

## **No Matter Who Wins the Mayor's Race, Los Angeles Will Still Have a Homelessness Crisis in 2028**

*By Benjamin F. Henwood*

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This week, Los Angeles voters will choose among candidates for mayor, nearly all of whom have promised to reduce or even end street homelessness. In July, the FIFA World Cup arrives in this city. In two years, the Olympic Games open at the Coliseum, before a global audience of hundreds of millions.

Here is something worth saying plainly before any of that happens: whoever wins, whoever governs Los Angeles through 2028, will likely preside over a city that still has tens of thousands of people sleeping outside. Not because they failed. Because the structural conditions driving homelessness cannot be reversed in the time available, not without a scale of investment and housing production that shows no signs of materializing soon.

What does that mean for the election, for the World Cup, for 2028? That is the question worth pressing candidates on.

### **The Math Is Not on Anyone's Side**

Homelessness in Los Angeles is, at its core, a housing shortage problem. There are simply not enough homes that low-income residents can afford, and that shortage has been building for decades. Even if the annual homeless count accurately reflects a recent reduction in overall numbers, the pace of progress falls far short of what the scale of the crisis demands, and it has required enormous public investment to achieve.

Closing the gap would require massive, sustained investment in affordable housing production, the kind of commitment that implicates state and federal policy, not just local decision-making. Local leaders can coordinate services, direct resources, and set priorities. But the policy levers that could actually end homelessness at scale sit largely in Sacramento and Washington: housing subsidies, rental assistance, and affordable housing production. Until those resources materialize in the quantities needed, local officials are managing a crisis they cannot fully resolve.

This is not a complicated argument. It is arithmetic. It means that when the World Cup kicks off this summer and when the Olympic torch is lit in July 2028, there will be unsheltered people near the venues. The question is not whether. It is what Los Angeles plans to do about it.

Prior Olympic host cities have faced this same question. Athens, Beijing, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo all responded with large-scale enforcement and displacement, moving people out of visible areas before the cameras arrived, only to watch them return when the attention passed. It did not reduce homelessness. It concealed it temporarily, at considerable financial and human cost.

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## **The Questions Worth Asking**

If tens of thousands of people will be living outside, what does responsible governance actually require?

Where should people sleep? Where should they use the bathroom? How should a city manage sanitation in areas where people are living outside? Should individuals be cited or arrested for meeting basic human needs in public when there is nowhere else to go?

These are genuinely hard questions, and there are no easy answers. But they are the practical implications of a housing system that is not going to be fixed quickly, and they deserve more serious attention than they typically get in political campaigns. One thing worth noting: even providing basic, humane conditions for people living outside (cooling centers during heat waves, access to water, functioning public restrooms, regular sanitation) costs real money. A more honest approach to managing the crisis is not cheaper than the status quo. It may well cost more.

What about the people visibly struggling with mental illness and addiction? Evidence-based approaches have consistently shown that people with serious mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorders can be housed and stabilized with the right intensive support. But this population, though the most visible, is a fraction of those experiencing homelessness. Most people on the streets are there primarily because they cannot afford housing. Homelessness looks like a behavioral health crisis from the outside; structurally, it is largely a housing and income problem.

## **What This Election Could Actually Decide**

No mayor will end homelessness by 2028. But the next mayor will shape whether Los Angeles responds to the pressure of the Olympic moment with a governance framework built on evidence and sustained investment, or with enforcement and displacement, the approach other host cities have tried and that has not worked.

The Olympic timeline could, if taken seriously, create an opening for the kind of cross-sector coordination and public commitment that has been hard to sustain in normal times. It could also sharpen the case for the state and federal investment that local leaders cannot generate on their own. Whether any of that happens depends on what voters ask of candidates now, and what candidates are willing to say.

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