



SEASON 5 EPISODE 5

Punished and Persecuted for Being Unhoused, Part 1

In Los Angeles, thousands of people who live outside have to navigate the insecurities caused by homelessness, the ire of housed neighbors, and the city penalizing them for their circumstances. In one park, months of efforts to remove unhoused people culminated in a showdown with police. Reporter Mark Betancourt investigates in this episode, part one of a two-part series about the criminalization of homelessness.

Mitzi Miller:

I am Mitzi Miller. This is 70 Million. It's 7:00 AM in Echo Park, just above Downtown Los Angeles. The park is mostly a lake with grass and paths built around the water's edge, fringed with water lilies. A fountain in the center continuously erupts like a small geyser. There are ducks and geese and open spaces amid the noise and smog of LA. Then there's the [metal fence that encloses the entire park](#). A few months before a COVID hit the US, [a group of unhoused people started living in tents](#) by the lake. [The fence showed up to keep them out](#). As of January 2022, [more than 28,000 LA residents](#) were living outside all over Los Angeles, the unhoused camp out on sidewalks and in parks, often banding together in small [makeshift communities](#).

Local residents are getting more concerned about safety and their ability to use parks and sidewalks. So much so, what to do about the unhoused has become [the number one political issue](#) in Los Angeles. According to [City-Data](#), the sanitation department received over 48,000 calls about homeless encampments in 2021. Like a lot of places across the country, LA has responded [by passing or expanding laws](#) that effectively make it illegal to live outside in certain public spaces, often [using law enforcement officers to remove people](#) from such places. Almost every state and many US cities have [passed laws that unhoused people can break just by trying to survive](#). The system is rigged against them and their stories are everywhere. In this special two-part episode, Mark Betancourt tells one of those stories.

Mark Betancourt:

March 24th, 2021, [hundreds of police officers, many in riot gear, amassed](#) in a parking lot near Dodger Stadium. The staging area was only a few minutes drive from Echo Park where a group of unhoused people had been living in tents for more than a year. The city had been [transferring people in the camp to temporary housing](#) for months. Now the police were coming to close the park and removed anyone who tried to stay.

Ashley Bennett:

We had people on the lookout, kind of driving up and down Sunset, just seeing what was going on, seeing if there was any police or sanitation trucks incoming.

Betancourt:

[Ashley Bennett is an advocate for unhoused people](#) and an organizer with [Ground Game LA](#), a grassroots nonprofit. She'd worked with the people living in Echo Park for more than a year, helping them get

through some very tough times by building a small community. In the process, she'd become part of an extended family and she was there that day to help defend it.

Bennett:

And I remember getting a picture of dozens of cop cars staged at Dodger Stadium and I remember seeing it and I was like, "There's no way that's for us. We're a peaceful community of ... A few people are left. There's no way that police response is for us." I just feel like I was in denial of what was about to happen. But then someone sent us word that like, "Oh yeah, no, they're coming. They're coming that direction." And I was like, "Oh, we are not ready for this." We sent messages out to all different movement groups being like, "This is really happening. We need as many people as possible here to defend the park. Please send anyone that you can."

Betancourt:

[Hundreds of people responded](#), unhoused and housed Angelinos alike. Student journalist, Emily Holshouser, captured the day on video.

Bennett and Protesters:

Housing is a human right. Fight, fight, fight. Housing is a human right. Fight, fight, fight.

Betancourt:

That evening, a woman named Queen, a resident of the park encampment, [climbed onto a park bench and gave a speech](#) to the crowd.

Queen:

... I'm going to say it because I've been here for 30 years. My mother's sold corn on that corner. So whatever's happening tonight hits home. They're ready and they're coming hard, but you know what we have and they will never have? Cora. We have heart. We have love for this.

Betancourt:

The [police arrived after dark](#). There were [more than 400 officers and they were armed with less-than-lethal projectile launchers and batons](#). They blocked off streets around the park and told the protestors to leave. Throughout that night and into the next night, protestors refused to disperse. Some [shined strobe lights and yelled at the police](#). The police responded with force.

Protester:

Don't push me forward.

Betancourt:

This sound was captured by freelance journalist Vishal Singh, who tweeted that he was hit with a baton and almost crushed by officers while filming.

Queen:

Police were hitting these people with their batons.

Betancourt:

Here's Queen.

Queen:

We had seen people being dragged out already. We had seen people being pushed, being hit. I personally saw one, he must have been like 17, 18, they were holding him by his wrist and by his feet, carrying him like this. He was knocked out.

Betancourt:

A homeowner in the neighborhood, Riley Montgomery, says he was overwhelmed by the scale of what was happening. He and his neighbors had also spent months [organizing, pressing the city](#) to clear the unhoused people out of the park and get them into housing.

Riley Montgomery:

If the city had done outreach and offered housing to people when there were only 10 tents in the park, that would have never have happened. It should have never been allowed to get to that point. and I said that over and over again. It should have never been allowed to get to that point.

Betancourt:

More than a year after that night, I visit Queen in the hospital. She's tiny, less than five feet and looks even smaller in her hospital bed. She smiles, even though she's in a lot of pain. She has a condition called [cirrhosis](#), extensive damage to her liver that she says comes from years of alcoholism. She says addiction was her way of dealing with the stress of living outside in Echo Park when she had nowhere else to go. By her side is her soft-spoken husband who also lived in the park. That's where they met. His name is Cesar Segura, but he goes by Wall Street.

Wall Street:

It was a name I gave myself. I didn't want to give people my name because a lot of times you don't know if you're going to trust him, so a lot of people go by nicknames. Everyone presents the dream about being not only financially secure myself, but the people I care about, the people I love.

Betancourt:

Wall Street's long hair is up in a loose ponytail and he looks as tired as Queen does. He's been sleeping in the chair next to her bed for days, squeezing in some work on his laptop when he can. Queen's real name is [Jessica Mendez](#), but everyone who knows her calls her by her nickname because she always takes care of her people. Now Wall Street is taking care of her.

Queen:

Can I have water?

Wall Street:

Yes.

Betancourt:

It's here in her hospital room that Queen and Wall Street tell me their story. For Queen, it starts when she and her family [moved to the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles from Mexico when she was a year and a half old](#).

Queen:

We've only moved apartments once but same building. My mom sold corn on that corner and my dad used to sell shoes on the opposite corner for Payless back in the day. So it's like this was our home. This is where we work, This is where we socialize and then we had to park right behind us. So literally, it's our playground.

Betancourt:

Queen's family didn't always have money for food at the end of the day, so another vendor would swap her mom corn for tamales.

Queen:

But we never went hungry. Like no matter what, we never went hungry. You literally went down the block and you said hi to everybody and everybody knew me and everyone knew whose daughter I was. So it wasn't just my mom, I want to say in a way, raising us. It was like the whole community.

Betancourt:

Queen's family still lives in that apartment, but [the neighborhood has changed around them](#). There are fewer immigrants and the median home price in Echo Park is now [over \\$1 million](#). In October of 2020, Queen was 32 years old and living in the Bay Area, studying to be an electrician. One day, she was back in LA visiting her family when she was hit by a car.

Queen:

Technically it was like a hit and run. I was left almost for dead.

Betancourt:

She was in the hospital for three months.

Queen:

Not being able to go back to San Francisco, I lost everything. My apartment that I had there, the job that I had there, everything that I had. And then being in the hospital, coming out, I didn't really have anything.

Betancourt:

There are a thousand pathways into homelessness. [Disability, addiction or mental illness](#) can be factors. Sometimes all it takes is an accident. But studies have shown that for most people, it comes down to one thing, [how difficult it is to get and keep housing](#). Queen worried that if she stayed in her childhood apartment, it could put her whole family at risk. Her five daughters and one granddaughter already lived there with her mom and several other family members. And she says the landlord had been threatening to evict them because of the crowding.

Queen:

It's one of those things that you have to decide which of the two is the lesser evil, "Do I stay here and cram everything more up and let my family see me go through this much pain," or my idea is like, "Okay, I'm only a block away. I live at the park anyway pretty much because I'm there all the time and just stay there."

Betancourt:

There had been a handful of [people living in tents in Echo Park](#) along the shores of the lake for years. Recently, the encampment had started to grow into a small community. Queen knew many of the people living there, so she decided to get a tent and set it up in the park. [Camping in LA City parks is illegal](#), so is camping in other public spaces. One city ordinance called [Section 4118](#) prohibits sitting, lying, sleeping or keeping personal belongings in any public right of way, meaning sidewalks or streets. In 2021, the LA City Council amended [41.18](#) to allow the council to designate [special enforcement zones](#) where unhoused people are given [a deadline to leave](#). Any belongings left after the [deadline are cleared out by city sanitation workers](#). Anyone who doesn't leave is [removed by police and they get a citation](#).

People who resist are charged with a misdemeanor and either jailed or fined. One analysis created by the campaign of [Kenneth Mejia](#), a 2022 candidate for LA City controller showed that [special enforcement zones cover about 20%](#) of the city's sidewalks.

Mike Bonin:

What we're doing today, even as improved, tells people who are unhoused and unsheltered and have no place to go where they cannot sleep, but it [does not tell them where they can sleep](#).

Betancourt:

Mike Bonin is an [LA City council member for District 11](#) on the west side. He's leaving office at the end of 2022. He went through bouts of homelessness in his 20s and he was one of a minority on the council who has [argued against the city's use of special enforcement zones](#).

Bonin:

I would say if there has been a consistent element of the nine years I've been in office in terms of what we have discussed at the city council, it has been criminalization of homelessness, not solving homelessness, but criminalization of homelessness.

Betancourt:

Almost [42,000 people were experiencing homelessness](#) in the city of Los Angeles in January of 2022, the last time the government counted. More than 28,000 of them lived outdoors. According to the [Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority](#), there [isn't enough affordable permanent housing](#). For that matter, the city only has [enough shelter beds for about a third of its unhoused population](#).

Bonin:

If we are consistently adding no camping zones, but not adding housing at the same time, then you're creating a situation where people will be moved out of sight and then back out on the street on another corner.

Betancourt:

In other words, [unhoused people are put in a position where they can't avoid breaking the law](#). The system is rigged against them and that's not a metaphor. Ashley Bennett, the organizer from [Ground Game LA](#) says the special enforcement zones are designed for this purpose.

Bennett:

There are definitely known encampments, larger encampments that you can see very clearly that are targeted. By the way, some of these zones have been drawn and then there are individuals as well. We have people like, one or two people in an encampment that have just been there for a really long time and then you'll see a sign go up that says just like one little swath of the street, exactly where those people are staying is what's outlawed and what is going to be subject to being swept on a weekly basis.

Betancourt:

Ashley used to be an outreach worker with the [Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority or LAHSA](#). It's a joint agency of the city and county and part of Ashley's job there was to reach out to people before and during enforcements which she calls sweeps and help connect them with services including helping to get them on a path to housing. A [2018 US Circuit Court decision](#) said cities [can't criminalize unhoused people who sleep in public spaces](#) unless they can offer an alternative. So LAHSA's job is to try to fill in that gap. Ashley says the city should be focusing on the people who need services the most, but that's not how it always plays out.

Bennett:

Oftentimes, we get messages directly from council offices and that would be a priority in our day. If an encampment is being complained about, that's the first thing we're going out in the morning to do.

Betancourt:

So would it be that explicit where the council office would actually tell you, "We are getting complaints about these people"?

Bennett:

Yeah, definitely. Mm-hmm.

Betancourt:

Here's Councilmember Mike Bonin again.

Bonin:

Right now we have a situation where lots of people are living on the street and there's unregulated encampments everywhere and that is a failure for everybody. You're housed or unhoused, that's a bad situation. We then attach ourselves as a city government to policies that are inherently divisive because it's about saying where people cannot be instead of where people can be. And that then pits unhoused people versus housed people.

Betancourt:

All of this set the stage for what happened at Echo Park Lake. When only a few people were living in the park, [there weren't many complaints about it](#), and for the most part, the city left them alone. In late 2019, a few young black unhoused men were tired of being criminalized elsewhere in the city. So they came to the park and set up their tents. They would become the leaders of what grew into a community and a movement. I wasn't able to talk to any of them, but Ashley knows them well. She started doing outreach in the park right around the time they arrived.

Bennett:

They essentially just became the core group that people checked in with when they came to the camp or if they needed anything, they needed food, if they needed a tent, if they needed a sleeping bag, if somebody was giving them problems. They just became the unofficial keepers of the camp.

Betancourt:

That organization's sense of community and fewer sweeps attracted people to the camp. More tents went up. Because there was a concentration of need in the park, services started showing up, nonprofit organizations and city-funded programs that would bring food or a truck with a mobile shower. Then the [Los Angeles Police Department and city park rangers started coming around](#), telling people the park was closed at night and they'd have to leave.

Bennett:

When the comprehensive sweep notices started going up, it was just kind of solidifying the fact that this group needed to come together as a community. So the leaders started to do [Know Your Rights trainings](#), which taught them how to talk to cops, how to counter these situations. And we started beginning to formulate plans if comprehensive operation did come down like, "What would we do as a community response? Let's actually see if we can stop these sweeps in an alternative way because something's got to give."

Betancourt:

The chance came in January of 2020 when sanitation workers showed up at the park to clear out the encampment. The camp leaders decided to resist the sweep and refused to go. With help from Ashley and organizers from a group called [Street Watch LA](#), along with dozens of activists who came out to support the camp, it turned into a full-fledged protest.

Bennett:

I remember one of their tactics ended up being driving one of their sanitation trucks onto the sidewalk and just the immediate thing in my mind was something that I learned, a de-escalation tactic from an environmental action that I'd been to years before was just like, "Okay, if a vehicle's coming at you, if you feel like it's safe, sit down in front of it because that's taking a nonaggressive stance and they can't move forward or they're at fault, the person in the vehicle." So I was like, "Okay, great. Let's stop this. I'm going to sit down. Everybody sit down." So yeah, just things like that kind of reacting in the moment, and ultimately, we're able to stop that sweep which was amazing, but that's the action that ended up getting me fired from LAHSA.

Betancourt:

Losing her job at this stage of her life was no small thing.

Bennett:

I was relying on neighbors for food, made like \$17 an hour when I started at [LAHSA](#), so my rent was my entire paycheck. I should have been unhoused after losing that job.

Betancourt:

[Ground Game LA](#), the grassroots organization that she'd helped found a few years earlier offered her a job where she could keep working with unhoused communities. Then the situation changed.

Norah O'Donnell:

... both coasts. Tonight, Los Angeles County where 10 million people live has [declared a public health emergency](#). This comes-

Newsom:

... and there's a recognition of our interdependence that requires of this moment that we direct a [statewide order for people to stay at home](#).

Betancourt:

But not everyone could stay home. Unhoused people everywhere were [stuck in public, exposed](#). And for the people living at Echo Park Lake, there was another problem.

Bennett:

The height of pandemic, [all the services stopped](#). All of that got taken away. And you saw the leaders of the camp be like, "Okay, well, shoot, all this stuff has been taken off the map. Let's build our own. Let's build our own showers. They took away our showers, let's build our own. They took away the food distribution, let's build our own.

Betancourt:

Wall Street was a new arrival at the camp. He says he had been unhoused for a few years. Since fighting a wrongful DUI, it cost him so much, he couldn't afford to keep the room he was renting. He's a freelance software programmer. He had been living on the streets, teaching himself to code on his laptop, charging it wherever he could until police chase him away. When he got to Echo Park Lake, he jumped right in, helping to [build the camp shower](#). It was a wooden structure with gravel underneath to control drainage.

Wall Street:

I worked on roofing, I've done construction, I've done all types of things. So yeah, I can work a hammer. And we did it. And we didn't have all the tools we needed, but we got it built and it worked and it was beautiful and people got to use it.

Betancourt:

There was also a library, a garden, a pantry where the encampment gathered food donations. [Street Watch set up a charging table](#) where people could charge their phones. The camp [pooled some money](#)

[and gave a few camp residents jobs](#) like cleaning up trash in the park or organizing donations, so they could earn a little bit of extra cash and benefit from [being part of the camp's social fabric](#).

Wall Street:

I was amazed just I got to see really how promising it was and how really special the whole place was. Every meeting I went to, every time I talked to him, it was about community. This is our community. You have dignity. You have purpose. You give each other purpose and you work together and you build something.

Betancourt:

Queen and Wall Street met during an outdoor church service at the park, organized by local church leaders.

Wall Street:

I fell in love with her the first time we met. You can see a lot when you look into someone's eyes. So with her, I saw a lot of love and I tried to give that. When I first saw her, I tried to show as much love as I could.

Queen:

My dad was like he had come to the service with me, so it doesn't matter how old you are, but if you're with your dad and there's boys, it's like being on the street, being a woman, you learn to be tough. Very little room for affection. And with him, I didn't have to fight anymore. He saw me for me.

Betancourt:

Queen's tent was on the north end of the park where the playground was. There were several families set up there too and she took it upon herself to try to make sure the area was safe.

Queen:

I would just walk around all the time to make sure everyone was okay. So the whole thing was, if you see a needle, if you see anything on the floor, it doesn't belong, throw it away for the kids.

Betancourt:

If someone wasn't keeping their area clean, for example, Queen and others would respond as a community.

Queen:

There were people there that were hoarding way too many things and so we would come together and talk as a group and we would approach the person and address the issue and ask very nicely, "Hey, we all live here. This is the issue we're having. Is that something we can work on?" They were more open to it because then at the same time when they needed something, "Queen's got me." So it's like a give and take, take and give part of a community. And then also looking out for each other because we all had clear that as soon as the fighting or drug use started to come out or violence, then there would be a reason for the cops to be like, "Well, they're causing havoc. They're not letting the neighbors sleep. They're not letting the residents sleep," which is why we try to not have that issue, so we wouldn't get kicked out.

Betancourt:

That problem wasn't theoretical. As the camp grew, some of the housed neighbors took notice.

Montgomery:

Echo Park like any city in a major metropolitan area like Los Angeles always had occasional crimes and it had tents that would come and go and that was never a big deal.

Betancourt:

When Riley Montgomery and his wife bought their house in the hills above the park, the house wasn't in great shape.

Montgomery:

It took years to fix because I did a lot of the work myself, with permits, of course. But that sense of hard work and that sense of taking something and really building it to be part of your community is why I was offended, I think, when people decided they wanted to live here basically for free because I've worked so hard. I've worked my ass off to be able to afford to have a place here. I started noticing it started going from four or five tents to seven or eight to nine to 10 and then all of a sudden there were almost 20 tents. But then that started attracting crime because you started finding needles here and there and you started seeing people that obviously needed mental help and they were acting a little irrational, unstable, maybe lurching at people that were walking by and acting aggressively.

Betancourt:

Riley [started a petition](#) to get housing for people living in the park which garnered thousands of signatures. He and other neighbors formed a group called [Friends of Echo Park Lake](#). They organized to write letters and sent out flyers asking people to call elected officials, especially their city councilmember, Mitch O'Farrell, who has [worked to build affordable housing](#) in the district.

Montgomery:

There was never an intention to kick people out or create some situation where people didn't have housing. The intent was always get the city to understand that this is a huge issue and that neighbors are interested in solving it and then get people housed. So that was always the intention, was create a system that works for everyone.

Betancourt:

But the messages the group was sending were mixed. Riley is a documentary filmmaker and he used that skill to make a short documentary about the encampment. He called it [Echo Park: Chaos in Los Angeles](#). It's got an ominous soundtrack and includes footage of fights in the park.

Documentary: Woman 1:

What do you want from me?

Documentary: Woman 2:

I don't want you on my side.

Documentary: Woman 1:

I'm going to be right there.

Betancourt:

Riley also interviewed neighbors about the encampment.

Documentary: Homeowner:

It got to the point that there were so many tents, there was no place to avoid, just having a free space without being concerned for our family.

Documentary: Young Woman:

I wouldn't say I didn't feel like I belonged there, but I didn't feel welcomed.

Montgomery:

One of the things in that documentary that I wanted to do was I wanted to shame the city. Like that is a shameful documentary. You watch it and it's like, you're like, "Wow, you want the city to feel bad." That's the intent. I wanted them to look at the mess they'd created because of their ineptitude and say, "Something has to change."

Betancourt:

Riley sent the documentary to Councilmember O'Farrell and put it up on YouTube where it got a lot of comments from supportive neighbors.

Montgomery:

And I started realizing there were a lot of people that were concerned about this. And at the same time, crime was going up and the overdose deaths were happening at the lake.

Betancourt:

Five people died in the park in 2020, three from overdoses. [Overdose deaths spiked](#) across the country that year. In Los Angeles County, there were [nearly 50% more drug-related deaths](#) in the first few months of the pandemic compared to the same period the year before. And one study found that unhoused people were [generally 12 times more likely to die of an overdose](#) than the general population. But Queen says it's not only unhoused people who use drugs or die from them.

Queen:

It's one of those double standards. I smoke weed. Even when I had my apartment, I would do it there, but of course, doing it outside, I think, yeah, people became more aware and I think that was an anchor that they used to say, "Oh, these people don't care. They just want to break the law." But literally, there's people that are doing it in their homes, in their garages, in their cars, but because we're doing it in our ... Because to us, that was our home. Our tent was our home.

Betancourt:

As for Riley's claim that the camp brought more crime, City-Data reflects that there was an increase in crime, in and around the park, during the boom times of the encampment. According to an LA Times

analysis, [burglaries and aggravated assaults both increased significantly in 2020](#) compared to the decade average. And unhoused people were disproportionately the victims of assault in the park.

Bonin:

If there is a crime near an encampment, it gets reported and it gets immediately attributed to the encampment when it might be somebody preying on somebody in the encampment or it may be just adjacent and unrelated to the encampment.

Betancourt:

Here's Mike Bonin, the former councilmember from LA's West side.

Bonin:

It inevitably leads to, "Oh, okay, the solution to this, this is not a homelessness problem, this is a crime problem, therefore, the solution to this must be more police officers."

Betancourt:

As complaints about the Echo Park encampment piled up, the [police became more of a constant presence](#).

Queen:

They always had dark sunglasses on. As soon as they get out of the car, they would put their hand on the belt, on their weapon. To me, it's like saying, "I can use it if I want to."

Betancourt:

Nighttime was hardest.

Queen:

Helicopter always at night, always at night. You can't really sleep. It's LA PD because they would be flashing the lights. The helicopters, the cops coming in surrounding a tent, flashing lights and scaring the people.

Betancourt:

Queen found it hard to get enough rest and the stress wore her down.

Queen:

It meant I was grumpy the next day. I wasn't all the way together, literally no sleep. I was very upset most of the time. It took a massive toll on people, on their morale, on their spirit, on their physical.

Wall Street:

And a lot of people would pack up their tent and finally decided to go.

Betancourt:

Wall Street thinks this treatment was all part of a plan to reduce the population of the park.

Wall Street:

The more people that they got out of Echo Park, the less people that were there to fight for it.

Betancourt:

After the pandemic began, the Centers for Disease Control recommended that [unhoused encampments not be cleared](#) unless housing options were available. People displaced from camps could be cut off from services, and if they were sick, they could spread COVID-19. The mayor of Los Angeles, Eric Garcetti, had issued a directive to the city government that everyone living in Echo Park had to [be offered housing before they could be removed](#). Councilmember O'Farrell [promised the same thing](#). It looked like the city had actually heard Riley and his neighbors about what they wanted to happen. LAHSA outreach workers started showing up in the camp with more frequency, so did workers from [Urban Alchemy](#), a non-profit outreach group hired by Councilmember O'Farrell to supplement LAHSA's work.

Queen:

So at first, they started coming in very little days and very slowly and it was more of a friendly people around there like picking up trash, giving out coffee, giving out donuts. And then slowly, it became into like, "Oh, well we're going to sweep and you need to go here. You need to go to the PRKs."

Betancourt:

PRK stands for [Project Room Key](#). It was a new program to protect the most vulnerable unhoused people from COVID-19. Elderly people who were living outside or those with health conditions were being [offered hotel rooms](#) where they could ride out the pandemic. It was paid for with funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA. Camp residents had been asking the city to put them up somewhere safe for months, but it had been [hard to get a room and a lot of people were on waiting lists](#). But now Queen says suddenly rooms were being offered to everyone in the Echo Park Lake encampment.

Queen:

So right off the bat, to me, was like, "Why are all these people getting rooms when there's been a massive line since way back then?" So to me, it was just, right off the bat, noticed it as being tactical, being almost I want to say a chess move.

Denise Velasquez:

It all of a sudden became a priority. You got to visit every week, you got to visit every day.

Betancourt:

Denise Velasquez was an outrage worker at LAHSA during this time. She was one of the many workers the agency brought from all over the city, even paying them overtime to work on the weekends.

Velasquez:

I didn't understand it because they had so many teams from different areas go in and help. And so that was my other like, "Well, why are we rushing? What's going on? What's the rush?" Now I understand, they had an agenda.

Betancourt:

Denise says she never offered Project Room Key rooms to people who didn't qualify for them, but it wouldn't surprise her if others did, given the pressure put on them to get people out of the park. I also talked to Molly Rysman, [chief programs officer at LAHSA](#). She told me that encampment resolutions, as she called them, can go well.

Molly Rysman:

[Encampment resolution](#) can be done in a way where you're helping people get into a much more positive and healthy situation, where we're able to build trust with people where we have time to build those relationships where we can give people accurate information, so that we can help them make an informed choice and we can give them authentic offers of assistance. Echo Park was a unique situation and that it was driven by a variety of outside factors. LAHSA was not the lead in that effort. There was no service provider that was the lead in that effort, but I do think it's helpful to have somebody leading the effort who's really focused on the needs of the people in the encampment because a bazillion challenges come up when you're doing encampment resolution and it's good to be really people-focused when you're doing this so that you can address those challenges and you have to compromise and make changes and all sorts of things happen.

Betancourt:

You were talking about how it needs to be provider-led and it needs to be people-focused. So how was Echo Park Lake not those things?

Rysman:

I don't think I'm the best person to answer those questions. It was a city initiative. I think we can all say it was a city initiative and I think those are questions for the city.

Betancourt:

Councilmember O'Farrell declined my request for an interview, but a spokesperson told me that the park was closed, "Only once transitional housing placements were secured for every single person experiencing homelessness at Echo Park Lake." Mayor Garcetti's office never responded to my request for comment. Even before the park was emptied, there was debate about whether interim housing like [Project Room Key](#) rooms counts as housing. O'Farrell claimed the park residents were on the path to a better life. Some residents of the encampment believed the city was just getting them out of the way. Mike Bonin gave me his perspective.

Bonin:

There are so many people in Los Angeles who are angry and frustrated about encampments and they should be. Who the hell isn't doffed about the fact that tens of thousands of people are sleeping outdoors? But that manifests itself in an anger towards people who are unhoused and that lends itself to solutions that eventually get down to, "Let's just get them out of my sight."

Betancourt:

Riley, the organizer from Friends of Echo Park Lake, told me he wasn't angry at unhoused people in the park. He was angry at the city for failing to house them. But Mike says, in the context of dealing with a specific encampment, that nuance can get lost.

Bonin:

What often happens is government has a very short attention span. So if some people are saying, "Just get them the hell out of my sight," and some people are saying, "I want them out of my sight, but I want them housed," the first thing most elected officials are going to do is get them out of people's sight.

Betancourt:

Mike says no one official is responsible for homelessness and everything that causes it. By the time neighbors complain about an unhoused encampment and demand urgent action, the city has limited options for how to respond.

Bonin:

Most people who are housed probably don't perceive it this way, but basically, they are asking the police, the sanitation department, the city to use the power of the state to punish people who are unhoused, right? With a limited number of resources, with a limited number of dollars, the loudest refrain is strategies that inevitably punish people or threaten people or push them down further into poverty or into the criminal justice system. Instead of voices that are saying, "Spend more on jobs, on housing, on healthcare, on education. Spend more on mental health, on substance abuse recovery."

Betancourt:

In the early months of 2021, as the city went all out to offer interim housing to the residents of Echo Park Lake, word got around unhoused. People from all over the city came to the park [in the hopes of getting the same offer](#). From the city's perspective, the situation looked dire.

Bennett:

We knew that something was coming in the days leading up to it was obvious because there were so many outreach workers there. We were getting information from the inside like that, "Oh yeah, there's a big sweep that's going to happen."

Queen:

When we would look at each other's eyes, wherever you would go around the park, there was a sadness in everyone's eyes because we knew it was going to happen, but at the same time, we knew who was going to be the last ones. We knew that we were going to stay there. We were going to fight until the very end. And in that came a bittersweet solidarity, unification and it was almost like the feeling of Christmas. You know how Christmas, everybody wants to get together, everybody wants to be there for each other. It was like that. It's like when we decided as a community, the homeless encampments of Echo Park community, that no matter what happened, we would always look out for each other and we would fight for our home because that's the only home that we had.

Protesters:

This is what community looks like. [This is what community looks like](#).

Betancourt:

On March 24th when people at the camp got word that the [LAPD was preparing to close the park](#) and hundreds of protestors came to defend the Camp, Queen and Wall Street were moved by the outpouring of support.

Queen:

I saw a gathering of people that I have never seen in Echo Park other than the movements of Caesar Chavez. I saw [cultures come together](#). I saw businesses come out. I saw moms, grandmas, uncles, children come out.

Wall Street:

I remember seeing a poor girl, she was sobbing because she was being arrested and she probably had never been arrested before. And I remember yelling out to her, "You're a hero. You're a hero," because she was. She did everything she could to stand there with us and to fight. She wasn't a resident, but she got it that we were fighting for something special, community, and having the right to just have dignity as a homeless person. And that's why so many people were there because they understood that they're probably only a hospital bill or an accident away from being homeless themselves, so what are they going to do then? Where are they going to go? So I remember yelling to her, "You're a hero."

Betancourt:

A total of [187 people were arrested](#) during the protest, including [several journalists and legal observers](#).

Montgomery:

I had no idea the scale of what was going to happen.

Betancourt:

Riley walked down from his house and filmed some of the protest.

Montgomery:

I guess, yeah, I was pretty taken aback by that and just surprised that it had gotten to this point. If the city had done outreach and offered housing to people when there were only 10 tents in the park, that would've never have happened. It should have never been allowed to get to that point. And I said that over and over again. It should have never been allowed to get to that point.

Betancourt:

While the police were facing off with protestors, city contractors were on the other side of the park driving poles into the ground and connecting them with chain link fencing section by section. Reporter [Jonah Valdez](#) captured [this sound](#). Here's Ashley.

Bennett:

They're like, there's no way they're going to actually fence this whole thing off in one night. That can't happen. That's not humanly possible. They can't put up a fence around this whole place in a night.

Queen:

We got in there before they managed to close that little part off, but literally, by 3:00 in the morning, that fence was done.

Betancourt:

The night before, police had given the remaining residents of the camp 24 hours to leave. Queen and Wall Street, along with a handful of other camp residents spent that night inside the fence after everyone else went home.

Queen:

To me personally, the silence killed me. The silence hurt. A lot of fear. I felt a lot of fear of losing my house again. More than anything, I just felt very, very lost like, "What am I going to do now?"

Betancourt:

As the sky lightened, she could see that the police had blocked off all the exits from the fenced-in area. Anyone who came out wasn't allowed back in, ever. A crowd of protestors came back and huddled outside the fence, but by this point, there was nothing anyone could do to stop the eviction.

Mitch O'Farrell:

Good morning everyone. I am Los Angeles City Councilmember Mitch O'Farrell.

Betancourt:

That morning, Councilmember O'Farrell held [a press conference](#) on the street beside the park.

O'Farrell:

We have had a very successful housing operation that began in January. Since that time, including yesterday evening and this morning, we have housed 161 individuals who've been experiencing homelessness at Echo Park Lake.

Betancourt:

Later that day, he [addressed the city council](#) to explain why the park had been closed.

O'Farrell:

The months-long work to get people housed at Echo Park Lake precedes the temporary and necessary closure of the park facility so crews can begin extensive repairs. The repair work there includes lighting, plumbing, removal of hazardous material and repairs due to widespread vandalism. For anyone to convey that this is somehow a utopian existence, or as The LA Times was quoted in an article yesterday that, "The park has evolved into a commune-like society or that the environment is somehow nurturing," this couldn't be further from the truth. Here are the realities. The park has, in fact, devolved into a [dangerous, chaotic environment](#) for all users.

Betancourt:

O'Farrell went on to accuse the leaders of the encampment of charging people to live there and running a prostitution ring. Everyone I talked to from the camp told me those accusations are false. That night, Ayman Ahmed, one of the men who had founded the camp and another camp resident, David Busch-Lilly decided to be the last ones to resist. They sat down inside the fence and stayed there until police came in and arrested them. They were released shortly after. The park would stay closed to everyone for two months.

Bennett:

It's like I deal with a lot of guilt and feel like I could have done better in a lot of ways, been a better leader. I just remind myself that we were up against basically a militarized force like LAPD. There was no way that a peaceful community that was as small as we were was going to rival that. I just be myself up sometimes like, "Is there something that I could have done better? Is there a way that we could have actually preserved that space for that community and where will we build something like that again?"

Betancourt:

Ashley and other activists raised enough money to put some of the last residents of the camp up in motel rooms while they tried to figure out what to do next. Queen and Wall Street spent almost a month in their motel room. Queen became close with Ashley who helped her apply for a job at Ground Game LA and she got it. Thanks to her new income, Queen and Wall Street were able to get an apartment through a LAHSA-funded program called [Rapid Rehousing](#). They're among only a handful of former Echo Park Lake residents who ended up with permanent housing.

Queen:

Sometimes I have to stop myself from worrying too much because I'll be like, "Where are they? How are they? I wonder if they've eaten." And it sucks because we lost them. In every sense of the way, we lost them. And with everyone that we lost, a little part of us got lost as well. I feel very powerless because I don't know where half of my people are. I don't know how they're doing. I don't know how they're feeling. It's just I feel powerless and very sad.

Betancourt:

We'll talk more about what happened to the other residents of the camp in part two of this story. Queen was in and out of the hospital in the weeks after we spoke. She almost died from an internal infection, but she's better now and back home in their apartment. While she was in the hospital, she found out she and Wall Street are expecting a child, who's also doing fine.

Miller:

Coming up in part two of this episode, Mark talks to people living in hotel rooms as part of Project Room Key, where strict rules can make housing seem more like jail.

Project Roomkey Resident: Will:

The going notion seems in public's mind is, "Oh, they're taken care of. They're in the hotel. Everything's fine." They're not seeing the carcerality in the system because they haven't experienced it. They can't sense it. They can't smell it.

Miller:

Thanks to Mark Bettencourt for that story. For more information, toolkits and to download the interactive transcript for this episode, visit 70millionpod.com. 70 Million is an open-source podcast because we believe we are all part of the solution. We encourage you to use our episodes in supporting materials in your classrooms or organizations and anywhere they can make an impact. You may rebroadcast parts of or entire episodes of our five seasons without permission. Just please drop us a line, so we can keep track. 70 Million is made possible by a grant from the Safety and Justice Challenge at the MacArthur Foundation and is produced by LWC Studios. Monica Lopez is our editor. Paulina Velasco is

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