

## **Opinion - Other Views**

# **An exhaustive look at the true cause of homelessness**

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Gov. Gavin Newsom, newly inaugurated Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and legislative leaders are pledging decisive action on California's homelessness crisis, which raises a pithy question: Why did it erupt during a period of strong economic growth?

The reasons often offered include a moderate climate, the availability of generous welfare benefits, mental health and drug abuse. However, a lengthy and meticulously sourced article in the current issue of Atlantic magazine demolishes all of those supposed causes.

Rather, the article argues persuasively, California and other left-leaning states tend to have the nation's most egregious levels of homelessness because they have made it extraordinarily difficult to build enough housing to meet demands.

Author Jerusalem Demsas contends that the progressive politics of California and other states are "largely to blame for the homelessness crisis: A contradiction at the core of liberal ideology has precluded Democratic politicians, who run most of the cities where homelessness is most acute, from addressing the issue."

"Liberals have stated preferences that housing should be affordable, particularly for marginalized groups ... But local politicians seeking to protect the interests of incumbent homeowners spawned a web of regulations, laws, and norms that has made blocking the development of new housing pitifully simple."

Demsas singles out Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area as examples of how environmentalists, architectural preservationists, homeowner groups and left-leaning organizations joined hands to enact a thicket of difficult procedural hurdles that became "veto points" to thwart efforts to build the new housing needed in prosperous "superstar cities."

While thriving economies drew workers to these regions, their lack of housing manifested itself in soaring rents and home prices that drove those on the lower rungs of the economy into homelessness.

"The small-c conservative belief that people who already live in a community should have veto power over changes to it has wormed its way into liberal ideology," Demsas writes. "This pervasive localism is the key to understanding why officials who seem genuinely shaken by the homelessness crisis too rarely take serious action to address it."

The syndrome that Demsas details is well known in California political circles and Newsom and the Legislature have taken some steps to reduce — or bypass — the procedural hurdles to increasing construction of new housing, particularly projects to serve the working class families most in danger of being priced out of the market and therefore becoming homeless.

The state is finally enforcing the quotas it sets on regional and local governments for zoning enough land for needed housing. It has also exempted some forms of housing from local zoning rules, and has talked about cracking down on cities that impose impossible land use or design criteria on developers. However, the state's mostly Democratic politicians have largely been unwilling to put their ideological brethren and allies, such as environmental groups, on the hot seat.

That reluctance is symbolized by their persistent reluctance to make a much-needed overhaul of the California Environmental Quality Act, which is often misused by anti-growth activists and labor unions to tie up housing projects.

It should be embarrassing to California officials that while their state deals with a seemingly intractable homelessness crisis, red states, as Demsas points out, don't have similar problems because they don't have structural aversion to construction and therefore don't have the high housing costs that drive people into streets.

The governor, legislators and others who profess commitment to ending homelessness in California should begin by reading the message of truth to power provided by Atlantic, whose own ideological bent is also to the left.