

A COHORT OF WORKING AMERICANS LIVING IN THEIR CARS

One of the fastest growing segments of America's homeless population is people who live in their cars, R.V.s or other vehicles. It's a sign of the squeeze on the middle-class.

California has more safe parking lots than any other state, with more than two dozen from Santa Rosa to San Diego [...] thanks to New Beginnings, [...] the nonprofit that runs the parking initiative in Santa Barbara County. The inspiration for it came from a county supervisor who stepped out of her office one day, looked around at the parking lot and realized that the solution to Santa Barbara's growing homelessness problem was there.

But even with the growth of these programs, only a fraction of the tens of thousands of people living in their cars across the country can be accommodated. And some cities are cracking down on people sleeping in their cars. [...]

That growth is a testament to the growing tension between municipalities who are trying to limit the eyesore of R.V.s, vans and passenger cars parking on public rights-of-way and the people stuck inside them, who have nowhere else to go.

The need has become so pronounced in California that Long Beach City College set aside a parking structure for its homeless students, after discovering that nearly 70 students were sleeping in their cars each night. [...]

In many ways, it's a sign of the worsening squeeze on the nation's middle class. Compared with those living in tents and shelters, the so-called mobile homeless are more likely to have jobs or to be actively looking for work, a U.C.L.A. study found. Many lost their homes after being unable to afford rent or their mortgage, and had to move into their most valuable possession.

But living in a car comes with risks — of burglary, harassment and more. That has led to the creation of safe parking lots, designated places for people living in their vehicles to stay overnight. Dozens of such lots, often outside churches, have opened across the nation in the past five years, a testament to the severity of the homelessness crisis.

"Cities aim to build affordable housing, but the timeline for doing so is measured in years," Rukmini Callimachi, a housing reporter said. [...] He just published an article about these lots and the people who need them, most of whom have some kind of income but are stuck in expensive housing markets. He shadowed a social worker in Washington State who makes more than \$72,000 a year, but lives in her car.

Now they are fielding requests from other community colleges asking how to provide parking for their own homeless students.

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