

## An Off the Sidewalk Story: Letter from Los Angeles

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It's been one body blow after another for the homeless population of the city of Los Angeles. Actions by city and state government officials in recent months have been intended to start resolving the homelessness crisis in L.A., arguably the worst in the nation. But even in the context of offering assistance to the city's most vulnerable electorate, there's the whiff of blame, a sense of choking off available options, a feeling if not a fact of kicking people when they're down:

July 28: The Los Angeles City Council voted to approve an ordinance restricting homeless encampments within the city limits. Including sidewalks. Mayor Eric Garcetti signed it the next day, and it went into effect on Aug. 29. The ordinance bans encampments on sidewalks and driveways, freeway overpasses and on-ramps, and near libraries, parks, schools and homeless shelters.

Aug. 5: California Gov. Gavin Newsom expressed his support for removing large homeless encampments, calling those lining the state's freeways and sidewalks, and the ones in public parks "not acceptable." In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Newsom said the state needs to develop humane ways to move people and clear the camps, and called on the federal government to help "at a massive level." Newsom conducted the interview while observing one such encampment being dismantled.

On Aug. 10, city policy analysts decided that Los Angeles shouldn't pursue plans to allow overnight camping at Westchester Park, Mar Vista Park and outside Will Rogers State Beach. In a curiously brief four-page report, the city administrative officer said a half-dozen possible locations for homeless facilities would cost too much or be otherwise unsuitable.

Aug. 16: Los Angeles City Councilman Joe Buscaino, a mayoral hopeful in 2022, tried to enlist his colleagues on the council in an effort to use the July 28 anti-encampment law to prevent tents from going up within 500 feet of any city public school, making the sidewalks of 1,000 school locations into "no-camping zones." Buscaino made his case at a charter school in Hollywood on the first day of school.

With sidewalks and driveways and parks out of bounds, with space under the freeways off limits, with more and more places to rest one's head being made

“unacceptable,” and shelters inconsistently unavailable ... what are the homeless to do?

All of these government responses might well be proof of a toughlove approach to homelessness, but lately it's been long on tough – the kind of cosmetic frankness that scans well before elections -- and short on anything resembling love, the menschkeit compassion for others we see so rarely these days.

It's easy to get caught up in homelessness in the distant, impersonal context that plays with regularity in the mainstream media. It's another thing to see it up close. See it on a walk or a bus ride down Central Avenue, the spine of a thoroughfare that runs through much of downtown Los Angeles.

This is the heart of what's long been known as Skid Row, a city district of poverty so historically relentless it's been showing up on maps by name since the 1930's, a tourist attraction reliable as Sunset Boulevard and the Hollywood sign. Skid Row actually encompasses 50 square blocks, but one seven-block stretch -- Fifth Street from Towne Avenue to Crocker Street to San Pedro Street to San Julian Street to Wall Street to Maple Avenue to Los Angeles Street – sharply distills the homeless experience of LA. You're witness to a standing parade of pup tents and Coleman fabric palaces, arrayed on the sidewalks from corner to corner, a brightly colored curbside metropolis on either side of the street.

Some of the more enterprising of the neighborhood's 4,757 residents have erected structures that merge with others on the sidewalks, camper duplexes almost improbably large and attentive to the real-estate mantra of location location location. Skid Row residents are a testament to human resilience; they have neighbors; they set out folding chairs on warm days and nights, like their moneyed counterparts in more traditional housing. You hear radios on as you move past; lively conversations are underway.

And you hear laughter. It's the sound of hope in a hopeless place. These people – 58 percent of them black, 12 percent of them white, 24 percent of them Latino -- make do. They make it work. They survive.

It would be one thing if Skid Row was something the city of Los Angeles could conveniently isolate to a half-mile stretch of downtown. But it doesn't end there. Just go to West 6<sup>th</sup> Street and South Beaudry Avenue, hard by the city's financial district. Or just head over to Hollywood.

On Hollywood Boulevard and Bronson Avenue, another encampment soon to be endangered reflects a truly American perspective. Pitched on the sidewalk amid colorful flags, this collection of tents is a testament to human ingenuity, and a sense of humor. One tent bears two oversize images: an American flag at the top, and a picture of a \$100 bill below, Benjamin Franklin's smirk gazing at anyone who walks by.

These and other homeless enclaves would be the stuff of light humor and benign jokes if the situation was funny. But one thing's inescapable: despite the joie du vivre of the homeless, despite their attempt to put the best face on a bad situation, there's no escaping the collapse of the social safety net – and the fact of poor people putting a happy face on a situation that shouldn't exist in the first place.

It's not hard to contextualize historically. LA's flirtation with hardcore homelessness policy goes back, most immediately, to early 1987, when LAPD Chief Daryl Gates and Mayor Tom Bradley did a tag team in an earlier iteration of a homeless crackdown, joining forces for sweeps of Skid Row residents. There was pushback, mainly the courage of City Attorney James K. Hahn, who said (in a comment whose urgency you could superimpose on conditions in 2021): "I simply will not prosecute people for being poor, underprivileged and unable to find a place to sleep until I'm convinced that a viable alternative to sleeping on the streets exists."

The shots being absorbed by L.A.'s homeless population today are, among other things, evidence of a selfishness and an exasperation with a situation the city's more moneyed residents could neither predict nor prevent. There's an evident frustration with homelessness; you see it in Franklin Village, a quietly snobbish Hollywood enclave. You see it downtown in the vibrant civic crossroads of 7<sup>th</sup> and Figueroa. The affluent have become inured to the homeless, exhausted by the prevalence of the condition, a low-grade fever that won't go away.

There's a kind of détente in place; it's still life during wartime, but down on the ground, a long way from City Hall, the terms of engagement have chilled to a myopic, incidentally cruel indifference. People just have too many other things going on. Including the mayor: On July 9, Mayor Garcetti was tapped by the Biden administration to be the next ambassador to India. Garcetti accepted the

nomination on July 29; the confirmation process is expected to take months, a time in which he's likely to be, by escalating degrees, the increasingly invisible man of City Hall.

But City Councilman Mike Bonin grasps what's happening to the City of Angeles right now. Before the July 1 vote on the ordinance effectively criminalizing homelessness – an ordinance he voted against -- Bonin spoke eloquently of his own encounter with having no shelter on the streets of L.A. His experience speaks its universal volumes.

"Some of those nights," he said, "I slept in the car. Some of those nights, when my car was in the shop, I slept on the beach. I cannot tell you how much turmoil is in your heart when the sun is setting and you don't know where to sleep. I cannot tell you how demoralizing and dehumanizing and defeating that experience is when you don't know where you're going to sleep."