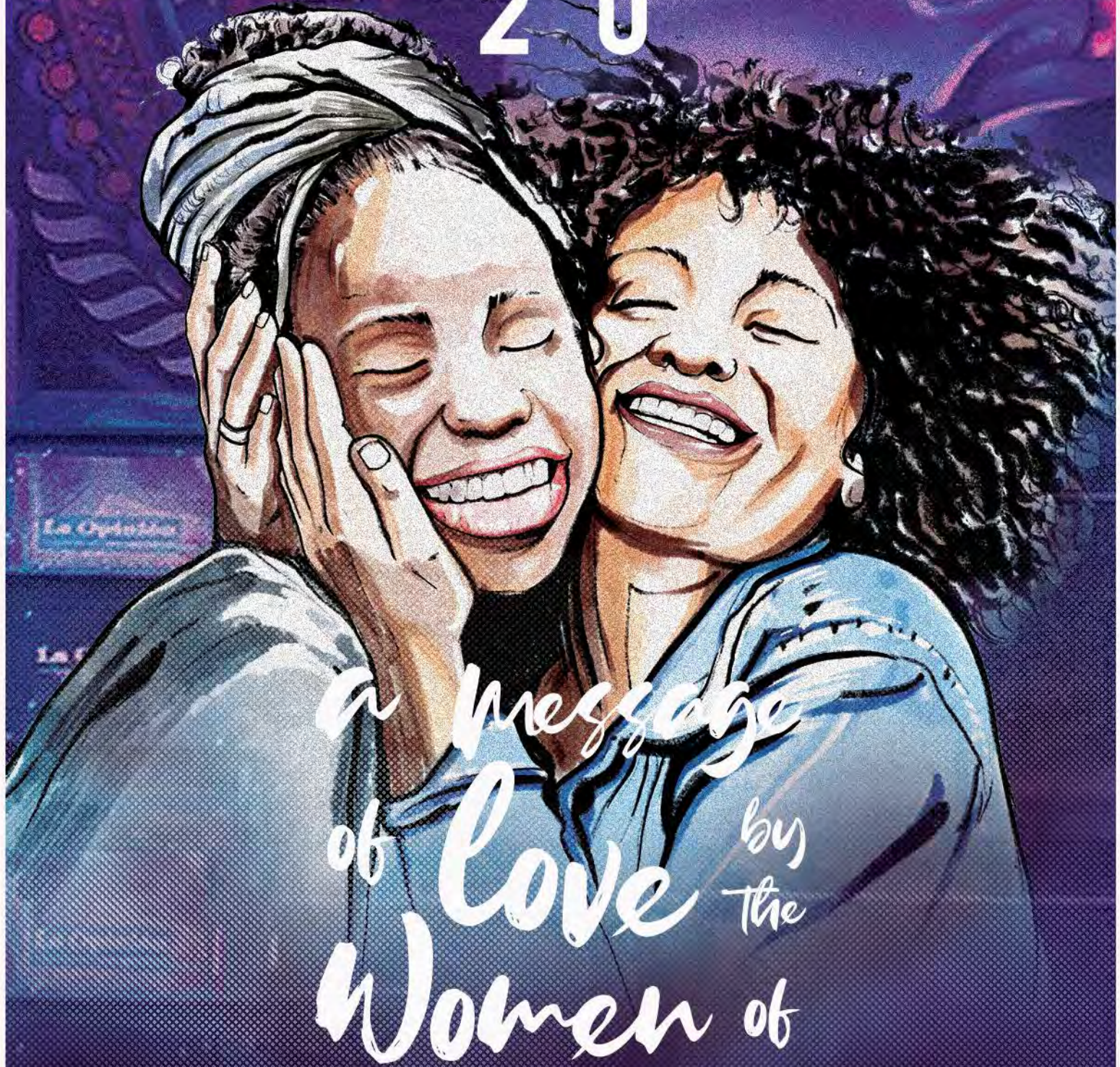


20

WOMEN'S NEEDS ASSESSMENT

20



*a message
of love by
the
Women of*

DOWNTOWN WOMEN'S ACTION COALITION
D.W.A.C.

S K I D R O W





Hot, sticky, dense with dust and angst. Unfresh winds whirl remnants of a once-together family in a miniature cyclone in a ditch by the bus stop.
Her little boy loved sketching.

"I'll be right back" and "damn I'm back". No deep inhale. Relaxation will not follow. Can't catch your breath. Congested. Detained.

The stench. Apartheid reheated, thick in the air, sits in your lungs, infects your life and fights you for your oxygen. You muster breath, just to survive, you have to survive. Soberness holds your nervous system to ransom - fight, flight, muscles tensed tight. No peace, no respite. It's easier on your psyche to forget crippling inequalities, forget that your ancestors built this country, that you get to roam the streets dodging terror on the beat. Just need a break.

"Oooooo mmmm"! You know that smell! Charlene's BBQ lets your nose take leave. You inhale, deeply, happily, your stomach groans, recalls these past days it stayed empty, recovering from the expired, stiff peanut butter, jelly-and-something bread tossed at you from a whizzing car... You know she'll share til it's gone. You wanna wash up before you get stuck in... "Out of service". Restroom's always out of service, hope she's got water too.

There go Ducci, muting bleak, blasting their loud ass happy demo damn they should be on the radio. "You look fabulous" Janice yells dramatically, tossing her head up, shooting a backwards glance in full Grace Jones mode. You catch the intention in her eyes, you feel supported in her stance, fortified by her conviction. Your heart responds, activated, buzzing, that energy is life. Roses grow in concrete. All over Skid Row.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Women's Needs Assessment is a community-led research project and the 7th in a series of surveys with houseless and extremely low-income women living in the Skid Row neighborhood of Downtown Los Angeles. Women are disproportionately poor and unduly subject to vulnerability and violence. This feminization of poverty and the needs of women living in Skid Row have been regularly ignored. Since 2001, the Downtown Women's Action Coalition, a leadership group of women who live and work in Skid Row and Downtown LA, have organized to ensure that women's needs are not forgotten and to advocate for critical services and programs. Between late Fall 2019 and Summer 2020, close to 300 surveys were completed among women living in Skid Row -- anchoring the hundreds of stories, poems, and community art collected as background for this report and providing an expanded data set that helps present a holistic picture, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Taken together, this report encompasses key findings and experiences from women living in Skid Row.

6/10

- Six out of 10 women who completed the survey are Black women. With structural racism as a main driver, Black women are overrepresented in the population of houseless women in Skid Row.

20% increase

- The median age of women surveyed was 52 years old, with 3 out of 4 (78%) reporting being between 57 and 64 years old. With a recorded 20% increase of houseless seniors 62 and up in the 2020 Homeless Count, we expect the number of older women living in Skid Row to increase. Services fall short to address existing housing and health needs. As this population ages and could face additional health challenges, will women have the support that they need?

difficult to find a clean restroom or shower

- Women reported challenges with access to hygiene, with roughly half of women reporting that it was always or often difficult to find a clean restroom or shower. These challenges have intensified and women have reported limited access to water and handwashing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

multiple intersecting forms of violence.

- Women also reported experiences with multiple intersecting forms of violence. In addition to experiences with interpersonal violence, women report having to deal with different forms of state violence, including interactions with the criminal justice system and with the Department of Child and Family Services.

In the face of structural violence and poverty, women in Skid Row have created community and support systems for each other.

Through this report, we describe the daily challenges for women in Skid Row, honor their stories and resilience, and call attention to the needed services, programs and housing.

The report's data and statistics are amplified by lifting the voices of the women whose spirit, resilience, compassion, and commitment to providing mutual aid serve as an inspiration to us all. What emerges is a story of how misperceptions, stereotypes and ineffective policies have worsened the lives of the women of Skid Row —current conditions are unacceptable.

INTRODUCTION

All of the women responsible for this report — a “love letter,” if you will, expressing our heart-felt affection and support for each other and the Skid Row community — believe that human life is invaluable, precious and sacred. No matter the hue of your skin, the contour of your nose, the formal education you did or did not receive, the zip code in which you currently reside (which could change overnight), your right to live should not be determined by how profitable you are to the Lords of Capital. We value life. We cherish and preserve life. This is why we are here — to share with you what we see, what we experience, how we survive, how we support the lives around us and how we’ve made it through the harshest conditions and still stand with love and determination in our hearts. We band together and fight at the intersection of discrimination and oppression. The conditions in Skid Row are a recipe for extinction. It is not an environment where one can thrive; we are not meant to even survive here.

Don’t just read our stories, use them as evidence that the institutional structures in which we live result in policies that subjugate and kill; and therefore, they must be changed. Let our experiences fuel the fight for agency and equality for women of color and equality for women everywhere, and when we say “women”, we mean everyone who identifies as such, but particularly those in the poorest neighborhoods. Neighborhoods where we are not seen, where we are not heard, where our rights are routinely violated, where organized abandonment is the order of the day. The research, outreach, stories and assessments were co-ordinated, prepared, presented and illustrated through letters of love by women in the Skid Row community. We invite you in to see life as it is for us. As global movements begin to shift to correct centuries-old racist, injurious practices, we now need you to do your part. Once you become aware of a crime, silence is complicit. Support our calls and our recommendations because, when we fight, we win.

To all the women holding it down and holding it together, for so many people... breathe. Imagine your heart in your hand, kiss it, love it. We see you... We love you!

WOMAN,

for the purpose of our work, includes all who identify
as women and all subjected to the same

OPPRESSION

arising from being perceived as a woman.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The Women’s Needs Assessment 2020 launched in the late Fall of 2019 with a survey among a sampling of women living in Skid Row that helped us ground our understanding of the current conditions and feelings among our respondents. Six out of 10 of those respondents are African-American, 12% White and 11% Latinx.

RACE & ETHNICITY

African American and Black women continue to be overrepresented in the houseless population of Downtown Los Angeles. Despite the fact that Black people make up only 8% of LA County’s general population, they represent a whopping 34%[1] of the houseless population. Within service planning area 4 (Metro LA) specifically, which includes the Skid Row neighborhood, Black people make up 37% of the houseless population, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority’s 2020 Homeless Count Report[2].

Respondents who reported English was not their first language expressed difficulties in accessing services. Immigrant women often bear the brunt of systemic and structural discrimination and inequality. Living through an era of pronounced hostility toward immigrants and debasement of their rights and humanity, immigrant women face a myriad of barriers including: language, employment, ineligibility for public services and, often avoid seeking help for fear of deportation.

RACE DISTRIBUTION

AFRICAN
AMERICAN

56.6
%

AMERICAN
INDIAN

1.83
%

ASIAN

1.37
%

HISPANIC
LATINEX

13.24
%

NATIVE
HAWAIIAN

0.91
%

OTHER 1.37%

TWO OR MORE RACES 9.59%

WHITE 10.96%

PREFER NOT TO ANSWER 0.91%

UNKNOWN 0.46%

BLANK 2.74%

AGE

While more than a third of all survey respondents were over the age of 55, older women reported having poorer health than in previous years, 27% reported not being able to sleep because of stress and 35% reported healthy food was one of the most needed resources. Furthermore, 26.7% of older women rated their physical health as poor and 21.6% of older women rated their mental health as poor. Currently, 67.1% of women over 55 surveyed are houseless.

*67.1%
women over 55
houselessness*

AGE DISTRIBUTION

Houselessness, particularly in older people, increases mortality risks, as a result of multiple causes ranging from adverse environmental conditions to circulatory and respiratory diseases. 2014-2018 data from the Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner showed “male deaths outnumbered female deaths, but the percentage of homeless women who died increased faster than that of men. And although Black people make up fewer than one-tenth of the county’s population, they accounted for nearly a quarter of the homeless deaths”. Stress, a lack of healthy food and exposure to the elements contribute to an early death. In Los Angeles County, the average age of death for houseless women is 48 and 83 for housed women in California.

UNDER 25	1%
25 - 34	13%
35 - 44	12%
45 - 54	28%
55 - 64	31%
65 - 74	7%
OVER - 74	2%
BLANK	7%

Houseless adults are often 10 to 20 years older physiologically than their age, a process called premature aging, often as a result of prolonged stress [4]. Due to structural factors that result in this prolonged stress, houseless older adults have an increased likelihood of victimization, chronic illnesses such as high blood pressure and arthritis, and premature mortality [5].

LGBTQ COMMUNITY

Twelve percent (11.98%) of respondents reported their sexual orientation as gay or lesbian, bisexual, or “other”. Three percent (2.76%) reported their gender identity as transgender or non-binary. Of those that are currently houseless, 10.7% are bisexual, 4.1% are lesbian or gay, and 4.9% are “other.” Additionally, 20.7% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported being LGBTQ+ identified as one of the greatest barriers to accessing permanent housing

“Trans women aren’t recognized as women”

“ There are no services for trans women in Skid Row. I would like to see a lot of people supporting trans women, having support groups for trans women in Skid Row for them to feel comfortable and share their story, like they’re part of the community too. For trans women, and women in general, I’d like to see all of us come together.” Serena Reddick, Skid Row Resident

11.98%

of respondents reported their sexual orientation as

BISEXUAL,

10.7%

LESBIAN

4.1%

OTHER

4.9%

Of those that are currently houseless

20.7%

reported their gender identity as

TRANSGENDER

20.7%

respondents reported being

LGBTQ +

identified as one of the greatest barriers to accessing housing”

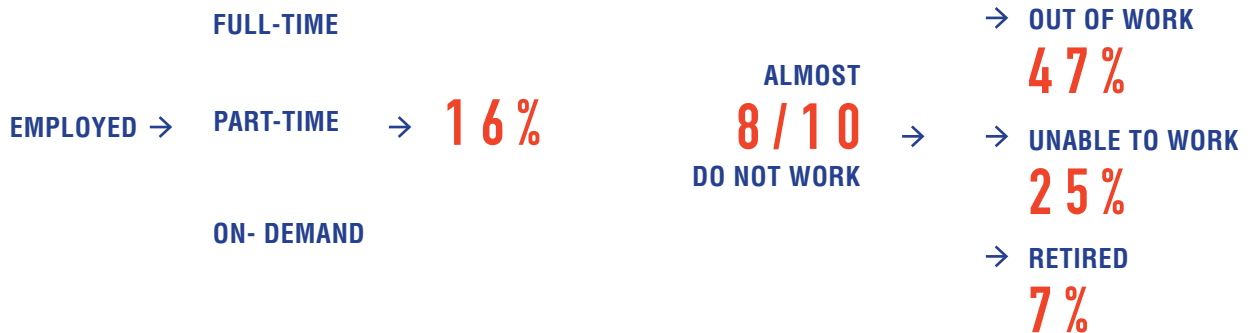
**EDUCATION
INCOME
AND BENEFITS**

Among those female Skid Row residents surveyed, two out of three report having a high school diploma, GED or have some post-secondary education and only about one in three report having less than a high school education.

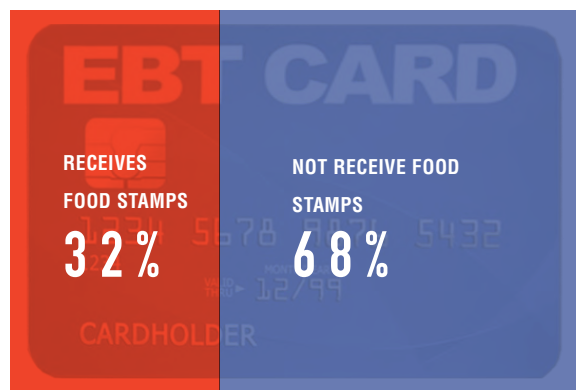
The most common forms of income tend to be the biggest and most widely available ‘safety net’ programs:



When it comes to working for an employer, only 16% of women surveyed report being employed in full-time, part-time or on-demand/gig work. Almost 8 out of 10 surveyed respondents claim they do not work (47% out of work, 25% unable to work, 7% retired) 16% of those report being employed in full-time, part-time, or on-demand/gig work.



FOOD STAMP



To whom it may concern,

I am a 65 year old woman with physical disabilities. I have a fiancé I have a daughter and a puppy. I would love to keep my family together. We are homeless. We live on the streets. To get housing they want to force us apart by putting us in SRO. That doesn't support my outlook on life and what family represents. Why do I have to lose my family in order to gain shelter. Just because you see me on the streets doesn't mean that I'm on drugs and just because you see us in a group doesn't mean we're in a gang. When you see me, you are looking at a representative for all who have survived racism, someone who refuses to be delegated and separated from family. A woman who believes in herself, who has filtered through life and has extracted all of what's good from each experience and is able to spread my knowledge daily through interactions of goodwill and a shared connection of neighborly love. Home is where my life began so that can never be taken away, but a house is man made and can be broken or torn down. So some would say that I am homeless. I say I'm searching for land to plant my heart in so my home can grow.

Fredrica Trawick

a message
of love ^{by} the
Women of
SKID ROW

THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

Prior to COVID-19-related shutdowns, and as of March 13, 2020 there were already 7.1 million unemployed Americans. More than 22 million workers have since become unemployed. In April, the unemployment rate of women was 16.2%, whereas the unemployment rate for men was 2.7 points less, at 13.5%. This is because, despite women making up only 49% of America's workers, they account for 55% of the job losses in April [6]. These alarming figures reflect the highly inadequate welfare state that, even prior to this crisis, drove a vast number of Americans to the margins of the US economy and excluded and shamed them from seeking the services they required to build resilience against

Women are facing poverty at a Welfare reform has increased hardship is a class-based policy with underlying have disproportionately higher rates of Covid-19 accelerated the rise of poverty Black women [10] experiencing poverty. health insurance or benefits [11] and center of the pandemic. Given the vast incarceration and the prison industrial and bear responsibility of being the sole families: immediate, extended and institutional racism, as well as gender earn the same as men, are often locked impossible to access affordable housing including rent [12].

since March 2020
7.1 million unemployed
US unemployed
men 13.5%
women 16.2%

such shocks [7].

disproportionately higher rate than men. for women of color [8]. Welfare reform racial/ethnic bias, and people of color poverty compared to white people [9]. among women of color, particularly Those that have jobs often have no work in areas that put them front and disappearance of Black men due to mass complex, more women head households provider. Black Women are carrying communities. However, structural and and class inequality mean they do not out of employment, and find it almost or keep up with housing payments

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many of income, only amplifying the threat numbers of renters in Los Angeles income replacement programs, do not no resources once these programs end A report released by the UCLA Luskin

365,000 renter households imminent danger of eviction

offers that "365,000 renter households [in Los Angeles are] in imminent danger of eviction once the current restrictions on evictions expire" (page 10, Blasi) [13].

have lost employment and their source of losing housing. Alarming high either do not receive enough from qualify for these programs, or will have and they will therefore face eviction. Institute on Inequality and Democracy

Once you lose your home you often lose your family. Lack of access to affordable housing results in people finding shelter where support and resources can be shared, often in densely-populated encampments. Add the inability to afford healthy food, which leads to poor health outcomes, and you get a rise in stress levels, which weakens the immune system.

The shutdown of services in Skid Row during the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that even the unhealthy food that was provided or dropped off, is no longer available. People are becoming desperate, and hunger has reached unsustainable levels. Frustrations are high and domestic violence is on the rise.

This stands in sharp contrast to the idealized vision of American society built of grand notions of "equality," "freedom" and "justice for all." The disparity is exemplified most poignantly in Skid Row. The violence of being locked out of housing, restrooms, employment, education, health care, and access to clean, nutritious food has created the humanitarian crisis seen throughout poor Black and Brown communities.

What do you think women need in Skid Row now?

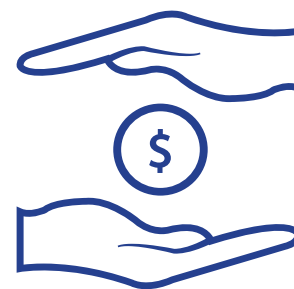
“NOW?”

MORE RESOURCES FOR WORK.
“MORE FOOD, MORE INCOME.” [12]

If poverty did not take such a destructive toll on Black women, Skid Row would not look the way it does. These injustices destroy people and families. Race, class and circumstance render mothers in Skid Row Department of Children and Family Services targets. Their children are snatched and everyone’s lives shattered. They fight, fight, fight to bring the family back, back to those who know them best. Who knows what their favorite cereal is and what makes them laugh? Their biological mother! Mothers are dying without their babies. The pain of losing them is sometimes numbed with painkillers, sometimes tumbles out in rageful outbursts. But that’s all... they don’t go on mass shooting sprees. No one else loses their lives.

LACK OF HOUSING AND HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

42%



BARRIERS TO PERMENET HOUSING



LACK OF SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

29%



LACK OF SUBSTANCES ABUSE SERVICES

11%



LACK OF CASE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

30%



LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

17%



LACK OF MEDICAL SERVICES

14%



CULTURE AND ETHNIC SENSITIVITY

14%



LACK OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

18%



LACK OF CENTRALIZED CENTERS


17%

To whom it may concern,

It takes a whole life to build a life and fulfill our necessities, I am talking with a sense of privilege. It takes a moment to understand that we lose everything and we are houseless and this is a real bold feeling.

Skid Row, Downtown, Los Angeles in the early 1900's became the mecca of housing services for caucasian men who were deployed and or migrated after their military service and the construction of the Western Pacific railroad. As housing services and other services grew, competition for those services brought more men and especially women and families to Skid Row by the 70's and 80's. At this point nothing about it was tailored to fulfill women's needs and overlooking these needs until today is the

reason to write with deep concern. I can not accept that having to live in a city with so much resources and self claimed progressives, the dehumanization of all women still prevails. Living on the streets is violence, houselessness is violence. Today, agencies that are now open to serve homeless women in the Skid Row area still do not fulfil the sophisticated needs that women require. Dirty facilities, a lack of healthy food, temporary shelter, non-specialized health care staff, limited hygiene items, a lack of dedication and respect from staff along with an honest sense to serve have contributed to and perpetuated houselessness for all women. We know that African American and Hispanic women are the highest demographic as houselessness rises. We want to stay alive because that is our natural right. And today during an historic pandemic we women, more than ever, demand to be treated with dignity and be provided with a safe place to live and survive.



Silvia Hernandez, Mother,
Grandmother, Womanist

a message
of love by
The
Women of

SKID ROW

HOUSING

Survey respondents reported housing as being the most difficult resource to access, with 42% reporting affordability as the primary barrier to housing. [d] “They make the rent too high and tell you to find housing,” was a constant refrain from women in Skid Row.

CES USAGE AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE LOOKED FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

26%

DON'T KNOW WHAT CES IS

27%

HAVE NOT USED CES

45%

HAVE USED CES

57% of respondents said it is very hard to pay for housing. Accordingly, 86% of respondents have been houseless at some point in their lives, and 59% of respondents are currently houseless. A third of respondents first became houseless before they reached the age of 30. 34% of respondents reported income loss as a reason for becoming houseless. The original surveys were conducted pre COVID-19 pandemic, so estimates for loss of income and evictions that could potentially lead to houselessness are predicted to skyrocket [14].

Nearly two thirds of respondents reported seeking housing within the last twelve months, pushing back against the commonly held notion that houseless women are service resistant and enjoy living on the streets. Almost half of respondents have applied for affordable housing in the past twelve months, and a year later, are still without housing.

A common theme within the focus groups we held were women talking about the dismay, distress and disheartenment stemming from being “processed,” polled and placed on lists like Coordinated Entry System (CES) or Section 8 Housing. Almost half of respondents have been placed on CES, but have found that CES and Section 8 never actually lead to permanent housing.

According to LAHSA’s 2020 Homeless count almost 21,000 women are experiencing houselessness, with the City of Los Angeles seeing a 14.2% rise compared to last year. The report also states that Black people are four times over represented among people experiencing houselessness than in the County population overall and “clearly demonstrate the failures of the economy and effects of institutional racism” [15].

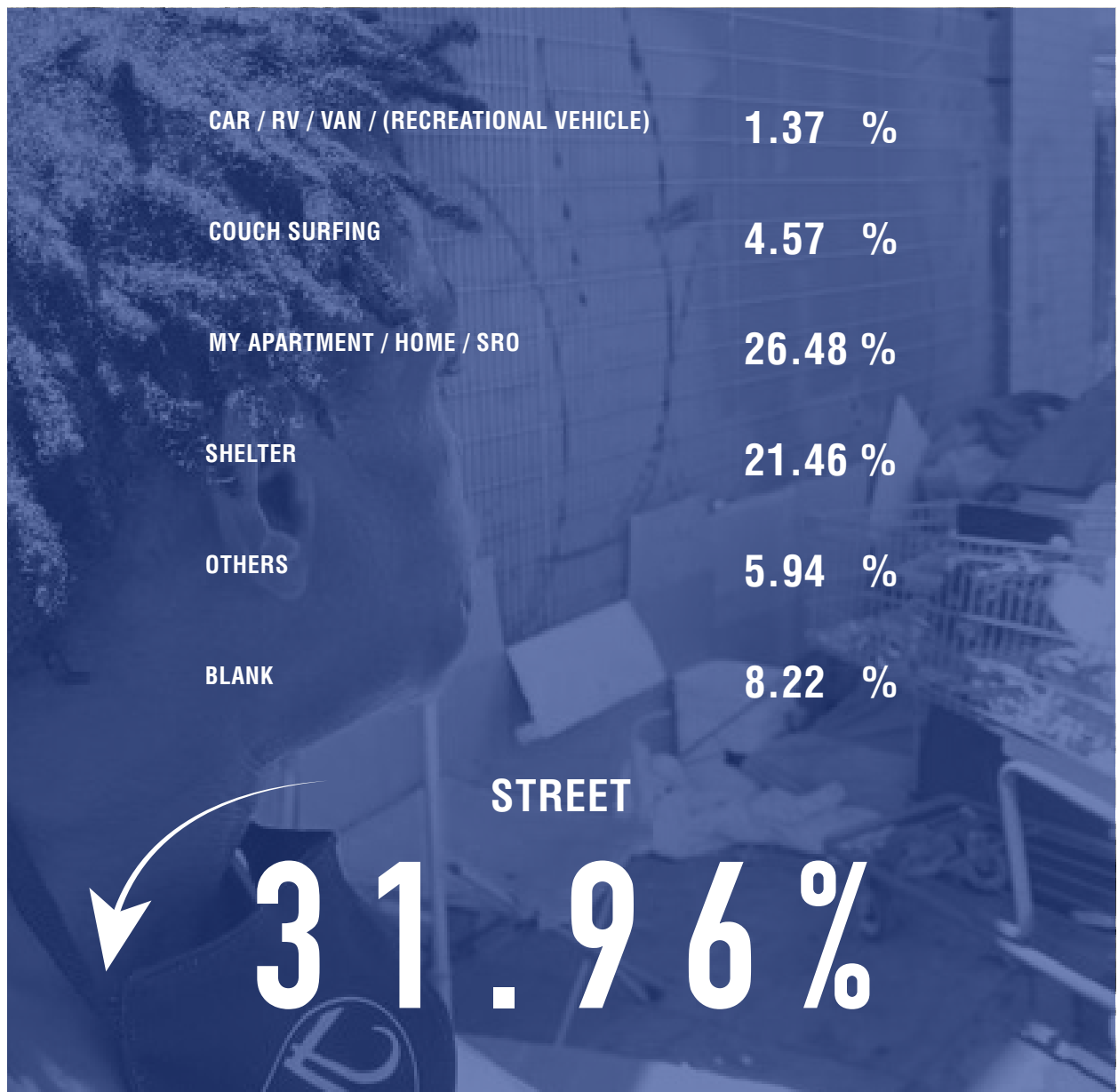
21,000
women
houselessness

Racial discrimination is rooted in slavery. Though slavery was abolished in 1866 [16], exclusions from housing markets continue to perpetuate the conditions of slavery. In 1883, interpreting its powers to enforce the Thirteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court did not agree that exclusions from housing markets could be a “badge or incident” of slavery [17], setting the tone for violations of civil rights to this day. Structural and institutional racism is the cause of the houseless crisis in Skid Row. (The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority admits that if not for racism there would be 15,000 fewer houseless people. While rhetorically this is a bold assertion coming from a joint services authority serving the city and county of L.A., it in no way accounts for all the systemic and structural pathways that lead directly to houselessness.)

"...my executive directive ensures our City leadership looks at every issue through a lens of racial justice, acts to end structural racism, and brings more Black Angelenos and people of color into the halls of government" [18], Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti.

The city's negative and positive action in failing to eliminate structural racism and subsequently creating barriers to housing is unconstitutional [19].

WHERE RESPONDENTS SLEEP MOST FREQUENTLY



COVID-19



The COVID-19 pandemic brought another layer of complexity to the challenges people living on the streets have to face, especially women, many of whom are over 55-years-old. The stay at home order, social distancing, frequent hand washing, wearing a mask and testing strategies to stop the spread, are either impossible or difficult for houseless communities to implement and cannot be realistically followed until real housing is provided. City and county efforts to contain the spread of the virus have not taken into consideration the unique needs of a community of more than 60,000 people countywide who live on the streets, over 60% of whom are Black — a glaring example to the world of the effects of institutionalized racism. Women have to rely on their own limited supply of water, poorly maintained hand-washing stations and restrooms or donations to at least wash their hands. Hygiene facilities are closed due to the pandemic and the need to take care of the sophisticated needs of women is more difficult and remains overlooked.

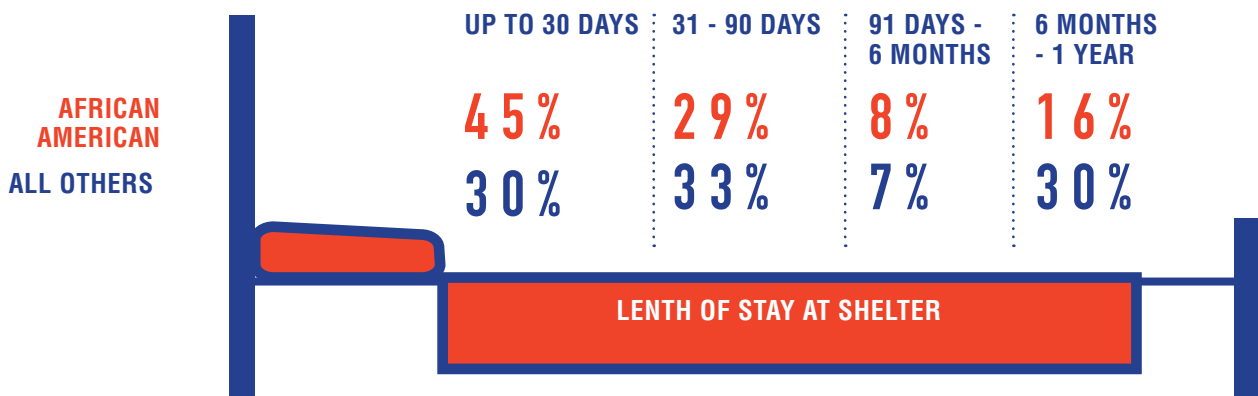
Silvia Hernandez, DWAC Member

As of July 2020, LA County had a total of 173,995 confirmed cases and 4,360 deaths due to COVID-19 [20]. As the number of cases continues to increase, Black and Latinx Angelenos are dying at a disproportionately higher rate than White Angelenos. For every 100,000 people, 38 Latinx Angelenos and 37 Black Angelenos have died from COVID-19 compared to 19 White Angelenos [21]. In Downtown LA, there are currently 517 confirmed cases and 12 reported deaths [20]. In Skid Row, there have been many COVID-19 outbreaks in shelters which put houseless people at more risk. Despite efforts to reduce the spread, 4 out of 5 large shelters in Skid Row and bridge homes in the surrounding areas have had COVID-19 outbreaks [22].

In the midst of a global pandemic, the need for housing has never been more apparent. On March 19, 2020 [23], Los Angeles issued a “Stay at Home” order. Housed Angelenos followed orders, houseless Angelenos, predominantly Black and Brown, were unable and left exposed on the streets. Houseless DWAC members attempted to register with LAHSA Project Room Key but were told they were not “vulnerable” enough. In July 2020, one DWAC member was finally given a room to share with her mom. She reported having to empty her purse every time she entered, having to follow a strict 7pm curfew and not being given a room key — every time she left the room a worker would have to walk her back to open her room for her. This, she stated, made her feel “like a criminal” [24].

49%
of unhoused respondents
did not feel safe
in shelters

Of the women who have been or are currently houseless, 49% reported that they did not feel safe in shelters. Furthermore, 47.1% stated that they could not trust staff.



SHELTER CONDITIONS

Shelters can be an important resource in a crisis, but our data shows that they are an inadequate stopgap and can be a source of trauma when improperly operated. There are several shelters in the Skid Row/Downtown LA region, and they serve many individuals.

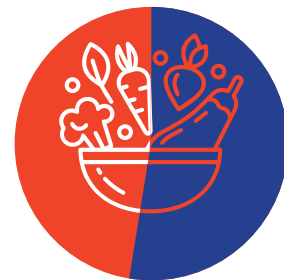
21% of respondents currently live in a shelter, and 40% have stayed in a shelter at some point in their lifetime. However, staff often treat residents poorly; of the women who have stayed at shelters, 49% reported that they did not feel safe there and another 47% stated that they could not trust the shelter staff. Residents' feelings of insecurity were warranted, as a quarter of those who have stayed at a shelter reported being physically attacked by another resident.

"I mostly had sleepless nights. I sleep with my eyes kinda open because I didn't trust anyone."

"I didn't eat one plate of food there during my one month stay there; it looked really nasty. One time they gave us a soda and it tasted funny, so I looked at the date and saw that it had expired."

In addition to inadequate support, shelters also often had poor conditions: 42% said that the shelter they stayed at was filthy, and 49% said the food offered was not nutritious.

NUTRITIOUS



NOT NUTRITIOUS

RESTROOMS AND HYGIENE FACILITIES

Los Angeles has consistently failed to address the public health inequality in Skid Row. There is a serious lack of public health infrastructure - such as clean restrooms, showers, and drinking water - that poses a serious health issue for women living in Skid Row. In light of COVID-19, these issues have been tragically highlighted. However, these issues have existed and have been unaddressed for years, resulting in significant health issues for women.

Water insecurity has always been an issue for the residents of Skid Row. While the also predominantly Black city of Flint, Michigan [35] has faced a similar struggle of water insecurity, that problem is the result of infrastructure failure, while that is not the case in Downtown Los Angeles. The water shortage in Skid Row simply exists due to a lack of action toward increasing accessibility in Skid Row to existing clean water. This inaction to a problem sitting right at City Hall's doorstep impacts the health of thousands of people living in the streets here, and illustrates the results of a deliberate indifference to a crisis by those with the power to change these outcomes, resulting in the negative health outcomes for already disenfranchised communities.

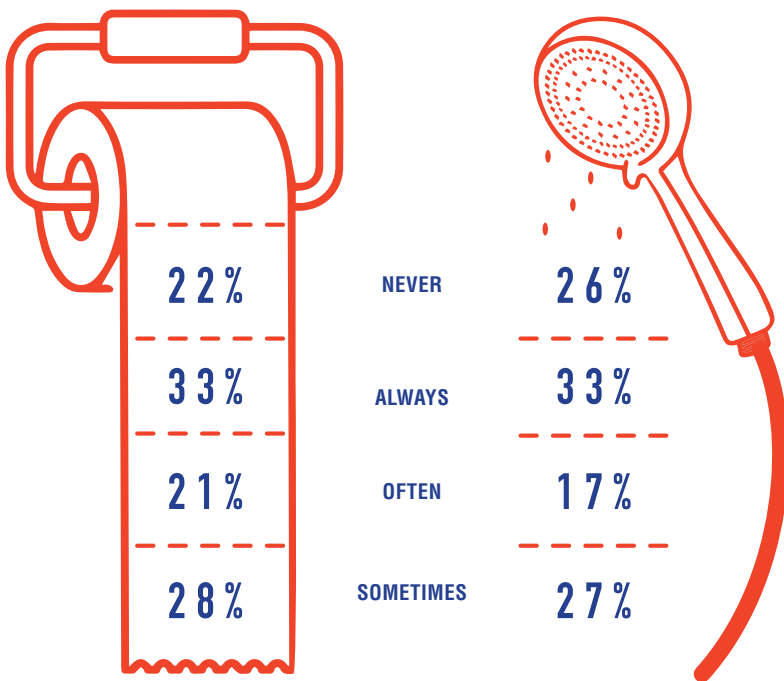
A major issue is the simple fact that there are not enough public restrooms or showers in Skid Row. Restrooms, showers, hand-washing stations, soap and water are essential to contain the spread of Covid-19. Limited access to such essentials in Skid Row increases the risk of people becoming infected. From our survey, 46% of women stated that restrooms/showers are difficult to access in Skid Row. 52% said it is always or often difficult to find a safe and clean restroom, and 47% said it is always or often difficult to find a safe and clean shower. Those surveyed described the hardships of maintaining basic personal hygiene under these conditions. Because of this lack of basic sanitation, women are at higher risk for infection (especially urinary tract infections). In addition to these medical issues, lack of hygiene infrastructure can also be a barrier to employment.

HOW OFTEN IS IT DIFFICULT FOR YOU TO FIND A SAFE AND

"9 times out of 10 we're going on the corner; we just have to pop a squat," one person said referring to the lack of public toilets.

CLEAN RESTROOM?

CLEAN SHOWER?



"When the park's closed there's no water. They've got these little machines where you're supposed to clean your hands, but they are not refilling them," according to another person. Lack of drinking water is a major issue. In the Needs Assessment follow up, over half of respondents said they are always thirsty. Only 3% are never thirsty. A majority of women (73%) do not have access to clean tap water, and instead buy or are given bottles of water. Adequate amounts of drinking water is necessary for physical health and mental well-being. Clean drinking water is a basic human right, declared by the UN, that is denied to the women of Skid Row.

Finally, there is no provision for menstrual needs. Having tissue but not sanitary pads is discriminatory against people who menstruate. In our follow-up survey, 23% of women reported that it is difficult to obtain personal care products, including menstrual products. Women are made to pay for medically necessary products, and their inability to pay for adequate menstrual products can, again, result in serious health complications and infections. One person pointed to the lack of feminine hygiene items: "These restaurants and businesses need to allow people to use their restrooms because we're all human beings. Some public restrooms don't have tampons or pads so they need to add those to the restrooms."

To whom it may concern,

There are facts surrounding the many barriers to mental, physical, and emotional health among houseless women. It can be very difficult to access services/facilities to combat these issues. There are many needs for a woman that may not be required for a man, yet, most facilities seem to be geared more towards men. This is one way the women's needs go overlooked by most facilities. It is proven that houseless women have a difficult time accessing the services they desperately need. Consequently, houseless women's health deteriorates at a much more rapid rate than housed men and women. The facilities that are available have very limited access, are unsanitized, and often women receive poor treatment from staff.

Foot health is a major, often overlooked issue for houseless women. Mostly, women are on their feet as they search safe spaces and resources to survive. Many of the women in Skid Row walk on painful feet with unaddressed issues including infections, tinea pedis (Athlete's foot), nail pathologies, corns and calluses and ill-fitting shoes. Foot pathologies are directly related to chronic diseases such as

diabetes. Nutrition plays a key role in women's health. Oftentimes the food is not suitable for lead to many health access to water only the day. All these health conditions UTI's, depression, gain, diabetes, high/cholesterol, constipation, other chronic mental conditions. It is crucial women to have access to "focused" services in clinics, kitchens and other providing

available to houseless women consumption which can issues. Most facilities allow during specific times of factors can lead to many such as yeast infections, unhealthy weight loss/low blood pressure, high/low chronic fatigue, and and physical health for houseless more "women shelters, facilities these

Shameka Foster,
DWAC Member

a message
of love by
The Women of

SKID ROW

HEALTH & WELLNESS

New questions were introduced around well-being in this wave of the survey. Almost half of respondents reported feeling isolated from others and 33% reported not feeling motivated in their current environment. More than a quarter of the respondents said stress affects their sleep.

"Nobody's Coming to Save Us", a DWAC whitepaper on the impact of COVID-19 on Women in Skid Row, identifies structural racism as the cause of housing affordability, housing availability and poverty and illustrates the fatal toll on our bodies in holding and carrying stress and anxiety.

Street sweeps, laws that criminalize your very existence, the ever present dangers of being unsheltered affect mental and physical health as well as immune system function. Janice Ross, cherished DWAC member, whose contributions to this report are invaluable, sadly lost her life in December 2019. Janice had been houseless for decades, In her hospital bed, Janice said, "I didn't have time to be ill. I had to watch my belongings, I had to negotiate a space to sleep and protect it, I had to try to find food, water, I had to make sure no one was creeping up on me, I had to make sure I was in a spot that was close to a place I could safely go to the bathroom, I had to move home every week. I didn't have time to be ill but now I can rest a little" [25].

Numerous studies have documented that just the anticipation of racial discrimination triggers a nervous system response that increases vulnerability to chronic disease.

"Yet the insidious impact of sleep loss on health runs much deeper. Every major system, tissue, and organ of your body suffers when sleep becomes short. No aspect of your health can retreat at the sign of sleep loss and escape unharmed. Like water from a burst pipe in your home, the effects of sleep deprivation will seep into every nook and cranny of biology, down into your cells, even altering your most fundamental self - your DNA" [26].



ACCESS TO
AFFORDABLE
HEALTHY FOOD

TOP 3 MOST - NEEDED
RESOURCES

35%

DIFFICULT TO ACCESS

21%

WHAT AFFECTS YOUR SLEEP?

STRESS



27%

LACK OF HOUSING



10%

HEALTH ISSUES



9%

NOISE



6%

WORRY



1%

INSOMNIA DEPRESSION



4%



4%

“This is why women die here: depression, feeling alone, feeling abandoned, feeling casted out, feeling not cared about...”[27]

“There was one [woman] that used heroin and fentanyl, and I saw her the next day and she died from an overdose of fentanyl. Rigor mortis set in very quickly and somebody took a picture of her — her body was stiff and her face was contorted like a scary movie. And then another lady was lying on the ground for a few days and people were walking around her — she had went into a spice seizure and died.”

“The elements always catch up to us. I almost died from the elements. I didn't know that I had walking pneumonia. I didn't know that I had Typhus fever.”

“I had a stroke in my tent due to stress on moving day, clean-up day. For seven years I had been moving my stuff, but finally this stuff was gonna take a toll on me. My back went out and my whole body just shut down, my whole left side went out and I fell in my tent. My family had to take me to the hospital — I was there for 10 days and could barely hold a cup or a spoon... If I hadn't known what I know about self help, I would've been dead in my tent just like a lot of others that die in their tents... Stress does kill.”

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Since the expansion of the Affordable Care Act, the number of uninsured people in the U.S. has declined significantly and its expansion has reduced racial/ethnic and gender disparities [28]. Despite this expansion, research suggests that racial/ethnic and gender disparities still persist, especially among Black women [29].

12.6% of survey respondents were uninsured. Of those who have health insurance, 47.9% have Medi-Cal, 17.4% have Medicare, 3.7% have VA health benefits, 4.1% have MyHealthLA, and 3.2% have private health insurance. Many women have indicated that better healthcare access is crucial, with 32% listing this as one of the top three resources most needed to improve Downtown LA and 47.7% reporting that it is difficult to access in Skid Row.

Among social determinants of health, sleep deprivation is especially harmful and a contributing factor to the death of three houseless people everyday, according to an L.A. County report [30].

MENTAL HEALTH

Overall, almost half (49%) of women surveyed living in Skid Row rate their mental health as either ‘fair’ or ‘poor’. About four out of ten (38%) identified mental health care as one of the top three resources most needed in the community and, interestingly, roughly the same proportion (41%) of women found mental health care difficult to access in Skid Row. Additionally, 34% of women who are currently houseless reported lack of mental health services as one of the greatest barriers to access to permanent housing.

41%
*mental health care
difficult to access*

To whom it may concern,

I am a woman who's been through a lot so when you see me walking down the street without shoes and my make up is all crazy and I'm talking to myself don't judge me I am not crazy. It's not my fault that I was raped and sexually molested at an early age and removed from my home before I was a full-grown teenager and got pregnant too soon before I knew about family, then my baby was taken away for me. It's not my fault that when I ran away I ran into a pimp and he put me on a hoe stroll where I endured sexual exploitation, was exposed to drugs, abused and mistreated to the point where I've learned to mask my pain to avoid the suffering. Developed a role that allowed a way out while in the struggle. I did not ask to be

poor. So when you see a woman, a woman who's learned to hide behind a protects me Never judge cover cause miss out on a

here and definitely did not ask to be me know that you see a strong been through trauma, a smart and clever that's disguise herself and character that from the pain. a book by its you might great story.



A Queen is
Skid Row resident

a message
of love by
The
Women of

SKID ROW

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Stories such as this highlight the everyday traumas that can lead to feelings of desperation and hopelessness. Women feel alienated, excluded, discriminated against. This is reinforced by the LAPD's hyper policing, harassment and quality of life citations targeting women. Not to mention the violence inflicted upon them by police officers who see them as having no value to society. Who humiliate women, set them up, sexually harass and assault and jail them for being poor.

Over half (55%) of respondents have experienced sexual assault, state or interpersonal violence. African American women in particular were more likely to experience domestic violence and state violence in the form of profiling and incarceration. [b]

Violence within Single Room Occupancy units and shelters are crimes and should be treated as such. An elderly LACAN member reported a violent physical attack. She was beaten up by an unauthorized person at her place of residence, in an SRO, which left her face swollen and bruised. She was 70. Her complaint was not taken seriously, investigated, or followed up until DWAC intervened.

Lack of adequate housing puts women in extreme danger, to the point they must make compromises in order to survive including trading sex for shelter[e]. Of the women surveyed, 17% reported engaging in survival sex, and 71% of those respondents were victims of sexual assault or domestic violence as a result. However, violence to houseless women is not restricted to cases of survival sex. In the past 12 months, 33% of women reported to be a victim of crime, 28% experienced domestic violence, and 27% survived sexual assault. The most common perpetrators of these crimes against women are strangers (48%) which could be easily prevented by housing these women. However, 34% of women reported the perpetrator of violence to be a friend, and another 34% reported it being a husband/partner to inflict the violence.

These statistics emphasize the need for women to have access to their own housing as a place of refuge, and the resources to escape abusive relationships. Housing sovereignty for women will not only protect from the violence that the patriarchy inflicts, but also prevent the need to engage in predatory relationships.

55%
experienced
sexual assault

DESTRUCTION OF FAMILIES

For all survey respondents who have children, 29.8% reported experiencing a change in their children’s custody and 27.9% reported having interactions with the Department of Children and Family Services. For mothers who currently have a child under 18 years old, 57.1% reported experiencing a change in their children’s custody (with 22.4% in the last year) and 54% reported having interactions with DCFS (with 24.5% in the last year).

“Stop taking our babies away from us. Not being able to afford housing does not make us unfit mothers. It makes us victims of structural racism. Let us live.”

CRIMINALIZING POVERTY/ POLICING

Black women are more likely to have interactions with the police than other race/ethnicities. 31% of women who were surveyed have spent time in jail or prison, which then increases risk of houselessness and poverty. It was reported that in the past year, 32% of survey respondents have interacted with the police. Of those who had interactions with the police, the most reported interactions were 1) seeking help (38.3%), 2) being stopped, questioned and/or detained by the police on the streets (25%), and 3) being arrested (23.3%).

“We’ve [Trans women] even been ostracized by male police officers. They’ve mishandled trans women, disrespected trans women... Police need to have more training when it comes to us [trans women] or women period. Police brutality is definitely an issue in Skid Row. When I see them, I just hope that they aren’t gonna mess with me and hope that this isn’t the day I’m gonna go out.”

VIOLENCE AGAINST TRANS WOMEN

Transgender people face a great amount of violence, especially trans women of color. So far in 2020, at least 22 transgender people have been killed due

to transphobia, the majority being trans women of color [31]. Since 2013, the Human Rights Campaign has tracked at least 157 cases of anti-transgender homicides, with nine out ten (89%) of these cases being Black transgender people [32]. Transgender people have high rates of physical assault or attacks, sexual assault, domestic violence, and policing and rates are even higher for trans women [32, 33].

In our surveys, 75% of trans women reported experiencing either sexual assault, domestic violence, or being a victim of crime. Among their comments:

“We get targeted because we’re different — by men, police, just people that don’t understand us. I mainly stay inside, I don’t really go out anymore because I don’t feel safe. Trans women have been beat, shot, raped, and chastised in Skid Row; all just for being trans.” (IMG_9193)

“I feel like there’s no support when it comes to trans women in Skid Row...there’s no support when it comes to health, mental health; all there basically is, is housing, but there still isn’t a voice for trans women to get it. So many girls here don’t know where to go, they get wrong information - there’s no one here to help them navigate to get the help that they need. Services like support groups... trans women of color need more safe havens. A lot of trans girls get kicked out of their families, disowned, and they have nowhere to turn, nowhere to go to, so they turn to prostitution or a life of crime because they don’t have anyone to help them navigate life. Escorting, pornography: that’s where they end up because that’s what they [trans women] know...That’s how a lot of trans women are brought up because that’s survival- you gotta make money and not a lot of people are going to give you a job to support yourself.”

75% transwomen experienced sexual assault

EVER HAD INTERACTION WITH DCFS

20% YES



20% NO





Bernadette Parker

Visit Hell

a poem

It's no surprise pain lingers in her eyes
her hearts been snatched out, stomped on and beat up
She wore shoes four sizes too small couldn't pick her feet up
People telling her Pray But
all the praying in the world couldn't help this girl
What she needed was a first class ticket to heaven
Might as well, She had already flew coach to hell
I'm that girl And that's my world
So you wanna know who I am and what I'm about?
Spend day and night trying to figure me out
Only way you can do that, True fact, visit hell and come back
And don't bother screamin out
Nobody will hear you no matter how loud
you shout because the pain inflicted is all in your brain
until you feel it slipping through your split veins

Then it becomes reality fact of your life When you see
yourself holding that knife

And when you look in the mirror You start to
fade away For me this is everyday
Trapping myself inside insecurities That the
world has given me

Building my prison from the inside Not
letting anyone inside

No need for bars, bricks will do just fine
No need for guards there's no escape

I have an empty stomach And sitting in
front of me is an empty plate

and very soon it becomes very clear I'm
stuck here

just the devil, my insecurities and me, I
have convinced myself that this is a good
place to be

I sit in the corner who am I to speak up
my words just fall flat in the mud

so you want to know who I am and what
I'm about spend day and night trying to

figure me out only way to do that true facts
visit hell and come back

you will see I am nothing more than
trapped.



a message
of love by the
Women of

SKID ROW

By
Marquesha Babers

YOU GOT IT WRONG, LISTEN TO US

(RECOMMENDATIONS)

Anti-Black racism must be purged from all systems, organizations, and institutions responsible for providing houseless services. As noted in the recent LAHSA, “Black People Experiencing Homeless Report” race continues to be a powerful determinant of who gets housing and who doesn’t; of how long you stay in housing; and, if lucky enough to get in but need to leave for any period of time, the impossibility of being rehoused.

HOUSING

Treat the housing crisis like the emergency it is -- **house the 2,000 women currently houseless in Skid Row immediately.** There is no stopgap measure that works. Mayor Eric Garcetti committed to providing 15,000 rooms through Project Roomkey. Currently, with only a fraction of available rooms, this program has fallen woefully short of its celebrated goal.

Commit significant resources from the COVID-19 CARES Act to livable housing solutions for women. The CARES Act provides resources for local municipalities to address the public health needs of its most vulnerable residents. The flexible pool of resources allows municipalities to define what types of public health interventions they want to pursue. It provides opportunities to house people; employ local residents to clean and sanitize public accommodations; purchase and distribute PPE and other items; and to provide resources for caretaking. With an estimated \$153.5 billion, this provides an opportunity to improve housing and economic conditions women face.

Work closely alongside community organizations and tenant unions to establish strategies to minimize the crush of impending mass evictions and increased houselessness among women through short-term rent forgiveness/cancellation programs. Keeping people in their homes, keeping women in their homes, is an important precondition for gender justice. As documented in this report, the state of being houseless greatly exacerbates the structural inequalities experienced by women. Ensuring the right to housing is an important component of ensuring gender equity and women’s rights.

Develop effective protocols that allow flexible and unbiased entry into all housing relief programs such as Project Roomkey. As noted in our research, women in Skid Row were given severely limited pathways into these programs, while at the same are the most vulnerable. If local and state government

officials invest in emergency solutions, protocols must be created to ensure flexibly and non-biases entry into the programs.

Service delivery must be recast to reflect the changing nature of our communities. As currently structured many families are not eligible for an array of life sustaining services and refuse to be torn apart. LAHSA must immediately review and reform policies that serves as barriers to entry.

Improve shelter conditions and reduce barriers to shelters and services. Many of the women in our survey listed shelters beds/emergency shelters as one of the top three resources that are needed to improve the Downtown L.A. community and in the surrounding area as well. Additionally, many women report being disappointed after experiencing unclean conditions, disrespect from staff and feeling unsafe.

Convert all vacant city owned property into housing that can be used for women and families. Acquire vacant tourist hotels and motels and their conversion into permanent social housing as a way to expand the inventory of permanent housing in L.A [34]. This is part of the broader efforts to flip the script of eminent domain, i.e. to use eminent domain for the public purpose of housing.

Ensure State and Local government provide eviction protection for women and women head-of-households subsequently codify it into local policy. As Covid19 eviction protections are set to expire on the national and local level unless extended by Congress, the forecast for families and women headed households are disastrous. In preparation, houselessness eviction prevention resources must be set-aside to ensure women head-of- households are protected from mass evictions. Right to Counsel resources must be earmarked for those at greatest risk of becoming, or returning to, homelessness.

Commit to a Housing First approach that eliminates intrusive conditions on those being housed and policing and surveilling them at the point of housing.

Create a permanent fund to be used to master lease empty residential units for the long-term and prioritize women for these units.

Stop investing in shelters and bridge housing. Housing starts with transitional housing, placing women in their own rooms, rooms which they should be allowed to stay in until permanent housing is made available to them. I think this should say : Stop the public investment in temporary solutions that don't create long term change like shelters and bridge housing.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

LAPD current houseless outreach and engagement strategies are not making women's lives safer and must end. Communities calling for alternatives to incarceration and the funding of programs that actually make us safe has reached a feverish pitch. The Los Angeles Homeless (Services) Authority published Guidelines for Homeless Outreach which called for the removal of law enforcement, but they remain and criminalization continues to flourish. Criminalization makes it almost impossible for many to secure housing and services and remains a real barrier to participation.

Stop disrupting lives with traumatizing street sweeps and municipal ordinances that criminalize poverty. Such criminalization must be understood as causing death, through the destruction of valuable personal property (including medication) of the houseless and through the real effects of stress. They are violations of human rights and must end. Follow LAHSA's guidelines on outreach.

De-escalate intense situations; do not call police on women. Stop the issuing of Quality of Life Citations for Women and criminalizing populations, for existing and trying to survive.

HEALTH / PUBLIC HEALTH

Provide clean and accessible public restrooms and handwashing across the Skid Row immediately. Long-term, all city-owned buildings should provide safe solutions round-the-clock.

Install easy-to-find usable water fountains that are available 24/7.

Make menstrual hygiene products available in all public restrooms.

Increase access to healthcare services. Almost a third of survey respondents listed this as one of the top three resources most needed to improve Downtown LA, almost half reported that it is difficult to access in Skid Row. In a neighborhood where people are already more vulnerable to negative health outcomes due to a multitude of health risks, and inadequate resources to prevent them, reliable structures for the response to such health outcomes becomes all the more necessary.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Invest in civilian transformative justice programs and community-based alternatives to policing. This should not be understood to mean community policing and community safety partnerships.

Create a LAHSA-sponsored oversight board, comprised of service users and women in the community to monitor shelter conditions, addressing, surveying and recommending changes of operation. Shelter conditions and treatment has long been an issue confronted by DWAC. We have waged campaign after campaign and have only seen incremental, temporary changes. We once again call for the regulation of shelters which would offer a very public grievance process and regular resident driven assessments.

Invest in and provide culturally sensitive, trauma informed counselling and care services. More than half of African-American survey respondents reported mental health services were not available to them, but yet they felt they needed mental health services and support.

Work with community organizations and the LA Food Policy Council to mitigate food insecurity and facilitate easy access to healthy, nutritious food -- particularly to meet the needs of the growing aging number of houseless women in Skid Row.

Reallocate meaningful resources toward safe spaces and support services for non-binary and trans gender women in Skid Row with immediate effect.



METHODOLOGY

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT

The Women's Needs Assessment 2020 officially launched on the morning of November 2nd, 2019 with an excited and informed team of more than 60 volunteers focused on the goal of using a simple survey to have conversations about life for women in Skid Row. This group was comprised of researchers, Moms, scientists, artists, teachers, 'veterans' who had been on past launch day teams as well as high school and college women who offered their time to help ensure the objectivity and sensitivity for the 7th in the series of a study that is fielded every 3 years in this dynamic community. Once volunteers had been trained by experienced researchers, teams were assembled and deployed into the community across approximately 12 locations throughout Skid Row. The assessment tool from the 2016 survey was modified to incorporate feedback from the community. In addition to preserving questions from past assessments, additional questions were created in an effort to gather information inclusive of the Trans community, as well as more information on women's living conditions in shelters and deeper exploration of their interaction with staff at the shelters.

The survey instrument contained three qualifying questions to ensure respondents belonged to the target population and to eliminate duplication. The survey comprised 85 multiple-choice questions (almost twice the number in the previous wave), most with an optional fill-in "other" answer. Like past waves, the questions were divided into four sections: Demographics, Access, Services, and Safety. For select responses, respondents were asked follow-up questions, and the final question invited respondents to share any additional thoughts, observations, or recommendations they had about housing and services in Downtown LA. The full survey can be found online.

Prior to the survey launch date of November 2, 2019, the survey was presented to a small test group of community residents, reviewed by DWAC members, finalized, and translated into Spanish.

ADAPTING TO THE PANDEMIC

The Women's Needs Assessment 2020 was interrupted by the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdown of businesses and services in and around the Skid Row community. The team responded with a nimble, adaptive approach by building a foundation of learning based on insights gained from the data and stories collected around the launch of the study and the following weeks of late fall 2019. This was followed by carefully curated input sessions and friendship circles across the winter and spring seasons and ending with 60 topical microsurveys exploring the impact of living in this volatile, unpredictable community during a life-changing global pandemic into Summer 2020.

We are proud and fortunate to bring this holistic look at what life is like for women who call Skid Row home as told through personal poignant stories that reveal levels of resilience that are breathtaking and courageous, illuminating and inspiring, dire and necessary in our effort to join forces to build power.

DATA COLLECTION

DWAC recruited volunteers primarily from the ranks of its committee members and from across the Downtown LA community. Additionally, volunteers joined from allied organizations and various academic institutions. Volunteers were invited to attend a ‘launch day’ survey administration training session that provided general information about houselessness, context about the specific issues houseless women face, definitions of relevant terms, and protocol for administering the surveys. Volunteer team leaders were also identified in this session.

Data collection consisted of individual, face-to-face interviews. Respondents were informed that their participation was confidential and voluntary -- clearly communicating they had the option to decline to answer any question or terminate the survey at any time. Respondents were also offered pampering gift bags as an incentive for participation. The survey was conducted in English or Spanish and lasted approximately 25 to 35 minutes. Responses were self-reported by each respondent; no additional verification of answers was requested. Participants were pre-screened for having not participated in this specific survey. After the Needs Assessment was administered, debrief meetings with survey volunteers, DWAC members and community ally organizations joined with researchers from the University of Southern California and University of California - Los Angeles to generate insight about the data collection process, themes observed in speaking with the women before and after the survey and volunteers’ recommendations. After the data was analyzed, DWAC members hosted two focus groups with Skid Row community members on the topics of trauma and violence, housing vouchers, shelter conditions, and emergency room visits. Insight from these groups is included within this report to provide context for the survey data.

DEFINITIONS

Across this report, the following terms are used throughout, except where otherwise noted:

The term “LOS ANGELES”	refers to the City of Los Angeles specifically, unless otherwise noted (i.e. “metropolitan L.A.” or “greater L.A.” L.A. County is also specifically noted when used).
The term “DOWNTOWN”	refers to Downtown L.A.
The term “SKID ROW”	refers to the 50 square block geographic area just east of Downtown Los Angeles bound by 3rd and 7th Streets, to the North and South, and Alameda and Main Streets, to the East and West, respectively.
The term “WOMEN”	generally refers to females aged 18 years and older.
The term “FEMALES”	refers to all women and girls.
The term “HOUSELESS”	refers to people who do not have a regular consistent source of shelter; it is also used interchangeably with the term “homeless”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Downtown Women's Action Coalition extends deep love and appreciation to all the women residents of Skid Row who shared their stories and an informed assessment of what is needed in their community. This love letter is a true example of community lead, participatory action research and would hold little value without the voice and guidance of women in Skid Row.

We thank the volunteers from Parkside Residential College and USC Athletics, Chicano Studies, Community Service Commission and Institute on Inequality and Democracy UCLA, Occidental College, Stop LAPD Spying and LA CAN members for the dedication, professionalism and respect shown to this project and the Skid Row community at large. Special thanks to Dr. Deshonay Dozier, Organizer and Assistant Professor, California State University Long Beach, who inspired our title and concept development of 'love letters' for this report, Paul Freedman for his dedication to the work of the organization through media and promotional material and USC Arts in Action.

Lastly DWAC would like to recognize the community organizations who donated staff time, gifts and space for interviews at their sites: Downtown Women's Center, Giving Children Hope, Homeless Health Care Los Angeles, Lamp Community and Shelter Partnership.

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