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Understanding Who Lives in Cars in Los Angeles County

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Issue

Homelessness continues to be an issue of increasing scale across Los Angeles, necessitating research to better understand the diversity within the unhoused population. Notably, much of the existing research on homelessness has focused on unhoused individuals living in shelters and tents but has often overlooked those living in vehicles, despite the fact that this is one of the fastest-growing segments of the unhoused population.

In pre-pandemic Los Angeles, nearly 40% of the unhoused and unsheltered population (about 11,000 people) lived in a vehicle. Half of this population lives in cars or vans and half lives in RVs. For individuals experiencing homelessness, living in a vehicle can provide privacy, safety, and better access to resources than homeless shelters and tents. While homeless counts provide information on the scale and the location of homelessness, they do not include information about the people themselves. A better understanding of this population is critical to creating effective programs and policies to help those living in vehicles transition to more stable housing.

Accordingly, research in this study was framed around three central questions:

- What are the specific characteristics of those living in vehicles?
- How do these characteristics differ from those living in tents, on sidewalks, or in makeshift shelters?
- Do the factors that help predict homelessness differ between these two groups?

To answer these questions, the research team analyzed data from Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's Homeless Demographic Survey (2020). Findings from this study show that there are distinct demographic differences between both population groups. Therefore, interventions that seek to help people living in vehicles, like safe parking programs, can better orient their programs to meet this specific population. Safe parking programs use surface parking lots equipped with bathrooms and security to provide legal places for people to reside overnight. Further, these targeted efforts and policies can support the transition to permanent housing.

Key Findings

- **Those living in their vehicles were more likely to identify as female, white, and older — and to live in larger households that include children, compared to the non-vehicular unhoused population.** For women, especially women who were unhoused due to experiences with domestic violence, vehicles can provide safety for themselves and their children, as well as increased mobility (Table 1).
- **People living in vehicles reported higher employment rates than those people experiencing non-vehicular homelessness.** Vehicle-dwelling was more likely to be an option for individuals and families who were employed but with minimal financial resources (monthly average income of \$1,458). One study of people living in oversized vehicles in Oakland, California, revealed that most of the interviewees received some kind of regular income from either low-paying jobs or benefits.¹
- **The unhoused population living in vehicles were less likely to be chronically unhoused than people living in tents and on sidewalks.** Chronically unhoused people have experienced homelessness for at least one year, or on at least four separate occasions in the past three years. On average, people who experience chronic homelessness face more barriers to finding permanent housing than those living in vehicles.
- **Among those living in vehicles, unemployment was the main reason they cited for becoming unhoused.** Meanwhile, unhoused individuals living in tents, on sidewalks, and across public spaces were more likely to report mental and physical health issues or incarceration as the main reason for experiencing homelessness.
- **The largest predictor of someone living in a vehicle was being part of a household with children.** Controlling for other characteristics, this factor alone was five times more predictive of an unhoused individual living in their vehicle than the next highest factor. Other significant predictors of vehicular homelessness included: being retired, female, employed, older (over 62 years old), and receiving disability benefits.

Recommendations

- The unhoused population living in vehicles has different circumstances and needs than those living unsheltered in public spaces, and cities need to recognize these differences when crafting programs and policies.** The growing population of people living in their vehicles presents unique challenges and opportunities for developing innovative policy solutions and assistance. More specifically, this includes considering different approaches for people who live in RVs versus cars or vans.
- Safe parking programs, sites where people have access to legal parking and bathrooms, should be designed to ensure that households living in vehicles have a place to stay during all hours of the day.** Safe parking programs have the potential to provide temporary relief, safety, and support to help people transition into more permanent housing. Across Los Angeles County, there are only 17 safe parking program sites serving 508 people, a notably small portion (less than 5%) of the total unhoused population living in vehicles. Also, many of these sites do not operate 24 hours a day, indicating the need for further investment and improvements to existing programs.
- Safe parking programs should not only provide safe spaces to park, but also act as hubs that connect the unhoused community to important resources.** Many people who shelter in vehicles will hide in plain sight, making it difficult for outreach workers to find them. Social workers should be available at these hubs to help unhoused individuals and families enroll in government assistance programs and connect them with other critical resources. People who have been unhoused for shorter periods and have fewer other needs besides housing are more likely candidates for rapid re-housing or housing vouchers.
- Ultimately, a better demographic understanding of people experiencing homelessness can help cities and organizations more effectively tailor successful interventions, especially for the unhoused population living in vehicles.**

More Information

This brief is drawn from the “Cars as Housing: Vehicular Homelessness in Los Angeles County” research project by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, led by UCLA Lewis Center researchers. The academic journal articles and briefs can be found at www.its.ucla.edu/project/cars-as-housing-vehicular-homelessness-in-los-angeles-county.

Table 1.

Select demographic characteristics of people living in vehicles in Los Angeles County

| Characteristic | Tents, sidewalks, makeshift shelters, public spaces | Cars, RVs, vans, and campers |
|----------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Male | 71.4% | 53% |
| Female | 26.2% | 46% |
| Transgender | 2% | 0.8% |
| Gender non-conforming | 0.2% | 0.1% |
| Living with children | 2% | 18% |
| Chronically unhoused | 50% | 38% |
| Senior (over 62 years old) | 10% | 15% |
| Employed | 13% | 19% |

About the Authors

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1 Pruss et al. (2022) The Long Road Home: Housing and Service Needs of People Who Inhabit Oversized Vehicles in Oakland’s Public Parking. *Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative; University of California San Francisco*. <https://homelessness.ucsf.edu/resources/long-road-home-housing-and-service-needs-people-who-inhabit-oversized-vehicles>