

HOMELESSNESS IN ORANGE COUNTY: LEGAL, POLITICAL AND HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

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INEQUALITY IN ORANGE COUNTY AND REPERCUSSIONS FOR HOMELESSNESS

It is well documented that Orange County is polarized across geographical lines when it comes to socioeconomic indicators. This is evident if we compare North and South County, but significant differences also exist within particular cities and neighborhoods across the county. For example, in Anaheim there is a drastic difference across most social indicators if we compare residents of Anaheim Hills to those residing in the flatlands. And of course, these disparities in part result in homelessness in certain areas.

Overall, class disparities are striking across the county. For instance, Orange County ranks fourth out of the largest 100 metropolitan areas for the fastest growing income gap between the rich and poor (UCI Community & Labor Project, 2014). It is 43.8% more expensive to live in OC than the national average, and in Anaheim, the cost of living is 46% more than the national average. The Anaheim-Irvine-Santa Ana area is the second least affordable area in the nation to buy a home. The median monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$1,312.00 (UCLA Labor Center, 2017). Therefore, a minimum-wage worker would need to work two full time jobs to afford rent, or make \$25.00 an hour—about \$53,000.00 annually. Yet, 41% of Orange County residents who rent earn a median wage of \$18.00 an hour. As a result of the bewildering housing costs, 60% of renters cannot afford rent, which of course results in homelessness. This has deadly consequences. In 2017, at least 193 people died of homelessness (Graham, 2018).

Across the country, women and children are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population, and Orange County is no exception. During the 2012-2013 academic year, the number of children between preschool and twelfth grade that identified as homeless or in unstable living arrangements rose 7% (SoCal Department of Education, 2015).

Between 2014 and 2015, the number of pre-k12 kids living in shelters rose 326%, and the number of homeless kids in Orange County rose 589% (SoCal Department of Education, 2015).

HOW TO ADDRESS THE CHRONIC ISSUE OF HOMELESSNESS

There are three potential approaches to this crisis, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: political, legal and humanitarian. Unfortunately, over the past several years, legal and political concerns have overridden humanitarian ones, which in turn has led to a rise in activism to contest some of the more draconian legal measures and policies that have been implemented and the underlying lack of long-term thinking. On the legal front, the cities of Santa Ana, Costa Mesa and Anaheim (which have the largest concatenation of homeless persons) have adopted ordinances that ban the homeless from setting up tents or sleeping in public—“urban camping,” “or sitting/lying down or sleeping in public spaces” (Winslow, 2018).

In 2017, after complaints from many government workers in the City of Santa Ana who have offices in the area of the Civic Center, where hundreds of homeless have set up camp, the Santa Ana city council approved a ban on any enclosed spaces (tents and tarps), as well as a shutdown of the provision of food and medical services that many nonprofits and faith-based groups were allocating, without prior city permission (Gerda, 2018). This was in the interest, according to the city council (which voted unanimously), of public health and safety.

A similar attempt is underway at the Santa Riverbed. Despite a lawsuit that has been filed by an attorney representing Orange County Catholic Worker (a nonprofit) in addition to seven homeless individuals, the county has stated it will pursue the convictions that it began in January 2017 (Custodio, 2018). Catholic Worker has fed the homeless at the Civic Center for years. One of the humanitarian grounds for the lawsuit is that people are being forced out of their tents along the riverbed with nowhere to go, as shelters are filled to capacity and renting an apartment is well beyond their means. Those living in tents who refuse to leave within the next few weeks will be arrested and/or ticketed due to the anti-camping laws. Activists have gathered at the riverbed in support of the homeless, questioning both the constitutionality and the inhumanity of the decampments (Custodio, 2018).

There is justification for citizens to resist the “putting the cart before the horse approach.” For example, Orange County currently has only 3,600 shelter beds to accommodate the 21,000 homeless. Additionally, Santa Ana and Anaheim have shelters that open only from December to March, and the Fullerton City Council recently defeated a proposal to open what was intended to be the first year-round shelter in the county (Ponsi, 2013). One of the main objections came from neighbors worrying about the safety of their community if indigents moved in—another case of NIMBY (not in my back yard).

On the political/policy side, there is a broad spectrum of opinion. The more short-sighted solution is to force the homeless out of their camps with nowhere to go, other than back on the streets, where they will be subject to legal repercussions for their “criminal” activity of existing. However, there are more nuanced responses put forth by academics in search of smarter and more effective long-term policy solutions. For instance, a study in 2017 by the University of California, Irvine concluded that housing is the most cost-effective solution to the homeless crisis (UCI School of Social Sciences, 2017). The analysis demonstrates that in terms of taxpayer dollars, it is much less expensive to provide housing and support services to long-term homeless persons as it alleviates monies going to hospitals, most specifically emergency room visits. In fact, the study found that the average cost of public services for persons in permanent housing is approximately fifty percent lower than treatment for them while they are on the streets. Thus, there would be a savings of nearly \$42 million each year if the homeless had permanent housing (UCI School of Social Sciences, 2017).

Yet, some cities seem to be moving in the opposite direction. In Anaheim, as part of the new bylaws established by Orange County supervisors in late January, the Ten-Year Plan to End Hopelessness that was assigned to the county commission, yet never received funding which inhibited the plan, was terminated (Gerda, 2018). This plan had been put together over several years with community input in addition to political representatives. The supervisors did approve \$10 million in state mental health money for permanent supportive housing for people with

severe mental illnesses, however, this will house about a mere 2% of the homeless population (Gerda, 2018).

Most importantly, homeless individuals and families need a path out of homelessness via a continuum of care rather than a Band-Aid approach. Both Santa Ana and Anaheim activists, as well as the Anaheim City Council, recently have been advocating for the “housing first” model. This means that permanent housing is provided first for homeless individuals, and once situated in stable housing they can receive other social services that they need. This makes sense. Consider the juggling act of getting help with mental health or substance issues, trying to find a job, receiving therapy or any other services one may need while staying in a crowded shelter (if you are lucky enough to get a bed), and meanwhile looking for an apartment or other living arrangements. It is an insurmountable task.

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