



# Creating a Strong and Safe Los Angeles

## BOYLE HEIGHTS: THEN AND NOW

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Then, as now, Nuñez says lack of education and jobs played a significant role in the decision of young men and women to join gangs. She recalls some of the early steps to create opportunities for area youth through summer programs at Dolores Mission and is proud that the seeds of Homeboy Industries were sown in her neighborhood when Fr. Boyle was Pastor of Dolores Mission.

Although her neighborhood is safer than it was back then, Nuñez is intensely aware of the ongoing need for education, training, and jobs for the sons, brothers, and fathers that live in Boyle Heights.

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*Understanding the link between removing barriers to employment for formerly incarcerated men and women and reducing violence and recidivism.*

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**In 2009**, Jose Osuna earned a certificate for having successfully completed the Photovoltaic Training Program at the East Los Angeles Skills Center. Completing the course marked a turning point for the 45-year-old from Long Beach.

That certificate, earned as part of Homeboy Industries' Solar Panel Installation and Training Program, was a path to a living-wage job – a rare opportunity for men and women like Osuna, returning home to their community with a felony conviction. But, he says, completing the highly sought-after course provided more than just the prospect of economic security. It was a critical part of his journey to redefine himself.

"Before that course, I had seen myself as this gang member, as a convict, as a criminal, as an addict. When I became a full-time student I was able to see myself as a learner," says Osuna. "Society is never going to look at you differently until you look at yourself differently."

As Director of Employment Services for Homeboy Industries, Osuna bears witness every day to the challenge and the opportunity of transformation – both for the gang members and other formerly incarcerated individuals he works with and counsels and also for their families and for the larger community.

### Re-Entry in the 'City of Second Chances'

Each year, tens of thousands of men and women return to Los Angeles after serving time in county jail or in state or federal prison. Roughly one-third of all state parolees reside in Los Angeles, which is said to have the highest number of parolees per capita of any U.S. city.

Providing for the successful re-entry of formerly incarcerated individuals is critical to fostering strong and safe Los Angeles neighborhoods, says Michel Moore,



## BEATING THE ODDS

Statewide, California grapples with a 61 percent overall three-year recidivism rate (which takes into account both first releases and those who have been re-released), according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's 2013 Outcome Evaluation Report. But the Solar Training Program at Homeboy Industries is defying the odds – boasting just a three percent recidivism rate among graduates since the program began in 2008.

Homeboy staff point to several factors that contribute to the program's positive outcomes, including:

- ▶ Tutoring to increase academic success and passage of a national certification program
- ▶ Economic support through stipends while students are enrolled in the course
- ▶ Mental health support and substance abuse services
- ▶ A diverse student body from throughout Los Angeles
- ▶ A 75% job placement rate within 90 days of graduation, thanks to strong partnerships with the solar industry.

Assistant Police Chief for the City of Los Angeles. He identifies four areas that, when addressed, increase the opportunity for full integration: mental health services, substance abuse counseling, housing, and a job.

“Our state’s criminal justice system has failed woefully at addressing these needs while someone is incarcerated,” says Moore, making it even more critical that barriers are removed and support is provided when men and women return home to their communities.

In a county that receives roughly one-quarter of all state parolees, successful re-entry has far-reaching implications. It contributes to stronger, safer neighborhoods and communities and begins to shift spending from law enforcement and incarceration to schools, programs that create opportunity, and infrastructure needs.

### Jobs: A Powerful Mitigator to Crime and Violence

Research points to the unique and powerful role that job training and access plays in interrupting the cycle of crime, violence, and hopelessness and addressing the costly and destabilizing effects of recidivism.

In a 2011 study on the role of employment and social ties in reducing recidivism, authors Mark T. Berg and Beth M. Huebner detail the significant role employment plays in determining whether an individual will get caught in the revolving door of the broken criminal justice system. According to the report, two years after release, nearly twice as many employed people with records had avoided negative contact with law enforcement as those without a job.

Joseph Paul, Program Manager of the Jericho Vocational Services Center, a program of Shields for Families in Watts and South Los Angeles, has seen first hand the critical role that employment plays in reducing recidivism and helping to rebuild lives.

“The ability to get a job and keep a job has a *compounding effect*,” says Paul. “It accomplishes the goal of the individual becoming self sufficient – having the resources he or she needs to take care of themselves and, often, their families.” Equally important, he adds, is the self-esteem and self-confidence that accompany getting and keeping a job. “That is critical to a person being able to break way from the pack that typically influences negative behaviors in the first place.

“No one grows up saying, ‘I am going to go to prison and get a life sentence,’” says Paul. “It is an overwhelming bombardment of hopelessness that produces that outcome. Getting and keeping a job signifies that things are changing in their life.”

Job training, like Jose Osuna received, along with other forms of employment assistance, represent some of the most cost-effective investments, according to a benefit-cost analysis by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy. Based on an April 2012 review of literature, the Institute identified vocational training

and job assistance – both inside prison and after release – as some of the most strategic investments to support adults in the criminal justice system.

Too often, however, job skills – even in competitive and growth industries – are not enough for men and women with a criminal history, especially in tough economic times and in areas with high unemployment rates. In jobs, as in housing, formerly incarcerated individuals face persistent discrimination, due in no small part to disclosure requirements on applications that have the effect of removing individuals from the applicant pool – regardless of their qualifications.

According to the National Employment Law Project, one of the most significant structural barriers is the box on most job applications asking applicants if they have a criminal record. Studies show that if hiring discrimination is going to take place, it is most likely to take place at the first interaction, the submission of a job application. Applicants who indicate a criminal record on this application are much less likely to get a call back.

“Everyone loses out,” says Michelle Rodriguez, a senior staff attorney with NELP. “Employers are missing out on the opportunity to hire highly skilled employees and strengthen the economy. Cities lose out on the opportunity to increase public safety. And individuals and families lose out by being denied access to jobs that help to create economic security and stability.”

Research shows that having a felony conviction and being African American has a significant compounding negative effect on ability to find employment. For example, in a 2003 article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Devah Pager reports that 17 percent of white job applicants with a criminal record received a callback, while only five percent of African Americans with a criminal history heard back from the potential employer.

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### **Fairness in Hiring: Banning the Box**

In 2013, California passed AB 218, the Fairness in Government Hiring policy, which removes questions about prior convictions from job applications for state agencies, as well as cities, counties, and special districts and postpones such inquiries until later in the hiring process. In doing so, California became one of 12 states and more than 60 local jurisdictions nationwide in “banning the box” and opening up job opportunities to an estimated 7 million Californians with arrests and convictions.

On June 6, Los Angeles City Council Member Curren Price, Jr., in partnership with LA Voice, All of Us or None, Homeboy Industries, NELP, and others, introduced language to begin developing an ordinance in Los Angeles that would extend this policy to all employers in the city limits, a shift that would have profound consequences for formerly incarcerated residents in the region.



### **ENDING COLLATERAL SANCTIONS**

The recently released report by the White House’s My Brother’s Keeper Task Force speaks to the persistent discrimination against the formerly incarcerated: “Criminal histories keep many young people from getting a job, securing housing, or attaining higher education, loans or credit – when they are otherwise qualified, have paid their debt to society and are unlikely to reoffend. The long-term—sometimes lifetime—impact of a criminal record is of particular concern when it comes to getting a job.”

The report goes on to recommend that large employers, including the Federal government, consider “banning the box” and that federal and state government and “private actors” should support “public campaigns focused on eliminating forms of discrimination and bias based on past arrest or conviction records.”



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