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How can a place with 58,000 homeless

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Even as it continues to gentrify, downtown L.A. remains the epicenter of a staggering homeless problem. (Los Angeles Times)



Homelessness affects the lives of all Angelenos, not just those forced to live on the streets. And it does so almost daily, in ways large and small.

Consider the pairs of thick gloves that George Abou-Daoud has stashed inside the nine restaurants he owns on the east side of Hollywood. When a homeless person accosts his customers, Abou-Daoud says, he can no longer count on the police for help; unless there's an imminent threat to safety, he contends, they don't respond quickly and can't just haul the person away. So he's had to take matters into his own hands, literally, by physically ejecting problematic homeless people himself. That's why he has the gloves — to keep his hands clean.

Abou-Daoud's gloves are a particularly bleak symbol of the relationship between the homeless and the non-homeless. But everyone's got a story of one sort or another. Day in and day out, Metro riders step into trains with homeless people on them — often visibly disturbed or threatening, prompting nervous passengers to edge away or change cars. In downtown L.A., shop owners worry that customers will opt for suburban malls to avoid the panhandlers and glassy-eyed wanderers. In Venice, besieged businesses have banded together to share the cost of security guards and cleanup crews to clear garbage, bedding or worse from the sidewalks.

Across the city, drivers exiting freeways routinely encounter homeless people on the off-ramps shuffling from window to window requesting money. Libraries, train stations and public parks have become refuges for homeless people. In many residential neighborhoods and commercial districts, encampments have become a seemingly immutable fact of life.

As homelessness spreads across Los Angeles County — the official tally shows a 46% increase from 2013 to 2017 — it is drawing two conflicting responses, at times from the same people. There's sympathy and a desire to help, but there's also a sense of being invaded and perhaps even endangered — in terms of both physical safety and public health (see, for example, the state of emergency California declared last year over a [hepatitis A outbreak](#) that spread among the homeless, or the Skirball blaze that was sparked by a [cooking fire in a homeless encampment](#)). There's an unavoidable, often unspoken, fear that the city around us may be in a state of irreversible decline, and a suspicion on the part of some that the rights of homeless people have trumped the rights of everyone else.

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The increasing visibility of homelessness and destitution contributes to the uneasy feeling that the problem is closing in on everyone. It's also a daily reminder that the values and systems to which we cling — liberty, democracy, free enterprise, the social contract that's supposed to hold a community together, the safety net that is supposed to protect the most vulnerable — haven't steered us out of this mess. Nor have our leaders.

It's not surprising that some Angelenos are angry or even afraid. But we need to channel those concerns into constructive action.



(Los Angeles Times)

The city and county must find a way to balance effectively the needs and rights of homeless people against the demands and expectations of everyone else.

Respecting the rights of homeless people doesn't mean consigning the sidewalks and parks permanently to tents and shopping carts, just as respecting the rights of property owners doesn't mean rousting the unsheltered and shuffling them from one neighborhood to the next. Instead, what is needed are reasonable compromises that protect the health, safety and basic needs of homeless people while ensuring the community's ability to function day in and day out. That, in turn, requires residents and businesses not just to accept the presence of homeless people, but to have a stake in getting them off the streets and into housing. (They should start by remembering that only a minority — though a visible one — of homeless people are mentally ill or drug addicted; many are simply down on their luck and pose no threat to others.)

Some compromises have already been laid out. What's often been missing, though, is the political courage necessary to implement them. For example, the L.A. City Council adopted an ordinance [two years ago](#) that requires homeless people to abandon their carts and put most of their possessions in storage once the government has made a storage facility available nearby. The city, however, has been able to open [only two such facilities](#), and only one — on skid row — has available storage space. Community opposition has killed or hamstrung projects in San Pedro and Venice.

WITHOUT A HOME

They're part of the Los Angeles streetscape, as familiar as the swaying palm trees and idling traffic, living under freeways, alongside riverbeds and on canyon hillsides. The mentally ill, the drug addicts, the economically disadvantaged, many with their life belongings in a backpack or shopping cart. In this ongoing series, *Without a Home*, The Times is examining the crisis of homelessness in our region. [Full coverage](#) [i](#)

Similarly, faced with mounting complaints about homeless people sleeping in their cars and campers, the council adopted an ordinance in late 2016 imposing a ban on people lodging in their vehicles overnight in residential areas. But the city has been far too slow to follow through on the safe parking areas it called for on property owned by churches, nonprofits and public agencies. That was at the heart of the compromise, and without it, the problem is merely shifted to commercial and industrial zones. Today, there is just one small safe parking lot in the city, at a church in South Los Angeles.

Admittedly, the city and county have taken some important steps forward, and have acted with an unusual degree of coordination. For example, L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti's office has been conducting weekly meetings in a "war room" of sorts to begin identifying the homeless encampments most in need of attention, and then to devote outreach workers and other resources to the people living in them in a concentrated effort to move them into housing. The encampments would then be cleared. And at Metro, teams of Los Angeles Police Department officers, outreach workers and mental health experts now respond to calls about homeless people (which make up about half of the calls received). The point is to connect people to the services they need, rather than just hustling them off the trains and buses.





Yolanda Gutter, a mental evaluation officer with the LAPD, speaks with Ken Adam on the subway and on the platform. (Los Angeles Times)

Those are the right approaches, but they're not yet making a visible difference. In Hollywood, for example, business owners say street people seem younger, more aggressive and well aware of how limited the police response has become. As a consequence, businesses are relying more on private security guards they fund through the local business improvement district, and living with a rise in drug use and petty theft.

Sitting in one of his restaurants on Sunset Boulevard, Abou-Daoud — who says he supplies food to homeless people and has twice given them jobs — reels off a list of recent incidents. Here's one: A homeless man stretched out on that restaurant's patio floor one evening and screamed at the diners around him. "I asked him politely to leave. He gave me a blank stare," Abou-Daoud said. "What am I supposed to do?"



George Abou-Daoud with his dog Hudson at one of his restaurants in Hollywood. (Los Angeles Times)

Some contend that the police are handicapped in their dealings with homeless people by criminal justice reform measures such as Proposition 47, which downgraded some nonviolent crimes from felonies to misdemeanors, and court orders that, for the time being, give homeless people the right to spend their nights in tents and blankets under the stars. Yet a **Times investigation** found that as the homeless population grew from 2011 to 2016, arrests of homeless people went up significantly — largely for petty crimes relating to quality-of-life issues.

If the police really backed off on arrests, there's nothing in the criminal justice reforms that compelled them to do so. Nor is it a crime to be homeless. And moving homeless people from one street or neighborhood to the next is no solution; it just moves the problem to someone else's property. Yet that's how

private security officers deal with an uncooperative or problematic homeless person.

The real, durable solution is to get homeless people into housing, which means building many more apartments (the point of Proposition HHH) as well as providing the outreach workers and services needed to move people off the streets and keep them off the streets (the point of Measure H). It will take years to get those housing units built, however. Realizing they can't leave thousands of people in tents on the sidewalks in the meantime, city officials have kicked around a number of promising ways to house homeless people on a temporary basis; for example, there's a proposal to fast-track the conversion of motels into short-term rentals and a plan to put housing trailers on a city-owned lot.

The county is also preparing to send out far more outreach teams this year, eventually putting 10 times as many in the field as it had before Measure H passed. And it's expanding its 211 phone service to summon outreach teams if they need help with a homeless person. A responsive and effective 211 service would provide at least a partial answer to Abou-Daoud's question about what Angelenos are supposed to do in the face of homelessness. But officials haven't spread the word about it yet — they're waiting until they have enough teams assembled to make the service worth calling.

At stake here is the quality of life for everyone in the county, not just the people without homes. We can't continue trying to solve the problems on the sidewalks by foisting them onto someone else. That's not striking a balance between the competing needs of the homeless and the non-homeless; it's just staying on the path that got us to this point.

This is the fifth in a series.

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