

# Addiction and Life on the Streets: Homelessness in Los Angeles within the U.S.

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**Abstract:** This literature review explores the multifaceted relationship between substance abuse and homelessness in the United States, with a focus on Los Angeles. While drug use is frequently perceived as a primary cause of homelessness, evidence suggests that economic hardship, housing unaffordability, mental illness, and systemic inequities are more significant contributing factors. A comparison between Los Angeles and West Virginia highlights how geographic differences in housing costs influence homelessness rates more than drug usage alone. The paper further investigates how the rise of fentanyl use, particularly in areas like Skid Row, intensifies the challenges faced by unhoused individuals by compounding mental health crises and impeding recovery efforts. It reviews both historical and contemporary policy approaches, noting the inefficacy of punitive drug enforcement strategies in addressing root causes. This review advocates for comprehensive, data-driven solutions that prioritize affordable housing, mental health services, and harm reduction initiatives to effectively combat the homelessness crisis.

**Keywords:** homelessness, unhoused, drug addiction.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness has persisted on a large-scale for hundreds of years in the United States. However, it wasn't until recently that our population configured a relationship between drugs and homelessness. Drugs are frequently associated with homelessness and seen predominantly as a contributing factor. Yet many people fail to realize this is a stereotypical misconception. Although drugs may cause unstable habits leading to homelessness, its direct role in causing homelessness isn't as prominent as other influencing factors. This common misconception leads people to believe substance abuse is the primary cause to homelessness, completely disregarding the corrupt, systemic factors at play. While substance abuse can be a contributing factor in some cases, research emphasizes that economic hardship, lack of affordable housing, mental disorders, and social inequalities are the driving forces behind homelessness. The research seeks to unravel the association between drugs and homelessness through statistical data, exploring the root causes of housing insecurity, and highlighting the realities of unhoused individuals living in the US, more specifically Los Angeles. Los Angeles happens to be one of the cities leading the nation in homeless rates as well as substance abuse rates. Through a critical examination of the addiction rates among unhoused populations amongst the nation and Los Angeles, this study aims to provide a more sophisticated understanding upon the root causes of homelessness and how our geographic location can affect the outcomes. Addressing these misconceptions is crucial in shaping effective policies and interventions that prioritize housing opportunities instead of giving homeless people alternatives to promote clean drug use, furthering their detriment to society.

## II. HOMELESS CRISIS IN THE ENTIRE NATION (UNITED STATES)

In 2024, an estimated 771,480 individuals experienced homelessness on a single night in the United States. This is the highest number ever recorded – representing approximately 23 per 10,000 people, an 18% increase from 2023 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2024). California, New York, and Washington marked the largest homeless population with California alone accounting for around 24% of the national total. The estimated number of people experiencing homelessness in 2023 was 653,104 individuals which saw a significant increase from 2022 and was the highest number since 2007. Homelessness in the US has evolved into a multifaceted humanitarian emergency, driven by economic disparity, housing insecurity, mental health struggles, and systemic policy failures. According to the U.S. Department of

Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the number of people experiencing homelessness has increased steadily, with a significant portion being individuals suffering from chronic issues often linked to mental illness and substance abuse. Although substance use is prevalent among individuals experiencing homelessness, the relationship is bidirectional rather than causal. As Los Angeles Detox (2024) notes, drug addiction may increase the risk of homelessness, just as homelessness may increase vulnerability to substance use as a coping mechanism.

### **III. STATISTICS AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF HOMELESSNESS**

Homelessness in the United States is a multifaceted problem influenced by economic instability, racial inequalities, mental health issues, and substance abuse disorders, even though drug addiction is frequently incorrectly identified as the main reason. As reported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in 2023, more than 650,000 individuals faced homelessness on any night, with 60% being individuals and 40% families with children, highlighting that homelessness affects more than just single adults. Racial inequalities continue to be a major issue—Black Americans represent just 13% of the overall population but comprise 37% of the homeless population, with Hispanic and Indigenous communities also experiencing unequal impacts. Veterans, representing approximately 11% of the homeless population, still face challenges even with federal initiatives designed to decrease veteran homelessness. Although substance use disorders contribute to homelessness, data indicates that addiction is typically a result rather than the main factor leading to homelessness. Research shows that 22% of homeless individuals face long-term substance abuse issues, and 30% deal with serious mental health disorders, emphasizing the necessity for combined mental health and addiction care services. Economic struggles continue to be the primary cause of homelessness, especially in expensive cities like Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, where soaring rent costs and a scarcity of affordable housing leave countless individuals without shelter. In 2023, more than 75,000 people were reported as homeless in Los Angeles, with around 70% residing unsheltered in tents, cars, or public areas. The city's escalating housing crisis has driven many individuals to self-medicate themselves with drugs or alcohol to cope with severe poverty, trauma, and mental health issues, thereby reinforcing a cycle of homelessness and addiction. Nevertheless, policies that penalize drug consumption without tackling housing instability and social assistance do not successfully decrease homelessness. Rather, approaches should prioritize affordable housing projects, harm reduction strategies, increase mental health support, and addiction treatment, guaranteeing that people get the assistance they require instead of being left in a cycle of struggle. An all-encompassing, data-informed strategy is essential for addressing homelessness and the connected challenges of addiction and mental health, providing enduring stability instead of temporary punitive solutions.

### **IV. WEST VIRGINIA'S DRUG USE TO HOMELESS RATIO**

West Virginia has long been at the epicenter of the U.S. opioid epidemic. The state has the highest drug overdose rate in the entire nation due to fentanyl, prescription painkillers, and heroin. One extensive reason for W.V.'s spike in drug usage is through a long history of coal mining jobs that required extensive strength and physical endurance. Throughout the 1900's, coal miners were placed in harsh conditions of work leaving their body physically pained and sore. As these working conditions were far too gruesome, many left the industry; during this transition period, pharmaceutical companies began promoting pain relief medications (painkilling drugs). This created a chain effect made for disaster; miners quitting their jobs caused an influx of unemployed men whose bodies were worn out, seeking refuge in a new "prescribed" drug that would relieve their pain. The opioid epidemic was increasing quickly and soon was out of control, leaving West Virginia as the state of drug overdoses. Since 2021, W.V. ranks number one in overdose deaths at 90.9 fatal overdoses per 100,000 people. (American Addiction Centers, 2024) Despite the elevated drug usage rates in Huntington, WV, their rates of homelessness are remarkably low. The main difference between L.A. and West Virginia is housing affordability. Despite W.V.'s opioid crisis, the state ranks number 1 in lowest costs of housing at an average of about \$846 a month. (Fernandez, CNBC 2024) An average family in W.V. can afford a modest two-bedroom rental on less than \$17 an hour; in LA the same family would need to make \$40 an hour. (Bierman, 2023) The difference in affordability helps to visualize that location is a true factor to how life is set out for an individual. It's safe to say when comparing WV's substance rates to LA's, there are larger factors at play to homelessness that stem from a lack of recovery programs and affordable housing.

### **V. LOS ANGELES HOMELESS CRISIS**

In California, the homeless population increased around 3%, with more than 187,000 individuals sleeping outside in tents or in homeless shelters. (Kendall, 2025) Though California maintains 12% of the nation's entire population, it's home to around 30% of all homeless people in the United States. (Karlamlanga, New York Times 2024) Furthermore, Los Angeles

accounted for an estimated 45,252 people who experienced homelessness in 2024. (Los Angeles Almanac, 2024) This means that LA's homeless population accounted for around 25% of the state's entire homeless population. Homelessness in Los Angeles has always been prevalent since the 1950's as the creation of Skid Row invited many unhoused individuals as a beacon of refuge. After World War II, Los Angeles was a port for tens of thousands of soldiers. Many of them returned with PTSD, alcoholism, and most prevalently, substance addiction. (Roos, 2022) This commonality of substance abuse amongst the streets of Skid Row, a homeless infested area, heightened the rapid spurge of homeless prevalence with drugs in Los Angeles. This intertwined crisis of homelessness and substance abuse have been long shaped by a web of complex system driven issues.

In recent years, the rate of drug usage has increased as LA encountered the fentanyl epidemic. Fentanyl surged in popularity as drug traffickers sought to exploit the drug market which caused the shift in utilizing fentanyl as it was easier to produce in large quantities, contained higher potency, and was cheaper to smuggle. (State Health Access Data Assistance Center, 2024) As fentanyl prevalence grew, the overdose rates rose drastically. The proportion of all opioid involved overdose deaths involving fentanyl increased from 19% in 2016 to 94% in 2023.

## **VI. THE DETRIMENTAL AND CYCLICAL IMPACT OF DRUGS IN LA**

Drugs, particularly high potent substances such as fentanyl, are detrimental to the homeless cycle in LA because it creates a black hole, filled with struggle. They deepen physical, psychological, and systemic barriers that trap individuals in a state of chronic instability. The pervasive role of drugs, particularly fentanyl, significantly exacerbates the homelessness cycle in Los Angeles in vulnerable areas like Skid Row where drugs are utilized everyday. In order to maintain housing fees and more specifically a place to live, people must be able to take care of their wellbeing first. Substance abuse, reported by 31% of LA's homeless population as a primary barrier to housing, (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, LAHSA, 2022) often stems from self-medication from untreated mental health issues or trauma, conditions that worsened through lack of shelter and well-being.

The introduction of fentanyl, which is 50 times more potent than heroin, made matters worse by intensifying the overall overdose rates of the homeless population. Preliminary data from 2023 exemplified this spike as fentanyl was responsible for 75% of overdose deaths in LA county. (Meija, LA Times, 2024) This morbidity not only reduces lifespans but also destabilizes efforts to secure housing, as addiction erodes employability, strains social service resources, and isolates individuals from support networks, all effects from the 44% national spike of fentanyl deaths from 2019 to 2022. (SHADAC, 2024) In areas like Skid Row, where drug markets thrive amidst concentrated poverty, this cycle is reinforced by criminalization, undermining government interventions such as Measure H despite its \$355 million annual investment. Thus drugs deteriorate homelessness in LA by intertwining health crises with socioeconomic challenges making escape increasingly elusive. Although the devastating impact of drugs like fentanyl undeniably intensifies the challenges of escaping homelessness, it is important to understand that substance abuse is not the root cause of this crisis, but rather one of the factors that compounds the struggle in finding stability within oneself in order to maintain a home.

## **VII. HOUSING ISSUES AND AFFORDABILITY - CAUSES OF RAPID HOMELESSNESS**

As housing becomes scarce due to a lack of construction to match the growing demand, many people are pushed out onto the streets. This outpaces other contributing factors such as mental illness and substance abuse. In Los Angeles, a 2024 city report estimated that solving its homeless crisis would sum up to a whopping \$21.7 billion, two-thirds of which remains unfunded. (Dillon, LA Times 2024) A primary driver is the dramatic escalation of prices, met with the heightened demand for housing. LA faces a severe housing deficit, suggesting a shortfall of 500,000 units needed to accommodate its current population. From 2012-2017, for every 5 residents, only one new housing unit was created. (Tracy A. Stone, 2023). This disparity has caused rents and home prices to soar, rendering stable housing unachievable for numerous low- and middle-income individuals. Gentrification has intensified the homelessness crisis in Los Angeles by forcing out long-term residents from neighborhoods that were once affordable. As affluent individuals and developers pour resources into neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights, Echo Park, and South Central, property prices and rents increase significantly, compelling lower-income residents to move or, in many instances, leaving them completely homeless. This issue adversely impacts communities of color, since historically marginalized populations that have resided in these areas for years are being pushed out due to rising costs. A 2024 UCLA study indicates that the median rent in gentrifying areas has increased by more than 40% over the last ten years, greatly exceeding wage increases. In the meantime, measures like the Ellis Act, enabling landlords to evict tenants for transforming properties into more lucrative units, have exacerbated displacement. As the availability of affordable housing declines, numerous residents face difficulties in locating new homes in their

neighborhoods, frequently resulting in a rise in homelessness. Without more robust tenant protections, rent control measures, and affordable housing programs, gentrification will persist in displacing at-risk communities, exacerbating the housing crisis in Los Angeles. Adding to the problem, strict zoning regulations and bureaucratic obstacles have obstructed the creation of affordable housing initiatives, worsening the crisis further. Consequently, an increasing number of individuals and families are on the verge of homelessness, unable to pay for even the simplest form of shelter. Moreover, stagnant salaries and the escalating cost of living have enlarged the disparity between earnings and housing costs, driving at-risk groups—such as seniors, individuals with disabilities, and low-income workers—into homelessness at concerning rates. Without major policy changes, including enhanced funding for affordable housing, rent regulation initiatives, and expedited construction permits, the crisis is expected to worsen, leaving many without secure housing.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Homelessness, particularly in industrialized cities like Los Angeles, is a complex issue that roots far deeper than just substance abuse. Corrupt systemic efforts and skyrocketing prices for housing impacts members in marginalized areas detrimentally as this constant struggle feeds into their psychological battle, which leads them to rely on cheap, easily accessible stress relievers; drugs.

While substance abuse can be a factor, research has proven that economic instability and housing affordability are what predominantly cause this dramatic cycle of life on the streets. Ultimately, psychological therapy treatments and life coaches in the homeless population are a necessity as people must learn to maintain stability in their life. The most effective method of change is by integrating resourceful organizations that aim to improve the homeless crisis through mental health checks, daily necessities, and donation. Developing programs similar to this kind will effectively render and help the homeless population in Los Angeles and throughout the nation.

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