LOSING GROUND:
The New Face of Homelessness

An EVC Study Guide
Acknowledgements

STUDY GUIDE
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LOSING GROUND was produced by six New York City youth who participated in EVC’s 2006-2007 Youth-Organizers Television (YO-TV) program.

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Additional, in-kind support is provided by the New York City Department of Education and Satellite Academy High School. All of EVC’s activities are made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency: Arts in Education and Electronic Media and Film Programs, National Endowment for the Arts, and from individual donors.

Videotapes and accompanying study guide materials were produced by the Educational Video Center, Inc. Copyright © 2007.
Introduction

The Educational Video Center is a non-profit youth media organization dedicated to teaching documentary video as a means to develop the artistic, critical literacy, and career skills of young people, while nurturing their idealism and commitment to social change. Founded in 1984, EVC has evolved from a single video workshop for teenagers from Manhattan’s Lower East Side to become an internationally acclaimed leader in youth media and education. EVC’s teaching methodology brings together the powerful traditions of student-centered progressive education and independent community documentary.

EVC CORE PROGRAMS

DOCUMENTARY WORKSHOP is a 15-week credit-bearing course that teaches high school students from undeserved communities across New York City to research, shoot, and edit compelling documentaries that examine issues of immediate relevance in their lives.

YOUTH ORGANIZERS TELEVISION (YO-TV) is a ten-month pre-professional paid internship that jumpstarts the college and media careers of graduates of the Documentary Workshop.

EXTERNAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS provide workshops and resources in media production and EVC’s methodology, including EVC’s Youth-Powered Video DVD Curriculum, for K-12 teachers and after-school educators, nationally and abroad.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT promotes dialogue and social change through the screening of EVC’s youth produced documentaries in collaboration with strategic partners. An important component of the Community Engagement program is the Youth Speakers Bureau, a group of EVC alumni who receive training in public speaking and facilitation skills and who use this training to lead screenings in local schools and community organizations and encourage audience members to engage with important social issues.
Guidelines For Using This Tape

EVC documentaries are powerful, and often deal with sensitive issues. For this reason, we recommend that you preview the Losing Ground documentary and supporting materials before using them in the classroom. The curriculum we've prepared represents suggestions for using the classroom version of Losing Ground. If any of the activities are not useful to you, feel free to modify them and design your own.

Before using these materials, consider the following questions.

- How similar/different are your students and their experiences from the students who made this video?
- How does this video relate to the subject you are teaching?
- What results do you hope to see from using this video?
- What concerns do you have about your students’ responses to the issues raised in this video?
- What background information will your students need before viewing this tape?

Assumed in this guide are the following beliefs about teaching and learning:

- Writing deepens thinking and is one of the best ways to explore sensitive issues, even before discussion.
- All learning starts from the students’ own experiences.
- Diversity of opinion is useful in a classroom and must be respected.
- Students can make a difference in the world.
- Students can learn from each other.
- Social issues and community problems are an integral part of the school curriculum.
- Students learn from a variety of methods.
- Students learn best through experience.
- An active viewing experience leads to a richer understanding of the documentary.

For many teachers, having students write or take notes while viewing is not something new. For others, this aspect of active viewing is a bit controversial. Some feel it gets in the way of their viewing experience, while others feel it enhances it. You may want to show the tape twice: the first time to view it, and the second time to complete the viewing exercise. Your comments and questions are always welcome. Contact us at info@evc.org.

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RUNNING TIME: 8 minutes

SYNOPSIS: Every night, thousands of young people under the age of 18 are forced to sleep in shelters, at friends and relatives homes, or on the street. Many are young people from families affected by rising poverty rates and the declining supply of affordable housing. Many are youth that have been kicked out of their homes because they are gay. This piece highlights a young lesbian couple facing this crisis, shedding light on their everyday challenges and the sources of strength and inspiration that keep them going as they work to build a better life for themselves.

RELEVANT STATISTICS:

• LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning.

• Homeless youth are typically defined as unaccompanied youth aged 12 to 24 years. The National Alliance to End Homelessness’ typology of homeless youth includes four major categories: runaway (fleeing youth), transitory or episodic (couch surfing youth), unaccompanied homeless youth (shelter hoppers), and street dependent youth (squatters and travelers).

• In 1999, the Second National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMART II) was published. The study determined that 1.7 million adolescents experienced at least one episode of homelessness each year.

• Seven different studies of homeless youth in the U.S. have concluded that approximately 20 percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ. This is disproportionately high when compared to the 10 percent of LGBTQ youth in the general population.

• Youth consistently report severe family conflict as the primary reason for their homelessness. LGBTQ youth report double the rates of sexual abuse before age 12.

• The major reasons homeless youth cite for remaining homeless include lack of affordable housing options, incomplete education, inaccessible job market, and on-going drug use.
• Demographically, LGBTQ homeless youth are disproportionately African American or American Indian, and often from low-income communities, and from poor or working class families.

• Studies indicate that once homeless, LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for victimization and suffer higher incidents of mental health problems and unsafe sexual behavior than straight homeless youth. They experience an average of 7.4 more acts of sexual violence toward them than their heterosexual peers and are more likely to attempt suicide (62 percent) than their heterosexual homeless peers (29 percent).

• Discharge and emancipation from foster care is a big contributor to youth homelessness. Studies show that 12 to 36 percent of emancipated foster care youth will report being homeless at least once after discharge from care.

• A national shortage of youth shelters and housing programs result in many youth being denied assistance. Increased appropriations for Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs from $103 to $140 million would help alleviate this problem by offering 7,000 more youth residential services and 200,000 homeless youth crisis intervention.

• Several intervention models for homeless youth have proven effective, including early intervention and prevention services, intensive case management services coupled with shelter or drop-in centers, and youth housing models with supportive services.

Source: All of the above facts come from the National Alliance to End Homelessness: www.endhomelessness.org
Before Viewing the Tape

PREPARATION: It is important for you to watch *Losing Ground* before showing it in class. This will make your preparation and post-discussion more fruitful. Make sure your students will have paper for note taking and that you will have markers and poster paper (or you can use the chalkboard). Test out the TV and DVD player and make sure the TV volume is set to a good level. Ideally, all students will sit close enough to the TV that they can read all the captions in the video. If this isn’t possible, we recommend that you use your remote to pause the video long enough to read important captions aloud.

STEPS TO CREATE A SAFER SPACE: It is important to make sure students feel as comfortable as possible discussing such a sensitive topic as homelessness. The following steps can be taken to create a safer space:

- Write the name of a school counselor on the board.
- Write local resources on the board (e.g. a LGBTQ community center).
- Write a national helpline on the board
  - GLBT National Hotline: 1.888.THE.GLNH
  - GLBT National Youth Talkline: 1.800.246.PRIDE

UNDERSTANDING DOCUMENTARIES: If necessary, familiarize your students with the concept of documentary film. Here are a few guiding questions:

- Have you seen a documentary film before?
- Based on what you have seen, what is a documentary film?
- Why do you think someone would want to create a documentary?
- How are they different from other kinds of films?

Here are some points that you may want to incorporate into this discussion:

- Documentary films are often referred to as "documentaries" or "docs."
- Docs are significantly different from narrative or fiction feature films (even the feature films that are based on true stories).
- Mainly, documentaries are different because they record events as they happen, without a script or actors.
- Documentary filmmakers incorporate several resources in order to accurately report the truth. Examples include the use of archival footage (of past and present people or events); interviews with experts in the field they’re working on; interviews with the general public or members of a community to gather opinions or information on a subject.
OPTIONAL BRAINSTORM WARM-UP ACTIVITY: Have students say the first thing that comes to their minds when they think of youth homelessness. Take a minute to reflect and make a list. Using your list as a beginning, have students discuss or write about the following topics:

- What do you think are the main causes of homelessness?
- Are there additional causes that contribute to youth homelessness?
- What do you think are some of the challenges facing homeless youth?
Lesson Plan

FOCUS QUESTION: What is a home? What would you do if you didn’t have a home?

OBJECTIVES:
• To raise awareness of homelessness.
• To connect the issue of homelessness to personal experiences of loss and rebuilding.
• To encourage students to reflect on the roots of youth homelessness.

EDUCATION STANDARDS
NYS Language Arts Standard 3; NCTE Standard 12; NYS Social Studies Standard 5; NYS Arts Standard 3; NETS Technology Standard 1; NYS Mathematics, Science, & Technology Standard 7

INTRODUCING THE DOCUMENTARY: (3 minutes)
It may be helpful to say a few words before watching Losing Ground. Here are a few suggestions.
• Six young interns (ages 18-22) from the Educational Video Center in New York City produced this video.
• The stories told in the video are all true.
• This can be a sensitive topic. Please view this tape respectfully, even when you hear points of view you may not agree with.
• You may want to require all students to write down the information from the board (see "Steps to Create a Safer Space").

SCREEN LOSING GROUND: (8 minutes)
Ask students to take notes while watching the video. Have them write down anything that surprises them, whether a story or a statistic, or anything they may feel strongly about. Screen the video.
SHORT IN-CLASS GROUP ACTIVITY: (30 minutes)

**Step One:** Write the word “home” on the blackboard or butcher paper. Ask students to brainstorm some words associated with the concept of home, and write the words branching out from the word “home” that you have written.

**Step Two:** Now that you have established some ideas of what makes a home, distribute two copies of the worksheet below, which consists of three concentric circles. On the first sheet, within the three circles, have the students write some factors within the Family, Community and Nation that might cause youth homelessness.

The following can serve as a guide for possible causes of youth Homelessness.

**Family:**
- Abuse in the home (sexual, physical, psychological)
- Family rejecting identity (gay, etc)
- Parents losing jobs or income and family being forced out of home
- Loss of parents and not being in foster care (no caretaker)
- Kicked out of home for behavior (drug abuse, etc)
- Fire or other unexpected event destroys home

**Community:**
- Building being condemned and family not having alternate housing
- Gentrification
- Natural disaster effecting communities
- Failed housing programs or low income assistance programs
- Failed programs for teens released from juvenile detention (halfway houses, job programs)

**Nation:**
- Bad economy
- Civil conflict (ethnic conflicts, civil war, guerilla movements, etc)
- War between nations
- Failing national programs for teen and low income assistance (post-foster care, etc)

**Step Three:** On the second sheet, have the students write some support systems within the Family, Community, and Nation that might help cope with being homeless or that can help homeless youth find homes.

The following can serve as a guide for examples of support systems.

**Family:**
- Extended family members providing money, shelter or support
Community:
- Friends providing money or shelter
- Job assistance programs
- Homeless shelters in the community
- Community centers (GLBTQ centers, etc)
- School counselors helping to cope
- Rehab centers
- Homelessness orgs and non-profits
- Mentor programs

Nation:
- Refugee shelters
- Better policies for job and financial assistance (lobbying)
- Disaster orgs (FEMA, etc)
- Asylum in other countries (from war, etc)

If there is class time leftover, have each group share some of their ideas from the two worksheets with the whole class.

**ALTERNATE IN-CLASS WRITING ACTIVITY:** (30 minutes)
Have each student write his or her own response to the following, allowing them to answer each question before asking the next:

1) Think of a place that makes you feel comfortable and safe where you can relax. Write down what that place is and why it makes you feel good.

2) What would you do if you find out that you are never allowed to go back to this place? How would you cope? Who might you turn to for guidance in finding a new safe space? How would you go about finding that space?

3) Imagine that you cannot return to your safe space AND can no longer return to your community as well. What will you do? What will you take with you?

4) Can you relate this feeling of not having a home (or displacement) to any larger issues in the world such as poverty, human rights, or displacement (think of refugees, for example)?
Lesson Plan - Day Two

If time allows, we strongly recommend the following lesson as a follow-up class.

**PROBLEM TREE:** (30 minutes)

The problem tree is a visual problem-analysis tool. It helps to define the main problem by analyzing and prioritizing its causes as the first step towards alleviating the problem. The tree helps reveal the relationships between the causes and effects of a problem. Follow the steps below to analyze the problem of youth homelessness in your community.

- First, draw a tree with roots, a trunk and branches.
- The roots of the tree represent the causes of the main problem.
- The tree trunk at the center of the drawing represents the main problem, youth homelessness.
- The tree branches symbolize the effects of the main problem.
- After the relationships between the root causes and effects have been analyzed, flowers can be added to symbolize possible solutions.

The following are suggestions for your Problem Tree discussion:

- The **trunk**, representing the **main problem**, should be labeled in advance as youth homelessness.

- The following could be some of the **causes** of the problem, written out at the tree's **roots**:
  - Family acceptance – family members disapproving of sexual identity.
  - Abuse – some youths face homelessness as an alternative to abuse in the home.

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1 The Problem Tree concept is taken from the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Association. Ideas for causes and effects are taken from DoSomething.org.
o Cultural acceptance – looking down on homelessness can exacerbate youths from seeking proper assistance.
o Residential instability – histories of foster care and lack of a permanent residence, sometimes youth become homeless when they’re discharged from temporary residencies.
o Financial insecurity – youth can become homeless when their family suffers extreme poverty or financial troubles. Sometimes they get separated from their families while living in shelters.
o Lack of affordable housing.
o Displacement:
  ▪ Natural disasters, fire and other phenomena out of people’s control can cause homelessness;
  ▪ Gentrification and other development issues can displace families.
o Limited government policies:
  ▪ Limitations of programs such as welfare to assist poor families.

• The following are suggestions for some of the effects of youth homelessness, written out at the tree’s branches:
o Long-term health problems:
  ▪ Homeless teens suffer chronic health issues at twice the rate of other teens.
o Anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress
o Decreased self-esteem
o Exposure to dangerous situations:
  ▪ Some teens exchange sex for food, clothing and shelter;
  ▪ These situations increase risk of HIV/AIDS and other STDs.
o Lack of sleep
o Problems attending school because of guardianship regulations
o Problems getting a job because of no permanent address
o Nervousness
o Emotional outbursts
o Violence

• Encourage students to make connections between the root causes and the effects, for example:
o Financial distress can force young people into dangerous situations such as selling sex for shelter and food.
o Abuse in the home can cause low self-esteem and depression. Youth may feel less empowered to change their situation under these circumstances.

• Be sure to constantly ask "Why?" which will lead to more causes, effects and connections in analyzing.
TAKE ACTION GRAFFITI BOARD ACTIVITY: (15-20 minutes)
Hang 2 large sheets of newsprint around the room (or divide the black board into 2 sections). Write the headings “Supporting Homeless Youth,” and “Community Support.” Supply the students with markers or chalk and ask them to respond to the question: What actions can we take in each area in response to what we have seen in the documentary? Though the students should generate ideas, you can offer one or two suggestions in each category to stimulate their thinking about possible actions. Possible examples might include...

Supporting Homeless Youth
- Listen to his/her story.
- Recommend a counselor/community center/hotline.
- Know where services are, where to go for help.

Community Support
- Volunteer in a local shelter.
- Host a clothing drive in your school or community.
- Write to community leaders encouraging them to improve availability and conditions of shelters especially for young people.
Resources

As a follow-up assignment, you can ask your students to research one of the organizations or books listed below and write a short paper that includes what these organizations are doing to raise awareness about youth and LGBTQ homelessness and what people can do to get more involved.

ORGANIZATIONS & WEBSITES:

StandUp For Kids
www.standupforkids.org
StandUp For Kids is a nonprofit organization founded in 1990 to help rescue homeless and at-risk youth. With national headquarters in San Diego, California, StandUp For Kids is run almost entirely by volunteers, and has programs in a number of states. The mission of StandUp For Kids is to help homeless and street kids. This mission is carried out by a national volunteer force whose on-the-streets outreach efforts find, stabilize, and assist homeless and street kids in their efforts to improve their lives. The organization's mission is also focused on deterrence and resource programs provided in schools and via the Internet.

The Empire State Coalition
www.empirestatecoalition.org
The Empire State Coalition is a membership organization using its collective voice to promote the safety, health and future of runaway, homeless and street-involved youth. The Empire State Coalition is committed to working on behalf of runaway, homeless and street youth to ensure their rights. Youth have the right to be safe, healthy and prepared for the future. The organization brings together agencies and individuals from throughout New York State who share our ideals and who, by serving youth in the full context of their families, their cultures and their communities, provide a continuum of services that works towards making that ideal a reality.

Compass House
www.compasshouse.org
Compass House exists to provide safe shelter and services to Runaway and Homeless youth (RHY). Clients of Compass House voluntarily enter the shelter or engage in case management through the Resource Center. All services are aimed at preventing the client's decline into chronic homelessness while promoting a more stable and productive living situation.
Sylvia’s Place
www.homelessyouthservices.org/sylviasplace.html
Sylvia’s Place is an emergency overnight shelter for LGBTQ youth (under 24) open 365 days/year from 8pm-8am. They provide hot meals (dinner and breakfast); clothing; showers; case management; physical and mental health medical services; court advocacy; and host a number of groups during the week.

Safe Schools Coalition
www.safeschoolscoalition.org
The mission of The Safe Schools Coalition: An international public-private partnership in support of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth is to help schools - at home and all over the world - become safe places where every family can belong, where every educator can teach, and where every child can learn, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Formerly a Washington-based organization, the Safe Schools Coalition has expanded its efforts worldwide. Besides featuring comprehensive support services for LGBT youth, they have a list of major homeless shelters catering to LGBT in every state.

The National Runaway Switchboard
www.1800runaway.org
The mission of the National Runaway Switchboard is to help keep America’s runaway and at-risk youth safe and off the streets. The organization serves as the federally designated national communication system for runaway and homeless youth. Founded by a group of Chicago agencies, NRS was established in 1971 to fill a need for comprehensive crisis intervention for young people in Chicago. A few years later they expanded into a national hotline with federal government support. The NRS works to prevent youth homelessness before it begins through intervention programs, and also offers a number of services catered specifically towards homeless youth as well.

The Ali Forney Center
www.aliforneycenter.org
Located in New York City, the Ali Forney Center(AFC) is the nation’s largest and most comprehensive organization dedicated to helping homeless LGBT youth. Their mission is to provide homeless LGBT youths, aged 16-24, with the support and services they need to escape the streets and begin to live healthy and independent lives, through services such as a day center, emergency and transitional housing programs, and a family outreach program.
YouthPride  
www.youthpride.org  
Based in Atlanta, Georgia, YouthPride is a nonprofit organization started in 1995 dedicated to serving the needs of LGBT youth in the metropolitan Georgia area. YouthPride offers a number of centers that provide places for homeless youth to hang out away from potentially hostile “general” shelters, providing a safe haven for LGBT youth off the streets. They operate a number of shelters in the Atlanta, GA area.

My Friend’s Place  
www.myfriendsplace.org  
My Friend’s Place started in 1988, with Steve LePore and Craig Scholz initiating a volunteer-led, mobile meal program to distribute sack lunches to the homeless youth in the Hollywood community. Soon the volunteers built trust with the young people and realized that youth are driven to the streets by abuse, abandonment and neglect by families and caregivers. Two years later, the volunteer group opened My Friend’s Place and began to add social and creative opportunities to their services. Today, My Friend’s Place is the most frequently visited drop-in Resource Center for homeless youth in Southern California, serving 1,000 youth ages 12 and over and their children, each year. 100% privately funded, the center is not government or religiously affiliated in any way.