



2025 Youth Survey + Focus Group Findings

About the Research

For the third consecutive year, A Better Chicago partnered with Global Strategy Group (GSG) to survey Chicago youth (aged 10–24) and gather opinions on various topics. The survey was conducted between June and July 2025, and census data was used to ensure a sample that is representative of the citywide population. Additionally, three focus groups were conducted at local youth-serving nonprofit organizations to collect additional qualitative data.

Chicago youth were asked about a range of issues including education, school attendance patterns, deportation fears, school engagement, recreation spaces, community violence, mental health, and more. Many questions were similar or identical to those asked by A Better Chicago and GSG in previous years to track change over time.

Objectives

- Gain firsthand knowledge from Chicago youth about the challenges they face, what supports they need to thrive, and their outlook on the future.
- Bring the youth perspective to the forefront to better inform decision-making in the nonprofit, philanthropic, and youth advocacy space.

KEY FINDINGS

1

Mental Health

Mental health continues to be a challenge for young Chicagoans and has remained universally high across groups and time (an overwhelming 95% say it's a problem). Worry among youth of color has mounted in recent years.

2

Safe and Welcoming Spaces to Gather

Youth desire places where they can relax and be themselves without worry. Nearly one-fourth say there is a need for more spaces that are built for them, with youth living on the South and Southwest Sides of the city reporting the greatest desire for more recreational spaces.

3

Community Violence

Consistent with last year's findings, almost two-thirds of Chicago youth report having witnessed community violence, with nearly a quarter witnessing violence weekly or more. Young people point to a supportive school environment, community programs, and strong role models as key factors in helping them and their peers stay safe and out of harm's way.

4

Deportation Fears

Fears around deportation and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids are impacting young people, especially the Hispanic/Latinx community. Over half of Latinx youth over the age of 15 say they worry a lot about a family member or friend being deported due to immigration status.

5

School Engagement and Belonging

In-school opportunities like sports, clubs, study groups and tutoring, particularly during the week after school, keep young people engaged and connected to their learning environment.

6

Education and College Readiness

Nearly all Chicago students (92%) believe schools are preparing them with the skills they need to succeed in college, but less so for the real world and professional jobs.

7

Chronic Absenteeism

Nearly one-third of young Chicagoans say they sometimes or often miss school, and data suggests Latinx females are most at risk for missing school.

8

Community Programs

Youth are seeking more access to community-based programs, particularly ones that prepare them for real life and connect them to opportunities, networks, and jobs. Nearly all who have participated in community-based programming report having enjoyed their experience.

9

Skills for the Future

Young Chicagoans' appetite for more programs has remained high but especially in the case of financial and business skills, academic programs, and peer tutoring.

10

Youth Optimism

Chicago youth are overwhelmingly optimistic (98%) about their future, and students who participate in community programs are even more hopeful.

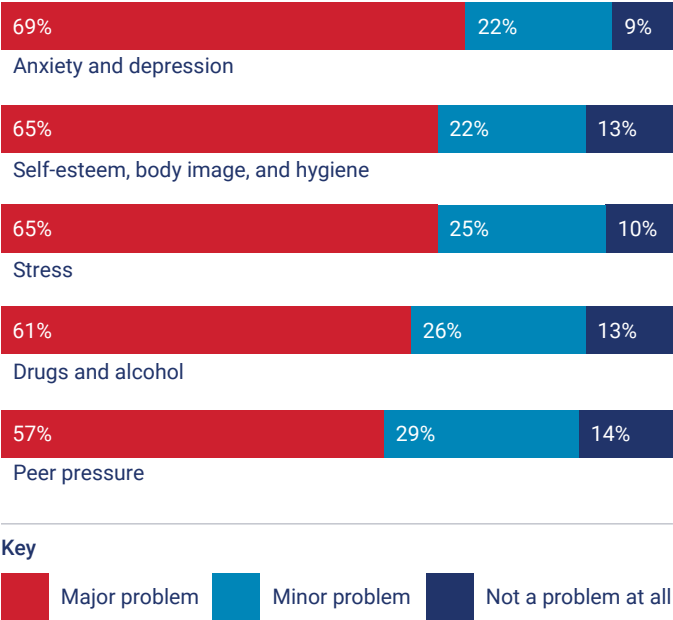
Mental health continues to be a challenge for young Chicagoans and has remained universally high across groups and time (an overwhelming 95% say it’s a problem). Worry among youth of color has mounted in recent years.

- **Anxiety/depression** still tops the list as the biggest mental health issue young people face (91% say it’s a problem), along with stress (90%), self-esteem/body image/hygiene (87%), and drugs and alcohol (87%).
- While more than half of the youth surveyed have already sought mental health services, they are still seeking more reliable access to support. Among those who haven’t received **mental health services**, over one-third (38%) say they have wanted or needed support for their mental health and well-being.
- Regardless of race, **girls** are more in tune with the impacts of life experiences on their mental health. Early childhood abuse or trauma (84%), loneliness or isolation (77%), bullying (76%), and loss of a relationship due to death (76%) have major impacts on their mental health

“I recently started doing therapy two weeks ago. But before that I had really bad issues, I didn’t really have any coping mechanisms. I would shut down, bottle up all my problems, until I couldn’t handle it no more and I would just bust out crying on a regular basis.”

– Black middle-school girl

How big of a problem would you say each of the following is for people your age these days? (top five)

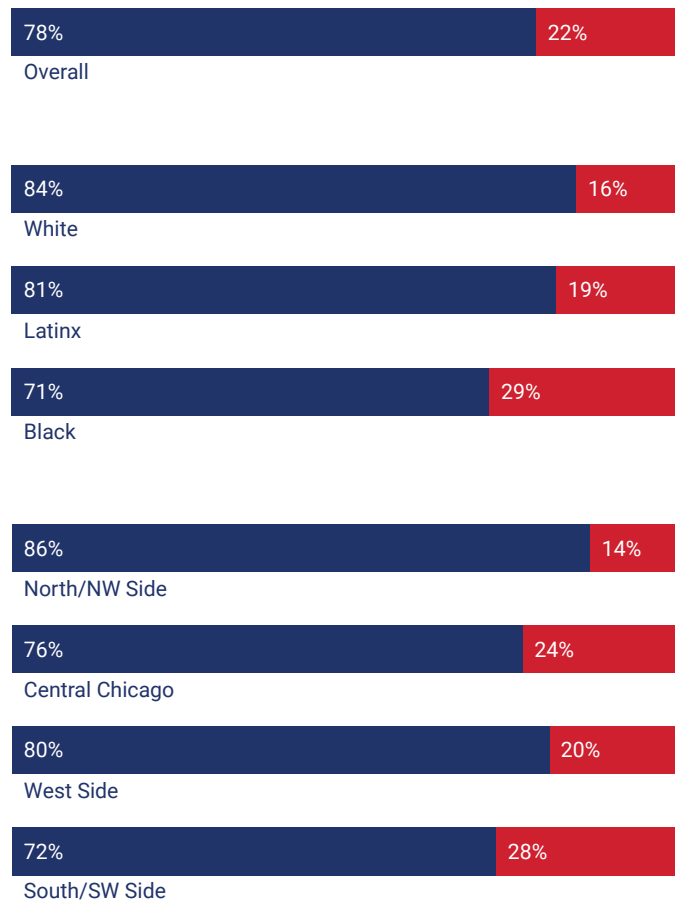


Youth desire places where they can relax and be themselves without worry. Nearly one-fourth say there is a need for more spaces that are built for them, with youth living on the South and Southwest Sides of the city reporting the greatest desire for more recreational spaces.

- Black young Chicagoans (29%) and those on the South/Southwest Sides of the city (28%) are most likely to say there are **not enough places where they feel comfortable and safe** hanging out and being social with friends.
- Youth would like to see increased access to safe, recreational spaces that are **free to access** (no cost to attend).
- Parks and community centers are the sorts of spaces young people desire the most, with nearly three-fourths (73%) reporting that they currently spend time in these facilities.



In your opinion, are there enough spaces in your community and in the city where you feel comfortable and safe hanging out and being social with friends?



Key



“Have multiple safe spaces to either chill or vent... having people there so you can spill out your problems and have people to talk to, and space to just calm down.”

– Black middle-school boy

Consistent with last year’s findings, almost two-thirds of Chicago youth report having witnessed community violence, with nearly a quarter witnessing violence weekly or more. Young people point to a supportive school environment, community programs, and strong role models as key factors in helping them and their peers stay safe and out of harm’s way.

- Gun violence is creating real concern and contributing to mental health difficulties in **communities of color**. Latinx and Black youth are especially worried about losing a family member or friend to gun violence (60% worry a lot).
- Nearly all groups say they **take extra** precautions and do not feel totally safe taking public transportation at night (73%), walking alone at night (72%), and driving in a car at night (60%).
- Black youth and young women over the age of 15 report being more **on guard** than their white and male counterparts during everyday activities.

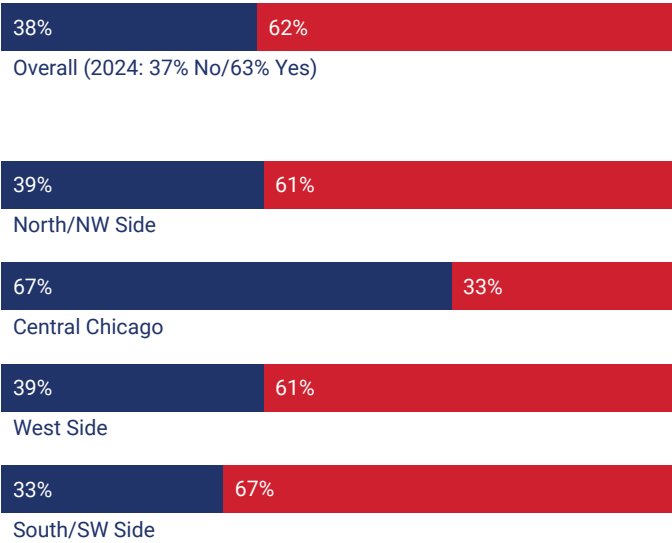
What kinds of violence in your community have you witnessed?



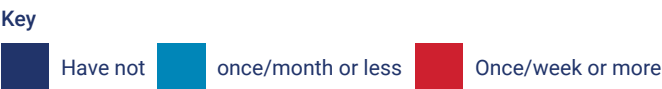
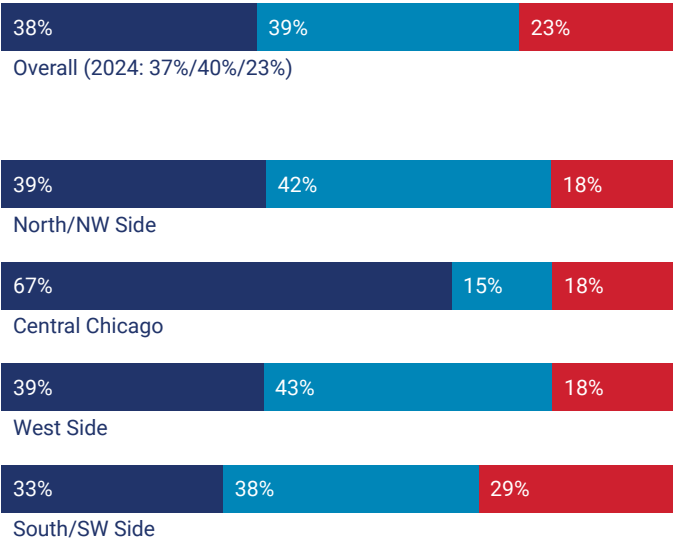
“One time I was walking home with my friend. Then we went through the alley. I don’t know why we did that. Then there was an undercover car. It was four police officers. It was three of them that jumped out on us. They pushed us on the wall. They made me pull up my shirt. I had nothing”

– Black high-school boy

Have you ever personally witnessed or seen violence in your community?



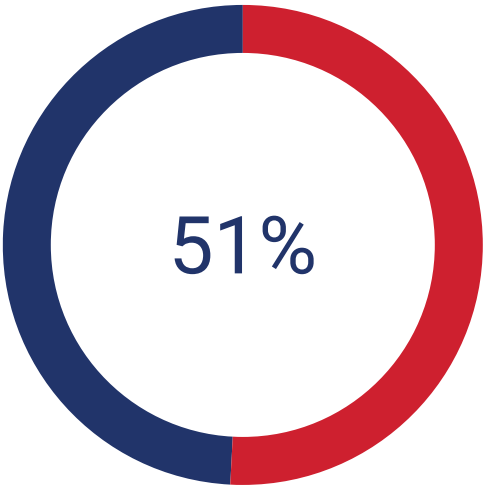
(If witnessed) How often do you witness or see violence in your community?



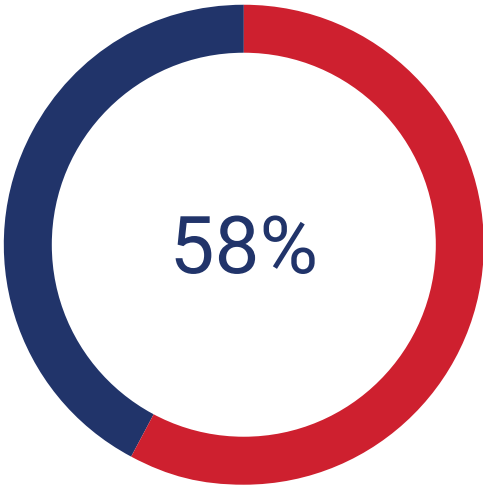
Fears around deportation and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids are impacting young people, especially the Hispanic/Latinx community. Over half of Latinx youth over the age of 15 say they worry a lot about a family member or friend being deported due to immigration status.

- Among all youth over 15, 43% say someone close to them has confided fears about deportation.
- This number is even higher among Latinx youth—58% report having had someone in their life share those concerns.

Fears around deportation and ICE raids are impacting young people, especially the Hispanic/Latinx community.



51% of Latinx youth over the age of 15 worry a lot about a family member or friend being deported due to immigration status.



58% of Latinx youth say someone has confided in them about deportation fears.

(If older than 15) How much do you worry that each of the following scenarios could happen to you?



- Key
- Worry a lot and think about it often
 - Worry a lot and try no to think about it
 - Worry some
 - Don't worry

“My uncle is scared to pick up my cousin from school, so sometimes she has to walk alone, because they’re just scared that ICE might get them.”

– High-school Latinx girl

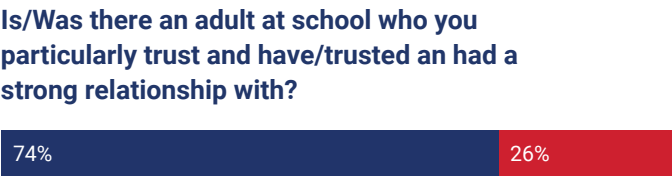
In-school opportunities like sports, clubs, study groups and tutoring, particularly during the week after school, keep young people engaged and connected to their learning environment.

- Students volunteered strong engagement in the classroom, enjoyment of the material, and their experience in and out of the classroom alongside teachers and peers as reasons they regularly attend school.
- Overall, nearly three quarters of young Chicagoans (74%) say there is an adult at school who they particularly **trust** and with whom they have a strong relationship.
- **Teachers** (rather than counselors) stand out as adults students trust most at school. However, young Chicagoans report their engagement with school counselors for mental health services is up nearly 10% from last year (36% compared to 27%).



“What I feel like my school does good is that they have Career and Technical Education programs. So, there’s a medical program, there’s culinary, there’s gaming... There’s different programs you can get into, and you can do entry level, and also certifications that can get you more knowledge about what you’re really getting into in the future.”

– High-school girl of color



Are there other types of activities or spaces you would like/have liked to see at your school to increase student engagement?



Nearly all Chicago students (92%) believe schools are preparing them with the skills they need to succeed in college, but less so for the real world and professional jobs.

- Of those who have not yet completed high school, most (82%) plan to **pursue schooling after high school**, either through four-year public/private universities, community colleges, two-year certificate programs, or vocational/technical schools.
- 84% of students believe schools are preparing them with the skills needed to **succeed in the real world**, but only 44% feel very prepared for success.

“I know it’s gonna be hard and stuff... cause it’s not easy to be successful, you gotta work through stuff and it’s challenging.”

– Black high-school boy



Thinking about your own school, do you believe you will be/were prepared in the following areas?



With the skills to succeed in college



For college



With the skills needed to succeed in the real world



For life and its everyday challenges



With the skills to join the workforce right out of high school



For my career

Key



What skills do you feel you’ve gained in school that are most helpful?



Nearly one-third of young Chicagoans say they sometimes or often miss school, and data suggests that Latinx females are most at risk for missing school.

- Youth attribute absenteeism to **serious challenges like anxiety and depression** (40%), bullying (36%), and drugs and alcohol (34%); but some say their peers are just bored (38%).
- Students say **enjoying learning** (46%), learning meaningful lessons in their classes (43%), and liking being with their friends (37%) are their top reasons for attending school.
- In focus groups, youth also volunteered **disengagement**, parents who do not stress attendance, a lack of belonging, and unreliable/poor transportation as other reasons students chronically miss school.

“I think they’re in an environment that they don’t think suits them. They don’t think they belong there, so they lack the sense of belonging, and they’re like, ‘I just belong in my bed at home in my specific community area.’”

– High-school girl of color on why peers miss school



Which best describes why your peers are missing school regularly?
(Top 5 responses)

- 1 Anxiety and depression
- 2 Boredom or dislike of school
- 3 Bullying
- 4 Drugs and alcohol
- 5 Stress

What are the biggest reasons for why you attend/attended school? (Top 5 responses)

- 1 I enjoy learning.
- 2 I am learning meaningful lessons.
- 3 I like being with my friends.
- 4 It is a positive environment.
- 5 It is a safe place to be.

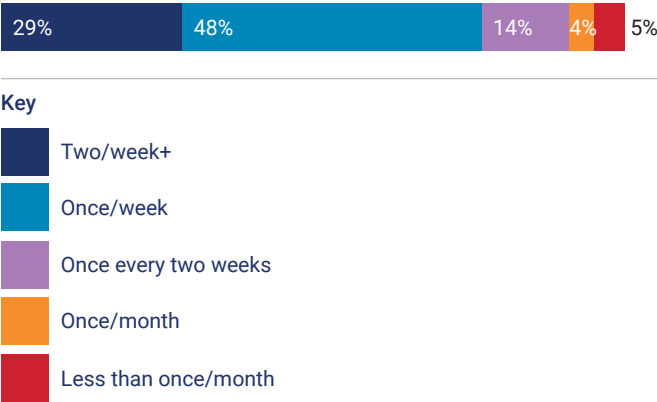
Youth are seeking more access to community-based programs, particularly ones that prepare them for real life and connect them to opportunities, networks, and jobs. Nearly all who have participated in community-based programming report having enjoyed their experience.

- Three quarters of young Chicagoans (75%) cite some level of participation in community-based programming; **Black youth are the most active** with nearly half participating in a community program two times or more a week (49%).
- Youth in community programs are more likely to have a plan to **further their education** post high school (87% compared to 70% among those not in community programs).
- Community-based programs are **filling the gap** when it comes to critical social-emotional skills; students who have participated in programs say they feel prepared for life and its everyday challenges (89%) and with the skills needed to succeed in the real world (88%) because of them.

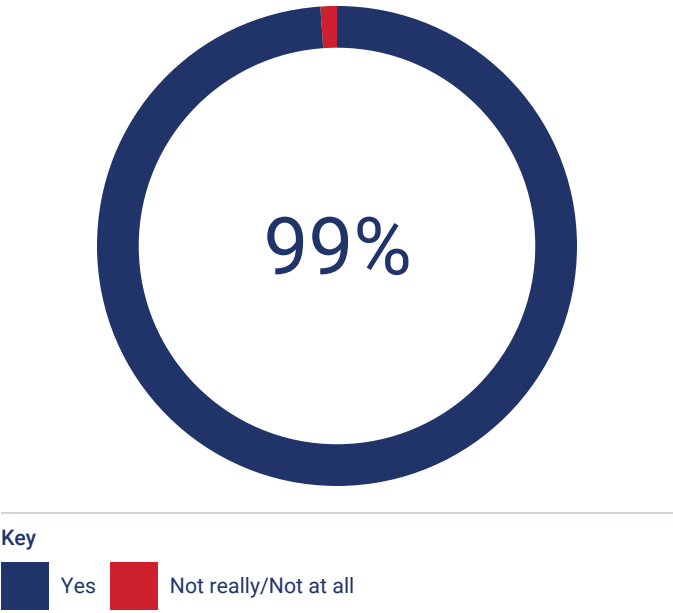
How often have you participated in community-based programs (outside of traditional school)?



How often would you like to participate in community-based programs (outside of traditional school)?



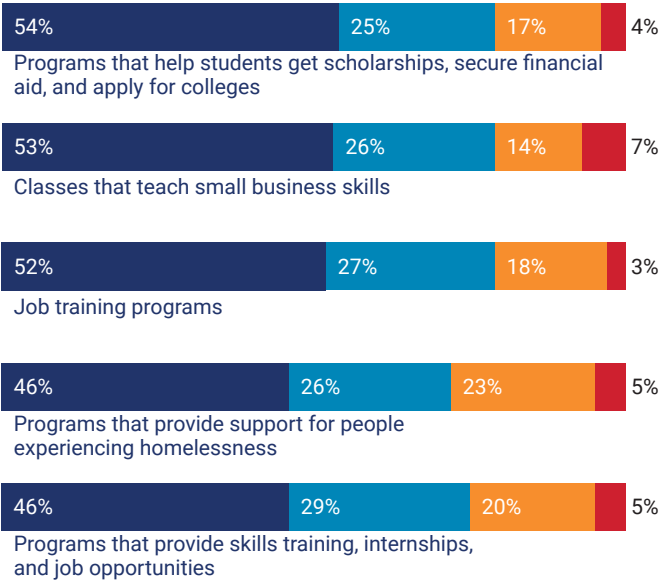
Nearly all who have participated in community-based programming report having enjoyed their experience.



Young Chicagoans’ appetite for more programs has remained high but especially in the case of financial and business skills, academic programs, and peer tutoring.

- Youth are seeking community-based programs that will **prepare them for real life** and connect them to opportunities, networks, and jobs. A vast majority (79%) would like to see more programs that help students get scholarships, secure financial aid, and apply for colleges.
- There is a clear desire for **financial skills** like how to budget, and ways to save and invest money. Over half of youth (52%) believe schools are not focusing on these skills.
- Nearly 4 in 5 young Chicagoans (78%) say they would like to see more **peer tutoring and mentoring**, including 44% who would like to see more of this programming in their communities (up from 39% in 2024). A quarter (26%) say they have not participated in these kinds of programs but would like to.

Would you like to see more or less of each provided in your community? (top five)



“I feel like we can have programs that just can help people learn, like how to teach, how to save money, how to spend money, spending their money on the right things at the right time...”

– Black high school boy

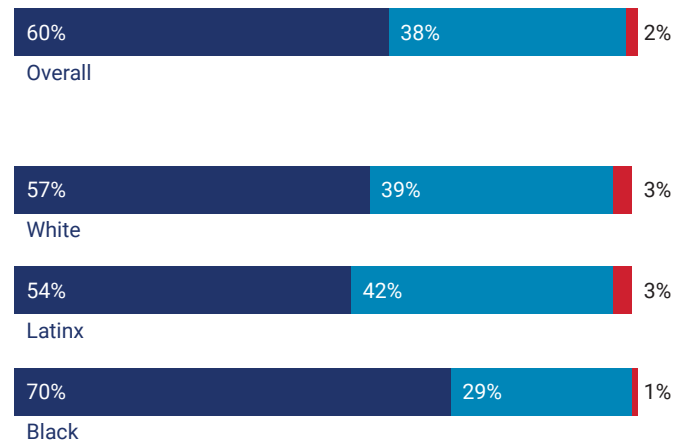


Chicago youth are overwhelmingly optimistic (98%) about their future, and students who participate in community programs are even more hopeful.

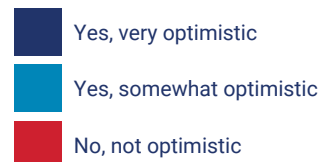
- A large majority of those surveyed continue to believe they can **stay out of trouble** (85%) and build successful futures (80%).
- Young Chicagoans see the city as providing good opportunities for jobs, networks, and success, but would like more. A vast majority of youth surveyed (80%) say they would like to see more **job training programs** in their community and 75% want to see more programs providing skills training, internships, and job opportunities.



Are you optimistic about your future?



Key



Why are you optimistic about your future?



“I’m hopeful for the future. The possibilities are endless for me.”

– Black middle-school boy

RECOMMENDATIONS

Young Chicagoans are optimistic about the future—born from a mix of supportive family networks, self-belief, and access to opportunities in Chicago. They see the city as providing good pathways for jobs, networks, and success and are looking for more. But chronic absenteeism, mental health, and community violence persist as real challenges facing young Chicagoans. Addressing these issues is key to ensuring our city's young people not only survive but thrive.



Both quantitative and qualitative research concludes that our young people's future success can be better supported by the adults and systems in their lives with access to more of the following:

- Community-based programs, particularly ones that will prepare them for real life and connect them to opportunities, networks, financial literacy, and jobs;
- In-school opportunities like sports, clubs, study groups and tutoring, particularly during the week after school, that keep them engaged and in school (a safe space built for them);
- Access to reliable mental health services, especially in the form of school counselors, who understand their perspective and are accessible, trustworthy, and willing to listen;
- Role models and mentors who demonstrate alternatives to violence or unsafe behavior; and,
- Spaces that are built for them—safe, clean, and affordable (or free) recreational places for them to go and be themselves, outside of their home or school environments.