

Homelessness surges in southern California

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A report released this week by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) chronicles a drastic rise in homelessness in the Los Angeles area over the last year. In 2019, the homeless population of the city increased by 16 percent to 36,000, while the homeless population of the county increased by 12 percent to 59,000. The figures in the report contradict the official narrative that the economy has recovered and that the working class is, despite this or that issue, faring well.

In Los Angeles the growth of homelessness is driven by an exorbitantly high cost of living, dominated by rent. The majority of the homeless people surveyed in this study pointed to economic hardship as the main cause of their vagrancy. Because of the high cost of living, a worker earning the minimum wage of \$13.75 per hour would need to work 79 hours per week for a median one-bedroom apartment in the city to be considered “affordable”—defined as costing no more than one third of an individual or family’s income.

Many of those on the streets today have only recently lost their homes, with a quarter of the homeless people in the city reporting becoming homeless for the first time in 2018. Young people have been disproportionately affected by the housing crisis, with homelessness increasing among the youth by 24 percent. A net 1 million people have left the state in the last decade for cheaper destinations like Texas, Arizona or Nevada, with the majority of them being working class youth. In 2017, the Los Angeles Unified School District estimated that over 17,000 of its students were homeless.

However, it is not only the scale of the housing crisis that has expanded. It has done so in spite of much vaunted programs promoted as the solution to the crisis. With programs enacted in the last few years such as measure H and proposition HHH, a sales tax and a loan program meant to fund homeless assistance, the

LAHSA expanded its activity and provided record levels of support this year.

They were able to provide permanent housing to 21,600 people in 2018, more than double the number for 2014 and up by 4,000 since last year. In a number of other categories including prevention and interim housing, their work has also markedly expanded. In 2018 homelessness in the county decreased by 4 percent.

However, the expansion of the housing crisis has far outpaced relief efforts. The LAHSA says that 1,400 units are scheduled to open this year and that 10,000 will open in the coming years, in accordance with the initial targets of these funding programs. This is barely enough to support a sixth of the county’s homeless population.

But despite this modest goal, homelessness has still grown significantly this year. While unemployment is officially low, many workers find themselves in multiple, low-paid, and casual jobs, one reversal away from finding themselves on the streets.

Perhaps more telling than the conditions in Los Angeles are those in the neighboring counties, where the rise in homelessness has been even more drastic. In these less urban areas, statistics are not methodically collected in the same detail, but figures are still available: In neighboring Ventura County the number of homeless people increased this year by 28 percent, in Orange 43 percent, and in Kern 50 percent.

The LAHSA report is also a devastating indictment of the politics of the Democratic Party. Despite being the wealthiest state in the US, and in addition to that being home to more billionaires than any other state, California has the highest poverty rate when the cost of living is accounted for. There is no question that there is an enormous amount of wealth locked up in the bank accounts of the super-rich, but the Democratic Party rejects any moves to use this wealth for the benefit of

the working class.

Instead, as prices are driven up, workers are unable to afford to continue living in their old neighborhoods, and many leave the state. Any relief that exists is funded primarily through regressive taxes and loans whose repayments will come from the city's coffers, and ultimately from the working class. Any serious attempt to deal with the housing crisis will by necessity have to confront the ruling class and threaten its immense wealth.



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