

# Evicting the Evicted

## *Five Misleading Rationales for Homeless Camp Evictions*

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*How the 2014 eviction of San Jose’s “Jungle” homeless camp follows a national trend of punishing the poor and popular deception*

THIS PAST DECEMBER San Jose evicted the residents of what was then called America’s largest homeless encampment – 68 acres of creek-side property inhabited by some 300 men, women and children residing in tents, shanties, tree houses and underground adobe dwellings. The clearance of Silicon Valley’s “Jungle,” as its residents called it, is but the latest in an ongoing strand of evictions of mass encampments across the US – whereby local police forces along with legions of public work employees forcibly remove those who have already been evicted from the private spaces of the real estate market.

In California, Los Angeles’ Arroyo Seco, Ontario’s Camp Hope, Sacramento’s American River, Stockton’s Slough, Albany’s Bulb, and Fresno’s Tent-City District have all been evicted in the last five years. Over this same period, Seattle’s Nickelsville, Lakewood’s Tent City, and Rhode Island’s City of Hope and Camp Runamuck are just a few of the largest camps across the nation to face eviction. All of these encampments had over a hundred residents at certain points, and in some cases far more than the Jungle, before being dispersed

into the familiar and less spectacular smaller camps that have long dotted the US urban landscape.

There is nothing exceptional about the Jungle in its existence or its eviction. Mass homeless encampments are common fixtures of US cities and their evictions follow nearly identical scripts. As the media has its field day with the pornographic poverty of squalor in the midst of opulence that the US is so prone to produce, it is important to examine San Jose’s Jungle in relation to the serial production of mass encampments and the fallacious justifications of eviction that eventually uproot them.

### **Eviction Mitigates Environmental Damage**

First, evictions of large camps are always deemed necessary by city officials to protect the environment. In San Jose, the city was faced with a \$100,000 fine by the State Department of Fish and Wildlife if it failed to clear encampments along Coyote Creek by mid-December. However, such “sweeps” rarely redress environmental damage posed by homeless habitation beyond the initial cleanup. In most cases,



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*Photos courtesy of the author.*

campers simply return after sweeps, as has been repeatedly the case in Los Angeles, Stockton, Ventura, and even the Jungle, which experienced eviction only two years ago.

When specific sites are successfully eradicated of camps, they come at great expense and brute force. In Fresno the city has rolled out miles of chain link fence in a systematic policy of clearance and dispersal. Private lots long abandoned have been fenced at the city's expense and a dedicated "Homeless Oriented Police" force, or HOP squad, is charged with constant monitoring of street-based people. In a sad turn of irony, the city's assault on homeless camps has resulted in particular environmental damages of its own, including the razing of miles of bougainvillea along a major thoroughfare's median that was hiding the homeless and the uprooting of trees around a popular campsite that provided shade from Fresno's brutal summer sun. Albany's vigilant police monitoring of the Bayside waterfront park that had served as a homeless camp for over two decades has similarly prevented the re-establishment of a permanent encampment since an eviction last April. Yet overall, environmental impacts are not resolved but simply moved around. This point is especially salient in San Jose where the Jungle is merely the largest camp in a much longer archipelago of 247 tent cities containing some 1,230 people along Santa Clara's waterways. While the \$7,000 investment in an eight-foot high steel fence and several boulders to seal the site may restore the natural habitat of the former campsite, it will be at the cost of increased environmen-

tal degradation further upstream where the evicted will relocate.

### **Eviction Cleanses Unsanitary Conditions**

In San Jose, unsanitary conditions were directly linked to environmental impacts, as human feces and trash were polluting waterways, but evictions of large camps are also justified as a necessary step in improving the health and wellbeing of the homeless. As Ray Bramson, San Jose's Homeless Response Manager repeated over and over to the media leading up to the eviction, "encampments represent an unsafe, unsanitary and a dangerous place for people to be."

Unfortunately, evictions more often exacerbate rather than improve the unsanitary conditions of the evicted – pushing them further from clean water, recycling centers and toilets. An alternative would be to provide access to sanitation, a solution widely recognized by the hundreds of US foundations operating across the Global South that seems to be lost to us here in the US. In November, Jungle residents protested for better sanitary provisions, in an event eerily similar to those occurring in the *favelas* of Rio and slums of Mumbai, shouting "No Potty, No Peace" in front of three porta-potties provided by the city. Not only was the 1:100 person to toilet ratio grossly inadequate, they were only open between 8:00 am and 4:00 pm. After hours, residents were encouraged to use city-provided sanitary bags. Similar to the rapidly increasing ordinances criminalizing the provision of food

to the poor, it was feared that sanitation would "enable homelessness," serve as a hidden outpost for drug-use and be seen as a further sign of tolerance towards illegal camping.

Again, restrictive policies to sanitation are not unique to the Jungle. In Fresno, city officials threatened a community group when they provided dumpsters and a porta-potty to its tent city district. When a United Nation's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights visited Sacramento's Safe Ground encampment and discovered similar conditions, the city was found in violation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights for denying access to safe water and its policy of evictions. As the UN official had to make embarrassingly clear to the Mayor: "Because evacuation of the bowels and bladder is a necessary biological function and because denial of opportunities to do so in a lawful and dignified manner can both compromise human dignity and cause suffering, such denial, in some cases, could amount to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment." Far from a solution to unsanitary conditions, San Jose's eviction is likely a violation of international law.

### **Eviction Eradicates Unsafe Environments**

The Jungle was not a safe place. Yet, it was considered a safer option among limited alternatives according to its residents and street-level service providers. According to long-time Jungle resident Robert Aguirre, police officers and social workers had been sending people to the Jungle for years: a widespread

practice of poverty containment in many US cities. While living in the homeless camps of Fresno for two months of research, I witnessed police and parole officers informing homeless residents of the camps in the same breath as the shelter. They pointed to the plentiful donations, food and services that inevitably accumulate around such concentrations of poverty. I also witnessed homeless people being given orders to move to the camps under threat of citation or arrest. While the hidden spots in sleepy residential neighborhoods or lighted storefronts where these men and women were first evicted may have been safer from the tent-burnings, rapes and robberies that were all too common at the camps, they were not safe from the hassling of police.

The Jungle's eviction will likely only increase the insecurity and violence experienced by the evicted. From the interviews I've conducted with 63 residents of large encampments across the west coast, the primary reason people "chose" to live at such sites as opposed to their limited alternatives is that "safety in numbers" guards them from attacks by other homeless people, pestering by police, dangers of the shelter and harassment of the housed. Yes, the Jungle was a violent and dangerous place. The sad reality is that it was likely safer than the places the evicted now inhabit.

### **Shelter is an Adequate Alternative to Camps**

San Jose officials tried to convince the media and public that the opening of the regularly scheduled 250 winter shelter beds would somehow relieve a permanent eviction in a city with more than 5,000 unsheltered individuals. In a similar response, the small city of Albany, California, which does not have a single homeless shelter, opened a set of prefab buildings crowded with bunk beds adjacent to its encampment to demonstrate the city's commitment to sheltering the victims of eviction. On the first weekend of its opening, not a single bed was filled as campers found its accommodations comparable to the county jail or state penitentiary. As one formerly incarcerated resident of Fresno's Village of Hope described, "The wake-up time and chow-time, same thing as being in prison. You don't really sit down with family or friends, more like a chow hall. The bed check times, checking in your names at security, being served instead of takin' care of



Evictions of an encampment in Fresno

yourself. A lot of times it feels like bein' back in prison.”

When asked why they “chose” to camp as opposed to other alternatives, camp residents referred to the shelter in nearly every case, but rarely ever to its inaccessibility. Instead they referred to the material and moral benefits of the camps. In the Jungle there were no wake-up times and curfews. Dinners were prepared fresh over fires and in the company of neighbors. Residents could remain with their pets, sleep with their spouses, keep their belongings, and maintain their last refuge of privacy.

### **Housing Provision Will Absorb the Evicted**

Finally, San Jose officials claimed to have taken a “housing first approach” to eviction in providing two-year rental vouchers to 200 Jungle residents. This incomplete excuse is the fifth fallacy of the Jungle’s eviction and is another common strategy of city officials to distract attention from the social suffering wrought by their evictions.

The fact that 60 voucher holders in San Jose’s Jungle, more than one-quarter of recipients, could not find housing even with government guaranteed rent, is an embarrassing indictment to city, state and federal policies that subsidize wealthier homeowners at the expense of poorer renters. Furthermore, as other cities such as L.A. and San Francisco move towards coordinated assessments to distribute limited housing to those most in need, one must wonder if San Jose’s blanket-provision of vouchers to Jungle residents is the most efficient and just use of resources or merely a strategy to reduce the public relations bruising of eviction. When federal stimulus funding was used by officials in Fresno to clear a camp that had given its Mayor consistently bad press, many elderly and disabled homeless who had been living in shelters for years were furious to discover that the often younger, self-sufficient, and illegally dwelling homeless were given free housing.

The housing vouchers given to Jungle residents in San Jose surpass the handouts that have accompanied previous evictions. It was a far better shake than given to those at Albany’s Bulb who each received \$3,000 checks after signing contracts promising never to return, or the more frequent rental supplements that typically

span a few months. Yet in the end, housing provisions, if they come at all, never cover everyone, and all too often, not long enough. In San Jose, police evicted scores on December 4, and countless others left beforehand in anticipation of eviction. These people were not living in the Jungle “by choice,” but because they had few places to go. They have now been pushed into more remote, dangerous, and unsanitary jungles along Coyote Creek.

### **Coda: The Roots and Implications of Mass Encampments**

The last time America’s tent cities captured the same degree of national and international media attention was in 2009, when they were vividly portrayed as creatures of the recession: re-born Hoovervilles for the laid off and foreclosed. This time the headlines project a mirror image: “Struggling in the shadow of Silicon Valley wealth” (*USA Today*) and “Hanging Out With the Tech Haves-Nots at a Silicon Valley Shantytown” (*Mother Jones*). The Jungle was lodged in the heart of the venture-capital drenched Silicon Valley, 10 miles from the headquarters of the world’s most profitable corporation, Apple, and the eviction came just one day before the Labor Department announced that hiring growth was at its best pace since 1999. While economic booms and busts drive the media’s attention towards large encampments, encampments of this scale persist.

The media and city officials have done better this round at connecting the housing question with the homeless question. As capital and new tech workers poured into Silicon Valley after the recession, the average apartment rent within 10 miles of San Jose reached \$2,633 in September 2014, from \$1,761 two years earlier. The media and local officials have also pointed out that since 2010 San Jose’s funds for affordable housing have been cut by a third by federal and state sources. Nearly every article and statement by officials has cited the stunning rent inflation, criticized the reductions in state and federal monies for affordable housing, and highlighted the regional dynamics constraining city action. Yet, while the diagnoses of mass encampments may be improving, the prescription of eviction premised on these five fallacious justifications perpetuates just the same: wreaking havoc on the lives of the marginalized, normalizing their criminalization, and dispersing a visible political and social problem into the shadows of comfortable ignorance. P<sup>2</sup>