



## Solano Youth Voices

A partner of the Children's  
Network of Solano County

"I am very impressed with the work of the Youth Leadership Council and have enjoyed working with them as they develop the policy platform. The previous generation should always help the next to help develop their leadership skills because one day the world will be theirs to govern."

—MONICA BROWN,  
SOLANO COUNTY  
SUPERVISOR

1 <https://www.sutterhealth.org/pdf/for-patients/chna/ssmc-2016-chna.pdf>

2 [https://share.kaiserpermanente.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-KFH-Vallejo-CHNA\\_Final.pdf](https://share.kaiserpermanente.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-KFH-Vallejo-CHNA_Final.pdf)

3 <http://www.solanocounty.com/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=27717>

4 <http://www.solanocounty.com/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?blobid=22410>

# Solano Youth Voices Policy Platform

## Addressing the Unmet Needs of Youth Through the School System

### SOLANO COUNTY'S STRUGGLE FOR EQUITY

While Solano County is generally considered part of the San Francisco Bay Area—and its economy and population depend on the vitality of that broader region—it severely lags behind other Bay Area counties in the number of resources and services available to help its residents, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. In 2016 two separate community health needs assessments were conducted by Sutter Health<sup>1</sup> and Kaiser Permanente.<sup>2</sup> Both reports highlight a number of root causes undermining the health of Solano residents, including a lack of access to mental health and substance abuse services, safety issues, and an inability to secure basic needs like food, housing, economic security, and education. Meanwhile the County's 2017 Community Health Improvement Plan<sup>3</sup> identified poverty, homelessness, a lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and a lack of access to quality education as the strategic issues in need of addressing, noting that "numerous other county-wide and community level plans" had pinpointed similar issues. In all of these assessments of the health of Solano County and its residents, a recurring theme appeared: **resource inequity**.

The statistics bear this out. Solano County has the region's lowest median household income and highest rate of poverty, with 11.4% of the population living in poverty, including nearly one in five children. The Community Health Improvement Plan projects that the challenges facing the County will intensify in the near term as Solano faces an aging population, substantial immigration and net population growth, and significant increases in cost-of-living and housing. Unlike in other Bay Area counties, these challenges in Solano County have not spurred significant investment of philanthropic dollars. A recent study<sup>4</sup> examining giving in the Bay Area found that less than 1% of foundation grants provided in the region serve Solano, with Solano agencies receiving just \$3 per capita (compared to almost \$1200 per resident in San Francisco). Furthermore, the study found that the "giving gap" is actually increasing, with recent investments in Solano lagging further behind those in other counties.

It is against this backdrop that Solano Youth Voices (SYV) was formed last year. Members of the SYV Youth Council are keenly aware that youth in Solano lack the resources and opportunities their peers in neighboring counties rely on, and they are determined to do something about it.

SYV believes that Solano County does not have to continue being restricted by resource inequity. Youth Council members set out to develop a policy platform to bring about positive change and ensure that Solano youth do not continue slipping through the cracks.

"Solano County should have services that are equal to the rest of the Bay Area because all youth should have the same opportunities, especially if they are services that get results. If services are beneficial in the rest of the Bay, we should be able to benefit from them here, too. I also think that we should get equal resources because youth who progress affect other youth positively, too, and we need that here in Solano County."

—ZAHRAYA WOODS,  
SYV COUNCIL MEMBER

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND SURVEY RESULTS

After surveying more than 700 of their peers from across the County and convening 17 youth focus groups, SYV found that the most frequently cited issues facing youth in Solano were related to education, mental health, bullying, and homelessness.

While SYV's survey sample was comprised entirely of youth, its findings align closely with the determinations from the needs assessments conducted by Sutter and Kaiser Permanente, as well as the Community Health Improvement Plan for Solano County. Each of these assessments reiterates the resource and equity challenges facing the County.

Accordingly, the Youth Council chose to focus its policy platform on proposing and promoting solutions in each of its three focus areas. SYV recognized that not only did their peers identify education as a priority, but most of them spend a significant part of their lives on school campuses and the education system wraps around all three issues. Given these considerations, the Council chose to prioritize promoting school-based solutions to mental health, bullying, and homelessness.

Council members also conducted extensive independent research and met over 20 community leaders and issue experts to learn more about their current and ongoing efforts as well as their perspectives on outstanding challenges and needs. This outreach and research phase helped the Council further hone its priorities and recommendations.

“Youth development is investing in the future.”

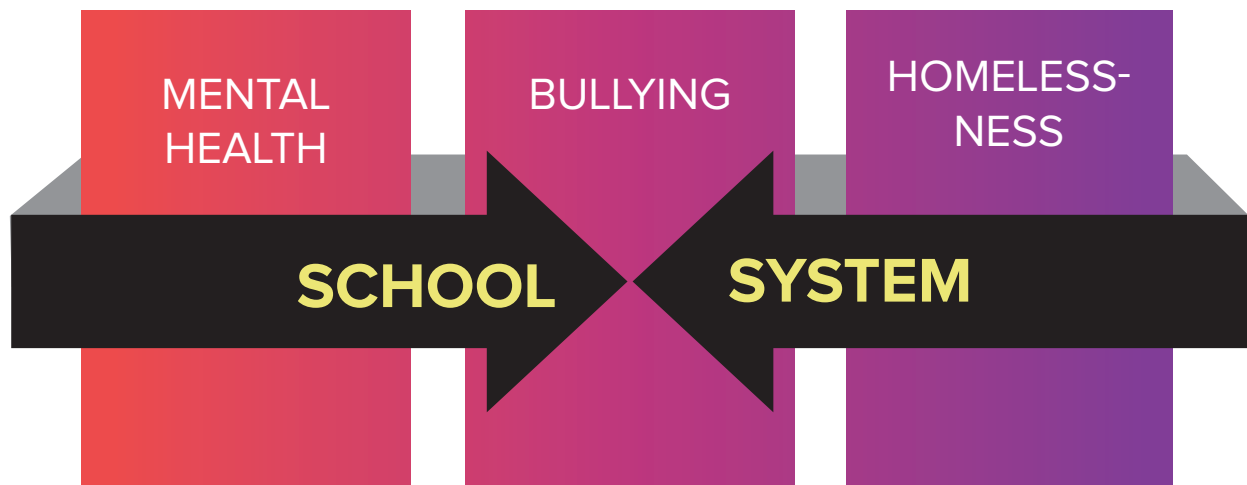
– TROY SAMBAJON, SYV COUNCIL MEMBER

“When we were doing our outreach events, the discussion groups were a really cool way of talking about the issues happening in Solano County with other youth. We also got to understand where they were coming from.”

– NATHEN JORDAN, SYV COUNCIL MEMBER

“Our Council Members use their life experiences, leadership skills, and resourcefulness to address issues which are important to the youth of Solano County.”

– ALYSSUM MAGUIRE, PROJECT DIRECTOR



# Solano County Needs Assessment

## Youth Survey Results

Total Number of Surveys: 704

Which topics are the TOP 3 issues for youth in Solano County?	
Education	307
Mental Health	257
Bullying	251
Homeless	179
Drug/Alcohol Use	171
Gun Violence	156
Recreation	135
Immigration	123
LGBTQ+	110
Youth Employment	102
Physical Health	93
Transportation	69
Foster Care	50
Juvenile Justice	33

Where in Solano County are you from?	
Fairfield Region	271
Rio Vista	173
Vallejo	87
Vacaville	77
Benicia	42
Dixon	34

How old are you?	
11–13	28
14–17	501
18-24	167

Which of these topics are problematic issues for youth in Solano County?	
Bullying	429
Drug/Alcohol Use	425
Homeless	386
Mental Health	374
Education	356
Recreation	311
Gun Violence	305
Physical Health	289
Immigration	276
Juvenile Justice	249
Youth Employment	236
LGBTQ+	223
Transportation	223
Foster Care	209

Which of the following have you personally experienced?	
Worried About Education	390
Bored	348
Bullied	290
Low Income	284
Mental Health Issues	272
Felt Unsafe at School	268
Have Used Drugs/Alcohol	183
Transportation	178
Had Thoughts of Self Harm	158
Effected by Immigration Laws	119
LGBTQ+	103
Legal Issues/Juvenile Justice	86
Felt Unsafe at Home	81
Does Not Live With Birth Parents	73
Affected by Gun Violence	71
Chronic Medical Issues	67
Has Been (or is) Homeless	56
Pregnant/Parenting Youth	31
Experienced Human Trafficking	22

# TOGETHER, LET'S MAKE SCHOOLS SAFER PLACES!

We asked more than 700 youth what problems needed to be fixed and their ideas for solutions. Here is what we learned...



## Solano Youth Voices

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Solano Youth Voices is a group of youth who want to help make our county better for young people ages 10-25.

## We need to work together

Schools shouldn't have to fix problems by themselves. Youth, officials, businesses, non-profits, parents, school staff, and other leaders all need to be part of the solution.

### Mental Health

Expand Mental Health services at school and make them easy to access. For example:

- ✓ Safe spaces at school where students can get support if they are stressed out or having a bad day.
- ✓ A student group on campus whose job is to educate other students about the importance of emotional health and how to help each other be healthier.
- ✓ Youth, school staff, parents, and community leaders get together to figure out how there can be more mental health support at schools.

### Bullying Prevention

Increase skills and knowledge about how to prevent bullying. For example:

- ✓ A student group on campus whose job is to make a plan for preventing bullying among students.
- ✓ Youth and adults lead trainings together about how to communicate with each other in positive ways, and about how to prevent or stop bullying. Students, school staff, and parents all get this training.

### Homeless Youth

Homeless students feel respected and get their needs met at school. For example:

- ✓ Help homeless youth with everyday needs (like food, a place to wash their clothing, hygiene supplies, and haircuts). Do these things on school campuses after school, and do not make youth prove they are homeless in order to get help.
- ✓ Youth, school staff, parents, and community leaders should get together to figure out how campuses can be open later so homeless students have a safe place to hang out and get help after school.

“Ask yourself... if we don't take action on these issues now, what will our future look like?”

— Nathen and Zahraya, SYV Council Members

# MENTAL HEALTH

## The Issue

School-based mental health services are often insufficiently available and restricted to youth with a specific mental health diagnosis. This limits accessibility for many youth in need, while stigmatizing students who do seek support.

## Scope of the Problem

- ✓ Chronic sadness and hopelessness are rampant among Solano County public school students. A recent report found that 29% of 7th graders, 31% of 9th graders, and 37% of 11th graders had suffered from these experiences in the past 12 months.<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Shockingly, almost 1 in 5 of these students have considered suicide in the past year.<sup>2</sup>
- ✓ Mental health-related hospitalizations have increased by more than 70% over the past decade in Solano County for children ages 5 to 19.<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ While the American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-school-counselor ratio of no more than 250:1, in Solano County there are an average of 1,111 students per counselor,<sup>4</sup> more than four times the recommended number.
- ✓ The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a student-to-school-psychologist ratio of no more than 1,000:1, in Solano County there are an average of 1,190<sup>5</sup> students per psychologist.

## Recommendation

Expand the availability and accessibility of non-stigmatizing and culturally-competent school-based mental health services for students.

“When I was in High School I often felt isolated and pressured to deal with my declining mental health alone. I believe that if our recommendations are implemented they will help reduce teen suicide rates and other serious outcomes related to mental health such as school drop out rates, hospitalization, and homelessness.”

— Beck, SYV Council Member

## Steps for Consideration

1. Establish a public-private task force or committee to identify barriers to universal access to school-based mental health services and provide recommendations.
2. Develop a “safe space” on each campus where students under stress or in crisis can anonymously receive mental health supports and services during the school day.
3. Develop a student group on each campus focused on educating peers about mental health issues and addressing school culture related to mental health.



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<sup>1</sup> Solano County. *California Healthy Kids Survey, 2015–2017: Main Report*. San Francisco: West Ed Health and Justice Program for the California Department of Education. Pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Hospitalizations for Mental Health Issues, by Age Group (2006–2016). As cited on [www.kidsdata.org](http://www.kidsdata.org), a program of the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health. Retrieved on April 2, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ratio of Students to Pupil Support Service Personnel, by Type of Personnel (2017). As cited on [www.kidsdata.org](http://www.kidsdata.org), a program of the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health. Retrieved on April 2, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

# BULLYING PREVENTION

## The Issue

While awareness about the impacts of bullying has grown in the education community, there is still work to be done; schools will benefit from additional focus on prevention and upstream interventions to prevent bullying from occurring in the first place. Additionally, trainings for school staff and other adults could be bolstered by incorporating youth experience, voice, and recommendations.

## Scope of the Problem

- ✓ Bullying and harassment are commonly experienced by Solano County public school students. A recent report found that 42% of 7th graders, 36% of 9th graders, and 30% of 11th graders had suffered from these experiences in the past 12 months.<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ At the same time, 41% of 7th graders, 38% of 9th graders, and 35% of 11th graders reported having mean rumors or lies spread about them at school in the past year.<sup>2</sup>
- ✓ Perhaps unsurprisingly, only about half of students across these three grades feel safe at school.<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Research compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)<sup>4</sup> demonstrates the ripple effect of bullying on children:
  - Kids who are bullied are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, attempt suicide, skip school, and struggle academically.
  - Kids who bully others are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, get into fights, drop out of school, engage in early sexual activity, and be involved with the criminal justice system as adults.
  - Kids who witness bullying are more likely to use drugs and alcohol, miss or skip school, and experience mental health problems including depression and anxiety.

“When I went to middle school, I was overwhelmed with how different it was compared to what I was used to. That’s when I became an outcast for a time and was harassed, beat up, and more. Although it was a chaotic time, I know that if there were systems in place, run by students, like those we are recommending, the bullying and eventual psychiatric hospital visits I experienced could have been avoided.”

— Spencer, SYV Council Member

## Recommendation

Equip and empower the school community, including staff, students, and parents to recognize, address, and prevent in-person and cyber-bullying.

## Steps for Consideration

1. Develop a student group focused on raising awareness about bullying and promoting strategies to improve peer to peer respect and increase student safety.
2. Youth and adults co-lead trainings about social emotional well-being and bullying prevention, including in-person and cyber-bullying to be offered to students, school staff, and parents.



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<sup>1</sup> Solano County. *California Healthy Kids Survey, 2015–2017: Main Report*. San Francisco: West Ed Health and Justice Program for the California Department of Education. Pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Hospitalizations for Mental Health Issues, by Age Group (2006–2016). As cited on [www.kidsdata.org](http://www.kidsdata.org), a program of the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health. Retrieved on April 2, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> “Effects of Bullying.” [Stopbullying.gov](http://Stopbullying.gov), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/index.html](http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/index.html). Accessed April 2, 2019.

# HOMELESS YOUTH

## The Issue

Students who are homeless often lack access to resources to meet their basic needs, including food and clean clothing. This sometimes leads homeless youth to commit crimes of necessity (i.e. “survival crimes”) and become involved in the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, they are often victimized in the community during after school hours, jeopardizing their safety and causing trauma.

## Scope of the Problem

- ✓ 1,793 public school students in Solano County from Pre-K through the 12th grade were recorded as being homeless at some point during the 2016 school year.<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ The Solano County Point-In-Time homeless count in 2017 found 111 children under the age of 18 to be homeless, as well as an additional 209 young adults ages 18 to 24.<sup>2</sup>
- ✓ Research has demonstrated that due to their housing instability, homeless youth are more than two times as likely as their peers to be chronically absent from school, jeopardizing their academic performance and progress and making them more likely to drop out of school.<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Youth who are homeless will often avoid being identified as homeless for a variety of reasons, including fear of abuse,<sup>4,5</sup> and are more likely to be victimized in the hours after school.<sup>6</sup>

## Recommendation

Ensure that school campuses are “safe spaces” where homeless youth are treated with dignity and respect and provided with comprehensive support services.

<sup>1</sup> Homeless Public School Students, by Grade Level (2016). As cited on [www.kidsdata.org](http://www.kidsdata.org), a program of the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health. Retrieved on April 2, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Applied Survey Research. (2017). Solano County Homeless Census & Survey. Watsonville, CA.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Homeless Education. (2017). In School Every Day: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Among Students Experiencing Homelessness. Retrieved from: [www.nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/chron-absent.pdf](http://www.nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/chron-absent.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Pilnik, L. for the Coalition for Juvenile Justice. (2016, June). *Youth Homelessness and Juvenile Justice: Opportunities for Collaboration and Impact* (Volume 1 Issue 1). Retrieved from: [http://juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/policy%20brief\\_FINAL.compressed.pdf](http://juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/policy%20brief_FINAL.compressed.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Pergamit, M., Cunningham, M., Burt, M., Lee, P., Howell, B., & Bertumen, K. for the Urban Institute (2013, July). *Counting Homeless Youth: Promising Practices from the Youth Count! Initiative*. Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/23871/412876-Counting-Homeless-Youth.PDF>

<sup>6</sup> Afterschool Alliance. (2014, May). *Keeping Kids Safe and Supported in the Hours After School*. Retrieved from: [http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/issue\\_briefs/issue\\_KeepingKidsSafe\\_65.pdf](http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/issue_briefs/issue_KeepingKidsSafe_65.pdf)

## Steps for Consideration

1. Provide campus-based support for homeless youth in meeting basic needs (i.e. food, clothing washers/dryers, hygiene supplies, haircuts, etc.) after school hours, without requiring youth to identify that they are homeless in order to receive help.
2. Form a task force including youth, school staff, parents and community leaders to develop strategies for keeping campuses open later so that homeless students have a safe place to receive services after school hours.

“When I was in school and homeless, I felt disrespected and unsafe. I was bullied because my shoes and clothes were worn through, my family couldn’t afford to keep up my haircuts. If we had support at school and could have gotten regular things like clothes, shoes, and haircuts at school, there would have been less bullying and less stress overall. I would have done better in school and it would have improved my mental health in the long run.”

– Nathen, SYV Council Member



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## AN OUTLINE OF THE 2018-2019 POLICY PLATFORM

Through collaboration with public, private, and non-profit partners, the overarching goal of the Solano Youth Voices Policy Platform is to further **develop schools into emotionally and physically safe spaces that allow students to learn and thrive.**

### MENTAL HEALTH

**THE ISSUE:** School-based mental health services are often restricted to youth with a specific mental health diagnosis. This limits accessibility for many youth in need, and also stigmatizes the students who do access supports.

“I’m glad that mental health is being made a priority in school finally. I feel like if this much attention had been put into it when I was a Freshman and Sophomore, me and a lot of other people I know could have benefitted greatly.”

—LOVIE ALSTON, SYV COUNCIL MEMBER

**RECOMMENDATION:** Expand the availability and accessibility of non-stigmatizing and culturally-competent school-based mental health services for students.

#### STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION:

Establish a public-private task force or committee to identify barriers to universal access to school-based mental health services and provide recommendations.

Develop a “safe space” on each campus where students under stress or in crisis can anonymously receive mental health supports and services during the school day.

Establish a youth-led group in each school focused on educating peers about mental health issues and addressing school culture related to mental health.

### BULLYING PREVENTION

**THE ISSUE:** While within the education community awareness of the impact of bullying has grown, there is room for enhancing current work through additional focus on upstream interventions designed to prevent bullying from occurring in the first place. Additionally, trainings for school staff and other adults could be bolstered by incorporating youth experiences, voice and recommendations.

“Youth who are being bullied at home or even cyber bullied from anywhere can become really angry and aggressive towards other youth. It is a good idea to deal with this issue at school, where we can actually help both the person being bullied and the person doing the bullying.”

—NATHEN JORDAN, SYV COUNCIL MEMBER

**RECOMMENDATION:** Equip and empower the school community, including staff, students, and parents to recognize, address, and prevent bullying and cyberbullying.

#### STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION:

Build upon existing joint youth-adult training efforts to develop and disseminate an effective curriculum for bullying prevention and communication/pro-social skills to be co-facilitated by youth and adults and delivered to students, parents, and school staff.

Build, train, and implement a student advocacy team on each campus who can partner with school staff to promote prosocial behavior to create healthier school communities.

### SERVICES FOR YOUTH WHO ARE HOMELESS

**THE ISSUE:** Youth who are homeless often lack access to resources to address their basic needs, including food and clean clothing. Furthermore, they are often victimized in the community during after school hours, causing safety concerns and trauma.

“Having more resources for homeless students in school would have prevented my friends from dropping out of high school.”

—DIANA PINO, SYV COUNCIL MEMBER

**RECOMMENDATION:** Ensure that school campuses are “safe spaces” where homeless youth are treated with dignity and respect and provided with comprehensive supports.

#### STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION:

Convene a task force or committee of public and non-profit stakeholders to explore the feasibility of extending the hours that campuses are open to students and to develop funding and programming strategies to support expanded access and campus-based service delivery.

Convene a task force or committee of public and non-profit stakeholders to increase service availability during regular school hours, such as free meals and access to laundry facilities.