

Research and Policy Brief

Homelessness in Los Angeles County

by Joseph Martinez and Bill Pitkin

Los Angeles has the unfortunate distinction of being the homelessness capital of the nation, producing great social and economic costs for both individuals and the community-at-large. The purpose of this Research and Policy Brief is to summarize what we know about the homeless population in Los Angeles County, the causes and costs of homelessness, and several policy options for preventing and ending homelessness in the region.

Overview of the Homeless Population in LA County

How is homelessness defined?

According to the federal government, homelessness is defined as lacking a “fixed, regular, nighttime residence” that is not temporary (e.g. a shelter) or not designed as a sleeping accommodation (e.g. a car).⁸

How many people are homeless in Los Angeles County?

According to the most recent homeless count, conducted in January 2007, there are approximately 73,000 persons homeless in Los Angeles County every night, and about 152,000 homeless over the course of a year.⁹ While precise historical figures on the homeless population in Los Angeles are not available, we know that the number of homeless exploded during the 1980s.¹⁰ Homelessness is no longer an isolated phenomenon relegated only to the poorer quarters of Los Angeles. According to a recent Gallup poll released by Fannie Mae, half of people in Los Angeles have taken in a friend or relative who would have otherwise become homeless, and about half of respondents expressed concern they could become homeless due to losing a job or not being able afford the high cost of living.¹¹

What is the demographic makeup of the homeless population in Los Angeles County?

A homeless person is more than twice as likely to be a man than a woman, though the proportion of homeless women has grown substantially over recent decades. Children and youth in homeless families have also been rising, now accounting for about 15% of the homeless population. According to the Los Angeles Unified School District, there are 13,521 homeless students in the district, a 35 percent increase in just the last year.¹² Older adults (age 56 and older) are about 13% of the homeless population.



Did you know?

One in four people who are homeless in LA County each night are in families.¹

There are 13,521 homeless students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, a 35 percent increase in just the last year.²

Of the four major race/ethnic groups, African Americans make up over 50% of the homeless population in L.A. County but just 9% of the general population. About 24% of the homeless are Latino, followed by whites at 19%, multi-race at 4%, American Indian or Alaskan Native at 2% and Asian Pacific Islanders at just 1%.

Where do homeless people stay most of the time?

In contrast to other major urban areas, the vast majority of homeless persons in Los Angeles County do not tend to spend the night in emergency or transitional shelters. Only 17% of LA County homeless are sheltered, compared to 57% in San Francisco and more than 90% in New York City, Denver and Philadelphia.¹³ There are about 17,000 emergency beds in LA County for a homeless population that is over 70,000 every night.¹⁴

This type of severe shortage is true for all parts of the county. Although these shortages hit everyone who is homeless, they are especially acute for the growing number of families that have become homeless. According to a study by Shelter Partnership done last year on LA County's family shelters and agencies, existing capacity in terms of short term housing programs and beds accommodates only about a quarter of homeless families.¹⁵ In addition, 85% of surveyed agencies and shelters that serve families regularly turn away families because of the lack of beds available. One cannot just walk into any shelter and expect to find a bed—even if there are empty ones. Many shelters serve only a specific client base (such as persons with substance abuse issues, women, families, men, women, etc.). As a consequence, others who are not part of the client base are turned away.

How long do people remain homeless?

About 40% of the homeless in Los Angeles have been homeless for less than a year (compared to 54% nationally), and about 15% for less than four months. More than third of the homeless, however, have been homeless for more than two years.

Persons are considered “chronically homeless” if they have a disabling condition (e.g. mental or physical disability, illicit drug use, HIV/AIDS, chronic health conditions etc.) and have either been continuously homeless for at least a year or have had four or more episodes of homelessness within the past three years.¹⁶ About a third of the homeless population in LA County meet the definition of chronically homeless, compared to an estimated 23% across the U.S.

How is the homeless population spread out across LA County?

When most people think of homelessness in Los Angeles, they think immediately of Skid Row, the 50 square block area on the east edge of downtown that has long been home to the highest concentration of homeless persons and service providers in the region.¹⁷ Homelessness, however, is present throughout the county, with thousands of homeless persons every night in each of the eight Service Planning Areas of the county.

The Metro area of the county has the highest share of the homelessness, containing almost a third of the homeless population and a fifth of the poor population, while accounting for just 12% of the county's total population. As

Did you know?

Veterans are twice as likely to become homeless as the general population.

15% of the 13,000 people released from jail in LA County each month are at risk of becoming homeless right after release.³

a percentage, South Los Angeles has a large portion of the homeless population in LA County while the Western region of the county has a smaller portion of homeless persons. The percentage of homeless persons is least in the San Fernando Valley, East, and South Bay/Harbor, Antelope Valley, and San Gabriel Valley regions.

Homelessness by LA County Service Planning Area (SPA)

	Percent of Homeless Population in LA County	Percent of Total Population in LA County	Percent of Poor Population in LA County
SPA 1 – Antelope Valley	2.6%	3.7%	4.5%
SPA 2 – San Fernando Valley	9.3%	21.1%	15.2%
SPA 3 – San Gabriel Valley	14.5%	17.7%	13.3%
SPA 4 – Metro Los Angeles	32.1%	11.5%	18.0%
SPA 5 – West Los Angeles	9.8%	6.1%	3.9%
SPA 6 – South Los Angeles	17.0%	10.2%	18.4%
SPA 7 – East Los Angeles	8.1%	13.6%	12.3%
SPA 8 – South Bay/Harbor	6.5%	16.0%	14.5%

Sources: 2007 LAHSA Homeless Count, 2005 American Community Survey

Causes of Homelessness

There are a number of complex and interrelated reasons why people may not have a stable place to live, but they generally can be divided into two areas: economic and structural issues such as the cost of housing, poverty, wage structure, and social service delivery infrastructure; and “personal vulnerabilities” that cause people to become homeless, such as mental or physical illness, family violence, and substance abuse.¹⁸

In a high-cost area like Los Angeles County, economic challenges are especially tied to homelessness. Simply put, millions of households do not have sufficient income to cover the rising cost of housing, putting them at risk of homelessness. According to a recent poll released by Fannie Mae, 40% of people in Los Angeles surveyed worried that the price of housing could cause them to become homeless.¹⁹ As shown in the chart below, housing costs have increased much more than wages over recent years, meaning that housing is eating up an increasing amount of family budgets. More than half of renters in LA County pay more than the suggested 30% of their income toward housing. With the slowing homeownership market, the pressure on the rental market will likely only increase. Los Angeles is the most expensive rental market in the state and has seen a 5.4% increase in average rent over the past year.²⁰

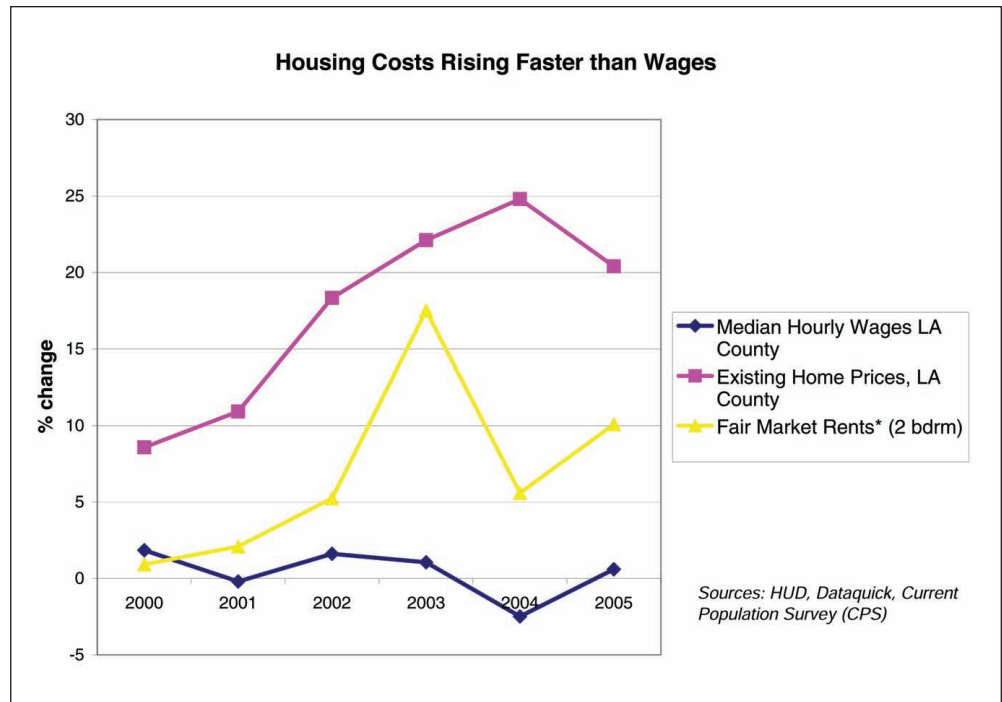
Local median wages have mirrored the decline of wages across the nation. In LA County, from 1979 to 2005, real median hourly wages have declined 6%, and the minimum wage, during the same period, lost more than a quarter of its purchasing power.²¹ About 4 in 10 LA County residents are considered poor or near poor, earning 200% of the federal poverty level or less. Many of these are working poor, living literally paycheck to paycheck, and are at risk of joining the growing ranks of the homeless due to the subtlest change in the amount of work they can get, a temporary interruption in access to childcare, or a sudden illness. According to the 2007 LAHSA Count, the most cited cause of becoming homeless was the loss of a job.

Did you know?

More than 8 in 10 of persons who are homeless in LA County every night are not sheltered.

NY City has about 80% the population of LA County, but about 65% the number of homeless persons of LA County.⁴

Even for the poorest and most vulnerable residents, public benefits do not keep them from homelessness. Of all homeless persons in Los Angeles, almost two-thirds receive some type of public assistance, such as Food Stamps, MediCal, SSI, and veteran's benefits. The county's General Relief (GR) program, for example, provides just \$221 a month for adults with very little or no income, an amount that is not enough for even the most basic housing such as Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels found on Skid Row. A recent review of the GR program found that the majority of participants (60%) are estimated to be homeless.²²



In addition to the stagnation of wages and public benefits, clearly a related cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing options. In a report by the US Conference of Mayors on Hunger and Homelessness, the majority of city officials cited the lack of affordable housing when asked about the cause of homelessness.²³ Nowhere is the affordable housing crisis more apparent than in Los Angeles, which was recently ranked as the most unaffordable housing market – in both homeownership and rental – in the nation.²⁴ Housing costs continue to rise, and the supply of affordable housing is well below the need. From 2001 to 2006, the city of L.A. produced about 12,800 affordable homes but lost over 11,000 rent-stabilized apartment homes, primarily due to condo conversions and demolitions, so we are making very little progress on increasing access to affordable housing.²⁵

In addition to the economic causes of homelessness, persons experience social and health problems that can cause them to become homeless. After “losing a job” and “eviction,” the next most common causes of homelessness in LA County according the 2007 LAHSA survey were “conflict with family or friends” and “problems with alcohol or drugs.” 20% of homeless women reported currently experiencing domestic violence, and half of those women said that domestic violence contributed to them becoming homeless.

Did you know?

4 in 10 of the homeless at any one time have been homeless for less than a year.

About a third of the homeless population in LA County are chronically homeless, compared to an estimated 23% across the U.S.

Costs of Homelessness

The costs of homelessness are great, personally and collectively, financially and otherwise. Obviously, homeless individuals and families experience great costs, as they are more likely to experience health problems and be victims of crime or abuse. According to the LAHSA survey, more than 1 in 5 of the homeless in LA County said that since becoming homeless they have needed medical attention but have been unable to receive it. A third of the homeless report being victims of a crime, nearly a third have been assaulted, and more than 40% have been victims of police harassment.

Providing health, social, and public safety services for the homeless produce great costs for local governments and taxpayers. About half of all homeless in LA County use hospital emergency rooms as their primary source of health care, according to the most recent LAHSA study. It is estimated that the hospitals in just the area surrounding Skid Row spend about \$40 million annually on emergency services to homeless individuals.²⁶ These costs are particularly acute for the chronically homeless, each of whom are estimated to account for \$100,000 over a year and half in emergency medical services.²⁷ Society must also bear high costs to deal with the high victimization rates of the homeless, and the largely punitive approach brings with it increased costs. Each homeless person incarcerated in jail costs tax payers over \$14,000 a year and \$20,000 if the person is incarcerated in state or federal prison.²⁸

Policy Options

While homelessness is a problem that businesses, community groups and individuals need to address, the role of government in making an impact is perhaps most crucial. In fact, 51% of people in Los Angeles surveyed recently felt that the city or local government should take a major supporting role in finding a way to reduce homelessness, while a quarter said that the city should take the lead role.²⁹ Many places have shown that the problem of homelessness is not doomed to be intractable, and indeed there are examples of local governments reducing the overall numbers of people who are homeless as well as preventing the economically vulnerable from falling into this extreme form of poverty.

Overview of Current Policy Actions

In Los Angeles County, all public and private resources spent to address homelessness account for about \$600 million annually, less than half what New York City spends on its homeless population, which is much less than LA County's homeless population.³⁰ However, there have been several major collaborative efforts in recent years to more effectively combat homelessness in Los Angeles.

The Bring LA Home project developed a broad coalition to develop a 10-year plan to address homelessness in Los Angeles. Bring LA Home released a plan in 2005 with hundreds of policy recommendations, but bureaucratic inertia from multiple parties did not allow for consensus on an overall direction of policy, limiting the impact of the plan.³¹

In the City of Los Angeles, there have been efforts to increase permanent housing and a focused effort to address public safety and homelessness on

Did you know?

The most commonly cited reasons for becoming homeless in LA County are losing a job, followed by being evicted.

About a quarter of the homeless persons in LA County have at least some college education.

Skid Row. In September 2006 Mayor Villaraigosa announced a commitment to provide Section 8 vouchers to 2,000 homeless individuals and families and devoting \$100 million to supportive and affordable housing. The City also launched the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) effort to increase public safety on Skid Row by deploying an additional 50 police officers, at a total cost of around \$6 million.³² Currently, the city is working with other stakeholders to develop a specific action plan for Skid Row.

In October, 2006, the Los Angeles County Supervisors approved an \$80 million plan to prevent and mitigate the growth of homelessness in the county. This plan included monies for low cost financing for developers of affordable housing, as well as a plethora of homeless prevention services aimed at populations vulnerable to becoming homeless (CalWorks clients, those exiting jail, and families living in Skid Row).³³ Services include eviction prevention programs, moving relocation funds for those seeking to secure permanent housing, rental subsidies for CalWorks clients, a pilot project of oversight of hospital discharge of patients to a limited number of emergency shelter beds and more.

Perhaps most significantly, the county and city have begun to work together more closely to address homelessness, jointly funding LAHSA with \$2 million for comprehensive planning for the Los Angeles Continuum of Care. They are also coordinating on advocacy at the state and federal levels to ensure that the region gets its fair share of resources. Los Angeles County is slated to receive around \$150 million over the next five years from Proposition 63 funds to provide mental health services for the homeless. Also, the federal government's Interagency Council on Homelessness is increasingly active in Los Angeles.³⁴

United Way of Greater Los Angeles has also developed an initiative called *A Pathway Home* to mobilize support and resources for preventing and ending homelessness in Los Angeles County.³⁵ *A Pathway Home* is a county-wide initiative aimed at empowering Los Angeles communities to more effectively prevent and end homelessness by enhancing community outreach and building strategic collaborations. To reach this goal, the initiative will focus on three components:

- **Community Mobilization**

(Outreach, Education, Engagement and Advocacy) designed to mobilize multiple levels of the community with an emphasis on business to unite and respond to the homelessness crisis. *HomeWalk* a 5K walk on Saturday, November 17, 2007 will serve as catalyst for community engagement efforts by mobilizing thousands of walkers from around the county

- **Capacity Building – (Resource and Organizational Development)**

to enhance the capacity of the broader system of care with an emphasis on strengthening links to permanent housing

- **Coordination of New Strategic Efforts**

Strategic public/private partnerships to leverage support resulting in a more coordinated, cost-effective system of care

Did you know?

LA County Cal Works recipients are 7 times more likely to be homeless than the average resident.⁵

It costs tax payers over \$14,000 a year to put a homeless person in jail and \$20,000 if the person is incarcerated in state or federal prison.⁶

Potential Solutions to End Long Term Homelessness

Despite all the promise and achievement of the efforts mentioned above, there is room to do more. Here are some potential approaches that can transform Los Angeles from being the capital of homelessness into a model for other cities and counties. These approaches have been tried with success in placed and are considered models of best practices.

• Homeless Prevention / Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness

Perhaps the smartest way to cut the number of homeless persons is to prevent people from recycling back on to the street. San Diego, for example, has developed a public safety initiative which, instead of employing police in punitive fashions, is focused on getting people off the streets and eventually into permanent, stable housing. San Diego's HOT (Homeless Outreach Team) involves police officers in concert with mental health professionals and case workers who link up with some of the hardest to serve people living on the streets.³⁶ In addition, San Diego has a Serial Inebriates Program (SIP) where teams of case workers are involved with courts and those publicly intoxicated and homeless in an effort to get them off the streets and into rehabilitation programs. Both these programs have shown reductions in arrest rates as well as well as saving the city money (several thousand dollars per person for the HOT program and several hundred for SIP).

Another popular preventive measure is utilizing "community courts," as New York City has done. Community courts involve linking those homeless persons responsible for minor offenses (such as public urination, vagrancy, sleeping in public and prostitution) with social services that are aimed at addressing issues that will keep them off the streets. New York started its successful Midtown Community Court Program in 1993. In 2005, 72% of those on trial performed community service and/or obtained services to help with their problems (be it substance abuse, mental illness or other).³⁷ Using the courts as an intervention strategy rather than a punitive instrument has gained support as more and more cities (such as San Francisco, San Diego and Santa Monica) are modeling themselves after the community court system in New York.

• Housing First

"Housing First" is a relatively new approach to ending chronic or long-term homelessness – which accounts for most of the public cost of homelessness – and is meant to minimize clients' time on the streets and in emergency shelters. Whereas traditional approaches have focused on emergency shelters, which may not accept people with severe psychiatric or substance abuse problems, Housing First allows clients to move into housing without requiring them to participate in psychiatric or substance abuse programs. After clients are allowed to settle into their living situation, they are given a choice to participate in a whole range of services if they so choose. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, "the most successful model for housing people who experience chronic homelessness is permanent supportive housing using a Housing First Approach."³⁸

Many local governments including Philadelphia, New York and San Francisco are adopting this housing first approach with some success. In Philadelphia,

Did you know?

The waiting list for Section 8 housing subsidies in Los Angeles is 10 years.

It takes a wage of a little over \$21 an hour to afford the average two bedroom apartment in LA County.⁷

for example, the Housing First approach has been implemented for a few years with the city seeing a drop of 50% in homelessness. San Francisco has also reduced the numbers of people living on the street by 40% in the span of 3 years.³⁹ In Portland, Oregon, the city's first year of its Housing First approach exceeded the goals of city's ten-year plan. In 2005, the city managed to house 660 chronically homeless persons (well above the ten-year plan's 175 people), with 407 homeless families housed.⁴⁰

• Permanent Supportive Housing

72% of people polled in Los Angeles agreed that many homeless people could get back on their feet and become self-sufficient if only they could receive proper housing.⁴¹ Supportive housing is necessary for people with long-term disabilities and other issues to transition to long-term and permanent housing. Supportive housing involves bringing services (health, job skills related, counseling and others) on site or near their residence for those with chronic illnesses, disabilities, mental health issues, substance abuse problems, or a combination of these factors. Supportive housing has proven to be efficient in getting people off the streets, and also cost effective to local and state governments. Supportive housing costs just \$30 a day for one homeless person in Los Angeles, compared to \$84.74 in a jail, \$607 a day in a mental health institution, and \$1,474 in a hospital.⁴²

Recently, New York City and State created over 3,000 units of supportive housing. According to one study, the creation of these supportive housing units were correlated with a drop in utilization of public services such as shelters, jails, and emergency rooms. This drop in utilization of public services saved New York over \$16,000 for each unit of supportive housing.⁴³ San Francisco has its own permanent supportive housing initiative that is considered a model of success. San Francisco's Direct Access to Housing program seeks to house those who historically have had trouble establishing stable continuous housing (about 90% came either directly from the streets or from shelters).⁴⁴ The initiative brings in mental health professionals and counselors to help the tenants secure stable living environments. More than two-thirds of tenants who started the program remain either in supportive housing or transition to market rate housing. This and other policies such as eviction prevention programs have helped curb San Francisco's chronic homeless population in recent years. From 2002 to 2005, chronic homelessness dropped 28% in San Francisco. In addition, San Francisco saw a 44% reduction in days sentenced to incarceration for those who were chronically homeless.⁴⁵

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Endnotes

¹ LAHSA, 2007, *2007 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count*. <http://lahsa.org/homelesscount.asp>. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this Brief come from the 2007 LAHSA Count.

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³ Urban Institute, 2007, *System Change Efforts and Their Results*, pg.16
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⁴ Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty, 2005, *Homeless Counts in Major US Cities and Counties*, <http://www.unitedwayla.org/getinformed/rr/research/basic/Documents/2005HomelessCities.pdf>

⁵ LA County Department of Social Services, May, 2005 *Cal Works Homeless Families Key Points*, http://www.ladpss.org/dpss/REQAD/pdf/cw_homeless_families_keypoints.pdf

⁶ National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), *The Costs of Homelessness*, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/tools/tenyearplan/cost>

⁷ National Low Income Housing Coalition
<http://www.nlihc.org/oor/oor2006/data.cfm?getstate=on&getcounty=on&county=203&state=CA>

⁸ This definition comes from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan on July 22, 1987. For more information on the act, see:
<http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/lawsandregs/laws/>

⁹ These numbers reflect the total for Los Angeles County, which includes estimates from the four continuums of care in the county: Pasadena, Glendale, Long Beach and LAHSA (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority).

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¹⁴ Shelter Partnership, 2006, *Short-Term Housing Directory of Los Angeles County*,
<http://www.shelterpartnership.org/Studies.htm>

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¹⁶ This definition is shared by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Notice of Funding Availability for the Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness/Federal Register, Vol. 68, No. 17/Monday, January 27, 2003, 4019.

¹⁷ For a history of Skid Row, see:
<http://www.unitedwayla.org/getinformed/rr/research/basic/Documents/HistoryofSkidRow.pdf>. According to Blasi, 2007, Skid Row accounts for 43% of the emergency shelter beds in the LAHSA Continuum of Care, 37% of all transitional housing units, and 55% of all permanent housing units.

¹⁸ See Wolch, et al., 2007 for more background on systemic and personal causes of homelessness.

¹⁹ Gallup Poll conducted for Fannie Mae-November, 2007 *Homelessness in America: Perceptions, Attitudes and Knowledge*.

²⁰ Real Facts, 2007. See Chang, Andrea, "Rents on the rise as home prices slip," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2007, C1.

²¹ California Budget Project, 2006, *Left Behind: Workers and Their Families in a Changing Los Angeles*,
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- ²⁸ NAEH, *The Costs of Homelessness*.
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- ³¹ Bring LA Home, 2005, *Bring L.A. Home Plan*
- ³² See Blasi, 2007. During the first year of SCI, LAPD officers wrote about 12,000 citations, the majority of them for pedestrian violations.
- ³³ LA County Chief Administration Office, September, 2006, http://www.bringlahome.org/docs/LA_County_Board_Letter_9-26-06_cms1_050188.pdf
- ³⁴ Philip Mangano, the Interagency Council's Executive Director – the Bush administration's so-called "homelessness czar" – has been focusing some efforts on Los Angeles. See, for example, the op-ed he co-authored with Gary Blasi: "Stuck on Skid Row," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 2007.
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- ³⁶ HUD, 2004 *Strategies for Reducing Chronic Street Homelessness*, <http://www.huduser.org/Publications/PDF/ChronicStrtHomeless.pdf>
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