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Magic housing solutions

If you had a regulatory magic wand and \$20 billion, what would you do to alleviate the housing crunch? All week, Joseph Mailander and Peter Dreier debate Los Angeles housing policy and solutions.

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April 12, 2007

Today, Dreier and Mailander propose big-picture solutions to city's housing problems. Previously they debated whether [rent control helps or hurts](#), discussed [City Hall efforts](#) to rein in property rights, and [sketched out the contours](#) of what they think this housing crisis is. Tomorrow, they'll clear up myths about the Los Angeles housing market.

The battle over Skid Row

ByPeter Dreier

I'm sure you'll agree, Joseph, that the most tragic victims of the housing crisis are the 90,000 people in Los Angeles County who are homeless on any given night. We are the nation's homeless capital—a dubious distinction. Some are alcoholic, drug addicts, and/or mentally ill, but most, including the working poor, are simply victims of bad luck and a tight housing market.

A year ago, a blue-ribbon task force, [Bring LA Home](#), unveiled a comprehensive multibillion dollar plan—a mix of housing and social services—to eliminate homelessness in L.A. County in ten years. A new report reveals that this goal is ambitious but [feasible](#). It will require collaboration of business, housing and service providers, and government at the federal, state, county, and local levels.

But the plan is collecting dust. The County Board of Supervisors has dropped the ball. Led by Mike Antonovich, they've failed to establish a regional network of homeless service centers, a centerpiece of the plan.

Rather than acknowledge that homelessness is a regional responsibility, the Supervisors and many local officials want to foist the problem on Los Angeles.

To his credit, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has committed more than \$100 million for "supportive housing"—apartments and social services. This is the lynchpin of any solution. But, in reality, one city, on its own, can't eliminate homelessness.

According to a [recent report](#), in L.A. it costs \$1,474 a night to treat a homeless individual in the hospital and \$607 in a mental hospital; \$84 a night to house a homeless person in prison and \$63 a night in jail; \$37 a night to house a homeless person in shelter, and \$30 a night in permanent supportive housing.

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So, Joseph, perhaps here's where a progressive (me) and a libertarian (you) can agree. If I had a magic wand and an extra \$20 billion—and L.A. County residents have already spent over [\\$13 billion on the war in Iraq](#)—I'd put half into subsidies for mixed-income apartments (mostly along transit corridors) and half into supportive housing (throughout the county, not just Skid Row).

Molly Rysman of [Skid Row Housing Trust](#) points out that cities that have invested in supportive housing have seen dramatic reductions in homelessness. San Francisco has seen a 37% decline in homelessness.

New York's investment was found to be cost-neutral to taxpayers because of large reductions in formerly homeless individuals' reliance on expensive emergency services. It costs the same to leave homeless individuals on the streets as it does to end their homelessness through permanent supportive housing.

We can reduce our housing crunch by redirecting resources to efficient housing strategies like permanent supportive housing, rather than spending more to send homeless individuals to jail and prison. Our courts are inundated with drug and quality of life crimes. This is neither effective nor cost-efficient. Let's focus instead on the violent criminals and predators who really belong in prison.

About 13,000 very poor residents live in Skid Row—in residential hotels, shelters or on the street. According to Becky Dennison, who works on Skid Row with [LA Community Action Network](#), L.A.'s rent stabilization law has prevented thousands of long-term residential hotel tenants from becoming homeless. But landlords often use illegal tactics to evict them, and then raise the rents. So even these bottom-rung units—typically a small room with a shared bathroom—can cost \$800 a month.

Meanwhile, however, the battle over Skid Row has pitted the homeless and their advocates against developers and their political allies. It is a microcosm of larger dilemmas facing LA city officials.







It began as a battle between the LAPD and the American Civil Liberties Union over whether homeless people have a "right" to sleep on the streets—during the day or at night. The ACLU argued that the homeless have a "right" to squat on sidewalks and alleys so long as there's not enough low-cost housing for them. But securing the right for homeless people to sleep on the street doesn't really address the misery of homelessness.

LAPD framed the issue primarily as one of public safety. Police Chief William Bratton views Skid Row primarily as a haven for drug dealers and other criminals, including those who prey on the homeless, shoppers and residents. There is more the LAPD could be doing about reducing violent crime on Skid Row, but pushing sleeping homeless people off the streets is not an effective crime fighting strategy

This controversy, however, diverts attention from the more fundamental issue. Will our shiny new downtown have a place for the people who live and work here now, or will it be yet another playground for the rich, full of luxury housing, galleries, museums and concert halls, upscale restaurants, boutiques and tourist attractions?

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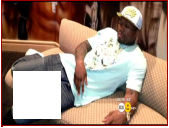
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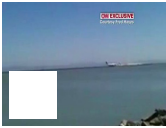
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