

Youth Perspectives on:

Cost of Living



Overview

Cost of Living emerged over 500 times during 94 listening sessions with Alexandria students. Students described financial stress as a central concern affecting their families and peers. Rising prices, housing costs, healthcare inaccessibility, and visible poverty emerged as common themes. Youth highlighted a strong desire for a community where no one experiences homelessness or has to struggle to meet their basic needs.

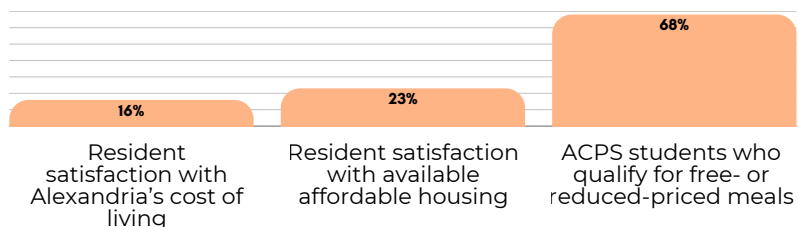
WHY IT MATTERS

When basic needs go unmet, such as food, housing, healthcare, and transportation, young people face significant challenges in learning, connecting, and planning for the future. Youth described how economic hardship and unreliable transportation create daily stressors that impact their well-being and development.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Economic Conditions

Sources: 2024 Alexandria Resident Survey & VA Department of Education (2024)



WHAT YOUTH WANT

150+ mentions

Economic Justice

"A community in which everybody has access to the things they need."

A fairer economy where wealth and resources are distributed equitably and everyone gets their basic needs met and can thrive.

55+ mentions

Housing for All

"Housing for everyone (affordable housing)"

Housing costs are fair and everyone has access to safe, quality, and affordable housing/rent.

30+ mentions

Food Justice

"Healthy organic food that is affordable"

Everyone has access to healthy, affordable, and abundant food and no one goes hungry.

45+ mentions

Greater Healthcare Access & Well-being

"Access to great healthcare for free"

Everyone has access to high-quality, affordable, and compassionate healthcare and health and well-being are prioritized for all.

20+ mentions

More Social Services

"More free resources for youth."
"Help poor people."

Everyone has access to the support they need, including safe places to stay, help with basic needs, and programs that uplift low-income and unhoused individuals.

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

90+ mentions

Economic Disparities

"It is very expensive just to live here."

"A lot of people don't get paid much and can't afford a lot of things."

Students point to rising prices and inflation, stagnant wages, the financial strain their families experience, and a heavy tax burden as stressors.

50+ mentions

Housing Instability

"Rent is too high."

"High rates of people experiencing homelessness."

Many young people see their community as struggling with unaffordable housing, rising homelessness, unsafe living conditions, and a cost of living that makes it hard for families and youth to stay and thrive.

15+ mentions

Food Insecurity

"The prices of food are very high."

"Not enough food."

Many students experience food insecurity due to high grocery prices and limited access to enough food, leaving families unable to meet basic nutritional needs.

25+ mentions

Healthcare Inaccessibility

"Expensive healthcare."

"People don't have healthcare."

"The Teen Wellness Center is not accessible and needs more funding."

While the Teen Wellness Center was named as a valuable resource, many youth in our community struggle to access affordable, reliable healthcare, leaving their physical and mental health needs unmet and putting their well-being at risk.



Barriers to Improvement

When asked about the challenges of addressing cost of living issues, students highlighted a range of systemic, economic, and political barriers that make meaningful change difficult.

Systemic and Economic Barriers

Low-Wage Jobs and Cost of Housing

Students noted that even when people are working, “jobs often don’t pay enough to support a family - especially with Alexandria’s high housing costs.” A significant portion of income goes toward rent or mortgages, leaving little for other necessities like food, healthcare, and childcare.

Cycle of Poverty

Many students emphasized that poverty is self - perpetuating - once people are struggling financially, it becomes increasingly difficult to break free without significant economic resources. One student put it simply: “Poverty is expensive and breeds more poverty. The only way to escape is with money.”

Rising Costs and Inflation

Students acknowledged the impact of “rising inflation and high property values,” which make it even harder for lower - income families to afford basic needs.

Political and Structural Challenges

Political Resistance and Corruption

Some students saw “political opinions and systemic corruption” as major obstacles to addressing cost of living issues.

Taxes and Government Policies

Students identified “high city taxes, low - paying jobs, and enforcement policies” as factors that contribute to the financial burden on residents.

Wealth Disparities and Structural Inequities

The Influence of the Wealthy

Some students pointed to “the rich” as a barrier, suggesting that those in positions of power benefit from maintaining the status quo.

Expensive Childcare and Healthcare

The rising costs of “childcare and healthcare” were also flagged as significant challenges for families trying to stay afloat financially.



Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Address Cost of Living

When asked to brainstorm potential solutions to address cost of living challenges in Alexandria, students proposed a mix of policy changes, direct support programs, and community-driven actions.

Invest in Early Care and Educators

- Pay early educators fairly. Create a fund to raise salaries and keep great teachers.
- Grow the early learning workforce. Offer scholarships, paid training, and partnerships with local colleges.
- Make childcare affordable. Invest more city funds in childcare centers and home-based programs.
- Reflect every family's culture. Support diverse, culturally responsive teaching materials and training.

Make Early Learning Easy to Find and Access

- Create one easy application for all early learning programs.
- Focus funds where they're needed most, especially in underserved neighborhoods.
- Add more spaces for infants and toddlers by upgrading community centers or public buildings.
- Help families choose programs that fit their needs, schedules, and values.

Make Housing Affordable and Secure

- Build and keep affordable homes. Follow through on the Housing 2040 Plan and make sure new developments include affordable units.
- Use public land wisely. Partner with nonprofits and builders to create mixed-income housing.
- Protect renters. Limit huge rent hikes and support rent stabilization.
- Prioritize families most in need. Invest where housing costs hit hardest.

Make Living Costs Fair and Manageable:

- Help families with direct aid like rental support or guaranteed income programs.
- Raise wages so people can afford to live where they work.
- Offer affordable essentials, like childcare, healthcare, and job training co-located at community hubs.
- Lower financial pressure by freezing or reducing property taxes and condo fees for low-income residents.

Ensure Access to Basic Needs Strategies:

- Expand free school meals and provide healthy snacks during the day.
- Grow community food options through gardens, food banks, and neighborhood grocery stores.
- Make healthcare affordable. Help more people get insurance and reduce medical costs.
- Create youth discount programs for fresh produce and healthy foods.

Empower and Inform the Community:

- Educate renters and residents about their rights and available resources.
- Spread the word. Work with schools, churches, and nonprofits to reach families.
- Listen to those most affected. Keep asking for feedback through surveys and community meetings.
- Be welcoming to all. Make Alexandria a place where immigrants and newcomers feel supported.

Take Action Together:

- Vote for leaders who care about fairness and affordability.
- Advocate for strong housing and cost-of-living policies.
- Involve youth in decision-making. Encourage them to attend meetings and share their ideas.
- Keep listening. Use student and resident surveys to shape city priorities.