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METH, DEATH AND ABUSE: INSIDE THE PRIVATE SECURITY FORCES PATROLLING THE HOMELESS

LAUREN HEPLER, CALMATTERS.

Wendy Powitzky thought she'd finally found a way off the street in Orange County.

The former hairdresser had spent years sleeping in her car and parks around Anaheim, near the suburban salons where she used to work. One day a social worker told Powitzky about an old piano shop recently converted into a shelter.

She just had to clear security to reach her new twin bed.

That's where guards at the taxpayer-funded shelter groped and strip-searched her and several of her neighbors, and left them in constant fear of eviction, according to a lawsuit filed on behalf of eight former Orange County shelter residents.

"It was going to be my saving grace," Powitzky said of the Anaheim shelter. "It was more unsafe."

As California's homeless population spiked nearly 40% in the past five years, the growth has been accompanied by a boom in private security. Governments, nonprofits and businesses are increasingly turning to hired guards to triage homelessness, opening a new front in the state's housing crisis — one ripe for violence and civil rights issues, but thin on accountability and state oversight.

More than a dozen recent legal proceedings and public contract disputes reviewed by CalMatters suggest that, rather than ensuring safety, guards can compound already dangerous and chaotic situations.

Shelter residents in multiple Southern California cities have alleged in lawsuits that they were raped or sexually assaulted by shelter guards, including a Los Angeles case where a guard was sentenced to prison after a homeless woman complained of repeated abuse. In Sausalito, people living at a publicly funded tent city said in court that contract workers dealt drugs and harassed women. After a homeless woman in L.A. was stabbed to death by a fellow shelter

resident, her family sued a guard for negligence in an ongoing lawsuit, alleging that he remained at an onsite office despite loud screams during a long attack.

No state agency publicly tracks how many guards work with homeless people, let alone what happens when things go wrong. The California agency that regulates guards — the Bureau of Security and Investigative Services — denied a CalMatters public records request for complaints and reports of violence involving guards and homeless people.

Several lawsuits, meanwhile, allege that security companies, shelter operators and government regulators have failed to properly train and oversee guards, who in some cases are paid just over minimum wage and struggling to stay housed themselves.

"Private security is a lot cheaper than cops," said Paul Boden, executive director of activist group the Western Regional Advocacy Project. "And a lot less regulated."

Around the world, economic researchers have found that private security reliance tends to rise along with income inequality and fear of crime. The industry grew nearly 20% in California from 2010 to 2022, the most recent state data shows, to more than 301,000 licensed guards — a force that outnumbered sworn law enforcement officers roughly 4 to 1.

In recent decades, court rulings have put some limits on local governments' and police's ability to clear encampments and interact with homeless people. Private guards are bound by different rules.

The legal complaints against security guards underscore bigger flaws in the state's approach to homelessness. Guards and other front-line workers often aren't trained to handle complex social issues. And

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The O Lot Safe Sleeping site at Balboa Park in San Diego on March 22, 2024. Photo by Kristian Carreon for CalMatters (Kristian Carreon/CalMatters)

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COALITION ON HOMELESSNESS

The STREET SHEET is a project of the Coalition on Homelessness. The Coalition on Homelessness organizes poor and homeless people to create permanent solutions to poverty while protecting the civil and human rights of those forced to remain on the streets.

Our organizing is based on extensive peer outreach, and the information gathered directly drives the Coalition's work. We do not bring our agenda to poor and homeless people: they bring their agendas to us.

STREET SHEET STAFF

The Street Sheet is a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness. Some stories are collectively written, and some stories have individual authors. But whoever sets fingers to keyboard, all stories are formed by the collective work of dozens of volunteers, and our outreach to hundreds of homeless people.

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Street Sheet is published and distributed on the unceded ancestral homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples. We recognize and honor the ongoing presence and stewardship of the original people of this land. We recognize that homelessness can not truly be ended until this land is returned to its original stewards.

ORGANIZE WITH US

HOUSING JUSTICE WORKING GROUP TUESDAYS @ NOON

The Housing Justice Workgroup is working toward a San Francisco in which every human being can have and maintain decent, habitable, safe, and secure housing. This meeting is in English and Spanish and open to everyone! Email mcarrera@cohsf.org to get involved!

HUMAN RIGHTS WORKING GROUP WEDNESDAYS @12:30

The Human Rights Workgroup has been doing some serious heavy lifting on these issues: conducting direct research, outreach to people on the streets, running multiple campaigns, developing policy, staging direct actions, capturing media attention, and so much more. All those down for the cause are welcome to join! Email lpierce@cohsf.org

EVERYONE IS INVITED TO JOIN OUR WORKING GROUP MEETINGS!

WHAT IS A HOME?

INTI GONZALEZ

The reality of the war in Gaza was such a shock to me, especially since my country is an equal contributor to the violence unfolding there. It made me go out and protest, learn and get involved like never before. It was hard, even scary, to make that initial step to help carry such immense pain, but doing so allowed me to learn more than I ever thought I would about myself.

These people who had homes that were made up of communities, cultures and personal spaces are having everything taken away from them through racist colonization at its worst. I felt this pain and realized that it was familiar to what I felt in my own struggles with homelessness.

America has been at war for nearly its entire existence. As a country our history is riddled with colonizing behavior within and outside of our borders. America itself was born from the colonization of this land from the Native Americans. According to The National Alliance to End Homelessness, Native Americans are the second most likely to experience homelessness, behind Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, and ahead of Black Americans.

In my home, the Bay Area, many can no longer stay without struggle, homelessness or prison. Wealth and stability is made difficult to reach; therefore segregation and colonization by richer, mostly caucasian people seeps in and destroys lives. If you have no money, you have no value. It doesn't matter if your community has lived here for generations.

I left my family home in 2021 to be a caretaker in exchange for housing in Richmond. I knew the housing was unstable because any day the woman I was caring for could pass from old age. After one year, I started having confrontations with the woman's daughter. Returning to a toxic home life with my family simply wasn't an option. I'd rather live on the streets.

I needed more time to find affordable housing. So I ended up moving to a cold garage on the secluded hills of El Sobrante. I spent six months there. Six months as legally homeless. What a stressful time that was. To this day it still amazes me that I wasn't even experiencing close to the worst of it like many people on the streets

who are struggling with mental and physical disabilities. Some people on the streets are literally dying. Like people in war, or a genocide, where terror is their daily reality until a bomb or a bullet full of hatred takes their lives, homes and people.

Currently, I live in a warehouse in Oakland that is housing 200 artists, musicians and circus performers. I see art along every hallway. I feel the culture of the East Bay in my home and the people who live in it. It reminds me of the stories I would hear about what the Bay used to be like. The music and creativity, the community and culture. My home is one of the last affordable housing communities in the area. There were many more just a few years ago, but they got shut down. I love my home and my community. I love this city. Sadly, Oakland often feels like a forgotten place, which segregation has greatly assisted with. Like the war on Gaza, It's easier to colonize and abuse and pretend a problem doesn't exist when borders of any kind, invisible or otherwise, exist. I see the corruption and hardship every day but I can tell that the beautiful people of Oakland are what keep the city alive. But they are leaving too, the great majority of them not by choice. Lack of affordable housing continues to be the leading cause of homelessness. If they don't leave then they will be forced to the streets, an extremely stressful and dangerous environment that leads many to drugs and crime, which in turn leads them to death or imprisonment.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, the U.S. accounts for 20% of the world's total prison population. We have by far the highest incarceration rate in the world, currently detaining more than 2 million people. African Americans and Native Americans lead all other racial and ethnic groups in incarceration rates. Even in what many would call a stable home, I still feel the instability. Every time a unit empties—which usually houses three to six people—

If we want to change things, we must realize that we should take responsibility to effect change. Telling a small percent of millionaires and billionaires to change will never work. We ourselves must change.

the landlords are allowed to renovate it and bring the rent up to unaffordable value. COVID-19 job loss managed to wipe out a lot of my building neighbors, and it still

continues to do so today. A big reason is because of the overwhelming rent debts.

I went to the moving sale of one of my neighbors, a very nice and creative person. Being the only one in a four-room unit he owed \$30,000. Like many, he had trouble with his work and finding tenants to help him pay the rent. Difficulty

sustaining units financially when multiple people move out is a very real threat.

Two women came in and bought a table saw for their woodworking projects. They told us how they were also moving out since they had a rent debt of \$80,000.

Keep in mind that this is just one of a variety of tools being used to drive us out. These situations make me fear that my home may soon be next.

My homeless neighbor has been trying with no success to find affordable housing for him and his son.

I had walked past a trailer with a mother of three kids, the youngest one had got to be around 4.

I had visited my other homeless neighbor and saw her with a pained look on her face. She had just lost another relative to drugs.

I gave a hug to a man who wept because he had just gotten out of prison and had nowhere to go, no money for food, and had been previously dealing with family and drug issues.

What I'm talking about is really just a small fraction of the injustice that happens at America's hands, in our country and in all the counties we have affected and continue to affect.

So I genuinely ask, what are we doing wrong? Why can all the world's biggest "criminals" do literally whatever they want because of their wealth? Why can they rob us of all that we have,

including our lives? And been allowed to do so since our country began? How can this happen when the great majority of us do not want this?

We need to question the core issue of this problem to help not just eliminate homelessness but all other legally supported human injustices, because really it's all coming from the same place: A broken system where it's easy for billionaires to exist while the poor lay on the streets, where racism is systemic and war—another form of racism—is more funded than basic education and health care.

A system run by corrupt people who are also governing a nation that has given up its power to the corrupt.

If we want to change things, we must realize that we should take responsibility to effect change. Telling a small percent of millionaires and billionaires to change will never work. We ourselves must change.

Only together can we solve any and every world problem. I want to see a real change in my lifetime, and I believe it will happen, and I will fight till it does—for all our fellow human brothers and sisters, no matter the gender, pigment of skin, or culture. No matter the distance and borders that seem to separate us.

What is a home?

A home is a place that I can call my own.

A place where I can be without the fear of removal.

A place for my family and friends and my community to

take root and to flourish.

A place where I know that as generation

after generation

comes along,

We will never have to be forcefully separated or displaced.

Only then will I call it my true home.

Inti Gonzalez is currently working as an Art and Organizing consultant for Tiny Village Spirit, a nonprofit that builds housing for homeless people. She is studying to be a musician and activist. Her work can be found at intigonzaez.com.

ESSENTIAL ITEMS OFTEN SWEEP AWAY

As the City conducts encampment resolutions, advocates for unhoused San Franciscans emphasize the importance of ensuring that items essential to an individual's well-being are not lost, impounded or discarded. Loss of these items can make it harder for them to exit homelessness and worsen the problem. Following are examples of these essential items.

VITAL RECORDS

Lost identification and vital records can take several months to replace and are often required to obtain housing and employment. Their loss can cause significant delays in someone's ability to exit homelessness.

- Identification, including drivers' license, passport and other government-issued ID
- Social Security card and Social Security-issued income and verification letters
- Birth certificate

ITEMS NECESSARY FOR EMPLOYMENT

People who have recently become homeless for the first time are more likely to become chronically homeless if they lose their job and source of income.

- Work uniforms or other work clothing or shoes
- Work tools including for trades (e.g. wrenches, sound equipment, food delivery totes)
- Social Security card

ITEMS OF MEDICAL NECESSITY

Many people rely on anti-psychotic and bipolar medication to help moderate their thoughts and behavior. Schizophrenia affects approximately 1% of the population, but it is estimated to affect 20% of the homeless population.

- Prescription and over-the-counter medications, including those used for mental health, substance abuse disorder, cardiac diabetic, allergy and other medical health
- Wheelchairs, walkers, canes, compression socks, clean bandages

SURVIVAL GEAR

The ideal temperature for sleep is 65°F to 68°F. Temperatures above 75° and below 54° can disrupt sleep. Lack of sleep can cause and/or exacerbate physical and mental health issues, and make it harder for an individual to exit homelessness.

Proper sleep requires protection from wind, rain, dampness, sunburn, heat and particularly overnight cold temperatures.

- Blankets or sleeping bags
- Other items to stay warm and dry overnight

FOOD AND WATER

In San Francisco, there are not many accessible public bathrooms that are open 24/7 nor are there adequate public sources for clean drinking water.

RESOLUTION ON SEIZURE OF HOMELESS PEOPLE'S PROPERTY THE WORKS

The board that monitors the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH) will draft a statement demanding that the City of San Francisco stop illegally seizing unhoused people's property and dwellings.

On September 5, the Homelessness Oversight Commission agreed to come up with such a resolution by their next meeting in October to present to officials at multiple City agencies. These departments include those that comprise the Healthy Streets Operation Center (HSOC) including the Homelessness, Police, Public Works and Emergency Management departments, among others.

The Coalition on Homelessness proposed that the commission urge them not to seize and destroy items essential for unhoused folks' survival, such as identification, work tools, medical supplies and mobility devices. The Coalition, which is the homeless advocacy organization that also publishes Street Sheet, announced this proposal at a press conference at City Hall preceding the commission's meeting.

This comes in the wake of the City's ramped-up sweeps of street encampments and RV communities after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that their removal by local governments is not unconstitutional. Shortly after the ruling on *Grants Pass v. Johnson*, Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered California state workers to sweep encampments and encouraged cities to do likewise. Mayor London Breed also promised to be "very aggressive and assertive in moving encampments, which may even include criminal penalties" at a recent candidate debate.

This forceful approach ordered by Mayor Breed was captured by local media outlets that tagged along with police in recent enforcement efforts. The San Francisco Chronicle photographed one Mission District street dweller being arrested and ticketed by five officers after he replied "no" to one who asked, "You don't want shelter, right?" The San Francisco Standard videotaped another encampment resident on the Central Freeway clinging onto his tent in vain as San Francisco Police Department officers and San Francisco Public Works crew members took it away.

The Central Freeway incident was just one of countless incidents where Public Works staff did not "bag and tag" property as per department policy. Instead, staff were seen seizing tents and other survival gear from unhoused residents. At the press conference, Coalition executive director Jennifer Friedenbach stressed that the department is clearly violating its own rules.

"They're never supposed to take property out of people's hands," Friedenbach said. "And if someone's not there and it's unattended, they're supposed to bag and tag it. So they really shouldn't be throwing away items that are valuable to folks."

These operations also target owners of the seized belongings for criminalization—especially when they're Black or brown, Dyan Ruiz, a representative of the Race & Equity in All Planning coalition, noted. Black and Latinx people are five times and two times more likely, respectively, to experience homelessness than white people in San Francisco. Lately, she said, an increase of sweeps have also led to an increase in police checking for outstanding warrants.

"You can be cited, arrested, given a one-way ticket out of the city, and swept under the rug not by a broom but a police baton," Ruiz said. "Homelessness means an increased exposure to law enforcement, and this disproportionately gets people of color."

The Homelessness Oversight Commission meeting, upon advice from the Homelessness Oversight Commission, upon advice from communication to City departments, "whereas" and "be it resolved."

Commissioner Sharky LaRocca said the City doesn't always communicate. In particular, he noted that the notice posted near encampments gives residents minutes to collect their belongings.

"Whatever the case may be, it's important to protect people from the essential items that can exacerbate the existing problems," he said.

In the meeting's public comment period, he praised the commission for its transparency and collaboration, especially in providing clear communication and paperwork.

"If we can't get HSH and Public Works to coordinate documents, how can we get the City to do better?"

Meanwhile on San Francisco's streets, the population also faces seizure of property. The Coalition's presser also highlighted that, to the residents, the San Francisco Police Department has been displacing families and evicted RV dwellers from the Central Freeway Road.

Lucas Chamberlain, who has lived in a tent, said residents were assured that tents would be moved to a safe parking site or housed. Instead, he said, police officers to ticket them for illegal parking, leaving them without any shelter.

"RVs are low-cost homes for many people," he said. "Why would the City force us to live in tents when we already have a home?"



OF PROPERTY IN

TJ JOHNSTON

ight Commission unanimously decided at the
m the City Attorney's Office, to draft this com-
ments in the form of a resolution, replete with
olved" statements.

guana told his fellow members that he heard that
omply with its own rules and policies on sweeps.
at City workers don't always give 72 hours' prior
pments or, upon arrival, allow residents 30 min-
gings.

be, it is not helpful or productive to separate
items," he said. "That's going to perpetuate or
problem."

omment period, Coalition organizer River Beck
or its effort to push for City departments' col-
preserving unhoused people's ID and other vital

HSOC to allow folks to retain their identifying
get them housing?" Beck told the panel.

isco's west side, another segment of the homeless
zure of their most valuable possession—their RVs.
also included vehicularly housed folk. According
Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency has
on wheels from streets along Lake Merced. SFMTA
from Winston Drive in August, then again on Zoo

has been living in an RV for five years, said resi-
they wouldn't have to move until the City found
sing. Instead, SFMTA has deployed enforcement
r parking more than 72 hours. RV dwellers also
impounded if they don't register them on time,
y shelter.

that come free to the City," Chamberlain said.
ce me and my neighbors into street homelessness
ome?"



CRIMINALIZATION WON'T MAKE HOMELESSNESS GO AWAY

JACK BRAGEN

Some fundamental changes in how we do things in the U.S. are going to be necessary, irrespective of how much the rich people and the militant ultraconservatives might oppose this. The general public must have a reasonable ability to acceptably live, or else the entire fabric of society will disintegrate. The poor people need to have an acceptable means of existing. The disabled and/or unemployable people must not be put to death, no matter how much linguistic or cranial perfume you'd like to add to this atrocity to try and obscure its reality and its heinousness.

When I said people are "being put to death", this is not imaginary nor is it much of an embellishment. The way society currently deals with unhoused people causes many to die under horrible circumstances.

The recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that allows governments to ban sleeping in a public place sets a precedent for our entire government, broadcasting it is OK to do anything you want to an unhoused person, and you can get away with it. And it is a stinking shame that the rest of the U.S. government is embracing this and is following suit with more laws to make homelessness into a crime. This reeks to high heaven.

The current direction of criminalizing homelessness shows that if you don't have enough money to live on, you will ultimately be incarcerated. Once incarcerated, the way people are treated in jail will destroy people's souls first, then their bodies.

People must not be eliminated from society and thrown out because someone believes they are unfit, unable to keep up, too poor or too different. Human beings are an abundant, but corporations treat them as expendable.

Additionally, anyone who appears as though they can think for themselves becomes a target and will not be able to keep their job.

Our economy would improve to a more robust one if we give jobs to people who are impoverished rather than jailing them. Some kind of minimal housing can also be created for the new working class that I propose, or automobiles could be modified to allow living in them. If you have a job, but don't make enough money to rent a unit, then you should be allowed to sleep in your vehicle.

Times are changing, and many people might assert there is less of everything to go around, but I disagree. The excess in how people live disproves the notion that our society can't afford to give people sufficient room and board, and not punish or dispose of them just because they ended up at the bottom—or just because.

In my proposal, I'm still talking about an unfair situation. But if the architects of society could squeeze in a bit more humaneness, they might discover that people who are believed to be a problem are actually a solution.

Our entire government is moving towards fascism regarding how the unhoused community is being destroyed. This is inexcusable, yet it is being done because politicians believe they can.

This attitude can't last.

Ultimately, I have faith that justice will prevail, and we can build a more accepting and fair culture, though it would take a long time. I hope we can once again live in a tolerant and prosperous world.

But how many people must die before this happens?

Whether it's city and county mayors, state governors or any official at all levels or government, they are in on this collective atrocity. I do not need to name names here.

We see some militancy in objecting to another Trump presidency. But for those at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder, there is far too little empathy.

Untreated mental illness is not the cause of most homelessness. The lack of opportunities to earn a living, and the unwillingness to help those who just can't keep pace, to me, seem like the causes of homelessness— and people's attitudes toward those who are unable to keep up don't help.

People's Park is gone. Ability to sleep somewhere when there is no other place to go is gone. Lives? Also gone, and the victims get blamed. We can't accept this. Today, they might not come for you, me or most people we know, but eventually they will come.

And they'll come for more.

Jack Bragen lives in Martinez, California.

METH, DEATH AND ABUSE CONTINUED

LAUREN HEPLER,
CALMATTERS.

continued from page 2...

despite public officials who criticize homeless people for rejecting shelter, some unhoused people say shelters and city-run encampments can be worse than the street.

More political pressure is on the horizon. This spring, the U.S. Supreme Court will rule on whether clearing encampments when there is no shelter available violates the Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. Donald Trump's presidential campaign includes a plan to "relocate" homeless people from cities, arresting those who refuse and sending others to large tent cities. In California, a bipartisan statewide bill would make it easier to sweep encampments and ticket or move people off the street.

As crackdowns loom, homeless advocates argue that pouring money into stopgaps such as private security and temporary shelters — rather than permanent housing — will breed more problems.

"You put people in power over incredibly vulnerable people who are dependent for their very place to live," said Minouche Kandel, a staff attorney for American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. "It's a setup for abuse of power."

The Bureau of Security and Investigative Services said it has received 20,475 total private security complaints since 2019, but that it has no way to search for how many involved unhoused people.

"The Bureau looks into every complaint it receives, and when determining if a violation has occurred, the Bureau relies on facts and information obtained during the course of an investigation," the agency said in a statement.

Former shelter residents like Powitzky are the first to note that there can be very real security concerns associated with homelessness. It isn't easy, she said, for people who have struggled with trauma, constant stress and sometimes addiction or mental illness to live in close quarters with limited privacy.

That's why she was initially reassured by the uniformed guards at the front door of Anaheim's La Mesa shelter in 2019.

One night when Powitzky attempted to enter the shelter with her adult son, a guard approached after she cleared the metal detector and told her to put her arms up. The guard proceeded to "rub her hands all over" Powitzky's breasts, she said in the lawsuit, making her son "uncomfortable watching his mother get touched in this manner." Powitzky didn't complain for fear of eviction.

Later that same month, Powitzky said another shelter guard forced her to expose her breasts in front of male guards and other residents. More invasive searches where guards "inappropriately rubbed" her body followed, she said in the lawsuit, even after she did complain.

"I honestly just felt like they wanted to get people out of there — 'You're going to do what we want, or you're going to get out of here,'" Powitzky told CalMatters. "It's a horrible way to run a situation for people that are already having problems with their life."

The shelter was built by the city of Anaheim and run by the nonprofit Illumination Foundation, which then contracted with L.A.-based security company Protection America. The foundation did not respond to multiple requests for comment about how much they paid the guards, or the allegations by residents. In response to the ongoing lawsuit, the foundation and the city of Anaheim said in court filings that security searches were a city requirement at the shelter, but that neither party "can be held vicariously liable for alleged sexual battery" by guards.

The La Mesa shelter was shuttered in 2022 as part of a plan to focus on and expand another city shelter, Anaheim spokesperson Mike Lyster said in a statement. Protection America and Orange County declined to comment. The security company denied the allegations in a January court filing.

"We require high standards for our shelters and expect security to be done with compassion and respect," Lyster said in the statement. "The issues raised here were taken seriously and investigated. We stand by our shelter operator's work and procedures at La Mesa."

In addition to the searches, Powitzky said in the lawsuit that it was impossible to work her way out of the shelter; she lost two jobs due to scheduling issues with a strict curfew. She left in early 2020 when COVID hit, not wanting to get stuck inside with shelter staff and guards who, the lawsuit alleged, appeared to lack appropriate training.

"I'm still in limbo. I sleep in my car at night," Powitzky said in the interview. "I will never go to a shelter again."

ENCAMPMENT WARS

On the first sunny morning after days of tent-thrashing rain on Skid Row, a downtown Los Angeles native and longtime activist known as General Dogon (given name Steve Richardson) is rallying the neighborhood. Between taking orders for new sleeping bags financed by an online fundraiser, the Los Angeles Community Action Network organizer points out the security guards that dot the streets around him.

Just around the corner was where, three decades earlier, Dogon saw the first of what he called "the red shirts" — uniformed, armed private guards hired by a local tax-funded

business group charged with cleaning up downtown. He's been fighting them ever since.

California's private security industry has existed for more than a century, but in 1994 state lawmakers granted the business groups — formally known as Business Improvement Districts, or BIDs — a right to spend public money on private security. Dogon had just gotten back from serving a long prison sentence and was living in a nearby residential hotel when he started to hear stories that turned into class-action lawsuits.

"They was jacking up homeless people, taking their tents, pushing them down the street," he recalled. "They were so bad, we was getting complaints from drug dealers that they was taking the drug dealers' stuff."

Dogon had a front-row seat for court battles in the 1990s and 2000s that added some checks to prevent BIDs and their guards from harassing people and destroying belongings.

But with California now home to a record 181,000 homeless residents, tension on public streets is hitting another high. And when it comes to private security, BIDs were just the beginning.

Guards still patrol many property-tax-funded downtown districts. Cities are also directly entering into contracts with security companies and nonprofits to patrol encampments or other public areas. Some businesses and residents hire their own guards, frustrated by property crime and what they consider a lack of police responsiveness.

For security companies, it all adds up to surging demand from clients who increasingly expect them to replicate law enforcement, complete with guns, body cams and pricey liability insurance, said Robert Simpson, owner of Fresno County Private Security. It's a far cry from earlier eras of "observe and report" security, he said, when guards were trained to call police for social issues or more heated conflicts.

"Now if we make that phone call, they may show up two, three days later," said Simpson, whose company was sued after a guard shot a homeless man in what the guard described as self-defense. "We're navigating what is being presented to us."

Some security companies advertise "transient eviction" or other services to "control and manage any homeless activity." In LA, security

company DTLA Patrol and its armed, state-licensed guards were featured in a report on a local TV station on how "Private Security Helps LAPD in Homeless Crisis."

"Essentially, we are a subscription-based law enforcement service," the company's founder told KNBC in 2020, emphasizing that his guards focus on private rather than public property.

State-licensed security guards must undergo background checks and complete 40 hours of required training within their first six months on the job, compared to 664 hours for law enforcement basic training.

The state also requires guards to take a series of classes offered by dozens of state-authorized private companies or colleges. Classes span citizen's arrests, terrorism and de-escalation, plus a "public relations" course that covers diversity, mental illness and substance use. In recent years, state lawmakers moved to require new use-of-force training and reporting standards, after which incident reports more than doubled from 2019 to 2023, state reports show.

Now, the security boom is poised to collide with encampment backlash.

California Sen. Brian Jones, a San Diego Republican, is leading a bipartisan effort to strengthen encampment bans in cities across the state. Senate Bill 1011 is modeled on a San Diego camping ban designed to push people into large, outdoor tent cities with 24-hour security.

Any concerns about security or other civil rights issues, Jones said, should be weighed against dire street conditions.

"Those things are happening in the encampments, too — you know, sexual assault, drug abuse, drug overdoses, murder, attacks," Jones said. "It's easier to keep an eye on and enforce if the locality does decide to use a safe camping site."

Homeless people and their advocates, meanwhile, say security guards are just one of several converging threats. Police shootings of homeless people have spurred other wrongful death and excessive force lawsuits. Two serial killers recently targeted people in tents in LA and Stockton.

All told, death rates for homeless people more than tripled in the past decade, the University of Pennsylvania found. Advocates across the country increasingly worry about



vigilante violence, as Kentucky weighs a measure that would decriminalize shooting people camping on private land.

“It’s a really scary time,” said Eric Tars, legal director of the National Homelessness Law Center. “When we have governments giving permission to their own law enforcement to harass and punish people, it gives an implicit green light to others.”

THE NEW GUARD

Small local security companies. Bigger regional firms winning contracts across the state. Global private security behemoths that dabble in homeless shelters.

In the sea of companies vying for publicly funded homeless security work in California, one newcomer stands out: a six-year-old San Francisco nonprofit called Urban Alchemy. It insists it’s not a security company at all, but it has received public funds earmarked for security and been called a “de facto” security provider in legal complaints filed by former shelter residents.

Urban Alchemy advertises street cleaning services and “complementary strategies to conventional policing and security.” Its revenue quickly multiplied — from \$36,000 in 2019 to \$51 million in 2022, tax records show — after winning a slew of contracts to manage city-funded shelters and sanctioned encampments.

With a motto of “No fuckery,” the marketing revolves around de-escalation, “calming public spaces” and employing workers who have experienced homelessness, poverty and incarceration.

Some who have lived in shelters managed by Urban Alchemy tell a different story.

“They come on very friendly and sympathetically and then use drugs to take advantage of us, many of whom are struggling to stay clean,” one former resident of a Sausalito site contracted to Urban Alchemy, said in a 2022 court filing in a wide-ranging civil rights lawsuit against the city.

Urban Alchemy won a \$463,000 city contract to manage the Sausalito tent city housed at a public tennis court during the pandemic. In the civil rights suit, which the city eventually paid \$540,000 to settle, encampment residents alleged that Urban Alchemy workers sexually harassed women and “used and trafficked methamphetamine.”

The city did not respond to requests for comment, but said in a legal filing that two Urban Alchemy workers were removed from the site and one was fired, and that no police reports were filed. Urban Alchemy’s contract with the city was not renewed, and the organization denied the allegations in a statement to CalMatters. The nonprofit has larger ongoing government contracts in LA, Portland, Oregon and San Francisco, where another former worker is awaiting trial on charges of attempted murder after shooting a person outside the shelter where he was working.

Urban Alchemy declined to make an executive available for an interview. The organization said in a statement that its workers complete “extensive training,” including two days of paid lessons and roleplaying on conflict resolution, complex trauma and inclusivity. Workers are not required to be state-licensed as guards, and people with criminal backgrounds could be ineligible under state law.

In an email, Urban Alchemy’s community and government affairs head Kirkpatrick Tyler said, “Urban Alchemy practitioners do life-saving work in our communities that is more difficult than most of us could imagine.” When it comes to security issues, he said workers are taught to use “emotional bank accounts” and follow a six-step process to de-escalate: “If at any point during this process, a person becomes violent or has a weapon, practitioners will call the authorities.”

Tyler said the nonprofit is “saddened by the news media’s repeated eagerness to regurgitate every one of these kinds of claims it hears about Urban Alchemy — an organization that happens to be composed of more than 90% Black formerly incarcerated long term offenders.”

Several of Urban Alchemy’s own workers have also sued the nonprofit over alleged labor and wage violations, discrimination, sexual harassment and unsafe work environments. A San Francisco sexual harassment case — which Urban Alchemy has denied — is ongoing, and the organization has settled other labor lawsuits in San Francisco and LA.

Carmina Portillo heard about the job by chance. The 38-year-old LA resident and auto mechanic was homeless herself and evangelizing at a park when she got curious about a man in uniform sitting next to a Porta Potty.

“I asked the guy there how much

he was getting paid, and it was \$19 an hour,” Portillo said. “I was like, ‘Wow, that’s a lot for just sitting there.’”

Last year, she filed a lawsuit against Urban Alchemy over alleged unpaid wages, discrimination and wrongful termination after working for eight months at an LA “Safe Sleep” site — a temporary outdoor shelter lined with city-funded tents. It was always an unwieldy job, Portillo said, ranging from making sure no one was overdosing to cleaning bathrooms or serving food.

State records show Portillo wasn’t licensed for security work. Rather, she and colleagues were left to “take matters into our own hands,” she said in an interview, if problems arose. In one case, Portillo said in the lawsuit that a supervisor discouraged her from calling for medical help after a homeless resident told her in Spanish that he was in distress.

Urban Alchemy denied the claims in a legal response, arguing that Portillo did not complain and that its other employees “acted reasonably, in good faith, and in a manner consistent with the necessities of their business.”

Looking back today, Portillo pauses when she thinks about what to call Urban Alchemy.

“I would just say it’s a gang,” she said. “Literally that’s how I felt. There’s a lot of tension.”

Tyler of Urban Alchemy said, “Every large organization deals with some HR issues. When these issues arise, we take them seriously, and we do our best to handle them fairly.”

Portillo settled her lawsuit with Urban Alchemy; the terms are confidential.

A DEADLY RESPONSE

Three hours inland in Fresno, a different type of reckoning over homelessness and private security is playing out — over what happens in extreme cases, when clashes with armed guards turn deadly.

In March 2021, a Fresno man with a history of mental illness named Joseph Gutierrez was shot to death after a struggle with a 21-year-old guard outside a vacant building. The guard in the case was not hired by a city or a shelter, but by nearby businesses to patrol the area.

Surveillance video shows that the guard employed by Fresno County Private Security lightly kicked a sleeping Gutierrez’s feet and shined a flashlight in his eyes. Once awakened, an unarmed Gutierrez got up and lunged for the guard’s neck. The guard shot four times at close range. A fifth shot hit a bystander in a parking lot, who survived.

No criminal charges were brought against

the guard. Gutierrez’s widow recently agreed to an undisclosed settlement in a civil wrongful death lawsuit brought against the security company. The company didn’t admit responsibility in the settlement, and Simpson, the owner, emphasized that the shooting was in self-defense.

“You’re going to have the Monday quarterbacks — ‘Why didn’t he do this?’ ‘Why didn’t he do that?’” Simpson said. “Until you’re in the moment, you can’t quarterback that.”

It’s not the only recent guard controversy in Fresno. Last year, another private security contractor was removed from local homeless shelters after the Fresno Bee reported on guards’ pepper “spray first, ask questions later” policy.

“I’m not surprised that this is a mounting problem with the growing number of homeless folks out there,” said Butch Wagner, the attorney who represented Gutierrez’s widow and children. “These security people have no idea what the hell they’re doing.”

The guard in the Gutierrez case took additional courses at a local community college, and work logs filed in the case show that he came into contact with homeless people often: asking “three vagrants” to leave a Family Dollar store, removing a man from the Little Caesar’s Pizza dumpster, moving along people sleeping in bushes and alleys all along his route — “no use of force required,” he often wrote in the logs.

Wagner, who has also filed suit against police officers accused of shooting homeless people, is most concerned about rules governing when guards are armed.

State law requires that private guards who want to carry a gun apply for a permit and pass a test with the Bureau of Security and Investigative Services demonstrating that they are “capable of exercising appropriate judgment, restraint, and self-control.”

Simpson said it’s up to his guards whether they want to be armed, and also whether a client requests it. He estimates less than 5% of his Fresno County Private Security guards are armed.

“It is your choice. You want to be armed, you can be armed,” Simpson said of his policy. “But you will use a company firearm.”

Had he lived to tell about it, Gutierrez, 35, would have been more qualified than most to weigh in on the debate about where his home state should go from here on homelessness and security.

Before he was killed outside an empty building with 19 cents in his pocket, he’d been a guard, too.

This coverage was made possible in part by a grant from the A-Mark Foundation.

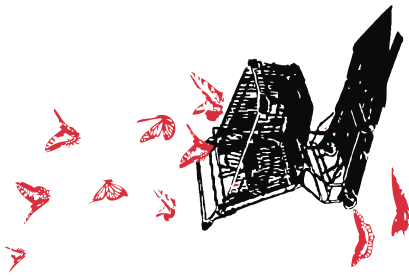
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First: General Dogon stands behind caution tape and observes an encampment sweep along a block of Skid Row. Last: An encampment sweep by the city of Los Angeles along a block of Skid Row. (Jules Hotz/CalMatters)

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