




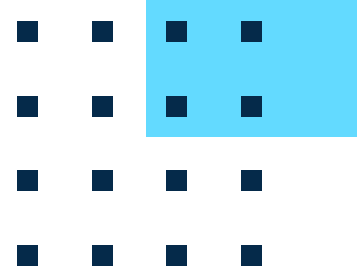
POWER, PREVENTION & THE PATHWAYS WE MISS:

Understanding Youth Exploitation



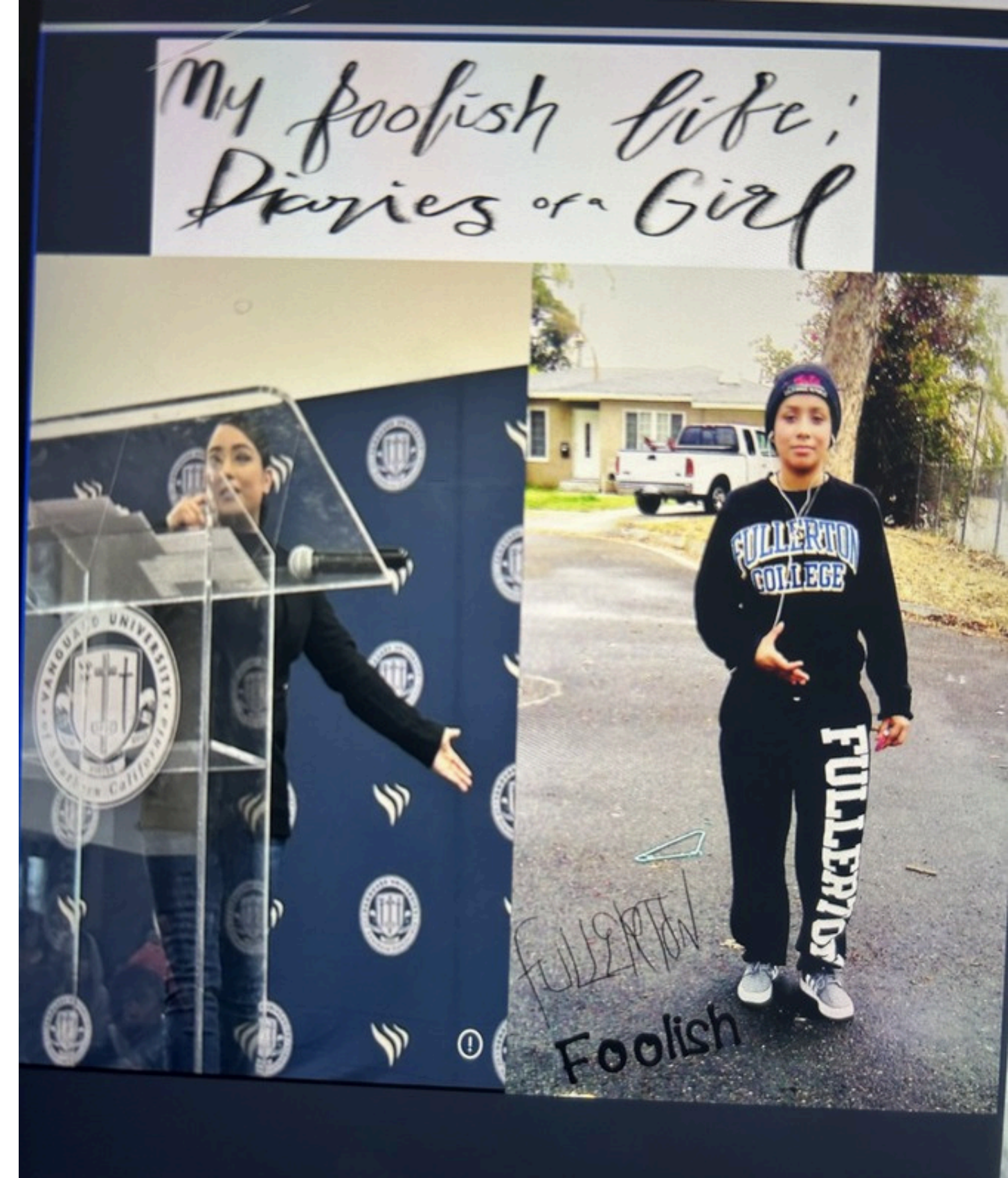
 Date:
5th, May 2026

 Presented by
Martha Coral Trujillo

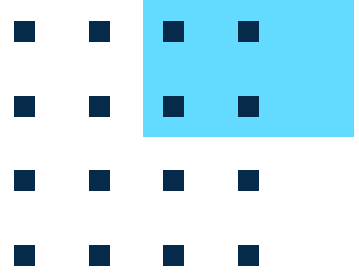


INTRODUCTION

- Founder & Executive Director, Full Circle Orange County
- Master's Degree in Criminology
- Developer of the Gang Trafficking Pathway™ framework
- Survivor-informed practitioner with lived experience
- Direct service provider to system-impacted youth across Southern California
- Specializing in gang involvement, exploitation, and youth criminalization
- Advocate for child-centered diversion through mentorship



“This isn’t about gangs. This is about how we understand children.”



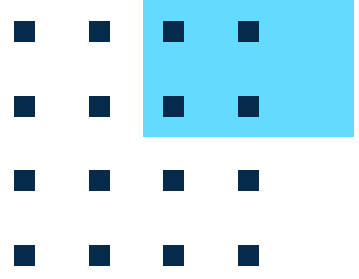
OBJECTIVES OF TRAINING

Today we will:

- Recognize the children we miss, (the ones that don't get justice)
- Understand the Gang Trafficking Pathway™ — step by step
- Recognize how power and Influence shape youth experiences
- Challenge how we label and respond to system-impacted youth
- Reframe survival behaviors vs. criminal behavior
- Explore a survivor-led, intervention-to-prevention model
- See how this work is applied through Full Circle — including the Lil' HOMIES Initiative pathway.



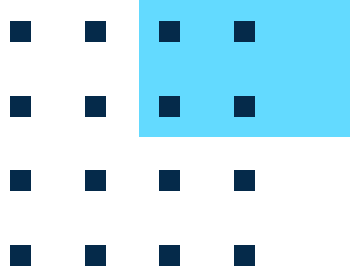
TENDING THE SOIL



POWER: WHO HOLDS INFLUENCE OVER YOUTH?



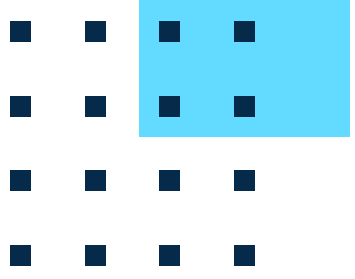
- Power is not always visible
- Power can look like protection, belonging or opportunity
- Youth are often influenced before they understand the risk



PREVENTION: WHERE WE START MATTERS

- Many youth are already experiencing harm
- Prevention alone can come too late
- Intervention is necessary to prevent further harm, but it needs to come from the right people. We will explore Survivor-led Intervention





PATHWAYS WE MISS

- Exploitation is a process not a moment
- It begins before system involvement
- It often goes unrecognized



THE CORE PROBLEM:

We recognize that children cannot give informed consent and we have laws that protect them from risks that can cause them harm. Yet when it comes to gangs, we treat children as if they did consent to a life of crime

CONSENT CONTRADICTION

Highlights a fundamental inconsistency in how systems understand children and youth:

A child cannot legally consent:

- sex
- contracts
- medical decisions
- police interrogations, stops in some cases
- marriage

Because we recognized

- their developmental stage
- their vulnerability
- their susceptibility to influence and coercion

Yet.....

When that same child:

- is recruited into a gang
- is groomed by older individuals
- is pressured into criminal activity
- is acting out of fear, survival or belonging

LEGAL DEFINITION

Child Sex Trafficking

1. Under 18 the person is a minor
2. Exchange something of value is given or received (Money, shelter, protection, food, etc)
3. No need to prove force
 - a. Force, Fraud or Coercion are not required for minors

■ ■ ■
■ ■ ■
■ Children in gangs are trading their literal lives for something of value. This is heart-breaking

Gang Penal Code

- Under the law California Penal code 186.22
A criminal street gang is defined as :
An ongoing group of three or more persons whether formal or informal, that has:
 - A common name or identifying sign/symbol
 - Members who collectively engage in a pattern of criminal activity
 - and whose primary activities include committing certain crimes.

■ ■ ■
■ ■ ■
■ ■ ■
■ ■ ■
■ ■ ■
Many of those crimes are crimes against ourselves and our own people

LEGAL CODIFICATION

California Penal Code 186.22 Step ACT 1988

- Defines “Criminal Street Gang”
- Allows sentence enhancements if someone is labeled a gang member
- Gives legal weight to police classification

but here’s the interesting part:

The law defines the gang, not clearly the

individual membership standard, so enforcement relies heavily on police interpretation

Databases & System Labeling (1990's - Present)

- Law Enforcement created gang databases like:
 - CalGang

People (including youth) could be entered based on:

- feild interviews (with no adult consent)
- Associations (if they are hanging out with older homies
- Appearance (if you look like a Gang Member)
- Location (if you happen to live in the hood)

Many individuals were never charged with gang-related crimes and yet they still carried the label for years.

POWER & INFLUENCE

Youth decisions are shaped within systems of influence and power, not isolation

Power

- The ability to shape options, access and outcomes.
- Not always force, can be relational and situational
- Often held by those who provide:
 - Protection
 - Resources
 - Identity

Influence

- How behavior and decision-making are shaped over time
- Built through:
 - Trust
 - Dependency
 - Repeated exposure
- Can normalize harmful dynamics before risk is recognized

WHICH CHILDREN DO WE MISS?

Youth labeled as:

- Gang-members
- Delinquents
- High-risk
- Throw-aways
- Academically disengaged
- Disrespectful
- Truant
- Drug addict
- Bad student

Often viewed through behavior

- More likely to be:
 - Criminalized
 - Surveilled
 - Punished
- Less likely to be:
 - identified as victims
 - Offered protection
 - given adequate support for their obstacles

THE GANG TRAFFICKING PATHWAY™

The Gang Trafficking Pathway™ is a framework that identifies how children and minors are systematically targeted, recruited, groomed, controlled, and exploited within gang environments, and ultimately criminalized for behaviors that emerge from that process.

It explains how adults and older individuals in positions of influence—including gang-affiliated adults and, in some cases, individuals within systems responsible for supervision or care—leverage vulnerability, unmet needs, and survival conditions to establish relationships with youth that evolve into dependency, coercion, and control.



CONTINUED

Within this pathway, what is commonly labeled as “gang involvement” is reframed as a progressive process of exploitation, where youth are not acting with full autonomy, but are conditioned, influenced, and maintained in roles that benefit others.

This process is sustained through psychological coercion, fear, loyalty conditioning, normalization of harm, and the strategic use of acceptance, belonging and identity — making it difficult for youth to recognize exploitation or safely exit.

As youth move through the pathway, they are often used for labor, criminal activity, and, in some cases, sexual exploitation — frequently in roles that shield adults from risk and accountability.



CONTINUED

Under federal law (22 U.S.C. § 7102; 18 U.S.C. § 1591) and California law (Penal Code § 236.1), these conditions meet the legal elements of human trafficking, particularly as minors cannot legally consent to exploitation.

However, youth are commonly documented and classified by law enforcement as “gang members” or “associates” (e.g., under California Penal Code § 186.22), a designation that emphasizes association and criminality rather than exploitation.

This creates a critical contradiction: children who meet the conditions of trafficking are frequently processed as offenders instead of being identified and protected as victims.



CONTINUED

The Gang Trafficking Pathway reframes gang involvement of minors from individual choice to a structured process of exploitation—shifting the response from punishment to prevention, early intervention, and protection.



8 STAGES IN THE PATHWAY

1. VULNERABILITY



2. TARGETING VS. SEEKING



3. RECRUITMENT/GROOMING



4. ACCEPTANCE/ INITIATION



5. CONTROL CONDITIONING



6. EXPLOITATION (2FORMS)

7. CRIMINALIZATION



8. NORMALIZATION

STAGE 1. VULNERABILITY

Unmet needs create conditions where influence becomes power

Common Forms of Vulnerability

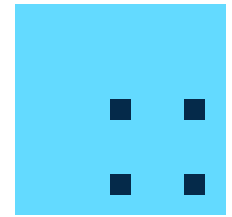
LACK OF CONSISTENT SAFETY OR SUPERVISION

FAMILY INSTABILITY OR SEPARATION

FOSTER CARE/. PLACEMENT. DISRUPTION

EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE OR TRAUMA

POVERTY/ SURVIVAL-BASED LIVING



STAGE 2. TARGETING VS SEEKING

Pathways into influence begin through both external targeting and or internal need-seeking

TARGETING (External Pull)

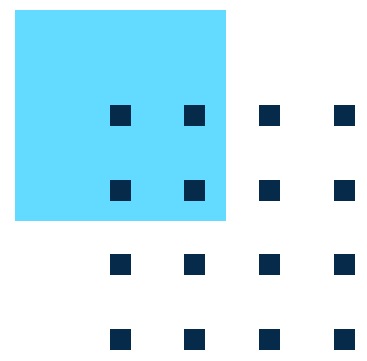
- Youth are identified and approached based on vulnerability
- Older peers or adults initiate contact
- Offers of protection, belonging, or opportunity
- Intentional recruitment in schools, neighborhoods, placements



drugs start making an appearance

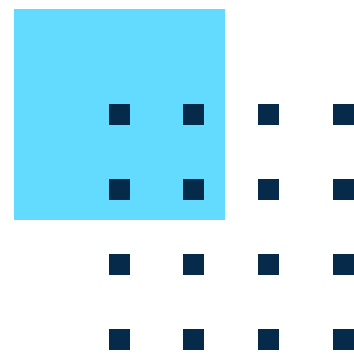
SEEKING (Internal Pull)

- Youth actively search for connection or stability
- Looking for belonging, identity, or family
- Seeking protection or safety
- Drawn toward environments that appear supportive



STAGE

3.RECRUITMENT/GROOMING



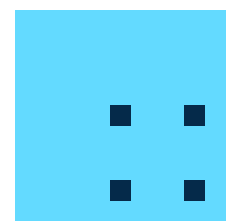
Relationships are intentionally built to create trust, connection, and influence

Common Grooming Strategies

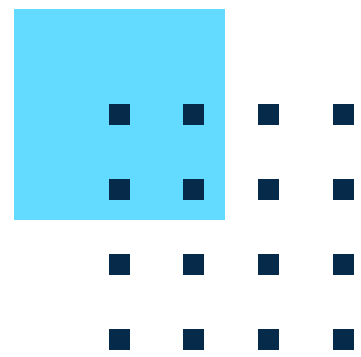
- Offering protection (“I got you”)
- Providing attention, validation, or affection
- Creating a sense of family or belonging
- Giving money, food, rides, or resources
- Normalizing gang presence and lifestyle

How Influence Develops

- Needs begin to be consistently met by the same source
- Emotional connection increases
- Trust replaces skepticism



STAGE 4. ACCEPTANCE/ INITIATION



The youth is no longer just connected, they are now recognized as part of the group

Common Forms of initiation

JUMPED IN (PHYSICAL VIOLENCE)

SEXED IN (SEXUAL EXPLOITATION)

WALKED IN (PUT ON THROUGH FAMILY OR RELATIONSHIPS)

BACK IT UP (EARN STATUS THROUGH ACTIONS)

What changes

IDENTITY BEGINS TO SHIFT "THIS IS WHO I AM"

LOYALTY IS EXPECTED, NOT OPTIONAL

SEPARATION FROM PREVIOUS LIFE NORMS BEGIN

Key insight: Initiation is not just an event, it is a psychological transition into belonging and obligation



STAGE 5. CONTROL CONDITIONING



Belonging is now reinforced through rules, expectations and psychological pressure.

Methods of Control Conditioning

LOYALTY TESTS AND EXPECTATIONS EX BEER RUNS

“PUT IN WORK” REQUIREMENTS

FEAR OF CONSEQUENCES FOR DISOBEDIENCE

REWARDS + PUNISHMENT CYCLES

REINFORCEMENT OF “US VS. THEM” MENTALITY

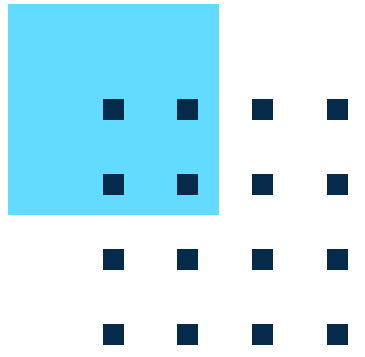
Psychological Impact

IDENTITY BECOMES TIED TO THE GROUP

FEAR AND LOYALTY BEGIN TO COEXIST

DECISION-MAKING BECOMES INFLUENCED, NOT INDEPENDENT

Key insight: Control is most often emotional, psychological and relational. Its a psychological warefare, you really believe this is who you are. Its a trap!



STAGE 6. CONTINUED.....



Form 2: System-related Exploitation

Occurs through system response::

- YOUTH ABSORB LEGAL RISK WHILE ADULTS REMAIN PROTECTED
- INCREASED SURVEILLANCE AND POLICING
- DETENTION, PROBATION OR INCARCERATION
- LOSS OF ACCESS TO SUPPORT AND RESOURCES
- EXCULSION FROM TRADITIONAL EDUCATION
- LABELING BEGINS: GANG MEMBER, OFFENDER,
- GANG-ENHANCEMENTS AND GANG-INJUCTIONS

Why this matters: The same behaviors that result from exploitation are later used to:

- justify punishment
- reinforce criminal identity
- Deny victim recognition

STAGE 6. EXPLOITATION (2 FORMS)

Youth are used for labor, harm and profit. Youth are no longer just involved they are now being utilized, directed and placed at risk

Form 1: Street-Based Exploitation

Occurs with gang environments:

- DRUG SALES AND DISTRIBUTION

- CARRYING OR HIDING WEAPONS

- THEFT, ROBBERIES OR BURGLARIES

VIOLENCE ON BEHALF OF THE GROUP

- SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OR COERCION

- RECRUITING OTHER YOUTH

- DRIVE-BYS, THAT LEAD TO ATTEMPTED MURDER OR MURDER

Key insight: Youth are often placed in high-risk roles with low power roles and high consequences.

STAGE 7. CRIMINALIZATION

System involvement begins and youth are now processed, labeled and punished.



What happens here:

- ARREST, CHARGES OR CITATIONS
- GANG AFFILIATION DOCUMENTED
- ENTRY INTO PROBATION, DETENTION OR INCARCERATION
- COURT INVOLVEMENT AND LEGAL RECORDS ESTABLISHED
- NOT SEEN AS A VICTIM

System framing:

- INTENTIONAL
- VOLUNTARY
- CRIMINAL

Why this matters: Criminalization leads to

- LONG-TERM SYSTEM INVOLVMENT
- RESTRICTED OPPORTUNITIES (EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, HOUSING)
- DEEPER ENTRENCHMENT IN GANG IDENTITY

Key Insight: The system responds to the outcome without addressing the pathway that produced it.

STAGE 8. NORMALIZATION

- ▪ ▪ ▪ Exploitation becomes accepted as identity, culture or choice

What normalization looks like :

- THAT'S JUST GANG LIFE
- VIOLENCE AND RISK BECOME ROUTINE
- YOUTH DEFEND LIFESTYLE
- COMMUNITY AND SYSTEMS ACCEPT IT AS INEVITABLE
- WE FORGET THEM AS CHILDREN

System reinforcement:

- CONTINUED LABELING AS "GANG MEMBER"
- REDUCED ACCESS TO SUPPORT/SERVICES
- PUNITIVE RESPONSES OVER PROTECTIVE ONES
- LACK OF RECOGNITION AS VICTIMS

Psychological Impact:

- HARM BECOMES NORMALIZED INTERNALLY
- IDENTITY BECOMES TIED TO THE LIFESTYLE
- LEAVING FEELS UNREALISTIC OR UNSAFE

Key Insight: gang involved youth are taught not to snitch or share anything regardless if they are the ones being harmed. we do not EVER press charges

THE GANG EXCEPTION

The Gang Exception is like a process by which a child is labeled “gang-involved” is no longer treated as a child, and the protections normally given to youth are reduced, removed or ignored

We can connect this to:

- Adultification Bias
 - Children are seen as older, more responsible and less innocent.
- Labeling Theory:
 - Once labeled “gang member” everything they do is interpreted through that lens
- System behavior:
 - Systems respond differently based on the label not the developmental reality

Additionally,

- Youth are recognized as victims only when it benefits prosecution.

The same murdered child is:

- A victim in court
- A criminal in every other system

**Protection is temporary and conditional
Support does not follow the recognition of harm.**

INSIDE THE GANG MIND



Understanding behavior through survival, conditioning and control

Psychological Conditioning

- Identity is shaped through belonging, validation, and role assignment.
- Violence and crime are normalized over time
- Youth are taught:
 - Who they are
 - Who the enemy is
 - What loyalty looks like and what it doesn't
 - What happens to those that are unloyal

Fear-based Compliance

Fear of:

- PUNISHMENT
- ISOLATION
- RETALIATION
- “CHOICE” is often made under pressure, threat or consequence
- Saying no can carry real danger

Loyalty = Survival

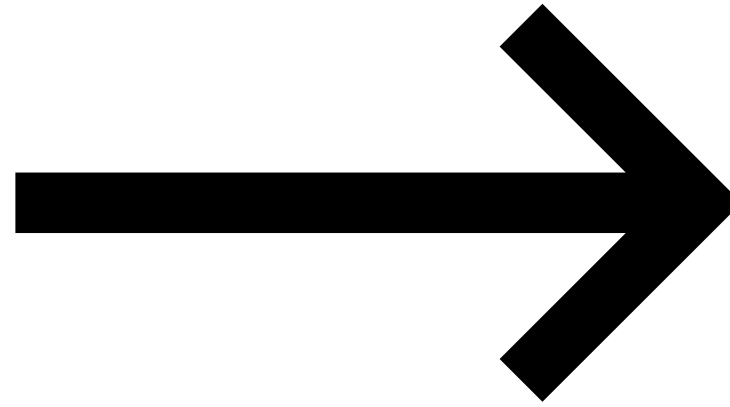
Loyalty is tied to:

- Safety
- Protection
- Identity

Betrayal can mean:

- Violence
- Abandonment
- Obedience becomes a survival strategy not a moral decision

WHY THIS ISN'T CALLED TRAFFICKING



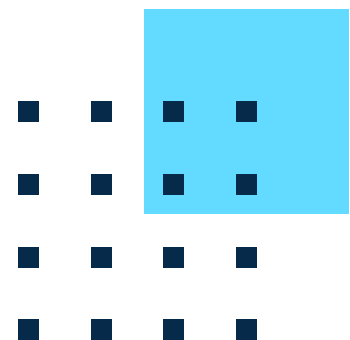
THE LABEL DETERMINES THE RESPONSE

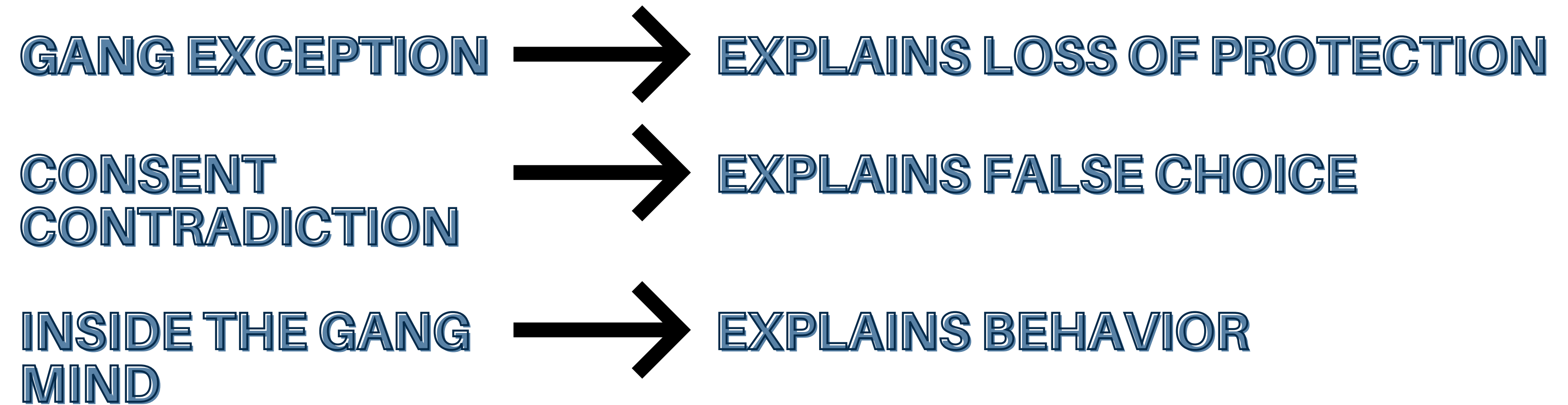
If we call this trafficking :

- Adults become traffickers
 - Not just “influences” or “older homies”
- Youth are recognized as victims
 - Not offenders first
- Systems become accountable
 - For missed interventions and protection failures
- Policies must change
 - From punishment to protection



THE LABEL DETERMINES THE RESPONSE

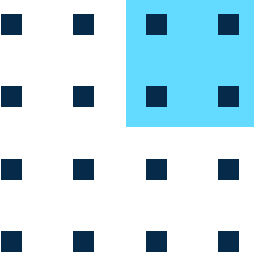




“TRAFFICKING ISN’T ABOUT WHAT WE CALL THE GROUP”.

IT’S ABOUT THE ACTIONS:

- **RECRUITMENT**
- **COERCION**
- **CONTROL**
- **EXPLOITATION**



THE IMPACT: WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUTH

Intermediate Impact

- Criminalization instead of protection
- Arrest, Probation, or Incarceration
- Loss of Safety and stability



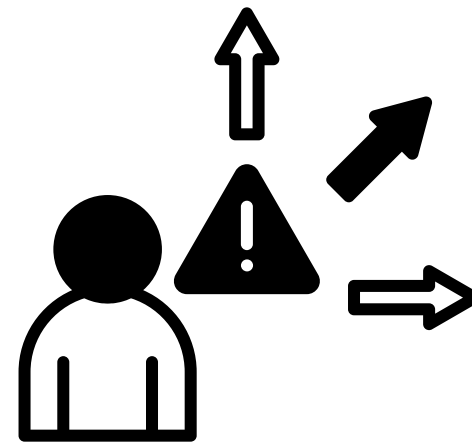
Psychological Impact

- Trauma, hypervigilance, survival thinking
- Identity shaped by labels (Gang member”
- Normalization of violence and harm



Long-term Consequences if they survive

- System involvement becomes a cycle
- Barriers to education, employment, housing
- Disconnection from positive opportunities
- They don't recognize themselves as victims



Human Cost if they don't

- Youth are Lost to:
 - The streets
 - The system
 - The Soil



The children we lose to death is reason enough to understand that this is a form of child abuse, child endangerment and child trafficking



SURVIVOR-LED INTERVENTION TO PREVENTION

Intervention leads to Prevention:

- Many youth are already experiencing harm before system involvement
- Aiming with prevention first often comes too late
- Intervention disrupts pathways of harm already in motion

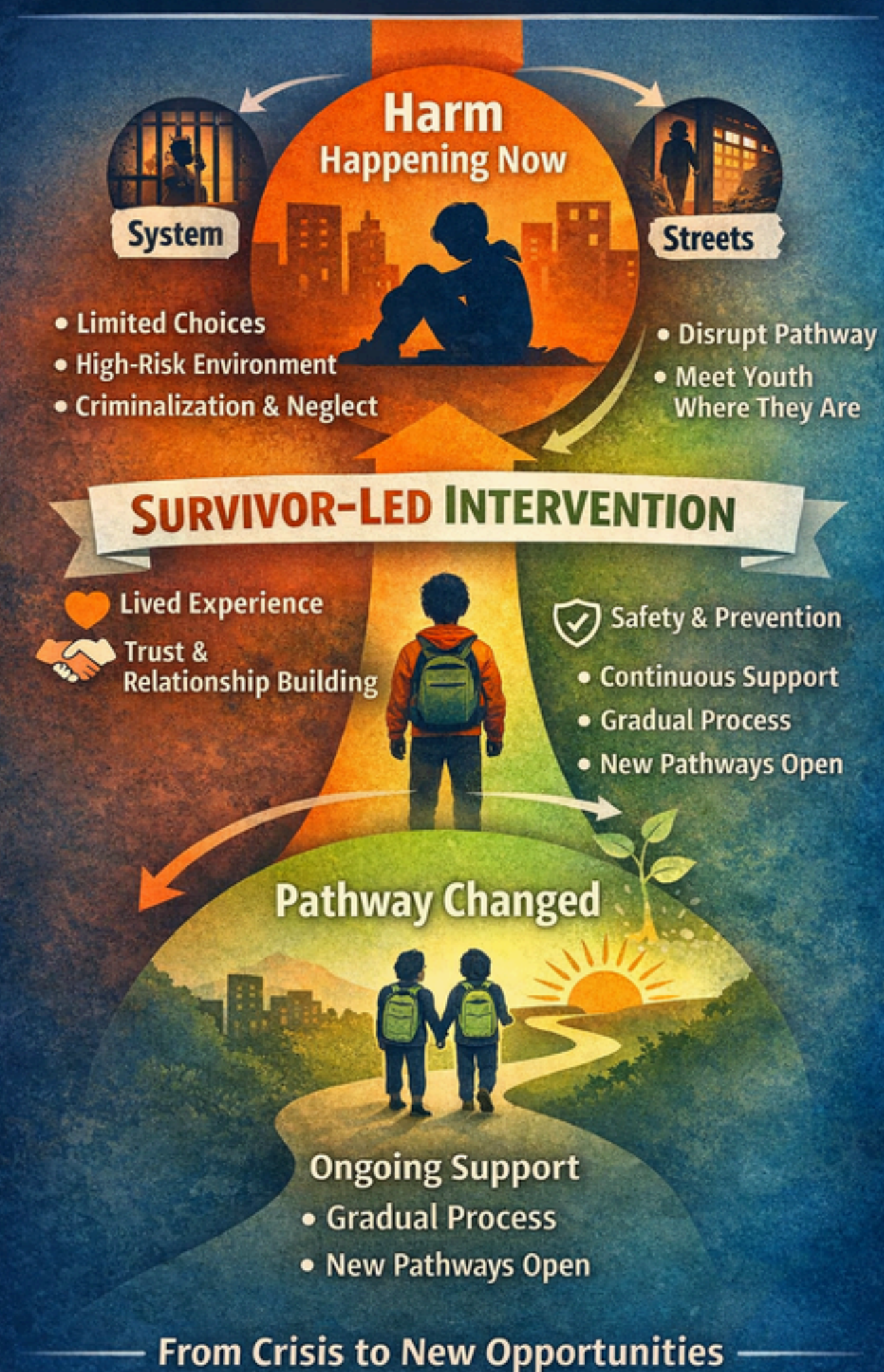
Why survivor-led matters:

- Lived Experience recognizes patterns not always documented
- Helps identify early signs of influence, control and exploitation
- Builds trust with youth who resist traditional systems

What makes it effective

- Relationship before redirection
- Meeting youth where they are
- Responding to behavior with context, not assumption

SURVIVOR-LED INTERVENTION TO PREVENTION



FULL CIRCLE MODEL

Survivor-led Mentroship

- Relationship-building before behavior
- Presence youth can trust
- Credible messenger with lived experience

Workshops that reflect Real Life

- Lil Homies initiative (Intervention to prevention model)
- Survival-based living to decision-making skills
- Identity, loyalty and mindset reframing
- Creative expression (ALOT OF THIS FORSURE)

Feeding before teaching Approach

- Food and incentives used intentionally
- Meeting a basic need to create engagement
- Building trust through consistency and care

Reentry & Transition Support

- Clothing, hygiene and essential needs
- Gas cards, grocery support and basic support
- Support navigating life after placement or incarceration





LIL HOMIES INITIATIVE PATHWAY

INTERVENTION THAT LEADS TO PREVENTION

BUILT IN RESPONSE TO THE GANG TRAFFICKING PATHWAY

- Direct response to how youth are recruited, conditioned and exploited
- Addresses each stage of the pathway in real time (even if the youth don't always understand at the moment).
- Designed for the current harm that is being experienced and for the future harm that needs to be prevented

REWIRING SURVIVAL INTO STRATEGY

- Helps youth understand:
 - Why they think the way they do
 - How their environments shaped them

The Lil' HOMIES Code (Core Curriculum)

The curriculum is grounded in the following framework:

H — Here to Protect

Youth will learn what true protection looks like in relationships, community, and self-management.

O — Out the System's Way

Participants will gain awareness of how decisions intersect with surveillance, policing, and incarceration.

M — Mind Over Moments

Skill-building focused on impulse control and long-term thinking.

I — I'm Still Here

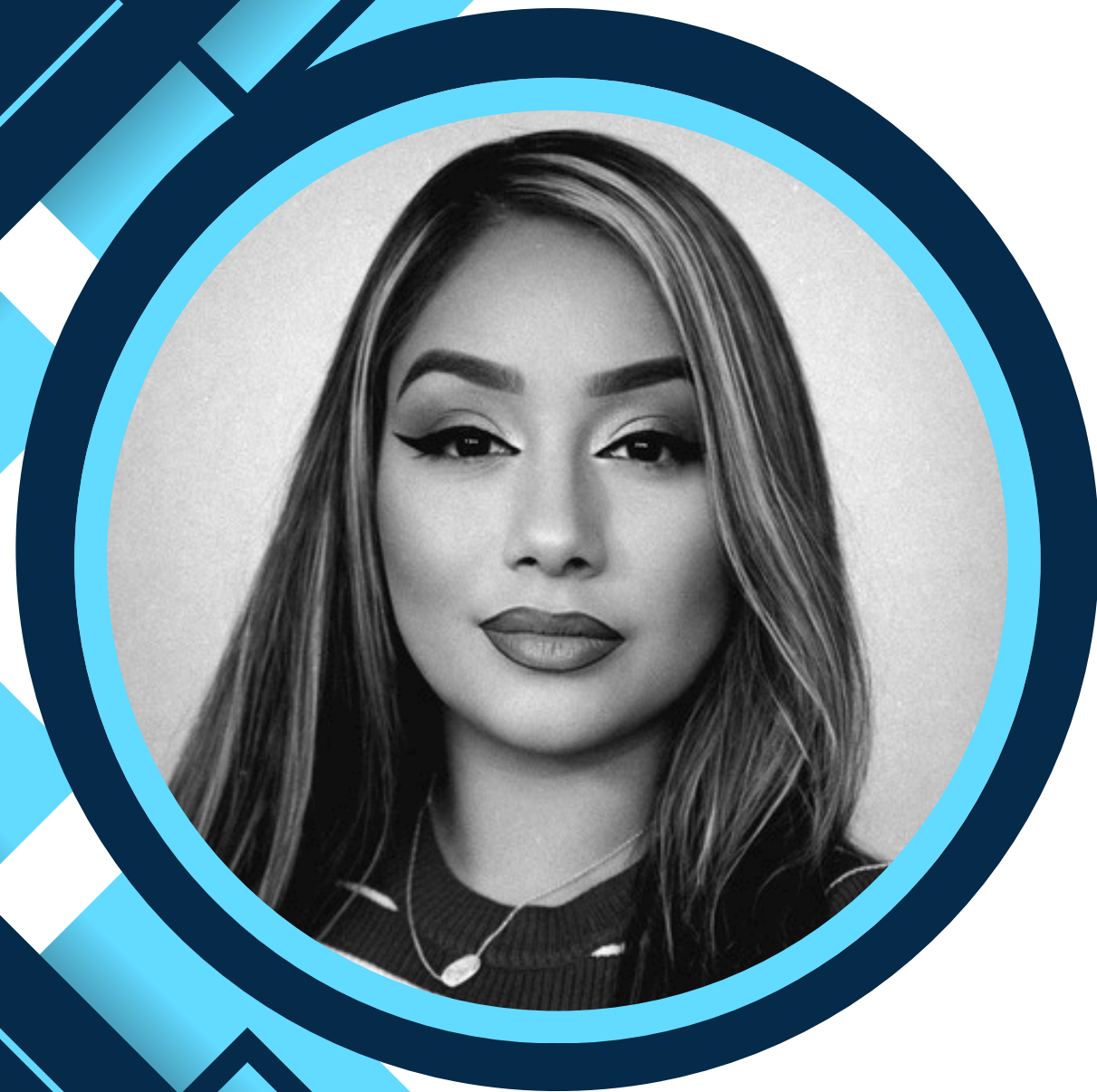
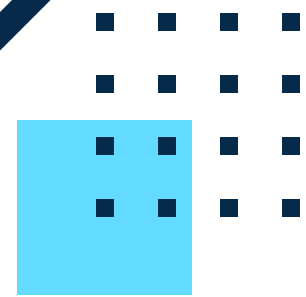
Reframing survival and resilience as strength, not luck.

E — Earned Respect

Teach respect as consistency, not fear or reputation.

S — Stand on Something

Youth clarify personal values that guide decisions in crisis.



THANK YOU



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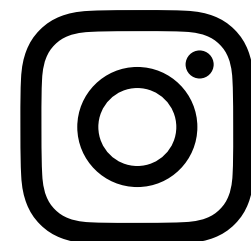
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