

The Making of a Crisis: A History of Homelessness in Los Angeles

Executive Summary

This report grows out of previous work by the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy on the history of rent control in Los Angeles to examine a related crisis facing the county today: homelessness. Rates of homelessness have risen substantially in the region, increasing by 14% in the City of Los Angeles and 13% in Los Angeles County since last year, despite renewed attention and funding directed toward the problem. By examining the history of homelessness in Los Angeles, we aim to shed light on how and why our contemporary crisis has taken shape so that policy makers may be more aware of the entrenched obstacles they face in addressing homelessness, as well as what policies have worked or failed in the past.

The report traces the history of homelessness through three main periods: the Great Depression and World War II, the Post-War period, and 1980 to the present. A confluence of factors shaped the demographics, experiences, and responses to homelessness in each period. The severe economic downturn in the 1930s drove many into homelessness, most of whom ended up on Skid Row. At this point, a majority of the city's homeless population consisted of white, single men, though African Americans were disproportionately represented given their low numbers in the general population. Although World War II spurred significant job growth and federal efforts to house the region's growing population, such efforts did not last.

By the 1970s, business and real estate interests had become a powerful voice in city development, and had pressured the city to revitalize downtown at the expense of low-income and homeless individuals living there. This pressure combined with deindustrialization, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, dwindling affordable housing units, and the recession of the early 1980s again drove many to the streets. Plans to "contain" the homeless in Skid Row meant many homeless individuals and services ended up there, though the city's containment plan could not deal with an increasingly decentralized phenomenon. While white, single, older men comprised a majority of Los Angeles's homeless population prior to the 1980s, thereafter Black and Latinx individuals began to make up a majority of this population following decades of racialized residential segregation, employment discrimination, and financial redlining.

Although homelessness receded from headlines during the 1990s, Los Angeles's recession and affordable housing crisis at the beginning of the decade exacerbated the problem. During the twenty-first century, the affordable housing crisis deepened, particularly following the subprime mortgage crisis and Great Recession of 2008, while wages stagnated. At present, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens the lives and livelihoods not only of those without homes, but also those struggling to make ends meet due to widespread business closures and stay-at-home orders. People of color remain in the most precarious position and continue to make up a majority of the region's homeless population today.

Responses to homelessness in Los Angeles over this period reveal government officials' ongoing struggle to develop and coordinate solutions that deal with the structural determinants of the problem. While federal, state, and local authorities stepped in at various points to mitigate factors exacerbating homelessness, such as unemployment and housing shortages, such initiatives were short lived as budgets,

public sentiment, and the political climate shifted. The overlapping, labyrinthine structure of Los Angeles City and County government, along with the heavy representation of business and real estate interests in local development, have stymied progress on finding low-cost housing options for the homeless. Various private and non-profit agencies stepped in to provide services to the homeless where government agencies did not, creating a patchwork of service provision that remains today.

In the absence of effective, long-term policies or a robust social safety net, law enforcement became increasingly involved in policing poverty in Los Angeles. It did so especially after the 1970s amidst a growing law and order movement in the U.S., deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and mounting pressure from the business and development community to protect their interests at the expense of homeless residents. The criminalization of homelessness has disproportionately impacted people of color and those with mental illness. Although studies have shown that managing homelessness through policing and incarceration is less effective and more expensive than permanent supportive housing solutions, the former remains the most ubiquitous method of managing homelessness in Los Angeles today.

Drawing on this history, we offer a list of key actions and policy recommendations that policy makers might use to develop solutions to homelessness that address long-standing structural determinants of the problem and avoid the many mistakes of the past.