The 2019 Los Angeles City Women’s Needs Assessment is the first report of its kind to study the needs, conditions, and demographics of women experiencing homelessness across the City of Los Angeles. This summary, in conjunction with the full report, aims to provide a comprehensive reference for the development of evidence-based service and policy interventions on behalf of women experiencing homelessness in greater Los Angeles.

In the past few years, Los Angeles has experienced a dramatic surge in homelessness, expanding beyond Skid Row to every neighborhood in the city. As homelessness has increased, there has been a disproportionate impact on women: from 2013 to 2019, there was a 41% increase in homeless women in Los Angeles County.

With more women than ever experiencing homelessness for the first time, The Downtown Women’s Center (DWC) sought to bring together partner agencies and homeless and low-income women from across Los Angeles in order to better understand and document their needs. This report is the result of that community effort, expanding on the legacy of the past six projects to include women from the broadest geographic swath of the City yet. It encompasses responses from 305 women across six Los Angeles County Service Provider Areas (SPAs) and includes updated survey questions regarding policies and programs implemented in recent years. Results are divided into five sections: (1) Demographics; (2) Housing; (3) Healthcare; (4) Violence Against Women; and (5) Community Resources.

The results reflect the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women experiencing homelessness and highlight the importance of developing gender-specific and trauma-informed housing and healthcare solutions. They point to an immediate need to:

01 Expand funding and support for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, with 60.2% participants experiencing violence in the last year.

02 Increase access to women-specific housing and shelter services, with 82% of women identifying housing as the most difficult resources to access and another 50% identifying lack of shelter (including lack of beds, wait lists and time limits) as a major barrier.

03 Designate women as a specific homeless sub-population that requires unique services, with women currently representing nearly one-third—or 32.4%—of the total homeless population in Los Angeles County.

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METHODOLOGY

The 2019 Needs Assessment survey was administered by volunteers in English and Spanish to 305 homeless and low-income women across six SPAs in the City of Los Angeles: Metro LA (SPA 4), West (SPA 5), South (SPA 6), East (SPA 7), South Bay (SPA 8), and San Fernando Valley (SPA 2). DWC developed survey questions together with partner organizations and women experiencing homelessness. The USC Sol Price School of Social Innovation conducted data analysis.

1 A homeless Point In Time (PIT) count by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) counted 12,449 women in 2013, 14,461 women in 2016, and 18,331 in 2019.

2 LAHSA 2020 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count Presentation.
Key Findings

Demographics

- Nearly half (48.9%) of all women surveyed were age 51 and older. More younger women are becoming newly homeless, too, with women ages 18 to 40 comprising 36.7% of women who became homeless for the first time within the last year.
- Women of color--particularly black women--are disproportionately affected by homelessness. While Black women make up 9% of LA County's population, they account for nearly one-third (28.7%) of the women surveyed.
- A majority of new homeless women were also women of color: 24.1% were Black women, and 35.4% were Latina.

Violence Against Women

- The persistently high rate of violence is one of the most distinguishing differences between men and women experiencing homelessness. A majority (60.2%) of women surveyed had experienced some form of violence within the last year.
- More than one-quarter (25.7%) of women surveyed had experienced frequent violence within the last year, while more than half (53.2%) had experienced domestic or interpersonal violence in their lifetime.
- LGBTQ+ women are more likely than average to experience sexual assault or sexual violence. More than one-third (35.7%) of LGBTQ+ women surveyed had experienced sexual assault in the last year.

Housing

- Los Angeles' housing crisis is driving more women into homelessness than ever: over a quarter (25.9%) of women surveyed became newly homeless within the last year.
- The largest barriers to housing remain lack of housing and housing affordability, which 66% of the respondents named as a problem. Another 41% of respondents named lack of case management as a major barrier.
- Women also face barriers to accessing safe overnight shelter. One-third of women reported difficulty accessing restrooms at night, while 27% noted that shelter staff did not treat them with respect, 26% that the shelters were uncomfortable, and 23% that they felt unsafe in shelters.
- The vast majority (80%) of survey respondents had lived on the streets at some point, while 75% had lived on the streets within the last year.

Health

- Homeless women continue to face challenges accessing necessary medical services. Although the vast majority (84.2%) of women surveyed possessed some form of health insurance, more than half (63.2%) had also visited the emergency room within the last year, suggesting they were not regularly accessing primary of preventative care.
- A majority (54.9%) said they live with a mental health or psychiatric disability, and nearly two-thirds (63.5%) received treatment for mental health issues.

Community Resources

- An overwhelming majority (82%) of women indicated that access to housing was the most critically needed resource, but also the most difficult to access.
- Mental health care was also highlighted as a needed resource. Just over a quarter (28.1%) of respondents indicated that mental health services would improve their communities.
- More than one-third (37%) of respondents indicated a preference for accessing services in woman-only environments.
- The need for a trauma-informed approach to services provision was also highlighted, with 40% of respondents reporting that housing services did not understand their trauma, and another 35% reporting that street outreach/case management providers did not understand their trauma.

To read the full report, please visit www.DowntownWomensCenter.org

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