

The Dismantling of the Santa Ana Riverbed Homeless Encampment: A Case Study

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Abstract : This research provides the first case study of the Santa Ana riverbed homeless encampment. It contributes valuable information about the little-studied factors contributing to the formation and dismantling of transient homeless encampments. According to the author's best knowledge, this is the discussion of three reoccurring characteristics of homeless camps: camps form a self-governing system, camps are viewed by the community as unsavory places, and the campers are viewed as being unable or unwilling to participate in normal society. Three theories are proposed as explanations for these characteristics: the social capital theory as a reason for homeless campers to develop a system of self-government, the aesthetics theory as rationale for camps being viewed as unsavory places, and the theory of vulnerable and inevitable inequality as a reason why campers are seen as being unable or unwilling to participate in normal society. Three hypotheses are introduced to assess these theories: The encampment was created because it provided inhabitants a sense of safety and autonomy. It was dismantled due to its highly visible location and lack of adherence to the Orange County consumption and leisure aesthetic. Most homeless people from this encampment relocated approximately thirty miles east to Riverside County to avoid harassment by police. An extensive review of interviews with camp inhabitants revealed that fifty-one percent resided in the camp because it gave them a sense of safety and autonomy. An examination of Anaheim city council meeting meetings showed that thirty-eight percent of complaints were related to aesthetic concerns. Analysis of population reports from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development indicated that there was a notable increase in homelessness in Orange County the year after the camp was dismantled. These results reflect that the social capital theory is an applicable explanation for the homeless being drawn to set up camp as a collective. The aesthetics theory can be used to explain why a third of residents complained about the encampment. Camp residents did not move East to Riverside after the camp was dismantled. Further investigation into the enforcement of anti-camping ordinances needs to be conducted to evaluate if policing contributed to the vulnerability of the homeless.

Keywords : poverty, social relations, transformation of urban settlements, urban anthropology

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