



**THE
NORTHWEST
NETWORK**

Of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian,
& Gay Survivors of Abuse

King County Youth of Color Needs Assessment

**THE EXPERIENCES, STRENGTHS, AND NEEDS OF HOMELESS
& UNSTABLY HOUSED YOUTH OF COLOR.**

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The NW Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian & Gay Survivors of Abuse (the NW Network) led the Youth of Color Needs Assessment, a county-wide, systematic examination of the overrepresentation of homelessness among youth of color in King County, WA. This qualitative project elevated the voices of homeless and unstably housed youth of color to clarify their experiences, strengths, and needs regarding housing. The project aimed to illustrate opportunities and barriers for the county's ongoing efforts to prevent disproportionate rates of homelessness among youth of color.

METHOD

The project used a participatory, community-based approach that incorporated the feedback and guidance of community partners and young leaders of color throughout the project. We conducted twelve focus groups throughout King County from September to December 2016, using a maximum variation purposive sampling strategy to guide data collection. The focus groups aimed to understand the experiences of and the contexts surrounding homelessness among youth of color in King County, ages 13-24.

The project team analyzed verbatim transcripts from the focus groups using a phenomenological approach with two independent coders. Youth and other project partners discussed and helped generate emergent themes based on the coding.

KEY FINDINGS

We adapted the Five Domains of Wellbeing Framework (Full Frame Initiative, 2015) to create a context for and connection between the key themes of the project. The **first theme** highlights the structural forces and conditions that limit the capacity of families to provide meaningful support for young people of color experiencing homelessness. The **second theme** explores the racial biases and discrimination experienced by homeless and unstably housed young people of color from the formal systems and services where they sought help. The **third theme** examines facilitators and barriers to supporting the self-determination of homeless young people of color. The **fourth theme** describes the value and characteristics of positive relationships between caring adults and homeless young people of color. Finally, the **fifth theme** outlines organizational practices and components that affect access for homeless young people of color.

CONCLUSIONS

We outlined four major takeaways from the project based on the themes that emerged in the focus groups. For each takeaway, we provided policy and practice recommendations for regional providers, agencies, and King County officials. The **first major takeaway** is a call to continue addressing the structural conditions that undergird the experiences of homelessness for young people of color. **Secondly**, we emphasize the need for services and information systems to remain nuanced and reflexive in their understanding of the complex roles that families play in young people of color's lives and experiences of homelessness. The **third takeaway** and related recommendations regard ways and opportunities to expand the positive relationships homeless young people of color can build with caring adults. The **final takeaway** clarifies the features and components of services that young people of color said they wanted, including strength-based and flexible services that support their self-determination and help them meet their basic needs

Project Overview & Context

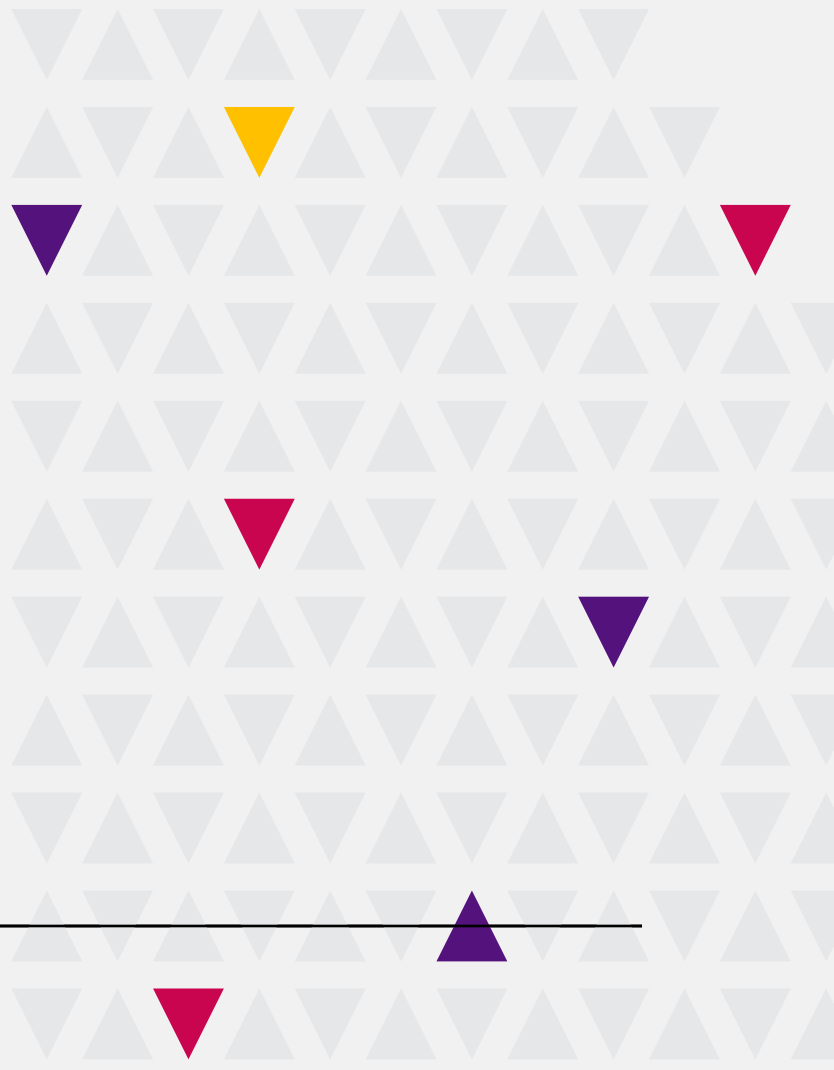
BACKGROUND

National prevalence studies estimate that 1.7 million youth under the age of 18, about 7% of all youth, are homeless or unstably housed in the United States each year (Hammer, et al., 2002). Homelessness puts youth at a greater risk for harmful physical, emotional, and mental health outcomes including drug use, substance abuse, crime, gang activity, incarceration, risky sexual behavior (such as survival sex, or the practice of exchanging sex for money, drugs, or shelter), exposure to STDs, inadequate nutrition, extreme levels of stress, premature death, and suicide (Auerswald et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2006; Halcón et al., 2004; McCaskill et al., 1998; Noell et al., 2001; Roy et al., 2001; Roy et al., 1999; Shane, 1996; Whitbeck et al., 2000; Whitbeck et al., 2004). While state and local governments receive some federal grants to help with services, they must provide their own additional funding, which is often still too little to meet the high need for homeless services (Esparza, 2009).

Youth homelessness is a critical issue in Seattle and King County specifically, where nearly 10,000 people experience homelessness on a given day, and nearly 8,000 youth and young adults under the age of 25 experience homelessness in a year. Additionally, it disproportionately affects people of color across the country and in King County, where 65% of homeless youth under 18 are youth of color even though people of color represent less than 35% of the population (All Home King County, 2016).

In addition to experiencing homeless at differential rates, many homeless youth of color and white youth have different experiences with their families and of homelessness more broadly. Researchers in one study investigated the disparity in prevalence of homelessness among white and black youth in San Francisco (Hickler, 2009). They found that while youth from both groups attribute their situation to significant family dysfunction, black youth were more often taken away from their families and placed into foster care by social service agencies,

were more likely to describe their housing instability as a consequence of poverty and failure of social services, and were more often still tied to their immediate and extended family members despite their family's inability to help. The study highlighted the role of poverty, gentrification, and systemic racism in the path to youth homelessness for black youth, where the absence of any resources at home drove them out. In contrast, white youth came from homes that could provide resources, but those resources often came at too high of a physical and emotional price. These findings support the debilitating impact of racism on the stability and unity of Black families. It also suggests a potential strength and unity of Black families (and potentially other communities of color) on which service providers could build when serving youth of color.



CURRENT CONTEXT

In its 2015 strategic plan, the Committee to End Homelessness in King County (now known as All Home King County) oriented its solution for ending youth homelessness towards achieving racial equity because homelessness is intricately connected to structural racism. The plan addressed the need for strategies to measure and take direct action toward reducing racial disparities, especially within systems such as jail and foster care, where youth of color are disproportionately represented (All Home Strategic Plan, 2015).

The Committee to End Homelessness Comprehensive Plan to End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness outlined four benchmarks for success, including addressing the overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth and youth of color among homeless youth populations. While King County has made strides to address the benchmarks, it has not yet produced a coordinated and proactive effort to address the specific needs of homeless youth of color. The region has struggled to determine the scope and framing of the issues it is trying to address. While available quantitative data illustrates the overrepresentation of young people of color among homeless youth and young adults, the data does little to explain why the overrepresentation exists and produces conflicting data on the success of services for young people of color. As a result, public and private funders in King County pooled resources to fund a project that could contextualize these statistics by hearing directly from youth of color about their experiences and what they most need.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Youth of Color Needs Assessment represents an effort by stakeholders within King County to systematically examine the overrepresentation of homelessness among youth of color. The NW Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian & Gay Survivors of Abuse (the NW Network) led the project and implemented a participatory, community-based approach that incorporated community and youth partners throughout. Using qualitative methods, the project centered the voices of homeless and unstably housed youth of color to clarify their experiences, strengths, and needs regarding housing.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary question the needs assessment aimed to answer was: ***What are the experiences of youth of color who are homeless or unstably housed in King County?***

Within this broader question, we also aimed to examine the following contexts/experiences:

- *Experiences seeking and receiving services*
- *The role/impact of family and friends*
- *The role/impact of systems and institutions*

Methodology

APPROACH

As a culturally responsive and community-based project, the YOC Needs Assessment involved community members, partners, and youth leaders of color through every stage of the project. The project featured a participatory approach to the study design, instrument development, data collection, and data analysis and interpretation. Our foundational community partners include Interagency Schools, Seattle Indian Health Board, Therapeutic Health Services, Chief Seattle Club, and independent community leaders. Through ongoing sessions, our community partners provided feedback and guidance for the design of the study and development of instruments. The foundational community partners also helped NW Network staff build collaborations with community stakeholders to coordinate and hold specific focus groups.

Additionally, the NW Network team collaborated with and provided training to ten youth of color to assist with the project as youth leaders. We identified youth leaders through suggestions from our foundational community partners and through the NW Network's youth and young adult programs. Youth leaders completed over seven hours of research skills training in preparation to co-facilitate, take notes, conduct initial data analysis and participate in data interpretation. Youth leaders participated extensively in the analysis and interpretation of the findings during multiple data analysis meetings. We compensated youth leaders hourly for their involvement in the project, including training time. None of the youth leaders were participants in any of the focus groups.

DATA COLLECTION

The project used a maximum variation purposive sampling strategy for data collection. We purposely recruited a wide range of people who differed across dimensions like age, geographic region, race/ethnicity, and experiences like being a young parent. This strategy allowed us to identify not only unique differences and contexts among youth of color who are homeless or unstably housed but also important similarities that transcended these differences.

To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria (see Appendix A for further details):

- Be between 13 and 24 years old
- Ever been homeless or unstably housed (defined as having trouble staying in the same place for over 30 days at a time).
- Stayed in or received services somewhere in King County in the last ten years
- Identify as a youth of color
- Comfortable speaking English

We held focus groups from September to December 2016. As illustrated in Figure 1 (see below), we conducted twelve focus groups throughout King County, ensuring at least one focus group in each of six regions of the county we identified. We held focus groups in a variety of venues, from service agencies—including those specifically focused on homelessness—to detention facilities, schools, libraries, and other community spaces. By varying the kinds of spaces where focus groups were held, we aimed to increase the likelihood of speaking with both young people who had sought formal homeless services (who may be more likely to come to homeless agencies) and those who had not (who may be more likely to go to libraries or other community spaces).

To recruit focus group participants, we used a variety of methods often tailored to the specific location where we held the focus group. For many of the focus groups held at service agencies, we consulted with the agencies to help recruit eligible participants. Our foundational community partners also helped to recruit participants through their community connections and direct work with young people of color. Further, the NW Network staff created flyers for most of the focus groups, advertising the opportunity for young people to color to participate. See Appendix B for a sample flyer.

In each focus group, a NW Network staff member served as the primary facilitator, one youth leader as the co-facilitator, and one youth leader as the note-taker. On average, the focus groups included eight to nine young people and ran two hours, including thirty minutes at the beginning for participants to get settled, complete paperwork, and eat food. All participants received an incentive of \$30 for participating, and most received an additional \$3 to compensate for the travel costs to get to and from the focus group.

Before the start of each focus group, the facilitator, co-facilitator, and note-taker verbally reviewed the project consent form (see Appendix C) with each participant. Participants checked and initialed whether they agreed to participate, and project staff signed as witnesses. We did not request signatures from participants to avoid gathering identifiable information (i.e., their names), which could increase the risks associated with their participation in the focus groups. Participants also completed a demographic form (see Appendix D). Again, in an effort to reduce risk for this vulnerable population, the demographic form could not be matched with what participants shared in the focus groups. All participants from each focus group agreed to have the focus groups recorded and transcribed verbatim.

PARTICIPANTS

In total, 103 young people participated in the focus groups. Table 1 shows the demographic information of all participants. A little over half identified as African American and over a quarter as American Indian or Native American. Although the table shows nearly one-fifth identified as white, nearly all selected other racial identities as well and thus could be classified as multiracial. In total, 5% identified as white only. Although we advertised the focus groups as intended for youth of color, in settings like detention centers where community partners recruited participants, we had less control over the sample. We could not exclude the white youth from the analysis; however, given their small percentage in the sample, we do not expect their inclusion to have significantly influenced the findings.

The sample was evenly split between male and female participants, and nearly 10% identified as trans*, gender non-conforming, or genderqueer. While the majority (65%) identified as heterosexual, over 1 in 5 participants (21%) identified as bisexual. It's worth noting that although an additional 11% identified as lesbian, queer, or questioning, no participants identified as gay. Future studies should explore whether this represents an anomaly of the sample or generational differences in sexual orientation terminology that could affect future outreach efforts to LGBTQ homeless young people of color.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS (N=103)

RACE / ETHNICITY (N=90)*			SEXUAL ORIENTATION (N=99)*		
	#	%		#	%
Black or African American	51	57%	Heterosexual / Straight	64	65%
Am. Indian / Native American	24	27%	Bisexual	21	21%
Hispanic**	25	26%	Lesbian	6	6%
White	17	18%	Queer	3	3%
Asian	12	13%	Questioning	2	2%
N. Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	11	12%	Gay	0	0%
Multi-Racial	30	32%	Something else	6	6%
Something Else	14	15%			
GENDER (N=102)*			AGE (N=99)		
Men	48	47%	13 - 17 years old	39	39%
Women	45	44%	18 - 21 years old	32	32%
Trans* or Gender Non-conforming or Genderqueer	9	9%	22 - 24 years old***	28	28%
Something Else	3	3%			
SYSTEMS INVOLVEMENT & OTHER EXPERIENCES			IMMIGRATION		
Ever been in foster care	25	26%	Not born in U.S.	6	6%
Ever been in detention	51	52%	Parent(s) not born in U.S	24	29%
Ever been pregnant	8	9%			
In School	54	55%			
Has a job	23	23%			
Looking for a job	65	67%			

* Participants could check all that apply, so percentages do not total 100%.

** Ethnicity was a separate question with a different number of total responses. This affects the percentage.

*** One participant identified as 25-years old

INSTRUMENTS & DATA

Facilitators used semi-structured focus group guides (see Appendix E) to ask young people about their experiences and attitudes seeking formal and informal services and supports, their experiences with their families and with systems (e.g., criminal-legal, healthcare, education), and their suggestions for how to improve services for homeless youth of color. We asked participants about a range of services and supports, from traditional services like emergency shelters, drop in centers and transitional housing, to those less commonly thought of as homeless supports like afterschool programs, athletics, and arts programs. We included the latter based on conversations with foundational community partners about different ways young people of color seek and find support for homelessness.

The data also included materials produced through the focus group activities and notes from facilitator debrief sessions that occurred immediately following each focus group. See Appendix F for the worksheets completed by the focus group facilitator, co-facilitator, and note-taker after each of the focus groups.

DATA ANALYSIS

Project team members created verbatim transcripts of each focus group recording. We used phenomenological techniques and strategies outlined by Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014) to analyze the transcripts. Two independent coders completed multiple rounds of inductive and deductive coding for each transcript using the qualitative software program NVIVO 10. The first round of coding featured predominantly topic and descriptive codes. After completing this first round, the project team solicited feedback and insight from the youth and other community partners to help identify patterns and themes in the data. Many of these patterns and themes then became analytic codes used in the 2nd round of coding that two

independent coders completed. The team, again with the assistance of youth and other partners, identified patterns and themes across all codes and used these to develop network displays, matrices, and conceptual frameworks. Following the guidance of Miles and colleagues (2014), these visual displays helped develop the final findings and conclusions of the project.

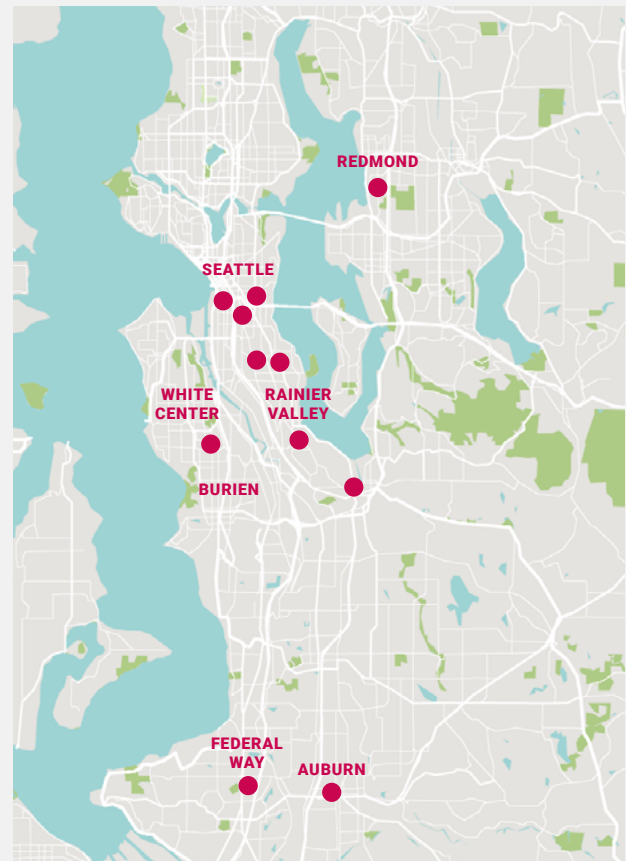


FIGURE 1: Location of focus groups.

Informal support refers to support from friends, family, coworkers, neighbors and other individuals who interact with young people informally and not because of an affiliation with specific services, agencies, or systems. In contrast, formal support refers to supports affiliated with traditional and non-traditional homeless providers, agencies, and systems.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We adapted an evidence-informed framework for wellbeing proposed by the Full Frame Initiative (2015) to provide context and build connections across our findings. The framework outlines universal needs that are central to a person's wellbeing. The framework features five "domains of wellbeing." These interconnected, universal needs include: **stability, social connectedness, meaningful access to resources, mastery, and safety** (defined in a table below). The framework pushes for individuals, agencies, and systems to provide support in ways that consider the impact on each domain of a person's wellbeing. This can help minimize potential tradeoffs people must make in meeting their universal needs and ensure the accessibility, efficacy, and sustainability of the support being provided.

Through our iterative data analysis process, our project team discovered that the key themes emerging from the focus group data mapped on closely to the wellbeing framework. Young people of color described significant challenges, opportunities, and tradeoffs related to each of the wellbeing domains in their experiences of homelessness. We made two key adaptations to the Full Frame Initiative framework to increase its fit to the specific context of youth of color who are homeless or unstably housed. The first is the addition of the context of structural racism. Outlined in greater detail below, one key theme

of this project described how **structural racism** created overarching conditions that taxed all domains of wellbeing for young people of color. Although this context is implied through other components of the model, we saw the need to add it explicitly in this context to reflect the consistent and profound effects structural racism had on the lives of the young people with whom we spoke.

Structural racism refers to social, economic, and political systems that perpetuate racial inequities through policies, practices, and cultural norms that privilege "whiteness" and disadvantages culture, history, and people associated with "color." Aspen Institute (n.d.)

The second adaptation we made reflected another major theme of the focus groups: the central role of **self-determination** in the search for housing by young people of color. We heard throughout the focus groups how critical it was for young people to retain their agency and the ability to make choices that affect all domains of their wellbeing. Again, self-determination may be implied in the original framework; however, we thought it important to add it explicitly to the model to show how self-determination emanates outward, affecting all the other domains of wellbeing for young people

- **Mastery:** the extent to which a person has the self-efficacy and supportive context to make meaningful decisions that can impact their lives.
- **Social connectedness:** the extent to which a person has positive and reciprocal relationships that provide emotional, material, and/or informational support.
- **Meaningful Access to Resources:** ability for a person to meet their needs with reasonable effort and in ways that are not overly demeaning or stigmatizing.
- **Safety:** ability to be one's full and authentic self without increased risk of harm or injury.
- **Stability:** the extent to which a person has sufficient predictability in their life, being able to know what to expect from day to day.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, CONTINUED

This adapted model provides the conceptual framework for describing the themes and subthemes that emerged from the focus groups. Since the domains are interrelated, some themes below relate to multiple domains while others primarily pertain to only one. The sections below will discuss the key themes and subthemes from the focus groups with young people of color, highlighting their relation to the domains of wellbeing and components of the framework.

Self-Determination refers to the ability of a person to make choices and decisions based on their own preferences and interests and to be goal-oriented and self-directing.

National Gateway to Self-Determination (2017)

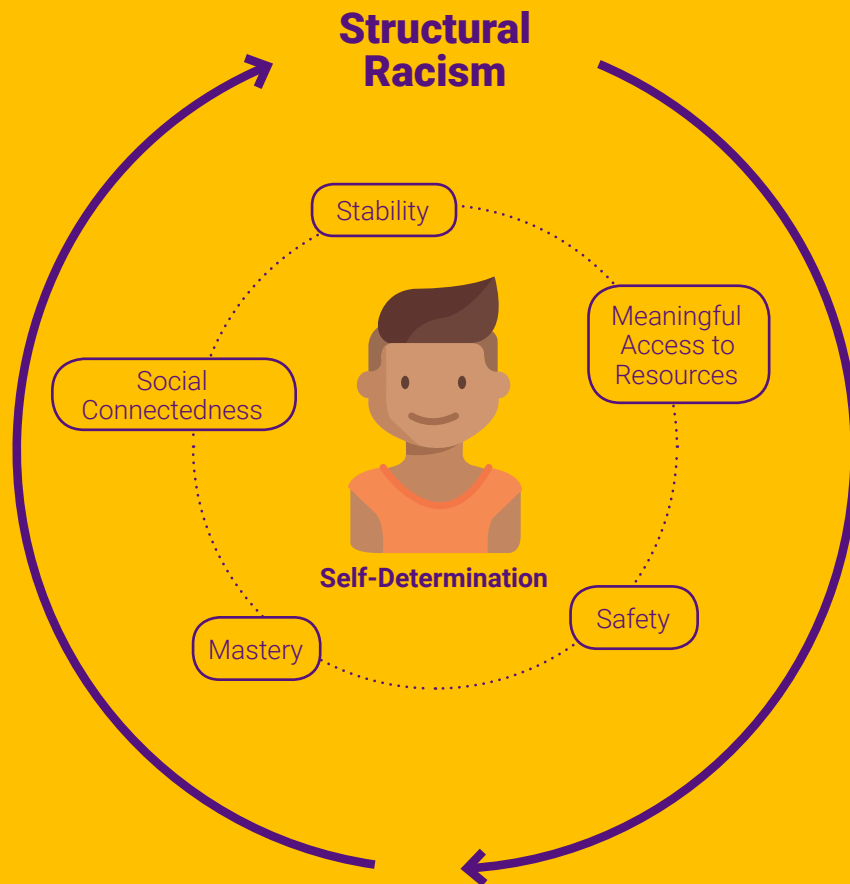


Figure 2. Adapted Five Domains of Wellbeing Framework (Full Frame Initiative, 2015)

Theme 1: Families “Going Through It”

Focus group participants painted an incredibly complex picture of families and their roles in young people’s experiences of homelessness. Participants described ever-changing relationships and circumstances with their families. Young people of color shared numerous examples of rotating among a variety of biological and chosen family members during their experiences of homelessness or when unstably housed. For example, a young person may stay with their mother at their non-biological auntie’s house for a few months, then stay at their biological grandmother’s while their mother stays at a hotel for a little while, then the young person may reconvene later with their mother in their own apartment. When talking about their families, some participants spoke as children in their families while others as young parents. Their experiences of homelessness and help-seeking differed based on these very different roles in their families.

Chosen family refers to people with whom one chooses to accept reciprocating responsibilities of family even though one is not related by birth or marriage.

Across this complex and widely varying familial landscape, focus group participants most commonly said they turned to family (including chosen family) at some point for housing support. This illustrates the important social connectedness that many young people of color have with their families, supporting prior research in this area (Hickler, 2009). However overall, participants’ families could not be reliable sources of support because they, too, were “going through it.” This referred to a variety of situations, including when parents were themselves homeless or unstably housed, in need of financial support, jailed, deported, or were experiencing their own emotional/psychological trauma. As described in more detail below, often what families were “going through” relates to structural racism in the form of policies and practices at



national, state, and local levels that disproportionately impact families of color.

Intergenerational Homelessness And Poverty

Most examples of families “going through it” related to families’ own experiences of homelessness and poverty. Not surprisingly, intergenerational homelessness and poverty created substantial obstacles for young people of color (and their families) to find safe and stable housing. Young people of color often explained how their family’s poverty meant lacking a safety net when they needed help preventing homelessness or getting back into stable housing after becoming homeless. While still in the care of their families, focus group participants described shuffling between homes of biological family members, family friends, and other chosen family members. This naturally affected many young people of color’s housing stability and safety. Given the often crowded living situations, young people explained how conflicts regularly arose among family members living together, which frequently forced them to find somewhere else to live. Some participants expressed discomfort and feeling like a burden when staying with others because they saw themselves as draining limited resources and space. Intergenerational poverty also meant young people of color spent considerable time and effort working to support their families, decreasing opportunities to build

INTERGENERATIONAL HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY, CONTINUED

and sustain financial resources for themselves. Other young people explained how their family's poverty created obstacles for them to maintain their own housing. For example when one young person received a subsidized apartment, their whole family was in need of housing and stayed with them, straining resources and destabilizing that youth's capacity to provide for their own needs.

"When I see my mom and dad tryna get money... it just makes me sad so I have to leave and try and do something to help.... So I just go do what I have to do to get money."

Many young people vocalized how this lack of family housing stability often occurred despite their families' considerable efforts to make it work. Young people recounted parents with multiple jobs who tried numerous formal and informal ways to make ends meet. Thus for many of the young people of color we talked with, their first experiences with homeless services and agencies was in the context of seeking support with their families. This could be an important factor affecting young people of color's perceptions of these services later as unaccompanied minors, especially given the number of youth who described how the systems and services their families turned to did not help them escape poverty.

"We had to stay in a hotel for six months. And [my mom] made it so my grandma took us in, so we didn't have to live with her there cuz she didn't feel like it was comfortable.... She just played a big role in keeping us in a safe place."

"They're trying to break up black families."

Focus group participants often provided examples of how structural racism in the form of biased policies and systems destabilized and broke up their families,

thereby increasing the likelihood of intergenerational homelessness and poverty. One common example was the confluence of mandatory reporting, child protective services, and foster care in removing young people of color from their families. Numerous participants recounted how they did not seek help from potential sources of support like teachers or school officials out of concern that the person would report them to child protective services and remove them from their family. This aligns with recent research illustrating how mandatory reporting policies often limit the help-seeking strategies of individuals and families (Lippy, et al., 2016). Numerous participants validated this fear when they shared their own experiences of being removed from their family against their will by child protective services

"My step dad used to hit me and my mom and my little sister. But how was I supposed to tell someone? Cuz if I tell someone then I'm gonna get taken away from my mom too.... You never know how that's gonna go down."

Foster care presented numerous challenges, hardships, and complications for young people of color. In addition to the destabilizing nature of being removed from their families, many participants explained how shuffling between homes was a regular part of their experience in foster care. Repeatedly uprooting and changing foster homes destabilized fundamental aspects of young people of color's lives, like their education, medical care, and connections with friends and family. Throughout the focus groups, young people of color also described the harms they experienced from foster parents, the perceived lack of oversight of the foster care system, and the way in which being in foster care felt like it set them on a path towards homelessness.

"Being in foster care is basically moving around, house to house to house to house to house. You dunno which place you going. Moving counselors, social workers, moving schools, it's just how foster care is, pretty much."

"Whenever I had to move to another house, they would just pull me outta school. Like in the middle of the day. I didn't really like that."

Family members being sent to jail or prison was another common way the families of young people of color were broken up. Young people explained the significantly destabilizing effect this had on their housing, and the negative effects on their social connections. Extensive research illustrates not only the deleterious effects on young people of color having family members in jail (Miller, 2006; Travis & Waul, 2003) but also the racial disproportionality of this experience (Garland, Spohn, & Wodahl, 2008). People of color, particularly African American and Latinx, have been shown to be disproportionately targeted by law enforcement and punished through criminal legal procedures (Mauer, 2010), resulting in longer sentences that keep families of color separated. The focus groups clearly illustrated the impact of this on the housing stability of young people of color. In addition to their families being in jail and prison, over half of the young people of color we spoke with had been in detention themselves. For many, this posed additional obstacles for securing housing. For example, by not being able to pass required background checks.

"As a young child I didn't really know where I was gonna sleep, and I didn't really have any support to rely on cuz my mother was in prison..."

On a more local level, young people of color discussed how agencies and providers that do not support their whole families can unintentionally diminish their social connectedness, creating barriers to receiving benefits from their families. In a focus group of young mothers, they described how some agencies did not want to help their whole family, just them alone or them with their children. These mothers explained that agencies blocked Black fathers in particular from staying with them at shelters or temporary housing for reasons such as the father didn't pass a background check, the father was assumed to be a pimp, or the agency didn't provide services for men. The young mothers said this put them in the challenging position of having to decide whether to accept services or keep their family together. Other young people described similar problems when seeking services when their families were large; they were either turned away or kicked out of services because agencies could not accommodate their whole family. Restrictive housing policies of landlords and Section 8 housing represent other frequently cited obstacles to keeping families together. Young people talked about how they could have stayed with a family or friend, but doing so would have violated that person's lease or put their Section 8 housing in jeopardy. These types of policies negatively affected the ability of young people's friends and families to provide meaningful material resources in their time of need.

Facilitator: Are there other examples of how you feel like the programs try to break up Black families?

Participant: Well just calling CPS on the father and saying that no felons or... people with certain backgrounds can't come in to the premises. I mean it's hard enough for [my child's father] as it is.

An important caveat for this subtheme is that some young people were intentionally disconnected from their biological families and did not wish to reconnect. Young

people throughout the focus groups described various harms and abuse they experienced in their families of origin. For these young people, policies forcing continued connection would be harmful. Thus, it remains important for young people to determine for themselves when supporting or dissolving connections with their families is in their best interest.

Severe Consequences for Being an Adolescent

When families are 'going through it,' they are less able to function as buffers or safety nets as their children navigate the developmental challenges of youth and young adulthood. Adolescence (typically considered between the ages of 13-26) is a developmental stage where young people develop a sense of autonomy and identity that is separate from caregivers and commonly involves pushing back against authority figures, acting out, and sometimes making risky choices (Full Frame Initiative, 2016). Despite the developmental normality of these behaviors, young people of color in the focus groups provided numerous examples of receiving severe consequences for this adolescent activity, which often created additional barriers and sometimes led to a loss of housing. For example, one young person explained how their mother was fined for their tardiness at school. To avoid these fines, their mother did not take them back home when they were released from juvenile detention. With nowhere else to go, the young person was placed in a group home instead. The consequences for being late to school included confiscatory financial costs to this young person's family that resulted in the youth being separated from their family and placed in foster care. Punitive school policies like this and zero tolerance policies have a demonstrated disproportionate negative impact on young people of color (Johnson et al., 2001; Giroux, 2003; Heitzeg 2009; Skiba et al., 2002; Verdugo, 2002; Ayers et al., 2001). Many young people of color in the project, and beyond, lacked the buffers within their families that can

soften or reduce the impact of these punishments on their housing.

Another young person we heard from was kicked out of their house for smoking marijuana. Although it has been significantly decriminalized in Washington State, marijuana remains a federally controlled substance with significant consequences for possession, including losing Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing or access to other federally funded benefits. While possession might present an opportunity for thoughtful dialog for an adolescent whose family owns their home, it could result in homelessness for families utilizing federal resources or for a parent on probation. Similarly, several young people described being arrested for smoking marijuana outside. Given the housing options for homeless and unstably housed young people (e.g., shelters, temporary housing, shared housing, foster homes), few opportunities exist for young people of age to legally smoke indoors. With the documented biased targeting of communities of color by law enforcement (Gabrielson, Jones, & Sagara, 2014), the enforcement of these kinds of laws disproportionately impacts young people of color. Further, having drug charges on their records makes it more challenging for young people to secure housing in the future.

Theme 2: Racial Bias & Racism in Formal Supports

The focus groups featured young people who differed widely in the degree to which they had previously sought and received formal services and supports for homelessness. Of the young people in the focus groups, some described getting no formal services while others had spent years receiving a variety of traditional and non-traditional homeless services and supports. Transcending these differences was young people of color's widespread experience of racism and racial bias while interfacing with formal supports and systems. Young people provided countless examples of direct experiences of discrimination and racial bias they experienced from individual staff members, the implementation of organizational policies, and systems like law enforcement. These experiences contribute to a widely held perception that systems, agencies, and individuals are not intended to help and simply "don't care" about them. This sentiment was pervasive throughout the focus groups and had significant ramifications on the meaningful access to resources for homeless young people of color.

Although some of the examples below may suggest a racial bias that is specific to certain staff, it is important to refer back to the project framework to understand how racial bias within organizations and systems may relate to structural racism that functions at a societal level. We heard examples of racism and racial bias in every single focus group about a wide range of providers, agencies, and systems, demonstrating the widespread and structural nature of the problem.

"[Staff] look at your background and be like "okay, this person African American, this person Latino.... Oh you're just another one like on the streets... You tryina do nothing with your life."So you eventually just don't wind up getting help because the judgments of people."

Racial Bias and Racism in Services & Systems

One of the largest contributors to participants' sense that individuals, agencies, and systems were not there to help and did not care about them was young people of color's myriad direct experiences of racial bias and discrimination. They described ways that agency rules are often enforced differently based on race, wherein a young person of color may be more likely to get in trouble (or even banned) for the same behavior a white young person does without consequences.

"So the latest you can be out [of the shelter] is 8 on the dot. So say if I leave out the door 8:01, that means I cannot come back for the night, and there's sometimes someone [who] will walk out like 8:05 and they won't be told nothing."

Young people of color also described being stereotyped or treated with suspicion based on their race or ethnicity. Sometimes this was through overt comments made by staff (e.g., "she asked me if abuse was common in my community"), but often this was conveyed through nonverbal behavior like being "looked at funny" or followed by staff. Young people of color described how their presence seemed to cause discomfort of (predominantly white) staff, and how this ultimately led to their own discomfort and lack of desire to return to the service or program. Thereby reducing their meaningful access to resources, including housing resources and other supports.

"I feel like they look at you funny. And it's just like "Okay if I can't just be here, then don't say it's a welcoming place but it's not."

More broadly, young people provided myriad examples of being stereotyped and profiled in systems like the criminal legal system. Across the focus groups, we heard a tremendous number of instances of racial profiling, misconduct, and abuse by law enforcement. Some participants talked about being falsely arrested, even when they did not match the gender or race of the person the police were looking for.

"This year I got tazed, twice, by 10 to 15 officers. And it's just me. It's just me! Whatchu mean 10 to 15 officers had to hold me down? I was on the ground before you shot me the first time!"

Other young people talked about the sexual and physical abuse they experienced at the hands of police. This mirrors the extensive research showing racial bias in the actions of law enforcement and the disproportionate harms this causes for communities of color (Gabrielson, Jones, & Sagara, 2014; Goff et al, 2014).

"So I guess I have a couple people that look like me around Seattle, and one of them robbed a bank. And so they thought it was me, so they detained me for about six hours. And I had a meeting with a case manager that I couldn't go to... and that's the reason why I got evicted, for missing too many meetings."

Participants' examples point to these systems adding to the trauma and disruption in the lives of young people of color while simultaneously generating unnecessary obstacles for young people to securing housing. These examples reinforce the need to address structural racism and underscore the notion that many participants

articulated: that society does not care about young people of color.

"I was actually 16 and... [the police] stopped me... and searched me. Well while he was searching me and patting me down, he got a little too comfortable. And I noticed that that happens more often than not."

—Female participant

"Favoritism" at Homeless Service Agencies

Something that came up repeatedly was the perception that staff at some traditional homeless service agencies "pick favorites" among the young people they're serving. For some, they saw this as directly tied to race and ethnicity; that is, staff "favorites" were more likely to be white youth. A common way focus group participants witnessed this favoritism was through the distribution of resources like bus tickets. Many explained that staff were more likely to give white youth bus tickets or asked white youth to do less to receive the bus tickets than youth of color. Participants reported that as result of this favoritism, young people of color had less access to resources at homeless agencies than white young people. Again, the consistency of this theme counters the idea that this is merely a function of a few individual staff in need of training. Instead, it points to ways that structural racism and implicit bias may be functioning within social service agencies.

"They don't care."

Given the pervasiveness of racism and racial bias in formal systems and supports, it is not surprising that young people of color commonly expressed the idea that people and systems "don't care" about them.

*"As a Black female, I feel equally if not more threatened by cops. [...] When women started getting killed, especially women of color and nobody gave a f*ck, I felt really invisible."*

Native Participant: *They pick favorites with bus tickets.... They give somebody they like bus tickets just cuz.... But I need to be going somewhere and I can give you my story and be sincere, and it's "no you still gotta do 2 chores. You already know how it goes."*

Facilitator: *Is there a reason you feel like you might get treated different than other people?*

Native Participant: *Yeah! Your color, your race.... It's crazy cuz I see [black people] get dogged the most, like when they try to go anywhere and do anything.*

Focus group participants illustrated multiple ways they see this lack of concern playing out. One is through interactions with individual staff members or individual system agents. For example, in discussing teachers, several young people talked about how some teachers were not willing to offer any assistance to the young person as soon as the teacher was officially off work.

*"They're paid to give a f*ck. And then once they aren't paid anymore, they don't care about you or your family situation or what you're going through... They don't care unless they're getting paid on the clock for it."*

Or how they perceived some school counselors, social workers, and case managers as recycling generic advice instead of taking the time to get to know the young person and address the specific issues they are facing. When participants perceived staff at agencies as unable or unwilling to help them, this often got coded as further evidence that this person simply doesn't care, and it often reduced their willingness to seek further assistance from them.

"[They're] locking people up instead of helping the homeless community...."

Highly visible examples of economic and racial disparities that young people of color regularly witness throughout King County exacerbated this perception that people "don't care." Throughout the focus groups, participants cited numerous examples of situations they saw as unfair and as indicative that their needs were not a priority. They pointed to things like the construction of new high rises and housing complexes in their neighborhoods in which they could not afford to live, or to the limited funding available for their schools. These serve as constant, visual evidence for many young people of color that decision makers and leaders in the region do not care about them.

Participant 1: *All [Washington] needs to do is invest money in rebuilding and remodeling things. But [they] are focused on the less important.*

Participant 2: *They're focused on Amazon and Google and Microsoft.*

Participant 1: *Instead of building the new prison, you should build a new school because they're wasting our money.*

Participant 2: *Instead of building a new anything, you should actually fund the school we already have. Cuz freakin Rainier Beach is just fallin apart.*

Theme 3: Supporting Self Determination and Efficacy

“Doing it on my own.”

As described above, structural racism has profound effects on the formal and informal housing supports available for youth of color. It can limit the availability of informal supports by undermining the financial and housing stability of families and friends. The racism and racial bias within services and systems can reduce the efficacy of these formal supports. As a result, young people of color in the focus groups described how in the course of searching for housing and resources, they developed an array of skills and strengths to be able to survive on their own.

Young people were dogged in their pursuit of resources. They persistently searched for resources from a multitude of different people and programs, often illustrating adept problem solving and flexible thinking skills. For example, in search of a loan for a down payment, one young person explained how they were able to find a single, sympathetic bank employee who was willing to bend the rules to help them out. Young people also developed a variety of skills to jump through the litany of hoops necessary to receive services.

“I’m gonna pick up change along the side of the road so that I can have something to give the bus driver so I can get a ride.”

Some demonstrated extraordinary patience through their willingness to endure long waiting periods to receive services. Others showed strong organizational skills in being able to keep track of important documentation they needed to access services. And they illustrated persistence in their efforts to find services for which they met the criteria. Many focus group participants showcased considerable levels of self-efficacy and mastery.

Young people also invested considerable emotional labor to make ends meet. Young people regularly mentioned

sacrifices they made in their search for housing. For instance, some focus group participants described a number of “typical” adolescent activities in which they could no longer participate because it conflicted with their nearly constant search for housing. Things like art, sports, and other afterschool programs. Many of these sacrificed activities and opportunities are the same ones young people said often helped them when they’re having a hard time. Other sacrifices young people made related to their willingness to seek services and supports that they otherwise found “embarrassing.” This emotional labor often accompanied the physical and mental labor involved in young people’s search for housing.

“A lot of afterschool programs they say “here meet with us and we’ll talk about your situation and maybe possibly find some sort of solution, maybe.” And so it’s not a guarantee. You have to dedicate a lot of energy into getting there, when it may just be a waste of time. So even when I have heard of some afterschool programs, I could never justify going.”

“You have to demean yourself.”

For some young people, the skills and strengths they developed while navigating homelessness actually served as barriers to accessing some resources. That is, their self-efficacy and mastery worked against them when attempting to utilize services rationed based on relative need. Young people described having to downplay or deny the strengths and resources they had in order to access services. This could be an unintended negative consequence of the coordinated entry process that prioritizes service recipients by factors like perceived need and vulnerability. Acknowledging resources they secured for themselves could put them lower on the priority list, delaying their receipt of services or reducing the amount they received.

When young people did secure resources, some described experiencing a similar dilemma in maintaining their access to them. For example, one young person described the challenge of having a paid internship with maintaining their access to food stamps. Once they started earning a little more money, their allotted food stamp amount immediately decreased. Focus group participants explained how they wish their burgeoning growth and development did not hurt their access to resources that they still perceived as vital to their success and continued growth.

"You just gotta watch what you put up on that paperwork.... They won't help you unless say "I'm pretty much ass out. I don't got shit, I don't got nowhere to go, I don't got no food." You just put zero for everything. Unless you put that, it really take them a long time to help you out."

"It's like they give you enough time to get yourself halfway out of the position you're in, and then they just let you go."

"They're saying that they're giving food stamps in assistance to help you get on your feet, but once you're starting to get there it's just like "oh, you're cut."

Self-Determination & Self-Efficacy

The young people who participated in the focus groups spoke again and again of the value they place on providers, agencies, and systems that support their **self-determination**. That is, people that support their ability to make and enact decisions that affect their lives.

*"I like the [arts program]. It's quiet, [you] can listen to the radio or just plug in your headphones and... just tune out and do whatever you want, **just do your thing.**"*

Focus group participants shed light on a number of services and programs that supported their self-determination. Some of the most consistent examples were community arts and music programs where youth were provided the freedom to come and go, express themselves through various artistic media, and are given the space to do their "own thing." Focus group participants talked about how the spaciousness of these programs allowed them to be more self-directed and to have full choice of how they spent their time, the length of time they stayed, and with whom they interacted while there. Young people of color expressed similar sentiments about some of the homeless youth drop-in centers in the region as well.

Another program that many young people of color enjoyed and felt supported their autonomy and self-determination was Late Night. Late Night is an event offered on Friday and Saturday nights where young people aged 13-19 can gather and participate in a variety of activities and

"You have to demean yourself. As if the process isn't already demeaning enough to get any kind of help. Like if you got a little bit of help they be like "well that's too much." You be like "but all I got is bread." [They'll be] like "we can't get you butter boo." That's what it feels like. You have to embarrass yourself to get help."

games from 7pm - midnight. A number of young people in the focus groups mentioned Late Night as a particularly positive event that provided the opportunity to do their own thing, stay connected with friends, and also meet some of their basic needs through services like free food offered at the event.

Some of the challenges described earlier that youth of color face can be understood in part as an infringement on their self-determination and self-efficacy. For example, one young person explained that when they are first coming off the streets, going to an agency for support can sometimes feel like being “pummeled” by staff.

“Like the second you go in [shelters], they’re pummeling you with questions and counselors, and everyone wants to talk to you. And it’s like, ‘I’m not ready to talk yet. Back up.’”

For that young person, being able to determine when and how people interacted with them was an important aspect of their self-determination and safety. Given the psychological and emotional toll that prolonged trauma-exposure exacts on a young person and their brain development (Cook et al., 2005), this may also speak to a broader need for developmental and trauma-informed approaches to homeless services for young people.

Mandatory reporting policies represent another example of potential infringements on young people of color’s self-determination and self-efficacy. In many instances, a young person turns to a teacher, counselor, or other trusted adult about a harm they experienced in an effort to get guidance or support. Mandatory reporting policies undermine the efficacy of that action, however, by then initiating the involvement of systems and processes that are entirely out of that young person’s control and not of their choosing.

Life Skills

Related to self-determination and mastery, many youth of color said they wanted more life skills, such as being able to manage their finances, secure a job, and maintain their apartments or cars. That is, skills that can build their capacity to find and remain in safe and stable housing. The participants in the focus group who received opportunities to learn these skills appreciated them, and those who didn’t receive opportunities often wished they had. Some even saw how not having these skills was directly related to becoming homeless in the first place.

“So when I lost my house, I ended up getting evicted cuz I tried to be an adult too early and didn’t know how to manage finances.”

“I did [a church program where]... you go on field trips to places. For one field trip, you went to a big apartment. You do whatever you do if you were to get an apartment. You went through the process of it so that one day you know how to do it... It was fun.”

Focus group participants most commonly developed life skills through job-training programs. **Overwhelmingly, young people in the focus groups had extremely positive experiences with job training programs.** The opportunity to earn money while learning a skill or trade was invaluable for many young people of color. Additionally, many of the job training programs that participants described featured other types of supports and resources for participants, including case management, leadership development, and school support. By increasing the financial resources and skills of youth of color, these programs helped expand the mastery and self-efficacy of these youth of color to live independently.

"[The program] explains stuff to you more, and they'll actually teach you at your own pace. I did [an art job training program]. And that program, it doesn't even matter if you're artistic or not, they'll teach you how to do stuff. They'll help you with your resume also.... There's a lot of shy people last time I did the program, so they taught you how to speak up for yourself."

Theme 4: Positive Relationships With Caring Adults

Related to the domain of social connectedness, focus group participants repeatedly emphasized the value of and need for building meaningful relationships with adults. Most programs that young people of color liked and saw as helpful centrally featured strong relationships with adults. The figure below shows some of the key features of these relationships.

In general, when describing adults with whom they developed positive relationships, young people spoke of the long-term investment the adult demonstrated. From how it was described, this kind of relationship building takes time. Sometimes, the pace was quite slow; a young person might attend a program and see a staff member several times before saying anything to them. Other young people talked about the value of adults regularly checking in with them, taking the time to listen, and being able to empathize and speak to their experiences.

"That's the thing about mainstream high schools though, they don't have as much support and people set in place for the type of shit that the Interagencies or an alternative school has for you. Cuz Interagency is set up for children who go through the stuff that we go through."

One common example of positive relationship building was in the relationships young people of color built with the adults at Interagency schools. The participants saw this largely as a function of Interagency staff's time commitment, personal investment, and capacity to handle their complex histories.

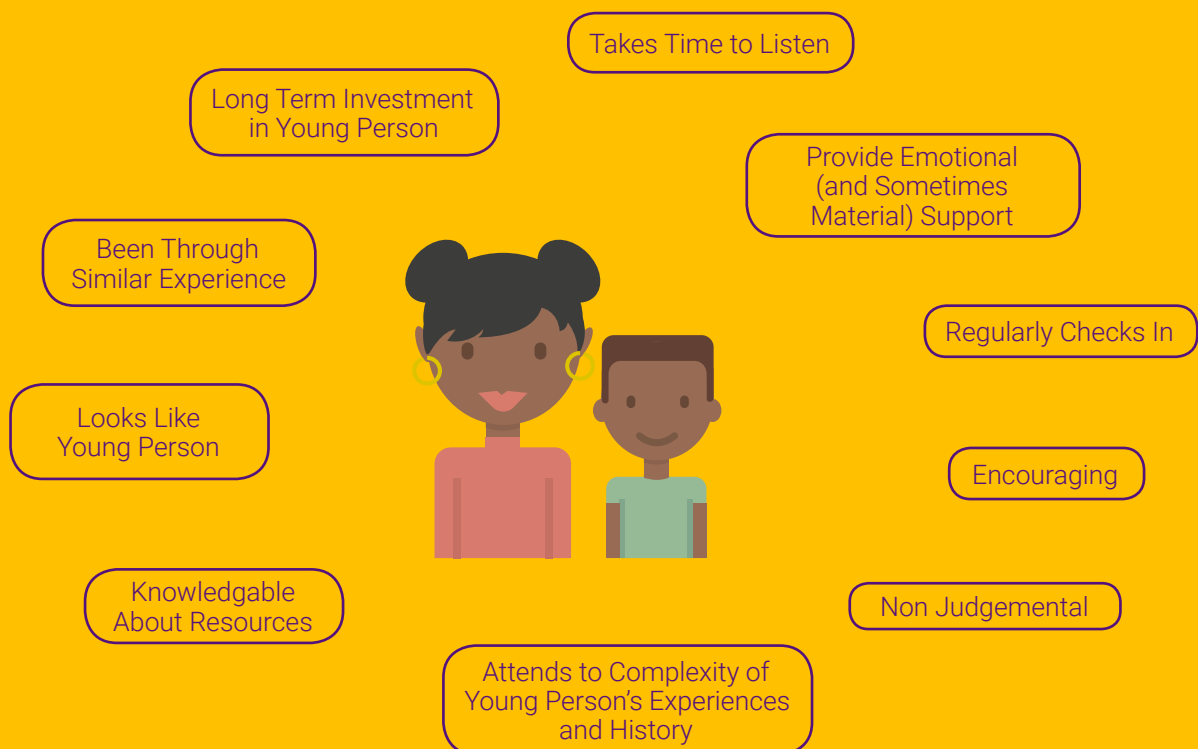


Figure 3. Common Characteristics of Caring Adults

"You know how everyone at their high schools have counselors and stuff? They should take the time to actually talk to the kids like they do at Interagency. Cuz usually at Interagency you don't have to go talk to no one. They come and talk to you and ask you what you need help with and stuff. Cuz they're really tryina help us."

Young people of color articulated another important factor in building strong relationships with adults: being able to relate to and identify with the adult. A number of the youth of color in the focus groups described a strong desire to receive guidance and support from someone who has been through what they've been through and who can understand and more directly empathize with their experiences. Sometimes they described the negative impact when staff cannot relate to their experiences. For example, several young mothers talked about the judgment and harm they received from case managers who are not parents themselves. Other young people of color spoke directly about how helpful it was (or would be) to receive services from other people of color

Participant 1: *They expect us to be the best parents. I didn't even have a real parent, how am I supposed to know how to do all these things?*

Participant 2: *Exactly! Our case managers—they don't even have kids! They don't understand our parenting situations.*

Finally, it is important to note that young people built strong relationships with adults across a variety of agencies and systems. Often, caring adults transcended the circumstances or contexts in which they interacted with young people. A caring teacher may work in an unsupportive school context, or a helpful staff member may work at an agency that does not serve the young person very well overall. Or the young person may have developed a positive relationship with their probation officer or with a particular police officer despite having negative experiences with law enforcement or the criminal legal system in general. This suggests that while these individual adults may not neutralize the way structural racism plays out in their agency or context, they still can play an important role in supporting the wellbeing of young people of color

Participant: *[I want] more encouragement.*

Facilitator: *What would that encouragement look like?*

Participant: *To me, a black dude that's been there, you know? Could just guide me on the way I need to go.*

Theme 5: Increasing Access to Resources

Program Flexibility

Throughout the focus groups, homeless and unstably housed young people of color spoke about factors that impacted their meaningful access to resources. Strict hours represented one of the most consistent barriers to accessing formal services like emergency shelters. For many young people of color, their work schedules conflicted with shelter hours. Many participants discussed the good pay and appeal of night shift positions; however, they explained that often shelter hours were not flexible and would not allow young people to come to the shelter after their shift ended. Further, the lack of services and agencies that allow young people to sleep on their premises during the day posed additional challenges for young people with non-traditional work hours. Outside of work schedules, strict hours at shelters and day centers limited participants' ability to decide how and where to spend their time. Participants expressed gratitude for programs that were flexible and accommodated their schedules, often wishing that more formal services would provide this flexibility.

"If you wanted to be by yourself, you could make an hour in the day or the week and just let [the staff at the art program] know 'I wanna come in at this time.' And they'll definitely try to make space for you. They compromise."

Several young people of color also identified what they perceived as overly narrow entry criteria as another key barrier for accessing programs. Focus group participants explained that sometimes they received a handful of promising referrals only to find that they did not meet the entry criteria for any of them. Young people were excluded from services based on criteria like age, gender, income, and whether they had children or a pet. Determining whether they met the criteria took a lot of time and energy for young people, and ultimately could be very

demoralizing. Some young people we spoke with wished there were more programs open to all young people, without exceptions.

"I called 2-1-1 before and I've been on the phone for hours, and somebody's been like "Oh I have transitional housing. Call this church, call this person, call this person." And then I call all of them and they all have different requirements and I meet exactly none of them."

Transportation

Young people regularly mentioned transportation as a factor affecting their utilization of services in the region. Take for instance the young person in Auburn who explained how they took two to three buses and spent over an hour just to get to their therapist's office. Given the limited availability of traditional and non-traditional homeless services in many areas of King County, especially south King County, transportation poses a real challenge to accessing services and supports.

Other young people who discussed challenges in accessing emergency shelters because they would find out that they did not get into one shelter less than an hour before the next one in a different area of town closes. Access to affordable and reliable transportation in this case was the difference between sleeping in a shelter or sleeping outside for the night. Several participants gave examples of receiving transportation support from informal sources like friends and family when they could not access formal sources like buses or trains. Several others described getting rides and other transportation assistance from strangers. In this way, access to transportation is related to young people of color's safety as well. Without access to reliable forms of transportation, young people may have to compromise their safety by hitching a ride with a

stranger for meaningful access to resources (i.e., to reach a shelter before it closes or get to their job on time).

Facilitator: *Has there been anything that you felt was helpful... to get out of the shelter?*

Participant: *Yeah bus card gets you moving out the neighborhood.*

One type of formal transportation support that focus group participants particularly valued was bus tickets. Bus tickets provide critical opportunities and freedom for young people to seek and access the services and supports they need. As mentioned previously, young people of color cited several barriers in their access to bus tickets, including perceived racism and racial bias of providers and agencies that distribute the bus tickets.

"You do a chore but you can only get one bus ticket... So it kinda takes that motivation away from you a little bit. Because it's like, if I get to where I'm trying to go to be a little bit more successful, I can't get back to lay my head down at night."

Shelter Lotteries

Several young people of color cited that shelter lotteries posed barriers to their access to shelters as well as to the stability and predictability of their lives. Not knowing whether they would gain entry into a shelter presented challenges for how they could schedule their day and left them in limbo until they received confirmation one way or the other. As mentioned in the section above, some young people reported finding out so late that they did not get into a shelter that it made it harder to access other shelters for the night. This lack of predictability, and thus lack of

stability, hurts the capacity of young people to make plans and move forward in their efforts to find more permanent housing. The challenges associated with lotteries are so great for some young people that they discussed seeking supports from adult shelters sometimes even though they felt less safe there because at least they knew for sure that they could get in. Again, having limited access to supports means young people sometimes must make untenable tradeoffs in their own safety.

Lockers

Young people in the focus groups reported that lockers helped them in accessing other services. Several young people discussed how being provided a locker (often through an emergency shelter or day center) greatly reduced the likelihood of losing important documents or resources while living on the streets or in shelters. Losing items like birth certificates or social security cards can destabilize young people and make it difficult (or impossible) to receive certain kinds of services. Often, young people have to go through an entire process to acquire these items again in order to access services. Lockers, therefore, were extremely helpful in maintaining the stability of their belongings and thus their access to housing supports.

"[I] used to go to jail cuz I didn't wanna be in a home. Just cuz I knew the homies was gonna be in the same home. And I can kick it with them."

Big dreams: Asking for Basic Needs

Focus group participants that found themselves unable to get their most basic needs met for food, shelter, healthcare, or personal hygiene often had to make costly tradeoffs.

**BIG DREAMS: ASKING FOR BASIC NEEDS
– CONTINUED**

This included engaging in risky behaviors like shoplifting for food, squatting in unsafe places (e.g., stairwells, abandoned buildings, buildings under construction), or working in the sex trades or drug markets. These behaviors decreased the safety of the young people and increased their risk of arrest. Thus young people were willing to trade elements of their safety to increase their access to basic needs. Other young people voluntarily turned to jails and juvenile detention facilities to meet their basic needs. For these young people, jail represented a known entity and someplace where they could stay that would provide shelter, food, and social connections. Although some youth were able to get their basic needs met through the criminal legal system, this came at a high cost to the stability and mastery of both themselves and their families as outlined in the sections above.

"I just went to jail because I didn't have nowhere to go, I didn't have nowhere to stay."

When asked what they would do if they were a major decision maker in King County, or the "boss of the world," the majority of focus group participants said they would create systems, agencies, or processes to meet their basic needs. In the context of dreaming big, many young people of color listed dreams like having consistent access to shelter, food, money, and clothing. That is, the essential ingredients to maintaining basic levels of safety and security. One young person said they would own a hotel that caters to homeless young people. However, even this larger dream (and others like it) ultimately distilled down to wanting consistent access to shelter, food, clean clothing and medical care.

"Everybody would have their own [entry] card and whatnot and [the] hotel would provide a laundry, it would have a pantry if you need some food, free breakfast, and free dinner, and free child care. And once a month I'll have... a dental van and medical van, so in case you just need something, you got it."



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Conclusions & Recommendations

The NW Network, working with a team of community partners and young leaders of color, conducted a community-based, qualitative needs assessment examining the experiences of homeless and unstably housing young people of color in King County, Washington. Below are key takeaways from the needs assessment based on the findings outlined in the sections above. Youth of color in this project called attention to their need for flexible supports that build on their strengths. They asked for caring adults paired with meaningful resources, a foundation that would allow them to lay the groundwork for stability and to achieve their goals. We offer recommendations as a general guide and to provide concrete examples for ways the conclusions can be implemented. However, further study and examination of the recommendations will be needed to understand their feasibility and applicability to the unique context of King County.

Takeaway #1: Structural racism undergirds the experiences of homelessness for young people of color.

Across the county, youth of color repeatedly emphasized the impact of structural racism on their ability to access a safe and stable place to live. Youth of color experienced racial bias and discrimination throughout the systems and supports where they sought help. Many were raised in families experiencing intergenerational homelessness and poverty, or harmful involvement of the criminal legal system. The young people were also well aware of policies and cultural practices that undergird the challenges they faced. They repeatedly called attention to inequitable conditions that disproportionately disadvantage communities of color and thus put them at greater risk of experiencing homelessness in the first place.

This racial inequity sends the message to youth of color that they do not matter and that King County, and subsequently its institutions and service providers, “just don’t care” about their wellbeing. The extent of racism’s harm cannot be tended to easily. If King County is going to put an end to the disproportionate rates at which youth of color experience homelessness, it will require taking tangible steps to combat racially inequitable systems and practices that drive communities of color into homelessness to begin with. Our focus groups demonstrated not only the willingness but the expertise of homeless and unstably housed young people of color to shed light on these systems and identify opportunities for policy and practice reforms.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Establish youth of color-led opportunities to provide feedback on King County and City of Seattle policies and practices.
- Continue funding efforts that elevate the voices of youth of color, and communities of color more broadly, to identify strengths and needs and to inform policy decisions.
- Public and private funders and policymakers should continue addressing priorities and initiatives that have already been identified by communities of color as promising strategies to reduce youth of color homelessness, including those that pivot resources from criminal legal solutions to those developed by and for communities.
- Address implicit bias, misconduct, and disproportionate impact in law enforcement and the criminal legal system across jurisdictions within King County.
- Divest/Invest: create a racial justice screen for County investments to rate the impact of proposed investments on communities of color and young people in particular. This screen could be similar in approach to the one used by the City of Seattle.

Takeaway #2: We need to recognize the complex role of families.

Young people recounted complicated family histories that featured regular movement in and out of the lives and homes of biological, foster, adoptive, street, and/or chosen families. Some young people experienced homelessness for the first time on their own while many others experienced homelessness in the context of their families. Given the destabilizing nature of poverty and homelessness, many young people of color regularly rotated between staying with family and friends and using formal services like emergency shelters, transitional housing, and day centers.

The complex role of families and the fluidity with which young people of color move between informal and formal supports challenges and complicates how King County measures and tracks homelessness. The data from the county's homeless management information system (HMIS) helps the county assess the efficacy of homeless services in the region, and it guides the development of future services and supports. If the data collected on young people of color does not accurately represent their experiences, then it hurts the capacity of the city and county to use this data to assess its efficacy in serving young people of color or develop new strategies to serve these youth. For instance, leaving a shelter to live at the home of a relative is considered a "successful exit" in HMIS. However, we heard repeatedly that young people stayed with relatives for short periods of time before being back on the streets or before moving again to stay with a different family member. Thus while it may be deemed a "success" in HMIS, the young person may still be homeless or unstably housed.

Similar limitations exist for how information systems as well as providers and agencies more broadly categorize and understand family homelessness. Many participants regularly rotated between being what might be considered an unaccompanied minor, to living with and receiving support from their family. Further, some young people

who are currently unaccompanied minors initially experienced and navigated homeless services as children in their families. Thus their perceptions of and utilization of homeless youth services is likely influenced by their experiences in (and the success or failure of) family and adult homeless services.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The approach to youth homelessness used by King County and public and private funders needs to be inclusive and holistic in addressing both the homelessness affecting families and unaccompanied minors. Many young people of color will not be as well served by solutions focusing on only one type of family structure.
- King County's collection and analysis of HMIS data should be modified so that it can account for the fluidity with which young people of color rotate between being with their families, on their own, and in formal services. Modifications may need to include changes to data collection forms, changes to operational definitions of variables like family structure and "successful exits," and/or changes to the emphasis the county places on this data to indicate its efficacy in addressing homelessness.
- King County should supplement HMIS data with other forms of information that can capture from young people's perspectives their experiences of and satisfaction with services. Qualitative approaches could be particularly useful to ensure the information collected is nuanced and reflects the realities of young people.
- Efforts to improve the perceptions and utilization of homeless youth services among young people of color should also work to improve family homeless services since this is sometimes the entry point into homeless services for young people of color.

Takeaway #3: Building relationships with homeless young people of color is essential for supporting them.

Throughout the focus groups, young people described a range of racially-biased and discriminatory interactions they experienced from systems and formal homeless supports. These experiences often further solidified their distrust of systems, agencies, and service providers and their sense that “they don’t care.” Relationship building is one key way to build back trust, mitigate the impact of prior negative experiences, and help young people of color utilize services and find them effective. The findings illustrated several important elements of successful relationships between adults and young people of color. These included investing time and resources in the young person over long periods of time, regularly checking in, and having an adult who looks like or has been through similar experiences as the young person. In contrast, individuals who “don’t care” were seen as only invested in the young person when they were “on the clock.” Other adults seen as unhelpful were perceived as “pummeling” young people with questions, did not have concern or capacity to address young people’s complex history, and were not able to connect them with helpful resources. Overwhelmingly, young people of color spoke positively about their relationships with teachers and staff at Interagency schools. Thus Interagency schools represent a very promising model for building strong relationships between adults and homeless and unstably housed young people of color.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- King County should examine and build on successful models of relationship building that already exist in the county. This could include increased funding to examine what is working well in settings like Interagency schools and what kind of resources would be needed to expand the scale and scope of this work.
- Agencies should review their intake procedures to see how they may be creating barriers to relationship building. How can intake information be collected or utilized in ways that serve to build relationships with young people of color? For example, information can be collected later after the young person has had more time at the program. Or staff could explain more about why the information is necessary to collect and how it will be used to help the young person.
- Agencies should commit greater resources for and think strategically about outreach. Simply seeing an adult repeatedly in community spaces made them feel more trustworthy for some young people of color. Agencies and providers should think about what teen spaces and events they can consistently attend to increase young people of color’s familiarity (and eventually trust) in them.
- When issuing referrals, agencies should ensure that they are connecting young people with resources that will be helpful and for which they qualify. Agencies need to have the staff skill and capacity to identify the supports available to the young person they’re working with.

- King County should invest resources so that homeless service agencies can develop and sustain a workforce that better reflects the program participants they serve. One way to do this is by increasing livable wages at agencies so that they reflect the financial realities of members of marginalized communities. King County and other funding agencies need to support proposals and contracts that permit a salary structure that can sustain the employment of staff of color.
- Public and private funders should identify and invest in 'by and for' organizations or projects.
- Agencies in the region should explore how to build organizational pathways so that program participants can move into leadership positions and even gain employment within the homeless response and youth-serving fields. This could help increase the representativeness of the region's workforce.
- King County & regional agencies should invest in mentorship programs to create further opportunities for homeless young people of color to develop positive relationships with caring adults.

Takeaway #4: Young people of color want flexible, strengths-based supports that affirm their self-determination and meet their basic needs.

Our findings revealed the many ways in which youth of color find their basic needs pitted against each other. The consistency with which participants reported this points to a widespread need among service agencies to define and implement a strength-based practice that is experienced as such by young people. Agencies often required young people to make untenable trade-offs in order to receive services. For example, shelters that would not serve whole families asked young people to trade their social connections for safety and stability. Assistance like food stamps sometimes required young people to trade their mastery (in the form of things like paid internships) for their continued access to basic resources like food. These steep trade-offs created more obstacles for young people of color to get their basic needs met and served as barriers for gaining the skills and resources necessary to find sustainable housing.

Services and supports that young people appreciated did not require the same kinds of trade-offs. They were more flexible (e.g., in their hours of operation), featured fewer rules and regulations, included access to concrete supports like lockers and cell phone chargers, and provided more opportunities for young people to do their “own thing.” These features supported participants’ self-determination and decision-making. Having fewer agency rules also reduces opportunities for racial biases to play out through differential enforcement of the rules. Other services and supports young people of color appreciated and wanted were those aimed at increasing their general life skills and stability. Participants particularly valued job and employment programs. They found services such as lockers to provide the stability they needed to be able to focus on other goals. Lottery systems for shelters, in contrast, hurt the stability of young people and created more obstacles for them to get their needs met.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Develop a pilot project to define components and practices of culturally-responsive, strength-based programs and approaches.
- Public and private funders should invest in more job training programs, expanding their scope and reach.
- Agencies, in particular shelter and day centers, should review organizational rules and regulations to identify ones that may not be necessary, may lend themselves to differential enforcement by staff, or that may exact unnecessary tradeoffs on domains of wellbeing.
- King County and public and private funders should expand the safe spaces where young people can sleep during the day. This could involve coordinating the hours of operation among existing shelters, opening additional services or spaces that permit young people to safely sleep during the day, or moving to 24-hour shelters.
- King County should expand the available safe spaces for young people to spend time at night. This could include expanding the number and locations of Late Nights or developing similar types of events for young people.
- The region should provide more lockers for homeless young people. Participants identified this resource as extremely valuable as they searched for housing.
- Homeless youth emergency shelters should eliminate lotteries and work to increase ways to guarantee housing spots for young people.
- King County officials and agencies should continue finding ways to reduce the tradeoffs that young people must make in order to access services in the region.

Limitations

The needs assessment exclusively collected self-report data, which carries with it a number of limitations. The first is potential bias or misinformation that cannot be verified or independently checked. Additionally, self-report data is dependent on the accurate memory and recall of participants. This could pose a particular challenge for some participants given the very young age at which some of the events occurred that they described in the focus groups. As with many qualitative studies, the current project used a non-representative sampling strategy, which limits the generalizability of findings. Particularly, the findings cannot be used to estimate prevalence rates but rather highlight common themes that emerged across the groups. Further, since only one young person attended one of the focus groups, that focus group essentially became an interview. However, they were asked the same questions as all other focus group participants. Another limitation is that given budget and time constraints, all of the focus groups were conducted in English. This may have limited the participation of some young people of color. Finally, the design of the study limited our ability to focus exclusively on experiences of certain subgroups of youth of color (e.g., those who never sought services, specific age groups or racial/ethnic groups). In order to recruit the number and range of youth that we did, it was not feasible to ensure this specificity among research participants within specific focus groups. Future research should explore opportunities to conduct focus groups and interviews with particular subgroups of youth of color.

Through its support of projects like the Youth of Color Needs Assessment, King County begins laying the foundation to reduce the disproportional rates of homelessness among youth of color. The findings from this project illustrate a number of promising future steps for providers, agencies, and leaders in King County. Many of these steps will require County leaders to not only sustain their commitment but also expand the resources to address this critical issue. Thankfully, the current project demonstrated considerable strengths on which

King County leaders can build. These include a number of successful existing programs and practices as well as the willingness of homeless and unstably housed young people of color to share their knowledge and expertise to inform future policies, practices, and programs. King County would benefit from giving youth of color a seat at the table, keeping their energy and innovative ideas at the heart of its efforts to end youth homelessness.

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Appendix A: Inclusion Criteria

IS THIS THE RIGHT FOCUS GROUP FOR YOU?

Have you ever had trouble staying in the same place for over 30 days at a time? This can look like:

- a. Staying in a hotel for 2 or more straight weeks
- b. Couch hopping
- c. Regularly rotating between houses, including the houses of friends, family, or relatives.
- d. Living in your (or someone else's) car
- e. Not being sure where you'll stay from day to day
- f. Sleeping on public transit, streets, or abandoned/foreclosed building.
- g. Staying in a place that wasn't safe from harm

YES NO

In the last ten years, have you stayed in or received services somewhere in King County (for example, Seattle, Auburn, Renton, Kent, White Center, Redmond, Burien, Bellevue, or Shoreline)?

YES NO

Are you between the ages of 13 and 24?

YES NO

Do you identify as a Native youth or a youth of color? This includes white youth of Hispanic/Latinx descent, Arab/Middle Eastern youth, mixed and multiracial youth and young adults.

YES NO

Are you comfortable speaking English?

YES NO

If you answered yes to all of the questions, then join us!

Appendix B: Sample Focus Group Flyer

YOUTH OF COLOR

EVER STRUGGLED TO FIND A SAFE & STABLE PLACE TO STAY?

ARE YOU 13-24 YEARS OLD?

SHARE YOUR STORY

JOIN A FOCUS GROUP
MEALS PROVIDED

\$30 FOR YOUR TIME

WHEN: OCT 12 2016, 4-6PM
WHERE: RENTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

HOW: RSVP TO 206.568.7777 OR SYDNEY@NWNWORK.ORG

CALL OR EMAIL FOR QUESTIONS & ACCOMODATIONS

YOC Focus Group
10/12/16 14-6PM
Renton Public Library
RSVP: 206.568.7777 or sydney@nwnetwork.org

YOC Focus Group
10/12/16 14-6PM
Renton Public Library
RSVP: 206.568.7777 or sydney@nwnetwork.org

YOC Focus Group
10/12/16 14-6PM
Renton Public Library
RSVP: 206.568.7777 or sydney@nwnetwork.org

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YOC Focus Group
10/12/16 14-6PM
Renton Public Library
RSVP: 206.568.7777 or sydney@nwnetwork.org

Appendix C: Consent Form

THE NORTHWEST NETWORK YOUTH OF COLOR (YOC) NEEDS ASSESSMENT INFORMED CONSENT

TITLE: Youth of Color Needs Assessment

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Carrie Lippy, PhD

1. EXPLANATION OF THE RESEARCH and WHAT YOU WILL DO:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The goal of the study is to learn about the experiences of youth of color who have struggled to find a safe and stable place to stay. You are invited to participate because you are a youth or young adult of color who has struggled to find a safe and stable place to stay and has stayed in King County at least once.

If you decide to be in the study, we will ask you participate in a focus group one time. The focus group will last about two hours. During the focus group, we will ask about your experiences with finding safe and stable places to stay. The information you share will be confidential, meaning your name will not be attached to it. We plan to hold 6-12 focus groups and talk to 35-100 youth and young adults in King County. A member of our project team will take notes during each focus group. We will also audio-record each focus group to help us with our notes. Before we start analysis, we will change all information that could identify you. We will use a fake name rather than your name on all study materials.

2. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to be in the study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you can drop out at any time. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer or stop at any time. Whether you choose to be in the study or not will not affect any supports you receive from the NW Network or any people or organizations working with us on the project.

3. COSTS AND COMPENSATION

If you participate in this study, you may not benefit personally. However, the information you share will help King County learn more about the experiences of youth of color. You may feel some discomfort when facilitators ask about your experiences finding a place to stay. If you feel discomfort during the study, you may skip any questions that you do not want to answer or stop at any time. You can also talk to one of our project team members, and they can meet with you privately to provide support.

If you participate in this study, you will receive \$30. You will receive the money once the focus groups end. If you need help with the travel to and from the focus group, then you can also receive a bus pass. You will get this at the same time as the money. We will also provide food and drinks during the focus groups.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will keep what you share during the focus groups private to the extent allowed by law. Only the project team will have access to your data. All project team members, including youth staff, have received confidentiality training. We will not share your name or other facts that might point to you with anyone outside of our team. The only exception is that information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly. We will use a fake name rather than your real name on all study records. We will store your data in a password- and firewall-protected computer. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear in presentations, reports, or publications of the study. We will report the findings of this study in group form. You will not be identified personally.

5. CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact Carrie Lippy at 206-568-7777 or calippy@gmail.com. If you would like support for what we talk about during the focus group, please contact Sydney Peak at 206-568-7777 or at Sydney@nwnetwork.org.

6. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

Are you willing to be in this study and be audio-recorded?

YES

NO

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant Initials

Date

Project Team Member Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix D: Demographic Questions

PRE-GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What is your birth month and year? Month_____ Year_____

2. In the last ten years, have you stayed in or received services somewhere in King County (for example, Seattle, Auburn, Renton, Kent, White Center, Redmond, Burien, Bellevue, or Shoreline)?

YES NO

3. Have you ever had difficulty staying in the same place for over 30 days at a time? This can look lots of different ways, including any of the following:

- a. Staying in a hotel for 2 or more straight weeks
- b. Couch hopping
- c. Regularly rotating between houses, including the houses of friends, family, or relatives.
- d. Living in your (or someone else's) car
- e. Not being sure where you'll stay from day to day
- f. Sleeping on public transit, streets, or abandoned/foreclosed building.
- g. Staying in a place that wasn't safe from physical and emotional harm or neglect

YES NO

4. What best describes your race? Check as many as apply.

American Indian / Native Alaskan Asian Black / African American
 Caucasion / White Something Else (Please Write In)_____

5. What is your ethnicity?

Hispanic Not Hispanic

6. How would you describe your gender? Check as many as apply.

Woman Man Transgender Genderqueer
 Gender Non-Conforming Something Else

7. How would you describe yourself? Check as many as apply.

- Heterosexual / Straight Lesbian Gay Bisexual Queer
- Questioning / Unsure Something else

8. In what country were you born? _____

If not the United States:

How many years have you lived in the United States? _____

What age were you when you moved to the United States? _____

9. In what country (or countries) were your parents born? _____

10. Where did you stay last night?

- With my parent(s) indoors In my own apartment/house Foster home
- With my friend(s) indoors Abandoned/ foreclosed building / squat Hospital
- With my relative(s) indoors Drug/alcohol treatment center Hotel/Motel
- Shelter Transitional living program Outside/ tents
- Car/RV Jail/ Juvenile Detention
- Other _____

12. What is the zip code of the place you're staying now or most recently stayed? _____

13. What is the last grade you completed? _____

14. Are you currently in school? Yes No

15. Do you have a job? Yes No

16. Are you currently looking for job? Yes No

17. Have you ever been in foster care? Yes No

18. Have you ever been to detention or jail? Yes No

19. Are you pregnant or parenting? Yes No

20. How did you hear about the focus group? _____

Appendix E: Focus Group Guide

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Everyone is here because at some point in their life, they struggled to find a safe and stable place to live. I know everyone’s idea of a “safe and stable place to live” probably looks very different. For the purposes of our conversation today, when we say a “safe and stable place to live,” we mean somewhere that is comfortable, free from harm, and where you could consistently live for a month or longer. For some of you, you are currently trying to find this kind of place. For others, you may currently have a safe and stable place, but you struggled a while ago to find it. We want to hear from all of you about your experiences trying to find this place.

1. Thinking back to when you were looking for a safe and stable place to live, where did you turn for support?

- a. Who did you turn to?
- b. How have you tried to find a safe and stable place to live?
- c. What helped you?
- d. What made it harder?

2. How have the people you consider family impacted your ability to find a safe and stable place to live? For our purpose today, family can include biological family, or friends or other loved ones that you’re closest to.

- a. How have they helped your situation?
- b. How have they hurt your situation?
- c. Is that a biological family member?

3. Next, I’d like to learn more about the kinds of services or supports you received while looking for a safe and stable place to live.

As you’ll see around the room, we have different kinds of services or supports that young people sometimes get. I’d like you to walk to each of the services and indicate if you ever received the support, didn’t receive it, or didn’t know it was available. Put a **green sticker** in the appropriate spot if you received the support, a **red sticker** if you didn’t receive it, and a **yellow sticker** if you didn’t know that type of support was available.

Green: Received support

Red: Did not receive support

Yellow: Didn’t know it was available

Traditional Services		Non Traditional Services		Medical / Healthcare
Food (Food Pantry, Kitchen)	Case Management	After-school Program	Arts Program	Medical Care
Basic Need (shower, laundry, hygiene)	Day Center / Drop In	Athletics	Job training / employ. program	Substance abuse programs
Transitional Housing	Shelter	Faith Based		Mental Health
Other housing (subsidized apartment, rental assistance,). Please write down what it is.		Culturally-specific (cultural center, cultural community program)		Domestic Violence Program
		Other programming (please write down what it is)		

4. It looks like many of you got support at X. What are some of the reasons you received services there?

- a. What was the experience like?
- b. How well did the organization provide the help you wanted?
- c. What was inviting, if anything, about the service?
- d. How comfortable were you receiving services there?
- e. If you needed services again in the future, would you go there again? How come?

5. It looks like few of you received support at Y. What are some reasons you didn't get support there?

- a. What concerns, if any, did you have about getting services there?
- b. How inviting was the organization?
- c. How did you think you would be treated if you went there?

6. Think back to when you were looking for a safe and stable place to live. Imagine you saw an organization that said they offer "homeless youth services." Would you think those services would be intended for you?

- a. What comes to mind when you hear "homeless?"
- b. How do you identify with that term?
- c. Can you talk more about why that is?

7. What other terms could an agency use to make it clear that they offer support for young people who do not have a safe and stable place to live?

8. Next we're going to do a writing activity. We want you to be able to answer as honestly as possible, so the activity will be completely anonymous, and we will not read your answers out loud.

[Co-facilitator hands out sheets of paper and reveals big sheet of paper with the questions on it]

On the separate sheets of paper, I would like you to write about your experiences with each of the following: school, police, doctors, child protective services, foster care, and juvenile detention. If you haven't had experiences with one of them, you can just write Doesn't Apply. Once you've written your answers, you will go to each of the jars corresponding to that system and put your paper in the appropriate jar.

For each, we want to know the following:

1. How did this impact your ability to find a safe and stable place to live?
 - a. Did it make it easier or harder?
2. An example of what you mean.

[Participants write responses on small sheets of paper and place them in corresponding jar]

9. Next, I'd like you to think back on your experiences of trying to find a safe and stable place to live. Imagine you could decide how the county supports other young people looking for safe and stable places to live. What kinds of things would you want the county to do?

- a. Think back to the strategies you used to find housing. How could the county have supported or strengthened the places where you turned?
- b. How can the county support the things that are already working well?

10. What is something that you do that helps you when you're having a hard time?

11. These are all of the questions I have for you today. Are there any closing thoughts or comments about our discussion, or anything else you think we should know?

Appendix F: Focus Group Debrief Worksheet

YOUTH OF COLOR (YOC) NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

1. What key themes or ideas emerged during the group?
2. What new ideas or concepts emerged during the group?
3. What big ideas, hunches, or thoughts did project team members have as a result of the group?
4. What questions worked well during the focus group?
5. What questions may need to be changed for future focus groups? How should they be changed?
6. What, if any, ideas, concepts, or themes would we want to explore more in future focus groups?

"We know that they have the resource [to help homeless young people of color], and... they can do it, but they don't do it. They choose not to.... They know what we need, and the services that we need, and what they can do to provide it to make sure that we don't end up in these situations."

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