

Los Angeles: city of the stars becomes US homeless capital

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Los Angeles's Skid Row made front-page news recently. Police officers from other jurisdictions within the county were observed "dumping" their unwanted mentally ill homeless on the area's streets. This discovery provoked a furor in City Hall and open recriminations between the city and the county police. The new mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa, has demanded an investigation.

But those who deal with the homeless know that this cruel and inhumane "dumping" at the doors of social service organizations already short on staff and funds has been going for years. "The truth is," one social worker told the WSWS, "those cities don't have the services to serve the homeless, so they travel miles outside their municipal jurisdictions and 'dump' them on us here downtown."

As one Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) police officer assigned to the Skid Row beat told the WSWS recently, "Look, I've seen them myself drive here and dump people who couldn't take care of themselves. But what really galls me is that the big wheels in the department and the press seem to have some sort of collective amnesia. They act as though this had never happened before, but they have conveniently forgotten the scandal about the 'dumping' of the homeless on Skid Row three or four years ago."

Skid Row is a not-so-hidden 50-block area in the shadow of the LA downtown skyline. It has the largest concentration of homeless in the country: between 8,000 and 11,000 people live here under appalling conditions. Recently LAPD Chief William Bratton referred to it in the press as "Dante's Inferno."

Scott Ito, the director of development and communications with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LASHA), explained that the Los Angeles political establishment's recent concern over the homeless problem in Skid Row is a result of the neighborhood's gentrification. "[LAHSA] had to move because we couldn't pay what the landlord was asking us," he told the WSWS. "The building was being converted into condominiums. We couldn't afford the rent anymore. The entire downtown area is being renovated to attract business, and rents have gone through the roof—say, between \$2,000 and \$3,000 a month, sometimes even more."

Another social worker who works at one of the mental clinics that serve the homeless on Skid Row agreed with this

assessment: "That's why there's a big brouhaha about the 'dumping' now. Five, six, seven years ago there weren't any plans to gentrify Skid Row with condos and lofts that sell for \$700,000 or more and a Grand Hotel a few blocks away. The rich simply don't want the homeless to be part of the landscape anymore."

On October 6, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article alluding to LAPD Chief Bratton's solutions for dealing with the homeless: arrest and jail them for any minor infraction, from littering, to public urination, to sleeping on the sidewalks. It's a strategy that's winning the applause of the business community and real estate developers. In the same article, Carol Schatz, president of the Central City Association, which is at the center of the downtown gentrification efforts, gushed, "Chief Bratton understands what makes cities thrive," she said.

As a result of this strategy, city jails are bursting at the seams with the homeless and cannot take in any more. County services for this population have been scaled back, and charitable organizations are severely understaffed.

The homeless are "being forced more and more to move away from Skid Row to make room for all the development taking place downtown, where I myself work but can no longer afford to live," Ito explained. "They are being pushed out farther and farther to the east, to the Los Angeles River. And after that, where are they supposed to go? But the services they are offered are still located in downtown, in what people still call the Skid Row. They are going to have to walk further for the various services which the agencies provide—health, food, etc."

Within walking distance, near Staples Center a few blocks away, \$1.5 billion have been earmarked for a development that includes a 1,100-room \$400 million hotel financed, at least in part, with city funds. "But for the city's homeless," continued Mr. Ito, "the County's Board of Supervisors has allocated \$24.6 million, which is a good start, but many more resources are needed to invest in this problem."

The scandal about the "dumping" of homeless people follows on the heels of a report issued last June by LAHSA on the state of homelessness in Los Angeles County.

According to this recent study, the number of homeless on any given night in Los Angeles County has reached 90,000, up

8.4 percent from 83,000 in 2003. Ito noted that “the County of Los Angeles is now the homeless capital of the United States,” surpassing by far New York City’s 40,000, Chicago’s 9,600 and San Francisco’s 9,600 homeless populations. “To put it in perspective,” noted Ito, “the homeless population of Los Angeles County is larger than the entire population of the city of Santa Monica [a beach community that abuts Los Angeles]. It is truly an appalling situation.”

The bulk of the LA county homeless—82,291 out of the 90,000—are found in the City of Los Angeles—South Central (which includes Watts, Downtown, Pico Union, Boyle Heights, Hollywood—and in the City of Compton and in some of the smaller cities within the county. The industrial city of Long Beach, to the south (California’s sixth largest), Pasadena and Glendale to the north conduct their own count and provide their own services. They have 6,000, 1,200, and 400 homeless, respectively.

Out of the city’s 82,291 homeless, 34,518 (42 percent) are considered chronically homeless; that is, they have been “on the streets for more a year or more, or have had four episodes of homelessness in the last three years” and “have one or more disabilities, including mental illness, substance abuse and health conditions.” Approximately 55 percent of this population suffers from three or more disabilities.

Los Angeles County shelters provide services to approximately 10,000 of the homeless. Between 42 percent and 77 percent of all homeless do not receive—or choose not to receive—the benefits to which they are entitled.

Families headed by single mothers make up the largest percentage of the homeless, which means between 20 and 43 percent of the homeless population. In the City of Los Angeles, there are two children per average homeless family. As of February 2004, there were 34,000 homeless family members in the county—more than the entire population of Beverly Hills.

African-Americans, who make up 9 percent of the county’s population, constitute 41 percent of the homeless population. Latinos represent 24 percent of the homeless but make up 47 percent of the population. Whites constitute 27 percent of the homeless while making up 30 percent of the population. The remaining 7.5 percent of the homeless is identified as other.

As recently as 2000, the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco noted that “the pace of growth in inequality was faster in California” than in the rest of the country. It added that nowhere else in California or in the United States was the gap between the rich and the poor greater than in Los Angeles County.

Commenting on this deep social inequality, Ito told the WSWs: “You’d think 90,000 homeless would open some eyes, especially in LA., because it has a lot of resources, a lot of opportunities. But not so for the homeless people. There’s such a wide spread between the haves and have-nots and I’ve seen it expand and expand throughout the years and that’s the frustration I feel—to see that there are vast resources and that

they are not being shared with those in need.”

The poverty rate in the county now hovers at 17.9 percent—1,674,599 of its citizens live below the poverty line.

Recently, the California Budget Project released the following startling statistics: for the average family of four with two working parents living in Los Angeles County it is now necessary to make at least \$70,000 *just to make ends meet*. This is four times the poverty standard of \$19,300 for a family of four established by the federal government.

What these statistics indicate is that for tens of thousands of workers and middle-class families one large unanticipated expense—an injury, an illness, a fire, or a car wreck—can send them hurtling over the edge.

This is precisely what happened to Daniel and his daughter Jennifer, both now homeless and living for a short time at the Comunidad César Chávez, an emergency shelter for the homeless in the Boyles Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, one of the poorest and oldest sections of the city. Daniel, a hefty 6 foot 4, 48 year-old man with a mane of graying red hair, explained how he became homeless.

Having worked as a manager in retail stores for nearly two decades, he suffered a herniated disk in 1998, required surgery and was out of work for four years. After returning to work he was diagnosed with a tumor in his back and told he could not continue working.

Having made \$70,000 plus bonuses as a manager, he was forced to return to vocational school, but was still not hired, except for a low-wage job in Arizona for a year. His workers’ compensation money ran out after three years, and he found himself homeless, living first with a friend for a few months and then in a hotel, until finally ending up in the shelter.

“The whole reason I am here was catastrophic—a herniated disc,” he said. “My life was in retail. I can’t do the walking and the lifting anymore. I used to work 16 hours and 24 hours straight ... I just can’t do it anymore. It’s probably been worse for Jennifer than for anyone. She’s had to change schools six or seven times in the last year. But I couldn’t work anymore. And so, here I am.”

The size of the homeless population in Los Angeles County, which more than any other in the country has sold itself to the rest of the world as the Promised Land of endless opportunity, underscores the depth of the social crisis that racks the state of California and the entire country.



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