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Op-Ed: What if L.A.'s homeless population were a city?



Will Mendez, 40, a former iron worker from Michoacan, Mexico, spends the day under the Fourth St. Bridge in Los Angeles.

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Fifty-seven thousand eight hundred. That's approximately how many people are homeless in Los Angeles County on any given night. If they all came together, they would constitute a city the size of Arcadia.

What would such a city look like? What can we say about its residents, its health, its future?

If we walked through Homeless City, we would see that more than two-thirds of its residents are male. Four of every 10 people we meet would be African American — many more than in the surrounding areas, where only 9% of residents and 12% of those living in poverty are African American.

We wouldn't get very far before being struck by the children of Homeless City. One of every 10 city residents is a child. We ought to be particularly worried for these 5,370 youths because experiencing homelessness as a child powerfully predicts later homelessness.

The average homeless woman in the city experiences as much major violence in a single year as the average American woman experiences in her lifetime.

Homeless City's elderly population is also visible, vulnerable and growing. Nearly one-quarter of its residents are 55 or older. Over the last five years, average rents in Los Angeles County have increased two times faster than the median income of senior households. Squeezed by soaring rents and fixed incomes, more seniors move in to Homeless City all the time.

People on our tour will be surprised if we smile or offer a kind word. They are used to being ignored by those who sleep in beds at night. We will see weariness and heartache on their faces. But we will also be struck by residents' hope and resiliency. People sweep the sidewalks in front of their tents and share food with their neighbors. Even in the midst of dire poverty, community and kindness are common.

Homeless City's population is exploding. Though many people find housing and leave the city, about 400 others arrive daily. Homeless City is growing far faster than Conroe, Texas, which is the fastest-growing U.S. city with a population of more than 50,000. In 2016, Conroe grew by 7.8%. Homeless City grew by 23%. Though Homeless City's growth comes predominantly from the return of former residents, around 8,000 of this year's arrivals never experienced homelessness before.

Most residents rest uneasily in Homeless City. Only 26% sleep in shelters. The other 42,000 or so sleep in places not meant for human habitation. Day and night, we'll find people sleeping in one of the 15,000 vehicles, tents or makeshift shelters spread throughout the city.

It's unhealthy and unsafe to live in Homeless City. People who are homeless use the emergency room four times more often than other low-income residents. These visits are particularly challenging because 30% of the city's residents have a serious mental illness, 18% have a substance abuse disorder, and 2% are HIV-positive. The violence in Homeless City disproportionately affects female residents. The average homeless woman in the city experiences as much major violence in a single year as the average American woman experiences in her lifetime.

Death is ever present. Last year, 805 people died in the city. Whereas Californians, on average, can expect to live to 80, the average age of death in Homeless City is just 48.

Perhaps most striking, we know that our quick walk through Homeless City at a particular point in time dramatically understates its population. Over the course of a year, more than 200,000 people experience homelessness in Los Angeles. That's enough to fill Dodger Stadium four times over.

There are many reasons why so many people end up in Homeless City. To name just a few: poverty, institutional failures, racism, greed, indifference and an inadequate safety net. As we walk through Homeless City, we can be overwhelmed by manifestations of these injustices. But if we stop for a moment and consider what is around us, we see what will make Homeless City a smaller and healthier place: more affordable housing, higher incomes, more healthcare and social services and earlier interventions.

We know that many of these interventions are cost-effective. Just last month, a Rand Corp. study of 890 homeless individuals with complex health issues who received housing and services through L.A.'s Housing for Health program found that the county saved \$1.20 for every \$1.00 invested in the program.

Statistics alone can't capture the heartbreak and horror of homelessness. Every one of these numbers reflects a human being — someone's son or daughter. Even though 14% of likely voters in Los Angeles report having been homeless at some point in their lives, it is too easy to see Homeless City as a place where someone else's children reside. Until we all start treating it as a place where our children live, Homeless City will be with us.

Adam Murray is executive director of Inner City Law Center, which serves homeless and working-poor clients from its offices on skid row.