FROM THE FRINGES

Understanding Homeless Transition Age Youth (ages 18-25) in Inner City Los Angeles

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Introduction to *From The Fringes*

David is a twenty year old Latino, and on most mornings he can be found at the Learning and Technology Center at Jovenes, Inc. Each day, he makes his rounds between the different community centers with computer access in Boyle Heights, getting to know the staff, sharing his poetry, and offering to help out. His rent and basic needs are paid for through his disability checks, but he has no job or steady income other than his benefits. Despite his friendships throughout the community, he believes that the challenges and burdens he faces are his alone to bear, and keenly understands how youth like him are left to languish on the fringes of society. In his poetry, he writes:

> “Living on my own
somewhat happy, somewhat sad
sometimes crying, sometimes trying
to make it in this tough nation
that we live in today.”

David’s situation is not unique, and one of its central themes is the issue of connectedness; both in the ways he is trying to connect his possibilities for a healthy future, and in the way social and political institutions are disconnected from youth like him. Despite a tremendous infrastructure of supportive services and dedicated people in communities like Boyle Heights, transition aged youth in these places are left by the wayside, passively watching as life passes them by. These are youth who have been engaged in systems such as foster care, criminal justice, and immigration, but also include many youth who lack personal support structures, such as positive interactions with families and friends.

The fringes are the places where homeless youth exist in the context of current society. They are not easy to identify, hard to count, and their voices remain unheard. They move from place to place, and sleep in parks, storefronts, abandoned buildings, couches, and shelters. These are youth who have already “fallen through the cracks,” and without intervention, they face the prospect of chronic homelessness. They each have their own history and unique circumstances that have pushed them into homelessness, but through our research and interactions with the youth, we’ve found consistent trends that provide the basis for this report and recommendations. These youth are:

- Young men of color
- Predominantly from Los Angeles, specifically Boyle Heights, East LA, and South LA
- Heavily involved in “systems,” such as foster-care, detention, immigration, and mental health
- Socially disconnected from peers and family
- Experienced high levels of trauma

**About Jovenes, Inc.**

Jovenes is a place of personal transformation for homeless youth ages 18-25. For over 20 years, Jovenes has been providing housing and supportive services to homeless youth. We believe that *homelessness is an experience, not a lifelong condition, and that anyone can prosper if they have the right support and stability*. The mission of Jovenes, Inc. is to help homeless youth and at-risk families become productive and integrated members of the community. We provide comfortable, stable housing, access to skills training, employment support and other community-based services in a safe, nurturing environment. We believe that anyone can prosper given the right conditions. We deliver opportunities for personal growth and provide hope, comfort and support where once there was none. We empower those we serve, so that they can develop healthy relationships and make meaningful contributions to the community we share.
For an agency that specializes in individualized supportive services, creating a report such as this that focuses on the systems and policies that impact youth homelessness has been quite an experience. It is our hope that through this project, we can raise awareness of the challenges faced by homeless youth and create more community support that empowers them to successfully transition into adulthood. We know how resilient our youth are, and the amazing progress they can make when they are supported and are surrounded by people who they can trust. These youth are valuable, and it is our collective duty to ensure they have pathways to opportunities, stable homes, and brighter futures.

Description & Aim

*From The Fringes* is the culmination of a two-year research project, which incorporates literature review, data collection, and analysis through engagement of youth, open ended interviews, focus groups, oral histories and participatory action research via leadership development (over 40 youth from Jovenes participated in this research). Gaining insight about the experience of homelessness and the factors that lead youth into this situation is critical to lessening the impact of the systems of inequality that perpetuate the cycle of homelessness and diminished life chances among young men of color in low-income communities throughout Los Angeles. Listening to youth describe their personal histories of hardship, strategies they use to cope, and barriers they face is necessary to de-marginalize this overlooked, misunderstood, and underserved population.

*From the Fringes* involves three phases (the first two are covered by this report):

1. Carry out a research study focused on learning about the challenges facing 18-25 year old men who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless

2. Create a policy brief that outlines our research findings and that makes policy and systems change recommendations aimed at changing the structures thatnegatively impact the lives of 18-25 year old men in communities East of Downtown Los Angeles.

3. Develop and implement a local advocacy campaign through which we will disseminate policy recommendations in order to create public awareness on the issue of youth homelessness in the community so to increase support and engagement among community members, organizations, and government officials on the issue of homelessness among young men of color of transition age.

The City of Los Angeles holds the title of “homeless capital of the U.S.” because of the astronomical numbers of homeless people who live on our streets, in shelters, and other hidden areas. Homeless Transition Age Youth (TAY) are presently one of the fastest growing subpopulations, and the one group we know the least about (Witte, 2012).

Living in shelters or on the streets, unaccompanied homeless youth are at a higher risk for physical and sexual assault or abuse and physical illness, including HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, homeless youth are at a higher risk for anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide because of increased exposure to violence while living on their own (Bernstein and Foster 2008). Overall, homeless youth are also likely to become involved in prostitution, use of drugs, and engage in other dangerous and illegal activities (ibid).

*From the Fringes* examines the issue of youth homelessness in the context of communities East of Downtown LA—communities that embody the prototype of the “U.S. inner-city neighborhood” characterized by high concentrations of people of color living in poverty, widespread crime and violence, lack of economic and development opportunities, substandard schools and housing, limited
access to basic services, and geographical and racial segregation. For this reason, race, place, and gender are the central frameworks of analysis in this project.

Methodology & Data Sources

This report uses information and data gathered from a number of sources. In addition to the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and story collection from the homeless youth served by Jovenes, we conducted a literature review of studies pertaining to youth homelessness and incorporated data that analyzes the current situation of youth in Los Angeles. This includes the Los Angeles Homeless Count, as well as the roster of Jovenes’ clients. For over three years, Jovenes has operated The Beacon Network Connect online platform (www.TBNconnect.org). TBN Connect is a resource directory for youth in Boyle Heights and East LA that provides information about over 250 local programs. As youth search for local opportunities, we are able to collect demographic information about them and their needs. Since the platform began operating, over 16,000 searches have been conducted on TBN Connect. While this data is imperfect (for example, TBN Connect data does not differentiate between users who conduct multiple searches and those who use the system only once), it provides a basis for understanding the challenges faced by youth in Boyle Heights and East LA.

A Growing Focus

From the Fringes comes at a time when awareness on the issue of youth homelessness in America is on the rise. Acknowledging the severity and urgency of the issue, the U.S. government has set ending youth homelessness as one of the three main priorities in the 2010 Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, Opening Doors. One objective of this initiative is to improve health and housing stability for youth coming out of foster care and juvenile justice systems. In addition, recognizing how little we know about this population, the government has issued a partnership between the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs to compile data on as well as develop content, technical assistance, and federal resources for homeless youth (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010).

Recently in California, there has been a wave of research initiatives and partnerships involving numerous foundations, research institutions, and advocacy organizations that are aimed at increasing our understanding about unaccompanied homeless youth and their needs. These initiatives are very promising and are already making important strides towards approaching the issue of youth homelessness more competently. Despite this increased focus, there remain challenges regarding gathering information that helps us understand trends among the homeless youth population, and the role of various systems that affect them. What follows is a list of critical issues that emerged in the course of our study, regarding current approaches to youth homelessness in Los Angeles.
Challenges in Understanding and Addressing Youth Homelessness

Hard to Count

Attaining precise assessments on the number of youth experiencing homelessness in the United States poses a real challenge. Depending on the source of the count, nationwide it is estimated that between 500,000 and 2.8 million youth experience one or more episodes of homelessness every year, (Burt 2007 & National Clearing House on Families & Youth, NCFY). In Los Angeles, it is estimated that approximately 5,000-10,000 youth experience homelessness on any given night.

Homeless youth are highly mobile and often don’t want to be identified as homeless. Many of Jovenes' youth do not even perceive themselves as homeless as long as they have a place to sleep at night, even if they lack stable housing or are staying in a shelter.

During our focus groups and one-on-one interviews, participants disclosed the various strategies they used to cover up their homelessness: many of them reported using public restrooms to bathe and wash their clothes; others mentioned asking friends and relatives to allow them to shower, or simply snuck into their homes to do so. In one particular case, a client became homeless in the 10th grade but continued attending school for the following two years without his housing situation being addressed by employing various strategies to avoid being identified as homeless.

Currently, point-in-time counts and one-time surveys are the only two official methods used to measure and evaluate the state of youth homelessness. In Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) organizes a bi-annual count of the counties’ homeless population. Most agencies in charge of counts rely solely on volunteers to do the field counting, and their counts usually last no more than a day. Manpower and time limitations pose great challenges in covering massive cities such as LA. Point-in-time counts and surveys, on their own, are not able to capture the complex realities of homeless youth or their trajectories. LAHSA’s figures of the homeless are only estimates of those in streets and shelters, and do not include individuals or families who are “couch surfing” or “doubled-up.” This is of particular concern when it comes to obtaining an accurate figure of the homeless youth population in Los Angeles. We know that many of these young people resort to couch surfing in order to delay ending up on the streets.

“While I was couch surfing I always had a place to shower at bedtime. I wore uniforms so I did not really have to worry about having any other clothes. All I had to do was wash my uniform once a week. When I was staying on the streets, my best friend and his family would allow me to shower and wash my uniform at their place. I would also leave my books there because, since they belonged to the school, I could not risk losing them or damaging them.” David- age 20, Latino

The exclusion of “couch surfing” or “doubled-up” in their definition of homelessness is at great discrepancy with the Federal definition of homeless youth. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, a piece of federal legislation, “homeless children and youth” include those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Youth’s age-range and homelessness experience are defined differently across federal, state and local agencies, sometimes the definition of “youth” begins at age 16 and ends at 21, other times it runs from 18-25 years old (NCFY).
Children of “Systems”

1,100 youth in the Los Angeles County foster care system turn 18 each year, and more than 20% experience homelessness within a year of emancipation. Typical risk factors for this population include lack of high school diploma/GED, no employment experience or job training, mental health disabilities or behavioral disorders, and experience in juvenile justice and mental health systems (Child Welfare Initiative, 2013). While not all homeless youth were in the foster care system, they share similar traits and characteristics. Homeless youth are socially marginalized and often arrested for “status” offenses, such as running away or breaking curfew (The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010). Studies show how homeless youth become involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems more often than the general youth population (ibid). And for youth released from juvenile corrections or penal facilities, reentry is often difficult because they lack support systems and opportunities for work and housing (ibid).

The relationship between the foster care, juvenile and criminal justice, as well as homeless youth systems of care is central to addressing and ending youth homelessness. And although there is a strong relationship between youth homelessness, the child welfare, and the juvenile and criminal justice systems, collaboration and cooperation among these entities is limited. Youth who have been involved in systems and who access Jovenes’ housing resources demonstrate how a lack of individualized planning and supportive mechanisms further isolate these youth and push them into homelessness.

The connection between youth and their assigned worker, ceases or a the very least become irrelevant in the personal development of the youth, when they exit the system and contributes to a distrust of public social service agencies (Burt 2007). As a result, youth are commonly not enrolled for government benefits, such as GR, SSI, Section 8, and Healthcare. Due to this, they end up seeking these resources when they are experiencing a crisis, making it even harder to navigate the bureaucracies and the series of steps to obtain these benefits; it’s crisis intervention rather than homelessness prevention.

Gender, Race, & Place

Local, state and national statistics on the homeless have consistently shown that, across the lifespan, males outnumber females, and that Blacks and Latinos are the two most predominant ethnic groups within the homeless population (Witte 2012, LAHSA 2011, HUD 2010, and Rabinovitz, Schneir and Clark, 2010).

“In Skid Row, you see people shooting drugs and prostituting themselves. You have to sleep next to people who are really dirty and who stink really bad because their clothes are full of feces and urine. The one night I spent at a shelter there, I was so scared and kept myself awake all night long because I feared a crazy person would jump on me with a knife or something. After that, I figured I could sneak into car dealerships at night, and sleep inside one of their cars, and that’s what I did until I found Jovenes” Matt- age 21, Latino

When research is conducted on youth homelessness in Los Angeles, focus is primarily paid to two distinct geographic areas: Hollywood and the Westside (Santa Monica and Venice). Meanwhile, the state of youth homelessness in the context of racially segregated, inner-city neighborhoods such as East and South Los Angeles is basically unknown. In our literature review, we found no studies on
homeless youth in Boyle Heights and East LA, even though these communities have some of the highest rates of youth homelessness within the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The urban landscape of Los Angeles has been configured along color and class lines. For decades, East and South L.A. have been the home to poor communities of color, comprised almost exclusively of either Latino or African American residents. These communities hold a long history of structural oppression reflected in disparities in just about every social indicator of prosperity and wellbeing, involving health, education, employment, income, social connectedness, and public safety among others.

In addition, the immigration of unaccompanied Latin American youth has been a long-standing phenomenon in Southern California and remains an important social phenomenon today. As young as 8 years of age, an alarming number of unaccompanied Latin American minors, mostly teenage boys, are risking their lives in order to make it to the U.S. (Amnesty International 2003, Bhabha 2004, and Byrne 2008). And while some youth come seeking to join parents or relatives already living in the U.S., others are simply fleeing abusive situations in their home countries (ibid). Unaccompanied immigrant youth generally lack any significant sources of support once in the U.S., leaving them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, victimization, and homelessness, as well as in desperate need of coping mechanisms, such as drugs and alcohol, to ease the pain and uncertainty in their lives (Department of State, 2010).

Community by Community

Due to the lack of knowledge about youth homelessness, the tendency to consider homelessness only in the context of chronically homeless adults and families, and generalization that homeless youth in LA are here because they are chasing their “Hollywood dream” or are “troublemakers,” there is a severe lack of awareness regarding youth homelessness in the neighborhoods from which these youth emerge.

Comparison of Ethnicity of Homeless Youth in Hollywood & Jovenes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHNICITY</th>
<th>HOLLYWOOD</th>
<th>JOVENES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparison of Place of Origin of Homeless Youth in Hollywood & Jovenes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLACE OF ORIGIN</th>
<th>HOLLYWOOD</th>
<th>JOVENES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles County</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California (Outside LA)</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States (Outside CA)</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside US</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Counted</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tables above compare the demographics of homeless youth in Hollywood compared to those at Jovenes. The Hollywood Homeless Youth Project conducted a thorough point in time count in October 2012 that showed that the majority of homeless youth in Hollywood were not from Los Angeles (Rice, Winetrobe, Rhodes, 2013). Jovenes’ demographics reflect the enrollees in our shelter from April 2012-March 2013, and show that more youth come from Los Angeles County and abroad than homeless youth in Hollywood. This distinction is important because it demonstrates the diversity of the homeless youth population in LA, and the need for individual communities to build capacity and tailor solutions that reflect the population they serve.

The disparities facing boys and young men of color have been captured through the measurement of standard indicators of human welfare and prosperity including socioeconomic, health, safety and educational outcomes. Economically disadvantaged boys and young men of color are at the bottom of nearly every positive indicator. Poor young men of color have the lowest life expectancy, income earning, and high school and college graduation rates, as well as the highest unemployment, violent assault, and murder rates. Many organizations and funders are currently studying and addressing the health disparities of ‘Boys and Young Men of Color’ (BMOC), and this initiative is a major undertaking that is bringing attention to the correlation between race-gender-age and chronic inequality. Their studies take the racial inequality analysis even further as to explain the acute social disparities currently affecting boys and young men of color in California. Such disparities are widely prevalent across East and South LA neighborhoods. The BMOC initiative examines human inequality through social indicators of development and health, including academic achievement, available services and resources, unemployment, incarceration, crime and victimization, violence, lifespan, chronic illnesses and mental health, income, and public safety, among others.

Despite an underlying claim about the systematic displacement of boys and young men of color in our society, the initiative does not incorporate the issue of youth homelessness into their analysis. This is a critical gap, especially at a time when homelessness is regarded as the epitome of human displacement. Dropout rates, likelihood of arrest/detention, victimization, substance abuse, and mental health disorders (among other factors) are key determinants in youth homelessness. However, this connection is seldom made, and so housing stability is overlooked when strategies are constructed and implemented to address the social disparities faced by young people of color.
From Jovenes’ interactions with community members, local organizations, and stakeholders, we have seen that youth homelessness is not on the radar of expressed community concerns. In fact, we know that community residents and decision makers commonly believe homeless service agencies import youth from elsewhere throughout the city and state rather than working with a population that grew up within their communities’ boundaries. The ‘Not In My Backyard’ (NIMBY) philosophy still has a strong following, as residents who feel nervous about or are reluctant to the idea of living in close proximity to homeless youth protest the creation of affordable housing units (especially if the housing units cater to people with mental disabilities). Nevertheless, from the clients we serve along with official sources, we very well know that there is a high incidence of homelessness among local youth. According to the Homeless Education Program at LAUSD, the three main schools in Boyle Heights (Hollenbeck Middle School, Mendez Learning Center, and Roosevelt High School) had 724 youth who experienced homelessness in 2010. USC Sociologist Dr. Eric Rice estimates that there are over 36,000 students in LAUSD who experience homelessness (Rice, Winetrobe, Rhodes, 2013). Given this, how can we expect youth to reintegrate when their communities and supportive networks, having already rejected and failed them, continue to exclude their existence from local priorities?

**Blame the Family, or Blame the System?**

“Ever since I was six years old I have gone through many episodes of homelessness. I remember not having a stable home and bouncing from motels, to shelters, and to skid row. There was even times when my mom snuck us into her job at night so that we could sleep there. Furthermore, in skid row I witnessed many fights and lots of drugs, and prostitution. At eight years old I remember seeing people trading sexual favors for drugs.”

Adam - age 20, Latino/Samoan

Parents of homeless youth receive the most blame for their child’s plight. As leading studies point out, youth homelessness commonly reflects eroding family relations. Most of these studies deem the family as the root of the problem. However, this analysis fails to recognize the role of macro-level, structural inequalities that lead to family dysfunction and disintegration among communities of color in the first place. Economic struggles, instability, undocumented status, and violence as well as lack of resources and opportunities (such as living wages, parks and recreational spaces, youth and adult empowerment programs, access to nutritional foods, and adequately populated and maintained schools) put stress on families. When the youth of Jovenes describe why they became homeless, they typically do not state that their family simply kicked them out. Instead, they describe scenarios in which their families were thrown into turmoil due to unemployment, incarceration, illness and injuries and as a result were no longer able to house their aging children.

**Government & Family Breakdown**

The vast majority of children who enter the Foster Care System come from poor families of color in which parents are deemed unfit caretakers by the state, eventually resulting in parents having their custody rights revoked either temporarily or permanently (Foster Care Statistics by Racial/Ethnic Composition). About 8% of children enter Foster Care because their immigrant, often undocumented parents are detained and deported (Applied Research Center, 2011). In almost every single one of these cases, immigrant parents end up losing all parental rights to their children in a permanent fashion because, while in detention or after being deported, they are denied the possibility of attending DCFS court hearings.
Working-age Black and Latino men become incarcerated for non-violent, first time offenses and, from there, become entrenched in a continuous offender re-entry cycle. In line with the rest of the nation, juvenile detention centers and adult correctional facilities in California are filled with young men of color. According to legal scholar Michelle Alexander; the current trend in our society of mass incarceration among working-age men of color accounts for the shortage of caring-responsible adults, especially positive male role models, in the lives of boys and young men of color. To illustrate the extent of this issue, Alexander states that today an African American child is less likely to grow up with his father than during times of slavery (2010). In this sense, family breakdown among poor communities of color could also be conceived as the result, 'not the cause,' of long-endured structural racism, concentrated poverty and violence. Looking into the structural elements that lead families to become dysfunctional and disintegrate is critical to understanding the root causes of youth homelessness.

The Allocation of Resources for Serving Homeless Youth

With more than 12% of the nation’s population, and more than 10% of the nation’s Federal Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) caseload, California’s share of FYSB’s funding is approximately 3.5%. As a result of budget cuts and economic downturn, that funding level is only continuing to shrink. Considering the size of the state’s population as well as its FYSB caseload, California is already at a great disadvantage for programs and services intended for homeless youth. In a similar fashion, the distribution of public funding for programs and services for homeless youth in Los Angeles are unequal. Most resources for homeless youth are concentrated in Hollywood and the Westside, while in already underserved areas such as East and South LA, programs and services for homeless youth are scarce to none, even though many youth become homeless in these communities.

While it is not surprising that funding is limited, the issue that we have identified is that certain communities in LA that have a high concentration of homeless youth do not have the capacity to serve them. In this scenario, youth are unable to stabilize in their home communities, and neighborhoods are unable to create local solutions. What is needed is an increased focus on building capacity in underserved areas so that providers can operate continuums of care that include shelter and permanent housing solutions with supportive services.
Challenge #1: Barriers to Safe, Stable, & Affordable Housing

Having a safe and stable place to call home is paramount to youth who are trying to break their personal cycle of homelessness. When youth are faced with homelessness, they tend to have three reactions:

1) Couch Surfing (with extended family or friends)
2) Sleep in the streets, cars, or other public areas
3) Go to a shelter/housing program

For most of the youth who come to Jovenes, this is not the first time they accessed a housing program. This means youth are constantly moving from program to program (shelters) for many months if not years, without being able to reach a phase of stabilization where basic needs of the youth are met. Other youth are transitioned without significant preparation or planning between different providers (this is the typical example of youth aging out of foster care or juvenile detention systems). For these youth, emotional distress adds to the trauma that they carry with them, leading to a psychological state that is not the best ground to build successful transitions into adulthood. Youth who’ve experienced prolonged trauma need a longer time to heal compared to what most short-term shelter programs are able to offer. In our experience, these youth go from shelter to shelter because they oftentimes do not fit in with programs that are designed to capitalize on functioning behavior patterns within group dynamics: violent outbursts and an inability to follow program rules are grounds for expulsion. In this scenario, youth that need the most help are not able to remain in programs where they could receive life-changing support.

A Pathway to Permanency

The homeless youth population is very transitory who often move between the different regions of LA, such as Hollywood, the Westside, or Skid Row to access shelter and resources. In the landscape of Los Angeles, a major challenge is that youth who grew up in communities such as Boyle Heights, East LA, or South LA must leave their neighborhoods in search of housing, and even then, the availability of beds and permanent housing units does not come close to the number of youth experiencing homelessness. It comes as no surprise that there is a differentiation between service approaches for youth and other homeless populations (i.e. chronically homeless adults). This becomes evident when hearing from youth who have stayed in larger shelters with an older population and in how they describe the stigmas they have about being identified as homeless and fear of ending up on Skid Row.

“When I got expelled from a housing and job placement program in Downtown LA, the program officer told me he had to take me to a homeless shelter, since I had nowhere to go. When we got to skid row, I was so scared of what I saw that I had to beg the officer to not leave me there, to take me somewhere else.” Greyson- age 20, African American

The places and neighborhoods where these opportunities exist are extremely important. Having entry points and housing options in residential areas that do not necessarily have a high concentration of homeless, or are exclusively dedicated to homeless individuals, creates a more natural environment for youth. This allows them to integrate back into their community (or build a new supportive community for themselves), and create a place-based plan that includes education & employment that complements stable housing and maintaining supportive relationships. Resource rich environments like Boyle Heights are optimal places for this process to occur due to its proximity to

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commercial areas, public transportation options, and numerous community based organizations. What is certain is that short-term interventions have little chance of success as youth remain in a state of constant instability, worrying more about their relationship with program rules and maximum bed-nights allowed than their own personal growth and success.

**Moving Towards 'Housing First'**

The federal laws (HEARTH ACT, 2012) regulating funding for homeless programs executed by the department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) calls for a 30-day average stay in emergency shelter as a national goal, along with a much stronger emphasis on permanent housing placement as the model to end homelessness. Like HUD, other funders are also changing priorities and moving toward a “Housing First Approach.”

While we believe Housing First is the right strategy, there are some considerations that need to be made related to how providers transition from their traditional program design (emergency & short term shelter) to the latest models.

The reduction in length of stay in short term housing programs creates additional pressure on clients and the staff related to outcome achievement. With the new model, service providers are being pushed to adopt the new expectations of housing placement without the guarantee of additional resources to meet outcome goals. Stress is created as youth and providers must show significant progress within 30 days, a timeframe where developing trust and positive communication is crucial between youth and staff, and so clients are pushed even more to accomplish traditional housing and employment outcomes, even if those outcomes are unrealistic within a short timeframe.

As Housing First is continually implemented, there are signs that lessons are being learned. We commend the approach that Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority adopted on this issue by maintaining a degree of flexibility on length of stay, allowing service providers the ability to use their own judgment in working with youth instead of set-in-stone benchmarks that dictate how long youth are able to be served.

The fact that Housing First is the new approach does not mean that there is enough supply of permanent housing units available to meet demand. Unfortunately we are far from it. This means that all the short-term housing programs (that by HUD definition includes shelter and transitional housing) are still very much necessary to deal with homelessness and represent an important safety net for thousands in our community. Especially among TAY providers and funders, the debate on what approach best serves youth is very animated. In particular, many advocate for the transitional housing model as a very beneficial approach that prepares youth for the move to permanent housing. While we agree that historically the transitional housing model has been successful (Jovenes’ transitional housing program has between 75-85% rate of placement into permanent housing for each of the last 3 years), we have to consider that in many cases only the *best performing/behaving clients* are the ones that meet the eligibility requirements, leaving out many of the most vulnerable and the neediest youth.

More than just the availability of a bed, it is the program design, including the intensity and the quality of supportive services, which makes a difference. Youth at this age are still in a developmental stage; their maturity has not yet reached that of an adult, even more so for a young person who, from childhood, has lacked the necessary conditions for a healthy development (experiencing trauma at a young age can significantly hamper development). Youth, at this stage, can thrive in programs where intense adult guidance and support are provided, allowing them to successfully transition into adulthood. Advocates of Critical Time Intervention, an evidence based practice used by homeless service providers, state that homeless youth often need between 30-50% more time to
stabilize than other homeless populations.

So what is the best housing option for transition age youth? All of Jovenes’ internal data and experience suggests that youth thrive in housing arrangements that provide mid to long-term stability. The model that accomplishes this most successfully is Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), because it ensures housing stability for longer period of time for the most vulnerable homeless youth (chronically homeless and youth with mental disabilities). PSH is a type of housing where a tenant signs a lease at a very affordable and subsidized rent, moves into their own unit, and is still surrounded by supportive services that help them maintain their housing and advance their individual plan. In order to work, an appropriate level of funding for services must accompany PSH. Without maintaining an individualized, goal-oriented case management structure that fosters trust, personal development, and stability, youth in PSH are at high-risk of re-engaging in negative behavior and losing their housing. The property management approach must also embrace a strategy and flexibility that prioritizes keeping youth in their housing and improving behavior patterns rather than enforcing evictions for lease violations especially during the first few months. There is a steep learning curve that youth face to understand and adjust to the new housing environment.

Room keys are a cause for celebration. “I’ve been through so much to get to this point. Now that I’ve got my keys, I feel so relieved. I don’t have to worry about where I’m sleeping next. Been through so many shelters, in the streets, have gotten off track, and struggled. I’m so happy. I’ve been waiting so long for this, and it’s finally coming together. When I was worried about where I was going to sleep, I was surrounded by negativity and couldn’t focus on anything, like school or a job. Now I have a place of my own and can live my life.”

- Alec, age 21, upon receiving his keys for his Permanent Supportive Housing unit.
Transitional housing is a program model that takes many forms, from shared housing with many beds to scattered site where each individual has his own unit. Some programs look more like shelters and are free of charge, while others place clients into their own apartments and gradually (in this case the model is very similar to permanent supportive housing). Some of these programs are free of charge and others collect rent payments that are heavily subsidized at first, with the tenant gradually paying a larger portion as time goes by.

In general, all transitional housing programs allow a longer stay (up to 18-24 months) compared to emergency shelter programs. The major limitations seen in transitional housing programs is that these programs are limited in time so that youth still need to find an alternative housing option, and that rent adjustments are not tied to the amount of income each tenant is generating. It is increasingly difficult for homeless youth to pick up the full amount of a market-rate lease in Los Angeles. Despite this, transitional housing is an important solution at the current stage of our local continuum of care, because it is accessible to youth who may not fit the eligibility requirements for permanent supportive housing and exposes them to a support system and resources that can help them be better prepared for their life as independent adults. The time spent living in these programs provide enough time for youth to stabilize and should have the ultimate goal of placing youth into permanent housing that they can afford.

Rapid re-housing programs are designed to provide a limited payment that can prevent eviction or cover move-in costs. this one time assistance has limited use for many youth that need a longer period of time to develop income and skills to afford and maintain housing on their own. Options that are able to provide longer-term assistance are more effective by giving more time to youth to develop their plan and count on resources that are feasible and sustainable. Due to the temporary nature of the support, the affordability of the unit becomes a central issue in regards of housing retention. We cannot stress enough that when transition age youth are able to obtain housing, it is paramount that they still be surrounded by quality supportive services and positive connections.

**Recommendations**

- Expand pipeline for youth to access permanent supportive housing and increase number of affordable units dedicated to youth.

- Advocate for TAY to be included as a priority target population in Los Angeles various strategies to address homelessness (current prioritized populations are veterans and chronically homeless adults).

- Development of housing and funding/financing approaches that avoid “one-fit-all” strategies to respond to the different levels of development stages of youth while continuing to provide a personalized level of support across the different housing options youth may transition into.

- Advocate for exception to the rule in regard of background check, credit and employment history to allow increased chances of success to enter permanent housing.

- Build capacity for the creation of local solutions within communities where access to a full continuum of care which allows youth to grow, integrate and feel included in the community they live in.
Jovenes, Inc. Housing Options

Jovenes operates a Continuum of Care that facilitates a process for homeless youth to exit the streets and access permanent housing as fast as possible. Not all the youth served at Jovenes qualify for traditional affordable housing (which factor in income, legal status, criminal history, and family size). Having a mix of public and privately financed housing options allows us to house populations that are most vulnerable to chronic homelessness (such as those with mental health illnesses), provides a degree of flexibility to extend permanent housing to subpopulations that are often left out, and reduces the number of eligibility requirements that homeless youth must pass in order to qualify for housing. Our programs are structured to allow youth to access the right option of permanent housing based on their particular needs.

**Short term housing (20 units).** Our 90 day, 12 bed emergency shelter program provides the point of entrance to youth in our continuum. In addition we provide eight beds of transitional housing. These programs are operated in a traditional fashion where the transitional housing is only accessible to youth that were previously enrolled in our emergency shelter.

**Progress Place Apartments (14 units).** In operation since 2012 and funded by CALHFA, California HCD and HACOLA, Progress Place provides permanent supportive housing to youth with mental disabilities. In order to qualify youth must be certified by Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. Rents can be lower than traditional affordable housing units and capped at 30% of income. Provision of supportive services are part of the project design to better respond to eligible applicants’ needs.

**My Home- Mi Casa (18 units currently available and 15-20 units in predevelopment).** A partnership between GENESIS LA and Jovenes, My Home- Mi Casa manages a $3 million investment fund (privately financed) to buy and rehabilitate small properties in the community of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, especially 2 bedroom homes and duplexes where in each property youth share the home with another tenant. By timing acquisition with market bottoming and low interest rate we were able to create a non-traditional affordable housing option for homeless individuals. Rents are usually $500/month per unit and each month youth that live in the unit accumulates $50 (10% of rent) in the form of equity sharing. They will be able to cash out once they transition to another housing option. Due to the private financing, My Home Mi Casa is able to accept sub-populations that may be left out by other traditional options: un-documented youth, youth with a criminal background or youth with bad or no credit. In our experience, rent level in this option is comparable to 40-45% average median income in the lower range of income requirements for traditional affordable housing.

**Boyle Hotel set aside (5 units).** Developed by East Los Angeles Community Corporation, the Boyle Hotel is a 50 unit affordable housing building just a few hundred feet from Jovenes’ main campus. Of the 50 units, 5 are studios where TAY referred by Jovenes are on a preferential list. Rent may vary between 30%-45% Average Median Income.
Challenge #2: Accessing Services, Counseling, & Health Coverage

Though mainstream benefits and services such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), General Relief (GR), Food Stamps, Medi-Cal, Healthy Way LA, mental health and substance abuse services, and housing subsidy programs, along with their state and local equivalents are intended to address the basic needs and provide relief to the neediest and most vulnerable populations, more often than not, eligibility and delivery service protocols pose significant challenges to homeless youth who desperately need them. According to the Holes in the Safety Net report (Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, 2003), barriers to access are often inherent in the condition of homelessness.

It is common for homeless youth to be turned down from medical and government benefits due to lack of identification documents—such as I.D., social security card, birth certificate, proof of address, and proof of income. It takes great effort from clients and case managers to get past those challenges because it involves numerous visits, phone calls, and letters, as well as having to go through long and complicated processes that cost money clients don’t have, to obtain the documentation required to submit an application. In addition, lack of access to a telephone, transportation barriers, poor health, trauma and other psychological disabilities, along with substance abuse issues, commonly get in the way of homeless youth obtaining services and benefits. When youth are facing all these ailments at once, they are challenged to prioritize their activities. Healthcare enrollment activities also primarily occur at health clinics and hospitals, which aren’t places where youth would be prior to a health crisis.

Data from www.TBNConnect.org shows us that, of the 38% of searchers who answered the question about medical insurance, 64% of youth of them were uncovered. (From TBN TAY Resources Report, April 2013):

Medical Insurance amongst www.TBNConnect.org users:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has medical insurance</td>
<td>2,289</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not have medical insurance</td>
<td>4,046</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,335</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This chart shows the highest concentration of individuals having medical insurance is around 16 to 17 years old, after which there are more youth without medical insurance than with. Age is negatively correlated with the health insurance status of TBN Connect service seekers. A simple regression estimating the impact of each additional year of life (up to age 25) on medical insurance status, controlling for gender, found a statistically significant 2.2% percentage point decrease in the probability of having medical insurance for each additional year of life.

Without insurance, homeless youth are forced to use emergency services more than outpatient services, with each visit to the hospital costing hundreds or thousands of dollars. As a result, youth are left with substantial amounts of debt. The process of mental health stabilization is one of the first areas that we have to address when dealing with youth that are homeless in order to build a good foundation for a stable future. Youth coming out of systems often miss out on critical resources and opportunities they are entitled to, which results in increased vulnerability and greater likelihood of homelessness. Psychological and psychiatric care are essential components for serving homeless youth. Nevertheless, accessibility, feasibility and effectiveness of treatment are often a challenge, particularly in low-income communities such as Boyle Heights. If a youth has a negative experience when attempting to access resources for the first time, they are likely to avoid continu-
Adequate access to legal services, including legal counsel, advocacy, and representation is also a significant challenge for our youth. Many of our clients are ticketed and arrested for quality of life offenses such as sleeping on public benches and riding the metro without paying for a ticket. In most cases, youth are unable to pay the penalty fees. In addition, youth often miss their court hearings because they forgot or because they never received the actual notice, since they don’t have a stable place of residence. Unfortunately, a number of these simple cases end up turning into arrest warrants and sometimes even culminate in actual arrests. Most youth in these and other cases are not able to access legal services and often end up engaged in the criminal system.

Another instance is undocumented youth. Among our clients, we have cases in which young men entered the U.S. illegally, fleeing persecution either because of their sexual orientation, or because gangs and other organized crime groups are after them. In addition, we see cases where immigrant youth arrived in the U.S. as unaccompanied minors. In most of these cases, youth report fleeing abusive or unlivable situations. With adequate legal representation, most youth living through these types of circumstances would have a good chance of obtaining asylum, making them eligible for many benefits. However, in most cases unaccompanied immigrant youth remain in the shadows and their life conditions remain as bad or even worsen once in the U.S.

**Recommendations**

- Improve youth wellbeing by increasing access to health insurance programs and increase awareness of the benefits of health screenings/mental health services/healthy lifestyles and develop collateral material aimed at TAY explaining healthcare coverage options & importance.

- Define strategies for County Agencies (Dept. of Public Social Services, Dept. of Mental Health, Dept. of Health Services) to expand enrollment activities targeted towards TAY to happen outside of community health clinics by embracing and funding youth promotor & peer ambassador models in non-profits and in places where TAY congregate.

- Adapt service protocols that emphasizes obtaining basic benefits (ID’s, insurance, government benefits, etc.) and services to meet the needs of homeless and at-risk TAY.

- Develop methods that implement and facilitate effective coordination and collaboration across youth-servicing agencies and agencies that offer specialized professional services (legal, health, etc.) to maximize leveraging of resources.

- Create and implement training opportunities for clients and service providers on how government systems and welfare programs work and/or how to navigate them as well as improve lines of communication and cooperation between local service providers and government program officials.

“After waiting the entire day in a room full of really weird people, a nurse saw me for 5 minutes. She prescribed me a very strong medication without explaining the effects and never told me what my diagnosis was. I took the medication for a couple of days but they made my symptoms a lot worse, so I just stop taking them and never went back.”
Challenge #3: Barriers to Educational, Professional, and Economic Development

After being released from Juvenile Hall in Texas at age 16, I came back to California. I stayed with my aunt for a couple of days, then stayed with my best friend and his family in a one bedroom apartment for a while until the landlord threatened them with eviction because there were too many people living in a small apartment. From there, I was just couch hopping in different places until eventually I ran out of places to stay. Other people did not want to help me. Then I ended up staying on the street for a while. [Despite living on the streets] I enrolled back in school. My teachers knew about my situation but they did not have any resources. All they did was called the social worker but the social worker could not help me because I’m already too old to be put in foster care. Nobody is going to want to take an older kid. The social worker could not find any resources for me. She just kept calling other social workers but they just did not know how to help me. They had no idea, no clue, no resources, nothing. David- age 20, Latino

Throughout Los Angeles, there are hundreds of non-profits and programs that work with youth. More and more public and private initiatives that target at-risk youth are being instituted in underserved communities of color. With a wide array of objectives and approaches, youth-oriented programs that operate from inner-city neighborhoods seek to lessen the barriers and open opportunities for marginalized youth to lead healthy and productive lives. While we are not in a position to objectively evaluate how successful these programs are, we would like to explore these opportunities from the perspective of homeless youth, taking into consideration their unique needs and challenges.

Educational Attainment

Comparison of Educational Achievement between Homeless/Not Homeless Youth (source: www.tbnconnect.org)
Homeless youth are significantly more likely to have been expelled and pushed out from school. The stacked bar chart above shows education status by being homeless or not homeless for TBN Connect users. Homeless searchers were significantly more likely to have been expelled or left school by choice. 46.4% of homeless searches either left school by choice or were expelled versus just 9.7% of non-homeless searches.

In Los Angeles, there is movement to implement Restorative Justice, a practice that reduces suspensions and expulsions in favor of disciplinary practices that keep youth in school. Reducing or eliminating expulsions is a critical part of homelessness prevention.

Along with Restorative Justice, the standardization and deliberate implementation of the McKinney Vento Act in order to ensure that homeless youth have an equal opportunity to access and further their education. This includes offering youth homelessness awareness education into schools’ standard curricula; the standardization of student homelessness prevention and intervention efforts by developing and implementing ongoing student homelessness awareness lectures and staff trainings, as well as by integrating homeless education policies and resources into schools’ written protocols; and the development of educational materials like posters and brochures that inform students and the public about the facts and warning signs of youth homelessness as well as where and how to get help. Helping homeless youth transition into support systems that prevent them from dropping out, becoming marginalized on the streets, and enables them to access postsecondary opportunities is key to transforming the experiences of homeless youth.

Professional and Economic Development

Expulsion or dropping out of high school creates significant barriers to personal, professional, and economic development. These three areas are critical to the life chances and personal success of any individual in our society. Personal and professional growth are key to economic development. Our clients often find it extremely difficult to find and secure employment due to lack of skills, confidence, and job readiness. In addition, there are some practical barriers that our clients face when it comes to accessing means of economic support. These include lack of personal identification documents, lack of employment experience, employment disqualification or denial due to criminal background or sexual orientation, and lack of means of reliable transportation.

At Jovenes, youth who come to our program often report a recent or current engagement in a program for at-risk youth. Overall, youth speak very positively about their experiences in these programs, but their unstable housing situations ultimately deter them from continuing their participation. Within programs that target at-risk youth, more attention needs to be paid to their housing needs. These opportunities and programs must be developed in conjunction with the specific service approaches that assist youth who cannot count on adult role models or mentoring figures who can help them navigate challenges like their lack of skills, confidence, and job readiness. Service approaches should recognize and address outstanding items like missing documentation, support for transportation, and financial aid.

Recommendations:

• Revisit school policies to understand how homeless youth are being ensured an equal opportunity to further and complete their education, as delineated in the McKinney-Vento Act.

• Create more collaboration between housing providers and educational/occupational institutions to ensure a safety net for homeless youth by developing outreach & enrollment strategies that target homeless youth and decrease the fees and bureaucratic hurdles that prevent youth from continuing their education.

• Create funding streams that offer free public transportation passes for homeless youth.
Challenge #4: Social Estrangement, Trauma, & Emotional Illiteracy

Social Estrangement

Young men of color of transition age often experience persecution, alienation, and invisibility. Often, they are also subjects of criminalization reflected in racial profiling practices, ticketing, constant arrests and highly punitive approaches to offenses. In addition, these youth are often the targets of gang and police violence as well as victims of civil and human rights violations.

For many decades, dominant claims suggesting an inherent deficit of human capital among inner-city communities of color have circulated through American society. These claims have evolved into various forms of inequality and structural discrimination and are inflicted upon certain ethnic communities—such as Latinos and African Americans.

Structural discrimination translates into systematic alienation, violence and, according to Lawrence et al., involves:

- Specific power arrangements that perpetuate chronic disparities, especially as they exist in public policies and institutional practices.
- General cultural assumptions, values, ideologies, and stereotypes that allow disparities to go unchallenged.
- The dynamics of progress and retrenchment, which highlight how gains on some issues can be undermined by forces operating in other spheres or by oppositional actors, and
- Political, macroeconomic, regional, and other contextual factors that have enormous influences on outcomes for children, youth, families, and communities.

Just as ethnic groups, subgroups can also become targets of structural discrimination. Young men of color from inner-city neighborhoods have become the target of a system of oppression that engages race, gender and age. Claims about the inherent deficit of human capital in young men of color have gone as far as to demonize them by attributing an innate predisposition to violent and criminal behavior. Such claims have fed and justified various forms of institutional violence as well as systems of social alienation befalling young men of color. Institutional violence towards young men of color has been characterized by mass incarceration, racial profiling, gang injunction laws, police brutality, and felony branding along with its chain of consequences (complete or partial ineligibility for employment, government benefits, financial aid for college and civic rights among others).

On top of being the targets of criminalization based on their racial, gender and age profile, homeless young men of color also face criminalization and discrimination on the basis of being homeless. The lack of available shelter space leaves many homeless young men with no choice but to struggle to survive on the streets. According to a 2009 report by the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, homeless youth become involved in the criminal justice system more often than the general youth population.

Not until recently did we begin to pay attention to the severely diminished life chances for poor boys and young men of color in California. Such profound disparities have been captured through the measurement of standard indicators of human welfare and prosperity including socioeconomic,

Jovenes, Inc.

From The Fringes
health, safety, and educational outcomes. Economically disadvantaged boys and young men of color are at the bottom of nearly every positive indicator. Poor young men of color have the lowest life expectancy, income earning, and high school and college graduation rates, as well as the highest unemployment, violent assault, and murder rates.

Moreover, young men of color of transition age often lack family and community support and are commonly the targets of widespread prejudice and mistrust inside and outside their communities. And when it comes to homeless young men of color; there is a widely held assumption that these young men end up homeless because they are troubled kids who do not want to abide by their parents’ rules.

**Trauma**

Research demonstrates that the majority of homeless youth experience multiple traumatic events including physical and sexual assaults, hate crimes, and multiple forms of violence (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2009). Even though most youth are subjected to traumatic events before leaving their home, many are re-traumatized while on the streets (ibid). Trauma can interfere with normal development, behavior and performance (academic and work-related) and may lead to lifelong problems including cognitive problems, depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and chronic health problems (ibid). Among youths’ responses to trauma are difficulties sleeping and/or eating, inability to concentrate or complete everyday tasks, feelings of inadequacy and guilt, multiple health complaints, acting out or impulsive behaviors (including unsafe sex, promiscuity, substance abuse or illegal activities) bullying or intimidation of peers or staff, immature behaviors, moodiness, irritability and lack of trust (ibid).

A large number of youth who enter Jovenes present trauma-related symptoms that seemingly interfere with their ability to perform many daily activities. It is not uncommon for clients to exhibit sluggishness, apathy, arrogance, impulsivity or excessive anger. Unfortunately, these behaviors are often perceived as signs of lack of compliance instead of as trauma-related coping mechanisms, and a punitive approach is taken instead of a restorative one.

From our focus groups, we discovered that youth who disclosed having experienced high levels of sustained poverty, discrimination, institutionalized forms of punishment, police surveillance and racial profiling among others--all manifestations of structural violence--were almost always the same clients that staff identified as exhibiting greater levels of defiant, at times violent, and emotionally disturbed behavior.

Seemingly, such behaviors are based on an underlining violence and estrangement-based trauma that has never been addressed. While conducting this research project, we worked with a wide array of clients with diverse experiences and backgrounds. We found that those clients who most struggled with anger containment, emotional distress and substance abuse, were the same clients...
whose stories implicated sustained experiences of violence that went beyond interpersonal or familial violence. In most of these cases, youth’s experiences appeared not as simple isolated occurrences but rather as expressions of a collective legacy of domination, inequality, and repression closely connected to an interrelation across race/ethnicity, gender and class.

Trauma is reflected in the lives of young men of color through engagement in destructive coping mechanisms (substance abuse and violence), as well as through feelings of discouragement, shame, anger, and self-blame.

**Emotional Illiteracy & Gender Norms**

Growing up I had it rough. I never had a chance to have a good childhood. I witnessed my dad go to jail many times. He’d be missing out on his responsibilities and sometimes I even felt ashamed to claim my dad. I was judged on his behavior. Everyone around me used to tell me: “oh, you are about to be like your dad always going to jail.” I never knew how to respond back to that quote, so I had took my anger out on that person just to let that person know not to mess with me and to never say that again. -Leonard, age 19, African American

When comparing the long-term outcomes of boys and young men of color to those of girls and young women from the same communities, males present far more negative outcomes than females in a consistent fashion, even though both groups are seemingly exposed to equivalent degrees of violence and trauma. We believe that this is tied to cultural gender divisions that confer girls and women greater room to process trauma and grief than they do boys and men. Only recently have researchers taken notice of the interrelation between race and gender as well as race and adolescence as predominant elements in systemic inequality. The commonality across these studies is a strong analysis and critique of structural racism that looks outward to explain repression inflicted on boys and young men of color; while overlooking an internal cultural sexism inflicted on males.

There is no doubt that dominant society regards young men of color as being inherently violent and criminal-prone and that an unspoken, highly effective system of elimination targeting poor Latino and African American young men has developed and become ingrained into official social arrangements and institutions, constituting what is known as ‘structural oppression.’ And while this type of systematic alienation is growing in its visibility and efforts to challenge it, particularly among Latino and African American activists and advocates (the Boys and Young Men of Color Initiative being a perfect example), the paradoxical cultural systems within communities of color that naturalize, value, excuse and even demand aggressive conduct among boys and young men, symbolized in the “boys will be boys” slogan, go unquestioned.

Machista gender norms and values dictate the ways in which Latino and African American males are raised. Machista norms are programmed into males’ psyches from childhood. Though machista gender arrangements have already been examined in different studies, analyses are predominantly from the perspective of how these gender norms negatively impact women. However, the negative effects that culturally specific machista gender norms have on males of color have yet to be recognized and addressed. From our study, we concluded that machista gender norms also carry detrimental consequences for males. These cultural gender norms strip boys and young men the ability to have healthy emotional outlets and coping mechanisms, what psychology describes as ‘emotional literacy.’

Traditionally, grieving and emotional distress have been deemed feminine attributes among Latinos and African Americans. This is why it is culturally acceptable for girls and women to openly admit to and display such feelings. Boys and men, on the other hand, are taught to suppress their feelings,
especially when it comes to grief and emotional distress. The open expression of grief and suffering among boys and men is commonly perceived as a sign of manly weakness within traditional Latino and African American circles.

Most inner-city boys and young men grow up being bombarded with strong notions about masculinity and "what it means to be a man" (Healing the Hurt: Trauma-informed Approaches, 2009). These ideas will and do influence how young men seek or refrain from getting help, raise their sons, behave when in danger, and react when feeling their masculinity threatened in some way (ibid).

Recognizing Resiliency

Traditionally, service approaches to homeless youth have been focused on meeting youth’s primary needs (shelter, food, and medical attention), providing safety and crisis intervention in a temporary fashion. There exist relatively few efforts to engage homeless youth in leadership, advocacy and/or community service initiative, and for the most part, homeless youth are not granted the opportunity to remain engaged in such activities long-term.

There are many challenges to working with homeless youth in this capacity. For one, the time allocation to house homeless youth, as stipulated by public housing and homeless service authorities, is limited. Service models such as ‘trauma-informed’ and ‘sanctuary’ are increasingly being adopted by agencies working with homeless youth. The aim of trauma-informed and sanctuary models is the rehabilitation of victims of trauma through the provision of ‘compassionate’ individualized treatment, prevention, and intervention services. Such methodologies assume that the only path to healing trauma victims involve individual approaches. Though beneficial, these models don’t go beyond the ‘traumatized survivor,’ still a stage of victimhood pathology, in which services are centered on addressing the individual problems and pathologies of young people; what the LISTEN’s Youth Engagement Continuum denominates as a ‘youth services approach,’ falling under phase one of the continuum: intervention.

By focusing exclusively on individualized service approaches, agencies that serve homeless youth are overlooking both the positive assets of community engagement as well as the empowerment and self-esteem building capacities of leadership development and participation. Studies have consistently shown that homeless youth who are the most socially connected are also the most resilient and can more effectively turn their lives around. In light of this fact, we want to stress that meaningful community connections and long-term caring adult support are vital in preventing homelessness re-entry among youth who leave the shelter as positive outcome.
We believe the key to breakthrough progress with any type of homeless youth, in particular with youth whose struggles with the aftermath of structural violence are the greatest, is by implementing trauma-informed approaches into social service delivery (understanding that victims of violence need the space and time to heal), as well as by opening opportunities for leadership development and sustained community engagement. This can only be achieved through compassionate, non-judgmental, social supportive services that include housing, psychological therapy and youth development and recreational programs and activities that can help restore a youths’ stability, resiliency and capacity for reintegrating into society, while sustaining independence and self-sufficiency. In short, we believe that long-term supportive housing with collaborative case management, sustained community engagement, as well as culturally competent youth development opportunities, can prove most effective in addressing youth homelessness.

**Recommendations**

- Alongside best practices that offer individualized planning and healing/recovery, implement the deployment of motivational, social connectedness, and empowerment methods as well as approaches that promote self-esteem, strengthen resiliency and unleash leadership capacities among youth.

- The facilitation of comprehensive and accessible mental health services for underserved, homeless and at-risk youth as well as youth with institutional histories (foster care and justice system).

- The decriminalization of substance abuse and drug addiction among youth with mental health diagnoses, and the shifting of drug addiction and illegal substance use from a criminal to a mental illness framework.

- Transform community cultural norms that carry detrimental consequences in the lives of boys and young men of color.

- Refashion disadvantageous masculinity values among families and communities of color through workshops, meetings, community forums that create safe spaces for dialogue and emotional expression/growth.

- Raise awareness among communities of color to demystify the notion of who homeless youth are, where youth homelessness happens, and why.
Subgroups Facing Distinct Challenges

While the recommendations provided throughout this report can apply to homeless youth in general, there are sub-populations that are served at Jovenes with specific risk factors:

**Undocumented Youth**

The immigration of unaccompanied Latin American youth has been a long-standing phenomenon in Southern California. As young as 8 years of age, an alarming number of unaccompanied Latin American minors, mostly teenage boys, are risking their lives in order to make it to the U.S. (Amnesty International 2003, Bhabha 2004, and Byrne 2008). And while some youth come seeking to join parents or relatives already living in the U.S., others are simply fleeing abusive situations in their home countries (ibid).

Jovenes, Inc. was born over 20 years ago in response to a growing need for emergency shelters triggered by the large influx of undocumented Latin American young men fleeing political and economic turmoil in their countries of origin—two specific cases are the Salvadorian Civil War during the 80s, in which entire villages were massacred and boys and young men were forced into guerrilla and government armies and, more recently, the violent transformation seen in Mexican cities just across the border from the United States due to drug militias (Dickson-Gomez 2002 & Beale 2012).

Today, the influx of unaccompanied Latin American migrant youth still remains an important social phenomenon. The U.S. Border Patrol reported that, in the fiscal year 2012, it caught 15,590 unaccompanied immigrant minors, compared to 10,776 in 2011 and 13,267 in 2010. From those, 8,327 unaccompanied minors have been placed into the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. That number is more than double the 4,016 unaccompanied migrant minors detained during the same period in 2011.

Typically, children from Mexico apprehended after crossing the border are quickly turned over to Mexican authorities for a hasty return to their country. Children from Central America are more likely to be taken into U.S. custody until their immigration status is determined and asylum claims can be adjudicated. Although unaccompanied children come to the United States from all over the world, between 73 and 75 percent of unaccompanied minors are boys from El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). In 2009, around 80 percent were between the ages of 15 and 18. Since many boys begin working around these ages, and since travel is safer for boys, they are more likely than girls to migrate alone.

Latin American minors migrate to the U.S. for a number of reasons but mostly do so in order to escape poverty, persecution from organized crime— including gangs and drug cartels—as well as social and political repression on the basis of sexual orientation (Amnesty International 2003, Bhabha 2004, and Byrne 2008). Unaccompanied minors are an extremely vulnerable population and often become targets of sex trafficking and slavery (ibid).

Furthermore, if we take into account that most contemporary Latin American undocumented immigrants come from the lowest economic and most socially marginalized sectors back in their countries of origin, including rural indigenous communities and urban squatter settlements known as colonias populares in which extreme poverty and structural racism are ordinary aspects of life, we can then understand why most undocumented migrant youth are coming from those realities. As such, they generally lack any significant sources of support once in the U.S., leaving them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, victimization, and abuse, as well as in desperate need of coping mechanisms, such as drugs and alcohol, to ease the pain and uncertainty in their lives.
On the other hand, the conditions under which LGBTQ Latin American youth decide to migrate to the U.S. and, in many cases, the reasons why they end up homeless tend to differ significantly from those experienced by their non-Queer counterparts. All four unaccompanied LGBTQ immigrant youth, clients of Jovenes Inc., that were interviewed for this project reported having left their country of origin not necessarily for economic hardships but more so due to the widespread discrimination, persecution, repression, and family rejection that they were subjected to for being gay. In all of our documented cases, LGBTQ youth reported coming from upper or middle class families and from metropolitan areas. In fact, our study leads us to believe that queer identities tend to be more accepted and tolerated among rural indigenous and urban squatter communities or colonias, than in any other sector of Latin American society.

During our research, we learned about cases in which queer youth were subjected to severe persecution and repression back in Latin America, to the point of fearing for their lives. Though we cannot deny that in Latin America both queer men and women have historically been subjected to significant discrimination and repression on the basis of their sexual orientation, our experience with queer Latino immigrant male youth suggests that in most Latin American societies, especially those in which machista ideologies prevail, there is a greater degree of intolerance, reflected in greater levels of rejection, aggression, and violence towards queer men than women.

In some cases, when LGBTQ youth first arrived to the U.S., they were reunited with reasonably well-established relatives who provided them with financial and other forms of support. But as time went by and the relatives became fully aware of the youth’s sexual orientation or gender preference, they ended up ceasing all forms of support, also becoming increasingly hostile towards youth.

It is known that among asylum seekers, some of the most vulnerable individuals are those who have experienced persecution in their home countries based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status. In addition, LGBT asylum seekers face additional burdens when accessing legal services in their immigration proceedings and that are commonly isolated from immigrant and refugee community on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender preference. LGBT foreign nationalists may not connect to the broader stream of LGBT rights and resources in the United States due to cultural or language differences, for which LGBT asylum seekers are often unaware that, under U.S. law, they may be eligible for certain protections as a result of the persecution they experienced in their homeland.

**Risk Factors for Undocumented Youth**

- Undocumented status
- Risk/fear of deportation
- Disqualification for many basic services and resources
- Difficulty obtaining and maintaining stable employment that pays a livable wage
- Invisibility, alienation, discrimination, victimization (risk of being exploited, assaulted, and suffer human rights violations even within government institutions
- Language barriers
- Lack of competency in American society’s cultural and civic norms
- Lack of networks of social support
LGBTQ Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness

According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, between 20 and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as LGBT. LGBT youth are not only overrepresented in homeless youth populations, but reports indicate that while living on the streets, LGBT youth are at great risk of physical and sexual exploitation—at the hands of adults, police, and other youth. They experience an average of 7.4 more acts of sexual violence than their heterosexual peers and are more likely to attempt suicide (62 percent) than their heterosexual homeless peers (29 percent).

LGBTQ Homeless Youth of Color

Increasingly, studies on youth homelessness are drawing attention to the connection between non-conforming sexual orientation among young people and homelessness, as well as pointing out LGBT youth’s greater vulnerabilities once on the streets.

Though identifying family rejection and abuse as the primary reasons behind LGBTQ youth homelessness, studies on LGBTQ homeless youth have not directed their scope of analysis towards the socio-cultural systems behind LGBTQ youth’s rejection and abuse within their own family and community circles. In addition, albeit some of these studies recognize that, even within the LGBTQ homeless youth subcategory, youth of color are overrepresented, racial and ethnic divides do not make central elements in their analyses, and gender divisions do not even make it into the conversation.

From our study, we found that machista norms in communities of color also carry dreadful consequences for young Latino and African American queer men. The violence inflicted upon these young men due to their sexual orientation comes in the form of direct rejection and victimization from those closest and dearest to them: parents, siblings and relatives as well as spiritual and cultural circles.

At Jovenes Inc, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning homeless youth are common cases. Homeless gay youth of color are forced to battle a triple oppression in their daily lives: being poor, gay and an ethnic minority, and to this we often have to add the burden of being undocumented.

From an agency-led LGBTQ youth focus group as well as from one-on-one interviews and informal conversations with gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning clients, we learned that family disintegration and poverty are not always implicated in youth homelessness. This is particularly true among Latino and African American gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning homeless youth. Homelessness among this group is often the result of family and community rejection, as well as social alienation triggered by homophobic ideologies ingrained in cultural values.

In a number of cases concerning Latin American immigrant youth, such collective homophobia has been known to escalate to various forms of social persecution and repression that involve the criminalization of those openly displaying non-heterosexual identities, in particular young men. This type of legal persecution is done under penal codes known as “Delitos contra la moral publica y las buenas costumbres” (crimes against public decorum and good manners).

Beyond the widespread invisibility of LGBTQ people of color within their communities, the absence of LGBTQ-centered programs and services in these neighborhoods truly poses a challenge for LGBTQ youth of color in Los Angeles, in particular for youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
Social invisibility

During in-house (Jovenes Inc.) and community-wide focus groups with LGBTQ leaders and representatives from Boyle Heights, it became clear that one of the main challenges for local LGBTQ youth was the vast invisibility facing LGBTQ individuals in the area as well as the lack of acceptance.

Quique, a 22-year-old sensitive and opinionated, “undocuqueer” Jovenes resident, from Mexico City, wrote the following letter addressing the need to open spaces of support for LGBTQ homeless and at-risk youth in low-income communities of color:

As a resident of East L.A. and as part of a community of Latino LGBT homeless youth, I’d like to ask government officials and stakeholders who are invested in bringing equality to marginalized communities to please take notice and support LGBTQ homeless and at-risk youth in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles.

When I first became homeless due to family rejection, I visited a Lesbian and Gay center in Hollywood for the first time. My first impression was, “there are a lot of crazy people here.” I later realized that those people I had first labeled as crazy were people with a tremendous need of affection and support—like myself. Although it was a bit difficult for me to become integrated into the LGBTQ community at this center in Hollywood, given my Latino immigrant background—I did realize that this agency offered a lot of resources to LGBTQ individuals in the area.

Because of my personal need to be close to my Latino roots, I ended up coming to East L.A. and that’s when I found Jovenes Inc. It was not long before I realized that although Jovenes was a great local community organization helping homeless youth in the area, LGBTQ-specific resources for youth in East L.A. were and still are very scarce.

This is a big problem given that, just as in West L.A., many of the youth who end up on the streets do so because of their gender or sexual orientation. This is a harsh reality not only in Boyle Heights but throughout East Los Angeles. Many LGBTQ Latino youth end up homeless in this area because of family rejection, as in my case. For many LGBTQ homeless youth in this area it is simply not feasible to travel all the way to the other side of the city to obtain any type of adequate support. Not having adequate resources for LGBTQ youth in East Los Angeles, including Boyle Heights, puts this already marginalized population at a huge disadvantage. For many Latino LGBTQ youth from East L.A., going all the way to West Los Angeles to find support is almost like having to migrate from one country to another; it’s simply very difficult and often times the challenge discourages youth from seeking much needed help.

In my opinion, East L.A., and in particular Boyle Heights, is a region rich in history and cultural diversity, and its social wealth is nothing less than what we find in the West side. For these reasons and more, the residents of Boyle Heights and East L.A. deserve to have more LGBTQ and Latino-competent community centers that can offer:

1. Comprehensive supportive services to LGBTQ Latino homeless and at risk youth.

2. Education for Latino parents about the importance of supporting their LGBTQ children (and that being gay is not a disease or a mental condition that can be cured). By creating culturally competent family workshops for this purpose, I believe we would see a significant reduction in discrimination against and homelessness among Latino LGBTQ youth in this community.

3. An employment center or a place that helps LGBTQ Latino youth find employment and career opportunities.
5. Psychological counseling for Latino LGBTQ youth in crisis and family mediation services for those who are afraid of coming out to their familias.

6. A vocational center with an area where LGBTQ youth can safely engage in healthy physical and relaxing activities. I believe that such occupational and recreational services will keep the youth away from drugs and trouble as well as give them the opportunity to gain skills to help them become self-sufficient.

Risk Factors For LGBTQ Youth

- Family and community rejection
- Targets of hostility (bullying), violence and abuse
- Social invisibility
- Insufficient LGBTQ friendly programs and services as well as programs specifically catered towards LGBTQ youth
- Lack of LGBTQ specific service protocols among public service offices and youth organizations
- Discrimination by potential employers
Youth Leaving Gangs

Currently, there are no studies in the United States that show the correlation between youth leaving the gang lifestyle and homelessness. This is an enormous gap given that this is a recurrent scenario at Jovenes that we believe is representative of the realities of many young men, throughout Los Angeles, who want to turn their lives around by leaving gangs. During our study we learned about a number of cases, mostly involving our clients, in which youth have become homeless because of leaving or attempting to leave gangs. These cases involved youth exiting juvenile corrections or prison; unaccompanied immigrant youth who’d come to the United States escaping gang and government persecution; as well as youth who had suffered a highly traumatic life changing event involving gang related violence (i.e. either the death or injury of a loved one, a personal near death experience, or a serious physical injury). In addition, many of these youth were also or had been involved in some type of a gang intervention-rehabilitation program; programs to which we can attribute a big part of youths change of mindset, from a gang lifestyle to having the desire to lead healthy and productive lives away from gangs.

Since its institution in 2007, the Gang Reduction Youth Development Program (GRYD) has made great strides towards decreasing gang related violence in Los Angeles. With this, a number of programs that provide support to gang related youth, helping them end their gang involvement and become reintegrated into society as productive members, have either emerged or grown. Programs within the scope of reducing youth involvement in gangs, have their own approach to working with youth in their quest for a better life. While some focus on job training and job creation, art therapy and artistic expression as a vehicle to public awareness; others implement specialized educational programs, psychological counseling, family wellness, and advocacy campaigns. Some of these programs have a local or regional scope, while others have a national or transnational scope.

The shift from punishment and persecution to empowerment, rehabilitation and reintegration that we have seen with the establishment of the GRYD model, has made a tremendous impact on the levels of gang related violence in Los Angeles. According to the Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development, in just five years, gang related crimes in the City of Los Angeles have gone down 40%.

Though we commend the much success that GRYD and alike programs have had in helping youth end their gang engagement and move in the right direction to become reintegrated into society as productive members, we found that those programs alone do not address all of youth’s critical necessities to be successful in their path to reintegration.

When youth decide to leave their gang behind, they lose their primary networks of support—which unfortunately came mostly from their gang circle—along with the protection that being part of a ‘gang family’ afforded them. In addition, for the sake of their personal safety, youth must move out of their communities, creating additional challenges of integration. This process becomes difficult when in a city like Los Angeles, gangs are widespread across different areas and due to rivalries youth and providers must be careful in evaluating the safety of each housing option and location.

Risk Factors

- Exposure to life-threatening events
- High risk of incarceration
- Challenges of accessing employment due to background
- Exposure to substance abuse
Conclusion

From the Fringes shows that homeless youth in Boyle Heights and East LA have a wide-range of challenges and needs. The displacement of young men of color into homelessness is deeply embedded in the interplay of structural discrimination, involving elements of race, gender and age, concentrated poverty, and machista gender norms. Homelessness and the factors that lead to homelessness create a gap in the ability of youth to develop skills and attitudes and behaviors that are necessary for them to become independent and self-sufficient. Such gaps become deeper and more difficult to deal with as those factors and homelessness are increasingly part of youth daily routine. The process of healing is not a quick fix, but at Jovenes, we firmly believe that homelessness can just be an experience that youth go through, not a life long condition. Tackling this problem will require increased collaboration, innovative ideas, and a renewed focus on one of our societies most vulnerable, yet resilient populations.

I have been through all three of Jovenes’ programs: The Emergency Shelter, the Transitional Housing, and their first Permanent Housing project. Everyone working and volunteering at Jovenes were always more than helpful. They always had a smile on their face and were willing to supply me with any and all resources at hand. They would often go above and beyond general expectations. Staff would provide clothes or a clothing voucher for job interview attire if needed. The main building/Drop-In center has a computer lab mainly to assist with online job applications, resume building, and constructing cover letters. Meetings were held to teach interview manners and go through practice interviews.

I was referred to Jovenes Inc. from the previous shelter I was at and was homeless just before that. I started at the Emergency Shelter across the street from their main office. I was living here when I had obtained my first full time job and was unemployed prior to this. With the help of the staff in the Drop-In Center, I fixed up my resume and cover letter. I had only been to one other shelter, so it was slightly overwhelming. Though, I was gracious for the opportunity, the roof over my head, and the food supplied. Lunches were provided to those who wanted one upon leaving in the morning after breakfast. With the help of the staff, I was able to start saving for a deposit for an apartment to maintain permanent housing. I worked very hard to save as much money as possible.

From there, I moved to the Transitional Housing upstairs from the main office after a short time. Here, I was able to work on my cooking skills and learn how to properly budget. I was able to continue my savings with Jovenes. I learned how to shop at a supermarket, keeping all the main food groups in mind.

I then moved into Progress Place, Jovenes’ first permanent housing development. It was great to have a place to call my own. Where I could feel safe, and off of the streets. My roommate and I shared our 2 bedroom, 1 bath apartment with a living room and kitchen. Here, I was able to use and further develop the skills I had learned through Jovenes and through life’s lessons. I have since moved on but still keep in contact with staff and continue to receive helpful and motivational emails.

Going through my own transition in and out of Jovenes Inc. has taught me plenty. Among others, some of the things I have learned along the way would include dedication, motivation, trust, and self-discipline. I thank them for all they have done for me, my peers, and the future generations to come through this great program. I truly believe each and every employee and volunteer at Jovenes Inc. wants to see all of us succeed. Given that people will only get out of the program as much as they put into it, Jovenes Inc. was an essential ingredient to my recipe for success. Nothing changes, if nothing changes.

Spade- Age 22, Caucasian
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