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### **Authors**

Roy, Ananya  
Bennett, Ashley  
Blake, Jennifer  
et al.

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A black and white photograph showing a large number of tents pitched in an open area, likely a park or public square. In the background, a multi-story apartment building with many windows is visible. The scene is surrounded by trees and foliage. The top half of the image is overlaid with a solid orange-red color, which contains the title text.

# (DIS)PLACEMENT: THE FIGHT FOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITY AFTER ECHO PARK LAKE

UCLA LUSKIN INSTITUTE ON  
**INEQUALITY  
AND  
DEMOCRACY**  
ORGANIZED 2016



UCLA LUSKIN INSTITUTE ON

**INEQUALITY AND DEMOCRACY**

ORGANIZED 2016

# **(DIS)PLACEMENT: THE FIGHT FOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITY AFTER ECHO PARK LAKE**

Authored by the *After Echo Park Lake* Research Collective and the data team at the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, including:

Ananya Roy  
Ashley Bennett  
Jennifer Blake  
Jonny Coleman  
Hannah Cornfield  
La Donna Harrell  
Terrie Klein  
Samuel Lutzker  
Hilary Malson  
Jessica Mendez  
Carla Orendorff  
Gustavo Otzoy  
Annie Powers  
Chloe Rosenstock  
Rayne Laborde Ruiz  
William Sens, Jr.  
Pamela Stephens

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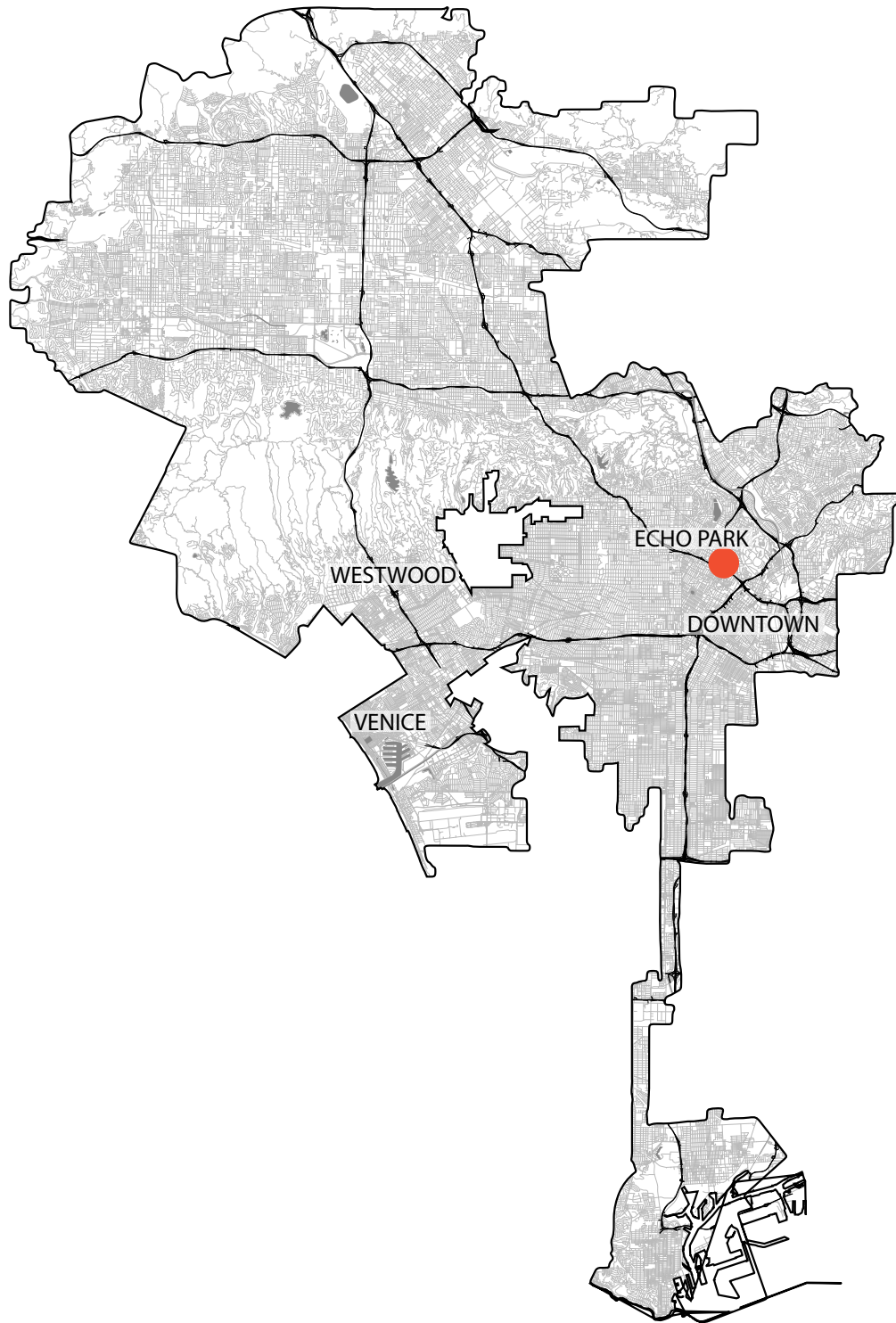
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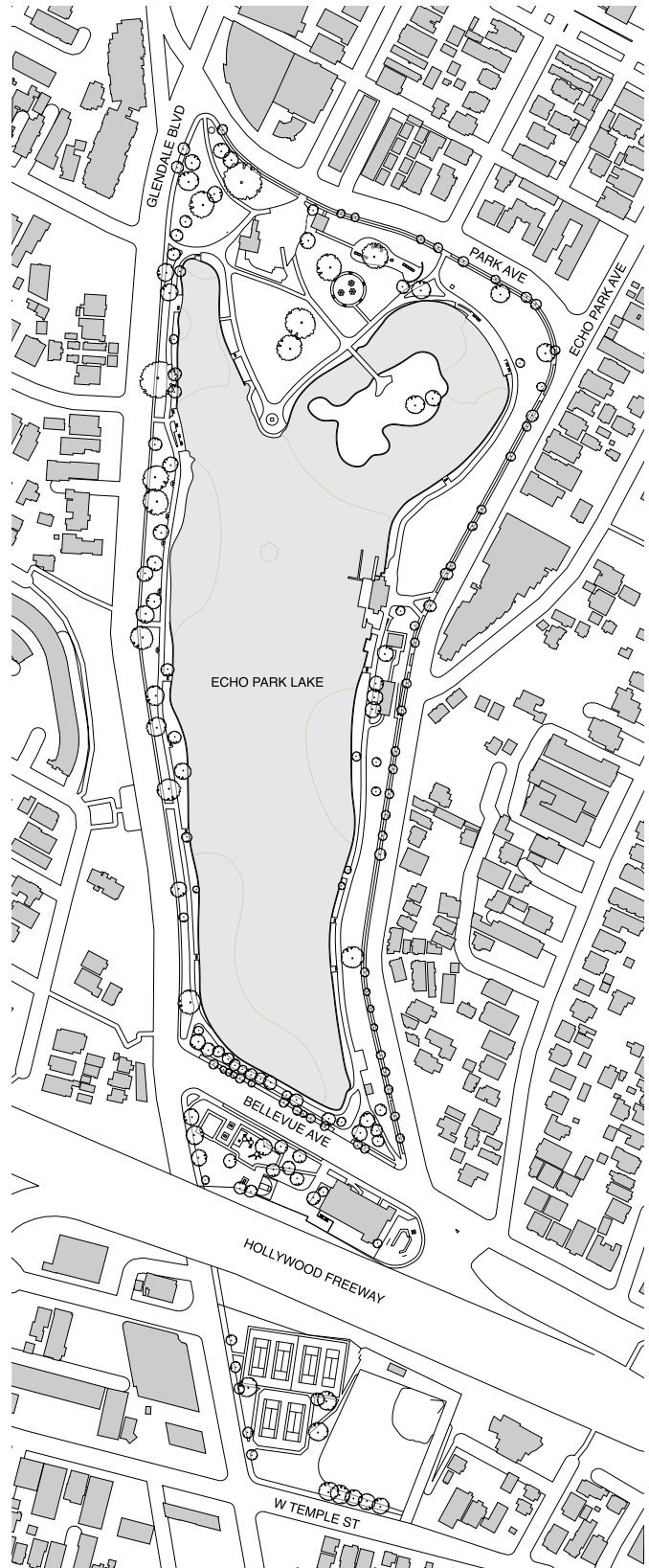
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# City of Los Angeles





# Echo Park Lake





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 24–25, 2021, the City of Los Angeles staged a police invasion of Echo Park Lake, a public park in a gentrifying neighborhood close to downtown, in order to evict an unhoused community that had made a home there for the past eighteen months. In a reflection of the social composition of homelessness in Los Angeles, the encampment had many Black, Indigenous, and immigrant residents and was a refuge for people fleeing gendered violence. In the weeks leading up to the police action, the community had shrunk in size, with numerous residents leaving in anticipation of a violent eviction. Others acquiesced to temporary placements, which were presented to them by elected officials and public agencies as a guaranteed path to stable and permanent housing. In a spectacular show of militarized power, [400 police officers](#) descended on the park to intimidate and evict those who remained, about 15–20 residents. But also present were scores of community organizers ready to defend the Echo Park Lake community and put their bodies on the line against the police invasion. Arrested by the dozens, beaten and brutalized by the police, they were outflanked in the streets surrounding the park. Behind the police formations, city workers swiftly erected a massive chain-link fence, enclosing the park along with the few residents who remained and who were ultimately pushed out or arrested.

The Echo Park Lake enclosure and eviction is a turning point in Los Angeles. While neither unique nor unprecedented, it marks the coordinated mobilization of public resources, from policing to homeless management services, for the purposes of state-led displacement. While instigated by Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell, it creates a blueprint for a broader spatial governance of poverty, one where the ruse of housing legitimizes displacement. It is thus that the Mayor’s Office declared the Echo Park Lake displacement to be a “model” for housing and services in the city, claiming that “all 193 displaced residents will be placed in stable, permanent housing within a year.”<sup>1</sup>

This monograph provides a comprehensive analysis of the aftermath of the Echo Park Lake displacement. It presents ethnographic research with displaced residents over 11 months, draws on community histories to determine the impact of the displacement, examines public records pertaining to the resources expended on eviction and enclosure, and analyzes homeless management data for Echo Park Lake placements. Our key findings are the following:

## 1. The Ruse of Housing

Nearly a year out from the eviction, very few of the displaced Echo Park Lake residents have been housed. Of the 41 displaced residents we have interviewed, only 4 are now housed, and mainly through social networks and community support. Of the additional 43 displaced residents about whom we have community knowledge, none have gained access to housing. Six have passed away since the displacement.

Our analysis of data provided by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) shows that of the 183 people who were on the official Echo Park Lake placements list, only 17 have been placed in what we classify to be housing. Of these, 4 people were housed through their own means, 4 people were placed in Project Homekey, 4 people in subsidized rentals (through Rapid Re-Housing and Section 8 vouchers), and 5 people in permanent supportive housing. As of February 9, 2022, 82 residents had disappeared, exited from the LAHSA system to unknown situations, and another 15 had returned to homelessness. Since this placements data is in de-identified format, we cannot ascertain to what extent it overlaps with our ethnographic data.

**In undertaking and presenting such analysis, we find it imperative to recast the category of “housing,”** calling into question the classifications used by the homeless management system. We use three classifications to assess the aftermath of displacement: *housing* (which includes Rapid Re-Housing, Permanent Supportive Housing, Project Homekey, Housing Choice and Emergency Housing Vouchers), *temporary programs* (which includes Project Roomkey, Recovery Re-Housing, Tiny Homes, Safe Haven), and *shelter* (which includes winter shelters, A Bridge Home, and day shelters). We do not count vouchers as housing until a unit has been obtained. Nor do we attach the word “permanent” to housing because our research shows that even placements in housing are not necessarily stable and permanent.

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1 Statement made by Deputy Mayor for City Homelessness Initiatives, Jose Ramirez, at April 7, 2021 meeting with concerned faculty experts whose letter is available here: <https://ucla.app.box.com/s/njm70xbuetoa0cfbg0q4e6qpllufv0ip>

At a time when city officials and mayoral hopefuls are touting housing placements as the justification for encampment sweeps and the banishment of the poor, such reclassification is imperative because it reveals that much of such housing is a ruse.

## 2. The System of Placements is One of Displaceability

Housing placements are not housing outcomes. Many of the Echo Park Lake placements were in Project Roomkey, a temporary program that utilizes hotel rooms as non-congregate shelter but presented to residents facing displacement as a guaranteed path to housing. The LAHSA placements data shows that in addition to the large number of residents who have been exited from the system, another 48 are waiting, mainly in Project Roomkey, for housing. Our ethnographic data provides insights into both exits and waiting, revealing a system of permanent displaceability where people face expulsion, carceral isolation, as well as unending uncertainty. Such findings are also borne out in our analysis of the full scope of LAHSA data, made available to us through a Data Usage Agreement. **We find a churning system of project enrollments that gives the lie to shelter-resistance.** While the unhoused are willing to repeatedly respond to street outreach and enroll in programs, the system is a shuffle, where people are moved from one placement to another creating the appearance of activity but with little change in their housing status.

## 3. A Perverse Investment of Public Resources in Carcerality

While the scarcity of shelter and housing resources in Los Angeles is well-known, the current moment is one of an upsurge in federal emergency and economic relief funds related to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as in state funds generated by California's budget surplus. We find that such funds are being perversely invested in programs where access to housing is contingent on carceral rules and conditions. Project Roomkey, dubbed Project No Key by residents, is an exemplar. And there is no reason to believe that Project Homekey will be any different. We find that there is a **continuum of carcerality**, from the police power wielded against homeless encampments to the state supervision of those enrolled in placements. The human costs are high, as are the financial costs, with millions of dollars being squandered on such policing, surveillance, and supervision. Service providers, including new mercenary entities like Urban Alchemy, hold lucrative contracts for this continuum of carcerality and have a vested interest in maintaining the carceral isolation and spatial containment of the unhoused.

## 4. The New Spatial Governance of Poverty

Our research shows that the official Echo Park Lake placements list is partially a fiction with residents of other encampments funneled into this list. Facing tremendous political pressure from Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's office, which had targeted this specific encampment, LAHSA outreach workers had to demonstrate placements. Knowing that shelter resources such as Project Roomkey are severely limited, they used this as an opportunity to place those experiencing homelessness at other locations. We call this process **spatial triage**. As a new regime of spatial governance takes hold in Los Angeles, exemplified by the expansion of City of Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) Section 41.18, a cruel anti-camping law which is essentially a ban on poor people, we expect that such geographic prioritization will take place precedence over vulnerability, requiring more and more spatial triage by outreach workers to manage the visibility of homelessness.

## 5. The Criminalization of Encampments and Black Unhoused Organizers

Through meticulous analysis of public records and community histories, we find that the police invasion of Echo Park Lake in 2021 was the culmination of the systematic criminalization of the encampment and the targeting of Black unhoused residents who led organizing at the park. **Such criminalization has deliberately used racialized narratives of crime and waste.** The agents of such criminalization are many, including NIMBY groups, Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell and his staff, and various media outlets. In particular, we hone in on the role of park rangers who under Chief Joe Losorelli, formerly a commanding officer at the notorious Rampart Division of LAPD, have played a significant role in policing the park. With the reopening of the park as an enclosed and surveilled space, they have sought to impose banishment orders on unhoused organizers and their movement allies.

## 6. The Fight for Housing and Community Continues

In sharp contradiction to the racialized narratives of crime and waste that were used to criminalize the Echo Park Lake encampment, we find ample evidence of a complex and thriving community that when abandoned during the COVID-19 pandemic, **built life-saving**

**infrastructures** such as a community garden, community kitchen, jobs program, and showers. Creating systems of self-governance, encampment residents ensured refuge for people fleeing gendered violence and demonstrated what safety looks like without the police state and carceral supervision. Repeatedly facing the threat of eviction, all through 2020, the encampment endured, and now despite being scattered, it serves as a vitally important reminder of the ongoing fight for housing and community.

### **About this monograph:**

Authored by the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective, which brings together university-based and movement-based scholars with unhoused comrades, including those displaced from Echo Park Lake, this is a lengthy monograph. It is long and detailed because the system of permanent displaceability requires careful exposition. At the heart of our monograph is the knowledge of those who are unhoused, expressed not only in ethnographic vignettes but also through their analysis and theorization of the system. Dear reader, we invite you to read the monograph as a counterpoint to the simplistic explanations of, and solutions for, homelessness that abound in liberal cities such as Los Angeles. To transform this system of inequality and carcerality, we must first understand it thoroughly.

**1.**

# **THE ECHO PARK LAKE DISPLACEMENT**

# 1. THE ECHO PARK LAKE DISPLACEMENT

## Veronica's Story

Veronica was the “mom” of Echo Park Lake, a public park in a gentrifying neighborhood of Los Angeles close to downtown. Residents of the park turned to her for conflict resolution, the maintenance of community guidelines, and a loving shoulder to lean on. She helped run the community kitchen, distribute food, and construct the family that Echo Park Lake became for many. At 60 years old, Veronica had lived in the neighborhood of Echo Park nearly all her life and found a home at the park when she became unhoused. This sense of comfort, community, and stability was obliterated on March 24, 2021. With hundreds of police officers encircling the park, Veronica faced eviction at gunpoint. In the span of two days, over a year’s worth of home was uprooted, stolen, and tossed into garbage bins like trash—including irreplaceable items from family photos to essential documents.

In the days leading up to the forced eviction, police officers had regularly roamed Echo Park Lake, intimidating residents by announcing that “they were going to start closing the park at 10 o’clock. And nobody could be here.” Veronica had asked for clarification, “So you mean we’re going to have a curfew at 10 o’clock, we have to be inside the tents?” The officers replied, “No, your tents can’t be here either. We’re going to start giving fines and giving you tickets.” Veronica then asked, “What are we supposed to do?” Police responded, “You guys can go to the public sidewalk.” Veronica was led to believe that there would be options for people to stay somehow—if not in the park, then on at least the sidewalks outside. But she also knew that the sidewalk was never public to the residents of Echo Park Lake, nor to any unhoused person in Los Angeles. Veronica remembers the sidewalk as the very place from which residents of Echo Park Lake were evicted before finding refuge at the park.

On the fateful night of March 24, 2021, in true maternal fashion, she “sat there and watched [the police] all night long to see what they were doing” to her community. But she was also deeply scared. During a collective reflection on the police invasion, community organizers recounted these moments:

Later, when the cops really descended and smoke bombs were going off and helicopters circling ... Clara Mun, who lived at the park, and I went tent to tent. I just remember vividly, like terrifyingly etched in my brain, going to some tents, and Veronica, who’s a longtime Echo Park unhoused resident, was there. She came out of her tent, and she was really freaked out “What the fuck is happening?” The helicopters—boom, boom—smoke bombs. It felt like we’re in a war, and Veronica had no idea. She was scared. Veronica immediately started packing and moving her stuff across the street, because she just didn’t want to take the risk. She asked if they were going to hurt her.



Figure 1-1. The LAPD raid at Echo Park Lake. Photo by @courierbelle, #EchoParkRiseUp Instagram, March 25, 2021.

The next morning, she awoke in the park, caged. The City had built a fence around her and the other remaining residents.

Almost a year after the eviction at Echo Park Lake, Veronica is living outdoors in a tent on Glendale Boulevard not far from the park. Even though she had enrolled for housing and services seven years prior to living at Echo Park Lake, her case manager had not maintained contact. While some residents of the park were offered shelter placements, notably in Project Roomkey, Veronica was not. The encampment where she lives has recently been designated as a Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) Section 41.18 enforcement zone, meaning that the City has a right to criminalize any person who sits, sleeps, or lies in this area. In addition, CARE+ sweeps are still ongoing. A CARE+ Sweep is meant to be a comprehensive street cleanup with a printed and posted notice in advance. But each sweep is different. Sometimes, LA Sanitation cleans only certain parts of the street where people do not reside. Sometimes, they have residents move their things to the other side of the street and then return when the sweep is over. Other times still, they do not show up altogether. Veronica is used to dealing with the violence of these sweeps as they occur, never certain if the sanitation team will be sympathetic or ruthless.

On January 21, 2022, the sweep at Glendale Boulevard was ruthless. Police are not supposed to be present at a CARE+ sweep unless specifically called by LA Sanitation. Annie Powers, co-author of this monograph and Street Watch LA organizer, was present and reported, “Cops were there and aggressive . . . and they were also the only ones offering ‘placements’ to Veronica.” One police officer spearheaded the effort of moving Veronica, telling her, “Time’s up. You gotta go, Sanitation is here.” As LA Sanitation began to systematically trash and destroy Veronica’s personal belongings, she began to cry. The police officer told Veronica, “Don’t cry. You will make me feel sad.”

The police offered Veronica a placement at the Tiny Homes Village at Westlake. She advocated that a placement also be made available to a friend of hers who was eager for shelter. But shortly thereafter, Veronica was notified by the police that the placement was a hoax. There was a COVID-19 outbreak at the Tiny Homes Village, and no other placements were available to her. Regardless, LA Sanitation, which had already taken custody of her personal belongings on the basis that they constituted a threat to public health, refused to allow Veronica to retrieve these items.

Staff from Los Angeles City Council District 13, which includes Echo Park Lake, who were present claimed that the sweep was meant to prevent ecological degradation to the hill due to the rain, stating that the area would most likely be fenced. Only a few weeks after the January 2022 sweep, an enormous sign went up declaring the area a “highway improvement zone,” declaring “Your tax dollars at work!” Veronica didn’t miss the irony that those tax dollars would be used to displace the community and fence them out, just as they have been used in the past. In a note to our research collective, Annie Powers reminded us that in addition to the Echo Park Lake displacement and fencing in March 2021, there had been one at Reservoir Street in November 2021, making this, at Glendale Boulevard, “the third fencing and banishment in the Echo Park neighborhood since March 2021.”



Figure 1-2. Fencing of Reservoir Street after CARE+ Sweep, November 2021. Photo by Annie Powers.

## Conceptual Frameworks to Understand State-Led Displacement

*“A new social geography of the city is being born but it would be foolish to expect that it will be a peaceful process.”*

*Neil Smith, The New Urban Frontier<sup>2</sup>*

### Revanchism

Shortly after 5:00 am on 3 June 1991, 350 police officers dressed in full riot gear moved into Tompkins Square Park in New York’s Lower East Side, woke more than 200 sleeping residents, and evicted them. Remaining clothes, tents, shanties, other structures and private belongings were bulldozed into several waiting sanitation trucks, and seven protestors were arrested. The 10.5-acre park was then cordoned off with an 8-foot high chain link fence, and most of the 350 officers were left to patrol its perimeter.<sup>3</sup>

The Echo Park Lake displacement of March 2021 is eerily reminiscent of urban struggles elsewhere, notably that over Tompkins Square Park in New York. The 1991 eviction in Tompkins Square Park was the culmination of protracted contestation over housing and community that started with a police invasion of the park in 1988 and lasted several years, marking “the battle for New York’s Lower East Side.”<sup>4</sup> As New York’s homeless population grew, so newly elected liberal mayor, David Dinkins, sanctioned the police-led closure of the park in 1991. Over the years though, the park had become “a focal point of resistance in the city,”<sup>5</sup> with informal structures that provided shelter as well as squatter occupations in several of the buildings in the neighborhood. As was the case in Echo Park Lake three decades later, community organizers and housing justice activists repeatedly faced off with police. Indeed, various [first-hand accounts](#) of the 1988 police riot at Tompkins Square Park make evident **the role of police violence in state-led displacement**, noting how hundreds of “vicious out-of-control cops . . . were attacking anybody in their sights,” beating protesters, bystanders, and journalists, all “to serve and protect real estate.” In the face of such police violence, protesters held up signs stating that “Gentrification is Genocide.” The struggle at, and for, Tompkins Square Park continues, most recently with [new barricades](#), brutal sweeps of a homeless encampment, and [police violence targeting unhoused residents](#). In a cruel irony, as of February 2022 the television show *Law and Order* was filming at the park “[with a fake \(much bigger\) encampment](#).”

In his seminal account of gentrification, geographer Neil Smith, interprets the 1991 closure of Tompkins Square Park as “the onset of a stern anti-homeless and anti-squatter policy throughout the city that betokened the coming of the revanchist city.”<sup>6</sup> By **revanchism**, Smith means a revengeful and reactionary politics, a taking back of space by those who hold power. The script of revanchism, he emphasizes, is often laden with the “populist language of civil morality, family values, and neighborhood security,” as “middle- and ruling-class whites” react to their perceived “‘theft’ of the city by variously defined ‘others.’”<sup>7</sup>

Following Smith, we view the Echo Park Lake displacement as an expression of revanchism, one laden with **race and class politics in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood**. Indeed, as we show in Chapter 6, the displacement is part of a longer arc of revanchism in Echo Park that includes civil gang injunctions and other forms of policing that further “white liberal imaginaries and interests.”<sup>8</sup> We understand such white liberalism, and its fear of racial and poor others, in relation to Molina’s family history of Echo Park. A distinguished historian of Los Angeles, Natalia Molina shows how in the 1950s and 1960s, the neighborhood was a “multicultural crossroads,” with various racial and ethnic groups settling here and building “connections across the color line.” Molina argues that “urban redevelopment and gentrification, beginning in the 1990s, have resulted in the erasure of the area’s history and the sense of space in which ethnic identity

2 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, 29.

3 Smith, “After Tompkins Square Park: Degentrification and the Revanchist City,” 203.

4 Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York’s Lower East Side*.

5 Smith, “After Tompkins Square Park,” 202.

6 Smith, “After Tompkins Square Park,” 204.

7 Smith, “After Tompkins Square Park,” 211.

8 Bloch and Meyer, “Implicit revanchism,” 1101.



and multiethnic bonds were fostered.”<sup>9</sup> For us, Molina’s account sits alongside that of Queen, an unhoused member of our research collective who was displaced from Echo Park Lake. Queen reflects:

Echo Park was the first home I ever knew, after we came to Los Angeles from Mexico. I was a year and a half old. It was my whole life until I was 30. So I grew up here. Not only that, but because my mom was a vendor, she sold corn on the same corner that I lived on. She chose this neighborhood because she felt that there was Mexico here. It was the most Mexican place they could find in Los Angeles and where she and my dad could make an income. And, you know, I came to grow up in the neighborhood with the local stores, being a child going into stores and getting into trouble. Me and my sisters running up and down. I went to school right across the street from there too. And my children studied here too. I have raised six daughters here as my mother raised me here. But I’ve also seen the neighborhood change, become gentrified. In fact, I’ve seen it become gentrified many times in my lifetime, with the gang injunction, with other changes. It’s all more corporate now. More fancy. There are very few stores left that are willing to interact with the community other than buying and selling.

## Racial Banishment

Gentrification is often understood as a process of market-driven displacement. However, as the concept of revanchism makes evident, police violence is a crucial part of such a process. With this in mind, we rely on the conceptual framework of racial banishment in order to emphasize **state-led displacement**. Indeed, we view state-organized violence against racialized bodies and communities as foundational to market rule.

In conceptualizing banishment, we build on the work of Beckett and Herbert, who pinpoint the role of urban control tools in the creation of “legally imposed spatial exclusion.”<sup>10</sup> From civil gang injunctions to municipal ordinances that target the homeless, cities across the United States have been enacting territorial exclusion through such tools. Los Angeles has an especially dense collection of banishment tools and has pioneered an apparatus of militarized policing to implement them. Implicated in banishment is not only the forced mobility of repeated displacement, but also a form of “racialized rightlessness,”<sup>11</sup> or what Patterson has famously called “**social death**.”<sup>12</sup> This type of rightlessness, or social death, is starkly evident in various aspects of our study, including in the criminalization of homelessness. As American Studies scholar Lisa Marie Cacho notes, social death does not mean that people are “excluded from law’s discipline, punishment, and regulation.” The point is that they are subject to criminalization but “excluded from justice ... excluded from law’s protection.” Cacho emphasizes: “As targets of regulation and containment, they are deemed deserving of discipline and punishment but not worthy of protection.”<sup>13</sup> The lack of protection is also a key feature of the temporary programs to which the displaced are relocated and where they are contained, such as Project Roomkey. Governed by carceral rules, these programs deny civil and housing rights to residents. As civil and social death, racial banishment can also entail actual death. Thus, Pete White, founder and executive director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN) [explains](#) why he uses the term banishment rather than displacement: “Banishment is when there is no place for you to go. Places for you to go are jails or death.” Following abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore, we foreground the inevitably “premature” nature of such death, making careful note of her reminder that racism is the “state-sanctioned ... production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>14</sup>

A key feature of racial banishment is dispossession. State-led displacement creates the loss of space and place, of personal belongings, and of community. It also involves the **dispossession of personhood**. Thus, Cacho notes that criminalization “justifies people’s ineligibility to personhood because it takes away the right to have rights.”<sup>15</sup> We view the dispossession of personhood to exceed criminalization. The very social category of “homeless” can entail such dehumanization and dispossession. Seen to stand outside of what Roy has termed “propertied citizenship,”<sup>16</sup> the homeless other is not seen to be worthy of rights. Indeed, as Porter has shown, property serves as a

9 Molina, “The Importance of Place and Place-Makers,” 82, 78, 70.

10 Beckett and Herbert, “Penal Boundaries,” 1.

11 Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*.

12 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

13 Cacho, *Social Death*, 5.

14 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, 28.

15 Cacho, *Social Death*, 8.

16 Roy, “Paradigms of Propertied Citizenship.”

“threshold of recognition” in settler democracies, and those who cannot meet these standards of “possessory recognizability” are erased and disappeared.<sup>17</sup>

## Displaceability

While displacement is a well-known concept, less known is displaceability. Part of a broader social science literature on state power pertaining to development schemes in the global South, displaceability foregrounds logics of resettlement that reproduce social inequality and political subordination. Such an approach focuses on what Leitner, Sheppard, and Colven calls the “afterlives” of displacement.<sup>18</sup> Formally included in state programs, the displaceable are subject to **permanent insecurity** as well as to the constant negotiation of eligibility and services with the agents and brokers of state power. Displaceability is structured by, and deepens, social differentiation (class, gender, race, ethnicity, caste) and must therefore be understood as a key modality of segregation and dispossession.

We are particularly interested in how the relocation and resettlement of the displaced is not a counterpoint to displacement but rather a perpetuation of displaceability. **Placements, while doing the crucial work of political consent, continue displacement.** We thus interpret the Echo Park Lake placements through the robust understanding of “rehabilitation” that has been developed in the global South. One example of this comes from Haritas’ recent book on “rehabilitation housing,” which shows how slum-dwellers in Bangalore, India, were displaced and relocated to the far periphery of the city. Only a small number of residents received the offer of rehabilitation housing and others were “denied through state-defined ‘eligibility criteria’ and through omission from surveys.”<sup>19</sup> Those placed in rehabilitation housing had to labor and struggle for permanence, navigating a complex bureaucracy for years to come.

Specifically, our concept of displaceability draws on the work of political geographer Oren Yiftachel, who studies ethnocratic urban regimes characterized by what he terms “creeping apartheid.”<sup>20</sup> In foregrounding displaceability, Yiftachel draws attention to how those subject to such power are forced to live “on borrowed time” in a perpetual state of waiting and uncertainty. Most important, he emphasizes that “**this concept expands the understanding of displacement from a policy act to a systemic condition through which spatial power is exerted by policy, legalities and violence.**”<sup>21</sup>

## The Right to Remain

This monograph is not only about (dis)placement but also about the fight for housing and community. Our unhoused comrades displaced from Echo Park Lake have repeatedly emphasized that this fight is not for a program enrollment or temporary placement but rather for belonging and remaining. It is for the **city as home**.

The right to remain is at the heart of “urban rights praxis” in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.<sup>22</sup> As evident in the work of the [Right to Remain collective](#), such praxis shows how even “exclusionary displacement” cannot fully erase a community—that “something always remains even after human and material losses ... even among those who leave and who have lost.” Often taking the form of collective memory, this can prompt “further activism and the advancement of rights.” Masuda et al. term this the “**rights-based praxis of the dispossessed.**”<sup>23</sup> It is a notion of community that remains even after the loss of place and space. Our ethnographic research makes visible how such forms and practices of remaining connect the Echo Park Lake community, even though its residents have been scattered and disappeared.

Remaining is closely tied to remembering. Memory can be intimate and personal and also collective and public. Following geographer Deshonay Dozier, we argue that the formation of encampment communities in Los Angeles must be understood “as both a result of

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17 Porter, “Possessory Politics and the Conceit of Procedure,” 398.

18 Leitner, Sheppard, Colven. “Market-Induced Displacement and Its Afterlives.”

19 Haritas, *In Search of Home: Citizenship, Law, and the Politics of the Poor*, 4.

20 Yiftachel and Yacobi. “Walls, Fences and ‘Creeping Apartheid’ in Israel/Palestine.”

21 Yiftachel, “From Displacement to Displaceability,” 161.

22 Masuda et al., “After Dispossession,” 229.

23 Masuda et al., “After Dispossession,” 231.

rising homelessness and as a necessity for creating life-fulfilling alternatives.” Dozier focuses on “Black-led and supported encampment communities in the 1980s and 1990s in Los Angeles” and foregrounds their “Black spatial visions,” **showing how they sought to envision, plan, and practice a new way of being in the city.**<sup>24</sup>

Such forms of remembering, whether as public history or life history, allow us to take up a vital question posed by Black studies scholar, Clyde Woods: “Is there life after death?” Woods reminds us that “predictions of the death of impoverished and actively marginalized racial and ethnic communities are premature.” But Woods also asks if the tools of research “have become so rusted that they can only be used for autopsies?” Refusing to become “academic coroners,”<sup>25</sup> we strive throughout this monograph to reject what Black studies scholar, Katherine McKittrick, has described as the “familiar analytical naturalization of violence, blackness, and death.”<sup>26</sup> It is thus that what happens AFTER Echo Park Lake matters tremendously, especially in the fight for housing and community. Here we are guided by the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#), which in its recent volume, *Counterpoints*, creates an atlas of both displacement and resistance.<sup>27</sup> Such an endeavor, as public historian Chris Carlsson notes, is the labor of “**overcoming imposed amnesia.**”<sup>28</sup> This monograph must thus be read as contesting the state of disappearance in Los Angeles by creating a record of remaining and remembering.

## Housing Insecurity in An Age of Plenty

*“Under the guise of “services” the City of Los Angeles found a new way to re-package sweeps, brutal law enforcement and the continued criminalization of people who live on the streets: they simply called it ‘housing.’”*

*Carla Orendorff, Street Watch LA organizer and member of the After Echo Park Lake research collective, February 16, 2022*

This is an era of **mass homelessness**. Los Angeles, in particular, has drawn national attention for its homelessness problem. At [last count](#), Los Angeles County had nearly 70,000 people experiencing homelessness, with the vast majority unsheltered. While national public health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic [prohibited the displacement of homeless encampments](#) and [urged the expansion of non-congregate shelter](#), such COVID compassion is now waning. Through municipal ordinances such as Section 41.18, the City of Los Angeles has expanded the criminalization of homelessness through the targeting of encampments. On October 20, 2021 alone, [the City Council banned 54 homeless encampments](#), declaring them “exclusion zones.” As temporary programs like Project Roomkey come to an end, so will COVID-19 eviction moratoria. Housing justice scholars such as Gary Blasi have warned about [the looming crisis](#), noting the direct connection between evictions and homelessness. Systemic racial inequality already structures homelessness in Los Angeles, with [Black Angelenos experiencing homelessness](#) at much higher rates than other social groups. Such inequality is expected to deepen as evictions unfold and temporary programs end. In Los Angeles, working-class communities of color that were already carrying untenable rent burdens and that have borne the brunt of [COVID-19 related health impacts and job insecurity](#) now hold disproportionately large shares of [rent debt](#) unmitigated by rent bailout programs and are thus vulnerable to homelessness. In short, mass homelessness is about to get worse in Los Angeles.

Yet, this is also a moment with a massive infusion of relief resources, including those earmarked for homelessness. Austerity is not the order of the day. Instead, billions of federal dollars are circulating through public and nonprofit housing and shelter and service systems in Los Angeles, spurring new state and local programs such as [Project Homekey](#), Safe Sleep Villages, and Tiny Homes. The American Rescue Plan has authorized approximately 70,000 [emergency housing vouchers](#) nationwide of which 6,806 are available to the City and County of Los Angeles. In addition to federal emergency and economic relief funds related to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are also

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24 Dozier, Deshonay. “Rethinking the Homeless Crisis,” 3.

25 Woods, “Life After Death,” 63.

26 McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” 955.

27 Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. *Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement and Resistance*.

28 Carlsson, *Overcoming Imposed Amnesia*, xxii.

state funds generated by California's budget surplus, described as “[overflowing coffers](#).” The question at hand is whether at such a conjuncture of crisis and relief there is an expansion of housing resources for those who are experiencing homelessness.

Our monograph uncovers two worrying trends. First, we point to a perverse investment of public resources, including federal and state funds, in carceral forms of temporary programs and shelter placements rather than in the expansion of housing. Many of these programs, for example, the Safe Sleep Villages, have [high public costs](#). Many of these programs are designed to be impermanent, with ever-present uncertainty about time limits and next steps, thus reproducing displaceability. For example, Project Homekey, which was meant to be a permanent housing option, now has several programs that are temporary with short-term participant agreements for unhoused residents. And many of these programs are deliberately carceral, stripping residents of civil and housing rights and subjecting them to oppressive forms of curfew and containment, a topic we take up at great length in Chapter 4 where we analyze the Project Roomkey program. Carcerality is closely related to displaceability because the punitive terms and conditions of such programs easily lead to expulsion. We find that the logics of eligibility and exclusion in these temporary programs replicate and deepen racist and patriarchal assumptions about personal motivation and morality, sorting the “deserving poor” from those deemed to be “undeserving.”<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that what is at stake in expulsion is not only the loss of housing, which is significant, but also incarceration, child removal, and family separation.

When programs have the promise of permanence, such as the Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV), which have both a long duration and a robust rent subsidy, the existing system does not seem equipped to implement them. The vast body of research on housing vouchers points to how discrimination and segregation shape whether or not voucher-holders are able to access housing, in which parts of a metropolitan region, and on what terms.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Los Angeles, vitally important research by legal scholars and sociologists on Section 8 housing voucher programs shows high levels of discrimination, segregation, and insecurity experienced by Black residents.<sup>31</sup> While there is reason for optimism about the large number of Emergency Housing Vouchers that will be available in Los Angeles, there is also much reason for concern about how voucher-holders will actually obtain units. In various information sessions that the authors of this monograph have attended, the [Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles \(HACLA\)](#) has placed the burden of referrals on LAHSA and community based organizations. The more difficult part though is the match with landlords, many of whom still use credit and background checks to sort potential tenants. **In tight housing markets structured by race, class, and gender differentiation, vouchers can too often be a dead end.** As an advocate at a community-based organization who has helped a number of unhoused applicants complete their EHV applications recently stated to us:

HACLA has released a list of units available for folks who have EHVs. For a second I thought, OMG, did they actually do their job for once?! I started calling some of the landlords for properties listed on the sheet and they are all still requiring credit and background checks. Upon further investigation, I realized that the list that they put together was just something that they had pulled from <https://www.affordablehousing.com>. They didn't actually do any outreach to the landlords to make sure people would be able to get in.

Second, we find that **the Echo Park Lake displacement is a blueprint for a new spatial governance of poverty in Los Angeles.** Unlike earlier moments of the governance of homelessness that relied on crude police enforcement to disappear unhoused residents, such as the Safer Cities Initiative of 2006,<sup>32</sup> the present conjuncture entails the legitimization of homeless sweeps at visible homeless encampments through offers of housing. In July 2021, a few months after the Echo Park Lake displacement, [Los Angeles City Council](#), declaring that the “homeless crisis has reached epic proportions,” dramatically expanded an existing anti-camping law, Section 41.18, setting the stage for a ban on encampments in most zones of the city. We already know from cities such as San Francisco that this type of criminalization does not reduce homelessness but rather creates what sociologist Chris Herring and colleagues call a “spatial churn,” one in which “homeless people circulate between neighborhoods and police jurisdictions rather than leaving public space.”<sup>33</sup> Put simply, **Section 41.18 is a ban on poor people**, as evident in the [maps](#) documenting the areas that fall under its jurisdiction.

**What is distinctive about the new regime of banishment in Los Angeles is that it couples police enforcement with housing placements.** Dubbed the “[Street Engagement Strategy](#),” and even more boldly, the “Street to Home Strategy,” it provides unhoused persons with “a

29 Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*.

30 See for example Rosen, *The Voucher Promise: “Section 8” and the Fate of an American Neighborhood*.

31 Ocen, “The New Racially Restrictive Covenant,” Kurwa, “The New ‘Man in the House’ Rules,” Hayat, “Section 8 is the New N-Word.”

32 Blasi, *Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness? The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row*.

33 Herring et al., “Pervasive Penalty,” 131.



Figure 1-3. Community statement at Aetna Street Special Enforcement Zone, Van Nuys. Photo by Carla Orendorff, January 12, 2022.

suitable offer of shelter, interim, or permanent housing.” In this arrangement, LAHSA, the main public agency responsible for homeless management, is required to “provide a declaration at the end of an engagement confirming that all people experiencing homelessness (PEH) living at the site have been offered a housing option.” But what are these housing options, who is placed in them, and with what outcomes? These are the questions that this monograph takes up in relation to the Echo Park Lake displacement but that are also pertinent for what has now become a citywide strategy.

We interpret the new spatial governance of poverty in Los Angeles as an emergent formation of liberal urbanism, one where state-led displacement is legitimized and reproduced through “the right to shelter.” While framed by now disgraced Los Angeles politician Mark Ridley-Thomas, key proponent of the expanded anti-camping law, as a right to housing in the tradition of the civil rights movement and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this perverse “right” is in fact the very point of police enforcement and criminalization. As legal and housing justice scholar Gary Blasi has pointed out, this particular articulation of the right to shelter is most clearly [stated](#) by Sacramento mayor, Darrell Steinberg, in his collaboration with Ridley-Thomas: “Homeless people should have a legal right to shelter and a legal obligation to utilize it.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the refusal of shelter activates spatial exclusion and penal punishment. But the consent to shelter activates a system of broken promises, with over 48,000 unhoused persons in the City of Los Angeles and [just about 12,000 available shelter beds](#) and even fewer temporary programs and housing units and vouchers. As our research shows, **such placements are a churning system best understood as a shuffle, where people are moved from one placement to another, creating the appearance of activity but with little change in their housing status.**

We also find that **the new regime of geographic targeting in Los Angeles puts tremendous political pressure on LAHSA outreach workers to demonstrate placements tied to a specific encampment, a process that we call spatial triage.** Our research shows that

34 Blasi, “Legal Right to Shelter.”

the “final, validated placements list” for Echo Park Lake is partially a fiction, with unhoused persons from other targeted zones funneled into such placements. It seems that what is in the making, through the political imperatives established by the Los Angeles City Council, is a homeless management system where geographic prioritization supersedes vulnerability as the criteria for placement, including for temporary programs such as Project Roomkey that were public health interventions meant to serve “[high-risk individuals](#).” Given how limited resources and services are, whether they be shelters, temporary programs, or housing, such spatial triage quickly becomes a shuffle, creating the illusion of solving homelessness while reproducing displaceability.

## The After Echo Park Lake Research Collective

*“I’ve seen too many people like me who wanted to say something and couldn’t,  
because they were behind bars—metal bars, wooden bars.  
I am still here, and I will still be here, as long as there are people around who see me.”*

*Queen, displaced Echo Park Lake resident and member of the After Echo Park Lake research  
collective, February 16, 2022*

A striking aspect of the police invasion of Echo Park Lake and the forced eviction of unhoused residents from the park was the **numerous claims of housing placements made by public officials**. These are detailed in Chapter 3 of this monograph, which demonstrates the shifting nature of such claims as well as how they were mobilized to justify displacement. In the days following the eviction, faculty experts from UCLA, University of Southern California (USC), University of California Irvine (UCI), and Occidental College wrote a [letter](#) to City of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, the Los Angeles City Council, and Executive Director of LAHSA Heidi Marston expressing “grave and urgent concerns” about the displacement. Noting that the failure of housing policy in Los Angeles had created a situation where “homeless encampments have become the only safe and reliable form of housing for many Angelenos,” they called out the displacement as an “eviction at gunpoint” that violated international human rights protocols and CDC COVID-19 guidelines. In particular, the letter cast scrutiny on the claim of placements, noting that “placements into interim shelter must not be equated with housing people.” The faculty, whose expertise lies in urban planning, social work, history, law, public policy, and public health, warned that “without a clear path to permanent housing, such temporary housing serves as yet one more stop in the endless cycle of displacement.”

The faculty experts’ letter was only one part of a **vast outpouring of outrage** about the Echo Park Lake displacement, both in Los Angeles and beyond. Leilani Farha, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, [stated](#) that “Echo Park is an example of what happens when govts [sic] don’t understand homeless encampments as human rights claims and homeless people as human rights defenders.” Even traditional media outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times* filled with voices of displaced residents, including those whose life-histories were to be come central to this research project, such as [Ayman Ahmed](#) and [Gustavo Otzoy](#). Already Echo Park Lake residents and their social justice allies [had faced off with police](#) during the two nights of the militarized invasion of the park. And as detailed in Chapter 5 of this monograph, such action continued a practice of resistance that had developed over months as police sought to surveil and intimidate residents and as the city implemented sweeps. Indeed, Ashley Bennett, one of the co-authors of this monograph, had been fired from LAHSA in February 2020, at Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell’s bidding, for her advocacy of Echo Park Lake residents. In a powerful open letter titled, “[Dear Mitch O’Farrell, You Can’t Fire a Movement](#),” Bennett pinpointed the “strategy of enforcement and harassment to make unhoused people disappear” used by Los Angeles politicians like O’Farrell as well as the endurance and persistence of the community. In the aftermath of the displacement, the community continued to rally, mobilizing mutual aid resources and drawing attention to the trauma and suffering that residents had experienced with the forced eviction. Housing justice movements such as Street Watch LA and ground Game LA, which had worked closely with residents, provided support and challenged the enclosure of the park. Such movement praxis is brilliantly encapsulated in the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition’s zine on Echo Park Lake, [Blueprint for Displacement](#).

But the official narrative lay elsewhere. After journalists put pressure on Mayor Garcetti to respond to the letter, Deputy Mayor of City Homelessness Initiatives Jose “Che” Ramirez agreed to a meeting with the faculty experts, which was held via zoom on April 7, 2021. At the meeting, Deputy Mayor Ramirez stated that the Echo Park Lake “clean-up” was a “model” for housing and services and **boldly claimed that all 193 displaced people will be in “stable, permanent housing” within a year**. Neither he nor his Executive Officer, Claudia Luna, provided any plan for such housing and instead lauded a decentralized system of governance with each Council District

devising “solutions for homelessness.” In Chapters 3 and 6 of this monograph, we provide a detailed account of the politics of Council District 13 where Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell and his staff targeted the encampment at Echo Park Lake and mobilized vast public resources, from militarized policing to Project Roomkey rooms, for its removal.

Alarmed by the meeting, Professor Ananya Roy, a co-author of this monograph and convener of the faculty experts’ letter, wrote the following to Deputy Mayor Che Ramirez and Executive Officer Claudia Luna (April 8, 2021) on the matter of placements: “I ... look forward to confirmation of such permanent placements from your office. It is vitally important that such placements not continue the shuffling of poor people that this city government has become notorious for over the years.” She expressed concern about Project Roomkey (PRK), the main site of placements, noting that “the City of LA has failed on every aspect of PRK,” falling far short of its own targets and wasting the opportunity to fully utilize FEMA reimbursements. She also pointed to “leaked LAHSA memos” published in [Knock LA](#) that indicated that the placement of Echo Park Lake residents in PRK, “cut the line, pushing away those who were in urgent need of such PRK rooms because of age and health conditions.” **Worried that PRK had been “weaponized to justify displacement,”** she asked whether the placements being promised by the city “will mean breaking promises to others who were already in line for such housing.” Deputy Mayor Ramirez never provided a response to such concerns and questions. On April 19, 2021, when asked for data on placements, he referred the faculty experts to LAHSA, with the note: “not much more we could add there.”

**How does one test the promise of “stable, permanent housing” if the functionaries of the state do not keep track of the displaced and their housing placements?** With this question in mind, Professor Ananya Roy, in her role as faculty director of the [UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy](#), reached out to organizers at Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA to initiate a research project focused on the Echo Park Lake displacement. In April 2021, Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA organizers, including Ashley Bennett, Jonny Coleman, and Annie Powers, co-authors of this monograph, and Jed Parriott, invited displaced Echo Park Lake residents to community conversations about a potential UCLA research project. David Busch-Lilly, long-time housing justice activist and one of the displaced Echo Park Lake residents who had been arrested during the police invasion, played a crucial role in getting the word out. Held at the perimeters of the enclosed park from which residents had been banished and in the shadow of Project Roomkey sites where residents had been placed in carceral isolation, these meetings made evident the **community interest in, and aspirations for, such a research project**. Scattered to freeway underpasses, precariously parked RVs, distant motels, and curfew-governed Project Roomkey hotels, Echo Park Lake residents put forward two primary aspirations for the research: first, that it help displaced community members stay connected to one another; and second, that it serve as testimony in support of the ongoing fight for housing rights. With uncanny clarity, they interpreted the **system of placement as one of displacement**, one in which people are disappeared through expulsion and exclusion such that there are fewer and fewer among them eligible for resources and repair. Those still in the system, they pointed out, are kept in a state of permanent waiting for housing.

Such analysis and aspirations became the founding principles of the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective, a partnership between the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, Ground Game LA, and Street Watch LA. **Bringing together movement-based and university-based scholars, the research collective is anchored by a community board made up of unhoused scholars, several of them displaced from Echo Park Lake.** Since April 2021, we have met each week, either in zoomworld because of pandemic protocols, or at UCLA, sprawling out in the late afternoon sun on the lawn of the sculpture garden that forms the backyard to the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. As evident in our first report, [We Do Not Forget: The Stolen Lives of LA’s Unhoused](#), our research priorities have been set by the experiences and concerns of unhoused comrades. Less evident is that in our shared work we strive to create a space of collective reflection and collective care, especially for those among us who are on the frontlines of housing justice struggle. In particular, we believe in the healing power of shared research and scholarship. William Sens, Jr., displaced Echo Park Lake resident and one of the members of the research collective put it this way:

If it wasn’t for this research study, I think I would have just buried it all. This really was a blessing in disguise, to sit down and soul search about the implications of how these people are treating us. For me, it was a deep experience, to really think about it. People are going to have to see that we are human and not just a number.

In its formation, the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective set as its main intention **the research task of following displaced Echo Park Lake residents over the course of a year**, from May 2021 to June 2022. While the official numbers hovered at about 180 placements, it was also evident that there were many residents who had refused placements or had been excluded from them. The goal of the research was to mobilize multiple forms of knowledge, from media reports to claims by elected officials to community knowledge among the unhoused, to identify as many displaced residents as possible. Coinciding with the formation of [UTACH](#), Unhoused Tenants



Figure 1-4. After Echo Park Lake research collective meeting with La Donna Harrell and Queen, UCLA Sculpture Garden, June 30, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.

Against Carceral Housing, the research collective also became a key space for documenting and analyzing the experiences and struggles of unhoused comrades placed in, and pushed out of, Project Roomkey. Worried about the erosion of social networks and the spatial dispersal of the community, we sought to counter erasure and disappearance through a rigorous ethnographic methodology. Developed through several collective reflections led by Hilary Malson, one of the co-authors of this monograph, and Terra Graziani of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, this methodology has four key features.

- It develops an understanding of housing trajectories through open-ended interviews. Adopting a **life-history approach**, such an interview method is concerned with the complex social relations, extended over time, that shape experiences of home and homelessness. It thus contextualizes each person's experience of housing insecurity within their larger life story.
- Instead of thinking of displacement as a singular moment, it seeks to capture its **iterative nature**, paying close attention to how unhoused people labor to establish access to housing and how they are dispossessed of such access in multiple ways and at multiple times over the course of a lifetime.
- Recognizing the central role of state-led displacement, it journeys with a small group of unhoused comrades, learning from their everyday efforts to navigate bureaucracies of shelter and services and to press for accountability. In doing so, it seeks to uncover **the structural violence of the everyday state** in addition to the militarized violence that accompanies spectacular moments of displacement.
- It connects life histories with **movement histories**, thereby developing an archive of resistance against displacement. This serves as collective memory for communities built and lost, such as the one at Echo Park Lake. It also reinscribes the city,



including public spaces such as parks, as terrains of struggle, where the attempt to privatize, police, and enclose is always under contestation.

In the chapters that follow, we present analysis rooted in this ethnographic methodology. With the exception of the members of the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective and Echo Park Lake residents who held publicly visible leadership and liaison roles for the community, we have not used the real names of people, and in many cases, we have changed the names of locations. While displaced Echo Park Lake residents have been keen to tell their stories, we have felt that such anonymization is an important practice to prevent further state supervision and harassment.

In addition to the ethnographic methodology, the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective also set the intention of collecting and analyzing **the official data on housing placements and homeless services**. In the days after the displacement, LAHSA issued an internal memo with the following “final, validated placement list,” which was shared with us by various sources.

Not satisfied with this snapshot of placements, we pressed LAHSA leadership for **detailed data on housing trajectories** such that we could follow these placements over the course of a year to see if they lead to the promise of “stable, permanent housing.” Keen to support the research, LAHSA leadership immediately agreed to enter into a Data Usage Agreement that would provide access to a full picture view of outreach, assessment, and housing placements. Discussed more fully in Chapter 3 of this monograph, such data encompasses all of Los Angeles County, (excluding the cities of Glendale, Long Beach, and Pasadena, which are not part of LAHSA’s Continuum of Care), goes back to 2014, and includes all HUD data elements, LAHSA’s Coordinated Entry System data, as well as more recent datasets such as Encampments and Project Roomkey. When narrowed to the Echo Park Lake encampment, such data provides valuable insight into the housing trajectories of residents prior to the encampment, revealing the iterative nature of displacement and the long struggle for housing and shelter. While LAHSA leadership was also agreeable to share the data that underlies the “final, validated placement list”

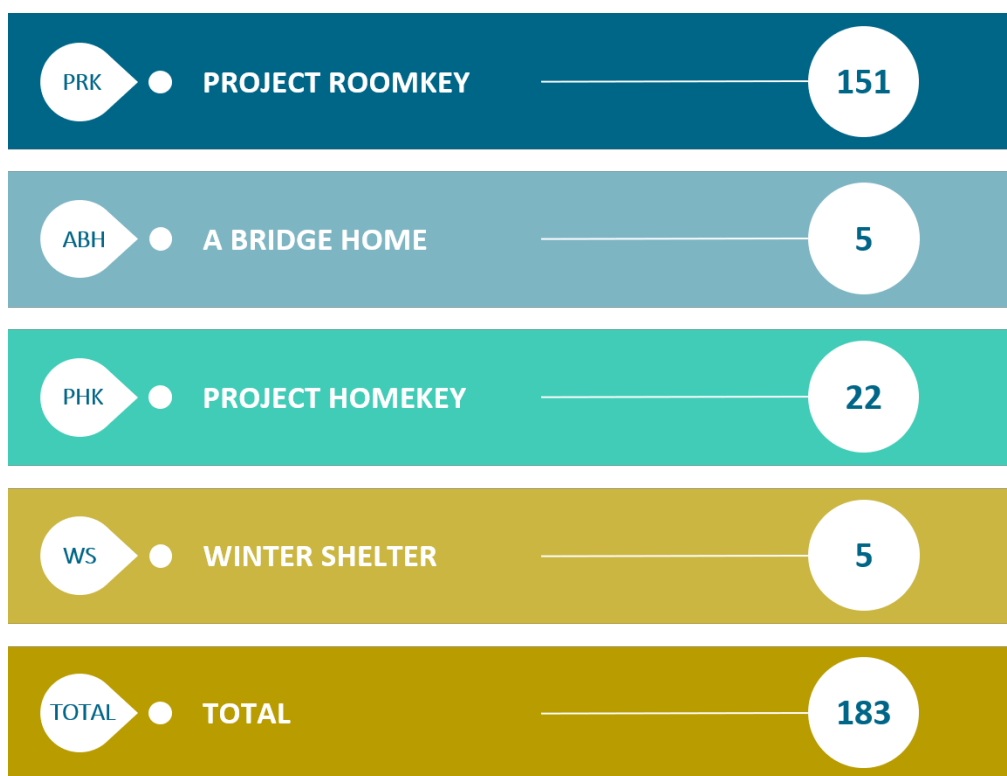


Figure 1-5. Source: LAHSA internal memo titled “Echo Park Lake Closure – Final Report,” April 6, 2021.

of 183 Echo Park Lake residents, the Data Management and Communications offices at LAHSA provided such data without location and personal identifiers. However, they agreed to provide this data in disaggregated and longitudinal format so that we could follow these 183 placements over the course of a year. Also in Chapter 3 of this monograph, we discuss what we learn from this data, including the “exits” that have unfolded since initial placements.

Taken together, our ethnographic research and our analysis of LAHSA data provides unique insight into the aftermath of displacement in liberal cities such as Los Angeles. **We unpack the category of “placement” through which state-led displacement is implemented and justified**, showing how people are excluded and expelled from such placements or kept in a permanent state of waiting. In other words, placements are an integral part of the process of displacement and often serve as the next stage of displacement. We also demonstrate the churning system of homeless shelter and services through which people are cycled, often over the course of years. Governed by cumbersome rules, conditions, and eligibility criteria, this is a Kafkaesque bureaucracy with numerous service providers, public agencies, and mercenary subcontractors. That people experiencing homelessness repeatedly and persistently navigate this system is testament to their fierce endurance and exposes the lie of “shelter-resistance.”



Figure 1-6. After Echo Park Lake research collective members, Jennifer Blake and Gustavo Otzoy, at LAHSA in their role as UTACH organizers, June 22, 2021. Photo by Carla Orendorff.

**2.**

**PERMANENT  
DISPLACEABILITY**

## 2. PERMANENT DISPLACEABILITY

Though many people slip into houselessness through one simple misstep or hardship—an eviction notice, a missed paycheck, a prolonged illness—the journey of finding housing has exponentially more obstacles. Whether they are waiting a seemingly infinite amount of time for a promised housing voucher to arrive or are facing chronic threats of removal from the police or program service providers, a person who becomes unhoused is forced to navigate life without secure ties to place, without recognized claims to rights, and with compromised abilities to maintain connections. The loss of housing may occur through a single event, but the result is a life lived within a new condition: one of permanent displaceability.

In foregrounding the concept of permanent displaceability, our research collective draws from the work of planning scholar Oren Yiftachel, whose perspective from the Global Southeast yields insights into displacement that diverge from the gentrification theories emerging out urban North America and Western Europe.<sup>35</sup> **Displaceability extends beyond the event of displacement** and the mechanisms through which it occurs, to describe the particular condition that some urban residents face: of being susceptible to involuntary distancing “from the full rights to the resources and opportunities of their metropolitan region.”<sup>36</sup> This condition of existence, where one’s displacement is always imminent, is a life made marginal. Importantly, to think from the Southeast is to contend with the afterlives of colonialism, which requires foregrounding the identity regimes through which structural oppression is perpetuated. Riffing on the parlance of American apartheid, Yiftachel argues that displaceability is the setting under which “colonized urban citizenship is re-constructed as ‘separate and unequal.’”<sup>37</sup>

Although Los Angeles, the city from where we write, is in California (a place often framed as the Global North and the fifth largest economy in the world, were it to be counted as its own nation), the number of lives lived at the margins here is large and growing, and life at the margins is unevenly experienced. Black Angelenos are but nine percent of the county’s population, yet a [recent LAHSA report](#) indicates that Black Angelenos are overrepresented as 40 percent of the unhoused population—a number which has likely grown due to the disparate impacts of the pandemic. Likewise, many of the former residents of Echo Park Lake and other unhoused Angelenos who we spoke with over the course of this research are Black, Latinx, or Indigenous, and are therefore more likely to experience outright discrimination. Thus, the un-housing of Los Angeles’ Black and Brown residents can be understood as a project of racial banishment.<sup>38</sup> When we think from Echo Park Lake, we do so not as beneficiaries of the multimillion-dollar renovations to the crown jewel of the City’s neighborhood parks; rather, the perspective we think from is that of the banished, who are excluded from accessing the full spectrum of rights to public urban life. This is not brand-new terrain: geographer Don Mitchell theorized from the streets of the U.S. to demonstrate how unhoused people are banned from living in public space (and thus living at all), and [Erin Gooding built upon this analysis](#) to illuminate how propertied business interests are empowered to police unhoused people into forced mobility.<sup>39</sup> Yet in addition to highlighting identity regimes as a logic of constructing urban citizenship, **what “permanent displaceability” does differently is that it frames time as an important tool of governance.** Living under the *permanent* threat of displacement is a condition through which urban society’s marginalized are excluded from civic life. Perspectives from other peripheries, such as Yiftachel’s, enable us to see urban processes here with renewed clarity.

Permanent displaceability is the mode through which unhoused residents of Los Angeles are governed. Sanitized phrasing such as “placements” and “exits” obscure the mechanisms of carceral warehousing and punitive eviction that unhoused people face once they become embroiled in state homelessness systems of care. This obfuscation performs multiple functions. Consider the ambiguity of “placement,” the term given for any form of shelter in the complex matrix of City and City-contracted services. Sweeps—the term for eviction of those living on the street—are often justified through policy and in practice if the newly-evicted unhoused person is offered a

35 Yiftachel introduces the term ‘Global Southeast’ as a nuanced intervention to the dichotomies of Global North and South, and the West and East, which in and of themselves are spatializations of the division between developed and developing parts of the world, or as spatializations separating settler colonies and historical colonizing nations from those places they colonized. The Global Southeast is comprised of those places seen as ‘outside’ of the North and the West.

36 Yiftachel, “From Displacement to Displaceability,” 154-155.

37 Ibid., 160.

38 Roy, “Dis/possessive Collectivism.”

39 Mitchell, *The Right to the City*. Goodling, “‘Move Along.’”

placement. Those who accept the placement subsequently enter a purgatory: a system where they are stripped of the autonomy of the streets and the ordinary dignities of adulthood, yet where the security of permanent housing is beyond reach. Even the few who receive accommodations they find decent are living on borrowed time, with short term leases of several months to a year, and with the threat of an “exit” always looming. Meanwhile, housed residents who would prefer that unhoused people be moved out of their view (and advocate for this to occur) are reassured that their circumstances have improved, with no insight into the conditions within the homeless services systems.

People living under permanent displaceability are being traumatized by the state. Unhoused members of our research collective fiercely resist these conditions as a fight for their lives, and with good reason: submitting to these terms is akin to a social death. Under social death, birthright social entitlements, such as maintenance of relationships to family and community, are disregarded.<sup>40</sup> Queen, an unhoused member of our research collective who previously lived in the Echo Park Lake encampment, characterized the emotional and mental impacts of displaceability as “living in a permanent state of anguish.”

In this chapter, we analyze permanent displaceability through the lived experiences of the evicted residents of Echo Park Lake. We begin this examination with a table summarizing the housing trajectories of the former residents. Using public data provided by LAHSA, we identified the former residents of Echo Park Lake, their residences prior to moving into the park, and the sites and forms of shelter they have had in the year since the eviction. We then delve into the concept of permanent displaceability and illuminate its contours through the experiences of people displaced from Echo Park Lake. **We have conceptualized permanent displaceability as a non-linear cycle comprised of nine components, taking place in three thematic stages: swept and violated; waiting, the shuffle, separated, and disappeared; and threatened, punished, and banished.** We define each of these components, and then illustrate them with vignettes. The vignettes presented here illuminate the cycle of permanent displaceability, from the perspectives of those subjected to it. Some are first person accounts, written by unhoused members of the research collaborative, while others are anonymized vignettes derived from interviews that our team conducted with nearly 50 former residents of Echo Park Lake. The stages in the cycle of permanent displaceability are framed as non-linear because they convey different expressions of the cycle, rather than sequential steps within it. Thus, a person might go from the extreme exclusions of being threatened, punished, and banished, to then setting up on the street and experiencing the disregard of personhood that typify being swept and being banished. Underlying all these components is removal from the right to urban life, and the permanent subjugation to displaceability.

## Where Are Echo Park Lake’s Residents Today?

The Echo Park Lake displacement scattered the community that had formed at the park. Since April 2021, the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective has sought to maintain ties with former residents and learn about their housing trajectories. As detailed in the two tables included here, we have conducted interviews with 41 displaced residents and maintained community knowledge about, and connections to, another 43 displaced residents. As people have been dispersed across Los Angeles and as community ties have frayed, so such community knowledge has weakened. Phones have stopped working, tents have been destroyed, and people have been swept, arrested, and have died. We have sought to acknowledge the presence of each resident in these tables, even when the information we have about their housing status is incomplete. The tables foreground three main findings of our ethnographic research.

First, the encampment at Echo Park Lake had become an important refuge both for those who were newly unhoused as well as for those who had experienced homelessness for many years. The varied paths to homelessness show how housing insecurity and social precarity combine such that a single emergency or crisis can precipitate the loss of housing. Social networks and community support are important bulwarks, as demonstrated by several of the housing trajectories that follow the Echo Park Lake displacement, with community-funded motels, mutual aid, and family and friends as important housing resources.

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40 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 4-9. Patterson conceptualized social death in his examination of slavery, and he argued that “natal alienation”—the severing of those birthright entitlements—was a constitutive element of slavery. We recognize that unhoused people are not enslaved but find his theorization of social death useful for elucidating the state’s formation of unhoused people as a class whose humanity is formally unrecognized. The cycle of permanent displaceability is an active process of *dehumanization*.

Second, while a large number of displaced residents (32 out of 41 interviewed and 18 out of the 43 for whom we have community knowledge) were placed in temporary programs such as Project Roomkey or have obtained a housing resource, such as a Section 8 voucher or enrollment in the Rapid Re-Housing program, very few are now housed (4 out of the 41 interviewed and 0 out of the 43 for whom we have community knowledge). These seeming “success cases” are not instances of state support but rather of social networks and community support. For example, the two displaced Echo Park Lake residents who are now enrolled in Rapid Re-Housing were able to meet the stringent income and employment criteria because community organizations mobilized to help them find jobs. In the rare cases where someone was able to return to a program such as Project Roomkey (PRK) after incarceration, it is only because of the advocacy of community organizers.

Third, the housing trajectories reveal permanent displaceability, with people being exited from placements such as Project Roomkey and even Project Homekey to return to precarious living on the streets or in a vehicle. It is crucial to underscore that such displaceability often engenders death. Six out of the 43 people for whom we have community knowledge have passed away since the Echo Park Lake displacement.

**Table 1: Housing Trajectories of Echo Park Lake Residents (Interviews)**

	Path to Homelessness*	Housing Trajectory		
		Location Immediately Prior to Echo Park Lake	Placements after Echo Park Lake	Placement in Housing?
1	Job loss	Street	Community Org Motel -> Vehicle	No
2	Eviction	Street	Street -> PRK -> Street -> With Family/Friends	No
3	Incarceration	Street	Community Org Motel -> With Family/Friends	No
4	Partner violence and exclusionary housing rules	Section 8 Housing	PRK	No
5	Domestic violence	Shelter	PRK -> Apartment via Catholic Charities Program	Yes
6	Unhoused as a teenager, mental health issues, difficulty getting a job, rocky marriage	Unknown to us	PRK -> Street -> Street -> With Friends/Family -> Left town	Unknown to us
7	Unknown to us	Street	PRK -> Unknown to us	No
8	Incarceration	Street	PRK -> Street -> Street -> Parks -> Squatting -> Street	No
9	Airline ticket scam that didn't allow a return home	Street	Community Org Motel -> PRK -> RV -> With Family/Friends	No
10	Domestic violence	With Family/Friends	PRK	No
11	Eviction	Street	Street -> With Family/Friends -> With Family/Friends	No
12	Unknown to us	With Family/Friends	PRK -> Section 8 Voucher (No Unit Obtained)	No
13	Incarceration/parole violations	With Family/Friends	PRK -> Section 8 Voucher (No Unit Obtained)	No

Housing Trajectory				
	Path to Homelessness*	Location Immediately Prior to Echo Park Lake	Placements after Echo Park Lake	Placement in Housing?
14	Worked rideshare but not enough to pay the rent; was evicted	Street & Park	PRK -> Street	No
15	Incarceration	Street	PRK	No
16	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	PRK -> Street (41.18 zone)	No
17	Domestic violence and then strictness of domestic violence facility	Shelter	PRK	No
18	VA doesn't allow unmarried partners + job loss due to COVID	Street	PRK	No
19	Evicted from family's house	With Family/Friends	PRK -> PHK -> Street	No
20	Parents were homeless & was left to fend on one's own	Street	Community Org Motel -> Street -> Street (41.18 zone)	No
21	Evicted from family's house	Street	PRK	No
22	Didn't want to live at family's home in Tampa so began camping outside.	Shelter	PRK -> Apartment in Skid Row (found without help from services)	Yes
23	Domestic violence	Housed with former partner	PRK -> Vehicle -> Vehicle	No
24	Lost job & informal living space due to COVID	Street	PRK	No
25	Wage-rent gap; business partner's car business tanked	Park	Community Org Motel -> Motel -> Street -> Rapid Re-Housing	Yes
26	Unknown to us	Vehicle	PRK -> Street (41.18 zone)	No
27	Airline ticket scam that didn't allow a return home	Street	Community Org Motel -> PRK -> RV -> With Family/Friends	No
28	House fire	Street	Street (41.18 zone)	No
29	Fleeing domestic abuse, but also had been on and off homeless before.	Hostel	PRK	No
30	Kicked out by landlord/ employer for demanding withheld wages.	Rented room in a house	Community Org Motel -> Park -> PRK -> Incarcerated -> Voucher Hotel	No
31	Worked four jobs but not enough to pay rent	Apartment	PRK	No

		Housing Trajectory		
	Path to Homelessness*	Location Immediately Prior to Echo Park Lake	Placements after Echo Park Lake	Placement in Housing?
32	Unknown to us	Street	With Family/Friends -> Street (41.18 zone)	No
33	Unknown to us	Squatted in abandoned apartment	PRK	No
34	Used to live with relative	Park	PRK	No
35	Eviction	Street	Street	No
36	Lost wages	Street	PRK -> Voucher Motel -> Recovery Re-Housing	No
37	A significant car accident	With Family/Friends + Street	Community Org motel -> Motel -> Rapid Re-Housing	Yes
38	Unknown to us	Street	Community Org Motel -> Street	No
39	Unknown to us	Prior to EPL first time: Street; Prior to EPL second time: Motel Voucher + RV	With Family/Friends -> Vehicle -> Temporary Shelter Program -> Motel Voucher + Vehicle -> Section 8 Voucher (no unit obtained)	No
40	Unknown to us	Prior to EPL first time: Street; Prior to EPL second time: Motel Voucher + RV	With Family/Friends -> Vehicle -> Temporary Shelter Program -> Motel Voucher + Vehicle -> Section 8 (no unit obtained)	No
41	Couldn't afford hostels anymore	Hostel	PRK	No

\*Note: We recognize the central importance of housing insecurity as a cause of homelessness; in addition, we focus attention on the related structural processes through which people become unhoused.

**Table 2: Housing Trajectories of Echo Park Lake Residents (Community Knowledge)**

		Housing Trajectory		
	Path to Homelessness*	Location Immediately Prior to Echo Park Lake	Placements after Echo Park Lake	Placement in Housing?
1	Fleeing domestic violence	Vehicle	PRK -> PRK -> With Friends/Family -> Community Org Motel -> With Friends/Family -> Unknown	No
2	Job loss	Street - displaced from another neighborhood by law enforcement	Community org motel -> Left town -> With Family/Friends	No
3	Incarceration	Vehicle	PRK -> Street	No
4	Fleeing domestic violence	Street	PRK	No
5	Unknown to us	Street	Community Org Motel -> PRK -> Street	No
6	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	PRK -> Unknown to us	



Housing Trajectory				
	Path to Homelessness*	Location Immediately Prior to Echo Park Lake	Placements after Echo Park Lake	Placement in Housing?
7	Unknown to us	Street	PRK -> Street -> Street	No
8	Job plan fell through	Street	Left town (b/c they were nervous about law enforcement action taking place) -> Unknown to us	Unknown to us
9	Partner's job plan fell through	Street	Left town (b/c they were nervous about law enforcement action taking place) -> Unknown to us	Unknown to us
10	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Vehicle	No
11	Job loss	Street	Community Org Motel -> Street -> Vehicle -> With Family/Friends	No
12	Fled country because of gender persecution + couldn't find a job	Traveling on Trains	RV -> Park -> Unknown to us	No
13	Unknown to us	Street	PRK -> Incarcerated -> With Family/Friends -> Street -> With Family/Friends -> Street	No
14	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	PRK	No
15	Unknown to us	Street	Park -> Street -> With Family/Friends	No
16	Job loss	Street	Community Org Motel -> Vehicle -> Street	No
17	Unknown to us	Street	Community Org Motel -> Shelter	No
18	Unknown to us	Street	Community Org Motel -> Street	No
19	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	PRK	Unknown to us
20	Incarceration	Street	Community Org Motel -> Park -> Vehicle -> Incarcerated	No
21	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Unknown to us
22	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	PRK	Unknown to us
23	Job loss	PRK	Community Org Motel -> Street	No
24	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Park -> Unknown to us	No
25	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	With Family/Friends	No
26	Struggled with health conditions	Street	PRK -> Hospital -> Unknown to us	Unknown to us
27	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	PRK -> Unknown to us	No
28	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Street -> Swept -> Unknown to us	Unknown to us
29	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Street -> Vehicle -> Unknown to us	No

		Housing Trajectory		
	Path to Homelessness*	Location Immediately Prior to Echo Park Lake	Placements after Echo Park Lake	Placement in Housing?
30	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Unhoused	No
31	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Unhoused	No
32	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Deceased
33	Eviction	Shelter	PRK -> Deceased	Deceased
34	Eviction	Street	Vehicle -> Hospital -> Deceased	Deceased
35	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Vehicle or Street -> Deceased	Deceased
36	Unknown to us	Shelter (Orange County)	PRK	Deceased
37	Unknown to us	Street	Street -> Deceased	Deceased
38	Unknown to us	Street	Street -> Street -> PRK -> Unknown to us	Unknown to us
39	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	Community Org Motel -> Street	No
40	Unknown to us	Street	PRK -> Unknown to us	Unknown to us
41	Unknown to us	RV	RV	No
42	Unknown to us	Unknown to us	PRK	No
43	Eviction	Street	Community Org Motel -> PRK -> PRK -> Voucher Motel	Unknown to us

\*Note: The housing trajectories included in this table are of people we have not interviewed, but whose stories are known to us through networks of community knowledge and support that endure in the aftermath of displacement. They have been assembled with the guidance of our Community Advisory Board members who are themselves displaced Echo Park Lake residents. It is clear that the scattering of people has taken a toll on relationships, and this is evident in the incomplete nature of information. We present the table as an acknowledgment of those who were present in the Echo Park Lake community and as a counterpoint to administrative records, which we find to be equally incomplete and much more unreliable.

## Key Components of Permanent Displaceability

### Stage 1: Swept and Violated

#### Swept

##### Definition

City of Los Angeles departments such as LA Sanitation, the Los Angeles Police Department, and City housing agencies work together to facilitate encampment sweeps under the guise of environmental and public health protections. During sweeps, sanitation and police departments seize unhoused individuals' belongings and force mobility.<sup>41</sup>

Being swept is compulsory mobility, a permanent inability to stay still, to build comfort, to rest.<sup>42</sup> Unhoused individuals are swept from one place to the next, facing a continuous cycle of displaceability, social isolation, and banishment.

##### Kyle

Kyle sought refuge at Echo Park Lake after losing his home to a house fire. He came to the park on a whim, recognizing that without an ID or birth certificate, it might be close to impossible to find housing. Kyle felt embraced at the park. He made relationships with Street Watch LA organizers and was a regular at the Power Up table where he charged his devices. He felt safer at the park than he ever had on the streets. On the night of the mass eviction from Echo Park Lake, all of that was brutally and forcefully stolen from him. Kyle tried to understand what was happening, asking his neighbors what they knew. He remembers his neighbor saying, "They're making us leave, they're going to kick everybody out if we don't leave, or they're gonna pack our stuff up and throw it away." Kyle asked, "What are they going to do for us though? Like provide housing or what?"

Kyle was not offered housing the night of the eviction, a sweep on a massive scale. However, even after many broken promises of motel rooms from Urban Alchemy and housing opportunities from LAHSA, Kyle *still* said he "would have took [the housing]," if offered to him, "but it never got to that. [He] never got the chance." Kyle was not given the option of shelter. He was given no options at all. He was banished from his home, separated from all his belongings, and relegated to another patch of public land. Without an ID or a birth certificate, finding housing was close to impossible. In the aftermath of the eviction, Kyle's only option was to set up a tent at a nearby encampment. In late 2021, he told us he'll be there "as long as it lasts. Until whatever happens. As long as [he's] safe."

Kyle still experiences compulsory mobility at the hands of the state. He expressed that his new residence feels unsafe. "People come in my tent in the middle of the night while I am sleeping and steal from me." This reality and lack of security has caused Kyle to move most nights, failing to have a secure place to go back to. Without his ID and birth certificate, this is his only option. The City will not house him. With the growing banishments occurring at the hands of Section 41.18, it is likely that Kyle's place of residence will be swept and fenced in within the coming months. He has no promise of housing to rely on if this site eventually does become privatized and criminalized. However, as he put it himself, he waits and stays where he is "until whatever happens." It seems that something always will. This is the only promise that the City keeps.

41 Hankins et al., "Forced Mobility."

42 Homelessness is a condition of involuntary mobility. The state forces people to remain mobile by failing to provide housing as an alternative, thus making it compulsory. There are no options to stay still. UCLA Professor of Gender Studies, Dr. Judy Han assisted in providing this definition through a mobility studies lens.

## *Violated*

### Definition

Unhoused people are subjected to the dispossession of their personhood. For women, queer people, and others whose bodies render them particularly vulnerable to perpetrators of violence, life on the street is characterized by a lack of rest, due to the constant vigilance required to stay safe and alive. Yet inside service programs, carceral rules strip unhoused people of any claim to security, instead providing forms of shelter that come without walls and doors (as in congregate shelters and some Bridge Home sites) or room keys (as in Project Roomkey). These programs refuse unhoused people basic rights: to protection, to safety, to privacy, and even to personal property. Not only does this condition of rightlessness enable gross violations to the minds and bodies of unhoused people, it ensures that there is little to no recourse. Unhoused people suffer horrific violations to their human dignity behind the (unlocked) doors of service programs like these precisely because they have already been invisibilized and deemed rightless by the state. When a program structures its participants as undeserving of basic societal norms, situates them outside of humanity. This is social death.

### Madison

Madison is a mother whose experience of homelessness began with protecting her child. When she learned that her young daughter was being molested, the two of them fled the family home, initially staying together in women's shelters before being separated. Madison subsequently endured years of upheaval, living in harrowing conditions in shelters and on streets while battling addictions to drugs she used to blunt her feelings, before becoming sober and receiving a placement in Project Roomkey.

Whatever sense of security Madison might have cultivated through her Project Roomkey stay was undermined and disturbed by consistent staff intrusions into her room. The mandate of regular daily temperature checks emboldened male staff members to enter her room, even when she would announce that she was in the shower. Even more distressing were the multiple desecrations to her most cherished possession: the urn containing the ashes of her other daughter. On multiple occasions, Madison returned to her room - only to find the urn tampered with and her daughter's ashes coating the floor.

### Alice

Alice fell into homelessness when fleeing domestic violence. Because her partner stalked her and her family at their homes, she left behind her support networks and lived in a tent at Echo Park Lake for nearly a year. Although she found support at the park through the few close relationships that she nurtured, her year in the tent was marked by constant harassment and unwanted propositions. A room of her own in Project Roomkey appeared to be a gift: though it came without a key, she would finally have a safe space where she could rest her head and lock her own door, protected from threats of violence and harassment.

Yet Alice's sense of security was shattered around 10 p.m. one night, when an intruder attempted to enter her room, foiled only by her unsanctioned locking of her door. She stepped out into the hall a moment later and questioned the only person present: a male staff member. He acknowledged trying to get into her room to empty the trash, chastised her for locking the door, and threatened her with being exited from the program. The absurd excuse of a late-night trash cleaning left Alice feeling furious and deeply unsettled by the invasion to her privacy, re-traumatized by the unspoken threat of sexual violence, and silenced by the possibility of losing her shelter.

## Stage 2: Waiting, the Shuffle, Separated, and Disappeared

### Waiting

#### Definition

Waiting is a condition in which the state prolongs the process of attaining stable, permanent housing that people were promised in the first place. The waiting one experiences feels infinite because it entails many phases in an ever-perpetuating cycle. Shuffled through various institutions of the homeless management bureaucracy, unhoused people who have been displaced are subject to an array of revolving doors: carceral rules that prevent people from maintaining employment or appointments, copious and repetitive paperwork that is arbitrarily required, and a seemingly endless stream of newly assigned case workers, who may not even present themselves. While people who have been displaced wait long periods (sometimes years) for stable housing, actors from within the bureaucracies of homeless management approach the issue with a range of urgency, from empathetic to apathetic. Their behavior further informs the decisions of residents, who may choose to wait, leave the program due to its dehumanizing conditions (termed “self-exit”), or break its ostensibly arbitrary rules. The last option may result in not only an “exit,” but also future delays in accessing programs or receiving housing placements, thus relegating someone to an informal blacklist of sorts. Time is weaponized over a whole group of people, to control the movements, psyches, and housing trajectories of individuals the state deems to be problems. Confined in a pipeline between the streets and incarceration, people who are unhoused live in a reality where they are just waiting to be swept again, waiting to be incarcerated again, waiting to be displaced again.

#### Will

Will lost his hospitality sector job at the start of the pandemic, and shortly thereafter he and his roommates were kicked out of their apartment. After living in a car for some time and visiting Echo Park Lake during the day to secure supplies, he and his partner eventually moved into the park, where they became active community members. In February 2021, when LAHSA employees began offering previously ineligible Echo Park Lake residents access to Project Roomkey, he and his partner accepted their placement. One year later, they remain in the hotel room, no closer to permanent housing than they were when they left the park. Here, Will shares his perspective on “waiting,” which opens with an original poem:

We will not go on awaiting hope  
No nameless pawns in endless game  
No bait & switch no rope a dope  
Nor wait for help from hurting hands  
No wait for city system vote  
decide I'm good or bad  
Time alive in energy  
Now the time to act

They have it down to an art. The carrot on the stick, keep it bright and polished at all times. Oh, you almost had it at that time, just one more try. That ball in volley indefinitely ... They have to convince you that they're on your side, that they have your best interest at heart. “We have these experts to help you out.” They keep you walking on eggshells, and they keep you waiting, hoping that you'll fail. That will save them a lot of money—and actually make them money if they can get you incarcerated. That's the game how I see it, swapping you from this “housing” into incarceration. “We want you jailed, not in this free jail, but in this jail that's gonna pay us.” That seems to be what the system does. It imprisons people. That's a whole waiting game. That is a thing that a lot of people are feeling, waiting to be imprisoned. But I've heard from a lot of people that have been to prison, it kind of ruins your life. You're waiting to have to go back. It's very likely when you're on the streets.

My place in the whole waiting thing is helping other people wait. Helping people to not give up and kind of settle into it and stay calm. That happens a lot because the staff will goad people, tease people in different ways, get you agitated. They definitely want people to leave. The reason I know is because they jump right to that: “We'll put you out of the program,” this guy told me. “You better put a muzzle on that dog or you're gonna have to leave the program.” They want you to fail. Let's say I got permanent housing. The bets are on that I'm gonna lose it. There's plenty of rules and different ways that I could lose that housing real easily.

Refilling out the same paperwork brings you back to this feeling of, “No, I gave you this two months ago. What are you doing with the information I’m giving you?” They don’t acknowledge that it’s a repetitive cycle, which lends to the gaslighting feeling of it. A big thing that I’ve seen with a lot of people—haven’t had this issue myself, but a lot of people have had his issue—they don’t get a case worker that can help them. They get a warm body that comes to their door and says words to their face, and they don’t see the person again for three months. And the next time they see a person it’s another person. My neighbor had like six case workers. None of them did a thing except for collect pay checks. Each person doesn’t pick up the paperwork from the last person. They come back to you. The whole list of things that you have to give to people several times. It seems really chaotic and random, but it’s not. They’ll come with a paper, one paper. This guy, I’ve dealt with him twice. He has my “case.” He’s a LAHSA employee. One time I had to sign a paper that said that I filled out my emergency housing voucher form, and the other time I had to give him a copy of my bank statement. It impacts me because there’s never any result from it. Or there hasn’t been, anyway. Now I can be confident that they’re gonna give me the same form again. Wouldn’t be surprised. Whereas at first it was kind of a head trip: “Um, did you lose the first one?” And what do they say? “Just sign it.”

There’s constant interruptions, with everything. Since being at the Project Roomkey hotel, there’s been four different closing dates that we’ve been given. It’s the person that’s in the know that comes and tells you, “We need to get you housed because the location is gonna close on such and such date. Gotta get you housed by that date.” They ramp up the anxiety. With the closing dates that they gave us on those occasions, the date would come and go, and no one would say a word. No one comes and says, “Disregard that.” There was a thing of the 30-day notice. What they did was really over the top, the unsettling environment that they foster. To do that on an official level, to try to fool people into thinking that you were gonna get kicked out in 30 days—that was an instance where they did plan to exit people. The waiting in that circumstance, that was really stressful. I was trying to get an explanation for why they gave us the 30-day notice paper in the first place. No one would tell me for days. When the guy finally did tell me, that’s when he was saying that I didn’t have to worry about it because, “I was one of the good ones.” I just feel like “one of the good ones” is hidden language for some people get preferential treatment. Being viewed in that way has made it so that I don’t get kicked out early. They don’t try to bait me as much because of that. Because they view me as “one of them.” It does make them chummy with me, and I don’t necessarily want to be chummy with them. It helps me in that sense. There’s been lots of situations where I could get into the hotel where I know someone else wouldn’t have been able to. In the first place when LAHSA approached us, they chose me and Sarah, when they were supposed to be looking for people in more of a dire situation. But we were there and we were easygoing. They could just get our information really fast. They did us and the two people beside us. They were in Echo Park Lake a total of 20 minutes each time. That got me in there faster. Because you know, white privilege. That was a big thing. The way people are so uncompassionate here, like the staff. Are you not expecting to have traumatized people come in? I would explain to the people, “Okay, you’re saying I have acceptable behavior, and you wish other people were like me. But there’s a reason why they’re here and there’s a reason why I’m here.” I don’t know what they were thinking. How they’re judging people by standards that are for people who are securely housed.

It’s the stress that they try to keep on you at all times. And a lot of that has to do with time. With waiting, they’ll say, “We need this paperwork filled out by whatever time tomorrow.” And then they never show up for it. Those kinds of things happen all the time. And really, after a while, I figured out that it just doesn’t matter. If it’s really that bad, they’ll come and get me. You’re existing on other people’s terms. While you’re in this unsettled situation, you can’t make any progress in the waiting. That’s a big thing of it. They’re saying, “Sell, why aren’t you getting anything done?” But at the same time, they have all these carceral rules that make it hard to maneuver. A lot of people don’t want to leave the hotel because you have to go through check points. That is waiting: the thing that you’re expecting, this picture that you have in your head, it’s not matching up with what you’re getting at all. And you have no clue when it’s gonna come through for you. Especially when the so-called experts are throwing curve balls every time you turn around...

I’ve run into two people out of hundreds who have found permanent housing through Project Roomkey.

### Garrett

In the homeless services industry, waiting is par for the course, something that Garrett at first didn’t seem to mind. While the rules of the Project Roomkey site in the City of Norwalk, where he stayed for four months following the eviction, were bothersome, particularly a 5 p.m. curfew that prevented him from getting back to Los Angeles to see his friends (what were once daily interactions had become monthly ones), he felt “grateful just to have a place over my head.” Even during the ample time he had by himself, Garrett “was able to entertain [himself] and not go crazy mentally” by using his computer and phone. As a former web developer, Garrett was especially familiar with computer technology and myriad ways to use it in keeping busy.

Nearing the end of his 6-month stay (and the hotel’s recently announced closing date for renovations), Garrett was assigned a caseworker with People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) and moved to a voucher motel in Bellflower. Because he was given the impression that he’d be moved to another motel should they have to switch locations, Garrett wasn’t initially worried about the exit notice he received from PATH. Nearing the end of his 3-month stay, however, he reached out to his caseworker to ask about what the next steps would be. His



caseworker's answer alarmed him: PATH didn't have the budget to put people into motels, so unless he found housing quickly, he'd very likely be moved to a congregate shelter. This was a "red flag" for Garrett, who had previously been "very nonchalant" in attempts to "accommodate" his caseworker, burdened with more than 30 other clients. Being "in the fire" himself now, however, changed Garrett's ways: "I just kind of had to be, like, on him." Desperate, Garrett applied to whatever they could find, including a \$1,400 per month studio near MacArthur Park in the City of Los Angeles. Whether he could afford the rent long-term mattered less than finding a place before PATH sent him to a shelter (or the streets). Even with two applications filed, Garrett had to "plead" with his caseworker's boss for a several-night extension on his motel room while his application was being processed. Luckily, Garrett both got the extension and was approved for a 1-year lease on the studio, utilizing the Recovery Rehousing Program. The problem is that these temporary funds will expire once his lease ends, meaning Garrett will have to pay the full rent after one year. While he's currently going through a job training program, Garrett is conscious of the new clock that has started. If he doesn't find a way to pay the rent within that time, he'll be waiting again, but this time for an eviction.

## *The Shuffle*

### Definition

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the shuffle in its verb conjugation as an act "to move similar things from one position or place to another, often to give an appearance of activity when nothing useful is being done." Navigating the homeless management bureaucracy requires skill and persistence on the part of "clients." One is churned through numerous enrollments in various programs, each of which requires piles of paperwork and, in many cases, testimony of trauma. To keep moving through the system towards the goal of stable, permanent housing, one must be willing to move from location to location, sacrificing social networks and community ties. Yet, the movement through the system is too often a shuffle, an illusion of advancement and progress when little has changed. Equally important, the shuffle isolates and individualizes, scattering people into separate trajectories of impermanent shelter.

### Beth

Beth always wore her Clarity card with her HMIS identifier, the unique number assigned to her by the LAHSA system, around her neck on a long chain. "The number has to be handy," she would tell us. "It's the key to the system." Displaced from Echo Park Lake and earlier in San Francisco through an Ellis Act eviction, Beth was placed in a Project Roomkey hotel in the San Gabriel Valley in April 2021. To attend community meetings in Los Angeles, she traversed over 20 miles each way, spending hours connecting between buses. On the way back, she raced to make the 7 p.m. curfew imposed on residents. When this Project Roomkey site was abruptly "demobilized," with residents served an eviction notice alongside their breakfasts one morning, Beth doubled her energies to find stable, permanent housing.

After laborious interactions with her case manager, she was enrolled in a Recovery Re-Housing Program and given a few motel addresses scattered across Los Angeles County. "I'm relieved there was progress," Beth wrote in a text to us, noting that she was going to check each motel to see if "they were family-type places or seedy." On the morning of her move, Beth waited patiently for her case manager to transport her to the confirmed motel, one close to her familiar neighborhoods in Los Angeles. But when her case manager failed to show, and with the police enforcing eviction at the Project Roomkey hotel, Beth convinced another motel owner to accept her voucher. She saw it as a huge win—except that the motel was in a distant city, with few public transportation connections to Los Angeles. At an UTACH organizing meeting in July 2021, Beth proudly showed us photos of her motel room, stating that she was glad that the "hell" of waiting for housing had come to an end. But Beth also knew that her rehousing voucher would expire in a year and that she would have to navigate the system to ensure the next placement. Once active in pressing collective demands to LAHSA, she no longer wanted to discuss her own housing trajectory, simply stating that she was working on it with her case-manager. By August 2021, Beth had dropped away from community meetings and her phone had stopped working.

## Separated

### Definition

One way the state creates and maintains the displaceability of unhoused people is by severing their ties to place and to other people. Separation is a state-organized process of violence, one which is mediated by actors in the “helping” professions, including social workers and homeless services staff. This is carried out through myriad policies and regulations. The state’s power to remove people from their family members and to displace them from their homes is disempowering, creating circumstances of vulnerability and precarity. It is a testament to many unhoused people’s resilience that they can and do cultivate relationships outside of the traditional nuclear family or outside of a legal partnership in order to survive and create lives anew. Yet these very life-sustaining relationships are undermined through the “continuum of carcerality” that is homeless services. Sweeps, like the one at Echo Park Lake, separate people from the relationships that constitute the critical infrastructure of their lives. Moreover, in programs like Project Roomkey, unhoused people are denied visitors; the severity of this isolation policy is deeply detrimental to the mental and physical health of residents, [often with fatal consequences](#).

### Alice and Wesley

When Alice fled a violent relationship, she sought out a safe place for refuge, and found that safe place among the tents at Echo Park Lake. Soon thereafter, she invited her nephew Wesley to join her at the park, as he had been navigating housing insecurity and homelessness since his family was evicted several years prior. Different circumstances caused them both to fall into homelessness, but once reunited, their familial bond became a vital source of mutual support and protection. While both experienced estrangement from various nuclear family members, their relationship ensured that both were cared for and felt some degree of ease during a time of severe stress and uncertainty.

Once it became clear that Echo Park Lake was closing, Alice accepted a placement in Project Roomkey. Exceptions to program rules were made to fast-track Echo Park Lake residents’ placements in Project Roomkey, but the line was held against extending Wesley an offer into the program, because it was designed for seniors and immunocompromised people, and he was a young adult. He appealed at the door of her hotel to get in and temporarily received a room there, but he was forced out not long after. Both Alice and Wesley have requested that he be re-admitted, but despite the availability of rooms, their requests have been denied. He now sleeps outside the hotel on the street.

### Queen

The enduring state-sanctioned gentrification in the Echo Park neighborhood, including the police raid of the Echo Park Lake encampment community, culminates in a sequential form of mass displacement and separation from home and community. The robust community building that was Echo Park Lake was raided by the police, and as a result, the community was separated from each other. Queen, a member of the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective who grew up in the neighborhood of Echo Park and was an active resident of the Echo Park Lake encampment community, knows this displacement and dispersal of community members from Echo Park Lake as akin to a family separation. Queen’s experiences as a self-identifying single Mexican mother contribute to her power struggle with the state and the multi-layered forms of separation that she has been forced to endure, resist, and challenge. The separation from the Echo Park Lake community extends Queen’s earlier and continued experiences of separation as loss across many relationships: being separated from her home, culture, neighbors, community, and family.

Being separated from the roots of where I grew up, from where I was born, which is Mexico in 1988 and arriving on Sunset and Logan in Echo Park in 1990—that neighborhood, those trees, *those* were my home, that was my sanctuary. And that encampment community was and will still be my family. This separation from the Echo Park Lake community literally took my heart out of my soul, and I still keep breathing. This separation takes the core from your soul, splits it. When you remove the people from a location, you’re not just separating people. You are taking the heart and soul of the place. You are taking the community, which is the essence of any place. My answer to that violence is, see what people will do to get that back.



Over the years, so many people got separated. So many people lost their homes, mom and pop shops that I grew up with. My mom made a living selling corn on that corner for 16 years, and I grew up with the other vendors every day. They were so much more than vendors, they were family. This is Echo Park, where you have community, where you have heart, where you have family, where you create roots and give them room to grow. That part of it is getting wiped away. And it's our job to not get it wiped away.

No matter where you came from, what your background is, if you made the park your home because you had no choice, then imagine what it would feel like to be separated from your safe haven. It could be a tree, it could be a tent, it could be a bathroom, it could be a room with four corners, or it could be just a corner—that is your safe haven. Separation is when they take everything away from you, and then they keep, keep, keep taking. The system makes it so. Basically, they are doing all of this to let us die off, and then we have one tenant left. We cannot forget the consequences of the damage that these actions cause on mental health and the family stability. The separation is torture. They don't care. Separation just kills humanity.

Since the raid, I haven't seen people I know who were in trouble that I know needed help, later to find out that they had committed suicide or overdosed or are simply lost. The people who I do know are definitely not the same people I knew prior to entering Project Roomkey. It's like you're looking at a blank wall. They're like robots now. They have no sense of accomplishments. Most of them just don't have a sense of accomplishments, no goals. At this point, they're just looking to not get evicted the next day.

Because a lot of our community didn't have phone numbers and resources, it's a challenge to remain in contact and support each other. I don't know if my neighbor is overdosing, I don't know if my best friend is getting her butt whooped by her boyfriend, I don't know. Before, it was easy to say, "Hey, someone's not feeling well across the park," and we would just cross the park. Now, helping takes longer because we don't have those connections anymore. The separation has taken so much away from all of us. They've even taken the ability to grieve over our people in the expected time. I'm tired, but I'm gonna text this person, "Hey, how are you? How are you doing?" But what about the people that don't have that? It just makes us want to stay closer with the people that we can maintain a connection with. If separation has taught us anything, it's that when we come together, we are stronger than this system and its manmade rules that test our survival. This system is inhumane treatment for anyone.

## *Disappeared*

### *Definition*

State-led displacement entails a forced removal of people, a process that has gone hand in hand with urban development and gentrification in Los Angeles. Those designated as a problem are disappeared. Such removal is more than spatial exclusion and expulsion; it is racial banishment, a state of rightlessness akin to civil and social death. But the banished are recorded in the archives of the state—through gang injunctions, stay away orders, and eviction notices. To be disappeared is to be erased from such records, to be deliberately forgotten. In the homeless management bureaucracy, the category of "exits" facilitates such disappearance. The notations accompanying exits read like a bureaucrat's shrug—"No exit interview completed," "Data not collected." To be attentive to state power is to recognize that these are acts of disappearing the poor.

### *Joey*

Home as place matters a great deal to Joey. That he grew up in the City of Thousand Oaks,<sup>43</sup> that this was home, was an important refrain in his interview with us. When he became unhoused—evicted from his apartment in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Van Nuys because his gig economy livelihood driving for Uber did not pay enough to cover the rent—he returned to Thousand Oaks. Sleeping on the streets, in a park, on mall benches, he was repeatedly targeted and criminalized by the police. "That was very scary to me," Joey reminisced, "because that was supposed to be a safe place, my home, the place where I grew up, a city where I was born and raised." During the pandemic, he became a visible figure, living outside City Hall and the library. One day LAHSA outreach workers appeared and offered him a room at a Project Roomkey hotel in downtown Los Angeles. After two years of being unhoused, Joey was keen to have this opportunity. "I knew it was temporary, but I was hopeful it would lead to permanent housing," Joey said. He was briefed that these placements were meant for Echo Park Lake residents and indeed Joey appears in all LAHSA datasets as a resident of the park. "It was like a little, tiny corrupt act," Joey said, "to play the game, so I could be housed." When we first interviewed Joey, in October 2021, he was patiently waiting at the Project Roomkey hotel for his Section 8 housing voucher. In February 2022, when we followed up with Joey, he

43 We have changed the name of the city in order to maintain confidentiality.

didn't want to talk about the path to housing. "I'm still here, but I think I'll be leaving this week and going back to the street," Joey stated. He described the situation at the Project Roomkey hotel as "torture." "I can't take it anymore. I would rather go back on the street at this point." Joey's agony is unfortunately not unique, with many Project Roomkey residents feeling that they have been institutionalized and experiencing acute isolation, anxiety, and surveillance. As Joey returns to the street, he is disappeared. In the state's records, his life story has already been erased, with his connection to home as place replaced by the game to get housed. His exit will be a double erasure.

## Stage 3: Threatened, Punished, and Banished

### *Threatened*

#### Definition

A threat is the looming promise of danger, a likelihood that one's life will change for the worse, an inability to control one's own fate. People in positions of power use threats to subordinate those who lack social capital. Residents of Project Roomkey are threatened into silence, into adhering to rules and regulations that dehumanize them, into being treated as though they lack autonomy, and into carcerality in order to maintain the basic human right of shelter. The threat of being "exited," removed, and banished is necessary to maintain the carceral system of Project Roomkey. Without these threats, residents of Project Roomkey might fight back against conditions that relegate them to their rooms like prisoners, or punish them like children when they return a mere few minutes after curfew. The threat of precarity and instability keeps carcerality alive in this housing system. If residents break the rules, they end up back on the street. Threats are not empty promises, but bone-chilling realities.

#### Wesley and Alice

Wesley and his aunt Alice entered Project Roomkey after the mass eviction at Echo Park Lake. When living in the park, neither of them stayed present much during the day, but they were always able to check in with one another at night. They could come and go as they pleased, basing their movement upon what felt safe and sensible for them. When they got to Project Roomkey, this was no longer the case. As Alice told us in her interview, the threat of being exited from the program was regularly wielded to keep residents in line. Some threats of being exited were out of residents' control altogether. In February 2021, their hotel gave every resident 30-day notices of eviction without reasoning. The hotel staff claimed the program was ending and that everyone needed to leave before the end of the 30 days. A month later, this threat proved to be a farce: the program did not end, and residents were allowed to stay. However, for that 30-day time period, Wesley and Alice were forced to worry about how they might secure housing in such a short period of time, facing the reality that they might be pushed to the streets again.

Even though Project Roomkey remains open, residents are still not guaranteed a place to sleep inside. Wesley expressed that he often felt belittled by staff, but knew that "If you get smart with 'em? *Exited.*" One evening, Alice arrived at the hotel 7 minutes after curfew and was forced to sleep on the street that night. Punitive rules give threats of further punishment that much more weight. There is no option to stand up for oneself, to assert one's right to shelter, one's right to privacy in a locked hotel room, or one's right to be respected by staff that are meant to serve their residents. All rights to personal expression are squandered by those in power: the staff. A program that is supposed to alleviate housing insecurity merely re-creates it.

## *Punished*

### Definition

Temporary shelter programs, like Project Roomkey, are governed by carceral, oppressive, and arbitrary rules that demean and dehumanize the people staying in them. These rules and their consequences are no accident: they are designed to punish the unhoused for the “crime” of experiencing poverty, extending the criminalization of homelessness well beyond the street. Such criminalization is itself a reflection of the carceral logics of the racial capitalist order, which seeks to immiserate and punish anyone whose lives fall outside of—and thus demonstrate the contradictions of—the strictures of that very system.

### Scott

“I can’t be controlled like that. It’s not right. [Nobody] should be controlled like that,” Scott shared after he decided to leave his Project Roomkey placement due to the program’s carceral rules. He characterized staff as “discriminative” toward him, allowing some residents leeway (like storing bikes or smoking inside the room) that he and others were denied. Frustrated by a curfew that prevented him from getting a job and a completely absent case manager, Scott fought back. He posted flyers in the elevator advertising a meeting of UTACH (Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing) to organize collectively, which were immediately taken down by Salvation Army staff. In this way, he was punished whenever he attempted to improve his experience in the program or to use his time in Project Roomkey to get back on his feet. These conditions deeply depressed and isolated Scott, who felt helpless and hopeless. He “self-exited” from the program shortly thereafter because staff refused to communicate with him about an upcoming COVID quarantine, putting his livelihood at risk. Not long after our interview, Scott decided to leave Los Angeles all together, feeling that he could neither thrive nor survive the homeless services system. No longer in California, Scott has been forced out of his community by repeated punishment—not only for existing while experiencing poverty, but for attempting to get *out* of that state of precarity.

## *Banished*

### Definition

Where property ownership is racialized, the reverse is also true: banishment from property (whether public, private, or somewhere in between) is racialized. Legalistic measures define both ownership and banishment, with the latter enacted through such forms as gang injunctions, stay away orders, and eviction notices. Like property ownership, these legal actions are then recorded in the archives of the state. A combination of political offices (e.g., Mitch O’Farrell’s Council District 13 office), traditional and auxiliary police forces (e.g., LAPD and Park Rangers), contracted social service providers (e.g., LAHSA) and neighborhood interests (i.e., usually businesses and homeowners) work together to banish those who challenge their power over spaces like Echo Park Lake. These forms of banishment are racialized not only in terms of disproportionate impact, but also in terms of their purposes—i.e., the *de facto* goal is to dismantle the rights of people whose mere presence threatens white-dominated property relations. Within the United States, racial-class characteristics often define who is seen as belonging, as well as who is seen as out of place and therefore in need of correction. Unhoused people of color, then, are at particular risk of racial banishment, a state of rightlessness akin to civil and social death.

Building upon carceral logics, banishment makes people’s presence in certain areas illegal, while simultaneously pushing them to other areas. These instances of forced mobility occur across a variety of land-use types, from parks to “special interest zones,” broadly defined (e.g., Section 41.18; see the glossary for further details). Even areas where people are pushed to aren’t stable, as the targeting of freeway-aligned camps and gentrification efforts in traditionally poor areas shows (e.g., recent efforts to “clean up” San Francisco’s infamous Tenderloin neighborhood). Banishment, therefore, is an ongoing process whereby sites of banishment add up over time, creating entire zones of cities where people such as the unhoused are unable to live in relative peace. Echo Park Lake, like Leimert Park Plaza and other public spaces before it, is another instance of this banishment. To merely pass through these spaces as an unhoused person, especially one who is Black or Latinx, is to face a real risk of harassment. To actually occupy such spaces then, even temporarily, is to face banishment.

### Gustavo

Gustavo, an unhoused member of the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective, has been banished from the sanctuary he once called home. A displaced resident of the Echo Park Lake encampment, Gustavo's cumulative experiences overtime of being forced out of his home exemplify a perpetual state-sanctioned banishment that people in poverty, people of color, and people who challenge the authority of the police state. The Echo Park neighborhood was the first place Gustavo arrived when immigrating from Guatemala to the U.S. in the 1980s, and it was where he returned to seek refuge in the summer of 2020, after being defrauded and evicted by his employer-landlord. While living in the park for nearly a year, he drew upon his previous experience as an activist to solicit and redistribute essential donations to his neighbors. And as the militarized police force invaded the park for the mass eviction, he once again harnessed his protest skills to coordinate a poster campaign.

After the eviction, Gustavo shuffled from a mutual aid-supported motel room, to a tent in MacArthur Park, and eventually to a Project Roomkey site. When the park re-opened, completely fenced-in, he joined other Street Watch LA organizers in posting flyers that protested the fence. Targeted for his participation in Street Watch LA, Gustavo was assaulted by park rangers and hospitalized. Several weeks later, he was "exited" from Project Roomkey. A month later, his participation in flyering the fence was framed as a parole violation, and he found himself under arrest. Although he left jail on bail later that summer, Gustavo did so under a new condition of his parole: he was banned from going within 500 feet of Echo Park Lake. Six months later, the parole violation charge was lifted, but his parole remains in place—and so does the condition of banishment from the park. Here, Gustavo reflects on the intersection of resistance, banishment, and injustice:

I didn't want to leave Echo Park Lake. I didn't want to leave there. Because the people that were living there, they were like my family. When everyone knew the police was going to be there, we had a meeting, like, "Today's the day. How can we fight this?" My way of helping was going to buy signs and markers. We made quite a few signs. They were protesting so peacefully there. And what did the police do? Sent their hundreds and hundreds in, arresting them, putting them in jail, shooting at them...

The case is not about me; it's not about me, Gustavo. We—Street Watch LA—are helping thousands and thousands of people, because we are watching the police. We are doing the right thing. Who are the real criminals here? It's the police. It's the City Council, because they are the ones to send the police there. They are the ones to give millions and millions to the police to do the criminal things. So that's why I decided to join Street Watch, because of what they did to us. Did they hurt me a lot? Of course. But what they did to Street Watch hurt me more.

How many innocent people are in jail? Or, even if they did something, they put more charges on them. Why? Because the more charges, the more time they go in jail, and the more time in jail, the more money they make. It's not justice, it's just business. I know I'm not the first victim there. I'm pretty sure there are thousands and thousands of people who are innocent there, some maybe for life. Banishment is about lack of justice.

## Displaceability by Design

Permanent displaceability is a process of state-sanctioned violence, wielded upon unhoused people to create and maintain a condition of insurmountable rightlessness. The violations inflicted upon them, the unrealized and conditional promises of housing made while they wait, and the increasingly harsh threats and punishments, are all weaponized to dominate people into submitting to their condition, of exclusion from the right to urban life. The housing trajectories summary table illustrates the churning that people endure in the homelessness services system: being placed within, and then exited from, program after program—but rarely securing housing. The definitions and vignettes of lived experiences of the former residents of Echo Park Lake demonstrate how the cycle of permanent displaceability is designed to work: to disempower people through repeated traumatizations, until they ultimately succumb to banishment.

The entrenched claim to place expressed by the people living at Echo Park Lake, and the grassroots power that they cultivated from the margins, made their encampment a threat to state authority and incited the spectacle of militarized violence unleashed during the March 2021 mass eviction. The perseverance that unhoused members of our research collective and their comrades have sustained in the year since the eviction has been extraordinary: they have demonstrated a continued will to organize, to stay connected, and to maintain hope while living through the innumerable violences of permanent displaceability. This is a testament to the strength of the power that their community built. Yet despite their courage, they remain unhoused one year later. The state subjects unhoused people to an enduring condition of rightlessness and forced mobility by design.

**3.**

**“LIES, DAMN LIES,  
AND STATISTICS”**

## 3. “LIES, DAMNED LIES, AND STATISTICS”

The Echo Park Lake displacement was justified through the claim of housing placements and the promise of “stable, permanent housing.” Mayor Eric Garcetti and Deputy Mayor Jose “Che” Ramirez declared success, anointing the displacement as a model “housing transition,” one that serves as template for other parts of the City. Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell, the key driver of the targeting of the Echo Park Lake encampment and its militarized eviction, put forward grandiose statements about placements. Using a deliberately vague and ever-shifting terminology of placements, he sought to create a social media narrative and political propaganda about “homelessness solutions.” As researchers, we have taken up the task of meticulously sifting through such claims and going behind the numbers that constitute the status quo narrative of housing placements. We note that the term “housing” itself deserves scrutiny since Los Angeles politicians conveniently use it to refer to various forms of temporary and emergency shelter, including those with exclusionary eligibility criteria and rules. In keeping with housing justice movements, we refuse such misleading invocations of housing and express concern about the weaponization of shelter to legitimize displacement. Recognizing the significance of the Echo Park Lake displacement, we provide a detailed analysis of the official placement data made available to us by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA). In addition, we do a deep dive into the full scope of LAHSA data, available to us through a Data Usage Agreement with the agency, in order to analyze the housing trajectories of those identified as Echo Park Lake residents. As discussed in the following sections, such data analysis involves the complex tasks of sorting and clarifying who counted as an Echo Park Lake resident, understanding how outreach workers make and manage placement lists, and noting the limits of state-generated data. It is for this reason that we have titled this section, “lies, damned lies, and statistics.”<sup>44</sup> We encourage you to read this data analysis alongside the ethnographic data and research findings we presented in Chapter 2.

### The Ruse of Housing

In the lead up to and aftermath of the Echo Park Lake raid, Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell and other officials made persistent and sweeping claims of “housing” residents of the park. In reality, this was a ruse. Only a handful of the “nearly 200” residents ever had a shot at a form of true housing, the details of which will be broken down later in this chapter. But despite this fundamental lack of housing, the illusion that poor residents of the park were offered “housing” has been consistently pushed by City and County officials, Urban Alchemy spokespeople, and echoed in media reporting on the ongoing narrative of this mass displacement. The ruse is effective because it undermines and shifts the meaning of “housing” when left unchallenged.

### What Counts as “Housing”?

For the purposes of this monograph, we lean heavily on our understanding and definition of “housing” from local and national tenant movements. The Los Angeles Tenants Union [demands](#) “truly affordable and safe housing.” The People’s Action coalition’s Homes Guarantee [calls for](#) housing “that is safe, accessible, sustainable and permanently affordable.” We consider Section 8, Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV), Project Homekey, Permanent Supportive Housing, and Rapid Re-Housing to be forms of housing although their permanence and stability remain under question. For voucher programs like EHV and Section 8, these categories can only be considered housing provided there is a unit obtained with the voucher. Without one, they are meaningless.

With regards to Echo Park Lake, O’Farrell and others have consistently employed an arsenal of intentionally misleading phrases such as “housing,” “housing placements,” “placements,” “housing transitions,” “identifying housing options,” “place people into housing,” and so forth to describe situations that are fundamentally *not* housing.

**Housing is *not* congregate shelter or any situation that is temporary by design.** This includes Project Roomkey, Safe Sleeping Sites, Tiny Homes, Recovery Re-Housing, Safe Haven, Transitional Housing or any form of interim housing, shelter, or temporary programs. These conditions are impermanent, precarious, and carceral by nature, and they constitute the majority of so-called “housing” options

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44 The saying is attributed to Twain, Chapters from My Autobiography.

offered and taken at Echo Park Lake. Indeed, the battle over the concept and meaning of “housing” between the unhoused and the state remains a crucial front in the battle for material housing.

## An “Historic” “Housing” Event—The Raid

During and immediately following the police raid of Echo Park Lake in March 2021, Councilmember O’Farrell made claims of “housing” an ever-shifting number of people living at the Lake via an “historic” and “humane” housing event that achieved many “placements.” Mayor Garcetti, Urban Alchemy, and others spoke to the media and general public with an aligned set of talking points, obfuscating murky housing trajectories, and perpetuating the notion that the operation was “successful.”

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March 23, 2021	<a href="#">Los Angeles Times</a>	<p>“A spokesperson for the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority told the Times that on Monday and Tuesday, outreach workers from the agency <b>moved 44 people from the lake into hotels</b> being rented by the city for homeless people.”</p> <p>“...City officials said they were <b>taking a humane approach, offering residents housing</b>. But some say they don’t want it.”</p>
March 25, 2021	<a href="#">The Guardian</a>	<p>“Mitch O’Farrell, the local councilman pushing the park closure, said that <a href="#">120 residents of the park</a> had <b>moved into transitional housing</b> and that service providers were on site to offer services. He said LAPD was deployed to “support community safety efforts”...“O’Farrell said in a statement that his office has <b>identified housing options for everyone who has lived there since January...</b>”</p>
	<a href="#">Urban Alchemy claims housing 166 people</a>	<p><b>“166 people got housing today. Great day #EchoParkLake #resources and wraparound services for our community family.”</b></p>
March 26, 2021	<a href="#">Los Angeles Times</a>	<p>“This is the largest <b>housing transition</b> of an encampment ever in the city’s history.” - Eric Garcetti</p>
March 27, 2021	Excerpt from Mitch O’Farrell’s <a href="#">Statement</a> on the raid	<p>“This week, as <b>we continued our work to house people</b>, and as the park prepared to temporarily close and begin its repairs, LAPD was deployed to ensure this work could be effectuated safely.</p> <p>“For months, my team has worked diligently with Urban Alchemy and LAHSA to <b>focus on housing people</b> experiencing homelessness at Echo Park Lake.</p> <p>“Our approach has been compassionate, thoughtful, and mission-driven - and what was requested of our office by Echo Park’s unhoused community. <b>With 209 placements</b>, it’s clear that <b>our approach has been a success</b>.</p> <p>“As my team and <b>I spent months successfully housing people</b>, it’s also been clear that Echo Park Lake is badly in need of repairs, which are now underway.</p> <p>“This week, as <b>we continued our work to house people</b>, and as the park prepared to temporarily close and begin its repairs, LAPD was deployed to ensure this work could be effectuated safely.</p> <p>“A small but vocal contingent of outside groups sought to escalate the situation, repeatedly issuing credible threats <b>in an attempt to disrupt our efforts to place people into housing.</b>”</p>

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## “The Single Largest Housing Event in the History of the City”—After the Raid

In the two months while the park was fully shut down, Councilmember O’Farrell and others doubled down on the line that the operation was a “housing” success, describing it as “the single largest housing event in the history of the city.” O’Farrell’s language persists in treating housing as interchangeable with temporary shelter, lumping them together to misdirect from the shelter shuffle.

March 29, 2021	Mitch O’Farrell <a href="#">Twitter</a>	“I visited our Project Homekey site in #RampartVillage, <b>now providing housing solutions to some of the 209 unhoused people from Echo Park Lake.</b> I had the great pleasure of welcoming Clifford, Brittney & Lamont to their new homes.”
March 30, 2021	O’Farrell tells <a href="#">The Hollywood Reporter</a>	“I am extremely gratified that we found housing solutions for 209 people at Echo Park Lake, which is pretty much everyone. My office has been working on this since last year, and we hired Urban Alchemy ... So they began outreach in late December. By January, they had housed 24 people in temporary shelter. And those 24, for the most part, are still in shelter and have housing solutions.”
April 6, 2021	<a href="#">Los Angeles Times</a>	O’Farrell <a href="#">calls</a> Echo Park Lake “ <b>the single largest housing event in the history of the city.</b> ”

## “Transitional Housing”—Echo Park Lake Reopening

For the park reopening media blitz, Councilmember O’Farrell focused the messaging on “transitional housing,” insisting every person living at the park “was offered transitional housing and services.” Councilmember O’Farrell balked at criticism that there is no actual housing his office has provided.

May 26, 2021	Mitch O’Farrell’s <a href="#">Statement</a> on Echo Park Lake’s Reopening	“For over a year, my team worked tirelessly to <b>provide resources, services, and ultimately transitional housing</b> to people experiencing homelessness at Echo Park Lake,” said Councilmember O’Farrell. “As time went on, conditions at the park became increasingly unsafe for everyone - park visitors and park dwellers. Echo Park Lake is a shared public space, and unhoused people were existing in inhumane conditions - which is why <b>every single person experiencing homelessness in the park was offered transitional housing and services.</b> ”  “The Echo Park community is compassionate and cares deeply about helping people experiencing homelessness receive the <b>services that lead to stability and permanent housing.</b> ... Over a period of several months, <b>outreach partners placed nearly 200 people into safe, managed, transitional housing.</b> ”
	<a href="#">Los Angeles Magazine</a>	“O’Farrell has maintained that all of the individuals who were pushed out of the park were <b>offered housing.</b> Of the <b>roughly 200 people moved out of the park, 90 remain in temporary housing or in hotel rooms</b> rented through the Project Roomkey program, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.”
May 31, 2021	Mitch O’Farrell, per the <a href="#">Los Angeles Times</a>	“I’m disappointed that some local elected officials, valuing politics over finding <b>real housing solutions</b> in their own districts, have sought to <b>mischaracterize our successful work to house people.</b> ...”



## “Secured transitional housing placements—Six Months to a Year After the Raid

To date, Councilmember O’Farrell has settled on “nearly 200” as the number of residents he has offered “housing solutions” to. His language has expanded to include inscrutable bureaucratic mouthfuls like “**secured transitional housing placements**” and vague phrases such as “**brought indoors**” to describe the states of permanent displaceability residents inhabit.

October 2, 2021	6 months after raid, O’Farrell on <a href="#">Twitter</a>	“Six months ago, we led one of the most successful housing operations in the history of the City, when we <b>secured transitional housing placements for nearly 200 people</b> who had been experiencing homelessness at Echo Park Lake.”
October 28, 2021	O’Farrell in <a href="#">Planning Report</a>	“Just look at our successes and look at what we are doing in terms of enacting legislation that will keep the sidewalks freer and cleaner. <b>You have got to stand up for housing solutions along with reclaiming our public spaces.</b> ”
December 12, 2021	O’Farrell in his weekly <a href="#">CD 13 newsletter</a>	In March, <b>we brought indoors nearly 200 people</b> who had been experiencing homelessness in unsafe, inhumane conditions at Echo Park Lake. And all year long, we’ve made progress across the entire district.

## The Official Placement List

As noted earlier in this monograph, a few days after the Echo Park Lake displacement, LAHSA issued a final closure report that included a list of 183 placements categorized by placement type. In late May 2021, journalist Claudia Peschiutta [reported](#) that the LAHSA data she had obtained showed that 44 people had exited those placements. With the release of this deidentified data, we became interested in the nature of these exits, and the movement of displaced residents through LAHSA programs since the sweeps. Thus, in addition to our larger request for the administrative records in the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS), we requested that LAHSA share data pertaining to the 183 Echo Park Lake placements. Through months of correspondence, meetings and discussions with LAHSA’s Director of Data Management and other key data analysts at the agency, we obtained deidentified data on initial placements, current placements, and exit destinations of the 183 residents of the Echo Park Lake encampment that were recorded in LAHSA’s HMIS database in relation to the displacement. We have continued correspondence and meetings with the data management team at LAHSA to reach clarification about the classificatory systems used by the agency as well as the ways in which displaced residents show up in these datasets..

The various programs created in the past few years to address the crisis around homelessness have obscured the distinction between shelter and housing. We consider Section 8, Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV), Project Homekey, Permanent Supportive Housing, and Rapid Re-Housing to be forms of housing although their permanence and stability remain under question. For voucher programs like EHV and Section 8, these categories can only be considered housing provided there is a unit obtained with the voucher. Temporary programs, like Project Roomkey, Tiny Homes, and Recovery Re-Housing, at best can be seen as pathways to permanent housing. The remaining placements are shelters which generally are shorter-term placements last anywhere from a single night to a few weeks.

As detailed below, our analysis of the LAHSA Echo Park Lake placements data shows the following:

- Of the 183 claimed placements, there were 168 actualized initial placements.
- As of February 9, 2022, 82 residents had disappeared, exiting the LAHSA system to unknown situations, and another 15 had returned to homelessness.
- Only 17 have been placed in what can be considered to be housing but such placements are not necessarily stable and permanent.
- 48 residents are waiting in the system for the promise of “stable, permanent housing.”

### Overview of Echo Park Lake Placements as of February 9, 2022

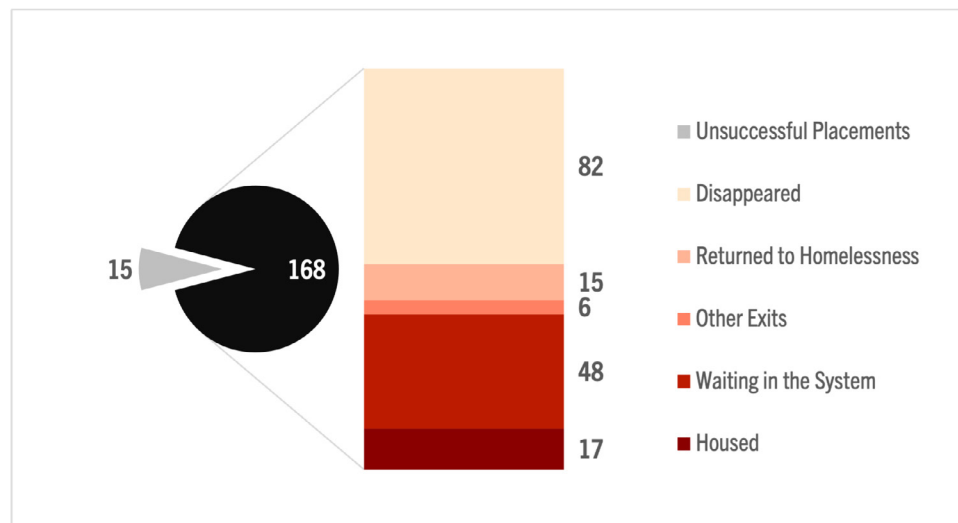


Figure 3-1. “Unsuccessful placements” refers to identified residents that did not complete the placement process. “Disappeared” refers to residents that were initially placed but have exited to unknown circumstances. “Returned to homelessness” refers to residents that have exited to places not meant for habitation. “Other exits” refers to residents that have exited to non-homeless temporary or institutional situations. “Waiting in the system” refers to residents that are still actively enrolled in the LAHSA HMIS system. “Exited to housing” refers to residents that have exited to permanent housing situations: permanent supportive housing, rentals or homeownership, or other long-term subsidized housing. Source: Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

### A Snapshot of Initial Placements

Of the 183 placements reported by LAHSA in its final closure report, 168 were actualized placements. LAHSA data shows the intake process was not completed with 5 residents and an additional 10 residents were not successfully placed. More than half of the placements (93) took place during the week of the encampment sweeps—March 22, 2021 through March 26, 2021. Another 39 percent (65 placements), occurred in the week prior or earlier.

As is widely known, **the vast majority of these placements were to Project Roomkey.** The data shows that only 21 placements were in what we consider housing: Project Homekey sites. More than three-quarters of placements (127) were to “COVID Motels,” which are Project Roomkey sites, with an additional placement in a Tiny Home Village. As the chart illustrates below, the remaining placements were to shelters, mostly Bridge Homes and Winter Shelter programs.

Echo Park Lake Initial Placements, by Project Type

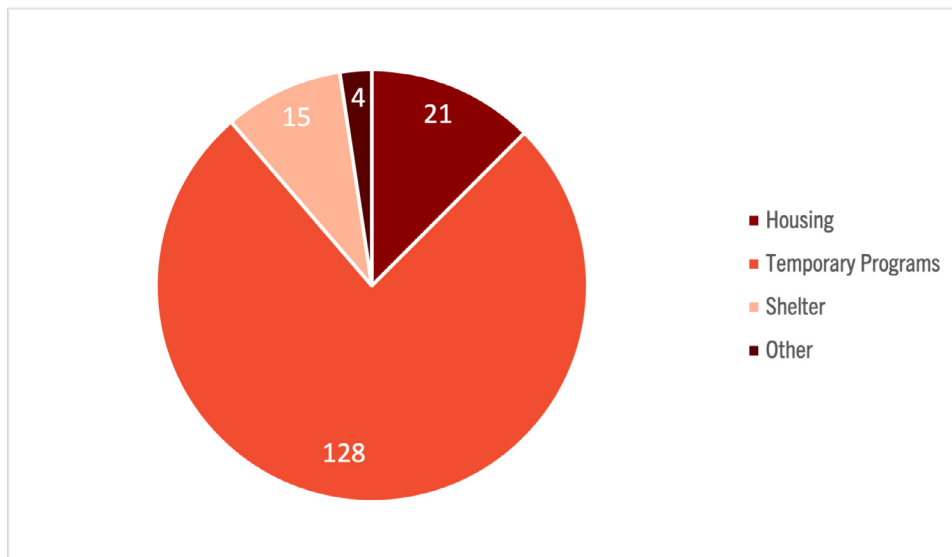


Figure 3-2. “Housing” refers to Project Homekey placements. “Temporary programs” refer to Project Roomkey and Tiny Home Village placements. “Shelter” refers to A Bridge Home, Interim Housing, and the Winter Shelter Program. “Other” includes unidentified placements or Access Center enrollments. Source: Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

## Understanding Exits

The category of “exits” is an important component of the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and managed by local public agencies such as LAHSA. However, “exits” is also a category prone to obfuscation. As noted by HUD itself, exits can be “positive,” as in the case of a move to permanent housing, or they can be “negative,” as in the case of incarceration. Detailed in this [Housing Destination Summary table](#), an exit can also mean death or disappearance.

In the LAHSA Echo Park Lake placements data, residents that exited to another program within LAHSA’s Continuum of Care, which is the geographic area for which LAHSA administers services, are recorded as “current” and discussed in the next sub-section. Those who are no longer part of LAHSA’s system of programs are recorded as exits. As of February 9, 2022, these make up 69 percent (116) of the initial placements. Of these, 29 residents fully exited the system less than a month after their initial placements, seven of whom exited the same day they were placed. Nearly half of all exits (55) occurred within the first three months of the initial placement.

That data includes eight exit destination types consolidated in the chart below into five categories for legibility. More than 70 percent (82) of exit destinations were identified as “Other Situations” which—aside from instances in which the client has passed away—indicates that the exit destination is uncertain either because the client doesn’t know or refused to say, or because the data were not collected or the exit interview was not completed. In other words, they have basically disappeared from the system.

As the chart below shows, just 11 percent of exits (13) ended up in what can be considered housing: in permanent supportive housing (5), in subsidized rentals (4), or securing housing through their own means (4). Meanwhile, 13 percent (15 residents) have returned to homelessness.

It is important to note that the exits to housing do not necessarily mean that such housing is stable and permanent. As we demonstrate later in this chapter, the longitudinal housing trajectories of those displaced from Echo Park Lake indicate a churning through various programs, including returns to homelessness from seemingly permanent housing placements. Indeed, recent research by the California Policy Lab builds on the findings of the 2018 report of LAHSA’s [Ad Hoc Committee on Black People with Lived Experience of](#)

### Exits for Echo Park Lake Placements, as of February 9, 2022

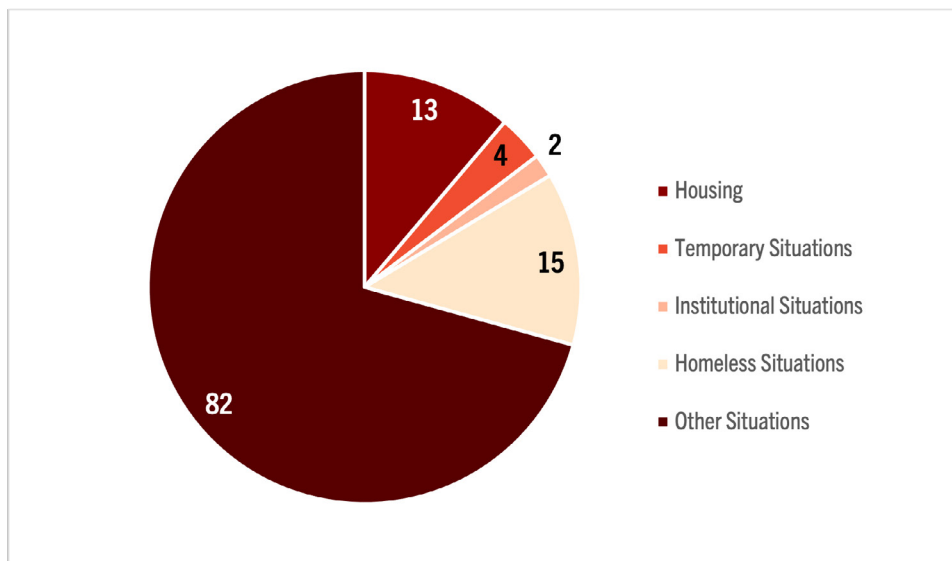


Figure 3-3. “Housing” refers to Continuum permanent housing project, traditional rentals or homeownership with or without subsidies, and other sources of what LAHSA refers to as permanent housing (i.e., staying with family and friends permanently or other subsidized housing programs). “Temporary situations” refer to non-homeless or institutional arrangements that would not be considered permanent. “Institutional situations” refer to jail or prison, hospital or medical facilities, and substance abuse or mental health treatment facilities. “Homeless situations” refer to places not meant for habitation including vehicles, abandoned buildings, or anywhere outside. “Other situations” is the LAHSA classification that largely captures exits for which there was no exit interview/ the data was not collected or the client has not disclosed exit plans. It also includes residents that have passed away. Source: Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

**Homelessness** and finds persistent “racial inequities in outcomes for Black residents of homeless services.” With a focus on residents of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), this study shows that in Los Angeles County, “Black single adults were exiting PSH and falling back into homelessness at a much higher rate than White single adults were.” They also find that “Black residents largely described PSH as impermanent, short-term housing and considered it a ‘steppingstone’ to other long-term housing options like Section 8 housing vouchers.”<sup>45</sup>

### Waiting in the System

As noted above, of the 183 initial Echo Park Lake placements, 168 were actualized, and of these 116 residents have exited the LAHSA system as of February 9, 2022 with only 13 in what can be considered housing. Of the remaining 52 residents, the majority (38) are in temporary programs such as Project Roomkey (23) and COVID Recovery Re-Housing Programs (4). Just 4 residents (8 percent) are placed in what can be considered to be housing—Project Homekey. We consider all other current placements to be “waiting in the system” for the promise of “stable, permanent housing.”

45 Milburn, et al. *Inequity in the Permanent Supportive Housing System in Los Angeles: Scale, Scope and Reasons for Black Residents’ Return to Homelessness*, 6.

Waiting in the System, Echo Park Lake “Current Placements” as of February 9, 2022

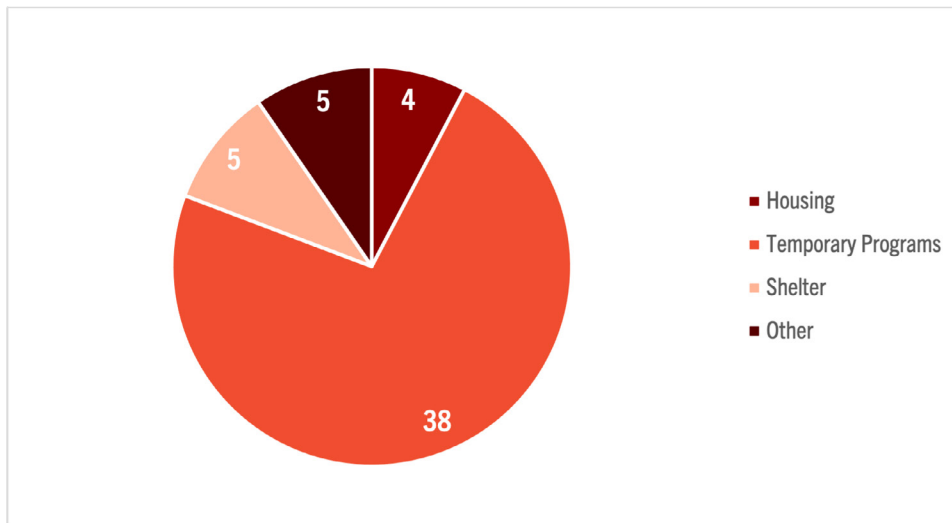


Figure 3-4. “Housing” refers to Project Homekey placements. “Temporary programs” refer to Project Roomkey, Recovery Re-Housing, and Tiny Home Village placements. “Shelter” refers to A Bridge Home/Bridge Housing, Bridge to Subsidy, and Safe Sleep. “Other” includes unidentified placements or Access Center enrollments. Source: Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

## Behind the Official Numbers: Who Counts as “EPL”?

The weeks leading up to the Echo Park Lake displacement were a time of considerable stress and tension at the park. In the interviews we conducted, residents told us about the repeated police incursions, including those in the middle of the night, that were clearly intended to harass and intimidate. They noted that Urban Alchemy had become a regular presence, coaxing residents to pack up their tents and accept offers of shelter. As detailed in Chapter 6 of this monograph, email records indicate that by December 2020, **the staff at Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell’s office were in a state of rage about the Echo Park Lake encampment**, putting pressure on LAHSA and various service providers to move residents into shelters, notably the Shatto Recreation Center. Dissatisfied with LAHSA, O’Farrell’s office hired Urban Alchemy at the cost of \$350,000 for six months, demanding weekly tent counts and daily outreach. Yet, even this mercenary subcontractor proved unable to (dis)place people, its trickle of a couple of intakes per day in early January 2021 slowing to zero by mid-January, with subsequent notations each week indicating that the shelters were full.

It is now clear that a massive mobilization of public resources took place to facilitate the Echo Park Lake displacement. In addition to the Urban Alchemy contract, Mitch O’Farrell’s office pushed for the deployment of a vast police force (discussed in Chapter 6 of this monograph) as well as of housing and shelter placements facilitated by LAHSA outreach workers. Leaked LAHSA memos and emails [published by Knock LA](#) a few days after the displacement make evident this pressure from O’Farrell’s office on LAHSA’s Homeless Engagement Teams (HET) and the sudden and rapid placement of residents in Project Roomkey. LAHSA employees interviewed by Jamie Loftus for *Knock LA* specifically noted that **PRK rooms meant for “highly, highly vulnerable populations” were diverted to Echo Park Lake placements**, and that this was with the full knowledge and participation of the Mayor’s Office.

Our research, including interviews with former and current LAHSA employees, indicates a **flurry of outreach activity in the weeks preceding the displacement**. In the previous section, we showed how over half of the placements recorded by LAHSA took place in the week of the militarized eviction and several more in the week prior. Queen, displaced Echo Park Lake resident and a member of the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective put it: “In just a few days, LAHSA and service providers placed more people than they had in years. It was a massive tactical operation. But we have to ask, where did those rooms come from? Who was pushed out of line?” As one former LAHSA HET member put it in an interview with us: “LAHSA bent over backwards for the city.” This pace of outreach created chaos as LAHSA HET members scrambled to complete intakes with scores of residents, enter them into the system, and match them

Monday, February 1, 2021	Today we had our continental breakfast for our guests. We engaged with Chris and he wanted to go to the shelter. The Shatto Shelter (9131 W 4th St Los Angeles Ca 90026) is full. So we tried to place him at the Echo Park Rec (313 Patton St Los Angeles Ca 90028) which was also full. He wasn't interested in going either shelter. Let's follow up with him tomorrow. We did park beautification. Thank you team for your support.
Tuesday, February 2, 2021	The UA team served Hot Coffee, Cocoa & Tea to our guests this morning. I attempted to follow up with Chris today but I was unable to locate him at the park. We did park beautification. The Shatto Shelter Population Count (9131 E. 4th St, LA CA 90020) Total 48 full to capacity. Thank you Practitioners for your support today.
Wednesday, February 3, 2021	The UA team served Hot Coffee to our guests. I attempted to follow up with Chris again today. We were unable to find him at Echo Park Lake. We engaged with Ros Teer today and I gave her resources for low income housing. No one is willing to go to shelter today. Shatto Shelter 9131 E 4th St, Los Angeles Ca 90020 Population Count 48 Total The 48 bed Max shelter is full. Thank You Practitioners for your support.
Thursday, February 4, 2021	Today we served Hot coffee, cocoa & tea to our guests. I attempted to follow up with Chris and could not locate him in the park. We did engagement and park beautification. Our guests are asking us to service the restrooms in EPL. We started trying to keep those restrooms a little cleaner. No guests wanted to go to the shelter today. The Shatto Shelter 9131 E 4th St is currently full to capacity which is 48 beds. Thank you practitioners for support.
Friday, February 5, 2021	Today we served Hot coffee and donuts to our guests. The UA team went to MacArthur Park today to be Covid-19 tested. The remaining team members will be tested no later than Monday, which is [redacted] both were off today. No one was willing to go to shelter today. We did park beautification including the park restrooms. Many of the guests complain about the condition of the restrooms. Thank You practitioners for your continued support.
Saturday, February 6, 2021	Today we served Hot coffee to our guests. No one in EPL was willing to go to a shelter today. Pam Pacific Winter Shelter 7600 Beverly Blvd, Los Angeles CA 90036 Currently full to capacity. Echo Park Community Center 303 Patton St, Los Angeles CA 90028. Currently full to capacity. The Shatto Shelter 9131 E. 4th St, Los Angeles CA 90020. Currently full to capacity. Oakwood recreation Center Winter shelter, 787 California Ave, Venice, CA 90291. Currently full to Capacity. We did
Sunday, February 7, 2021	Today we served Hot coffee and cocoa to our guests. No one from EPL wanted to go to the shelter today. Pam Pacific Winter Shelter 7600 Beverly Blvd Los Angeles Ca 90036 currently is full to capacity. Echo Park Community Center 303 Patton Street, Los Angeles California 90028 currently is full to capacity. The Shatto shelter 9131 e 4th Avenue Los Angeles California, 90020 is currently full to capacity. Oakwood Recreation Center Winter shelter 787 California Avenue, Venice California, 90291 currently full to capacity. We did outreach and assist to [redacted] today. about EPL on how we are trying to make it better. The left count is less today. Because the city workers came and picked up some tents today. Thanks team for a great day. If you have any questions or concerns feel free to contact me.



Figure 3-5. Extract from Urban Alchemy weekly report dated February 7, 2021, to Marisol Rodriguez, District Director, Office of Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell.

From: Ahmad Chapman  
 Date: March 25, 2021 at 4:49:44 PM PDT  
 To: All Staff  
 Subject: A Message from Heidi Marston Regarding Echo Park Lake

Good afternoon LAHSA,

Heidi is currently at Echo Park helping our Homeless Engagement Teams place unsheltered individuals still at the park into interim housing, so she asked me to share the following message about last night's events with you:

In February, at the request of the Office of Los Angeles City Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell, HET began intensifying efforts to move people experiencing homelessness living at Echo Park into interim housing. Since the deployment began, 14 LAHSA HET teams and their partners have placed 152 people from Echo Park into a nearby Project Roomkey hotel, the newly opened Project Homekey site, Nest, and other interim housing options.

Since last Friday, our teams helped place:

- 71 clients in PRK
- 22 clients in Nest
- 6 clients in Mayfair
- 3 clients in A Bridge Home

Figure 3-6. Source: Knock LA, <https://knock-la.com/echo-park-lake-lahsa-heidi-marston/>, published with permission of Jamie Lottus.

with placements. Unaware that a police invasion had been planned, they were focused on getting Echo Park Lake residents to the front of the PRK line. Yet even here they often had to be conduits of broken promises. One former LAHSA HET member described how she and her partner were told by their supervisor to sign up 20 Echo Park Lake residents in a single day for placement at the LA Grand Hotel, a large PRK site in downtown LA, only to learn that there were no rooms available at the Grand and that they were to be instead placed in Norwalk and other distant locations, far from social and service networks. The HET member said during an interview:

Me and my partner worked our butts off to make sure we had 25 people ready to go only to be told, it's not happening. Oh my God! To be told, it's not happening. I got upset. I was very upset with my manager. I even cried, because how can you do this to people? And she told me, well, you should never promise them anything. We never used that word "promise"...I even documented it because I was really upset, like, how do you do that to us, and then you jeopardize our relationship with them. So you can imagine when we had to go back, I mean, my partner was almost beat up.

The chaos, stress, and broken promises are evident in the lists and notes made by LAHSA HET members during this intense period of outreach and placement. Shared with us by employees at LAHSA and other service providers, these documents serve as the complex backstage to the "final, validated placement list" circulated by LAHSA and touted by LA politicians as evidence of success. While LAHSA's data management team provided us with placements data that does not identify individuals or placement locations, **these backstage documents include names, placement locations, and outreach notes, including for the 183 individuals who constitute the official Echo Park Lake placement list.** Working with this list of names, we sought to reach out to displaced residents in order to expand our sphere of life-history interviews. Since we had no contact information for them, we focused on those placed at the LA Grand Hotel. Obtaining permission from both LAHSA and the Salvation Army, the service provider for this large PRK site, we distributed an interview recruitment letter in October 2021 to individuals who were identified in the backstage documents as Echo Park Lake residents. The recruitment effort was immediately fruitful. Of the 75 people identified as Echo Park Lake residents placed at the LA Grand Hotel, by October 2021, only 35 were there, with the rest either having been "exited" from the hotel, or never having been placed there. Of the 35, 13 residents had already completed interviews with us or responded to our recruitment letter, expressing interest in an interview. **In the interviews, 4 out of the 13 residents openly stated that they had not been living at Echo Park Lake during the PRK placement.** Each with a long history of homelessness, two in Orange County and one in the San Fernando Valley, these residents showed up at Echo Park Lake because word had gotten out that this might be a way to gain access to PRK. And sure enough, after spending just a night at the park, they secured placement at the LA Grand Hotel. In the fourth case, the resident had endured homelessness and police harassment for several years in the Conejo Valley. LAHSA outreach workers had brought this resident to the LA Grand Hotel from one of the cities in the valley, creating an Echo Park Lake identification in order to ensure placement. These interviews confirmed what we had already suspected when we first received the backstage documents and looked through the names of people listed as Echo Park

Lake placements. A large number of those names were completely unfamiliar to our research collective, including to members of the collective who were integrally involved with the Echo Park Lake community from 2019 to 2021.

Prompted by the **discrepancy between those who were actually at Echo Park Lake and those who received placements**, we took a closer look at the full LAHSA dataset with identified information to determine what we could learn about the Echo Park Lake placements. Here, in the Encampments dataset, we found that 323 residents had been geotagged as Echo Park Lake between November 2019 and March 2021, the main time period of the encampment. One would expect all 183 of the Echo Park Lake placements to come from this list of 323. However, we found that this was not the case. Of these, 100 names among the 183 placements were geotagged as Echo Park Lake in the LAHSA encampments dataset. The others either had no encampment location information or were identified as other locations, notably ABH, Civic Center Priority Catchment and Lafayette Special Enforcement and Cleaning Zone. Interestingly, the residents we can verify as hailing from other locations such as Agoura Hills or Orange County were geotagged as Echo Park Lake.

After a meticulous matching and sorting of such names and locations, we have arrived at the conclusion that not all of the official Echo Park Lake placements were residents of the encampment. The pressure exerted by Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's office, the alignment of such pressure with the Mayor's Office, and the reluctant compliance by LAHSA, created a situation where **geographic prioritization took precedence over vulnerability**. Thus, encampment residents, regardless of age and health status, were placed in the few available PRK rooms, politicizing a public health program and undermining its eligibility criteria for political expediency. In turn, these placements served to legitimize the displacement, transforming a militarized eviction into a successful housing transition. The obsession with placement numbers is apparent in the emails exchanged in late March 2021 between Marisol Rodriguez, District Director for the Office of Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell, Brian Buchner, Chief, Homelessness, Operations and Street Strategies in the Office of Mayor Garcetti, and other staff at these offices. Not fully satisfied with LAHSA placement numbers, Rodriguez declares that she "will get numbers from Urban Alchemy tomorrow to fill in the blank." As already discussed earlier in this section, O'Farrell's office had a six month contract with Urban Alchemy which included weekly tent counts. Rodriguez's email, which included detailed daily placements from March 19, 2021 to March 24, 2021, was sent at 12:24 am on March 25, 2021, the first day of the militarized eviction, to several protagonists including Valerie Flores, David Michaelson and Gita O'Neill at the LA City Attorney's Office, Donald Graham, then Homeless Coordinator for LAPD, Alfonso Lopez of LAPD who was to conduct the police invasion later that evening, and Matt Szabo, LA City Administrative Officer and former Garcetti aide. **The placements number game was the necessary prelude to eviction and enclosure.**

While the functionaries of the state and the brokers of displacement were constructing endless lists and numbers to demonstrate placements, what was underway at Echo Park Lake was something else. Even in the reports submitted by mercenary subcontractor Urban Alchemy to Mitch O'Farrell's office, one catches glimpses of **community and refuge**. "On Saturday, March 20, there was a wedding ceremony held for one of the clients living at the park named Bridget," reports Urban Alchemy, going on to note that "Bridget has been offered housing multiple times, including most recently a PRK room, but has denied." Later in that report, Urban Alchemy states: "Many new homeless individuals came to the park because they heard that 'if you come to Echo Park you will get a hotel room.'" Our ethnographic research and careful analysis of multiple datasets indicates that several Echo Park Lake residents, such as Bridget, refused placements. Their refusal is obscured in the official documentation of placements. At the same time, as we have already shown, many who were offered and accepted placements were not residents of Echo Park Lake. Reduced to a headcount by the offices of Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell and Mayor Garcetti, and serving as props for the displacement, they were nevertheless people experiencing prolonged homelessness. Their stories too have been obscured by the performativity of placement numbers. **In fact, their placements demonstrate both the eagerness of the unhoused to gain access to housing and services as well as the eagerness of diligent outreach workers, both at LAHSA and at other service providers, to fully utilize limited shelter resources, such as PRK.** Under tremendous pressure to complete placements, outreach workers undertook what, in the following section, we call **spatial triage**. For example, in one case, an elderly person eligible for PRK had been unable to receive placement for months. While this individual is geotagged as Civic Center Priority Catchment, he is one of the 183 Echo Park Lake placements. It is our understanding that LAHSA HET members seized the Echo Park Lake opportunity to place him in PRK. As the park had served as a space to build community and refuge, so even during the displacement it served as a conduit for shelter, creating a pathway to PRK for many in need.

In almost all cases though, whether from Echo Park Lake or not, the placements have not led to "stable, permanent housing." Instead, as indicated in the official LAHSA placements data analyzed earlier in this chapter, and as demonstrated in our analysis of housing trajectories based on the full LAHSA dataset, people are caught in a churning machine of (dis)placement and are either relegated to **an interminable waiting in the system** or have been disappeared and expelled. Only a handful are on the path to housing. Thus, a

resident placed at the LA Grand Hotel recounted the relief that came with this placement and also shared the bitter disappointment of interminable waiting:

The police would profile me, target me, because I was homeless... and each time I got arrested, I had to start all over again. You lose all your stuff. You have to reestablish yourself... So this was nice... I mean, it's cool that we're in here and shit... Because we never had anything like this before... But it just seems like we're not getting housing... I'm, you know, disappointed and upset that then people are like stuck. And it shouldn't have to be that way... Cuz they said we would be here three months and usually after three months you get housed. But now it's October and we are waiting... we did the paperwork and have heard nothing back... We're like, having to deal with more bullshit... Now it just seems we are going to be in the hotel forever (October 2021).

In all of the time at the LA Grand, she has been unable to get an appointment with the assigned case worker. When we checked with her in February 2022, she was still at the LA Grand Hotel, trying to navigate the voucher application and utilization process: "Still haven't seen our Case Worker, just a big Cluster F\*\*k lol."

## The Churning System of (Dis)Placement

The "final, validated placements" list for Echo Park Lake is partially a fiction. As discussed in the previous section, it is made up of residents of the park as well as those who either came to the park on the day of the displacement hoping for access to PRK or were in other locations and encampments and were identified as park residents by outreach workers in order to facilitate their placements. Yet, there is considerable truth revealed by this fiction, notably that the system of placements is one that perpetuates and reproduces displacement. Our ethnographic research provides a thorough understanding of this system, showing how the unhoused must fiercely advocate for access to housing, how they are subject to exclusionary eligibility criteria and carceral rules and conditions, and how when access to shelter or housing is established, it is precarious, easily lost through expulsion and eviction. While the ethnographic research provides an unmatched life-history understanding of such housing insecurity and dispossession, **the administrative records of LAHSA also reveal a churning system of (dis)placement.** With unprecedented access to the full LAHSA dataset, we took a close look at the housing trajectories of individuals drawn from various lists relevant to the Echo Park placement. In doing so, we find the following:

- The vast majority of placements are in emergency shelters and temporary programs, indicating the lack of permanent housing options in Los Angeles. Even when programs that promise a path to housing, such as rapid re-housing, are referenced, they rarely materialize in housing.
- In many cases these placements are spread out over different parts of the city and region, indicating the forced mobility of the unhoused.
- Each housing trajectory is made up of numerous program enrollments, and associated assessments, across different service providers, giving the lie to "shelter-resistance."

Specifically in the case of Echo Park Lake placements, we find the following:

- The Echo Park Lake displacement must be understood in the context of housing trajectories constituted through multiple displacements.
- The placement of many displaced residents in PRK sites such as the LA Grand Hotel must also be understood in the context of housing trajectories constituted through multiple placements that have failed to result in housing.
- There is a cruel irony in the fact that unhoused residents from other encampments and locations were included in the Echo Park Lake placements, a process we term spatial triage, but have not benefited from this prioritization and continue to experience housing insecurity.



## Our Methodology

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) operates as a relational database with data segmented into multiple tables that are joined using primary and foreign keys. In order to produce the housing trajectories of individuals, we joined seven data tables, specifically Client, Enrollment, Project, Organization, EnrollmentCoC, ProjectCoC, and Exit tables. Once tables were joined, the next phase required the conversion of coded data entries into descriptive information. Most data entered into HMIS are coded integer numbers that represent specific information. The HMIS Data Dictionary was utilized to create separate tables of the coded values and then merged to convert the data entries into the proper descriptions. The final phase was to focus only on the individuals displaced from Echo Park Lake. This was done by matching the data with a separate LAHSA dataset of recorded street encampments in the county. The encampment data was filtered for the Echo Park Lake encampment from November 2019 to March 2021. Once joined with the HMIS dataset, only individuals who were on the official LAHSA Echo Park Lake placement list were selected. This resulted in what we have called “The List of 100.” We then generated housing trajectories for these 100 individuals, that includes 503 enrollments, some of which are analyzed below.

## Project Enrollments for the List of 100

The housing trajectories we have developed provide a rare look at project enrollments. According to [HUD’s HMIS Data Standards manual](#), an enrollment is the period in which a person is considered a client of the ‘project.’ An enrollment begins at the start of a project recorded as the entry date. HMIS projects include a wide range from street outreach, stand-alone supportive services, emergency shelters, to permanent supportive housing. Enrollments occur for each new project entry. For example, if an outreach occurs to an individual, an enrollment is made. If they then get placed into an emergency shelter a new project enrollment is made. And if they are transferred to a new shelter, once again the previous project ends, and a new enrollment is made. A total of thirteen Project Types<sup>46</sup> are available for official entry into the HMIS database. But in keeping with the analysis presented throughout this monograph, we reclassify these project types into shelter, temporary program, and housing, while also maintaining the category of street outreach. **One important revelation is that street outreach outweighs placements, accounting for over half of project enrollments. This indicates the scarcity of shelter and housing resources in Los Angeles, a scarcity that is by design.** Public resources are thus being expended on street outreach rather than on housing people. Within placements, shelter and temporary programs dominate, with housing placements only a tiny percentage of project enrollments. Further, as our analysis of individual housing trajectories provided below demonstrates, even such housing placements are not guaranteed to be stable and permanent.

## The Shuffle

The List of 100 constitutes the overlap between the official 183 Echo Park Lake placements and individuals geotagged as living at Echo Park Lake in the LAHSA Encampments dataset. While our interviews reveal that this list includes a few people from other locations and encampments, we view it as an important window onto the housing trajectories of those who were offered and accepted placements during a moment of state-led displacement. An overall analysis of this list indicates patterns similar to those revealed by the official LAHSA reports on Echo Park Lake placements: that there have been several exits or disappearances and that the vast majority of the remaining residents are in a state of waiting at PRK sites such as the LA Grand Hotel. What is especially significant about the full LAHSA dataset is that it allows us to understand housing trajectories *prior* to the Echo Park Lake encampment. We have selected a few such housing trajectories as exemplars, deliberately focusing on those not included in our ethnographic research. **There are two main findings from such housing trajectories: first, that people are willing to undergo numerous project enrollments, thus giving the lie to “shelter-resistance,” and second, that they are caught in a “shuffle,” moved from one placement to another creating the appearance of activity but with little change in their housing status.**

**Mr. Murphy** first entered the LAHSA system in 2010. He was placed at the PRK Mayfair Hotel on March 25, 2021, during the Echo Park Lake displacement and is still there, presumably waiting for housing. He has churned through the LAHSA system 13 times since 2015, moving from Lancaster to Los Angeles. Identified as Black and male, Mr. Murphy is 44 years old and has been placed in various winter shelters for short stints. In July 2020, he was briefly placed in PRK, specifically at the LA Grand Hotel, but was exited a month

46 Emergency Shelter, Transitional Housing, PH – Permanent Supportive Housing, Street Outreach, Services Only, Other, Safe Haven, PH – Housing Only, PH – Housing with Services, Day Shelter, Homeless Prevention, PH – Rapid Re-Housing, and Coordinated Entry.

### Project Enrollments for the List of 100

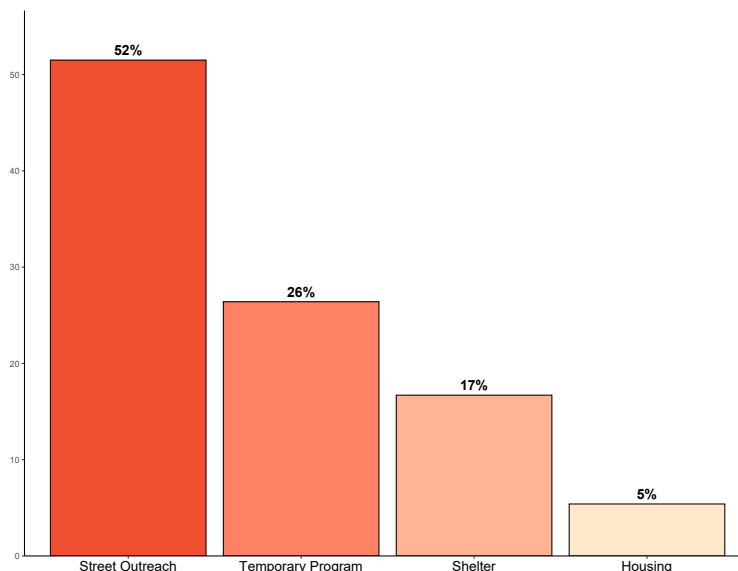


Figure 3-7. 503 Total Enrollments. “Street Outreach” refers to Street Outreach, Services Only, and Coordinated Entry. “Temporary Program” refers to Project Roomkey, Recovery Re-Housing, Transitional Housing, and Safe Haven placements. “Shelter” refers to A Bridge Home, Emergency Shelters, Winter Shelters, Day Shelters, and COVID Recreation Center placements. “Housing” refers to Project Homekey, Permanent Supportive Housing, and Rapid Re-Housing placements. Source: Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

later. LAHSA records indicate that he was living on the streets prior to each new program enrollment, showing an iterative return to homelessness. Street outreach teams continued to have contact with him until he was placed, in February 2021, for less than a month at the Project Homekey Motel 6 in Baldwin Park, and then ultimately at the PRK Mayfair Hotel. One important question pertaining to Mr. Murphy’s housing trajectory is why he was exited from Project Homekey, supposedly a site of permanent housing. After this exit, Mr. Murphy returns to homelessness and is recorded by street outreach teams as living at Echo Park Lake, before he is placed at the PRK Mayfair Hotel.

**Ms. Shepard**, identified as Black and female, is 23 years old. She has churned through the LAHSA system 20 times since 2018 starting with Bridge Housing Program for Youth. Over the years, Ms. Shepard has been in various emergency and day shelters in locations ranging from Los Angeles to North Hollywood to Pasadena to Pomona with the duration of each stay listed as “two to six months.” In January 2021, she is placed at the Winter Shelter at Shatto Recreation Center but exited a couple of weeks later for “non compliance with program.” She is then recorded as “currently sleeping in Echo Park and in need of stable housing.” On February 19, 2021, she is placed in PRK at the LA Grand Hotel and then transferred to the Knights Hotel in Palmdale on March 12, 2021. Ms. Shepard seems to be one of the lucky ones, listed in the system as having a recovery re-housing voucher since July 2021 and in a rental unit in Lancaster. As indicated earlier in the monograph, the recovery re-housing program, while [included by LAHSA](#) as a type of permanent housing, is temporary rental assistance coupled with supportive services. It provides 100 percent of a participant’s rental assistance for up to 6 months and then provides “progressive assistance” for up to 12 additional months “with the hope that the housing can be permanent.” Put another way, the permanence of such housing ultimately rests on the participant’s capacity to pay for full rent after the 18 months of support has expired.

**Ms. Blake** has been at the Project Homekey Motel 6 in Whittier since July 2021. She has been in the LAHSA system since 2006. In July 2020, she was placed in the Winter Shelter Program in Long Beach. Shuffled through shelter programs in San Pedro and Pomona, she was in the Winter Shelter Program at Shatto Recreation Center for two weeks in January 2021, exited for “non compliance with

program,” after which she is recorded as “sleeping in Echo Park.” Placed in PRK at the LA Grand Hotel on February 19, 2021, she was exited on June 4, 2021, transferring to another PRK, the Sunrise Hotel in San Pedro. Identified as Black and female, Ms. Blake is 51 years old and one of the fortunate ones who was enrolled in the [Project 100 Permanent Supportive Housing](#), a housing justice program run by the Downtown Women’s Center in partnership with LAHSA intended to serve 100 unhoused women living in Skid Row.

In contrast to Ms. Blake is the case of **Ms. Moore** who is 57 years of age and identified as Black and female. Ms. Moore has churned through the system since 2012 with numerous placements in shelters and crisis housing and even enrollment in rapid re-housing in 2017. Prior to most program enrollments, she is recorded as living on the streets, including a repeated return to homelessness. During the pandemic, Ms. Moore was placed for a few days, in April 2020, at the Westwood Recreation Center and was then cycled through various shelters, including some in Skid Row. On March 25, 2021, she was placed in the PRK Saddleback Inn in Norwalk. The records show that she was exited on April 21, 2021 and that no exit interview was completed. She has been disappeared from the LAHSA system.

**Mr. Garcia** entered the LAHSA system in 2009. Identified as Hispanic/Latino and male, he is 51 years of age. But he was cycled in and out of several programs in this short period of time. First placed in the PRK Mayfair Hotel on July 17, 2020, he was exited a month later with the records showing that no exit interview was completed. Two weeks later he is placed again at the Mayfair where he remains until January 2021. He is again exited in February with the entry noting that “no data was collected.” He is recorded as living outside, specifically in Echo Park Lake, “on the side closest to Park Avenue.” On March 24, 2021, he is placed in PRK at the LA Grand Hotel with an exit date of October 4, 2021. This time the reason for exit is marked as “deceased.”

**Mr. Harris** is identified as white and male. 55 years of age, he is a veteran. In 2019 and 2020 he is enrolled in the Winter Shelter Program in West Los Angeles. In February 2021, he is placed in PRK at the LA Grand Hotel. He was exited on July 30, 2021 with the exit destination marked as “jail, prison, or detention facility” and with “no exit interview completed.” However, since street outreach also records him as being in Echo Park Lake on July 8, 2021, months after the eviction, we can only assume that he returned to the park before being subject to incarceration.

## Spatial Triage

Not all of the people on the official Echo Park Lake placements list are identified in the full LAHSA dataset as residents of the Echo Park Lake encampment. Several are identified as living in “ABH, Civic Center Priority Catchment” and yet others in the “Lafayette Special Enforcement and Cleaning Zone.” Identified as a designated area adjacent to “A Bridge Home,” an euphemistic term for a shelter, they are sites of weekly encampment sweeps. While A Bridge Home has been [touted by Mayor Garcetti](#) as “a path to a permanent home,” the housing trajectories encapsulated in the LAHSA data indicate that it is instead merely one stop in the churning system of (dis)placement. While unhoused residents of special enforcement zones are meant to have priority placement in specific A Bridge Home shelters, such access remains limited. As of December 2021, there were only 2,181 beds in the A Bridge Home shelter system in Los Angeles. The [LAHSA ABH dashboard](#) shows even fewer beds, with only 1136 beds active in the system as of January 31, 2022. Yet, these scant beds justify brutal sweeps that displace people and destroy their personal belongings.

A Bridge Home shelter then is no guarantee of temporary or permanent housing. However, the designated Special Enforcement and Cleaning Zone, with the promise of “[keeping our neighborhoods clean](#),” is an important tool of political appeasement, meant to reassure housed residents who typically reject the siting of shelters without such enforcement and cleaning. This combination of shelter and enforcement has become a key feature of the homeless services system in Los Angeles. The cruel irony is that there are very few shelter beds available at any given A Bridge Home, thus necessitating the spatial triage that we uncover through our research.

A catchment area is a slightly different designation. Demarcated by homeless service providers as the jurisdiction for a shelter, it provides priority to unhoused residents living in that area. But as noted above, given the paucity of shelter beds, such priority is either meaningless or serves to legitimize sweeps and other forms of displacement. It is thus not surprising that residents of the Lafayette Special Enforcement Zone and ABH, Civic Center Priority Catchment Area were funneled into the Echo Park Lake placements by outreach workers. We view this as a form of spatial triage. Yet, as indicated in the three housing trajectories we have selected as examples, such triage did not succeed in staunching housing insecurity. Each of the cases we have selected result in disappearance rather than stable, permanent housing.



Figure 3-8. Photo courtesy of Mike Dickerson, Ktown for All, December 10, 2021.

**Ms. Evans** is one of the Echo Park Lake placements but was geotagged in the full LAHSA dataset as living in the ABH, Civic Center Priority Catchment encampment. Identified as Black and female, she is 46 years of age and has been in the LAHSA system since 2013. LAHSA program enrollment records indicate that she has been cycled through numerous emergency shelter placements between 2013 and 2021 with also stints in medical facilities. She disappears from view in the system from 2018 to 2020 and then, during the COVID-19 pandemic, was placed in an emergency shelter. She was exited from the shelter in February 2021 with no exit interview completed. She then comes back into view in the LAHSA system in April 2021 as living in the ABH, Civic Center Priority Catchment area, and appears on the Echo Park Lake placements list, with a placement at the PRK Lincoln Plaza hotel on April 13, 2021. She was exited on May 22, 2021, with no exit interview completed and was thus disappeared from the system.

In contrast to Ms. Evans, **Mr. Lopez** has only been in the LAHSA system since November 2020. He is 35 years of age and identified as Latinx and male. LAHSA street outreach teams indicated that he was living in an encampment in the Lafayette Special Enforcement Zone. On March 24, 2021, Mr. Lopez was placed in PRK at the LA Grand Hotel as one of the Echo Park Lake placements. According to LAHSA data, he is still in this placement. However, our research inquiry at the LA Grand Hotel indicates a different outcome. According to Salvation Army records, Mr. Lopez was exited from the LA Grand Hotel on April 19, 2021. He is one of the disappeared.

Also disappeared is **Mr. Tyler**. 59 years of age and identified as Black and male, Mr. Tyler had been primarily living on the streets with the exception of a one-day stay at an emergency shelter in 2018. LAHSA street outreach notes show that he was living at the ABH, Civic Center Priority Catchment encampment in 2021. He was placed in PRK at the LA Grand Hotel on February 18, 2021, as an Echo Park Lake placement. On March 1, 2021, Mr. Tyler was exited for “non compliance.” He too has been disappeared.

**It is obvious but must be said that what connects spatial triage and the shuffle is the scarcity of shelter and housing resources.** If each encampment sweep has to be accompanied by a demonstration of housing placements (not housing outcomes), then the immediacy of such placement rather than the permanency of housing drives the system. Conversely, if there are not enough shelter and housing resources available for a targeted zone, then the only way to ensure placements is to undertake spatial triage.

**4.**

**PROJECT NO KEY**

## 4. PROJECT NO KEY



Figure 4-1. La Donna Harrell, Right to Rest Rally, Los Angeles City Hall, July 28, 2021. Photo by Anthony Geronimo Orendorff.

On July 28, 2021, unhoused organizers across Los Angeles convened at City Hall to demand [the right to rest without facing arrest](#). They rallied collectively against Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) Section 41.18, an ordinance designed to prohibit sitting, sleeping, and lying in what would become hundreds of zones across the City—a de facto ban on homelessness in all the places that unhoused communities gather and make home. The mass displacement wrought by Section 41.18 is justified by a host of temporary programs and shelter options, often characterized by the City of Los Angeles as “housing.” La Donna Harrell, a member of Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH) stepped up to the microphone and [described her experience](#) in Project Roomkey:

First I just wanna talk about the programs that they give unhoused people. These government programs, even their names are made to put me down. Like, Project Roomkey? It's called Project Roomkey, yet no one has a room key.

These programs are made so we don't want to go. I can make a tent with as much room as I want, and come and go as I want. When they say, “There's programs”—no, nobody wants to go to any of those, where they can be harassed and demeaned. You wanna displace us just to put us in this bullshit? And then on top of that, we have all these rules. For what? For not being able to afford rent in California, in Los Angeles? As an adult, I don't want to have a curfew just because I can't afford rent. All these hoops and everything. And while I've been in Project Roomkey, my case worker has never tried to get in contact with me. And that's the programs that are being offered. Ran by power-tripping, regular ol' folk, with fuckin' carceral rules. Even in jail, my sister can come to visit. We get written up if we visit inside the rooms. And they wonder why people get isolated and depressed, getting their drugs in, or whatever. They have a pool there [at the hotel], they have a gym, and we're not allowed. They even took out the ice machines. If you wonder why we don't want to go to these programs, that is why.

Following Harrell's lead, this chapter examines the ways in which the emergency shelter program **Project Roomkey**, into which many **Echo Park Lake residents were displaced, systematically strips residents of civil and human rights—a dehumanization akin to social death**. Although Project Roomkey was a hard-won victory by housing justice organizations, it was contorted into a carceral tool of

displacement, pushing Echo Park Lake residents into leaving the park by promising permanent housing. Far from that promise—and in contradiction to even its name, as Harrell points out—[Project Roomkey residents live in a prison-like](#) environment with the ever-present threat of eviction looming large. This carceral model of enforced rightlessness punishes the poor for merely existing outside the productive capacity of the racial capitalist order and in that way demonstrating the contradictions of that system. Indeed, Los Angeles' regime of neo-colonial gentrification and private property relationships both inevitably produce homelessness while requiring the enforced banishment and disappearance of the poor so that capital may continue to conquer. Project Roomkey is a direct product of such a system. But unhoused Project Roomkey residents did not and do not accept the inevitability of these conditions. **Instead, participants in the Project Roomkey program continue to collectively contest and resist this state of enforced rightlessness, in the process laying claim to humanity, dignity, self-determination, and life in the midst of a carceral program designed to rob them of each.**

## The Fight for Hotels as Housing

Near the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst the shelter-in-place order, California Governor Gavin Newsom [announced Project Roomkey](#), a program that placed people experiencing homelessness in hotel rooms left vacant by the mass contraction of the tourist economy. Explicitly designed as a temporary COVID-19 measure, the plan required unhoused individuals to demonstrate pre-existing medical conditions in order to be considered “at risk” enough to gain admission to a Project Roomkey site. At the outset, the program also only promised [15,000 rooms statewide](#)—a drop in the bucket compared to the official Los Angeles County numbers of [over 60,000 people](#) experiencing homelessness in 2020, themselves likely an underestimate. Moreover, deployment of Project Roomkey was left to individual mayors, and many, including Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, did nothing but drag their feet.

Community organizations across California immediately saw these conditions as a massive barrier that meant most unhoused people would never have access to Project Roomkey, regardless of need. A constellation of housed and unhoused organizers across California joined together to collectively demand the state expropriate vacant hotels and convert them into housing. Called No Vacancy! California, the campaign highlighted the sprawling numbers of unused luxury hotel rooms—increasingly the case because shelter-in-place orders diminished the number of tourists using them—in contrast to the brutal conditions of life on the street. In Los Angeles, after nearly a month of inaction by the City, unhoused Echo Park Lake resident [Davon Brown led an action](#) to turn the pressure on. On May 1, 2020, he waltzed into the Ritz-Carlton, one of many now-empty luxury hotels across Los Angeles, with an entourage of organizers from Street Watch LA in tow. Posing as a famous recording artist and his retinue, the group toured the room under the guise of a long stay—once inside, Brown [revealed his actual purpose](#). “Actually, I’m not famous, I’m homeless. I live in Echo Park. And I’m not leaving this hotel until Mayor Garcetti commandeers these vacant rooms.” Just as police descended on the Ritz to detain Brown and his fellow organizers, Garcetti claimed during his nightly COVID-19 press conference there was, in fact, a hotel room available for Brown. Around a month after the action, an outreach worker did offer Brown a Project Roomkey placement. In response, he asked whether or not there were spots for everyone else sleeping outside. When the answer was no, he declined the room. That a slot in Project Roomkey was only available after Brown occupied a hotel hints at the way the program’s qualifications could be relaxed or bent to accommodate the requests of politicians like Garcetti—but not those who were experiencing life on the street. The action also emphasized what Brown made clear at the time: **“You’ll see the difference between how they treat a famous person and a homeless person. Money makes you human at this point.”** The day-long Ritz occupation—and the No Vacancy! campaign as a whole—underscored the importance of seizing hotels for use by unhoused Angelenos, and community organizations like the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN), Street Watch LA, and Ground Game LA continued to push for and amplify that demand.

Indeed, in the Echo Park Lake encampment, where Brown lived, organizing to open more Project Roomkey spots continued. At thrice-weekly Street Watch LA Power Up! community tables, the incredibly [small number](#) of filled Project Roomkey slots were a frequent topic of conversation and frustration amongst the unhoused community. Indeed, the high-water mark of the Project Roomkey program was in August 2020, [housing a mere 4,239](#) people at one time. So when the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) began to offer Project Roomkey placements to Echo Park Lake residents, especially toward the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, many took them up on it—especially (and in many cases, primarily) because of the [promise of permanent housing](#) after Project Roomkey. Organizers in the encampment and in Street Watch LA recognized this change as a **direct result of clear and consistent demands that hotel rooms be opened for people experiencing homelessness.**

However, other unhoused members of the Echo Park Lake community were suspicious of these Project Roomkey offers, and for good reason: it had been nearly a year of the pandemic with almost no movement on demands for hotels as housing. So why now? By February 2021, the answer was clear: Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell’s office had pushed to [evict the Echo Park Lake community](#) and hoped to do so under the radar of both potential protestors and the press. Leaders in the Echo Park Lake encampment saw LAHSA’s Project Roomkey offers as part and parcel of this strategy, an attempt to quietly scatter the strong and politicized community that had developed there over the course of 2020. Project Roomkey meant residents would leave the encampment for a hotel room, thereby undermining the community’s numerical strength. In this way, placements in the program subtly paved the way for the mass eviction well before those plans were made public. **The City had taken the demand for vacant hotel rooms and twisted it into a sinister tool of displacement.**

By the night of the police raid on March 24 and subsequent fencing of Echo Park Lake on March 25, members of the encampment who had taken on Project Roomkey placements began to realize that the promises of the program were far from the reality. As part of the intake process, William Sens, Jr. and another resident were both encouraged to lie about pre-existing conditions in order to be accepted into Project Roomkey. After attempting to secure services for her ailing friend Jake, living in his car in the neighborhood, Veronica Palacios realized that Project Roomkey placements were only available to Echo Park Lake residents. Tragically, Jake died in his vehicle shortly thereafter. One resident, Cristina Walker, recounted that as part of accepting the hotel room, LAHSA “told us we could go back and get our stuff. We didn’t know that it was getting swept up by bulldozers and thrown away. So a lot of people lost out on a lot of their stuff,” including precious items like IDs, social security cards, birth certificates, and irreplaceable family photos. Others, like Joshua Peterson, heard back from friends who had taken the Project Roomkey offers, and opted to decline a hotel room for a simple reason: “It’s like living in a prison.”

## Enforced Rightlessness: The Carceral Conditions of Emergency Shelter

*“They got us off the street. But there was a price that we had to pay.  
We had to give up everything that we had.”*

*Cristina Walker, displaced Echo Park Lake resident*

Peterson’s observation was far from exceptional. **This section seeks to make visible the carceral conditions of Project Roomkey through ethnographic interviews with those who have experienced those conditions most directly.** It illustrates the ways in which the deeply carceral Project Roomkey program denies and revokes residents’ civil and human rights. This state of rightlessness is deeply dehumanizing, a type of social death. As Walker described, Project Roomkey required its residents to give up everything—including, in many ways, their humanity. However, this section also hints at the ways that Project Roomkey participants refused and refuted this systematically enforced rightlessness, a thread picked up in the final section of this chapter.

We focus here on the LA Grand Hotel, or the Grand, in Downtown Los Angeles as a case study for a number of reasons. First, it is one of the key Project Roomkey locations where Echo Park Lake residents were displaced into either before, during, or just following the police raid. Second, residents of other homeless communities targeted after Echo Park Lake, like the Venice Boardwalk, were *also* placed at the Grand as part of the City’s strategy of encampment displacement. Third, the Grand is also something like a final destination within Project Roomkey for those who have experienced evictions across the program. Sites like the Sportsmen’s Lodge and the Airtel Plaza Hotel, both in the San Fernando Valley, have been closed (“demobilized”) already, and those living in them displaced once again. Due to the collective resistance among residents at those Project Roomkey locations, prompting community support from groups like Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA, many of these evicted from Valley sites were moved into the Grand. For these reasons, **the Grand is situated at the intersection of many different displacements all across the City, offering a demonstrative slice of the experience in Project Roomkey.** It is important to note that Project Roomkey is not the only type of carceral temporary program; others include Tiny Home Villages, Safe Sleep village sites, and more. Nevertheless, Project Roomkey demonstrates the prison-like quality of this system of carceral temporary programs, one through which people are shuffled around, dehumanized, and disappeared.



**Project Roomkey operates as a public-funded suspension of civil and human rights**, starting even at the moment of enrollment in the program. Project Roomkey “participant contracts,” generated by LAHSA, must be signed by residents before gaining entry into the program—and strip away hard-won tenant rights. A contract from September 2021 includes as its second stipulation: “You Are a Participant. In this Project Roomkey Interim Housing (PRK-IH) Program, you are considered a ‘Participant’ in a ‘Tier 1 Non-Congregate’ interim housing site during a declared public emergency.” This fuzzy participant status means that **Project Roomkey residents are not legally considered tenants**, and therefore do not have basic rights like written notices for entry or legal processes for fighting eviction. The other rules in the contract underscore this point: participants are only permitted to bring the “equivalent [of] one 60-gallon garbage bag” of personal property on the premises, staff are allowed to enter and inspect rooms at any time, and signing the participant agreement “give[s] consent to Service Provider staff to search your hotel/motel unit” if they suspect a participant of using drugs. The fact that personal belongings are measured in terms of garbage is telling of the ways in which participants’ lives and rights are considered dispensable in Project Roomkey. The consequence of violating any of these terms is an immediate “exit,” that is, eviction, from the program. The end of the contract puts it clearly, in bold, right before the signature line: “I understand that **NO TENANCY IS CREATED** by my participation in the Project Roomkey Program.” In this way, **Project Roomkey hopefuls are forced to choose between a roof over their head—one with the promise of real housing at the end—and their own civil rights.**

Jaime Ramos, a former Echo Park Lake resident and member of UTACH, stays in a similar temporary shelter program and created an annotated version of a participant agreement: it struck out all text “that is unconstitutional or against the laws of the State of California or the human rights” and made corrections to adjust the original contract to the law. For example, Ramos rejected restrictions on personal property: “My belongings are my treasures, my remembrances, my plans, my dreams, and my culture. Depriving me of that is a violation of my human rights.” Ramos’ updated contract is chock full of other strike-outs and additions, underscoring the numerous violations of participants’ rights in the program—and emphasizing the way these participant agreements absolve the program itself of any responsibility for these violations. On top of that, Ramos pointed to the ways in which these contracts undermine their own stated goals of COVID-19 safety and assisting the unhoused in obtaining permanent housing. “Exiting people to the street is a very betrayal of your very goal.”

This amended (and more accurate) version of the participant contract also makes clear the **key enforcer of rightlessness: the service provider in charge of running the program**. Each Project Roomkey site has its own service provider, and each service provider has its own *additional* set of carceral rules, building on the rightlessness mandated by the participant agreement. The Salvation Army is the service provider at the Grand and outlines its carceral terms of stay in 23 rules, each of which—including curfews, mandated thrice daily “wellness checks,” a 5 minute limit on using the communal smoking area, and constraints on personal property—dehumanize participants by denying them basic agency and autonomy.

<b>CONTRACTED LAHSA SERVICE PROVIDER</b>	
Print Name: _____	
Signature: _____	Date: _____
<b>(Service Provider Staff)</b>	
<b>PARTICIPANT(S).</b> I have read and understand the terms of this Agreement and I agree to abide by it. I understand that violations of this Agreement may result in immediate exit/termination from the Project Roomkey – Interim Housing Program. <b>I understand that NO TENANCY IS CREATED by my participation in the Project Roomkey Program. I understand that my anticipated last day in the PRK-IH Program is [ _____ ].</b>	
Print Name: _____	
Signature: _____	Date: _____
<b>(PRK-IH Program Participant)</b>	

Figure 4-2. Project Roomkey Participant Agreement, Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, September 2, 2021.



## THE SALVATION ARMY PROJECT ROOM KEY RULES

1. Curfew for all program participants is 10:00pm
2. Program participants are subject to property search upon entrance. No weapons nor any other objects that can be used as weapons are allowed on the premise
3. Program participants are allowed to be away from the program for 48 hours before they are exited
4. Two bags of belongings in room per person only. Additional items are subject to removal
5. Quiet hours are between 9:00pm and 7:00pm
6. No acts of violence or threats will be tolerated. Any acts of threats will be considered grounds for termination
7. Masks are always to be worn in the facility. No eating, drinking, or music playing while walking through the facility
8. The entrance and exit are located at the security guard post
9. Wellness checks are conducted during meals 3x per day: 8 am, 12 pm, and 5pm (nurses will take one temperature per day during each mealtime)
10. If staff knocks and there is no answer, after the second knock, staff will enter the room to ensure participants safety
11. Participants must have their room cleaned by housekeeping 2x per week
12. No visitors are allowed in the facility or room and no knocking on each other's rooms
13. Residents are not allowed to visit each other's rooms and no hanging around the hallways or outside other rooms or in any common area of the facility
14. Five-minute smoking limit in the smoking area (no music, haircuts, gambling, alcohol, or drugs)
15. No smoking inside the rooms
16. No drugs or alcohol are allowed on the property
17. No pets-Service and emotional support animals may not be left unattended in the room
18. All service and emotional support animals must be on leashes while outside their room
19. Animal's owners must pick up their animals bodily waste
20. No addition outside items: TV's, recycling, furniture, coffee makers, irons, stoves, knives, car tires, mirrors etc.
21. No bikes or electric scooters or shopping carts (TSA is not responsible for items left on the hotel property unattended)
22. No burning candles or incense
23. We are practicing all aspects of the Safer at Home Order

**\*\*FAILURE TO COMPLY WILL RESULT IN COMPLIANCE WARNING AND/OR TERMINATION FROM PROJECT ROOM KEY\*\***

Figure 4-3. Salvation Army Project Roomkey Rules. Photo: Anonymous resident of Project Roomkey at the LA Grand Hotel.

Indeed, the prison-like content and application of the Salvation Army rules begins with entry, creating an environment of intimidation and incarceration upon merely approaching the Grand. Former Echo Park Lake resident Sabrina Jones described the process:

Now, let me tell you how Project Roomkey works. When you get there, when you get into the parking lot, you got to go through a security checkpoint where you got to pull out your pockets. They wand you down. And then you go inside, they gotta take your temperature. You give them your room number, they walk five feet away to another table, where you say your room number again, then you go up to whatever floor. And you'd have to wait for somebody to let you in your room, you got to tell them your room number again, and they got to take you down to your room.

**This invasive and intimidating entry situates Project Roomkey as a prison—and positions people experiencing homelessness as deserving of such punishment and surveillance.** As Jones highlights, that carcerality extends to the most basic component of housing: a key to your own door. That universal reality across Project Roomkey sites is what led Harrell and others to characterize it as “Project No Key,” testament to the absolute lack of autonomy in these temporary programs.

Jones’s experience also underscores the security apparatus at Project Roomkey sites as a fundamental component of enforcing the carcerality of the program. According to LAHSA’s Request for Information (RFI) documents issued in Spring of 2020 and 2021, directed toward security companies that might be contracted for Project Roomkey, guards are to be on the premises a full 24 hours a day, a non-stop patrol to maintain the perimeter of the prison. The RFIs also make clear that security is woven into the fabric of the program: the very first listed guard duty is working collaboratively with service providers to “provide program oversight and supportive services.” **An echo of the way that offers of Project Roomkey came with a mass police mobilization to evict Echo Park Lake residents, enforcement and services are deeply interconnected at places like the Grand.** Indeed, guard responsibilities like patrolling the premises and documenting “notable incidents” involve reporting back to the Salvation Army and other service providers. It is also security who notifies the Project Roomkey site manager and/or law enforcement in the event of any incident, including “arguments/altercations.” Last on the list is that guards will “ensure adherence to the Safer at Home” order. Together, these duties criminalize a range of normal human behavior, including contentious conversations or gathering to spend time with one another. The picture painted by these documents is that security does not operate primarily for the safety of residents—rather, its effect is to control, surveil, and criminalize them for daring to express their humanity while experiencing poverty.

On top of this prison-like security apparatus and entry process, access to the hotel is also decided by curfews. Curfews vary across Project Roomkey. Because of the organizing of the homeless union, Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing ([UTACH](#)), established mainly by displaced Echo Park Lake residents, the Grand’s evening curfew is now 10 p.m., extended from 7 p.m. Other hotels initially only allowed participants to leave between 12 p.m. and 4 p.m. each day, a tiny window akin to yard time in prison. But even the Grand’s relatively late curfew still constrains residents and prevents them from getting on their feet. Madison Roberts pointed out that it is already difficult to find employment as a homeless person in one of these programs—lack of a job history and a mailing address discourage potential employers, and many of the opportunities that are available come with odd hours outside of curfew. Add to that the constraints of living in a carceral environment tantamount to prison and it is nearly impossible to find work. For example, Scott Merchant, who participated in the Echo Park Lake jobs program, tried to use his time at the Grand to find employment. He was offered one as a grocery stocker, where his hours were 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. When Merchant asked for permission to stay out later than curfew so he could take the job, his request was rejected outright: “They said, ‘Well, you can’t have that job, because it’s past curfew.’ So it’s just ... you can’t grow there [in Project Roomkey].” **Merchant was punished for attempting to improve his material circumstances and move out of poverty—attempts that put him at odds with the prison that is Project Roomkey.**

Once a participant is able to enter the premises and get into their room, there is no guarantee of basic safety or privacy. As the carceral Salvation Army rules indicate, after just two knocks, staff can enter a room to ensure the participant’s “safety.” **Under the guise of protecting residents’ well-being, Salvation Army and security have carte blanche to enter rooms at any time with no notice—itsself a much greater safety risk for the residents than an unreturned knock.** One person at the Grand told us that staff entered when she was in the shower; another while he was using the restroom; more still while they were sleeping or naked. Because it is staff members who have access to room keys, while residents do not, many live in a state of constant vigilance, never knowing when their most intimate moments might be abruptly interrupted and surveilled by staff. This enforced lack of control over basic bodily autonomy is yet another echo of incarceration. On top of that, many people staying in Project Roomkey sites across the County shared experiences of staff entering and searching the room while residents were out, leaving residents with a deeply disconcerting sense of constant surveillance laced with the implicit threat of punishment. Madison Roberts described an especially devastating example of this process:

I came back [to my room] and my daughter's ashes—they had unlocked the bottom [of the urn], pulled out her ashes, cut the bag open. And in the process, some of it spilled. So when I came back, I seen her ashes. I see the bag's cut. I'm just not understanding, like, why? The thought that I had to have my daughter's ashes vacuumed up, and still keep a mental state of, *Okay, you got to follow rules, you got to make sure you're cordial to everyone, show respect...*

Not only was Roberts violated by Project Roomkey staff, she recognized that in order to stay at the Grand, she had to bend and suppress her own humanity to continue abiding by the program's rules. The need to keep up a happy face for the very people who constantly invade one's personal privacy places residents in a traumatic and demeaning double bind. This deep dehumanization of both Roberts and her daughter is not an accident but a direct result of the program's carceral structure.

Even something as simple as food service remains a point of contention at the Grand. The poor quality of food was universally reported by the Grand residents we interviewed—many described moldy, spoiled meals or attested that what they ate made them physically sick. People with certain dietary restrictions or health conditions do not have access to suitably healthy meals through the Grand, and residents have experienced confiscation of personal food supplies. As Cristina Walker put it, **the food is higher quality at Twin Towers Correctional Facility than it is at the Grand**, testament to the treatment of Project Roomkey participants as subhuman prisoners undeserving even of edible meals—a requirement not just for wellness, but for survival itself.

It was not just the food that made people unwell. A condition of life in Project Roomkey is extreme isolation: as the rules point out, no visitors are allowed. This applies not just to people visiting from outside Project Roomkey—like friends and family—but also to neighbors inside the Grand itself. This requirement in particular wreaks havoc on residents' mental health, compounding the emotional duress caused by other punitive rules and violations of privacy. Charlie and Emma Ramirez, who were placed in one room together because they are partners, observed that if they had been single, things would have been a lot different: "There's so many people in the rooms by themselves. I couldn't do that. I would have gotten kicked out so long ago." And many were, for this very reason. One participant, Alfonso Hunt, was written up twice for having company in his room, leading to his eviction from the Grand. He commented:

[Having company is] against the rules, but I'm being locked in my room for 12 hours a day. That's spending half my time on Earth locked in by myself, after doing 21 years in prison, a lot of that in single cells. Solitary confinement. It's traumatizing for me to be out in the real world having to go through that, even in a nice room.

This experience of disconnection from community as a result of participation in Project Roomkey exacerbates the trauma of homelessness by severing people from the community networks that kept them alive in the first place. Exacerbating this condition is the fact that many Project Roomkey sites are far-flung from communities that residents previously inhabited. Even the extremely limited common spaces are rigidly policed: when talking with a friend in one of the few areas where that is permitted on-property, staff abruptly started yelling at Roberts, demanding the group move due to COVID-19 concerns—even as the Safer at Home order had been lifted, and even as staff flagrantly refused to follow the same pandemic protocols they impose on residents. Indeed, long after the Safer at Home order was revoked, Project Roomkey residents reported security reprimanding them for building connections and community with each other. In this way, guards used the emergency safety measure to justify further repression of program participants. **This intense and intensely enforced isolation is family separation: breaking up community and familial bonds, dehumanizing participants, and making it difficult to share information about or connect with others to oppose the entire set of rules that strip people of their fundamental rights.** As Harrell commented at the Right to Rest rally, at least in prison, your family could visit—in Project Roomkey, even that was impossible.

As this extreme isolation suggests, residents' mental health suffered severely in Project Roomkey. **There is no on-site mental health support for Project Roomkey participants, and separated from community ties of collective care, many residents experience ongoing mental health crises.** When he was enrolled in Project Roomkey, Seb Turner was asked if he drank or smoked—making him more vulnerable to COVID-19 and therefore qualified for the program. When he said no to both, "the only thing they wrote down was depression. And since I got here, I got more and more depressed. So, I mean, they were right about that one, but it took a while." Scott Merchant similarly described how the Grand worsened his anxiety and depression enormously, to the point of moving back out to the streets—and ultimately, out of California. As Hunt's account suggests, being in Project Roomkey could trigger old trauma, especially around incarceration—and for many, being in the program *itself* was traumatic due to the dehumanizing, cruel conditions. Project Roomkey residents reported that the amenities offered in a typical hotel were completely off-limits—no access to the gym, pool, and even ice machines—testament to the deprioritization of residents' well-being. Even such smaller examples of inequity and imprisonment were indicative of the broader program, which not only fails to offer mental health support but intentionally bars participants from utilizing extant resources that are part and parcel of hotel stays. In Project Roomkey, to be poor is to be deprived of basic comforts.

Indeed, Roberts characterized the way that mental health support is used as a weapon rather than a resource in Project Roomkey; staff would threaten to call “mental health services” when participants broke rules. Once again tying enforcement to potential services, Project Roomkey staff are untrained in mental health support but nevertheless directly and negatively impact the mental wellness of residents, even going so far as to goad them into fights or push them out of the hotel entirely.

Criss-crossing all of these punitive, prison-like conditions—and their disastrous impact on residents’ mental health—is how inconsistently they are applied. Putting it best is Megan Ross: “I worked as a social worker [and] I can’t understand the [Project Roomkey] protocol.” Decisions about to whom and in what context the rules apply at the Grand are made at the whim of Salvation Army staff members and contracted security guards present. Many rules around what a participant can have or do in their rooms were bent for some residents but not for others. Some could store bicycles, keep pets, or bring additional personal property to their rooms; others were denied these options, or pursued them and were punished as a result. In some cases, this punishment came in the form of an abrupt “exit” from the program, demonstrating how high the stakes of inconsistent rules could be—and how disposal Project Roomkey residents were considered. According to the participant contract, rule violations would lead to a “non-compliance notice.” If a resident “has repeatedly violated the rules” following one of these notices, they could be “terminated from the program.” If terminated, they would be immediately evicted from the premises—in many cases, not even permitted to retrieve their personal belongings. A non-compliance notice and “termination” could both occur on the same day or even during the same incident; as the participant contract *and* Salvation Army rules dictate, failure to comply can lead to immediate exit, so displacement was possible at any time. Many of the Grand residents we met had already been unwillingly exited from the program by the time of our interview. In this way, **the inconsistent application of carceral rules at the Grand perpetually destabilizes residents, as any move they make could be considered grounds for an exit, further coercing the unhoused into obedience to dehumanizing rules that systematically strip away their civil rights.**

Indeed, the looming threat of eviction from the Grand had potentially dire material consequences: **because the promise of Project Roomkey was eventual placement in permanent housing, an exit from the program could mean you never reach that destination.** The LAHSA participant contracts outline that all non-compliance notices and program exits must be logged in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), meaning that even the smallest rule violation could negatively impact one’s chances at permanent housing. At worst, an eviction due to alleged rule-breaking—deemed the fault of a participant—could disqualify them from future housing options. In this way, even when residents clearly recognized the civil and human rights violations they were experiencing, they were discouraged even from speaking up or fighting back because of the extreme consequences. Instead of housing, as Project Roomkey promised, participants in the program were constantly forced to following carceral rules because of the ever-present threat of *losing* future housing. As Cristina Walker put it, “I just keep going. Because if I say something or if I do something, then I may lose housing myself.”

In many cases, the only option available to those who cannot tolerate living under this carceral regime is a “self-exit,” that is, leaving the program entirely—regardless of what impact that might have on future housing options. Several of the Grand residents we interviewed chose to do so because of the dehumanizing, confusing treatment experienced at the hands of staff and security, which ranged from uneven application of the rules to verbal abuse and what some likened to psychological torture. Project Roomkey residents across Los Angeles have complained that even questioning the rules leads to some version of this universal reply: if you don’t like it, go back to the street. In self-exiting, participants averred that living in a tent was a better condition than staying imprisoned in the Grand. Considering how long many had hoped for and demanded Project Roomkey placements—in many cases, over a year—moving back to the street clearly underscores how punitive and prison-like the program is. **As La Donna Harrell put it to our research collective: that people prefer a tent to a hotel tells us all we need to know about the conditions in Project Roomkey.**

Moves back to the street after Project Roomkey often come as participants realize that despite promises to the contrary, remaining in the program is no guarantee of housing. According to the state of California, Project Roomkey participants are on a “[path to permanent housing](#)” which for many unhoused people is an interminable labyrinth churning them through different versions of temporary shelter, with no end in sight. Each participant is supposed to have a case manager and a “housing navigator” to help them move through the entangled bureaucracy of this system. However, many Grand residents have no case manager whatsoever or have never heard from their assigned case manager. Participants also report that housing navigators are frequently absent and unhelpful; at worst, they actively make it *more* difficult to find housing by creating unnecessary hoops. In many cases, **the work of getting into permanent housing is offloaded to the unhoused themselves, who then either fall out of the system due to the extremely high barriers to entry or develop expertise at navigating it that far outpaces that of their assigned case managers.**

This interminable state of rightlessness, created by the carcerality of Project Roomkey, constitutes a social death. **Systematically removing unhoused residents' rights to property, privacy, and autonomy, Project Roomkey also holds participants in a purgatory: severed from their communities, waiting for permanent housing that may never come, in a temporary program that could end at any time.** Devastatingly but predictably, this social death can lead to actual death within the confines of Project Roomkey, as the structured dispossession and dehumanization of the program systematically renders the bodily life of participants unimportant and unvalued. As Violet Howards, a member of Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH), put it: **the Grand is not just a prison, but a morgue.** As discussed in the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective's report, "[We Do Not Forget: Stolen Lives of LA's Unhoused During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)," Project Roomkey hotels are the site of frequent and unacknowledged death, a direct result of the program's carceral and atomizing rules. One of the primary causes of death in Project Roomkey is overdose: like Harrell pointed out at the Right to Rest rally, drug use is a key coping mechanism in the midst of a program that deliberately dehumanizes and demeans participants. After unhoused people staying in these programs fought for access to harm reduction, Narcan and Narcan trainings have become available to participants—but crucially, a person cannot overturn their own overdose. To borrow Nancy Campbell's framework, Narcan is a technology of solidarity: its effectiveness depends on (and helps build) community support, and because Project Roomkey participants are barred from even having visitors, these gestures from service providers do little.<sup>47</sup> Critically, many participants complain that their stay in the Grand has been frequently punctuated by wailing ambulance sirens and stretchers bearing the bodies of loved ones, all while Project Roomkey staff refuse to even acknowledge the deaths running rampant, or the deep impact of those deaths on participants. As Harrell attested, the first day she was in Project Roomkey, which she called "death jail," she wondered whether or not someone had passed away in her bed. These conditions make clear that social death does not end at bodily death. Even with the end of life, the structural violence of Project Roomkey refuses to recognize the humanity of its participants. As a result, residents in Project Roomkey are fighting not to die in these programs, fighting for not just their lives, but their very humanity itself. As demonstrated by Project Roomkey, even so-called "housing options" are structured to punish anyone whose life is deemed non-productive by the demands of racial capitalism. **In such a system, to be poor—to be unable to pay the rent—is to be less than human, deserving of banishment and even death for visibly existing in the face of gentrification and neo-colonial capital development.**

## Mass Evictions and the System of (Dis)placement

In these conditions of carcerality and enforced rightlessness, eviction is an ever-present possibility, highlighting the way in which a system offering placements into temporary programs is actually a churning system of displacement. Unhoused individuals are displaced from their communities *into* Project Roomkey sites (although, notably, far from every person displaced is offered this program), and these sites become the fulcrum of further displacement and dehumanization. The precedent for this Project Roomkey (dis)placement process was set in the San Fernando Valley. In January of 2021, residents of the Airtel Plaza Hotel [were notified](#) that they would be evicted in early February, and the only options offered were distant congregate shelter or the street. Similarly, in July 2021, the Sportsmen's Lounge "[demobilized](#)" its Project Roomkey program in order to accommodate developers planning to turn the hotel into a luxury development. In both cases, unhoused residents fought back, demanding the permanent housing they were promised upon entry to the program, and until then, that they be allowed to stay in place at Project Roomkey or given motel vouchers. Although not all of these conditions were met, and the hotels ultimately closed, the dedicated organizing of a small group of unhoused people forced LAHSA to relocate some to the Grand in Downtown Los Angeles. Far from their communities in the Valley, those who moved to the Grand had already experienced eviction and internal displacement in the Project Roomkey program.

But placement in the Grand is hardly more stable. In mid-September 2021, those living in the Grand received notices posted to their doors stating that they would have to exit the program in 30 days. Despite the extension of the Grand's contract with Project Roomkey to January 2022, assured by LAHSA leadership, these notices implied that residents had to move out within a month. Stating that Project Roomkey was meant to be "a temporary program," with people staying in it "less than 90 days," each notice listed an "exit date" based on "enrollment history" in the program. Will Sens Jr., a member of UTACH, describes and analyzes his experience of receiving those eviction notices:

The Project Roomkey program at the LA Grand Hotel tries to maintain the face of an entity who strives to serve its participants with fairness & equitability. This image conjured for the public eye reveals itself to be a smokescreen before long to those directly affected by its various shifting

47 Campbell, *OD: Naloxone and the Politics of Overdose*.

policies. As a full year's survivor of the program (disturbingly many have not survived), I have witnessed and personally experienced instances of injustice, lack of empathy, utter cruelty. The following example demonstrates the twisted logic instilled by the architects of these programs and the calculating strategies they're willing to perpetrate on vulnerable people to maintain the facade of a status quo.

In mid-September of 2021 to my great fear and frustration I was unexpectedly handed a 30-day notice that I was to be ejected from the program & hotel back onto the streets! There was no explanation given. I was forced to sign the notice, or I'd have to leave immediately! Before long I realized that everyone in the hotel was getting these notices, and without any explanation. After a few days of asking around, I finally found a staff member who I knew would tell me what was going on. His answer shocked and repulsed me! He told me to disregard the form. The staff member explained to me that the notice was a ruse to scare folks in the program who were not exhibiting what he described as acceptable behavior. He said it was for the people who weren't being diligent about finding employment and staying in their rooms. Then he told me that I didn't have to worry because, "You're one of the good ones. You're doing what you're supposed to do." I was shocked because I couldn't believe that a government program could sink to such depths at such an official level. People are being targeted and manipulated to lose their shelter for not adhering to unspoken normative behaviors that monetarily advantaged folks are indoctrinated to follow. Scheming to put innocent vulnerable people out on the streets is reprehensible behavior! This is repulsive news in a time when trauma-informed care is a household term. No one in a position to care for disadvantaged people should expect or require normative social behaviors as a prerequisite for a person to receive the care that they need. This scenario begs the question, "Who deserves care?"

Although organizing against the eviction notices led to their rescission, for an entire day, a pending eviction became reality for residents. Here Sens makes clear that **the underlying principle of these exit notices is intimidation and punishment—that someone who does not dutifully seek employment or march quickly enough along the unending "path to permanent housing" is deserving of eviction to the street.** Compounding these unspoken behavioral directives is the fact that the conditions in the Grand made them even more difficult to follow. For example, rules constraining residents' autonomy made it hard, if not impossible, to gain employment. This carceral logic reflects one that has long dominated policy around homelessness: that people living outside must be coerced, through policing and incarceration, into accepting services or staying inside even the most temporary and carceral of shelter programs. Those who do not do so—despite the massive hurdles and prison-like conditions of many so-called services—are then deemed deserving of criminalization and incarceration.<sup>48</sup> This perspective reverberates throughout Project Roomkey, categorizing participants as "good ones" in contrast to others who must be punished and threatened into submission to the system's churn. As Sens illuminates, this is a cruel and dehumanizing process. It is impossible to coerce people into housing that doesn't actually exist. Forcing Project Roomkey participants back onto the street for not finding housing quickly enough will not help them to find housing; instead, it makes it even more difficult for unhoused people to access that housing, and in that way, exacerbates the problem of homelessness more largely. This deliberately fabricated rationale for evicting people is far from the only one. At the Grand, participants are required to take COVID-19 tests—sometimes weekly, sometimes more sporadically—which are administered on-site at the hotel by an outside testing company. If a test comes back positive, residents are required to quarantine in complete isolation, and if they do not, they will be immediately exited to the street. In one instance, someone who tested negative on an outside test but positive at the Grand was abruptly evicted and denied the opportunity to sort out which result was accurate. This example makes clear that such exits are not for personal or public health, but punishment for failure to comply: evicting someone to the street neither protects them or the rest of us from COVID, but does make surviving the disease that much more difficult.

We have heard this same story play out across Los Angeles, offering a glimpse at yet another wave of completely bogus mass evictions—**evictions that would be illegal if Project Roomkey contracts did not place residents in the rightless category of "participant."** In this way, COVID-19 safety protocols have been twisted and weaponized against the unhoused in Project Roomkey, a tactic of control that undermines residents' safety by evicting them to the street.

These evictions demonstrate the ways in which **service providers like Salvation Army are motivated to continuously push people through the revolving door of temporary programs like Project Roomkey.** More people leaving (willingly or not) means more people coming in, creating the illusion that service providers are succeeding, in turn ensuring that funding to those service providers keeps flowing. Because the promise of Project Roomkey has always been permanent housing, turnaround in the program suggests that the unhoused are obtaining that housing. This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which that assumption could not be further from the truth. Indeed, this is reflected in the numbers: although Project Roomkey only ever held over 4,329 people at once, as of September 2021 **over 9,000** have passed through the program. If this were a system meant to house people, funding would be based on program retention and the percentage of program participants that successfully enter into permanent housing.

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48 Blasi, "Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness? The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row."

In the midst of these incredibly destabilizing evictions, one of the key strategies for individual and collective survival among Project Roomkey residents has been connecting to broader organizations focused on mutual aid and housing justice. These groups collectivize the knowledge of organizers and activists, housed and unhoused, familiar with navigating the unending web of homeless services in Los Angeles. In the face of eviction notices, under the threat of further displacement, Project Roomkey residents have managed to band together and demand better. Contrary to the narrative promulgated by elected officials, [like Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell](#), and other City officials, **people suddenly displaced from encampments or Project Roomkey placements are not supported by the homeless services system but rather survive in spite of it, relying on the collective care of the very communities directly affected by that displacement.** Echoing Sens' question at the end of his narrative, in a city where ongoing banishment is justified by offers of temporary carceral programs, the work of housing justice organizations demands: *who is really housing who?*

## Nothing About Us Without Us: Organizing in Project Roomkey

As suggested throughout this chapter, **every step of the way, Project Roomkey residents have fought back: contesting their participant status; fighting for their rights; sharing their experiences; and staying connected amidst systematic attempts to displace, banish, and ultimately disappear them.** After Echo Park Lake was raided and fenced by police, many former residents found themselves staying at Project Roomkey sites where they were demeaned and dehumanized. In response, unhoused Project Roomkey participants began to meet together with members of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN), LA Tenants Union, Street Watch LA, and Ground Game LA to strategize about how to fight back, and they called on these community networks to engage more Project Roomkey residents from across the City. In particular, participants of Project Roomkey sites in the San Fernando Valley like the Airtel Plaza Hotel had been organizing contest their own eviction months earlier, and they were eager to share the lessons learned from those experiences. Joining together at meetings in Pershing Square, squatting or standing on the concrete after security demanded they stay off the grass, the group formed Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH). Pronounced as “attack,” the organization sought to include anyone experiencing prison-like living conditions as a result of poverty—from Project Roomkey and “tiny home villages” to congregate shelters and criminalized life on the street—and began to struggle for self-determination in their housing and over their lives.

UTACH held [a press conference in May](#) to formally announce the organization and demand “nothing about us without us.” The organization’s released [statement of purpose](#) is instructive:

We, the members of U.T.A.C.H. (Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing) are unhappy with the current conditions that we have experienced at PRK sites across the city. We have all experienced various levels of harassment, discriminatory practices, and policies that have hindered our ability to achieve personal and professional growth. The city has not offered us any form of permanent housing, and many of us do not even know who our case managers/housing navigators are. There is no plan in place to house us once the COVID-19 crisis ends, but we were promised upon entering the PRK program that we would never have to return to the streets. We deserve to know what the plan for our future holds. We deserve concrete answers on where we will be permanently housed. We deserve to be treated fairly, and in a way that upholds our constitutional rights while we are in the program.

Out of this analysis of their own conditions, UTACH presented a series of demands that point to the specific modes of carcerality encountered in the program: end the curfew, give residents keys to their rooms, allow residents to visit with each other, limit the scope and power of security, offer nourishing meals, provide harm reduction supplies like Narcan, and most of all offer permanent housing. Following the unveiling these demands, with testimony from unhoused community members and Project Roomkey residents, Project Roomkey made changes like the extension of the curfew to 10 p.m. and the provision of Narcan.

UTACH continued to meet regularly, and one of the key components of their discussions became mutual aid in the form of housing advocacy. Many UTACH members had already been churned through Project Roomkey, displaced from sites across the City in some cases directly into the Grand. With that experience came hard-earned knowledge about the mechanisms of the homeless services and housing systems. A selection of UTACH members were extremely well-versed in self-advocacy for their own housing, a process that essentially became an unpaid full-time job. **In UTACH meetings, that knowledge of the system became collectivized through informal skill shares and mutual support.** Instructive is the case of Grand residents receiving 30-day eviction notices in September 2021, the same Sens describes in his narrative above. UTACH members shared the notices within the organization as they received them, and Ashley Bennett, co-author of this monograph, immediately reached out to LAHSA Executive Director Heidi Marston and Chief Programs



Officer Molly Rysman to ask why eviction notices had been issued. It stood in direct contradiction to what Marston and Rysman had shared with UTACH in a meeting the week prior: that the program at the Grand had been extended for at least 3 months, until January 2022. Marston responded the following day and informed Bennett that the Salvation Army would be issuing a memo to rescind the evictions. Residents at the Grand confirmed with Bennett that they had been given a letter retracting the notices shortly thereafter. In this way, UTACH directly and materially changed conditions by reversing evictions, keeping people in their rooms to fight another day.

Of course, many demands remain unanswered. During meetings with UTACH, LAHSA would not fully take up responsibility for action. For UTACH's demands for more bathrooms for unhoused communities, LAHSA repeatedly expressed their "hope" that more bathrooms be made available. To this Sens poignantly remarked, "You can't shit in hope." Other responses to UTACH by LAHSA and service providers alike proved to be empty gestures. After all, an extended curfew still cost Scott Merchant his grocery stocker job, and Narcan access cannot save lives if Project Roomkey rules force residents to isolate. Indeed, as we have described, Project Roomkey itself is a co-optation of demands made by housing justice movements. A far cry from organizers' fight for hotels as housing, Project Roomkey is systematically designed to disappear and punish the poor for visibly experiencing homelessness. It reinforces the racial capitalist order by eliminating any evidence of its contradictions or the radical possibilities of life outside of its confines. Indeed, state power continually deploys new tactics of banishment as UTACH members and unhoused communities continue to fight for their survival. The area outside the Grand has become a place where people displaced from the hotel live. They are joined by people who hope to enter the program, which is a testament to the very small number of unhoused people even offered a Project Roomkey slot. This very same area has become a Section 41.18 banishment zone, where anyone visibly experiencing poverty can be ticketed or arrested for sitting, sleeping, or lying on the sidewalk. It is no mistake that Section 41.18 and Project Roomkey go hand in hand. After all, the City's Section 41.18 banishment strategy means that many now in Project Roomkey will return to streets where it is a crime for them to sleep. **These interlocking systems of carcerality banish and dehumanize the poor by systematically stripping away their civil and human rights—as La Donna Harrell reminds us, all for not being able to pay rent in California.**

But as UTACH has revealed, **to survive and stay connected in this carceral churn, to collectively demand and demonstrate community self-determination, to stay organized—these are no small victories within such a system.** On February 4, 2022, UTACH joined with organizations across Downtown LA to speak out against Section 41.18 and all forms of carceral housing. Gathering outside the Grand hotel, unhoused and housed tenants alike offered testimony about their experiences in carceral programs like Project Roomkey. Protestors held banners declaring "Housekeys Not Handcuffs" alongside posters offering possible housing options at the Hotel Cecil to anyone looking down from their cell inside the Grand. Some came down from the hotel and joined in, sharing information about their experiences (one person asked for a tent to camp on the street because he could not tolerate life at the Grand any longer) and connecting to UTACH members who have survived the same treatment inside Project Roomkey and elsewhere. In this way, UTACH continues the crucial work of making visible and opposing the cruel, prison-like conditions of Project Roomkey and all forms of carceral housing across the City. Indeed, this monograph itself is a reflection of organizing like that of UTACH, which refuses to allow unhoused people to be swept into dark corners. The fight against carceral housing continues.

**5.**

# **INFRASTRUCTURES OF COMMUNITY**

## 5. INFRASTRUCTURES OF COMMUNITY

### We Keep Us Safe

**Echo Park Lake functioned as a refuge: a safe haven where the unhoused could find relative safety and peace compared to sleeping on the sidewalk.** Those who stayed at the park—even those who were not enmeshed in the organized community—described the safety of Echo Park compared to life on the street. Kyle Stewart, eager for a Project Roomkey spot but unable to obtain one due to lack of ID, described the park as “a lot more safe” than his current spot outside—one that is now a Section 41.18 zone. “It was definitely safer at the park ... and now it’s like, I see different faces every day. And oh, man, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been robbed, lost my stuff.” The personal familiarity and community bonds of the park meant that residents could relax knowing their personhood and personal property were not under constant threat. Jesse Adams, similarly back on the street after eviction from Echo Park Lake, explained that “I hardly ever leave my tent anymore. I will be in there for literally five or six days with a padlock on the door,” for fear that it will be invaded, occupied, trashed, or stolen all together. Adams had lived at the park for a long time and had difficult experiences there due to criminalization and the condition of life outside. Nevertheless, his experience back on the street stood in marked contrast to Echo Park, where one could leave one’s tent and move around in the world knowing it would still be there later. This enabled residents to do more than worry about survival, which was exactly the case for Trevor Ricci: he pursued employment, saved up, and sought housing for his spouse and children. He could do this because, put simply, “I had a space for my family to be safe.”

The importance of safety at Echo Park Lake was particularly the case for women seeking refuge from domestic violence. Mina Sullivan, who became homeless after fleeing intimate partner abuse, described the park: “There were lots of good people in that community. So if anything happened, they would stop it. They would help you. Or, you know, [they] check that women are safe.” At Echo Park Lake, the eyes and ears of the collective meant that there was always someone looking out. This experience of the park was very different from the experience of staying in shelters, even those specifically designed for people escaping from domestic violence. As Elena Morgan put it, “I prefer outside over shelter just because even being outside you’re more protected. You can protect yourself. You can run away.” Sullivan elaborated: “In the [domestic violence] shelter, I was treated like a prisoner, and I was cheated. Living in a park was actually 1000 times better than being in a shelter. Being in a shelter is horrible. It’s too abusive.” Shelters specifically designed for women escaping violence replicated the same confinement, punishing treatment, and fear that all characterize an abusive relationship—conditions that women like Sullivan and Morgan were fleeing in the first place. After navigating the patriarchal structure of shelter system, the park was an enormous reprieve.

As the experience of domestic violence shelters suggests, the safety that residents felt at Echo Park Lake was very different than what they found in Project Roomkey. Nicole Ward, like many women, had trouble in the past living on the streets; she felt the possibility of danger and assault looming over her every time she went to sleep at night. At Echo Park Lake, she was able to sleep soundly and “felt safe there with the people [she] knew. . . nearby.” If someone were to try and harm Ward, she knew that her neighbors would protect her. After moving to Project Roomkey, these feelings of safety and security were stripped away. Ward has faced possible eviction multiple times; if she misses curfew by so much as five minutes, she is not allowed back to her room. As a result of these carceral rules, she has spent nights back out on the same streets she feared before obtaining shelter, because she had to take her dog out past curfew. The alternative was allowing her dog to relieve himself on the carpet, another violation of Project Roomkey rules. Ward reported having her bike stolen from the front of the hotel; she had locked it at the sidewalk where the security guard is supposed to be standing. This stands as a stark contrast from Ward’s feelings of community at Echo Park Lake. Had she asked a neighbor at the park to watch her bike, she could have trusted it to be there upon return. Paid security at Project Roomkey did not keep Ward safe and well—something that her community at Echo Park Lake did as part of life there.

The park provided something that temporary, carceral shelters or programs never could: a measure of stability. **The unpredictability of life for people experiencing homelessness makes meeting basic needs in many cases a day-to-day struggle, but the park created a context of trust and predictability that enabled residents to move beyond survival.** Tomas Kelly explained it simply: “There was trust.” Garrett Sanchez explained what it was like to have basic needs met in the community:

No one went hungry. If you had food, you would cook for people. You would go out of your way to be able to take care of others and help them in need. If there is free food around, there is a support system where people will let you know, like, “Hey, there’s food over here.” It was definitely an experience that I’ll never forget and I thoroughly enjoyed.

These networks of community care and mutual aid were transformative, growing a support system that for many was an unfamiliar experience compared to the daily grind of life on the street. And that care took many forms: supply provision, phone charging, and information sharing that ranged from tips on the best spots for setting up a tent to knowledge about civil rights when confronted by police. Scott Merchant described that collective care: “When you come together as a community, you’re a lot better off. And it helps, you know, to be as a team.” Alone on the sidewalk or in a Project Roomkey hotel, it is difficult to build and maintain that community, but at Echo Park Lake, residents learned the power of a collective to create some level of stability.

The relative stability of the Echo Park Lake collective did not mean that there was no conflict, however. Disagreement is a normal part of any human community, and Echo Park Lake was no exception. The key difference is that, as much as possible, conflicts were handled internally with the community, rather than involving police or park rangers. In this way, **Echo Park Lake is an example of abolition in practice, demonstrating the possibilities of life without police.** This was not simply an idea, but a material necessity due to the City’s intentional abandonment of homeless communities in the moments they most need support. Demonstrative of this condition is the preventable death of Andrew Kettle. In June 2020, Linda Kane found him complaining of severe physical distress and called 911. When the paramedics arrived, “They were screaming at him and yelling at him and speaking in accusatory tones. Like, ‘Go back to your tent in this 90 to 100 degree weather, and sleep off the alcohol.’” They left without providing any medical assistance, and after being berated, Kettle followed their suggestion and went back to sleep in his tent. He was found dead in that same tent a few hours later. As Kane described it, they “sent him to his deathbed, literally.” Later, Kane conferred with other community members and learned from their experiences that alcohol can be deadly in this way, information the paramedics should have known but did not share with Kettle or the rest of the community. Testament to the deep dehumanization of unhoused people by the City of Los Angeles, the paramedics refused to treat or even understand Kettle’s condition. Among many other examples of the City’s failure to provide basic services to the unhoused, Kettle’s death underscores the hostility of City entities toward the park community. Because of this deliberate dehumanization by state power, **collective problem-solving, conflict resolution, and emergency response were a necessity for community survival.**

**The Echo Park Lake community developed a set of rules and agreements to govern themselves,** and they were straightforward: do not steal from each other and keep drug use inside tents. Joshua Peterson described the origin of these rules: “It’s simple like you would have in any community. You don’t steal from friends. You look out and you respect one another. You don’t use drugs or illicit activity outside your tent. Keep it in your tent, and you can do whatever you want.” This practical approach to harm reduction made it easier for former drug users to stay sober in the community, while also holding space for those who are using. Residents recognized addiction as a disease. As Peterson explained, “You can’t shun a person for [drug use], you can’t hate a person for that, you can’t say you’re weak for that. You say you’re human and all that happens. And let’s try [sobriety] next time.” By keeping drug users in the community, rather than pushing them out, Echo Park Lake residents were able to support each other—and even save each other by using Narcan—rather than banishing people to the street or prison, leaving them to die, as the City would have done. Peterson also elaborated on the other key community agreement around theft:

If you want to steal, steal from stores. Steal from places that are insured, where you’re not hurting anybody. But when you’re stealing from someone who’s homeless, who’s struggling for everything they got every day, that’s messed up.

This moral code recognized class hierarchy and made clear that theft from each other was unacceptable. But if you were in need, and the community couldn’t provide necessary resources, stealing from a corporation with ample expendable capital was fair play. Considering the ways in which some stores in the community actively encourage the criminalization and banishment of the unhoused—particularly gentrifying establishments like Lassens Natural Foods & Vitamins and others -- the rules around theft encouraged class solidarity among residents by aiming fear and frustration at the wealthy rather than those in the same boat of poverty.

Inevitably, some residents would not follow these community agreements. **A small group of residents “regulated” the park to ensure the rules became the norm.** As Peterson explained of the structure: “In a community, you have to have guidelines. And those guidelines are sometimes enforced by the law. You know, it’s not the laws of the state, it’s the laws of the community.” Peterson himself was one of these regulators who enforced the laws of the community. He characterized his (unpaid) regulator job as part public relations: he’d go around the park meeting new people and informing them of the rules:

I'm Joshua, I'm doing security here. If you ever have a problem, let me know. If you need help, or if you need assistance or something, pitching a tent, whatever it was, let me know, and we'll take care of it.

Occasionally, enforcement meant escorting rule-breakers or openly hostile people out of the park, which could become physical. Sullivan described her experience with the regulators' patrols: "If anything happened, they would stop it. They would help. They would patrol the whole park and make sure there's no people coming in the park to start anything." Not everyone had the same experience of comfort with these patrols as Sullivan. Some were at odds with this regulation or disagreed with enforcement style or direction. Regardless, however, that this regulation was largely conducted without police involvement was a victory in and of itself. Without police or other security forces, individuals were left to deal with issues alone or by involving hostile City entities like park rangers or even paramedics. Conflict resolution can be messy, thankless work, and as Peterson put it, "I'm not a cop. I'm doing the dirty work no one wants to do."

Peterson and the regulators were not the only ones supporting this work. Community leaders like Omar Dawson and Veronica Palacios often stepped in to help soothe tensions or smooth over disagreements. Palacios lived in the neighborhood of Echo Park nearly her whole life and maintains deep ties to the community and the neighborhood. When gang activity increased around the park, Palacios communicated with her networks to de-escalate while making sure the regulators were "reinforcing it the right way." Described by many as the maternal figure of the park, she "oversaw" the work of rule enforcement and operated as a third party who could verify what happened in any given incident:

If they couldn't fix something with the girls or the guys, they'd come get me. I was like their last resort. But sometimes Jeffery would be like, "I can't deal with that lady, you gotta go talk to her, Mom!" Or sometimes they would try to argue with the guys, so I'd always intercept, because they'd start screaming, cussing, acting like they're gonna hit 'em [the regulators]...

Palacios' role in the community meant she had familial relationships with different groups across the park, making it possible for her to facilitate conflict resolution or de-escalate where others could not. This too is abolition in practice, ensuring that individuals who wanted to stay and work on improving their behavior could do so. As Peterson put it, "Everybody can change, and there's nobody that's exempt from change. If you want to do it and you find somebody to support you to do it, do it!" **At Echo Park Lake, the unhoused could imagine a world outside of the police state and carceral system that punished them for existing.** At Echo Park Lake, abolition, even in microcosm, was possible.

The media portrayals of Echo Park Lake often directly contradicted the reality of life in the park. Linda Kane described people that would come to the park, film the community, and "go around slandering everybody." Nicole Ward recounted a particularly traumatic version of this experience with the *Los Angeles Times*. Once, when LAHSA visited her tent, they came with a retinue: one that started peppering her with questions. Assuming this was part of their protocol as LAHSA workers, she answered all of them in hopes that doing so would help her secure housing and attain services. She gave them her full name, opened up about personal experiences with drug use, and when two of her friends began to fight, explained that it happens often but they always make up. Weeks later, after she read an article featuring her personal information and photographs of her friends fighting, she realized all those extra LAHSA workers were actually *Los Angeles Times* journalists. Moreover, the photographs published of her two arguing friends depicted the park as a rowdy, violent place, rather than one where people could live in the fullness of their lives—which included working through conflict. Two people fighting verbally inside their homes wouldn't be the subject of a news article, after all, but in the park it became twisted into a talisman of violence. What the *Los Angeles Times* refused to see as violence, however, was their publication of Ward's name and personal location without her consent—which directly put her safety at risk. Kane analyzed this type of media coverage as intentional: reporters would "show all the bad on camera," which "fed into the fire of why the government felt, 'Oh, we should take this away.'" The media depicted the park as violent and criminal, and therefore deserving of systematic removal, repression, and banishment. **These negative portrayals reflect the views of the state: the everyday practice of abolition at the park made the community a threat to the City by demonstrating the possibility of life outside of its carceral modes.**

## Prefiguration: The History of the Echo Park Lake Settlement

### The Park as Refuge

The unhoused community at Echo Park Lake began to grow in September 2019. The neighborhood of Echo Park has always been home to a small group of unhoused individuals, but prior to that fall there were very few tents spread throughout the entirety of the park. The infrastructure at Echo Park Lake provided several key elements that initially made it an ideal location for camping. Perhaps most importantly, the park offered access to public restrooms that were open almost 24 hours a day, access to sinks and soap dispensers, and access to clean drinking water via water fountains. When seeking an area to camp, having these three key elements present nearby is crucial for anyone trying to survive outdoors. During this time period, as the number of unhoused individuals was growing larger in Los Angeles City Council District 13 (CD 13) and in surrounding districts, businesses that previously offered access to public restrooms and water (such as grocery stores, fast food restaurants, and gas stations) were locking their doors and requiring that purchases be made in order to use them. It was the **ability to access these basic survival necessities** without the hassle they were encountering in other locations that brought the first few waves of unhoused individuals to the lake.

Also during this time period, in Fall 2019, encampments across the city were being brutally swept on a daily basis due to the **changing parameters of CARE+ comprehensive sweep program**. Although the CARE/CARE+ program was marketed as a more humane version of encampment cleanups than previous models, by the end of 2019, individuals in encampments were being subjected to the same, and often worse, treatment at the hands of law enforcement and LA Sanitation. Individuals who sought refuge in larger encampments in CD 13 were forced to move all their belongings multiple blocks away from central encampments on a weekly basis for scheduled “cleanings.” During the sweeps, individuals at encampments were given anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes to move all of their worldly possessions several city blocks (oftentimes at least a mile) away to be out of a designated cleaning zone. If an individual was unable to move all their items in the allotted time frame, they were kept out of the area by LAPD and all remaining items would be trashed or put into storage at the Bin in Skid Row. During these sweeps, it was not uncommon for LASAN to confiscate and/or destroy personal belongings critical to survival ranging from tents/ bedding, to food, to personal documents such as IDs, Social Security Cards, and documents pertinent to obtaining housing.

CARE+ sweeps are a City-based program, and initially only public streets and sidewalks were subjected to these types of encampment sweeps. Parks, including Echo Park Lake, fall under the jurisdiction of Parks and Recreation and Park Rangers and are governed by LAMC 63.44. As people in surrounding areas became more and more exhausted by having to move weekly, and risked losing their belongings by staying in encampments on sidewalks, Echo Park Lake became a refuge. During CARE+ operations that took place on the streets around the perimeter of the park (Glendale Blvd., Park Ave., Echo Park Lake Ave., and Bellevue Ave), LA Sanitation often encouraged individuals who were camping on the sidewalks around the park to move to the grassy area **INSIDE** the park because they did not have instructions to conduct the clean-up operations inside the park.

### The Echo Park Community Center Emergency Shelter

In the week leading up to Thanksgiving 2019, Los Angeles was preparing for a storm that would bring a level of rain and low temperatures that had not been experienced in the City for years. With nearly all interim housing sites and traditional shelters at capacity, leaders in the homeless services sector felt hard pressed to take some sort of action to protect the growing homeless population from the impending storm. The solution that the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) landed on was that they would open **several “pop-up” emergency winter shelter locations for the week**, and have the locations run by volunteers from the agency who did not have holiday plans. The pop-up locations were supposed to act as an intermediary solution that would provide access to low-barrier shelter and meal resources prior to the opening of the regular winter shelter locations (which were slated to open the following week). LAHSA identified several pop-up winter shelter locations that would be able to serve hundreds of unhoused community members during the rainy week. One of the emergency pop-up shelter sites that opened during this week was at Echo Park Community Center.

Winter shelters are an **impermanent shelter option** for the unhoused that offer a cot to sleep on during the winter months in Los Angeles (generally in operation from late November through April each year). Most winter shelters are opened in community centers, or gymnasiums where anywhere from 20 to 150 pop-up cots can be set up in a single room. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, winter

shelters required individuals to check-in at 5 p.m. every day, and vacate the location by 7 a.m. (unless it was raining). Beds were distributed daily on a first-come, first-served basis, which generally meant that people who wanted to stay at the shelter would not be able to leave the area if they wanted to be sure they had a bed for the evening. During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals participating in winter shelter programs were permitted (and often required) to stay at the site during the day, which took a lot of the stress of having one's bed given to someone else away. Winter shelters are an invaluable resource to individuals who are living unhoused because they are the **lowest-barrier entry shelter resources available**. This means that anyone who is unhoused can come to claim a bed without having to go through any assessments, paperwork, or waiting lists before entering the shelter. If a bed is available, and an individual is present when beds are being assigned, they will be able to enter. Outside of the winter shelter program, it can be extremely difficult to be placed in a shelter due to the scarcity of beds. The missions in Skid Row are the only shelters that allow people to walk-in and seek shelter if a bed is available. The process to get into a majority of the City and County shelter programs require that an individual complete the arduous Vulnerability Index—Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) assessment to determine acuity score, then be placed on a waitlist for anywhere from 2 weeks to 6 months depending on how high they score in the assessment. Getting into even the most low-grade congregate shelter is often a grueling, and time-consuming process.

On the day that the emergency pop-up shelters were slated to open, LASHA teams began doing outreach early in the morning to inform the unhoused population in the area and provide transportation if needed. During the scheduled workday, LAHSA staff scrambled to set up the gymnasium with military-style cots and blankets; the cots, blankets, and a warm place to stay during the rain were the only guaranteed resources that LAHSA could provide for a program set up with such little planning. LAHSA teams shuttled unhoused community members to the community center throughout the day. Because it was a holiday week, some LAHSA staff left early in the afternoon, but many stayed to ensure that their clients made it out of the rain and into the community center.

The pop-up community center program relied solely on **volunteer staff from LAHSA and First to Serve**. By the early evening on November 27, 2019, Ashley Bennett, co-author of this monograph and an outreach worker with LAHSA at the time, took command of running the Echo Park Community Center shelter due to the lack of personnel. Bennett began to reach out to community organizations in the area for support. She believed that the shelter experience should not only be a cot, blanket, and warm place to stay, but an actual enjoyable experience for all people who sought refuge there. By that evening, there were 36 unhoused individuals staying in the shelter and a roster of volunteers ready to make the Thanksgiving holiday an enjoyable experience for all those present at the shelter. The volunteer team led by Bennett was quickly able to set up a **functional shelter operation**. This included spaces where unhoused residents could be alone if the congregate setting felt overwhelming, and arts and crafts and games stations for collective activities.

In the initial planning stages of the pop-up winter shelters, LAHSA leadership stated they would provide each pop-up location with three meals per day. Although volunteer staff members petitioned LAHSA leadership throughout the week to provide a delivery schedule so they could inform the shelter residents, meal delivery was sporadic and unreliable. **Bennett began making calls for hot food donations and coffee on social media on the first day of the Echo Park Community Center operation, which was amplified by community organizations like Ktown for All, Street Watch LA, and Ground Game LA**. By that evening, the community center received numerous food donations. Bennett recalls the following:

I made a Google Sheet on the first night and put time slots for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the upcoming days and sent it out to everyone. The hope was that different individuals and organizations would sign up to bring food at those designated times. I think only Melissa Acedera from Polo's Pantry actually signed up for a slot. That was stressful. The next morning, no one had signed up, and I thought, *Oh my God, I have 30-something people here and we have nothing to feed them*. But sure enough at 9 a.m. this sweet lady who was just a neighbor came with her kids and brought 20 cartons of coffee for everyone. Then someone else brought pastries and fruit. Then people started bringing Thanksgiving meals—like full on thanksgiving meals with turkey, mac and cheese, potatoes and gravy, vegetables, and so, so many desserts. I realized we were going to be okay on food. No one needed to sign up; people just kept bringing food because they wanted to help.

The success of the Echo Park Community Center pop-up shelter can largely be attributed to the **non-carceral nature of the programming that took place during the shelter's operation**. There were basic rules in place that dealt with cleanliness and respect for other participants. However, there were no threats to kick residents out for certain behaviors, and perhaps most importantly, there was no curfew. Bennett notes this significance:

People were allowed to come and go as they pleased. We had one security guard by the door throughout the night just in case we had a new arrival, and I slept in the back room in case there were any issues that the night volunteer staff of First to Serve security guard couldn't handle. We didn't have any issues at night though. There were a few people who got up to have a cigarette or go for a walk in the wee hours, but a majority of the

residents just stayed inside. There were no rules about ins and outs, and there was no threat that if you left during a certain time that you would lose your bed. One of our arts and crafts projects was making nameplates for our beds. If you checked-in and got a bed, that bed was yours and no one had to worry about losing it. Being in a congregate setting can be stressful, and it wasn't always easy. But the whole volunteer staff wanted to make the space feel as much like home as possible for everyone there. Residents at the shelter also had access to the community center showers throughout the day, and they were incredibly grateful to be able to have all of the hygiene needs met in one location.

**Programming was a major part of the Echo Park Community Center shelter.** Along with calls for food and donations, Bennett also put out calls for community members to come and volunteer to do recreational activities with the unhoused residents. Throughout the week, people brought board games; decks of cards; and art supplies such as coloring books, crayons, paint, and canvases. Several people also brought in battery operated radios so people could listen to music, and several volunteers brought in their laptops so that they could watch Netflix shows with participants in small groups. At any point in the day, unhoused residents and volunteers could participate in fun activities at the shelter. Bennett reflects:

It was a really beautiful, celebratory time. It was the first time I really saw what a holistic shelter environment could look like. We had people who were housed and unhoused all together in one space caring for one another, just trying to facilitate joy and healing. Not every moment was perfect. It was a large group of people, and there were a few squabbles and breakdowns. But each of those situations was handled with compassion, love, and care. Even though it was only open for a few days, I fell in love with so many of the people there. We became a family. No one wanted to leave. I didn't want to leave. It felt like a home, and I feel like if we truly want to end homelessness, that is how all housing programs should feel.

## Termination and Closure: After Echo Park Community Center

Just a couple of days into the shelter, on early Saturday morning, volunteer staff at the Echo Park Community Center (EPCC) received word that the shelter would be closing the next day, and that they would be required to ensure that all residents had vacated the property by 7 a.m. With rain in the forecast for the following day, Bennett reached out to Kristy Lovich, a fellow LAHSA employee and supervisor who ran the pop-up shelter site in Glassell Park, to try to strategize around appealing to LAHSA leadership to keep the shelters open. Lovich and Bennett reached out to the LAHSA director of Access and Engagement Nathaniel VerGow and made their case for extending the pop-up shelter operations. They argued that exiting residents from the shelters back into the rain without any alternative shelter placement was not only inhumane, but it would be a major breach of trust with dozens of unhoused clients who were very clearly motivated to receive shelter. VerGow responded that the “city is not willing to keep any of their sites open past 7AM tomorrow,” and that

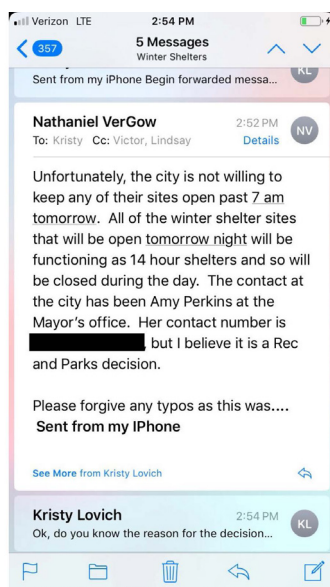


Figure 5-1. Screenshot of email sent from LAHSA director Nathaniel VerGow regarding the closure of pop-up winter shelter sites.



winter shelters would be available at 14 sites throughout the city starting the following night. The closest winter shelter to the Echo Park Community Center would be the location 12 miles away at Athens Park.

Bennett and Lovich refused to accept orders from their superiors that would require them to evict unhoused shelter residents back onto the street. Lovich continued to petition LAHSA leadership to reconsider their decision, and Bennett contacted members of Ground Game LA for support. Ground Game LA founder and organizer Jessica Salans put Bennett in contact with Los Angeles City Councilmember for District 11, Mike Bonin. Once Bonin was brought up to speed on the shelter closures, he was irate. He informed Bennett that he would reach out to the Mayor's Office and to LAHSA leadership to communicate his anger about the situation and advocate for those who sought shelter to remain indoors. At 8 p.m. on Saturday evening, **after a grueling day of negotiations and uncertainty, Bennett and Lovich were finally briefed on a plan that would enable all shelter residents to remain indoors.** While the Echo Park Community Center shelter would still have to close on Sunday, First to Serve staff agreed to open the winter shelter in Athens Park a day early and give priority beds to all residents in the Echo Park Community Center. On Sunday morning, Councilmember Bonin arranged for three city buses to take residents from the community center shelter to the winter shelter location in Athens Park. But in the days after Echo Park Community Center shelter closed, Bennett received numerous reports of sub-par conditions at Athens Park from former residents. Bennett recalls:

Almost every day someone else would let me know that they were leaving Athens [Park community center winter shelter] because the staff had treated them badly, or they couldn't live with having to leave every day at 7 a.m. and never know if they were going to have a bed at night, or getting sick from the food, or feeling so far away from the area they were used to. It was very different from Echo Park Community Center, and a lot of people felt that they would be better off returning to the streets in an area that they were familiar with than feeling imprisoned in an unfamiliar place in South LA.

Bennett worked to stay in contact with everyone who stayed at Echo Park Community Center. In the two weeks after the closure, **she estimates that about half of the residents who went to Athens Park had returned to the Echo Park area,** and a majority of those who returned began or continued camping at Echo Park Lake. Bennett recalls doing outreach at the park a few times prior to the operation of the Echo Park Community Center shelter, but when individuals she had gotten close with began camping there again, she worked to have her LAHSA team visit the park multiple times a week to try and get people into housing. Bennett explained the situation thus:

I really felt a sense of responsibility to the folks who were at EPCC, and I felt that I had let them down. We experienced such a beautiful home environment at EPCC, and then they had terrible experiences at Athens, so I wanted to make that right for each and every one of them by helping them get into housing. There weren't any housing resources available. Everyone was on a waitlist for something. And that's when I think the vision started to become clear for some of us. We are all here, we care about each other, and until we can create a community with the feeling of "home" indoors like we had at EPCC, we're going to do it outdoors right here in the park.

## The Fight for Echo Park Lake

### Threats, Lies, and Film Permits

By January 2020, the encampment at Echo Park Lake had grown to around 60 residents. The northwest lawn of the park, easily visible from the heavily trafficked intersection of Glendale Boulevard and Park Avenue, was filled with colorful tents of all sizes. The increasing number of unhoused residents and the high visibility of the location made the park a prime target for harassment by law enforcement. **Residents began reporting increased encounters with LAPD and park rangers at the beginning of 2020.** Former park residents recounted many instances of being woken up between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. by LAPD, with officers banging flashlights on their tents aggressively. LAPD would tell them forcefully that the park was "closed" and that they would need to vacate the premises by the following evening. Former park resident Irene Joseph recalls, "It was like a form of psychological torture. I would just finally be falling asleep, which is really hard to do as a woman sleeping outdoors sometimes, and then I would wake up to a group of men with guns banging on my tent telling me I couldn't be there. It was the middle of the night. I don't know where they expected me to go. I couldn't sleep after that."

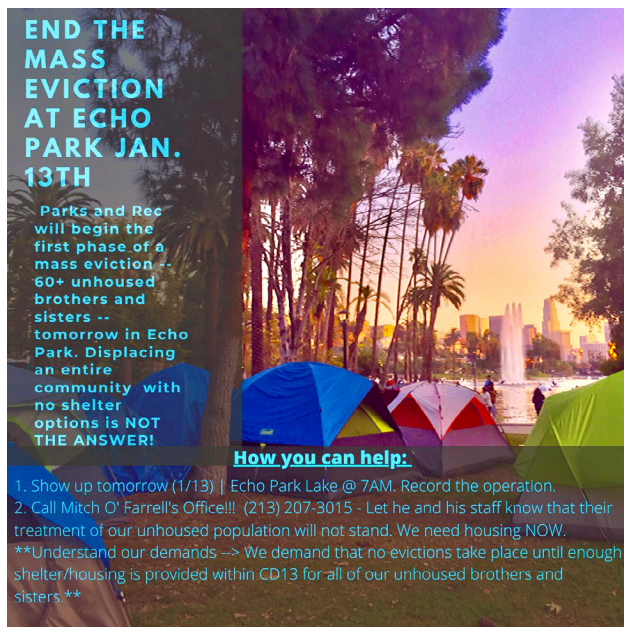


Figure 5-2. Call to action for January 13, 2020 eviction blockade. January 12, 2020. Graphic: Ashley Bennett.

Community organization Street Watch LA began meeting with park residents with increased regularity as instances of harassment and abuse became more commonplace, and residents expressed a desire to learn about their rights and options to counter the threats made against them. **The first official notice of an eviction at Echo Park Lake came on the week of January 10, 2020.** The park rangers posted notices around the park informing residents that all property must be removed by January 12 for a comprehensive “area cleaning” that was slated to occur between January 13 and January 17. During the posting of the notices, rangers informed residents that although the “cleaning” operation would end on the January 17, residents would not be able continue camping there as they were going to begin enforcing the park curfew, and “no camping” restrictions in accordance with a municipal ordinance, [LAMC 63.44](#).

At this point, residents faced with an impossible situation. Park rangers told them that they had to vacate the park, while members of LA Sanitation and LAPD were simultaneously conducting CARE+ operations in surrounding areas and penalizing people for camping on the street. Many Echo Park Lake residents during this time were working with the LAHSA team HOPE West<sup>49</sup>, which included Bennett, and were on waiting lists to get into A Bridge Home and other shelter programs. But shelters and temporary programs across the City were at capacity. Residents of the encampment were growing tired of being kept in a constant state of upheaval while waiting for such placements. Because of the resources that the park offered and the community that they started to build there, **residents decided that it was time to fight back and advocate for a safe place to exist outdoors while they waited for housing placements.** Residents at the park thus informed activists from Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA that they wanted to fight the pending eviction, and they requested that supporters of the community come out to protest of the permanent eviction from the park on January 13, the day the operation was scheduled to begin. A call to action went out on social media the evening of January 12.

On the morning of January 13, activists joined park residents on the Northwest lawn at 7 a.m. Housed and unhoused community members came together to make signs and strategize around how to form a blockade around people’s tents when the park rangers arrived. When the rangers arrived, it became clear that they had not gone through proper channels to schedule a comprehensive clean-up of the park. When LA Sanitation arrived, the Environmental Compliance Inspector (ECI) who had been dispatched said that he felt uncomfortable carrying out an operation within the park, because it fell under the jurisdiction of the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. LA Sanitation had only been given orders to clean the streets around the park and were not informed of the

49 HOPE, or Homeless Outreach and Proactive Engagement, was run by LAPD, with counterpart teams in LAHSA. Most HOPE teams have since converted to CARE+ teams.

park rangers' desire to have the entire park cleared out. By 9 a.m., LA Sanitation departed from the scene, and the threat of a CARE+ comprehensive cleanup dissipated. At 9:30 a.m., the LAPD officers who had been called to monitor the protest and Chief Park Ranger Joe Losorelli had a conversation with Bennett about the operation. The narrative shifted—this was not a comprehensive CARE+ cleanup and eviction ordered by the City but clean-up for the Nike corporation, which had applied for a permit to film in the area and did not want the tents in the park.



Figure 5-3. Protests signs at Echo Park Lake. January 13, 2020.

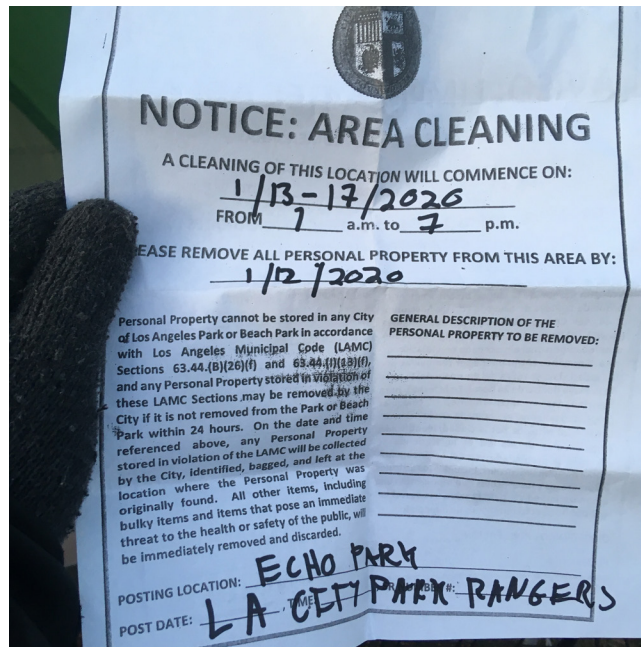


Figure 5-4. Notice of area cleaning/closure posted by Los Angeles Park Rangers at Echo Park Lake. January 12, 2020.

In a video captured by a member of Ground Game LA, Bennett and Echo Park Lake residents question Losorelli about a comprehensive park clearing:

**Bennett:** ECI Kevin said this wasn't a comprehensive clean-up that he had been assigned to do. The rangers have been posting notices and telling residents all week this is CARE+ comprehensive clean-up ordered by the City, and that is why they would have to leave.

**Losorelli:** This is actually a notice that the park needs to be cleared because of a film crew that has a permit to shoot in the area. The permit has them on location from the 13th to the 17th. They'll be filming on the 17th, but they'll be setting up out here. So, the tents have got to go.

**Bennett:** Okay, so how are you all going to be enforcing that? Because ECI Kevin said—

**Losorelli:** Well, if they don't leave, we're going to take them down, because Nike applied for a permit. They paid for it. It's been in the works for several weeks. It's only right that if [Nike] pays to use the park, [the people in the park] have to vacate.

**Bennett:** Okay, I understand. I used to work in production, so I know what goes into filming on location. The issue is that none of that information was given to us. We've been receiving contradictory information from your rangers all week. What the rangers have been communicating is that this was going to be an eviction that would last beyond the 17th. I spoke with one of the supervisors of the park rangers on the phone, and the ranger said that the goal for this month was going to be evicting everyone. The information we've been getting from park rangers at the helm, I guess, is that on the 17th when folks are allowed back in the park according to this (notice), law enforcement is going to be involved and everyone will have to remain off the premises.

**Losorelli:** Well, there are posts completely around the park that say no tents allowed during the day. That's in any City park. If you go to Griffith Park, Elysian Park, the City system does not allow tents to be in the park. The parks close at 10:30 at night. We enforce that. And so if the parks are closed at 10:30 at night, it's for everybody. You can't tell this gentleman over here that you can't be here past 10:30 at night, and then allow this person over here to be here. This isn't a encampment ground. This is a park, and we've been getting complaints about it. So eventually we are going to enforce that.

**Johndell (Echo Park Lake resident):** Who have you been getting complaints from?

**Losorelli:** From the citizens that live here, in the neighborhood. The complaints aren't sent out to you folks. Let me be honest with you, okay? You guys get a lot of support from advocate groups for the homeless, but there are also a lot of folks who don't want tents in the park. And they shouldn't be in the park. It's a park.

**Johndell:** What if we put the tents down in the daytime?

**Losorelli:** Well, go over there and look at them now. They're supposed to be down—

**Johndell:** The only reason they are not down is because of what we've got going on here. That's the only reason why they're up.

**Losorelli:** I'm here everyday, sir. Last week I saw some guy smoking dope and—

**Johndell:** What's that got to do with us?

**Bennett:** So, is this going to be announced? You're going to go tell people this right now?

**Losorelli:** I'll go tell them and let them know that we did not... that this wasn't our doing. Basically, it was posted by the City because there is going to be filming

**Bennett:** Okay, so on the 17th when the filming is completed, or, has been completed, will folks be allowed back in the park?

**Losorelli:** Uh, that really depends on... We have some meetings set up to address the issue here, and so I'm not sure exactly. I'm gonna tell people they can't do it.

**Sachin (community organizer):** What meetings?

**Losorelli:** It's a meeting that I have with LAPD. I'm not going to disclose where that meeting is going to be. That's a confidential meeting.

Following the conversation with Losorelli, the group of residents and organizers was angered by the egregious shift in the narrative that they had just witnessed. Encampment leaders decided that because Chief Park Ranger Losorelli ultimately placed the blame for the eviction posting on the City, that the appropriate next steps would be to march to Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's office (located one block north of the park), and demand a meeting with him about the eviction and housing placements. O'Farrell's staff did not open the doors for encampment residents or organizers. The protest ended at approximately 12 p.m. Following the protest, LAPD HQ tweeted a response to the protest due to the media coverage it gained, stating, "Contrary to media reports, there was no scheduled cleaning of



Figure 5-5. Protest outside of Mitch O'Farrell's office. January 13, 2020.



Figure 5-6. Tweet from @LAPDHQ regarding protest at Echo Park Lake. January 13, 2020.

Echo Park by LA Park Ranger or LAPD personnel today. However, Film LA did issue a filming permit for the park later this week.” As is evidenced by the numerous postings, eyewitness accounts, and video footage of park rangers and LAPD, this was a lie.

On the day following the protest, organizers in Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA were informed that Juan Fregoso, the field deputy for Echo Park in Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's office, told a source that the office was planning to schedule a sweep the following morning “due to the film permit.” Organizers reached out to peers in the entertainment industry and quickly learned that the film permit had not been acquired by Nike, but by the non-profit organization FilmLA for the production company Park Pictures. Through a personal connection, John Motter, a founding member of Ground Game LA, contacted the head of production for the shoot in question. On the afternoon of January 14, 2020 the head of production for Park Pictures issued a memo clarifying the location of the shoot and the company's stance on the encampment:

We know that there is a group of unhoused residents located in the Echo Park Lake area near Park Avenue and Glendale Blvd (North End).

Park Pictures hereby would like to confirm that this group of Unhoused residents and their presence will in no way impact our filming activities as we are located in a completely different area of the park. Park Pictures does not need them to move, nor are we asking any of the city authorities to remove them.

The memo was sent to the office of Mitch O'Farrell, the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, the Mayor's Office, and the LAPD. With permission from the production company, Ground Game LA posted a redacted version of the statement to the

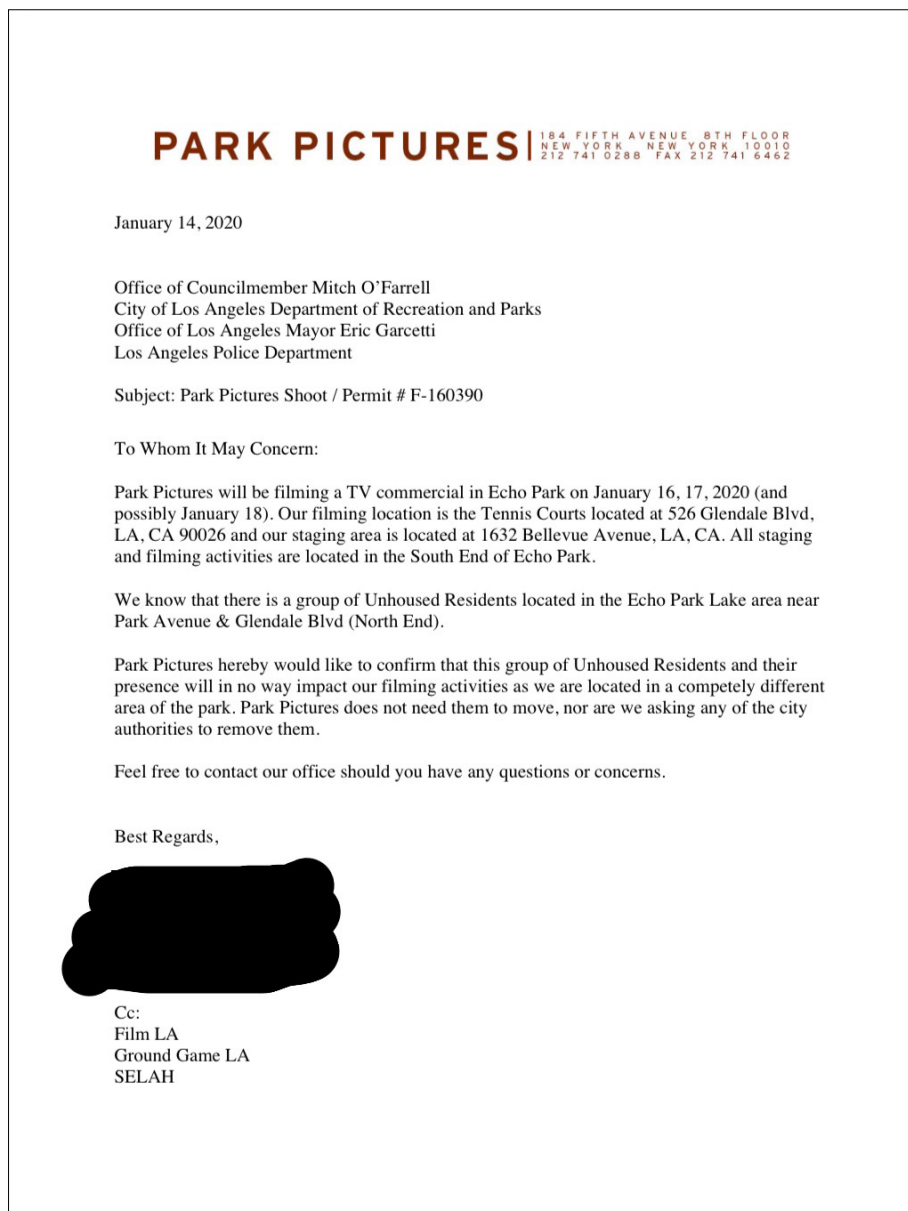


Figure 5-7. Letter from Park Pictures stating that their film shoot would not be impacted by the encampment at Echo Park Lake, and that they were not asking authorities to move them. January 14, 2020.

organization’s Facebook and Instagram pages. Within an hour of posting, the post was removed from both platforms due to being flagged as “spam.” From the threats and eventual retraction of eviction, to the false claim that the area needed to be cleared due to a film permit obtained by Nike, to the revelation that the production company that had actually filed the permit would not film anywhere near the encampment and did not have any desire to have unhoused individuals removed—those who had been following the story witnessed **the web of lies that law enforcement had been weaving in an attempt to clear the encampment was made evidently clear**. It was clear that a massive, coordinated effort was underway to clear the encampment by any means necessary and to appease housed constituents who had been submitting complaints.

## The Fight to Remain

In the weeks following the protest on January 13, 2020, the unhoused residents at Echo Park Lake began making major strides in developing a cohesive and supportive community collective. **The struggle to remain in the park with a pending threat of eviction brought park residents together.** Along with the positive growth of the community came the darkness and turmoil that stemmed from the retaliation from park rangers, LAPD, and Councilmember O’Farrell’s office for the embarrassment over their deceitful eviction attempt. LAPD and park rangers continued to make rounds in the middle of the night. They continued to shake tents and forcefully tell park residents that the park had closed and that if they didn’t vacate the park prior to 10:30 p.m. the following evening they would risk citations or arrest for violating LAMC 63.44. Although these were largely empty threats, a small group of individuals grew extremely tired of being startled awake in the middle of the night, so they made the decision to move to the sidewalks surrounding the park to avoid these nightly disturbances. On January 21, 2020, two unhoused park residents, Omar Dawson and Eddy Price, were arrested by park rangers for smoking weed in the park. Dawson and Price were not in the act of smoking when they were arrested. Dawson had been seen by a ranger smoking earlier in the day, and the rangers said that they had seen a picture of Price smoking in the park. Smoking weed in Echo Park Lake is not an uncommon occurrence, and is certainly not an activity that only unhoused people take part in. It was clear that the rangers were targeting Dawson, who had emerged as a leader in the encampment.

The fight to remain was also intensifying across Los Angeles. In the week following the January 13, 2020, protest at Echo Park Lake, **the City announced major changes to its CARE/CARE+ encampment sweeps protocol.** The change in programming, outlined in a January 21, 2020, [City of Los Angeles Inter-Departmental Report](#), shifted the power of deploying CARE/CARE+ teams from LAHSA and the Unified Homelessness Response Center (UHRC) to City Council offices. LAPD’s role in sweep operations was expanded with



Figure 5-8. Echo Park Lake residents arrested by park rangers for smoking. January 24, 2020. Photo: Instagram @streetwatchla.



Figure 5-9. Call to action for Echo Park Lake eviction and sweep defense. Posted January 22, 2020. Graphic: @streetwatchla.

LAPD Homeless Outreach and Proactive Engagement (HOPE) officers to be deployed along with CARE teams at “sites with documented histories of escalation or aggressive or confrontational behavior.” This was a significant shift in the role of police enforcement in the CARE/CARE+ program. Since at the start of the program, LAPD was not allowed to be present at sweeps and would only become a part of the operation if they were called in by LA Sanitation.

At places like Echo Park Lake, the change in policy gave explicit permission to LAPD and LA Sanitation to conduct clean-up operations in areas that were previously the jurisdiction of the Department of Recreation and Parks: “LASAN and LAPD will conduct operations on City property owned or operated by the Department of Recreation and Parks (RAP), with RAP operational teams no longer needed on site, ensuring greater coverage of parks across the City through interdepartmental coordination.” CARE+ operations were now officially allowed to be conducted within parks, and a sweep of Echo Park Lake became imminent. Within hours of the report being released, postings for a CARE+ comprehensive cleanup at Echo Park Lake appeared around Echo Park Lake for January 24, 2020.

Park residents and community organizers also began developing a defense strategy for the park. They expected the operation scheduled for January 24 would be a more organized, calculated, and brutish eviction attempt than what occurred previously. Everyone agreed that in order to have a chance at halting the sweep and eviction, there would need to be a massive turnout to defend the unhoused residents at the park. On January 22, Street Watch LA posted a call for people to show up at the park on the morning of January 24 to help defend the community at Echo Park Lake. The action details were circulated widely by supporting organizations including Ground Game LA, Ktown for All, SELAH Neighborhood Homeless Coalition, and many others.

While the physical turnout at the park was of the utmost importance, park residents and organizers understood that the messaging around the action and the experiences and demands of the park residents needed to be explicitly clear. This way the broader public would understand the situation and why action needed to be taken. **On the evening of January 23, unhoused park residents publicly released a letter to Mitch O’Farrell, making an honest and thorough plea for him to halt the eviction process, meet with the community, and work with them to find housing solutions.** The letter included the following:

We, the unhoused residents of Echo Park Lake, are coming to you as your constituents, and fellow human beings to express our fear, grief, and anger in regards to the severe harassment and persecution we have felt at the hands of law enforcement and city employees over the past three months. We have built a community at this lake that is now made up of more than 60 people, and we are facing the threat of eviction and being displaced from our community, the family we have built here every single day, and we are devastated....



We did not end up unhoused by choice, nor do we desire to stay on the streets forever. At this point there is no viable option for shelter within, or near CD 13 for all of us. Many of us have tried to enter the shelter system elsewhere, and do not feel safe or comfortable returning to those places. Many of us have section 8 vouchers, many of us are on 2–3 year long waiting lists for programs that would lead to permanent supportive housing. But what we need and what we desire is to create a solution within this city council district, our home...

Before you answer, or take any action against us, please come and meet our community and discuss this matter with us first...

Yours truly, **Your constituents of Echo Park Lake**

Also that evening, community organizers worked with encampment residents to ensure that everyone felt comfortable with the plan of action for the following day. A majority of the encampment residents were prepared to stay in the park and stand against LA Sanitation and LAPD, even if it meant losing their personal belongings or suffering punishment in the form of citation or arrest. Residents who were worried about staying in the park received help moving their tents and personal belongings to the city streets surrounding the park, where they would not be at risk during the operation. Organizers and community members who were not present at the park on the evening before the sweep worked to circulate the letter from Echo Park Lake residents on social media, developed a [petition to support the unhoused community](#) at Echo Park Lake via Change.org, and made personal appeals to Councilmember O'Farrell via phone and email demanding that he halt the eviction.

Around 6:30 a.m. on the morning of January 24, 2020, activists, organizers, legal observers from National Lawyers Guild of Los Angeles (NLG-LA), and press began showing up to greet park residents on the north lawn. Breakfast was brought in for residents and served on tables in the center of the encampment. The plan for the day was to host a press conference with designated encampment residents at 7:30 a.m. and then move into a defensive position by forming a human barrier between the encampment and LA Sanitation equipment and personnel. Long-time Echo Park Lake organizer and founding member of Street Watch LA Jed Parriott and founding member of Ground Game LA Ashley Bennett, who attended the protest outside of LAHSA work hours as a supporter of the Echo Park Lake community, were the designated liaisons for the protest. They coordinated the protest with the support of encampment residents Ayman Ahmed and Davon Brown. LA Sanitation, LAPD, and park rangers began arriving on the scene at the park at 7 a.m. Organizers and park residents decided to begin the press conference early to allow enough time for activists to get into defensive positions prior to the start of the operation. Encampment residents took turns stepping up to the microphone in front of the press line. They shared the stories of how they became homeless, explained the trials and tribulations of trying to get into housing, and expressed how the community at the park had become a refuge to them. After the speaker program, activists and organizers were put into position around the perimeter of the north lawn by Ahmed and Bennett.

Shortly after the blockade perimeter around the encampment was established, LA Sanitation and Recreation and Parks made an attempt to begin the clean-up operation by driving a Recreation and Parks truck into the park on the sidewalk to the left of where the protest perimeter had been established. Bennett yelled for protestors to move from the line on Glendale Boulevard to the sidewalk where the truck was coming in and to stage a sit down. **The maneuver succeeded, and the truck was forced to back out of the park to ensure that none of the sitting protestors would be harmed.** The blockade formation then shifted—protestors moved from standing around the perimeter of the encampment to sitting in lines at all potential sidewalk entry points. Ahmed quickly realized that the new formation left portions of the encampment vulnerable and began assigning individuals who were not on the front lines of the sidewalk blockade to stand by and defend specific tents in the encampment.

With all potential entry points to the encampment blocked and tents defended, LA Sanitation, park rangers, and LAPD were forced to enter into negotiations with liaisons and encampment residents. Park residents and protestors argued angrily with City personnel, pressing them to answer where people would go if they were evicted from the park, where Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell was, and why O'Farrell wasn't willing to meet with the encampment to collectively work towards solutions. During the standoff between protestors and personnel, Bennett and Parriott spoke with ECIs, ranking LAPD officers, and Chief Park Ranger Losorelli about canceling the operation. LAHSA associate director of Access and Engagement Victor Hinderletter entered in the middle of negotiations. Hinderletter asked Bennett if she would agree to let Parriott take over negotiations for the protest, because he feared what the ramifications would be at LAHSA if she continued at the scene. Bennett agreed to leave the protest, and Parriott became the lone liaison negotiating on behalf of the protest. After nearly two hours of protest and negotiations, the ranking officers present made the decision to call off the comprehensive cleanup and eviction. LA Sanitation and Parks and Recreation sent a handful of workers to collect trash from around the encampment with protestors allowing this as they remained in a defensive position around the tents. During the negotiations, Parriott

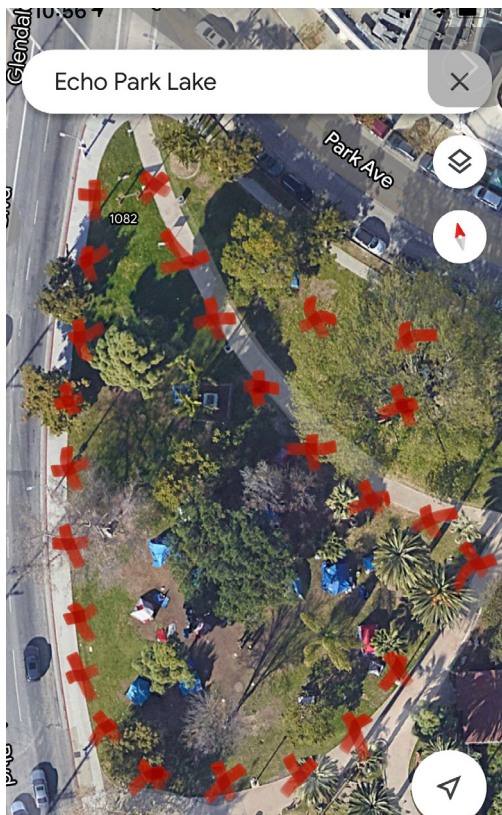


Figure 5-10. Blockade strategy. January 24, 2020. Photo: Ashley Bennett.

was able to broker a meeting between ranking LAPD officers, the City Attorney, and encampment residents Davon Brown and Ayman Ahmed. After LAPD and City personnel began to vacate the area, encampment residents and protestors celebrated the success of the blockade and triumphantly marched from the park to Councilmember O'Farrell's office in hopes that he would be ready to meet with them. When encampment residents reached the office and requested a meeting, O'Farrell refused.

### The Aftermath of the January 24th, 2020, Blockade

Immediately following the successful blockade on January 24, 2020, LAPD Commander Vito Palazzolo arrived at Echo Park Lake to talk to unhoused residents. Ayman Ahmed and Davon Brown engaged in a conversation with Palazzolo along with Jed Parriott of Street Watch LA and Kath Rogers of NLG-LA. Also present was Emily Alpert Reyes of the *Los Angeles Times*. After Ahmed relayed the community's demands to stop the displacement attempts and to meet with Councilmember O'Farrell, Palazzolo said that LAPD can only enforce laws, not change them. He offered to hold a formal meeting with community members to continue the conversation. Ahmed and Brown consulted with encampment residents who collectively decided that a meeting with Palazzolo could be useful in several ways: it could show the city that encampment residents were serious about a formal dialogue and could also put pressure on Councilmember O'Farrell to hold a meeting with residents. A meeting was set for January 28, 2020.

The meeting place on the second floor of the old firehouse in Angelino Heights. There, Ahmed and Brown represented encampment residents, with Parriott and Jorge Gonzalez from NLG-LA joining to provide support. Ahmed and Brown gave personal testimony of their experiences of being unhoused, how they became unhoused, and how harmful police had been for them, and they relayed their demands. LAPD Commander Palazzolo responded, saying, "We understand this crisis. I used to patrol Skid Row for years," and, "We know policing isn't the solution." He continued that they had no power in changing ordinances, only City Hall. Ahmed and Brown asked

that LAPD not enforce, threaten or intimidate park residents until they were able to get a meeting with O'Farrell. Captain Alfonso Lopez countered, "Will you guys agree to take your tents down during the day?" Ahmed and Brown asked "Would you really stop enforcing if we take tents down during the day?" Palazzolo replied that they cannot guarantee that they would not enforce, continuing, "If you leave the park and go to a city sidewalk, you can have your tent up all day. It's just the park ordinance that prohibits tents up during the day." Parriott immediately responded, "Actually, Commander Palazzolo you are incorrect. [LAMC 56.11](#) states that tents up are prohibited from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. on all city sidewalks, and we've seen it enforced many times." Palazzolo then awkwardly shrugged, "Oh, oops, I guess you're right." With that, the meeting was over.

In the meantime, **Councilmember O'Farrell had not responded to, or even acknowledged, the letter from the unhoused residents at Echo Park Lake.** Between January and March of 2020, the community made numerous unanswered requests to meet with him. Along with the letter from the unhoused community at large, four encampment residents named Jordan, Jasmine, Lloyd, and Bobby also attached personal letters to Councilmember O'Farrell documenting their personal experiences of trying to obtain housing, and they asked for the opportunity to meet. O'Farrell staffer Jeanne Min responded thus:

Dear Jordan, Jasmine, Lloyd, and Bobby:

The Councilmember received your letter and asked that I reply on his behalf.

Thank you for sharing your stories. We strongly encourage you and any other constituents who need assistance with housing to contact my office at (213) 207-3015 with your LAHSA caseworker's name and phone number so we may schedule an appointment to assist in expediting your case.

The group responded to the email that Ashley Bennett was the LAHSA caseworker that represented them and other members of the community who had drafted the collective letter. The group shared Bennett's contact information and stated that they were looking forward to scheduling an appointment. There was no further communication from O'Farrell's office after this response email. **Bennett was terminated from LAHSA less than one week later at the bidding of Councilmember O'Farrell.**

On the Monday following the protest at Echo Park Lake, Bennett was called into a private meeting with LAHSA associate director of Access and Engagement Victor Hinderliter and her direct supervisor Peter Motta. During the meeting, Hinderliter revealed to Bennett that O'Farrell had placed a call to then interim director of LAHSA Heidi Marston, and was very angry that an employee at LAHSA was "instigating anarchy" at Echo Park Lake. Hinderliter expressed to Bennett that he and the rest of the leadership staff at LAHSA was especially concerned about this complaint because O'Farrell was the head of the Los Angeles City Council Homelessness and Poverty Committee at the time and therefore was directly responsible for signing off on the funding for numerous LAHSA programs. Hinderliter informed Bennett that due to the complaint, she would no longer be able to conduct outreach in City Council District 13. Further, there would be an investigatory meeting set up regarding the incident, but that Hinderliter didn't think it would result in anything more than a warning. He encouraged Bennett to reach out to her SEIU union representative for support and guidance on how to prepare. After the meeting, Bennett continued her daily work routine without any information on when or where the investigatory meeting would be held.

On the Monday of the following week, Motta told Bennett to stay back from the field because Hinderliter needed to speak with her. When Hinderliter came into the office an hour later, he informed Bennett that the investigatory meeting would be taking place that morning. Bennett's union representation was unavailable to be at the meeting on such short notice and asked that Bennett make a request to postpone the meeting. When Bennett made the request, Hinderliter told Bennett that the leadership staff did not feel it was necessary to have a union representative present for the meeting, because they "just needed to share a bit of information with her." Hinderliter and Motta walked with Bennett to the location of the investigatory meeting where several members of LAHSA leadership and human resources staff were present. Bennett was invited to sit down, and the director of human resources informed Bennett that her employment was being terminated effective immediately. Hinderliter added that the reason for the termination was related to the conversation that they had the week prior and that the agency had decided that her employment there was "not a good fit." Members of human resources confiscated Bennett's work materials and escorted her out of the building. Bennett was devastated by the termination, and documented her response in an open letter to Mitch O'Farrell entitled, "[Dear Mitch, You Can't Fire a Movement.](#)"

## Sprinklers, Batons, and Handcuffs

In the weeks that followed the January 24, 2020 blockade, **tension between park residents and law enforcement continued to escalate.** Park rangers and LAPD worked diligently to make life at the park as unpleasant for residents as possible. LAPD continued visiting the

encampment at hours between 12 a.m. and 4 a.m. and began telling residents that by sleeping in the park they were risking being cited or arrested. Park rangers began doing the same during the day. The Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks began turning on sprinklers during random hours of day and night in areas of the park with tents. For park residents, this was a time of constant fear and uncertainty. There were also instances where park residents were detained (though not arrested) for having their tents up during the day.

Throughout the chaos, harassment, and turmoil the encampment experienced at the hands of law enforcement, **the bonds between community organizers and encampment residents continued to grow and strengthen.** Street Watch LA continued to host meetings every Saturday at the park. The meetings included “Know Your Rights” trainings, which educated park residents and community organizers about the history of criminalization in Los Angeles, the various legal victories that had been fought and won by unhoused people in Los Angeles, their right to film police, what to say if cops came to harass residents, how to provide jail support, and the risks involved with fighting back against law enforcement. The hours following each meeting were a time of joy, celebration, and friendship amidst a dark and chaotic time. Housed and unhoused members of the Echo Park community looked forward to this time each week and spent the late afternoon and early evening hours eating together, laughing together, dancing, singing, creating art, and getting to know one another on a deeper level.



Figure 5-11. Event flyer for community potluck at Echo Park Lake. February 1, 2020. Graphic: @streetwatchla.



Figure 5-12. Unhoused and housed residents and organizers at “Pitchin in the Park” event. February 1, 2020. Photo: Ashley Bennett.

On February 3, 2020, LAPD Captain Alfonso Lopez paid a visit to the park for the first time since the protest on January 24. Captain Lopez approached Davon Brown and asked, “Why are your tents up during the day? I thought we agreed that you would keep them down during the day.” He then informed Brown and other community members in the area that if they did not leave the park by 10 p.m. that evening, rangers and LAPD would issue citations and make arrests for camping in the park. Community organizers and park residents quickly decided to host an event at the park that evening in which housed members of the community would camp with unhoused community members and risk citation and arrest alongside them. More than 50 organizers and activists from Street Watch LA, Ground Game LA, SELAH Neighborhood Homeless Coalition, and Ktown for All came and camped out at the park with unhoused residents that night. LAPD did arrive on the scene briefly, but upon observing the number of housed community members camped out with unhoused residents quickly departed from the scene. After housed community members had departed, park rangers arrived at the park the following day, February 4, and posted notices informing park residents that a major sweep would occur on February 5 and that they were required to move out of the park by 9:30 a.m. that day. Community organizations posted a call for defense against the sweep immediately. On the morning of February 5,, LAPD, park rangers, and LA Sanitation entered the park in force. Possibly due to the short lead time, fewer community members had attended in support, but they still managed to ensure that no tents or personal property in the park was destroyed. LA Sanitation downgraded the operation from a comprehensive clean-up to a “spot cleaning,” They only picked up trash and did not require any residents to move. A Recreation and Parks employee informed a resident after the operation ended that LA Sanitation, park rangers, and LAPD intended to continue scheduling comprehensive sweeps every Wednesday until they were able to successfully remove everyone from the park.

Upon learning that the plan was to attempt a comprehensive sweep and eviction the following Wednesday, **park residents and community organizers acted to plan another heavily attended blockade.** On that next Wednesday, February 12, LAPD, park rangers, and LA Sanitation showed up at Echo Park Lake yet again to terrorize and displace the unhoused community at the park. Organizers, news media, and community supporters showed up for the blockade in the largest protest numbers to date and were again able to prevent a sweep and eviction from occurring. During the protest, organizers also set-up tents with signs on the sidewalk in front of



Figure 5-13. Tents staged on Sunset Blvd. to demonstrate where unhoused community members could legally camp if they were evicted from the park. February 12, 2020. Photo: @streetwatchla.

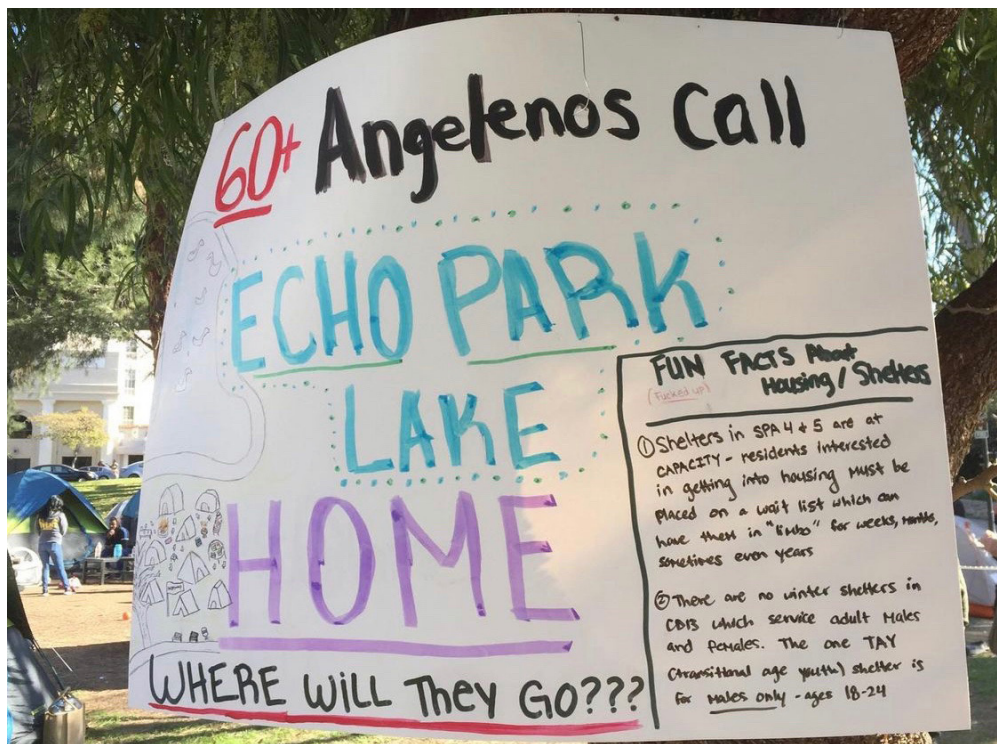


Figure 5-14. Protest sign at Echo Park Lake. February 12, 2020.

Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's office on Sunset Boulevard and outside of the Parkview Living apartment complex directly across from the park to demonstrate where park residents would legally be allowed to camp if they were forced to leave the park. An inside source at Recreation and Parks had revealed that many of the complaints against the encampment were coming from the Parkview Living apartment complex. This was also later confirmed by some apartment-dwellers who started attending neighborhood council meetings.

The February 2020 operation was called off, and protesters marched once again to Councilmember O'Farrell's office to request a meeting. Bennett was at the front of the march and brought flowers to O'Farrell's office as a peace offering following her forced termination. She felt that there would be no hard feelings about the situation if O'Farrell agreed to meet with the unhoused community and worked with them to find permanent housing. Bennett and encampment resident Lloyd Edwards were briefly allowed into the office to speak with Field Deputy Juan Fregoso, who denied that the office had any involvement in Bennett's termination. Fregoso said that he would bring the request for a meeting to O'Farrell and follow up with the group. The office's involvement in Bennett's termination was unearthed by California Public Records Act (CPRA) documents released later in the year, and Fregoso never made an attempt to follow up regarding a meeting with the Councilmember.

**On Wednesday February 26, 2020, park rangers brutally attacked and arrested park resident Davon Brown.** Brown had been gaining notoriety in the weeks leading up to his arrest due to powerful speeches given during protests and during public comment at City Council meetings that discussed the community at Echo Park Lake as an agenda item. On the morning of the scheduled "clean up," Brown began questioning park rangers about his housing status, and where park residents would go if they were forced to leave. When the rangers announced that they were going to begin throwing away all property in the park, Brown continued to ask park rangers where people were supposed to sleep, and how they were supposed to shelter themselves if all of their belongings were disposed of. In a [video](#) posted by [Street Watch LA on Twitter](#), Chief Park Ranger Joe Losorelli can be seen approaching Ayman Ahmed and Brown, stating, "It's a park cleanup. You're not going to tell us how to do our job." He squares his shoulders and forcefully tells Brown, "Get the fuck out of here," in a blatant attempt to escalate the situation. Brown responds to the advance by Losorelli with an equally forceful, "What the fuck are you talking about?" while maintaining his distance. Street Watch LA organizer Jed Parriott can then be heard encouraging Brown, "Back up," as Ahmed continues to sit peacefully in a folding chair between Losorelli and Brown.

Moments later, in a video captured by protestors Brown can be heard saying, “For what?” as he backs away from the park rangers. Rangers then aggressively close in on Brown with their batons drawn. As Brown backs away from the scene, as he had been told to do, he trips over a tree branch and stumbles, and one park ranger sprints to keep up with him. Brown can be heard asking, “Are you going to hit me with that? For what?” The ranger, with his baton drawn, can be heard screaming, “Put your hands behind your back!” Brown then stumbles slightly again, still attempting to put space between himself and the park ranger charging him. A park ranger behind Brown puts him in a chokehold and brings him to the ground. The video ends with Brown being held down by several park rangers, one laying on top of him, and handcuffed.



Figure 5-15. Park resident Davon Brown being attacked by park ranger at Echo Park Lake. February 26, 2020. Photo: @streetwatchla.



Figure 5-16. Park ranger attacking Brown with baton. February 26, 2020. Photo: @streetwatchla.

The incident captured on video illustrates the eagerness of the park rangers to escalate situations. Indeed, park rangers have continuously petitioned the Los Angeles City Council for the right to bear arms in the field, as police officers are allowed to do. If park rangers on the scene that day had been armed, Brown may have suffered a fate far worse than incarceration. After the altercation, Brown was taken to the LAPD Metropolitan Detention Center and charged with battery of an officer, even though in reality Brown had been the one who was thrown to the ground. Community members immediately demanded for Brown’s release. Images with the hashtag #FreeDavon circulated on social media with information to call into the LAPD Metropolitan Detention Center to demand Brown’s release. According to operators at the detention center, they were fielding hundreds of calls regarding Brown, and around 6 p.m., the main phone line was no longer open, likely due to call volume. Brown was released the following day, and ultimately he was not charged.

In the weeks following Brown’s arrest, park residents noticed a subsequent decrease in the amount of interaction that they were having with park rangers, LAPD, and City personnel. Ayman Ahmed recalls that the time seemed “eerily peaceful,” and park residents braced themselves for a massive retaliation the following Wednesday. In actuality, the retaliation that park residents had anticipated would not come for more than a year due, to the COVID-19 pandemic. City staff were being briefed on the potential closing of the City, leaving less time to focus on the clearing of homeless encampments. When the shutdown of Los Angeles was announced on March 13, 2020, park residents and activists shifted their focus to demand adequate shelter-in-place opportunities for unhoused residents across the City.

### Activism at the Height of COVID-19

On March 6, 2020, park residents learned about a proposal Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell had introduced to City Council regarding a temporary emergency congregate shelter at St. Paul’s Church across the street from Echo Park Lake. Residents were informed by LAHSA personnel and LAPD that they would receive priority in entering the shelter, but if residents chose not to enter the shelter, there would be grave consequences, including arrests. With growing concern about the spread of the coronavirus, park residents again published



Figure 5-17. Graphic demanding the release of park resident Davon Brown after he was attacked by park rangers, then charged for “battery.” February 26, 2020. Graphic: @streetwatchla.



an [open letter](#) to Councilmember O’Farrell outlining their concerns: “At this moment, our tents feel safest. If a shelter is to be provided, it should consist of private rooms with a max of one roommate.” The letter from encampment residents was again ignored by O’Farrell’s office, and requests for a meeting with the Councilmember by park residents were denied.

As the city officially shut down due to the pandemic, **community organizations shifted their focus to ensure that encampment residents had access to basic survival needs, as many City-sanctioned services were being discontinued.** Organizations including Street Watch LA, Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN), and Mutual Aid LA (a newly-formed COVID-19 response network founded by Ground Game LA), worked to ensure that encampments across the city had access to soap and homemade hand washing stations, and they demanded that the City provide to all informal settlements in Los Angeles basic hygiene necessities, including dumpsters, showers, City-funded hand washing stations, water, vermin abatement, soap, and regular meal delivery.

In response to the City’s inadequate response to provide services, and to protect unhoused residents at the height of the pandemic, the Services Not Sweeps Coalition released [COVID-19 Guidelines for Unhoused Angelenos and Demands to the City and County of LA](#) demanding that the City halt all programs that prevented unhoused individuals from sheltering-in-place and start working towards providing adequate housing resources—namely, commandeering vacant hotels.

The largest demands that Echo Park Lake residents, activists, and organizers advocated for during this time were for City officials to provide sanitary, non-congregate housing options for unhoused residents to safely shelter-in-place and to completely stop encampment sweeps that required residents to vacate the area. As described in Chapter 4, across the City activists protested in front of major hotels, demanding that the City commandeer hotels and motels to make thousands of pandemic-induced vacant rooms available to unhoused residents. In early April 2020, Project Roomkey was announced by Governor Newsom but the roll-out of the program was slow. With Los Angeles politicians touting thousands of available rooms, **frustration in unhoused communities quickly grew, as they had not seen offers of hotel rooms actually come to fruition.** In a campaign led by Echo Park Lake residents via Street Watch LA, individuals who lived in the park were photographed holding signs that stated, “Mayor Garcetti, I will gladly trade this tent for a hotel room.” The individual portraits were accompanied by brief statements from several park residents that highlighted their desire to enter their own hotel room and expressed frustration with the way rooms were allocated up to that point.



Figure 5-18. Echo Park Lake residents hold signs declaring that they will gladly trade their tents for hotel rooms. April 22, 2020. Photo: @streetwatchla.

## The Social Economy in Practice

The mandatory shutdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was announced in Los Angeles on March 13, 2020. As the City focused on sheltering-in-place and staying home, residents at Echo Park Lake began to breathe a little bit easier. In the absence of law enforcement, constant harassment, and threats of displacement, the residents were able to begin building a self-sustaining and vibrant community that had some of the most sophisticated infrastructure and programming ever constructed in an unauthorized settlement in Los Angeles. Here we provide glimpses of these infrastructures of community.

### Mutual Aid LA and Power-Up

In April 2020, Mutual Aid LA, an aid network pioneered by members of Ground Game LA, raised thousands of dollars that allowed volunteers from across the City to provide critical aid to low-income, immunocompromised, and unhoused Angelenos. Homeless outreach teams, led by Ground Game LA co-founder Ashley Bennett, who had been fired from LAHSA for her advocacy of encampment residents, began visiting the park multiple times a week to provide food, water, hygiene kits, and other critical survival necessities. Around the same time, Lloyd Ngom, an unhoused resident at Echo Park Lake, began hosting a Power Up table multiple times a week in partnership with Street Watch LA. The Power Up table was a place for Echo Park Lake residents to charge their phones, use a laptop to sign up for stimulus checks, receive information about their rights, and find out what resources were available to them in the area (such as shower locations). Mutual Aid LA and Power-Up became staples in **the organizing culture at Echo Park Lake**; both programs brought housed and unhoused community members together on a daily basis, and in the absence of the need to coordinate sweep defense, gave space for people to think creatively about sustainable infrastructures to create in the park to make the lives of residents living there less stressful.

By Fall 2020, when the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks began shutting off lights on the west side of the park, making the most populous area of the encampment dark and nearly unnavigable at night, organizers from Ground Game LA and Street Watch LA sponsored Sunday Night Lights. Park residents and community members came together and hung battery-operated and solar-powered lights throughout the encampment. After lights were installed, attendees took part in a socially-distanced potluck, created signs and artwork to display around the park, and listened to music. Indeed, music was an important part of life at Echo Park Lake, with encampment resident Dancing David leading “Dance Dance Revolution,” providing much joy and community.



Figure 5-19. Echo Park Lake residents at Power Up table. May 8, 2020. Photo: @streetwatchla.

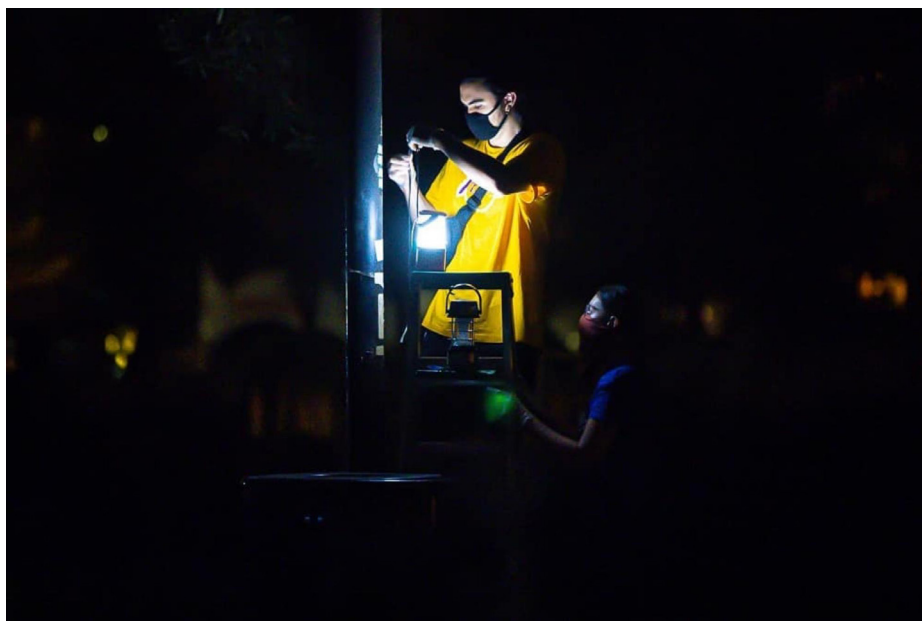


Figure 5-20. Community member hangs light at Echo Park Lake during Sunday Night Lights event. September 13, 2020. Photo: Chelsea Lauren.

## Echo Park Rise Up and Community Jobs Program

In February 2020, park residents officially named their community Echo Park Rise Up. In the first months of the group's existence, the group focused on ensuring that food and non-perishable donations were fairly distributed throughout the encampment. They started an Instagram page in hopes of keeping the community at large informed of the happenings at the encampment and to encourage groups to continue donating supplies and become involved with supporting unhoused residents. By the summer, there were weekly meetings with dozens of encampment members in attendance. With new people entering the encampment on a regular basis, Echo Park Rise Up felt that it was important to create guidelines and a mission statement for the encampment, as well as establish rules for residents to ensure that the encampment stayed clean, safe, and enjoyable for everyone living there. By Echo Park Rise Up worked closely with organizers in Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA to ensure that everyone at the encampment had what they needed. If someone moved in and needed a tent, they would reach out to organizers to obtain one. If there was conflict in the park, they would de-escalate the situation.

In Summer 2020, Ayman Ahmed, encampment resident and a key figure in Echo Park Rise Up, began envisioning official roles and responsibilities for encampment residents, accompanied by payment for such labor. Many residents had stepped up to share the burden of labor within the encampment and already helped to distribute supplies, clean the showers, and keep the park clean. Ahmed wanted to take the division of labor further and pitched the idea of **an official jobs program** to other Echo Park Rise Up community members. The group was extremely enthusiastic about the idea and created a basic project plan for an Echo Park Lake jobs program. Mutual Aid LA provided funding for the launch of the program.

In August 2020, Ahmed made a video regarding the progress of the Echo Park Lake community and jobs program, recapping the progress the group had made in the weeks prior.

A post made to the Echo Park Rise Up Instagram page on August 7, 2020, read:

BIG things are happening!

In the past 2 weeks, the community here at Echo Park Lake has been able to create 2 food/donation tent pantries, set up 4 showers at Echo Park and Grant Park, and begin employing residents of the encampment to do various jobs in the operation of the encampments.

The newly created unhoused board of directors/ homeless citizen oversight committee has been able to begin to offer \$10/hour to 10 residents (8 at Echo Park, 2 at Grant Park), to do jobs including park security, shower monitor, donation inventory, donation tent distribution, police and community liaisons.

The post included a video of Ahmed touring different areas of the encampment and interviewing members of the job program, who were also members of the newly formed unhoused Board of Directors at the park. The goal of the **unhoused Board of Directors** was for a group of individuals from different areas of the encampment to meet, discuss, and vote on issues that arose in the encampment, such as how to spend funds and how to delegate work. This Board would also be the final authority on peacefully removing individuals from the park if they broke the rules of the encampment multiple times. Board directors included:

- Edgar, who was the logistics manager for the encampment and whose idea it was to start the pantry tents and create a regular inventory of donations;
- Jeffery and Travis, who spearheaded the security team and conducted daily safety patrols around the park;
- Lucian, who was the social media manager and news media liaison; and
- Carmen and Nancy, who led the community kitchen.

Echo Park Rise Up also created a Go Fund Me with the goal of raising funds to continue the jobs program when the Mutual Aid LA funding ran out. The fundraiser, entitled [Echo Park Rise Up: A Vision of Love and Community](#) included a statement written by Ahmed that outlined the **community's vision for the future**. It included the following:

Imagine a world where there was no “bottom.” One where your neighbor was your neighbor because they’re your neighbor not because of tax brackets or real estate. A world where good is done for the sake of good not gain. In the past few months, we the unhoused community at Echo Park Lake, have been creating the groundwork for this world.



Figure 5-21. Ayman Ahmed at Echo Park Lake. September 2020. Photo: Ashley Bennett.

Amidst all the drama of L.A.P.D. and city harassment we've been able to come together as one 🤝 community; both "unhoused" and "housed." What we've discovered is that there really is nothing but love. Separation is an illusion. One that our society unfortunately permeates in everything it does. From class division to hierarchical work structures to goals that benefit only the individual people are either really feeling themselves... #ego, or really feeling down on themselves and that just isn't our reality. At least not the one that we live everyday in the park.

**For us there are no barriers and no labels.**

No class divisions and no power structures. We are simply a community of people trying our best to keep positive and keep going through difficult times. When the Mayor cut funding for showers during COVID-19, we didn't just accept it, we built our own showers. When the city decided to then cut our water supply we didn't just accept it, we rallied community support and now have full gallons everyday. The point is, **we aren't just your typical homeless encampment who accepts 2nd class citizen treatment and the city knows it 😊.**

The Go Fund Me proved successful, and donations from the general public were enough to sustain the community jobs program and provide funds to continue building and expanding the infrastructure at the park for months. At the height of the jobs program, more than 20 members of the encampment were working in designated jobs on a daily basis (with a cap of earnings set at \$40/day per person due to funding constraints). **The jobs program helped the encampment build community infrastructure** including showers, a community kitchen and dining area, pantry and storage tents, a medical tent, and a community garden. Though many of the gains of the jobs program were manifested in a physical way, the true importance of the program was providing encampment members with a sense of purpose, responsibility, and belonging. In reminiscing about the days of the jobs program, Ahmed recounts, "People actually had a reason to wake up in the morning and do something other than get high. A lot of people didn't know what they were living for, but having a job gave them a reason to live."

## The Shower Program

In May 2020, Mayor Garcetti shut down the CARE shower program, which was a program that deployed shower trailers to designated areas near major encampments throughout the week, providing unhoused residents with a critical hygiene resource that was extremely difficult to find elsewhere. Due to the pandemic, at least a dozen shower trucks were taken out of commission, and residents at Echo Park Lake were left without access to facilities where they could shower. Gyms were their other critical shower resource, and gyms were closed due to the pandemic. **In an incredible display of creativity and resourcefulness, encampment residents discussed building a shower of their own.** Organizers in Street Watch LA, and Mutual Aid LA supported the idea and contributed funding to encampment residents to purchase materials. Taking about two weeks to construct, the first community shower consisted of a wood frame mounted in the ground near Ahmed's tent on the west side of the park and shower curtains made of black garbage bags. Residents used refillable 5-gallon water jugs as a water supply and relied on community organizations to donate soap and hygiene supplies for shower use on a weekly basis. This first iteration of a community shower held a sign that read, "Mayor Garcetti Took Our Showers!"

In the months that followed the construction of the first shower, demand for shower use became high. The encampment, which was now home to more residents than ever, was spread from the northwest lawn to the far west lawn, near the intersection of Glendale Boulevard and Bellevue Avenue. In July 2020, Father David Innocenti, a retired Catholic priest who had become a close friend of residents, donated two pop-up showers that were stationed in two other sections of the encampment, which increased daily shower access for more residents. The shower program at Echo Park Lake became one of the first programs that allowed residents to hold a job within the encampment. Residents utilizing the showers quickly realized that with such heavy use, showers needed to be cleaned on a regular basis to prevent the growth of mold and bacteria. Further, encampment leaders realized that some people felt safer using the showers when a trusted member of the encampment was present to ensure residents were safe while showering in a relatively public space. Therefore, each shower had designated residents from their respective area of the park responsible for cleaning the showers on a daily basis and taking shifts monitoring showers to ensure safety.

The showers functioned well for months, but they ultimately began breaking down due to exposure to the elements and frequency of use. In November 2020, **Ahmed envisioned constructing large, weather resistant, hot water luxury showers for the encampment.** By this time, the encampment's job program and crowdfunding campaign were well underway, and Ahmed was able to begin construction on the luxury showers with the support of other encampment residents and organizers from local community organizations. The showers were completed in early 2021, a few weeks prior to the police raid and eviction on March 24.



Figure 5-22. First community-built shower at Echo Park Lake. May 28, 2020. Photo: @streetwatchla.



Figure 5-23. Hot water shower at Echo Park Lake. February 2021. Photo: Ashley Bennett.

The two hot water showers that were erected on the west side of the park near Ahmed's tent were one of the most intensive construction projects completed by encampment residents. The wooden craftsman-style showers stood over seven feet tall, and came complete with metal locks on the doors, wooden shelving for hygiene products, and hooks to hang towels and clothing inside the door without getting wet. Outdoor shower units were provided by Street Watch LA member Amanda Darouie, who equipped each shower with a functioning shower head and a converter that filtered and heated water from the 5-gallon jugs. White marble rocks were placed under the wooden bases of the showers to help control drainage, and make the area look more aesthetically pleasing. Ahmed's goal in creating these showers was to provide people in the encampment with a luxury experience he believed they deserved. Unfortunately, the community at Echo Park Lake did not get to use these new facilities for long before the police raid. On the day the park was cleared, LA Sanitation teams broke down and disposed of the structures as if they were pieces of garbage.

## The Community Garden

One of the first ideas that came up in Echo Park Rise Up meetings in early 2020 was that of a community garden. The idea was in conversation for weeks, but without access to proper gardening resources and knowledge, it was tabled while more pressing construction projects began. The desire for a community garden again arose that summer, after the community experienced the loss of two residents to drug-related overdoses. The first was long-time park resident and beloved community member Andrew Kettle, who passed away on June 16, 2020. The second resident was a young woman named Brianna Moore, an 18-year-old who had moved into the encampment with her partner and a few other newcomers just days prior to her death on August 9, 2020. Although encampment residents did not know Moore well, her death shook the community to its core. Encampment residents worked with Moore's partner and community organizers from Ground Game LA and Street Watch LA to host a memorial in her honor. On August 12, community members covered the ground where her tent had been with white linens and lace, and they set up an altar adorned with photos of smiling Moore and flowers.



Figure 5-24. Memorial for Brianna Moore. August 12, 2020. Photo: Ashley Bennett.

White roses were hung from tree branches over the altar, and housed and unhoused community members came together that evening to pray and share the brief memories that they had of Moore.

A post on the Echo Park Rise Up Instagram page paid tribute to Kettle and Moore, and read:

“Brianna and Andrew are all of us, they are our brothers, our sisters, our sons, and our daughters. Brianna was taken at 18. We all remember that age. Regardless of what we felt at that age, for all of us that are still alive, we know that time is the ultimate healer. Whatever ‘end of the world’ we felt, time allowed us to heal.”

Following the memorial, encampment residents agreed that the location of Moore’s tent should remain vacant in her memory. Encampment residents quickly decided that this space should be the location of the community garden that they had envisioned. It felt appropriate that the space be transformed into a garden and kept as a place of beauty and remembrance for Moore. Encampment residents began working with Paige Emery, an organizer with The Future Left with extensive knowledge and experience in gardening. By late August, the community garden project was well underway with Emery visiting the park regularly to teach encampment members how to care for the soil and begin planting flowers, herbs, and vegetables.

The community garden at Echo Park Lake became a focal point of the community, with passerbys regularly stopping in to ask residents what the garden was and why it was there. **The garden became a link between the unhoused community of the park and the broader community which would not be interested otherwise in the encampment.** Media outlets began frequenting the park to report on the progress of the garden, and profile Emery and the unhoused residents who she trained in the basics of gardening. The garden was a place of healing, and park residents, activists, and organizers all had the opportunity to plant seeds that Emery continuously brought in and contribute pieces of themselves.

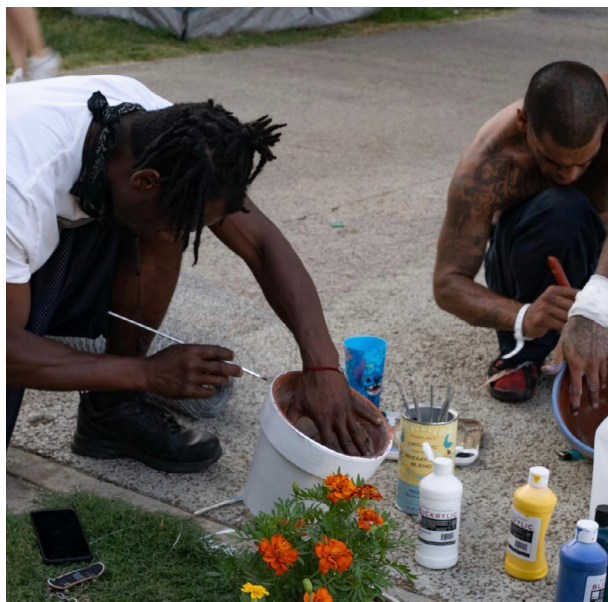


Figure 5-25. Echo Park Lake residents paint flowerpots for the community garden. August 25, 2020. Photo: @echoparkriseup.

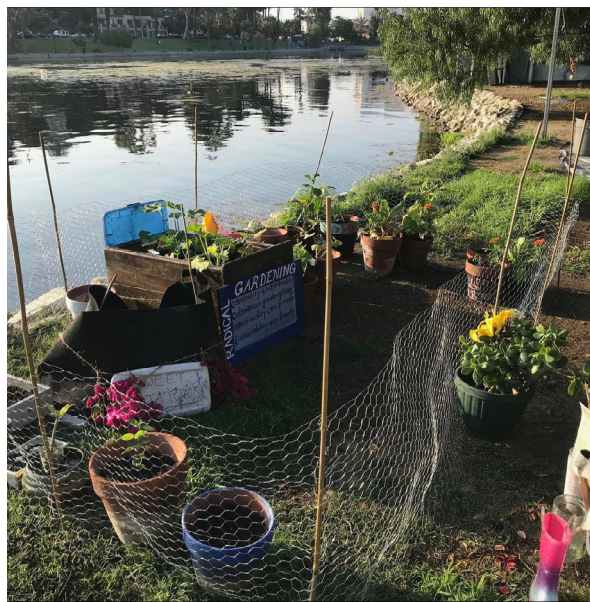


Figure 5-26. Community garden at Echo Park Lake. August 25, 2020. Photo: @echoparkriseup.

## The Community Kitchen

As the encampment at Echo Park Lake grew, food donations from organizations near and far started arriving on a daily basis. During each major holiday, for example, Father David Innocenti provided catered meals for residents, and the community saw generosity from many others, as well. As donations became more regular during the summer months of 2020, community members saw **an opportunity to create a functional kitchen and dining area that the encampment could utilize throughout the day**. The first iteration of the community kitchen was put together with a few pieces of wood, and blue tarps. Chairs and tables, both donated to the encampment and found from the trash in the neighborhood, were set up as a dining area next to the makeshift kitchen. At the height of the jobs program, a majority of the jobs were related to the kitchen area; roles included community chefs, who would work to prepare hot meals for encampment residents throughout the day on several portable propane stoves; food outreach team members, who would work to inventory and distribute non-perishable goods to members of the encampment who lived outside of the main encampment areas; and clean-up crew, who washed dishes, disposed of trash, and cleaned the kitchen and dining areas after each meal.

Near the end of the summer, the encampment had raised enough money to both sustain the jobs program and support additional work, and Echo Park Rise Up began discussing a kitchen beautification project. This idea comprised a functional kitchen space with running water and ample shelving to store cooking utensils and non-perishable food. They also wanted to improve the dining area to encourage more members of the park to use the space when meals were prepared and dine together. Construction of the new community kitchen space began in Fall 2020 and completed in early 2021. Street Watch LA member Amanda Darouie led the kitchen build and several **kitchen-build days** with members of the housed and unhoused community to make the project a success.

The kitchen and dining area became the center of the community at Echo Park Lake; everything from daily meals to community meetings were hosted in the area. As a result of the construction, the dining area grew to include several tables with umbrellas and fold-out seating, a number of fold-down serving tables for food, and a lounge with a coffee table and couches. The kitchen and dining area of the encampment was lively with park residents from sunrise to sunset, with people dropping in throughout the day to pick up food and supplies, eat hot meals, and hang out and relax on the comfortable couches. Echo Park Rise Up organizer Cecilia Luis reflected on the accomplishment:

The kitchen felt like the biggest victory, because we had to go through a lot with each other to get that—because it wasn't ego-centered. It wasn't about trying to take ownership. At Echo Park Rise Up, we would sit on the steps and have very long involved conversations about community





Figure 5-27. Echo Park Lake community members preparing meal in kitchen. August 13, 2020. Photo: Ashley Bennett.

projects, what community meant, all of these struggles with substance abuse (which was killing people before our eyes), and what we could do. How we could manage all of this shit that's from systematic neglect. The fact that we were having unhoused and housed people be there on those couches at the community kitchen, sharing space, it was so beautiful and a total counter to what the City is trying to do with its banishment and fencing.

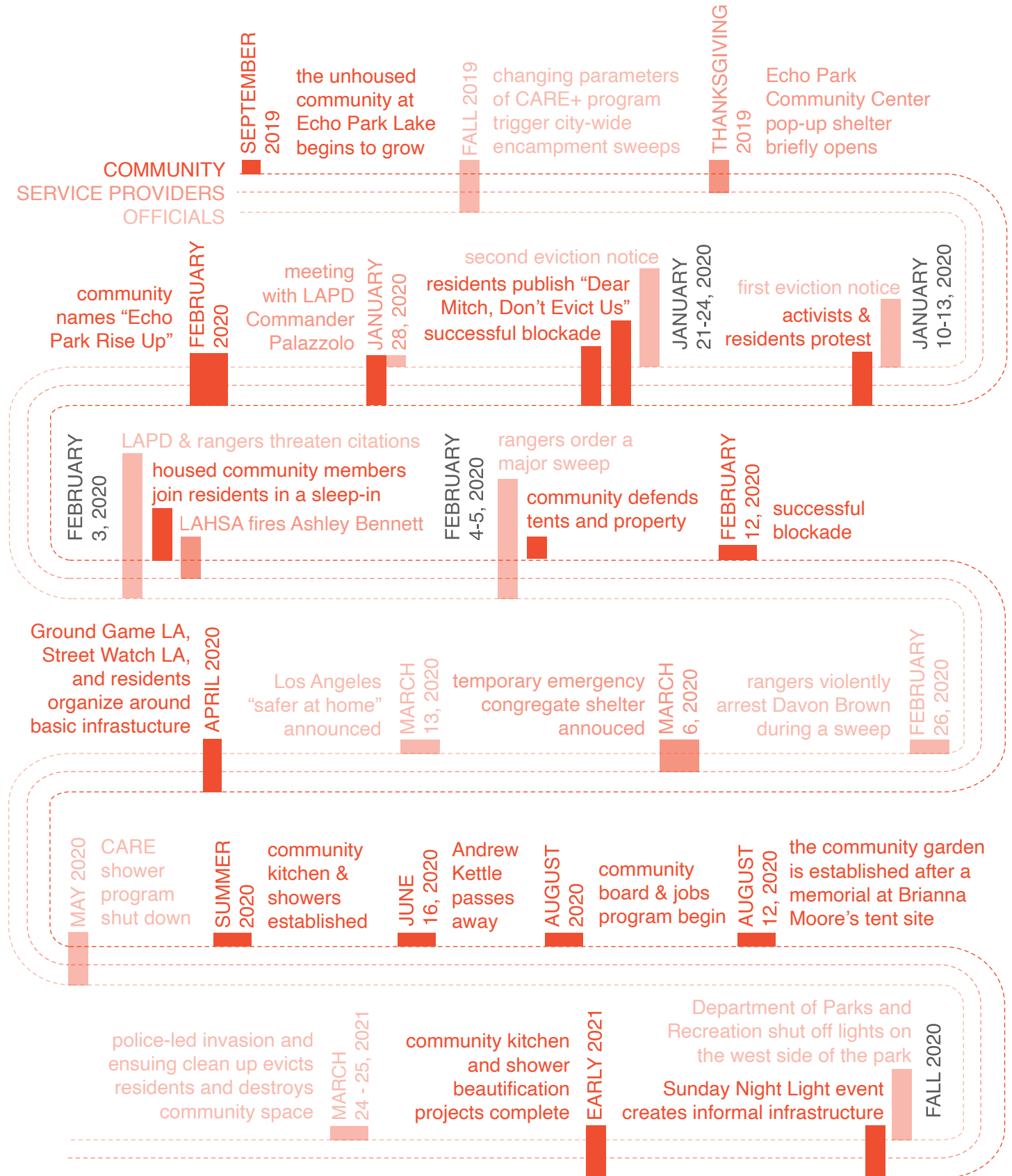
Such infrastructure had begun to attract journalists, reporters, bloggers, and curious community members to the park on a daily basis. Encampment residents were interviewed, questioned, and profiled by media outlets large and small, all in awe of what a group of unhoused individuals had been able to accomplish amidst a global pandemic. The success of the jobs program and Echo Park Lake construction projects, and notoriety that the encampment received, came with **the sobering reality that a day of reckoning was coming for park residents from law enforcement and City officials that had long fought for their removal**. In the months before the police raid and displacement in March 2021, park residents and community members responded creatively to petty attempts to make life harder for encampment residents. The group had no idea that a large-scale, militaristic operation would destroy everything that they had worked so hard to build.

## Afterword

In the following chapter, we situate the police invasion of March 24 and 25, 2021, in the longer arc of the policing of the park and draw attention to how the Echo Park Lake displacement was brokered by various actors and agencies. In the weeks leading up to the forced eviction, with the threat of violence in the air, several encampment residents had left out of fear. Many others had accepted Project Roomkey placements because they were promised that this would be a guaranteed path to stable, permanent housing. With such promises in mind, Street Watch LA organizers such as Jed Parriott and Ground Lane LA organizers such as Ashley Bennett were at the park every day, working with LAHSA outreach workers and service providers to ensure that residents were on the placement lists.

However, as shown in previous chapters of this monograph, not all Echo Park Lake residents received such placements. Yet others, anticipating the carcerality that accompanied such placements, refused them. In the aftermath of the displacement, they had no place to go. With scores of protesters arrested, a caravan of organizers from Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA crossed police lines and made their way to the entrance of the park to help the remaining residents. Organizers helped load the personal belongings of residents into vehicles and shuttled them to motels in Echo Park and Hollywood. Park residents Ayman Ahmed and David Busch-Lilly remained in the park for an additional evening and were arrested the following morning. Organizers were transported from jail to motel rooms immediately after their release. In total, 16 Echo Park Lake residents who had not received or had declined placement in Project Roomkey were temporarily housed in **community-funded motel rooms** for four to six weeks following the displacement. Organizers from Ground Game LA, Street Watch LA, and SELAH Neighborhood Homeless Coalition worked together to check on residents, deliver meals, and renew the weekly payment for the rooms. When the funding for the motels and meals ran out several weeks later, a majority of the residents made the decision to return to the streets as opposed to Project Roomkey. The willingness of displaced Echo Park Lake residents to accept motel rooms provided by community members but not from the City is telling. Throughout the weeks that the community-funded motel program was in place, residents lived peacefully in their rooms, never causing a disturbance or getting into trouble. The rooms provided by community members did not come with curfews or strict program guidelines, but instead with compassion, support, and care. Running the community-funded motel program required a lot of time and effort from organizers working on a volunteer basis, but truly demonstrates the possibility of running interim housing programs devoid of carceral rules, security, stress and anxiety, and instead based in compassion, care, and support.

# Timeline of Key Events at Echo Park Lake



**6.**

**THE POLICE  
AND THE PARK**

## 6. THE POLICE AND THE PARK



Figure 6-1. Protesters stand off with police, Echo Park Lake, March 25, 2021. Photo by Robin Petering.

The police invasion of Echo Park Lake on March 24 and 25, 2021, has become a searing moment in the City's collective memory. The spectacular show of militarized police formations, the arrests of scores of protesters, the police beating of protesters and bystanders, mark a seeming exception, one in which the liberal city is taken over by police force. Yet, the police power demonstrated during the two nights of the Echo Park Lake displacement are neither exceptional nor new. In this chapter, we trace the long arc of policing in Echo Park, its implications for working-class communities of color, including those who are unhoused, and identify how such policing is expanded through deputization. Paying close attention to the growing militarization of the park rangers and the emergence of mercenary brokers of displacement, such as Urban Alchemy, we situate racial banishment in such a formation.

### Gustavo's Story

Community and justice matter greatly to Gustavo. Displaced from the Echo Park Lake encampment community at age 55, Gustavo's story exemplifies a perpetual state-sanctioned banishment that people in poverty, people of color, and people who challenge the control of the police state experience. Throughout narrating his story, Gustavo emphasizes the power struggle between the people and the police, who, as agents of the state, exert their power using carceral logic and punitive force. Gustavo's experiences with forced mobility, risk of deportation, eviction, arrest, and incarceration signify traumatic occurrences of coercive force and surveillance by state agents and show many forms that displacement and banishment take. "Banishment," Gustavo states, "is about lack of justice."

Echo Park was the first place where Gustavo arrived in the 1980s when immigrating from Guatemala to Occupied Turtle Island (North America) and Tongva Land (Los Angeles) at age 17. On his way to reunite with his family who had already immigrated to Tongva Land/Los

Angeles to make an hourly income, Gustavo was stopped and detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). He was taken out of custody by a lawyer whom his family sent. He explains,

I believe that they [the lawyers] said my intentions were to come here and study. That's how they were able to get me out: that my intentions were not to come here and work, but to study. And when they got me out, I remember, they took me to Figueroa Street. And the very first place they took me was Echo Park. Before the lawyers took me to where my family used to live, in their apartment, they took me to Echo Park. Why? Because the woman who was the lawyer had to pick up something at her house, and her house was at Echo Park. That was the very first part, before they took me to my family.

From that moment forward, Echo Park became a very special and significant place for Gustavo.

Many years later, after graduating from high school, working, living with his family, getting married, and eventually separating from his wife, Gustavo shuffled through rented rooms in houses during the 2000s. Eventually working for a couple who bought houses in order to rent out the rooms, Gustavo rented one of the rooms in the house that he managed for this couple. At the beginning of the pandemic, in June 2020, Gustavo realized he was experiencing wage theft and was subsequently evicted after advocating for his paycheck. After seven years of working for this employer, Gustavo thought he had built trust with the couple:

I was so devastated, because I never thought that these people were going to do that to me. I was in a lot of pain from what they did to me. I was devastated. I never thought that I was going to be homeless. So, there was a lot of pain, a lot a lot of pain. A lot of pain. What they did to me was so evil.

Gustavo's experience of wrongful eviction is an example of the entanglement of systems of penalty and housing insecurity. In a February 20, 2022, letter to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Staff Attorney with ACLU SoCal Kath Rogers files a complaint of civil rights violations for the incident. The letter documents that during the financial dispute between Gustavo and his landlord, it is Gustavo's parole officer who informed Gustavo that "he needed to *permanently* leave his apartment . . . within two (2) hours or else he would be arrested." The complaint thus states:

Mr. Otzoy had a legal right to a civil proceeding about his tenancy matter. . . However, [the parole officer] unlawfully forced Mr. Otzoy to *immediately leave his home under threat of arrest without due process of law*. As a result, Mr. Otzoy became homeless in the middle of a global pandemic.

Prior to this incident of banishment, Gustavo randomly rode his bike one day to Echo Park Lake, far from where he was living:

I guess things happen for a reason. Before I got kicked out, I just took my bicycle, and I just went to Echo Park. I just went to Echo Park, and there were some tents there. I approached one tent, and I asked him if the police told them anything about staying there. They said, "No, the police did not tell us anything."

After being evicted by his employer, Gustavo immediately thought of Echo Park Lake and returned there to reside. "I guess there was a really good reason for me to go to Echo Park before I got kicked out. That's how I take it." As a resident of Echo Park Lake, he became heavily involved in the community, spearheading the organizing of a donation table called the Helping Hands Donation Center:

When we put up the Donation Center, we got a lot a lot a lot of stuff: shoes, clothes, water, brand new tents! People noticed, and they went there. Even people who were not living in the tents, they were getting blankets too. Everybody had the right [to receive donations], everybody. Not just people who were living in the tents. Anyone who wanted one.

In the park, Gustavo connected with Street Watch LA at the Power Up table, where people could charge their phones:

I was so grateful! I was so grateful for the people that were there like three times a week to charge our phones. Maybe some people don't think much about it, but, when you're homeless, it's a blessing.

While connecting with Street Watch LA during his time living at Echo Park Lake, Gustavo continued to fight against sweeps, evictions, displacement, and other forms of injustice enforced by the police against unhoused individuals. In an interview with Gustavo, he expresses his commitment to organizations and community confronting the police:

I do admire Street Watch LA, I really do, because I believe that there is no other organization that has the guts to confront the police. I don't think there is another organization that does that. Why? Because other organizations are afraid of the police. I don't think that any of us are. Why? Because we are doing the right thing. So, yeah, I'm pretty sure that none of us are afraid of the police. We are not doing anything wrong. I myself am not afraid of the police. If it's going to happen, it's going to happen. If it comes, I'm going to live my life like that. It's okay. I'm not afraid of them, no. I don't think that any Street Watcher is afraid of them. No, I don't think so...

[On the first day of the police invasion when everyone knew they [the police] were going to be there, we had a meeting. We all sat on the ground, and we had a meeting. "Today's the day. How can we fight this?" I said, "This is my way of helping. I'm going to buy signs and markers. I'm going to buy the supplies. If people want to come and write their own signs to the police, let them come. I'm going to have the supplies here." As soon as we finished the meeting, I went to buy lots of signs, markers, this and that. I was ready: "The police are coming for us, to get rid of us, please help us. Write to the police whatever you want." We made quite a few signs...

I didn't want to leave [Echo Park Lake]. I didn't want to leave there. Because the people that were living there, they were like my family. I used to get along with everyone, like every single one of them—well, there's always someone that doesn't like you for some reason. Hey! That happens *everywhere*...

The second night of the raid, when the police showed up in riot gear in the hundreds to remove people, Gustavo witnessed the masses of protestors in the streets, and communicated via phone with the remaining Echo Park Lake residents who were inside the park about the show of support outside.

They were protesting so peacefully there. [The police] arrested them when they protested so peacefully. And what did the police do? Sent their hundreds and hundreds in, arresting them, putting them in jail, shooting at them. No matter what kind of bullets, they are still bullets; they were rubber bullets, but still, they were bullets. So who are the real criminals here? It's the police. It's the City Council, because they are the ones to send the police there. They are the ones to give millions and millions to the police to do the criminal things. Yeah. So that's why I decided to join Street Watch LA, because of what they [the police] did to us. Did they hurt me a lot? Of course. But it hurt me more what they did to Street Watch LA. They were not doing anything bad, they were just protesting so peacefully. And these police think they have the right to do whatever they want. That's wrong.

Even people that didn't want us there, they were on our side because of what the police did—maybe they didn't think about how the police were going to get rid of us. But in seeing the truth, I don't think they were on the side of the police anymore, for what they did was too much. Seeing hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of police move in on us. How much money do you think they spent on us? One million? Two million? Why didn't they use that money for people that really need that money? That's a waste of money. Not only that, the way they treat everyone! A lot of communities are helping us. They are with us, which I like. I love it. People are opening their eyes. What the police did there was like a bell ringing in our ears to wake up. Not only to wake up, but open our eyes, to see the reality, which is what people are doing. Yeah, people are waking up. But some people are waking up, but they haven't opened their eyes yet, so we are making them open their eyes to the truth.

After the police raid and the community's separation from each other and banishment from their home, Gustavo stayed in a motel provided by a community organization. He left after a week or two because he felt uncomfortable accepting the community organization's funds for what he believed was the government's responsibility. Gustavo lived briefly in a tent in MacArthur Park and was eventually placed at a Project Roomkey site, where he experienced mental health crises amidst the pervasive carceral logic and practices of the program, particularly the surveillance and monitoring of participants. In June, following the reopening of Echo Park Lake, Street Watch LA launched a petition/flier campaign to have the fence taken down at Echo Park Lake. Gustavo, along with other Street Watchers, led the process of flyering, including on the long chained fence. There, Gustavo was confronted and jumped by park rangers.

They hurt me a lot. I have pictures of the wounds. Mostly my arm, yeah. They hurt my neck, too. Everything happened so quickly. The next thing I knew, I was down, and three or four park rangers were over me. They hurt me a lot. Like I said, they know what happened, they know what they did. They supposedly work for justice, but not really. They just work for themselves. They think they have the right to do what they want, because they represent justice. That's why we need to make changes in the justice department. After everything happened, supposedly the police arrived and took me to the hospital. That's what the park rangers say. But guess what? The police never got there. The ambulance got there. The ambulance took me to the hospital for my wounds, but the police never got there. But the park rangers wrote that the police got there and took me to the hospital, which never happened. They're just making up the story, as always. It's not the first time, and I'm pretty sure it's not going to be the last time!

Later, the park rangers accused Gustavo of vandalism and of battery on a peace officer, saying Gustavo had put his hands on a park ranger. "They [the City] spent almost one million dollars to renew the park. They spent thousands and thousands of dollars putting up cameras. But when I supposedly went there to attack them, the cameras were off? What is that? Hiding the truth." At this point, Gustavo was not yet officially banished from the park, but he was set up by the City to be surveilled and targeted.

His experience and fear of surveillance continued while at the Project Roomkey site. On July 8, 2021, Gustavo received a notice of “non-compliance” from the program and was subsequently exited by security. Causing a mental health crisis related to fear of being surveilled, the carceral logics of the Project Roomkey program perpetuate an attitude and practice of people in positions of power that invalidates and gaslights the experiences of people being controlled, shuffled, confined, and banished through the homeless management bureaucracy. Banishment is an active process of negligence, in which people exit or self-exit from temporary placements or are deemed ineligible for those placements altogether. What’s more, people who have interfaced with social service agencies and participated in their programs are being disappeared from the official lists. Gustavo, for example, does not show up anywhere in the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority data, reinforcing the disappearance caused by ongoing acts of banishment.

On August 23, 2021, Gustavo was arrested for parole violation. Though Gustavo had not yet been officially banished from Echo Park Lake, he continued to be targeted by park rangers. Days before his arrest, the park rangers took a photo of Gustavo at the Power Up table. Later that week, Gustavo received a call from his parole officer demanding a report. Upon reporting, he was arrested and incarcerated for parole violation, and the subsequent bail approval came with a new parole condition: a ban from being within 500 feet of Echo Park Lake. Gustavo was banished from the very first place in Los Angeles he ever visited, a space that became home and which he had advocated to remain public for all. Committed to community and justice, Gustavo continued to advocate for his rights and those of all unhoused Angelenos. He joined Street Watch LA and Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN) to demonstrate at a press conference hosted by Councilmember Joe Buscaino’s office to announce an enforcement bill to ban the presence of unhoused individuals near schools. When one of the councilmember’s staff members pushed a demonstrator, Gustavo stepped in, and a journalist captured the moment in a widely published photograph. After the protest, Gustavo’s parole officer called him and said, “If you keep protesting, you’re going to end up in jail.”

Gustavo now stays at a voucher hotel in Boyle Heights and remains on parole. Anticipating his court case, Gustavo emphasized, again, a power struggle and the importance of community:

That case is not about me. It’s not about me, Gustavo. We—Street Watch LA—are helping thousands and thousands of people. Most of the time, we are watching the police, the sheriff, the City Council and all that. By doing that, we help the community.

On February 2, 2022, Gustavo went to court, and his community showed up in support. After waiting all day outside of the courtroom for the case to begin and several attempts to get Gustavo to agree to a deal, in the end, the prosecution agreed to dismiss the rangers’ case against Gustavo. However, Gustavo’s parole officer maintained the condition that he is prohibited from going to Echo Park Lake. While the rangers’ case was dismissed, Gustavo finds himself, yet again, banished.

## To Protect And (Pre)Serve

As our comrades at Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH) write in their zine, [Blueprint for Displacement: Breaking Down LAPD’s Echo Park Rehabilitation After Action Report](#), the eviction by gunpoint at Echo Park Lake was “Not a moment in time, but a continuation of history.”

This section, “To Protect and (Pre)serve,” is named after the combined motto of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), “To Protect and to Serve,” and the Los Angeles Park Rangers, “To Protect and Preserve.” Unpacking and contextualizing events from the early 2000s to the present reveals the long arc of policing in Echo Park. As traced through the gang injunction, prior and current rehabilitation projects, expansion of the park rangers as law enforcement officers, targeting of unhoused people, and implicit and explicit surveillance of people of color (especially Black and Latinx park users and residents), clear relationalities between law enforcement and the “security politics of white liberalism” introduced in Chapter 1 show the ways in which the policing of the park alters social and physical geographies for constituents made vulnerable by inequitably enforced laws.

## The Project of Gentrification

The neighborhood of Echo Park and the park itself, Echo Park Lake, share a history of being depicted as areas of high crime, gang activity, and poverty. Echo Park is also the longtime home to a significant police presence—even by Los Angeles standards—as it falls within the



jurisdiction of the internationally notorious Rampart Division of the LAPD. It is also the home to LAPD Police Academy, which served as the site of police staging for the raid on Echo Park Lake in 2021. The friction between poor communities of color, predominantly Latinx, and police has been pronounced since the neighborhood became a majority non-white after World War II, providing a backdrop for how narratives of crime, criminality, and policing played out before and after the park raid.

Gentrification in Echo Park increased dramatically in the 2000s as downtown development spread into the neighborhood, which offered cultural cachet and a scenic lake made famous in films like *Chinatown*. By the end of the 2000s, Echo Park was rapidly transforming, and the Latinx and Asian American population quickly dropped. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, policy, law enforcement, housing precarity, and developers acted in alignment to force out poor immigrants and people of color. Echo Park Lake has long stood as a vital symbolic and material hearth of the neighborhood, and the raid of the park marks an historic moment in a long-term campaign to “reimagine” the park.

Luiza Padilla Mavropoulos, a vendor at Echo Park Lake, [recalled](#) after the raid:

I remember when families were evicted in 2009. They were camping here in Echo Park. LAPD would come at 6 a.m. every morning and tear down their tents. If they didn't open the tents, they would cut the tents. What happened a few months ago isn't something new—we've seen it going back since the 70s.

I used to have a youth group here. We were 500 strong. Gentrification totally changed that demographic. We lost everybody. You see this church right here. That church was standing room only with three parishes: English, Spanish and Korean. Anywhere you go, you'll find a seat now. I only know one family left. Everybody else is gone.

The big issue goes back to the '80s with the Echo Park Improvement Association (EPIA). I was the only Latina who attended those meetings. Their whole thing was, “Get rid of the Cholos,” because they are messing up our property values. It's always been about property values. A lot of the old time members of the EPIA are multiple homeowners now, actually renting out houses.

Back then, there was a vibe, there was a spirit, there was a feeling about this whole community. Everybody talked to each other—yeah we had gang issues—but as long as everybody was at least, “Hi, how you doin’,” nobody messed with you. You can say hi now and people just look at you funny. **That's not a neighborhood. That's just another street you live on. That community life for me is gone. Gentrification hit everywhere.**

In 2007 Echo Park Lake was closed with no apparent notice for the annual Lotus Festival. Journalist Daniel Hernandez [mused](#) on the fate of the lake, if it were this easy to take away at short notice, in a blog post titled “Echo Park, in the crosshairs of gentrification”:

For the Lotus Festival this weekend, obnoxious temporary fences went up around the park's exterior, two weeks ahead of time, with no warning. Questions keep circulating as to what might happen to the lake in the future.

**In 2011 Echo Park Lake, under the jurisdiction of Councilmember Eric Garcetti, was closed again via fence, this time for a multi-year “makeover” that cost the City \$45 million.** Mitch O'Farrell was a CD 13 staffer under Garcetti from the early 2000s through 2013. In the summer of 2013, the lake reopened with a fresh makeover, including replanted lotuses, updated boathouse, new paddle boats, and a restaurant, all with the accompanying language of “rebirth” and “revival” that often accompanies large scale gentrification projects. The [Los Angeles Times](#) reported:

“It was the heart of Echo Park, but it was in need of a triple bypass,” Los Angeles Mayor-elect Eric Garcetti said at a morning ceremony marking the lake's and park's formal reopening. He recalled some of the past troubles with crime and pollution but predicted a safer and cleaner future. “Today we celebrate the rebirth of a lake, of a park and of a neighborhood,” said Garcetti, who has represented the area on the City Council.”

The message was clear: the New Echo Park had arrived. Mere months after the park reopening, the City of Los Angeles enacted the Echo Park Gang Injunction in the Glendale Corridor as another tool to banish poor people of color from Echo Park. City Attorney Mike Feuer targeted six local gangs. In a thesis on this topic, Soriano writes:

As part of the lawsuit, the injunction sought to criminalize “gang-related activity” including graffiti, loitering and other forms of perceived gang influenced behavior. Long term Echo Park residents were made unwelcome from the park itself fearing that they would be marked as gang affiliated.

...

In Los Angeles, where there are over forty-six gang injunctions, criminalized Brown and Black people find little to no space to freely move without confronting racial, class, and gendered boundaries that gang injunctions impose. Gang injunctions in Los Angeles act to control access to public space throughout the city.<sup>50</sup>

Even the *Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board thought the gang injunction was unnecessary when it published the editorial, “[Does Echo Park need a gang injunction?](#),” in 2013:

Residents say that the worst of times was the 1990s and that since then, the area has gradually improved. They can, and do, argue over the reason for that improvement: the most violent gang members were prosecuted and sent to prison; the area became gentrified by young professionals and artists unconnected to the history of neighborhood rivalries; or the culture of gang violence petered out, even though the suspicions and loyalties remain, and violent crimes still occur.

Also recognizing this trend, Soriano notes further, “This gang injunction was proposed and passed despite the neighborhood’s significantly decreased crime rates.”<sup>51</sup> The injunction, like the multiple park closures, helped to further normalize the collapse and control of public space at the park. As a result, the push out of people of color—via eviction, raised rents, self-eviction, or incarceration—increased and attracted even more real estate speculation, as was the intention. In a 2015 blog post, the real estate company Real Estate Unlimited writes, “As Echo Park becomes a wealthier area, many former gang members can no longer afford to live there.”

The gang injunction was challenged legally by the Youth Justice Coalition and others from 2016 onward, and [the injunction has effectively been dismantled](#). However, much of the damage to the Echo Park Community has already been inflicted in the interim. Demographic data from the neighborhood [reveals](#) that “the Latinx population of Echo Park [decreased 10 percent](#) from 2000 to 2010 and the white population increased 10 percent. From 2000 to 2014, [5,000 Latinos and 2,000 Asian Americans](#) were pushed out of the neighborhood as speculation, gentrification, and Airbnbs exploded.”

As gang activity dissipated in the wake of the injunction and the cost of living soared, the presence of homelessness at the park increased. And as the unhoused population increased at the park between 2018 and 2020, so did complaints, sweeps, and police presence at the park. **In effect, the hysteria around gang activity was supplanted by hysteria around the unhoused.**

This conflation of organized crime and poverty creates the flattening perception that unhoused people are dangerous, inducing further fearmongering. In an email from late 2020, procured through public records request, CD 13 staffer Marisol Rodriguez invokes “active gang shootings” and “on-going crime that is happening at the park” as reasons why the Echo Park Lake situation is urgent and O’Farrell’s top priority. O’Farrell personally chimes in on the thread to reiterate the alleged peril when he says, “The Lake is dangerous.”

In private and public, **Councilmember O’Farrell repeatedly used the perception of gangs in Echo Park to paint the unhoused people living at the lake as criminals as he tried to construct the narrative that there was an organized crime ring led by the unhoused.** “[The Homeless Republic of Echo Park: Life \(and a Death\) in L.A.’s Fastest-Growing Tent City](#),” a hit piece on the poor residents of Echo Park Lake in *Los Angeles Magazine* from December 2020, invokes all of the tropes that O’Farrell’s office would employ for the next year.

In some ways, Echo Park has become the perfect microcosm of Los Angeles at this particular and very peculiar moment in the city’s history, an intersection of rampant homelessness, pandemic politics, class warfare, mass marketing, radical chic, and, when you scratch just below the surface, **drug abuse, crime, and heartbreaking tragedy.**

These talking points were pushed by O’Farrell’s office, law enforcement, and YIMBY astroturf groups, such as [Friends of Echo Park Lake](#), in the lead up to and following the raid. Specifically, Mitch O’Farrell promoted two narratives about alleged crime at the park after the raid. The first was the waste narrative, promoted in the wake of the park closure, in April 2021. The **waste narrative combined classic homeless tropes of crime, drug usage, unsanitariness** to try to implicitly blame the unhoused community for a [hyperbolic amount of waste](#) dredged from the lake:

The services were provided as conditions became increasingly unsafe at Echo Park Lake, he said. In addition to five fatalities that occurred at the park in 2020, preliminary analyses conducted by city personnel found approximately 30 pounds of sharp objects including hypodermic needles,

50 Soriano, *Getting Up: Gentrification, Gang Injunctions and Graffiti in Echo Park, Los Angeles*, 1-2.

51 Soriano, *Getting Up: Gentrification, Gang Injunctions and Graffiti in Echo Park, Los Angeles*, 2.

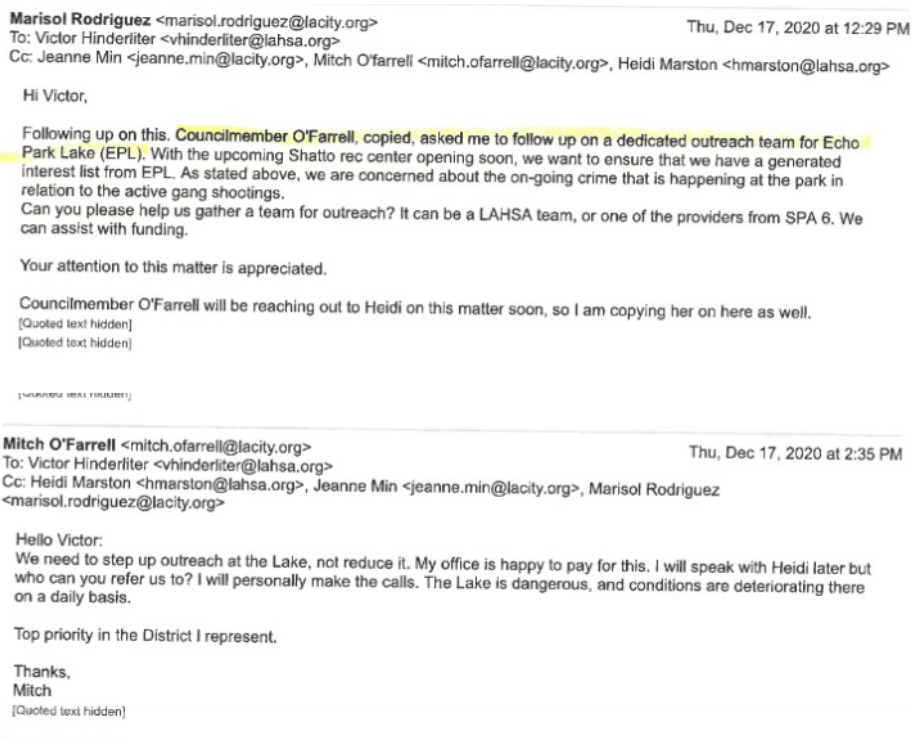


Figure 6-2. Emails between CD 13 and LAHSA, December 17, 2020.

400 pounds of biological waste and 43 tons of solid waste. Weapons, including firearms, were also found, but exact totals were not immediately available.

The second bogus narrative was a **crime narrative**, deployed to friendly news outlets like *Eastsider LA*. (Publishing an article with the headline, "[Crime drops following Echo Park Lake closure](#)," *Eastsider LA* qualified this narrative with, "It's not clear, however, if the decline in crime was directly related to the closure of the park on March 25.") When the lake reopened in May 2021, O'Farrell continued to double down on sensationalistic, reactionary rhetoric without substantiating his claims. In a [statement](#) to media, he claimed:

The situation at the lake was not "commune-like," and it was naïve and inaccurate to describe it as such. It was unsafe, unhealthy, inhumane, and deadly—with multiple fatalities, widespread drug usage, and criminal activity, including reports of sexual assaults.

**Historic gang activity and fear of the unhoused were combined to catalyze the narrative that the park and neighborhood were in need of "cleaning up," cynically taking advantage of and amplifying narratives of danger, gangs, and crime related to the unhoused to further induce displacement.**

Indeed, long before the raid at Echo Park Lake, Council District 13 had been particularly hostile and discriminatory towards unhoused constituents. [Court Watch Los Angeles data](#) reveals that between 2017 and 2019, LAPD "issued more citations targeting unhoused people in CD 13 than in any other district . . . nearly 1 for every unhoused person in the district." Reinforcing the prevalence of both racial policing against Black Angelenos and the overrepresentation of Black individuals within the Los Angeles unhoused population, CD 13 "is also the district with the most extreme racial disparity in citations by LAPD. Our data shows that **LAPD cites Black people in CD 13 at a rate 7 times their share of the population.**"

Yet, the coordination against the residents at Echo Park Lake marks a particularly brutal and concentrated period of discrimination in the face of powerful organizing and space-making efforts led by residents of color to create and maintain a community in public space. **The approximately 16 months of coordination against the Echo Park Lake residents—sometimes by design, and often through neglect—**

included a vast array of NIMBY coalitions, law enforcement groups, service agencies, and CD 13 officials, and culminated in the planning and execution of an eviction at gunpoint on March 24, 2021. Costly, degrading, and ineffective, this revanchist approach to “reclaiming” public space highlights many of the policy flaws and unchecked police powers at play in low-income communities. While each group played a significant role in delegitimizing, and eventually entirely illegalizing Echo Park Lake residents, this analysis focuses on an under-investigated arm of Los Angeles law enforcement, who despite their small force and vast geography were overrepresented at Echo Park Lake: the Los Angeles Park Rangers, led by Chief Ranger and former Rampart Division detective Joe Losorelli.

## The Shifting Scope of Park Rangers

Founded in December 1965 with a crew of four rangers, “the mission of the [City of Los Angeles Park Ranger Division](#) is to enrich the lives of the residents of Los Angeles by providing safe, welcoming parks and recreation facilities for people of all ages to play, learn, contemplate, build a sense of community, and be good stewards of our environment.” Per their organizational mission, rangers are tasked to “protect those who are using parks and protect park resources so that future generations may enjoy them.” By 2021, the program grew to 31 rangers with “peace officer” status, with stated plans to expand to 50 sworn officers. [Whereas](#) “from 1965 to 1985, the program was staffed exclusively with employees in the civil service classification of park maintenance supervisor [who] aided the public, managed park resources and enriched the community enjoyment of parks through their extensive background knowledge of park fauna and flora, the [21st century park rangers](#) have become “a different animal ... They’re great at conflict resolution, which happens in a park.” Such “conflict resolution” is abetted by park rangers’ ability to write citations and make arrests, and by their everyday carry: baton, pepper spray, handcuffs, LAPD radios, and uniforms that are, [by their own admission](#), difficult to discern from Sheriff’s Deputies’ khakis. This gear, largely identical to LAPD provisions, is paired with basic police academy training, which must be successfully completed upon hire. The overlap between the park rangers and the police—so different in stated mission and force size, and yet so alike in their roles as actors of the surveillance state—has been a point of tension not only with community members, such as people living at Echo Park Lake, but also within City Council and LAPD leadership. Park rangers are distinct from their similarly-trained law enforcement colleagues in two ways: they do not have firearm provisions and the geography of their patrol is limited. However, City officials and the park rangers themselves have contested those distinctions.

A [motion by Councilmember Joe Buscaino](#) filed in early 2020 and advanced from the Arts, Parks, Health, Education and Neighborhoods Committee in November 2021 aims to arm park ranger in their capacity as law enforcement officers, an expansion of their scope that increases their resemblance to police officers. The motion claims that “Approximately 70 percent of a ranger’s daily duties are related to law enforcement activities and the first responder to an emergency in a City park is likely to be a park ranger,” despite the exponential differences in personnel—for every park ranger, there are 350 LAPD officers. **Such requests are not new. Park rangers have requested to carry firearms for at least 25 years**, but they have traditionally been met with resistance by the LAPD, City Council, and their own department, though this may be changing of late.

In 1996, the [Los Angeles Times reported](#) on the effort of the park rangers to carry guns. They mounted “an aggressive campaign to carry the same 9-millimeter handguns used by Los Angeles police.” As one City of Los Angeles park ranger put it, “We see it no differently than a construction worker asking for a hard hat.” Others disagreed. The Assistant Manager of Recreation and Parks, the Department that oversees the park rangers, stated, “I don’t think they’re hampered at all by not having weapons.” LAPD officials emphasized that “the general position of the Police Department is that we don’t want a lot of concurrent groups doing the same thing in the same area—all armed.” In other words, the LAPD wanted “one city, one police department.” Lending credence to their concern, the public began referring to the Los Angeles County Park Rangers as “park police” after the force was armed.

In 2000, the Los Angeles City Council [considered a motion](#) to reduce the law enforcement capacity of the park rangers, limiting rangers’ authority to make arrests to only “cases in which rangers’ or park visitors’ lives are in danger.” Department of Recreation and Parks leadership “wanted to leave law enforcement to the police and to limit rangers primarily to their naturalist work to increase the safety of park patrons and employees,” as well as “to put to bed the issue of arming rangers.” Chief Ranger Charles Shorts admitted that the shift in rangers’ role from nature-focused service providers to law enforcers actively harmed both the parks and the program itself: “We’ve been involved in so much security, we had not been offering sufficient interpretive and educational programming.” While the motion [failed to gain City Council approval](#) in the face of strong ranger opposition, over the next two decades, this expansion from educational programming into securitization became more entrenched. Another shift has been in the making during the same time. Since 1996, the number of parks in Los Angeles has grown, but the number of park rangers has not been commensurate with this growth, even with the

supplementation of part-time park patrol officers. What is clear though is park rangers have targeted specific parks in the name of crime-reduction, such as in the now defunct [Safe Parks program](#) which was a partnership between LAPD and the Department of Recreation and Parks. What is of concern to us is the surge in park ranger activity in Echo Park Lake since 2019, one that can only be explained by uncovering the systematic targeting of the unhoused community and its leaders. Put another way, how did Echo Park Lake become Losorelli's park?

## Losorelli's Park

Before serving as the current Chief Ranger, Joe Losorelli served in the LAPD for 35 years, retiring in 2017 as is the LAPD Commanding Officer of Rampart Detective Division—the division that includes Echo Park Lake and its surrounding neighborhood. Infamous for the corruption of its anti-gang unit in the 1990s, the [Rampart Division's scandal](#) implicated over 70 officers, led to the overturning of 106 criminal convictions due to falsified evidence and perjury, generated over 140 civil lawsuits against the City, and eventually dispersed a then-record \$125 million in settlements. In Los Angeles—and American—collective memory (and through widespread media portrayal) “Rampart” remains synonymous with police corruption, racialized policing, and the uneven enforcement of the surveillance state. Losorelli's appointment marks an almost unrecognizable shift from the park rangers' origins, or more recent moments like the 1987 appointment of Lucia Ruta to chief ranger. A landscape expert by training who opposed the move to make park rangers armed police offers, Ruta [shortened the peace officer training](#) “so that trained rangers wouldn't leave for other law enforcement departments” and to preserve the naturalist focus of the job. Yet, Ruta's [compliance with a 1988 decision](#) to place park rangers in six South / South Central Los Angeles parks to surveil and dissuade perceived gang members from gathering marks a key turning point in the park rangers' trajectory from preservationists to biased protectors.

**Losorelli is unabashed in his claims that unhoused people are not welcome in the park rangers' Los Angeles.** From declaring that unhoused people's presence threatens park settings where “[decent people](#)” like to go to claims at a Brentwood Homeowners' Association meeting that he has “hired 18 more park rangers and is trying to [form a team](#) to focus exclusively on encampment clearance.” Public statements and emails to CD 13 representatives, service agencies, and LAPD, particularly after a failed sweep in early January 2020, indicate that Echo Park Lake was both Losorelli's testing ground for anti-unhoused practices and highlight his and other key agencies' underlying fear: that Echo Park Lake residents were well organized and asserting their right to public space. On January 15, [Losorelli wrote](#) to an area LAPD Captain that the hygiene trailer (a portable shower system) should no longer be deployed “anywhere near the park” as the number of residents grew, because “the homeless population now feel a sense of entitlement to be in the park regardless of city park rules . . . This park is turning into a campground and eventually will become another occupy L.A.” His suggestion was heeded, on the grounds that “the hygiene trailer is routinely deployed at MacArthur Park . . . a short walk.” MacArthur Park, located in another Council District and serving a separate community, is nearly two miles away. Two days later, [while coordinating](#) with Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's staff to ensure LAPD presence at “a clean up on the 24th,” Losorelli wrote “If we dont [sic] work together on this park, we are going to lose it.”

**Losorelli's public statements, emails, and timing point to City and Council District 13 anxiety around the presence of unhoused people living at Echo Park Lake as the mobilizing force behind the rangers' geographic shift.** Reporting on the presence of rangers at Echo Park Lake prior to the encampment's growth in 2020 is limited to comments on the park's plentiful fish and fauna. Though advocates and those who lived at the park recall an earlier presence, media attention to ranger presence began with coverage of protests against sweeps in January 2020 and the arrest of Echo Park Lake resident Davon Brown from his tent in late February 2020. Related park ranger-filed LAPD reports from February 2020 cite five rangers (including Chief Losorelli and accounting for 16 percent of the force) and four City of Los Angeles Recreation and Parks Security Officers (part of the aforementioned reallocation program) as conducting weekly multi-agency Echo Park clean ups “for bulky items, trash removal, and outreach service at Echo Park” alongside City of Los Angeles Recreation and Parks maintenance and LA Sanitation teams. The frequent coordination between the rangers and LAPD-controlled Recreation and Parks Security Officers, part of the LAPD Security Services is well documented in photos and reports, seems to indicate a loophole around rangers' limited police powers.

**Radical organizers of color at Echo Park, particularly Black organizers, implemented new forms of spatial justice, threatening Losorelli's white supremacist worldview, which was linked to his legacy of racialized policing in Rampart. This organizing became a locus of his patrols.** Ashley Bennett, a co-author of this monograph, faced retaliatory firing after Losorelli accused her of “steering up

To: Joe Losorelli[joe.losorelli@lacity.org]; Jimmy Kim[jimmy.kim@lacity.org]; Juan Benitez[juan.benitez@lacity.org]; Brenda Aguirre[brenda.aguirre@lacity.org]; Marisol Rodriguez[marisol.rodriguez@lacity.org]; Javier Solis[javier.solis@lacity.org]
From: Alfonso Lopez
Sent: Wed 1/15/2020 5:30:14 PM
Subject: Re: Hygiene unit at Echo Park.

Joe,

I completely understand your position and support your rational. In addition, the hygiene trailer is routinely deployed at MacArthur Park which is close by to Echo park and support those who wish to use the facility after a short walk.

Al

ALFONSO LOPEZ, Captain
Commanding Officer
Rampart Area

"I pledge, as a good pedestrian, to always look left, to always look right, to always look left again, and continue looking while crossing the street."

From: Joe Losorelli <joe.losorelli@lacity.org>
Sent: Wednesday, January 15, 2020 7:59 AM
To: Jimmy Kim <jimmy.kim@lacity.org>; Juan Benitez <juan.benitez@lacity.org>; Brenda Aguirre <brenda.aguirre@lacity.org>; Marisol Rodriguez <marisol.rodriguez@lacity.org>; Javier Solis <javier.solis@lacity.org>
Subject: Hygiene unit at Echo Park.

Hi Jimmy, As much as I hate to sound unsympathetic to the homeless at Echo Park, at this point I think we should "not" deploy the Hygiene Trailer anywhere near the park. This is why: The tent population is growing in the park is growing every week. I have been out to the park on many occasions over the past few weeks and the homeless population now feel a sense of entitlement to be in the park regardless of city park rules (Tents in Park during the day/trespassing after hours).

This park is turning into a campground and eventually will become another occupy L.A. I have been in discussions with the maintenance crew at the park and I am being told of all the vandalism and destruction caused by the homeless on a weekly basis in and around the park. I am meeting with CD 13, LAPD, and AP Dinz on the 23rd to discuss a strategy to address the park. However, I will not move forward on any enforcement until after I discuss this issue with our general manager.

At this time, by bringing services to Echo Park (with all issues currently happening at the park) sends out a perception that we will now be catering to the homeless in the park and making them feel more at home. THIS IS JUST MY OPINION

JOE LOSORELLI
Chief Park Ranger
Griffith Park Ranger Station
4730 Crystal Springs Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90027
323/644-6661

To: Alfonso Lopez[30243@lapd.online]
Cc: Joe Losorelli[joe.losorelli@lacity.org]
From: Marisol Rodriguez
Sent: Fri 1/17/2020 9:10:26 PM
Subject: Re: Echo park

Hi, can We get on a conference call? What is the best number to reach you?

Marisol Rodriguez
District Director
CD13

Sent from my iPhone

On Jan 17, 2020, at 12:55 PM, Alfonso Lopez <30243@lapd.online> wrote:

I have personally invited him and he has confirmed his attendance with me. Al Lopez

Sent from my iPhone

On Jan 17, 2020, at 12:34 PM, Joe Losorelli <joe.losorelli@lacity.org> wrote:

Hi Marisol, can you make sure the LAPD Commander Don Graham, the LAPD homeless coordinator, gets an invitation to the meeting on the 23rd. The homeless group in echo park is threatening conflict with future clean ups in the park. The park has been vandalized, the vegetation (grass area) is gone where the tents have been. Our electrical circuit boxes have been breached by the homeless, not to mention the complaints of the drug and drinking activity in the park that we are getting. We were out there today posting for a clean up on the 24th.

If we dont work together on this park, we are going to lose it. Most of the homeless in the park are young people in their 20s.

LAPSHA has provided services to the homeless in the park but no one accepts the services.

Figure 6-3. Emails between Joe Losorelli, CD 13, and LAPD, January 15-17, 2020.

the crowd” and “causing problems” in emails to CD 13 staff (see Chapter 5). She reflects in an interview with the After Echo Park Lake research collective:

Ayman Ahmed helped create something that completely challenged the status quo. To be a young Black man, there’s definitely some prejudice, some racism. Losorelli could have started targeting other places first. It could have been MacArthur Park, it could have been Venice. But what happened at Echo Park Lake directly threatened his white supremacist [view]. Just look at the track record: how he treated the community, how he advocated for me to lose my job, and how started touting the narratives about Ayman running crime rings and similar things—are you kidding me?

Losorelli then set his sights on Davon Brown, who he violently arrested on February 26, 2020. Brown was frequently quoted in media reports at the time, including after the rangers’ failed January 13 sweep and the successful eviction defense on January 24. As with Ayman Ahmed and Bennett, park rangers viewed the public nature and effectiveness of Brown’s organizing as a threat to their own control. Brown’s arrest record includes a (denied) park ranger order for banishment: “Request the court order the suspect to stay away 500 yards from Echo Park.” And this chapter begins with the story of Gustavo Otzoy; the rangers tracked him within and beyond the park—even after his eviction—as his voice and presence as an activist grew, leading to Otzoy’s arrest and ongoing banishment from Echo Park Lake. Losorelli strategically targeted key organizers as a means to weaken community resistance, particularly as Black leaders sought to build solidarity within the encampment.

The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and UTACH record similar connections in their Blueprint for Displacement: Breaking Down LAPD’s Echo Park Rehabilitation After Action Report zine:

It’s no surprise that police surveillance, enforcement and engagement dramatically increased once a core of Black leadership began to grow among the residents of the encampment. That’s when police and park rangers started showing up most aggressively, ramping up tickets, arrests, and being politically intimidated in jail. Anti-Blackness opened the door to the brutalization of Indigenous and gender non-conforming park community leaders, along with other lake residents.

### Expanding Enforcement

The targeting of Bennett, Brown, and Otzoy provide three examples of the unusually attuned and insidious surveillance methods deployed by both the rangers and LAPD. Their “Echo Park Rehabilitation After Action Report” lays out the broader, systemic structure behind this surveillance: **SARA, or Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment**. Officials and officers were concerned about the “distinctly different group of individuals” who began inhabiting the park in November 2019, who the report recalls having “an unusual level of external support with easy access to resources like food, camping equipment, and electronics,” deemed “aggressive and threatening.” Reacting to this concern, the Rampart Division Commanding Officer formally launched a SARA Project. LAPD frames SARA efforts as “wholistic” and collaborative, and uses the program to rebrand sweeps, threats, and disruptions as “education and outreach activities.”

Between January of 2020 and March of 2021, Rampart Area SLOs [Senior Lead Officers] recorded 52 education and outreach activities geared towards the PEH in Echo Park. Instead of giving citations, they issued warnings for quality of life violations. Rather than arresting people for sleeping in the park, they provided security for cleanups and outreach efforts led by City partners

In contrast, [Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and UTACH's analysis](#), and the aforementioned stories of targeting, reveal SARA's true purpose.

LAPD pretends this program isn't just more of the same racist, proactive enforcement by hiding behind coordinated outreach efforts with the city and other stakeholders (including the developers and gentrifiers that are contributing to making rent too damn high). LAPD's outreach efforts were never intended to support the needs of the unhoused residents of Echo Park but instead to weaken the encampment's solidarity and collect data to map out enforcement strategies.

Implementing a SARA project allowed LAPD and partners to access new monitoring resources, reorient public image regarding their presence at the park, and selectively implement partnerships in the effort to displace residents.

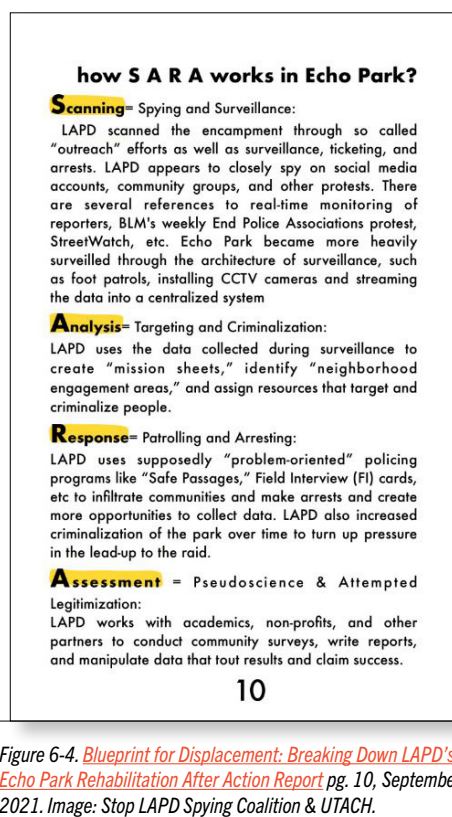


Figure 6-4. [Blueprint for Displacement: Breaking Down LAPD's Echo Park Rehabilitation After Action Report](#) pg. 10, September 2021. Image: [Stop LAPD Spying Coalition & UTACH](#).

## Planning the Raid

As detailed in the previous chapter, in the sixteen months that dozens of Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell’s CD 13 constituents lived at Echo Park Lake, he refused to meet with them.

While O’Farrell and his CD 13 staff continued to ignore meeting requests with unhoused constituents at Echo Park Lake, they met with housed constituents, validating and favoring voices deemed more powerful in a complaint-driven system. In emails released as part of a public records act request, staff members echoed Losorelli’s claims against Brown, Ahmed, and other residents, **painting Black Echo Park Lake residents and organizers as dangerous conspirators**. Coordination against the encampment culminated in extensive partnerships with law enforcement to sweep and close the park, permanently displacing the Echo Park Lake residents.

The LAPD Echo Park “Rehabilitation After Action Report” reveals that meetings with the Rampart Commanding Officer and Metropolitan Division regarding park closure began in September 2020, but the “Echo Park Operation” was twice delayed. In March 2021, “CD 13 moves forward in closing Echo Park for rehabilitation.” Though the report does not specify meeting dates, CD 13, Recreation and Parks (including the rangers), LAPD, Sanitation, Department of Transit and the City Attorney are all named as planning collaborators for the Echo Park Operation.

### ECHO PARK TIMELINE

Joe Losorelli <joe.losorelli@lacity.org> Tue, Mar 23, 2021 at 4:31 PM  
To: Jimmy Kim <jimmy.kim@lacity.org>

Hi Jimmy, Per your request, this is the timeline for the operation

- 1) Wednesday from 700 a.m. to 6 p.m. normal activity in the park. no law enforcement presence.
- 2) Wednesday at 6 p.m. the LAPD Command Post, located at 1700 Stadium Way, lot 13, becomes operational. I will be in the command Post with Commander Graham.
- 3) Wednesday at 9 p.m. rangers will post the park with LAPD officers.
- 4) at 930 p.m. the fence contractor arrives.
- 5) at 1030 p.m. LAPD and DOT will close all 4 roads around the park only to allow residences, which include Park Avenue, Echo Park Avenue, Bellevue Street and Glendale Bl.
- 6) also at 1030 p.m. the fence will go up around the park with the security aid from LAPD and Rangers. The fence will be left open at the north west section of the park to allow people to exit the park. One a person exits the park, they will not be allowed to re-enter. THIS IS BEST CASE SCENARIO if no protest infringement.

LAPD will be enforce in the area.

Thursday 8 a.m.

- 1) Urban Alchemy will inform all homeless that the park is closing and will be asked to vacate.
- 2) at 900 am. sanitation starts the clean up
- 3) at 1030 p.m. LAPD will arrest anyone who fails to vacate.

LAPD will have a strong presence until Friday morning then they will re-evaluate LAPD will be responsible for all removal of occupants in the park and will make all arrests if necessary.

Captain Abajian and I will be in the commenda post both days.

—  
JOE LOSORELLI  
Chief Park Ranger  
Griffith Park Ranger Station  
4730 Crystal Springs Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90027  
323/644-6661

On Mar 24, 2021, at 4:25 PM, AP Diaz <ap.diaz@lacity.org> wrote:

Additionally, in separate conversations, I've asked Darryl and Cathie a question about the blue park closure signs.

Let me recap City expectations on tonight:

1. Rangers post the 24 hour property notices at 10:30
2. Rangers in addition to No. 1 pass out a CA approved informational flyer (currently being finalized by the CA and printed by CD 13 and being arranged for pick up by Rangers from CD 13)
3. Ideally have Rangers put up at least 5-10 of the blue banners (Darryl worked on) on parts of the installed fence announcing the park closure before the 5AM traditional opening time. For general public awareness of the closure). If the Ranges can do that on the fence or other prominent locations, since our maintenance staff will not be on site before 5 AM, that is ideal. \* we will need to know if this is possible, where the signs are and if they can be delivered or picked up by the Rangers before 5AM.
4. CA has also asked that once those blue signs go up if the Ranges can "tape" the information flyer in No. 2 above on those blue signs.

And lastly document everything with photos.

Then tomorrow the Contractor or our staff can finish the Green No trespassing signs.

One final question: is there is a post removal flyer or notice once the park is closed that is to be placed where any property was removed being posted - perhaps this is the SAN notice.

Thank you. We can jump on a call if needed. To the extent this is all worked out already thank you. Just trying to stay abreast of current activities.

Figure 6-5. Emails showing park ranger-led scheduling and coordination of the eviction, March 23 and 24, 2021.

While the report indicates that LAPD planned the raid with an intended post-eviction hand-off to Recreation and Parks, emails indicate **the park rangers played a crucial role**. Losorelli, for example, was actively emailing schedules on March 23, 2021, and co-lists himself and LAPD Commander and Homeless Coordinator Donald Graham as “in the command Post.” In [a follow-up email](#) emphasizing park ranger involvement, Department of Recreation and Parks Executive Officer and Chief of Staff emphasized a timeline for public noticing that fails to meet even the most lenient interpretation of the required 24 hour notice. Though the LAPD report, emails from CD 13 staff, and law enforcement communications reveal detailed planning over a span of months, intentional lack of communication with the residents and activists who comprised the Echo Park Lake community intensified the confusion, chaos, and trauma that residents and protestors emphasize when recounting March 24, 2021.





Figure 6-6. On the morning of the raid, protesters march between Echo Park Lake and Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's office, near Lemoyne Street & Sunset Boulevard, March 24, 2021. Photo: Joey Scott.

## Voices from the Raid

The raid of Echo Park Lake in March 2021 was nothing short of a full-scale militarized police seizure of public space. It was the culmination of decades worth of policy, policing, surveillance, gentrification and park shut downs and a full expression of state force. As was the case throughout recent history at the park, it was also a response to the success of radical organizing, especially by Black leaders in the encampment, that created a community whose very existence denied and defied the mandates of the police state.

According to CPA and candidate for City Controller, Kenneth Mejia, "it cost taxpayers \$2,039,149 to pay the LAPD to evict unhoused residents out of Echo Park Lake. That could have housed 85 unhoused residents in apartments for a full year." **LAPD deployed 750 officers.** At least 187 people were arrested, including 182 protestors for "Failure to Disperse." Nine were journalists, though LAPD continues to discredit three as "internet bloggers." And yet, as staggering as these statistics are, these numbers do not fully reflect the myriad experiences, encounters, acts of resistance and persistent struggle during and after the raid.

As housed and unhoused organizers from Street Watch LA collectively reflected in a convening held by the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective, the police raid was a deeply traumatic event from which those involved have yet to heal. As this monograph demonstrates, many members of the Echo Park Lake camp are still grappling with the consequences of the raid on a daily basis. Indeed, some of those most closely connected with the community expressed how little they could recall about some aspects of the raid, as their intensity would make them difficult to recall or synthesize. These fractured memories also reflect the nature of the raid itself. Massive and multi-focal, the raid was both organized and fragmented, with large numbers of housed community members joining the fight to protect the park. **The form of this section seeks to reflect that duality, illuminating the experience of the raid through the multivalent perspectives of those who were there. From housed to unhoused, organizer to neighbor, this is the story of the raid on Echo Park Lake in March 2021 through the words of some who lived it.**

The following are excerpts from a collective memory exercise held at UCLA by the *After Echo Park Lake* research collective on November 3, 2021. Additional interviews were conducted with organizers after the initial group session.

## Beginnings

I can tell you that whatever happened didn't boil down to those two days on March 24 and March 23. It started like a month before that, where we could kind of sense something wasn't right in the air.

Okay, so basically the Wednesday rally was super peaceful, it started at seven or eight in the morning. There were so many people, and there were hardly any cops. We started out in the park. People gave the press conference and then we walked out on Sunset past Mitch's office. We marched. We protested. No cop presence.

Glendale Boulevard—that's kind of where the mass protest started. Those hours were really chaotic. I just remember walking up and down, and walking and running up and down Glendale.

It was the worst day of my life, ever. Hands down. It was the scariest, worst day, and it happened so fast. **I haven't even begun to process, let alone recover in any way from what happened.** I went for a walk to Walgreens that night to buy a soda or something, left the park. I came back 10 minutes later or so, 15 minutes later, my friend Allison had called and told me that they're staging at the fuckin'... the Academy. And I was like, "Staging? For what?" I didn't understand. I thought it was something to do with a protest. Anyway, **I got back to Echo Park, it was completely blocked off. They wouldn't let me in.** I didn't know what to do.



Figure 6-7. LAPD block streets surrounding Echo Park Lake, Glendale Blvd & Park Ave, March 24, 2021. Photo: Shanley Kellis.



Figure 6-8. LAPD deploy smoke bombs around the park, March 24, 2021. Photo: ACLU SoCal.

## Staging

On that Wednesday night, we saw those pictures coming in in our communication channels of the staging around the Dodger Stadium area. And I think that was the moment that we **realized** if they arrest 50 people here, it's gonna be a blip, because they're so over-prepared. And then we just started putting call-outs on social media and saying we need as many people to come out here as possible and that we really need support. We started posting pictures of how many police cars were there. And I mean, it was incredible how quickly people started showing up. Because at first it was like, we had 50 or 60 people, kind of huddled together talking about getting ready to be arrested. Then all of a sudden, we're seeing, like, a couple hundred people show up within 45 minutes to an hour.

I made the decision to attend the protest the first time because I saw really terrifying images circulating on Twitter, like documentation of the staging area. I remember this video. Someone must have been taking it while they were driving. Just like seemed like police cars as far as the eye could see. It was clear from that imagery alone that the LAPD was preparing for a literal insurgency.

...I don't even know how to describe, I was so scared... I saw convoy trucks going by on Sunset and Alvarado, with 8, 9 men hanging off the side in full riot gear; 10 police cars in a row with their sirens blaring. And their lights going. Driving 10 cars in a row, driving nowhere.



Figure 6-9. LAPD begins staging near Dodgers Stadium, LAPD Police Academy / Elysian Park, March 24, 2021. Photo: Anonymous.



Figure 6-10. LAPD caravans move from staging area to Echo Park Lake, March 24, 2021. Photo: Vishal P. Singh.

## Negotiation

About the show of force, the unnecessary show of force, the convoy trucks going back and forth on there. To this day, I'm not sure if that was a compliment, if you will, to have support from the community that was coming. We had way more support—still have!—way more support, specifically in Echo Park, than we have non-supporters.

Checking in with folks I remember being on the phone with [someone] who was trying to get in contact with [LAPD Chief] Michel Moore through his connections and being like, “We need to negotiate with the police,” and was like, “I don't know if I feel comfortable with that.” I remember talking. I was like, “Do we want to try to get one of the captains to come and talk to us about what the heck is happening?” Because there was no correspondence between the police and the folks who were living in the park. We didn't understand what was happening. All we knew is that **there were so many people who were still living in the park, different ends of the park.** We had folks like scouting in different locations.

And, yeah, why did we believe the cops? Why did we even listen to them? Really what it comes down to is the leadership that was in place. They took responsibility for what happened. It was the people who lived there who decided to do what they wanted to do. That was in their best interest. They didn't want to escalate. It was all non-violent. They're all a one-love tribe.

## Takeover

So, I walked back up towards Sunset Boulevard, mainly because I just didn't want to have to walk up to the police officer to talk to him, because I don't like doing that. I do not want to be anywhere near a law enforcement officer. And everything just changed. I was crying and screaming at people, because they were sitting at the restaurant. They were standing on the bridge, looking down, talking. They were at the food truck. “What the fuck are you doing? You should drop everything you have, including maybe your child, because these human beings are being...” It was such a fucking mind blow that it was happening, that it was just happening. It was so illegal and so immoral and so insanely wrong. And all for the purpose of basically rich people getting their way and homeless people being removed. The taxpayers paid the LAPD \$500,000 to kick homeless people out of a park.

There were three cops in the middle of the formation with light black flashing lights, flashing and literally flashing lights that they had, because the people were chanting and some of them were closer to the cops. [The police] started flashing the lights in the people's eyes. That story got missed. They make it sound like the protesters started just flashing lights and being aggressive. That was not what happened.

There's like maybe fifty protesters in rows facing off with maybe twenty-five cops in riot gear. And at some point, the police just, you know, by classic fiat declared the protest unlawful. But none of us moved. So this line of like battle-ready police start encroaching with their, like, metal composite batons out, and they're starting to do these sweeps. The police officer directly opposite me was far and away. The most violent cop on the line—his first really hard baseball backswing broke my arm. I immediately recoiled. Luckily, a few gracious protesters took me to the hospital. And so that's how my first night ended.

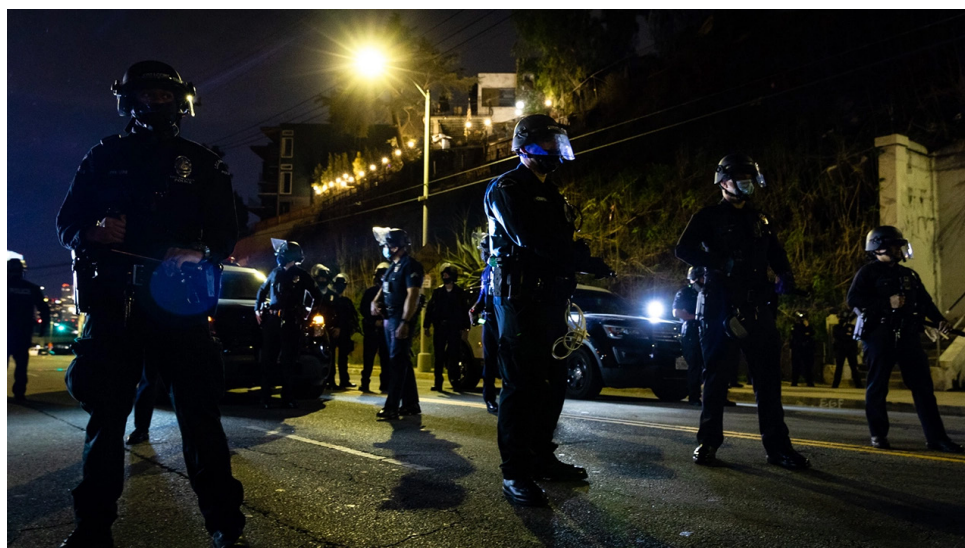


Figure 6-11. LAPD officers move protestors north, Clinton Street Stairway, March 24, 2021. Photo: Shanley Kellis.

## Imprisonment

They took people one-by-one, especially people who were chanting, the people who had the drum circle. They took them first and they put us all in zip ties. When I asked what we were being arrested for... They couldn't tell us when I asked where we were being taken. They couldn't tell us. It was super unorganized. They came with a few buses and then vans.

We ended up kind of on the inside of the police line and we're just, like, in total shock that they had shut everything down. But the fence was fully up. Folks were obviously inside. And it just felt occupied.

They were building the fence around me at three o'clock in the morning, and the poles hitting the ground. One worker would put the pole down like this. It was three o'clock in the morning. So, the other guy just throws it clean, because that person didn't give a fuck, or that person was getting off on it. That was... going back to that scary thing. There was nothing that wasn't scary. I couldn't believe they built that fence around us so fast at three o'clock in the morning. I mean they came at like 9:30 at night. It was dark, totally dark, of course. And they just fucking ... they just came in like it was Commando style.

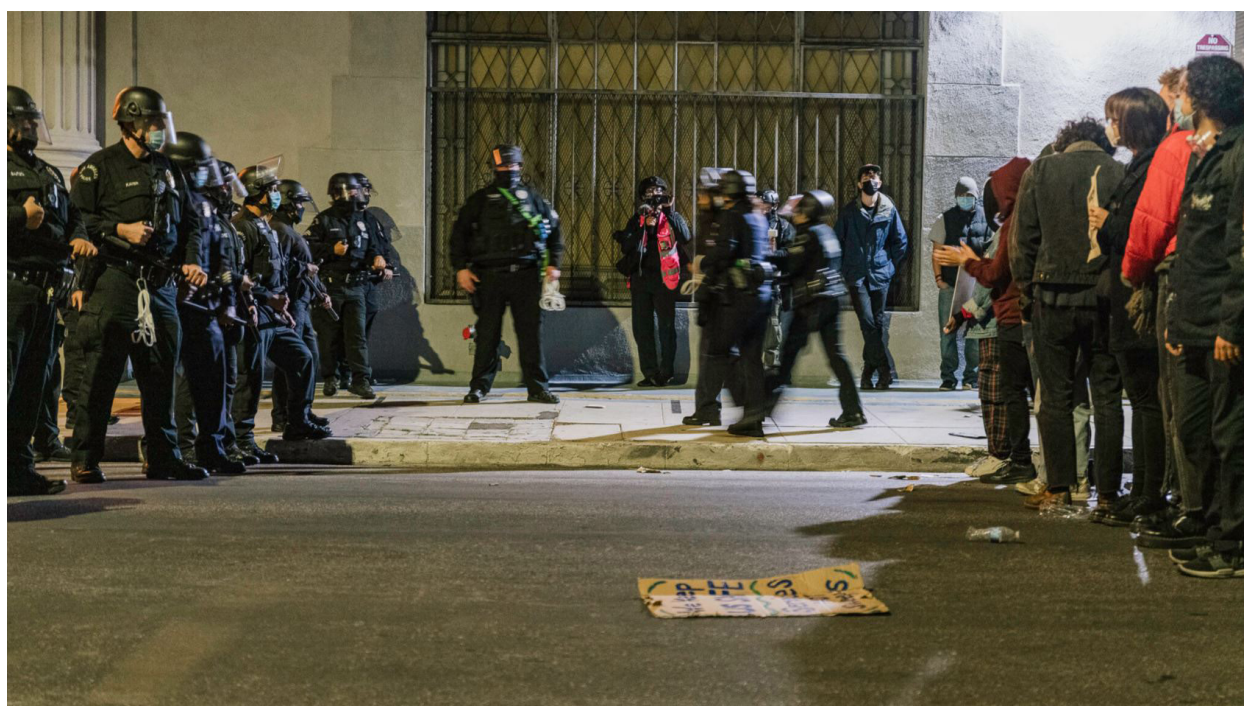


Figure 6-12. LAPD kettle protestors outside of Angelus Temple on Lemoyne St, March 25, 2021. Photo: Joey Scott.

## Reopening Echo Park Lake

On May 26, 2021, at 3 p.m., two months after eviction at gunpoint, Echo Park Lake “reopened.” The announcement came a week before, in the form of a [statement](#) from Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell’s office which almost solely focused on claims of “transitional housing” offers and placements for prior residents. **As Councilmember O’Farrell struggled to frame the reopening as a triumphant return, public and media narratives continued to center on displacement.** “I worry about over-policing and profiling taking place and that there’s a culture shift to removing people by force,” said the [chair of the Echo Park Neighborhood Council](#), who was not informed of the park’s closure or reopening in advance. Her concern, reflective both of the raid and of the park rangers’ targeting of both housed and unhoused individuals, is embodied across three key changes upon reopening: the fence; the expanded surveillance; and the broadening banishment.

ECHO PARK - Los Angeles City Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell on Wednesday announced that Echo Park Lake will reopen to the public [on May 26th at 3:00 PM](#), following two months of extensive repairs. The park was temporarily closed in late March after a three-month long process placing nearly 200 formerly unhoused individuals into transitional housing with clean beds to sleep in and wrap-around services including three nutritious meals a day, medical care, job opportunity placement, case managers, and the ability to keep their animal companions with them at their side.

"For over a year, my team worked tirelessly to provide resources, services, and ultimately transitional housing to people experiencing homelessness at Echo Park Lake," said Councilmember O'Farrell. "As time went on, conditions at the park became increasingly unsafe for everyone - park visitors and park dwellers. Echo Park Lake is a shared public space, and unhoused people were existing in inhumane conditions - which is why every single person experiencing homelessness in the park was offered transitional housing and services."

Figure 6-13. CD 13 press release for Echo Park Lake reopening, May 19, 2021.

## The Fence

The day before reopening, Street Watch LA organizers documented not what many had expected—the removal of the perimeter fence—but rather the addition of interior fences, particularly around the north park region where many residents once had tents. "City workers tell us that while the park is 'opening' tomorrow, the fences will remain to 'keep the homeless out,'" [Street Watch LA reported](#).

Street Watch LA refers to the fence—which lines the exterior perimeter and several interior grass beds, limits the previously highly permeable park to four entrances, and compromises ADA access—as an act of "architectural apartheid." Architectural apartheid describes "how the physical design, layout and construction of buildings and places can confront people with hazards and barriers which make the built environment inconvenient, uncomfortable or unsafe and may even prevent some people from using it at all."<sup>52</sup> Particularly given the park's already small occupiable footprint—nearly half of its 29 acres are the lake, the fence looms large and leaves little room to linger. The four park entrances force visitors to take long walks around the park's perimeter, which exceeds one mile, particularly if they seek an accessible entrance or exit. The park's beauty that the City claimed to renovate was difficult to discern through a chain link fence.

Soon after the park reopened, Department of Recreation and Parks general manager Michael Shull emphasized that [the fence was not here to stay](#): "It's now going to serve the purpose of temporarily securing the park while people are returning, until we can gauge what level of involvement the public's going to have and what they want to do with fencing. But we have to have a community process around that." Yet, Urban Alchemy, a service and surveillance group contracted by CD 13 whose role in the displacement of unhoused Echo Park Lake residents is explored in depth in Chapter 6, [told trainees](#) that "The fence is never coming down. That's how they keep the encampments out and control the park."

52 Govender and Loggia, "Adaptive Reuse Strategies in Durban Inner City Using Hybrid Mapping Tools," 219–250.



Figure 6-14. City workers install additional fences inside the perimeter fence, Echo Park Lake, May 25, 2021. Photo: Street Watch LA.



Figure 6-15. New signs on the perimeter fence direct visitors to the four remaining entrances, Echo Park Lake, May 26, 2021. Photo: Rayne Laborde Ruiz.

## Systems of Surveillance

### Cameras

Next to the fence, the most profound physical change to the park are the **33 CCTV cameras installed**. Unlike the fence, their presence is mostly concealed—and CD 13 has sought to keep them this way. First mentioned by Field Deputy Juan Fregoso in an interview, the cameras were not a line item in the **nearly \$1.1 million “renovation”** authorized by Recreation and Parks. The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition has repeatedly attempted to track these cameras and the data they collect, to no avail.

In a **Public Records Act request** to CD 13, the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition noted that the LAPD “Echo Park Rehabilitation After-Action Report” includes the cameras in their budget tally, at a \$200,000 cost estimate “provided by CD 13 and RAP.” They further note that “Councilman Mitch O’Farrell has also stated that these new cameras “will definitely be monitored by Recreation and Parks and a feed will be available to the LAPD.” Their request for “any work orders, work plans, maps, correspondence, emails, contracts, photographs, or any other documents indicating where the cameras were installed” was closed without resolution. “Certain records were withheld due to the deliberative nature of the documents... our office suggests that you contact the Los Angeles Police Department and/or the Department of Recreation and Parks,” the CD 13 **request closure notice** states.

The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition hosted a **“Watch the Watchers”** activity to identify cameras throughout the park, yet exact locations remain unverified. Perhaps more concerning, the collection and use of their recordings remain a mystery. Fregoso **assured** that **these cameras “cover every inch of the park.”** Stop LAPD Spying **notes** that “LAPD can run facial recognition on any person seen by those cameras. This is how surveillance is always used to criminalize poverty and control people.” And yet, when prompted to produce footage—as with Otzoy’s aforementioned arrest after park ranger targeting—CD 13 and affiliated agencies refuse.

Whatever the reality of the CCTV cameras - the visual scope they capture, amount of data processed, and extent of use - their threat looms large over the park, and remains referenced by previous residents, vendors, and activists alike. The threat of all-seeing surveillance, kept intentionally opaque by the Council District, rangers, and LAPD, furthers an environment of uncertainty and insecurity within nominally public space. **This threat disproportionately affects people already made vulnerable by systems of carcerality, surveillance, and enforcement: unhoused people, “unlicensed” vendors, and park visitors of mixed housing and jobs statuses who are regularly subjected to racialized policing.** In other words, these cameras are yet another tool to enact gentrification and race-based spatial sanitation in Echo Park, disproportionately impacting non-white residents, visitors, and workers.

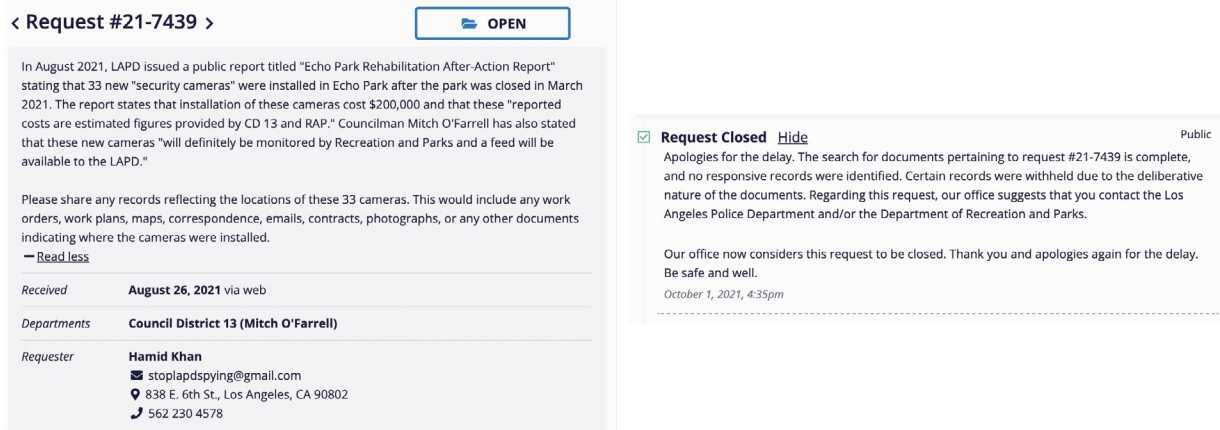


Figure 6-16. Public Records Act form correspondence between the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and CD 13 shows refusal to disclose the locations of park cameras over the course of months. August 26 and October 1, 2021. Credit: Stop LAPD Spying Coalition.

### Law Enforcement Presence

Other forms of surveillance, however, are impossible to miss. The reopening day at Echo Park Lake saw, through much of the afternoon, a greater density of law enforcement officers than any other visiting group. Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell and his staff were escorted through the park by Chief Park Ranger Losorelli and a group of park rangers, before they resumed pacing near the four remaining entry points to the park. Mounted officers lingered near an Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH) press conference in heavily fenced North Park, which officials claimed remained blocked to ensure grass regrowth from the damage done by tents. As *Los Angeles Times* reported, "That didn't stop two horses with park rangers on their backs from indulging in some lunch by ripping up what had only just been replanted." Large groups of police cadets, led by officers, did rounds around the lake.

In addition to the abundant law enforcement presence, CD 13 and Recreation and Parks reported retaining a private security firm, whose name was not released. "It's not unusual for us to use contracts to being in security officers," Recreation and Parks general manager Michael Shull *told LAist*, remarking that there are "a little over 30 park rangers for the entire city of L.A." In response to questions around tents and staying in the park overnight, Shull added that "We're not here to arrest people, we don't want any of that. We're trying to make the rules known, that after 10:30 the park is closed. And in order for the public to continue to enjoy these parks, they're going to be asked to leave." Losorelli had a *different response* regarding LAPD and park ranger enforcement of the tent prohibition: "There will be zero tolerance." He *continued*, "Anybody that's in the park will be removed from the park, either by their own volition, or if when we ask them to leave and they don't, they'll be subject to arrest and or citation."

As Ananya Roy, co-author of this monograph, stated after attending the reopening, "If you feel comfortable in this park, you might want to check your privilege. This is what the afterlife of displacement looks like."

### Banishment

#### Vendors

Unhoused residents were not the only marginalized Angelenos banned from Echo Park Lake upon reopening. Upon reopening, *Councilmember O'Farrell announced*, "No one will be allowed to occupy space for personal use or profit in the park. The community is ready to enjoy Echo Park Lake again." In addition to an increase in anti-camping signs, new signs prohibiting vending were posted, even though the LAMC 63.44(b) citation credited was overturned by state law as part of the effort to decriminalize vending. O'Farrell later issued a passive *memo on Twitter* in response to public inquiry: "When Echo Park lake reopened last week, my team observed some outdated signage regarding vending. We immediately contacted [Recreation & Parks] and I'm pleased that the incorrect signage





Figure 6-17. Anti-vendor signage, Echo Park Lake, May 26, 2021. Photo: Molly Lambert.



Figure 6-18. Updated anti-vendor signage, Echo Park Lake, June 5, 2021. Photo: Kevin @publicownedbus.

was removed.” His message failed to note that the signs were replaced with equally threatening anti-vendor language under a separate citation, LAMC 42.13. This is not the first time Mitch O’Farrell has attempted to erase vendors from the park. In a [2018 Streetsblog article](#) on the eve of sidewalk vending legalization, Sahra Sulaiman reported,

Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell ... seemed intent on significantly limiting vendor access to parks in other ways (and to Echo Park, in particular). ... He spoke of the possibility of as many as 64 vendors taking over Echo Park. Such a scenario, he argued, was in direct conflict with the mission of parks to create active and passive spaces for Angelenos to enjoy... But this and the extent to which vendors are, for many Angelenos, integral to a positive park experience, seemed to get lost in the discussion.

Like other community members, vendors received no formal warning of the park closure, which [destroyed the informal economy](#) upon which they and their families rely. For vendors, like the Echo Park Lake residents, this was a double [fencing out](#): the March 24 park closure and the continued fence presence upon reopening on May 26, when their familiar locations were rendered inaccessible and highly surveilled. Maria Hernandez, who has been selling in the park for 23 years, shared her story with [The LAnd Magazine](#):

[During the pandemic] we don’t get any help. I’m not able to get any unemployment benefits. After we realized that the pandemic wasn’t going away, we started working again, risking that we would get sick ... A lady who used to vend over there, she died from COVID... But even still we weren’t selling much because people weren’t going out. And then as we started to sell more, they closed the park down.

Closing the park hurt me, but it also hurt my son. He doesn’t understand days or time and that there is a pandemic. He’s special. He’s the dancer over there with the cowboy hat. Before the fence, if something happened, I was right there. Now if something happens, I have to go find him inside the park.

Vendors, like unhoused residents, were banned from Echo Park Lake in an action that threatened their livelihoods, shattered community connections, and continues to be enforced through inequitably applied legal means through constant police presence and threats of hidden surveillance.



Figure 6-20. People pass food over the perimeter fence, Echo Park Lake, June 2021. Photo: Joey Scott.



Figure 6-19. Banned from the park, vendors line the narrow, fenced sidewalk along it, Echo Park Lake, June 2021. Photo: Joey Scott.



Figure 6-21. A palettero walks outside the perimeter fence, Echo Park Lake, May 26, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.

## Brokers of Displacement

A system of permanent displaceability does not happen on its own. It requires agents, and the City of Los Angeles has outsourced more of the labor of displacement to the private sector as the so-called “homeless problem” swelled over time. In order to displace several hundred people at Echo Park Lake, Urban Alchemy served as a key broker of displacement.

Active across Los Angeles and San Francisco, Urban Alchemy siphons millions in city and state funds through contracts to broker the mass displacement of people into carceral programs like Project Roomkey and to coordinate directly with law enforcement. Its function is to disappear visible poverty in a manner that appears less violent and more palatable than previous sweep systems. **Urban Alchemy is in effect a mercenary outfit**, intent on exploiting their workers’ own precarity as feel-good media narratives, which serve to (1) misdirect the public from the lack of housing and political will to stably house people and (2) create the case for a dissolution of LAHSA.

Likewise, initiatives such as Project Roomkey function as programs and novel sites of temporary, carceral housing and employ their own set of mercenaries to manage and operate PRK sites. While presented as well-intentioned, Project Roomkey represents a crucial node in this system of impermanence. In both cases of Urban Alchemy and Project Roomkey, public records and community testimony reveal alarming amounts of resources being funneled to unaccountable private actors to facilitate the expansion of carceral logics hidden behind the guise of “housing” and community reinvestment and empowerment.

## Urban Alchemy—the Mercenary Model

### *San Francisco*

Urban Alchemy began as a project based out of [Hunter’s Point Family](#), a non-profit that serves the predominantly Black San Francisco neighborhood with programs focused on such issues as environmental health and workforce development. One such workforce development program was Pit Stop, founded in 2014 with the San Francisco Department of Public Works, then under the leadership of [corrupt official Mohammad Nuru](#). Originally premised on employing “lifers” recently released on parole, Pit Stop organized mobile bathroom and hand-washing stations which their employees maintain throughout the day. Even more than that, however, **the program was premised upon an idea of re-integration**, whereby the largely male, African American staff would find stable footing in the chaotic (and often demoralizing) period after release from prison. While being employed, Pit Stop staff were often housed temporarily in one of several residential re-entry programs in the city, where they may also receive such services as mental health treatment. What began as a small, tight-knit program (around 24 staff over six locations, according to an early employee of the program), however, soon began to expand across the city and to include a wide variety of recently released prisoners, no longer solely “lifers.” As the organization grew, so did their profile, reaching unhoused advocates in places such as Los Angeles, where they would next expand to.

### *Skid Row & Venice*

Urban Alchemy-led initiatives like Pit Stop—porta potties and handwashing stations—and the Mobile Shower Program were the first to appear in Los Angeles, beginning in 2019. In Skid Row, Urban Alchemy’s presence was met with mixed reactions from community organizations. **While the core function of maintaining bathrooms and showers was generally well-received, critics point to lack of meaningful outreach on behalf of the non-profit to both unhoused individuals and the long-standing movement groups active in these neighborhoods.** General Dogon of the Los Angeles Community Action Network thus notes:

I have seen [Urban Alchemy] on the block. They move in teams. So a team of six to eight people, you know, people of color walking...They all have black uniforms with black and green, little shirts and vests. They have rakes, brooms, shovels and stuff like that and push trashcans. And they go block-by-block. And they clean up block-by-block, which is all good, like I said. And I even when they first came, to keep it real with you, I even applauded. I said, “Man, this is what we need: people to come through the street and clean up.”

Unhoused activist and former Echo Park Lake resident David Busch-Lilly helped the push to bring the non-profit to Venice, where the need for services such as bathrooms is high. Busch-Lilly reflects:

And so they did this up in San Francisco, and they bought a bunch of mobile toilets, and they set them up all over town. It was a huge success, and they did a lot of data collection. When they brought the program down here to LA, rather than using parolees, they were using people who were coming out of the county jails, who didn't have guaranteed housing, didn't have that extensive training that the parolees got. And they were even hiring people who were homeless on the street and paying them the same seventeen bucks an hour. It's not a living wage.

This critique points to a key contradiction in the work of groups like Urban Alchemy. While the outfit promotes the notion of community empowerment, they actually serve to exploit and undermine the unhoused community further. Los Angeles Urban Alchemy Community Ambassadors are not paid a living wage and their employment is not tethered to guaranteed housing in Los Angeles, as they are in San Francisco. A large number of the Community Ambassadors are living precariously, many unhoused or formerly unhoused themselves, and are placed in a chaotic environment where they are often undertrained and are instructed to collaborate with police.

One unhoused resident of Echo Park Lake shared that he knew of an Urban Alchemy worker expected to de-escalate high-pressure situations with no training. When he was unable to do so, he was transferred to another temporary shelter program administered by Urban Alchemy. That program was one he was already staying in -- and per Urban Alchemy rules, he was unable to work at the same site where he lived. **His story demonstrates that Urban Alchemy workers are often in the same state of precarity as the unhoused communities they are deployed to facilitate displacement.**

As such, Urban Alchemy has developed a reputation among many of the unhoused at Echo Park Lake (and throughout the greater San Francisco and Los Angeles metro areas) as untrustworthy and an arm of the police. At a meeting at the Echo Park tennis courts in April of 2021, displaced residents called Urban Alchemy, "**Undercover Alchemy**," a month following the raid when reflecting on the non-profit's sudden and suspect presence at the lake.

This is not just mere speculation; documentation of Urban Alchemy Ambassador and management conduct reflects a **chaotic, exploitative approach to homeless outreach**. Mike Chervani, an Urban Alchemy supervisor, was documented verbally assaulting an unhoused woman at a homeless camp in Sausalito around the new year. Urban Alchemy employees have been documented taunting volunteers from groups like Street Watch LA. Additionally, Urban Alchemy is currently facing two class action lawsuits. Strickland v. Urban Alchemy concerns how the Urban Alchemy and police tried to penalize a homeless woman for feeding birds in a public space. A second class action suit, [Reyes v. Urban Alchemy](#), reveals an alleged culture of wage theft and other workplace exploitation. This hardly matches the feel-good narrative the non-profit has attempted to construct.

The City of Los Angeles ultimately provides no meaningful oversight over Urban Alchemy's wide array of poor and exploitative practices, thus compounding the layers of anti-Blackness at play. As Busch-Lilly attests:

UA's "shortcomings" are the result of City Hall's horribly racist disregard for UA and Pit Stop as a largely Black-staffed and run city contractor with a largely probation/parolee work force.

Beyond just all us homeless currently being abused, L.A.'s mishandling and under-support of Pit Stop, Urban Alchemy, and its workers is also yet just another sign of City Hall's ongoing, disgusting, systemic racism towards disadvantaged African Americans here.

### *The Rush to Clear the Lake*

Public records show that Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's office contracted Urban Alchemy to provide "outreach and other supportive services" at Echo Park Lake in late December 2020. It cost \$350,000.

To defray the operational costs associated with providing outreach and other supportive services for up to 500 individuals experiencing homelessness throughout Council District 13 with specific emphasis on assisting individuals living in and around the Echo Park area including; assisting unsheltered individuals identify interim to permanent housing, providing a Family Reunification program ensuring safety and cleanliness of the park, and temporary 24 hour staffing of a shelter serving unsheltered individuals at Shatto Recreation Center.

This procurement came after weeks of scrambling by Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell's team to address the growing encampment at the lake.

CD 13 staffer Marisol Rodriguez wrote to Victor Hinderliter of LAHSA on December 10, 2020:

Victor - from what I saw yesterday in the few hours at EP lake, we have a lot of work to do. Unfortunately this cannot be accomplished if there are several different outreach workers from different homeless service provider non-profits splitting duties. Who can I talk to about getting a regular dedicated team at EP Lake on a regular basis? EP Lake is the Councilmember's number one priority right now and we need to ensure we try and get people into shelter, especially because of the gang shootings. We have beds available at EP community center, plus the upcoming beds at Shatto, and we need to prioritize this population now.

Internal emails show that CD 13 was reaching out to other service providers as late as December 18, 2020, for a contract that would begin only ten days later. As a PATH representative explains to CD 13 staffers:

I wanted to circle back with you ASAP on your request for focused outreach in Echo Park Lake starting 12/23 and running through the end of March.

The short answer is that we simply don't have the capacity at this time.

Our current teams are working at capacity, and the short time assignment does not warrant hiring/training new staff. (Typically we need a year+ commitment/contract to justify hiring). The quick start is also a challenge given current staffing and the holidays.

Rodriguez replied on December 22, 2020:

While we understand the staffing challenges, we do feel a bit disillusioned [sic] by the fact that we have a great opportunity with an upcoming nearby shelter and yet all the providers we have outreached to don't seem to have the staffing capacity or urgency.

Urban Alchemy was clearly hired in haste and under a shortage of qualified labor. This would later be reflected in the "housing" outcomes.

### Tent Counts & Police Coordination

Urban Alchemy became a crucial part of a reporting network that included O'Farrell and CD 13 staffers and law enforcement agencies Park Rangers and the Los Angeles Police Department. Urban Alchemy's role was to perform "outreach," which entailed helping convince as many people as possible to leave the park before the closure. Or, as [Street Watch LA](#) put it, Urban Alchemy outreach functions to "offer people carceral shelter under the threat of arrest or banishment." This "outreach" also included two key micro-practices Urban Alchemy has failed to address publicly: tent counts and regular meetings with law enforcement as the plan to clear the park developed. **This is the brokerage of displacement—a physical negotiation with park residents to self-evict coupled with long-term bureaucratic coordination with law enforcement and state entities.**

DATE	# Guests Willing to Shelter	# Guests Non-Committal	#ADA Guests Observed	# Children Observed	# Guests (Observed-TOTAL)	# Tents
Monday, December 28, 2020	0	22	1	0	23	137
Tuesday, December 29, 2020	4	15	0	1	20	131
Wednesday, December 30, 2020	15	13	0	0	28	125
Thursday, December 31, 2020	7	15	1	4	27	137
Friday, January 1, 2021	13	8	2	7	30	142
Saturday, January 2, 2021						
Sunday, January 3, 2021						
Monday, January 4, 2021	8	5	1	0	14	140

During this first week, we have enjoyed the work, felt accepted by guests and neighbors. We look forward to working with you to refine further the data you would like us to collect, as we encourage guests to utilize Shatto Center for shelter and support for longer-term housing solutions.

Figure 6-22. Extract from emails procured through public records request.

Beginning in January 2021, Urban Alchemy conducted daily tent counts or qualitative and quantitative reports on “population, tent & animal counts, specific metrics” relayed to CD 13 on a weekly basis.

Daily reports often begin with some variation on “today has been a great day.” Some contain stories of “outreach,” many of which tell a familiar and not-so-great tale of not just housing dead-ends but a failure to connect the poor with even the paltriest of offerings.

January 16, 2021: “Today we had a few men that wanted to go to Shatto, but the Salvation Army said that they were full... both seniors.”

January 19, 2021: “We had a wonderful time interacting with guests today. All was mostly quiet today. We visited with the new family and are building our relationships daily with them and other park guests.”

January 20, 2021: “Today has been a great day. One of our residents says he wants to go to Shatto, but every time it’s time to go he talks himself out of it. We found out later that currently all the men’s beds are taken.”

January 23, 2021: “Today was a good day although it was wet. The residents didn’t seem to like that. We did population Count and park beautification. The residents are starting to follow our lead and pick up more. Thank you practitioners for your diligence and teamwork.”

February 1, 2021: “Today we had our continental breakfast for our guests. We engaged with Chris and he wanted to go to the shelter. **The Shatto Shelter... is full. So we tried to place him at the Echo Park Rec... which was also full.** He wasn’t interested in any other shelter. I will follow up with him tomorrow. We did park beautification.”

February 3, 2021: “The UA team served Hot Coffee to our guests. I attempted to follow up with Chris again today. We were unable to find him at Echo Park Lake. We engaged with Ros Teer today and I gave her resources for low income housing. No one is willing to go to shelter today... **The 48 bed Max shelter is full.**”

February 4, 2021: “No guests wanted to go to the shelter today. **The Shatto Shelter... is currently full to capacity...**”

February 5, 2021: “**No one was willing to go to shelter today.** We did park beautification, including the park restrooms.”

February 6, 2021: “Today we served Hot coffee to our guests. No one in EPL was willing to go to a shelter today. Pam Pacific Winter Shelter [sic]... **Currently full to capacity.** Echo Park Community Center... **currently is full to capacity.** The Shatto shelter... **Currently full to Capacity.** We did outreach and park beautification, including the restrooms.”

February 7, 2021: “Today we served Hot coffee and cocoa to our guests. No one from EPL wanted to go to the shelter today. Pam Pacific Winter Shelter [sic]... **currently is full to capacity.** Echo Park Community Center... **currently is full to capacity.** The Shatto shelter... **is currently full to capacity.** Oakwood Recreation Center Winter shelter... **currently full to capacity...** **The tent count is less today. Because the city workers came and picked up some tents today.** Thanks team for a great day...”

These memos exhibit both the lack of shelter and the unwillingness by many unhoused individuals to choose congregate shelter under a pandemic.

Volunteer organizers familiar with homeless outreach practices and who were deeply embedded in organizing at Echo Park Lake noticed daily Urban Alchemy’s presence at the park early 2021. They were underwhelmed by what they saw from a basic outreach perspective. Jed Parriott, Street Watch LA organizer, reflected:

What I witnessed was really, Urban Alchemy employees walking around Echo Park Lake with like tweezers or like, pinchers, to sort of pick up trash, in groups of three and trash bags, and just kind of walk by and pick a piece of trash and say hi to folks. And that was it.

Kelvin Martinez, another Street Watch LA organizer, noted:

Honestly, Urban Alchemy definitely had a presence. But that is in the most literal sense. Like they’re just hanging around. They weren’t even picking up trash. They weren’t really engaging people. They’re just kind of walking around the park. They’re just bodies. And a lot of times I see them, you know, hanging out clustered together, maybe on a smoke break or hanging out. It seems mostly just a literal physical presence. But these police officers seem to really be telling people that they needed to be getting connected somewhere, that they were going to need to move soon, but they weren’t giving a lot of information about dates.

Urban Alchemy practitioners’ lack of training and basic competency was later [documented](#) by journalist Jon Peltz who was hired by the non-profit and experienced their onboarding and outreach philosophy:

The main premise of UA's training documents was that they were hiring people with emotional intelligence, because they believe that unhoused people have a similar type of emotional intelligence to damaged or incarcerated people, therefore facilitating communication. They view their outreach as coming from a "trauma informed lens."

What he found was Urban Alchemy's training was light on proven engagement techniques and heavy on murky spiritual hokum:

Our Practitioners must be armed with a powerful spirit that communicates caring, safety, non-judgement, and kindness. One's spirit gains power through righteous deeds and actions. Alchemy is the science of spiritual power. This science cannot be persuaded, manipulated, or deceived to provide different results.

Public records prove that Urban Alchemy (like the other entities conscripted to clear the park) knew about the dates of park closure and reopening, and yet they instruct their employees not to give this basic information:

"If they ask you when the fence is coming down," [an Urban Alchemy manager] said, "then they're part of LA Street Watch [Street Watch LA]. They could look like anyone. A husband and wife. They bring their kids. They don't want us here because they want the homeless in the park... Don't give LA Streetwatch any information because they want us out of the park and the homeless back in."

The reporting also revealed that it was common practice for Urban Alchemy to use trash collecting as a pretense to cover up what Urban Alchemy was really doing at the lake:

"If anyone asks what you're doing here, be careful," our [Urban Alchemy] manager said. "Point to a piece of trash and tell them you're here to pick up that trash. That's it."

**Public records reveal significant coordination between Urban Alchemy, law enforcement, and Council District 13 offices to clear the park, despite the lack of housing and shelter.** The records depict a massive mobilization by O'Farrell's office to target the Echo Park Lake encampment and push for "placements", including pressure on LAHSA, other service providers, and Urban Alchemy, even when there is little-to-no available shelter—let alone housing—as evidenced above in Urban Alchemy's weekly reports.

While Urban Alchemy was conducting "outreach" in early 2021, it's clear from Urban Alchemy's regular reports to CD 13 that the nearby shelters are full, as is the case with the Shatto Shelter. As we see in these emails, CD 13 staffer Marisol Rodriguez pushed to put Echo Park Lake residents in the Koreatown shelter. But this was never a viable option, because the Shatto shelter was specifically opened to serve other encampments in the immediate vicinity. In these emails, Urban Alchemy consistently reports the shelter is full and that everything else is full. There were at least sixty people residing in the encampment right next to Shatto. As soon as the shelter opened, it was full.

**Clearly, there is no housing and few shelter options. Urban Alchemy and similar groups are merely shuffling unhoused people into a system that is extremely unlikely to provide them with permanent housing.** As General Dogon put it to us, it is "outreach to nowhere. You don't need 10 [Urban Alchemy employees] that's making \$35 an hour to go tell them that. The City don't have nothing to offer."

In addition to negotiating unhoused people out of the park, Urban Alchemy also acted as surveillance and security detail. In fact, [reporting from Knock LA](#) has revealed that some Practitioners "list their job title as 'Security Guard.'" Or as one Street Watch LA organizer realized when Urban Alchemy was using the CD 13 as a staging area, "**Actually, you're not the outreach. You're the security.**"

**Records from the Los Angeles Police Department reveal long-term direct coordination with Urban Alchemy and CD 13 representatives.** According to LAPD's [SARA report](#) on Echo Park Lake, LAPD met at least five times with Urban Alchemy in the lead up to and aftermath of the raid.

4/27/21 – Meeting with LAPD, CD 13 and Urban Alchemy. "Discussed park opening, further homeless outreach at park. LAPD requested for more housing services outreach at Echo Park."

3/24/21 – "Advised lodgers of Urban Alchemy's presence in park. Posted signs with 24 hours notice of park closure. Fence erected around park perimeter."

3/17/21 – "Advised lodgers of Urban Alchemy's presence in park."





Figure 6-23. An Urban Alchemy Practitioner sweeps outside the Tiny Home Village on Alvarado Street in Echo Park, February 11, 2022. Photo: Jonny Coleman.

2/24/21 – “Met with CD 13 and Urban Alchemy. Discussed homeless outreach in Echo Park, and park maintenance issues. Discussed outreach success and number of people that have accepted housing.”

2/11/21 – “Walked foot beat in park..Warned (15) about park rules/park closing times. Met with Urban Alchemy. They advised that they have placed (48) people from park into housing since 01/01/21. Contact info - Nina Sanford 323-923-8273. Urban Alchemy is in park seven days a week from 0830-1700.”

Urban Alchemy in Los Angeles has followed the same trajectory as Urban Alchemy in San Francisco; they both are open collaborators with local law enforcement.

### “Great Day”—After the Raid

After the Echo Park raid, Urban Alchemy was foregrounded in media appearances alongside Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell, in an intentional effort to promote the lake clearing as a feel-good model for sweeping large encampments. **As part of this media campaign, Urban Alchemy helped sell the myth that a majority of the park residents received “housing.”**

On March 25th, 2021, Urban Alchemy [tweeted](#), “166 people got housing today. Great day #EchoParkLake #resources and wraparound services for our community family.” At a March 28th press conference, Lena Miller [claimed](#) helping “166 [placements] as of today” and that “everybody who wanted housing in this park was housed.”

On March 25, 2021, Mitch O’Farrell [tweeted](#):

This morning, I announced that we have now sheltered 166 people experiencing homelessness at Echo Park. The work to provide shelter to anyone who wants or needs it at the lake continues at this very moment. . . . I was also joined by Dr. Lena Miller, Chief Executive Officer of Urban Alchemy—our amazing outreach partner that has been working relentlessly to build relationships with the unhoused at Echo Park since last December in preparation for the temporary closure of the park.

On March 30, 2021 O’Farrell told *The Hollywood Reporter*:

“I am extremely gratified that we found housing solutions for 209 people at Echo Park Lake, which is pretty much everyone. My office has been working on this since last year, and we hired Urban Alchemy — which is a nonprofit out of San Francisco made up of nothing but professionals with lived experience of homelessness, incarceration and drug addiction issues, but [who] have healed from all that. We’d heard good things about them...We contracted out with them out of my office — this is on discretionary funding — because we knew we needed real help at the lake. So they began outreach in late December. By January, they had housed 24 people in temporary shelter. And those 24, for the most part, are still in shelter and have housing solutions. So they started making great strides. And we were working like the devil to secure rooms through Project Homekey and Project Roomkey, which included buying a new building for the Project Homekey, that my office identified.”

**When Echo Park Lake reopened in May 2021, Urban Alchemy maintained a strong presence at the park in the ensuing weeks, along with law enforcement.** Their combined role was to help ensure that no one re-settled at the park. News [coverage](#) of the park reopening explains, “Workers with Urban Alchemy will be available to conduct outreach to homeless persons and inform them of housing and shelter options.” To date, there has been no re-settlement at Echo Park Lake.

### *Scapegoating LAHSA*

In the wake of the Echo Park raid, Urban Alchemy and fellow mercenaries like St. Joseph’s and Hope of the Valley have provided an alternative model to homeless outreach to LAHSA, the beleaguered city and county-governed agency.

A month after the raid, Councilmember Joe Buscaino [argued](#) in the editorial, “LAHSA has failed to do its job effectively. Let’s end it:”

But as the crisis continues to grow, the City hasn’t seen the value in its annual financial contribution to LAHSA, or the federal and state grant funds that LAHSA receives and administers on the City’s behalf. And the agency refuses to consistently cooperate with the city, even refusing to share desperately needed data that simply tells us who was offered housing, how many times and who accepted.

Beds go unused. My office has received reports that service providers are not always paid on time. And while over 40,000 people slept on our City streets, apartments with services sat empty for months—which is unfathomable.

Buscaino also drew a clear comparison with LAHSA to Urban Alchemy, without naming the latter, in regard to Echo Park Lake, as he claimed the non-profit offered “housing” to every lake resident:

In Echo Park, LAHSA conducted outreach for over a year, but the encampment continued to grow, as did issues with public access and safety. Realizing the need to take matters into their own hands, the local council office hired **a different service provider who then offered housing to every person in the encampment in less than three months.**

Under this vision, Urban Alchemy and non-profits would absorb LAHSA’s funding:

The city needs to regain control over the functions that LAHSA has failed to carry out. Then we can use the current LAHSA funding to support those service providers that have shown much more positive results. This will give the city more local control, deliver accurate data and accountability and ensure better results with the money spent in our efforts to eradicate homelessness.

As such, **Urban Alchemy has emerged as the alternative model for erasure of visible poverty in Los Angeles**—a model that is quicker, sloppier, and less accountable than the existing one.

Three months after the raid, Buscaino and Councilmember Paul Koretz [introduced](#) a motion to dissolve LAHSA, formalizing a campaign that had been long brewing, with Echo Park as the case study. Were LAHSA to be replaced by Urban Alchemy and others, it would still fail to address the underlying problem: the fundamental lack of tangible, stable housing, regardless of who is doing the outreach and regardless of the quality. In an interview, General Dogon remarks:

Urban Alchemy is falling right into this position, with LAHSA and them. You're gonna be doing outreach? False hope. You're offering people false hope. And some fake ass promises that you can't keep... Ain't nobody seen permanent nothing. We didn't get no housekeys. Motherfuckers is just in handcuffs.

**Privatization of these public entities and services will only create more incentive for grift and unaccountability.** While LAHSA is flawed, Urban Alchemy is entirely opaque. It operates as a black box.

### *Urban Alchemy Expansion*

Since clearing Echo Park Lake, Urban Alchemy has been awarded more contracts by the City of Los Angeles, and their roles now include managing various Safe Sleeping Sites and Tiny Home Villages and leading the CIRCLE pilot program, an alleged alternative to policing.

Public records show that Urban Alchemy was paid \$350,000 to help clear Echo Park Lake and received \$2,600,000 to manage the CIRCLE pilot program in Hollywood and Venice between October 2021 and June 2022.. The non-profit received \$400,000 for four months of outreach in Hollywood and Venice in 2021 and \$1,791,022.63 for one year of “Skid Row Cleaning” that began in July of 2021.

The rapid growth of this mercenary model extends beyond city and county lines. In San Francisco, the Tenderloin emergency echoes the way in which Echo Park Lake was constructed as an urgent problem with Urban Alchemy filling similar roles in both neighborhoods. Building off their “success” with Tiny Homes and other initiatives, Urban Alchemy will now run their first [indoor congregate shelter in San Francisco](#)—when Urban Alchemy will be running congregate shelters in Los Angeles? Further, Urban Alchemy has established a presence in [Sausalito in Marin County](#)—how long before we see Urban Alchemy performing outreach and collaborating with law enforcement in counties neighboring Los Angeles?

In September 2021, [reporting](#) from *Knock LA* revealed that **Urban Alchemy CEO Lena Miller and representatives from other mercenary non-profits had met with Jeffrey Katzenberg**, the billionaire who spent much of 2021 publicly lobbying to erase poor people from Los Angeles. Katzenberg “has also met with Lena Miller, the CEO of Urban Alchemy; the CEO of St. Joseph Center; and Ken and Laurie Craft, who are, respectively, the CEO and Chief Programs Officer of Hope of the Valley Rescue Mission.”

The mercenary model continues to surge in popularity. Urban Alchemy is being rewarded for serving a valuable role in the neoliberal push to cleanse cities of visible poverty. There's big money in using poor people to surveil and sweep even poorer communities into systems of permanent displaceability.

## Reclaiming The Park

The evicted residents of Echo Park Lake have engaged in numerous acts of resistance, and remembrance; ranging from protests to [vigils](#) to counter-report [zines](#). Two especially poignant communal acts of reclamation are the Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH) Echo Park Lake reopening press conference on May 26, 2021; and the Echo Park Lake Community Day, organized by UTACH, Street Watch LA, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN), and Los Angeles Tenants Union (LATU).

### UTACH Reopening Press Conference

Council District 13 framed the reopening of Echo Park Lake as the beloved return of a temporarily lost public space, and a celebration of housing over 200 individuals. This narrative mandated two lies: that “housing” of any semi-permanent kind was on offer, and that the evicted residents of Echo Park Lake had less of a right—and were more of a threat—to public space than other CD 13 constituents. **On May 26, 2021, over a dozen former residents were present to [share their truth](#) with press, fellow activists, and park visitors.** In addition to correcting the narrative on housing (that former residents had short term hotel rooms at best, and were back on the streets, without community or resources, at worst), people sought to correct the narrative of pre-eviction Echo Park Lake and its former residents as dirty and dangerous. Despite fences, marching police cadets, hidden cameras, mounted rangers, and NIMBY hecklers,

former residents proudly and confidently held space, reclaiming their place in the public sphere in the midst of an ongoing campaign of banishment and degradation. In the face of increased surveillance, former residents reclaimed this right to public space, and their right to control the public narrative of their lives.



Figure 6-24. Street Watch LA organizers hold a banner for their UTACH comrades as former Echo Park Lake residents speak out in one of the most heavily fenced areas of the park, north Echo Park Lake, May 26, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.

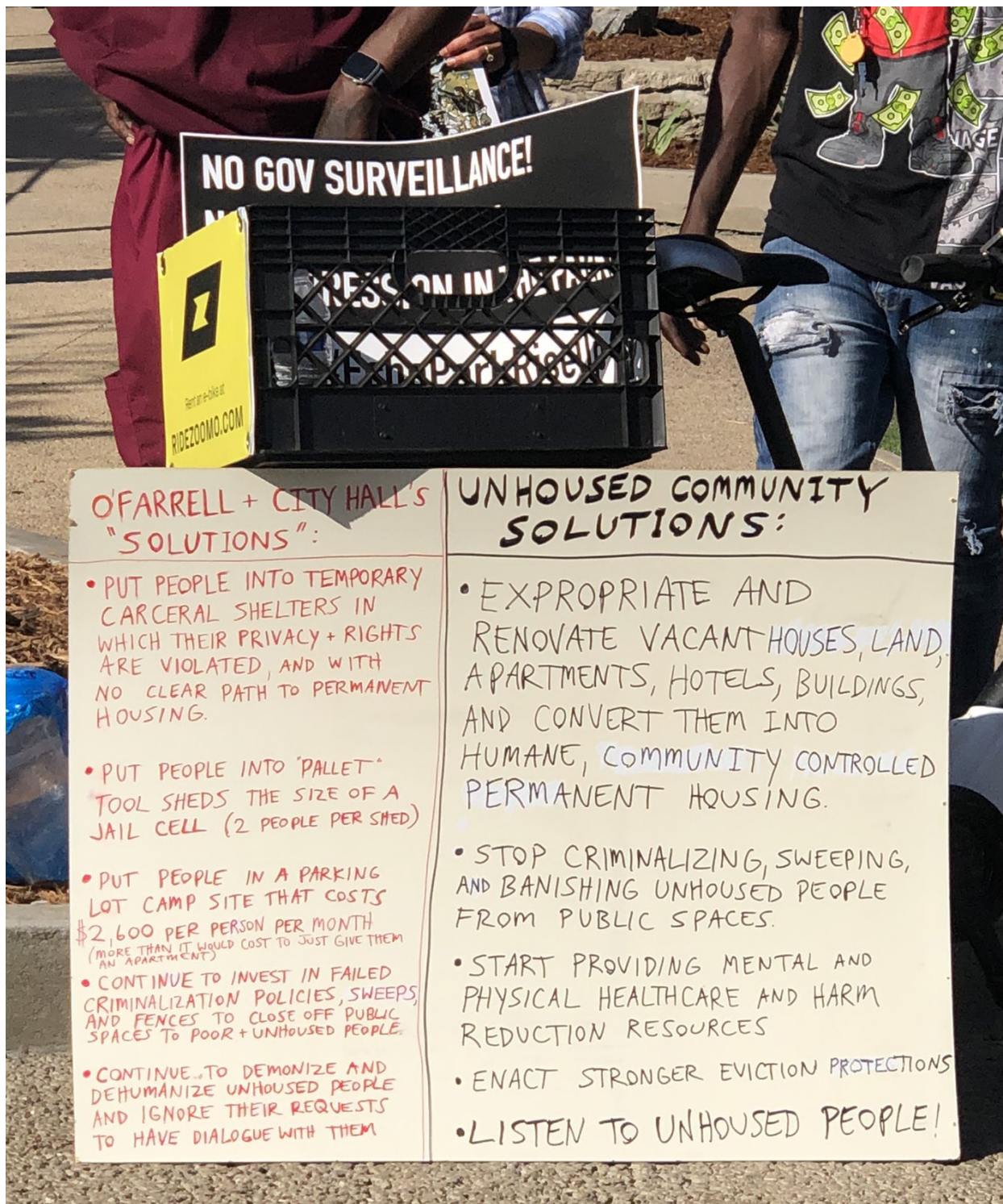


Figure 6-25. UTACH organizers and goals model the difference between discriminatory policy and community led futures, Echo Park Lake, May 26, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.



Figure 6-26. UTACH, Street Watch LA, friends, and neighbors gather after the press conference, Echo Park Lake, May 26, 2021. Photo: Rayne Laborde Ruiz.

Cecelia, quoted in [Los Angeles Downtown News](#). **We advocated for ourselves** during [the pandemic] ... We spent time together and created these things that we imagined together and now they want to separate us and put us in hotel rooms... **We were figuring out how to solve these problems that come about due to the lack of affordable housing in California...** [Echo Park Lake] was not a bad community.

*Queen.* For those of you that didn't know, we had a kitchen, we had a garden. There was books, we had a Power Up table by Street Watch LA. **We had everything we ever needed. You never went hungry.** We had spiritual food. We had a church. We are friends, we had a congregation. We had everything that no society, no city, no place right now has because they're in it for themselves. **We're in it to make sure our neighbors don't go hungry, don't go cold, and have some kind of peace after the mental hardship that you've gone through.**

*Diana.* I lost my apartment. And next thing I knew, I'm in the streets and I'm a different person... Nothing changed about me, except my situation. When I started going to this park ... I was staying in my vehicle ... I had the mentality that I'm better; I'm in my car over there... I had to check myself. Because I'm like, wait a minute, what am I talking about? ... **I started seeing how they were really working with each other**, helping each other in the kitchen, and charging the phones and getting clothes and things... after meeting a few people, **I was offered if I wanted to have a tent to sleep.** At the beginning... rejected it, because of the stigmatism that I was seeing... afterwards, when I really joined the community... it was really an experience for me. Because **I get to be part of the community that we kept each other safe.** We look after each other, we were not asking for anybody, we didn't want anybody to do anything for us. **We just wanted to get out of the situation and help others in our situation** ... When I became part of a community, there were a lot of things that happened that I really enjoyed ... **I became happy with the person that I became, with what I was doing every day.**

*W/C.* I became homeless because of COVID. The first day, the first day literally, when I bought a tent, I placed it in Skid Row... I actually work in Martin Luther King hospital as a server down in the basement, where we serve the COVID patients The moment I came back, all of my stuff was

gone. The whole tent, like it was never there. I heard about this park and then I came. **Ever since I came to this park, I didn't have any problems.** But when there were problems here, there were a group of us, a small handful of me, CeCe, Ayman, Ashley—we started Echo Park Rise Up. We were receiving donations, food, money, whatever it was, whatever was needed. And we found everyone here, who was mentally disabled, or physically, and until they, you know, until the government took it away. **This was not a bad community. This was a community where people look to, and this was a community where people came and said, “Yo, my stuff is going to be safe here. My body, my mind is going to be safe here.”**

*Diana.* Echo Park was the community that we kept each other safe. If you ask yourself, “How long have you had Skid Row there? A long time. How come they don't get rid of it?” I'm going to tell you why. **When COVID hit, the government and other agencies disregarded us.** They closed everything down in LA. There is a small Refresh Spot, the only spot in all LA County for our homeless to go to. They shut it down for two to three months. **So they basically said to all the homeless people, screw you.** I'm gonna tell you why they're spending so much money, so much energy to really attack us and drain us out. During COVID, when we were shut down, **we became a community and we survived and thrived with each other, with the community, with the resources that we have.** So while the government was telling everybody, “Stay in your home. You need us. We protect you. We do this. Go home and panic,” everybody left us out here, and left us scared like we're gonna die. Next, we did the opposite. **We united together, we survived, and we thrived.** So that's why we are a threat. Because for the world to see what we can do, that there's no government agency that you need to protect you, that you can work with your neighbors and your community to keep you safe and to succeed and to thrive? That's why they're spending \$2 million on the police here. That's what they're doing everything that they're doing. **They don't want you to see what we're capable of as independent thinkers, as human beings.** Let me tell you why they haven't gotten rid of Skid Row: they haven't gotten rid of Skid Row because that's what is needed to sell you the lie that they're selling you - to take away the money, to tell you that we are a problem and that they are fixing it. No. They are the problem.

*Queen.* We can't control everybody's actions. But **we can control what comes around a community.** Echo Park was one of the cleanest, safest, most self-sufficient communities that we've had. Not even the best governments could attest to that.

## Community Day

October 2, 2021, marked six months since the raid and eviction at Echo Park Lake. As Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell continued to [tweet](#) lies about leading “one of the most successful housing operations in the history of the City,” former residents, activists, and neighbors convened in the park to reclaim the space once more. The park, in many ways, remained the same: fenced, and scattered with mounted cops, rangers in UTVs, and a few officers, who watched the day's events from a distance. [Organized](#) by UTACH, Street Watch LA, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, LACAN, and LATU, the community day expanded upon the foundation built by UTACH's press conference.

Many of the key organizers and former residents of Echo Park were present and involved in organizing the community day. But far more were absent. Even in this act of reclamation and resilience, the shadow of banishment was present. For some former residents, Echo Park was now too far, as they were pushed further and further away in a search for temporary accommodations through service providers or on a less-policed street. For others, the memories of this place were too painful: memories of the community that was lost, or traumatic memories of harassment, uncertainty, and eventual eviction at gunpoint by night led by LAPD and park rangers. Many had fallen out of contact, without stable access to Wi-Fi, cell service, devices, and power—let alone in-person connection.

Unhoused speakers were joined by everyone from legal aid advisors to harm reduction specialists, collectively speaking out against carceral housing and the spread of Section 41.18, and for “Housekeys not Handcuffs” and abolition. Memorials and tributes were laid out for former residents who died in the aftermath of banishment, and those living but facing permanent, legal banishment, like Gustavo Oztzy. Artwork by unhoused artist Michael and oversized pages of the Stop LAPD Spying *Blueprint for Displacement* zine dotted the landscape between organizational banners, shade tents, and tables. The community day added a crucial collective who were also banished from the park: vendors, who organizers fundraised to buy out in bulk, though their stalls and carts remained outside of the fence. Ice cream, tacos, every variety of aguas frescas, and other street foods flowed from the sidewalk into the park.

Our *After Echo Park Lake* research collective set up a table with the UCLA faculty letter (see Chapter 1), research recruitment flyers, relevant research on housing precarity and policing, and a human-scale Memory Map. What Ananya Roy, co-author of this report, [terms](#) “a modality of intimate & collective memory,” the Memory Map portrays Echo Park Lake and an approximately two-block radius. Stickers, pens, colored pencils, post it notes, and tape invite mapping participants to record stories, paths of movement, sites of key events or



Figure 6-27. The Street Watch LA Power Up table, once a fixture within the park, returns for Community Day, Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Rayne Laborde Ruiz.



Figure 6-28. An oversized print of Stop LAPD Spying Coalition & UTACH's "Blueprint for Displacement" zine reminds passerby of the truth behind LAPD's Echo Park Rehabilitation After Action Report, Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.



Figure 6-29. Former Echo Park Lake resident Queen shares her story at Echo Park Community Day, in front of the memorial for unhoused lives lost, Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.



now-gone structures, and spatially preserve intangible memories. Inspired by “thick mapping”<sup>53</sup> practices, which bring together historic, qualitative (stories, photographs, observations, and perceptions) and quantitative (reports, analysis, statistics, metrics) findings to tell the multi-layered story of an area, the Memory Map is open to interpretation and flexible use. This is demonstrated in what former residents and activists chose to map. Some shared stories of meeting and falling in love—where they first saw each other, where they first kissed, where they moved their tents to be together, where weddings happened. Others marked ends: the location of Andrew Kettle’s tent when he died, where police kettled protestors on the night of the raid, where the fence was first erected. Acts of resistance were common memories: sites of teach-ins, successful blockades against sweeps and evictions, and the cite of the UTACH re-opening press conference. So were acts of joy: the community kitchen, “Dancing David’s Dance Dance Revolution Party,” and the Power Up Table.

Full schedule of Community Day events:

- 12:00 PM: Welcome & Land Acknowledgement; Testimony from Echo Park Rise Up residents
- 12:15 PM: Memorial for unhoused lives lost, Theo Henderson of *We The Unhoused*
- 1:00 PM: Stop LAPD Spying Coalition & UTACH present *Blueprint for Displacement* Zine
- 2:00 PM: “Watch the Watchers” camera hunting activity with Stop LAPD Spying Coalition
- 3:00 PM: Harm reduction training with Community Health Project & SoCal Street Medics
- 4:00 PM: LATU & UTACH members speak about the fight against evictions
- 5:00 PM: LACAN & UTACH & Street Watch LA on 41.18 + Housekeys not Handcuffs
- 6:00 PM: March around the park
- ALL DAY: Vendor buy out; Memory Map; Back to school supply & hygiene kit distribution; clothing swap; and more

53 Thick mapping comprises “the processes of collecting, aggregating, and visualizing ever more layers of geographic or place-specific data [to] embody temporal and historical dynamics through a multiplicity of layered narratives, sources, and even representational practices.” Presner et al., *HyperCities: Thick Mapping in the Digital Humanities*; thus allowing new depths of narrative and analysis: “When spatial ethnography and inventive mapping practices come together, they add contour to ‘the flatlands of conventional depictions.’” Cuff et al., *Urban Humanities: New Practices for Reimagining the City*.



Figure 6-30. The large-scale Memory Map, Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Rayne Laborde Ruiz.

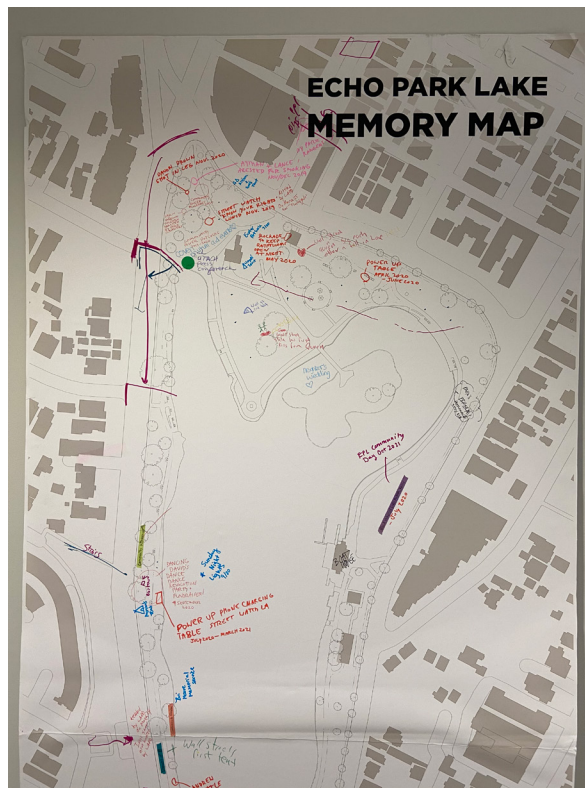


Figure 6-31. A portion of the Memory Map, February 2022. Photo: Liya Kunnathuparambil.

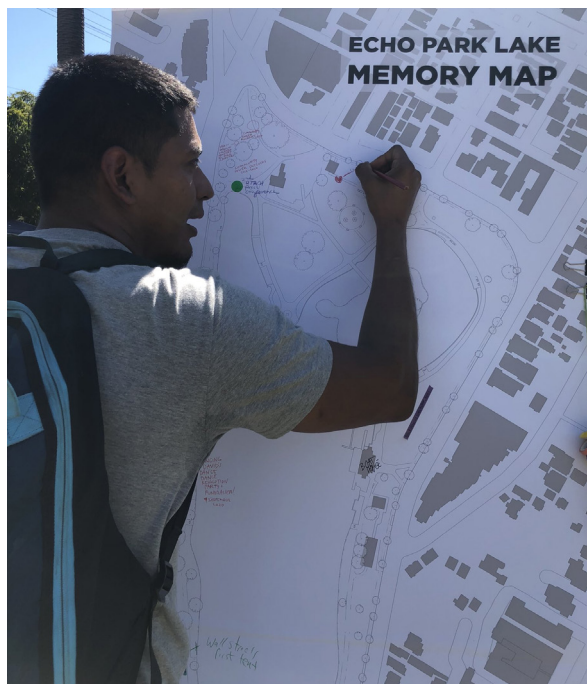


Figure 6-32. A former Echo Park Lake resident shares experiences on the Memory Map, Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.

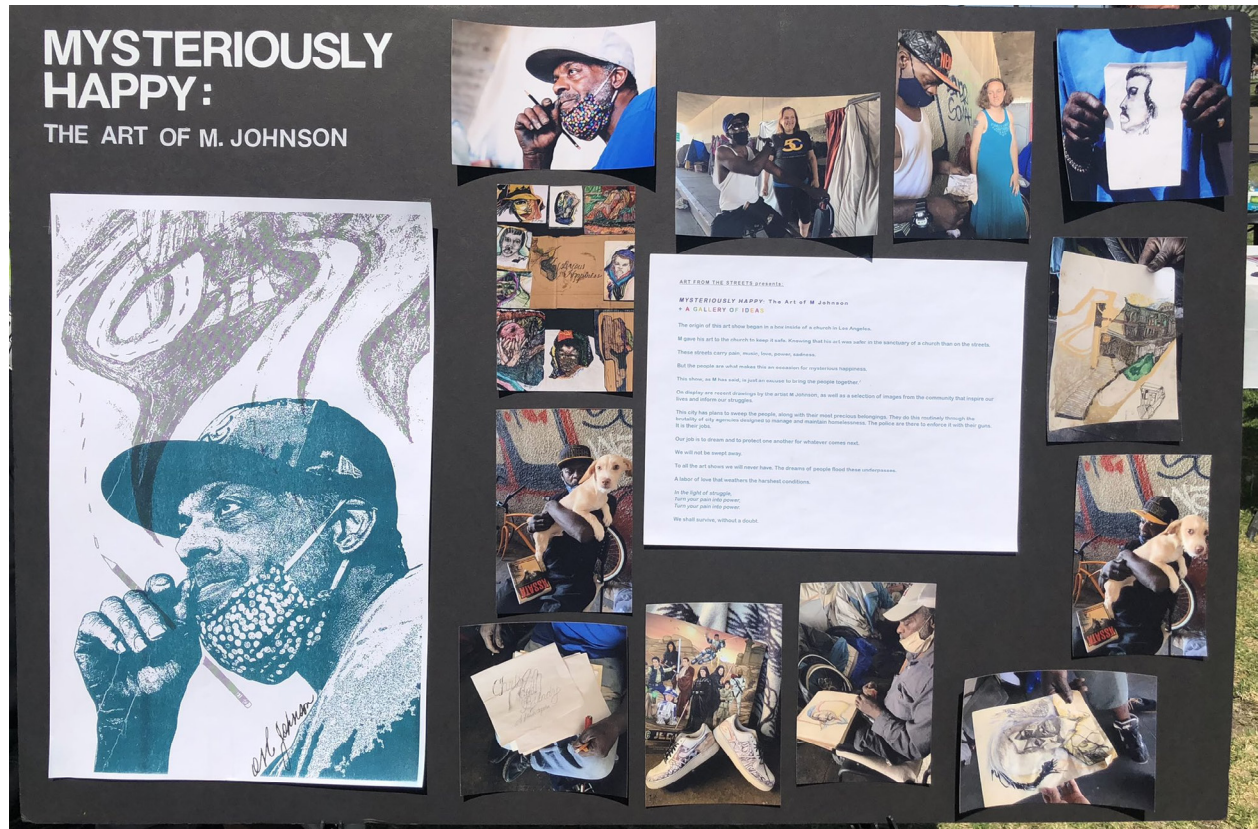


Figure 6-33. Dozens of artworks by unhoused artist Michael Johnson were on display, Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Ananya Roy.



Figure 6-34. Though Gustavo Otzoy was banished from the park, former residents and Street Watch LA organizers ensured he was neither invisible nor forgotten with signs and “I am Gustavo” t-shirts, Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Rayne Laborde Ruiz.

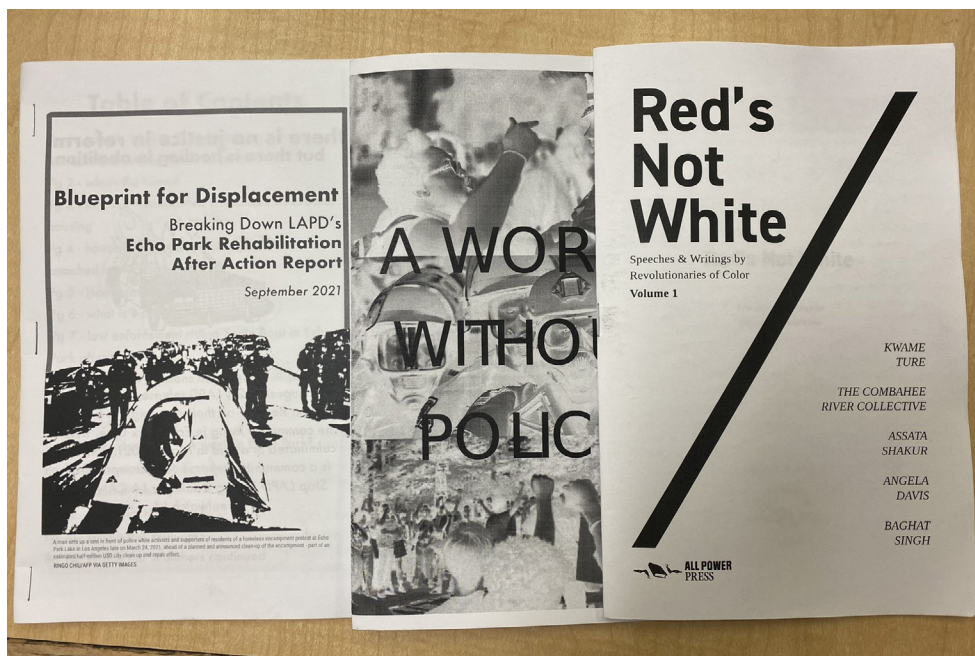


Figure 6-35. Community knowledge-making and alternative forms of knowledge production marked both Echo Park Community Day and the broader culture of organizing at Echo Park Lake. The abundance of zines attests to this record. Echo Park Lake, October 2, 2021. Photo: Jane Nguyen.

**7.**

**IN CONCLUSION,  
A LETTER TO THE  
FUTURE**

## 7. IN CONCLUSION, A LETTER TO THE FUTURE

Dear reader,

If you have accompanied us to the conclusion of this monograph, you must be wondering how this saga ends. We are wondering that as well.

It is obvious that those who engineered the Echo Park Lake displacement broke their promise that the displaced will be housed within a year. While we have exposed their ruse of housing, we expect that those in power will repeat this playbook of state-led displacement, legitimized through placement offers, over and over again. Indeed, this is the Section 41.18 system that is now securely in place, with the enthusiastic approval of most of Los Angeles' councilmembers and mayoral hopefuls.

As the playbook is repeated, we will be told a set of liberal lies. These might seem to be different than the violent and racist criminalization of homeless encampments touted by the engineers of the Echo Park Lake displacement. **But in fact, these liberal lies aid and abet revanchism.**

What are these liberal lies? **We will be told that the unhoused are shelter resistant.** The liberal promoter of this lie will exhibit empathy for the seeming refusal of shelter and note the scarcity of shelter and housing resources. Shrugging in the face of such "natural" scarcity, the liberal will come to begrudgingly support the "right to shelter," which is the obligation to accept shelter, as a way of getting the unhoused out of harm's way (freeway underpasses) and family neighborhoods (public parks). We hope that this monograph has given the lie to shelter-resistance and also indicated that scarcity is manufactured; it is a policy choice, one that can be actively overturned through the investment of ample federal and state funds in housing programs.

But there is a second liberal lie that is in the air: **that these housing programs are on their way and that we all need to be patient, even grateful.** After all, in Los Angeles, the vouchers are here. Emergency Housing Vouchers. More vouchers than the City and County have seen in years. No one is more eager to believe in the "voucher promise,"<sup>54</sup> than our unhoused comrades who have been in carceral isolation in Project Roomkey for a year now. They have spent most days of this year navigating the opaque bureaucracy of homeless services and managing their case managers. Having filled out numerous applications and program enrollment forms, they feel victorious when they have obtained a voucher. And yet, such a voucher does not guarantee housing. We remember [Anthony "Tony" Goodwin](#), a Black unhoused veteran in Van Nuys, who died on the street with a Section 8 housing voucher in hand.

Dear reader, here are two stories about Section 8 housing vouchers drawn from our ethnographic research so that you can understand the situation at hand and what is to come with Emergency Housing Vouchers.

### "We Don't Accept Couples"

Emma and Charlie are in their mid-30s to early 40s. They had been unhoused for the past seven years in Orange County, stuck in a churn of incarceration, probation, and homelessness. Living in a riverbed encampment and on the streets, they were constantly targeted by the police, either facing arrest or a sweep, and "losing everything and having to start all over each time." Separated from their three children, Emma and Charlie are close to one another and joke about the fact that they divorced one another but promptly remarried the next year. In early 2021, on a rainy spring day, "wet and homeless," they lost their patience with the cycle of dispossession in Orange County and asked a friend living on the streets in Los Angeles to give them a ride. They arrived in Echo Park Lake on March 23, 2021 and were given a tent by LAHSA outreach workers who urged them to spend the night in the park, promising that they would be taken to a Project Roomkey site the next day. When morning broke, Emma and Charlie boarded a waiting bus with a couple of bags of belongings

54 We borrow this phrase from Rosen, *The Voucher Promise: "Section 8" and the Fate of an American Neighborhood*.

and in what seemed a miracle, had a hotel room at the LA Grand hotel. They were taken with their “really nice” room, which is an end unit, a “huge” space with “two televisions, a stand-up shower and a separate bathtub.” But if the beautiful room felt like a miracle, the rules were a shock. Prohibited from having a room key or locking their room door, and with a 7 pm curfew, they felt constantly unsafe and violated. They experienced the rituals of security as constant harassment, with levels of surveillance and supervision that even surprised Charlie’s parole officer during one of his visits. “Dude, what the hell are these fucking gates you have to go through to get to your room, like what the hell,” the parole officer had said to Charlie.

While pinpointing the behavior of specific staff and security, Emma and Charlie also saw it as a system: “All the security, these people, are all in our position. The only difference is that they have a badge.” They also saw it as continuous with court-ordered programs run by the same service provider, The Salvation Army, that manages the Project Roomkey site at the LA Grand Hotel: “I’ve had a bunch of buddies that had to go to Salvation Army because of court order and do the program. And they find every and any issue to get them kicked out. It’s the same thing here,” said Charlie.

But what worried them the most was that there was no housing in sight. “How can we get jobs if we don’t have a place to live? When we don’t know where we will be next?” they fretted. When we interviewed them in October 2021, Emma noted that they had filled out all possible applications for housing programs, including Section 8 vouchers, but had not been able to get an appointment with their ever-changing case-manager. Often they did not know that they had a new case manager, or in some cases the departing one stuck a post-it note on their hotel room door with the phone number of a new manager who was typically overworked and unavailable. Written up twice already by the Salvation Army staff for rule violations at the LA Grand Hotel, they were worried that they would be exited before the prospect of housing materialized or that Project Roomkey would come to an end. In fact, they were making plans to permanently leave Los Angeles and move in with family in New Mexico.

In February 2022, Emma and Charlie finally got their Section 8 housing voucher paperwork. They had still not been able to connect with their case-manager, but their persistence had yielded this important document. Emma and Charlie were now trying to use the voucher to find a housing unit. Our research collective had just heard about the availability of units at the [newly renovated Hotel Cecil](#), a residential hotel that had been acquired by a developer and was to be operated by a nonprofit entity, the Skid Row Housing Trust. In keeping with the long tradition of organizing at residential hotels, the [Los Angeles Community Action Network \(LACAN\)](#) had been working since the acquisition to ensure that potential tenants of the Hotel Cecil were protected by the hard-won [Wiggins Settlement of 2006](#), a landmark lawsuit that preserved single-room occupancy hotel units for low-income residents in Skid Row. We connected Emma and Charlie to organizers at LACAN who were strategizing on how to move people from Project Roomkey hotels like the Mayfair Hotel and the LA Grand Hotel to Hotel Cecil. Here is the text exchange between Ananya Roy, one of the co-authors of this monograph, and Pete White, founder and director of LACAN:

Pete: Yes, the word is out that a few hundred people will be moved from PRK into the Cecil.

Ananya: I wish it were true.

Pete: Shit, we’re going to try to make it true.

Dear reader, indeed, this is what organizing does. It makes the system deliver on its fake-ass promises.

With all the paperwork in place, and with the support of LACAN organizers, the Hotel Cecil seemed a sure thing for Emma and Charlie. They were elated. “Omg this is amazing?!!!!!!” Emma texted us on February 4, 2022. But on February 11, 2022, she texted the following:

Hello there just letting you know that Hotel Cecil doesn’t accept couples. They said they couldn’t accommodate us...thought it to be really strange. But thank you for thinking of us. Really appreciate it.

Dear reader, have you given up? LACAN organizers remind us that there is no such option. They continue to organize for a covenant at the Hotel Cecil that would ensure long-term affordability for low-income tenants and for equitable access so that family separation is not a prerequisite for housing.

## “They can house so many people, they won’t even notice”

Maria has a dream of acquiring a “piece of land for \$10,000 to \$15,000 ... in a nice little neighborhood... in the Texas area high desert,” and building her own home. “I kind of forgot lately that that’s what I want to do,” she said, “You know, because I’m so caught up. Just trying to live just trying to live right now, I’m stressed out about having to go get work. I’m stressed out about my babies being comfortable. I’m stressed out about everybody eating properly.” Living in a motel with her husband, Hector, and their two children, one of them an infant, Maria contemplates who owns the motel in which they crowd together in a room:

One person is getting all that money from all these people just living. Yeah, there’s millionaires and billionaires out there that’ll never see the bottom of their pot. Yeah, and there’s homeless people out on the street. They can house so many people, and they wouldn’t even notice.

In their early 30s, Maria and Hector have suffered housing insecurity for many years, sleeping at Maria’s family’s place, in their car, and at Echo Park Lake. They hold fond memories of the community at Echo Park Lake, including the support provided by the jobs program. After the displacement, they landed in a transitional housing program for families but were subject to privacy invasions, carceral rules, and harassment from security. They were ultimately evicted for standing up against that treatment. They now have a motel voucher for a short stint. Hector is acutely aware of what it will take to achieve housing stability for his family. “LAHSA tells me, ‘We’ll set up you up, and you can pay for your housing.’ And I’m like, that’s not permanent housing.” Worried that their combined earnings cannot pay the rent in much of Los Angeles, Maria and Hector have vigorously pursued the Section 8 housing voucher.

When we interviewed them in February 2022, they finally had the voucher in hand. “But we’re on our own to find the apartment, you know,” said Hector, “and then most of these places need a credit score of whatever that we don’t got, you know what I mean?” Tearing up, he pointed to his seven-year-old:

This motel voucher runs out on Thursday. What’s gonna happen Thursday? When we have to sleep in the car, he’s used to it. He grew up in my van, you know what I mean? And he’s a strong little dude. It beats me up because I need a foundation. I need a strong solid foundation so I can build from, you know what I mean? I’m not a lazy person. I got a fat resume. I’m a good strong worker, you know what I mean? Throw me in the warehouse and give me 12 hours a shift for six days, you know, and I’m gonna run that. That’s just the type of person that I am. Just until I can get it, you know...it’s almost there.

Describing the tough search for housing units, Hector noted:

I was on Facebook marketplace last night. And I put “Section 8 accepted” on my search. And one apartment complex came in. And it said like, Section 8 in the title. So I contacted that lady right away. And I said, “Hey, man, it’s overwhelming. You know, if you guys can bump down the rent to \$2500 instead of \$2600.” It’s not like a nice neighborhood or whatever, but like, I’m not worried about it. You know, I’m gonna protect my family.

Like Hector, Maria is worried that they will not be able to get a housing unit:

But like, man, so you’re telling me, if this is what I have and if I want to get an apartment right away, it has to be these neighborhoods. Because that’s the only places that’s renting to people with low credit scores and have Section 8 vouchers. And there’s a waiting list for people with Section 8 to get into even these apartments. I think we’re just fighting for time, at this moment right now.

Worried about the imminent end of their motel voucher, Hector and Maria were ready to sell their car, hoping to get “at least two grand for it.” But it turns out that they would soon need more than two grand.

On February 14, 2022, Annie Powers, one of the co-authors of this monograph, reached out to UTACH, Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing, which has set up its own rapid response mutual aid, noting that Hector and Maria had found a housing unit that will accept their Section 8 voucher but that they have come up with a massive deposit of first and last month’s rent, a sum of about \$5,000. While UTACH members mobilized around fundraising for this large amount, they also passed along tips for program resources such as Los Angeles County Development Authority’s (LACDA) Landlord Incentives Program. It showed how the unhoused had become their own case managers, with deep technical expertise regarding programs and services. Since Hector and Maria had been told by LACDA that they were not going to get help with the security deposit, UTACH member Violet Howards noted that “Some of the people at LACDA are uninformed. It makes no sense to be homeless and not qualify for the program. And it’s really the landlord who qualifies for the program.” Ms. Howards also offered to reach out to her housing navigator at a service provider whose name we are not including here and



to her case manager at LACDA. Like many unhoused people who are in the churning system, she has to manage many different service providers and agencies. The next day Ms. Howards reported back to the group:

My case manager said that LACDA does not provide help with paying the security. He said if I need help with the security deposit to contact LAHSA: [problem-solving@lahsa.org](mailto:problem-solving@lahsa.org). I know there is help with the cost of the security deposit. I have been told this by several navigators. I believe it is funded through LAHSA and your navigator has to make a request for the funding. I am currently waiting on my navigator to get back to me on this matter.

Two days later, Ms. Howards wrote with frustration:

I want to first say that [this service provider] is very unprofessional. Just because you are a religious organization does not make you fit to help the homeless. LAHSA needs to stop funding them to help the homeless. All they are doing is collecting employment checks for doing practically nothing. The money they use for homeless services could be better spent. Many in this group could do a better job as housing navigators. I had promised Annie that I would reach out to her when my navigator gave me a call back regarding the security deposit issue. He never called me back. I have emailed him and texted him several times over the last six days on other matters and he has not responded. Very frustrating when you are dealing with time sensitive issues.

It is important to note here that Ms. Howards herself holds an Emergency Housing Voucher and had been assured by her housing navigator that there would be assistance with the security deposit.

Refusing to give up on helping Maria and Hector, Ms. Howards took on the task of contacting the LAHSA problem-solving helpline. Here is the response she received:

Thank you for reaching out to LAHSA's Problem-Solving Unit. You can contact the Family Solutions Center nearest to you and ask to speak with the Problem-Solving Specialist on site to discuss financial assistance eligibility. Not every Family Solutions Center has a Problem-Solving Specialist on site, so you may need to contact more than one ... Alternatively, you can have the case manager/agency that applied for the EHV voucher with you submit the Problem-Solving Funds request on your behalf. Best wishes to you on a smooth move-in.

Now, Maria and Hector are still waiting, this time for a *different* housing unit. Their case worker is in touch with the landlord, but Maria and Hector are still waiting to hear back. Days later, Hector shared via text that their application is in, but they're waiting for a call back and "We don't know how long it could be. We fear the worst, having to sleep in a car with my children." In the meantime, they're stuck scraping together enough cash to stay indoors:

I really wish 1000 people could toss me \$1 so I can buy some more time indoors 'til my paperwork gets pushed. It's very upsetting having this little and to be expected to handle so much alone with no one on our team to want us to win.

Dear reader, has reading this tired you? Maria and Hector are tired as well. Emma and Charlie are tired. Ms. Howards is tired. They are tired of the interminable waiting in carceral isolation, of the broken promises, of the ruse of housing. They are tired of churning through the system of prison-like programs and the street—they are demanding housing on their terms.

But the call from the Los Angeles Community Action Network rings in our ears: "Shit, we're going to try to make it true."

## What Needs to Be Made True

### 1. Keep People Housed

Benito Flores, UTACH member and key organizer in the [Reclaiming our Homes](#) movement, always introduces himself as “lawfully homeless.” “The reasoning of those in power is that we are guilty of being homeless. We refuse to be made guilty. We are lawfully homeless because we have made homeless by high rents, low wages, and cruel laws.” In this interview with [Dissent](#) magazine, he explains the wage-rent gap:

Flores has been in the United States for thirty-four years, he said, always working, often for not much more than minimum wage. “Up until 2005, that was fine. I could live modestly. I could pay my rent.” But the rent hikes and harassment from his landlord drove him out of his house; he’s kept working while living in his van. “I was a welder. I made a lot of wrought iron, making gates and doors,” he said. “Obviously, doing that produced a lot of value, but where has all that value gone now that I have to live in the streets? That has all basically just gone to surplus value and not to my wages.”

Flores’s housing trajectory exemplifies the situation faced by working-class communities of color in Los Angeles, which carry some of the highest rent burdens in the country. In 2018, [the Economic Roundtable](#) reported that nearly 600,000 Los Angeles County residents were not only in poverty, but were also in households spending 90 percent or more of their income on housing, putting them at severe risk of eviction and, in many cases, homelessness. As Gary Blasi’s path-breaking report, [UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness](#)



Figure 7-1. Theo Henderson (front), founder of We the Unhoused, and William Sens, Jr., UTACH member at the Right to Rest Rally, Los Angeles City Hall, July 28, 2021. Photo courtesy of UTACH.

*in Los Angeles*, has shown, in recent years the main driver of the dramatic increase in homelessness in Los Angeles has been economic hardship, caused by stagnant wages and rising rents. He predicts that such housing insecurity is set to dramatically worsen, with the COVID-19 pandemic taking a massive toll on working-class communities of color through increasing employment and wage instability. Most evident in the growing rental debt carried by low-income tenants, this looming catastrophe is being barely mitigated by rent relief programs, most of which siphon resources to landlords. It is clear that the stage has been set for another round of racialized dispossession, as evident from the [renter vulnerability index](#) developed by Paul Ong and colleagues, which shows how such vulnerability is concentrated in Black and brown neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Initiatives such as [Stay Housed LA](#) are important as a first step in keeping people in their homes but as the [Los Angeles Tenants Union](#) reminds us, the only guarantee of this is through tenant power.

## 2. Tackle Discrimination in Housing Markets

In their important study of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) in Los Angeles, the California Policy Lab finds that “Black residents are returning to the same structurally racist housing markets that may have shaped both their prior homelessness and experience of PSH. This can make utilizing a housing voucher especially challenging and in turn increase housing instability.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, even with a voucher in hand, unhoused persons face significant barriers, such as application fees, background checks, and credit checks. This is a matter of great concern for the Emergency Housing Vouchers, the main expansion of low-income housing resources currently underway nationwide and in Los Angeles. Such vouchers rely on “structurally racist housing markets” and will thus most likely reproduce the forms of exclusion and expulsion that we have foregrounded in this monograph. While existing law, the California Fair Employment and Housing Act, prohibits various forms of discrimination, the legal and sociological research on the experience of Section 8 voucher holders shows ample evidence of “policing integration” through various mechanisms of surveillance and segregation.<sup>56</sup> A new California Bill, [AB 2203](#), introduced by Assemblymember Luz Rivas, seeks to specifically “prohibit requiring a consumer credit report, as defined, as part of the application process for a rental housing accommodation in instances where there is a government rent subsidy.” Of course, the consumer credit report is only one of many tools of race and income discrimination used against voucher holders. And while discrimination is often seen to be a landlord problem, as the landmark Department of Justice lawsuit against the Cities of Palmdale and Lancaster and the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles (HACLA) and subsequent [settlement agreement](#) (2015) shows, it is also public entities that systematically discriminate against voucher holders, including through discriminatory enforcement of program rules. Without a dismantling of institutionalized discrimination in housing markets and in housing programs, people with vouchers will continue to die on the streets without being able to utilize them.

## 3. Abolish Criminalization

On page 14 of the settlement agreement noted above, the plaintiff, the United States of America, prohibits the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles from collusion with police, stating: “It is not a legitimate law enforcement purpose for LASD to investigate [HACLA] voucher holders strictly in connection with their compliance with the voucher program.” As we have shown throughout this monograph, the collusion between police enforcement and shelter and housing systems is ongoing and widespread. While currently being consolidated by laws such as LAMC 41.18 that banish unhoused communities, such forms of poverty management have been in the making for a while through Special Enforcement and Cleaning Zones, A Bridge Home shelter, CARE+ sweeps and more. Indeed, in June 2020, LAHSA supervisor Kristy Lovich issued [a powerful call for LAHSA to end its partnerships with police](#), noting that such collusions furthered anti-Blackness and undermined the agency’s work with unhoused populations, who are disproportionately Black. Lovich was fired from LAHSA for the petition and, as our research shows, such carcerality has been extended into new programs such as Project Roomkey, Tiny Homes, Safe Sleep Villages, often with police power deputized to security subcontractors. Most significant, LAHSA will now manage the “Street to Home” strategy that underpins the brutal policing unleashed by LAMC 41.18. Tying criminalization to services makes punishment a fundamental part of poverty management. Extending such criminalization into shelter and housing programs undermines housing security and poor people’s dignity and self-determination.

55 Milburn et al. *Inequity in the Permanent Supportive Housing System in Los Angeles: Scale, Scope and Reasons for Black Residents’ Return to Homelessness*, 7.

56 Hayat, “Section 8 is the New N-Word: Policing Integration in the Age of Black Mobility.”

#### 4. Invest in the Public Acquisition and Community Control of Property

As our monograph shows, the initial demand for [hotels as housing](#), at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, came from unhoused communities and allied movements. Indeed, the emergency of the pandemic presented a unique opportunity for the public acquisition of distressed and vacant property and their conversion to low-income housing, including through eminent domain. While the opportunity has been squandered in California, with programs such as Project Homekey confined to a minuscule scale, there continues to be a national push for such public acquisition as the basis of a [new social housing program](#). At a time when Wall Street and other corporate investors are once again on a real-estate buying spree through “[housing grabs](#),” such public acquisition is crucial to counter speculation, predation, and eviction. Such formations remain deliberately opaque, hidden behind a veil of LLCs (limited liability corporations), with disclosure of real ownership repeatedly stymied by property lobbies. To rely solely on the market provision of housing is a losing game, one in which housing gains will always be swallowed up by corporate investors and speculators. It is to this end that housing justice movements around the country are experimenting with various modes of socializing and collectivizing property relations, including community land trusts. Especially significant are organizing efforts that seek to “decolonize and heal relationships to land,” as in the case of the [Land Relationships Super Collective](#).

What does it mean to dwell in a settler democracy? As the [Homes Guarantee platform](#) reminds us, “fair housing” can only be considered within a “reparative framework” that addresses the long arc of violence from “Native genocide” to “urban renewal.”<sup>57</sup> The fight for housing and community by displaced Echo Park Lake residents must be understood within such a framework. Their fight demonstrates that the public acquisition and ownership of property will not suffice without a vigorously defended framework of tenant rights. In Los Angeles, the long struggle for tenant rights in residential hotels thwarted the displacement effects of redevelopment. But such rights were not extended to Project Roomkey, despite the long duration of stay by residents. It is significant that these residents came to call themselves “Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing,” or UTACH. For the promise of housing to be “made true,” their rights have to be recognized and honored. What is at stake in these tenant rights, paradoxically asserted by those who are unhoused, is a transformation of the system of displaceability, inequality, and carcerality that this monograph exposes.

In July 2021, on a warm summer evening, our research collective gathered at the UCLA Sculpture Garden. We ate pasta and salad and homemade cupcakes and did a writing exercise where we each expressed our vision of housing justice. William Sens, Jr., a member of our research collective, UTACH member, and a displaced Echo Park Lake resident, noted: “It was all doomed from the start. This country is based on the theft of land. What then is justice? The only way forward is for a nation of unhoused people to connect and organize.”

Dear reader, what role will you play in connecting and organizing? At the Echo Park Community Day held in October 2021, six months after the displacement, General Dogon of LACAN asked the gathered crowds to contemplate: “What do you bring to the fight?” We each have a role in the transformation of the system of displaceability, carcerality, and inequality analyzed in this monograph.

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57 People's Action, *A National Homes Guarantee*, 15.

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