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L.A. Cops Crack Down on Skid Row as Gentrification Looms

by Jessica Hoffmann

In a move that coincides with rising property values and shirks a federal ruling that slammed Los Angeles's treatment of homeless residents, the LAPD is cracking down on the city's poorest residents.

Oct. 17 – Fear and uncertainty pervade the streets of downtown Los Angeles's Skid Row neighborhood, which has the highest concentration of homeless residents in the nation, as police activity in the area escalates.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), in conjunction with the mayor and city attorney, has stepped up its activity in the fifty-block Skid Row area just months after a federal appeals court called the city's citations and arrests of people sleeping on sidewalks because they have nowhere else to go "cruel and unusual punishment." This month's increased police presence comes in the midst of rapid gentrification of the area and a city-wide affordable-housing crisis.

People on the streets are "in a state of fear and apprehension," community organizer Rick Mantley said Wednesday after walking through the area with the Los Angeles Community Action Network's Community Watch program.

In interviews with *The NewStandard* last week, residents described increased police harassment and arrests for sleeping on the sidewalk during the daytime, possession of stolen milk crates and shopping carts, and obstruction of public walkways with tents and other property. They also said police stole or destroyed their personal property.

"It's like we are dogs," said Melvin, an elderly homeless man in a wheelchair, as tears streamed down his cheeks. "I don't care if you wear a uniform, I pull my pants on just like you do."

According to Captain Andrew Smith of the LAPD, 50 new uniformed patrol officers arrived in the area in late September, on the heels of an unspecified number of new undercover narcotics officers who had arrived several weeks earlier.

In April, the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that a Los Angeles law prohibiting sitting, lying or sleeping on streets, sidewalks and other public ways constitutes cruel and unusual punishment as long as there is not adequate shelter for everyone in the city.

Nevertheless, on September 20, the city attorney authorized police to enforce the sidewalk-sleeping ban during daytime hours.

There is widespread uncertainty among residents about the hours of enforcement of the ordinance, but LAPD Captain Andrew Smith told *TNS* that enforcement has been permitted from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Police and political leaders say their aim is to rid the area of crime while moving non-criminals off the streets and into shelters. Smith told *TNS* that sidewalk-sleeping citations and stolen-milk-crate arrests are "infrequent" and that most police interactions with homeless people entail directing them to shelters and other service providers.

On Friday, during one of the now-common street sweeps, *TNS* observed as several pairs of officers moved along a targeted block passing out cards that read "We're here to help," while occasionally arresting homeless people on small violations. A woman standing next to her mattress and other belongings on the sidewalk asked an officer for clarification of the law as it relates to mattresses on the streets – "Is it illegal or okay?" – and the hours of enforcement of the sidewalk-sleeping ban. The officer walked away without answering.

Police are "suggesting that this is really about education and help," said Becky Dennison, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), a grassroots organization that works to empower Skid Row residents. "In reality, it's about harassment, arrests. People don't need law enforcement to get services."

According to Captain Smith, the 50 new patrol officers, most of whom have been police for less than two years, received only three days of training in dealing with special-needs populations before going out on the streets of Skid Row.

"The quantity of officers is increasingly detrimental," said Dennison, "particularly to young people, mentally ill people, and the elderly" – all populations with a significant presence on Skid Row.

On Friday, documentarian Ernest Savage videotaped police putting handcuffs on a mentally ill man and driving him away. The man's wife, also mentally ill, erupted into tears and screams. When an LAPD officer shouted at her to pack up her tent, she wailed, "I can't do it without him." The officer simply pushed past her to enter and investigate her home while she shouted in protest.

LA CAN co-director Pete White expressed his concern about situations like this. "You just can't run roughshod over these people if you're gonna have a community approach. You need to know the linkages that keep people together mentally and physically. What they're doing could create a crisis situation at any time."

"The last thing we want," White said, "is people suffering from [Posttraumatic Stress Disorder] because the cops are out there."

LAPD officers' statements to *TNS* cast an interesting light on the department's stated commitment to "helping" the homeless. Captain Smith said many residents don't want to go into shelters. "They're perfectly happy and content on the streets where they are," he said.

Senior lead officer for the Skid Row area Mike Fernandez said: "Some of these people do need help, but the majority of these people do not need help. They just need the push to get out." For this reason, he sees church groups that deliver food directly to people on the streets as "enabling" them. "Why would they get up and go to the mission if someone is out here feeding them every day?" he said. "It's almost like a child. If you set some type of guidelines and restrictions, he'll be a positive person in society. If you allow him to do whatever he wants, he will."

"Broken Windows"

The recent escalation in police activity on Skid Row is part of LA's Safer Cities Initiative, which focuses on reducing crime in target areas using the "broken windows" theory of law enforcement that current LA police Chief William Bratton formerly employed on the streets of New York City in the 1990s.

The main principle of "broken windows" policing is that small signs of supposed disorder in a community – like litter, graffiti, and broken windows – make neighborhoods appealing locations for criminal activity. Hence, the theory goes, addressing these signs of "blight" should make neighborhoods less likely to invite serious crime.

Critics say this theory motivates law-enforcement crackdowns on members of marginalized communities, who are disproportionately targeted for petty crimes.

In the Skid Row area, applying "broken windows" involves admonishing and occasionally arresting homeless people for sleeping or spreading out their belongings on sidewalks or possessing stolen milk crates. Community organizers see this as a means of criminalizing homelessness.

American Civil Liberties Union attorney Marc Rosenbaum calls the city's ban on sitting, lying or sleeping on public sidewalks "a street-sweeping ordinance that treats the homeless as disposable."

LA CAN's Dennison said that as homeless people accumulate arrests for petty infractions, the penalties get tougher. She predicts this will likely result in decreases in the number of homeless people in Skid Row because they will be displaced to jail or other neighborhoods where police attention is less invasive.

Criminal or Socioeconomic Issue?

Community organizers and residents question why law enforcement is the city's primary tool for addressing its homelessness crisis. In LA's Skid Row, 11,000 to 12,000 people vie for 9,000 to 10,000 beds in shelters, single-room-occupancy hotels, and other temporary or transitional housing.

"The police have been asked to solve social problems that are not of their making," said Paul Tepper of the local Weingart Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty. "Homelessness is a broader issue of poverty and affordable housing."

Although Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa in September announced a plan to allocate \$100 million to find and subsidize housing for more than 2,000 people who are currently living in transitional housing or emergency shelters, LA CAN's Dennison noted, "They have criminalized an entire population prior to any of that becoming reality."

Even if the plan does come to fruition, it will not be enough. According to research by the Weingart Institute, approximately 80,000 people are homeless each night in Los Angeles County. Yet, as of 2003, there were only 18,529 shelter beds in the county.

Affordable-Housing Crisis

In September, the Southern California Association of Non-Profit Housing (SCANPH) released a report revealing that while Los Angeles's population grew by about 4 percent between 2000 and 2004, the number of new rental units constructed in the last five years has been effectively cancelled out by the loss of an almost-equal number of rental units via condo conversions and other sources. This has forced many of the city's renters into a "housing squeeze," SCANPH reported, with a 12 percent increase over the last five years in the number of renter households paying more than 30 percent of their income in rent.

"It's hard enough for the working poor to afford to pay rent, let alone someone on [public assistance]," Robert Dhondrup, SCANPH's director of communications, told *TNS*.

Paul Tepper of the Weingart Institute noted that there has been an "enormous" loss of affordable housing in downtown Los Angeles, where Skid Row is located, as old buildings have been renovated and turned into luxury loft condos.

Gentrification

Asked why he thinks the LAPD has stepped up actions in Skid Row now, community organizer General Dogon, who has lived in the area most of his life, does not hesitate: "The objective is to gentrify the area. They do not want you on the streets, nor do they want you walking around, because it's bad for business."

During the Southern California real-estate boom of the last several years, a wave of luxury-loft developments in downtown Los Angeles has inched ever closer to Skid Row. Today, LA CAN's office shares a block with upscale lofts and an art gallery. The lofts have replaced residential hotel rooms. The next block over has a wine bar, a yoga studio and several small boutiques that have filled formerly empty storefronts.

As White sees it: "There is a huge push to get poor families out and a huge pull to get other families in. That's discrimination."

But, said White, "the Skid Row community is a longstanding community with community-based linkages. You cannot uproot and destroy it and not have divisive, crazy impacts. This is a community worth saving."

Dennison concurs. "Far more positive things are happening in this community than negative," she said, citing local organizations that provide "nationwide models for housing people who are seen as the hardest to reach, the hardest to serve." The Skid Row-based organization Lamp Community, for instance, provides housing for homeless people with severe mental illnesses, an often underserved population, arguing that housing security is a prerequisite for effective treatment programs.

Linda Valverde, a staff member at the Downtown Women's Action Coalition who herself went through substance-abuse treatment on Skid Row, told *TNS*: "Skid Row is not just about poverty and homelessness. Skid Row is about treatment and recovery." Valverde and other residents described a large recovery community in the area, with residential and outpatient substance-abuse treatment programs such as needle-exchange centers, 12-step support groups and single-room-occupancy hotels dedicated as sober-living facilities.

Samuel D. Wilson and his chosen family, who stick together to care for one another on the streets, have recently been forced by police "clean-ups" to move from location to location. "This is a war to me," Wilson told *TNS*. "I have to fight every day to defend my family to the best of my ability."

Community-Based Solutions

Community members think there are better ways than criminalization to address the homelessness crisis in Los Angeles. "Solutions," said Dennison, "are going to be housing and services for folks in this community." Representatives from SCANPH and the Weingart Center, as well as several people living on Skid Row's streets, also emphasized the primary importance of increasing the city's stock of affordable housing.

Dennison said: "You can't ignore a problem for 20 years and then create a [housing] fund and expect it to solve everything. It's a long-term problem, it's gonna require a long-term solution. We need to change the system of resources and access."

Meanwhile, the police crackdown on Skid Row continues.

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