

“COVID

REALLY,

REALLY,

REALLY,



The impact of the  
COVID-19 Pandemic  
on Youth Experiencing  
Homelessness in the  
San Francisco Bay Area

Berkeley Public Health  Innovations  
for Youth

Benioff Homelessness  
and Housing Initiative

# AUTHORS

(with affiliation at the time of study participation)

**Jessica Wright**

MSW Student, UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare

**Fernando Augusto**

Strategic Initiatives Creative Lead, UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**Anoop Bains**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Estefani Barba**

Executive Assistant to Dean Michael C., UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**BRod Beteta**

Community Intern

**Vivian Bui**

MPH Student, UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**Kya Chen**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Jessica Hu**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Silvana Larrea-Schiavon**

DrPH Candidate, UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**Jessica Lutz**

Medical Student, UCLA

**Andrea Mackey**

MPH Student, UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**Aen Navidad**

Community Intern

**Sahra Nawabi**

Community Intern

**Amrita Ramanathan**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Racquel Richardson**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

# AUTHORS Cont.

(with affiliation at the time of study participation)

**Greg Ritzinger**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Ana Rodriguez**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Onye Ryan**

Community Intern

**Teresa Skelly**

MPH Student, UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**Shukri Suhir**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Robson Swift**

Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Sydney Tucker**

MPH Student, UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**Anthoni Walls**

Community Intern

**Shayna Weinstein**

MPH Student, UC Berkeley School of Public Health

**Rakia White**

Community Intern and Undergraduate, University of California, Berkeley

**Attakai Yazzie**

Community Intern

**KrAy LiT**

Community Intern

**Ray Egorova**

Community Intern

**Marguerita Lightfoot**

Associate Dean of Research, Oregon Health Sciences University / Portland State University School of Public Health

**Colette (Coco) Auerswald**

Professor, Community Health Sciences,  
UC Berkeley School of Public Health  
Co-Founder and Co-Director, I4Y (Innovations for Youth)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Who We Are**

**What We Did & How We Did It**

**Who Participated**

**What We Found**

Access to basic needs / What youth said

Housing / What youth said

Education / What youth said

Income / What youth said

Relationships

Discrimination & Stigma

COVID-19 infection & vaccination / What youth said

Health status and substance use

**What Youth Recommended**

**Implications and Recommendations**

Access to basic needs

Housing

Education

Income

Relationships

Discrimination & Stigma

COVID-19 infection & vaccination

Health status and substance use

Youth Voice

**Funding**

**Acknowledgments**

**References and Resources**



Click each section for fast navigation

# WHO WE ARE

Youth and Allies Against Homelessness (YAAH) is a research team based in i4Y (Innovations for Youth), a Berkeley School of Public Health research center. YAAH is made up of youth community members with lived experience of homelessness, undergraduate and graduate students who have experienced homelessness and/or who have demonstrated a commitment to ending homelessness, and a faculty lead.

During the summer of 2021, the members of YAAH conducted the COVID-19 Youth Impact Survey to document the effect of COVID-19 on the health and wellbeing of youth experiencing homelessness (YEH) in the Bay Area. This document reports what we did, how we did it, what we found, and the implications of our findings. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, we hope that by making youth's experiences visible and their voices heard, we can help prevent further harm to YEH due to COVID-19 or other man-made or natural disasters.





# WHAT WE DID & HOW WE DID IT

We launched cross-sectional English/Spanish surveys of San Francisco and Alameda County YEH from March 29 to July 2021. Youth were eligible if they were **15-24 years of age, had spent the prior night in Alameda or San Francisco Counties, and reported experiencing homelessness since the initial shelter-in-place order** in March, 2020. The survey was completed online using Qualtrics. It included questions about demographics, education, housing, income, access to basic needs, relationships, and COVID-19 infection and vaccination status.

## Survey Development

We formed a team of graduate/undergraduate students and community youth interns to develop the survey. At each iteration, youth interns and undergraduates with lived experience reviewed the survey and gave feedback.

## Community Feedback

We opened the survey to service providers that work directly with YEH in Alameda and San Francisco Counties to solicit their feedback.

## Survey Distribution

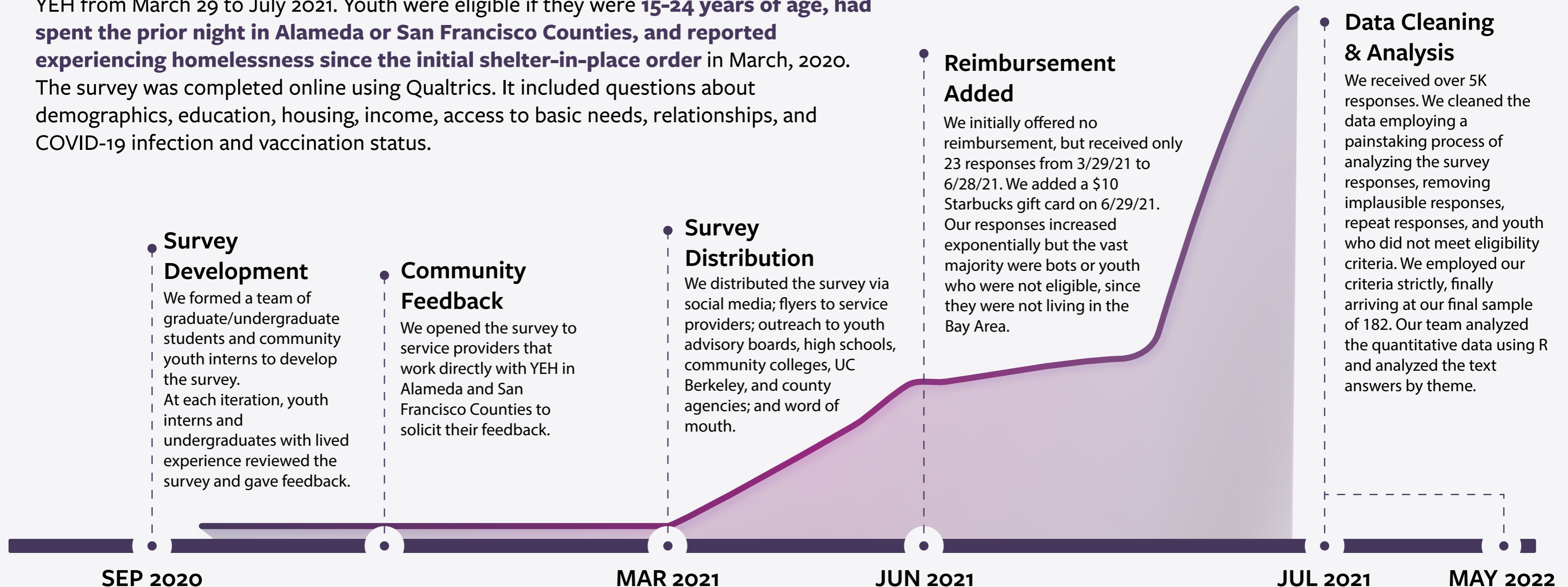
We distributed the survey via social media; flyers to service providers; outreach to youth advisory boards, high schools, community colleges, UC Berkeley, and county agencies; and word of mouth.

## Reimbursement Added

We initially offered no reimbursement, but received only 23 responses from 3/29/21 to 6/28/21. We added a \$10 Starbucks gift card on 6/29/21. Our responses increased exponentially but the vast majority were bots or youth who were not eligible, since they were not living in the Bay Area.

## Data Cleaning & Analysis

We received over 5K responses. We cleaned the data employing a painstaking process of analyzing the survey responses, removing implausible responses, repeat responses, and youth who did not meet eligibility criteria. We employed our criteria strictly, finally arriving at our final sample of 182. Our team analyzed the quantitative data using R and analyzed the text answers by theme.



SEP 2020

MAR 2021

JUN 2021

JUL 2021

MAY 2022

# WHO PARTICIPATED

## RACE

|       |                                   |
|-------|-----------------------------------|
| 43.4% | NON-HISPANIC WHITE                |
| 29.7% | NON-HISPANIC BLACK                |
| 13.2% | LATINX                            |
| 5.0%  | NON-HISPANIC ASIAN                |
| 5.0%  | AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKAN NATIVE |
| 2.0%  | MIXED RACE AND OTHER              |
| 0.5%  | PACIFIC ISLANDER                  |

## GENDER IDENTITY

|       |               |
|-------|---------------|
| 50.0% | CIS MEN       |
| 39.6% | CIS WOMEN     |
| 4.9%  | NOT SPECIFIED |
| 3.8%  | NON-BINARY    |
| 1.1%  | TRANS WOMEN   |
| 0.5%  | TRANS MEN     |

## TOTAL PARTICIPANTS

182

### COUNTY

|                      |                |
|----------------------|----------------|
| 70.9%                | 29.1%          |
| San Francisco County | Alameda County |

## AGE RANGE

17-24  
YEARS OLD

0.5% <18 | 99.5% 18+

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

|       |                          |      |                          |
|-------|--------------------------|------|--------------------------|
| 74.7% | HETEROSEXUAL OR STRAIGHT | 1.6% | OTHER SEXUAL ORIENTATION |
| 9.3%  | GAY/LESBIAN              | 1.1% | ASEXUAL                  |
| 7.7%  | BISEXUAL                 | 0.5% | PANSEXUAL                |
| 2.2%  | QUEER                    | 0.5% | QUESTIONING              |

# WHAT WE FOUND





# BASIC NEEDS

The trauma of experiencing homelessness can have an important effect on short-and-long-term youth development by limiting **access to basic needs**. Basic needs include food, water, and sanitation, as well as Wi-Fi and access to a cell phone (Abri Lavasani K et al., 2020; Alturk R et al., 2020; Farnish KA et al., 2022; Samuels GM et al., 2019).

The pandemic made it even more difficult for youth in our study to access basic needs. Nearly **6 out of 10 youth** were **eating fewer meals per day** and **over half** were **going to sleep hungry** more often than before the pandemic. Nearly **1 in 3** had **more difficulty accessing water** and over **one fourth** had **more difficulty accessing a toilet**. Finally, **38%** of youth reported having **more difficulty accessing Wi-Fi** and **23%** had **more difficulty accessing a cell phone**, resources which are key to connecting them to services, health care, education, and employment.

## Youth's ability to access basic needs worsened with the pandemic

**57%**  
Eat fewer meals/day



**52%**  
Go to sleep at night hungry

**31%**  
Water



**27%**  
Toilet



**23%**  
Phone



**38%**  
Wi-Fi



**“Due to COVID-19, I have lost my main source of income, no money to rent a good house, and no money to buy enough food.”**

23 y.o. Black cisgender man from Alameda

**“No WiFi in the shelter.”**

22 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco

## WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT BASIC NEEDS

**“I don’t have a house to live in, I often don’t have Internet access where I live, and I don’t have enough money to buy food.”**

22 y.o. White cisgender man from Alameda

**“Because I lost my part-time job during the pandemic, which cost me most of my money, so I often starved.”**

20 y.o. Latino cisgender man from San Francisco

**“The city wouldn’t allow us to access restrooms; people were more scared of homeless people during the pandemic.”**

20 y.o. White nonbinary person from San Francisco

**“I lost my job, I didn’t have much money, I didn’t live in a stable place, I had to scrimp and scrimp.”**

22 y.o. American Indian or Alaskan Native cisgender woman from San Francisco

**“Financial issues and public places are mostly closed or do not provide public restrooms.”**

21 y.o. Asian cisgender woman from Alameda

**“Before I got my shelter-in-place hotel, bathrooms were all closed...**

**You just couldn't find one to use.”**

*23 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco*

**“When the outbreak started, there were few people on the streets who could help me, and I was sad.**

**23 y.o. Black cisgender woman from San Francisco**

**“No shops open.”** *18 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco*

## WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT BASIC NEEDS

**“Because I didn't have enough money, I was always hungry and always sleeping while I was hungry.”**

*21 y.o. White cisgender man from San Francisco*

**“Because I have so little money, I sometimes have to go hungry to save money.”**

*20 yo White cisgender man from San Francisco*

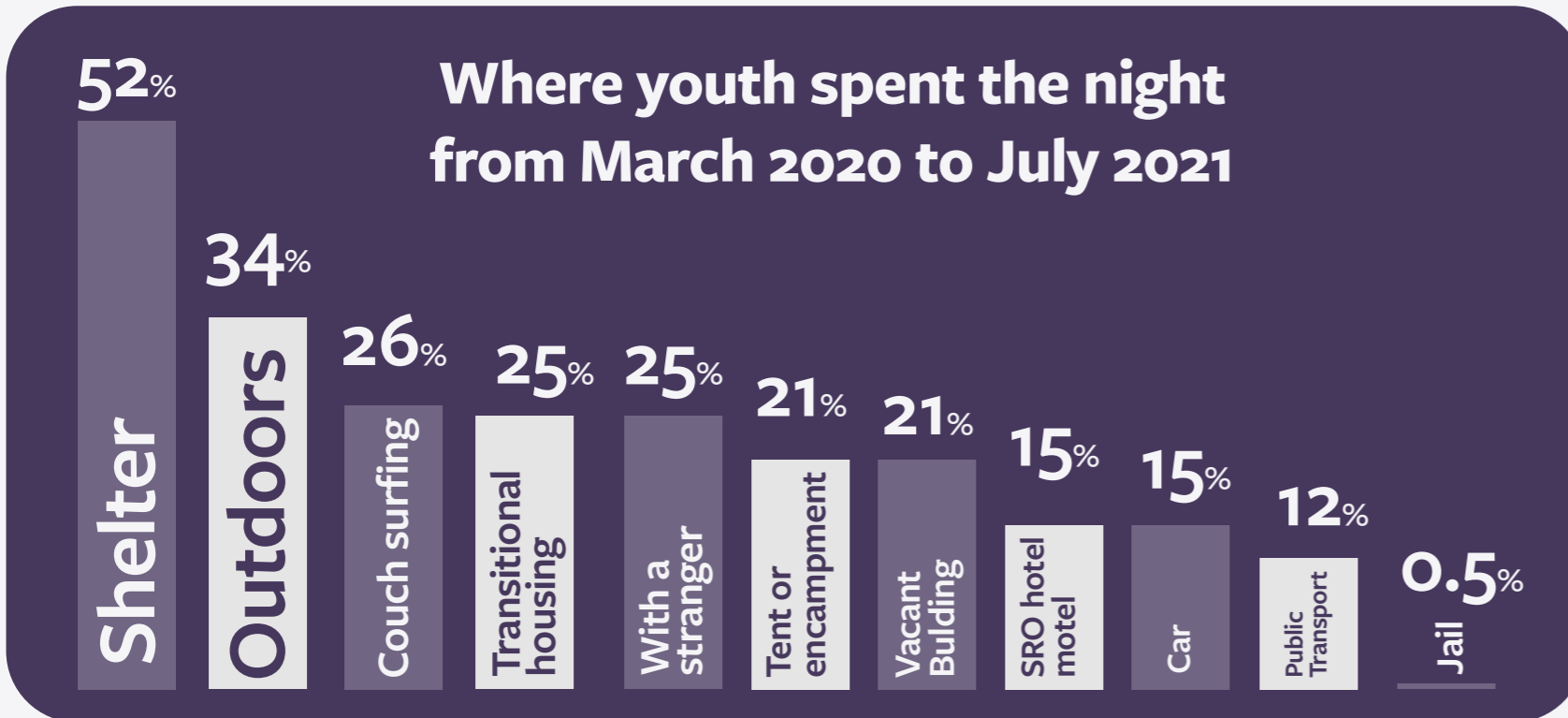
**“We are not allowed to travel freely.”**

*24 y.o. American Indian or Alaskan Native cisgender man from San Francisco*

**“I don't have a place to stay and can't get stable toilet service.”** *21 y.o. Black cisgender woman from Berkeley*

# HOUSING

Safe, stable housing is a requirement for the well-being of youth and for their successful transition to adulthood (McCallum A & Rich H, 2018; Rolfe S et al., 2020; Samuels GM et al., 2019; Taylor L, 2018). Our findings document the effect of the pandemic on the housing status of YEH. **Eight out of every ten** youth in our study **experienced a change in their housing status** since the start of the pandemic, with **1 in 3** youth **reporting becoming unhoused**. In our qualitative data, youth reported **fears of becoming infected** due to their unstable housing.



## How youth's housing changed since the onset of the pandemic



***“The shelters I lived in always found people who might be infected, so I had to move.”***

*21 y.o. White cisgender male from San Francisco*

## WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT HOUSING

***“I move a lot because sometimes I feel like the shelter I’m in is not safe, so I might move to a motel, and even though I don’t have a lot of money, I have to move just to be safe.”***

*23 y.o. White cisgender Man from San Francisco*

***“[I did not feel safe in my housing because... ] there is no necessary security protection.”***

*23 y.o. American Indian or Alaskan Native cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“Relatives have died during the virus, and I am homeless.”***

*21 y.o. Black cisgender man from Alameda*

***“Tents don’t give me a sense of security.”***

*20 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco*

***“There were a lot of people in the shelter and there was a lot of contact.”***

*23 y.o. White cisgender man from San Francisco*



*“[I did not feel safe in my housing because...]  
**I’m worried about being attacked.”***

*24 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco*

## WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT HOUSING

*“[I did not feel safe in my housing because] **I was unaccompanied,  
alone and afraid**”* *23 y.o. Latino cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“During the COVID-19 outbreak, I was unable to work outside the home,  
had no financial support and couldn’t afford to rent my old house”***

*22 y.o. American Indian or Alaskan Native cisgender woman from San Francisco*

***“Moved into San Francisco  
SIP [Shelter-in-Place] hotel room”***

*23 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco*

***“My housing was precarious before the pandemic.  
I moved 4-5 times in 2019. I am disabled and high-risk,  
and the student co-op I was living in refused to implement  
any COVID protocols. It was low-income housing  
and I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”***

*21 y.o. White nonbinary person from Berkeley*



**“[I did not feel safe in my housing because...] *I had no weapon to protect me.*”**

*19 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco*

## WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT HOUSING

**“*There are too many people and it’s crowded. It’s not safe.*”**

*21 y.o. Latino man from San Francisco*

**“*I am a non white person in a white household/ experienced sexual harassment from a friend/ cannot stay safely with parents because i have to hide medication and gender.*”**

*22 y.o. Asian trans masculine person from Alameda*

**“[I did not feel safe in my housing because...]”**

***I was feeling scared and lonely.*”**

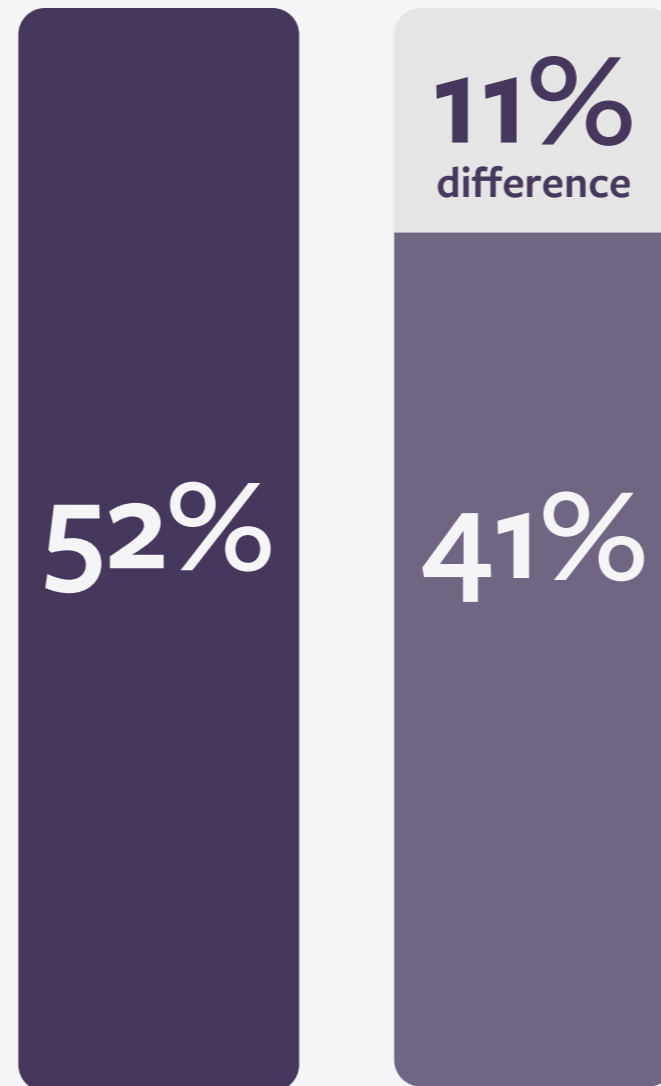
*21 y.o. White nonbinary person from Fremont*

# EDUCATION

To successfully transition to adulthood and become productive members of society, all youth require access to education and/or vocational training. The pandemic has increased the challenges youth face in achieving educational and vocational milestones (Parolin Z et al., 2021; UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2021; UNICEF, 2020; Samuels GM et al., 2019; Sarkar U et al., 2021).

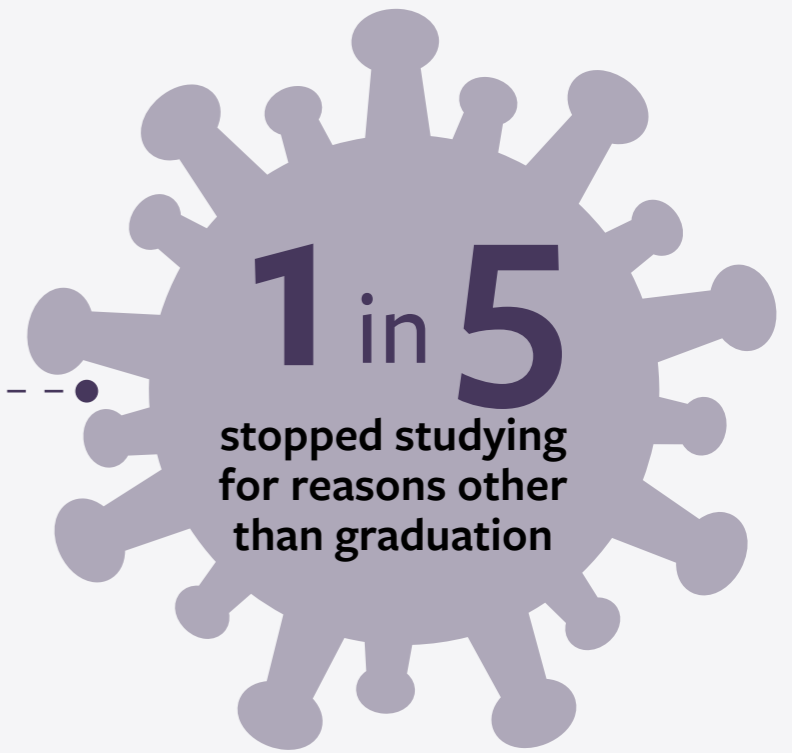
This has been particularly true for youth from historically marginalized populations. The youth in our survey who shared their experience with us were no different. Although only 52% reported being a student before the pandemic, this number had decreased to 41% by the time of the survey. In other words, **1 in 5 youth** who were in school before the pandemic had **dropped out of school for reasons other than graduation** by the time of the survey. Moreover, **24%** of all our participants **reported not being able to get help to go back to school** and **27%** could not get help to enroll in technical or vocational training program.

How many YEH were students?



Before the pandemic

After the pandemic



School-related resources

**24%** not able to get help for going back to school

**27%** not able to get help for technical & vocational programs

**“Online school was harder since I’m more of a in person learner.”**

18 y.o. Persian cisgender woman from Oakland

**“ [I stopped being a student because...] Because my parents lost their job. In order to relieve the burden of my family, I want to go to work early to make money.”**

22 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco

## WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT EDUCATION

**“I don’t have enough money to go to college.”**

23 y.o. Black cisgender male  
from San Francisco

**“ [I stopped being a student because...] Because I was an orphan and my family had no means of support. I was raised to school by my grandma who got infected with COVID-19. So I had to drop out and get a job.”**

19 y.o. Latina cisgender woman from San Francisco

# INCOME

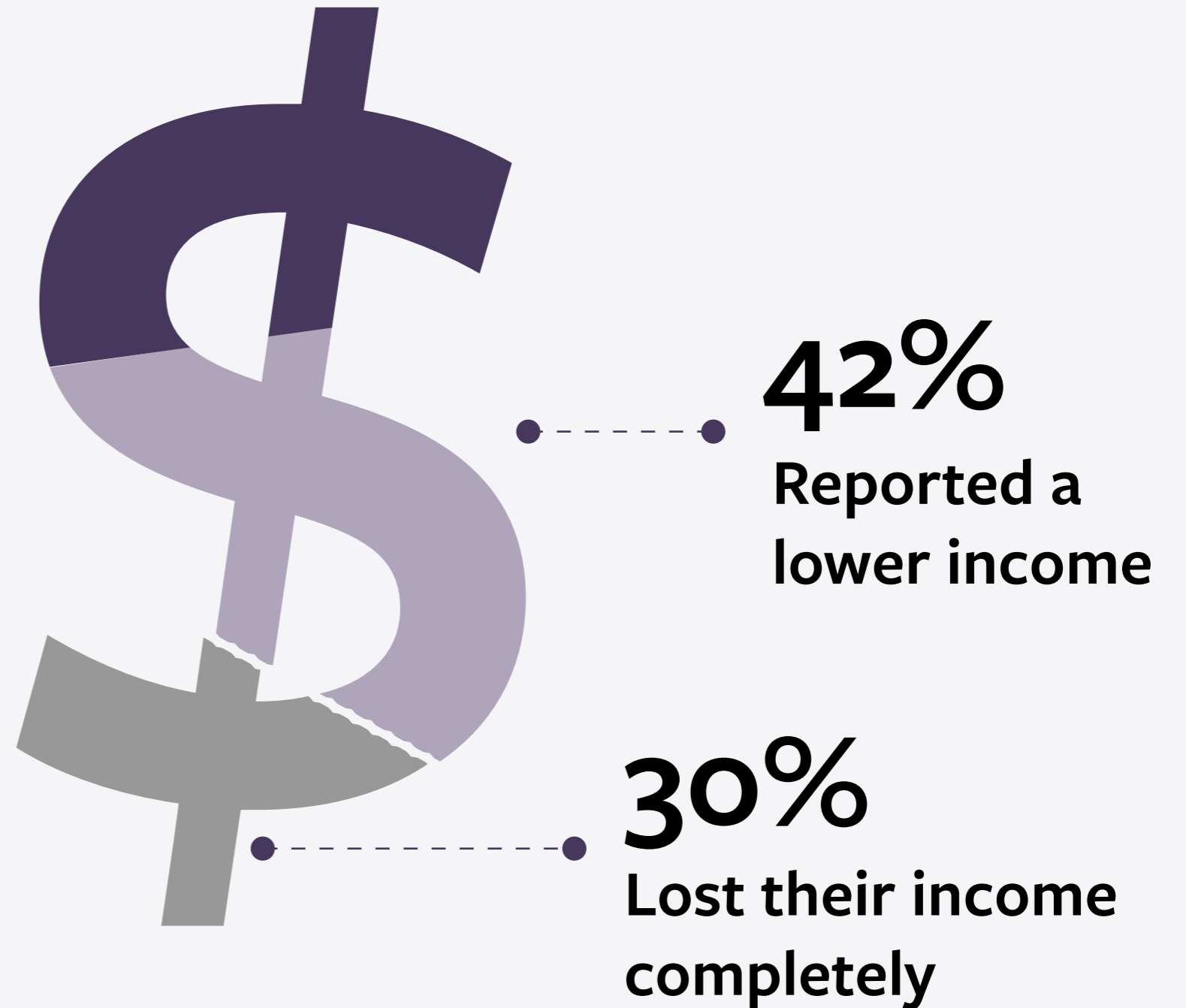
The income and employment opportunities of young people were also severely impacted by the pandemic (O’Higgins N et al., 2021; Parolin Z et al., 2021; United States Census Bureau, 2020). YEH in our study incurred a devastating blow to their income. **Seven out of every ten** participants **lost their income completely or reported a lower income** since the start of the pandemic. Simultaneously, almost **6 out of every 10** youth reported **not being able to get help when looking for a job**.

## Employment-related resources

**59%**

not able to get help when looking for a job

## How YEH’s income changed with the pandemic



***“The place where I worked was forced to close, and I couldn’t find another job.”***

*23 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“There were not many people in the streets to help me. I could not survive.”***

*23 y.o. Black cisgender woman from San Francisco*

## WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT INCOME

***“My company went out of business because of COVID-19 and I lost my main source of income.”***

*23 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“Due to the outbreak of the epidemic, the number of jobs has been reduced.”***

*23 yo White cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“Because I had to stay in a shelter or a hotel during the pandemic, I could not go out to look for work.”***

*20 y.o. Latino cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“I was discriminated against everywhere I looked for a job.”***

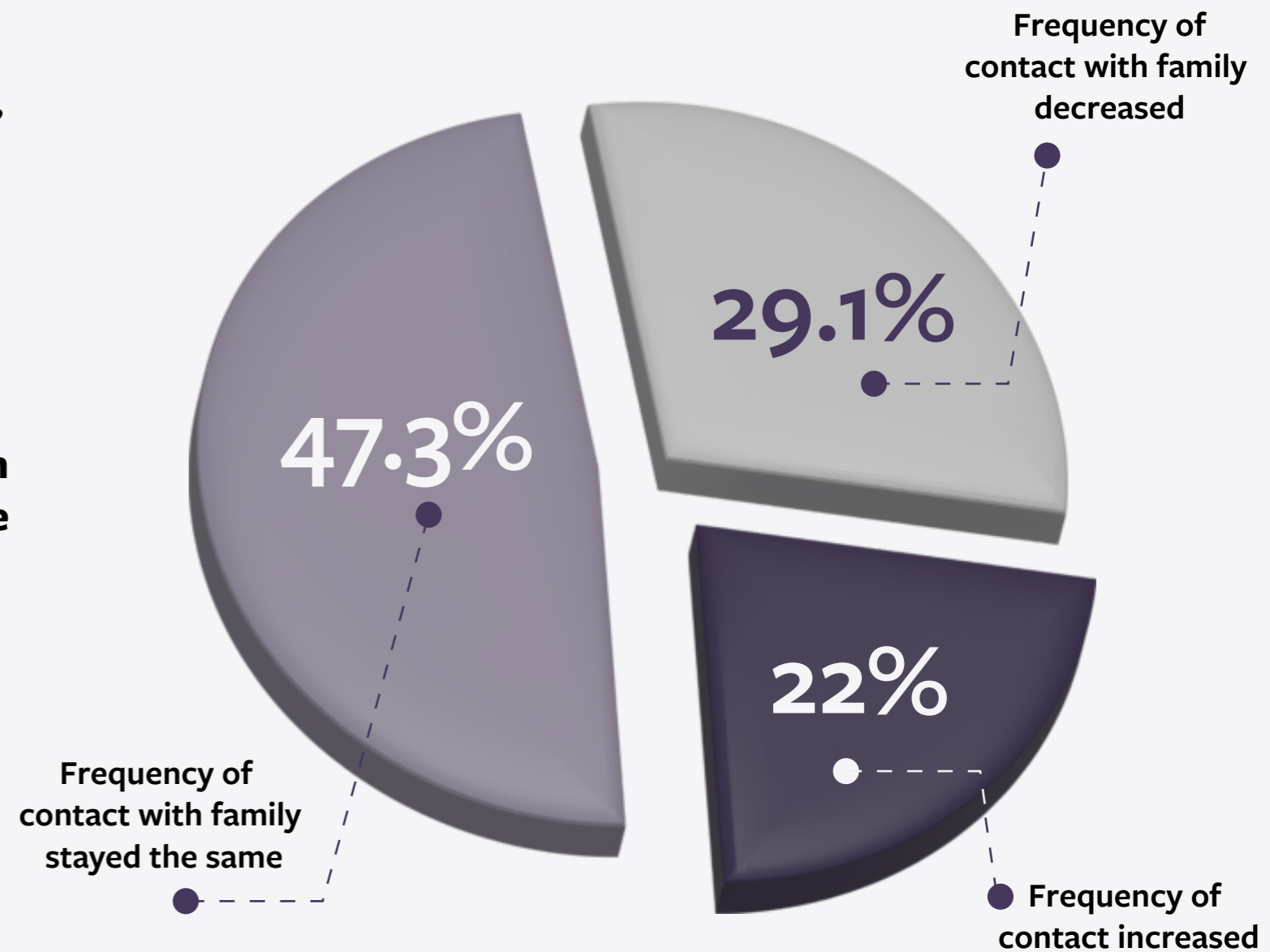
*21 y.o. Black cisgender man from Alameda*

# RELATIONSHIPS

Prior research shows that youth experiencing homelessness rely on their social networks, including family members and friends, to support their resilience, overcome isolation, and promote their wellbeing (Cronley C et al., 2017). In our study, the pandemic had **mixed effects on youth’s family relationships**. Twenty-nine percent of youth decreased their frequency of contact with their family after the pandemic, 22% increased their frequency, and about half of the youth maintained the same frequency of contact.

Tragically, our results also show that a **large percentage of youth lost key members of their network to the pandemic or pandemic-related causes**. Seven percent of youth lost someone to a **COVID-19 infection**, while 19 % lost someone to an **overdose**. Given the sparseness of the networks of youth in our study, this is alarming.

## How youth’s frequency of contact with family changed since the onset of the pandemic



**7%** lost someone to COVID-19

**19%** lost someone to an overdose

**YEH who reported losing someone with whom they interacted frequently since the start of the pandemic**

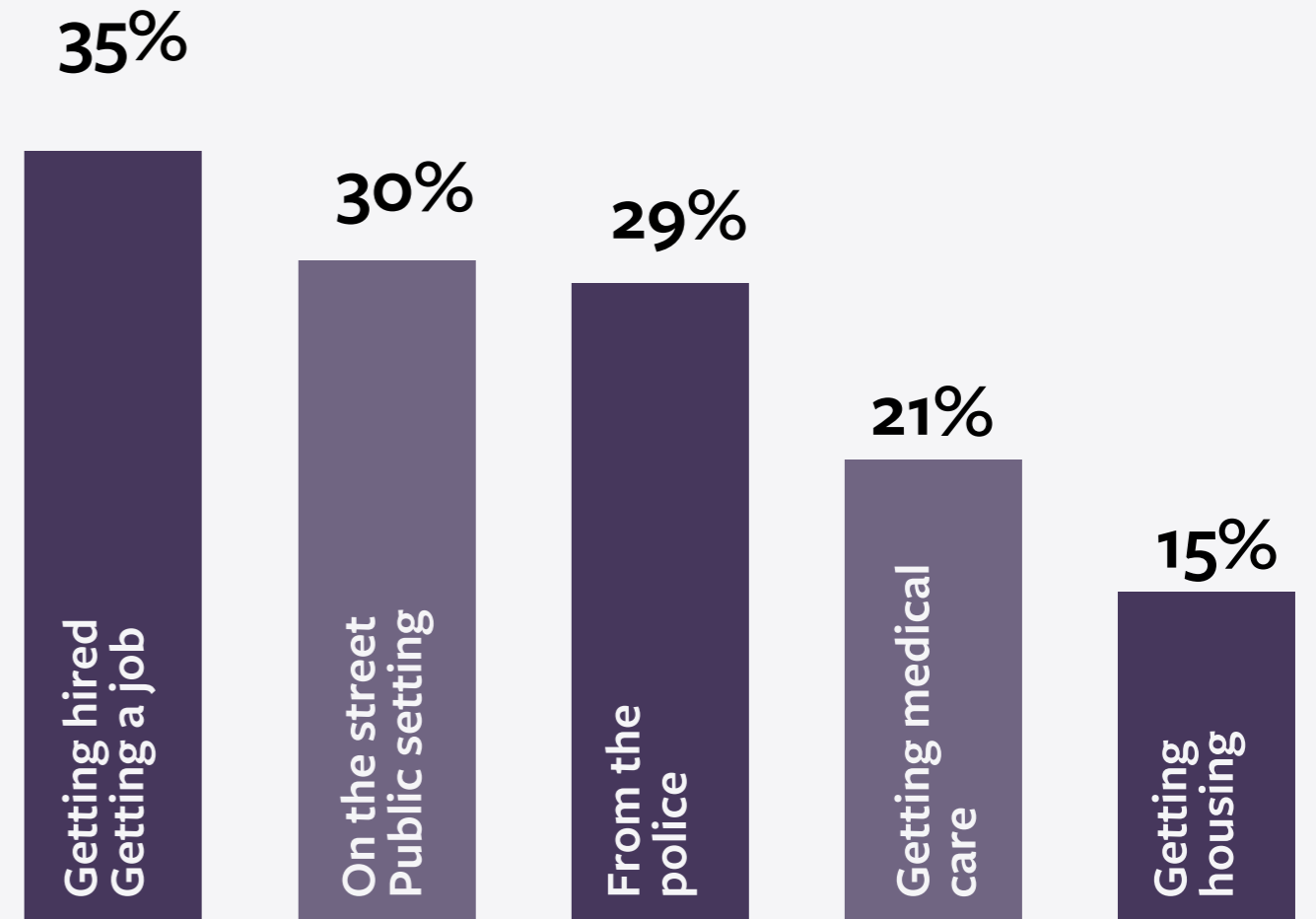


# DISCRIMINATION & STIGMA

Amnesty international has reported that the pandemic exposed marginalized groups (i.e., LGBTI+ people, sex workers, people who use drugs, and people experiencing homelessness) to further discrimination practices and human rights abuses global (Amnesty International, 2022).

Youth in our study similarly reported experiencing **increased discrimination** since the onset of the pandemic in multiple key areas of their lives, including in **public settings and on the street, from the police, looking for a job, accessing medical care and applying for housing.**

**Situations in which youth reported increased increased discrimination and stigma since the pandemic**



# COVID-19 INFECTIONS

The number of COVID-19 cases among people experiencing homelessness is likely underestimated, due to a lack of access to COVID-19 tests and to healthcare, particularly during the study period (Alameda County Health Care Services Agency, 2022. City and County of San Francisco, 2021; Meehan AA et al., 2021; Mosites E et al., 2020; Silliman Cohen RI & Bosk EA, 2020). In our study, **7%** of participants stated that, to their knowledge, they **had been sick due to a COVID-19 infection. However, one in four reported not having been able to access a COVID-19 test** when needed.

Many youth reported challenges to protecting themselves from an infection during the first year of the pandemic. **One in three** youth reported **not knowing how they could protect themselves from COVID-19** all the time. A similar percentage of youth perceived that avoiding an infection in their current situation was somewhat or extremely difficult.

**7%** reported having had COVID-19

**26%** were not able to access a COVID-19 test when needed

**35%** reported knowing how to protect themselves from COVID-19 all the time

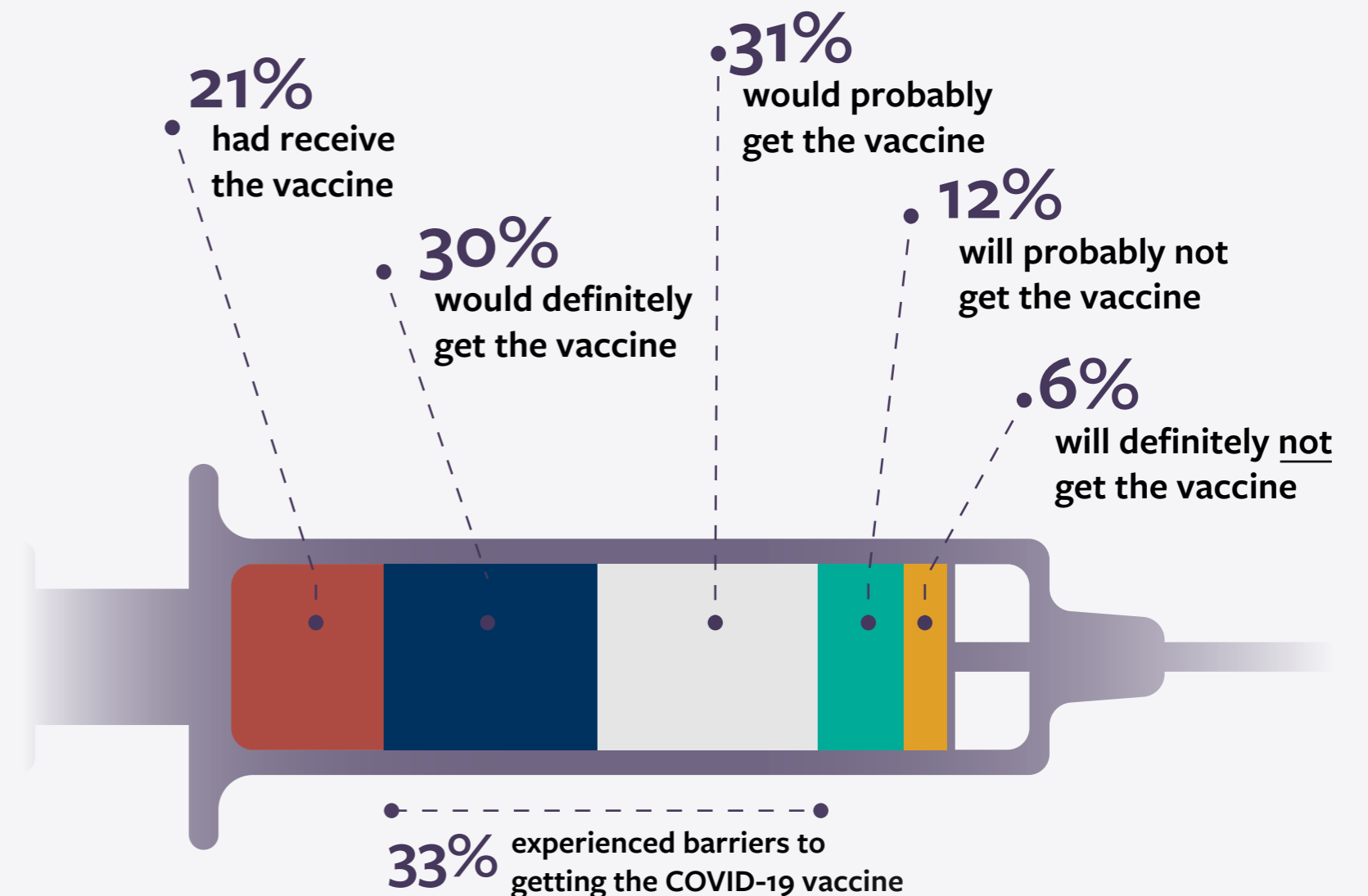
**30%** perceived that avoiding an infection in their current situation was extremely or somewhat difficult

# COVID-19 VACCINATION

By the end of July 2021, 73% of the general population in Alameda and San Francisco counties had been vaccinated with at least one dose of the vaccine, with approximately 68% having been fully vaccinated (Alameda County Health Care Services Agency, 2022; City and County of San Francisco, 2021; Montgomery MP et al., 2021).

Based on our results, **a significantly lower percentage of YEH had been vaccinated when the survey was administered** (June-July 2021). Only **2 out of every 10 participants had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine**. Even though the percentage of youth vaccinated was low, **6 out of every 10 participants that had not received the vaccine stated that they would definitely or probably get the vaccine when offered**. However, **one third** of those who would definitely or probably get the vaccine **experienced barriers to getting the COVID-19 vaccine**. These results show that YEH participating in the survey were very accepting of the COVID-19 vaccine but experienced barriers to being tested and vaccinated.

## Youth attitudes and experience with the COVID-19 vaccine



***“Because it’s not FDA approved and there’s absolutely no data showing it improves the immunity I have.”***

*23 y.o. White cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“Don’t know where to get the vaccine.”***

*21 y.o. White cisgender woman from Oakland*

# WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT INFECTIONS & VACCINATION

***“Some people discriminate against us Blacks and don’t want to vaccinate us.”***

*20 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“I don’t understand the safety of vaccines.”***

*17 y.o. White cisgender male youth from San Francisco*

***“There are so many people to be vaccinated that it takes a long time to wait.”***

*21 y.o. White cisgender man from San Francisco*

***“No information available.”*** *18 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco*

***“I was a little scared because some people had severe reactions after getting the vaccine.”*** 21 y.o. Black cisgender man from San Francisco

# WHAT YOUTH SAID ABOUT INFECTIONS & VACCINATION

***“They thought I was too messy to get vaccinated.”***  
20 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco

***“I don’t have the money to get vaccinated.”***  
- 20 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco

***“I don’t know how to get vaccinated.”***  
23 y.o. Black cisgender woman from San Francisco

***“I don’t know if I’m qualified.”***  
21 y.o. Latino cisgender man from San Francisco

***“I can’t make an appointment because it’s too much trouble.”***  
20 y.o. White cisgender woman from San Francisco

***“There’s a shortage of vaccines and I’m not sure they’re safe.”***  
20 y.o. White cisgender man from San Francisco

# HEALTH STATUS & SUBSTANCE USE

Youth experiencing homelessness suffer from disproportionate rates of mortality and poor health relative to their housed peers. These health disparities are linked to structural injustices, that lead to increased exposure to pollutants, criminalization, increased substance use, poor housing conditions, and other living conditions that are harmful to their health (Auerswald CL et al., 2016; Finnigan R, 2021). As in other parts of their lives, youths' health worsened with the pandemic.

**Half of YEH** in our study **rated their health as worse after the pandemic** compared to before, **4 out of 10** reported **decreased access to medical care**, and **10% decreased access to prescription medicines**. **Over one third** of participants who used alcohol, cannabis, and/or other drugs reported an **increase in substance use** since the start of the pandemic.

## Self-reported health since the start of the pandemic



**50%**  
reported a worse health status



**6%**  
reported a better health status

## Health-related resources



**40%**  
reported decreased access to medical care



**10%**  
reported decreased access to prescription medicines

## Substance use since the start of the pandemic\*

\*among those who reported using said substance

**33%**  
reported drinking more alcohol

**29%**  
reported more cannabis use

**36%**  
reported using other drugs more



# WHAT YOUTH RECOMMENDED



# WHAT YOUTH RECOMMENDED

*“The counties need to understand the dual axis of homelessness and disability. Many unhoused people and youth, are also disabled and therefore at extreme risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19. Homelessness is a public health issue. If we want to eradicate COVID, we must eradicate homelessness and fulfill the empty promises of “safety” these counties made to our youth. Fill empty houses. COVID has displaced and made youth homeless due to domestic violence situations which heightened during the shelter in place. Sweeps from police and CalTrans also increase the risk of mortality from COVID-19 either through direct transmission from unmasked police officers or, more importantly, displacement -- making unhoused folks enter highly dangerous situations with strangers in order to get basic needs met.”*

21 y.o. White nonbinary person from Berkeley

*“Stop fucking around and house people in vacant properties.”*

23 y.o. White cisgender man  
from San Francisco

*“Get more people vaccinated and create more jobs for homeless young people.”*

21 y.o. Black cisgender man  
from San Francisco

# WHAT YOUTH RECOMMENDED

*“Providing more affordable housing options (more rooms or apartments that can be rented out at a lower rates like co-ops), more aid that is easily accessible, creating legislation that makes it housing easier to attain and is more accessible for low income students and youth.”*

21 y.o. Asian nonbinary person from Berkeley

***“PUT THEM IN HOUSING!!!!  
IT IS NOT AS HARD AS THEY ARE MAKING IT SEEM.”***

24 y.o. White nonbinary person from San Francisco

*“Provide safe housing  
for young people who  
experience familial abuse.”*

19 yo Asian cisgender woman from  
Pleasanton

*“Provide better protective  
gear and hand out free face  
masks.”*

20 yo White cisgender man from  
San Francisco

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS



# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the lives of YEH we surveyed in Alameda and San Francisco Counties. Their access to basic needs was compromised by the public health response to the pandemic. **Shelter-in-place decreased their access to basic needs, and increased their hunger and poverty.** Furthermore, **youth were generally excluded from pandemic-related access to emergency and permanent housing** (SFHSH, 2023). These impacts on their housing, education, income, relationships and health will likely impact on their successful transition to adulthood.

Research has shown that the **return on investment in YEH is very high** (Foldes, 2015; Befield, 2012). **It is far more expensive to allow youth to be excluded from achieving their potential as members of our community than it is to support them towards social and economic inclusion.**

The following summary of the implications of our report is only a preliminary list of steps we can take as a community to address the ongoing effects of the pandemic on YEH. **YEH were among the first to be affected and, unless we act decisively, will be the last to recover.** Reflecting the domains of the survey, we make our recommendations here by theme. However, clearly these domains are interdependent. For instance, education can only be effectively addressed if housing and stigma are also contended with, and vice versa.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Basic Needs

Youth experienced a significant decrease in access to basic needs such as food, water, and sanitation as well as wifi, cell phone service, and transportation. Since a successful transition to adulthood depends on access to these basic needs, we recommend the following:

- Ensure basic needs access for all youth at all times. The pandemic highlighted an underlying failure to ensure their access.
- Include all people experiencing homelessness, including YEH, in disaster preparedness planning for pandemics and extreme weather events. In particular, measures must be taken to mitigate the decreased access to food, water, and sanitation that will result from future shelter-in-place orders.
- Ensure the digital equity of YEH, who require access to cell phones and wifi to meet their basic needs and to access the education, vocational training and jobs for them to successfully transition to adulthood



# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Housing

Youth's housing became even more unstable during the pandemic. One third of our sample became unhoused during the first sixteen months of the pandemic. The most frequent demand in our open-ended questions was for housing, specifically housing that was safe, stable, and affordable and that did not put youth at increased risk of infection with COVID-19. Respondents emphasized that without housing they could not work, stay in school, or stay healthy.

- Ensure that programs providing emergency housing to youth are physically safe and do not place youth at increased risk of infection.
- Offer rapid re-housing in a range of developmentally appropriate types of housing, including dorms, shared housing with peers, co-operatives, or with family.
- Include YEH in future emergency housing programs (such as Roomkey) proportional to their percentage in the overall population of people experiencing homelessness. Provide youth with youth-friendly emergency housing.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Housing

Youth's housing became even more unstable during the pandemic. One third of our sample became unhoused during the first sixteen months of the pandemic. The most frequent demand in our open-ended questions was for housing, specifically housing that was safe, stable, and affordable and that did not put them at increased risk of infection with COVID-19. Respondents emphasized that without housing they could not work, stay in school, or stay healthy.

- Ensure transition from emergency housing to transitional or permanent housing so youth do not enter or re-enter homelessness due to a disaster.
- Ensure a set-aside for youth in all housing and homelessness programs funded by the state.
- Extend public funding, particularly HUD funding, to YEH in student housing.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Education

Our survey documents only the tip of the iceberg of the educational loss experienced by YEH. Since education is the best vaccine against homelessness and the most effective way for youth to permanently exit homelessness, we recommend the following:

- McKinney-Vento activities in Alameda and San Francisco counties need to be expanded and fully staffed, with a single point of contact in every school.
- McKinney-Vento programming should be extended to public community colleges and universities.
- Fund transition coordinators in higher education to support students with financial, housing and basic needs access.
- Adequately fund school districts, community colleges, and universities to implement outreach strategies targeted to youth who have dropped out of school during the pandemic in order to lower their barriers to re-enrollment and graduation.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Education

Our survey documents only the tip of the iceberg of the educational loss experienced by YEH. Since education is the best vaccine against homelessness and the most effective way for youth to permanently exit homelessness, we recommend the following:

- Require and publicly fund services for post-secondary students with a history of homelessness on all campuses.
- Increase access to resources to link YEH to vocational training to develop employment-related skills in occupations that offer them a livable wage and job opportunities (Year Up, 2023; Larkin Street Youth Services, 2023).

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Income

Youth suffered from a lack of a financial safety net to protect their continued successful transition to adulthood even in times of crisis.

Recommendations based on our findings and successful pilot programs include the following:

- Universal basic income (also known as Direct Cash Transfers) should be extended to all YEH, including students (Chapin Hall, 2023; Point Source Youth, 2023).
- YEH who have a history of foster care and those who do not have such a history share similar histories of trauma, abuse and neglect as children. Extended foster care should be expanded to support all youth who have experienced homelessness to facilitate their successful transition to adulthood.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Relationships

Our prior research has illustrated the limited scope of youth's social networks, and the potential protective effect of the maintenance of family ties (Valente, 2013). Over half of YEH in our survey maintained the same level or an increased level of contact with family members. However, 29% experienced decreased contact with family. Furthermore, respondents reported high rates of pandemic-related death in their social networks.

- Provide psychological and support services for YEH.
- Protect access to wifi and cell phones to ensure YEH can maintain access to their social networks.
- Support family/kinship strengthening as defined and requested by youth and when restorative for youth.
- Support in identifying and building a support network if a youth's family/kinship network is not accessible or safe.



# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Discrimination & Stigma

Respondents reported increased experiences of stigma and discrimination in multiple settings since the start of the pandemic. Addressing stigma is an underlying issue which is key to addressing all the findings of our survey.

- Addressing stigma towards by making housism (the structural and interpersonal dehumanization of people experiencing homelessness) unacceptable in all settings, including housing, education, vocational education and training, work, service settings, and with the police.
- Increase public awareness of the causes, experience and solutions to youth homelessness.
- Minimize youth's risk of experiencing stigma in settings that have historically been stigmatizing e.g., by providing business-professional attire for interviews, access to hygiene products, and "know your rights" training regarding police encounters, medical care interactions, and housing interviews.
- Intentionally employ language that refers to youth's housing and support crisis versus the youth homelessness crisis.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Vaccination & Prevention

We found that vaccination of YEH lagged far behind vaccination of the general population at the time of our survey. This was true despite a minority of our sample stating they would probably or definitely not want to be vaccinated.

- Provide information regarding vaccines and access to vaccines in venues where youth are known to spend time, including social service agencies, libraries, and via street outreach.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Health status & substance use

Half of youth in our survey reported that their health had worsened since the start of the pandemic.

Among those who used alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs, one third reported increased utilization. Many youth reported worsened access to medical care.

- De-stigmatize utilization of all services for youth health and wellness.
- Provide low-barrier free access to mental health services that are youth-friendly, trauma-informed, and culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- Maximize access to Narcan and its proper administration by YEH and service providers.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Health status & substance use

Half of youth in our survey reported that their health had worsened since the start of the pandemic. Among those who used alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs, one third reported increased utilization. Many youth reported worsened access to medical care.

- Ensure universal access to inpatient and outpatient youth-centered substance abuse treatment programs.
- Provide access to buprenorphine in all primary care settings that serve YEH.
- Provide access to youth-friendly safe injection sites and safe, clean, reliable needle exchange.

# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Youth Voice

Guidelines from UNICEF, WHO, the Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and the US Interagency Council on Homelessness emphasize the importance of youth partnership and of soliciting youth voice in addressing the needs of marginalized youth, including youth experiencing homelessness (Patton, 2016; Auerswald, 2017).

- Our experience documents the need to expand methods and opportunities to conduct regular, community-wide, state-wide, and nationwide surveys for YEH to share their experiences and their recommendations regarding events and issues that affect their lives.

# FUNDING





# FUNDING

This project is/was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under award UA6MC32492, the Life Course Intervention Research Network. The information, content and/or conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

Additional funding was provided by the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, as well as the UC Berkeley School of Public Health's Martin Sisters Chair in Medical Research and Public Health.



Benioff Homelessness  
and Housing Initiative

**Berkeley** Public Health

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the youth who participated in our project for lending their voice and sharing their experiences. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their input and/or support: Ali Aronstam, Erika Benitez, Shalini Chatterjee, Colleen Kohashi, Hannah Moore, Ari Neulight, Lucy Shang, Grace Taylor and the members of the Alameda County Youth Advisory Board and the members of the Alameda County Ending Youth Homelessness Collaborative.

Many organizations supported the project in small or big ways. We give thanks to those projects below in alphabetical order and apologize for any that we may have left out.

**Abode Services - Fremont**  
**Alameda County Youth Advisory Board**  
**Berkeley City College**  
**Berkeley Free Clinic**  
**Building Futures - San Leandro**  
**City of Oakland - C'Mone Falls**  
**Covenant House California**  
**Dream Catcher**  
**First Presbyterian Hayward**  
**Food Not Bombs**  
**HuckleBerry Youth Programs**  
**Instituto Familiar de la Raza**  
**Larkin Street Youth Services**

**Legal Services for Children - San Francisco**  
**REACH Ashland Youth Center**  
**Renegade Feedings**  
**Ruby's Place**  
**SF LGBTQ Center**  
**Side by Side - Our Space**  
**Spark Voices**  
**Sunset Youth Services**  
**The Suitcase Clinic**  
**Tiny Village**  
**Young Women's Freedom Center - SF**  
**Youth Spirit Artworks**

# REFERENCES AND RESOURCES



# REFERENCES

The following are our publications regarding youth experiencing homelessness and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as our policy white papers. We hope you find them useful. They are all be freely available.

For a complete list of references for this report please click [here](#).

For more information about our research group and i4Y (Innovations for Youth) please visit <https://i4y.berkeley.edu>.

Abri Lavasani K, Aridomi H, Butzin-Dozier Z, Chu B, Ferrell S, Graham J, Cakouros B, Chiang J, Colford J, Dang H, Herring C, Kane M, Katyal T, Ma C, Martin D, Matusiewicz, McCoy S, Auerswald C. For the good of Us all: Addressing the needs of our unhoused neighbors during the COVID-19 pandemic. UCB School of Public Health Community Action Team and i4Y. 2020. **Publication Link**

Alturk R, Bains A, Bui V, Chatterjee S, Edmond J, Grover A, Juarez Armenta J, Liu E, Lutz J, McCreary S, Taylor G, Auerswald C. On the COVID-19 front line and hurting: addressing the needs of providers for youth experiencing homelessness in Berkeley and Alameda county. i4Y and UCB School of Public Health Community Action Team. 2020. **Publication Link**

Auerswald CL, Adams S, Lightfoot M. The urgent and growing needs of youths experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2020;67(4): 461–462. **Publication Link**

Borgen N, Lo J, Liu E, Auerswald C. Youth homelessness should be rare, brief, and one-time. Part I: principles and prevention: reducing the number of youth experiencing homelessness. i4Y, UCB School of Public Health. 2019. **Publication Link**

Borgen N, Lo J, Liu E, Auerswald C. Youth homelessness should be rare, brief, and one-time. Part II: decreasing the time a youth remains homeless and the percentage of youth who return to homelessness after exiting. i4Y, UCB School of Public Health. 2019. **Publication Link**

Gewirtz O'Brien JR, Auerswald C, English A, et al. Youth experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic: unique needs and practical strategies from international perspectives. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2021;68(20), 236-240. **Publication Link**

“COVID

REALLY,

REALLY,

REALLY,



Share this report!



Berkeley Public Health  Innovations for Youth

Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative