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Homeless Deaths on Skid Row Have Decreased

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Excluding murders and suicides, 60 people died in the skid row area in 2008, according to Los Angeles Police Department statistics. In 2005, there were 94 such deaths.

The drop comes amid an LAPD crackdown that has led to drops in crime and a sharp spike in arrests. But skid row has also seen a drop in the number of people who live on the street, with some homeless advocates saying they've moved to other neighborhoods such as Hollywood and South L.A.

There is general agreement that the streets of skid row are safer these days. But the debate continues to rage about whether the LAPD's aggressive Safer City campaign is the reason -- and whether it's coming because police are harassing downtown's homeless population.

"We're seeing less deaths on skid row because the people who need help are getting help," said Los Angeles Police Capt. Jodi Wakefield. "We've done a much better job of outreach, steering people to programs that work on their addictions, whether it's alcohol or drugs. We've become social workers in a lot of ways."

Wakefield said stepped-up police contacts with the homeless early in the day have helped identify people who are sick or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. That, in turn, has allowed those at-risk people to get the medical services they need, "which is the difference between them living or dying," she said.

Along San Julian Street on Monday, most homeless people interviewed by The Times said that while there might have been fewer deaths on the streets, they were feeling the squeeze of increased police activity in the area.

"It used to be that there were a lot of people down here," said Frank Jones, who said he had been living on downtown's streets on and off for nine years. "Not anymore. Now, the police can come to one spot and grab people up. Their job is easy now."

Jones said that he had seen two people die on the streets in the time that he had been there, one man who was stabbed and another whom passersby thought had just been drunk. They had walked past him for hours before anyone realized he was dead.

Ron Stephenson, who had been living on skid row for two years, said he felt that a status quo had descended on the area. "They are trying to clean it up," he said. "But it's never going to really be safe," he said.

The drop in deaths coincides with a drop in the overall population of skid row. There are no solid numbers measuring how many homeless people live in the district. The LAPD performs periodic spot counts of the homeless people officers see. According to LAPD data, the street population around skid row dropped from 1,391 in November 2006 to 750 in August 2007. But last year, that number began rising again, and in September 2008, was back to nearly 900. Despite the rise in the homeless population, deaths continued to drop.

Many homeless service providers in the area believe the downtown homeless population has grown in just the last few months as the economy worsened.

"We are seeing a bit of an aging [homeless] population, which you would expect would have a higher mortality rate," said Los Angeles Mission president Herb Smith, who called the LAPD numbers "a nice aberration."

The changes in skid row have come during a major revitalization of downtown L.A., as some of the old warehouses and office buildings have been transformed into luxury lofts. Restaurants, bars and art galleries have followed, pushing gentrification to the edges of skid row. With that has come charges that the city wants to push homeless people out of downtown.

Some homeless advocates have long alleged that the Safer City initiative has coincided with increased harassment of the homeless by LAPD officers, causing some to leave the area.

"They haven't been housed," said Casey Horan, the executive director of Lamp Community. "They have been chased out of the neighborhood."

Advocates also say the city has not provided the additional services that should have gone along with the increased police presence.

But City Councilwoman Jan Perry said the city's efforts go beyond policing.

Low-income housing has also reduced the number of people on the street, Perry said, giving at-risk individuals the support, guidance and referrals they need while exposing fewer people to crime and other negative influences, including open-air drug dealing, she said.

Since the crackdown began, arrests in skid row -- mostly for drug crimes -- are up, while most crimes, including homicides, are down.

Estela Lopez, executive director of the Central City East Assn., cautioned that it was important not to be too self-congratulatory about the decrease, because not enough had been done to prevent people from ending up homeless in the first place.

"We'll always be patting ourselves on the back," said Lopez. "But until we've broken the culture that brings people to skid row, ultimately to die, we are still in the negative column as far as I am concerned."