

United Coalition East Prevention Project
a program of Social Model Recovery Systems, Inc.

Toxic Playground:

Growing Up In Skid Row



Youth Survey Findings and Recommendations • November 2005

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You can wake only a person
who is asleep not the person
pretending to be asleep.

—African Proverb

Introduction

Hundreds of children are growing up in the dangerous, toxic environment of downtown Los Angeles' "skid row". They endure horrible living conditions, with no place to play, no sports, no chance for a good education. They have difficulty getting to school because of limited access to transportation, and once there, are often stigmatized by teachers and administrators. These young people are easy targets for the drug dealers and sexual predators. Yet the police rarely offer protection; instead they are quick to intimidate and cite these children for minor offenses like jaywalking.

The children of "skid row" have been ignored far too long. We must start now – before they succumb to illness, crime, despair and death – to improve their environment and provide them with opportunities for the future. Remarkably, the children themselves are leading the way. In conjunction with the United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), young people have designed a survey and administered it to their peers. The results are highlighted below, together with background information that provides a context for the challenges these young people confront. Finally, this report sets out practical recommendations for steps public agencies can take to make a qualitative difference in the lives of our children living in "skid row".

A Toxic Environment For Children

Mention "skid row," and the image that comes to mind is of destitute men—typically drunk and passed out in the street. "Skid row" is the end of the line, a place where no one would choose to live. It seems that every city has a "skid row," but Los Angeles has the largest such area in the nation, crammed not only with those destitute men but also with thousands of homeless people, addicts, the mentally ill, parolees, veterans ... and children.

According to *Crisis on the Streets: Homeless Women and Children in Skid Row*, a 2003 University of Southern California study, children are the fastest growing segment of the "skid row" population. From 1990 to 2000, children living on "skid row" jumped from 1 percent to 15 percent of the population.

"Skid row" is a brutal environment for anyone to live in, but it is especially horrific for children. More than 11,000 adults and children are contained within 55 square blocks. Some are homeless, sleeping in the streets, while others live in shelters, missions or SRO (single room occupancy) housing that provides just one room—no bath or toilet, and no kitchen. The sights and smells of trash, urine and feces are everywhere, and drugs and alcohol are a constant presence. It is bad enough that our society disregards the adults who wind up in "skid row"; ignoring the children is unconscionable.

The children of "skid row" regularly witness behaviors that no one should see – lewd activity, public drunkenness, drug dealing, crime and violence. It is not uncommon to walk past someone injecting drugs, to see people urinating or defecating in public, to see prostitutes soliciting customers or actually engaging in sexual activity. The single room occupancy hotels offer no refuge from this blight. Only six of the 83 single room occupancy hotels in the area allow children, and all are run-down and infested with rats and roaches. Children confined in these close quarters cope with the worst possible influences, including predators that lure the kids into drug use, drug dealing and prostitution.

The public health risks are obvious. They include conditions that foster communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis. Addiction to drugs, alcohol and tobacco is rampant, along with a high prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS. Severe mental health problems, including high rates of depression and schizophrenia are frequently visible in this population. Violence is widespread; disputes quickly become fights, and murder and suicide are not uncommon.

Tragically, barely any effort is being made to address the needs of the children of "skid row". Despite the presence of more than 30 service providers in the area, programs for children are limited to feeding projects and child care centers. The conventional wisdom appears to be that children would be better off elsewhere, so if no assistance is offered, maybe they will relocate. Unfortunately, there is nowhere else for them to go.

To make matters worse, some public institutions treat these children harshly, unfairly stigmatizing them. Rather than helping the children of "skid row", the policies of the L.A. Unified School District and the LAPD frequently make the lives of these youth even more difficult. At the end of this report, UCEPP suggests concrete steps local agencies can take to adapt their policies to the special needs of our children.



Drawing by: Travelle R., 12 years old

Toxic

UCEPP And Youth Coalition X

The United Coalition East Prevention Project was founded in 1996 to address the related problems of alcohol and other drugs in “skid row”. In 2003, UCEPP began working with young people in this community.

UCEPP’s involvement with youth has evolved as an unintended consequence of its existing work. The organization did not go looking for these young people—they found UCEPP on their own. Perhaps the motivating factor was the lack of recreational opportunities in an area where the parks are locked shut at 6 p.m. and the only community center is off-limits to kids. Maybe it was the boredom of preteens “off track” from school with nothing to do. For whatever reason, beginning in May 2003, a group of young people ranging in age from 8 to 21 began to drop in to the UCEPP office; gradually their visits became a regular occurrence.

UCEPP staff could not—would not—ignore these children and soon realized that they really had no other safe place to go. In addition to providing books and videos to keep them busy, staff began to look for constructive ways to help the youth express themselves. Staff told the children about the organization’s ongoing work and encouraged their participation in collaborative efforts to improve the quality of life in “skid row”.

The youth named themselves *Youth Coalition X*. The ‘X’ refers to the unknown factor—the question of who they truly are and what they will become, given the circumstances in which they live. To date, UCEPP has collaborated with these young people on several projects, including an arts festival, a mural project, protest marches for safe living conditions and production of a video documentary chronicling the harsh realities of the youths’ lives.

It is hard enough to be a child today, but growing up in “skid row” poses unimaginable challenges. These children are past being “at-risk”; they are *“in-risk.”* Yet despite their hardships, many are determined to succeed. A few of the young people who have been active with UCEPP are profiled below. They explain why they are involved in community activism and why they are reaching out to their peers.

Now 17, Michael is multiracial. He has moved repeatedly since he was three years old. He lived for several years in a dilapidated “skid row” hotel with his aunt. When she died suddenly, in February 2005, he was detained in juvenile hall. His “crime”: being young and poor with no family to take him in. He is currently living in a group home. *“I try to get my friends involved with UCEPP because it would have a more lasting effect on the changes that we as a group are working toward.”*

Roshawn is 18 and is also African-American. She has lived in “skid row” for four years; her life has been filled with uncertainty and violence. She hoped to complete high school at the campus she was bused to in the San Fernando Valley, but the school “signed her out” (removed her from the rolls) because she lacked sufficient credits to graduate within a specified time. She is currently attending continuation school. *“I think that if people can invest millions of dollars to send people to explore the planet Mars, they can spend some dollars making sure our children have a place to call home, because the places they inhabit are definitely not home. That is the dream I have ... for the thousands of youth who yearn for a safe haven that is drug and violence free.”*

Yesenia, a 15 year old Latina, lives with her parents, two siblings and her daughter in a “skid row” hotel. The family shares one tiny (approximately 90-square-foot) room that has no kitchen or bath. Her family emigrated here from Mexico when she was a toddler. *“I lived in a mission where they wouldn’t let us go in until 8 p.m. and we have to get up and leave at 5 a.m. everyday. Then we moved to a hotel...I started feeling anger with all these changes and I felt something in my chest ... I started feeling that I was nobody, lonely, abandoned ... [I am part of Youth Coalition X] because I want to be out of “skid row” and the nastiness, I want to be an important person...”*

Jamaica is 16 years old and multiracial. Her family—mother and four siblings—also live in a “skid row” hotel. It takes her two hours to get to school each day, where she taunted by her classmates and singled out by teachers for not wearing the appropriate clothes. She is currently on probation for defending her younger brother from a drunk, violent man. *“We moved there hoping to be there for a few months, but we weren’t. That was a real disappointment for me, so I started to retaliate ... I don’t want to live here ... I want to live some place better than this...[UCEPP] is important to me because of the simple fact that it’s my community and I am living in it.”*

Alexis is 23 years old and multiracial. She came to “skid row” two years ago and got help for her addiction. Now a recovering addict, she is committed to giving back to the community that helped her get her life back. *“My friends talk about how bad “skid row” smells, how bad it is, how we should move out of here and I say why don’t we do something to change the thing that is so disgusting? I have finally found some hope here working with UCEPP. Instead of existing day in and day out buying a place to sleep, I now work to make it better because I know it can be done.”*

1 UCEPP is a project of Social Model Recovery Systems, Inc. (SMRS), a multi-faceted human services organization which has experience working with young people. One of the many youth oriented projects operated by SMRS is Touchstones, which began in 1992. Touchstones is a treatment program for adolescents which addresses the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of the disease of addiction. To date, more than 1,300 adolescents between the ages of 12 - 18 years-of-age and their families have received services.

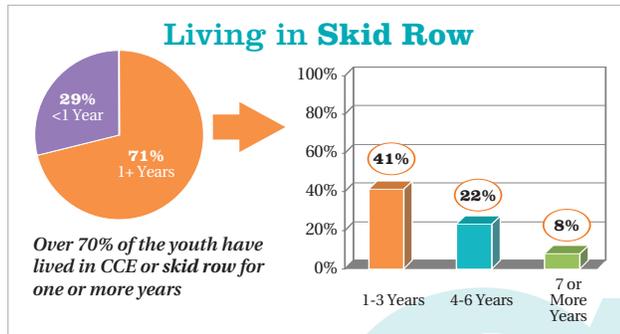
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Surveying Youth In “Skid Row”

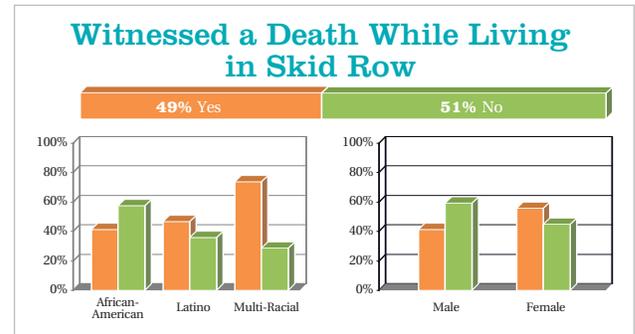
Recently, members of *Youth Coalition X* documented their daily struggles to draw public attention to their circumstances and help change public policy. With assistance from the UCEPP staff, the young people designed a survey questionnaire. They then administered the survey to their peers. A substantial number of interviews were completed—96 in all. The responses were analyzed by Dr. Cheryl Grills, CEO of The Imoyase Group, Inc. and professor of psychology at Loyola Marymount University.

The responses to the survey are startling. They reveal the children's pain and frustration, and contradict many of the stereotypes associated with “skid row” residents and children from impoverished backgrounds. The following is a sampling of the key findings:

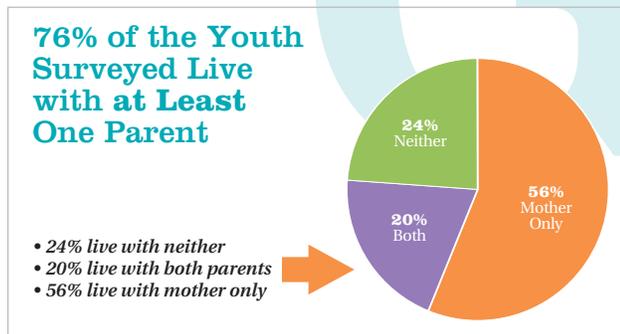
- Children living in “skid row” are not transient—most have lived here at least one year, and many have been here for much longer.



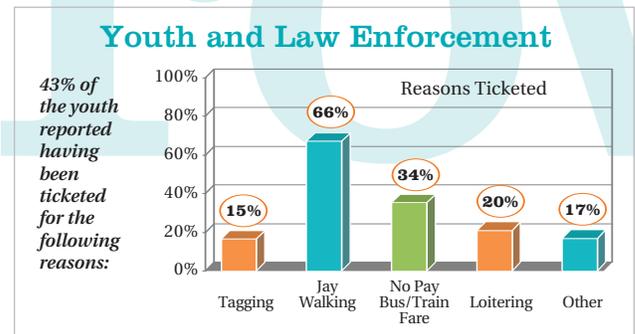
- These children are surrounded by violence. Almost 50 percent of the children of “skid row” have witnessed a death while in this community.



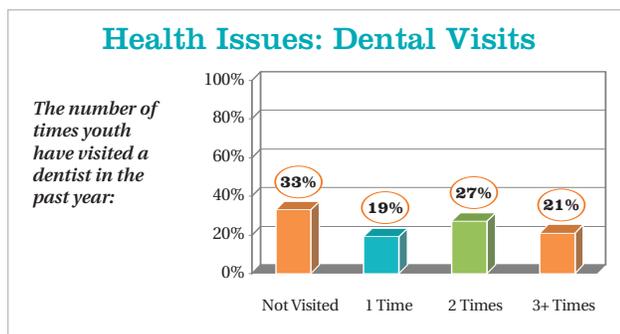
- These children are not runaways—most respondents (76%) state they are living with a parent or relative with whom they have a good relationship.



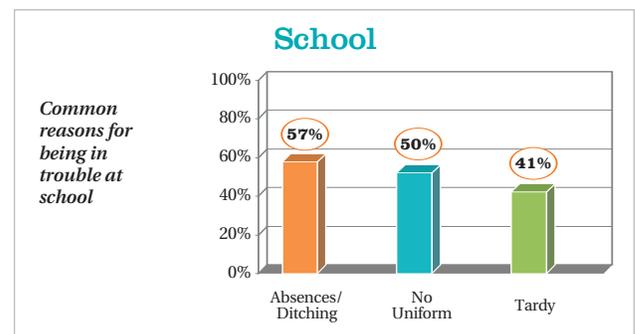
- Law enforcement targets our children for harsh treatment. Many of the respondents have been cited by the LAPD for such minor offenses as jaywalking.



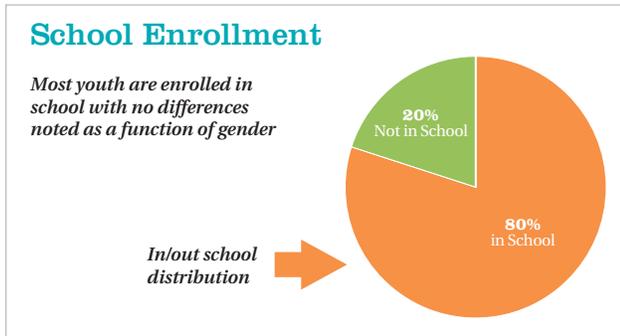
- Most of the respondents stated that they have limited access to health care.



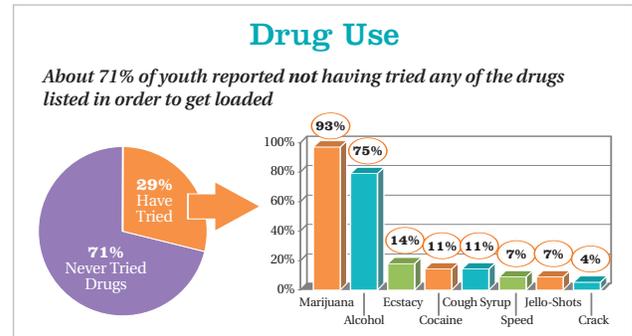
- School is not a safe haven for these children. Fifty percent of the respondents have been punished at school for not having a proper uniform.



- Most respondents attend school regularly.



- Most respondents have not used drugs.



Next Steps

It is generally assumed that anyone living in an area as rough as “skid row” is an addict or has dropped out of society. Children living here unfairly suffer from that stigma. But members of *Youth Coalition X* are defying society’s low expectations of them. Instead of giving up or dropping out, these children have collected data and assisted in analyzing it to help them understand their experiences. They are courageously using their painfully personal stories to stimulate public discussion and advocate for much-needed change.

It is imperative that the recommendations made by *Youth Coalition X* be given serious consideration, because they are the real “experts” on these issues. They know best which changes in public policy will address their actual needs and improve their surroundings, help them succeed in school, and revitalize the quality of their housing.

Recommendations for the LAUSD:

Suspension from school ranked highest as the obstacle experienced by most of the youth. Fifty-three percent have been suspended up to four times or more. Fifty percent of the youth have been suspended for not having school uniforms. Suspending a child for not having a proper uniform blames the child for a situation in which he/she has no control such as economic conditions that affect laundering and clothing purchases. Instead of sending students away, schools must become a safe haven where children are welcomed and accepted despite their economic status and living situation.

UCEPP recommends that the LAUSD:

- Annually notify all staff members of McKinney – Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth program (Title VII-B of the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act), which mandates that state educational agencies ensure equal access by homeless children and youth to the same free, appropriate public education, as other children and youth.
- Ensure that all eligible students are receiving the services and resources mandated by the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act and *No Child Left Behind* legislation.
- Make a distinction between the special needs of homeless children and those of low-income children. Approximately 10,163 children in LAUSD have been identified as meeting the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act. A liaison within the school district should be assigned to respond to the children’s special needs, i.e., uniforms, school supplies, transportation, truancy, tardiness, hygiene, health-related issues and hunger.
- Educate principals and key school administrative staff about the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act.
- Inform and educate principals, school-site personnel as well as parents, caregivers at schools where homeless children are enrolled of the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act to guarantee access to comparable services as outlined within the Act.
- Develop materials in appropriate languages to inform parents, caregivers and families of the resources available to them under the McKinney – Vento Homeless Act.
- Require quarterly district-wide reporting regarding delivery of service and compliance with McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act.
- Create a district-wide system to identify and track homeless youth, to ensure that they are receiving services.
- Collaborate with key community groups to provide alternatives to suspension and/or expulsion for “behavioral issues.” Develop a program with such groups to provide a custodial setting in case of a suspension and/or expulsion.
- Comply with LAUSD regulations of informing the parent or legal guardian before sending a child home.
- Partner with foundations and philanthropic organizations to earmark resources for educational and recreational opportunities for the children of “skid row”.

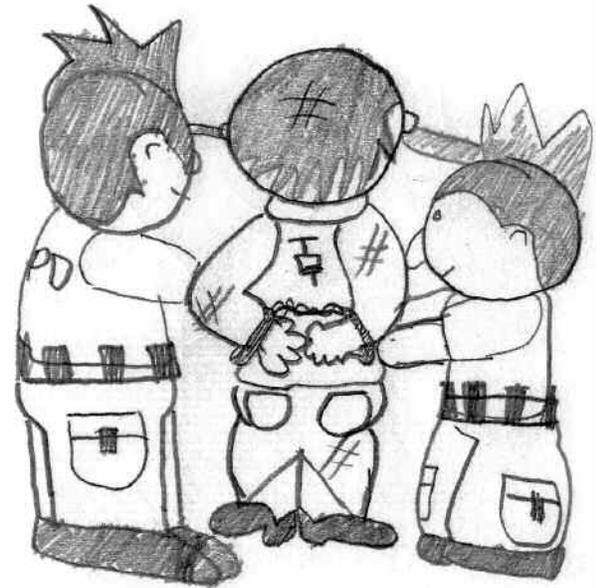
Recommendations for the LAPD:

UCEPP understands that LAPD's role is to attack crime. Yet the police tactics currently in use amount to an attack on children. The punitive, "zero-tolerance" approach practiced in "skid row" criminalizes poverty itself. Children are being targeted and cited for jaywalking and loitering. Instead of reducing crime, these citations have unintended consequences which prove disastrous for young people in "skid row": neither the children nor their families have the financial resources to pay fines which can quickly escalate to an amount equal to or greater than the family's monthly income. If the citations turn to warrants, young people who are already facing daunting challenges are at risk of starting adulthood with one "strike", further complicating their attempts to complete school and find jobs.

Apparently the LAPD takes this "zero tolerance" approach in an effort to stop homeless people from hanging out in the streets. But these young people are not "hanging out" in "skid row" ... they live here. L.A.'s "skid row" is a residential neighborhood. And when children live in one room, when parks and community centers are closed to them, the only place they have to go is the street.

UCEPP recommends that the LAPD:

- Change its strategy from "zero tolerance" to "compassionate correction."
- Stop criminalizing poverty by targeting youth for petty citations, such as jaywalking and loitering.
- Assign a youth liaison officer or Youth Services Officer (YSO) to handle all youth-related criminal matters in "skid row"
- Establish an alternative way to address outstanding tickets, e.g., community service, traffic school or other strategies that do not involve monetary payment.
- Provide resources to implement alternative activities in downtown L.A. that are accessible to the children of "skid row" (such as space, funding and staff for recreational activities), or augment and modify existing programs. The goal is to develop healthy, constructive options such as sports and other team activities, especially for children between the ages of 10 and 17.
- Endorse UCEPP's recommendation that the parks and other recreational/open spaces operated by downtown Los Angeles service providers be opened to the children of "skid row".



Drawing by: Travelle R., 12 years old

Recommendation for the MTA:

- Work with the LAUSD to develop and cover the costs of a sliding fare scale or provide free bus transportation for the children who meet the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act's definition of homelessness.

Recommendations for the City of Los Angeles Parks and Recreation Department:

- Open up city parks to the children of "skid row".
- Provide playground equipment and recreational staff during after-school hours and off-track schedules.
- Partner with foundations and philanthropic organizations to earmark resources for recreational opportunities directed at children from "skid row".

Recommendation for the Department of Juvenile Justice:

- Adapt existing policy to allow the youth of "skid row" to resolve their existing citations with community service instead of a monetary fine.

Recommendation for the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS):

- Notify the school district that a homeless child meets the definition of the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

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Conclusion

No one knows exactly how living in “skid row” will affect the growth and development of our children. But without significant policy changes, the prognosis is not good. An environment of overwhelming blight and violence has already condemned their parents to lives of desperation and despair. The key to making a difference for the younger generation is to build on their tremendous potential. UCEPP staff is constantly amazed by their resilience, impressed by their creativity, encouraged by their humor and inspired by their courage. The next step is to implement programs that can help our youth cope with the enormous challenges of poverty and gain the skills and confidence to change the course of their lives.

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UCEPP is a program of Social Model Recovery Systems, Inc., a multi-faceted human services organization. UCEPP is funded by a grant from the Los Angeles County Alcohol and Drug Program Administration. For more information visit us at <http://www.socialmodel.com/> or call 213.622.1621. The mission of UCEPP is to engage the most vulnerable populations of the Central City East area of Los Angeles, also known as skid row, to challenge the systemic conditions and social disparities that threaten a healthy environment.

To obtain a copy of the complete survey, or any part thereof, call the United Coalition East Prevention Project at 213.622.1621 or e-mail: Zcardenas@socialmodel.com.

Acknowledgments

This report was developed by *Youth Coalition X* under the auspices of United Coalition East Prevention Project. It is made available in order to advance understanding of the influences children in “skid row” face on a daily basis. This invaluable tool is provided to policy makers with hope for significant improvement in our neighborhood. This report should stimulate discussion, spark outrage and criticism, and stir public debate about the status of our children of “skid row” and the issues of poverty in our community.

Gathering data is never an easy task, and obviously problems of this magnitude cannot be solved by one person, one program, or one agency alone. Therefore, we would like to send a heartfelt “thank you” to *Los Angeles Central City Community Church of the Nazarene, S.A.Y. Yes! Center for Youth Development, and Union Rescue Mission* for opening their doors and allowing us the opportunity to use their facilities so that we could begin this process.

Many people provided hours and hours of opinions, review, and recommendations enabling us to prepare this report. It is not possible to thank them all. However, there are two individuals whose countless hours cannot go unmentioned. Thank you to *Dr. Cheryl Grills* for stepping in, providing consultation, and serving as an advisor to this project. To *Mary Lee, Esq.*, for her stability and insight, invaluable advice, strong sense of conviction, and elegant style in word and action — a deep, heartfelt thank you.

We also wish to thank *The California Wellness Foundation and Hoy* for their financial support in hosting the **Toxic Playground: Growing Up in Skid Row** event on November 10, 2005. They have allowed us to release the survey findings to a far wider audience of public policy makers. Special thanks must also go to *Julio Marcial, The California Wellness Foundation's communications officer*, who early on embraced our efforts and immediately demonstrated his understanding of what we are trying to accomplish. *Julio's* support and encouragement has been invaluable! Thank you for believing in the young people and going the extra mile for *Youth Coalition X* and United Coalition East Prevention Project.

I wish to acknowledge the *UCEPP Team* who awoke all of us to our obligation to help those in need so that they may help themselves. The *UCEPP Team* transcended their differences to meet a collective challenge, inspiring us to be tireless in our efforts to attain justice, equality and prosperity despite the struggles we encountered along the way. They have proven the power of thinking outside of the box and the wisdom of the old saying: *“If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got. If you want what you have never had, you must do what you have never done.”* The *UCEPP Team* are the real experts and without their guidance and strength throughout this painful journey, this grass-roots report would not have been accomplished: To *Charles Porter, “Our Doctor,”* you embody a strong sense of conviction and a rare spirit that inspires our imaginations — thank you. To *Leslie Croom*, your unwavering and forceful vigilance as well as your sense of purpose are qualities we all aspire to have — thank you. To *Socorro Gutierrez-Chacon*, you exemplify the struggle with elegance and courage. You are the shining light at the end of the tunnel — thank you.

Finally, words simply cannot express our gratitude to all the members of *Youth Coalition X* — *you are an inspiration! Your determination to speak your own truth to powerful forces and yourself being a force for something positive in our community is indeed humbling.*

Rigo, Thomas, Christian M., Anthony, Justin C., Kianna, Brianna, Imani A., Nas M., Marquette, Jumuah Z., Hassan B., Elijah B., Tahj B., Delanieo R., Desiree R., Damion, Ankara A., Hillary P., Emily P., Maria P., Elisha, Veronica P., Selene P., Talisha E., Priscila, Ana, Sunshine, Christopher, Brianna J., Shalisa, Lamar P., Marcus B., Miguel B., Shaddai W., Maribel A., Alexander G., Felix G., Angel A., Raymond W., Jensine W., Yesenia Q., Roshawn C., Egypt A., Traveled R., Mario M., Franklin A., Michael M., Davion, Kevin S., Alexis G., Abraham A., Jamaica A., Dorothy W., Tatiana, Kayla Q., Daran (DJ), Eddie (Epoi), Joel, Jonathon N., Issac R., Keosha R., Leah R., Robert C., Elvia M., Fatima M., Gladys M., Luis A., Jocelyn C., Timothy, Tierra M., and Tasha P — who willingly bared their souls and shared their painfully personal stories, who despite their hardships continue to move ahead with their lives and improve their circumstances with dignity and pride.

Finding solutions to the issues raised here will not be easy, and we urge policy makers to look beyond “quick fixes” such as arrest, expulsion, displacement and relocation. We believe, however, that solutions do exist, and the first step to identifying them is to listen to the children themselves. Treat them the same way you would treat children from any other neighborhood: with compassion, understanding, respect and love.

We owe these children — the most vulnerable in this city — a life free of violence, fear, poverty and neglect. It is obvious, that if we do not take a stand to address these issues we will sentence these young people to lives of desperation and despair much like their parents before them. To do nothing is a form of genocide, no better than gang warfare or terrorism. Join us in taking immediate action that will transform the lives of our children.

On behalf of the Agency, we thank you all.



Zelenne L. Cárdenas

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