

As Homelessness Surges in California, So Does a Backlash

Tent encampments across California are testing residents' tolerance and compassion as street conditions deteriorate.



A homeless encampment in San Francisco. Homelessness is an expanding crisis that many California residents say has tested the tolerance and liberal values for which the state is better known. Credit: Jim Wilson/The New York Times

OAKLAND, Calif. — Insults like “financial parasites” and “bums” have been directed at them, not to mention rocks and pepper spray. Fences, potted plants and other barriers have been erected to keep them off sidewalks. Citizen patrols have been organized, vigilante style, to walk the streets and push them out.

California may pride itself on its commitment to tolerance and liberal values, but across the state, record levels of homelessness have spurred a backlash against those who live on the streets.

Gene Gorelik, a property developer in Oakland and an aggressive critic of the homeless, recently suggested luring the thousands of homeless people in the San Francisco Bay Area onto party buses stocked with alcohol and sending them on a one-way trip to Mexico. “Refugee camps in Syria are cleaner than this,” he said in an interview at a fast-food restaurant in Oakland that overlooks a homeless encampment.

Homelessness is an expanding crisis that comes amid skyrocketing housing prices, a widening gap between the rich and poor and the persistent presence on city streets of the mentally ill and drug-dependent despite billions of dollars spent to help them.

Although rarely as coarsely as Mr. Gorelik — who made headlines recently when he tried to shower a homeless encampment in Oakland with dollar bills to persuade those living in tents to move elsewhere — residents say they have found themselves weighing concerns for the less fortunate against disruptions to their own quality of life.

“I do think this is, in a lot of ways, a test of who are we as a community,” said John Maceri, the chief executive of the People Concern, a social services agency in Los Angeles, who has noticed a stark uptick in hostility toward the homeless in recent months.

“Some people who I’d put in the fed-up category, they’re not bad people,” he continued. “They would describe themselves as left of center, and sometimes very left of center, but at some point they reach the breaking point.”

(What questions do you have about inequality in California? [Ask them here](#), and a reporter may look into them.)

For many, that breaking point was the worsening squalor in the streets of cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco, where open-air drug dealing is rampant in some spots and where human feces and scattered needles and syringes have been found lying about. Those scenes have also proved a potent symbol for Republicans like President Trump to [showcase what they call the failures](#) of liberal urban enclaves.

Homelessness has been an intractable problem in the largest California cities for decades, but it has surged in some areas in recent years. San Jose, the nation's 10th-largest city, counted 6,200 homeless people this year, a 42 percent increase since the last count two years ago. In Oakland, the figure climbed 47 percent. And it rose 17 percent in San Francisco, and 12 percent in Los Angeles, where the county counted so many homeless people — 59,000 — that they could fill Dodger Stadium.

Homelessness in California

[How a Tuxedoed Sommelier Wound Up Homeless in California](#)
Sept. 28, 2019

[Life on the Dirtiest Block in San Francisco](#)
Oct. 8, 2018

[In Los Angeles, Where the Rich and the Destitute Cross Paths](#)
July 2, 2018



A Public Works crew removing boulders from a sidewalk in San Francisco. Residents had installed them to deter people from erecting tents and dealing drugs there. Credit Liz Hafalia/San Francisco Chronicle, via Associated Press

recently called for the governor to declare [a state of emergency](#) to free up funding for addressing homelessness, similar to what has been done to address natural disasters.

The frustrations have manifested themselves in ways that Bill Bedrossian, the chief executive of Covenant House California, a nonprofit group that operates shelters and programs for homeless youth, said illustrate an “increase in the lack of empathy.”

“People don’t want homeless people near them,” Mr. Bedrossian said. He and other leaders of Covenant House met with strong opposition at a raucous City Council meeting in Berkeley last month when they presented plans to buy a center that would offer housing and counseling services for up to 30 young homeless people.

“It’s the worst it’s ever been, as far as the backlash,” he said.

Residents of a street in San Francisco recently installed boulders on the sidewalk to deter people from erecting tents and sleeping there. In Los Angeles, homeowners have installed prickly plants for the same purpose.

Near Southwestern Law School in the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, a grass strip between the sidewalk and curb is fenced off with green plastic to keep homeless people away. But around the corner is an encampment with a few dozen tents.

“I think they care more about animals than us,” said Lucrecia Macias, a nurse who lived in a house in Palmdale before cancer wiped her out financially and led her to the streets. “They’re making parks for dogs but they’re not building housing for us.”

Lynell Cain, who also lives in a tent at the encampment, said the community response had grown worse in recent months. “They’ll kick you out of stores,” he said. “They won’t even let you into laundromats to wash your clothes. The bus driver won’t pull over.”

Josh Rubenstein, a spokesman for the Los Angeles Police Department, called homelessness “the crisis of our generation.” Despite high-profile violent attacks such as a [beating death](#) on Skid Row, [an intentional fire](#) at an encampment in Eagle Rock, and an arson attack on Skid Row in which a homeless musician died, Mr. Rubenstein said, the authorities had not seen an increase in violence toward the homeless attributed to the community backlash. (Some cases have involved violence among homeless people, and in others, such as the [Eagle Rock case](#), the motive is unclear.)

Still, he acknowledged a growing frustration among residents. “There are strong, strong feelings on all sides of this issue,” he said.

Part of that exasperation, at least in Los Angeles, comes from two publicly approved actions in recent years — a sales tax increase and a bond measure — to spend billions of dollars on the problem of homelessness, which officials pledged would mitigate the issue. But thickets of regulations in California stand in the way of a quick housing fix.

“I think those of us in the service-provider community always knew we weren’t going to solve the problem,” said Mr. Maceri of the People Concern. “But I think the expectation was we were going to make a significant dent. So on the one hand, the message is we have all these resources to quote-unquote solve this problem. And what the general public sees is, it’s not getting solved, it’s not getting better, it’s getting worse.”

In San Francisco, residents have opposed plans by the city to build a homeless shelter in a wealthy waterfront district filled with newly built office buildings and condominiums.



Logs line a street in Oakland in an effort to discourage tents. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

“Putting mentally ill people and people with drug abuse problems in residential areas is careless,” said Paneez Kosarian, a technology company employee who joined neighbors in opposing the shelter, which a judge said could be built.

Last month, Ms. Kosarian made headlines when security camera footage showed her wrestling with a man outside the front door to her apartment building.

Before he attacked her, the man warned her that the world had been taken over by robots. The episode [prompted local news coverage](#) of other attacks by people who appeared to be mentally ill.

DISTURBING VIDEO: Terrifying video shows a woman being violently attacked by an unknown man outside a luxury condominium complex in San Francisco

Watch the full video here: <https://t.co/Sv9TPKOY9L> pic.twitter.com/OQbn1R8AT8

— KRON4 News (@kron4news) [August 13, 2019](#)

Ms. Kosarian and others cite [city estimates](#) that half of the homeless people in San Francisco have substance abuse issues, and say the crisis is being misdiagnosed as purely a lack of housing. Mayor London Breed announced this month that San Francisco would begin enforcing a state law that makes it easier to force mentally ill people off the streets.

“This is definitely a more complicated definition than just homelessness,” Ms. Kosarian said. “Even during the daytime, I fear walking alone.”

Few have been more outspoken about the homeless than Mr. Gorelik, the property developer. “Compassion is counterproductive,” he said, adding that services for the homeless only encourage homelessness to flourish. Charities in California provide food, clothing and tents to homeless people. California cities also provide many services. But shelter is more elusive in the state, where more than two-thirds of the homeless live outdoors, compared with 5 percent in New York.

Mr. Gorelik said he saw a connection between the 90 homeless encampments in Oakland and crime. His construction sites have been burglarized nine times, he said, and his car has been broken into twice.



Gene Gorelik standing outside a chain-link fence at a property in Oakland he once owned and intended to develop into housing. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Candice Elder, the founder and executive director of the East Oakland Collective, an organization that assists homeless people, described Mr. Gorelik’s views as very extreme, even as anti-homeless sentiments had become more widespread.

“When people think about the homeless crisis, sometimes humanity goes out the window,” she

said. “People say, ‘I don’t like what’s going on. I don’t want them near our school, get rid of them.’”

Ms. Elder said it was understandable that residents had concerns about cleanliness and safety around the homeless encampments. But she argued that people should not be forced to leave an encampment until they are provided with housing.

“When people complain,” she said, “they are not combining the complaint with a compassionate solution.”

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, homeless people living in an encampment in Chatsworth have had rocks thrown at them from cars, have had insults yelled at them and have been pepper-sprayed, according to Paul Read, 43, who assists the homeless there.

And about two weeks ago, Mr. Read said, he confronted a man shooting pellets from a rifle into a cluster of tents. The man told him it was "target practice."

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