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## Youths Speak Out About Life on Skid Row

They hope right people are paying attention as they document their lives on troubled streets.

By CARLA RIVERA  
Times Staff Writer

Michael Mabry walked the grim streets of skid row recently, interviewing its most unlikely inhabitants — children — about the gantlet they face each day.

Their fears of violence, repugnance at the stench and destitution, and hopes for their families rang with familiarity.

Michael is only 17 himself and lived on skid row for two years. He is part of a group of current and former skid row residents, called Youth Coalition X, who hope to change their community by documenting the reality of their lives.

The result is a study released Thursday called "Toxic Playground: Growing Up in Skid

Row," designed and conducted by the youths under the auspices of the United Coalition East Prevention Project, a social service agency that works with the young people of skid row.

"I hope people are listening to us," Michael said during a community forum at Little Tokyo's Japanese American National Museum, where five of the young interviewees talked about their findings. "I hope doing all this is not just wasting our breath."

The youths surveyed 96 other

young people, ages 8 to 21, with the median age of 13. The responses revealed that many skid row children go to school and church, and more than half live with their mothers.

But the children also recounted an often brutal side of their lives. Nearly half said they had witnessed someone's death while living downtown. More than a third said they feared for their own lives. Twelve percent of the young people said they had

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*'They didn't just leave us behind, they hid us,  
and they're acting like they don't see us.'*

Franklin Arburtha, 14, a resident of skid row, on the lack of government help

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attempted suicide.

Roshawn, 18, who wanted to use only her first name, spoke of how she was expelled from a San Fernando Valley high school she was bused to because she didn't have enough credits to graduate within a specified time.

"When I was going to school, I couldn't really function and focus," said Roshawn, who now attends a continuation school in Inglewood. "I had to get up at 5 a.m. and didn't get home until 5 p.m. They're putting stuff on us that we can't really handle."

The youngsters' frustrations also came through in a 25-minute video, "We're Not Bad Kids," produced by Franklin Arburtha, 14, who has lived at the single room occupancy Ford Hotel for five years with his mother and siblings.

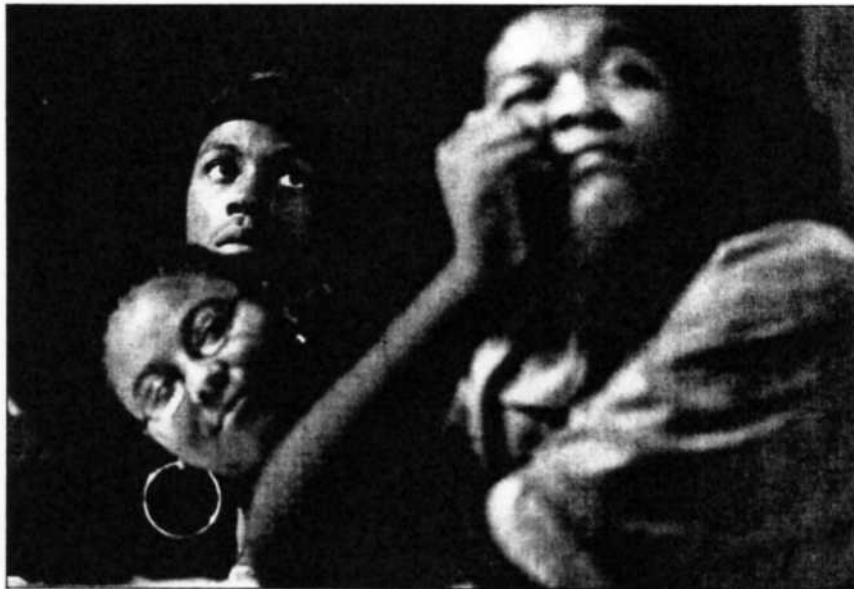
"I made the movie for the poor kids in my community to give them something," Franklin said. "Most of the time, I feel like I don't get nothing. The president and the Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act. But they didn't just leave us behind, they hid us, and they're acting like they don't see us."

The documentary was a tour of the best and worst of skid row, including a candlelight vigil for a woman stabbed to death by an acquaintance in the presence of some of the children.

Michael lived in the Ford Hotel for two years with his aunt, until she died earlier this year. He went from friend to friend, and then was placed in juvenile hall because, he said, he had nowhere to stay. He is now in foster care in a group home but comes back to skid row almost every day to visit the friends he considers his family.

"Living on skid row changed my life, but not for the worse," he said. "Being there and seeing things made me grateful and glad for what I have. Seeing the drugs and conditions is scary, especially the way some people get hurt. I don't want to be one of those people sitting next to the police station all day smoking crack. I want to be outside helping."

Thirteen-year-old Raymond,



**LIVES REVEALED:** Michael Mabry, 17, in cap, who lived on skid row for two years, is among a group of youths at a forum in Little Tokyo. He is part of Youth Coalition X, skid row youths who designed and conducted the study "Toxic Playground: Growing Up in Skid Row."

RICHARD HARTOG Los Angeles Times

a ticket he got for fighting.

"I would prefer to have community service than have a fine and have my mother burdened for what I did," he told the gathering.

Their concerns attracted key policymakers, including representatives of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's office and several City Council districts; Los Angeles County Director of Public Health Jonathan E. Fielding; the Rev. Cecil "Chip" Murray, who recently retired as pastor of Los Angeles' First AME Church and was nominated by Villaraigosa to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority; Assemblyman Mark Ridley-Thomas (D-Los Angeles); state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles); and other community leaders.

Ridley-Thomas said he would work to have the children's findings presented at the next meeting of the commission that oversees Proposition 63—the Mental Health Services Act—which taxes wealthy Californians to

be heard and will be heard," Ridley-Thomas said.

The survey of the 96 children also found:

- Children living on skid row are not transients: More than 70% have lived there more than a year, and 22% said they had lived in the area four to six years.

- Most are not runaways. More than half reported living with their mothers, and a fifth live with both parents.

- 80% are enrolled in school, and most reported attending regularly.

- Three-quarters of the youngsters said they worshiped in church.

- The majority of youngsters—71%—said they had not used drugs.

- Two-thirds said they visited a medical doctor two or more times in the last year.

- 81% reported receiving at least three meals a day.

Many youths also complained about their treatment in schools and by police. More than half had been suspended from school at least once, and nearly a quarter, four or more times. Many—57%—said they had gotten in trouble at school because of absences or ditching, and half said they were punished for not having a school uniform or having dirty clothes.

Forty-three percent of the youngsters reported being ticketed by police for jaywalking, not paying bus or train fare, loitering or tagging. Nearly 30% said they had been arrested.

You know what a gaffer is.

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