

TOWARDS  
RESILIENCY  
for  
VULNERABLE  
YOUTH

REPORT SUMMARY  
APRIL, 2011

United Way of Calgary and Area has a long history of commitment to supporting vulnerable youth in our city. In 2010, we undertook research into the experiences of vulnerable youth as they transition into adulthood including the challenges and opportunities they face.

The research process was comprised of a literature review, focus group discussions with 70 vulnerable youth connected with youth serving agencies and a survey of over 400 youth from across low-income neighbourhoods in Calgary. We heard from a truly significant number of youth about the issues that matter to them.

This summary report will lead you through the current Calgary context, key research findings and our recommendations to build on the successes in our community and ensure that this city is great for all youth.



The complete report can be found online at [www.calgaryunitedway.org/vulnerableyouth](http://www.calgaryunitedway.org/vulnerableyouth)



**MESSAGE FROM** *Ruth Ramsden-Wood, President & CEO,  
United Way of Calgary and Area*

For a city to be truly great, the conditions must exist for our youth to fulfill their potential. Why are so many of our youth struggling? Why do so many fall through the cracks? How can we create an environment which supports our young people as they transition to adulthood and propels them forward?

This transition is a time when young people are building their future economic, social and physical well-being while pursuing opportunities related to education, employment and personal development. These experiences shape their own lives as well as the well-being of the broader community. How they navigate the transition period will have lasting effects, years into the future.

Most of Calgary's youth are successfully negotiating the challenges of the transition process, drawing on a range of supports from their families and communities, thriving, and looking ahead to their futures.

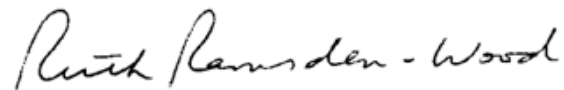
There are, however, many youth in our city facing distinct challenges during this transition period. United Way of Calgary and Area conducted research, during the summer of 2010, into the particular barriers vulnerable youth in our city face.

We found that some lack the basics necessary for well-being, from stable housing to employment opportunities and supportive families. These are the young people more likely to struggle as they move towards independent adulthood, too often missing out on opportunities to pursue healthy development and the education and skills training that would support their movement out of poverty, forever.

Poverty contributes to, and compounds, vulnerability for youth as this report highlights. Findings also emphasize the importance of social supports and inclusive services for youth to realize successful transitions. Most importantly, vulnerable youth truly want better lives. They want to be in school, to find meaningful employment and to have a safe place to live. They want to support their own families and be active members of their community. Like all youth, they have huge potential and important aspirations waiting to be realized.

It is not acceptable for a city like Calgary, with one of the youngest, wealthiest, and most educated populations of Canada, to be failing so many of our youth, especially when the solutions are available and within our reach. United Way is committed to supporting vulnerable youth to realize their full potential. We will exercise leadership, make sound investments and work with strong partners to accomplish the work.

It is our hope that by heightening awareness within our community, this report will serve to deepen our understanding and engagement on the issues raised so that we can all better support the many systems, agencies, communities and individuals who are already doing so much to make Calgary great for all youth.





This report contributes to the development of organizational strategies and highlights the need to comprehensively address the root causes of exclusion and poverty for youth through collaborative action.

## DEFINING VULNERABLE YOUTH

For the purposes of this report, youth are defined as falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. United Way considers vulnerable youth to be youth who face significant barriers to achieving or maintaining well-being. The drivers of such vulnerability often reflect poverty, exclusion, family breakdown and violence. Literature on youth vulnerability notes that certain groups are consistently overrepresented including, but not limited to: youth with mental health issues; youth in government care; street-involved youth; youth who are homeless or at risk of being homeless; Aboriginal youth; immigrant and racialized youth; youth with addictions; youth involved in the criminal justice system; youth with mental or physical disabilities; and, youth who have experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse or trauma.

## UNDERSTANDING HOW YOUTH TRANSITION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical period in youth development. Generally, it is considered to encompass the period between the mid-teens through to the mid-twenties when adolescents gradually gain independence. This period is characterized by the concentrated changes that occur as new roles, relationships and responsibilities are taken on. Core transition areas often include completing school, entering the workforce on a full-time basis, establishing financial independence and independent housing, entering stable committed relationships, and having children.

The transition period to independent adulthood for most youth, regardless of their economic or social status, has become longer and more complex than for previous generations. The steps no longer have a clear path or predictable timeline. Many Canadian youth are pursuing lengthier educations, living at home for prolonged periods or returning home after having moved out, and they are taking longer to marry, to start families and to gain economic independence. For vulnerable youth, who face additional challenges and have fewer supports to rely on, this transitional period is even more complex.

Mental illness is often described as the most significant health issue for youth, affecting an estimated 15 to 25 percent of individuals as they transition to adulthood.

## THE CALGARY CONTEXT

### How Many Youth are Vulnerable in Calgary?

#### Low Income Status

- In 2006, Statistics Canada reported that 17.7 percent of youth aged 15-24 years old in Calgary were living on a low income (before tax), which reflected an income of \$20,791 or less for an individual.
- Based on this indicator, approximately 27,000 youth in Calgary can be considered as vulnerable or at-risk of experiencing vulnerability.

#### Homelessness

- The City of Calgary's 2008 Biennial Count of Homeless Persons reported a total of 355 homeless children and youth under the age of 18 and 327 homeless youth between the ages of 18-24 years old.
- In 2009 the Calgary Homeless Foundation described the youth homeless population as substantial and growing quickly.

#### Mental Health

- Mental illness is often described as the most significant health issue for youth, affecting an estimated 15 to 25 percent of individuals as they transition to adulthood. Furthermore, mental health issues amongst youth often go undiagnosed and untreated.
- An estimated 80 percent of adults suffering from a psychiatric disorder experienced initial symptoms of their illness between the ages of 15 and 24.
- Alberta Health Services reported that 10,370 youth were treated for anxiety and 8,061 for depression in the 2007-08 period in Calgary.

#### Youth in Care

- In 2009-10, in Calgary and area, Alberta Children and Youth Services reported a monthly average of 457 youth aged 15-17 years old in government care, and an additional 116 youth 15-17 who had received services while not in care.
- Youth aging out of government care, often at age 18, are at risk for a number of problems compared to their peers. Research indicates they are more likely to drop out of school, become involved in the criminal justice system, struggle with mental health and/or substance abuse issues and face difficulties with employment.



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### Youth Involved in the Justice System

- Youth involved in the juvenile justice system tend to struggle both early and later in life. High-risk behaviours, often reflecting issues of poverty and exclusion, can lead to conflict with the law. Youth exiting the criminal justice system are less likely to complete high school or find employment.
- In 2006, Statistics Canada reported that 8,456 male youth under the age of 18 and 2,939 female youth under the age of 18 were charged under the Criminal Code in Alberta.

### Aboriginal Youth

- In 2006, Statistics Canada reported a total of 4,710 youth, or three percent of all 15-24 year olds, living in Calgary as having identified themselves as Aboriginal.
- Reflecting historic and systemic issues of racism, many Aboriginal youth tend to experience higher rates of poverty, homelessness, family breakdown, child welfare involvement and involvement in high-risk behaviours relative to other youth.

### Immigrant and Visible Minority Youth

- In 2006, there were 22,265 immigrant youth living in Calgary, representing 15.6 percent of the youth population. In the same year, 22.2 percent of all youth in Calgary were from a visible minority.
- These youth are more likely to confront barriers related to racism, discrimination and marginalization, compounding the likelihood that they will live in low-income households and struggle to access education and employment opportunities.

## KEY TRANSITION AREAS AND SUPPORTS

### High School Completion

Alberta has one of the highest high school dropout rates in the country. In 2009-10, the provincial rate for high school completion three years after entering grade 10 was 71.5 percent. Alberta Education estimates that approximately 9,000 students drop out annually across the province of Alberta, which roughly translates into 3,000 young people dropping out of high school in the city of Calgary every year. This is not a phenomenon of the economic boom, but rather has presented itself for the past decade.

While some youth subsequently return to complete their high school education, a significant number do not. The cost of a high drop out is considerable, not only on the individual, but also to society overall, as individuals who do not complete high school tend to have lower levels of civic participation and considerably higher consumption rates of healthcare and social assistance. The actual cost for a single drop out in Canada is estimated to be \$15,850, per year, throughout their lives.

**Figure 1:** Annual costs associated with dropping out of high school for Canada

| Cost Area         | Annual Cost/Person |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Healthcare        | \$ 8,000           |
| Social Assistance | \$ 4,000           |
| Crime             | \$ 224             |
| Earning Loss      | \$ 3,400           |
| Tax Revenue Loss  | \$ 226             |
| Totals            | \$ 15,850          |

\* Source: Canadian Council on Learning, 2008

### High School Completion Figures

- The high school completion rate for youth in Alberta is 71.5% within 3 years of entering grade 10.
- The high school completion rate for Aboriginal youth in Alberta is 34% within 3 years of entering grade 10.
- An estimated 9,000 students drop out of high school annually in Alberta, which translates into approximately 3,000 students dropping out in Calgary every year.

*“My family is having extreme financial problems at this point, which is why I want to help them out and get a job. They’re in debt by a lot of money right now and I would love nothing more than to help them pay that off.”*

– Participant in focus group discussion

Youth are often the first to be laid off during economically difficult times and their employment levels lag 18 months behind the general population during recovery.

## Employment

Despite Alberta’s consistently lower rates of unemployment relative to national levels, joblessness remains a reality for many, particularly youth. Youth are often the first to be laid off during economically difficult times and their employment levels lag 18 months behind the general population during recovery. For youth aged 15 to 24 years old, the unemployment rate in Alberta in February 2011 was double the rate of the general population at 11.3 percent, down from 14 percent in 2009. This affects their ability to meet basic needs in the short term as well as their long-term ability to secure permanent employment.

## Family Supports

A strong cohesive family represents a foundational aspect of healthy youth development, providing nurturing relationships, financial resources and support for the development of a strong sense of identity. Likewise, family violence and breakdown represent key drivers of vulnerability and pathways to homelessness, with recent research noting that the majority of street involved youth in Calgary reported experiences of child abuse and neglect.

Given the recent economic downturn and soaring levels of debt, many Calgary families are not in a position to be able to offer comprehensive support to youth as they navigate prolonged transitions to adulthood. Further, for many youth the decision to pursue further education and training opportunities is heavily influenced by their own and their family’s financial ability to do so. Without access to needed family financial support, vulnerable youth struggle with a more limited ability to pursue opportunities to invest in their futures.

# UNITED WAY'S RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 1. RESILIENCY

The effort that many vulnerable youth are expending on meeting their basic needs is considerable and ultimately limits their ability to focus on other areas of life.

Many vulnerable youth are exhibiting deep resiliency and coping abilities, despite the risk factors and additional challenges they face. In fact, many are developing independent living skills earlier and faster than their middle-income peers, often without the same family supports. They are juggling a myriad of adult responsibilities while also managing to stay in school, keep jobs and develop meaningful relationships with friends and family. Many vulnerable youth demonstrated high levels of resourcefulness and initiative in not only ensuring that their basic needs are met but also in their roles as caregivers to others and in pursuing their own goals of finishing school or securing housing.

In describing their ability to cope, youth consistently referred to the critical role their support networks played. They regularly rely on family, friends and professionals for specific information and resources, as well as for critical emotional and psychological support.

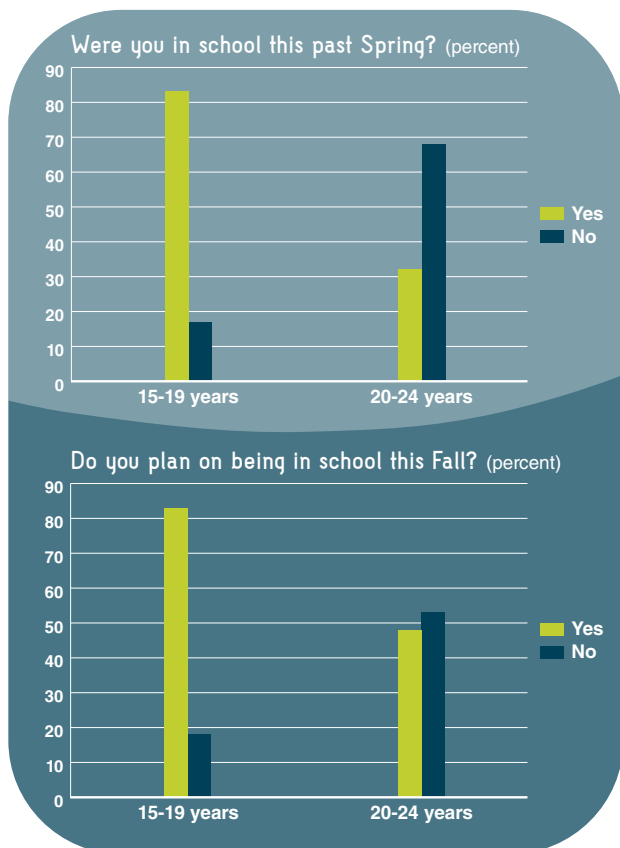
### 'Catch-22'

The coping strategies employed by vulnerable youth, such as securing full-time employment, can correspondingly be detrimental to ensuring investments for longer term well-being are made during this key transitional period. As vulnerable youth work at low-skill, low-paying jobs required to meet their basic needs they are unable to save enough for tuition and living expenses in order to pursue their education or other training opportunities, which would provide longer-term benefits. **With such opportunities out of reach, poverty becomes increasingly difficult to move out of.**

Many of these youth were coming up against multiple and interconnected barriers. For instance, a job is needed for regular income but to secure the job the individual must first be able to afford transportation, pay for relevant certifications and also buy necessary equipment or uniforms and potentially pay for child care. **Youth described a real sense of frustration with such 'catch-22' situations, noting it is often the very challenges they have struggled to overcome which then further limit their ability to secure opportunities necessary to moving beyond their position of vulnerability.**



In describing their ability to cope, youth consistently referred to the critical role their support networks played.



*“So it’s the kind of a dilemma as to how do you make money when you’re supposed to be in school, and how do you be in school when you’re trying to make money?”*

– Participant in focus group discussion

Poverty is a dominant and recurring theme when vulnerable youth speak about the challenges they face. The effort that many vulnerable youth are expending on meeting their basic needs is considerable and ultimately limits their ability to focus on other areas of life, such as academic achievement, enjoying recreational activities and focusing on their own personal development, which are all critical for healthy transitions to adulthood. It becomes clear how cycles of poverty can easily persist. Once transitioning youth are on a pathway marked by additional challenges, vast amounts of physical and emotional energy are spent trying to cope with, and overcome, these barriers.

## 2. EDUCATION: Critical but often out of reach for vulnerable youth

Discussions with vulnerable youth in Calgary clearly indicated that most valued school and recognized its importance for their well-being now and into the future. However, they also identified multiple barriers to staying connected with school, in pursuing post-secondary education, or in returning to finish their high school education. These barriers included financial costs, housing instability and family breakdown as well as other additional challenges they faced in their own lives.

### Engagement in the Education System

The survey conducted by United Way indicated that over 80 percent of 15-19 year olds had been in school in the spring and the same percentage planned to be in school come the fall term. Education participation rates for the 20-24 year old group showed 32 percent indicating they were in school this past spring but 48 percent expressed the intention to be in school for the fall semester. When asked to ‘rate their ability to remain in school’, 30 percent of respondents described it as ‘neutral’ to ‘low’, indicating a significant percentage of these youth are at risk of stopping their education and dropping out of school.

### The Value of Education

**For those vulnerable youth currently in school, education was described as a point of pride and consistently referred to as a positive aspect of their life during focus group discussions.** They spoke about future plans and

career aspirations, and the critical role education plays in enabling them to achieve these aims. Youth also clearly recognized that a high school diploma is fast becoming the minimum requirement for even low-skill, low-pay jobs in the service industry.

### Barriers to Staying Connected to Education Systems

For those youth not in school, many expressed frustration at the barriers they faced in (re)accessing education. Financial barriers, related both to the need to work full-time to cover costs of living and to the costs of courses, were the most prominent of the obstacles they identified. While some financial supports are available, they are not available to all youth who need them, with many supports only covering certain costs and based on certain eligibility criteria.

Many youth who had dropped out of school cited reasons closely related to their own situations of vulnerability, including family conflict and breakdown, addictions and lack of stable housing. It was clear that difficulties related to staying in school are compounded by the same obstacles that vulnerable youth are struggling with in other areas of their life.

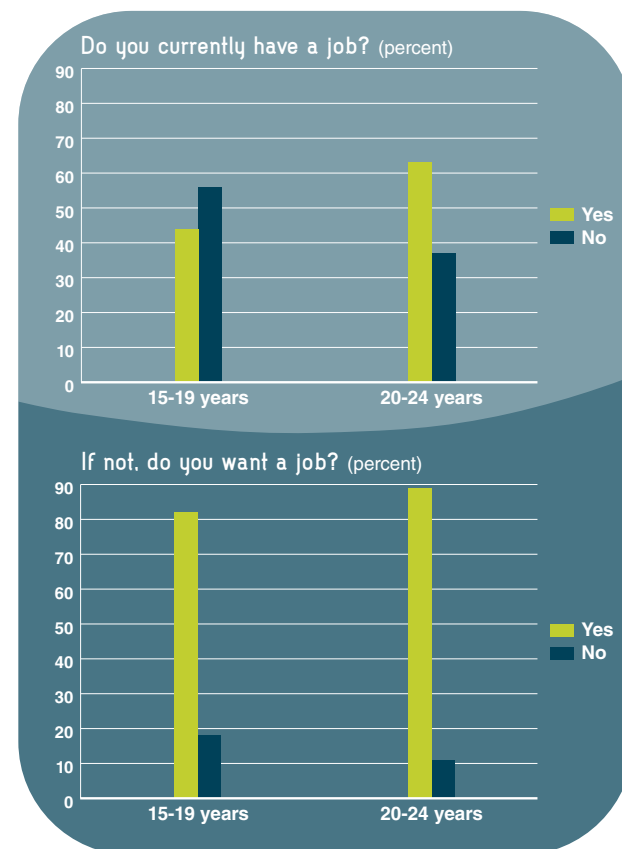
Only 44 percent of survey respondents indicated they had accessed any program or service to assist with their educational needs. This could indicate that either there is a lack of available programs offering education supports, a lack of appropriate or relevant programs for the needs of vulnerable youth or a lack of knowledge about services that youth can access.

An estimated  
10,800  
vulnerable  
youth in our  
city are wanting  
employment  
but do not  
currently have  
access to it.

## 3. EMPLOYMENT: High unemployment and growing frustration

### Struggling to Secure Needed Employment

When vulnerable youth were asked 'what is the biggest challenge you're faced with?' 53 percent indicated that employment or money was their first concern. For many vulnerable youth the need for employment stems from the financial impetus of covering basic needs. As youth in this group are often unable to access adequate financial support from their families, their need for employment is acute.



*“I think employment and education seem to go pretty much hand in hand now a days. Without education you can’t really get employed anywhere. Most places want you to have at least your diploma and even for fast food they’re starting to ask for Grade 12”*

– Participant in focus group discussion

A total of six percent of survey respondents indicated that they did not have enough food to eat while another 43 percent noted they relied on various services to meet their basic needs.

A total of 63 percent of the 20-24 year old respondents indicated that they had a job, as compared to 44 percent of the younger group. Overall, 50 percent of respondents indicated they were currently unemployed and 83 percent of those without work indicated that they did in fact want a job. This indicates a potential unemployment level of 40 percent, which translates into an estimated 10,800 vulnerable youth in our city wanting employment but not able to secure it.

### The Importance of Employment

A total of 77 percent of youth surveyed stated that having a job was either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ for them. In focus group discussions, many vulnerable youth articulated feelings of satisfaction and worth in relation to employment. When asked if they felt they contributed to their community, youth often pointed to the work they did, be it fixing roofs or repairing old flooring for instance, as a means of contributing. Others pointed to the income taxes they paid during employment as a positive contribution they could make. The majority of youth, however, noted they did not have a job and found it difficult to secure one, resulting in significant feelings of frustration and high levels of stress.

Key barriers to employment, as identified by youth, included discrimination and stigma, primarily related to race and age, as well as their lack of education and work experience. They also noted more immediate barriers in securing work, such as the need for bus tickets to be able to travel to potential places of employment or the difficulty in securing affordable childcare.

### 4. BASIC NEEDS: Too many vulnerable youth struggle with basic needs

With the lack of employment and other sources of financial support, many vulnerable youth had difficulties in meeting their basic needs. Several youth mentioned their reliance on food bank programs and other social services to ensure that they and their children had enough to eat. A total of six percent of survey respondents indicated that they did not have enough food to eat while another 43 percent noted they relied on various services to meet their basic needs.

Youth described this lack of affordable transportation as a barrier to accessing the supports and services designed to help them succeed.

### Housing

While the majority of survey respondents indicated they had safe and stable housing and over half lived with parents, there were many youth participants in focus group discussions experiencing a range of issues related to housing. Such youth identified multiple barriers to securing affordable housing. These included high costs as well as long wait times for entry into Calgary Housing, being rejected by landlords due to bad credit histories, limited past tenancy references and/or perceived discriminatory renting practices, with landlords seeking out older tenants or families. For those youth who had managed to secure independent housing, a sense of insecurity often persisted, with some expressing real fears that they would be homeless if unable to meet next month's rent.

### Transit

An emergent theme in the focus group discussions was the lack of affordable transportation. Youth described this lack of affordable transportation as a barrier to securing and maintaining employment, attending school, as well as accessing the supports and services designed to help them succeed, such as career counseling or after-school programs.

While City Transit has programs in place that are intended to make transit more affordable to students and low-income individuals, these programs are not always accessible to vulnerable youth aged 15-24 who may be out of school or unable to supply the necessary documentation to qualify for low-income transit passes once they turn 18. Many vulnerable youth are falling through these policy cracks, with impacts on their access to a range of services, resources and opportunities.

## 5. SOCIAL PROTECTION: High levels of stress and trauma affecting transitions

The stress, anxiety and violence experienced by vulnerable youth in Calgary are significant. From managing family conflict, to the grinding reality of life in poverty to the trauma associated with experiences of abuse, vulnerable youth are facing complex emotional and psychological issues. In turn, these challenges can have negative effects on vulnerable youth's resiliency and ability to cope as they navigate the demanding transition to adulthood.

*"All my money goes into rent and I'm not working so I only rent a room for \$300 a month, but that \$300 a month is money I need to get. If I don't get it I'm on the street."*

– Participant in focus group discussion

Barriers to housing identified by youth include, high costs, poor credit history, limited tenancy references, discrimination by landlords and long wait list for entry into Calgary Housing.

### Key stressors identified by youth included:

- Making major decisions without parental guidance
- Finishing school
- Navigating complex social support systems
- Managing relationships with family and friends
- Meeting basic needs and securing employment
- Not feeling safe at home or in the community

Youth participants repeatedly cited their own first hand exposure to domestic and sexual abuse, street violence, crime, chronic poverty and racial discrimination.

Overall, 21 percent of youth survey respondents rated their sense of well-being as neutral to very low and 27 percent rated their sense of safety as neutral to very low. Discussions frequently pointed to the multiple traumatic experiences some vulnerable youth have had to confront, both during their childhood as well as in their lives now, especially those who had experienced homelessness or street-involvement.

### Stress and Mental Health

The vast majority of youth across the spectrum of vulnerability indicated they are struggling with constant worry and high levels of anxiety. This was particularly associated with key areas connected to their transition to adulthood, ranging from securing employment, to finishing school, to managing their family situation and other relationships.

With a considerable number of vulnerable youth who participated in focus group discussions living in poverty or not able to fully rely on their parents, they faced numerous stressors making decisions about their life without the close guidance or support of parents, being forced to navigate complex systems of social welfare services and agencies, not always feeling safe at home or the inability to secure employment and meet basic needs were all issues raised by youth. The consequent elevated levels of anxiety and insecurity, regardless of the incredible resiliency that many youth demonstrate, must be exhausting and devastating.

### Mental Health and Addictions

Vulnerable youth are more likely to struggle with mental health issues, as well as emotional and behavioural problems, ranging from depression, anxiety and self-esteem issues to different forms of mental illness, such as bipolar disorders. Further, street-involved youth are more likely to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidality. Many youth participants openly discussed their own struggles with depression, anxiety and insomnia while others noted the difficulty in accessing mental health services. For those who were able to see a professional, they expressed frustration with the long wait times in between appointments and limited contact with doctors and counselors. **Left unaddressed, these mental health issues can have serious consequences for the well-being of youth as well as their ability to move toward greater self-reliance.**

The quality of a person's social networks and relationships, their social capital, is a critical aspect of their mental and physical well-being, their sense of inclusion and their resiliency.

### Victimization and Exclusion

Youth participants repeatedly cited their own first hand exposure to domestic and sexual abuse, street violence, crime, chronic poverty and racial discrimination. These experiences have significant, life-long impacts on a person's ability to make positive decisions for themselves and, ultimately, on their exposure to other forms of risk, including violence and poor health, as other aspects of vulnerability are compounded.

Street-involved and homeless youth represent only one facet of vulnerable youth in Calgary; however they also experience specific forms of exclusion and high rates of victimization. In a 2008 survey of street-involved youth in Calgary, 71 percent of respondents reported having experienced some form of child maltreatment. The same study described street-involved youths' home environments as characterized by dysfunction, violence and in many cases, child welfare involvement. Further, street youth's ability to protect themselves from crime is severely restricted by their poverty, including the limited choices they have for income generating activities, and their lack of adequate shelter.

In focus group discussions, several formerly street-involved youth told us the paradox created by some shelters and group homes, as certain policies inadvertently reinforce the risks such youth are exposed to. Youth living in shelters, for instance, are often only allowed to spend time there in the evening and for sleeping. Without school or employment to go to, many such youth effectively spend their days in public places, which are high-risk given the peer groups who also congregate in these areas. Youth participants repeatedly noted that they would prefer to avoid many of these public places, such as downtown parks, where they know their safety is compromised and drug use is prevalent, but that they felt there was no where else to go. With such limited options, it becomes difficult for youth to protect themselves.

### 6. SOCIAL SUPPORTS: Strengths and weaknesses in vulnerable youths' social networks

Social capital refers to a person's social network and relationships. It is a critical aspect of their mental and physical well-being, their sense of inclusion and their resiliency. Parents who advocate for their children, peers who offer positive role models, schools and communities that provide meaningful interaction, all foster positive youth development. Social capital can also have



*“It's really frustrating because I have a job and I don't work till 5:30 (pm) sometimes and you have to be out of the house (transitional housing) by 9 (am). So I go run around downtown all day or sit on a train and ride it back and forth because I hate being downtown”*

– Participant in focus group discussion

*“I was seeing my mental health worker once every two months. So basically, every time I’d take a step forward in a meeting I’d take 3 or 4 steps back in between the meetings.”*

– Participant in focus group discussion

When asked about their biggest challenge, and how they overcame it, the majority of youth respondents cited support from family or friends.

a significant influence on a range of opportunities and resources that a person has access to, including job opportunities, in-kind support, mentors and so on. Isolation and a lack of social capital are often key elements that contribute to and perpetuate poverty and exclusion.

### The Importance of Social Networks

Vulnerable youth, like other youth, rely heavily on support networks for everything from a sense of inclusion, to sharing information about resources, to guidance with longer-term decision-making. Sixty one percent of youth survey respondents rated their relationship with their friends highly and 47 percent rated their relationship with their family highly. When asked who they would turn to first for support, youth respondents ranked family first, friends second and romantic partners third. Following a question about their biggest challenge, youth were asked how they overcame it and the majority cited support from family or friends. For those vulnerable youth who are not able to rely on support, be it emotional, practical or financial, from their families, the impact is significant. They face additional challenges and potentially greater risk in every aspect of the transition to adulthood.

While vulnerable youth remain reliant on their families in critical ways, many have very strong relationships with their immediate peer groups. Street involved youth often referred to their networks of peers as their ‘street family’. These bonding networks represent a positive contribution to vulnerable youth’s ability to cope, particularly when family supports are not available. However, while such networks are critical, they are also often limited as they aren’t always able to offer exposure and access to different perspectives, positive role models, and diverse connections. It is these different connections that are most able to change the range of resources available to youth.

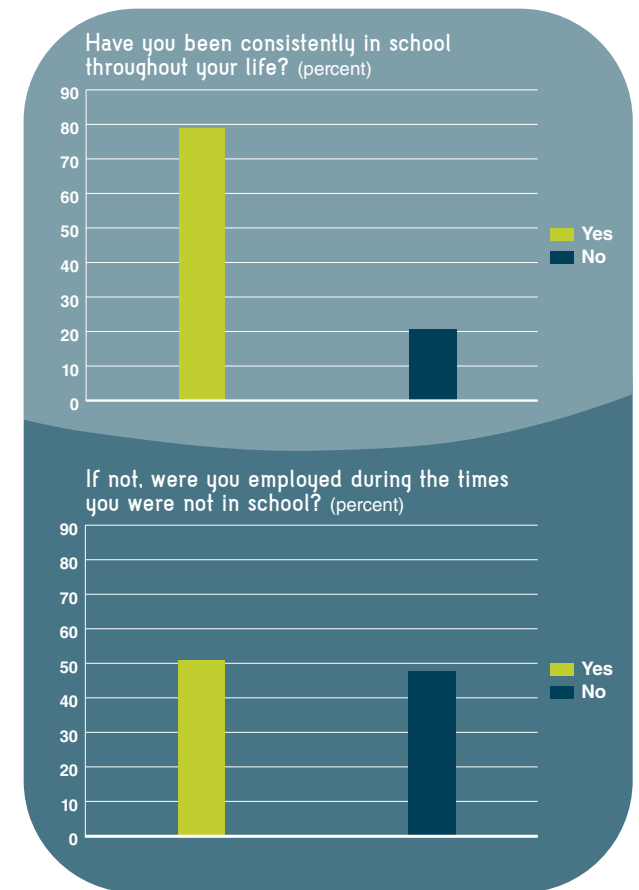
Not only do vulnerable youth struggle with multiple complex challenges but they struggle with them during a time when they often acutely need the very stability and support they lack.

Bridging networks and relationships are those that connect different communities, linking marginalized individuals and groups with those who do not experience marginalization, for instance. While vulnerable youth in Calgary demonstrate strong resiliency with their close peer support networks, they often have limited access to these forms of relationships that offer them opportunities to connect outside of their circumstances in a positive way. Many youth, for instance, gain critical work experience through summer internships that are possible based on a parent's professional contacts and connections. Vulnerable youth who are disconnected from these networks are less likely to have access to such concrete opportunities to build their assets. It is often these types of connections, as well as the more intangible impacts of exposure to different expectations and positive role models, that have the greatest impact in supporting successful transitions and, ultimately, movement out of poverty for vulnerable youth.

### Disconnected Youth

A further area of concern is the number of vulnerable youth who are not connected to key institutions during the transition to adulthood. Institutions are a critical source of support for vulnerable youth yet of the 20 percent of youth respondents in the survey who stated they had not been consistently connected with school, only half indicated they were employed during these times. For the other half of these respondents, they were out of school and out of work. Disconnected from major institutions during the transition to adulthood, such youth are missing out on critical sources of support and opportunities for asset building.

In addition, vulnerable youth are often highly mobile and transient, both in their daily routines as well as over the long term. These youth are regularly changing residences, changing shelters, changing jobs and changing friends. As a result of this lack of stable supports they are likely to have weaker social capital networks to draw upon as they navigate the transition to adulthood.





Successful transitions lead to better health outcomes, increased levels of well-being, improved levels of employability and earnings and greater community engagement.

## CONCLUSIONS

**Many vulnerable youth in Calgary are struggling during the transition to adulthood.** Whether vulnerable youth have had experiences with poverty or with family breakdown, for instance, the key challenges they struggle with during the transition period tend to centre around: a lack of family supports, difficulties with staying engaged in educational institutions, a lack of employment opportunities, chronic stress, limited community integration or combinations of these and other issues.

The ability of vulnerable youth to overcome such challenges is often limited given their inter-connected nature. The 'catch-22' situations described by many youth reflect the complexity of their lived experiences. Without access to one resource they are restricted in their ability to secure other assets or resources, and thus struggle to pursue critical opportunities which would support them to move out of poverty.

**The impact of the transition to adulthood is significant for the well-being of youth and our community.** There is a clearly established link between a youth's ability to make investments in their personal and professional development during the transition period and a significantly higher likelihood of leading a resilient adult life. Successful transitions lead to better health outcomes, increased levels of well-being, improved employability and earnings and greater community engagement.

Vulnerable youth themselves recognize the importance of the transition period and have clearly articulated their desire for a better life, for real opportunities to pursue their aspirations and to actively participate in their communities. Many vulnerable youth want to go back to complete high school or be able to continue on to post-secondary education. They want to support their own families and they want to pursue different pathways. Their ability to do so affects us all.

**Investing in vulnerable youth supports them to successfully transition into adulthood and lead resilient lives.** Transitions to adulthood represent a critical time for transforming and breaking inter-generational cycles of poverty. It is a time when youth are able to expand their opportunities through education, skills training and personal development, ultimately laying the foundation for meaningful, resilient lives.

If vulnerable youth can access the supports and resources they need during this period, they are better able to pursue these opportunities and invest in their futures. Those supports may be in the form of a positive role model or a caring adult, whose influence changes their expectations and perspectives, or alternatively in the form of bursaries or housing supports, enabling vulnerable youth to meet their basic needs and pursue their education. The approaches that frame such supports and resources need to be grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of vulnerable youth as well as the inter-connected nature of the challenges they face.

## UNITED WAY RECOMMENDATIONS

We cannot afford to continue to fail so many youth in our city. There are a range of responses and actions that as a community we can undertake to lessen these struggles and work towards the vision that all youth in Calgary grow up great. Some are described below. Importantly, vulnerable youth need the power of our collective attention, effort and voice, emanating from every corner of the city, to ensure that their transition to adulthood is also a transition from poverty to possibility.

### **1. More comprehensive and coordinated responses are required to address the complex issues faced by vulnerable youth and support them throughout their transition to adulthood.**

#### **Provincial Government:**

- To ensure that vulnerable youth can access needed services throughout the prolonged transition period, we encourage the provincial government to review relevant legislation and policies and provide access to services beyond existing age-based eligibility criteria.
- The extension of critical supports available to youth receiving assistance through Alberta Children and Youth Services to other vulnerable youth in our community who are without adequate family and financial supports would have significant positive impacts on their well-being.





- We believe the most successful approach to addressing the complex barriers faced by vulnerable youth includes coordinated, cross-ministry responses from implicated government systems. The establishment of a designated 'Youth Opportunities Secretariat' would play a key role in ensuring such a joined-up approach amongst relevant Ministries and programs.

#### All Levels of Government:

- The development of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy at the municipal, provincial and federal level, which takes into account the experiences of vulnerable youth, is a critical area for government action. Poverty is a key driver of vulnerability for youth and has negative impacts on their ability to successfully transition to adulthood.

#### United Way:

- United Way is currently developing a three to five year Vulnerable Youth Transitions to Adulthood Strategy aimed at enhancing organizational investments, collaborations and leadership in support of vulnerable youth who are disconnected from work and school. The strategy, to be launched in the fall of 2011, will provide at least half a million dollars in new funding for vulnerable youth in our community.
- United Way is currently conducting research, in the form of a systems mapping, to better understand existing government mandates, funding and services in relation to vulnerable youth as well as existing gaps in support. This research will inform United Way's work with government in ensuring more comprehensive supports for vulnerable youth.
- Through its annual campaign, ongoing relationships with donors and leadership in the community, United Way will continue to champion issues affecting vulnerable youth in Calgary and work with key partners in order to implement collaborative, impactful responses.

## 2. Vulnerable youth must be supported to (re)engage in education, with the entire community mobilized to realize this aim.

### Provincial Government:

- The provincial government can support high school completion by extending the age cap for publicly-funded high school from 19 to 24 years old and by raising the age of mandatory school attendance from 16 to 17 years old. The new *Education Act* is set to be tabled in 2011 and represents an opportunity to demonstrate such a commitment to improved graduation. United Way will continue to work with government partners in advocating for these key policy changes to be enacted.

### Community:

- An intentional and collective effort is required to address the barriers that contribute to elevated high school drop out rates. The identification of shared goals aimed at increasing high school completion rates over the next five to 10 years by all systems and stakeholders would represent a key step forward.
- Some schools in our community are implementing promising practices designed to increase appreciation of the contributions of Aboriginal people to Alberta. We encourage all relevant education systems to include such cultural awareness and appreciation as regular components of teaching practice to counter racism and the disengagement of Aboriginal children and youth from conventional schools.

### United Way:

- UpStart, a United Way initiative, is working with community leaders across sectors and systems, including education, justice and business, to develop shared actions and measurement aimed at improving school completion rates for all children and youth in Calgary.

*“I just want to go to school so that I can have a good career and then I can maintain my life and my son’s life, because I want it to be the best it can be.”*

– Participant in focus group discussion



- The unacceptably low rates of high school completion amongst Aboriginal youth require the entire community's attention and action. United Way is supporting such community-led work through its Full Circle initiative, which is focused on leveraging existing community services in assisting Aboriginal youth to complete high school. This initiative is one aspect of United Way's Aboriginal Youth and Education Strategy, a 10-year commitment to address the root causes of low graduation rates for Aboriginal youth through collaborative action with a range of stakeholders, including school districts, donors and agencies.

### **3. Vulnerable youth need improved opportunities to access meaningful training and employment opportunities.**

#### **Provincial Government:**

- Given the chronically high unemployment rates experienced by many vulnerable youth, and the detrimental impacts this has on their ability to successfully transition to adulthood, a focused Youth Employment Strategy represents a key tool for government impact in this area. Based on a renewed commitment from the government, this strategy must be responsive to the particular needs of vulnerable youth. United Way is committed to working with Alberta Employment and Immigration and other government partners to realize such aims.

#### **United Way:**

- United Way is supporting a collaborative initiative, facilitated by The City of Calgary's Youth Employment Centre, to provide pregnant and young mothers with opportunities for skills training, personal development and practical work experience, supported with personalized coaching throughout. United Way will distribute learnings from this initiative to all agency providers, funders and stakeholders.

- United Way will seek to engage with employers in creating intentional strategies to provide vulnerable youth with training, mentoring and employment opportunities. Such a commitment could significantly strengthen vulnerable youths' access to meaningful employment opportunities as well as support the city's workforce development.

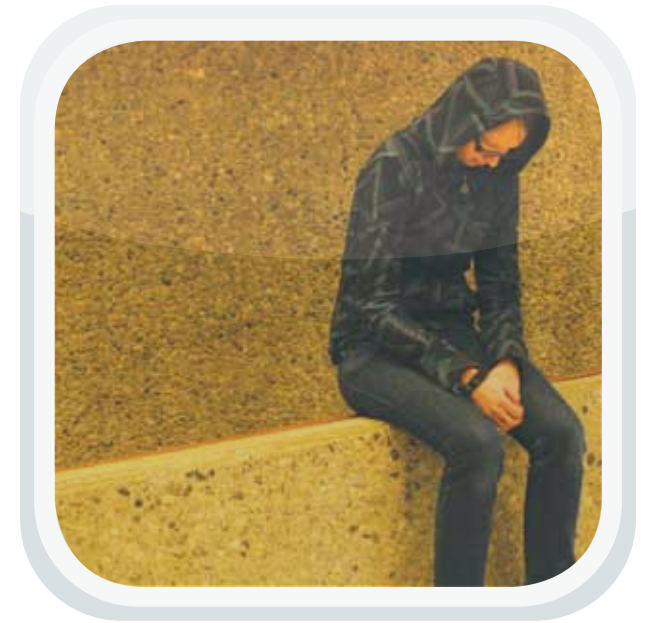
#### **4. Improved access to basic needs for vulnerable youth will enable movement from crisis to stability.**

##### **Municipal Government:**

- A more streamlined and accessible application process for low-income discounts across municipal services, including transit, would greatly support vulnerable youth. This includes accepting multiple forms of 'proof of income' as vulnerable youth are often unable to provide the currently required Notice of Assessment from Canada Revenue Agency.
- We encourage the municipal government to further strengthen access to affordable transit for vulnerable youth by eliminating school enrollment requirements for the Youth Transit Pass and by standardizing age-based discounts for youth across city services at a minimum of 50 percent. United Way recently presented recommendations to City Administration and City Council and will continue to work with key partners in realizing improved access to transit for vulnerable youth.

##### **All Levels of Government:**

- Municipal and provincial government support for an increased quantity of affordable housing stock through relevant policy changes, such as liberalized secondary suites regulations, could make a significant contribution to addressing the housing needs of vulnerable youth.
- More robust resources for the many vulnerable youth who are precariously housed, from funding for emergency rent banks to other resources, such as damage deposits and housing repair funds, is a further critical area for government leadership.





- Collaboration between the provincial and federal government to adapt eligibility criteria and increase levels of income assistance so that they are more reflective of vulnerable youth's lived experiences and needs, would contribute to movement from crisis to stability for this group.

#### United Way:

- United Way will support the Calgary Homeless Foundation and other key partners in developing and implementing the 10 Year Plan to End Youth Homelessness.
- United Way supports access to basic needs for vulnerable youth through enhanced funding for youth bursary programs for high school completion as well as support for training programs and post-secondary education.

#### 5. **Vulnerable youth are confronting barriers in accessing comprehensive mental health supports.**

##### Provincial Government:

- Given that many mental health issues have peak rates of incidence during the transition to adulthood, the mental health system needs to be at its most comprehensive and integrated during this period in youths' lives. By ensuring seamless supports for youth aged 15-24 years old, rather than requiring them to switch from the diagnostic and treatment services available for children to those available for adults at the age of 18, Alberta Health Services would significantly strengthen access to appropriate mental health supports for all youth.

##### United Way:

- In recognizing the importance and complexity of mental health issues affecting vulnerable youth, United Way will engage in further research and consultation, including through current research that is mapping relevant government systems and gaps. This will enable a better understanding of strategic areas for leadership and action in regards to strengthening responses.

## 6. **Vulnerable youth must have access to a range of diverse formal and informal networks and relationships in their communities.**

### All Levels of Government:

- Strong family relationships remain a foundational aspect of youth development and healthy transitions into adulthood. From family strengthening interventions to conflict mediation, government plays a critical role in ensuring adequate support for such efforts that can directly contribute to vulnerable youths' well-being.
- For those youth who do not have family supports to rely on, comprehensive wrap-around supports that provide not only a range of services but also assistance in navigating systems, connecting with positive role models and pursuing opportunities for personal development would have a positive impact on vulnerable youths' ability to successfully transition to adulthood.

### United Way:

- United Way's Vulnerable Youth Transitions to Adulthood Strategy will emphasize the importance of social supports, both formal and informal, for youth as they transition to adulthood and will fund collaborative and innovative community initiatives that strengthen positive peer and family relationships as part of existing service delivery.
- United Way has developed two exploratory projects which engage youth and seek to strengthen social capital: the first is a digital storytelling project implemented in collaboration with the University of Calgary that provided vulnerable youth the opportunity to articulate their experiences through the creation of digital stories while fostering relationship-building between youth participants from the community and university. The second project, led by United Way's BeCause initiative, will convene a multi-stakeholder table, aimed at exploring and implementing creative ways of strengthening access to alternative networks that lead to increased opportunities for vulnerable youth.



# RESEARCH DESIGN

## Purpose of this study

A mixed methods approach was used to guide the research process. Given the difficulty associated with reaching vulnerable youth, by employing different data collection methods during different phases of the research, the research findings better reflect the full spectrum of vulnerable youth in Calgary.

Qualitative data was collected in July 2010 through a series of focus group discussions and quantitative data was collected through a survey delivered between late July and early August 2010. Findings were integrated into a single framework during the interpretation phase of the research process conducted during the fall of 2010.

## Research Framework

The key research questions were identified as follows:

- To articulate the challenges and opportunities associated with the transition to adulthood for vulnerable youth in Calgary
- To understand the impact of this transition on the well-being of youth, their families and the community
- To understand how United Way can better respond to support our youth and the staff/agencies who work with them

## Advisory Council

The research process was guided by an Advisory Council, composed of leading experts and practitioners from the Calgary community. Members were selected based on their areas of expertise, ranging from youth-related policy issues, service-delivery for youth in Calgary and/or academic perspectives on vulnerable youth.

## Primary and Secondary Research

### Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to identify the key barriers, facilitators, indicators and pathways for successful transitions from adolescence into adulthood.

### Secondary Statistics

Local statistics on vulnerable youth and the key indicators for successful transitions were gathered from existing sources.

### Focus Group Discussions

A total of nine focus groups discussions with 70 vulnerable youth connected to different agencies in Calgary were conducted.

### Survey and Questionnaire Design

The survey of youth was conducted from late July through to early August 2010 and delivered in low income neighbourhoods across the city by youth research teams. Questions were focused on participant's experiences and connections with education and employment as well as the nature and role of their support networks and the most critical challenges they face as they transition to adulthood.

Participants were screened based on their age, their voluntary participation as well as residence in lower-income neighbourhoods. There were a total of 493 respondents to the survey and 413 clean entries entered into the database for analysis, which was done using Excel and SPSS software.

### Facilitated Discussion with Youth-Serving Agency Staff

A facilitated discussion was held with 18 staff members of youth-serving agencies in August 2010. The session was aimed at fostering reflection and further exploration of potential programming implications and blockages at policy levels based on initial research findings from the focus groups discussions.



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## ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS

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### Vulnerable Youth Research Project

Dr. Daniel Lai – University of Calgary (*Co-Chair*)

Adam Legge – Calgary Chamber of Commerce  
(*Co-Chair*)

Cheryl Doherty, Ronni Abraham – Boys and Girls  
Club Calgary

Barb Boyer – United Way Volunteer

Helene Weir, Tanis Cochrane, Christy Daniels – YMCA

Camille Farrag – Calgary Homeless Foundation

Shelley Heartwell – The Alex

Cheryl Joynt, Doug Borch – City of Calgary

Bob Ritchie, Amory Hamilton, Curtis Olson  
– Calgary Police Service

Ann Rowbotham – Children and Youth Services

Hugh Williamson – United Way Volunteer

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**Principal Research:** Alison Thompson, MA;

United Way of Calgary and Area, under the

direction of Dr. Loreen Gilmour, PhD, MBA;

Director Poverty Initiatives and Research,

United Way of Calgary and Area

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**PHOTO CREDITS:** Participants in "Youth by Youth: A Digital  
Storytelling Project"



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