

# High housing costs and long commutes drive more workers to sleep in cars

## It's a symptom of a bigger, nationwide problem: the lack of affordable housing near jobs

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Santa Barbara, California, a coastal enclave boasting beautiful beachfront Spanish missions and a nearly \$2 billion tourism industry, offers a postcard view of the state's many natural advantages.

At night, in about a dozen area parking lots attached to churches, nonprofits, and city property, it also provides a look at California's continuing affordability crisis. Known as the Safe Parking Program, the initiative, run by a local nonprofit called the New Beginnings Counseling Center, provides a place to park and rest overnight, as well as connections to local government and charitable resources. These lots form a network of temporary rest spots for low-income workers living out of cars and recreational vehicles with few other options.

According to Safe Parking Program coordinator Cassie Roach, there truly are few options. The city of nearly 92,000 has a 7 to 10 year waitlist for subsidized housing, a single room is hard to find for under \$1,000, and the rental market has a 0.6 percent vacancy rate, according to the city (apartment owners argue that's inaccurate). Many of her roughly 150 nightly clients, who spend their evenings in RVs or attempting to doze off in their cars, usually spend their days working: 35 to 40 percent are employed, working as painters, gardeners, servers, and even nurses and veterinarians.

"A lot of the time people have been here in Santa Barbara the majority of the lives," she says. "They have family and friends, and they're established. To go somewhere without family or friends is hard. And living in a vehicle while trying to find a new job is very difficult."

Roach and her team have been trying to solve a unique facet of the affordable housing crisis in the United States. What happens when the working class, tied to jobs and relationships in an area without affordable housing, get pushed past the point of a reasonable commute? For some, cars and RVs end up being the solution.

### Behind the wheel, and behind on rent

Housing costs, and homelessness, remain serious concerns across much of the United States, with no easy solutions in sight. According to research from the advocacy group Home1, 11 million Americans spend more than half their paycheck on rent, and the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that a renter making minimum wage working 40 hours a week can reasonably afford a one-bedroom apartment in just 12 counties nationwide. Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies found that rent keeps taking a disproportionate chunk of renter income. In 2016, the median renter in the bottom income quartile had just \$488 left each month after housing costs, a full 18 percent less, adjusted for inflation, than they did in 2001. Between 2001 and 2011, the JCHS also found that median rental housing costs rose 5 percent, while median renter income dropped 15 percent.

This squeeze—increasing housing costs and stagnating wages—has created a scenario where some people working full-time jobs are living in homeless shelters, or in some cases, camping out in parking lots and along highways. There are no official statistics on the number of working poor using cars and RVs as a home of last resort, but a recent spate of stories on municipalities tackling this issue suggest it's becoming more prevalent, or at least more visible.

Santa Barbara, like much of the country, is seeing its low-income workers increasingly spend more of their lives shuttling to and from work. According to U.S. Census data from 2015, 11,950 of the city's workers, roughly a quarter of the total, commuted more than 50 miles to their job. Nearly a third of those making longer commutes, 2,724 people, make less than \$1,250 per month. That's a significant increase from 2002, when only 7,515 made such a long daily trip to work.

Driven in part by the search for affordable housing, rising commute times are an issue both regionally and nationwide, adding even more expenses to full-time workers. Brookings Institution research found that between 2000 and 2012, more Americans took on outsized commutes: The number of jobs within the typical commute distance for residents in a major metro area fell by 7 percent nationwide. The 2015 American Community Survey found that the country's average commute rose to 26.4 minutes in 2015, and the number of Americans who live in one county and work in another soared from 23.5 million to 40.1 million between 1990 and 2014, a 7 percent increase. More time behind the wheel or on a bus or train is taking more money from the working poor: Data from the Metropolitan Policy Program for the Brookings Institution shows the cost of commuting takes up roughly 6 percent of their income, double that of high-income workers.

In California, especially high-rent coastal areas and the booming Bay Area, many lower-income residents have moved inland to escape ballooning housing costs, leading to a spike in supercommuters. A Pew study found the number of Californians traveling 90 minutes or more to get to work jumped 40 percent between 2005 and 2015. A *New York Times* article in August offered a poignant case study of this phenomenon: an office worker making \$81,000 a year who still needs to wake up at 2:15 a.m. for her marathon commute.

### **The long trips of tourism and hospitality workers**

Many of these poorly paid supercommuters find themselves working in the hospitality and tourism industries. A recent *Miami Herald* profile detailed the exhausting 13.5-mile round trip of a Hotel Fontainebleau housekeeper that, due to erratic bus schedules, can take between one to three hours each way. Most of her coworkers had a similar story, with commutes lasting two hours or more, four times the county average.

There's a sad calculus to this brutal commute; the article noted they'd have to spend their entire paycheck to afford rent in Miami Beach, where the Fontainebleau is located. As the piece underscores, "a bitter cocktail of exorbitant rents and stagnant wages have pushed workers farther and farther away from the workplace."

A recent survey of workers at Disneyland, based on work by a team of researchers including Occidental College professor Peter Dreier, made headlines for revealing the company's low wages. But as Dreier explained to *Curbed*, Disney also had a disproportionate amount of workers embarking on above-average commutes. Fourteen percent of the park's workers drive more than an hour and a half each way.

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“You would think Disney would be aware of how many workers drive more than an hour to make \$13 or \$14 an hour,” he says. “It’s so overwhelmingly bigger than the average in Orange County and Los Angeles. Disney should be a leader in this, yet they make the problem worse.”

As Dreier notes, Disney has previously campaigned against proposals to bring more workforce housing to Anaheim, which would ostensibly provide more room for their workers. Dreier’s research found that, due to juggling family and child care issues with oversized commutes, many workers miss shifts. The company has a serious absenteeism issue; why not use its influence and resources to make things easier for its workforce of more than 30,000?

“People love to be a part of the magic,” Drier says. “They love their work, put on a smile, and then they go to sleep in a car, or drive an hour to someplace where they pay 60 percent of their wages for rent.”

The physical and financial gap between affordable housing and working-class jobs continues to put stress on workers, even in areas considered hotbeds of economic growth. In Palo Alto, California, the heart of Silicon Valley, city officials have implemented a 72-hour rule for parked vehicles, after the number of RVs parked along area roads has spiked to more than 200 in neighboring communities. Advocates say they’re not new arrivals as much as they’re residents with fewer and fewer places to go.

“There’s this myth that we attract people from all over the place, and it really is a myth,” Brian Greenberg of LifeMoves, an organization that helps the homeless, told the *Guardian*. “Most of the people are what I’d say are our people—they graduated from local high schools on the peninsula, in Silicon Valley. People aren’t as mobile as one would think.”

In Seattle, home to Amazon, where more than 2,300 residents live in their cars, the issue has become serious. A judge recently ruled that if you’re living in your car, it can be considered a home based on a interpretation of the Homestead Act, which may significantly change how the city deals with those living in vans and RVs.

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While workers choosing to live in vehicles may, in some respects, be the edge cases that draw attention to a wider problem, proximity to work is a serious issue. It’s not just about the inconvenience of long commutes. The Brookings Institution’s research found that the “suburbanization of poverty” that started in 2000 has meant that both jobs and low-income populations have been shifting geographically. With research showing that, for poor residents, living closer to jobs increases the likelihood of working and leaving welfare, it becomes even more important to link transportation and affordable housing investments with job programs.

With few metro areas managing to match affordable housing construction with job and population growth, many see programs like Santa Barbara’s Safe Parking initiative becoming more prevalent. According to Roach, their program is the largest by far, though there are smaller operations in other California cities such as Santa Cruz, San Diego, and San Luis Obispo. And they’ve received inquiries from Los Angeles, as well as officials in Tennessee and even Pennsylvania, about setting up similar programs. Ever since Roach started in 2015, she has just seen the problem, and the need, get worse.

“This is the worst housing crisis I’ve ever seen,” she says, “and it looks like it’s getting more difficult every day.”