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Tackling Homelessness in Los Angeles' Skid Row: The Role of Policing Strategies and the Spatial Deconcentration of Homelessness

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The policing initiatives in Los Angeles' Skid Row studied by Berk and MacDonald (2010, this issue) are part of a long history of using police to control public spaces and delimit the physical appearance of homelessness in the modern American city. Shop owners, local chambers of commerce, tourism officials, and their advocates in government have long been frustrated by the presence of visibly destitute men and women in commercial areas. These frustrations have led to repeated attempts to criminalize homelessness with ordinances that target panhandling, loitering, and sleeping in public (Foscarinis, Cunningham-Bowers, and Brown, 1999; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2006). Even more commonly, police have been deployed to clear areas of indigent people by prodding them to "move along" or by loading them in vans for transport to shelters or even to other towns. People who are homeless have also been the target of differential enforcement of various laws as a means of discouraging them from settling in certain areas or for clearing them for special events (e.g., national political conventions, Olympics, etc.). Encampments and other informal squatter settlements have been dismantled regularly on the grounds of enforcing health and safety standards (Guy and Lloyd, 2010; Katz, 2010).

The rationale for the Safer City Initiatives (SCI) in Skid Row went beyond the mere management of physical space and aimed more specifically to reduce *crime* in the downtown district of Los Angeles. As Berk and MacDonald (2010) indicate in their test of its effects, the initiative was intended explicitly to reduce nuisance, property, and violent crimes that were thought to be associated with the spatial concentration of homelessness in Skid Row. The authors report

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that a "meaningful but modest" reduction occurred in crime in the period subsequent to the clearance of encampments and stepped-up enforcement. However, because crime rates remained approximately 60% of their prior levels, they also concluded that most of the crime in the area was not associated with public forms of homelessness *per se*. The area itself may have remained a place that attracts or is home to perpetrators of crime, regardless of the visible presence of people who are homeless. Moreover, as the authors note, because people who are homeless are more likely to be victims of some crimes, especially violent crimes, some of the crime reduction may be attributable to the removal of potential victims, not just perpetrators.

In any case, Berk and MacDonald (2010) conclude rightly that that the SCI did not produce results that could support a policing strategy as an effective means to address homelessness. Without adequate alternatives to street homelessness, as in a sufficient supply of supported housing and emergency shelter, any clearance strategy is simply going to disperse people into other areas, where they will remain homeless. (Interestingly, the authors did not find a displacement effect on *crime*—people who were homeless and scattered by the elimination of encampments in Skid Row did not create an increase in crime in adjacent areas. Rather, they found a spillover effect—adjacent areas also saw declines in crime, possibly because of the carryover of stepped-up enforcement in adjacent areas.) As noted by Berk and MacDonald (2010), the SCI intervention was not intended as an intervention to address homelessness, but instead it was developed to fight the crime problems created by the *spatial concentration* of homelessness in encampments and on the streets of Skid Row. The authors report that they could not find any potential confounding explanations for the observed drop in crimes that were linked to the timing of the SCI. However, it is noteworthy that simultaneous interventions were underway in Skid Row sponsored by Los Angeles County, under the umbrella of the "Homelessness Prevention Initiatives," which included the creation of expanded supported housing capacity, increased housing assistance under the General Relief program, and more aggressive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) enrollment. All of these programs were targeted to people who were chronically homeless in Skid Row. Each of these likely contributed to some declines in homelessness in the area but perhaps not in so distinct a temporal association with the SCI impacts found by the authors.

Regardless, the focus on the deconcentration of visible homelessness and encampments ultimately might prove to be of limited impact, *both* on the spatial concentration of visible homelessness *and* on crime in downtown Los Angeles. First, the intervention seems to be time limited. Police resources cannot be reallocated to this purpose indefinitely. Second, as noted by Berk and MacDonald (2010), the increased police presence may be among the lesser costs of the strategy compared with the costs of related arrests and incarcerations. Thus, it is not clear that the city, which bears the costs of the police, or the county, which pays for the jails, would want to sustain such a strategy. Indeed, a growing body of research—including a study evaluating a housing program targeting chronically homeless persons in Skid Row (Flaming, Matsunaga, and Burns, 2009)—shows that it is cheaper to provide supported housing for many of the chronically homeless than to have them shuttling among hospitals, shelters, and jails (Culhane,

Metraux, and Hadley, 2002; Gilmer, Manning, and Ettner, 2009; Larimer et al., 2009; Perlman and Parvensky, 2006;). Third, and perhaps most importantly, the spatial concentration of visible homelessness and encampments in Skid Row is caused largely by a factor left unaddressed by this dispersal strategy. Specifically, people are living in the streets of Skid Row *en masse* because of the spatial concentration there of large shelters, meal programs, and other social services that target people who are homeless. These programs have longstanding ties to the area and are not going away in the near term. Indeed, among the more fundamental long-term issues to consider regarding the concentration of homelessness in downtown Los Angeles is how to disperse the homelessness *facilities* that are a magnet for needy persons and that have created a self-perpetuating and unrivaled social services ghetto (at least in the United States).

Of course, dispersing homelessness facilities is no more of a long-term approach to addressing homelessness than is dispersing the homeless themselves. Any attempt to address the problematic concentration of homelessness facilities, as well as the visibility of street homelessness in Los Angeles, must include a larger vision and longer term strategy to address homelessness. Indeed, a collective public and private commitment to break up and disperse the facilities in downtown Los Angeles could create just the impetus that is necessary to force a rethinking of how the region addresses the problem of homelessness more generally. Without such a concomitant approach to rethinking the social service ghetto in Skid Row, it will remain the most potent symbol and institutionalization of homelessness in Los Angeles and, indeed, in the United States.

The ingredients of a more sustainable solution should consider several reforms and initiatives. First, as part of the dismantling of the shelter and social services facilities in Skid Row, a plan should be developed for new, more dispersed facilities that are designed at an appropriate scale so as to fulfill an emergency mission (not a human warehouse or long-term care facility). The facilities should be specialized with regard to the populations they serve (people exiting corrections, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, and youth) and should be programmed 24 hours a day (not nighttime only) to provide the services and support people need to relocate sustainably with family, friends, in supported housing, or elsewhere in the community. These new shelters should be intentional, targeted, outcome oriented, and time limited, with clear expectations for both providers and clients (none of these are features of the contemporary homeless shelter as commonly understood or practiced).

A major challenge with the dispersal of homeless facilities will be the certain resistance by neighborhood organizations to the establishment of new facilities. As part of the initial proposals for SCI and the Homelessness Prevention Initiative (HPI), five stabilization centers were proposed as alternatives to incarceration for those committing minor crimes and for those discharged from county hospitals, but resistance was so great that none were ever built. Any strategy involving newly dispersed programs would have to rethink the nature and structure of the programs, physical design, security, and location if they are to be built successfully at all.

Second, programs that support people in avoiding shelter entry or that facilitate shelter exit should be expanded greatly. New federal resources through the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program provide for a significant, newly designed model of service provision

whereby resources are directed to assist homeless and at-risk households with stabilizing their housing or with relocating to a new unit (Culhane, Metraux and Byrne, 2010). Consistent with a more outcome-oriented shelter system, this new paradigm places the emphasis on the desired housing solution rather than on simply maintenance of homeless people in homeless facilities. The prevention of homelessness should become a multisectoral and cross-agency responsibility, with social welfare agencies required to identify if their clients are at risk of homelessness and to provide the first line of defense against it. These agencies would include the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, and programs with residential or institutional components, such as correctional agencies, inpatient care programs, detoxification programs, and dependent and delinquent youth services. Each of these agencies should have protocols for assessing the risk for homelessness among their exiting clientele and programs designed to avert shelter placement, even if those interventions are time limited (the primary risk periods for shelter entry are 30 to 60 days after institutional discharge, and most persons are homeless fewer than 60 days).

Third, the new, spatially deconcentrated, and housing solution-oriented homelessness assistance system should be embedded deeper in the traditional community-based health and social services network. Rather than creating insulated homeless programs or service ghettos, as may have been done inadvertently through the federal Continuum of Care policy, homeless assistance programs should be connecting individuals and families to the regular sources of health and social services supports they can access in their communities after their exit from homelessness (and that many were presumably using prior to entering homelessness). Indeed, these service networks need to be part of the solution to homelessness, both in identifying at-risk households who need stabilization supports as well as in assisting with the transition of people back into stable housing.

Fourth, a newly reformed homelessness assistance system will need much closer coordination with mainstream entitlement and income assistance programs. Every person or family who approaches the homelessness assistance system should be screened systematically for benefits to which they may be eligible. These benefits would include TANF, General Relief (GR), and SSI. Special General Relief initiatives that can provide income and housing assistance to people awaiting SSI approval should be expanded, as these costs are fully recoverable from the federal government from the date of application to the date of receipt. Successful GR housing subsidy programs and employment programs should likewise be expanded and coordinated on site with the newly reformed homeless programs. Recent evaluations of these efforts in LA County have found that employment programs are successful in connecting people to jobs, that housing programs successfully avert and end homelessness among GR recipients, and that both programs are cost effective (Culhane and Metraux, 2009; Moreno, Toros, and Stevens, 2009).

Fifth, because the homelessness problem results most fundamentally from a lack of affordable housing, especially for populations with fixed and low incomes, permanent housing subsidy programs must be expanded aggressively. Research on Skid Row has shown that permanent supported housing programs targeted to people who are chronically homeless can yield a net

positive cost-offset for county government and other public payers (Flaming, Matsunaga, and Burns, 2009). Similar approaches for vulnerable families, particulary those who face costly out-of-home placement of children, should be established, and targeted to this subset of homeless families and to other vulnerable families on fixed disability incomes. Broader housing afford-ability strategies can also help to alleviate some pressure on emergency assistance programs by reducing the number of households with acute housing needs. These strategies could include set-aside programs that require developers to allocate a proportion of new units at affordable rents, designating tax credits for affordable housing projects that target persons who are homeless or of very low income, and expansions in state and federal rental subsidy programs.

Sixth, any effort to address homelessness effectively must consider the perspectives of people who are homeless in the design of various solutions. The single adult homeless popula-tion is aging and is not the same as it was only 15 years ago. Wagner's (1993) ethnography of homelessness made a point of the "resistant" posture of the population at that time, a posture that may be changing as the population ages, and based on more recent ethnographic work (M.H. Moreno, personal communication, May 13, 2010). In any case, input from people who are homeless will help to shape housing solutions and emergency programs that are responsive, timely, and focused on the results that are sought collectively.

Finally, reform strategies should be evaluated rigorously to provide policy makers with in-formation regarding the effectiveness of programs and opportunities for efficiencies. Generating and sustaining political support for homelessness assistance will depend on showing results and must prove to decision leaders that public resources are being invested prudently. Although not all homelessness assistance programs can show cost neutrality or a positive net benefit-cost ratio, many efforts can show that they have positive spillover effects, especially in terms of quality of life for the residents assisted and the communities in which they live (or from which they have spatially deconcentrated), as well as in the reduced use of expensive emergency services. Research will be critical to document these effects.

Conclusion

Policing strategies can address the spatial concentration of homeless encampments and, thereby, reduce some crimes associated with this disproportionate concentration. However, dispersing people who are homeless does not solve their homelessness. As Berk and MacDonald (2010) describe, homelessness is a complex problem that cannot be addressed through a policing ap-proach alone. A legitimate and appropriate role for law enforcement is to help indigent people connect to services and even to discourage unhealthful encampments that enable people to avoid engaging with meaningful services and supports. However, critical to the legitimacy of law enforcement's involvement on this issue must be a broader societal commitment to address homelessness more effectively. That includes not only law enforcement but also social service providers who are willing to reenvision their roles (and locations), community organizations that are willing to provide their support, and government funding for the new model, including targeted shelters and expansions in housing subsidies for those who cannot exit homelessness

without them. A new and more comprehensive approach to homelessness in Los Angeles is possible, and perhaps the modest success of the SCI, as well as the noteworthy successes of the county's HPIs in Skid Row, can provide a new impetus for a more fundamental change in Los Angeles.

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