

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

Fact Sheet

For most of the twentieth century, Los Angeles's homeless population consisted predominantly of white, single men. Following **decades of racialized residential segregation, employment discrimination, and financial redlining**, nonwhites—and African Americans in particular—came to comprise the majority of the region's homeless after 1980.

Today, African Americans make up 34% of LA County's homeless but just 8% of the general population. Latinx-identified people make up 36% of the county's homeless and 48% of the general population.

The **lack of affordable housing** put pressure on Angelenos at multiple points over the past hundred years, pushing many into homelessness. However, rising property values and rents, the incursion of real estate and business interests in local development, the inability of LA City and County to coordinate on housing solutions, and lack of protections for tenants over the past forty years have all contributed to the massive shortage of affordable housing today.

Policing of homeless transient laborers spurred the growth of Los Angeles's carceral system in the early twentieth century. Since then, **policing and criminalization of homelessness** has remained a primary method of poverty management in the region. The criminalization of homelessness has disproportionately affected people of color and homeless individuals with mental illness.

Going back to the Great Depression, **local government officials have been unable or unwilling to respond to homelessness in a comprehensive and coordinated fashion**, offering only a patchwork of welfare benefits and services. Private and non-profit agencies have tried to supplement this patchwork, leading to fractured and often temporary responses to homelessness in Los Angeles.

The **lack of public services** for people with mental illness, particularly those living in poverty, combined with increased recourse to law enforcement exacerbated the plight of the deinstitutionalized from the 1970s onward. Many mentally ill homeless individuals ended up cycling through hospitals, jails, and the streets.

The prevalence of homeless adults in LA County with either a mental illness or substance abuse disorder is 67%, according to analysis by the Los Angeles Times. In LA County, 72% of homeless adults lack shelter. Unsheltered individuals are regularly engaged by police and emergency services, **rather than receive shelter and appropriate care**.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has not only threatened the health of Los Angeles's homeless population, but has also severely threatened the housing security and economic prospects of thousands of Angelenos. Communities of color have disproportionately suffered the health and economic impacts of this pandemic.