

# SLATE

February 07, 2020

## Living on the Streets of L.A.



Skid Row in Los Angeles on Sept. 16. Mario Tama/Getty Images

I was homeless in Salt Lake City. But nothing prepared me for what I saw in Los Angeles' Koreatown.

**by Lori Teresa Yearwood**

**Koreatown, LOS ANGELES**—Resting inside one of the stone entryways of St. James Episcopal Church on St. Andrews Place, Josh Law heard a drunken man's slurred speech and then the sound of an opening zipper. In 16 months of homelessness, Law had learned to sleep in an altered state of hypervigilance. He grabbed his makeshift bed of clothes and blankets—and dodged the stream of urine.

Sixteen long months of hell, Law says. Sixteen months of adjusting his nightly agenda to the event schedule of the church so that he wouldn't block a doorway with his bed. Sometimes he stretched out at 8 p.m.; sometimes he waited until 10 p.m. He always made sure he was up at 4 a.m., before the garbage truck drivers passed. "I didn't want people to see me and think: 'Oh, what a lazy homeless bum,'" Law said.

But the number of homeless people in this country is steadily increasing; there are far too many for literal—or figurative—invisibility. The statistics extend gloomily from there. Advocates who work with the homeless estimate there are at least [2 million unhoused people](#) in the United States. Between 2018 and 2019, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's count, the homeless population in the city of Los Angeles [increased by 16 percent](#)—bringing the estimated homeless population to 36,165, at least 27,200 of whom were living on the streets. Koreatown, a neighborhood that takes up just 2.7 square miles, contains nearly 600 unhoused residents.

Here, in Koreatown, while locals have protested the building of a homeless shelter, forcing the project to relocate half a mile away, the homeless live on sidewalks, in alleyways, parks—and anyplace else they can find. Dilapidated tents bound together with rope create strange formations amid the city's mix of modern and Art Deco architecture. They awkwardly jut from the sidewalks like poorly crafted spaceships.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly suggested that he might try to implement some kind of police crackdown in California to clear its streets. And on Christmas Day, he tweeted that Gavin Newsom, California's governor, was doing a "bad job" with "taking care of the homeless population in California." "If he can't fix the problem, the Federal Govt. will get involved!" the president wrote.

In November, I traveled to Los Angeles from Salt Lake City, where I had lived on the streets between 2014 and 2016. Salt Lake has relatively few homeless inhabitants compared with other major American cities. Even as some outlets have [disputed](#) this specific claim and I regularly see homeless people sleeping in tents on the sidewalks where I was once homeless, Salt Lake has been held up as a [national symbol](#) of a city that has "all but ended chronic homelessness."

While I did not know what I would see or learn in my five days in L.A., I know how traumatizing it is to be homeless. And I wanted to witness how people—housed as well as unhoused—cope with this issue on such a devastating scale.

I met Law on a Saturday afternoon, in the parking lot of St. James Church, where he had just finished taking a shower inside a mobile shower van offered by Shower of Hope, a nonprofit organization that serves the homeless population in Los Angeles. Once a construction worker who says he made up to \$50 an hour, Law lost his housing after being severely injured on the job—he fell and suffered a compound fracture to his tibia, he says, pulling his pants leg up to show a deep scar from surgery. The \$1,347 a month he says he got from disability was nowhere near enough to cover the cost of an apartment, not even a studio, which averages \$1,000 to \$1,300 a month in Los Angeles. “No one would give me a lease where I was paying nearly 80 percent of my income toward rent,” Law said.

The 42-year-old hasn’t told his relatives back in Kentucky that he’s homeless, even though he says they have the means to help him out financially. A man has got to have his pride, Law says. When his daughter came to visit, he said, “I rented an Airbnb for four days so she would think I was housed.” These past 16 months have culminated, Law says, in six painful ulcers.

Law tells me he is paying for his food—“I refuse to go on food stamps,” he said—cellphone bill, storage unit, and other necessities by selling his plasma and by buying shirts at Goodwill stores and then reselling them. Yes, it’s a demanding, hardscrabble life. But the biggest stressor of being homeless, Law said, is “other people’s views of me.”

Despite the widespread myth that homeless people flock to Los Angeles to bask in the sunshine, most of the unhoused are people who have been living in the area for many years, according to [a 2018 report](#) from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. Sixty-five percent of the homeless people in Los Angeles County have lived there for at least two decades, and three-quarters have lived in the county for at least 10 years. “Many of them are living in tents across the street from the

apartments from which they have been evicted,” said homeless advocate Jane Nguyen.

Walking into a Subway shop in Koreatown, I was overcome not only by the homeless man looking directly into my eyes as he sits on a patch of pavement outside, but by the in-your-face smell of urine emanating from the doorway. “Ma’am, do you have any money so I can get a warm meal?” Suddenly, there is an agenda to tend to. Which shall it be? Mine—or his?

Even as a formerly homeless woman myself, I feel unsure how to cope with the flurry of emotions this request brings. I know what it’s like to lose everything and fall to the lowest rungs of society, a place so stigmatized that people keep a careful distance, rarely stepping close enough to ask how you are doing or what you might need. Yet two and a half years into my emergence, I sometimes freeze in survival mode, forgetting that I can spare a dime, or at the very least a smile. And so I walked guiltily past the man, without interacting with him. Like everyone else, I’m coping with the reality of living in a world where the need for self-preservation is as great as the need to help those in need.

In November, I talked with Johnny Lee, who owns a pizza restaurant in Koreatown: “Yesterday, I was riding my bike to work and I saw a man take his last breath and die. He was homeless.” Lee, 36, is also the co-founder of Koreatown for All, a small group of Los Angeles residents who have banded together to watch over their unhoused neighbors. In L.A., the death of the unhoused is becoming commonplace: An average of three homeless people die every day in Los Angeles County, according to [a 2019 report](#) from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

The dying man Lee saw lay some 50 feet away from a Starbucks, next to a high rise filled with pricey condominiums, Lee said. Another man was pumping the homeless man’s chest with the palm of his hand. Lee saw a passerby, a man who looked like he was in his 30s, shake his head. He recalls hearing him say to no one in particular, “Oh, another dead guy.”

It was the oddest thing, says Lee. Everyone was doing their daily thing on that bright blue November morning: buying their juice, drinking their



latte, heading to work. “And all I could think was: ‘I just watched someone leave this earth,’ ” Lee said.

Koreatown is a neighborhood that prides itself on having created something out of nothing—in the 1960s it was a working-class area inhabited mostly by Korean immigrants who went on to establish many thriving businesses. Since then, it has become one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Los Angeles: Approximately 7.1 percent of the population is white, 51.8 percent is Hispanic, 4.9 percent is black, 33.6 percent is Asian, 1.5 percent is “mixed,” and 1.1 percent is “other,” according to [information gathered](#) from the U.S. 2010 census and from the 2012–16 American Community Survey.

Koreatown is now known for having one of the largest concentrations of nightclubs and 24-hour businesses and restaurants in the country. It’s undergoing the same gentrification process that has swept through Los Angeles and displaced many.



Protesters march down Wilshire on May 24, 2018, in anger about a temporary homeless shelter being built in Koreatown.

Francine Orr/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

In May 2018, Lee staged a protest against a protest against the city of Los Angeles' proposal to build a homeless shelter in Koreatown. More than 100 people showed up to oppose the homeless shelter proposal, Lee says. Some of them shouted stereotypes about homeless people, according to Lee—how they were dangerous and drug addicts—and said they didn't want “people like that” around their children, he recalls. Lee stood in the midst of the angry chaos of the protest, holding a cardboard sign. “Koreatown Choose Love,” one side read. “Least of These,” read the other side—a partial quote from Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40, “as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” It was a Sunday, and he hoped to catch the eye of his fellow Korean Christians leaving services. “Koreans have come a long way,” Lee says, “with many of them fighting ... to finally ‘make it’ to middle class—only to push away the middle class.” But as a Korean American, he felt very sure that “all Koreatown residents were [not] against the homeless shelter.”

Lee hadn't initially planned on anything broader than a one-off counterprotest. But people saw his photo on Twitter and on the news and started to contact him, telling him they wanted to join forces in support of Koreatown's homeless population. And so Koreatown for All was born.

The group now has five core activists and hundreds of drop-in volunteers—all of whom walk the streets of Koreatown, acting as de facto case managers: talking with homeless people, keeping track of their needs, and connecting them to resources and information. The volunteers range from teenagers to senior citizens. Some are attorneys, some business owners. Another, Lee says, is a reality television producer.

One of them is Jane Nguyen. Nguyen says her entire life purpose shifted after she first saw a tweet about Lee and his protest. Before, she had a full-time office job. Now her entire focus is on helping the homeless. She

gives her phone number to her unhoused neighbors, and she shared a slew of urgent texts from them with me:

“Do you guys have tarps and clamps and extra heavy duty blankets—any pillows?”

“I need a tent.”

“I’m homeless and a friend of mine said you could help me out. Any kind of help to make life a little easier. Text me back if you can help.”



Lucrecia Macias, 41, gets ready for the day in her home, a tent on the sidewalk behind a bank in Koreatown, on Nov. 10.

Julie Pena

On a Friday night in November, Nguyen drove me to East Eighth Street, to the tent where Lucrecia Macias, a 41-year-old woman with stage 3 lymphoma, is living.

Macias wasn't home, a young man in a white gym suit told us.

“She’s still in the hospital,” he said.

No one knew exactly when she would be home again.

“Home” was a row of half a dozen tents, surrounded by mounds of children’s toys—there was a pink-and-white plastic stove that looked a lot like the one I pretended to cook on when I was a child—and grown-up pots and pans and tools and bicycle frames and tires, one of which was hanging from the top branches of a tall oak tree above Macias’ tent. Everything was inexplicably random, perhaps the most familiar hallmark of homelessness.

Two days later, I went back to the encampment. The smell of bleach and lavender incense wafted through the air. The same young man in the gym suit told me Macias still wasn’t home. This time, there was an air of protectiveness about him. But when I told him Nguyen from Koreatown for All had sent me, he nodded and waved me past a mound of metal bicycle parts next to Macias’ tent.

“Wait a minute,” Macias called out.

I could hear her sweeping the cloth floor of her tent with a broom. Then she lifted the canvas door, inviting me inside. She had covered the tent’s holes with colorful scarves and butterfly appliqués, and there was a determined air of cheerfulness about her as she began to talk.

Yes, she had been in the hospital for a few days, she said, as the chemotherapy she’d undergone made her prone to viruses. But the medicine had helped her feel better, and the cancer was in remission, she said confidently.

Macias became homeless three years ago, because she had a meth addiction, she said. She said she removed herself from her home, as otherwise, her entire family would have been evicted. The substance abuse came after she filed a rape charge against her husband, who was deported as a result of her allegation, according to Macias. She thought the meth would help her keep up her energy, she told me. At the time, she was a live-in vocational nurse and a single mom. When she moved out, she said, she had to leave everyone behind.



Now she's smoking only cannabis to deal with the pain from the cancer, she explained, and she's ready to be back with her children. Until that happens, she cooks for the young people who live in the nearby tents. "They all call me 'mom,'" she said proudly. Everyone, including Macias, takes turns staying up all night because they know they are never safe on the streets.



Jodan Wischmeier, 42, holds her dog Rusty outside of her home in an alley in Koreatown on Nov. 9.  
Julie Pena

For Jodan Wischmeier, a woman living next to three garbage dumpsters off the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Berendo Street, coping with the danger of homelessness often looks like carrying a 4-inch switchblade in her purse. Other times, it looks like Wischmeier digging through her purse and taking a swig from a bottle of vodka. Especially, she says, after hearing the police tell her that she needs to move her home—a tent holding everything from her propane cooking stove to her bed to her Bible. "We're always being told we have to move,"

Wischmeier said, tears spilling from her eyes. “But where are we going to go?”

Wischmeier has a young face, with dirty-blond hair pulled back into a neat ponytail. She became homeless after fleeing a domestic violence situation, she said. With nowhere to go, she moved into her tent. Regardless, the 42-year-old said she feels “lucky,” as she is currently living across the street from a Chevron station, where most of the employees allow her to use the bathroom without telling her to buy something first. Plus, a couple of times a week, her boyfriend’s mother allows her to take a shower and do laundry.

She works odd jobs, she said, and those jobs allow her to buy food and pay for her cellphone. She doesn’t want to talk about what the jobs are. But the one thing she is willing to talk about is how she hasn’t found a way to navigate the anxiety that rushes through her on a regular basis. A doctor prescribed anti-anxiety medication, Wischmeier said, but the diagnosis left her feeling deeply ashamed. “I don’t see what I have to be that stressed about,” she said.

I told her that I recently reported and wrote [a story for Slate](#) about the constant stress of living on the streets, as well as the misdiagnosis and under acknowledgement of post-traumatic stress disorder in homelessness. Hearing her personal situation normalized, Wischmeier sobs openly. “Honestly, it’s getting harder and harder for me to leave this alley,” she said.

I remember that feeling—how, before my sudden plunge into homelessness—I had been a successful journalist who traveled the country reporting stories. Yet in the trauma of homelessness, which included being stalked, beaten, and sexually assaulted, my world shrank to a two-mile radius around the park bench where I slept. I coped by withdrawing into my own mind, where I prayed.

Five days after I met Wischmeier in the alleyway, California state Sen. Holly Mitchell held a campaign event at a pizzeria around the corner from Wischmeier’s tent. Nguyen invited Wischmeier to come. There, Wischmeier had the chance to talk to two candidates running for the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors about the criminalization of the

homeless. “It’s not every day that [the homeless] get to talk directly to elected officials,” Nguyen said. “It’s so important that politicians hear directly from [them].”



Javier Prado, 61, sells electronics and cellphone covers on South Alvarado Street on Dec. 1.

Julie Pena

It was quarter past three on a Wednesday afternoon. A 61-year-old man, Javier Prado, was being evicted from his home of six years, as the city had deemed the building uninhabitable. “Do you want to go and meet him?” Nguyen asked me.

The two-story house on Lake Street, in a gentrifying neighborhood on the edges of Koreatown, looked decent enough on the outside. Inside, though, there were huge holes in the corners of ceilings, holes surrounded by what Prado’s attorney, Sean Chandra of Eviction Defense Network, said appeared to be a moldlike substance. The toilet that Prado shared with other housemates was broken, and the entire building stank of human waste. The landlord had been cited with failure to meet fire, safety, sanitation, and construction regulations.



Prado says that after the eviction notice came, but before he finished packing his belongings, he sat determinedly on the edge of his single bed, holding his guitar, strumming out a song about perseverance that he found on YouTube: “A Wooden Cross.” Prado sang along karaoke style, to cheer himself on.

He’d paid his rent on time and showed me receipts to prove it. But now he didn’t know where he would go. Prado is a street vendor who works seven days a week, eight hours a day, selling cellphone cases and batteries in downtown L.A. He says he makes between \$125 and \$150 a week—nowhere near the minimum needed to rent a studio apartment in Los Angeles.

Dressed in perfectly pressed black dress pants, spotless black shoes, and a shirt with cheerful lime and blue pinstripes, his thinning black hair carefully combed across his lined forehead, Prado looks to me like a picture of determined stoicism. “Many people I know in similar situations have gotten depressed and then become homeless—they live in tents on the streets,” he said. “I cannot allow myself to get depressed, even though I am sad and depressed.” Prado’s eviction notice said he needed to be out on Nov. 13—two days away. “I don’t know what I’m going to do,” he said.

Prado’s attorney says the judge allowed Prado’s landlord to evict him under a no-fault eviction. “There is a lot of lip service in this city about defending tenants’ rights,” Chandra said. “But if you look at what [the city] is doing behind the scenes, it’s ugly.”

The office of council member Herb Wesson, who represents Koreatown, said his schedule was too busy for an interview.

Meanwhile, the issue of homelessness in America has reached the federal level, where the Supreme Court decided in December against hearing an appeal to the case of *Martin v. City of Boise*. In that case, Robert Martin and five other homeless individuals challenged the city of Boise’s ability to fine them for violating an anti-camping ordinance, and won. In [its appeal](#), the city of Boise argued that “the creation of a de facto constitutional right to live on sidewalks and in parks will cripple the



ability of more than 1,600 municipalities in the Ninth Circuit to maintain the health and safety of their communities.”

In Los Angeles, [Ordinance 85.02](#) expired Jan. 1. The legislation had made living in a vehicle in residential areas or within a one block radius of schools and parks illegal. There are approximately 16,500 people living in cars, vans or RVs in Los Angeles County, according to [a 2019 LAHSA report](#). Also on Jan. 1, California enacted a 5 percent cap (plus inflation) on rent increases.

Despite these changes, Chandra says that the number of people he serves who are teetering on the brink of homelessness is increasing. One of his most recent cases involved a woman with a severely disabled 11-year-old child, as well as a 6-year-old. The woman had been burglarized and lost the money orders that she had been keeping to pay her rent.

Later that afternoon, on another quintessentially sunny California day, Sabrina Johnson, a Koreatown for All volunteer, talked with Prado outside his home, assuring him that she would help him move his things into storage, as well as make calls to the landlord’s attorney about compensation for the move. There was a feeling of extreme urgency between Johnson and Prado, as if a bomb were about to detonate. But no one knew how to stop it before it went off.



Koreatown for All volunteers Dan Donoue, Andrea More, and Jane Nguyen stop by to see Jodan Wischmeier on Sixth Street on Nov. 30. The volunteers handed out hygiene supplies, water, and socks, and gave out information about services for the homeless in the area.

Julie Pena

In January, a Koreatown for All volunteer said that Josh Law had suddenly moved away from the city, and he was not returning phone calls.

Jane Nguyen has been hired to participate in the Activist-in-Residence Program at UCLA, where she will be helping students to engage with the issue of homelessness. “As much as I would like a happy ending, things are getting worse,” she said.

Lucrecia Macias was still in her tent on the streets.

Javier Prado received a relocation check for approximately \$10,000 from the client trust account of the lawyer who evicted him. While that may sound like a great solution for Prado, it is really “a Band-Aid fix,” his

attorney Chandra said, as the money will pay for less than a year of market-rate rent in a studio apartment—that is, if Prado can prove income to pay for the rent after the money runs out. Prado had not yet been approved for such an apartment; the last Chandra heard, Prado was staying with a friend.

Jodan Wischmeier told me on the phone that police had asked her to move her tent in late November. She now lives on a street a few hundred feet away from her original homesite in the alleyway. She told me that the news she gets on her phone tells her there are city services available for homeless people. But no one other than Nguyen has come out to her area to offer her anything, she said. “No one is helping with permanent housing,” Wischmeier told me. “We get wet when it rains, even though we have tarps. I don’t know how I’m doing. I just do every day.”

*This story was supported by the [Economic Hardship Reporting Project](#).*



Lori Teresa Yearwood. Photo: Cass Studios of Salt Lake City  
*Lori Teresa Yearwood’s work can be found at [loriyearwood.com](http://loriyearwood.com)*

