Inside LA's Homeless Industrial Complex

Jim Newton is a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley and former editor in chief of the Los Angeles Times. His most recent book is "Justice for All: Earl Warren and the Nation he Created," published by Riverhead Books in September 2016. It's an example of his opinion writing exactly as intended.

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Here is a weekly "Street Fair Service" where activists offered cold, hanging-out-in-the-park-on-a-Saturday-morning-in-November, and warm-in-the-evening information, treats (natural reflecting-incentives for the community), or incentive meetings, for seeker a registration for dial-jokes and an appointment-to-see-a-doctor. The Street Fair Service is a community-driven, to-make-the-future, idea for homelessness. "Once that can-Do-it-so-we-can-be-spoke-in-English, or sometimes-through-an-interpreter, sometimes-in-Spanish-and-sometimes-in-Korean-and-sometimes-in-Tagalog-and-sometimes-in-Spanish-and-sometimes-in-Korean-and-sometimes-in-Tagalog-and-sometimes-in-the-Spanish-and-sometimes-in-the-Korean-and-sometimes-in-the

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Municipal policies have exacerbated the problem. The withdrawal of federal funds has locked municipal governments in a devil's bargain. To create a tax base for their resources, they must court investment and raise property values. As the social wage withers, individuals pin their hopes on the appreciation of their homes. Even public sector workers' pensions are pegged to real estate investment trusts. But when property values rise, more people lose access to housing. "In a good economy," Mayor Garcetti once explained, "homelessness goes up."

As Echo Park exemplifies, efforts to raise property values imperil long-term residents. In 2014, the city proposed Echo Park Lake after a $45 million renovation and established a zone injunction over the neighborhood. During the two years of the park's closure, property values in the area rose by 29 percent. Flippers seized on both single-family homes and rent-controlled buildings, inhabited for decades by working-class Latino tenants. Many were displaced. Between 2000 and 2014, Echo Park's immigrant population fell by 27 percent. (In 2015, Garcetti listed an Echo Park pied-a-terre home at $1.65 million; he'd purchased the property in 2000 for $345,000.) As richer, whiter residents felt more secure, residents of color suffered police harassment, citations, and incarceration. (The gang injunction's discriminatory campaign went so far as to make it illegal for one Echo Park native to be seen with his father outside.) Last year, average home prices in Echo Park crested $1 million; rent for a one-bedroom topped $2,300.

For every 5 percent increase in LA rents, 2,000 people become homeless. Rising rent burdens make homelessness a monthly threat: about 200,000 tenants in Los Angeles spend 90 percent of their income on rent. Of course, the problem isn't limited to that city. Across the country, only 37 rentals are affordable and available to every 100 extremely poor households: in no city can a minimum-wage worker afford median two-bedroom rent. Encampments have grown 1,300 percent since 2006.

Homelessness is both a result of and an impediment to the pursuit of economic growth. Visible signs of poverty disrupt cities' capacity to sell themselves as products and have increasingly global capital. Though unhoused people are much more often victims than perpetrators of violence, their presence is associated with a decline in neighborhood safety and thus threatens the security of speculative investments. As municipal policy aligns with the profit motive, police act as the shock troops for real estate's capture of public space. The management of unhoused people—whom the LAPD calls "transients"—becomes an avatar for the best of capital flight.

Called to protect city property values rather than unhoused residents, police are the first responders of homelessness policy. Between 2017 and 2019, according to Court Watch LA, police in O'Farrell's district issued the highest rate of homelessness-related citations in the city, nearly one per unhoused person. In 2016, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, one in six LAPD arrests was of an unhoused person. In 2019, the department admitted that unhoused people were the victims in one in every three times police "used force." The allocation of state resources reveals criminalization and containment as a matter of intent, not austerity: The state runs a $16 billion surplus, and the city's policing budget claims $4 percent of discretionary funds. In 2015, a city audit found that $87 million of the $100 million earmarked for homelessness went to policing. The cost of Los Angeles's new "safe sleep sites" runs $2,663 per person per month—more than the median one-bedroom rent.

"The service the state is providing," Hamid Khan, founder of the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, explained, "is population control." Those not driven elsewhere by policing are driven indoors. Interim housing acts as an "arm of the prison system," in Kristy Lovich's words. It warehouses under the guise of rehabilitating—those caught in police dragnets. As with prisons, containment is a racist project. Black people make up 8 percent of LA's general population, but 34 percent of its unhoused. And the cycle linking incarceration and homelessness is well documented: According to the Prison Policy Initiative's review of most recent available data, 7 percent of formerly incarcerated people were homeless in 2008, a rate nearly 10 times higher than among the general public. If prisons become an unpopular line item in future state budgets—while the surplus population grows—policymakers can expand interim housing to direct funds to similar ends.

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"Wish I can force them into housing and treatment," Sgt. Mike Flanagan posted on social media this past January, alongside before-and-after pictures of a sweep. In March, Governor Gavin Newsom promised to expand California's conservatorship laws, a legal basis to hold unhoused people against their will—as if their refusal to accept interim housing says more about their mental capacity than the conditions of what's offered. In 2019, nearly 60 percent of people experiencing homelessness for the first time in LA cited economic hardship as the cause. Against a wealth of evidence that most people become unhoused because they cannot afford rent, politicians and police deploy the language of mental illness, "justifying the shelter system as a medical intervention," said scholar Marques Vestal.

Homelessness is not a problem caused by individuals experiencing it, but by the systems that disorbear—and deprive people of—housing. Your unhoused people die in Los Angeles every day. Their deaths are as predictable as they are preventable. Their lives are stolen by the interlocking systems of economic abandonment and aggressive policing, of services choked by carceality, of sweeps that force the community ties that hold people to life. "To keep the undesirable person in a lifetime of flux, in a lifetime of transitions, in a lifetime of insecurity, in a lifetime of disruption," Hamid Khan told me, "is absolutely the desired outcome." In practice, our homelessness policy blurs the distinction between services and prison, between social workers and police. Resisting or accepting interim options, you either become a ward or get a warden. "It's not a mistake that there's curfews and that people are so isolated and atomized from their community," Annie Powers said. "All of that is intentional and by design... in order for poor people to be made to feel like this is what they deserve. The point is punishment."

Unhoused people's comfort is a moral hazard. If the state provided housing for all who needed it—permanent, unsurveilled, well-resourced public housing—it would undermine the capitalist dictate that you must work for a wage in order to pay for the basic human need of shelter. Both a limit to capital accumulation and a visible reminder that the system often fails, unhoused people threaten the foundations of the everyday "rat race," as Ayman Ahmed put it, of "struggling week to week just to pay for that ridiculous box." But nothing about our housing system is natural or inevitable. "Didn't we make this all up?" Ahmed reminded me. "Can't we make it up better?"

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In April 2021, Gustavo Otzoy joined former Echo Park Lake residents at Pershing Square—a shadeless, nearly benchless park redesigned in 1994 to harden its architecture against unhoused people. Passing a microphone across chicken and waffles, residents talked about their struggles in Project Roomkey: the difficulty of maintaining jobs under the curfews, of losing touch with friends scattered by placements, of the humiliating treatment by staff. That day, they founded Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing. The name claimed solidarity with tenants indoors and rejected the entire interim system—soft imprisonment for the crime of not being able to afford rent. UTACH's first action, held in late May on the steps of City Hall, resulted in a few improvements, including a 10 p.m. curfew at the Project Roomkey site at the Grand Hotel. But at a meeting with LAHSA, the agency failed to make any broader commitments.

In mid-June, Otzoy was attending an UTACH protest at Echo Park Lake, affixing NO FENCES posters to the fence with masking tape, when park rangers accused him of vandalism. They knocked Otzoy over, pinned him to the ground, and arrested him, leaving him bloody and bruised. The charges were dropped, eventually, a ranger admitted he'd mistaken Otzoy first. But Otzoy spent around a month in jail, in violation of his parole for interacting with officers at all. And though that violation was ultimately dismissed, Otzoy was still banned from Echo Park Lake for as long as his parole lasts—evidence, he told me, of the lengths to which the city will go to dictate where an unhoused person can be.

Lately, Otzoy has been staying at a hotel in Boyle Heights. After he was exiled from Project Roomkey, he secured an emergency voucher for a modest room under no restrictions. He has a key, but no assurance of how long he'll get to stay. UTACH has turned to building its base, traveling west to the San Fernando Valley, south to San Pedro, and east to Boyle Heights to do outreach at encampments either under or at risk of 41.18 enforcement. The group aims to empower people with their rights—including the right to demand more rights—in order to build an infrastructure for collective refusals and collective action cycwide. But outreach itself shows people that they are not alone. "Fighting the injustice helps me to get out the pain that I have, that I feel," Otzoy said. "It helps me."

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Organizing to turn the slogans of "homes end homelessness," "homeless not handcuffs," and "nothing about us without us" into policy, UTACH calls for community-controlled, permanent housing. Pointing to the expanding gulf between wages and rent and real estate's tightening grip on the state, the group demands that the city's new, nearly $1 billion homelessness budget serve a whole new system rather than a carceral fix. But the first step in solving homelessness, as Boden of the Western Regional Advocacy Project emphasized, is to stop making unhoused people disappear.

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Brenda *who declined to give her last name*) spent most of her 63 years within a few square miles of Echo Park Lake. Unhoused for around eight years, she'd lived at the park from November 2020 until the sweep. Always accompanied with gifts from her "street kids," Brenda was known at the encampment as a peacekeeper and a fixer, negotiating conflicts and locating resources. ("I'll give up where Gwyneth gives up," Brenda once told me at an UTACH gathering. Otzoy laughed. "I'm never giving up," he said.) After the park's cleanseen, Brenda didn't make it into Project Roomkey, though she told me she'd wanted a room. Instead, she settled on a hillside between a residential street and the on-ramp of a freeway.

When Annie Powers and I arrived at her tent in January 2022, sanitation workers were across the street, coating trash bags from residents and pointing at areas they said impeded pedestrians' right of way—a spot clean. But that side of the street was the property of the California Department of Transportation. On Brenda's side, city land, different rules applied. The city planned a "Motor Cleaning." All shelters and belongings would be removed or destroyed. Brenda herded her two cats into a carrier and placed them in the shade cast by a squad car. An officer insisted she'd already taken enough of her things, that she'd had 24 hours' notice, that it was time to go. She wrangled clothes, canned food, and personal documents, then lugged her possessions up the hill, sweating from effort. No one was allowed to cross the police barrier to help.

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The two on-site officers, not LAHSA or the Urban Alchemy outreach workers who lingered down the hill, offered Brenda a spot in the Westlake Tiny Homes. "They're really nice," Officer Ramirez told her. "I would live there.... For you to come across another opportunity like that, it's going to be difficult.... You're at that age that you need to be inside a shelter." (Ramirez had been a member of the LAPD's Homeless Outreach and Proactive Engagement, a program invented and then disbanded within a few years—another in a series of overhauls that privilege public relations over new policies or personnel. That morning, he also handcuffed and ticketed one for jaywalking.)

Sanitation workers in hazmat suits pulled Brenda's items out with pole pickers and tossed them to the ground. "I'm just doing my job," one worker told me.

"All my jewelry is in there," Brenda said, near tears, "and my daughter's painting stuff that I bought her."

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"Are you crying?" Ramirez asked at one point. "Don't feel bad. You're going to make me feel bad."

When Brenda promised she would go if they let her get a few more of her things, he agreed. He said she could even bring her two cats along.

Brenda and I watched a bulldozer tear through her shelter and those of her neighbors. The city had been bound by court order to collect unhoused people's property during an encampment sweep and store it for their retrieval—unless sanitation workers declare their belongings hazardous; the discretionary process for making that determination is now subject to another lawsuit. When I asked why nothing could be saved, a worker said it was contaminated. He tossed a folding chair toward the truck. One suitcase unzipped in the air, landing in a tangle of sweater sleeves.

"I wouldn't want this in front of my house," the other officer told me. "I pay my taxes."

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Brenda didn't think the sheds would be so bad, but she worried about staying in touch with her community outside, and she mourned all she'd lost to the dumpster. Twenty minutes later, her shelter mostly razed, Brenda was left by an O'Farrell staffer that he'd just received new information: The Tiny House site she'd been offered was under quarantine. He said LAHSA had her information; it would be in touch. They didn't offer replacements for the tents or tarps they'd destroyed, or any advice for where to go.

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Tracy Rosenthal is a co-founder of the L.A. Tenants Union. Rosenthal's first book, *Abolish Rent*, written with Leonardo Vilchis, is forthcoming from Verso.

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