

# Los Angeles Times

## Here's a jaywalking ticket that's nonsense

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Points West

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I bumped into my pal Mr. Ayers on the street the other day and asked what was new.

"This," he said, handing me a jaywalking ticket he'd been issued that morning on skid row.

To be more specific, the ticket said he had walked "against red don't walk signal."

At the time, Mr. Ayers was pushing his shopping cart, which is loaded with musical instruments and lots of other stuff. Sometimes it's hard for him to cross a street before the light stops flashing.

Without breaking a sweat, I could name roughly 1,000 better things a cop could do with his time on skid row than write a ticket to a man who calls a mental health agency home.

But I'm not surprised Mr. Ayers got a ticket. Since September of last year, when Los Angeles began its Safer City Initiative, roughly 11,000 citations have been written in the skid row area. Many of the recipients can't afford the fines or don't have the wherewithal to make court appearances, so arrests on warrants for outstanding tickets are common.

Why should anyone care?

Because this isn't just bad public policy; it's expensive public policy. Time and resources are being wasted attacking symptoms rather than problems. There's no shortage of things that should be addressed before jaywalking on skid row, such as supportive housing and more mental health and drug rehab services, which are far more cost effective than churning clients through courts, jails and hospitals.

Philip Mangano, President Bush's homeless czar, called the city's efforts "shameful" and quickly named a host of cities that have done far better, including Denver, Portland, Ore., Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis and New York.

"The punitive approach has never worked anywhere in our country," said Mangano, who talks policy on occasion with L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and other local officials. Mangano plans to travel to Denver this month with L.A. County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky to show him how that city's smart planning, political will and the involvement of business leaders have produced dramatic results.

Gary Blasi, a UCLA professor who studies skid row and has been crunching numbers on the recent police crackdown, said residents who get cited often are handcuffed while police run background checks on them.

"By far the most common ticket is for jaywalking," Blasi says. "The tickets are also for dropping an ash on the street, inappropriate use of a milk crate -- things that, if they were written in any other part of the city, would be considered ridiculous."

What makes it all the more absurd in downtown Los Angeles is that many of the recipients are mentally ill or elderly. Casey Horan, executive director of the mental health agency Lamp Community, says she has seen people with wheelchairs or walkers cited. She has also seen chronically ill members of Lamp in handcuffs for minor infractions.

Blasi's study of the Safer City Initiative, which added 50 police officers in downtown L.A., paints a disastrous picture. Although the population of street dwellers has been reduced by several hundred or more, many have simply been scattered to other areas of the city, including Hollywood and South-Central Los Angeles. He said very few additional people have been treated for addiction or mental illness, or housed.

Blasi said 2,000 people have been arrested for drug sales and 1,000 for possession, but he argues that many of the former are primarily addicts rather than dealers. In the skid row-bartering economy, they might sell two rocks of crack for a dealer and get a single rock as payment. Once a person serves a prison sentence, Blasi said, he becomes ineligible for housing, is often still addicted and the problems just recycle at great public cost.

Some have hailed the heavy police action as long overdue, and many merchants and residents are understandably pleased to have fewer offenders on the street.

But at City Hall, Blasi's questions about the long-term efficiency of Safer Cities are creating a stir.

"We're taking a good hard look at it," says Torie Osborne, a senior advisor to the mayor. "We'll be building on what's working and changing what's not."

I've got some advice for the mayor: Tell LAPD Chief Bratton to focus on serious crime and on drug suppliers. Tell him we don't need any more of his officers writing jaywalking tickets to schizophrenics.

Osborne says she disagrees with Mangano's bleak assessment of the city's other efforts, arguing that Los Angeles has a bigger challenge than other cities.

An upcoming United Way campaign could enlist more businesses in the cause, she said, and about 1,000 housing units are "in the pipeline." But funding limitations, inter-agency differences and bureaucratic restrictions are a trio of thorny beasts.

Mangano's response? Get it together, already.

He's impressed with the good intentions of Villaraigosa, Yaroslavsky and other players, the homeless czar said. But he can't help but notice that skid row hasn't changed much in 30 years and that the momentum that followed the L.A. Times' spotlight on skid row horrors has been lost.

In defense of those public officials, this is not an easy issue to deal with.

Two and a half years into my relationship with Mr. Ayers, I still can't guarantee that my efforts and those of Lamp will always be enough to keep him off the street. He has good days and bad, and I never know which will be next.

I haven't written about him much lately because I want to avoid the perception that I'm promoting an upcoming book and movie about our relationship. But readers frequently ask how he's doing, and I'll continue with occasional updates, especially when they can help shed light on the nature of mental illness and inform public policy.

As for the mayor, I'm not giving up on him.

I don't think it was a publicity stunt when he called me almost two years ago and joined me as I made the rounds on skid row.

In fact, maybe it's time for us to take another walk and talk about what's next.