

How police preserve inequality in Los Angeles – and everywhere else

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Protesters face the LAPD on Sunset Blvd. in Echo Park. Photo: [Ted Soqui](#)



The 1974 classic Hollywood film “Chinatown” features a scene set on a picturesque lake in Los Angeles where J.J. “Jake” Gittes, played by Jack Nicholson, spies on two characters, Hollis Mulwray and Katherine Cross, snapping photos of them as he leans back in a boat. The iconic location where this and [many other Hollywood movie scenes](#) were filmed was near the site of a violent confrontation by hundreds of Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers against protesters on March 24. Riot gear-clad law enforcement faced off against protesters and bystanders, including residents of the surrounding neighborhood, legal observers and journalists, and [violently beat](#) some of them and arrested [nearly 200 people](#). The police officers were following the orders of City Councilman Mitch O’Farrell to dismantle a large encampment of unhoused people living by the lake.

The clash between police and protesters in Echo Park is a microcosm of our nation’s current economic system and the role that law enforcement plays to preserve it. A decades-long [housing crisis in Los Angeles](#) has steadily pushed growing numbers of people into the streets. According to the [Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority](#), there were 41,290 experiencing homelessness within city limits in 2020—a 16.1 percent increase from the year before. Over the past year, with the pandemic-related mass layoffs, resulting overdue rents and other bills, and a tenuous barely there safety net, that number has [likely risen even more this year](#).

Krithika Santhanam is an attorney and mass protest defense coordinator at the

National Lawyers Guild of Los Angeles, which sent legal observers to the Echo Park protest to document any resulting police brutality. She explained to me in an [interview](#) that the police response on March 24 was “no different than the same sort of violent, militant response we continue to see over and over when it comes to large-scale, predominantly progressive protests demanding social justice.” Indeed, as this past year has demonstrated, regardless of location and issue, American law enforcement has applied violent police power against expressions of progressive dissent [while openly tolerating](#) or even abetting the preservation of a white supremacist capitalist order. The Echo Park sweep, taking place just as the high-profile trial of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the killing of George Floyd began, is disappointingly typical of law enforcement’s role in policing the poor.

Like [many other police departments](#) that were found to have engaged in serious misconduct during last year’s Black Lives Matter protests, the LAPD, according to a [report](#)  authored by former law enforcement and commissioned by the city council, was found to have performed poorly. The report’s authors lamented, “It is unfortunate that the same issues have arisen again and again, with the Department being unable or unwilling to rectify the problem.” According to Santhanam, the same impunity that has led to the department paying out millions of tax dollars to settle misconduct lawsuits was on full display at the raid on Echo Park. The police have been “emboldened in some ways to execute this form of policing,” she said. Ultimately the role of the police is, according to Santhanam, “managing inequality under capitalism.”

Among the hundred or so people living at Echo Park Lake before the encampment was destroyed was CC Luce, an organizer with Lotus Collective and [Street Watch LA](#) who [told](#) me that she has now lost her home and the sense of community and family that the camp’s residents had built up. For Luce, “the question of housing goes way beyond a structure or affordability.” “A house is not a home; a house is just

an object,” she said. But to elected officials and state and local authorities, individuals and shelters are simply pieces of a puzzle that can be moved around to fit one inside the other in order to claim success at solving the crisis of homelessness.

Luce has no idea where her friends and neighbors have now been moved. She told me that as far as she knows, they were moved into transitional housing through [Project Roomkey](#) (PRK), part of a statewide program that the LA Homeless Services Authority describes as “a coordinated effort to secure hotel and motel rooms in L.A. County as temporary shelters for people experiencing homelessness who are at high-risk for hospitalization if they contract Coronavirus (COVID-19).”

As of last fall, the [\\$100 million program](#) ended up housing only a small fraction of the city’s unhoused population. Seen as an innovative solution to the problem of homelessness in a city where the cost of living displaces people from their homes faster than authorities can provide them shelter, the project is simply a band-aid, and a deeply flawed one at that. [One journalist who interviewed people](#) placed in temporary housing through the program pointed out that “punitive policies and practices are causing residents to leave PRK or act in ways that get them kicked out,” and that strict curfews and other harsh policies are “tools used by PRK’s service providers to discipline their residents.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a [set of guidelines](#) for cities to tackle homeless encampments during the pandemic and warned that “Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread.” [Councilman O’Farrell’s justification](#) for destroying the encampment was to conduct repairs to the park, as if that could not be done while people were living in the area. O’Farrell told the [Hollywood Reporter](#), “my non-negotiable was that we would have housing solutions for everyone before we closed the parks for repairs. We were able to do just that.” And yet, a handful of

those who remained in their tents at Echo Park Lake were ultimately [arrested](#) before the repairs commenced. Perhaps O'Farrell sees jail and housing as interchangeable locations for the unhoused.

The councilman claimed that razing the encampment had nothing to do with Hollywood production companies' use of the area for film shoots. He said, "Filming at the lake is nothing that even entered my mind." And yet he added, "I'm very aware that filming was really popular there, to film movies, commercials, you name it. It'll be, I think, available again, but the primary focus is to get people back to enjoy the park." By "people," he clearly meant those other than the inhabitants of the encampment.

Santhanam pointed out that the sweep was an indication of how we "continue to prioritize and privilege the viewpoints, opinions, and preferences of those who have access to housing and who have the financial means to thrive under this system." In other words, the wealthier residents of Echo Park's surrounding and gentrifying neighborhoods have made clear that they will no longer tolerate the sight of unhoused people at the edge of the lake. A [petition](#) signed by 4,000 people warned, "WE — THE CITIZENS OF ECHO PARK — WILL NO LONGER TOLERATE OUR LAKE BEING DESTROYED!" One person living at the encampment countered that sentiment, telling the Los Angeles Times, "Until you find and address the actual problems and actual solutions, I'm sorry, but we're going to be here."

And therein lies the problem that the Echo Park Lake encampment and its dismantling has symbolized so heartbreakingly well: our society would rather spend money to violently clamp down on protesters who are protecting an unhoused community than fund long-term solutions to the housing crisis. It would rather displace those who created their own community in the vacuum of affordable housing options and pour resources into temporary and sterile solutions for transitional housing than foster conditions where people can actually afford to live in

the places where they create their own communities. “Right now all of us who lived at Echo Park Lake, we might have roofs over our heads, but we’re unsheltered because we can’t see each other,” said Luce.

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