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Geographic and Regulatory Impacts on Vehicular Homelessness in Los Angeles

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Issue

In Los Angeles, the percentage of unsheltered people living in vehicles is estimated to be almost 50% of the region's homeless population. Over the past few years, those living in cars, vans, and RVs/campers has increased in line with the affordable housing crisis and rising unemployment and poverty rates.

While studies on homelessness are vast, little attention has been paid to the high percentage of unsheltered individuals living in cars, vans, and RVs. However, relative to the alternatives — sleeping in public spaces or reliance on temporary shelters — vehicles provide safe, stable, and secure shelter. Vehicular dwelling enables individuals to avoid street violence, policing, and criminalization; it provides freedom against strict rules and curfews of the shelter system. During the pandemic, living in a car has provided social distancing to reduce the likelihood of contracting and spreading the virus. Finally, operational vehicles can support people's access to jobs, schools, and services.

Despite the advantages, vehicular dwellings have cramped conditions that lack access to running water, electricity, or restrooms. Their presence also incites hostility among local residents and businesses who are concerned about trash, the dumping of human waste, the use of scarce parking spaces, and increasing crime. These complaints have amplified the proliferation of vehicular-dwelling criminalization ordinances — making it difficult for individuals to locate safe places to park, elevating fears of being towed, ticketed, or interacting with the police.

This study sheds light on the relationship between municipal ordinances and the presence and spatial dimensions of vehicular homelessness in Los Angeles County. The findings

have implications for efforts to regulate and address the needs of those living in vehicles.

Study Approach

The researchers analyzed the municipal ordinances of 85 cities to characterize the regulatory environment that affects vehicular homelessness (Figure 1). They paired these regulations with data from the region's annual homeless count to examine the spatial patterns of vehicular homelessness. Finally, they modeled how vehicular restrictions affected the number of people sleeping in vehicles at both the neighborhood (census tract) level and on neighboring areas.

Key Research Findings

- Vehicle-dwelling restrictions reduced the number of people living in their cars; census tracts with stricter regulations contained fewer people living in vehicles than areas with fewer or no restrictions. However, stricter regulations also had a greater indirect positive effect on nearby tracts. For example, a citywide ban on sleeping in vehicles resulted in 3 fewer people in that particular area, but the ban also increased people in nearby areas, resulting in an increase of 4.5 people.
- As of 2020, 95% (14,972 people) of people living in vehicles were in census tracts with some type of restriction on vehicle dwelling.
- Cities with more restrictive ordinances had higher average median household incomes, older residents, a larger percentage of single-family detached housing units, and less industrial land use.

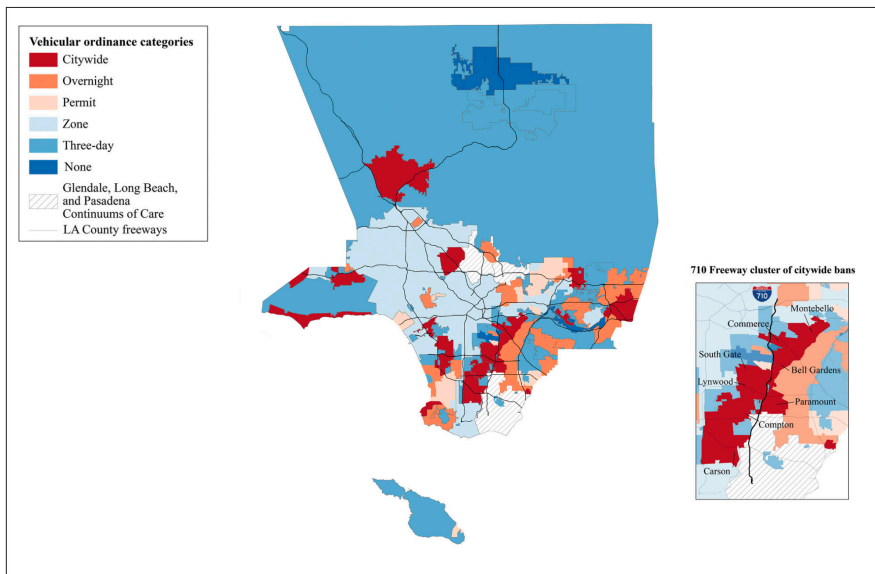


Figure 1. Categories of vehicular dwelling ordinances by city in Los Angeles County

- Compared to other cities with citywide bans, a group of cities located along the 710-freeway corridor had relatively low household incomes but slightly higher industrial land use as well as the freeway itself — suggesting that, in some cases, built environment characteristics or enforcement of existing bans may play a role in understanding geographic differences.

Conclusion

Despite the growing presence of citywide bans, the number of people living in vehicles has continued to increase. The authors suggest the following policy recommendations to reduce the harm and precariousness of living in vehicles while recognizing the need for policies and services that enable successful transitions to permanent housing.

- Cities should reject policies that may actively harm people experiencing homelessness, including enacting vehicle-dwelling restrictions that require people to constantly be worried about parking in restricted areas.
- Rather than restricting vehicle dwelling, cities should consider adopting Safe Parking Programs — that offer safe, secure shelter and services for the unhoused — as

a proactive approach to harm reduction. For example, the City of Los Angeles could accommodate about one-quarter of people living in their vehicles if it offered 13% of the 11,831 total public parking spaces it owns to Safe Parking. Currently, there are less than 500 safe parking spaces available countywide.

- Even with an increase in safe parking spaces, collaboration between city staff and service providers is necessary to ensure that people living in vehicles have a path toward permanent housing. Safe shelter and long-term housing, rather than regulations that force movement and instability, are the ultimate solution to addressing the issue of people living in cars.

More Information

This brief is based on an academic publication: Giamarino, C., Brozen, M., & Blumenberg, E. (2022). Planning for and against vehicular homelessness: Spatial trends and determinants of vehicular dwelling in Los Angeles. *Journal of the American Planning Association*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2022.2050936>. For more information about the findings in this brief, please contact Madeline Brozen at mbrozen@luskin.ucla.edu.

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