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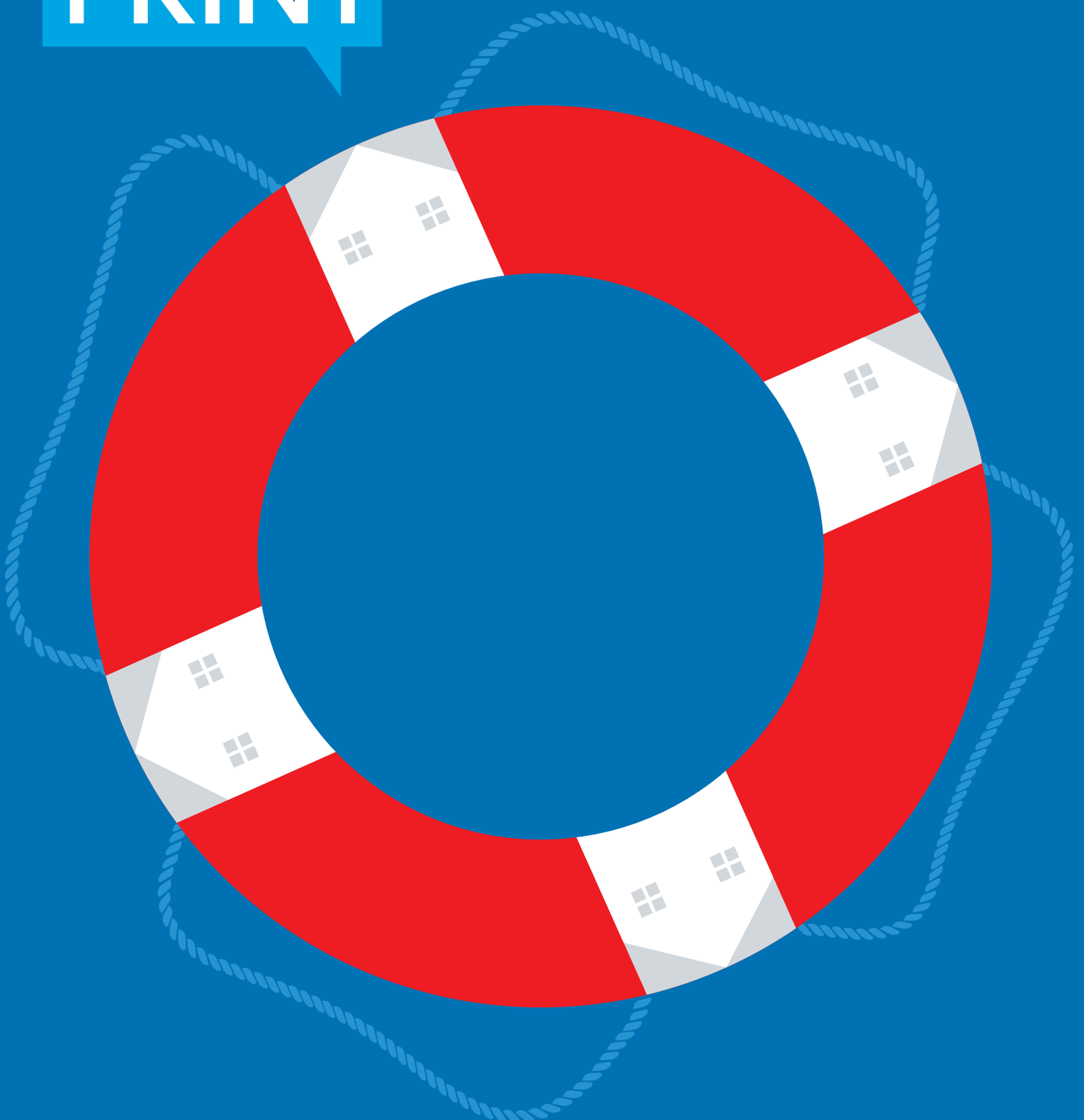


ISSUE #8 / FALL 2018
DESIGNS FOR A NEW CALIFORNIA
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
UCLA LUSKIN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

HOUSING AND THE HOMELESS

A CRISIS OF POLICY AND CONSCIENCE

EDITOR'S NOTE

BLUEPRINT
A magazine of research, policy, Los Angeles and California

SHELTER. Only food and water outrank shelter in terms of human needs. Shelter provides protection from the elements, stability, a place for family, a base for prosperity. And yet shelter is threatened across the world — and for diverse reasons.

In much of the world, homelessness is a result of poverty. Shantytowns provide bare cover for the poorest of the poor. And those poor remain poor forever, passing their deprivation to their children, enduring generations of suffering and more homelessness.

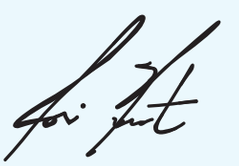
Los Angeles and California pose a different challenge in the search for shelter. Here, the threat is prosperity. Gentrification undermines the character of neighborhoods even as it offers a boon to property owners who have long lived in suddenly changing areas. Soaring home prices deliver wealth to those fortunate enough to have been able to purchase property in the past, but they also shut out the less fortunate who cannot join in this bonanza. How does the working class survive in a housing market that prohibits middle-income earners from acquiring a home?

These are the quandaries at the heart of this issue of Blueprint. Our articles examine shelter — housing — and the consequences of its loss: homelessness. Few misfortunes strike more gravely at the heart of what it is to be human. To have no place to live is to suffer on many levels. It complicates the search for employment and endangers the health and welfare of those so denied. It is dangerous to live in a tent or under a bridge. Those who do so fall ill and are often victims of crime.

These are not abstractions. Los Angeles is second only to New York in the number of people who live without a settled address. Some are what experts call the "chronically homeless," their situation complicated by addiction and mental health challenges. They pose one kind of need: For them, recovery requires a blend of treatment and housing services. Such services are in woefully short supply throughout the United States.

Others are without homes temporarily. Many have lost jobs and have been priced out of the housing market. Some live in cars and try to support their families by working at menial jobs. They earn just enough to live but not enough to afford a home. They represent a far different problem: For them, the answers are found in better employment and affordable housing — a model at odds with California's historic reliance on the single-family home.

For academics and policymakers, housing is not one concern but many. It needs to be considered in terms of both its global and local consequences. Homelessness stretches from Mumbai to Sao Paolo to Skid Row in Los Angeles. This issue of Blueprint attempts to comprehend that range and to suggest solutions, some of which may work in one place but not in another. Homelessness has a single theme, however: Every human being needs and deserves a place to live.



JIM NEWTON
Editor-in-chief

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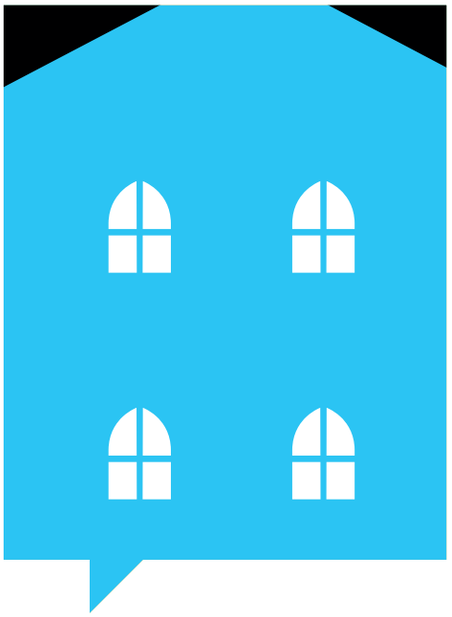

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LANDSCAPE

POT SHOPS GO MAINSTREAM

This is no sleazy pot shop. No jostling to stand in line. No buying a bag of weed that might be laced with mold and pesticides. Instead, it is an antiseptic, well-lit boutique, decked with sleek tables where iPads line up to explain and sell marijuana the way a sommelier would offer a bottle of Pinot Grigio. The store, one of two operated by MedMen in Venice, buzzes with customers chatting about edibles, vaporizer pens and dried cannabis flowers packaged in stylish wrapping like expensive perfumes.

But mainstreaming is still a pipe dream. Two years have passed since Californians voted to legalize the adult, recreational use of pot, and the sale of cannabis for pleasure has been legal for more than six months. It is impossible, however, to buy marijuana from a legal dispensary in most of the state. That is largely because, seven months into this year, 67% of the 482 municipalities and 58 counties in California had banned recreational pot businesses, according to Amanda Ostrowitz, founder of cannaregs.com, a website that tracks marijuana regulations. During that time, California issued only 413 licenses to sell cannabis, Alex Traverso, spokesman for the state Bureau of Cannabis Control, said in an email interview. One reason, he said, is that licenses are granted only to applicants with local permits.

Credit — or blame — groups like Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM), one of the nation's leading anti-legalization organizations. "We've learned that even if one votes for statewide legalization, they [voters] often do not want pot shops in their neighborhoods," Kevin Sabet, president of SAM, said, also in an email interview. "SAM has an experienced grassroots team in California that is working with communities across the state to support local bans and restrictions. We have put together model text for bans and worked with towns and unincorporated areas to draft and implement their proposals."

Anti-pot groups stretch from Northern to Southern California. The International Faith Based Coalition, Take Back America, Citizens Against Legalizing Marijuana (CALM) and Stop Pot, are based in the north. To the south are San Diego's Prevention Coalition and the North Coastal Prevention Coalition, to name only a few. They are opposed by pro-pot organizations, including the Association of Cannabis Professionals, United Cannabis Business Alliance, Southern California Coalition and Canna Advisors, which try to persuade local and county jurisdictions to allow legal dispensaries. Some groups publicize officeholder positions on pot; others endorse candidates in local, state and federal elections.

They are at cross-purposes, but there is common ground. In addition to opposing legalized marijuana, anti-pot groups want to wipe out unregulated, black-market shops. So do pro-pot groups. "It is counterintuitive, but at the core, we are saying the same thing," said Dallin Young, executive director of the San Diego-based Association of Cannabis Professionals.

PHOTO BY **THOUGHT CATALOG** ON **UNSPLASH**

"We want to get rid of the black market, and we want to make it more difficult for teens to get access to pot. We are fighting for regulations. ... We don't want it to be unregulated."

The black market "is thriving at the moment," said Pamela Epstein, chief executive of Green Wise Consulting, which helps marijuana businesses get licenses and permits. Illegal operators cost legal businesses money. Outlaw marijuana is cheaper, not least because it is free of the 15% state excise tax, plus local sales taxes, which, for places like Culver City, are set at 10%. Moreover, legal dispensaries must absorb the cost of local permits, application fees and the pricy state licensing, Epstein said. She calls it unfair competition.

Kenny Morrison, president of the California Cannabis Manufacturers Association, said he has paid $25,000 in application fees alone for two state licenses to make marijuana products. In total, he said, he would end up paying $500,000 to obtain the licenses.

In addition, legal marijuana businesses had to have their products tested, starting on July 1, for pesticide and mold. At first, too few laboratories were licensed to do the work. This created a bottleneck and forced a fire sale of untested pot. What couldn't be sold by the deadline had to be trashed. Licensed dealers, Epstein said, "cannot sell non-compliant product."

"The cost of being compliant with the law is very high," she said. "Operators are encouraged to report any black-market businesses."

A close look at local jurisdictions shows how difficult it can be to buy legal marijuana in the Golden State.

As of mid-year, Los Angeles County had banned all commercial cannabis activity in unincorporated areas. Orange County had banned pot businesses everywhere but in the city of Santa Ana. Placer County, in Northern California, had banned all marijuana businesses. To the far south, the city of San Diego had only 14 regulated adult-use recreational and medical marijuana retailers. The city of La Mesa had issued one medical marijuana license, but as of July, the business owner had not yet opened. Lemon Grove allowed medical marijuana dispensaries after a 2016 voter initiative, Young, the Association of Cannabis Professionals executive director, said — but as of August, there were none.

In unincorporated San Diego County, population 3 million, only four medical marijuana businesses had conditional-use permits, and because of a change on the Board of Supervisors, the permits cannot be renewed, Young said. Three seats on the board will open in 2020, he said, creating an opportunity to shift the county to a more pro-cannabis stance. "This is the first year," he said, "that I think people in the industry are realizing you need to get involved in politics."

Distance from legally available pot creates opportunities for black-market operators. "If there are only 10 regulated dispensaries in the East Bay, and I live 45 minutes from one of them, I'm going to call... my unregulated delivery service" Hezekiah Allen, executive director of the California Growers Association, was quoted by Business Insider as saying.

"Like I have for the past five years."

It is difficult to tally illegal pot shops in California.

"The illicit market outnumbers us by 5-to-1," Morrison, the California Cannabis Manufacturers president, told Bloomberg News. "You can go to a random city and find four legal stores to 20 illegal stores. What's worse is those four legal stores are charging two and three times the price of the illegal stores."

The Bureau of Cannabis Control counts more than 2,300 cease-and-desist letters it has written to black-market operators ordering them to close down, said Traverso, the agency spokesman. But they are not always compliant. "We are currently exploring our next steps against some of the outstanding illegal operators," he said, adding that the bureau plans to begin working with local jurisdictions to build cases.

Those local agencies include the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office, which had filed 86 cases by July 19 against 351 defendants based upon investigations into black-market activity.

Charges can include owning or operating an unlicensed retail pot shop; participating as an employee, contractor, agent or volunteer in unlicensed activity; and leasing, renting or allowing an unlicensed commercial cannabis business to operate on one's property, said Frank Mateljan, deputy director of the city attorney's community engagement and outreach.

Most of the charges, Mateljan said, carry a possible sentence of up to six months in jail and a fine of as much as $1,000.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department raids about five cannabis dispensaries a week, said Lt. Frank Montez, head of its narcotics task force. As of August, he said, the task force had documented 80 illegal cannabis businesses in the county. Montez said he was sure there were many more.

After being investigated, customers caught in a raid are released, Montez said, "unless there is a warrant out for their arrest, they have a stolen gun, or have racked up additional charges.

"It is like a speeding ticket. They promise to appear in court."

By July 11, the Los Angeles Police Department had served 81 search warrants related to cannabis activity, said Capt. Stacy Spell, head of the LAPD Narcotics Division. They included warrants for investigations into reports of cultivating and growing marijuana. Because Los Angeles has an estimated 300 to 600 illegal cannabis retailers, Spell said, the LAPD is only scratching the surface.

"But it is important to know that the department only deals with areas where our primary focus is significant criminal activity," he said. "We have limited resources, so we only deal with the worst places that generate the most complaints, or there are other crimes associated with the location, like shootings, robberies, or it could be a gang location."

Black-market operators can be jailed for up to 180 days, Spell said, or fined as much as $1,000 by the city — and $500 by the state.

"Illegal operators often open right back up after we have shut them down," he said. "There are no teeth in the laws, and the penalties are so light — and there is a lot of incentive to make a lot of money. So it is like playing whack-a-mole when we shut them down. They open right back up because they are easily doing between $20,000 and $40,000 a day in business."

Spell said the LAPD is most effective when its pot investigations are conducted in collaboration with other agencies, including the Fire Department, the Department of Building and Safety and the Department of Food and Agriculture. "We have found that if we go in as a team approach, it is a force multiplier, and we are more successful in shutting these places down."

Closing down black-market operators and lifting bans in local jurisdictions can't come soon enough for the legal cannabis industry. Licensed pot shops can operate lawfully in California, but they are still shut out of most of it.

– Kathleen Kelleher

40 YEARS LATER: HOW HAS PROPOSITION 13 FARED?

Jan Dennis well remembers the panic spreading among her neighbors in the months before California voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 13, the landmark property-tax-slashing initiative, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.

"People were having to move," said Dennis, a Manhattan Beach historian and author who has lived in her ocean-view house since 1972. "They owned their homes but they couldn't pay the property taxes, so they had to sell."

Rising property values had been triggering notices of higher assessments that rendered homeowners afraid to look in their mailboxes. Frustration mounted when the Legislature failed to address the issue. There was even an attempt to create a new South Bay county that would offer kinder tax treatment, although it was rejected.

Finally, on June 6, 1978, voters across the state endorsed Proposition 13 by almost 2-to-1 (though not quite, as former Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa discusses elsewhere in this issue — *Ed.*). It rolled back property tax rates, which the Legislative Analyst's Office said were averaging 2.67 percent of assessed valuation. The rates dropped to 1 percent of a home's value (based since then on selling price). The initiative restricted future increases to 2 percent a year, depending upon inflation.

No one can say exactly how many Californians would have been pushed out of their properties without Proposition 13. Still, large numbers of homeowners, especially among the elderly and those on fixed incomes, have credited the initiative with saving their homes.

But it sent shock waves through local governments and school districts, which suffered a roughly 60 percent drop in property tax revenue — their main source of income. Municipal services were eliminated. Libraries closed. Class sizes increased. City and school officials scrambled to find new ways to raise money.

Nonetheless, 40 years later, Proposition 13 remains popular with California voters and has become a model for residents in other states battling high property taxation.

"The No. 1 priority and goal was to allow people to stay in their homes," said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, named after the man who spearheaded California's taxpayers revolt, which became Proposition 13. "That has to be judged a success. It made property taxes more stable and predictable."

Coupal acknowledges, however, that the initiative has been less successful in meeting a secondary goal: holding down the cost of government.

Cities, craving sales tax revenue to replace property taxes, began competing to lure auto dealerships, shopping malls and big-box stores. They levied user fees for services and required developers to provide parks and streets. In hot housing markets, some builders tacked those costs onto the prices of their homes and apartments.

As a result, the cost of some local government services has grown and has shifted from the shoulders of property owners to broader groups of consumers — auto purchasers, builders, new home buyers and restaurant-goers, to name a few.

"We did see some evidence that, in the presence of Proposition 13, cities appear to be more likely to use fees ... that fall disproportionately on the purchasers of newer homes," said Brian Uhler, deputy legislative analyst for state and local finance in the Legislative Analyst's Office.

Uhler and analyst Carolyn Chu wrote a comprehensive report in 2016 titled "Common Claims About Proposition 13." Among their findings:

- Wealthier people generally have received the greatest tax benefit from Proposition 13, because they tend to own higher-value properties and sometimes multiple properties.
- Before Proposition 13, property taxes comprised more than 90 percent of local tax revenue; today that share is less than two-thirds.
- Despite the lure of increased sales-tax revenue, researchers found little evidence that cities changed zoning and permitting decisions to favor retail development over housing.
- Property turnover has declined: 16 percent of properties were sold in 1977-78, but only 5 percent in 2014-15. This likely has been caused by several factors, including Proposition 13.
- Proposition 13 might have increased home ownership for some older Californians while decreasing it for younger residents. It is unclear whether renters have gained.

Mary Sloane, a human resources director, said her family benefited from Proposition 13 in two ways. It allowed her to keep an older, cheaper property tax base when she inherited her mother's Manhattan Beach house, and her daughter has been able to live in a Signal Hill condo once owned by Sloane's late father.

The Manhattan Beach home, which Sloane's mother bought in 1973 for $80,000, was appraised at $424,000 upon her death in 1993. Sloane estimates it is worth more than $2 million today.

"I would not have been able to live here without the 'grandfathered' property taxes," Sloane said. "Because of Proposition 13, I could graduate from Mira Costa High School [and] raise my kids here. There is no way I could have afforded that without it."

Proposition 13's popularity has made it unlikely that voters would agree to major changes weakening its protections in the foreseeable future, experts agree. Periodically, efforts are made to tax commercial property at higher rates, but they face tough odds.

A measure on the ballot this coming November, called Proposition 5, would strengthen the protections of Proposition 13 by making it easier for those older than 55 and the disabled to keep their former tax base when they sell a home and buy another.

Dennis, the Manhattan Beach historian, said she would support measures to strengthen or preserve Proposition 13 but would fight hard against any move she feels would undermine it. As a longtime civic activist and a member of the City Council during the 1980s, she said she has struggled through layoffs and service cuts blamed on Proposition 13.

Nonetheless, she said, "It was so worth it."

– Jean Merl

NEW SHOOTINGS REVIVE A TROUBLED HISTORY

Largely because of the effectiveness of its fabled SWAT team, the Los Angeles Police Department rarely kills a hostage or an onlooker, even in confrontations with armed and often disturbed suspects.

But Michel Moore, the department's new chief, had barely settled into his job this summer when his officers shot not one but two bystanders in separate incidents. On June 16, a man held a knife to the throat of a homeless woman in Van Nuys; officers fired, killing both the assailant and the woman. Then, on July 21, a suspect, allegedly fleeing a shooting, led police on a car chase and careened into a utility pole at a Trader Joe's market in Silver Lake; officers exchanged fire with the suspect, killing a store manager.

This tragic pair of events raised concerns about the department, which once was considered a dangerously violent and sometimes racist agency. It is impossible, of course, to judge an organization as large and complex as the LAPD by such a small number of incidents, but I have reported on and written about the department over the years, and I would offer two thoughts.

One concerns intent.

What makes the LAPD's history so tarnished have been allegations that some of its officers not only have done harm but that they did it on purpose — that officers in the Rampart Division in the late 1990s, for instance, who robbed a bank and reportedly stole drugs and threatened suspects, did so to enrich themselves and to brutalize the suspects; there was nothing said to have been accidental about it.

Similarly, among the most shocking aspects of the Rodney G. King beating in 1991 was not only that officers repeatedly struck and kicked King, who had led them on a chase after refusing to be pulled over for speeding, but also that so many other officers watched and did not report any wrongdoing. That suggested a broken police culture, not just some wayward cops.

Second is the question of official response.

In the King case, then-Chief Daryl F. Gates at first criticized the officers, who had been caught on videotape. But when the LAPD fell under sharp criticism, he defended the department. That sent mixed signals, and Gates, who was combative (he once challenged me to a fistfight), struggled to toe a straight and consistent line. Mayor Tom Bradley, frustrated and hamstrung by civil service rules that limited his ability to discipline Gates, convened the Christopher Commission, named for its chairman, attorney Warren Christopher, who would become secretary of state under President Bill Clinton. It was the Christopher Commission that finally showed Los Angeles how to repair its police department.

When details of the Rampart scandal were reported, the city's leadership waffled between pursuing the wrongdoers and arguing that the outrage was isolated and unique. The U.S. Justice Department bore down, insisting that Rampart was part of a larger LAPD failing and that only federal oversight could fix it. The oversight became a major part of the LAPD's recovery, but the city's confused response early on was evidence of deep trouble at the department and with the city leadership.

This time, Chief Moore has sent encouraging signals. He released bodycam and other video and audio recordings that captured the moments leading up to this summer's two shootings. Some critics suggested the release was self-serving because it showed the stressful situations the officers faced and helped explain their actions. But that's beside the point. Of course, videos of officers shooting bystanders will demonstrate that the officers were under pressure. No officer wakes up in the morning hoping to shoot a bystander. Such shootings are rare precisely because they are the last thing any police officer wants to be involved in.

In addition, the LAPD made public the names of the officers involved in these incidents, albeit quietly and seemingly with some reluctance. Releasing names is a good practice. For a while, the department had been pulling back from the timely and routine release of officers' names, an unfortunate departure that did little for officer safety and much to undermine public confidence. Moore's actions do not suggest an enthusiastic embrace of such releases, but at least the department did what was necessary.

There is a tendency police accountability for participants to debate in clichés. Police unions defend "officer safety." Reformers and news reporters demand "transparency." As this summer's shootings demonstrate, there is room for both. Officers deserve respect and empathy for the dangerous situations they confront, and the public is entitled to insight into their actions — including their names and evidence that shows why they did what they did. Moore's first brush with those challenges as chief suggests reason for hope.

– Jim Newton

PHOTO BY **DAVID SPRAGUE**

A NEW LOOK AT HOMELESSNESS

Taking a Long View of an Urgent Crisis

PROFESSOR EVELYN BLUMENBERG sat in her UCLA office explaining her well-researched and unconventional thoughts on homelessness. Having spent my life in the conventional world of journalism, I was especially interested in what she had to say.

Like most journalists, I tend to accept the establishment solution to homelessness offered by most elected officials and government and nonprofit experts. They focus on providing low-cost housing, counseling, job training and health care for the homeless. Journalists, being results-oriented, tend to like the quick fix. We also like numbers, reporting the count of homeless people every year and gauging progress by whether the numbers go up or down.

Blumenberg, director of UCLA's Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, and some of her academic colleagues understand the need for housing. But they go deeper, with solutions that are longer-range. Breaking with conventional wisdom, they talk about cars in addition to housing.

WRITTEN BY
BILL BOYARSKY

They see the cause of homelessness as income inequality — the difference between the poor and the more affluent. It is becoming all but permanent because of the inability of impoverished Americans to earn money. They can't do that without transportation — a motor vehicle or public transit if it is available — to reach one or two jobs that will permit them to rent a place and begin the climb out of poverty.

"The increasing costs of housing, and rent in particular, and the fact that there has been next to no change in median income, earnings, that's just a perfect storm for households that causes many of them to end up on the street," Blumenberg said.

That's an argument that takes some getting used to. Reducing income inequality may get at the roots of homelessness, but it will take time. Meanwhile, the problem is as immediate as the homeless encampments on the streets of Skid Row or just a few miles from UCLA. "Some really smart people have tackled that subject [income inequality]," I said. "Like Karl Marx. He was a pretty smart fellow but he didn't solve it."

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That was a sample of the exchange we had in July about homelessness. It began over the kitchen table of the West Los Angeles home Blumenberg shares with her husband, Professor Brian Taylor, director of UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies. They have two daughters, 24 and 21. I had more questions so our talk resumed a week later at her office at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

> ***"HAVING A CAR, IF YOU ARE A LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLD, IMPROVES YOUR ECONOMIC OUTLOOK. HAVING ACCESS TO A CAR MAKES IT MORE LIKELY YOU WILL HAVE A JOB, MAKES IT MORE LIKELY YOU CAN LIVE IN A BETTER QUALITY NEIGHBORHOOD WITH LOWER CRIME RATES, LOWER POVERTY RATES."***
> *— Evelyn Blumenberg*

Blumenberg started out as a progressive political organizer. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in political science, she became an organizer in the 1980s for Neighbor to Neighbor, a grassroots group campaigning to elect senators and House members who opposed aid to the Contras, the right wingers backed by the Reagan administration in Nicaragua.

She worked with two legendary community organizers. One was Fred Ross, an associate of Cesar Chavez, founder of the farmworkers union. The other was Ross' son, Fred Jr.

"Those organizers had a huge influence on my life," Blumenberg told me. "That coupled with being a kid of Holocaust survivors. That gave me the motivation. The other (working for Neighbor to Neighbor) gave me the tools to work with. I feel very blessed to have worked with such a group of talented individuals."

She was dispatched to cities around the country, finding volunteers and teaching them how to run political campaigns." Fred senior had this whole way of using house meetings as building blocks. It was nuts and bolts, grassroots," she said.

"She was a gifted teacher and trainer," said Fred Ross Jr. "Not everyone can do that. She was a passionate progressive. She wanted to go out and change the world and was looking for ways of doing it seven days a week, picking up, going to other states.

"She stayed overnight in people's houses; sleeping on couches, always ready to take off for another state at short notice. She had a natural warmth and curiosity about people," said Ross. "She won people over. People liked to work with her. She had an infectious sense of humor and was really fun to be around. She knew how to make the world fun."

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Blumenberg returned to school and earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in urban planning from UCLA. Her specialty is examining how access to transportation, including auto ownership, affects the poor. In 2014, she was named a White House Champion of Change for her research. It's research that is counter to views of city planners who'd like to sideline the gas guzzlers.

"Let me talk about the car," she said. "The research is conclusive, by a whole bunch of scholars, including what I have done, that having a car, if you are a low-income household, improves your economic outlook. Having access to a car makes it more likely you will have a job, makes it more likely you can live in a better quality neighborhood with lower crime rates, lower poverty rates."

She conceded that it was a "hard sell" to convince some of her urban planning colleagues who favor a combination of more mass transit and affordable housing built around transit lines. Their idea is to supplement public transit with ride sharing, Uber, Lyft, bicycles, motorized scooters and — as foreign as the idea is to the Southland — feet.

"How do you get a car if you don't have any money?" I asked.

"What's no money?" she asked. "There are some pretty cheap cars around. You're not buying a Tesla."

No, but even a battered old Ford may be beyond the means of poor people. Would government subsidize such car purchases? Where would the money come from? How could an equally poor friend or relative help pay?

I wondered how her students, after graduation, confront these issues and weigh short-term fixes against long-term solutions.

Blumenberg replied, "I think we have to be moving both for longer-term change and immediate change. People are struggling now. They're not going to wait 10 years to get reasonable health or find a job. Their lives are being destroyed as a consequence."

She said, "There are multiple causes of homelessness. There are individuals who are rightfully discussing the lack of affordable housing as one of the causes. At the same time, the cost of rent goes up; the median income does not go up. We need to think of what is going on in the income side, increasing the supply of affordable housing and finding ways of increasing household incomes so they can afford those rents."

"When you get a job and a car, your life changes?" I asked.

PHOTO BY **DAVIDSON LUNA** ON **UNSPLASH**

FOR MANY WHO ARE WITHOUT A HOME, THE LACK OF A CAR CAN COMPOUND THE STRUGGLE FOR A NORMAL LIFE.

"You have income," she said. "It means access to everything, including finding a place to live. Think what it gives you having some reliable form of transportation, being able to go to the store, being able to go to the doctor.

"Being able to find a job and travel to that job regularly," she added. "It's not just finding the job, you've got to be there whatever your schedule is, you've got to regularly travel to that job. For women, in particular, they have to balance taking care of the kids and maintain the job. All those things are essential." So is "juggling multiple jobs so your earning stream is higher."

I thought of the women and men who stock shelves at the market at night and go to another job during the day. And if it's a parent, she has to stop home, feed the kids, take them to school and then go to the day job and in the evening back to her night duties. Without a car, that's extremely difficult.

"At night," Blumenberg said, "if you are female, you are not likely to be hanging out at a bus stop in your neighborhood waiting for a bus to show up."

These are not just theoretical questions for Blumenberg. She takes them into the classroom. "I teach a class on transportation and poverty," she said. "The students are social justice-minded. They tend to be interested in equity issues."

I asked what the Lewis Center, Luskin and the entire university contribute beyond theoretical solutions, in policies that will help the rest of Los Angeles.

"The bread and butter of the university is research," she said. "That's what we do at UCLA. We do research. I think that is essential to broad policymaking. Students get frustrated because there is research and intervention. The students are intervention-oriented."

"And journalists are intervention-oriented, too," I said.

"Exactly," she replied. "So there is always the challenge of taking these scholarly ideas and translating them into particular strategies. The lawmakers can figure out what the nuts and bolts are."

That made sense. Blumenberg is sending her students out into neighborhoods miles from UCLA. There they interview people, take surveys and observe. They study whether the new rail lines will bring many people close to their jobs. They learn about gentrification — how the big new apartments in Chinatown and the Sawtelle Japanese American neighborhoods are pricing housing out of reach for all but the affluent. Then they write up their findings to meet the rigorous UCLA graduate school standards.

From there they will head to jobs in city halls, foundations, Sacramento, Washington and other places where politicians deal with the nuts and bolts of fixing these problems. With luck, the graduates will provide a fresh approach to a debate badly in need of new ideas. ◤

HOW MANY ARE HOMELESS?

The problem of homelessness is national — international, in fact — but four of the nation's most afflicted metropolitan areas are in California.

01 **New York:** **76,501**

02 **Los Angeles City and County:** **55,188**

03 **Seattle/King County:** **11,643**

04 **San Diego City and County:** **9,160**

05 **District of Columbia:** **7,473**

06 **San Jose/Santa Clara City and County:** **7,394**

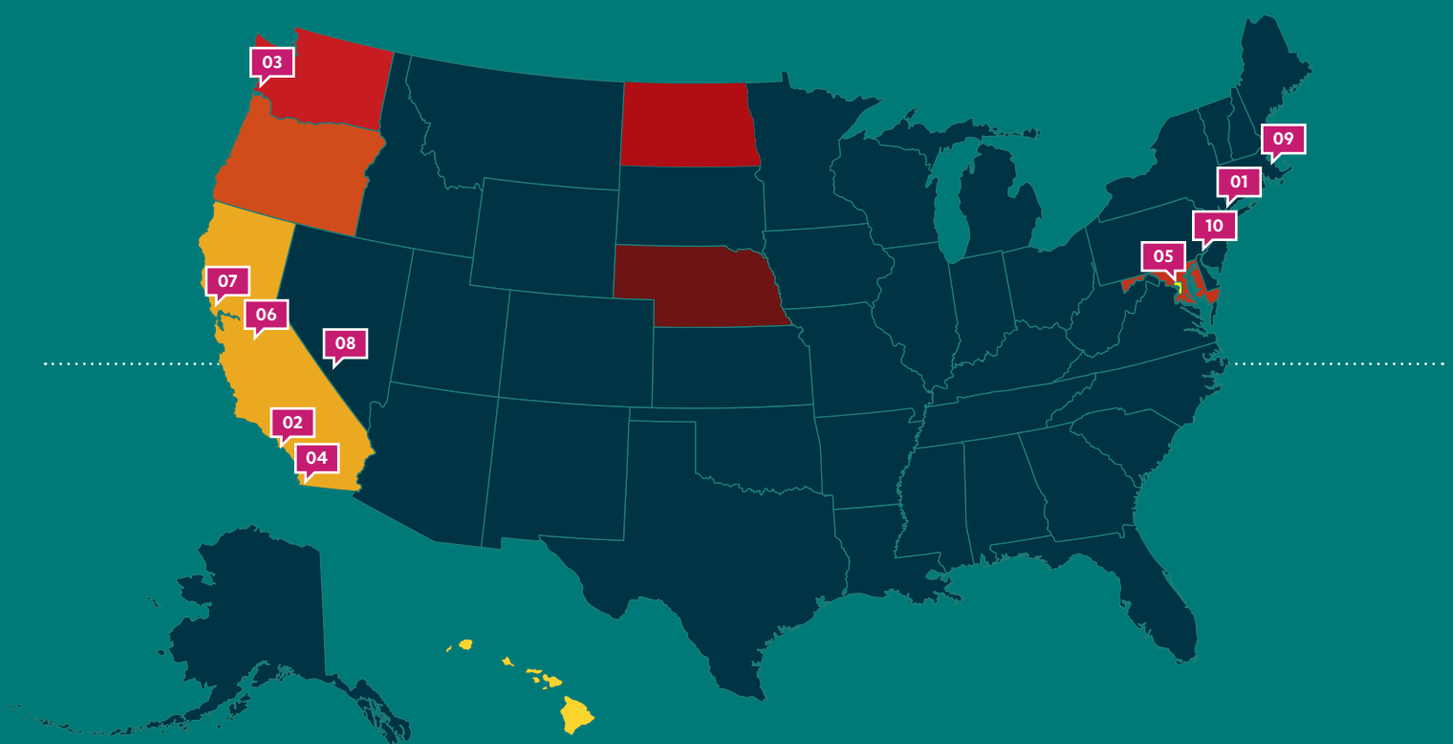
07 **San Francisco:** **6,858**

08 **Las Vegas/Clark County:** **6,490**

09 **Boston:** **6,135**

10 **Philadelphia:** **5,693**

Source: https://www.statista.com/chart/6949/the-us-cities-with-the-most-homeless-people/

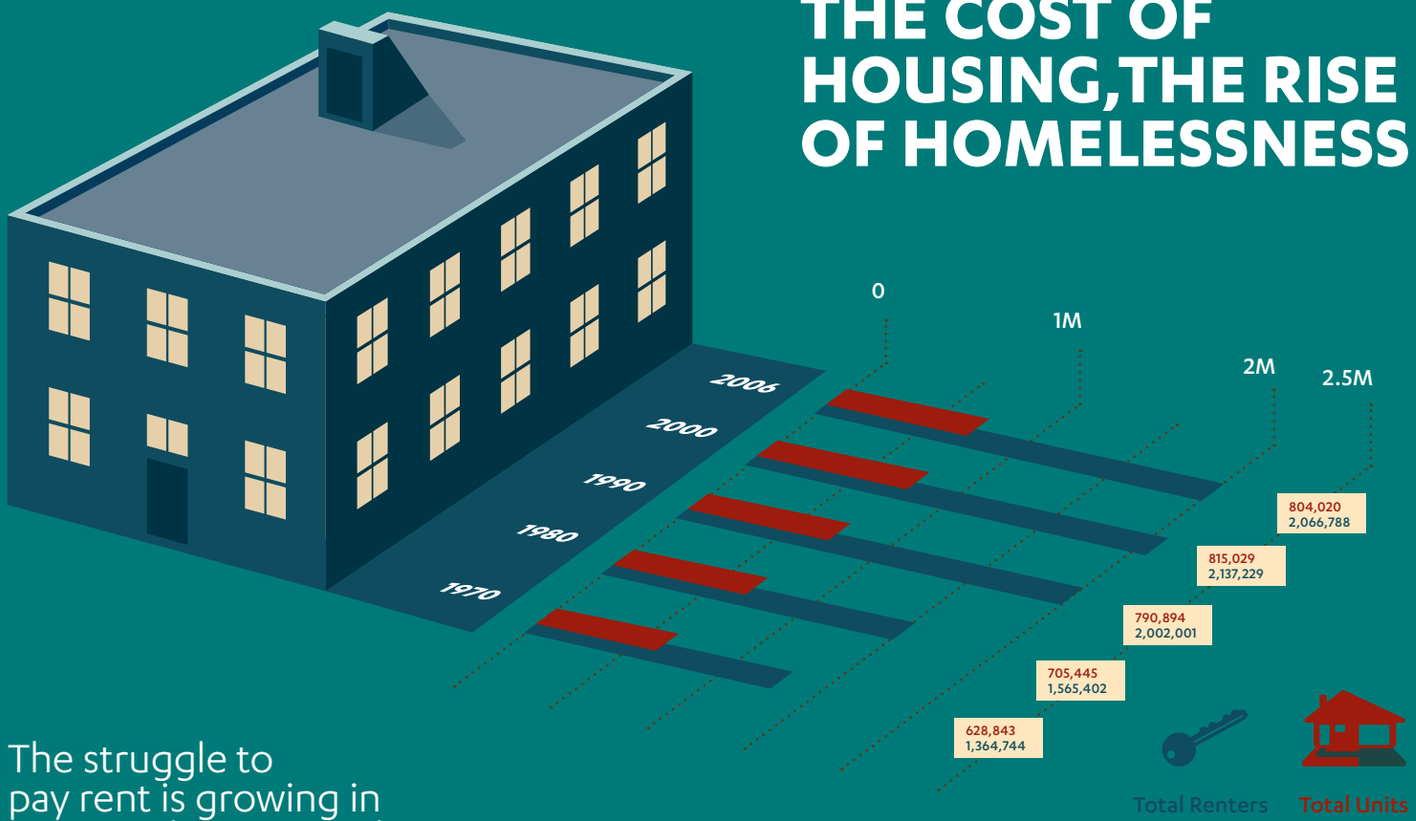


HOW MUCH IS LAND WORTH?

District of Columbia: $729,227
Hawai'i: $742,015
California: $408,760
Oregon: $230,936
Maryland: $189,973
Washington: $198,481
North Dakota: $85,221
Nebraska: $26,407

Note: These are not ranked but cited as examples. All prices are for 2016, and reflect the value of land in a home at the median price for each area.
Source: California Legislative Analyst

THE COST OF HOUSING, THE RISE OF HOMELESSNESS



The struggle to pay rent is growing in Los Angeles, as units become more scarce.

The gap between the population of Los Angeles and available rental units has grown in recent decades.

Source: "'People Are Simply Unable to Pay the Rent': What History Tells Us About Rent Control in Los Angeles" Note: Information for this graphic comes from the L.A. Economic Roundtable

WHAT DO HOUSES COST?

Source: California Assn. of Realtors
Note: All prices are median home sales for July 2018. For more detail on California prices, see this issue's Map feature.

RECONSIDERING THE SINGLE-FAMILY HOME

WRITTEN BY
JON THURBER

THE WESTWOOD/RANCHO PARK METRO STATION in West Los Angeles is nestled snugly in a development of single-family homes that dates from the 1950s. The location is something of a head scratcher. On a recent Friday morning, only a few people exited the westbound train, and not very many boarded the next train going east. The only high-rises in sight housed commercial offices along Pico Boulevard to the north. There was nothing to suggest multifamily residential opportunities.

Not long ago, UCLA professor Paavo Monkkonen stood at the Westwood/Rancho Park station talking to members of a production crew from NPR's podcast "Planet Money." He had asked them to meet him there because it offers an excellent example of one of the problems of urban planning in California: Despite a crisis in affordable housing, there seems to be little political will to change zoning laws to build multiresidential housing units. At the same time, it seems politically acceptable to build an expensive mass transit system with rail stations in areas with little mass to transport.

To Monkkonen, this speaks to the elephant in the room in public planning: the single-family home. That bias is particularly noticeable in Los Angeles, where 75% of the residential land area is zoned for low-density, single-family houses and stems from a time when the ideal of a good family, household and neighborhood was, in many ways, exclusionary.

The impact is profound and far-reaching. Single-family zoning covers half the population of the city. Zoning restrictions in Westside communities have a trickle-down effect in Boyle Heights. The lack of new or affordable housing keeps residents from moving up the economic ladder. Twenty-five years ago, those with the financial means might move from areas where they were renting or perhaps where they owned in comparatively modest surroundings to higher-end areas near better schools, transportation or the beach. That kind of urban/suburban migration in the Los Angeles Basin is less common now as housing supplies have shrunk and the cost of existing homes has become prohibitive. So residents stay in what were once euphemistically called "starter communities" instead of moving to other parts of the city and making way for new families.

Has It Outlived Its Usefulness?

Monkkonen is an associate professor of urban planning and public policy at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and vice chair of the Department of Urban Planning. He researches the ways policies and markets shape urban development and social segregation not only in California but in cities around the world. He says that he has been increasingly vocal about local planning issues related to housing — not only in op-eds about funding affordable housing but in writing letters to officials about state bills and local plans and ordinances. In a November 2016 research paper, "Understanding and Challenging the Opposition to Housing Construction in California's Urban Areas," he offers reasons for and some modest ways to mitigate the affordable housing crisis. Another paper, co-authored with UCLA professor Michael C. Lens, on whether strict land use regulations increase income segregation in metropolitan areas, was published in the December 2015 issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association. Their findings were included in the White House's "Housing Development Toolkit" as part of an effort by the Obama administration to address the issue of housing supply in major metropolitan markets.

Opposition to zoning changes in areas developed for single-family homes can be based on factors including an historic desire for sprawling, horizontal homes on large parcels of land and concerns about traffic, noise and pollution. To a degree, the opposition also can be mounted in support of economic segregation that keeps those with lesser means out of the community. Add to that a somewhat irrational disregard for land developers and a knee-jerk reaction that equates multifamily residences to high-rise, glass and steel buildings, and you have a formula that generally maintains the status quo. Single-family homeowners are, as Monkkonen has noted, something of a cartel because their interests — centered around increasing the price of their homes on the market — hold sway with elected officials. Generally speaking, single-family homeowners have the time and money to fight efforts to change zoning laws. Homeowners are more active than renters on election day and more active in neighborhood councils and representative boards.

But single-family zoning and high home prices may also hurt the regional economy by limiting population growth, which can influence the job market by discouraging highly skilled workers from coming and cause companies to leave. Those costs, Monkkonen notes, were among the reasons for Toyota's decision to move from Torrance to Texas in 2014.

Low-density zoning can also have a negative environmental impact. It forces cities to expand horizontally, which increases consumption of land and creates longer commutes, which in turn generate more greenhouse gases. Interestingly, environmental concerns are often used as a pretext in blocking developments for reasons that have little to do with the environment. The California Environmental Quality Act, Monkkonen writes, has been cited effectively to block or reduce the size of developments. One Los Angeles city planner, he says, has noticed that most of the lawsuits filed under this act have been in opposition to residential, not commercial, projects.

PHOTO BY DAVID SPRAGUE

PAAVO MONKKONEN HAS RAISED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ADEQUACY OF LOS ANGELES PLANNING AND ZONING RULES, BOTH THROUGH HIS RESEARCH AND IN OUTREACH TO ELECTED AND APPOINTED OFFICIALS.

CALIFORNIA'S AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS HAS A NUMBER OF CAUSES, including what Professor Paavo Monkkonen describes as a bias in favor of single-family homes and an absence of "financial carrots or sticks" in a state requirement that cities produce housing to meet regional need allocations. Among his recommendations are:

Enforce and enhance existing housing laws.

Modify the project approval process to include input from a wider cross-section of residents, including renters.

Encourage government agencies to proactively produce data and literature to assist growing efforts by pro-housing advocates to inform the public debate.

Monkkonen, 40, was born in Los Angeles, grew up in Culver City and went to UC Berkeley, where he studied classical civilizations as an undergraduate. After earning his bachelor's degree, he taught English in Mexico and then Spain before working for a time in San Francisco with a nonprofit group that helped people with developmental disabilities in public housing. He went on to get his master's in public policy at UCLA and his Ph.D. in city and regional planning at Berkeley. Before returning to UCLA to teach, he spent three years as an assistant professor of urban planning at the University of Hong Kong.

In an hourlong interview in his spare and tidy office on the fifth floor of the Luskin School, Monkkonen spoke quietly and thoughtfully about the social impacts of housing planning policy. He wore a polo shirt, jeans and sneakers. More than once the conversation turned to Culver City, where his family came to live from Minnesota in 1977 so his father could take a teaching position in the history department

at UCLA. His father would go on to be among the first faculty members in the Department of Public Policy. His mother, a former librarian at UCLA and then at an elementary school, still lives in the home where Monkkonen was raised. He and his wife, who works in the collection management department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, now live in Culver City (regrettably, also in a single-family home, he said), and their 6-year-old daughter goes to the same Spanish-immersion elementary school that he attended as a child.

Being back in the city of his youth, he said, has given him a close look at change and status quo in Southern California. Monkkonen said many of his former classmates from Culver City, while successful, can't afford to buy houses there. Many of their parents, however, are still in their old family homes. Some won't — or can't — leave because of the property tax hit that they might take under Proposition 13 by selling and moving into something more to scale for their current lives, such as a townhouse.

Much of the urban planning in the Los Angeles area, Monkkonen said, was done when the population was only about 5 million. Now, it is 18 million, but zoning, generally speaking, hasn't changed to reflect that reality. Although the state is in a housing crisis, he said, the policy changes needed to ease it would include some that have little public support, such as reforming the mortgage income deduction on federal taxes, the government's largest housing subsidy, which, he writes, "promotes the use of housing as an investment and in turn incentivizes homeowners to rationally oppose any changes that negatively impact the value of their homes."

Property taxes under Proposition 13 also shape land use policy by shielding homeowners from what Monkkonen describes as "the fiscal consequences of increased home values." In addition, he writes, the complex approval process for new construction "has become a central moment for land value recapture, and new construction is asked to shoulder the burden of funding infrastructure, affordable housing and other community benefits, while existing structures (and residents) face no such obligation. This has a restrictive impact on development, making projects with large profit margins the only ones feasible."

At the other end of the spectrum, he notes, rent control or rent stabilization laws, while shielding residents from current market prices for housing, may have the "unintended consequences of creating a constituency that is more concerned with tenant protections than widespread affordability."

In his view, land use issues are too important to be left entirely to cities, and it has become increasingly important for regional or state authorities to help regulate zoning. Currently, California requires cities to produce housing units to show they can meet regional housing need allocations, he said, but the requirement "carries no financial carrots or sticks for actual production of housing."

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When asked if any major cities in California are doing a good job with housing planning, Monkkonen was hard-pressed to name even one. He said Seattle, Portland, Oregon, and Minneapolis had recently made headway in creating multifamily housing.

The key in Los Angeles and other parts of California, he said, is educating the public about what changes in zoning laws actually mean and offering examples where zoning changes have enhanced neighborhoods. He said a four-story model of housing that he sees in other cities might be an answer, and he doesn't understand the antipathy toward such a solution.

"If you've traveled and lived in places where there are mid-rise density neighborhoods all over the world, they are often fabulous and look nice, and kids are playing there, and everything," he said. "They're socially just as great as any single-family neighborhood in L.A."

Monkkonen said he sees his generation as the one beginning the work to dismantle the legacy of single-family zoning and create a new mentality about cities for California. That would include changing the narrative in urban planning from one that simply keeps most of the city the way it has been to one that that is more inclusive and "would continuously adapt the built environment throughout the city for all its residents."

"IF YOU'VE TRAVELED AND LIVED IN PLACES WHERE THERE ARE MID-RISE DENSITY NEIGHBORHOODS ALL OVER THE WORLD, THEY ARE OFTEN FABULOUS AND LOOK NICE, AND KIDS ARE PLAYING THERE, AND EVERYTHING. THEY'RE SOCIALLY JUST AS GREAT AS ANY SINGLE-FAMILY NEIGHBORHOOD IN L.A."

— Paavo Monkkonen

World Lessons of Homelessness

WRITTEN BY
MOLLY SELVIN

FROM MUMBAI TO L.A.

ANGELENOS MIGHT BE DISMAYED TO KNOW IT. But Professor Vinit Mukhija will tell them: Mumbai, one of the poorest cities in the world, can teach them some things about improving life for L.A.'s tens of thousands of homeless people.

In Mumbai, India's biggest city, says Mukhija, chair of Urban Planning at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs, relatively fewer people sleep on the streets than in Los Angeles or New York.

There is more poverty, but both the lower middle class as well as millions of the poor, he said, inhabit the sort of large communities of unpermitted shelters or makeshift huts that characterize Rio de Janeiro's favelas and the slums of cities in other developing countries.

After years during which the number of people living on Los Angeles streets or in their cars has soared, city and county officials are now focused on building permanent housing for the homeless and providing the social services necessary to help them rebuild their lives. But those units will take years to complete. Meanwhile, Mukhija believes that local leaders can adopt several other measures, some of which he has studied in Mumbai and elsewhere, that would make life "more dignified" for those without shelter.

"Permanent housing cannot be the only solution," he said. "It's just one part of a range of solutions."

Mukhija, 50, joined the Luskin faculty in 2001 after training as an urban planner and architect at M.I.T., where he earned his Ph.D., and at the University of Texas, the University of Hong Kong and the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi. A native of India, where his father still lives, Mukhija was soft-spoken and relaxed during a recent interview in his Luskin office, a windowless but exquisitely tidy and serene refuge where the spines of all the books on his shelves align like soldiers in formation.

He described his broad interest as the "informal city" — how people find shelter and earn a living through unregulated economic activities. Think street vendors and people living in unpermitted converted garages. Mukhija's research projects have focused on slum upgrading and redevelopment in Mumbai, on unpermitted trailer parks in California and on garage conversions in L.A. as a form of affordable housing — what he calls "stealth density." In his teaching, he draws upon years of experience as an urban planner in China and the Middle East as well as India.

In Mumbai, he said, half the population lives in slum settlements or informal housing arrangements. Similarly, homeless encampments have sprung up in the Los Angeles area, under freeway overpasses, near abandoned buildings and along the Santa Ana River in Orange County. In both India and California, Mukhija said, these settlements serve the same basic human need for a stable place to sleep and eat. That's why, when police periodically clear these tent camps, responding to neighborhood complaints of drugs, crime and possible disease, people with no place else to go often return or set up new settlements nearby.

The shacks and lean-tos in Mumbai, Mukhija said, were originally built by people who simply "squatted" on vacant public or private land. The oldest settlements date from the 1940s. Some have been upgraded with electricity, water and sewer connections. Evictions are rare, and the upgrades speak to the fact that public officials by and large accept that these settlements respond to a need.

The goal for L.A. policy makers, Mukhija said, certainly should not be to re-create Indian slums. But officials should recognize, he said, that people without a permanent or even semi-permanent home, here as elsewhere, continue to search for some measure of stability — a place where they can return each night to eat and sleep and store their possessions.

To some extent, Angelenos realize this.

In recent years, city and county voters have approved more than $1.5 billion in sales tax and bond funds to build thousands of units of supportive housing and to hire outreach workers, mental health experts, anti-addiction specialists and other professionals to help the homeless. While more promises than action have characterized homeless policy, Mukhija and others detect a new sense of urgency. He attributes this resolve to the fact that a large number of unsheltered people have spread out beyond Skid Row to sidewalks and parks across the region, including in wealthy enclaves like Santa Monica and Beverly Hills.

> ***"PERMANENT HOUSING CANNOT BE THE ONLY SOLUTION."***
> *— Vinit Mukhija*

"THE GOOD THING ABOUT HOMELESSNESS BEING MORE DISPERSED IS THAT PEOPLE ARE PAYING MORE ATTENTION."

— Vinit Mukhija

"The good thing about homelessness being more dispersed," Mukhija said, "is that people are paying more attention."

Construction of additional housing is a key part of the response. But because, as Mukhija noted, housing is "expensive and time-consuming to build," local leaders are also turning to other more temporary forms of shelter and assistance. Many of these interim and often smaller solutions draw on research that he and others have published on the need for a variety of temporary shelter options and other services.

So-called "safe parking lots," for example, allow individuals and families living in cars, trucks or recreational vehicles — an estimated 25 percent of all homeless residents in L.A. County — to lawfully park overnight at locations, many with wash facilities and social workers on site. Safe Parking L.A., the nonprofit that negotiates use of the sites in Los Angeles and oversees their operation, models its program after successful efforts in Santa Barbara and San Diego. Founded in 2016, Safe Parking L.A. currently runs parking sites at a Mid-City church and at the Department of Veterans Affairs in West L.A. It plans to open more.

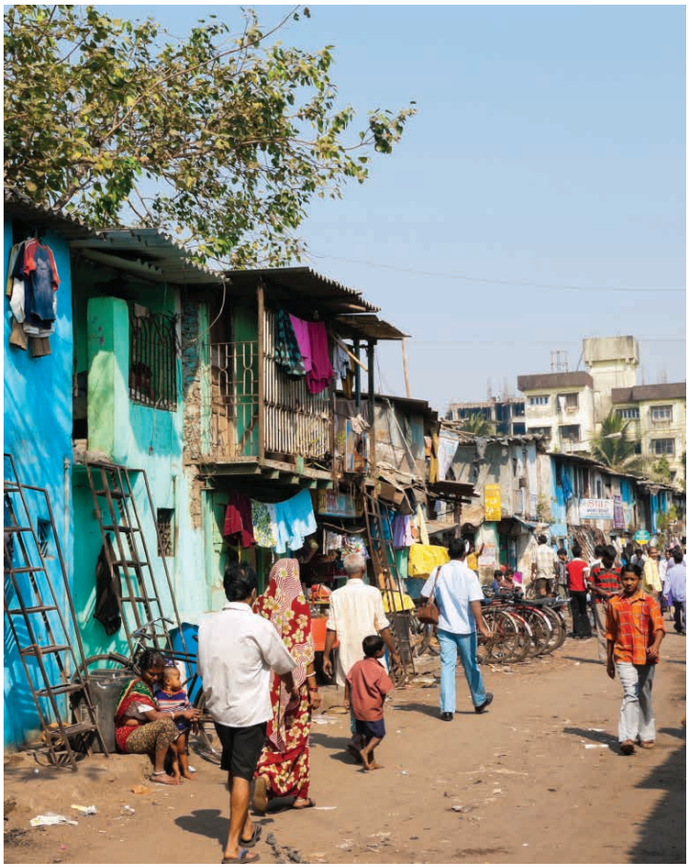
The program A Bridge to Home, also in Los Angeles, has a similar goal — to open emergency shelters in each council district across the city and temporarily house up to 1,500 people. The first shelter began operation in early September downtown; trailers installed on a former parking lot can now house as many as 45 homeless people. Mayor Eric Garcetti has made construction of these shelters a high priority and allocated $20 million to the initiative. However, efforts to create the first shelter outside of downtown, on Vermont Avenue in Koreatown, generated such fierce opposition from local residents that the City Council has recommended further study.

Mukhija would also like to see Los Angeles officials encourage construction of more accessory dwelling units (ADUs), so-called "granny flats." He estimates there are at least 50,000 unpermitted secondary units on single-family homes in the city. Officials have historically taken a dim view of these detached backyard structures and garage conversions, but Mukhija sees more ADUs as a way to increase the number of affordable rental units, especially in gentrifying urban neighborhoods.

State lawmakers agree and recently passed legislation making it harder for cities to block ADU construction in neighborhoods zoned for single-family homes. Senior city planner Patricia Diefenderfer and her colleagues at the Los Angeles Department of Planning are drafting a new zoning ordinance that would permit ADUs while remaining sensitive to needs and conditions in different neighborhoods, such as the topography in hillside areas.

ADUs are "a way of gently lacing in additional units in a way that doesn't materially change the nature and character of neighborhoods," Diefenderfer said. This is "not 'big a' affordable housing but 'little a' affordable" because these units cost less to build than larger, multifamily structures.

LA-Más, a Los Angeles nonprofit, wants to incentivize homeowners to build backyard dwellings. Working with L.A. County officials,



LEFT: MUMBAI, INDIA — THE SLUMS OF MUMBAI ARE HOME TO GRINDING POVERTY, AND MANY RESIDENTS ARE HOMELESS. THEY ENJOY SOME STABILITY, HOWEVER, IN CONTRAST TO THE TUMULT MANY HOMELESS PEOPLE IN LOS ANGELES EXPERIENCE.
BELOW: AS HOUSING BECOMES MORE EXPENSIVE IN CALIFORNIA, POLICY MAKERS AND BUILDERS ARE EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW MODELS, INCLUDING THIS BACKYARD STUDIO.

PHOTO COURTESY OF **COVER.BUILD**

the group is launching a pilot project that would provide three homeowners with financing and architectural assistance to build backyard ADUs. In exchange, the owners would commit to renting for five years to low-income tenants eligible for a Section 8 housing subsidy. Another backyard unit is already being built at a Highland Park home under an initiative supported by Garcetti's office.

LA-Más, where Mukhija is a board member, also has embarked on a series of smaller improvements to make urban life more welcoming and safer for pedestrians, including the homeless. LA-Más is installing brightly painted outdoor furniture and whimsical structures on an empty lot at Ivar and Selma in Hollywood, as well as along the sidewalk on a stretch of Reseda Boulevard. The colorful additions are meant to invite residents to sit and talk with homeless people and generate a sense of community, said Helen Leung, LA-Más' co-executive director. "Everyone," she said, "has the right to enjoy a public space."

Even small measures help the homeless, Mukhija believes. Students in one of his classes, called "The Informal City," explored how people access toilets in Westwood. The students interviewed passersby, including a homeless man. He said that he felt uncomfortable entering businesses like Starbucks to use a bathroom, because carrying his belongings identified him as a homeless person. If this man had a place to store his possessions, Mukhija said, he could use the toilet more easily.

Sending students off campus to observe the real city and interactions among its residents is a key part of Mukhija's teaching. That approach is part of what attracted Connor Johnson to Luskin for graduate work. He knew about Mukhija's research on informal economies and was "really excited" to study with him.

Even before his graduate work at UCLA, Johnson had founded Would Works, a nonprofit that trains the poor and homeless in basic woodworking. Would Works helps them set modest financial goals — for example, to pay for security-guard training, or to buy furniture for an apartment — and employs them at a downtown workshop to meet their goals. Through this process, the homeless learn skills, earn up to $600 toward their goals and gain a job reference. Would Works sells their handcrafted products.

Johnson believes this short-term goal setting and employment can "provide a bridge to larger goals," noting that many poor people are "stuck meeting short-term needs."

Johnson completed his graduate work in 2016 and is now a senior program manager with the Corporation for Supportive Housing, based in Minneapolis. He remains actively involved in Would Works. Like Mukhija, he is optimistic that new energy and thinking about poverty in Los Angeles will make a difference. "Because the problem is great," Johnson said, "the ability to solve it is also larger."

As Mukhija said, "Homelessness is not going anywhere, but we should see the numbers decline if we can provide these alternative options." ◤


HUELGA

NEW STRATEGIES FOR CHANGING COMMUNITIES

WRITTEN BY
RICHARD E. MEYER

IT GAVE HIM THE CHILLS. He was just Chris then, not Professor Zepeda-Millán, and he was still in grade school. On television, during a Martin Luther King anniversary, he saw King deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. Manacles of segregation, chains of discrimination, African Americans living on a lonely island of poverty, exiles in their own land... .

"I can't believe this happened to black people," Chris told his uncle John. "Well, similar stuff happened to us," his uncle said. He suggested that Chris watch *Chicano!*, a PBS documentary about the Mexican-American civil rights movement. Much of it focused on Boyle Heights, in East L.A., where Chris Zepeda-Millán had been born and was growing up. "What?" Chris said. "I can't believe this happened here. I didn't know this... . "

That was how it began.

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Zepeda-Millán is 37 now, an associate professor of public policy and Chicana/o studies at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs. His areas of expertise include Latino politics, immigration policy and social movements. His story begins at the home of his grandparents, immigrants from Mexico, whose hard work finally enabled them to buy the modest house where he was raised. On what they earned, even adjusted for inflation, purchasing that home would be impossible in L.A.'s current housing crisis.

Blame gentrification. Like his outrage at what he learned from "I Have a Dream" and "*Chicano!*," Zepeda-Millán's indignation at the injustice caused

PHOTO COURTESY OF **CHRIS ZEPEDA-MILLÁN**

LEFT: UNITED FARM WORKERS' CALL TO STRIKE. BELOW: THE MODERN CHICANO RIGHTS MOVEMENT IS CULTURAL AS WELL AS POLITICAL. PICTURED HERE MEMBERS OF THE BAND CHICANO BATMAN, CARLOS AREVALO, GABRIEL VILLA, BARDO MARTINEZ AND EDUARDO ARENAS.

PHOTO BY AL SEIB FOR LOS ANGELES TIMES. POSTER COURTESY OF OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

by gentrification is palpable — as is his refusal to abide injustices of any kind. His book, "Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Radicalization, and Activism," published last year by Cambridge University Press, documents a wave of protests by up to 5 million people across the United States in 2006 — perhaps the largest demonstration for immigrant rights ever. The protests contributed significantly to the defeat of intolerable anti-immigrant legislation in Congress.

Zepeda-Millán ends his book with a declaration of Latino strength. "We can say with confidence," he writes, " ... that people from Latin America will continue migrating, transforming and staking their rightful claim as part of the social, cultural, economic and political fabric of the United States. ... When met with xenophobic attacks, we can also expect Latinos (with and without papers) to fight back — on the streets and at the ballot box — in defense of their families and communities.

"No president, bill or wall — no matter how high — will stop us from doing so."

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A scholar engaged with public issues, Zepeda-Millán chose to be interviewed in public, first at a coffee shop in Echo Park, which proved to be too noisy; then at a table in the park, which grew too warm; and finally on some grass under a tree near Echo Park Lake. He wore his trademark flat cap and a black T-shirt emblazoned with "Huelga." Strike!

His parents, he said, separated when he was 2 years old, and he spent most of his time with his grandparents. They were sweatshop workers. "The house was full of sewing machines, because my grandmother and grandfather would come home, cook, and then start sewing again all night, and yet we were still poor," he said. "But I didn't know I was poor. It was an amazing neighborhood. Everybody knew everyone. There were, like, 10 other kids within two years of my age. Every day we'd go to school together, come out and play in the streets together." In the evenings, some of the men would listen to music and have a beer, while some of the women played Mexican bingo, called Loteria. "We kids played hide and seek — on the streets, behind people's houses, under cars, on rooftops. It was super fun.

"But in the '90s, everything started changing. There was a lot of gang activity. ... Boyle Heights was the capital of it. ... One of my cousins was part of one of the oldest gangs in Los Angeles — White Fence. ... He got shot in the back and paralyzed, and he spent his whole life in a wheelchair... .

"I saw shootings happen. ... Violence was normalized. It was not uncommon to say, like — 'Oh, did you hear that this person got shot?' It was just kind of like the juicy news that happened over the weekend."

One Sunday, Zepeda-Millán went to Mass with a friend, who joked around. Instead of money, he put a coupon into the collection basket. "We all thought it was funny, and I was, like, 'Oh, man, you're going to get punished by God.' Later on that night, I couldn't get into my block because it was all taped up, and I saw a body. It was covered in white, but I knew it was him because I saw his shoes. ...

"I knew gang members. I went to school with their little brothers, and some of them ended up being in gangs too. But I knew where to avoid, whom to avoid. I played sports. I honestly think that gang members were nice to me because of my cousin. ... She was, like — how can I say it? — the pretty girl that everybody liked. 'Hey, tell Vanessa I said hello.' 'Hey, Chris, tell Vanessa I said what's up.'"

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Zepeda-Millán attended Salesian High School in Boyle Heights. It was run by Salesians, an order of Catholic priests. "We had tons of gang members from rival gangs," he said. "It was the one school where they were all forced to come together. Surprisingly, we ended up creating a brotherhood. If there was going to be a drive-by, they'd tell each other, 'Hey, man, don't go to that park tonight.' All these guys are still my best friends. A couple of us went to college. Ninety percent didn't. Some of us are leftist activists, some are cops. We're brothers still, no matter what. We're on the opposite sides of things, but it helps me, because I get to hear their perspectives, and they're open to hearing some of my ideas, too."

The Salesians opened their doors early. "They gave us basketballs and things to do from 7 o'clock in the morning to 9 or 10 o'clock at night," Zepeda-Millán said. "They'd turn on the lights in the gym for us. Some kids didn't want to go home. There were problems [at home]. And guess what? The option is to join a gang, hang out on the street, do drugs. But if you have a fun place to be, that makes a huge difference."

Educational resources were minimal, he said. "Now [Salesian High] offers a much better academic education, [but back then] classes were underfunded and overcrowded. ... You had immigrant kids, undocumented kids and kids that had been kicked out of public schools. ... I was a C or D student. ... I graduated reading at an eighth-grade level. ... [Later on] I literally had to show myself how to read. ... I didn't have the qualifications [for] college."

The Salesians, however, talked Loyola Marymount University, run by the Jesuit order, into accepting him — and giving him a full scholarship.

His uncle John, who had introduced him to "Chicano!," kept encouraging Zepeda-Millán to be proud of his heritage. Chicano, originally derogatory, is short for Mexicano, which comes from the Aztecs, who called themselves Mexica, his uncle said, and their civilization was more advanced in many ways than Europe's. Zepeda-Millán's cousin Lucy, who was at UCLA, told him: "Yeah, we're Chicano. We're not just Mexican-Americans. We have to learn our history. ... You have to take some Chicano studies classes."

A counselor at LMU steered him to Graciela Limon, a Chicana novelist. She set a number of her stories in Boyle Heights. "For the first time, I could relate to what I was reading," Zepeda-Millán said. "I wanted to read more things I could relate to." He found them in Chicano studies. "I started devouring

everything." He registered as a political science major, but he ended up double-majoring in political science and Chicano studies.

On the first day of Introduction to Political Theory, his professor, a Jesuit, declared: The church is an opiate of the masses. "He was a Marxist priest who, I found out, was influenced by liberation theology." Then Zepeda-Millán met the director of campus ministry. "He wasn't a Jesuit, but he had dedicated his life to the church and to liberation theology. Loyola was at the heart of a lot of activism in solidarity with [the poor in] Central America. ... They paid for us to go to activist workshops."

LMU also taught him the importance of graduate school. "9/11 hit," he said. "My friends who didn't go to college started enrolling in the military. Immigrant children were signing up. ... Then, within weeks, there were immigration checkpoints in front of elementary schools, in front of medical clinics. ... People were being picked up at the bus stop. It was a huge contradiction. I was like, 'What the hell?' I'm seeing my community under siege [because of] these horrible attacks that we had nothing to do with.

"I was, like, 'I need to learn more about immigration and immigrant rights.'"

.....

That was not all. "At the same time," Zepeda-Millán continued, "the college Republicans got an infusion of money, and they brought in tons of speakers. They were all anti-immigrant, right-wing speakers. I started seeing people on television talking about 9/11 and immigrants. I started realizing these speakers were saying racist things that just weren't right. But they were getting the microphone because they had Ph.Ds. ... That's when I realized the power of the Ph.D. ... I dedicated myself: 'I need to get the best grades possible, because I need to get into graduate school. ... I need to be an academic. I need the intellectual ammunition to defend my beliefs.'

"There were zero immigration classes offered at Loyola. I wanted to be the professor I didn't have. And that's the way it played out." Zepeda-Millán became the first Chicano to receive a Ph.D. from the Department of Government at Cornell. He returned to Loyola as an assistant professor. "The first class I taught was immigration."

From Loyola, he went to UC Berkeley, where he chaired the Center for Research on Social Change. His first classes at UCLA began in September.

.....

None of this might have been possible if his immigrant grandparents had not been able to buy a house in Boyle Heights for $20,000. It's "not that type of neighborhood anymore, because of gentrification. Now it's the exact opposite."

Landlords have raised rents or let their apartments fall into disrepair. Tenants have moved out, whereupon the landlords remodeled and tripled their prices. Many homeowners, including Zepeda-Millán's grandparents, the temptation was to sell. Investors knocked on their doors. "'Sell your house! Sell your house!'...

"I remember my grandmother, when I was in college, saying, 'Oh, a white man came to the door wanting to buy the house for cash.' She was, like, 'He wanted to offer me $200,000.'

"'No!'

"'Do you see how much money we're going to pay you? We know how much you paid for this house.'

"But my grandmother was, like, 'I know everybody in the neighborhood. Why would I sell and move?'

"This was happening to everybody. ...

"Then, all of a sudden, we started getting city inspectors coming in saying, 'Oh, you have foundation issues. It's going to cost you thousands of dollars,' or, 'Oh, you have that little extra room. You have to demolish it because it's not up to code — or that's going to cost you $10,000.' The city was about to fine an immigrant lady, living off Social Security, $10,000. 'It's easier if you just sell your house.' The city was being used to push people out."

Many people started moving into cheaper housing farther east, Zepeda-Millán said. "Because of kinship networks, they were moving in with other family members. ... We know from tons of studies that the more people you cram in, the more tension there's going to be. People are going to be super-irritable, always arguing. ... There are horror stories about kids right now. There's nowhere for them to study. They have to lock themselves in the bathroom to do homework, just to be away from the noise.

"If parents, who are already working so much, have to move an hour farther out, that's another two hours, going and coming, that they're not spending with their families. Kids are unsupervised, probably not eating right. [And the parents] have to pay more for transportation. ... Sometimes they lose their jobs because they're so far out. ...

"A lot of suburbs aren't equipped to have an influx of poor people. The government and private services they need just don't exist there. People live in poverty, and things get worse and worse." Maybe they end up on the streets, Zepeda-Millán said. It's hard to know where many of these people go, he said, because they become difficult to trace, "and it's going to be the poorest of the poor, which we know are the undocumented."

.....

"Boyle Heights has a history of activism, so you're seeing the type of resistance that you haven't seen in any of the other Eastside Latino neighborhoods," Zepeda-Millán said. "There are several organizations. The one that gets the most attention is Defend Boyle Heights. It's radical, civil disobedience — direct action, I should say. ... Some gentrifiers were giving a tour of Boyle Heights, and they were going to have an orchestra play in the park for all these white Westsiders. The local high school band came and drowned them out. ...

"If an art gallery opens up, they'll go and graffiti it. They'll break a window.

"These kids and people my age who still live in the neighborhood, a lot of them majored in Chicano studies, so they have the language, they understand the history, and they're, like, 'This isn't by accident that rents are going up. This isn't by accident that we have people getting pushed out of their apartments.'"

The Center for the Study of Los Angeles at LMU has asked Zepeda-Millán to help design and conduct a study of Boyle Heights as part of a project on L.A. neighborhoods. "They said, 'What do you think we should focus on?'

"I said, 'You have to do housing in Boyle Heights. It's the most contentious issue right now.'" ◤

"VIOLENCE WAS NORMALIZED. IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON TO SAY, LIKE — 'OH, DID YOU HEAR THAT THIS PERSON GOT SHOT?' IT WAS JUST KIND OF LIKE THE JUICY NEWS THAT HAPPENED OVER THE WEEKEND."

— Chris Zepeda-Millán

DO THE POOR BRING CRIME WITH THEM?

A New and Critical Look

PHOTO COURTESY OF **MICHAEL LENS**

MICHAEL LENS IS ALL-TOO FAMILIAR WITH THE STRUGGLES of those in subsidized housing.

"Our world discriminates against poor people," said Lens, an associate professor of urban planning and public policy at UCLA. "When you come in the door with a voucher, you're labeling yourself as a poor person. Let's just be real about that."

For more than a decade, Lens has been studying job accessibility, housing subsidies, such as government vouchers, and low-income housing. Much of Lens' work examines whether housing vouchers allow recipients to live in safer neighborhoods and whether voucher holders bring to their neighborhoods an increase in crime. His interest in these living conditions and how people choose where they live led him to look at the relationship between rental housing and crime rates in neighborhoods where vouchers are used.

Lens concentrated much of his work on the federal Housing Choice Voucher program, known as Section 8 or HCV. This program provides rental assistance to more than 5 million people in 2.2 million low-income households nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which administers the program through housing authorities across the country.

Created in 1974 as an alternative to government-funded public housing, the voucher program was designed to give low-income individuals and families, the elderly and the disabled a chance to rent privately owned apartments or houses in neighborhoods of their choice. (HUD also has a separate housing choice voucher program for veterans.) Section 8 voucher holders, who generally earn less than 30% to 50% of the area's median income, pay a portion of their rent, with the government making up the difference. That has spread the poor out of public housing, but it has led some critics to contend that the program has fueled crime in previously safe neighborhoods.

WRITTEN BY
LISA FUNG

A Short History of Section 8

PHOTO BY MW ON UNSPLASH

THE FEDERAL HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER PROGRAM, known as Section 8 or HCV, has been in place since 1974, when Congress passed an amendment to the U.S. Housing Act of 1937, the original public housing subsidy program.

Administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development via local housing authorities, the program provides rental subsidies to low-income individuals and families, the elderly and disabled. It serves as an alternative to government-run housing projects by allowing participants to choose where they want to live and the type of housing – apartment, single-family home or townhouse.

Households that receive Section 8 vouchers pay 30 percent of their income as rent, with the government paying the rest. More than 5 million people in 2.2 million households participate in the program.

— BY LISA FUNG

"NOW THAT MORE LOW-INCOME RENTERS ARE SUBSIDIZED THROUGH THE VOUCHER PROGRAM THAN PUBLIC HOUSING, ARE THEY LIVING IN HIGHER CRIME ENVIRONMENTS OR LOWER CRIME ENVIRONMENTS THAN THEY WOULD BE IF THEY WERE STILL IN PUBLIC HOUSING?" *— Michael Lens*

Growing up in Minnesota, Lens saw firsthand the realities of housing assistance programs. "My mom was on Section 8. I grew up in not-so-well-off circumstances," he said. "I lived in neighborhoods that you would not be particularly fearful of. But as a person of color growing up in a place that was so white, it was sometimes even more obvious that all of the really poor neighborhoods were black and brown, mostly black, at that time."

Lens was the only child of a single mother in St. Paul, and he was largely oblivious of his circumstances when he was young. "I had a very happy childhood. I didn't even think about it," he said. "I didn't know much until I was talking to my mother about it later. Thinking about neighborhoods in Minneapolis and St. Paul, racial segregation is very visible."

That was his past. His present is a bright, fifth-floor office on the UCLA campus, his tidy desk adorned with colorful drawings by his children. When he looks up from his computer, he faces a wall with mounted photos of scenes around the Jordan Downs housing project in South Los Angeles, including one depicting young kids playing in a plastic swimming pool in front of a weather-beaten apartment, with bars covering the doors and windows. The 40-year-old married father of two says he recently took a self-guided tour of the Jordan Downs redevelopment project, the biggest public housing redevelopment in L.A. history.

Despite his upbringing, Lens didn't develop an interest in urban policy until late in his college career. "I was interested in anything the government does to reduce poverty, to reduce the number of people living in poverty and make living in poverty less of a horrible condition," he said. That led him to study labor market policy and how to get people jobs or better jobs. By the time he earned his doctorate at NYU, he had married his interest in how to make the lives of the poor better with his research on neighborhoods and segregation and why people live where they live.

"One question I was trying to answer was: Now that more low-income renters are subsidized through the voucher program than public housing, are they living in higher crime environments or lower crime environments than they would be if they were still in public housing?" Lens said. "The answer that I found is there seems to be clearly lower crime."

The modern-day image of people on government assistance stems largely from the historical view of subsidized housing in America, which has long been synonymous with poverty and high crime. Lens' research attempts to dispel that mythology.

"We found that the connection people observe between voucher households and crime has more to do with the fact that voucher households have limited options on the housing market, and they are more likely to move to higher crime environments," he said. "It's not that they tend to bring crime to neighborhoods."

Most public housing in the United States was constructed in the '40s, '50 and '60s, often as high-density, high-rise building complexes that replaced shantytowns, tenements and slum areas. Many of these complexes lacked adequate funding and fell into disrepair and decay. Some, such as Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and Jordan Downs in Los Angeles, did become notorious centers of crime, drugs and gang activity. Critics seized on those numbers and blamed the poor for crime.

The voucher system emerged in the '70s as an alternative to high-density, high-rise public housing. "We started to look at these [public housing] properties as mistakes, crime-infested or dangerous because we had built these in very segregated places and then largely neglected them. The only people who would live there were extremely poor and desperate," Lens said. "So that's the kind of stereotypical picture we have of public housing. That's the vast majority of the experience of public housing in this country."

The hope was that vouchers would allow users to seek out private landlords in areas dispersed throughout communities, making subsidized housing less centralized and, perhaps, in better neighborhoods. In 1986, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program was created to offer incentives to private developers who add low-income housing units to their buildings.

Because Section 8 voucher holders are renting from private landlords, they have more anonymity and the potential to escape the segregation, stratification and stigma that may come from living in public housing complexes. The same is true, for the most part, for tenants of LIHTC buildings. "I couldn't bring you to 10 properties that were built with low-income housing tax credit funds without talking to a nonprofit developer," Lens said. "We don't know what they look like — they look like anybody else's multifamily property."

For that reason and others, vouchers became the primary means for obtaining subsidized housing, said Lens, whose research has found that Section 8 voucher holders are less likely to live in very high-crime areas than public housing tenants or even LIHTC tenants. That's largely because LIHTC and public housing units are fixed locations, often in higher crime neighborhoods, while voucher holders have a wider array of options, including suburban areas with lower crime and poverty rates.

Many housing projects across the country have been demolished and, like Jordan Downs, are being redeveloped into modern low-income housing communities. But the problem of finding housing remains an issue. Millions of people nationwide may qualify for low-income housing, yet cities lack the inventory and funding to accommodate them.

Today, the Los Angeles Housing Authority manages more than 50,000 Section 8 vouchers. Long waiting lists for vouchers are common nationwide, with wait times spanning years. Los Angeles is no exception. Last October, the Housing Authority opened its waiting list for the first time since 2004. About 188,000 people applied for 20,000 spots on the waiting list. Even those lucky enough to get waitlisted may spend years waiting to get to the top of the list.

"There's not an entitlement to rental assistance in this country, so if you are eligible and you apply, and you're on a wait list, you're waiting. There's not necessarily anything for you," Lens said. "You might be on a wait list for a couple of years or maybe a few months, depending on where you live. In the meantime, you try to figure out how to find a low-cost living situation."

According to the L.A. Housing Authority, the average annual income of a family in public housing is about $20,000. About 66% of voucher holders are employed. By comparison, in order to afford the median home price in Los Angeles, households must make about $112,000 a year, the housing authority reports.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for those who have vouchers is finding a place to live in cities like Los Angeles, which has a vacancy rate of about 4%. In Los Angeles, recipients have six months to find landlords who will accept the vouchers or risk losing the subsidy. More than 1.6 million low-income households in California pay more than half of their income for rent, and those households run a high risk of becoming homeless, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonpartisan research and policy institute based in Washington, D.C.

It appears unlikely that more funds will be allocated to these subsidies. Earlier this year, HUD proposed legislation that could triple the amount of rent the poorest Section 8 voucher holders would have to pay under the program. It also would impose work requirements for some tenants in public housing to "provide an incentive [for renters] to increase their earnings" and "move more people to self-sufficiency," HUD Secretary Ben Carson said in April, when the plans were unveiled.

"WE FOUND THAT THE CONNECTION PEOPLE OBSERVE BETWEEN VOUCHER HOUSEHOLDS AND CRIME HAS MORE TO DO WITH THE FACT THAT VOUCHER HOUSEHOLDS HAVE LIMITED OPTIONS ON THE HOUSING MARKET, AND THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO MOVE TO HIGHER CRIME ENVIRONMENTS. IT'S NOT THAT THEY TEND TO BRING CRIME TO NEIGHBORHOODS."

— Michael Lens

"What a lot of U.S. cities and housing scholars are increasingly grappling with is the reality that there's just not likely to be a lot of increased money for subsidy coming from the federal government, and we've been restricting housing in a lot of different ways for quite a long time," Lens said. "We might be hitting some kind of precipice, at least in some markets, where there is just not enough housing to go around, period. It doesn't matter what kind."

So what can be done? In Lens' view, we need to pay attention to both the rate and location of building efforts.

"We need to build more housing in more places — especially in high-income neighborhoods — to allow for more housing of more types to be built," said Lens, who recently has been engaging in research on how zoning restrictions contribute to housing crises in urban areas of the U.S. "We need to build a lot more housing in a lot of places that have been incredibly successful in excluding it."

People are building housing in Los Angeles, but not nearly enough, he said, and "the problem is that we've been building not nearly enough for a long time."

But it's not simply a matter of building more housing. "We have to pay some attention to how people can get around without being in their cars all day," he said. "We've got this big, shiny new light rail on the Westside, and the Expo Line, and we need a lot more housing along places like that." The biggest hurdle is NIMBY-ism, with a minority of homeowners pushing their elected officials to keep low-income housing out of their neighborhoods.

A bill introduced by state Sen. Scott Wiener of San Francisco, SB 827, sought to remove control of zoning regulation from local governments, ensuring that all new housing construction within a half-mile of a train station or a quarter-mile of a bus route would not be subject to size, height, number of apartments or restrictive design standards. Though the bill was defeated, Lens called it a bold move that would have removed power from elected officials who may feel beholden to homeowners opposed to such development.

Yet even for those who receive vouchers and move to better neighborhoods, there's still a downside, Lens said. The voucher may take people out of bad neighborhoods, but it's not enough to move an adult out of poverty.

"You might physically move away from poverty, but you're not going to move out of poverty in your own world any faster than if you are hanging out in public housing," he said. "It's not helping you get a job. It's not getting you a car. It's not changing your life in any more obvious way than it's going to help you pay the rent."

Still, change begins with safe and stable living conditions, which can be a way for the next generation to begin to achieve higher status, Lens says. Decent housing cannot ensure prosperity, but the lack of it almost certainly guarantees poverty.

MOST & LEAST EXPENSIVE COUNTIES

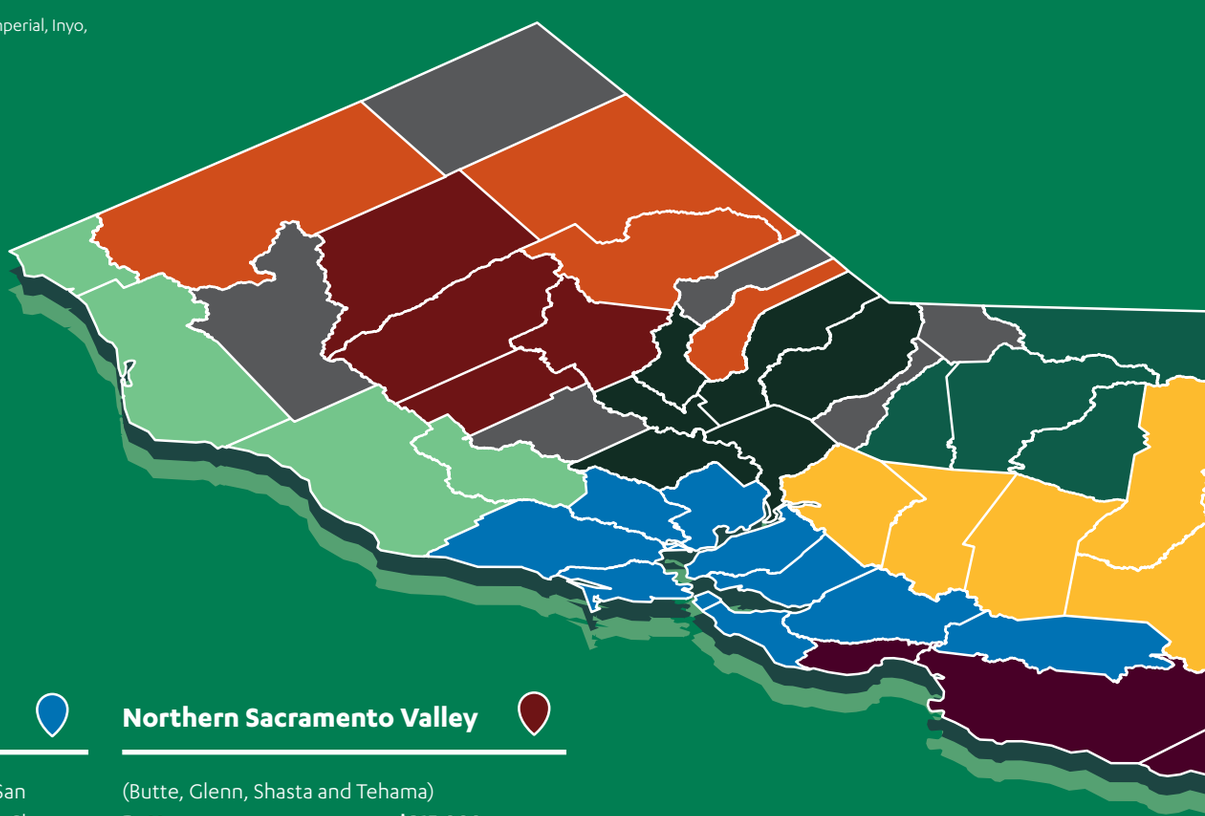
IN EIGHT ECONOMIC REGIONS OF THE STATE* (Median sales price for existing single family home)

California has some of the most expensive real estate in the country. In a recent survey, 8 of the top 10 most expensive real estate markets in the country were in the Golden State, most found in the San Francisco Bay Area. The statewide median sales price for a single family home was $591,460 in July, according to the California Association of Realtors. But there are huge disparities in different regions of the state. The median sales price for a single-family home in Lassen County, in the far northern reaches of the state, was $185,000 in July. In San Francisco the single-family-home median sales price is more than $1,000,000. The map shows the counties with the most and least expensive median sales prices in eight economic regions of California and examples of what the approximate statewide median will buy in different areas of the state.

*Data not available for Alpine, Amador, Colusa, Imperial, Inyo, Modoc, Sierra and Trinity counties

**Mono County is June 2018 data.

Sources: California Association of Realtors; Zillow.com; Realtor.com; California Economic Strategy Panel



San Francisco Bay Area

(Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Benito, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano and Sonoma counties)

San Francisco	**$1,650,000**
Solana County	**$454,000**

Northern Sacramento Valley

(Butte, Glenn, Shasta and Tehama)

Butte	**$315,000**
Tehama	**$223,000**

Southern California

(Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura counties)

Orange County	**$829,000**
San Bernardino	**$292,000**

Greater Sacramento

(El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo and Yuba counties)

El Dorado	**$504,000**
Yuba	**$289,000**

Northern California

(Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Mendocino, Nevada, Plumas and Siskiyou counties)

Nevada	**$419,500**
Lassen	**$185,000**

Central Coast

(Monterey, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties)

Monterey	**$655,500**
Santa Barbara	**$550,000**

San Joaquin Valley

(Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Tulare counties)

San Joaquin	**$370,000**
Kings	**$224,975**

Central Sierra

(Calaveras, Mariposa, Mono, Nevada and Tuolumne counties)

Mono	**$570,000****
Tuolomne	**$315,000**

San Francisco — *What $599,000 will buy you:* An 831-square foot, 1-bedroom, 1-bath "fixer-upper" in San Francisco, built in 1900.

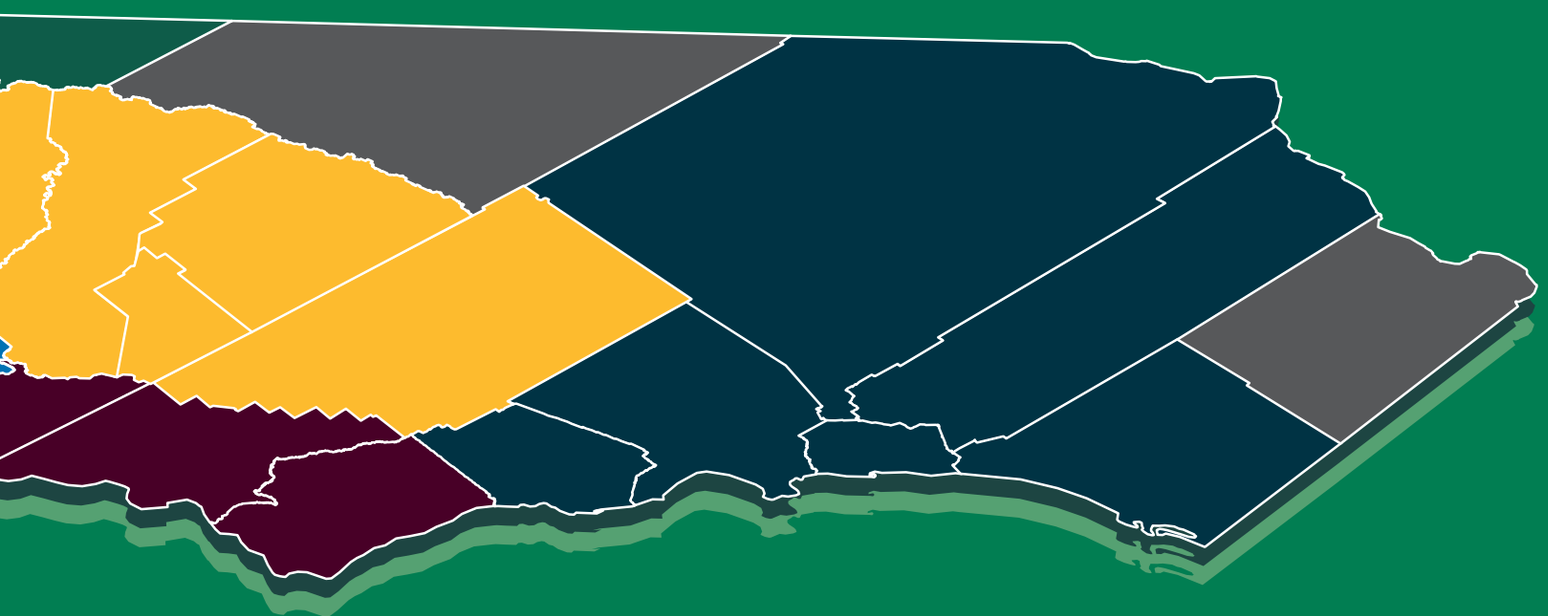
Central Coast — *What $595,000 will buy you:* A 3-bedroom, 2 bath, 1,958-square-foot home built in 1941, in Paso Robles in San Luis Obispo County on a 14,000-square-foot lot.

San Joaquin Valley — *What $595,000 will buy you:* A 4-bedroom, 4-bath, 4,054-square-foot home with a swimming pool on a corner lot in Fresno.

Los Angeles — *What $595,000 will buy you:* A 3-bedroom, 3-bath, 1,564-square-foot home in North Hollywood with many upgrades, built in 1955.

Sacramento — *What $595,000 will buy you:* A 3-bedroom, 3-bath, 3,018-square-foot home built in 2007 in West Sacramento on a 6,098 square-foot lot.

San Bernardino — *What $585,000 will buy you:* A 6-bedroom, 5-bath, 4,199-square-foot two-story ranch home with a "granny apartment" built in 2014.



San Diego — *What $595,000 will buy you:* A 4-bedroom, 3-bath, 1,474-square-foot home on a 7,501-square-foot lot built in 1956.

Lassen County — *What $549,000 will buy you:* A 3-bedroom, 2-bath, 2,541-square-foot home built in 2002, on six acres of land with a creek running along the property in Susanville.

RESEARCH BY
NONA YATES

PHOTO BY **DAVID SPRAGUE**

REFLECTIONS ON LOS ANGELES AND CALIFORNIA

FROM A VETERAN OF THEIR POLITICS

INTERVIEW BY
JIM NEWTON

ANTONIO VILLARAIGOSA AND BLUEPRINT EDITOR JIM NEWTON HAVE KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR 18 YEARS. They first met at an El Pollo Loco on Wilshire Boulevard when Villaraigosa, the 63rd speaker of the California State Assembly, was preparing for his first campaign for mayor of Los Angeles. In the years since, Villaraigosa has run and lost that campaign, won a City Council race, then served two terms as mayor and, most recently, campaigned unsuccessfully for governor.

Villaraigosa and Newton have been talking about government and politics in California for two decades (Newton can be emphatic; Villaraigosa refers to these conversations as his "beatings."). Until this interview, however, all of the conversations have been conducted against the backdrop of Villaraigosa's political ambitions. Having finished out of the money in the governor's race this year, Villaraigosa was more reflective during this discussion, even pensive. Once prone to talking fast and hurling assurances, in this session he was quieter and more deliberate.

Throughout his campaigns for mayor, Villaraigosa made grand promises. He delivered on some — huge transportation projects are still being built with money from a sales tax measure he supported. Other times, he came up short. In this interview, he mentions planting "a million trees." The reference is to an ambitious goal he set and did not meet. But no one denies his heart or courage. He is, among other things, the rare California politician willing to question any aspect of Proposition 13, the property tax limitation passed in 1978 that fundamentally restructured California finances.

Villaraigosa has been a force in state and local politics for a generation. Here, in his modern home overlooking Beachwood Canyon, he reflects.

Blueprint: Do you think that the politics of California are producing the kinds of leaders that California needs?

Antonio Villaraigosa: I don't think it has as much to do with politics as with society. When we fail to educate broad swaths of the public, when the poor and disenfranchised are almost invisible, politics are going to produce leaders who don't reflect the needs and aspirations of the changing face of California. The broad swath of California has been left behind.

BP: What can we do to change that?

AV: I come from that swath of the left-behind. I got an education, and it changed my life. I believe strongly that improving our public schools, making them places of excellence, the best anywhere in the world, is critical to meeting America's promise of unlimited opportunity if you're willing to work for it.

"WHEN PROPOSITION 13 WAS SOLD TO THE PUBLIC, IT WAS SOLD ON THE PREMISE THAT HOMEOWNERS WERE PAYING TOO MUCH. AT THE TIME, HOMEOWNERS PAID 40% OF THE OVERALL PROPERTY TAX, AND CORPORATIONS WERE PAYING 60%. NOW IT'S THE OTHER WAY AROUND."

— Antonio Villaraigosa

BP: I grew up here, too, in Northern California. And I remember a time when people would move to California to get their kids into public school here. It was part of the magnet that drew people to this state. What happened?

AV: Well, I think a couple of things. Proposition 13 happened. We took away the tools we needed to fund our schools. But around that time, really since the mid-1960s, a changing demographic happened. People increasingly didn't have their kids in public schools, so they wouldn't fund them. And the reason why Proposition 13 was so critical is that it required a two-thirds vote to increase taxes. It wasn't just Proposition 13 itself. That's a misnomer.

BP: There's something strange to me about the fact that Proposition 13 imposed a two-thirds requirement for tax increases when it did not pass by two-thirds.

AV: It's hypocritical and defies logic. So, those two things have produced today's reality. When I was going to public school, we were in the top five in per-pupil spending, and we had the best public schools in the country. Now we're close to the bottom in both.

I've argued that you can't just throw money at the problem. You have to connect money with results. But money is part of the solution. There are demagogues on both sides. One side says it's only money, and the other says money has nothing to do with it.

BP: If the politics of Proposition 13 were not as loaded as they are, how would you change it?

AV: First, I don't think we should change it with another initiative [some critics of Proposition 13 have backed an initiative to create a so-called "split roll" that would treat business property differently than residential real estate]. During the campaign, that didn't score points with some. ... The reason is that the whole tax system is broken, and the opportunity that comes with any system that is this broken is to fix the whole thing.

It's broken at the top, where the upper income tax is the highest in the nation because of the way it taxes capital gains. That produces a feast-or-famine revenue paradigm because a small group of people pay those taxes.

Secondly, because of Proposition 13, we have one of the lowest property tax rates. ... And corporate entities can sit on property a very long time and pay very little in taxes. When Proposition 13 was sold to the public, it was sold on the premise that homeowners were paying too much. At the time, homeowners paid 40% of the overall property tax, and corporations were paying 60%. Now it's the other way around.

BP: It's truly one of the unanticipated consequences of Proposition 13.

AV: Right. And, let's be honest, they [corporations] are the biggest funders of any effort to oppose a change.

Then, finally, we need to discuss a service tax. The service economy is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the overall California economy. There are a majority of states that tax services to some degree or another.

So I think you need to fix the whole thing.

BP: That's a big task.

AV: Yeah, it is. ... When I used to do leaders lectures, ... I talked about swinging for the fences. When you're a kid and you get up to bat, sure, you want to get on base. But let's be honest: Everybody's thinking about hitting a home run. When you're playing football, you'd love to get four yards, five yards, 10 yards. But you'd really like to score a touchdown.

Leadership has to be about being bold enough to aspire to do big things. Sometimes you're going to fail. A million trees....

BP: I'm glad you said it, not me.

AV: Hold it. We got 400,000. Bloomberg did a million trees. He didn't get there. Denver did a million trees, Houston did a million trees. None of them got there. We did six times more than any administration in an eight-year period. We didn't do a million trees, but we aspired to it.

So, yes, the tax system is a big, tall order. But it's so broken across the board. The feast-or-famine, the uncertainty of long-range revenue projections — they make this important. It's not going to be easy, but it is something that is really, really important.

And I think at some point fixing the two-thirds vote is critical. [Proposition 13 requires a two-thirds vote of the relevant body to approve any tax increase, state or local.] Our democracy is based in part on the idea of preventing the tyranny of the majority. But here you

almost have a tyranny of the minority.

The vast majority of people who need services and a safety net are actually unable to achieve their democratic aspirations.

BP: Tell me what you think are the biggest challenges that this state needs to face in the near and long term.

AV: The biggest challenge in both the near and long term is that of creating an economy that works for more people. When I say that, I will often look at a reporter or a photographer and say: "In the last 10, 20, 30 years that you've been working at this job, has life gotten easier or more difficult?"

BP: Well, if you're asking reporters, the answer's obvious. It's not pretty out there.

AV: Yeah. The answer is always that it's gotten more difficult. So, from my vantage point, figuring out how to make the economy work for more people is critical.

But a key to the income inequality and the poverty that results from that broken economy is an educational system that works. They're connected. Jobs today require a higher level of knowledge and skills than they did in the past, and we're not preparing enough people for that. The children of the wealthy and the upper middle class are being trained, but the children of the poor and the lower middle class really don't have the same access to a great education that the rest of us do.

BP: Do you think California is harmed by the almost complete insignificance of the Republican Party here?

AV: I chaired the Democratic Party convention in 2012, and I am a Democrat, but I did support the top-two primary, and I did because I saw what happened when I was mayor [Los Angeles elections are nonpartisan, and the top two finishers for city office, regardless of party, face one another in a runoff if neither gets more than 50% in the first round]. I had to appeal to a broader cross-section of the public. ... I spent a lot of time in the San Fernando Valley. I knew that it was the epicenter of the middle class. I had to spend time there, and I did. I had to listen and speak to a broad, cross-section of people, many of whom didn't agree with me. It does moderate you.

BP: What do you think about term limits and the effect that they've had on politics and governance in California and L.A.?

AV: I've historically been against term limits. I think we already have them. They're called elections.

With gerrymandering and the other machinations that both parties have employed, I understand why some people support limits. But I don't think it works, particularly for legislators.

Having said that, if you remember, when the [Los Angeles City] Council sought to move from two to three terms ... they needed my help and my support. They wanted me to get behind it, and I did. They offered to extend term limits for the mayor. ... I said no. I said no for two reasons. I said it looks self-serving for the mayor to do that. I won't be able to campaign on your behalf in the way I could if it's not affecting me. And I also believed that for a chief executive, the first two terms are usually the best.

PHOTO BY **DAVID SPRAGUE**

BP: I have a theory about term limits — that by encouraging elected officials to think in a shorter term, the limits have contributed to the pension crisis, that officials don't want to give raises because that affects current spending but instead favor pension increases because those will come due during someone else's term of office.

AV: I think that's true. ... There's a tendency to say: "Not my problem. It's somebody else's problem."

BP: Do you think California can be successful in holding off President Trump in areas such as immigration and climate change? Is there room for an effective resistance out here?

AV: That word "resistance" doesn't resonate with me. We're going to chart our own path. We focus so much on Trump and forget the axiom that people want to know what you're for, not what you're against.

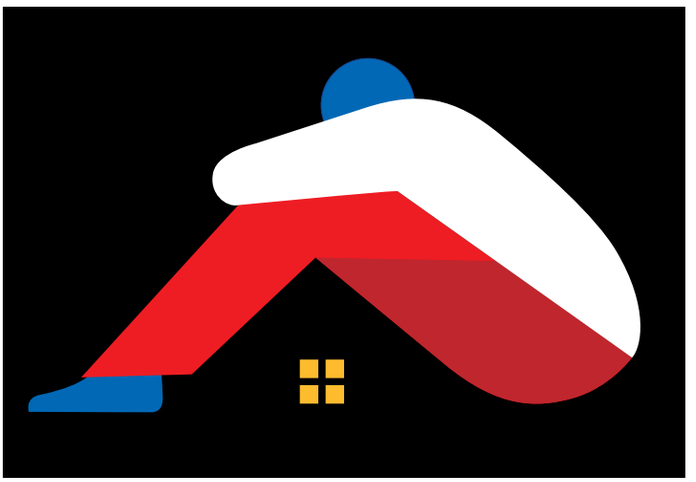
Let's focus on poverty and housing, health care and education. The best way to convince people that California's path is a brighter one for Californians is to do something about the quality of life here.

BP: What's next for you?

AV: I don't see another race in the cards. I actually was excited about taking on a broken tax system and fixing a school system that doesn't work for the poor in the way that it could and should in a great and generous California. ... I revel in crisis and really want to tackle big challenges. I saw governor as that opportunity.

One door closes. Another opens. ◤

CLOSING NOTE:
CRAFTING POLICIES TO CREATE SHELTER



THERE IS NO SINGLE SOLUTION TO HOMELESSNESS, no fixed idea of housing that will shelter humanity. As the research in this issue of Blueprint shows, what works in Mumbai may or may not work in Santa Monica. But it's also clear that different experiences suggest lessons, some of which may travel, and all of which deserve consideration.

Start with the single-family home. Few institutions are more ingrained in Southern California's sense of itself than that type of home — sometimes with a swimming pool, often part of a sprawling suburb in which neighbors have elbow room. As Professor Paavo Monkkonen notes, roughly three-quarters of Los Angeles is zoned for single-family homes, and they dominate the physical landscape of the city. But as they have grown more expensive, they have thwarted the mobility that once enabled residents in smaller homes to grow into larger ones. Political factors — homeowner associations and other forces of homeowner activism — have helped lock the status quo into place, and mobility has slowed down.

That creates a multidimensional obstacle, but it is being addressed. Some cities such as Seattle and Portland are promoting higher-density housing, and even Los Angeles is experimenting with transit-oriented development. L.A. is nowhere near giving up on the single-family home, but intelligent zoning, based on research by Monkkonen and others, may blunt some of its negative effects.

Lessons come from farther afield, too. Half the population of Mumbai lives in slums. That is no solution for Los Angeles, but Mumbai's improvised dwellings offer benefits that L.A.'s homeless encampments do not. They are semi-permanent — some have existed since the 1940s — and they offer stability, if not comfort. Reflecting on those observations, Professor Vinit Mukhija says local leaders should improvise along the way to finding permanent solutions to homelessness. He suggests converting parking lots or other open spaces into safe housing areas for the very poor. If leaders listen, Mumbai may in fact have spoken to L.A.

There is resistance. Sadly, the poor often frighten the middle class. One canard is that housing assistance for poor people in middle-class neighborhoods brings crime. Professor Michael Lens has discovered that it's not true. His research speaks to the value of the federal government's Section 8 housing assistance program, which helps subsidize poor people outside of public housing. But the impact of the Section 8 program is limited by the funds allocated to it. Policymakers interested in taking advantage of its benefits need to consider whether to increase its funding, how to connect its benefits to public transportation and how to disabuse residents of their fear that larger subsidies will result in more crime.

Then there are those issues that test the limits of policy solutions. Gentrification, for instance, has created a paradox for those affected by it. The soaring value of homes in places such as Boyle Heights creates new wealth — and potential windfalls for homeowners who have long held property in the area. But it also creates pressure on those neighborhoods, ripping apart old connections and traditions. Professor Chris Zepeda-Millán describes how this has been a call to activism. It should also be a call, he says, for government and private services to assist those forced out of their homes and apartments because of rising prices.

These are among society's toughest issues. It hurts the soul to allow people to remain homeless, and it hurts society to price working people out of decent homes. No one solution will suffice. Together, however, the work reviewed in these pages may suggest some ways forward.

– Jim Newton

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