

LOS ANGELES: I DO MIND DYING RECENT REFLECTIONS ON URBAN REVOLUTION IN SKID ROW

*Nicholas Dahmann with the
Los Angeles Community Action Network**

From the perspective of our Skid Row community, the City of Los Angeles, the State of California, and the federal government are failing in their solutions to the current budget crises. These political decisions further intensify the effects of policies that produce poverty while eliminating the last traces of safety nets that help reduce the violence of poverty and homelessness. Our daily life experiences in Skid Row represent a particularly intense intersection of failed policies and short-sighted budget decisions that affect those in poverty nationwide. Nevertheless, our struggles and victories serve as hopeful reminders of the power of poor people's movements and collective organization in fighting social funding cuts and disproportionate spending on police budgets.

Throughout the last decade, in the "Homeless Capital" of the United States, city-led gentrification and budget cuts have nearly removed us from our community. Founded by community residents

* The Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) was founded in 1999 by Skid Row residents in Downtown Los Angeles. As a grassroots membership organization, LA CAN is composed and run by Skid Row's housed and homeless residents. LA CAN organizes primarily around housing, police violence, and women's rights. Nicholas Dahmann began working with LA CAN in mid-2008 as part of his PhD on the Skid Row community's survival and resistance to displacement as a result of gentrification and policing policies. He continues to work as part of LA CAN's ongoing organizing work in addition to coordinating students and volunteers.

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in 1999, the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) organizes amongst ourselves rather than allowing outside “experts” to speak for us.¹ LA CAN is our grassroots organization that facilitates and mobilizes our voice and power in the policy decisions that affect our lives. Today, we are actively organizing to defend our community’s ongoing survival in the face of eliminations to social spending in the budget crisis.

Our social and fiscal conditions on Skid Row have been dismal for decades. Ninety-five percent of the approximately 15,000 Skid Row residents are extremely low-income.² Roughly two thirds are housed in residential or single-room-occupancy (SRO) hotels while one third are homeless, living on the street or in emergency shelters. These numbers make Skid Row home to the largest concentration of both affordable housing *and* homelessness in Los Angeles. Seventy-five percent of the residents here are African American,³ and deep histories of racial discrimination and exclusion in the housing and job markets have produced these levels of poverty and homelessness and contribute to our criminalization. Furthermore, many of the positive victories we fought for during the 1960s-era Civil Rights Movement have been reversed over the past few decades.⁴ The recent financial meltdown has caused but the latest round of dispossession, forcing our community, along with others nationwide, into deeper poverty and increased homelessness.

Funding for social assistance programs and affordable housing has gone from bad to worse over the last two years. Even at the outset of the current crisis, there were eleven homeless people for every permanent supportive housing unit, sixteen for each emergency shelter bed, and nine for every transitional housing bed. As one of the poorest communities in the country, many of us survive on very low or fixed incomes due to disability, mental

1. See LA CAN website, <http://cangress.org/> and frequently-updated blog: <http://cangress.wordpress.com/>. For a more in-depth history of our organizing work and struggle, see Los Angeles Community Action Network Writers Collective, *Ten Years of Struggle for Human Rights: The Housing and Civil Tights Work of the Los Angeles Community Action Network*, forthcoming in DOWNTOWN BLUES: A SKID ROW READER (Christina Heatherton & Yusef Omowale, eds., 2010).

2. Settlement Agreement, County of Los Angeles v. Cmty. Redevelopment Agency of City of Los Angeles, (L.A. Super. Ct. No. BC276472).

3. See *id.*

4. See generally Gary Stewart, *Black Codes and Broken Windows: The Legacy of Racial Hegemony in Anti-Gang Civil Injunctions*, 107 YALE L.J. 2249 (1998).

illness, loss of veteran's benefits, age, and lack of employment. More than 5,000 of us are currently without homes each night, along with 50,000 to 100,000 people countywide.⁵

We fight to survive and thrive in this environment every day, but the odds are against us, in large part due to urban policies past and present. In contrast to the national average of eighty years, our life expectancy is only forty-two to fifty-two years, making us three to four times more likely to die prematurely.⁶ As the faces of these numbers, in our organizing work we emphasize the impacts funding cuts in Los Angeles have on our life spans and we relate our collective struggle against premature death. The recent social program cuts have made these the worst conditions since welfare reform in the mid-nineties and have forced assistance programs to place strict time limits on individuals' eligibility. Fewer people will be able to receive assistance as a consequence of exceeding these time limits. Thus, our own already-limited financial and health security is further jeopardized, while many others will be forced to join us in this inadequate system.

Despite more and more homeless families in need of public assistance, the system simply cannot meet these needs. The CalWorks program has not seen a cost of living increase in years. In fact, this past year the governor threatened to eliminate it entirely.⁷ Similarly, those of us who receive General Relief (GR) have had our benefits fixed since 1993 when the monthly amount was *reduced* to \$ 221.⁸ Not surprisingly, with such meager assistance, half of GR recipients are homeless. Our Social Security benefits have been frozen, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) has fallen to between \$ 50 and \$ 100 per month in California, and Medi-Cal has eliminated dental, vision, and podiatry care.⁹ As a result, our bodies deteriorate

5. INTER-UNIVERSITY CONSORTIUM AGAINST HOMELESSNESS, 2008 REPORT CARD ON HOMELESSNESS IN LOS ANGELES 5 (2008). [hereinafter REPORT CARD], available at http://www.bringlahome.org/docs/HomelessReportCard_v7.pdf.

6. JAMES O'CONNELL, NATIONAL HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS COUNCIL, PREMATURE MORTALITY IN HOMELESS POPULATIONS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 13 (2005), available at <http://www.nhchc.org/PrematureMortalityFinal.pdf>.

7. Evan Halper & Shane Goldmacher, *Governor Again Seeks Steep Spending Cuts, Pleads for U.S. Aid*, L.A. TIMES, Jan. 9, 2010, at A1.

8. See REPORT CARD, *supra* note 5, at 13.

9. The latest round of reductions was not to occur until our February SSI checks but many of us received the decreased amount in January. However, through our weekly legal clinic, we were able to ensure proper representation and help to correct the problem.

while we are unable to afford, find, or readily access fresh vegetables or cooking facilities in our SROs.¹⁰

Housing is the only way to end homelessness and mitigate the instability and vulnerability produced by inadequately-funded social programs. Despite the deep need for housing, however, fewer affordable units were built in Skid Row during the past decade's housing boom than in the recessionary 1990s. Several recent cuts only make the problem worse. For example, an Affordable Housing Trust Fund (AHTF), launched to much media fanfare in 2002, has been decimated. Without a mention in the *Los Angeles Times*, the AHTF was reduced from \$ 100 million in 2007 to \$ 9 million today, less than a tenth of its original size.¹¹ Even if it were better funded, the rent of the "affordable" units – set at 60 percent of Los Angeles's average median income or \$ 900 for an individual – is too high for most of us. In contrast, the Permanent Supportive Housing Program (PSHP) supported truly affordable housing. Created in 2006 with initial funding of \$ 50 million, the PSHP provided partial financing to a number of Skid Row projects; however, the program is currently inactive and has not announced funding availability in over a year. Similarly, the Community Redevelopment Agency has had its funding cut this year by an estimated \$ 72 million, limiting its ability to meet requirements to stabilize and fund SRO preservation.¹² At this point, the political will and funding for affordable housing have all but vanished.¹³

"People are getting it all upside the head. It was just one lump, now we've got three or four." LA CAN member and Skid Row resident

These multiple "lumps on the head" referenced by a long-time Skid Row resident active with LA CAN are not merely physical, but also mental and spiritual. For those of us on Skid Row who have

10. LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK, TAKEN FOR GRANTED: IGNORING DOWNTOWN FOOD-INSECURITY 2 (2005), available at <http://congress.org/archive-documents/foodreport.pdf>.

11. Figures drawn from comparisons of the City of Los Angeles budget summaries for fiscal years 2006-07 and 2009-10. See City of Los Angeles, Balanced Budget, <http://budget.lacity.org/> (last visited Apr. 16, 2010).

12. Mitchell Landsberg, *In the Details, a Far Less Golden State: Students and Poor will Notice the Biggest Changes from Downscaling of Government*, L.A. TIMES, Jul. 22, 2009, at A1.

13. Data in this paragraph is drawn from a paper presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of Meeting of the Association of American Geographers. Nicholas Dahmann, *The Right to the Right to the City: Radical Democratic Practices in Downtown Los Angeles* (2009) (on file with author).

been homeless before and are now housed, the fear of not having the security and peace of mind that is possible in stable housing is deep-seated. Reductions to assistance create uncertainties. As one resident explained, “The cuts to my SSI benefits take away money that I need to survive. . . . [W]ho knows how many more times they’re going to cut it; I’m not sure how I’m going to keep my housing.” Whether budget and policy decisions are made in Washington, D.C., Sacramento, or down the street at City Hall, residents have little opportunity to be meaningfully involved. As a result, we’re often confused over the loss of benefits. As one Skid Row resident said, “They just cut it out for no reason, I just don’t know why.” With the homeless and housed receiving only \$ 221 a month from GR, it is more and more difficult for us to make do each day. With recent cuts to dental and eye care, we are forced to visit doctors that we cannot afford. Many of us are compelled to adopt part-time jobs but often the only available employment is sifting through trash for cans and bottles to recycle. As rents and costs continue to rise and our incomes remain fixed or non-existent, many more of us will be forced into homelessness. The instability inflicted on us increases our stress and anxiety, leading to anger, depression, and frustration.

“If you look at history from every war we’ve been through, we’re still standing, we’re still here. . . . We need everyone to stand up and stand together and say, ‘Hell no, we’re not going to do this anymore.’” – LA CAN member and Skid Row resident

Our organizing must help turn the justifiable anger about our current circumstances into a mobilizing passion and spirit. Alone, each of us might succumb to despair, but we have learned that we’re much better together. LA CAN’s early organizing campaigns were effective in establishing Skid Row community demands and needs through both measured and disruptive means. Our housing work has centered around the human right to housing in a city that generally treats housing as a privilege and commodity. Our civil rights work seeks to ensure those in power enact the letter and spirit of the Fourteenth Amendment, which gives all of us equal protection under the law. We carry forward today the struggles that ended chattel slavery, Black Codes, and Jim Crow Laws, and forced the 1960s era civil rights legislation.

While LA CAN has been successful in establishing tenancy rights and stabilizing affordable housing, the task of expanding and preserving that housing has been far more difficult. Likewise, our early successes in curtailing civil rights violations by private security guards have given way to an entrenched LAPD occupation. Landlords, developers and other business interests became increasingly anxious and reactionary, fearing the presence of poor and homeless people threatened their profits. In 2006 they escalated their gentrifying efforts to push the “New Downtown” into and across Skid Row. Following LA CAN’s successful efforts in advocating for a moratorium on the conversion of any low-income housing, the LAPD was called in to “clean up” Skid Row – but not for the benefit of Skid Row residents. In September 2006, fifty to a hundred officers were deployed to Skid Row as part of the “Safer Cities Initiative” (SCI). The reported aim of the SCI was to target serious crime and the “outside criminal element,” but the reality has been the criminalization of our entire community, with 1,000 minor citations for littering and crosswalk violations and approximately 750 arrests each month.¹⁴ To date, this assault continues with over 30,000 citations and 25,000 arrests since the inauguration of the program.¹⁵

Our response during SCI’s first year was to monitor the human rights violations of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) with our Community Watch teams. In our organizing and direct actions, heavy attention was predominately placed on personal testimonies and filmed footage exposing the horrific police violence and the racial profiling of our community. Despite our repeated demonstration of these injustices, city officials paid no attention. In response, by late 2007, we began focusing not just the on social but also the fiscal costs of SCI, particularly after analysis revealed that the expensive occupation had not proportionally reduced crime.¹⁶

14. GARY BLASI ET AL., UCLA SCHOOL OF LAW, POLICING OUR WAY OUT OF HOMELESSNESS? THE FIRST YEAR OF THE SAFER CITIES INITIATIVE ON SKID ROW 7, 32 (2007) *available at* <http://cdn.law.ucla.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/clinical%20program/policing%20our%20way%20out%20of%20homelessness.pdf>.

15. Press Release, Los Angeles Community Action Network with Gary Blasi, Nicholas Dahmann, Anat Rubin and Forrest Stuart. Safer Cities Initiative Third Year Analysis (September 2009) [hereinafter Press Release] (on file with author and LA CAN).

16. GARY BLASI AND FORREST STUART, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES, HAS THE SAFER CITIES INITIATIVE IN SKID ROW REDUCED SERIOUS CRIME? (2008) [hereinafter SAFER CITIES INITIATIVE], *available at* <http://cdn.law.ucla.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/>

Since then, we have advanced our struggle for human rights by taking up fiscal arguments, mobilizing around the idea that “Wasteful spending makes no cents!” Our lives should not be reduced to objects of a debasing cost-benefit analysis, but if securing our human rights is our mission, we have to use the same fiscal language that politicians understand.

In 2009, Los Angeles was named the “meanest city” in the nation for its criminalization of homelessness and poverty.¹⁷ We have tried to build locally on this unfortunate reputation by connecting our struggle with others around the city, the nation, and the world.¹⁸ For instance, we hosted two United Nations rapporteurs, in July 2008 and September 2009 respectively, who have exposed local human rights violations to the international community.¹⁹ Our ongoing Community Watch Program was also recognized by *The Nation* as one of the “Top Ten Things You Need to Know to Live on the Streets.”²⁰ Back at the local level, we have inserted ourselves into the ongoing budget debate. We have revealed the hidden spending of policing by emphasizing that court costs now total over \$ 100 million for tens of thousands of arrests that have not reduced crime.²¹ Also, our Citation Defense Program connects residents with pro bono legal representation to fight the record number of frivolous and harmful tickets in court.

Our fight for housing is directly impacted by SCI’s criminalization of our community because arrests and citations often render residents ineligible for permanent supportive housing and

missing%20files/did_safer_cities_reduce_crime_in_skid_row.pdf.

17. NAT’L LAW CTR ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY AND THE NAT’L COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS, HOMES NOT HANDCUFFS: THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS IN U.S. CITIES 33 (2009) [hereinafter HOMES NOT HANDCUFFS], available at http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/crimreport/crimreport_2009.pdf.

18. For instance, LA CAN has worked with the Western Regional Advocacy Project, the National Campaign to Restore National Housing Rights, the North American Street Newspaper Association and International Network of Street Papers, and the National Economic & Social Rights Initiative.

19. HOMES NOT HANDCUFFS, *supra* note 17, at 34-35; UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL, REPORT OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF RACISM 20 (2009), available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/11session/A.HRC.11.36.Add.3.pdf>; UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL, REPORT OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON ADEQUATE HOUSING 4 (2010), available at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/13session/A.HRC.13.20.Add.4_AEV.pdf.

20. *Ten Things You Need to Know to Live on the Streets*, THE NATION, Aug. 3, 2009, available at http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090803/ten_things.

21. See Press Release, *supra* note 15, and SAFER CITIES INITIATIVE, *supra* note 16.

many of the above-mentioned social assistance programs. Despite repeated studies demonstrating the cost efficiency of affordable housing over arrests, incarceration, and emergency room visits, the City has never prioritized construction or preservation of affordable housing. While the mayor and police chief of Los Angeles pay lip-service to affordable housing, they continue to allocate resources to policing. Because of this, we are focusing our efforts on preserving the affordability of our homes through reforms to the City's Rent Stabilization Ordinance (LARSO). Created out of organizing in 1978 following Proposition 13, LARSO was intended to create parity between the needs of landlords and those of tenants. To know better how to implement LARSO reforms, the City commissioned a one million dollar study that found landlords were doing well while tenants were not.²² Following our shift toward fiscal arguments, we are emphasizing how the city can reduce our rent burden without spending a penny. For example, under existing statutes, landlords are permitted to raise our rents a minimum of 5 percent every year even while our incomes remain the same or go down.²³ Our fight to remove this floor would freeze rents this year, cost nothing to the city, and reduce profits for slumlords. In tandem, we are also fighting federal and city housing authorities' plans to scrap existing public housing and we are working to launch a Bill of Rights for emergency and transitional housing.

Los Angeles can no longer fiscally afford to continue its socially disastrous crash course that has enriched the few while further impoverishing so many of us. By July 2010, Los Angeles' budget deficit is projected to increase to upwards of approximately \$ 700 million.²⁴ Proposals from the Mayor's office and the City Council to

22. ECONOMIC ROUNDTABLE, ECONOMIC STUDY OF THE RENT STABILIZATION ORDINANCE AND THE LOS ANGELES HOUSING MARKET (2009), *available at* http://www.economicrt.org/summaries/RSO_Study.html.

23. The 5% annual rent increase is a combination of the city's rent floor of 3% and a combined gas and electricity pass through of 2% landlords are able to charge when buildings are master metered. *See* recommendations one and two of "Communication from Housing Department" on Council File 07-0883, *available at* http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2007/07-0883_RPT_LAHD_10-08-09.pdf.

24. The current deficit is between \$ 148 and \$ 222 million depending on a cash transfer from the Department of Water and Power. This existing deficit from FY 2009-10 joins the FY 2010-11 of \$ 485 million on July 1, 2010. Press Release, City of Los Angeles, City Administrative Officer to Release Fourth Financial Status Report (April 9, 2010), *available at* <http://cao.lacity.org/Press%20Release%204th%20FSR%202010%2004%2009%20final.pdf>; City of Los Angeles Fiscal Year 2010-2011 Budget Summary, *available at*

save a few million dollars²⁵ do not address either short or long-term deficits when 70 percent of the budget is locked up in public safety. Specifically, the LAPD receives an incredible 52 percent of the budget, yet has been largely immune to cuts.²⁶ The resources that could be spent on affordable housing are diverted to harmful police and prison budgets. In light of this, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's call for "working together" to solve the budget crisis is disingenuous, as the burdens of cuts disproportionately impact those of us already in poverty and homelessness.

"The Los Angeles Community Action Network means life and the future. It means a tomorrow fight. It means my get up and go. That's what it means. We're still here. We ain't going nowhere. If it wasn't for our work at LA CAN, it would have been a Katrina. It would have been genocide down here." – Downtown Resident and LA CAN Member

The title of this article refers to the classic and timely 1975 book, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, which focuses on the forgotten role of black labor during the 1960s struggle against racial and economic injustice.²⁷ Our organizing picks up that torch and our victories result from ordinary people doing extraordinary things. To conclude, we emphasize that we are political prisoners in our own community inside Los Angeles. There is no need to board a plane and leave the country to find human rights violations leading to mass premature death. The situation in Los Angeles reflects the same crises existing worldwide wherein fiscal concerns override human rights. While police and prison spending are offered as solutions, they actually represent much of the problem: turning away from collective social welfare to a war on the poor further decreases our chances of being

http://cao.lacity.org/bud2010-11/10-11Proposed_BudgetSummary.pdf.

25. David Zahniser, *Proposal Would Merge L.A. Agencies*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 23, 2010, at AA4; Maeve Reston, *City Coffers Get a Boost: L.A. Council Agrees to Give Up \$12 Million to Replenish City's Emergency Reserve*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 26, 2010, at AA1.

26. We found that the Mayor's Office created an online "Budget Challenge" game to allow residents try to balance the budget. While the departments administering libraries, recreation and parks, and parking are all options, the LAPD is not even a choice. The game is completely rigged because you have to make all the maximum cuts to all choices to eliminate the deficit without letting us pick the LAPD. See http://labudgetchallenge.lacity.org/budgetchallenge/sim/budget_master.html.

27. DAN GEORGAKAS & MARVIN SURKIN, *DETROIT: I DO MIND DYING: A STUDY IN URBAN REVOLUTION* (1999).

adequately housed while punitive policies persistently eliminate precious life chances for our community and others across the world. Ultimately, our struggles and victories are beacons of hope in the ongoing fight for our human rights because a changed city is not only possible but necessary.