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LATINAS AND BLACK WOMEN'S STORIES

Preliminary Views on the Path to Homelessness

**BY MARIA ELENA RUIZ
WITH TYKESHA THOMAS,
CARLOS CONTRERAS,
AND REBECCA GLASER**

FOR my entire professional career, I have been working with people on the fringes of society; whether immigrants or exiles, non-English-speaking individuals, homeless, incarcerated young men, uninsured families, victims of violence, farmworkers, or other groups who are vulnerable or who face a harsh sociopolitical climate.

As a Family Nurse Practitioner, medical sociologist, researcher, and educator, I have gravitated towards providing services for the neediest in society. A few years ago, when I first joined UCLA as a faculty member in the School of Nursing, I had no qualms about doing public health in the skid-row areas of Los Angeles. After all, I grew up in Boyle Heights, a Mexican immigrant, and well experienced with living and navigating through “at risk” neighborhoods.

In that first year, I supervised 12 nursing students as they gained their first public-health experience. I did not expect any surprises. However, as soon as we arrived at the SRO (Single Room Occupancy Program) hotel, which would serve as our home base for 10 weeks, the word got around that I and some of the students spoke Spanish. Suddenly, we had a group of older Latino men and women waiting for us to arrive; many of them remained in the lobby throughout the day—eager to converse, socialize, and query us about their health concerns. My thoughts immediately shifted to the stereotypes that

we are frequently taught: that, for example, Latinos predominantly live in multigenerational households, embraced by an extended, collectivist family spirit, where elders are respected, provided for, and cared for by younger family members. Why, then, I thought, were all these older Latinos present and living on skid row? Where is the literature, where is the research, and where is the media on this growing group of homeless individuals? That first introduction to a growing group of Latinos aging on skid row drew me to expand my work with the homeless.

Homelessness in the United States

In general, it is difficult to get a good handle on the number of homeless individuals and families because there is a lack of consensus on how to define and measure homelessness, plus the difficulty in identifying and locating homeless individuals. What figures we do have are only our best estimates of what is a serious public health issue. From various reports, we do know that there is an estimated 1.6 million people homeless in the U.S., with more than 3 million people, including an estimated 1.3 million children experiencing homelessness over one year (AARP 2008, NLCHP 2009).

The latest report from the National Alliance to End Homelessness (LAHSA 2012) also shows that at one point in time in January of last year (referred to as

a point-in-time estimate), almost 644,000 people were considered homeless. We can think of this as 20 individuals per every 10,000 people—an astounding figure for the U.S. While the majority may be staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing units, nearly 4 out of every 10 are unsheltered, which means they are living in the street, under bridges, in parks, in abandoned buildings or cars, or in other places not meant for human occupation. Moreover, most of the literature points to a simple typology of economic/jobs and housing as the primary factors that contribute to individuals becoming homeless.

A national portrait of the homeless also reveals that almost 66% of homeless individuals are men, and while six out of ten are racial/ethnic minorities, the majority of these are Black males (42%), with 20% Latino/Hispanics. Many of these individuals also suffer from various debilitating physical and mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, or trauma.

Growing Diversity of the Homeless Population in Los Angeles County

In contrast to national data, LAHSA’s report reveals increasing demographic changes among the homeless population in Los Angeles. Here, slightly fewer than half of all homeless individuals are Black (49%) and approximately 25% are Latino/



Hispanic. Also, a lower percentage is men, with a greater percentage of women (43% versus 34% nationally).

Homelessness among Latinos in Los Angeles

Drawing from our first public health experiences in the skid-row area, the first study explored what older Latino men and women in the SRO community area perceived as contributing to their becoming homeless (funded by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center). From the surveys and oral interviews with volunteer participants, we heard stories about how violence, poverty, and war contributed to their immigration experiences; how their vulnerability made them dependent on others for housing (that is, a garage or crowded floor space for sleeping) and how the kindness of others was their only source for a place to sleep and eat (especially for immigrants without family or networks), or how seasonal and low-paying service jobs (that is, day worker, delivery driver, housekeeper/nanny) all contributed to their homelessness. Additionally, these men and women shared how language, culture, stigma, discrimination, racism, unmanaged physical and emotional health issues, and lack of “los papeles” all intersect and contribute to their becoming and remaining homeless. From the women, we also heard how some had experienced and still fear sexual, physical, and emotional violence. This picture is not one that previous research, literature, or the media have provided, given that these stories move beyond the simple typology of loss of jobs and housing.

Sociodemographics for Latinas and Black Women Study (N=25)

CHARACTERISTICS	LATINAS (N=12)	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN (N=13)
AGE (YEARS) Less than 50 50–59 60–69 70–79 Range: 50–77 Mean: 77.4	0 6 (50%) 2 (17%) 4 (33%) Range: 50–77 Mean: 77.4	6 (46%) 4 (31%) 1 (.07%) 2 (1.5%) Range: 25–77 Mean: 50
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN U.S. Mexico Puerto Rico El Salvador Other: 1 each for Cuba, Guatemala, Argentina	2 (17%) 3 (25%) 2 (17%) 2 (17%) 3 (25%) *	13 (100%)
LANGUAGE English preferred Spanish limited Both Spanish English	2 (17%) 8 (67%) 2 (17%)	13 (100%) - -
EDUCATION - YEARS COMPLETED 1–6 years 7–10years 12 years Unknown Mean: 8 years	5 (42%) 3 (25%) 4 (33%) 1 Mean: 8 years	1 (7%) 1 (7%) 11 (85%) - Mean: 11 years
INCOME - MONTHLY Under \$300 \$600–1,000 Unknown: Missing or did not wish to disclose Range \$3–\$979	2 (17%) 6 (50%) 4 (33%) Range \$3–\$979	2 (15%) 4 (31%) 6 (46%) Range \$182–\$860



While all the narratives leave saddeningly powerful images, the women's experiences do stand apart from the stories provided by the majority of the men.

Experiences of Latina and Black Women

For the present study, we build upon the research on the experiences of older Latina women and expanded our project to survey and interview adult Latinas (12) and Black women (13). Utilizing the same quantitative and qualitative design from the first

study, including the short survey and audiotaped oral interviews (conducted in Spanish or English), we gathered demographic and other information related to health, social support, healthcare-seeking activities, experiences in skid row, as well as their recommendations for improving or ameliorating experiences faced

by homeless women. A preliminary review of the surveys and interviews reveals that changes or breakdowns—in family, job loss, mental health issues, or loss of or lack of social support and networks—all interwove and contributed to their becoming homeless.

Although all the women may have shared similar stories, there are some salient differences between the Latina and Black women, and these need to be carefully and more thoroughly assessed for the final analysis.

For the Latina participants, most were born outside of the U.S. (10 out of 12) and so reported various reasons for immigrating to the U.S. The primary reasons given included a need to escape from war, poverty, and violence in their country of origin and a need to work and support children and family in their home country. It could be said that these women were vulnerable and at risk from the beginning; some may not have been able to move beyond being dependent on others for food or shelter—and so we could say they were homeless to begin with. For these women, as well as others, untreated physical and emotional health issues coupled with loss of jobs were perceived as leading to their homelessness (for those who served as housekeepers or nannies, for example, they can lose their housing and income when the children grow up and they are no longer needed). Also, some Latinas revealed how language, cultural differences, abuse in employment, discrimination in jobs and housing, limited education and occupational opportunities, as well as “los papeles,” contributed to their homelessness.

These women also report a lack of services and resources for the non-English speaking and older population.

For the Black women participants, immigration to the U.S. was not an issue. Instead, most shared how conflicts with their biological family; a marriage breakup; and physical, emotional, or substance abuse have contributed to their homelessness.

Overall, the table on demographics highlights some revealing differences between the two groups of women, including a much younger age pattern, higher educational levels, and hints of higher monthly income level for the Black women. (We can also note that almost half of these Black women did not wish to report their monthly income.) In contrast, the majority of Latinas immigrated from various Latin American countries (most immigrated alone or with a relative or friend) and most were Spanish limited, with a lower educational level, and limited income (several reported they did not know their income, which warrants further exploration).

Interviews/Qualitative Data to be Assessed

In the interviews, several comments stand out, including comments by some Latinas that individuals who speak English, have health insurance and a monthly income are privileged and do not fully appreciate the benefits given to them as well as the services they can easily access. Among the Black women, some comments suggest that the women feel there are sufficient food, housing, health, computer, and other resources available in the skid-row hotels. While the preliminary analysis shows some similarities and

differences, a more detailed analysis will provide us with greater insight for developing programs and policy recommendations.

Finally, this study could not have been performed without the invaluable cultural, and language expertise provided by a multidisciplinary team of students from various disciplines, including the departments of Nursing, Philosophy, Chicano Studies, and Education. While some students have graduated and moved on, they remain committed to the projects and to furthering this work.

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Photos courtesy of Maria Elena Ruiz and Carlos Contreras.

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