



The Home Zone Pilot Project

A Report from the Field

Housing Distress in the Los Angeles Promise Zone

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Stable housing provides the vital platform for child and family well-being. What happens when families cannot afford the rent for adequate housing? How do they maintain a roof over their children's heads? We decided to ask that question in the Los Angeles Promise Zone.

Rental Housing Stock in the Los Angeles Promise Zone

The Los Angeles Promise Zone is comprised of five diverse neighborhoods: Hollywood, East Hollywood, Koreatown, Pico Union, and Westlake/MacArthur Park. According to census data, 95% of the residents of the LA Promise Zone are renters. City of Los Angeles data indicate a population of approximately 165,000 residents, of whom 35% live in poverty. With some of the highest densities of people living per square mile in the City of Los Angeles and the country, data suggests that nearly one-quarter of LA Promise Zone households earn less than \$15,000 each year.ⁱ

Low-income rental housing stock in the LA Promise Zone is composed primarily of studios (29 percent) and one bedroom apartments (45 percent), many constructed in the early 1900s. Historically, the studio and one-bedroom apartment rentals in the LA Promise Zone and adjacent neighborhoods provided lower level housing for single individuals, couples, and the elderly or disabled living on fixed incomes or entitlements. These traditional residents were “priced out” over the years – a contributing factor to the increase in homelessness on the streets of Los Angeles today.

For low-income families unable to pay the higher rents in other areas of the city, the rental housing stock in the LA Promise Zone provides “housing of last resort”. Families with children crowd into deteriorating rental units for which they often pay a major portion of their income. Those who are unable to maintain the rent without additional support share already overcrowded units with relatives or with people to whom they are not related. Because many low-income families in the LA Promise Zone are living there due to the lack of affordable rental housing in other neighborhoods, it is unlikely that any significant number will be able to relocate without increases in income. Within this context and with a continual flow of desperate tenants willing to rent apartments in poor physical condition, owners of dilapidated properties do not feel obligated or motivated to upgrade or rehabilitate them.

Housing instability is generally defined as high housing costs in relation to income, poor housing quality, overcrowding, sub families (shared housing with another family), residential mobility, and homelessness. Partnering for Change is leading the Home Zone Pilot Project, together with the LA Promise Zone Liaison,

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and collaborative partners, to address indicators of housing instability among families with children in the Los Angeles Promise Zone or served by organizations and programs based there.

Taking a Closer Look at the Problem

As a Collaborative Partner in the Los Angeles Promise Zone, Partnering for Change engaged in a two-year feasibility analysis and planning process that included an in-depth evaluation of City and county reports and Census data on population density, affordability, homeownership, and income; research papers and studies were reviewed, and outreach was conducted to a wide array of LA Promise Zone Partner organizations and other stakeholders. A white paper on “Housing Affordability in the Los Angeles Promise Zone” summarized existing data, research findings and feedback from meetings and focus groups. That paper also included recent research findings from a literature review on the detrimental impacts of housing instability on child and family well-being.

Our “Housing Affordability” paper provided both a rationale and a mandate for taking a closer look at current housing conditions in one of the worse rental housing markets in the country. A 2014 UCLA study identified L.A. as the most unaffordable rental market in the nation.ⁱⁱ A recent Harvard study called Los Angeles the least affordable of the nation's 381 metropolitan areas, with one in four households spending at least half its income on housing.ⁱⁱⁱ What does housing look like for low-income families when rents are much higher than their capacity to pay?

Three distinct yet related information-gathering efforts in 2017 were conducted, as follows:

- a photo-documentation project providing data and visual documentation of substandard rental housing in the LA Promise Zone;
- ongoing analysis of student enrollments in the Homeless Education Program of the Los Angeles Unified Schools in the LA Promise Zone; and
- an online survey conducted with frontline staff at representative child and family services organizations to gain feedback on their experiences and perceptions about the living conditions of their client families.

This paper summarizes the findings from each activity. With the affordability crisis in Los Angeles steadily increasing, the goal is to serve as a catalyst to promote the public will, collaboration, and innovation that are required to address and help mediate the detrimental impact of the housing crisis on very low-income children and their families.

Photo-Documentation of Poor Housing Conditions

Because it is difficult to visualize the interiors of the often dilapidated rental properties in LA Promise Zone neighborhoods, a photo-documentation survey was conducted to document visual and accompanying data on 10 representative overcrowded, shared, and substandard housing units in MacArthur Park (6 units), Koreatown (3 units), and Pico Union (1 unit). The documentation project was implemented for Partnering for Change by a team of graduate student consultants from the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California.^{iv} Information captured included number of

individuals living in the unit, number of months living in the unit, cost of rent, monthly income, etc. The most salient findings are summarized below:

Female-headed households: Of the respondents, 90% were Latina women who had children living with them. The children ranged in age from the youngest at two years old to the eldest at 26 years old. This correlates with the current Housing Elements data from the Los Angeles City Housing Department, in which 71% of female-headed households in the city are renters (71%); citywide, their median family income was \$21,463 compared to the median family income of all households (\$47,031).^v

Length of tenancy, unit size, and rents: All respondents had remained in the same apartment for over five years, five respondents lived in studio apartments, four lived in one-bedroom apartments, and one respondent lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Rents ranged from \$720 to \$1,125. Most of the respondents spend a disproportionate amount of their income on rent.

Overcrowding: The majority of respondents (90%) were living in overcrowded conditions, the most crowded of which being a household of five (two unrelated adults and three children) all sharing one living space in a studio apartment.

Poor housing conditions: Many respondents were dealing with bed bugs, roaches, mice, and fleas. They reported that managers were not responsive to the pest problems and were also dismissive of much needed repairs within the units. Housing conditions included inability to store food safely, with mice and roaches coming out during the day and night, serious overcrowding, mold inside the bathroom ceiling, unsafe windows, and uncovered light fixtures. Safety concerns included insecure windows and neighbors using drugs and alcohol.

Visual documentation of poor housing conditions: The project included 300 photographs taken with cell phones that documented visually a broad range of unhealthy and potentially dangerous living conditions, including potentially serious health and safety issues, severe overcrowding, and deteriorating electrical and plumbing fixtures, ceilings, walls, and floors.

Tracking Data in the LAUSD Homeless Education Program

The Home Zone Pilot Project has tracked student enrollment in the Homeless Education Program at LAUSD schools located within the LA Promise Zone over the past two years to better understand the services offered to student families and to identify gaps in housing-based services and resources. There are 47 schools in the LA Promise Zone, with 35 LAUSD schools represented in the data that is tracked. Several learning communities are within the same school and located on the same campuses, and are thus combined in the data. These schools are the Miguel Contreras Learning Center, RFK Community Schools, and Hollywood Senior High School.

The Homeless Education Program (HEP) is a federally-funded program to assist homeless students and families as part of the No Child Left Behind initiative. Criteria for enrollment in the Homeless Education Program include the following: lack of a fixed, regular nighttime residence; living with a friend or relative because the family cannot afford housing (doubled-up), living in a motel/hotel; living in an emergency,

transitional, or domestic violence shelter; living in a car, trailer, park, or campground; or “other.” On any given day, there are over 10,500 identified homeless students attending schools within the boundaries of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Data provided by LAUSD for the School Year 2015-2016 documented 579 students enrolled in the Homeless Education Program at LAUSD schools in the LA Promise Zone. In data retrieved in April 2017 on the School Year 2016-2017, that number had increased to a total of 769 students.^{vi}

<i>Description of where student is currently living</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>
<i>Adult that is not the Parent or Guardian</i>	59
<i>Another Family's House or Apartment</i>	402
<i>Car, Trailer, or Campsite</i>	11
<i>Foster Child Awaiting Placement</i>	3
<i>In a rented garage</i>	12
<i>Motel or Hotel</i>	50
<i>Rented Trailer/Motor Home in Private Property</i>	3
<i>SRO Building (Single Room Occupancy)</i>	22
<i>Shelter</i>	63
<i>Transitional Housing Program</i>	26
<i>Other</i>	118
<i>TOTAL</i>	769

Of the 769 homeless students documented, more than half (402 students) reported that they lived “in another family’s house or apartment.” This aligns with earlier findings on overcrowding and shared housing and the data on population density in LA Promise Zone neighborhoods. At the end of the academic school year 2016-2017, 763 of the 769 students (99%) enrolled in HEP were still listed in the HEP data as unhoused.

According to the data, 55% of HEP enrollments were high school students, with three multi-school complexes representing the majority of homeless students. The three schools include Miguel Contreras Learning Complex (166 homeless students), the RFK Community schools (143 homeless students), and Belmont High School (65 homeless students). This indicates that a higher concentration of HEP students are of high school age and condensed to fewer campuses, which helps to identify where housing assistance can be most impactful.

Upon evaluating the findings, a meeting was convened between Partnering for Change, the LAUSD Homeless Education Program and the Family Solutions Center operated through the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority in SPA 4 to discuss the referral system to Rapid Rehousing programs and ways it might be improved. Three HEP staff assigned to LA Promise Zone schools participated in the discussion and shared their concerns about the current system. Various solutions were considered, including improving screening for eligibility and referrals to permanent housing programs. Sample

screening tools were provided by Partnering for Change to the HEP Director who is currently improving practices within the program.

Another challenge relates to the differing definitions of homelessness by federal agencies. For families who are living “in another family’s house or apartment,” *unless the host family is willing to orally indicate to the family that they must vacate within 14 days and this is verified by an intake worker from a homeless program, families sharing housing (but not on the lease) would not be considered eligible for Homeless Prevention or Rapid Rehousing programs.* This is also true for families living in a motel or hotel room, *unless the motel or hotel is paid for by government or charitable organizations.* Based on differing definitions of homelessness between the U.S. Department of Education and HUD, more than half of homeless students’ families in LA Promise Zone schools are not eligible for housing assistance.

Staff Survey at Child and Family Services Organizations

The Advisory Council of the Home Zone Pilot Project has included child and family services organizations either based in the LA Promise Zone or whose services extend into its neighborhoods. To gain a better understanding of the day-to-day experiences of frontline staff at these agencies, an online survey was conducted in Spring 2017.^{vii} The questions were directed towards their perceptions of the prevalence and types of housing instability among their client families over the most recent 12-month period and included instructions to answer survey questions to “the best of their recollection” rather than scanning data that might not have included the requested information. The respondents represented family services, children’s services, youth programs, a Head Start program, and a community center. The agencies included the Youth Policy Institute, Koreatown Youth and Community Center, Central City Neighborhood Partners, Para Los Niños, and Children’s Institute. A total of 18 respondents completed the 17-question survey. The final survey question requested that respondents “describe the impact of housing instability on the health and well-being of the children and families that you serve?” The key findings are presented below:

- ❑ **Knowledge of families’ living situations:** Respondents reported an average caseload over a 12-month period as 98.5, with over 2/3 of staff having knowledge of families’ living situations. They reported that more than half of client families were living in shared housing, both temporarily and long-term and that the most common poor housing conditions were inadequate sleeping arrangements, severe overcrowding, and roaches, bedbugs, rats, or other vermin in the unit.
- ❑ **The most prevalent types of housing instability:** The three most prevalent indicators of housing instability that emerged from the survey were overcrowding, poor housing quality, and sub families (shared housing).
- ❑ **Housing assistance requested by client families:** The most common types of housing assistance requested by client families were help finding affordable housing, access to move-in funds, and referrals for emergency shelter. Respondents identified the most needed resources as transitional housing for youth, housing for victims of domestic violence, and the addition of a housing specialist to staff. They also identified the need for a centralized list of affordable housing that is available and updated regularly.

- **Outcomes reported from housing interventions:** The majority of respondents reported that they attempted to address housing problems of client families either directly or by referral within their own organization, rather than refer the client family to an outside resource. More than half of respondents reported that they were able to either resolve housing problems or to somewhat improve their housing problems for approximately 50% of client families' requesting housing-based assistance.
- **Outcomes of referrals for homeless services:** Half of respondents reported that the services needs of homeless families referred for emergency shelter were either rarely met or not met at all (2 respondents). However, slightly more than half of respondents reported that there was some improvement in the homeless family's situation.
- **Examples of respondent concerns about the impact of housing instability on the provision of services:**
 - *It has impact on the child's school attendance. It also reflects on the well-being of the child.*
 - *When families do not have a stable place to stay, they cannot concentrate in school, they cannot sleep well, and they often become depressed, which affects the child even more.*
 - *When basic needs are not met, it affects a youth's ability to concentrate on educational and employment goals, which in turn impacts their ability to reach self-sufficiency.*
 - *The consistency of a safe, stable environment gives children the ability to thrive, regardless of other circumstances.*
 - *Housing instability is one of the biggest barriers in achieving program contracts. The focus of the case becomes specific to housing, as it is a basic necessity and a time-consuming case management goal.*
 - *Housing instability has an enormous effect on the family unit. Whether the effects are expressed through a parent's frustration or the child's behavior at school or programming, families are being severely impacted by unstable housing.*
 - *I've also seen how the stress affects the children academically and emotionally. They want to help their parents but don't know how.*

Although purposefully designed as a personal interview tool rather than an academic assessment tool in order to better engage often overwhelmed and busy staff, the survey provided a semi-structured means to gain valuable feedback. Staff responses provided insight into the prevalence and types of housing instability on children, youth, and families; the survey also documented the impact of housing distress on non-housing related services provided through diverse child and family services programs – from the services provider point-of-view.

In addition to supporting earlier research on wide-spread and seemingly chronic housing instability among low-income residents of the LA Promise Zone, the survey provides another rationale for the testing of Housing Instability Assessment and Intervention tools among participating child and family services agencies within a cross-sector and collaborative framework.

Home Zone Strategies Moving Forward

These “reports from the field” have helped to reframe the Home Zone initiative as a catalyst for social change on a broader scale. As a result of this effort, Home Zone goals have broadened to include a focus on *the current housing conditions* of families with children in the LA Promise Zone, overcrowded and substandard rental properties in LA Promise Zone neighborhoods, and the development of innovative strategies to address these challenges.

The Los Angeles Promise Zone provides an opportunity to address these issues in the least affordable rental housing market in the country and, in so doing, to develop new cross-sector strategies that will be adaptable in other areas of Los Angeles. It is anticipated that “lessons learned” will also be shared with other Promise Zone initiatives facing similar housing issues.

Within the collective impact framework, Partnering for Change is leading the development of the Home Zone Task Force to address housing instability among families with children in the LA Promise Zone and improve the living conditions for everyone. Distinct yet connected “working groups” will facilitate cross-sector collaboration among Partner agencies – schools, child and family services, neighborhood and community development initiatives, healthcare, and legal aid – and among government entities, philanthropy, the private sector, and civil society.

Strategies That Could Make a Difference in 1-3 Years

- ❑ **Identify and Alleviate Serious Housing Instability:** Within a cross-sector and collaborative framework, implement and evaluate the integration of Housing Instability Assessment and Intervention tools among participating child and family services agencies, to identify the most serious indicators of housing instability and provide timely and appropriate responses.
- ❑ **Work Collaboratively to Intervene:** Develop a centralized *Housing Intervention Response Team* to work in collaboration with child and family services systems to address serious housing conditions of families, including relocation.
- ❑ **Identify Homeless Families with Children 0-5:** Identify homeless families with children under 5 years of age who are sharing housing temporarily with others, including younger siblings of children enrolled in the HEP program, and facilitate referrals to Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing programs; studies indicate that at least 50% of homeless children are ages five and under.
- ❑ **Operationalize the “Housing First” Approach:** Develop new protocols and practices between schools, child and family services systems, and healthcare systems in the LA Promise Zone, to improve referrals and access to Family Solutions Centers and Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing programs.

- ❑ **Integrate Housing Services at Schools:** Test the co-location of a “Housing Specialist” at schools in the LA Promise Zone with high numbers of homeless students, in collaboration with the LAUSD Homeless Education Program.
- ❑ **Promote Rental Housing Compliance:** Work closely with the Los Angeles Housing and Community Investment Department, Public Counsel, the Housing Rights Center, and other neighborhood and community-based organizations to identify and address rental housing violations and ensure compliance.
- ❑ **Collaborate with Landlords and Property Owners:** Engage property owners in collaborative action, including facilitating the upgrading and renovating of rental units in exchange for maintaining or lowering the rent, special recognition as a Promise Zone partner, and other incentives to participate.
- ❑ **Catalyze and Promote Housing-Centered Innovation:** Catalyze and promote innovative “housing demonstration projects” in which non-traditional partners (including property owners, philanthropy, and volunteer groups) collaborate to conduct upgrades on substandard housing or the adaptive re-use of existing properties.

References

ⁱ City of Los Angeles. *Promise Zone Stats*. Web. Jan. 2016

ⁱⁱ Ray, Rosalie; Ong, Paul; Jimenez, Silvia; *Impacts of the Widening Divide: Los Angeles at the Forefront of the Rent Burden Crisis*, Center for the Study of Inequality, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Revised September 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ *The State of the Nation’s Housing*, Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies (2017)

^{iv} Report on Photo-Documentation Project – Partnering for Change, May 2017

^v *Housing Elements 2013-2021*, Chapter 1 - Housing Needs Assessment, Los Angeles Department of City Planning.

^{vi} Data on Homeless Education Program, Los Angeles Unified School District – February 2016, April 2017

^{vii} Report on Online Organizational Staff Survey conducted April-May 2017, Partnering for Change