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Police Tactic Strips Homeless of Comfort

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Critics of the LAPD say milk crate recovery is a new harassment.

by Evan George



“That’s everything I own, my personal property!” Handcuffed in the back seat of a police cruiser, LeRoy Jackson is inconsolable. As one of the officers rolls up the automatic window, Jackson screams, “I am being arrested for having a crate!”



It’s a scene from an unfinished documentary on the gentrification of skid row, from which excerpts were released this week by Los Angeles Community Action Network and filmmaker Ernest Savage, one that homeless advocates say shows a new tactic being widely used by the LAPD to harass the homeless and force them from the streets of downtown: milk crate recovery.

For years, those who sleep in the cardboard boxes dotting skid row have used stray or stolen milk crates to store their personal effects. Now, the LAPD has begun enforcing a confiscation program that officials say aims to return these crates to the companies that own them. When officers remove what they believe to be stolen property, they hand out orange tickets that read Coalition for Milk Recovery and contain a code number.

Though arrests are sparse, the confiscation of milk crates has increased

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dramatically over the last few months. Often police show little regard for the personal property contained within.

“We don’t generally arrest people for possession of stolen milk crates,” says Capt. Andrew Smith, commanding officer for the Central Division. “If we do come across those, and officers have time in their busy day, they will pick crates up and drop them off at our storage facility and the company that owns them will come and pick them up.”

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Footage shot by Savage and LACAN employees shows otherwise.

In one scene of the video, officers are shown taking milk crates and shopping carts from the homeless along San Pedro Street, between 5th and 6th streets, and throwing them into the back of a city maintenance truck along with other personal objects, such as blankets and clothes.

When asked where the crates are being taken, one officer responds, “They go to a temporary warehouse and then are returned to their owners. We’ve returned, already, 1,500 crates-last month,” he says.

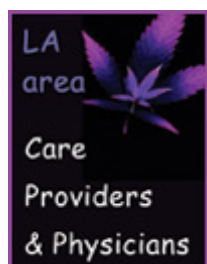
The next scene shows officers escorting a city maintenance truck loaded with crates to a spot underneath the 6th Street Bridge, at night. The officers call homeless men over to the truck to unload the crates and shopping carts and dump them on the ground where the homeless can come pick them up. When asked on tape, these officers shrug shoulders as to whether the containers are to be returned to companies.

Savage points out that many of the shopping carts being dumped are “hippie carts,” given to the homeless by Los Angeles Catholic Worker groups specifically to prevent their confiscation by LAPD.

Advocates for the homeless say the confiscation process is little more than an attempt to push people out of the area by searching and stripping them of their belongings.

“It’s definitely part of a change in the campaign,” says Savage, who spent six months filming activity on skid row. “Every time I walk out there, they are taking somebody’s cart, they are taking somebody’s crate, beds, pillows-anything that they call ‘items of comfort...’ anything that makes it bearable to be on the streets. ... I don’t know what their criteria would be, other than ‘Move people along.’”

In April, the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that LAPD officers cannot legally arrest homeless people for sleeping, lying or sitting on the streets unless the city can provide shelter for them. In the last few months, arrests in the Central Division have significantly dropped, especially for misdemeanor crimes such as minor drug possession. Police officials have said that the ruling strips police officers of their most effective tool in cleaning up downtown. Police Chief William Bratton has referred to police as “handcuffed” by the decision.





While arrests have played little role in milk crate recovery, critics see it as a new tactic to criminalize homelessness.

“It has completely replaced the other kinds of harassment,” says Becky Dennison, co-director of LACAN. “It’s not about the arrests, it’s about the use of police power to collect crates, and saying that they’re recovering them for other businesses, but what they’re really doing is going and dumping trash all over and taking everybody’s personal property in the process.”



Dennison calls the practice a system of “removing ‘items of comfort,’ which is their (LAPD’s) own language, though unfortunately not on tape.”

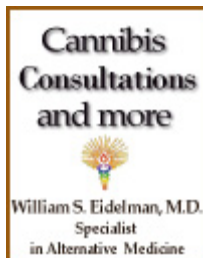
In a press conference on Thursday, Aug. 24 LACAN and other downtown activists called for a community effort to keep LAPD from seizing the property of downtown’s homeless.



“It’s a complete waste of resources when we have other serious issues in the community that they could be focusing on,” Dennison told L.A. Alternative. “Why on earth would they care about collecting personal property?” LAA

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