understanding how different dimensions of the social environment, such as neighborhoods, families, schools, labor markets and welfare states combine to shape the developmental trajectories and experiences of disadvantaged urban youth. One day he hopes to be done with school.



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