

## An Overlooked Voice: Chicago Youth Perspectives

OCTOBER 2023

### Background

In June and July of 2023, A Better Chicago engaged Global Strategy Group to conduct 3 in-person focus groups among Black and Latinx Chicago youth and an online survey of 700 Chicago 10–24-year-olds in August. The goal of the focus groups and survey was to gain firsthand knowledge from Chicago youth of the current education and career development opportunities available to them, current challenges they are facing, as well as the supports and investments they believe are needed for Chicago's young people to thrive in education, career, and life.

### Key Findings

- Mental health and well-being is a major concern among Chicago youth; more than 9 in 10 say it has become a problem with people their age and 7 in 10 say it is a major problem. Despite broad agreement that mental health is a problem facing youth, the factors negatively impacting mental health largely vary by demographics. Notably, when asked about seeking help on the issue, parents are seen as most helpful, while very few say the same of school counselors. Further, non-school programs positively influence how youth view mental health support.
- Non-school community-based programs are having a positive impact on Chicago's youth - and in many ways are filling the gap left by schools when it comes to teaching students' life skills that they deem important. Overall, youth have more confidence in non-school community programs' ability to prepare them for life skills.
- Overwhelming majorities of youth would like to see more programs aimed at job skills, helping secure financial aid for college, as well as mentoring and coaching - especially when it comes to helping develop social and professional skills.
- While nearly all current Chicago students plan to graduate high school and pursue post-secondary education, there are signs that serious barriers exist. Many current students express struggling to balance responsibilities at home with school - this is especially true among youth of color. Importantly, responsibilities at home were also the top contributing factor for why some of today's unenrolled youth did not graduate high school.

# Chicago's youth see an overwhelming need for more mental health support

Across all age groups, races, and gender, mental health and well-being is seen as a major problem. Nine in ten (92%) Chicago youth overall believe mental health is a problem with people their age, with 71% saying it's a major problem. Similar findings crossed all age groups, races, and gender, however, the factors negatively impacting mental health varied by demographics. For instance, young white and Hispanic females were more likely to believe loneliness negatively impacts mental health than their peers, while Black youth (across gender) believe the death of someone you know plays a larger role than their peers. The following is detailed in the table below:

**How much do you think each of the below has an impact on a person's overall mental health and well-being?**  
**% Major impact**

|                                              | White male | White female | Black male | Black female | Hispanic male | Hispanic female |
|----------------------------------------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| [If over 18] Early childhood abuse or trauma | 77         | 86           | 66         | 85           | 76            | 84              |
| Physical abuse                               | 65         | 74           | 74         | 78           | 78            | 79              |
| Loss of a relationship due to death          | 71         | 71           | 80         | 81           | 63            | 73              |
| Crime / lack of security                     | 64         | 69           | 73         | 74           | 71            | 79              |
| Bullying                                     | 52         | 75           | 76         | 79           | 66            | 84              |
| Discrimination / racism                      | 51         | 71           | 69         | 71           | 69            | 80              |
| Loneliness or isolation                      | 56         | 75           | 62         | 68           | 54            | 78              |
| Social media                                 | 57         | 64           | 72         | 69           | 61            | 72              |
| Lack of education                            | 66         | 64           | 66         | 59           | 51            | 70              |
| Peer pressure                                | 47         | 55           | 66         | 69           | 47            | 75              |
| Technology                                   | 55         | 52           | 49         | 52           | 34            | 53              |
| Getting older                                | 29         | 30           | 41         | 41           | 31            | 44              |

Throughout focus groups, Chicagoans consistently express the need for more support with regards to mental health. The youngest respondents repeatedly expressed having instability in their mental health—including moments of self-doubt, lack of confidence, fear that they won't reach their goals, and struggling to control their emotions in certain situations. Older participants relay their own struggles with mental health too—often feeling as if they (as Black men) are not able to have or express emotions with others, and in times of need turn to drugs. Looking back on their own lives, older respondents pointed out that many struggles with mental health start young and believe today's youth need more support.

"I feel like a lot of people my age are starting to struggle with mental health."

-12-year-old, Hispanic girl

"When I turned 13, I felt like I had horrible mental health. And I felt like I couldn't go past that. Like I wouldn't feel confident in myself."

-13-year-old, Hispanic girl

"I want to be able to know that I'm able to control my emotions and be in control of what I do."

-14-year-old, Black boy

**Parents are seen as a source of help when it comes to mental health and well-being, but youth of color are less likely to say so.** When it comes to finding solutions youth are most likely to volunteer their parents as most helpful when dealing with mental health issues, however youth of color are less likely than their white peers to see their parents as helpful (white 49%, Black 30%, Hispanic 26%). This question forced a choice across multiple potential sources of help, and notably, few youth (3%) believe school counselors would be most helpful to people experiencing mental health and well-being issues; this holds true across age, gender, and race.

**And if you were experiencing an issue or a problem like the ones you were asked about earlier, who do you think would be the most helpful in helping you through it? (Choose 1)**

|                                    |     | Male | Female | 10–14 | 15–19 | 20–24 | White | Black | Hisp. |
|------------------------------------|-----|------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| My parents or legal guardian       | 35% | 40   | 30     | 63    | 26    | 19    | 49    | 30    | 26    |
| My best friend                     | 15  | 15   | 15     | 9     | 21    | 15    | 16    | 12    | 17    |
| A therapist or psychologist        | 13  | 9    | 17     | 7     | 10    | 19    | 13    | 11    | 13    |
| My closest friends or friend group | 9   | 8    | 10     | 4     | 8     | 14    | 5     | 10    | 12    |
| My sibling or siblings             | 8   | 8    | 9      | 1     | 13    | 11    | 3     | 11    | 11    |
| Another close relative             | 5   | 6    | 4      | 3     | 5     | 7     | 3     | 7     | 6     |
| A teacher, coach, or mentor        | 3   | 4    | 3      | 6     | 1     | 3     | 5     | 3     | 2     |
| A school counselor                 | 3   | 4    | 3      | 5     | 2     | 3     | 2     | 3     | 5     |
| Police or public safety officer    | 3   | 3    | 2      | 0     | 6     | 1     | 1     | 2     | 5     |
| Other                              |     | 1    | 4      | 0     | 4     | 4     | 1     | 5     | 2     |
| None of these                      | 3   | 2    | 4      | 2     | 3     | 5     | 2     | 7     | 3     |

**Importantly, non-school community-based programs have a positive influence in how youth view mental health support.** Among Chicago youth that participate(d) in non-school community-based programs, they are much more likely to give their community higher marks when it comes to providing services and help to those with mental health and well-being issues (60% good/excellent, 40% fair/poor, net+20) than youth who are not involved in similar programs (44% good/excellent, 56% fair/poor, net -12).

**About this research:** Global Strategy Group conducted 3 in-person focus groups in Chicago among young Black and Hispanic girls (ages 10-18), young Black and Hispanic boys (ages 12–16), and young Black men (ages 25-32) who participate in non-school programs on Chicago's west side.

Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 700 Chicago 10–24-year-olds between August 14 and August 31, 2023. The margin of error at the 95% confidence level is +/-3.7%. The margin of error on sub-samples is greater.

**Non-school community-based programs have demonstrated a real model for success in supporting Chicago's youth, and importantly may be more effective at filling key gaps in their future development than the school system overall.** Among those who have participated in community-based programs, overwhelming majorities believe those experiences helped develop skills needed to succeed in the real world (net +82), for life and its everyday challenges (net +82), and to enter the workforce right out of high school (net+72).

**Further, Chicago youth say those same community-based programs have been far more helpful in developing a wide range of skills that they believe are important.** The table below lists skills ranked by how important Chicago youth said each skill will be in ten years, along with their perceptions on whether schools are focused on each skill and whether non-school programs help develop each skill. Notably, outside of reading and writing, among the top 10 most important skills to develop, Chicago youth believe non-school community-based programs help fill the gap from schools.

| Skills<br>(Ranked by importance in 10 years)                         | Schools focusing on... |    |     | [If current/former participant]<br>Non-school programs help with... |    |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|----|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-----|
|                                                                      | Yes                    | No | Net | Yes                                                                 | No | Net |
| Reading and writing                                                  | 92                     | 7  | +85 | 68                                                                  | 31 | +38 |
| Communication                                                        | 78                     | 19 | +59 | 84                                                                  | 15 | +69 |
| Social and emotional skills                                          | 59                     | 31 | +28 | 77                                                                  | 19 | +58 |
| Financial skills like how to budget, save, and invest money          | 49                     | 48 | +1  | 52                                                                  | 47 | +5  |
| Critical thinking                                                    | 71                     | 24 | +47 | 76                                                                  | 22 | +54 |
| Judgment and decision making                                         | 64                     | 29 | +35 | 75                                                                  | 22 | +53 |
| The ability to tolerate unpleasant feelings or stressful situations  | 48                     | 46 | +2  | 69                                                                  | 27 | +42 |
| Teamwork and collaboration with others                               | 84                     | 13 | +71 | 90                                                                  | 9  | +81 |
| Creativity                                                           | 67                     | 22 | +45 | 77                                                                  | 19 | +58 |
| Networking                                                           | 48                     | 41 | +7  | 60                                                                  | 38 | +22 |
| Mathematics                                                          | 89                     | 10 | +79 | 56                                                                  | 43 | +13 |
| Public speaking                                                      | 68                     | 28 | +40 | 67                                                                  | 31 | +36 |
| How to start a business                                              | 36                     | 59 | -23 | 40                                                                  | 57 | -17 |
| Foreign language                                                     | 74                     | 25 | +49 | 47                                                                  | 52 | -5  |
| The ability to successfully take standardized tests, like SAT or ACT | 77                     | 18 | +59 | 49                                                                  | 48 | +1  |

**Overwhelming majorities of Chicago youth want more community programs to be provided—especially programs focused on job skills training, access to college aid, and building social skills through coaching and mentorship.**

- Programs that provide skills training, internships, and job opportunities (84% more, 64% much more)
- Programs that help students get scholarships, secure financial aid, and apply for colleges (85% more, 55% much more)
- Programs that build professional and social skills through coaching and mentorship (82% more, 53% much more)
- Job training programs (85% more, 51% much more)

**While most believe there are lots of community programs available in their area, there is a stark difference across race;** Black youth (65% lots of programs, 35% not a lot of programs) are nearly three times more likely to say there are not a lot of community programs in their area where they can learn interesting skills compared to white youth (88% lots, 12% not). Hispanic youth (75% lots, 25% not) are also less likely than their white counterparts to believe there are lots of programs available.

## Most Chicago youth plan to graduate high school and pursue post-secondary education, though responsibilities at home can often become a serious barrier.

The vast majority of current Chicago students intend to graduate high school. Further, 9 in 10 expect they will continue their education after high school, with a majority of them planning to pursue a four-year college, however male youth and youth of color are more unsure about their plans post-high school.

- Nearly two-thirds of Chicago youth plan on pursuing a four-year degree; however, there is a bit of a racial gap with white youths (72% four-year college) more likely to say so compared to Black (52%) and Hispanic (55%) youth.
- Meanwhile, Black youth are more likely to pursue work (11%, compared to White 4% and Hispanic 5%) as Hispanic youth are more likely to pursue vocational school (10%, compared to 4% white and 3% Black).

**Having to work to support family is a top reason for why some did not graduate high school, and importantly, many Chicago youth today see responsibilities at home as a barrier in school.** Though the sample size is small for this specific audience, qualitatively among unenrolled youth who did not graduate from high school, the primary reasons for not graduating were having to work to support family (26%) and not enjoying school (26%). Among currently enrolled students, more than two in five say they have responsibilities at home that make it harder for them to focus on school—Black (46%) and Hispanic youth (48%) are far more likely to say so than white youth (29%). These responsibilities take the form of financial responsibilities or often caring for younger siblings in the absence of a parent. In an open-ended question among those who did not graduate high school, one youth cited this exact issue—saying “programs to help support kids in need of juggling a job and school at the same time,” would have helped them graduate. Further, during focus groups, multiple current students shared having concerns for their own success because they had to focus on others:

“I [worry about] not having opportunities. Not having as much time because I’m busy at home. I’ve got two little siblings.”

–15-year-old, Hispanic boy

“I have to stay on edge because I’ve got a little sister. I’ve got a baby sister. My mom works night shifts and so she can’t get up and cook breakfast for them, so I get up at 6:30 in the morning. I cook for them. I make sure they’ve got their clothes on for school. Things of that nature.”

–13-year-old, Black boy

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## Community-based programs fill key gaps in youth skill-building & development where schools fall behind, but more access to those programs is needed

Chicago youth have mixed views on the effectiveness of the education they’re receiving at school—especially when it comes to preparing them for the real world. Most Chicago youth feel schools prepare them with skills to succeed in college (net +78), but less so when it comes to skills to succeed in the real world (net +68), for life and its everyday challenges (net +74), or to enter the workforce right out of high school (net +65). Further, Chicago youth believe schools are overfocused on standardized testing, while leaving major gaps on financial skills and entrepreneurship.

**A BETTER CHICAGO**

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