

## More than 1/3 of CT Homeless Youth are Latinos

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One young Latina's story, told to a crowd of advocates, policymakers, and the public last week at Hartford's Legislative Office Building (LOB), created a stark illustration of a dysfunctional world into which far too many young Latinos enter when they become homeless. Jessica Ferreira gave an individual face – and the voice of hard experience – to a session that spotlighted a Yale Study on homelessness in Connecticut entitled “Invisible No More.”

The report painted an in-depth statistical picture drawn from 98 homeless youth ages 14 to 24, 33 of whom were Latino. Professionals who regularly deal with the homeless report a that disproportionate percentage of the homeless as Latino, at least twice as large as Latino's representation in the overall population of the state. Derrick Gordon, Ph.D., the lead researcher on the Yale study, gave a rough estimate of as many as 11,700 unaccompanied youth in Connecticut alone.

Not surprisingly, Ferreira said that the experience of homelessness was tremendously destabilizing: “I did not like wondering where my next meal would come from, or how to keep warm, because it was during the winter-time,” she told the crowd gathered at the LOB. “I didn't have any family with me; I didn't have any friends with me. I was all alone,” she told CTLatinoNews in a phone interview.

Ferreira's experience held a light up to the cracks in the system, because she had fallen through many of them. The most surprising aspect her story was that her ordeal need never have happened, and the expense to the state need never have been incurred. A perfect storm of legal hurdles, poor communication, and lack of cultural understanding was a large part of the problem, but the biggest piece was an inadequate system for dealing with mental illness in this state.

It all began when then 18 year-old Ferreira's behavior taxed the tolerance of her parents, with whom she lived in New Britain. “My parents wanted nothing to do with me,” she said, so out of desperation, she checked into University of Connecticut Medical Center for a psychological evaluation, mostly as a means of having a roof over her head. Ferreira was found to have Borderline Personality Disorder; however, UCONN could only keep her for a week, and couldn't secure long-term housing for her. So they paid for a taxi to the closest available space, a homeless shelter in South Norwalk. “It was my only option. Everything was full.

Homeless shelters around the state have different legal mandates: some serve adults only; some take in families with children. Beds for unaccompanied teens are very few. For the homeless who are legally adults by a few months, they find adult shelters harrowing. “When they go into adult shelters, there are many more middle-aged adults, adults that have chronic mental illness, serious substance abuse, and young people often times do not want to enter into an adult shelter,” said Kathleen Savino, Psy.D., Director of Homeless Youth Services and Women and Children Programs for The Connection, a statewide social service agency.

Things only got better for Jessica when her parents began to receive the support they needed, from an agency based in their own community, in order to reconnect with her: “My parents took me back in when Community Mental Health Affiliates got involved. They helped by getting a case manager to come to my home and discuss with my parents what was going on. They had my parents go to groups to help them understand my mental illness.” Community Mental Health Affiliates is a nonprofit provider of behavioral health support services that serves northwestern Connecticut and has an office in New Britain.

Mental health challenges are one factor in why Latinos are over-represented among Connecticut’s homeless population. Savino said, “There have been some instances when we are trying to get a minor in our program connected with Mental Health Services or DCF, and older generations in their family, grandparents, will say, ‘we don’t need that.’ It comes up when they call grandma to ask for advice, and grandma is saying “don’t do this.”

Stacey Violante Cote, director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Project at the Center for Children’s Advocacy, a Hartford-based nonprofit agency that provides services to low-income children and youth across Connecticut, said that families with immigration status issues also avoid seeking help: “One of the things that I always tell my immigrant clients, in terms of being free from abuse and neglect, is that they shouldn’t be afraid of DCF. Maybe other state agencies have different policies, but the Department of Children and Families has a very clear policy that they do not report immigration status, and in fact, if a child is abused or neglected, there is a path to status, and so these young people should not be afraid to reach out to DCF if they are abused and neglected.” A third factor that adds to the large number of homeless young Latinos was LGBTQ youth being pushed out of traditional households, according to Maryellen Santiago, a community organizer. The Yale study cited intolerance of sexual orientation as a problem across races and ethnicities.

Jessica Ferreira’s experience illustrated that lack of information was the biggest problem of all. She gave the following advice to any youth who are on the brink: “Try to fight the statistics, and try to get help through an organization in your town. Call 211, or call a local Warm Line and get help.” Warm Lines are peer-to-peer support lines that people can call to talk to others who have coped with mental illness. Jessica says that staying connected with the community is very important, “and if you can, lean on your family and friends to help you.”

State Representative Matthew Lesser (D-Middletown) helped organize the event at which Ferreira spoke. He believes that the state should prioritize making resources available to the families who need them, and having shelter options locally so that a young woman from New Britain don’t need to take a taxi to Norwalk as a last resort. “It’s critically urgent,” said Lesser, “especially with temperatures falling so low right now. In my area, we’ve actually seen housing shut down.”