

## Living in the Shadows: The Daily Lives of Young Homeless Adults in Los Angeles County

By Jaycie Thierry and Nicolette Rojo

Homelessness is an ongoing problem for Los Angeles County, with numbers continuing to increase over the past five years. However, one segment of the population that is often forgotten are the homeless youth. Like adults, homeless youth suffer from the same issues such as food insecurity and lack of permanent housing, but unlike adults, they are young— many are in school, some are with their families and others trying to survive on their own, yet they are often overlooked and left out of the conversation.

Homeless youth are defined as people ages 18 to 25, an age group that is experiencing a significant part of their lives as young adults. Emily James is the Vice President of Programs for the Los Angeles region of Step Up on Second, where she primarily works with this homeless population and has witnessed the troubles of this demographic firsthand.

“Homeless youth went up 24% in Los Angeles County and there's a lot of debate of whether did it actually go up or are they just counting better,” Emily James said. “So that's sort of a question people are trying to figure out.”

“It's an age group where they are not children anymore, but they're in a very unique stage of life.”

The most recent numbers from the 2019 homeless count, conducted by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, show that there are 31,000 youth between the ages of 18 and 25 who are homeless in L.A. County.

When they were teens, K'lema Burleson and Destiny Vasquez were part of that demographic. Today, Destiny is 22 years old, but a few years ago she and her older brother lived with their mother in tents and slept in bathroom stalls in Lincoln Park, in the northeastern section

of Los Angeles.

“My daily routine consisted of me getting up and maybe washing my body off with a rag from the park, sink or maybe not,” Destiny said.

K’lema, who is now 21, lived with her mother in a broken-down van, moving from place to place in the San Gabriel Valley, while attending school full time at the University of La Verne.

“We were in downtown L.A. and then we're in El Monte and it's funny because we were in so many, like, cities in between,” K’lema said. “I can't even remember.”

Their stories are not unlike the many homeless young adults between ages 18 to 25-

People can become homeless for various reasons, but one thing they share is being young with adult worries, learning how to survive despite their circumstances.

For K’lema, the trouble started when she was in middle school, then the 2008 recession hit. Her mother was a real estate agent and her business was in sudden decline.

“She wasn't making commissions anymore, she wasn't doing open houses anymore, she wasn't doing broker deals anymore,” K’lema said. “It was the first time I ever saw my mom not working on, like, a regular basis.”

K’lema’s mother sent K’lema and her brother to live with their father in neighboring San Bernardino County. When K’lema turned 17 and graduated from high school, she made the decision to move back in with her mother.

“So when I started to move all my stuff down to L.A., I realized that she didn't really have a place to stay. So the whole five years that I was in high school, apparently she was going through roughing it, as well, in LA,” K’lema said. “I didn't understand at first and then I kind of was like, ‘Okay, now I understand,’ like you don't have a place for me to stay.”

For about five months, they moved from house to house staying with relatives. Then, her mother found a solution.

“I wasn't working, she wasn't working and so she had this crazy idea to go to one of her old friends and buy their RV off of them and it costs us about 400 bucks and it was like super old, it had all this junk in it,” K’lema said. “It was either too hot or too cold. It was too dark or like not, you know, light enough.”

Despite the van’s condition, K’lema preferred this living style over the previous ones.

“It was better than nothing because, in a way, I didn't like the idea of sleeping at other people's houses,” K’lema said.

“You could ask a young person, ‘Are you homeless?’ and they'll say, ‘No,’ but they've just been couch surfing. James said, explaining why those living in situations like K’lema’s are easy to overlook.

“They've been staying with a friend three nights here, an aunt, two nights there so they'll say no,” she added. “But I think to the rest of us that would say, ‘Oh yeah, but you don't have your own place,’ so that's pretty, pretty close to homeless and should count as that.”

L.A. County currently offers various resources and programs to assist the transitional age youth community. However, according to Sam Prater, co-founder of the student housing assistance organization Los Angeles Room and Board, the concerns of an inaccurate young adult count raises a challenge for measuring the severity of the issue.

“Like any issue, when you are able to quantify what the issue is then more resources follow,” Prater said. “If folks aren't accurately counted, then the number and the amount of resources that are allocated aren't reflective of the actual problem.”

It is not uncommon for people to struggle with homelessness at a young age from the lack

of a stable parental figure and household. In Destiny's case, it was during her pre-teen and teenage years, age 10 to 17 years old, that her mother struggled with drug addiction and was unable to care for her family or provide them with a stable home.

"We would live in hotels. We would live in other people's homes, and one particular time when we were living in transition between homes, um, the department of children and family services was called on for drug usage in the home," Destiny said. She and her sibling were also placed in the foster care system where they bounced from home to home.

For six months, when Destiny and her brother were with their mother, they lived on the streets of Los Angeles, and called Lincoln Park her home.

"It was a really big handicap stall and, you know, you can fit a lot of people in there and it's safer. It has a lock on it, you know, people aren't going to come in and steal your items or come in, you know, attack you physically," Destiny said. "I slept in the shack in the back of the park during the day."

Although Destiny was homeless, she managed to hide it from outsiders.

"It's easier for people my age to hide in the shadows of homelessness because, you know, they just have a backpack on and they can just navigate the world and nobody will know unless you talk to them," Destiny said. "It's way easier for them to get lost and jaded because, you know, they have more friends. There's more people that want them around or it's easier to find resources."

For homeless youth, safety and survival are big concerns, but so are the simple things that make life bearable. For K'lema, it was electricity.

"I had like a little bed to lay on and, but we couldn't get the electricity going. Nothing," K'lema said. "One of my most like stressful things about living in the RV is I just didn't have

entertainment and I could of course you want to do your homework, you want to study, but the light wasn't good enough. And, and um, just being next to the street it was just like can't concentrate on nothing. So I just did all of that when I was at school.”

Homeless people also have to deal with the psychological impact of being homeless. Destiny refers to it as the “homeless mentality.”

“My biggest challenge that I faced while I was homeless was actually, just being able to come to terms that I was living homeless on the streets and then being able to recognize that it's not a healthy way of living,” Destiny said. “It's not an ideal way of, you know, you don't want to live that way. You don't want to live like, what's the next day? What am I going to do tomorrow? Like there's nothing on the agenda, there's no work, there's no stuff you have to do and everything is just a little bit like more difficult when you don't have housing or you don't smell good.”

K'lema also struggled with the “homeless mindset.”

“I think that's really where you start to think, ‘Okay, if I can sit here and do nothing all day, I can just sleep all day.’ You'll, like, get into that mindset where you think that's okay,” K'lema said. “And so I was like, ‘I may be homeless, but I'm not.’ So, that was like the hardest part was trying not to feel homeless.”

Despite the different experiences between the younger and older adult homeless populations, both still face the stigma of homelessness and the public's misunderstanding of its many causes.

“The thing to really understand about homelessness is it could happen to anybody,” James said. “There's just a whole variety of circumstances. People like to kind of default to, ‘Oh, it's mental health’ or ‘Oh, it's addiction,’ and in some cases it is, you know, that's definitely a

contributing factor. But you could imagine what if you were in a car accident and you were no longer able to work. Disability is only typically a percentage of what your salary is and I don't know how many people could, you know, basically have their salaries cut in half and still make all their bills when you've kind of built your life already around a certain income level.”

“Homelessness isn't the people that you see, like, in the front lines. Those aren't the people that represent homelessness,” Destiny said. “They are actually people that have lost access to affordable housing, who have experienced domestic violence, who are paying rent and just experience something traumatic like just a car accident that just takes them out of work for two months where, you know, they lose everything and they just can't get back up off their feet.”

Destiny and K'lema dealt with being homeless during the most critical time of their lives. However, it was those experiences that have given them the drive to help others facing similar hardships today.

As a student at the University of La Verne in 2017, K'lema moved out her van and into campus housing and put her passion for helping others into play by starting the school's food pantry. She received an email from the university's chaplain, Zandra Wagoner, who asked K'lema to help establish a monthly food pantry for students experiencing food insecurity.

“She told me that they had a pantry idea that they had tried to do the December, like December of 2016, before I had even got there and they were only able to do it for, like, do one giveaway that one month just for Christmas. So the goal was to get it going every month, was to serve a certain amount of students every month,” K'lema said. “After like the first five, six months we're running it every month. We have one distribution, we have like 50 students coming every month.”

K'lema graduated from the University of La Verne in January of 2020 and is planning to

join the Peace Corps once conditions permit for volunteer operations to continue. Currently, all volunteer and service operations are suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, she continues to bring awareness of sustainability and food security by spreading the word to others within her area.

After escaping homelessness in 2019, Destiny enrolled in college and walked away as a graduate with two degrees.

“I went to school, I got my A.A. in English, transferred to Cal State Fullerton with a full-ride scholarship through the Guardian Scholars Program that serves current and former foster youth,” Destiny said. “Now, I actually have my B.A. in English from Cal State Fullerton because I was able to utilize the resources that are out there.”

She also plans to pursue post-graduate education in hopes of providing more access to programs for homeless foster youth.

“I really look forward to, hopefully, one day opening my up my own nonprofit to help, it would either be current or former foster youth that were homeless, that ended up homeless, and help them create a sustainable life for themselves.” Destiny said. “To do this, I would love to get a master’s in social work and then also get a juris doctorate, just so that way I can also defend them legally and, hopefully, one day be that change that needs to happen for homeless youth.”

While Los Angeles has invested into many programs to assist those who are homeless, the homeless rate for the transitional age population is still high. James says that granting more access to education will help this population increase their opportunities to gain employment and peer group support systems for young adults.

“Education is really the key to better employment to a better future. It also connects people with a community at the college. Our hope is that whether people are on the streets or if

they're in housing, you know, being part of a school community, a peer group, you know, having a purpose and continuing your education are all a lot of really positive age appropriate things," James said.

Prater advocates for pursuing higher education because he has seen it change lives, including his own.

"It's kind of hard to focus on, you know, school and classes when you're dealing with so much economic instability," Prater said. "But, we know that education is the great equalizer. We know that it is the best intervention to make sure students and people fall out of poverty."

Destiny and K'lema advise young adults to learn and grow from their personal experiences, and to not succumb to the feelings of guilt and shame that come with being displaced.

"My main source of advice would be to, you know, find a like-minded group of people. Find a good resource center in your community because, you know, the people that do work in these nonprofits, they're amazing people," Destiny said. "Don't lose hope because the second you lose hope in yourself and the world, that's the second you fall down the road you don't want to go down. You always need to keep hope, because honestly life will go on and days do get better."

"Figure out what your situation [is] and tell a parent, tell an adult, tell an administrator and let them know what you need and how you need it," K'lema said, "Another thing is ask for help. I didn't want to ask for help for a long time, but I asked for it. People are willing to, willing to give, make yourself known and don't be ashamed of your story. There are thousands, millions of people out there going through it from your level of struggle to way below, like degrading type stuff."