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Some Respite, if Little Cheer, for Skid Row Homeless

By [SOLOMON MOORE](#)

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 30 — Not so long ago, Kenneth Johnson, 29, lived in a West Los Angeles condominium with his wife and three children and earned \$4,000 a month as a forklift operator.

Now he is unemployed and divorced, and beds down each night on a grimy sidewalk in downtown's 50-square-block Skid Row.

"It's weird to be down here," said Mr. Johnson, leaning against a wall as night fell. "It's not a very easy feeling, but over a couple of weeks I got used to it."

Like thousands of others in this despairing city within a city, Mr. Johnson came to Skid Row because it is the easiest place in Los Angeles to find services, shelter and three square meals a day.

And beginning this month, the neighborhood's homeless have also been guaranteed some respite from the police. Under pressure from the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), Los Angeles agreed on Oct. 10 not to appeal a federal court order and will instead allow sleeping on the sidewalk, at least until the city provides 1,250 new beds in low-income housing.

The deal partly rolls back a zero-tolerance crackdown on petty offenses in the Skid Row area, including sleeping in public places, that was undertaken late last year by Police Chief [William J. Bratton](#). The effort has reduced by about half the 8,000 homeless who frequented the area a year ago, according to police estimates.

Some advocates express concern that the flight from Skid Row has left people cut off from vital assistance. The police, however, maintain that the area is safer — for everyone, including the homeless — with fewer people living on the streets.

As of Oct. 6, the police had made 10,742 arrests in and around Skid Row this year, 15 percent more than in the corresponding period of 2006. At the same time, property crimes had dropped by 25 percent and violent crimes by a third, police statistics show.

But while there are 17,000 shelter beds in Los Angeles County, most of them within the city, there are some 74,000 homeless across the county's 4,060 square miles, officials say. And despite the decline in their numbers on Skid Row, it remains an area with one of the nation's largest concentrations of the homeless. As a result, the shelters remain full every night, said Andy Bales, chief executive of the Union Rescue Mission, which operates one of them.

Though the shelters have set up courtyard cots to accommodate the nightly overflow, some of the homeless

prefer the street, which, they say, is safer. One woman, Guadalupe Ibarra, who showers and eats at the missions but does not sleep there because she fears for her safety, gestured at the sleeping bags and tents under a store's awning. "This is our residence," she said. "We all respect each other here."

Yet Skid Row's street people have been watching their territory shrink for years, as downtown developers open the long-neglected area to gentrification. Late-night restaurants, art galleries and refurbished loft spaces selling in the high six figures now form the edge of the neighborhood.

Every few days, Hollywood producers descend upon nearby streets to floodlight a midcentury bank building or a bar, standing in for the grit of an East Coast city. Dogs are walked past bookstores and DVD shops, their owners only occasionally approached for change or [cigarettes](#). "There's a lot more money people around now," Ms. Ibarra said. "They put fences and gates around a lot of places where we used to stay."

She said the changes had pushed many homeless people into East Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, and west to Santa Monica and Venice Beach. (Homeless-population maps — at <http://homeless.cartifact.com/> — that were produced by the police chart the dispersal of street people from Skid Row since last year.)

Much of Skid Row, however, remains a place of wandering drunks and drug addicts, with homeless people lining urine-stained sidewalks in sleeping bags, cardboard shelters and tents.

Lee Ann Salazar, 63, said she had lived on the streets for six years. She tries to keep on the move, tending to 70 or so stray cats with a sack of Friskies. Ms. Salazar told of having recently been attacked by gang members who burned her shopping cart full of possessions.

"Living out here is like sliding down a 40-foot razor blade," she said. "Your body cannot rest. It's like you're pulling out your eyeteeth to get up every morning."

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