

A police state on skid row

The LAPD is again rousting and searching homeless people without cause.

By Ramona Ripston

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THE LOS ANGELES Police Department has a message for skid row residents: The 4th Amendment doesn't apply here. That's the constitutional protection from arbitrary searches, and L.A. police officers have been violating it since late last year by detaining, handcuffing and going through people's pockets and possessions on the slimmest pretenses.

Cecil Bledsoe is a 65-year-old African American man who was once homeless and now works as a counselor helping others find housing. He was on his way to the bus in December when a police car rolled up and officers ordered him against a wall, then searched and questioned him. Bledsoe was released because he had done nothing wrong.

Police are also detaining homeless people for minor infractions such as jaywalking or sitting on the sidewalk, then using those pretexts as a basis to search them. Shawn Robertson was packing up his belongings one morning last November when police stood him against a wall and handcuffed him. They searched his stuff, ran his name, then let him go.

Paul Johnson was searched in December by officers who told him that "everybody down here is on probation or parole." Johnson isn't. The police officer who stopped him later admitted that he could not offer a reason for the search.

These aren't the hard-core criminals police promised to round up when the LAPD assigned 50 more officers to skid row last September. They're ordinary people whose only mistake was being homeless in the wrong part of town.

City leaders promised that the new officers would be part of a strategy to solve the homeless problem that included housing and services. Instead, the city has done exactly what everyone said it should not do: send police out as its primary tool. We're seeing the inevitable result.

We've been here before. Twenty years ago, the city and civil rights groups agreed that police were going too far on skid row by trashing residents' belongings in twice-daily sweeps. "It would appear that we have miraculously solved the horrible problem of destitute homelessness in our community by simply declaring it illegal," actor Martin Sheen wrote in *The Times* that year.

Since then, we've been caught in a disturbing cycle, with police abusing their power and then being challenged in court, only to either back down or be nudged into compliance by the courts.

Three years ago, a federal judge found that police were conducting arbitrary searches in the 50-square-block skid row area of L.A. and stopped them. The ACLU of Southern California and civil rights attorneys have filed a motion to extend that injunction.

The police shouldn't need a judge's order to know that this kind of activity is unlawful. The Bill of Rights has a nearly 220-year-old prohibition against "unreasonable searches."

New York started to reduce homelessness only when it decided that an enforcement-only approach to the problem was inefficient and expensive. A 2004 study on the costs of homeless services in the U.S. shows that jails and prison are twice as expensive as housing and shelter. L.A.'s leaders say the police are stretched too thin, yet they seem to have deep pockets for skid row police and prosecutors while always coming up short for housing.

Some say aggressive policing is working. Today, skid row's streets are strangely empty, as if hundreds of people who just months ago crowded the area's alleys every night have disappeared. Where have they gone? Some are in jail where they belong. A handful are in pretrial diversion programs where they can get the help they need. The vast majority have likely moved — to Hollywood, the Valley or Venice. These places have fewer services that the homeless need. When this crackdown ends, they'll be back.

We know where they haven't gone: into housing that's connected to services such as mental health care and job training, the only solution we know works. Meanwhile, constant police searches have added to the burdens of those who are seeking help for mental illness and addiction in skid row and complicated the efforts of those who would help them.

"The fear and stress people feel from interactions with the police add significantly to their issues," Casey Horan, executive director of Lamp Community, a homeless services provider, said in a statement the ACLU filed with the court. "When people are subject to aggressive policing, it makes outreach more difficult."