

# Los Angeles' homelessness crisis is a national disgrace

By The Times Editorial Board  
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(Los Angeles Times)

There are few sights in the world like nighttime in skid row, the teeming Dickensian dystopia in downtown Los Angeles where homeless and destitute people have been concentrated for more than a century.

Here, men and women sleep in rows, lined up one after another for block after block in makeshift tents or on cardboard mats on the sidewalks — the mad, the afflicted and the disabled alongside those who are merely down on their luck. Criminals prey on them, drugs such as heroin and crystal meth are easily available, sexual

assault and physical violence are common and infectious diseases like tuberculosis, hepatitis and AIDS are constant threats.

Skid row is — and long has been — a national disgrace, a grim reminder of man’s ability to turn his back on his fellow man. But these days it is only the ugly epicenter of a staggering homelessness problem that radiates outward for more than 100 miles throughout Los Angeles County and beyond. There are now more than 57,000 people who lack a “fixed, regular or adequate place to sleep” on any given night in the county, and fewer than 1 in 10 of them are in skid row.

Homelessness burst its traditional borders several years ago, spreading first to gloomy underpasses and dim side streets, and then to public parks and library reading rooms and subway platforms. No matter where you live in L.A. County, from Long Beach to Beverly Hills to Lancaster, you cannot credibly claim today to be unaware of the squalid tent cities, the sprawling encampments, or the despair and misery on display there.

There are close to 58,000 homeless people in Los Angeles county. That’s a stunning, bewildering, tragic number – in a region that’s home to some of the richest people in the world. This is an L.A. Times editorial series.

At last, the problem became so acute — and so visible — that Los Angeles took extraordinary action. To your credit, to all of our credit, the citizens of this city and this county voted in November 2016 and again in March 2017 to raise our own taxes to fund an enormous multibillion-dollar, 10-year program of housing and social services for the homeless.

As a result, Los Angeles now has its best chance in decades to combat homelessness — an opportunity that surely all can agree must not be wasted. It is neither desirable nor morally acceptable nor practical for this city or this county to blithely tolerate the signs of destitution more commonly associated with 1980s Calcutta or the slums of Rio de Janeiro or medieval Europe. We cannot go on shutting our windows to beggars at freeway offramps or stepping casually over men and women curled up in sleeping bags or turning away when people who have no access to public bathrooms use the city streets as toilets. We cannot indefinitely roust people who have nowhere to go or confiscate their belongings or criminalize their struggle for basic necessities. Such desperate stopgap measures are not solutions, but emblems of a deteriorating city, admissions of failure. We now have the opportunity to do better.

## **Without a Home**

They’re part of the Los Angeles streetscape, as familiar as the swaying palm trees and idling traffic, living under freeways, alongside riverbeds and on canyon hillsides. The mentally ill, the drug addicts, the economically disadvantaged, many with their life belongings in a backpack or shopping cart. In this ongoing series, *Without a Home*, The Times is examining the crisis of homelessness in our region. [Full coverage](#)

But here’s the bad news: Passing Measures H and HHH was the easy part. Money alone doesn’t solve problems, and in the end the tougher questions are how to spend it, where to spend it, on whom to spend it and how to measure success. If we hope that the crisis will be gone — or, more realistically, under control — when the money runs out in 10 years, we need city and county officials to explain what actions they’re taking and why, how many people they’ve housed or failed to house, what they expect to accomplish by the end of the year and by the end of the decade — so that we can hold them accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, those politicians who have for too long shamefully shirked their responsibility to address the festering problems must now exercise real leadership; they must stop pandering to the vocal minority of residents who object to housing for homeless and low-income people in their neighborhoods. Years of infighting, mixed messages and failures of political will must come to an end.

All the region’s politicians must step up, but especially Mayor Eric Garcetti — whose legacy and political future will rise or fall on how he handles this colossal urban crisis — and the members of the Los Angeles City Council, who have too often allowed political expediency and timidity to guide their actions. Homelessness in the city of Los Angeles has risen every year since Garcetti took office in 2013. Over the course of his tenure, it is up 49%.

County officials have made some progress — breaking down bureaucratic silos, leveraging new federal Medicaid dollars, setting sensible goals and priorities, using Measure H money to quadruple the number of homeless outreach teams, add shelter beds and help with rental subsidies — but they too have an enormous task ahead of them. And homelessness, which does not recognize municipal boundaries, is also present in most of the other 87 cities in L.A. county, many of which have historically tried to push the poor and homeless out, hoping the problem would go away. Only three cities in the county are on track to meet their “fair share” housing construction goals.



(Los Angeles Times)

How did we get here? From the founding of this newspaper in 1881, the pages of The Times have been filled with stories of those we have called, at various times, vagrants, hobos, tramps, transients and drifters. And for as long as there have been homeless people, there has been a tendency to blame the victims themselves for their condition — to see their failure to thrive as an issue of character, of moral weakness, of laziness. Since the “deinstitutionalization” of the mentally ill in the second half of the 20th century, and the subsequent failure of government to provide the promised outpatient services for those who had been released, the problem has grown significantly worse.

**Don't feed the worthless chaps. It only encourages them in their idleness and viciousness. There is no cause for begging. They could all get work at good wages if they would accept it. Whenever a healthy vag solicits a meal or money you do not do your duty if you do not inform the police and have the beggar arrested.**

Today, a confluence of factors is driving people onto the streets. The shredding of the safety net in Washington and here in California is one. (Consider the inexcusable shortage of federal Section 8 vouchers for subsidized low-income housing, or the dismally low level of “general relief payments” for the county’s neediest single adults.)

At the same time, California is experiencing a severe housing shortage. Gentrification is taking more and more once-affordable rental units off the L.A. market, and restrictive zoning laws along with high construction costs and anti-development sentiment make new affordable units hard to build. Over the last six years, the rent for a studio apartment in Los Angeles has climbed 92%, according to UCLA law professor emeritus Gary Blasi, so that even people who have jobs can find themselves living on the streets after a rent spike or an unexpected crisis. As Blasi notes: “In America, housing is a commodity. If you can afford it, you have it; if you can’t, you don’t.”

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Gary Blasi, UCLA law professor emeritus

Contrary to popular belief, the homeless in Los Angeles are not mostly mentally ill or drug addicted, raving or matted-haired or frightening — although a sizable minority meet some of those descriptions. They are not mostly people who drifted in from other states in search of a comfy climate in which to sponge off of others; the overwhelming majority have lived in the region for years. Today, a greater and greater proportion of people living on the streets are there because of bad luck or a series of mistakes, or because the economy forgot them — they lost a job or were evicted or fled an abusive marriage just as the housing market was growing increasingly unforgiving.

It will surprise no one to learn that it is the most vulnerable among us who usually end up without a place to live. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, more than 5,000 of the county’s 58,000 homeless people are children and more than 4,000 are elderly. About one-third are mentally ill. Some 40% are African American. Also heavily represented: Veterans. The disabled. Young people from the county’s overwhelmed juvenile justice system and its foster care programs. Men and women just released from jail, without the tools or skills needed for reentering society. Patients released from public hospitals — often with untreated cancers, infections, heart disease or diabetes. Victims of domestic violence.

All the great social issues of American society play out in homelessness — inequality, racial injustice, poverty, violence, sexism. Naturally, life expectancy for the homeless is short: about 47 years, according to skid row doctor Susan Partovi, compared with 78 in the population as a whole.



(Los Angeles Times)

Solutions to the problem vary, depending on which portion of the homeless population you're trying to help. In the months and years ahead, many more supportive housing units (which include access to social services and treatment) must be sited and built for the chronically homeless, as promised by Measure HHH — in all parts of the city, not just where the backlash will be weakest. To this end, city politicians (who have control over land-use policies) must lead rather than be led by a vocal minority of obstructionist constituents. At the same time, for the region's "economically homeless," the state's broader housing crisis must be addressed by new laws and incentives that encourage construction, especially of subsidized affordable housing. For the good of the city itself, short-term needs must be weighed against long-term solutions and officials must find the right balance between managing the homelessness problem and eradicating it. The rights of people living on the streets must be protected and balanced against the needs of the city.

The challenges are enormous, even if everyone is pulling in the same direction. That reality was driven home this month by a new Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority report showing that the county's homeless population is increasing faster than the supply of new housing, despite the millions of dollars already flowing in from the two ballot measures.

In the world's richest nation, homelessness on this scale should be shameful and shocking. But most Angelenos are no longer either shocked or shamed. Increasingly, we are uncomfortable, irritated, disgusted, scared or oblivious. Compassion is being replaced by resignation.

Yet we all know the truth: The men curled up in the sleeping bags and the women pushing the overflowing shopping carts or talking to invisible interlocutors on the subways could, if the world were just a slightly different place, be our mothers, our brothers, our friends, ourselves.

It is imperative that we act now so that we don't wake up in five, 10 or 20 years wondering where we were or what we could possibly have been thinking or why we kept quiet and did nothing as this unconscionable catastrophe took hold.

*This is the first in a series of editorials.*



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