

Los Angeles homeless population grew by 16 percent since 2013

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According to a recent survey, the population of homeless people in the Los Angeles area has increased 16 percent since 2013, leading to the mushrooming growth of tent cities and other encampments.

Every two years, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority releases a count of the homeless population of Los Angeles County, excluding Long Beach, Pasadena and Glendale. This year's count, taken in January 2015, jumped to 41,174, up from 35,524 in 2013.

Although the homeless population increased, beds available in shelters and transitional housing shrunk by almost 5,000 over the last four years to a total of 12,226, representing a 29 percent decline. In Los Angeles County today, nearly 60 percent of the homeless population—almost 30,000 people—live in cars or sleep in parks, on sidewalks, beneath freeways or in abandoned buildings.

The causes of the growth in homelessness are not hard to find. Almost one quarter of California residents live in poverty, the highest rate in the nation. Households with incomes in the lowest quartile must spend two thirds of their income on housing, forcing residents to choose between paying rent, buying food, getting to and from work or securing medicine and other health care.

Despite the pressing need, there has been a 69 percent reduction in state and federal investment in affordable housing in the area since 2008. Since the financial crisis hit in 2008, state and federal affordable housing investment in California has dropped from \$2.6 billion to \$807 million.

Rent has risen 22 percent since 2000, while median income has fallen 8 percent. California has 21 of the 30 most expensive rental housing markets in the United States and its 2.2 million low-income households

compete for a paltry 664,000 affordable rental units, a shortfall of 1.54 million. No county in California has enough affordable housing to meet demand.

“Skid Row,” an area near downtown Los Angeles, has the highest concentration of homelessness in the country. Nearby gentrification, however, has increased pressure on the homeless to move out, as inexpensive residential hotels are transformed into luxury apartments and condominiums.

To accelerate this exodus, in 2006, former Los Angeles Chief of Police Bill Bratton introduced the “Safer Cities Initiative,” a reheated version of his “broken windows” tactics used to drive the homeless out of New York City two decades earlier. For the last ten years, LAPD officers have subjected denizens of Skid Row to citations and arrests for myriad minor infractions, including littering and public urination, the inevitable result of the lack of housing.

The LAPD uses violence as well. Last March, a squad of LAPD officers targeting Skid Row homeless were captured on a surveillance video outside a rescue mission shooting and killing unarmed Charley Saturmin Robinet, a native of Cameroon. In December of last year the LAPD shot and killed David Wear, an unarmed homeless man who survived on tips earned as a Hollywood street performer.

The impact of the increase in homelessness and the crackdown on Skid Row is noticeable. Tent cities are springing up in surrounding residential neighborhoods, especially near freeways, bypasses and dry riverbeds throughout the city.

Out of the slightly more than \$100 million the City of Los Angeles spends annually on homelessness, \$87 million goes to the LAPD to pay for arrests, Skid Row patrols and mental health interventions.

Conversely, emergency response teams from the Los

Angeles Homeless Services Authority have a staff of only 19 people to cover the entire county and are supported with only \$330,000 from the city general fund.



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