

**NOWHERE
TO GO**

**Transitional Age Youth in
South Los Angeles:
A Case Study**



This report was conducted as a part of KFH – West Los Angeles Community Health Needs Assessment for 2019. Social Change Institute (SCI), a social enterprise of Community Health Councils was contracted to design and implement the study and produce this report.

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The RightWay Foundation

Home at Last

Sanctuary of Hope

*Cover photo – the alleys of South LA are riddled with trash and gang related graffiti.

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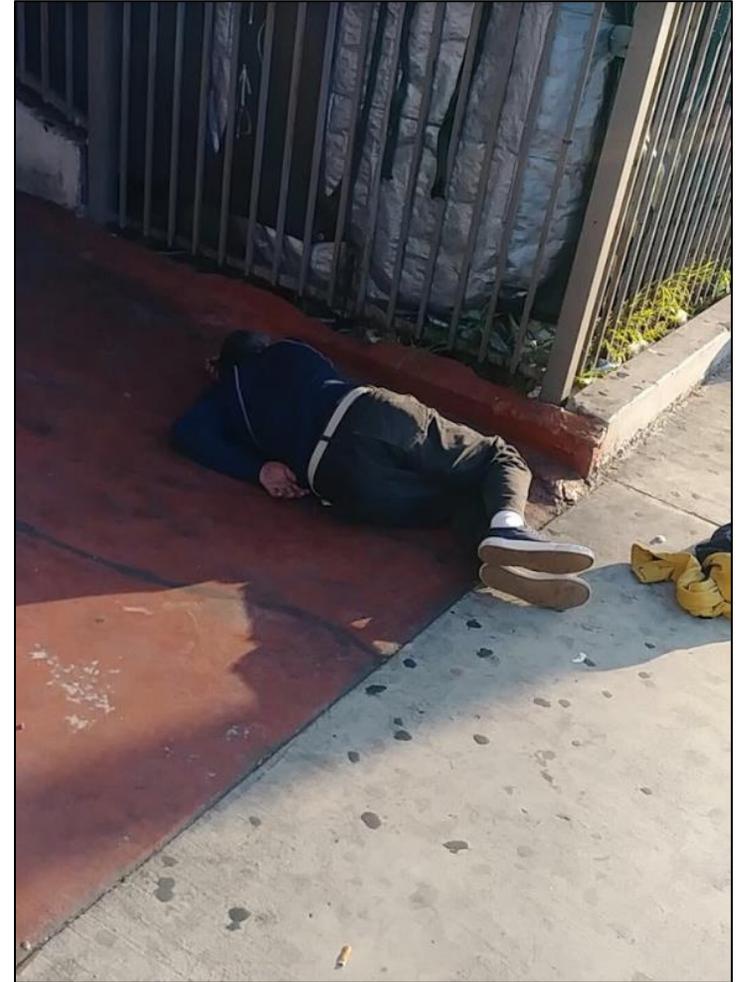
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BACKGROUND

Los Angeles has long been known as an epicenter for homeless youth, especially those in search of the eponymous that lures many to the streets of Hollywood Boulevard. More recently, the rampant gentrification in the City of Los Angeles has increased homelessness and displacement by at least 16% since 2017 (McDonald, 2018). The Transitional Age Youth (TAY) community in South Los Angeles provides a tragic and disturbing example of how rampant gentrification is impacting the community's most vulnerable. This

special report is a case study conducted by Community Health Council's (CHC) Social Change Institute (SCI) as a part of KFH – West Los Angeles Community Health Needs Assessment. All photos in this report were

taken by TAY participants as part of this case study's photo-voice component. Each photo portrays their lived experiences. Photo-voice is an innovative participatory approach to collecting data in partnership with community members. The youth in



1. Sleeping on the streets is often the only option.

this study are not professional photographers, nor did they receive any photographic training for this study. The photos are gritty and personal, taken on the fly, as the youth move through their daily lives. This case study included a total of 25 youth,

ages 18-24, from South Los Angeles; 52% Female, 48% Male; 64% African-American, 16% Latino and 20% other.

The focus groups were coordinated by TAY service providers, The RightWay Foundation, Home at Last and Sanctuary of Hope. This is a qualitative study, inclusive of focus groups, photo-voice and a brief survey. Data was collected via focus groups, using a set of protocols - strategic learning questions, related to social predictors of health and lived experiences. The survey provided additional supporting data to aid in drawing correlations and the photo-voice allowed for further correlations, which will be the basis of this report. A brief background will be provided using secondary data to better understand the current TAY landscape in Los Angeles County. The voice of the TAY will be the primary focus of this case study. Their language and their perspectives will be used to lift up the predominant themes in their responses.



2. Food and clothing pantries are in short supply.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA – THE BEST AND THE WORST



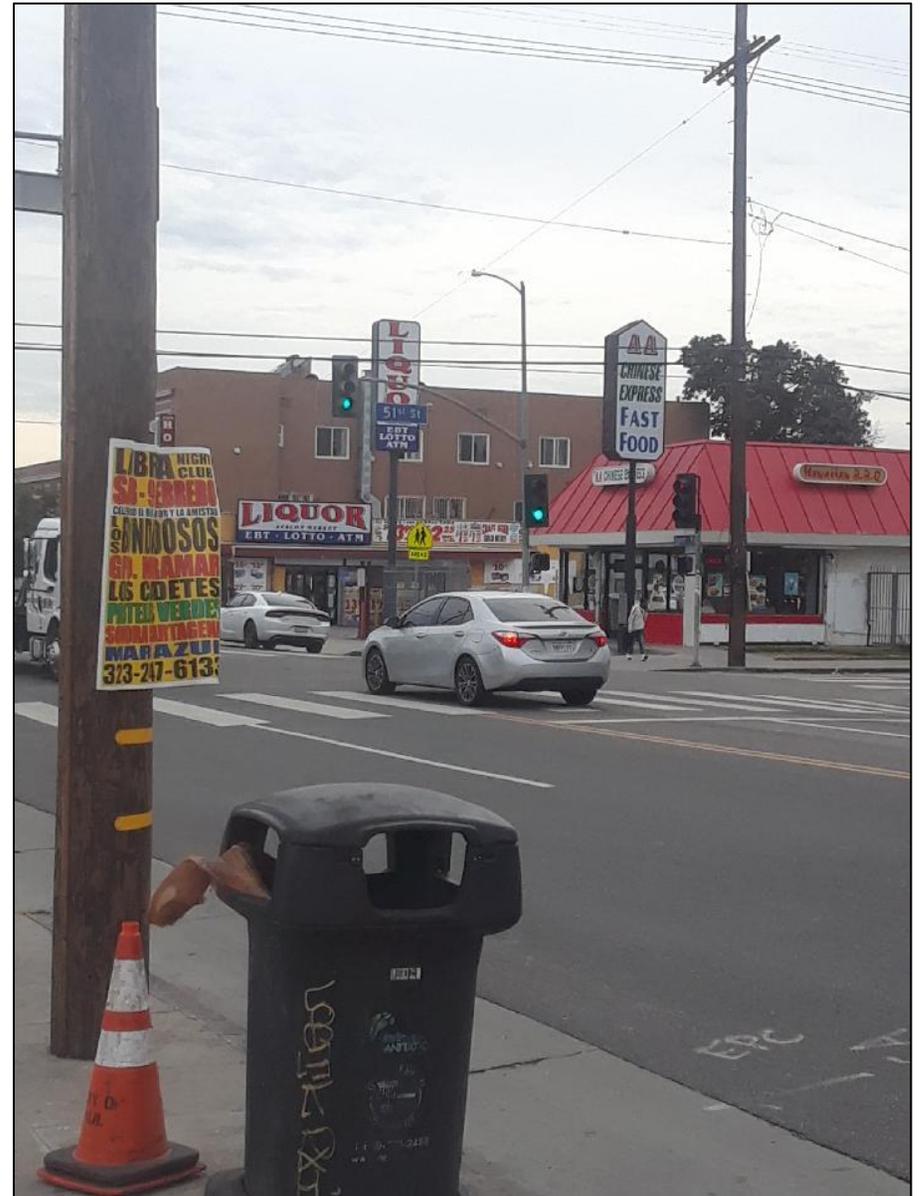
3. Homelessness is increasingly visible in South LA.

Alabama holds the 31st position, in terms of its economic strength as a state and its GDP per capita in 2017 was \$44,329

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) estimates that nearly 6,000 youth are sleeping or wondering the streets of Los Angeles nightly (2017), which represents a 16% increase in youth homelessness since 2016.

California is among the top three states with the highest youth homelessness rate, sharing that title with Mississippi and Alabama. In 2017, Mississippi had the lowest GDP per capita of \$37,849 in the country, and the lowest average weekly wage of \$707.48 and currently ranks 46th as one of the worst states economically in the nation (Kiersz, 2018).

(Kiersz, 2018). California ranks 6th as one of the strongest economies with a 2017 average weekly wage of \$1,050.53 and a GDP per capita of \$69,589 (Kiersz, 2018). Globally, in 2018, California soared, regaining its position as the 5th largest economy in the world boasting a GDP that increased by \$127 billion from 2016 to 2017 (Corcoran, 2018). According to the Alliance for Children’s Rights, a nonprofit founded and operated by some of Los Angeles’ most prominent legal firms, 28,000 children are currently in foster care in Los Angeles County. About half of these children have learning disabilities and 42% will not graduate high school. When these children age out of foster care, half of them will become homeless and/or incarcerated. Based on these figures, LAHSA has estimated that the actual number of TAY is much higher than documented. Demographically, 40% are Black/African American, 38% Hispanic/Latino, 17% white, 68% identify as male, 24% female, and 1% transgender (LAHSA, 2018). The crisis of youth homelessness is a complex issue and the solutions will likely require multi-sector approach. This report will not focus on the solutions, but lifts up the voices of transitional age youth and their lived experiences. This study



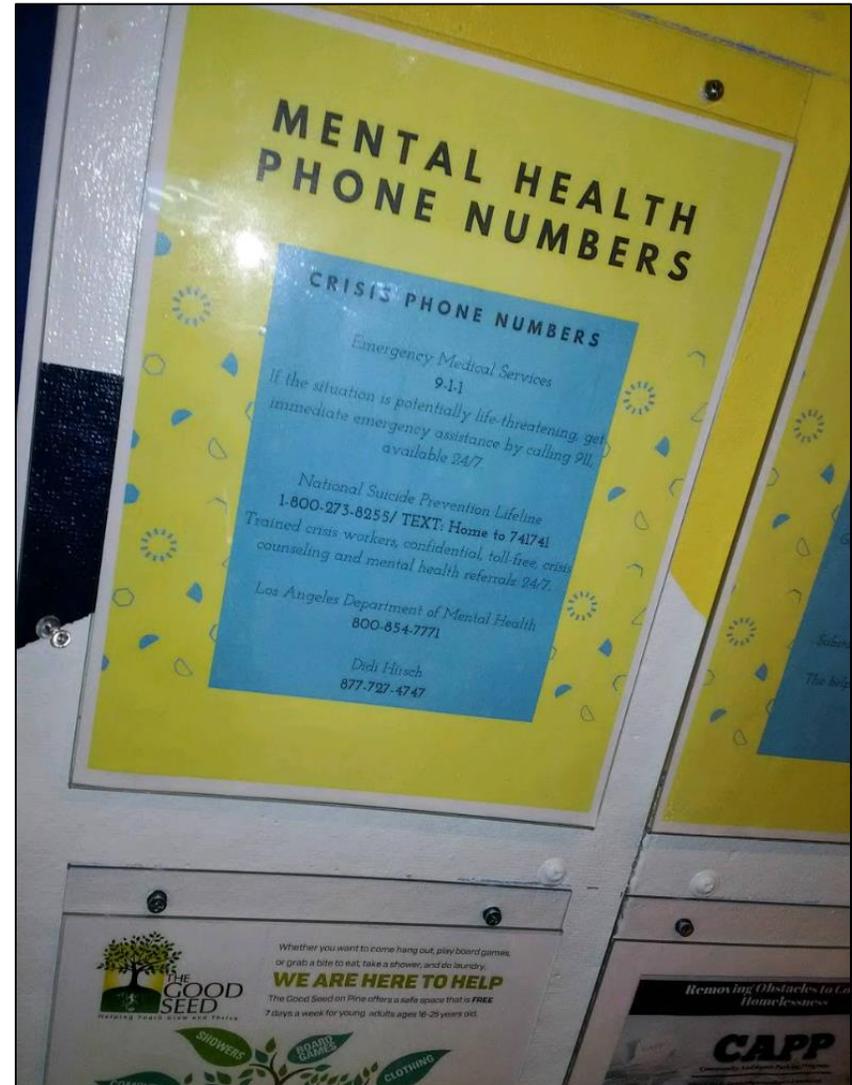
4. Gang related graffiti, liquor stores and fast food are prevalent.

serves to offer a brief, but impactful look at youth homelessness in South Los Angeles. Input from the TAY community represented here, provides a disturbing glimpse into how they perceive their reality and what they believe they need to survive in, what they have described as, a hostile environment wrought with uncertainty, intense policing and limited access to resources. This hostile environment, by their accounts, results in overwhelming stress that escalates the issues of mental health, substance abuse and violence in their daily lives.

SOCIAL PREDICTORS OF HEALTH - TAY INSIGHTS



5. Substance abuse is a widely used coping mechanism.



6. Mental health support is in shortage.

ECONOMIC STABILITY

Sitting with his hands in the pockets of his hoodie, and a large piece of gauze taped under his eye from an unspecified injury, Adam talked a lot about mental health and proper education. A consistency arose across groups, where youth believed that resources were available, but not easily accessed.

This inability to access resources, was due to a lack of general education as well as substance abuse and violence. When the discussion turned to what might be some of the causes and challenges of being low-income, he and many others shared that it is difficult to seek and retain employment while suffering from untreated mental illness. Economic stability requires the capacity to seek out, apply and



5. Many homeless people live in their cars or RV's.

maintain a job and if youth are self-medicating, using alcohol, marijuana or crystal meth, this proves difficult. Not only is this an issue for TAY, it is an issue for parents. Many discussed watching parents struggle and suffer, never able to overcome their own traumas. When asked about whether or not there were enough resources in their communities, many felt that there were resources, but that they did not always feel welcome in those spaces. This was a sentiment shared by several African American TAY who wanted to see more African Americans working in places where they are able to access resources.

“I think honestly, it stems from proper education about mental health, about how to get a job, how to apply for certain resources, how to weather certain storms, because lack of education, lack of financial resources create violent situations, circumstances where a person feels they have to do anything to get what they want or need out of life, and that’s just not the case.” - Adam

Challenges

- Lack of general education
- Lack of visibility of available resources
- Affordable housing
- Transportation is too expensive
- Too stressed to do anything positive
- Substance abuse and addiction
- Untreated mental illness
- Minimum wage isn’t enough to live in Los Angeles

NEIGHBORHOOD AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

These pictures, like all the photos in this report, were taken by TAY participants. They wanted to showcase the prevalence of violence and gang activity in their communities. There were many moments during the focus groups where youth used dark humor to express themselves, and mask their uneasiness and sometimes their anger, as they answered questions.



6. A knife in the dirt, violence is prevalent.

A substantial number of images taken, were of trash, homelessness, graffiti, empty alcohol and beer containers, smoke shops and needles. In their neighborhoods, there are no clean places, and no sense of safety. Mobility is challenging.

“My name is Sophia, what makes it hard for the community is the parks, it’s not even safe to be in the park. If you want exercise, anything like that, there’s a lot of homeless people, there’s a lot of shooting, how can you go out in your community, it’s dangerous.”

The simple act of getting from one place to another is daunting as TAY figure out how to bypass expensive Metro fares, unsafe walking paths, and the constant threat of violence. Living in these conditions is traumatizing and contributes to further stress and mental health issues, encouraging substance use as a means to cope with day to day life. The environment becomes so overwhelming that substances are used to numb the anxiety, stress and depression caused by living in such poor conditions.



7. Gang graffiti and empty beer bottles.

Challenges

- Trash is everywhere, all the time
- Homeless people are living in tents
- Graffiti is common
- Violence and the threat of violence is prevalent
- Nowhere to exercise
- Drugs and alcohol usage are done in the open
- Smoke shops, liquor stores and fast food are the only places to go
- Police regularly harass youth

EDUCATION

Anthony delivers the comment below with little differentiation between a drug dealer and someone working a regular job. Maribel shares that a degree doesn't stop someone from making bad decisions.

“A drug dealer is someone that is making ends meet... Then you have the next person who is working a full-time job making ends meet.” - Anthony

“But some people that do go to school, they don't use that degree either. They throw it in the trash. By doing certain things. Like an educated person could easily decide to rob someone, or stab someone, and throw that away by going to jail.” - Maribel



8. Bookshelf at a TAY shelter, education is not a focus and there are little resources to support education.

When asked about education, no one really talked about schooling or their experiences in primary or secondary institutions. Instead, the conversations always reflected the daily lived experiences of the TAY, which revolve around the outputs of living in trauma-rich environments. Youth clearly communicated that they had little experience with education as a means to improving the quality of their lives. Workforce development was mentioned as a way to access free food or transportation vouchers, not as a path towards self-efficacy. No one discussed having aspirations of college or exciting careers. One young man had decided to join the military at the suggestion of his pastor.

This group of TAY were fiercely focused on survival and getting their basic needs met. Education, by their admission, had no real place in their current state of being and as one young person offered, once you have a criminal record, it doesn't matter anyway because no one will hire you.

Challenges

- Lack of lived experiences where education really matters
- Too busy getting basic needs met
- Illegal activities pay better and faster
- Trauma-rich environments take focus off of education
- Good jobs require a lot of education
- Education does not erase a criminal record

FOOD

The focus group had ended. A young woman walked in asking if she were too late to participate and she looked around to see if there was any food left from the meeting.

Once she realized that all the food was gone, she promptly went over to the trash can, reached inside and found enough leftovers to quell her hunger. She told the facilitator that they (TAY) are homeless and hungry and there needs to be more food for them. Food is a basic



9. Food is wasted everywhere, and many TAY scavenge garbage for food to eat daily.

necessity. Healthy food is a luxury and if people have to choose between paying rent or buying food in general, they often will

“So there’s like Sprouts, what’s that other place, Trader Joe’s and stuff like that, if they built more of those, in a lot of different communities, that’s what I noticed. In certain areas, they only built certain things. So, we’re limited to those options, so for example, you wouldn’t see a Trader Joe’s in South Central. You wouldn’t see a Sprouts in South Central, so if they offered that to everybody instead of limiting to certain areas that would probably help more.” - Belinda

have limitations on the number of visits and quantities. Food stamps and general relief are also helpful, but food prices are high and those resources run out quickly.

opt to pay other bills. For the TAY, much of their time revolves around where their next meal might come from and although they are ruefully aware of how unhealthy fast food is, they don’t feel they have any other options. The increasing cost of fast food was discussed by a few youths, lamenting the loss of the dollar menus that were popular at one time. Food banks are a valued resource, but they are few and far between, difficult to access, and

Challenges

- Too many fast food places
- Not enough healthy grocery stores
- Lack of nutrition education
- Stress causes bad dietary choices
- Not enough time to cook if you work long hours
- Lack of access to healthy options
- Healthy options are too expensive
- Smoke shops, liquor stores and fast food are the only places to go

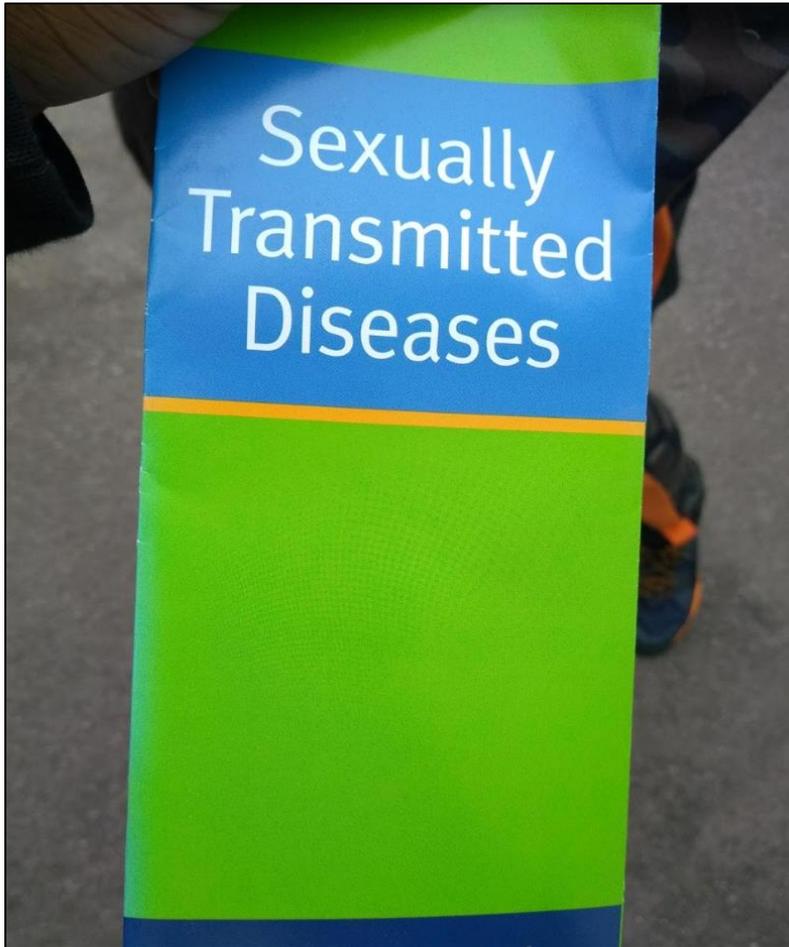
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

TAY are members of the “invincible population”: the age group that accesses the healthcare system the least. This group is also aggressively targeted for enrollment by health plans to even out their cost of care for other members and super users.

Not unlike other young people their age, their own engagement with the healthcare system seemed to revolve around emergency room visits. Sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s) were not discussed openly in the focus groups, but the image above, taken by a TAY, expresses the reality that STD’s are a concern.



10. Substance abuse is prevalent in the community.



11. STD's are an issue amongst TAY.

“If I don’t see anybody that looks like me I don’t feel like it’s for me. When you go to these clinics in Watts or Compton, its 90% Latino in there working and I don’t want to make this a racial thing but honest to God, Latino people are striving for more, and better in life.” - Eric

The primary focus of the conversation around accessing health services was dominated by the need for mental health services. Every focus group spoke of the urgency to address mental health concerns for adults, youth, and the homeless and mentally ill. This lack of access to mental healthcare, they believed, was a primary driver of substance abuse and violence, domestically and on the streets.

The other interesting narrative that will be explored further in the community and social contexts section, was the observation of cultural sensitivity within their communities, including places like clinics. The

majority of TAY that participated in this case study were African American and that unique perspective was communicated throughout the sessions. Feeling welcome and feeling like they belonged in certain spaces was an important factor in their ability to access care. Eric’s comment about Latinos striving for more, implied that perhaps he wasn’t seeing more African

Americans in clinics because somehow that meant African Americans weren't seeking a better life. Eric and others spoke of self-determination being a factor in accessing services as well.

Challenges

- Cultural sensitivity
- No care for the undocumented
- Untreated mental health
- Affordability
- Transportation
- Nowhere to exercise
- Stress and trauma as barriers to seeking care

COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS



12. Fires and other degradation occur regularly.

Gang activities, shootings, drug use, poverty, trash, fighting, homelessness, mental illness, environmental pollution, noise pollution and many other scenarios were used to describe the TAY reality.

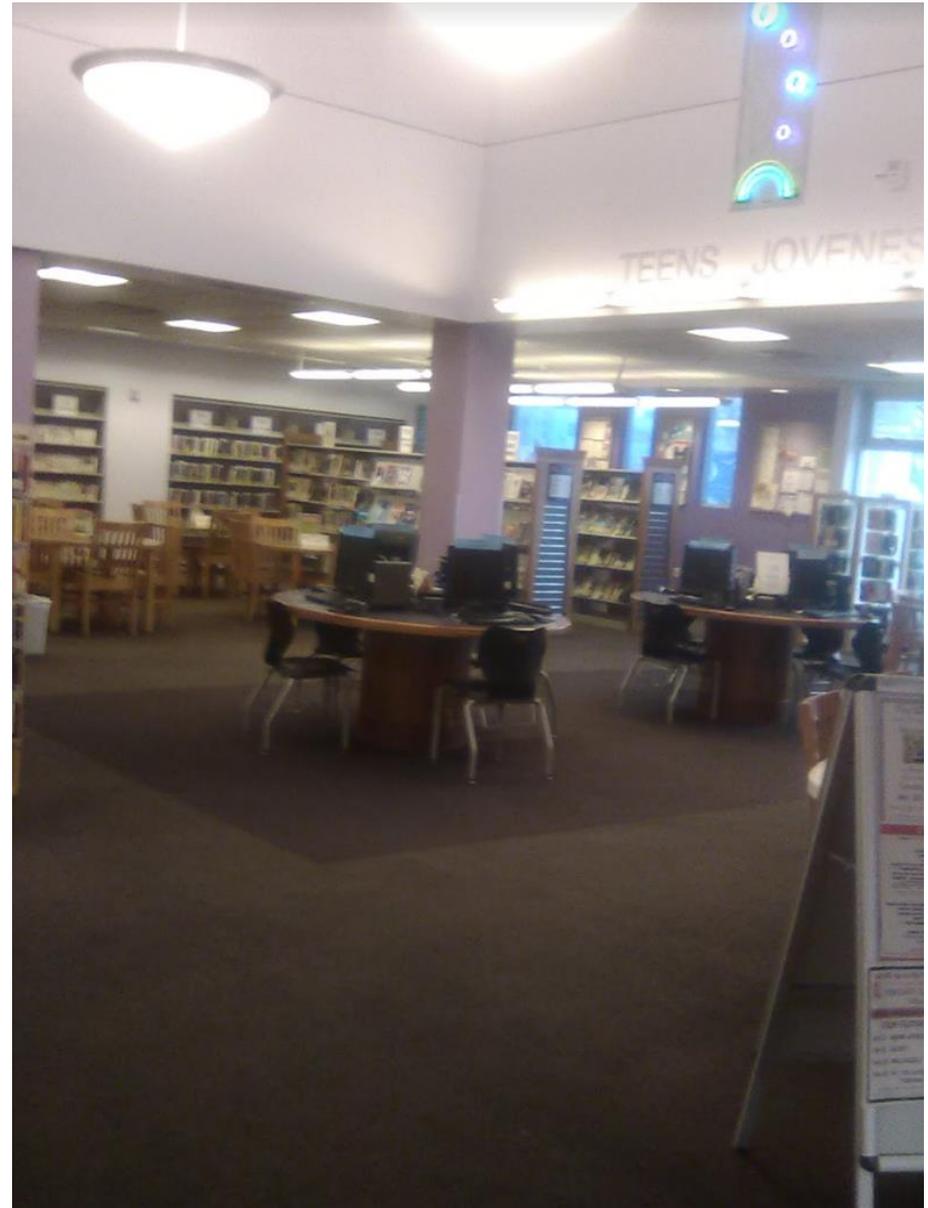
In South Los Angeles there are a limited number of places they can go to socialize or find community. Organizations like The RightWay Foundation, Home at Last and Sanctuary of Hope provide some respite but have limitations as well. Parks could be an option if they were safer and having access to showers and restrooms was discussed. Libraries offer a quiet space to escape the streets for a short while. Relying on substances like alcohol and marijuana, were admittedly another way that TAY found an escape. All in all, it seems that TAY find themselves enduring the threats of violence, hunger, police harassment and homelessness all day, every day. Gentrification in some areas has increased anxiety, as more affluent people and shops arrive, TAY feel the stress of a changing community where resources will become even less affordable.

“Library, it’s quiet, you can cool out, use the WIFI, get a job application online, I don’t go to the library to read, but when I need to calm down and get away from reality, I might look at a book or two.” - Shawn

The tensions between the Latino and African American communities have been longstanding. TAY discussed how being incarcerated perpetuates the division and when they get released from being in the criminal justice system, they keep that mentality when they are back on the streets. It becomes a matter of survival.

Challenges

- Racism within systems
- Segregated communities
- Tension between Latinos and African Americans
- Violence and the threat of violence is prevalent
- Substance abuse
- Gangs are prevalent
- Police regularly harass youth
- Safety is an issue everywhere



13. The library is one of few refuges for safety and quiet.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE



14. Graffiti represents the stress of living in trauma-rich environments.

The 25 young people that participated in this case study and photo-voice project are just a small sampling of a much larger community of homeless TAY. The quotes excerpted from the focus groups do present a small but impactful glimpse around how TAY are coping with the weight of homelessness and the many disparities they face. Further research with a larger, more significant number of TAY would help to more accurately assess how to better support systems change approaches to helping them thrive, despite their many challenges.

The stark realities shared by TAY in this case study draw a dark and almost hopeless future for the 6,000 young people sleeping or wondering the streets of Los Angeles nightly. Of all 25 TAY participating in this study, only Adam talked about how to see past the challenges to make a better life for himself. Other youth also discussed wanting to take better control of their lives and their futures, but they were unsure of how to overcome the

“And I think anytime someone gives you a bad shine it’s kind of hard to grow up from that. When someone brings out the bad in you.” - Derek

disparities discussed throughout this report. Most others, echoed Derek’s sentiment in one way or another, indicating a need to feel valued. Institutions like KFH – West Los Angeles strategically fund and partner with community-based organizations and public agencies to address many social predictors of health.

The implications to consider based on this case study point to a growing population of homeless TAY in need of immediate basic needs, such as housing and food. If basic needs are not met, youth cannot focus on other social predictors related to economic stability and healthcare access.

TAY clearly communicated that they will choose quick cash options like prostitution, stripping, and drug dealing if that will provide them with immediate access to food and shelter. More importantly, a critical implication is access to mental health services. TAY populations have more mental health issues than the general population and their ability to navigate the world is challenging at best, which makes them more vulnerable and more susceptible to substance abuse, violence and victimization.

As described, earlier, Los Angeles is not lacking economically and addressing these issues will require an intersectional approach between public and private entities that are willing to make necessary sacrifices, in order to transform this generation from being an acronym to being valued members of a safer, healthier, affirming society.

“It’s a lack of wanting for a better life. It’s the being shown the bottom of the barrel and accepting it as life. Me, I’m going to the military, and trying to explain to my associates that there’s more out there, this is not the 1900s, the 1920s, we’re confined to this box, if you want a better life, it’s out there for you, you have to break your back and get it. And I say break your back because like I said about those people in El Segundo or Malibu, there are people who came before them that made those necessary sacrifices for them to never have to go through what her and I experience.”
- Adam

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