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## Los Angeles Homeless Encampments: East of Mainstreet

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## Los Angeles Homeless Encampments: East of Mainstreet

### Abstract

Homelessness can impact a person's ability to navigate public spaces, find employment, meet basic subsistence, and have access to essential social services. Instead, the long-term consequences of homelessness have been focused on the criminalization of unhoused people. This fieldwork analyzes the daily obstacles that individuals face east of main street in downtown Los Angeles. Although wide variation exists from different locations many challenges stemming from mental illness, substance use disorder, and ostracization from mainstream society make these circumstances increasingly difficult to navigate. All these factors are influenced by the policy environments that continuously impact these targeted populations. I will present findings regarding informal social dynamics, subsistence adaptation, mental health within the unsheltered homeless, as well as alcohol and drug use. This research will provide a better understanding of the criminalization of homelessness by considering the unique needs of the individuals. It will also illuminate potential changes in policy amid efforts to move out the homeless into permanent housing.

### Keywords

Homelessness, Poverty, Public Spaces, Policing, Criminalization

**Los Angeles Homeless Encampments: East of Mainstreet**

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JS 207: Seminar in Qualitative Research Methods

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October 16, 2022

### **Abstract**

Homelessness can impact a person's ability to navigate public spaces, find employment, meet basic subsistence, and have access to essential social services. Instead, the long-term consequences of homelessness have been focused on the criminalization of unhoused people. This fieldwork analyzes the daily obstacles that individuals face east of main street in downtown Los Angeles. Although wide variation exists from different locations many challenges stemming from mental illness, substance use disorder, and ostracization from mainstream society make these circumstances increasingly difficult to navigate. All these factors are influenced by the policy environments that continuously impact these targeted populations. I will present findings regarding informal social dynamics, subsistence adaptation, mental health within the unsheltered homeless, as well as alcohol and drug use. This research will provide a better understanding of the criminalization of homelessness by considering the unique needs of the individuals. It will also illuminate potential changes in policy amid efforts to move out the homeless into permanent housing.

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### **Los Angeles Homeless Encampments: East of Mainstreet**

When people begin to think about Los Angeles, they are captivated by the glitz and glamor that has been continuously portrayed in the media. From afar the city sky lines are captivating and visually appealing even to the untrained eye. Tourists come to the city with expectations of being in close proximity of A listers who are constantly spotted all over the town. However, reality strikes when tourists realize there are numerous homeless encampments throughout various parts of the city. Instead, of being captivated by the luxury and grandeur that the city has to offer they very quickly begin to realize that there are “good” and “bad” parts like any other city. East of Main Street, where my research was primarily focused there were long lines of tents that situated themselves even in the busiest of sidewalks. The sounds of this busy city were flooded with car horns and business owners shouting the latest deals of the week. On the other side of the street, rows of tents that have undergone various tests of weather, time, and durability. The tents are torn, rugged and covered with fabrics to maintain a sense of privacy. Most of these people’s belongings did not all fit within this tent, so they often took an additional portion of space on the sidewalk. There were lawn chairs along the sidewalks they were overrun by the stench of urine and trash that had been collecting over days managed to slip through the thick layer of my mask. The storefront of these businesses was often tucked away by the lavish fabrics that shimmered in the hot day’s sun. As I carefully tried to maneuver my way around the tents and businesses, I noticed that locals were in fact navigating through these conditions with ease. I was in awe of their focus. They walked with a purpose accustomed to the unhoused living conditions but always made sure not to walk too closely to someone’s living quarters. Many consumers made an exemption to this unspoken rule when there were parking spots available on the street, so they wouldn’t have to pay elevated parking prices. They always made sure to lock

their cars and, in several instances, when someone was sitting outside, they preferred to walk on the street instead of on the sidewalk.

In stark contrast amongst the businesses who are trying to gather attention from onlookers, many of those who are unhoused strategically place their tents in an area they are less likely to be evicted. Many of these encampments are placed in front of fenced parking lots or closed businesses where they are not directly interfering with day-to-day consumerism in downtown. Their imagery of the city is much different that tourists that idealize living in Los Angeles. Many are constantly in search of running water, restroom facilities and a hot meal. As they navigate their way through the city, many avoid crossing paths or making direct eye contact with tourists as well as other locals. I noticed the isolating feeling of seeing others walk with their head down and arms across their shoulders trying to conceal their presence on Main Street. As well as the stark contrast between sounds, while some locations were dormant while others are filled with agitated screams of frustration. Making their presence known as their breaths become heavier and demanding to be seen. Many have endured long days of inactivity and an overwhelming feeling of uneventfulness that is met with ongoing feelings of seclusion (Rowe & Wolch, 1990). Both encounters recognize the ostracization that has been internalized due to the economic circumstances that have resulted from a lack of social networks and struggles with mental illness or both (Rufo, 2020).

As a researcher, who grew up in Los Angeles I noticed that there were visible disparities depending on what part of town you were in. Not only in the structures but the type of social connections that you were able to develop interacting with local businesses as well as out on the streets. I wanted to analyze the ways in which community members interacted with the homeless or the lack thereof. Whether this differed from other individuals who were experiencing the same

circumstances and if the lack of interaction is due to the lack of understanding towards these large, marginalized groups. By looking at how the city has become accustomed to having these groups and their living facilities in open spaces that are near businesses particularly in the downtown area. Due to the circumstances, I also wanted to see whether social disorganization influenced the ways in which these areas were policed. Lastly, through these series of external (poverty, violence, stereotypes) and internal (personal inclinations) had any effect on the ways in which these groups have adapted to living in these conditions and making the best out of their current situations.

### **Literature Review**

The underlying significance in understanding the cycles that many homeless individuals endure gives us an authentic insight into navigating public spaces in Los Angeles. Societal and cultural norms emphasize the importance of individual responsibility to get out of conditions of poverty. However, those that are found in these conditions find that long term solutions to homelessness are not plausible if they are worried about meeting basic subsistence. The Safer Cities Initiative that began in 2006 incorporated an additional patrol of fifty officers to the area that saw a dramatic increase in the number of arrests and citations issued in the area (Vitale, 2010). According to the National Institute of Justice, Skid Row was targeted due to the high-risk characteristics of these communities. These characteristics included abuse problems, mentally ill and lastly having disabilities (Rowe & Wolche, 1990). According to the Great Los Angeles Homeless Count that included both sheltered and unsheltered population a total of 5,131 individuals. The operation of this program was active for approximately 68 weeks. As of September 17, 2006, to June 1, 2007, during the first eight-month period the Metropolitan Division Mounted Unit and Eastside Detail made “1,800 felony arrests, 1,300 misdemeanor

arrests, performed 8,000 warrant checks, and issued more than 8,000 citations” (Vitale, 2010). For the cost of the fifty officers deployed into skid row alone it was \$6 million a year and each arrest cost the City of Los Angeles \$4,300 which came out to a total of \$118 million during the 68-week life of the program (Vitale, 2010). Also, a part of this initiative portable toilets was removed to deter homeless from loitering.

In 2016 approval of Proposition HHH that increased the city budget of homeless people into 1.2 billion dollars and the harmful effects of Skid Row remain intact. Despite law enforcement efforts previously mentioned by Vitale (2010) that highlighted the use of arrests and citations to remove members away from Skid Row. Recent research supports Rufo’s (2020) conclusions, as many individuals endure the iron grip of homelessness, addiction, and mental illness the solution is not to arrest people to show them the way out. The Los Angeles Supportive Housing (PSH) was seen to help individual cases to have access to vital resources such as job training, counseling, and financial support. Rufo (2020) illustrates that there is a dense network of supportive-housing units that houses residents that suffer from mental illness, disability, and severe levels of economic distress. During an encounter with a resident of PSH, they explained that they may have a hotel room, but some would rather choose to spend the night on the streets. Since many wanted to be closer to the action as Cohen (2001) describes, that substance use is common when trying to escape the uneventfulness of everyday life. The City and County’s final plan wanted to address providing housing resources; its limitations are the maintenance of these buildings and the services that are provided. Some residents of these facilities have gone on to describe that PSH are “mental wards” that have lots of fights and overdoses occur within these buildings. Rufo (2020) criticizes this proposition since even after spending \$619 million in housing the number of people on the streets increased by 16%.



Both Vitale (2010) and Rufo (2020) agree that criminalizing poverty and financing buildings without offering a viable alternative for housing creates short term solutions to a more complex problem. When you remove encampments in certain locations, they pop right back up creating an ongoing loop that is neither cost effective or efficient. Culhane (2010) criticizes that the homelessness problem should not be addressed through policing alone. He emphasizes that SCI had no alternatives to housing and supportive resources as a result these groups would disperse indigent people into other areas. Overall, emphasizing the importance of connecting these individuals to resources that address chronic homelessness to permanently uplift these communities. Sergeant Kouvelis stated: “the street gangs” control the markets for meth, heroin, prostitution, cigarettes, and stolen goods in the epicenter of LA for drug addictions” (Rufo, 2020). The goal of the police force goal was to disrupt the booming business rather than addressing the devastating consequences of housing or job loss. They approached the housing crisis as one that needed to be dismantled by the selling and distribution of drugs. Therefore, those who resided in these areas became targets of broken windows policing. This ultimately resulted in the criminalization of homelessness by turning to “prohibition, incarceration and abstinence” (Rufo, 2020). Culhane (2010) notes that even without the presence of these people the area may still attract perpetrators of crime and criminalize the victims of this social problem. As described by Vitale (2010) the tens of thousands of arrests that occurred many were issued fines and arrestees were permanently ineligible for social services. Vital services such as food stamps, supportive housing, training programs, and federal aid that was in place to help these individuals satisfy their immediate needs. The last consequences of a criminal record remaining years keeping the cycle of poverty limiting access to socio-economic mobilization.

The concentration of social services today is a result of social services that were installed in this neighborhood in the 1980s so that residential neighborhoods were not burdened with providing for these populations (Vitale, 2010). Social services were concentrated in this area to meet the needs of the rapidly growing sector of the homeless population. Overall, creating an obstacle for gentrifying forces that want to push out the homeless without taking into consideration the proximity of service hubs that is concentrated in Skid Row (Rowe & Wolch, 1990). A homeless individual's locale influenced the development of social relations that can dramatically affect material, emotional and logical support. When there is a dramatic shift from traditional social networks that are typically developed in the home and workplace are no longer their informal peer networks are formed. Street encampments serve as a new peer network whose locale is situated within vacant lots, sidewalks, and parks. Throughout Los Angeles and other cities these are the spaces that are typically occupied by the homeless.

Demographically within the homeless population males outnumber the number of women (Rowe & Wolch (1990), Green (2013)). Rowe & Wolch (1990) stated that for many women this meant that they turned to a love/spouse relationship for protection that serves as a home-based network. An absence of traditional frameworks and threatening locales including vulnerabilities to attacks increases the likelihood of many women tolerating negative aspects of the relationship (Rowe & Wolch, 1990). Even connections with informal encampments can easily fall adrift due to the constant relocation. Within these groups they often socialize with one another and provide protection for one another's belongings commonly seen in love/spouse relationships that can provide a sense of security (Rowe & Wolch, 1990). Counter to Green et al. (2013) characterizes the social network of homeless men to be with people with whom they interact daily. Continuous homelessness being a factor in the way that there is "an increased exposure to high-risk

individuals rather than protective or supportive individuals.” Green argues that the greatest impact on a man’s social network is typically established earlier on before they enter the culture of chronic homelessness. Both Rowe, Wolch (1990) & Green et al. (2013) emphasize that the primary characteristics in both men and women experiencing homelessness prioritized their immediate needs rather than lifelong goals. For subsistence, many turn to panhandling or helping local businesses as a way for them to receive immediate necessities or cash. Both social networks and forms of income are highly unstable which can over time have severe impacts on an individual's identity and self-esteem.

As of 2022, an ordinance replacing Section 41.18 places prohibits sleeping, lying, or blocking the passage of the public right of way. The spaces that were banned included not obstructing a sidewalk or street. Those who do not comply shall be issued a citation if they resist or delay a city employee from throwing away items that can be found in their encampments. For those that are experiencing homelessness and have no place to go they have all their belongings thrown away without an opportunity to get it back. The Skid Row homeless sweeps allow for a fifteen-minute notice as residents have described to move out or lose their belongings. Many go through this process more than once and when the city vacates these premises many of the residents move their items back. So, this process is ongoingly repeated, and the residents are frustrated because it is just another form of removal without assistance. They must be on high alert from city officials along with other potential threats or they risk losing everything that they own. Additional information placed on the signage of this ordinance provided a phone number to recover these items but most of these street cleaners throw their personal items into the dumpster. This has detrimental effects on an already vulnerable population that struggle with feeling invisible having a life that is worthwhile (Culhane, 2001). Many argue that these

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cleanups are necessary for the beautification of the city but without proper accommodations it is once again a short-term solution that temporarily revitalizes the city.

The construction of space in a city is not a neutral act but is one that is influenced by social agents and capital. Smith and Walters (2018) argue that the contemporary cities like Los Angeles are shaped by neoliberal ideologies that result in spaces often designed to control and exclude the homeless. The control of space is seen as a fundamental strategy that the governance of these spaces can be seen through “zero-tolerance policing, anti-social conduct by laws, privatization and exclusionary design” (Smith and Walters, 2018). The privatization of urban spaces ultimately emphasizes the importance of renewal through cleanup and gentrification. For these reasons, LA is now seen as a carceral city that has an evident divide between those who can afford this luxury and those who are living in chronic poverty. Those who are less likely to economically engage in these ‘renewed’ spaces are met with actual and social boundaries within urban neighborhoods. Defensive urban architecture provides a constrained, individualized and consumption-based interaction within the city (Smith and Walters, 2018). Ultimately, determining the terms of use and engagement of these spaces. However, they also determine that people will navigate and use these structures to fit their own personal needs. Changes that have been made to city benches that discourage homeless people from lying or sleeping on “urban furniture.” Therefore, making these benches uncomfortable and penalizing the broader public altering social behaviors in reducing their utility of spaces of encounter. Even the planning decisions of public toilets in downtown L.A. where the Community Redevelopment Agency bulldozed the remaining toilets in Skid Row. The design for South Park did not include any replacements and depended on ‘quasi-public’ restrooms in retail areas or galleries (Smith and

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Walters, 2018). Those who are unable to move to another area have a harder time navigating these public spaces that they depend on daily.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most recent data available in the Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count done in 2019 determined that there is a total of 3,782 in Skid Row. To date most men experiencing homelessness is 67% compared to women at 31%. Those who primarily experience homelessness includes African American (2,225), Hispanic (962), followed by White (511). The majority who experience homelessness are between the ages of 25 and 54. DiGuseppi et al. (2020) conducted a survey at the beginning of the pandemic that had a sample of approximately 600 residents in the Skid Row to examine the underlying health impacts within the homeless population. Much of the findings suggests that social distancing was virtually impossible therefore the Skid Row area was at its peak in infection rates. This was due to the restricted availability and quality of social services within the area. As a result of the stay-at-home order, homeless individuals did not have access to essential facilities such as public spaces such as libraries, aid organizations and stores shut down (DiGuseppi et al., 2020). The conclusion of the study demonstrated that there was recognition amongst the vast homeless population that COVID-19 transmission and infection rates was seen as a serious threat. Most importantly especially among PSH tenants that already displayed “premature aging, early onset geriatric conditions” (Henwood, Redline, and Lahey, 2020). Many of the respondents were a part of the permanent supportive housing that prioritized the most vulnerable homeless individuals.

To counter the immediate health threat that these homeless encampments faced a cost-effective community response in this area was generated by a USC graduate class and the L.A. Community Action Network. In comparison to the city response that they recalled as slow and expensive these organizations managed to raise \$10,000 through a Facebook campaign. These

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organizations managed to distribute 250 handwashing stations throughout homeless encampments across the city (DiGuisseppi et al., 2020). They were able to meet an immediate need and were able to disperse it to multiple areas using this bottom-up approach. Following a petition by LA CAN, “Superior Court Judge Carter ordered the city and county of LA to submit a timeline for installing 50 additional toilet and sanitation stations in Skid Row” (DiGuisseppi et al., 2020). Therefore, emphasizing the importance of community advocacy and partnerships to address proper cleanliness protocols within these areas.

### **Methodology**

#### **Setting**

The location I chose for my field observation was 315 E. 7th Street in downtown Los Angeles. Having frequented this location for several years, I had noticed that there was a newly built Joshua House Clinic-Health Center whose glass windows were free of blemishes and whose exterior looked out of place in this location in observing the daily social interactions on this busy street. This street is divided by businesses and social services on one side with many homeless encampments on the other. These encampments consisted of various tents that had tarps hung alongside the long fence to provide protection from rough winds and rain. They had taken up the curve and left little room for pedestrians to walk along the road. The closest available restroom and washing station was a porta potty that was placed on the curb of the street. It had been tagged and showed signs of extreme wear but nonetheless served its purpose. I conducted my observations on Friday, October 14th from 9am to 2pm. I chose this time to conduct my field observation because the busiest times within the business district are earlier in the day. I also recognized that the distance to arrive at this location was over five hours, so this factor impacted the day that the field observation was conducted. Another component that was

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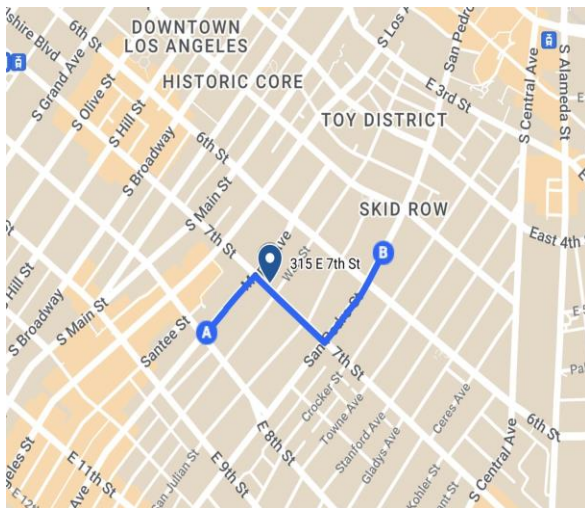
crucial to my study were weather conditions on the day that I chose to conduct my research due to rain conditions that may affect outdoor social relations. Luckily, it was cool weather where I was able to observe just outside the business on Maple Street as shown in Figure 4. I had access to this business since it was previously my father's place of employment. I was able to have a lawn chair just outside of this facility; I was easily able to conduct my fieldwork in this setting. My initial expectation was that there were going to be a lot of social dynamics to document that would be easy to observe in public spaces. My previous experience in the area and knowledge of local business owners made it easier to have access to this location. Without it, I feel like my presence would have been more noticeable in other areas that I was not particularly familiar with.

Figure 1 is a Google map that shows my walking path and the general areas that I focused on throughout my research. My position changed on that day due to the inactivity that was seen primarily on my observation of 7<sup>th</sup> street. Within this street, there are twelve homeless encampments where the entire sidewalk was devoted to these dwellings. Many of them had belongings that were not confined to the outside of the tents but that poured out into the sidewalk. Many had covered their tents in tarps for privacy and clothing hanging along the fences. Tarps were also hung along the fences to have more of an airflow going into these tents. Just outside of these tents tv tray tables, bicycles, umbrellas, and other mismatched items. Within this location, there were no restrooms or hand washing facilities located nearby. Many of these residents made accommodations by placing their own buckets for trash and gallon water bottles for bodily fluids. This made an intense odor that I immediately picked up on as I parked on San Pedro and 7th Street. Figure 5 demonstrates that although there are encampments people will still park on the streets as a cheaper alternative than immediate parking lots. Many residents

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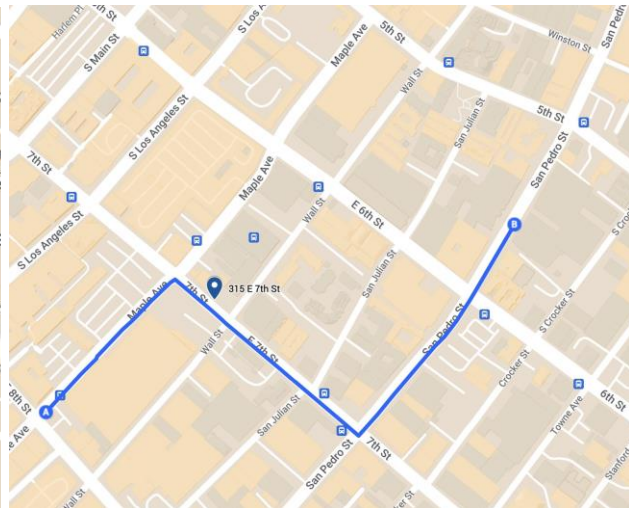
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remained inside of their tents for much of my observation, and I do believe it was largely in part due to the cold weather that is typically not seen in L.A.



**Figure 1 (Zoomed Out) Google Map**

**Location A (Maple & 7th Street)**



**Figure 2 (Zoomed In) Google Map**

**Location B (San Pedro & 7th Street)**

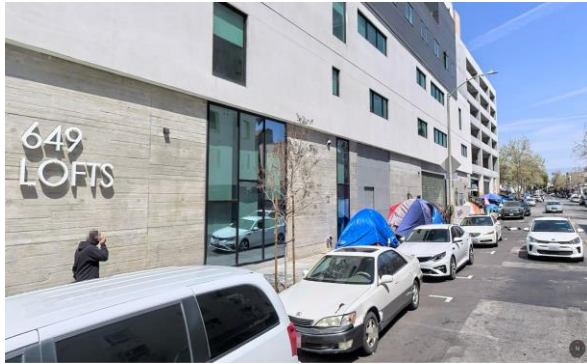


**Figure 3 (Maple & 7th Street)**



**Figure 4 (Maple & 7th Street) Businesses**



**Encampment, Google Maps Photo****Google Maps Photo****Figure 5 (San Pedro & 7th Street), Google Maps Photo****Ethical Considerations**

Even before getting to the setting, I was concerned with accurately capturing the day-to-day experiences of those who are experiencing homelessness. I wanted to make sure that I was not only siding with these participants but also including the perspective of business owners who are also impacted. The first ethical issue that I knew I was going to run into was informed consent and respect for the privacy of participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Therefore, I opted out of taking photographs due to the lack of special provisions and for respect of the site. I recognized that even if these tents are in public locations, I should not be intrusive into what is very much their homes and tight knit communities. As a way of maintaining my insider status and not significantly impact day to day relations I also opted out of using technology and wrote all my notes by hand. I recognized that by observing their personal lives without their informed consent some may have opted out of this study. Therefore, it may be implied that I was simply “using” the site as a researcher by having a one-sided gain. I took into consideration if I made it obvious by having a laptop or camera in my field observation it would significantly alter participants behavior. It would automatically draw attention not only from my participants but other community members as well. However, I wanted to be transparent in the fact that if

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someone asked me what I was doing and the purpose I would disclose this information. The time this came up was with a business owner on Maple & 7th street who was curious about what brought me back into the neighborhood. Other than that, I did not inform my presence to the participants that I was observing to maintain anonymity and obtain the best results.

Due to the limited time of the study, there was not time to build rapport and trust among the participants. It is also important to note that due to the limited geographic observation it is crucial not to make generalized assumptions about other lived experiences of homelessness within the Los Angeles area. Throughout this process I was concerned for hygienic and sanitation conditions that I had observed. These included indecent exposure due to the lack of showers, hand washing and restroom facilities. With the ongoing pandemic, I began to think of the welfare of the group that I was primarily observing. These were my biases that I was aware of and in part influenced the analysis of my data. As a female researcher, I did not want to be viewed as an outsider for my own personal safety. As a result, I was very strategic in the clothes that I wore to attract minimal attention. My comfort level was moderate because although I was familiar with the location, I was accustomed to spending elongated periods of time out in the open. I considered the fact that not only was I a researcher but a female as well to a certain degree that did make me feel vulnerable. For this reason, it influenced the location of my fieldwork. A bias that I did have due to growing up in similar areas was that it could be potentially dangerous. So, I did take pepper spray with me just in case I had a negative encounter as the sole researcher in this study. I did my best to work through these potential biases by being open and alert with my surroundings including those around me.

**Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher, I wanted to take a closer look at the daily lives of those that are in encampments. From my location, I was able to write down a lot of notes and voice memos that would ensure that I could accurately capture the description of multiple encampments to an outsider. By spending time on considerable detail, I was able to better understand the social networks and point of interest within this location. On the other side of the street of these encampments, I was able to set up a station that consisted of a chair just outside of a business owner that was familiar with who I was due to past encounters. My location was close enough to the business where I was able to take notes on a notepad without making it seem as something out of the ordinary. Many bystanders did not notice my presence; they just passed along minding their own business. While other male bystanders attempted to engage in conversation or make eye contact and proceeded about their day. With my bilingual background, I was able to listen to conversations both in Spanish and English. My location was near a bus stop as well so many topics included work, family/friend relations as well as personal issues that they had encountered throughout their day. This was one of the first times I had ever conducted fieldwork but as an insider I wanted to make sure that I wouldn't miss or overlook details that an outsider would coming into this area. I wanted to make the best use of my time, so I began to go into detail about the condition in which these encampments were in. Also taking into consideration if they were the state of their tents and belongings was an indicator to me approximately whether it was near or chronic homelessness (Green et al., 2013).

After I proceeded to record everything that I saw, I adjusted my focus to movement. I wanted to see how homeless individuals interacted with the environment as well as others around them. It was very gloomy and many people towards the earlier part of my observation remained

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in their tents. For others it did not hinder their ability to socialize on street corners and socialize with those who were around them. However, this movement was not so consistent since many kept to themselves or occasionally sat outside of their tents but did not engage with the outside world. It was difficult to see how they had been feeling that day or what concerns they may have had on their mind. I also believed that the weather played a factor for this inactivity.

Some of my strengths as a researcher was my adaptability and calmness to certain situations that I was exposed to. As an insider, I was able to capture these incidents with detail without being too startled at something that I was not previously exposed to. Before conducting this study, I had not been exposed to indecent exposure or the use of illicit drugs like heroin. However, I knew that including these lived realities was a part of the lived experience that homeless individuals go through. As a researcher, I wanted to ensure that I reported honestly and to the best of my ability. Although these observations were limited in the sense that I did not get to conduct interviews which I feel would have made impactful and memorable statements for my qualitative research. This posed a challenge for me since I did not want to generalize the lived experiences that these communities go through daily. I worked through these limitations by paying attention to the types of interactions that people were having and by filling the gaps through relevant literature that had studied a large sample size.

### **Findings**

#### **Theme 1: Informal Social Dynamics and Subsistence Adaptation**

In the early morning of my observation, several business owners on the street started their morning routine by spraying down the front of the sidewalk. They had to do this because of the strong smell of urine that had been left from the day before. One of the business owners had commented to me that without addressing the smell so it would often deter a lot of customers

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from entering their store. Business owners would often outsource labor even for a small job and would hire someone conveniently located outside. Some of these jobs included stocking shelves, loading inventory, and power washing the sidewalk in front of the store. Most of the locations of the blocks had security guards to ensure that items were not taken off the shelf without paying. Businesses on the block were privately owned and would become extremely frustrated when robberies occurred. Business owners like Raul wanted to ensure that their businesses would not be easily targeted. They would branch out to these individuals going through economic hardship since it was a cheaper alternative than hiring someone full time. Business owners saw this as not only cost effective but to have effective crime control within their location. Rowe & Wolche (1990) emphasized that this part of their home network where these reciprocal interactions allowed these individuals to feel as a productive person. For those that had no money to enter these businesses they would encounter small stands that consisted of items placed on a tv dinner tray table. Some of the products consisted of cigarettes, shampoo, deodorant, and lotto tickets. For those that were experiencing economic troubles they often depended on panhandling as a source of income to meet their immediate needs (Rowe & Wolche, 1990). Another example of subsistence adaptation is when these individuals do not have access to running water for drinking or hygiene. They depend on shelters, public parks, and newly installed porta potties that are poorly maintained. A black woman was walking along the street when she noticed that there was a porta potty installed. Her first instinct was to check if there was running water in the handwash station. She then proceeded to give herself a full body wash with a wet paper towel. She didn't mind if people were staring, she simply wanted to clean herself.

Later in the day, it was interesting to see the social dynamics that were carried out in front of the food mart, cafe, pizza place. Black men would gather on the street corner in front of

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the cafe to talk over breakfast while playing loud music. Many of the onlookers from the other side of the street would come over to join in conversation. At first when they came over, I was unsure if they had known each other beforehand or just met because their demeanor was significantly friendly. They would break down into laughter and their body language read attentive listening. Occasionally, a woman would pass by and gather their attention. One of them would gather the courage to say something like “Hope you have a blessed day, beautiful.” The woman would walk off feeling complemented, I could tell by her vivid smile as she was walking away. As time passed by about an hour or so the conversation did not die off, but they had grown tired of standing so they pulled a lounge chair and wheeled it off into that very corner. It was not in very great condition; it was brown with tears, but it could still serve its purpose. For others, they would wait outside of their tents and just talk to people that happened to pass by. These interactions whether wanted or not would also consist of the people who had just parked nearby to go into the flower district nearby. They would prefer to park on street parking since it was a cheaper option than the parking lots nearby that were guarded by a fence that was waist length.

Throughout most of my observation, I noticed that there was a lack of movement and productivity within this encampment location. Many of the inhabitants seemed to stay in their tent and occasionally came outside to enjoy the fresh air. As the weather got colder, there were fewer social interactions and more people remained indoors. While others gathered on the corner next to a mom-and-pop shop, the social dynamics within these sectors are ones that many scholars argue are used to meet immediate needs such as food, shelter, and protection. Many just sat on their lounge chairs in front of their tents and did not socialize for much during the time that I was there. They were in observation of who parked in front of their tent and who was passing along.

**Theme 2: Mental Health within the Unsheltered Homeless**

Oftentimes this prevailing boredom as Cohen (2001) describes that the world around these encampments placed “full social and work lives with being normal, and busyness with importance.” Rowe et al. (1990) and Cohen (2001) agree that these individuals’ social identity is significantly shaped by the idea that their lives are worthwhile if they are seen as productive members of society, for those that are attempting to engage with this idea of eventfulness they will dramatize mundane events that occur in their daily lives. Cohen (2001) emphasizes that these adaptive behaviors are setting-specific and are therefore normalized in everyday encounters. Rowe et al. (1990) emphasizes that an individual’s locale is a combination of both social institutions and environmental features. When there are cans, debris and trash surrounding their homes are perceived as beneath these normative cultural standards of a decent quality of living. The stereotyping that occurs from their clothing and shoes also play a factor with how shopkeepers, bystanders as well as other people they may encounter generalize about their person. Typically, I noticed that when there were poorly dressed homeless individuals they would have been automatically kicked out of a store. Even if it was the closest food market on the block and most food distribution was more than three blocks away. On the streets, many would keep their distance and cross the street to avoid contact with the individual or their encampments. This is a social distancing behavior that has been prevalent even before the pandemic. Even when a lot of these individuals that were trying to engage in conversation, just wanted someone to talk after spending a lot of time talking to themselves. Cohen (2001) suggests that these individuals try their best to seem mentally competent by knowing something as simple as the day of the week or the President of the United States. Using these well-known facts, they want to emphasize that they are people that should not be dismissed due to their circumstances.

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On the streets, the most visible homeless people were those that were loudly talking to themselves along the street. As they were walking, they were attentively looking on the ground, in trash cans to see if they could find anything. On one occasion a man that had passed by was looking through the city trash can outside of the cafe to have leftovers from this business. They were not concerned about being judged by the public; they were just in dire need to fulfill their hunger. After they had found something to eat, they continued to walk down the street moving along. On another occasion, there was a black woman that was screaming on the streets through her tone she was extremely angry. Unlike the gentleman before her, he tried to keep a low tone, but she was adamant to make sure that she was being heard. Many that were along her pathway noticed this and moved out of the way as quickly as they could. Compared to the other gentlemen, these individuals that had been waiting by the bus were on higher alert. She was hitting herself in the head and then proceeded to jaywalk into oncoming traffic because someone was coming after her. She kept rambling on about all the wrongs that had been done to her throughout her life and I was trying to interpret much of the mumbling that occurred. Her already agitated state was exacerbated by cars that were honking at her. She had no shoes on and her clothes were torn in multiple areas. An observer, just like other bystanders did not intervene and just watched her as Cohen (2001) describes enduring their psychotic pain alone. Due to the location of the observation, I noticed two mental health workers from the Joshua House Clinic next door come out of the building once they heard all the commotion. They then called her by her name; they quickly de-escalated the situation by asking her why she was upset as well as if she wanted something more to cover up with. She walked back from the other side of the street as if nothing had happened and waited patiently for the workers to help her out. There was a



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sense of relief that she was being heard and her needs were not being neglected. She put on a t-shirt and a pair of shoes that were her size and her demeanor completely changed.

According to Grotts et al. (2022), 25% of adults who are homeless in Los Angeles County have serious mental illness (SMI). This disorder can impair the mental and the behavioral health of the person that can consequently affect different spheres of social networks. This is critical because they are impaired in areas such as “work, school, relationships, health or other areas of life.” With the ongoing demand for psychiatric facilities there has been a reduction in supportive residential facilities that deal with mental illness or disabilities. As a result, those that have SMI and are homeless fall into the cycle of going through the emergency rooms, psychiatric holds, jails without much of an alternative (Grotts et al., 2022). Each of these impairments have different features that range from hallucinations, delusions, manic episodes in a spectrum of bipolar disorders.

**Theme 3: Alcohol and Drug Use**

Cohen (2001) suggests that the hardships of everyday life and the uneventfulness contributes to the ongoing use of substance to escape these circumstances. Many had made an informal income from picking up the leftover beer cans off the streets and placed them in their carts. While others found enjoyment loitering next to the food mart that were often used for alcoholic purchases with brown bags. Green et al. (2013) acknowledges that these substances serve as a buffer for the stressful outcomes that are often derived from both near-term and long-term homelessness. Particularly, for men there were higher reported rates of hard drug use compared to their female and youth counterparts. Rufo (2020) emphasizes that drug use is a booming business in Skid Row and Homeless Healthcare of Los Angeles has been working with this population since 1985. The executive director of this center explains that most of the people

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that he sees are crystal meth users and a combination of other hard drugs while the remaining percentage are single drug users.

During my observation, I had a chance to overhear a conversation between a late 20's white couple about the money they were going to spend on drugs. The man was insistent that they spent more money on quality items, and he was irritated because the woman had overspent on something he believed was overpaid for. The woman apologized several times and attempted to reason with him. They were sitting on the side of the building right next to my car where I had taken a break for a short period of time. However, this stay was elongated once I knew what they were up to. They then proceeded to inject themselves with a substance on a busy street. The tints on my car windows were dark enough to not make it noticeable that I was there. Luckily, no one had walked through where they were because they had enough cover by the vehicles parked in front of them. They had marks on their arms that to me were indicators that they had been using for a while. I believe they were already under the influence due to the slurred speech. After they had participated in this illegal activity, they ate food that they had received from the shelter. Soon after their departure I noticed that they had left behind the needle on the floor along with their trash.

Recently, the Center for Hard Reduction used their resources to offer short term solutions in extreme cases such as an overdose. Rufo (2020) observed that these centers had limited outreach since "Less than 1 percent voluntarily enrolled themselves in its free outpatient drug-treatment program after responding to more than 12,000 addicts with clean needles and supplies." Rufo then goes on to state that these statistics are not particularly effective in the public policy setting that keep people alive but do not change the trajectory of addiction on Skid

Row. Tringale and Subica (2021) describe the two essential changes that the Homeless Health Center went through considering the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the safety of syringe exchange patients. These programs were essential because it aimed to avoid medication gaps, pre-pandemic required patients to consume MAT medications onsite. Innovative solutions such as frosted glass sanitized booths that were frequently sanctified by staff that allowed on-site physicians and social workers to continue to provide these essential services. However, there were protective measures in place like social workers and substance use counselors that directly referred their patients and responded to requests for identification when they picked up medications. A second alternative included having a “coordinated pharmacy” that allowed for the dispensing of essential medication that avoided standard barriers such as identification and insurance. For these dispensing programs, it lessened the workload and regulations that offered patients more choices while retaining MAT patients.

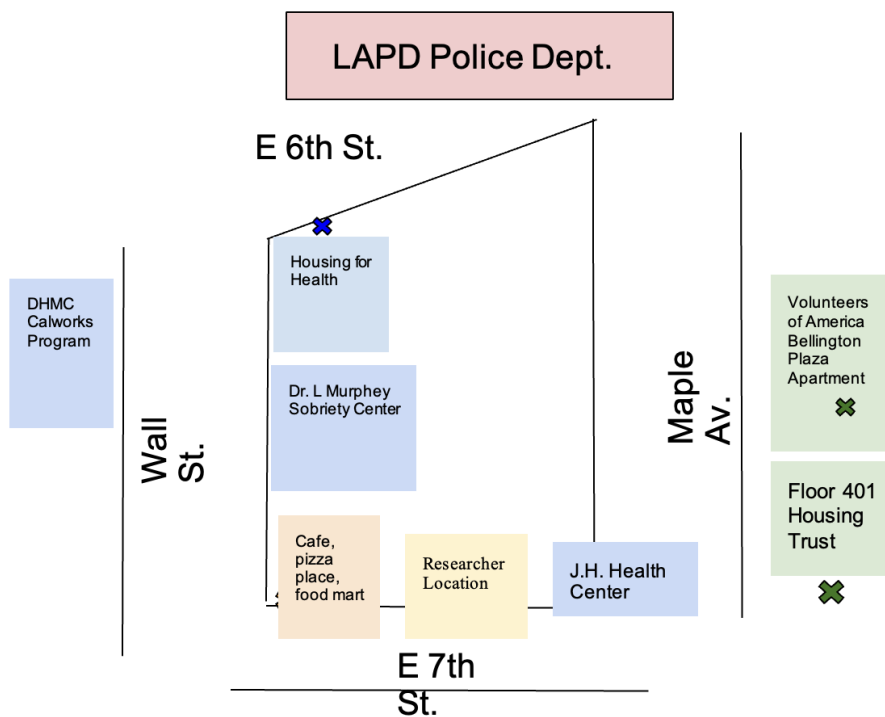
### **Significance and Contributions**

The significance of this fieldwork observation highlights the role of the environment in structuring individual experiences of unsheltered homelessness. It has important implications for various community stakeholders who can agree that homelessness is an extensive social problem that is ingrained in Los Angeles County. As seen throughout my essay, billions of dollars have been spent to address these housing inequities and yet Skid Row encampments remain largely intact. Despite law enforcement efforts to dismantle these communities by forcibly removing these encampments and issuing citations without providing long term placement alternatives for those who have nowhere else to go. Within my findings, it explores the various internal and external factors that homeless individuals encounter that overall limit the long-term impacts of self-help centers. Each one of my themes categorize these challenges that are ingrained in social

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networks, mental health and substance that critically analyze the obstacles that these individuals encounter daily. These obstacles are not separate but interrelated, especially in cases of chronic homelessness where homeless individuals are significantly more exposed to these issues. As Rufo (2020) emphasizes it is not only a housing problem but a human one that can't be fixed by simply opening buildings that house these issues. The deliberate placement of these services and housing trusts maintains Skid Row as the largest service hub in the city. Halushka (2019) emphasizes how constant engagement with bureaucratic engagements can be both physically and emotionally draining due to the runaround punishment. This primarily came from services with temporary and short-term assistance that does not lift these individuals out of poverty and break them from these cycles. Overall, my research contextualizes these issues in a specific geographic location as seen in the figure below.



### Conclusion

Coming back to my community as a researcher gave me an additional lens that allowed me to critically think about all the stakeholders there were impacted by this issue. Therefore, I knew from early on I did not want to generalize these experiences by offering general interpretations of what I was observing. Throughout this process I wanted to ensure that I remained authentic while protecting the identities of these individuals since certain observations could be incriminating. From this experience, I was able to learn more about the insider and outsider approach in this geographic area. In the beginning, as an insider I was able to have access to this area without standing out and blending in as best as possible. I took into consideration typical behaviors that could be found in this neighborhood and adjusted accordingly. Strangely enough, I still felt like an outsider while conducting my observation since I felt that I could not relate to the daily hardships that these individuals had to go through daily. This led to a personal reflection where I was grateful for running water, restroom facilities, and not having to worry about subsistence adaptations.

With my new role, I also recognize that within my observation I did not offer any sort of compensation for the personal lives I was observing. So, for further research, I want to get to know those who have been in the community for a long time and have experienced these issues firsthand. I found it very informative in other qualitative research when they included these various perspectives since it demonstrates the wide range of personalities and backgrounds on Skid Row. By formally obtaining their consent and serving as a point of reference for any immediate need that they are experiencing. Cohen (2001) suggests that the uneventfulness of leading this lifestyle can have detrimental effects on mental health. Therefore, it is significant to

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empower these individuals to tell their narratives that often go unseen in policy implications on the very issues that they are experiencing.

Another stakeholder that I am interested in interviewing are the People's Park Advocates in Berkeley that have persistently met the needs of the homeless there with limited and cost-effective resources. I was able to look at the online resources that they offered for the public that referred them to information and resources on how to help the park members. I want to assess how they managed to revitalize a space and community by demonstrating the historical importance of the area. I would also adapt these observations and apply them to the Los Angeles area.

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