

The background image shows a city street scene. In the foreground, a tent is pitched on a sidewalk. The tent has an orange top and a dark grey bottom. To the left, there is a building with a grid-like facade. To the right, there are trees with autumn-colored leaves, a bench, and a parking sign. The overall scene is slightly blurred, suggesting a focus on the tent and the text overlay.

**UCLA** *Luskin Center for  
History and Policy*

THE MAKING  
OF A CRISIS:  
A HISTORY OF  
HOMELESSNESS  
IN LOS ANGELES

The Making of a Crisis:  
A History of Homelessness in Los Angeles

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## ***A Preface in Time of Pandemic***

The pre-pandemic homelessness crisis that called out for this research project seemed, in optimistic retrospect, to be nearing its apex. New public attention about the rising population of unhoused people in Los Angeles County justifiably pushed forward local policy discussions, as it did this project. Billions of dollars of public funds have been dedicated to the aim of flattening the shameful curve of homelessness. Even though the ideal of creating a landscape of accessible, dignified housing seemed far off, it still seemed possible to make a turn toward a new horizon. Then the novel coronavirus unleashed a pandemic upon the world.

Shelter-in-Place orders sent those of us with housing into the safety of quarantine; and for the unhoused, the pandemic added yet another multiplier to chances of premature death. Access to safe housing has always been critical to personal and collective well-being, as recent outbreaks of tuberculosis in Los Angeles’s Skid Row have made painfully clear. But as the present crisis continues to unfold—at the deadly intersection of a historic pandemic, a dysfunctional social welfare system, a decades-long scarcity of affordable homes, skyrocketing unemployment, and the persistent reality of racialized violence at the hands of the state—the fundamental link between housing and well-being has come undone in unprecedented ways. As the public health mandates of “lockdown,” “social distancing,” and “hand hygiene” restructure everyday life, the lethal consequences of unequal access to safe shelter have taken on new proportions. The chilling prospect of hundreds of thousands of Los Angeles households facing eviction and potential homelessness has only added to the sense of urgency. Recently published research, for example, suggests that between 365,000 and 495,000 households in Los Angeles County are at imminent risk of eviction, most of whom will be lower-income people of color, especially Black Angelenos.<sup>1</sup> This estimate does not include illegal evictions, which means that the actual number of people facing homelessness in the near future might be much higher.

While marking an unprecedented conjuncture of eviction and displacement, the current moment might also represent a unique time to tackle housing inequality and,

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Blasi, “UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles,” *UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy*, May 28, 2020, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gz6c8cv>.

particularly, homelessness. If urban crises like this one provide an opportunity for mass mobilization around housing injustice, then politicians and government representatives must seize the moment to advance bold ideas and comprehensive programs benefiting the houseless. Serious and committed action to challenge displacement in Los Angeles, especially among policymakers and other authorities, is overdue. The COVID-19 pandemic has merely heightened this urgency. At stake is not only the looming dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Los Angeles residents in the upcoming months, but, more fundamentally, a violation of the human right to housing. Framing housing as a human right implies not only that housing should be affordable and accessible, but that security of tenure should be guaranteed. And this is especially critical now, when social distancing, access to basic services such as water and sanitation, and the ability to shelter in place are matters of life and death.

**How Did We Get Here?**  
**The Past and Present of Homelessness and Attempts to Solve It in Los**  
**Angeles**

***Introduction***

More than a half-century ago, social theorist Michael Harrington published *The Other America* (1962). The book confronted the anomaly that a country of such extraordinary wealth, talent, and innovation permitted tens of millions of people to dwell in poverty. This was the “other America,” Harrington wrote, referring to “the unskilled workers, the migrant farm workers, the aged, the minorities, and all the others who live in the economic underworld of American life.”<sup>2</sup>

Nearly sixty years after Harrington’s sobering diagnosis, the problem has hardly disappeared; in fact, it is even more deeply entrenched in the fabric of the American economic and social order. Whereas Harrington suggested, not entirely accurately, that the “other America” was largely invisible in the early ‘60s, there can be no such claim today. The other America stands right before our eyes, on sidewalks, in tent camps, cars, and temporary shelters. We walk past that America every day in our cities and towns. The other America consists of the homeless women, men, and children whose presence on our streets attests to one of this country’s gravest social and moral failings.

Sadly, Los Angeles has come to be regarded as “the homeless capital” of the United States.<sup>3</sup> Rising property values, which have driven up rents, and the increasing conversion of affordable housing to market-rate housing has led to a severe shortage of low-cost options. This unprecedented housing crisis has prompted a spike in the rates of homelessness both in the city and county of Los Angeles. Notwithstanding increasing public attention and countless policy solutions, homelessness increased over the last five years by nearly 50%, according to the Los Angeles County Homeless Count. Over 2019 alone, the rate grew by an astonishing 14% in the City of Los Angeles to more than

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Gorman, “Los Angeles Homelessness Rises Sharply as Housing Crisis Deepens,” Reuters.com, June 4, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-homeless-losangeles/los-angeles-homelessness-rises-sharply-as-housing-crisis-deepens-idUSKCN1T6o9L>.

41,000 (and more than 66,000 in the county), not including the new wave of people experiencing homelessness as a result of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> As housing becomes more expensive, as wages continue to stagnate, and as the Angeleno population ages, additional social groups will become *at risk* of homelessness in a city that lacks the basic infrastructure and political capacity to address an already dire crisis.

With statistics such as these, it is little wonder that homelessness has attracted much attention in recent years, generating initiatives to increase local taxes for homeless housing and services in Los Angeles City and County (Measures HHH and H, respectively). But the phenomenon has a long history in the region. Residents have struggled to secure housing in Los Angeles extending back to the nineteenth century, when transient laborers rode the rails west to the city seeking work. Since then, government initiatives, migration trends, and a highly uneven housing market have repeatedly transformed the region's homeless population. These transformations are especially apparent considering the demographic makeup of Los Angeles's homeless. Single, often older, white men comprised most of the Skid Row population into the 1970s. Thereafter, following decades of racialized residential segregation, employment discrimination, and financial redlining, nonwhites—and African Americans in particular—began to make up the majority. Today, African Americans make up 34% of Los Angeles County's homeless but just 8% of the general population. Latinx-identified people constitute 36% of the homeless population and 48% of the general population.<sup>5</sup> People of color are disproportionately represented among the region's homeless.

This report explores this important demographic and racial change as it unfolded from the early twentieth century to the present. It illuminates how Los Angeles's current homelessness crisis took shape in response to local conditions, as well as to broader regional and national patterns of racialized residential segregation, employment discrimination, and other forms of inequalities. It goes on to ask a number of other key questions. What factors contributed to sharp increases in homelessness at particular moments? How did government officials, private agencies, and the public respond to

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Oreskes and Doug Smith, "Homelessness Jumps 12% in the County and 16% in the City; Officials Stunned," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), "Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count 2020," June 2020, <https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=4558-2020-greater-los-angeles-homeless-count-presentation.pdf>.



homelessness over time? What policy solutions were proposed or tried, and how did these address, or fail to address, the problem? Why have certain types of policy solutions remained popular despite their continual inability to address homelessness in Los Angeles? Why have others not been implemented or even considered? The answers to these questions shed considerable light on why—at a moment when government officials and the public have agreed to invest billions in solutions to homelessness—the problem seems so intractable today.

In tracing the arc of homelessness in LA over the past century, this report is attentive to both similarities and differences in how homelessness has evolved over time. Placing homelessness in Los Angeles into different historical contexts—such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, the period of economic growth following World War II, or deindustrialization in the 1970s and ‘80s—can deepen our understandings of the problem in its current manifestation. The reasons many Angelenos cannot afford housing today are *not* the same as during the Great Depression, nor are local and federal government responses to these housing crises. At the same time, historicizing homelessness in Los Angeles can draw attention to underlying structural issues that do not receive sufficient attention in policy discussions today, including the economic legacy of racial discrimination and the considerable influence that real estate and business interests have had in shaping local development policies.

We aim to highlight these structural issues by tracking a few key threads that run through the history of homelessness in Los Angeles. These threads are deeply entwined with one another, and we cannot understand our current homelessness crisis without understanding their historical interrelationship. The **lack of affordable housing** is not merely a contemporary problem, but has put severe pressure on Los Angeles residents at multiple points over the past century, pushing many into homelessness. Low incomes along with high rents have contributed to this crisis. While those experiencing homelessness proposed immediate and long-term plans to address this issue time and again, such plans often only led to temporary solutions. The **historical demography** of homelessness in Los Angeles has changed significantly over the past century, although the disproportionate rate of African American homelessness has been a constant (though often ignored) factor. Discriminatory housing and employment policies compounded economic constraints, such as affordable housing shortages and

rising unemployment, disproportionately affecting this group. Although the racial dimensions of this crisis are now receiving more publicity, thus far homeless policy has failed to address the issue.<sup>6</sup> City officials have relied on **policing and incarceration** to manage homeless populations in Los Angeles extending back to the early twentieth century. This widely used method of poverty management in Los Angeles has unduly affected certain populations—such as African Americans in heavily surveilled communities or the chronically mentally ill—and exacerbated the plight of economically marginalized groups by saddling them with fines and ineradicable criminal records.

County and city officials along with private agencies have responded to homelessness in other ways as well. Going back to the Great Depression, local officials have been unable or unwilling to respond in a comprehensive and coordinated fashion, offering only a **patchwork of welfare benefits and services, which private and non-profit agencies have tried to fill in**. The labyrinthine structure of local government in Los Angeles County—where cities exercise police and zoning power, the county is responsible for social welfare, and neither the city nor the county has responsibility to provide or build “housing” per se under state law—has contributed to this fractured response. We underscore these factors and their interconnection throughout our historical narrative to show how and why homelessness has taken shape in Los Angeles the way it has over the past century (and will likely continue along such lines unless we acknowledge and address these factors in homeless policy going forward).

This report also traces a geographical thread, focusing on the history of downtown Los Angeles and particularly Skid Row. This neighborhood has been a constant presence in popular conceptions and public responses to regional homelessness since the late nineteenth century. The concentration of homeless services and populations in Skid Row continually reinforced one another. But homelessness in Los Angeles has not been confined to this neighborhood. For over a century, houseless individuals have sought out places to live throughout the county. In recent years, homelessness has increased exponentially in the county’s suburbs of the San Fernando

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Lopez, “Black people make up 8% of L.A. population and 34% of its homeless. That’s unacceptable,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2020.

and San Gabriel Valleys as well as its periphery in the Antelope Valley. Acknowledging the geographic breadth of homelessness in the region, we nonetheless focus on downtown Los Angeles, as this area has long been a central concern of policy makers, service agencies, and the media. In many ways, conceptions of and responses to homelessness in Skid Row have set the tone for conceptions and responses to homelessness in Los Angeles more broadly. This report helps explain why that is.

In providing a social history of homelessness in Los Angeles, we rely heavily on a thick qualitative description of what the phenomenon looked like over the past century. This approach allows us to gain a more granular sense of the relationship between factors shaping and exacerbating homelessness over time. In addition, it enables our central task of contextualizing what it meant to be homeless in Los Angeles at different moments. While we have supplemented our archival material with some quantitative data, they are not a central source base here. For much of the period covered, homeless numbers were collected in piecemeal fashion, if they were collected at all. Therefore, it is difficult to be precise about the quantitative picture of homelessness and its causes from the early twentieth century. Furthermore, there are certain questions raised here—for example, how property rights have been discussed and understood in the past and how this history might inform present discussions of property rights—that are far more amenable to the kind of descriptive social history used here.

As this brief introduction suggests, homelessness in Los Angeles is an exceptionally complex phenomenon that has consistently vexed policymakers and scholars alike. And this phenomenon of homelessness has a long history in Los Angeles, with through-lines of continuity appearing alongside dramatic shifts in the story. It is our aim to explore the longer history of homelessness in Los Angeles, noting how the phenomenon has been described, what caused it, and what solutions were proposed by private and public officials to address it. It is our belief that this historical perspective is essential to understanding the roots of contemporary homelessness and to suggesting a path forward that avoids the many mistakes of the past.

### **Report Roadmap**

This report serves as a foundational text for understanding the historical and political landscape of homelessness in Los Angeles, key factors that have contributed to it, and policy recommendations to address homelessness. Section I provides a chronicle of the history of homelessness in Los Angeles over the past century or so. It divides up this history into three main parts: the Great Depression and World War II, the Postwar Era (including a subsection on the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill), and the 1980s to the Present. This is followed by a discussion of the consequences of the current COVID-19 pandemic for homelessness and the health of the homeless in Los Angeles, as well as a brief summary of our findings. The report concludes in Section II with policy recommendations gleaned from this research.

### **A Word on Language**

While the term “homeless” continues to dominate policy discussions, many unhoused people deem it stigmatizing and imprecise, arguing that a sense of home should not be conflated with a physical structure. This report uses “homeless,” “houseless,” and “unhoused” interchangeably to reflect such debates over terminology.

## ***Section I: The History of Homelessness in Los Angeles***

### **The Great Depression and World War II**

The dynamic interplay of economic factors and race, as well as local governments' reliance on private organizations and policing to manage homeless populations, represent long continuities in the history of homelessness in Los Angeles. At the same time, homelessness in Los Angeles, and its demographics in particular, looked very different in the first half of the twentieth century than it does today.

#### *Foundations of Homelessness in Los Angeles*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the most visible and policed cohort of homeless people, overwhelmingly men, were white, including both native-born individuals and European immigrants. White migrant laborers traversed the West by railroad to labor in seasonal industries, such as logging and crop harvesting. During the winter months, thousands of single men streamed into Los Angeles for cheap lodging in what would later come to be known as Skid Row. This downtown neighborhood first emerged as a distinct community in the 1880s in the vicinity of a Southern Pacific Railroad passenger terminal, quickly becoming home to many transient laborers (“tramps” in the popular parlance of the time), who rode the rails in search of waged work and places to rest. The predominantly poor white men of Skid Row tended to live in cheap apartments, residential hotels, flop houses, and privately supported lodging houses. Unhoused people searching for more permanent accommodations outside Skid Row built housing on their own on undeveloped and marginal lands throughout Los Angeles.

Denigrated as a “serious menace to public welfare” and a threat to the sedentary middle-class values of homeownership, this population’s presence in the city was reviled by law enforcement and city authorities.<sup>7</sup> They were incarcerated accordingly. The ratio of white men imprisoned in Los Angeles’s jails peaked in 1905, when 98% of the city’s inmates were white, jailed predominantly for public order offenses linked to

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<sup>7</sup> 1909-1910 Housing Commission Report, 12.



homelessness and poverty, such as vagrancy. In fact, Los Angeles's systematic jailing of transient laborers incited the first significant expansion of the city's carceral infrastructure, with overcrowding leading to two new city jails, a new county jail, and a stockade at Lincoln Heights.

This signaled a clear pattern of homeless governance that emerged in the region around the turn of the twentieth century. During this period, the city consistently interacted with unhoused and precariously housed people through law enforcement, a recurring though by no means unchanging form of state intervention. Anti-vagrancy statutes and informal deportation, coupled with attempts to instill a sense of "discipline" in a population deemed a threat to the social order, constituted the primary mechanism for managing homelessness. Permanent or temporary residents of Los Angeles forced by circumstance to live out their poverty in public were frequently jailed and ordered to work on chain gangs, while transients caught entering the city were intercepted at railyards and turned away.<sup>8</sup>

White transients not incarcerated in Los Angeles' growing jail system searched for shelter among the city's racially and ethnically diverse poor, whose substandard housing was subject to citation, condemnation, and demolition. By 1910, the Housing Commission of the City of Los Angeles reported over 9,800 people of thirty-three different nationalities living in "house courts," clusters of poorly built wooden structures occupying a single lot. City reformers blamed housing demand, rising land prices, and race and building restrictions for high rents, which, for example, forced people to sleep in converted chicken houses or ten people to a single room. Yet city administrators also blamed "ignorant" or "dirty" migrant tenants not accustomed to American standards of living for unsanitary and crowded conditions. Thus, the Commission targeted these courts as threats to public health and abolished, demolished, or vacated nearly 200 courts between 1910 and 1913, leaving their racially and ethnically diverse residents searching for other means of insecure housing. Aside from house courts, housing insecure residents made homes from tents and abandoned train cars.<sup>9</sup> Together predominantly white transients and racially diverse poor urbanites comprised the city's

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<sup>8</sup> Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Housing Commission, 6; Molina, 167-8, 170.

population most vulnerable to insecure housing in the early twentieth century, linked together by poverty and the racial and class-based ideas of city law enforcement and administrators.

### *Economic Crisis and Homelessness during the Great Depression*

The global economic crisis of the 1930s vastly increased the regional homeless population, precipitating an aggressive local response that encompassed both new and old approaches to poverty and housing. The Great Depression was the most severe economic crisis in U.S. history. From just before the stock market crash in 1929 to the bottom of the Depression in 1933, the country's gross national product declined 29%; consumption expenditures dropped 18%; construction plummeted 78%; and investment nearly ceased, down 98%. As the economy seized and contracted, cumulative unemployment rose from about 3% to nearly 25% and personal incomes declined by 44%. Amidst this exponential growth in unemployment, those experiencing homelessness expanded to include not only the working urban and transient poor, disabled, elderly, and physically and mentally ill, but skilled and white-collar workers as well.

Among people of color, employment losses were significantly worse. While unemployment for white Angelenos peaked around 25% in 1933, Black Angeleno unemployment peaked at double that rate by the same time.<sup>10</sup> Prior to World War II, Los Angeles' racially segmented economy restricted most Black workers to varying forms of service employment and unskilled manual labor, which experienced deep losses as white households and businesses cut budgets to weather the Depression. These cuts were especially devastating for Black women concentrated in domestic work, who experienced higher unemployment earlier in the Depression than Black men.

The Depression did not just create new economic insecurity but also exposed the existing insecurity of millions of poor and middle-class people. For these Americans, the "roaring twenties" were marked not by general prosperity, but by income and wealth inequality. By 1929, the top 0.1% of American families had a cumulative income equal to the bottom 42%. While the top 0.1% of families earned over \$100,000 per year, 71% of

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<sup>10</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 75.

Americans earned incomes of less than \$2,500. In wealth, the disparities were greater. Twenty-one and a half million Americans—80%—had no savings at all, while the top 0.1%—24,000 families—held 34% of savings. Homeownership in 1930 was no salve for this crisis. Only 46.8% of Americans owned their homes nationwide (compared to 66.2% in 2000), and the mortgages they used to buy homes were not the long-term, fully amortized loans popularized after World War II.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, at the eve of the Depression, most Americans were tenants with no savings, living on their wages alone.

Again, conditions of economic insecurity before the Depression differed along racial lines. Black Angelenos lived in a segregated housing market where rents increased amid widespread unemployment. By 1930, racially restrictive covenants thoroughly prohibited all but a few enclaves of Los Angeles to Black residents. The housing market for these residents remained constrained during the Depression. Amid proliferating restrictions, Los Angeles' Black population grew 66% over the 1930s, driving up rents for limited housing.<sup>12</sup> Promising to introduce legislation to curb exorbitant rent increases, Sidney Dones—actor, director, real estate broker, and aspiring politician—complained in 1938, “The people of the district who own rent houses are paying no more taxes than they paid several years ago, yet the rents on the same properties have doubled and in some instances trebled.”<sup>13</sup> Those who owned rental properties were not just professional landlords, as 21% of Black families had lodgers in 1930 (double the white family rate). Rents from those units, the availability of which likely increased in the 1930s, may have addressed shortfalls in Black household wages.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of the historic economic collapse and wealth inequality of the Great Depression and in the absence of a centralized welfare state, thousands of American residents took to the road searching for work, as migrant laborers had done since the Civil War. Estimates varied widely. In a 1933 Congressional hearing, experts identified between 1.5 to 5 million “needy homeless” nationwide. A 1935 Works Progress Administration report placed their count closer to half a million, while in a 1937 report,

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<sup>11</sup> 1930 Census: Vol 6. Families. Reports by states, etc.; “Historical Census of Housing Tables,” <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/owner.html>; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 196.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence De Graaf, “Negro Migration to Los Angeles, 1930-1950,” Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1962, 112.

<sup>13</sup> “Dones Says He'll Fight High Rents in Assembly,” *Sentinel*, October 13, 1938.

<sup>14</sup> 1930 Census: Vol 6. Families. Reports by States.

the Los Angeles Police Department estimated between 300,000 to 600,000 transients in Southern California alone.<sup>15</sup> While the estimates varied, observers agreed that California was one of the most popular destinations, receiving around 12% of the nation's transient homeless.<sup>16</sup>

Although smaller in number, the state's Black population was overrepresented among the homeless due to their distinct and heightened vulnerability to homelessness during the Depression. In March 1935, whites comprised 91% of single men, 95% of single women, and 96% of families registered with the Federal Transient Service (FTS) in the state, when they collectively made up 88% of the population in 1930.<sup>17</sup> Yet, at 5.9% registered versus just 1.4% of the state population, Black American transients in the FTS represented four times more people than their proportion of the general population. Their relatively small numbers compared to thousands of homeless white people did not raise much contemporary alarm, but this overrepresentation mirrored a phenomenon also witnessed in northern cities, where rates of Black homelessness were also disproportionately high.<sup>18</sup>

### *Homeless Policy during the Great Depression: Public and Private Responses*

The development of Los Angeles' Depression-era homeless policy began during the economic downturn just before the crash. In 1928, the city established the Municipal Service Bureau for Homeless Men in Skid Row as a clearinghouse for men seeking shelter in Los Angeles.<sup>19</sup> The Service Bureau, as it was commonly known, did not provide services directly. It registered, interviewed, examined (mostly for venereal diseases), and referred medically cleared applicants to local philanthropic organizations known as Community Chest for what was, at best, a few days of lodging and food. Men

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<sup>15</sup> John N. Webb, *The Transient Unemployed, A Description and Analysis of the Transient Relief Population, 1935*, 12; Los Angeles Police Department, *Transiency in Southern California, 1937*, Los Angeles City Archives.

<sup>16</sup> State Relief Administration of California, "Transients in California," 1938, Folder F3448: 99A, Folder number 148-18A, California State Archives.

<sup>17</sup> State Relief Administration of California, "Review of Activities of the State Relief Administration of California, 1933-1935," April 1936, F3448:1-4 State Relief Admin – Administration Office Files, 1933-1938, State Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Kusmer finds that in major northern cities in 1931, African Americans were overrepresented in municipal shelters two to four times their 1930 population, Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down & Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 208.

<sup>19</sup> The Bureau had several locations through the 1930's. It was established in Skid Row at 411 South San Pedro Street, then relocated just outside Skid Row to 220 South Main Street. By 1937, the *Los Angeles Times* reported the Bureau's location back in Skid Row at 396 South Los Angeles Street. See, City Council Minutes, June 26, 1933 and "Bureau for Homeless Men Assists 3,194 in Month," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1937.

requiring medical attention were referred to an area hospital for treatment.<sup>20</sup> The increased visibility of homeless women in the city encouraged the establishment of a Service Bureau for Women in January 1933 with a referral function similar to the existing bureau.<sup>21</sup> Unlike some eastern and northern cities, Los Angeles had no municipal lodging house or publicly operated shelter.

The Bureaus referred homeless men and women to more than thirty different privately operated charity organizations in the city, but the Midnight Mission was the largest serving homeless men. The Mission hosted a chapel, game room, cafeteria, and large dormitories that could accommodate 300 people tightly. As the Depression worsened, shelters such as the Midnight Mission witnessed a rising tide of demand. In January 1930, the mission provided 8,414 nights of lodging to homeless men. Two years later, that number increased 250%, to 21,043. The county subsidized the cost of care for men who were county residents, and the Community Chest appropriated funds to the Mission for general support. But as the crisis worsened, private shelters were pushed beyond capacity. Other prominent shelter organizations such as the Salvation Army, Volunteers of America, and the Union Rescue Mission struggled to keep up the pace.

Condescending treatment and strict daily regimens made private shelters undesirable, to be used as a desperately last resource by those in need. “The Journal of Transient,” authored by an undercover social worker, provides a firsthand account of a shelter’s intake procedure, which required a physical inspection: “The doctor was extremely cross with the men and ‘bawled them out’ if they were too slow in unfastening their clothes for the inspection.”<sup>22</sup>

Relief to Black Angelenos was limited and segregated. Black community-operated and -funded institutions, such as the Colored YMCA and YWCA, the Eastside Mothers’ Home (East Side Shelter), and the Sojourner Truth Home, provided the bulk of homeless services in Black Los Angeles, primarily for women and children. Homeless Black migrants applying for aid to the Municipal Service Bureau were referred to these institutions and received some funding appropriations from the city’s Community

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<sup>20</sup> Annual Message of the Mayor, 1930, Folder: Annual Message of the Mayor 1929-1930, box unnumbered, Police Commission Files.

<sup>21</sup> Petition No. 6381 (1932), City Council Minutes, March 16, 1933.

<sup>22</sup> Excerpt of a “Journal of a Transient” in M.H. Lewis, Special Surveys and Studies Progress Report 7, Transients, Feb. 28, 1936. Folder F3448:99-100, State Relief Admin—Surveys & Studies, 1935-1936 (Folder Number 148-18).



Chest. Other charitable institutions, such as the “white” YWCA, explicitly denied accommodations to homeless Black girls.<sup>23</sup> In this context of segregated private services, the Eastside Mothers’ Home modified its charitable mission to include homeless girls during the nadir of the Depression in 1933.<sup>24</sup> Other than county or state relief (welfare) or the city’s Community Chest allocations, neither state nor city policy ever addressed the distinct employment and housing disparities heightening Black vulnerability to homelessness.

As homelessness continued to swell through 1931, Councilman Williams presented a resolution to establish the first municipal lodging house (a city shelter) in Los Angeles. The Board of Social Service Commissioners recommended against the establishment of a city shelter, arguing that “the need for the same has not yet been satisfactorily demonstrated,” and instead suggested that the Council expand funding to existing agencies when the need arose.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, Los Angeles never built a municipal shelter during the 1930s, continuing to contract services from private religious, secular, and racial institutions.

Even as far back as the Great Depression, services for the homeless in Los Angeles were concentrated on Skid Row. Often regarded menacingly as a nuisance, Skid Row was an essential part of the regional economy, the city’s cultural and social ecology, and city growth. By the 1930s, Skid Row’s central thoroughfare, Main Street, was home to an array of restaurants, barbershops, second-hand stores, theaters, missions, storefront churches, hotels, and flop houses, all owned, operated, and patronized by a diverse cohort of residents, migrants, and visitors. Resident day laborers essential to the city’s local economy could be found awaiting work opportunities around 5<sup>th</sup> and Towne, known colloquially at the time as the “slave market.”<sup>26</sup> Anyone, of whatever race or ethnicity, could venture into Skid Row for cheap entertainment, food, lodging, and free help. For many poor and working-class people in Los Angeles, Skid Row was a beginning as well as an end.

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<sup>23</sup> M.H. Lewis, Special Surveys and Studies Progress Report 7, Transients, Feb. 28, 1936. Folder F3448:99-100, State Relief Admin—Surveys & Studies, 1935-1936 (Folder Number 148-18).

<sup>24</sup> “Proceeds From Tea Will Aid Mother’s Home,” *Sentinel*, July 12, 1934.

<sup>25</sup> City Council Minutes, Aug 21, 1931. A different petition quoted a 102 percent increase of 19,871, see Petition No. 636 (1932), City Council Minutes, Feb. 8, 1932.

<sup>26</sup> Herbold, Paul. “Sociological Survey of Main Street, Los Angeles, California.” Order No. EP65552, University of Southern California, 1936, 27.

For city administrators though, the transient homeless frequenting Skid Row were a problem. Commissioners' earlier recommendations to increase appropriations were later paired with proposals for aggressive policing of transient homeless people. By December, they expressed grave concern at the nearly 100% increase in homeless applicants, 26,526 people, to the Bureau in 1931.<sup>27</sup> They continued to recommend that the Council allocate additional monies for the care of homeless men and boys in Los Angeles and Hollywood, as well as separate appropriations for "colored" homeless boys. This indicates both that there were two important sites of youth homelessness and that Los Angeles practiced *de facto* segregation in homeless services. They also recommended the establishment of a "work test" which could lead to three days of lodging and food, issuing three-day identification cards, and launching a vigorous policing campaign, all to rid the city of transient homeless people. The plan harkened back to anti-tramp policing around the turn of the century that was responsible for the first major expansion of the city's jail system.<sup>28</sup> The Chief of Police threw in support for the plan, approving the use of three-day passes so officers could force those with expired ones to leave the city. Along with coaxing away homeless people with police force, the Commissioners hoped "that vagabonds serving sentence will work on the rock pile and word of this plan will go back East to discourage transients from coming to Los Angeles."<sup>29</sup>

A large-scale subsistence work program was also in the works in the fall of 1931. As the continuing crisis exhausted state funding and policing transients proved to be ineffective, the State Unemployment Commission recommended to Governor James Rolph a statewide camp program through the Department of Forestry, according to which predominantly transient homeless men would volunteer for fire prevention activities in winter camps in exchange for food, clothing, and remedial shelter, but not actual wages. The main objective of the plan was to "relieve" unemployment in large city centers through the removal of single transient men, and thereby lessen employment

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<sup>27</sup> Petition No. 9221 (1931), Council Minutes, Dec 17, 1931; California State Unemployment Commission, 340.

<sup>28</sup> Hernandez, *City of Inmates*, 62.

<sup>29</sup> See petition No. 9221 (1931), Council Minutes, Dec 17, 1931.

competition with local married men. Within a month, the plan was authorized, and the first camp was established in Tuolumne County on December 1, 1931.<sup>30</sup>

Over the next two years the camp program grew quickly. At its peak operation, the program hosted fifty-seven camps, with twenty-three in Southern California, sheltering over 7,000 men by April 1933.<sup>31</sup> The program's expansion was not without initial community opposition. S. Rexford Black reported that it "was based upon the fear of local people that if large numbers of undesirable men would be sent to their communities it would result in trouble in the way of crime and misdemeanors of all kinds." Yet these homeless men constructed hundreds of miles of fire trails, cleared combustible brush, chopped wood for relief recipients, and in one instance, helped fight a 500-acre wildfire in Malibu. Opposition later turned to demand, according to Black, and "the committee was besieged with requests to establish camps in various parts of the State."<sup>32</sup>

Participation in the camps was voluntary, yet the men's choice was driven by severe hunger and deprivation. These were desperate people. In a winter progress report, the state camp director recalled, "A forest officer in charge of one of the camps stated that men have come to his camp who were so weak from lack of food that they could hardly stand, and that many men became sick during their first few days in camp from overeating." Men in these camps were reportedly well fed, gaining twelve pounds per man in one sampled camp. In Southern California, they also weathered the winter in leaky tents and complained about the lack of adequate clothing, which was later remedied through Red Cross donations.<sup>33</sup>

Homeless advocates, including those experiencing homelessness themselves, suggested—or insisted on—their own emergency plans that differed from the camp plan. As private shelters filled beyond capacity in the winter of 1932, Alfred Hoddell asked the City Council to open the doors of City Hall at night for "the homeless and the wanderer" to keep warm. The request was filed. Chas. Dempster's petition was more ambitious,

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<sup>30</sup> S. Rexford Black, Report on the California State Labor Camps, July 1932, California labor camps - printed matter, UCLA Special Collections; Objects of the State Unemployment Camps, undated, California labor camps. M.B. Pratt's progress reports on camps, UCLA Special Collections.

<sup>31</sup> M.B. Pratt, Report to Director of Natural Resources, April 1933.

<sup>32</sup> S. Rexford Black, Report on the California State Labor Camps, July 1932, California labor camps, printed matter, UCLA Special Collections.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.; Progress Report on the State Unemployment Camps, February 3, 1933.

requesting that the Council “take over all needed public buildings,” and if insufficient, rent private ones to provide people shelter, a plan the Mayor echoed later in the year. The Council responded that there was no money allocated for such a plan.

People experiencing homelessness also proffered more long-term plans. One of them, Fred Mason, collaborated in 1932 with the county Board of Supervisors and the Los Angeles Railway Company to build a village—New Haven—using donated rail cars as converted shelters on county land. In July, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Los Angeles Railway had donated fifty cars and the county had leased forty acres of land at South Figueroa and 220<sup>th</sup> Street for the village, but whether the plan materialized is unknown.<sup>34</sup> Proposals such as New Haven that sought to use low-cost or converted structures for homes would recur in the history of homelessness in Los Angeles. Most recently, Pete White of the Los Angeles Community Action Network suggested holding some of the county’s nine thousand parcels of land in a community trust and building modular homes using 3D printing technologies.<sup>35</sup>

The following year in 1933, at the bottom of the Depression, a group styling itself the Organized Homeless Youth of Los Angeles requested that the county directly rent them a house. They even had one chosen. When their request was denied, they occupied the house anyway. Harry Carr of the *Los Angeles Times* fretted, “If the ‘League of Homeless Youth’ is allowed to get away with taking possession of empty houses, it will be the beginning of a chapter of trouble.” Although the boys had “innocent intentions,” he opined, “if they refused to accept work in one of the county labor camps, they should be sent home.”<sup>36</sup>

Nationwide, homeless people founded shantytowns they named “Hooverilles,” to ridicule President Hoover’s handling of the economic crisis. Not much information about Los Angeles’ Hooverilles has survived. The County Health Department in 1932 photographed conditions of, perhaps, one of Los Angeles’ largest encampments, named Hoover Town, built on a local church’s property at Firestone and Alameda in the

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<sup>34</sup> “Village for homeless to be built of old cars,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1932.

<sup>35</sup> Pete White discusses modular housing here, <https://omny.fm/shows/dr-drew-midday-live-with-leeann-tweedden/dr-drew-midday-live-08-01-19-1pm>. Also see, “Takeaways from Design for Dignity: A Roundtable Discussion on Measure HHH,” February 8, 2018, <https://aialosangeles.worldsecurerestaurants.com/home-page-latest-news/takeaways-from-measure-hhh-roundtable#.XWBahuNKhEY>.

<sup>36</sup> Harry Carr, “The Lancer,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 25, 1933.

Florence-Graham area of South Los Angeles. Around fifty families pitched canvas tents and built one-room homes from scraps of wood, corrugated metal siding, and cardboard. Other encampments of self-built homes could be found throughout the county and surrounding municipalities on peripheral lands in Vernon, Santa Monica, Santa Clarita, Duarte, and along the Los Angeles River.<sup>37</sup>

Firsthand accounts of these encampments are rare. Jesse Jackson, a lumberjack and “mayor” of one of the country’s largest Hoovervilles in Seattle, suggested that

Hoovervilles were not simply last-ditch efforts built from the edge of desperation; instead, homeless individuals set out to “construct relief shelters of [their] own.” He continued, “We were among the first to face and taste the bitter realities of a social system that would not provide employment for willing workers to enable them to care for themselves,



*Figure 1. Officials Order Destruction of Hooverville, Los Angeles, circa 1940. n.d. Photograph. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.*

or a humane relief system to relieve their suffering in a time like this.” These encampments, we learn from Jackson, provided a sense of home that was unavailable in the charitable private shelters of Los Angeles, affording a measure of privacy, autonomy, regularity, and dignity.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Hoovervilles served as homes for the entire decade of the Depression. In 1940, on the eve of the U.S. entrance into World War II, the city ordered these encampments destroyed.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The habitations of the unemployed in Los Angeles County, 1931-1932, Los Angeles County Department of Health Services Collection, 1930-1932. Huntington Digital Library, <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll2/id/7778/rec/1>.

<sup>38</sup> Jesse Jackson, “The Story of Seattle’s Hooverville,” 1938, in Calvin F. Schmid, *Social Trends in Seattle*, (University of Washington Press, 1944), 286. See also, [https://depts.washington.edu/depres/hoverville\\_mayor.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/depres/hoverville_mayor.shtml).

<sup>39</sup> UCLA Digital Library Collection.



Amid crowded shelters, homeless work camps, and Hoovervilles, the City Council pleaded to Congress in the spring of 1932 that cities had extended all aid possible and “[c]haritable organizations are faced with a task to provide aid and shelter to the hungry and the homeless in such numbers that a breakdown confronts them.” They called on Congress to pass legislation providing a five-billion-dollar national work relief program to deal with a growing crisis.<sup>40</sup> On September 1, 1933, a one-day homeless census taken in forty-eight of the state’s most populous counties revealed a stunning figure: there were 101,174 homeless people at a time when the state population in 1930 was 5.7 million; by comparison, in 2018 California had an estimated 130,000 homeless people with a population of 39 million.<sup>41</sup> The local ability to address this crisis without federal help had been eclipsed.

Federal intervention arrived in form of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, which established the Federal Transient Service (FTS), described as “the first federal agency in American history designed to aid the homeless unemployed.” Prominent welfare organizations had been advocating for direct federal involvement for transient relief since 1932, and the newly inaugurated Roosevelt administration answered the call. The FTS established 300 “transients centers” in cities and 300 rural camps that together would serve over one million people nationwide.<sup>42</sup> In California, the FTS folded into the existing state camp system, and by February 1935 there were sixteen transient shelters, forty-three federal camps, twenty-six state camps (for “resident homeless”), and transient “family bureaus” in thirteen cities. At peak operation the California FTS was serving 77,118 individuals: 47,859 unattached men and boys, 926 unattached women, and 28,333 family members.<sup>43</sup>

FTS voluntary subsistence work camps served white, Mexican, and Black transients in putatively integrated accommodations. Tensions sometimes flared, and, in some cases, racial violence erupted. In an FTS work camp near Los Angeles, hostilities arose when, in May 1935, camp officials attempted to house forty new Black workers

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<sup>40</sup> City Council Minutes, Petition No. 2256 (1932), May 13, 1932.

<sup>41</sup> According to this report, the census was counted by contacting both public and private relief agencies and counting people living in transient “jungles” and shantytowns, State Relief Administration, “Review of Activities of the State Relief Administration of California, 1933-1935,” April 1936, California State Archives.

<sup>42</sup> Kusmer, *Down & Out, On the Road*, 210-11.

<sup>43</sup> State Relief Administration of California, “Transients in California,” 1936, Box 148, Folder F3448: 99A, Folder Number 148-18A.

with resident white and Mexican workers in the same barracks.<sup>44</sup> According to historian Kenneth Kusmer, however, incidents such as this were rare, and no significant racial violence broke out in integrated federal shelters nationwide, reflecting egalitarian traditions in transient cultures.<sup>45</sup>

The Roosevelt administration liquidated the FTS beginning in September of 1935 in preparation for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), shifting federal priorities toward wage-paying public employment, and away from the subsistence-based program of the FTS. This caused what the State Relief Administration described as “chaos and confusion.”<sup>46</sup> In the policy gap, Los Angeles returned to the tried and true practices of policing, incarceration, and removal of transients. From February to April of 1936, the LAPD, in coordination with railroad companies and law enforcement agencies in eastern border counties, established a rogue border patrol to deny and dissuade suspected transients entry into California. In the city, the LAPD created twenty-four-hour teams that stopped and searched trains, making 2,558 arrests in a two-month period. For women and family transients, the Los Angeles County Relief Administration required applicants to sign an agreement consenting to transportation back to their county of residence in exchange for immediate aid.<sup>47</sup> Recourse to policing and incarceration has remained a recurring theme in Los Angeles’s response to homelessness.

### *World War II and the End of the Great Depression*

The economic slump continued through the late 1930s. However, massive state investments in the defense industry during World War II brought Los Angeles and the nation out of the Depression. Los Angeles became the second largest defense production center in the country during the war, attracting depression weary migrants for jobs the

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<sup>44</sup> In what the Black Los Angeles newspaper the *Sentinel* called a “race riot,” white workers reportedly threw stones at the newly arrived Black workers, even after they were segregated into separate units. Officials sent the Black workers back to Los Angeles, where they were subsequently charged with assault. The charges roused the local chapter of the International Labor Defense, a legal defense affiliate of the Communist Party, who successfully won the workers’ release. “Racial Prejudice Leads to Attack on Negro Youths,” *Sentinel*, May 30, 1935; “Release secured for negroes arrested in CCC camp riot,” *Sentinel*, June 20, 1935.

<sup>45</sup> Kusmer, *Down & Out, On the Road*, 216-217.

<sup>46</sup> State Relief Administration of California, “Transients in California,” 1936, Box 148, Folder F3448: 99A, Folder Number 148-18A.

<sup>47</sup> Los Angeles Police Department, *Transiency in Southern California, 1937*, Los Angeles City Archives; M.H. Lewis, *Special Surveys and Studies Progress Report 7, Transients*, Feb. 28, 1936.

city could now amply supply.<sup>48</sup> This wartime migration increased the city's population by 20 percent between 1940 and 1946, inaugurating the most severe housing shortage in Los Angeles' history. As the war ended, it was estimated that 162,000 families, 50,000 veterans among them, were forced to reside in tents, garages, vehicles, and other substandard accommodations.<sup>49</sup> In response, the federal government built nearly a million units of temporary and permanent housing nationwide and thousands of units in Los Angeles, including over a thousand units of permanent public housing.<sup>50</sup> For the county's 550,000 private rental units, the Emergency Price Control Act of 1942 established rent control until 1950, freezing market rate rents and imposing strict eviction protections.<sup>51</sup> Although unprecedented in scope and scale, homelessness and housing insecurity during the war were mitigated by government action.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Postwar Era**

#### *1940s-50s: The Roots of Racial Disparities in Housing and Homelessness*

At the same time, however, many postwar housing and land-use policies also substantially widened the racial wealth gap and paved the way for a crisis of homelessness that continues to affect African Americans at a disproportionate rate. From mortgage and insurance redlining to the exclusionary zoning practices of newly incorporated municipalities, an array of public measures and private acts excluded most households of color from the full benefits of the postwar housing boom afforded to whites. Some of the structural roots of current racial disparities in homelessness, then, were planted by public policy, public bank lending, and racist neighborhood covenants during and after World War II.

Between 1940 and 1970, the city's Black population grew by a factor of ten without a commensurate increase in housing construction in neighborhoods open to

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<sup>48</sup> Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 37.

<sup>49</sup> Donald Parson, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 76.

<sup>50</sup> Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 177-78; Donald Craig Parson, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 48-49.

<sup>51</sup> Alisa Belinkoff Katz, "People Are Simply Unable to Pay the Rent": What History Tells Us About Rent Control in Los Angeles," Luskin Center for History and Policy, October 2018.

<sup>52</sup> "To Mayor Bowron's Special Committee on the Housing Emergency: Report No. 2 of the Sub-Committee to Determine over-all Community Need for Housing for Los Angeles County" July 11, 1945.

nonwhites. Consequently, Black neighborhoods had population densities around three times the county rate by 1960. For hundreds of thousands of migrants fleeing Jim Crow violence and increasingly mechanized southern farms, the promise of economic and physical security symbolized by Los Angeles was only provisionally fulfilled. Some Black men did find good-paying jobs in rubber, steel, and aerospace factories, while thousands of Black families became homeowners. Nonetheless, rampant employment discrimination, residential segregation, and financial redlining confined the majority of African Americans to low-wage work and densely-populated neighborhoods governed by the whims of absentee landlords and an aggressive Los Angeles Police Department.

Furthermore, efforts to reorient the metropolis around its swelling suburbs, via newly built freeways that split predominantly Black and Latinx working-class communities, took precedence over the provision of affordable housing. Such “urban renewal” resulted in housing demolitions and mass displacement, exacerbating overcrowding in the central city. The choice to bolster the suburbs at the expense of inner-city residents of color reflected a national pattern, as did the city’s meager commitment to affordable housing. In 1953, in fact, the local real estate industry led an anticommunist campaign that resulted in the city’s permanent abandonment of public housing construction, curtailing the most reliable source of affordable housing for marginalized communities. Such priorities stemmed from decades-old racial biases enshrined in real estate practices and public policies.

With private market development essentially abandoning Black neighborhoods, the housing stock available to African Americans grew significantly older and therefore less capable of supporting the rising number of people who depended on it.<sup>53</sup> Los Angeles’s decision to forego additional public housing construction further limited Black housing options, especially as “slum clearance,” highway construction, and other federally funded redevelopment programs leveled aging structures. These various factors produced a housing crisis in residential corridors south and east of downtown, which mainly took the form of overcrowded boarding homes and rented rooms in

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<sup>53</sup> Poverty Areas in Los Angeles County, April 1964, Box 2, Folder 9, Welfare Planning Council, Los Angeles, records, Collection no. 0434, California Social Welfare Archives, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

rundown private houses (a housing arrangement far more prevalent in Black and Latinx communities).

By the 1950s, data from the Los Angeles County Department of Charities confirmed that African Americans in the 1950s were vastly overrepresented among its general relief applicants. While Black men comprised 5.2% of the county's adult male population, they made up 17.45% of sampled applicants. Of those surveyed, nearly 60% lacked shelter upon contacting the department.<sup>54</sup>

Government agencies continued to observe the effects of this inequality over subsequent decades. A 1970 report on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) beneficiaries (nearly all of them women) found that Black welfare clients and applicants in Los Angeles were 50% more likely than their white and Hispanic counterparts to identify housing as their "primary problem."<sup>55</sup> This statistic suggests that race-specific barriers to quality housing were producing disparate outcomes among people of the same economic class.

Thus, as Los Angeles's Black population increased with the Second Great Migration (1940-1970), African Americans remained disproportionately affected by housing insecurity, while constituting an ever-growing segment of the total population of precariously housed people in the region. By mid-century, such patterns of metropolitan inequality were deeply ingrained and the political will to alter them proved limited. For Black families in Los Angeles, the debilitating effects of housing inequality intersected with employment discrimination, segregated schooling, and an inadequate social safety net. Most devastating over the long run, many Black families were unable to share in the most common factor in post-war white intergenerational wealth accumulation, home ownership in neighborhoods with steady increases in property values.

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<sup>54</sup> A Study of Single, Unattached Men in Los Angeles, circa 1957, Box 23, Folder 2, Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services records, Collection no. 0431, California Social Welfare Archives, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

<sup>55</sup> AFDC Client Needs and Social Services: A Study of the Service Process in the Los Angeles Department of Public Social Services, July 1970, Box 21, Folder 2, Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services records, Collection no. 0431, California Social Welfare Archives, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

### *Charity, Containment, and Skid Row*

During the postwar period, public and private welfare providers tended to view homelessness not as a symptom of an uneven labor market or a sign of unmet demand for government-subsidized housing, but as a problem of disability, employment history, and individual pathology.<sup>56</sup> In the 1950s, most private shelters and indigent services were clustered around the city's downtown. Once known as a way station for seasonal workers and individuals and families migrating to the city, the Skid Row area was transforming into a community associated with unemployed or underemployed older white men, many of whom suffered from alcohol dependence and physical and mental disabilities.<sup>57</sup> While African Americans certainly bore a disproportionate share of poverty and unemployment, at the time in the center of the city, the site of most public and private homeless services, the low-income population remained visibly older and whiter. Therefore, unemployed or underemployed older white men unmoored from the



Figure 2. *Los Angeles County Department of Charities Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1956-1957, Box 23, Folder 6, Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services records, Collection no. 0431, California Social Welfare Archives, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.*

nuclear family constituted the primary target of homeless policy through the 1970s. The unconventional lifestyles and family arrangements of this demographic, rather than the structural inequalities of race and class, became the main focus of social reformers concerned with the plight of unsheltered people. This focus also helps

<sup>56</sup> A 1956 review of service organizations affiliated with the county's nongovernmental Welfare Planning Council reflected the typical conflation of "unattached men" with precarious shelter. Of the county's 37 Community Chests, only two offered shelter to this demographic. Survey of Community Chest-type Services: Los Angeles County: 1955, April 1956, Box 4, Folder 16, Welfare Planning Council, Los Angeles, records, Collection no. 0434, California Social Welfare Archives, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

<sup>57</sup> Donald R. Spivack, "CRA's Role in the History and Development of Skid Row Los Angeles," *History of Skid Row Series, Paper 1* (September 15, 1998).



explain why Skid Row solidified its reputation as the city's center of homeless policy by the 1970s.

With its array of social services, cheap hotels, and reputation for casual labor opportunities, Skid Row was a logical destination for people with little income and limited job prospects. But not everyone desired to concentrate the homeless in this location. The Department of Charities, which operated an office exclusively for “unattached men” two-miles south of downtown, recognized “the urgent need for facilities outside the Skid Row area to care for certain types of single men who would otherwise be homeless.”<sup>58</sup> Most of the agency's unsheltered clients received temporary placements in inner-city hotels, single-room-occupancy units or assisted-living “board and care” homes, but several hundred “ambulatory” men, typically fifty or older and with little chance of employment, found shelter in two county-run compounds in the Antelope Valley. Built in the early 1930s as Civilian Conservation Corps relief camps, Acton Camp and Warm Springs Camp came under the jurisdiction of the Department of Charities in 1941. In their first two decades as county shelters, they developed reputations as voluntary residences for unhoused men seeking lodging during the winter months and membership in a close-knit community centered around resident-led Alcoholics Anonymous programs. In the 1960s, the camps established comprehensive drug and alcohol rehabilitation clinics, serving both voluntary patients and clients arriving by way of court referrals. Responding to the region's long-term neglect of homeless and substance-dependent women, Acton opened a women's dorm in the 1970s. Over the same decade, the camps' portion of young adults and people of color increased dramatically, a demographic trend that persisted.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> A Study of Single, Unattached Men in Los Angeles, circa 1957.

<sup>59</sup> Valery Garrett, “Substance Abuse Treatment in Southern California: The History and Significance of the Antelope Valley Rehabilitation Centers,” *Journal of Policy History* 8, no. 2 (1996): 181-205.

The county's commitment to providing shelter fifty miles from downtown may have reflected the desires of some homeless individuals for accommodations outside a dilapidated and overcrowded urban core.<sup>60</sup> But as in the Depression-era, the context of choice was shaped by severe deprivation as well as by the central city's prevalence of



Figure 3. Men Walking by Entrance to Los Angeles' Skid Row Volunteers of America Men's Service Center. 1964. Photograph. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.

government and private institutions tasked with surveilling and disciplining visibly poor people. Moreover, the county's interest in diverting individuals from more costly downtown-adjacent services reflected the common belief in the postwar period that Skid Row would soon be consigned to the past.<sup>61</sup> In the 1950s and '60s, U.S. cities embarked on massive downtown revitalization projects

aimed at luring residents, consumers, and capital to central business districts hollowed out by suburbanization. Seen as obstacles to "urban renewal," few skid rows across the country survived the downtown redevelopment process. That Los Angeles' did is in part a matter of timing.

In the mid-1950s, the downtown business and real estate elites dominating the newly established Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) set their sights on the central-city area. A campaign to "clean up" Skid Row beginning in 1955 led to an uptick in policing in the neighborhood. Arrests for petty crimes and citations for building code violations mushroomed. The ramped-up law enforcement was understood as a prelude to an official program of redevelopment.<sup>62</sup> But before such a program got off the ground, the CRA embarked on the city's first large-scale urban renewal initiative in nearby

<sup>60</sup> Poverty Areas in Los Angeles County, April 1964.

<sup>61</sup> Garrett, "Substance Abuse Treatment in Southern California." 183.

<sup>62</sup> Gilda Haas and Allan David Heskin, "Community Struggles in Los Angeles," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 5, no. 4 (1981): 546-63.

Bunker Hill. A dense, multiethnic neighborhood known for its rundown apartments and elderly population living on fixed incomes, Bunker Hill's demolition and subsequent conversion into a high-end culture district in the early 1960s resulted in the displacement of thousands of people.<sup>63</sup> A small percentage of them received relocation assistance but the absence of new public housing and the dearth of affordable units in the surrounding area forced many into a permanent state of economic insecurity.<sup>64</sup> In the wake of the Bunker Hill Redevelopment Project, contemporary observers noted the influx of impoverished elderly individuals, a number of whom ended up homeless, into the adjacent Skid Row and Westlake neighborhoods.<sup>65</sup>

Despite concerns over the human costs and long-term efficacy of redevelopment, Skid Row remained a principal target of the CRA. Citations of residential hotels for code violations abounded in the 1960s, ultimately leading to a 20% reduction in the area's housing stock by the early 1970s.<sup>66</sup> In 1968, amid a wave of displacement stemming from the demolition of Skid Row hotels, the city ratified Municipal Code 41.18(d), which stipulates that "no person shall sit, lie or sleep in or upon any street, sidewalk or other public way." Though subsequently modified in response to civil liberties suits, the law continues to facilitate the removal of ostensibly homeless people from city streets.<sup>67</sup>

By the mid-1970s Skid Row seemed slated for elimination. The CRA-approved "silver book" plan of 1972, a part of the Central Business District (CBD) Redevelopment Plan, envisioned the wholesale transformation of the district by 1990. At that point, the temporary detoxification/rehabilitation center proposed in the plan would be shuttered for good and the razing of the neighborhood would be complete. The area would no

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<sup>63</sup> Mara A. Marks, "Shifting Ground: The Rise and Fall of the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency," *Southern California Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2004): 241-90.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen C. Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story: Welfare, Redevelopment, and Housing Crisis in Postwar Los Angeles," M.A. Thesis, City University of New York, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, "The Housing Question: An Interview with Mike Davis," *Freedom Now! Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in LA and Beyond*, eds. Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (Los Angeles: Freedom Now Books, 2012), 83. A 1967 study of the "Skid Row Problem" by the research department of Los Angeles's Welfare Planning Council lent credence to the perception that "slum clearance" tended to disperse residents into neighboring communities, thus marginally shifting the geography of poverty without eliminating its visible presence. The Skid Row Problem: A Survey of U.S. Cities, November 1967, Box 4, Folder 16, Welfare Planning Council, Los Angeles, records, Collection no. 0434, California Social Welfare Archives, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

<sup>66</sup> Haas and Heskin, 555.

<sup>67</sup> Andrea Gibbons, *City of Segregation: 100 Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 2018), 125-151.

longer accommodate the thousands of low-income people who called it home nor the organizations that served them.

When local activists learned of the proposal, they joined forces with Skid Row residents to defeat it. Ratified in 1976, the Skid Row “blue book” plan provided an alternative. It signaled a compromise between a community-based social movement demanding the preservation of the neighborhood and city officials, property owners, and merchants who feared that scattering Skid Row’s poverty over a wider terrain would deter

investment and consumption in the central business district and beyond. In its

proposal for Skid Row’s “physical containment,” the Los Angeles Community Design Center strategically conjured up the specter of Bunker Hill when it predicted that the “silver book” plan “would result in Los Angeles having several small Skid Rows to contend with.”<sup>68</sup> This proved to be a compelling argument.

By relocating soup kitchens, missions, and the like inside the fifty-block containment zone and investing CRA funds in the improvement and development of affordable housing in the same area, the city sought to prevent the expansion of the Skid Row homeless population. The containment plan also included the selective policing of

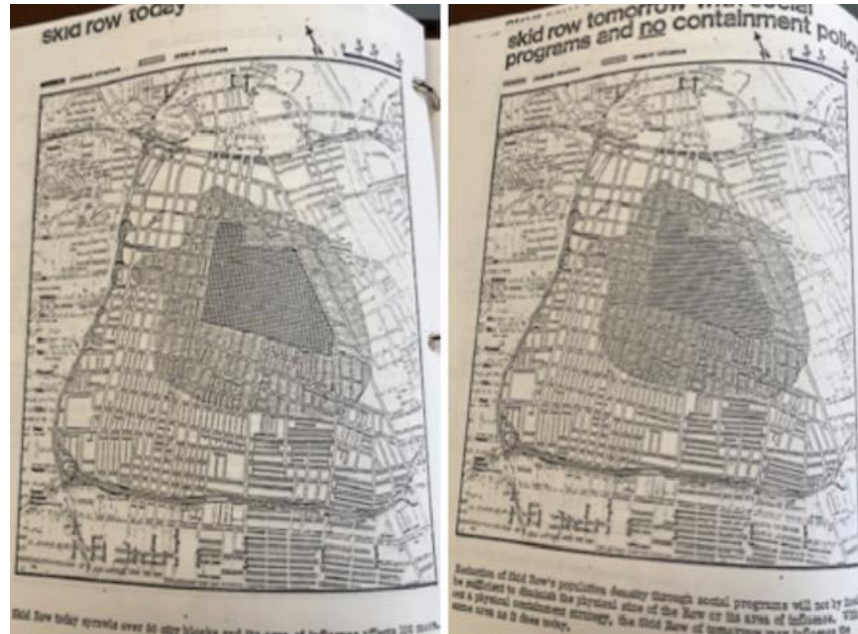


Figure 4. *Skid Row: Recommendations to Citizen Advisory Committee on the Central Business District Plan for the City of Los Angeles, 1976, Homeless Issues Binder No. 4, Box 32, Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles reports and publications, Collection no.7037, Regional History Collection, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.*

<sup>68</sup> Skid Row: Recommendations to Citizen Advisory Committee on the Central Business District Plan for the City of Los Angeles, 1976, Homeless Issues Binder No. 4, Box 32, Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles reports and publications, Collection no. 7037, Regional History Collection, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

the perimeter by the LAPD and the use of physical buffers to discourage the movement of Skid Row residents beyond the neighborhood. But just a few years after the plan's enactment, homelessness began to grow at a rapid rate throughout the Southern California region as it did in cities across the country. Communities of houseless people appeared everywhere from Santa Monica to the San Fernando Valley. The city's containment strategy was ill-equipped to deal with an increasingly decentralized phenomenon.

The causes of the so-called “new homelessness” of the 1980s are myriad yet interlocking. Beginning in the late 1970s, rising unemployment and the replacement of well-paying manufacturing jobs with low-wage work in garment factories and the hospitality and retail sectors widened income inequality. At the same time, high-salary work in information technology, financial services, and real estate was expanding. Increased demand from high-income households led to a torrent of luxury housing development at the expense of dwellings affordable to households in lower income brackets. Relatedly, with more and more people concentrated at the lower end of income distribution, demand for low-cost housing skyrocketed, driving up the prices of previously affordable units. During the 1970s, as property values rapidly rose across California, Los Angeles tenants increasingly paid more than a third of their income for rent. Moreover, rising land values renewed pressures to redevelop the downtown area, with Skid Row routinely identified as an obstacle to real estate and commercial profits. Starting in the 1970s but accelerating in the 2000s, the financialization of real estate intensified the push to maximize the rate of return on every parcel of land, leading to a continuing wave of evictions and displacement in Skid Row and throughout the city. The passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 greatly added to the challenge faced by many in economically precarious positions. By drastically reducing property-tax revenue, the California ballot initiative helped stoke a nationwide “tax revolt” that unraveled the social safety net at a moment when it was urgently needed. These political-economic conditions created an environment in which drug addiction, medical debt, and other personal misfortunes could easily spiral into a full-blown housing crisis for these individuals.



The effects of rising housing costs in the 1970s were felt most acutely in neighborhoods beset by decades of overcrowding, which, again, largely fell along racial lines. Census data show that in Compton, Florence-Graham, East Los Angeles, and other Black and Latinx communities, the portion of nonrelatives per household doubled between 1970 and 1980, only to double again over the next decade.<sup>69</sup>



*Figure 5. Volunteers Making Sandwiches for Occupants of Tent City II, in Los Angeles, California. 1986. Photograph. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.*

Such data suggest that households in these areas increasingly relied on “doubling up,” or merging of previously separate households under a single roof, in the face of a mounting affordability crisis. The 1990 census revealed an even greater rise in such housing arrangements, reflecting the expanding population of Black and Latinx households confronting housing insecurity. These same communities bore the brunt of deindustrialization, which decimated incomes and exacerbated rent burdens. In the final quarter of the twentieth century, then, homelessness in Los Angeles acquired an unmistakable racial composition: from the 1980s to the present, African American and Latinx individuals have made up the overwhelming majority of homeless people in the region, with African Americans constituting the most overrepresented group.

### *The Problem of Deinstitutionalization*

Deinstitutionalization of mental health care also contributed to the sharp rise in Los Angeles’ homeless population beginning in the late 1970s, as the impoverished mentally ill population struggled to find a support system outside of state mental hospitals. Although deinstitutionalization occurred in a particular post-war milieu, this movement intersected with many issues that had long shaped homelessness in Los

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<sup>69</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1970 Census Tracts, Final Report PHC(1)-117 Los Angeles-Long Beach, Calif. SMSMA Part 1; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1980 Census Tracts, PHC80-2 Los Angeles-Long Beach, Calif. SMSMA Section 1; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1990 Census Tracts, CPH-3-215B Los Angeles-Long Beach, Calif. SMSMA Section 1.



Angeles, including inconsistent policy commitment, fractured government services, focus on individual pathologies rather than structural factors, and reliance on law enforcement to manage the poor and sick.

Up until mid-century, state mental hospitals remained the model of public mental health care. This began to change in the 1950s, when concerns over state welfare costs, public outcries over inhumane conditions in state mental hospitals, and the advent of new antipsychotic drugs spurred calls to move mental health care outside of these institutions. These calls culminated in 1963 with the passage of the Community Health Centers Act, which promised federal resources for the building of community mental health centers. New federal entitlement programs, such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), were supposed to help individuals cover health care costs. Federal investments for community mental health centers were relatively short-lived, however, with federal funding for these centers ending in 1981. Many promised centers were never built, and many hospital patients were discharged before sufficient services were in place.

California initiated deinstitutionalization efforts in 1957, when the state legislature passed the Short-Doyle Act to allocate funds for the development of community mental health programs. Theoretically, the state would funnel money saved from closing mental hospitals into community-based programs. In practice, federal benefits shaped what type of care the poor could access. Many patients discharged from state hospitals ended up residing with family members. Some without strong family or social supports were able to use their federal welfare benefits to settle in board-and-care or nursing homes. Others ended up on the streets.<sup>70</sup>

The LA County Department of Mental Health (DMH) and local agencies struggled to implement mental health services during the 1970s. Budget shortfalls continually plagued efforts to expand community-based services. The DMH poured most of its resources into inpatient services via contracts with hospitals, which it found easier than establishing new outpatient or partial programs favored under the Short-Doyle program. Los Angeles received a relatively low share of state Short-Doyle resources as a result. The mechanism by which the state distributed funds to the

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<sup>70</sup> H. Richard Lamb, "Board-and-care home wanderers," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 37 (1983): 135-137.

counties led to the buildup of unspent funds, which Governor Ronald Reagan cited to justify freezing the Short-Doyle budget in 1974-75.<sup>71</sup> After peaking in 1973, state expenditures for mental health steadily declined.<sup>72</sup>

Lack of coordination between state, county, and local levels also stymied plans for community-based mental health. Community mental health centers that received federal and state funding operated under dual mandates circumscribing where and to whom they could provide services, so that many otherwise-eligible people fell through the cracks.<sup>73</sup> As federal investments dried up, community centers abandoned poorer patients with a high service utilization, such as the chronically mentally ill.<sup>74</sup> To manage costs, the DMH contracted with private agencies to deliver public mental health services. While this fit Los Angeles' general approach to social service provision, it meant discharged patients often lacked continuity of care.

As part of deinstitutionalization, the state passed the California Mental Health Act of 1967, also known as the Lanterman-Petris-Short (LPS) Act. This act stated that authorities could only take individuals into custody for seventy-two-hour psychiatric holds or compel them to receive psychiatric treatment if they were deemed to be a danger to themselves or others or judged "gravely disabled" (those unable to meet basic needs for food, clothing, or shelter). The bill's authors sought to end the practice of institutionalizing patients against their will or for indefinite periods. LPS hastened the movement of psychiatric patients into communities.

While initially lauded, LPS did not work as well as imagined. After its passage, most state hospital patients were discharged to residential facilities or their families. These patients had to go through the lengthy process of applying for SSI benefits. Some never applied since they could not do so themselves.<sup>75</sup> Due to fears of living near people with mental illness, cities and communities adopted more stringent licensing and zoning

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<sup>71</sup> Health and Welfare Agency (State Dept. of Health), Report of Task Force on Community Mental Health Funding, January 20, 1975; USC Frank Lanterman Papers, Box 28, Folder 2.

<sup>72</sup> California Council on Mental Health, "Quarterly Meeting Report, July 24 and 25, 1986," USC Archives, Lila Berman Papers, Box 2, Folder 13.

<sup>73</sup> E&R papers, Vol 6, no. 3, paper on CMHCs and geographical responsibility in LAC, Dec 28, 1978, by Gloria Fowler and George Wolkon, USC Archives, Los Angeles County Mental Health Advisory Board Papers, Box 1, Folder 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 789.

<sup>75</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, Supportive materials for Board of Supervisors Action, March 28, 1985, USC Archives, Los Angeles County Mental Health Advisory Board, Box 2, Folder 1.

regulations for mental health facilities in residential areas.<sup>76</sup> Individuals with chronic mental illness rotated in and out of hospitals, only able to access acute inpatient or emergency psychiatric care. As the federal and California government rolled back welfare benefits during the 1980s, many who relied on the public mental health system—particularly the poor—found themselves with few supports and, consequently, became homeless or moved into substandard housing.

LPS was also strongly critiqued for diverting many people with mental illness into the criminal justice system.<sup>77</sup> Amidst a growing law-and-order movement in the U.S., many felt the government should focus on protecting public order, now made more difficult by the inability to institutionalize people involuntarily who “disturb[ed] the peace because they refuse treatment for their bizarre behavior.”<sup>78</sup> Law enforcement became tasked with evaluating whether someone should be taken in on LPS criteria, a task for which they had not been trained. The fact that they could not always find a spot in treatment centers for individuals they picked up encouraged “mercy bookings.”<sup>79</sup> The new mental health system did not provide aftercare and follow up services for discharged patients or inmates, and accessible outpatient services for this population remained scarce. This form of transinstitutionalization prejudicially impacted communities of color, who were subjected to increasing policing and surveillance as part of the war on drugs.<sup>80</sup>

From 1973 to 1993, reductions in mental health funding were mirrored by significantly faster transitions into homelessness among the mentally ill.<sup>81</sup> Many factors encouraged this group to reside in Skid Row, where there was a wide range of city homeless services. Other cities and states also bused unattached individuals with mental

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<sup>76</sup> ENKI Research Institute, Study of California’s New Mental Health Law, 1972, Part 2, USC Archives, Frank Lanterman Papers, Box 27, Folder 4.

<sup>77</sup> Richard H. Lamb, et al., “Mentally ill persons in the criminal justice system: Some perspectives,” *Psychiatric Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2004): 107-126.

<sup>78</sup> Preliminary Report: Issues relating to the proposed phase-out of the state hospital system, July 1, 1973, Senate Select Committee on proposed phase-out of the state hospital services, USC Archives, Frank Lanterman Papers, Box 22, Folder 17.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from JR Elpers to Los Angeles County Supervisors, November 10, 1980, USC Archives, Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Papers, Box 2, Folder 7.

<sup>80</sup> Anne Parsons, *From Asylum to Prison: Deinstitutionalization and the Rise of Mass Incarceration After 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

<sup>81</sup> Anne Wuerker, “Factors in the Transition to Homelessness in the Chronically Mentally III,” *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless* 6, no. 3 (January 1997): 251–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02939568>.

illness to Los Angeles—so-called “Greyhound therapy”—and specifically to Skid Row.<sup>82</sup> One DMH consultant estimated in 1984 that rates of serious mental illness among homeless in Skid Row were as high as 50% and close to 90% for single women.<sup>83</sup> Experts did not think this group comprised only those who had been discharged from state hospitals. Some also felt homelessness resulting from unemployment or the breakdown of family structures could provoke acute mental illness.<sup>84</sup>

While the DMH acknowledged the risk people with chronic mental illness faced in becoming homeless, they recognized that the public was unsympathetic to this group. “When someone sees a homeless mentally ill person,” DMH Director J.R. Elpers noted, “the citizen just sees a bum, someone who has sunk to the depths through his or her own doing. The public does not understand that being poor and homeless can be a direct result of being schizophrenic, that schizophrenics may not be able to organize their thoughts well enough to get a job or even to get dressed.”<sup>85</sup> This stigma weighed even more heavily on those dually diagnosed with mental illness and a substance abuse disorder. Mental health officials increasingly



Figure 6. J. R. Elpers, MD, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health 1978-84. Photograph. Los Angeles, n.d. UCLA Online Repository for History of Public Mental Health Care in California.

explained mental illness through biochemical models to claim that this was a “no fault illness” similar to developmental disabilities, which received more public sympathy, and physical ailments covered by health insurance.<sup>86</sup> Advocates also stressed the utility of

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<sup>82</sup> Rodger Farr, “The Los Angeles Skid Row Mental Health Project,” *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal* 8, no. 2 (1984): 65

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Homeless Task Force Draft Report “Planning and Recommendations for the Homeless Mentally Ill,” June 1985, attachment B, USC Archives, Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, Box 5, Folder 5.

<sup>85</sup> California Council on Mental Health, Quarterly Meeting Report, July 24 and 25, 1986, 4, USC Archives, Lila Berman Papers, Box 2, Folder 13.

<sup>86</sup> Summary of AB 4518: A Bill to Ensure Equal Access to Mental Health Services, 1988, USC Archives, California Coalition for Mental Health Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.

services run by mental health clients and former clients to reach homeless individuals, who may have distrusted government agencies due to past experiences with involuntary institutionalization or imprisonment.<sup>87</sup>

Private and non-profit groups tried to fill the gaps in mental health services. The Skid Row Mental Health Project served as an early model for integrating mental health into a broader array of services for the homeless. This project grew out of the difficulty agencies faced working with mentally ill clients in Skid Row, which did not have a mental health facility in the early '80s. To address these issues, the DMH helped develop evaluation and referral services for the community and trained staff to work with the mentally ill. DMH consultant Rodger Farr argued that many in Skid Row's homeless population required mental health services and that providing shelter, food, physical care, and protection from violence was "a significant mental health treatment process."<sup>88</sup> Advocates for supportive housing, vocational programs, and other social services echoed these calls to consider basic needs as essential to treatment over the decade.<sup>89</sup>

Officials working in or with the DMH's Homeless and Housing Services Division highlighted the need of the mentally ill homeless population for a wide range of medical and social services, including but not limited to affordable housing. Since they had little capacity to implement services, many solutions they discussed relied on public-private partnerships. For example, officials recommended vouchers for hotels that accepted mentally ill residents and had on-site counselors and referral services.<sup>90</sup> Contracting with local private and non-profit agencies, however, perpetuated the fracturing of services for mentally ill indigent adults and encouraged temporary short-term solutions, such as emergency hospital care and shelters.

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<sup>87</sup> California Network of Mental Health Clients, "Response to the California Model," undated, USC Archives, Lila Berman Papers, Box 1, Folder 12.

<sup>88</sup> Farr, "The Los Angeles Skid Row Mental Health Project," 64-76, 71.

<sup>89</sup> California Mental Health Services Reform Act of 1985, AB2541, CA Legislature Assembly, Assembly Bill; Final Report of Meeting of State Mental Health Directors, "Implementing a Supported Housing Approach," 9, February 24-25, 1988, USC Archives, Lila Berman Papers, Box 2, Folder 12.

<sup>90</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, Draft Report "Planning and Recommendations for the Homeless Mentally Ill," prepared for the Countywide Task Force on the Homeless, June 1985, 4, USC Archives, Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

### **1980s to Present**

The affordable housing crisis, rising unemployment rates, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and the deterioration of the social safety net over the 1970s contributed to what many have described as the “new homelessness” of the 1980s. This phenomenon assumed particular form in Los Angeles County, which the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development dubbed “the homeless capital of America” in 1984. Both old and new factors contributed to this designation. Lack of affordable housing and growing economic inequality remained major problems, affecting communities of color disproportionately. Criminalization of homelessness emerged as a main pillar of poverty management. The intersection of over-policing, underemployment, and housing inequality in Black Los Angeles helps explain the disproportionate rate of homelessness in Los Angeles, as does the endurance of punitive responses to poverty more generally.

Furthermore, Los Angeles’ legal and political structure, which is inimical to tackling big, region-wide problems, hindered coordinated efforts to address homelessness. Each of the county’s 87 cities exercises police and zoning powers, while the county is responsible for social welfare. Separate agencies handle transportation, schools, and other issues. State law gives neither the city nor county responsibility for providing or building housing *per se*, and until fairly recently, the state and federal governments provided the only financial support for housing construction (besides redevelopment funds). The City of Los Angeles historically has had a “weak mayor” form of government, which has effectively empowered real estate interests, while the county has had no powerful chief executive at all. County departments were known for operating in “silos” and rarely worked together to advance the interests of mutual clientele. Historically, the city and county governments distrusted each other as they competed for tax dollars, attention, and power. Party politics exacerbated this tension: although both jurisdictions have non-partisan elections, the city has long skewed Democratic, while the county Board of



*Figure 7. Jose Alvarez Sitting on a Cot in the Tent City for the Homeless in Los Angeles, California. 1984. Photograph. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.*



Supervisors was majority Republican during the 1980s. It remained so until the election of the Board's first Latinx member, Gloria Molina, in 1991. Consequently, policies implemented to deal with the region's homelessness crisis during the late twentieth century failed to address the deeply-rooted contributing factors.

### *Shifting Makeup and Development of Skid Row*

Despite, or perhaps due to, its long history of alignment with real estate developers, the Los Angeles City Council adopted a policy of containment, described earlier, to preserve Skid Row as a viable very-low-income neighborhood and keep its residents away from the upscale part of downtown. The CRA promised millions to renovate and preserve the single-room occupancy (SRO) apartments—small, single, furnished rooms with shared bathroom facilities and kitchens—that housed the area's poorest. In 1980, the average SRO rented for \$100 a month, while median monthly income in Skid Row was \$390 a month—a rent burden of about 25% (well within the “normal” range).<sup>91</sup> This would change over the coming decade.

Rising housing costs, particularly in areas of downtown targeted for “revitalization,” and unemployment had a large impact on the demographic makeup of

#### **Mentally Ill Overtaking Alcoholics on Skid Row**

*I was walking by a little park in Skid Row and it was like I was back in the ward of a mental hospital. The only difference was that there weren't any walls.*  
—John Marabelli, who was homeless on Skid Row.

By WILLIAM OVEREND,  
*Times Staff Writer*

They are the mentally ill and the mentally disabled, released by the thousands from state hospitals and wandering the streets of Los Angeles in growing numbers.

Throughout the community, they are an increasingly visible part of the larger homeless population. But nowhere are they as numerous as on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles.

The homeless mentally ill have become the largest single group within the Skid Row population, according to estimates by county mental health officials.

##### **Rough Estimates**

There may be as many as 5,000 of them on Skid Row alone, by those calculations, and twice that number scattered elsewhere throughout the county.

The estimates are rough, and disputed by some as probably too high. There are still large numbers of the chronically alcoholic, and efforts at an accurate count have only recently begun.

“Alcoholic behavior and mental illness often look the same,” said Jill Halperin, founder of the Downtown Women's Center, a program that treats the mental health needs of some of the area's women. “What we do know as fact is that there are



Frank Rice, head of the Skid Row Development Agency, sees proper care for mentally ill population as area's major need.

services for the alcoholic, but not the mentally ill.”

There is no mistaking the transformation brought about by the mentally ill and handicapped. The entire Skid Row area—two square miles or so—has become a kind of urban campground for them.

It is the substitute for a system of community care that was supposed to replace the hospitals during the last two decades, but wasn't developed because of state budget problems and other priorities.

in the budget Gov. George Deukmejian will announce Jan. 10.

If the extra money comes, say county officials, some of it will be used to provide additional minimal psychiatric service to the Skid Row population.

No noticeable change on Skid Row is expected, however, even if some extra attention is focused on the problem in the coming year.

“We've just begun to see it at this stage,” said Frank Rice, president of the Skid Row Development Agency, who has come to view the needs of the mentally ill as the area's major problem. “Any real solutions are a long way off.”

“They are nobody's constituency,” he added. “For a change of any magnitude at all, there would have to be a major shift in public thinking. . . . It would need to be a crusade.”

The needs of the mentally ill who are among the homeless on Skid Row range from the psychiatric care most of them lack to such other basic requirements as money, food and shelter.

They have trouble following the welfare rules, so many of them fail to receive the minimal public assistance for which they are eligible.

“The hotels in the Skid Row area along with many of the social agencies themselves often don't want to deal with them because of their behavior problems.”

It is harder for them to have the friends they need for their social support, and it is harder to find the jobs that are necessary in rebuilding self-esteem because of the stigma of mental illness.

Many times they avoid the little help available because they fear it

the homeless on Skid Row.<sup>92</sup> Up until the 1980s, this population was primarily comprised of older, single, white men, many of whom suffered from alcoholism. The closure of state mental institutions and “dumping” of indigent patients drove many chronically mentally ill people into the neighborhood. When the recession of the early 1980s hit, a younger, more diverse group dubbed “economic

Figure 8. Overend, William. “Mentally Ill Overtaking Alcoholics on Skid Row.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 30, 1983.

<sup>91</sup> Hamilton, Rabinovitz, & Alschuler, Inc., *The Changing Face of Misery: Los Angeles' Skid Row Area in Transition* (Los Angeles, CA: prepared for The Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, 1987), III-13.

<sup>92</sup> Ellen Reese, Geoffrey Deverteuil, and Leanne Thach, “Weak-center’ gentrification and the contradictions of containment: deconcentrating poverty in Downtown Los Angeles,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 34, no. 2 (2010): 310-327.

refugees” joined them. Over the decade, an array of social ills, including crack cocaine addiction, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and tough-on-crime policies, rendered homeless even more economically challenged people. Since there was no set of suitable institutions available to house and care for these people, many of them ended up in jail. This was particularly true for the mentally ill homeless, which led psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey to declare, “(t)he Los Angeles county jail has become the largest unofficial mental hospital in the United States.”<sup>93</sup>

**ETHNICITY AND LIVING ARRANGEMENT OF UNDUPLICATED ADULTS CLIENTS**  
**FISCAL YEAR 1991-92**  
**Living Arrangement (N=52,136)**

ETHNICITY	HOMELESS %	IND. LIVING %	LIVING HOME %	RES CARE %	INSTIT CARE %	SUPP HOUSING %	OTHER %	UNKNOWN %
WHITE NON-HISPANIC	45.82	46.00	31.12	57.95	47.74	42.11	22.43	41.68
HISPANIC	13.87	21.86	29.92	11.80	15.18	9.47	18.65	23.95
BLACK	35.44	24.88	26.70	21.72	24.38	35.79	51.35	25.88
ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	2.34	4.37	9.06	5.71	2.78	12.63	2.43	4.63
AMERICAN INDIAN	0.67	0.66	0.51	0.52	0.55	0.00	0.00	0.49
OTHER	1.97	2.24	2.69	2.30	9.36	0.00	5.14	3.37
TOTAL	100.11	100.01	100	100	99.99	100	100	100

Figure 9. Table, “Ethnicity and Living Arrangement of Unduplicated Adults Clients FY 1991-1992,” in Draft Housing Report from LA County Department of Mental Health Homeless and Housing Services Division, 1993, p. 22, UCLA Archives, Tom Bradley Administrative Papers.

Looking back at this period, homeless advocates now suggest that the phrase “economic refugees” grew in part out of a conscious decision to highlight European Americans and downplay drug use and mental illness among the homeless in order to gain favorable press and public attention. This approach, however, helped obscure the ways structural racism had contributed to a steep rise in African American homelessness.<sup>94</sup>

Many Skid Row newcomers, in fact, arrived from South Los Angeles, where deindustrialization, aggressive policing, and limited access to an increasingly formalized

<sup>93</sup> E. Fuller Torrey, “Time Bombs on the Streets,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 1989.

<sup>94</sup> Gary Blasi, “And We Are Not Seen: Ideological and Political Barriers to Understanding Homelessness,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 37, no. 4 (1994): 563-586; Gary Blasi, conversation with authors, April 30, 2019.

rental market exacerbated precarity in areas acutely vulnerable to displacement.<sup>95</sup> Communities built just a generation earlier by African Americans escaping the depredations of the Jim Crow South saw thousands of residents forced to migrate to Skid Row for the bare necessities of survival. By the late 1980s, the neighborhood was majority Black, a stark contrast from the previous decade when it was 67% white and 21% Black.<sup>96</sup> Since the 1980s, African Americans have been disproportionately represented among the Los Angeles homeless population and continue to be four times more likely to experience homelessness.<sup>97</sup>

The growing number of homeless in and around Skid Row soon ran up against pressure from business interests seeking to develop the area around the neighborhood. Observers claimed the infusion of younger homeless men and the advent of crack cocaine had made the area “an angrier, more violent place.”<sup>98</sup> Government, philanthropic, and business organizations worked to expand SRO unit availability, shelters, and social services, but progress was exceedingly slow. This frustrated business owners. Grocer Jack Simone, who bought his market on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street in 1957, contacted Mayor Tom Bradley’s office in the spring of 1987 to complain that homeless campsites were blocking the entrance to his store and panhandlers were accosting and frightening his customers.<sup>99</sup> Longtime drapery wholesaler Si Frumkin reported open drug use and battery outside his business at 6<sup>th</sup> and San Julian.<sup>100</sup> Other merchants who had followed the homeless individuals to Skid Row for the lower rents complained as well.<sup>101</sup> They all demanded the city act.

Thus, in February 1987 the police and sanitation departments began raiding and dismantling street encampments on Skid Row at the behest of the association representing Central City East business owners. In May of that year, Police Chief Daryl F. Gates announced plans to arrest homeless street sleepers for violations of city

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<sup>95</sup> David Thacher, “The Rise of Criminal Background Screening in Rental Housing,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2008): 5-30.

<sup>96</sup> These statistics come from Los Angeles legal scholar Gary Blasi cited in Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>97</sup> Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, Presentation: Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count – 2019, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Penelope McMillan, “Uncertainty, Crack Add to Skid Row Woes,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1989.

<sup>99</sup> Ann Japenga, “A Merchant Adapts on Skid Row,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1987.

<sup>100</sup> Frank Clifford and Penelope McMillan, “Bradley Says He’s Responsible for Skid Row Raids,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1987.

<sup>101</sup> Patricia Hurtado, “Skid Row Toy Stores Hit: A Booming Business Feels Chill of Crime,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1985.

ordinances concerning sidewalk use. Activists urged Mayor Bradley to halt the sweeps, but he declined. Reflecting on this episode a few months later, he said, “I thought it was necessary...There was a condition of filth and obstruction on the sidewalks...that nobody would tolerate in their neighborhood, the rodent infestation, and the human excrement



Figure 10. Bulldozer Clearing Homeless Camp in Los Angeles, California. 1987. Photograph. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.

that was dumped on the sidewalk, the mattresses that were filthy, and they are all health hazards. All that stuff had to be dealt with.”<sup>102</sup>

Later that year, the Bradley administration opened an “urban

campground” for the homeless. More than 900 mostly African American and Latinx people were encouraged to leave the street and squat in tents and makeshift shanties on 14 acres of dirt surrounded by high steel fences near downtown.<sup>103</sup> The camp was only supposed to last for two months in order to offer social services and a safe place to stay while the mayor “continue(d) to look for more permanent solutions.”<sup>104</sup> Although about 240 people found jobs or qualified for government assistance while at the camp, and 119 families were relocated away from Skid Row, the depth of residents’ need for comprehensive medical, employment, and social services completely overwhelmed the effort.<sup>105</sup> “More permanent solutions” did not materialize. However, the camp had taken on a life of its own, and activists fought to prevent its closure, arguing there was nowhere else to go.

<sup>102</sup> Bill Boyarsky, “Bradley: Is He Losing Old Touch?,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1987.

<sup>103</sup> Blasi, “And We Are Not Seen.”

<sup>104</sup> Penelope McMillan and Roxane Arnold, “Bradley Proposes Temporary Camp for L.A.’s Homeless,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1987.

<sup>105</sup> Penelope McMillan, “Homeless Camp Ends Much Like It Began: A Grim Place of Refuge Closes Today and No One Involved Calls It a Success,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1987; Frederick M. Muir, “No Place Like Home: A Year After Camp Was Closed, Despair Still Reigns on Skid Row,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1988.



As these sweeps continued, contradictions inherent in the containment policy became clear. As early as 1985, many considered containment, and the effort to preserve Skid Row as a viable very-low-income neighborhood, a losing battle. Little Tokyo to the north was booming with investment from Japan and elsewhere, and its City Council representative, Gilbert W. Lindsay, wanted the Little Tokyo redevelopment area expanded south of Third Street into Skid Row proper. Lindsay actually tried to amend the CBD Redevelopment plan to allow luxury condominiums in Skid Row. Pressure from the fish-processing industry on the neighborhood's eastern border and the many wholesale toy businesses opening up on Skid Row itself also threatened the containment plan. Simultaneously, some Skid Row activists argued that the policy had been overtaken by the growth in homeless numbers.<sup>106</sup> According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Mayor Bradley and his allies were re-evaluating the containment strategy in the face of development pressure.

The plan was never officially overturned, however, and Mayor Bradley remained committed to the idea. He proposed a \$100 million bond for seismic reinforcement of SRO buildings and imposed a moratorium on demolition of SROs.<sup>107</sup> In 1988 Bradley attempted to extend the life of the CBD Redevelopment Project by promising to divert \$500 million of the proceeds to low-income housing and other services for the homeless.<sup>108</sup> With the exception of the demolition moratorium, none of these longer-term efforts was implemented.

The extension of the CBD plan fell through largely due to widespread mistrust of the CRA in preserving low-income housing. Despite its many successes in building and rehabilitating very low-income units on Skid Row, the agency had developed a reputation for subsidizing unworthy developers and creating condos for the rich. The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles charged that the CRA had destroyed thousands of low-income units, such that its net housing production was not nearly as robust as it had claimed. It also said the agency inflated its housing production record by advertising

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<sup>106</sup> Rich Connell, "SKID ROW: 'Containment Strategy' of Aiding Residents, Easing Impact on Business District Is Slow and Frustrating," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1985.

<sup>107</sup> Gary Squier, Housing Coordinator, Office of Mayor Tom Bradley, City of Los Angeles, *Housing the Future—Briefing Book: Blue Ribbon Committee for Affordable Housing*. (Los Angeles, CA: draft for distribution to city agencies for review of data, April 20, 1988), 9.4 and 7.10.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.2.

shelter beds as “family units,” and that it failed to ensure the low-income units it built would be reserved for low-income people in the future.<sup>109</sup>

The Los Angeles Union of the Homeless, a grassroots collective of unhoused people, noted the CRA’s shortcomings. The Union sent a letter to city officials in the fall of 1986 calling for the reinvestment of \$300,000, which the CRA had allocated to renovate a Skid Row park by first evicting dozens of individuals who slept in it. Rather than investing the money in a sprinkler system to force out the park’s inhabitants, the Union called for the CRA to use the funds to convert vacant city-owned buildings into housing units both in the vicinity of Skid Row and “outside of the downtown area so as to distribute the homeless problem throughout the L.A. area in a more equitable manner both financially and socially.”<sup>110</sup>

### *County and City Tensions in Addressing Homelessness*

The clash between rising homelessness and Skid Row businesses, the shortcomings of the CRA, the inherent contradictions of the containment plan, and the ongoing police sweeps all serve as evidence of the failures of city policy with regard to homelessness during the 1980s. Moreover, conditions driving many groups into homelessness, particularly people of color, remained unaddressed. But that is only half the story. While the city attempted to manage homelessness through its police and redevelopment powers, the county was responsible for administering General Relief (GR)—the welfare program for single, childless, indigent adults mandated by state law. California Welfare & Institutions Code Section 17000 provides that “(e)very county and city shall relieve and support all incompetent, poor, indigent persons, and those incapacitated by age, disease, or accident, lawfully resident therein.”

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<sup>109</sup> Alisa Belinkoff Katz, personal notes, 1988.

<sup>110</sup> Los Angeles Union of the Homeless Low Income Housing Proposal, October 1986, Box 4895, Folder 3, Mayor Tom Bradley Administration papers (Collection 293). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.



County rules made it difficult to enroll in GR, as they required identification and a residence address, which many homeless people did not have. A 1982 *Los Angeles Times* story noted that “(o)fficials themselves contend, sometimes with a touch of pride, that the system has its own built-in Catch 22s.”<sup>111</sup> During the early 1980s the Republican majority on the Board of Supervisors rejected an effort to team up with the city on



*Figure 6. Homeless Men Watch as Group of People Have Picture Taken on Steps of Los Angeles City Hall, California. 1988. Photograph. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.*

homelessness and refused to lessen restrictions on GR.<sup>112</sup> The county was sued multiple times by public-interest law firms and excoriated by its own Civil Grand Jury for failing to properly carry out the spirit of Section 17000.<sup>113</sup>

In July 1987 Los Angeles City Attorney James K. Hahn, together

with legal aid groups, filed a lawsuit challenging the county’s handling of its Section 17000 obligation. They charged that the system of General Relief, “although purportedly designed to provide last resort subsistence benefits for the indigent, is in fact designed, at least in part, to deny emergency shelter and other essential assistance to substantial numbers of indigent residents.” The lawyers claimed that county officials established an annual quota of GR recipients and implemented administrative procedures to keep the caseload within that limit.<sup>114</sup> Board of Supervisors Chairman Michael D. Antonovich pushed back, defending the adequacy and legitimacy of the general relief program, charging that changes demanded by Hahn would “lead to rampant welfare fraud” and attacking the CRA for its demolition of thousands of low-income housing units in and

<sup>111</sup> Judith Michaelson and Louis Sahagun, “New Wave of the Homeless,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1982.

<sup>112</sup> Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County Statement of Proceedings, May 22, 1984.

<sup>113</sup> Frank Clancy, “Lawyers Team Up to Fight for the Homeless,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1986; Los Angeles County Grand Jury 1984-85, *Review of the 60-Day Sanction General Relief*, (Los Angeles, CA: written by Deloitte Haskins + Sells, April, 1985).

<sup>114</sup> Superior Court of California for the County of Los Angeles, *City of Los Angeles v. County of Los Angeles*, Case No. C 655 274, Second Amended Complaint, May 25, 1990.

around Skid Row.<sup>115</sup> A counter-suit along these lines was filed the following month. The two lawsuits dragged on for several years, with *The Times* chastising the county for paying its attorneys \$325 an hour to defend a program under which GR recipients got no more than \$312 a month.<sup>116</sup> The case was settled in 1991, and the county agreed to increase GR and ease some of its restrictions. At the end of 1993, in further resolution of the lawsuit, the city and county created a Joint Powers Authority to operate homeless programs, later known as LAHSA (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority). Each agency was to fund LAHSA with approximately \$2.5 million a year “consist[ing], in part, of the grant funds currently available to each Party for homeless programs and services.”<sup>117</sup> In other words, this did not expand programming. The county and city stopped fighting, but their service delivery systems were no better integrated or robust than before.

Indeed, throughout the 1980s officials failed to comprehend the breadth and depth of homelessness, or to truly consider what its resolution might require. A 1988 study conducted for the Greater Los Angeles Partnership for the Homeless, which included Mayor Bradley, Archbishop Roger M. Mahoney, and many other civic and business leaders, concluded that solutions to homelessness depended on a joint effort by government and those private institutions that controlled welfare benefits (GR), physical and mental health care, detox services, policing, jobs, and rents to implement a comprehensive, integrated strategy. However, they wrote:

The high level of motivation and sustained action necessary to achieve this common purpose and commitment is unlikely to be mobilized unless someone in the County develops and clearly articulates a comprehensive and compelling policy toward the homeless. No agency in government has yet announced such a policy nor does any appear likely to do so.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Craig Quintana, “L.A. Sues County on Homeless Aid; Antonovich Calls Action ‘Frivolous,’” *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1987.

<sup>116</sup> “Cease Fire,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1991.

<sup>117</sup> Joint Exercise of Powers Agreement between County of Los Angeles and City of Los Angeles Creating an Agency to be known as The Los Angeles Services Authority, December 17, 1993.

<sup>118</sup> Paper prepared by Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Alschuler, Inc., “Confronting Homelessness: What Should Be Done? Strategic Planning Data and Policy for the Greater Los Angeles Partnership for the Homeless,” December 1988. Online Archive of California, Collection No. 0449, Box 2, Folder 6.

The problem was too big, solutions too expensive, and political divisions and dysfunction too deep. Los Angeles did not know how to tackle soaring real estate values, stagnant wages, deep-seated racism, and increasing poverty. It was much easier to send in the police.

It is important to note that Skid Row, and the City of Los Angeles more generally, was not the only locus of homelessness during the 1980s and '90s; many cities had to confront this crisis. The City of Santa Monica attempted to deal constructively with its homeless residents. In 1983 the city offered workshops to churches and social service organizations on how best to serve this population, and the following year the city budget allocated more than \$100,000 for homeless services.<sup>119</sup> But by the end of 1984, city officials, in response to growing complaints, felt compelled to “do something about the panhandlers, the drunks and the derelicts who roam our beautiful city.”<sup>120</sup>

Candidates for City Council vowed to push for wider enforcement of vagrancy laws. City Attorney Robert Myers refused to press charges unless criminal behavior was clearly evident, but he lost his job over the issue several years later.<sup>121</sup> In the early '90s, Santa Monica joined Fullerton, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Orange, Santa Ana, and West Hollywood in passing ordinances banning

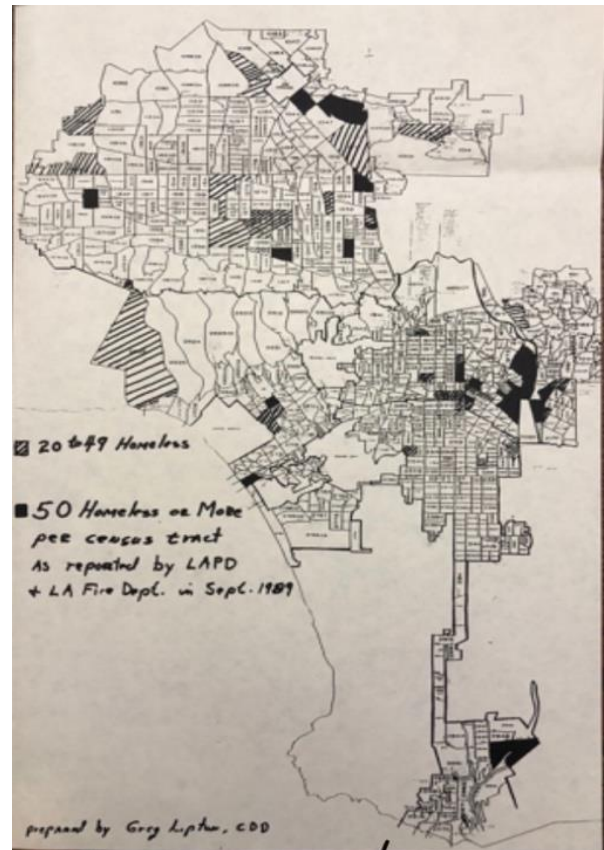


Figure 7. LA Homeless Map prepared by Greg Lipton, CDD, 1989, Box 4893, Folder 10, Mayor Tom Bradley Administration papers (Collection 293). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>119</sup> Nellie Hendersen, “S.M. Acts on Problems of Homeless: Council Votes Money for Workshops to Help Local Agencies,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 1983.

<sup>120</sup> Mathis Chazanov, “The Homeless: Thousands Seek Shelter in Santa Monica, Venice Just Minutes From the ‘Good Life’,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1984.

<sup>121</sup> Nancy Hill-Holtzman, “Santa Monica Council Fires City Attorney: Government: Robert Myers had resisted orders to crack down on the homeless. His ouster comes at an explosive meeting as his supporters hiss and scream,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 1992.

sleeping on public property.<sup>122</sup> As on Skid Row, suburban city officials had turned to criminalization to solve the problem of homelessness.

### *Deepening Economic Woes, 1990s-2000s*

By the early 1990s, the economic dimensions of homelessness in the region metastasized into a full-scale affordable housing crisis. Newspaper stories and official committees reported that 200,000 people were living in garages; that 25% of renters were paying in excess of 50% of income for rent; and that older apartments averaging \$350/month rent were being demolished to make way for new units averaging \$900/month.<sup>123</sup>

Meanwhile, increasing immigration from East Asia and Latin America since the 1970s created competition for affordable apartments in neighborhoods long neglected by real estate interests and local government. Compounding the problem of scarcity, new apartment construction had crashed after the Federal Tax Reform Act of 1986, which severely limited incentives for investment. Thereafter, apartment construction was largely geared toward the high end of the market, such that Los Angeles suffered both from a dearth of affordable housing and high vacancy rates.<sup>124</sup> These factors squeezed the housing market and, along with the recession, contributed to increasing poverty and homelessness. Author David Rieff alluded to these pressures when he labeled Los Angeles “The Capital of the Third World” in 1991.<sup>125</sup>

To make matters worse, Los Angeles faced another recession. The recession of the early ‘90s was far deeper than the downturn of the early ‘80s, with 562,000 jobs lost (13.4% of the whole) and an unemployment high of just over 11%.<sup>126</sup> Much of the job loss was in the high-paying aerospace and defense industries. When the economy finally grew again, the new jobs were concentrated in low-wage service employment. Los Angeles also faced a battery of costly disasters, including floods, fires, and the 1994

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<sup>122</sup> Somini Sengupta, "Out in the Cold: Poverty: Homeless People Get Less Help Coping with Winter's Chill this Year as their Numbers Soar and Public Funding for Shelters Dwindles," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 14, 1993.

<sup>123</sup> Stephanie Chavez and James Quinn, "Substandard Housing: Garages: Immigrants in, Cars Out," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1987.

<sup>124</sup> Harry Anderson, "Vacancies Amid an Apartment Shortage," *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1990.

<sup>125</sup> David Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

<sup>126</sup> Dan Hamilton, "The Los Angeles County Job Market: A Comparison with the 1990s," CERF Blog, August 27, 2009, <https://www.clucerf.org/2009/08/27/the-los-angeles-county-job-market-a-comparison-with-the-1990s/>.

Northridge Earthquake—a devastating event that left thousands of Angelenos without homes. This followed civil unrest after the acquittal of four LAPD officers in state court over the beating of Rodney King, a Black man, in 1992, much of which was concentrated in the predominantly Black and Latinx area of South Central Los Angeles. Stoked by years of racial and economic inequality in the city and claims of police abuse, this event magnified local dynamics of race and class and the unequal distribution of resources.

The recession also caused tax revenues to plummet. As a result of state budget machinations, by 1995-96 Los Angeles County faced a \$1.3 billion annual shortfall, equivalent to approximately half the county’s general purpose revenues.<sup>127</sup> The Board of Supervisors had just settled the city’s lawsuit by agreeing to increase General Relief, but with the county facing bankruptcy, they revised their plans. In early 1996 a state commission ruled that Los Angeles County was in “significant financial distress” and allowed the Board of Supervisors to reduce GR from \$341 to \$221 a month, saving as much as \$78 million a year.<sup>128</sup> GR in Los Angeles remains \$221 today despite decades of inflation—less than the 1982 level of \$228.

**Homeless and Non-homeless Unduplicated Adult Clients by  
where service was received  
Fiscal Year 1991-1992**

SERVICE AREA	HOMELESS		NON-HOMELESS	
	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
1 - NORTH COUNTY	250	5.98	2941	6.14
2 - SAN FERNANDO VALLEY	391	9.36	5771	12.05
3 - WESTSIDE	395	9.45	2210	4.61
4 - SO BAY/LONG BEACH	363	8.69	7728	16.13
5 - SO CENTRAL LA	313	7.49	7320	15.28
6 - SAN GABRIEL VALLEY	358	8.57	4041	8.44
7 - SOUTHEAST	301	7.20	2232	4.66
8 - METROPOLITAN	1807	43.25	15516	32.39
9 - OTHER	0	0.00	141	0.29
TOTAL	4178	99.99	47900	99.99

Service Area 8 includes Skid Row Mental Health Center and Hollywood Mental Health Services, and both areas include large numbers of homeless individuals.

Figure 83. Table, “Homeless and Non-homeless Unduplicated Adult Clients by where service was received FY 1991-1992,” in Draft Housing Report from LA County Department of Mental Health Homeless and Housing Services Division, 1993, p. 24, UCLA Archives, Tom Bradley

<sup>127</sup> State of California Legislative Analyst Office, “Los Angeles County’s Fiscal Problems”, July 11, 1995.

<sup>128</sup> Josh Meyer, “County Plan to Cut Welfare Payments 25% Gets Initial State OK; Finances: Commission on Mandates rules that fiscal crisis justifies reduction for 90,000 homeless and poor recipients,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 1996.



Government and the non-profit sector continued to offer services amidst the economic downturn. LAHSA picked up the pace of its activity in the '90s, though it did not serve to bridge the gap between city and county operations. The number of shelter beds increased from 2,000 in the mid-1980s to 8,000 in 1990 and over 13,000 by the year 2000.<sup>129</sup> Various agencies also tried to perform a homeless count. The federal government conducted a special census in 1990 that was criticized for finding only 11,790 homeless people in Los Angeles County, while the non-profit Shelter Partnership estimated 36,000-59,000.<sup>130</sup> Shelter Partnership continued to offer population estimates throughout the early 1990s based on assumptions about the relationship between homelessness and applications for General Relief. From the above figure for 1990 they hypothesized an increase to 77,141 homeless in 1991-92, and more than 84,000 by 1993-94.<sup>131</sup> (For comparative purposes, LAHSA's point-in-time count in 2020 came to 66,436.)

While the 2000 U.S. Census did not include an official homeless count, it recorded abundant evidence of widespread poverty and of an affordable housing shortage in Los Angeles. The Census found 18% of the county's residents living below the poverty line (vs. 11.3% nationwide).<sup>132</sup> A City Housing Crisis Task Force reported in March 2000 that the waiting list for Section 8 housing had recently opened to new applicants for the first time in ten years, leading approximately 153,000 families to submit their names – nearly 10% of *all* the city's households. They also found that in 1998-99, the city's population had increased by 65,000 people while only 1,940 net new housing units were built.<sup>133</sup>

The Task Force also noted that Los Angeles spent about \$23 per resident on affordable housing, none of it from locally generated funds. By contrast, New York City spent \$69 per person—three times as much. They recommended creating an Affordable

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<sup>129</sup> Joel John Roberts, "Commentary; VOICES / A FORUM FOR COMMUNITY ISSUES; Going for Clean, Not Mean, Streets," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2002.

<sup>130</sup> Tracy Wilkinson and Janet Rae-Dupree, "Judge Orders Revised Census Data Released Population: State Senate Wins Access to Survey that Increases Count of Minorities and Homeless. U.S. Officials Plan to Seek Stay of Order," *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1991.

<sup>131</sup> Shelter Partnership, "The Number of Homeless People in Los Angeles City and County July 1992 to June 1993" and "July 1993 to June 1994."

<sup>132</sup> Scott Martelle and Erin Chan, "Income Drop in '90s Cut a Broad Swath, Data show," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 27, 2002; Joseph Dalaker, "Poverty in the United States: 2000," Current Population Reports, September 2001.

<sup>133</sup> Los Angeles Housing Crisis Task Force, "In Short Supply," March, 2000, 5-8.



Housing Trust Fund, which Mayor James Hahn did in 2002, pledging to build its funding up to \$100 million per year.<sup>134</sup> While the fund was able to help construct about 3,000 new units during Hahn's tenure, it never had an independent revenue source and was unable to sustain the desired funding level.<sup>135</sup> A \$1 billion affordable housing bond placed on the November 2006 ballot had no better luck, coming up short of the required two-thirds support.

Meanwhile, the corporatization of the residential real estate sector in the 2000s drove housing prices up considerably. The expansion of the mortgage market in this period, allowing banks and financial institutions to issue mortgage-backed securities, made almost all income levels eligible for a mortgage loan. Decades of an increasingly deregulated financial sector ultimately culminated in the 2008 Subprime Crisis, worsening housing affordability in Los Angeles and other cities even more. Saddled with a heavy financial burden, many homeowners owed more than the market value of their homes. Millions of Americans lost their homes, and many others saw their rents rise significantly as the population of renters swelled. Especially after 2008, foreclosure became one of the biggest forces behind displacement in the U.S. This was especially true in California, the epicenter of the crisis, which experienced more foreclosures than any other state in the country.<sup>136</sup> Over two million properties were foreclosed in less than three years in the United States at the peak of the crisis.<sup>137</sup> In Los Angeles, it is estimated that almost 150,000 properties were repossessed by banks and other financial institutions in the years succeeding the crisis. Foreclosure properties made up 43% of the totality of the home sales market in the county during 2008 and 2009.<sup>138</sup>

The massive wave of foreclosure obviously had a major impact on homeowners in Los Angeles, but it also drove up housing rents. Rents rose 7.3% in 2014, costing the

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<sup>134</sup> Los Angeles Housing Crisis Task Force, "In Short Supply," March, 2000.

<sup>135</sup> Neighborhood Housing Services of Los Angeles County, "Transit Oriented Development and Affordable Communities in Los Angeles County," April, 2015.

<sup>136</sup> David Harvey, "The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis This Time," paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meetings, Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 2010, <http://davidharvey.org/2010/08/the-enigma-of-capital-and-the-crisis-this-time/>; Ashok Bardhan and Richard Walker, "California, Pivot of the Great Recession," Working Paper Series No. 203-210 (Berkeley: Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, March 2010); J.T. Camp, "Blues geographies and the security turn: Interpreting the housing crisis in Los Angeles," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 653-678.

<sup>137</sup> S. Sassen, "When local housing becomes an electronic instrument: the global circulation of mortgages—a research note," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33 no. 2 (2009): 411-426.

<sup>138</sup> P.M. Ong, C. Pech, and D. Pfeiffer, "The foreclosure crisis in Los Angeles," *California Policy Options* (2014): 31-51.

average Los Angeles County tenant \$20,592 a year.<sup>139</sup> However, the median renting household earns less than \$40,000 annually, spending nearly half of its income on housing. The foreclosure crisis significantly aggravated their plight. This trend was exacerbated by California’s Ellis Act of 1985, which allowed landlords to evict tenants in order to “go out of the rental business,” as well as by the short-term rental platform Airbnb. According to a study by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP), while the Section 8 voucher waitlist has been closed for years now, landlords and developers have used the Ellis Act to evict tenants in 25,853 units across the city of Los Angeles between 2001 and 2019.<sup>140</sup> Airbnb, launched in 2008, pulls thousands of housing units from the long-term rental market. In 2014, Los Angeles city residents listed over 11,000 units on the website—more than 10% of the total hotel accommodation stock.<sup>141</sup>

In paradoxical fashion, the Subprime Crisis has been responsible for increasing the rental supply in Los Angeles. Foreclosure in the wake of the financial crisis reversed the trend of growing homeownership in Los Angeles, “leading to concentrated vacancies or rental conversions in distressed communities.”<sup>142</sup> At the same time, the “flipping” of foreclosed homes into rental units by big corporations made housing much less affordable in those neighborhoods. The effects of these processes have been especially severe in Black and Latinx neighborhoods.<sup>143</sup>

Race remained a central factor in the crisis. In cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, and San Diego, African Americans were nearly twice as likely to report lender marketing efforts as the reason for taking out a home equity loan compared to whites (40% versus 24%). Subprime lending not only made African American families more vulnerable to evictions due to the loans’ onerous terms, but also due to existing patterns of racial segregation.<sup>144</sup> From September 2006 through October 2009, foreclosure rates for African American and Latinx homeowners were 1.9 and 2.3

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<sup>139</sup> D. Lee, “How Airbnb short-term rentals exacerbate Los Angeles’s affordable housing crisis: Analysis and policy recommendations,” *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 10 (2016): 229.

<sup>140</sup> Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, “The destruction of Los Angeles affordable housing due to the Ellis Act,” 2019 <http://www.antievictionmappingproject.net/losangeles.html>.

<sup>141</sup> Lee, “How Airbnb short-term rentals exacerbate Los Angeles’s affordable housing crisis.”

<sup>142</sup> Ong, et al., “The foreclosure crisis in Los Angeles,” 33.

<sup>143</sup> Emily Molina, “Foreclosures, investors, and uneven development during the great recession in the Los Angeles metropolitan area,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2016): 564-580.

<sup>144</sup> J.S. Rugh, and D.S. Massey, “Racial segregation and the American foreclosure crisis,” *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 5 (2010): 629-651.

times higher than whites, respectively. Besides experiencing higher foreclosure rates, predominantly African American and Latinx neighborhoods experienced the highest real estate-owned property vacancy rates.<sup>145</sup> This reflected a new wave of speculative investment in historically marginalized communities, increasing housing costs and displacement in turn.

### *Los Angeles Homelessness Policies and Approaches in the Twenty-First Century*

The new iterations of Los Angeles' affordable housing and homelessness crises during the twenty-first century were met with many of the same old approaches. Notably, policing and incarceration remained key strategies for addressing homelessness in Los Angeles. As homeless persons continued to crowd the streets, sidewalks, and shelters of Skid Row, changes to zoning laws brought gentrifying, middle class residents to downtown. This latter group joined the chorus demanding homeless sweeps. In 2002 new Police Chief William Bratton brought his "broken windows" policy to Los Angeles.<sup>146</sup> The Police Department began enforcing Municipal Code Section 41.18(d), which prohibited street or sidewalk sleeping. The ACLU sued, eventually obtaining a ruling from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals that such a ban in the absence of sufficient shelter resources amounted to cruel and unusual punishment. In 2007 the city and the ACLU reached a settlement in the case, known as *Jones v. City of Los Angeles*, that allowed people to sleep on sidewalks citywide overnight. It also held that police may begin enforcing LAMC 41.18(d) once 1,250 units of supportive housing are built.<sup>147</sup> That goal has been achieved, but this ordinance is not being enforced.<sup>148</sup>

In fall 2006, while enforcement of 41.18(d) was on hold after the Ninth Circuit ruling, Chief Bratton launched his "Safer Cities" initiative, deploying 50 additional police officers to Skid Row to enforce a zero-tolerance policy on crime. In the ensuing two months, police made 1500 arrests, two-thirds of them for felonies. According to *Los*

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<sup>145</sup> Ong et. al., "The foreclosure crisis in Los Angeles."

<sup>146</sup> The broken windows criminological theory states that visible signs of crime, anti-social behavior, and civil disorder create an urban environment that encourages further crime and disorder, including serious crimes. Patrick McGreevy, "Crackdown Cuts Skid Row Death Toll, Bratton Says; the Chief Credits LAPD Action Against Homeless Encampments. Arrests for Drug Offenses are Thought to be Helping Cut the Overdose Rate," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2007.

<sup>147</sup> Evan George, "City, ACLU Settle Street Sleeping Case," *L.A. Downtown News*, October 15, 2007.

<sup>148</sup> "The last thing L.A. should be spending resources on is rousting homeless people from the sidewalks," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 2018.

*Angeles Times* columnist Steve Lopez, downtown middle-class residents were ecstatic about the drop in serious crime, but social service providers and homeless activists decried the fact that “innocent people -- many of them mentally ill -- have been harassed, handcuffed, cited and sometimes arrested for as little as jaywalking or tossing cigarette butts...when those people are unable to pay [citations], they’ll be subject to arrest for outstanding warrants. None of that will help anyone...The arrestees are unlikely to get assistance for the problems that put them on skid row in the first place, and the churn of people through police stations, courts and jails will cost taxpayers a fortune.”<sup>149</sup> In an age of globalization and inter-urban competition, policing constitutes, as it did in several key junctures in the twentieth century, a ready-at-hand “solution” to visible poverty: “homeless sweeps” and other “broken windows” measures to shuffle Skid Row residents temporarily off the streets became the principal means of managing the problem.

The homeless mentally ill faced particular challenges, which put them in frequent contact with law enforcement. In 2005 allegations grew of numerous Los Angeles hospitals illegally discharging homeless patients to the streets. Hospitals flagged by the Los Angeles Police Department for leaving patients on Skid Row stated they had no other option when discharging homeless patients but to send them there.<sup>150</sup> A letter from city council members Eric Garcetti, Wendy Gruel, Jan Perry, and Bill Rosenthal requesting that hospitals stop dumping patients underscored a lack of resources for homeless patients. “You should no longer make the assumption or claim,” it stated, “that there is a support network that has the capacity to deal with whoever arrives at the doors of the agencies that serve the indigent in downtown Los Angeles.”<sup>151</sup> Due to a lack of capacity in healthcare facilities and in the absence of an adequate mental health support system, Los Angeles County jail became a de facto mental health institution and homeless shelter for mentally ill homeless people.

Without question, the Los Angeles County jail system was ill-prepared to accommodate an influx of inmates with mental health and substance abuse needs. Once released, former inmates entered a cyclical pattern that was difficult to escape, moving

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<sup>149</sup> Steve Lopez, “POINTS WEST; Cop a hero to some, a villain to others,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 2006.

<sup>150</sup> Cara Mia Dimassa and Richard Winton, “Homeless Patient Policy May Shift,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

between jail and the streets and increasing the likelihood of becoming homeless.<sup>152</sup> Since a criminal record often results in barriers to employment, public housing, and various government services, the criminalization of homelessness perpetuates the conditions that produce homelessness in the first place. It is little surprise, then, that the demographics of Los Angeles's contemporary homeless population resemble those of the nearly seven million individuals incarcerated, on parole, or on probation in the United States. In both cases, people of color in general and African Americans in particular—who make up 40% of the incarcerated population but only 13% of the total U.S. population—are disproportionately represented.<sup>153</sup>

And yet, in the early 2000s, local officials began to revise some of their approach to homelessness. Experimental special courts for Skid Row inhabitants and the mentally ill emerged as ways to provide services and keep the homeless out of jail. A 2005 Board of Supervisors motion recognized the importance of discharge policies to assist newly-released prisoners, parolees, emancipated foster youth, and hospital patients without homes. It also recommended stationing county welfare staff in the jails to take GR applications from inmates pending release.<sup>154</sup> The county worked harder to obtain federal benefits for homeless individuals and to improve access to social services of every type. LAHSA's operations became more professionalized.

Policy makers stepped up in other ways, as well. In April 2006 the Board adopted the \$100 million "County Homeless Prevention Initiative." This included \$80 million for a Homeless and Housing Program and the remainder for a variety of important efforts, including housing subsidies for GR recipients and a Homeless Family Access Center on Skid Row. It also created a series of 24-hour, multi-disciplinary "stabilization centers" located in each supervisorial district to serve as an alternative to jail for homeless persons arrested for minor offenses and a discharge location for homeless persons released from hospitals and jails.<sup>155</sup> While some of this program was implemented, the housing portion was deferred due to the 2008 recession, and the

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<sup>152</sup> Margot B. Kushel et al., "Revolving Doors: Imprisonment Among the Homeless and Marginally Housed Population," *American Journal of Public Health* 95, no. 10 (October 2005): 1747–52.

<sup>153</sup> Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2020," Prison Policy Initiative Report, March 24, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>.

<sup>154</sup> Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County Statement of Proceedings December 20, 2005.

<sup>155</sup> Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County Statement of Proceedings, April 4, 2006.

“stabilization centers” failed due to a lack of consensus on the Board of Supervisors. The funds set aside for this purpose, however, are provided each year to the Board of Supervisors, which uses them to build and staff homeless facilities countywide.

Some of the biggest changes came as a result of national research suggesting that permanent supportive housing was not only the key to ending chronic homelessness, but saved money as well. In 2007 Philip Mangano, the George W. Bush administration’s “homeless czar,” brought this concept to Los Angeles: identify the most vulnerable among the homeless and move them into permanent housing with “wraparound” supportive services. Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky embraced this idea and launched “Project 50” with the goal of identifying, housing, and providing services to the 50 people most likely to die on the streets of Skid Row. After a two-year pilot period, nearly all clients remained housed. The project was also successful financially, costing \$3.045 million but yielding cost savings of \$3.284 million.<sup>156</sup> Despite this success, a motion to expand the project died for lack of a second.

Though study after study has repeated Project 50’s findings and shown that policing the post-1970s crisis of homelessness has cost significantly more than supportive-housing approaches, the former strategy remains the most ubiquitous one.<sup>157</sup> Reliance on law enforcement and emergency room visits produces a higher overall cost and by saddling people with criminal records and fees, perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Nevertheless, localities continue to calculate, often in the wake of considerable pressure from merchant and property-owner associations, that arrests and fines generate more immediate results than long-term investments in housing.

Such policy logic has made the status of homelessness more intractable than it was in the past. It has also deepened the roots of racial inequality in the city, given the disproportionately large number of African Americans experiencing homelessness. Once escapable with a steady job, homelessness now accrues crippling debt and the debilitating stigma of a criminal record. The prevalence of racialized narratives about the “undeserving poor” in contemporary policy debates helps explain the overemphasis

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<sup>156</sup> Project 50 Cost Effectiveness, CEO, June 2012

<sup>157</sup> See for example Sarah B. Hunter et al, “Evaluation of Housing for Health Permanent Supportive Housing Program,” RAND Corporation Research Report, 2017.



on policing strategies.<sup>158</sup> Just as proponents of the 1996 federal welfare reform bill mobilized images of “unworthy” African American AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients to justify slashing cash-aid payments, such imagery has likewise hastened the erosion of publicly subsidized housing and accelerated the build-up of prisons.<sup>159</sup> Since the 1980s, mass homelessness, mass incarceration, and the gentrification of central cities have reinforced one another. The convergence of these forces in Los Angeles continues to destabilize the lives of poor people of color. In a city long suffering from a shortage of affordable homes, banning activities like sleeping in cars or sitting on sidewalks effectively criminalizes poverty. Given the targeted population, one scholar has located this new regime of urban policing in a broader process of “racial banishment.”<sup>160</sup> Movements for racial justice led by houseless people have similarly theorized their community’s position on Los Angeles’s political landscape.<sup>161</sup> Asserting the same right to the city as owners of landed assets, such movements have called for investments in adequate housing in lieu of punitive policies aimed at “cleaning up” Skid Row and other areas with homeless encampments. The slogan “house keys not handcuffs,” captures this alternative vision.

High rates of mental illness, substance abuse in the homeless population, and philosophical shifts in the treatment of these conditions have also spurred the demand for new solutions. The *Los Angeles Times* recently revealed that the prevalence of homeless adults in Los Angeles County with either a mental illness or substance abuse disorder is 67%—much higher than the 29% reported by LAHSA, which interpreted data much more narrowly. The *Times*’ analysis supports what many in Los Angeles already believe. It also aligns with data from a national study published by the California Policy Lab, which show that rather than receiving shelter and appropriate care, unsheltered

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<sup>158</sup> Policy makers have used the term “undeserving poor” to refer to able-bodied adults in poverty due to individual behavior or character flaws rather than structural forces beyond their control. During the 1980s and 90s, critics mobilized the concept of the underserving poor, alongside claims of welfare fraud and critiques of the welfare state as a source of debilitating dependency, to cut back on poor relief. Kristina Cooke, David Rhode, and Ryan McNeil, “The Undeserving Poor,” *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2012.

<sup>159</sup> Blasi, “And We Are Not Seen.”

<sup>160</sup> Ananya Roy, “At the Limits of Urban Theory: Racial Banishment in the Contemporary City,” London School of Economics lecture (February 13, 2018).

<sup>161</sup> David Wagner and Peter White, “Why the Silence? Homelessness and Race,” in Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, eds., *Freedom Now! Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in LA and Beyond* (Los Angeles: Freedom Now Books, 2012), 42-47.

homeless individuals with major health challenges are instead regularly engaged by police and emergency services.

These findings coincide with a growing demand for criminal justice system reform that is focused on replacing jails with treatment. In 2013 the Board of Supervisors upended plans to rebuild the deteriorating Men’s Central Jail facility, proposing that part of it be replaced with an “Integrated Inmate Treatment Center” designed to serve inmates with mental illness, co-occurring substance abuse, and specified medical conditions.<sup>162</sup> In February 2019 that plan was scrapped in favor of a “mental health treatment center” operated by the Department of Health Services. In August 2019 the Board, led by Supervisors Janice Hahn and Hilda Solis, cancelled the construction contract for that facility in favor of a solution that was not a jail, or a confinement center, which they called “Care First, Jails Last.” The Board has moved ahead with the effort, approving a motion in July 2020 to direct county departments and the Alternatives to Incarceration Workgroup to come up with a plan to close the Men’s Central Jail within the year. The motion calls on the county to commit costs saved from closing the facility to “reinvesting into our most disenfranchised communities and increasing access to basic need and the county’s system of care, to further reduce the county’s historic reliance on its jail system to meet its residents’ health and service-related needs”—particularly mental health care.<sup>163</sup>

Therefore, despite the challenges of implementing such policies as the Homeless Prevention Initiative and Project 50 in the 2000s, Los Angeles has undergone a significant change in its experience of, and response to homelessness. City and county leaders have finally begun to imaginatively consider the size and scope of necessary responses to homelessness. The 2016 LAHSA count revealed homelessness had skyrocketed, growing 16% in just 12 months.<sup>164</sup> That same year, the City Council formally reversed the long-standing containment policy and declared its intention to make services, facilities, and housing for the homeless accessible city-wide. In 2017 it approved a long-awaited linkage fee, meant to provide an ongoing source of revenue for

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<sup>162</sup> Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County Statement of Proceedings, May 21, 2013.

<sup>163</sup> Quoted in Taylor Walker, “LA County supes order plan for closing Men’s Central Jail within a year,” *WitnessLA*, July 7, 2020, <https://witnessla.com/la-county-supes-order-plan-for-closing-mens-central-jail-in-a-year/>.

<sup>164</sup> Miguel Santana, City of Los Angeles Chief Administrative Officer, April 16, 2015.

affordable housing construction.<sup>165</sup> In 2018, LAHSA released the Report and Recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness, a landmark effort to name and start to tackle the deep-seated racism that underlies the demography of homelessness in the region.

Public opinion has also changed. A poll conducted for the California Community Foundation by the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs in February 2016 asked respondents, “Suppose you were given \$100,000 that you had to give to a Los Angeles cause or charity. If that were the case, what would be your three highest priorities?” Forty-three percent of the respondents said, “ending homelessness” was the highest priority.<sup>166</sup> This was the genesis of Measures HHH and H, local initiatives to increase local taxes for homeless housing and services in Los Angeles City and County, respectively. Approved in 2016 and 2017, these initiatives form the backbone of Los Angeles’ response to homelessness today.

Ed Leibowitz of Politico Magazine suggested in 2014 that the willingness of Los Angeles residents to get serious about homelessness may be the result of gentrification near Skid Row: “perhaps more surprising than this urban hipster upgrade has been another consequence of the vanishing buffer zone between Skid Row and the rest of L.A.: It seems, finally, to be forcing Angelenos to open their eyes to how the city treats its most vulnerable residents.”<sup>167</sup>

This may be the key to understanding homeless policy in Los Angeles over the last forty years: nothing happened until homelessness spilled over the boundaries of the “containment” area and became visible and present in neighborhoods region-wide. Policymakers’ initial response to homelessness during the 1980s was to open successive “tent cities,” “urban campgrounds,” and “homeless drop-in centers”—as if any one-off solution would make a difference for the tens of thousands of people who could not afford to pay the rent. They appealed to the public for funds to build and rehabilitate extremely low-income housing, without success. Throughout this period the presence of homeless people camped on the doorsteps of Skid Row stores and factories spawned an

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<sup>165</sup> Los Angeles City Clerk Council File Index, Huizar motion January 12, 2016 and Dakota Smith, “Council Passes New Fee on City Development,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 2017.

<sup>166</sup> Los Angeles County Giving Survey, February 2015.

<sup>167</sup> Ed Leibowitz, “Reinventing Skid Row,” *Politico Magazine*, March 5, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/los-angeles-skid-row-reinvention-104266>.

ongoing conflict, presided over by law enforcement, which resulted in the criminalization of the homeless and the further deterioration of their lives.

Now the public has demonstrated that it is ready for massive overhauls of social service delivery systems and willing to pay for them. Indeed, a regional consensus has developed that affordable housing and attendant social services must be provided at a higher level in order to address this crisis. In spite of this momentum, activists fear recent plans by the Trump administration to move the homeless into massive “camps” on federal land—plans entertained by local officials—will direct attention away from the need for more affordable housing and services.<sup>168</sup> This underscores how the persistence of notions of race, law and order, and what Michael B. Katz has called “the undeserving poor” remains a challenge even though public opinion in Los Angeles suggests public desire for an affordable housing solution. The crisis of homelessness did not emerge overnight, and it will not go away overnight. Much work lies ahead, but the path forward seems clear.

### **Homelessness and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

#### *Homelessness and Infectious Disease Control in Los Angeles*

The emergence of COVID-19 has brought a new sense of urgency to housing Los Angeles’ homeless. People experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable to infectious disease due to limited access to healthcare, a lack of hygiene facilities, and crowded living conditions. These factors coupled with nearly 48,000 unsheltered individuals create the potential for COVID-19 to spread rapidly among this population and overwhelm local healthcare systems.<sup>169</sup>

Outbreaks of hepatitis A, typhus, and tuberculosis in Los Angeles encampments over the past few years have highlighted these risks.<sup>170</sup> Of these, tuberculosis is most similar to COVID-19: both are communicable diseases that thrive in close quarters and

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<sup>168</sup> Allssa Walker, “Plans to move California’s homeless population into centralized facilities gain steam,” *Curbed*, Jan 13, 2020, <https://www.curbed.com/2020/1/13/21035807/california-homelessness-trump-newsom-garcetti>

<sup>169</sup> LAHSA, “2020 Great Los Angeles Homeless Count Results,” June 12, 2020, <https://www.lahsa.org/news?article=726-2020-greater-los-angeles-homeless-count-results&ref=hc>.

<sup>170</sup> County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health, “Los Angeles County Hepatitis A Outbreak Among Persons Experiencing Homelessness or Using Illicit Drug,” 2017; Anna Gorman and Kaiser Health News, “Medieval Diseases Are Infecting California’s Homeless,” *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2019.

require early detection of cases and contact tracing. The successes and pitfalls of Los Angeles' response to tuberculosis outbreaks among people experiencing homeless can inform current approaches to mitigate the spread and impact of the novel coronavirus.



Figure 13. Goodheart, Jessica. "Homeless Deaths Are Spiking in Los Angeles and Beyond." *Capital & Main - Investigating Power & Politics*. *Capital & Main*, August 31, 2020.

Tuberculosis, once slated for eradication in the United States, reemerged as a public health concern in Los Angeles during the 1980s. Countywide, tuberculosis cases rose steadily beginning in 1989, and peaked in 1992 at more than twice the national

rate.<sup>171</sup> By 1993, it was estimated that half of the 15,000 people experiencing homelessness in downtown Los Angeles had tuberculosis.<sup>172</sup> The resurgence of the disease was fueled in part by the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic since immunosuppressed individuals with HIV were particularly susceptible to tuberculosis. Authorities estimated 20% of the homeless population in Skid Row were living with HIV and another 10% had AIDS.<sup>173</sup>

Budget cuts and local bureaucracy undermined county efforts to respond to the tuberculosis outbreak. Cost saving was paramount as the county, already beset by serious funding cuts as a result of California's budget crisis, was spending over \$4 million annually to hospitalize homeless tuberculosis patients.<sup>174</sup> Of the \$23 million spent on tuberculosis in 1992, only 10% went to prevention. When the county's

<sup>171</sup> County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services, "Communicable Disease Morbidity Report," 1998.  
<sup>172</sup> Sheryl Stolberg, "Taking It to the Streets : A Small Cadre of Community Workers and Nurses Struggles to Contain an Outbreak of TB--At a Time When Clinics Are in Danger of Closing," *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1993.  
<sup>173</sup> Madeleine Stoner, "Homelessness and AIDS: An L.A. Secret," *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 1991.  
<sup>174</sup> Irene Wielawski, "Skid Row TB Clinic Is Forced to Go Begging," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1990.

healthcare budget was cut by \$78 million the following year, funds gained from tobacco tax revenue could not fully remedy the financial shortfall.<sup>175</sup> Convoluted and lengthy administrative processes within the county health department stalled the approval of a \$1 million federal matching grant, which had to be returned.<sup>176</sup>

Los Angeles County employed community outreach workers and public health nurses to track and monitor homeless tuberculosis patients and incentivized programs to improve medication adherence. The county Department of Public Health's tuberculosis control division distributed food and shelter vouchers, nearly doubling the number of patients returning to clinics for treatment and preventing costly hospitalizations.<sup>177</sup> The program became so successful that some people experiencing homelessness hoped to become infected with tuberculosis to gain access to food and housing.<sup>178</sup> Following a large tuberculosis outbreak that began in 2013,<sup>179</sup> the Department of Public Health employed more community health workers to promote testing and treatment and introduced new tuberculosis screening guidelines for shelters. Today the county recommends that incoming clients, as well as all employees and volunteers, be screened for tuberculosis symptoms and that a tuberculosis liaison is appointed to track and log homeless clients with persistent coughs.<sup>180</sup>

In the midst of the current novel pandemic, Los Angeles has adopted unprecedented infectious disease control measures directed at the homeless. Governor Gavin Newsom created a new program, Project Roomkey, in April to house 15,000 homeless Californians in hotel and motel rooms during the pandemic. This effort is also underway at the county level, and Los Angeles County has set its own goal of housing 15,000 homeless Angelenos.<sup>181</sup> Under Project Roomkey, rooms are prioritized for those at greater risk of serious complications from COVID-19, including homeless adults over the age of 65 and those with underlying health conditions. Hailed as an exceptional effort, it aims to house more people experiencing homelessness than any other homeless

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<sup>175</sup> Stolberg, "Taking It to the Streets."

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Wielawski, "Skid Row TB Clinic Is Forced to Go Begging."

<sup>178</sup> Stolberg, "Taking It to the Streets."

<sup>179</sup> C. Y. Liu, S. J. Chai, and J. P. Watt, "Communicable Disease among People Experiencing Homelessness in California," *Epidemiology and Infection* 148 (2020).

<sup>180</sup> Christopher Weber, "Los Angeles Undergoes Massive Effort to Get Homeless into Hotels," *PBS*, April 8, 2020.

<sup>181</sup> Christopher Weber, "Los Angeles Undergoes Massive Effort to Get Homeless into Hotels," *PBS*, April 8, 2020.



initiative. However, statewide progress has been uneven and Los Angeles City and County have been sued by the L.A. Alliance for Human Rights, who contend that the project is moving too slowly.<sup>182</sup> As of early August, the project has fallen short of its goal to house 15,000 by about 11,000.<sup>183</sup> Project Roomkey has also been unequally applied to clients. Although African Americans are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles, a May report to the Board of Supervisors indicates the majority of Project Roomkey clients are white.<sup>184</sup> A group of advocates have also recently alleged that LAHSA has “deliberately excluded” individuals with disabilities by instructing service providers to deny individuals with physical accessibility issues, particularly those who need support for activities of daily living.<sup>185</sup>

While delays in other counties have been attributed to a shortage of support services staff and to a lesser extent, pushback due to NIMBY interests, the primary hurdles in Los Angeles are a slow leasing process with motels and hotels and low capacity in downtown where hotels are only able to accommodate 4% of those living on Skid Row.<sup>186</sup> With too few Project Roomkey beds available, Los Angeles plans to provide 6,000 beds in city-owned recreation centers. This has prompted public health experts to warn that congregate shelters may serve as incubators for COVID-19, as they did for tuberculosis in the past.<sup>187</sup> Despite these challenges, LAHSA has proposed a three-year, \$800-million COVID-19 Recovery Plan to permanently rehouse the 4,000 temporarily staying in hotel rooms under Project Roomkey and the 11,000 who never received one.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Patrick McGreevy, “Some Cities Are Blocking California Efforts to Protect Homeless People from Coronavirus, Newsom Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 2020.

<sup>183</sup> Benjamin Oreskes, “A Judge Comandears L.A.’s City Hall in His Campaign to Curb Homelessness,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 2020.

<sup>184</sup> Dennis Culhane et al., “Older Adults Sheltered Under Project Roomkey - A Client Population Profile and Recommended Approach to Ensure Retention of Housing through the Coming Transition Period,” May 2020, <http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/146022.pdf>.

<sup>185</sup> Doug Smith and Benjamin Oreskes, “Advocates Say Homeless Hotel Program Discriminates Against Disabled People,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2020.

<sup>186</sup> Doug Smith and Benjamin Oreskes, “California Leased 15,000 Hotel Rooms to Help Homeless People. Half Now Sit Empty,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2020.

<sup>187</sup> Peter F. Barnes et al., “Foci of Tuberculosis Transmission in Central Los Angeles,” *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine* 159, no. 4 (April 1999): 1081–86.

<sup>188</sup> LAHSA, “Report to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, COVID-19 Recovery Plan Related to People Experiencing Homelessness,” June 23, 2020, <https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=4579-lahsa-covid-19-recovery-plan-report>.

Quick action and testing will be crucial to preventing COVID-related loss of life and unnecessary hospitalizations among people experiencing homelessness. As of mid-August, the homeless population registered over 1,300 positive cases, though have suffered mortality rates comparable to, if not better than, the overall population.<sup>189</sup> Since the reasons for this better-than-expected outcome are not entirely clear, it will be important to remain vigilant, especially since COVID-19 deaths generally track along economic and racial inequalities. Mortality rates are nearly four times higher for Los Angeles County residents living in neighborhoods with high poverty rates compared to people living in areas with low poverty rates<sup>190</sup> and mortality rates are higher for African American and Latinx Californians compared to white.<sup>191</sup>

Infectious disease control efforts used during tuberculosis outbreaks can provide ideas for improving responses to COVID-19 and highlight potential pitfalls. COVID-19 testing and contact tracing will be essential to prevent further spread of the virus. Yet people experiencing homelessness are avoiding testing sites, even on Skid Row where cases are on the rise.<sup>192</sup> Incentives proved effective for increasing tuberculosis treatment rates and offering incentives for COVID-19 testing could encourage uptake among the homeless community. However, the county has balked at providing incentives, chalking up low testing rates to inconvenient testing locations. Once again, community outreach workers will play an essential role engendering trust and connecting individuals to testing and services. Significant budget cuts weakened Los Angeles' public health infrastructure and programming thereby contributing to the spread of tuberculosis. COVID-19 has been referred to as one of the greatest global public health crises in more than a century and will require commensurate funding. Given the economic impact of COVID-19 in California, however, a request for additional public health funding in the state budget from local officials is to be granted.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Gale Holland, "Have L.A.'s homeless people dodged a COVID-19 catastrophe?" *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 2020.

<sup>190</sup> Rong-Gong Lin II and Luke Money, "The Two Big Reasons Why California Is Struggling to Control Coronavirus," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2020.

<sup>191</sup> Ben Poston, Tony Barboza, and Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, "Younger Blacks and Latinos Are Dying of COVID-19 at Higher Rates in California," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 2020.

<sup>192</sup> Joel Grover, "Resist Getting Tested as COVID-19 Spreads Faster on Skid Row," *NBC Los Angeles*, April 23, 2020.

<sup>193</sup> Angela Hart, "Public Health Funds Are Needed More than Ever but Lack 'lobbying Muscle' in California," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 2020.

### *Economic Fallout from COVID-19*

The COVID-19 pandemic has already had an enormous economic impact on Los Angeles, threatening the livelihoods of millions of Angelenos. Public health responses, including months-long closures of “non-essential” businesses and shelter-in-place orders, have put millions out of work. The unemployment rate in Los Angeles County reached 17.5% in July, up from 6.7% in March.<sup>194</sup> As of May 9, approximately 599,000 workers in the county have lost their jobs and have no unemployment insurance or other income replacement.<sup>195</sup> Many who have tried to file for unemployment benefits have struggled to get their claims processed through a severely overtaxed system. Immigrants lacking legal status cannot access unemployment benefits at all. Others have had their wages cut as business and work hours are reduced. Although some essential workers, such as grocery store workers, saw a temporary wage increase, this “hazard pay” has not been maintained.<sup>196</sup> Many of these workers were already in a precarious financial position and more likely to live in densely populated low-income neighborhoods. Now they must choose between losing a critical source of income and facing potential exposure to the novel coronavirus at work. Even though some businesses are beginning to reopen in California, this does not mean things will return to “business as usual.” Many businesses are struggling to stay afloat and may not be able to come back from their losses. Economists are predicting a major global recession as a result of the pandemic.<sup>197</sup>

As a result of this economic crisis, which some have labeled the country’s worst since the Great Depression, many people are struggling to pay their rent or mortgage. While Los Angeles County has instituted an eviction moratorium for those who can prove their inability to pay rent is COVID-19 related, not everyone is protected under the order. For example, those without sufficient documentation of how coronavirus has

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<sup>194</sup> State of California Employment Development Department, “Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale Metropolitan Division (Los Angeles County) - California Labor Market Information,” August 21, 2020.

<sup>195</sup> Gary Blasi, “UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles,” UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy Report, May 28, 2020, 5.

<sup>196</sup> Suhauna Hussain, “Grocery stores and coffee chains gave workers hazard pay. Now they’re taking it back,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2020.

<sup>197</sup> Bloomberg, “IMF sees coronavirus-fueled recession as worst since Great Depression,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2020.

impacted their economic situation (such as gig workers) may not receive protection. Some landlords are still putting severe pressure on tenants to pay rent despite the moratorium, including asking tenants to give their government-issued stimulus checks for rent or to agree to more strict payment plans than required by law.<sup>198</sup> Reports of potentially illegal attempts by landlords to evict residents including lockouts and shutting off utilities have been concentrated in South Los Angeles in predominantly Black and Latinx communities.<sup>199</sup> Los Angeles County and City have issued a freeze on rents, though this only applies to buildings covered under current rent stabilization programs and not many newer properties or single-family rentals.<sup>200</sup> Governor Newsom signed a last-minute, five-month extension to the moratorium on evictions, which was set to expire September 1. The new law will protect those who can prove COVID-related hardship—which they must do each month—and pay 25% of their rent from September until January 31 from being evicted in February 2021. Those who cannot meet these criteria will eventually join the many others who have already been evicted for not paying rent, despite the moratorium. In June the California Senate approved SB 1410, a rental relief plan that asks landlords to forgive rent payments in exchange for equally sized, transferable tax credits over 10 years beginning in 2024.<sup>201</sup> However, it is unclear how the State Assembly or Governor Newsom will respond to the bill given the state’s budget deficit.

Therefore, while Los Angeles officials have recognized the severe pressure this pandemic has put on tenants, protections for this group are far from perfect, and it is uncertain what relief will be available when the pandemic ends but thousands are still unable to pay rent. Just as the Great Depression led to a spike in Los Angeles’ homeless population in the 1930s, it is likely, according to experts, that the COVID-19 pandemic will push many out of their homes as well. The wave of evictions predicted in Los Angeles—a city comprised predominantly of renters, many of whom were rent-burdened

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<sup>198</sup> Liam Dillon, “L.A. has a coronavirus eviction ban, but landlords are finding ways to demand rent,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2020.

<sup>199</sup> Liam Dillon and Ben Poston, “Despite Protections, Landlords Seek to Evict Tenants in Black and Latino Areas of South L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 2020.

<sup>200</sup> Liam Dillon, “Tenants get help as L.A. freezes rent hikes for thousands of apartments over coronavirus,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 2020.

<sup>201</sup> Matt Kristoffersen, “Rent relief bill that cleared California Senate could give tenants until 2034 to pay rent,” *The Sacramento Bee*, June 26, 2020.

before the pandemic—are likely to hit low-income communities of color disproportionately.<sup>202</sup>

The county and city, which have had to slash their budgets amidst the emergency and lost revenue, may have limited options for mitigating the economic fallout from this crisis.<sup>203</sup> Although the county Board of Supervisors has declared their commitment to expanding affordable housing initiatives despite the cuts, they acknowledged there would be less money for homeless services from Measure H available going forward due to the pandemic.<sup>204</sup> County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas recently estimated that Measure H would lose roughly \$200 million over this and next fiscal year due to shortfalls in sales taxes during the pandemic.<sup>205</sup> According to Professor Emeritus at UCLA Law, Gary Blasi, “Without intelligent planning and immediate action, Los Angeles faces the prospect of many thousands of people, including families with children, joining the thousands already on the streets or living in their vehicles.”<sup>206</sup> Continued circulation of COVID-19 will provide an additional threat to this population without sufficient public health measures in place.

### **Conclusion**

A look back at the past century shows that homelessness in Los Angeles has changed in notable ways, though many continuities persist. African Americans have always been disproportionately represented among the region’s homeless population but, along with Latinx-identified people, have comprised a majority of this population since the 1980s. This demographic trend is likely to continue as COVID-19 threatens the health, economic prospects, and housing security of many low-income communities of color. Lack of affordable housing has placed considerable pressure on Angelenos since the early twentieth century, though stocks of affordable housing shrunk significantly

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<sup>202</sup> Blasi, “UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles,” 5-6.

<sup>203</sup> David Zahniser, “Economic slowdown could hit L.A.’s budget hard next year, city controller says,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 2020.

<sup>204</sup> Jaelyn Cosgrove, “L.A. County OKs budget as slump looms,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2020.

<sup>205</sup> Benjamin Oreskes and Doug Smith, “Homelessness worsens in L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 2020.

<sup>206</sup> Blasi, “UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles,” 6. Blasi estimates that if there is no massive infusion of federal resources or a more effective state and local legislative response, somewhere between 36,000 and 120,000 households (including 56,000 and 184,000 children, respectively) will become homeless following the end of freezes on evictions, depending on how well social networks and informal resources have escaped economic devastation.

over the past four decades. Rising property values and rents, the heavy involvement of real estate and business interests in local development policy, the inability of Los Angeles City and County to coordinate on housing solutions, and the lack of protections for tenants have all contributed to this problem. Due to racially discriminatory housing and employment policies, which perpetuated poverty, the current housing crisis disproportionately affects communities of color. The current administration's success in rolling back Obama-era housing regulations that address segregation and discrimination have only added to this burden.<sup>207</sup>

Federal, state, and local authorities stepped in to mitigate factors exacerbating homelessness at multiple points in this history. The federal government, for example, created employment opportunities during the Great Depression and invested in public housing construction during World War II, while the City of Los Angeles sued the county to increase General Relief in the early 1990s. However, many government social service initiatives were short lived as budgets, public sentiment, and the political climate shifted. Private agencies stepped in to provide services to the homeless where government agencies did not, creating a patchwork of service provision that remains today. People experiencing homelessness have proposed various strategies to address immediate and long-term homelessness, including converting donated railcars to housing during the Great Depression or pushing the CRA to convert vacant buildings into housing in the 1980s, though these have also been small-scale and temporary at best. While law enforcement has long been involved in policing poverty in Los Angeles, it did so increasingly since the 1970s amidst a growing law and order movement in the U.S., deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and mounting pressure from the business and development community to protect their interests at the expense of homeless residents. Just as economic factors have disproportionately impacted communities of color, so too has the criminalization of homelessness. Society has thus far failed to address the structural racial factors that indelibly shape our contemporary crisis. With the history presented here, we aim to shed light on how and why that has occurred so

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<sup>207</sup> Jeff Andrews, "The fair housing rule Ben Carson's HUD wants to delay, explained," *Curbed*, Jan 26, 2018, <https://www.curbed.com/2018/1/26/16930056/affirmatively-furthering-fair-housing-rule-hud-delay-explained>.



that policy makers may be more aware of the significant, entrenched obstacles they face in addressing homelessness in Los Angeles today.

After decades of racial injustice, the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer has become a rallying cry for reforming police practices and the broader criminal justice system. Structural racism is embedded across systems within the fabric of American society; it is built into our culture, economy and politics; it manifests as inequalities in power, opportunities and treatment. It is the reason why African Americans are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness, the incarcerated, and those who have died from COVID-19. Across the country, on-going protests are commanding public attention, demanding deep and lasting change. Such change includes a revision of what many agree is an over-reliance on law enforcement in responding to homelessness, cases of mental illness or substance abuse, and other social welfare issues, which put police into increased contact with communities of color.<sup>208</sup>

The history of homelessness in Los Angeles is inextricably rooted in structural racism. Structural racism has laid the foundation for discriminatory employment and housing policies relegating African Americans to low-income professions and segregated resource-poor neighborhoods. In turn these communities have been overpoliced and under-protected, perpetuating a pattern of incarceration as poverty management. It is no coincidence that African Americans line Los Angeles' streets or that they too often suffer from mental and physical disease. Inequalities in labor, housing, criminal justice, and health, stem from reinforcing discriminatory policies and systems. From this perspective it is clear: ending homelessness begins with racial justice.

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<sup>208</sup> Dakota Smith, "Unarmed specialists, not LAPD, would handle mental health, substance abuse calls under proposal," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2020.

## ***Section II: Policy Recommendations***

### *Introduction: Framing Housing as a Human Right*

Access to adequate housing is the basis for a healthy, dignified, and full life. It also affects the full enjoyment of other basic rights such as the right not to be discriminated against, the right to freedom of association and expression, and the right to security of person. Adequate housing includes adequate privacy, space, security, lighting, ventilation, and basic infrastructure such as access to drinking water and sanitation services. Although the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights included access to housing as part of the right to an adequate standard of living, millions of U.S. citizens are still not adequately housed. Asserting the right to housing as a fundamental principle of American society requires a commitment from all levels of government that every citizen have access to adequate housing.

The century-long history of homelessness in Los Angeles chronicled in this report demonstrates the need for more comprehensive, urgent, and effective initiatives to address homelessness. The lack of affordable housing due to both insufficient housing supply and low incomes, structural racism, inadequate support for the impoverished mentally ill, and uncoordinated policy responses continue to perpetuate this crisis. With this in mind, the set of policy recommendations outlined below emanate from the core proposition that housing is a fundamental right. Acknowledging this basic right, and confronting the root causes of the phenomenon identified in this report, can lead to a reorganization of policy and funding priorities that might finally make real progress in combatting housing precarity and homelessness in Los Angeles. A racially equitable approach will be necessary to eliminate racial disparities affecting the disproportionate number of Black people experiencing homelessness.

### *Recommendations*

#### **Land and Housing**

- Limit housing precarity by developing renter protections and landlord regulations that bolster tenants' rights, disincentivize long-term vacancy, and regulate the financial sector's incursion into the rental market.

- Repeal the Costa Hawkins Rental Housing Act and approve more aggressive rent stabilization legalization.<sup>209</sup>
- Amend or repeal the Ellis Act that is used to circumvent tenants' rights.<sup>210</sup>
- Provide a right to counsel for tenants in eviction proceedings.
- Limit the incursion of the sharing economy (e.g., Airbnb) and institutional investors (e.g., Invitation Homes) into the housing market.
- Develop tax policies that will incentivize the development of vacant land that is zoned for housing.
- Encourage the state legislature to develop an authority whose chief function is to locate and purchase land for low-cost housing.
- Increase federal low-income tax credits that incentivize developers to build more low-cost housing.
- Adopt Value Capture policies that require a meaningful set-aside for low-income housing. Any set-aside should benefit low- and moderate-income people, including those earning between 0% and 15% of the median L.A. County income.<sup>211</sup> With the extra revenue collected, local authorities can invest more in public housing and other subsidies.<sup>212</sup>
- Remove institutional barriers to housing subsidies that address tenant security, housing stability, and entry-level home ownership.
- Require landlord participation in subsidized housing programs such as Section 8.
- Incentivize alternative methods of building homeless housing units through zoning and other regulatory policies, including modular and other modes of less expensive construction.
- Prioritize hotel and motel conversion into Permanent Supportive Housing. These uses are ubiquitous in the county, and their conversion is comparatively less expensive to implement.

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<sup>209</sup> Passed in 1995, the Costa Hawkins Rental Housing Act established limits on rent control ordinances in the city of Los Angeles. It prohibited the municipality from placing rent control over certain types of residential units and in newly constructed units.

<sup>210</sup> The Ellis Act is a provision in California Law that allows landlords to legally evict tenants in rent-controlled units if landlords will go out of the rental market business. Often, the Ellis Act is used by institutional landlords, investors, and real estate developers to force tenants out and convert buildings into luxury condos, hotels, and Airbnb units.

<sup>211</sup> As government increases development rights, property owners should return a percentage of the value generated back to society.

<sup>212</sup> Publicly owned.

## **Systems**

- The county and city of Los Angeles should reimagine the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) by transforming it into a superagency with executive leadership that is empowered to site homeless housing projects and expedite their approval across the county.
- Improve research methods and data collection to assess the risks and long-term outcomes of unsheltered homelessness. Better collaboration among university-based, private, and public research institutes is needed to link research efforts and data across service providers, research institutions, and community partners.

## **Mental Health**

- Prioritize the coordination between housing agencies and mental and behavioral health agencies in the development of permanent supportive housing, such as that created under the No Place Like Home Initiative.<sup>213</sup>
- Support community based mental health service pilots patterned on the Trieste, Italy model and others, now under consideration in the County of Los Angeles, with a focus on expeditiously scaling successful projects.<sup>214</sup>

## **Criminal Justice**

- Adopt and implement policies in the spirit of the Right to Rest Act.<sup>215</sup> Repeal laws—including Municipal Code 41.18(d), Los Angeles’s so-called “sit-lie ordinance”—criminalizing activities essential to the survival of houseless people.

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<sup>213</sup> The No Place Like Home (NPLH) Initiative uses a portion of California’s Mental Health Services fund, established under the Mental Health Services Act of 2004, to create supportive housing for individuals with mental illness who are homeless or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

<sup>214</sup> The Trieste model describes a system of deinstitutionalized mental health care provided through networks of community-based services. This model aims to care for the whole person within their social circumstances, rather than through a narrow clinical model (or a “whole system, whole community” approach).

<sup>215</sup> The Right to Rest Act, also known as the Homeless Bill of Rights, enshrines the following rights for all people in public space: “the right to rest in a non-obstructive manner,” “the right to shelter oneself from the elements in a non-obstructive manner,” “the right to eat, share, accept, or give food in any public space where food is not prohibited,” “the right to occupy a motor vehicle or recreational vehicle, provided that the vehicle or recreational vehicle is legally parked on public property or parked on private property with the permission of the property owner,” and “the right to a reasonable expectation of privacy in one’s personal property.” The act bans “criminal or civil penalties or harassment by law enforcement, public or private security personnel, or any agents of any public-private partnership established under any municipal or county law” targeting individuals exercising such rights.

- Fund and increase the capacity of the Community Collaborative Courts to serve homeless individuals.<sup>216</sup> Support reformative justice approaches aimed at diverting offenders to treatment and rehabilitation rather than incarceration.

### **Benefits**

- Expand the Los Angeles County Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) program to ensure those eligible for federal SSI/SSDI benefits are enrolled and able to claim them.<sup>217</sup>
- Increase L.A. County’s monthly General Relief stipend currently set at \$221/month.

### **Shelter**

- Increase the availability of quality emergency beds and transitional housing, which provide supportive human services. Access to shelter should be unconditional, consistent with the “Housing First” model.
- Fund housing and services in underserved Service Planning Areas (SPAs) to ensure a needs-based investment strategy.
- Require university campuses to set aside overnight parking places for homeless students as interim measure.

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<sup>216</sup> Collaborative courts combine judicial supervision with treatment and rehabilitation services in lieu of detention. A treatment plan tailored to the individual is developed by a multidisciplinary team comprised of the District Attorney, public defenders, the Sheriff, the Los Angeles Police Department, Probation Department, the Department of Health Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Los Angeles City Attorney.

<sup>217</sup> SOAR is a program funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which helps states and communities increase access to SSI and SSDI benefits for adults and children who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness, medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder. It does so by training case managers to assist those eligible in completing and submitting SSI/SSDI applications.