

International

Parking lots offer safe haven for the homeless Californians

Nearly 554,000 people in US are homeless

LOS ANGELES: It's a chilly winter evening in Los Angeles as Cameron Jones maneuvers his white sports car into an open-air parking lot and picks a secluded spot where he can recline his seat and call it a night. "I lost my apartment about 10 days ago because I couldn't afford the \$2,200 rent and was told this is a safe place to be until I get back on my feet," said Jones. "I can sleep soundly here without having to keep waking up at night and looking over my shoulder," added the 26-year-old Marine Corps veteran, who served in Afghanistan and now works for a company that sells solar panels.

Jones joined a health club in order to shower every morning before going to work. His suit hangs in the back seat, ready for use. Within an hour or so, about a dozen other vehicles—some with children inside—fill the lot that is part of a growing number of so-called "safe parking" areas in California and other US states. Half a dozen such lots monitored by security guards have sprung up in the Los Angeles area in the last year, offering a temporary safe haven to some of the more than 15,500 people in the region who live in their vehicles.

One "safe parking" is located at the back of a church, another at a synagogue and a third at the sprawling campus operated by the US De-

partment of Veterans Affairs. Portable toilets and hand-washing stations are available to the vehicle dwellers who must fill out an application before being granted access to the lots.

'I feel safe here'

Nearly 554,000 people in the United States were homeless in 2017, according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). About 25 percent of them—or 134,000—lived in California, the highest number of any state. California also has the highest rate of so-called "unsheltered" homeless—meaning people who are living in vehicles, abandoned buildings, parks or on the street, according to HUD.

In Los Angeles county alone, there are some 53,000 homeless people, a huge increase from 2010, when the number stood at about 38,700, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. Carlos Gonzalez Jr is a 60-year-old US Army veteran who fell on hard times after suffering an elbow injury and has been liv-

ing in a mobile home for the past couple years. For him, the safe parking program means he does not have to constantly move his car or face harassment.

"There are bad people out there and I feel safe here," he told AFP as he parked his RV at the Veterans Affairs lot near LA's upscale Westwood neighborhood and prepared to go to sleep. "Here I can sleep without being concerned about someone breaking into my car,"

Gonzalez added, speaking over the constant din of cars racing along a nearby highway. Similar programs have been implemented elsewhere in California—including in the San Francisco Bay area—where skyrocketing housing prices have increasingly pushed

low-income residents onto the streets.

"We have a school teacher who uses one of our lots and she said the rent got higher than she could afford and she wound up in her car," said Ira Cohen, who co-founded the Safe Parking LA program with his wife Pat. "The economics are such that some people can no longer afford to

live indoors... and some are lucky to have a vehicle to provide a home for themselves."

"This didn't happen overnight"

Experts say the lack of affordable housing and soaring home costs are the key reasons for the dramatic spike in homelessness. They blame federal, state and local authorities for failing to develop a sound strategy to address a crisis that was years in the making. "This didn't happen overnight," said Gary Painter, who heads the Homelessness Policy Research Institute at the University of Southern California. "Rents in Los Angeles have been going up faster than people's incomes for quite a few decades... and I think it's reasonable to say that we reached our breaking point in the last three years in terms of that leading to people living on the streets."

Painter said although there has been a massive influx of funding for new housing, shelters and outreach programs in recent years, the state was unlikely to turn the corner any time soon, given the scale of the problem. In the meantime, programs like Safe Parking LA are gaining in popularity as authorities seek interim solutions. "If you spoke to me a couple years ago and told me that I would be in this situation, I probably would have laughed at you," said Jones. "I thought I was living the American Dream."—AFP



53,000 people
homeless in LA

Search ends in Lagos building collapse as anger flares

LAGOS: Emergency services yesterday said they had called off the search for survivors of a building collapse that killed nine in Nigeria's biggest city, Lagos, as anger mounted over dilapidated property and unscrupulous owners. The building, which housed a primary school and nursery, came down without warning in the teeming Lagos Island area at mid-morning on Wednesday.

Firefighters and other emergency services worked through the night to find anyone still trapped. One body was recovered in the early hours, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) said. "We have gotten to ground zero," added Kehinde Adebayo, spokesman for the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency. "The debris has been cleared. All those trapped have been evacuated and the rescue operation has ended," he told AFP. Final casualty figures were still being compiled and would be announced later, he said. NEMA has said that 37 people were rescued alive.

Lagos State governor Akinwunmi Ambode said the building had been earmarked for demolition and a nursery and primary school were being run illegally on one of its floors. School bags, toys and clothes were among the piles of rubble as a bulldozer tried to clear a path through wreckage. Shopworker Adeniyi Afolabi, who lives nearby, gave the name of the school as the Ohen Nursery and Primary, and said there were 144 pupils in attendance on Wednesday. Another local, Zion Munachi, also confirmed the name and the number of pupils. But both said not all children were at the school because of sports activities.

Chaotic scenes of heavy lifting equipment and ambulances try-



LAGOS: Emergency and rescue personnel are seen at the site of a building which collapsed in Lagos.—AFP

ing to pick their way through huge crowds and narrow streets gave way to anger yesterday, as residents demanded answers. Lagos Island is the historic heart of the metropolis, which is home to an estimated 20 million people, and also home to its central business district. Building collapses are tragically common in the city and elsewhere in Nigeria, where building regulations are routinely flouted.

In September 2014, 116 people died — 84 of them South Africans—when a six-storey guesthouse collapsed at the Lagos church complex of celebrity televangelist TB Joshua. An inquiry found extra floors had been added without planning permission. Engineers responsible for the construction are currently on trial for manslaughter. In 2016, at least 60 people were killed when the roof collapsed at a church in the southern city of Uyo.—AFP

Kids 'not spared' by homelessness crisis

LOS ANGELES: Jose Razo, the principal of Telfair Elementary School in Los Angeles county, wants his students to spend their time worrying about homework, their grades or playdates. But the harsh reality for more than a quarter of the 720 children at the school is far different—they are classified as homeless. "Food, somewhere to sleep, something to put on their back: those are the challenges our students are facing," says Razo. "Someone seven or eight years old should not have to worry about that."

According to the Los Angeles Unified School District, nearly 18,000 students in the district are classified as homeless and Telfair is at the epicenter of the crisis. Built in 1945, the school is located in Pacoima, about a 30-minute drive north of downtown LA, and nearly all of its pupils — 98 percent—are Latino. About half of the homeless students come from low-income families struggling to survive. They are forced to live with relatives, in shared homes, in garages—sometimes with no running water—or in mobile homes.

Nearly every student is poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price meals. "When you have a single mom working to pay for two students and herself, and she's just making the minimum wage (\$12 an hour in LA), that's barely enough for just the food," says Razo, who himself experienced homelessness growing up.

"So families will double up, triple up, quadruple up in a house, and each family might rent a room for two or three children," he added. Razo said "home" for some of the pupils at Telfair is a living room where they are unlikely to get a good night's sleep amid the comings and goings of the house's other occupants. "So they come here the next morning tired and anxious," he said. A small number of the students, Razo said, live in motels. The worst off live in RVs, shelters or even a car.—AFP