



WE DO NOT FORGET: STOLEN LIVES OF LA'S UNHOUSED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By Ananya Roy and Chloe Rosenstock

WE DO NOT FORGET: STOLEN LIVES OF LA'S UNHOUSED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Ananya Roy and Chloe Rosenstock
On behalf of the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective

Published by the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy

Cover image by Kemal Cilengir
Cover design by Marisa Lemorande
Layout by Vania Sciolini

Publication Date: December 1, 2021
ISBN: 978-1-7351062-3-6



UCLA LUSKIN INSTITUTE ON

INEQUALITY AND DEMOCRACY

ORGANIZED 2016

CONTENTS

FOREWORD | 4

INTRODUCTION | 5

WE DO NOT FORGET | 8

DATA AND METHODOLOGY | 13

KEY FINDINGS | 15

Place of Death

Racial Composition

Age

Gender

Manner

Cause

PROJECT ROOM KEY | 21

STOLEN LIVES | 23

CONCLUSION | 24

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 26

ABOUT THE AUTHORS | 27

FOREWORD

In March 2021, Los Angeles's elected officials unleashed a militarized police invasion of Echo Park Lake, evicting its unhoused residents. The displacement was accompanied by promises of immediate housing in Project Roomkey, a pandemic program that leverages federal funding to place people experiencing homelessness in vacant hotels and motels. [Hailed by the Mayor](#) as the largest, and one of the most successful housing transitions in the history of the city, the Echo Park displacement was justified through assurances of permanent housing for all, with Project Roomkey seen as a transition to such permanence. Our research collective, After Echo Park Lake, brings together movement-based and university-based scholars, both housed and unhoused, to cast scrutiny on such housing placements and housing promises. A partnership between the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, Street Watch LA, and Ground Game LA, we undertake research to support the concerns and demands of movement organizations led by the unhoused, notably [UTACH](#), Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing.

It is our comrades at UTACH who brought the issue of unhoused deaths to our attention. While there was already significant concern about the death toll among people experiencing homelessness in LA, they pointed to the fact that such deaths were also taking place in Project Roomkey hotels and motels. What does it mean for places of relief and care to become places of death? What does it mean for the very sites that were meant to protect people from the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic to become spaces of carceral isolation and state neglect? While accounted in state records, notably coroner's data, as individual acts of overdose, these deaths are more appropriately understood as a collective condition of suffering caused by displacement. Especially galling to UTACH comrades has been the social silence on such deaths. Public agencies and nonprofit service providers have failed to acknowledge these stolen lives and the grief of those who knew and loved them. It is for this reason that this report is titled "We Do Not Forget," a phrasing insisted upon by La Donna Harrell, UTACH comrade and a member of our After Echo Park Lake research collective.

This report, prepared by Institute faculty director, Ananya Roy, and UCLA undergraduate student and Street Watch LA organizer, Chloe Rosenstock, on behalf of our research collective, provides a thorough analysis of coroner's data for LA County to illuminate the deaths suffered by unhoused residents during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to Project Roomkey, our analysis also foregrounds key locations of death, revealing the social geography of survival and shelter for people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles. We are acutely aware of the limitations of coroner's data — of how people are identified and counted, of the causes to which death is attributed, and the absences and silences in the data. Our broader research endeavor is precisely a counterpoint to such dehumanization. Yet, we have felt the imperative to present this analysis of coroner's data because it provides an understanding of key patterns and trends that are of direct relevance to the struggle for justice and freedom in Los Angeles. We thus invite you to read this report with a critical eye on the data and with full attention to the principles of well-being and self-determination advanced by housing justice movements such as UTACH.

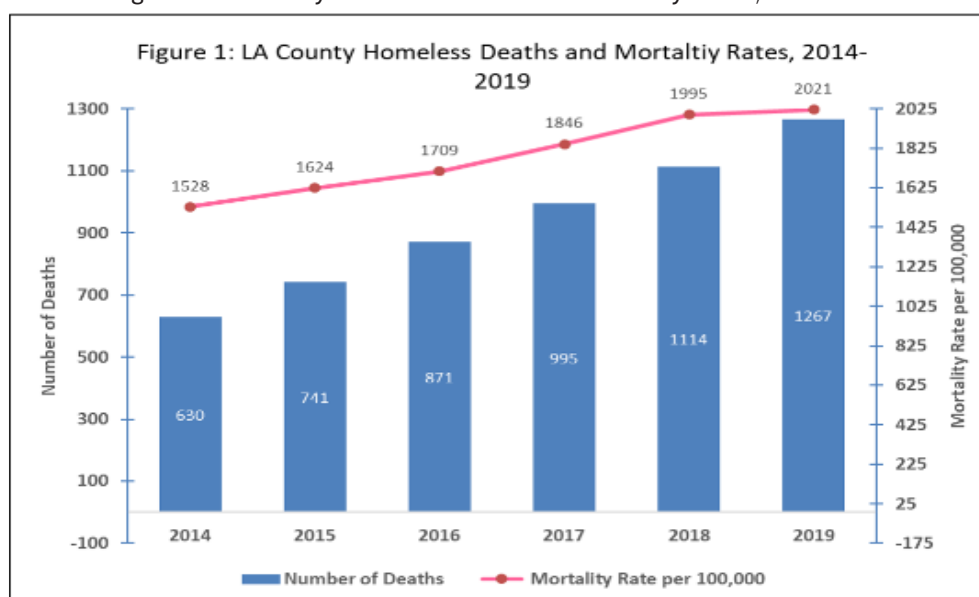
On behalf of the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective

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

INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles, one of the wealthiest metropolitan regions in the world, has drawn attention for its steady rise in homelessness. LA's unhoused residents die in large numbers, their deaths a stark reminder of suffering amidst plenty. Utilizing publicly available data from the [Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner](#), which covers deaths that are deemed “sudden, violent, or unusual, and those deaths where the decedent has not been seen by a physician 20 days prior to death,” and filtering such data based on locations of death most closely affiliated with unhoused status, we find that up to 1,493 unhoused persons may have passed away in Los Angeles County's streets or outdoor spaces between March 2020 and July 2021. While not every person is guaranteed to be unhoused, the sites most affiliated with the unhoused population provide us a large enough pool to determine what is most important for this research report—the key characteristics of race, age, gender, and manner of death for the unhoused. The timeframe of the coroner's data utilized for this analysis coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, including with the various “Safer at Home” orders issued by city and county executives in Los Angeles. In addition, another 418 persons passed away in hotels and motels—a place of death identified in the coroner's data and that we hold as a crucial site of residency for the unhoused during this period. As demonstrated in other Institute reports, notably *Hotel California: Housing the Crisis*¹, tourism underwent a sharp decline and hotel vacancy rates soared. We thus make the viable assumption that those residing in hotels and motels during this time period were either unhoused persons placed in the Project Roomkey program or persons experiencing dire housing precarity relying on hotel and motel rooms as a housing of last resort. This means that many of the 418 hotel/motel deaths must be added to the 1,493 deaths for a more robust count of unhoused deaths in Los Angeles County between March 2020 and July 2021. But given the special attention we give to hotels/motels in this report, we keep unhoused and hotel/motel cases separate in order to amplify key characteristics for each category.

Figure 1. LA County Unhoused Deaths and Mortality Rates, 2014-2019



Source: Reprint from “Recent Trends in Mortality Rates and Causes of Death Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County” (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, January 2021)

1 Roy, Ananya et al. “[Hotel California: Housing the Crisis](#).” UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. July 9, 2020.

This high death toll is in keeping with other reports on unhoused deaths, including the finding that [1,301 unhoused persons](#) have passed away in Los Angeles County during the first 10 months of 2021, a death toll that is on pace to establish a grim record. To put this number in context, a total of 630 unhoused deaths occurred in 2014, growing each year by an average of 16% and surpassing 1,200 deaths in 2019 (Figure 1). In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of deaths spiked to 1,383.² The reporting of official death counts for the unhoused population are published by the county in full calendar years. We felt the need to examine a period during the pandemic when the protection of human life was most critical in order to ascertain impacts on the unhoused population.

Additionally, through our analysis of coroner's data, we find the following for the 1,493 unhoused deaths during March 2020 to July 2021:

- Over 35% of such unhoused deaths were at locations designated as sidewalks.
- The average age at death for unhoused persons was 47 years old—significantly lower than LA County's life expectancy of 82 years.
- Black unhoused persons accounted for 25% of all unhoused deaths, while only 8% of LA County's population is Black.
- Nearly half of all unhoused deaths were attributed by the coroner to an accidental manner of death, with less than one-fifth attributed to a natural death.
- For unhoused accidental deaths, nearly 40% were attributed by the coroner to drug/alcohol overdose.

For the additional 418 deaths that occurred in hotel/motel rooms, we find the following:

- Persons who are white accounted for nearly half of all deaths in hotels/motels.
- Women accounted for nearly 30% of all deaths in hotels/motels.
- The average age of persons declared dead in hotel/motel rooms was 44 years old—even lower than the average age of death for unhoused persons.
- Nearly 60% of all deaths in hotel/motel rooms were attributed by the coroner to drug/alcohol overdose—much higher than overdose deaths on the streets.

Given that many of the 418 deaths in hotels/motels could very well be that of unhoused residents, our findings related to deaths attributed to overdose requires special attention. In October 2019, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health released a brief on recent trends in mortality rates and causes of death among the unhoused population. Between 2013 and 2018, drug/alcohol overdose was the second leading cause of death at 21% of cases. More notable, drugs/alcohol had the largest increase per capita among all causes from 196 to 294 per 100,000 individuals.³ In early 2021, an updated report was released with the major finding that drug overdose has become the new leading cause of unhoused deaths since 2017.⁴ Subsequently, an unhoused person

2 Smith, Doug. (2021, January 7). [“The Powerful Synthetic Opioid Fentanyl Is Behind Rising Deaths in the Homeless Population.”](#) Los Angeles Times.

3 Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, [“Recent Trends in Mortality Rates and Causes of Death Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County.”](#) October 2019.

4 Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, [“Recent Trends in Mortality Rates and Causes of Death Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County.”](#) January 2021.

is 36 times more likely to die of an overdose than the county's general population. Specifically, the drugs involved with the highest percentages of overdoses are methamphetamine and fentanyl.

It is important to put the data on deaths attributed to overdose in context. As we note in the foreword to this report, while accounted in state records, notably coroner's data, as individual acts of overdose, these deaths are more appropriately understood as a collective condition of suffering caused by displacement. Indeed, there is robust research on what Bardwell et al.⁵ term "intersecting housing and overdose crises." Of particular interest here is Project Roomkey, an emergency housing program for LA's unhoused residents during the pandemic. While meant to be a life-saving program, financed by FEMA reimbursements, Project Roomkey has become notorious for its carceral rules and conditions, leading to the formation of the homeless union, [Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing](#) (UTACH).⁶ These rules include curfews and prohibit Project Roomkey residents from having visitors, thereby severing tenants from the networks of care and community that had kept them alive and well. Indeed, it is our UTACH comrades who assigned us the homework of investigating unhoused deaths and of taking a closer look at deaths in hotels/motels. The urgent question at hand then is why such places of shelter become places of death. Why has a program such as Project Roomkey, which was intended to protect the most vulnerable of LA's unhoused residents from COVID-19 transmission, failed to reduce the death toll among the unhoused and how might the program have even exacerbated unhoused deaths? The complete answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this report but are being taken up by the After Echo Park Lake research collective through its focus on displacement, housing precarity, and the carceral state.

5 Bardwell, Geoff et al. "[Addressing Intersecting Housing and Overdose Crises in Vancouver, Canada: Opportunities and Challenges from a Tenant-Led Overdose Response Intervention in Single-Room Occupancy Hotels.](#)" *Journal of Urban Health*. 2019; 96(1), 12-20.

6 Lexis-Olivier, Ray. "[Unhoused Residents Speak Out Against 'Prison-Like' Conditions at Project Roomkey Hotels.](#)" L.A. Taco. May 20, 2021.

WE DO NOT FORGET

We start this report with a remembrance of the stolen lives of LA's unhoused residents, notably Tony Goodwin and Salvy Chic.

Anthony “Tony” Goodwin

Tony was an unhoused, Black veteran who lived in Van Nuys and whom friends describe as the heart of the neighborhood. Placed in Project Roomkey during the COVID-19 pandemic, he was abruptly evicted after missing some of the curfews imposed by this emergency housing program. Shortly after his eviction, on September 8, 2021, Tony passed away on the streets.

While many unhoused deaths often go ignored, Tony's friends and chosen family refused to let his death fade into the shadows. On September 18, 2021, community organizations such as J-Town Action and Solidarity, Street Watch LA, and We the Unhoused came together to hold a vigil for Tony and other loved ones who passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizers and friends marched through Little Tokyo holding a casket, and carrying flowers, signs, and balloons. The group also set up a vigil, lighting the Eternal Peace Flame, signaling love, peace, and remembrance for their fallen comrades.



*Community remembrance of unhoused deaths, September 18, 2021.
(Photo courtesy of Carla Orendorff)*



Tony Goodwin in his Día de los Muertos shirt and Christmas hat. (Photo courtesy of Carla Orendorff)

Street Watch LA's Carla Orendorff presented a eulogy for Tony; she recounted Tony's reputation for escorting elderly women through the pews at church, even though he himself had a difficult time walking with a broken back and multiple disabilities. Carla described Tony as “a helper and a healer, and his spot was a place where people could come together and be as they were.” Furthermore, he “loved the holidays but especially Día de los Muertos. He was so deeply loved by many of us and deeply targeted by the City of LA for keeping a food pantry so no one around him went hungry. He loved to cook for everyone, he would put on some Anita Baker and groove with his warm laugh and loving arms. His spot was an invitation for those who had nowhere else to go.”

Street Watch LA's tribute to Tony on Instagram is instructive. It reminds us that "Tony died on the streets waiting for housing." The tribute explains: "We were in the process of working with his brother to obtain a copy of his birth certificate which was destroyed in a sweep that he regularly faced as an unhoused person living in Van Nuys. These sweeps are ordered by the [@mayorofla](#), [@cd6nury](#), [@lacitysan](#) and [@lapdhq](#). On many occasions, the city destroyed Tony's belongings which made life even harder than it already was as an unhoused person living with disabilities. No one was made for the streets. Homelessness ends with a home. Tony was advanced in years but young at heart. One of our friends described him as a veteran who dedicated his life to service, caring for a community of people in the 'war zone' of the streets. Tony gave freely and took great joy in cooking elaborate meals for others. The city targeted him week after week in part because he maintained an outdoor kitchen on the street and didn't have access to refrigeration, running water, or regular trash collection. Tony endured more sweeps than anyone else in Van Nuys, yet we never saw him take out his anger or frustration on another soul. We will miss you deeply, Tony."



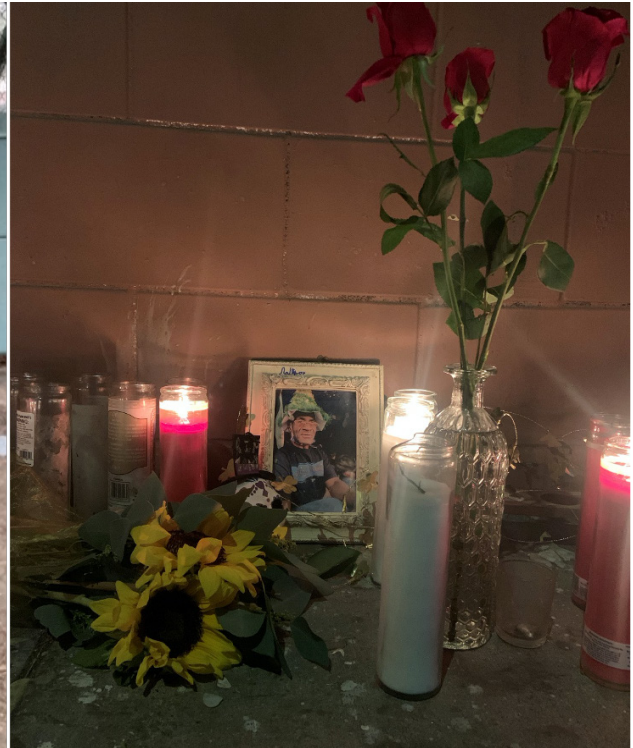
Memorial to Tony Goodwin, September 2021. (Photo courtesy of Carla Orendorff)

On October 28, 2021, just weeks after his death, Tony's memorial was defaced. LA Sanitation and Environment (LASAN) bulldozed the site, destroying all memorial objects and uprooting the artificial turf from the very ground on which Tony's friends had gathered to remember him. Even in death, Tony was unworthy of recognition or respect from the carceral state.

On November 19, 2021, Street Watch LA organizers and Tony's friends rebuilt his memorial.



*Tony Goodwin's memorial site bulldozed by LASAN, October 2021.
(Photo courtesy of La Donna Harrell)*



*Tony Goodwin's rebuilt memorial, November 19, 2021.
(Photo courtesy of Carla Orendorff)*

Salvy Chic

Cecelia Luis, former resident of Echo Park Lake, shared this remembrance of Salvy Chic who passed away in August 2021.

“Salvy Chic” was a friend and true community member. Early on, we appointed her secretary of our pantry. I remember her on the day she took charge of our project. The person who initiated the project needed to leave LA without much warning. There was a group meeting where many of us were confused and didn’t know where to go with what we had started. She immediately gave us our direction, empowering us to take the lead on the community project and keep it in our hands rather than give up on what had been done. With her help we created an additional pantry at another corner of the park so that people wouldn’t have to walk as far and could participate in growing the community within arm’s reach of their own areas. She was a careful guardian of this tent, constantly keeping watch and helping our community stay safe. I remember she was especially a guardian of the young people who would come through the park. She would discourage runaways from staying on the streets and would help negotiate reuniting them with their families. She did this while separated from her own children under the unfair carceral system unhoused women face.

Despite the challenges and hardships the community at Echo Park faced, Salvy was always one to lighten our spirits and energy with music. I will always remember sitting with her and her husband Edwin and their baby chickens on a humble mat on the hill where they stayed, watching reggaeton videos and rocking out to music. Salvy Chic was a major figure of support to me. When my back was really hurting me, she encouraged me to dance with her and even taught me how to “pop that thing,” grabbing my hips and empowering me to overcome my self-consciousness and outrageously twerk. She was the first person I ever heard play the awesome Tupac/MJ mashup song ‘They Don’t Care About Us,’ and I still remember her shaking her head with her fist up in the air in solidarity with the message in the song lyrics. That song was played at our Dance Night and it became something of an anthem to me, about our community struggle at the lake.



Echo Park Lake, after eviction and enclosure. (Photos courtesy of Ananya Roy)

The last time I saw Salvy was around Halloween, after she had moved to a different area. I was walking to my trailer with an inflatable air mattress from the donation table, in my mind I asked her for permission to take a rest where she and Edwin had once camped. Just then she came walking up the path. It was a beautiful moment of reunion. We greeted each other as sisters in the struggle and fast friends. She sat with me in my trailer for a moment and offered words and jokingly said that if it got too much for me she would take it off my hands. I couldn't have predicted that it would be the last time that I saw her, my friend, my comrade, and someone who I could turn to for anything. I will miss her spirit and her dancing. She has transitioned but I believe that she is still with us in this fight."

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This report is concerned with exposing the deaths of LA's unhoused residents. To this end, we utilize public data from the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner's office for the time period, March 2020 to July 2021. The County Coroner's office is required by state law to inquire into, and determine, the manner and cause of death for cases that may be deemed to be "sudden, violent, or unusual, and those deaths where the decedent has not been seen by a physician 20 days prior to death."⁷ Cases are available to search via a public database on the coroner's website.⁸ Data provided include the name, place of death, date of birth, date of death, gender, ethnicity, and cause of death. The public database does not disclose the classification of individuals as unhoused. However, based on the Department of Public Health's methodology, *Los Angeles Times*' reporting, and viewing of [data](#) obtained by movement organizations from a public record request, we surmised that the coroner's office does internally record unhoused individuals as 'Indigent-Homeless.' We submitted a public record request but discovered that a charge of \$126 per hour is required, making the complete data prohibitively expensive. Therefore, we relied on web scraping the coroner's website to capture our data and devised our own methodology for determining unhoused deaths.

After web scraping the public database for all cases during our analysis period of March 2020 to July 2021, the dataset resulted in 11,196 cases—establishing a baseline for the county's general population. To determine unhoused deaths, we sought the guidance of the After Echo Park Lake research collective to identify which of the places of death were most likely to be associated with unhoused status. Such a methodology mobilizes the vast academic and movement knowledge that has been assembled on the social geographies of homelessness. Thirty-two⁹ sites were selected resulting in a subset of 1,493 cases. The subset data does not include the unhoused who may have still been alive when they received medical attention but declared dead at a hospital because in such cases their place of death would be recorded as 'hospital.' Nor would it include the unhoused who passed away at a site of temporary housing where the coroner's office recorded their place of death under a general category of 'residence.' Finally, it does not include the unhoused who live and passed away in a 'vehicle.' Our limited data makes unhoused individuals indistinguishable from the general population in these place of death categories. Therefore, our subset could very well be understood as an undercount of unhoused deaths. For deaths at hotels and motels, the coroner's office joins the two into one category of 'hotel/motel,' thus giving us the ability to isolate this data and identify an additional 418 cases of death.

The matter of hotels/motels is an important focus for this report. Across the U.S., including in Los Angeles, hotels and motels have served as a housing of last resort for those facing housing precarity.¹⁰ Since our period of analysis coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic and the various "Safer at Home" orders issued by city and county executives in Los Angeles, we make the viable assumption that those residing in hotels and motels during this time period were either unhoused persons placed in the Project Roomkey program or persons experiencing

7 Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner, "[Our Process](#)"

8 Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner, "[Coroner Case Search](#)"

9 Selected locations: abandoned building, alley, aqueduct, beach, bridge, bus bench, dock, embankment, field, freeway underpass, hillside, motorhome, park, parking lot, public restroom, railroad tracks, ramp, reservoir, riverbed, roadside, shed, shelter, sidewalk, tent, trailer, train station, transient encampment, trash dumpster, underpass, vacant lot, walkway, and wash.

10 Ross, Andrew. *Sunset Blues: The Failure of American Housing*. Metropolitan Books, 2021; Dum, Christopher. *Exiled in America: Life on the Margins in a Residential Motel*. Columbia University Press, 2016; Fernandes, Deepa. "[Motel Owners See Altruism and Opportunity in Sheltering the Homeless](#)." KCRW. June 28, 2018.

dire housing precarity relying on hotel and motel rooms as a housing of last resort. As demonstrated in other Institute reports, notably *Hotel California: Housing the Crisis*,¹¹ tourism underwent a sharp decline and hotel vacancy rates soared in Los Angeles during this period. Project Roomkey is of particular concern to us. While we were in the midst of our analysis, The *Los Angeles Times* published an exposé of Project Roomkey deaths.¹² Using the coroner's database, we searched the four Project Roomkey deaths identified in the article to observe the place of death information provided. Two of the four cases were categorized as 'Hotel/Motel' for their place of death, while the other two were listed as 'Hospital' and 'Residence.' This demonstrates two key facts: one, what was mentioned above, the place of death indicates the location where the individual was declared dead. In the hospital case, the individual was found unconscious at the Airtel Plaza Hotel but transferred to the hospital where the declaration of death occurred. And two, Project Roomkey sites may be consolidated into a generalized category of residence. We point out such discrepancies and ambiguities to make note of the complexities of the data at hand. Nevertheless, it is our assertion that hotel/motel as place of death must be taken into account in research on unhoused deaths and that for the time period at hand, this category also serves as the best possible proxy for Project Roomkey, a program which we discuss at greater depth later in this report.

Not every person in data subsets of unhoused cases and hotel/motel cases is guaranteed to be an unhoused person, but we are confident the sites most affiliated with unhoused status provides us a large enough pool to be representative of the unhoused population. What is most important for this report is going beyond an official count. We are most concerned about analyzing the key characteristics of the county's unhoused population who passed away during the pandemic when the protection of human life was most critical.

11 Roy, Ananya et al. "[Hotel California: Housing the Crisis](#)." UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. July 9, 2020.

12 Alpert Reyes, Emily et. al. "[Why Did so Many Homeless People Die While Staying at One Hotel Used in Project Roomkey?](#)" Los Angeles Times. June 28, 2021.

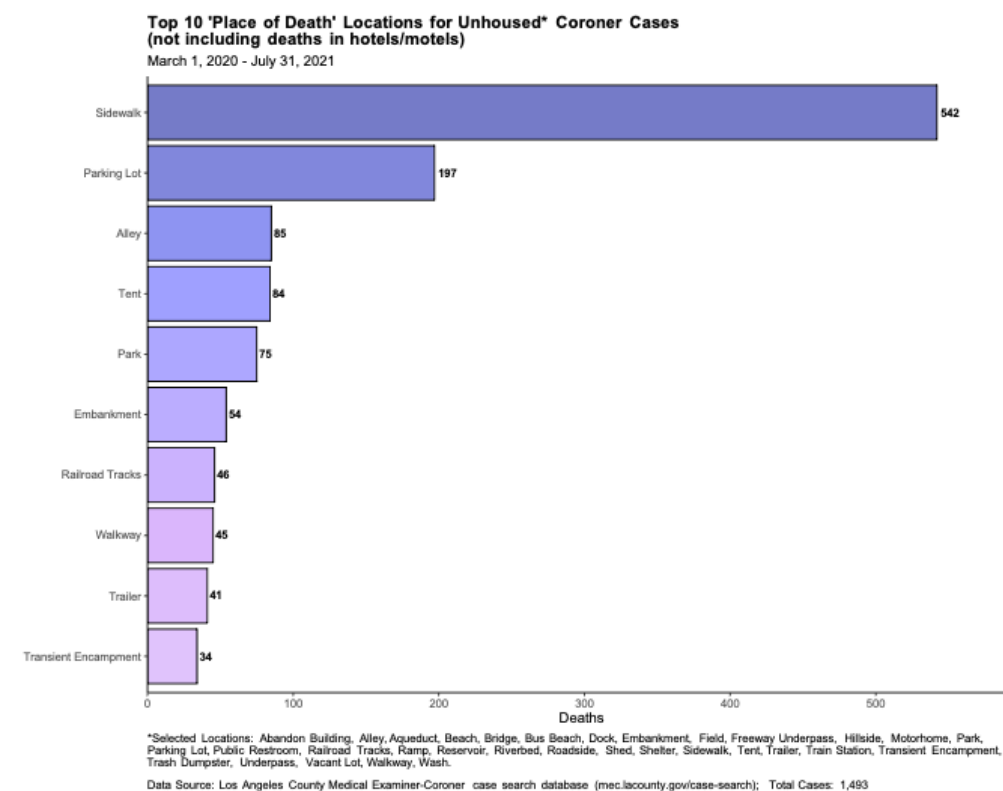
KEY FINDINGS

PLACE OF DEATH

Quantifying the ‘place of death’ sites for our unhoused coroner cases, we produced a top ten list and found ‘sidewalk’ holding the overwhelming majority with 542 deaths—or over 35% of all cases (Figure 2). The remaining sites in the list with total counts are: parking lot (197), alley (85), tent (84), park (75), embankment (54), railroad tracks (46), walkway (45), trailer (41), and transient encampment (34). If we go beyond the top ten list we also find: shed (28), bus bench (26), shelter (26), riverbed (24), underpass (19), vacant lot (19), abandoned building (17), field (17), beach (16), hillside (16), motorhome (12), train station (12), wash (11), bridge (9), dock (9), freeway underpass (7), roadside (6), public restroom (5), reservoir (4), aqueduct (3), trash dumpster (3), and ramp (1).

In addition, after filtering out all ‘hotel/motel’ sites from the county’s total coroner case count, a total of 418 deaths were recorded. While we treat this category separately, as we explained earlier in this report, for the time period under consideration, it must be treated as a possible place of death for unhoused persons.

Figure 2. Top 10 ‘Place of Death’ Locations for Unhoused Coroner Cases (not including deaths in hotels-motels)



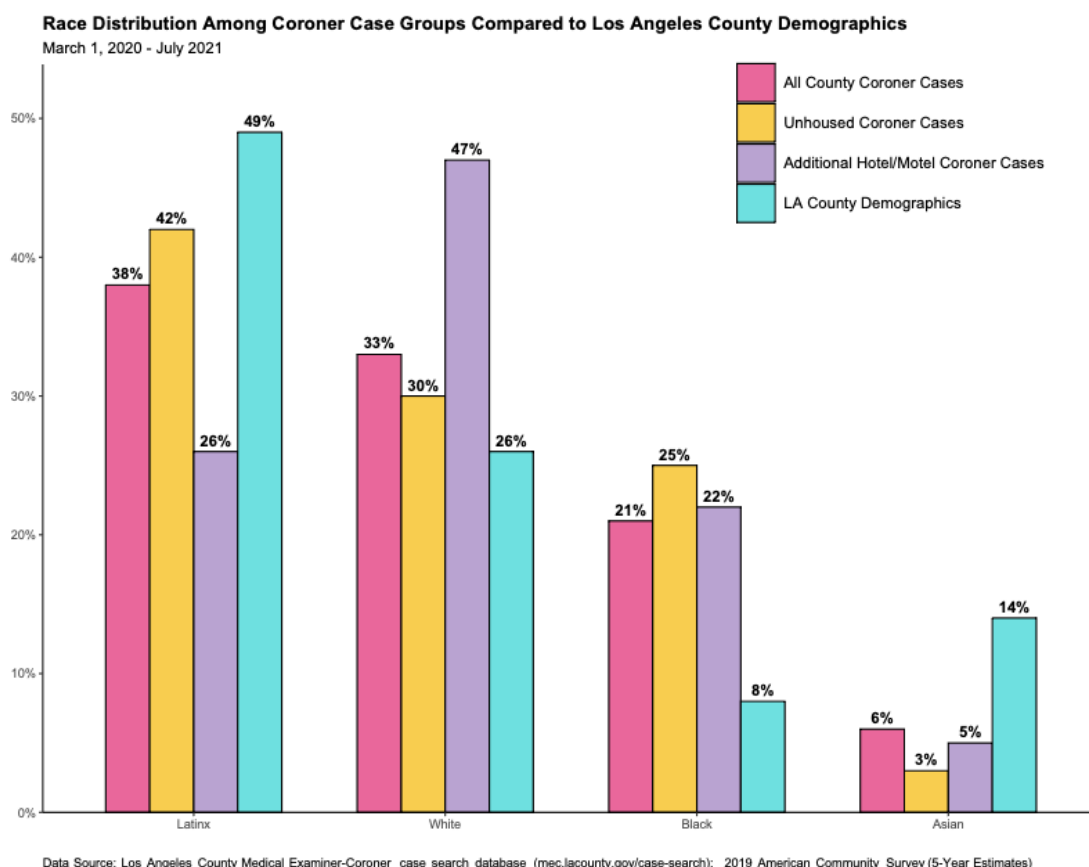
RACIAL COMPOSITION

In the total coroner data of over 11,000 deaths in Los Angeles County, Latinx residents account for the largest number of cases at 38%, followed by white 33%, Black 21%, and Asian at 6% (Figure 3). Again, it is worth keeping in mind that the data collected by the Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner pertains to deaths that are deemed “sudden, violent, or unusual, and those deaths where the decedent has not been seen by a physician 20 days prior to death.” When compared to Los Angeles County demographics, clear racial disparities are found for white and Black Angelenos. White residents make up 26% of the county’s population, yet account for 33% of the coroner’s cases. More significantly, Black residents make up 8% of the population, but account for 21% of the coroner’s cases—a difference of 13 percentage points. We use the total coroner data as a baseline to be representative of LA County’s general population during this period and make comparisons to unhoused and hotel/motel cases to identify disparities.

Whereas the county’s baseline of Latinx coroner cases is 38%, for unhoused coroner cases they account for 42% of cases. And whereas the baseline for Black cases is 21%, they account for 25% of the unhoused coroner cases. Both groups are equally over-represented by 4 percentage points.

For the additional 418 hotel/motel deaths, there is a shift, with persons who are white accounting for the largest number of cases at 47%—a difference of 14 percentage points compared to the county’s coroner baseline. This raises a set of important questions, unanswered in this report, about the racial composition of LA’s unhoused residents who have received Project Roomkey placements.

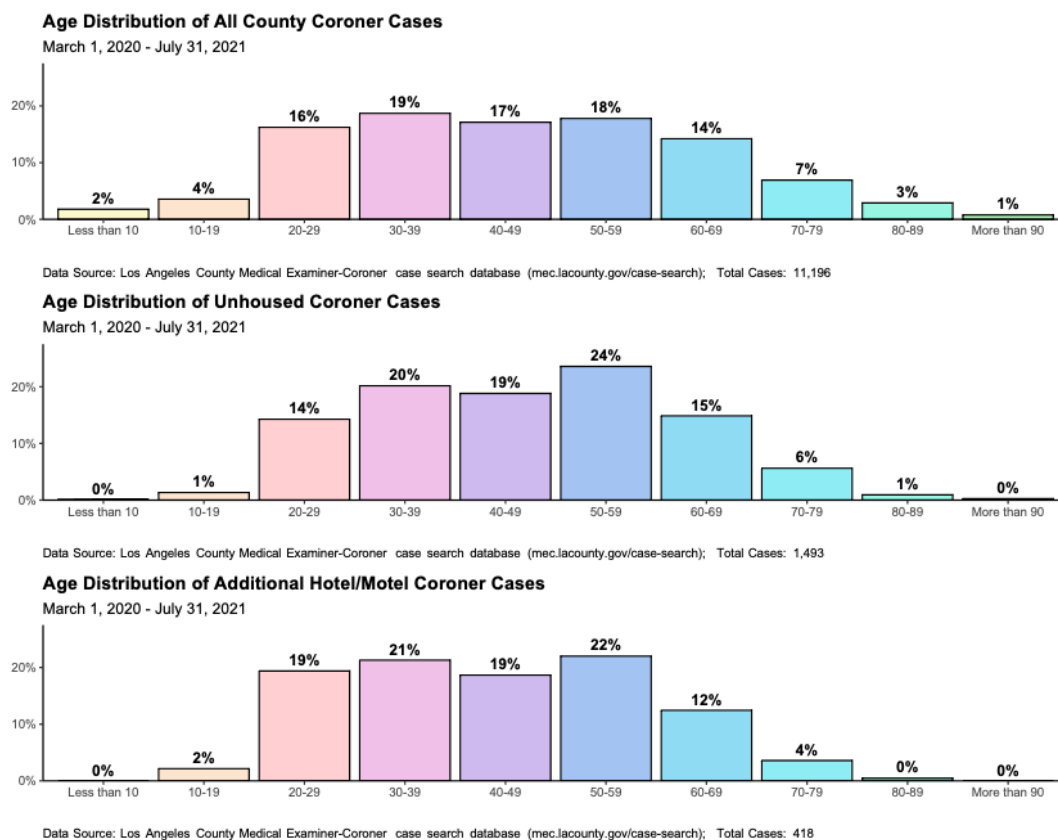
Figure 3. Race Distribution Comparisons



AGE

While life expectancy in Los Angeles County is 82 years, the average age for each of the coroner case groups is as follows: 46 for all county cases, 47 for unhoused cases, and 44 for the additional hotel/motel cases. Again, it is worth keeping in mind that the data collected by the Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner pertains to deaths that are deemed “sudden, violent, or unusual, and those deaths where the decedent has not been seen by a physician 20 days prior to death.” Our age distribution analysis (Figure 4) shows that the largest category for the county’s baseline is 30-39 years old with 19% of cases. For both unhoused and hotel/motel cases, the largest decade is 50-59 years old at 24% and 22% respectively—demonstrating a higher rate of death for the unhoused community’s older population. It is also important to note that the average age of death at a hotel/motel is 44 years old, which is 6-10 years below the majority age of death for an unhoused individual otherwise (50-59), and 3 years below the average age of death. This raises urgent questions about residence in hotels/motels, including programs such as Project Roomkey. In what ways might such forms of shelter and emergency housing exacerbate rather than mitigate the death toll endured by LA’s unhoused residents?

Figure 4. Age Distribution Comparisons



GENDER

The gender distribution for the County Coroner's baseline is 77% male and 23% female (Figure 5). For unhoused deaths, males account for a larger majority with 85% of cases. For the additional hotel/motel deaths, females account for a larger portion than the county's baseline, with 28% of cases.

Figure 5. Gender Distribution Comparisons

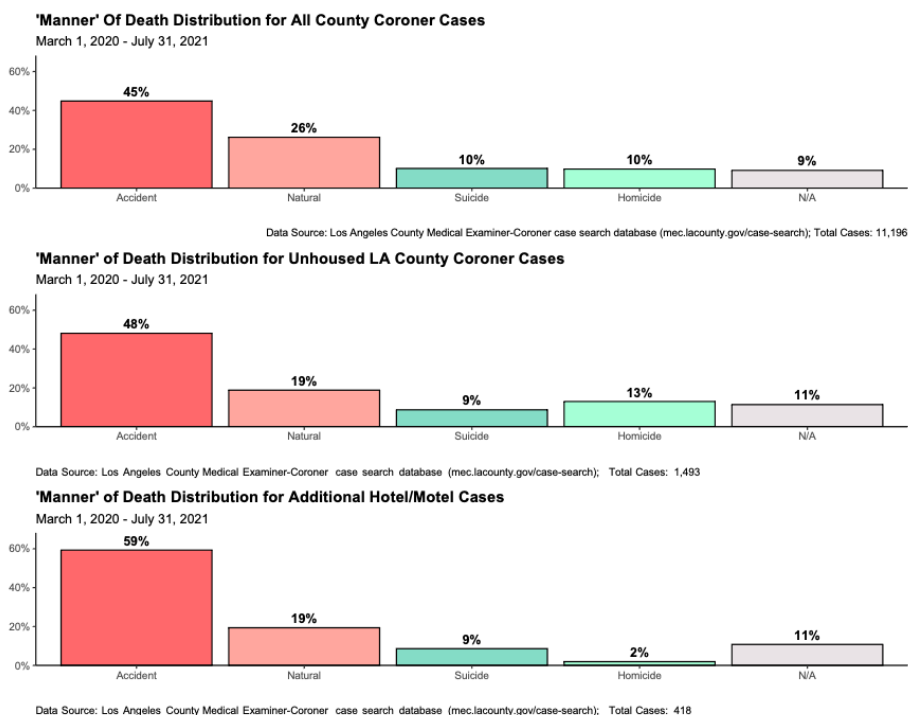


MANNER

The County Coroner's office includes the data point of 'manner' to identify how the death occurred. In our dataset the categories include accident, natural, suicide, homicide, or undetermined. The county's baseline numbers show accident as making up the largest proportion with 45% of cases, natural at second with 26%, and the remaining categories at 10% or less of cases (Figure 6). For unhoused cases, the rate of accident increases to 48% with natural cases declining to 19%. Along with the increase in accidental cases, an increase is found in homicide cases with 13% compared to the county's baseline of 10%.

For the additional hotel/motel deaths, there is a substantial increase in accidental cases, which are at 59%—a difference of 14 percentage points compared to the county's baseline. And similar to unhoused cases, natural deaths are less common in hotel/motels with a difference of 7 percentage points compared to the county's baseline.

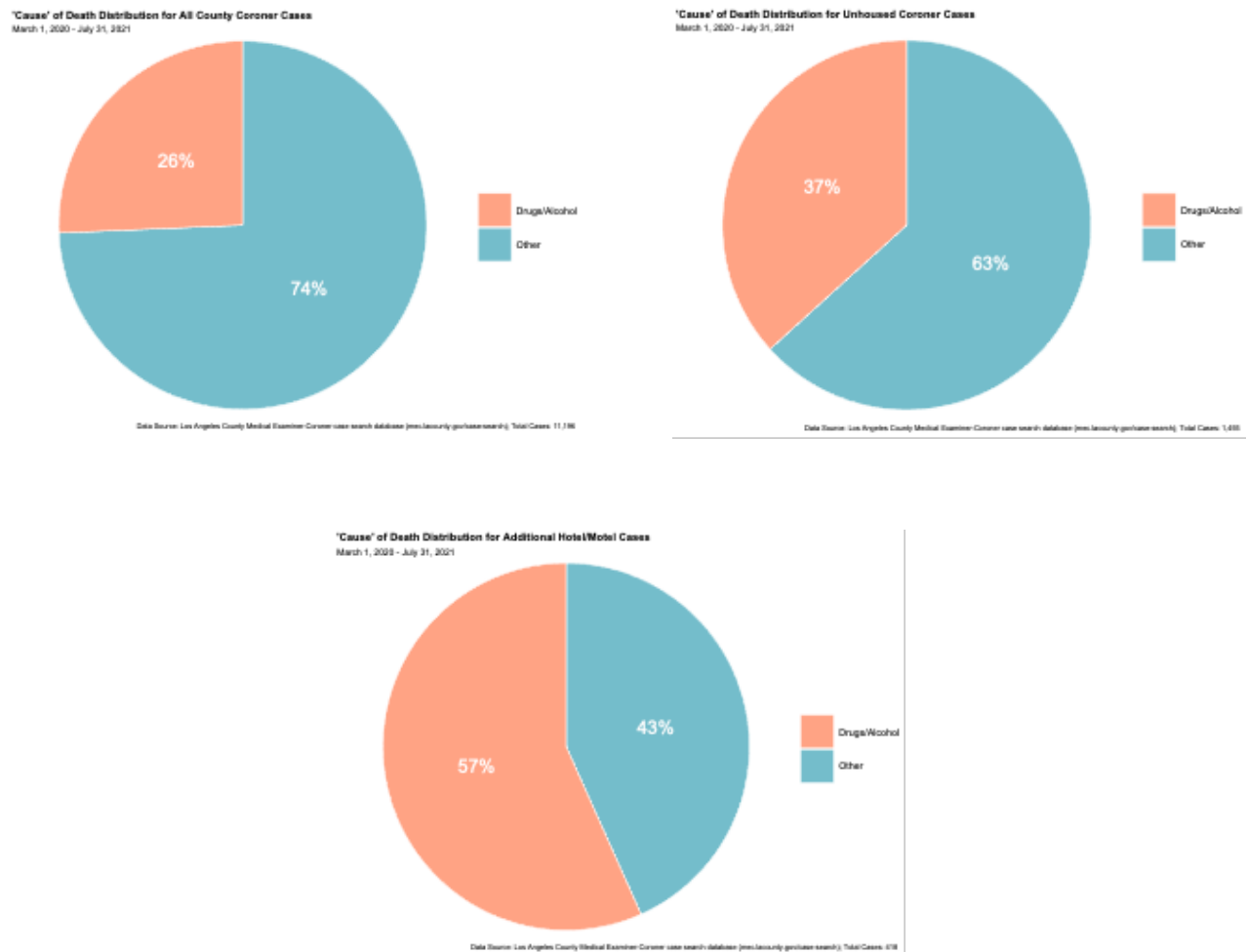
Figure 6. 'Manner' of Death Distribution Comparisons



CAUSE

The ‘cause’ of death data point includes many distinct descriptions. Therefore, we conducted a text search for keywords including ‘toxicity,’ ‘intoxication,’ and all other substances referencing alcohol and drugs to create the cause category of ‘Drugs/Alcohol.’ The county’s baseline is that 26% of deaths were determined to be attributed to drug and alcohol intoxication (Figure 7). For unhoused cases, the rate increases to 37%. For the additional hotel/motel cases, the rate is more striking with an increase of more than 30 percentage points to 57%. This figure should be read in conjunction with the previous data point we shared – that 59% of unhoused hotel/motel deaths are determined by the coroner to be accidental. We now turn to one segment of hotel/motel deaths, which is Project Roomkey.

Figure 7. Drugs/Alcohol ‘Cause’ of Death Distribution Comparisons



PROJECT ROOMKEY

Mayor Eric Garcetti signed a Declaration of Local Emergency¹³ on March 3, 2020 with a “Safer at Home”¹⁴ emergency order becoming effective soon after on March 20th. All residents of the City of Los Angeles were instructed to stay in their residences and limit all outdoor activities beyond essential tasks. Project Roomkey (PRK) was the solution provided by the State of California to protect unhoused individuals from the deadly COVID-19 virus. The County, City, and the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) received authority from the state to secure PRK rooms and administer the program with FEMA reimbursements covering 75% of costs. If unhoused individuals were 65 years of age or older, had underlying medical conditions, or were medically compromised, they met the eligibility to participate in the program. LAHSA and homeless service providers in each Service Planning Area (SPA) were responsible for identifying and making referrals for eligible individuals.

The original plan was to *secure* 15,000 rooms. However, the objective was revised to instead *serve* 15,000 individuals with the intent to transition participants into permanent housing.¹⁵ Project Roomkey operations reached its peak in late August 2020 with 38 total sites¹⁶ and the largest number of 4,329 individuals housed at a single point.¹⁷ Due to concerns about privacy and the likelihood of individuals treating Project Roomkey as “walk-up” services, the City and County of Los Angeles has kept hidden the addresses of PRK sites. Instead, the only location data disclosed for each PRK site is their Service Planning Area (SPA) in the Los Angeles County Emergency Operations Center’s daily COVID-19 newsletters.¹⁸ This has made scrutiny of Project Roomkey difficult, including the matching of coroner’s database addresses to Project Roomkey locations. However, earlier this year, The *Los Angeles Times* published a detailed investigation into the deaths at Project Roomkey hotels and motels. They raised a crucial question: as vulnerable unhoused individuals are moved from the streets into state-run hotel/motel rooms, are they receiving the necessary care to protect human life?¹⁹ The *Los Angeles Times* reported that 49 deaths had been recorded among the unhoused residing in PRK sites between Spring 2020 and Spring 2021. Relying on information provided by unhoused residents and Street Watch LA organizers such as Carla Orendorff, the article provided an in-depth look at the Airtel Plaza Hotel, a Project Roomkey site located in Van Nuys. There, a total of 8 deaths have been documented, one of the highest death rates among all PRK sites. The *Los Angeles Times* article also revealed that LA Fire Department records indicate that emergency medical technicians showed up to the Airtel nearly every other day. Most recently, CBS News reported the following about Project Roomkey: “LA County confirms that 91 people have died while in the program.”²⁰ Since the same CBS News report also includes LA County numbers that 9,118 persons have been placed in Project Roomkey, we can conclude that this program has an official death rate of 1 per 100 persons. This is a conservative estimate since these county numbers are most likely an overestimation of PRK placements and an underestimation of PRK

13 City of Los Angeles, [“Declaration of Local Emergency.”](#) March 4, 2020.

14 City of Los Angeles, [“Safer at Home Emergency Order.”](#) March 19, 2020.

15 City of Los Angeles Chief Legislative Analyst, [“Status of Project Roomkey.”](#) September 4, 2020.

16 County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office, [“Project Roomkey Extensions and Expansion with 100% FEMA Reimbursement.”](#) March 2, 2021.

17 Oreskes, Benjamin. [“‘Manna from Heaven’: Biden Funding Could Get Thousands of Homeless off Streets, L.A. Officials Say.”](#) Los Angeles Times. January 27, 2021.

18 County of Los Angeles, [“COVID-19: Incident Updates.”](#)

19 Alpert Reyes, Emily et. al. [“Why Did so Many Homeless People Die While Staying at One Hotel Used in Project Roomkey?.”](#) Los Angeles Times. June 28, 2021.

20 CBS Los Angeles, [“Project Roomkey Fell Short of Expectations in LA County, Experts Say.”](#) September 21, 2021.

deaths. In addition, as evident in the case of Tony Goodwin, there are deaths related to PRK evictions and other forms of structural violence, that do not take place at the actual PRK location.

How and why does a place of shelter become a place of death? Why did a program that was meant to protect the most vulnerable of LA's unhoused residents from COVID-19 transmission turn deadly? These questions become even more pressing when we note that PRK program guidelines require each site to be staffed 24/7 with a team consisting of an LA County Fire Site Manager, County and City Disaster Service Workers, Nursing Staff, Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) staff, and a Homeless Service Provider with Client Services Managers and Case Manager.²¹ How then, with this level of staffing, are PRK residents suffering overdose deaths, as documented by The *Los Angeles Times*? Guided by the After Echo Park Lake research collective and the organizing led by UTACH, we argue that one important answer to this question lies in the structural violence of displacement.

21 County of Los Angeles, "[Project Roomkey](#)."

STOLEN LIVES

While our report relies on state records, notably coroner's data, we undertake such analysis with keen awareness that such records obscure the forms of structural violence and organized abandonment that produce death. As public concern grows about overdose as the leading cause of unhoused deaths in Los Angeles, so it is necessary to understand these deaths not as individual acts of overdose but rather as a collective condition of suffering caused by displacement. They are a manifestation of what Bardwell et al. term "intersecting housing and overdose crises."²² More broadly, public health researchers have emphasized that while there has been a focus on the increased availability of drugs, specifically opioids, it is crucial to recognize "that elevated rates of opioid overdose, suicide, and alcohol-related mortality...have resulted from compounding social and economic disadvantage over the life course."²³ Housing policy plays a central role in such "deaths of despair" with researchers increasingly taking a close look at housing insecurity, notably evictions, as a structural driver of overdose mortality.²⁴ For example, in a recent community-based research study conducted in the Downtown Eastside neighborhood of Vancouver, Canada, McNeil et al.²⁵ find that "post-eviction spatial practices and routines produced risk and harm as participants navigated the uncertainties of housing vulnerability and drug supply change."

It is our argument that emergency housing programs such as Project Roomkey have not only failed to take into account such effects of displacement but have also exacerbated them through the carceral rules and conditions that are imposed on residents, including carceral isolation that separates residents from each other and severs their social networks and ties.

It need not be this way. Bardwell et al.²⁶ show how tenant-led overdose response interventions can be an effective form of harm reduction. They study the Tenant Overdose Response Organizers Program (TORO), a pilot project implemented in the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels in the Downtown Eastside neighborhood of Vancouver, and find it welcomed and valued by SRO residents but opposed by building managers and owners. Emerging from the long arc of organizing by tenants in the DTES SRO Collaborative, TORO is a reminder of the necessity of tenant power in addressing the intersecting crises of housing insecurity and drug overdose. We invite you to learn more about the DTES SRO Collaborative and TORO by listening to this [podcast](#) recorded during a visit to Los Angeles by Vancouver organizers, including Wendy Pederson and Samantha Pranteau. Such community-led responses are active on the streets of Los Angeles, whether by movement organizations such as Street Watch LA or by unhoused residents at encampments such as the one that once thrived at Echo Park Lake. The point is not just the availability of interventions such as Narcan but rather the strength of community ties and social networks that facilitate the use and distribution of Narcan to save lives. Ultimately, what is at stake is housing justice, a vision and demand emphasized by our UTACH comrades who first urged us to take up the matter of unhoused deaths.

22 Bardwell, Geoff et al. "[Addressing Intersecting Housing and Overdose Crises in Vancouver, Canada: Opportunities and Challenges from a Tenant-Led Overdose Response Intervention in Single-Room Occupancy Hotels.](#)" *Journal of Urban Health*. 2019; 96(1), 12-20.

23 Venkataramani, Atheendar and Tsai, Alexander. "[Housing, Housing Policy, and Deaths of Despair.](#)" *Health Services Research*. 2020; 55(1), 5-8

24 Bradford, Ashley and Bradford, David. "[The Effect of Evictions on Accidental Drug and Alcohol Mortality.](#)" *Health Services Research*. 2020; 55, 9-17.

25 McNeil, Ryan et al. "[Navigating Post-Eviction Drug Use Amidst a Changing Drug Supply: A Spatially-Oriented Qualitative Study of Overlapping Housing and Overdose Crises in Vancouver, Canada.](#)" *Drug Alcohol Dependence*. 2021; Volume 222, 108666.

26 Bardwell, Geoff et al. "[Addressing Intersecting Housing and Overdose Crises in Vancouver, Canada: Opportunities and Challenges from a Tenant-Led Overdose Response Intervention in Single-Room Occupancy Hotels.](#)" *Journal of Urban Health*. 2019; 96(1), 12-20.

CONCLUSION

In the City of Angels, unhoused lives and unhoused deaths are often invisible. Theo Henderson, founder of [We the Unhoused](#), refuses such imposed invisibility. At the vigil for Tony Goodwin, Mr. Henderson recited the poem, “Can You See Me?”:

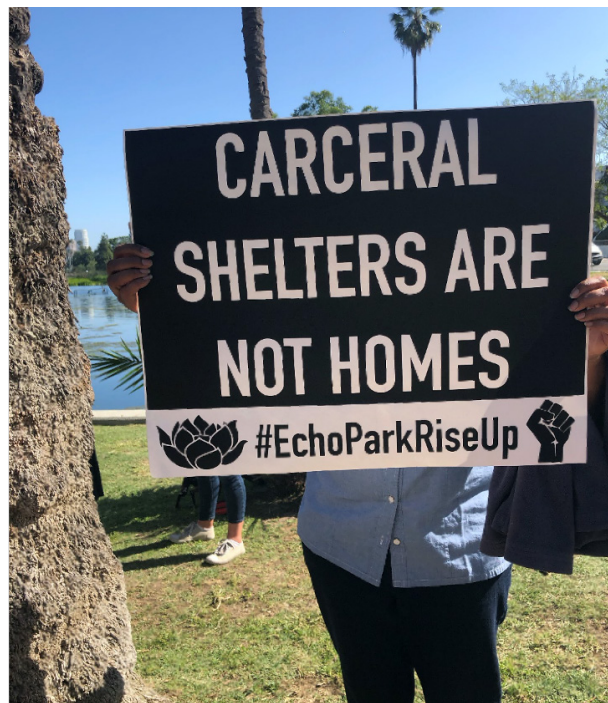
People walk by me while I’m filled with pain.
I’ve been running so long to find an escape from the literal and figurative rain.
Excuse me I’m sorry to bother you,
But do you see me?
I see how you read me,
Naked hatred and fears,
When I leave this earthly sphere,
There will be no shedding of tears
You may not realize that you erased me.
You walk past me fast with fear and disgust, so me you can’t see.
It haunts me, how you will remember me.
The world watched me die only to be remembered in a lie
Cruelty and disinterest is my sad reward
Watch the fear and hate when I move forward
Living Unhoused is not free
24/7 work on survival and trauma plagues me.
How will you accept me?
This is and not been for me the land of the free
That thought stays with me.
Until I go to my grave, this will still haunt me.

This report is a counterpoint to racial banishment, which entails civil, social, and actual death for LA's unhoused residents. It necessitates a set of actions best encapsulated by the principles and mission of UTACH, Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing. We invite you to join in such organizing and to uphold these principles of housing justice.

U.T.A.C.H. Principles & Mission

- We recognize that the unhoused crisis was created by the City Council by making rents high and keeping wages low.
- We are fighting for permanent, humane housing.
- We believe "Housing is a Human Right!"
- We DO NOT believe that congregate shelter is housing.
- We stand against carceral housing.
- We stand against the criminalization of the poor.
- We are fighting for tenant rights & equal opportunity housing.
- We believe in creating systems that empower unhoused residents & center our voices in solutions to housing and houselessness.
- We believe in community self-determination. We acknowledge the long history of means-testing to get the support we need & we reject carceral solutions to our concerns as a community. We believe that solutions around homelessness come from those who are most marginalized & impacted by the system of oppression. We embrace harm reduction & trauma-informed care as a method & a principle for everything we do. We must learn to take care of all of us. Nothing about us without us!

Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing



UTACH in action at the "reopening" of Echo Park Lake, May 26, 2021. (Photo courtesy of Ananya Roy)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report relies on the wisdom and insight generously shared by unhoused comrades in the After Echo Park Lake research collective and UTACH and by organizers in Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA. We would also like to acknowledge Claudia Bustamante for helping us design the final report.

The UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy acknowledges the Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (Los Angeles basin, So. Channel Islands) and are grateful to have the opportunity to work for the taraaxatom (indigenous peoples) in this place. As a land grant institution, we pay our respects to Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders), and 'eyoohiinkem (our relatives/relations) past, present and emerging.

The UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy recognizes the ongoing efforts of UCLA students, faculty, staff, and workers to ensure divestment from policing at the University of California and acknowledges that such policing disproportionately violates Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, trans, and poor peoples and ultimately renders all members of campus and its surrounding communities less safe. We are committed to a public university that advances racial justice by ending such forms of harm.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ananya Roy is Professor of Urban Planning, Social Welfare and Geography and founding Director of the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. She holds The Meyer and Renee Luskin Chair in Inequality and Democracy. Ananya's research and scholarship is concerned with dispossession and displacement and the movements and mobilizations that contest them. Ananya leads the National Science Foundation Research Coordination Network (BCS 1758774) on Housing Justice in Unequal Cities. She is the recipient of the 2020 Freedom Scholar award from the Marguerite Casey Foundation, an award that has made possible the convening of the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective.

Chloe Rosenstock is an undergraduate student at UCLA and organizer with Street Watch LA Westwood and Echo Park Lake. Chloe caseworks for Mobile Clinic Project at UCLA, a streetside medical and social service clinic serving unhoused residents of Los Angeles. She is also a part of the After Echo Park Lake research collective under the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. Chloe's organizing and research interests include housing justice, the politics of unsanctioned urban living spaces, and the impact of gentrification on Los Angeles tenants. Chloe is in the process of completing her Bachelors of Sociology and Gender Studies with minors in Labor Studies and Community Engagement and Social Change.



UCLA LUSKIN INSTITUTE ON

INEQUALITY AND DEMOCRACY

ORGANIZED 2016