

In the city of dreams, Skid Row is a nightmare problem to solve

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WORLD AT FIVE

A judge has ruled the homeless people of LA's notorious tent city must be found shelter. But is it a plan to merely hide the poor from wealthy residents?



[Ben Hoyle](#)

| Los Angeles

Thursday May 13 2021, 5.00pm BST, The Times

At her lowest ebb, Suzette Shaw grabbed a duffel bag and took a midnight train from her mother's home in the Arizona desert to Los Angeles.

"A few weeks later I was homeless," she said, standing in the heart of one of the most desperate, dangerous neighbourhoods in America. "I ended up here."

Skid Row covers about 50 squalid city blocks right next to the hip restaurants and bars of downtown Los Angeles. Homeless people's tents stretch as far as the eye can see in the shadow of large industrial units, warehouses, religious missions and cheap hotels.

As Shaw, 57, spoke, an old man in a leather jacket spun his wheelchair in circles in the road behind her, indifferent to the busy traffic around him. People smoked in silence on salvaged office chairs in front of tarpaulin dwellings. Later a woman in a skimpy bright pink outfit would pass out on a nearby pavement in the full glare of the afternoon sun, spread-eagled next to two cardboard boxes of possessions.

The horror of finding herself here has never left Shaw, even nine years later.

Initially the sheer number of people living on the streets was overwhelming. The rats and the cockroaches were enormous. The stench seemed insufferable. The constant yelling and screaming wore her down. There were shootings. Drug deals took place under the window of the room she found in dilapidated housing. Addicts injected themselves on the pavement. Dead bodies sometimes lay in the street for hours awaiting collection.

“I was utterly traumatised,” she said. “I never knew anything like this could possibly exist.”



District judge David Carter has ruled that all the homeless people on Skid Row must be offered housing by October

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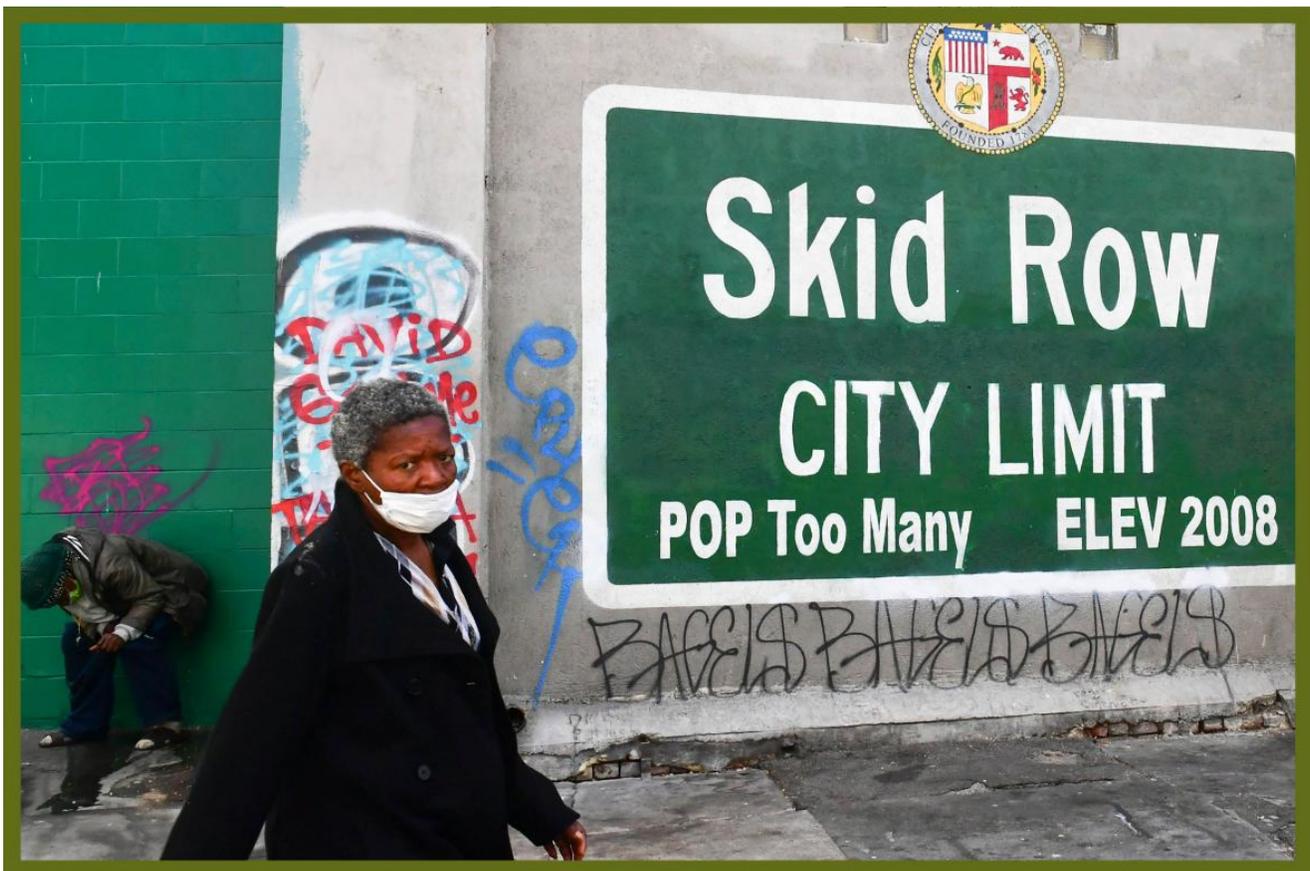
Except that Skid Row had by then existed for more than a century, calcifying over the decades into part of the Greater Los Angeles landscape, like the beach, the Hollywood sign and Sunset Boulevard, a byword for Americans who have lost everything, including hope.

Now one maverick judge is trying to change that.

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Last month the district court judge David Carter ordered the city and county to rip up their existing homelessness strategy and, by the middle of October, find shelter for every person who sleeps rough on Skid Row.

To fund his mandate he instructed the city to place on hold nearly \$1 billion — the entire amount earmarked for homelessness spending in Los Angeles this year — subject to an audit.



Graffiti proclaims the population of Skid Row is “too many”

FREDERIC J BROWN/GETTY IMAGES

In a furious 110-page legal brief that quoted Abraham Lincoln and framed the history of Los Angeles homelessness as a consequence of racist policies, Carter excoriated civic leaders for their failure to do more about the human tragedy in their midst.

“All of the rhetoric, promises, plans and budgeting cannot obscure the shameful reality of this crisis — that year after year, there are more homeless Angelenos, and year after year, more homeless Angelenos die on the streets,” he wrote.

He condemned the “deadly” decision to fight homelessness by building new permanent housing rather than cheaper short-term shelters, arguing that that choice had left tens of thousands of people on the streets and “caused the quality of life for all residents of the city and county to deteriorate at an alarming rate” as tents have spread into “parks, beaches, schools, sidewalks, and [the] highway system” across the metropolis.

Kevin de León, the councillor who represents Skid Row, praised the judge’s intervention to deal with what he has called the “Ground Zero of the nation’s homelessness crisis”.

Reverend Andy Bales, a homelessness advocate who advised Carter, said Skid Row was “the biggest man-made disaster in the United States” and that conditions there had never been worse. Bales, the chief executive of the Union Rescue Mission, one of the largest shelter operations in America, estimated that the death rate on the streets was at an all-time high and added that he was mystified that “anybody can think that the status quo is OK”.

The backlash to the judge’s order, however, was immediate. The mayor, Eric Garcetti, said the plans were “the last things we need”. The Los Angeles authorities are fighting the ruling in the courts.

Homelessness activists and service providers have lined up to claim that while the judge’s ruling was apparently well-meaning it was also short-sighted: focusing solely on the roughly 4,600 people crammed into Skid Row meant it ignored an estimated 62,000 more homeless people spread across the rest of greater Los Angeles.

Stephanie Klasky-Gamer, chief executive of the homelessness service provider LA Family Housing, said the judge had decided to “throw the baby out with the bathwater”.

She said: “His approach has been all about enforcement. It’s been all about hiding people. It has not been about ‘what are their permanent needs?’.”

Amy Turk, chief executive of the Downtown Women’s Centre, which helps 5,000 homeless women each year, said the judge’s order was “disingenuous” because all the shelter beds in Los Angeles were full already. “It’s literally an offer of something that does not exist.”

She worried that failure to clear Skid Row would then become a pretext to arrest and imprison people for sleeping there, an approach that has been tried in the past, is ultimately more expensive than finding permanent housing, and is also “cruel”.

Suzette Shaw, who is now an activist, found long-term housing in a subsidised apartment just outside Skid Row several years ago. She wants much more to be done to dismantle the systemic failures, which she says include lack of housing and structural racism, which create

the conditions for homelessness in the first place.



Suzette Shaw worked in Silicon Valley for almost 20 years before ending up homeless

“The ruling is rhetoric and posturing,” she said. “Ultimately, the judge’s ruling proposes moving unhoused people out of sight from wealthy white people and their communities. It doesn’t end their homelessness. It appears the judge is trying to solve the nuisance of homelessness rather than homelessness itself.”

The point echoes suspicion among critics of the plaintiffs in whose favour the judge ruled: a coalition of local business owners and residents called the LA Alliance for Human Rights, who filed a lawsuit accusing the city and county of breaching their duty to abate a nuisance and reducing property value without compensation.

No one knows how many people are currently sleeping rough in the United States. Before the pandemic, the Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated that more than 560,000 Americans were homeless in 2019, a figure that was widely regarded as conservative.

More than one in four of them were in California where the deep roots of the homelessness crisis include a severe shortage of affordable housing, America’s threadbare social care safety net, crack cocaine and opioid epidemics from the 1980s onwards, the 2008 financial crisis and the inadequate care for veterans traumatised by wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.



Homeless people on Skid Row are disproportionately likely to be black, which some critics argue is a result of structural racism

FREDERIC J BROWN/GETTY IMAGES

Three quarters of Los Angeles' homeless were living on the streets in 2020, according to the latest survey by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

Like Shaw, they are disproportionately likely to be black. Also like Shaw — a former homecoming queen who has never taken drugs, has no criminal record and worked in white-collar jobs in Silicon Valley for almost 20 years — a majority did not have substance abuse problems or serious mental illness.

However, there were still a large proportion — 41 per cent — who did, which is likely to complicate any large-scale effort to sweep them into shelters.

On East 4th Street addicts queued at a window of the Centre for Harm Reduction to pick up clean syringes, sterile water, swabs, tourniquets and naloxone (medication used to reverse opioid overdoses).



Two homeless people move their belongings so city cleaning crews can disinfect the street

RICHARD VOGEL/AP

Darren Willett, the director, said that unless hard drugs were decriminalised it was difficult to imagine a large proportion of Skid Row's homeless population agreeing to leave their tents behind.

The centre had surveyed more than 500 of their clients, mostly meth and heroin users, and found that only 29 per cent ever used shelters; just 15 per cent used them with any frequency.

“Now you switch the question and you ask: what if you were allowed to use drugs in these shelters? Over 80 per cent said they would use them [shelters] and 53 per cent said they would use them daily. The implications of that on homelessness in Skid Row are immense,” said Willett.

If the judge's order survives its court challenges, “there's going to be a lot of busybodies taking surveys trying to get these people into rooms”, said Robert Lorenzo Garcia, 59, a homeless veteran crouched on a pavement by a friend's tent near the Downtown Women's Centre. “Most people won't go because you can't take your drugs to your room. People can't follow rules so they'll be kicked out of whatever housing they get.”



The makeshift tents of Skid Row cover 50 city blocks and are home to roughly 4,600 people

FREDERIC J BROWN/GETTY IMAGES

Around the corner Tyrone Hammer, 63, a poet, said he had been living on Skid Row “on and off” for about 15 years.

He has what he calls escape routes for when he needs to “save my soul” but always ends up returning to the streets. “I find my way back because these people are my family, regardless of the conditions.”

Conditions on Skid Row had improved over the past year, Hammer said, with the addition of new bathrooms. Behaviour was “another story” — but that would never change unless the root causes of mental illness and addiction were tackled.

He had no confidence in the Carter plan working. “If you’re not really addressing the problem you are not doing anything. It’s a cover-up. It’s all bullshit. It’s not gonna work.”

He added: “This isn’t the life that I want, right, but sometimes it’s the only life that you know. And that’s not the way it should be.”