

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

Local  
Perspective

Fearing homelessness, a D.C. teen looked into her family's options. What she found left her more worried.

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April 24, 2021 at 12:00 p.m. EDT



Jessica Amaya Torres, left, worries that she and her mom, Milagro Torres, will end up homeless. Her research on the topic surprised her. (One World Education)

Jessica Amaya Torres knew she needed to write an essay for her high school English class, but she was finding it hard to concentrate on homework.

The 16-year-old's thoughts were on the two roommates who suddenly moved out of her family's D.C. apartment, leaving her mom facing more rent than she could afford.

"What would my mother and I do if we had to move out?" Torres recalls thinking. "What shelters could we go to? Then again, what if we can't go to shelters? Will we end up sleeping on a bench?"

Her mother didn't ask for help, but as Torres tells it, she didn't want to leave her bearing the weight of their worries alone. She knew her mom already carried plenty. An immigrant from El Salvador with little family in the Washington region, her mom had kept the two of them fed and housed by cleaning three buildings in the city.

The teenager decided to look into their housing options.

She opened her browser and started typing: *What if there are no available shelters for homeless people?*

When I talk to Torres on a recent afternoon about her experience, she doesn't know that she's about to win a contest.

She doesn't know that the research she started that day when she was worried about her housing — research that she later turned into an essay and a video presentation — didn't just land her in the final round of a competition held by a D.C. nonprofit organization; it landed her in first place.

All she knows in that moment is that her research opened her eyes to how cities push the unhoused out of sight, and that grown-ups are listening to what she has to say.

“Of course, I'm hopeful to win,” the 10th-grader tells me. “I want to prove to my mom what I can do. But she says she's already proud of me. I'm okay with losing because she knows that I've already made an impact with my story, with our story, with the story of our community.”

That's the thing about Torres's story — it's not hers alone. Housing insecurity is a shared reality for many people right now and will become so for even more as eviction moratoriums lift. At the end of last year, according to a [Washington Post article](#), an estimated 11.3 million households nationwide were behind on rent or wouldn't be able to pay the next month, and landlords had responded by filing hundreds of thousands of eviction notices.

Torres's story offers a glimpse into what that looks like for many children in the Washington region. Her mother is working. She's trying hard in school. And they are worried.

In her research, one click led to another. Soon, Torres realized that if she and her mom couldn't go to a shelter or sleep in their car — which only sometimes runs — they couldn't even count on finding a place on the street to sleep. She discovered that many cities have put in place outdoor furniture that prevents people from lying down or sitting too long.

Spikes on heating grates. Benches split by armrests. Metal seats angled uncomfortably upward. She saw photos of designs intended to keep the unhoused uncomfortable, and then, once she realized what she was looking at, she saw those structures all around her. An Instagram page [dedicated to hostile architecture](#) in the District features a map covered in dots, each marking an example.



Once Torres learned about “hostile architecture,” she started noticing examples around the District. She took this picture on 14th Street. (Jessica Amaya Torres)

“It really shook me,” Torres says. “It’s saying that members of the community are unwelcomed. It’s also sending the message that people are trying to push away problems instead of trying to solve them.”

Investing in solutions instead of pushing the problem out of sight seems logical. It also seems right. When Torres first decided to write about the issue for her English class, she was hesitant to share her personal connection to the topic. But when that class essay gained her a chance to participate in the [One World Education program](#), she decided it was important to open up.

The program grew out of a D.C. teacher’s frustration with the lack of student engagement in essay assignments and has become one that sees thousands of the city’s children each school year write about issues that matter to them.

During a normal year, the students’ words offer powerful views into their lives, fears and hopes.

During a pandemic year, they provide important first-person accounts of what students have experienced during a historic time, one in which a virus has pushed people apart, calls for racial justice have pulled them together and economic uncertainty has left them standing on shifting ground. They also provide the students with a chance to win a cash prize. The top amount in Torres’s category was \$1,000.

This year, one high school senior focused her presentation on migrant children who are detained by the government. In her video, she cites not only statistics, but also her own experience in a Texas detention center after her mother received a deportation order.

“Being there left me with the fear that I could be separated from her, and that’s a fear no child should ever have to go through,” she says. She describes seeing people served expired food and sleep in bathrooms because of overcrowding. “When I was detained, I was dehumanized.”

Another student picked as her subject teenage suicide. In an essay, she tells of losing one of her closest friends and pleads for people to pay more attention to the issue.

“Take this seriously,” she says. “Imagine if that was your family member — wouldn’t you want to know someone has your back and could help you? I know I would’ve wanted it.”

Natalie Hinds, a D.C. educator who worked with the students for One World, says the most powerful aspect of the program for her was “hearing their whys.”

“Everybody can pick a topic they can write about, but understanding why it’s important to them was the most enlightening part,” she says. She recalls feeling struck by Torres’s why, and her willingness to share it early on during group discussions.

“To feel courageous enough to be able to share that without fear of judgment felt remarkable to me,” Hinds says. “She inspired me as an educator and as a woman to be courageous and vulnerable and understand that maybe people might not know what I’m talking about, but because I’m willing to share, maybe they will understand and even agree with what I’m saying.”

Hinds says Torres also changed the way she looks at outdoor spaces in New York, where she grew up, and in the District.

On the night that the organization announced the winners, Torres watched through a screen in the apartment she feared — and still fears — losing. Her mom, she says, has managed to keep them housed by using her stimulus check, getting help from a community organization and cleaning buildings when she can.

When her name was called, Torres listened alone. Her mom wanted to witness that moment, but she couldn’t. She had to work.